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One Person, One Vote? Not Exactly

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WASHINGTON

Two economists, [Brian Knight](#) and [Nathan Schiff](#), set out a few years ago to determine how much Iowa, New Hampshire and other early-voting states affected presidential nominations.

Mr. Knight and Mr. Schiff analyzed daily polls in other states before and after an early state had held a contest. The polls tended to change immediately after the contest, and the changes tended to last, which suggested that the early states were even more important than many people realized. The economists estimated that an Iowa or New Hampshire voter had the same impact as five Super Tuesday voters put together.

This system, the two men drily noted in a [Journal of Political Economy](#) paper, “represents a deviation from the democratic ideal of ‘one person, one vote.’ ”

A presidential campaign is once again upon us, and Iowa and New Hampshire are again at the center of it all. On Thursday, Mitt Romney will announce his candidacy in Stratham, N.H. Last week, Tim Pawlenty opened his campaign in Des Moines. The two states have dominated the nominating process for so long that it’s easy to think of their role as natural.

But it is not natural. It's undemocratic, in fact. It is unfair to voters in the other 48 states. And it distorts economic policy in several damaging ways.

Most obviously, the federal government has lavished subsidies on ethanol, even though those subsidies drive up **food prices** and **do little** to solve the climate problem, partly because candidates pander to the Iowa corn industry. (Mr. Pawlenty, who now says the subsidies must end, is an admirable exception.) Beyond ethanol, a **recent peer-reviewed study** found that early-voting states received more federal dollars after a competitive election — so long as they supported the winning candidate.

Pork is hardly the only problem with the voting calendar. In the long run-up to the first votes, Iowa and New Hampshire also distort the national conversation because they are **so unrepresentative**. They are not better or worse than other states, to be clear. But they are different.

Their populations are growing more slowly than the rest of the country's. Residents of Iowa and New Hampshire are more likely to have health insurance. They are older than average. They are more likely to work in manufacturing.

Above all, Iowa and New Hampshire lack a single big city, at a time when large metropolitan areas are crucial to lifting economic growth. Big metro areas are where big ideas most often take shape and great new companies are most often born. The country's 25 largest areas are responsible for 52 percent of the country's economic output, according to the Brookings Institution, and are home to 42 percent of the population.

Yet metro areas are also struggling with major problems. The quality of schools is spotty. Commutes last longer than ever. Roads, bridges, tunnels and transit systems are aging.

You don't hear much about these issues in the first year of a presidential campaign, though. No wonder. Iowa, New Hampshire and the next two states to vote, Nevada and South Carolina, do not have a single city among the country's 25 largest. Las Vegas, the 30th-largest metro area, and the Boston suburbs that stretch into New Hampshire are the closest these states come.

So the **presidential calendar** becomes another cause of what Edward Glaeser, a conservative-leaning Harvard economist, calls our “**anti-urban policy bias.**” Suburbs and rural areas receive vastly more per-person federal largess than cities. One big reason, of course, is the structure of the Senate: the 12 million residents of Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina have eight United States senators among them, while the 81 million residents of California, New York and Texas have only six.

Bruce Katz, a Brookings vice president and veteran of Democratic administrations, points out that the world’s other economic powers take their cities more seriously. China, in particular, has made urban planning a central part of its economic strategy.

“The United States stands apart as an anti-urban nation in an urbanizing world,” Mr. Katz told me. “Our political tilt toward small states and small towns, in presidential campaigns and the governing that follows, is not only a quaint relic of an earlier era but a dangerous distraction at a time when national prosperity depends on urban prosperity.”

The typical defense from Iowa and New Hampshire is that they care more about politics than the rest of us and therefore do a better job vetting candidates. But the intense 2008 race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton showed that if Iowa and New Hampshire care more, it’s only because of their privileged status. In 2008, turnout soared in states that finally had a primary that mattered, be it Indiana or Texas, North Carolina or Rhode Island.

A more democratic system would allow more voters to see the candidates up close for months at a time. The early states could rotate each year, so that all kinds — big states and small, younger and older, rural and urban — had a turn. In 2016, the first wave could include states that have voted near the end recently, like Indiana, North Carolina, Oregon and South Dakota.

A rotation along these lines would enliven the political debate. Investments in science and education, which are the lifeblood of future economic growth, might play a bigger role in the campaign. You could even imagine — optimistically, I know — that the deficit might prove easier to address if **Medicare** and

Social Security recipients did not make up such a disproportionate share of early voters.

The issues particular to small-town America would still receive extra attention because so many of the 50 states are rural and sparsely populated. It's just that Iowa and New Hampshire would no longer receive the extreme special treatment they now do.

And that special treatment is a nice thing, indeed. It focuses the entire country, and its next leader, on the concerns of only 1 percent of the population, as if democracy were supposed to work that way.

At a recent candidates' forum in Des Moines, The Wall Street Journal [reported](#), the moderator did something that seemed perfectly normal: She chided Mr. Romney for not having spent enough time in Iowa lately. "Where have you been?" she asked.

How do you think the rest of us feel?

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