

**The Presidential Primary Process:
Democracy at Risk
The Center for Political Participation
Allegheny College**

Executive Summary

A legendary party boss once claimed, “I don't care who does the electin', just so I do the nominatin'.”

Indeed, the process of selecting party nominees is at the center of the election process. It is a critically important mechanism in our system, but at the same time it has changed in numerous, important ways over the past two centuries. And by all accounts, the presidential nomination process—already in freefall—will not endure another election.

A parallel and equally significant problem is the profound lack of interest in voting among our nation's youth, a phenomenon that is even more apparent in primary elections.

The event proposed here will train a critical eye on the future of the presidential nominations. It will focus on the strengths and limitations of the current process, and in particular on reforms for the next presidential elections. New models for conducting presidential primaries will be considered, including an innovative model proposed by political scientist Dan Shea that could help reinvigorate interest in the electoral process among our nation's youth. Given that the event will take place at the very apex of the 2008 nomination process—the week of the so-called “Tsunami Tuesday”—participants will also provide analysis on the results to date.

The Event

We propose a two-part political forum shortly after “Tsunami Tuesday” (February 5, 2008). Given the importance of this primary/caucus day in the 2008 election, we believe our event will draw a large audience and a great deal of attention. That is to say, the event will be timely and relevant.

The main event will consist of a keynote speaker and a panel of experts. Possible keynote speakers might include Governor Rendell, Senators Casey or Specter, former senator Elizabeth Dole, columnists David Brooks, Anna Quindlen or David Broder, or political activists Jesse Jackson or Donna Brazile. We might even “shoot for the stars” and invite Al Gore, Jimmy Carter, or George H. W. Bush. With several of the current presidential candidates likely to drop out of the race in the coming months, they too might be good keynote choices.

For the panelists, we have in mind a mix of politicians, academics and journalists. As with the keynote speaker, we would invite prominent figures. For example, a wonderful

panel might include South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, and political scientist John Aldrich '69 of Duke. We might also consider former national party leaders, such as Democrat Terry McAuliffe and Republican Ed Gillespie.

We envision this as a Shafer Auditorium event, beginning at 7 and going until 9 p.m., with plenty of time for questions.

The main event will be mirrored and preceded by poster and/or video presentations by high school and college students, detailing their proposals for engaging their peers in the electoral process – and particularly in primary elections. We will invite delegations from 20 colleges in the region, as well as from high schools. These students will be available to discuss their ideas with the public and with the media and will be invited to stay for the main event later in the day.

Partnering with the *New York Times*

We can imagine no better partner for Allegheny College as we move forward with this project than the *New York Times*. In the past we partnered with the *Times* on a project that focused on stimulating youth engagement in the political process: the production and distribution of 2,000 “Why Bother?” posters. Although the project proposed here will take considerably more resources, it has the potential to reach a much larger audience, with a particular focus still on young people, through a dynamic and enriching program. The contacts and expertise that the *Times* can provide us will be invaluable in making this program one that could have a significant and lasting impact on youth.

Why Allegheny? Why Crawford County?

A large event of this kind makes good sense at Allegheny for several reasons. First, the college’s Center for Political Participation, which is primarily a student-run organization, is known for innovative programs designed to engage young Americans in the civic and political world. Second, Pennsylvania will likely not be a player in the nomination process, given its late primary date. This has become a big issue, a topic that the Governor has spoken about repeatedly. In fact, it was one of the major issues confronted in 2005 by his Election Reform Taskforce (which Shea served on). Ironically, Pennsylvania will likely once again be a “swing” state in the 2008 general election.

Finally, Crawford County holds the distinction of being the first municipality in the nation to mandate primary elections for party nominations. It did so in 1842. As the “birthplace of the primary,” Crawford County would seem an ideal location for an in-depth discussion of the future of presidential primaries.