

Guest Observer

## Time to Reform the Presidential Primary System

By **Jimmy Carter and James A. Baker III**  
Special to Roll Call

December 5, 2005

Think of a major election in which less than 8 percent of voters cast a ballot, yet millions of other voters want to vote but never get the chance. While such an election is hard to imagine in the United States, that is precisely how we select the candidates for the highest public office in the land.

In recent election cycles, the races for the presidential nomination of each of our major political parties have effectively ended by March, before people in most states have the opportunity to vote. As a result, most Americans have no real say in the selection of the nominee. Intense candidate scrutiny by the media and the public is limited to about 10 weeks. Candidates must launch their presidential bids a year or more before the official campaign begins, so that they can raise the \$25 million to 50 million needed to compete.

The presidential primary schedule has become increasingly front-loaded. While eight states held presidential primaries by the end of March in 1984, more than three times that — 28 states — held their primaries by March in 2004.

The Commission on Federal Election Reform, which we co-chaired, has recommended a comprehensive overhaul of the presidential primary system. This recommendation was received enthusiastically in numerous editorials, which expressed the view of a great many voters across the country who want a say in choosing their presidential candidates.

The Carter-Baker Commission has endorsed the proposal of the National Association of Secretaries of State to create four regional primaries, held after the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary at one-month intervals from March to June. The regions would rotate their position on the calendar every four years. The NASS plan would substantially expand participation in the selection of presidential nominees and give voters the chance to evaluate presidential candidates over a period of three to four months. The commission's recommendation seeks the change for the 2008 primaries.

We believe that it is important for the parties to maintain control of their own primaries. Therefore, we would encourage the two parties to make the needed changes in their primary schedule. If the parties don't take action, they risk losing that power to Congress, which should make the desired change through federal legislation if the parties remain unwilling to do so.

In the end, voters throughout America deserve a say in the selection of candidates for the most powerful job in the country.

**Former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James A. Baker III co-chaired the Commission on Federal Election Reform, based at American University.**