

Campaigning for Delegates:

The Role of Proportional Representation Rules

Tad Devine, President, Devine/Mulvey

Anthony Corrado, Dana Professor of Government, Colby College

Overview

The 2008 race for the Democratic Party presidential nomination has turned into a campaign for convention delegates, with Senators Clinton and Obama locked in a battle to secure the 2,025 delegates needed to win the Democratic nomination. The party rules used to allocate delegates will therefore have a major impact on the outcome of the nomination contest.

Under Democratic Party rules, delegates elected in the states are allocated to candidates on the basis of strict proportional representation, with candidates earning delegate support on the basis of the share of the vote received statewide and district-by-district. These rules make it very difficult for a candidate, even a frontrunner, to build large delegate margins, especially in a race featuring two strong challengers.

Consequently, the voting on Super Tuesday is likely to produce close delegate contests in most of the states, with neither candidate able to secure the number of delegates needed to wrap up the nomination or even make a nomination inevitable. Depending on the outcome on Super Tuesday, the rules will also increase the importance of the chase for party “superdelegates,” which present candidates with the best opportunity to build delegate support. This is likely to lead to the superdelegates playing a major role in determining the outcome of the race.

Winning Delegates under Proportional Representation

All of the 22 states that will hold contests for the Democratic nomination on Super Tuesday are required to use proportional representation to allocate delegates to the candidates. Most of the more than 1,600 delegates at stake on Super Tuesday will be decided by the voting that will be based on the results in individual congressional districts. Overall, 1,094 delegates will be decided by the district-by-district results; about 584 delegates will be decided by the overall statewide voting results.

Most of the delegates will therefore be selected based on district voting results. The number of delegates assigned to each district is set by party rules and most of the districts have 4, 5, or 6 delegates at stake, with the largest number of districts having either 4 or 6 delegates. In other words, the largest share of the districts voting on Super Tuesday will have an even number of delegates (4 or 6).

The Math of Proportional Representation

Under proportional representation, it is very difficult to achieve a significant delegate margin, especially in districts with an even number of delegates. In order to qualify for a delegate, a candidate has to receive a threshold share of the vote, which is set at 15 percent. So only a candidate who receives at least 15 percent of the vote is eligible for delegates. Given John Edwards' decision to suspend his campaign, only two candidates are expected to break threshold in the Super Tuesday voting, Senator Clinton and Senator Obama. If the vote of the candidates who do break threshold does not equal 100 percent (for example, candidate A gets 47 percent, candidate B gets 43 percent, and 10 percent is scattered among candidates who have dropped out but are still on the ballot or minor contenders), then the vote shares of the two candidates who break threshold are adjusted to equal 100 percent and their relative shares of the vote used to decide the delegate allocation. Figures are rounded to the nearest "whole" delegate.

To amass a significant delegate margin, a candidate needs to win 3 of the 4 delegates in a 4 delegate district (thus a 3-1 advantage) or 4 of the delegates in a 5 or 6 delegate district (thus a 4-1 or 4-2 advantage). Otherwise there is little relative advantage, since districts will divide 2-2 or 3-2 or 3-3. The reason the delegate race is likely to remain close is that a candidate has to win a district by an extraordinarily large margin in order to gain a significant delegate advantage.

For example:

Four Delegate District: In a 4 delegate district in a two candidate race, the district will usually split 2-2. Where the top two candidates get 100% of the total vote, **the winning candidate has to receive at least 63 percent of the vote in order to win 3 delegates. In other words, a candidate has to win by a margin of 25 points to get a 3-1 split.**

(If Candidate A gets more than 62.5 percent and Candidate B gets less than 37.5 percent of the vote, then Candidate A wins 3-1. If Candidate A get less than 62.5 percent, then the district splits 2-2, even if Candidate A has more votes than Candidate B.)

Even if the top two candidates garner only 90 percent of the total vote (assuming some votes are cast for others), the winning candidate, Candidate A, has to win more than 56 percent of the vote and win by a margin of more than 22 points to get a 3-1 split.

Five Delegate District: In a 5 delegate district in a two candidate race, the district will usually split 3-2. **In order to win another delegate and get a 4-1 split, the winning candidate would have to garner 70 percent of district vote or win by a margin of 40 points** (where the top two candidates total 100% of the vote).

Even if the top two candidates only garner 90 percent of the total vote in a district, the winning candidate, Candidate A, has to win at least 63 percent of the vote or win by a margin of 36 points in order to get a 4-1 split.

Six Delegate District: In a 6 delegate district, 3-3 or 4-2 splits are typical. In a two candidate race, **in order for the winning candidate to gain a 5-1 split, the winning candidate would have to take 75 percent of the vote or win by a margin of 50 points.**

Even if the top two candidates only garner 90 percent of the total vote in a district, the winning candidate would have to receive more than 67 percent of the vote or win by a margin of 45 points to win a 5-1 delegate split.

The Problem of Building Delegate Margins

As these examples indicate, it is very difficult to develop a big delegate advantage under proportional representation. That is especially true when there are two strong, well financed candidates competing for the nomination, as is the case in 2008. Many of the districts will produce even splits or, at best, a one delegate advantage. Neither candidate is likely to sweep up the lion's share of delegates in most of the states.

Even at the state level, the voting on Super Tuesday is not likely to produce a substantial delegate edge for one candidate. The smaller share of delegates that will be decided on the basis of the statewide vote (about a third of all the delegates at stake on Super Tuesday) will be apportioned on the basis of each candidate's statewide vote. And in this year's race, it is likely that the candidates will be dividing up the states, with many state outcomes decided by relatively close margins. Few, if any states, will be decided by the extraordinarily large margins needed to build an overwhelming delegate lead.

Implications for the 2008 Campaign

- The candidates continue to focus on winning states in hope of "lighting up the map" on Super Tuesday and establishing the momentum needed for the next stage of the campaign. But Super Tuesday is not going to resolve the Democratic race. The 2008 campaign has now become an intense battle for convention delegates in which the candidates are competing in a state-by-state, district-by-district contest in hope of gaining the small relative margins that are possible under proportional representation rules. In most states, the campaigns are now competing for the extra delegate or two that might be won in district competition or the relatively small delegate advantage that might be gained by winning a state.
- The Democratic Party rules highlight the importance of Super Tuesday because they increase the significance of building a delegate lead. Just as is it difficult for a winner under proportional representation to gain a significant delegate advantage, so too is it difficult for the trailing candidate to overcome any sizable delegate lead held by the frontrunner. Such a lead would be difficult to overcome, unless the trailing candidate was able to turn the tide in subsequent elections or draw on the support of superdelegates to overcome the gap produced by state voting.

- The Super Tuesday results are also crucial because at this stage of the race money and momentum are critical. A candidate with momentum coming out of Super Tuesday and well-filled coffers will be able to continue to campaign and advertise everywhere in the quest to amass a delegate majority. This aspect of the race is highlighted by the campaigning leading up to Super Tuesday, where the candidates are advertising in even the smallest states to accrue delegates and Senator Clinton is even advertising in New York in an effort to gain a delegate advantage.
- The party leaders and elected officials who qualify as unpledged delegates to the convention, the “superdelegates,” may end up playing an important role in deciding the Democratic nomination. This bloc of 796 delegates, more than a majority of whom remain uncommitted to a candidate at this date, offer the primary opportunity available to candidates to build big delegate margins. In 1984, the superdelegates played a critical role in providing Walter Mondale with the delegate edge he needed to secure the nomination. Again in 1988, the superdelegates played a critical role in providing Michael Dukakis with an insurmountable delegate lead. In 2008, the race for superdelegates will be the race to watch after Super Tuesday.
- The key to success in the days and weeks ahead will be to get ahead in the delegate count, and to build momentum by winning states and adding to a delegate lead. A string of state victories after Super Tuesday will convince superdelegates to move towards a frontrunner, and add to that candidate’s delegate advantage. And with the impact of proportional representation, catching that front running candidate becomes almost impossible.