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A Closed Primary Hurts the State GOP

NEW YORK is an important Republican state, with the third largest delegation to the Republican National Convention. But Republican leaders are afraid to let their own party members have an honest choice in the March 7 primary. Why don't party leaders trust the same voters who have given Republicans control over almost all of the state's 62 counties, one of the two U.S. Senate seats, the State Senate, three of the four statewide offices and the state's largest city? State Republicans are undermining the party's prospects to carry the Empire State in November by closing the state presidential primary to most of the challengers. Unlike primary voters elsewhere, New York Republicans will not have a chance to vote for thoughtful moderates such as Lamar Alexander and Richard Lugar or genuine conservatives such as Alan Keyes. Under New York's anticompetitive election laws, the state motto effectively reads "DO NOT ENTER."

As a result, only multimillionaire Steve Forbes has so far overcome the costly legal hurdles that have kept all the others (except for Patrick Buchanan, entered in 17 of the state's 31 congressional districts) off the New York primary ballot.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, the architect of this policy is a longtime Dole cheerleader. But, by favoring Dole so much, he runs the risk of weakening Dole and the Republican voters in New York. What if Lamar Alexander, invigorated from a strong third-place finish in Iowa, somehow wins the Republican nomination and the White House? The former Tennessee governor, a graduate of NYU Law School, will certainly not forget the heavy-handed New Yorkers who prevented him from running in the state's presidential primary.

Furthermore, by delivering the state's convention delegates to Dole in March, D'Amato undermines the chance that Dole will win presidential electors in November. The state Republican apparatuses do not appreciate that a presidential primary is much more than a contest for convention delegates; it's an opportunity for a political party to attract new volunteer workers and to broaden its contributor base. A plethora of presidential candidates just by nominating competitive local delegate slates expands the party's grass-roots base and engages more households in the political process.

Simply put, a presidential primary is a political party's version of "spring training," a chance to get in shape, test your bullpen pitching and strengthen the weak spots in the lineup.

There is no better endurance test for a presidential candidate than a New York primary dominated by unruly groups of every ethnic background. Moreover, recent demographic and economic changes have transformed New York into a microcosm of the nation's political culture. Buffalo and western New York resemble the industrial Midwest with its resurgent economy. The north country is as hostile to government as the Rocky Mountain states, while

the Adirondacks are stunning although less chic, than the Grand Tetons.

And the corporate office parks and shopping malls of Westchester County and the mid-Hudson Valley look like the "edge cities" found in northern Virginia. Even suburban Long Island with its shrinking defense contractors, array of small high-tech businesses and automobile culture has more in common with Orange County, Calif., than with neighboring New York City. In fact, the Big Apple, despite its size and high-profile politicians, makes up less than one-third of the total state vote.

After 20 years of control over New York City and Albany, the Democratic Party in New York State is in a shambles. There is no party organization, just a bunch of political barons with separate financial and power bases. But the Republicans are so politically blinded that they won't even allow a fair fight within their own party primary.

The moderates who once dominated New York's Republican Party such as Dole delegate, former Nelson Rockefeller adviser and New York City Deputy Mayor Robert Price are a diminishing species. Price and other Republicans believe Dole would win in an open presidential primary. The new crop of Republicans includes self-made entrepreneurs and political junkies, not the Locust Valley blue-bloods who inherited the family wealth without the work ethic.

Michael Dukakis beat George Bush in the New York general election in 1988, and Clinton trounced him in 1992. But 1996 promises to be a far different race. New York Republicans do not serve their party or Dole's interests by letting him take the New York primary without a real fight. By avoiding a good workout in the spring, the Republicans will lack the muscle and the edge to win in November.

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