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OPINION

Average Jane: Citizen politico journalist Are delegates a good idea?



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— Editor's note: Tanya Amador-Daigle will be reporting for Florida Weekly on the national primaries until the presidential candidates are chosen this summer. She has a unique perspective on the primaries and the process for choosing a candidate, having traveled the country reporting on primaries and caucuses for the Purple States project. To learn more about Purple States go to www.purplestates.tv.

While we choose our next president, I have had the rare opportunity to participate in a political project called Purple States. In it, citizen-journalists closely follow and report news from the political primaries. You may have seen the project in the New York Times, in a recent feature in Florida Weekly or visited the Web site www.purplestates.tv.

Being involved in this project, I've seen a political landscape that was foreign to me. I watched politicians bicker, news-anchors debate and "experts" squabble. And in doing so, I've formed more than one politically driven opinion.

One of the most noted involves the role that delegates play in the process of selecting the nominee for their party. As an average, every-day Jane, this was part of the political process that I hadn't really understood. In attempting to decipher the concept of delegates and how they are assigned to their roles, confusion set in, to say the least. Even for those well informed on the process, there are many factors that vary from state to state, congressional district to congressional district and most importantly between parties. But since you are probably going to start scratching your head in a moment, I'll attempt to explain a little bit of how the process works from my novice research.

On the Republican side, delegates are awarded based on the results of primaries, caucuses and/or convention votes. Some states, such as Florida, award delegates to candidates on a "winner-take-all" basis, meaning that the candidate with the most votes in a state during a primary election is awarded all of that state's delegates. Other states, such as Arkansas, award delegates in proportion to each candidate's share of the primary vote.

Another important factor for the Republican Party is whether delegates are "bound" or "not bound" to vote for the same candidate the voters in his or her state or district supported in the primary. I found this particularly interesting when I learned that in our state of Florida two delegates are bound to vote for a particular candidate determined by primary and caucus results or until a candidate releases his or her delegate. I must say that last part has me perplexed.

On the equally mind-boggling Democratic side, the "pledged" delegates (those that are committed to voting for each candidate at the Democratic National Convention) come from the results of primaries and caucuses as well. These delegates are supposed to reflect the preference of the voters but are not legally bound to vote for the candidate to whom they are pledged. However, candidates may "fire" delegates they suspect of being disloyal.

Confused yet? Well, get out the aspirin because it's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superdelegates! Only the Democratic Party has them and they appear to be super humanlike persons of only the highest political caliber. These people are made up of members of the House of Representatives and Senate, governors, members of the Democratic National Committee and some add-ons, just for good luck. The best part is that there are currently 794 of them, that's 20 percent of the total 4,047 delegates, and they are unpledged. Their numbers can go up and down. For example Clinton just lost New York's latest scoundrel, Gov. Elliott Spitzer, when he resigned. Also, there are four open seats in Congress right now and once they are filled one of them will be lucky enough to automatically become a superdelegate. To top it all off, these delegates, since they are uncommitted, can endorse any candidate publicly at any time in the process. Do you see where I'm going with this? I can only assume that Presidential candidates are wooing them like Romeo did Juliet.

To better understand the delegate's perspectives and to be fair to them, Purple States gave me the opportunity to interview some of these delegates. After speaking with them, I was truly able to get the logic behind their role. As one blogger said on the Purple States Web site, "Superdelegates are rewarded for years of public service by acting as representatives for masses of people who aren't paying attention. And thank God for it, because there's a lot of people out there letting Oprah pick their vote for them." That makes sense to me.

In speaking with these delegates I found that they are experienced persons who have been involved in the political arena for some time and their designations are designed to represent the demographics of their constituents. In addition, the delegates, theoretically, take their cue from voters who cast their ballots in the state primaries and caucuses. I've witnessed countless examples that demonstrate this. For example, Fox News exit polls showed that most African American citizens in Mississippi turned out in record numbers to vote for Obama. Nearly half of the Democratic voters were black and 9 out of 10 of them voted for Obama. Now, to be fair, 72 percent of the white voters voted for Clinton. But here's what made me flinch; although a majority of these voters said race was not an issue, 60 percent of them said it was a factor and so they voted for Obama. What? Voting for a candidate based on race, not record? I had to reach for my roll of Tums. So I think to myself; doesn't it make sense for these more qualified people known as delegates, who know the candidates records and proportionately represent the faces of their state, to decide who should represent their party?

The other side to this dilemma is less complicated and is best portrayed by this case in point: Senator John Edwards currently has 18 delegates remaining in his pocket that he gained before dropping out of the race. What if he decides to use them at the Democratic National Convention to tip the scales in favor of one candidate over another? Should a single person be allowed that much control? Why should these delegates decide who our next President is? What's the point in voting? One Superdelegate told me that the people elected her and that she represents what the people want. Well, I don't know about anyone else, but I barely have enough time to learn everything I can about the candidates, never mind researching delegates. Besides, how many of these delegates are really in touch with "the little guy or the every day Jane" and the world he lives in.

I have come to the conclusion that although both sides have valid and well-intended points, I ultimately have chosen the lesser of two evils when deciding what stance to take. And so, I vote for the people. The people of this country should ultimately decide who the next leader of the free world should be. Not a small group of handpicked people and politicians or any other elitists who may or may not have our best interests at heart. But rather, us; we should be the ones to bear the responsibility, good or bad. ■

MOMENTS IN TIME

- On March 27, 1912, in Washington, D.C., the wife of President William Taft and the wife of the Japanese ambassador plant two Yoshina cherry trees near the Jefferson Memorial. After World War II, cuttings from the trees were sent back to Japan to restore the Tokyo collection that was decimated by American bombing attacks during the war.

- On March 28, 1979, the worst accident in the history of the U.S. nuclear power industry begins when a pressure valve in the Unit-2 reactor at the Three Mile Island plant near Harrisburg, Pa., fails to close. As engineers struggled to understand what had happened, the reactor came within less than an hour of a complete meltdown.

- On March 29, 1927, Major Henry O'Neil de Hane Segrave becomes the first person to break the 200-mph barrier. Driving a 1,000 horsepower Mystery Sunbeam, Segrave averaged 203.79 mph on the course at Daytona Beach.

- On March 30, 1820, Anna Sewall, author of "Black Beauty," is born in Norfolk, England. "Black Beauty," first published in 1877, was the first significant children's story in the English language to focus on animal characters and was made into a movie at least three times.

- On March 31, 1889, the Eiffel Tower is dedicated in Paris. At 984 feet tall, the Eiffel Tower remained the world's tallest man-made structure until the completion

of the Chrysler Building in New York in 1930.

- On April 1, 1700, English pranksters begin popularizing the annual tradition of playing April Fool's jokes. In keeping with the fun in 1957, the BBC reported that Swiss farmers were experiencing a record spaghetti crop and showed footage of people harvesting noodles from trees.

- On April 2, 1917, Jeannette Pickering Rankin, the first woman ever elected to Congress, takes her seat in the U.S. Capitol as a representative from Montana. The same day, President Wilson urged a declaration of war against Germany. Rankin was one of only 50 representatives who voted against the declaration. ■