

Levin: Michigan's primary influence a stroke of luck



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(Photo: Bill Pugliano, file / Getty Images)

Michigan finds itself strategically positioned to influence both the Republican and Democratic presidential primary nominees this year, but it's by chance — not design.

That's the opinion of retired U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, the Detroit Democrat who has argued for decades that a diverse, industrial state such as Michigan should be scheduled earlier in the presidential primary calendar compared with the outsized, decades-long influence wielded by the small early states of Iowa and New Hampshire.

"The difference this year is the earlier primaries didn't decide the matter as they frequently do. In both cases, there's still a contest," Levin said Monday. "That's what's driving the attention paid to Michigan."

Falling on March 8, Michigan's primary comes after the Super Tuesday bonanza of 13 contests but ahead of most of the large, winner-take-all state primaries. It helps to boost Michigan's relevance in the 2016 nominating process, experts say.



Levin (Photo: Lauren Victoria Burke / AP)

The Great Lakes State hosted two modern, unprecedented presidential debates in the past week — the GOP forum in Detroit and the Democratic one in Flint — as well as many campaign speeches, rallies and town halls, as the candidates made last-minute trips to Michigan.

Turnout on Tuesday is projected to be around 2 million, combined between the parties, according to the Secretary of State's Office. The most recent high mark was about 1.2 million in 2000 for the Republican primary between George W. Bush and Arizona Sen. John McCain. The number of absentee ballots returned as of Monday was up 4 percent to more than 340,000.

Of the four states holding contests Tuesday, Michigan holds the largest prize, 59 Republican delegates and 147 Democratic delegates, which will be divvied up proportionately. Democrats also vote Tuesday in Mississippi with Republicans, while the GOP holds a primary in Idaho and caucuses in Hawaii.

Michigan Republican leaders purposely chose to set March 8 for the primary in an effort to attract presidential candidates; however, under the Republican National Committee's rules, delegates must be awarded proportionately because of the timing. March 15 is the earliest date that states may hold a winner-take-all presidential primary.

Michigan Democrats decided to go along with holding their primary on the same date instead of holding caucuses on another date — which was tradition until 2008.

For the sake of fairness, Levin said he would like to see a nominating system that randomly rotates the order in which states hold their presidential primaries or caucuses.

"Our nominating system is cockeyed. The same two states always go first and second, giving disproportionate impact to two small states," he said. "You should have a state such as Michigan come earlier in the mix."

Jenny Tatsak, professor of business communication at Walsh College in Troy and a former Democratic campaign organizer in Michigan, said Michigan's position in the primary calendar this year attracted more media attention and could help drive Tuesday's voter turnout.

"Our timing is good. What also helps Michigan this cycle is what's going on in the news — sadly, Flint," said Tatsak, referring to the lead contamination of the city's drinking water.

Michigan falls a week before the home-state primaries of Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Florida U. S. Sen. Marco Rubio. A strong showing in Michigan could help build momentum heading into those contests, Tatsak said.

"It's almost a perfect storm in a sense," she said.

Paul Welday, a Republican consultant and former chairman of the Oakland County GOP, said Michigan could determine Republicans' alternative to the front-runner.

"Michigan is going to be a real pivotal state in this process, as it turns out, because it's going to define who the viable alternative to Donald Trump is, if it exists," said Welday, who donated to former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush to gain access to an event but is "agnostic" on the GOP presidential field.

Former Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who heads Hillary Clinton's super political action committee, predicts that Michigan's contest will be closer between Clinton and U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont than people expect.

"I think it's competitive because they both have compelling messages," Granholm said Saturday in a telephone interview with The Detroit News.

"People like both of them, and I do think (Sanders) has been really effective in getting out young people to vote."

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