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Pennsylvania is a hugely important political battleground, but it hasn't traditionally mattered much in presidential primaries.

That's because the state votes so late. It holds its presidential primary on the fourth Tuesday in April, long after many states have voted. Despite being one of the biggest swing states in the nation, the nomination for the country's biggest political office is largely decided before Pennsylvania voters go to the ballot box.

State lawmakers have tried to bump Pennsylvania up in line before and now they're trying again, in time for what could be a heated 2024 open Republican primary.

Legislation introduced last week in the state House and Senate would move Pennsylvania's primary up a month to the third Tuesday in March from the fourth Tuesday in April. It would make the state's primary date the same as Arizona, Florida, Illinois, and Ohio. Currently Pennsylvania votes the same day as Delaware, Maryland, and Rhode Island.

If passed, Pennsylvanians in 2024 would vote on March 19 instead of April 23. The primary would revert to the third Tuesday in May every year without a presidential election.

The plan also calls for a coordinated effort with Pennsylvania's neighboring states to create a primary cluster that would make it easier for candidates to campaign in one region — and likely draw more attention from candidates.

In 2019, lawmakers tried to move the primary date up just a week. The legislation passed in the Senate but didn't clear the House. This time they're aiming for a more sizable move-up. The bill was introduced by Democrats Malcolm Kenyatta and Jared Solomon in the House and by Sen. Sharif Street (D., Philadelphia) and David Argall (R., Carbon/Luzerne/Schuylkill) in the Senate.

"Pennsylvania will be a pivotal battleground state in 2024 and having the primary election well after many other states already have theirs makes our commonwealth one of the last states in the nation to weigh in, despite being a crucial swing state," Kenyatta said. "With an earlier primary, Pennsylvania voters will represent the 'keystone' needed for each candidate to win their party's nomination in 2024 and beyond."

The idea received bipartisan support in years past, but it's unclear if it will pass this time in a narrowly divided statehouse, which has had a frenzied start to its session this month.

“We certainly got it through the Senate last time,” Argall said. “The House, who knows? Calling it a very chaotic place is probably being charitable, and I say that as someone who served there.”

Argall said one of the concerns among objectors in the past was that moving the primary up meant candidates and incumbents running for reelection might have to circulate petitions over the holidays.

“No one wants to be knocking on doors on Christmas Eve,” Argall said.

But he thinks the benefits to voters outweigh that worry.

“We’re the fifth-largest state in the country. We ought to matter when it comes to presidential primaries, and too often, we’re ignored.”

The bill will not change the date of primary elections in non-presidential years. It does not run afoul of any party calendar restrictions or rules.

Chris Borick, political science professor and pollster at Muhlenberg College, said the legislation could be an opportunity for a divided House to show constituents it can pass a bipartisan bill.

Pennsylvania’s primary has mattered only once in recent years: between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in 2008, when national press flooded the state in the weeks leading up to the primary. Even then, though, Obama had a pretty firm grasp on the nomination.

Pennsylvania will be so crucial in the general election that how Republican candidates perform in the state in an open primary will be closely watched.

“Eyeballs will be looking to see what passes here,” Borick said. “How are these candidates playing here, given they’re eventually gonna have to appear on a general election ballot? I think the amount of attention would be extraordinary. There will be other big states, Ohio, Florida, but what makes us special is the general election stakes eight months down the road.”

The Democratic National Committee is in the midst of a big shake-up in how the earliest Democratic primaries will run. A revised proposal would give South Carolina the first 2024 presidential primary, on Feb. 3, a Saturday, followed three days later by New Hampshire and Nevada. Georgia would hold an early primary on Feb. 13, and then Michigan on Feb. 27. The full committee still needs to vote on the proposal.

The changes stem from a desire in the Democratic Party to give more influence to voters of color. The party voted last spring to reopen the nominating process, taking away the first two caucus and primary spots long held by Iowa and New Hampshire.

The Republican National Committee voted last year to stick with the early lineup of Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada.

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Julia Terruso I cover politics and our divided electorate. I’m interested in what unites and separates us, shifts in voting trends, and grassroots movements.
