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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Democratic Dark Side

By GAIL COLLINS

All the major Democratic candidates for president have signed a pledge promising they will only go to Florida or Michigan when they want to raise money.

Among the really bad ideas in the history of the Democratic Party, this ranks somewhere between butterfly ballots and William Jennings Bryan.

Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Barack Obama have all vowed to honor the Democratic National Committee rule that only New Hampshire, Iowa, South Carolina and Nevada can hold primaries before Feb. 5. At the urging of the Democratic chairs of the four firsties, they signed a pact promising not to campaign in any state that tries to break into the front of the line. There is, however, an exception for “activities specifically related to raising campaign resources.”

Florida has moved to Jan. 29, and Michigan to Jan. 15. Cue the Democratic Death Star.

“Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina need to be first because in these states, ideas count, not just money,” said Edwards. He actually sent out a press release bragging that he had signed an agreement under which he can hang out with the fat cats at a Miami fund-raiser, but would presumably have to flee in the other direction if a group of regular citizens stopped him at the airport to ask for his views on health insurance.

What were they thinking?

“No comment,” said an Obama spokesman.

“She thinks it was important to honor the normal procedure the Democratic National Committee set forth,” said a Clinton spokesman. We hope to see this sentiment on a banner at Hillary’s next Rally for Change.

Ray Buckley, the chairman of New Hampshire’s Democratic Party, urged that all questions be directed to Carol Fowler, the chairwoman in South Carolina. “It was her idea,” he said.

Fowler did not respond to a request for comment.

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Let’s take a brief pause here to vent about Florida.

In election years, Florida rules the universe. The major presidential candidates spend half their waking hours

riding back and forth between Tampa and Daytona Beach. Because all politicians quiver in terror of Florida, we have a completely loony policy toward Cuba and ridiculously high sugar tariffs. And now, Florida has moved its presidential primary up because it feels that it has not been getting enough attention.

There. I feel better.

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The Florida primary was moved by the State Legislature, a body in which Democrats have about as much control over policy as Harry Reid does over Iraq. Nevertheless, the D.N.C. is planning to strip it of all its convention delegates, so whoever wins the primary will come away with — nothing. This is not the perfect way to woo a state that will probably come in handy down the line. Florida is also not the very best place to announce that when voters go to the polls, the Democratic Party has made sure that none of their votes will count.

Meanwhile, the Republicans are snickering. Their leaders in New Hampshire, Iowa, etc., aren't trying to get candidates to sign blood pacts about where they campaign. And while in theory, rebellious states could lose Republican delegates, too, nothing will happen until the convention next year when it will almost certainly be too late for anybody to care. Meanwhile, as Michael Luo reported in The Times, Florida Republicans are urging Democratic voters to change their registration so they can vote in a primary that really means something.

All this is happening to protect a primary schedule that's not worth saving. If Florida moves, the argument goes, the first four will move, too, and you'll have the Iowa caucus in December instead of January. Big deal. Iowa in the winter is Iowa in the winter.

Michigan Democrats, bent on undermining the tyranny of New Hampshire firstism, seem determined to march down the Florida path. "We are taking on the system!" said Debbie Dingell, a longtime party leader. As it stands now, Michigan will get the no-delegate treatment, and if a group of Detroit children invite Obama to their school, he'll have to tell them that he needs to see a check first.

In one reluctant concession, the Democratic chairs in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and that great American tradition, the Nevada caucus, are graciously allowing one exemption to the no-campaigning rule so the candidates can participate in a conference held in Dearborn by the Arab American Institute.

Are you following all this? Here's where we are so far:

Florida:

A) One man, no vote.

B) No talking to any Floridians who are not waving checkbooks.

Michigan: Both of the above, but Arab-Americans organized into a large conference are exempt.

Really, the Democrats should give it up. The worst that can happen is that the states will keep jumping ahead.

They'll have to stop once the New Hampshire primary occurs immediately after the presidential inauguration.

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