

Interview With Political Science Professor Kenneth Janda

[Posted Wednesday, May 21st, 2008 – 14:30 PDT]

Last Thanksgiving, I took a vacation from the blog and (while I was gone) I ran a **series of speech transcripts** from all eight of the Democratic candidates for president. It was an interesting process, since I had to contact all the campaigns to get their permission to do so, and to get them to select which speech to use. I did it as a public service, something that newspapers used to do back when they were interested in their civic duties as members of a free press (say, the early 1960s, at a guess).

After the series ran, I was contacted by **Professor Kenneth Janda**, who asked if he could use the speeches as data for his project examining the language of such political stump speeches [[PDF](#) of a *Chicago Tribune* article on the subject]. I told him "sure, go right ahead," since I already had permission from the campaigns to use the speeches publicly.

Since we are about at the halfway point in the 2008 elections — with the last dust settling from the nomination race and the general election campaign gearing up — I thought it would be a good time to talk to Janda again. I am not professionally trained in political science (I just pretend to be, on the internet), so I thought it would be interesting to hear from someone who is.

Kenneth Janda is the Payson S. Wild Professor Emeritus in Northwestern University's Department of Political Science. Together with Jerry Goldman and Jeff Berry, he is the author of a leading college textbook on American government, ***The Challenge of Democracy*** (currently in its Ninth Edition), and co-editor of the international journal "**Party Politics**." He and Goldman also created **IDEALog**, an application for analyzing political values.

He took time from his busy schedule to answer my questions about the 2008 election (so far).

This has been, if not a unique election historically, at least a somewhat rare one, for many reasons. First, we had the experiment of the so-called "national primary" on February 5th this year, when over twenty states voted on the same day. On the Republican side this worked the way people expected it to, by anointing a clear victor very early in the process. On the Democratic side, it didn't work the way everyone planned, and we are still paying attention to primaries in the news here in May. Why do you think it turned out like this? Is it a function of the Republicans having a winner-take-all system for individual state contests, while the Democrats have a proportional allocation system for delegates — or is there something else at play here?

Indeed, this presidential primary election season has been spectacularly different from years past. True, more states (25) chose delegates on Super Tuesday 2008 in some manner for at least one party than ever before, but the difference is greater when compared with 2004 (10 states voting) than with 2000 (16 states). More important than Super Tuesday was starting the process so much earlier (January 3rd, compared with January 27th in 2004) and adding two states (Nevada and South Carolina) to the process to supplement the perennial front runners (Iowa and New Hampshire). The candidates barely finished campaigning for these four states before February 5th, after which half the delegates had been selected. True also, the winner-take-all system worked for the earlier decision on the Republican candidate. The Democratic requirement that delegates be awarded in proportion to votes resulted in the leading candidates bagging roughly an equal number of delegates after Super Tuesday while faced with a dwindling number of targets.

Do you think that the goal of adding two more states to the early part of the process for the Democrats (South Carolina and Nevada) had its intended effect, i.e., that minority voters got a seat at the table of the early primary states?

It's hard to compare voting patterns in those two states because South Carolina held a primary while Nevada held a caucus. The threshold for participation is higher in caucus states and turnout is typically lower. Although they usually vote at a lower rate than African-Americans, Hispanics in Nevada appeared to participate somewhat more than African-Americans in the

Democratic caucus and favored Clinton. In South Carolina, African-Americans went strongly for Obama and turned out in large numbers.

Is it really that unusual to have such a long nomination campaign? Or is it something that we just haven't had for a while, meaning we simply have short memories about such things?

Most Western democracies have relatively short campaigns of a few weeks. Because they have parliamentary systems that hold elections according to political conditions, elections can be called at any time. We hold our elections according to the movement of the planets. As I wrote in our American government textbook: "In early November, after the Earth has traveled four times around the sun, the United States holds a presidential election. The timing is entirely predictable but has little to do with political need." One major consequence is the multiyear nature of our political campaigns. Rest assured that presidential hopefuls will be planning for the 2012 election in mid-November 2008.

Do you think the Democrats will likely revisit the whole concept of "superdelegates" after this election is over? Or even revisit the proportional allocation of delegates? What changes do you think they may make?

I'm sure that the topic will come up in the Democratic National Committee, but I doubt that superdelegates will be eliminated. They provide seats for hundreds of elected party members and for party officials who would otherwise need to compete with lesser party activists for convention seats. Moreover, superdelegates haven't done anything (yet) to thwart party voters' will — and they are unlikely to do so. It's foolish to liken them to deciding in a "smoke-filled" hotel room for two reasons. First, most political leaders today don't smoke and would not allow other to smoke during a meeting. Second, no hotel room could contain the nearly 800 Democratic superdelegates. They don't constitute a party "clique" as much as a broad cross-section of party leaders. They have diverse views on candidates but tend to be united in backing the results of the primary process and in choosing a nominee likely to win in November.

Do you think either party will rethink the concept of letting states decide when to vote and decide to impose their own primary calendar on the states from above, or will they continue to leave it for the states to decide?

Both the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee have definite interests in structuring their parties' nomination processes. If not, the committees wouldn't be worth having. Truth is, some states value the publicity from scheduling primary contests more than their contribution to the delegate selection process. People who complain about the length of primary campaigns should look to pushy states, not to the DNC and RNC. This year, both national committees tried to control the process by allowing four states to choose delegates "early" and requiring all others to wait until February 5th. Even then, some states (notably Michigan and Florida) jumped the gun. Without national committee restraints, ambitious states might inaugurate a new Thanksgiving tradition — enjoy your turkey and then vote in a primary — the year *before* the actual election.

Do you think Florida and Michigan are going to "learn their lesson" this year, or do you think they (or any other state) will try to jump the gun in future elections?

Even if both state delegations are seated at the convention, their Democratic state party leaders can hardly claim victories. They and their slates of delegates failed to have an impact on the primary outcome, and they suffered through uncomfortable uncertainties over their convention attendance. These states and others that may be tempted to ignore national committee rules will be gun-shy at the next election cycle.

Do you think the states themselves, after watching the Democratic campaign this year, may decide that shoving to the

front of the line may not gain their state the most influence, and instead decide to hold their primaries in the middle or even the end of the primary calendar? Or do you think they'll continue to push to the front of the pack until we truly do have a "national primary," with almost all the states voting on a single day?

No doubt, debates among party leaders in many states will break out over the timing of their 2012 primaries. Some leaders will see fewer advantages in voting early and more benefits from voting later. Also, next time around fewer state party leaders will be anxious to challenge the rules of their national committees. About a truly national primary: If you want more emphasis on national television advertising and less emphasis on candidates speaking to ordinary voters in small groups (as in Iowa and New Hampshire), then you should favor a national primary day. I prefer the situation as it is.

As it is in 2008, or as it was in 2000 or 2004? Are you saying you wouldn't want to see more than 25 states vote on the same day, or would you prefer fewer? Or as it is now?

By preferring the situation as it is, I mean favoring having two (or four) states leading off the primary season with some spacing between the contests. That sets a low bar for candidates to enter the race (think of Mike Huckabee) and requires retail politics — meeting ordinary voters, spending time with them, and actually answering their questions. Our current process of choosing the presidential nominees for the two great parties is competitive and unpredictable, which fits democratic theory. Mitt Romney was the best-financed Republican candidate; he lost. Rudy Giuliani led most polls in the summer of 2007; he lost. Mike Huckabee (who?) was given no chance; he gave John McCain his strongest challenge. McCain was written off when his campaign ran out of money in 2007; he won. John Edwards was the Democratic Party's Vice-Presidential candidate in 2004; he lost. Hillary Clinton was the "inevitable" candidate of the Democratic Party; she lost. Barack Obama was an African-American candidate with a foreign-sounding name; he won. Our nominating process does have faults, but it isn't predictable — and the world takes notice.

The second reason this election is a rarity is the relatively high voter turnout, especially on the Democratic side. Do you see this continuing in November, or will it fizzle out somewhat?

I do think that voter turnout will be relatively high in the general election. As in the 1992 election with Ross Perot as a third-party candidate, many new voters have been attracted to the primary process. I expect them to carry through to the general election.

Another rarity is the fact that even with three candidates remaining from the two major parties, it seems virtually assured that for only the third time in American history, a sitting senator will make the jump to the Oval Office. Have such presidents had an easier time dealing with Congress, or do you think it won't make much difference?

As you note, there are so few cases that we have little on which to judge. Kennedy was the most recent, and he did not serve out his term. In 2009, however, I would suspect that Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain would all have better relations with Congress than the president they would replace.

Do you think we've made any progress towards a better election infrastructure since the Florida fiasco in 2000, or do we still have a long way to go? What nuts-and-bolts changes would you suggest to improve the voting machines and systems in place now?

From what I read in the papers, Florida has not yet gotten its electoral act together. Nor has Ohio. The real problem in American elections is that we elect so many offices that it strains ballot design and counting procedures. Again, as I wrote in our American government text: "American voters carry a heavy burden. They are asked to choose among *more* candidates for *more* offices *more* frequently than voters in any other country." For example: In the 2006 parliamentary election, each

Canadian voter only had to make *one* choice among a small set of candidates for parliament. "The 14.8 million Canadians who voted in their 2006 election cast just 14.8 million votes, all for parliamentary candidates. The 122.3 million Americans who went to the polls in 2004 cast over 1 *billion* votes — voting for president, congress, state executives, state legislators, county executives, judges, and miscellaneous offices on their ballots." No wonder it's hard to count votes in U.S. general elections.

Is there anything else which makes 2008 a unique or rare year in American politics? In what other ways can this election be considered out of the ordinary?

The year will go down in history for the contest between a woman and an African-American seeking the nomination of a major political party. No matter who wins, it's historic.

Finally, if you could wave a magic wand and redesign any part of the American electoral process to make it better, what would you change and why?

I'd simplify the task for the American voter, reducing the number of choices to be made in the polling booth. For starters, at the state and county levels, I'd ask the voter to choose only one person for executive office — e.g., governor at the state level and only one officer at the county level. Some might say that this would reduce popular control of government. I argue that it would *increase* popular control of government. At the national level, Americans now vote only for president (and vice-president), allowing the president to appoint cabinet officials — such as Secretary of State, Treasurer, Attorney General, and so on. We hold the president accountable for their actions. But now most states separately elect Secretaries of State, Treasurers, Attorneys General, and so on. Operating with much less visibility, these state officers claim their own popular mandate and are unaccountable to the chief executive of the state. (The Democratic Governor of Ohio, Ted Strickland, had to ask for the resignation of Democratic Attorney General, Marc Dann, over a sexual harassment complaint in his office. After vowing to stay on, Dann finally resigned on May 14.) In Cook County, Illinois, I vote for a County Clerk and a Clerk of the Circuit Court. I teach political science and even I am unsure what the Clerk of the Circuit Court does, and I have not closely followed the performance of the County Clerk either. Assuming that other voters are like me, how does that advance popular control of government? I *know* that it adds to the voter's burden.

Cross-posted at [The Huffington Post](#)

– Chris Weigant

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2 Comments on “Interview With Political Science Professor Kenneth Janda”

1. *Michale wrote:*

Wow!

That's a lot of great information... :D

Michale.....

[Wednesday, May 21st, 2008 at 14:46 PDT]

2. *fstanley wrote:*

I had not thought about how many offices are elected and not appointed here in the US. I agree with the Prof. that it would make more sense just to elect the governor at the state level.

I do think the whole thing takes too long and uses up too much energy that should go towards actual governing.

What an interesting interview - I had to take notes!

...Stan

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