In 1988, Democrats in the southern states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas held the first regional primary, later to be dubbed “Super Tuesday.” This primary was an attempt by these states to focus the Democratic Party on issues in the South as well as nominate a presidential candidate that would more closely represent southern Democrats than the front-runner from the Northeast-Michael Dukakis. While the South’s bid to unseat Dukakis ultimately failed, the importance of regional primaries has grown since 1988 and Super Tuesday is no longer strictly a southern affair. During the primary elections of 2000, which had no presidential incumbent seeking a party nomination, twelve states held their primary elections or caucuses, on Super Tuesday-March 7, 2000. This was the largest number of states participating in the twelve-year history of Super Tuesday, with approximately 16.8 million total votes cast. Results from those states are shown in Figure 1. What is interesting about the 2000 race on the Republican side was the small margin by which George W. Bush won in most of the states and the fact that he did not win in New England. John McCain received the majority of votes in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Vermont. Additionally, in Connecticut and Washington, no candidate received a majority. Finally, when the number of total Republicans and Democrats who voted in the primaries is compared, those states that participated in Super Tuesday are almost evenly divided between the two parties; Georgia and Washington were the exceptions. In Washington, Republicans who voted in the primary outnumbered Democrats by almost 3 to 1.

This contrasts with the eight states in the Intermountain West in which only 1.3 million total votes were cast during the 2000 primary season, roughly between the totals cast in Massachusetts and New York. The eight states of the Intermountain West saw significantly higher Republican turnout relative to their Democratic counterparts. Figure 2 details primary vote information for the region. Excluding New Mexico, the ratio of Republicans to Democrats voting in state primaries ranged from 1.29 to almost 6 to 1 in Utah. Some may use this information to support the theory that the Intermountain West is heavily Republican and a regional primary would do nothing more than solidify the GOP’s base. However, three states—Colorado, Utah and Wyoming—voted three days after Super Tuesday and in Utah, George W. Bush won the state by the smallest margin of any in the region—including Arizona, which was John McCain’s home state. The anomaly of Utah suggests that Republicans in the region might have turned out in higher than expected numbers because the nomination was still in contention, whereas most Democrats were solidly behind front-runner Al Gore. Additionally, the strong showing in Utah of John McCain, who was considered more moderate than George W. Bush may mean that when there isn’t an incumbent running for office, Utahns tend to choose candidates that are more middle-of-the-road.

Another consideration for local policymakers and party officials is that the in-migration and demographic shift happening in the Intermountain West is equivalent to that seen in southern states during the late 1980s through the 1990s. In Georgia and Florida, recent in-migrants from other states have shifted the balance of power further to the right politically. The Intermountain West is now the fastest growing region, attracting residents from all over the country, many with political and social views that are different from what has been seen in the region in the past.

As the political landscape of the region changes, there is much that is unknown about the
outcome of the candidate selection process. Some of those unknowns are highlighted below.

- Who currently votes in primaries in the eight western states?
- Will a western states primary encourage greater voter participation? If so, which demographic/socio-economic groups are likely to participate at greater rates? Which groups would be less likely to participate?
- Within the Republican Party would a western states primary shift the balance of power? If so, how?
- Would a western states primary benefit the minority Democrats? If so, how?
- Would fundraising and other efforts of local parties shift in western states due to the primary?
- Would a western states primary encourage greater collaboration between western states on common policy issues? If so, how?
- Do the states run the risk of losing their individual identities in the minds of national office seekers?

These questions and others will be addressed by academics and policymakers at a University of Utah Center for Public Policy & Administration symposium on the topic of a Western States Primary. If you would like more information on the symposium and how you might be able to participate, please contact Janice Houston by clicking here. We’d also like readers of this column to contact state-level elections officials and party leaders to express your thoughts on participating in a regional primary during the presidential elections of 2008.