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No Super Tuesday primary means big cost savings for New Jersey

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By Carly Q. Romalino/Gloucester County Times

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If the tab to put on a February Presidential primary wasn't so steep, registered New Jersey Republicans would be at the polls today, electing the GOP candidate best to challenge Barack Obama in November.

But a \$12 million expense to put on the special election wasn't worth pulling voting machines out of storage for Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno who signed a bill last year to keep the presidential primary in June with when other federal and county offices are on the ballot.

New Jersey's winter primary in 2008 — where Democrats here picked Hillary Clinton over Obama, and Republicans chose John McCain — was one of the very few this state has held.

"One of the reasons the parties are not enthusiastic about having it early is because it's such an expensive primary to run in," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

Presidential primary candidates — this year it's Republicans Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum and Ron Paul — would have to spend millions in TV advertisements to get New Jersey voters amped for a special election that would have only their names on the ballot. The expense might not be worth it, according to Weingart adding that New York City is the most expensive media market and Philadelphia comes in as fourth most costly.

"If you have it in February there is going to be a June primary no matter what," Weingart said. "So it would be an added election and there is an expense in that, and the turnout tends to be

lower than if its held the same day as the primary for other offices.”

Super Tuesday — in which the Garden State and 23 more states held primaries in 2008 — cost state and local governments a combined \$12 million to put on.

Gloucester County’s share of the cost totaled more than \$275,000 for one day of polling, according to Stephanie Salvatore, Gloucester County Superintendent of Elections.

More than 19,700 of the county’s 27,600 registered Republicans, and 43,100 of the 48,900 Democrats voted in the election — a “big turnout,” Salvatore said.

While keeping the presidential primary in June has been touted as a way to save millions across the state, by June, Weingart said the national committees — and most of the country — already know which candidate’s name is most likely to be printed on the general election ballot months later.

“Most years, by the time we vote in the presidential primary our vote doesn’t really matter and it’s clear who the party is picking as their nominees,” Weingart said. “If we were in February, our opinion would count somewhat more. But there are some years when (voting) in June could be the king-maker or the queen-maker and put a candidate over the top.”

In 2008, Clinton won the New Jersey Democratic primary over Obama. With Obama running in November for a second term, it’s easy to see the unpredictability of an election.

“None of us have been very good at predicting how a race will unfold or predicting in advance when it would be great to have a primary,” Weingart said.

Cost is the second-highest influential factor in deciding when to hold it, he said. Political agendas and strategy usually drives the decision to move it up as early as January.

But if this state wants another Super Tuesday, Weingart said legislators will have to argue that the state can somehow make up the millions.

“You would argue the added income the state would get from the (national) press hanging out in the state for a couple of days,” he said. “The real factors are the politics of that year’s presidential election.”

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