A MESS ONLY A REPUBLICAN COULD LOVE

Never before has a presidential nomination been determined by a do over. This year there may be two. And they may not be enough to prevent a bloodbath at the Democrat convention in Denver in August.

Hillary Clinton's victories Tuesday in primaries in Texas, Ohio and Rhode Island mean the battle for the Democrat nomination will go on and on. But thanks to the Democrat party's bizarre rules, she didn't gain much ground on Sen. Barack Obama.

Despite winning Rhode Island by 18 points, Ohio by 10 points, and Texas by 4 points, Ms. Clinton shaved only 12 delegates from Sen. Obama's lead, with 10 still to be allocated. That lead is pretty narrow. Sen. Obama has won 1,366 delegates in primaries and caucuses to date, compared to 1,222 for Sen. Clinton.

Mr. Obama needs 659 delegates more to obtain the 2,025 needed to win the nomination. Sen. Clinton needs 803. But only 611 delegates are left to be won in the remaining primaries and caucuses, 158 of them in Pennsylvania's primary April 22. That means the nominee will be picked by the 795 "superdelegates," who have been elected by nobody.

(Of the superdelegates, 207 have declared support for Sen. Obama, 242 for Sen. Clinton, but they are free to change their minds at any time.)

If the superdelegates retain their current allegiances, and no additional ones declare, Sen. Obama could win the nomination if he wins 74 percent of the delegates in the remaining primaries and caucuses. Mrs. Clinton would need 92 percent. Thanks to the Democrats' proportional representation rules, the actual split is likely to be close to 50-50, with Sen. Clinton, because she is currently favored to win in Pennsylvania, winning slightly more than half.

The totals above do not include 210 delegates from Florida and 156 delegates from Michigan, because the Democrat National Committee stripped these states of their delegates because they violated party rules by holding their primaries before Feb. 5. The DNC asked the presidential candidates to boycott those primaries. The other candidates obeyed, but after agreeing not to, Hillary Clinton entered the primaries anyway, and won them.

Sen. Clinton, understandably, wants the Florida and Michigan delegations seated. Even if the delegates she claimed to have won in those states were added to her total, Sen. Clinton would still trail Sen. Obama, but the difference would be slight. Sen. Obama, understandably, doesn't want them seated. He obeyed the rules. She didn't, and she shouldn't be rewarded for cheating.

The only way for the Democrats to avoid a nasty credentials fight is to have a do over. But what kind? The party would prefer caucuses, because they're cheaper. So would Sen. Obama,

because he's done much better in caucuses than he has in primaries. But Sen. Clinton would insist on new primaries.

I think it would be in the best interest of the Democrat party to schedule new primaries in Michigan and Florida. Sen. Clinton cannot overtake Sen. Obama among elected delegates. But she could demonstrate to the superdelegates that he's an empty suit with a glass jaw.

Sen. Obama has risen as high as he has in part because of uncritical coverage by the news media. But that's been changing since his campaign dissimulated about what a senior aide told Canadian officials about the North American Free Trade Agreement; Antoin "Tony" Rezko, a major contributor to Sen. Obama, went on trial in Chicago, and Saturday Night Live lampooned the love affair between the Illinois senator and his traveling press corps.

Sen. Obama bolted from a news conference Tuesday in San Antonio when he was asked hostile questions. He had "the surprised look of a man bitten by his own dog," wrote the Washington Post's Dana Milbank.

Suppose there are some awkward revelations in the Rezko trial, and Sen. Clinton wins Pennsylvania as decisively as she won Ohio. This would put superdelegates in a quandary. Should they go with the guy who was hot in February, or the gal who was hot in March and April?

Reruns in Michigan and Florida could remove doubt. If Sen. Clinton won them both, then the super delegates could regard this as proof the bloom is off the Obama rose. If Sen. Obama won them both, then Sen. Clinton might yield gracefully, instead of having to be dragged, kicking and screaming, from the race.

But what if Sen. Obama wins in Michigan and Sen. Clinton wins in Florida? Then you have a mess only a Republican could love. Heh, heh, heh.