

## Demystifying Iowa

By Christopher C. Hull : 02 Jan 2008

### Q: What's a Caucus?

A: The old saw in Iowa is "caucus" is an Indian word for gathering together to make a great noise. That may be apocryphal, but the noise Iowa's caucuses generate is certainly no myth.



Generally, a caucus is simply a meeting of the like-minded. On Capitol Hill, the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus come together to advance the interests of the communities they represent. In U.S. legislatures more generally, the Republican and Democratic caucuses sit down privately to hammer out the agendas they fight for on the floor.

And in state partisan politics, a caucus is just a party meeting.

These meetings kick off what is known as the "caucus-to-convention" process. Instead of determining which presidential candidate the state supports using a primary vote that operates like a general election, caucus states have local party meetings that select delegates that go on to county conventions, which select delegates to district and/or state conventions, which ultimately decide who will represent the state at national convention.

In Iowa, the precinct caucuses are a time-honored tradition, which since the early 1970s have garnered ever-greater attention as they moved first earlier in the presidential nomination process, and then upward in the importance placed on them by candidates, the media, and the voters.

### Q: Why Iowa?

A: Iowa's first-in-the-nation precinct caucuses are a historical accident. After the disastrous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where anti-war protesters supporters backing the dovish George McGovern clashed with police in violent riots as party stalwart Hubert Humphrey was nominated over their determined opposition, the party decided to re-examine its presidential selection process.

The reforms from the McGovern-Fraser Commission that resulted placed strict requirements on caucuses in the context of presidential nomination contests, to make certain they were not mere ciphers, smoky back rooms in which insiders got party elites' nod and nothing more.

To comply with these time-consuming requirements and still hold a 1972 state convention slated for late spring, Iowa Democrats were forced to push the initial precinct caucus all the way back to February, placing it at the outset of the nomination fight.

McGovern - who both lost the 1968 fight and designed the new system - recognized the

potential boost from winning the early contest, and led by an obscure campaign manager named Gary Hart, deployed "border-runners" from his home state of South Dakota into the bordering Hawkeye State. The 1972 results attracted national attention, and set Iowa's feet on the road to today's big, big show.

### **Q: Who's Won and Who's Lost in Iowa?**

A: The greatest victory in Iowa's history came in 1976, when obscure Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter came in second to "undecided" - note that technically speaking he didn't win - and exploded in national fame. Carter went on to win the nomination and the White House.

In 1980, seeking a similar fate, George Herbert Walker Bush campaigned and organized heavily in the state. Ronald Reagan, who had all but ignored the state, fell to the unknown Bush in the Caucus by a tiny margin, setting up a David and Goliath story in which Bush ultimately fell - but gained enough prominence to be made Vice President to appease the GOP's moderate wing.

McGovern's former campaign manager Gary Hart was a senator by 1984, and translated his former boss' strategy into a (distant) second-place showing in the state behind Walter Mondale, edging astronaut and American icon John Glenn and catapulting himself to national fame. In 1988, Hart tried again to gain the presidency, but the brilliant and attractive candidate collapsed amidst a sordid sex scandal of his own making.

That year, it was Missouri Congressman Dick Gephardt who grabbed the Democrats' gold ring in Iowa, riding the dismal farm crisis to success. Kansas Senator Bob Dole likewise dominated the '88 caucuses - and televangelist Pat Robertson placed second, handing Vice President Bush a startling defeat that signaled the rise of Iowa's social conservative base.

The 1992 contest was perhaps Iowa's low point in the presidential race. On the Republican side, no presidential precinct competition was even held, given sitting President Bush's hold on the party infrastructure. And Iowa Senator Tom Harkin's run for the presidency mooted the Democratic race, as well.

Bob Dole - Iowa's third senator, according to some wags - triumphed again in 1996 over a spirited challenge from publisher Steve Forbes. The billionaire's television attacks wounded Dole, but proved useless in propelling Forbes to the front of the pack, and his fourth-place finish sent up a warning flare to all those trying to use negative TV ads alone to capture caucus victories.

Forbes learned his lesson in 2000, and coupled a powerful advertising campaign with a muscular ground game, deploying paid chairmen in Iowa's 99 counties. But George W. Bush also ran a methodical organization effort, bested Forbes, and went on to win the nomination. John McCain emerged as a wild card in that race, laying down any Caucus effort but playing to a convincing victory over Bush in New Hampshire before ultimately being trumped. And on the Democratic side, Al Gore bested Bill Bradley, stifling a potential challenge before it could ever gain steam.

Finally, the 2004 race saw Howard Dean collapse amidst questions about his electability, eliciting the infamous "Dean Scream" and catapulting John Kerry to the nomination.

### **Q: What Should I Watch for in 2008's Caucus?**

This election season, Iowa is once again a battleground on both sides of the aisle.

On the Republican side, Iowa will kick off an historic first: No GOP nomination fight in the

modern era has begun without a clear front-runner.

Not only is the national campaign unprecedented, Iowa's race will see something special, too. Mitt Romney has invested heavily in both television and ground forces, reminiscent of Forbes' 2000 caucus effort; Mike Huckabee has surged on support from the state's social conservatives. The outcome of the race will be the first clash of the full-court press launched in 2000 with the state's Christian Right infrastructure. The result will be as unpredictable as it is fascinating.

On the Democratic side, a nationally dominant Hillary Clinton will face off against two tough challenges. One is from Barack Obama, whose field team has swelled to an astonishing 200+ operatives, a level of effort never seen before in the state. The other is from John Edwards, who is said *never to have closed his 2004 Des Moines office*, and so has constructed a base of support painstakingly over the course of not just four years, but *six*.

Some said Iowa's results would be lost in the extreme frontloading of the 2008 presidential nomination calendar. Yet the effect appears to have been the opposite: If Clinton wins Iowa, she appears poised to cement the nomination from that point on. On the other hand, if Obama wins the first-in-the-nation Caucus, he has a shot to capitalize on it with a New Hampshire win as well - something no Democrat has ever done without also winning the nomination, a fact which should chill the Clinton camp to the bone.

Likewise, a Romney win may propel him through New Hampshire to the GOP nomination. On the other hand, a Huckabee victory may doom Romney's lavishly-funded and finely-tuned bid for the presidency, as it opens the former Massachusetts governor to an upset in New Hampshire by John McCain, almost certainly knocking Romney from the race. (And note: if that happens, do not write off a 2008 McCain victory, something that seemed certain in November 2004 and impossible in November 2007.)

Finally, after Iowa and New Hampshire, watch the campaign of Rudy Giuliani. The former Mayor of New York has placed his bet on a dicey proposition that has never before paid off: That his substantial support in larger states can carry him through the early primary period and still gain him the nomination. Writing off the marquee presidential contests has already done substantial damage to his polling over the last few months, and it remains to be seen if he can survive a series of additional blows as he loses race after high-profile race. If he does, it will mark a new era of primary strategies.

The only thing that is certain in the 2008 Iowa Precinct Caucus, though, is the uncertainty. Watch most of all for history to be made - in a way no one can predict.

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