

Hull: Why is Iowa first?

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http://www.statesman.com/opinion/content/editorial/stories/01/04/0105hull_edit.html

Friday, January 04, 2008

About now, most Americans are probably asking themselves the same question: Why Iowa?

That is, why does a small state with an overwhelmingly rural, white population get the first crack at who both parties' presidential nominees will be?

Well, Iowa became the first-in-the-nation presidential contest, believe it or not, by accident.

In 1968, anti-war supporters of George McGovern were furious that Hubert Humphrey got the Democratic nomination in spite of dovish McGovern's mass following. In reaction, the Democratic Party adopted a series of reforms, under McGovern's leadership, to open the presidential nomination process more to its rank and file.

Those reforms included strict requirements on states relying on "caucuses," the precinct-level party meetings that choose delegates that ultimately help decide who from the state attends national party conventions.

Ever since it had become a state in 1846, Iowa had relied upon the caucus-to-convention system with only a single (disastrous) exception.

So Iowa Democrats were determined to stick to the caucus. But to maintain their system, and conform to the new rules, and still have time to get national delegates selected for the early 1972 national convention on July 9th, they had to move the precinct caucus up to Jan. 24.

That 1972 caucus attracted (who else?) McGovern, who understood the new system he helped design. He worked Iowa hard from his neighboring state of South Dakota, was rewarded with a healthy second-place showing, and ended up capturing his party's nomination.

So in 1976, an obscure southern governor named Jimmy Carter took note of McGovern's strategy and invested enormous effort in Iowa. He topped all other candidates in that year's caucuses — and rode the win all the way to the White House.

The rest is history, as other candidates scrambled to replicate Carter's feat.

But ought the Hawkeye State's fabled caucuses have this position?

Critics cry in unison, no!

Iowa, they say, does not match the country's diversity. Indeed, as of 2005 the state was 96 percent white and 3 percent black, while the country was 75 percent white and 12 percent black. Hardly a perfect match.

Critics also charge Iowa's political parties are more extreme than the national electorate. The state has strongly anti-war Democrats, for instance, and a powerful corps of Christian conservatives that make it look more like a southern state than the country's GOP writ large.

Finally, critics ask, why should any one state hold so much sway over all the others?

Supporters defend the state by saying Iowa performs a very particular —and valuable - role.

A caucus, they say, requires candidates to build up an organization, rather than merely tear down other candidates. The reason is that it's very difficult to get voters to attend 2-3 hour long party meetings at which they must often declare their support publicly — and may even have to give a speech for their favored candidate!

So any caucus is a test of retail politics — of inspiring people, one-on-one and through a group of loyal staff, to stand up, take action, and even speak out themselves about why the candidate's approach to leadership is the right one for the country.

Sound like a useful skill for a president?

Iowa in particular also discourages dependence on television and attacks. The Midwestern "Iowa nice" political culture punishes candidates who punish their peers. And my research suggests that more spending on TV relative to other candidates may actually harm presidential hopefuls, rather than helping them.

So those worried about too many negative ads in American politics, too little grassroots activism, and not enough personal leadership and strength, may have a friend in the Iowa Caucus.

Of course, that probably won't stop anyone from asking — why Iowa?

Hull, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, wrote "Grassroots Rules: How the Iowa Caucus Helps Elect American Presidents."

