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The Iowa Caucuses, 1972-2008: A Eulogy

Peeverill Squire*

*University of Missouri - Columbia, squirep@missouri.edu

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Peverill Squire

Abstract

The Iowa Caucuses have been at the front of the nomination process since 1972. There are strong indications that their first in the nation status may not last past this campaign season. I offer an assessment of the caucuses by examining six myths that have developed about them.

*Peverill Squire holds the Hicks and Martha Griffiths Chair in American Political Institutions in the Department of Political Science at the University of Missouri. His research focuses on American Politics and legislative institutions. He is co-editor of *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. His publications include *101 Chambers: Congress, State Legislatures, and the Future of Legislative Studies* with Keith Hamm, *Legislatures: Comparative Perspectives on Legislative Assemblies* with Gerhard Loewenberg and Roderick Kiewiet, and *Who Runs for the Legislature?* with Gary Moncrief and Malcolm Jewell. He taught for many years at the University of Iowa.

Iowans have long reveled in their caucuses' "first in the nation" status. The state's exalted position, however, is under grave threat. The barbarians, led by Michigan Democrats who possess a fanatical loathing for the nomination role played by Iowa, have been pounding at the caucuses' gates for a number of years. The bizarrely unsettled nature of the 2008 campaign calendar may finally give these critics all the ammunition they need to overthrow the current nomination system and finally push Iowa out of the political limelight. Thus this may be an appropriate occasion to assess the life and times of the Iowa caucuses, to separate the myths surrounding them from the reality. This is important to do because in many ways the caucuses have been misunderstood and unfairly maligned. My goal in this essay is to reflect on the history of the caucuses and to challenge some of the more important misperceptions about them.

The Iowa Caucuses: Myth and Reality

Myth #1: The Iowa country bumpkins pulled a fast one on the big state folks by jumping to the front of the line. The Iowa caucuses became the first event on the nomination calendar in 1972. It happened by accident and not through any conspiracy. Iowa Democrats settled on January 24 as the date for that year's precinct caucuses by counting backward from the national party convention's earlier-than-normal July 9 starting date. The precinct caucuses, then as now, were the first in a series of party meetings, followed in sequence by county conventions, congressional district conventions, and the state convention. In 1972, state party rules required at least 30 days between each of these events to allow for paperwork to be processed. Given that requirement, January 24 was the latest possible date when Iowa Democrats could hold precinct caucuses. As it happened, this made them the first event on the nominating schedule.

Nobody really noticed, and the caucuses were unimportant in the nominating race. In retrospect, some people pointed to them as providing the first hint of the McGovern phenomenon, because he finished a "surprising" third with 23 percent of the vote, behind uncommitted and Edmund Muskie, each with 36 percent of the vote. But McGovern had only campaigned in Iowa for about a day and a half. And in the days and weeks leading up to the caucuses the network news shows had not mentioned them at all. Even the day after the caucuses, the three network news shows devoted only between two and four minutes to discussing their results. Major tomes recounting the election did not rate the caucuses as at all important in explaining the outcome. To wit, Theodore White made no mention of them in *The Making of the President 1972*; Timothy Crouse made no mention of them in *The Boys on the Bus*; and perhaps most tellingly, Hunter S. Thompson did not hallucinate about them in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*.

It should be noted that while Iowa party leaders did not conspire to be first in the nation in 1972, after the fact the country bumpkins calculated that being at the front of the campaign calendar was a good thing. Consequently, Iowa Democrats made a conscious effort to keep the caucuses first again in 1976. Iowa Republicans, who did not need to caucus in 1972 because President Nixon was not seriously challenged, opted to join them. Being first in 1976 made the caucuses into a big deal, because long-shot candidate Jimmy Carter used them to catapult first to the Democratic nomination and then to the White House. Carter's unexpected success prompted the growth of the second myth.

Myth #2: Iowa was a king-maker. There was some resentment among political observers around the country that a small, demographically unrepresentative state like Iowa got to play such a large role in deciding who would be president. Some even labeled Iowa a "king maker." A review of the historical record shows that the decisions made in the caucuses were very important in deciding both parties' nominations. But it also reveals that Iowa alone never selected the nominee in either party.

The results of the contested caucuses in each party from 1976 to 2004 are given in Table 1. Incumbent presidents were not seriously challenged in 1984, 1996, and 2004, and nominating caucuses were not held by their party in those years. (Actually, caucuses were held, but only to tend to party matters unrelated to the presidential nomination.) In 1992 the Democratic caucuses were not seriously contested because of the candidacy of Tom Harkin, a favorite son, and that year the GOP opted not to conduct a candidate preference poll during their caucuses, even though Pat Buchanan was running against President George H. W. Bush.

As a review of table 1 reveals, the caucuses had a pretty good record for backing the eventual nominee in each party. On the Democratic side, the nominee won five out of the six caucuses, the only failure coming in 1988 when Dukakis finished a respectable third in a crowded field. The record on the Republican side was not quite as strong. The eventual party choice won Iowa in 1976, 1996, and 2000. The nominee lost in 1980, when George H. W. Bush took first in front of Ronald Reagan, and in 1988, when Bob Dole and Pat Robertson finished ahead of Bush. Those exceptions, however, prove a larger and more important point: nobody who finished below third in the Iowa caucuses ever went on to win the nomination, leading to the adage that there were only three tickets out of Iowa.

The caucus nominees' batting average of .727 might lead some to affix the king-maker label. But that title would be appropriate only if events following the caucuses showed that voters in New Hampshire and the rest of the states simply accepted Iowa's choices. In fact, there were notable instances when New Hampshire voters reached a contrary decision, such as 1984 when Gary Hart upset Walter Mondale in the Democratic race and 2000 when John McCain rallied

Table 1. Pre-Caucus National Poll Compared with Contested Caucus Results, 1976-2004

Year (Caucus Date)	Democratic Candidates	Pre-Caucus National Poll	Caucus Result	Republican Candidates	Pre-Caucus National Poll	Caucus Result
1976	Humphrey	29		Ford	53	45
(1/19)	Wallace	20		Reagan	42	43
	McGovern	10		Other, DK	5	
	Jackson	9	1	Undecided		11
	Muskie	6				
	Bayh	5	13			
	Shriver	5	3			
	Other, DK	16				
	<i>(Carter)</i>		28			
	<i>(Harris)</i>		10			
	<i>(Udall)</i>		6			
	<i>(Uncommitted)</i>		37			
1980	Carter	51	59	Reagan	40	29
(1/21)	Kennedy	37	31	Ford	18	
	Other, DK	12		Connally	9	9
	Uncommitted		10	Baker	9	16
				Bush	7	32
				Dole	4	2
				Other, DK		
				<i>(Crane)</i>		7
				<i>(Anderson)</i>		4
				Undecided		2
1984	Mondale	49	49			
(2/20)	Glenn	13	4			
	Jackson	13	2			
	McGovern	5	10			
	Askew	3	3			
	Cranston	3	10			
	Hart	3	17			
	Hollings	1	0			
	Other, DK	11				
	Undecided		10			
1988	Jackson	10	9	Bush	32	19
(2/8)	Dukakis	10	22	Dole	23	37
	Simon	10	27	Robertson	8	25
	Gore	6	0	Kemp	6	11
	Gephardt	3	31	Haig	6	0
	Babbitt	2	6	Du Pont	2	7
	Hart	25	0	Other DK	24	

Year (Caucus Date)	Democratic Candidates	Pre-Caucus National Poll	Caucus Result	Republican Candidates	Pre-Caucus National Poll	Caucus Result
	Other, DK	34				
	Uncommitted		5			
1996 (2/12)				Dole	52	26
				Forbes	13	10
				Gramm	7	9
				Buchanan	5	23
				Alexander	3	18
				Keyes	3	7
				Lugar	2	4
				Dornan	1	0
				Other, DK	13	
				Undecided		2
2000 (1/24)	Gore	58	63	<i>Bush</i>	64	41
	Bradley	30	35	McCain	17	5
	Other, DK	12		Forbes	5	30
	Uncommitted		2	Hatch	3	1
				Keyes	1	14
				Bauer	1	9
				None, DK	9	
2004 (1/19)	Dean	25	18			
	Clark	19	0			
	Kerry	9	38			
	Lieberman	9	0			
	Gephardt	7	11			
	Edwards	6	32			
	Braun	5	0			
	Sharpton	4	0			
	Kucinich	2	1			
	None, DK	14				
	Uncommitted		0			

Note: Candidate in bold won nomination, candidate in bold and italics won general election.

Sources: Polls conducted by the Gallup organization under various auspices, January 2-5, 1976; January 4-6, 1980; February 10-13, 1984; October 7-10, 1987 (Republican), December 15, 1987 (Democratic); January 12-15, 1996; January 7-10, 2000; and January 9-11, 2004. Caucus results from Peverill Squire. 1989. "Iowa and the Nomination Process." In *The Iowa Caucuses and the Presidential Nominating Process*, ed. Peverill Squire. Boulder, CO: Westview Press and <http://desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/99999999/NEWS09/71114028>.

to beat George W. Bush in the GOP contest. Even in 2004, when John Kerry seemingly rolled to the nomination on the basis of his victory in Iowa, there were serious efforts by John Edwards and others to thwart his ambitions.

In reality, Iowa's results did not end any of the nomination contests, but they did give the winner a big leg up. Importantly, the second- or third-place finishers also reaped benefits if they managed to exceed media expectations. Thus the critical role that Iowa played in the nomination process was to winnow the field. Candidates who finished lower than third, or failed to do as well as expected, were effectively forced to drop their nomination bids. This suggests that Iowa's role was less that of a king-maker and more of a peasant-maker. It also leaves open the possibility that Iowans made irresponsible or indefensible decisions. This gave rise to the third myth, that Iowans foisted unpopular choices on an unsuspecting nation.

Myth #3: Iowans made crazy decisions. Also presented in table 1 is the result of a Gallup survey taken in advance of each caucus. These data allow us to compare the choices made by Iowans with the preferences of voters nationally. In five contested caucuses—1980, 1984, and 2000 for the Democrats, 1976 and 2000 for the Republicans—caucus results closely mirrored the national numbers. Not surprisingly, several of these contests were among small slates of candidates. But in the crowded 1984 Democratic caucuses and 2000 GOP caucuses, Iowans rendered decisions about large numbers of candidates that the rest of the country likely would have made as well. Voters in Iowa also came reasonably close to national preferences in the 1980 and 1996 Republican contests. In the latter they selected the national front-runner, but by a much smaller margin than voters nationally, and in the former they boosted George H. W. Bush, a seeming also-ran nationally, just ahead of Ronald Reagan, the leading candidate. Given the overall results in those races, Iowans did not appear to have greatly violated national sensibilities. In four other caucuses, however, Iowa caucus attendees substituted their preferences for those of voters nationally. As noted above, in 1976 Iowans took an obscure former governor of Georgia, an afterthought in most national surveys, and started him on the path to the White House. But Iowa Democrats were not as prescient as political folklore would have it. The national leaders in the early surveys were candidates who did not actively run, leaving the obscure former Georgia governor to run against lower-profile opponents, albeit ones who were still better-known than he was.

In 1988, the caucuses for both parties were hotly contested by large numbers of candidates. On the Democratic side, no candidate had much support nationally. Accordingly, some candidates had to do better than their national numbers, and they ended up being Gephardt, Simon, and Dukakis. The other candidates did as well as their national numbers would suggest, save for Gary Hart whose

candidacy imploded before Iowa for reasons having nothing to do with Iowans or the caucuses. In the 1988 Republican caucuses, Iowa voters shuffled national preferences a bit. Vice President Bush, the GOP heir apparent and national front-runner, slid to third place, supplanted by Bob Dole who was second in the national polls, and Pat Robertson who was a minor candidate nationally. Dole's success was not much of a surprise, because he was a fellow Midwesterner (although not a neighbor; Iowa and Kansas do not share a border) and as such well versed in issues of interest to rural Iowans. The Robertson results might be seen as a sign that Iowa Republicans were out of touch with national sentiments, but it is here that we can credit Iowans with being prescient: Robertson's success in the caucuses heralded the arrival of the Christian Right as a force in the national Republican Party.

The final deviation occurred in 2004 on the Democratic side. National front-runner Howard Dean finished third, while John Kerry and John Edwards, both of whom were in single digits in national surveys, finished first and second respectively. Again, Iowans may not have deviated as much as it initially appears. In the days before the caucuses, the Dean candidacy had already begun to lose its appeal. (The death knell "scream," however, did not come until the post-caucus rally.) Two other nationally ranked candidates—Wesley Clark and Joe Lieberman—foolishly opted to bypass the caucuses and as a result got no support at them. Thus, with Dean looking less attractive and Clark and Lieberman missing in action, Iowans only had a few candidates to whom they could turn and among those, Kerry and Edwards were preferred.

In sum, the record of the caucuses was impressive. Iowans backed a large number of candidates who went on to get their party's nomination. The preferences of Iowans, however, largely reflected those of the nation at large. The instances where Iowans opted for candidates without much national support were relatively few and usually for understandable reasons. But if Iowans were not really wielding power to push their preferences on the rest of the country, why did they fight so hard over the years to maintain their first in the nation status?

Myth #4: It was really all about the money. Much was made about the amount of money the caucuses generated for the Iowa's economy and some people even suggested that the state's devotion to being first in the nation was really driven by dollars. How much money did the caucuses bring to the state? The economic impact in the 2008 election cycle was estimated to be as high as \$100 million. That is, of course, a large sum of money. And the business the caucuses generated meant a lot to the state's television stations, which reaped increased advertising revenues, and its restaurants and hotels, which enjoyed higher levels of patronage than they might otherwise.

Yet it is important to put the estimated economic impact in proper perspective. The Bureau of Economic Analysis' estimated gross state product for Iowa in 2006 was just under \$124 billion. It was undoubtedly bigger in 2008. If we use the \$100 million assessment of the caucuses' economic impact in 2008 and divide it by the state's overall economic product at the 2006 level it suggests that they contributed at most only .08 percent to the state's overall economy. Thus, when the caucuses cease to be important, only the bank accounts of the state's television station owners, restaurateurs, and hoteliers will really notice. But there might be a more nefarious explanation for the state's devotion to being first in the nation.

Myth #5: Iowans liked being first in the nation, because the caucuses were responsible for the federal government's ethanol subsidies. This myth was permanently enshrined in popular culture on January 26, 2005 when *The West Wing* ran an episode entitled "King Corn." It showed presidential candidates pandering to Iowans by promising continued support for ethanol subsidies. It is no secret that a lot of corn is grown in Iowa and that Iowa farmers pushed ethanol as a way of driving up the demand for corn, which, in turn, would drive up the price of a bushel. Candidates appealing for the votes of Iowans clearly had every incentive to promise to support ethanol subsidies, and over the years most, but not all, of them did so. Yet their backing does not account for government's pro-ethanol policies for two reasons.

First, while ethanol subsidies enjoy broad support from Iowans, they are really of central importance to farmers and a few associated industries that are usually located in rural areas. This means that ethanol was more important in Republican contests than in Democratic races, because Iowa farmers and rural dwellers leaned heavily in the GOP direction. Thus, ethanol policy was really much more important to Republican presidential candidates than to their Democratic counterparts. Second, while most U.S. senators may see themselves as presidential material, only a few of them run for their party's nomination every four years. Accordingly, there were too few Iowa panderers in any one election cycle to force a policy on the Senate that a majority or more of their colleagues did not support.

Keep in mind as well: members of the House have to concur with anything that passes the Senate, and even fewer of them run for the White House and pander to Iowans. Ethanol subsidies were the product of a coalition among members of Congress from agricultural states, not a nomination system that forced presidential wannabes to swear an oath to uphold them. Nevertheless, even if aberrant or self-serving national policies were not a product of the caucuses there was one more concern about them that prompted considerable consternation among outside observers. Many pundits were dubious about the process by which Iowans expressed their presidential candidate preferences.

Myth #6: In the final analysis, the caucuses were undemocratic. Many commentators chided the caucuses for their lack of participation, calling them democratically deficient. Compared to voting in most American elections, participation in the Iowa Caucuses was much more difficult and time-consuming. The caucuses were held in the evening and did not allow for any absentee voting. A person had to be at his or her caucus at the appointed time in order to participate. Moreover, the caucuses often took quite a bit of time to determine the level of support each candidate enjoyed, particularly on the Democratic side where a 15 percent threshold often prompted a second round of voting (along with seemingly endless debates over the application of the basic rules of arithmetic). And of course, a vote in a Democratic caucus was cast in full public view. All of these things worked to reduce turnout below what would have been expected for a primary election.

But it may not have been as low as many people thought. To vote in a party's caucus, a person had to be registered with that party. (Voters could register with the party on caucus night at the caucus site prior to the start of the caucus.) Thus, the appropriate turnout calculation is to divide the number of caucus attendees by the number of voters registered with the party. For example, the number of Democrats who participated in the 2004 caucuses was estimated to be 124,000. According to the Iowa Secretary of State, 533,107 active voters were registered as Democrats in January 2004. This means that turnout for the 2004 Democratic caucuses was a bit over 23 percent, a figure that might not have been anything to crow about compared to turnout in most contested primaries, but one that was far higher than the single digit numbers bandied about by caucus critics. Indeed, 23 percent turnout for an event that requires active and engaged participation might even be deemed impressive.

A related question worth pondering is what the Founders would have made of the Iowa Caucuses. Most Americans today see the caucus process as an anachronism, a reasonable opinion given their differences with the elections with which most Americans are familiar. The Founders, however, would look at the caucuses and immediately recognize them as being like the electoral processes they experienced. The Founders were familiar with the idea that voters might in some sense know the candidates from having actually seen them and with the notion that neighbors would gather together and discuss candidates and issues before voting. In contrast, current American voting practices would probably strike the Founders as odd.

Conclusions

Many of the ideas Americans had about the Iowa caucuses were wrong. Participation in them was higher than was widely thought and the decisions rendered by them were not really at much variance with the opinions of national voters. It is worth mentioning that there were a few myths that did have some grounding in the facts. Retail politics mattered. Iowans enjoyed unparalleled access to the candidates. They might not come over to the house and mow your lawn or shovel the driveway as folklore sometimes suggested, but voters in the state could see and hear the candidates in person and size them up in a way voters in the rest of the country, save for New Hampshire, could not. Because of this, it is also true that money mattered less in Iowa than elsewhere. Over the long months leading to the caucuses, candidates could substitute handshakes for television ads and still do well. Indeed, because of the enormous time and effort many candidates put into the caucuses, voters in the state could, if they so chose, become remarkably well informed. Indeed, that may be what makes Iowans most proud as they reflect on their time as first in the nation.