

# An Outsider's Inside View of the Iowa Caucuses

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Every four years the state of Iowa leads off the presidential primary season by voting in its famed First in the Nation caucuses. And every four years academics, journalists, and citizens question whether Iowa is a suitable candidate to start the primary season. As a lifelong New Jerseyan, I joined this opposition view, and favored a different system—whether regional primaries, a rotating first state, or, well, anything else. Then, just three years ago I moved from New Jersey to Iowa, providing me an inside view of the state's role in the nominating process and forcing me to see the caucuses in a new light. What I have seen, and will discuss here, are my reasons for changing my mind.

Starting in summer 2015, I started seeing campaign material appear throughout Ames, where I now live, and began hearing about events as candidates began “making the rounds.” It started with a smattering of lawn signs, and grew into almost daily mailers and canvassers from the respective candidates. The canvassers in particular were fun (for a political scientist), because they would avidly and actively try to solicit my support while I played dumb about American politics. Yes, this is how political scientists have fun in Iowa.

The real energy of the campaigns, however, are the candidate visits. The candidates don't quite swarm like flies, but they do travel all over the state doing as many events as they can before returning home to their day jobs. Most of this I expected, and found enjoyable. I was even shocked to hear people say things like, “Oh, I'm not going to the XXXX event tomorrow. He is all the way on the other

candidates and making sure that we don't let any sick chickens escape out into the yard.

Whereas I had previously viewed candidates as spectacles to see, or campaign events as political events to witness, I discovered that Iowans treat the campaigns with casual ease. Few Iowans are impressed with the candidates (at least not simply because they are potentially the next president), or awed by their presence. To Iowans, candidates are just people seeking a job, and these candidates have to be evaluated and grilled to make sure they can hack it. The candidates come to Iowa to solicit votes, but they certainly don't find Iowans wearing those votes on their sleeves. Votes are closely guarded awards that must be earned through effort and authenticity.

Some of my previous disdain towards the Iowa caucuses was created by a sense of the unfairness of the process—whereby a small sliver of an unrepresentative state got to anoint the front-runners in the presidential nomination contests. I didn't feel that Iowa, with its homogenously white, agricultural population was a fair choice to make such an important early decision. But in all my time talking to Iowans, attending events and reading local newspapers, I rarely encountered voters who advocated for a particular candidate because of specific issue stances. Almost always, the vote decision hinged upon character and a “presidential demeanor.”

This seemed odd to me, because I had thought that presidential nominees gained support here in Iowa by supporting

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side of town (a 5-minute drive). I'll wait until he does something closer to home.” Candidates do so many events throughout the state that voters can pick and choose which to attend based upon convenience, because honestly, we know they'll be back.

What I was impressed at from the process was the seriousness that most Iowans seem to approach it. Being from New Jersey, I had never seen a presidential candidate campaign in my state, and certainly would never expect to talk to one of them directly. But in Iowa that seems to be treated as standard practice. Beyond being able to see the candidates, many Iowans feel that it is their responsibility to personally talk to them. It is as if each Iowan plays an important function in vetting the

ethanol, glorifying pork, and declaring homage to egg production (three of the largest agricultural products of Iowa). But then I discovered that agriculture represents only about 3% of the Iowa economy, and that, while many Iowans have some connection to farming one way or another, they don't treat farming issues as litmus tests.

They are important, sure, but when you have seen seven candidates talk about how much they admire pigs, you really stop caring so much. Yes, Iowans do care about pork production, but they are also smart enough to realize that pork requires consumers, and consumers need jobs, and that presidents affect a much bigger world than Iowa. And besides, within the parties, how much variance is there in what candidates advocate for? Much more important, when you see them talking, is how candidates advocate for what they purport to believe in.

The real beauty of the caucus system, as I saw it, was in watching people grill candidates about what they really believed, and

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An earlier version of this article appeared in the section newsletter of the President & Executive Politics organized section of the APSA.

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what they truly cared about. Sound bites don't cut it at town halls in Iowa, because the crowd has already been to six other events, have already seen the commercials, and most have been attending events like this for decades now. Regurgitating your prepared statement is nice, but people want to hear what you really think, in your own words. What Iowans want to hear is who you are, what you stand for, and how you propose to govern. This is well beyond the starry-eyed crowd goers I expected, and typically resembled much more of a thesis defense than a political rally. Sure, people grant a certain amount of deference and respect to the candidate. But they better answer the dang questions.

I attribute this to the seriousness that Iowans take towards the process. It sounds cheesy to say, but the Iowans I met at campaign events typically cared a great deal about the role Iowans played in the nomination process. It is a source of state pride that Iowa goes first, and the citizens of the state honor that by taking their roles to heart. People didn't just attend the events of a preferred candidate, but typically go to many events, and often for candidates of both parties. They want to look at multiple candidates, use their responses against each other, and wear down each campaign until all that remains is a candidate, standing alone in front of a crowd.

The attention that coming first brings to Iowans have molded the civic duty of the citizens into one where people feel it is their responsibility to go out and personally vet the candidates. The vetting process is not a passive one—where voters sit and listen to speeches—but is an active one—where individuals ask candidates

Successful candidates in Iowa succeed not because of what they say, but for how they say it. Those candidates who can go off script, who can chat freely and casually, are the ones voters prefer. These candidates seem to convey a sense of authenticity that they truly believe in what they say, and thus don't need to hide, constrain or prepare their statements. Words flow freely off their tongue, conferring a sense that this is a candidate who can be trusted to do what they say, and not just what their campaign manager tells them is focus-group tested.

This is not to say that issues don't matter in Iowa, of course they do. And yes, the population here is very white and evangelical, and farming is a big deal here. All of that is true. But those things are not what make candidates do well in Iowa. The true value of the Iowa caucuses, and why I now support this state's right to go first, is that the people of Iowa dedicate themselves to the process, taking pride in the campaigning process. Maybe other states could learn to do this too, but Iowa does it now.

Iowans weed out those candidates who just can't handle the pressure, and reward those who can. The caucuses don't always pick the eventual nominee, but have always picked that person as one of the top three finishers. And this is an extremely valuable function to have—that of weeding out candidates who just aren't ready for the rigors, responsibilities and difficulties of campaigning for the presidency.

Yes, the state does tend to elevate the prospects of Republican candidates who cater to Christian evangelicals, and Democrats who tend to be more liberal. But overall, the caucuses serve to

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direct and pointed questions. The expectation is that candidates answer directly and honestly, revealing a great deal about their temperament, character, and personality.

This is where I found votes to be won, in the personal interactions between candidates and voters. While the typical event began with a standard stump speech, they then turned into more open question and answer sessions. The candidates that were more comfortable in this setting (Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz, Chris Christie and John Kasich come to mind) earned the respect of the crowd. Those who didn't (Jeb Bush and Carly Fiorina stand out), made less of an impression.

eliminate those candidates who don't "resonate" or don't have "what it takes" to make a strong campaign. Unlike other states, where televised commercials play a dominant role, Iowa prides itself on retail politics and hard work. Iowans want to see that candidates are willing to put in the effort to meet the public, explain their views and then do that over and over again for a sustained period of time. What better test of presidential ability is there? Perhaps another state could go first, and could approach the process with similar energy and focus. But I would caution any state that wants to try that they have huge shoes to fill. Iowa truly does it well. ■

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