

Article published Jan 6, 2008

## Why Iowa first?

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By Christopher C. Hull - Now that Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee have triumphed in the presidential race's opening salvo, 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, antiwar supporters of George McGovern were furious that Hubert Humphrey got the Democratic nomination despite dovish Mr. McGovern's mass following. In reaction, the Democratic Party adopted a series of reforms, under Mr. 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 became a state in 1846, Iowa relied on 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 9, they had to move the precinct caucus to Jan. 24.

That 1972 caucus attracted (who else?) Mr. 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 captured his party's nomination.

So in 1976, an obscure Southern governor named Jimmy Carter took note of Mr. 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 Mr. Carter's feat, just as Messrs. Huckabee and Obama hope to.

But, ought the Hawkeye State's fabled caucuses have this position? Critics cry in unison, *no*.

Iowa, they say, does not match America'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 antiwar 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 particular — and valuable — role.

A caucus, they say, requires candidates to build an organization, rather than merely tear down other candidates because it's very difficult to get voters to attend two- to three-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 about why the candidate's approach to leadership is the right one for the country. Certainly the caucus winners this time took that tack. 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 more spending on TV relative to other candidates may actually harm rather than help presidential hopefuls.

So those worried about too many negative ads in American politics, too little grass-roots 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?

*Christopher C. Hull is an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. His book, "Grassroots Rules: How the Iowa Caucus Helps Elect American Presidents," was published by Stanford University Press in November.*