

Present at the Beginning: Examining My Iowa Caucus Analysis Forty Years Later

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Abstract: My “caucus orientation” began with undergraduate participation in the 1972 Iowa caucuses. It subsequently blossomed into a PhD dissertation and early scholarly publications on the Iowa caucuses. This paper examines my analyses of the caucus process published during the first decade of their notoriety. The paper identifies the generalizations from those studies upheld in more recent work, noting the “path dependency” of the caucuses’ evolution. Forty years is a long time.

The Iowa caucuses of January 24, 1972 were my introduction to the new, reformed Democratic presidential nomination process. A sophomore at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, I and two classmates trudged through the cold darkness to a nearby school where we intended to declare our support for Edmund Muskie, the candidate we thought most likely to defeat Richard Nixon in the fall elections. Upon arrival, we found ourselves outnumbered by supporters of George McGovern’s candidacy. The McGovernites included a sizeable number of Simpson College faculty and students, liberal activists who constituted the campaign’s activist base that year.

Little did we Muskie supporters know at the time, but the McGovern turnout at our caucus would be part of a surprisingly strong statewide caucus showing by his campaign. That became national news. For the first time, the caucus results would get national media attention from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other outlets and help launch McGovern toward his presidential nomination. A state McGovern leader was my German professor Glen Buhr,

who later convinced me to support McGovern and who engineered my eventual membership on the McGovern campaign's state steering committee.

That experience spurred my interest in Democratic presidential nominations and the growing importance of the Iowa caucuses in the party's nomination politics. As an undergraduate on American University's Washington Semester program in late 1973, I researched the varying "party models" advocated by four Democratic interest groups active in post-1972 reform battles over the party's nomination process: The United Auto Workers, AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education, Americans for Democratic Action and Coalition for a Democratic Majority (where I interned). This research focus persisted during my graduate education in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's political science department. My dissertation under Leon Epstein compared the Democratic nomination processes in Iowa and Wisconsin from 1968 to 1976. It was published by the University Press of America in 1980, the first detailed scholarly examination of the Iowa caucuses (Schier 1980a).

The work examined several aspects of the Iowa caucuses. Documentary research and elite interviews yielded an account of the structural alteration of the caucuses after the pre-reform year of 1968. It explained how the new rules were adopted and their consequences in 1972 and 1976. The study described the growing role of the national media coverage of the caucuses, reaching a new height launching Jimmy Carter's 1976 candidacy, though he actually finished well behind "uncommitted" on caucus night. It also included a geographic examination of candidate support in 1972 and 1976, analyzed at the county level.

The "Old" System of 1968

Iowa's series of caucuses and conventions leading to the selection of national convention delegates underwent profound changes after 1968. That year, delegate selection proceeded as it

had in previous decades. Though the caucuses witnessed an influx of insurgent supporters of Eugene McCarthy, party “regulars” aligned with Democratic Governor Harold Hughes dominated delegate selection at district and state conventions (Schier 1980a, 91-97). No statewide tabulation of candidate support in the caucuses occurred; it remained largely an internal party matter without detailed press scrutiny by the state media and with no coverage from the national media. County conventions chose one set of district/state convention delegates by majority vote for a single slate, with the regulars’ slates usually prevailing. By the state convention’s conclusion, McCarthy had secured only five delegates, compared to 28 for Robert Kennedy and 12 for Humphrey.

Kennedy’s assassination created much flux in the delegation, but delegates ultimately followed the leadership of Governor Hughes. Hughes wanted ample support at the national convention for both Humphrey and McCarthy to keep peace in the party with whomever became the nominee. This required former Kennedy campaign chair William Sueppel to vote for McCarthy. He recalled that “I held my nose and did my duty” (Schier 1980a, 105). State party Chair Clark Rasmussen had to juggle the presence of alternates for the final national convention vote so that a balanced result occurred: 19 ½ for McCarthy, 18 ½ for Humphrey, five McGovern and three for Ted Kennedy (Schier 1980a, 105). The Iowa delegation at the national convention behaved in the fashion of the “classic” model depicted by David, Goldman and Bain in which state delegations were amenable to strategic direction by delegation leaders, usually state governors and their inner circles, in convention voting. This style accompanied the norm of selecting party and public officials as national convention delegates (1964, 250).

Big Changes in 1972

All this would alter in 1972. Governor Hughes was a Muskie supporter, but the new delegate selection process eliminated his authority over delegate selection and national convention delegation behavior so evident in 1968. Accompanying the national reform tide was the creation of the Iowa Democratic Conference, an organization of liberals pressing for internal reforms of the Iowa Democratic Party. Key leaders of the new organization were professors Charlie Hammer and Dick Seagrave of Iowa State and Glen Buhr of Simpson College. Their goal, echoing that of national reformers, was to “open up” the state Democratic Party and its delegate selection process to the influx of a new group of liberal and anti-war activists. At the national and state levels, the liberal activists succeeded.

Proof positive came in the new national rules that transformed Iowa’s delegate selection and created new opportunities for one of the most liberal 1972 presidential candidates in the Democratic field, George McGovern. The new rules created an open process contested by campaign organizations, making the caucuses a playing field lacking any hierarchical control by party regulars.

The new 1972 rules are a striking example of “path dependence” in which structures adopted at one time serve to shape behaviors in subsequent years (Pierson 2000). Though the 1968 Iowa process seems remote and obscure today, the 2020 Iowa caucuses operate according to procedures similar to those imposed by the national party in 1972. The key rules shaping outcomes over this 48 year period were the national rules requiring proportional representation and open participation, along with the new state party procedures of scheduling the caucuses first in the nomination process and tabulating the presidential preferences of caucus participants on caucus night. In 1972 and 1976, this system boosted George McGovern and Jimmy Carter, both

of whom became their party's presidential nominees. Presidential candidates, campaign operatives and national reporters have flocked to Hawkeye state's competition ever since.

In 1972, Iowa became the first state to begin delegate selection largely by accident. The rules governing the state party required that meetings in the delegate selection process be at least thirty days apart. State Democratic Chair Cliff Larson recalled that the National Convention date of July 9 required setting the state convention for May 20. That in turn required the Congressional district conventions to meet on March 25, the county conventions on February 26 and the precinct caucuses on January 24 (Squire 1989, 1). The initial "first in the nation" date was not established to create preeminence in the national process and attract national media attention. But in 1972, that is what began to happen.

The proportional representation requirements of the national McGovern-Fraser Commission were urged upon the state party by Iowa Democratic Conference leaders, many of whom had been McCarthy insurgents in 1968. The new fifteen percent proportional representation rule regarding candidate preferences made the caucuses an organizing target for campaigns seeking early momentum toward the presidential nomination. The 1972 McGovern campaign was the first to take advantage of this, dispatching several staff people in mid-November and eventually McGovern himself on a mid-January campaign swing through the state to amass support. The frontrunner Muskie's campaign, hoping Senator Harold Hughes' endorsement would boost them in the caucuses, in contrast only sent eight staff persons to the state shortly before caucus night.

The result on that night was a McGovern "surprise" that benefitted from national media attention. The state party headquarters had prepared a list of target precincts from which to project statewide candidate support. Reporters from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*

covered those results from party headquarters in Des Moines. Muskie only managed to tie uncommitted in the target precinct results at 35.5 percent while McGovern amassed 22.6 percent support. R.W Apple of the *Times* wrote that Muskie's victory was "clouded by the unexpectedly strong showing of Senator McGovern (Apple 1972). William Chapman in the *Post* wrote that the results "gave no new impetus to the Muskie campaign" (Chapman 1972).

The proportional representation rules, implemented without great confusion, changed the caucus process and its national impact in great ways. "Proportional representation clearly aided the McGovern supporters by granting them some county convention delegates in many precincts where they were only a small minority. Under the old rules, such minorities might have been outmaneuvered in the urban precincts by a slate making alliance of Muskie and uncommitted party regulars" (Schier 1980a, 148). That had happened to McCarthy insurgents in 1968.

Nelson Polsby summarized the impact of the new rules in Iowa and elsewhere: "... changing the rules had changed the game. Pre-convention skirmishes were no longer simply important evidence to be taken into account by party leaders in making nominations [as in the 1968 Iowa Democratic process]: they were the game itself" (1989, 153). 1972 thus begat an Iowa caucus boom that persists to 2020. Aspiring candidates learned the advantages of an Iowa breakthrough. Key traits of the new 1972 process would be magnified in 1976: candidate and national media attention, early scheduling, timely reporting of results. 1976 would also demonstrate how the Iowa caucuses issued the first "coffin nails" to unsuccessful candidates (Schier 1980b).

The 1976 Iowa Marathon

It was obvious to Tom Whitney, Democratic state chair in 1975, that an early date for the Iowa caucuses would garner his party much national attention from which he could generate

contributions and volunteers. The 1976 delegate selection plan, approved by the party's State Central Committee in June 1975, established January 19 as the 1976 caucus date. Whitney had convinced the state GOP to convene caucuses on the same date. Whitney's motives were "to get publicity and make money for the Democratic Party of Iowa. We knew early caucuses would get a lot of media attention this time because the 1976 process looked so unpredictable" (Schier 1980, 294). Attention was forthcoming.

The big scale of the 2020 Iowa caucus campaign continues a trend of extensive caucus campaigning that first appeared in 1976. Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter and his campaign learned from the example of early McGovern campaign attention to Iowa. Longshot candidate Carter devoted unprecedented attention to the state. He began visiting the state in February 1975, initially drawing small crowds. With the aid of campaign staffer Tim Kraft he assembled an eighty person steering committee. Kraft moved to Iowa full time by September 1, having argued in a memo to campaign leaders that "you are aware of the media/political significance of Iowa's January 19 precinct caucuses. . . . Money can't buy the kind of press we'll get if JC finishes first in the precinct caucuses" (Witcover 1978, 211). Carter's campaign was the first to emphasize Iowa in 1975, and Kraft accurately predicted the effectiveness of that strategy.

Carter's rivals, all of whom came later but eventually deployed campaign staff in Iowa, included a group of comprised mostly of liberal Democrats: US Senators Birch Bayh of Indiana and Henry Jackson of Washington, former Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma, 1972 Vice Presidential nominee Sargent Shriver, U.S. Representative Morris Udall. The October 23, 1975 Jefferson-Jackson day Democratic dinner provided an opportunity for Kraft to demonstrate his organizing skills. Carter won a candidate straw poll with 23.4 percent of the vote.

Interest groups also became more active in caucus politicking. The State's United Auto Workers formally endorsed Carter and leaders of the Communications Workers of America informally touted Bayh to their members. Several district committees of the Iowa State Education Association endorsed Bayh and one committee endorsed Udall. The early and energetic efforts by the UAW on Carter's behalf proved to be the most important interest group endorsements of the caucus campaign (Schier 1980, 311).

By January, more candidate organizations were active and campaign funds expended than ever before on the caucuses. Carter, Bayh, Harris, Shriver and Udall engaged in three hectic weeks of campaigning across the state leading up to caucus night. Dick Sykes, working for Bayh, recalled: "When Bayh got to Creston, a town of 6,000, we found we were the third presidential candidate to be there! We were the first in Pocahontas (2,500 people) but we were closely followed by Eunice Shriver and Carter. It was just incredible saturation" (Schier 1980, 313).

On caucus night, all major national newspapers and wire services had correspondents present, and the three major networks broadcast live coverage of the caucus returns. Tom Whitney had established a phone in system linking county party chairs to a caucus return headquarters at the Des Moines Hilton. Party employee Joe Genereaux provided immediate coverage of candidate support patterns based on sample precinct returns. Whitney charged a \$10 admission fee for the public and press (Schier 1980, 316).

Republicans got in on the act by conducting a straw poll in which President Gerald Ford narrowly bested challenger Ronald Reagan by 45 to 42 percent. The big news, however, was on the Democratic side, where Jimmy Carter finished far ahead of the other candidates with 29.1 percent, though uncommitted led the preferences with 38.5 percent. Birch Bayh finished third

with 11.4 percent, far behind Carter. The results also delivered “coffin nails” -- the beginning of the end of the campaigns of Jackson, Shriver, Bayh and Harris. Only Udall fought on for several months before Carter prevailed in subsequent primaries and caucuses. Carter’s nomination and election as president confirmed the importance of the caucuses among the political cognoscenti.

The 1976 caucuses produced a then-record seven *New York Times* stories and fifteen network news stories about the candidate competition. That would grow steadily in later years, particularly when both parties had competitive nomination battles, as for example in 1988. In 1987 and 1988, the *Times* produced 118 Iowa caucus stories and a majority of all satellite dishes in the nation were in Des Moines broadcasting caucus night results (Squire 1989, 5). Democratic candidates on average spent seventy-eight days campaigning in the state that year, Republicans averaged fifty (Squire 1989, 4). The candidate and media din continues in 2020.

The key rules of 1972 have structured often grand caucus battles ever since. The Iowa parties have successfully fought to keep the caucuses “first in the nation” status. Proportional representation coupled with timely reporting from the state parties gives the national media, devoted to “horserace” coverage, useful information on the competition. Open participatory rules make the caucuses scandal free and user-friendly to the sliver of the public willing to spend several hours in a meeting room with fellow activists in the middle of winter. 2020 brings more of the same.

Researching the Iowa Caucuses

The rising importance of the Iowa caucuses caused academics to study aspects of the contests. Since the late 1970s, studies have centered on three topics: the representativeness of the Iowa caucuses, process behaviors in the caucuses and the impact of the caucuses on presidential nominations and American politics.

An early study of caucus representativeness by Hutter and Schier (1984) compared the presidential preferences and political opinions of caucus attenders and state convention delegates. The authors employed a mail questionnaire of caucus attenders and state convention delegates yielding a response rate of approximately 50 percent. They discovered close representativeness on issue opinions and presidential preferences between state delegates and caucus attenders of each of the parties. Hugh Winebrenner next contributed an evaluative critique of the caucuses, arguing they were a “media event” lacking broader representativeness due to media exaggeration of the import of the results (Winebrenner 1987).

Evidence from the 1984 Iowa process gathered by Stone, Abramowitz and Rapoport (1989) further assessed representativeness. Amassing mail surveys of caucus attenders in Iowa, Virginia and Michigan, the authors discovered the Iowa attenders were better representative of responses in a general election exit poll of state voters than were Virginia and Michigan caucus attenders of their states’ voters. The authors suggested the stronger Iowa representativeness may have resulted from the heavier turnout and candidate competition due to the state’s early place in the nomination calendar (1989, 45). However, they found Iowa nomination activists were better educated, older higher income and more ideologically extreme than the broader group of 1984 state voters (1989, 44).

In contrast, Daniel C. Bowen discovered that the 2008 Iowa caucus attenders were representative of the state’s registered voters in terms of partisanship and socioeconomic status, concluding that they seem “fairly representative of the Iowa electorate” in that year. (2009, 136 and 138). He noted how the caucuses’ prominence and competitiveness may have boosted representativeness. In a related study, Redlawsk, Tolbert and Donovan (1989, 116) emphasized the importance in “drawing distinctions” among caucusgoers: “Calling voters who attend

caucuses ‘party activists’ is just not accurate. Many are, but in a high-turnout year like 2008, many are not” (1989, 117). The summary lesson so far is that schedule prominence and candidate competition seem to enhance the representativeness of the Iowa caucuses.

Recent decades witnessed many studies of process behaviors during the Iowa caucuses. Christopher Hull’s thorough multivariate study of the 2004 caucuses (2008) yielded important discoveries about the process. In 2004, time spent by candidates in the state affected the outcome, the fifteen percent proportional representation rule for Democrats hurt their lower tier candidates, television ads did not enhance candidates’ fortunes and the Internet boosted Iowa’s impact on the New Hampshire primary and the eventual nomination (2007, 143-147). Jay Newell, analyzing the intense political advertising during the 2016 Iowa caucus campaign -- \$46 million spent by 21 candidates over nine months – found that candidate spending in that year mattered: “high spending candidates were most successful in gaining support at the caucuses” (2018, 1). 2020 caucus campaigns now operate on that premise for fear of missing an opportunity to win big in Iowa.

Yet another “competition effect” of the caucuses has appeared in the engagement of caucus attenders. Comparing registered voter survey samples in early, middle and late voting states in the 2008 nomination process, William W. Franko found the highest levels of engagement among his Iowa sample. Iowans had the highest incidence of reading political news, visiting candidate websites, sending political emails, attending campaign events, contributing money and actually meeting a candidate (2011, 190-1). Competitiveness, he argued, may lead to many good outcomes: “A take-home lesson from 2008 may be that competitive presidential nominations make the process work better, leading to more representative electorates and reducing bias in participation” (2009, 209). Redlawsk, Tolbert and Donovan (2009, 86-117),

employing caucus attender surveys, document the widespread and frequent contact of potential caucus goers by 2008 candidates, a year that featured intense contests in each party, which also no doubt boosted participant engagement that year.

Recent studies of Iowa caucus goers have also sought to address related theoretical questions. Knoll, Redlawsk and Sanborn conducted an experiment employing surveys of Iowa voters during the 2008 caucus campaign to assess group framing labels on views about immigration policy. Framing labels, they discovered, matter most among Republican partisans holding immigration to be a highly important issue (Knoll, Redlawsk and Sanborn 2011). Dimitrova and Bystrom (2013) conducted a multivariate analysis employing two telephone surveys of Republicans and Independents in Iowa during the 2012 caucus campaign. They found that social media had no effect on caucus turnout among respondents but did affect their perceptions of candidate traits. Warner and colleagues (2017) surveyed candidate rally attenders during the 2016 caucuses to determine their attributions of malevolence toward rival groups and acceptance of political violence. The authors utilized questionnaires conducted at rallies for candidates Clinton, Cruz, Sanders and Trump. They discovered that attending a rally for Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump indirectly related to acceptance of political violence and attributions of malevolence.

A third research path has examined and evaluated the impact of the Iowa caucuses upon nomination and general election outcomes. Polsby, Wolfinger and Bartels (1989) each assessed the importance of the Iowa caucuses upon presidential selection in the 1980s. All concluded the Iowa effect was important and raised questions about the appropriateness of one state having such a pronounced role. Mark Hull's extensive empirical analysis of the caucuses (2008) found that Iowa's caucuses mattered "disproportionately" (144) in presidential nominations from 1976-

2004, with the impact growing later in this period due to the rise of the Internet. Redlawsk, Tolbert and Donovan, employing a national phone survey conducted before and after 2008's Super Tuesday, found that early state results affected Super Tuesday voters' "perceptions about the viability and electability of candidates" (2009, 177). Iowa results helped generate candidate momentum that affected subsequent nomination contests. Christenson and Smidt (2013) also discovered that "early states still matter" (2013, 600) by examining early polls in Iowa and New Hampshire in 2007 and their effect on national polls, media coverage and campaign fundraising during the "invisible primary" before the Iowa caucuses. The authors concluded: "Most notably, we show that Iowa and New Hampshire make it possible for success in retail politics and local campaigning to translate into national success" (2013, 620).

The "Iowa effects" uncovered in recent research give later support to a summary assessment by Nelson Polsby in 1989: "Iowa results, plus media spin, structure the alternatives for the New Hampshire primary. These two events together plus media spin structure alternatives for everything that follows" (1989, 158).

Lessons from Early Research

The Iowa caucuses received increasing scholarly attention over the decades, allowing one to draw conclusions about the caucuses' operations and evolution. Three aspects of the caucuses seem predominant: traits that have vanished, those that have persisted and those that have evolved to the present day.

The structure and behaviors of the "pre reform" Iowa caucuses have pretty much vanished. The internal composition of the Iowa parties during that era have disappeared. A. A Rogow in 1961 described those extinct traits: "Political differences exist, but they exist less between the parties than within the parties, and within the parties they tend to be personal or

factional rather than ideological” (Rogow 1961, 69). Many recent studies reveal sharp ideological differences between Democratic and Republican caucus attenders and political activists (for example, Schier 1980, Stone, Abramowitz and Rapoport 1989, Hull 2008, Redlawsk, Tolbert and Donovan 2011). Governor Hughes’ domination of the 1968 convention delegation, an example of Davis, Goldman and Bain’s (1964) “traditional” delegation behavior, also vanished with the 1972 reforms. These extinct characteristics serve as a baseline for identifying the causes of the Iowa caucuses’ transformation after 1968.

The 1972 Iowa Democratic Party and McGovern-Fraser delegate selection alterations are the major structural change creating the Iowa caucus politics with which we are familiar in 2020. The key national party rules shaping outcomes since 1972 proportional representation and open participation. The state party contributed timely tabulation of the presidential preferences of caucus participants and the advent of “first in the nation” candidate competition. With these changes, the parameters of caucus preeminence and competition were well established by 1972. The persistence of these traits has maintained the caucuses’ frequent national political importance for 48 years.

After 1972, the caucuses experienced a gradual magnification of caucus competition, growing from the realization among candidates, interest groups and journalists that the Iowa caucuses could shape presidential nomination outcomes. The national nomination process had become a multistate marathon, far removed from the smoke filled rooms of the past. As I wrote in 1980, “the post-1976 conventional wisdom is that all serious candidates must actively participate in most state primaries and caucuses to win the nomination” (Schier 1980, 3).

By 1976, the astute Carter campaign had increased campaign efforts beyond those pursued by McGovern and Muskie in 1972. State interest groups, primarily unions such as the

United Auto Workers and state teachers association, devoted more resources to influencing caucus outcomes. The caucuses in 1976 also first signaled the eventual death knell of candidates who finished back in the pack. In later decades, more candidates would devote great time and campaign resources to the caucuses, interest groups would undertake more activities to spur turnout among their members and assist the campaigns of endorsed candidates, and candidates finishing back in the pack usually would find their nomination prospects greatly dimmed.

Changing the rules did change the game. New structures produced new behaviors that are with us in the 2020 caucuses. Little did Iowa Democrats realize in 1972 when they reworked the caucus process and implemented the McGovern-Fraser reforms that they had created a path that we would follow for 48 years. Over those years, media attention, candidate competition and popular participation in the Iowa caucuses has increased, a magnification of traits first evident with the new 1972 rules. Path dependent evolution, indeed.

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