

Iowa caucuses mark official start of US presidential nomination process

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The Iowa Democratic and Republican party caucuses, held January 24, marked the official beginning of the selection of delegates to the presidential nominating conventions of the two big business parties. Media coverage has focused only on the immediate results—Bush's victory on the Republican side, Gore's easy defeat of Bradley among the Democrats—while attributing enormous significance to the actions of a relatively small number of voters.

Caucuses served as a means of political mobilization in the days—half a century ago and more—when the Democratic and Republican parties had a sizeable popular base and depended on extensive local organizations to sustain them. The Iowa caucuses are precinct-level meetings held at several thousand locations throughout the state on the same evening to select delegates to county-wide conventions, which in turn will select delegates to the state convention, which will then select delegates to the presidential nominating conventions of each party, to be held next August.

Prior to voting for delegates to the county conventions, those attending the precinct caucuses indicate their choice for the presidential nomination, with a secret-ballot vote on the Republican side and a division into groups supporting each candidate on the Democratic side. The Iowa Democratic Party does not even count or report the number of votes actually cast for any candidate, only the percentage of county delegates pledged to each.

As the organizational framework of both big business parties has weakened, caucuses have been replaced in most states by primary elections, usually open to any voter. But a handful of states have preserved the caucus system, which no longer plays any significant role in the internal functioning of the party. Instead, the caucuses have become the occasion for a peculiar sort

of campaign in which the candidates compete to turn out the largest number of supporters at the precinct-level meetings.

This means that an enormous amount of money and organizational effort are expended to influence an extremely narrow section of the electorate. Those who attend the caucuses are either closely linked to the party apparatus itself or, more frequently, linked to organizations which are allied with the two parties. In the case of the Democrats, the trade union bureaucracy and university groups supply disproportionate numbers of caucus-goers. In the case of the Republicans, attendance is boosted by the Farm Bureau Federation, the Chamber of Commerce, and above all, right-wing fundamentalist groups like the Christian Coalition.

The unrepresentative character of the Iowa procedure is compounded by the fact that the caucuses are party-run polls, not state-run, and voters have to identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans in order to take part at all. More than 50 percent of the electorate reject any formal affiliation with either party. Add to this the enormous mobilization of the media, giving exaggerated attention to a campaign in a state which, like New Hampshire next week, is overwhelmingly white and rural, with only one city of more than 100,000 people.

The media presence created another anomaly, which only underscores the artificiality of the whole event. Unlike election-night reporting, which relies on exit polls, the caucus-night reports were based on entry polls of delegates going into the precinct meetings. The television networks were thus able to broadcast their predictions of the winners before any voting had actually taken place. Press accounts describe caucus-goers flipping on televisions to see who had won the caucuses statewide, then proceeding to cast their own

ballots.

State officials estimated that about 166,000 people participated in either Democratic or Republican gatherings, just over 9 percent of the 1.8 million registered voters in the state. The actual vote totals for the Republican candidates add up to just over 84,000 people, of whom some 34,547, or 41 percent, voted for George W. Bush. Billionaire publisher Steve Forbes received 25,490 votes, or 30 percent. Anti-abortion campaigner Alan Keyes obtained 12,000 votes, or 14 percent, while the other Christian fundamentalist candidate, Gary Bauer, received 7,150 votes, or 9 percent, Senator John McCain, who did not campaign, collected 3,950 votes, 5 percent, and Senator Orrin Hatch, who did, received only 867 votes, 1 percent, and announced his withdrawal from the race.

It is worth comparing the 80,000 who voted in the Republican caucuses with the 25,000 who cast ballots in the straw poll held last August at the state fairgrounds in Ames. Forbes, Keyes and Bauer between them took 53 percent of the vote at the caucuses. By contrast, at the straw poll, there were five candidates seeking the fundamentalist vote, including Patrick Buchanan and former Vice President Dan Quayle, but they received only 40 percent of the ballots cast.

Thus the caucuses—while conducted statewide rather than at a single location, and thereby drawing a numerically larger turnout than the straw poll—were even more under the sway of the extreme right-wing groups which have come to dominate the Republican Party in the last two decades. Bush's own vote owed considerably to support from evangelical and fundamentalist Christians—according to caucus-day entry polls he was the leading choice of these elements, just ahead of Forbes. In the last two weeks of the Republican campaign in Iowa the candidates focused almost entirely on abortion, with Bush under attack from his right-wing opponents for allegedly downplaying the issue.

On the Democratic side the social layers participating in the caucuses differed, but were just as narrow. The AFL-CIO and UAW bureaucracy played the major role, along with the National Education Association, mobilizing union officials, teachers and workers close to the bureaucracy to campaign and vote for Gore.

Bradley could not match this organizational support, despite outspending Gore on television, \$1.9 million to

\$1.6 million, and spending far more time in the state campaigning, 63 days to 38 days. Just a month ago, Bradley's staff was openly speculating that he could win the caucus fight, but the former New Jersey Senator did not articulate any significant differences with the conservative social policies of the Clinton-Gore administration. Gore won 64 percent of the delegates to 35 percent for Bradley, who ran ahead of the vice president in only one social group: families with incomes over \$75,000.

Bush pronounced himself “thrilled with a record-setting victory,” meaning he exceeded the previous record for a winning candidate in a six-candidate field, the 37 percent polled by Robert Dole four years ago. But despite media headlines about his victory, Bush actually received about the same number of votes as Bradley, whose performance was characterized by the same media as a disastrous setback. His margin of victory over Forbes, 10 percentage points, was the same as his margin in the Iowa straw poll nearly six months ago.

Forbes outspent every other candidate. The self-bankrolled billionaire publishing heir spent more than \$2 million—about \$100 for each vote—a figure which could easily be topped in next week's New Hampshire primary election.



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