

## The Cess Poll

*Is the Iowa Caucus a Negative Force in Presidential Politics?*

On January 21, 1980, KEMB-FM in Emmetsburg, Iowa, broadcast from the city water plant. With a pause between each, the announcer intoned the names of the two major candidates for the Democratic nomination that year, Carter and Kennedy, and then “undecided/don’t care.” After reading each one, he asked Emmetsburgers to flush their toilets to indicate their choice. The station measured how far the water level dropped for each. Undecided/don’t care was the winner by a two-to-one margin, with Kennedy trailing Carter badly. The contest came to be known as the cess poll (Winebrenner 1998).

The main question this book addresses is whether the first-in-the-nation Iowa Presidential Caucus is a cess poll—and whether we should be flushing at “don’t care” regardless. To answer that one question, it tackles a series of others whose answers ultimately (I hope) shed light on how presidential candidates win state nomination contests and even on the nomination itself.

But perhaps we should back up and define the book in a slightly more formal way. Its subject is the Iowa Precinct Caucus Presidential Straw Poll, known to most simply as the Iowa Caucus, which has for several decades been approximately the first contest in the American presidential primary process, usually occurring just before the New Hampshire Primary.

Caucuses, for those not familiar with them, are lengthy local party meetings used to conduct party business and select delegates to further regional conventions, which ultimately decide how the state's presidential delegates will be allocated. They are different from primaries, in which voters simply show up and vote as they would in a general election. Because of the time commitment that caucuses require, they tend to draw only the party's activists—and according to their folklore at least, caucuses as a result encourage primary candidates to rely more heavily on retail politics and grassroots organization<sup>1</sup> to win them.

To its critics, the Iowa Caucus in particular has some explaining to do, to put it mildly. Winebrenner, for instance, concludes his landmark work, *The Iowa Precinct Caucuses: The Making of a Media Event* (1998, 262), by saying, “The public interest is not well served when manipulated and distorted nominating events like the Iowa precinct caucuses determine the viability of presidential candidates.” Manipulated? Distorted? Those are fighting words. To Winebrenner and his (numerous) fellow critics, the Iowa Caucus is *definitely* a cess poll.

Every time the snow flies the year before the U.S. presidential election, America notices again that a small, rural, overwhelmingly white state in the Midwest is helpfully eliminating a swath of candidates running for president. Accordingly, like clockwork, a quadrennial call to impose the death penalty on the first-in-the-nation Caucus rings through the media, the political science community, and especially the political superstructure of other states that would rather go first.

And they've got a point—or rather, several of them.

First, critics say, the press that comes out of the Caucus is crazily out of step with the technical importance of the contest. According to Brady (1989), for instance, Iowa receives about 243 times as much media coverage as one would otherwise expect given the number of delegates it allocates, even controlling for the date of the contest.

That said, there is a serious debate over whether Iowa actually has an impact on the nomination. Two recent studies (Atkins and Dowdle 2001;

Mayer 2004) contend strongly that what really matters is New Hampshire—and after it, Iowa is a bit of an afterthought. If that's true, and Iowa doesn't matter to the ultimate nomination, then critics' charge that it gets too much attention is a little moot. (Of course, this book would be a bit moot as well, so it is well worth exploring.)

Second, critics contend that the Iowa Caucus in particular has simply gotten away from what made it special: retail politics. Caucuses, according to their advocates, tend to encourage candidates to build, rather than to destroy—to rally supporters to them in elaborate, motivated organizations, not simply to run attack television ads as they do in primary states and the general election. But because of Iowa's prominence, critics charge, turnout there has soared, organization's importance has dwindled, and television has become a far more dominant force.

Not so fast, say Iowa's supporters—in this case, Iowans themselves. Political observers in the state acknowledge there is far more TV advertising than in years past, but they insist that “time on task” by the candidates themselves and powerful grassroots organizations still carry the day.

Third, critics point accusingly to Iowa's demography and ideology, saying both are totally unrepresentative of the party or of the country more generally. The state is racially homogeneous, they argue, and there can be no doubt that it is so.<sup>2</sup> According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2005 Iowa was 95.79 percent white and 2.79 percent black, with 3.48 percent of whites identifying as Hispanics, while the country was 74.7 percent white and 12.1 percent black, with 14.5 percent identifying as Hispanics.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, goes this line of critique, caucusgoers in particular are philosophically more extreme than others of their party. The Democratic National Committee chair, Ron Brown, for instance, made the argument in 1992 that Iowa was nominating candidates too liberal to win the general election (Winebrenner 1998, 21).

Again, some have raised skeptical eyebrows. In a series of studies in the 1980s, Abramowitz, Stone, Rapoport, and others proposed a Moderation Hypothesis: in Iowa and elsewhere, ideologically extreme voters were strategically choosing candidates closer to the political center than they were, basing their choice on the candidate's ability to win the White House. If that Moderation Hypothesis is borne out in Iowa's actual outcomes, critics' charge on ideology is, again, moot.

By the same token, if in spite of Iowa caucusgoers' demographic unrepre-

representativeness, minority candidates are not losing out disproportionately, especially when controlling for other factors, it would take some edge off critics' charges on that front as well.

Fourth, a common concern about Iowa is its tendency to support mid-western candidates. Certainly in 1992, when Iowa senator Tom Harkin (D) ran for the presidency, the state gave little ground to other candidates. But more generally, regional favorites like Senator Bob Dole (R-Kan.) and Representative Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) have overperformed in the Caucus.

Fifth and finally, there is Winebrenner's charge that the Iowa caucus results themselves are questionable. Overall, Winebrenner argues, "projections based on precinct caucuses are invalid and unreliable indicators of presidential candidate strength in Iowa." He cites three reasons. First, he says, no actual votes are taken. Second, the 15 percent "viability thresholds" mandated of caucuses by the national Democrats mean candidates' vote strengths include support from other candidates. Third, the "fluidity and duration" of Iowa's true delegate selection process undercut estimates made on caucus night (Winebrenner 1998, 50).

In 1976 on the Democratic side the result was "phony" and on the Republican side it was badly overblown, Winebrenner charges (pp. 71, 73, 75). In 1980 the process was improved somewhat, he reports (p. 101), but he says the real lesson was that "Iowa's political parties should be required to provide independently verified caucus results, or the media should ignore the state and its precinct caucuses" (p. 98). In 1984 the Democrats again struggled with how to report their results in a timely and accurate way, and the *Des Moines Register* called it "a botched caucus count" and a "pathetic performance" (pp. 124, 171). In 1996, says Winebrenner, "although only a straw poll, and unrelated to delegate selection, the results were 'votes' to the media and they were reported nationally and internationally" (p. 237). When constructing the Iowa caucus system and promoting it to the candidates and the national media, Winebrenner argues, "the promoters conveniently lost sight of the fact that caucus and convention systems do not produce outcomes in the way that primary elections do" (p. 254).

Winebrenner's argument leads to the single research question that undergirds this book: is the Iowa Caucus a negative force in presidential politics? While final judgment must be left to each reader, the following fundamental questions, were we to answer them, would certainly help us

to better understand the Iowa Caucus's role and the presidential primary process more generally:

Does Iowa make any difference in who wins the nomination? If Mayer and Adkins and Dowdle are right and Iowa doesn't matter in its own right, why not write a book on New Hampshire? (Should we flush at "don't care"?) Or does the Caucus have an important impact on the outcome of the nomination, as it appeared to in both 1976, when Carter rode a win there to the White House, and 2004, when Kerry rode a win there to the nomination (and back to the Senate)?

Does retail politics really still matter in the Caucus? Is turnout now so high and TV now so dominant that the state has lost its claim on being a Lincolnian, social capital-rich, positive grassroots force in the presidential primary process? Or is pressing the flesh in person, persuading one thoughtful voter at a time, still the crucial tactic it supposedly once was?

Do Hawkeye State caucusgoers vote strategically or ideologically (or both)? That is, are they supporting those who can win or just choosing candidates based on who believes most like them? Are they crippling their parties by nominating candidates philosophically out of step with the American voting public? Or do they make allowances for candidates who are more likely to win the White House, letting them off the hook ideologically, as it were?

I set out to answer these questions. In the process, I hoped to illuminate issues broader than whether Iowa was a cess poll.

- I wanted to examine the early states' role in the primary more generally, measuring the impact of both Iowa and New Hampshire on the ultimate nomination.
- I wanted to test whether technology was changing the role of those early states, and of momentum more generally, by amplifying candidates' ability to capitalize on important events.
- I wanted to find ways of quantifying so-called retail politics, the oldest and most common tactic in all of politics and yet one so poorly understood.
- I wanted to find a measure of ideological crowding within a multi-candidate field, building on many past studies of how competitors'

philosophies interact with those of the electorate, to construct a useful tool that I (and others) could use in the future.

- Finally, I wanted to find out how presidential candidates win state nomination contests, and more specifically, I wanted to explore as completely as I could how candidates won in a single, crucially important state's contest—in fact, the most puzzling, mysterious state one could choose to predict in the presidential nomination process.

This study contains what I found out about all these issues, both inside and outside the Missouri River and Mississippi River borders of the Hawkeye State.

As I see it, the results fit within two separate but interlocking debates within the political science literature: what matters in winning the ultimate nomination, and what matters in winning an individual state's nominating contest.

First, the book is situated within the presidential primary literature's debate over the impact, nature, and desirability of variations on what thinkers like James I. Lingle (1981a) and Barbara Norrander (1996) have termed the "Rules of the Game." Those rules include the fallout from the Democratic Party reforms of the 1970s, the placement of the earliest states in the primary, the increasingly dominant role of front-loading, and the interplay of these forces with the "exhibition season" (or "invisible primary") of fund-raising, poll taking, and pundit opining during the year or so before the election.

Like the presidential general election literature, the primary literature includes elaborate and highly sophisticated efforts to predict which presidential candidate will ultimately triumph in the nomination battle. Those efforts, especially the early ones by Parent et al. (1987) and Bartels (1988), lay the foundation for understanding the role of substantive factors like the demographic and political lay of the land, as well as dynamic factors like candidate momentum and bandwagon effects.

In particular, theorists modeling multicandidate presidential primaries (Bartels 1988; Norrander 1993; Mayer and Busch 2004; Cohen et al. 2004) place a central emphasis on momentum. The models rely on success in preceding contests to proxy that momentum—but in the Caucus, there usually are no preceding contests. We need a better understanding of what predicts success in Iowa to calculate early-state candidate odds in future multi-candidate primary models.

If rules placing the Iowa Caucus first and emphasizing the momentum that Iowa generates are indeed exerting an important impact on nomination outcomes, as commonly held, then knowing what kinds of campaigns win in Iowa matters a great deal, and we need to understand the Caucus's nature better. If Iowa is not exerting a significant impact, to some extent the rules placing it first and the momentum it creates are less important.

Those examining Iowa's impact on the nomination in particular have focused on the intense media coverage it generates (Arterton 1978; Robinson 1981; Brady 1989; Mayer and Busch 2004) and the resulting devastation it brings to poorly performing candidates (Bartels 1989; Wolfinger 1989). But Adkins and Dowdle (2001) suggest the Caucus is of no predictive value in the nomination's outcome. Rather, they find, the preprimary exhibition season dominates who is nominated. This line of thought also explores how much state-to-state momentum matters in determining nomination outcomes (Lengle and Shafer 1976; Schier 1980; Polsby 1983; Stone and Abramowitz 1983; Norrander 1996; Hagen and Mayer 2000).

Thus the question, worth revisiting after Kerry captured Iowa and the nomination in 2004: how much does winning the Iowa Caucus really matter?

With respect to the Rules of the Game conversation, Chapters 3 and 4 are part of an active current inquiry by various researchers into the role of Iowa's first-in-the-nation Caucus and New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation Primary—including both the positive question of the degree to which they influence the ultimate nomination process, and the normative question of whether that degree of influence is a good or a bad thing.

With respect to the predictive literature, both chapters contend mostly with the dynamic side of the equation, estimating traditional and technological forms of momentum coming out of the early primary states.

In addition, Chapter 4 defies the long-standing premise reflected in several recent works that Iowa bows to New Hampshire in its ultimate impact on the nomination. In a sense, I see this result as supporting theorists who believe the Rules of the Game are crucial determinants of primary outcomes. The chapter also strongly challenges long-standing predictive assumptions about momentum's role, based on American politics' new wired world.

And most directly, Chapter 7 proposes a way to tackle forecasting outcomes in the Caucus—very likely the hardest nomination contest in

the country to predict—which is intended to aid theorists like Mayer at Northeastern and Cohen and his colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles, who are currently at work building and improving larger primary forecasting models that require some estimate of momentum going into Iowa.

Second, the study is part of the debate over what explains outcomes in electoral contests, including the degree to which American politics still fosters and draws upon Putnam's "social capital."<sup>4</sup> Within the primary literature, one line of this discussion centers on campaign effects—the impact on electoral outcomes of various tactics like television, in-person voter contact, and direct mail. Another line of discussion within that literature is the "vote choice" investigations of the interplay between ideology and electability—the "strategic voting" that rational choice theorists in particular contend is taking place.

Thus assuming Iowa is important, the next question to address is what factors influence which campaigns succeed in the state—that is, what explains Caucus outcomes. Many theorists have looked at vote choice and representativeness in the caucus and primary system (Lengle 1981b; Hutter and Schier 1984; Mayer 2000) and find that Iowa is demographically and ideologically deeply unrepresentative. However, as we have seen, one class of the vote-choice school qualifies that finding by positing that Iowa's ideological slant is mitigated by the caucusgoers' desire to pick a winner (Stone 1982; Abramowitz and Stone 1984; Stone, Rapoport, and Abramowitz 1989, 1992).

What this literature does not contain is a full exploration of what factors actually determine candidate outcomes in Iowa, as opposed to individual vote choice. Such an understanding could help determine whether the ideological and demographic unrepresentativeness of the state skews its actual outcomes and the degree to which those outcomes are mitigated by the previously observed individual caucusgoer's desire to favor electability. More generally, such a model could help answer the question raised by Winebrenner (1998): whether the Iowa Caucus structure still places a central emphasis on grassroots organizing and whether electronic media has passed grassroots by in terms of determining the state's outcomes.

In particular, Chapter 5 enters the melee over whether the Iowa Caucus—which may be the hardest primary contest in the country to



explain—remains organization driven or is evolving into a kind of pseudo-primary. Chapter 5 lands heavily on the side of those who believe retail politics dominates the state.

Also, Chapter 6 participates in the literature's discussion over how caucusgoers' ideological and demographic skew interacts with their sophistication to produce strategic results, ultimately siding with the team of Abramowitz, Stone, Rapoport, and their colleagues, who have found caucus voters' political sophistication counterbalancing their staunch ideologies, finding that sophistication reflected in aggregate-level Caucus results.

A more specific summary of the questions asked and answered by each chapter follows.

*Chapter 2: What Is a Caucus?* This chapter asks, broadly and with a historical tone, How did the American presidential primary system evolve into its current form? Should we be concerned about that form at all? How did that system spawn the current role that Iowa plays, whatever that may be? And what candidates has the Caucus helped and halted since it gained its role at the forefront of the presidential primary process?

*Chapter 3: Who Cares about Iowa?* This chapter investigates whether the Iowa Caucus actually matters in how we pick our presidents. It adds new data on Kerry's 2004 win as well as Carter's 1976 win not included in past studies to help settle the score, relying exclusively on the current measures of momentum used in the literature, rather than taking technology into account as Chapter 4 does.

Chapter 3 finds as recent studies have that, measuring Iowa's momentum effects in the traditional way, the New Hampshire Primary results mediate the impact the Caucus has on the presidential nomination (Mayer 2004). However, it also finds that candidates' Iowa performance plays a modest role as a predictor of their New Hampshire vote share, controlling for pre-Iowa Granite State polls as well as performance in the exhibition season that precedes the election year on measures such as fund-raising and national polling. And the chapter identifies a potential explanation for the recent empirical finding that Iowa does not appear to matter to the ultimate nomination: New Hampshire may be filtering out Iowa's midwestern bias, at least with respect to Tom Harkin, the Hawkeye State's favorite son in 1992.

*Chapter 4: From the "Big Mo" to "E-mentum."* This chapter explores

whether technological changes are amplifying the impact of momentum in presidential races. It asks, Do moments of increased momentum have bigger payoffs in a world of online fund-raising, Web-based organizing, and e-mail communication?

The question is important, the chapter argues, because the literature is rife with studies of momentum's impact on the state-by-state dynamics of primary election presidential politics. But the impact of that momentum appears to be changing. In 1980 George Bush the elder won the Iowa Caucus but could not capitalize on his "Big Mo." Yet in 2004, for the first time since Carter, Iowa momentum again carried a candidate to the nomination. The reason may be that the Internet finally allows cash-strapped, trailing candidates to jack into money and supporters online fast enough to catch up with front-runners, given a big-enough win. I term this technologically enhanced momentum *e-mentum*.

The chapter finds empirically that *e-mentum* is a quantifiable, statistically significant phenomenon, with respect to Iowa's impact on both the New Hampshire Primary and the ultimate nomination. It further estimates specific *e-mentum* bonuses from Iowa in both contests, as well as the amount by which current models seem to be underestimating Iowa's effects. That result also indicates that the Rules of the Game, with respect to early states and front-loading, matter more intensely than they have in the past—and that candidates should beware the trendy strategy of skipping Iowa.

Finally, the chapter seeks to provide a road map for others who wish to investigate *e-mentum*'s effects, especially looking forward to 2008's crucial inflection points in the presidential campaign—Iowa and New Hampshire, for starters, but also South Carolina, Super Tuesday, the party conventions, and the presidential debates.

The chapter's results actually ratchet up critics' concerns about Iowa's distorted impact on the overall nomination. They also raise the stakes on the questions explored in the remainder of the book.

*Chapter 5: The Ground War or the Air War?* The literature on the first-in-the-nation Iowa Caucus includes overall qualitative research, national-level quantitative research on its impact, and individual (voter's-eye-view) state-level quantitative research. What it doesn't include is aggregate (candidate's-eye-view) state-level quantitative research, that is, a model to help

explain success for a presidential campaign in Iowa.<sup>5</sup> This chapter unveils such a model, and examines its results with respect to which tactics matter most in boosting or busting presidential candidates in the Hawkeye State.

The results of this Explanatory Model indicate that candidates' days in Iowa relative to their opponents have the largest positive impact among the tactics tested. The model also supports the contention that the Democratic 15 percent viability threshold thwarts low-tier candidates on that side of the aisle. And it finds that greater television spending relative to competitors is actually associated with *lower* Caucus vote share, holding constant Iowa spending, and subject to important caveats about the quality of both television and Iowa spending data.

Those findings in turn strengthen arguments for Iowa's grassroots reputation. They also provide support for those who believe in the importance of the Rules of the Game, in this case on an internal, state-specific level. Finally, the findings undercut critics' charges that television has taken on a new dominance in the state, turning the Caucus into a glorified primary.

*Chapter 6: Ideological Intrigue or Strategic Voting?* This chapter uses the Explanatory Model to test the Moderation Hypothesis, the finding in individual-level studies that ideologically extreme Hawkeye State voters may strategically choose more electable candidates, sacrificing their own views to select winners.

The model finds that strategic voting dominates Iowa's aggregate outcomes, just as previous studies had found it dominates Iowa's individual vote choice. Specifically, it estimates that Ideological Crowding—a factor I developed to measure the concept in a multicandidate race—plays the largest role of any tactical or strategic factor in the model. However, it also finds that perceptions of electability matter significantly in determining Caucus outcomes, partially supporting the Moderation Hypothesis. The model's results also indicate that viability does not matter, holding Electability and Ideological Crowding constant. In other words, caucus attendees seem willing to compromise on philosophy when a candidate looks more likely to capture the White House, but *not* when the candidate looks more likely to capture the nomination.

The chapter also notes tentatively that minority candidates do not appear to suffer at the hands of the overwhelmingly white Iowa caucusgoer,

and that in fact when controlling for philosophical placement and perceptions of electability, the estimate of minority candidates' differential performance is actually positive, though not statistically significant. However, it also takes pains to point out that those placements and perceptions might themselves be shaped by racial motivations.

*Chapter 7: Predicting What Happens.* Finally, Chapter 7 sketches the broad outlines of approaches to predicting Iowa Caucus results. It settles on a complex model made up of explanatory factors, Iowa polling, Gallup polling, and success in early straw polls, and demonstrates that approach's superiority to other approaches. I hope that it will also be clear, however, both that the approach is tentative at best and that the others all have their merits.

Given all that information, we should be able to draw some conclusions about whether the Iowa Caucus is a negative force in American presidential politics.

Is Iowa a cess poll?