

Defending Iowa's First-in-the-Nation Status The 1984 Precinct Caucuses

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FROM A POSITION of relative obscurity before 1972, the Iowa precinct caucuses evolved to their present position of national prominence in the presidential nominating process.¹ In recent elections, the time and attention given the Iowa caucuses by presidential candidates and the national media have increased geometrically. The impact of the caucuses has grown to the point that Iowa now rivals New Hampshire for the title of presidential kingmaker.²

The transformation of the caucuses into a national event is an asset for the state. Iowa benefits from the national publicity surrounding the caucuses and the numerous in-depth stories about the state and its people. The caucuses also generate large sums of money for the state's economy as presidential candidates spend in pursuit of delegates, and the media also expend large sums to cover the campaigns. The national attention helps the Iowa Democratic and Republican parties by stimulating interest and participation in the caucus process. State officials of both parties are pleased to identify sources of citizen support several months before the November elections. They also are pleased by the increased status accorded the parties and their

1. For a discussion of the changes in the Iowa precinct caucuses, see Hugh Winebrenner, "The Evolution of the Iowa Precinct Caucuses," *The Annals of Iowa* 46 (Spring 1983): 618-35.

2. See Michael J. Robinson, Nancy Conover, and Margaret Sheehan, "The Media at Mid-Year," in *Presidential Politics: Readings on Nominations and Elections*, ed. James I. Lingle and Byron E. Shafer, 2nd ed. (New York, 1983), 147-48. Also see Hugh Winebrenner, "The Iowa Precinct Caucuses: The Making of a Media Event," *Southeastern Political Review* (Fall 1985).

leaders, many of whom have been quoted in national publications such as *Time* and *Newsweek*.

But not everyone is pleased with the early precinct caucuses and their impact on the presidential selection process. Several states, undoubtedly envious of the status afforded Iowa, and probably not wanting a small farm state which normally supports Republican presidential candidates to play a pivotal role in choosing the Democratic nominee, have pressed for changes in the party rules governing the Democratic nominating process.³

Although party rules which compressed the Democratic nominating process into a thirteen-week period between the second Tuesday in March and the second Tuesday in June were enacted for 1980, Iowa's (and New Hampshire's) position of prominence was preserved by the inclusion of an appeals process for states that held nominating events earlier in 1976. Iowa Democrats requested and received a variance to hold their 1980 precinct caucuses in January, thus successfully parrying attempts to limit their influence in the presidential selection process.

Efforts to limit the impact of Iowa and New Hampshire in the nominating process were renewed after the 1980 caucuses and primary elections.⁴ The Democratic National Committee (DNC) appointed the Commission on Presidential Nominations (Hunt Commission) to consider a number of changes in the nominating process. Their January 15, 1982, report included a recommendation (proposed rule 10) that the length of the Democratic primary schedule be compressed into a thirteen-week period between the second Tuesday in March and the second Tuesday in June. In deference to Iowa and New Hampshire, they granted permanent exemptions from the schedule for the Iowa and New Hampshire nominating events although both had to be held later in 1984. (Iowa may hold its Democratic caucuses no earlier than fifteen days before the start of the thirteen-week period and New Hampshire seven days.) The exception gives Iowa and New Hampshire the opportunity to focus national attention on their primary events as in the past, but may lessen the long-term impact, as candidates can tumble more quickly from victor-

3. Iowa had voted for the Republican candidate in eight of the last nine presidential races.

4. See Winebrenner, "Making of a Media Event."

ies (or rebound more quickly from defeats) in Iowa and New Hampshire. (The recommendations were accepted by the national committee on March 26, 1982, and made part of the *Rules of the National Party*.)

Following the DNC decision, a dispute developed between New Hampshire and Vermont over the date of Vermont's "Town Meeting Day" which includes a presidential straw poll and traditionally is held on the first Tuesday in March. In 1984, that fell on March 6 which was the scheduled date for the New Hampshire presidential primary election. The DNC-approved thirteen-week "window" did not apply to non-binding electoral events such as Vermont's. The potential for conflict between the two states apparently had been underestimated by the Hunt Commission; although well aware of the date of the Vermont straw poll, the commission did not believe it necessary to schedule the New Hampshire primary election earlier than March 6.⁵ New Hampshire and the DNC were unsuccessful in resolving the conflict and New Hampshire Democrats, not wishing to share the limelight with Vermont on March 6, defied national party rules and moved its primary election forward a week to February 28.

Predictably, Iowa Democrats were extremely upset by the decision which would have narrowed the separation between the New Hampshire primary election and the Iowa caucuses to a single day.⁶ Fearful that Iowa's impact in the Democratic party nominating process would be greatly diminished, Iowa Democrats discussed changing the date of their 1984 caucuses at a November 19, 1983, meeting of the state central committee.⁷ John Law, former executive director of the Iowa Democratic party and a member of the Hunt Commission, informed the committee that a commission compromise had led to the new party rules governing the length of the primary and caucus schedule, and it was his understanding that Iowa had been guaranteed an eight-day separation between the New Hampshire and Iowa primary

5. See Edward Campbell et al. v. Iowa State Democratic Central Committee and David Nagle, No. 83-115-W, 6 (S.D. Ia. January 17, 1984).

6. The Iowa General Assembly reacted to the threat by passing legislation that requires the Iowa precinct caucuses to be held at least eight days earlier than any other nominating event. See Iowa, *Acts and Resolutions of the Seventieth General Assembly*, 1983, chap. 138, 306.

7. The following discussion is based on my notes of the meeting of the Democratic State Central Committee.

events. He further argued that if New Hampshire violated party rules by moving its primary election forward and the DNC did not force them back into compliance, Iowa should advance its caucus date to maintain the eight-day separation. Members of the DNC Compliance Committee in attendance argued against a change in caucus dates and threatened disciplinary action against the Iowa Democratic party if national party rules were violated. The debate was spirited and sometimes animated before Bill Sueppel of Iowa City proposed a compromise that ultimately carried by a vote of twenty to ten: the Iowa caucuses would be held on February 20, 1984, unless New Hampshire decided on or before December 10, 1983, to return its primary election to the original March 6 date. If New Hampshire relented, the Iowa caucuses would be held on February 27 as originally scheduled. The deadline passed without action by New Hampshire and Iowa Democrats proceeded with plans for a February 20 caucus date in 1984.

The controversy over the decision to change the caucus date did not end on December 10, however. In Iowa, three prominent Democrats—Edward Campbell, former state party chair and co-chair of the Mondale for President effort in Iowa; Jean Haugland, also a Mondale co-chair; and Charles Gifford, a member of the State Central Committee—filed suit in federal district court to block the change from February 27 to February 20.⁸

The plaintiffs requested "that the Court enjoin the State Party from holding statewide caucuses on a date prior to the 27th day of February, 1984, as an earlier date would jeopardize the seating of Iowa delegates at the Democratic National Convention."⁹ In testimony, Gifford further asserted "that the State Party is obligated to follow the clear dictates of the National Party Rules and that failure to do so may well jeopardize Iowa's first-in-the-nation status in future election years."¹⁰ In defending the decision to move the caucus date forward, the state party, with presidential candidates Alan Cranston and John Glenn as intervenors, argued that the campaigns of some presidential candidates would suffer irreparable harm due to their large ex-

8. Edward Campbell et al. v. Iowa State Democratic Central Committee.

9. *Ibid.*, 2.

10. *Ibid.*, 10.

penditures of time and money in Iowa if the date were not changed to February 20.¹¹

The court ruled in favor of the defendants and let the earlier date stand. In the decision, the court agreed that the plaintiffs were entitled to relief, but found for the defendants because "the intervenor presidential candidates will suffer a significant harm if the caucuses are not held on February 20, as their previous commitments may be wasted or reduced in effectiveness." The court added that "the individual damages that may be suffered by the plaintiffs are outweighed by the irreparable harm that changing the rules of the presidential nominating process [in Iowa] at this late date may have."¹²

The DNC entered the controversy by threatening sanctions if Iowa moved its caucus date forward, including the possibility of not seating the Iowa delegation selected by the "illegal" caucus process at the Democratic national convention. Ultimately, the DNC relented and on May 3, 1984, agreed to seat both the Iowa and New Hampshire delegations at San Francisco, but scars remain from the intraparty struggle.

By 1984, the Iowa precinct caucuses were institutionalized as a significant part of the primary and caucus schedule. The 1980 efforts of Carter, Kennedy, and Bush demonstrated that a strong organization was necessary to compete in Iowa and that the "dark horse" candidacies of McGovern in 1972 and Carter in 1976 probably would not recur now that Iowa was a well-publicized event in the presidential nominating process. To fare well in Iowa would require a major organizational effort, but with New Hampshire a week later and "Super Tuesday" with its ten state delegate selection events on March 13, candidate efforts could not be concentrated in the state as they were when several weeks separated Iowa and New Hampshire.

Democratic presidential candidates were commonplace in Iowa from 1982 to 1984 as each worked to enlist supporters and develop an organization capable of identifying and turning out potential caucus supporters. Although most of the Democratic hopefuls made a strong effort and spent large sums of money

11. *Ibid.*, 13.

12. *Ibid.*

and energy pursuing support, it was no contest from the start. Mondale was well known in Iowa and he received early support from the United Auto Workers and the Iowa State Education Association. The support of organized groups and endorsements from many prominent Iowa Democrats helped Mondale develop an organization that was "clearly superior to others."¹³ He developed an early lead in the polls, never relinquished the front-runner status, and entered the final stages of the Iowa campaign with a commanding lead. Other Democrats also made significant organizational efforts in the state, but with Mondale enjoying a seemingly insurmountable lead, they competed for second place and hoped for a stronger-than-predicted finish.

Alan Cranston was probably the next best organized of the Democratic candidates and the fifty-five days and \$727,358 that he spent in Iowa in the two years prior to the 1984 caucuses topped all presidential hopefuls. He made nuclear disarmament the central issue in his campaign and was well known in Iowa by the time of the caucuses.¹⁴

Gary Hart was the first candidate to open an Iowa campaign office but it took him a long time to develop an effective organization. Limited funds, the decision to move a number of his campaign staff to Wisconsin where he unsuccessfully competed in that state's straw poll, and the resignation of top aides made continuity difficult; but he appeared well organized in the final weeks of the Iowa campaign.

John Glenn apparently never understood the nature of a caucus organization as he ran a primary election race in Iowa. The \$759,178 spent by his campaign included heavy expenditures on television which may work well in a primary election but generally produce few results in the Iowa caucuses. (John Connally unsuccessfully employed the same approach in the 1980 caucuses.)

13. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 12 January 1983, 2601.

14. The campaign data were obtained from the candidates. From 1982 to 1984, Askew campaigned in Iowa 47 days, Cranston 55, Glenn 33, Hart 60, Hollings 14, Jackson 2, McGovern 37, and Mondale 34 days. Spending data from the Federal Election Commission indicate caucus expenditures in Iowa as follows: Askew \$194,315, Cranston \$727,358, Glenn \$759,178, Hart \$453,503, Hollings \$11,382, Jackson \$8,953, McGovern \$52,403, and Mondale \$687,712.

Reuben Askew's forty-seven campaign days in Iowa were exceeded only by Cranston, and his attempts to organize the right wing of the party, and particularly the anti-abortion vote, were not appreciated by Iowa Democrats who had seen that group help defeat Democratic candidates in three recent Iowa general elections.¹⁵ The other Democratic candidates—George McGovern, Ernest Hollings, and Jesse Jackson—had little or no organization in Iowa.¹⁶

The media also came to Iowa very early to follow the Democratic candidates. A 1982 *Newsweek* story detailed the early efforts of the Democratic hopefuls and speculated on their chances in Iowa.¹⁷ Media coverage waxed and waned from 1982 to 1984 but on special occasions such as the "Open Forum on Arms Control with Presidential Candidates" held in Des Moines on August 13, 1983, and the *Des Moines Register* debate on February 11, 1984, attended by all eight Democratic presidential candidates, national media attention focused on Iowa.

In the final weeks leading to the caucuses reporters searched for the "typical Iowan" to interview, and most of all, played the "expectations game."¹⁸ Mondale was judged the "clear front-runner" and John Glenn the "primary challenger" even though a significant Glenn campaign organization never developed in Iowa. McGovern, Hart, and Cranston were branded "dark horses"; Hollings, Askew, and the late entrant, Jesse Jackson, were dismissed as "also rans."¹⁹

As the caucuses neared, media coverage was awesome. The press "filing space" for the 1984 caucus night was double that of 1980. Over one thousand press credentials were issued by the Iowa Democratic party to representatives of approximately 150 United States and foreign news organizations: over thirty television and many radio stations were represented in Iowa; *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation* originated from Des Moines on the day before the caucuses; on February 20, the day of the caucuses, the

15. David Yepsen, *Des Moines Register*, 6 February 1984, 15A.

16. J.P. Steffen, caucus chairperson, Iowa Democratic party, interview with author, 4 December 1984.

17. *Newsweek*, 24 May 1982, 31-32.

18. For a discussion of the game aspects of campaigns, see Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President* (New York, 1980), 22-24.

19. *Congressional Quarterly*, 2599-2600.

Today Show and the evening news programs of ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN broadcast live from Des Moines.²⁰ The 1984 Democratic caucuses were a bigger media event than ever before.

Turnout for the 1984 precinct caucuses was high but less than in 1980. Democratic party officials estimated that seventy-five thousand people attended their meetings (approximately 14 percent of the registered Democrats). A definitive explanation is not possible, but Mondale's early big lead and media overkill probably contributed to the 25 percent decline in attendance from 1980.²¹

After months under the media microscope and to the relief of many Iowans, the 8 p.m. starting time for the February 20 precinct caucuses finally arrived. It took twelve minutes for controversy to erupt. On the basis of a review of "sign-in sheets" at some caucuses, CBS projected Walter Mondale the Iowa winner at 8:12 p.m. (CST), eighteen minutes before Democratic party rules permitted the delegate selection process to begin.²² NBC used polls and News Election Service (a vote counting service funded by ABC, CBS, NBC, AP, and UPI) data to project at 8:18 p.m. that Mondale "will be the winner," John Glenn "will not finish second," and "there is a very good chance tonight that Gary Hart will be second."²³ ABC withheld its projection that Mondale would win and that Glenn, Hart, and Cranston were "fighting it out for second place" until 8:46 p.m., sixteen minutes after the caucuses began but before any delegate counts were available.²⁴ (Delegates elected to county conventions provide the official basis for determining winners and losers in the Iowa caucuses.)

Iowa Democrats were very disturbed by the early media projections and so was the United States Congress. On February 27, 1984, the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Consumer Protection, and Finance held a hearing on early elec-

20. Barry Piatt, press secretary, Iowa Democratic party, telephone interview with author, 19 March 1984.

21. Steffen interview.

22. *Early Election Projection: The Iowa Experience*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Consumer Protection, and Finance; Committee on Energy and Commerce; House of Representatives; 27 February 1984, 12.

23. *Ibid.*, 14.

24. *Ibid.*

tion projections which centered on the Iowa caucuses. Chairman Tim Wirth (D., Colorado) informed those present that the hearing was being held "to discuss the civic responsibility of the electronic media and the implications that their methods and their announcements of projected results have on the electoral process."²⁵ A number of research papers were received and testimony was taken from top media executives and leaders of the Republican and Democratic parties. Dave Nagle, Iowa Democratic chair, testified that the state party had evidence that the early projections found their way into caucuses that were in progress. Nagle warned that "to report the supposed outcome of our process before it even begins . . . runs the risk of seriously intruding on the process and damaging the party."²⁶

The subcommittee continued hearings on the problems of early 1984 election projections, and late in the year, two congressmen, Al Swift (D., Washington) and Bill Thomas (R., California), formally asked ABC, CBS, and NBC for "a firm, explicit, public, corporate commitment not to use exit poll data to suggest, through interpretation of that data, the probable winner in any state until the polls in that state have closed."²⁷ By early 1985, the three networks had forwarded letters to Congressmen Swift and Thomas which stated that in future elections they would not "use exit polling data to project or characterize election results until the polls are closed in [that] state."²⁸ In return, the congressmen agreed to begin hearings on a uniform election day throughout the United States. It is not clear how the agreement will affect reporting of Iowa caucus outcomes. If taken literally, the 1984 projections of caucus results based on entrance polls and party "sign-in sheets" will not recur in 1988.

The early projections were not the only controversy associated with results. Apparently sensitive to the criticism that Iowa caucus results are not meaningful, the electronic and print media requested the Iowa Democratic party to provide a breakdown of the candidate preferences of those attending the 1984

25. *Ibid.*, 5.

26. *Ibid.*, 78.

27. Congressmen Al Swift and William M. Thomas, *Letter to ABC, CBS, and NBC*, U.S. House of Representatives, 6 December 1984.

28. Press conference, Congressmen Al Swift and William M. Thomas, Rayburn Office Building, Washington D.C., 17 January 1985.

caucuses. In essence, they were asking the party to conduct a straw poll of caucus members and provide raw vote totals rather than the delegate equivalent totals reported since 1972. Iowa Democrats asserted that raw vote totals would misrepresent the caucus process and refused to bow to media demands.²⁹ The media responded by employing the News Election Service to attempt to determine candidate preference totals at the caucuses. Since the caucus process does not lend itself to tabulating candidate preferences, and the Iowa Democratic party refused to cooperate, the news election service was able to provide preference totals for only 74 percent of the 2,495 precincts; those totals are of questionable validity due to the dynamic nature of the caucus process. The presence of two sets of results proved to be confusing to all.

As caucus results began to come in on February 20, the "expectations game" continued with media interpretation of the outcomes. Some of the media reported News Election Service results; some Democratic party delegate equivalents, and others reported both.³⁰ The *Newsweek* summary of the Iowa caucuses was representative. They concluded that "Mondale's victory met all expectations," and Glenn's "humiliating fifth-place finish" was a disaster for his campaign. McGovern's third-place finish was "startling" and "the caucuses gave Hart 'media momentum.'" Cranston, Askew, and Hollings were declared the big losers along with Glenn. On the basis of Iowa, *Newsweek* reduced the field to Mondale, Hart, Jackson, "and maybe Glenn." Perhaps the biggest winner in the Iowa expectations game was Hart since he was elevated to the position of Mondale's primary competitor, a position previously assigned to Glenn.³¹ On the February 23 *NBC Nightly News*, Don Oliver reported that after Iowa,

29. "Caucus Results Are Tabulated for Good of Party, Not Press," *Des Moines Register*, 16 October 1983.

30. The official Democratic party results are weighted county delegates from 94 percent of the precincts: Mondale 48.9 percent, Hart 16.5 percent, McGovern 10.3 percent, Uncommitted 9.4 percent, Cranston 7.4 percent, Glenn 3.5 percent, Askew 2.5 percent, Jackson 1.5 percent, and Hollings 0 percent. The NES results are from 74 percent of the precincts: Mondale 44.5 percent, Hart 14.8 percent, McGovern 12.6 percent, Cranston 9.0 percent, Uncommitted 7.5 percent, Glenn 5.3 percent, Askew 3.3 percent, Jackson 2.7 percent, and Hollings 0.3 percent.

31. *Newsweek*, 5 March 1984, 22-23.

contributions to the Hart campaign increased from \$2,000 to \$12,000 per day.

THE REPUBLICANS also held precinct caucuses in 1984, but with an incumbent president seeking reelection there was no media interest in their meetings until President Reagan decided to visit Iowa on February 20, the day of the caucuses. The president appeared in Waterloo and Des Moines in an attempt to increase interest in the Republican caucuses and perhaps to steal some of the limelight from the Democrats who had monopolized media attention in Iowa for several weeks.

The straw poll initiated in 1976 and continued in 1980 was not conducted in the 1984 Republican caucuses. The rationale offered by Republican officials for the absence of a poll was the lack of a contest for the nomination. This was probably a wise move on the part of Republican leaders as it assured no media publicity for any dissatisfied Republicans that might have attended caucuses. Attendance figures for the Republican caucuses are very tentative due to the absence of a poll, but it was estimated that twenty-three to thirty thousand people participated.³²

Although they have cooperated with their Democratic counterparts, Iowa's Republican party has played a more limited role in defending the state's position of prominence. The national Republican party has no rules governing the length of their primary and caucus season, and when Iowa raised the issue at the 1984 national convention, there was little interest in developing such rules. To date, there have been no significant threats from other state Republican parties, but Iowa Republicans believe that could change by 1988. There are rumblings from other states, notably Michigan, about moving their 1986 off-year caucuses forward in order to be in a position to challenge Iowa for the early date in 1988.³³

Shortly after the 1984 Democratic National Convention, the now predictable assault on the date of the Iowa caucuses began anew. Representative Morris Udall (D., Arizona) and Senator Dennis DeConcini (D., Arizona) introduced companion bills (H.R. 6054 and S. 2890) to Congress on July 31, 1984. The

32. Luke Roth, executive director, Republican party of Iowa, telephone interview with author, 7 December 1984.

33. Tamara Paulin, organization director, Republican party of Iowa, telephone interview with author, 7 May 1985.

bills would have required "that Presidential primaries or caucuses be held only during the period beginning on the second Tuesday in March and ending on the second Tuesday in June of the year of the Presidential election." A Task Force on Elections created by the Committee on House Administration held a hearing on September 19, 1984, but the bills died in the Ninety-eighth Congress.

Congressman Udall reintroduced an identical bill (H.R. 1380) on February 28, 1985. In describing the bill for the House, Udall explained that "it would make two small, but important changes in the way we choose our Presidential nominees. First, the primary season would be limited to a specific period of time, eliminating the disproportionate influence of a few early primary states. Second, a shorter primary season would reduce the amount of campaign spending and relieve some of the 'boredom factor' experienced by many voters."³⁴

If judged from a historical perspective, the likelihood of Congressman Udall successfully reforming the Iowa and New Hampshire nominating events out of existence is not good; since 1911, none of the approximately three hundred bills designed to reform or alter the presidential nominating process has passed the Congress.³⁵

It appears likely that Iowa will continually have to defend its "first-in-the-nation" status in the presidential campaign. Without an incumbent presidential candidate in 1988, both the Republican and Democratic party races are likely to be spirited events. The stakes are so high that other state parties, in all likelihood, will take aim at the early date of the Iowa caucuses.

34. *Congressional Record*, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, E723.

35. John Hyde, *Des Moines Register*, 20 September 1984, 3A.

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