

**PARTY RULES, GROUPS AND THE GRASSROOTS
IN THE IOWA CAUCUSES ^[1]**

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February 26, 2002

Abstract

Political scientists who study elections have recently bemoaned the lack of grassroots efforts that seems to define the modern campaign. Perhaps because of their first in the nation status or the fact that caucuses are simply different from primaries, campaigns during the 2000 Iowa Caucuses appear to have spent significant efforts on grassroots mobilization, or the ground war as it is otherwise known. Whether campaigns were candidate driven, or interest group efforts in direct support of candidates, or pure issue advocacy, campaign activities in Iowa included extensive get-out-the-vote personal mobilization. Potential caucus-goers were directly contacted by well-organized efforts to get them to spend two hours on a cold January night in support of both candidates and issues. This is not to suggest that the air war was not important; large sums of money were spent in all of the key Iowa media markets. But even so, the most successful campaign efforts were those which worked hard to mobilize actual voters, to get them out to the caucuses, and to have them offer resolutions which might ultimately effect political party platforms. This study, carried out during the height of the Iowa caucus campaigning from October 1999, through January 24, 2001, attempts to quantify and describe the quality of the efforts expended by both candidate campaigns and interest groups as all jockeyed for position in this crucial early test of their staying power. And this examination shows how the rules that a party adopts can encourage grassroots mobilization. Broader trends in rules, however, seem to be working against such activity.

As campaigns have become candidate-centered air wars, distinguished by their nearly total reliance on television advertising and scripted media events and as political parties have retreated from their traditional role as mass-based organizations to become what Shea calls "service-oriented" organizations, grassroots campaigns have seemed to many observers a thing of the past.[2] Rather than employ legions of field workers and volunteers to knock on doors, distribute flyers, and proselytize for the cause, campaigns focus on blanketing the airwaves with expensive 30-second television commercials, stuffing mailboxes with campaign mailers, and attempting to create the perfect 6-second sound bite.

While the air war was certainly fought with great vigor during the buildup to the 2000 Iowa Caucuses, we found that the campaigns that made use of what we would consider traditional grassroots organizing were the ones that did best on the cold winter night of January 24, 2000. However, rather than suggesting that retail politics is once again in vogue, and that grassroots organizing is making a comeback, the results of the Iowa caucus process seem to point out the significant role that party rules play in the level of grassroots activity, and why these patterns may be difficult to duplicate in other places.

The Caucus Process

Iowa is one of only a handful of states that employs the caucus rather than the primary election process. Because the Iowa caucuses are the first test, candidates want to convince the national press of their early strength in Iowa. Caucuses require a major commitment from participants, who must be willing to go out for two hours on a cold January evening to discuss issues and candidates. Mobilizing people to attend caucuses is more difficult than getting them to vote in an election and caucuses tend to have substantially lower turnout compared to contested primaries. Participants can find the process intimidating and confusing. And there is much greater need to educate participants about the procedure than in a primary election.

Democrats and Republicans have different caucus rules. After discussing the candidates, Republicans take a secret straw poll ballot to determine preferences on candidates before the delegates are selected. Delegate selection follows separately, determining how much support each candidate will actually have at the state convention. However, since the press only reports the straw poll result, it is all that matters. In the Democrats' caucus there is no secret ballot. Instead, after discussing the candidates, attendees divide into groups supporting each candidate. Each precinct has a predetermined number of delegate slots to fill. And delegates are apportioned based on relative support, and it is the delegate count the press reports. Unlike the Republican caucus, heavy turnout has no effect, since each caucus is allocated a set number of delegates no matter what the turnout. This also means that on the Democratic side, the geography of turnout also matters. A candidate who has concentrated support, for example on college campuses, will be disadvantaged when running against one with broader geographic support even if the total number of supporters are the same. Bringing

along an additional fifty students from the dormitories will have a minimal effect, if any, on the number of delegates won.

Thus, organization is more important than in a primary election. For candidates to do well, or for groups to have influence, it is best to be visible all across the state. Finding a few voters everywhere is more difficult than finding blocks of voters in a few places. In addition, a typical election day effort where you might have someone ferrying people back and forth from the polls all day long will not work. If you have a lot of people who need rides or someone to watch the kids, you have to arrange for all the rides and all the sitters at the same time. And people must be instructed as to how the caucuses will work, learning when they will discuss the candidates, when they will discuss issues, when they will vote, and when they will conduct party business.

The 2000 Iowa Candidates

The Democratic Caucus included only two candidates: former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley, and Vice-president Al Gore. The Republican race was more complicated. Governor Bush was the favorite, having raised \$60,000,000 and garnering the endorsements of most leading Iowa Republicans. His fundraising success forced a number of candidates out of the race before Iowa, leaving Senator John McCain, Steve Forbes, Alan Keyes, Senator Orrin Hatch, and Gary Bauer as challengers. McCain, however, decided to skip Iowa and concentrate his initial efforts in New Hampshire. Hatch made only a token effort, while the others competed for the support of the party's right wing. The wild card was Forbes. In 1996, Forbes came into Iowa focused on an economic agenda and spending heavily. This exclusive focus on economic issues, combined with a lack of organization hurt Forbes. In 2000, Forbes was determined not to make the same mistakes. Instead, he emphasized his conservative credentials on social issues, particularly abortion, and he built a large, statewide organization. Forbes' willingness to spend liberally on his campaign and the lack of another strong challenger for Bush gave Forbes viability.

The candidate air war was extensive with television ads running nearly non-stop. All candidates started with positive advertisements introducing their positions. As the campaign progressed, a certain amount of negativity began, particularly in Gore attacks on Bradley. But negativity was limited overall. Spending was substantial. In three major markets, Bradley and Forbes spent over \$1,000,000 on television, while Gore and Bush spent about \$750,000. The dollars, however, do not convey the level of saturation. From November 17, the day Bradley began his advertising campaign, through the caucus, a total of sixty-nine days, Bradley ran 1574 ads just on the three major Des Moines commercial television stations, averaging over twenty-two ads per day. Gore, Forbes, and Bush bought similar amounts of time.[3]

Candidate efforts were not limited to air wars. Many Iowans seem to expect to meet candidates in person, not once, but several times. Most of the candidates,

recognizing this, built strong grassroots organizations, making use of personal contacts, telephoning, and new technologies such as email. Bradley's campaign, for example, developed an extensive email list, which they used to mobilize supporters. Their commitment to the ground war was clear from the "community involvement kit" supporters could download from the Internet. The kit explained what could be done to help the campaign at the grassroots. According to Interactive Week, as many as 20,000 of these kits were downloaded nationally during the Bradley campaign, though the Bradley effort could not match the effort made by the unions on behalf of the Gore campaign.[4] Forbes, learning from his 1996 campaign which was all air war and no organization, worked to build up his organization's strength, sparing no expense to directly connect with the voters. He used give-aways like T-shirts, hosted dinners, lunches, and breakfasts, and held rallies through Iowa. At the straw poll in August, for example, Forbes spent over \$150,000 to buy tickets for supporters, \$50,000 for a tent for supporters, and \$90,000 for food, entertainment, a sound system, and air-conditioning for his tent.

Candidates also used direct mail and phone calls to reach voters. One woman reported to us that she received a call one Thursday evening asking her to come to breakfast on Saturday with Bradley. As she hung up, the phone rang again and the Gore campaign asked her to come meet the Vice President. Her experience was not unusual. Three weeks before the caucus, 39 percent of registered Democrats and 34 percent of registered Republicans said they had personally met one of the candidates.[5] Candidates or their surrogates blanketed Iowa rallying the ground troops. On the night before the caucuses, all the major candidates held rallies in the state, with Gore and Bradley both holding major rallies in Iowa City, approximately 1/2 mile and 2 hours apart.

Ultimately Bush won the Republican caucus with 41 percent of the vote. Press observers did not see this as a decisive victory, given Forbes' strong second-place finish, at 30 percent. In addition, the two far-right contenders, Keyes and Bauer, received almost one-fourth of the vote between them. On the Democratic side, nothing unexpected occurred. Gore was always ahead in the Iowa polls and his organizational strength was too much for Bradley, finishing with 64 percent of the delegates.

Interest Groups and the Iowa Campaign

Interest group activity in the 2000 Iowa Caucuses was substantial and included both an air war and grassroots organizing. Interest group in Iowa fit into one of three categories. First, some groups tried to directly influence the outcome of the caucuses in Iowa. Second, some groups seemed to be laying the groundwork for November. A third set of groups seemed focused on a pure issue agenda.

Groups Trying to Influence the Caucuses

The most active groups supporting candidates were the AFL-CIO and the Iowa State Education Association (ISEA), both of which supported Gore. AFL-CIO distributed four mailings to approximately 25,000 union households. These included a five-minute

video of President John Sweeny's endorsement of Gore while the regular quarterly newsletter included pro-Gore information. ISEA newsletters contained endorsements of Gore and urged participation while the union ran radio ads urging citizens to promote the issue of improving public education at the caucuses and to support the candidate who "stood for behind them and for education," a clear reference to Gore. [6]

The unions also worked hard at the precinct level. Captains whose job it was to motivate Gore supporters were identified in each precinct. The AFL-CIO and AFSCME sent thirty-five full-time organizers to Iowa. [7] The AFL-CIO brought a tractor-trailer to Iowa City. Inside was a "war room," with computer systems, telephones, and a sophisticated phone-banking plan. During the last two weeks of the campaign, union volunteers made thousands of calls to union households throughout the state urging caucus attendance for Gore.

These and other grassroots efforts were essential in helping Gore win so comfortably. A Bradley organizer in Polk County told us in October that they hoped labor would not make a big push for Gore. [8] But labor did not hold back. According to the Voter News Service (VNS) exit polls, fully one-third of all participants in the Democratic caucuses came from union households, and Gore won the support of 69 percent of them. The story of Bradley v. Gore at one caucus we monitored tells the tale. The three Gore precinct captains, recruited by the unions, arrived an hour early, set up coffee and cookies, and taped signs all over the room. They also had a list of supporters they intended to check off as each arrived. The Bradley captain, on the other hand, arrived about 5 minutes early, looked around the room, and said with surprise, "I didn't know we were allowed to have signs!"

Efforts to effect the Republican results were not as visible, and seemed limited primarily to television or grassroots efforts by very small groups to support one of the Bush challengers. The Republican Leadership Council (RLC) ran television and radio advertisements warning Steve Forbes not to become "too negative." Bob Dole personally paid for an ad in the Des Moines Register making the same appeal that Republican candidates not weaken each other through attack ads. And, in an example that really points out the retail nature of Iowa campaigns, Keyes campaign workers hand delivered the Iowa Conservative Coalition's newspaper stuffed with a Keyes flyer door-to-door in Iowa City in the middle of a snowstorm. One worker even stuffed a newspaper into the handle of a snow shovel, whose owner was taking a break from shoveling. The Conservative's newspaper included a two-page voter's guide which, while not specifically endorsing Keyes, showed him as the only candidate deserving a 100% rating. Missing in action was the Christian Coalition, a group one would expect to be most involved in the Republican caucus. They did not expend much visible effort in Iowa since no unacceptable candidates were actively campaigning. The Coalition, rather than attempt to influence the Iowa outcome, focused on later primaries where John McCain, who they opposed, was actively campaigning.

Groups Laying Groundwork for November

While some groups were directly involved in candidate support efforts, others appeared to be active in Iowa mainly to prepare for the fall campaign by establishing their positions and attacking the opposition. These campaigns were almost entirely run on television. The RLC, in addition to its small effort against Forbes, ran a fairly extensive series of advertisements attacking both Gore and Bradley. Clearly the RLC's intent was to position for the general election, no matter who the nominee turned out to be.

One RLC attack, on Gore's position on gays in the military, prompted the Human Rights Campaign to respond with ads attacking Bush on the same issue. In addition, they ran television and newspaper ads attacking all of the Republican candidates for ignoring the rights of gay and lesbian citizens. The goal in these efforts was more to build support for Democrats in November than to influence the nomination process. In a similar effort, NARAL ran some early ads over the summer, arguing that Bush was less moderate on the abortion issue than he seemed to be trying to imply.

These efforts by groups did not involve much grassroots activity as they were not intended to influence the caucuses. They were designed to catch the attention of the public in a limited way, but also to catch the attention of the large national press corps covering the Iowa caucuses.

Groups Employing Pure Issue advocacy

The biggest interest group story in Iowa, based on media spending, was the efforts of groups concerned with putting their issue agendas on the table without directly supporting, or even mentioning, candidates. Fully 68 percent of interest group campaign communications fit this category. The reason such efforts appeared in Iowa has much to do with the nature of the caucus process and its emphasis on building party platforms, and with the national media attention that comes from the unique placement of Iowa in the nomination process. Unlike primaries, caucus voters also get to tell the parties what they want in the platforms, so groups have a special incentive to push an issue agenda. And being first means that the national media pays an inordinate amount of attention to what goes on in Iowa (and New Hampshire), so that a group that can display public support for their cause gets an additional boost of national publicity.

Three issue-oriented groups were particularly active. A consortium of five groups, NumbersUSA, Negative Population Growth (NPG), Population-Environmental Balance, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and the American Immigration Control Foundation, flooded Iowa airwaves and newspapers with a series of ads questioning immigration policy and calling for a reduction in immigration. Between December 29 and caucus day, an ad appeared in the Des Moines Register and other newspapers almost every day along with television ads on all of the network affiliates. The ads generated tremendous controversy and resulted in large numbers of news stories about the groups and their goals. However, no presidential candidate responded positively to the groups' agenda, and officials in Iowa uniformly attacked the ads. Significantly, the anti-immigration effort was entirely media-based. No grassroots

organizing took place. As a result discussion on the immigration issue occurred in only five of the forty caucuses where we had observers and in all of these cases the resolutions adopted were opposed to the position advocated by these groups.

A second very active group was Iowans for Sensible Priorities (ISP). The local chapter of the organization founded by Ben Cohen, of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, ISP pushes for lower defense spending and more spending on education. ISP spent money on television, radio, and newspaper ads, spending over \$800,000. But, unlike the anti-immigration groups, ISP was also a clear presence on the campaign trail. Peggy Huppert, ISP campaign director, estimated that they were at 80 percent of Bill Bradley's campaign events. [9] One of their leaders, M. L. Lindon, became known as "the cookie lady" because she handed out cookies decorated as pie charts showing the amount of money spent on the military. ISP brought a "road show" to the University of Iowa and elsewhere, with inflatable figures graphically representing Pentagon spending and comparing it to education spending. The group held a workshop to train supporters on what to do at a caucus, and they sent postcards to their supporters with a sample resolution on cutting military spending to bring to their precincts. These grassroots efforts succeeded in bringing attention to their agenda and getting it adopted at a number of Democratic precincts. By ISP's count, over 125 precincts in Polk County adopted their resolution, and thirty-five counties in the state included it in their platform.

A third group focused on an issue agenda was the Interfaith Alliance of Iowa (IFA), which promotes a "proper" role for faith-based organizations and works to counter the Christian Coalition in Iowa politics. The IFA sent mailings to over 2200 houses of worship, discussing the "do's and don'ts" of religious involvement in politics. [10] They also organized a workshop designed to train their members on caucus activity and procedures and provided packets of information to over 200 workshop participants with information concerning the IFA's positions and potential caucus resolutions on a variety of issues. Quite a few caucuses on the Democratic side adopted resolutions from their platform, though they had no success on the Republican side.

A final example of a group promoting grassroots activism was the AARP. They began early in the campaign with newspaper ads asking seniors to collect their prescription drug bottles and bring them to the attention of all the candidates, raising the issue of prescription drug benefits. They also sent out pamphlets and ran a half-hour broadcast on WHO (the Des Moines NBC affiliate) and other TV stations throughout the state. The broadcast and the pamphlets laid out the positions of all of the candidates on a series of issues important to the AARP. The broadcast consisted of clips of the actual candidates, and the pamphlets had their written responses to questions. They included all of the candidates, including McCain. No attempt was made to editorialize. Only the answers to the questions were given. In addition, as has been the case in the past, members of AARP came to their precinct caucuses with prepared resolutions on issues of concern to seniors. This effort was more designed to bring awareness to these issues to the campaign than to influence the caucuses to nominate any particular candidates.

Conclusions

In Iowa, grassroots campaigning appears to pay. In many ways, the big winner in Iowa was labor, whose organizational efforts in the ground war were essential to Gore's victory. Like New Hampshire, Iowa gets an enormous amount of attention from the candidates for four or five months. So a group or candidate with the inclination has the time to build a grassroots organization. Because candidates spend huge amounts on television advertising, it is difficult for any one candidate to overwhelm the opposition with air war spending. Thus, candidates and groups who devoted money and resources to organization were better able to distinguish themselves than those who relied more extensively on the air war. In particular on the Republican side, Forbes' focus on developing an organization turned the story of the Republican caucus into Forbes' success rather than the easy victory story Bush would have preferred. On the other hand the anti-immigration groups, which focused strictly on television and newspapers and ignored grassroots organizing, were much less successful. They may have called attention to their concerns, but not in ways that built support for their position. No candidates supported them, Iowa political leaders vocally opposed the ads, and no precinct caucus adopted their position.

There were, then, three important ways in which the caucuses in Iowa encouraged grassroots organizing. First, the first in the nation placement of Iowa in the nomination process allowed candidates and groups the time to build an organization, and to do so in an environment which would gain an inordinate attention from the national press. Being first meant that Iowa mattered to the candidates in ways that were different from later states. Spending a year building an organization in, for example, New Mexico, might not be worth the effort if the candidate is no longer viable or the race is over by the time the state's turn in the process rolls around. But Iowa and New Hampshire offer hope for everyone. They may not win or do "well enough" to continue, but they know they have a chance. And groups know that national reporters will be there to cover the story, which might bring national attention to their cause. Second, caucuses require more organization than primaries as candidates and groups that want to do well need to train supporters as to how the caucuses will work and get these people to the caucuses at the same time all across the state on what is likely to be a cold January night. This is made even more compelling by the rules used by the Democrats which do not involve a straw poll for the media to report and thus, make the geography of support matter. And third, the caucuses both allow and encourage issue discussion apart from measuring support for candidates as they are the first step in building a state platform for the party (which will also attempt to influence the national platform). The Democrats actually require issue discussion before candidate preferences are measured. Republicans take their straw poll first, allowing those with no desire to be involved in an issue discussion to leave before it occurs. But both parties do discuss issues, giving groups incentives to organize independent of their feelings about the candidates.

The rules, thus, can encourage grassroots organizing. But for those who think that such activities are healthy for a democratic society, the lessons of the Iowa caucuses are

not encouraging. In many ways, the uniqueness of Iowa points to the difficulties of duplicating such incentives elsewhere. Only a few states can be isolated early enough in the process to warrant the kind of saturation coverage given to Iowa and New Hampshire. And once a state reaches a certain size, the costs of the kinds of organizing that go on in Iowa may become prohibitive, forcing candidates and groups to fall back on less citizen-involving techniques. Furthermore, current trends in the nomination process may lessen the incentives discussed here. In particular, the frontloading and shortening of the nomination process will create a different set of incentives.

As the time between Iowa and New Hampshire and the other states in the process is shortened and more (and larger) states move up in the nomination calendar, two changes are likely to occur. First, candidates will have to devote more time to raising money and campaigning in other states, lowering the relative time and effort available for organizing in Iowa. And second, the national press will spend more time in these other states, lowering the national attention to Iowa and the incentives for groups to organize independently of the candidate efforts. For some, this may seem to be a good thing. Why should Iowa (or New Hampshire) count for so much in the process? It is hardly a representative state. Allowing a broader range of states to play a role will create a nomination system where those choosing are more likely to represent the nation as a whole. But we should also recognize that such a change will come with a cost.

There is a benefit to having candidates and groups involved in an effort to organize at the grassroots level and bring people into the process in a way that goes beyond simply casting a ballot. Candidates meet with “real citizens” in many more forums. Citizens are engaged in discussion of issues and policy. The level of democracy is closer to the democratic ideals we value, but rarely seem to reach. In her study of citizen learning in the New Hampshire Primary, Tami Buhr documents how that relatively unique, high information, high direct contact, environment leads to citizen learning and relatively well-informed decision-making by the electorate. [1] Iowa shares that unique environment but in a way that actually encourages even more grassroots activity as the caucus rules encourage group involvement beyond the efforts of candidates. Perhaps the two states that benefit from this environment should not always be Iowa and New Hampshire. But if we want a Presidential nomination system where there is some place where grassroots organizing is essential and the level of involvement of citizens involved in the process is maximized, then maintaining a system which provides a first in the nation test in a relatively small state, with a time lag before other larger states begin to weigh in, would seem to be a necessary part of the system.

Notes

[1] Earlier versions of this paper focusing on campaign finance are available in Getting Inside the Outside Campaign, Report funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, David B. Magleby, Editor. <http://www.byu.edu/outsidemoney/2000primary/index.htm> and in a symposium in PS: Political and Politics 34: (June 2001) 270 (abstract) and at www.apsanet.org/PS/June01/redlawsk.cfm (article).

[2] Shea, Daniel M. "The Passing of Realignment and the Advent of the 'Base-Less' Party System," *American Politics Quarterly*, 27 (January 1999), pp. 33-57.

[3] During the period, candidate ads totaled: Bradley 1574, Gore 1009, Bush 1206, and Forbes 1217. Prior to this time, Gore had run 93 ads (he started on October 16), Bush had run 269 ads (starting on October 26) and Forbes had run 612 (starting on June 2).

[4] Raney, Rebecca Fairly, "Campaign Lessons from the Bradley Camp," *Interactive Week*, July 3, 2000, pp. 24-25.

[5] Zelany, Jeff, "A Third in Iowa Poll Meet, Hear Candidates," *Des Moines Register*, Monday, 10 January 2000, A1.

[6] Phrasing the support for Gore in this way, without mentioning him by name, allowed the ISEA to pay for these ads with "soft money" union funds. A direct endorsement ad would have to have been paid for with "hard money" raised specifically for that purpose.

[7] Steve Rosenthal, telephone interview by David B. Magleby, 28 June 2000.

[8] Jeff Smith, Polk County organizer for Bradley, interview by Art Sanders, 6 October 1999.

[9] Peggy Huppert, telephone interview by Art Sanders, 25 May 2000.

[10] Alicia Claypool, executive director of the Iowa Interfaith Alliance, telephone interview by Art Sanders, 30 May 2000.

[11] See Buhr, Tami, "What Voters Know about the Candidates and How They Learn It: The 1996 New Hampshire Republican Primary as a Case Study," in Mayer, William, editor, In Pursuit of the White House 2000: How We Choose Our Presidential Nominees, (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000).