

Standing Tall: A Note on the Iowa Caucuses' Role in the 2004 Nominating Process

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By the time this article appears, the American presidential race will be long over, and as the informed reader knows, George Bush retained the United States' most powerful office--indeed, it can be argued, the most powerful office in the world--for four more years. What will become of all of us over this next term is only speculation at this point, but how the American president is chosen sometimes appears as a mysterious or mystifying process, what with primaries, caucuses, nominating conventions, the campaigns and the final vote by the Electoral College. I'd like to briefly introduce how John Kerry was selected by the country's earliest caucuses held in the state of Iowa, what happened to the early Democratic frontrunner Howard Dean, and reflect on their meaning for future grassroots democracy in America, especially after Kerry's loss.

In mid-January, hoards of representatives of the mass media descend on the nation's heartland state of Iowa to report on the country's first caucuses. They have tended to accurately predict who would go on to be the presidential candidate for their party, be it Democratic or Republican. In 1976, the Iowa caucuses chose Jimmy Carter, who went on to win the presidency, while Al Gore got a big boost in his win in Iowa caucuses in 2000.

Campaign fever really begins here because it is the first of any of the states where the candidates can test each other and where the whole nation can

see them up close and personal, as reporters dog their every step. The Iowa caucuses became important in 1972, when George McGovern used them to gain momentum for his New Hampshire primary push.

According to Matthew Chatterly of the *Des Moines Register*, “Caucus critics say the caucuses give Iowa too much say in the election process. Supporters say they are important because candidates must meet voters one-on-one and cannot rely on television campaigns alone. People get the chance to meet those who may someday become president.”¹ Both are correct in a sense, which makes the focus on the caucuses understandable for the mass media, the candidates and would-be voters across the nation, and American citizens abroad, who cast their votes as well.

How does a caucus work? The process that nominates the candidate at the national conventions of both major parties begins in Iowa at the local level. Any citizen of the United States over 18 years of age (as of November 2, 2004, for the 2004 election) and resident of the precinct where the caucus is held may participate. In 1,993 caucuses across the state, people gather at their local schools, meeting halls, and public centers to choose delegates to the county convention. All the caucuses are called to order at 6:30 p.m. to review information on the candidates and on procedure. At 9:00 p.m. the people attending the caucus divide into groups according to their candidate preference. Delegates are then selected on a representational formula based on attendance at the last caucus and candidate support numbers. Each group selects its delegates to represent their candidate. Delegates then proceed to the county convention, where roughly the same process is repeated. At the county level, delegates are chosen for the state convention, where again delegates to the national convention are selected. These final representatives will vote for the person who will be the party’s nominee for the presidency.

¹ Chatterly, Matthew, “How a caucus works.” *Des Moines Register*, Jan. 23, 2004, p. 6.

In 2000, about 61,000 people participated in the caucuses and chose Al Gore to run against George W. Bush. This time, in January 2004, more than double that number—122,193 people-caucused to stand for their candidate. There may be an “uncommitted” group, but for the most part, people coming to the caucuses have decided for themselves whom they want the party to nominate.²

Just before the caucuses, newspapers and radio stations in Iowa polled voters and predicted a tight race with Howard Dean coming out ahead in a squeaker. The various polls also showed the uncommitted at 3%-15%, yet the results show the uncommitted were just 0.1%. People made up their minds in the time between when the polls were taken and the caucuses, or at the caucuses themselves. The actual caucus results were:

John Kerry	37.6%
John Edwards	31.8%
Howard Dean	18.0%
Dick Gephardt	10.6%
Other	0.4%
Uncommitted	0.1% ³

Preceding the caucuses are months of door-to-door campaigning by the presidential hopefuls. The Howard Dean campaign, it could certainly be said, had the biggest army of supporters, with an estimated 3,500 volunteers from all over the U.S. coming to Iowa to get out the vote for Dean. Dick Gephardt had the support of many volunteers gathered from labor unions, but it was Dean's supporters who fanned out across Iowa with upsetter enthusiasm that caught the attention of the nation. Because of their efforts, Dean jumped out as the

² Information from Chatterly, *Ibid.*, p. 6, and from an interview with David Leshtz, Contingency Manager of the Howard Dean campaign and precinct leader in Iowa City.

³ Leys, Tony, “Pundits offer flood of ‘wisdom’.” *Des Moines Register*, Jan. 27, 2004, p. 25.

early frontrunner in the fall, but the late momentum of the John Kerry campaign “overcame [this] massive organizational effort.”⁴ What happened?

For months prior to the Iowa caucuses, volunteers are organized to “get out the message” for their candidate. They knock on doors, take out advertisements in the media, register voters, hand out campaign literature on street corners and in shopping malls, take the issues to the people wherever they are. These volunteers give information to voters on the caucus process and urge everyone to participate. The candidates’ organizations as well as the mass media keep a finger on the pulse of the electorate in the state by polling. In the early days of the race, the polls showed Dean emerging as the frontrunner. What was so attractive about Dean to the disaffected Democrat?

I interviewed Howard Dean’s Outreach Contingency Director, David Leshtz, in September 2004 when I visited Iowa. He talked about the campaign and the view from one precinct that he led, the Longfellow School precinct in Iowa City. Leshtz spoke about his own experience with and impressions of the Dean campaign. At a Thanksgiving party in 2002, an old friend of Leshtz’s asked him about whether to go to work for the Howard Dean campaign for the presidency and he strongly recommended that she do so. (Ironically, another friend of Leshtz’s went to work for the Kerry campaign, illustrating perhaps just how incestuous Democratic organizers in the state of Iowa can be.) Later, she called on him to ask if he’d be interested in taking a paid leadership position with the Dean campaign. Ready for a change, Leshtz quite his job of 15 years with University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics as a disabilities education specialist, with all of its benefits, to tackle directing Dean’s organizational efforts in Iowa.

⁴ Okamoto, Lynn, and Mark Siebert, “Kerry, Edwards prevail over rivals’ organizations.” *Des Moines Register*, Jan. 27, 2004, p. 1.

"I liked Dean. He was the only candidate speaking against the war [in Iraq]. He was the best candidate on disability issues, which was a big concern of mine...he was great on health care," Leshtz explained. "He was the best blend of pragmatism and idealism I've ever seen."⁵

Coming into 2003, Dean was a long shot, but Leshtz commented that a campaign "isn't just winning, it's beating the expectations. When I joined the campaign, a third place would've been considered great," but "we did a good job, maybe made him a frontrunner too soon." A few weeks before the caucuses, newspapers and the major television networks considered Dean the outright favorite, but in the run-up to the caucuses, his support slowly eroded and was overtaken by Kerry and Edwards. Kerry certainly appealed to veterans and women, while Edwards concentrated his efforts in small towns, opening up "50 Iowa satellite offices on Monday [before the election] in addition to the 14 he already had."⁶ Kerry and Edwards had money and powerful backers.

Howard Dean was very well organized and had perfected Internet fundraising from millions of small-time donors. When he jumped out in the lead, this scared the Democratic Party's inner circle. "Dean wasn't one of them. He was not part of the game and couldn't be trusted to keep the party line, so they took him down," Leshtz commented. Kerry put six million dollars of his own money into the Iowa campaign because he understood how important these first caucuses were in boosting a candidate into the limelight. Kerry gave up on everything else to focus on Iowa while Dean was trying to run a national campaign. The strategy paid off. It should be noted as well that Kerry was considered the logical choice to run against Bush at the very beginning of things, in early 2002. He was a Senator, inside the Washington power grid and liked by

⁵ This and all other quotations from David Leshtz were taken from a recorded interview by this writer on Sept. 14, 2004, in Iowa City, Iowa.

⁶ Okamoto, Lynn, and Mark Siebert, *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Democratic Party powers-that-be. “He went down because Dean was eating him for lunch. Kerry isn’t very good in living rooms and Dean was knocking ’em dead,” Leshtz explained further. “Kerry had paid staff at the precinct level,” according to Leshtz. “This may be good organization but it’s not grassroots.” Indeed. Coming in late with deep pockets and the backing of the Democratic Leadership Council, “the entrenched Washington interests,” allowed Kerry to push the undecided into his corner.

The caucus process itself can tend to favor whoever is on the bandwagon. Although the caucuses are places where Americans can stand with their neighbors in support of a candidate-and there are not too many places left anymore where one can do this-this very process can be disconcerting. A participant is not in the privacy of a voting booth but actually has to stand up and physically move to one side of the room or the other and visibly declare whom he or she is supporting. Kerry supporters were out in numbers, encouraging the uncommitted to vote for anyone but Dean. For example, in Coralville, “Kerry volunteers told those who were undecided or were switching allegiance to support any candidate but Dean, even if they weren’t supporting Kerry.”⁷

At the Longfellow precinct meeting, hundreds of people attended. The Longfellow district is a good cross-section of the American population in terms of age, education, and backgrounds. The turnout was so large that the people were standing elbow to elbow at 6:50 p.m., according to Leshtz. The groups supporting the various candidates had to meet in separate rooms. If everyone was in the same room, there can be more interactions between the groups and more of an informal process calling others to join a specific group. The large numbers and the chaos of many of the caucuses reflected how seriously people were taking this particular election. In the end, Howard Dean’s “electability”

⁷ Falwell, Sara, “Support anyone but Dean, fence-sitters told.” *Des Moines Register*, Jan. 27, 2004, p. 65.

was called into question and many people who had said they would support Dean began to doubt if he could go toe-to-toe with George W. Bush. "Our support was broad, but shallow," Leshtz commented on the results. "People like to be on the winning side." The so-called soft supporters were susceptible to the Kerry press.

The Longfellow precinct ended with Dean's winning by one vote. In other precincts, the Kerry momentum built to push him into the winner's circle. Dean's third-place showing virtually doomed his campaign. He went on to Wisconsin but withdrew finally, giving his reluctant support to Kerry. At the Democratic National Convention in July, after John Kerry won the nomination to lead the Democratic Party ticket in the November elections, "Dean warned the Iowa delegation that electing John Kerry wouldn't be enough to take back the country from the right-wing ideologues. The former Vermont governor urged delegates to run or recruit candidates for every office and to contribute money and volunteer as much time as possible."⁸ Leshtz expects "Dean to continue to promote grassroots engagements, interactions and leadership to empower people to take control of the political process."

What of the Iowa caucuses? They'll continue to be the nation's first roll of the dice for candidates. As imperfect as the process may be, they do provide us with a glimpse of America's last great democratic institution, where people can stand up for who they think will be the best choice to lead the nation. Whether they should set the course of an election is another matter. George Will, political commentator for the Washington Post, writes that Democrats "should rethink their compressed nominating calendar-Kerry was effectively selected by 135,000 who voted for him in Iowa and New Hampshire-and the fetish of allowing those two states, rather than, say, Michigan, to dominate the process."⁹

⁸ *Cedar Rapids Gazette* article July 30, 2004.

⁹ Will, George, "Michael Moore faction can now bow out." *Japan Times*, Nov. 3, 2004, p. 20.

Nonetheless, for a few weeks in mid-winter every four years, the Iowa caucuses and the campaigns of presidential hopefuls for the hearts and minds of the heartland will entertain us and will inspire us. It is quite true Democrats have a lot to think over after the defeat of Kerry. It turns out he was no more “electable” than Howard Dean. So how much should we make of the early Iowa caucuses? Perhaps in the future their effect on the nominating process may be diminished.