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Grassroots Rules

How the Iowa Caucus Helps Elect American Presidents

By Christopher C. Hull

(Stanford University Press, November 2007)

Being first thrusts the Iowa Caucus onto a towering public stage with extraordinary public interest. The caucus is extensively polled, and generates 143 times as much media coverage as other presidential primary contests. But is all the attention warranted?

Critics contend that Iowa does not mimic the country's demographics well. It is a small mid-western state, primarily rural and predominantly white. Allowing Iowa to go first skews results, preemptively damaging the chances of potential winners at the national level. If you look at Iowa's track record in making predictions about the presidential race, it does not improve the argument for Iowa's first-in-the-nation status: Iowa has a reputation for picking losers when it comes to the presidential race (barring a few exceptions: Jimmy Carter in 1977 and the current president in 2000 and 2004).

In this primary season, the timing of the primaries has been a contentious issue. Other states have challenged Iowa's first-in-the-nation status seeking to hold their primaries before Iowa's, such as Florida, New Mexico and South Carolina. Yet in a nod to tradition, Iowa remains first. The state will hold its elections on January 3, 2008.

So why Iowa?

In a recently released book, *Grassroots Rules* (available in November 2007 from Stanford University Press), Christopher Hull looks at the impact of Iowa on the primary nomination and the presidency. Taking into account data spanning nearly three decades of presidential candidates in Iowa, Hull makes the case that Iowa's first state status is well deserved. While New Hampshire "filters out" Iowa's geographic bias toward favorite local candidates, Iowa plays a significant role in assessing a candidate's ultimate ability to get elected.

In many ways, the book proves the political folklore that a candidate's time in Iowa is the most powerful tactic available, as Hull finds a strong statistical correlation between time spent and winning the nomination. He makes the point that the caucus encourages the give-and-take of retail politics and real debate on the issues. It forces candidates to organize and build grassroots coalitions. In putting a high premium on strong grassroots networks,

Iowa seems to amplify the impact of the internet (“e-mentum”). The data shows that the caucus limits the impact of negative campaigning and the influence of advertising dollars. Perhaps the book’s most startling conclusion is that, keeping other factors constant (such as time spent canvassing in the state, press coverage, campaign contributions, internet spending, etc.), increased television spending in Iowa seems to *harm* candidate’s chances rather than improving them.

Grassroots Rules underscores the point that Iowa is in fact playing the role it is intended to: given the unique format of its caucus, it forces candidates to focus on healthy retail politics rather than television and selects electable candidates, not just ideological ones. In Hull’s view, even if the caucus has been unreliable when it comes to picking winners, the state performs an important function by weeding out losers (Steve Forbes in 2000, for instance). Of course, other states could mimic Iowa’s caucus, and according to Hull that would be good for democracy in America. But as long as that is not the case, it appears that Iowa has earned its right to be first.

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