

From Why Iowa? How Caucuses and Sequential Elections Improve the Presidential Nominating Process by David P. Redlawsk, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Todd Donovan. Copyright 2011, University of Chicago

CHAPTER THREE

Iowa Caucus Rules

I have never understood the Iowa caucus. — Larry King, CNN

The Iowa caucuses are among the most commented-on political events in the world. Whenever there is a competitive presidential nomination for either major party, candidates, reporters, and pundits all leave their comfortable East Coast and West Coast haunts and begin camping out in Middle America, a place that many have never visited. And while Iowans (and some others) actively defend the caucus as a shining example of grassroots democracy, others charge that caucuses are archaic, arcane, and unrepresentative. The *New York Times* (2003) once called them “quaint.” Others have been less kind. Over the years the Iowa caucuses have been characterized as “dominated by special interests” (Wilgoren and Swarns 2004, writing about Howard Dean), “indecipherable chicanery” (Lane 2008), and a “mind-numbingly complex system” (Fund 2007). In an article at Slate.com, commentator Jeff Greenfield (2007) takes the state of Iowa itself to task for suppressing turnout, since it requires participants to show up in person at a specific time of day and stay for a lengthy period of time. He also criticizes Democrats’ caucus rules for violating precepts of one person, one vote.

As we begin our look at Iowa, we want to reiterate our basic point that the rules governing presidential nominations are important. In the case of Iowa, both the sequential voting rules that place Iowa first in the current nomination schedule and its use of a caucus process rather than a primary election matter by shaping candidates’ campaign strategy, voter participation, and media coverage. And it is always important to keep in mind that the rules of the Iowa caucus itself differ by party. Republican candidates face a very different electoral environment compared to Democrats, as we describe in this chapter.

Whether criticisms of the caucuses arise as a matter of jealousy on the part of citizens in other states that do not get the attention Iowa does, or are sincerely argued positions about how a democratic process ought to work, the fact is that every four years Iowa gets its chance to shine, and every four years denunciation of the Iowa caucuses peaks. And yet the caucuses continue. Perhaps one of the most fascinating things about the Iowa caucus is how routinely people signal its death knell. Every presidential election cycle, the question is asked: is this the end for Iowa? In 2008, no less an Iowa caucus expert than political scientist Peverill Squire, for many years at the University of Iowa and editor of an important book on the caucuses (Squire 1989), felt compelled to write a eulogy of sorts to Iowa. While Squire's article means to challenge six "myths" about the Iowa caucuses, it is written in the past tense, suggesting that 2008 would be the last time Iowa would go first in the nominating process.

As we write this book, we do not know if Iowa will remain first in 2012, but Professor Squire may have come to bury the caucuses a bit too early. The 2008 caucuses broke all attendance records for both parties, and generated a level of citizen involvement in the nominating process never seen before. This may well protect their position for at least one more cycle. At its national convention in August 2008, the Republican Party adopted a tentative plan for 2012 that would leave the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary intact; Iowa because the Republican straw poll is nonbinding on delegate selection, and New Hampshire because the plan specifically provides for that state and South Carolina to hold primaries before any other state (Deeth 2008). While the Democrats do not make their primary calendar decisions until late 2010, initial indications are that they will not disturb Iowa's position if the Republicans do not. With Obama winning the presidency, it is even less likely the Democratic Party will have an interest in moving Iowa, a state that was key to his nomination in 2008. Thus, it seems reasonable for us to provide the reader with a sense of the history of the caucuses and how they operate, with particular attention to the rules of the game that differ between Republicans and Democrats.

The Iowa Caucuses: A Little History and a Lot of Process

The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide an insider's understanding of how the Iowa caucuses operate.¹ Readers who have a solid

understanding of the caucuses may feel free to skip ahead to our discussion of the 2008 Iowa campaigns. But for those for whom the caucuses remain a bit mysterious, or who would simply like to brush up on Caucus 101, this chapter should provide what you need to know. Iowa's political parties have used caucuses—which at their core are simply party meetings—to organize themselves since before Iowa statehood in 1846. With the exception of 1916, when a primary was employed but abandoned due to low turnout and high cost (Boots 1920), the caucuses have also been Iowa's starting point for choosing delegates to the national party conventions.² For most of that time, little outside attention was paid—and to be fair, little attention was paid by Iowans themselves. The precinct caucuses were the ultimate insider operation, held in homes and the back rooms of businesses but rarely out in public. They were used to elect precinct committee people who ran the county party organizations, and delegates to the biennial county conventions. Attendance was light, and efforts to bring people out minimal. For the most part, the only people who cared about the precinct caucuses were a few party activists.³

Everything changed in 1972, as one of the unintended consequences of the national Democratic Party's McGovern-Fraser Commission was to force Iowa Democrats to hold their caucus earlier in the year. The commission was formed after the disastrous 1968 Democratic National Convention. Among other things, it established rules intended to open up the nominating process to rank-and-file party members by making the selection of delegates more transparent (Shafer 1983; Ranney 1978). These rules required that delegates be selected within the year of the presidential election and that all party members be allowed to participate in the selection process. For Iowa, this meant that at least thirty days had to be allowed between each of the four steps in the caucus-to-convention process (precinct caucus, county convention, district convention, and state convention). As Squire (1989; 2008) notes, the Democratic National Convention was set for July 9, 1972, which required Iowa Democrats to move their caucuses to January 24 of that year, earlier than even the New Hampshire primary. But in the end this change did not play much of a role in the 1972 nomination. Even though there was a small amount of press coverage of the caucus after it happened, Squire (*ibid.*) also points out that South Dakota senator George McGovern spent only a day and a half on the road in Iowa to achieve his strong showing just behind Maine senator Edmund Muskie. But, as has become the stuff of political legend, the 1976 Jimmy Carter campaign saw the Iowa cau-

cuses as an opportunity to make a splash and to get media attention for a little-known southern governor. When Carter did better than expected by coming in second to “uncommitted,” his path to the presidency was launched, as was the mythology of Iowa as an important initial test of any would-be presidential candidate.

The point to be made here is that Iowa got its leadoff position not because anyone thought this state would be a good place to begin a presidential nominating process, but simply because its multistage delegate selection rules required the state’s Democratic Party to change the timing of the 1972 caucus. Subsequently, the leaders of both major parties in Iowa recognized it would be to their benefit to remain first in 1976, and cooperated to ensure this was the case. But as Squire (1989) points out, this effort most likely would not have mattered but for the Jimmy Carter phenomenon. Once the leadoff position was established and Carter showed that it could matter, the legend of the Iowa caucuses was born.

While the story of Iowa becoming first to vote in the nominating process focuses on the Democrats, the Republicans were also affected by the decision to move the Democratic caucus earlier in the year. In addition to agreeing to share the January 19 date for their 1976 caucuses, the Republicans modified their existing procedures to ensure that data would be available for the media, instituting first a “poll” of those attending a few selected precinct caucuses (Squire 1989) and then moving to the ballot-based straw poll now in use. Both parties also worked together to enshrine the Iowa caucuses in state law. Iowa code states in part,

Delegates to county conventions of political parties and party committee members shall be elected at precinct caucuses held not later than the fourth Monday in February of each even-numbered year. The date shall be at least eight days earlier than the scheduled date for any meeting, caucus or primary which constitutes the first determining stage of the presidential nominating process in any other state, territory or any other group which has the authority to select delegates in the presidential nomination. (Iowa Code 43.4, 2007)

Thus, the caucuses’ status as the lead nomination contest for both parties is clearly laid out in Iowa law. The caucuses, then, are a hybrid of state law and party practice, defined by both the state and the national parties. Section 43.4 of the Iowa Code goes on to require that the state party central committees set the actual caucus date, as opposed to using a government-specified election date, which is typical in primary states.

Moreover, the party chairs in the ninety-nine Iowa counties are explicitly charged with issuing the “call” to caucus, setting up caucus locations, and identifying temporary chairs for each of their caucuses.⁴ Unlike a primary election, the costs of the precinct caucuses are borne by the parties, not the state. One result is that one of the first activities of any precinct caucus is to “pass the hat” to raise funds for the county and state party. But also unlike a primary election, vote counting is done by the parties, not government officials. The Iowa Code specifies that

When the rules of a political party require the selection and reporting of delegates selected as part of the presidential nominating process, or the rules of a political party require the tabulation and reporting of the number of persons attending the caucus favoring each presidential candidate, it is the duty of a person designated as provided by the rules of that political party to report the results of the precinct caucus as directed by the state central committee of that political party. (Iowa Code 43.4, 2007)

The first sentence of this Iowa Code section recognizes that the Democrats and Republicans operate under different caucus rules (see below), but nevertheless requires the parties to publicly report the results. In fact, another section of the code places criminal penalties on anyone willfully choosing to report inaccurate results or failing to report at all (Iowa Code, 39A.4[c] [2], 2007). So it is clear that while the caucuses may have become first by accident, and may have once been essentially party events, their importance in the nominating process has led to their codification and the requirement that the results be reported. Even so, room for variation exists so that each party can establish its own idiosyncratic rules.

The Purpose of a Caucus

Why caucus in the first place? Caucuses seem oddly out of step with the march of American progressive values and the move toward primary elections (which accelerated following Democratic Party reforms after 1968). Primaries were initially open only to party members, but over time many states have opened them by law to any eligible voter. More recent has been the rise of no-excuse absentee voting, letting any voter cast a ballot before the designated election day.⁵ Yet in Iowa, caucuses

older than the state itself persist into the twenty-first century. The main reason is that caucuses were not invented as a presidential nomination system; instead, they have always been about organizing political parties at the precinct level. Parties in Iowa still see value in this grassroots organizing and are unwilling to see it change. The fact that caucuses occur every *two* years rather than every four reinforces their basic purpose.

County political parties in Iowa are directed by a central committee whose members are chosen at the precinct caucuses, either in a fixed number or based on party strength in the precinct. The precinct caucuses are also used to elect delegates to the county convention (also held every two years), which is the governing body of the county party. Finally, county parties build their own platforms, again starting at the precinct caucuses where attendees introduce resolutions to be forwarded to the county platform committee, which then submits a platform proposal to the county convention for adoption. In addition to adopting a platform, the county convention elects delegates to the congressional district conventions and the Iowa state convention, both of which are also held every two years. The more this process is understood, the clearer it becomes that at their heart, the Iowa precinct caucuses are really about organizing both political parties from the grass roots up.

Grafting on a Nomination System

Every four years during the presidential nominating process, Iowa Democrats operate a “caucus to convention” system. At each level, from precinct caucus to state convention, delegates to the next level are chosen in rough proportion to the number of people supporting each presidential candidate at that level.⁶ Iowa Republicans, however, do not couple their caucus and state convention process to the selection of their national convention delegates, no matter what it may look like to outsiders. The Republicans hold a presidential preference straw poll at their precinct caucuses, but there is no necessary relationship between the outcome of this poll and the election of delegates to the county convention. Likewise, at the Republican county convention there is no necessary relationship between delegate selection for the next levels and candidate preference. The same is true at the state convention, where national convention delegates are chosen; once more there is no requirement that national delegates be aligned to the preferences of the state delegates. Thus for Re-

publicans, the straw poll results reported the night of the Iowa caucuses represent nothing more than the aggregated preferences of those attending the caucuses at that time. As Winebrenner (1998) describes, the Republican Party did not even hold an organized straw poll at its caucuses before 1976. It only established a voting process once it became clear that the party could benefit by feeding the media interest in Iowa.⁷

So while the Republican nominating process is not integrated into the caucuses, the Democrats do connect their national delegate selection to the precinct caucus results. However, this connection is not straightforward, though it does attempt to proportionally represent attendees' preferences. Beginning with the precinct caucuses themselves, Democrats apply a threshold requirement so that in most cases a candidate must have at least 15% support among those attending the precinct caucus to elect any county convention delegates.⁸ This threshold also applies at the county, district, and state conventions. At each precinct caucus, following the procedure detailed below, candidate support is measured, and delegates are elected to the county convention. Those delegates are "pledged" to their candidate but not legally bound by the caucus results; they are allowed to change their mind at the county convention, which is usually held in March. Again candidate support is assessed, and any candidate preference group receiving 15% or more support at the county convention elects "pledged" delegates to the district and state conventions in proportion to their county convention support. Next, about two-thirds of Iowa's Democratic National Convention pledged delegates are elected at the congressional district conventions, usually held in April, again in proportion and subject to the 15% threshold. But delegates can once again change their allegiance at either subsequent convention. Finally, the remaining national delegates are elected at the state convention in June, also chosen in rough proportion to attendee preferences, recognizing that those preferences may not at all represent what happened five months before at the Iowa caucuses. So while the Iowa caucuses are the first nominating event, actual national convention delegates are not elected until April and June, at nearly the end of the nominating process.

It is worth noting that while the Republican Party process means campaigns need only focus on contesting the precinct caucuses, which have no real connection to national delegate selection, the Democrats' rules require that campaigns—at least those remaining active—organize and reorganize at every step if they wish to secure the national convention

delegates they presumably “won” on caucus night. It is also worth pointing out that the Democrats’ proportional system with a 15% threshold is quite similar to electoral systems that choose members of legislatures through proportional representation. Democrats see the process as one of “representing” voters throughout the steps of the nominating process pyramid. Thus do Iowa Democrats (weakly) connect their January caucuses with their national convention delegates. In 2008, for example, media reports following the precinct caucuses said that Barack Obama won 16 of Iowa’s 45 elected pledged delegates, while John Edwards won 14 and Hillary Clinton won 15. But no one had actually won *any* national delegates at that point. By the time the final national delegates were selected in June—when only Clinton and Obama were still in the running, and Clinton had “suspended” her campaign—the count was Obama 24, Clinton 14, and Edwards 7, with 3 of Edwards’s 7 actually elected by the Obama delegates at the state convention as part of an agreement that brought Edwards’s pledged district delegates into the Obama camp. Ultimately, at the national convention on August 27, 2008, the final Iowa vote was 48 for Obama and 9 for Clinton.⁹

One of the ultimate ironies of Iowa and the sequential nominating process may be that Iowa votes both first and among the very last in the nation. Its precinct caucuses, electing delegates to the county conventions, are first. But its state conventions, where the process of electing national convention delegates is completed, are generally among the last national events for convention delegate selection. In the unlikely event of a competitive nomination going to the national convention itself, candidates may find themselves campaigning once again in Iowa in June—at least for support from the three thousand or so state convention delegates who make the final decisions.

Inside the Caucus: How the Iowa Caucuses Actually Work

In the wake of the 2008 caucuses, there were numerous “insider” blogs posted on caucus night providing varying levels of detail about how the caucuses actually work.¹⁰ But few of these gave detailed descriptions of the actual process that occurs within the Iowa caucuses. Years ago a group of political scientists attending a conference at the University of Iowa around the time of the 1988 caucuses wrote about their experiences in the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics* (22, no. 1 [March 1989]:

35–39). More recently, Fowler (2008) published a detailed report of the 2008 Democratic caucus in Iowa City Precinct 8, which was chaired by one of us authors, David Redlawsk. Our intent in providing the following description is to give a good sense of what happens in the caucus generally without getting down to the specifics of any particular caucus, for which either of the preceding sources is worth a look. We have already gotten some sense of the complexity of the Democrats' overall caucus process. Given this complexity, it will come as no surprise that it is much simpler to describe what happens inside a Republican presidential-year caucus.

First, a few things in common to both parties. The presidential-year caucus date has been the same for both parties since the agreement in 1976, and the parties start their precinct caucuses at about the same time, often in the same building. Voters sign in on preprinted forms listing all registered party members in their precinct. Those who are not registered with the party may register at the door, so caucus participants need not be registered voters ahead of time. This is different from primary elections in most states, with the exception of those few that allow election day registration. But no one is allowed to participate without becoming a registered party member. State law requires that anyone who will be of voting age on the date of the general election must be allowed to participate; thus, a number of seventeen-year-olds may join the caucus. And as described earlier, at the precinct caucus both parties elect county central committee members and county convention delegates, and debate and pass resolutions to be forwarded to the county platform committee. In all the above activities the two different caucuses are quite similar, and in fact in an off-year caucus they are virtually alike in procedures and results.

There are significant differences in the parties' presidential-year caucuses, driven by very different rules for national convention delegate selection. The Republican procedures are easy to describe, since there is no necessary link between presidential candidate preference and other parts of the caucus process. A presidential-year Republican caucus will be similar to that party's off-year caucus. In fact, the only difference is that the first order of business after officers are elected is the presidential straw poll. Once signed in as a registered Republican who lives in the precinct, the caucusgoer will generally be seated in a room—such as a library or school classroom—to wait for the caucus to be called to order by the temporary chair, appointed by the county party chair as the caucus convener. Following the call to order, a permanent chair and secretary are elected, with the temporary chair usually, but not always, getting the job.

At this point, the Republicans begin the presidential straw poll. In most precincts this will be carried out via a paper ballot (the state party's preference), which may be simply torn pieces of paper or a more formal ballot prepared ahead of time by the temporary chair. Those in attendance are asked if anyone wishes to speak on behalf of a candidate. Speeches are usually short, and are of the type "why I support candidate X and why you should too." Following the speeches, ballots are cast and then collected by the chair, who next assigns someone (perhaps the secretary) to count them, report the results to the caucus, and record them on a form provided by the state party. Given the media obsession with precinct caucus results, the caucus is temporarily suspended while the chair phones a special number to report the results to the state party. Significantly, those results are the actual number of ballots cast for each candidate. Typically the straw poll process takes no more than half an hour, after which the caucus moves on to electing county convention delegates and county central committee members at large, with all those still in attendance voting for these positions. Resolutions, if any, are offered up, possibly debated, and then voted on before forwarding to the county platform committee. The caucus then adjourns, probably about an hour or so after it began.

The Democrats, who are often across the hall, are almost always still in session when the Republicans adjourn. Will Rogers famously quipped, "I am not a member of any organized party—I am a Democrat," and to outsiders a Democratic precinct caucus appears to confirm this insight. Not only does it take longer than the Republican caucus, but the Democratic presidential preference rules are far more complex. This complexity comes because *national* party rules require proportional allocation of delegates at every level of a caucus-to-convention nomination system. The viability threshold requirement adds to this complexity, but the system may well end up giving more candidates a chance and more voters a choice, and bring about more sincere voting. Democrats begin their caucus the same way as Republicans do, by electing a permanent chair and secretary. Party rules require that "preference groups" not be formed until half an hour after the caucus opens, so the time is usually filled by reading letters of greetings from elected officials, and passing the hat to raise money for the local and state parties. Once the appointed time arrives, things shift into gear.

The first thing the chair must do is determine how many people are actually present. This sounds easy, and is when turnout is low; but when

more than five hundred people crowd into a small elementary school gym, getting an accurate count is difficult. Some larger caucuses now issue cards with numbers to each person at registration, allowing the chair to determine the total count by simply looking at the next number once registration finishes. Why does this matter? Because the first step in determining the precinct results is to figure out the *viability threshold*: the minimum level of support any preference group must have to win even one county convention delegate. Assuming 200 people attend and the precinct is allocated 8 delegates, each preference group will have to have at least 30 members to be viable—that is, the group’s preferred candidate will win at least one delegate.¹¹ Once the viability number is established, the chair announces the beginning of the “first alignment” period. During this time—usually thirty minutes—caucus attendees form preference groups by literally moving to different parts of the room (or even different rooms, at a large caucus) to show their support for their candidate. Candidate precinct leaders attempt to corral as many people into their corner as possible, using such enticements as food—cookies, cake, or even sandwiches, as the Hillary Clinton campaign provided in many precincts in 2008—and good old-fashioned efforts at debate and persuasion. This process is public—everyone in the room can see where their neighbors go. Most of the effort to bring people into a group happens in a friendly but slightly assertive manner. Still, there can be pressure to move in one direction or another as precinct leaders, friends, and neighbors argue and cajole. As our survey data reveal, most participants find this rare form of civic engagement fun and exciting.

After time is up, each preference group reports its number of members. The chair determines which groups have met the viability threshold and announces the result. Those who have joined nonviable preference groups (that is, pledged to support a candidate who has not received enough votes) now have one of four choices to make during what is known as realignment, lasting another thirty minutes.¹² They can move to some other viable preference group and add to that group’s numbers; attempt to get people to come over to their group to make them viable; combine with another nonviable group to become viable either for one of the candidates or declare themselves “uncommitted”; or they can simply pack up and go home. For example, in the 2008 precinct caucus that two of us authors observed, two candidates, Connecticut senator Christopher Dodd and New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, were not viable after the first round in that they did not meet the 15% threshold. Those

caucusing for either Dodd or Richardson realigned, and most joined the group caucusing for Edwards in the second round. Thus, the caucuses allow for a form of preference voting, where individuals can vote for their second-choice candidate if it is clear their first choice will not win any delegates (is nonviable). This is the part of the process that seems especially confusing and arcane to those who have never participated.

During the realignment period, precinct captains of viable preference groups work as hard as they can to bring over members of nonviable groups, while captains of nonviable groups may urge their supporters to move as a group in support of some other candidate. In one Iowa City precinct in 2004, supporters of Ohio representative Dennis Kucinich who were not a viable group were encouraged by John Edwards supporters to join them, since the two campaigns had announced that each would support the other in precincts where one was not viable. But the Kucinich captain was unhappy with what his campaign had told him to do, and he urged his supporters to go home. In the end, about half moved to Edwards and about half simply left. In the same precinct in 2008, the Edwards group was initially 11 people short of viability—only the Obama and Clinton groups were viable—so the Edwards precinct leaders worked hard to convince Biden, Dodd, and Richardson supporters—all nonviable—to join them. Supporters of Delaware senator Joe Biden came over as a group, while Dodd supporters split among the top three candidates and Richardson supporters mostly went to Obama. At the same time, the Obama group, in an effort to deny delegates to Clinton, sent some of its supporters to the Edwards group to ensure its viability. This kind of back and forth characterizes large caucuses, where there may be hundreds of people milling about as candidate precinct captains try hard to keep things under control and to the benefit of their candidate. In many cases during this process, the caucus is characterized by honest discussion and debate about the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates—a type of democratic deliberation that is often lost in modern American politics (Barber 1984).

Following the close of the realignment period, everyone is counted again to determine how many are now in each candidate's corner. If any nonviable groups remain—having failed to attract enough support—those people get one last chance to move to one of the viable groups. Then the final count is made and recorded on a form provide by the state party. Two important points are worth noting. First, there is no of-

ficial record kept of the initial alignment; the first count in the caucus is not recorded anywhere. Second, the final alignment counts, although recorded, are never publicly reported. Instead, the raw counts for each candidate are translated into delegates, with delegates assigned as proportionally as possible. It is the delegate count in each precinct, not the actual number of supporters, which is phoned in by the precinct caucus chair. Once that count is known, caucus business is suspended while the caucus chair phones Democratic Party headquarters in Des Moines to report the delegate counts for the media.

Delegates are allocated through a process known colloquially as “caucus math” and often described by the media as some arcane calculation that no mere mortal can possibly do. In fact, the math is quite simple, though it may require a calculator. Given the number of participants, and given the final alignment support for each candidate, it is relatively easy to calculate the percentage of support for each viable candidate and to use that percentage to allocate delegates. If in a group of 200 caucusgoers there are 110 for Obama, 50 for Edwards, and 40 for Clinton once all alignments are made, then Obama will be allocated 55% of that precinct’s county convention delegates, Edwards 25%, and Clinton 20%. In a precinct with 8 delegates, this translates to 4.4 for Obama, 2 for Edwards, and 1.6 for Clinton. However, since there cannot be fractions of delegates, basic rounding is used, so that the final numbers reported will be Obama 4, Edwards 2, and Clinton 2. What started as 200 people aligning themselves initially with 6 candidates and finally with 3 viable candidates becomes 8 delegates. Each preference group then elects its own delegates from among its members. Following these delegate elections, the caucus reconvenes as a whole to complete its business—electing the county central committee and debating resolutions. Democrats have spent anywhere from two to two and a half hours to get this all done.¹³

How the Rules Matter

Because nominations are decided through a sequential process, a major role Iowa plays is to signal to the rest of the country which candidates its voters think are potential presidents and which are not. This signal is given by the results of the precinct caucuses as reported by the parties. The Republicans report a vote count, whereas the Democrats report del-

egate allocations, but in both cases the media take this as a sign of a candidate's strength or weakness based on the "expectations game," as we discussed in chapter 2 and will cover in detail in chapter 7. Iowa voters know this, of course, which might cause them to vote strategically (also known as sophisticated voting; Abramson et al. 1992)—that is, support a candidate who they may like less but is more likely to actually win the nomination. Given the media environment, Iowans have a great deal of information on who the media think is viable, and are in position to act on it. Thus, Iowans might have a propensity to vote strategically, given their role in the process. In doing so they would be sending an invalid signal to later voters about their true preferences by simply reinforcing media expectations about viability. Alternatively, Iowans might vote sincerely; supporting the candidate they truly believe in, even if that candidate is not considered viable. If they were to do this, then Iowans would be telling later states what they truly believe about the candidates.¹⁴

Voters in later states should be able to take advantage of the information Iowans give them, and this information might well include a true measure of viability—the actual votes of sincere Iowa voters, rather than media expectations alone. We are well positioned to briefly investigate this point here. Our Iowa caucus and 2008 Super Tuesday surveys allow us to test both possibilities using Abramson and colleagues' (1992) estimate of voting patterns in the 1988 Super Tuesday event as a baseline and comparing them to our own surveys of 2008 Super Tuesday and Pennsylvania primary voters.

We show the comparison in table 3.1.¹⁵ A sincere voter is one who casts a vote for the candidate he or she prefers over all others, while at the same time believing that some other candidate is more viable, that is, more likely to win the nomination. A strategic voter (sometimes called sophisticated voter) is one who casts a vote for a candidate he or she rates lower than another because that candidate is thought to be more viable. A strategic voter sacrifices general preference for a candidate in order to vote for one thought more likely to win. Finally, a straightforward voter is one who casts a vote for the candidate he or she rates the highest and that he or she also rates as the most viable, or likely to win the nomination.

In the 2008 Iowa caucuses, we see much *higher* rates of sincere voting and much lower sophisticated or strategic voting than expected from national samples based on either 1988 or 2008 Super Tuesday voters, with

TABLE 3.1. **Percentage of straightforward, sophisticated/strategic, and sincere voters: comparing national and Iowa samples**

Voter type	Time period 1: First nominating event—2008 Iowa Caucus (late October 2007)		Reference time period 2: National sample— 1988 Super Tuesday (from Abramson et al. [1992])		Time period 2: National sample— 2008 Super Tuesday (pre-/ post-Feb. 5)		Time period 3: Late nominating event—PA pri- mary sample (April 2008)
	GOP	Dem.	GOP	Dem.	GOP	Dem.	Dem.
<i>Straightforward</i> (high rating and high viability)	53.5	55.6	52.8	43.8	49.6	65.9	77.8
<i>Strategic/Sophisticated</i> (lower rating and high viability)	9.8	8.0	13.9	13.1	17.0	15.9	2.0
<i>Sincere</i> (lower viability and high rating)	28.2	29.9	10.3	14.3	24.4	13.7	17.2
Irrational	8.6	6.6	10.0	11.7	8.9	4.6	3.0

Note: Ties coded as missing following Abramson et al. (1992).

sincere voting in the Iowa caucuses 20 percentage points higher than in either of the other events. This suggests that Iowa's voting first in the sequential nominating process and the intensive grassroots campaigning we will document in the following chapters foster more sincere and less strategic voting. In other words, the rules matter. We also see higher rates of sincere voting among Democrats than Republicans, reinforcing our argument that the two rounds of voting for Iowa Democrats also have consequences. In fact, we strongly suspect that if first-round voting results were actually available, we would find even more sincere voting, since Democratic caucusgoers know they have a second chance. We see roughly the same percentage of straightforward voters nationally and in Iowa.

Iowa voters, at the beginning of a sequential election environment, create information for later voters, who then appear to behave more strategically in terms of candidate choice. We see roughly the same percentage of strategic voters in the Super Tuesday primaries in 1988 as in 2008, even though twenty years separate these two elections. The higher percentage of sincere voters nationally in 2008 on the Republican side (24.4%) may be because of greater overall dissatisfaction with the candidates compared to Republicans in 1988, or Democrats in either 1988 or 2008. Our surveys consistently showed Republicans less satisfied with their choices over the course of the 2008 nomination campaign.

Challenges to the Caucuses: Was 2008 the End of an Era?

The astute reader will have noticed that while the Republicans report actual straw-poll numbers, the Democrats do not. In our example above, Obama had 55% of all the supporters, but only got 50% of the delegates. Likewise, the precinct will be reported as a tie between Clinton and Edwards when Edwards actually had more supporters than Clinton. And any candidate who had up to 14.9% of the supporters (29 people in our example) received no delegates at all. These anomalies are not simply theoretical. They happen throughout Iowa for the simple reason that Democratic caucus attendees are choosing delegates, and the reduction necessarily requires rounding. Interestingly, this is not unique to the caucus. In all Democratic nominating events where delegates are selected, whether caucuses or primaries, rounding must and does take place, since no fractional delegates may be awarded. But in Iowa, the Democrats have chosen to withhold the actual vote counts and report only the delegate numbers, so it is impossible to know how candidates did in terms of actual support before the realignment period. For an event that has become so important, it seems odd not to provide the media and voters with full information about what happened. We return to this anomaly in the conclusion of the book.¹⁶

The Iowa caucus process has raised a number of questions from both media commentators and political scientists, often pertaining to issues of participation, fairness, and complexity. Conventional wisdom holds that the caucuses are archaic, arcane, and unrepresentative. Certainly events like caucuses that are mostly about party building seem archaic in a day when parties seem to be less important and states seem keen to open up nominations to all citizens, rather than just party members. And based on our description above, the rules may seem arcane to many, though to be fair this is only because rules governing all Democratic caucuses and primaries (like the 15% threshold for winning delegates) are simply spelled out more clearly for caucusgoers. And, of course, as we will consider in chapter 6, nomination contests of all types may be generally less representative of the public as a whole, since they typically attract those most interested in party politics.

Yet a closer look suggests something else. The Democrats' use of proportionality to allocate delegates may allow more candidates to have a chance, and their use of two rounds of voting, which encourages sincere voting over strategic voting, may lead to better translation of preferences

and fairer outcomes. In effect, Democratic caucusgoers are given two votes, and if their first-choice candidate is not viable, they can vote for their second choice. Thus, even voters supporting a less than likely winner have a chance to vote for their favored candidate in the beginning, and then, having registered their initial preference, move to support a more likely winner. Primary voters do not get this chance (nor do Republicans in Iowa).

Defenders of the caucus process might also point to features that make caucuses even more open to participation than primary contests in most states. First, the caucuses have used same-day registration rules for many years, long before other states began adopting such processes for elections. They could do this because the caucuses are party events, and the parties can allow people to reregister right at the door if they wish—and they do. Unlike primaries, the Iowa caucuses also allow any person to vote who will be eligible to vote at the general election the following November. Young people who will not be eighteen until the November election day are eligible caucus attendees, unlike at primaries, where a voter must be at least eighteen on the date of the primary. The caucuses themselves, which used to be held in private houses and other not-so-accessible locations, have moved out into the open as the media attention increased. Thus, in most places caucuses are now held in public buildings—in fact, state law requires public buildings to be made available—and are increasingly in buildings accessible to the disabled.

In addition, caucus defenders can point to ways in which the caucuses involve voters in the grass roots of party organization (Squire 1989). As far as most people know, the Iowa caucuses are about presidential nominations—but they are also about identifying party supporters and bringing them into the system. Given the effort required to attend, voters may become more attached to their party organizations when they get involved in their caucus. Finally, election reform advocates have long called for revising the standard “first-past-the-post” system to allow voters to express something more than a single vote for one candidate. In particular, preference voting is often seen as a better process, since voters get to show not only their first choice, but also other preferences. In effect the Democratic caucus already does this, at least for those whose first choice fails to catch on with other voters. Realignment allows those voters to show their second preference, rather than be disenfranchised entirely, as is the case in standard primary elections.

At the same time, those who challenge the caucuses can make a strong

case. Caucuses require that voters be present in person; there are no absentee ballots. People who are working, housebound, without transportation, or otherwise unable to attend in person simply cannot participate, especially since the caucuses are normally held on a weekday evening.¹⁷ This is true for both parties. Moreover, Democrats who attend must be willing to be public about their candidate preference. There are no secret ballots in Democratic caucus (or convention) proceedings. And, of course, caucuses take time. Whereas voting may be a very quick process, caucusing can take at least an hour or two, effectively eliminating the participation of those who just do not have the time. And given the relatively low turnout, the caucus process itself may be subject to challenge as a representative activity, a point we will address in detail in chapter 6.

Given these strong critiques and the significant level of frustration expressed by party leaders in other states, pundits suggest every four years that the Iowa caucuses have had their last gasp. Yet four years later they rise again. So the debate over the fairness, representativeness, and appropriateness of the caucuses continues. We intend to contribute to the debate ourselves as we document the Iowa caucuses as a wellspring of grassroots participation and as more representative than conventional wisdom suggests. We do not, however, end the debate, leaving it to the reader to examine the evidence for 2008 and to ask whether the intensely competitive nomination contests that year represent a new Iowa caucus or simply the end of a tradition.