

## Reading One: Why Do Iowa and New Hampshire Go First?

Each presidential election, a perennial question arises: Why are Iowa and New Hampshire always the first two primary states? Is it fair that these two small, disproportionately white and rural states get the extra attention and clout that goes with holding the earliest contests?

Zachary B. Wolf, a Senior Writer at [CNN](#), notes that “New Hampshire leaders had the foresight to intentionally hold the first primary on the calendar starting in the 1920s. Iowa ended up being the first caucus by accident – there were no hotel rooms available for the regularly scheduled state party convention so Democratic leaders moved the caucuses up to comply with a state law.”

Holding early primaries is something that other states covet, because early contests can sway the rest of the nation and bring notice to less-known and less-well-funded candidates. Further, the residents of early primary states get a great deal of attention and access to candidates compared to other states. Critics question the long tradition of allowing Iowa and New Hampshire to go first and the undue influence of both states. They point out that these two states are small ones whose populations are disproportionately white and rural, and that they therefore do not accurately represent the nation at large.

Presidential candidates usually avoid openly criticizing the first primary states out of a fear of alienating themselves from their party’s first voters. But before he dropped out of the presidential race in early January, Julián Castro, who was Secretary of Housing and Urban Development during the Obama administration, took a risk by sharing his opinion. A November 2019 Politico article by national political reporter Nolan D. McCaskill reported:

Castro has highlighted that much has changed since 1972, the year Iowa began holding its caucus first. He said Sunday that he appreciates how seriously voters in Iowa and New Hampshire take the process of vetting candidates. But in his statement Thursday, he cast it as an affront to Black women’s critical role in the Democratic Party and said Democrats can’t “complain about Republicans suppressing the votes of people of color, and then begin our nominating contest in two states that hardly have people of color.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “I believe, as many Iowans themselves do, that it’s time that our presidential nominating process reflects our nation’s and our party’s diversity. That’s just the truth.”

<https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/14/castro-iowa-new-hampshire-primary-071055>

Castro isn’t alone in his criticisms, nor are such arguments new. During the 2016 election cycle, Dylan Matthews, a Senior Correspondent at Vox, outlined just how different the first two primary states are from the rest of the United States. He wrote:

Iowa exerts a huge amount of power over the American presidency. A 2011 study by economists Brian Knight and Nathan Schiff found that caucus-goers in Iowa (and their counterparts in New Hampshire) carry the same influence in determining their party’s ultimate nominee as five voters from Super Tuesday states put together.

So it's concerning that the states selected to start the primary season, and wield this disproportionate influence, are among the least diverse in America: A whopping 88.7 percent of Iowans and 92.3 percent of New Hampshire residents are non-Hispanic whites; only 63.7 percent of Americans as a whole are.

Only 3.4 percent of Iowans are black; 13.2 percent of Americans are.

Unlike the rest of the country, Iowa and New Hampshire do not have particularly large immigrant populations. Only 4.7 percent of Iowans and 5.6 percent of New Hampshire residents are foreign-born, compared with 13.1 percent nationwide. Only 7.2 percent of Iowans and 8 percent of New Hampshire residents speak a language other than English at home; 20.7 percent of American families do.

New Hampshire and Iowa are also markedly less urban than the rest of the country; they have cities, but none are particularly big. Des Moines, Iowa's biggest city, has only 209,220 people; Manchester, New Hampshire's largest, only has 110,448.

By putting Iowa and New Hampshire first, the Democratic and Republican parties are effectively saying that disproportionate power and influence should go to a small group of overwhelmingly white people in rural areas and small cities.

<https://www.vox.com/2016/2/1/10890718/iowa-new-hampshire-diversity>

What might be an alternative system of selecting which states hold the first primaries?

One option would be to choose the first two states at random, with a provision to ensure that each state would eventually get a turn.

Some defenders of the current system argue that it makes sense to have two small states go first, since these states might otherwise be perpetually ignored and skipped over in favor of places with major cities and large media markets if all states were treated equally. To address this concern, an alternate system might allow a number of small states to hold the earliest primaries, but distribute them evenly across different regions.

As a third option, freelance political writer Ben Jackson argued in a July 2019 article for the Boston Globe for having a national primary. He wrote:

A single national primary shortly before the nominating convention would give all voters an equal say in determining their party's standard-bearer. It would also shorten the campaign, reducing the need to raise staggering amounts of money nearly two years before a presidential election. The people we elect to govern could spend their time doing so instead of campaigning for their next election. From sea to sea, we would give electoral power to the very voters we as Democrats claim to care about. The result would be a party and a government that looks more like the people they aspire to represent.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/10/06/the-democratic-primaries-and-white-privilege-iowa-and/nKGGJGSD3q9XHjCNqeViCO/story.html>

In the face of decades of political tradition, the chances of moving Iowa and New Hampshire out of their prized spots might seem slim. But detractors are sure to continue pushing for a new system to be adopted—and would prefer a change sooner rather than later.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
  2. According to the reading, what are some ways in which Iowa and New Hampshire are different from the United States as a whole?
  3. Critics believe it is unfair that these two states are consistently allowed to have the first contests of the primary season? Do you agree? Why or why not?
  4. What alternative might you propose to the current system of ordering the primary?
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## **Reading Two: What Are the Iowa Caucuses and How Do They Work?**

Technically, although voters in Iowa are the first to select their preferred candidates for the presidency, the state's selection process is not a normal primary election. Instead, it is called a caucus.

So what is a caucus, and how does the caucus process differ from primaries in places like New Hampshire and beyond?

The Iowa caucus system isn't a simple secret ballot election. Instead, a caucus is a public community event in which voters from a political party determine their preferences. In the last presidential election cycle, 13 states and two territories used caucus processes; this year, however, only six states will, as more states are moving toward conventional primaries. Eun Kyung Kim, a Washington D.C based immigration and demographics journalist, described the Iowa caucuses in a January 2016 article for Today.com:

In Iowa, groups of voters will meet in 1,681 precincts throughout the state beginning at 7 p.m. local time Monday.

"It's basically a gathering of neighbors, so it's the folks on your street or in your neighborhood or at your church who vote at the same place where you vote, coming together to discuss politics," said David Redlawsk, a political science professor at Rutgers University currently serving as a fellow at Iowa's Drake University.

The caucuses will take place at schools, fire stations, city halls and sometimes churches — any easily accessible public location.... Republicans cast secret ballots, but Democrats go through a

far more complex process.

“Democrats have to be willing to stand up in front of their friends and neighbors and say, 'I'm supporting [their favored candidate].... They will literally, once the caucus is called to order, physically move to different parts of the room to show their support.”

The larger the preference group the better, because Democrats require candidates to garner at least 15 percent of support per precinct.

And that's when Iowa voters may find themselves appealing to a neighbor — or good friend or colleague — to join their side. Supporters of candidates who fail to meet that threshold may campaign to gain additional voters, or they may choose to walk over and join those supporting the remaining candidates. The percentage of support is crucial because it determines how many delegates are awarded to each viable candidate.

<https://www.today.com/news/how-iowa-caucus-works-why-it-s-different-new-hampshire-t69301>

Supporters of the caucus acknowledge its unique format, but they claim it benefits not only Iowans but the country as a whole. Andrew Prokop, Senior Political Correspondent at Vox, discussed some of the perceived positives of the caucus process in a February 2016 article:

Caucus defenders respond by saying that Iowa does skew the results — positively. "I think it distorts the process in a good way," says Crawford.... That's because Iowa's a state where retail campaigning and one-on-one interactions with voters, rather than simply big money and ad buys, matter. Its voters have shown that they don't just follow the prevailing national winds — they're more willing to give little-known and poorly-funded challengers a chance, which helps ensure a more democratic contest overall. "Iowa's a level playing ground," says Iowa GOP operative Eric Woolson. "And Iowa has an electorate that pays attention to what's going on."

<https://www.vox.com/2016/1/25/18089440/iowa-caucus-2016-polls>

Yet the caucuses can be hard for everyone to participate in. As opposed to a quick voting process that can be undertaken at any time during the day—allowing voters to schedule around their work and personal obligations—the caucuses require attendance for a much longer period, at a defined time. Elaine Godfrey, assistant editor at The Atlantic, highlighted these problems in an article from October 2019:

The Iowa caucus has long faced criticism for being inaccessible to a large swath of voters, including those with disabilities or inflexible work schedules.... Democrats across the country have positioned themselves as voting-rights champions, challenging voter-ID laws and other legislation that they argue is intended to curb voter turnout. After Democrats took control of the House of Representatives earlier this year, the very first bill they passed was a sweeping voting-rights and anti-corruption package that would expand early voting nationwide. But the Iowa caucus process “suppresses the vote at a time when we want to increase the number of people participating,” says Stuart Appelbaum, the president of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union, which represents workers at Quaker Oats and General Mills plants in

Iowa. It is inherently “discriminatory.”

Caucuses pose major concerns for voters with disabilities in particular. “The in-person caucuses are still not accessible,” says Jane Hudson, the executive director of Disability Rights Iowa. Often, there aren’t microphones around, so the evening’s proceedings can be difficult for voters to hear. And caucus sites—which can include churches, schools, and union halls—are often packed, with limited seating and not enough handicapped parking.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/10/iowa-satellite-caucus-democrats-voting-rights/598999/>

Caucus defenders highlight the value of neighbors getting together trying to persuade one another by engaging in democratic dialogue. But Michelle Cottle, a member of the New York Times editorial board, believes that the caucuses are fundamentally undemocratic. She wrote June 2019:

Iowa’s caucuses are mind-numbingly convoluted and anti-democratic, favoring the most motivated, well-organized few over the less-obsessive majority of Iowans.... Compared with primaries, they tend to be less inclusive and more complicated, resulting in much lower participation rates. In 2016, less than 16 percent of Iowa’s voting-eligible population participated in its caucuses. In New Hampshire, which holds the first presidential primary, the participation rate was over 52 percent....

Defenders of the Iowa-first system typically fall back [the argument] that keeping the focus on Iowa promotes an old-fashioned, hands-on brand of retail politics that doesn’t rely on big money or celebrity the way campaigning does in larger states....

Please. Who’s to say that the true measure of a candidate can — much less should — be determined by a talent for one-on-one schmoozing? Or on how willing a campaign is to sink insane amounts of time and money into a small, unrepresentative state?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/11/opinion/iowa-caucuses.html>

#### **For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what are the Iowa caucuses and how do they differ from more conventional primaries?
3. Promoters of the caucus process argue that they encourage people to engage in dialogue with their neighbors and foster a more robust democratic discussion than just secret ballot voting. What do you think of these arguments?
4. According to the reading, what are some of the criticisms of the caucuses? In what ways might they be less democratic than a conventional primary?
5. What is your view? Do caucuses make sense? Why or why not?
6. Does your state have a conventional primary or a caucus? Which do you think it should have?