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## The Idiocy of the Iowa Caucuses



By Marty Kaplan



BRENDAN HOFFMAN VIA GETTY IMAGES

What were we thinking?

If we're lucky, the day will come when we look back at the Iowa caucuses and the quadrennial carnival they inaugurate with the same embarrassed horror we now feel for duck-and-cover as a safety drill for nuclear war.

What a dangerous distraction the Iowa spectacle has been from the dysfunction and unfairness of democracy as we now know it. No, worse, what a cynical celebration of it. Pitifully few Americans vote, and shockingly few of them are young or poor or people of color, yet we give wildly disproportionate influence to the white rural voters of one small state whose priorities, like subsidies for corn-based ethanol, are nationally marginal, and whose disposable time for caucus-going is unimaginable to parents working multiple shifts at multiple jobs.

At the same time, what a bonanza it's been for the state's TV and radio stations, which have raked in tens of millions of dollars in attack ads, and what a bordello it's been for the billionaires and special interests who've anonymously funded those air wars.

What a misbegotten surrogate for civic seriousness this interminable campaign has become, with news networks getting in bed with parties to co-sponsor debates, selling national ad time for those debates at Super Bowl rates and polluting public discourse with bloviating "strategists" and accountability-free predictions.

I don't question the intentions or integrity of Iowa caucus-goers. They're just rising to the opportunity our system offers to participate in the nominating process. It's not their fault that a year of meaningless polls has tracked their every evanescent preference. It's not their choice to be targeted by a fusillade of ads or hunted by battalions of ground gamers. But the \$100 million that campaigns and super PACs are spending in Iowa is terrific for their state's economy, and if those citizens'

unrepresentative demographic has been arbitrarily elevated by party hacks and media elites to a sacred status, well, who could refuse an offer like that?

It was Jimmy Carter who invented the significance of the Iowa caucuses. In 1975, the Georgia governor had a one percent name recognition outside his state. But instead of bowing to New Hampshire's similarly arbitrary first-primary-in-the-nation status, Carter practically lived in Iowa, sleeping on supporters' couches, carrying his own garment bag and engineering a showing good enough to get him national attention. Even though he came in second in the 1980 caucuses, behind Uncommitted, he still beat nationally known Democrats like senators Birch Bayh, Fred Harris, Mo Udall and Scoop Jackson, which won him a media narrative ("Jimmy who?" won Iowa!) and a launch pad to win New Hampshire a month later.

From then on, the media took it as a given that Iowa mattered. In 1983-84, I was deputy campaign manager to Walter Mondale, who had been Carter's vice president, in Mondale's own bid for the presidency. Winning Iowa was a lynchpin of our plan; I think I spent more time in Iowa than any other state. It paid off, or so we thought: In an eight-candidate field, Mondale nearly won an absolute majority: 48.89 percent.

But what none of us in the campaign anticipated was the media's need for a suspenseful narrative. "Frontrunner's Iowa win seals Mondale's inevitability" was the most boring story anyone could write about the caucuses; who would bother paying attention to the race after that? And so, to my naïve astonishment, the big story out of Iowa was about the candidate whom Mondale crushed almost 3-to-1: Colorado senator Gary Hart. Hart's weak second-place finish was enough for him to steal the Iowa caucuses narrative. A month later, Hart beat Mondale in the New Hampshire primary. It wasn't until the California primary, in June, that Mondale finally scraped together enough delegates to get the nomination.

So it was ironic when, in 1988, I had a bit part in stealing Iowa from that year's numerical winner. In 1987, I had done some informal, unpaid work on Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis' campaign. I contributed to the speech announcing his candidacy, and, every other week, I hung out at his campaign headquarters in Boston. (It was a hell of a commute from Los Angeles, where I had moved from Washington, but that's another story.)

On the night of the Iowa caucuses, I was with Dukakis in his Des Moines hotel when the numbers came in. Missouri congressman Dick Gephardt was first, at 31.3 percent. Illinois senator Paul Simon won 26.7 percent. Behind him was Dukakis, with 22.2 percent. The problem was that Dukakis was supposed to have come in first. It's what his political and financial backers expected; it's why Boston TV (which broadcast to the New Hampshire media market) was going live with his Iowa victory speech. The only stumbling block: no victory.

But it dawned on me there was a way to ignore that. 1988 was an Olympics year, and in the Olympics, there are actually three winners: gold, silver and bronze. So I wrote some lines for Dukakis to express his excitement and gratitude to the people of Iowa and his supporters in New England. "We won the bronze, folks!" he told a ballroom full of supporters, whose disappointment effortlessly pivoted to triumph. To my knowledge, no one in the press, and none of his opponents, nailed him for that. In 2016, expect the campaigns and the media to concoct ways that finishing third, fourth or even fifth in Iowa or New Hampshire somehow constitutes victory.

We're suckers for the patriotic mythology and gauzy imagery of town halls and high school gyms where candidates get grilled and caucus-goers speak up and get counted. But the power of Iowa and New Hampshire isn't a reward for the superior candidate-scrutinizing skills that their citizens inherently possess; it's a consequence of state party officials flexing their muscles over the calendar.

Various ways to reform that calendar have been proposed. I like the Interregional Primary Plan put forward by Rep. Sander Levin (D-Mich.) in 2007. Break the country into six regions (e.g. Region 1: New England/mid-Atlantic; Region 3: upper Midwest; Region 5: Southeast etc.). Each region has six sub-regions made up of one or more states (e.g., Region 1 (A): Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont; Region 1 (B): Massachusetts; Region 1 (C): Connecticut, Rhode Island etc). Hold six primary elections, March through June, with a sub-region from each larger region represented in each election. The regions would rotate through the order every four years, so over a 24-year cycle, every state will have occupied every primary and caucus slot exactly once, and each state's voters would have had a fair shot at influencing the process.

As long as we're at it, let's also get the parties and the networks out of the debate business, and give the debates back to an independent group like the League of Women Voters. Throw in media reform that gives free airtime to candidates, and pretty soon we could actually be looking more like our ideals than like our entertainment.

*This is a crosspost of my column at the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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