

Iowa serves the presidential nomination process well

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As co-authors of the recent book "Why Iowa? How Caucuses and Sequential Elections Improve the Presidential Nominating Process," we were both bemused and disappointed by Stephen Bloom's recent online piece on Iowa in The Atlantic. Others have responded eloquently to his hodgepodge of misconceptions, inaccuracies and old-fashioned stereotypes.

While there is a kernel of truth in some of Bloom's characterizations, much is simply inaccurate or skewed by impression rather than based on objective facts.

The apparent purpose of the essay, though, is to add to the regular cacophony of coastal elites who wonder why Iowa votes first and tells the rest of the country who to elect as president. Unfortunately, Bloom contributes nothing original to this chorus. We've heard it all before. Iowa is unrepresentative; Iowans are different, not like the rest of the country. This makes them unfit to play the leadoff role.

But rather than address valid questions about the role of the caucuses, Bloom uses stereotypes to reinforce what his east and west coast readers already think they know as they look down their noses at the heartland.

Let's put aside the fact that if Bloom really thinks anyone in Iowa calls the caucuses "chew'n'chats" he's clearly not been paying attention. The reasons why Iowa votes first and the beneficial impact of the caucuses on the process are much more complicated than he admits.

In our book, we draw on extensive survey data and statistical analysis, rather than journalistic impression, to study the effect of the Iowa caucuses on the presidential nomination process over time. We find that the caucus process, while not perfect, adds significant value by requiring candidates to talk to people, honing their messages and building grassroots campaigns rather than focusing entirely on mass media advertising and nationalized TV debates.

While Iowa's voters are not determinative, they send important information to later voters in our sequential presidential nomination system, information those voters use to inform their own decisions.

Why Iowa? Iowa votes first not because of any strategic actions, but largely by accident. In 1972, Iowa Democrats moved their caucus to late January to accommodate rules changes. The end of January was the last day the precinct caucuses could be held given a new 30-day notification rule because electing delegates in Iowa requires four steps -- caucuses, county conventions, district conventions and finally the state convention.

Why has this seemed set in stone ever since? Well, it is sort of -- state law now requires the caucuses be first -- but more importantly because there has never been any agreement among the rest of the states on a better option.

Why Iowa? Because Iowa has a caucus. Caucuses require commitment by voters. They take more time than voting in a primary. And while caucus turnout is lower than primaries, those who do show up are the kind of democratic citizens we say we want. They pay attention, learn about their options and care about politics.

For the most part, the need to convince voters to caucus on a cold winter night, spending a couple hours talking about politics, means that campaigns must be grassroots, and candidates who can build such campaigns tell us something about their ability to manage large organizations and to connect with ordinary citizens, skills we think are important.

Why Iowa? Because caucuses in small population states foster grassroots politics. Grassroots politics, whether in Iowa, New Hampshire, or other small states, offers distinct advantages over large state campaigns. Voters see the candidates up close while candidates have opportunities to learn about "real" people, escaping at least briefly the campaign bubble that will form as time goes on.

We have watched candidates come to Iowa with half-formed ideas, interact personally with voters, and take away new perspectives allowing them to improve their understanding of voters' needs in ways they don't get from their consultants and polling. Grassroots politics combined with a sequential process has other advantages.

A crowded field of candidates is reduced over time. At the same time, underdogs have a chance to win by gaining momentum from early nominating events. Those without large war chests or name recognition can at least compete,

leveling the playing field. But even when they don't win, the ideas and issues they discuss often find their way into leading candidates' rhetoric and party platforms.

Why Iowa? Because despite Bloom's underlying complaint, Iowa is actually the median state; that is, it sits squarely in the middle, not just of the country, but on a host of indicators as detailed by our colleagues Michael Lewis-Beck and Pev Squire.

On 39 of 51 economic, social and diversity factors, Iowa is in the middle, and for most of the other 12, Iowa's difference is in a positive direction. In this sense, Iowa is representative, though in a larger sense no one state can be, no matter how large or small.

Even California is thoroughly unrepresentative, with much larger Latino and Asian populations, for example, than other states. In the end, representativeness is a straw man argument.

No one state is like the country, and unless we ditch the sequential nominating system, some state will have to go first.

Are the caucuses perfect? Of course not. Does it have to be Iowa? We believe a well-run caucus in any small state could serve the same purpose. Iowa voters take the caucuses seriously and the rules of the game are well understood. Given time, some other state could do the same, but Iowa does have a 40-year head start.

While we propose some modifications to the system in our book -- including creating a caucus window where all caucus states could vote before a one-day national primary -- our final takeaway is that Iowa has been a great place to start the nomination process.

Why not start in a place where candidates can talk to voters, voters take their role seriously, and the emphasis is on the grassroots, dare we say, the 99 percent, rather than those who can finance the barrage of 30 second negative ads that are soon to come.

So why not Iowa?

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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