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Iowa Voters Go First, but Are They the Best?

Iowa's caucus boosters prepare for another run at their special status.

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MASON CITY, Iowa—As Iowa politicians freshen their briefs as to why their state deserves to vote first in every presidential primary season, they should look no further than Ann Kohlman.

The 72-year-old retiree first voted for Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and has made it a point to vote in every election since. Already this year, she has sought out and attended area appearances by Bernie Sanders, Carly Fiorina, Hillary Clinton, Martin O'Malley, and Lincoln Chafee. And on a recent Monday evening, she'd arrived early at Music Man Square to hear what Jeb Bush had to say.

“Too many people died so we could have the right to vote for us to throw it away,” she explained after finding an empty plastic lawn set up in the touristy homage to the famous musical. “As Iowans, we have a special duty to find the best candidates to put forward.”

Which succinctly and just about perfectly restates Iowa's early-voting rationale: Iowans should keep their leadoff spot in the presidential lineup because they understand that responsibility and take it seriously. It's an argument Iowa political leaders have made for decades, and, it appears, it's an argument that they will have to make again.

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus's [recent comments to *National Journal*](http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73980/rnc-chair-iowa-new-hampshire-arent-sacred-cows-after-2016?mref=home) (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73980/rnc-chair-iowa-new-hampshire-arent-sacred-cows-after-2016?mref=home>) indicated that other states could make legitimate cases for changing things up heading into the next election. He suggested a rotating schedule of primaries in which the country is divided into five regions, with the states in each group voting every two weeks or so.

"I don't think there should ever be any sacred cows as to the primary process or the order," Priebus said.

Which means Iowans can expect—again—the usual criticisms: Their state is too small, too agricultural, too white, and, on the Republican side, too dominated by evangelical Christians to play such an important role in choosing the president.

Former Iowa Republican Party Chairman Matt Strawn said he's heard it all before. "Part of me is saying: It's Groundhog Day. We go through this every four years."

Whenever the status of Iowa and New Hampshire has been challenged in the past, their defenders are quick to invoke their traditional roles in presidential elections. Any change in the pecking order is a slap at history, goes the argument.

"Why do they play the Rose Bowl in Pasadena?" former state GOP political director Craig Robinson asks rhetorically. "They could play the Rose Bowl in Arizona."

As it happens, though, the Rose Bowl has been in Pasadena since 1902, which makes it older than the New Hampshire primary, which began in 1916. Then, the names of delegates to the nominating convention were on the ballot, rather than the candidates themselves. That was changed for the 1952 election, when war hero Gen. Dwight Eisenhower demonstrated the primary's influence by springboarding from a win there to take the nomination from establishment-favorite Robert Taft.

But that's New Hampshire. Iowa's early-voting tradition goes back only to 1972, meaning it's about as old as the Fiesta Bowl (which actually is in Arizona), and came about largely by accident.

The timing of the Democratic convention in 1972—a month earlier than the one in 1968—required the Iowa party’s precinct caucuses to be held before the New Hampshire primary. The caucuses’ main purpose was to conduct party business, but they happened to include a presidential straw poll—which showed “uncommitted” finishing ahead of Sen. Edmund Muskie, at the time considered the front-runner. The candidates had not campaigned in Iowa for this, but prominent *New York Times* reporter R.W. “Johnny” Apple noticed Muskie’s weakness and Sen. George McGovern’s strong showing, just behind Muskie.

The resulting media attention helped McGovern win the nomination, and four years later, Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter built his strategy around winning Iowa and wound up in the Oval Office.

“All the credit goes to Johnny Apple,” said former Democratic Rep. Dave Nagle. “It was really Apple’s coverage that showed that Muskie wasn’t the favorite that everyone expected him to be.”

Nagle ran the Iowa Democratic Party prior to his three terms in the House, so he is familiar with the efforts by other states to displace it on the election calendar over the years. When Bush held a breakfast event at a Cedar Falls diner, Nagle was eager to see the son of the man who was vice president, then president during his time in office.

He agrees that Iowa’s 39-year history does not quite compare with New Hampshire’s, but said that Iowa voters have accepted both the privilege and the responsibility of going first.

“They’ve grown to it,” he said. “People who come to these things are highly educated about the issues.”

That is certainly the archetype Iowa political leaders want to showcase—voters like Ann Kohlman, who conscientiously seek out and research candidates from both parties prior to caucus night.

But for every Ann Kohlman, there is at least one—and probably many more than one—resident like Brad Meyer. When first asked, the 35-year-old Des Moines beer distributor said that although he is not following the campaigns now, he will by the time of the caucuses.

But he eventually allowed that he has never attended a caucus and probably won't participate next year, either: "It has to do with my work schedule, more than anything," he said as he unloaded a pallet at an Urbandale convenience store.

That puts Meyer solidly in the majority of Iowans. In 2012, only 121,500 out of nearly 1.3 million registered Republicans and independents voted in the GOP caucuses. In 2008, when both parties had contested events and Democrats saw record turnouts, a total of 352,000 Iowans participated in the caucuses—about a 17 percent turnout rate.

Even at the Cedar Falls campaign stop that drew Nagle were attendees who, while curious about the candidates, have done little research about their positions or backgrounds.

Rebecca Brekke, a retiree from nearby Waterloo who came to Bush's breakfast with her husband because Bush's campaign called to invite them, said all she really knew about the candidates so far is what she's learned from the debates. "Basically what I've seen on TV."

University of Missouri political science professor Peverill Squire, who in 2008 wrote a paper defending Iowa's first-in-line status, conceded that he's unaware of any research showing that Iowans are better informed politically than residents of any other state.

"It's more anecdotal than based on any hard evidence," he said. "The reality is, if you're an activist in Iowa, it's easy to be involved. But most Iowans are going to sidestep most of that."

Actual ballots cast in the January 2012 Republican caucuses show that they drew 121,500 voters, just one-sixth as many Republicans as turned out that November for eventual nominee Mitt Romney. In New Hampshire just days later, 248,000 voters cast ballots in the GOP primary—more than three-quarters of the total that Romney won that November.

Iowa boosters, though, argue that while a small percentage of voters wind up participating in the caucuses, those who do are exceptionally well informed and have had the opportunity to see the candidates in person—more than once, even.

What's more, Strawn said, it's good for the system to start off with a state like Iowa, which has cheap media markets and is reasonably drivable from one end to the other. "The fact that there is a place like Iowa, where an outside or a movement candidate can have a shot, is a healthy thing for the process." To replace that with a larger or more expensive state or states would necessarily mean a greater emphasis on televised debates, polling, and national advertising, Strawn said. "Which is another step toward a national primary. Which would effectively become a fundraising contest."

And in a post-*Citizens United* era in which super PACs collect eight-figure checks from single donors to pay for saturation advertising, Nagle said, an early state known for retail politics is all the more important.

"That's the great thing about it. We get to see whether your shoes are shined or not. Whether your tie is straight. You can hide things from a camera, but you can't hide things from people in a room like this," Nagle said, waving his hand toward a dining room packed with attendees eager to see Bush in person. "It gets us out of TV land and into seeing people up close. I think that helps."