

The Big Mystery in Iowa: Donald Trump's Ground Game

Even the experts don't know if he has one – or whether it even matters



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MARSHALLTOWN, Iowa—Donald Trump's hopes of turning reality TV into reality could well be in the hands of Barb Matney.

She's 57, a lifelong resident of this central Iowa town, and a supporter of Trump's presidential bid who recently signed up on his website to volunteer for his campaign. Last Sunday evening, eight days before 2016 voting starts with the Iowa caucuses, she finally heard back.

"They called me the other night and said I'd be a precinct captain," she said as she stood in snow flurries waiting to enter a Trump rally. The job entails calling other potential Trump supporters in Marshall County to remind them to turn out Monday night at 7 p.m. Of course, to do that she needs names and phone numbers—which, as of earlier this week, she still had not received.

"I've asked for a list, and there's only a few days left, so I hope it's soon,"

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she said.

And therein lies the central mystery of the developer-turned-reality-TV-star's unorthodox campaign: Is precinct captain Matney's inability to get basic campaign data the exception? Or the rule? And, with a candidate who has relied on his ability to hijack "earned media" coverage with outrageous remarks, does it even matter? Even the experts admit they don't know.

"Anyone who is being honest with you will tell you that they have no earthly idea of what's going to happen caucus night," said Matt Strawn, a former chairman of the Iowa Republican Party.

The Trump campaign declined to share details of its turnout operation with *National Journal*, and the Iowa office staff similarly denied access to its work. But visits to other campaign offices suggest that Trump's get-out-the-vote-effort pales compared to some of his rivals.

On a recent evening just a week out from caucus night, the Cruz Iowa headquarters hummed with activity. Dozens of volunteers sat at folding tables filling a large room in a suburban office park. Each table was topped with a pair of black office telephones. A sign on a wall stated a goal of 15,000 calls per day, and the volunteers made one call after another, appearing to read a script printed on a piece of paper.

A few miles away, at the Jeb Bush Iowa headquarters, a dozen volunteers also made phone calls, but in an even more sophisticated fashion. Each had an open laptop running a voter-database program, displaying detailed information about the person on the other end of the line, including what was said during previous calls and in-person contacts. The Bush campaign's daily goal: 12,000 calls from the Des Moines headquarters and a Cedar Rapids field office.

Also in the neighborhood, in yet another office park, was the Trump Iowa headquarters, where it was less clear what activity was taking place. A Trump staffer declined to give *National Journal* access to anything beyond the entryway. In the course of an hour, not a single staff member or volunteer entered or exited the building.

The next day, at a nearby call center hired by Trump for phone-banking, only eight volunteers had signed in by midday—by which time other campaigns would have twice or three times as many people working the phones.

How much difference this activity—or inactivity—will make is unclear. Many voters don't appreciate getting unsolicited phone calls.

A Trump rally attendee wearing a Vietnam veterans patch and a no-Hillary T-shirt who would give only his first name (Frank) said he had re-

ceived calls from the campaigns of Mike Huckabee, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz. “They get an earful of profanity and I slam the phone down,” he said.

“Many, many calls. I grew weary of the calls,” complained Tom Flynn, a 70-year-old lawyer attending a Rubio rally in Des Moines. He said he occasionally picks up for pollsters, but never for individual campaigns. “Those are the ones I absolutely haven’t taken.”

Another Rubio rally-goer, 48-year-old stay-at-home mother Karen Janssen, wondered why the Republicans haven’t done much door-to-door canvassing, which she says the Democratic campaigns are actively doing. “Exactly two people have come to my door,” she said. One was for Sen. Rand Paul; the other was a Democrat looking for the home’s previous occupant.

Indeed, the conventional wisdom in Iowa has been that the only path to victory was “retail.” This requires candidates to spend hundreds and hundreds of hours meeting voters face to face, shaking hands, and answering any and all manner of questions, while simultaneously creating a vast network of workers to identify likely supporters and get them to the polls.

But with Trump ignoring that conventional wisdom, almost exclusively staging large rallies and leading the polls thanks to his celebrity, other campaigns have responded by sinking precious money and staff time elsewhere, particularly New Hampshire, which votes just eight days later.

“The upshot is you can do well in Iowa, but the downside of losing the momentum in New Hampshire is probably too great a risk,” said one Republican strategist.

Meanwhile, at least some voters appreciated Trump’s visits, even if they weren’t “retail” events. Brian Thomes said Trump’s recent rally in Muscatine, where Thomes works in a sports lighting factory, was a big deal for the community. “I think him showing up here will help him,” Thomes said as he filled up his gas tank. “I really think he’s going to take Iowa.”

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