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The First Primary: Why New Hampshire?

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For the past half century, political leaders, representatives of various states, and media pundits have excoriated the premier positions that New Hampshire and Iowa hold in the presidential delegate selection process. Why should these two small, mostly white states, which hardly represent the diversity of voters across the country, especially voters in the Democratic Party, host the first presidential nominating contests? The impact of winning there is undeniable,¹ and, the argument goes, it's not fair to other states and to many presidential candidates that these states wield such influence.

That criticism was made explicit in this election cycle by Julian Castro, who is not doing well in the polls in Iowa and New Hampshire and perhaps can afford to offend the voters of those two states by suggesting that they should not always be first. "We can't as a Democratic Party continually and justifiably complain about Republicans who suppress the vote of people of color, and then turn around and start our nominating contest in two states that, even though they take their role seriously, hardly have any people of color," he told reporters in Iowa.²

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Castro has a point. There is nothing rational or fair about a presidential nominating process that allows two small states to hold the first nominating contests every four years. Partisans from both states like to justify this controversial arrangement by arguing that it puts candidates in the position of having to meet voters one-on-one, providing would-be presidents with insights into the American public they would not get in larger, more media-dominated states. But the actual developments by which these states came to be first were accidental, generated by a variety of events not at all intended to educate future leaders and certainly not adopted with any

expectation that these states would emerge with the enormous influence that comes with being first. But once Iowa and New Hampshire were first, and once they realized the extensive benefits the position brought to them, their leaders fought tenaciously to hold on to their advantage.

Origin of the New Hampshire Presidential Primary

The Granite State's decision to adopt a presidential primary was born out of the progressive movement of the late nineteenth century, which, among other reforms, led to the constitutional right of women to vote. New Hampshire adopted primaries for local and state elections starting in 1910, and then instituted a presidential primary for the 1916 election. To save money, the state legislature decided to hold the primary on Town Meeting Day, the second Tuesday in March.³ For over two centuries, New Hampshire's town meetings had been timed to occur in mid-March,⁴ after the most brutal part of the winter and before the muddy season, which made it difficult to travel. Thus, Yankee frugality and the cold New England climate contributed to the timing of the New Hampshire presidential primary, which has been the first primary in each presidential election cycle for one hundred years.

Emergence of the Beauty Contest

From 1920 until 1948, the New Hampshire primary consisted of ballots only for delegates to the party conventions. Then, in 1952, the state legislature passed a law specifying that in addition to the ballots for delegates there would also be ballots for the presidential candidates, with their names listed separately. This arrangement was widely referred to as the "beauty contest," because the vote for the presidential candidates had no official impact. It was theoretically possible for a presidential candidate to win the beauty contest and still not win the most delegates, since prominent delegates, well-known state leaders in their own right, might attract more

votes than other delegates supporting the candidate preferred by the voters.⁵ Still, the beauty contest became the event to watch. Over the next twenty years, the New Hampshire primary remained the first delegate-selection contest, the first “real” vote for a presidential candidate.

In the overall national delegate-selection process, however, little had changed. Some candidates —such as Democrat Estes Kefauver in 1952—could arrive at their party’s convention having won more delegates through the primaries than any other of their competitors, and still not win the nomination. The reason was that fewer than half the national delegates were chosen by primaries; most were appointed by party leaders in the states or selected in state conventions largely controlled by party elites (as in Iowa). At the national party conventions, the delegates would mostly vote the way they were instructed by party leaders.

Origin of the Iowa Presidential Caucuses

From its very beginning as a state when it joined the union in 1846, Iowa adopted the caucus and convention process for nominating candidates to political office. The state has since adopted primaries for statewide elections, but it continues to use the caucus/convention method for selecting delegates to the national party conventions.

That process is an extended one. It begins with precinct caucuses (meetings) throughout the state (currently Iowa has over 2,000 precincts), where party members participate in discussions about issues and presidential candidates, and elect delegates to the county conventions. At the county conventions, a similar process occurs, resulting in delegates elected to attend the congressional district conventions. At the congressional district conventions, delegates are elected to their party’s state convention. Depending on the political party, some of the presidential delegates are elected at the district conventions and some at the state convention. The complete selection of presidential delegates is not finalized until late in the spring, and the results for the presidential candidates often differ considerably from what was indicated in the initial caucus meetings. As one researcher noted, the Iowa caucus precinct results (those recorded in the very first caucus meetings) “are neither valid nor reliable indicators of the presidential preferences of delegates elected to succeeding levels in the caucus and convention process.”⁶

Until 1972, the national news media paid virtually no attention to the results of the early precinct meetings in Iowa. There was no way to assess the early results, since there was no preference vote among the voters who attended the caucuses, and there was no way to project which presidential candidates might win the most delegates in the final stage of this process, usually ending in May. And, as was the case with most caucus states, party leaders typically exerted tight control over the selection of presidential delegates and would attend the national party conventions accompanied by mostly uncommitted delegates who would vote the way the party leaders said.

Democratic Party Reforms

Objections to the party’s essentially undemocratic nomination process came to a head after the Democratic National Convention in 1968. Disillusioned antiwar Democrats, along with many party leaders who felt the nomination process needed to become more democratized, supported the establishment of a special commission to propose rules that would make delegate selection more democratic. The Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, formed shortly after the 1968 presidential election, was chaired initially by Senator George McGovern and, after he resigned to run for president, then by Representative Donald Fraser. It became known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission.

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The intent of the reforms was to increase participation of rank-and-file party members and to ensure that the full racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of party members was represented in the state delegations to the national convention. The new rules also called for more transparency in holding caucuses that chose national delegates. The overall impact of the reforms was to change the locus of political power from the party leaders to the party voters. The voters would choose the delegates, either in primary elections or in open state caucuses and subsequent conventions.

Iowa Jockeys to Be First

The reforms had little immediate direct impact on the New Hampshire primary, which continued to be scheduled on Town Meeting Day, the second Tuesday of March. But the reforms did bring about significant changes in the Iowa caucuses, which now had to abide by a number of rules to make the process more transparent. Thus, in Iowa, the Democrats had to calculate how they could meet all of the transparency requirements and still meet a schedule that called for the final state convention to be held in mid-May (a date that was determined by the availability of a place to meet). Ultimately, they decided to hold their first round of caucuses on January 24, the earliest start of any state's nomination process. According to author Hugh Winebrenner, "the party leaders maintain that there was no political intent in moving the caucus date forward and confess that they were unaware that the Iowa Democratic caucuses would be the nation's first as a result of the move."⁷

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Regardless of intent, Iowa had now positioned itself as the first state holding a vote that directly affected the presidential nomination process. New Hampshire, positioned as the first state holding a primary election, believed that Iowa's caucuses would be given little attention. The national media had never given much coverage to the early caucus results, so there was no expectation that the situation would change. Nevertheless, the press did start to cover Iowa's early results, and the Hawkeye State became the media's first meaningful contest in the nomination process. New Hampshire, which had expected to be "first in the nation," was now relegated to the first primary.

Over the next several election cycles, Iowa and New Hampshire defended their claims to hold the first contests and eventually obtained official endorsement from both major parties. The main reason the parties acquiesced was that no consensus could be found among state party leaders for any other system. A national primary would be too costly, and it would reward those candidates with the most money. Also, it wasn't obvious which other states should be first rather than Iowa and New Hampshire, or whether their voters would be "better" than those in Iowa or New Hampshire to judge presidential material.

Still, as Castro's comments make clear, the issues of fairness and logic continue to rankle. Much has changed in the past half century of history. The nomination process should change too. Yet, as New Hampshire Secretary of State William Gardner has observed, "An ounce of history is worth a pound of logic."

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Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion of the impact of the New Hampshire primary and Iowa caucuses, see David W. Moore and Andrew E. Smith, *The First Primary: New Hampshire's Outsize Role in Presidential Nominations* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2015), pp. 1–9.
2. Jordan McDonald, "The Democratic Presidential Field Is the Most Diverse It's Ever Been, But Early Primaries Lack the Same Representation," CNBC, Nov. 15, 2019 (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/15/2020-democrats-are-diverse-but-early-primaries-lack-minority-voters.html>).
3. Richard F. Upton, "Address at the New Hampshire Historical Society on the Opening of the Exhibition, 'New Hampshire's Road to the White House: Franklin Pierce to the Presidential Primary,'" *Historical New Hampshire* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 195; also, Hugh Gregg and Bill Gardner, *Why New Hampshire: The First-in-the-Nation Primary State* (Nashua, NH: RESOURCES-NH, 2003).
4. Gregg and Gardner 2003, p. 226.
5. Upton 1987, pp. 196–97.
6. Hugh Winebrenner, *The Iowa Precinct Caucuses: The Making of a Media Event*, 2nd ed. (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1988), pp. 254–55.
7. Winebrenner 1988, p. 32.

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