

TEXAS VS IOWA

While most states require parties to hold primaries to nominate candidates for the general election, Iowa uses a system of caucuses. The word *caucus* allegedly comes from a Native American word for a meeting between tribal leaders.¹ The Iowa caucus system developed in the late 1800s within political parties as a method of selecting delegates to political party conventions. The Iowa caucuses operate similarly to a closed primary in that the participants must be registered with a political party. This process effectively limits the Republican caucuses only to Republicans and the Democratic caucuses only to Democrats.

On the night of the Iowa caucuses, participants gather in over 2,000 local, precinct-level meetings. Historically, these meetings occurred in the homes of local party activists, creating a feeling of neighborliness among participants. In recent years, the meetings have occurred at a local school, library, or church, or at a similar place. To some extent, the caucuses still take on the flavor of a giant precinct party.

The two major parties have slightly different rules concerning how the caucus proceeds. For the Republican Party, the caucus consists of participants dropping the name of a candidate in a hat. Results are then tabulated. At a separate meeting, participants choose delegates to attend a state convention where the official nomination of party candidates for the general election takes place. At the Democratic caucus, participants break into groups based upon which candidate they support. Note that “undecided” is an acceptable grouping. If any group consists of less than 15 percent of the total number of participants, then those group members must realign with another group. Participants then lobby and persuade members of the other groups or the groups with less than 15 percent to change their preference. When all remaining groups supporting a candidate are above 15 percent of the total participants at that location, delegates to the party county convention are allocated based upon the size of the groups. The table on the right contains a comparison of the results of the party caucuses since 1972 when the Iowa caucuses gained their reputation as a presidential bellwether and grabbed the attention of candidates and the nation alike.

By tradition, the Iowa caucuses are the first caucuses held in the United States. Because winning, or at least doing well or “better than expected,” in an Iowa caucus creates momentum for a candidate’s campaign and encourages financial support from donors, the Iowa caucuses are very important to candidates running for U.S. president. For example, Rick Santorum’s narrow win in the 2012 Republican Iowa caucus gave his campaign a boost that helped him be seen as one of the primary challengers to Mitt Romney. Because so much attention is paid to Iowa’s caucus results, critics suggest that Iowa carries too much weight in presidential elections, especially considering the state’s relatively small and homogenous population.

While turnout for Texas primaries is quite low, the turnout rates for the Iowa caucuses appear to be increasing. However, turnout for the Iowa caucuses is harder to determine simply because, in

Results of the Iowa Caucuses since 1972

Year	Democratic Party Iowa Caucus Winner	National Party Nominee	Republican Party Iowa Caucus Winner	National Party Nominee
2016	Hillary Clinton	Hillary Clinton	Ted Cruz	Donald Trump
2012	Barack Obama	Barack Obama	Rick Santorum	Mitt Romney
2008	Barack Obama	Barack Obama	Mike Huckabee	John McCain
2004	John Kerry	John Kerry	George W. Bush	George W. Bush
2000	Al Gore	Al Gore	George W. Bush	George W. Bush
1996	Bill Clinton	Bill Clinton	Bob Dole	Bob Dole
1992	Tom Harkin	Bill Clinton	George H. W. Bush	George H. W. Bush
1988	Richard Gephardt	Michael Dukakis	Bob Dole	George H. W. Bush
1984	Walter Mondale	Walter Mondale	Ronald Reagan	Ronald Reagan
1980	Jimmy Carter	Jimmy Carter	George H. W. Bush	Ronald Reagan
1976	Uncommitted	Jimmy Carter	Gerald Ford	Gerald Ford
1972	Edmund Muskie	George McGovern	Richard Nixon	Richard Nixon

Source: Compiled from “Caucus History: Past Years’ Results,” *Des Moines Register*, <http://caucuses.desmoinesregister.com/caucus-history-past-years-results> (accessed August 3, 2016).

contrast to closed primaries, lists of registered Democratic or Republican voters do not exist. Estimates of participation in the Democratic caucuses indicate that the percentage of the population that participates in the caucuses is increasing over time.ⁱⁱ

THINKING Critically

- ★ Have you ever voted in a primary in Texas? Why or why not?
- ★ Would you be more likely to participate in the Texas presidential primaries if they occurred earlier in the nomination process or if the candidates campaigned more actively in the state?
- ★ What do you think the advantages or disadvantages of a system such as the Iowa caucuses would be if Texas changed to that system?

i. “Frequently Asked Caucus Questions,” *Des Moines Register*, www.desmoinesregister.com (accessed November 5, 2007).

ii. *Ibid.*