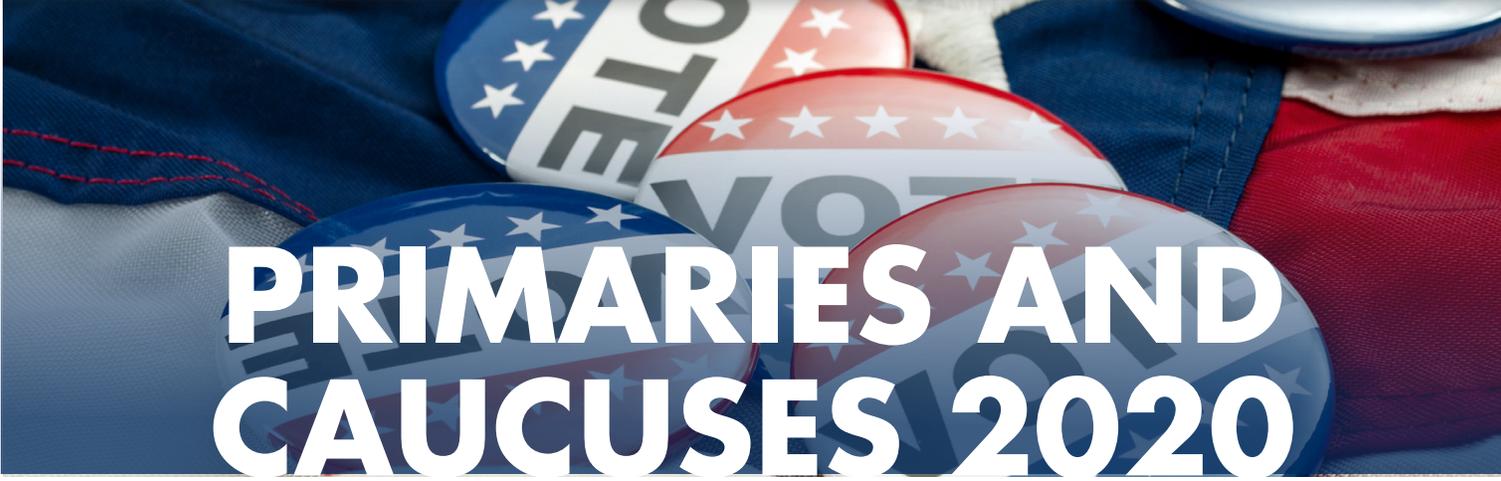


PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES 2020

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE NEWS





PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES 2020

CENTRAL QUESTION



Should Iowa and New Hampshire maintain their first-in-the-nation voting status?

INTRODUCTION



On November 3, 2020, Americans will go to the polls either to elect President Donald Trump to a second term or to elect a new 46th president. Voters will choose between one Democrat, one Republican, and any third-party candidates who qualify for the ballot. So, how do the two major parties choose their nominees? The process begins months before Election Day, as candidates build their campaign organizations, raise money, and participate in a series of televised debates. Their goal? To win the support of voters in state primaries and caucuses.

In this *Close Up in Class Controversial Issue in the News*, we will outline the system of primaries and caucuses, examine the significant role that two states—Iowa and New Hampshire—play in the process, and challenge you to consider whether or not there is reason to change the nominating calendar.

BACKGROUND



Primaries and caucuses are statewide elections that commit delegates of the Democratic and Republican Parties to support certain candidates on the basis of popular vote results. This nominating system was adopted in its current form to follow the recommendations of the McGovern-Fraser Commission of 1969–1972.¹ After each state party holds its primary or caucuses, delegates attend their national party convention, where they participate in a roll call vote to formally nominate a candidate.

What Is a Primary? Most states hold a primary—a statewide election in which voters cast a secret ballot for their preferred candidate.² Some states have an open primary, in which registered voters may choose from any of the candidates, no matter their party affiliation. Other states have a closed primary, in which voters may choose only from the candidates of their registered party. (A primary can also be partially open, partially closed, or open for unaffiliated voters only.)³



Does your state have an open primary, a closed primary, or a hybrid of the two?

What Is a Caucus? In fewer states, at least one of the political parties chooses to hold caucuses instead of participating in a state primary. A caucus is a party meeting in which participants, usually registered party voters, show support for their preferred candidates by raising their hands or breaking into groups. Caucuses often attract fewer—but more politically engaged—voters than primaries.⁴

How Do Primaries and Caucuses Lead to a Nomination? In order to become the Democratic or Republican nominee for president, a candidate must perform strongly enough in the primaries and caucuses to win the support of a majority of the party's convention delegates. So, how exactly does a candidate's performance at the polls translate into delegate support?

Both parties assign a number of delegates to each state on the basis of the state's population, party loyalty, and several other factors. In most states, delegates are then awarded to candidates on the basis of the votes the candidates receive in the state primary or caucuses. These “pledged” or “bound” delegates are split between at-large delegates (awarded on the basis of the statewide vote results) and district-level delegates (awarded on the basis of the vote results in each congressional district).⁵

The two parties use different formulas to determine how many delegates the candidates receive.

- Democrats allocate delegates proportionally, but only to the candidates who earn at least 15 percent of the vote in the state primary or caucuses. If no candidate receives 15 percent, the threshold to earn delegates becomes 50 percent of the vote received by the frontrunner. If only one candidate earns 15 percent of the vote, that candidate wins every pledged delegate.⁶
- Republicans use a similar system for primaries and caucuses before March 15, but the party allows the threshold for winning delegates to be as high as 20 percent of the vote. The Republican National Committee also allows state parties to enact a threshold for a candidate to receive all of a state's at-large and bonus delegates. After March 15, state parties allow the use of proportional allocation, a winner-take-all system, or a hybrid system.⁷ In 2020, Republicans in Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Kansas, Nevada, South Carolina, and Virginia are choosing not to hold a primary or caucuses. Those state delegates will likely be awarded to President Trump.⁸

Once the primaries and caucuses are complete and delegates are allocated, the process moves to the conventions. At the Democratic National Convention (in Milwaukee from July 13 to July 16, 2020), the party asks pledged delegates “in all good conscience” to “reflect the sentiments of those who elected them” and to vote for the candidate to whom they are pledged. (Technically, however, they are not legally bound to do so.)⁹ To make matters more complicated, the delegates to the Democratic National Convention include an estimated 771 superdelegates—elected officials and party leaders who are free to support any candidate they choose. Superdelegates are not allowed to participate in the first round of voting if their support is going to be the deciding factor in choosing the nominee (a rule adopted by the party in 2018). But if no candidate wins a majority in the first round of voting, superdelegates can participate in later rounds, when most pledged delegates become unpledged.¹⁰

At the Republican National Convention (in Charlotte from August 24 to August 27, 2020), most delegates are bound to vote for their assigned candidate on the basis of the results of the state primary or caucuses. If no candidate wins a majority on the first ballot, many delegates are free to support whomever they wish on the second ballot.¹¹

In order to win the nomination on the first ballot at the 2020 Democratic National Convention, a candidate must capture a simple majority (1,990) of the estimated 3,979 pledged delegates. If the convention goes to a second ballot (thus allowing superdelegates to vote), a nominee must win at least 2,376 of the 4,750 delegates. In order to win the 2020 Republican nomination, a candidate must capture a simple majority (1,276) of the estimated 2,551 delegates to the Republican National Convention.¹²



How many Democratic delegates does your state have?



How many Republican delegates does your state have?



Should Iowa and New Hampshire maintain their first-in-the-nation voting status?

In 2020, the first four states—Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina—hold their influential primaries or caucuses in February, while the remaining states follow in March, April, May, and June.

- February 3: Iowa caucuses (Democrats and Republicans)
- February 11: New Hampshire primary (Democrats and Republicans)
- February 22: Nevada caucuses (Democrats only)
- February 29: South Carolina primary (Democrats only)¹³

Since 1920, New Hampshire has held the first primary in the nation and has even written this requirement into state law. Iowa has held the first caucuses for both parties since 1976, as state law similarly mandates that the caucuses be held at least eight days before any other nominating contest.¹⁴

So, why does the order of states' primaries and caucuses matter so much? The early contests are important to candidates because they offer an opportunity to gain momentum on the national stage. In fact, since 1976, only one major party candidate—Governor Bill Clinton, D-Ark.—has secured the nomination without winning Iowa or New Hampshire.¹⁵ The small geographic size of Iowa and New Hampshire has historically allowed candidates to meet face to face with a large number of voters, letting Americans across the country see how the candidates interact with citizens in intimate settings. But in recent years, some policymakers, activists, and voters have questioned the wisdom of granting so much influence to two states, especially two small states that are not representative of the nation.

To minimize the significance of Iowa and New Hampshire, the political parties—particularly Democrats—have supported moving forward the dates of other states' primaries and caucuses.¹⁶ Supporters of such actions argue that it is well past time to lessen the influence of Iowa and New Hampshire, both of which are overwhelmingly white and rural. But those who defend the early voting status of Iowa and New Hampshire argue that the two states play an important role in the electoral system, with their educated voters who take their responsibilities seriously, inexpensive media markets that lessen the role of campaign money in the primaries and caucuses, and small geographic areas that allow candidates to travel easily and meet face to face with as many voters as possible.

	United States	Iowa	New Hampshire
Population	327,167,434	3,156,145	1,356,458
Persons under 18	22.4%	23.2%	19%
Persons 65 and over	16%	17.1%	18.1%
White	76.5%	90.7%	93.2%
African American	13.4%	4%	1.7%
Asian	5.9%	2.7%	3%
Hispanic/Latino	18.3%	6.2%	3.9%
High school graduates (among those over 25)	87.7%	92%	92.9%
Persons in poverty	11.8%	11.2%	7.6%

Source: Census Bureau, 2018



SHOULD IOWA AND NEW HAMPSHIRE MAINTAIN THEIR FIRST-IN-THE-NATION VOTING STATUS?



YES: Iowa and New Hampshire take their electoral responsibilities seriously.

In the early days of the 2016 presidential election, there were 17 candidates vying for the Republican nomination.¹⁷ Some candidates had vast amounts of money to spend on television advertising, direct mail campaigns, and large rallies. Others did not.¹⁸

Yet campaign money becomes significantly less important—and has considerably less influence—in small states like Iowa and New Hampshire. These small states help level the playing field by enabling candidates to travel easily to all corners of Iowa and New Hampshire, to readily advertise in relatively inexpensive media markets, and to truly connect with voters in intimate settings.

“As the story goes, New Hampshire residents need to meet a candidate three times before they’ll consider offering up their votes in the first-in-the-nation primary,” wrote Nick Reid of the *Concord Monitor*. Although Reid exaggerates, he makes an important point. Iowa and New Hampshire voters get to know the candidates and study their positions.¹⁹ These voters may not be as racially diverse as the nation as a whole, but they have higher rates of high school education, and they take the time to attend town hall meetings and speak to candidates directly.

“New Hampshire has earned its place as the first-in-the-nation presidential primary state because our voters are sophisticated and take their role in the nomination process seriously,” said former New Hampshire Republican State Committee chairwoman Jennifer Horn. “The entire nation benefits when candidates are forced to answer the concerns of voters face-to-face in living rooms and backyards.”²⁰

If a larger state, such as California, New York, or Texas, was to take the place of Iowa or New Hampshire, this kind of meaningful, personal politicking would be impossible. Campaigning in larger states requires candidates to travel great distances, to advertise in expensive media markets, and to attempt to reach enormous populations in a limited period of time. These actions all require huge amounts of campaign cash, thus diminishing the prospects of lesser-known candidates and forcing the big names to spend even more time fundraising.

Ultimately, the intense scrutiny that candidates face in Iowa and New Hampshire is good for the entire nation.



NO: Iowa and New Hampshire are not sufficiently representative of the nation.

“Historically, Iowa and New Hampshire account for about half the news media coverage of the entire primary season, with the winners absorbing the lion’s share of the attention,” wrote Democratic political consultant Mark Mellman. “Moreover, coverage of the winners tends to be almost entirely positive, which fuels rising poll numbers. It’s extremely difficult for those who fail to win either of the first races to catch up.”²¹

In 2018, Iowa and New Hampshire had a combined population 4.5 million people, representing a mere 1.4 percent of the national population. Yet these two small states dominate the focus of the electoral process in ways that are unhealthy for democracy.²² The decisions made by voters in Iowa and New Hampshire—and the frenzied media coverage of those decisions—significantly affect how voters behave in other states, as candidates who win in Iowa and New Hampshire instantly gain frontrunner status. This makes the later primaries less meaningful, as candidates with early victories receive more campaign contributions and more positive media coverage than other candidates. “It is not natural,” wrote David Leonhardt of the *New York Times*. “It’s undemocratic, in fact. It is unfair to voters in the other 48 states.”²³

Furthermore, Iowa and New Hampshire are inadequate representatives of the United States as a whole. Both states are largely rural, with populations that are overwhelmingly white. “You’re hard pressed to find two whiter states,” said Matt Barreto, a pollster for Latino Decisions. Added Thomas Schaller, a professor of political science at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, “The prominence and first-in-the-nation position of Iowa and New Hampshire do elevate white primary voters over nonwhite ones, and in both parties.”²⁴

New Hampshire, especially, also has a much smaller percentage of persons in poverty than the national average. This fact makes it easier for candidates to inadequately address poverty issues while campaigning in the state.

In the end, it is well past time to develop a presidential nominating system that better represents and listens to the voices of all Americans—not only to the loudest voices of a lucky few voters in Iowa and New Hampshire.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER



1. Do you believe primaries and caucuses are the best system for nominating presidential candidates? Why or why not? Is there another system that would be more effective?
2. Take a look at this Census Bureau website (<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00,19,33>) to see how the populations of Iowa and New Hampshire compare with that of the United States. In what ways are these states representative of the nation? In what ways are they not?
3. Using the same website and your own experience, consider your own state. Do you think it would be a better site for an early primary or caucuses than Iowa or New Hampshire? Why or why not?



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