Only in the Midwest: Every four years, the race for president starts in Iowa, and leaves a lasting impact on the state's political process

By Mike McCabe [1]
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For most presidential candidates, the road to the White House begins in Iowa. Since the 1970s, the state’s presidential caucuses have served as the nation’s first real test of voter interest in competing candidates, and have launched the successful campaigns of presidents from Jimmy Carter to Barack Obama. As important as they are to the candidates themselves, the Iowa caucuses are significant in other ways as well.

Rep. Linda Upmeyer, who serves as Iowa House majority leader, says the precinct caucus system — which features local meetings of neighbors in each of Iowa’s 1,774 election precincts — shapes the way voters think about politics and participate in the process.

“The people of Iowa are used to meeting the candidates,” she says. “They like being able to ask questions and not just listen to stump speeches.”

David Yepsen, a long-time observer of the Iowa caucuses during a 34-year career as a writer, editor and columnist at the Des Moines Register, agrees that the caucuses inspire “citizen activism.”

And, he says, more than a few members of the state legislature and other noteworthy public officials got their start in politics by working on presidential campaigns at the local level.

“They get inspired, and they get the itch,” says Yepsen, who recalls first meeting Tom Vilsack, the future Iowa governor and U.S. secretary of agriculture, on a street corner in Des Moines when Vilsack was working on Joe Biden’s presidential campaign in 1987.

Yepsen, now director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University, says the caucuses have had a significant impact on party politics across the state.

“The caucuses have built a healthy two-party competition in Iowa,” he says. “They produce a great list of activists and donors in every precinct that gets refreshed every four years.”

The attention and the intense competition that characterize Iowa’s caucus system also impact the state legislature in ways that are unmatched in other states.

Yepsen points to the money that often flows from presidential candidates to state legislative campaigns, as well as the willingness of presidential contenders to get actively involved in local General Assembly races.
“Legislators expect to see [presidential] candidates in their districts,” he says.

Upmeyer, a 10-year legislative veteran, notes that the benefits flow both ways; presidential candidates are eager to come into the state, and local legislators are eager to share the attention they receive.

Yepsen adds that the nature of Iowa’s legislative campaigns is also affected by the presidential race, which “tends to raise public awareness of national issues,” especially during the caucus season.

More than in most states, national issues can shape and determine local races.

“If you haven’t got rock-star [legislative] candidates,” Upmeyer says, “issues can still make the difference.”

Upmeyer says the state’s unique caucus system has been good for the state. It engages people in a meaningful way, she says, and can be a lot of fun too.

“The spirit of the process is enduring — the idea that input at the grass-roots level can really make a difference,” she says.

Yepsen concurs, though he cautions that if Iowans want to preserve their first-in-the-nation status, they’ll have to work to ensure that the Iowa caucuses continue to provide “a good, fair, honest hearing” for the presidential contenders.

“Constant improvement and quality control are the keys,” Yepsen says.