

"Iowans: It's best for America if our caucuses go first." March 1, 2015 *The Des Moines Register*.

By Josh Hafner

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Every four years, candidates descend upon Iowa to woo voters in the first-in-nation caucus state. And every four years, people ask, "Why Iowa?"

It's so small, critics say, so white and so far away from America's biggest cities and cultural hubs.

Well, if you're a coastal elite or member of the national media, rest assured: The vast majority of Iowans think their state should get a stab at picking the next president ahead of any other.

That's according to The Des Moines Register's latest Iowa Poll, where 69 percent of Iowa adults say they think it's in America's best interest for Iowa to be the first test for presidential candidates. Just 13 percent think it would be best for the country if some other state or states went first. Eighteen percent are unsure.

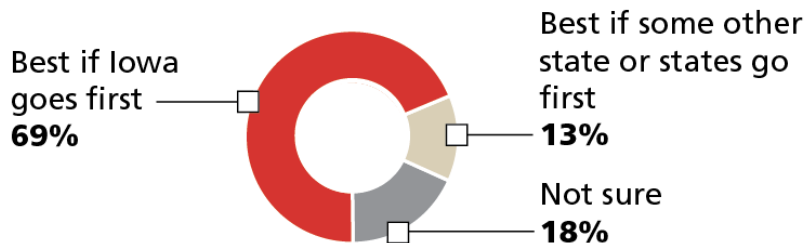
Iowa's role in holding the lead position in the nomination process was cemented decades ago, ensuring its caucuses occur ahead of New Hampshire's primary — the second contest in line but the nation's first primary.

Count Becky Brown among the masses of Iowans who think the state should stay first. Brown, a retired nurse in West Des Moines, said Iowans deserve the vetting privilege because they take the chance seriously and know the issues.

"I feel like the people in Iowa are a hard-working, ordinary type," said Brown, 70. "We're not the East or West coast elitists, and I feel Iowans do a really good job of vetting the candidates and taking our responsibility seriously."

Iowa caucuses

With the Iowa caucuses approaching, do you think it is best for the country for Iowa to be the first test for presidential candidates, or would it be best for the country if some other state or states go first?



Source: Des Moines Register Iowa Poll of 807 Iowa adults Feb. 15-18; margin of error: plus or minus 3.5 percentage points

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That's how most Iowans feel, said David Redlawsk, a political science professor at Rutgers University and author of the book "Why Iowa? How Caucuses and Sequential Elections Improve the Presidential Nominating Process." Redlawsk participated in the 2004 caucuses as acting Johnson County Democratic party chair. "For Iowans generally, the caucuses are an institution," Redlawsk said. "Even for those who never participate in it, I think there's just a general sense that this has become Iowans' responsibility to kick the whole thing off."

IOWA POLL: Joni Ernst approval at 38 percent
Caucus defenders also note that competing in

Iowa forces candidates to do retail politics, to meet voters in person at coffee shops and high school gyms in small towns. In more populous states dominated by big media markets, campaigns are conducted largely through TV ad wars and mega events in the largest cities.

Independent voters are more likely to doubt Iowa's prominence: Eighteen percent of them said another state should go first, compared to just 11 percent of Democrats and 8 percent of Republicans.

That doesn't surprise Redlawsk. Independents tend to feel — incorrectly — that they can't participate in the caucuses, he said. Both caucuses allow same-day registration, and you can switch to another party or no party the next day.

Kristin Severson, a Republican who oversees a farm in Soldier, said she thinks Republican candidates should compete in a less conservative state than Iowa. Too often, she said, moderate Republicans pander to Iowa's conservative base only to have it haunt them in the general election.

"The last two elections have not gone well from a Republican standpoint," said Severson, 55. "Change is a constant in life. Maybe it's time for a change."

In the town of Walker, Democrat Scott Geers said that Iowa's demographics allow presidential candidates to avoid critical issues elsewhere that may not play well or aren't prominent in Iowa. Imagine a Missouri primary leading off the process after the racial unrest in Ferguson, he said.

"There's going to be states that have different concerns than Iowa because we haven't had that turmoil," said Geers, a 53-year-old on disability.

Barbara Smith, a retiree in Marion, describes herself as a moderate Democrat who's voted for Republicans such as Gov. Terry Branstad and Sen. Chuck Grassley. She could see lending Iowa's first-in-the-nation status to another state, she said, but not to a New Hampshire or South Carolina.

"I think someplace in the middle of the country you get more people with good sense, good values," said Smith, 74. "Any surrounding state might be OK. I wouldn't have a problem with it."

In Ames, Iowa State University student Christian Arnold expressed apathy toward Iowa's role. Arnold, a 24-year-old independent, thinks the lead-off state should have more prominence and diversity than Iowa.

"New York. Washington. Texas, maybe," he said. "They're basically more notable and remarkable for pretty much anything compared to Iowa."