

"Let's Strengthen - Not Endanger - Iowa's First-in-the-Nation Caucuses in 2016." 09/14/2014 *Huffington Post*.

By Jean Hessburg

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jean-hessburg/lets-strengthen-not-iowa-caucus\\_b\\_5585559.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jean-hessburg/lets-strengthen-not-iowa-caucus_b_5585559.html)

The number one goal of Democrats looking to reform the Iowa presidential caucuses should be simple: Don't mess up a good thing.

As the national media and others have reported recently, the Iowa Democratic Party is undergoing a formal process to gather ideas and consider ways to expand access and turnout at the 2016 Iowa caucuses.

At one point in the process, a top Iowa Democratic Party official stated that "everything's on the table to talk about." It should come as no surprise that an "everything goes" approach to changing the Iowa caucuses opens up the Democratic Party to criticism from two powerful forces: (1) Rival presidential hopefuls who fear that tinkering with the caucus rules will favor one candidate over another and (2) other state parties who would rightfully complain if Iowa moves closer to being a primary rather than a caucus.

Born in 1972, the Iowa Caucuses have a rich history of launching little known candidates into the stratosphere of the rough and tumble of the presidential primary season. Barack Obama and other less known candidates benefitted from the meet-and-greet exchanges only small communities with inexpensive media markets can offer.

For more than 40 years, Iowans have enjoyed our moment in the spotlight as the national media descends to record candidate progress, measure our opinions, and take our pulse. In the end, we gather on a cold night in January to discuss, cajole, rearrange and align ourselves with the candidate that we believe is the best candidate to continue on to the next contest.

Times are changing and, more important, Iowans must recognize the need to keep up if we hope to continue to increase turnout at our caucuses and choose the candidate most reflective of who we are. Our relevance in the primary process depends on recognizing the true gem we have in our unique qualifying system and what we can do to enhance its appeal to those in our base.

A few points to remember about the Iowa Caucuses. First, we are not a primary, we are a caucus. Simply put, a caucus is a meeting and a primary is not. This is an important distinction and one that keeps Iowa first in the nation. We are the first state because we hold a meeting of Democratic activists who align themselves with candidates, rearrange until the candidates are viable, and the candidate who wins the most viable groups across the state is the winner.

Second, Iowa's affordable media markets, urban, suburban and rural geographies, and recently our increasing minority populations have made us an attractive landscape for lesser known candidates who would not otherwise have had the funding to compete. We represent a good cross section of America at an affordable price.

Finally, we have a history of boots-to-the-ground organizing know-how. Iowa is known nationally as the place for candidates and campaign staffers to earn political chops. We have an excellent work ethic, we know retail politics, and we bring well over 100,000 voters together every four years with ease. Our caucuses, after all, are also meant to strengthen the foundation of our party in preparation for the upcoming election.

How do we improve Iowa's caucus system without losing the integrity of our event? Get creative, as a team of us did in Nevada in 2008.

When Nevada became the third in the nation with a caucus, we looked for new and innovative ways to maintain the unique nature of the caucus process -- while customizing it to meet the demands of a 21st century world. The result -- increasing Nevada's caucus turnout from 9,000 in 2004 to an unprecedented 120,000 in 2008.

Nevada's record turnout was partially because of remarkable enthusiasm by Democrats across the nation in 2008. Other important keys to Nevada's success was the creation of "at-large precincts" that were designed to increase participation by shift workers; training sessions run state-wide for Democratic activists in the 12 months leading up to the caucuses; and a "tweaking" of party rules that made the caucus process less time consuming to new participants. The results of these innovative efforts were to bring new people in the party and increase caucus turnout.

If we want to make it easier for shift workers to caucus and to encourage more elderly residents and Millennials to participate, let's go to them. Iowa could explore creating at-large precincts for our shift workers, elderly and college-age students. Iowa could also look at making the Caucus process less intimidating to newer participants.

The goals in Nevada were to hold a caucus rather than a primary, to include more voters, and to be sure the integrity of the caucus system was upheld.

We will do well to achieve those same three goals and add one more: Don't mess up a good thing.

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