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Meg Cadoux Hirschberg photo

Caucus-goers gather in the Merrill Middle School gymnasium in Des Moines. The scene was raucous and complicated, but, strangely, it seemed to work.

# What I saw in Iowa

## It's not N.H., but it's exuberant and good for democracy

By MEG CADOUX HIRSHBERG  
For the Monitor

**A**s a political activist, I've often defended our first-in-the-nation status to skeptical friends around the country who challenge New Hampshire's overly influential role in selecting a president. But when the criticism rains down, my umbrella of defense shelters only the New Hampshire presidential primary. I leave the Iowa caucus out to get soaked. I've never really "gotten" the Iowa caucus, or the caucus system in general. What the heck do they do out there? Why don't they just show up at the polls and vote, like people do in any self-respecting democracy?

This year, I had the opportunity to find out. Before my husband and I became active supporters of Barack Obama, we had signed on with former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack's campaign (Tom dropped out last February due to lack of money). Shortly after leaving the presidential race, Tom became one of Hillary Clinton's national co-chairmen, and he and his wife, Christie, began stumping hard in Iowa for Hillary. Although we had decided to support different candidates, the Vilsacks kindly offered to host us for the Iowa caucus.

We flew to Des Moines, and on Jan. 3, caucus day, we joined a group convened by Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin to learn in greater detail about how the caucus system works. Harkin's legislative

assistant, Richard Bender, drafted the legislation creating the Iowa caucus in 1972. Bender is smart and well-meaning, but the more detail he gave us, the more I felt like I was drowning in a sea of complexity.

So bear with me here - I'll try to make this simple. A caucus is a gathering of neighbors in a precinct. About 2,000 such meetings are held all over Iowa on caucus night. Republicans and Democrats caucus on the same night, often in the same buildings. (You can change your party affiliation, or register for the first time, at the caucus itself. This makes it possible, for example, for Independents and even Republicans to

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vote in the Democratic caucus.) On caucus night, attendees elect delegates to represent the different presidential candidates at an upcoming county convention. At the county convention, delegates will elect yet other delegates to the congressional district convention, at which yet other delegates will be elected to the state convention, at which final delegates will be chosen for the Democratic National Convention in the summer. Still with me?

It gets worse. Each precinct is awarded a certain number of delegates based on the average of the number of people who voted in that precinct during the past two presidential election years. So let's say that in your precinct an average of 500 people showed up 2000 and 2004, and that meant you got five delegates. Even if 1,000 people show up *this* time, you still only get to elect five delegates to the county convention.

When supporters show up, they are sent to different corners of the room according to whom they support. Then, a headcount is taken. Candidates must have the support of at least 15 percent of the attendees, or they are considered not "viable" and they must align with another candidate. As the cheerful, patient Mr. Bender carefully explained this to us, I started thinking that maybe Iowa folks are a lot smarter than I am.

How, I asked myself, did this mishmash serve democracy? You seemed to need a degree in theoretical mathematics to figure it out. Plus, since absentee ballots are not allowed, men and women serving in Iraq and elsewhere overseas had no vote. And what about people who work the night shift? Or folks who can't afford babysitting for the hour or two this process requires? I felt more smug than ever about the superiority of the New Hampshire primary system. You go, you vote, that's the end of it.

Asked to explain the benefits of

their approach, Sen. Harkin replied, "We wanted a system where people would talk about things."

Bender added: "We're hoping that participants will be energized, informed and engaged in the system. It's not perfect, since it does exclude some people, but we thought that the interaction and discussion at the caucus would boost involvement and build community among activists."

At 6:30 that evening we found ourselves squeezed against a row of lockers as we inched our way through a throng of Precinct 70 voters registering for the Democratic caucus at Merrill Middle School in Des Moines. Several other precincts were meeting there as well, so the place was a zoo. Everyone remained polite and good-natured, but, already the process felt chaotic.

Turnout was huge (80 percent higher than four years ago) and the room buzzed with excitement. Many children were present — babies and proud boys and girls of all ages, who strutted purposefully around the gym, checking ID tags and trying to be helpful. A round Obama sign was taped to a wall; someone was holding a huge photo of John Edwards, and the middle of the gym was full of Hillary supporters carrying small signs.

The moderator called the meeting to order: "We need to do a head count!"

He asked people to raise their hands and count off. "There are 551 voters here," he continued. "That is the denominator. That means that each candidate must have 82.65 supporters, rounded up to 83, in order to reach 15 percent and be viable."

The moderator was having a hard time imposing order and was clearly becoming frustrated. "Please work with me here," he pleaded. "Will the Clinton, Edwards and Obama people take the left, right, and center of the gym, and

the rest of you come up here to count off and see if you are viable!"

The precinct captains for each candidate did a head count: Mike Gravel had one supporter; Chris Dodd, three; Uncommitted, 12; Dennis Kucinich, 13; Bill Richardson, 38; Joe Biden, 46; Clinton, 103; Edwards, 104; and Obama, 231.

The moderator piped up: "Now comes the realignment! Only Clinton, Edwards and Obama have enough supporters to be viable. This is your opportunity to persuade others to join you. Let's be passionate, but not boisterous! You have one half hour."

Now the melee began. From various corners of the gym, Clinton, Edwards and Obama supporters approached friends, neighbors and even spouses with pleas to join their candidate. People circled each other like predators eyeing prey, figuring out whom they knew, whom they could convince.

Before our amazed eyes was a tableau of conversation, hand gestures, pleading, chants, cajoling, hugs, and bursts of applause as someone joined a group. The atmosphere was passionate, even exuberant. If Bender and those who created this caucus system were looking for engagement and a sense of community among activists, they clearly got it.

A woman wearing an Obama button pleaded with a Richardson supporter: "Molly, I am not going to convince you, but you can look backward or you can look forward. You've got to look into your heart."

A group of supporters of "non-viable" candidates tried to coalesce to join the Biden people, to get the Biden number up to the magic "viable" number of 83, but they failed to agree. I overheard an Obama supporter pleading with one of Biden folks to come with her: "It's time to bring people together," she said.

I chatted with a middle-aged Obama supporter named Jim Dietz-Killen, who told me that in 30

years of attending caucuses, he'd never seen anything like this, in terms of numbers and enthusiasm. Asked to reflect on the strength of this voting method, he said, "For us, this is not the end of the process — that's the general election. We're still in dialogue here. We're going from here to the county, district, and state conventions, to continue the dialogue. This, right here, is a great confirmation of the vitality of the process we've been engaged in for a year. There's a lot of give and take. Democracy is supposed to be messy."

It was almost hard to hear Jim amid the background roar. Watching the excited youngsters in the room, and their impassioned, gesticulating parents, I found my negativity about the caucus system melting away. These discussions going on around me, this high level of engagement, *was* messy, but it felt vital and real. It's a different process than we have, with a different intent. These voters weren't making a final decision — they were starting a process by which, with further discussion and conversation at the county, district, and state conventions ahead, a final decision would eventually be made. In the meantime, at these meetings they were building community, involving their young people, creating new activists, and engaging old ones. Like town meetings here in New England, the dialogue felt important for democracy.

I asked Jim whether people sometimes felt intimidated in the midst of all this. What if you're shy, or what if you live in the same precinct as your boss, and you're afraid she'll see you voting for someone else?

"I've never seen any coercion at a caucus," he replied. "But sometimes, in an attempt to convince someone, you might see a little bit of flirting."

(Meg Cadoux Hirshberg lives in Concord.)