

Iowa's quirky caucuses open 2012 White House race
Reuters
January 03 , 2012

DES MOINES, Jan 3 — The long and sometimes quirky drama of electing a US president, marked by obscure rules and long-held traditions, begins today in more than 800 schools, libraries, churches and homes across Iowa.

Iowa's caucuses, which bring voters together for hours to cast ballots in a public place on a winter night, are the first step in a state-by-state nominating race that ultimately will decide the Republican challenger to President Barack Obama in the election on November 6, 2012.

Iowans, accustomed to the personal courtship of numerous presidential candidates, take the political ritual seriously and defend it with pride.

"If you are active, your expectation is that you will meet one or more of the candidates face to face and get a chance to evaluate them personally," said Iowa Republican lobbyist Joe Hrdlicka. "People embrace the process."

Hrdlicka will be the caucus chairman this year in his West Des Moines voting precinct, one of 1,774 precincts that will host caucuses at 809 sites.

The caucuses are usually held in libraries, schools or other public locations, although in some smaller communities they can be in homes, churches or other spaces. One caucus this year will be in a winery.

The turnout at each caucus can vary by community, ranging from as many as 1,000 in cities like Des Moines to a few dozen in sparsely populated areas.

Before the voting, a surrogate or volunteer from each campaign is given a chance to speak to a gathering of their neighbors to persuade them to back their candidate.

In a tight Republican race marked by frequent swings among voters, that adds an element of unpredictability to the result.

"There are people who will change their minds while they are at the caucus. A strong speech can have an effect," said Steve Deace, a conservative radio talk show host in Iowa.

Unlike Iowa Democrats, who gather into groups by candidate preference in a public display of support, Republicans write their vote privately on a sheet of paper that is collected and counted at the site by caucus officials.

A representative of each campaign is allowed to observe the counting. The results are announced to the caucus before they are reported to the state Republican Party, which tabulates the results from around the state and reports them to the public.

The size of the turnout in conservative western Iowa, or in college towns where Texas congressman Ron Paul is popular, could give an early clue about the results.

A heavy turnout in western districts could indicate strong support for social conservatives like Rick Santorum, a former US senator from Pennsylvania. Low participation in the more moderate Des Moines suburbs might be bad news for Mitt Romney, a former Massachusetts governor.

Mixed record

The Iowa caucuses have been the first vote of the presidential nominating cycle since 1972. They have a mixed record at picking overall winners - Mike Huckabee won the caucuses in 2008 while eventual Republican nominee John McCain finished fourth — but they tend to whittle down the field before other states take over.

Nearly 120,000 Iowans took part in the Republican caucus in 2008 and state party officials are unsure if they will hit that number this time.

“It’s the first chance anywhere that Republicans have a chance to cast a vote to start replacing Barack Obama,” Iowa Republican Chairman Matt Strawn said. “All things being equal, the potential exists for a strong Republican turnout.”

The leaders in Iowa opinion polls — Romney and Paul — both ran and lost in 2008. That familiarity has almost certainly helped them in a state where voters are accustomed to the personal touch.

“Most Iowans are not overly impressed with the cult of personality of a presidential candidate. They want to get to know the candidate,” Deace said. “People are very well informed. Poseurs don’t play well here.”

With left-wing Occupy protesters targeting some Republican candidates and the state party in recent days, officials said the master count will be done at an undisclosed location.

State party officials said they will report the votes for nine candidates, including the six who have been actively campaigning in Iowa — Romney, Paul, Santorum, Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry.

Votes also will be reported for Jon Huntsman, who has skipped Iowa to focus on the next contest in New Hampshire; Herman Cain, who dropped out of the race after he was accused of having an extramarital affair; and longshot candidate Buddy Roemer.

The party also will report votes for “No Preference” — which includes those who vote present, uncommitted or none of the above — and for “Other” candidates who get votes.

The caucuses begin at 7pm Central Time today (0100 GMT tomorrow) and party officials expect to begin reporting results within a few hours.

Democrats also will caucus, although Obama is the only candidate running. Obama, who launched his White House run with an Iowa win in 2008, will address caucus-goers by video tonight. — Reuters

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Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/world/article/iowas-quirky-caucuses-open-2012-white-house-race/>