

From the Editor

This just in: presidential elections matter!

You knew that didn't you?—even as you cringed away from watching the 41st or so Republican debate while you frosted Christmas cookies.

As we go to press we are days away from the first test, the Iowa caucuses on Jan. 3 and the New Hampshire primary on Jan. 10.

Complaints about both states being “first” abound, chiefly from media types who would rather be somewhere warmer the first week in January.

New Hampshire was always seen as the first in the nation test, holding their primary—in which any registered voter can vote for any candidate—useful in years in which both parties had contests—toward the end of January.

In the 1976 election race, the savvy folks running Jimmy Carter's campaign knew they were going to lose New Hampshire to favorite son Ted Kennedy, from neighboring Massachusetts, so they began trumpeting how well their candidate was doing in the Iowa caucuses, also held in January. The caucus process is quite different from a primary or general election and involves people gathering, or caucusing, and declaring they are supporting a particular candidate. The caucus process in some states is binding, in others not. But ever since 1976, Iowa has mattered in presidential politics.

The rap on both states is that they aren't “representative” enough of the whole country,

since neither matches the overall US demographics very well and neither has a great big city that wags the political dog of the whole state, like Chicago does Illinois, New York City does New York and Boston does Massachusetts, to name a few.

But they are, historically, the last place where presidential politics are “retail” before going wholesale for the clusters of later primaries that make up various Super and semi-Super Tuesday that follow through the spring.

By retail, it is understood that it's the last place where the candidates have to actually show up and interact with voters—press the flesh as the colloquialism has it. They also go to pancake breakfasts, town hall meetings, stand outside factories, visit restaurants and smilingly partake of local delicacies. The whole process is designed to introduce the candidates to the voters—and vice versa. Sometimes, candidates charge in with their multi-point programs and discover the fine folks in either state could either (a) care less or (b) care a lot—but just not in the way a candidate thought they would.

Neither Iowa nor New Hampshire is definitive any more—neither state's results in January assures the party's nomination, let alone a general election outcome.

Both states' results will be pondered and parsed, but only for as long as it takes to ramp up to the next stop, the next primary.

During the full primary season,

we still see glimpses of retail politics—the trips to the bowling alley, the earnest chat about duck hunting, etc. But by then the majority of the campaigning is being done on television, either in tightly staged photo ops, yet more debates and, especially through television commercials. There are also now sophisticated telephone operations and strong and evolving Internet presences.

Lost in the whole thing are often the candidates themselves as they ratchet down everything superfluous until they are just Candidate X—the most appealing product they can be for the most number of people.

When all is said (and said and said) and done, the primary victors will face off in the general election, a three or four month flurry that resembles the primary season, but is intensified on all fronts, culminating in a couple of debates—tightly controlled by both candidates and the media—and then we have Election Day 2012.

Somewhere between the time you recycle this magazine along with all the after-Christmas catalogs and October 2012, you are going to be part of the process, however vague, annoying, or distant it seems now.

The time to pay attention, however, has already begun.

Peggy

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