



At first, Iowa did not intend to be first. The process for selecting delegates to the 1972 Democratic National Convention was set to proceed as in the past: party members would meet in precincts to select **delegates**, that is, representatives, to county conventions. Later, the county conventions would select delegates to district conventions and the state convention. Finally, the state and district party conventions would elect several dozen delegates that would represent Iowa at the national convention.

But new Iowa state party rules required at least 30 days' notice between party meetings. In light of the national convention's scheduled July 9 start date, the latest precinct caucus date that would allow the 30-day buffer between successive meetings was January 24 – before any other state delegate selection contest.

After the 1972 Iowa Democratic Caucuses drew increased attention from media and candidates as a result of being held so early, the Iowa Republican Party moved its 1976 caucuses to coincide with the Democrats'. Iowa's state parties – and its state legislature – have fiercely guarded its 'first in the nation' status ever since.¹

The Iowa system preserves the multi-stage (precinct, county, district & state) selection process that existed in 1972. In the first, precinct caucuses, stage, residents gather at 7pm on caucus night² in each of more than 1,600 precincts for meetings that may last for hours. While there, voters select representatives to the next level (the county conventions), and indicate their choice of presidential candidate. On the Republican side, delegates to the national

convention are apportioned to candidates based on a secret ballot vote taken at the caucuses.³

Democrats have a more complex process. Participants first divide into groups based on which candidate they support.⁴ Larger groups are eligible to elect more delegates than smaller groups. For example, if Candidate A's supporters outnumber Candidate B's supporters by a factor of two to one, Candidate A's group may get to select twice as many delegates to the county convention as Candidate B's group.⁵

Some groups may have too few people in them to be able to elect any delegates at all. Members of these groups that have not met the **viability threshold** may then join other groups, thus boosting their numbers. Discussions occur as larger groups try to persuade caucus-goers from non-viable groups to join them.

After this back-and-forth, each group elects whatever number of delegates its size entitles it to. Because caucus-goers' affiliations may shift during the meeting, a candidate's level of support in a **straw poll** conducted at the beginning of the evening may not equal the proportion of support for that candidate at the end of the night.

Advocates of the caucus format say that it constitutes a more active and meaningful form of political participation than a primary election. Critics say that the time required to take part, as well as the complex format, results in very low participation. In 2016 the Iowa Caucuses drew 15.7 percent of eligible voters, for example, whereas the New Hampshire Primary had a turnout rate of 52.4 percent.⁶

¹ Hugh Weinbrenner, "The Evolution of the Iowa Precinct Caucuses," *The Annals of Iowa* 46 (1983), pp. 618-635.

² In 2020, February 3.

³ Republican Party of Iowa Bylaws: <https://www.iowagop.org/about/bylaws/>.

⁴ There may also be an "uncommitted" group.

⁵ For detailed caucus rules, see the Iowa Democratic Party's Delegate Selection Plan: <https://iowademocrats.org/2020-more-caucus-documents/>.

⁶ Data from the United States Elections Project, <http://www.electproject.org/2016P>.