

January 2004

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So what is a Caucus?

He [every citizen of a republic] must watch for the State as if its liberties depended upon his vigilance alone.
--Benjamin Rush, signor of the Declaration of Independence

The process of winnowing to two, the number of presidential hopefuls, begins in earnest (and Iowa) in less than two weeks. But the suspense may be arrested in as few as six weeks after some 30 states have conducted preference primaries or caucuses. Polls of likely voters in those states suggest that former Vermont Governor Howard Dean will lead the Democratic ticket this year against the incumbent President George W. Bush.

Although the two major political parties in America are national in scope, they are creatures of state rather than federal law. The U.S. Constitution is silent on the subject of political parties. It is also silent regarding presidential primaries and caucuses. The power to conduct elections belongs to the states.

The practice of nominating candidates for president and vice-president began early in the Republic when congressmen gathered informally in each party to choose their party's man. The meetings were known as a "caucus" from the Indian word meaning "elder."

The caucus eventually gave way to the nominating convention—attended by delegates elected in each state according to party rules. This summer, Democrats expect to send 4300 delegates to Boston for four days beginning July 26 to "select" their president and vice-presidential nominees. New York City will host about 2500 Republican delegates on August 30. It will be the GOP's first nominating convention in the Big Apple.

In the meantime, each state plus the District of Columbia will hold some form of presidential preference primary or caucus to determine how delegates to the national conventions will vote. Washington State has experimented recently with preference primaries, but will not have one this year.

In an interview with the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, Sen. Adam Kline (D-Seattle) said it would be "a very unnecessary exercise and a waste of \$6 million" since Democrats are using their February 7 caucuses to choose their nominating-convention delegates and Republicans already know their nominee will be President Bush.¹

Agreeing with Sen. Kline, Governor Locke last month, called a one-day session of the legislature to enact a law canceling the 2004 presidential primary. It was supposed to be a done (bipartisan) deal. In fewer than 15 minutes, the House debated and passed the bill 84-7 with seven members absent. But Senate Republicans became conflicted and withdrew their support after viewing a taped legislative testimony by former Secretary of State Ralph Munro who argued against the bill.

Evidently persuaded by Munro's arguments, Sen. Dave Schmidt (R-Mill Creek) said that spending by visiting candidates and media would more than offset election expenses.

He also suggested that the state's dependence on federal subsidies would be enhanced by familiarizing presidential candidates with our needs and issues. But the bill carried when a lone Republican defected, giving senate Democrats the winning margin.

The Christian Coalition applauds the legislature for canceling the largely meaningless presidential primary (at least for this year) and continuing with a caucus system similar to eight other states. Preference for the latter is based upon our experience that caucuses encourage and require more grassroots involvement. Where does government involvement begin if not in the neighborhood?

Washington State has more than 7,000 political subdivisions called precincts where caucuses are held. The number and size of precincts in a given county are determined by population and geographic considerations. Typically, precincts have 200 to 300 registered voters. But precincts in high density areas may exceed 1,000 while the isolated Stehekin precinct on Lake Chelan has few more than a dozen registered voters.

On caucus night, registered voters gather by precinct to vote for their favorite presidential candidate—just like their counterparts in preference primary states. But unlike the primary voters, more is required of them. Caucus participants will debate and draft platform positions on issues ranging from health, education, and transportation, to illegal immigration, abortion, and same-sex marriage. Further, they will elect one or more delegates to represent their views at a political party county convention where the process continues to the state and national level—ending in Boston or New York City this summer.

Generally, precinct caucuses are held in homes, but many convene in nearby schools, churches and community halls. Although actual caucus voting is limited to registered voters, interested teenagers are always welcome and usually invited to actively participate in the discussions.

Until this year, caucuses for both major parties have been on the same day. But for the first time since the 1930's, state Democrats have decided to move their caucuses ahead by one month to Saturday, February 7. Republicans will caucus a month later on Tuesday, March 9.

To determine the location of your neighborhood caucus, call the county headquarters for your preferred political party or call your county auditor and ask for the elections division. Give your address or the name of the precinct on your voter registration card. Caucus locations are also usually printed in local newspapers a day or two ahead.

During the next few months, voters in most states will be satisfied to take a moment from their activities to punch a presidential ballot and return home until November 2 when they will punch a ballot again. But voters in Washington can—and Christians certainly should—do more!

It is essential for those of us favoring sound economic and moral principles in government to pray for our leaders (1 Tim 2:2); let our values be evident to all (Matt 5:16); endeavor to flavor our neighborhoods with them (Matt 5:13); and avoid the temptation to sleep while the enemy sows tares (Matt 13:25). That is our duty. The rest belongs to the Lord.

Hope to see you at the caucuses!

Rick Forcier

Executive Director

¹ Modie, Neil, *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, Saturday, December 6, 2003