



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on January 29, 2020

Iowa Is Too White to Host the First Caucus, Writes NY Times Columnist

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The first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses are set for next week, but *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt recently penned a column insisting that this should be the last time that happens. After all, according to Leonhardt, Iowa is “among the country’s whitest states.”



The *Times* column is entitled “Iowa Should Never Go First Again: The current system is a form of white privilege that warps the process.” Not only is Leonhardt opposed to Iowa holding the nation’s first caucuses to choose delegates to the national conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties, he thinks that New Hampshire — which holds the nation’s first presidential primary — is similarly just too white to have such clout in determining the next president of the United States.

In a caucus state such as Iowa, party members go to meetings known as caucuses where they elect delegates to their party’s county conventions. Those chosen to go to the county conventions then elect delegates to their party’s congressional district conventions and their party’s state conventions. In turn, those conventions elect delegates to the respective party national conventions, which ultimately choose the nominees for president and vice president, and hammer out the platform, which tells the country where they stand on the major issues of the day.

Primary states are states in which voters cast ballots for a particular candidate for president, the results of which generally bind the physical delegates to vote for certain candidates at the national convention.

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Leonhardt’s beef is that since New Hampshire is the first primary state and Iowa is the first caucus state, candidates can emerge from those two contests with enough momentum to carry them all the way to the nomination, and because both states are overwhelmingly “white,” that is discriminatory against voters who are not white.

“About six percent of their combined population is black or Asian-American,” Leonhardt wrote. “Almost 87 percent is non-Hispanic white, compared with 60 percent for the country as a whole. Demographically, Iowa and New Hampshire look roughly like the America of 1870.”

Leonhardt contends that this has caused two black candidates — Cory Booker of New Jersey and Kamala Harris of California — to have to drop out of the race prematurely. “They led [South Bend Mayor] Pete Buttigieg in some polls. But Booker and Harris are finished, in no small part because of their struggles in Iowa and New Hampshire.”



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The recent surge of Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont also bothers Leonhardt. He laments that Sanders “could win both Iowa and New Hampshire this year.” With two such victories, Leonhardt fears, “That result would create a media narrative about [former Vice President] Joe Biden’s campaign being badly wounded, even though Biden leads among two large groups of Democratic voters: African Americans and Latinos. Those voters, however, are told to wait their turn.”

Iowa and New Hampshire are mostly white, as Leonhardt has observed, and the results from those two states no doubt can greatly help the candidate who prevails in them. But Leonhardt’s thesis that Iowa voters are just too bigoted to support a black candidate does not have historical support. After all, it was Senator Barack Obama’s drubbing of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the Iowa caucuses in 2008 that began his ascent to the nomination that year. Additionally, just because Iowa votes one way does not guarantee success in New Hampshire. In 2008, Hillary Clinton recovered from her defeat in the Iowa caucuses to win the New Hampshire primary. In 2016, Texas Senator Ted Cruz won the Iowa caucuses in his battle with New York businessman Donald Trump for the Republican nomination, but then lost to Trump in New Hampshire. And, despite his upset win over former California Governor Ronald Reagan in Iowa in 1980, George H.W. Bush got annihilated shortly thereafter in New Hampshire by Reagan.

Sometimes candidates win in Iowa, then go on to win the nomination, such as little-known Governor Jimmy Carter’s surprising win in 1976. After all, if someone wins the nomination, there is at least some possibility they could win Iowa.

But Leonhardt evidently believes a state with a heavier minority and urban demographic should go first. Of course, one could ask why minority voters should be able to go first over the ethnic majority, any more than states with larger ethnic majorities should go first? To progressives like Leonhardt, race and ethnicity is — supposedly — highly important.

“All of this skews the campaign,” Leonhardt complained in his column. “And it’s another form of privilege for groups that already benefit from the Senate and Electoral College — white voters, older voters and voters outside of major metropolitan areas.”

Leonhardt predicted that Iowa and New Hampshire would fight any effort to change their first-in-the-nation status, arguing, “Strip away the rhetoric ... their argument comes down to this: We’re better than the rest of you, and we deserve special treatment forever.”

Actually, Leonhardt’s rhetoric is much like so many of the cultural elites that carry so much clout in this country. For example, Leonhardt is a Yale graduate. Many of the cultural elites think that presidents and Supreme Court justices need to come from Ivy League schools such as Yale, Harvard, and Columbia. Our recent presidents such as the Bushes, and Barack Obama, and almost all of our Supreme Court justices are Ivy League graduates. When Sarah Palin was made a vice-presidential candidate in 2008, these same cultural elites snickered that Palin’s degree was from *Idaho State*.

Those who live in the Great Plains are largely considered to be in “flyover” country by these snobs. Hillary Clinton thinks of them as “deplorables.” Barack Obama disdained them as “clinging to their religion and their guns.”

The next time Leonhardt uses his argument that someone thinks he is better than the rest of the country, perhaps he needs to look in the mirror.

Insofar as benefitting from the Senate and the Electoral College, both of those institutions are operating as the Founders intended — as a check on elitists such as Leonhardt.



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The way we choose our presidential nominees is a reflection of the federal system of government created with the Constitution. States play a large role in the process of nominating a president because of this. Would it be better if an overwhelmingly blue state such as New York went first, or if a strongly red state such as Oklahoma was first?

Iowa and New Hampshire are states in which either party's candidate has a real shot at winning in the general election. Obama won Iowa and New Hampshire, while Trump was victorious in Iowa and barely lost New Hampshire. One would think the parties would want candidates that can perform well in these purple "swing" states such as Iowa and New Hampshire.

The truth is that no state would be without its advantages and disadvantages. Because of the process we have now, candidates are forced to appeal to a broader range of interests — rural and urban, black and white, North and South, East and West. If we had one primary day (which some have advocated), flaws of candidates would show up later, during the general election campaign, rather than earlier in the nomination process. Voters have ample opportunity to consider the merits of candidates over a longer length of time in our present system. Certainly, in choosing a president of the United States, slow and deliberate is better than quick and with little thought.

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