



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on May 21, 2019

Iowa Poll Demonstrates Limited Importance of “National” Polls

National polling has former Vice President Joe Biden far ahead of the remainder of the Democratic Party field in the race for the nomination of the Democratic Party. A Fox poll has Biden ahead of his nearest rival, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, by 18 points among Democrats nationally, while a CNN poll puts Biden an astounding 24 points over Sanders.



Every presidential election cycle, it seems that a certain fact of American presidential politics continues to be under-reported, which is that American presidential elections are not national contests, but federal. The battle for the nominations of the political parties and the contest among the nominees of the political parties are fought out at the state level.

Delegates at the national conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as the various minor parties, make the decision as to who will represent their party in the November election. Presidential electors, chosen according to who wins the state's popular vote, as opposed to who wins the national popular vote, elect the president.

An Iowa Starting Line/Change Poll of 615 likely Democratic caucus-goers, conducted from May 15 to May 19, powerfully confirms this reality. According to the poll, Biden is tied with Sanders for a first-place finish in Iowa, with both candidates garnering 24 percent.

Some states, such as Iowa, are what are known as caucus, or caucus-convention, states. In a caucus state, a person does not go to a public polling place and cast a secret ballot for one of the candidates running to get their party's nomination. Instead, for a person to have any say in who gets the delegate votes from his state, he or she must physically meet in a “caucus” of other party members in their voting precinct. These meetings are often held in school gymnasiums, church basements, private homes, and the like. The caucus attendees sit around and discuss the merits of the various candidates, and attempt to persuade others to their choice.

Finally, a vote is taken, with each caucus-goer announcing his or her preference openly. Under Iowa's caucus system, if one's candidate fails to obtain 15 percent of the vote, the caucus-goer then has the opportunity to switch his vote to a candidate who did obtain 15 percent or more of the vote. This is why the candidates that caucus-goers would pick as their “second choice” in the Iowa poll is very important.

Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts did the best in this part of the poll, getting 19 percent, followed by Biden at 16 percent, Kamala Harris with 15 percent, and Sanders at 11 percent.



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Of even more specific importance is who is the “second” choice of the leaders, Biden and Sanders. This is where Sanders could edge Biden (if the poll results were to be repeated at the Iowa caucuses early next year — which they won’t, of course), as Sanders has an advantage as the second-choice among the mostly more openly liberal candidates.

South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg was third in the Iowa Poll, at 14 percent, followed by Warren at 12 percent, and Senator Kamala Harris of California at 10 percent. Trailing, in the single digits, was former Texas Representative Beto O’Rourke.

Sanders defeated eventual Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton in Iowa in 2016, and conventional wisdom holds that his victory then will give him “residual” support this time. But each election has its own set of variables. For instance, former Senator Rick Santorum did very well in Iowa in 2012, only to trail far behind Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, who won the 2016 Iowa caucus contests.

Biden easily was first among those polled on the issue of likability, with 67 percent saying Biden was likable. Buttigieg was in second-place on this question, with Sanders trailing far behind at 45 percent. Biden also led in the poll on the question of who is most likely to defeat President Trump in the general election.

In contrast to caucus states, “primary” states allow any person who is registered in the party — or in some states a voter who just identifies with that party on primary election day — to cast a secret ballot for a candidate. In most cases, but not all, this election then binds delegates to the national convention, generally on the first ballot. In some states, a candidate only gets the percentage of delegates he or she wins in the primary ballot, while in others it is “winner take all.” And in some states, it is some combination of both. In short, the selection of a presidential nominee is a state-by-state process, because of the federal nature of America. Finally, some states hold both a “beauty contest” primary (which determines nothing insofar as the selection of delegates), and caucuses.

All of this is to say that the winner of a particular state’s caucus or primary is not determined by who is doing better “nationally.” And Iowa winners have no “lock” on ultimately winning the party’s nomination. Witness Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz, who won the Democratic and Republican Iowa caucuses, respectively, in 2016, but could only finish second to eventual nominees Clinton and Trump.

It should also be noted that a poll taken in May of 2019, for a contest that will be conducted in Iowa in January of 2020, is just a “snapshot” of opinion, at best. That is why we have campaigns.

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