



Super Tuesday

by Doug Stout

In June, Iowa joined eleven other states in conducting primary elections to set the stage for the general elections in November. There were some interesting results. However, the biggest story may have been the discrepancy in the turnout rates between Iowa Republicans and Iowa Democrats. According to the preliminary figures from the Iowa Secretary of State's office, there were almost three voters in the Republican primary for every voter in the Democratic primary. If this is even a slight indication of what will happen in November, it is a bad omen for Democrats.

No one would argue that the Republican turnout will be three times the level of Democratic turnout in the fall, but it may reinforce the perception that the playing field is not level this year. Conservatives are motivated and liberals are deflated. The Iowa numbers are actually quite dramatic: 227,347 Iowans cast their votes in the Republican primary and 72,062 Iowans cast their votes in the Democratic primary. This was the highest turnout by Republicans in a primary election since 1994, when Governor Terry Branstad was unsuccessfully challenged by United States Congressman and former actor Fred Grandy.¹

Democrats would point out that the turnout was generated by the heated three-way struggle for the Republican nomination for Governor. There were also four candidates on the ballot in northeast Iowa to face incumbent Congressman Bruce Braley, four candidates to face incumbent Congressman Dave Loebsack in southeast Iowa, and seven candidates to determine who would face incumbent Congressman Leonard Boswell in central Iowa. So, there were 15 Republicans who gained ballot access to challenge the three sitting Democratic Congressmen. There were three Democrats who stepped forward to challenge Iowa's two incumbent Republican Congressmen. There was a two-way primary to see who would challenge incumbent Congressman Steve King in western Iowa and one Democrat was on the ballot to face incumbent Congressman Tom Latham in north central Iowa. No incumbents at the federal level or at the statewide office level faced a primary challenge in their own party in Iowa.

I think most political observers from both parties would agree that most voters are driven to the primary polls on a statewide level by the election choices available for Governor, Senator, and U.S. Representatives, although local numbers can certainly be driven up by the personal nature of local contests.

The Democrats had a three-way primary for their nomination for the opportunity to face incumbent United States Senator Chuck Grassley in the November elections. The race pitted trial attorney Roxanne Conlin, who had previously lost the gubernatorial election to Terry Branstad in 1982, against two former State Legislators, Bob Krause and Tom Fiegen.

Any way you look at the primary election turnout, it is hard to see good news for the Democrats. The fact that there were 15 Republican congressional challengers for three Democratic seats and only three Democratic challengers for the two Congressional seats held by Republicans, may help explain some of the turnout discrepancy, but should be a warning sign to the Democratic party. Candidates do not run and voters do not take the time to vote on races they think are "lost causes." They vote in primaries when they think they may be choosing "the next" Governor or Senator. The basic fact is that 227,347 Iowans thought it was relevant who was going to face Governor Chet Culver in November. Only 72,062 Iowans thought it was relevant who was going to face Senator Chuck Grassley in November. Which incumbent do you think Iowans believe is going to be vulnerable in the fall?

You could make the case that Ms. Conlin was expected to win her contest, so perhaps voters thought the race was a foregone conclusion, but she had two credible opponents. Tom Fiegen was actually endorsed by the *Des Moines Register* over Roxanne Conlin.² In its editorial the *Register* did not exactly heap praise on the trio, saying: "All three deserve credit for the daunting task of trying to unseat a longtime incumbent. Yet none is an especially impressive choice for the job of U.S. Senator."³

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Many post election news stories seem to be about difficulties the Republican Party may face in uniting its ticket for the fall, which I suspect will be an outdated issue by November. However, in case you missed it, Democrat Tom Fiegen said on election night that he would not endorse the United States Senate primary winner Roxanne Conlin.⁴ In fact *Radio Iowa* reported in an election night story that he had some harsh words. They reported he said that the Democratic Party isn't the "voice" of working people anymore. He also added: "People who work for a living no longer feel like either party speaks for them...and the Democratic Party has simply become "Republican Lite."⁵

Elections are emotional events and I suspect both political parties will resolve most of their internal issues to form a common front for the fall. Our two party system is always about forming coalitions of voters. It is simply not possible in a nation of 300 million people to find a majority of voters who agree across the board on everything. The system has always resulted in factions finding common ground to support candidates who more closely share their general views than the candidates of the other party. Compromise is the "heart and soul" of any functioning democracy. In countries that have many political parties, rather than only two leading parties, there is more opportunity to build a smaller more cohesive political party with people who more closely share each other's views. However, this merely delays the process of compromise to the level of forming a government and can often lead to chaos. The election of multiple parties into a legislature or parliament just means the compromise has to take place at a higher level. Very distinct parties have to come together to form coalitions to govern because, in any healthy democracy, a coalition representing the majority of voters must be formed.

Iowans should consider how they feel about the actions of the group "Iowans for Responsible Government," led by former Iowa Democratic party chair, Rob Tully. The group spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on television ads and direct mail trying to influence the Republican primary voters by pretending to be conservative advocates and attacking former Governor Branstad. There are a lot of things that go on behind the scenes in politics that are unseemly; this seems rather blatant for Iowa tastes. Fortunately, they underestimated the intelligence of Iowa voters. Some misleading political tricks that work elsewhere fall short in Iowa.

At least we did not reach the level of personal attacks that went on in the South Carolina Republican primary for Governor, in the closing days leading up to the June 8th primary. When a State Legislator who had been running behind two opponents surged into the lead, she came under blistering attacks. She was called a derogatory ethnic term by a State Legislator based on her Indian heritage and two allies of political opponents came forward to allege she had past incidences of marital infidelity, allegations she vehemently denied. She overcame the attacks to finish first with 49% of the vote and then won the run-off election.

Running for political office can be a daunting experience. Personal flaws in a candidate's background are often distorted and used against them. Past mistakes, whether relevant or not, are often used in whisper campaigns. Those campaigns harm not only the candidate, but they can also have a devastating impact on their family. If sufficient flaws are not available, lies can be manufactured, which may not be found out until long after an election. We should all take a moment to thank candidates of both parties and of all ideologies who have made the sacrifice to run for office. A healthy democracy requires that we have individuals ready to do so. We should remember that the unsuccessful candidates are the ones who make a democracy work and open debate possible. We should always commend their efforts. Being gracious in victory can be difficult, but being gracious in defeat is a true test of character.

(Endnotes)

¹William Petroski, "Iowa GOP primary turnout was highest since 1994," *Des Moines Register Staff Blogs*, June 11, 2010, <http://blogs.desmoinesregister.com/dmr/index.php/2010/06/11/iaow-gop-primary-turnout-was-highest-since-1994/> (June 15, 2010).

²Fiegen: Did his homework better on challenging national issues," *The Des Moines Register's editorial*, May 30, 2010, <http://m.desmoinesregister.com/news.jsp?key=660526&rc=op> (June 15, 2010).

³Ibid.

⁴Jennifer Jacobs, "Roxanne Conlin wins Democratic primary for U.S. Senate," *Des Moines Register.com*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100608/NEWS09/100608046> (June 15, 2010).

⁵"Polls have closed on 2010 Iowa Primary Election," *RadioIowa.com*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.radioiowa.com/2010/06/08/profiles-of-statewide-contests/> (June 15, 2010).

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