



A Party With a Purpose

by Deborah D. Thornton

Labor Day has come and gone. The children are back in school. The biggest party of the summer is over – the Republican Party of Iowa’s (RPI) Presidential Straw Poll, in which a grand total of 16,786 people voted. The harvest and winter rapidly approach.

Michelle Bachmann (4,823 votes) won the straw poll, with Ron Paul (4,621 votes) a close second. Tim Pawlenty dropped out and Rick Perry jumped in. Rick Santorum (1,675) and Herman Cain (1,456) had a significant number of supporters at the straw poll. Sarah Palin was still flirting with her decision and teasing both supporters and detractors. Political pundits and commentators nationally and internationally wrote their 600 words, got their TV time, and then moved on.

The Iowans at the straw poll only represented about 2.7 percent of the state’s registered Republicans. They are the ones who took the time to drive to Ames and spend their day listening, asking questions, talking with the candidates, and hanging out with other activists.

Technically, you did not have to be a registered Republican or even a registered voter to attend the straw poll and to vote – only a resident of Iowa. It was started as – and still is – a major fundraiser for the RPI. However, if you wanted to participate but did not want to write the RPI a personal check, any of the candidates would have given you a free ticket and a free meal just for coming. It is a secret ballot, so you did not even have to vote for the candidate who gave you your ticket. These facts about the straw poll are widely known, yet only 16,786 people voted.

However, it was a party with a purpose. The next party with a purpose is the presidential caucus, February 6, 2012.

There are almost 2 million active registered voters in Iowa (1,963,372). Of those, about 610,000 are registered Republicans and 641,000 are registered Democrats. There are more people registered “No Party” or “Other” than either Democrats or Republicans – over 706,000.¹

In 2008, over 119,000 Republicans came to their local caucus site and voted, which was the most ever. That was just over 20 percent of the 576,231 registered statewide at that time.² So the number participating has historically increased about seven-fold between the straw poll and caucus night. Interestingly, over 34,000 voters have become newly registered Republicans in the last three-and-a-half years. If the numbers hold true, over 125,000 Republicans should attend the 2012 caucuses. As President Barack Obama currently has no primary opposition, the Democrat turnout is expected to be significantly less.

In 2008, there were 11 Republican candidates who made 211 individual visits, totaling 441 days, to Iowa between January 2007 and caucus night. The seven Democrat candidates made fewer

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visits (199) but stayed longer (533 days.)³ The economic development and income to Iowans from these visits, the straw poll, and the caucus is significant, as is the opportunity to personally meet and talk with someone who potentially will become our next President. Barack Obama was considered to have little chance of success in the presidential contest until he won in Iowa.

It is a party with a purpose.

Yet, only 20 percent of our citizens and voters take the time to participate and express their opinion. Further, the 700,000 people who chose to make no choice in their party affiliation have no voice in this party. They are unable to participate. Fortunately, they can come on caucus night, fill out the registration form, and declare a party affiliation – either Republican or Democrat.

Significantly, Gallup recently came out with a presidential opinion poll showing that President Obama has his lowest approval rating ever, falling three points to 39 percent. Obama's all-time high approval rating was during inaugural week in 2009, at 69 percent. His disapproval rating in mid-August 2011 increased 3 percent to 54.⁴ Only one in three voters approve of the job he is doing and more than half disapprove, though the liberal base remains solidly behind him.

We currently live in a country mired in the economic doldrums, with trillions of dollars of government debt on the books and more added every day, where the real unemployment/underemployment number is not 9 percent, but closer to 16 percent,⁵ where our young people are graduating from college with an average of \$23,000 in debt and no jobs,⁶ and where 70 percent of African-American children are born to unwed mothers.⁷ Unsurprisingly, the President's job approval rating is 39 percent and falling.

Thus the Iowa Republican Straw Poll and the Democrat and Republican caucuses are not just political festivals or parties – they are parties with a purpose, a very important purpose. Be sure to accept your invitation.

(Endnotes)

¹ "New Congressional District Voter Registration Totals," Iowa Secretary of State, August 1, 2011, <<http://www.sos.state.ia.us/pdfs/elections/redistrictrepincnt/congVRtotals.pdf>> accessed on August 15, 2011.

² "P 2012 The Race for the White House," Democracy in Action, <<http://www.p2012.org/chnr/iowa12.html>> accessed August 14, 2011.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Obama Job Approval," Gallup.com, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>> accessed August 14, 2011.

⁵ "Table A-15, Alternative measures of labor underutilization," Economic News Release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 5, 2011, <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.t15.htm>> accessed August 15, 2011.

⁶ "2011 College Grads Have Highest Average Debt to Date," *Consumer Reports*, May 16, 2011, <<http://news.consumerreports.org/money/2011/05/2011-college-grads-have-highest-average-debt-to-date.html>> accessed August 15, 2011.

⁷ "Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women," Child Trends Databank, <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/75_PDF.pdf> accessed August 15, 2011.

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