



Rosenfield Program & Program in Practical Political Education (PPPE)

2018 Midterm Caucus Primer

Here's some information that will tell you where the closest caucuses are and what to expect.

When: Monday evening, February 5, 7:00 p.m. start

Where: **1st Ward Democrats**, Presbyterian Church (1025 5th Avenue, which is across 6th Avenue from Burling.)

1st Ward Republicans, Grinnell High School (1333 Sunset Street, head west on 8th Avenue, which intersects Sunset in about a mile.)

General Information

A “caucus” is simply a local party meeting, and both the Democratic and Republican parties in Iowa hold caucuses. Many people around the world are familiar with the “Iowa caucuses” because they’re notable in presidential nomination politics. But the parties also *caucus* in midterm years – that is, the even-numbered years between presidential elections. The purpose of these midterm (aka “off-year”) meetings is to tackle the business of running a party, including selection of party leaders, to begin work on the platform/program, and to lay the groundwork for the selection of the parties’ nominees for contests on the November general election ballot (like governor, members of congress, state legislators and county officials) if nominations are not settled by the primary election in June. The caucus itself (more formally the “precinct caucus”) is the first step in series of similar party meetings, each at a more inclusive geographic level, culminating in state conventions in the summer.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties invite observers to their caucuses. If you would like to observe, simply go to the caucus site a little bit (perhaps 10 or 15 minutes) before the start of the caucus. Let the people running the caucus know that you are an observer, and they’ll likely welcome you and direct you to place to sit and watch.

The Democratic and Republican caucuses are held at the same time but in different locations. And because party rules govern how the caucuses are run, the Democratic and Republican caucuses – though both fundamentally serving the same purposes for the party – will look a little different. Either one would be interesting to observe, though there will probably be significantly higher attendance at the Democratic caucuses this year, in part because of the nature of the competition for the gubernatorial and congressional nominations.

The Democratic Caucus

Democrats in the U.S. tend to be more rule-oriented than Republicans, so you will likely observe a highly regimented set of steps in this meeting, starting with the selection of the officials who will preside over the caucus, and moving to the selection of delegates and alternates to the county convention (in Montezuma), and finally considering issues that might be included – eventually – on the platform of the state Democratic Party.

That second step of selecting delegates and alternates *may* become quite involved, given the dynamics of a particular caucus. Democrats in the 1st congressional district – that is, the district that encompasses Grinnell – have four candidates vying for the congressional nomination. And there are a large number of candidates who want the Democratic Party’s gubernatorial nomination. Democratic rules give a caucus the option – if there is sufficient support for this – to separate into “preference groups,” which would make the connection clearer between support at the caucus for a particular candidate and selection of delegates who will move on to the county. Some Democratic caucus-goers may push for this, in anticipation of an unresolved nomination after the primary election.

Under usual circumstances, party nominees would be selected in the June 5 primary election. But in order to be nominated, a candidate needs to receive at least 35% of the vote in the party’s primary. If no candidate emerges for a given contest with that level of support, then the selection of the nominee is made at the convention. So Democrats who support a particular candidate, anticipating that no candidate will receive 35% of the vote in a multi-candidate nomination contest, may be interested in making sure that their candidate has delegate strength at the subsequent conventions.

The Republican Caucus

Republican caucuses will also focus on the selection of local party officials, the selection of delegates to the county convention and early work on a party platform. Whereas in presidential years, Republicans would take a vote (or preference “poll”) in a caucus to gauge the support for different Republican presidential hopefuls, there’s nothing like that happening in the midterm caucus. At this point, it looks like there will be no contest for the Republican congressional nomination in this 1st congressional district; Congressman Blum, the incumbent, is unlikely to be challenged. However, Governor Kim Reynolds, who succeeded former Governor Terry Branstad when he became President Trump’s Ambassador to China, is being challenged, most notably by Ron Corbett, a former GOP legislative leader and – more recently – Mayor of Cedar Rapids. But even with two or three candidates in that nomination contest, it’s not very likely to go to convention – because numerically it’s likely that one candidate will receive at least 35% of the vote in the June primary.

This is all to say that while there may not be overt politicking for particular candidates at the Republican caucus, there may be some divisions lingering below the surface.

Election Coffee: Midterm Caucus Reflection and Q&A

The next day, Tuesday (February 6) at 11:00 in Burling Lounge: Please join us to discuss – or if you have questions about – what you observed!

Note: If you will be 18 years old by the November election (i.e., November 6, 2018) and are a registered voter in Iowa, you can actually participate in the caucuses – provided you are a party registrant, meaning that you indicate that you are a “Democrat” or a “Republican” on your voter registration. It is possible to register to vote at the caucuses themselves, and you can also change your party registration there.