

Hugh Winebrenner, *The Iowa Precinct Caucuses. The Making of a Media Event*. Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1987.

This study of the Iowa Precinct Caucuses deals with the influence of the mass media on the making of their status as the first major event in the American Presidential Campaign. It tells us how the Democratic party of Iowa changed its caucus rules in 1969 in order to be sure that in the future they would be first in the presidential candidate selection process. The book, which is highly informative and easy to read, was very conveniently published just before the holding of the 1988 Iowa Precinct Caucuses.

The first chapter of the book gives a short – and in my opinion too short and too superficial – introduction to the literature on the influence of the mass media on the American Presidential Campaign. In the 1970s and early 1980s Thomas E. Patterson and Michael J. Robinson have been at the forefront of researchers examining the impact of the media on the national electoral process. Winebrenner says that he is drawing on both scholars' theories; actually it seems as if he is mainly drawing on Patterson's empirical findings and on Robinson's theory about the power of the mass media in changing the reality into what he called a *mediality*.

Chapters two and three deal with the origins and evolution of the Iowa Caucuses and give a good description of the political and demographic profile of Iowa State. Here, Winebrenner agrees with Thomas E. Patterson in his criticism of the fact that although no state can legitimately claim to mirror the national electorate, Iowa is less representative than many, because of its WASP culture consisting of an almost 100% white population living for the most part in small-town communities.

The central part of the book comprises chapters four to seven, which contain a detailed analysis of every caucus from 1968 to 1984. According to Winebrenner the Iowa precinct caucuses are essentially local party functions that have been manipulated into the function of making or breaking presidential candidacies by the trinity of the media, the political parties of Iowa, and the presidential candidates themselves. A major conclusion of the book is that projections based on precinct caucuses are invalid and unreliable indicators of presidential candidate strength in Iowa. They are invalid because no votes are taken anywhere in the process. The fluidity and duration of the caucus and convention system also limit the reliability of projections, because the presidential race is "normally" reduced to two or three contenders by the time of the county caucuses, and by the time of the state caucuses the presidential candidate race is actually over.

Another important conclusion is that the making of the Iowa caucuses as a major event in the presidential campaign has resulted in a longer, more expensive and "front-loaded" campaign season, where the primary election in such major states as for instance California is without influence. Furthermore, the media have dealt more with the expected winners and losers – the so-called horserace journalism – than with the political issues of the campaign. Winebrenner's major sources are the prestige paper of Iowa, the *Des Moines Register*, and telephone interviews. The author is, in my opinion, sometimes too uncritical in his use of these sources. For instance in his using of telephone interviews from 1984, with the 1984 campaign leaders of the two major parties in Iowa, to get the actual number of participants in the 1976 caucuses.

The final chapter of the book is a short perspectivization of the meaning and significance of the Iowa Precinct Caucuses on the presidential campaign seen from a national point of view. Winebrenner has devoted only twelve pages to

this chapter, which is a pity because a comparison of the differences between a primary state election, as in New Hampshire, and the selection of party delegates from local caucuses, as in Iowa, would have been very interesting. Winebrenner indicates the differences simply by saying that a caucuses campaign means more weight on a grassroots campaign among the party active parts of the population, while a primary state campaign means more weight on a "fullscale modern media campaign", built around political television commercials.

Winebrenner furthermore indicates that the media-based party caucuses have resulted in a strengthening of the political parties in Iowa. I think it would have been very interesting if the author had concentrated more on this side of the Iowa caucuses, because the mass media are normally seen as a major reason for the decline of the American political parties since the early fifties (see for example Larry Sabato's excellent book from '1981 *The Rise of Political Consultants*).

*The Iowa Precinct Caucuses. The Making of a Media Event* is a good and well-written book which has shown how the mass media adjust the reality – here the Iowa caucuses – to the reality of the media itself. In Robinson's terminology, the reality has become a mediality. In the author's own words, the Iowa caucuses from 1972 to 1984 have become a "media-choreographed" contest for the presidency.

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