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The Caucus, the Candidates, and the Dance of Democracy

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The dance of democracy is rarely graceful and almost never predictable. But, in the end, the people have their say. The 2008 U.S. presidential contest started earlier than any other in the nation's history, but the first real votes were taken last night in the form of the Iowa caucuses.

The results are a reminder of the unpredictability of the democratic process. The biggest news was on the Democratic side. The victory of Sen. Barack Obama is a big moment for his party and for the nation. The fact that an African-American candidate won with such a significant margin of victory is historic. Sen. Obama just may have emerged as the symbol of a new political mood and national aspiration. The eloquence of his victory address surpassed that of any presidential candidate since Ronald Reagan, and much of it appeared to be extemporaneous.

The fact that Sen. Obama outpolled Sen. Hillary Clinton even among women voters is another indication of the magnitude of his victory. The fact that Sen. Clinton came in third effectively buried her campaign strategy of inevitability. The Democratic race is now effectively a two-person race with the party's eventual nominee almost surely either Sen. Obama or Sen. Clinton.

On the Republican side, the result was less surprising but no less significant. The convincing victory won by former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee instantly reshapes the Republican race. The Governor's victory speech was a very powerful demonstration of effective political communication. Gov. Huckabee has an undeniable ability to connect with voters, and his appeal was far wider than many had expected.

Nevertheless, the picture among the Republicans is still rather confusing. The race in New Hampshire — just five days away — is very different, with former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and Sen. John McCain seemingly running ahead of the pack. Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani was not a significant factor in the Iowa voting, but the fact that Gov. Huckabee came out ahead of Gov. Romney may give Giuliani the opening he needs. Then again, a Huckabee-Romney, Huckabee-McCain, or Romney-McCain showdown is also quite possible. A great deal depends on the voting in New Hampshire just five days away.

Americans should pause to think about the imbalances of the nomination process. The Iowa caucuses were basically inconsequential until 1976, when former Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter rode a victory there to national prominence, his party's nomination, and the White House. Yet, the reality is that a relative handful of Iowa citizens now has an inordinate influence on the nomination process.

Over the past few decades, America's evangelical Christians have emerged as a powerful and influential voting constituency within the Republican Party. While this is due to a host of issues, the issue of abortion has been front and center. In recent years, the issue of marriage has emerged as another critical issue. The turnout in Iowa contradicts the predictions that the so-called Religious Right has been sidelined. Gov. Huckabee's victory can be directly traced to the huge numbers of evangelicals who turned out in Iowa.

All of the candidates on the Democratic side are committed to protect and extend abortion rights. Among the Republicans, Mayor Giuliani is well known for his pro-abortion positions — right down to opposing a ban on partial-birth abortions. The most he has yet promised is to appoint strict-constructionist justices to the Supreme Court.

Evangelicals will be watching the Republican race closely.

The rhetoric of the race — and the rhetoric of many evangelicals — is disturbing. This race is important and necessarily so. We are talking about the next President of the United States, after all. But evangelicals have invested far too much hope in the political process. No government can make people good, transform humanity, or eliminate sin. The political sphere is important, but never ultimate. Jesus Christ is Lord — and He will be Lord regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

This presidential race offers evangelical Christians an opportunity to mature and rethink our model of political engagement. We are likely to confront developments and choices that will require significant intellectual effort among American Christians.

Americans should give thanks today, mindful of the fact that our democratic process is evidence of national stability and constitutional order. The U.S. Constitution is the world's longest-surviving political charter. For a contrast, just think of the political turmoil and tragedy seen in Pakistan and Kenya in just the last week. Our political process may be only rarely graceful or predictable — but it is still one of the wonders of the world. Stay tuned.

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