

DEFINITION OF A CAUCUS

There's been some discussion of a do-over, an electoral mulligan, for the great clusterfuck of Michigan. And—in the ongoing debate whether Obama's victories in caucus states are "real"—discussions about caucuses. As those two subjects potentially converge, I wanted to say a few words about caucuses, in general, and caucuses in Michigan.

I agree with Lambert's general dissatisfaction with caucuses:

However, the caucus system clearly disenfranchised several classes of people:

1. People who couldn't get away from work, and since Maine is a state that's both big, poor, and challenged by the weather in the winter, that's a larger percentage than you might think;
2. People who have child care issues;
3. People with disabilities;
4. People without cars;
5. People who are elderly and/or sick.

When this season is over, the caucus system should be abolished everywhere, in favor of a system where all votes count equally.

And for all these reasons, I don't think a caucus state should have first in the country privileges, under any circumstances (though I am sympathetic to the notion that parties ought to organize their primaries or caucuses in such a way as to foster ongoing participation, which is one benefit to traditional caucuses). When canvassing in Iowa in 2004, for example, I ran into a bunch of restaurant workers who would have to forgo an entire night's wages to caucus.

Imposing that kind of poll tax is a terrible message for the Democratic party to send.

That said, not all caucuses are created equal. Michigan's caucus—at least as it was run in 2004—is a lot closer to NM's caucus: it's just an election that the party, as opposed to the state, runs. It's open for about 8 hours, and once you cast your vote, you're done, pack the kids back in the car and drive them to their volleyball game. At least as we ran it in 2004, there were fewer caucus locations, so longer lines and longer drives/cab rides/free rides to polls, which is a problem. And the rules for challengers allow for each candidate to have one—but only one—loudmouth standing at the entrance pitching her candidate (this was my role in 2004, one I relished).

In two ways, though, Michigan's caucus has greater accessibility than your garden variety state-run primary. First, at least in Michigan, the rules for casting an absentee vote are more forgiving than under the state-run primary system (our GOP SOS has made it more difficult for seniors and the disabled to enjoy automatic absentee voting, and those who absentee vote for other reasons have to show cause). So if the issue is ensuring those who can't make the polls is an issue, MI's caucus is actually better than the primary.

And—how cool is this? Michigan allows online voting. While there's a huge digital divide, online voting is a way to offer voting at a time and place aside from the caucus. So while some caucuses do impose accessibility issues that we can debate (I see some benefit to it, though also, clearly, the drawbacks), not all do.

That said, understand that one of the reasons why Michigan, at least, had a primary this year instead of a caucus where we might have tweaked the rules to avoid the clusterfuck is because primaries are just as susceptible to legislative fights as anything else. The advantage a caucus offers over a primary is that the party can do what it wants to do (which is one of the curious

aspects of Hillary's underperformance in caucuses—to a large degree caucuses are controlled by party insiders, and more of those insiders seem to support Hillary than Obama, so you'd think they could game the rules for her...). That's how Michigan's Dems can decide that it's time to try online voting, for example.

And in Michigan, at this point, if we wanted our electoral mulligan, it would have to be a caucus. There's simply no way the Republicans who control the state senate would allow the state with the worst economy in the nation a do-over, particularly not one the state had to pay for.

But, understand, all the word "caucus" means is that the party controls the election, not the state. That may mean crowded high school gyms or it may mean a simple xeroxed ballot stuck in a box. And it may, in some ways, mean more accessibility than an election.

But for Michigan, at least, it would also mean having an election where our votes can and should count.