

Iowa's Almost Always Impossible to Predict ... But We've Tried Anyway

With the Iowa Caucuses now just five days (and a few hours) away, we're going to focus our attention entirely on the Hawkeye State. Much of what happens there on Monday night will have a much greater impact than the newest numbers out of New Hampshire and South Carolina, or even national polls (although they play a role in what happens next).

So let's break it all down.

For starters, what we're attempting to do is very difficult, because it requires reliance on information that, at times, may not be entirely accurate (on purpose). But we cannot rely upon polling numbers alone to predict what will happen on Caucus Night. To do so would be folly.

The Landscape

Right now, Donald Trump holds a 5-point lead over Ted Cruz in Iowa, which is just outside the combined margin of error for the 14-day window we're looking at. The Cruz camp just released their own version of "shock and awe," suggesting they have the best ground game that has ever been amassed for an Iowa Caucus campaign.

It's that good.

What we don't know with absolute certainty, however, is the strength of the Trump ground game. His camp has effectively rewritten the rulebook for campaigning in Iowa, and they're being a little bit proprietary about it, but from grassroots organizers who have been willing to talk in general terms, there is a lot of confidence about turnout.

Only Rand Paul boasts a ground game even comparable to Cruz and Trump, but he's focused most of his energy not on attracting traditional caucus voters, but on mobilizing college students. In past elections, young voters have done a very poor job of showing up on Caucus Night, so it remains to be seen if it will finally pay off.

Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum lack the ground game, but have put in the elbow grease of relentless "retail politicking" across the state. They were the first to complete their "Full Grassley" tours of Iowa's 99 counties, and Santorum has nearly pulled off a second just ahead of Monday's vote.

Jeb Bush, Chris Christie and John Kasich have put in almost no effort to win Iowa. Christie and Kasich have established their fire lines in New Hampshire, while Bush is putting much of his effort into winning South Carolina. It's unlikely a poor finish in Iowa will force any of those three out prior to the conclusion of the New Hampshire Primary.

The Weather

Because the caucuses take place during a very narrow window of the day, weather forecasts play a role in predicting turnout, which can be a strong indicator as to how a candidate may perform in the final vote tally. If, for instance, a winter storm were to blow through the northwestern part of the state, Cruz, Huckabee, Santorum, and Marco Rubio would all feel the impact.

The forecast for Monday, at this point, indicates that's exactly what is going to happen. After a brief period of unseasonably warm weather over the weekend, a low-pressure system will move in during the afternoon and evening hours on Monday.

This will bring the possibility of rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow, all of which could hamper travel for potential caucus voters. The exact timing and anticipated temperatures

are not yet known, so the forecast remains a little vague in terms of the ratio of wet to frozen precipitation.

Right now, the system is expected to track across the northwestern two-thirds of the state, with the area of heaviest impact being along a line from Council Bluffs to Mason City and all parts northwest. This would immediately impact Iowa's "Bible Belt" area in the northwest corner of the state.

That means turnout could be negatively affected by the weather. We will provide additional weather updates in the days ahead, along with any potential impacts on caucus turnout.

Caucus Turnout

If weather isn't a huge factor, turnout should set a record this year for Republicans. The large number of candidates have energized a greater number of traditional voters, particularly committed Christians. Also, love him or hate him, Donald Trump has broadened the party's appeal to voters who don't typically take part in the caucus.

The most reasonable assessment has put total turnout right around 135,000, which would shatter the current record, which was set in 2008. The higher that number goes on Caucus Night, the better it will be for Trump and Carson.

Several of the campaigns are working their GOTV—get out the vote—efforts overtime right now. The average Republican who has yet to commit to caucus is probably getting two or three phone calls an hour during "prime time" hours (one reason why many Iowans are ready for the caucus to get here).

Based on all of the factors we've described above, here's what we expect will be the final vote tallies (rounded to the nearest 500 votes) on Monday night:

1. Donald Trump	46,000
2. Ted Cruz	45,500
3. Marco Rubio	9,500
4. Ben Carson	9,000
5. Rand Paul	8,500
6. Rick Santorum	5,000
7. Mike Huckabee	4,000
8. Jeb Bush	3,000
9. Chris Christie	2,000
10. Carly Fiorina	1,500
11. John Kasich	1,000

Double the Tickets

Traditionally, because there is typically three “lanes” in the Republican Party nomination race—establishment, Christian/conservative, outsider—and a much smaller pool of candidates, the conventional wisdom is that Iowa winnows the field down to three remaining viable candidates. With such a large field, and several of those in the very crowded establishment lane effectively bypassing Iowa, there is likely six tickets out of Iowa.

Based on the projections above, it is likely that Trump, Cruz, Rubio, Paul, Kasich and either Bush or Christie (but not both) will still have a fighting chance to compete in New Hampshire. Even if the others try to make a run for the Granite State, since it’s only seven days later, it’s highly unlikely they will gain the traction they need.

Huckabee has said he needs a “top three” finish in Iowa to

continue; that seems unlikely. Santorum's creditors, who have funded more than 90 percent of his campaign to-date, are likely to cut him off if he also fails to hit the top three in Iowa, too.

Carson's support in New Hampshire is minimal, and the voters of South Carolina will likely be influenced heavily by what they see in Iowa. And Fiorina's numbers are just as dreadful in New Hampshire and South Carolina as they have become in Iowa.

Democrats

Hillary desperately needs to win Iowa to avoid getting swept in the first three states. A loss in Iowa, no matter how close, followed by the very likely scenario of a Bernie Sanders blowout in New Hampshire, would hurt her greatly in South Carolina.

Sanders is far more organized in Iowa than Clinton, and has been working the state for months with door-knockers and phone calls. His populist message also appeals greatly to the 99-percenter crowd in the liberal bastions of eastern Iowa.

Clinton may be an Alinsky acolyte, but Sanders is a living, breathing socialist. He's incredibly popular in Johnson County, home to the University of Iowa, arguably one of the most liberal of the nation's liberal arts universities. The poll numbers are trending in his direction for a reason.

The question mark is what will become of the Martin O'Malley voters. It's impossible to consider he will be viable in any of the state's 1,682 precincts, but will they break for the communist sympathizer, break for the avowed socialist, or just walk away?

They can swing the final delegate counts regardless of what they do.

Right now, it would appear Sanders is on pace to receive about 51 percent of the delegates with about 2 percent going uncommitted, leaving Clinton with just 47 percent.