

Voting First: Iowa Offers a Diverse Range of Life Experiences

Iowans, as a collective, have a very diverse range of lifestyles and life experiences. Some of that is a result of Iowa's diversified "new economy" (see last week's installment for an explanation), some of that is geographical, and some is the result of culture.

Let's start with the state capital, Des Moines. In many ways, it's a microcosm of the state as a whole.

With a population of a little over 200,000—which grows to about a half-million when you factor in its many suburbs—which offers a mix of urban, suburban, and luxury experiences. There are even a few pockets of rural life in the metropolitan area.

This diversity makes Iowa, in general, knowledgeable about a whole host of issues now in the forefront of the national conversation.

- Economy—Because of its diversified economy, it feels—albeit at a smaller scale—all of the ups and downs of the U.S. economy. Iowa isn't just a leader in agriculture, but also in manufacturing, insurance, finance, and technology.
- Environment—As a result of its reliance for decades on the environment to produce food for the rest of the world, Iowans are keenly aware of environmental issues, regardless of their views on "climate change." The official title of the state's agriculture department is the Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship. It also has a separate Department of Natural Resources, which serves as the chief environmental protection agency in the state. Iowa also happens to be a leader in the production of renewable fuels and wind energy.

- Science—With two of the largest research universities in the world, the University of Iowa and Iowa State University, Iowans see up-close the amazing technological advances—in a wide array of applications—that result from scientific research and development. There are literally dozens of tech startups that call Iowa home.

- Crime & Justice—Iowans face many of the same challenges other parts of the country face with regard to its criminal justice system. Drugs, prison overcrowding, and broken families all contribute to the issue in the Hawkeye State just as much as they do anywhere else in the U.S.

- Health Care—Iowa ranks seventh nationally in hospitals per capita, and has some of the best medical facilities—big or small—in the country. The University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics is one of the top medical research facilities in the world. Des Moines also happens to be a key hub for the health insurance industry.

- Data Security—In recent years, Iowa has become home to a number of data centers for major online service providers, such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft. And, Iowans like to use social media just as much as anyone else. So, it's a very important issue to the state, just as it is for all Americans.

- Education—Iowa has always been a leader in education, but its test scores have dropped off considerably in the past two decades, which is a cause of great concern for the state's leaders. K-12 education spending is the largest component of the state's budget each year, and nothing gets an Iowan riled up more than matters that revolve around their children's and grandchildren's schooling. Iowa is also a leader in homeschool education, and is easily among the most educationally diverse states.

- Religious Liberty—Most Iowans consider themselves to be Christian, but are also tolerant of other religious views.

But, the state's population is also highly polarized, spanning the entire political spectrum, which has led to more than a few instances of religious liberty being trampled in the name of political correctness.

- **Social Issues**—Also as a result of the polarized political views of the general population, Iowa has found itself on the forefront of many social issues. Iowa City is home to one of the oldest abortion clinics in the country, and the Iowa Supreme Court can be blamed for getting the ball rolling on the issue of same-sex marriage.

- **National Defense**—Iowa's military participation, per capita, is slightly higher than the national average. The state is also home to a number of important military installations and defense contractors. Just over the Mississippi River from Davenport is the Rock Island Arsenal, and just over the Missouri River from Council Bluffs is Offutt Air Force Base (home of the U.S. Strategic Command).

- **Transportation**—The Union Pacific Railroad, one of many railroads in the state, runs its main east-west arterial line directly through the middle of the state. The nation's busiest east-west arterial highway, Interstate Highway 80, also intersects with the nation's busiest north-south arterial, Interstate Highway 35 at Des Moines. Trucking is a major industry, and the Des Moines International Airport has a steady stream of cargo flights taking off and landing every day. The state's agriculture industry also requires a large network of roads and bridges to get their products to the markets.

- **Immigration**—In the past, Iowa's agriculture industry has relied heavily on migrant workers, but technology is replacing many of those jobs. The state has opened its arms to many different nationalities of refugees in the past, as well. But due to its location along the main transportation corridors, it also has seen the darker side of the immigration issue,

including human trafficking and drug smuggling. Best estimates place the number of illegals in the state at around 70,000.

As you can see, there isn't a campaign issue the average Iowan isn't at least somewhat experienced with. This bank of knowledge and experience is useful in the presidential vetting process, and is a big reason why most candidates say they like coming to Iowa first in the race for their parties' nominations.

Next week, we'll look in deeper detail at the polarization of the Iowa political scene.