

Why Is This Guy the Most Important Candidate in Iowa?

When asked, “Who is the most important candidate in Iowa right now?” Some may think briefly on the names of the major contenders: Trump, Cruz, Carson, Rubio, Clinton, Sanders.

But, if one is going to be really honest, he or she would have to say Martin O’Malley.

Many voters don’t even know who he is, but the third-place also-ran could be the guy who decides who the Democrat presidential nominee will be. And he could do it without a single endorsement, and without winning a single delegate in the first-in-the-nation state.

As Charisma Caucus laid out for you a few days back, the winner of the Iowa Democrat Caucus is not decided by total votes cast, but rather by the number of delegates awarded. To win delegates, a candidate must be considered “viable” in that particular precinct.

O’Malley, the former Maryland governor, polls much higher in Iowa than he does in the rest of the country—a tribute to his retail politicking efforts in the Hawkeye State—but he’s still polling well below the “viability” threshold of most precincts: 15 percent. As a result, it is very likely, in almost every precinct in the state, that his supporters will have to choose another candidate.

And although pollsters say they can capture the likelihood that O’Malley supporters will break for Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders, the truth is, there is no way to know how every individual voter will break. And in many smaller precincts, a single voter can mean the difference between winning a delegate or coming up just short.

Some, who may be uninspired by either of the other options, may choose to just sit it out, too. "Uncommitted" is an option for those voters, as well, although it only means those delegates will be decided at the state convention. Some Iowans will stand on principles and refuse to vote for a candidate who wasn't their first choice.

For instance, in 2012, President Obama didn't win 100 percent of the caucus vote in Iowa, even though he didn't face any major challenger within the party. He got 98 percent of the delegates, while the remaining 2 percent were uncommitted.

This matters to Republicans, as well. Iowa Democrats have built up a reputation of being kingmakers for their party's presidential nomination. The winner on Monday night will likely be the Democrat nominee, and while Clinton and Sanders seem to be very similar, they are not identical.

Who the Democrat nominee is will greatly affect how the eventual Republican nominee will frame his general election campaign. It will determine what issues have prominence on the national stage, and, by extension, those that do not.

All of that could be decided by the supporters of a candidate who's currently polling in the single digits.