



(1) Flying the flag (2) Donald Trump's only appearance on the stump this year (outside a home in eastern Des Moines)



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Talk show

Pork chops and promises are part of the race for the White House at that livestock-laden oracle, Iowa State Fair.

By *Ed Stocker*
Photography *Lyndon French*

Kamala Harris, looking calm and collected, is being funnelled through the crowds at Iowa State Fair. Her campaign volunteers, wearing signature yellow T-shirts, are dotted among the throngs of people, while secret service men circle looking grumpy. Harris is on her way to what is arguably one of the most important election stops she will make in her bid to become the Democratic presidential nominee: the Iowa Pork Producers Association stand. Once there she will dutifully pose with a freshly grilled pork chop on a stick, before the melee of camera-wielding journalists and curious fairgoers continues to the next photo op.

Every four years, during the convoluted and costly presidential-election cycle, Iowa becomes the centre of the US political universe. Since 1972 it has been the first state in the union to vote in the primaries and caucuses process to elect the nominees for the Democratic and Republican parties (Iowans will hold caucuses on 3 February next year, even if the Republican one is a foregone conclusion given Donald Trump doesn't have a

serious challenger). That means that for this presidential cycle it's the Democratic pack that is on a mission to woo the maximum number of potential caucus-goers and get their respective campaigns off to a flying start; lose badly in Iowa and it can mean the end of the road.

Of the staggering 3,000 presidential events the state is expected to hold during the election cycle, Iowa State Fair – which takes place on the eastern edge of capital city Des Moines – is the cherry on the cake: a chance to make a bid for the votes of the rural US in the heart of the Midwest. It's a tried-and-tested piece of political theatre, paying deference to the pork producers in a state with more pigs than people. Democrats also realise the importance of crisscrossing Iowa with the 2020 presidential election in mind.

This is a key swing state, where Trump beat Hillary Clinton by nearly 10 percentage points in 2016, while the Democrats in turn flipped two House seats in the 2018 midterms. The eventual Democratic nominee will be hoping to turn the state blue once more.

“This doesn’t happen in Virginia, which is also a swing state,” says high-school teacher Shannon Roth, surveying the fair spectacle alongside her husband Brandon. “It’s because Iowa goes first and it’s all about momentum. You don’t need to win Iowa – but you need to do well.” Trump decided to skip the event this time but Republican longshot Bill Weld and every Democratic hopeful added the fair to their list of campaign stops (Beto O’Rourke subsequently cancelled to be in his hometown of El Paso in the aftermath of a mass shooting there).

The largest event of its kind in the country, Iowa State Fair welcomes some 1.1 million people over 11 days each year. Punters throng for agriculture events that include opportunities to milk a cow or assess the athletic qualities of a pig. Added to the mix are everything from rubber-chicken throwing competitions to dried-cowpat hurling, plus a beauty contest for men’s legs. Wafting over the entire proceedings is the smell of frying oil and the chance to munch on everything from bacon-wrapped ribs to corn dogs (a frankfurter on a stick that has been battered and deep fried), the latter Bernie Sanders’ fair food of choice.

The main reason that politicians are in town is the Soapbox stage run by the town’s newspaper of record, *The Des Moines Register*. Candidates are given 20 minutes to make their pitch on a tiny platform decked with a couple of hay bales, while the crowd is encouraged to be “Iowa nice” and not heckle too much.

The day before Harris’s appearance, Texan hopeful Julián Castro had been perched on stage. As he glistened in the sunshine he was perhaps slightly disappointed to have been allocated a 09.00 slot during the fair, when crowds are thinner than later in the day. “Talk to your friends, family, neighbours and co-workers,” he implored, aware of not just the



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Caucuses explained**

While most states hold primary elections to select nominees for each party, Iowa’s vote – like several others, including Nevada, Alaska and Wyoming – doesn’t involve a traditional ballot box. The Democratic party process sees people gather in large spaces to discuss candidates. Attendees then peel off into groupings for the vote. Any candidate coming in with less than 15 per cent is eliminated, with voters in those groupings given the chance to choose a new candidate who meets the threshold. Once the procedure is complete (it can take a couple of hours), tallies are taken and each candidate is allotted a proportional number of delegates. They go towards his or her bid to win the 1,885 delegate votes needed to clinch the party nomination – chosen at the party convention in July – in the first ballot. The Republican party caucus in Iowa, meanwhile, is a straw-poll system, with a candidate needing a total of 1,237 delegates to eventually win the nomination. Following Iowa’s caucuses on 3 February, the action moves to the New Hampshire primaries on 11 February.

(1) Bacon-wrapped rib, Mr President? (2) Democratic hopeful Kamala Harris (3) It’s a media blitz at the fair

people in the crowd but the potential for having his message replicated and amplified by both social media and the press ensemble. “There are probably about four Iowans in the crowd,” one cynical passer-by said. “The rest are press.”

What’s most fascinating about Iowa State Fair, and the Soapbox in particular, is the access. In a modern US election calendar of silky-smooth campaign roll-outs heavy on high-production TV advertisements and scripted town hall meetings, glad-handing at a state fair seems almost archaic. But many believe it offers a chance to make a more genuine impression. “Even if you’re not asking a question of presidential candidates, you could easily be 10 or 20 feet away from someone who might be the next leader of the United States,” says *The Des Moines Register*’s politics editor Rachel Stassen-Berger, who comperes on the Soapbox stage. “That’s a very heady experience for a lot of people.” It’s also a prime forum for some candidates, who might not resonate with Iowans from afar, to make their campaigns connect. As lawyer Lydie Hudson – who has driven four-and-a-half hours from her home in Madison, Wisconsin – puts it, it’s a chance to “see who’s authentic”.

While the fact that you can walk into Iowa State Fair without a bag check (the fair introduced random searches for the first time this year) and come within touching distance of some of the most powerful politicians in the US may seem bizarre, Iowan appearances are by no means restricted to the fairgrounds. Stassen-Berger says that candidates started to trickle through the state as early as last year and the paper, despite its modest circulation of just under 60,000, has allocated 14 reporters to follow them. Bernie Sanders dropped in on West Des Moines for 4 July celebrations this year, for example, while Democrats make regular stops in Clear Lake in the north of the state. “I can have handshakes and chats with candidates for six months living here,” says Jennifer Garst from Ames, north of Des Moines, who says she’s at the fair primarily for the weed identification competition. “A few months ago I had to run away from a candidate because I didn’t know his name.”





(x) Iowans strolling the fair's main drag

Runners and riders: top 10 Democrats*

1. **Joe Biden:** *Former vice-president*
 CALLING CARD: A senator from Delaware from 1973 until 2009, Biden made his biggest mark as the charismatic – and gaffe prone – VP under Barack Obama.
Polling: 32%

2. **Elizabeth Warren:** *Senator, Massachusetts*
 CALLING CARD: Former Barack Obama adviser who pushed for tougher Wall Street regulations after the 2008 financial crisis.
Polling: 19%

3. **Bernie Sanders:** *Senator, Vermont*
 CALLING CARD: Gave Hillary Clinton serious competition in the 2016 Democratic primary race.
Polling: 15%

4. **Kamala Harris:** *Senator, California*
 CALLING CARD: The former San Francisco District Attorney and Attorney General of California was the second African-American woman ever to win a seat in the Senate.
Polling: 7%

5. **Pete Buttigieg:** *Mayor, South Bend*
 CALLING CARD: The former US navy reserve officer is the first openly gay presidential candidate.
Polling: 5%

6. **Andrew Yang:** *Technology entrepreneur*
 CALLING CARD: A lawyer turned Silicon Valley entrepreneur, he's been a major proponent of universal basic income.
Polling: 3%

7. **Beto O'Rourke:** *Former congressman, Texas*
 CALLING CARD: O'Rourke almost beat Republican Ted Cruz in the senate race in Texas, a long-time red state.
Polling: 1%

8. **Cory Booker:** *Senator, New Jersey*
 CALLING CARD: Made a mark nationally as the savvy and vocal mayor of Newark from 2006 to 2013.
Polling: 1%

9. **Amy Klobuchar:** *Senator, Minnesota*
 CALLING CARD: A former corporate lawyer, Klobuchar is socially liberal.
Polling: 1%

10. **Julián Castro:** *Former mayor of San Antonio*
 CALLING CARD: The youngest member of Barack Obama's cabinet (he was 34 when he took the position of secretary of housing and urban development).
Polling: less than 1%

* Based on Quinnipiac University poll, 21 August



(1) Cowhides for sale at the fair (2) Democratic heavy hitter Elizabeth Warren speaking on the Soapbox stage (3) Warm welcome for Democrat Julián Castro (4) There's a definite message here (5) Getting around on the Skyglider chair lift

For some, Iowa has an outsized importance: a “flyover” state that is older and whiter than much of the rest of the US that suddenly becomes a coveted political prize. Independent pollster J Ann Selzer, who directs the much-watched Iowa Poll for the *Register*, argues that Iowans don’t vote according to identity politics (Barack Obama won the 2008 caucus and presidential election, while African-American candidates from Jesse Jackson to Alan Keyes have performed well here) and adds that the race has to start somewhere. “I will submit that Iowa may be the worst place to start,” she says. “Except for, perhaps, all the others.”

For proponents of the current system, Iowa allows for a level playing field: a state of just three million people where, due to the population size and lower media entry costs, candidates don’t need to spend California or New York-sized sums of cash to achieve equal penetration. “If candidates use Iowa well they’ll get better as a candidate,” adds Selzer. “Because when you’re seeing the same person and they’re asking the [same] question, you’d better get a better answer if it doesn’t go over the first time. If you’re just doing a TV ad you don’t necessarily get that kind of immediate feedback.”

While neighbouring Minnesota has switched to a primary for 2020 – a secret ballot vote in line with the majority of US states – there is little momentum for change in Iowa. At the Democratic caucus, registered party members gather in large spaces such as school gyms to openly discuss each choice before deciding on which candidate grouping to join (there will also be “virtual” caucuses over the phone for the first time next year). With several independents we spoke to at the State Fair confessing that having to register a party affiliation in order to vote puts them off, the numbers of those taking part in a caucus come February is expected to be low (just over 170,000 people turned out for the Democratic caucus in 2016).

Yet according to Selzer, Iowa is a state that “anyone can win”. And that, she says, means candidates aren’t about to ignore it any time soon. Meanwhile Iowa State

(I) Burlap sacks ahoy for a ride on the cunningly named Giant Slide, recently braved by presidential aspirant Pete Buttigieg



Fair gives them access to just the sorts of people who might normally avoid more staid political events. Selzer points to the fact that Bernie Sanders was polling at just 4 per cent in Iowa at the start of the 2016 race but ended up losing the caucus to Hillary Clinton by less than half a percentage point.

This time around – and with the Iowa State Fair corn kernel poll proving a highly unscientific barometer for who may be the eventual Democratic nominee – it remains almost impossible to predict whether Elizabeth Warren’s high-octane Soapbox speech (one of the biggest crowd-draws along with Bernie Sanders) or Kamala Harris’s pronouncement that “Dude gotta go!” will edge them over the line. Or whether Joe Biden’s gaffe at a Des Moines side event, in which he clumsily announced that “poor kids are just as bright and just as talented as white kids”, will derail his campaign. What’s certain, however, is that the baby-kissing, junk-food-gobbling, family-photo-op-coveting political juggernaut rolling through the state at the moment isn’t about to halt any time soon. As Trump-supporting fairgoer David Thurston puts it, “We give politicians their start.” — (M)

In your corner

With so many candidates left in the race to become the Democratic nominee, it’s still anyone’s guess who will ultimately go head to head with Donald Trump. But that hasn’t stopped Democrats from putting in an early endorsement for their favourite candidates; here are some of the advance approvals.

By Will Kitchens & Carlota Rebelo

Steve Adler

Mayor of Austin, Texas

Backing: Pete Buttigieg

“Mayor Buttigieg is someone who we want our children to emulate, someone who rallies our better souls. Above all he is a true executive and the entire country can benefit from his talent and skill.”

Eddie Bernice Johnson

Congresswoman, Texas

Backing: Joe Biden

“Now, more than ever, we need a leader who can bring people together and get our country on the right track.”

Don Beyer

Congressman, Virginia

Backing: Pete Buttigieg

“The Democratic party is as alive as it has ever been in my lifetime. Buttigieg is best able to harness that energy and address our national crisis.”

London Breed

Mayor, San Francisco

Backing: Kamala Harris

“I wholeheartedly endorse Harris because she is acutely aware of the work that needs to be done on behalf of this nation and she is prepared to lead.”

Salud Carbajal

Congressman, California

Backing: Beto O’Rourke

“I have known O’Rourke as both a colleague on the House Armed Services Committee and as a friend. He’s a compassionate leader, a thoughtful policymaker and a strong candidate.”

John Carney

Governor, Delaware

Backing: Joe Biden

“Biden’s a leader who the American people deserve and who can bring the country together.”

Tom Carper

Senator, Delaware

Backing: Joe Biden

“Joe has proven that you can disagree without being disagreeable, and that you can compromise on policy without compromising your principles.”

Raúl Grijalva

Congressman, Arizona

Backing: Elizabeth Warren

“Warren is a formidable champion of progressive values, ideas and principles who will lead us towards becoming a country that doesn’t kowtow to corporations and special interests but a nation that will bring real power to

workers, women, immigrants and the most vulnerable and marginalised.”

Jerry H Goldfeder

Election and campaign finance lawyer, New York

Backing: Pete Buttigieg

“Mayor Buttigieg is thoughtful and intelligent, and displays terrific leadership skills. The fact that he is younger is important – he would bring vibrancy to the presidency.”

Bill Pascrell Jr

Congressman, New Jersey

Backing: Cory Booker

“Senator Booker represents the best of New Jersey and the best of America.”

Peter Knowlton

President, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) union

Backing: Bernie Sanders

“UE endorsed Sanders because of his commitment to the working class and his bold plans for labour-law reform, Medicare for all and a Green New Deal.”

Bill Pascrell Jr

Congressman, New Jersey

Backing: Cory Booker

“Booker is a builder who believes the US’s greatest days are in front of us. So do I.”

Dean Phillips

Congressman, Minnesota

Backing: Amy Klobuchar

“Klobuchar is the bridge-builder that the US, and the world, needs now.”

Raul Reyes

USA Today Board of Contributors

Backing: Julián Castro

“Castro was the first candidate to unveil a detailed immigration plan. He did well in the debates. Unlike former presidential hopefuls Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, he is an authentic reflection of Hispanic Americans, who are overwhelmingly Mexican-American and largely progressive.”

Bobby Rush

Congressman, Illinois

Backing: Kamala Harris

“A Harris presidency would represent a complete repudiation of everything that President Trump has stood for.”

Libby SchAAF

Mayor, Oakland

Backing: Kamala Harris

“I am confident that Kamala will lead with integrity. I know that she will be able to take on Donald Trump and win.”