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On to New Hampshire

History says Iowa is not as vital for the GOP as the Granite State is

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

In less than 40 years, Iowa's caucus has gone from a little-noticed electoral oddity to one of the most important political events in the world, where fewer than 125,000 voters effectively fire the opening gun in the race to choose America's presidential nominees. Perhaps due to the extremely unsettled nature of the Republican presidential field, the results of this caucus were, shall we say, ambiguous at best, with front-runner Mitt Romney barely eking out a victory — an eight-vote margin! — over a surging Rick Santorum.

However, if history is any judge, an Iowa victory is not in itself of tremendous help to the ultimate Republican nominee. Iowa's general failure to push forward winning Republican candidates may come as a surprise, especially when you consider what a huge role the state's caucus has played for the Democrats.

Iowa first really put itself on the map, in fact, with Jimmy Carter's stunning victory — albeit a slightly compromised one: technically he came in second to “Uncommitted” — over a host of better-known names in 1976. Carter's Iowa success in the face of little national name recognition propelled the former Georgia governor into the White House. Since then, the winner of the Democratic caucus has almost invariably gone on to win the party's nomination — the only exceptions being in 1988, when Michael Dukakis came in third, and 1992, when the race was basically uncontested, due to the presence of Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin.

However, the Republican winners have enjoyed nowhere near the same clear, stark record. Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and John McCain all lost in Iowa before winning eventual nomination. Instead of clarifying a front-runner, Iowa traditionally has served to muddy up the GOP field, helping boost the candidacies of second-place finishers, such as Pat Robertson in 1988, Pat Buchanan in 1996 and caucus winner Mike Huckabee in 2000.

As can be seen from the placement of Reagan and Bush on the list of Iowa losers, Republicans can take considerable solace in this record. So far, the only winners of a contested Iowa caucus to triumph in November have been Carter, George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

In the case of the New Hampshire primary, to be held next Tuesday, the situation is almost the reverse. Other than Carter, no Democrat has won a contested New Hampshire primary and gone on to claim the White House since 1960, back when primaries and caucuses were mere proving grounds, and the party conventions were the only means of selecting the candidates. For Republicans, the Granite State has proven to be a pick-me-up for fallen front-runners. Reagan, George H.W. Bush and McCain all recovered from their Iowa defeats to win New Hampshire — and the party nomination. Both Reagan and Bush then, of course, went on to win the White House.

Unfortunately for the Republicans, New Hampshire also has some negative history to it. The state's promotion of Pat Buchanan in 1992, when he won an astonishing 38 percent of the vote against an incumbent president, to say nothing of his outright 1996 victory, only exposed the party's candidate to serious questions and ultimately forced him to take a more extreme

stand. The party also faced difficulty four years later when George W. Bush's 2000 race was complicated and very nearly derailed by McCain's success in New Hampshire.

This combined record of these two states also reveals one other critical fact: No non-incumbent Republican has ever won both Iowa and New Hampshire in the same year. Right now, it looks like Romney — who has a commanding lead in the Granite State, thanks in part to his status as a former Massachusetts governor — may well be the first. Romney holds a double-digit lead over his nearest rival in New Hampshire, and yesterday's endorsement by former primary opponent McCain should only help things. All this makes a last-minute uprising by Santorum (or the rapidly fading Newt Gingrich) appear, at the moment, incredibly unlikely.

However, Romney does have something else to count on: Since Carter's triumph, there has only been one candidate in either party to win the nomination without winning either state — Bill Clinton in 1992 (when Iowa was effectively conceded to Harkin). As with all of history, this could easily change this year, but it points to an unpleasant fact for the group of Republicans running: Until now, at least, a candidate doesn't have to win both states, but he'd better win at least one.

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