

Notes and photos from Iowa

Rohan Alexander

14 January 2016

Bernie Sanders seems quite reasonable for a revolutionary. An energetic man of 74, he spoke for an hour in Perry, Iowa, to a room of 300 from only a few lines of handwritten notes, and then took half an hour of questions. He does not have the same aura that surrounded, then, Senator Obama in his own Iowa battle with, then, Senator Clinton say those who saw both. Instead, Sanders has preternatural calm.



Photo of Bernie Sanders and audience at Perry, Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

So much calm, in fact, that some audience members who walked into the auditorium undecided walked out excitedly supporting Sanders' 'socialist' revolution. This includes, amongst other features, universal medical coverage, paid maternity leave and a \$15 hourly minimum wage. Few politicians that are against these policies get elected in Australia. Sanders will test whether a politician who supports them can get elected in the US.

Much has been made of Sanders' recent polling. But the Iowa Caucuses, especially for Democrats, are a test not just of support, but enthusiasm.

Participants do not vote, they caucus. This means they gather with their neighbours and publicly indicate their support of a candidate - sometimes by raising a hand, sometimes by moving to a side of a room. Supporters must resist peer pressure, and continue supporting their candidate even as others try to sway them. The quip that Democrats fall in love (while Republicans fall in line) is especially true of Iowa.

In addition to popularity, winning in Iowa requires organization and attention to detail. This is why the operatives of Secretary Clinton, who is 68, remain content despite the polls. Caucusing is onerous, especially for those with children or without transport, and campaigns must organise to ensure their supporters turn out. Clinton operatives are quick to mention their advantage in terms of this 'ground game'.

Clinton's ground game advantage is partly due to experience, but it is also due to money. Sanders unexpectedly raised \$33 million in the final quarter of 2015, which compares favourably with Clinton's \$37 million, but Clinton is supported by other sources of funds. Sanders supporters should hope that the poor advance work at the event in Perry, Iowa, itself (for instance, he had to repeatedly ask for water as none had been left on the podium, nearly losing his voice on occasion) are not indicative of broader organisational oversights.

Donald Trump is different. More than a thousand people watched Trump, who is 69, speak in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Almost all were white. Like Sanders, Trump spoke with few notes, but Trump's was a rambling style without substance or structure. For 40 minutes he verbally picked at this and that, discussing polls, as well as goading opponents via 'hypotheticals' and name calling. The audience was allowed no questions.



Photo of Donald Trump at Cedar Falls, Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

Trump does not campaign in poetry (although he did literally recite song lyrics) and he seems unlikely to govern in prose. His operatives were clad in ill-fitting suits and shiny leather shoes that looked newly purchased. These (usually white, young, male) Storm Trumpers were unfailingly polite, but nonetheless menacing. The loudspeaker request, moments before Trump spoke, to not physically harm protesters was chilling rather than reassuring, especially as it was followed by laughter from the crowd. The comfort of knowing that the Secret Service would have confiscated any knives or guns at the door was relative rather than absolute.



Photo of Donald Trump audience at Cedar Falls, Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

Trump's political inexperience seems matched by that of his supporters. His warm-up acts (one of whose qualification, as she explained, was being a runner-up on *The Apprentice*) spent considerable time explaining the importance of turning out to caucus on 1 February. Unlike the Democrats, Republican caucus-goers do not have to be as resistant to peer pressure - secret ballots are possible. But much of the crowd was new to the political process, and the organization required to have his supporters turn out, and in some cases, register as a Republican may be too much. If so, then it is likely that Senator Ted Cruz, a 45-year-old conservative Republican from Texas, will prevail.

For all their differences, it is the same anger that propels Sanders and Trump toward the top of the polls. And some likely caucus-goers spoke of

choosing between the two, which would jibe traditional political analysis. Neither candidate is an establishment member of their party - Sanders only joined earlier this year despite having generally voted with the Democrats as a senator, and Trump appears to swear allegiance only to himself. It is the feeling of being let down by the status quo that drives their popularity.

While Sanders' policies may not make much difference for today's caucus-goers, he speaks to their concern that their children's lives may not be better than their own. His is an appeal for hope. Trump's appeal is to those who feel they are worse off now than they were in the past. He gives them someone to blame, and provides solutions such as tariffs and walls, that some see as plausible.

The economic reality is that feeling worse off is reasonable for many Americans. After accounting for inflation the 2014 measure (which is the most recent one) of American household median income is lower than it was in 1997. And, as both Trump and Sanders accurately explained to their audiences, the 5 per cent unemployment rate that President Obama appeals to as a measure of his success is artificially low because some have given up looking for work.

The losing counterparty to the success of Sanders and Trump are candidates such as John Ellis Bush: Jeb!, who is 62. Like his Dad, Jeb! seems to have worked hard to come across as a nice guy, albeit one who is a little annoyed about having to speak to about 200 people in Coralville, Iowa. Being a Bush comes with expectations, but it does have its advantages, such as immaculate event advance work and plenty of press.



Photo of Jeb! advance work at Coralville, Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

Jeb! emphasises his commander-in-chief credentials. His older brother's war in Iraq may have ensured that the age of aggressive American imperialism is over for now, but Jeb! is still introduced by a retired Admiral who speaks of Jeb!'s leadership fighting hurricanes in Florida and neighbouring states.

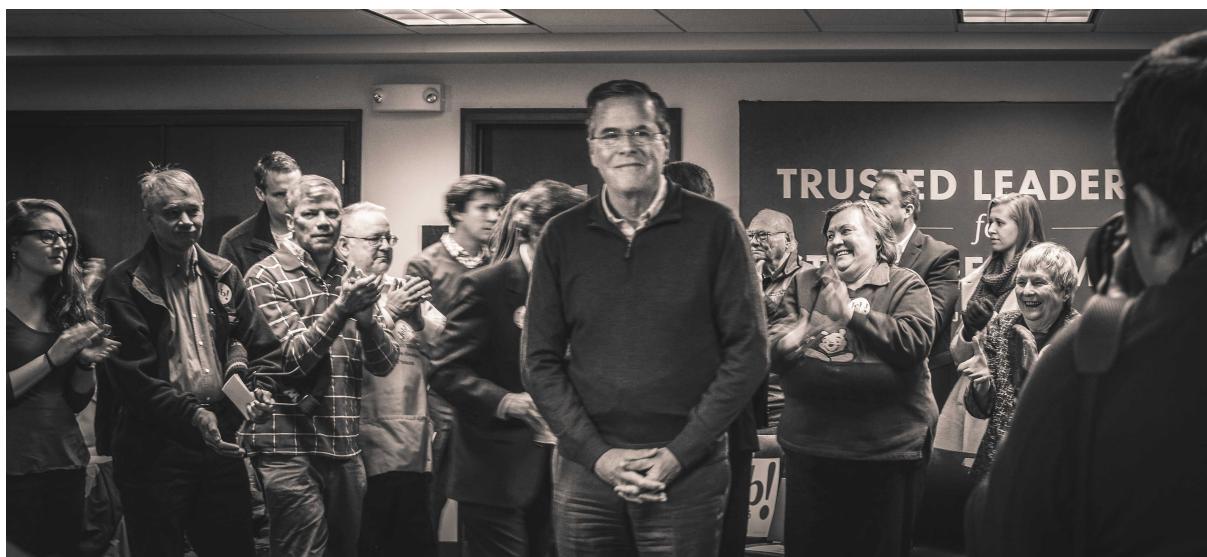


Photo of Jeb! and audience at Coralville, Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

The crowd was lively and Jeb! was frequently interrupted by cheers. He spoke without notes for about 30 minutes to a crowd that surrounded him

on all four sides. Maybe this is a plan to seem more approachable? Roaming microphones then let the audience ask questions for an hour or so. Jeb! worked hard to be nice, but occasionally lapsed and gently made fun of a questioner. However, climate change protesters and their questions were treated seriously and without any trace of contempt - Jeb! acknowledged that climate change is real and then quickly pivoted to the importance of economic growth.



Photo in Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

For all the well-acknowledged flaws of presidential systems in general, and the US one specifically, it has much to be proud of. Every candidate for their party's nomination will visit Iowa at some stage this week, many visiting multiple towns in a day. The scrutiny is intense. Iowa is a state of 3 million people, divided into 99 counties, and by 1 February, many candidates will have visited every county.



Photo in Iowa, by Monica Alexander.

If one were starting from scratch the Iowa Caucuses would probably not be the way to go. Iowa is not representative of the rest of the United States, and its outsized electoral importance skews national policy. But in their own way, the Iowa Caucuses are valuable. In general, the nature of the candidates seems to come through in the events because they are so intimate. Given that so much of leadership consists of reacting to unexpected events, and the difficulty that politicians tend to have implementing their desired policies, perhaps this is the most important consideration. It may be that, to rework Churchill's aphorism, the Iowa Caucuses are the worst way to select presidential candidates, apart from all the others.

There are many aspects of the United States that should not be considered, let alone encouraged, in Australia. But the rigorous examination of candidates facilitated by the Iowa Caucuses is something Australia should emulate.

Sincere thanks to Monica, Owen, and Callam for reading and improving these notes.