

Summary of Government and Elections in Iowa

Government, Elections and Laws

From its creation, the United States was different from its European predecessors. Its people were not united by a common heritage, ethnicity or even language. It was then, as it is now, a diverse nation of immigrants. What united it was a radical belief of the time, that “all men are created equal,” and that a free people could govern themselves and not descend into anarchy and chaos. For centuries, European nations had monarchs and aristocracies to maintain order and stability from generation to generation. The United States declared that its people would be governed only by their elected representatives. This belief in democracy, as one British commentator observed, created in the United States “a nation with the soul of a church,” united by a common belief.

Framework of U.S. Democracy

Three documents have been central to the essence of this perception. The Declaration of Independence was drafted by the Second Continental Congress in 1776 in Philadelphia to explain and justify why the colonies were separating themselves from the domination of Great Britain. Delegates from 13 colonies along the Atlantic Coast sent delegates to the convention in Philadelphia. They approved a resolution to separate themselves from Britain and appointed a committee of five men to draft an explanation to the world why the colonies were taking this step. The committee chose Thomas Jefferson of Virginia to write the original draft. He began with an explanation of why governments are established and then moved on to the injustices the colonies had endured by Parliament and the king. The document ends with the declaration that the colonies were from now on free from British rule. It was approved by the Continental Congress on July 4, America’s Independence Day. It declares that “all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” The nation has never fully lived up to that bold statement in practice, but it is the measure against which perceived injustices are measured.

The former colonies that defeated the British Empire needed to establish some legal framework that would bind them together for certain purposes but not become as oppressive as the monarch they had just defeated. At first, the Articles of Confederation provided a weak central government but pressure for a stronger authority developed quickly. In 1787, delegates to a Constitutional Convention began meeting to strike a balance between responsibilities left to the states and those delegated to the federal government.

Like the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution begins with a preamble that sets forth its purpose — “to form a more perfect union.” Federal authority is divided into three branches: the legislative branch that makes the laws; the executive that administers the laws; and the judicial that interprets the laws in cases of conflict. Central to the Constitution is the concept of checks and balances. Each branch has some authority to curb undue power exercised by the other two branches. Some duties were specifically delegated to the federal government and some specifically reserved to the states. The Convention specified that the plan would go into effect when nine states approved it. New Hampshire was the ninth in 1788, and Rhode Island was the last in 1790. George Washington was elected as the first president in 1788.

Ever concerned that the central government could abuse the rights of the people as the colonists felt Great Britain had done, Congress proposed a series of amendments to the Constitution that specifically spelled out restrictions on the federal government. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment, which states that individuals shall have the right to freedom of speech, religion, the press and assembly and the right to petition the government.

These three documents are central to how the United States presents itself to its own people and to the world. They have been copied by many emerging democracies around the world and show remarkable resilience over the 250 years since their adoption.

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Early American Political Parties

Iowa political parties, like those in other American states, respond to changes that are important to voters at the time of elections. Economic interests like taxes are always important, but sometimes moral or cultural issues like prohibition or bodily autonomy can also capture attention. The American federal system that links states to the national government also plays an important role in fostering the creation and continuation of the political party system.

Whigs and Democrats in Iowa

Before the Civil War, in Iowa's territorial and early statehood days, there were two dominant political parties: the Whigs and the Democrats. The Whigs tended to favor a more active government role in the promotion of business and economic development (building roads, promoting commerce and manufacturing, stronger currency) while Democrats favored the smallest government possible with lower taxes. However, both parties experienced internal divisions as the interests of eastern states and western states differed, and especially with growing tensions between the North and South over slavery.

In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the settlers in western territories to decide themselves whether they would be a slave or free state. This ended the provision of the Missouri Compromise that extended the line along the Missouri-Arkansas border as the western division between slave and free territories in the West. This opened the possibility of more slave territory and was strongly opposed by many in the North of both parties. Opponents of the new law in both parties broke ranks to form first the Free-Soil Party which quickly became the Republican Party. While the Democrats continued to hold support in both North and South, the Republican Party was based almost entirely in the North, including Iowa. The Civil War cemented Iowa's loyalty to the Republican Party that continued to produce election victories at the polls until the Great Depression in the 1930s. Following World War II, Democrats began gaining strength in the cities. Today, Iowa is a two-party state and has swung both ways in recent presidential elections.

Issue-Based Party Formation

While third parties have sometimes appeared on the Iowa ballot, none has earned a significant permanent place in the political landscape. In the 1870s and 1880s, tough economic conditions for Iowa farmers led to the formation of the Populist and Greenback Parties, which encouraged the regulation of railroads, corporations and other business interests thought to be practicing unfair policies toward farmers. They also wanted more money in circulation to make borrowing and repaying interest easier. The Prohibition Party focused narrowly on efforts to eliminate the sale of alcohol, but it competed for voters with the Republicans. In 1912, supporters of Teddy Roosevelt backed him in a race against the incumbent President William Howard Taft. This split the Republican vote and allowed the Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win the White House.

In early days, candidates were nominated by political conventions. Those who had influence within the party structure played the key roles in candidate selection. In the early 1900s, Iowa amended the constitution to select candidates by direct primaries where registered voters in the party held primary elections to name the candidates. A popular candidate could gain the nomination without the support of party leaders, though this rarely happened. In 1976, the Iowa caucuses moved front and center of the national stage as the first step in the presidential nominating process. Every four years, those testing the waters for a shot at the presidency come to Iowa, providing opportunities for local voters to meet personally with top national leaders. Local politicians may step in to support one candidate or another or may keep on the sidelines so they do not offend Iowa voters or other persuasions. Regardless, national politics becomes Iowa politics every four years.

Parties are loose coalitions of citizens who rally around candidates who best promote their interests. Today, more Iowans register as "no-party" or independent than either Republican or Democrat. Among active party voters as of



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July 2019, registered Democrats hold a slight lead over Republicans. Republicans hold margins in the rural areas, while Democrats have urban majorities.

Caucuses and Elections

For a hundred years after the Civil War, Iowa was a reliably Republican state. Only during the crisis of the Great Depression in the 1930s did Iowa show up in the Democratic column on election night. However, beginning the 1950s, the Democratic Party took on new life in the face of rural/urban divisions, the growing strength of labor unions, and attention to national issues like civil rights and the Vietnam War. Cities pushed for more equitable representation in the legislature against rural resistance.

Despite its smaller size and population, Iowa became very important in the election of a U.S. President. Each state has its own process for selecting delegates to national political conventions where the parties nominate their candidates. Iowa uses a caucus system. Members of each party meet together in local meetings called caucuses to select delegates to a county convention that chooses delegates to the district and state conventions. The state conventions are held in June and choose delegates to the national convention. Because the process takes many months, the local caucus has to meet in January or early February to get all the steps done. Because of that timing, the Iowa caucus becomes the first official step anywhere in the nation in selecting a president, and news reporters flock to the state to find out which candidates are ahead.

Candidates Find Democratic Foothold in Iowa

In 1972, Senator George McGovern gained national attention when he came out on top of the Iowa caucuses. In 1976, Jimmy Carter made a major effort to score well in Iowa. He did and went on to become the Democratic Party's nominee, and eventually, the president of the United States. After that, the Iowa caucus attracted national attention as candidates from both parties flocked to the state to make their case to Iowa voters in local cafes, church basements, and similar venues. The winner of the Iowa caucus doesn't always become the party's candidate, but a poor showing in Iowa often leads candidates to withdraw.

From its early years when Republicans almost always won most elections, Iowa now has two competitive parties. Nevertheless, Iowa voters tend to keep incumbents in office. Harold Hughes, a Democrat, and Robert Ray, a Republican, both won re-election to the governorship several times, and Terry Branstad became the longest serving governor in U.S. history. Charles Grassley and Tom Harkin represented different parties but both hung on to their U.S. Senate seats through multiple elections. The majority in the legislature, however, has shifted numerous times, sometimes even split between the Iowa State Senate and the Iowa State House.