

Good surveys will run pilot tests and conduct interviews to determine common meanings and peg responses to the survey to reality.

Can the mere existence of a poll be a problem?

It can too early give the perception that the election — or anything else — has already been determined. A vote is different from a poll. And I think polls can really hammer some of the lesser-known candidates, because they can't get a foot in the door to raise money or get media coverage.

So what good is a poll, anyway?

It does give a good overview of a situation. It can help people ascertain where they are in context to other things or people, and it can help make sense of reams of individual responses.

Caucusing for Candidates

Scott Brennan '85 is the chair of the Iowa Democratic Party, and he says Iowa remains an ideal place for candidates to jump-start their campaigns.

The Iowa caucuses are first, but why else are they a big deal for presidential candidates?

Presidential candidates understand the value of retail politics. Actually going through the crucible of [visiting] small towns, going to events, and meeting people is really important. You can't just pay for 30-second campaign ads. And it's manageable: it would be impossible to campaign in California the same way you can campaign in Iowa.

What's wrong with California?

Nothing, but there's a chance for anyone to win the Iowa caucuses. You don't have to be the wealthiest to win Iowa, you just have to get out here and do your work.

But some suggest that Iowa doesn't necessarily represent the American population as well as other states with more diversity.

Iowa's diversity has increased in the past decade, particularly with the Hispanic and Asian population. But candidates tell me that Iowans tend to be a bit more pointed in their questioning. I'm not presuming to say that Iowans are smarter or better read, but they have been through the process before.

Do candidates have to address topics in Iowa that aren't front-burner issues elsewhere?

I think every state has their own parochial interests, and for Iowans, ethanol is that big issue. But we're also talking about the three big issues that everyone is talking about: the plan for Iraq, health care, and immigration.



Recently, other states have been angling for a way to move up their primaries and caucuses so they can have the kind of influence that states like Iowa and New Hampshire do. What are your thoughts on that?

Well, I suppose I'm biased. Iowans like having the first caucus, and I think it's something that we do well. We take our role very seriously.

Staying Home on Election Day

If you go to the polls and cast your vote in November, are you doing your civic duty — or just wasting your time? Economics Professor Mark Montgomery thinks it's a little bit of both.

We've all learned that voting is one of our responsibilities as citizens. How would an economist frame the question of whether or not to cast a vote?