The Whole World Was Watching … Again: Indiana’s 2008 Presidential Primary

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Hoosiers do not usually see presidential campaigns in person. We know from media coverage that they are taking place in other states, but we know just as surely that candidates for the presidency do not come to Indiana, with the occasional exception of a trip to raise money. The Indiana primary takes place in May, much too late to make a difference in most presidential nomination races. Presidential candidates generally see no reason to visit in the fall campaign, either. Republican candidates have grown accustomed to winning the state’s electoral votes whether they travel to Indiana or not, as has happened in every election since Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory in 1964. For the same reason, it has long seemed pointless for a Democratic presidential candidate to waste his or her time trying to change that pattern.

Hoosiers pay a price for such assumptions. Presidential campaigns serve a number of purposes in addition to selecting a winner. A

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presidential candidate's visit generates real excitement in an area. People who have the chance to see a candidate in person are more likely to feel an emotional connection to the campaign. Knowing that Barack Obama has visited a local tavern or that Hillary Clinton is speaking at a nearby arena builds a link between citizens and the candidate that goes beyond what they see on the news. When people feel such a connection—as long as it does not become fanatical—their interest is engaged and they learn more readily about issues, politics, and the candidate him- or herself.

The 2008 Indiana primary sparked a greater degree of such involvement than this university town has seen in three decades. Most college-age adults' political involvement is low. They stand on the cusp of dramatic changes in their lives—graduation, the hope of a job, a family, a home, a mortgage—most of which are far more engaging than the prospect of learning about presidential candidates. Their addresses typically change from year to year, so the volleys of direct mailings that older adults come to expect do not reach their mailboxes or even their e-mail inboxes. Their favored television stations—MTV and, yes, Nickelodeon—carry little political advertising; campaigns know that people under the age of 25 turn out to vote at only about two-thirds the rate of people over the age of 65, and so do not place TV ads on the stations these young people watch. Finally, Indiana's primary takes place a week after final exams have ended at IU; most students have left town before the polls open.

Imagine our surprise, then, on the mid-April day in 2008 when vans sponsored by Students for Obama began pulling up in front of the Indiana Memorial Union, offering free rides to anyone who wanted to take advantage of the new opportunity to vote in person during the month before Primary Day. Barack Obama himself had visited town the week before, stopping at Nick's English Hut for a quick photo opportunity and exciting local interest. The number of students voting early soon proved so substantial that County Clerk Jim Fielder decided to allow early voting in the Union itself on two additional afternoons. On April 25, Hillary Clinton spoke at IU's Assembly Hall; five days later, Obama was back, this time at Assembly Hall as well. The same experience occurred all over the state, prompted by hundreds of campaign stops: Hillary Clinton's visit to a Kokomo high school gym; Chelsea Clinton's visit to Salem; Bill Clinton's visits to more than 100 sites, ranging from Plymouth High School to a Munster steel company, a Kendallville firehouse, and a rock concert in Indianapolis.
Old Indiana hands recall the 1968 Democratic primary as the most recent instance in which Indiana's presidential primary affected the nation as a whole.¹ New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy had announced in mid-March that he would challenge President Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination as a protest against Johnson's policy of escalated American involvement in the Vietnam War. Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, also an opponent of the war, had previously entered the Democratic race. At that time, state party leaders—not primary voters—selected most of the delegates to the presidential nominating convention. Underdog candidates would often run in a few selected primaries to demonstrate their appeal. John F. Kennedy, for instance, had entered the 1960 West Virginia primary to prove to Democratic Party leaders that a Catholic could win in a heavily Protestant state. In 1968, after Johnson's March 3 withdrawal from the race, Robert Kennedy chose Indiana as the first state primary in which to test his new candidacy. He hoped to show that Indiana's working-class whites—later termed “Reagan Democrats”—were increasingly opposed to the war and preferred Kennedy to McCarthy as their standard-bearer. Johnson's successor as the candidate of the party establishment, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, was not on the ballot in Indiana. But Democratic governor Roger Branigin ran as a “favorite son,” a means by which a state leader could keep the state's delegates unified until a key moment at the convention when he or she could swing the state's delegate votes to one presidential candidate in return for some consideration for the state, such as policy commitments or pork barrel projects.

Early one evening in April 1968, Kennedy was on his way to speak at an outdoor rally in a predominantly black area of Indianapolis when he heard that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot to death in Memphis. Against the urgings of the police and his own staff, Kennedy continued on to the rally, where he broke the terrible news to the waiting crowd. He spoke movingly of his shock and grief, of his own family's losses, and of the fact that his brother John's killer had also been a white man. He implored the crowd to forsake violent retribution in favor of love, compassion, and a desire for justice. Indianapolis was one of the few large cities in the United States to escape the violence that erupted from outraged black Americans that night. And against all expectations, Kennedy

¹See Ray E. Boomhower, Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary (Bloomington, Ind., 2008).
beat the party establishment and won a plurality of votes in the primary—a month before he, too, was assassinated.

The tumult of the 1968 nomination race continued into the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Kennedy and McCarthy supporters protested bitterly that by nominating Humphrey, the party’s leaders were not listening to the demands of rank-and-file Democrats, especially regarding the Vietnam War and civil rights. Party leaders negotiated a fragile and temporary peace by promising a reform commission—later known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission after its two successive chairs—that would open up the nominating process to greater participation by grassroots activists. The commission produced a series of rules changes in time for the 1972 Democratic nomination race: requiring the majority of convention delegates to be chosen by rank-and-file Democrats in primaries and participatory caucuses, and translating those choices into convention delegate seats according to a system of proportional representation.2

Increasingly, state Democratic parties chose to hold primaries to select their convention delegates, because these events were more likely than caucuses to attract media coverage and, consequently, voters. The Iowa caucuses (by state law, the first delegate selection event in the nation each election year) and the New Hampshire primary (also by state law, the first primary) usually have received the most attention, a fact not lost on Democrats elsewhere. By the 1990s, so many other states had moved their delegate selection events closer to the dates of Iowa’s and New Hampshire’s that the primary season was becoming highly “front-loaded.”3 Indiana, however, did not follow suit; its primary continued to be scheduled in early May, just as it had been in 1968. Indiana’s resistance to front-loading was driven as much by state party leaders’ concern about the unpredictable choices made by new voters drawn into an early primary by a lively presidential race as it was by any innate

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2If a presidential candidate received 52 percent of the votes in the state or congressional district, he or she would receive 52 percent of the delegates from that state or district, not 100 percent. Candidates other than the frontrunner would still have a chance of winning delegates in each primary, encouraging more candidates to remain in the race longer. On proportional representation, see Marjorie Randon Hershey, *Party Politics in America* (New York, 2009), 32. On the Democratic reforms more generally, see Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, 70-71; and Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976).

hostility toward change. Thus the turbulence of the 1968 Indiana primary led to party reforms that ultimately placed the Indiana primary so late in the nominating season that few noticed it—even in Indiana—until May of 2008.

Early in the year, during the Democratic nomination race, first-term Illinois Senator Barack Obama took an unexpected lead over the early frontrunner, New York Senator (and former First Lady) Hillary Clinton. Obama won the Iowa caucuses, lost the New Hampshire primary, but regained his footing with a string of primary and caucus wins in February. Obama’s lead, though persistent, was small; the Democrats’ proportional representation rule meant that although both candidates were winning states by lopsided margins, each was continuing to win enough delegates in each state to closely balance the other’s delegate totals.

By early March, however, Obama’s storied success as the first black American with a genuine chance of winning a presidential nomination had begun to fade. In the Ohio primary, Obama lost by 8 percent; the seven-week wait until the Pennsylvania primary—the first extended pause in a lightning-fast campaign—permitted commentators to dissect the meaning of that loss. They concluded that Obama lacked sufficient appeal for working-class whites, who could be swing voters in the general election.4 Other events hit the Obama campaign hard as well. Much was made of Obama’s remark at a private fundraiser in California that small-town voters, bitter about their economic misfortunes, clung for reassurance to religion and guns. Clinton cited this impolitic remark to charge that Obama was an elitist in populist clothing. Then Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., Obama’s longtime preacher in Chicago, was found to have made a number of incendiary statements, including that the U.S. government bore partial responsibility for the 9/11 terrorist attacks and for the spread of AIDS to black Americans. Obama repudiated Wright, but not immediately. Although Obama’s subsequent loss in Pennsylvania had long been anticipated by polls, it capped one of the worst weeks of Obama’s nomination race. He continued to lead Clinton in pledged delegates by about 155 (out of 2831 chosen at that point) and was gaining in

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superdelegate commitments, but his failure to “close the deal,” in Clinton’s phrase, was becoming the main storyline of the campaign.

The next two major delegate selection events were held in Indiana and North Carolina two weeks later, on May 6. Most polls showed Clinton leading in Indiana by about 5 percentage points. That was understandable; demographically (especially in terms of income, industrial makeup, and race), Indiana resembled Ohio and Pennsylvania, and a number of leading Indiana Democrats endorsed Clinton, including Sen. Evan Bayh and State Democratic Party Chair Dan Parker. And Obama’s chances suffered again when Rev. Wright unapologetically repeated his controversial claims at a press conference soon after the Pennsylvania vote.

The momentum had swung toward Hillary Clinton. Analysts suggested that if Clinton won by at least 10 percent in Indiana, and came close to winning in North Carolina—where Obama was clearly favored—then her candidacy could possibly turn the tide in superdelegate support. But if Obama won North Carolina handily and just came close to a win in Indiana, Clinton’s hopes for the nomination would be dashed. Clinton supporter James Carville, speaking on TV’s “Larry King Live,” pronounced that “Indiana’s the tie-breaker.” A May 2008 story in The Economist carried a similar analysis:

Should Mrs. Clinton stumble in Indiana, her campaign will almost certainly be doomed. Her recent comeback critically depends on maintaining the momentum generated since her breakthrough in Ohio on March 4th, which has allowed her continually to close the gap in the popular vote between her and Mr. Obama. If that process goes into reverse, she will lose the most convincing argument that she is able to deploy to the wavering superdelegates who will determine the final outcome because the tally of elected delegates is so finely balanced. But this time there are some risks for Mr. Obama as well. He badly needs a resounding success to counter a period of well over a month in which the news has been unremittingly bad for him.1

In the end, Hillary Clinton won Indiana with only 51 percent of the vote. Her support came disproportionately from whites (especially white women), those over the age of 50, non-college graduates, gun owners, moderate to conservative Democrats, and those feeling the impact of the economic decline—though the differences by education and income were not as marked as they had been in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Obama voters tended to be under 40, college-educated, African American, those with no religious affiliation, and those who considered themselves very liberal. Geographically, Obama won northwest Indiana and Marion County; Clinton won everywhere else.

There was some crossover voting in the Indiana primary; about 10 percent of Democratic primary voters identified themselves in exit polls as Republicans. Although radio commentator Rush Limbaugh claimed to have affected the Indiana results with his “Operation Chaos” (urging Republicans to vote for Clinton and thus prolong the Democratic race) these crossover voters divided their votes in almost the same proportions as Democratic voters did. Indiana’s 72 pledged delegates are allocated proportionately: 47 based on the outcome of each congressional district and the remaining 25 on the basis of the statewide results. The close outcome of the 2008 Indiana primary produced 38 delegates pledged to Clinton and 34 for Obama.

In part because Clinton did not do as well in Indiana as she had in Ohio and Pennsylvania, Indiana was perceived as nearly a loss for Clinton; it undercut her claim that she was clearly the more electable candidate in big states. The Clinton campaign’s disappointment was deepened by Obama’s convincing win in North Carolina, 56 to 42 percent. In the days following the primary, enough superdelegates declared their intention to vote for Obama that he finally took the lead in superdelegates and in pledged delegates. The media concurred that as a result of Indiana’s vote, Senator Clinton had lost the nomination race, and it was time for Obama to turn his attention to the presumptive Republican nominee, Sen. John McCain. The Washington Post reported, for instance, that “in a campaign of near-deaths and

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7It is impossible to prove if voters were responding to Limbaugh’s appeal, but given the distribution of their votes, Limbaugh’s effect appears to have been negligible.
premature obituaries, the night of May 6 will be remembered inside Hillary Rodham Clinton’s campaign as the moment it really ended.”

The unprecedented media attention to the Indiana primary gave Americans a chance to learn more about the state of Indiana than they would otherwise have known. Although early inquiries from members of the national press corps revealed a rather limited familiarity with what some have termed “flyover country” (one news analyst from a major newspaper asked an Indiana University professor to confirm that Indiana “is a farm state, right?”), by the time of the primary at least some reporters showed much more detailed knowledge about the various parts of the state. The American and international press paid attention to some state and local political leaders for the first time. Media people spent at least a few hours in Indiana prior to the election, and stories about the primary were carried in outlets as diverse as the Kyodo (Japan) News Service, Agence France Presse, and Rosbalt (a Russian independent media outlet). The resulting rise in Indiana’s public profile was undoubtedly worth even more to the state than were the many dollars spent by media people covering the campaign.

Another intriguing outcome of the presidential primary was its effect on state and local races. Turnout in previous Indiana primaries had been slight, so state and local contests had been decided largely by party activists and other stalwart party voters. But in a year when about 200,000 Hoosiers registered to vote for the first time—most because they wanted to vote in the presidential race—these state and local candidates faced the prospect that their races could be decided by people who knew almost nothing about them, including crossovers from the other party.

Perhaps the most notable result of the primary’s starring role was its impact on Hoosier political involvement. In the 2008 Indiana pri-

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9On the other hand, National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” ran an interview with a hair stylist in a small Indiana town who commented in hushed tones, but with an obvious effort at tact, “Well, if Obama became president, it might be a problem in international negotiations that he has been, you know, a practicing Muslim.”

10Though there are no data to substantiate it, many observers speculated that former U.S. Representative Jill Long Thompson’s gubernatorial campaign got a boost from the large number of primary voters mobilized by the Obama campaign in the state.
mary, 39 percent of registered voters went to the polls, up from just 21 percent in 2004. There were 173,525 absentee ballots cast, compared to 61,345 in 2006.¹¹ To the extent that citizens of Indiana—including even university students—were stimulated to pay attention to national politics by the unexpected prominence of the Indiana primary, the state will have received a valuable boost in continuing citizenship education.