

HOW OUR POLITICAL SAUSAGE IS MADE

“President Bush should be proud,” said a lady standing next to me at last week’s caucus.

She was referring to the impressive turnout that included the two of us and 717 other Democrats who were crowded into the City High School cafeteria. It’s a good thing the Iowa City Fire Marshall wasn’t among them (as far as I know) or he might have closed the place down.

This was my third caucus. I originally started going to them eight years ago out of a desire to see firsthand how our political sausage is made. If you’ve never attended one, it can best be described as good-natured chaos - the recent New Year’s Eve celebration in Times Square probably had more structure and decorum.

I can see why the word “arcane” pops up frequently in references by the national news media. Arcane can be defined as “known or understood by only a few.” My guy (Edwards) nosed out Hillary statewide, but she somehow ended up with more Iowa delegates. I’m sure somebody knows why (maybe it’s the same person who can explain how Gore lost to Bush in ’00 despite getting more popular votes), but don’t ask me.

I was surprised to find a variety of food provided by the different candidates’ camps. I peeled the Edwards sticker off my shirt long enough to cruise the other tables to see if I’d be tempted to change my affiliation. Every candidate had something – sub sandwiches, potato chips, bottled water, pizza, cookies or fruit juices. Edwards had freshly baked brownies and bundt cakes, so I decided I was in the right place.

I’m sure that if we could figure out how to make beer available at these things, we’d have even better attendance (not to mention livelier discussions).

I don’t know what it was like in the other caucus rooms, but it was really hot in ours. Every human being is a mobile heat generator. According to

my exhaustive research (defined as five minutes of Googling), people engaged in moderate activity - such as milling around aimlessly - generate over 400 Btu/hr, which is about half that of an open candle flame.

It didn't take long for the people on the non-window Obama side of the room to start shouting for the Edwards and Clinton people to open the windows. We told them that if they changed candidates their problem would be solved, but no takers. The almost comical result of open windows in sub-freezing weather was a continuum of attire ranging from parkas and fur-lined boots near the windows to T-shirts and halter tops at the other end of the room.

One guy who supported former U.S. Senator Mike Gravel (Alaska) asked our precinct chair where the Gravel people were congregating. He was told that it was wherever he happened to be standing – he was the only one.

After the first round of voting, the Richardson, Dodd, Kucinich and Biden people didn't have viable groups so they banded together and proudly declared their viability. A few minutes later they realized they couldn't agree on just one candidate to support, so they all wandered off in different directions.

There was a college-age guy there who was a volunteer for Hillary - he had traveled here from New York to help at our caucus site. He was totally clueless. After the first round of voting, Hillary was a few votes short of being viable and he was almost in tears. I'm sure he never thought he'd travel all that distance to spend the evening supporting a nonviable candidate.

While someone was looking for a paper bag for him to breathe into - and at LuAnn's urging - I abandoned an already-viable Edwards and cast the deciding 108th vote for Hillary. What the heck. I was extremely popular among her supporters for about 20 seconds ("Here, have a cookie!"), until a bunch of disenfranchised caucusers from various other nonviable candidates threw in as well.

I read somewhere that over \$19 million was spent in Iowa by Obama, Clinton and Edwards alone, which represents almost \$90.00 for every Iowa democrat who caucused. I'd rather have taken mine in small bills, but nobody asked me. Certainly, nobody in this state has felt underloved or underappreciated in the last couple of months, as evidenced by my daily mailbox influx of processed dead trees.

I hope you enjoyed the circus while it was in town, because there's never any guarantee that it will be back. I hope it will, because I'm looking forward to giving the crank handle on our political meat grinder a few more turns.