

## Iowa Politics Roundup: State Kicks Off 40 Days of Voting

Written by Lynn Campbell  
Friday, 24 September 2010 10:20

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Iowa Democrats are targeting those who don't normally vote in midterm elections along with first-time voters who supported Barack Obama in 2008 in the push for early voting, which began Thursday in Iowa and lasts for 40 days.

"Tomorrow is Election Day in Iowa," Iowa Democratic Party Chair Sue Dvorsky declared Wednesday. "Iowans will be able to vote early; they'll be able to vote by mail; they'll be able to vote early in person at their auditor's offices. We have been preparing for Election Day tomorrow since last year, and we are very excited to get ready to kick it off."

As of Friday, Iowa Democrats had requested more than twice as many absentee ballots as Republicans – 40,632 compared with 16,286 – according to the Iowa secretary of state's office. There have been a total of 69,376 requests for absentee ballots.

Dvorsky said Democrats also have a 55,000-voter registration edge over Republicans.

"But we also know that it is the independents ... who will swing this election, and so that is who we have been targeting," she said. "We know that our Democratic base will come out and vote. ... So we have really made sure that we have contacted those voters who typically may not be as willing or ready to vote in a midterm election."

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Meanwhile, the Republican Party of Iowa on Thursday launched its own statewide effort to encourage Iowans to take advantage of early-voting opportunities.

“Iowans don’t have to wait until November to change the direction of this state and this country,” said Republican Party of Iowa Chair Matt Strawn. “It’s time to return principled, conservative leadership to the state of Iowa, and that starts today with electing Republican candidates. We have 40 days to bring competent leadership back to Iowa.”

Strawn said traditional absentee voting is but one part of the GOP’s voter-contact program.

“For the first time, Iowa Republicans have worked with all 99 counties to develop early-voting locations all across Iowa as the next 40 days will be a series of election days,” he said.

### **DeCosters Testify About Salmonella, Egg Recall at Congressional Hearing**

Austin “Jack” DeCoster, the owner of Wright County Egg, on Wednesday told members of the U.S. House Oversight & Investigations subcommittee that he was horrified to learn his eggs may have made people sick and has prayed several times a day for improved health for those affected.

“Over the years we have grown to be pretty big in producing eggs,” DeCoster said. “Unfortunately we got big quite a while before we stopped acting like we were small. What I mean by that is we were big before we started adopting sophisticated procedures to be sure we met all of the government requirements.”

DeCoster has been identified as a “habitual violator” of environmental regulations by the state of Iowa and has been assessed \$219,000 in civil fines. But DeCoster said for about 10 years now, the company has focused on meeting government requirements, including when it comes to fighting salmonella.

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“With all of these systems, we have made important strides, and I am proud of our work,” DeCoster said. “Still, these challenges never stop.”

Peter DeCoster, the CEO of Wright County Egg and Jack DeCoster’s son, blamed the conditions at the company’s hen houses on inclement weather in Iowa over the past year. He said the local co-op had gotten behind on removing manure from buildings, and he believes the salmonella outbreak was due to meat and bone-meal ingredients in feed given to the hens.

The younger DeCoster also said salmonella is a fact of life in the egg industry, and noted that’s why egg cartons carry safe-food-handling instructions.

“As an Iowan, I’m offended by the claim from some in the egg industry that consumers are somehow responsible for getting sick because they didn’t properly cook their eggs,” said U.S. Representative Bruce Braley (D-Waterloo). “Now is the time for accountability, not blame-shifting.”

U.S. Representative Henry Waxman (D-California), chair of the House Committee on Energy & Commerce, said he’s skeptical that feed was the problem and noted that the DeCosters have had problems for more than 30 years, including in states other than Iowa. More than 20 years ago, the state of Maryland ordered the DeCosters to stop selling eggs in the state.

“You’ve claimed that you’re going to modernize and clean up your facility, but it doesn’t appear that you’ve modernized and cleaned up your facilities,” Waxman said. “It sounds like to me that both of you are refusing to take responsibility for a very poor facility.”

Both Peter and Jack DeCoster said they feel bad about how the egg recall has affected the industry.

A former Iowan, Carol Lobato, contracted salmonella and testified before the congressional subcommittee. Lobato, 77, was raised on a chicken farm in Iowa and spent five days in the hospital suffering from septic shock, vomiting, and diarrhea. Doctors told her she would have died without aggressive intervention.

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Braley and other subcommittee members said the sickening of more than 1,600 people from salmonella highlights the need for the U.S. Senate to act on food-safety legislation.

“The House passed food-safety legislation late last year that would give the FDA [Food & Drug Administration] authority to order mandatory food recalls, impose fines for food-safety violations, and require more-frequent food-facility inspections,” Braley said. “It would also give the FDA access to company records in the case of emergency. These are important first steps to make sure our food supply is safe.”

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### No Big 2012 Clues in Palin Speech at GOP Fundraiser

Former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin didn't drop any hints on a potential 2012 presidential run during comments last Friday to about 1,500 at the Republican Party of Iowa's Ronald Reagan Dinner in Des Moines.

The closest Palin came to the subject was at the beginning of her speech, saying her husband Todd told her Friday morning not to go jogging outside because someone might deliberately misinterpret the activity.

“I guarantee you: If anybody spots you in the tennis shoes ... they're going to say, ‘Palin, in Iowa, decides to run,’” Palin said her husband told her.

Palin, who was last in the state in December for a book-signing in Sioux City, spoke for about 30 minutes at the event but didn't take questions from the media. Republican Party of Iowa spokesperson Danielle Plogmann said this was the largest and most successful Reagan Dinner since it began in 2001, with more than \$100,000 raised. Tickets were \$100 each.

“It is time to take our country back,” Palin said, calling for Republicans to set aside differences

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and unite for the general election in November.

She also told the assembled crowd it was time to “elect strong leaders who aren’t afraid to shake it up.”

Palin also went after Obama, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, saying they have failed to stimulate the economy, passed the “mother of all unfunded mandates” through the health-care-reform law, and have gone soft on foreign-policy issues.

Mike Beecher of West Des Moines said he would support Palin in 2012, and he believes she will run. He also said he’s okay with Palin not making many appearances in Iowa at this point and described it as “pacing herself.”

“I came away a lot more impressed than I thought I would,” Beecher said of Palin’s speech.

Darlene Blake, a candidate in House District 61, said Palin was charming, showed common sense, and brought energy to the state. She also said she understands that Palin is in high demand and can’t spend all her time in Iowa.

“She is busy,” Blake said. “You’ve got to know when to start building your campaign or else it will eventually fizzle out. I think with any candidate, they can come and test the waters. Ones that don’t get a good feeling won’t be back.”

### **Candidates Focus on Job-Creation as Unemployment Holds Steady**

Candidates this week made sure voters were aware of what they’re doing to improve the economy.

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Governor Chet Culver this week appeared on CNBC to provide his reaction to the president's jobs plan and talked about Iowa's economic successes. Culver also unveiled his own job-creation strategy if elected to a second term, calling for further efforts to add "green collar" jobs in the state, continued research and development through the Iowa Power Fund, and continued investments at regents institutions and community colleges.

The campaign of Republican gubernatorial nominee (and former Governor) Terry Branstad this week released a new TV ad called "Let's Work," which highlights his plan to bring 200,000 new jobs to Iowa. He called for opening an Expanded Trade Agency and a South Korea trade office for the state. And Branstad said if he's elected, he'll create a staggered four-year rolling sunset of all state regulations affecting job creation and retention. He would also require that any new state law or rule have an accompanying statement showing its impact on small businesses and jobs.

Iowa Workforce Development announced this week that Iowa's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate held steady at 6.8 percent in August, still half a percentage point greater than the 6.3-percent unemployment rate in August 2009. The U.S. unemployment rate last month was 9.6 percent.

"The August jobs numbers show that modest improvement has occurred over the past year," said Elisabeth Buck, director of Iowa Workforce Development. "Corporate balance sheets are in much better shape than they were a year ago, making it more likely that hiring will strengthen in the months ahead."

The number of Iowa residents estimated as unemployed increased to 114,200 in August, up from 113,300 in July and 104,900 a year ago.

The latest job numbers again emphasize the importance of public-sector jobs to the state's economy, said Iowa Policy Project Executive Director David Osterberg. He said the largest drops in Iowa payroll jobs in August came in the two largest employment sectors – government, which dropped 2,500 jobs, and trade, transportation, and utilities, which lost 2,200. For the past 12 months, those two sectors have lost almost 16,000 jobs combined. Meanwhile, private-industry sectors lost only 300 jobs.

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“Those who want to cut the size of government have to realize that means cutting jobs,” Osterberg said. “That means fewer people buying goods and services in Iowa communities, and that has an impact on the private-sector economy. People employed by the state, counties, schools, and cities – and people working for companies that do business with those entities – have a role in the speed of recovery.”

### Obama Visit Before Midterm Election Brings Mixed Blessings

President Obama’s visit to Iowa less than five weeks before the November 2 election is strategically aimed at helping Iowa Democrats in 2010 and boosting his own chances at re-election in 2012, despite being billed as an official visit to talk about the economy, political strategists say.

“It is a campaign stop without it being a campaign stop,” said David Roederer, the 2008 state chair for GOP presidential candidate John McCain. “Otherwise, some candidate was going to have to pay for it. They’re going to try to make him look as official as he possibly can. He’s going to try to convince Iowans that the stimulus package, cap-and-trade, and health care are good things.”

Rob Tully, former chair of the Iowa Democratic Party, said any presidential visit is good for Democrats, although an official visit will mean that Obama technically can’t do any campaigning, since his trip will be funded by tax dollars instead of campaign money. Still, Tully said Obama’s presence will help.

“The Democrats need a boost,” Tully said. “The fact that he’s decided to do that I think is a boon for the Democratic candidates. Anytime a president comes in, it’s a plus.”

Governor Culver said he will “absolutely” stand at Obama’s side when he comes to Iowa September 29. It appears that Obama will appear at a single event in the Des Moines metro area, although Iowa Democratic Party officials said Wednesday they had not yet been notified about the exact location and details.

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“We’re going to highlight the fact that Iowa has one of the fastest-growing economies in America,” Culver said, “that according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, we have the eighth-fastest-growing economy. He’s going to highlight what we’ve done to work successfully with 260 companies to create 20,000 new jobs. He’ll highlight our success in renewable energy in particular, the new green-collar jobs that we’ve created at these manufacturing facilities in places like Newton. So I absolutely will stand with him to talk about our record.”

When Culver was asked if Obama would campaign for him, he said: “You know, good policy is good politics.”

Tully said with economists saying the recession has officially ended, now it’s time to talk about strategies to continue moving forward. Obama’s visit will likely emphasize the key differences between the Republican and Democratic approaches to improving the economy, as he’s done at other recent events.

Top Iowa Republicans said the timing of the visit could highlight issues that work against Democrats, pointing to the 114,200 Iowans that are still unemployed, plus frustration and anger over government spending at both the state and federal levels.

“People are universally upset,” said Senate Minority Leader Paul McKinley (R-Chariton). “If I were a Democrat, I would be very, very hesitant to want President Obama to come in. I think he has a tin ear when it comes to what small business particularly is going through. I just think he doesn’t understand.”

*This weekly summary comes from [IowaPolitics.com](http://IowaPolitics.com), an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.*