

Iowa Politics Roundup: Iowa Straw Poll Gets a Boost with Fox News Debate

Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 17 December 2010 11:01

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Iowa Republicans hope that a nationally broadcast GOP presidential debate they've scheduled for August 11, 2011, in Ames will up the stakes for the Iowa Straw Poll two days later.

"We wanted to make sure it's bigger and better and more prominent than it's ever been before," Republican Party of Iowa chair Matt Strawn said Thursday in a conference call with reporters, less than an hour after announcing the two events.

The Iowa Straw Poll has historically been considered the critical first test of grassroots support for Republican presidential candidates in the first-in-the-nation caucus state.

However, the future of the Ames Republican straw poll was cast into doubt in June 2007 after former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Arizona Senator John McCain decided to skip the key event leading up to the caucus.

That's something the Iowa GOP hopes to avoid this time around.

"The opportunity to address not only Iowa-caucus and -straw-poll participants but the nation from Ames would be something very difficult for a candidate to pass up," Strawn said.

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The debate will be held on a Thursday at C.Y. Stephens Auditorium on the campus of Iowa State University, the traditional location of the straw poll. The event will be broadcast on Fox News.

Strawn said Thursday that no invitations to the debate have been extended to potential candidates at this point, and specific details will be worked out between the Republican Party of Iowa and Fox News as the date gets closer.

However, he discouraged candidates from participating in one event but not the other.

“A candidate would have to think long and hard how that would look in the eyes of an Iowa-caucus-going Republican,” Strawn said. “It would be a very risky decision in my opinion to do that.”

Strawn called the straw poll a good tool for presidential candidates to test their strength and for Iowans to organize.

“Presidential candidates cannot underestimate the importance of a good showing in Iowa,” Strawn said. “This is the first true test of support in the presidential nominating cycle. Candidates come face-to-face with tens of thousands of Iowans at the straw poll, and will reach every corner of our state and a national audience in our presidential debate. Candidates who perform well here will enjoy a national boost in support.”

Strawn said there was “a lot of appetite” for the party to play a larger role in the event, so leaders have made that a priority over the past few months. He said talk about whether to stage a debate in conjunction with the straw poll started internally before the November election.

Collins Officially Announces Bid for RNC Chair

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Former Republican Party of Iowa Executive Director Gentry Collins has officially announced that he is running to be chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC).

Collins, 35, made the announcement on Facebook. "I am honored to have received support from people all across this country," he wrote. "I look forward to continuing my travels and meeting with members of the RNC. Stay tuned for more details."

In a letter of candidacy to RNC members, Collins said the most successful RNC chairs have come from the ranks of operatives who have spent their careers learning to win races in tough cycles in swing states.

Collins' announcement came the same evening that RNC Chair Michael Steele announced in a conference call with Republican National Committee members that he will be running for re-election when his term is up in January.

"Gentry Collins has an opportunity because he's from a younger generation and he is very familiar with the other states and has worked with the other RNC members," said Kim Lehman, Iowa's RNC member, on Thursday in an interview with IowaPolitics.com. "Not being a member himself, that does put him at somewhat of a disadvantage. But he's made a good reputation, a good name for himself."

Collins most recently worked as RNC political director before writing a scathing five-page resignation letter last month blasting Steele for his management and leadership. Collins' status as a former RNC employee distances him from Steele, yet gives him the national experience necessary for a chairperson.

"He was able to showcase his talent and meet one-on-one, being the political director, with other state members who really needed his assistance when they were working within their states," Lehman said.

Collins is now one of six candidates for RNC chair along with Steele, former Michigan GOP Chair Saul Anuzis, former Missouri Republican Party Chair Ann Wagner, Wisconsin Republican

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Party Chair Reince Priebus, and Maria Cino, a veteran of the Bush administration.

Culver Won't Choose Three Supreme Court Justices

Governor Chet Culver will not be afforded the opportunity to appoint three justices to the Iowa Supreme Court.

The State Judicial Nominating Commission announced Monday that applications for vacancies would be accepted starting that day. The deadline for submission is January 14, the day of Terry Branstad's inauguration as governor.

Culver had said he would appoint nominees selected by the commission if the slate was completed by January 14, but the announced timeline eliminates that opportunity. Nominees are appointed by the sitting governor.

Commission member and Cedar Rapids attorney Steve Pace said that although he did not know specific people applying for vacancies, "I know that 25 application packets were requested [on Monday]. We hope to get some good applicants, and the commission looks forward to the interviews."

Chief Justice Marsha Ternus and Justices Michael Streit and David Baker were ousted from office November 2 by public vote. Their terms expire December 31. The trio was part of a unanimous ruling in April 2009 that state law violated equal-protection rights of homosexuals who wished to legally marry someone of the same sex.

Iowa Democrats said this week they are not disappointed that Culver will not appoint the justices as one of his last acts in office, adding that the nomination-selection process itself is a nonpartisan issue.

The commission plans to meet the week of January 24, after which the 15-member board hopes

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to have a slate of nominees to present to Branstad, according to the state Judicial Branch. Applicant interviews will be available for public viewing on the Internet.

Santorum Plans to Hire Iowa Staffer in Early 2011

Former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pennsylvania) – one of the most upfront about his ambitions to run for president in 2012 – indicated Wednesday night to members of the Quad City Tea Party that he would soon put a staffer in Iowa.

This was Santorum's eighth visit to Iowa. On his way out the door at Wednesday night's event in Bettendorf, Santorum was asked, "When will you put a staffer in Iowa?"

"Soon," he said.

"How soon is 'soon' – in the first quarter?"

"Yes," he said with a smile. "Some time in the first three months."

The move would put Santorum on equal footing with Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, who in September became the first 2012 prospect to hire a full-time Iowa staffer in advance of the August 2011 Iowa straw poll and February 2012 Iowa caucuses kicking off the nation's presidential-nominating process.

Sixty people turned out at the Bettendorf Public Library on a cold, snowy night to hear Santorum's opinions and stands on the issues. Santorum told the group that he was in Washington, D.C., last week, "and you are very much on their minds there."

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Typical of potential presidential candidates in the early stages of a campaign, the former senator gave the crowd a short biography of himself. "I wonder if I can make a contribution to the country [again], so I'm out kicking tires, and now it's your turn to kick this tire," he said.

Santorum on Wednesday told IowaPolitics.com how a social conservative can win votes from independents in the middle.

"As you look across the country, social conservatives won in 2010," he said. "I think Americans believe in strong communities, strong families, respect for human life, and I think a candidate who holds those views will do very well in America."

And Santorum gave his assessment of how he compares philosophically with other potential 2012 presidential candidates. "I would suspect that my voting record and Newt Gingrich's voting record are pretty close," he said. "I might be a little more different than [U.S. Senator John] Thune [R-South Dakota]."

Santorum declared that America is on a road to fiscal insolvency.

"It's about duty, and we all need to pitch in," he proclaimed. "If we're told the truth about where we are economically and we lay out a vision on what we need to do to get our house in order, then we'll see the opportunity that will be presented when our economy is restored. We have to create a better opportunity for America through better management of our resources in Washington."

When asked why some politicians didn't have the courage of their convictions, Santorum told these Tea Party activists that they play a very important role. "You are the backbone of Congress," he said. "They'll stand up if you stand with them."

GOP Considers Changes to Four-Year-Old Preschool

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Iowa House Majority Leader-elect Linda Upmeyer this week questioned the value of the state's program for preschool for four-year-olds, saying that the state shouldn't subsidize preschool for families that can afford it, and that there were other avenues available before the program for families that couldn't.

"It's not that it does nothing for kids," Upmeyer (R-Garner) said Wednesday at an IowaPolitics.com forum featuring legislative leaders. "By the time you get to third or fourth grade, you see no difference. So especially children in poverty, children in homes without the resources, without the perhaps parenting. But children that are perhaps at risk in some way, those kids absolutely benefit, and those kids absolutely received that benefit before."

Upmeyer said legislators have also never been able to get data on how many kids in Iowa were not able to access preschool before the program began, and she said families that weren't able to send their children to preschool before the program began still had access to Head Start and empowerment dollars.

"We started this on a premise that in my mind is faulty," Upmeyer said. "You need good research and good reasons to do what you do. This is a very expensive program."

Upmeyer said the state should go back to look at how things were done before the statewide four-year-old preschool program began. "What we've essentially done is put those kids into an additional grade that we've added to the K-12 education and put it on the backs of property-tax payers," she said.

Incoming House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (D-Des Moines) sharply disagreed with Upmeyer, saying studies have shown children that go to preschool are more likely to be successful later in life.

"I thought that the concept was pretty well settled, that the more you invest in education, particularly for three- and four-year-olds, the better you do in that age group, that life will be much better for that individual later on," McCarthy said.

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But Senate Minority Leader Paul McKinley (R-Chariton) said McCarthy is wrong about the research, and “it’s very, very questionable whether there is benefit.”

“That said, whether we call it an investment, whether we call it spending, it’s taxpayers’ dollars, and I think we need to look: Are we holding these folks accountable, and are we getting what we expect to get?” McKinley said.

Senate President Jack Kibbie (D-Emmetsburg) said he believes there will still be a four-year-old=preschool program at the end of the 2011 legislative session. “I predict our caucus in the Senate will be very strong, probably draw a line in the sand on that issue,” he said.

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.