

Kerry Shows Broad Strength in Iowa While Dean Struggles in Core Groups

John Kerry virtually ran the table in the initial preference of Iowa caucus goers, beating his opponents in surprising quarters: He won liberals, young voters, Internet users and strong opponents of the Iraq war – all supposedly central to the Dean movement – and beat Dick Gephardt in his base, members of union households.

Kerry whaled among caucus goers looking for a candidate with the "right experience"; while it ranked only fourth on the attributes list, cited by 15 percent, he won the initial support of a huge 71 percent of those who cited it. He also scored strongly on electability. And he was especially popular with seniors, while Howard Dean was especially not.

John Edwards placed strongly as well, benefiting – like Kerry – from participants who made their final decision in the campaign's closing week. Edwards was solidly second in most respects, with one notable first: He won 41 percent of attendees looking most for a candidate who "cares about people like me." (Edwards also did six points better with women than with men.)

Kerry and Edwards, then, both succeeded with some of their central themes – experience and electability for Kerry, empathy and tone for Edwards. In so doing they stole Dean's early thunder, and whomped fourth-place Gephardt in an event he won 16 years ago.

These results are from the network entrance poll of caucus attendees, measuring their initial preferences only – 35 percent for Kerry, 26 percent for Edwards, 20 percent for Dean and 11 percent for Gephardt. The outcome in terms of delegates is different, since participants could (and in some cases had to) shift allegiances as their caucuses proceeded.

The lessons for New Hampshire and beyond may focus on the question of just what kind of candidate Democrats want: The anti-war Dean, who's campaigned as the Democrats' Democrat but failed to win self-described "strong" Democrats, or a more moderately positioned opponent, be it Kerry or Edwards (or Wesley Clark or Joseph Lieberman, both of whom sat out Iowa).

Another question ahead pertains to union clout, or its absence: Dean and Gephardt, with the most labor support, finished third and fourth. And turnout from union households was down to 23 percent of participants, compared to 33 percent in 2000. (Kerry did especially well, 37 percent initial support, among non-union participants; Edwards had 27 percent in this large group, Dean 21 percent, Gephardt just eight.)

Dean fell short in almost every regard in Iowa. Kerry narrowly beat him, 34 to 29 percent, among those who "strongly disapprove" of the war – half of caucus participants. And Dean's support fell off very sharply in less anti-war groups.

Dean may have held a narrow edge among "very liberal" attendees, 32-28 percent vs. Kerry; but again his support dropped among others. Among all liberals – 57 percent of attendees, up from 49 percent in 2000 – Kerry was first in initial preference with 33 percent support, followed by Edwards and Dean with about one-quarter each.

Dean was much weaker among moderates – Kerry won 37 percent of them, Edwards 27 percent, Dean just 17 percent (and Gephardt, 14 percent) – raising further questions for Dean's campaign in primaries in which more moderates participate.

Kerry also won the initial preference of younger participants (age 17-29), with 35 percent to Dean's 25 percent. Kerry won the initial preference of those who use the Internet for political information; even among those who use it "a great deal," 17 percent of the total, Kerry narrowly beat Dean, by 31-25 percent. And Kerry won the initial preference of first-time caucus-goers, while Edwards and Dean roughly tied for second in this group. (First-timers made up 55 percent of participants, up from 46 percent in 2000.)

Turnout of 30-and-under participants was up sharply from 2000 – they accounted for 17 percent this time, compared to nine percent then. Nonetheless, seniors accounted for 27 percent of caucus goers – similar to 2000, and double their share of the state's population. As noted, Kerry was very strong among seniors, with 43 percent support to Edwards' 23 percent in initial preference. Gephardt had 17 percent in this group, Dean 15 percent. (While Kerry won both younger and older voters, he ran about evenly with Edwards among more middle-aged participants, 30- to 64-year-olds.)

Gephardt, for his part, got hammered. Not only didn't he win union households, he only managed essentially a three-way tie for second in this group. He did best by far among voters who cared most about U.S. trade policy – but they accounted for a mere four percent of caucus goers.

Top issues cited in importance were "economy/jobs" (chosen by 29 percent) and "health care/Medicare" (28 percent). Kerry won the initial preference of participants who cared most about health care; Kerry and Edwards split on the economy.

Dean did win the initial preference of those who cared most about the Iraq war, but it was a lower-tier issue, cited by 14 percent. (Education was cited by 14 percent as well; Kerry won the initial preference of that group by eight points over Edwards.)

In terms of candidate attributes, "takes a strong stand on issues" (29 percent) and "can beat Bush" (26 percent) were cited as most important. Dean narrowly won in the former group, Kerry in the latter. The third most-cited quality (by 22 percent) was a candidate who "cares about people like me," and as noted, it was Edwards' best.

Kerry and Edwards had strong appeal among late deciders: Forty-one percent of caucus goers “finally decided” in the last week; of them 39 percent gave their initial preference to Kerry, 35 percent to Edwards, just 14 percent to Dean and six percent to Gephardt.

METHODOLOGY – This analysis is based on an entrance poll of 1,665 participants as they entered 50 randomly selected Iowa Democratic caucuses. The results have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points. Field work by Edison/Mitofsky for the National Election Pool.

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