

ELECTION 2012

The PostPolitics guide to campaign news and conversation

Sunday, February 12, 2012

Maine caucuses provide a window into Ron Paul delegate strategy

By Felicia Sonmez

PORTLAND, Maine – The “Freedom Lists” started circulating a little after 12:30 p.m. Saturday.



Mary Keene, a Ron Paul supporter from Portland, fills out her Maine state delegate ballot at Saturday's GOP caucuses. (Felicia Sonmez/ The Washington Post)

Republican caucus-goers at the Riverton Elementary School cafetorium had wrapped up voting in their presidential straw poll, and a second – and, some would argue, even more important – step in the nominating process was beginning: the selection of some 73 delegates from the Portland area to the state convention in Augusta in May.

By the time this part of the process rolled around, two hours after the caucuses had begun, nearly half of the Portland caucus-goers had emptied out of the school, having already cast their ballots in the straw poll.

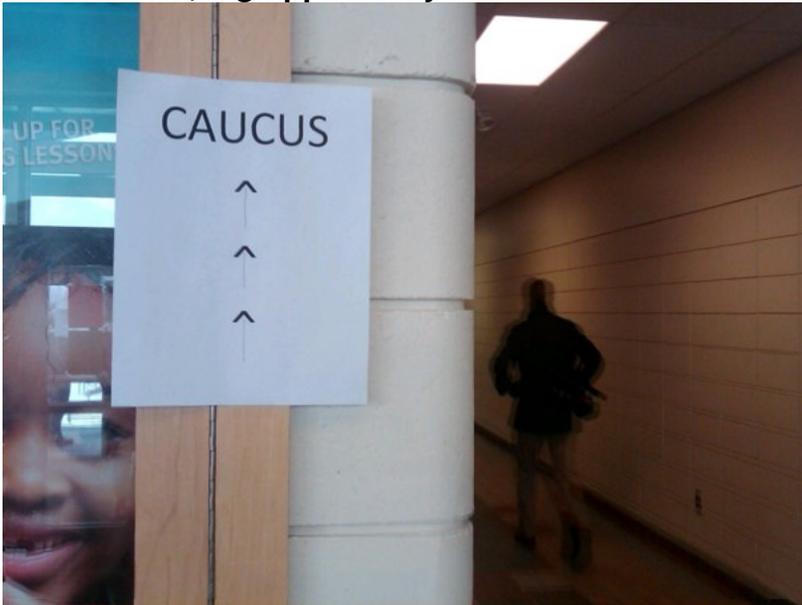
Mitt Romney had come, made his pitch to voters, and gone. His volunteers had packed up and moved on. And the dozens of reporters and TV crews that had descended on the school earlier in the morning were nowhere to be found.

It was then that the Freedom Lists – as well as the somewhat less-mysteriously named “Conservative Republican Lists,” both pre-printed sheets of Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas) supporters – began making the rounds.

Estimates by CNN and other national news organizations Saturday night projected that Romney, who placed first with 39 percent in the Maine GOP straw poll, would wind up taking at least nine of Maine's 24 national convention delegates, compared with seven for Paul, who placed second with 36 percent.

But due to Paul supporters' superior organization in the low-turnout caucuses, those projections could be way off, and the libertarian-leaning Texas congressman could well sweep Maine's 24 delegates at the August Republican National Convention.

Small states, big opportunity



Paul's campaign is eyeing caucus states like Maine that have been bypassed by some of the other GOP presidential contenders. (Felicia Sonmez/ The Washington Post)

The Paul camp's strategy is one that bears similarities to then-Sen. Barack Obama's (D-Ill.) focus on smaller caucus states four years ago. During the 2008 campaign, Obama was able to best then-Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) in the delegate race in part by running up large margins in low-turnout caucus states – contests that the Clinton camp had largely bypassed in favor of focusing its resources on bigger, delegate-rich states.

Since Democratic delegates were awarded proportionally, however, a narrow victory in a big state wasn't worth nearly as much as a wide victory in a small one, a factor that the Obama camp used to its advantage.

This time around, the GOP frontrunner, Romney, has generally focused on the bigger races, while Paul's camp has been throwing its effort into caucus states. But unlike in the Democratic contest four years ago, some caucus states in the current GOP race award delegates in a process that's completely separate from the presidential preference poll.

That means that a candidate could in theory win the caucus-night straw poll – as Romney did on Saturday – but lose the battle for the state's delegates.

Doing so would mean having been massively out-organized by a rival candidate's operation. And that's just what appeared to happen to Romney's camp at the Riverton School on Saturday.

A caucus-within-a-caucus



Mainers at Portland's GOP municipal caucus Saturday afternoon.
(Felicia Sonmez/The Washington Post)

At the Portland caucuses Saturday, the first step for succeeding in the state delegate race was ensuring that the contest would take place as a sort of caucus-within-a-caucus.

“The delegate race (matters more), for sure,” said Alex Lycars, a 21-year-old student and Paul supporter from Portland. “I mean, I don’t really care about the straw poll as long as the delegates are representative of what’s going on. (Paul) can win straw polls anywhere he wants, but if he’s not getting the delegates, it doesn’t really matter.”

Lycars was among the scores of Paul supporters who lingered at Saturday’s caucuses well after the straw poll in order to cast ballots in the state delegate race.

On this snowy Saturday afternoon, about 260 people had showed up for the GOP caucuses in Portland – up from about 200 four years ago, according to Steven Scharf, secretary of the Portland City Republican Committee.

Of them, about 145 had signed up to run for the 73 state delegate spots – a marked uptick from the 89 or so who had signed up four years ago, Scharf said.

According to the original caucus-day order of business, the state delegate vote had been scheduled to take place first, followed by the presidential straw poll.

But just as the vote was about to get underway, Jonathan Pfaff, a 31-year-old software engineer and member of the Portland City Republican Committee, raised his hand, stood up and motioned to reverse the order of business. After a few minutes of debate, the motion was seconded, and a wide majority of the assembled voters agreed.

Since many attendees planned to head home after the straw poll, the flip meant that rather than taking place among the full 260 caucus-goers, the state delegate race would be conducted with only about half that many people in the room.

And that meant the pool had effectively been reduced to only the most committed voters of an already quite diehard bunch – among them, many Paul supporters like Lyscars who were willing to spend more than four hours at a caucus on a Saturday afternoon and for whom the straw poll results were secondary to the actual delegate race.

In an interview, Pfaff, who participated in the caucus until the end, declined to say which candidate he supported but observed that the majority of caucus-goers agreed with him that reversing the order of business was a good idea.

“That was important because as you can see — how long this process is taking — there are a lot of people that aren’t going to have time to go to the convention, right?” he said. “They don’t know very many people or whatever. And it’s snowing outside. They just want to make sure to make their preference poll known, and they wanted to go home. So, I wanted to give them the opportunity. And they agreed with me, right? You saw it. Ninety-nine percent of people agreed with me that that was the right thing to do.”

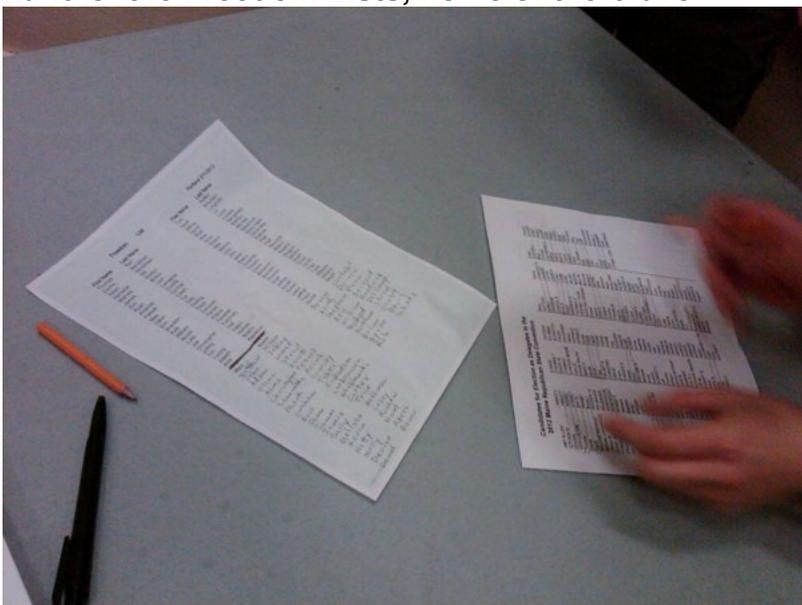
Asked whether he personally believed the state delegate race was more important than the straw poll vote, Pfaff declined to say.

“As you well know, the media will be reporting the straw poll, and the delegates will be going to vote for their preference at the convention,” he said. “So whatever’s important to the campaign is what they want to have happen.”

Jean Carbonneau, a 50-year-old post office worker who caucused at Riverton Elementary School and had been vying for a spot as a delegate for Paul, said in an interview later Saturday at Paul’s caucus-night party that the delegate race was “absolutely” the most important part of the process.

“You’ve got to understand, with the straw poll, most people show up to these caucuses just for that, and then after that’s conducted, they go home,” he said. “It’s only a few the people that stay around for the actual most important part. And I know, speaking for myself in Portland, the majority of the people that stuck around were Ron Paul supporters.”

Land of the Freedom Lists, home of the brave



A Portland caucus-goer checks his state delegate ballot against a “Freedom List.”
(Felicia Sonmez/ The Washington Post)

The second step in securing a state delegate win called for maximizing the number of votes cast for delegates who would go on to support Paul.

It was at this stage that it became clear Paul supporters had a strategy in place – and that the Romney camp, apparently, had none.

How do about 145 people in a room decide which 73 of them will go on to become delegates?

If you're at the Portland Republican caucuses, the process involves paper ballots with 145 names on them -- printed by the party onsite -- on which participants must individually circle their top 73 choices.

Once the ballots were printed, candidates for state delegate were each given 10 seconds to stand in front of the crowd and make their pitch.

About four-dozen of the delegate candidates formed a line that snaked around the room, waiting their turn to speak.

One after another, the Paul supporters took the microphone.

"I'm a nine-year Navy veteran. Served on submarines. And like all veterans, I support Ron Paul."

"I make sure you get your junk mail every day. And I support Ron Paul."

"Having read the Constitution – Ron Paul."

"I'd like to say, it's immigrants, not aliens. And it's national health care, not Obamacare. And I vote for Ron Paul."

Of the 50 or so speakers, only a handful spoke out in support of candidates other than Paul.

Then, the balloting began – and the Freedom Lists made their appearance.

The lists (along with the Conservative Republican Lists) were pre-printed sheets that Paul supporters appeared to have brought to the caucus.

Most of the sheets had about three-dozen names printed on them in alphabetical order, with another few dozen handwritten below.

It wasn't clear who had made the lists, and few caucus-goers were willing to field questions about them. But for the next hour or so, Paul supporters gathered throughout the cafetorium, seated in groups and standing around the long tables near the doors, circling the names on their ballots corresponding with those on the lists. It was a lively scene, with caucus-goers talking loudly and some Paul backers making the rounds to make sure that other supporters filled out their ballots correctly.

While the Paul camp was clearly organizing together, the Romney team had no visible get-out-the-vote operation in place.

Mary Keene, a 54-year-old certified residential medication aide, was sitting down with a large Ron Paul sign in her lap as she circled names from one of the Freedom Lists on her own ballot.

A Paul supporter who herself had run for a delegate spot, Keene said she believed the delegate race was unquestionably more important than the straw poll.

“Well, it has something to do with the college of electorals,” she said of the process. “I don’t believe in it. I don’t like it. But that’s the way it is.”

Live by the caucus, die by the caucus



Signs for Ron Paul and Mitt Romney outside the Portland caucus site.
(Felicia Sonmez — The Washington Post)

If Paul comes out ahead in the Maine delegate count, it will be in no small part due to the enthusiasm of his supporters and their mastery of the technical ins and outs of a little-understood and often-overlooked part of the electoral process.

But as Saturday’s Portland caucuses revealed, that process can cut both ways.

Party officials announced at the end of the Riverton Elementary School caucus that there had been a discrepancy in the final tally of state delegate ballots, and that they had received 19 more ballot sheets than they had the green index cards that voters turned in when they took their ballots.

That meant that the results of Portland’s state delegate race – at least, for the time being – were void.

“It was tossed,” Carbonneau, the post office worker, said at Paul’s caucus-night party. “It was voided. The whole thing.”

He said that some at the caucus had floated the idea of appealing to the state GOP on the matter, while others suggested mailing out ballots to those who had attended, to be returned ahead of the state convention in May. For now, though, the results – as well as Paul’s fortunes -- are in limbo.

“It’s just frustrating,” Carbonneau said. “I mean, some people were there for five, six hours. And it was all tossed out.”