The Rhetorical Consequences of the Iowa Caucus Debacle

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In addition to being a former resident of Iowa who earned all three of my degrees from the University of Iowa, I have long been an advocate of caucuses during elections. I have argued that caucuses offer the
possibility of transparent deliberation and persuasion—concepts at the heart of democracy. They also provide a human touch to voting. Or at least that’s what I use to contend. Rather than rehashing the arguments for and against caucuses, allow me to express my thoughts as a political communication scholar about what transpired Monday evening and why that is significant.

Sadly, the enormous and unacceptable failure of the Iowa Democratic Party to report the results of the Caucus, regardless of the cause and who is at fault, had unintended political consequences that hurt those who were not responsible: the Democratic candidates. These are consequences that cannot be reversed and may reverberate for some time and penalize several of the candidates.

First, in addition to being a bad example by the Iowa Democratic Party of how to rhetorically handle a crisis, the technological reporting failure played directly into President Donald Trump's hands, giving him more grist for his rhetorical mill. For example, it provided him additional evidence to assert once again that the Democrats are disorganized, don't know what they are doing, and hence are incapable of governing the nation.

Worse yet, the Iowa Primary debacle reinforced Trump’s frequently disseminated conspiracy theory, namely, that elections are rigged. This unproven claim was given life Monday by Trump and his sons, perhaps convincing voters they can’t and shouldn’t trust the outcome of the 2020 race—something that might increase the likelihood of President Trump remaining in office.

Beyond this, I say without fear of exaggeration that Tuesday’s electoral fiasco symbolically led to a horrible start for the Democratic campaign. As someone who for over 40 years studied and taught political communication, I am reminded of Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of
rhetoric. Bitzer, who received his PhD from the University of Iowa, argued that it is incumbent upon speakers to provide a “fitting response” to the rhetorical situations with which they are confronted and that invite their discourse. However, as Bitzer reminded us, frequently rhetorical situations “decay” because a speaker waits too long to talk, preventing them from making a fitting response.

This is partially what happened this week in Iowa, except that the candidates were not culpable. Put simply, regardless of when the votes are finally counted and how accurate they may be, the opportunity for the Democratic winners and losers to spin the results to their advantage will be gone. There is nothing they can do; there is no appropriate rhetorical response. Timing, after all, is everything in political communication.

Finally, while I love my home state, this likely will be the end of the Iowa caucuses and perhaps the last time Iowa will be the “first in the nation” vote.

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