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Instructions from Iowa

by Rushworth M. Kidder

Among the instructions coming from the Iowa caucuses, three are particularly encouraging to those who care about the ethics of campaigning. They are: (1) Be nice, (2) don't be nasty, and (3) be there.

Pundits long will debate the messages to be drawn from Monday's surprising results: Sen. John Kerry's definitive win, Sen. John Edwards' strong surge into second place, the sudden collapse of longtime front-running Gov. Howard Dean into third, and the fourth-place knockout punch to Rep. Richard Gephardt. But one message is clear: Negative campaigning is not a formula for success -- not, at least, in Iowa

How else to explain Edwards' surge? He long ago staked out a positive position. Earlier in the season, when Dean was apparently in irreversible ascendancy, his opponents moved into the attack mode, taking on the front-runner at every turn. It almost seemed as though the other candidates had nothing else on their minds save a commitment to savage and destroy the Vermont outsider. With one exception: Edwards, true to his promise to maintain an uplifting tone, had ample opportunity during the televised debates to lambaste Dean -- and refused to do so. "If all we are in 2004 is a party of anger," he told an audience last month, "we can't win."

Iowans liked that. They obviously liked other things about Edwards, too. If he were a mere Pollyanna, he wouldn't have won the surge in support. But the rapid movement of caucusgoers into Edwards' camp over the last week suggests a relief that a candidate could still be found who believes in comity, friendliness, and a positive message.

Iowa voters, however, didn't simply reward the positive. It would appear they also punished the negative. Reporters on the ground in Iowa this past week were particularly struck by the warring television commercials, especially those that pitted Gephardt against Dean. These apparently took their toll as the days passed. In the end, Dean was knocked farther back on his heels than most people would have thought possible. Gephardt was bounced entirely out of the ring. It would seem, in a way, that they ground each other down. That result squares perfectly with some of the survey research we've done here at the Institute in prior years. Nationally, we've found, the U.S. public is deeply offended by nasty, attack-oriented, scorched-earth politicking. They think that it's unethical, that it produces unethical officeholders, and that it keeps good people from running for office. Iowa, it seems is no exception.

The national surveys also told us something else: Negative campaigning keeps voters from going to the polls. After all, if the choice is between two slimeballs, why bother to trek down to vote when you could go fishing or read a book? In Iowa, by contrast, great numbers of people -- many more than usual -- trekked to the caucuses. In part that was because they had some positives they could support, rather than simply some negatives to vote against. But perhaps more importantly, I suspect, they felt they had a stake in something important. They were debating a huge issue, quite possibly affecting the entire course of the world's leading democracy. The conclusion was by no means foregone. And the debate was taking place in a small state, in intense and sometimes intimate meetings where it wasn't hard to see how a single vote could make a real difference. Hence the willingness on the part of Iowans to turn out and be there.

Which is the way politics ought to practiced. There's been lots of hand-wringing about party politics in the United States and its increasing distance from the people. Do people really care? Can you get citizens interested in their candidates? Will they bother to turn out and vote?

That's still a question. After all, despite the healthy turnout at the caucuses, the great majority of eligible Iowans *didn't* show up. Those who did, however, reminded the nation -- and the candidates -- that ethics and campaigning need not be separated. In an age when ethics so often shows up in the news by its absence, that's a gratifying sign.