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Caucuses, the Exhibit

By [Leslie Wayne](#)

If political junkies cannot get enough of the Iowa caucuses – or if they want to experience it without coming to Iowa on a cold January night – the Iowa State Historical Building in Des Moines has a 10,000-square-foot exhibit called “Caucus Iowa” that is a behind-the-scenes look at the caucus process.

Proclaiming that Iowa is “More Than Pigs and Corn,” the exhibit is a sophisticated multi-media show that is open to the public and will also be used as a stage for programs from CNN, NPR and C-Span. The political writer Mark Halperin is scheduled for a book signing and the political activist Ben Cohen, of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream are scheduled to speak soon.

The exhibit shows the caucus process in intimate detail: There is a re-creation of a typical small-town café, with life size cardboard cut-outs playing the rolls of the press, the candidates, the staff members and, oh, a bored waitress and a few voters. Beyond the café is another life-sized farm house, where the Republicans will gather. Outside the house, the exhibit has sounds of a harsh wind blowing and a car engine turning over in the cold. The Democrats are featured arguing it out in a replica of a gymnasium, again with cutouts substituting for people. Several cutouts are of real people – Tim Lang of the Washington Post posed for the “reporter” model.

Political buffs are sure to love the array of signs, photos, badges and other campaign memorabilia collected since the caucuses began in 1972. There’s even a replica of the Des Moines Register newsroom, just as messy as the real one.

But for Iowa, the free exhibit is more than just fun and games. It is a way to stress the importance of the caucus – to those in the state and outsiders – at a time when many are questioning whether Iowa should retain its first-in-the-nation caucus position.

At a ribbon-cutting ceremony last week, Iowa Lieut. Gov. Patty Judge addressed that issue head on: “It’s important that Iowa remain number one,” said Mrs. Judge to a crowd sipping wine and nibbling canapés. “A lot of pundits are taking about whether the Iowa caucuses are relevant and whether Iowa should be the lead off. Thirty-second sound bites are not the way to determine who is the next president of the United States. In Iowa we take the time to thoroughly vet the candidates and ask the hard questions.”

Given the vast amount of time that both Republican and Democratic candidates are spending in Iowa, it is certain that the Historical Society will have plenty of material to add to its next exhibit.