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On Caucus Night, a Time Commitment

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DES MOINES — Iowa voters will kick off the Republican presidential voting on Tuesday. But logistically, there is much more to it than that.

IN IOWA Reporting on candidates and voters from the Hawkeye State.

One reason the Hawkeye State retains its influence in the nominating fight is the nature of its caucus system, which forces candidates to do far more than persuade voters to punch a hole or fill in an oval.

Instead, the process requires a commitment of several hours for a voter. And it encourages campaigns to have a level of organizational sophistication that often helps separate candidates who can go the distance from those who cannot.

For Republicans, the caucus-night process is slightly less complicated than it is for Democrats. But it still forces voters and campaigns to invest more time and energy than in states that hold primaries, like New Hampshire.

Here is a rundown of the way the Republican caucus works in Iowa and how the process might test the candidates in the field:

GETTING VOTERS THERE At just about every recent rally and meet-and-greet session, the Republican candidates have begged and pleaded for voters to brave the elements to go to a caucus.

“I ask you to do more than just to attend a rally or to sign up as you go out today,” Gov. Rick Perry of Texas said at an event last Tuesday. “Regardless of what the weather may be on next Tuesday, the third of January, I want you to go and caucus for me.”

The 2012 caucus will begin at 7 p.m. Central time, a post-supper part of the evening that will require voters to travel to schools, churches and community centers. Once there, they generally stay for several hours as they vote for a presidential nominee and conduct other party business.

The challenge for the candidates? Identifying their supporters and convincing them that the caucus is time well spent, especially if the weather is bad. While the weather has been unseasonably warm and calm this month, temperatures are expected to dip into the 20s on Tuesday evening.

THE ARRIVAL Iowa’s caucuses are technically open only to Republicans. But because the state allows

Democrats and independents to reregister when they arrive at a caucus, they are effectively open to everyone.

Localities are allowed to set their own rules, so the gatherings will vary. Some caucus locations will have just a few people gathered in a living room. Others will be larger, more formal affairs, held in a gymnasium or a ballroom.

THE CAMPAIGNING Once voters show up at their caucus location, it is not as simple as just making a quick decision. Representatives of each campaign are typically given the opportunity to make remarks in an attempt to sway some people at the last minute.

The better-organized campaigns will have members of the community stand up for them at every caucus location. By contrast, the candidates with passionate, energized followings often receive more spontaneous expressions of support.

It is a very different kind of democratic process than in primary states, where overt electioneering is kept at a distance from the actual voting. In Iowa, the campaigns are waged up close and personal, all the way until the end.

THE SECRET BALLOT When everyone has had their say, the voting begins. Ballots — sometimes blank pieces of paper, sometimes preprinted ballots — are distributed to the caucus voters, who record their choice. For Republicans, those choices are kept secret. That is different from Democratic caucuses, where voters gather in like-minded clusters in various parts of the room to indicate their support for a candidate. The Republican ballots at each caucus location are collected, counted and usually announced at the caucus. They are then transmitted to a central location, and the results are released nationally.

THE COUNT The result from those ballots is what everyone will be waiting for on Tuesday night. In 2008, about 120,000 Republicans cast ballots in their party's caucuses. (By contrast, the heated battle between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama in the Democratic caucus that year drew 227,000 people.) Some political observers expect a higher Republican turnout this year.

THE DELEGATES The overall results of the caucuses will drive news coverage as the candidates leave Iowa for New Hampshire, which holds the next primary contest, on Jan. 10. But those results actually do not determine the number of Iowa delegates the winners will receive. That is done by conventions — first local county conventions and then the Iowa Republican State Convention, which will choose delegates to the Republican National Convention this summer.