



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
BONUS Episode: 2020 Iowa Caucus, Reflection from Campaigns & Elections Field
Research Project

Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Cynthia Peacock
Ashley Muddiman
Joshua Scacco

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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

In this episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*, I'm talking with researchers from the Campaigns and Elections Field Research Project. The Campaigns and Elections Fields Research Project is an interdisciplinary program that includes participants from the University of South Florida, the University of Alabama, the University of Kansas, the University of Missouri, Iowa State University and Emerson College. As part of the program, participating students and faculty members visited Iowa from January 31st through February 4th for the caucuses that were held on February 3rd. Three of our communication scholars—

Cynthia Peacock:

My name is Cynthia Peacock and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.



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Ashley Muddiman:

I'm Ashley Muddiman and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Kansas.

Joshua Scacco:

I'm Joshua Scacco. I'm an assistant professor at the University of South Florida.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

—Led students on conducting a joint survey to assess candidate campaign communication around the Iowa caucuses. I'm privileged to have all three of these notable political communication scholars joining me on the podcast today. Thanks for joining us, everybody.

Ashley Muddiman:

Thanks for having us.

Cynthia Peacock:

Glad to be here.

Joshua Scacco:

Yeah. Thanks for having us.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

We hear a lot of talk about the caucuses and certainly this year, that talk has been rampant all over social media, the regular media channels and the like. But not everybody is probably familiar with the format. We know that the Iowa caucuses are a somewhat modern tradition beginning in the early 20th century. Can you tell us a little bit about what you discovered about the format of the caucuses and what makes them unique and how they worked during your visits in the Hawkeye state?

Cynthia Peacock:

Sure. The caucuses function in a different way than primaries. So, Iowa is one of a handful of states who has caucuses rather than primary elections. They differ in a couple of important ways. First, they're very public. So, states that primary, when we show up to vote, we walk in and cast a ballot in a relatively secret way and it can be completely private. Caucuses are very much the opposite. People have to show up and stand in a particular location. This takes place usually in maybe a high school gym or something like that. And they stand in a place and show support physically for the candidate that they're supporting. So, that's one big difference. Another difference is we show up in cast a ballot and then leave whereas caucus goers stand in support of a candidate but in some cases, their candidate doesn't meet viability meaning they don't reach



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that 15% threshold of support that they need to be a viable candidate. So, then they have a realignment process and at that time, people who were supporting a candidate who didn't meet the threshold can line up to show their support for another candidate or they can leave. So, I would say those are probably the two big differences for caucuses than primaries.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Did you witness I guess any persuasion underway? Did any of the viable candidates' people come to the unviable caucus goers and try and persuade them to come to the other side, to come to the dark side maybe?

Ashley Muddiman:

I think that is one reason why caucuses are so fascinating for communication scholars is that it's public and you have the chance to talk to people. In the caucus that I witnessed, there were a couple of moments where people were trying to persuade each other. The first was when actually not even with this election but there were candidates who came into the caucus to try to get people to sign a petition so they could run for office in the future. So, those were kind of fun speeches. Then every group or every candidate that has support in the room got to send up a representative to talk about their candidate and why they supported that candidate. And so, that was a moment of persuasion. And then especially when some of the groups were not viable. Especially Elizabeth Warren's group on the first count in the caucus I watched wasn't viable and they sent representatives to all the other non-viable groups to try to get people to come over and they must have been at least somewhat successful because they made viability on the second round. I unfortunately couldn't hear what they were saying to try to persuade the other groups but there was definitely a role of persuasion and communication going on that we don't typically see in a primary process.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Interesting. I am curious about any interactions that you all found or reactions that you heard about regarding the satellite caucuses. That was a new thing in 2020. They set up, what, 87 satellite caucuses and some of those were held in other states, some were held in Iowa, some were held outside the country. Did you see any impact from those satellite caucuses on the whole process?

Joshua Scacco:

The satellite caucuses were actually an interesting addition this year to the Democratic caucus. In Florida, for example, there were four satellite caucuses to capture many of the lowans who are snowbirds this time of year in Florida. And just for the record, I'm looking out my window right now and it's 80 degrees and sunny here in Tampa. So, I was actually getting a call and contacts from a local reporter who was covering the satellite caucus in St. Petersburg here and asking for what



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we were seeing on the ground in Iowa. So, the big purpose in thinking about the satellite caucuses was to try to capture more individuals who might not be in state but might want to participate in the caucus so increasing the accessibility of it to individuals who were not physically in state. Arizona had a number of them as well. There were also international ones, for example, in Paris as well as in Glasgow, Scotland. So, there were opportunities for individuals who were not in state to participate. The interesting thing about the satellite caucuses is looking at the results compared to what was happening in state is you're getting a different sample of perspective caucus-goers at these particular sites. So, whereas, for example, Bernie Sanders was doing quite well in Iowa, in many of the satellite caucuses in Florida, it was actually the more moderate candidates like Amy Klobuchar or Pete Buttigieg that were doing quite well in many of the Florida sites particularly in the St. Petersburg site. So, they are an interesting phenomenon to think about. There was also talk before the caucus about ways in which the Democratic Party could even expand further to things like virtual sites. Obviously, those types of things I think will be in conversation for the future. But what you see at this particular moment is that, if nothing else, the satellite caucuses illustrate the influence of the different demographic groups within the Democratic Party, the different coalitional forces that are trying to determine a nominee.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm wondering about that turnout issue, if maybe the satellite caucuses are an attempt to drive up turnout. As we're recording this today, about 53% of New Hampshire voters are going to the polls to cast their ballots in the New Hampshire primary. But the turnout in Iowa was pretty low. It was around 18% I think and there's been a lot of hand-wringing particularly amongst Democrats that this is somehow a signal of a lack of enthusiasm or some concern. I'm wondering if you saw any evidence of concern or if you had any thoughts about the lower turnout numbers in Iowa.

Ashley Muddiman:

Well, I think there are pros and cons of caucuses and the turnout is definitely one of the cons. I mean just in general, not necessarily just this year but in general, caucuses, you have to be in a room at the same time as everybody else and they can easily last two hours or longer on a Monday night. So, if people have jobs where they're working in the evening and they can't get time off or they don't have childcare or something else, there are reasons why they can't show up for two hours at a time. And so, that lower turnout I think is pretty common with caucuses and one of the criticisms of it. But I also think that it's interesting especially seeing how they work that the flip side of it is that the point of a caucus might not necessarily be to get everybody to turn out but to get people who are more motivated and who want to take part in the party process to come out. So, things that happened at the caucus I watched and I believe that others too, again there were speeches from future candidates who hope to be running. So, they were trying to get support even very early in their campaigns. There were moments where people could fundraise for the political party and do other things that are more related to party building than necessarily just



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getting out the highest percentage of voters and they're definitely critiques of that. But I do think the goals are a bit different with a caucus. It's not necessarily that the caucus should have the highest turnout but maybe that the people who care the most should come out because they might be more active in the political party in the future.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm wondering if you saw any residual impact afterwards. In other words, these Iowa caucuses were so chaotic this year, unusually so, and you talk about Ashley in terms of party building and building up the Iowa Democratic Party in particular and I'm wondering if there was any residual effect that you might have seen from the chaos for the Iowa Democratic Party. I know a lot of people nationally were very concerned about the impact of all of the reporting problems. Did you sense any of that while you were actually at the caucuses or in the immediate aftermath?

Ashley Muddiman:

Well, I think all of us will be able to jump in on this one too. What was so interesting to me it was that the caucus itself that I saw wasn't chaotic. I mean it was pretty much like any maybe PTA meeting or something. There were over a hundred people in a room. So, you have to try to make sure everybody's paying attention. But the caucus itself was really well-run. Everybody seemed to know what they were doing or caught on pretty quickly and there were paper ballots that they were writing on. So, the caucus itself to me wasn't too chaotic but I know Josh and Cynthia had experiences with this too.

Cynthia Peacock:

Yeah, just to echo what Ashley said, the caucus that I attended which was a different one than Ashley and Josh did was very well-run. So, the chaos that ensued really was post-caucus. So, the caucus went off as planned. It was not chaotic at all. It was well organized. And then, it wasn't until later in the evening when results were not rolling in that there was the concern about the reporting. But that was, as Ashley mentioned, there are paper ballots, there are the candidate preference cards which essentially function as paper ballots. So, even when it came to light that things did not go as planned, I felt pretty confident in the caucus process to have a paper trail for candidate preferences. So, the chaos really was after the fact.

Joshua Scacco:

And I'll just add as well that the three of us were texting back and forth with each other from our respective caucus sites and giving each other updates on things. And one of the surprising things was we were in Ames, Iowa just outside of Iowa State and we also had a fairly well-run caucus. We had a moment where there was a question about the total count of individuals in the room and they had to recheck the count. And that's important though especially in a Democratic caucus for that viability threshold of 15%. But once they got over that minor hiccup and realized that the



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official count was correct, there were a few issues. We had just a dedicated group of volunteers not only with the local Democratic Party but also with the campaigns that wanted to get it right. And so, for me when I got back to the hotel about 45 minutes after our caucus ended and saw that the media was beginning to question what was going on, there was actually for me surprise in terms of what was going on. So, I think some of what we saw in terms of the hand wringing and concern was a combination of the campaigns that wanted the results right away and the media and news media folks who wanted to be able to gain the race very quickly.

And because neither of them had the information that they needed, that then created this kind of consternation that we saw particularly on cable news that night of individuals like on CNN not be able to talk about what's happening. And so, I think that for the listeners out there, it's important that for the volunteers that were in the room, for the observers, the caucus process itself in many of these sites went off reasonably well and compared to what I observed four years ago with the addition of paper ballots made it all the more in fact reliable. So, for those of us who observed it, we were just kind of holding our breath saying well, we'll get the results. We might not get them on the timetable that journalists would like on CNN or what the campaigns would like but we will get the results.

Cynthia Peacock:

You were talking about party-building with regard to the reporting app. It seemed like the state party using the app, like that is clearly a PR problem for them. But the individual precinct level party-building, that seemed to go well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Speaking of parties, did anybody go to a Republican caucus? I'm told there were Republican caucuses. I'm wondering if you went to any of those and if they were different or how those were conducted.

Joshua Scacco:

So, I can speak to a little bit of that just because four years ago, some of the students that I took observed a Republican caucus and there were Republican caucuses across the state. Apparently, there was some fairly high turnout as well even though Donald Trump was the major candidate on the ballot. There were also though two other candidates: former Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld and former Congressman Joe Walsh who were also on the ballot. I had actually taken some of my students to see Governor Weld at one of his events this year in Iowa. Those caucuses function very differently than the Democratic Party and in some ways reflect the organizational differences of the party too. With Republicans, it is a pure straw poll. So, individuals enter the room and they're counted for their candidate. And then once they're counted, they leave. There's no viability threshold. There's no second realignment round. It's essentially a simple count and



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then people leave. So, interestingly four years ago when there quite a bit of activity on the Republican and Democratic sides, it was interesting to watch all the caucuses begin at the same time and then about 20 minutes later, half an hour later, the Republicans were exiting and they were done and the Democrats were still going and they were still realigning and doing all of these interesting things.

So, in a lot of ways, I would say this is and I actually had an organizational communication scholar at Kansas State contact me after and said in a lot of ways the caucuses are also a really interesting organizational study and I said absolutely. They reflect the organizational values that the parties have traditionally prioritized. So, the Democratic Party being more coalitional in nature, particularly the modern Democratic Party since the 1970s McGovern-Fraser and those types of things. Because of that, you have these particular mechanisms that are built in, the viability and those types of things. Whereas the Republican Party, modern Republican Party has been at least until Donald Trump very hierarchical, very top-down oriented and that's what you see reflected in the ways in which the caucuses are structured.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Speaking of the students, I'm really interested in their experiences and how many of them had been to the Iowa caucuses. How many of them had actually been to the Iowa is probably also an interesting question. But what were their reactions? How did they respond to what was going on in these caucuses that they were witnessing?

Cynthia Peacock:

I think we all have something to share there but I'd be glad to start off. I took five graduate students, Master's students with me to Iowa and although a couple of them had been through Iowa before, no one had really spent any time there. We came from the University of Alabama. And so, these students are just like the rest of the citizens in Alabama, are not used to seeing this type of attention paid to voters. And so, I think that was one of the big takeaways for my students. They were rather starstruck to see not just the candidates but all of these media personalities, people who run podcasts they listen to, people they watch on the news, other journalists. There's a lot to see there. And then from the candidates to actually have the opportunity to sit and listen to candidates talk about their platforms, that's just a great benefit for the people of Iowa that we in Alabama and a lot of other states just don't get that type of attention.

So, my students were super excited, had a great time. One of my students mentioned that she felt for the first time like she was watching democracy take place and that actually seeing something happen which is so much different than walking into a polling place and casting your ballot and leaving. So, watching the caucus happen, listening to the speeches, observing the realignment and odd things that take place. And this links maybe to a question you asked early



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on but in the caucus location that we observed, in the beginning there was one Cory Booker supporter who showed up and then in the realignment process, she had convinced all the supporters from the other non-viable candidates to join her. So, Cory Booker actually ended up a viable candidate at the caucus location we watched and my students thought that was super interesting to be able to watch something like that happen which just couldn't happen in a primary.

Ashley Muddiman:

Yeah, I think what Cynthia said sums up the student experiences of my students as well. I had one PhD student and six undergraduates. And similarly, some had been to Iowa but nobody had been to caucuses and I don't think any of them had even ever been to a political rally. So, going to so many in two or three days, I think exactly what Cynthia said. Everybody felt like oh, this is what it feels like when you get to see your politicians and they're showing up for you and you get to listen and compare and they were all really excited about the whole experience and I think hope to be able to experience something like that again.

Joshua Scacco:

Yeah, I would say that very similar to Ashley and Cynthia's students, I took a doctoral student, a Master student and four undergraduate students. And there are not only benefits in terms of experiential benefits to being able to see what's happening and observe but also the types of skills that they're taking away in terms of talking with prospective voters, recruiting caucus goers to take the survey and then coming back here after the process and looking at the data and trying to make sense and understand what's going on. They're very much doing what we all do as academics, as researchers. And so, imparting those particular skills I think is very important and being able to share that with the students is really in a lot of ways an important endeavor. An important goal of this project is to bring these field research and engage scholarship elements into really try to center them in political communication. We went into this knowing, for example, that communication scholar Judy Trent has been taking students to New Hampshire since 1988 and these types of efforts in political science are also fairly common. And so, thinking about the value that this type of effort can do for students, for undergraduate students, for graduate students and giving them the types of skills and experiences that they will be able to talk about and share later is also something invaluable.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Can you all talk a little bit more about the survey and what kinds of questions you were asking the caucus-goers? How you recruited the caucus-goers to answer the questions? I mean that, I agree, Josh, would be a great experience for the students but not without its challenges. I'm curious how it all unfolded for you.



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Cynthia Peacock:

Sure. We collaborated, of course, ahead of time in putting questions together for the surveys and although Josh and Ashley and I all have overlapping interests, we all have our own particular areas of political communication we're interested in. Ashley was had some questions on our survey about civility and incivility Josh was looking at presidential communication preferences so how people prefer to hear from the President. And with my class, we were interested in looking across the different candidates, what attributes led them to support their particular candidates in a field of Democrats so asking them who do you support and why do you support them. So, we had a lot of questions in those areas plus of course standard demographics and other partisanship and ideology questions.

So, it was sort of a lengthy survey but we did a great job and our students did an excellent job of getting responses. So, our data collection started on Saturday. We all got in Friday evening and we went to lots of candidate rallies and we worked together to sort of split up and go to different places so that we could gather data. And we went with our clipboards and surveys in hand and our students were brave. For many of them, this was the first time to walk up and ask someone to fill out a survey. We also had the benefit of using a QR code where if people wanted to take the survey on their phone, they could click on that and go straight to our survey. So, we had both paper and online and we were able to reach a lot of different people.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

By a lot, how many are you talking?

Joshua Scacco:

So, we were able to make contact with over 200 prospective voters and caucus goers. We are going through the data now. Not everyone who started a survey completed it as happens in real life as well and this, of course, is real life. We face the challenges of, for example, it's 30 plus degrees and oftentimes individuals are waiting outside in line. So, we're facing kind of elements so cold when people are taking paper surveys. We face potential technological challenges if people are taking the survey on their phone. So, that potentially cuts down on the full number of completes. The other interesting dynamics just in terms of thinking about this type of collaborative effort and in terms of opportunities and challenges is it required getting all of our institutional review boards on board with what we were doing and making sure that information was being shared with IRBs at multiple research institutions.

And one interesting takeaway that I think for anyone who might be listening to this and thinking about some similar efforts maybe with colleagues at other institutions is really starting early with your institutional review boards, having conversations with the good folks at the IRBs who are reviewing the surveys, understanding how data sharing is going to work. And oftentimes, these



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had to be personal conversations so phone calls in addition to emails to make sure that all of the universities were on board with what was happening before we got on the ground. Luckily, we didn't have many issues at least in terms of on the ground. IRB approval came for us almost at the last minute. And so, these are particular conversations and it's also good as well for the students to understand this and know that part of the research process before you have to talk to people is everything leading up to it. It is the ethical considerations of submitting and having conversations with institutional review boards. It's also the training that's required to do it. So, all of the students on the trip took the official city training so were trained to work with human subjects. And so, there's a whole process that happens before we get on the ground and then we face the potential opportunities and challenges of working with people face to face. And so, there are opportunities and there are learning experiences throughout the entire process.

Cynthia Peacock:

Yeah, and jumping in, a couple of details about like some of the face to face challenges. Like Josh mentioned, some technology challenges. I'll give you one example that kind of shows a couple of these. My team went to a Yang event that was being held inside a Marriott Hotel in the evening. So, we didn't want to collect data inside private property. So, instead we stood outside where it was cold and windy and we're trying to get people to complete the survey and nobody would have stood outside to complete the paper survey. So, we asked them to scan the QR code so they could take it inside. And some of them did and that was lovely and again, the students were so great about being energetic and getting people to talk to us and at least start the survey. But at a lot of these rallies and especially the Yang event was one of them, a lot of like cell phone service was not great because there were so many people in a space in one small location. And so, even people who wanted to take the online survey might not have been able to have internet access to complete it. So, just one example of some of the challenges we had. But even facing that we still got more surveys than I even thought we would and people were really encouraging and wanting to take the study when we asked them to. But I think those are all challenges to think about for other people who are going into the field to do this kind of study.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great advice especially the IRB and the challenges of the face to face dynamics in a challenging environment like Iowa and the caucuses. I think that's very useful. I'm wondering if Iowa nice is actually true. It sounds as if most people were pretty kind and willing to help you out. I'm wondering if you had a real difficult time with anyone getting them to take or complete the survey.



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Ashley Muddiman:

We did not have any trouble and I was really relieved that my students all had a really positive experience. So, there may be something to that Iowa nice. They were all very nice to fill out our surveys.

Cynthia Peacock:

Yeah. I completely agree.

Joshua Scacco:

Yeah. And I'll just add that four years ago when I took a team of undergraduate students, we did actually face some challenges working with some of the candidates' campaigns and I won't necessarily name names in terms of candidates. But we did have some candidates and some campaigns that were less amenable to data collection. And so, that was a challenge four years ago. Oftentimes again, those require conversations upfront with there are usually some very friendly volunteers that are trying to get individuals signed up and registered and those types of things. So, making sure we're not in their way as they're trying to do their job but also being upfront of what we're doing there as researchers and making sure that everything is good in terms of being able to survey. So, oftentimes, it is a matter of there's some initial skepticism that can be confronted particularly with the campaigns. They're there to win. They're there to sign up prospective caucus-goers. They have a task. We're coming in with a task and just making sure that everyone knows no one's going to interfere with anyone else is usually the best type of prevention in those circumstances.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm really glad, Josh, that you mentioned Judy Trent a minute ago. When we talked about setting up this podcast episode and talking to the Campaign and Elections Field Research Project, I was struck by the fact that this is something a lot of scholars have done over the years and I think it's a really fantastic program for students and for the faculty and for the research that will come out of the work that you all did. So, I'm really grateful for all of you joining us today on *Communication Matters*.

Joshua Scacco:

Yeah, absolutely.

Cynthia Peacock:

Yeah, thank you.

Ashley Muddiman:

Thanks so much.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

In NCA news, NCA is focusing its Spring public programming on political communication in battleground states. On April 30th, 2020, expert panelists will address the topic of communicating in the battlegrounds, politics in the purple states, an NCA public program to be hosted at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. To attend the program and for more information visit natcom.org/calendar. Also in NCA news, the March issue of *Spectra* will focus on political communication in the 2020 presidential campaign. Top scholars in political communication and rhetoric address Trump's presidential rhetoric, candidate social media use and much more. NCA members, the upcoming issue should arrive in your mailboxes in early March. NCA members can also access the new issue online at napcom.org/spectra. And listeners, we hope you'll tune in next week for the regular edition of *Communication Matters*. I'm speaking with Stephen Kidd and Daniel Fisher from the National Humanities Alliance. We'll be discussing the NHA annual meeting, the National Humanities Conference and the Humanities for All Project which promotes publicly engaged humanities work. I hope you'll tune in to this really interesting episode to learn how publicly engaged teaching and research in the humanities strengthens our communities, leads to better learning variances and advances humanities scholarship.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA executive director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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