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From the Iowa Caucuses to the White House

Understanding Donald Trump's
2016 Electoral Victory in Iowa

Andrew D. Green

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Palgrave Studies in US Elections

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Luke Perry
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Victory in Iowa

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Palgrave Studies in US Elections

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*For my wife and sons,
Amber, Reese, and Reilly Green.*

PREFACE

Iowa is considered “flyover” territory by many Americans. However, for politicos, Iowa provides excellent opportunities to observe and study elections and political institutions. While the state is more well known for the “retail politics” of the Iowa Caucuses, the state’s status as a swing state, its significant share of “No Party” voters, its diverse “political geography”, its non-partisan system of redistricting, its arduous process for amending the state constitution, and other political characteristics and institutions lead to interesting political outcomes, which should pique the curiosity of political scientists and politicos across the country. As interesting as Iowa politics is, little has been written about the state by political scientists. In short, Iowa politics is fascinating and justifies more attention from scholars.

The 2016 presidential election was a fascinating enterprise from start to finish in Iowa. Few expected Hillary Clinton to have a serious primary challenge. Even fewer expected Donald Trump to defeat 16 candidates to secure the Republican nomination for president. Both became a reality. Beginning with the Iowa Caucuses, Clinton was challenged by a 75-year-old self-proclaimed “Democratic Socialist” from Vermont named Bernie Sanders. Sanders caught fire in Iowa, and on caucus night, he essentially split the delegate count with Clinton. On the Republican side, except for Ted Cruz’s significant campaign organization built to win the Republican Caucuses, Trump defeated the rest of the field of Republican candidates, which included seasoned campaigners like Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Marco Rubio and Scott Walker. After securing the nomination of their respective political parties, both Clinton and Trump sent surrogates to the state, and they personally came back to campaign for Iowa’s six

Electoral College votes. After a hard-fought campaign, Trump won the state by nearly 10%. His victory had down-ballot implications for political races all across the state.

Therefore, when given the chance to write a book on the 2016 campaign in Iowa, I jumped at the chance. Political scientists have examined the outcomes of presidential elections for decades, and more recently they have examined the outcome of the 2016 election using national-level data. However, one must ask: Are the findings of national-level studies applicable to the state, or are there other factors which shaped vote choice in 2016? The goal in writing this book was to develop a volume that provided readers an empirical frame to evaluate why Donald Trump was successful in Iowa. In other words, how did a billionaire businessman from Manhattan come to Iowa, a predominantly rural state, and find success? What explains his 10-point victory over Hillary Clinton? How do we explain the significant vote shifts that occurred between 2012 and 2016? The political science literature here is used as a theoretical guide to answer the aforementioned questions in an objective, evidence-based manner.

Additionally, it was important to develop a volume of interest to both scholars and teachers of electoral politics, as well as ensuring its accessibility and readability for observers of Iowa politics. To that end, a mixed-methods approach was utilized in developing the book. The qualitative data, collected through interviews with state political elites and an original survey of county party officials, paints a rich narrative about the 2016 campaign and its outcome in the state. The qualitative data is also used to inform the theoretical development of the quantitative statistical modeling at the county level and individual level. Every effort was made to explain the results of the statistical modeling in a substantive way that still makes sense to those who are not methodologically trained academics. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data effectively explains why Trump was so successful in courting Iowa voters in 2016, and these results create a potential roadmap for how the 2020 presidential campaign will proceed in Iowa.

After spending nearly a year developing and writing this book, I have a number of people to thank for their help and guidance. First, thank you to Luke Perry for including the volume in the new series “Palgrave Studies in US Elections.” This book would not have become a reality without your support and interest.

To Michelle Chen, John Stegner, and the team at Palgrave Macmillan: Thank you for making this endeavor as easy as possible for a first-time author. Your assistance and responsiveness to inquiries is appreciated greatly.

Iowa's political culture certainly includes an emphasis on accessibility to candidates and public officials. However, political consultants and party officials in the state are also accessible to the people of Iowa. I want to thank Jeff Boeyink, Eric Branstad, Pete D'Alessandro, Jeff Kaufmann, David Kochel, Jeff Link, Andy McGuire, and Troy Price for their willingness to participate in elite interviews for the project. I also want to thank the Democratic and Republican county party officials who responded to the survey of county party officials.

I especially want to thank my colleagues at Central College for their assistance. To Mary Strey, Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Faculty Development Committee: Thank you for your support of my sabbatical leave and R&D Grant, which were essential to developing the book. To Jenae Jenison, thank you for your help in setting up interviews with state political elites. To Kelly Taylor, thank you for processing the countless interlibrary loan requests I submitted for the project. To Jim Zaffiro, thank you for supporting the project and, as department chair, for helping me create space to complete the project. To Keith Yanner, thank you for reviewing chapter drafts and being a sounding board for ideas throughout the development of the project. Finally, to Josh Dolezal, Keith Jones, and Randy Renstrom, thank you for your advice and feedback at various stages of the project.

At Central College we are also fortunate to have talented students who are eager to work with faculty members on research projects. A big thank you goes to Kurt Sernett, a sophomore at Central College, who provided invaluable assistance during the development of the book.

Thank you to the following political science colleagues who provided important feedback on methodological questions and chapter drafts: Christopher Larimer, Dan Thomas, and Stacy Ulbig.

To my parents, Dennis and Mary Lu Green: Thank you for instilling in me a love of learning and reading, and for the impromptu "Grandma Camp" over spring break, which allowed me to focus a significant amount of time on writing.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my wife, Amber, and sons, Reese and Reilly. Maintaining balance in work-life and home-life is difficult when writing a book manuscript. Amber, thank you for your willingness to pick up some of the slack at home on top of the important work you do with students. Reese and Reilly, thank you for allowing me to go to work early or stay late from time to time while working on this project. Without your love and support, this book would not have been completed.

Pella, IA

Andrew D. Green

Praise for *From the Iowa Caucuses to the White House*

“We can finally stop all the speculation surrounding Donald Trump’s surprise victory in Iowa in 2016. Andrew Green’s insightful new book provides the first systematic and, importantly, data-driven look as to how Iowa, a state that twice voted for Obama, overwhelmingly voted for Trump. Anyone interested in understanding the shifting dynamics of presidential politics, where to look for answers in 2020, or why Iowa should still be considered a swing state needs to read this book.”

—Christopher W. Larimer, *Professor of Political Science,
University of Northern Iowa, USA*

“Theories about why Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election are common. In this book about the election in Iowa, Andrew Green brings evidence to the question. His in-depth analysis explores some of the common themes associated with the election, including change and the urban-rural divide, in order to explain the political conditions and campaign choices that led to a Trump victory.”

—Julia Azari, *Associate Professor of Political Science, Marquette University, USA*

“In this impressive volume, Andrew Green takes a deep dive into Iowa’s pivot to Trump in 2016. After detailing the enormity of the change, Green unpacks perspectives among Iowan political elites for local knowledge to inform plausible accounts on what happened, and then brings a series of regression analyses to bear in testing these accounts with county-wide and a sample of individual voters. The result is the definitive study of the Trump surprise—in a state going for Democrats in six of the last seven presidential elections.”

—Dan Thomas, *Professor Emeritus, Wartburg College, USA*

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CHAPTER 1

The 2016 Election in Iowa: An Introduction

I met the President for the first time ... April 8th, 2015, and I knew at that meeting that he was going to be president. He has "it." My Dad has "it." President Reagan had "it." President Clinton had "it." It's just one of those things where they have a natural ability to really connect with people.

—Eric Branstad, *Iowa State Political Director*
for Donald J. Trump for President

Abstract In this chapter, I contextualize the 2016 presidential election in Iowa, including a description of the election results statewide. Focusing on the literature written about Iowa politics, this chapter introduces the reader to the roots of competitive elections, which leads to the state being identified as a swing state. This chapter also focuses on the significant shift in candidate preference between Barack Obama's statewide victories in 2008 and 2012, and Donald Trump's statewide victory in 2016. It concludes with an outline for the remainder of the book, accompanied by a description of the remaining chapters.

Keywords Donald Trump • Hillary Clinton • Barack Obama • Swing state • Pivot counties