

THE EARLY STATES

How to read the tea leaves in the early presidential primaries

For political junkies, the early-state presidential primaries and caucuses are like the Final Four, World Series and March Madness rolled into one — a winter moment of drama, surprises and, most important, the first actual vote tallies of the 2012 cycle.

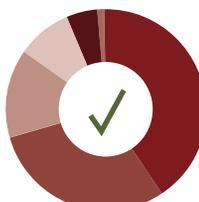
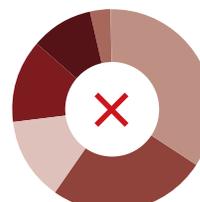
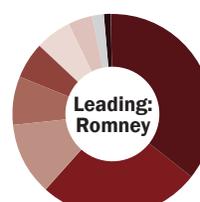
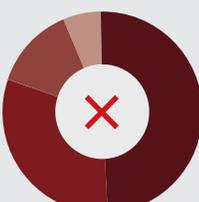
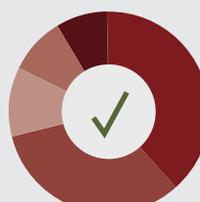
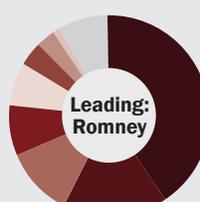
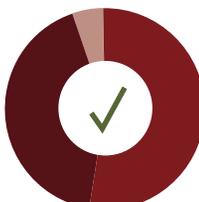
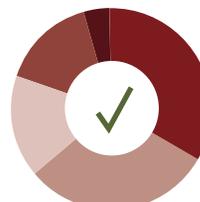
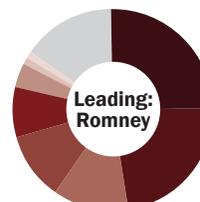
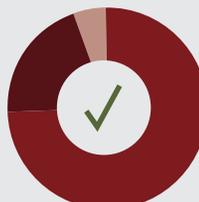
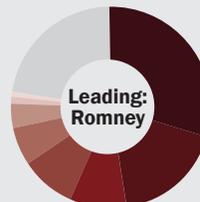
Luckily for POLITICO, we have the expertise and experience of reporters and editors working on the ground in the early states to help us make sense of what's happening. Here are some tips from our partner

publications in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida on what the national media often gets wrong about the early states.

And for more early-state analysis, join us Tuesday, starting at 8 a.m., for POLITICO's One-Year Countdown, featuring these reporters, POLITICO staffers and political players and analysts. To RSVP, go to: POLITICO.event.com/event/OneYearCountdown, or watch online at www.politico.com.

HOW WELL DO THE EARLY STATES PREDICT FUTURE WINNERS?

Looking at the past two Republican nominations for president, Florida and South Carolina both got it right in 2000 and 2008. If Iowa was reflective of all 50 states in 2008, Mike Huckabee would've been the Republican nominee running against Barack Obama. New Hampshire got it wrong in 2000 but recovered in 2008.

QUICK FACTS	2000 GOP NOMINATION	2008 GOP NOMINATION	2012 GOP NOMINATION
<p>2,284 Total GOP Delegates 1,143 Needed to Win</p>	<p>National Winner: George W. Bush</p>	<p>National Winner: John McCain</p>	<p>Latest Polling</p>
<p>IOWA 28 GOP DELEGATES DATE OF CAUCUSES: Jan. 3, 2012</p> 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41% BUSH 30% FORBES 14% KEYES 9% BAUER 5% McCAIN 1% HATCH 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34% HUCKABEE 25% ROMNEY 13% THOMPSON 13% McCAIN 10% PAUL 3% GIULIANI 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23% ROMNEY 22% CAIN 12% PAUL 8% BACHMANN 7% GINGRICH 7% PERRY 5% SANTORUM 1% HUNTSMAN 15% UNDECIDED <p>Des Moines Register poll, Oct. 23-26</p>
<p>NEW HAMPSHIRE 23 GOP DELEGATES Expected to be reduced to 12 because of a Republican National Committee penalty DATE OF PRIMARY: Jan. 10, 2012 (expected)</p> 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 49% McCAIN 31% BUSH 13% FORBES 6% KEYES 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 38% McCAIN 32% ROMNEY 11% HUCKABEE 9% GIULIANI 8% PAUL 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41% ROMNEY 17% CAIN 11% PAUL 8% GINGRICH 7% HUNTSMAN 4% PERRY 3% BACHMANN 1% SANTORUM 5% UNDECIDED <p>Rasmussen Reports poll, Oct. 25</p>
<p>SOUTH CAROLINA 50 GOP DELEGATES Expected to be reduced to 25 because of a Republican National Committee penalty DATE OF PRIMARY: Jan. 21, 2012</p> 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 53% BUSH 42% McCAIN 5% KEYES 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 33% McCAIN 30% HUCKABEE 16% THOMPSON 15% ROMNEY 4% PAUL 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 25% ROMNEY 23% CAIN 12% PAUL 11% PERRY 8% GINGRICH 4% BACHMANN 1% SANTORUM 1% HUNTSMAN 15% UNDECIDED OR NONE <p>CNN/Time/ORC poll, Oct. 20-25</p>
<p>FLORIDA 50 GOP DELEGATES Reduced from 99 because of a Republican National Committee penalty DATE OF PRIMARY: Jan. 31, 2012</p> 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 74% BUSH 20% McCAIN 5% KEYES 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 36% McCAIN 31% ROMNEY 15% GIULIANI 14% HUCKABEE 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30% ROMNEY 18% CAIN 9% GINGRICH 9% PERRY 6% PAUL 4% BACHMANN 1% SANTORUM 1% HUNTSMAN 22% UNDECIDED OR NONE <p>CNN/Time/ORC poll, Oct. 20-25</p>

IOWA

Every four years, a new crop of caucus-haters sprouts up, generating headlines like this one from a recent Stone Zone blog: "Hicks in Iowa shouldn't be picking the next president." Stone — as in Roger Stone — is a GOP political consultant, not a journalist, but he's rehashing a common theme. Many critics hold that Iowa is too white, too old and too rural to have such an outsize say in choosing the next leader of the free world.

Let's look at the facts.

It's undeniable that Iowa is older, whiter and fatter than the American average. So why is Herman Cain leading Newt Gingrich in the caucus campaign? Iowa is 92 percent white, and yet it was instrumental in elect-

ing the nation's first African-American president. Republican John McCain looked a lot more like the Iowa profile, but Barack Obama won the general election.

Three presidents since 1972 have won the Iowa caucuses. Most have at least finished third. That's a long way from saying Iowans make the decision for the rest of the country. (In fact, critics often point to this record as a way to say Iowa shouldn't get so much attention.) The early states do make a difference in a nomination battle. Iowa's clearest role is to weed out weak candidates. You don't often hear caucus critics arguing, however, that Lamar Alexander, Dick Lugar or Orrin Hatch would have been the GOP nominee if only they'd done

better in Iowa.

The value of the caucuses, as the veteran national reporters know, is the conscientious engagement of Iowa voters. They're educated, they ask informed questions, and they expect candidates to do more than buy ads to earn their vote. The issues Iowans care most about — jobs, the economy, federal spending — are the same as American voters' priorities.

Now, if you'll excuse me, my tractor is double-parked.

Kathie Obradovich is a political columnist at the Des Moines Register.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

I was asked to provide a few words on what the national media most often "gets wrong" about New Hampshire.

The answer: not much, really.

You guys seem to know the state pretty well after all these primary campaigns. And the national media, after all, is never really wrong, is it? After all, this is the national media we're talking about here. What you say goes.

So, when the national media says New Hampshire is quaint, it's right. I do live in a quaint town, as a matter of fact. Downright Rockwellian, especially at this time of year.

But Manchester, or Nashua, or I-93 near the Mass. border at 5:30 p.m.?

Well, quaint ain't exactly the word.

In New Hampshire, Live Free or Die is not just a motto, it's a way of life. At least that's what the national

media says.

And to a degree, that's right.

We're the only state without a mandatory seat belt law for adults. Motorcyclists aren't required to wear helmets, only "proper eye protection," whatever that means.

But we do have a few laws. For one thing, you can't drop out of high school until you're 18. You have to obey the speed limit. And by that I mean you have to go at least 75 on the highways, snow or no snow. And of course, you do have to genuflect at the site of the fallen Old Man of the Mountain.

Politically, the national media gets just about everything right about New Hampshire, too. It should. I doubt any state, with the possible exception of Iowa, has been more dissected and analyzed and polled and

prodded than ours, certainly not on a per capita basis.

But for the sake of clarity, I'd just point out that while our state House of Representatives is the most representative governing body in the nation, we do have royalty in our state, too.

I know, you're thinking I mean the Gregg, Sununu and Bass dynasties.

No. I mean that soft-spoken, balding man who lurks in the corner suite of the second floor of our State House.

King Bill. Gardner the Great, that is. The Protector of the Primary.

John DiStaso is a senior political reporter at the New Hampshire Union Leader.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Yes, South Carolina's Senate President Pro Tem spent almost \$30,000 on a replica Confederate cannon.

And yes, the Palmetto State is home to Bob Jones University whose top institutional goal is to inspire regenerated students to know, love and serve Jesus Christ.

And yes, it's also known for bare-knuckle politics that most recently flared up last year, when a former governor's aide claimed he had an affair with a female state lawmaker running for governor.

But it also has a diverse mix of conservative voters who have handed important wins to Republican presidential hopefuls. Whoever has won this state's GOP primary has gone on to win the nomination every time since 1980.

South Carolina GOP chairman Chad Connelly said sometimes the national media misses that fact.

"We're an early state for a reason," he said. "We are a good cross section of the conservative Republican vote. We have all three — social, fiscal and military conservatives. ... Some may wonder, 'Why does South Carolina get in this spot?' We've proven our spot."

The diversity of the state's Republicans can be seen in the contrasting styles of Sens. Lindsey Graham, one of the most moderate Republicans, and Jim DeMint, hero to the tea party.

Graham said he thinks the national media is mistakenly portraying the state's Republicans as overly ideological. "That doesn't resonate with the reality of how we've been a good filter," he said. "South Carolina conservatives are going to be very practical. They're going to look for somebody who can beat President Obama."

Former state GOP chairman Katon Dawson, who is

backing Texas Gov. Rick Perry, said the national media misses how sophisticated the state is — how the state's presidential primaries have sharpened consultants here.

But Dawson has no qualm with the state's rough-and-tumble reputation — one that stems in part from a whispering campaign against Sen. John McCain during his 2000 presidential bid.

"It is a brutal primary, but it was a brutal primary state when Democrats controlled the state," he said. "Our races become very personal. Backgrounds are checked. Voting records are dissected. Personal business habits, personal life habits become an issue."

Robert Behre is a political reporter at the Charleston Post and Courier.

FLORIDA

Florida is so massive, diverse and ever-changing, it's always risky to make assumptions and generalizations about politics in America's biggest battleground.

Some things to keep in mind:

1. Size. Ten major media markets, many of them dramatically different from one another, culturally and politically. The Tampa Bay market alone has an electorate roughly the size of the entire states of Colorado or Arizona. Running a statewide campaign in Nevada is akin to running in the West Palm Beach market.

2. Don't forget early voting. In 2008, 55 percent of the vote was cast before Election Day. Where the race stands one month out can be just as important as where

it stands on Election Day.

3. Don't underestimate the GOP turnout advantage. Yes, Democrats have a more than 500,000-voter registration advantage, but even with Obama's get-out-the-vote efforts Republicans still outperform Democrats. A big part of Obama's Florida win in 2008; only 78 percent of Republicans turned out, compared to 83 percent in 2004.

4. The Florida Hispanic vote — about 13 percent of the electorate — is much different than elsewhere. It's a mix of Cubans (a shrinking share), Puerto Ricans (growing share), Mexicans, Colombians, Dominicans and many more nationalities. Hostility toward ille-

gal immigration is as strong in Florida as many other states, though clumsy rhetoric by a politician can turn off crucial Hispanic voters.

5. Miami may be more glamorous and colorful, but Tampa Bay is ground zero for statewide politics. It's the largest media market (and significantly cheaper than Miami), and home to roughly one in four voters in the primary and general election. It's the biggest battleground in the country's biggest battleground state.

Adam Smith is political editor at the St. Petersburg Times.