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There are some things that are uniquely American, like apple pie, fireworks on the Fourth of July ... and the ridiculous hoopla that surrounds the Iowa caucuses, the first big electoral event in the run-up to the presidential election.

On Friday, the state's Democratic and Republican parties announced a new system that will be used to count the votes cast by Iowans during the complicated election process. Authorized precinct representatives will use new apps to report results to their party headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa's capital, when the election takes place early next year.

The system is powered by Microsoft's Azure cloud platform and was built by the tech giant in collaboration with its partner InterKnowledge, which also made CNN's Magic Wall election result reporting tool. It replaces a set-up that required precinct representatives to call into automated phone systems with no way of authenticating whether the person was authorized to do so and then record votes using their phone's keypad. Representatives also mailed paper records to the party's central office.

That was a potentially error-prone process that led to problems. In 2012, the state Republican party initially reported that Mitt Romney won the caucuses, but ended up changing the final count after discovering problems with the votes submitted. It took two weeks for the party to resolve the errors and declare a victor, despite never receiving results from 8 of the state's precincts.

It also ran at odds with the around-the-clock coverage of the presidential election from American media. Iowa's primary election has been the first in the nation since 1972, which means the results are the first sign of what may be on the horizon for voters and candidates in other parts of the country.

Microsoft's new system not only provides for easy transmission of election results, but it also allows party administrators to view results as they come in and will automatically identify potential problem areas. Election officials can then contact the precinct representative to clear anything up. It also means that tech experts will be lending their security know-how to the process, which is a good sign since the Iowa Democrats' press release announcing the system included spammy advertisements Friday for discount pharmaceuticals.

It's an interesting way to modernize the caucus process, which is among the quirkiest fixtures of modern American government. Each party has a different process for nominating a candidate, but one thing is constant across both: Iowans gather in a room to discuss the candidates' relative merits, before deciding on how many delegates to send to a county-wide caucus. The Democrats' system is particularly complicated. It involves sectioning off a room into multiple areas for supporters of different

candidates, and then having those different camps try to convince their fellow voters to join a different side. ([Microsoft has released a video explaining the whole process here.](#)) – **IDG News Service**



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