

2000 Election

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - In the end, the state that weighed in first in the presidential race was the among last to finally decide.

One of the longest, most exhausting presidential campaign seasons in Iowa history came down to one long, tension-filled night. When it finally ended early Wednesday, hours after the polls had closed the night before, few Iowans were awake to hear the result.

Weary Democrats mustered what cheers they could as Al Gore eked out a narrow victory over Republican George W. Bush in the closest presidential race in Iowa in a quarter century.

Gore won with the help of voters like Pleasant Hill pharmacist Phyllis Smith, who doubted Bush's leadership abilities.

"He never had a successful business, so why give him the U.S. government?" Smith said.

And so the circle was complete. Iowa was the first state to have a say in the presidential race with its January precinct caucuses, which Gore and Bush won, and one of the last to declare a winner.

Iowa did not officially fall into Gore's column until 3:13 a.m. Wednesday. Still unresolved was whether the state's seven electoral votes helped make him the next president. As the nation awakened to a new day, the race was still too close to call.

"I've never seen anything like this," Iowa attorney general Tom Miller, a Democrat, said as the tabulating continued with no outcome in sight. "I've never seen anything this close."

The race ran even closer than the polls had projected _ and those margins were so thin that Iowa had been considered a toss-up state and received attention in the campaign like never before.

With all but seven precincts reporting, Gore had received 49 percent of the vote to narrowly defeat Bush, who had 48 percent. With 99 percent of the votes tallied, his margin was under 5,000 votes _ 634,475 to 629,521 _ a mere 0.4 percent of the total vote.

Green Party candidate Ralph Nader had 27,566 votes, or 2 percent of the total. Reform Party nominee Pat Buchanan picked up 1 percent or 6,776 votes.

It was the closest presidential race in Iowa since 1976, when President Gerald Ford defeated Jimmy Carter by 12,978 votes _ about 1 percent of the vote.

Gore had led 50-47 for most of the night, then saw his margin shrink as results came in from conservative Pottawattamie County in western Iowa. That, and a hitch in Allamakee County, left the race hanging in balance until almost all the votes were in.

The machine used to count votes in the northeastern Iowa county, which is heavily Republican, broke down and had to be sent to Minnesota for repairs. Until the machine was returned, the Allamakee votes could not be counted.

Gore carried traditional Democratic strongholds: Des Moines, Dubuque, Cedar Rapids-Iowa City, Waterloo and Davenport. Those urban areas were just enough to offset Bush's advantage in more numerous but less populated rural counties.

"I think he won Iowa because the vice president had a better get-out-the-vote effort in the state," said Gov. Tom Vilsack, a Democrat. "That was the margin of victory in this state. Folks did a tremendous job in making sure that Democratic votes got to the polls."

Campaign workers from both parties put forth a massive effort to turn out voters on Tuesday, calling them on the phone and offering to drive them to polling sites.

Robert Carlson, 69, a retired construction worker from Pleasant Hill, said he got so tired of the Gore campaign calling him that he took his revenge in the voting booth _ a straight Republican ticket.

Not that he would have voted for Gore anyway.

"Al Gore is the biggest damn liar in the country," Carlson said.

Iowans had plenty of chances to get to know the candidates. In the past, Iowa dropped off the campaign radar screen once the precinct caucuses were over. This year, the state stood front and center in the race.

Starting with Gore's boat trip down the Mississippi River, he and Bush visited Iowa more than a dozen times and stumped in the state to the very end. Both stopped in Iowa on Monday, the final day of the campaign.

Said Drake University political historian Hugh Winebrenner: "If you haven't seen a candidate in Iowa, you haven't tried very hard."