

The Dangers of “Electability”

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Dear Democratic Primary Voter,

So far, many Presidential primary voters have cast their vote for the most “electable” candidate. That has me worried. I’m worried that such voting will not produce the candidate with the best chance of winning, and I’m worried about what such voting could do to democracy even if it succeeded. Most of you, like me, have yet to vote. So I’m going to explain why I don’t plan to consider electability, and why I hope you won’t either.

Picking a Loser: If electability swings my vote, my logic is “Well, he’s not my favorite, but I think other people will like him better.”

If enough people do this, the perverse effect is to hand the nomination to someone who is second or third best. The hope is that “others” will like this person; the reality is that many who voted for him (always a him) really preferred someone else, and saw some flaws or limitations in the candidate.

This is an awfully risky way to choose a champion.

Reading Minds: It’s very hard to know what the world looks like to someone who is much different from myself. And yet that is precisely what I must do if concerned with electability.

Fortunately, I’m a trained Sociologist, and I know my limitations. Let me try to convince you they are yours as well. For example, most people asked to estimate the average income, or even the minimum necessary income, pick a number much closer to their own income than is correct. They don’t realize how different actual incomes are.

Another example: I think the line that “the right to life begins at conception and ends at birth” is a good joke, and that a call for small government and military buildup is hypocrisy. But many voters don’t, because their positions grow out of a different world view than mine. It would be naive for

me to think I could get inside their heads and predict how things will strike them.

There is another game that places a premium on telling how others think: investing. With stocks, the trick is to figure out what other people will pay, and purchase accordingly. Yet the professionals who make good money doing this (I also used to be one of them) do no better, on average, than random guesses. They, and most of the amateur investors, just had a very expensive lesson in their own ignorance. Maybe you should consider that before you try to divine the mind of the “average” investor or the “average” voter.

Predicting the Future: You may object that the previous concerns are misplaced, because all you need is polling data. But, as the recent rise of Kerry and fall of Dean attests, there is a problem. You don’t need polling data from now; you need it from just before the election.

Electability is a concern about how people not in the Democratic primaries will vote. But most of them haven’t really had a look at the Democratic candidates, and won’t until well into the general election.

Furthermore, many of the most important events haven’t happened yet. Michael Dukakis looked very strong, and then came Willie Horton, the pledge of allegiance, Boston Harbor, and an unfortunate tank ride.

This little bit of history also highlights the importance of the unfolding dynamics of the campaign. Concern about “electability” usually comes with an implicit theory of those dynamics: winning is about convincing the swing voters.

This is a dubious theory; even Al Gore has said that he ran on it, and it was a mistake. What about the ability of a candidate to energize partisans who would otherwise stay home (it was the fall off in Democratic voters, more than a GOP surge, that lost the house in 1996)? What about the ability to take an issue (e.g., the war in Iraq) to the opposition and stick it to them? A moderate, centrist person may seem like the best person to win the election, but that doesn’t make it so.

So far I’ve talked about why voting for someone because of their perceived electability is error prone and hazardous. In other words, it *can’t* be done. I also think it *shouldn’t* be done, because even the attempt to vote on electability is hazardous to democracy.

Helping the Rich: Money helps win elections, buys respectful treatment from the press (lack of funds makes you not a “serious” candidate),

and builds awareness that may be reflected in polls. So if I consider any of these, I am directly or indirectly picking a candidate based on money.

A tiny minority gives money to politicians. Most of the money comes from the 1 in 1,000 who give over \$1,000.

Fat cats neither need nor deserve my help shaping politics.

Helping Bigots: Some people are not going to vote for a candidate who is a woman, a black, a Jew, or a Catholic, or anything but a straight, white, male Protestant. So, if I'm concerned about electability, it's only prudent to follow their lead. Many elections are close; why take a chance?

It's bad enough that some people are prejudiced; I don't need to amplify their prejudice by casting extra votes on their behalf.

Shrinking Democratic Debate: If you say "Dennis Kucinich has the best judgement and the best position on the issues" and I say "He'll never get elected," it means I'll never have to debate what I really think should be done. If I keep this up for awhile, I probably won't even know what I think should be done.

Instead, we'll all play amateur pollsters, discussing decisions that other people make. We'll debate how other people will vote. The honest discussion of what our country should do will never come.

In Conclusion: If you don't have the courage to vote for the person who you think would make the best President, don't expect anyone else to do so on your behalf. In a democratic election, you are supposed to represent yourself; I might even say you have a duty to do so. Strategic voting has its place, but casting a vote in a primary on some dubious calculation of what others unlike yourself will do in the future is just a bad idea. Don't do it.

Sincerely yours,
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