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Forum: Victory by no means assured

As recently as a few weeks ago, the political pundits were ready to anoint Howard Dean the Democratic nominee for the 2004 general election, this without a single primary or caucus vote being cast. With the polls tightening in Iowa and New Hampshire however, it appears the Democratic Party may be coming to its senses.

Mr. Dean is the surprise candidate of this presidential election. He seemed to come out of nowhere in 2003 and surge in popularity, easily outpolling and outearning all the other candidates. He garnered heavyweight union and party endorsements and with the addition of Carol Moseley Braun's, even that of his political victims.

Mr. Dean's policies however, are those of the extreme left-wing of the Democratic Party, making him unattractive nationally. Mr. Dean's initial surge in popularity, earning power and poll-numbers is to a great extent due to his message being well-received by voters most active in the early part of an election; primary voters, volunteers, and activists. These voters are the real believers, giving of their time, energy, and money for the cause. Mr. Dean's supporters are the type who politically never rest, and this has enabled

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him to show well early, creating momentum.

Despite this early success, it seemed odd that the punditry and media were ready to proclaim Mr. Dean the victor without a single vote being cast. While many attributed this to the early poll number dominance and big endorsements, it was more likely a result of money Mr. Dean was bringing in: More in a single quarter than any other Democrat ever.

Of all the candidates, Mr. Dean has best utilized the Internet for donations. However, being a relatively new funding source for politicians and considering the ease of donating via the medium, it is possible some have assigned more significance to Mr. Dean's earning power than actually exists, mistaking big money for more widespread support.

Mr. Dean may still be the favorite to win the nomination, but to secure this he will have to win well early in the primaries. Based on the latest numbers, this could be

a challenge. Zogby International reported on Jan. 16 that John Kerry leads the Iowa caucus, by 5 percentage points. In contrast, Mr. Dean led by 5 points on Jan. 12. In New Hampshire, where Mr. Dean was enjoying 20 percentage-point leads in late December, Wesley Clark trails currently by only 5 percentage points. This is up from being 15 points behind on the Jan. 7.

The change in poll numbers is due to more mainstream Democrats now considering who should be the nominee. These voters are far more moderate than the volunteers and activists who got behind Mr. Dean early. To such voters, Mr. Dean does not have the allure of a John Kerry or Richard Gephardt. The policies that won Mr. Dean so much support early-on — his opposition to the war in Iraq, his call for a repeal of the Bush tax cuts, his willingness to rely more on the United Nations — will hurt him among mainstream voters.

Mr. Dean's negatives will become more significant as the primary season continues. He is weak among Southern and minority voters, and his attempt to embrace the former hurt him with the latter. Additionally, his refusal to release his gubernatorial records does not bode well for voters wanting to take a closer look.

While at first glance Mr. Dean is attractive to those seeking the anti-Bush, few believe he can win in November. This is the dilemma for the leadership of the Democratic Party. In Mr. Dean, they have

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a candidate who is considered unwinnable. Yet so far, he has done everything needed to be embraced by the party as the front-runner.

This past November, the experts appeared ready to give Mr. Dean the nomination and move on to the general election. Now however, the electorate appears to be coming to the realization of what a Dean candidacy may mean for the party in 2004.

With the polls tightening and real voters involved, victory for Mr. Dean is by no means assured.

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Mr. Pappas is a Maryland-based writer and editor.



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