
Unfortunately, he is not equally numerate. Can you spot the problem with his handicapping?

Essay
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The Henny Poll

WASHINGTON

To the question "How's your wife?" the comedian Henny Youngman would reply "compared to who?" He should have said with whom, of course, but the political point is valid: between campaigns, those polled tend to judge incumbents in a vacuum. We will put that right today.

Much was made of a New York Times/CBS News poll showing a four point dip in Bush the Younger's job approval ratings over the past month. However, the Gallup poll showed virtually no change in that period, and the most recent Zogby survey showed a bump upward for Bush.

The lesson; put not your faith in pollsters, especially when they offer their interviewees no alternative. Instead, measure your opinion of the president against those who may be running against him in a few short years. Here is the early-morning line handicapped by one right-wing tout:

Tom Daschle (4-1), sure to command regular national TV coverage as Senate majority leader. An amiable partisan who is always on message and regularly on the record, he is attractive to Democratic nominating constituencies. Drawbacks: South Dakota is uncoastal, and his Senate power carries the risk of chronic oppositionitis or too-frequent compromise, as well as suffocation in legislative detail.

Joe Biden (5-1), new chairman of Foreign Relations, which guarantees serious exposure at times of global tension; quick mind, has been on the track before and will plagiarize nothing. Needs identification with a domestic issue; nobly shies from muddy track.

Richard Gephardt (15-1), knows too much about too many issues; needs speakership in 2002 to be taken seriously, at which point he'd have to be a crazy gambler to run. Ever lengthening long shot

John Edwards (9-1), good-looking, hyperarticulate trial lawyer from North Carolina, frequently mentioned by future-wavers. Will be closely associated with likely H.M.O. lawsuits. Adept in debate, though light on gravitas; needs to avoid appearance of slickness. Shows too much early media foot, but his fund-raisers can belly up to the plaintiff bar.

John Kerry (4-1), Massachusetts New Democrat with good financing, multilateralist impulses and a passion for preventing drilling in pristine Arctic wastes. Studious and serious. Must overcome perpetually worried look and will have to advertise heavily coming out of the starting gate to show he's "not that Kerrey."

Pat Leahy (6-1), Vermont chairman of Judiciary who will become nationally known at storm center of Supreme Court confirmations. Comes across on TV as soft-spoken but hard-headed; was loyal and effective Clinton defender. Starts far off pace and, on the outside but could close unexpectedly in stretch.

Joe Lieberman (5-1), now a familiar face with few negatives who would deliver centrist and faith-based voters.

Handicapping 2004 the right way.

Will attract new attention overseeing Government Operations when scandals bloom, and is well positioned with his "new prosperity" in case of recession. Problem: has pledged not to compete with Al Gore for nomination. If Gore issues a Coolidge statement ("I do not choose to run"), lower Lieberman odds to 3-1.

Chris Dodd (4-1), combination of heart and head appeals to old Clintonites, Catholic, can run knowledgably in domestic or international turf. Workhorse rather than show horse, partisan but not unreasonable, experienced on TV, his time may be coming. As with Leahy, you read it in this tip sheet first.

Russell Feingold (8-1), youthful, idealistic, courage of his convictions (he eschewed soft money and yet won in Wisconsin). Needs identification with issue other than campaign finance reform. If backed by an off-reservation McCain, could offer delegates capture of the center.

Al Gore (2-1), wise to lie low for first Bush year, his course will become clear if he decides to campaign widely for Congressional Democrats next year. Sly slogan: "Re-elect Gore in Two Thousand Four." Overweight or trim; dismissed as an old face by resentful party strategists or supported quietly by soccer moms in primary states; helped or hindered by distance from Clinton - it's Al against the field.

Now you're ready for the Henny pollster's call: "How's your candidate?" Do you prefer Bush – or one of the above?

Once you've thought about this, go to the next page to see what's wrong.
Consider the 4-1 odds against Daschle. They mean he has one chance in five of receiving the nomination, or a 20% probability. The 15-1 odds against Gephardt mean he has one chance in 16 of receiving the nomination, or a 6.25% probability. Converting the odds against the other candidates to probabilities yields a total probability of 168% that one of these men will receive the nomination!

Source: John Allen Paulos, Counting Nominees, Did Safire Mean What he Wrote?, ABCNEWS.com, June 28, 2001