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## Finishing in the Money (an early look at the 2008 presidential election)

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# FINISHING IN THE MONEY

**Michael I. Niman** on the US election horse race

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They're all lined up at the starting gate, ready to go. Bugles sound. And they're off. It's Clinton (the media likes to call her Hillary because she's a girl) and Obama neck and neck at the first turn, pulling away from the pack. Obama's out front by a nose. It's Obama by a head. It looks like Obama's got it. But wait – here's Clinton on the outside neck and neck with Obama in the final turn. Now she's pulling ahead at the wire. And it's Clinton, our winner by a Diebold nose. Wow, what a race. And what a smart dresser she is.

This pretty much sums up election coverage this primary season. It's a horse race. It's all about who's in the lead – not why or how. We all love a winner, issues be damned. We're the cheering mob with our life savings on the line, and they're the horses. It's as simple as that.

Of course there are issues. But issues are dangerous. Especially when they tend to embarrass the candidates that the corporate media has already crowned as finalists before the first vote has ever been cast. Sure, we get to vote

in our model of a democracy. But the field is narrowed to a point that our vote is stripped of its real potential power. We can choose between vanilla and chocolate – but perhaps we don't want ice cream?

The corporate media, now an ad hoc monopoly dominated by about five corporations with interlocking boards of directors, sets the pace for the race, anointing "front runners" as the only "viable" or "electable" candidates – before the first vote is ever cast. The unworthy contenders become "minor" or "second-tier" candidates who, as the *Wall Street Journal* pulled no punches in reminding us in a January 10 article, just "siphon off votes" from the legitimate candidates.

The most interesting media-preordained loser this year is Cleveland's representative to Congress, Dennis Kucinich. What makes Kucinich interesting isn't the tabloid fodder about his having lived in Shirley McClain's basement or his being married to a British ex-hippie half his age, or even that McClain claims that she and Kucinich once saw a UFO. This stuff certainly could ultimately un-

dermine his electability (I find the daughter-aged wife thing a bit creepy), but given the big picture, it's not what sets him apart from the other candidates, all of whom have weird histories of personal drama.

What sets Kucinich apart from the rest of the pack is the fact that he is the only candidate in the Democratic primary who voted against the Patriot Act and against authorizing the Iraq invasion; who supports the only proven model for universal health care – a not-for-profit, single-payer system; who has refused corporate campaign financing (not that any was offered); and who supports a universal right to marriage for all consenting adults. He is also the only candidate who has proposed a New Deal/WPA style economic stimulus program to pull the nation out of recession. And he's the only Democrat who wants to end the Iraq War immediately – like pronto.

### **A winning loser**

What sets Kucinich apart from the other “losers” is the fact that he was winning debates and polls while the corporate media was writing him off as a loser and, more importantly, marginalizing his voice and keeping his populist ideology out of the presidential contest.

Let's go back to the early stages of the race, when ABC hosted a full debate with the top 10 Democratic contenders. An ABC news poll showed viewers choosing Kucinich as the winner by a large margin, with 34 percent believing he bested Obama (22 percent), Clinton (14 percent) and Edwards (four percent). Most polls are of questionable accuracy, but this one was conducted by the same

organization that later contradicted its own findings by declaring that Kucinich didn't have enough support to warrant inclusion in subsequent debates. Kucinich was still polling strong in November when CSPAN's viewers chose him as the clear winner of a seven-way debate. In that poll, 41 percent of those queried chose Kucinich as the winner, compared to 18 percent for Clinton, 15 percent for Obama and five percent for Edwards.

Toward the end of January, NBC in Las Vegas televised a local Democratic presidential debate in advance of the Nevada caucuses. Their criterion for participation was for candidates to rank among the top four in national polls. There are a few problems here. First, polls are only as accurate as their methodology allows them to be. But even more importantly, this is not how democracy works. Democracy is not set up to limit debate – especially to those who are only popular before the public knows anything about them. The only way poll respondents can be equipped to pick a favorite is by hearing the views of all the candidates – not just those the corporate media determines are worthy of coverage.

What we wind up with here is a Catch-22. Only popular candidates get media coverage. Candidates become popular by being covered in the media.

Candidates can also become popular by buying the necessary media access. Here's where the real invisible election contest comes into play. In American politics, the candidate with the most money almost always wins – this rule has held true with top fundraisers winning in over 90 percent of TV-era Congressional elections.

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## ELECTION FEVER 1

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It's in this first, invisible election that the presidential front-runners have established themselves. So far, Hillary Clinton, a former member of Wal-Mart's board of directors, is the clear winner with \$91 million. Barack Obama, another stalwart of the status quo, has racked up \$80 million. Edwards, who has made the politically dangerous issue of economic inequality central to his campaign, has only raised slightly over \$30 million. Kucinich, by comparison, has only raised slightly over \$2 million. This is why Edwards is "in third place" and Kucinich is a second-tier spoiler.

The problem for NBC, however, is that their poll put loser Kucinich fourth in the 10-way race, earning him a spot in NBC's exclusive, winner's circle debate in Nevada. (Blame the Internet.) By its own rules, NBC had to invite Kucinich to participate in the debate. But rather than allow Kucinich, who has publically spoken ill of NBC and its owner – military contractor GE – to participate, the network changed its rules mid-game. NBC uninvited him and limited the debate to the three most popular candidates: Clinton, Obama and Edwards.

### **Missile maker & gatekeeper**

Kucinich sued, arguing that by excluding "credible candidates" NBC was artificially narrowing the field and in effect endorsing those candidates it had selected to participate in the debate. The lower court found in his favor. A higher court reversed the ruling, and with hours to go before the debate was to begin, a Nevada judge made a final ruling in Kucinich's favor: By excluding him from the debate, NBC violated the Federal Communications Act of 1934.

NBC responded by pulling the debate off local Nevada broadcast television and running it only on its national cable network, thus evading the FCC law it would otherwise be violating. It seemed they really didn't want Nevadans to hear Dennis Kucinich.

The end result was that the very part of the electorate that Kucinich needed to connect with – people who couldn't afford the \$45-and-up monthly cable charges – would not get to hear anyone debate. In our malfunctioning democracy, the media is the gatekeeper. And the election is over before it begins.

Like Kucinich, John Edwards is another preordained loser, though his third-place fundraising finish (thank the trial lawyers) guarantees him media recognition. So we have Edwards and his populist message about the toxicity of social inequality muscling its way into the debates, but still the media needs to remind us that this winner is a loser. Hence, we got *USA Today's* December 2007 article about the supposed "electability" of presidential candidates. Obama, their polls show, is more electable than Clinton in hypothetical matchups against various potential Republican nominees. Edwards, well, he really wasn't part of this story. This is rather odd, since, as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting pointed out in a December 21 "Action Alert," polls that included Edwards, such as those conducted by CNN, showed him faring better than both Clinton and Obama in matchups against Republicans.

Despite its own polls, however, CNN was no friendlier toward Edwards than *USA Today*. After Edwards upset the pollsters by beating Clinton in the Iowa

caucuses, coming in as a strong second behind Obama, CNN's David Gergen declared on January 3 that "John Edwards has no place to go...because he has no money."

Get it? Third place in the money race just ain't good enough. The next day the *New York Times'* David Brooks declared that Edwards' political career is "probably over." By January 7, before 95 percent of the national electorate had a chance to vote, *USA Today*, the folks who sidelined Edwards in December, reported that "[t]he Democratic contest is a two-person race" between Clinton and Obama.

Interestingly enough, by contrast, while Edwards' surprise second-place finish in the Iowa Democratic caucus condemned him to the trash bin of history, "Bomb-bomb-bomb, bomb-bomb Iran" crooner John McCain's fourth-place finish in the Iowa Republican caucus was nearly universally celebrated in the corporate media as a victory and a jump-start for the McCain campaign. This media-manufactured momentum propelled McCain into a victory in the

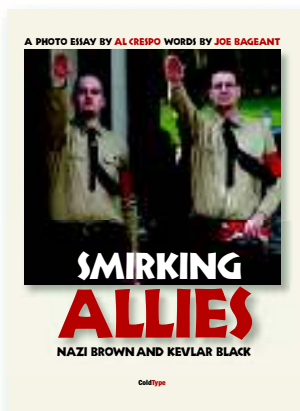
subsequent New Hampshire primary – the same primary that transformed Clinton from a loser into a winner.

The New Hampshire results aren't necessarily indicative of anything other than how a small group of relatively unique ("Live free or die"), overwhelmingly white folks happened to vote in the dead of winter. And they might not even indicate that. In what threatens to be a harbinger of worse things to come, the New Hampshire primary ended with allegations of voting machine irregularities; Obama bested Clinton by four points across the state in districts with hand-counted ballots, while losing to Clinton by five points in districts where Diebold machinery tabulated the votes.

Maybe the horse race analogy is wrong. Maybe wrestling would be more apropos. **CT**

*Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Buffalo State College. His previous columns are at [artvoice.com](http://artvoice.com), archived at [www.mediastudy.com](http://www.mediastudy.com) and available globally through syndication*

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