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POLITICAL POINTS

## Edwards Wins: A Theory Tested

By JOHN TIERNEY

**I**MAGINE there's no Iowa. No New Hampshire, too. Imagine the Democratic Party, instead of relying on a few unrepresentative voters to quickly anoint [John Kerry](#), had allowed people across America to vet the candidates and contemplate the issues.

Then Mr. Kerry might well not be the nominee, and the Democrats would stand a better chance of reaching the White House, at least according to the results of a novel experiment during the primary season.

After choosing a representative national sample of more than 700 people, political scientists conducted what is called a deliberative poll. They created a group of well-informed voters by giving them home computers and exposing them to the candidates' commercials and policy positions. These voters, using microphones with the computers, discussed the candidates and the issues in small groups that met online once a week, starting in January on the day of the Iowa caucuses.

Over the next five weeks, as Mr. Kerry built up momentum among both real-life primary voters and the control group in the experiment, [Senator John Edwards](#) enjoyed the biggest surge in the well-informed test group, which was won over by his personal traits as well as by his policies, notably his protectionism on trade. Besides appealing to the Democrats in the test group, Mr. Edwards did better among the group's independents and Republicans, and he emerged as the strongest candidate against Mr. Bush.

"The normal primary process allows a few small and unrepresentative states to create the momentum for all that follows," said James Fishkin, who conducted the study with Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford colleague, and Robert C. Luskin of the University of Texas. "We wanted an alternative to shrinking sound bites, attack ads and a largely inattentive public that responds mainly to candidates' traits and horse-race coverage by the media," Mr. Fishkin said. "What would happen if people across the country were really engaged and informed and had a chance to think about the issues?"

You may call him a dreamer. But there must be at least one former presidential candidate who shares his sentiments.

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