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Kerry's Fatal Error: Edwards

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Democrats stunned by Sen. John Kerry's narrow loss to President George W. Bush are overreacting in ways that threaten irreparable harm to their party's future. Even with the president's re-election victory less than a week old, some Democrats are going so far as to call for a major reorientation to make their party more accommodating to the evangelical religious views and conservative social values of the Republican base.

Instead Democrats should pause and consider not only how close Kerry came to victory but how a simple change in just one decision would almost certainly have carried Kerry to the White House. Kerry's fatal error can be summed up in just two words: John Edwards.

The inexperienced North Carolina senator made no electoral contribution whatsoever to Kerry's ticket. Many party activists, remembering both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, initially applauded Kerry's decision to put another rhetorically appealing Southerner on the ticket. But Edwards' selection failed to make even a single traditionally Southern state electorally competitive, and at no time during the fall campaign did the president's re-election effort have to seriously contest any of the Old South states. Even Edwards' home state of North Carolina never became a battleground, and in the end, Bush cruised to the exact same 56 percent of the vote that he won in North Carolina in 2000.

Not only did Edwards fail to make the Democratic ticket competitive anywhere in the South, but Kerry's top alternative choice for vice president, Missouri Rep. Richard Gephardt, could have supplied three crucial boosts that almost certainly would have carried the Democrats to victory. Much to the surprise of most observers, the Kerry campaign gave up on contesting Missouri, a traditional swing state, weeks before voters went to the polls. In the end, Bush's victory margin in Missouri was less than 200,000 votes. Had the highly popular Gephardt been on his home state ticket, Democrats would not have made the huge mistake of giving up on Missouri's 11 electoral votes and very likely would have seen the St. Louis congressman carry them to statewide victory.

In addition, as experienced political activists know, Gephardt has also been popular in the neighboring swing state of Iowa. In the spring, Gephardt's own presidential campaign faltered badly there, but his residual popularity and familiarity among Iowa voters would undoubtedly have given the Kerry ticket a very tangible boost. Since Iowa gave Bush a narrow margin, choosing Gephardt rather than Edwards for vice president almost certainly would have put Iowa's seven electoral votes into Kerry's column.

The resulting Electoral College arithmetic is both simple and decisive. Had both Missouri's and Iowa's votes, a total of 18, been denied Bush, he would have won 268 electoral votes, two short of victory, even with his win in Ohio.

What's more, Gephardt's presence on the Kerry ticket might have made a decisive difference in Ohio, too.

Ohio exit polls show that 38 percent of voters who were union members themselves, and a full 40 percent of voters from union-member households, cast their ballots for Bush. Gephardt has been organized labor's favorite Democrat for more than two decades, and Gephardt's widespread popularity and support among labor activists might have proven crucial in a state where Bush's apparent margin of victory is about 130,000 votes.

Those electoral realities in Missouri, Iowa and Ohio should be a painful lesson for Democratic activists who first cheered Edwards' selection and now call for a decisive reorientation of their party. Had Kerry chosen Gephardt, those activists would have expressed disappointment in such a traditional choice. But in choosing Edwards' youthful style over Gephardt's tangible political coattails, Kerry made a fatal error that both party history and his own political hero should have taught him to avoid.

In 1960, in similar circumstances, John F. Kennedy selected old-fashioned Texas Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate, a decision that was highly unpopular among Democratic activists. Johnson's stylistic appeal was non-existent, but Kennedy rightly calculated that Johnson's presence on the ticket would bring Texas' electoral votes into his column. Kennedy was right, and Texas' result proved decisive to his election.

Unfortunately for Democrats, Kerry failed to make the old-fashioned but savvy choice that would have won him the White House. Yet Democrats now must realize that when voters are as narrowly divided as they were this year, it's nothing more than old-fashioned electoral calculations that win or lose the most decisive states. Rather than move rightward to contest the Republican base, Democratic activists should acknowledge how one erroneous choice spelled the difference between victory and defeat.

GRAPHIC: Illustration by Paul Lachine.