

The Nation.

[Click here](#) to return to the browser-optimized version of this page.

This article can be found on the web at

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040223/rogers>

Progressives Should Vote Edwards

by JOEL ROGERS

[posted online on February 8, 2004]

I'll be voting for John Edwards in next week's Wisconsin presidential primary. I think all progressives should vote for him in all remaining primaries. With Dean in meltdown, Clark without traction and the rest of the Democratic field still invisible to voters, this race has effectively narrowed to Kerry versus Edwards. And Edwards is our better shot at getting progressive values stamped clearly on the national ticket.

Come November, of course, I'll happily vote for whomever the Democrats finally nominate. That includes John Kerry--a fine social and free-trade liberal with the courage of his convictions. In truth (no comparison to Kerry implied) I'd vote for Homer Simpson if the Democrats nominated him, so badly do I want Bush gone. But in the meantime I'm for Edwards, who matches Kerry on mainstream Democratic issues but goes beyond them, in a clear progressive direction.

To begin with what they hold in common, Edwards and Kerry have similar views, all pretty good, on healthcare, women's rights, Medicare and Society Security privatization, and the environment--including the idea, recently revived by the Apollo Alliance, of an aggressive national project to achieve energy independence within a decade. Of course, they also share the baggage or ignominy of having voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq. This was at least stupid; they should never have trusted Bush's word on anything, especially matters about life and death. But I think with most voters that it's time to move on. They were lied to. And there's a big difference between a senator authorizing the potential use of force, based on misinformation, and a President fabricating that information and actually starting a war. Bush's contempt for truth and disregard for life are the real sins on Iraq, and Kerry and Edwards committed neither. I'm close to certain we wouldn't be in Iraq if either were in the White House.

Where Edwards diverges from Kerry is in addressing a series of issues of distinctive concern to progressives--inequalities of race and class, abusive corporate power, neoliberal globalization, ghetto poverty and prison, and the importance of worker and community organization outside the state. And what makes him distinctive is not just that he regularly touches these third-rail issues but is effectively running on them.

He is unabashedly pro-union. He regularly challenges white audiences to confront "the white problem" of continued racial injustice. His "two Americas" stump speech is all about class. He appreciates and notes the sheer pervasiveness of corporate crime--from tax evasion to union avoidance, predatory

lending to environmental degradation, unsafe working conditions to subsidy abuse. He is sharply critical of the "Washington Consensus" on international trade and finance. He talks about the growth of poverty and dead-end jobs. And he's the only candidate who does this in engaging language ordinary voters understand.

Better still, Edwards is relentlessly upbeat about America's ability to solve these problems. He's not another Clintonesque "I feel your pain, now let me tell you why I can't do anything about it" sort of guy. He has a real program of democratic renewal. And it is largely ours.

So, for example, Edwards wants to commit America explicitly to promoting "high road" competition--high wage, low waste, more socially accountable--and getting off the "low road" that's dragging down wages and increasing inequality. He wants to raise labor and environmental standards, invest heavily in worker training and continuing education, and build the public infrastructure--some crumbling, some never built, some bricks and more, some organizational--needed to achieve a shared prosperity.

He also wants to get beyond the free trade/protectionism frame for international economic policy and commit the United States clearly both to defending living standards here and enabling sustainable growth in the Third World. He wants to change trade rules to promote an upward rather than the present downward leveling in global wages, environmental standards and worker rights; open the World Trade Organization to sunlight and break its Chapter 11 stranglehold on higher local standards; and move international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund away from imposing cookie-cutter "structural adjustment" on weak economies.

And in a campaign that's barely mentioned the problems of urban areas, or America's astronomical rate of incarcerating central-city residents, Edwards brings these up too, and has developed views on both. To cure modern urban ills, he favors a series of strategies--in labor-market rules, economic development, transit investments, education and training, and social services--to integrate them more effectively into their surrounding metropolitan economies. And he would have us shrink our bloated prison population and return its present members more successfully to society by better distinguishing nonviolent drug crimes from other offenses, restoring abandoned treatment and training options, and re-enfranchising those who have done their time. Together, these policy changes would amount to a quiet revolution in what has to be near the top of America's social and economic problems--the devastation of many of our cities and the sheer waste and neglect of millions of their inhabitants.

And then there is the personal stuff about Edwards himself--his own story, told in an accent many Americans recognize as their own, and whose hearing can only help a national Democratic ticket. This story too is about class, race, and democracy. Unlike Bush and Kerry, Edwards didn't go to an elite prep school, then to Yale and then to Skull & Bones. He went to state schools, in what was then a very poor state. And he made his money taking down big corporations screwing little people, many of them black. He's seen a more democratic society work. He's an example of the opportunity it can offer all. And now, a middle-aged millionaire white Southerner from a right-to-work state, he simply wants the same for others. This is a message as American as apple pie, violence and the Gettysburg Address, and Edwards is uniquely credible in carrying it.

So at this point in the campaign I don't think a strategic progressive vote is for Dean or Clark or Kucinich--none of whom has a chance. But neither do I think we need to muffle our voice in the crowd now rushing to coronate Kerry. If we want to send a progressive message that will really be felt, and maybe even choose a President, progressives should vote for Edwards.