

Democratic Candidates for Congress Bring Strengths, Weaknesses to Voters

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Voters in the June 4 Democratic primary for Iowa's First District seat in Congress have a difficult choice ahead of them. Each of the three candidates has positive attributes, yet each also has significant political liabilities.

Ann Hutchinson, the front-runner by virtue of her war chest, has proved adept at fundraising (with \$260,000 raised by March 31) but is a recent defector from the Republican Party. Dave Nagle served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives but has also been defeated twice by Jim Nussle, the Republican incumbent. And political newcomer Denny Heath has populist ideals about reforming government but little money with which to deliver his message.

The campaign has primarily focused on which candidate will have the best shot at unseating Nussle. As Hutchinson said, "Basically we believe the same things."

But for citizens more interested in voting their conscience than for political strategy, the three Democrats do have different priorities and different positions.

Ann Hutchinson

Hutchinson, the mayor of Bettendorf, has been labeled a political opportunist by her opponents because of her recent switch from the Republican to the Democratic party.

Had she chosen to run for the Republican nomination for Congress, she would have had virtually no chance of escaping the primary against a well-heeled incumbent. As a Democrat, if she makes it through the primary, she gets the benefit of party money and organizational support. She also gets the advantage of a favorable district in which the incumbent (because of re-districting) currently doesn't represent Scott County – her home base and the source of nearly 30 percent of the district's population.

But Hutchinson claims she's been a Democrat much longer than she's been a Republican. She was a Democrat until 1988, when she changed her party registration to support Maggie Tinsman, she said, and her mayor seat is technically nonpartisan. "I didn't participate in any party," she said. Nonetheless, she said, "I've always believed in the principles of the Democratic party."

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Yet when asked how she's voted in recent primary elections, Hutchinson said she voted in the 1998 Republican primary.

Many Democrats remain skeptical of the conversion. They cite the zoning battle between the City of Bettendorf during Hutchinson's tenure and a Planned Parenthood clinic that offers abortions as evidence that she's recently acquired her pro-choice views. And they note that she hasn't categorically ruled out privatizing a portion of Social Security.

On the issue of abortion, Hutchinson said that before she began her campaign for Congress, "I had no opinion, and I had no position. ... I had never been in a position when I would have to vote on abortion. ... I didn't think about it. It didn't impact my life." She said that she would not support any restrictions on abortion rights.

On Social Security reform, Hutchinson doesn't make any blanket statements opposing privatization. She did say, though, that the plan proposed by the Bush administration to set aside a portion of Social Security revenues for investment would not garner her support. "As the plan is proposed right now, no, I wouldn't support it," she said. "There's not the kind of flexibility that people think is in that plan."

On plenty of issues, though, Hutchinson walks the Democratic line. Hutchinson opposes using surplus Social Security funds for general government expenditures. "You've got to replace what's been spent and set it aside," she said.

She opposes a fast-track trade-agreement process in which Congress cannot amend documents negotiated by the presidential administration, and she supports negotiating "fair trade" agreements. Currently, environmental and labor restrictions make production more costly in the United States than in much of the rest of the world, and "we have to demand that our trading partners live up to these same standards," she said.

That will go a long way toward revitalizing the United States economy, which has lost 2 million jobs in the past 18 months, she said.

Hutchinson also said she would "bring back some of the investment by the federal government in this area," in streets, sewers, schools, and bridges. She said doing that is more of a "mindset" than specific proposals.

Hutchinson, like her opponents, favors adding prescription-drug coverage to Medicare, but she also wants to go a step farther, supporting price controls. "It's an industry that's out of control," she said.

She said mandatory sentences for certain offenses take decisions away from judges. "We need to give the legal system flexibility," she said.

Dave Nagle

Nagle, an attorney, was elected to Congress in 1986, 1988, and 1990 before becoming a

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victim of re-districting in 1992, losing a close election to fellow incumbent Nussle. When he ran against Nussle again in 1994, he lost by a wider margin. (Nagle planned to run for U.S. Senate in 1998 but dropped his bid after his third alcohol-related arrest. He is now sober and has been up-front about his alcoholism during the campaign.)

Nagle said he has a better shot against Nussle this time because the new First District is considered to lean Democratic. "It's a totally different district," he said. In addition, he said, "The times are different."

Hutchinson, he said, hasn't paid her dues to the Democratic party; he called her party switch a "death-bed conversion" and said, "You don't normally sit at the head of the table when you just joined the family."

Nagle also cites his tenure in Congress as an asset. Nussle, he said, hasn't brought enough federal tax dollars back to the district. "I have shown a capacity in the past to do that," he said, noting the Avenue of the Saints highway project in eastern Iowa.

Federal priorities for Nagle include rolling back some of President George W. Bush's tax cut for people earning more than \$200,000, creating a prescription-drug benefit in Medicare, and creating a fairer economy with higher wages.

Nagle added that it will also be crucial to address priorities within the Congressional district, particularly re-building infrastructure and cleaning up the Mississippi River.

In trade agreements, "we need to take our labor and environmental standards and take them overseas," he said.

Nagle said Social Security is not in imminent danger, but that he supports taking it "off-budget" and therefore making it inaccessible to Congress for general spending. Repealing a portion of the Bush tax cut would also provide revenue that would reduce the need to raid Social Security. Finally, if the fund were still in trouble somewhere down the road, he would support eliminating the system in which only the first \$80,000 of income is taxed for Social Security purposes. Nagle said he would support instituting additional Social Security taxes for income earned over \$200,000. He also said he would not support any plan that would privatize any portion of the program.

As Congress considers re-authorization of welfare reform, Nagle said it will be key to improve wages. People moving off welfare and into minimum-wage jobs are going to struggle mightily, he said, and he would favor adding some "living wage" element to welfare reform, providing workers at least \$12 an hour.

Nagle said he might consider price controls for patent renewals of prescription drugs but noted that "the answer is to make prescription drugs part of Medicare. Drugs are still going to be expensive" even if price controls are instituted.

Federal drug-policy ought to be reformed, Nagle said. "I really think it's time the country moved

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to de-criminalization for first-time offenders,” he said. Treatment programs have proved more effective than prison, he said.

Denny Heath

Heath’s primary agenda doesn’t sound very Democratic; on issues from gun control to the public financing of elections, he sounds alternatively libertarian and socialist. But the former teacher and railroad conductor thinks his two opponents have enough “political drawbacks” that voters will be attracted to his message.

Heath has unveiled a three-pronged approach to fixing politics, the tax system, and government bureaucracy in this country.

First, he supports full public financing of all federal campaigns. In his plan, campaigns would be limited to 60 days before an election, candidates would have equal access to television time on set-aside channels, and each candidate would get a set amount of money based on the population of the area in which they are running. “We have to get private money out of campaigns,” he said.

Second, he supports a flat-tax system with three or four income brackets, rates between 15 and 18 percent, and no exemptions or deductions.

Third, with a simpler tax structure, the federal government wouldn’t need the services of the Internal Revenue Service, so Heath proposes turning it into the Department of Expenditure Verifications. The IRS’s 100,000-plus employees would be unleashed on the federal bureaucracy, reducing waste. “They would be perfect to be auditors of government spending,” Heath said. “We know we waste millions of dollars each year.”

Even Heath admits that such dramatic changes are “not going to happen overnight.” But he said he’s confident that if the public holds elected officials accountable for their votes on such measures, eventually they might become reality. Representatives and senators, though, are going to have to be pushed toward these measures, because the current system is set up to favor incumbents. “Congress is not going to want this to happen,” he said.

Heath is also unconventional on other positions. Although he said he would not vote to repeal current gun-control measures, he would support national legislation ensuring the right to bear arms.

He would also support legislation that would forbid the federal government from running a deficit unless it got the population’s approval in a public referendum. He wants to make English the official language of the United States and extend tax incentives (which he said are currently only available to immigrants) that “forgive” a person’s income tax for the first seven years of their working lives. Heath also supports outlawing telemarketing.

Meanwhile, he also supports a national health-care plan, something even liberal Democrats have shied away from since the Clinton administration’s failed attempt at it.

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Heath opposes using the surplus in Social Security for general-fund expenditures and also rejects the idea of privatizing any portion of the program.

There are also subtle differences between Heath and his two opponents on key issues. Like Nagle and Hutchinson, he opposes fast-tracking trade agreements, but while they supported imposing United States standards on trading partners, Heath suggested he would support measures such as the current tariff on foreign steel.

Ann Hutchinson's campaign Web site can be found at (<http://www.annhutchinson.com>).

Dave Nagle does not have a campaign Web site, but his campaign said all queries can be sent by e-mail to (nagleuscongress@aol.com).

Denny Heath's campaign Web site can be found at (<http://www.dennyheath.com>).