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ECONOMIC BRIEF NO. 17

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## *Pleasing the Median Voter*

*Having the support of the median voter is the key to political power in a democracy.*

Politicians aim to please. So an important part of the campaign process is for candidates to find out exactly what will and won't please voters. When these candidates are elected and begin to craft budgets, laws, and regulations, economists assume that they are responding to a mythical "median voter."

Having the support of the median voter is the key to political power in a democracy. The median voter is not a single individual. A voter may be at the median on one issue and way off center on another, in which case someone else becomes the median voter. The notion of a median voter assumes that the preferences of citizens are somehow represented by a bell-shaped curve as is intelligence or height.

Shifts in the location of the median voter on the political spectrum signal changes in the demand for government services. As politicians sense the median voter has shifted a little to the left, Congress, state legislatures, and city councils give us more government and demand more taxes. And when the median voter moves to the right of where he or she used to be, we get less government and

lower taxes.

In a two-person election race, a candidate slightly to the right of center can usually count on getting the votes of everyone to his right, and perhaps a few just a shade to the left. The same is true of a candidate just to the left of center. The trick is to locate the center, get as close to it as possible, and then figure out just enough differences between you and your opponent to win half the votes plus one.

Recent elections, particularly in 1992 and 1994, raise questions about the capacity of our election system to actually produce candidates that lie somewhere close to the preferences of the mythical median voter.

The problem, if there is one, is in the process by which parties nominate candidates. To get on the ballot, candidates for most offices above the local level have to win a party primary first. The median voter of a party is likely to be different from the median voter of the total voting population. Each primary election pulls candidates toward the median of the party and away from the center of the voting population as a whole.

Thus, the primary system

leads us away from the middle-of-the-road candidate. Sometimes it produces candidates that tend to polarize the electorate rather than build coalitions. In such situations, the median voter casts a ballot for the less unacceptable candidate or chooses to stay home.

Candidates elected in polarizing elections often have trouble governing. Governing is about building coalitions that embrace the median voter from left and right rather than coalitions which add the median voter on to a bloc of left- or right-wing voters. One of the more interesting observations about the recent Congressional elections was the loss of moderate candidates in both parties, the ones who might actually be able to build bridges and seek consensus.

In politics, winning isn't everything. Winning is just the first hump. A candidate who can't make the transition from primary to general election, from campaigning to governing, and from the median voter in the primary to the median voter in the general election to the median citizen who may be next time's voter may have a short term in office indeed.

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