Standard dictionaries don't list the term and your spell checker is unlikely to recognize it. But the political world seems obsessed with it, and the next presidential election may be determined by it.

We're talking the E word here--"electability"

Electability can be defined as that quality attributed to a candidate by voters in nomination contests--based on an assessment whether that candidate can win the general election.

Put directly, can this guy win it or can't he?

Electability is an aspect of electoral behavior we know little about. It's in fact a phenomenon seen first in this presidential election year, initially in Iowa then in New Hampshire and now in the other primary and caucus states.

As voting proceeds in state after state, more and more evidence accumulates that voters are voting for or against candidates on the basis of their perceived ability to beat President Bush, i.e. their electability.

National news media have been quick to report on it. Newsweek, for example, recently referred to it as the defining idea of the campaign:

Democrats yearn to unseat President George W. Bush with an apocalyptic fervor that makes one word - electability - the defining idea in the race. "I've never seen anything like it," said Jeanne Shaheen, former governor of New Hampshire. "Voters care more about electability than anything else."

The Washington Post ties Kerry's success to his electability message:
Sen. John F. Kerry raises the question of electability at every turn.

And Business Week attributes the demise of Howard Dean to the chant of electability, electability, electability:

Dean's rallying cry of "Power to the People" (has been) muted as pragmatic voters flock to any contender they deem capable of defeating George W. Bush. The new chant: "electability, electability, electability."

In one sense, electability is not new in politics. Prior to the era of caucuses and direct primaries, political elites, and activists paid considerable attention to a candidate's electability. It can be argued, in fact, that electability has historically been the number one concern of political organizations and those who ran them.

But voters participating in nomination contests largely have been another story. And that story has been that rank and file voters don't vote strategically, meaning they don't usually vote for a candidate based on electability criteria.

What we know about primary and caucus voters comes from decades of study and reams of exit polling. And the thrust of that knowledge is that a mix of factors that may include ideology as well as issues, and certainly
include candidate traits and personality motivates voters. Electability traditionally has not influenced voters' choices.

This has been the case for both major parties. A couple of examples will suffice from recent elections against incumbent presidents.

Democratic voters surely weren't thinking about electability when they nominated leftist George McGovern in 1972 to run against the then popular and entrenched incumbent Richard Nixon. Nor did they think about electability much in 1988 when they nominated another left leaning candidate, Michael Dukakis, to run against George Bush.

Republicans have only been slightly better at producing electable nominees. Barry Goldwater's supporters in 1964 maybe knew in their heart he was right—but he sure wasn't electable. And Ronald Reagan in 1980 won the Republican nomination even though everyone "knew" he couldn't win the election.

But the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination is not following the familiar script chronicled by journalists and studied by scholars. The latter are particularly confounded by the unfolding 2004 campaign. Political science scholarship has studied voting behavior as intently as any other single subject in political science.

Thus, we can explain with some confidence why people turn out to vote or not—and what motivates them to support one candidate over another. We also have a wealth of information available regarding the social and demographic aspects of voting—what demographic groups are more likely or less likely to do, and what social and economic characteristics are linked to particular voting choices.

But electability as a criteria used by voters is a new and startling factor in presidential nominations.

The interesting, indeed, compelling question to ask is why? Why are voters in large numbers apparently abandoning habitual voting habits and standards to support candidates on the basis of their perceived electability?

The phenomenon is too new to accommodate more than casual explanation. However, several general factors present in contemporary national politics are undoubtedly contributing to this new voter behavior.

One of these is the residue of a bitter 2000 election. Certainly a root cause of electability lies in the bitterness generated by the 2000 presidential election and unusual hostility Democratic core voters have for President Bush.

A related factor impelling voters has been graphically captured by the widely circulated "red" America vs. "blue" America maps. Politically, the country is sharply polarized—perhaps as any time since the period following the Civil War and Reconstruction. And there may be other forces at work here that we only dimly understand, including the expanded information available to voters via the Internet.

Is the E word a temporary phenomenon or are we witnessing a permanent shift in voter behavior? It's hard to say, but our best guess is this is more than a one-act play. Voters might find nominating electable candidates a hard habit to break.
Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2004 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.