

Looking Back at the Arkansas Senate Race

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Posted: October 18, 2010 01:54 AM

It was only about four-and-a-half months ago that the Democratic primary for the Arkansas senate seat currently held by Blanche Lincoln was a big story threatening to create division within the Democratic Party. The outcome of that primary was that Blanche Lincoln, a conservative Democratic incumbent senator, defeated Bill Halter who was challenging her from the left in a Democratic primary. The primary drew national attention as labor unions and activist groups supported Halter, while the conservative incumbent got support from the party leadership, former President Bill Clinton and the White House.

Today, Lincoln [is given little chance of retaining that seat](#) against Republican candidate John Boozman who is leading in most polls. The heated Lincoln-Halter primary has faded into memory and will probably garner very little attention in the future. Nonetheless, there are some lessons which that primary has to offer. At the time of the primary, the major argument for supporting Blanche Lincoln was that she was more electable than Halter because as a more moderate Democrat with years of incumbency she would be more popular in November. There is, of course, no way of knowing whether or not Halter would be doing better than Lincoln if he were the nominee, but it is clear that Lincoln is not as electable as many thought.

Nominating a more conservative candidate because she or he is the more electable Democrat is sometimes necessary, but nominating more conservative Democrats who can't win anyway is pointless. This is not just an abstract point, because candidates like Blanche Lincoln, even if she were to win, often stand in the way of successfully passing legislation once they are elected. Therefore, if they are not more electable in November, there is very little strategic reason to nominate these types of candidates in primaries.

Assuming that the more conservative Democrat is the more electable one is a reasonable and intuitive approach, but it is not clear that this is always the case. The national political environment indicates that this was probably going to be a tough year for any Democrat running in Arkansas, but Lincoln's incumbency and moderate record have not turned out to be of great value to her during a year when voters are frustrated with Democratic incumbents and not so open to hearing senators who have been in Washington for decades explain that they are somehow different from the rest of the Democrats in congress.

This narrative, that it is necessary to nominate conservative Democrats, is so dominant that it is barely ever challenged. However, the evidence, beginning with the presence of Barack Obama in the White House indicates that the story is more complicated. The inability to articulate a platform or concrete differences between your party and the other party is not as much of a campaign asset as this narrative suggests. Similarly it should not be overlooked that many conservative Democrats lack the ability to connect with and mobilize the party's liberal and African American base. Clearly this is not true of all moderate and conservative Democrats, but it applies to many of them.

There is also a cost to the Democratic Party and its leadership for pursuing this path. When the White House decides to get involved in a campaign in support of a candidate who has run afoul of the party's base, and in opposition to a candidate who, like Halter, had very strong support from a key constituency, in Halter's case organized labor, the relationship between the White House and the party's activist base gets further strained. Many progressives are already disappointed with the Obama administration. To further alienate these voters so that Blanche Lincoln, or somebody like her, can lose by ten points in November is not smart politics.

The widespread support which Lincoln got from the Democratic establishment was not unlike the support Joseph Lieberman received when he was challenged by Ned Lamont in the Democratic primary in 2006 and sends another message to the party's progressive activist—that while their support is great, and their volunteer hours and money is valuable, they should leave important party decisions to the leadership. The irony of the [Obama administration either deliberately or inadvertently sending this message](#) notwithstanding, this runs the risk of eventually pushing away key parts of the party's base.

When a close race in November is expected, electability is an issue which should be taken into consideration when nominating a candidate. Politicians, interest groups and individuals should all weigh this issue when deciding who to endorse, assist or even just vote for. Obviously, the Democratic Party gains nothing from nominating progressives who cannot defeat Republicans, but they may gain even less by nominating conservatives who lose in November. It is lazy, short-sighted and politically unwise to simply conflate electability with being a conservative Democrat, yet it seems Democratic politicians continue to do this year after year.