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Do Swing Voters Swing Elections?

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American presidential electoral politics are shaped to a great degree by two qualities: their competitiveness and their partisanship. American presidential politics are about as competitive as politics get. Even landslide presidential elections rarely reach a 60-40 split of the two-party vote, and most presidential elections are decided in the 55-to-45-percent range. American politics in general are also very partisan, and they have become more so in recent decades. Among those survey respondents who said that they voted (reported voters) in the 2004 election, about 40 percent identified strongly with either the Democratic or Republican parties and another 55 percent indicated some lesser level of party identification.¹ With competitive and highly partisan politics, it is natural that campaigns and those who observe them focus on the voters who are relatively uncertain about who they will vote for in an election. These potentially persuadable, or “up for grabs,” voters have become known

1. These percentages were calculated from American National Election Study (ANES) data and have been corrected for the disparity between the vote division in the data and the actual national vote division. The proportion of strong party identifiers among reported voters in 2004 is very close to what it was in the 1950s and early 1960s, the heyday of modern partisanship as documented by the classic study of *The American Voter* (Campbell and others 1960). Those who are less identified with a political party include those who said that their identification was not very strong (about 29 percent in 2004) and those who initially said that they were independent but then said that they leaned toward a party (about 26 percent). Bruce E. Keith and his colleagues (1992) provide an array of evidence to indicate that these “leaners” are the equivalent of “not very strong” (often labeled “weak”) partisans.

as swing voters. Not being firmly committed to vote for a particular candidate, these undecideds or persuadables may swing their votes toward one candidate or the other.

Politicians and political observers have long attempted to determine the characteristics of these swing voters in the hope that once they were identified, messages could be crafted to push or pull their decision one way or the other. In the late 1960s, Vice President Spiro Agnew talked about swing voters as the “silent majority.”² Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg identified swing voters by the characteristics that they lacked: they were “unyoung, unpoor, unblack.”³ Later efforts to tag the elusive swing voters labeled them as Reagan Democrats, angry white men, soccer moms, NASCAR dads, security moms, and, most recently, mortgage moms.

The substantial attention devoted to swing voters is based, at least in part, on an implicit assumption that swing voters swing elections, that the votes of swing voters decide who wins presidential elections. The competitiveness of presidential elections and the partisanship of the electorate, providing many voters with a strong “standing decision” to vote for their party’s standard bearer, make the importance of the swing vote a reasonable assumption. It is an especially reasonable assumption when the parties are relatively evenly balanced in partisans as they have been since the mid-1980s. It is quite likely that the median voter positioned to decide the election is also a swing voter. This does not mean, however, that most or even a majority of swing voters vote for the winning candidate or that the winning candidate requires a majority of the swing vote. It may be possible to win presidential elections with a large and activated base vote and only a small fraction of the swing vote.

The question posed in this chapter is whether winning presidential candidates in recent elections have carried or won a majority of the swing vote and whether they won *because* of the swing vote. If presidents are elected because of the swing vote, then the importance often attributed to swing voters by campaigns and the media is warranted. If, on the other hand, the swing vote has not been instrumental in electing presidents, then the role of the swing voter in the political landscape should be reassessed. If carrying the swing vote is not the key ingredient to a popular vote plurality, then how much of the swing vote do candidates need to win in order to achieve a popular vote victory?

2. Roberts and Hammond (2004, p. 313).

3. Scammon and Wattenberg (1971).

Who Are the Swing Voters?

In order to determine the impact of swing voters in deciding presidential elections, they must first be identified. What is distinctive about swing voters—what distinguishes them from nonswing voters—is that they are to some significant degree unsettled about how they will vote. It is clear that this is a matter of degree, that all voters are potentially open to changing their vote up until the moment it is cast. But voters differ in their degree of uncertainty about how they will vote, and some are much more open to being moved than others. At some level of this uncertainty, they can be labeled swing voters.

Three aspects of this vote uncertainty should be noted. First, the voter is not necessarily aware of or cognizant of his or her uncertainty about the vote choice. What makes a swing voter is the actual uncertainty of how the voter will vote and not whether the voter is subjectively willing to admit to this uncertainty. Many voters may harbor the illusion that they are open to either side in an election even though their vote choice is effectively well decided and predictable. Though voter-supplied information about the vote is useful in assessing the extent to which the vote choice is unsettled, saying you are a swing voter does not make you a swing voter. There must be a real possibility that your vote is moveable.

Second, at least for the purposes of this analysis, a swing voter is a voter. That is, swing voters are assumed to have turned out to vote. It is, of course, possible to include in the uncertainty about voting the decision of whether the potential voter will bother to vote. It would be understandable if many potential voters who are torn about whom to vote for decide not to vote. For the purposes of this analysis, these nonvoters were both potential voters and potential swing voters who, by opting not to vote, did not fulfill their potential.

Third, the uncertainty about how a voter will vote can (and most probably does) change over time. For instance, for many voters, their vote choice may be significantly less certain four or five months before the election than four or five weeks before the election. With more information and greater focus on that information, voters may become more settled in their vote for a candidate. It is, therefore, important to be time-specific in ascertaining who is and who is not a swing voter. In this analysis, given the limitations of available survey data, swing voters at two points in the election will be examined: precampaign swing voters and campaign swing voters. Precampaign swing voters are voters who we have reason to suspect are to a considerable degree uncertain in their vote choice well before the campaign begins. Their swing voter status is largely inde-

pendent of the particular candidates running in the election. Campaign swing voters are voters who we have reason to suspect are to a considerable extent uncertain in their vote once the general election campaign is under way. These are swing voters who are unsettled in their vote after receiving information about the presidential candidates running in the particular election.

Who are the precampaign swing voters and how can they be best identified? The identification of precampaign swing voters draws on four different measures that have regularly been included in the American National Election Studies (ANES). First, precampaign swing voters are assumed not to be ideologically predisposed to vote for either of the major political parties' candidates. Since the 1972 election, the ANES has asked a national sample of potential voters what their ideological perspectives are. Using this measure, swing voters are assumed to be neither liberals, who are disposed to vote for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, nor conservatives, who are disposed to vote for the Republican Party's presidential candidate. In other words, they are either moderates or people who are unable or unwilling to characterize their ideology. Second, among reported voters who are self-declared moderates or are unable or unwilling to describe their ideological perspective, precampaign swing voters are assumed not to be strongly identified with either political party. Third, among these reported voters who are moderates (or ideological "don't knows") without strong party identifications, precampaign swing voters are assumed not to be more supportive of one of the political parties than the median strong party identifier. The strength of a potential swing voter's relative affect for a political party is measured using "thermometer" scales, on which respondents are asked to rate their attitudes toward the political parties on a scale from zero (the maximum disaffection) to 100 degrees (the maximum affection). These questions are posed separately about the Democratic and Republican parties and then combined into a single hundred-point index (with 2 being the most pro-Republican score and 99 being the most pro-Democratic score). The median strong Republican since 1972 has had a score of 30 and the median strong Democrat has had a score of 70. Precampaign swing voters, then, must have a party thermometer index score of more than 30 but less than 70. Finally, respondents who reported that they had "known all along" how they would vote were classified as not being precampaign swing voters.

Who are the campaign swing voters? Two indicators in the ANES surveys were used to identify campaign swing voters. First, in every presidential election since 1952, ANES has asked potential voters to respond to a battery of four open-ended questions about what they like or dislike about each party's

presidential candidate. Respondents may provide as many as five responses to each of the four questions. A simple count of these responses was found to be highly predictive of the reported vote choice.⁴ The direction and intensity of a voter's preference can be measured by the sum of positive mentions ("likes") about the Democratic Party's candidate plus negative mentions ("dislikes") about the Republican Party's candidate minus the sum of positive mentions ("likes") about the Republican Party's candidate plus negative mentions ("dislikes") about the Democratic Party's candidate. This index ranges from positive 10 (the maximum preference for the Democratic candidate) to negative 10 (the maximum preference for the Republican candidate).

The second indicator used is the voter's party identification. This is meant to capture some unstated predispositions toward the candidates. Since the intensity of party identification is associated with loyalty rates in voting, strong Democrats are given a score of positive 2, weak and leaning Democrats positive 1, weak and leaning Republicans negative 1, and strong Republicans a score of negative 2. These party identification scores are added to the likes-dislikes measure to arrive at an index ranging from positive 12 (pro-Democrat) to negative 12 (pro-Republican).

An inspection of the predictive success of this index indicates that those scoring either 2 or over or negative 2 or under are very likely to vote for the preferred party's candidate. In elections since 1952, 93 percent of respondents scoring more than 1 on the index voted for the Democratic presidential candidate and 96 percent of respondents scoring less than negative 1 voted for the Republican presidential candidate. Those with scores of plus or minus 1 are much harder to predict. Only 66 percent of those with a score of 1 voted for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, and 73 percent of those with a score of negative 1 voted for the Republican Party's standard bearer. The votes of those with a zero score have split nearly evenly, though with a slight Republican tilt (55 percent Republican to 45 percent Democratic). These voters with short-term evaluations (augmented by partisanship) near neutrality (negative 1, zero, or 1) are considered to be the campaign swing voters.

This likes-dislikes measure of the campaign swing vote corresponds fairly closely to the thermometer measure used by William G. Mayer in chapter 1 of this volume.⁵ The underlying voter preference measures (before collapsing the measures to the simple dichotomous categories of swing and nonswing

4. Kelley and Mirer (1974); Kelley (1983).

5. All comparisons of the thermometer and likes-dislikes measures are based on reported voters for the major-party presidential candidates.

voters) are highly correlated. Over the ten elections since 1968 in which both measures are available, the median correlation between them was quite strong ($r = .84$).⁶ Each measure was about equally and closely associated with the vote (median $r = .78$ for the thermometer measure and $.77$ for the likes-dislikes measure). In the typical election since 1968, both measures classified about 77 percent of the cases identically. This correspondence could have been even higher, but the cut-points selected by Mayer were more generous in classifying swing voters on the thermometer measure than the cut-points I used with the likes-dislikes measure. Mayer's coding typically counted an additional 8 percent of reported voters as swing voters (a median of 24 percent using Mayer's measure and cut-points as opposed to 16 percent using my measure and cut-points). Thus, even with identical underlying measures of vote preferences, the two counts would have had a disparity of 8 percentage points.⁷ Overall, there appears to be a good degree of overlap between the measures, providing assurance that each is a credible basis for designating voter status as a swing or nonswing voter. While Mayer's thermometer measure is the simpler measure (whether the cut-points are tightened to plus or minus 10 thermometer points or left at 15 points), the likes-dislikes measure is used here because it is available over a longer series of elections. The likes-dislikes measure is available for every presidential election since 1952, whereas the thermometer measure cannot be constructed before the 1972 survey.⁸

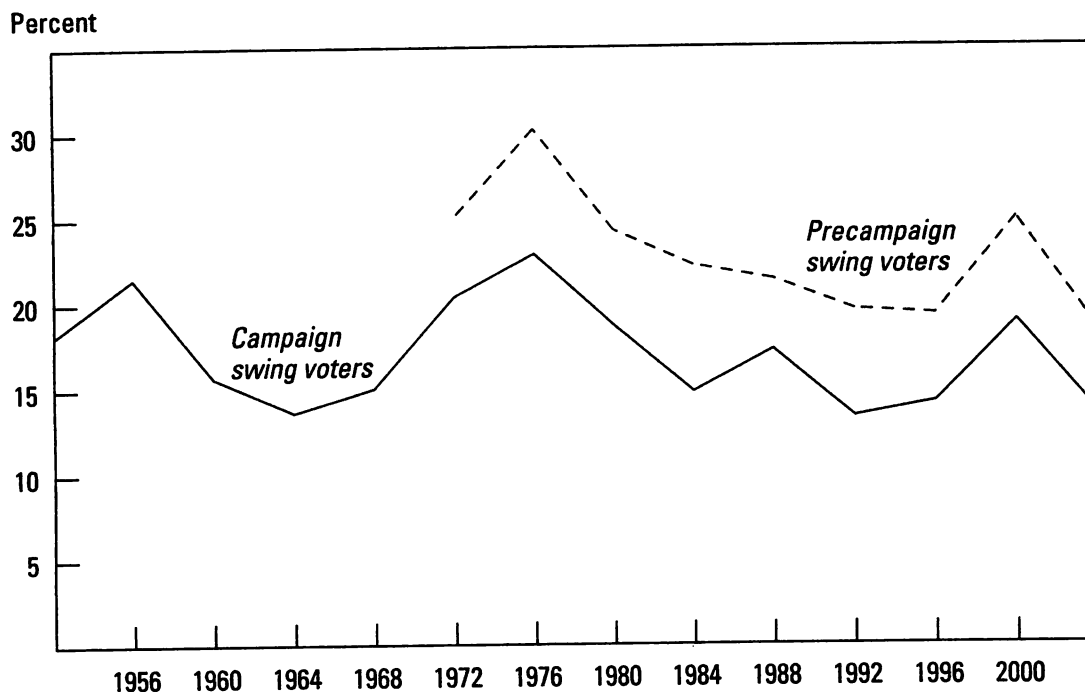
How Many Voters Are Swing Voters?

Figure 7-1 displays the percentages of precampaign swing voters in each election since 1972 and campaign swing voters in each election since 1952. In all cases, ANES data have been weighted to reflect the actual division of the

6. Mayer's measure (see chapter 1, this volume) uses thermometer ratings from the pre-election survey; he therefore reports data only for the elections from 1972 to 2004. For 1968, I use the thermometer ratings from the postelection survey.

7. Using a 10-point (rather than 15-point) cut for Mayer's thermometer measure reduces the median percentage of swing voters from 24 to 19 percent. The median percentage of voters identically coded as swing or nonswing voters increases to 79 percent, using this tighter cut-point. The likes-dislikes and the thermometer counts of swing voters are very strongly correlated over time ($r = .75$, or $.72$ using the 15-thermometer-point coding). That is, both measures tend to identify the same years as having more or fewer swing voters.

8. An added virtue of the likes-dislikes measure is that it permits examination of the content of these swing voters' likes and dislikes. It might be helpful for campaigns to know whether swing voters were responding disproportionately to particular issues or candidate traits.

Figure 7-1. Swing Voters as a Percentage of Reported Voters, 1952–2004

Source: American National Election Studies (ANES), Cumulative Data File.

national two-party vote. As is apparent from the figure, among reported voters, precampaign swing voters ranged from 18 to 30 percent with a median of 22 percent. Campaign swing voters ranged from 13 to 23 percent with a median of 16 percent. Put differently, the vote choice of roughly one out of every four or five voters is unsettled going into the typical campaign, and the vote choice of roughly one out of six voters remains unsettled during the typical campaign. In each election, as one might expect, the numbers of precampaign swing voters exceeded the numbers of campaign swing voters. The peaks of both precampaign and campaign swing voters appear to have occurred in the early 1970s during the depths of partisan dealignment and the transition to the new party system, and even though there has been a perceptible decline in swing voters over the last several elections, there were an unusual number of unsettled votes in the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

The numbers of swing voters are best appreciated when set in some perspective. First, in all elections, with respect to both precampaign and campaign swing voters, those who are settled in their vote choice substantially outnumber swing voters. In the typical election, the vote choices of nearly

80 percent of reported voters were largely settled before the campaign began, and nearly 85 percent were effectively settled once the campaign was under way. Second, there are more unsettled votes "in play" during a campaign than is suggested by most preference polls. Presidential preference polls rarely indicate an undecided vote of more than 4 to 6 percentage points. A more accurate portrait of the electorate would indicate three or four times as many unsettled votes. Third, with presidential elections typically decided by a vote margin of 4 to 5 percentage points (the winning two-party vote percentage over 50 percent), there are certainly enough swing voters to be decisive in the typical presidential election.

The Precampaign Swing Vote

Table 7-1 presents the analysis of the precampaign swing vote for the presidential candidate who received the majority of the national two-party popular vote. With the exception of the 2000 election, this is an analysis of the swing vote for the candidate who was elected to the presidency. The central question of interest is whether precampaign swing voters have determined which party's candidate won the majority of the popular vote. Though it is commonly assumed that carrying the swing vote is critical to winning a majority of the popular vote and with it the presidency, the evidence suggests otherwise.

The perception that carrying the precampaign swing vote is essential to a presidential victory may be due to the regularity with which the winning presidential candidate captures a majority of the swing vote. Seven of the nine presidential candidates since 1972 who received a majority of the popular vote also won a majority of the votes cast by precampaign swing voters. The only exceptions were the two most recent elections. In 2000, despite falling short of a popular-vote majority, George W. Bush rather than Al Gore narrowly carried a majority of the precampaign swing vote. In 2004, George W. Bush carried the popular vote but without a majority of the precampaign swing vote. Aside from these two cases, however, presidential candidates winning the overall vote also won the precampaign swing vote, and each of the nine majority-winning presidential candidates received at least 44.8 percent of the precampaign swing vote. In effect, if winning presidential candidates did not carry the precampaign swing vote outright, they came close to doing so.

Does the fact that winning presidential candidates usually captured the swing vote majority or came very close to doing so mean that the swing vote made these candidates the winners? With only one exception, the answer is no.

Table 7-1. The Precampaign Swing Vote, 1972–2004^a

Percent

<i>Election</i>	<i>Winning presidential party^b</i>	<i>Swing voters as percentage of total vote^c</i>	<i>Nonswing vote percentage for winner</i>	<i>Swing vote percentage for winner</i>	<i>Winner received a majority of the swing vote</i>	<i>Swing vote majority determined the winner</i>	<i>Swing vote percentage needed by the winner</i>	<i>Winning candidate needed a majority of the swing vote</i>
1972	Republican	25.1	61.1	64.0	Yes	No	17.0	No
1976	Democrat	30.2	48.7	56.4	Yes	Yes	52.9	Yes
1980	Republican	24.3	51.2	67.9	Yes	No	46.1	No
1984	Republican	22.2	57.6	64.7	Yes	No	23.4	No
1988	Republican	21.4	53.3	56.3	Yes	No	38.0	No
1992	Democrat	19.6	52.2	58.6	Yes	No	40.9	No
1996	Democrat	19.3	53.0	62.1	Yes	No	37.6	No
2000	Democrat	25.0	51.3	47.0	No	No	46.0	No
2004	Republican	18.4	52.7	44.8	No	No	38.0	No

Source: American National Election Studies (ANES), Cumulative Data File.

a. Precampaign swing voters are reported voters in the ANES surveys who claimed to be moderate ideologically or responded “don’t know” to the ideology question, were not strong party identifiers, indicated that they had not “known all along” how they would vote, and did not have a difference on the political party “thermometer items” more extreme than the median strong partisan. This last criterion meant that a voter could only be counted as a precampaign swing voter if he or she reported a major party thermometer index score between 30 and 70, where the index ranged from 2 (most pro–Republican Party) to 99 (most pro–Democratic Party).

b. The winning presidential party is the party whose candidate won a majority of the national two-party vote.

c. All vote percentages are of the two-party vote. The data are reweighted to conform to the actual two-party vote.

In eight of the nine elections examined, the winning presidential candidate had already carried a majority of the vote among voters who were *not* pre-campaign swing voters. In only one of the nine elections, the 1976 race between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, did the swing vote majority override an opposite majority among nonswing voters. Those who were not pre-campaign swing voters gave Gerald Ford a narrow majority of their votes, while pre-campaign swing voters counteracted this by giving Jimmy Carter a 56 percent majority—but this was the only election in which the pre-campaign swing vote overrode the larger vote among nonswing voters.

Additional perspective on the importance of the pre-campaign swing vote to assembling a popular vote majority can be gained by determining what percentage of the pre-campaign swing vote the winning candidate needed in order to arrive at 50 percent of the two-party vote. Given the relative sizes of the pre-campaign swing vote and that portion of the electorate who were not pre-campaign swing voters, as well as the vote percentage (or proportion of the vote) that these nonswing voters provided to the winning candidate, some simple algebra allows us to calculate the percentage of the swing vote needed by each of the winning presidential candidates. These calculations are presented in the eighth column of table 7-1.

The results indicate that every winning presidential candidate since 1972 has needed at least 17 percent of the pre-campaign swing vote, but only Jimmy Carter in 1976 required a majority from pre-campaign swing voters in order to secure his popular vote majority. In general, the data indicate how little winning presidential candidates have depended upon the pre-campaign swing vote. Presidential candidates who won their elections by landslide proportions, such as Nixon in 1972 and Reagan in 1984, clearly did not need many swing votes to arrive at a majority. They had plenty of votes from everyone else. What is interesting is that presidential candidates winning with majorities well short of landslides also did not need to win a majority of the swing vote. The median winning presidential candidate in this period needed to attract only 38 percent of the pre-campaign swing vote in order to accumulate his popular vote majority. That is, the typical winning presidential candidate since 1972 could have lost the pre-campaign swing vote by a landslide and still won a majority of the national two-party popular vote. The notion that pre-campaign swing voters swing elections is a myth. Presidential candidates have not been able to win election without some portion of the pre-campaign swing vote, but most do not need more than two of every five swing voters.

The Campaign Swing Vote

Though only one recent presidential election has turned on who receives a majority of the precampaign swing vote, there remains the possibility that votes that appear unsettled during the campaign are more important to the election's outcome. Table 7-2 presents the analysis of the campaign swing vote. Unlike the precampaign swing vote analysis, the analysis of campaign swing votes covers the fourteen presidential elections since 1952. The analysis, though based on a different indicator of what constitutes a swing voter, in most respects supports the findings regarding precampaign swing voters.

As with the precampaign swing vote, winning presidential candidates usually received a majority of the campaign swing vote. The winning presidential candidate captured a majority of the campaign swing vote in ten of the fourteen elections since 1952. In three of the four elections in which the winning presidential candidate fell short of a swing vote majority (Eisenhower in 1956, Nixon in 1968, Carter in 1976, and Clinton in 1992), the winner attracted at least 46 percent of the swing vote. The winning presidential candidate with the lowest percentage of the campaign swing vote was Bill Clinton in 1992. With this exception, winning presidential candidates have done well among those unsettled about their vote during the campaign.

As with the precampaign vote, however, the success of winning presidential candidates among campaign swing voters does not mean that they won because of this success. Winning presidential candidates tend to do well among nonswing voters as well as swing voters. A majority of the campaign swing vote offset an opposing majority of the nonswing vote in only one of the fourteen presidential elections since 1952. That exception was the legendary 1960 election between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John Kennedy. Nixon narrowly carried the vote of the large number of settled, nonswing voters in the campaign whereas the campaign swing vote split nearly 55 percent to 45 percent in Kennedy's favor. Other than this one exception, the division of the swing vote either reinforced or merely muted the verdict of those who were settled in their votes early in the campaign.

The very limited impact of campaign swing voters is also evident from the calculations of what percentage of that vote winning candidates required in order to assemble their majorities (shown in the eighth column of table 7-2). In only one instance, the Kennedy-Nixon race of 1960, did the winning candidate need a majority of the campaign swing vote to capture his overall majority vote. Candidates who went on to win by landslides (Johnson in 1964, Nixon in 1972, and Reagan in 1984) did not need any or needed very

few votes from campaign swing voters. Even setting aside these candidates, whose majorities were well settled before the campaign, the typical winning presidential candidate in this period was well enough supported that he required only about one-third of the campaign swing vote. Eisenhower in both 1952 and 1956, Reagan in 1980, and Clinton in both 1992 and 1996 required less than a third of the campaign swing vote to win their popular vote majorities. As with the precampaign swing vote, it is a myth that winning a majority of the campaign swing vote is necessary to win the presidential election. Most winning presidential candidates have been able to ride to victory with a minority of swing vote support.

The Impact of the Swing Vote

The analyses of both precampaign and campaign swing voters indicate that, contrary to conventional wisdom, presidential candidates do not need to carry a majority of the swing vote in order to win a majority of the two-party popular vote. Presidents have needed to pull some support from precampaign swing voters, but usually not very much. They have typically required less support, and in a few elections have needed no support, from campaign swing voters.

It is often thought that with both major-party candidates having a dependable base of partisan support and with elections being quite competitive, that the vote decisions of swing voters hold election outcomes in the balance. Apparently, this is not the case. The turnout and relative loyalties of the respective partisan bases have varied enough that they can effectively decide elections with only the help of a relatively small share of the swing vote.

Although this finding deflates the conventional wisdom's claims of the importance of swing voters, it is nothing new—it is consistent with a substantial body of electoral research over the years. Paul Lazarsfeld, a coauthor of both *The People's Choice* and *Voting*, two landmark studies in the field of electoral research, wrote in the 1940s that “in an important sense, modern Presidential campaigns are over before they begin.”⁹ It is not that campaigns have no impact, according to Lazarsfeld, but that (in the age before digital photography) campaigns are “like the chemical bath which develops a photograph. The chemical influence is necessary to bring out the picture, but only the picture pre-structured on the plate can come out.”¹⁰ This perspective

9. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944); Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954); Lazarsfeld (1944, p. 317).

10. Lazarsfeld (1944, p. 330).

Table 7-2. The Campaign Swing Vote, 1952–2004^a

Percent

<i>Election</i>	<i>Winning presidential party^b</i>	<i>Swing voters as percentage of total vote^c</i>	<i>Nonswing vote percentage for winner</i>	<i>Swing vote percentage for winner</i>	<i>Winner received a majority of the swing vote</i>	<i>Swing vote majority determined the winner</i>	<i>Swing vote percentage needed by the winner</i>	<i>Winning candidate needed a majority of the swing vote</i>
1952	Republican	18.1	54.5	59.1	Yes	No	29.9	No
1956	Republican	21.5	60.4	48.1	No	No	11.9	No
1960	Democrat	15.7	49.2	54.9	Yes	Yes	54.3	Yes
1964	Democrat	13.6	62.8	52.1	Yes	No	0.0	No
1968	Republican	15.1	50.6	49.2	No	No	46.5	No
1972	Republican	20.4	62.9	57.6	Yes	No	0.0	No
1976	Democrat	22.9	52.2	46.0	No	No	41.4	No
1980	Republican	18.7	55.2	55.9	Yes	No	27.5	No
1984	Republican	14.8	57.2	70.8	Yes	No	8.9	No
1988	Republican	17.3	53.4	56.3	Yes	No	33.7	No
1992	Democrat	13.3	55.2	41.9	No	No	16.0	No
1996	Democrat	14.2	53.8	60.5	Yes	No	27.2	No
2000	Democrat	18.9	50.3	50.3	Yes	No	48.9	No
2004	Republican	13.5	50.6	55.5	Yes	No	46.3	No

Source: American National Election Studies (ANES), Cumulative Data File.

a. Campaign swing voters are calculated using the ANES questions about voter likes and dislikes about the presidential candidates and the voter's party identification. Each mention of a like for a party is counted for it and a dislike counted against it. An identification for a party is counted in its favor and a strong identification is counted further to its credit. The total of these counts can range from +12 in favor of the Democrats to -12 in favor of the Republicans. Those with scores of (-1, 0, or +1) are classified as campaign swing voters.

b. The winning presidential party is the party whose candidate won a majority of the national two-party vote.

c. All vote percentages are of the two-party vote. The data are reweighted to conform to the actual two-party vote.

may exaggerate the fixed nature of public opinion and underestimate the potential for vote shifts, but it is not far off the mark in suggesting that most of the fundamental influences on elections are in place well before the campaign begins.

The belief that presidential elections are often effectively decided before the general election campaigns begin to settle the vote choices of swing voters is not confined to academic students of elections. James Farley, Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager in his 1932 and 1936 presidential victories, promulgated "Farley's Law": that presidential elections were decided before rather than after Labor Day of the election year.¹¹

The marginal character of the importance of swing voters to presidential elections is also consistent with the findings of the National Election Studies that typically two-thirds of voters say they decided how they would vote at or before the national nominating conventions in the summer of the election year.¹² It is also consistent with the marginal impact of the independent vote on presidential elections; late deciding voters splitting evenly between the major-party candidates with a tilt toward returning to vote for their party's standard bearer; the greater importance of precampaign party unity to the election results; the importance of precampaign fundamentals to the accuracy of election forecasts; and the infrequency with which campaign effects have decided which party has won the presidency.¹³

Given the abundance of evidence indicating that swing voters (or late deciders, preference changers, and independents) have a very limited impact on presidential elections, why do they receive the enormous attention that they do? One reason may be the democratic belief that elections should not be decided until voters go into the polling booth to cast their ballots, that voters should keep open minds and listen to all that the candidates have to say before they reach a final decision. Journalists, political junkies, and supporters of trailing candidates also want to keep the election story alive (or to keep hope alive), and elevating the role of the swing voter is one way to do so. Finally, the history of both precampaign swing voters and campaign swing voters is that they each made a critical difference in at least one election. Precampaign swing voters were responsible for electing Jimmy Carter in 1976 and campaign swing voters were responsible for electing John Kennedy in

11. Troy (1996, p. 191); Faber (1965, p. 186).

12. Campbell (2000, table 1.2).

13. Campbell (2000, table 4.1; 2001a; 2007; 2005; 2001b).

1960. There is always the possibility that swing voters could make a critical difference in the next election, but if history is a guide, the odds are that they will not decide the election.

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