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When journalists, commentators, and political strategists talk about elections, few terms come up more frequently than that of the *swing voter*, yet this concept has been almost entirely ignored by academic analysts of voting and elections. In an attempt to fill that void, this article first develops a definition of the swing voter and then offers a simple way of locating swing voters in a mass sample survey. Using data from the American National Election Studies, the article then provides an initial look at the swing voters and how they differ from the rest of the electorate.

Keywords: *swing voters; independent voters; electoral volatility; party identification; partisanship; split-ticket voting*

When journalists, commentators, and political strategists talk about elections, few terms come up more frequently than that of the *swing voter*. Every election cycle, there are literally hundreds of articles that speculate or make confident assertions about who the swing voters are, what they want, what the campaigns are or should be doing to attract them, and how they will finally cast their ballots.[1]

For all its popularity among reporters and practitioners, however, the concept of the swing voter has been almost entirely ignored by academic analysts of voting and elections. As far as I can determine, there is not a single journal article and just one book chapter devoted to the subject (the exception is Kelley, 1983, discussed below). Though an increasing number of academic works make use of the phrase, none tries to define it very precisely or to investigate its general properties. This article is an attempt to fill that void and

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thus to help bridge the gulf that too often exists between the "real world" of candidates, journalists, and campaign strategists and the research agenda of academic political scientists and political psychologists.

Given the lack of previous work on this topic, a good part of this article is taken up with definitional and measurement issues. I first try to explain just what the term *swing voter* means and then suggest a straightforward way of locating swing voters in a mass sample survey, such as the American National Election Studies (NES). I then compare my own definition to some alternative ways of trying to make sense of the swing voter concept. With the definition established, I then make an initial attempt to test some basic hypotheses about who the swing voters are and in what ways, if any, they differ from the rest of the electorate. I conclude with some suggestions about directions for further research.

Defining the Swing Voter

Though popular commentators often make assertions about who the swing voters are and what they believe, the phrase is, not surprisingly, rarely defined very precisely. (Journalists and campaign strategists are not much given to abstract thinking or theoretical clarity.) Still, as terms in ordinary political discourse go, this one is not especially vague or elastic. The definition that follows is partly descriptive and partly stipulative; that is to say, it is designed both to reflect what *most* people seem to mean when they use the term and to suggest what the term *ought* to mean if it is to contribute something new and valuable to the study of campaigns and elections.

In simple terms, a swing voter is, as the name implies, a voter who could go either way, a voter who is not so solidly committed to one candidate or the other as to make all efforts at persuasion futile.[2] If some voters are firm, clear, dependable supporters of one candidate or the other, swing voters are the opposite: those whose final allegiance is in some doubt all the way up until election day. Put another way, swing voters are ambivalent or, to use a term with a somewhat better political science lineage, cross-pressured.[3] Rather than seeing one party as the embodiment of all virtue and the other as the quintessence of vice, swing voters are pulled—or repulsed—in both directions.

To make this definition just a bit more concrete, and to point the way toward operationalizing it in a survey of the potential electorate, let us suppose we had a scale that measured each voter's comparative assessment of the two major-party presidential candidates. At one end of the scale—for convenience,

let us designate it as –100—are voters who see the Democratic standard bearer as substantially, dramatically superior to the Republican nominee. They have, in other words, both a highly positive opinion of the Democratic candidate and a very negative opinion of the Republican candidate. Voters located at +100 have a similarly one-sided view of the campaign, albeit one favoring the Republicans. Those at or near zero, by contrast, have a more even or balanced set of attitudes. They may like both candidates equally or dislike them equally. The important point is that voters in the middle of the scale are not convinced that one candidate is clearly superior to the other.

It is this last group, of course, who are the swing voters, and it is not difficult to see why they occupy a particularly important place in the thinking of campaign strategists. For as a presidential campaign sets about the task of persuading voters to support their candidate, they are likely to focus their efforts to a great degree on these swing voters while ignoring or taking for granted those located near the two end points of the scale.

To see why this is the case, consider the situation of a voter located at –100 or –80 (i.e., at the far Democratic end of the scale). The Democrats will probably expend some effort to make sure that this voter will actually show up at the polls on election day. But as a subject for persuasive actions or communications, this voter is not a very attractive target for either party, simply because there is so little likelihood of changing his or her voting decision. The Democrats will realize that he or she is already voting Democratic and thus conclude that, to put it crassly, they have nothing more to gain from him or her. Even if his or her ardor for the Democratic candidate cools somewhat, it is most unlikely that he or she will ever seriously entertain the idea of voting Republican. For similar reasons, the Republicans also have little incentive to spend time or money on this voter. Although they might succeed in making marginal improvements in this person's comparative assessment of the two candidates, those changes are unlikely to have any effect on his or her final voting decision. Even if the voter moves 30 or 50 points to the right, he or she will still be positioned solidly on the Democratic side of the scale.

The situation is, of course, very different for those voters at or near zero. Here, relatively small movements—5 or 10 scale points—may have a major impact on a person's vote choice. Hence, voters near zero—the swing voters—will receive disproportionate attention from both campaigns. As we will see in a few pages, when American voters are actually arrayed on this sort of scale, the distribution is approximately mound shaped (it would be stretching things to say that the scale scores are normally distributed), with a somewhat larger proportion of the electorate near the center than

located out on the tails. But even if this were not the case, campaigns would still concentrate on those voters in the middle of the scale because that is where campaigning will have the greatest expected pay-off.

The Theoretical Significance of the Swing Voter Concept

Defined in the way I have suggested, swing voters play a potentially significant role in the way that political scientists ought to think about elections. The core insight that animates the swing voter concept is that, in the context of an election campaign, not all voters are equal. Voters receive attention from campaigns according to the expected "pay-off" they will yield, meaning the number of votes that can be gained or at least not lost to the other side. Thus, campaigns will generally ignore or take for granted each candidate's most committed supporters and concentrate their persuasive efforts on the undecided or weakly committed swing voters. This insight is clearly central to the way that consultants and campaign strategists go about their work, even if it has not yet been incorporated into academic models of campaigns and elections.

In this respect, there is an obvious parallel between swing voters and the so-called battleground states in the electoral college. Like swing voters, battleground states are those that cannot be firmly counted on to support one candidate or the other, those states that are still potentially winnable by both major-party candidates. And if one does not take this idea into account, one would find it very difficult to explain a great deal of what occurs during a presidential general election campaign, such as why the candidates in 2004 spent so little time in California, New York, and Texas, the states with the three largest electoral vote totals, while devoting a lot of effort to considerably smaller states such as New Hampshire, New Mexico, Iowa, Colorado, and Wisconsin. Of course, the analogy between swing voters and battleground states breaks down at several points (all analogies do). In particular, it is, at present, much easier to target battleground states than it is to target swing voters, though this may change as we learn more about who the swing voters are and/or as new campaign technologies permit more precise targeting of individual voters.

The campaigns' focus on swing voters also has normative consequences. Opponents of the electoral college frequently criticize that institution on the grounds that it leads to a contest in which so many states are ignored or taken for granted by both campaigns and so much of the candidates' time and

money is focused on a relatively small number of battleground states. Such a situation, they complain, is manifestly undemocratic because it makes some voters more important than others. If only we could switch to a direct election system, they insist, all voters would be placed on an equal footing (e.g., Longley & Peirce, 1999).

As the preceding analysis should make clear, however, this last conclusion is manifestly false. A direct election system would undoubtedly remove some existing inequalities, but other types of inequalities would remain and possibly become more important. Campaigns, to put it bluntly, are not for everyone. Those who are already very well informed, those whose ideological and partisan predispositions effectively determine their choices from the moment the candidates are selected—voters of this sort do not need campaigns. And thus the distinctive benefits of campaigns—policy commitments adopted during the campaign, special grants and pork-barrel projects from the incumbent administration—will also be distributed unequally.

Operationalizing the Swing Voter

The definition of the swing voter provided earlier can be operationalized very easily. All that is required is a scale that measures, in a relatively nuanced way, each voter's comparative assessment of the two major-party candidates. In the NES, the best way to construct such a scale is with the so-called "feeling thermometer" questions. In every presidential election year since 1972, the NES preelection survey has included a set of questions in which respondents are asked to indicate how favorably or unfavorably they view each of the presidential candidates by rating them on a thermometer scale that runs from 0 to 100 degrees.[4] As a number of scholars have shown, these ratings are a meaningful summary indicator of how the respondent evaluates a given person or group and are highly correlated with other important political variables such as voting behavior and ideological self-identification (see, among others, Brody & Page, 1973; Conover & Feldman, 1981; Mayer, 1996; Weisberg & Rusk, 1970). To determine how a voter compares the two candidates, we need only subtract one candidate's rating from the other's. The scale used in the rest of this article was constructed by subtracting the rating for the Democratic presidential candidate from that of the Republican nominee, so that higher scale scores indicate greater Republicanism.

To help anchor the analysis that follows, the first column of data in Table 1 shows the distribution of these scale scores for all major-party presidential

Table 1
Distribution of Respondents and Division of Major-Party Presidential Vote by Difference in Preelection Thermometer Ratings, 1972 to 2004

Difference in Thermometer Ratings	Percentage of All Voters	Percentage Voting Democratic	Percentage Voting Republican	*n*
–100 to –91	2.0	100	0	212
–90 to –81	2.8	99	1	300
–80 to –71	0.4	100	0	47
–70 to –61	3.8	99	1	407
–60 to –51	4.7	99	1	505
–50 to –41	5.4	97	3	587
–40 to –31	5.3	95	5	570
–30 to –21	7.1	94	6	767
–20 to –16	4.3	91	9	466
–15 to –11	2.6	85	15	277
–10 to –6	4.5	84	16	486
–5 to –1	0.3	65	35	34
0	8.8	53	47	947
1 to 5	0.3	19	81	32
6 to 10	4.7	19	81	504
11 to 15	2.3	15	85	249
16 to 20	3.9	9	91	420
21 to 30	7.2	6	94	773
31 to 40	5.8	4	96	626
41 to 50	5.5	4	96	598
51 to 60	5.6	1	99	604
61 to 70	5.1	2	98	553
71 to 80	0.6	2	98	60
81 to 90	3.9	1	99	421
91 to 100	3.1	1	99	330
Totals	100.0			10,775

Source: American National Election Studies (1972-2004).

election voters in the nine NES presidential-year surveys from 1972 to 2004 combined.[5] As has already been noted, the scores are clustered somewhat more densely near the center of the scale, but there are also a surprisingly large number of respondents located at the tails of the distribution. Every 4 years, about one third of the electorate places the two major-party candidates more than 50 degrees apart on the feeling thermometer.

As a simple test of some of the basic points suggested earlier about the nature and utility of the swing voter concept, Table 1 also shows the division of the two-party presidential vote at every point along the scale for all nine surveys added together. Obviously, the score a respondent gets on this scale is highly correlated with his or her eventual vote. This finding is reassuring but no great contribution to the literature.

What is more noteworthy is what this table shows about the relationship between scale position and "convertability." Because the thermometer ratings in Table 1 are taken from the preelection survey whereas the vote variable comes from the postelection survey, one way of interpreting these results is to say that they show the probability that a person who holds a given set of attitudes toward the major-party candidates during the preelection campaign will ultimately cast a Democratic (or Republican) ballot. For voters located at either end of the scale, the odds of effecting a change in voting intention are clearly not very great. Of those who place the candidates more than 50 degrees apart during the preelection campaign, 99% will end up voting for the favored candidate. Even among those who see a difference of 25 or 30 degrees between the candidates, only about 5% will be sufficiently influenced by the campaign to "convert" to the opposition. Only in a rather narrow band near the center of the scale—running from about –15 to +15—does the number of partisan conversions reach 15%.

At one level, the data in Table 1 reinforce a conclusion that academics have long been aware of: that not a whole lot of people change their votes during the general election phase of a presidential campaign. But if campaigns cannot create the world anew, they clearly can change *some* votes—and in a close election, those changes may spell the difference between victory and defeat. More to the immediate point, if vote changes do occur, they are much more likely to occur among those near the center of the scale—among swing voters—than among those located closer to the end points. If it is difficult to persuade someone who rates the Democratic candidate 10 degrees higher than the Republican candidate to cast a Republican ballot, it is far more difficult to convert someone who rates the Democratic standard bearer 30 or 50 degrees above his Republican counterpart.

One advantage of using a scale of this sort is that it provides a nuanced, graduated measure of a voter's convertability or "swingness." Yet for the analysis that follows, it will be helpful to have a simple, dichotomous variable that divides voters into two categories: swing voters and non–swing voters. A close inspection of Table 1 suggests that the best way to define such a variable is to classify any voter with a score between –15 and +15 inclusive as a swing voter, with everyone else falling into the non–swing

Table 2
Percentage of Major-Party Presidential Voters Classified as Swing Voters, 1972 to 2004

Year	Percentage of Respondents With a Score Between –15 and +15 on the Thermometer Ratings Scale
1972	22
1976	34
1980	28
1984	22
1988	26
1992	22
1996	18
2000	23
2004	13
Average	23

voter category.[6] Outside of this range, more than 90% of the respondents voted for the candidate whom they rated as superior in the preelection survey. Within the –15 to +15 range, the defection rate is considerably higher. As shown in Table 2, by this criterion, 23% of the voters in the typical NES presidential-year survey fit into the swing voter category.

There is also, however, some noteworthy variation across elections in the percentage of swing voters. The 1976 election and, to a lesser extent, the 1980 campaign apparently left an unusually large number of voters ambivalent about the two major-party candidates and uncertain whom to support. By contrast, the 2004 election stands out as one in which the electorate was, at least in comparative terms, quite sharply polarized: Of those who cast a ballot for Bush or Kerry, only 13% could be classified as swing voters.

Some Alternative Definitions

If the definition of a swing voter developed here is plausible and shows some promise of being analytically useful, it is not, I would concede, the only way of making sense of this concept. In this section, I consider three other ways of specifying what it means to be a swing voter. I do this for two reasons: first, to suggest why my own definition is better than the alternatives; and second, to demonstrate the validity of the approach developed earlier in this article. As will soon become clear, the three alternative definitions considered here are by no means identical with my own conception

of the swing voter, but they do get at closely related underlying ideas. If the measurement strategy outlined in the previous section is valid, then its results—in particular, the sorts of people identified as swing voters—ought to be strongly correlated with each of the other variables described here.

Political Independents

If swing voters are those who are not firm supporters of either major-party candidate, who cannot be reliably counted on to march behind either party's banner, perhaps it would make more sense to think of swing voters simply as political independents, as those respondents who, in answer to the standard party identification question, express no affiliation with either party. Several political dictionaries actually offer definitions along this line. Binning, Easterly, and Sracic (1999), for example, define a swing voter as "a term used by journalists to characterize voters that are not strongly attached to political parties" (p. 397; see also Safire, 1993, pp. 778-779). A number of media articles on the subject also operationalize the concept this way. Having declared an interest in "swing voters," they examine survey data on or interview people who call themselves independents (e.g., *The Boston Globe*, July 19, 2000, p. A16; *Baltimore Sun*, August 8, 2000, p. 12A; *Christian Science Monitor*, September 19, 2000, p. 1). But political independence, whatever its other uses, is not a very good measure of what it means to be a swing voter. If the point of the swing voter concept is to identify those voters who might conceivably vote for either major-party candidate, political independents fall short in several different ways.

On one hand, there is substantial evidence to show that many self-declared independents are, in fact, "hidden partisans": people who embrace the independent label and the resonances of civic virtue associated with it but whose actual attitudes and voting behavior are every bit as partisan as those who embrace party labels more openly. This has been shown most exhaustively for the so-called independent leaners, who initially call themselves independents but, when pressed, will concede that they feel "closer" to one party or the other (see Keith et al., 1992). But even if one looks only at the small residual category—the "pure independents," who account for only about 7% of all major-party voters—there is some reason to think that even this group has not been entirely cleansed of hidden partisans. In 1980 and 1984, when the NES included the party identification question in both the pre- and postelection surveys, between 40% and 60% of those who were categorized as pure independents in the preelection survey expressed some level of partisan commitment in the postelection survey. For a number of years, the NES postelection

survey had a question asking respondents if they had voted a straight or split ticket in state and local elections. About one fourth of the pure independents consistently said that they had voted a straight ticket.

On the other hand, not all self-declared partisans can be counted as firm and reliable voters for their own party's presidential candidate. If party identification is a very good predictor of voting behavior, it is clearly not a perfect one. Every 4 years, a sizable number of party identifiers, particularly Democratic identifiers, defect to the opposition. On average, between 1952 and 2004, 19% of all Democratic identifiers voted for the Republican presidential candidate, whereas 10% of Republican identifiers returned the favor.

In many elections, indeed, much of the speculation about swing voters—and much of each party's most intensive presidential campaigning—centers on various kinds of partisans who are thought, for one reason or another, to be dissatisfied with their own party's presidential candidate and thus potentially winnable by the opposition. During the 1980s, for example, both parties devoted a great deal of attention to a group popularly known as the Reagan Democrats: White, blue-collar Democrats, most of whom held conservative views on social and cultural issues, who felt increasingly alienated from a party that seemed dominated by Blacks, feminists, and other liberal activist groups.[7] If swing voters are defined as political independents, then the Reagan Democrats are simply excluded from this category by fiat, without bothering to investigate their real attitudes and voting proclivities.

Table 3 shows the average relationship between party identification and the swing voter for the nine presidential elections held between 1972 and 2004.[8] As one might expect, the two variables are related, but the relationship is nowhere near strong enough to conclude that they measure the same underlying concept. On average, 40% of pure independents qualify as swing voters, as compared to 27% of independent leaners, 28% of weak partisans, and 12% of strong partisans. When the data are percentaged the other way, pure independents account for just 13% of the swing voters. The modal swing voter, in every survey analyzed here, was actually a weak partisan.

Party Switchers

Another political science category that bears some relationship to the concept of swing voters is that of the party switcher or floating voter: voters who actually cross party lines from one election to the next, who vote for a Republican in one presidential contest and a Democrat in the succeeding one, or vice versa. Like party identification, the party switcher variable has a distinguished political science lineage: Though not used quite so often in recent

Table 3
Relationship Between Party Identification and Swing Voters, 1972 to 2004

	Pure Independents (%)	Independent Leaners (%)	Weak Partisans (%)	Strong Partisans (%)
Swing voters	40	27	28	12
Non–swing voters	60	73	72	88

	Swing Voters (%)	Non–Swing Voters (%)
Pure independents	13	6
Independent leaners	28	22
Weak partisans	42	31
Strong partisans	18	41

Note: Figures represent the average percentages for the nine National Election Studies presidential-year surveys from 1972 through 2004. The difference between swing voters and non–swing voters was significant at the .001 level in each of the nine surveys.

years, it was once a major analytical tool in academic voting studies.[9] But party switchers are simply not the same thing as swing voters. There are too many people who fit into one category and not the other, or vice versa.

Most obviously, because party switchers are defined by a disjunction in voting behavior across two successive elections, using this variable as a way of identifying swing voters automatically excludes all those who did not or could not vote the last time around. (Since 1972, 15% of the major-party votes cast in presidential elections have come, on average, from people who said they did not vote in the previous election.) Second, the party switchers category leaves out all those voters who thought seriously about voting for a different party than they had 4 years earlier but finally decided not to. If it is, in many circumstances, worth knowing about those people who switched sides in successive presidential elections, the swing voter concept gets at a slightly different idea: those voters who waver between the parties within the confines of a single election campaign, at least some of whom will stick with the party they supported the last time around.

If not all swing voters are party switchers, the reverse is also true: Not all party switchers are swing voters. Party switchers include all those who decided to abandon the party they voted for in the last presidential election, no matter when they reached that decision. And although some voters will not make that decision until the final days of an election campaign, many, it

appears, decide months or even years earlier and are thus effectively removed from the swing voter category by the time the campaign begins. Between 1972 and 1976, for example, the Republican share of the total presidential vote declined by more than 20%—from 60.7% to 48.0%—but most of that decline, the evidence strongly suggests, had been consummated well before the 1976 general election campaign got under way. The huge Republican majority of 1972 was dissolved primarily by the impact of intervening events: the Watergate scandal, the recession of 1974-1975, Gerald Ford's decision to pardon Richard Nixon. (The simple fact that George McGovern was not the Democratic presidential candidate in 1976 also helped a lot.) By the early summer of 1976, then, many erstwhile Republican voters were safely and comfortably in the Democratic camp, with little or no prospect of leaving it. They were, in short, not swing voters.

All of these points are documented in Table 4, which shows the relationship between party switchers and swing voters for 8 of the 9 presidential elections held between 1972 and 2004.[10] As in the earlier analysis of political independents, there is a clear relationship between the two variables: Party switchers, especially those who jumped from one major party to the other, are more likely to be swing voters than the constants or "standpatters" (the latter term is Key's [1966]), who voted for the same major party in two consecutive elections. But only 41% of major-party switchers turn out to be swing voters. A majority of party switchers, in other words, were no longer "up for grabs" by the time the general election campaign began. Conversely, major-party and third-party switchers combined account for just 29% of all swing voters.

The Undecided

Another way to define the swing vote is to equate it with the "undecided vote"—with those respondents who tell pollsters that they do not know how they are going to vote in the upcoming election.[11] Of the three alternative definitions of the swing vote analyzed here, the undecided category is perhaps closest in spirit to my own definition. The principal difference, at the theoretical level, is that the swing vote is a slightly broader concept: It includes not only those who are literally undecided but also those who have some current vote intention but are weakly committed to that choice.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the undecided vote in the NES surveys is how small it is: Of those who said that they were going to vote in the November election, just 7%, on average, said they had not yet decided who they were voting for. One reason so few respondents are recorded as

Table 4
Relationship Between Party Switchers and Swing Voters, 1972 to 2004

	Major-Party Constants (%)	Major-Party Switchers (%)	Third-Party Switchers (%)	New Voters (%)
Swing voters	18	41	24[a]	25
Non–swing voters	82	59	76[a]	75

	Swing Voters (%)	Non–Swing Voters (%)
Major-party constants	54	72
Major-party switchers	23	10
Third-party switchers	6	4
New voters	17	14

Note: Figures represent the average percentages for the 1972 to 1980 and 1988 to 2004 National Election Studies surveys. (The 1984 survey did not include a question asking respondents how they had voted in 1980.) The difference between swing voters and non–swing voters was significant at the .01 level in each of the eight surveys. The groups are defined as follows: Major-party constants are those who voted for the same major party's presidential candidate in two successive elections. Major-party switchers are those who voted for the Republican candidate in one presidential election and the Democratic candidate in the next election, or vice versa. Third-party switchers are those who voted for a third-party candidate in one election and a major-party candidate in the next election. New voters includes all voters in a given election who did not vote in the preceding presidential election.
a. Based only on results from 1972, 1996, and 2000. In other years, the number of third-party switchers is too small to permit a reliable estimate.

undecided is that those who initially choose this option are generally pushed or "probed" to say who they think they will vote for. (Unfortunately, none of the NES surveys make it possible to determine who was pushed and who was not.)

This is only one aspect of a larger problem: It is very difficult to get a clear, consistent, reliable measure of the undecided vote. Estimates of its size and composition vary a great deal, depending on such factors as the question wording employed and whether and how interviewers were instructed to deal with respondents who initially claimed to be undecided. In an analysis of preelection polls from 1988, for example, Gelman and King (1993) found that variations in question wording had little effect on the relative levels of support expressed for Bush and Dukakis. But "the proportion undecided and refusing to answer the survey question varied consistently and considerably with the question wording and polling organization" (p. 424).

There is also some reason to think that many of those who say they are undecided may actually have a preference that they are reluctant to reveal to the interviewer. The strongest evidence on this point comes from the Gallup Poll, which for many years measured voter preferences in presidential elections in two different ways. Half of the sample were asked by the interviewer, in the now-familiar way, whom they would vote for if the election were held today. The other half were given a "secret ballot" listing the major candidates, which they were asked to mark in private and then deposit in a specially marked "ballot box." This simple subterfuge had a significant impact on the size of the undecided vote, reducing it by about one third. In the fall of 1976, for example, when Gallup used the nonsecret method, 17% of all respondents initially said they were undecided. When respondents were asked, in a follow-up question, if they "leaned" toward one candidate or the other, the undecided vote dropped to 9%. Among those respondents who used the secret ballot, however, just 6% were undecided (see Perry, 1979).

When compared to the supporters of major-party candidates, the undecided vote also appears to be unusually fluid. Large numbers of voters drift into and out of the undecided category throughout the general election campaign. In a panel study of the 1972 presidential campaign in the Syracuse, New York, area conducted by Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure, 13% of the respondents were classified as undecided in a September survey, as compared to 11% undecided in the October wave. But these relatively stable aggregate figures mask a far larger amount of turnover at the individual level. Of those who said they were undecided in September, 43% had settled on a candidate in October. On the other side, 28% of the October undecideds had been classified as Nixon or McGovern supporters in September.

For reasons both conceptual and empirical, then, I think it better to define and measure the swing vote as I have proposed in the previous section of this article than to equate it with the undecided vote. Yet if the swing voter definition proposed here is at all valid, the two variables should be strongly correlated—a hypothesis that is amply confirmed by the data in Table 5. Of those classified as undecided in the NES surveys between 1972 and 2004, 67%, on average, also fell into the swing voter category, whereas just 19% of those who expressed a candidate preference were swing voters.

A Different Measurement Strategy

As noted earlier, there is, as far as I am aware, only one other attempt in academic social science to conduct a systematic investigation of the characteristics

Table 5
Relationship Between Undecided Voters and Swing Voters, 1972 to 2004

	Undecided Voters (%)	Voters Expressing a Candidate Preference (%)
Swing voters	67	19
Non–swing voters	33	81
	Swing Voters (%)	Non–Swing Voters (%)
Undecided voters	16	2
Voters expressing a candidate preference	84	98

Note: Figures represent the average percentages for the nine National Election Studies presidential-year surveys from 1972 through 2004. The difference between swing voters and non–swing voters was significant at the .001 level in each of the nine surveys.

and behavior of swing voters. Stanley Kelley's (1983) *Interpreting Elections* is, as its title implies, primarily an effort to develop and apply a general theory about the meaning of presidential elections, but in chapter 8, Kelley focused specifically on the role played by a group he usually called *marginal voters*, though he did occasionally use the term *swing voters* as well.

Kelley (1983) defined marginal voters in a way that is similar to the one proposed earlier in this article,[12] but he used a different set of survey questions to operationalize that concept. In every presidential election since 1952, the NES has included a sequence of eight open-ended questions, asking respondents if there is "anything in particular" that they like or dislike about the presidential candidates and the two major political parties. For each such question, interviewers are instructed to record up to five distinct comments. By simply counting up all the comments favorable to the Republicans and hostile to the Democrats and subtracting the total number of comments favorable to the Democrats and unfavorable to the Republicans, Kelley created an index ranging from –20 (for the most zealous supporters of the Democratic candidate) to +20 (for equally zealous Republicans).

Table 6 shows the cumulative distribution of respondents on this scale for the eight NES presidential-year surveys conducted between 1976 and 2004,[13] along with the division of the major-party vote at each point along the scale. Like my own scale, there is a clear and strong relationship between a respondent's position on the Kelley index and his or her likelihood of voting for the Democratic or Republican candidate. Those with a

Table 6
Distribution of Respondents and Division of Major-Party Presidential Vote by Net Number of Likes and Dislikes, 1976 to 2004

Net Number of Likes and Dislikes	Percentage of All Respondents	Percentage Voting Democratic	Percentage Voting Republican	*n*
–20 to –16	1.2	100	0	106
–15 to –11	6.5	99	1	570
–10	2.1	100	0	181
–9	2.7	97	3	235
–8	3.4	97	3	296
–7	3.6	96	4	314
–6	3.9	94	6	339
–5	4.7	93	7	415
–4	5.0	89	11	437
–3	5.2	82	18	460
–2	5.4	79	21	471
–1	5.8	63	37	511
0	7.0	44	56	617
1	5.1	19	81	451
2	5.3	12	88	463
3	5.0	8	92	438
4	4.8	6	94	420
5	4.1	6	94	357
6	3.9	4	96	342
7	3.1	2	98	273
8	3.0	2	98	262
9	2.3	1	99	199
10	1.7	0	100	146
11 to 15	4.5	1	99	397
16 to 20	0.7	0	100	64

score of –10 or less are almost certain to vote Democratic, those with a score of +10 or higher are all-but-certain Republican voters, whereas those in the middle are, to some extent, still up for grabs.

Not surprisingly, Kelley's (1983) scale and my own are highly correlated. Across the eight surveys analyzed here, the average correlation between the two variables was .82. Yet much of this correlation reflects the simple fact that both scales do a very good job of discriminating between Democratic and Republican voters. From the perspective of the issues addressed in this article, a better test of the scales' comparability is to ignore partisan direction by taking their absolute values and see how well the scales agree in distinguishing between weak and highly committed supporters of the candidates. The

correlation between the absolute values of these two scales is, on average, just .49, suggesting a considerable degree of overlap but also a fair measure of disagreement.

Though at one point I considered using Kelley's method as the basis for my own investigation, I ultimately came to believe that it had two major shortcomings. First and most important, the Kelley index, in my opinion, actually measures two things: a respondent's comparative assessment of the major candidates and parties but also, to some extent, his or her level of political sophistication. That is to say, one can wind up near the center of the Kelley scale in one of two ways: (a) by providing a large number of likes and dislikes that are almost evenly balanced in their support for or opposition to each party or (b) by having very little at all to say. As a number of scholars have argued, a simple count of the total number of likes and dislikes a respondent provides to the eight questions in the NES survey is a good measure of political knowledge and awareness (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 304; Smith, 1989, chap. 2). No matter how strongly they support a particular candidate, some respondents simply are not able to offer much in the way of specific things they like about him or dislike about his opponent. Given the rather low number of likes and dislikes recorded for many respondents—in the eight surveys analyzed here, one fourth of all major-party voters, on average, offered a total of five comments or fewer—it is likely that many of those classified as marginal or swing voters according to the Kelley index are actually quite sure which candidate they will support but are not very good at articulating the reasons for their decision. Using the thermometer ratings avoids this confusion.

The other point in favor of the measurement strategy proposed in this article is its simplicity. Given the major role that the swing voter plays in a good deal of contemporary writing and thinking about campaigns, it is desirable, I believe, to develop a way of operationalizing that concept that can easily be included in other surveys and extended to other contexts. Whatever its other advantages, a scale such as the one Kelley (1983) used is plainly not designed for or well suited to such a purpose. It requires too many questions and too much additional time and training from both interviewers and coders. My own scale, by contrast, is built from just two relatively uncomplicated questions.

Swing Voters and Election Outcomes

What role do swing voters actually play in determining the outcome of presidential elections? To answer this question, Table 7 breaks down the

Table 7
Swing Voters and Presidential Election Outcomes

	Percentage of All Major-Party Voters	Percentage Voting Democratic	Percentage Voting Republican
1972			
Democratic base vote	25	96	4
Swing voters	22	51	49
Republican base vote	53	6	94
1976			
Democratic base vote	32	96	4
Swing voters	34	54	46
Republican base vote	34	6	94
1980			
Democratic base vote	36	92	8
Swing voters	27	38	62
Republican base vote	37	3	97
1984			
Democratic base vote	31	97	3
Swing voters	22	44	56
Republican base vote	47	2	98
1988			
Democratic base vote	32	97	3
Swing voters	26	55	45
Republican base vote	42	3	97
1992			
Democratic base vote	40	99	1
Swing voters	22	56	44
Republican base vote	37	3	97
1996			
Democratic base vote	47	96	4
Swing voters	18	50	50
Republican base vote	36	2	98
2000			
Democratic base vote	39	95	5
Swing voters	23	52	48
Republican base vote	38	3	97
2004			
Democratic base vote	42	96	4
Swing voters	13	53	47
Republican base vote	45	2	98

Note: Data have been weighted so that the survey results are equal to the actual results.

presidential electorate into three major groups: (a) the Democratic Base Vote, who have thermometer-rating scale scores between –100 and –16; (b) the Swing Voters, who, as defined earlier, are those with scale scores between –15 and +15; and (c) the Republican Base Vote, who have scale scores between +16 and +100. The table then shows, for each of the past nine presidential elections, the distribution of the electorate across these categories and the division of the major-party presidential vote within each category. For this table, I have also followed the lead of James E. Campbell (2000) and weighted the NES data so that the survey results are equal to the actual votes cast.

The base vote, as I am using the term here, is the opposite of the swing vote: It is those voters whose support a candidate can comfortably rely on. On average, the 18 major-party candidates shown in Table 7 held on to 96% of their base vote. The problem for most campaigns is that the base vote falls short of a majority. Hence, the principal goal of the campaign becomes to add on to the base vote enough weakly committed, undecided, and even initially antagonistic voters to secure a majority. And that, of course, is where the swing vote becomes important.

The swing vote is most significant, then, in close elections. The basic dynamic can be seen most readily in the elections of 1976, 1980, 1992, and 2000. In each of these contests, both major-party candidates had a base vote of between 30% and 40% of the electorate. When this is the case, which candidate wins will depend on how the swing vote breaks—and in every one of these elections, the candidate who won a majority of the swing vote also won a majority of the popular vote as a whole (though in Gore's case, this was not enough to carry him into the White House).

The situation is different when the general election shapes up to be a landslide. In 1972, for example, 53% of the voters in the NES preelection survey were already part of the Republican base vote. To win the 1972 election, George McGovern had to win an overwhelming percentage of the swing voters and make some substantial inroads into the Republican base. In fact, as the figures in Table 7 indicate, Nixon held on to 94% of his base vote—and also won a narrow majority of the swing voters. Ronald Reagan in 1984 and Bill Clinton in 1996 similarly began the general election campaign with a base vote that fell just shy of a majority.

The most one can say about the role of the swing vote in these three elections, then, is that it helped determine the size of the winning candidate's victory. Yet even in an election of this type, both campaigns would probably be well advised to concentrate most of their efforts on swing voters. From the perspective of the leading candidate, the swing vote may provide him with

the final votes necessary to secure a majority—and can also spell the difference between a comfortable victory and a landslide, a difference that most presidents take very seriously. As for the trailing candidate, even though it is most unlikely that he can win 80% or 90% of the swing vote, there simply is no better alternative. The swing voters represent the most likely source of converts. After that, the odds only become even more prohibitive.

The 1988 and 2004 elections are more difficult to categorize. In 1988, the Republican base vote was 10 percentage points larger than the Democratic base vote, but the GOP base represented just 42% of the major-party electorate and thus left George H. W. Bush well short of a majority. In 2004, as a result of the sharp drop in the number of swing voters, George W. Bush had a base vote of 45%, but John Kerry's base vote, at 42%, was only slightly smaller. To win the election, in other words, both Republican candidates needed to win a substantial share of the swing vote—but they did not need a majority. In the end, both Bushes carried enough swing votes to win the election, but it was actually their opponents who won a majority of the swing vote.

The swing vote, in sum, is not the be-all and end-all of American presidential elections. It is much less important in landslide elections—but, then, so are campaigns in general. For a candidate in McGovern's position—trailing an incumbent president by about 25 percentage points in most national polls at the start of the fall campaign—there was probably nothing he could have done to avert defeat. Had he run a good campaign, he might have reduced the size of Nixon's victory, but a Democratic win in 1972 was probably never in the cards. But in the more typical case, where an election is close, the final outcome hinges to a great extent on the decisions reached by swing voters.

One final point should be made about the data in Table 7. Although the swing voter concept serves a number of useful functions, one use to which these data should *not* be put is to use the final verdict rendered by swing voters as a measure of which candidate ran the better campaign. To begin with, the NES preelection interviews generally do not begin until September, by which time many of the best strategic moves and worst campaign blunders have already taken place. In 1988, for example, many analysts believe that Bush won the election primarily because of a series of attacks he launched on the gubernatorial record of Michael Dukakis in mid- to late August and because of Dukakis's failure to reply to those attacks more quickly and effectively. Based on contemporary polling by Gallup and other organizations, it seems likely that Bush's attacks moved a lot of undecided voters to support the vice president and made a lot of Dukakis supporters less comfortable with their choice. But any such effects would not be picked up in the NES preference data.

In addition, the dynamics of a particular election may produce a swing electorate who are predisposed toward one of the candidates. In 1988, for example, Bush was much more successful than Dukakis in uniting his own partisans around his candidacy during the summer. The result was that of the swing voters in the 1988 NES sample, 54% were self-identified Democrats and only 35% were Republicans. With that kind of initial advantage, it is no great surprise that Dukakis ultimately won a small majority of the swing voters.

Who Are the Swing Voters?

Are certain kinds of people more or less likely to be classified as swing voters? Do swing voters, when compared to the rest of the electorate, have distinctive attitudes or demographic traits? These questions are often the major focus of journalistic writing about swing voters. They are also, however, an essential issue for a social science analysis of the swing voter concept. Before we develop more elaborate theories about how swing voters decide which candidate to support, we need to establish some basic propositions about who they are. Indeed, all of the attention that campaigns lavish on swing voters—and any attempt to argue that they are theoretically important—presumes that swing voters are, in at least some important ways, different from the rest of the electorate. If swing voters are, for all practical purposes, a randomly selected subset of all voters, then a campaign's decision to concentrate on swing voters will not change its strategy. It will talk about the same issues, in the same ways, and make the same kinds of promises that it would if swing voters did not exist and it was targeting its message indiscriminately to the entire electorate.

Given the hundreds of questions that are typically included in the NES surveys, it is obviously not my intention to provide an exhaustive, definitive answer to these questions. Instead, based on previous work about ambivalent and cross-pressured voters (see, especially, A. Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Kelley, 1983) and contemporary journalistic analyses of the swing voter phenomenon, I have developed four major hypotheses about how swing voters might differ from their non–swing voter counterparts.

Hypothesis 1: Swing voters are less partisan than non–swing voters.

The evidence for this hypothesis has already been presented in Table 3. As noted there, in every single survey, there is a large and statistically significant difference, in exactly the direction predicted.

Table 8
Ideology of Swing and Non–Swing Voters, 1972 to 2004

	Swing Voters (%)	Non–Swing Voters (%)
1. Extremely liberal	1	2
2. Liberal	4	10
3. Slightly liberal	11	10
4. Moderate	31	22
5. Slightly conservative	18	15
6. Conservative	10	18
7. Extremely conservative	1	3
Don't know, haven't thought much about it	24	20

Note: Figures represent the average percentages for the nine National Election Studies presidential-year surveys from 1972 through 2004. The difference between swing voters and non–swing voters was significant at the .01 level in each of the nine surveys.

Hypothesis 2: Swing voters are more likely to be moderates, both in general ideology and on specific issues.

Those at the more extreme ends of the ideological spectrum, we might suspect, have a clearer affinity for one of the major-party candidates: liberals for the Democrat, conservatives for the Republican. Moderates, by contrast, are less certain about which nominee better represents their opinions and interests and thus more likely to waver.

At the level of ideological self-description, this hypothesis has a considerable measure of truth. The NES surveys generally measure ideology on a 7-point scale, ranging from extreme liberals to extreme conservatives. And as shown in Table 8, swing voters are more likely to come from the center of the scale and less likely to be found on the extremes than are non–swing voters, a difference that is highly significant in every survey. Averaging across the nine presidential elections, just 16% of the swing voters located themselves at 1 of the 4 outer points on the scale (Points 1, 2, 6, and 7) as compared to 33% of the non–swing voters. Meanwhile, 31% of swing voters placed themselves at the exact center of the scale (Point 4) versus 22% of the non–swing voters.

The relationship between being a swing voter and being a moderate gets a good deal weaker, however, when one examines attitudes about specific issues. If one looks closely at the responses to questions on such topics as job guarantees or the best way to provide health care, swing voters are slightly less likely to be found at the extremes on such issues, more likely to be near the center, but the differences are rather small. Of the 63 seven-point scale

questions I examined, in 58 cases the proportion of swing voters who placed themselves at one of the four outer points on the scale was less than the proportion of non–swing voters who gave such answers. But in only 32 of these 58 cases was the difference statistically significant at the .05 level (using a simple difference of proportions test), and in no case were the differences as large as they were for the general ideology question shown in Table 8.

Hypothesis 3: Swing voters are less informed about and less interested in politics than non–swing voters.

Though he presented small bits of other data, the principal focus of Kelley's (1983) analysis of the role of marginal voters in presidential elections concerned their competence—and his findings were quite pessimistic. "Compared to voters generally," Kelley concluded, marginal voters "were on average less well educated, less active politically, less interested in the campaign, less informed, and less attentive to politics" (p. 157). Given what has been said earlier, however, about the problematic character of Kelley's method of identifying marginal voters—particularly the fact that it may also serve as a measure of political sophistication—the whole matter is clearly worth revisiting.

Table 9 accordingly shows how swing voters and non–swing voters compare, on average, on a variety of measures of political interest, involvement, and information. As it turns out (the data are not reported here), using the thermometer ratings rather than the likes–dislikes questions does make some difference. Swing voters, as I have defined them, are, for a substantial majority of the questions in Table 9, more involved and more knowledgeable than a comparable group based on the Kelley (1983) index (specifically, those with scores between –2 and +2, inclusive). But the differences are in most cases rather modest and not enough to undermine Kelley's basic conclusion. Swing voters, no matter how one defines them, are consistently less involved in and informed about politics than the rest of the electorate.

The gap is widest for questions that relate specifically to the current election. By a substantial margin, swing voters are less likely to say that they are "very much" interested in the current campaign, that they care who wins the presidential election, or that they have participated in various forms of campaign-related activity. The difference is somewhat smaller, however, on those survey items that measure longer term political predispositions. Of swing voters, 26% say they follow government and public affairs "most of the time," as compared to 36% of non–swing voters; 52%

Table 9
Political Interest, Knowledge, and Involvement Among Swing and Non–Swing Voters

	Swing Voters	Non–Swing Voters	No. of Surveys
Interest in current campaign			
Very much interested	29	45	9
Somewhat interested	53	44	9
Not much interested	18	11	9
Care about who wins the presidential election	58	84	9
Follow government and public affairs			
Most of the time	26	36	9
Some of the time	42	40	9
Only now and then	21	18	9
Hardly at all	10	6	9
Respondent's general level of information about politics			
Very or fairly high	42	52	9
Average	36	35	9
Very or fairly low	21	13	9
Know speaker of the House	26	34	4
Know majority party in House of Representatives	65	73	9
Know majority party in U.S. Senate	52	61	6
Tried to convince others how to vote	28	45	9
Used campaign button or window sign	9	14	9
Went to political meeting or rally	7	11	9
Made contribution to candidate, party, or political group	10	17	9
Watched television programs on the campaign			
Good many	24	33	8
Several	42	39	8
Just one or two	22	18	8
None	12	10	8
Watched presidential debate	71	75	5
Have seen political ads	80	79	3

Note: Figures represent the average percentages for all National Election Studies presidential-year surveys in which the question was asked.

of non–swing voters were rated as having a very or fairly high level of information about politics and public affairs, versus 42% of swing voters.

As a generalization, then, one can say that although swing voters are a bit more difficult to reach than non–swing voters, they are not so isolated

or apolitical as to make the campaigner's task impossible. As the final two items in Table 9 indicate, swing voters watch presidential debates in about the same percentages as non–swing voters and are actually more likely to report seeing a political advertisement.

Hypothesis 4: Swing voters are demographically different than non–swing voters.

Media stories have assigned a remarkable variety of demographic traits to the archetypal swing voter. Among the groups that are often said to be significantly overrepresented within the ranks of the swing voters are women, the young, the elderly, Catholics, and Hispanics. On the other side of the coin, certain groups, particularly Blacks, are often depicted as very firmly attached to one of the parties and thus underrepresented among swing voters.

Common as such assertions are, however, what is particularly striking (at least to a social scientist) is that these claims are generally buttressed by not a shred of hard evidence. To put the whole matter to a test, I have selected 10 groups that have seemed, in recent elections, to be politically significant and to be frequently implicated in discussions of the swing voter phenomenon: men, women, Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, White Southerners, Protestants, Catholics, the young (aged 18-30), and the elderly (aged 65 and older). The simple question that Table 10 tries to answer is Are any of these groups relatively more or less likely to be swing voters than one would predict based on their numbers in the voting population as a whole?

The most important conclusion to be derived from Table 10 is that swing voters are, at least in demographic terms, a very diverse group. Of the 87 survey groups evaluated in Table 10, in only 16 cases is the group significantly over- or underrepresented among swing voters—and in only 4 cases does the difference reach 10 percentage points. To the extent that swing voters are demographically different from non–swing voters, moreover, their distinctive attributes vary from election to election. The only group that is overrepresented among swing voters in at least 8 of 9 elections is Catholics.

If there is one group that is most often described as a swing constituency in media stories, it is women. Yet not once in these nine elections do women emerge as significantly more likely to be swing voters. To the contrary, in 1996, 2000, and 2004, it was men who were more likely to be swing voters (though the difference never quite achieves statistical significance). Contrary to another common claim, Blacks are not dramatically less likely to be swing voters than Whites are. The perception that Blacks are not swing voters probably derives from the fact that in every recent presidential election except 1992, at least 80% of Blacks voted for the Democratic

Table 10
Demographic Characteristics of Swing and Non–Swing Voters

	Women		Men	
	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters
1972	58	54	42	46
1976	57	56	43	44
1980	55	54	45	46
1984	56	56	44	44
1988	59	53	41	47
1992	59	55	41	45
1996	51	56	49	44
2000	53	56	47	44
2004	46	55	54	45
	Whites		Blacks	
	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters
1972	89	91	9	9
1976	94	88**	5	9**
1980	91	88	8	12
1984	88	90	9	9
1988	86	88	11	10
1992	83	85	14	13
1996	86	88	10	10
2000	80	83	13	9*
2004	63	79**	24	12**
	Hispanics		White Southerners	
	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters
1972	—[a]	—[a]	15	19
1976	—[a]	—[a]	19	18
1980	—[a]	—[a]	25	22
1984	7	4*	20	19
1988	9	7	21	20
1992	11	6**	22	20
1996	8	7	31	25
2000	5	5	17	24*
2004	10	7	16	20

(continued)

Table 10 (continued)

	Protestants		Catholics	
	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters
1972	57	66**	35	23**
1976	59	65**	30	23**
1980	63	63	27	22
1984	57	60	32	27
1988	62	63	27	25
1992	57	58	27	23
1996	59	57	27	26
2000	46	55**	37	27**
2004	57	56	21	25
	Young (Age 18-30)		Elderly (Age 65 or Older)	
	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters	Percentage of Swing Voters	Percentage of Non–Swing Voters
1972	29	27	12	15
1976	26	25	14	19*
1980	24	21	21	20
1984	20	23	17	17
1988	22	15**	20	18
1992	17	17	22	21
1996	10	13	21	25
2000	16	12	17	21
2004	12	19	14	18

a. The 1972, 1976, and 1980 National Election Studies surveys each contained fewer than 25 Hispanic voters.
*$p < .05$, two-tailed. **$p < .01$, two-tailed.

candidate. But the swing voter concept, it is important to emphasize, does not measure how lopsided or equally divided a group's eventual vote totals turn out to be, but how many members of that group were undecided or weakly committed during the general election campaign. To judge by the data in Table 10, in both 2000 and 2004, a fair number of Blacks were, at best, lukewarm supporters of the Democratic candidate and might, with a bit more effort from the GOP, have joined the Republican camp.

Concluding Observations

The principal conclusion of this article is that swing voters do deserve more attention from academic students of voting and elections. The concept can be defined so that it does have a clear meaning and can be readily operationalized in election surveys. It also contributes something new and valuable to academic election studies by reminding us that in the context of an election campaign, not all voters are equal and that voters will receive attention according to their expected pay-off.

It is appropriate, then, to conclude with a few comments about directions for future research:

1. Are there other ways that swing voters differ from non–swing voters? Do they differ, for example, in the priority or salience that they attach to various issues? Besides being somewhat more moderate, do swing voters differ in the direction of their issue opinions? Are they, at least in some years, more likely to be pro-life on abortion or more in favor of gun control?
2. How do swing voters finally decide which candidate to vote for? Do swing voters use different decision processes than do non–swing voters? Do they, for example, place heavier reliance on retrospective performance evaluations or the candidates' personal qualities?
3. Though the analysis presented in this article deals entirely with swing voters in presidential elections, the basic idea can clearly be extended to congressional elections. The one complication in doing so concerns how to deal with those voters who do not know anything about one or both of the congressional candidates. The measurement strategy developed in this article requires that survey respondents be able to provide some sort of thermometer rating to both major-party candidates. In presidential elections, only about 1% of all voters are unable to meet this standard, but the number would surely be far larger in the typical congressional election. My inclination is to think that uninformed voters should be kept separate from swing voters, though both may play an important role in the strategic thinking of congressional campaigners.

Notes

1. For some examples just from the 2000 election cycle, see. *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2000, p. A19; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 14, 2000, p. B15; *USA Today*, March 24, 2000, p. 6A; *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 2000, p. A3; *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 10, 2000, p. 5A; *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2000, p. A4; *The Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2000, p. A14; *The Economist*, June 17, 2000, p. 27; *The Gazette* (Montreal), July 3, 2000, p. B1; *The*

Boston Globe, July 19, 2000, p. A16; *Baltimore Sun*, August 8, 2000, p. 12A; *Financial Times* (London), August 19, 2000, p. 6; *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 22, 2000, p. 1A; The *Seattle Times*, August 27, 2000, p. SL1; *National Review*, August 28, 2000; *Campaigns and Elections*, September, 2000, p. 68; *U.S. News & World Report*, September 11, 2000, p. 30; *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 2000, p. A1; *USA Today*, September 15, 2000, p. 8A; *Newsday*, September 19, 2000, p. A4; *Christian Science Monitor*, September 19, 2000, p. 1; *Newsweek*, October 16, 2000, p. 44; *Boston Herald*, October 19, 2000, p. 31; *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2000, p. A1; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 21, 2000, p. A5; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 22, 2000, p. 1A; *The New York Times*, October 25, 2000, p. A22; *The Boston Globe*, October 25, 2000, p. A24; *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 26, 2000, p. 14A; *USA Today*, October 27, 2000, p. 8A; *New York Daily News*, October 27, 2000, p. 5; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 28, 2000, p. 13B; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 28, 2000, p. 1E; *Business Week*, October 30, 2000, p. 60; *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2000, p. A1; *The New York Times*, November 5, 2000, sec. 4, p. 14; *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2000, p. A17.

2. As indicated in the text, among media articles that do provide an explicit definition of the swing voter, this is the most common approach. See, for example, *The San-Diego Union Tribune*, October 20, 2000, p. B-11; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 26, 2000, p. 14A; and *The New York Times*, November 5, 2000, sec. 4, p. 14.

3. Though it never employed the term *swing voter*, one antecedent to the analysis in this article is the discussion in most of the great early voting studies of social and attitudinal cross-pressures within the electorate (see, in particular, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954, pp. 128-132; A. Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, pp. 78-88; A. Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, pp. 157-164; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948, pp. 56-64). There was, however, never any agreement as to how to operationalize this concept (Lazarsfeld and his collaborators, 1948, tended to look at demographic characteristics; the Michigan school used attitudinal data), and almost the only empirical finding of this work was that cross-pressured voters tended to be late deciders. For reasons that are not immediately clear, more recent voting studies have almost entirely ignored the concept. The term appears nowhere in Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976), Fiorina (1981), or Miller and Shanks (1996).

4. For reasons made clear below, the analysis presented here requires candidate ratings from the preelection survey. Thermometer ratings of the presidential candidates were first included in the American National Election Studies (NES) in 1964, but in both 1964 and 1968 these questions were asked only in the postelection survey.

5. Throughout this article, I have followed the lead of virtually every other major academic voting model and treat voting in presidential elections as a dichotomous variable, where voters effectively choose between a Republican and a Democrat (see, among others, A. Campbell et al., 1960, chap. 4; Fiorina, 1981; Markus & Converse, 1979; Pomper & Schulman, 1975). In principle, one could also examine a second class of "swing voters" who waver between voting for one (or both) of the major-party candidates and voting for a third-party contender, though this would require additional data and analysis that would take us far beyond the main subject of this article.

6. An alternative procedure, less suitable for campaigns but perhaps more appealing to academics, would be to create a composite swing vote by weighting each point on the scale by the probability that a respondent in that position will defect to the opposite party. Experiments with that procedure show that it yields results almost identical to those based on the dichotomous variable described in the text.

7. Like the swing voter, there is some ambiguity as to what exactly a "Reagan Democrat" was. The definition in the text seems to be what most people who used the term had in mind.

8. To conserve space and enhance interpretability, Tables 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9 show only the average of the results from the nine separate surveys. In each case, the results do not vary much from survey to survey. Where there is some danger that averages such as these might hide very different results in individual surveys, as in Tables 7 and 10, I report separate results for each survey.

9. The distinction between party switchers and "standpatters" was the major dependent variable used by Key (1966) in his widely celebrated book *The Responsible Electorate*. Before the "discovery" of party identification, independents were generally defined in behavioral terms (i.e., as those who voted for candidates of different parties, either in the same election or across successive elections). See, for example, Eldersveld (1952). Party switchers also played a major role in some of the early work of the Michigan school. See A. Campbell et al. (1954, pp. 11-27) and A. Campbell (1957). For a good recent examination of the concept, see Zaller (2004).

10. The 1984 NES survey did not include a question asking respondents how they had voted in 1980, thus making it impossible to identify party switchers in that survey.

11. For media articles that adopt this approach, see *USA Today*, October 27, 2000, p. 8A; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 28, 2000, p. 13B; and *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, October 28, 2000, p. 1E.

12. Measurement issues aside, Kelley's (1983) definition of the marginal voter is slightly different from my own concept of the swing voter. As Kelley defines the term, marginal voters are

> that one-fourth of respondents at the intersection of, and equally divided between, the winner's core supporters and the potential opposition majority. The voters represented by these respondents gave the winning candidate the "last" increment of voters he needed to win, "last" in the sense that among them was the least enthusiastic segment of his core supporters. (pp. 70-71)

In a close election, where the two sides are about equal at the start of the campaign, Kelley's (1983) marginal voters will be the same as my swing voters. In a landslide election, where one candidate is substantially more popular than the other, the marginal voter category will probably include a number of respondents who are not, according to my criteria, swing voters. In terms of the specific issues addressed in the next few pages, however, this difference is not important.

13. In the 1972 NES, survey administrators coded only three comments per question, thus making it difficult to compare scale scores from that year with scores for other years.

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