

The Floating Voter and the Media

Higher SES and greater information seeking best describe voters who switch vote intention in state elections.

► Successful political communication starts with a realistic definition of the target audience. At election time, the unstable voter who changes his decision is often the crucial component. Scholars have disagreed about the number and the sophistication of floating voters, about their information use and level of volatility. Can this audience be separated from the "stables"? Discussion of these issues holds up to scrutiny the role of mass communication in American elections.

Most study of the vote-switching phenomenon has focused on the race for the presidency, but volatility in state elections may be greater. In both national and state elections, mass communication is useful only if it reaches a desired audience, especially the voters who hold the balance of power.

¹ Jack M. McLeod and Lee B. Becker, "Testing the Validity of Gratification Measures Through Political Effects Analysis," in Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz, eds., *The Uses of Mass Communication* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1974), pp. 137-166.

² David H. Weaver, "Political Issues and Voter Need for Orientation," in Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, eds., *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Functions of the Press* (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 107-119.

³ Carl R. Bybee, Jack M. McLeod, W.D. Luetscher, and Gina Garramone, "Mass Communication and Voter Volatility," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 45:68-90 (1981).

⁴ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Helen Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1945). Other important early studies included Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld and William McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), and A. Campbell, P. Converse, W. Miller and D. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960).

Research in uses and gratifications has related personal motivation for media use and possible effects of the message.¹ Level of uncertainty affects use of media sources and susceptibility to agenda-setting.² One intensive study pinpoints the reactions of the media audience by considering the nature of voter volatility, both normative and behavioral.³ Education, interest and media use exhibit differing and sometimes opposite effects on "anti-party volatility" and "choice and conflict volatility." These investigations parallel a body of literature — mostly political — which compares and contrasts floating and stable voters, the receivers of media messages.

Evolving Theories on Voting

Early studies of voting behavior found only limited effects of media and campaigns on the election audience. The crucial floating voter, as originally described by Lazarsfeld *et al.*, was uninterested in political knowledge and inattentive to the media.⁴ He was unattached to a party label and thus separated from the political activism which was considered a precondition for interest in campaign information. The "floater" was a *switcher* converted during one presidential election season. Intra-election changes are similarly the concern of this paper, even though the term floating voter has often been applied to both the switcher and the late decider (as well as to the voter who changes parties *between* elections).

► The author is associate professor of political science at Auburn University. She expresses appreciation to Dr. Patrick Cotter, Capstone Poll, University of Alabama, for the execution of the Alabama survey, and to the Alabama Press Association. Part of the material was originally presented at the 1986 meeting of the Southwestern Political Science Association.

Floating Voter

SJ Ball



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