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What Exactly Is a Swing Voter? Definition and Measurement

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When journalists, commentators, and political strategists talk about elections, few terms come up more frequently than *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. 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 Stanley Kelley's *Interpreting Elections* [1983], which I discuss later). 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.

Given the lack of previous work on this topic, a good part of this chapter 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. 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. 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.[1] 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.[2] 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 –100—are voters who see the Democratic standard bearer as substantially, dramatically superior to the Republican nomi-

1. 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, Joseph Perkins, "Which Candidate Can Get Things Done?" *San Diego Union-Tribune,* October 20, 2000, p. B-11; Saeed Ahmed, "Quick Hits from the Trail," *Atlanta Constitution,* October 26, 2000, p. 14A; and "Power of the Undecideds," *New York Times,* November 5, 2000, sec. IV, p. 14.

2. Though it never employed the term "swing voter," one antecedent to the analysis in this chapter is the discussion in most of the great early voting studies of social and attitudinal cross-pressures within the electorate. See, in particular, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948, pp. 56–64); Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954, pp. 128–32); Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954, pp. 157–64); and Campbell and others (1960, pp. 78–88). There was, however, never any agreement as to how to operationalize this concept (Lazarsfeld and his collaborators 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).

nee. In other words, these voters have 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.

This last group 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 the presidential campaigns set 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 voters 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 (that is, 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 her voting decision. The Democrats will realize that she is already voting Democratic and thus conclude that, to put it crassly, they have nothing more to gain from her. Even if her ardor for the Democratic candidate cools somewhat, it is most unlikely that 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. They might succeed in making marginal improvements in this person's comparative assessment of the two candidates, but those shifts are unlikely to have any effect on her final voting decision. Even if the voter moves thirty or even fifty points to the right, she is still positioned solidly on the Democratic side of the scale.

The situation is very different for voters at or near zero. Here, relatively small movements—five or ten points—may have a major impact on a person's vote choice. Hence, voters near zero, the swing voters, will receive a disproportionate amount of attention from both campaigns. As we will see, 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 are located out on the tails. But even if this were not the case, campaigns would still concentrate on voters in

the middle of the scale, because that is where campaigning will have the greatest expected payoff.

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 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 "payoff" 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 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 upon to support one candidate or the other, states that are still potentially winnable by either major-party candidate. If one does not take this idea into account, it is 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). For one thing, 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 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 many states are ignored or taken for granted by both campaigns and so much of the candidates' time and campaign funds is focused on a relatively small number of battleground states. Such a situation, they complain, is manifestly undemocratic, since it makes

some voters more important than others. If only we could switch to a direct election system, they say, all voters would be placed on an equal footing.[3]

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 don't 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 American National Election Studies (ANES), the best way to construct such a scale is with the so-called feeling thermometer questions. In every presidential election year since 1972, the ANES 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.[5] 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 chapter was constructed by subtracting the

3. See, for example, Longley and Peirce (1999).

4. For reasons that will be made clear, 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 in 1964, but in both 1964 and 1968 these questions were asked only in the postelection survey.

5. See, among others, Weisberg and Rusk (1970); Brody and Page (1973); Conover and Feldman (1981); and Mayer (1996).

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

Units as indicated

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.

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 1-1 shows the distribution of these scale scores for all major-party presidential election voters in the nine ANES presidential-year surveys from 1972 to 2004 combined.[6] 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.

6. Two general points about the analysis in this chapter should be noted. First, 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, Campbell and others (1960, chapter 4); Fio-

Every four 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 1-1 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"—the likelihood that a campaign can change a person's vote intention. Since the thermometer ratings in table 1-1 are taken from the preelection survey, whereas the vote variable comes from the postelection survey, one interpretation of these results is 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 their voting intentions are clearly not very great. Of those who place the candidates more than 50 degrees apart during the preelection campaign, 99 percent 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 percent 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 percent.

At one level, the data in table 1-1 reinforce a conclusion that academics have long been aware of: that not a whole lot of people change their votes

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rina (1981); Markus and Converse (1979); and Pomper and 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 chapter. Second, again like all of the sources just listed, I distinguish voters from nonvoters on the basis of self-report, counting as a voter everyone who told the ANES interviewer that he or she voted. Though it is widely recognized that this results in an overestimation of the voting population—many people who say they voted are lying or mistaken—in most years there simply is no alternative. However, to make sure that this overreporting does not influence the results presented in this chapter, I have rerun the analysis for 1984 and 1988, when the ANES also included a "validated vote" variable, constructed by checking each respondent's self-report with the records kept by the local board of elections. In general, restricting the analysis to validated voters instead of self-reported voters changes very few figures by more than 2 percentage points and has no effect on any of the major conclusions.

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." For the analysis that follows, however, it will be helpful to have a simple, dichotomous variable that divides voters into two categories: swing voters and nonswing voters. A close inspection of the data in table 1-1 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 "nonswing voter" category.[7] Outside of this range, more than 90 percent 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 1-2, by this criterion, 23 percent of the voters in the typical ANES presidential-year survey fit into the "swing voter" category.

There is also, however, some noteworthy variation across elections in the percentage of the electorate who are 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 percent 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

7. 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

Table 1-2. Major-Party Presidential Voters Classified as Swing Voters, 1972–2004
Percent

Year	*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

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–2004.

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: to suggest why my own definition is better than the alternatives and to demonstrate the validity of the approach developed earlier in this chapter. 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 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. William Binning, Larry Easterly, and Paul Sracic, for example, define a swing voter as "a term used by journalists to characterize voters that are not strongly attached to

with that procedure show that it yielded results almost identical to those based on the dichotomous variable described in the text.

political parties."[8] 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.[9] 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 voters who might conceivably vote for either major-party candidate, political independents fall short in several ways.

On the 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.[10] But even if one looks only at the small residual category—the "pure independents," who account for only about 7 percent 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 ANES included the party identification question in both the pre- and post-election surveys, between 40 and 60 percent 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 ANES postelection survey had a question asking respondents if they had voted a straight or split ticket in state and local elections. About a quarter 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. Party identification is a very good predictor of voting behavior, but it is clearly not a perfect one. Every four years, a sizable number of party identifiers, particularly Democratic identifiers, defect to the opposition. On average, between 1952 and 2004, 19 percent of all Democratic identifiers voted for the Republican presidential candidate, while 10 percent of Republican identifiers returned the favor.

8. Binning, Easterly, and Sracic (1999, p. 397); see also Safire (1993, pp. 778–79).

9. See, for example, Jill Zuckman, "Bush: Testing Party, Governor Woos Minorities," *Boston Globe,* July 19, 2000, p. A16; Karen Hosler, "Selection of Lieberman Hailed as 'Bold' Choice," *Baltimore Sun,* August 8, 2000, p. 12A; and Abraham McLaughlin, "Bush and the Momentum Game," *Christian Science Monitor,* September 19, 2000, p. 1.

10. See Keith and others (1992).

Table 1-3. Relationship between Party Identification and Swing Voters,1972–2004
Percent[a]

	Pure independents	*Independent leaners*	*Weak partisans*	*Strong partisans*
Swing voters	40	27	28	12
Nonswing voters	60	73	72	88

	Swing voters	Nonswing voters
Pure independents	13	6
Independent leaners	28	22
Weak partisans	42	31
Strong partisans	18	41

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–2004.

a. Figures represent the average percentages for the nine ANES presidential-year surveys from 1972 through 2004. Difference between swing voters and nonswing voters was significant at the .001 level in each of the nine surveys.

Indeed, in many elections 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.[11] 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 1-3 shows the average relationship between party identification and the swing voter for the nine presidential elections held between 1972 and 2004.[12] 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 percent of pure independents

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

12. To conserve space and enhance interpretability, tables 1-3, 1-4, 1-5, and 1-8 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 1-7 and 1-9, I report separate results for each survey.

qualify as swing voters, as compared to 27 percent of independent leaners, 28 percent of weak partisans, and 12 percent of strong partisans. When the data are percentaged the other way, pure independents account for just 13 percent 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 years, it was once a major analytical tool in academic voting studies.[13] 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, since 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 on average 15 percent of the major-party votes cast in presidential elections have come from people who said they did not vote in the previous election.) Second, the party switcher category leaves out all those voters who thought seriously about voting for a different party than they had four years earlier but finally decided not to. If it is, in many circumstances, worth knowing about the people who switched sides in successive presidential elections, the swing voter concept gets at a slightly different idea: 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 de-

13. The distinction between party switchers and "standpatters" was the major dependent variable used by Key in his widely celebrated book *The Responsible Electorate* (1966). Before the "discovery" of party identification, independents were generally defined in behavioral terms, that is, 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, "Who Really Switched in the Last Election?" *U.S. News & World Report*, March 29, 1957, pp. 62–67; and Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954, pp. 11–27). For a good recent examination of the concept, see Zaller (2004).

cided to abandon the party they voted for in the last presidential election, regardless of when they reached that decision. Some voters will not make that decision until the final days of an election campaign, but 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. For example, between 1972 and 1976, the Republican share of the total presidential vote declined by more than 20 percent, from 60.7 percent to 48.0 percent, 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 1974–75; 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.) Thus, by the early summer of 1976, 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 1-4, which shows the relationship between party switchers and swing voters for eight of the nine presidential elections held between 1972 and 2004.[14] 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 V. O. Key's), who voted for the same major party in two consecutive elections. But only 41 percent of major-party switchers turn out to be swing voters. In other words, a majority of party switchers 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 percent of all swing voters.

The Undecided

Another way to define the swing vote is to equate it with the "undecided vote"—respondents who tell pollsters that they don't know how they are going to vote in the upcoming election.[15] Of the three alternative definitions of the swing vote analyzed here, the undecided category is perhaps closest in

14. The 1984 ANES 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.

15. For media articles that adopt this approach, see Andrea Stone, "Lieberman in Pursuit of Swing Voters," *USA Today,* October 27, 2000, p. 8A; Kim Ode, "Still Undecided? Pay Attention to the Issues," *Minneapolis Star Tribune,* October 28, 2000, p. 1E; and Will Lester, "Swing Voters Still Waffling," *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* October 28, 2000, p. 13B.

Table 1-4. Relationship between Party Switchers and Swing Voters, 1972–2004
Percent [a]

	Major-party constants[b]	Major-party switchers[c]	Third-party switchers[d]	New voters[e]
Swing voters	18	41	24[f]	25
Nonswing voters	82	59	76[f]	75

	Swing voters	Nonswing voters
Major-party constants	54	72
Major-party switchers	23	10
Third-party switchers	6	4
New voters	17	14

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972-2004.

a. Figures represent the average percentages for the 1972-80 and 1988-2004 ANES surveys. (The 1984 survey did not include a question asking respondents how they had voted in 1980.) The difference between swing voters and nonswing voters was significant at the .01 level in each of the eight surveys.

b. Major-party constants are those who voted for the same major party's presidential candidate in two successive elections.

c. 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.

d. Third-party switchers are those who voted for a third-party candidate in one election and a major-party candidate in the next election.

e. New voters includes all voters in a given election who did not vote in the preceding presidential election.

f. 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.

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 ANES surveys is how small it is: of those who said that they were going to vote in the November election, just 7 percent, on average, said they hadn't yet decided who they were voting for. One reason so few respondents are recorded as 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 ANES surveys makes 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 way questions are worded and whether and how interviewers are instructed to deal with respondents who initially claim to be undecided. In an analysis of preelection

polls from 1988, for example, Andrew Gelman and Gary King found that variations in question wording had little effect on the relative levels of support expressed for George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis. But "the proportion undecided and refusing to answer the survey question varied consistently and considerably with the question wording and polling organization."[16]

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 a third. In the fall of 1976, when Gallup used the nonsecret method, 17 percent of all respondents initially said they were undecided. When, in a follow-up question, respondents were asked whether they "leaned" toward one candidate or the other, the undecided vote dropped to 9 percent. Among those respondents who used the secret ballot, however, just 6 percent were undecided.[17]

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 percent of the respondents were classified as undecided in a September survey, as compared to 11 percent 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 percent had settled upon a candidate in October. On the other side, 28 percent 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 chapter 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

16. Gelman and King (1993, p. 424).
17. See Perry (1979).

Table 1-5. Relationship between Undecided Voters and Swing Voters, 1972–2004
Percent[a]

	Undecided voters	Voters expressing a candidate preference
Swing voters	67	19
Nonswing voters	33	81
	Swing Voters	**Nonswing voters**
Undecided voters	16	2
Voters expressing a candidate preference	84	98

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–2004.

a. Figures represent the average percentages for the nine ANES presidential-year surveys from 1972 through 2004. Difference between swing voters and nonswing voters was significant at the .001 level in each of the nine surveys.

strongly correlated—a hypothesis that is amply confirmed by the data in table 1-5. Of those classified as undecided in the ANES surveys between 1972 and 2004, 67 percent, on average, also fell into the swing voter category, whereas just 19 percent of those who expressed a candidate preference were swing voters.

A Different Measurement Strategy

As noted earlier, there is only one other attempt in academic social science that I know of to conduct a systematic investigation of the characteristics and behavior of swing voters. Stanley Kelley's *Interpreting Elections* (1983) 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 defined marginal voters in a way that is similar to the one proposed earlier in this chapter,[18] but he used a different set of survey questions to operationalize that concept. In every presidential election since 1952, the ANES has included a sequence of eight open-ended questions, which ask

18. Measurement issues aside, Kelley's 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 whether 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 1-6 shows the cumulative distribution of respondents on this scale for the eight ANES presidential-year surveys conducted between 1976 and 2004,[19] along with the division of the major-party vote at each point along the scale. As with my own scale, there is a clear and strong relationship between a respondent's position on the Kelley index and his likelihood of voting for the Democratic or Republican candidate. Those with a 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 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 chapter, 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,

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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" (70–71). In a close election, where the two sides are about equal at the start of the campaign, Kelley's 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 criterion, swing voters. In terms of the specific issues addressed in the next few pages, however, this difference is not important.

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

Table 1-6. Distribution of Respondents and Division of Major-Party Presidential Vote by Net Number of Likes and Dislikes, 1976–2004

Net number of likes and dislikes	Percentage of all voters	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

Source: American National Election Studies, 1976–2004.

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: by providing a large number of likes and dislikes that are almost evenly balanced in their support for or opposition to each party; or 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 ANES survey is a good measure of political knowledge and awareness.[20] 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 respon-

20. See, for example, Smith (1989, chapter 2) and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, p. 304).

dents—in the eight surveys analyzed here, one fourth of all major-party voters, on average, offered a total of five comments or less—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 chapter 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 like the one Kelley 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 1-7 breaks down the presidential electorate into three major groups: the Democratic base voters, who have thermometer-rating scale scores between –100 and –16; the swing voters, who, as defined earlier, are those with scale scores between –15 and +15; and the Republican base voters, who have scale scores between +16 and +100. The table then shows, for each of the last 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 Campbell and weighted the ANES data so that the survey results are equal to the actual votes cast, as recorded by state boards of elections.[21]

The base vote, as I am using the term here, is the opposite of the swing vote: it is the voters whose support a candidate can comfortably rely on. On average, the eighteen major-party candidates shown in table 1-7 held on to 96 percent 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.

21. Campbell (2000).

Table 1-7. Swing Voters and Presidential Election Outcomes
Percent[a]

Year	*Party*	*Percentage of all major-party voters*	*Percent voting Democratic*	*Percent 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

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–2004.
a. Data have been weighted so that the survey results are equal to the actual results.

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 percent 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 wasn't 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 percent of the voters in the ANES 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 1-7 indicate, Nixon held on to 94 percent of his base vote—and also won 49 percent 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 percent 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 percent 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 percent, but John Kerry's base vote, at 42 percent, 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 1-7. The swing voter concept serves a number of useful functions, but 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 ANES 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 ANES preference data.

In addition, the dynamics of a particular election may produce a swing electorate that is 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 ANES sample, 54 percent were self-identified Democrats and only 35 percent 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 focus of journalistic writing about swing voters; they are also 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 ANES 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 as well as contemporary journalistic analyses of the swing voter phenomenon, I have developed four major hypotheses about how swing voters might differ from their "nonswing" counterparts.[22]

Hypothesis 1: Swing voters are less partisan than nonswing voters. The evidence for this hypothesis has already been presented in table 1-3. As noted there, in every single survey, there is a large and statistically significant difference, in exactly the direction predicted: swing voters are less partisan.

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 National Election Studies generally measure ideology on a seven-point scale, ranging from extreme liberals to extreme conservatives. And as shown in table 1-8, swing voters are more likely to come from the center of the scale and less likely to be found on the extremes than are nonswing voters, a difference that is highly significant in every survey. Averaging across the nine presidential elections between 1972 and 2004, just 16 percent of the swing voters located themselves at one of the four outer points on the scale (extremely liberal; liberal; conservative; extremely conservative), as compared to 33 percent of the nonswing voters. Meanwhile, 31 percent of swing voters and 22 percent of nonswing voters placed themselves at the exact center of the scale (moderate).

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 sixty-three seven-point-scale questions I examined, in fifty-eight 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 nonswing voters who gave such answers. But in only

22. See especially Campbell and others (1960) and Kelley (1983).

Table 1-8. Ideology of Swing and Nonswing Voters, 1972–2004
Percent[a]

Ideology[b]	Swing voters	Nonswing 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

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–2004.

a. Figures represent the average percentages for the nine ANES presidential-year surveys from 1972 through 2004. Difference between swing and nonswing voters was significant at the .01 level in each of the nine surveys.

b. As expressed in responses to a seven-point-scale question.

thirty-two of these fifty-eight 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 1-8.

Hypothesis 3: Swing voters are less informed about and less interested in politics than nonswing voters. Though he presented small bits of other data, the principal focus of Stanley Kelley's 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."[23] 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.

Accordingly, I have compared swing voters and nonswing voters on a variety of measures of political interest, involvement, and information. As it turns out, using the thermometer ratings rather than the likes-and-dislikes questions does make some difference. Swing voters as I have defined them are more involved and more knowledgeable than a comparable group based on the Kelley index (specifically, those with scores between –2 and +2, inclusive). But the differences are in most cases rather modest, and not enough to

23. Kelley (1983, p. 157).

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.[24]

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. Twenty-six percent of swing voters say they follow government and public affairs "most of the time," as compared to 36 percent of nonswing voters; 52 percent of nonswing voters were rated as having a very or fairly high level of information about politics and public affairs, versus 42 percent of swing voters.

As a generalization, then, one can say that although swing voters are a bit more difficult to reach than nonswing voters, they are not so isolated or apolitical as to make the campaigner's task impossible. In fact, swing voters watch presidential debates in about the same percentages as nonswing voters and are actually *more* likely to report seeing a political advertisement.

Hypothesis 4: Swing voters are demographically different from nonswing 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 ten 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 (age eighteen to thirty), and the elderly (age sixty-five and over). The simple question that table 1-9 tries to answer is: Are any of these groups relatively more or less likely to be swing voters than one would predict on the basis of their numbers in the voting population as a whole?

24 . For a more detailed presentation of the data on which these conclusions are based, see Mayer (2007).

Table 1-9. Demographic Characteristics of Swing and Nonswing Voters, 1972–2004
Percent

Year	Swing voters	Nonswing voters	Swing voters	Nonswing voters
	Women		*Men*	
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*	
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*	
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)

The most important conclusion to be derived from table 1-9 is that swing voters are, at least in demographic terms, a very diverse group. Of the eighty-seven survey-groups evaluated in table 1-9, in only sixteen cases is the group significantly over- or underrepresented among swing voters—and in only four cases does the difference reach 10 percentage points. To the extent that swing voters are demographically different from nonswing voters, moreover, their distinctive attributes vary from election to election. The only group that is overrepresented among swing voters in at least eight of nine 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

Table 1-9. Demographic Characteristics of Swing and Nonswing Voters, 1972–2004 (*continued*)

Percent

Year	Swing voters	Nonswing voters	Swing voters	Nonswing voters
	Protestants		*Catholics*	
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 (65+)*	
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

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–2004.

a. The 1972, 1976, and 1980 ANES surveys each contained fewer than twenty-five Hispanic voters.

* Difference significant (two-tailed) at .05 level.

** Difference significant (two-tailed) at .01 level.

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 percent of blacks voted for the Democratic 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 1-9, 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.

Inter-Election Stability

To fill out this portrait of swing voters, one final issue is worth addressing: Is being a swing voter a relatively stable characteristic, such that the same people are swing voters in one election after another, or is there a substantial amount of turnover across elections? Unfortunately, there is only one National Election Study that contains the requisite questions at the proper times: the 1972–76 panel.[25]

Table 1-10 shows the correlation between being a swing voter in 1972 and being a swing voter in 1976. In the words of that old familiar academic refrain, the results show both continuity and change. About 50 percent of 1972 swing voters were swing voters again in 1976. But half of the people who were "up for grabs" in 1972 were part of the Democratic or Republican base in 1976. The 34 percent of 1972 swing voters who were committed Democrats in 1976 is easy to explain: many normally reliable Democrats deserted the party in 1972 because they could not stomach George McGovern, but rejoined it as soon as the South Dakota senator was no longer its presidential candidate. More surprising is the sizable number of voters who vacillated between Nixon and McGovern but were firmly committed to Gerald Ford. To put the results in table 1-10 in perspective, I have run similar analyses of 1972–76 continuity for party identification and ideology. Measured by the size of the gamma coefficients, being a swing voter (gamma = .660) is considerably less stable than party identification (gamma = .910), but just as stable as ideology (gamma = .660).[26]

Concluding Observations

The principal conclusion of this chapter is that swing voters do deserve more attention from students of voting and elections than they have received in the past. 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 election studies, by reminding us that in the context of

25. The 2000–04 panel, which Daron R. Shaw analyzes in chapter 4 of this volume, has only a postelection component in 2004. This is fine for his purposes, but my own measure, it will be recalled, requires thermometer ratings from the preelection survey.

26. All results are for major-party presidential voters only. To make party identification and ideology more comparable with the three-category swing voter measure shown in table 1-10, both variables were also collapsed into three categories.

Table 1-10. Relationship between 1972 Swing Voters and 1976 Swing Voters[a]
Percent

	1972		
	Democratic Base	Swing Voters	Republican Base
1976			
Democratic Base	62	34	15
Swing Voters	28	51	30
Republican Base	10	15	55
N	160	158	450

Source: American National Election Studies, 1972–76 panel.
a. Results are for major-party presidential voters only.
Gamma = .660.

an election campaign, not all voters are equal, and that voters will receive attention according to their expected payoff.

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

1. Much more work clearly needs to be done on the differences and similarities between swing voters and nonswing voters. Do the two groups differ 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 nonswing voters? Do they place heavier reliance on retrospective performance evaluations or on the candidates' personal qualities? Do people who see no major differences between the candidates fall back on their party identification as a kind of "default value" or "standing decision"?

3. The data and analysis in this chapter have been concerned entirely with swing voters in presidential elections. Articles in the popular press that use the term *swing voter* also tend to focus overwhelmingly on presidential elections. This raises an obvious question (dealt with more extensively in chapter 5): Can the swing voter concept be applied to nonpresidential elections such as congressional elections? Perhaps the most significant complication in doing so concerns how to deal with voters who do not know anything about one or both of the congressional candidates. The measurement strategy developed in this chapter requires that survey respondents be able to provide some sort of thermometer rating to both major-party candidates. In presidential elections, only about

1 percent of all major-party voters are unable to meet this standard, but the number would surely be far larger in the typical congressional election. Should these uninformed voters just be added in with those who give equal or almost equal ratings to both candidates? Perhapsbut as Jeffrey M. Stonecash shows in chapter 5 of this volume, uninformed voters are not the same as ambivalent voters, and there may be reasons for keeping the two groups separate.

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