

# The Electoral Challenge

Theory Meets Practice

SECOND EDITION

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A Division of SAGE  
Washington, D.C.

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❖ = The Political Professionals Respond text box.

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## THE POLITICAL PROFESSIONALS RESPOND

V. Lance Tarrance Jr.

In the study of politics and government, and in particular of close elections, the search is on for the holy grail of electoral success: understanding the determinative swing voter—a type of voter who, according to Mayer, “could go either way” and “is not so solidly committed to one candidate or the other as to make all efforts at persuasion futile.” There are three worldviews concerning swing voters, and these worldviews are often in conflict. Each seeks to identify swing voters and discover the dynamics of how swing voters reach their ultimate decision. The three can be classified as (1) the academic view, (2) the campaign strategist view, and (3) the media entertainment view. Methodologies vary across the three, regional and demographic differences may be identified, and exotic new groups (Internet first-time voters would be a recent example) may occasionally capture the attention of all three perspectives. The fact remains, however, that in today’s polarized partisan politics, all political scientists, pollsters, and journalists wish to identify and target

swing voters—the media entertainment world for their value in television coverage, the campaign strategist world for the key to political power that they possess, and the academic world for statistical verification and explanatory discourse.

The media entertainment world tends to take shortcuts in identifying swing voters, mostly by necessity given that reporters and news analysts often work in a thirty-second sound bite environment that is incompatible with complex and technical explanations of what actually constitutes a swing voter. As a result, this particular approach usually looks simply at “the middle”—that is, at independent and less committed voters, and what these individuals are saying to pollsters. It relies on public polls, like Gallup, to determine which way the less-certain and independent winds are blowing. Frequent surveys allow journalists to gain insights into pure partisan independence and into the psyches of those voters who “might change their mind” but say they lean toward a Republican or Democratic candidate. Thus, the media entertainment world depends mostly on nonbehavioral (attitudinal) models of election intention; in so doing, it provides only a partial lens through which to view voters.

The academic view helps to clarify issues related to citizens’ perceptions of partisanship, particularly in the case of self-described independents. Scholarly surveys have shown that many such individuals (perhaps as many as one half) actually are disguised partisans;<sup>1</sup> to the extent that this is true, it means that party identification questions are not necessarily a good measure of who is likely to be a swing voter. Moreover, as revealed in many previous studies (see, for example, A. Campbell et al. 1960), so-called pure independents are anything but paragons of reason and civic virtue; rather, they are mostly nonideological in their policy views, poorly informed about political matters, generally uninterested in election participation, and so on. This characterization of swing voters did not make sense to political scientist V. O. Key who, in *The Responsible Electorate* (1966), looked at “switchers”—voters who did not support the same party over two consecutive elections—and concluded that they may be the real swing voters. In essence, Key said that we should forget the psychological approach and look at actual behavior when identifying swing voters. Using this approach, he found that the swing or switch voter was anything but apathetic; to the contrary, the switch voter appeared to be “a person who appraises the actions of government, who has policy preferences, and who relates his vote to those appraisals and preferences” (Key 1966, 58–59). In effect, Key rejected the self-identified independent as the prototype of a swing voter and tried to lead the academic world in a more meaningful direction.

Mayer has offered up a new way to identify swing voters; unfortunately, he offers another perceptual approach that suffers the same problem as the party identification model of independents. Mayer uses the feeling thermometer scale ranging

from 0 to 100 degrees to measure favorable and unfavorable views of each presidential candidate. To Mayer, it is all about image, not past behavior. The “middle-awareness” group (scoring -15 to +15) is found to be less interested in following campaigns, less informed, and seemingly apathetic about politics generally. This is hardly a breakthrough, and few campaign strategists would employ such a measure to identify swing voters. Even Mayer acknowledges doubt when he notes that “whether swing voters have distinctive positions on specific issues like abortion, immigration, or health care is not clear”—an observation that dooms this approach from any practical application.

The campaign strategist world must work in a much more concrete environment than the two other worlds; attempting to use momentary self-perception, feeling thermometers, and other such “soft” measures (“Do you think you may change your mind between now and the November election?”) are of limited value here. Campaign engineers must design minimum winning coalitions of 50-percent-plus-one, and there are no second-place trophies in this competition. To many political engineers, swing voters are split-ticket voters: easy-to-identify voters who already have proven their tendency to move back and forth across current or past ballots by not voting exclusively for candidates of either party. Within their surveys, campaign strategists look for those respondents who have in the past voted, or currently intend to vote, one way for president and the other way for Congress; or one way for governor and the other way for state treasurer; and so on. As David Broder of the *Washington Post* once explained, “this picture of the ticket splitter is closer to the kind of voter I imagine as determining the outcome of close elections” (see DeVries and Tarrance 1972, 14).

In his analysis of switch voting across elections, Key (1966) found a much more involved voter than is suggested by the self-perception models. Some years later, DeVries and Tarrance (1972, 61) also found split-ticket voters to be “slightly younger, somewhat more educated, somewhat more white-collar, and more suburban than the typical middle-class voter.” This study offered up a new paradigm by identifying ticket splitters as the swing vote. Today, campaign strategists of both political parties often recalibrate the political universe as Republicans, Ticket Splitters, White Conservative Democrats, White Liberal Democrats, and African Americans or Hispanics, as the case may be. They then apply various statistical probabilities for needed success within each segment. Republican Party strategists typically target a two-to-one positive margin among ticket splitters for their minimum winning coalition, while Democrats usually target break-even percentages for their own winning coalition.

The identification and targeting of swing voters attract enormous attention. Media entertainment, campaign strategy, and academic professionals all expend

enormous effort to this end. Even Hollywood has gotten in on the act: during the 2008 presidential election, film producers, in a didactic film about nonvoting called *Swing Vote* and starring Kevin Costner, used the apathetic voter model borrowed from the academic world presumably to embarrass nonvoters into participation. The campaign strategy world, like the media entertainment and academic worlds, has its own institutional biases, proclivities, and needs. However, it is the campaign strategy world that is truly on the line for generating successful election outcomes. And Key, the most visionary of academics, clearly pointed the way to the behavioral approach for the identification of swing voters. By reclassifying some voters as switch voters—later transformed by campaign strategists to ticket splitters—he demonstrated that it was this type of voter analysis that was crucial to understanding election outcomes. In general, past vote behavior is the best predictor of future swing voting. The campaign strategy world has taken note, and it is this world that runs the race.

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<sup>1</sup>In *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (1992), Bruce Keith and his colleagues observed that most voters who say they are independents will confess to leaning toward one of the parties when asked follow-up questions. This phenomenon has been demonstrated over time in the American National Election Study and Gallup surveys, among others.

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## Notes

1. See, among others, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944); A. Campbell et al. (1960); J. Campbell (2000); also, see chapters 1 and 2 in this volume.
2. For a summary of previous work on swing voters, from which much of the material in this article is drawn, see Mayer (2008).
3. These particular question wordings are taken from Gallup, but similar wordings and procedures were used by the Pew and Annenberg polls in 2008. For details, see Mayer (2008, chap. 8).
4. These are people who initially claim to be independent but, when asked, say they “lean” toward one party or the other.
5. The following draws on data reported in Mayer (2007, 380–382).
6. I focus here on congressional elections since they have been most intensively studied, but the same principles apply, to a greater or lesser extent, to other types of nonpresidential elections.