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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

SWING VOTERS: A HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS OF SWING VOTERS' INTEPRETATIONS OF 2000 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN SPOTS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

PHILIP D. DALTON
Norman, Oklahoma
2002

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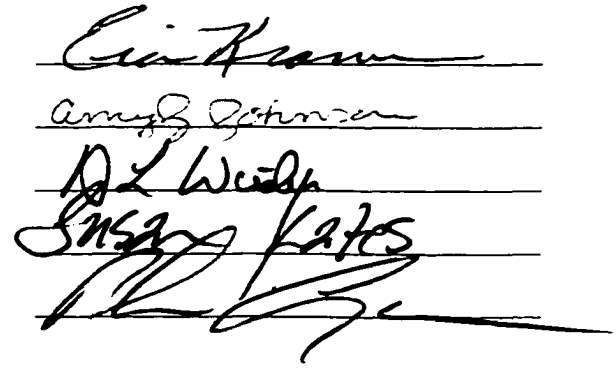
SWING VOTERS: A HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS OF SWING VOTERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF 2000 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN SPOTS

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

BY



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rarely gave students explicit direction, leaving the quality of your work up to your own level of motivation. Nevertheless, she knew enough to inform you when your work was underdeveloped. She presumed you pursued higher education because you wanted to learn. Possessing that motivation was central to succeeding with Dr. Cooper. I learned more about how to learn from Martha than anything else.

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Abstract

Swing voters are often neglected in the study of political advertising. Because swing voters constitute the single-most important group of voters, it behooves political advertising researchers to understand their reactions to advertisements more completely. This study examines swing voters by studying how they interpret political advertisements. The study specifically focuses on swing voters' responses to spots from the 2000 presidential election. Because little research has been undertaken to better understand this group of voters, the following approach is interpretive: This study constitutes an initial attempt at understanding them as voters. Data was collected and analyzed utilizing an ethnographic approach wherein subjects were shown political ads, asked to write responses, and participated in interviews that explored their reactions to the spots. An analysis reveals a consistent philosophy regarding politics. Swing voters are critical and active voters. They want to vote, yet without the framework of party or ideology, they have trouble settling on candidates. Analysis of interviews is followed by a hermeneutic explanation of the swing voter's horizon. Essentially, it is maintained that the philosophy of swing voters is a logical product of the values that

underlie democracy. The act of democratic participation in the United States has developed to make the individual more important (relative to the interests of the group), yet it has placed a burden on the voter that makes it difficult to make decisions, given our culture's emphasis on informed and rational voting.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Though swing voters are arguably the most important population of voters in presidential elections (Jamieson, 2000), academic definitions of this group are difficult to find. Moreover, the political communication research focusing on this group is sparse. For this reason an operationalization unique to this study was developed. For the purposes of this project, swing voters were generally characterized as late-deciding voters: voters who were swinging between and were uncommitted to either candidate. Because little research has been conducted regarding swing voters, this project is an initial attempt at describing the interaction between swing voters and advertisements. As such, the method utilized is ethnographic in nature: There is little means with which to measure the phenomenon if it has not yet been studied or defined.

The findings ran contrary to the many characterizations of contemporary voters as cynical (e.g., Hart, 1999) and disengaged (e.g., Berger, 2000). Put simply, to the extent that swing voters vote they are neither cynical nor disengaged. Instead, it is maintained that they are differently engaged. Though these voters are

non-partisan, this is not their defining characteristic: How they vote is not a function of partisanship because partisanship is ignored altogether. It is more accurate to characterize these voters as individualistic by default. Eschewing partisan identification or traditionalisms, these critical and concerned voters find themselves without much ground with which to make a decision. The result is a last minute decision wherein the voter bases his/her choice on the candidate perceived to best help the voter with his/her immediate and concrete needs, to the exclusion of other more abstract concerns.

Analysis of the data collected here indicates several characteristics of the swing voter. The presumption in their approach to voting is that an ideal candidate exists. Consistent with the premises of rationality which maintains that transcendental truths can be found, the swing voter proceeds from the assumption that the right candidate among those in the field can be determined. Choosing this candidate is simply a matter of devoting one's self to studying the available material sufficiently until this ideal candidate is made evident. Because of this presumption, swing voters highly value information. Both quality and quantity of information constitute the criteria with which swing voters assess candidates.

These assumptions set up an impossible standard for voter decision-making. The amount of information available to a voter is immeasurable. Voluminous information coupled with the severe limits in available time during which to process it ultimately leaves the swing voter frustrated as he/she is incapable of discerning the ideal candidate. Belated commitment to any candidate is the result of these pressures. Swing voters were found to distribute both positive and negative criticisms in a balanced fashion; neither candidate received the majority of positive or negative remarks from any swing voter that was interviewed. Without "sufficient" information or partisanship as a guide, these voters were found to make last minute decisions based upon their own immediate self interests.

The contemporary swing voter and how he/she votes is shaped by his/her horizon (Gadamer, 1975). Today's voter finds him/herself in a cultural milieu that values individualism or perspectivism (Gebser, 1949). Our democratic method of governance, voting procedures, and the way swing voters vote are manifestations of this horizon. While perspectivism made democratic governance possible, another apparent manifestation of perspectival consciousness among swing voters is little concern for a greater whole. This is not to claim that these voters are

value free, otherwise they would have little reason to vote. While swing voters clearly value voting and participation, this is seen as an ends and not a means: put simply, voting helps the democratic system while not voting harms it. However, with suspicion of partisanship and little else to use to help shape their decisions, swing voters ultimately relied upon the only concrete matter of concern - the self and its immediate needs. Thus, it is important for the swing voter to vote, yet how they vote is governed almost completely by self concerns. The final vote is not the fruit of a rational process of determining the ideal candidate. Instead, the swing voter compromises by voting for the best candidate he/she can choose, given the large number of messages available coupled with the limited quality of information and limited amount of time available during which to process it.

Purpose

The notion of the "swing voter" or "undecided voter" is often referenced in popular (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyenger, 1996; Breslau, 2000, Burns & Sorenson, 1999) and academic writing (e.g., Lucas & Adams, 1978; Tuckel & Tejera, 1983; Kimsey & Hantz, 1978). According to Newsweek, (August, 28, 2000, p 28) presidential campaign advisers

devote themselves to identifying who occupies the swing population. The article explains that this group has manifested itself as "Reagan Democrats," "angry white males," and "soccer moms." It further documents the arguments of George W. Bush pollster, Fred Steeper, about who the swing voters will be for the 2000 election. The efforts of Bush and Gore pollsters in the 2000 election to identify swing voters help support the more than 50 year old observations of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) who argued that "The campaign itself is progressively waged in order to win the less interested and less involved, the 'withdrawn' individuals living within narrower horizons" (p. 70). Though this characterization of campaigns and voters is over 50 years old, it documents a still existent tendency on the part of campaigns to focus on voters with soft allegiances. Their observation was a timely one, as the 1948 presidential race between Truman and Dewey was especially influenced by a relatively large number of undecided voters. Even Roosevelt feared loosing the 1944 election because of the substantial number of late-deciders, estimated at 10 million voters (Barnouw, 1968).

The efforts to identify and attract the swing voter underscores the highly technical and managed nature of the contemporary presidential campaign. While the myth of U.S.

presidential elections probably conjures images consisting of red, white, and blue bunting and values of patriotism, equality, and rationality, the actual practice of campaigning fails to match the myth. Perhaps also contrary to this myth is that political campaigns are rarely targeted at the more seemingly involved partisan voter. This is evidenced by Sabato's (1981) observation that consultants are constantly seeking ways to further narrowcast their messages at vital swing groups (p. 183). The practice of targeting swing voters is important because their numbers are typically greater than the gap between candidates (Fenwick, Wiseman, Becker, & Heiman. 1985).

Critical Review of Literature

The following project examines swing voters' interpretations of political advertisements. This study is motivated by a combination of the following six matters. First, the definition of "swing voter" is elusive and as a result, it is difficult to operationalize. Though this segment of the voting population is discussed in research and popular literature and its demographic composition is pursued by campaigners during each election, what constitutes this group is unclear. Second, political advertisements, among other political communications, are

primarily aimed at this portion of the electorate. Third, political advertising comprises the most important means of communication between candidates and voters (Kaid, 1996; Jamieson, 1984). Due to the vital role of swing voters in determining the winner of elections, understanding the interplay between these phenomena is both relevant and significant. Fourth, very little research in the discipline of communication, or other fields, can be found that helps explain the relationship between swing voters and political advertising. Fifth, it is argued by some that U.S. citizens have culturally developed into advertising consumers. The dynamics of this culture and its implications for elections are considered. Sixth, opposing arguments have been posited regarding the nature of swing voters: These arguments relate to whether swing voters are more or less involved as a group. While some claim that the swing population is constituted by disinterested and apolitical types (e.g., Packard, 1957; Burger, 2000; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), others more generously describe these voters as thoughtful, demanding and reasonable (e.g., Wattenberg, 1991; Key, 1966; Iyengar & Petrocik, 2000). This project investigates the validity or either characterization. In sum, the goal of this project is to shed light on what probably comprises

the single most significant communicative activity of presidential campaigning: mass communication between candidates and undecided voters.

The Swing Voter

Very often, the phrase "swing voter" is used without reference to any parameters to help define the group. Throughout campaign literature, many words are used interchangeably with swing voter. Nevertheless, a thorough analysis of campaign and voting literature helps explain what is implied by the phrase. Based on the following analysis, this project defines swing voters as individuals that developed their voting decision after the final campaigning weekend of the 2000 presidential election (November 5th or later). Based on self-reports, these voters have also voted for presidential candidates of different parties or profess to have little allegiance to either party (questions used to identify swing voters are in appendix C). Essential to this definition are the following three points. First, between elections swing voters can swing or switch support from candidates of one party to candidates of another. Second, these people may either have a party identification or be registered or self-identified independents. Third, it is believed that

swing and other voters are similarly educated and interested in politics, despite their typical late-decidedness.

Key (1966) identifies an important group of voters termed "switchers" who are capable of switching their votes from candidates of one party to candidates of another, between elections. It is clear from his book that "switching parties" means voting for candidates of different parties and not necessarily changing one's party identification. These voters can be either registered partisans or independents. He argues that these people do not differ educationally (p. 94) and are just as interested in politics as other voters (p. 104). The most significant difference from non-swing voters is that they tend to be more capable of switching parties over the long-run. Motivating switchers to swing is their tendency to vote for those with whom they agree on issues (p. 104).

Wattenberg (1991) identifies a group of voters called "floating voters" as "the most important group in American electoral politics" (p. 43). This group is important because it is the one targeted by campaigns due to their ability to change candidate allegiances. He explains that analysis of National Election Studies (NES) data reveals that floating voters make more neutral or balancing

comments in regards to politicians and parties, regardless of their professed independence or party preference. This group is less likely to rely on partisan affiliation; instead, they depend on both issues and perceptions of candidate performance.

While the observation that swing voters possess the capacity to swing between candidates of different parties is elementary, it is important to note that this alone defines the group and not their "independence" from party identification. Authors use the terms independent, non-partisan, and ticketsplitters (e.g., Iyengar & Ansolabehere, 1996; Joslyn, 1984) interchangeably without devoting much effort to clarifying what constitutes these groups. While independents may compose part of the swing vote in a given election, so may registered partisans.

Iyengar and Petrocik (2000) undermine the notion that swing voters are made up solely of independents. In their work they maintain that partisans and registered independents vote according to "basic rules" (p. 119). Specifically, they claim that it is generally true that partisans vote for their partys' slated candidate while independent votes are based upon their assessments of incumbent performance. The data that support this claim also reveal a significant proportion of partisan voters

that fail to follow these general rules. This group of partisans willing to vote on performance or rationales other than party preference is an important group of voters when one considers Fenwick, Wiseman, Becker, and Heiman's (1985) observation that undecided voters have, by virtue of the fact that their proportion is often larger than the difference between candidates leading up to an election, the power to decide the election. In short, nearly as many independent voters possess the potential to swing as partisan voters.

Reinforcing the point that swing voters can be either partisan or independent, Wattenberg (1991) maintains that while many independents tend to be very partisan, party members are increasingly neutral (p. 40-41). Simply identifying independents will not necessarily provide a campaign with the population of swing voters. Had this been Reagan's 1980 strategy, it is likely that he would have failed to target the registered Democrats of the south that swung his way that year.

Finally, it is often maintained that swing voters are less engaged, less educated, and more ignorant about politics (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Packard (1957) documents the cynical attitudes held by political advertising researchers ("depth probers") and

executives who characterized swing voters as less thoughtful, listless, and in one case, "snotty" (p. 183). Little academic evidence supports this point, however. Arguing that swing voters are equally interested and engaged in politics, Key (1966) explains that:

> In short, the data make it appear sensible to regard the voter as a person who is concerned with what governments have done or not done and what they propose to do… (p. 41)

This is consonant with Downs (1957) who generally maintains that all voters make rational decisions that benefit their own self interests. Consistent with this is Wattenberg's (1991) observation that floating voters are increasingly likely to cite issue based reasons for their votes. This is consistent with Iyengar and Petrocik's (2000) argument about basic rule voting, maintaining that independents base their vote on perceptions and evaluations of incumbent performance.

Thus, instead of using party affiliation as a heuristic when developing voting decisions, these authors seem to be arguing that swing voters assess the individual candidate and his performance. Something is still missing in this definition, as campaigns do not simply target people who fit this decision-making profile. So far, this

profile of swing voters as thoughtful includes both late and early deciders. Yet, early deciders are not vacillating between candidates. For instance, a voter may assess a candidate's performance very early in a campaign and choose to re-elect him. Having developed their preference early, these voters are less likely to be persuaded, thus there would be no reason for the candidates' advertisements to pursue him/her (Kirkpatrick, 1972).

Implied in nearly all uses of swing vote and other related phrases is a measure of undecidedness. It is because these voters have not yet made up their minds that campaigns target them. Targeting communication efforts at this key group of undecided voters still possesses the potential to pay off, whereas advertising to consistent voters faithful to the opponent's party would bear little fruit (Kirkpatrick, 1972). Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) first attempted to explain who these voters are ("September-to-November voters") and why they behave the way they do. They explain that these voters experience "cross-pressures" defined as "the conflicts and inconsistencies among the factors which influence vote decision" (p. 53). These cross-pressures drive the voter in opposite directions.

> . . . it is difficult for them to make up their minds simply because they had good reasons for voting for both candidates. Sometimes such reasons were so completely balanced that the decision had to be referred to a third factor for settlement. The doubt as to which was the better course - to vote Republican or to vote Democrat - combined with the process of self-argument caused the delay in the final vote decision for such people. (p. 130)

These observations have been echoed and developed by subsequent scholars and are consistent with Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory.

Several behavioral and attitudinal characteristics of these conflicted late-deciders have been identified. To begin, in addition to the observation about conflict introduced by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), Kirkpatrick (1972) argues that some voters often delay their voting decision when they prefer one candidate but expect another to win (p. 399). Kirkpatrick (1972) goes on to argue that cross-pressures contribute to election avoidance, withdrawal, and fluctuation. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) add that these voters also cast their votes with less enthusiasm. Lucas and Adams (1978) identified two characteristics of undecideds,

including that they discussed politics less often with others and watched less network television news. To resolve the pressures these conflicted voters experience, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) explain that undecideds usually delay their decision because of a lack of interest or until an event comes along that helps them resolve their conflict.

Finally, it is quite possible that the category of swing voter may be too all encompassing. Since Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) produced profiles of different types of late-deciders, little serious work can be found that attempts to explain who swing voters are. These authors identify "crystallizers," "waverers," and "party changers" as constituent parts of the late-deciding vote. According to their research, each type of late-decider possessed a somewhat different profile.

Swing Voters as Campaign Target

According to Joslyn (1984) the growth of non-partisan voters has had a significant effect on the presidential campaigning process.

> The decline in partisan loyalty among the electorate has created a growing independent/nonpartisan/ticket-splitting segment of the electorate, which has become

> the battleground of electoral politics and the target of campaign appeals. (p. 59)

Essentially, Joslyn (1984) is explaining that campaigns target the non-dedicated voter, whoever they may be. West (1993) offers further support to this point:

> In contemporary elections it is common for political consultants to divide voters into advertising segments based on public opinion polls and focus groups: the committed (those who are for you), the hopeless (those who are against you and about whom little can be done), and the undecided (those who could vote either way). The last group, of course, is the central target of campaign tactics. (p. 155)

Thus, one could conclude that the messages and the approach to the advertisements are tailored to persuade swing voters.

Just how the message is tailored is a question more to the point of this project. Packard (1957) explains that campaigns try to develop an "emotional pull" between voters and candidates (p. 183). Schwartz (1973) reinforces this point, and adds that this is done by "delivering" the voter to the candidate, as opposed to the other way around (p. 82). Essentially, this means that the campaign attempts to develop a situation wherein the voter draws a conclusion on

his/her own because of salient attitudes and feelings fostered by an advertisement. This is achieved by studying the voter in order to produce the advertisement that will resonate with him/her. West (1993) states that this is achieved by pretesting advertisements, using focus groups, and extensive polling. This testing is likely to be done in a fashion similar to that described by Gitlin (1983), wherein respondents are recruited, subjected to video, and tested for responses. These responses are measured with buttons, dials, and surveys from which quantitatively and qualitatively derived conclusions are drawn. In order for political advertisements to be effective, teams of pollsters are hired to identify who the swing voters are in a given election (Breslau, August 28, 2000). It is this very practice that has brought communication scholars to study, describe, and/or criticize the non-rational nature of political advertisements (Packard, 1957; Tinkham & Weaver-Larisay, 1994; Drumwright, 1993; Caywood & Preston, 1989; Colford, 1991; Richards & Caywood, 1991).

Political Advertising Deserves Academic Attention

That political campaigns target specific segments of the electorate would be of little significance if election outcomes did not have such great implications for society.

For this reason Berger (2000) contends that political advertising is the most important form of television spot. Because of the faith in the persuasive power of political spots the amount of money campaigns have begun spending on them has grown significantly, as demonstrated by the exponential growth of money devoted to this form of communication (c.f., Devlin, 1989; Devlin, 1993; Devlin, 1997). Because of the implications for democracy, the effects of political advertisements have attracted the attention of researchers (c.f., Kaid, 1981; Kaid & Chanslor, 1995; Garramone, 1983; Kaid, Leland, & Whitney, 1992; Cundy, 1986; Aden, 1989).

Though political spots will not necessarily win a campaign, a national political campaign in today's social milieu certainly cannot be won without them. West (1993) states, "In today's world, it is nearly impossible to imagine campaigns without political commercials" (p. xiii). This is because spots have come to constitute the single most important mode of communication between candidates and voters (Jamieson, 1984; Kaid, 1996). The effects of this development are believed to be substantial by some. Bagdikian (1997) argues this well, stating that "television electioneering"

> is now the major mechanism of American campaigns, [and] deals mostly with imagery and emotional manipulation engendered by the five-second and thirty-second commercial. It has displaced the phenomenon of the live candidate before live audiences and almost eliminated coherent debate. A whole generation of voters has not heard serious content in election campaigns; that this generation of voters increasingly does not bother to vote may not be unrelated. (p. 191)

As such, political ads warrant a great deal of attention from communication scholars. In 1936, networks worried about the deleterious dramatic effects radio broadcasting would have on democracy (Barnouw, 1968). Since then, a similar theme has run through scholarly assessments of electronic political broadcasts; primarily paid advertisements. Scholars have put forth a great number of questions about the nature and influence of spots (c.f., Cundy, 1986; Aden, 1989; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1997). While some have demonstrated their positive democratic effects (e.g., Patterson & McClure, 1976) others have noted more insidious impacts (e.g., Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994). Academic attention and the development of new questions is likely to grow as the implications for this communication are both realized and questioned.

Limited Interpretation Research

While a great deal of research has tested for the effects of political advertising, few studies can be found that address the meaning of political spots. Despite the observations of political advertising practitioners, like Packard (1957), McGinniss (1969), Schwartz (1973), and Sabato (1983) (to name a few), communication scholars primarily focus on the empirical characteristics and effects of this phenomenon. It is doubtless that effects research is typically motivated out of valid theoretical concerns. Nevertheless, our understanding of what occurs when spots impact viewers is limited to the extent that we know how the viewer is interpreting the stimulus.

If interpretation is not an important matter, campaign advisors would not put great efforts into learning the psychology of their target audiences. Campaigners know their audiences well, which is why questions about audience manipulation develop. Packard (1957) argued early that:

> All this probing and manipulation has its constructive and its amusing aspects; but also, I think it is fair to say, it has seriously antihumanistic implications. Much of it seems to represent regress rather than

> progress for man in his long struggle to become a rational and self-guiding being. (p. 6)

The fear, that still exists today, is that marketers could know their targets so well that they could cause audiences to base otherwise rational judgments on either emotion or subconscious processes. This concern is premised on the argument that irrational judgments are detrimental to democratic processes.

Schwartz (1973) complained that most advertising research simply examined message understanding and retention. While a great deal more advertising research has been conducted since Schwartz' The Responsive Chord was published, subsequent advertising and political advertising research typically suffers from similar limitations pandemic to positivistic methodologies: The presumed split between text and reader enables and limits scholars to measure what a receiver does with a message against what the message itself says. This perspective presupposes that the inherent meaning is explicit in a message. The researcher need only assume an objective or scientific standpoint to be qualified to conduct this research. Research of this kind is remarkable both for its volume as well as what it ignores; namely, meaning.

The notion that meaning is contingent upon cultural presuppositions, experiences, and context is derived from phenomenology and is well applied to culture by Hall (1973). He explains that the meanings that people educe are built upon the order, or structure, that they give to stimuli. These orders are different among cultures and among people.

> Groups can be defined by the relation of their members to a certain pattern. The individuals of a group share patterns that enable them to see the same thing and this holds them together. (Hall, 1973; p. 125)

This runs counter to the often-held assumption that two people encountering the same phenomena will experience the same thing, if all external states can be adequately controlled. This is inaccurate, as what stands out as meaningful is based upon the order given the phenomena by cultural imperatives (c.f., Goffman, 1974). Hall's (1973) emphasis on the value of learning about the assumptions of one's own culture is relevant here, as knowledge of the way swing voters perceive elections may shed light on different modes of reading and different grounds for making sense of political information.

With specific regard to advertising, Schwartz (1973) addresses the role that context plays in the development

and audience interpretation of political spots. He explains that "good political research seeks out attitudes in the environment and then judges a political spot by the way it affects these attitudes" (p. 100). Essentially, this means that context is important to the impact of a spot. More importantly, context is essential to both impact and meaning of a spot. West (1993) maintains that political advertising cannot be understood without attention to context. Context influences saliencies and the weighted relevance of issues, images, and values, among many concerns. Context impacts the person who ultimately produces the meaning of an advertisement. Key (1966) addressed this matter rather well before political advertising assumed its central role in the contemporary campaign:

> Differences in voters' interest, in their range of information, in the orientation of their attention, in their firsthand experience, and in their exposure to communications produce enormous variation in their perceptions of events and, consequently, in their appraisals of the alternatives posed by the electoral system. The explanation of voting behavior requires estimation of the modal parameters of the perceptions of the political world to which voters respond, a task

to which insufficient resources have been devoted. (p. 110)

It is the constantly changing context, environment, individual priorities, and circumstances for individuals and groups that ultimately comprise the situations in which voters make up their minds (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). As a component of the election context, the meanings of political spots are also influenced by context.

There is considerable reason to believe that political advertising practitioners view context, text, and reader as components of the meanings of advertisements. Schwartz (1973) states outright that "the people listening are actually part of the content of the advertisement" (p. 101). Thus, it is concluded here that there is need to research the interaction between voters and advertisers from a perspective consistent with Schwartz (1973) and others; a hermeneutic perspective. Given evidence that advertisers study and target the swing population, the following proposal focuses on the relationship between swing voters and advertising texts to better understand the interplay between the cultural presuppositions of this segment of the electorate and the political messages targeted at them.

Political Advertising Culture

It has been argued that a consumer advertising culture has developed in the United States. Due to the ubiquitous nature of advertising, our culture has devised ways of coping with, filtering, ignoring, expecting and rewarding advertisements. Advertisements are now printed on eggs, stuck to apples, projected onto sidewalks, hung above urinals, and dropped in wallets throughout major cities; all part of ingenious schemes to compete for "mind share" (Mills, 2001). The conventions of product advertising have greatly influenced the present form of presidential campaigns. Bagdikian (1997) explains that mass mediated advertising for election contests are influenced by the shapes and sizes of media markets, forcing candidates to standardize, broad-cast, and make their arguments less specific. Schuessler (2000) maintains that broadcast and mass-marketed campaigns result in an "all-things-to-all-people strategy" that focuses less on policy and more on symbol intensive imagery (p. 87-88). Though the internet and cable channels have increased the ability of campaigns to narrow-cast messages, the prevalence of broadcasting has influenced the nature of campaigning and voting.

Mass marketing of candidates has helped create what Schuessler (2000) terms a "common knowledge" based logic of campaigns (p. 71). He contrasts this logic to that of spatial voting models that emphasize traditional modes of logic and reason in campaign decision making, and was more applicable prior to nationwide campaigning. According to this common knowledge logic, the reception of information about a candidate is influenced by the knowledge that all others have been subjected to the same information. Meaning of information is influenced by the knowledge that that information is public knowledge: "Advertising and campaigning, in this light, are conduits for information pertaining to the collective witnessing of a signal that determines the meaning of one's participation" (p. 72). He is arguing that meaning and decisions are influenced by what the vote means and not necessarily what issues will be advanced.

The result of common knowledge logic is that voting decisions are based on a mass perception of the voter as a member of a "we" (Schuessler, 2000). The decision to vote and for whom to vote is a decision framed by the concerns of supporting a winner or a loser. Issues play a secondary role when, for example, voters are concerned with the

meaning of voting for a candidate they ultimately expect to lose.

Schudson (1986) argues that more insidious effects can result from marketing. In light of the development of political advertising's vague symbol laden language, Schudson's (1986) and Henry's (1965) arguments become important: That consumers can lose track of real needs is important. Though his writing was specifically addressing consumer marketing, his argument has fidelity when applied to political advertising. In an environment of symbolic hyperbole and high expectations "citizens lose a secure understanding of what their needs are and to what extent commodities satisfy them" (p. 155). Applied to politics, this would mean that voters are encouraged to focus less on concrete solutions and more on myth and metanarrative. Rhetorical analysis of political campaign communication and the growing body of literature describing voter cynicism and malaise may indicate our interest in the effects of this phenomenon.

Opposing Characterizations

Two seemingly different characterizations of the centrist/late-deciding voter phenomena have evolved and both characterizations stand to reason. While the

existence of less partisan individuals may indicate less partisan prejudice in the voters' decision making processes, by the same token it could equal less involvement or interest. Both of these sentiments have been expressed by scholars in this area.

Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) have argued that the increasing number of individuals that vote independent of partisan affiliation is a bad development. They describe these voters as "conflicted," less educated, "less enthusiastic," possessing "poorly developed attitudes," and as "somewhat less involved in politics." Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) consider these voters more "withdrawn" and "living within narrower horizons" (though still engaged and conflicted) (p. 70). More contemporary authors have reinforced these conclusions: Berger (2000) argues, "political ads target the apolitical. Those that are disengaged sitting at home" (p. 69). Some of these characterizations were supported by research conducted by Lucas and Adams (1978) and Zaller (1992). Specifically, Zaller (1992) found that the more politically aware, defined as politically knowledgeable, an individual is, the less centrist and more resilient they are to messages that oppose their predispositions.

On the other hand, quite the opposite can be reasoned. Iyengar and Petrocik (2000) explain that, for voting purposes, independent voters rely on assessments of candidate performance instead of partisan heuristics. Wattenberg (1991) makes this same point, explaining that voters are increasingly depending on "performance based voting" and adds that independent voters are more partisan than survey responses may indicate. Instead of relying on partisan bias to determine one's vote, the aforementioned authors would have us believe that voters are rationally assessing candidate records and positions. Additionally, Key (1966) found no reason to believe that switchers differed educationally from other types of voters.

Which side is correct is an important question, though the prize is definitely not a winner-takes-all scenario. There is always the chance that these voters fit both characterizations, wherein they are disinterested because they do not feel the information they need is available to make a defensible decision. Gebser (1949) and Kramer (1997) give good reason to believe that swing voters' lack of emotional involvement is not necessarily an indication of a lack of interest. They argue that one characteristic of mental/rational consciousness is a decrease in emotional involvement. Gebser's (1949) and Kramer's (1997) position

conflates what appears to be two contradictory characterizations. In any case, it is difficult to indict any voter's decision as irrational or as a product of a lack of concern or education. As is evidenced in Down's (1957) economic voting theory, anyone's voting decision can ultimately be determined the product of reason. Zaller (1992) explains that members of the U.S. culture are trained to produce reasons for their actions. What may set voters apart is how and upon what ground this reasoning is developed.

Given these six matters of interest and their implications for our democracy, this study proposes taking a step toward improving our understanding of the dynamics between the swing voting population and the single most important form of communication between candidates and voters; political spots. Specifically, this project's purpose is to better explain the interplay between cultural presuppositions of this segment of the electorate and the political messages targeted at them. The following research question is asked: "How do swing voters interpret political advertisements?"

Chapter 2

Method

We are 'thrown' into the world as beings who understand and interpret - so if we are to understand what it is to be human beings, we must seek to understand understanding itself, in its rich, full, and complex dimensions.

Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis

Bernstein, R. J. (1983). p. 136.

The methodology employed by the present project is patterned after a method of analysis used to develop Louis Rosenblatt's (1978) reader's-response theory of literary interpretation. Reader-response theory was developed from interviews conducted by Rosenblatt (1978) as described in The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work. The method used by Rosenblatt was designed to elicit the "paths by which students approached . . . a tentative first interpretation" of a text (p. 7).

In Rosenblatt's (1978) attempt to understand how individuals developed interpretations of texts, he was searching for the thoughts that preceded and contributed to interpretation. He states, "My aim was . . . to discover the paths by which students approached even a tentative first interpretation" (p. 7). Rosenblatt's method is not

fully articulated in his work, though he gives some framework. He explains that he presented written texts (e.g., poems and books) to subjects, who were his students, and asked them to write down their own thoughts about the meaning of the text as this meaning came to them. The thoughts of hundreds of subjects were collected and analyzed over a number of years. Rosenblatt's approach to analysis appears to be liberated from any systematic or structured approach; however, that is not to say his work is not rigorous. Instead, his method of analysis seems ethnographic in nature, albeit with a different goal than explaining or describing a cultural web of meaning. His objective is to explain the essential dynamics of the reading process. His conclusions make clear his goal to develop a theory of interpretation with epistemological ground consistent with his rejection of the subject-object dualism. He finds support for his conclusions in his research and interactions with students over many years.

Consistent with Gadamer (1975), Riceuor (1994), Bernstein (1983), and others, Rosenblatt (1978) maintains that the meanings developed by readers are contingent and can by no means be subjective or objective. A reading can be deemed incorrect or less correct if in the text can be

found nothing to have catalyzed it: The text should not be equated with a Rorschach inkblot (p. 151).

> As with all texts, the reader must bring a whole body of cultural assumptions, practical knowledge, awareness of literary conventions, readiness to think and feel. These provide the basis for weaving a meaningful structure around the clues offered by the verbal symbols. (p. 88)

Though his analysis could have revealed a great deal about his subjects, for Rosenblatt it is sufficient to focus on explicating reading as a transaction. Based on his epistemological conclusions, the following project investigates the cultural assumptions and practical knowledge of a specific group of readers in a manner similar to Rosenblatt.

The following paragraphs describe and offer justification for the specific method used in the analysis of swing voters' interpretations of political advertisements. An ethnographic approach is utilized, involving analysis of two forms of data; written comments and interviews. Informants were sampled according to a purposive scheme and asked to view political spots from the 2000 presidential election. The method of data analysis shares with the ethnographic approach its goal to represent

the cultural assumptions of a community in writing (Van Maanen, 1988) and to search for and sort emergent structures of signification (Geertz, 1973).

Informants

Careful attention was paid to sampling, such that it can be best argued that the conclusions drawn are argumentatively sound. The data, ethnographically obtained, will not be quantitatively assessed. Nevertheless, the following short discussion provides a rationale for both the number and types of subjects to be included in the project.

If looked at from a stochastic point of view, purposive sampling compromises the generalizability of results from this study. Unfortunately, as the review of literature makes clear, there has been little consistent scientific work done in this area from which to procede with measurements. What a swing voter is has neither been defined well, consistently, or operationally. Resultantly, a phenomenologically grounded approach is utilized for the purposes of shedding light on what constitutes a swing voter, before any attempt is made to measure it. Thus, the purposive method of sampling is ideal: This sampling method ensures the participation of a broad and

representative sample. The sample is representative to the extent that demographic groups which constitute swing voters were included. At the same time, this sampling method avoids the pitfalls of a pure convenience sample. Mead (1953) makes this argument well:

> The validity of the sample depends not so much upon the number of cases as upon the proper specification of the informant, so that he or she can be accurately placed, in terms of a very large number of variables. . . Within this extensive degree of specification, each informant is studied as a perfect example, an organic representation of his complete cultural experience. (p. 646)

Any stochastically determined sample size would prove overly ambitious, running the risk of exceeding both the requirements of the method and the resources of the researcher.

Morse (1994) contends that sufficient sampling for interviewing is determined by "indices of saturation, such as repetition in the information obtained and confirmation of previously collected data" (p. 230). He adds that in-depth studies typically include between 30 and 50 subjects. Ultimately, the sample size for this study (n = 30) was governed by saturation of themes, sample

representativeness, and interview quality. Repetition began early in the interviewing, yet, the researcher pursued a diverse group of people in order to let different types of responses arise.

To avoid neglecting the demographic variance within the population of swing voters a carefully developed purposive stratified sampling method was used. The benefits of this sampling strategy are enhanced breadth of analysis and, relatedly, a protection against bias (Johnson, 1990). A sampling frame was developed based upon the characteristics of swing voters outlined by research conducted by the Pew Research Center (Kohut, 2000). Pew Research conducted an extensive pre-election poll during November 2000 from the 2nd through the 5th. A total of 1829 telephone interviews with registered voters is included in the data set. The Pew Research data provides the demographic proportions of committed Gore, Bush, and swing voters used to determine which demographic groups needed to be included.

The significance of demographic factors constituting the population of swing voters is determined by their differences from committed voters. In other words, subjects were deliberately sampled from those demographic groups where proportions of swing voters are significantly

greater (as determined by z-tests) than either committed Gore or Bush voters. The purpose of this approach to sampling is to guarantee that the key demographics that constitute the population are reflected: Proportions of swing voters within demographic groups that are larger than chance would have it are included. As a result, the sample reflects the sundry social and economic influences that shape this population. The advantage of this approach is that it provided opportunities for different perspectives within the population to emerge, enhancing validity.

The shape of the sample is informed by six of the demographic factors measured by the Pew Research Center. These factors are listed in the following chart. The variables with which swing voters scored significantly higher relative to committed Gore or Bush voters are listed. Swing voters satisfying these demographics were included in the sample, though not exclusively. For example, whites constitute 85% of the population of swing voters. While this does not differ from committed voters, the sample would be incomplete without whites being represented. On the other hand, there is a significantly greater proportion of black swing voters versus black Bush supporters. Thus, the sample would be incomplete without including black swing voters. Purposively sampling this

demographic was intended to allow possibly divergent points of view to emerge.

Demographic	**Significant Differences with Z-Scores**
Race	Black swing 10% > Black Bush 2% (Z=5.89)
Sex	Female swing 53% > Female Bush 45% (Z=2.35)
Age	35-44 swing 24% > 35-44 Gore 18% (Z=2.41) 45-54 swing 24% > 45-54 Bush 18% (Z=2.23)
Income	$20-$30G swing 12% > $20-$30G Bush 8% (Z=2.31)
Education	H.S./GED swing 41% > H.S./GED Bush 26% (Z=4.68) H.S./GED swing 41% > H.S./GED Gore 31% (Z=3.18) Vo./Tech swing 6% > Vo./Tech. Gore 3% (Z=2.00)
Ethnicity Hispanic/Spanish)	Hispanic swing 9% > Hispanic Bush 4% (Z=3.1)

The construct of the swing voter has not been operationalized by previous scholars, though a general idea of what constitutes a swing voter resides in the definitions discussed in the review of literature. While the name given to swing voters implies that what characterizes them is their tendency to swing between voting options from election to election, if they were making solid decisions early in campaigns they would be

difficult to persuade. Thus, when campaigns pursue the swing voting population, it is reasonable to assume they are focusing on voters that have delayed their decision. Swing voters were operationalized this way for this study. Swing voters are individuals who voted and made up their minds late, seemingly because they could not decide among the options available. Recruits for the study were screened with the following two questions:

1. Did you vote in the last presidential election?
2. How long before election day did you choose who to vote for?

If prospective recruits indicated that they made up their minds during or after the last weekend of the campaign they were asked to participate.

Initially, participants were solicited from classrooms at an Illinois public university as well as through advertising techniques on college campuses, including newspaper advertisements and bulletin boards. To avoid limiting respondents to traditional university attendant ages (early 20's), advertisements were placed in Chicago area newspapers. In addition, subjects were recruited from "mature age communities," fire departments, and community bingos. In some instances, the snowball technique was utilized, as subjects referred the researcher to other

individuals qualified to participate (Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps, 1991). It was the goal of the project to find subjects fitting the various aspects of the demographics put forth in order to avoid excluding varying vantage points and interpretive conventions. Participants were notified that additional participation might be requested for follow-up interviewing.

Procedure

Once recruited, subjects were scheduled for an interview. While a fixed interviewing site was prepared at a public Illinois university, it proved to be cumbersome as subjects became unwilling to travel to the interview site. It became increasingly clear that the researcher would need to travel to meet the logistical needs of the subjects. In one instance, an interview was conducted in the subject's home. On all other occasions, subjects were interviewed at community college campuses, libraries, fire departments, and at a city park district. Once prospective subjects were contacted, the researcher explained the general subject matter, qualifications, one hour time requirement, and intent to protect informant anonymity. Each interview included four parts: Informed consent, stimulus "transaction", interview, and demographic questionnaire.

Informed Consent Form

Among other things, the Informed Consent Form (Appendix D) advised subjects of several matters of importance. First, it advised participants that, though their images were being videotaped, their likeness could be used for nothing other than the purposes of the study. Second, it notified subjects of the intent to protect their anonymity. Third, it described the study, its purpose, risks, and benefits. Finally, it provided subjects with the phone numbers of the faculty sponsor and the University of Oklahoma Office of Research Administration. Each subject was asked to give permission to be videotaped and to sign and date the form. Following this, each was offered a copy of the form for their own records.

Stimulus Transaction

The notion of a transaction between a stimulus and the informant is tailored after Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory. As explained, he characterizes the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text. He explains, "'Transaction' designates, then, an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned

by the other" (p. 17). Thus, to tap the nature of this transaction between swing voters and political advertisements targeted toward them, a research design similar to Rosenblatt's (1978), albeit supplemented by interviews, is used.

Subjects were seated with writing materials near a television and a VCR. They were verbally given the following instructions:

> Two political advertisements will be shown and you are asked to write down the meanings these spots have to you. You may begin writing as soon as you like, either during or after the spot. After the first advertisement, the tape will be stopped and you will be given as much time as you like to finish describing the advertisement's meaning. When you are through, we will continue with the second advertisement. Afterward, I will ask you some questions and then we will finish with a short questionnaire.

Blank writing materials were provided to the first subject. It was quickly learned that, without the prompting of questions, almost nothing was written by the respondent. Over a period of several interviews transaction writing materials were developed (Appendix E). Once informants

completed the entire transaction the researcher commenced with the interviews.

Several considerations went into choosing the advertisements included in the transaction (Appendix F). It is maintained that the two advertisements used provide balance between presidential candidates Bush and Gore. The exclusive concern regarding the type of advertisements chosen was in regard to the advertisements' subject matter. Specifically, advertisements dealing with matters deemed most significant in election 2000 exit polls were included. Portrait of America (2000), a division of Rasmussen Research, released a synopsis of "top issue" surveys compiled during election day exit polling. Education and social security matters received the highest proportions of "very important" scores on a four point scale (Portrait of America, 8/11/00). The Bush spot titled "No Changes/No Reductions" addressed social security. The Gore spot addressed college education and is titled "College." Both spots are 30 seconds in length. Advertisements were obtained from the University of Oklahoma Political Communication Center's political advertisement archive.

Ethnographic Interview

Following completion of the stimulus transaction, the researcher engaged informants in a discussion about the advertisements as well as other topics. Interview times lasted about an hour (Spradley, 1979). The times were contingent upon a number of factors, including available time and interview quality. Typically, no more than 50 minutes of the subjects' time was used. Though each respondent was informed of the researcher's desire to contact them with further questions if any arose, that need never presented itself. New subjects were recruited in good time, and new questions were incorporated into each subsequent interview.

After seven interviews, the researcher reasoned that subjects were talking very little about the advertisements. To prompt discussion of the advertisements, a book of pictures and text taken directly from the advertisements was made available for subjects to comment on. After using this book in a few interviews it proved to be of little value, as subjects made only short critical remarks about the pictures. They were rarely able or apparently willing to elaborate on the comments they made. Soon after, the book was considered unhelpful and was removed from the interview process.

All data from the interviews were recorded in two ways. First, each interview was recorded with portable video equipment. Second, the researcher kept short notes documenting both the researcher's thoughts and notable remarks made by subjects. Furthermore, each interview was transcribed verbatim and is available in hard-copy and on floppy disk. Tapes of interviews, corresponding interview notes, and transcripts are available for analysis by subsequent researchers.

While an initial interview schedule was prepared, it immediately changed. Nevertheless, a fairly consistent schedule was used for the last 20 interviews (Appendix B). Moreover, each interview was unique, given the idiosyncratic remarks of the subjects. Eight interview questions constituted the initial interview schedule. As it evolved, it retained a funnel format. More pointed questions were used later in the interview to avoid introducing topics into the subjects' awareness that could influence subsequent answers. These questions were designed using Spradley (1979) and Holstein and Gubrium (1995). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) describe the active interview as a limited improvisational performance with structure (p. 17). As such, questions were designed to provide the researcher with focus and structure. While

this project began with what it knew, it logically follows that it developed as it accrued knowledge.

In this case, the researcher does not have the benefit of a discreet culture. Swing voters do not meet regularly, do not live anywhere in particular, and do not have distinguishing physical features. In light of this, Spradley's (1979) description of typical ethnographic interviewing schedules was adapted to the unique limitations of this study. As a result, questions focused primarily on reflections and processes pertaining to viewing advertisements, the role of spots in decision making, and the decision making process in general.

In sum, there are two important characteristics of these interviews. Questions asked did not exclusively include those in the appended list. Questions unique to each informant and his/her answers were improvisationally developed during the course of each interview. This ability to adapt as the interview progressed allowed the researcher to probe informants' responses and uses of language more thoroughly. Second, the interview was intended to be a supplement to the written texts produced by informants during the stimulus interaction. As such, interviews followed the researcher's review of informant's written comments, resulting in subjects' reflections on

these comments. This process resulted in questions unique to the written remarks of each respondent.

Demographic Questionnaire

Appended (Appendix A) are eight demographic questions borrowed from Pew Research Center's pre-election surveys from the 2000 presidential election (Kohut, 2000). These questions were chosen to determine if subjects belonged to this study's sought demographic groups. Data from these questionnaires were not subjected to any inferential analysis, though descriptive analysis is provided to evidence the breadth of subjects interviewed. The questionnaire was conducted after the stimulus interaction and interview to protect from making the viewing situation any more artificial than it already was. Specifically, the researcher wanted to avoid making elements of the subject's socio-economic status any more salient than it would be in a natural setting.

Subject Profile

Nearly all of the desired demographic groups are represented in the sample. Both black and latino voters each constitute 8% of the sample. The sex of the sample was somewhat evenly split, with women comprising 57% of the

sample. The ages ranged from 18 to 80, while the average age was 37. Both age groups of particular interest were included in the sample: The group consisting of ages 35 to 44 made up 30% of those interviewed, while the 45 to 54 year old group constituted 23% of the sample. The average income of respondents was $56,764. Finding individuals that made between $20,000 and $30,000 per year was difficult for a number of reasons. Primarily, the average income in the city of Chicago is between $29,152 and $38,173, while the average for the surrounding suburbs lies between $38,403 and $59,284 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). These numbers are more than ten years old, as current census statistics related to income will not be available until early 2002. It is reasonable to expect that these averages have increased if just for cost-of-living alone. Additionally, most subjects were either students, professionals, or individuals from homes with two incomes. As a result, subjects were likely to fall either above or below the target income of $20,000 to $30,000. Finally, a large proportion of the sample met the education goals. Most had a high school degree or equivalent. Some of these had some college, but withdrew for reasons of which this study is unaware. Two indicated they had vocational training, when far more than two subjects were professional

tradesworkers without complete degrees. It is estimated that 33% of subjects were vocationally trained labor.

Method of Analysis

Geertz (1973) explains that the product of an ethnography should be descriptions cast in terms of the formula the researcher believes "they use to define what happens to them" (p. 15). Referring to approaches similar to the one described by Spradley (1979), Geertz (1973) argues:

> . . . this hermetical approach to things seems to me to run the danger (and increasingly to have been overtaken by it) of locking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life. There is little profit in extricating a concept from the defects of psychologism only to plunge it immediately into those of schematicism. (p. 17).

The following approach is consistent with the arguments of Geertz (1973) and his conceptualization of ethnography as an approach to analysis involving "thick description" of social discourse, developing theories about what we believe informants are up to, in order to gain access to their "conceptual world" (p. 24).

While classical ethnography looks at a discreet culture and attempts to immerse itself in it, the present instance is different in that the culture in question is not discreet. Analyzing how swing voters constitute their lifeworld while they are in their element cannot be studied in the traditional sense. The researcher cannot cross a physical border to enter into the world of the swing voter. Since the question at hand pertains to the meanings given to political spots, one can do no better than to give informants an opportunity to "interact" with political advertisements and to ask informants what those spots mean.

Analysis, in the general sense, begins as soon as one is immersed in the data, or as soon as the first interview begins. As important facets of the swing voting perspective emerged, hypotheses developed and new questions were added to subsequent interviews. Analysis in a more formal sense was hermeneutic, based on both Gadamer's (1975) hermeneutics and Culler's (1982) approach to deconstruction analysis.

Hermeneutics assumes that the meanings produced by informants are products of their cultural presuppositions. Mickunas and Stewart (1974) explain that

> Basic to philosophical hermeneutics is the attempt to discover and explicate the prejudgments that are

> inherent in various philosophical systems and the language in which they are expressed. These prejudgments constitute our own historical horizons and comprise a preunderstanding that is taken for granted in all that humans do and think. (p. 163)

The approach taken to elucidating these taken for granted prejudgments involve the following three steps: First, an analysis of themes from both the written commentary and the interviews; second, a hermeneutic analysis of the origins of these themes; and finally, an argument regarding the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

Informing this argument and the construction of themes is Culler's (1982) work pertaining to the deconstruction of texts. Deconstructing texts shares a great deal with hermeneutic analysis inasmuch as its aim is to uncover the ground upon which texts are posited. The critic's purpose is not to check the validity of a text but to elucidate the perspective that could produce and consider a text true, accurate or false. He explains:

> To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground for argument. (p. 86)

His book, On Deconstruction, outlines several approaches the researcher can take to reveal what is privileged and deferred and what language and concepts are chosen. In addition, Culler (1982) describes several critical conventions, including the examination of "supplements" in a text and the use of "grafting" texts into different contexts.

Analysis explaining the emergent themes of this study follows in the hermeneutic tradition. Gadamer's (1975) writings on hermeneutics provide a great deal of insight into the relationship between text and reader. He explains the role that preunderstandings play in making understanding possible. These preunderstandings are the product of historical situatedness, making essential the analysis of relevant realms of history that preceded, and in part constitute, our contemporary historical situation. Specifically, the history of presidential voting in the United States is examined for its impact on the conventions of interpreting political spots.

If one is to understand the preunderstandings of specific statements or interpretations produced in the collection of data, Gadamer (1975) also prescribes that the researcher step behind the statements in search of the possible questions one assumes when formulating a

statement. In other words, statements should be perceived as answers to questions: "[T]he meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply" (p. 333). Moreover, Gadamer characterizes interpretations as the product of the hermeneutic circle or an "oscillating movement between whole and part" (p. 168-169). As stated, the advantage of tailoring the stimulus reaction after Rosenblatt's (1978) original reader's response tests was to acquire informants' thoughts as they formulated meanings, helping reveal some of this oscillation. In short, these texts help reveal some of the viewers' early thoughts as well as salient components of the advertisements that impacted viewers' interpretations.

In sum, these conventions are used at the researcher's discretion as he immerses himself in the data. This point highlights the informal nature of the method, though it does not imply a lack of rigor. While Geertz (1973) describes the process of ethnography as drawing conclusions from one's "better guesses" (p. 20) his point acknowledges that the conclusions of the ethnographer are as contingent as those of his/her subjects.

Validity

Anticipating post-modernism, phenomenology and hermeneutics put forth the argument that upended the Cartesian dualism. Arguing that the truths of "objectivity" were incommensurable, it was maintained that standards for argument were contingent cultural products. While objective scientists attempted to transcend subjectivity and the biases of their cultural milieu by standardizing language and method, hermeneuticians focused on the futility of their efforts. Avoidance of pure subjectivism is often cited in defense of objective aspirations.

Eschewing the dualism between pure objectivity and subjectivity in favor of the thing itself, the hermeneutic perspective is premised on the rejection of both. Repudiating the myth of the absolute nature of positive science, Gadamer (1975) explains that each individual is always subject to their cultural fore-knowledge; "meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way" (p. 238).

As a rejection of the subject-object dichotomy, hermeneutics is a resultant product of the modern condition. Gebser (1949) terms this post-Cartesian hermeneutic mode of engaging phenomena "diaphaneity" (p. 7). Diaphaneity is a "rendering transparent" of those mentalities or attitudes toward phenomena which constitute

the world of those assuming them. Gebser summarizes this well:

> Contemporary methods employ predominantly dualistic procedures that do not extend beyond simple subject-object relationships; they limit our understanding to what is commensurate with the present Western mentality. Even when the measurements of contemporary methodologies are based primarily on quantitative criteria, they are all vitiated by the problem of the antithesis between "measure" and mass . . . our "method" is not just a "measured" assessment, but above and beyond this an attempt at "diaphany" or a rendering transparent. With its aid, whatever lies "behind" (past) and "ahead of" (future) the current dominant mentality becomes accessible to the new subject-object relationship. (Gebser, 1949; p. 7)

Thus, Gebser is arguing that a new "integral" mode of engaging the world has developed as a response to modernism. Those assuming this perspective realize that meanings associated with things are contingent upon the perspective assumed.

The hermeneutic perspective problematizes validity because it maintains that truth is contingent upon cultural standards. Despite this, the hermeneutician does not avoid

producing accurate or truthful statements. Instead, he realizes that the production of truth is always in progress and changing in light of developing horizons. Bernstein (1983) explains that "We should always aim at a correct understanding of what 'things themselves' say. But what the 'things themselves' say will be different in light of our changing horizons and the different questions we learn to ask" (p. 139), which is consistent with Geertz' (1973) assertion that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete" (p. 29). Bernstein's (1983) answer to how validity is determined then, is that by recourse to what a linguistic community considers good judgment, reason, and argument. Truth, he states:

> . . . amounts to what can be argumentatively validated by the community of interpreters who open themselves to what tradition "says to us." This does not mean that there is some transcendental or ahistorical perspective from which we can evaluate competing claims to truth. We judge and evaluate such claims by the standards and practices that have been hammered out in the course of history. (p. 154)

Validity, then, is determined by the community of readers and their standards for soundness of argument. To encourage testing of validity, data produced in the process

of this study have been stored and are available for future analysis.

Chapter 3

Analysis of the Themes from Ethnographic Data

All of the cultural presuppositions necessary for the U.S. voting process to make sense and function properly are part of our cultural natural attitude. However, as part of the natural attitude or taken-for-grantedness of the contemporary voter, and understanding of the contingent nature of this seemingly natural and sensible act is sedimented or lost. As such, the way a U.S. voter understands elections, voting preparations, and the act of voting itself is largely unexamined and revealed only by studying the language and behavior of the individuals who participate in the voting activity. In studying the reactions of swing voters to political advertisements, their assumptions about the notion of elections and how they are performed are revealed. Knowledge of how a house is made is not limited to understanding how the builder follows from blueprints to finished product. Instead, one must understand the tools and their respective mode of application by which the builder follows from blueprints to house. Similarly, how meaning is made of political advertisements is not answered solely by examining the respondents' interpretations of the advertisements'

messages. A more thorough assessment is ascertained by learning what perspectives, assumptions, or horizons the voter is equipped with when the advertisement is engaged.

As long as the U.S. has had popular elections, swing voters have existed. This stands to reason, as there would be little reason for campaigning if everyone had their minds made up long before election day. Nevertheless, in recent years scholars have bemoaned the loss of faith in the two party system (e.g., Tuckel & Tejera, 1983). Evidence of a trend moving away from party affiliation is said to be found in the decreasing proportion of voters willing to identify with either national party (e.g., Abramson, 1983), and in the apparent reduction in the number of people willing to vote (Hart, 1999). No study suggests that a national third party is accountable for the movement away from the two major parties, thus it is difficult to maintain that a common philosophy is pulling people towards the center of the political spectrum or that a transcendent logic is allowing voters to weave a new political perspective from the Democratic and Republican points of view.

That an increasing proportion of voters are unwilling to identify themselves with a major party is accepted as a major tenet of this study (Hart, 1999). However, the often

argued position that voters are increasingly independent neglects to explain the presumptions that many of these voters share. In fact, their supposed "independence" may even suggest that swing voters are more objective, having fewer or no presumptions relative to a partisan. Moreover, explanations of the independent voter phenomenon also appear to overlook the origins of the contemporary swing voter's attitudes about what an election, voter, and advertisement should be.

The written comments and interviews utilized in this study reveal something consistent among swing voters. Primarily, these voters do, in fact, share an elaborate philosophy enabling them to make sense of elections and how one properly goes about participating in them. This swing voter philosophy appears to be much unlike partisanism which, it is argued here, serves as a heuristic for party voters. The party heuristic is effective because it provides the voter with a voting rationale, with all of the pretenses of a metaphysic belief system, while failing to adhere to any consistent philosophical perspective. This is clearly evidenced by the planks of either major party's platforms which continuously change and are typically constituted by contradictory planks. In contrast, the philosophy of the swing voter manifests itself as an

anxiety over proper election procedure; the requirements of this procedure apply to both the voter, the candidates, their campaigns, and their communication (of which advertising is one example). Correctives for the world's problems are secondary to swing voters; instead there exists the presumption that the correctives follow from precise procedural practice. Studying, deliberating, and voting do not just prevent democracy from failing, but they cause it to work properly. An editorial in the *Boston Globe* illustrates this point well. Responding to the argument that voters are disengaging because of political corruption, it states:

> . . . these are tired excuses that have become cliches and a national self-fulfilling prophecy: "I won't participate because politics is so bad." Politics wouldn't be so bad if more people participated. So vote. ("Voting with Pride," P. A18)

This sentiment appears to be central to the philosophy of swing voters.

The following analysis looks at the data produced by 30 interviews and written commentary responding to two political ads from the 2000 presidential election. This analysis consists of four sections. First, the meanings subjects assigned to ads in their written commentary are

examined. Second, the interviews reveal an underlying perception of elections and the U.S.'s voting process. Third, the case is developed that the contemporary swing voter is guided by a distinct philosophy that facilitates meaning-making of both political ads and the general political dominion from which they are derived. Fourth, it is argued that these voters are not cynics, as both popular and academic writers tend to believe. Instead, swing voters are found to be very knowledgeable and critical consumers of political messages.

The linear or "political spectrum" metaphor is considered deficient from this point forward, as it is not helpful in explaining how swing voters constitute politics. Swing voters "see" politics in a different way than do partisans, so bracketing the language of the political science tradition will be helpful in conceiving how these voters approach the phenomena of engaging political communication and responding to it. Though voting options typically lie between either of the parties' candidates, a swing voter's tendency to wait and vacillate between these candidates does not reveal a centrist philosophy or a perspective composed of a blend of both Democratic and Republican principles. To more thoroughly explicate this

philosophy the analysis begins with the meanings subjects assigned to the political spots.

Written Responses Regarding Advertising Meaning

The meanings that respondents assigned to political spots were gleaned from both their written responses to ads and verbal responses to questions which followed the viewing of the advertisements. Interviews conducted early in the process garnered very short responses, however, a change in the written response format helped this project acquire more written data.

As was expected, the written comments provided relatively less information than the interviews. Nevertheless, the written comments served an important function; it provided the opportunity for subjects to write their responses immediately following the viewing of the political ads. Similar to Rosenblatt (1978), this project attempted to document the initial interpretations produced by viewers after watching the advertisements. This procedure helped avoid extensive reflection, second guessing, or reasoning about the accuracy of meanings.

Two different groups emerged from the data; the primary group of swing voters, characterized as consisting of voters who considered either of the two major party

candidates, and a second group who were relatively more partisan. These voters also made their voting decisions at the last minute. This primary group consisted of the largest number of subjects, and is the central focus of this study. It is maintained here that when people speak of "swing voters" (e.g., cites) they are more likely to be referring to the primary group and their shared characteristics. The second group, though relatively smaller in size, is significant because their responses to the advertisements offer a contrast to the primary group.

Overview of Themes

Written statements of subjects were initially examined according to the types of statements they were determined to be. A typology emerged as the comments were read and compared to the comments in the interviews. The themes used in the analysis of the data are described and explained below.

Statements characterized as "filtering statements" were identified in the written comments. These statements addressed how and in what way the advertisement's message was important. These types of statements constitute the key difference between the primary and the secondary groups, as they reveal how these groups interpret message

relevance differently. In short, spots were found to be important for one of two reasons. Some respondents appeared to reference a code of transcendent values when determining the importance of a spot. For example, respondents may have said that they liked an ad because it discussed educating people, and, they explained, education is the cornerstone of our society. Others deemed ads important because they believed the ad's proposal would benefit them directly.

All of the respondents criticized the ads. The different manifestations of criticism revealed a great deal. There were two prominent characteristics to these criticisms which helped define the differences among the voters. First, some respondents placed a high priority on either the quantity or quality of the information that was provided: These comments comprised an "information" theme. Another distinction was found among the balanced nature of criticism: While some respondents distributed either their negative or positive criticism in a balanced manner, others revealed their biases by weighing their criticisms heavily in favor of one of the candidates. This theme was termed the "balance" theme.

Evidence of the information theme was found in the use of God-terms (Weaver, 1985) or ideographs (McGee, 1980)

that made apparent an emphasis and valuing of information. Specifically, a good candidate, voter, or advertisement is one that has or provides "enough" information to make the "right" decision. This appeared to be central to the axiology of many respondents, as it was the primary ground from which subjects' criticisms or praise emerged. The fixation on information appeared to be part of a larger theme that emerged throughout the interviews: It was part of a larger theme described later as the "voting ethic." Numerous comments made during interviews provide a glimpse into the value system central to the swing voters that constituted the primary group.

Finally, the manner in which criticisms of the advertisements were distributed became important. Subjects either distributed criticisms evenly or stacked criticisms in a way that revealed biases towards one of the candidates. The nature of the advertisements did not warrant unbalanced criticisms, as they were both positive advertisements. To favor a candidate, subjects needed to be referencing something other than the spot; some metaphysical ground. Initially, criticisms were organized according to type. A typology of criticisms was being developed until it became apparent that how the subjects criticized candidates was less revealing than how the

criticisms were distributed. Only the levying of criticisms for perceived violations of the value of information stood out as a characteristic type of criticism exclusively made by the primary group of swing voter.

Secondary Group's Written Reactions

Five respondents were categorized into the secondary group. This grouping emerged from analysis of both the written and interviewed comments, although much of what is needed to recognize this grouping can be found in the written comments alone. Three of the five subjects in the secondary group indicated during their interviews that they were split between Nader and Gore. These subjects were markedly different in their philosophies in comparison to subjects comprising the primary group. This group's written responses to the political spots were consistent with one another in two important respects. First, these subjects often coupled harsh criticism for one candidate with strong praise for the opponent. Second, praise for candidates is based on idealistic notions, principles or values that transcend immediate self needs. Though these ideals manifest themselves as party affiliation and partisan voting habits, these voters unwittingly perceive themselves as supporting a consistent system of values and

issues. Both of these points offer unmistakable contrasts to the types of comments characterizing the written remarks of the primary group.

In short, these voters were left-leaners who decided to vote for Gore because they felt Nader could not win the election. This claim is supported by remarks made by these subjects during the subsequent interviews. There was one exception; an elderly Republican woman who made up her mind late because she was unclear which party was conservative. Thus, it is not surprising that their reactions to the stimulus would be different from voters split between the two major party candidates. The first significant characteristic of the secondary group's written comments was their tendency to harshly criticize one candidate while offering laudatory remarks to the other. Criticism was not dispersed among all the candidates. In doing so, members of this group reveal a distinct bias with respect to politics. Gore garnered all of the following positive comments:

S5: Fairness for all, the Al Gore plan.

S5: It made me feel good, I like Al Gore.

S16: Great job . . .

S16: I had a very positive reaction to his advertisement . . .

S16: Seemed he really cared about what he was talking about . . .

S29: [The ad] hits an important matter, education, which almost all can relate to. And it addresses the middle-class, which is a large amount of people.

S29: Many middle class families want their children to attend college and it sounds like the answer.

S29: Mr. Gore seems to be concerned for the average man.

In contrast, Bush received a very unbalanced response, wherein subjects produced very negative and cynical remarks. Subjects made the following comments:

S5: Affordable health care, but it's all talk.

S5: Tell the truth.

S16: Sounds like it was rehearsed, it didn't seem sincere.

S16: Phony, he has like theme music in the background and there is a crowd cheering him on.

S29: I was not impressed nor did I believe what was being said. Sounds nice and a good idea, but Bush gives me the feeling that he is one not to be trusted.

S29: The fact is that I do not, did not believe Bush was our answer.

S29: I believe he says only what needs to be said to win votes

That these criticisms are unevenly distributed between candidates is one characteristic of this secondary group. However, the nature of the praise and criticism marks another striking characteristic.

In the next section, contrasts between the secondary and primary groups and their significance will be discussed at greater length. Generally, one key distinction lies in the manner by which criticism or praise of the advertisements or the candidates is proffered. It is maintained here that the fundamental distinguishing characteristic of the secondary group's criticisms is that they are motivated by values other than immediate material or self gratification. After viewing the Gore spot, one subject responds to the question, "What do you think the advertisement means?" He replies, "Fairness for all, the Al Gore plan." Another subject elaborates further, stating, "It hits an important matter, education, which almost all can relate to. And it addresses the middle-class, which is a large amount of people." Asked for further reaction, she states: "Many middle-class families

want their children to attend college and it sounds like the answer." Another respondent states: "He was relating to a class of people who are often skipped over." What is missing from these comments are references to any specific self benefit. Instead, it becomes more clear in the interviews that these individuals' interpretations materialize from concerns for principles.

Primary Group's Written Responses

The two characteristics of the secondary group, unbalanced criticism and principle based praise, become meaningful when held in contrast to the primary group. The remaining 25 subjects comprise this primary group. These subjects organized their written responses in a significantly different way. First, their remarks are more balanced, reserving criticism and praise for both candidates. There is no apparent bias in favor of either candidate. Even when criticizing a candidate or his ad, the written commentary itself is balanced with positive remarks. The second, and most significant characteristic of the remarks of these subjects was that the relevance or importance of the candidates' remarks were consistently filtered directly through the self interests of the respondent. Third, central to the criticisms or praise

given by the primary group is a valuing of information. If subjects perceived that the candidate provided sufficient or high quality information, then praise was given. Likewise, criticisms were given when the opposite was perceived as true.

Almost all of these subjects offered balanced criticism of the candidates. This is consistent with the way one would expect late-deciders to react. Even though the data was collected after the election, subjects' comments still reflected balanced opinions regarding the choices. For instance, asked what the Bush ad means, one subject remarks: "It means vote for me, George W. Bush, and I will take care of the senior citizens and their needs. Maintaining social security is important to him." Asked the same question about Gore, she states: "It means vote for me, Al Gore, and I will take care of the average middle-class person and help them to be able to send their children to college. Affordable education is important to him." Even when the interpretations are not as literal, they are still well balanced between the candidates.

When asked for reaction to the advertisements, one subject made numerous yet balanced criticisms.

S15: I found it confusing - was Gore's plan to make $10,000 loans available to middle income families

or just not tax that tuition money that families would have to dish out? After three viewings, I still couldn't tell.

Regarding Bush, this subject continued his criticism.

S15: I thought it was very well produced but visually too busy - the introductory shots of senior citizens at the beginning were compelling but confused with the flashes of white screen after each shot.

These comments reveal an interest of the voter in a vaguely defined expectation of the candidate to campaign properly. In this case, the subject was interested in the clarity of the advertisement.

The following comments exemplify the balanced nature of the positive comments produced by subjects in response to the ads. Asked what the Bush ad meant, another subject wrote the following statement:

S17: I think that Bush's advertisement is directed solely to senior citizens. It is not catching the eye of young Americans. It is not showing what he is going to do for anyone not using social security or is on welfare and prescriptions. It is a strong advertisement to the older crowd. . . . If I was older and saw

this advertisement I would vote hands down for Bush.

Despite the fact that she believes Bush would be good for seniors, she offers praise to Gore for his ad.

S17: I think that this advertisement means that Gore cares about our education. He cares so much that he is willing to write off college tuition and also take care of the middle class families. He is directing this advertisement to the younger people that need help getting their children a better education.

Even the most critical comments are spread evenly. Asked for reaction to the Bush ad, one subject responded very negatively.

S21: If he can do what he is stating, then I think he is doing a good thing. Sometimes though these are only campaign promises and things change when in office.

Gore is not spared from this jaded commentary.

S21: I think that if he [Gore] can give this tax relief, why hasn't someone else done this to help families out. Myself, I don't care because I have already put my kids through college.

These subjects offer a fair illustration of the rhetorical balancing act performed by most of the subjects in this group. Based on these comments there was no reason to believe subjects preferred either candidate in the election. There is more here, however, when the nature of these comments is compared to that of the secondary group. The ground from which praise or blame emerges does not dispose swing voters to one candidate, based on an assessment of the candidates philosophy. Instead, as is revealed in analysis of their commentary, swing voters use a set of values which assess candidate performance as it relates to the voter.

This leads to the second characteristic of the primary group's comments. One of the most important values that emerged is that of concrete self-interests (e.g., money, education for children, tax rebates). Among these voters was little concern or interest of the well being of the group or community. If a candidate's policy is perceived to be directly helping the voter, it warranted praise. This is contrasted with the secondary group, which based judgment on abstract principles that had no apparent effect on the voter's well-being. For instance, the secondary group might favor Gore because of his desire to help middle-class families. This is deemed worthwhile because

it is believed to be generally important to help people. On the other hand, members of the primary group might state that because they are members of the middle-class, and stand to benefit from Gore's proposal, they prefer Gore or Gore's ad. One subject writes about the Gore ad:

S19: I am interested in more affordable education since I had to drop out of college with a 3.6 grade average after 2 ½ years due to financial problems. Student loan limitations were ridiculous. [I] really want to finish a degree but it will be very difficult. Single income, house, two kids, wife that does not work.

Another subject responds to the Gore ad:

S21: Myself, I don't care because I have already put my kids through college.

One other wrote:

S22: As a middle class and focus in education, that part was very significant for me.

Another, responding to Bush writes:

S26: It's nice to know that he wants to be the protector of my money but I feel the ad was geared mostly towards senior citizens concerned about that issue and not so much my issue at this time.

One other Bush respondent wrote:

S4: If this was an issue concerning me, watching this would definitely help my decision on who to vote for.

She also remarks that she would have been interested in the Gore ad, except that she is done raising children and is now more interested in her retirement.

S6: Well, you see, now because, at my particular stage in life, I'm probably more interested in affordable prescriptions . . . I've already paid the college tuitions.

While these are just examples, this theme is very consistent throughout the written commentary.

The primary group also appears to put a lot of emphasis on information. Thus, advertisements or candidates are good, dependent upon how forthright they are with information. Subjects speak of withholding judgment, for instance, until more information can be obtained, questioning candidate integrity because of a lack of information in the ad, or concern about knowing clearly how something can be accomplished. This point is illustrated in the following examples.

S3: I dislike that this (as well as other political ads) lack the presented plans of action, and instead focus on promises.

S4: I think that this was also good how it is - he gives a brief background on what is going on.

S4: I think that for the amount of time this was covered, he did a very good job. He gave brief explanations for everything and told people what they wanted to hear.

S4: I think the advertisement was highly informative citing a specific plan of action.

S15: The wording also keeps this viewer (or this viewer anyway) from totally understanding Gore's plan - that's important to know and I feel the spot fails at achieving that goal.

S17: If I was older and saw this advertisement I would vote hands down for Bush, (with a little more research of course).

S22: I wanted to know more about it. He talks, but he is able to leave some parts where you wanted to know more.

S24: Depends on what he means about caring and keeping costs down. He doesn't say all medications. He

is unclear about what he's specifically talking about.

This theme is especially apparent when the interviews are analyzed.

Outcome of Interviews

The written comments produced apparent divisions between types of responses. To further enable analysis and exploration of these divisions among types of swing voters interviews were done with the same respondents. In addition to providing respondents with an opportunity to expand on their original written comments, subjects were asked additional questions that would help provide material with which to explain how and perhaps why they responded to the advertisements the way they did. Analysis of the interview material supports the division found in the written responses between the secondary and primary group.

Of greatest significance from this point is the primary group, although the secondary group will be used for contrast. Coupled with their written comments, the primary group's interviews evidence a unique philosophy regarding politics and political communication. Undoubtedly, this philosophy influences how political advertisements are engaged and made meaning of. Evidence

of their perspective is found by checking for further evidence of emergent themes from the written comments, looking for new themes, and examining the nature of what is said and not said.

The three characteristics of the written comments of the primary group of swing voters were found to be consistent with the findings drawn from analysis of the interviews. The balanced nature of comments, emphasis on quality and quantity of information, and the filtering of information through self-interests appear to be consistent with the themes that emerge from the interviews. These themes are discussed in the following section.

Overview of Interview Themes

The most apparent theme running through subjects' comments was gathered more from what was missing than what was explicitly stated. This common thread could be termed non-partisanism or anti-partisanism. While some comments were explicitly anti-party, there was a glaring absence of overt references to party or any guiding philosophy for that matter. Responses from one subject were particularly interesting. Just 20 years old, this Nader voter reasoned that anyone would have been better than a major party candidate. Explaining why he supported Nader, he stated:

S2: . . . well, it helped that he wasn't either Bush or Gore, that was something that I liked about him. And otherwise, I guess I would say, um, I guess it just seemed good to have a little bit of variety in there, you know, you have Democrat, Republican, Democrat, Republican in there almost every single election and I, Nader, yeah I voted for Nader, but regardless of what Nader's policies are, um, even though what he says appeals to me to an extent, um, it would just be good to at least have another person in there for the sake of variety if nothing else, even if he isn't going to do something good for the country.

The last sentence is chilling for those who believe that voting is a way to do good by supporting a person who has the right ideas and will accomplish good things. This subject was the most anti-partisan of the sample, though there were similar types of comments made by others.

S6: . . . my mom is a strict Democrat, and she will not vote any other way no matter what. And to me that makes no sense.

S10: Well, I, um, I'm not committed to any political party. I don't think that's really a valid way

to vote. And, um, I wanted to be as educated as I could on my decision.

S12: Well, I look at the man's views. I don't choose the party as much as the man. It's the man that's important.

S20: Um, I guess, um, I'm not strictly Republican or Democrat or anything like that. I guess I kind of go as to who, maybe a feeling, or who comes across the best. . . . I think both of them were kind of equal in a way, and don't ask me what made me vote either way. I can't really tell you.

Others express a more subtle disdain for party politics.

S9: The best voter would be kind of, research on both candidate, you know, find out, you know what I mean they, kind of, if you are really into it you know you find out what each one is about yourself and you are not really leaning towards what other people are saying.

R: Then what do you think about people who pretty much have their minds made up as the conventions are done? It doesn't seem to the best voter that already has their mind made up.

S9: I don't think it is really fair because, a lot of times they are going on what other people say too and it is like, you got to vote for what you want and what they can do for you. If you are going on someone else, it is not going to help at all, really.

However, even when remarks were more implicit, even to the point of being absent, the point was still clear. These individuals were not using party philosophy to help them reason about politics; instead, they were going it alone.

Subjects' comments also evidenced an ethic that guided their voting. Essentially, these swing voters chose to vote because they believed it was generally right to vote. In short, they believe there is an inherent value in voting.

S2: I didn't really read or listen or think about much of anything till right before the election, my parents said, "You know that in a lot of countries people don't have a chance to vote. It's a pity that you have the right and you aren't going to use it just because you think you are uninformed." And I said, "Well, okay, you are right."

Another had a similar experience.

S8: . . . when I guess I did finally decide, ok, uh, I need to go ahead and make a decision or go ahead and vote because my parents were constantly calling me, "come home and vote," "come home and vote." That's when I kind of felt I should pay attention to what was going on, and go out and vote.

The following comment is interesting because of its awkwardness. Whereas voting is an expression of one's desire to approve of, or change, society, the following comment sees it differently.

S3: Why did I choose to vote? Prompted by, you know, people on the campus down there, everyone wants you to vote. It's more like peer pressure, or you know, a "Rock the Vote" sort of thing, you know. So I wanted to express my right to vote.

This voter wanted to vote to accomplish voting, because it is inherently good to cast a ballot. His vote was more symbolic than anything, although it ultimately influenced the election outcome. The next comment further illustrates this point. The subject knew she wanted to vote, though she had no idea who she wanted to vote for.

S10: I knew that I wanted to vote, but I hadn't really been paying a lot of attention in the early parts

of the campaign. And I, and I knew it was almost kind of procrastinating. I knew, you know, I wanted to vote, but I didn't want to go in just guessing. But I had kind of put off the work that I had wanted in order to make an educated decision.

This ethic serves as ground upon which voters criticize themselves.

R: How do you describe yourself as a voter? Take it any way you want.

S13: Probably not a good voter, for the simple reason that I don't go out and vote in all the elections, which I know I should. But half the time, I don't like who's running.

In contrast, members of the secondary group site beliefs and values that motivated them to vote. For example:

R: . . . what drew you to Nader other than the fact that . . . ?

S11: I kind of always liked him when he was like involved with all these different projects, involved in human rights . . .

Another example:

R: Would you say that it was more of a decision to vote rather than who to vote for?

S14: Yes. And I also like Bush. I don't think he was, he wasn't, all the things, he didn't come out and say, "I'm going to change everything." I think his speeches were more conservative.

Thus, the partisan votes to realize certain goals which motivate him/her, while the swing voter votes to realize their vote. The swing voter maintains that the more that voters vote, the better the society. There are no remarks in any of their interviews that hint at the value of expressing one's will or the merits in changing society.

Next, it follows that if voters do not allow themselves to use partisan preferences or transcendent values as voting heuristics, something must take its place. Either replacing the aforementioned heuristics or the cause of the "abandonment" of them is the valuing of sound policy. One learns about policy and is more capable of determining its prudence with information. Thus, it is maintained here that swing voters' fixation on quality and quantity of information is a result of the perceived need to deliberatively determine that policy has been properly conceived. One subject explains that she relies on mail pamphlets to choose her candidate.

S24: Um, I don't get enough, um, what do you say, pamphlets on people. Um, like sometimes you get

them through the mail. Sometimes, if you appear Democrat they will send you out Democratic, you know, merchandise. And, you know, if you are a Republican, the same. You know, um, I think that you really don't know if you want to be a Republican or a Democrat until you actually get the pamphlets, or you know, you hear about the person on TV, you know, or on the radio.

She further explains how important sufficient and accurate information is.

S24: Like Bush, he was saying that, you know, he was going to lower the cost of their Medicare and that. But what actually are you going to do? . . . That would have been interesting to me too, you know, to find out exactly what he is talking about. I think that if they are going to make promises then they should send out a thing saying exactly what promises they are actually going to do, and what's effecting that, you know.

For some, this value gives reason to criticize political advertisements on the ground that they do not provide enough information.

R: What do you think of political ads in general?

S1: I find them highly unnecessary, I mean, people shouldn't vote unless they like study what it is they are voting for and ads don't do very much.

This value becomes even more apparent as subjects describe the ideal voter.

S3: He knows the facts, he knows history of the candidate, he knows where he's been, what he's done, his policy on this, his policy on that, future policies if elected. He knows all these things. I think that would be the ideal knowledgeable voter.

S9: The best voter would be kind of research on both candidates, you know, find out, you know what I mean they, kind of, if you are really into it, you know, you find out what each one is about yourself and you are not really leaning towards what other people are saying.

S13: Well, I think a person needs to read, you know, about the candidates which, you know, we get delivered to the house here on everybody that's running, and I do basically read the pamphlets. You know, and I tried to watch some of the debates. And I watch a lot of news, if it has to do with politics.

S18: Uh, knowing where they stand on just about everything that you can. Uh, reading every little bit that comes out . . .

S28: [The ideal voter is] somebody who took the time to study the literature and found, and maybe even went to some of these political rallies and actually talked to people and found out, you know, what they though about the issues.

The uninformed voter openly criticizes him/herself.

S2: I think I'm generally under-informed, uh, because I haven't paid enough attention. I think I fit what must be a bit of a stereotype in my generation for just kind of being fed up with the way I've grown up seeing politics work or the way I think I've been seeing politics work.

R: What, how does the aware voter behave? What sets him or her apart from how you go about voting?

S17: Probably did a lot more, people did a lot more research than I did. Probably watched a lot more speeches that I did, and probably read a lot more of the newspaper about the two candidates than I did. And, uh, maybe had better beliefs than I did.

Another response is similar.

S20: . . . That's an ideal voter, because they are going to get all the facts and know exactly what each one of them, you know, was saying or doing, whatever. Compare me to that? It's probably not quite the opposite but pretty close to the opposite. I don't know. I don't follow it, I really don't.

Valuing information also allows the respondent to remark about the qualities of advertisements. Though most respondents disliked advertisements for their brevity and emphasis on image related information, they noted that the ads communicated the candidates' top priorities. This knowledge, they explained, enabled voters to follow the candidate's record of successes after he was elected. The information value also serves as ground to criticize "negative advertisements."

S20: To the candidate who is doing, that is doing it. I mean, to me, you have enough to get the information out as to what you are running for, what you are going to do for the people, not bashing the other person . . .

Importance of information to swing voters was made abundantly clear by the examples included here as well as in the many quotations left out.

As noted from the analysis of written comments, swing voters were also guided by a tendency to examine candidates and their policies by measuring their immediate relevance to themselves. This theme is more fully developed in the interviews. Advertisements were more meaningful when subjects perceived the issues in them as relating directly to their needs. Again, this stands in contrast to the secondary group: Subjects 11 and 14, for example, cite goals or values when assessing political spots. On the other hand, comments made by subjects comprising the primary group of swing voters are void of values other than self-interest. For example, subject 17 was a 23 year old, high school educated, union carpentry apprentice. Split between candidates because of pressures from the union and his moral beliefs, he explains his thoughts about both spots.

S17: The first ad was Bush, and I thought that if I was a senior citizen he would have gotten my vote, because of the fact that the welfare and the social security and how he explained it almost thoroughly in like that one minute section of how he's going to help the older crowd. But I didn't like it because, uh, it didn't really pertain to me at all at my age.

Addressing the Gore ad, he explains:

S17: I thought that pertained more to me, because he was talking more about younger class, middle class families, talking about education, and helping us financially and that really helps me more now than it would in the future. I'm not really that far into the future yet, so Gore would probably be the best bet from those two advertisements.

Another criticizes an ad because its proposal fails to do anything for her.

S21: Do I care about a tax deduction for people that went for $10,000? No. I paid for all my kids college without tax deducations. So, he's not helping me at all. He's helping people 5 years down the road, 4 years down the road.

Another subject stated that he felt one candidate would be the better president, yet he admits he voted for the one that would assist him most.

S23: Well, I felt maybe Bush would be a different, better president than Gore because Bush, he's more stronger. It feels like he's a more stronger person. Even with his voice and his

actions. That's what I felt. He would probably do a better job.

S23: . . . And, uh, you know, then I thought about, for Gore, for the kids for my college, for the middle class, I voted for Gore.

These types of comments are consistent throughout the sample.

Analysis of Swing Voters

The responses developed by swing voters to the political advertisements were surprising. This is primarily because few respondents examined the advertisements at any length. Even though subjects were strongly encouraged to comment on the ads and their content, they spent little time detailing meanings and defending them. One reasonable explanation for their limited reaction to the spots is a perceived lack of relevant or sufficient information. Put simply, swing voters had little to say because they saw little to react to. Admittedly, this suggests that certain types of responses were expected by the researcher. Though the subjects failed to meet the researcher's expectations, their reactions to the advertisements prove to be no less illuminating.

As has been mentioned, a philosophy emerged among the swing voters. From the emergent themes, a cogent and meaningful philosophy is proposed. Characteristic of this philosophy is an anti-partisan attitude. Abandoning partisanship as a voting heuristic, the voter is left to find new values or ground upon which to make voting judgments. Also absent, however, are references to organizations or groups of interest which either reflect or influence voters' decisions. The one exception to this was among the union voters: Each of them mentioned that the union attempted to influence their votes. Similar to anti-party feeling, however, was a general skepticism about the union.

Operating without a traditional political orthodoxy, one would expect the swing voter to find little reason to bother voting. Parties help voters develop agendas, and without these agendas it would follow that non-partisans would have less reason to vote. Contrary to reason, these individuals are self motivated; compelled by an ethic that values voting for its own sake. From the swing voter's perspective, if the number of voters is a measure of the success of an election, and democracy by extension, then it would reasonably follow that each person should vote. Unfortunately, while this ethic compels them to vote, it

fails to provide them with any direction with respect for whom to vote.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) introduce the notion of cross-pressures, described as competing interests in the mind of the voter. Because of cross-pressures, they explain, voters put off their decision, either finding good reasons or no good reasons to vote for either. This concept is helpful to the extent that the swing voters in this study often referenced, either explicitly or implicitly, opposing considerations or values when responding to the political spots or when talking about the development of their voting decision. Lazarsfeld et. al.'s (1948) cross-pressures provides a skeletal framework from which this study describes the nature of the competing interests with which swing voters cope when engaging political spots or choosing for whom to vote in the 2000 presidential election.

In short, swing voters swing between two types of candidates; the ideal candidate and the best candidate. The ideal candidate is the one that upholds the value of information and contributes to the sufficiently informed electorate. However, failing to uphold this virtue, because this ideal can never be fully achieved, the swing voter finds him/herself relying on alternative values and

interests to ground voting decisions. The value of information and subjects' alternative values constitute the cross-pressures experienced by swing voters.

The Ideal Candidate

No subject would maintain that the best candidate is defined as the one that provides the best, most forthright, or developed information. Nevertheless, this ideal is revealed in the language and rhetoric of the subjects. As has been demonstrated, the value of good and thorough information, in one way or another, acted as the basis for much of the praise or blame dispensed by respondents. Because the effort to determine the ideal candidate requires information, it ends up acting as a heuristic. For example, if a voter's job is to assess a candidate based on her argument, yet the candidate is perceived as communicating nothing more than claptrap, she is likely to warrant criticism.

Subjects applied this information virtue with regard to assessments of the candidates and themselves. Specifically, the ideal candidate does what s/he can do to inform voters. The candidate should be thorough. Some respondents remarked that the ads were good because they gave a good deal of information inside of the time

restrictions. Candidates needed to be believable. This is made apparent in remarks about the trustworthiness of the candidates. One subject remarked that she could not trust Bush because his father lied. Swing voters also valued consistency; several stated that the ads were valuable because the information enabled them to make a record of candidates' claims to which they could hold them. Another remarked that Bush could not be believed because his claims were not consistent with his party's history. Even outside the bounds of this study, this value manifests itself in the language of the campaign. For example, Sen. John McCain traveled through the Republican primaries in a bus named "The Straightalk Express."

By the same token, voters apply the same standards to their own voting performance, assessing their own preparation and reasoning. Whereas the candidate should be candid, subjects' remarks reveal an anxiety about their own obligation to both obtain and utilize this information. While only one respondent described himself as a "committed" voter, none characterized themselves as very knowledgeable. Many commented about their lack of time, ability, resources, and in some cases desire to get the information "needed" to cast a good vote. While these statements assume a sufficient amount of knowledge exists

out there somewhere, none displayed any confidence that they had approached this knowledge level. In short, if a finite amount of data regarding candidates existed, it is increasingly the case that voters are faced with a deficit of time, leaving them incapable of processing this information either well or at all. While Downs (1957) addressed this matter in his discussion of rational voting, Popkin (1991) addressed rational voting more fully for those voters who are without the time or resources to thoroughly process information. The challenge of time availability is a real phenomenon that significantly effects the participation of voters. While voters' ability or desire to pursue and obtain knowledge is limited, the amount of knowledge required to develop a cogently reasoned ballot is not. This gap between available time and perception of available and requisite information results in anxiety for the voter, as identification of the ideal candidate can never be sufficiently determined.

The Best Candidate

The best candidate is a compromise between the ideal candidate who is determined by complete assessment of available information, and other values that replace the value of information when the voter gets frustrated. The

primacy of the value of information is substituted by alternative values that provide the swing voter with ways out when the bad or good knowledge about the available options is balanced. Thus, when a voter is compelled by their voting ethic to choose between "a lesser of two evils," voters need to rely on additional points of reference with which to reason their decision. While all comments assessing candidates were filtered through this logic that values information, the unenthusiastic decisions were based on heuristics with which many of the voters seemed unsatisfied.

Some of the alternative values that emerged from the interviews included self-interest, job, union, personality concerns, or party background. Though these values did not operate to the exclusion of partisan considerations, when party was referenced, it was done so grudgingly. One statement that epitomizes this point was shared by a public school grammar school teacher.

S25: The reason why I chose the candidate I chose again, is I was raised a Democrat. I mean, you never went outside the Democrat. I mean, both of my parents are gone now so I kind of think I'm supposed to carry that over, as dumb as that may seem. And then, being in education, I mean, the

union pushes. You know, so that bottom line when you are going to regist . . . , going to vote, I mean, you've got the NEA card and it's kind of like. I mean it's probably not very smart to say but that's what geared me toward it.

S25: . . . Um, so, it was a bit confusing, but the bottom, when it came down to it, it was like that loyalty, it just. But it does make me want to, next time around, I think I'm going to pay more attention, because I don't think it's, it's as important anymore to be as strict, you know, party per se.

Even when stating that her decision was based on partisan tendencies and other pressures, her language continues to betray a fixation on the value of information. This is apparent when she characterizes this method of reasoning as "dumb," "not very smart," and warranting "more attention" next time around. This reliance on partisanship should not be interpreted as a reliance upon a larger ideology, as she explains that the vote was ultimately due to perceived pressure to vote that way. This same reliance upon self interests constitutes a sentiment shared by many other voters.

Yet, not every voter had a family tradition or a union to rely on to help them vote. Faced with this circumstance swing voters were left with little ground with which to make a judgment unless they relied on their own immediate needs. This appears to be what created dissonance for the previously mentioned teacher. Balancing her Democratic and union loyalties, she made the following response to the Bush spot:

S25: . . . I listened to it, and I listened to it a couple of times because I really wanted to hear what he had to say. Um, and actually, being confused of the two, it really, my confusion was more because I was raised a Democrat and I'm in the union, the teacher's union, so I'm supposed to go Democrat, so my mind is usually set already, I don't pay too much attention. But he actually made me want to listen to him, and what he had to say, which made it, them more interesting because I did like to hear what he had to say.

R: What did it [the Bush ad] mean to you?

S25: Um, to me, it meant he was supporting the elderly. That he was going to take care of the elderly through social security, medical

prescriptions. I mean, that's a real concern, my husband's grandmother is in her 80's and I go and get her medicine for her. And it's incredible, I went one time for 3 medications and it was $300, it was heartbreaking to just, because here's this lady, she just had a little social security check and all that money just has to go.

This is a voter who perceives herself to be a loyal Democrat, and yet Bush's advertisement resonated with her because of personal relevancies. Others make similarly motivated remarks about the spots.

S7: Yes . . . [that is why I voted for Gore] because of the educa . . ., because of the tax breaks he was giving to more, he was aiming more to the middle class throughout most of his campaign. Then you heard all of the tax breaks that Bush was going to give and I, until, like I said, up until the end I didn't even find out that it was for higher class, higher economic levels than it actually was so it wouldn't benefit me anyway.

S19: . . . I thought it was directed towards senior citizens basically. And basically it didn't do that much for me, you know, being in the fire service and everything else. We get a pension

and everything else, so, social security benefits, it doesn't do a whole lot for me.

S21: It wasn't only for people who reached senior citizenship now, but for people who are coming up to be senior citizens. It's for their future also. For me it doesn't matter, because I got a little ways to go yet.

These personal needs then help guide the voter to make the final decision. The swing voter's reticence for relying on these alternative values is evidenced by their reluctance to commit to a candidate until the final moment; in some cases the voters decided in the booth. Surrendering their preoccupation with the ideal candidate who, by definition, is prudently selected following a deliberative and informed process characterized by sound reason, the swing voter utilizes an alternative mode of reasoning, based on alternative values, which enables the voter to make a defensible decision in favor of a "best" candidate.

This process of determining the best candidate is consistent with the arguments of Popkin (1991) who explains that the limits and anxieties faced by voters result in them having to rely on shortcuts in reasoning. He terms this reasoning process "low information rationality" and defines it accordingly:

> This reasoning draws on various information shortcuts and rules of thumb that voters use to obtain and evaluate information and to simplify the process of choosing between candidates. (p. 7)

While there are glaring theoretical difficulties in drawing a distinction between "high" and "low" information reasoning, especially considering the way he defines his terminology, his arguments are no less relevant to this project. The conclusions of this project are consistent with some of Popkin's (1991) arguments, and yet explains more. Specifically, the conclusions developed here explain why people wait until the last minute when "alternative" modes of reasoning are available to them.

The Critical Swing Voter

The final finding is interesting because it counters the common perception that centrist, non-affiliated, and late-deciding voters are disinterested or cynical. This study rejects this perception for four reasons. First, swing voters care enough to vote. If they were cynical they would see no value in the act of voting. Second, as has been noted, the comments and criticisms of swing voters are balanced. Swing voters neither give positive nor negative comments exclusively to either candidate.

Moreover, when negative comments are made about a candidate, it is typically balanced by a positive remark. Based on the discussion above, it is suspected that swing voters behave this way because they feel they are inadequately informed to make conclusive judgments about candidates. Third, swing voters are as critical of themselves and their own knowledge and preparation as they are of the candidates. Contrary to Hart (1999), these voters do not show evidence of feeling clever about politics, enabling them to "tower" over politicians, as Hart states. Instead, swing voters reasonably see themselves as capable of constructively criticizing the informational value of advertisements. Fourth, these voters also marshal a large amount of accurate knowledge about advertisements. A prima facie conclusion drawn from swing voters' reactions is likely to characterize these voters as cynical. To the extent the aforementioned comments about swing voters are accurate, this conclusion warrants reconsideration. Moreover, swing voters' critical comments about politics and political spots reveal a rational and critical attitude versus the attitude of a cynic.

Comments made by swing voters suggest that the process of advertising political candidates is transparent; voters

understand how and why political advertisements are produced and disseminated. Simply because they possess and express this knowledge does not necessarily result in cynicism towards the ads or the political process. They couple remarks about the process of producing spots with fair assessments about the relevance and quality of the information provided. The following comments indicate the knowledge or suspicions swing voters have about the advertising process. Additionally, these remarks fail to support the claims that late-deciders are cynics who are relatively less engaged. Commenting on the Bush spot, the first subject remarks:

S1: Well, it's not bad, they've got the nice PC thing going there.

R: How's that?

S1: Well, you know, they've got like all the different like heights, widths, sexes, genders, races, all that stuff.

These comments are followed by what appear to be cynical commentary about political spots, yet within the same statement he explains that a good voter should try to rely on more and better information.

S1: I find them highly unnecessary I mean people shouldn't vote unless they like study what it is

they are voting for and ads don't do very much. I mean they advertise things and stuff on TV all the time, and that doesn't make what they're selling on TV any better. The same goes for political ads.

These are not the words of someone who has given up: he is not the victim of political malaise. The next individual provides additional explanation of the concerns and methods of political advertisers.

S3: So, I think when they're deciding what to put in a specific ad they try to appeal to a certain age group or a certain type of voter. Um, then try to find out what, you know, appeals to them; what they care about the most, what would affect them most, um, whether it be Texans or, I mean, the elderly, they care more about social security and medicare making sure that they can live a fruitful life without having to worry about financial burdens.

Another remarks about the look of the elderly people in the Bush spot.

S6: Well, I though they were fine. They looked like happy, healthy people and everybody is not that way. It only showed happy people, it didn't show

people that were on life support or in a nursing home or . . .

R: Why do you think that was?

S6: Well, because this is supposed to be an upbeat ad, and that would be a downer. And nobody wants to see anything like that.

Later in the interview she adds:

S6: Well, first of all, they're not, they're not done by people who believe in anything in particular. They're done by ad people who are trying to put the best spin on whatever they can for the candidate. That's why I'm not a fan of political ads.

Another discusses ads at some length.

S7: Advertisers are making them, the people who get paid to make them, make them. Why do they make them the way they do? They make them flashy and quick because that's about the time span that people can handle, the memory, you know, that, for instance in Bush's campaign ad the conviction and what he had to promise, the words were coming up in the screen because that's what they wanted you to look at, they wanted you to focus on the conviction and relate it to him. Do I think that

that's why I think they make anything the way they do, they're going to try to strike something within you, within the core . . .

Another subject shares a similar understanding of the process.

S10: . . . I think they definitely know how to target an audience. They look at their polls, and what, um, groups of voters they are missing and they'll have an ad targeted towards that person.

In addition to targeting audiences, one subject points out that even the phrases are tailored to resonate with audiences.

S12: [When making spots] they're thinking, "Who are we going to target?" Catchy phrases. I mean, Bush really, I mean his was catchy. You know, "no this, and no that, and no way." . . . It was like really well done. You know, that was something that was really like catchy. Gore didn't really have that. Uh, so, I mean, you know, who's the target audience? What's the target topic? You know, what's important, what are the most important topics to that audience, and let's zero in on that and let's give them as much encouragement, you know, that we are going

to do something, or promise that we're going to, you know, consider those topics important and that we're going to do something about them, and, you know, if they need to be corrected.

The following assessment of advertisement production is quite thorough.

S15: I think that there is kind of an equal balance between visuals and audio, that would have to be considered, you know, I think, um, and I think that the ads often, you know, present the image that the, you know, kind of like the most perfect image of the candidate. . . . I kind of feel that the ads can be kind of real telling as to, you know, the tone, or how secure the advertising company is, or the campaign company, or the campaign committee is in their candidate's image. Because they are kind of like, you know, they're like, you know, "We're not going to let that go out if it makes the candidate seem less than perfect." But that's why I thought there was a lot more care taken, I thought, on the Bush spot than on the Gore spot. I thought the Bush spot was obviously trying to change a bad perception, and I thought that was, you know, I thought that

they achieved that. Whereas the Gore spot kind of relied on a feeling that we already had like, you know, Al's a good guy.

Another subject responds to the people in the advertisements, indicating her belief that the people in the spots were deliberately chosen.

S18: [The people] were chosen specifically to represent what he was trying to get across. He was talking about social security, he had older people and affordable medications, and. You know, it was put together well.

R: Could you expand on that and tell me what you think about that?

S18: That it's, they're, politicians are put together down to the color suit they wear by the people that are paid to do that. So, the ads are, as far as I know, they spend a pretty penny on ads to make them look good. To target specific people in certain areas. So, it's, I don't know if an ad ever really sells me, personally. Yeah, he looks strong and confident, but I wouldn't turn around and say, "He's the man," just because of that.

She continues:

S18: Uh, they're scripted. They're planned well in advance. They're, it's down to every detail, I believe it's all planned out. The Gore one had him in a situation where he could very well have been talking in a group addressing a large body. That may have been chosen because of the people that were around him at the time. . . . I truly do think that all that is thought about and planned.

Regardless of her knowledge and criticisms, she finds value in the advertisements.

S18: I think [political spots] are good as far as getting people to know what that candidate is representing in quick brief bits, because sometimes sitting down and reading everything that they are pushing for is just too much for people.

Another subject discusses the value of ads. While he is critical, he is not dismissive of them. Instead, he finds some hypothetical value in the spots.

S21: . . . They are quick and they are brief and I think during the television campaigns they are telling people what they want to hear. So, um, I don't think there are ways of pulling them apart.

Maybe it helps clarify something that you may hear later on, to hear them uh, like the advertisement for the senior citizens.

The following subject addresses the brevity of the ads, remarking that they are carefully designed with time availability in mind, in order to get the most or best information across as quickly as possible.

S23: They probably cut a lot out of it just to try to squeeze as much as possible into it so they can get all the goodness out of it to make them look good as much as possible in a short period, what, 30 seconds or a half minute, or a minute?

Another subject moved the discussion from television spots to political bulk mailers, often referred to as "nuisance mail." She understood how these mailers were targeted, yet wished she could receive more of them.

S24: Um, I don't get enough, um, what do you say, pamphlets on people. Um, like sometimes you get them through the mail. Sometimes, if you appear Democrat they will send you out Democratic, you know, merchandise. And, you know, if you are Republican, the same. You know, um, I think that you really don't know if you want to be a

Republican or a Democrat until you actually get the pamphlets.

R: And you don't mind getting things in the mail?

S24: No really, you know, if I'm interested in it, I'll keep it and read it. If I'm not, then I'll just throw it away. But, um, mostly I do glance at it because it is something that I want to know about, you know, because the election is coming up and you want to know which guy you want to vote for.

Interestingly, the next subject remarks that she believes the advertising producers know how knowledgeable voters are about political advertising production. As a result, she believes the ads are produced with this knowledge.

S28: I think, because I'm a relatively intelligent human being, I'm, I think probably they realize that most of us watching this, most of us realize what they're doing, and they have to take that into consideration. Of course I know what both of these camp, these campaign people are doing, and it's a matter of what he's really telling me. You know, like, I know that Mr. Gore is trying to get all of his demographics in there. And cut through the crap, are you really going to do

> something with education? Is there really going to be a $10,000 tax cut per year for college education, you know, that's what I think.

Regardless of their knowledge and perhaps the attitude that accompanies it, late-deciding voters are the wrong population of voters to characterize as cynics. While they make knowledgeable and critical comments about political advertisements, they also acknowledge the value and place of advertisements in the campaigning process. Their criticisms of ads are quite reasonable, considering their anxiety over both the quality and quantity of information about candidates and their policies.

Chapter 4

A Hermeneutic Examination of the Swing Voter's Horizon

The process of analysis whereby a researcher attempts to explain how meanings are developed by readers is termed philosophical hermeneutics. Mickunas and Stewart's (1990) description of hermeneutics explains that the preunderstandings about the world and how it operates, which make behaviors sensible and reasonable to individuals and others in their culture, constitutes the individual's horizon. Thus, the horizon of the swing voter is both an assembly of the presumptions that they have about politics as well as a description of the historical antecedents which gave rise to them. While the previous chapter described the attitudes of swing voters towards politics and its resultant impact on interpretation of campaign communication, the following is an attempt to outline the historical and cultural circumstances that laid the foundation for these attitudes.

The best understanding of the attitudes of swing voters is not obtained solely by examining the language of the text (written comments and interviews). Any description of an interpretive philosophy is strengthened by a cogent argument explicating its historic situatedness.

Thus, this analysis extends beyond the original text or stimulus and the remarks of respondents to chance an attempt at explaining why the swing voter perspective exists in its current state. It explains why contemporary swing voters engage political spots and, more generally, politics the way they do. Thus, consistent with Gadamer's (1975) approach to hermeneutics, the historical horizon of the swing voter will be described.

Examination of Horizons

Rod Hart (1999) describes the contemporary voter as someone who, assuming a defensive attitude that he describes as "clever," resists being a jaded participant of democracy. The clever voter approaches voting with a great deal of assumptions about what has been said by politicians and about politics and even that which has not yet been uttered. Today's U.S. citizen possesses a "swagger whereby we tower above politics by making it seem beneath us" (p. 5). He explains that the clever citizen feels as though s/he knows a great deal about politics, campaigning, and the many issues of the day.

> To feel clever is to become a political methodologist, an expert on the moves and countermoves of the public sphere. In an electronic age, it means knowing about

> negative advertising and focus groups, about polling statistics and press maneuverings, about soundbites and pancake make-up. It means reacting to changing political circumstances quickly and then predicting the resulting counterreactions. It means going to work each day and speaking of politics like fraternity boys speak of their sexual encounters. (p. 77)

Hart's position is particularly relevant to this study, as a lot of evidence supporting the existence of the attitude Hart describes was available in the data produced in the interviews. Subjects often purported to know a great deal about how ads were produced and why. They seemed eager to share this information, and then use it as grounds for criticism of spots, candidates, and politics in general. It is difficult, however, to characterize these voters as cynics because they do not dismiss politics or the value of involvement: They still voted.

Television is targeted by Hart (1999) as the cause of the cynicism he describes. The electronic age, he explains, is one of political cynicism. Television watchers, he explains, have increasingly become watchers of television; defined by the medium through which they derive nearly all of their political information. Whereas, television increasingly makes politics accessible,

personal, intimate, and strategy oriented, citizens too have adapted by developing mechanisms to help them cope with the voluminous amount of information they are confronted with. This is mostly done by cynically dismissing it.

More in keeping with the findings of this study is Michael Schudson's (1998) analysis. He offers a different perspective on the contemporary voter, maintaining that the burden on the voter has increased to the point that the voter finds it increasingly difficult to cope with both the demands and the options available to him/her. Moreover, voting has changed from an engaging social act into a sterile and antiseptic activity. Today, Schudson (1994) argues:

> We have come to ask more of citizens. Today's views about citizenship come from the Progressives' rationalist and ardently individualist worldview. . . . The practice of citizenship, at least in campaigning and voting, became privatized, more effortful, more cognitive, and a lot less fun. (p. 62)

The voting process has become increasingly dissociated from the society it is meant to impact. Increasingly, it is difficult for voters to realize the impact of their participation. At the same time, voters are asked to make

decisions on a great number of matters, which was not the case earlier in U.S. history. Schudson (2000) puts a fine point on this observation:

> No European country has as many elections, as many elected offices, as complex a maze of overlapping governmental jurisdictions, as the American system. It is simply harder to "read" U.S. politics than the politics of most nations.

Today's voter is not only asked to cast a vote for federal, state, municipal, county government officials, public utility boards, judges and referenda, they are also expected to be able to provide a reasonable rationale for their decisions. It is little wonder why citizens choose not to vote.

Blaming television for citizen apathy is popular in academia. Schudson (1996a) is a bit more skeptical than most when it comes to passing the blame off to mass media. He points out that large reductions in voting percentages began before television arrived in many households. Moreover, during the period of television's most significant impact, 1965-1995, people have not been as cynical and apathetic as many maintain. While people of this period of time are characterized as civicly challenged and televisually dependent, they are responsible for

significant achievements in the advancement of individual civil rights and other large grassroots efforts (Schudson, 1996a).

Television draws a lot of critical attention to itself because the attitudes of many critical voters echo the language and attitudes of television. Yet with increasing demands to perform as voters, it is not entirely surprising that citizens disengage. More interesting, however, is why citizens understand the language of television. Television is not imposing a logic on its audiences. Instead, television and its audiences engage in a discourse where the language of both evolve. It would make little economic sense for television producers to present to audiences something entirely foreign to them, written in a language embedded in assumptions and preconceived notions about politics that audiences did not agree with. Thus, an examination of the historical horizon which gave rise to the ways that both television and citizens reason about politics may shed more light on this issue. Relying on hermeneutics, the following section chances to explain the philosophy that emerged from swing voters' written and oral remarks.

Historical Horizon of Swing Voters

The notion of an interpretive horizon originates from the work of Gadamer's (1975) discussion of hermeneutics. This explanation of the interpretive process describes the prejudgments that swing voters applied to the political advertisements. To start, this is accomplished by bracketing the natural attitude, or the assumption that the way things are is the way they have always been. Because the attitudes and preunderstandings about politics reflected in the commentary of the subjects are situated in history, it is fitting that this analysis examine the history that gave rise to this attitude.

Unlike Spencer's notion of adaptation, the genetic phenomenologist maintains that as cultures develop they accrue developments, instead of shedding old ones. It is upon this principle that Gebser (1949/1985) builds his argument explicating the evolution of human consciousness. Eschewing psychology, Gebser maintains that the way the world is engaged by the individual is largely a product of cultural development. He explains that humanity emerges with an archaic consciousness, which he describes as "a time where the soul is yet dormant, a time of complete nondifferentiation of man and the universe" (p. 43). Then, through a process termed dimensional accrual/dissociation, humans develop increasing dimensions of awareness (Kramer,

1997). These dimensions include awareness of space, time, and ego. At the same time, people become increasingly dissociated or abstracted from the surrounding world, resulting in increased rationalism and decreased emotionalism.

Cultures experience drastic changes when new levels of consciousness unfold. These changes occur after a period of time during which the culture's present mode of consciousness has proven to be deficient. For example, at some point all cultures have undergone a movement from an archaic consciousness to a magic consciousness. With magic consciousness is a rough awareness of the distinction between group and nature. In this mode of awareness the world becomes objectified and thus becomes something for the group to manipulate. Time is not yet conceived of and rational reasoning is a long way off. Once the magic consciousness proves to be deficient in meeting the needs of the group, the group stands poised to unfold a more developed way of engaging the world (Gebser, 1949/1985).

The mode of consciousness preceding our own is termed "mythic." The etiological background of "myth" is mouth (Gebser, 1949/1985). This makes great sense as the mythic consciousness is characterized by the cultural significance of the mouth and the power of the spoken word. This is

evidenced by Eastern and Western art from this period, which emphasizes the mouth to the exclusion of other facial features. It is from the mouth that explanations about the world and its dynamics emanated. Unlike rational people however, the explanations of the mythic era required no empirical basis. Mythic cultures were oral and without the ability to write: People were primarily emotional with explanations couched in terms of good versus evil. Ong (1982) points out important contrasts between these cultures and the rational consciousness we take for granted.

> [A]n oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought. (p. 55)

It is from this mode of consciousness that our present psychic means of engaging the world emerged.

The renaissance marked a significant turning point in the development of European rational thought away from mythicism, especially with regard to methods of governance. Prior to the enlightenment questions regarding ontology, epistemology, and axiology typically incorporated religious

myth. The reign of the Holy Roman Empire constituted a period of deficient mythology, and during this period these myths no longer provided satisfactory answers. Maintaining their control, the church mounted the Counter-Reformation. Mumford (1951) describes this period:

> From the fifteenth century to the seventeenth men lived in an empty world: a world that was daily growing emptier. They said their prayers, they repeated their formulas; they even sought to retrieve the holiness they had lost by resurrecting superstitions they had long abandon: hence the fierceness and hollow fanatacism of the Counter-Reformation, its burning heretics, its persecution of witches, precisely in the midst of the growing enlightenment. (p. 44-45)

On balance with individual reason, religious rituals proved increasingly deficient for solving the problems of the day.

Out of the enlightenment grew the notion of rule by the consent of the governed. No longer bolstered by divine right or endorsement of the Pope, authoritative government schemes increasingly came under scrutiny. Prior to this point in Western history, with the exception of ancient Greece, this could not have been conceived of at a mass level. Thus, according to Gebser (1949/1984), this marked

the evolution of thought from the mythic to the mental/rational perspective. Mumford (1963) explains the characteristics of the mental/rational mindset. Essentially, modern thought is constituted by abstract thought of time, space, matter, and people. Time became abstract and measurable. Space was an obstruction to be conquered. The once living and interconnected earth became subdivided into various matters with exploitable properties. Even the person became abstracted, considered inherently indistinguishable and interchangable. The identity of the rational human is liberated from group, tribe, or nation. With that, however, Kramer (1997) further explains the effect that the abstracted notion of the human had on the democratic conception of the individual:

> [I]n the perspectival [mental/rational] world identity is arbitrarily defined by legal code so that one can be a United States citizen with no regard to race, color, creed, or even language. . . . Democracy presumes a universe of interchangeable, equal units that have no inherent qualities of differentiation. (p. xiv)

Thus, individual ego and human will become valued over all else as deference to religious stories and myths becomes decreasingly significant.

With these developments came the rise of rationality or abstract thinking. Rationality is a form of reductionistic thinking whereby the individual subdivides problems into their constituent parts until no more subdividing is possible. By understanding what constitutes problems a person can know their antecedents and make predictions. Characterizing rationality is the following comment by Leibniz written in 1714, "When a truth is necessary, the reason for it can be found by analysis, by resolving it into simpler ideas and truths until we arrive at the basic ones" (as cited in Woolhouse & Francks, 1998; p. 272). Either by empirical observation or by reflection and reason, this process is one that allows the mind to access the "determinable laws of nature."

The increasing significance of the individual that accompanied the Western mental/rational culture led to an increased interest in the individual rights and living conditions. Evidence of such a shift is found in the growing significance of utilitarianism during the times of the renaissance and enlightenment (Mill, 1975). As a result, Mumford (1951) explains, "Instead of justifying

their existence by reason of tradition and custom, the institutions of society were forced to justify themselves by their actual use" (p. 177). While Christianity may have originated the concept of human equality, attempts to realize human equality on earth were the undoing of Christian control of inter and intra-state affairs. The growing popularity of the concepts of utility and individual equality contributed to development of democracy. Within democracy all people are considered equally capable of determining the overall utility of present and future courses of government action.

Out of these cultural developments arose a democratic ethic which has continued to shape and provide the impetus for reforms to contemporary manifestations of democracy. These developments follow predictable trends, as they are grounded in the principles derived from the mental/rational consciousness. These principles have given shape to democracies from their dawning. Central to these principles is the valuing of individual over group, as individuals have equal access, through reason and reflection, to universal principles and truth.

> Let any human being have enough information and exert enough thought upon any question, and the result will be that he will arrive at a certain definite

> conclusion, which is the same that any other mind will reach under sufficiently favorable circumstances. (Peirce 1946 as cited in Lippman)

Thus, to function properly, democracies must ensure that citizens have enough information and can reasonably apply it. These principles become, in part, the guiding ethics for democracy. These ethics are evidenced in Nilsen's (1958) description of the concept of "significant choice." To ensure that just choices are made by democratic participants, the values of individualism, rationality, and self-determination must be upheld. According to Nilsen's (1958) description of the best choice:

> It includes knowledge of various alternatives and the possible long- and short- term consequences of each. It includes awareness of the motivations of those who want to influence, the values they serve, the goals they seek. (p. 45)

According to Nilsen, (1958) this ethic functions as follows:

> If there is free and unhampered expression of opinion, the many competing interests, by presenting their respective views and arguments and criticizing others, will provide the kind of information and critical appraisal that will make possible for the listeners

> the most constructive choices. This 'marketplace of ideas' is fundamental to a democratic society. (p. 53-54)

This, of course is an ideal. To realize this ideal, typical efforts at government and election reform have concentrated on how government and institutions disallow the proper functioning of democracy. Unfortunately, this is done at the expense of attention to the limits of voters to perform as well as they are required to.

Present Western governmental traditions could not have been conceived without the development of ego or trust in reason and empirical investigation. While these concepts empowered cultures to realize new methods of governance other than monarchies or aristocracies, they have also shaped current democratic values that are contributing to the abstract and burdensome voting process and excessive anxieties associated with "correct" decision making.

1900's Voting Developments.

Use of the word "burdonsome" with regard to contemporary voting responsibilities is not intended to communicate a preference for prior methods of governance or voting. Instead, it is meant to highlight the growing expectations voters are faced with at the voting place.

Present voting conventions, which are perfectly consistent with the values of democracy, would have been completely foreign to the founders of this nation. Schudson (2000) argues this point:

> Today's mantra that the "informed citizen" is the foundation of effective democracy was not a central part of the nation's founding vision. It is largely the creation of late-19th-century Mugwump and Progressive reformers . . . (p. 16-17)

Undoubtedly, the developments of the Progressive movement were positive ones in helping counter corruption, however, it is equally undeniable that these changes have made the act of voting something different altogether. In short, each time politics and voting were changed to make elections more democratic, more responsibility was asked of the average voter.

Schudson (1994) describes the stark contrast between contemporary voting and early voting in the United States. Many of the assumptions about the nature of voting are based on the inaccurate assumption that voting is simply defined as a private anonymous affair. "The individuality and jealously guarded privacy of voting today contrasts dramatically with the *viva voce* process of eighteenth century Virginia or the colorful party ticket voting of the

nineteenth century" (p. 61). At the founding of this nation enfranchised people publicly voted and participated in parades. Travelling to vote was an occasion (Schudson, 1998). Today, the procedure is purely an abstracted measurement of will.

Many of voting's characteristics which we take for granted today are the products of reforms that took place between 1865 and 1920. At the turn of the 19th century, political parties did not rely on private contributions, as we think of them today, to operate. The political machine was run by assessments and patronage. People who were given government jobs knew that their continued employment was contingent upon the success of party candidates. For this reason, party faithfuls continued to work for campaigns and provided money to the party through assessments from their incomes. In 1877, President Hayes signed an Executive Order enforcing anti-political assessment legislation, threatening to enforce existent laws that outlawed involuntary garnishing of wages by political parties. Following the shooting of President Garfield by a disgruntled government job seeker, President Chester Allen Arthur signed the Pendleton Act of 1883, requiring the use of competitive exams for government job placement (Schudson, 1998). Schudson (1998) argues that

this type of legislation weakened parties and weakened U.S. democracy, "In the lingering demise of patronage, the musculature of American democracy weakened, and the flesh that made the constitutional bones move in synchrony, if only in certain directions, went slack" (p. 155). Without patronage, parties had a more difficult time motivating people to participate in the electoral process.

While Jim Crow laws requiring reading and intelligence tests for voting privileges appear today to be a repugnant and disenfranchising ploy, these types of tests were originally suffrage reforms intended to extend the right to vote. During the turn of the 19th century the Mugwumps were challenging the notion of the natural right to vote, which limited voting to those who had inherent qualities (e.g., race, sex, property), maintaining that people who were morally fit and literate should be enabled to vote. Ability to vote was determined with a test (Schudson, 1998). Thus, in some states the privilege of voting was extended from land owning white men to white men with passing scores. The assumption that "All men are created equal" has always meant that any citizen over the age of 18 should be allowed to vote is inaccurate. It is a product of an evolving democratic system.

Emphasis on direct popular voting also increased during the turn of the century. The seventeenth amendment required the direct election of senators by popular vote (Schudson, 1998). States also began requiring direct primaries. Both of these reforms made parties less important in the political process by putting more power of choice into the hands of the individual voter. Primary reforms continue today, and the same trend towards increased voter power characterizes these movements. In 1969, the McGovern-Fraser Commission, a reform of the Democratic party, required that primary and caucus delegates were required to support the candidate they swore allegiance to. The result was to strip the power to nominate presidential candidates from party leadership and hand it directly to the electorate (Patterson, 1994). Thomas Patterson (1994) argues that this required more from the rank and file partisans than they were capable of doing well: "The voters' problem is one of overload" (p. 43). He continues:

> The presidential election system places extraordinary demands on voters . . . There was a time when America's policymakers understood that the voters should not be assigned this type of election decision, even if they were able to make it. Citizens are not

> Aristotles who fill their time studying politics. (p. 45)

Despite the challenges faced by voters to make a sound and reasoned decision, they still vote.

When voters do cast ballots, however, the way the vote is performed is largely different than it was 100 years ago. Starting in 1888, states began to use the anonymous Australian-ballot (Schudson, 1998; p. 169). General presumption today maintains that voting is naturally an anonymous activity, and yet it is not only a relatively recent development in the history of voting, but champions of democracy argued against the Australian-ballot. While the reforms that brought about the utilization of the Australian-ballot were intended to counter influence at the polls, the voting process became even more sterile as the single most important act of civic duty retreated into the voting booth. With this change, voting became a celebration of the private individual making rational choices about policy preferences, instead of an opportunity to express party affiliation. As the institution became a more pure manifestation of democracy, the motivating factors which made it run were being taken away. "Response" was taken out of voter "response-ability," just as that responsibility was increasing.

As the democratic ethics of individuality, rationality, and self-determination are institutionalized, an increasing amount of responsibility is passed from government and private institutions to the voter. With the increased number of offices and candidates available to vote for and the increasing frequency of elections, the voter is required to know a great deal in order to cast a reasonable vote. Yet, an effect of exchanging increased individual responsibilities for a weaker party system is what voters would consider the lack of a legitimate frame of reference to make judgments about candidates. In The Power of News, Schudson (1996b) draws a distinction between the "Informational Citizen" and the "Informed Citizen." Both citizens come equipped with a great amount of factual knowledge; to be without information would be difficult in today's age of instant information and multiple news channels on television and the radio. The distinction lies in that the informed citizen has a developed set of interests. These interests allow the citizen to marshal information in support of his/her ideas. It is difficult to place the blame for political disinterest squarely on media sources when the values built into the system of governance appear to foster the attitudes of today's citizen. These attitudes can lead to disengagement, or in

the case of swing-voters, feelings of doubt, frustration, and inadequacy.

Summary

This analysis is intended to be non-evaluative. There is no desire to hearken back to the 1800's. The changes to the election system which have been noted here were made for good reasons, namely to overcome forms of political corruption. Yet, as has been noted, the guiding principles for these reforms have progressed in one direction which has ultimately led to increased voter responsibility. Whether it is the weakening of parties, the increase in available information, the growth of the ballot choices, or the anonymity of the voting process, the job of the voter has become increasingly daunting. The comments made by swing voters in this study fit with the observations made above. While they have the motivation to vote, they are not quite sure who to vote for. This is less a lack of interest than it is a self-application of the same democratic ideals which have reshaped U.S. voting procedure: Swing voters want to make the right choice, free from external influences like political parties. The combination of the growth of available information and the

eschewing of partisan allegiance leaves swing voters well informed and without ground for judgment.

How swing voters interpret political advertisements is a function of these considerations. Swing voters want to vote, and they want to vote well. But when they encounter information, there is little framework in which to organize it. Consistent with Hart (1999) it is maintained that swing voters do produce cynical-seeming remarks with regard to advertisements. Unexplained by Hart is why these voters couple their cynicisms with positive statements about the value of the ads. Hart's comments are just part of the story, for swing voters are not political cynics. Their comments are not born out of disdain for politics, or else swing voters would not vote. Instead, politics has become more demanding and less fun.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Swing voters were of particular significance in this last presidential election. Their population was sizable and influential. Unlike past presidential elections, as election day drew closer more states were categorized as undecided (Ceasar & Bush, 2000). This makes sense considering the size of the swing voting population. Post election surveys showed that 11 percent of voters in the 2000 presidential election made up their minds in the last 3 days (Ceasar & Bush, 2000). Considering the election was decided by a handful of votes in several states, that proportion is significant. Because of its size, campaign strategies were shaped to address this group. Gore is said to have developed his campaign strategy around the presumption that the group of voters most turned off by President Clinton were swing voters in the states he needed most, so he figured he had to devote a significant amount of time and effort in these states (Crotty, 2000). Though he lost the election, Gore's strategy may have worked considering swing voters broke in Gore's favor 48 percent to Bush's 45 percent ("A Look at the Polls", November 8, 2000). Because of the attention given these people by

campaigns, it is only fitting that academics understand who they are.

Attempts at describing swing voters that simply position them "between" Republicans and Democrats fail to do this group justice. It simply suggests that their voting decisions are a product of a blend of two philosophies. Moreover, to conclude that these people are lazy, disinterested, or turned off by politics is premature, to say the least. Given the outcomes of this project, it is accurate to state that these voters appear to be more "meta-partisan" or as seeing themselves as transcending the biases of traditional politics. Shedding these biases enables them to realize the values of the ideal rational voter.

To become the ideal rational voter, however, is a quixotic task because no one can ever know enough to make a perfect decision. The notion that a "right" decision for an ideal candidate can be made is a myth premised on the modern/rational assumption that truths are determinable. Voters' efforts to unveil the right decision are complicated by the constant barrage of information they are confronted with as well as the severe time limitations they are faced with. Contemporary voters receive information from television, radio, magazines, newspapers, email,

pagers, and cell-phones. In addition to these demands, voters are increasingly ill-equipped to process this information, as they come unarmed with little framework into which they can integrate this data. As a result, voting in the United States has become an increasingly rational and frustrating task.

In light of the conclusions drawn in this study, the following discussion addresses several of the issues raised in the review of literature, the cultural implications of the attitudes evidenced among swing voters, limitations faced by this project, as well as ideas for future research spawned by these outcomes.

Discussion

As was mentioned in the first chapter, efforts to define "swing voter" have been neglected by scholars, despite their central role in campaign efforts. Given their centrality in the strategy of presidential campaigns and their unique responses to political spots, it is very surprising more attention is not paid to who constitutes audience when political advertising research is conducted. The results of this study give reason to question the validity of effects research conclusions when subject samples are assembled with little attention to voter

history or experience. Nevertheless, the vague references to this population that pepper advertising and voting research required this project to operationalize the construct from the ideas that were consistent among the scholars who have approached this issue. Essentially, this project defines swing voters as late-deciders, based on the reasoning that if they could not make up their minds then they were still considering, or swinging between, options. It is maintained here that one of the strengths of this project is that it not only addresses the topic of swing voters, but it offers an understanding into who they are and what attitudes define them as a group.

Political campaign specialists do not appear to be concerned over proper nomenclature. Put simply, they know this group is out there, and they know they have to persuade them, almost at the cost of paying no attention to other voters. Jamieson (2000) addresses this point well:

> Candidates spend their greatest energy trying to persuade these initially undecided voter. It is axiomatic among campaign professionals that presidential races involve a 40-40-20 equation: Forty percent of the people will always vote for your party, 40 percent will never vote for your party, and the remaining 20 percent are up for grabs. (p. 5)

Thus almost all advertisements like those used in this project are produced with this group in mind.

Another issue addressed in the first chapter dealt with political advertising culture. Specifically, it was asked if swing voters develop ways of coping with political advertisements. Mills (2001) mentioned that individuals are constantly bombarded by efforts to compete for their minds. Advertisers, he explains, are constantly devising ways to grab attention. While remarks about the constancy of political advertisements surfaced in the data, they gave no reason to believe that they had developed any mechanism for coping with these ads other than to change the channel. Schuessler (2000) argued that advertisements tend to take on a broadly-cast message that attempts to be "all-things-to-all-people" (p. 87-88). Yet, respondents in this study remarked about the narrowcasting of remarks. The outcomes of this project might suggest that making political messages vague could be wasteful, as this population seemed to be looking for information that related directly to them. More interesting are outcomes that support Schuessler's (2000) contention that the mass marketing of candidates helps create a common knowledge- based logic. This logic leads voters to consider the fact that others are viewing the same ad or receiving the same information.

Voters react to this knowledge. Comments made by subjects support this contention, as there was a presumption in the language of this sample that indicated an awareness of who ads were for, how they worked, and how well they would work. Though they often remarked about the immediate benefits of the candidates' proposals, they tended to discuss the campaign like it was a chess game. Finally, Henry (1965) maintains that the hyperbolic claims and proposals produced by campaigns can cause consumers to lose track of real needs. While he was specifically discussing product advertising, there was no reason to believe that advertising candidates would have no less effect. Nevertheless, the critical tendencies of swing voters seems to protect them from candidates' exaggerated claims.

The most interesting issue addressed in the review of literature pertained to the opposing characterizations of swing voters that have been proffered by various academics. While some argue that swing voters' lack of partisan prejudice indicates a laziness and a lack of involvement, others argue that this is a sign that they are more thoughtful, independent, and involved. Results provide no reason to believe that the swing voters in this study were either more or less involved than the average partisan voter. Nevertheless, there was no evidence suggesting that

swing voters were less involved. Their remarks evidenced a conscientiousness about the campaign, the issues, and the candidates. This would hardly be the characteristics of a lazy and disinterested crowd.

Instead, the results give rise to the question of whether this dichotomy is a false one. Perhaps swing voters are more seemingly disengaged while relatively more or equally (relative to partisans) concerned and involved in the process of determining their vote. The results of this project give reason to conflate both of these positions. Displays of involvement (e.g., argument, campaign involvement, early decision making) may provide poor measure of the cognitive involvement of the voter. These results show swing voters as very concerned about election outcomes and desirous of the information that might empower them to make a sound decision. Kramer's (1997) dimensional accrual/dissociation theory offers theoretical ground to support this conclusion. He argues that as consciousness develops due to the accrual of dimensional awarenesses, as Gebser (1949) describes in chapter 4, individuals become more distanced from the concrete world as their thoughts increasingly dwell in the abstract. This distanciation manifests itself as a reduction in emotionalism. Thus, it can be reasoned that

as individuals become more rational they become decreasingly emotional. This theory both explains away the dichotomy between disinterested and more increasingly rational swing voters, and it helps make sense of the results of this project.

Implications

The implications of this project are sizable. First, the conclusions of this study support the argument by Schwartz (1973) that the messages of the advertisements are intended to resonate with voters. More specifically, the hot-button issues that are salient among undecided voters are studied by advertisers. Advertisers take these conclusions and design advertisements that awake potent anxieties in the voter. Swing voters in this study showed a preference for advertisements that related directly to them, and did not have much to say about advertisements that did not. Moreover, swing voters rarely assessed the greater good of the proposals that did not apply to them. Thus, even though they were being given issue information, it was shown that they had a relatively smaller propensity to consider its merits if they failed to see themselves benefiting from it.

This conclusion is an important one, as Schwartz (1973) is often overlooked in political advertising research. For the purposes of conducting effects research, advertisements used as stimuli are treated generically with little attention paid to the message and its specific relevance to the viewers. Moreover, the distinction between image and issue advertisements collapses in this study. Arguably, the advertisements used in this study would be categorized as issue advertisements, meaning that they deal primarily with issue oriented material instead of explicit treatment of candidate image (Kaid, 1991). Nevertheless, the advertisements with the most perceived relevance seemed to resonate with subjects and elicit the most emotive responses. Participants shared stories about the limits and challenges of social security, medicare, and college expenses. With just a couple of exceptions, there was little actual factual assessment of the ads' claims. One subject criticized the Gore advertisement for failing to explain the meaning of his proposed $10,000 education tax deduction while another identifies a contradiction in Bush's spot. This is the type of response expected from a rational voter, yet it was rare among those interviewed.

Second, if the population of swing voters is growing as political parties become less popular, then the results

of this study can be cause for concern. If examined from the perspective of an ideologue, the philosophy of swing voters is disconcerting because they demonstrate no concern for systemic correctives. More specifically, there was little evidence of concern among swing voters for a greater good. Instead, they were voting based on self-interests. And yet, this type of participation is promoted by cultural messages like the "Rock the Vote," and "Get out the Vote" efforts that encourage citizens to vote but fail to offer them arguments for whom to vote. Given these messages, it is not surprising to see their ambivalence over basic issues including the importance of character and size and role of government (Frankovic & McDermott, 2001). Voters in this last election could not make up their minds, were often unwilling to choose sides, and were likely to waver on fundamental and general matters of governance.

For as low as voter participation numbers are (Hart 1999), those numbers appear to produce an exaggerated impression of the actual willingness of voters to take positions on issues. Henry (1965) argues that our modern culture has developed in a way that devalues the interests of humans by emphasizing the importance of institutions and anxieties that do not benefit us, such as expansiveness, competitiveness, and achievement. Often, we seek to

accomplish these goals at the expense of our own well being. Henry (1965) would likely argue that the observations about swing voters' ambivalence about taking positions is consistent with the attitudes necessary for a successful capitalistic system.

> Most people are not obsessive truth seekers; they do not yearn to get to the bottom of things; they are willing to let absurd or merely ambiguous statements pass. And this undemandingness that does not insist that the world stand up and prove that it is real, this air of relaxed wooly-mindedness, is a necessary condition for the development of the revolutionary mode of thought . . . called *pecuniary philosophy*. (p. 49)

According to this philosophy, consumers do not think exaggerated advertisements are lies because they have been conditioned to know that exaggeration is just part of the language of advertising. Advertisers do not want consumers being concerned about the actual and determinable differences between products because, as Henry (1965) would maintain, there typically is very little. Once the consumer will dismiss the measurable differences between products, they are more likely to equally consider the non-substantive characteristics associated with the product.

Application of this principle to the political sphere produces some reasonable concerns. From a critical perspective, the swing voter pulls politics toward the center, effectively acting as a check against ideology. The act of pulling politics to the center is not constituted by an effort by undecided voters to moderate political ideologies per se. Instead, it is more accurate to state that politicians push their politics to the middle to avoid offending people who will vote but still have not decided for whom or why. Though they demand relatively little of candidates, in comparison to partisan voters, they receive the greatest share of attention. Free of an ideology recognizable on the political spectrum, it is difficult for politicians to discern what formula of statements or policies is capable of wooing this crowd without abandoning their base. To remain palatable to the center, the parties struggle from within, trying to reconcile the need to win elections with ideological concerns. Significant change becomes nearly impossible in this milieu where any position is considered partisan, and therefore a product of undue bias. Although centrist political movements function to moderate politics in all democracies, the center in the U.S. is growing. With this

growth, it is argued, follows the decreased capacity to actualize change through government when it is needed.

Limitations

The biggest challenge to this study was faced early on in the interviewing stage. It became difficult to elicit comments about the advertisements. Subjects wanted to write down a synopsis of the spoken message of the advertisements. It was only through a process of developing the interviews that both quantitatively and qualitatively more information was obtained. This process started with frustration, as the expectations of the researcher were violated by subjects who failed to understand what responses he wanted. Recognizing this as a limitation of the research design and the researcher, changes were made to give some control of the study over to the subjects. It needed to be acknowledged that the remarks subjects were making were elicited by the advertisements. Either subjects assumed an attitude towards the spots wherein they held low informational expectations during the viewing or subjects simply found very little information to respond to once they did view the ads. Perhaps the meanings of the spots seemed intuitive to them, thus there was little left for them to

do but talk about politics. The ensuing discussions allowed participants to reveal their reactions to political spots as part of presidential politics in general. Yet, the method seemed to lend itself to subjects' cognitive reactions to the advertisements.

Furthermore, election research suggests that voters tend to rely on their assessments of the incumbent candidate to make their decisions (Iyengar and Petrocik, 2000). If incumbent assessment plays a significant role in the decision making of undecided voters, then this project did not have an opportunity to measure the role of incumbent assessment in the overall decision making process. The results of this project reflect swing voter decision making during open seat presidential elections. As such, it is only part of the story and would require additional research to help validate or amend the conclusions drawn here.

Future Research

As a qualitative study, this project should serve to spawn new research. Provided that the conclusions of this study are heuristic and valid, it should provide the stepping stone to further understanding of who swing voters are and what their impact will be for future elections.

Answering these questions is no quick task, however, and progress needs to be achieved incrementally. Five areas of future research are recommended as logical extensions of the conclusions presented here.

First, and most important, it would have benefited this project if the notion of "cynicism" had been more fully developed by previous researchers. Similar to the situation with voting research, scholars examining the phenomenon of cynicism have made little effort to define it. Hart (1999) offers very little: The context of his book Seducing America suggests that cynics are predisposed towards a conclusion of disbelief in politics and politicians. Nevertheless, the lack of definition invites questions about the clarity in distinction between cynicism and criticism. Political communication research could benefit from a more thorough understanding of this construct.

Second, Hart's (1999) argument that television has influenced the attitudes of voters is a compelling one. Though the arguments outlined here suggest that his contention addresses only part of the phenomenon of discontented voters, there is room for additional exploration. First, while a relationship may exist, there is no reason to believe that it is causal in nature. If

there is a direct relationship between television viewing and voter discontent, evidence to support this claim should be found. One proposal is to study and compare the attitudes of generations that grew up with television and those that did not. A study like this would be likely to face some challenges. Primarily, senior citizens are known to be more politically active, and there is no reason to believe that this is a function or not of their belonging to a television cohort. Nevertheless, one would never know without initiating research.

One limitation of this project is that it does not have strong ground with which to draw comparison between swing voters and partisan voters. Criticisms that the attitudes outlined in the project are not characteristic of swing voters will be hard to defend against. The validity of these claims can be bolstered with comparative research. One point of future comparison that seems to naturally emerge from this project pertains to the anxiety that swing voters are believed to experience as a result of their attempts to prepare and formulate voting decisions. A research design incorporating comparisons of the general voting experiences, or more specifically, the voting anxieties or swing voters' and partisan voters' would make a valuable project.

Another limitation of this project provides direction for future research of the swing voter phenomenon. Subjects' comments appear to indicate that swing voters produce very linear and cognitively derived reactions to these advertisements. They comment on their reasons, thoughtful reactions, and struggle over choice. Yet, political advertising research as well as comments by campaign specialists make clear that the affective impact of advertisements is an important, if not the most significant, aspect of political spots. Unfortunately, it appears that the method used here may have limited the ability to assess the emotive reactions to the spots. Future research that examines emotive responses to advertisements by swing voters may further help expand our understanding of this part of the electorate.

Finally, Pomper (2001) explains that voters tend to size up elections by assessing the performance of the incumbent. In this case, there was no incumbant. Yet, an incumbent exists in nearly half of presidential elections. In the event that incumbent assessment would supercede the values outlined in this study as a decision making heuristic, it would be a challenge to this study. This provides an excellent option for future research. Future elections will present these circumstances, at which time a

study similar to this one can be conducted to examine what role job assessment plays in the decision making process of swing voters.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your race?
   a. White
   b. Black
   c. Asian
   d. Other or mixed
   e. Don't know

2. What is your sex?
   a. Male
   b. Female

3. What is your age?

   _____

4. In 1999, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes?
   a. Less than $10,000
   b. $10,000 to under $20,000
   c. $20,000 to under $30,000
   d. $30,000 to under $40,000
   e. $40,000 to under $50,000
   f. $50,000 to under $75,000
   g. $75,000 to under $100,000
   h. $100,000 or more
   i. Don't know

5. What is the last grade or class that you completed in school?

a. None, or grade 1-8
b. High school incomplete (Grades 9-11)
c. High school graduate (Grade 12 or GED certificate)
d. Business, technical, or vocational school after high school
e. Some college, no 4-year degree
f. College graduate (B.S., B.A., or other 4-year degree)
g. Post-graduate (e.g., toward Masters degree, Ph.D., law, medical school)
h. Don't know

6. What is your religious preference?

a. Protestant/Baptist/Christian/Episcopal/Jehovah's Witness
b. Roman Catholic
c. Jewish
d. Mormon (includes Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)
e. Orthodox Church (Greek or Russian)
f. Islam/Muslim
g. Other religion
h. No religion, atheist

7. Are you married, divorced, separated, widowed, or never been married?

a. Married
b. Divorced
c. Separated
d. Widowed
e. Never been married
f. Don't know

8. Are you, yourself, of hispanic origin or descent, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some other Spanish background.

a. Yes
b. No
c. Don't know

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

1. What did the first political advertisement mean?
    a. What are they trying to do with this advertisement?
    b. What do you think of the advertisement?
    c. What do you think about the people in the spot?
2. What did the second political advertisement mean?\
    a. What are they trying to do with this advertisement?
    b. What do you think of the advertisement?
    c. What do you think about the people in the spot?
3. Why did you ultimately choose the candidate you voted for in the last election?
4. How do you describe yourself as a voter?
    a. How do you prepare to vote?
    b. When did you start paying attention?
5. Why did you wait so long to decide who to vote for?
6. Could you describe what role political advertisements play in your decision making?
7. Describe what you think of political advertisements in general?
8. Could you describe any typical reactions or thoughts you have when you see political advertisements?
9. What considerations do you believe go into producing advertisements like these? How are they made?
10. Some say swing voters were waiting for last minute events to make their choice obvious. What do you think of that?

Appendix C

Screening Questions

1. Did you vote in the last presidential election (November, 2000).
2. Did you vote for any of the presidential candidates.
3. How soon before the election were you certain which presidential candidate you were going to vote for?
4. Were you a registered voter during past presidential elections?
   (If "Yes" ask question 5-A)
   (If "No" ask question 5-B)
5. A) Have you voted for presidential candidates from different parties in past elections?
   B) Do you believe you will vote consistently for one party or could your candidate preference change depending more on who that candidate is than on what party philosophy ho or she has?

Appendix D INFORMED CONSENT FORM

For research being conducted under the auspices of the University of Oklahoma

Introduction:

The purpose of this form is to document that you understand the project you are participating in. Specifically, this means that you are aware of what is being asked of you and that you have willfully chosen to participate. Involvement in the following study assumes that you voted in the 2000 presidential election. This project is being conducted to better understand how individuals interpret political advertisements. The study is titled:

Swing Voters: A Hermeneutic Analysis of Swing Voter's Interpretations of 2000 Presidential Campaign Spots.

The sponsor of this project is Dr. Larry Wieder. The principal investigator is Philip Dalton.

Description of the Study:

Of interest to this project is the meanings that viewers attach to presidential campaign advertisements. There is reason to believe that people who produce presidential campaign advertisements target them at specific audiences. During interviews following the viewing of political spots, this projects intends to learn what a variety of people think these advertisements mean. Analysis of similarities and differences found in these meanings may help shed light on how audiences develop meanings and how advertisement producers may be tailoring these spots to audiences.

Potential Risks and Benefits of Participation

Risks: There are no reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts for the person involved in this project, except perhaps, the inconvenience of participating. Under some circumstances, the researcher may contact a subject again to follow up on a point. However, participation is always voluntary and you always reserve the right at any time to refuse participation.

Benefits: This project offers the informant an opportunity to reflect on the political advertisements and issues that were important during the 2000 presidential election. The project may help raise awareness of issues, foster civic involvement, and allow the subject to develop a more inquisitive perspective toward advertising and politics.

Moreover, the conclusions drawn from this study will help develop a more thorough understanding of the meanings given to political advertisements and more fully explain what occurs when viewers engage political spots. This knowledge may enable researchers to identify or speculate about future problems and solutions in the voter decision-making process.

Conditions of Participation

1) To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older.
2) You must have voted for a presidential candidate in the 2000 presidential election.
3) You must be aware that your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.
4) You must be aware that interviews will be videotaped. Segments of interview transcripts may result in publication. Videos and interview notes will be made available for analysis by others upon request for purposes of checking validity of results. Participant identity will be protected: Identifying information will not be provided to those requesting access to archived video.

Confidentiality

Your confidentiality is ensured. Though names will be associated with this project during the data collection stage to enable the researcher to contact participants for points of clarification, record of names will be destroyed prior to data analysis. Informants will only be contacted if there is a need, unforeseen during the initial interview, to clarify or follow up on an earlier response. After this point, before the results of the study are written and published, all identifying information will be destroyed. Destruction of this information ensures that archived data (videotapes, survey data, and notes) cannot be linked to any participant.

Videotaping Research Activities

Interview information will be videotaped. **You reserve the right to refuse to allow such taping without penalty or prejudice.**

Contacts for Questions about your Rights.

1) To contact the primary researcher with any questions regarding this project, Philip Dalton can be reached at 630-841-5254.
2) To contact the faculty sponsor of this project, Dr. Wieder can be reached at 405-325-3111.
3) To contact someone regarding your rights as a research participant, the University of Oklahoma Office of Research Administration can be reached at 405-325-4757.

Signed Authorization

I hereby agree to participate in the above-described research. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Yes, I agree to allow my interview to be videotaped.

No, I do not allow my interview to be videotaped.

Signature: **Date:**

_____/_____

Appendix E



The University of Oklahoma

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

June 11, 2001

Mr. Philip D. Dalton
6186 Pinewood Ct #103
Willowbrook IL 60514

Dear Mr. Dalton:

Your research application, "Swing Voters: A Hermeneutic Analysis of Swing Voters' Interpretations of 2000 Presidential Campaign Spots," has been reviewed according to the policies of the Institutional Review Board chaired by Dr. E. Laurette Taylor and found to be exempt from the requirements for full board review. Your project is approved under the regulations of the University of Oklahoma - Norman Campus Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research Activities.

Should you wish to deviate from the described protocol, you must notify me and obtain prior approval from the Board for the changes. If the research is to extend beyond 12 months, you must contact this office, in writing, noting any changes or revisions in the protocol and/or informed consent form, and request an extension of this ruling.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely yours,

Susan Wyatt Sedwick

Susan Wyatt Sedwick, Ph.D.
Administrative Officer
Institutional Review Board

SWS:pw
FY01-379

cc: Dr. E. Laurette Taylor, Chair, Institutional Review Board
Dr. D. L. Wieder, Communication

1000 Asp Avenue, Suite 314, Norman, Oklahoma 73019-0430 PHONE: (405) 325-4757 FAX: (405) 325-6029

Appendix F

Transaction Writing Material

Subject #_____

Directions:

1) Watch the following advertisement.
2) Stop the advertisement what it is over.
3) Answer the following three questions. **Write as much as you want…take your time.**
4) You may rewind the video if you like to watch it as many times as you like.
5) Once the first video is through, repeat these directions for the second video.

1. What do you think the advertisement means?

2. What is your reaction to the advertisement? How do you feel about it?

3. What are the most important parts of the advertisement?

4A) How did the advertisement make you feel about the candidate, George Bush?

4B) How did the advertisement make you feel about the candidate, Al Gore?

Appendix G

Advertisement Transcripts

Bush Spot: "No Changes/No Reductions"

Bush: We will strengthen social security and Medicare for the greatest generation and for generations to come.	Image: Several seniors shown in succession against white backdrop. Fades into George W. Bush speaking.
	Text: Governor George W. Bush
Bush: I believe great decisions are made with care.	Image: Fade back to Governor George W. Bush speaking.
	Text: Care
Bush: Made with conviction.	Text: Conviction
Bush: We will make prescription drugs available and affordable for every senior who needs them.	Image: Senior woman getting blood pressure taken. Fades back to Governor George W. Bush speaking.
	Text: Available prescription drugs.
	Text: Affordable prescription drugs.
Bush: You earned your benefits. You made your plans. And President George W. Bush will keep the promise of social security, no changes, no reductions, no way.	Image: Senior citizen playing softball.
	Image: Seniors loading mobile home.
	Text: Protect and strengthen social security.
	Image: Fade back to Governor George W. Bush.
	Text: Keep the promise.
	Text: Bush/Cheney 2000

Gore spot: "College"

Voice: Big corporations get a tax write off for education or training for their high paid executives.	Image: Executive in board meeting. Image: Executive making power-point presentation.
Voice: But for hard working middle class families you don't get enough help to afford your kids' college tuition.	Image: Mother helping daughter with computer. Image: Two graduates in gowns walking outdoors with diplomas.
Voice: Al Gore understands middle class families need help.	Image: Al Gore talking in a school assembly. Image: Students smiling. Image: Student studying in library.
Voice: $10,000 of college tuition tax deductible every year to help middle class families send their kids to college.	Text: The Gore Plan: Make $10,000 of college tuition tax deductible. Image: Two students talking in library. Image: Students walking on campus.
Gore: We need help for middle class families to pay college tuition by making it tax deductible.	Image: Gore kneeling with student at computer. Image: Gore talking in school assembly with Liebermann.
Gore: I'm for a life-long commitment to education.	Text: Al Gore for President.