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The float vote

If you want to know who'll pick the next president, just use the formula 4M + 2M.

By Frank Luntz
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The British have a more sophisticated and accurate lexicon to describe their elections than we crass Americans do. U.S. politicians aggressively “run for election,” while British candidates more calmly “stand for office.” And what we call “swing voters,” as though they swing back and forth between candidates like a rusty screen door in a midsummer storm, are more accurately defined by the British term “floating voters” because they gently float between candidates -- occasionally stopping at “undecided” to catch their political breath.

Floater play an important role in every close electoral contest, but in races in which high turnout is expected -- as is the case for the 2008 presidential contest -- they are absolutely vital. Gone are the days when the candidate most successful in turning out his loyal partisans inevitably won. With split-ticket voting and the number of independent voters soaring, no presidential candidate can capture a majority of the nation’s vote without dominating the floating vote. If money is the mother’s milk of politics, floaters are

the cereal itself.

And reaching them has never been easier. Unlike some past elections, when the only people really paying attention were political junkies and activists, everyone is watching and voting this time -- including the floaters. The debates attracted record viewers, the primaries record turnout, and the number of campaign contributors has already hit an all-time high even though the general election is still months away. Politics is “in” this year, and the floaters are right smack in the middle of it.

So, are you a floater? Just answer the following two simple questions. On a 0-10 scale, with zero meaning “no way” and 10 being “definitely,” how likely is it that you would consider voting for Barack Obama? Then answer the same question for John McCain. If you respond with a score of three or lower for either candidate, forget it. One or the other has already been crossed off your list. And if

one of the candidates scores a seven or higher, you've essentially made up your mind but just aren't ready to say "I do" quite yet. But if you give both candidates a four, five or six, you are solid gold -- their lifeblood. Pick your cliché.

Right now, fully 80% of Americans give at least one of the candidates a passing or failing grade, according to polling that I've done -- and they are breaking relatively evenly for McCain and Obama. That leaves 20% floating around like rowboats looking for a dock slip. According to the website RealClearPolitics, the average of national polls has Obama beating McCain 47% to 43%, with just 10% seemingly undecided or uncommitted. But the real floating vote is twice that number because it includes people with a slight preference, not just those with no preference at all. And it is that 20%, not the outspoken partisans on either side, that will decide this historic election.

This discussion of definitions may seem like a distinction without a difference, but it's not. "Undecided" or "swing voters" may be unwilling to express a preference for a specific candidate, but that doesn't mean they're open to all options. Floating voters, by comparison, are more important because they're still in buying mode -- willing to kick the tires, go for a test drive and read up on the different warranties. Think of it this way: An undecided voter can be 90% certain of whom they will support (or oppose) on election day. A floating voter is genuinely 50-50.

For floaters, ideology has less of an effect on their ballot than ideas do -- and partisanship is less important than principles. By and large, research has shown us, they are simply looking for meaningful results, whether delivered by a Republican or a Democrat. Whether the issue is Iraq or immigration, abortion or affirmative action, they're more interested in the candidate's ability to act than where the candidate stands. Polls and focus groups suggest that they vote against, not for; they are rejecters, not embracers -- and the candidate they reject the least is the candidate they will ultimately support.

Who are these voters? Think of the political equation 4M + 2M: middle age, middle income, middle of the road and mid-America, plus Missouri and Michigan.

* Middle age. Obama is likely to win a larger share of the under-30 vote than any candidate in modern history, including Ronald Reagan in 1984. McCain is running relatively strong among senior citizens and is managing to pull a few older Democrats into his camp. The battle here is among voters age 40 to 59 who don't have strong partisan leanings. They appreciate Obama's energetic, youthful appeal but also admire McCain's knowledge and wisdom. Unlike younger voters, they aren't as swept up in "Obama-mania," and unlike older voters, they aren't as concerned about such issues as Social Security and Medicare. Simply put, these are the voters for whom leadership and a clear plan for restoring economic security and peace of mind are most critical.

* Middle income. Families with incomes of about \$50,000 a year -- the national average -- are highly pessimistic and negative about the direction of the country and the condition of the economy. From 1994 through 2004, Republicans tended to have a narrow advantage among these floating voters, allowing the GOP to capture and maintain control of Congress for the decade. But they returned to the Democratic fold in the 2006 campaign and are leaning Democratic this year. They despise President Bush's economic policies and are most certainly "change" voters, but tax increases are the kind of change they will eagerly vote against. Neither Obama nor McCain has a lock on economic solutions for the middle class, and so Americans with average incomes continue to wade around in the floating-voter pool.

* Middle of the road. By election day, Obama will likely win more than 95% of self-described liberals and McCain 95% of self-described conservatives. And both candidates will take more than 90% of their respective self-identified partisans. That leaves the people who reject partisanship because it's polarizing and those who denounce ideology because it's limiting. They cringe at Bush's dogmatic adherence to principle and his refusal to compromise. Eight years of that is more than enough for these voters. Obama and McCain have a shot at these floaters because both represent a clean slate. Obama's words are as unifying as any candidate in decades. Every time he says that

“Democrats need to stop acting like no Republican ever had a good idea,” the floating voters sit up and take notice. On the other hand, McCain’s record is among the most bipartisan of any Republican leader in modern times. He’s a “maverick” because he says no to Republicans so often that it is not merely a source of pride but almost a trademark of his political character.

* Mid-America. From Ohio to Minnesota and then south to the Mason-Dixon line, several of the Middle America states are up for grabs. But the two states that matter most are Michigan and Missouri. Historically, as Missouri goes, so goes the nation. In all but one election in the last 50 years, the Show-Me State has voted with the winner. It’s one of the few states with significant urban and rural populations, with up-and-coming communities bordering down-and-out neighborhoods. As for Michigan, what was once a Republican mainstay has moved decidedly Democratic in recent elections. But the state’s economic distress, coupled with a somewhat unpopular Democratic governor, unpopular Detroit mayor and unpopular Democratic Legislature, has made it a haven for floating voters. Call them cynical. Call them disgruntled. Call them whatever you like, but the people of Michigan are going to make the candidates earn their votes more than any other state.

What’s the best message for floaters? In a word, empathy. First, acknowledge the frustration. Admit the mistakes. Let them know you feel their pain. But unlike the Bush reelection campaign of 2004, which sought to emphasize the threat of the unknown, and John Kerry’s campaign, which was nothing more than a critique of his opponent, these voters want answers, solutions and, most important, results. “Yes we can” is certainly appealing, but “yes we will” is even better. And a declaration that “there are some things more important than an election” will win their votes as well as their hearts.

Obama and McCain may have captured their respective party nominations on the parallel themes of hope and heroism, but for floating voters, hope isn’t going to reduce the country’s dangerous dependence on foreign oil, and heroism will not fix the housing collapse or put struggling middle-class voters back to work. Pocketbook issues are as important as character concerns for these voters, and they will be watching closely over the next four months to see who can deliver. Period. History suggests that in times of anxiety and cynicism, Americans turn to a leader they trust to get things done.

For floating voters, change is not enough. It’s not simply a fresh face they want. It’s a leader who can give them a fresh start.

Frank Luntz, a communications advisor whose clients have included Rudolph W. Giuliani, Michael R. Bloomberg and two dozen Fortune 500 companies, is the author of “Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear.”

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