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ABSTRACT

Patterned after a 1976 study, a study examined voters' decision making during the 1980 campaign for the presidency of the United States. Data from a survey of 183 registered voters indicated that partisan voters were likely to be precommitted to a candidate choice and thus relatively immune to mass mediated campaign effects. However, those voters who made their voting decisions during the campaign varied in communication behaviors, candidate issue and image discrimination, and social structural variables. These voters were of three distinct types--campaign deciders, post-debate deciders (after the Carter/Reagan television debate), and last-minute deciders. Some of the differences across groups of voters, based on the time of their decisions, reflected similarities between this study and the 1976 study: ideological strength diminishes rapidly by time of decision; people with strong ideological stance, whether liberal or conservative, made up their minds early; and voters with below-average degree of ideological strength made up their minds just before election day. On the other hand, features of the campaign environment in 1980--most notably the candidacy of John Anderson and the timing and presence of a televised debate between the two major candidates--exerted substantial influence on the electorate, thereby distinguishing this study from the 1976 study. (RL)

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Theory and Methodology Division

MEDIA USE AND TIME OF VOTE DECISION IN THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

Data from a panel survey of registered voters (N=183) conducted during the 1980 presidential campaign indicate that partisan voters are likely to be precommitted to a candidate choice and thus relatively immune to mass mediated campaign effects. However, those voters who do make up their minds for whom to vote during the campaign do not do so in unitary fashion, and three distinct types of campaign deciders are found in the 1980 election, varying in communication behaviors, candidate issue and image discrimination and social structural variables. It is suggested that features of the campaign environment in 1980 distinguish this study from the 1976 study on which it is patterned.

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MEDIA USE AND TIME OF VOTE DECISION IN THE 1980 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Of considerable interest in the study of political decisionmaking by individuals have been what have been sometimes humorously dubbed the "holy trinity" of political partisanship, political issues and candidate images. It is increasingly contended (cf. Nie, et al., 1976) that at a macroscopic level, the relative weights of these elements has been shifting in the American electorate in the past four decades and that, moreover, the relative weights of each may be redistributed from one election to the next depending on short-term variations in (largely presidential) election campaigns. Further, as Chaffee and Choe note (1980: 53), presidential election campaigns themselves have been thought to exert relatively little effect on voting decisions, as "early deciders" or precommitted partisans relatively resistant to change in candidate preference are also those most interested in politics and most likely to attend to campaign messages while last-minute deciders are persuasable but not interested and less likely to attend to campaign messages. These conclusions, they point out, are the products of research conducted in the 1940s, and things have changed since then: Not only have characteristics of the electorate changed (Nie, et al., 1976), but also the structure, role, quantity and type of mass mediated election campaign content have (cf. Barber, 1980; Patterson, 1980). Finally, research by political scientists (Converse, 1962) and market researchers (Ray, 1973) appears to argue that decision times are analogues for decision types that may be treated as separate units of analysis.

The best recent study relating time/type of presidential campaign decision-making and partisanship, issues, images and communication, including media use, is Chaffee and Choe's Wisconsin study of the 1976 presidential election campaign (Chaffee and Choe, 1980). By means of a three-wave telephone-interview panel

survey of a statewide sample of registered voters, Chaffee and Choe were able to conclude the following:

1. Partisan precommitment is sufficient to preclude campaign effects.
2. In the absence of precommitment, those exposed to the campaign will make their decisions primarily on the basis of campaign-specific information.

These statements present a time ordering for possible effects. Precommitted voters decide on a candidate before a campaign is in full swing; others may be exposed to candidate information during the election season and may decide on that basis; and a third group relatively unexposed to campaign information will cast votes on the basis of preexisting attitudes and dispositions.

However, as Chaffee and Choe note (1980: 67), the possibility remains that findings from their study might be artifacts of the 1976 campaign. Evidence exists (cf. Sears and Chaffee, 1979) that in 1976 some voters delayed decisions until they could compare Ford and Carter in the debates; in 1980, by comparison, whether or not Carter and Reagan would debate was uncertain during much of the campaign. Comparisons of the 1976 and 1980 campaigns reveal a number of differences; among them are the uncertainty surrounding the debate in 1980, the uncertainty surrounding resolution of the hostage crisis, and perhaps most importantly, the emergence of a nationally-prominent third-party candidate, John Anderson, who garnered more than fringe-group support and arguably more than his fair share of media attention.

This study, then, had a number of purposes: first was to examine the nature of the relationship between features of the campaign environment, relevant characteristics of the presidential candidates as they came to be known to the electorate, and methods that members of that electorate might employ to make those features and

characteristics known to them; secondly, the Chaffee and Choe emphasis on decision times in 1976 demonstrated its utility, but as they noted and we wish to underscore, specifics of an individual campaign might alter both decision times and types from other campaigns. We therefore sought to replicate their results, and we did so in a different locale. As with many replications, there are both strong similarities in method and questions asked¹ and some differences. Here the differences largely have to do with wording of individual items and with addition of campaign-specific issue and image items. We proposed no formal hypotheses: our expectations were that the Chaffee and Choe findings would be repeated in most of their particulars across elections and across population samples.

Design and Measurement

Our panel consisted of a systematic probability sample of persons on the Champaign and Urbana, Illinois voter registration list as of September 9, 1980. They were contacted three times for telephone interviews. The first wave was conducted September 23-30, following the Reagan-Anderson debate. Wave two occurred October 21-27, a week before the election, and just prior to the Carter-Reagan debate. The final wave followed the election on November 4. Only the exact person whose name was taken from the voter registration list was interviewed; up to five callbacks over three days were attempted for wave one, other waves used saturation callbacks to limit panel mortality. Only those respondents who were contacted all three waves, and reported their vote are included in the analysis. The final sample of 183 voters closely matched the actual vote returns for the cities.²

Table 1: Local Sample and Actual, National Actual Vote for President, 1980.

	Survey Sample N=183	C-U Vote Tally	National Vote Tally
Carter	38%	37%	41%
Reagan	40%	43%	51%
Anderson	21%	20%	7%

It is important to note that Champaign-Urbana is a college community, and our sample included 20% students registered to vote at their campus addresses. The campus, like other university settings across the nation, served as wellsprings of support for Anderson, so the third party influence is reflected strongly in our local figures.

Respondents were categorized by time of decision to vote for their chosen candidate by finding the earliest time they expressed a "certain" intent to vote that way. Voters who wavered in the strength of their support were classified by the later time that they were certain of their vote. Four groups of voters were created for analysis. Pre-campaign deciders are those who expressed a definite preference at wave one; campaign deciders are those who were decided at wave two. At wave three, voters were asked again when they had made up their mind, and those who reported "after the Carter-Reagan debate" were post-debate deciders, and those who said "on election day" or "the last few days before the election" were classified last-minute deciders.³ As national samples showed, a goodly number of people came to a decision in the final days of the campaign, and this is reflected in the breakdown for our sample.



Table 2: Time of decision about presidential candidate preference, 1980 (Champaign-Urbana) and 1976 (state of Wisconsin) surveys.

<u>Time of Decision</u>	1980 Champaign-Urbana	1976 Wisconsin
Pre-campaign (Wave 1)	26%	29%
Campaign (Wave 2)	26	40
Post-Debate (1980 only)	32	--
Last-Minute	17	30
	<u>101%</u>	<u>99%</u>
	n = 183	n = 164

In each interview respondents were asked to rate candidate image and issue positions on a 10-point scale. The image items were: friendly and pleasant, strong leader of the government, honesty and integrity, and moral and religious. The issue items concerned unemployment, defense spending, foreign policy, women's rights, abortion, and a liberal-conservative rating.

Reliability tests on the issue questions showed that no item was particularly deviant from the others in terms of item-to-total correlations. (In the 1976 Chaffee-Choe study, the abortion items were dropped because of weak discriminating power.) Factor analysis on the image items produced a clear factor for each candidate.

From these issues and image items, a series of discrimination scores were computed to represent the differences in voter's perceptions of the candidates. The absolute value of Carter-minus-Reagan, Reagan-minus-Anderson, and Carter-minus-Anderson on the four image and six issue items were calculated. These were then summed within each of the three candidate comparisons to form total C-R, R-A, and C-A image and issue discrimination scores. Finally, these scores were summed across all three candidate comparisons to form a total issue or image discrimination score for each voter at each wave.

Party affiliation measures were designed to identify the "true independent" from the Democratic and Republican leaners, since the Anderson candidacy offered a popular choice outside the traditional two-party system. People who first identified themselves as independents were asked a follow-up probe to see if they felt closer to one party or another. Only those who responded with no party leanings were classified independents. Our panel consisted of 37% Republicans, 23% Independents and 40% Democrats. Strength of party affiliation, measured as strong, weak or leaning, was used as the partisanship strength variable. The self-rating along the 10-point liberal-conservative scale was folded over at the 5.5 midpoint to create an ideological strength variable.

A series of information acquisition questions looked at television attention, newspaper and magazine attention, and interpersonal discussion, both in general about the campaign, and specifically about campaign events, such as the debates and the party conventions. Standard demographic measures of education and income were also obtained.

Analysis and Results

Wave one differences among voters grouped by time of decision are shown in Table 3. (Means have been converted to standard scores x 100 to facilitate comparisons.) Examination of Table 3 makes it immediately apparent that inclusion of a post-Carter-Reagan debate decider group is necessary, as this group differs substantially from either the Campaign and Last-Minute deciders group. Examination of the entire table, moreover, brings to light a number of differences across groups, many of them similar to Chaffee and Choe's 1976 results: Ideological strength diminishes

rapidly by time of decision; people with a strong ideological stance, whether liberal or conservative, made up their minds early. Those with a below-average degree of ideological strength made up their minds just before election day. Chaffee and Choe found that in 1976 that their last-minute deciders had an above-average level of ideological strength.

Partisanship strength shows a similar downhill momentum over decision time, but with an upswing for last-minute deciders. Chaffee-Choe also found this small uptick among late deciders, but it is clear in both studies that people with above average party affiliation strength had decided on their candidate early in the campaign.

Among the demographic measures, it is clear that voters with above-average levels of income and education had made up their mind earlier than others.

The information acquisition measures show a mixed trend. Again, those who decided early had above-average levels of media use and discussion of the campaign. But there are up-swings in media attention for the last-minute deciders, perhaps reflecting some information-acquiring behavior.

Discussion of the campaign shows an interesting pattern of high levels of discussion among pre-campaign deciders, and among those who were to decide following the climactic Carter-Reagan debate. But this latter group shows below-average media use, so their interpersonal discussion may be information acquisition from more informed sources. As in the Chaffee-Choe figures, last-minute deciders have the lowest levels of interpersonal discussion at the Wave 1 measurement time.

The issue and image discrimination scores at Wave 1 generally reflect higher discrimination among the candidates by early deciders, and lowest levels of discrimination for last-minute deciders. Deviating from this pattern are the Reagan-



Anderson scores, which show a high degree of discrimination for those who would decide after the Carter-Reagan debate. But these Wave 1 measures were taken following the Reagan-Anderson debate, so these people may have picked up the candidate differences from the first debate, but not decided on a vote until after the second debate. A look at these discrimination scores by candidate preference and Reagan-Anderson debate viewing may add insight to these figures.

Also of note is the range and magnitude of the discrimination scores. For both image and issue distinctions, the greatest high-to-low, as well as the greatest absolute value of a standard score, occurs in the Carter-minus-Reagan row. This indicates that voters are making the greatest discrimination between the two major contenders in the Presidential bout. Also, there were a high proportion of "don't know" answers given for the Anderson scales. These were replaced by the mean score on that scale, which may tend to lessen the differences between Anderson and the other candidates reflected in the table.

Within-campaign measures from Waves 2 and 3 are presented in Table 4. Again, as in Table 1, there is an upswing in TV attention for those who are last-minute deciders, but no corresponding rise in newspaper/magazine attention. Chaffee and Choe data showed lowest levels of media attention for the last-minute deciders at both waves.

Our discussion of campaign question for this wave was worded as an influence item: "Is there any one person whose opinions you count on when you make up your mind in voting?" (4=yes, 1=no) A below-average score on this item by the pre-campaign deciders should be interpreted as reflecting the fact that these people generally made up their minds on their own, while last-minute deciders report having relied on others in making their voting decision. People who decided at Wave 2

also show an above-average level of being influenced, while those who said they decided after the Carter-Reagan debate show an average amount of influence, perhaps reflecting the use of the televised debate, rather than interpersonal information in their vote decision.

The differential debate effects are clearly marked in the next two rows of Table 4. We asked how much of the Carter-Reagan debate was watched or heard (all, one hour, half-hour or less, none), and whether it was viewed alone (no discussion), or with family or friends (discussion). Not surprisingly, the pre-campaign deciders, consistent with their higher media use, viewed and discussed this debate at an above-average rate. The last-minute deciders, with still a week left until election day following the debate, were much less likely to view or discuss the candidate confrontation. Voters who report making up their mind following this debate show a high level of viewership, but only an average amount of discussion. This is consistent with the average amount of oral interpersonal influence going on for this group, as reflected in the "discussion of campaign" measure discussed above.

The issue and image discrimination scores, which are Wave 2, or pre-Carter-Reagan debate measures, present some complex results. The issue scores generally show a lessening of the magnitude of discrimination, and a truncation of the range of scores. But most striking is the shift to last-minute deciders having the above-average levels of issue discrimination, which does not seem to be accounted for by gains in media use or discussion. It may be that these people are reporting very extreme positions for their favored candidate, or the opposition, in a low-information environment.

By contrast, the wave two image discrimination scores generally show a widening

range, and a greater absolute magnitude of values. This is especially evident in the critical Carter-~~Reagan~~ scale, where decided voters show even greater above-average discrimination scores from wave one (+29 to +43, and +10 to +17) while the undecideds at this wave show dropping, less than average scores (-17 to -34, and -31 to -34). The big drop among post-debate deciders from Wave 1 to Wave 2 on image discrimination may be indicative of a low information environment, even lower than for last-minute deciders, according to the TV attention and newspaper/magazine attention measures at both points in time. (These Wave 2 discrimination scales are calculated from pre-Carter-~~Reagan~~ debate interviews, so debate viewing is not a factor.)

Chaffee and Choe report a more consistent lessening of discrimination scores, across decision time groups, and the widening of gaps across interview times. But in 1980, national polls showed there were great shifts in sentiment in the final days of the campaign, and so we have separated the final-week deciders from the final-days deciders in order to show the changing perceptions of the electorate. This creates a more complex pattern of knowledge and attitudes to analyze, but it is clear that 1980 was a more complex election year.

Discriminant Analysis

To discern which variables best predict a voter's time of decision, we performed stepwise multiple discriminant analyses. The first analysis (Table 5) examines differences between the pre-campaign deciders and all other voters using the variables listed in Table 3. Six variables were found to contribute significantly to the prediction. Most strong in leading towards the pre-campaign deciders groups were Carter-~~Reagan~~ Issue discrimination, partisanship strength, and attention

to television. One variable which was a predictor of later deciders was Reagan-Anderson issue discrimination. This may be indicative of the number of "soft" Anderson supporters in the sample who certainly discriminated between him and Reagan, but had not made up their mind between Anderson and Carter. It appears, then, that the pre-campaign deciders are, as could be expected, the partisan, high media using and educated persons who have been able to differentiate between the two major candidates' issue positions.

The 1976 Chaffee-Choe study found that image, not issue, and discussion, rather than TV use, along with education and partisanship, were the major predictors of pre-campaign deciders. The 1980 three-way contest may well have provided more substantive, issue-related differences among the candidates, so that became the salient factor in this analysis.

A classification analysis was performed to check the validity of the discriminant function in Table 5. On the basis of a weighted linear combination of scores of the six predictor variables, 66 percent of our respondents were correctly classified by decision time at Wave 1.

The second discriminant analysis (Table 6) looks at Campaign Deciders and post-debate deciders vs. Last-minute deciders. These two groups have been combined to keep the analysis analogous to Chaffee and Choe's findings. All the time 2 and 3 variables listed in Table 2 were included in the stepwise analysis. Three variables made up the discriminant function. Carter-Anderson image discrimination, and attention to television late in the campaign are predictors of the last-minute deciders. This shows that the divided liberals are making up their minds between the Carter and Anderson on image, not issue, discrimination, and are using more TV during this period to follow campaign events. The third variable, debate viewing, was a strong predictor for the campaign deciders and post-debate deciders group.

In this study, the last-minute deciders are people who made up their minds in just the few days preceding Election Day. They generally displayed less debate viewing. The 1976 Chaffee-Choe study, with similar time of decision categories found that attention to TV and image discrimination were predictors of campaign deciders, not the last-minute deciders, and in that election, debate viewing was not the discriminant function.⁴ But 1980 was different in that the single debate came quite late in the campaign, as compared to the three scheduled Ford-Carter debates, and that the Anderson "difference" complicated the voting decision for a sizable part of our sample.

A classification analysis was performed to check the usefulness of the discriminant function in Table 6. Using these coefficients, 59% of the respondents were correctly classified.

Discussion:

Referring to the three conclusions from the 1976 Chaffee-Choe study, these 1980 data show again that partisan precommitment is a discriminator for the pre-campaign decider group. For the campaign deciders, these results show a strong indicator is viewing of the single Carter-Reagan debate, although debate viewing was not a discriminating variable in 1976. Our last-minute deciders seem to be relying on television more, and coming to a decision using enhanced Carter-Anderson image discrimination.

To date, our analysis of these results appears to indicate that features of the campaign environment itself, most notably the Anderson candidacy and the timing and presence of a televised debate between the two major candidates, exerted substantial effects on the electorate, almost three-quarters of whom had not decided

on a presidential candidate six weeks before the election. We have not, as yet, tested the assumptions on party identification and last-minute deciders' candidate preference.

All in all, 1980 was a perplexing political year. The pundits were undecided if it was the end of an era, or the dawn of a new one. Media coverage expanded to bring three major candidates into the nation's living rooms. For many voters, the decision was not easily made. (After the election, 30% of our respondents felt that they had voted more against one candidate than for one.) This study has hoped to show some of the components that went into the voter's decisions and how these were related to the campaign and the candidates of 1980.

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Notes

¹We are grateful to Professor Chaffee for supplying us with copies of the 1976 interview schedules and for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

²Initial completion rate for Wave 1 was 76 percent; Wave 1 comprised 363 registered voters; thus panel mortality between Waves 1 and 3 was about 50 percent. However, a closer accounting of our files has revealed an additional 31 cases (final n=214), meaning that later analyses from this dataset will reflect a Wave 1-Wave 3 mortality rate of 41 percent. Initial examination of the frequencies of the augmented dataset reveals no material differences between the n=183 and the n=214 files. Chaffee and Choe report only their final panel size (n=164).

³The Chaffee and Choe study had trichotomized decision time into precampaign deciders, campaign deciders and last-minute deciders; our four-way classification, which adds a post-Carter-Reagan debate group, is justifiable if substantial numbers of individuals were delaying a decision until after the debate. As our discussion of Tables 3 and 4 below notes, the post-debate group is different on a number of dimensions from either the campaign or the last-minute group.

⁴Chaffee (personal communication, March, 1981) notes that a debate viewing effect in the 1976 study was swallowed up in the discriminant function analysis by the more general TV campaign viewing measure.

Table 3: Wave 1 Standard Scores (x100) by Time of Decision,

Time 1 Measures	Decision Time			
	Pre-Campaign Sept. 30	Campaign Oct. 27	After C-R debate	Last- minute
Precampaign Measures				
Ideological Strength	+13	+03	-03	-21
Partisanship strength	+42	-03	-24	-14
Education	+05	-09	+08	-16
Income	+18	-02	-08	-01
TV attention	+17	-09	-06	-01
Newspaper attention	+15	-05	-12	+04
Discussion of campaign	+17	-12	+13	-23
Issue Discrimination				
	+10	-09	+03	-16
C-R	+23	-03	-09	-21
R-A	-10	-13	+16	-03
C-A	+10	-06	+02	-14
Image Discrimination				
	+23	+07	-11	-25
C-R	+29	+10	-17	-31
R-A	+01	-03	+10	-23
C-A	+17	+05	-14	+00
	N=48	N=47	N=58	N=30

Table 4: Wave 2 and 3 Standard Scores (x100) by Time of Decision.

Wave 2 and 3 Measures	Decision Time			
	Pre-Campaign Sept. 30	Campaign Oct. 27	After C-R debate	Last- minute
<u>Within-Campaign Measures</u>				
TV attention	+09	-02	-05	+03
Newspaper attention	-01	+09	-05	-04
Discussion of campaign	-13	+10	+01	+09
Viewing of C-R debate	+20	+08	+15	-54
Discussion of C-R debate	+13	+08	+00	-27
<hr/>				
Issue Discrimination	-05	-04	-03	+16
C-R	-01	+04	-09	+15
R-A	-17	+00	+01	+15
C-A	+08	-13	+01	+07
<hr/>				
Image Discrimination	+33	+08	-24	-12
C-R	+43	+17	-30	-34
R-A	-05	-01	-03	+17
C-A	+40	+01	-22	-10
<hr/>				
	N=48	N=47	N=58	N=30

Table 5: Discriminant Analysis: Pre-Campaign Deciders vs. Others

	Function 1 (standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients)
Carter-Reagan Issue Discrimination	.698
Reagan-Anderson Issue Discrimination	-.648
Partisanship strength	.591
Attention to TV	.417
Education	.326
Carter-Anderson Image Discrimination	.279

Canonical Correlation .345

Chi-square=18.961 p=.004

Centroids of groups in reduced space

Pre-campaign deciders .598

All undecided at Wave 1 -.222

Table 6: Discriminant Analysis: Campaign and Post-Debate Deciders vs. Last-Minute Deciders.

	Function 1
Carter-Anderson Image Discrimination	-.785
Attention to TV	-.510
Viewing Carter-Reagan Debate	.811

Canonical Correlation .232

Chi-square = 9.90, p=.02

Centroids of groups in reduced space

Campaign and Post-debate deciders .204

Last-minute deciders -.275