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You Don't Mean a Thing If You Ain't Got That Swing



By Marty Kaplan

If you're reading this, your vote for president won't count.

Don't get me wrong. Everyone should vote; I think it should be compulsory, as it is in Australia, with fines for no-shows. Too much patriots' blood has been spilled to protect our right to vote for America to be soft on civic deadbeats. Voting is the minimum price of admission to democracy.

But because the same Constitution that gave us the gift of elections also gave us the boobie prize of the Electoral College, all that presidential candidates really care about is winning enough states to total 270 electoral votes.

Based on history and polling, Democrats can probably count on winning 14 states in November, for 182 electoral votes. (Those are Cook Political Report numbers, which most insiders cite, and they'll change between now and the election, but as a snapshot, it's close enough.) Republicans can probably count on 23 states, for 191 electoral votes, though some people think Arizona (11 electoral votes) without John McCain on the ticket is also up for grabs.

So ignore national polls. It's only the 14 or 15 remaining states that really matter to campaigns. If you don't live in one of them, your local airwaves won't be carpet-bombing you with presidential attack ads, and Barack Obama and Mitt Romney won't be heading your way unless there's money to be raised. Sure, they'll have field offices in every solid and likely state, and they'll say they're taking nothing for granted, complacency is their biggest enemy, blah blah blah, but it's not your vote they'll be ardently wooing.

About 50 million presidential ballots were cast in the 15 swing states in 2008. By October, it's a good guess that the voting populations in those states will be closely divided, with Romney and Obama each getting about 45 percent. It's the 5 million lucky duckies who say they don't know who they'll vote for in November who'll be getting the most campaign love.

Campaigns don't lump those 5 million swing voters together; they target subsets. The Obama campaign, for example, has scenarios that start with the 246 electoral votes that John Kerry won in 2004, and then to reach 270, they have a "west path" (add Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada and Iowa); a "south path" (add North Carolina and Virginia); a "midwest path" (add Ohio and Iowa); and a Florida path.

Sure, there'll be an intense effort by both sides to mobilize the highest percentage of their partisans in those states that they can. But getting 50.1 percent of the swing voters is the name of the game. In a big state like Florida, that's around 420,000 people. But in Colorado, 125,000 voters may swing the election; in Iowa, about 75,000; in New Mexico, fewer than 45,000; in New Hampshire, fewer than 4,000. You get the idea. The presidential election could easily be decided by a crowd that wouldn't fill the Rose Bowl.

Who are these people? They don't think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans, but that doesn't mean we should think of them as ideologically centrist. They don't always split the difference on issues. Instead, their views are all over the map — they can be liberal on some things, and conservative on others. They also don't pay much attention to elections until close to Election Day. Watching Fox or "The Daily Show," bookmarking political blogs, following political news: unlike you, that's not their idea of a good time.

To campaigns, the good news about swing voters is the same as the bad news about them. The country may be sharply polarized, but swing voters don't identify with one side or the other. On the one hand, a person who could just as easily vote for Romney as for Obama isn't especially aware of, or moved by, the differences between them. On the other hand, unlike partisans, they're persuadable. So campaigns are already spending a lot of money on polls and focus groups trying to figure out what words will swing their needle to one side or the other. Those are the messages that their media buys will hammer home this fall when this 10 percent starts tuning in.

The reason that Romney isn't worried that abandoning his right-wing positions will indelibly brand him as the Etch-a-Sketch candidate is that swing voters haven't been paying much notice to those positions. In their case, what happens in the primaries stays in the primaries. Given their disproportionate power, it's a little dispiriting to think that Romney will be getting away with so much hypocrisy because of their inattentiveness. But if you believe that an engaged, well-informed electorate is essential to democracy, it's kind of alarming to think that swing voters may be as much a *tabula rasa* as Romney is a blank slate to them.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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