

FLOATING VOTER

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Abstract: The floating voter has always been important to politicians as the most difficult audience to understand and connect with among voter profiles. Since the beginning of the 20th century, representative democracy has been an indispensable form of governance for many countries of the world, and voter behaviour and profiles have also been investigated, but precise and detailed studies on floating voters have been limited. One of the most important factors in this situation is that even in modern times, the electorate consists of large groups and the proportion of those who are seen as undecided is ignored. Despite being considered as indecisive, the floating voter, whose proportion has become expanding over time since the middle of the 21st century, began to be seen as a decisive variable for election results and thus have become the subject of various research. With the use of new qualitative and quantitative research methods in the interdisciplinary field that emerged with the development of political psychology, it has become easier to understand and explain floating voters. Efforts to understand the view of undecided voters in politics and to solve the psychology of elections first classified the undecided electorate by subcategories, and then paved the way for the preparation of political communication campaigns for each group of voters. In this context, the article will first deal with the questions of who the undecided voter is and why he or she is undecided in his voting preference, and then will address the political communication routes used to understand and convince the undecided voter.

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Key Words: Floating voter, Political communication, Vote preference

KARARSIZ SEÇMEN

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bir yönetim şekli olmasıyla seçmen davranışları ve profilleri de araştırılmaya başlanmışsa da kararsız seçmenler üzerine kesin ve ayrıntılı çalışmalar kısıtlı kalmıştır. Bu durum üzerindeki en önemli etkenlerden biri modern zamanlarda dahi seçmen kitlelerinin geniş gruplardan oluşması ve kararsız olarak görülen kesimin oranının önemsenmemesidir. Ancak zamanla genişlemeye başlayan kararsız seçmen 21. yüzyılda seçim sonuçları için etkin bir değişken olarak görülmeye başlanmış ve çeşitli araştırmalara konu olmuştur. Siyaset psikolojisinin de gelişimiyle birlikte ortaya çıkan interdisipliner alanda nitel ve nicel yeni araştırma yöntemlerinin kullanılmasıyla kararsız seçmenin anlaşılması ve açıklanması daha kolay bir hal almıştır. Kararsız seçmenin siyasete bakışını anlamak ve seçim psikolojisini çözebilmek için yapılan çalışmalar öncelikle kararsız seçmen grubunu alt kategorilere ayırarak sınıflandırmış, sonrasında her bir seçmen grubuna yönelik siyasal iletişim kampanyalarının hazırlanmasına zemin hazırlamıştır. Makale bu bağlamda öncelikle kararsız seçmenin kim olduğu ve oy tercihinde neden kararsız olduğu soruları ile ilgilenecek sonrasında ise kararsız seçmeni anlamak ve ikna etmek için başvurulmuş siyasal iletişim yollarına değinecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kararsız seçmen, Siyasal iletişim, Oy tercihi

I. UNSTABLE VOTER: WHY ARE THEY UNSTABLE?

In the early studies on voters and voting behaviour, it was observed that the individual and its personality had less an important place, than of rational and measurable external reasons in the context of group behaviours. The situationist approach is to evaluate the causes of the voting behaviour of the selection by looking at the external factors such as the socio-economic status, social environment, and residence by attributing a passive recipient role to the voter in the face of situationism approach (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1968). However, in the field of research after 1960s, there has been a shift from situational approach to the dispositional approach in psychology and political science literature. Particularly the American Voter (the book written by Campbell, et al., 1960), which is standing on the electoral psychology and the "party identification" approach, has increased interest in that respect.

According to the party identification approach, the emotional proximity with the party determines voting behaviour. The individual's feelings are the decisive factor in this context because it is difficult to stop voting for the party which individuals supported and developed a heart bond from the years of youth. It seemed appropriate then to agree with the party identification approach in the 1960s when mass parties in many democratic countries were dominated by big partisan groups. At the time, the American elections were dominated by two parties (the Republicans and Democrats), as the British voter was polarized into

the labour against the conservative party. The second most important feature of the party identification model was that the voting behaviour of electorates was predictable and stable (1960). Because of felt intimacy to or confidence in the party for the long term it was suggested that voters who had emotional attachment to a party will vote for the same party even if that party triggered some downsides.

Although the shift from situationism to dispositional theory puts more weight to the individual and inner tendencies in voting behaviours, it does provide a larger space to the mass psychology. Voter profiling, which is based entirely on loyalty and stability, has limited room for undecided voters. While two-thirds of the electorate have strong party identification, only one-third of voter own weak party ties, who can change their voting preferences depending on the course of events (Houghton, 2018). Although this has been valid for a long time, especially in the post-modern era, the change of the structure of society and the increasing prominence of micro groups in the case of both party identification and stable voter profile have become weaker and the political language has therefore changed (Shea & Burton, 2006: 9-12).

The undecided electorate, considered a third of the electorate but expanding gradually after 2000, is the most important variable determining the outcome of the election. Undecided voters can be classified under two different headings. The first segment of voters has no party allegiance and thus cannot decide which party to vote for and thus choose in accordance with the course of events. Another segment is the electorate who cannot even decide whether to vote or not. For this "apolitical" voter profile, it is a bothering decision to go to the ballot box and vote. Over time, the major concerns of the voter shifted from broad areas such as economics and foreign policy to rather specific areas such as women's rights, environmental policies, animal rights, identity problems (Nie, et al., 1976). Most undecided voters are those who exclude themselves from mass parties and stand out with their more individual characteristics. These groups remain undecided about whether to vote when they cannot see a suitable candidate or party to solve their own problems, or because they cannot decide which party will better serve their interests.

The main feature of undecided voters in the second group is that they are "fluctuating". The electorate, which has a party identification, experience a prolonged decline. In 1964, for example, 38 percent of voters described themselves as Republicans or Democrats, yet the number dropped to 29 percent in 1992 (Houghton, 2018). In the 1900s in America, followed by the world, this group of voters was defined as an independent variable for the first time. John Zaller (2004) covered floating voters through the presidential elections between 1948 and 2000 and treated them as variables because they changed their votes on a case-by-case basis, while Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1976) emphasized in their

book *The Changing American Electorate* that the electorate differed according to the changing political environment. The party identification model had increasingly become inadequate by the 1960s and the emergence of divergent identities on civil issues has radically altered voter profiles and political atmosphere. The increasing power of the media in expanding the network of voters, as well as the fact that a new and younger generation more eager to use mass media began to cast ballots, also led to a weakening of party identification and an increase in the number of the floating voter according to current political situation (Houghton, 2018).

For a long time, one of the reasons suggested to explain floating voters' indecisiveness was that they were less knowledgeable. According to the floating voter theory, the majority of hesitant voters are the least knowledgeable about the election and the political atmosphere (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1944). Since the mid-1900s, partisan voters with party affiliations were considered more knowledgeable about elections, while floating voters' inclination to vote ambiguously from one election to the next were the result of their lower level of knowledge (Converse, 1966). Nevertheless, it has been observed through political psychology studies (e.g., Key, 1966; Shively, 1992; Accessing, 2018) that undecided voters are more likely to research and learn to understand the changing political environment and find solutions to their problems than a partisan voter is.

In the first half of the twentieth century, theories about floating voters also suggested that undecided voters were less interested in politics and less knowledgeable of the political atmosphere. However, subsequent studies do not provide data supporting the theory of floating voters but show that this link between knowledge level and voting preference is changeable (Daudt, 1961). It has often been emphasized that the voting preference of the undecided voter is unpredictable, and it is quite difficult to measure the behaviour of this group of voters (Campbell, et al., 1960: 264). However, understanding the importance of voter psychology and emotions in measuring voting behaviour has made increasingly easy to understand why floating voters are undecided and to develop political discourse in this line.

Unlike the theories that confine politics to the rational decision- making system, the theory of emotional intelligence, which emphasizes the importance of the person's innate or acquired feelings and personal experiences that influence the formation of these feelings, has been applied to explain the behaviour of the electorate since the 1980s (Brader, 2006). The theory of emotional intelligence has proposed many conventionally disruptive theories about voter behaviour. One of them is that negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger lead individuals to learn, as well as that they do not seek to obtain new information outside the image in the minds of the candidate, they support in order not to disturb the comfort

zones of voters who have infinite sympathy for a particular candidate in a partisan position (Marcus, et al., 2000; Albertson & Gadarian, 2015).

In this case, the validity of the thesis suggesting that one of the biggest reasons why the electorate is undecided is that they do not know enough about politics should also be questioned. Given that floating voters do not have infinite loyalty and sympathy for a particular candidate and are more concerned about voting preferences and the political atmosphere, they will seek more information to overcome their indecision and anxiety, according to the emotional intelligence model. Undecided voters follow their posts and image studies more carefully than partisan voters in order to reach a conclusion about politicians who play an active role during political campaigns, learn more about politicians and are more influenced by such political communication efforts to reach a political decision (Carmines & Woods, 2002).

Being able to accurately analyse the reasons for the unclear voting behaviour of the floating voter will play an important role in the success of candidates' political communication efforts. Candidates who develop new strategies for how to convince undecided voters and can send the right message to each group of voters take a step forward at the end of the election. The strategies employed by politicians who try to get floating voters by offering only temporary election gifts and making long promises (Parmaksız, 2017) are no longer enough to convince undecided voters who have current problems and no sense of belonging to any party.

II. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ROUTES AFFECTING UNDECIDED VOTERS

After the World War II, there have been major changes in party structures and related political communication in Europe and America. After mass parties that appealed to an ideologically specific segment in the 1800s, all-encompassing (catch-all) parties (Krouwel, 2006) that emerged in the 1950s led to the abandonment of ideological and sharp discourses. It is replaced by peaceful and positive political communication language aimed at all voters regardless of social class and interest differences. After the 1990s, cartel parties aimed at getting their support from the state rather than the electorate have emerged with a noticeable decline in party membership and loyalty (Katz & Mair, 1995). The main reason for this transformation in party systems is that the voter profile is becoming increasingly independent of party affiliation, the urge to act according to certain ideologies decreases, voter behaviour becomes uncertain by becoming more unpredictable, and therefore class and ideology politics are weakened (Sayar, 2018). This change in party politics also turned political communication and media tools towards being used to reach the entire electorate and trivialized

political communication methods depending on the work of the members (Sayar, 2018: 134). After the 2000s, with the power of the new media in political campaigns, the candidate-centred style of modern political communication began to dominate (Denton & Kuypers, 2008: 158). This has also increased the interest of undecided voters in politics. More recent political propaganda efforts try to win votes from undecided voters than voters with certain voting preferences (Burkan, 2009).

After the 1990s, ideological messages aimed at large groups in the era of mass parties were replaced by special messages prepared for micro groups defined around more individual characteristics and specific issues rather than ideology. With the understanding that micro groups including the floating voters, now have a bigger impact on the election result, the election promises of political candidates were also changed style, and moreover the different (populist) policies of candidates followed with interest and surprise by the whole world. Especially after 2010, extraordinary political decisions were taken outside the traditional system even in the developed countries. Trump's campaign announcement that a wall would be built on the Mexican border for national security was a too radical rhetoric for America's classic Republican and Democratic voters, yet it appeared a convincing campaign for some of the undecided voters whose expectations have diverged by the time. Or Britain's leave from the European Union was a surprising decision for many countries, but it pleased the country's micro-grouped electorate, except for the middle-aged electorate with a classic party identity. The example of America and Britain shows that unusual rhetoric will positively influence the electorate psychologically and emotionally more than the usual political agenda topics such as military, security, economy (Richards, 2019: 20-21). Reading voter psychology correctly and developing policies accordingly is undoubtedly one of the necessary ways to win over floating voters whose predictability and voting behaviour are becoming increasingly uncertain.

The political communication studies show that the secret of successful candidates is to form an emotional partnership with the electorate. The rationalist model claims that the electorate prefers to vote by rationally evaluating the current problems and the candidates who offer the most effective solution to them, and it imposes a great responsibility on the electorate to have sufficient knowledge of the electoral process, candidates, and current problems. However, even in the societies with the highest level of education, it has been observed that behind the voting behaviour is the emotional trust in the candidate rather than the cost-benefit analysis envisaged by the rationalist model. The voter makes a political decision by considering the emotional partnership before evaluating ideology of the candidate (Richards, 2019). This is especially true for micro groups and floating voters who see themselves outside the main party electorate mobilizing society. The negative political campaign language focused on the shortcomings and possible setbacks of the rival candidate was preferred for a long time in the global

political context. Then, it has turned to a positive campaign language dominated by positive feelings towards the electorate and messages towards the inner world with the influence of studies in the field of political psychology (Denton & Kuypers, 2008: 159). The positive campaign language, which focuses on the positive aspects of the candidate and facilitates the partnership with the electorate with its individual-internal characteristics, was also effective in getting votes from floating voters (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995).

Understanding the identity and needs of the undecided electorate, which is outside the basic ideologies accepted in society and does not have a specific preference for voting behaviour, is a natural end of modern times in a changing political atmosphere. The role of the media, and especially social media, in shaping the perception of the candidate of the undecided electorate has risen to an undeniable degree. The expanding power of the Internet which greatly influenced the language of political communication also played an important role in the transmission of focus group messages prepared for different segments of society, including undecided voters (Shea & Burton, 2006: 9-12).

III. THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON UNDECIDED VOTERS STUDIES

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About a third of the population and 70-80 percent of the politically relevant electorate followed political news through the print press in the 1960s. In other words, the information obtained in writing through the media attracted more attention and reached more voters than the verbal media gave about politics (Converse, 1966: 592). This process, which began to change especially with the spread of television, was moved to a different dimension after the 2000s, when social media was involved.

After 2008, social media was one of the most effective tools that candidates applied to as the Internet became a part of daily life with mobile applications. Politicians' effort to "share" by more interaction through social media is directly relevant with the interest of society. Especially after Obama's social media based political communication during the 2008 election cycle, different political candidates from many democratic countries around the world updated their political communication efforts. Instead of delivering cold, level-up and formal political messages, his focus on sharing personalized contents such as his personal characteristics, family life, and everyday habits positively contributed to Obama's political career. It has helped him to build a warmer and more intimate bond with the electorate. Indeed, the relevant research also indicates that the personalized messages and posts of political leaders that appeal not only to voters' interests but also their feelings attract more attention and bring more positive results (see, Lee & Oh, 2012). The main reason why social media has an impact on the electorate

is that it paves the way for the sharing of emotions between politicians who are seen as inaccessible and ordinary voters. It also allows mutual emotional communication between individuals. Social media allows people to share their feelings, judgments and to build an emotional communication with anyone (Bollen, et al., 2011).

Social media, which has become one of the important means of obtaining information, is functional not only in terms of dissemination of information but also sharing of emotion. One of the most important reasons for the use of social media as a political propaganda tool is that it quickly delivers a certain message to many people effortlessly and without expense. This situation has been seen to be higher in emotional political messages. The speed at which candidates' emotional social media messages are spread, the level of stimulation of the electorate, and the positive-negative feedback from the electorate are higher than other non-emotional messages (Bayer & Sommer, 2012; Huffaker, 2010).

One of the reasons for the rapid spread of social media messages is that it makes it easier to act with group psychology. People tend to partner up with people who think like themselves by posting comments or writing messages under the posts of politicians. This partnership strengthens the positive-negative perception towards the candidate. Considering that undecided voters who do not have any party ties are also a group within themselves, it can be said that the fact that the people in this voter profile learn each other's ideas and feelings through social media leads to the emergence of a new social identity. The emotional partnership, especially among individual social media users, affects not only their voting preferences personally, but also the political structural change and voting behaviour of society in general (Barbalet & Demertzis, 2013).

The increase in the number of followers of politicians exploring the power of social media is considered as a positive sign for them. In fact, people who follow the personal social media accounts of party leaders such as AK Party, CHP and MHP, which are considered Turkey's major mass parties, have surpassed the number of party members. This indicates that politicians have reached out to supporters of different parties and undecided voters through social media except for their own party supporters (Millet, 2018). Another advantage that social media provides to politicians is its contribution to the image work they want to project to the electorate. Through social media, politicians can control their public image and organize their discourse accordingly. Politicians go out of their way to influence the electorate by taking on various roles, as Goffman mentioned in the concept of theatricality. Goffman considers life as a theatrical scene, and the individuals in it as actors who take on various roles (Goffman, 1959). In this narrative, politicians are among the most skilled players and look for ways to reach out to them directly or indirectly to convince the electorate. Social media is one of the most vital media of political communication that allows politicians to reach

out to voters, categorize them and develop strategies to identify and convince floating voters (Unal & Mazman, 2020).

Social media seems to be the final limits reached by the mass media. Its use as a means of political propaganda began to be seen natural way for politicians to influence undecided voters. The studies on the voting habits and the political propaganda studies in which the mass media play a leading role show that the media is very effective on the undecided voters. For the determined voter who has no hesitation in voting preference, the reasons that determine this preference are mostly family, associations, affiliated civil society tools, while undecided voters change their voting preference by being influenced by friends, schools, and most of all the media. Furthermore, as the age of the electorate decreases, the level of instability in terms of media influence on voting preference increases (Cavusoglu & Pekkaya, 2015). The fact that social media is a continuously available resource allows the young voter to convey their comments and thoughts, to vote and to influence the undecided young voter (Aydın & Gülsoy, 2017: 973).

Political candidates are also convinced that internet-based promotional efforts are needed to influence the voting preference of the undecided electorate and to win their votes. Although many politicians are aware of the difficulty of predicting the floating voter turnout, they believe that the audience that will decide the fate of the election is also undecided voters and that they can only be persuaded through advertising and marketing efforts prepared by taking advantage of internet (Saritaş & All, 2016). Given the power of media tools to build public opinion, it can be said that these claims have strong background. So much so that the messages given by the media, which is influential in the formation of public opinion, can strengthen the political opinion of individuals as well as make it easier for floating voters to shape their voting preferences (Özkan, 2004: 215).

CONCLUSION

With the damage of structuralized electorate in a predictable and stable voter image, the floating voters are increasingly seemed the main target of political campaign in democratic countries. The main characteristics of undecided voters are the absence of party identification, unpredictable voting preferences, demands for individual and civil rights in addition to basic issues such as economy, foreign policy, and education, the use of mass media intensively, especially social media. Furthermore, research indicate that the level of indecision increases as the average age decreases. Although studies on voting behaviour after the 1950s presented a negative relationship between knowledge level and instability, more recent studies conducted after the 1990s has shown that the level of knowledge has no direct effect on the voting preference of individuals, and that people who are very interested in politics may experience indecision in voting behaviour. Efforts to

solve the mystery of floating voters first tried to make this group of voters known, and then to develop new ways of communicating politically that could convince undecided voters.

With the involvement of political psychology, the electorate was examined not only behaviourally but also emotionally, and it was understood that the undecided electorate developed more sympathy for the politicians with whom they were emotionally associated. With the theory of emotional intelligence, the effect of the electorate's emotional moods on voting and political decision-making behaviours can be better understood. This theory with some empirical backup overall suggests that being more anxious and afraid undecided voters ask more questions about the political atmosphere and thus more likely to research and learn. Consequently, they follow the political campaigns of politicians more closely and are more prone to political communication. Therefore, politicians should focus on the messages that will try to influence undecided voters rather than supporters in their election work. It has been observed that candidates who establish common ground and an emotional connection with the electorate by accentuating their ordinary and personal life and opinions with a positive political communication language that enables the consolidation of positive emotions are more persuasive in this context. In addition, recognition, understanding and publication of political messages about the individual needs and demands of the undecided electorate consisting of micro groups is again one of the requirements of winning over undecided voters.

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Social media is one of the most effective ways politicians use to convince undecided voters in their campaigns. While political preference of partisan voters has been affected from households, families and political associations, floating voters are influenced by friends, schools, and social media. This trend cannot be captured solely through the lenses of communication studies but also the lenses of changing political socialization of younger generations. It is not surprising that social media tools, which have become a part of daily life and political socialization are used as a means of information gathering and political propaganda.

Politics has long since abandoned the one-sided way of communicating in which only the voices of politicians are heard. The electorate is getting more actively involved in politics through social media so much so that they are now main actors rather than subjects in politics. In short, sharing and managing emotions in persuading floating voters is one of the most important requisites of politics in post-modern times.

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(!) *The author/authors declared that all processes of this study are in accordance with research and publication ethics, and comply with ethical rules and principles of scientific citation. Otherwise, The Journal of Political Psychology is not responsible.*