

## *The Floating Voter in the 2008 American Elections*

Edward C. Bearnot and Steven E. Schier

How polarized was the 2008 American electorate by partisanship and ideology? In 2008, as David RePass also discovered in 2004, a majority of the electorate is comprised of “floating voters” or “floaters” – weak party identifiers and independents with no ideological leanings. We find statistically significant evidence that floaters are lower income, less educated and younger than non-floaters. We relate this evidence to the debate between Alan Abramowitz and Morris Fiorina over the public’s ideological consistency. Evidence from both our and Repass’ studies supports Fiorina’s argument that the public possesses less ideological consistency than Abramowitz claims.

How divided were American voters in 2008 by partisanship and ideology? In his article *Searching for Voters along the Liberal-Conservative Continuum: The Infrequent Ideologue and the Missing Middle* (2008) David E. RePass addressed this question regarding the 2004 American electorate. By developing a measure of ideology and partisanship that better captures voters’ inconsistent survey responses and “non-attitudes,” RePass demonstrated that more than half of the electorate in the 2004 elections were “floating voters” or “floaters,” meaning that they did not express a consistent political ideology or party allegiance. He found that almost three quarters of voters in 2004 could be described as “non-ideological,” even if they expressed strong preference for a party. RePass concluded that, “the vast majority of the [American] electorate does not see politics in liberal-conservative terms . . . [and] engage in a much more complex and sophisticated process of evaluating candidates and issues” (2008, 27). By extending RePass’ study using data from 2008 we identify differences in ideology and partisanship that can help explain two distinctly different election cycles.

Both RePass’ study and ours have implications for an ongoing controversy among political scientists over the degree of ideological thinking and polarization among the American electorate. Alan Abramowitz in his book *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization and American Democracy* found an ideologically bimodal distribution of voters along a liberal-conservative scale in a 2006 Congressional election survey (2011, 55). This led him to conclude that voters now evidence “relatively coherent ideological preferences,” the result of growth in ideological thinking over the past two decades (2011, 60). Morris Fiorina in his book *Disconnect: The*

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*Breakdown in Representation in American Politics* takes exception to this view. He draws a sharp distinction between the “political class” of ideological activists and the broader citizenry: “Ordinary Americans are more uncertain about their political views and how they should translate them into voting than members of the political class . . . In sum, typical Americans differ from members of the political class not only in taking more moderate positions on most issues, but also in having positions that are more conditional than members of the political class” (2009, 30, 35).

RePass’ discovery that a majority of the 2004 electorate were floating voters provided evidence supporting Fiorina’s view. Our research examines whether the 2008 electorate was also dominated by a majority that did not express a consistent political ideology or party preference.

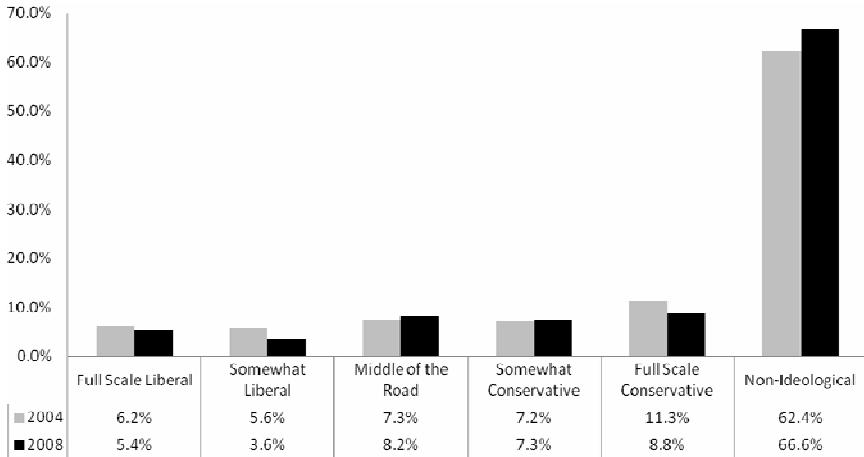
### **The Placement, Thermometer, and Recognition Measure<sup>1</sup>**

In order to disaggregate true political opinions from artifacts of the survey process, RePass developed an index, called the *Placement, Thermometer, and Recognition Measure* (PTR), which is composed of four questions from the National Election Survey. The first of these asks respondents to place themselves on a liberal-conservative political continuum, while the second two ask respondents to express their opinion of each party on a 0 to 100 scale. Finally, respondents are asked to identify which of the two parties is “more conservative.” In order to be considered an “ideologue,” a respondent must place his or her self on the spectrum, give a high rating to the party whose ideology corresponds to this self-placement, give the party with the opposite ideology a low rating, and be able to identify the Republican Party as the more conservative of the two parties. Depending on a respondent’s self-placement and rating of each party, the “strength” of his or her ideology is determined. Respondents who give contradictory answers or select “don’t know” or “haven’t thought about it” are considered non-ideological, as they do not display an understanding of the ideological “spectrum” and its corresponding partisanship.

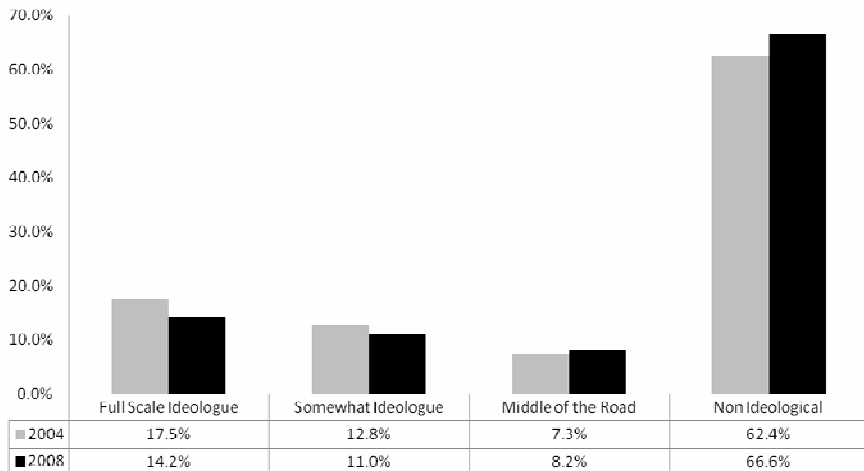
This is not a very demanding definition of ideological thinking. It does not involve concrete issue opinions aggregated in an ideologically coherent direction. All that is required is a basic sense of directionality regarding oneself and the two parties on an ideological spectrum, with affect corresponding to proximity of placement of the parties to oneself. If, as Abramowitz claims, voters have “relatively consistent ideological preferences,” this is about as undemanding a measure of consistency as one can formulate.

From 2004 to 2008, there are some notable differences in the ideological breakdown of the electorate. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, there were fewer “full scale” liberals and conservatives in 2004 than 2008, as well as

**Figure 1. Ideological Distribution of the American Electorate, 2004 vs. 2008**



**Figure 2. Ideological Distribution of the American Electorate, 2004 vs. 2008**



fewer “somewhat” liberals. There was a .1 percent increase in the proportion of “somewhat” conservatives, a .9 percent increase in the proportion of “middle of the roaders,” and most dramatically, a 4.2 percent increase in the proportion of non-ideological respondents from 2004. On the whole, however, the largely non-ideological characteristics of the American electorate

mirror those articulated by RePass. Despite the many differences between the elections of 2004 and 2008, the American electorate was still mostly non-ideological in their political beliefs, and in fact became more non-ideological during an election that was arguably subject to increased political polarization. David RePass asserted that the decrease in the proportion of ideologues may have been caused by, “the fact that there was less use of the terms “liberal” and “conservative” by candidates and commentators in 2008. Obama used “change” as a surrogate for “liberal,” and McCain had difficulty identifying who he was. In the primaries, he tried to shake off his reputation of being a moderate or a maverick but did not want to lose potential moderate voters in the general election” (2011).

### Validity Testing of the PTR Measure

RePass went to great lengths to test the validity and reliability of his new measure. To do so, he identified a battery of questions from the NES survey that correlate with liberal and conservative beliefs. He then observed how many “Full-Scale” conservative and liberal ideologues agree and disagree with each question or statement, and measures the difference. In the vast majority of cases, in both 2004 and 2008, respondents identified by the PTR as full-scale ideologues behaved as anticipated, though there are some differences that indicate, in most cases, a convergence of ideology between full-scale conservatives and liberals.

As we can see in Table 1, there are some marked differences in full-scale conservative and liberal responses to test questions between 2004 and 2008. Interestingly, the degree of differentiation between elections *decreased* in nine of eighteen questions present in both the 2004 and 2008 NES surveys. In four of these cases, the gap between liberals and conservatives closed by more than 10 points. Among the most notable of these shifts are a 9 percent full-scale liberal decrease and 16 percent full-scale conservative increase in their belief that “Federal spending on child care should be increased.”

In only two instances did the gap between liberals and conservative ideologues grow by more than 10 points, namely disagreeing with the statement, “The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes,” and believing that homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt. David RePass argued that former “is simply a very convoluted, poorly worded, question that respondents have trouble deciphering.” Interestingly, the widening gap in adoption attitudes runs counter to the 20-point decrease in the liberal-conservative difference in attitudes about women’s role in the workplace. Though RePass contended that “All voters, including conservatives, get accustomed to new social practices

Table 1. Validity and Reliability Testing

	Full-Scale Conservatives who took Stated Position		Full-Scale Liberals who took Stated Position		Degree of Differentiation		Inter- election Change
	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008	
Same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry.	85%	91%	11%	17%	74	74	0
Rather than the government in Washington seeing to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living, each person should get ahead on their own.	87%	81%	14%	10%	73	71	-2
There should be more emphasis on traditional family ties.	94%	94%	25%	25%	69	69	0
The less government the better.	83%	86%	21%	20%	62	66	4
Do you consider religion to be an important part of your life? Yes.	90%	88%	42%	46%	48	42	-6
Disagrees with the statement: "The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes."	79%	80%	31%	15%	48	65	17
Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry.	8%	6%	79%	83%	71	77	6
There should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone.	10%	14%	80%	75%	70	61	-9
Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt.	24%	17%	89%	96%	65	79	14

... table continues

Table 1. Validity and Reliability Testing (continued)

	Full-Scale Conservatives who took Stated Position		Full-Scale Liberals who took Stated Position		Degree of Differentiation		Inter- election Change
	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008	
Disagree that we have gone too far in pushing equal rights.	23%	27%	86%	90%	63	63	0
One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance.	17%	29%	79%	76%	62	46	-16
Federal spending on childcare should be increased.	18%	34%	79%	70%	61	36	-25
We should be more tolerant of different moral standards.	30%	35%	89%	90%	59	55	-4
We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems.	33%	33%	86%	85%	53	52	-1
Federal spending on public schools should be increased.	50%	37%	89%	73%	49	36	-13
Favors laws to protect homosexuals from job discrimination.	52%	47%	99%	99%	47	52	5
Homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the Armed Forces.	60%	57%	100%	97%	40	40	0
Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government.	61%	76%	100%	95%	39	19	-20

and begin to accept them,” (2011) it is clear that Americans views about homosexuality and adoption have yet to coalesce in a similar way among ideologues.

Does the overall pattern of responses to the PTR measure show a similar configuration in 2004 and 2008? We ran t-tests comparing the percentage of conservatives and liberals in 2004 and 2008 across all questions. These tests show no significant differences in rates of response across all questions. Given the similarity in findings between 2004 and 2008, the PTR measure is consistent in its validity. It will be useful, though, to continue tracing these validity questions over time.

### **Behavioral Differences**

Given the remarkably high percentage of the electorate that is non-ideological in both 2004 and 2008, it is worth revisiting RePass’ observations about the differential political behavior of ideologues and non-ideologues. As is visible in Table 2, ideologues represent substantially higher proportion of politically active and literate individuals than they do of the entire electorate. This pattern accords with that discovered by Abramowitz, lending external validity to our findings (2011, chapter 3). In both 2004 to 2008, the proportion of full-scale ideologues that attended a political meeting or rally, participated in a campaign, or read or listened to political news on the Internet was substantially higher than in the electorate as a whole. This confirms RePass’ finding that the common perception of polarization is driven at least in part by the outspoken nature of a minority of full-scale ideologues (2008, 29). Full-scale liberals were more active than their conservative counterparts, though full-scale conservatives continued to get political information from the Internet and radio in higher proportions than liberals.

### **Party Identification**

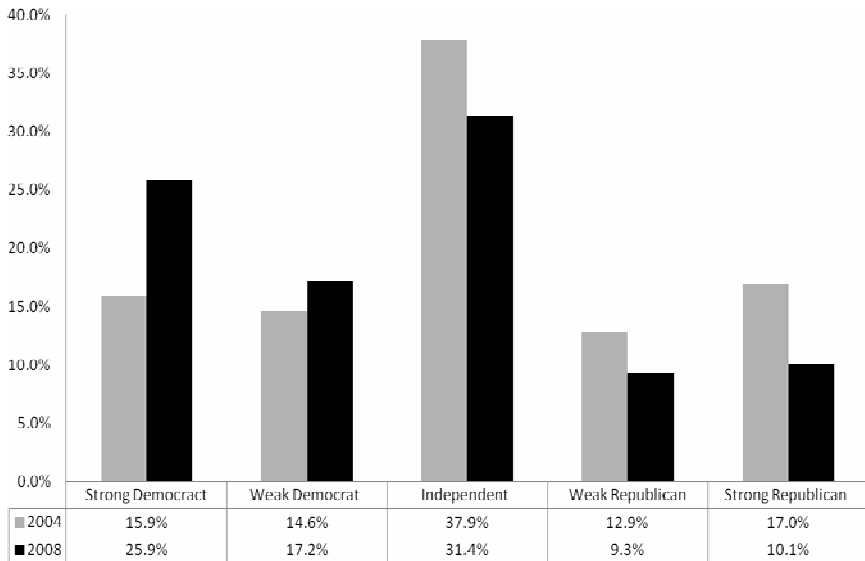
As is apparent in Figure 3, the partisan characteristics of the American electorate changed substantially between 2004 and 2008. Generally, there were more Democrats in 2008 than in 2004, and fewer Republicans and Independents. Strong Democrats increased by 9.8 percent, while Strong Republicans decreased by 6.8 percent. Weak Democrats increased by 3.2 percent while Weak Republicans decreased by 4 percent. The proportion of Independents fell by 6.3 percent. These findings are consistent with the widespread electoral success of down-ticket Democrats in a number of traditionally Republican districts and states, including parts of Florida, Ohio, Virginia, Colorado, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. It appears that Democrats

Table 2. Magnification of Ideology on Participation

	Attend Political Meeting or Rally		Work for Campaign		Get News from Radio		Get News from Internet		Total Electorate	
	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008	2004	2008
Full-scale Ideologue	36%	35%	50%	42%	28%	30%	24%	27%	18%	14%
Liberal		22%		27%		12%		11%		5%
Conservative		13%		15%		18%		16%		9%
Somewhat Ideologue	22%	9%	16%	8%	13%	13%	18%	12%	13%	11%
Liberal		6%		5%		4%		4%		4%
Conservative		3%		3%		9%		9%		7%
Middle of the Road	3%	12%	3%	9%	6%	6%	8%	11%	7%	8%
Non-ideological	39%	44%	31%	41%	53%	52%	50%	50%	62%	67%



**Figure 3. Distribution of Party Identifiers, 2004 vs. 2008**



were able to motivate independent and weak partisan voters, as well as those who would have otherwise abstained, to vote for Democrats. It is important to note that these changes in partisanship, though dramatic, were not indicative of changes in electoral ideology. As we will see, the ideological structure of the American electorate was stable from 2004 to 2008; in both elections, the majority of the voters were weak partisans and independents with no ideological leanings, individuals RePass describes as floaters.

### **Combining PTR with Party Identifiers**

Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate the fundamentally unchanged ideology of the American electorate amid shifting partisanship between 2004 and 2008. Though the increase in Democrats described in 2008 is notable, it is important to keep in mind that the most significant difference between 2004 and 2008 is the 7 percent increase in the proportion of weak party identifiers and independents with no ideological leanings, or floating voters. All other ideological and partisan combinations remained mostly unchanged, with .7 percent and 1.4 percent increases in the number of full-scale and somewhat conservatives who were weak Republicans and a 4.2 percent increase in the proportion of full scale conservatives who were strong Republicans. In addition, the proportion of somewhat conservative and non-ideological strong

Figure 4. Party Identifiers and Ideologues Combined, 2008

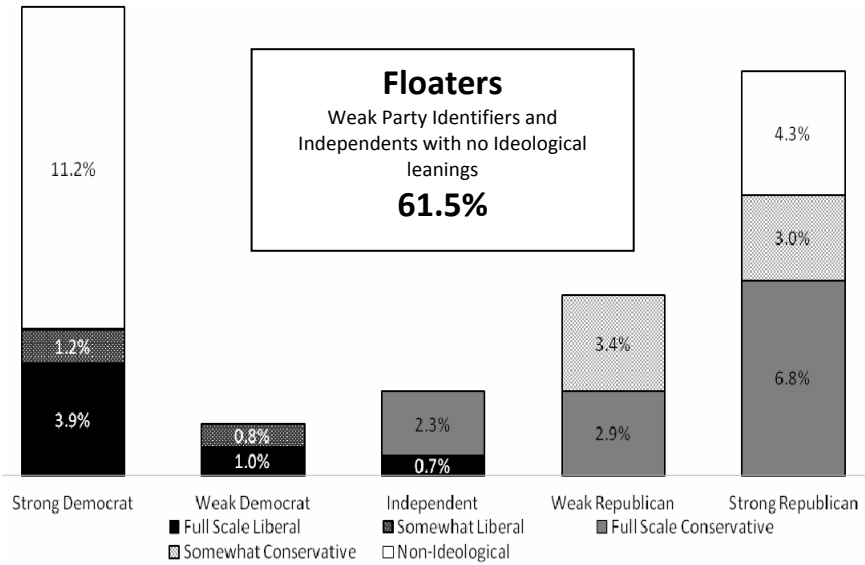
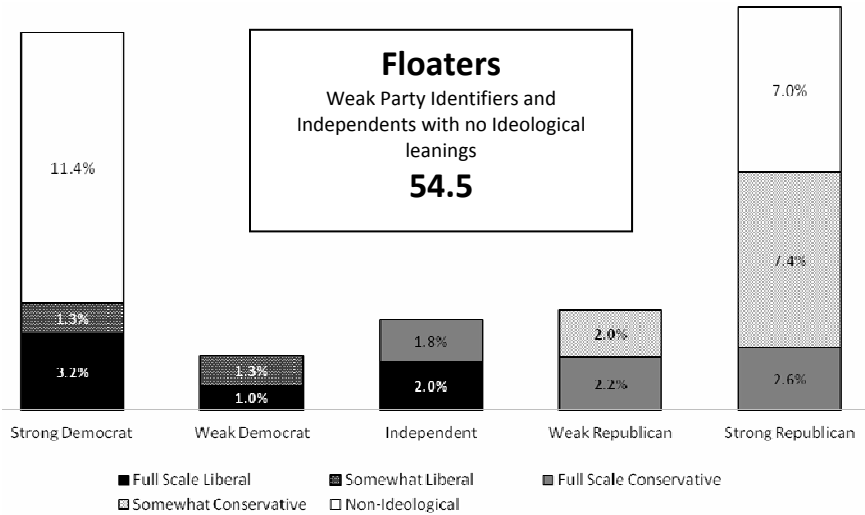


Figure 5. Party Identifiers and Ideologues Combined, 2004



Republicans decreased by 4 percent and 2.7 percent respectively, indicating a decrease in the number of moderate Republicans. Notably, all Democrat and liberal portions of the electorate were practically unchanged between 2004 and 2008. This suggests that while many non-ideologues may have been convinced to vote for Obama, their ideological orientation was not fundamentally changed. Such a curious finding illuminates two important points. First, that the ideology of the American electorate can be static, even when there are dramatic shifts in partisanship. Second, that there are an enormous number of voters who can be persuaded during any given election (Hillygus and Shields 2009). The question is, then, who are they?

### **Floating Voters**

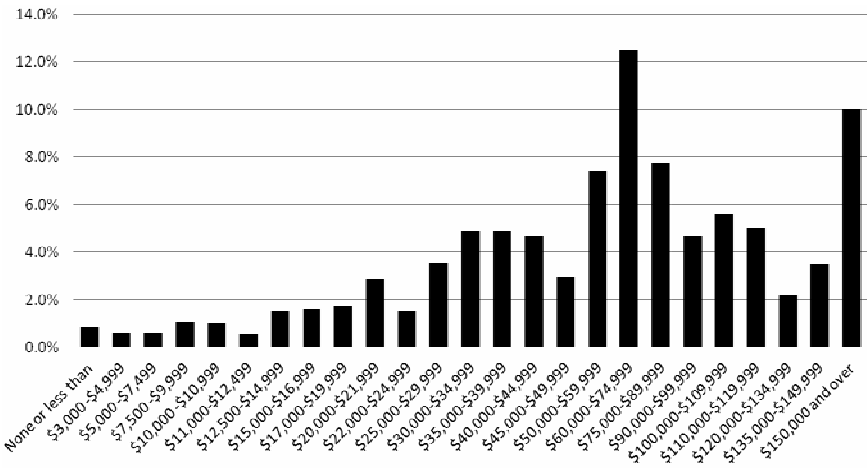
Figures 4 and 5 show this easily persuaded proportion of the electorate—RePass’ floaters—to increase from 54.5 percent to 61.5 percent from 2004 to 2008. Many of these floating voters, weak party identifiers and independents with no ideological leanings, appear to have voted Democratic in 2008, while maintaining their non-ideological stance. While Repass described these voters as highly persuadable due to their lack of party allegiance, ideology, and perhaps even their low political literacy, he goes no further in describing who these floating voters are. The following is a brief demographic breakdown of the characteristics of floaters during the 2008 election.

As is visible in Figures 6 through 16, the distribution of floaters is statistically similar to non-floaters across a number of demographic variables in 2008. The gender, racial, and employment status distributions of floaters and non-floaters, for example, are practically identical. However, there are some notable differences. A series of t-tests comparing variables measuring age, education, and income, indicate that floating voters are slightly *less wealthy*, *less educated*, and *younger* on average than their non-floater counterparts. It is not surprising that floaters are less wealthy, younger, and have less education than non-floaters, as their lack of political literacy, ideology, and partisanship speaks to their inexperience, dearth of resources, and lack of commitment in politics as in life more generally. In all, it is remarkable how similarly distributed the floater and non-floater populations are, indicating their lasting presence and importance in American Politics.

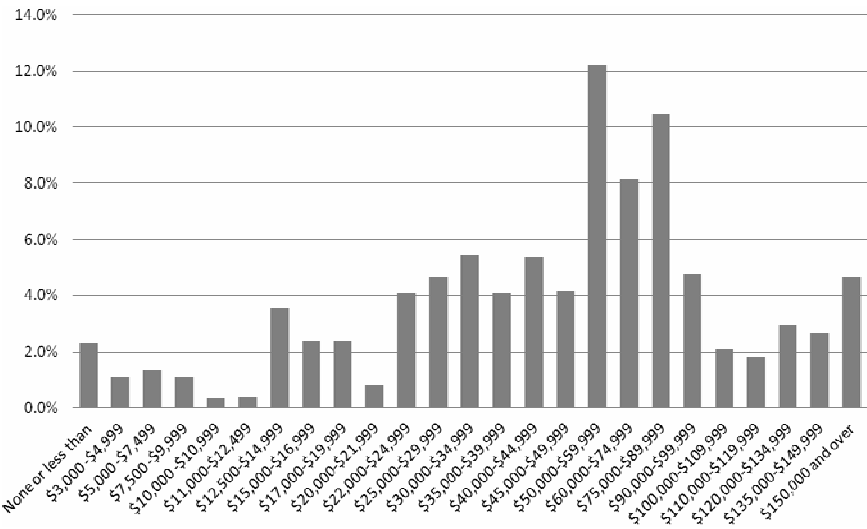
### **Implications for Party and Candidate Strategy**

RePass used his PTR measure and data measuring partisanship and political activism to draw several conclusions about how campaigns should be conducted. In light of his finding that the American electorate is largely

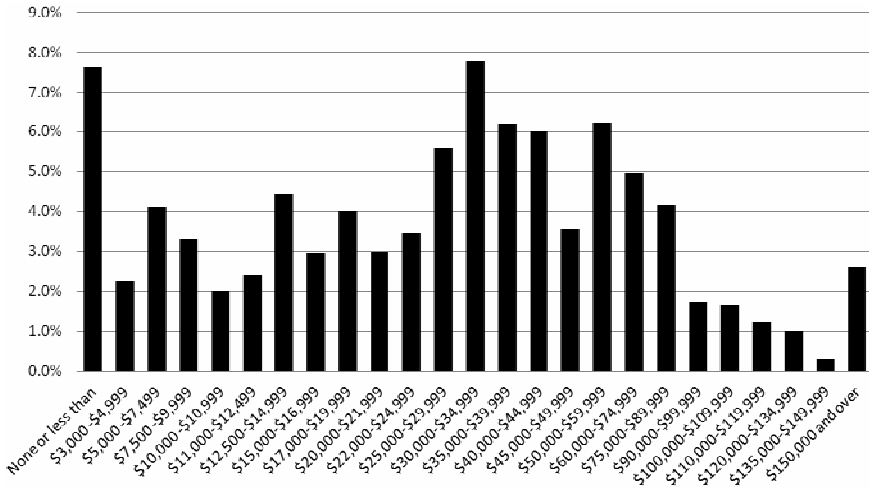
**Figure 6. Non-Floaters by Household Income, 2008**



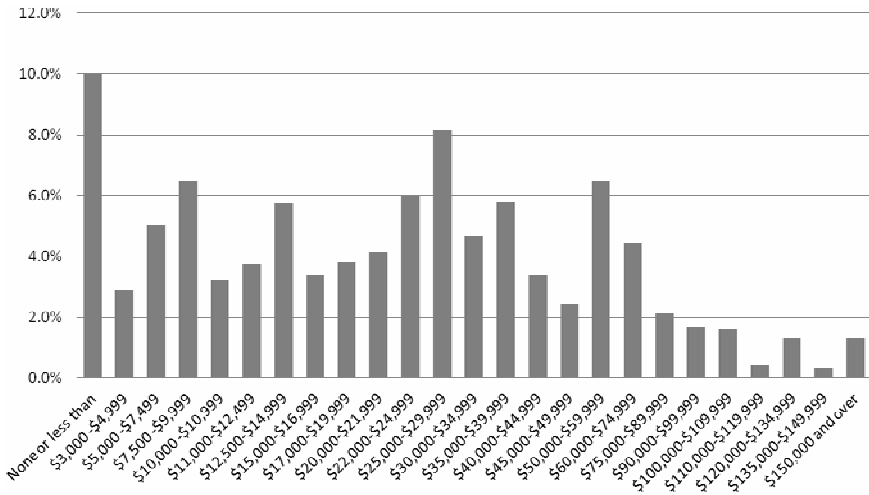
**Figure 7. Floaters by Household Income, 2008**



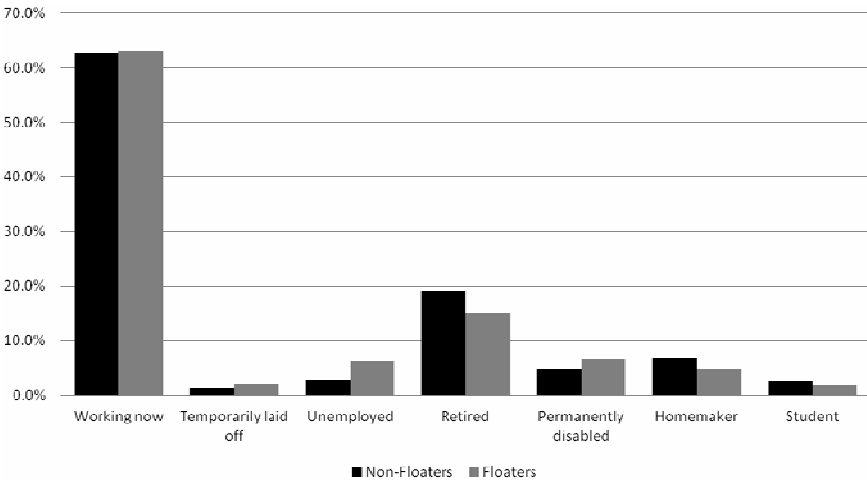
**Figure 8. Non-Floaters by Respondent Income, 2008**



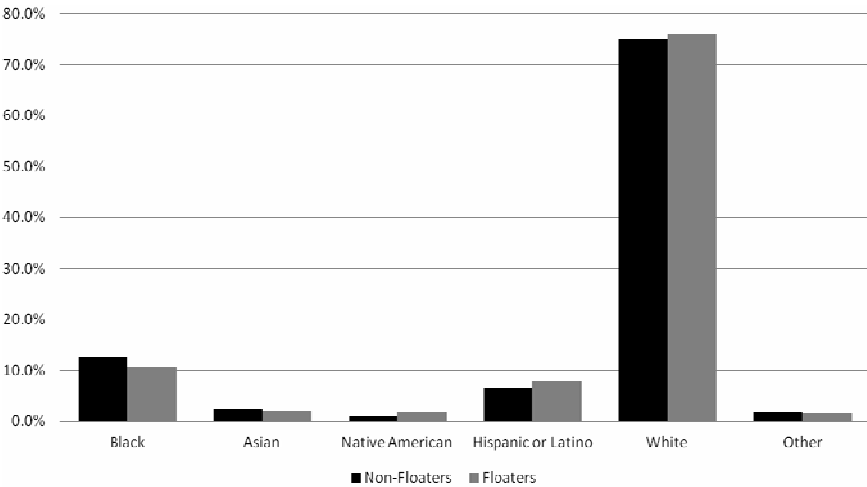
**Figure 9. Floaters by Respondent Income, 2008**



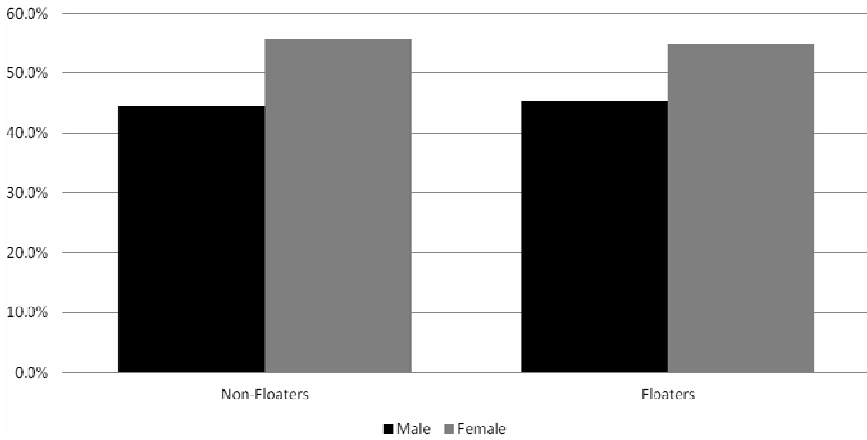
**Figure 10. Floaters and Non-Floaters by Employment Status, 2008**



**Figure 11. Floaters and Non-Floaters by Race, 2008**



**Figure 12. Floaters and Non-Floaters by Sex, 2008**



**Figure 13. Floaters and Non-Floaters by Years of Education, 2008**

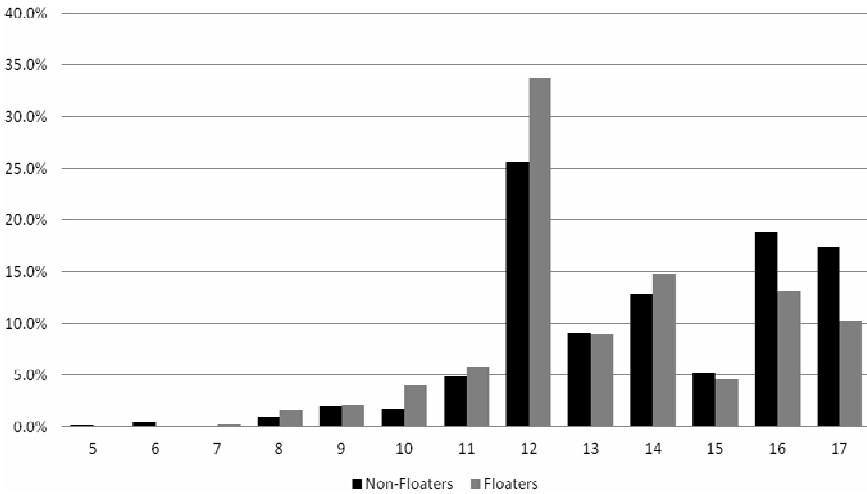


Figure 14. Floaters by Age, 2008

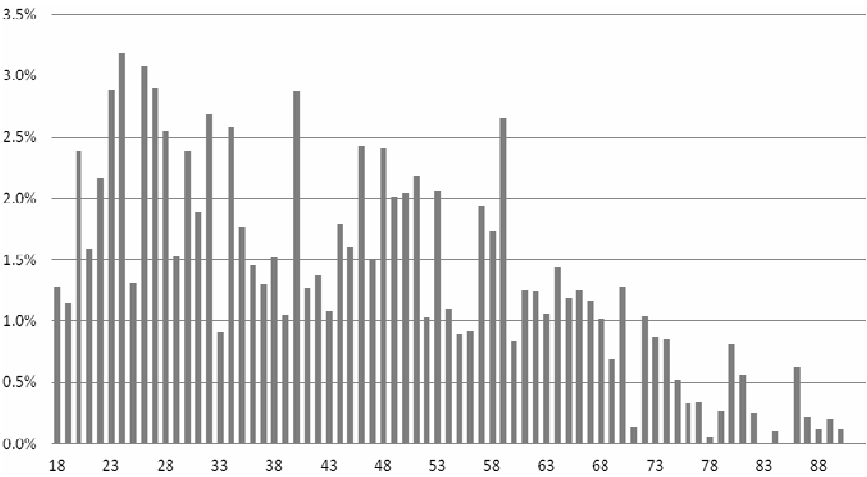
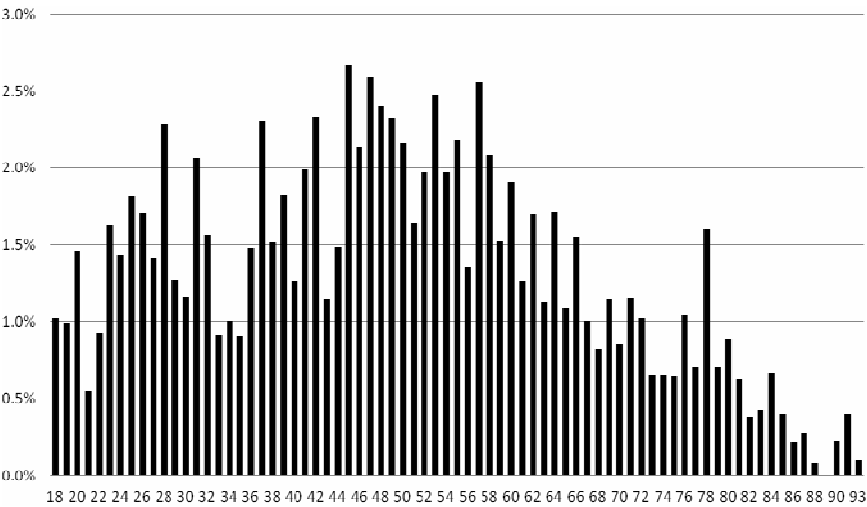
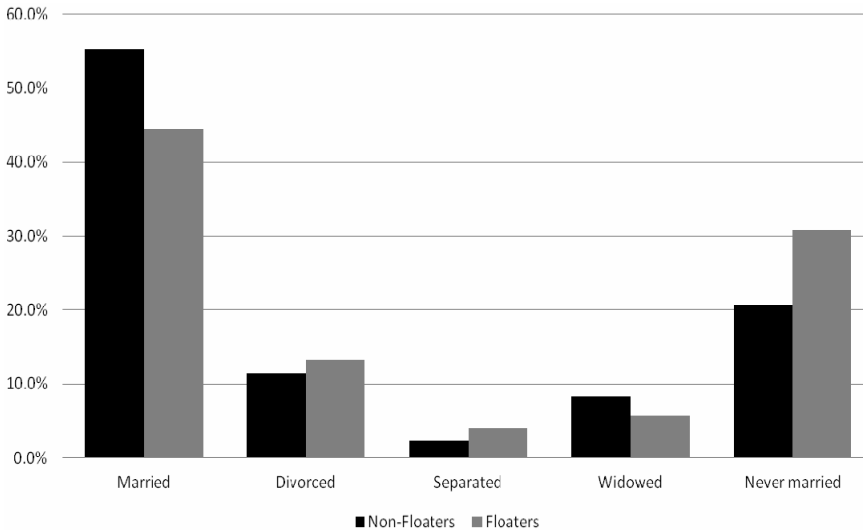


Figure 15. Non-Floaters by Age, 2008





**Figure 16. Floaters and Non-Floaters by Marital Status, 2008**



non-ideological and weakly committed to parties, he emphasizes the need to focus on convincing floating voters to participate. In addition, he points out that ideologues are far less persuadable than floaters, represent a smaller portion of the electorate, and thus cannot be the focus of successful campaign. In many respects, this extension of RePass’ work confirms these conclusions. Two campaign strategies remain useful, given the data from 2008:

1. **There are still an enormous number of people in play.** While many pundits argue that elections are won or lost in a fight over a handful of independents in just a few states, this perspective is unfortunately myopic. Persuadable candidates make up more than half of the electorate in 2004, and almost three-fifths in 2008, meaning that both parties have a vast pool of voters waiting to be convinced for whom they should vote. As RePass argued, “Do not waste a lot of time and resources appealing to or energizing . . . the voters who have both strong party identifications and strong ideologies [as they] are highly motivated to turn out and vote for their party” (2008, 23-4).
2. **Focus on younger, poorer, less educated voters and what they care about.** RePass pointed out that floating voters are incredibly diverse, making the decision by a campaign to focus on the needs of a single subset of voters, such as “the middle class,” self-defeating. In some

ways this study confirms RePass' advice in showing that floating voters are distributed across all demographic categories. However, it is clear that more floating voters are clustered among younger, poorer, and less educated populations. These voters are the opposite of the wealthier, older, and more educated voters who are usually the focus of campaigns because of their larger turnout and more predictable policy positions regarding entitlement and defense spending. Any effort to actively court floaters must focus on the issues that matter to them.

### **Conclusion**

The most important finding of our analysis is that, contrary to the beliefs of political analysts and media commentators, the polarized rhetoric of political elites in America is not representative of a majority of 2008 voters. This paper reaffirms the finding of RePass that most Americans are not part of this polarization. Indeed, the proportion of floating voters increased from 2004 to 2008. It appears that political decisions are much more complex for the majority of voters than simple party allegiance.

Polarization's limited presence—primarily among political elites—is preferable to its proliferation throughout the public. Ideologues that use formulaic reasoning to decide their political preferences threaten the role of deliberation, debate, and compromise in government. Politicians are prone to believing that the countless emails and phone calls they receive from passionate ideologues and the constant news coverage highlighting the ideological divisions of the American people accurately describe the public as a whole. However, these “realities” are actually artifacts of the political process and only represent the attitudes of a small minority. In order for candidates to unlock the enormous potential of floating voters, they must first look past the “left-right” paradigm of elites and search for voters where they really are, floating above the polarization, waiting to be convinced.

Our evidence supports Fiorina's view of the American electorate. He argues that, “the citizenry as a whole is much less deeply divided between liberals and conservatives than are political elites, and any evidence of increased polarization lies somewhere between nonexistent and slight” (2009, 12). Abramowitz's rival argument derives from a survey of a much smaller electorate, 37.1 percent of the voting age population, than does RePass's study of the 2004 electorate (54.5% of the voting age population) and our analysis of the 2008 electorate (61.5% of the voting age population) (McDonald 2011). Analyses of these larger electorates produced findings consistent with Fiorina's generalization.

The large number of floating voters in the electorate diminishes prospects for lasting change in partisan alignments via a realigning election

(Key 1955). The 2008 elections did not yield a partisan realignment of the country along the lines of the New Deal breakthrough of 1932. A sharp partisan reversal of course in the 2010 elections weakened that argument. Election results in 2010 indicated that partisan shifts evident in 2008 had little staying power. Further, we found no advent of a more ideological electorate in 2008. We agree with RePass that “Relatively few voters are ideologues. The vast majority of the electorate does not see politics in liberal-conservative terms” (2008, 27). That will continue to make American elections uncertain and exciting enterprises.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All statistical analysis in this paper uses weighted survey responses in order to account for the oversampling of Blacks and Latinos in the 2008 American National Election Study. Notably, this technique is not used by RePass as the 2004 ANES was not subject to the same sampling bias.

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