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What's up with still-undecided voters?



Dean Hanson / Associated Press A YARD DIVIDED: Harry and Marita Weil of Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, N.M., are canceling out

In Florida and Ohio, those who haven't made up their minds could tip the election. Interviews indicate they're earnest and deliberative about the monumental decision shead.

By Faye Fiore October 31, 2008

Gloria Raymond has watched on cable the talking heads on the left and on the right. For a year she has listened to the news, tuned in to the debates and taken in the stump speeches so she could make a wise choice for president.

But with only four days left, this 72-year-old retired Bob Evans waitress from Tallahassee, Fla., remains one of the undecided voters whom Barack Obama and John McCain are desperately courting in key battleground states. As far as she's concerned, there is only one thing that would help her make up her mind.



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"I'm waiting for one of them to shoot himself in the leg," she said, meaning the foot, which she would also like to see Democrat Obama or Republican McCain put in his mouth. "If one of them would do something that would make it so clear. . . . To tell you the truth, I feel the same about either one."

Raymond is one of a dwindling but crucial pack of voters who are both revered and reviled in the electoral system. They have been spotlighted on cable news shows, pandered to by the candidates and skewered on comedy television ("chronically insecure . . . attention-

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seekers . . . people who get their heads stuck in jars while eating pickles").

There is little research on undecided voters because they are an ever-changing population -- those who equivocate in one election cycle might not in another. A study of presidential elections at State University of New York at Buffalo found that the last time wafflers made a difference was 1960.

But this year, they look to be significant again. A Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll this week shows that this wavering wing of the electorate -- 6% in Florida and 8% in Ohio -- is large enough to make the difference in those battlegrounds.

The rest of the nation, minds made up and marching by the thousands to vote early, has begun to wonder: What's up with those people? They are, after all, faced with two starkly different men, from different generations, with different ideas, revealed and vetted in perhaps the longest campaign cycle ever.

Raymond and several others surveyed from Florida and Ohio explained their thinking in follow-up interviews this week, revealing an earnest if conflicted lot, deliberative by nature, particularly in decisions of consequence.

When it comes to dogs or her 2001 Ford Focus, Raymond, for example, tends to take a long time deciding.

"I have cats, but I love dogs, and I've been thinking about it like five years already if I should adopt a dog. It's a lot of responsibility and at my age I'm afraid to do it, but if I found a dog that's 10 years old so he doesn't live too much longer after me," she said. "And I want to buy another car because my car is old, but I keep thinking, if I just fix it . . ." (She did not hesitate, however, to say yes to her late husband of 50 years: "He swept me off my feet.")

Presidential elections don't always rise to the level of monumental decisions, but with two wars, a crippled economy and an energy crisis, this one does, and the undecided mind swings back and forth, amassing evidence, unwilling -- unable? -- to rush it.

Don Sayers, 48, of Liberty Center, Ohio, has lost one night's sleep (he allows that this might also have been caused by too much coffee). A union member and quality-control manager at an auto plant where everybody is for Obama, he says it's no fun being the odd man out.

The problem is this: The last candidate Sayers got excited about was Bill Clinton, whose wanton behavior let him down. "It's like he cheated on the country. It was traumatic. I don't want to be fooled again," Sayers said.

He never considered voting for Obama, who he believes will take away his hunting gun, even though Obama says he won't. The choice is between a third-party candidate and McCain, who has failed to impress Sayers, despite the fact that he lives 20 minutes from Joe Wurzelbacher, better known as Joe the Plumber.

"Now maybe if McCain had a plumber's card," he mused, noting that the Arizona senator was born with "a silver spoon."

Sayers is researching on the Internet, listening to Rush Limbaugh and watching bits of the Sunday news shows before church. "I just don't trust politicians," he said.

Joyce Noland, 66, of Wilmington, Ohio, has the opposite problem. She thinks McCain and Obama are "both good men," and can't decide which one she likes more.

"I'm leaning McCain, but I think Obama is like a breath of fresh air," she said, having voted twice for George W. Bush. She thinks Obama's running mate, Delaware Sen. Joe Biden, is "a blowhard." But no matter what happens, she plans to wake up happy on Wednesday.

Many undecided voters say they are waiting for that "one thing" that will lift the fog. John Moore, 64, of Sarasota, Fla., found his just this week. Retired from a telecommunications company, he is a Republican who never liked McCain, and was tempted to stay home. Then it came to him -- the reason to vote: The Democrats could end up controlling Washington unchecked.

"That kind of scares me," he said with newfound finality.

Two years of media scrutiny of the candidates would provide most voters with the tools to make a decision. But the glut only left Regina Hansley, 63, of Philo, Ohio, feeling snowed. She's been paying attention long enough to hear the candidates break promises and shift stands depending on the audience.

"It got to the point where it was too much. The back-stabbing. The phone calls. I'm tired of it," she said wearily.



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Hansley is feeling the full weight of the country's problems: Her husband recently died of a terminal illness, and the medical bills are staggering. She lost her job as a respiratory therapist. Her children served in the military and she wants the troops to come home. She usually votes Democratic -- which might point her to Obama, but doesn't.

"It's not race, I'll tell you that," she offered after a long pause.

"I'm angry and I'm tired, and I just don't feel it's right that people are losing their jobs and their homes. I don't trust either one. I really truly don't know who I will vote for."

The nation's woes are also causing Amanda Taylor's uncertainty. A high school teacher and mother of small children from Dayton, Ohio, she is reminded daily of the future generations that hang in the balance. She thinks Obama has good ideas, but wonders how he will he pay for them. She grew up a loyal Republican, but finds McCain too much like Bush.

So what would it take to win her vote? "If somebody would just drop the act, drop the script, have a candid moment. If I could ever see that," said Taylor, 32, sounding dubious

She plans to stay up Monday night, searching for that elusive piece of information that will lead to the undecided voter's Holy Grail -- certitude.

Fiore is a Times staff writer.

faye.fiore@latimes.com

















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