

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Meanwhile, the Republican National Committee has increased its influence through services to state and local parties. Under Chairman Bill Brock, the RNC provides state organizations with salaried managers, finance directors, and low-cost computer service. Even candidates for state legislatures can obtain funds from the RNC.

This new institutional strength has resulted in a paradox: increasingly disciplined parties, whose domination of electoral politics is reinforced by recent federal election laws, persuade a *decreasing* proportion of the voters to identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans.

When Do Voters Really Decide?

“Time of Decision and Media Use During the Ford-Carter Campaign” by Steven H. Chaffee and Sun Yuel Choe, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring 1980), Subscription Dept., Elsevier North Holland, Inc., 52 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Are autumn presidential campaigns a waste of time for voters and candidates? Since the 1940s, political scientists have believed that most voters make up their minds either before Labor Day, when campaigns traditionally begin, or during the last few days before the balloting.

Chaffee and Choe, researchers in journalism at the University of Wisconsin, polled a group of Wisconsin voters four times during the presidential race of autumn 1976: before and after the first Ford-Carter debate (September 23), after the second debate (October 23), and immediately following the November 2 election. They found an unexpectedly high 40 percent of respondents who made their choices during the *middle* weeks of the presidential campaign.

These “campaign deciders” (who split their votes between Ford and



Jeff MacNelly's 1978 cartoon depicts the traditional view of America's undecided voters.

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Carter) were considerably wealthier and better educated than last-minute deciders (who gave Carter a 60 percent majority) but somewhat below precampaign deciders (who went 59 to 41 percent for Ford) in social and economic status. Further, campaign deciders were more likely to be ideological neutrals than were precampaign deciders and last-minute deciders.

Campaign deciders base their choices on reports on TV and in the press, say Chafee and Choe. The amount of reading they did about politics in 1976 jumped between Labor Day and October, while the other groups' interest in political coverage tailed off considerably.

Diehard Democrats and Republicans fall in line behind their candidates soon after the nominating conventions, observe the authors. But once the party nominees are chosen, a large bloc of uncommitted Americans steep themselves in campaign coverage and base their choices on the candidates' views and performances.

Housing Test

"Housing Allowances: An Experiment That Worked" by Bernard J. Frieden, in *The Public Interest* (Spring 1980) Box 542, Old Chelsea, New York, N.Y. 10011.

Providing the poor with good quality housing has been a high priority of the federal government since the New Deal era. But a recent federal experiment suggests that low-income people are troubled most by high rents. So reports Frieden, a professor of urban studies at MIT.

Beginning in 1973, the Department of Housing and Urban Development offered cash payments averaging \$75 a month to poor tenants whose annual income came to less than \$7,000 (for a family of four). Recipients could spend the money as they pleased, provided they lived in or moved to housing that met sanitary and safety standards set by HUD.

The seven-year experiment involved more than 25,000 families in 12 metropolitan areas and cost \$160 million. As planned, the lowest income families received the greatest assistance. The average recipient family earned only \$4,000 (in 1976 dollars). The payments reduced the rent burden of poor families from between 34 and 53 percent of total income to between 17 and 30 percent.

However, less than half the families eligible for the new program applied. Reasons given included a reluctance to move from homes that failed federal inspections and an unwillingness to accept "handouts." Homeowning recipients used the allowances to make minor repairs, but only about 40 percent of the participating families moved to secure better housing. On the average, families spent only 20 percent of their additional income on rent.

"The poor do not give *quality* the high priority that program administrators do," says Frieden. In fact, just as the experiment began, an HUD poll revealed that 84 percent of poor families rated their homes "excellent" or "satisfactory."