

# This Week's Citation Classic®

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**Pomper G M.** From confusion to clarity: issues and American voters, 1956-1968.  
*Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 66:415-28, 1972.  
[Livingston College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ]

The character of the American electorate is changing. In contrast to the 1950s, voters in recent elections show greater association between their partisan loyalties and their positions on six major issues of public policy. They also are more likely to perceive differences between the parties and to agree that Republicans are conservative and Democrats liberal. Unexplained by demographic changes, these new perceptions arise from political events and the parties' reactions to these events. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 120 publications.]

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My family were immigrants, passionately proud of American democracy. They prized their right to vote at least as much as a Pilgrim descendant. If they were better educated, they would have described voting as the epitome of responsible and rational citizenship.

Children see the world as variations of their parents, so I believed that all Americans considered electoral choices this seriously. When I began to study political science, however, the conventional wisdom of the discipline was that most voters were a sorry lot: uninformed, uninterested, neglectful of issues, and incapable of connecting ideas. These findings clashed both with my preferences for a more rational electorate and my personal experiences. I wanted voters to be politically smart, and I had known a lot of smart voters. Still, who was I to disagree with my academic mentors and betters?

Came the 1960s. Whatever the political science literature said, issues were being debated, and voters seemed to be responding to questions of civil rights, social welfare, and foreign policy. Inspired by the posthumously published work of V.O. Key,<sup>1</sup> a number of us began to uncover evidence that parties had some ideological firmness,

that voters were aware of policy issues, and that electoral decisions were connected to policy preferences. My own contribution was to show that, in contrast to the 1950s, voters could now recognize policy differences between Democrats and Republicans and that their own party loyalties were correlated to these distinctions between the major parties. To draw some attention, I summarized the change in the title of this article as: "From confusion to clarity."

This line of research did not win immediate acclaim, since it challenged past assumptions. An attack on my own article, for example, was ill-manneredly titled: "From confusion to confusion."<sup>2</sup> Yet, the evidence mounted. The presidential elections of 1964, 1968, and 1972 were strongly affected by voters' preferences, respectively, on government social programs, civil rights, and the Vietnam War. A major book arguing the thesis of increased voter rationality was accorded the Woodrow Wilson prize, the discipline's highest research award.<sup>3</sup> The research questions shifted. No longer did political scientists see voters as unconcerned and unaffected by policy questions, or repeat the old clichés that the political parties were no more different than Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The analytical questions became ones of specifying the degree, conditions, and permanence of the newly discovered qualities of the electorate. This has led to the emergence of entirely different models of voting behavior, as illustrated particularly in the work of Fiorina.<sup>4</sup>

I can think of several reasons for the frequent citation of the article. It was a small part of an important shift in thinking on a vital element in democratic politics. Thus, research of this sort had both an intellectual and a utilitarian appeal. Furthermore, the article was published as the first contribution to a five-author symposium in the most prestigious journal in the discipline, giving it considerable visibility. Using only simple statistics and being, I believe, well written, it could be understood by most readers and used in their own work. Finally, I suspect that its optimistic conclusions about the quality of the American electorate were congenial to political scientists: many of us had immigrant parents.

1. Key V O, Jr. & Cummings M C. *The responsible electorate: rationality in presidential voting, 1936-1960*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966. 158 p. (Cited 260 times.)

2. Margolis M. From confusion to confusion. *Amer. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 71:31-43, 1977. (Cited 30 times.)

3. Nie N H, Verba S & Petrocik J. *The changing American voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976. 399 p. (Cited 255 times.)

4. Fiorina M P. *Retrospective voting in American national elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. 249 p.