

Directions:

1. Demonstrate evidence of close reading.
2. Highlight your confusion.
3. Answer the questions at the bottom of the page.
4. Write a 1+ page reflection in your WN.

Undecideds Think It Over

Swing-State Voters Can Make Up Minds in Unexpected Ways

BOARDMAN, Ohio -- Joe Sullivan worked his way through a cheese pizza during Friday's presidential debate, and as the candidates argued over the idea of face-to-face talks with rogue states, he couldn't help but think of his own divorce two years ago.

"It's always better to communicate," said Mr. Sullivan, who is 55 years old. "It's the most important thing you can do; countries, people, doesn't matter."

With much of the country clumped into red or blue states, the votes of working-class white suburbanites like Mr. Sullivan in such swing states as Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania could decide this year's election. Ohio, with its 20 electoral votes, is evenly split in the polls between Democratic Sen. Barack Obama and Republican Sen. John McCain.

Sen. Obama can count on strong support from big cities. Sen. McCain is polling well in rural communities and more-distant suburbs. As many as 24% of voters in the state say they are undecided or could change their mind before the Nov. 4 election, according to a poll by the Ohio News Organization, a consortium of eight newspapers.

Despite millions of dollars in TV ads and direct-mail ads flooding into the homes of Ohio voters, Mr. Sullivan's reaction to the debate highlights how the decision-making process among this bounty of voters can be quirky, personal and unpredictable.

Mr. Sullivan said he couldn't help but filter the debate over engaging rogue states through the prism of his divorce, which ended 30 years of marriage. "After our boys grew up, we had nothing left to talk about," Mr. Sullivan said. "We'd just grown so far apart."

Mr. Sullivan is a registered Democrat who's struggling. He worked 19 years in newspaper circulation before the industry's dwindling fortunes cornered him into a buyout. These days, he cuts hair during the week and performs as Jocko the Clown on weekends.

While Mr. Sullivan agreed with Sen. Obama over reaching out to Iran and North Korea, he hasn't ruled out a vote for Sen. McCain, whom he sees as battle-tested compared to Sen. Obama.

Both campaigns are lavishing attention and advertising money on 13 counties in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio dominated by conservative, working-class Democrats. Sen. Kerry won these counties in 2004. Sen. Obama lost badly here to Sen. Hillary Clinton in the primary.

On the northern edge of this battleground is Mahoning County -- home to the fading steel town of Youngstown, which has a population that is half African American, and the surrounding suburbs of mostly white residents.

Youngstown is bisected by the Mahoning River, with abandoned steel mills and dilapidated houses littering its riverbanks. The roads rising out of the valley lead to the modest, well-tended homes of Boardman, Poland and Austintown.

Sen. Obama likely needs to take at least 60% of the vote in Mahoning County to win Ohio, said Paul Sracic, a political scientist at Youngstown State University. The

recent Ohio newspapers' poll showed Sen. Obama holding 49% of likely voters in northeast Ohio compared with 40% for Sen. McCain.

Ron Eiselstein, a grocer and real estate investor in nearby Poland, has traditionally voted Republican and is worried about the economy and the Wall Street meltdown. Like Sen. Obama, the 48-year-old man was born in Hawaii and educated in Southeast Asia. Mr. Eiselstein's mother is Filipino and his father was white.

"Maybe it's just because we share so much in common, but I was really hopeful he would be the one," Mr. Eiselstein said. His enthusiasm diminished for Sen. Obama after revelations about the views of the Illinois lawmaker's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

After watching the debate with his wife, Mr. Eiselstein said the balance had tipped to Mr. McCain. Watching him at the podium, Mr. Eiselstein said he thought of his father, a Green Beret and Vietnam veteran. His father had such a commanding presence, Mr. Eiselstein said, that all he would have to do was stare at any of his seven sons and they'd jump to attention.

"My dad exuded authority," Mr. Eiselstein said. "So does McCain, and that's what we need right now." Watching the debate with five friends at Rachel's, a Youngstown restaurant known for its wood-fire grilled steaks, Heidi Hanni was less impressed. She thought each man spoke in half-truths and campaign slogans. But her anger had as much to do with who was missing at the debate as who was there.

Ms. Hanni is the daughter of a longtime Democratic Party boss of Mahoning County. She had a falling out with her family, and in her twenties she was divorced, on welfare and raising two children alone. Now a successful lawyer, Ms. Hanni saw Sen. Clinton as the champion of working women. After Sen. Obama declined to select Sen. Clinton as his running mate, and Sen. McCain picked Gov. Palin, Ms. Hanni began considering the Republican ticket.

But the debate made an impact, recalled Ms. Hanni, when Sen. McCain said he believes in the fundamental right of people to work in this country. She said it rang false to her: "I mean, how can he say that? He's voted to outsource jobs, half of that is based on big corporate tax cuts... That's taking food off the table of middle-class families."

Since the area's steel mills shut down in the 1980s, the critical issues here have been jobs and the economy. The unemployment rate in Mahoning County was 7.9% in August, well above the national average.

For Janet Chittock, 70, the Wall Street mess recalled the time when she was a newlywed and she and her husband fell behind on payments for a set of encyclopedias they bought from a door-to-door salesman. When her husband was furloughed from his railroad job, they had to borrow money from parents to pay the \$20-a-month bill.

"We learned our lesson," said Mrs. Chittock, a retired mental health counselor and a longtime Democratic voter. "We never got in over our heads again. I want to see Wall Street held accountable for their own mess."

By Douglas Belkin *Wall Street Journal* 9/29/09

What is the author's purpose?

Who is the intended audience?