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THE VIEWERS

Debate Leaves Some Milwaukee Voters Still in Doubt

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

MILWAUKEE, Oct. 9 - For the voters assembled in the Executive Conference Room of the baronial old Pfister Hotel in downtown Milwaukee on Friday night, it was not a question of who won and who lost the second presidential debate of the 2004 campaign. Most of them did not want to discuss it in such terms.

Like the people who questioned [President Bush](#) and [Senator John Kerry](#) in St. Louis, all of the 11 here had described themselves as either undecided or still persuadable. What they were looking for was more detailed answers, covering more policy areas, they said. After watching the 90-minute confrontation, many of them said they were disappointed by what they had heard and still searching for the information they needed.

"Neither man grasped the opportunity to shine, so I'm left waiting for my candidate," said Melissa Dresselhuys, 35, a homemaker from Shorewood, a prosperous suburb north of Milwaukee.

Yvette Mitchell, 39, a Milwaukee businesswoman, said she was not sure she would vote at all in November because "you can't tell who's telling the truth, and you suspect none of them is talking to the people straight, clean and true." She voted for Bill Clinton twice, she added, and wishes that she could vote for him again.

"Maybe I'll write in McCain and Feingold," said Darla Hellend, 57, a nursing care manager, referring to Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Republican, and Senator Russell D. Feingold of Wisconsin, a Democrat. "They got finance reform through when everyone said they had no chance."

What voters like those three women ultimately decide could have national implications. This city and its suburbs are a crucial swing area in a crucial swing state, and the relatively small pool of open-minded voters here could tip Wisconsin's 10 electoral votes either way. Four years ago, Mr. Bush carried the metropolitan area, which casts about a third of the state's votes, but not by enough, losing statewide to Al Gore.

No clear-cut pattern emerged from the post-debate discussions - no unanimous position among the younger voters, the women, or the African-Americans.

Byron Jones, 50, a vocal teacher in the Milwaukee public schools, was typically conflicted. He complained that Mr. Bush "has made a fiasco of Iraq" and has "slighted the black church," but he said he thought Mr. Bush a much better debater. Still, added Mr. Jones, who is also a performer, "there's something in him that's not quite honest, and this constant longing for approval, kind of, 'Mom, Dad, How did I do?' "

Although neither made any out-and-out converts, the Mr. Bush and Mr. Kerry each made some headway with three of the voters assembled by The New York Times. Angela James, a 29-year-old Milwaukee homemaker, said she had leaned toward Mr. Bush before the first debate, which was largely devoted to foreign policy. That debate left her confused, she said, but Friday night's meeting reassured her on issues like taxes and abortion.

"I'm so over the war," Ms. James commented with some asperity. "I'm not sure Kerry would have done anything else. I liked Bush's explanation about his tax cuts helping the economy, and I just can't agree with Kerry's pro-choice thing."

David Duncan, 44, pastor of a non-denominational, middle-of-the-road city church, said he had been impressed by what he called Mr. Bush's directness, particularly when the president suggested that waiting any longer for weapons inspectors to do their jobs in Iraq could have endangered the United States.

"Kerry tried to evade the questions," Mr. Duncan said, echoing a charge made by some of the others in the group about both candidates. "He introduced red herrings to pull attention away from things he couldn't answer, like how he would pay for his programs and still cut the deficit."

Donna Kempf, 43, of suburban Whitefish Bay, who teaches communications, agreed that Mr. Kerry ducked questions but said he exhibited more depth. She judged the president's answers to be superficial and said that it "was not even clear that he understood the issues at stake in embryonic stem cell research."

Karen Lynch, 40, of Cedarburg, another suburb, who works in corporate travel planning, voted for Bill Clinton in 1996 and for Mr. Gore in 2000 because she liked their stands on social issues. This time, she confessed, she "embraces many of Kerry's views, in particular his open-mindedness about stem-cell research and abortion." Poverty is a major concern for her as well.

But this election, she asserted, is not about those issues, so she is leaning ever more strongly toward Mr. Bush, who impressed her on defense.

"Bush is strong, he's consistent," she said after the debate. "They're afraid of him, those terrorists. They're eager to have Kerry in the White House."

Others said Mr. Kerry won points with them on national security.

Eric Olson, 29, an electrical engineering consultant, said he had voted for [Ralph](#)

[Nader](#) in the last two presidential elections, in Colorado and Alaska. Before Friday night, he had been hesitating between casting another vote for Mr. Nader and switching to Mr. Kerry because the race in Wisconsin is so close. Now he is likely to back Mr. Kerry, he said, because of the Democrat's foreign-policy positions, mainly on Iraq.

"I thought Kerry did an excellent job of clarifying his differences with Bush on things like Bush's failure to reach a consensus with our allies," Mr. Olson said. "He made a clear distinction between the removal of weapons of mass destruction and the removal of Saddam Hussein as our national goal, and a clear distinction between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein as the main target of our war on terror."

Mr. Olson said he was perturbed about "a kind of policy creep, from Osama to Saddam to who knows what next?"

Chris Degner, 25, a banker, was one of the few who emphasized how the candidates comported themselves as well as what they said. He was more impressed by Senator Kerry in both regards, and described himself as a more likely Kerry voter as a result of the debate, although Mr. Bush made a great deal more sense to him on most economic questions.

"I like Kerry wanting to keep the government out of morality issues," Mr. Degner said. "But mostly I'm leaning to Kerry now because I find George Bush to be an arrogant person, and I think he seems that way to the world. He walked around with his chest puffed out, very angry and aggressive. Kerry seemed more reasoned to me, and much more in control of himself."

Kathy Clark, 46, an insurance woman who lives in Hales Corners in southwestern Milwaukee County, emerged as one of the most probing participants in the group. She voted for Republicans in the last three presidential elections, she said, but earlier for Democrats like Jimmy Carter and Walter F. Mondale. She said she has no confidence in Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, trusts Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, and is not quite sure what to make of Mr. Bush.

"I got a clearer picture of where Kerry stands on Iraq and his exit strategy," Ms. Clark commented, "so that pushed me more toward Kerry. But now I have to get on the Internet and do some research. I need to learn more about their stands on health care, energy, the environment and stem cell research. And that could push me right back in the other direction by next week."

Ms. Hellend, the health worker considering a write-in, said she did not think much of Mr. Kerry's approach to Iraq - why the allies would join with him, for example, when they would not join with Mr. Bush - and was not so sure, either, about his proposal to make it easy for Americans to buy Canadian drugs. Perhaps, she suggested at one point, she would vote for Mr. Bush because he was "the devil you know."

Ms. Dresselhuys began the evening with the comment that she was frustrated by

"the way that pressing day-to-day issues are being obscured by Iraq and the debate about John Kerry's record in Vietnam." After watching the exchanges on television, Ms. Dresselhuys, who has backed Democratic nominees in the last three presidential elections, said her fears about both of the candidates had been reinforced.

"I'm concerned about Kerry's economic policies," she explained, "and about how he would work with a Republican Congress and how he would work with the allies to get us out of Iraq. Bush lives in a world that's too black-and-white. He's not good on the separation of church and state, and that make me worry about abortion and stem-cell research. I have two young daughters and I'm concerned for their future."

John Files contributed reporting for this article.