

## **Throttle Back on the Group du Jour**

The president's visit to Daytona this weekend raised inevitable discussions of the latest alleged swing voters, "NASCAR dads." We say, throttle back.

Soccer moms, campus kids, "freestyle evangelicals," "office-park dads," "security moms" - they crop up every election like mushrooms behind the barn (and they thrive in the same kind of medium). We call 'em the "group du jour" - the crucial swing voter group that's said to hold the key to the next election. In fact, as Ellen Goodman once put it, they usually can't swing anything more than a headline.

Now it's NASCAR dads. Who are they? Depends whom you ask. According to our own Political Unit, they're "auto racing fan Democrats, usually anti-gun control and tend to live in more rural areas of the country." Professorial pundit Larry Sabato calls them "middle- to lower middle-class males who are family men, live in rural areas, used to vote heavily Democratic but now usually vote Republican." To Wayne LaPierre, they're "hard-working, average tax-paying Americans that are raising their families and putting their kids through school. They are patriotic. They own guns. They hunt, and they go shooting and they love the Second Amendment." A CBS analysis specifies Southern and Midwestern suburban and rural white men. (Amusingly, only 41 percent of the CBS NASCAR dads said they were... fans of NASCAR.) And the Wall Street Journal, citing the conjurer of this group, Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, says they're "blue-collar fathers between 35 and 55... culturally conservative but very populist."

When we run data from our recent polls we find that married, middle- and lower-income white men account for a single-digit share of the national population, and support George W. Bush in precisely the same proportion as all white men. (Make it *rural* white men, and it goes down to *low* single digits.) And white men, particularly Southern white men, are a solidly Republican group, highly unlikely to swing anywhere, anyhow.

For good measure, we checked rural, suburban or small-city married white men with children and incomes under \$50,000 in the 2000 exit poll. They accounted for 2 percent of all voters, and supported Bush over Gore by 70-27 percent. You really want to call this a swing voter group?

Give us a definition, we'll run the data. But we've seen it before: Take soccer moms, the group du jour in 1996. We found, when we analyzed the exit poll, that they made up a fragment of voters - six percent - and voted like all other moms - essentially like all other women. In spring 2000 there was a new crop; the group du jour in one Washington Post article was "Midwestern non-union non-college-educated middle- and lower-income

women." That one didn't catch on, probably because the name alone takes half a 30-second spot.

In our view, a swing voter group ought to fit two basic criteria - its majority vote ought to swing between Democratic and Republican candidates from election to election; and it ought to be big enough to make a difference in the outcome. In a close election like 2000, admittedly, any group could have made the difference. (And not just in Florida. Three thousand, six hundred and six votes in New Hampshire would have made the difference.) But there are two classic swing voter groups in American politics: independents, and white Catholics. Win them, you're pretty sure to win the election: Ronald Reagan won independents and white Catholics in both his races. So did George H.W. Bush in 1988. Both groups swung to Bill Clinton in 1992, and he repeated with them in '96. Only the oddball election of 2000 is harder to read: George W. Bush won white Catholics by seven points and independents by two (within polling tolerances, essentially a dead heat.) He won the election, but not the popular vote.

It's human nature to look for a single sweeping answer to the secrets of the universe - in this case, that one crucial group that holds the key to the election. Beyond independents and white Catholics, it's unlikely to be a fruitful search.

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Gary Langer, Director of Polling, ABC News