

The Search for the Next Soccer Mom

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Ben Wattenberg and Richard Scammon introduced us to the Dayton housewife in their famous 1970 book, "The Real Majority." She was blue-collar and from middle America. She was middle aged and her views were moderate. Since their pioneering work, analysts, pundits and soothsayers have followed in hot pursuit, looking for the group holding the keys to the next presidential election.

In recent years, angry white men, soccer moms and Nascar dads have joined their Dayton housewife. Today's leading contender for the Democrats appears to be waitress moms.

There's usually some truth to the political shorthand, but only some. Soccer moms, supposedly college-educated women with children who lived in the suburbs, were 1996's great political icon. But most suburban women are not college educated, large numbers do not have children, and together those two groups were more important in that election than their college-educated cousins. This fact was lost in the buzz.

Still, the evolution of American politics is bound up with demographic and geographic change. So what are the trends to watch in 2008? A number of them will be examined today at an American Enterprise Institute-Brookings Institution conference featuring leading demographers and geographers. Here are some:

- Hispanic voters are becoming increasingly important. Between 2000 and 2004, Hispanics accounted for half of the growth in the U.S. population, but Brookings demographer Bill Frey argued a few years ago that they had a "translation problem." Out of every 100, 40 were voting age citizens, 23 were likely to be registered and only 18 were likely to vote. But on Super Tuesday in California, Hispanics were 30% of the Democratic primary electorate, up from about 17% four years ago.

Democrats' choice of Denver for their 2008 national convention struck some as odd because the state has only voted for a Democratic presidential candidate once since 1964. But a growing Hispanic population has turned Colorado into a more competitive state and Democrats hope similar demographic shifts will raise the party's fortunes elsewhere.

- Evangelicals are an important, but not overwhelming, force. The fastest growing Christian denominations are evangelical, and they gave Mike Huckabee a boost in Iowa and in the South on Super Tuesday. But the number of people with no religious affiliation is growing. These individuals are now about 16% of the population, up from 8% in the 1980s. They're reliable Democratic voters. According to John Green of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and E.J. Dionne of Brookings, where an individual stood on religion was a good predictor of how he would vote in 2004. The more religiously observant groups turned out heavily for George Bush and the less observant ones for John Kerry.

Political fault lines can and often do change. In 1960, the year John F. Kennedy became the first Catholic elected president, white Catholics and Protestants were sharply divided in how they voted. In 2004, these groups demonstrated similar voting preferences. How actively one practices one's faith was more important than religious denomination.

Yet in 2006 the electorate didn't break down as clearly along religious lines. That may be an indication that we are moving into a period where the religious divide is less consequential than it has been.

- The influence married voters have on elections is declining. Married voters typically vote solidly Republican and married voters with children even more so. But their representation in the national electorate is waning, as are some values to which these groups have traditionally been linked. According to Tom Smith of the National Opinion Research Center, two-parent families with kids at home were 23% of the population in 2006, down from 45% in 1972. The proportion of never-married adults rose to nearly a quarter of the electorate between 1972 and 2006, up from 15%. Overall, never-married, divorced, or widowed women are now a narrow majority of adult women, and unmarried households are now a majority of the nation's households. The growing, unmarried slice of the electorate is tilting Democratic.

- The suburbs are the contested terrain. According to Robert Lang of Virginia Tech, Thomas Sanchez of the University of Utah and Alan Berube of Brookings, Republican voters used to dominate the suburbs, but "with these areas becoming larger scale, quasi-urban environments, they are highly contested spaces that contain some of the nation's most important swing districts."

"Density equals Democrats," they argue, because the social environment and housing types in these areas tend to draw more Democratic leaning voters. Conversely, the farther out you get from the urban core, the more voters lean toward the GOP. Hence, strong Mr. Bush and GOP performance in the emerging suburbs and exurbs that lie on the fast-growing metropolitan fringe (52% growth between 1990 and 2005, compared to only 11% in the innermost suburbs).

But in 2006, the Democrats were more competitive in the metropolitan fringe and dominated the rest of suburbia. As Messrs. Lang, Sanchez and Berube put it, "The metropolitan political battle line is not neatly split between city and suburbs, but instead now mostly lies in the transition areas between mature and emerging suburbs." In 2006, the Democrats pushed that battle line fairly far out into the emerging suburbs. In 2008, the battle may turn on whether they can hold that line or whether the GOP can push it back into the mature suburbs.

- America's shifting class structure has reduced the white working class's political role. In 1940, 86% of adults 25 and over were whites without a four year college degree. By 2007, that group constituted 48% of the electorate. But reduced doesn't mean eliminated. Hillary Clinton's early campaign seemed to be powered by the support of these voters. Come November, this voting bloc will still be an important factor in who captures the White House.

In 2000 and 2004, Mr. Bush carried these voters by 17 and 23 points, respectively. In 2006, Democrats reduced the deficit to 10 points, and if they repeat that performance this year, they'll likely emerge victorious. If the deficit creeps back to 2000 and 2004 levels, they likely won't.

- People are becoming increasingly likely to live close to those who look, act and think like them. Author Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing of the University of Texas, argue in their conference paper and forthcoming book that this is happening because people all over the country are moving to communities where they feel culturally and politically comfortable.

In the close presidential election of 1976, 27% of voters lived in "landslide counties" -- counties where the winning presidential candidate had a margin of 20 points or more. In the 2004 election, almost half the country's voters (48%) did. That same year 60% of voters lived in counties that had not changed their presidential party preference since 1988.

These trends will likely influence the 2008 campaign. Swing voters will be downplayed, turnout in politically homogeneous communities emphasized, and microtargeting used to pick off partisans of one side that live in a community dominated by the other side.

With Ohio again a pivotal battleground, Messrs. Wattenberg and Scammon's Dayton housewife could return for a second act. But now she will live in Dayton's suburbs, her husband will have a white-collar job, she will be working, and both she and her husband will have some college education.

It's a different world. We'll see if the parties can keep up with the changes.

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