

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Swing Vote in 2000

“America’s Forgotten Majority” by Joel Rogers and Ruy Teixeira, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (June 2000), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

Forget the Soccer Moms, Wired Workers, and other recent journalistic chimera, exhort Rogers, a professor of sociology, law, and political science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Teixeira, author of *The Disappearing American Voter* (1992). The “real swing voters” are the white “working-class” Americans who make up about 55 percent of the electorate.

This “forgotten majority” is not, to be sure, the white working class of the past. Most of its members do not toil in factories or, for that matter, hold down any sort of blue-collar job. They are more likely engaged in low-level white-collar or service work. Many prefer to be considered “middle class.” Yet “in economic terms,” maintain Rogers and Teixeira, “they are not so different from the white working class of previous generations.”

The new white working class is formed by what the authors call “the Great Divide” in American life today: the “difference in prospects” between the one white adult in four who has a college degree and the other three who don’t (but generally do hold at least a high school diploma). Though some 20 percent of this new working class enjoy an annual household income greater than \$75,000, about 14 percent earn less than \$15,000 a year, and the median household income is only about \$42,000. While members of the new white working class make up three-fifths of suburban adults, the authors say, “their economic position in American society bears little resemblance to that of the suburban college-educated professionals we hear so much about.”

Since the early 1970s, Rogers and Teixeira argue, the forgotten majority’s common values—“opportunity, fair reward for effort, the centrality of hard work and individual achievement, and social commitment”—have been mocked by their economic experience and “the tremendous slowdown [of the] escalator to the middle-class. The failure of activist government to get that escalator moving again, together with its apparent concentration on the problems or rights of others (minorities, the poor,

gays, even criminals),” has resulted in a widespread “sour and skeptical attitude toward government.” The improved economy of recent years has taken the edge off that skeptical attitude, write Rogers and Teixeira, giving the two major political parties an opportunity to win “the long-term loyalty of these voters and thus to grasp and keep political dominance.”

Leaving out union members, only 39 percent of the forgotten majority voted Democratic in contests for the House of Representatives in 1998, and only 41 percent voted for the Democratic incumbent for president in 1996. If the Democrats could just break even with nonunion forgotten-majority voters, who comprise 45 percent of the electorate, they could win the presidency and almost certainly the House, Rogers and Teixeira believe. The Republicans, meanwhile, who “do relatively well among unorganized forgotten-majority voters,” need to strengthen that advantage, bringing their levels of support back up “to those of the Reagan-Bush years and of the congressional election of 1994.”



In search of the “forgotten majority”?