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Meet the Purples! Decoding the DNA of the Swing Voter



By Marty Kaplan

Both Obama and McCain will make huge efforts on Election Day to turn out their bases — the revved-up Reds and Blues. But it's still likely that the outcome will depend on the Purples, the swing voters in the middle.

Who are they? Working with Zogby International, the Norman Lear Center has now been in the field twice to find out. Our most recent survey of more than 3,000 people was conducted August 19-21. To figure out what color people were, we didn't rely on party identification or candidate preference; instead, we asked 42 questions about political values. Those answers reliably clumped into three groups — Reds, Blues and Purples.

But we didn't just ask them about politics. We asked about what kind of entertainment they liked, how they spent their leisure time, where they got their news, and dozens of other questions about their appetites. What makes this poll cool — and unique — are the ways we can correlate political values to their lifestyles and cultural preferences.

So if you're a candidate and you want to reach Purples, where do you reach them, and what do they want to hear?

Finding Purples

- All politics is still local. Purples trust and rely on their local newspapers for news. Fifty-eight percent prefer their hometown paper, five times more than any national or major city daily. So in addition to making a local stop, push local surrogates to deliver your message.
- Stick with 30-second spots. TV was tops when Purples were asked what they like to do in their free time.
- NBC is still king. Purples most trust old pro Tom Brokaw, followed by *Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams.
- Don't preach to the choir if you are McCain. Few Purples tune in to Fox News.

- Top TV shows to buy ad time on: *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *60 Minutes*, *CSI*, *Sunday Night Football*, *House*, *Two and a Half Men*, *Law & Order* and *Criminal Minds*.
- Avoid reality shows. More than a 25% never watch them, and *American Idol* is the only one to reach double figures (11%.)
- Letterman and Leno give you the best bang for the buck on late night, but 25% of Purples are already asleep by then.
- The news/talk radio format is a good buy, as 41% of Purples listen in.
- Rock and roll will never die. Classic rock and oldies stations will reach 30% of Purples. Pop stations are up there at 28%.
- Over half of Purples either don't listen to national political talk radio or don't have a favorite talking head. Of those who do, 18% listen to Paul Harvey and 13% to Rush Limbaugh.
- All sports, all the time. You can reach more than 10% of Purples with just about any sports on TV. Of course football is number one (54%), followed by baseball and basketball.
- Google them because 69% of Purples say that is their favorite site. Yahoo is at 51% and MSN at 39%.
- Get viral. YouTube is a favorite for 27% of Purples.
- They're surfing for news — 72% say that is the information they look for online. Purples are also more likely to go online to find out about TV shows, movies, games, music, fashion, shopping, books and sports. But don't waste your time with blogs — Purples don't really care about them.
- Celebrities won't help, as 87% of Purples say that their endorsements are a turn off or have no impact.
- The Oprah exception. Twenty-nine percent say Ms. Winfrey is well-informed about the candidate she endorsed (Obama), and George Clooney clocked in at a respectable 26%.
- Be happy because they are. Eighty-three percent of Purples say they are very or somewhat happy about their personal life.

What to Say to Purples:

- Forget about wedge issues. Purples are worried about the economy. Forty-nine percent cite it as most important, compared to 3% who chose morality and values.
- The Iraq War isn't working. Seventy percent of Purples say it has not been worth the loss of American lives and 53% don't agree that it can be won.
- Go green. Four of five Purples say more resources are needed to protect the environment rather than saying government has gone too far.
- Promise that you will throw the bums out of Washington. Seventy percent of Purples blame leaders of the political parties for the worsened state of politics. Eighty percent say this country's on the wrong track.

- Corporate America is not their friend. A whopping 90% say corporations don't generally act in society's best interests. Also, 57% say government regulation of business is important.
- Praise the working mother. Eighty-seven percent of Purples said men and women should share household duties equally.
- Privatize education at your peril. Eighty percent of Purples say that investing in public schools is better than supporting private education.
- Don't demonize immigrants. Two-thirds of Purples say they are here for work, not a handout.
- Walk a tightrope on trade. Purples are closely split on whether workers need trade protections.
- Be tech savvy. Three quarters of Purples say new technology and the social and economic changes it brings are a good thing.
- Civil liberties and equality take a back seat to security and freedom. We found that 57% of Purples say security is more important than liberties, and 74% say freedom is to be more valued than equality.
- However, don't believe that Purples want us to shoot first and ask questions later. When asked to choose between using force or improving anti-American sentiment to combat terror, 85% of Purples choose the latter.
- Compassion is popular. It is our duty to help the less fortunate, say 81% of Purples.
- Be very careful talking about religion's role. Purples are evenly split as to whether religion should have a greater role, or be left out of public life.
- Don't talk about guns. Purples are again evenly split on whether it is appropriate to regulate gun ownership.
- Cutting taxes is always a good thing for everybody. So say 66% of Purples.
- Are they listening? Over half of Purples say they're paying more attention to politics than four years ago.

If you want to find out about the Reds and Blues, too, or to read the details of how the survey was done, LearCenter.org has the info.

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