A recent best seller, the Da Vinci Code, features a furious and frenzied search for the fabled “Holy Grail”; an ancient and occult secret that found would illuminate all mysteries and resolve all issues. In case you haven’t read Da Vinci yet, we don’t want to give away too much here. But it’s fair to point out that the Holy Grail proves to be elusive-- both to find and to recognize.

Political prophecy has its own version of the Holy Grail. The search for it sometimes seems as frenetic as some of the action in the Da Vinci Code. And like the Da Vinci Code, the most difficult task of all can be recognizing what you have found.

We can only be talking about political bellwethers. Bellwethers are local areas looked to for early readings of how national elections will turn out. They may be precincts, municipalities, counties, or even entire states. A jurisdiction gets labeled a bellwether when its voting results consistently reflect the voting patterns of the nation as a whole.

Some observers scoff at the bellwether notion, and argue that bellwethers get it right due to nothing more mysterious than random chance. But many others do believe in the forecasting capacity of bellwethers. Journalists, in particular, still watch bellwethers as harbingers of electoral outcomes.

Most watched of all are the “swingometric” bellwethers. These reflect switches in party voting from one election to the next. Voters in swingometric bellwethers swing back and forth between the parties.

Swing voters are critical this year --in part because there are so few of them. While about 110 million Americans are likely to vote in November, not more than 15 million of them are swing voters. And only a fraction of these voters live in critical battleground states, such as Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

What we know about these crucial swing voters in critical battleground states is that they are more likely to live in the suburbs of large and middle size cities--useful information, but also pretty abstract. What we really need is something more concrete--a town or community of some sort, for example, with real people we can talk and listen to, and to understand what they are thinking about, and maybe what they intend to do in November. What we need is a bellwether.

Enter Abington Township in the Philadelphia suburbs. In Pennsylvania, it’s the Philadelphia suburbs where most of the swing voters live, and Abington Township is typical of the voters who live in those suburbs.

Abington is tucked into the northeastern part of Montgomery County with the Pennsylvania Turnpike to its northwest and the city of Philadelphia to its east. Abington’s voters provide a textbook profile of the nation’s swing voters. They tend to be Republican by party, independent by nature, prolific ticket splitters, and moderate in ideology.

Abington is the quintessential suburb. It’s 57,000 or so residents are white (85%), mostly married, (58%), predominantly middle class ($71,000 median family income), and rather typical in family size (3.1 people).
Many of the township’s residents are transplants from Philadelphia, especially the 10-percent of the African American population who live in Crestmont and some of the white working class who live in Glenside.

Forty nine percent of Abington’s registered voters are Republican while 42-percent are Democratic. But it’s their voting behavior in recent years that makes them a classic bellwether: Abington voted for presidential candidates Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996 and Al Gore in 2000, gubernatorial candidate Ed Rendell in 2002, and US Senate candidates Arlen Specter and Rick Santorum in 1998 and 2000, respectively. They pick winners in Abington Township. More accurately, perhaps, they make winners.

Looking more closely at Abington Township explains why it’s such a bellwether. Abington sits squarely in the center of the Pennsylvania’s 13th Congressional District. The 13th is the most competitive congressional district in the state, and one of the five most competitive in the country. One invites vertigo just reading about how often this seat swings back and forth between the Democratic and Republican Parties.

In 1992 a Democrat won the Republican held seat beating another Republican who promptly returned the favor by beating her in 1994. The winning Republican held the seat against a challenging Democrat for one term but then lost it two years later to the same Democrat. The Democrat who won it barely held on in subsequent elections, and the seat is now “open” again, as the incumbent runs for higher office. That’s Republican to Democratic back to Republican, then back to Democratic--all within a single decade.

It doesn’t get any more competitive--and every one of these elections was close. If the term swing voter didn’t exist, it would have to be invented to describe many of the voters in the 13th congressional district and those especially in Abington Township.

Some fascinating implications can be drawn for the rapidly approaching presidential race. As the campaign picks up momentum into the fall and toward Election Day, political analysts will be watching the suburbs in the battleground states hoping to get a glimpse of the swing voters that are going to decide it all.

But, there could be an easier way to do it. The pundits could skip the complicated calculus, and just keep an eye on Abington Township. Bellwether skeptics believe eventually that the Abington Townships of the country get it wrong. Maybe this will happen. But until it does, Abington is Pennsylvania’s crystal ball. In one election after another, Abington’s voters are consistently bellwethers in the big statewide elections. In close elections and not so close, they inevitably get it right.

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