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Automotive (A Special Report) --- Cars and Politics: Hybrid buyers tend to be Democratic and from blue states; Red states prefer SUVs

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DALLAS RESIDENT Randal Wright grew up in an oil family in Midland, Texas. Because his father was a geophysicist, Mr. Wright learned from an early age that oil wasn't available in an unlimited supply, that the natural resource was being depleted.

So when it came time to purchase a new vehicle last year, he decided to buy a fuel-efficient hybrid, the Toyota Prius. "It's almost insane the way we transport ourselves," Mr. Wright says of the popularity of SUVs and other gas guzzlers. "Policy makers will lag behind, but I'm doing my part now. With oil coming from places where they hate us, the Prius is the car of the future."

Maybe. For now, though, Mr. Wright's Prius is a rare sight in Texas. He acknowledges that many Texans he knows would be embarrassed to be seen in a Prius. For some Texans, the car is too much of a symbol of the environmental movement that they see as the oil industry's enemy, and of a general liberalism that goes against their conservative nature.

Indeed, just as the country has polarized along political lines between red-state Republicans and blue-state Democrats, a similar map could be drawn when it comes to hybrids: Blue-state drivers are embracing them much more than their red-state counterparts are. Similarly, red-state drivers tend to be bigger fans of SUVs. And as regional preferences for vehicles vary, so does related legislation: It's the blue states that are providing more incentives for people to buy hybrids.

Studies by auto research firm CNW Marketing Research Inc. of Bandon, Ore., and Scarborough Research, a New York-based firm that studies consumer behavior, draw a connection between vehicle choice and political leanings. Most hybrid owners say they are Democrats or independents who are left-leaning, while most SUV owners claim to be Republicans or independents who lean toward the right. And sales figures show that most hybrids are sold in the blue states, located mainly on the West Coast and in the Northeast, while most SUVs are sold in red states in the South and in the Mountain time zone.

As for legislation, California, where 40% of the hybrids sold in the entire country are being driven, has taken one of the boldest swipes against SUVs. State agencies in California have to get special permission to purchase an SUV, which must be needed to perform an essential function. And if an SUV is required, then priority will be given to an alternative-fuel or hybrid SUV.

Much of the relevant legislation on the state level breaks down largely along red/blue lines. For instance, most of the financial incentives for people to buy hybrids are offered in blue states like Connecticut and Oregon. In Texas, there are no local incentives to buy a hybrid, but there are programs for the alternative fuels biodiesel and ethanol. Most of the 500 gas stations that offer ethanol-based fuel -- which is made in part from agricultural products like corn -- are located in the Midwest, where ethanol is produced.

Some legislative efforts do bridge the red/blue divide. Many states on both sides allow single-occupant hybrid vehicles to travel in high-occupancy vehicle lanes. And Colorado, a red state, offers a tax credit of as much as \$4,713 for hybrid purchases.

Therese Langer is the transportation program director for the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy, a Washington-based environmental organization. Ms. Langer says she now receives calls from state officials and legislators in places she hadn't heard from in the past, like North Carolina and Texas, inquiring about ways to provide incentives to promote fuel economy. "The states are starting to say that 'If we're not going to get a policy on a national level, then we're going to do it on our own,'" she says.

There are also some signs of creeping bipartisanship on the national level. Currently, small-business owners who buy an SUV weighing more than three tons can get a federal tax deduction of up to \$25,000, compared

with a tax credit of up to \$3,150 for a hybrid purchase. But there is a bipartisan effort in the Senate to tip that balance more toward hybrids. Recently, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley, a Republican from Iowa, and Montana Sen. Max Baucus, a Democrat, introduced a bill that would grant small-business owners tax deductions of up to \$100,000 per vehicle for hybrids and vehicles that use alternative fuel. The committee hasn't yet voted on the bill.

A shift in tax incentives on the national level, or broader financial incentives on the state level, would provide a test for the argument that a third color might be more important to drivers than either red or blue -- green, as in money, not the environment.

"Consumers look at fuel economy as a pocketbook issue, not a political issue," says Art Spinella, head of CNW Marketing Research. CNW recently studied the average fuel economy of various households' vehicles. Those owning a Prius had an average of 3.2 vehicles with an average fuel economy of 29.6 miles per gallon. Households that owned a Dodge Ram pickup truck with a Hemi engine had 3.1 vehicles with an average fuel economy of 27.6 miles per gallon. Not exactly a Great Divide.

Sales of SUVs have sputtered as gas prices have risen, particularly last year when Hurricane Katrina pushed gas prices over \$3 a gallon. Still, SUVs made up about 25% of new vehicle registrations last year, compared with 1.1% for hybrids.

Another factor that may blur the red/blue line is simple utility. Steve Reisman, who lives in Southern California, bought a Hummer H2 because he needed a vehicle to tow his boat to the lake where he has a vacation home. But it isn't his primary vehicle; it has only 26,000 miles on it, although he has owned it for more than three years. When he needs to run errands, he usually rides his bike.

When he first bought his H2, Mr. Reisman says, he received cheers and high-fives from strangers in his travels. But several months later, he got stern looks and a thumbs-down sign from onlookers.

"Every now and then, people question it and say you don't need that thing," Mr. Reisman says. "But people don't know me. They think everyone who owns a Hummer doesn't care about the environment, but that's not true."

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