Amanda Short of Boston College was among college Republicans in Cambridge making calls on their cellphones on behalf of Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey's campaign. (Jodi Hilton for the Boston Globe)

Healey campaign uses data strategy

Potential supporters are targeted by system

By Scott Helman, Globe Staff | October 2, 2006

Massachusetts Republicans appear to be out-flanked at every turn this year. Democrat Deval L. Patrick boasts an unprecedented grass roots coalition. Polls show him leading big. Registered Democrats outnumber Republicans 3 to 1.

But Republican nominee Kerry Healey has a secret weapon: data. Lots of it.

Building on a model that Governor Mitt Romney used successfully in 2002, her campaign has been quietly identifying and courting likely supporters around the state through a sophisticated, niche-marketing strategy designed to cultivate a base of GOP, unenrolled, and even conservative Democratic voters who will pull the lever for her on Nov. 7.
It's called "micro-targeting," a computer-based method that allows the party to home in on individual voters and determine -- based on their backgrounds, voting records, and consumer habits -- whether they're worth pursuing as potential supporters. Healey staffers and volunteers ignore households they know they'd never win, instead of trolling for support street by street like before.

``We have to do it smarter and better than the other side," said Healey campaign manager Tim O'Brien.

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The strategy, which came to prominence nationally in 2004 when President Bush made it a centerpiece of his reelection campaign, is part of an effort by Massachusetts Republicans to stave off political obliteration. Beyond their hold on the executive office, the GOP has a dwindling number of Republicans in the Legislature, half the legislative candidates it had two years ago, and no promising candidates for any other constitutional office.

Whether the GOP can maintain its hold on the governorship hinges on much more than micro-targeting, but the effort has become a central tool to Healey's campaign.

The master voter database is called Voter Vault and exists on the servers of the Republican National Committee; party operatives in each state have access to it. The Healey campaign may know, for example, that an unenrolled voter living in Chelmsford drives a certain car, subscribes to a certain magazine, and has voted for Republicans in the past. So they pitch a certain message -- selling Healey's position on wanting to create more charter schools, say -- and log what they learn in a database.

The goal is to build profiles of all those voters, make sure they understand the distinctions between Healey and Patrick, and get them to the polls on Election Day. Healey's campaign can even customize the information for volunteers at 14 regional offices around the state.

``If you're going to communicate with someone, why not communicate with a group of people that you know should be most likely to be welcoming to your message, or be on the same side as your message?" O'Brien said. ``We can all go hold signs and then the Democrats vote for Democrats, and the Republicans vote for the Republicans, and they split the independents. And then we lose."

But they still might lose, if Patrick can use his vaunted organization as adroitly in the general election as he did in the primary, in which he trounced his two opponents, Christopher F. Gabrieli and Thomas F. Reilly, with more than 50 percent of the vote.

Patrick's campaign has the luxury of relying on union muscle and local Democratic candidates to get like-minded voters to the polls. It, too, has reams of voter data but is relying far more on volunteers to make impassioned face-to-face pleas to friends and neighbors, said campaign manager John Walsh. Walsh said micro-targeting can be a powerful tool, but he dubs the strategy "a lazy person's way of going out and knocking on everyone's door."
In addition to the micro-targeting, Healey stands to get help from the Republican Governors Association, which Romney chairs. The group, since it raises money from corporations, is prohibited under state campaign finance rules from donating money to Healey. But the group may run so-called issue ads or put out direct-mail pieces to help Healey and hurt Patrick, although its efforts cannot be coordinated with the campaign.

O'Brien concedes Healey's job would be easier if there were more Republican candidates in office and running for office because they would help draw local Republicans to the polls. But a Healey loss would only sink the party further, he said.

``Organizationally, the party will be in real trouble," he said, noting that without a Republican in a prominent leadership position in Massachusetts, everything would be harder -- from fund-raising to recruiting promising young candidates to local party-building.

The Republicans' dire state has not gone unnoticed by party elders.

Former senator Edward W. Brooke, in his address to the state Republican Party convention this spring, expressed exasperation at the lack of Republican candidates and local infrastructure.

``We've got to go back to the grass roots where we started from and rebuild this party," Brooke practically yelled after saying he was ``disturbed" at the death of Republican politicians.

For the last 16 years, though, Republicans have at least managed to hold on to the governor's office, often by running against the Democratic establishment. Now it's Healey's turn to try with its data-driven strategy.

In the final three weeks, O'Brien said, the campaign, armed with profiles on scores of voters, plans a final push of 1.1 million tactical phone calls.

But O'Brien acknowledged there's only one true test of whether Healey or Patrick has the better ground game.

``You don't know until the day after," he said.

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