With bits of data, parties assemble a voter portrait

In tight races, details add up

By Michael Kranish, Globe Staff | November 6, 2006

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. -- The setting for Democratic senatorial nominee Harold Ford Jr.’s get-out-the-vote effort seemed just like the old-fashioned campaign pep rally. Hundreds of workers crowded into a cavernous stable, feasting on chili and cheering wildly as the candidate climbed on stage to the strains of country music.

But when party leaders talked about "going on the VAN" they weren’t referring to vans that shuttle voters to the polls. They were talking about the acronym for a software program run by the Voter Activation Network, a company based in Somerville, Mass., that has contracts with Democratic organizations in 32 states. All told, the company says, it is involved in 50 of the top 60 House races, and eight of the top nine Senate races.

The VAN is high-tech network of Democratic voters and potential voters, and analysts say it could be the key to whether the party can win control of Congress.

Seeking to match a highly successful Republican strategy that many say resulted in President Bush's reelection in 2004, Democrats have spent many millions of dollars on “microtargeting,” compiling what they believe is the most sophisticated and accurate portrait of voters they have ever assembled, relying on consumer data about everything from car ownership to hunting licenses to magazine subscriptions.

Now, according to party leaders, even the smallest campaigns across the country can constantly upload and download data about millions of potential voters. Campaign specialists said the data could be crucial in improving field organizations, which can make up to a 4 percent difference in elections -- more than enough to be decisive in many close races.

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"The transformation that is happening in politics is akin to what happened 50 years ago when television commercials helped revolutionize politics," Karen Hicks, the field director for the Democratic National Committee in 2004, said in an interview.

The problem for Democrats, however, is that Republicans have been refining their own data for the last four years, and no one can say for sure whether the Democrats have finally matched the GOP.

The Republican strategy can be seen in Nashville, where dozens of workers have assembled in a second-story office, just above an Italian restaurant, in support of Senate candidate Bob Corker.

Unlike phone bank operations of the past, in which workers were given photocopied lists of voters in heavily GOP precincts, the callers here work off sophisticated lists based in part on data compiled by the Republican National Committee. The object is to find Republicans in even the most Democratic districts -- voters who might have been overlooked in the past.

Chris Devaney, the executive director of the Tennessee Republican Party, said that his workers made 200,000 telephone or in-person contacts in a seven-day period in late October, more than he can ever remember. That follows a yearlong effort in which the party used the database to identify supporters and conduct telephone interviews with many of them about key issues.

"You can definitely target people based on what issues they care about," Devaney said at his Nashville office. So, when a Republican Party worker calls a voter from the phone bank, the conversation isn't just a reminder to go to the polls. It is a reminder about the issues that the voter cares about, as determined by the party data.

This behind-the-scenes duel of the databases goes a long way in explaining the defeat of John F. Kerry in the 2004 presidential race. Two years ago, Kerry supporters expressed confidence because they had been able to turn out more voters for Kerry than for any previous Democratic presidential nominee. But Democrats nonetheless lost in states such as Tennessee and Ohio, because Republicans used their databases to turn out far more voters than Democrats expected.

Democratic officials acknowledge that inaccurate and incomplete voter data hurt their get-out-the-vote effort in 2004. A senior Democrat Party official said the accuracy of the party's database in 2004 was in the 40 percent range, well below what is considered an acceptable level of 65 percent. Moreover, much of the data was incomplete. For example, even when Democrats correctly identified a voter as Hispanic, the party often couldn't differentiate whether that person came from Cuba, Mexico, or some other country.

Republicans, meanwhile, had data that was more than 60 percent

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accurate, enabling the party to fine-tune its effort to get more voters to the polls.

After the 2004 failure, Democrats spent $8 million on a national voter file. Ben Self, who oversees the database at the DNC, said the party's data is now "equal or beyond" the Republican Party's.

A crucial component of the effort is the software that connects much of national and local data, which is where Somerville's Voter Activation Network plays its role. The 10-employee company, run out of a former shirt factory in Davis Square, collects information from local Democratic officials and synchronizes it with the national party spreadsheets.

For example, one of those at Ford's rally last Wednesday was Stephen Lindsey, who ran Kerry's presidential campaign in Tennessee in 2004 and is now working for a state Senate candidate. Lindsey spends much time "on the VAN" checking which voters have turned in early ballots, and sharing data with the Ford campaign. He described how the network could help him pull up a list of 35-year-old women who are earning $50,000, are married and have children. He can then make special pitches based on the issues most likely to face these women.

Similar work is being done by tens of thousands of party workers across the country.

On Oct. 31, for example, the VAN website experienced 1.4 million hits -- an extraordinary number for any Internet site, let alone one that is restricted to authorized users. A hit occurred every time someone logged on, viewed a page, or entered data, company officials said.

In theory, it is feasible for canvassers to identify the archetypal Volvo-driving, latte-drinking, Garrison Keillor-listening voter, or the gun-owning, snowmobile-driving, Rush Limbaugh-listening one.

In practice, the data is used to lump voters into broader groups. A Democratic database includes categories such as "young secular Democrats," "middle aged union Democrats," "young online liberals," and "downscale faith-oriented seniors."

Mark Sullivan, the cofounder of the Voter Activation Network, said he would be "hard pressed to argue that the data that the Republicans have isn't better." But Sullivan said the combination of improved Democratic data and "an army of canvassers" should make up much of the difference.

At the Tennessee Republican Party, Devaney, the executive director, expresses similar confidence. In a recent special election, he said, his data specialists told him to flood calls in a key precinct. The data proved prescient, and the Republican candidate won by a handful of votes. "It helps us get out every vote," he said.

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