

# GOP voter registration in the West

By Shellie Garrett

In 1984 the Republican National Committee made a major effort (its first since 1972) to register new Republican voters. The success of this effort contributed to President Reagan's overwhelming margin of victory over Walter Mondale in the presidential election. In this effort, the Republicans invested major amounts of money and talent to register new Republicans. They concentrated their efforts on several target groups that would produce a high percentage of new Republican voters. One of the target groups chosen was unregistered homeowners.

Homeowners were considered a good target group for potential Republican registrants because they are more affluent and have stronger ties to their neighborhood than non-homeowners. The Republicans felt they could make effective appeals to homeowners which would cause them to register Republican. In addition, homeowners vote at a greater rate than voters as a whole.

A program to reach unregistered homeowners was developed by RNC Western Regional Political Director Harvey Hukari for parts of California, Hawaii and Nevada. The first step in the program was to build a file of unregistered homeowners. To build the file, Voter Contact Services (working with Hukari) obtained computer tapes of property owners from the assessors of the target counties. These tapes were converted into a standard format and owners of single family dwellings and condominiums were extracted. The extracted property owners were then matched current voter registration files, with the remaining owners who did not match forming the file of unregistered owners.

To make the unregistered owner file more useful, certain features were added. The file was carrier-routed to allow mailings from it to go at the lowest third class rate. Phone numbers were purchased and matched to the file. The file was also crossmatched with several files of surnames of various ethnic groups (e.g., Hispanic, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, Armenian, Polish, etc.) to allow for specific appeals to selected ethnic groups. When completed, the file of unregistered owners allowed for flexibility of use (i.e., as door-to-door) and also allowed for refined targeting to specific ethnic groups.

Three methods of contact were used by the Republicans to mine this file for registration: door-to-door canvassing, phone bank canvassing, and direct mail. Door-to-door canvassing relied on volunteers to go through neighborhoods and visit unregistered owners who appeared on walking lists prepared by

Voter Contact. When an owner was contacted, he was asked if he supported Ronald Reagan for reelection and if he was registered to vote. If the answer to the first question was yes and to the second no, the owner was registered to vote on the spot by the volunteer, with his registration form being forwarded to the county elections department.

The phone canvass worked in a similar manner. Volunteers telephoned unregistered owners from a phone list prepared from the unregistered owners file and asked the same two questions as the door-to-door canvassers. Owners who responded correctly to the two questions were sent postcard voter registration forms from the phonebank. The owner then completed the form and returned it to the county elections department. A follow up call was made later to make sure the owner got the form and returned it to the elections department.

The direct mail appeal allowed the Republicans to make use of the verbal and visual qualities of the direct mail medium to persuade unregistered owners to register Republican. The appeals were tailored as to their locality, but generally stressed the benefits of four years of the Reagan presidency in reducing inflation and controlling taxes. Specific mailings were done to selected ethnic groups and sent to owners whose surnames were specifically coded for the particular ethnic group. A response device was enclosed with the mailing, and persons responding were sent postcard registration forms as were those contacted by the phonebanks.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact numbers of new Republicans who registered to vote because of this program, or how many registered because of it who would not have otherwise, it can be safely stated that the Republicans' unregistered owner program moved voter registration efforts to

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a higher level of sophistication and selectivity than previously reached. While selective voter registration has been practiced by all parties and interest groups since our country began, the Republicans in 1984 were one of the first groups to take advantage of the services offered by private computer vendors such as Voter Contact Services. Because of Voter Contact's experience with both assessor and voter files, a better file of unregistered owners was created than would have been possible had the party done the computer work in-house. Enhancing the basic unregistered owner file with carrier-routing, phone numbers and ethnic surname coding gave the Republicans greater flexibility in method of contact and allowed them to make specific appeals to selected ethnic groups which had not been done before.

Future campaigns, either for city alderman or President, will be able to take advantage of the techniques pioneered by the Republicans. Systematic voter registration efforts, such as this one to unregistered homeowners, should become an integral part of future campaigns.

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