

Targeting homeowners and renters

By Jonathan Kaufman

Property ownership is an important indicator of political outlook and, depending on the campaign, targeting specific messages to property owners and renters can be a key factor in winning an election victory. Some campaign programs, particularly direct mail and phone banks are excellent mediums for targeting owners and renters.

Developed initially during a 1977 rent control campaign by Solem and Associates, a San Francisco advertising, public relations and campaign management firm, targeting home owners and renters has proven itself to be an important tool in a variety of campaign circumstances. Voter Contact Services perfected the technology needed to reach owner-voters and renter-voters and has recently refined its approach to permit selected targeting of owners of homes within given ranges of assessed value. This most recent feature opens the targeting possibilities to campaign fundraising as well as targeted voter appeals.

Targeting is achieved by matching the voter file with the computer file of people whose names appear on the Assessor's rolls as a property owner. When a match occurs, those voters—and other members of their household—are considered property owners and the residual are considered renters.

Targeting selected messages to property owners and renters, like any other campaign program, may be more useful in some circumstances than in others. Survey research or review of past election results as outlined below should always precede implementation of voter outreach programs.

Voter Contact Services' targeting and ranking precinct correlation analyses have demonstrated that property owners and renters have distinctly different views on a variety of political issues and candidates.

San Francisco provides some useful examples. The city is overwhelmingly Democratic; Republicans make up only 18 percent of the electorate. Yet moderates do win election to office and the conservative side frequently prevails in that city's ballot measure campaigns over such issues as downtown development, municipal ownership of the electric utility and rent control. Obviously in San Francisco, as elsewhere, there are Democrats who can and do vote conservatively in many circumstances. Property ownership has proven to be a key factor in sorting out these Democrats and targeting an effective message to them.

Solem and Associates designed a Voter Contact targeting and ranking report to examine the 1979

mayoral race results in San Francisco. Precincts were ranked in order by twelve factors, four of which were percent homeowner, percent for Feinstein, percent for Kopp and percent for Scott. Feinstein was the non-elected incumbent who as President of the Board of Supervisors became Mayor upon the assassination of Mayor George Moscone. She went on to win the election after a runoff against Kopp and is considered a moderate. Kopp was also supervisor and, while a registered Democrat, appealed to the city's older and now dwindling conservative and Republican base. Scott, a liberal and a gay, openly appealed to that segment of the electorate.

Once the rankings were set, Solem also requested that Voter Contact prepare a correlation analysis of the rankings. The correlations are used principally to target precincts where two different factors are relatively predominant. However, this analysis also enables one to see the degree of correlation between two factors. A correlation of +30 or more is considered statistically significant, a 0 indicates a random relationship and -30 or less is a significant negative correlation. A correlation of + or -100 would indicate a complete identity or its opposite.

The correlations between homeowner and the three candidates were strikingly different. The homeowner-Kopp correlation was a positive +.46, with Feinstein a less significant -.20 and Scott a negative -.55. The statistics validate our notions of the voter's perception of the candidates and most importantly show that home ownership is an important tool in targeting messages. Kopp would find homeowners a fertile ground and Scott would find renters an even more useful political base.

The utility of owner/renter targeting in certain ballot measure campaigns also can be demonstrated by looking at survey research results. Using a random sample drawn by Voter Contact Services it is possible to distinguish owners from renters in the sample. Crosstabulating survey results by owner/renter, one can test the impact of various arguments on these two groups. When significant differences between owner and renter responses occur, this may indicate that a targeted message will be worth sending.

For example, results from a number of survey research studies conducted over the last few years all have indicated that homeowners are more apt to have heard of political and civic leaders than renters. Owners are more supportive of real estate

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development than renters. Renters are more concerned about the environment while owners are more concerned about transportation problems. On some issues owners tend to make up their minds earlier and have less ambivalence than renters but in other instances the opposite is true. It depends on whether one group perceives that a given issue is important to them. Owners are generally more apt to vote on the conservative side of candidate and ballot measure campaigns than renters. This is particularly true when the outcome is seen to affect property values or taxes. Renters have somewhat more faith in governmental institutions, services and processes than owners.

As one would expect differences in attitudes between owners and renters are most significant on housing-related issues. Renters are generally more concerned about the housing supply than owners. They are also more supportive of efforts to prevent increases in the cost of housing. Owners are more concerned about the physical quality of their neighborhoods. They do not feel strongly about housing matters unless they are directly affected. On a housing issue, property ownership frequently is the single most important demographic factor that determines a voter's attitude. As noted, this factor can easily be incorporated in random samples, phone and walk lists and mailing labels.

Now that owners can be targeted by the value of their property, campaigns are beginning to use this capability as a means of developing fundraising lists. Republicans have traditionally been more active in soliciting contributions through direct mail but the availability of this new targeting capability may provide an opportunity for Democrats. Senator Gary Hart used Voter Contact's targeting program for raising funds in his home state of Colorado.

Finally, just as we can match the owner and voter files to determine which voters are property owners, we can also match the other way to determine which owners are voters—or non-voters. The potentials of using this approach which include voter registration drives among homeowners were also explored for the first time during last year's elections.

In summary, home ownership is a more potent political tool than many people realize. The techniques have been developed and perfected and campaign managers have made successful use of these capabilities in a wide variety of campaign situations.

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