

Who votes?

By Jonathan Kaufman

There are important differences between the universe of all registered voters and the portion who will vote in a given election. As campaign managers across the country are now discovering, awareness of these differences, the technical capability to target known voters and a well-conceived research and outreach program can make the difference between success and failure on election day.

Formerly, direct mail and precinct operations focused on all voters in high turnout precincts, including those that don't vote. Regular voters who happen to reside in precincts where turnout happened to be low were ignored. Now it is possible to use computer technology to target voters individually based on their propensity to vote.

There are two strategic approaches to the use of data on voter propensity: the strictly cost savings of mailing only to those who have a greater likelihood of voting and the selective targeting of voters in qualitatively different ways, based on their propensity to vote.

PUTTING SCARCE RESOURCES TO WORK MOST EFFECTIVELY

If turnout is estimated at fifty percent, and one can identify with a reasonable degree of certainty which voters will actually go to the polls, then theoretically a campaign can double its efficiency by focusing on direct mail, precinct walking and phone bank programs on those in the 50 percent that will actually vote. A technology for predicting a voter's propensity to vote has been developed and put to work. This simple numbers game has been played by campaign managers over the past few election cycles.

Some states actually record participation information on their voter registration computer files thus making use of the information much more practical since no expensive data collection is necessary. States that do this include Alaska, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon and Washington. Counties in California are now required by state law to make available computer files of voters who voted in even-numbered November elections. However, since these are high turnout elections, more interesting and

useful data from local and primary elections must still be collected manually.

A file which includes data on each voter's history of voting on an election by election basis has come to be known as an election history or voter history file. These files should be developed for past elections of interest before the campaign gets under way. I.D. or affidavit numbers of voters who actually voted are taken from the rosters voters sign on election day and matched against an overall registration file. A participation profile of every voter in the jurisdiction is thus developed. Ideally, rosters from several past elections are fed into the system so that the ability to predict future tendencies to vote is increased. This technique is especially valuable in jurisdictions where election officials do not routinely purge non-voters from the rolls.

Solem, Loeb & Associates, along with some other consultants has used Voter Contact Services' California data base to build such profiles across the state. A change in the California state law made it easier to register to vote and harder to purge names of non-voters. This inflated the rolls and sparked interest in developing participation files. In nearly every major county in California, we now have files including as many as seven different elections. Similar files in other states also have been developed by Voter Contact Services.

In executing campaign programs using this technology, we routinely select voters who have voted five or more times out of the six elections on which we had history if we want a tight list. We broaden the base by selecting voters who voted two or more times if we want to expand the campaign's outreach effort. Alternatively, we can select specific elections. In a primary election campaign, for example, we may want all voters who voted in the last primary two years ago. Frequently, we will combine targeting techniques. In November 1985, an off year, we typically targeted voters who voted four out of six times plus those who voted in November 1984 and who registered recently, thus getting a relatively tight list of frequent voters plus the recently registered voters who are most likely to vote.

This technique is most useful in local, non-controversial elections when turnout is likely to be small. But any campaign with limited funds will want to reach frequent voters first. We mail initially to the most frequent voters, who have voted four or more times out of six. Then, if and when additional campaign funds become available, we go back and mail to less frequent voters.

Alternatively, a get-out-the-vote effort can be targeted at demographic groups known to be supporters who have a low propensity to vote. Voters who have voted only once, twice or not at all can be printed on a list for special treatment by a phone bank, election day walk program or be sent last minute mailings reminding them to go to the polls.

Why bother with such sophisticated methodology? Indeed, the cost of compiling this data for a sizeable jurisdiction can easily go into the thousands of dollars. An example illustrates the dramatic cost-effectiveness of targeting by election participation. In 1985 there were 395,300 registered voters in San Francisco, California. But in the past six elections, 73,000 had never gone to the polls, 104,500 had voted only once and another 52,600 had voted only twice. Deciding not to send a piece of mail to these 230,000 voters (180,000 households) can save \$45,000 at 25 cents apiece.

A program like the one noted above is not without its risks. One cannot casually lop off 58 percent of the officially eligible electorate even in a very low turnout situation and confidently expect to reach everyone who will go to the polls on election day. Precautions should be taken. Send some mail to all voters but send more to the frequent voters. Adjust the parameters used to separate "voters" from "non-voters" so that stable population groups like Republicans, homeowners and the elderly will get more mail than young, Democratic renters. We have found that registration and birth dates are good predictors of turnout. Some research on this subject was reported in a previous issue of *Voter Contact News* and more work is underway. While it's not wise to rely entirely on any single targeting model, a good campaign manager can utilize a diminished universe of known voters to dramatically increase the effectiveness of campaign outreach programs.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF FREQUENT VOTERS

A second strategic approach is based on the difference in the demographic profiles of frequent voters and those who are registered but don't often vote. Knowledge of these differences assists in developing campaign themes and targeting messages, and even deciding what's the best election for a particular candidate or measure. Understanding and using the demographic implications of voter participation levels can have a qualitative effect on a campaign that transcends the mere "numbers game" discussed above.

A correlation between frequency of voting and such demographic characteristics as party affiliation, homeownership, age and registration date was mentioned above. Our San Francisco data showed that of 114,000 homeowners, only 43,000 or 38 percent of them voted in fewer than three out of six elections. By contrast, 58 percent of the total voter population and 66 percent of the renters have voted in fewer than three of six elections. Based on these numbers alone, tenant advocates reportedly decided not to put a rent control measure on the ballot in a low-turnout election!

Knowing the demographic composition—and the opinions—of the voters who will actually vote is crucial to the development of a campaign strategy. It is no longer necessary to rely solely on public opinion survey research to determine whether respondents are

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registered and whether they plan on going to the polls in an upcoming election. Random samples drawn by Voter Contact can be pulled from the pool of frequent voters. Alternatively, the voting history of voters selected in the sample can be printed right next to the voter's name and later cross-tabbed with the survey results. Comparisons of answers to survey research questions about propensity to vote with actual data about that voter's past performance tend to show some discrepancy with more people claiming they voted than actual turnout figures indicate.

Survey research that is cross-tabulated by propensity to vote can tell us a lot about the opinions of those who will vote compared with those of voters as a whole. We have detected significant differences on awareness of issues and candidates and attitudes toward them. This has made it possible to offer clients advice about which elections offer ballot measures the best chance for success. For example, we've noticed that high propensity voters are somewhat less concerned about environmental issues than low propensity voters.

Just as Democratic candidates do well in highly Democratic districts, so certain candidates or ballot measures do better as turnout increases or decreases. Knowing the propensity to vote of particular groups of voters helps determine the size of the campaign effort that will be needed and how much of the effort should be persuasive (with frequent voters) and how much should be oriented toward getting voters to vote (with favorable but infrequent voters).

Voter Contact provides demographic profiles to help correlate propensity to vote with other demographic factors. Using data from these reports it is possible to see just how propensity varies from one demographic group to another. The chart below is excerpted from a Demographic Profile. Compare the voting behavior of young people and senior citizens in a couple of northern California locations where we have a file of six elections. Jurisdiction A is a smaller city that is experiencing recent growth as the suburbs move out to it. Jurisdiction B is a larger, more urban area.

	Age under 25	Age 35-44	Age over 65	Total Voters
Jurisdiction A				
Voted only once	31%	17%	16%	16%
Voted four+ times	4	41	46	45
Jurisdiction B				
Voted only once	33	26	18	23
Voted four+ times	2	22	41	33

The data from both jurisdictions predictably reflects that young people have a shorter voting history and are less stable. If you have a candidate who wants to appeal to youth, make sure he or she understands that if it's not a high turnout election, there better be a strong get-out-the-vote effort targeted at young people or the campaign should be directed at older people instead!

In the past, election participation information has been used simply to eliminate infrequent or non voters from a mailing list. But smart managers are now discovering that using this data in survey research and in targeting messages is a potent political tool.

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