

Schwarzenegger camp mines consumer data to target supporters

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Gin or vodka? Ford or BMW? Perrier or Fiji water? Does the car you buy or what's in your fridge say anything about how you'll vote?

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's campaign thinks so.

Employing technology honed in President Bush's 2004 victory, the Republican governor's re-election team has created a massive computer storehouse of data on personal buying habits and voter records to scout up likely supporters. Campaign officials say the operation, run in cooperation with the state Republican Party, is the largest of its kind in any state, at any time.

Some strategists believe the consumer information can decode a voter's political genetics even better than party label. The cocktail you have at dinner or the car you drive could provide a clue for the campaign to identify a like-minded voter, even in a heavily Democratic neighborhood.

“It's not where they live, it's how they live,” said Josh Ginsberg, the Schwarzenegger campaign's deputy political director.

The idea is an outgrowth of techniques that businesses have long used to court new customers. Using publicly available data, the Bush campaign in 2004 knew voters' favorite vacation spots, religious leanings, the music and magazines they liked, the cars they drove.

Few people might realize how much information is publicly available, for a price, about their personal lifestyles. Companies collect and sell consumer information they buy from credit card companies, airlines and retailers of every stripe.

Using microtargeting, as the practice is known, Bush's campaign teased out supporters in Ohio and other swing states. Schwarzenegger -- whose political operation is run by two Bush veterans, campaign manager Steve Schmidt and strategist Matthew Dowd -- is taking a page from that book, adapting it to California and updating it with the latest technology.

The governor appears headed for victory, and campaign officials already credit the system with driving up support, particularly among absentee voters.

Beyond California, Republicans hope microtargeting will drive up turnout in states with tight congressional races, including Indiana, Missouri, Kentucky and Pennsylvania. The success of the effort could decide national elections, with GOP candidates struggling to overcome generally sagging poll numbers.

A coalition of unions and other left-leaning groups called America Votes is using consumer records to help find Democratic supporters in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and New Hampshire. The Democratic National Committee is using consumer data in turnout efforts in several states.

The California Democratic Party, which heads the statewide turnout operation for Schwarzenegger rival Phil Angelides and other party candidates, has been gathering consumer data as well.

Angelides campaign manager Cathy Calfo said the governor's campaign is "using it as a system to manipulate people and allow a candidate that has no specific message to tell different people different things."

This time of year, a muddle of TV ads creates as much confusion as clarity. But behind the scenes, the Schwarzenegger campaign has stockpiled millions of names, phone numbers and addresses and merged them with consumer preferences, voting histories and other demographic markers. A household can be targeted with phone calls, mailings and visits from volunteers, delivering messages tailored to issues the resident is believed to care about.

"For a long time in California, the thesis has been that television advertising by itself drives voter turnout. That, in fact, is not the case," Schmidt said. "What drives voters is person to person contact."

In simplest terms: A homeowner who drives a Volvo, reads The New Yorker magazine and shops at Whole Foods Market likely leans Democratic. A pickup driver with a hunting or fishing license who reads Time magazine probably leans right.

Schwarzenegger's operation is bankrolled with up to \$25 million and staffed by 60 people backed up by volunteers.

Democrats and unions have their own data files to locate and persuade voters. With a few computer mouse clicks, they can isolate voters based on age, median income and gender, and target mailings, home visits or phone calls accordingly.

But some argue that analysis of consumer preferences is overrated when voters are focused on issues such as the Iraq war.

“No amount of microtargeting is going to save Republicans,” said California Democratic Party adviser Bob Mulholland.

In a behind-the-scenes book he co-authored, Dowd argues that your lifestyle can reveal at least as much about your politics as where you live.

Jaguar owners are those most likely to vote, according to the book, Hyundai drivers among those least likely. Dr. Pepper is the only sugared soft-drink with a GOP-leaning consumer base, and NFL viewers tend to be Republican.

Combining such data, the Bush campaign targeted types including “Archie in the Bunker,” “Mellow Bush Supporters” and “Terrorism Moderates.” Schwarzenegger is doing the same.

Last weekend, several dozen Schwarzenegger volunteers hunkered down in a Los Angeles office to call thousands of potential supporters.

The campaign, working from 48 offices statewide, estimates it has made over 3 million phone calls so far. Each voter is assigned a bar code for tracking purposes, a technique also used by Democrats. With information drawn from the database, the campaign produces a personalized script a volunteer will read over the phone that is based on an issue thought to be of importance to each voter.

This weekend, it ranged from illegal immigration to taxes to abortion regulation. After each conversation, voter responses are recorded and scanned into the computer system, further refining each person's profile. Next could be more mailings, more calls or a visit from a campaign volunteer.

But Schwarzenegger and national Republicans appear to be making more elaborate use of consumer data.

“After 2004, the world changed,” said Jano Cabrera, a Democratic strategist who advises America Votes. “Having a bunch of names can only help you so much. Knowing how to target each person on that list helps you a great deal.”

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