

The Evolution of Microtargeting

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All political campaigns share the same goal: to win more votes than the opposition. And most candidates believe that if they could talk about their campaigns with each voter individually, they would win. Of course, in most electoral constituencies it isn't possible for candidates to talk personally with every voter even if they wanted to. So choices have to be made. In the time available and with the resources at its command, it is important for the campaign to identify those voters with whom it needs to communicate and those with whom it does not. It is crucial for campaigns to specifically target their potential supporters. They must, to use an old adage, "pick their cherries where the cherries are."

All campaigns have different resources for the tasks before them but only one is always shrinking: the calendar. Therefore, it is important for a campaign to be able to make intelligent decisions as to who its targets are, and to make sure they are of sufficient numbers to make a difference in the election. No time can be spent during a campaign on unproductive efforts. Once those targets are chosen, they must receive effective messages from the campaign. The only way messages can be effective is if they are relevant to the targeted voters. And the only way they have a chance to be relevant is if the campaign has enough information about those voters to be able to tailor the messages to the individuals.

When we meet someone on the street, there is very little we can talk about. We may have in common the location where we meet, or maybe we can talk about the weather. We can perceive the person's likely gender, likely age range, and likely race, all of which allow us to tailor our communication in the hope of being relevant. If we want to hold the person's attention and elicit a response to what we say, we need to talk about something the person may care about.

While we won't necessarily know what that is, our assumptions are more likely to be accurate the more we know about the person. We might, for instance, assume that seniors care more about senior issues, that young people care more about young people's issues, that males care more about sports, that minorities care more about minority issues and so on. Of course, assumptions based on broad categories like these will never be perfectly accurate, but the more we know about voters, the more effectively we can communicate with them. If we are to have a hope of persuading enough voters to vote for our campaign, we must communicate with those who can be persuaded and use messaging that has the best chance of accomplishing that persuasion.

Targeting voters is not new. Early American candidates targeted voters by going to the places where they tended to gather—in the town square, at the saloon, or in the general store. As the US postal service matured, candidates began to use the mail to communicate with voters. As early targeted voters may have been only land-owning males. The franchise expanded throughout our history, broadening the field of potential targets but also making it more difficult to decide whom to target and what message to give them.

As the number of registered voters increased with the country's growth, the number of channels of communication for reaching the voters grew as well. As the US Postal Service matured, candidates began to use the mail to communicate with voters. Mailing materials to voters became common in the nineteenth century. Abraham Lincoln used the mail to send his campaign messages when running for the legislature and later for the US Senate.

The twentieth century brought in the phone as another mode of communication with voters, then e-mail late in the century, and the early twenty-first century has seen an explosion of communication channels such as texting, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. As the population grew, the costs of communicating with voters grew as well, and the growing costs

made the necessity of targeting more pronounced. Campaigns could rely on the traditional methods of broadcast communication, through newspapers, magazines, television, and radio but these are broad-based communications that have been unable to communicate individualized messages to targeted voters while avoiding messages to those not targeted. These forms of communication are critical in modern campaigns but can never fully replace the need to contact voters directly. As the American electorate grew more complex and dispersed, increasing expertise in more sophisticated methods of targeting became more important. Modern campaigners understand that all channels of targeting are important and that each must be done well.

Critical to the development of targeting techniques has been the rise of computer processing and, more recently, the proliferation of the personal computer. Databases of information about registered voters has accelerated the ability of campaigns to target more specific demographics, which helps the campaign avoid the waste of resources that occurs when communicating with voters who either cannot be won over or will not vote at all. Campaigns want to find the undecided voter who is also persuadable, and to use the data about that voter to have the best chance of persuading him or her to support the campaign and then to vote. Targeting at such a sophisticated level of precision is called microtargeting.

The Profession of Political Campaigning

The early history of political campaigns is marked by the existence of backroom politicians who were the architects of prominent successful politicians. William McKinley had Mark Hanna, Woodrow Wilson had Colonel House, and Franklin Roosevelt had Louis Howe. But few people spent their working lives on campaigns, in part because campaigns were relatively brief. For example, John Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign did not commence until January of that

year. And as recently as 1964, Robert Kennedy announced his campaign for the US Senate in New York a scant two and a half months before the election.

With the rise of primaries, the lengthening of the campaign season, and the advent of television campaigning, there arose a need for professional campaigners who could not only work in campaigns over a longer period of time but could also help the campaign allocate the larger budgets more effectively. The proliferation of presidential primary campaigning took the decision-making in the nomination process away from the backroom politicians and placed it squarely in the hands of campaign professionals. Also, the rise of television and radio made it easier for politicians to speak directly to the voters. The vacuum created by the weakening role of political parties has been filled by campaign professionals. Those who could help campaigns use modern communications to reach voters more effectively would be hired by the twentieth-century campaign.

Precinct Targeting

The era of the presidential candidate campaigning from his front porch ended with William McKinley at the conclusion of the nineteenth century. Personalities like Theodore Roosevelt made campaigning a much more publicly accessible event. The twentieth century moved campaigning toward greater democracy, not only in the way candidates became nominated but also in the way people became involved at all levels. Innovation that has contributed to the rise of professional campaigns came as the process opened up to other professions. Television marketers began producing the first campaign commercials, and computer programmers began to find ways to process political data to better inform the decisions each campaign must make.

One of these innovations was to compile precinct statistics to help make judgments about how each precinct performs in an election. As the smallest geographic unit in a candidate's

political universe, a precinct has years of election results that can help determine how much it might swing from one party to another, what kind of turnout might be projected, or the level of consistent party loyalty. Organizations like the National Committee for an Effective Congress (NCEC), founded by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1948, began compiling precinct statistics to help Democratic and progressive candidates in just this manner. Predictions about how a precinct is likely to perform allowed campaigns to decide where to target. They could decide where persuasion was needed, where they might want to place their yard signs, or where they only needed to turn out the vote. Similarly, they could decide where their campaign time and resources would more than likely be wasted. A campaign could target its efforts toward precincts based on how they historically performed.

Data produced from organizations like NCEC defined the nature of direct-voter targeting well into the 1970s. With each election cycle, the predictability of precinct performance improved, and campaigns came to rely increasingly on sophisticated precinct targeting. Precinct targeting was part of a larger movement toward more individual-based targeting. This movement toward targeting individuals would continue to progress with the computerization of databases used for direct voter contact.

Geodemographic Targeting

The United States Census Bureau began using computers to compile national statistics during the twentieth century. Aggregate census statistics, compiled well before the advent of the computer, have also been computerized since. As the data became increasingly detailed and computer technology improved, the ability to process the data and learn from it improved as well. During the 1970s, firms like Claritas pioneered the development of clustering—grouping people according to shared demographic data and behavioral patterns—leading to geodemographic

targeting in campaigns. All of the American populace could be categorized into one of forty clusters. The way the data was aggregated led to the categorization of every zip code into the same forty clusters. Claritas labeled those clusters in clear and understandable ways, allowing them to be used more easily in commercial marketing and later in political targeting.

A given cluster might, for instance, be labeled as “pools and patios,” which denotes interests connected to upper-income, well-educated people who have more disposable income and live in comfortable surroundings. Another cluster, “shotguns and pickups,” represents a demographic of lower-income, more rural, likely gun owners whose mode of transportation is more likely to be a pickup truck than an expensive sports car. The two groups may be targeted by the same campaign, but different methods and messages would be employed.

Claritas clusters were first used in a political campaign in 1978—a right-to-work referendum in Missouri, which was not an effort in favor of workers’ rights but one designed to destroy the collective bargaining process and, in turn, organized labor. When that campaign began, polling showed that the measure would pass overwhelmingly. Organized labor understood that the only way the referendum could be defeated would be if their opposition never saw defeat as a possibility. Their overconfidence could be used against them. It called for a stealth campaign of person-to-person, door-to-door, and professional direct mail and telephone contact.

Claritas clusters were used to define the sampling for the initial polls and then to define the targets. The labor campaign saw that it could use Claritas clusters to define those voters who were receptive to the argument that the “right to work” would not help workers. This new form of targeting by clusters, with an intensive direct-voter-contact campaign, allowed the pro-labor

forces to successfully defeat the referendum. The Democratic political community sat up and took notice.

Geodemographic targeting was another step toward more individual-based targeting, with the focus on reaching individuals within zip codes that fell into a particular cluster. This development conveniently intersected with my professional life and fully engaged me in the targeting business.

The Bayh Campaign

I grew up in Indiana and, like so many of my generation, was inspired by President Kennedy. In 1964, Indiana's Senator Birch Bayh was in a plane crash with Senator Ted Kennedy and rescued him. When I arrived in Washington, DC, in 1967 as a freshman at George Washington University, I travelled to Capitol Hill on the first day after my parents dropped me off to try and meet Senator Bayh. I was able to meet him, volunteered to work in his office, and was asked to do so a few weeks later. This changed my life and the course of my career.

While I was in DC as a student, my focus was the Bayh office. After a few months as a volunteer I worked my way into a paying job. One of the first projects I worked on was transcribing vote totals onto computer forms for a targeting project that would be a part of Bayh's 1968 reelection campaign. Once on the payroll, my responsibilities evolved, and I began working in the office almost every day between classes. From opening the mail in a small vestibule at the top of the stairs near the Senate attic to running errands for the office manager, I began to learn my way around the Senate. As I navigated around the various Senate services, I learned in the Computer Services Department that the Bayh office had a list of 13,000 names that was mailed once per year at Christmastime. This Christmas list was largely made up of Bayh's friends, elected officials, donors, and political leaders throughout Indiana. It was at this point that

I began my effort to build a mailing list so the office could have a more developed newsletter program. By the time Bayh left office twelve years later, we had a mailing list of 2.8 million Hoosiers with over 250 identification codes on it, and it had been the Senate's largest mailer for three years in a row.

I took every opportunity to develop the list. If we had a meeting with an interest group, I'd ask for a copy of their mailing list. As I worked more with federal agencies, I'd pursue lists of constituents that they might have. I acquired from the Veterans Administration a list of Indiana veterans to add to our database and a list of small business owners from the Small Business Administration. Adding in teachers, union members, farmers, and a number of other groups grew our list to the size it eventually became. And I continually worked at cleaning up the list, taking home the green-bar printouts of the list so I could scour it for updates, additions, deletions of the deceased, changes of address, and the like. This eyeball method of updating a list seems more than a bit antiquated today, but it was all we had at the time.

I also developed a variety of uses for the mailing list. When the senator decided to have a town meeting, I'd blanket all of the zip codes surrounding the meeting site with invitations. At the first of these meetings, we had far more people arriving than the room would hold—something all politicians love. And many of the people at the event had their invitations with them, proving to us that this targeting process and this form of communication worked.

When there were accomplishments in the Senate that impacted members of a given interest group or a specific geographic area of the state, the list provided the ability to send out informative mailings about those accomplishments in a targeted manner. When a government grant was extended, we sent mailings to make sure those who might be interested in the grant

were made aware of it, and thereby establish a positive connection with the senator at the same time.

During that period, the strict firewalls between official and political business—restrictions that are fully appropriate—did not exist, and it was common for campaign staff to store paraphernalia in the Senate attic. In preparation for Bayh's 1974 reelection campaign, I went to the attic and began rummaging around in large cartons of index cards. These cards had voter names, addresses, and phone numbers on them, and each had code letters and numbers written on them—likely information gathered by phone banks. I never learned what the codes meant, but the cards were a glaring example of the data waste that took place before it could be maintained on a computer in a database. Data that costs a campaign thousands of dollars to acquire is often discarded after an election. This insight gained in the Senate attic provided a valuable lesson that I would put to use later in my professional work with voter data.

The 1974 campaign was successful. Bayh held off the challenge by Indianapolis Mayor Richard Lugar, who would later serve in the US Senate even longer than Bayh did. It was clear that my advancement in the office during the ensuing years would place me in a key campaign role, and I was determined to learn as much as I could about campaigning. After the 1978 election season, I read an article about the right-to-work campaign in Missouri in which organized labor had defeated a referendum with the help of Claritas clusters. The effort had been directed by one of the pioneers in political consulting, Matt Reese. The article fascinated me, and I arranged to meet with Reese as well as the founder of Claritas, Jonathan Robbins. These proved to be very beneficial meetings, resulting in our campaign using Claritas for targeting and hiring Matt Reese to employ the technology in an aggressive (and expensive) voter-contact campaign.

No candidate had ever used this system before; clusters had been used up to that point only on issue campaigns. In preparation for Bayh's 1980 reelection campaign, we polled by cluster, bought television spots by cluster, ran phone banks and sent direct mail by cluster. We in the upper echelons of the campaign believed in the effectiveness of this sophisticated manner of segmenting voters and the capacity for messaging that came with it.

Back then we had to reach voters by mail and phone using lists of residents purchased on the commercial market. Even though we had this sophisticated method of targeting voters, we didn't know if they were registered or not. There were no such things as registered voter lists in a computerized form. We realized that we might be contacting people who were not even eligible to vote, but we had little choice.

That political year brought not only the end of Birch Bayh's Senate career, but the loss of enough Democratic incumbent senators to give the Republicans control of the Senate for the first time since the 1950s. California Governor Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency was a landslide. In Indiana, Carter lost by over 400,000 votes out of two million cast. Our gubernatorial candidate lost by over 300,000 votes. Our campaign lost by just over 160,000 votes, almost a quarter million ahead of the ticket but clearly not enough.

I learned valuable lessons about targeting voters during this experience. I'll never forget Matt Reese's admonition that voters care more about their bowling scores than who is running in an election; in a campaign we are fighting a battle for the voter's attention. As we began to poll in the campaign, not only to get a temperature reading on how we were looking but also to be able to define our campaign targets, we did something unique.

Early in 1980, long before J. Danforth Quayle had earned substantial name recognition but after it became clear he would be our opponent, we conducted a statewide poll. First we

asked who the voter would support in a race between Democratic Senator Birch Bayh and Republican Congressman Dan Quayle. We won that match-up 72 to 10. Then we asked what we later called the “Jesus Christ question. If the election was today, and the Democrat was Birch Bayh and the Republican was a young conservative who agreed with you on the major issues of the day, how would you vote?” In other words, the question framed Quayle as the perfect candidate—something we knew he would never become—which helped us establish our worst-case scenario. We lost that one 46 to 40.

Our goal was to define Quayle in a way that would place him far from perfection. We also could quantify our task. There was a 32-percent portion of the electorate that voted for Bayh against an unknown but voted against him in a race opposed by an ideal image of Quayle. Our campaign was largely focused on that universe of voters—those with us when running against an unknown Quayle and those against us when running against an ideal Quayle would like to become--as well as on the undecided voters. As the months rolled on it became clear that the atmosphere in the nation, as well as in Indiana, was leaning heavily against reelecting incumbent Democrats.

As already mentioned, we lost that campaign, but I was able to take lessons with me about targeting that have been valuable to this day. Our tracking polls showed us throughout the campaign that our targeting was accurate we were failing to secure support from those voters we had to win. This was also a reminder that finding the right targets is only part of the battle. Message is critical, to be sure, but more important are the larger trends going on in the electorate. In 1980, America was suffering through double-digit inflation, double-digit unemployment, gas lines, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, and hostages held captive in Iran for the entire year, with a very unpopular incumbent president running for reelection. Sometimes it doesn’t

matter how well you target or how effectively you deliver your message—sometimes you just can't win.

Post-1980 Election

Throughout that political year, people would constantly tell me not to worry—that even if Bayh lost I'd have no trouble getting a job I wanted. But not only did I not know what I wanted, there were 10,000 Democrats thrown out of work in DC. It was a dismal period for Democrats and a real challenge for me. I didn't know what I wanted to do and offers were not forthcoming.

Not long after Bayh left office, Ken Melley, political director of the National Education Association (NEA), called me to see if I was interested in working with them on a project. He had heard that I ran the most sophisticated targeting system anyone had ever seen and thought that, despite the election loss, my experience might be useful to NEA. As a result, I began a contract with the NEA that had me assess the state of the organization's computer capabilities and recommend ways their political operations could be better served by their computer services division. It was a natural progression for me in the process of learning more about how to marry data processing with politics.

I spent 1981 on the NEA project and on launching a political action committee (PAC) to fight what I considered the destructive influences of the New Right on politics. Organizations like Moral Majority and the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) had been active in the 1978 and 1980 elections in opposition to liberal Democratic senators, one of whom had been Birch Bayh. The level of name calling and vitriol that erupted as a result of their efforts motivated me to find effective ways to fight back, to lessen their influence where possible. Unfortunately, other organizations with similar goals were created around the same time and the competition in fundraising was intense.

The goals of our PAC—the Committee For American Principles (CFAP)—proved attractive to a direct-mail entrepreneur on the progressive side, Richard Parker. Direct-mail fundraising using modern computer technology had become something in which I was gaining expertise, and I had been very effective in using it to raise money for the Bayh campaign. Parker's firm decided that they would front the costs of a direct-mail prospecting campaign for CFAP. I was once again intensely engaged in computers and direct mail, coming to understand more than ever what worked and what did not.

Also during 1981, Matt Reese contacted me about helping him with some client problems. He had produced direct mail for the franking programs of a few members of Congress, and they were unhappy with the large amount of returned mail they were receiving. No one wants their money wasted on bad lists. I became engaged with those offices as well as with the Reese direct-mail processes, using whatever political skills I had to offer and learning more about these computer-generated processes.

Working in the Voter File World

Early in 1982 I was offered an opportunity to join the political computer firm Datatron. The task the firm gave me was to acquire voter lists to match against the AFL-CIO membership in order to let them know whether members were registered to vote or not. This required an investigation on my part, as computerized voter lists had not existed in Indiana only two years earlier. Datatron would purchase these voter databases and the rights to market them to candidates. Datatron needed someone from the campaign world who might understand these databases and be able to sell them to campaigns.

Working for Datatron put me in a good position to become well educated about the state of voter file computerization in the country and to develop strategies for selling them. States

were just beginning to computerize registered voter files, but virtually no candidates were using them. I would have used them in 1980 had they been available, and because I know how valuable it was I was able to sell this voter data to campaigns.

The following year I left Datatron and soon accepted a job creating the Washington office of a Los Angeles firm, Below, Tobe & Associates, that provided political computer services. Below, Tobe & Associates had a contract with the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to acquire voter files where possible for the DNC's direct-mail fundraising program. The Reagan administration was perceived by the Democratic community as being against social security, and the DNC felt it could raise money from voters on that issue using direct mail. To do that, we needed to find computerized voter files that included party registration information and dates of birth. The target was Democratic households with people at least fifty-five years old. The number of people in that demographic category would be so large that, should the prospecting mail be successful, the ability to roll out to a large group of people would exist. They needed me to manage that project and to sell the files we acquired to campaigns across the country. This was similar to what I was doing at Datatron, but my role was much larger.

Looking back, I now know that I was doing this virtually alone, that the business of providing political computer services was not well known and had hardly penetrated the political community at all. I found myself able to sell these services to campaigns and to generate lists and labels for phones and mail based on targeted criteria. And once a voter file is built and enhanced with information like telephone numbers, that data can be useful for many other campaigns within the same geographic area. Below, Tobe & Associates worked only with Democrats, which fit my political orientation, and we began building databases all over the country— wherever we found campaigns that were willing to pay the necessary funds to use them.

Early in my second year at Below, Tobe & Associates, I was hired by the Al Gore for Senate campaign in Tennessee. The task there was to build a voter file statewide, which had never been done in Tennessee. Many of the county voter lists were available only on paper, requiring us to have them keypunched into a computer form. Those that were computerized were provided in a myriad of formats—nine-track tapes, eight-track cartridges, and floppy disks of several sizes. While the file was being built, I persuaded the Gore campaign to get the state Democratic Party to take over the project. Through them, we would be able to make this data available to candidates at all levels throughout the state, usually for the first time. This was wildly successful. Not only were these services available to campaigns, but the party had gained a role in elections that it had not had for many years. And as a vendor we would be able to touch campaigns that would otherwise be very difficult to reach without our connection to the state democratic party.

This concept of a state Democratic Party voter file project made enormous sense to me and fueled an energy and enthusiasm for my job that I had not previously felt. I took the concept to the Indiana Democratic Party, where I knew the leadership as well as the party's nominee for governor in 1984, Wayne Townsend. They soon agreed that this kind of project made sense for them, and we began building the first Indiana voter file with many of the same processes used in Tennessee.

After our success in 1984 for the Democratic Party in these states, I was compelled to take the state Democratic Party voter file project on the road. By 1986 I had added four more states, doubling that number by 1988. Two years later, the DNC got into the act by helping fund state party voter file projects, and we added more state parties to our client list.

In 1991, I left Below, Tobe & Associates and started my own company, Blaemire Communications. For the next seventeen years, the central part of our work was with Democratic state parties, and in 2007, the last year of my company, we had twenty-six state party clients.

With my own firm, I was far better able to experiment—to take on tasks that didn't necessarily make money but held out hopes of developing new processes or new projects or of improving the way we worked. There was a simple adage that applied to our business: The more you know about voters, the better you can communicate with them. We did everything we could to help our clients know more about their voters so they could have better tools for targeting those they needed to communicate with and how they needed to communicate with them.

NCEC precinct data, matched to voter files, meant we could target voters based on two levels of information: the personal level data and the precinct aggregated-level data. Adding census data meant another level of information, also aggregated at the census geography level, giving us sociodemographic information very much like the Claritas clusters I had used in 1980. We found that the clustering systems used in the marketplace didn't work as well in politics, due to high costs and slow turnaround. Claritas worked mostly with corporations that had less trouble spending money than campaigns did and that would tolerate longer turnaround times. The task was to create the same kind of databases for voter targeting but with information obtained by other means and with a final product specifically useful to campaigns.

Ideally, a voter list would provide the names and addresses of registered voters with an indication of status (active, inactive, canceled, suspended or some other designation). In thirty states we could also acquire lists with political party registration as part of the data. In most states we would also get dates of birth and registration, and almost everywhere we would also have the necessary political geography on the file, such as county, precinct, or state legislative

and congressional districts. In southern states still governed by the Voting Rights Act as well as in a few states outside the South, the data would include race. As database operations in the states developed, we would more commonly receive vote history data telling us which elections a person voted in, partisan primary votes cast, or even whether they voted early or absentee. We used surname dictionaries to encode likely ethnicity and went to commercial sources to append telephone numbers.

During the 1990s, the ability to track voters who moved and deceased voters became easier. We could acquire a database of deceased persons from the Social Security Administration, allowing us to regularly match that data and remove or encode those who were no longer with us. And the US Postal Service introduced the National Change of Address (NCOA), a process that allowed us to change the addresses of people who have moved. Both of these resources added complexity to our work but were enormously helpful in our efforts to improve voter databases.

Over time, candidates and consultants became far more familiar with computer-generated processes, and it became easier to sell our services. Consistency, retaining data from previous campaigns and future applicability of the data was of the utmost importance. Professional campaign consultants became early advocates of preserving the personal level of information—for instance, a voter responding to a phone call might provide his or her party, candidate, or issue preferences—as that information would be critical for targeting efforts in future election cycles. The high cost of the professional processes employed by campaigns for mail, phone, and field operations underscored even more the importance of preserving the information that could be used in future campaigns.

As we moved toward the end of the twentieth century, campaigns could increasingly rely on vendors for individual-level information from voter files, such as party, age, race, and vote history, as well as telephone matches, census data, NCEC precinct targeting data, and IDs from previous voter contact efforts by campaigns at all levels.

The evolution of targeting seemed to be moving fast, but it was really piecemeal. Because of the inconsistency of data from one state to the next—and often within a given state—the way you could target in one place might be very different than in some other place. A state in which some county voter files provided vote history and others did not, for instance, would mean you had to target differently based on the level of data coverage. As those of us in the industry kept tweaking the process to make it better, we came to understand that the use of data to target voters and to develop relevant messaging involved making judgments about voters' likely future behavior. We decide who to target because we predict that these people will be more easily convinced to support us or may be supporters who need motivation to go to the polls. We target messages because we predict that they will be more effective than others. We use precinct targeting with past performance in order to predict future performance. Without a crystal ball to aid in our predictions, we needed to rely on other tools at our disposal.

This need to predict voter behavior more accurately experienced a sea change in its growth and development with the introduction of modeling. Just as pollsters draw a sample of people to poll and employ techniques to extrapolate what they learn to the larger community, modeling uses enhanced computer techniques to score voters on their likelihood to fit into a particular profile. These models, done right, are enormously predictive. They can reveal the likelihood of a voter to be a Democrat or to care about the environment, or voters' likelihood of taking certain actions, such as voting or take an action in support of health care reform.

Models are becoming more and more powerful. Models now exist that predict the likelihood that a person goes to church at least once a week, is a gun owner or hunter, is conservative or liberal, or is for or against President Obama. For targeting, the implications are tremendous. Now we can select voters based on their predictive behavior and communicate with them on the issues that matter to them in a far more precise manner than ever before.

While early targeting was a more shotgun approach, applying more generally to geography and broad categories of voters, enhanced targeting, also known as microtargeting, is a more rifle-shot approach. The age-old effort to “pick your cherries where the cherries are” in the world of campaigns means to devote resources where they have the greatest chance of having the desired impact. It is said that half of all campaign money is wasted, but we just don’t know which half. With microtargeting that uses sophisticated modeling, we have greater confidence that we are not wasting money by communicating with the wrong people with the wrong messages. There is a far greater chance that we can get this right.

The Age of the Internet

My own company created one of the early websites used for processing voter file data. Our system, known as Leverage, put the role previously reserved for programmers into the hands of the remote campaigner. Other systems were created around the same period of time, between 2002 and 2007. The most popular and widely used system on the Democratic side is Voter Activation Network (VAN). Because of the advent of these systems and the manner in which they have been embraced, there are now thousands of people around the country who access political data and voter files through web applications.

In 2007 I merged my company with Catalist, a company created to serve the data needs of the progressive community. Our efforts at Catalist have broadened the use of online tools

among Democratic campaigns and progressive organizations. One such tool is the Q-tool, the Catalist online tool to query its massive database. Organizations subscribing to Catalist use the online Q-tool to access data for a variety of personalized organizing and political or civic contracts. But Catalist also provides its clients a tool to match their own information to the Catalist database, whether it is membership information or campaign IDs. While solving the need to preserve this expensively obtained political intelligence for subsequent campaigns, this accumulation of data has also served the cause of creating predictive models. The advent of these online tools in politics has also led to applications developed to expand on the volunteer-to-voter experience.

The most effective form of communication obviously is between two persons who know one another. Politics has had to battle the limitations of that reality, and new technologies have helped overcome those limitations. When I worked with Senator Bayh in the 1970s, we had a program called Note Day, which was a simple, non-technological version of online social networking. Here's how it worked: As I traveled with Bayh, whenever someone asked how they could help the campaign they were handed a Note Day packet, which consisted of ten sheets of paper, ten envelopes, a sample letter, a postage-paid return envelope, and an instruction sheet. The job of the new volunteer was to write letters to ten friends explaining why he or she was going to vote for Birch Bayh (using the sample letter as a model, if needed), to address and stamp the letters appropriately, and to return them in the postage-paid envelope to our headquarters. The campaign would then mail them all at once in the final week before the election. If my memory is accurate, I believe we mailed more than a quarter million Note Day letters in each of the last two Bayh campaigns.

Early in the twenty-first century there was an explosion of activity in the online world. The broad public enthusiasm for the Internet has led to an amazing proliferation of websites, making virtually all knowledge reachable from our desktops. The current generation of eighteen- to thirty-five-year-olds hardly knows what it's like not to have online access. And as the culture has changed, political behavior has changed as well.

As entrepreneurs began creating websites that could put the voter files in the hands of the online user, software applications have sprung up that allow individuals to reach out through these apps to the people they know. The Internet has presented political campaigns with enormous opportunity. Modern campaigns can now make it possible for volunteers to carry their messages to their own acquaintances in a managed fashion. This sort of communication is effective and is bringing yet another transformation to campaign microtargeting.

Online apps exist that allow a volunteer to match his or her address book to voter files, communicate with those friends who are registered, and tell those who are not what they need to do to get on the rolls. This friend-to-friend communication is an effective way to take advantage of those who want to help. This intensive involvement by so many people, often individuals totally new to politics, has in many ways democratized the American political process. But it also presents risks to a campaign, which loses some control over the message and the targets. In many ways, these friend-to-friend programs trade targeting accuracy for communication efficacy. They can augment, but not replace, the more controlled system of microtargeted voter contact that is part of a campaign's strategy.

The Future

The evolution of targeting can be seen as an unbroken trend toward more precision and improved ability to zero in on the right people with the right messages, and it stands to reason that new

technology will only speed up this trend, not inhibit it. The ability to find the right people and accurately predict how they will behave in the political marketplace has been enhanced by the accumulation of data by companies like Catalist. Because of this massive amount of individual-level data, the ability to accurately model voters has improved enormously.

And modeling can predict other kinds of political behavior besides voting. A donor model scores people on their likelihood to give money. A mail readership model scores people on the likelihood that they will open and read their mail. Activist models predict the likelihood that people will take actions on a range of issues or political necessities. A volatility model can tell a campaign which voters are likely to change their minds during a campaign, which helps a campaign use its resources more efficiently, since money spent targeting a volatile voter could influence that person's vote, while money spent contacting a stable supporter is not likely to make a difference in the outcome of the election. We also have models predicting what kind of media consumption a voter will engage in.

Channel-oriented modeling adds to the trend toward more individual-level precision by increasing ability to know what the best channels are for political communication. We can know with a great deal of accuracy which voters are better reached by phone, mail, or e-mail. Whether households get political information through cable TV or broadcast television, the kind of viewing that reaches them, and even the time of day or length of time prior to the election to get the message to them are also questions that can be answered by channel modeling.

Other forms of political communication are also moving in the direction of personalization. Online advertising is moving toward greater individualization and more pinpoint targeting with the use of "cookie pools," data that tells us which websites a person visits. Similarly, in the world of online polling, campaigns are using survey responses of online

panels—which serve as virtual focus groups—to target registered voters with more precision.

This practice has also led to a more efficient and less costly way to test ads and direct mail.

Rather than convening focus groups for that purpose, the same things can be accomplished with online panels.

It also makes sense that eventually political targeting information will be used to change the way cable television broadcasts ads. In the future, it will be possible for campaigns to advertise to cable in the same precise way they now send mail and make phone calls, with different voters receiving different ads during the same show. There are technical challenges, to be sure, but there will likely be a time when completely variable advertising will be transmitted through our familiar cable boxes. New applications are being developed all the time for political campaigns that, by using voter data, allow for greater levels of targeting and individualized messaging.

One of the great challenges of politics in this first quarter of the twenty-first century in the midst of these tremendous technological innovations is reaching the young voter. A great many voters under thirty-five cannot be reached through commercial television or radio, do not read newspapers or magazines, do not have landlines, and do not read their mail. You would be hard-pressed even to find them door-to-door. The youngest voting demographic—growing at such a rate that they will soon overtake older voters in influence and numbers—cannot be reached by traditional campaign communication channels. Campaigns must turn to the new media, these emerging technologies, if they are to have any chance of influencing younger voters.

It is a greater expense and challenge to use voter data to target with these new methods, but it is more critical than it has ever been. It still wastes money and time for campaigns to

employ communication tactics for those who will not support them or will not vote, but now the cost of sending too general a message to too broad an audience is unacceptably high. It still makes sense to use data to vary messages, but younger voters are used to a high level of personalization and have no patience for messages that are not relevant to their lives. The need for targeting and using data appropriately will not change, but the need for more complex and sophisticated microtargeting will continue to grow.

I feel I have been fortunate to have a front row seat to watch this trend toward greater targeting precision and to play a small part. The evolution of targeting can be summarized as follows:

Simple demographics. Early targeting was aimed at white males who lived in the states or districts in which the campaigns were being conducted. As the country matured, the franchise expanded to include former slaves and free African Americans, women, and those at least eighteen years old. The expansion of the franchise created a much larger voting universe and made it necessary to avoid contacting everyone.

Multiplying channels. The rise of television advertising had its initial focus on broad demographics, with ads placed on television shows that were being watched by the type of people the campaign needed to reach. As broadcast television became more of a staple in American life, the ability to narrow-cast toward smaller and smaller demographics developed rapidly. As the number of television channels available to Americans expanded drastically with the advent of cable, the challenges to reach a targeted audience over the airwaves multiplied.

Rising costs. As the country's population grew and campaigns became more expensive, largely due to the development of political television ads, it became increasingly important for campaigns to select their targets accurately and find ways to spend their precious funds communicating only with those they needed to. Wasting money on those who should not be targeted meant fewer available funds to contact those who should be.

Precinct Targeting. The precinct is the smallest political geographic area. As computer technology developed that allowed a precinct's electoral history to be categorized, campaigners were able to target voters based on the kinds of precincts in which they lived—whether, for instance, they may be precincts that perform solidly Democratic or with large numbers of persuadable voters.

Geodemographic targeting. As computer processing developed further, it became possible for data processors to place all voters into a relatively small number of demographic composites, or clusters, allowing campaigns to choose which clusters to target according to which issues were important to voters within those clusters. The ability to poll by cluster was followed by the ability to send messages by cluster.

Computerized voter files. Once lists of registered voters became available in computerized form, campaigns could take advantage of the individual data items available on those lists to slice and dice the electorate as never before. They could target voters within the proper geography, and they could use precinct targeting to augment their choice and geodemographic targeting to overlay issue intelligence with the political intelligence. Computerization became democratized

with the rise of the personal computer, a tool that was necessary for campaigns to utilize but not only by those who would call themselves campaign professionals. Methods of contacting voters in person or through direct mail or telephones became far more professionalized with the creation of a large number of campaign mail and phone firms. The need to target grew as quickly as the ability to target effectively with the computer. And smart campaigns could use precinct targeting, geodemographic targeting, and highly individualized voter targeting in combination.

Preservation of data. Campaigns contact voters to see how they feel about their candidates and the issues of the day. Campaigns now save that information in a form suitable for future use rather than reinventing the wheel with each campaign, and they build upon previous efforts with new information about voters.. This has led to better voter targeting and messaging and less waste.

Microtargeting. All of these changes have led to the ability to fine tune targeting in a way that allows the campaign to predict voter behavior. By massing this tremendous amount of political information with commercial data, census data, specialty data, and individual responses, modelers have been able to create predictive models on very esoteric yet critical political behavior.

Changing technologies and improvements in data compilation will continue the trend toward greater individualization and precision in campaign targeting and message delivery. While some things coming down the pike seem easy to predict, it is impossible to know what campaigning will look like in the second quarter of this century or beyond. But we can be sure that

campaigners will only get better at zeroing in on the right voter and successfully motivating that voter with a message that makes sense and is entirely relevant. It is the challenge of modern campaigns and I have no doubt it is one that will be met.