Voter Files:

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

Since the early days of the United States, voter rolls were used to govern elections and establish eligibility to vote, listing male land-owners at first, all white males later. As the franchise expanded to include non-white males, then women and finally 18- to 21-year-olds, the task of maintaining lists of voters became larger and more difficult.

BY ROBERT BLAEMIRE

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TWENTY YEARS IS NOT a long time in many respects. It may not be noticeable when you think of the history of the world, and it's not a long period of time in American history. Nor is it long in the history of American political campaigns.

But in the history of modern American politics, especially in the computer era, the last 20 years have borne witness to monumental change in the way political campaigns are run.

B.C. (Before Computers)

Political campaigning on television, using professionally produced ads, made its debut in the Eisenhower presidential campaigns. Direct mail has been used to varying effect by candidates for political office since the beginning of the republic.

Letters written by Jefferson were used in his campaigns, and Abraham Lincoln proved adept at formulating his message through the use of the mails, carefully targeting his letters to opinion leaders and those who would help spread his message. Mass mailing – made more efficient and more widely used because of the advent of the computer – soared in the 1970s.

Similarly, elections since the early days of the United States used voter rolls to govern elections and establish eligibility to vote, listing male land-owners at first, all white males later. As the franchise expanded to include non-white males, then women and finally 18- to 21-year-olds, the task of maintaining lists of voters became larger and more difficult. As eligibility expanded, rules for voter registration came into effect. While it became easier to determine who was and who was not eligible to vote in a given geographic area, population growth and the wider franchise made the task increasingly difficult. Post World War II computer technology began its rapid growth and eventually the computer became the tool for processing voter lists.

At the same time, at the dawning of the information age and as television began monitoring election results, the computer became necessary in order to produce the rapid results that the medium required.

The Seventies and Eighties

At the end of the 1970s, I was writing the plan for the re-election campaign of U.S. Sen. Birch Bayh, a three-term incumbent from Indiana and father of the current senator, Evan Bayh. We had aggressively used computerized mailing lists in the Senate for our franked mail program and in our political operations for direct mail fundraising.

Our 1980 campaign team included the legendary consultant Matt Reese to handle our voter contact and I had written into our plan a large, targeted direct mail component. Matt had just come off a successful campaign against a Right-to-Work referendum in Missouri in which direct mail played a major role.

What became clear, however, was that we had to produce our mailings to names from commercially prepared lists of residential households. There were no such things as computerized voter lists in 1979-1980. And the cost to keypunch paper lists in an electorate of 3 million voters was clearly too much, given our lack of experience in targeted political direct mail.

We knew it was an important part of the campaign but also realized how little we knew about doing it right. We had to accept the fact that we were contacting people who may not be registered and we would know nothing about their voting history nor about their political geography.

For reasons not related to the lack of good voter lists, our election was unsuccessful, as were many Democratic campaigns that year. But I found that I had developed an affinity for this aspect of campaigning. We had developed targeting techniques in our campaign that were unique but also underscored the ways it could have been done better. I had learned a lot but knew there was lots more to learn.

Two years later, I took a job with a company that was working with the AFL-CIO to acquire computerized voter files where they could be found, using them to identify which labor union members were registered to vote. My mission was to make these databases available to campaigns. It wasn't hard. It's always easy to sell something I would buy

and, had I had the opportunity in 1980, I would have bought computerized voter lists.

In 1982, the availability of computerized registered voter files was not widespread. Very few states had centralized, statewide voter files. Increasingly, we saw the larger counties around the country going online. While those of us in the business were working to generate a demand from campaigners for these tools of computerized voter contact, the tools were becoming more readily available.

California led the nation in the '70s with the development of computer-generated voter contact using voter files. In Los Angeles, where more than a dozen congressional districts existed, these processes served candidates well because buying television time was not only expensive but extremely wasteful. Necessity is indeed the mother of invention and a number of companies grew up attempting to marry computer technology with politics.

By 1983, I left my previous job and joined one of those companies in Los Angeles – Below, Tobe & Associates. My job was to establish a Washington office to bring the political services that were being developed to candidates across the country. One of the clients we had at the time was the Democratic National Committee, using voter files to prospect for direct mail donors. This effort was facilitated by keeping track of the progress states and counties were making in the computerization of voter files.

Among our 1984 campaign clients was the Al Gore for U.S. Senate campaign. The first step in that effort, managed by Hal Malchow, who is now a leader in political direct mail technology, was to build a voter file, mostly by keypunching paper lists from the targeted counties. The next year, that database became the property of the Tennessee Democratic Party and we developed the first state party voter file project.

The concept was simple and dominates much of our politics today. A state party would own a sophisticated database that could be used by candidates across the state. This created a role in elections by the state party that had not previously existed. Technology was brought into campaigns, often for the first time, but always for less money than it would cost them on their own. And the vendor would end up working with campaigns they would never be involved with normally. It was really good for all involved and the idea caught hold.

My own state of Indiana joined in with a voter file project during the 1984 election, building the first statewide voter file, something I would have loved to have had available to our campaign four years earlier. Our company created and managed six State Party projects in 1986 and added others in 1988. Competing vendors were now doing the same and, by 1988, the DNC was involved in encouraging state parties to build and own their own voter files.

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At the same time, the technology was moving forward. Competition in the area of data processing services was also driving some of the costs down. Those of us working as vendors were also learning from our own mistakes. The mid-'80s were littered with stories of data processing errors that led to candidate tragedies. One southern State Party sent out a Jesse Jackson mailing targeted to minorities that ended up going to white households only. A New England state party in the 1988 Democratic presidential primary mailed a statewide piece to Republican voters only. As painful as some of these incidents were, particularly to the vendors involved, all of us who learned from these mistakes got better at the business. Others got out.

The Nineties

Using voter files in campaigns, for walk, phone and mail programs, had become a staple of politics. The national p[illegible]ies had become invested in this aspect of state party operations and substantial monies were committed each cycle to making sure the best possible voter files were available, especially for targeted campaigns. Many vendors either disappeared or got out of the state-party competition. Those who stayed in improved, as did the quality of the databases.

In 1991, I left Below, Tobe and formed my own firm. For the last 10 years, a centerpiece of our work has been Democratic State Party voter file projects. The ways in which these are done now are a good illustration of what has been happening in the computer industry at large.

Most state parties had to depend on vendors for all aspects of voter file work until the advent of the high-speed PC network and Windows operating systems. Mainframes had been the high-cost source for all data processing. As the industry downsized, increasing numbers of people who were competent on PCs became in-house vendors for many state parties. A number of the vendor functions could be done by staff. This has forced vendors to specialize and perfect those functions that are still best handled by the vendor. Parties, on the other hand, have become more sensible about what they should do in-house and what they should not. In the interests of saving money, many of those who fail to make mature decisions about when and when not to use a vendor have learned the hard way that mistakes can be far more costly than vendor services.

Those of us who operate as vendors to candidates and parties have had to change with the times. As our systems have downsized, so have our costs, requiring our price lists to be reduced as a result. We have had to learn the role political and management expertise play in these voter file projects. We have also learned, however, that we can be

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valuable to our clients because we continue to work with them from cycle to cycle, while the turnover in state chairs and executive directors is enormous. We have become the institutional memories for many of our clients.

Further developments have been in the production of computer products. For many years, the chief product we would produce was cheshire labels, machine applied mailing labels. Now, most mail projects require only a database formatted for mailing, which is e-mailed to the mail house and inkjetted onto the mail piece. Similarly, printed phone lists are rarely printed because phone files are being sent by e-mail to the phone banks instead.

The Future

Coach George Allen told us many years ago, that "The Future is Now." Since the future I refer to is the Internet, the future is now. The Internet is here and it is the focus of the political computer services and voter file work we provide. Clients routinely produce their own counts on our Web site and will soon be producing their own products as well. Whether they need printed lists, provided as PDF files via e-mail, or downloads of mail and phone files, much of our work will be handled on the Web.

Similarly, a typical walking program meant the production of walk lists, shipping those lists to the locations where the walk projects were being managed. Now, walk projects will use Palm Pilots containing the necessary data. As the names on those lists are encoded by the walker, the data may be uploaded to the master file database by e-mail as well.

Campaigners at all locations will have access to their particular lists and can make changes to any of the data as well as produce products from selected subsets. As new as all of this feels now, it will be routine for the next generation of campaigners. There will be a continued need for expertise from vendors who know the efficient ways to use voter data in campaigns, but much of the technical requirement will be satisfied by the user.

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Candidates and parties will increasingly rely on e-mail for mass communication, substantially reducing the time and cost required to produce traditional mailings. While it now seems that unsolicited use of e-mail addresses for direct voter contact is not advisable, that may change as the generations change and we become more accustomed to e-mail as a preferred form of communication.

A short 20 years ago, the use of the computer in politics was truly in its infancy. A computerized voter file was a unique, rather than common commodity. Only the richest of campaigns and parties could hire vendors to create their voter files or conduct their voter contact efforts. I look back at the 1980 campaign when voter files were not available.

Within two years, I was working with them for the first time. Twenty years later, heading toward the 2002 election, the innovations of the past two decades have moved us so far forward it feels like it had to have taken longer. Where very few states or counties had computerized voter files 20 years ago, now there are 30 that maintain centralized voter files through the Secretaries of State or State Boards of Elections.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the computer is far more standard in campaigns than the sound truck, used much more by all staff than the typewriter. There is rarely a question about whether a voter file is needed or can be afforded. Now it is more a question of how it should be put together and who should do it. Campaigns now assume they will have a voter file and will know how to use it.

When I first began speaking at seminars about computers in politics or voter files, I often had to begin by defining my terms. "What is a voter file?" was the opening for these talks. That is no longer necessary. I remember the intimidation I felt when I first sat down at a PC. My children cannot remember when they first sat down at a PC. My generation was as awestruck by the development of the Internet as our parents' generation was with the invention of the television. The next generation of campaigners will have no memory of life without the Internet, homes without computers, and campaigns without hi-tech computer and Internet technology.

And all of these new developments still work toward the age-old political goal of finding the best ways to win elections. ■