



## Everyone is a Special Interest

In their hunt for voters, microtargeters study how you live and what you like

By Dan Gilgoff

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Facing an otherwise bleak political landscape, the Republican Party believes Michigan presents a rare opportunity to pick up both a U.S. Senate and a governor's seat this November, and it knows just the kind of voters who can make it happen: male snowmobilers who live in the state's rugged Upper Peninsula. "We appeal to them on the need for more [snowmobile] trails," says state GOP Chair Saul Anuzis, who blames the "environmental extremism" of Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Sen. Debbie Stabenow for holding up construction of such trails. Of course, that message won't play in Detroit. So the GOP is crafting a separate appeal just for antiabortion union members. And it may target wealthy retirees along Lake Michigan in a different way, by vowing more tax cuts.



In fact, Michigan's Republican Party has sorted the state's 7 million voters into no fewer than 42 different categories, based on hundreds of pieces of data about each one. That includes voting behavior, age, income, magazine subscriptions, favorite vacation spots, even the length of a voter's daily commute and whether he or she has a telephone with caller ID. On the surface, much of the information is politically useless. But by using closely guarded algorithms and advanced computer modeling, the Michigan GOP can predict how likely voters in each category are to support Senate candidate Mike Bouchard and gubernatorial hopeful Dick DeVos-and which messages stand the best shot at winning them over by Election Day. Then the party delivers those customized messages through mailings and phone calls and by sending volunteers door to door.

**Slicing and dicing.** It's the most sophisticated deployment of such technology, called microtargeting, in state party history. "We've built our entire victory model on microtargeting," says Anuzis. The Democrats, meanwhile, are running a similar operation, courtesy of EMILY's List. The pro-abortion-rights group is dividing Michigan's undecided voters into a dozen different segments based on church attendance and other lifestyle traits.

The Republican and Democratic microtargeting efforts in Michigan are being replicated in dozens of competitive races across the country, in many instances for the first time on a nonpresidential level. The main Republican microtargeting firm, TargetPoint Consulting Inc., worked on just three Senate races in 2004, when it was focused on President Bush's re-election. This year, it is active in more than two dozen House and Senate contests, including in Rhode Island, where TargetPoint's work was largely credited with Sen. Lincoln Chafee's hard-won primary victory last week. Unlike any congressional election to date, the results of this fall's midterms could be determined by which party can out-microtarget the other.

Corporations have merged consumer and demographic data for decades to use in product marketing, but the software that can integrate such information with voter files and polling became cheap enough for campaigns only in the past few election cycles. TargetPoint founder Alex Gage, a veteran campaign pollster, first approached the Republican National Committee with his microtargeting ideas after 2000, when the party was studying ways to improve its ground game after having lost the popular vote for president. "The [RNC] was saying, we need to know more about our customers-which ones are cultural conservatives, economic conservatives, and all the different gradations," Gage recalls. "Then we need to

send them messaging based on what it is they want to buy." As recently as 2002, though, Gage was still working to persuade skeptical Republican candidates to be guinea pigs for his microtargeting experiments. "When you confront anybody with true innovation," he says, "there's a hesitancy to embrace it."

But the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign paid TargetPoint \$3.25 million to produce microtargeting models for 18 battleground states. That allowed Bush to go after Republican-leaning voters in heavily Democratic areas that had been ignored under the old campaign model, which targeted only precincts that were at least 65 percent Republican. Using computers to identify clusters of lifestyle traits common to various pro-Bush constituencies, TargetPoint generated lists of voters with the same "political DNA" but who were not strong Bush backers. "Party affiliation became secondary to lifestyle" in deciding which voters to chase, says Matthew Dowd, the Bush campaign's chief strategist. "It was a fundamental shift." After the election, the RNC hired one of TargetPoint's founders to work full time from inside the party.

**Glitches.** Democrats also used microtargeting in 2004, leading to an emphasis on support for embryonic stem cell research to appeal to traditionally Republican voters. But the Democratic National Committee's voter file was plagued by glitches, making it difficult to get even basic information on voters, such as who the registered independents were. "The GOP spent three years before the election working their database and spending millions testing it," says a Democratic strategist who worked on John Kerry's presidential campaign. "We got to the summer before the election, and there were basic problems with the voter file."

This year, the DNC says its voter file, called Demzilla, is finally up to date and user-friendly. But the DNC is spearheading microtargeting efforts in only about half a dozen races, leaving the lion's share of the effort to a patchwork of consultants and interest groups. Republicans, meanwhile, relying almost exclusively on TargetPoint, have a centralized operation whose models have been refined through the 2002 and 2004 cycles. "The more cycles you go through, the more you learn what went right and wrong, the more robust your models become," says Maren Hesla, the women's vote director at EMILY's List. "The Republicans had a couple of cycles to work that process. We'll be in better shape heading into 2008."

In the meantime, former Clinton administration official Harold Ickes recently launched a private voter file for use by liberal groups, irking the DNC. But Ickes also says his operation will need time to develop the capacity to produce microtargeting models and to collect the volume of information that more sophisticated models require. He thinks the investment, reportedly \$10 million, is crucial if the Democrats hope to win the White House again. "In a period when the presidency is decided by a handful of votes in a handful of states," Ickes says, "we need to be able to say, 'OK, we can't win a certain constituency, but we can find an additional 5 percent support in that group.'" Last month, MoveOn.org and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee sent out fundraising pitches that cited matching the Republican microtargeting effort as an imperative for winning this fall.

But microtargeting might be a more helpful tool for the GOP, because its supporters are diffuse, while Democrats are concentrated in cities, making them easy to reach with TV advertising. With President Bush and the Iraq war riding low in the polls, however, the GOP will also have to spend more time targeting voters whose support it took for granted in 2004. "It's the same customers as the last election," says Gage, who estimates that the GOP will pay around \$3 million for his services in this election cycle. "But it will be harder to get them to the point of purchase this year."