



Democrats, Playing Catch-Up, Tap Database to Woo Potential Voters

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October 31, 2006; Page A1

WASHINGTON -- In the final week before the election, Democrats pushing to convert their lead in the polls into control of Congress are pinning their hopes of success on an increasingly common tactic for pumping up voter turnout: microtargeting.

The technique aims to identify potential supporters by collecting and analyzing the unprecedented amount of information now readily available -- from census data to credit-card bills -- to profile individual voters. Political strategists then tailor messages to entice those prospects to the polls, using the same methods marketers use to sell autos or aspirin to consumers.



Alexander Gage

In this tight election year, microtargeting could make the difference in important House and Senate races in states such as Minnesota, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Alexander Gage, president and founder of TargetPoint Consulting, an Alexandria, Va., microtargeting firm that works for the Republican Party, estimates that successful microtargeting can bring congressional campaigns an additional 5,000 to 10,000 votes, a number that could be decisive in a House race. "Politics is always won and lost at the margins," he says.

Democrats are playing catch-up to Republicans, whose use of microtargeting in 2004 energized millions of new voters who backed President Bush. Republicans have since expanded their database in size and sophistication, even as formerly skeptical Democrats have spent millions of dollars building microtargeting systems of their own.

A key player for Democrats is Copernicus Analytics, a small and little-known firm based here that made its name last year by helping to propel Democrat Timothy Kaine to victory in the Virginia governor's race. Big-money, Democratic-leaning clients from the AFL-CIO to Emily's List, a group that backs pro-choice female candidates, have enlisted Copernicus this election year.

Focusing on 29 races, Copernicus says it already has helped campaigns identify more than a million potential new supporters, a significant number given that many races in the closely divided nation are likely to be decided by thin margins.

Copernicus's chief scientist, Ben Yuhás, likens microtargeting to searching for a needle in a haystack -- over and over again. The spreadsheet on a single voter from one of the states where Copernicus is operating contains more than 500 rows of information, ranging from whether a prospect lives in an apartment or house to commercially purchased data on the type of car the voter drives. Mr. Yuhás has developed mathematic formulas based on such factors as length of residence, amount of money spent on golf, voting patterns in recent elections and a handful of other variables to calculate the likelihood that a particular American will vote Democratic.

Last week, a Democratic congressional campaign locked in a tightening race in a battleground Midwestern state asked Copernicus to identify Republicans who could potentially be swayed into voting Democratic, and the issues likeliest to win them over. Copernicus crunched the numbers and came back with its answer: Tens of thousands of Republicans who the company predicted to be abortion-rights supporters didn't have strong partisan affiliation with the Republican Party. Now the campaign, which Copernicus declined to identify, is making a play for those voters.

Microtargeting entered the political mainstream in the 2004 election, when White House adviser Karl Rove, who long ran a direct-mail marketing business, deployed it to reach voters whom Mr. Bush's reelection campaign had failed to reach by other means. The Bush campaign gave TargetPoint \$3 million to microtarget voters in 18 states. In Florida, the campaign used microtargeting to make contact with 84% of eventual Bush voters, up from 33% in 2000. In Iowa, the campaign reached 92% of his eventual voters, up from 50% in 2000.

"It gave us a way of finding people we couldn't find before," says Bush strategist Matthew Dowd. "We could get at Bush voters in Democratic precincts, swing precincts and other places we'd never been able to look before."

Republicans have long outstripped Democrats in their support for, and use of, the technique -- an edge the Republicans hope to maintain this election. Today, Republicans use a centralized computer system called Voter Vault that is available to Republican candidates across the country. TargetPoint executives hold monthly conference calls with top Republican operatives such as White House political director Sara Taylor. The Republican National Committee now has data covering tens of millions of voters from across the country, to which TargetPoint has access. In 2004, the firm had such a comprehensive database only for Ohio.

Until recently, Democrats, who had long relied on the old get-out-the-vote muscle of organized labor, were skeptical of building voter databases, says Copernicus founder Mark Steitz, who spent several years as a senior official at the Democratic National Committee in the early 1990s.

In April, frustrated by the lack of a party-driven effort, former Clinton aide Harold Ickes launched a \$9 million initiative now known as Catalist to build a massive new voter file that campaigns and interest groups will be able to access directly. Catalist provides Copernicus with data on individual voters, which Copernicus then uses to predict how people with similar profiles will vote.

Though it is working for some individual Democratic campaigns, Copernicus doesn't work for the DNC. Most of the firm's work is for pro-Democratic interest groups. America Votes, a new umbrella group of 32 major liberal organizations including the Sierra Club, is pooling its members' microtargeting efforts in the hopes of boosting Democratic turnout in battleground states. Emily's List is spending \$250,000 in Michigan and Minnesota, while the AFL-CIO is spending nearly \$2 million more to run microtargeting efforts in more than 24 other states. Both organizations, which are part of the America Votes alliance, mostly use Copernicus, though Emily's List also uses rival company Garin-Hart-Yang, better known for polling work.

Naming his firm Copernicus was Mr. Steitz's nod to the famous 16th-century astronomer, whose work he had studied at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md. The astronomer tried to change how his contemporaries saw the world around them. "Copernicus took individuals out of the center of the physical universe; we are trying to put them back at the center of the political world," Mr. Steitz says.

The firm's number-crunching is done by Mr. Yuhas, who did his doctoral dissertation on lip reading and later spent years in the credit-card industry. He joined Copernicus in early 2005 because of anger at the Bush administration's opposition to stem-cell research. His brother was diagnosed in 1999 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or "Lou Gehrig's disease," and Mr. Yuhas saw the administration's stem-cell decision as profoundly misguided.

Messrs. Steitz and Yuhas, whose offices are above a yoga studio here, won their first big victory last year in Mr. Kaine's gubernatorial race. Recently, to illustrate the firm's work, Mr. Steitz called up a color-coded map of Virginia on a large flat-screen computer monitor, noting that none of the state had the bluish tint of a Democratic district. He punched a series of keys and the map zoomed in on a neighborhood, and then a street, until blue dots began appearing. Each dot represented an individual Kaine supporter in Loudon County. The Copernicus system allowed the campaign to find potential supporters regardless of where they lived, based on factors such as

whether they lived in private houses (more likely Republican) or apartment buildings (more likely Democratic).

Last year, Copernicus was unable to divide people into segments of like-minded voters, something Mr. Gage at TargetPoint has done for years. That left the Democrats at a disadvantage to Republicans, who have used Mr. Gage's models to decide what themes to emphasize with voter segments such as "Religious Conservative Republicans" or "Tax and Terrorism Moderates."

Copernicus says it has honed its techniques in recent months, enabling it to focus on voters in the same ways Republicans did in 2004. In Minnesota, Copernicus's work has led Democrats to focus on what the firm calls "Rural Religious Moralists," predominantly married women who might be swayed into voting Democratic over health care, education and gasoline prices. In Michigan, the company's work identified "Downscale Union Independents," who are socially conservative but deeply concerned about the economy.

For their part, TargetPoint and Republicans haven't been standing still. After profiling voters in many key states in 2004, the company can generate more detailed predictions of how voters will behave this time around. In Michigan, for example, TargetPoint's Mr. Gage says he will be able to give Republican officials a list of 800,000 voters with a strong likelihood of voting Republican, up from 500,000 in 2004.

Copernicus's Messrs. Steitz and Yuhas, meanwhile, are spending the last days before the election helping a liberal advocacy group compile lists of Christian voters who the company believes can be persuaded to vote Democratic. "We're not saying that all Christian voters can be moved a little on this," Mr. Steitz says. "We're saying that some Christians can be moved significantly, and that we can tell you who they are."