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The Very, Very Personal Is the Political
By JON GERTNER

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that you are called into the boss's office and asked to help sell the citizens of the United States on one of two presidential candidates in the 2004 campaign. Hard work, but what makes it especially tough is that you've been directed to try something experimental, something that's never been done before in a national election. Instead of creating a traditional political narrative for your candidate -- one that highlights charisma or character, for instance, or one that hews to a message on taxes or Social Security -- you've been told to focus on nothing but the people who might be persuaded to vote. In other words, forget about your candidate's nuanced ideas for space exploration or ending the conflict in Iraq. Forget about TV commercials, forget about radio, forget about debates, forget about the ups and downs of the news cycle. Think voters -- just voters. And don't think only in terms of big demographic groups like senior citizens, middle-class white men or young single women; don't think about them only in terms of geographical areas like districts or precincts or even neighborhoods. Think about what they like, what they do, what they consume. Think about them one by one. Name by name, address by address, phone by phone.

These are the customers you have to get to buy your Brand A over Brand B. So who are they? Where are they? Are they rich, with three kids and a jumbo mortgage? Do they own fly rods and drive minivans? Do they go to church or temple? And maybe most important, who among them has never voted, or rarely voted, or voted in ways that may deserve the special status of swing voter? To do the job right, of course, to really win this thing, you've got to find them, woo them and get them to the polls. Where to start?

These days, the first stop is a comprehensive database of U.S. voters. There are fewer than half a dozen of them. One, named Voter Vault, belongs to the Republican National Committee; another, named Datamart, belongs to the Democratic National Committee. Over the past few years, thanks to technological advances and an escalating arms race between the parties, Republicans and Democrats have gone to great lengths to make campaigning more like commercial marketing. Moreover, both parties have begun to sort through their troves of information in order to identify and then court individual voters. Variations on the new political sharpshooting have been tested successfully by the Republican and Democratic Parties in several recent statewide elections. And over the next few months, a handful of pollsters, tacticians and statisticians on each side, almost certainly fewer than two dozen political pros in all, will be scrutinizing socioeconomic data in Washington and Virginia as a part of their targeting work -- sometimes they also call it microtargeting -- in the coming general election.

This is a complicated business. Each party's databank has the name of every one of the 168 million or so registered voters in the country, cross-indexed with phone numbers, addresses, voting history, income range and so on -- up to as many as several hundred points of data on each voter. The information has been acquired from state voter-registration rolls, census reports, consumer data-mining companies and direct marketing vendors. The parties have also amassed detailed information about the political and social beliefs that you might have shared with canvassers who have phoned or knocked on the door over the past few years. While specifics

vary, a typical voter profile like my own, for instance, would show my age, address, phone numbers; which elections I've voted in over the past 10 or 15 years and whether I've ever voted on an absentee ballot; and my e-mail address. It would include my New Jersey party registration (Democrat), whether I've ever made a political donation (none that I recall), my approximate income, my ethnicity, my marital status and the number of children living in my house. Thanks to the ready availability of subscriber lists, mortgage data and product warranty information, the parties might use records of the newspapers I read (this one), the computer I work on (a Macintosh), the men's-wear catalogs I receive (Brooks Brothers, Land's End) and the loan-to-value ratio of my home.

The common practice of nonprofit groups sharing mailing lists with like-minded organizations would almost certainly provide them with useful information about the charities I favor and the civic groups I'm affiliated with. And with the help of polling (done by phone), canvassing (a lengthy "Democratic Leadership Survey" just arrived in the mail yesterday) or simple inferences (Sierra Club mailings scream "environmentalist"), the parties could divine my likely views on taxes, law enforcement, abortion and global warming.

It is difficult, at first, to see how all these discrete bits of information, aggregated within several whirring, refrigerator-size computer servers in the Washington area, could change the nature of politics. But that is a probable result. The new databases and statistical tools allow candidates to seek out individuals by predicting what personal characteristic, or what combination of characteristics, makes a voter worthy of a tailor-made outreach effort. In other words, someone who appears nonpartisan, someone who might even think of himself as nonpartisan, may nevertheless have a political DNA that the parties will be able to decode. When I spoke recently with one Democratic statistician who does not want to be named -- strategists on both sides see no conflict in combing through our personal lives and then speaking only on the condition of anonymity -- he explained that his work is to find voters not just by what they are and where they live (a 30-something Jewish New Jersey resident like me, for instance) but by how they live (a homeowner with two young children, a foreign car and two credit cards). In politics, he added, this is somewhat revolutionary, allowing campaigns to reach out -- by mail, phone or in person -- to voters they would ordinarily ignore. Thus, people who buck demographic convention (a young white male from the South whose data leans liberal), or those who flout geographic norms (a potential 19-year-old Republican voter living in a Democratic household) are now reachable. A Republican tactician working on a data project of this kind told me, "The big question is: What is the information that I have that indicates someone is a Democrat or Republican? And then it's all about talking to those people and giving them information packaged in a way to get them to buy your brand."

This doesn't mean that the old-fashioned excitement about a contender no longer matters. Momentum, message, money and an army of volunteers remain the engines of any campaign. And yet, should this election come down to a few battleground states, and should it come down in one or two of those places to a tiny, trembling, heart-stopping margin of victory, it is just as likely that one of the most crucial factors in November will not necessarily be what voters know about the candidates. It's what the candidates know about the voters.

In the wake of the 2000 election, each political party, convinced that its opponent was getting

ahead, stepped up its investments in technology and information-gathering. Alarmed that Democrats had done a better job at turning out voters for their nominee, the Republicans began to build what would eventually be called the 72-Hour Task Force, an intensive get-out-the-vote program that pours ground troops and resources into a state or locale in the days before an election. In various contests in 2001, 2002 and 2003, the Republican Party extensively and successfully tested the program's efficacy. (In the past year, for example, the strategy has been part of Republican victories in the Mississippi and Kentucky gubernatorial races.) And during this same period, Republican technicians began to upgrade their Voter Vault database. Essentially an electronic card catalog of the nation's potential voters, Voter Vault, according to the instruction and training manual the R.N.C. distributes, allows Republican workers to log on over the Internet, pull up a voter profile and then -- after calling that particular voter or making a home visit with a hand-held computer -- add vital personal information to the record.

Several months ago, Bush-Cheney volunteers around the country began the laborious work of canvassing and interviewing subjects for the Voter Vault. This under-the-radar data-mining campaign has been joined more visibly by Republican figures like Ralph Reed, the Southeastern chairman for the Bush-Cheney re-election effort, who in December publicly asked supporters to supply the party with their church membership rolls, hunting-club registries, college-fraternity directories and P.T.A. membership rosters. The hope is not only to target individuals and specific segments of society, but also to get those quarries into the voting booths. "We can tailor our message to people who care about taxes, who care about health care, who care about jobs, who care about regulation -- we can target that way," Ed Gillespie, the Republican National Committee chairman, told me recently. "But it's very, very important to us for people in the last 72 hours to e-mail their friends and knock on their doors and get Republicans to the polls. You want to hit them both ways."

Of course, the Democrats would like to do the same. When I asked Laura Quinn, a consultant to the Democratic National Committee who has overseen much of Democrats' new database and targeting work, why the national committee would invest so heavily in new technology, she replied that she didn't think the party had a choice. "If both sides don't do this well, one side will have a great advantage," she said. "These tools are that powerful." Speak with current and former officials on both sides, and you'll be struck by how much common ground the national committees share in terms of sensibility and strategy, if not philosophy. Both national committees see their detailed breakdown of the American electorate as a high-tech variation of pretelevision techniques -- from the 1930's, say, or even the 1950's -- when politics was driven by the one-to-one contact of a precinct worker who might know how to deliver an individualized political message simply because he knew your family, your job, your ethnicity, your values. Within the Republican Party, the 72-Hour Task Force and Voter Vault are considered proof of its return to grass-roots organizing, whereby the party will get to better understand, and keep track of, its supporters. "That's the culture of the party now, and that's a very good culture," Gillespie said. "It's much better than saying, 'We've got to run more ads.' " At the same time, Gillespie told me, he sees the new methods of targeting -- finding, courting and ultimately producing a voter on Election Day -- as a more sophisticated version of what he says Abraham Lincoln practiced in the 19th century, when as a lawyer in Illinois he would visit the local courthouse and review lists of neighbors registered to vote.

While this vision is not inaccurate, it is not complete. Quinn explained that data-mining technology offers three significant advantages. First, by locating likely voters with greater accuracy, it enables campaigns to spend their dollars more wisely and efficiently. Second, it opens up innovative ways of discovering and turning out new voters. Third, it creates the option of creating a narrow or individualized message -- delivered by a friend, through the mail, over the phone or on cable TV -- so that parties can talk to potential supporters about exactly the things they care about most. Dave Carney, a veteran Republican consultant who recently employed some elite statisticians in a successful statewide campaign, offered an example: "The microtargeter would tell me, 'You know, if you own a Ford Explorer and you garden and like the outdoors and you're over 50, there might be a high likelihood that you care about tort reform.' " Carney added, "I don't know how they do this, and I was skeptical, but it works."

Cultural signifiers are not especially new to campaigns. Recently an attack ad launched against Howard Dean by the conservative Club for Growth took them to a new level, denouncing him as a "latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading" tax-hiker. By the standards of the Ph.D.'s now doing microtargeting work in Washington, these are rather crude appeals. Yet they do illustrate how the personal can drive the political. Eddie Mahe, a longtime Republican consultant who worked at the R.N.C. during the 1970's, told me that some in-house committee research several decades ago revealed that Mercury owners were far more likely to vote Republican than owners of any other kind of automobile -- data that was so constant across the country, Mahe recalled, that it couldn't possibly have been the product of chance. "We never had the money or the technology to make anything of it," Mahe said. "But of course, they do now."

On a frigid day in January, I visited Hal Malchow, a direct-mail marketer in downtown Washington who works for candidates and causes on the Democratic side of the aisle. Malchow is a gracious Southerner with a honeyed Mississippi accent; he is also among the first campaign operatives to bring consumer data into the political arena. "Politics is just awakening to the tools that have dominated commercial direct marketing for over two decades," he said when I asked if the new techniques will actually prove effective. "To me there's no question about whether this stuff works. We see it work every day in the commercial world." Back when Eddie Mahe was thinking about targeting Mercury-driving Republicans, Malchow added, voter databases were in a primitive state. Political marketing, too. "There was no information in those days," Malchow said.

Beginning in the early 1970's, and continuing through the late 1980's, several private companies sent foot soldiers to statehouses and town halls across the country in a mighty effort to consolidate lists of voters. Some of the information was already digitally formatted, but in many small towns, family registrations were kept in yellowing ledgers (in at least one New England village, voters had submitted information scratched into the back of a piece of birch bark). Voter Contact Services and Aristotle International were two companies involved in creating statewide electronic lists in the early days for political candidates at all levels; both have since amassed large national databases that rival those of the two political parties. Other collection efforts were the work of local entrepreneurs or politicians who saw that they could make money by selling very basic information to campaigns. A voter's name, address, phone number, party registration and

voting history came to be regarded as the most crucial data. And in a very obvious way, the lists, which replaced the boxes of 3-by-5 index cards that most campaigns depended on, quickly helped improve efficiency: the integrated data showed volunteers which houses to call and not to call, which doorbells to ring and not to ring, which voters to spend more time with and which voters to keep tabs on throughout Election Day.

By the mid-1990's, Malchow and a few other political marketers had begun to merge U.S. Census information with voter registration records; soon after, ethnicity and approximate income became essential parts of most voter lists, followed by information about the number of dependents and the neighborhood level of education. The next step, begun in the late 1990's, was to purchase information from the huge commercial data-mining companies -- Experian, InfoUSA and Acxion, for example. The consumer information that has often shown the most political utility is age and home ownership. Then again, for a campaign with deep pockets and a creative statistician, the bazaar of personal information presents an almost infinite range of possibilities -- lists of magazine subscribers, investors, fine-wine lovers, world travelers, pet owners, you name it. As Malchow told me, when you plug personal data into statistical programs to find out who might be persuadable, "you never know what will turn up."

When I asked Malchow how he uses the information in a campaign, he started a software program, Answer Tree, which incorporated data from one of his recent statewide campaigns. "In this race we divided the state electorate into 15 segments," he said, showing me 15 different boxes on the screen. Malchow then selected one, and with a few quick keystrokes sliced a voting bloc up several times, into ever smaller slivers, based on geographic, demographic and voter-registration factors. In this particular contest, he said, independent voters who were married and not Hispanic and were living in certain Congressional districts had "very high persuadability scores." In other words, they were good targets. It had taken about 90 seconds to find them. The next step, Malchow said, would be to cross-index their profile characteristics with the voter database to get their names, addresses and phone numbers. After that, to devise a direct-mail appeal, Malchow would go over polling information to find out which issues would prove most effective. If need be, and if funds allowed for it, the targets could be reached again and again through the mail, or by phone, or in person. And campaign workers could likewise do their utmost to get them to the booth on Election Day. Perhaps they needed a ride to the polls?

Not long after watching Malchow's demonstration, I drove to Manassas, Va., to visit Richard A. Viguerie, the direct-mail impresario who sends out 120 million letters per year mostly on behalf of conservative causes and candidates. Malchow and Viguerie are separated by 35 miles of Interstate and a deep gulf of ideology, but the two men are friends who end up running into each other several times a year and talking shop. Both share a far higher regard for commercial marketing techniques than those used in traditional political campaigns. And while Malchow was among the first political operatives to see the use of applying consumer and census data to voter profiles, Viguerie, now 70, may have understood the true value of a name before anyone else in contemporary politics. In the summer of 1964, he learned that the clerk of the House of Representatives kept a list of donors who had given Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign \$50 or more. A committed conservative activist, Viguerie visited the clerk, got the list and sat for a day copying the names by hand; then he hired six women to help him finish the job. "I got 12,500 names," Viguerie told me as we sat on a big white couch in his office. "Now I have 3.5

million names."

A spry, charismatic Texan, Viguerie is a raconteur whose affability and wide-ranging intellect don't quite square with the vituperative intensity and single-mindedness of the mail he creates attacking centrists and liberals. Still, none of his appeals to donors are done in heated, off-the-cuff moments; he works diligently to find the precise message to provoke his 3.5 million contacts, and he interrupts his 13- to 15-hour days only to study commercial marketing for two or three hours each afternoon. Viguerie sees recent political history in terms of his kind of marketing. "Direct mail was our lighted candle," he said about the Reagan and post-Reagan Republican ascendancy. "It revolutionized American politics. It leveled the playing field for conservatives. It brought us to the table."

This is a worldview worth taking seriously, especially in light of the recent endeavors of the two parties. For one thing, as Viguerie proudly pointed out, Karl Rove was a direct marketer in Austin ("a very good" competitor of his) before he became chief political adviser to George W. Bush in Texas. Further, while Viguerie's mail lists are not to be confused with the far larger databases of the D.N.C. and R.N.C., his vision of what a directory of targets makes possible -- what kind of leverage it offers a candidate -- corresponds with the aims of both parties. Several officials at the D.N.C. told me that a better understanding of their base, or to be more exact, a better understanding of how to communicate with segments within their database, allows them to tap supporters not only for elections, but also for lots of other issues. To Viguerie this makes perfect sense. The goal of a list, as he sees it, is not merely to get money, or to win a single campaign, but to maintain an active constituency for the exertion of power. "What I understood that few people in the nonprofit world understood was the lifetime value of a donor," Viguerie said. "The Republicans and Democrats, it appears to me, are moving in that direction. But people in politics always thought of what we were doing as only fund-raising. They didn't understand that we were building a movement to identify our activists, pass legislation, defeat legislation." I asked Viguerie whether a good list of names, and a recognition of the pet issues of everyone on that list, was tantamount to a tool for governing. "Ah, there you are," Viguerie said, as his face lighted up in a broad smile. "Absolutely."

In the years since hanging chads and the chaos of Florida, it has become almost reflexive among political observers to describe an America fiercely divided along 50-50 partisan lines. To look at this country the way direct marketers might, through the prism of data, is to see an America of almost uncountable religious and ethnic segmentations, or a country of homeowners, parents, college graduates, high-school dropouts, entrepreneurs, fishermen, regular voters, absentee voters and irregular voters. Also, it's to notice that customers who purchase the message of a particular candidate generally have issues, rather than ideologies, that they respond to. It makes red and blue seem an apt description of the 2000 election outcome, but an exceedingly poor definition of the electorate. To the strategists spearheading the efforts in the 2004 campaign, in fact, it might be more accurate to describe the United States as a country whose population comprises two substantial but not overwhelming blocs of deep philosophical blue on the left and deep philosophical red on the right, in between which are a hundred variations of light blues and reds, some with only a blush of color. And even then, if a recent Pew Research Center poll is correct, the colored areas account for only 90 percent of the electorate.

The remaining 10 percent is the persuadable swing, certainly. But what remains of the lightest colors if one side has the better candidate, organization or message? Or now, the better focusing? To again view the political process as a direct marketer might, it would be a matter of converting them not through 5 or 10 partisan positions, but one narrow, powerful idea. As Richard Viguerie explained, "If you can get them on that one issue, then you can introduce them to a second and a third." This might mean finding a small businesswoman who feels comfortable with the Republican Party's stand on deregulation, for instance, and then reaching out to her on foreign policy. Or it might mean looking to an avid sportsman for support on guns before approaching him on tax cuts. Viguerie told me he'll spend the next four months going around the country in search of financing to help him get his list of 3.5 million names up to 10 million. "Once I can get them on that one issue, then I can get them to take action and get them to be involved politically and ideologically," he said. "You don't have to change 50 percent of Americans, you don't have to change 30 percent. You move 2 percent or 3 percent in New Mexico or Missouri or Wisconsin on one issue, then you've done a whole lot."

The parties, and the well-financed "527" political action groups, share the same ambition. And it may turn out that the newest technology helps them gain a percentage point by courting the right people in the right state with the right message. Some of their methods may also eventually rouse opposition. Among privacy advocates the new databases are almost uniformly viewed as a trespass into our zone of political privacy. Oscar Gandy of the University of Pennsylvania has further noted that political targeting may effectively disenfranchise portions of the electorate that are less likely to vote, or less likely to be persuadable. Why reach out to someone a statistician or a computer program does not consider a viable target?

Meanwhile, other privacy advocates say they worry about the dangers of assembling an individualized message from voter data -- a message to that 50-year-old Ford Explorer driver who likes gardening and cares about tort reform, for example. "The nightmare scenario is that the databases create puppet masters," Peter Swire, a privacy expert who worked at the Office of Management and Budget during the Clinton administration, told me. "In the nightmare, every voter will get a tailored message based on detailed information about the voter. The candidate would know what schools the voter went to, any public records that showed they supported some cause, any court case they've been involved in. There might even be several different messages sent by a candidate to the same home -- one for the wife, one for the husband and one for the 23-year-old kid." The nightmare vision, Swire added, means that the public debates lack content and the real election happens in the privacy of these mailings. The candidate knows everything about the voter, but the media and the public know nothing about what the candidate really believes. It is, in effect, a nearly perfect perversion of the political process.

Swire says he does not believe we're at this juncture, and certainly a curious press makes this vision seem far-fetched. Still, as computing power and money combine in increasingly complex and arcane ways, it's reasonable to ask how a well-financed candidate might use the new techniques for manipulation instead of communication. That said, it is striking that the very thing that concerns privacy advocates is what makes party strategists so enthusiastic. On both sides the talk about "real customized messaging" is without cynicism. The new marketing is a way to draw people into the process through the issues, or through the one issue, that they care about. "No one

is watching the debates, no one is reading Wes Clark's book," one former D.N.C. official told me just before Christmas, and the new data-mining technology presents a way for a campaign to break through the noise of modern life. In a hectic world, this official added, that may be its best chance to get your attention, to see what you truly care about, to get inside your head. And to enlist you, of course, in the attempt to carve out that slender but decisive political margin.

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