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Predictive Analytics Software Proves Its Presidential Timber

Obama Consultant Uses SPSS

The software provides way to "micro-target" residents likely to vote for your side

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Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, locked in an epic battle for the Democratic presidential nomination, need any edge they can get. That's why the Obama team has adopted a powerful software system to zero in on likely voters.

Companies have long used Predictive Analytics software to target high-value shoppers and bank customers. But political campaigns have started to embrace the software for "micro-targeting."

The software sifts through huge amounts of data to pinpoint those voters who might back a given candidate or issue. In this way, campaigns can better focus.

Strategic Telemetry, a political consulting firm based in Washington, D.C., conducts such computer searches for the Obama campaign. The firm uses analytics software from **SPSS**^{SPSS} to sort through vast streams of data. (Clinton representatives didn't respond to an interview request by press time.)

"Predictive Analytics can help users uncover associations in large masses of data," said **Richard Hren, SPSS director of product marketing.** **"This allows consulting companies to identify important patterns in the electorate."**

The software sorts through



Babies like this lad in Monaca, Pa., offer one way to reach voters. But Sen. Barack Obama uses analytics software to find harder-to-reach voters. AP

all kinds of reports from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and private market research firms such as **Experian** and **Acxiom**^{ACXM}. Insights are also gleaned from voter registration rolls.

The first goal is to uncover any voters who might be persuaded to support the candidate, says Ken Strasma, head of Strategic Telemetry.

"Campaigns are looking for people on the bubble," Strasma said. "We look at the undecided voters and issues that most interest them."

Micro-targeting lets a campaign bypass voters who are already staunch supporters, or foes, of the candidate, adds Strasma.

"The campaign doesn't want to waste money on those who already are on either side of an issue," he said. "You want to reach voters who are persuadable."

Campaigns first poll tens of thousands of voters to

build up statistical models. Then the predictive software applies algorithms to the data. The goal is to understand how voters will react to different campaign messages. Are voters most interested in the economy? Iraq?

"The real power of micro-targeting is you can hit right down to the individual level, not just targeting swing precincts like 10 years ago," Strasma said. "Now we can target voters in each household."

In 2004, Strasma micro-targeted voters in the Iowa caucuses on behalf of John Kerry's bid for president. The intricate math of the caucus format required Kerry to predict how each precinct would vote so he could lure enough delegates, Strasma says. "I believe micro-targeting played a key role in John Kerry's come-from-behind victory in Iowa in 2004," he said.

Micro-targeting is still fairly new in politics. But it

has been picked up by campaigns across federal, state and even local levels. The **Southern Political Information Network (Spin)** in Charlotte, N.C., uses micro-targeting to assist Democratic campaigns throughout the South.

In one such case, the approach helped elect an African-American woman to county commissioner in western North Carolina, says Carl Clark, executive director of Spin.

"We needed to find the people who we could get to go to the polls and vote for this woman," Clark said. It turned out the software suggested focusing on a subset of voters who had high education levels but lower incomes. That strategy made all the difference, Clark says.

Obama's campaign also relies on micro-targeting, but Strasma says he can't discuss any details. He fondly recalls, however, one memory from 2004. Back then, the Kerry team was targeting a group of independent voters in Minnesota who didn't vote in every election.

Strasma heard a right-wing talk show host on the radio. He was attacking the campaign ads for being poorly targeted. The host noted that he was a loyal Republican who always votes, yet he didn't receive the mailer. At the same time, he said his girlfriend was a periodic swing voter who did receive the piece.

"We had no idea who she was, but we had found that talk show host's persuadable girlfriend," Strasma recalled with a chuckle. "That really made my day."