

## Hot-button election

*Kevin Allison and Richard Waters*

Smart databases and Facebook-type online communities are at the heart of each main party's efforts to get out the vote, write Kevin Allison and Richard Waters. Below, the promise of sociopolitical networks and, right, the growing role of the bloggers

Stacey Weinberger was browsing Barack Obama's campaign website last month when she stumbled across an invitation to a party for local supporters who wanted to watch the Democratic presidential contender's speech during his party's convention in Denver. It took her just a few clicks to find directions to the party, which was being held at a private home on her way back from work.

The night of the speech, in a scene repeated at hundreds of similar "watch parties" across the US, Ms Weinberger and 15 other Obama supporters gathered in a campaign volunteer's living room to watch the candidate deliver his address. "They had some snacks and a big-screen TV with the convention going," says Ms Weinberger. "I brought some fruit. We had little name tags."

That Democratic gathering near San Francisco highlights what could turn out to be one of the deciding factors in the presidential election campaign that is now in full swing.

Modern politics is still a face-to-face business but, as practised in the 2008 election, it relies on the effective use of increasingly sophisticated technology. From industrial-scale database marketing to softer, "web 2.0" technologies such as online social networking, the rival campaigns are using many of the same technologies that are now heavily deployed by corporate America to try to motivate and mobilise their supporters.

For Mr Obama to win, his team will have to out-smart and out-hustle a technologically sophisticated Republican ground game that has got the better of the Democrats in the past two presidential elections. As it heads for a showdown against a resurgent John McCain, the Obama campaign is betting heavily on its ability to muster an army of volunteers to knock on doors and make phone calls to swing voters in battleground states.

Successful get-out-the-vote operations can increase the number of votes a candidate receives in a national election by 3-4 per cent, according to Donald Green, a professor at Yale University who studies voter turnout. That is more than enough to make a difference in a tight election. For both campaigns, the challenge of this election will be to meld new technologies effectively with old-fashioned politics to maximise the turnout for their side. "We are seeing the first true campaign of the 21st century," says Simon Rosenberg, head of NDN, a progressive think-tank that advises on new media strategies. "The essential core of it is not television but the actions of millions of people."

In a sense, it can also be seen as a return to the past. The personal contact involved has echoes of the 19th century, when the political parties that dominated politics in big US cities leant on voters to support their preferred candidates. That person-to-person approach faded as media campaigns, in particular on television, came to be seen as the most effective way to reach voters.

But in recent years, a series of close-run elections and the internet's ability to connect office-seekers to grassroots supporters have led to a renewed emphasis on putting bodies on the street to rustle up votes. "The campaigns of the last decade have rediscovered politics the way it was run 100 years ago, with people going door to door to encourage people to go vote," says Michael McDonald, a professor at George Mason University in Virginia. "The volunteers and the technology fuel the get-out-the-vote effort."

So far this decade, the Republican party has managed to stay a step ahead of Democrats in the art and science of door-to-door politics. The Republicans were the first to develop the technology at the heart of modern get-out-the-vote campaigns - a massive database

containing reams of information that has been offered up over the years by individual voters. It is known as the Voter Vault. "They've been building that for the past 20 years. It's at the centre of everything they do," says Juan Proaño, the head of Plus Three, a software company that worked with the Democrats to create their own database after 2002.

Both the Republicans and Democratic voter files now include around 170m names. They are founded at their core on state-level election rolls, which the parties have collected and amalgamated. These show the names and addresses of voters and in which elections they voted in the past. With some states it also includes a voter's registered party affiliation.

Personal and broader demographic data are layered on top of this, though neither party is prepared to talk in detail about all the types of information it has on individual voters. Household income and the value of a home from its street address are two pieces of information that are included for many, says Mr Proaño. Further data brought in include results of focus groups taken locally - information that might give a clue about likely political leanings.

"I [may] have five neighbours on my street who voted Democratic in two of the last five elections. We can look for all of them in a given area," says Thomas Gensemer, managing partner at Blue State Digital, the company that is managing the web technology for Mr Obama. "We scratched the surface of this in 2004, but there was always the missing link of real interaction with the voter file."

Sophisticated computer modelling is then employed to sift through the data and highlight potential supporters, making it easier to target the efforts of campaign volunteers. The goal is to identify likely supporters and rally them around specific campaign issues - a process known as micro-targeting. "Our most effective way is still knocking on doors - but ideally, you use the technology to narrow the number of doors you knock on," says a senior Democratic strategist.

For most of this decade, Democrats have been forking to catch up with The Republican ground game, which has benefited from the enthusiasm of a solid core of social conservative activists. This year, a network of volunteers active on the Obama campaign's website is expected to form the core of the Democrats' get-out-the-vote push. "We've spent the last 19 months building up [files on] millions of people," says Mr Gensemer. "It's unleashing a fire hose of power."

Part of that power stems from what party supporters themselves do. Those who organise door-knocking campaigns or events such as Ms Weinberger's convention watch party can send information about voters they meet and the concerns they express directly to the central campaign, which uses the data to make decisions about how to allocate its resources.

Volunteers and supporters can also interact on online social networks set up for each campaign. Unlike MySpace or Facebook, which serve primarily as a way for users to share photographs and other information with friends, the Obama campaign's social network, known as Mybarackobama, acts as a volunteer management tool. It links potential voters to volunteers, and volunteers to each other, by allowing them to organise, publicise and collect data on events.

Indeed, it has taken the unprecedented step of granting supporters who have registered on Mybarackobama controlled access to the Democrats' own central voter file. Mr Gensemer says that will direct supporters to specific addresses of likely swing voters during the final door-to-door and telephone push: "It's not just trying to grease the wheels for fundraising. It's us visiting the voter and [seeing] how the voter is responding. The network is really driving the campaign in many states."

Throughout the race, the Obama campaign has sought to build on the lessons learned during Vermont governor Howard Dean's pitch for the Democratic nomination in 2004. The Dean campaign was the first to make wide use of the internet as a tool to organise and motivate grassroots supporters. It proved adept at fundraising. But both in Mr Dean's primary contest

and in the general election between John Kerry and George W. Bush that followed, Democrats failed to turn out enough votes to win.

"It was meant to be a 'mouse-pads and shoe leather' campaign," says David Weinberger, Mr Dean's internet adviser, who is now a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center. "They were not good at doing the shoe leather."

The Obama campaign has already shown its mastery of online fundraising. Thanks to its effective use of social networking to galvanise supporters, and to e-mail marketing techniques that drew heavily on corporate marketing, Mr Obama has attracted more than 2m individual donors since the primaries began. Now, he has to turn this online endeavour into an election winner. In the closing days of the 2004 campaign, Republicans were more enthusiastic as well as better at identifying the important issues and the people they needed to talk to during their telephone and door-to-door campaign, says Prof McDonald.

"The Democrats were surprised by the organisation the Republicans launched at the last minute," he says. "The Republicans had whipped the evangelical Christians into a frenzy over gay marriage. They brought all these volunteers into Ohio in the last days of the campaign and went door to door. It was wildly successful. The Democrats met all their turnout targets - they just never planned on what the Republicans were able to put together."

Voter registration could also be a big factor in turnout efforts, as campaigns funnel data on each new voter into their voter files. Each of the campaign websites features sections with information for new voters. This year, the early numbers suggest that Democrats hold a big lead in new voter sign-ups in battleground states where get-out-the-vote efforts could be critical.

Regardless of who prevails in November, the new technologies applied this year are likely to have a lasting impact on how voters interact with political campaigns. For people such as Ms Weinberger, the internet has opened new doorways to political involvement. "I'm left-leaning but I wouldn't say I'm a political person," she says. Nevertheless, a few days after she attended her Obama convention watch party, Ms Weinberger contacted her local campaign office to volunteer.

Starting this month, she will be doing data entry work for the Democrats in their final get-out-the-vote push.

**Fonte: Financial Times, London, September 12 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 7.**