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Crovitz: Obama's 'Big Data' Victory

Marketing politicians is now like selling drinks. It involves filtering policies and voters through algorithms.

By L. GORDON CROVITZ

When the Obama campaign emailed supporters to join a $40,000-a-ticket dinner in June at the New York home of actress Sarah Jessica Parker, journalists at ProPublica noticed something odd. They uncovered seven versions of the email solicitation for the fundraiser, some mentioning a second fundraiser that night, a concert by Mariah Carey, others that Ms. Parker is a mother, and still others that Vogue editor Anna Wintour would be at the dinner.

Who got which email depended on "big data"—information about each fundraising prospect and how different people react to different messages. In this year's election, it looks as if the Obama team's use of such data was one of its biggest edges over the Romney effort.

Some uses of big data were known before the election—for instance, the Obama website was even more assiduous than online retailers like Best Buy about dropping "cookies" on users' computers to gather information about their online habits. Reporting since the election makes clear just how important the role of data was in deciding the election.

Campaign manager Jim Messina pledged to "measure every single thing in this campaign" and built an analytics department five times the size of the 2008 effort. A Time magazine reporter got access to the data scientists in the campaign's Chicago headquarters on the condition that the reporter would keep mum until after the election. "What they revealed as they pulled back the curtain," Time recently reported, "was a massive data effort that helped Obama raise $1 billion, remade the process of targeting TV ads and created detailed models of swing-state voters that could be used to increase the effectiveness of everything from phone calls and door knocks to direct mailings and social media."

According to the magazine, the campaign created a "single massive system that could merge the information collected from pollsters, fundraisers, field workers and consumer databases as well as

social-media and mobile contacts with the main Democratic voter files."

Associated Press

'Sex and the City' star Sarah Jessica Parker at the White House in 2010.

The campaign's "chief scientist," Rayid Ghani, had been at [Accenture](#), where he co-wrote an academic paper describing work helping companies that "analyze large amounts of transactional data but are unable to systematically 'understand' their products." For example, Mr. Ghani helped grocers figure out why people bought orange juice by reducing the product to attributes that could be analyzed by algorithms —"Brand: Tropicana, Pulp: low, Fortified with: Vitamin-D, Size: 1 liter, Bottle type: plastic."

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The Obama campaign focused on data showing the "persuadability" of voters. Multivariate tests identified issues and positions that could move undecided voters, ProPublica said: "The persuasion scores allowed the campaign to focus its outreach efforts—and their volunteer calls—on voters who might actually change their minds as the result. It also guided them in what policy messages individual voters should hear."

Big data give incumbents a big advantage, which seems to have surprised the Romney team. The Obama campaign has used cookies to track its supporters online since the 2008 election. It spent the past 18 months creating a new, unified database, factoring in some 80 pieces of information about each person, from age, race and sex to voting history. (The campaign denied reports that it tracked visits to pornography sites in its outreach algorithms.) The Romney campaign says it tried to match the Obama campaign's collection and analysis of data but had to start from scratch and had just seven months after the primaries.

What does this mean for you? Voters need to develop buyer-beware habits. The era of politicianssaying the same thing to all voters is over. Campaigns aim to tell voters exactly what each wants to hear: data-driven pandering.

Another consequence is that efforts by the Federal Trade Commission and other agencies to regulate data mining in the name of privacy are destined to collapse. Last month, Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D., W.Va.) sent a letter to the top "information broker" companies, accusing them of being "elusive" about what data they collect. Companies such as [Acxiom](#) and Experian replied that much of their information comes from government databases. They should also point out that political campaigns are among the most sophisticated users of the consumer data they collect.

The Obama campaign deserves credit for its big win through the sophisticated use of big data. As for regulators, they should understand that the information genie will not go back into the bottle —whether consumer information is used to sell orange juice or politicians.

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