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Matching voter, driver and phone tapes boosts Democratic voter registration in Nevada

By Chris Brown

Since October, 1985 over 12,000 new Democrats have been registered in Clark County, Nevada using a targeted drive which relies heavily on output from VCS computer file matching. With Democratic registration in the greater Las Vegas area at a little over 100,000, the new Democrats directly enrolled in this outreach program now comprise an impressive 10+% of that total.

In designing a registration program for the Nevada Democrats in 1985, we were confronted by an unusual situation for a somewhat Democratic urban area. Out of 394 precincts, we rate only 19 as "Precincts for Blanket Voter Registration" by Democrats. In a good "blanket registration" drive, deputy registrars systematically canvass a target precinct and register every eligible resident. This is the most efficient and least expensive kind of drive. It is being used successfully in the nineteen Clark County precincts where, "low-tech" though it is, it's still the best approach.

But what about the other 95% of Clark County? Since Democratic candidates typically get 55% to 58% of the countywide vote, there is no question that there are thousands of unregistered Democrats out there. But where? And how could they be targeted and registered?

To find the answer, we used an often discussed but seldom tried "high-tech" approach, a three-way computer file match.

To start, the Nevada Democrats first purchased a Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles tape of licensed Nevada drivers, a current MetroMail telephone number tape for Clark County, and a Clark County voter registration tape. These tapes were sent to Voter Contact Services for matching and printing of Clark County "prospect cards" based on the match.

The object was to produce 3x5 computer cards with the names of one or more "unregistered drivers with phones" at a given address. As a separate run, we

requested cards for "unregistered drivers without phones" for the more Democratic parts of the county.

Bearing in mind that our ultimate purpose was to register new voters who would not only register, but vote Democratic, we used political targeting as the basis for our card order to improve our odds and decrease our costs. This was not quite as easy as it sounds, however.

A driver's record contains a lot of information, like the color of the eyes, the thickness of the glasses, and the date of birth. But not precinct number. Thus, unless an unregistered driver happened to live in the same household with a registered voter, which wasn't often, there was no straightforward way to tell whether the driver lived in a highly Republican precinct or a marginally Democratic one. (We much prefer to register in the latter areas.)

To solve this problem, we analysed the Democratic strength of each zip code in Clark County instead, since zip is part of each driver's file record. VCS produced some file counts for each zip, which gave us an idea of how many cards we could expect.

We immediately eliminated highly Republican zips with few or no precincts of interest. Then, we ordered VCS 3x5 cards for unregistered drivers with phones in the somewhat Democratic areas, and cards for all unregistered drivers in the most-Democratic zips.

Our order yielded about 90,000 prospect cards, about equally divided between cards with phones and those without. But it was the unregistered-drivers-with-phones that we were most interested in for the early phase of our drive.

These 3x5 cards-with-phone provided our volunteers with an entirely new way to conduct a targeted voter registration drive without having our limited pool of deputy registrars and bird-dogs hit the pavement and knock on the doors of countless strangers before finding a bona fide, at-home, unregistered, eligible, interested Democrat.

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