

Voter Registration Tapes: Mining for New Votes, New Voters, and New Money

Russell W. Getter • James Emerson Titus

One of the basic building blocks for any campaign is the list of voters who are registered and thus eligible to decide the election. A campaign's limited resources should be spent only on attempts to influence this group of citizens; money and volunteer time expended to reach the unregistered—at least after the deadline for registration—are wasted. The authors of this article suggest several productive uses for the voter list: as a door-to-door canvassing device; a source for random-sample polling; a ready-made group for personalized, persuasive mailings; and even for selective fundraising.

The actual names of registered voters are the most prized commodity in American political campaigns. Election Day victory or defeat depends upon the proper prediction by a candidate of the behavior of these select members of the adult populations. Yet conventional wisdom seems to indicate that voter registration lists are of minimal use in campaigning or fundraising. As Richard Viguerie put it: "If you want to do fundraising, you go to fundraising lists. You go to voter lists if you want votes. But why would you use a voter list if you want money? It just

doesn't make sense to do it that way." In other words, registration data are supposedly too costly and too vague to use for targeted fundraising.

As with most political information, registration data are not (in their raw form) orderly and useful for special needs such as raising money, locating unregistered voters, producing turnout on Election Day, conducting telephone opinion polling, and canvassing the precincts. But registrant data can be cleaned up and refocused by use of a computer, to the financial and political benefit of campaigns.

Russell W. Getter is Associate Director of the Center for Public Affairs at the University of Kansas. James Emerson Titus has managed several campaigns for Kansas Democratic candidates. The authors would like to thank William Maxwell of Lawrence, Kansas, for his research, which was used as the basis for this article.

Basic data

(What do we get when we buy a computer tape of registered voters?) We have discovered that statutes vary from state to state allowing, at times, considerable leeway to officials regarding the location, coding, and quality of data.

But with some additions or exceptions in different states, these are the data we are usually buying on each voter:

<i>Person</i>	<i>Place</i>
1. Name	11. Precinct
2. Birthdate	12. Street Name or
3. Gender	Number or Rural
4. Party Affiliation	Route Number
5. Date of	13. Zip Code
Registration	14. Living Unit
6. State	a. House Number
7. County	b. Apt. Number,
8. Township	Letter, or both
9. City	c. Mobile Home Lot
10. Ward	Number

Data use

Let us assume that you have obtained a "cleaned," up-to-date registration tape of a single county. (You now have a list of names, but missing are the new voters to be created by a registration drive.) For most campaigns, this requires door-to-door knocking in a few highly transient precincts where you hope to pick up names of new potential voters who have moved in during the past year or two.

The data you purchased make it possible to focus registration drive efforts and to use the computerized Unregistered Household Method to blanket precincts systematically with a minimum of lost effort. Further, the application of aggregate precinct voting data, by party, allows you to choose those precincts with the highest potential of new voters for your candidate and party.

Start by sorting the tape of registered voters in the following ascending order:

1. City or township in the county.
2. Wards.
3. Precincts.
4. Street name or rural route.
5. Dwelling number.

6. Apartment number or letter, mobile home lot number or rural route box number, if available.

(The objective of this sorting procedure is the organization of all registrants by household.) This is a key sort for working the streets because it arranges every person (husband, wife, daughters, sons, aunts, uncles, boarders, renters, even grandma and grandpa) under one household heading. The next sort is to arrange households by odd and even numbers so that your workers, like the mail carrier, walk up one side of the street and back down the other. Once you have the registered households spotted, then you can identify the households in which no one is registered.) One way to prepare your door-to-door callers is to have someone drive through a precinct beforehand, noting on cards the dwelling numbers *not* contained on the list of households with registered voters.

This unregistered household method of conducting voter registration drives does not address the problem of unregistered persons living in households where former occupants were registered. Also, the method does not identify unregistered persons living in households where at least one occupant is registered. Nevertheless, the unregistered household method is many times more efficient than traditional methods of registering new voters and, at worst, is an excellent complement to the more traditional methods.

(The most efficient use of the unregistered household method occurs when aggregate data are also available showing the percentage of voters in a precinct that traditionally vote for one's favored party or candidate. Armed with this information, voter registration efforts can be specifically targeted on those precincts.) Targeting voter registration efforts, of course, is desirable where resources are limited and where one thinks that traditional canvassing methods may result in something less than maximum "useful" registration. Useful registration occurs when your candidate or party receives a high percentage of the votes

of the newly registered. It is sad but true that many campaign organizations inadvertently register voters for the opposition party or candidate. This can be avoided with the intelligent use of precinct voting returns and the unregistered household method of registering voters.

Canvassing devices

With registrants sorted by household, one may prepare several useful devices for canvassing, depending on who is doing the canvassing work. A perennial favorite is the candidate-centered device that has been found to be so useful for candidates for local offices and state legislative races.

The candidate-canvassing device is a card file of all registrants, sorted in the following order of priority:

1. Candidate's district.
2. Precinct.
3. Street name or rural route.
4. Even-numbered households.
5. Odd-numbered households.
6. Apartment designation, post office box, or mobile home lot.

Again, all registrants will be organized by household, within each set of odd and even household numbers for each street name. The separation of odd and even numbers enables a candidate (or a representative) to work one side of the street at a time.

The computer output can be either cheshire (i.e., plain white computer paper) or gummed labels with up to three registrants per household listed on one label. If there are more than three registrants at a given address, their names will be printed in blocks of three names until all registrants at that address have been listed. (Experience suggests that the basic registration information on these labels, in addition to the full names of the registrants, is the ward and precinct, the mailing address, the phone number if it is available, the birthdate or age of each registrant, and the party affiliation.)

These labels can then be affixed to 3 × 5 index cards, which can be preprinted with useful questions pertaining to the interests and activities of each registrant. Among the more useful of these questions are previous, present, or potential monetary or time contributions; occupations; interest group or labor union memberships; number of children in the household; whether the residents are owners or renters; etc.

(Armed with these cards (which may easily be carried in a coat pocket or purse) a candidate knows the characteristics of household residents before he/she rings the doorbell. Procedurally, the candidate should ascertain the identity of persons in the household and then proceed to note as much additional information about the registrants as possible.

Using this procedure over a period of time, a candidate can soon get to "know" the voters in his/her district in a way that most candidates currently only dream about. Moreover, the newly acquired information may be added to a computer file for personalized mass-mailings if the candidate has the resources with which to take this additional step.

Polling from a computerized data file

It is simply a fact of political life that the usefulness of any information, whether it pertains to voter registration information or not, depends substantially on the degree of access and control one has over the information. (Because of the need for timely access and some degree of secrecy and control, candidates appreciate having voter registration data on their own computer systems.) The available data storage technology has rapidly improved to the point where it is possible to store several thousand registrar records on a single removable device. For example, a 5 megabyte removable hard disc system will store up to 10,000 registrant records per disc. These data can then be sorted in whatever way one chooses and for several purposes, provided that one has the software with which

cf. contact management system

to manipulate these data. Certainly one of the initial pieces of software that one must develop or purchase is a database program that can not only handle *all* of the voter registration information, but also is capable of receiving any additional information that candidates and their workers might acquire. Telephone numbers and polling results are among the more useful of these additional data.

In recent years, market research firms have developed very sophisticated Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) systems. These CATI systems either have telephone numbers stored internally or they generate their own numbers with a random digit telephone number generator. In any event, the telephone numbers can be machine-dialed, thus initiating an interview. (For political polling, the best method is to enter the telephone numbers into each registrant record prior to the polling phase.) For three to six cents each, private firms will match phone numbers with a voter registration tape (Metro-Mail and R. L. Polk, to name only two). These private firms have a match rate of about fifty percent of the names on a voter registration tape, and about seventy-five percent of the households. Equipped with a database complete with phone numbers—albeit imperfect—one may then select registrants randomly for calling.

Once a registrant answers the phone, the interviewer is prompted by a display of textual material and questionnaire items displayed on a video screen in his office. Each possible response category for each question is also displayed, together with a code number for each category. When the registrant-respondent answers a question, the interviewer enters the appropriate response code and then proceeds to the next questionnaire item. (The data are stored for each registrant, thus adding to the knowledge-base about each potential voter polled.)

Such polling can have many objectives, including an assessment of the relative percentage point advantage (or disadvantage)

for the candidate. (However, even more useful data may include the likelihood of each registrant to vote and how persuadable each registrant may be to your candidate.) This information, coupled with some knowledge of the registrant's positions on issues and the level of intensity regarding them, will enable the campaign to focus its energies on these "undecideds" in beneficial ways.

Personalized mailing to selected registrants

One may generate personalized letters to selected respondents from a computerized listing. In its simplest form, the same letter content is sent to all of the selectees, even though each letter contains the names of one or more persons residing in each household. A more sophisticated version of personalized letters is to tailor the letter's content to the registrant's interests, party, and position on issues—information obtained from registrant records and polls. With computer assistance, one can then select from among a variety of stock paragraphs, matching each paragraph selection with each registrant's predispositions. To reinforce this message, which is matched to a specific kind of registrant, the letter also can be closed with a carefully tailored P.S. message for each type of registrant.

Certainly some persons will object on ethical grounds to tailoring letters to each registrant, usually without considering the implications of such a stand. It is important to note that computer-generated tailored letters *can be* abused, particularly if a candidate appears to be writing contradictory messages on various issues, but this need not be the case if candidates are judicious in composing the stock paragraphs to be stored in the computer. The matching of registrants with specific paragraphs can be as simple as writing about education to a registrant that you already know is concerned about such matters. Similarly, a farmer or rancher probably wants to read what the candidate has to say about agricultural issues, and so on. Since a letter's effectiveness

is generally considered to be inversely related to its length—at least beyond three paragraphs—a campaign organization needs the capability to get the correct messages to the appropriate subpopulations. Computer-assisted letters are one way of achieving a high level of effectiveness in this direction.

Multiname household mailing labels

The questions surrounding mailing come up in nearly every campaign at one time or another. On the plus side, mailing enables a candidate to target his/her message to a given subpopulation or to a geographic area with greater precision than virtually any other campaign vehicle. This has the effect of assuring a campaign director that he/she is not paying for the dissemination of a message to a nonregistered and nonvoting population. On the negative side, mailing is fairly expensive, especially if the campaign seeks to send a message to every registered voter in a subpopulation or a specific geographic area.

(By sorting a registrant file so that the names of all persons in a household are printed on the same mailing label, one can reduce mailing costs by as much as forty percent.) The average group of voter registrants will have 1.7 persons per household. Accordingly, one reduces mailing costs, and probably increases the effectiveness of the candidate's image, by sending *one* item to each household rather than inundating a multiperson household with unnecessary paper.

(The computer program that generates household labels should first sort the names by *zip code*, since bulk mailing rates require that mail be sorted in this order.) Other sorting should establish the household order. The next precaution that should be taken when writing the computer program is to check for the number of persons at a given address. If there are more than three or four registrants at one address, this may mean that a common address is being used by persons not normally

associated with one another in household fashion. Possible examples of such places are senior citizens' centers, small mobile home courts without lot numbers, rural routes without accompanying box numbers, and boarding houses. The safest procedure is to have the program write individual labels whenever a given address has more than three or four registrants. This procedure may result in marginal inefficiency, but it can avoid major blunders.

Fundraising from multiperson household mailings

Some consultants tell you that you should not attempt to raise money from voter registration lists and, if one approaches this task in the traditional way—of sending one letter per registrant—the conventional wisdom is sound advice, indeed. (However, we have found that if one sorts registrants by household and selects households carefully, it can be very cost-effective.)

Multiperson households in which the members share important characteristics such as party identification, interest group and labor union membership, or where they have the same or a similar occupation, tend to reinforce one another's political predispositions. (Through the social and psychological processes of selective perception and social reinforcement, residents of single-party households will tend to blame persons of the opposite party for everything—from bad weather to the 0-32 record of the local college basketball team!) Meanwhile, registrants living in single-person households are less likely to receive reinforcement for their political and social views. At a minimum, the social reinforcement necessary for singles to articulate their political views is left, at least to some extent, up to chance, and, thus, they are more of a "risk" in fundraising terms. Accordingly, fundraising from voter registration lists can, if properly done, be very effective. It can also be more effective (how effective

depends on a multitude of socioeconomic factors) if mail is sent *only* to multiperson households where the residents can be expected to share important characteristics.

Solving problems in voter registration data

Solution of the problems attendant to registration data requires the services of a sophisticated computer programmer and a mainframe computer complete with large disc drives and tape drives (7 to 9 track; up to 6250BPI), plus a full set of utility programs (i.e., file handling, sort-merge, etc.). In addition, it may be necessary, depending on the state, and jurisdictions within states, for the mainframe to be able to read and convert registration data on cards, diskettes, mini-cassettes, and any one of a number of other electronic data processing (EDP) media. It is wise to conduct an inventory of the types of EDP storage devices used in storing registration data for any state, jurisdiction, or geographic area of interest, as a first step; then, with needs ascertained, acquisition of the necessary reading and conversion services can begin. If you do not have good conversion services at your immediate disposal, you should contact

a private computer services bureau in your area.

Conclusion

Voter registration data need not be the wasteland that many political activists have come to believe that they are. These data are useful for many purposes, *including* fundraising.

(Despite the many potential uses of voter registration data, it is a safe assumption that not much of the potential is ever realized in most campaigns.) The reasons are numerous. First, many candidates and their managers have been "sold" on the effectiveness of broadcast media and, thus, often choose to devote usually scarce resources to the electronic media. Second, some candidates and their staffs tend to be philosophically predisposed to think that computers and computer technologies are dehumanizing and are incompatible with their goals. Third, many so-called campaign organizations are not sufficiently organized in advance of the campaign period to be able to incorporate advanced technologies into their campaign efforts.