

RUNNING

A VICTORY

LAB

They're tracking your habits.

They're reading your links.

They're watching your moves.

The Democratic and Republican campaign centers know everything about you. Where you shop, what you buy, the news sites you visit and your voting patterns. They've mined your data and now they're primed to bombard you for your vote

BY Shimmy Blum

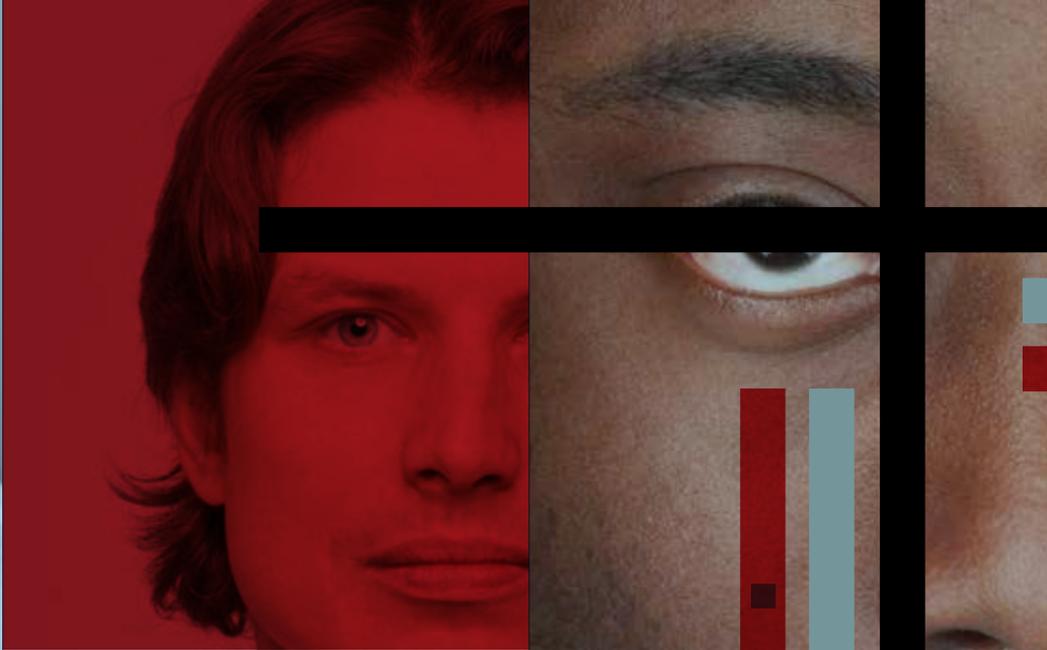
POLITICAL CAMPAIGN OPERATIVES MAY NOT KNOW exactly how you will vote in the next election, but they've probably compiled enough information about you — facts you thought were confidential — to have a pretty good idea.

Welcome to the new world of politics. Gone are the days of guesswork and generalities. These days, party analysts can key into the individual profile of every voter in the country, informed by thousands of individual data points that not only tell the campaigns who you'll vote for (before you might know yourself), but also how you might be manipulated to join them and recruit your friends too.

Data mining, once the exclusive tool of large corporations looking to sway your purchase of everything from soap to automobiles, has entered politics full force. The traditional tools of political campaigns may look the same — a knock on the door, a phone call at dinnertime, a media ad, a mailer — but behind them lurks a vast digital network with a single purpose: to get you to support their candidate.

“When someone from a campaign calls you during dinner, they usually already know your age, party affiliation, and more,” Sasha Issenberg, author of *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns*, shares with *Mishpacha*. “Very little in political communication today happens by accident.”

In the 2012 presidential election, which pundits then believed was winnable for Republicans, President Barack Obama's campaign outspent rival Mitt Romney's ten to one in this emerging area, building



## How to Make Them Go Away

Voters fitting the profile of a persuadable voter, or one not certain to turn out on Election Day, will inevitably get a highly disproportionate onslaught of campaign ads, communication, and contacts.

Much of what placed you atop a campaign's radar screen may be beyond your control, but Sasha Issenberg suggests some simple steps you can take if you want a break. In states that allow early voting, the earlier you're recorded by your board of elections as having voted, the earlier campaigns will know that it's too late to bother you.

Additionally, Mr. Issenberg notes that people often reflexively try to brush away campaign operatives by saying that they're not sure who they'll vote for, or what their position is on a particular issue, or whether they'll vote at all. But, he says, that strategy may invite even more contact. "If you say, 'I support candidate A and I'm firm about that,' they're less likely to contact you again."

available for decades, it was previously virtually impossible to mix and match it all for the massive population of voters. That is no longer the case.

During the 2012 campaign, the Obama team spent millions consolidating their various databases and matching what they knew about a voter in the past versus what he or she was telling them via surveys or phone calls. That allowed the campaign to pinpoint with laser-like accuracy the profiles of Obama, Romney, and undecided voters, and tailor persuasion scripts for individual voters. For instance, using recent survey results and voter data points, campaigns could customize the "pitch" canvassers made when knocking door to door. Then, using special software, the canvasser could send the results of the conversation directly back to the office — one more data point to play into the larger campaign.

**Connecting the Dots** The effects of digital data mining touch upon just about every area of political strategy. Whereas conventional methods are like scanning with an X-ray and announcing via a billboard in town square (a fuzzy picture and a general target), contemporary strategy is more akin to scanning with an MRI and announcing via an instant message to your personal smartphone (a precise picture and a specific target).

Regardless of political persuasion, analysts agree that President Obama's 2012 reelection campaign was the most sophisticated ever in this realm. Issenberg chronicles a sampling of the feats accomplished by the Obama team.

The campaign conducted as many 500,000 calls to voters a month, recorded all the information gleaned by those conversations, and then matched it to the myriad data

points available on those particular voters. Much of that information was bought from credit-reporting agencies and other data collectors, who, according to the *Wall Street Journal* and a wide array of other media outlets, earn extra revenues by selling data that's supposed to remain confidential.

The Obama campaign then used all that information to build profiles of the factors that best predicted how a particular voter might vote; whether that voter could be persuaded to vote Democratic; if so, how best to convince him; and how to make sure voters went to the polls.

For instance, the surveys found that deriding Republicans for their positions on women's health and equal pay for women most resonated with a subset of voters that were given a mere 20 percent to 40 percent probability score to support Obama. These voters — Republican-leaning who were ready to change their mind based on these issues — proved invaluable to the campaign, and this message was hit home to voters within that profile through various methods. Similarly, the Obama campaign discovered that voters aged 45 to 65 — those not yet eligible for Social Security and Medicare, but not far off — were most responsive to attacks claiming that Republicans threatened those social programs and their benefits.

When targeting particular voters, the Obama campaign also proved to be extremely efficient. For instance, the campaign

purchased a whopping 68 ads in the tiny media market of Dothan, Alabama. That market in a hardcore conservative state overlapped with approximately 9,000 voters in the key swing state of Florida. Even though approximately 7,000 of them voted against Obama in the 2008 election, strategists determined based on their profiles that enough of them could be persuaded to vote for the president this time — with the right message — and it was worth the investment.

Similarly, campaign research identified that voters who use mass transit frequently are more likely to support Obama, and a deluge of ads would help maximize their turnout. The campaign then made a large targeted purchase of ads on public buses in swing states — on routes that had the largest cluster of the targeted voters.

Ultimately, Obama won Florida and several other key states by a narrow margin. Although his victory margin in the national popular vote was modest and very similar to President Bush's reelection margin in 2004, Obama won by a landslide 332-206 in the Electoral College, where all the delegates from each state go to the victor.

**On the Radar Screen** Most campaigns won't have the Obama campaign's level of resources and/or unique data mining capabilities. Nevertheless, while the more sophisticated data collection and targeting may be in the hands of a

huge computer networks, linking databases, and creating specialized software to keep Obama as front-runner.

Obama's reelection campaign began its effort "confident it knew the name of every one of the 69,456,897 Americans whose votes had put him in the White House [in 2008]," Issenberg wrote in *MIT Technology Review*. Issenberg noted that even though those votes were cast by secret ballot, Obama's analysts could look at the Democrats' vote totals in each precinct, identify the people most likely to have backed him, and then work on reassembling that coalition, one person at a time, through a network of personal contacts.

The know-how advantage that comes from political data mining will be put to use by the Democrats to try to shape elections for years to come. And Republicans are doing everything in their power to catch up. If you're registered to vote, your local election board makes your age, race (oftentimes), address, party affiliation, and record of which recent elections you voted in a breeze for campaigns to access. Campaigns, political parties and public interest groups maintain records of all the individuals they've come in contact with — in person, by telephone or online. If you've ever filled out a politically related survey, or answered the questions of a volunteer who called your home or knocked on your door, many clues as to your political inclinations are stored in a database: Who did you vote for in the past? What's your position on a particular issue? How did you react when given a particular political pitch?

Census data offers a clear picture of race, age, income, home values and other key data points for every neighborhood in the country. Who owns a particular home and the estimated home value is within reach of anyone who can use Google. In addition, many companies, media outlets and public interest groups sell their list of customers, subscribers, and donors to anyone who pays. All these bits of information offer invaluable clues as to your demographics, lifestyle, personality, and preferences — many of which are completely unrelated to politics — but which political strategists can turn into gold.

While much of the information accessible today has been

precious few, the tech trend is overtaking US politics. It will inevitably affect lower-level, lesser-funded statewide and local campaigns in the future as well.

“From a technical perspective, a university student majoring in statistics can figure it out,” says Benjy Messner, principal at the Democratic Precision Strategies firm, which was cofounded by top Obama 2012 campaign lieutenants.

What puts you on or off the map?

## When someone from a campaign calls you during dinner, they usually already know your age, party affiliation and more

Mr. Messner explains that strategists put lots of focus on the process of elimination — who is most firmly in a candidate’s camp, and most likely to turn out and vote — in order to determine on whom not to spend resources. For instance, voters who are registered in a particular party and have a

record of loyally turning out for its primaries and general elections are considered unlikely to switch to the other side or in need of a nudge to get to the polls.

Independents and moderates have always been the number one target of campaign strategists, but there is now so much more to know than just individuals’ party affiliation. If they have a solid record of turning out for general elections, they’re a more valuable target. If they have school-age children, they’re the perfect target for ads, mailers, phone calls — or a knock on the door — touting a candidate’s position on education. If they

## Watching Your Every Move?

With revelations about the unprecedented data collection of the National Security Agency (NSA), voters can be forgiven if they are fearful about their personal data being used by candidates and/or elected officials for sinister purposes.

Data strategists in both parties wave away the fear, though, claiming that there’s a bright red line dividing the troves of conventional data and those related to more personal behaviors. Says Republican digital strategist Anthony Bonna: “A campaign might know they’re targeting a specific individual, but they don’t know anything about that user’s behavior online or offline. Conversely, a campaign might target users who visit specific sites or exhibit certain behaviors online and offline. In these circumstances, the advertiser does not know the identity of the individuals being targeted.”

Are campaigns truly respecting individuals’ privacy and only chasing computer browsers, not individuals, with online ads? Are they simply pursuing the general interests of a particular Internet browser, or are they collecting individual records of online purchases? Are they really following the rules and not accessing credit card data, phone records, or other consumer information that they’re not entitled to?

Journalist and author Sasha Issenberg is ready to give them the benefit of the doubt. “There is a difference between what campaigns *could* do through data mining and what they’re actually doing,” he says. He explains that, altruism aside, campaigns are petrified by the devastating political fallout should it be revealed that they have abused voters’ privacy.

“We have nowhere near the scale of information that the NSA has — we don’t even need it — and they have the luxury of acting in the shadows,” says Democratic digital strategist Benjy Messner.

That said, the experts concede that there is always some possibility that some campaign staffer will cross the line sometime in the future, especially as more personal data can be electronically accessed, more easily, by the day. To this end, basic protections such as disabling cookies on your browser and tightening the privacy settings on social media platforms can go a long way.

subscribe to a gun catalog or are members of the NRA, they’re the perfect address to stress the opposition candidate’s support for gun control. If you are determined to be uninsured, get ready for campaigns to deluge you with material related to the candidate’s position on health care reform.

Of course, your online browsing habits are also under scrutiny.

By way of “cookies,” which trace just about everything you do online, those with a propensity to visit conservative blogs or public interest group websites will be inundated with ads for conservative candidates — and vice versa for those displaying liberal online interests. Visitors who visited a particular candidate’s website and/or performed Google searches related to the candidate are now prime targets for turnout, volunteering and/or donations.

Did you visit the page on a candidate website dedicated to convincing the undecided? Did you search for particular terms and issues deemed by campaigns to be heavily used by undecided voters?

Then you’re inevitably in the crosshairs of both sides of the debate and should be prepared for the onslaught. The ads that will appear on your screen will also be tailored to the issues that your browsing history suggests you’re most interested in.

Campaigns also directly target groups of voters via e-mail — gleaning the addresses from various sources — and then direct their outreach to social media accounts linked to their e-mail addresses.

Mystery and spook factor aside, Mr. Issenberg believes that the data mining trend in politics is a positive development overall for a healthy democracy and individual voters.

He echoes political strategists who say that data mining enables candidates to be more in tune with the concerns and needs of voters. In other words, they can more effectively respond to the issues that voters care

about. Also, voters uninterested in politics and/or uninterested in what a particular candidate has to say will now encounter relatively fewer ads in major media outlets, and fewer mass mailings and robo-calls.

On the other hand, is it easier for politicians to manipulate their messages, and say A to the audience that wants to hear A and say B to the audience that wants to hear B?

Yes, but experts once again point to the fear factor posed by modern-day communication and media, which enables any individual to transmit a controversial or contradictory ad, phone call, or e-mail message to the world in an instant. “It’s kind of a cop-out to blame technology and messaging if we don’t hold our politicians accountable,” Mr. Issenberg says. “Bad or cynical candidates will play around with messaging even with mass ads and mailers.”

**Democrats Hold the Edge** In the immediate term, perhaps the greatest effect of the data trend has been to give the Democratic Party a significant edge in the political battlefield. Eager to win control of the White House and Senate again, Republicans have been working feverishly to up their data and digital game.

“Online budgets are increasing; digital strategists are getting a seat at the table,” says GOP digital strategist Anthony Bonna. “Republicans aren’t where we need to be yet, but the digital divide is rapidly tightening.”

Mr. Messner expresses confidence that his party has the upper hand for the long haul. “It’s absolutely possible that Republicans will catch up, but at the rate we’re going, I think we’ll be farther ahead at that point,” he says.

Whether that digital divide will close or expand may be the determining factor in which party will have control of US government for the foreseeable future. ●