





What the Tories know about you

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FROM SATURDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
SEPTEMBER 12, 2008 AT 11:25 PM EDT

The Conservative Party's campaign computers hold the most detailed electoral data on Canadians ever assembled by a political party, the product of highly sophisticated technology and a four-year mission to make personal contact with every voter in the country's key contested ridings.

Political strategists say it is enabling the Tories to run the most micro-targeted campaign the country has ever experienced, aimed at favoured ethnic and cultural groups – Chinese, South Asians, Jews – economically beleaguered “battlers” and a broad spectrum of “aspirational voters” wanting more material gains for themselves and their children and feeling ripped off by the state, the elites and big business.

The Conservatives have given fictional names to demographic segments in the electorate that they've identified.

“Zoey” is a central city inhabitant who eats organic food and is of no interest to them; ditto with “Marcus and Fiona,” a high-income urban couple with no children and professional jobs. But “Dougie” is a favourite, a tradesman in his 20s from a small town. And so is “Eunice,” 70, a widow, and “Steve [who owns his own business] and Heather” in their 40s with three children living in the suburbs.



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Conservative Leader Stephen Harper leaves a news conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia September 12, 2008. Canadians will head to the polls in a federal election October 14. *(Chris Wattie/Reuters)*

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The Conservatives have enlisted neighbourhood leaders – sports team coaches, community activists – to report information on voters to the party's data collectors and introduce potential supporters to party campaigners, a technique known by its acronym of FRAN: Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances and Neighbours.

The party spent time, money and effort to learn information such as the number of children voters have (three and they'll be inclined to vote Tory) and whether they graduated from university or college (community college and they're more likely to be Tories).

They have assembled their voter data through geo-demographic and psycho-demographic surveys, huge-sample polling and personal contacts made with voters through direct mail, e-mail, telephone calls and FRAN contacts.

While other parties are using geo- and psycho-demographic surveys – the Environics polling firm, for example, sells a program called Prism that analyzes social values, consumer behaviour and other identifying factors of people in 54,000 neighbourhoods in Canada – the cash-rich Tories have created their own databanks powerfully enhanced by direct voter contact.

Insiders in both the Conservative and Liberal parties say the Conservatives are far out ahead in knowing how to talk to voters, collect revealing information from them and deliver a targeted message.

Greg Lyle, of the polling firm Innovative Research Group Inc., identified three ways the Conservatives are breaking ground in the campaign for the Oct. 14 election:

They are focusing not only on swing voters but on their own supporters who don't vote.

Nationally they have launched a targeted campaign aimed at personal voter contact "on a scale we've never seen before."

As far as anyone knows, they are polling with bigger samplings than anyone else.

They have also lifted their campaign strategy holus-bolus from the people who fashioned the four electoral victories of John Howard's right-wing Liberal government in Australia from 1996 to 2004. As well, they've borrowed technical ideas from the U.S. Republican strategist Mike Murphy – how to slice and dice the demographic segments.

But it is the Aussie Liberals who have been their mentors. The Liberals began their climb out of 13 years in opposition when their newly hired pollster, Mark Textor, discovered traditional Labor voters sufficiently disillusioned with their party to switch sides, comparable with the Democrats who defected from their party in 1980 and 1984 to support Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan.

Mr. Textor identified them as economically beleaguered "battlers," as "aspirational voters," as blue-collar workers and low-earning white-collar workers in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and southern coastal Queensland who felt ignored by their government and the country's elites.

The Liberals lured them with meat-and-potatoes issues, reductions in taxes and cuts to state-supported groups and arts and culture programs. They launched a ferocious attack on Labor prime minister Paul Keating's ineptitude before his party had the opportunity to scare voters by demonizing Mr. Howard. The Liberal pitch unmistakably was based on social-class differences, something Stephen Harper's Conservatives can't do to the same degree because Canada is a more egalitarian society. But they're coming close.

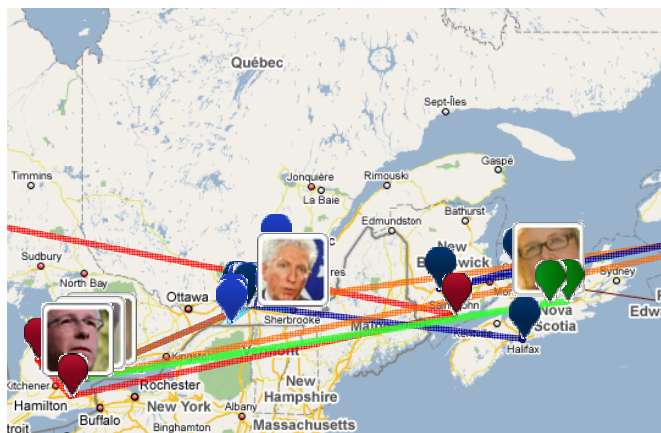
A political strategist speaking off the record said that because the Tories have a core vote of only 27 per cent of the electorate in a still-dominant Liberal political culture, they're required in each election to attract voters who usually support other parties.

Thus they've targeted swing voters who they've identified as primarily beleaguered "battlers" and "aspirational" – people who see funding for the arts as frippery, who see foreign involvement such as the Afghanistan mission as an unaffordable luxury, who think they're getting gouged at the gas pump.

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion's carbon tax was characterized by one Tory insider as a chunk of "red meat" to be thrown at nominal Conservative supporters who weren't intending to vote as an effective way of enticing them to the polls. And the Tories branded Mr. Dion as ineffectual and indecisive before he could demonize Mr. Harper.

The main brain behind the Conservative campaign is 35-year-old Patrick Muttart, a Toronto communications consultant hired by Mr. Harper after he gave the Conservative leader a face-to-face brutal critique of the party's mistakes in the 2004 election campaign.

To call Mr. Muttart an ardent student of politics is an understatement. He travelled on his own to Australia to see Howard elections as well as to Europe and the U.S. to observe campaigns. He is known for his brilliance at creating disciplined, well-researched and powerful visual representations of complex political ideas.



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