

Parties get sophisticated in bid for immigrant vote

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For the first time in a federal election, three of Canada's five main political parties are using a sophisticated new micro-targeting voter-profile tool, which outlines people's ethnicity, social values and income level, cross-referenced with their political support.

The tool, developed by Environics, allows political strategists to fine-tune their message for voters at the neighbourhood level, helping candidates win key battleground ridings in Ontario and British Columbia, many of which have large ethnic communities.

"This tool not only gives you the big picture, but goes to a riding level and tells you which percentage of voter groups live in the riding and whether ethnicity is an issue," said Jan Kestle, president of Environics Analytics.

She said client confidentiality prevented her identifying which three political parties are using her services.

There is a sudden demand for multicultural research tools such as this one, as Canada's ethnic communities grow in size and political importance. Now that immigrants no longer vote exclusively for the Liberals, all parties are reaching out to them.

A thousand more votes for the Conservatives in Newton-North Delta, where 60 per cent of residents are visible minorities, could help the party win one of the extra 28 seats it needs to form a majority government. In 2006, Liberal MP Sukh Dhaliwal won the suburban Vancouver riding with 34.3 per cent of the vote, compared with 30.6 for the Tory candidate, and 32 per cent for the NDP.

"It's a numbers game. The election can turn on a dime. Ethnicity play a key role in this and happen to be living in the ridings that are close," said David Crapper, president of Genesis Public Opinion Research Inc., the Conservatives' official pollster in the 2006 election.

The Conservative Party would not say whether it was using Environics' new tool. But the party is targeting certain ethnic groups, and has assembled a detailed database of voters in battleground ridings, and given fictional names to demographic segments in the electorate.

The Environics program breaks down voters into 18 groups, including suburban upscale ethnic and urban downscale ethnic, and provides a map of where they live in each of the 308 constituencies. Residents are assigned to a group based on their income level, age, job type, family type, ethnicity, and social values. The program then analyzes the 2006 election results through this lens to understand how much support each party received from each voter group, how large each group is, and where each one lives.

For example, in Newton-North Delta, suburban upscale ethnic voters comprised 64 per cent of eligible voters in the 2006 election. However they were 68 per cent of the Liberal vote and only 54 per cent of the Conservative vote in the riding.

Suburban upscale ethnics are described as recent immigrants from China, India, Pakistan and the Philippines, with white-collar and service-sector jobs. They tend to have children who play outdoor sports, own lots of computer electronics and enjoy rock concerts and amusement parks. They aren't interested in ecology or status recognition, but are global in outlook, tend to be savers, and enjoy trying new products and services.

"This information helps candidates with messaging, how to talk to these people and what their core belief systems are," said Ms. Kestle. For example, a candidate could emphasize crime, but not environmental issues, when talking to a suburban upscale ethnic audience.

Campaigns already have a good sense about the demographics of their supporters, through their own data bases and polls. But this tool allows them to go deeper, on a street by street level.

In Don Valley West, a highly diverse riding in northeast Toronto, a quarter of the riding's voters were urban downscale ethnic in the 2006 election. Half of them supported the Liberals, while 21 per cent voted for both the Conservatives and the NDP.

Urban downscale ethnics are defined as young and single, or divorced single parents living in high-rise rental apartments. They are not interested in the environment, and don't have a keen sense of social responsibility. However they are concerned about crime, have a strong need to escape the stresses of ordinary life and enjoy eating out.

This is just one of many new tools political parties are using to connect with immigrant voters. Parties are also placing ads in ethnic media, conducting Internet surveys aimed at tech-savvy newcomers who prefer to read rather than talk, and running focus groups in Punjabi and Mandarin.

Multicultural political polling and research has gone on for years in the United States, where Hispanics form 15 per cent of the population. In Quebec, research firms also ensure pollsters conduct interviews and focus groups not just in French, but in Québécois French, otherwise they get high refusal rates.

In the rest of Canada, it has been more difficult – and expensive – to conduct national surveys of immigrant voters in their mother tongue because of the diversity of languages.

Viewpoints Research, a Winnipeg-based polling firm, conducted focus groups in Punjabi and Cantonese for the NDP in the 2005 provincial B.C. election in Surrey, Burnaby and parts of Vancouver to understand the priorities of new Canadians.

"It helped the party win back a lot of seats in the Lower Mainland that they had lost in 2001," said Leslie Turnbull, a partner with Viewpoints, the NDP's official pollster. She found that immigrants from Hong Kong are concerned about access to health care and postsecondary education.

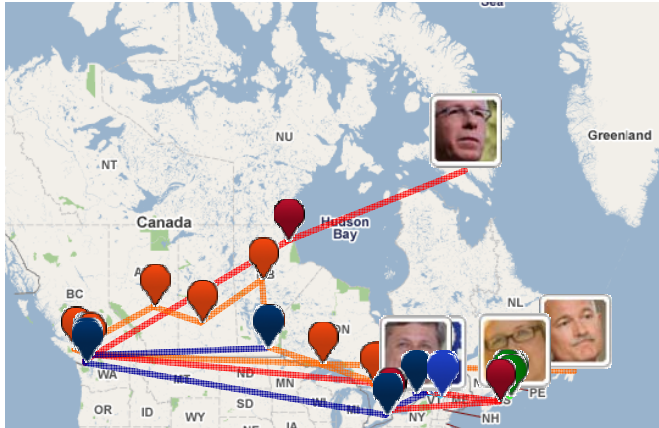
The Liberal Party has conducted polls in other languages at the riding level, says Michael Marzolini, president of Pollara, the Liberal Party's pollster. "Every market segmentation you can find is important, be it ethnic background, income level, education, gender, home ownership," he said.

In the past two years, retail giants such as Coca Cola, the Bank of Montreal and Microsoft have also invested in multicultural research and polling to understand the immigrant consumer. "The Chinese community likes to get to know the interviewer, so you have to build in 10 minutes of chit chat," says John Wright, senior vice-president of Ipsos Reid, which has a division to conduct multilingual polls. "East Indians find face-to-face interviewing more important than phone interviewing."

Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Inc., also does multilingual polling on behalf of corporate clients, including the B.C. Securities Commission. "Immigrants may be more reluctant to speak to a stranger about finances or political views than with someone who comes from their culture," said Mr. Lyle.

"Political parties are becoming more interested in ethnic enclaves as they have grown, and different parties try to break into these groups."

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