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March 30, 2009

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The Hill Times, March 30th, 2009  
NEWS STORY  
By Harris MacLeod

## Libs buy same voter-targeting software used by U.S. Democratic Party and Obama

Grits say the new 'Liberal 360' system will allow them to canvas, listen and respond better to voters.

If you live in a town where a factory recently shut down or your neighbourhood has a high number of middle-income Chinese-Canadians then the federal Liberal Party wants to know, and recently purchased the same voter-targeting software used by the U.S. Democratic Party to find out.

"Liberal 360" is the name of the party's new voter database system, which was purchased from a Massachusetts-based company called the Voter Activation Network. VAN is used by the Democrats at the federal and state levels, and it developed the volunteer management tools for the massively successful ObamaForAmerica.com.

The company only sells the product to "progressive political parties," which means that it's off limits to the Republicans and the Conservatives, which both have their own voter database systems.

Liberal Party National Director Rocco Rossi said the system will be "ready to go" for the party's convention in Vancouver, April 30 to May 2, where they will be training delegates how to use it.

"It's a great step forward if all of the party decides to get behind it, because software on its own is not going to solve our problems. But if we arm our volunteers, our candidates, our staff with the best tools available we're giving them the best opportunity to win," Mr. Rossi said.

The foundation of the system is a national voters list provided by Elections Canada, the party then inputs various "data sets," such as census and credit card information, that allows them to break down ridings and map them by local issues. It will be used to find donors and volunteers, and to make sure that their supporters get to the polling station on election day.

"There are any number of data points that could be put into the field to give you a really rich knowledge that could be shared with canvassers, whether they're local or if you have volunteers come into an area you can give them a quick debrief. It's going to allow you to then micro-target for phonecalling, or for direct mail, so long as you capture email addresses you can then do it on an email basis as well. It's the tool that has been used by the Democratic Party for several elections now in the U.S. at the state and federal level, including this last election with Mr. Obama," said Mr. Rossi.

The governing Conservatives have had similar software for some time, which parties use to identify both potential voters, and those they will never win over and should ignore. It can also be used for issue-tracking, whereby a campaign can tailor its message to how certain audiences feel about a specific issue, and parties can input "what if" scenarios to see how voting-intentions might change based on changes to a party's campaign platform.

Mr. Rossi refused to say how much the party paid for the software, adding that the cost of these types of systems vary depending on how detailed a voter profile the party wants.

The Conservatives, who far outstrip the Liberals in fundraising dollars, even have names for various subgroups of voters like "Richard Johnson," the affluent middle-aged married man who favours small government, or "Susan," the young small 'l' liberal who is struggling financially.

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"The better data you put in, the better the result is on the other side. It's the old rule, software in and of itself doesn't do anything, garbage in, garbage out. The better data [you have] and the better job you can do doing traditional things, like hard canvases, listening to people, and being able to respond to their concerns, the better you're going to do. What this allows you to do is track [an issue] and put it in a format, and then on a systematic basis your election team is able to maximize its time in a riding," Mr. Rossi said.

Voter-targeting software can be purchased for as little as \$20,000, however it's the psychographic information about voters that can cost upwards of \$200,000. Mr. Rossi said that no final decisions have been made about how much data the party will buy.

The Liberals have hired VAN staff to work with party staff to get the system up and running. Some Liberals will be trained in how to use the system before the convention and will teach some of the training sessions, however there will also be representatives from VAN in Vancouver.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) is hoping to make gains in Ontario, Quebec, and B.C., and he has been vocal about his desire to rebuild the party's fortunes in the West. A recent Nanos poll had the Liberals at 36 per cent support nationally, and the Conservatives at 33 per cent.

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