

# Democrats used good data to win midterms

## Party scrapped worn-out computers and old voter files for newer technology

BY DIBYA SARKAR

**T**he Democratic Party's victories in the midterm elections that enabled it to take control of the House and Senate were partly because of a new Democratic National Committee information technology system that improved its get-out-the-vote initiative, officials say.

Designed by Boston-based Intelligent Integration Systems (IISi), the system was used last spring to sort through the 200 million voter records and more than 900 fields associated with each record to target prospective Democratic voters.

The core component of the system is a data warehouse — developed by Netezza, a company based in Framingham, Mass. — that helped users sift through data faster and more accurately, DNC and IISi representatives said. The new system includes data quality software from FirstLogic, which Business Objects acquired last spring. In addition, it features extract, transform and load applications from Sunopsis and SPSS'

modeling software, representatives said. Officials estimate the system's cost to be less than \$1 million.

Jim Baum, Netezza's president and chief operating officer, described the company's flagship Netezza Performance Server data warehouse product as an appliance because it bundles the database software with server and storage capabilities in a prepackaged device that is quick to install and inexpensive to maintain.

Although Netezza's bundled capability was a factor, Richard Zimmerman, IISi's president and chief technology officer and the system's chief architect, said the appliance's performance was the primary consideration. He said it ranked higher than other vendor products they reviewed.

"The Netezza system runs literally two orders of magnitude faster than a comparable traditional architecture system, like an Oracle system, and it's cheaper than that," he said.

The DNC's former system could hardly be described as a system, Zimmerman said. It was a bunch of computers housing numerous voter lists — provided by state parties, secretaries

of state and other sources — that workers tried to reconcile. That was no easy task, he said.

"Every time the state parties would give them another list, it would have different sets of fields," Zimmerman said. "And one time, they'd get them and they would have a bunch of phone numbers. The next time, half the phone numbers would be gone, and the third time, the first name and last name were in one field [but] the next time, they were split out in two different fields."

The result was low quality and inconsistent data, he added.

Gus Bickford, a database consultant and former executive director at the Massachusetts Democratic Party for five years, said a crucial factor in the success of the party in November was cleansing the data to match potential voters' names with the right contact and demographic information.

Such data is created at the county or precinct level and usually is typed in by clerks or others, who send it to the DNC. A great deal of work then goes into standardizing the data so that names, addresses and other pieces of information are consistent. Data cleanup usually occurs twice before the fall elections, Bickford said, and people check the data against several sources, including consumer information and the national change of address file. Then they send the data back to the state parties. He said the new system allowed the DNC to get quality voter data out the door two to three times faster.

"And then you [clean] it a third time in either late September or early October because you want to get all the newly registered voters," Bickford said. "And so that's why the turnaround time is so critical" for processing the data. ■

## MICROTARGETING IS NEW ELECTION TACTIC

Microtargeting is an election practice that uses computer modeling to track, aggregate and target voters based on considerable amounts of information, such as consumer habits and other varied data. Republicans were the pioneers in political microtargeting, but Democrats are just beginning, said Paul Davis, chief executive officer of Intelligent Integration Systems, which built a new voter database system for the Democratic National Committee.

He said microtargeting wasn't available to the DNC in last November's midterm elec-

tions, but it could leapfrog what Republicans have once the new system is complete. Decades ago, he said, people who organized local political campaigns and precincts knew a lot about their neighbors, but as people became more mobile and transient, such grassroots intelligence declined.

"The irony is technology is in some ways allowing us to go back to that individual communication again," Davis said. "So the tools are helping us to adapt for changes in society in allowing that sort of grassroots connection."

— Ditya Sarkar



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