The Party As Consultant

An emerging role for state Democratic parties is to broker campaign services. Candidates pool their cash to purchase sophisticated techniques, and the parties profit.

By Robert Blaemire

THE 1986 ELECTION post-mortems that described new trends and effective campaign techniques missed at least one important development that suggests a revitalized future for state Democratic parties. Many of the professional services campaigns ordinarily purchase through consultants now are available to candidates at a lower cost through state parties.

Although the Democratic party often is depicted as the party favoring big government and centralized power, as a political institution it has moved in a

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different direction in the 1980s. It has strengthened its state parties, increased their respective power and influence, and has done so without concentrating additional functions or authority in Washington, D.C. (The accompanying article, "Now is the Time for All Good Parties to Come to the Aid of Their Candidates," points out how the new services offered by some Democratic state parties are making a difference.)

My perspective is a little different. As an employee of Senator Birch Bayh (D-Ind.) for 13 years, and now as a consultant specializing in computer work and direct mail with Below, Tobe & Associates, I have witnessed the takeover by some Democratic state parties of many of the functions previously reserved to consulting firms. As a result, many more campaigns at all levels are able to take advantage of modern campaign techniques.

New Party Role

Astute political practitioners know the proper role of a political party is not to articulate issues; this is better left to the party's major candidates. Instead, the best function for a state party is to help its candidates win elections. Since the breakdown of the patronage system and the advent of modern communications (especially television), the power of political parties to influence elections has diminished to the point that now is confined almost exclusively to contributing money to candidates. This role has led to a perception that the Democratic party is outgunned and impotent.

Republicans have had no problem amassing large sums to give to or spend in behalf of GOP candidates. Democrats have not had that luxury. The last few years have seen a change, however, instigated by a few strong individuals

within the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and by one or two imaginative consultants. They have redefined the role in campaigns for state parties, largely by encouraging state party officials to help coordinate aspects of various campaigns and to help them share computer technology. As a result, many of the services campaigns relied on consultants to perform now are available to greater numbers of candidates at a far lower cost.

It is clear that many campaigns are won because of the presence of a good campaign manager, lost because of an inarticulate or unattractive candidate, or decided by the campaign that implemented the art of campaigning better than the other. For those elections in 1986 that were determined by the way the campaign was waged, the strategic contributions of a few progressive Democratic state parties were important factors.

Creating a Voter File

In 1979, I was working toward the development of a campaign plan for Birch Bayh's 1980 Senate campaign. Always interested in seeing that we compiled the best lists for direct mail and other voter contact, my colleagues and I looked into the possibility of creating a statewide voter file in Indiana. Not knowing much about it, we went at the project like many amateurs do and quickly were discouraged by the potential costs.

Once the possible price tag exceeded $100,000, we shelved the idea. There was no way to convince the campaign to incur such an expense for a venture few of us knew anything about and none of us knew how to use effectively.

We knew we wanted to use targeted, repetitive direct mail and phone banks but not necessarily how best to attain that goal on our own without exorbitant cost. Although we had played a significant role in installing the new state Democratic leadership and could count on their desire to provide services to the Bayh campaign, we simply never tied the two pieces together. We never believed or even considered that they really could provide meaningful services to us or even organize a project of that magnitude in which we would share costs and benefits with other Indiana candidates.

Had the Indiana Democratic party offered us access to a statewide voter database at a fraction of what we envisioned our costs might be, our campaign would have lunged at the prospect. This did not happen, and we ended up using commercially available household lists for our voter contact, not knowing whether we were contacting registered voters nor how many would be found in each household—or even whether they were Democrats!

State parties now have grasped this important concept that cooperation is key. Undertaking coordinated efforts means parties not only have a renewed role in helping candidates win elections, but that they can develop a profit center as well, thus augmenting their ability to assist candidates in tangible ways.

Let's look at a few examples, specifically the six state parties of Alabama, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, North Carolina, and Tennessee, and see how this has worked. Our firm is one of a number of computer-services and direct-

> **With help from parties and vendors, candidates now can send specific messages to targeted voters via sophisticated direct-mail packages.**

mail companies that, working with Democratic parties and candidates, has been involved in helping make these coordinated efforts work for candidates.

The concept is fairly simple. All candidates have a single task: to win a majority of votes. To do this, candidates must reach voters with persuasive messages, the cost of which is determined largely by the size of the campaign budget, the experience of key campaign personnel, and the resources of their chosen vendors. Normally, each candidate is on his own, deciding how to amass the right lists and how to create and disseminate the right messages. Yet a candidate for governor and a candidate for U.S. senator have exactly the same constituencies. Their voters also are the same voters each congressional candidate must contact.

There has always been an enormous amount of duplication and overlap, a great deal of wasted money, inept efforts to use the new technologies effec-
tively, and many gaps that never are filled, because candidates often do not know such gaps exist.

A growing area of modern campaigning is the use of computers to create large databases of registered voters and to be able to communicate specific messages to only those voters who need to receive those messages. The computer is used to amass these voter databases and to append as much data to the names as possible, so the targeting can be as precise as possible. The more you know about a specific voter, the better you can communicate with him or her. Candidates are allowed a high degree of selectivity and a form of mass—yet highly personalized—communication.

Creating these enhanced voter databases, as we found out in Indiana, is expensive. The high costs are a function of the difficulty in compiling the lists, the numbers of voters involved, and the various pieces of information required to enhance the database. By coordinating the various needs of campaigns for voter files, the party can make sure the files are built only once and that several candidates are able to use them.

Our firm had contracts with six state parties to create these databases. Candidates, in turn, paid fees to their respective state parties to gain access to the voter files. This joint-financing approach means each candidate has access to a voter file for a relatively small sum. Consequently, candidates who never might have considered the venture have access to the files.

In the process, the party has saved some candidates money, introduced modern techniques to others, given itself a role of importance to candidates across the state, and created a profit center that might finance the creation of the database, its management, and maintenance.

Gains in Florida

The state of Florida, as large as it is, has never been in the forefront of technological advances. As a party in a state whose population increases by 800 people a day and elects statewide Republicans in spite of a two-to-one Democratic registration edge, Florida Democrats must be able to find "bad" Democrats, sustain "loyal" Democrats, and communicate effectively with a rapidly changing and diverse electorate.

In Florida, it costs more than $14,000 to purchase the necessary computer tapes from each of the 67 counties. For a cost far less than that, statewide candidates have access to a standardized voter file that includes all

registered voters with information on their party identification, age, race, sex, address, telephone number, voting history, ethnicity, place of birth, date of registration, and composite data based on the household in which each voter resides.

Candidates for congressional and other offices have the same access for lower prices, based on the size of their electoral jurisdiction. In 1986, the Florida Democratic party sold access to its lists to 99 candidates, who then ordered computer and direct-mail products from the statewide voter file. Because of these sales, the accumulated access fees paid for the startup costs of the project and made a profit for the party. These funds were used for staff support to help manage the project, for updating the files, and for the party's own use in behalf of Democratic nominees.

Sophisticated Services

In creating these tools, parties also are educating candidates about the newest direct voter-contact technologies. And, by ordering the lists, labels, and direct mail in behalf of the candidates, they often can pass on volume discounts to many candidates that otherwise would not be able to afford these sophisticated services.

Although many candidates are intimidated by direct mail, because they either do not understand computers or do not understand how economically to implement a targeted, sophisticated mailing, state parties can make it easier for their candidates by handling many of the details and by providing opportunities to learn about and discuss these new methods and products.

Compiling statewide voter databases and initiating seminars and conferences to educate candidates are difficult, time-consuming processes. But because state parties and political vendors have taken on such tasks, candidates now have the ability to communicate specific messages to targeted voters through sophisticated direct-mail packages. Their voter-contact projects also are less expensive and more available than ever before.

Other examples of successful ventures between state parties and candidates are worthwhile to examine:

• During the 1984 campaign, then-Congressman Albert Gore, Jr. (D-Tenn.) was the motivating force behind the Tennessee Democratic party's project to create a voter file. Potential participants were asked to pool their financial resources in advance, and the party was able to organize the creation of the voter file without spending any of its own funds up front. During 1986, a similar pooling of resources enabled the file to be updated. It was used for voter-contact programs by all three candidates for governor.

• Last fall, Steve Pajcic, coming off a close Florida gubernatorial primary campaign and entering a runoff, decided that the four-week campaign would be decided by a narrow universe of voters who cast ballots in runoff elections. There would have been no time to create such a file on such short notice. Consequently, Pajcic paid an access fee to the party, which updated the file with primary information and implemented an aggressive voter-contact effort. They waged a campaign that targeted 300,000 likely voters who were mailed twice and phoned twice during the last week of the campaign. Pajcic won the runoff by less than 10,000 votes.

• The North Carolina Democratic party instituted a statewide get-out-the-vote campaign in behalf of Terry Sanford's senatorial campaign and several congressional campaigns. The cost of each piece of mail was considerably less than what it would have cost each candidate to mail the pieces individually; I believe several close campaigns were won as the result of the last-minute mailings.

• The Indiana campaign of Jim Jontz for a long-held Republican congressional seat used the party's voter file effectively to find, target, and repeatedly contact the persuadable voters in a way never before seen in the state. The mail was noticed, had its impact, and Jontz was elected.

• In Alabama, which allows access to voter lists only by the two political parties, the state party created the only available voter database for Democratic candidates. Dozens of candidates used the file for state and federal offices, most using a computer in their campaigns for the very first time.

• The Maryland Democratic party expanded its services for candidates not only by creating a voter file but by managing polling and fund-raising projects for candidates. The fund-raising efforts that used the voter file in behalf of candidates have led the party to use the file to raise money for itself.

• "Get-out-the-vote grams," which used polling locations and hundreds of text variations, were used extensively by candidates in the six states that contracted with our firm. Most of these candidates never had seen such mail pieces, and neither had their voters. We received a higher and more favorable level of response from these campaign mailers.

Profit Possibilities

State parties can operate similar projects as profit centers:

1. Access fees or other participatory costs, based on the electoral jurisdiction of the candidate and the candidate's proportion of the file's cost, can cover most or all of the costs of creating the master file. The fees candidates pay must be large enough to have a proportionate impact on the project's costs, but they must be less than it would cost candidates to create databases themselves.

2. The state party can mark up products ordered by candidates to cover handling costs and as a share in the management costs of the project.

3. The parties can take advantage of batch ordering in behalf of multiple candidates ordering the same products at the same time. Because product costs are based on a sliding scale, orders placed through the party increase volume and lower unit costs, making available either increased savings to candidates or extra profit to the parties.

4. Other organizations or candidates outside the state, should they be interested in using the file, also pay access fees and costs that are commissionable to the parties. On some occasions, commercial opportunities for generating revenue from the voter file also exist.

These projects are no different from the way vendors deal with candidates now except in one respect: The party serves as an agency that manages the project. The party, as a result, creates a role for itself in campaigns, creates a profit center that also benefits candidates, and introduces modern, improved campaign techniques to candidates.

Candidates have access to the data and technology at a low cost (some possibly for the first time), and they can save money simply by following party procedures. On occasion, candidates benefit simply because they no longer are mailing untargeted and wasteful direct mail. Vendors, on the other hand, while charging less money per product than they would to individual candidates, end up working for many, many more candidates through the parties, and gain long-term institutional clients. The projects make sense for everyone involved.

Does it make a difference? Who knows what factors in a campaign tilt the final scales? But if you believe the key to winning elections is communicating the right messages to the right voters and moving people to vote, then the ability to do this is enhanced by your state party's voter files. ■