

Politics

Cruz campaign credits psychological data and analytics for its rising success

By **Tom Hamburger** December 13, 2015

URBANDALE, Iowa — As Cecil Stinemetz walked up to a gray clapboard house in suburban Des Moines last week wearing his “Cruz 2016” cap, a program on his iPhone was determining what kind of person would answer the door.

Would she be a “relaxed leader”? A “temperamental conservative”? Maybe even a “true believer”?

Nope. It turned out that Birdie Harms, a 64-year-old grandmother, part-time real estate agent and longtime Republican, was, by the Ted Cruz campaign’s calculations, a “stoic traditionalist” — a conservative whose top concerns included President Obama’s use of executive orders on immigration.

Which meant that Stinemetz was instructed to talk to her in a tone that was “confident and warm and straight to the point” and ask about her concerns regarding the Obama administration’s positions on immigration, guns and other topics.

The outreach to Harms and others like her is part of a months-long effort by the Cruz [campaign](#) to profile and target potential supporters, an approach that campaign officials believe has helped propel the senator from Texas to the top tier among Republican presidential candidates in many states, including Iowa, where he is in first place, according to two recent polls. It’s also a multimillion-dollar bet that such efforts still matter in an age of pop-culture personalities and social-media messaging.

So far, the Republican primary season has been dominated by [Donald Trump](#), a businessman who is running a race based almost entirely on his personality and mass-media appeal. The campaign of Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida has also placed a limited emphasis on the door-knocking tactics of the past, while others, such as New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Ohio Gov. John Kasich, are hoping that a strong finish in the New Hampshire primary will help them reach voters through free media coverage.

Cruz has largely built his program out of his Houston headquarters, where a team of statisticians and behavioral psychologists who subscribe to the burgeoning practice of “psychographic targeting” built their own version of a Myers-Briggs personality test. The test data is supplemented by recent issue surveys, and

together they are used to categorize supporters, who then receive specially tailored messages, phone calls and visits. Micro-targeting of voters has been around for well over a decade, but the Cruz operation has deepened the intensity of the effort and the use of psychological data.

Cruz, a critic of excessive government data collection, has been notably aggressive about gathering personal information for his campaign. Some of the data comes from typical sources, such as voters' consumer habits and Facebook posts. Some is homegrown, such as a new smartphone app that keeps supporters in touch while giving the campaign the ability to scrape their phones for additional contacts.

Another emerging tactic that the campaign has employed is "geo-fencing," a technique that allows people to send messages to digital devices in narrow areas, such as a city block or a single building.

When the Republican Jewish Coalition was meeting at the Venetian in Las Vegas in May, for instance, the Cruz campaign unleashed a series of Web-based advertisements visible only inside the hotel complex that emphasized Cruz's devotion to Israel and its security.

Cruz has also applied geo-fencing to wooing National Rifle Association members at a recent annual meeting and to similar gatherings elsewhere.

The personality and political scores applied by the campaign are used to tightly tailor outreach to individuals. For example, personalities that have received high scores for "neuroticism" are believed to be generally fearful, so a pro-gun pitch to them would emphasize the use of firearms for personal safety and might include a picture of a burglar breaking in to a home.

But those who score high for "openness" or traditional values are more likely to receive a message that promotes hunting as a family activity, perhaps accompanied by an image of a father taking his son duck hunting.

Cruz's campaign manager, Jeff Roe, spit chewing tobacco into a soft drink bottle as he explained the campaign's heavy investment in data and analysis. It's critical because of changes in the nature of the electorate, popular media, polling and campaign finance law, which make many of the old axioms of campaigning — gathering endorsements, purchasing high-cost broadcast ads — less valuable.

"There is no handbook for this," the Missouri-based political consultant said of running a presidential campaign in 2016. "The conventional wisdom has been destroyed. What you can do is rely on data."

To build its data-gathering operation widely, the Cruz campaign hired Cambridge Analytica, a Massachusetts

company reportedly owned in part by hedge fund executive [Robert Mercer](#), who has given \$11 million to a super PAC supporting Cruz. Cambridge, the U.S. affiliate of London-based behavioral research company SCL Group, has been paid more than \$750,000 by the Cruz campaign, according to Federal Election Commission records.

To develop its psychographic models, Cambridge surveyed more than 150,000 households across the country and scored individuals using five basic traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. A top Cambridge official didn't respond to a request for comment, but Cruz campaign officials said the company developed its correlations in part by using data from Facebook that included subscribers' likes. That data helped make the Cambridge data particularly powerful, campaign officials said.

The Cruz campaign modified the Cambridge template, renaming some psychological categories and adding subcategories to the list, such as "stoic traditionalist" and "true believer." The campaign then did its own field surveys in battleground states to develop a more precise predictive model based on issues preferences.

The Cruz algorithm was then applied to what the campaign calls an "enhanced voter file," which can contain as many as 50,000 data points gathered from voting records, popular websites and consumer information such as magazine subscriptions, car ownership and preferences for food and clothing.

Cambridge, which has staffers embedded in the Cruz for President headquarters in Houston, makes behavioral psychologists available for consultation as ads and scripts are drafted.

An email will be tweaked based on the personality of the recipient. If a respondent were a "stoic traditionalist," the conversation would be very direct and to the point. If a potential supporter was labeled "temperamental," the language and approach would change, according to Chris Wilson, the campaign's director of research and analytics, who has taken a leave from the polling firm he leads, WPA Opinion Research. "The tone would be inspiring and become more and more positive as the conversation progresses," he said.

The Cruz campaign has also persuaded nearly 34,000 supporters to download the "Cruz Crew" mobile app. Subscribers compete for points and prizes as they reach out to like-minded potential supporters whose names are provided after the subscriber gives the campaign access to contact lists.

Other campaigns also offer apps to supporters, but few are as far-reaching as Cruz's. Wilson said he didn't know what the campaign would do with the personal information it gathered after the election. "We will take great care," he said, "knowing that our supporters provided this data to us for a limited purpose."

One key purpose of the Cruz campaign's data focus has been to connect the candidate to evangelical [Christian](#) voters, who represent an enormous bloc of caucus-goers in Iowa and are a major factor in other early-voting states. That's part of the reason Cruz courted this group, starting with his announcement speech at Virginia's Liberty University in the spring.

In recent months, the Cruz campaign invited Christian activists to join special prayer call-ins and activist coalitions and to attend rallies in Iowa, South Carolina and other early states. The campaign's personality and issues data was used to determine which pastors to contact for recruitment as county "pastor chairs" for Cruz. So far, Cruz has endorsements from more than 100 pastors in Iowa and more than 300 nationwide, campaign officials said.

Roe said this kind of outreach is part of a plan to mobilize the Cruz base in the same way Obama galvanized his base in 2008 and 2012.

The campaign's big data operation is not deployed in just voter and supporter outreach. It also is used daily to help make key decisions — where Cruz should travel, what he should say. It has even informed the selection of precinct captains.

Last week, Cruz volunteers in Iowa were calling people identified as extraverts to be precinct captains and take on other leadership roles. Stinemetz went through his call list one evening and was pleasantly surprised at how quickly people signed up.

"I got three precinct captains to sign up just now," Stinemetz said, after dialing just a handful of potential volunteers. "It's like they were just waiting for us to call."

Frances Stead Sellers in Washington contributed to this report.

Tom Hamburger covers the intersection of money and politics for The Washington Post.

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