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**Richard Webber**

*is generally recognised as the originator of geodemographic systems, having classified UK neighbourhoods using statistics from each of the past five Censuses. Formerly managing director of Experian's Micromarketing Division, he is currently visiting professor at the Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, University College London.*

# How parties used segmentation in the 2005 British general election campaign

**Richard Webber**

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## Abstract

Activities which in any other context would be described as direct marketing lie at the heart of modern party political campaigning. Indeed, these activities, and the targeting systems that drive them, played a far more important role in the 2005 British general election than they did in any previous one. In 2009, or thereabouts, their role is likely to be even more important in determining who gets to run the country. Yet despite the high visibility of a general election campaign and the implications of the election result on the ordinary lives of direct marketing professionals, relatively little is known in the direct marketing industry about the extent to which political parties use the segmentation practices which underlie the majority of campaigns in the commercial sector. This paper seeks to address this lack of understanding, using interviews with communications managers in the three main political parties supplemented by experience in providing advice to two of the parties on information strategy both before and during the election. In particular it analyses differences between parties and commercial advertisers in terms of the environment within which they work; reviews the data and data management practices that the parties employed during the recent general election; provides information on the parties' own evaluation of their communications campaigns; and assesses how the use of segmentation techniques is likely to evolve in subsequent campaigns, for both Westminster and other parliaments.

**Keywords:** direct marketing, general elections, geodemographics, political campaigning, segmentation

## Context

The operational implementation of a general election campaign typically involves the planning of three principal areas of activity. These are the briefing and management of national and regional news media to ensure favourable editorial coverage; the articulation of political messages through mass media such as newspapers, poster sites and party political broadcasts; and the targeting of specific messages at individual electors at their home addresses.

Until this last general election, it was very difficult to find out, whether from the media or the parties themselves, what strategies and methods the parties used to target voters.<sup>1</sup> But it appears that the selection of Lynton Crosby to mastermind the Conservatives' 2005 general election campaign contributed to other members of the campaign team giving greater

Richard Webber  
Centre for Advanced Spatial  
Analysis  
UCL  
16 Broadlands Road  
London N6 4AN, UK  
Tel: +44 (0)20 8340 3034  
E-mail: Richardwebber@  
blueyonder.co.uk

## **Voter Vault**

publicity to the party's use of 'Voter Vault', the database used to drive its communications. As a result the parties' use of targeting systems received very considerable media coverage during the campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Although the manner in which parties control their media coverage and broadcast advertising is far more sophisticated than when Harold Wilson first timed his speeches to meet the scheduling requirements of the evening news, it is the third of the three areas mentioned above, direct communication with individual voters, that has experienced the greatest change in the past 50 years.

This change reflects evolutions in the political landscape, in social attitudes and in technology.

## **First-past-the-post systems**

In Britain, as in America, the numerical representation of parties in parliament is determined by a 'first-past-the-post' election system, unlike the situation in much of continental Europe where governments are elected using various systems of proportional representation. The implication of this system for direct marketing is, as was tellingly discovered by Americans in the US presidential election of 2000, that the outcome of any election is disproportionately influenced by a small number of voters in identifiable 'swing' constituencies. This makes it possible for a party to win an election without necessarily achieving the highest share of votes cast. When the UK general election was announced in March 2005, fewer than one in six electors lived in a constituency in which there was any realistic chance of the seat changing hands. These electors naturally become a highly important target for those managing the direct communications campaign.

## **One in six electors in key marginals**

While the location of key marginals has long influenced the decision by party leaders where to make visits or hold rallies, until recently it has been difficult for parties to target local activists at constituencies other than their own. Local members would typically be employed in addressing and stuffing envelopes to voters in their own constituencies, would raise money to fund the printing of their own leaflets and would deliver to and canvass in the immediate environs of where they lived. Satisfaction would be gained by returning the local member with an even higher majority than he or she might have enjoyed at the previous election.

## **Deployment of Liberal Democrats' resources**

The Liberal Democrats, perhaps because they had fewer realistically winnable seats, were the first party to manage effectively to redeploy local activists systematically to seats on a national target list. All of the party's most memorable by-election successes were based on their ability to mobilise and target activists at seats other than their own. Only recently have the other parties managed to emulate them, and even today to a much lesser extent.

By contrast, with the advent of volume direct marketing technologies, both the Labour and Conservative Parties have chosen to supplement the campaigns run by local associations with centralised direct marketing campaigns. These campaigns have typically targeted resources in a more focused manner on the one in six seats where the eventual outcome was unclear.

Promoters of CRM systems have often argued that detailed information

on customers and prospects is needed by large organisations to compensate for their lack of knowledge about individual customers when compared with, for example, the owner of a corner shop. The centralisation of communications activities in national call centres and letter shops has precipitated a demand for access to information which would compensate for that held by local activists about voters in their own localities. This information includes not just information about the party they normally vote for but also about their age and personal circumstances, and hence the policy issues that are likely to influence their eventual voting decision.

### **Shift to centralisation of local campaign implementation**

While some may regret the depersonalisation of the communications process, there are a number of social trends which cause many voters to prefer receiving mailshots and telephone calls rather than opening the door to party campaigners. The growing concern over security as well as a sense that party allegiance is a private matter not to be divulged in face-to-face communications with a person one does not know make the phone and the mailshot more acceptable communications media.

These changes need to be considered in the context of a culture in which party political allegiance is no longer handed down from generation to generation as it used to be, and in which an increasing number of electors vote differently from one election to another. Thus the results of canvass returns from one election are a much less reliable predictor of electors' voting intentions in the next than used to be case. It is also easy to underestimate the important role work-based organisations, such as trade unions, churches, clubs, societies and voluntary organisations, used to play in early post-war elections. It is the vacuum caused by the decline of these sources of influence as well as the decline in door-to-door canvassing that direct marketing is increasingly filling.

### **Mobilisation of key supporters or appeal to swing voters**

**Mobilising one's own supporters to vote has always been at the heart of local campaigning. By contrast the winning of the hearts and minds of 'floating' voters is more effectively addressed by national advertising and the management of media content.** The lower level of turnout which was one of the most striking features of the 2001 general election, and which was also a characteristic of 2005, increases the relative value of motivating existing supporters to vote as compared with converting potential supporters of opposing parties.

## **Interviews**

This paper presents a general review of the use to which segmentation can and is being used by the three main UK parties. This is based in part on a series of interviews with people whose role is to manage the direct communications operations: Greg Cook, head of political strategy of the Labour Party, Gavin Barwell, director of campaigning of the Conservative Party and David Loxton, director of marketing, fundraising and members' services for the same party and Mark Pack of the Liberal Democrats. This is supplemented with knowledge gained as a result of supporting two of the parties with information services previous to and during the campaign.

### **Three interviews**

**Structured  
questionnaire**

The interviews took the form of a set of questions, based on a consistent structured questionnaire. The themes these questions addressed included the parties' attitudes to direct marketing skills, the use of information to make decisions about constituencies to target, the data used to target communications to individual electors, how the data are held and deployed, the use of data to customise (as distinct from target) communications, the integration of direct communications with opinion research and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the campaigns that were run. The interviewees were also asked about the potential effect of the successful use of these campaigning techniques on politicians' attitudes to the potential role of direct marketing within government's own communications programmes.

**CRM tools and  
methods felt to be  
relevant**

**A convergence of party campaigning and direct marketing skills?**

There was common agreement that the skills needed to operate an effective political campaign were becoming closer to those needed by direct marketers to operate effectively in the commercial sector. For example, the campaign managers felt there was much to be learned from the concept of customer relationship management, in terms of both the marketing strategies on the basis of which it operated and the supporting technologies. People felt that increasing use was being made of enrichment data, of profiling and of data-mining techniques. The Liberal Democrats argued that the use of a formal approach towards testing and response evaluation was an aspect of direct marketing practice which also underpinned their own approach to maximising the effectiveness of their communications.

Currently all parties rely on external support during the election campaign. But with the increase in the number of types of election, for example with voting for European and Scottish parliaments, the Welsh Assembly and the Mayor of London as well as for local elections, it is felt by the Conservatives that there is sufficient analytical work to justify the recruitment of a stronger, full-time, in-house analytical resource.

Although there was felt to be great similarity with the commercial sector in terms of methods and data, none of the parties felt it appropriate to recruit specialists from the direct marketing industry, believing that it was easier to train specialists in political communications in the arts of direct marketing than to train specialists in direct marketing in the arts of political communications. In particular it was argued that the process had to be subordinate to the key political messages which should be communicated. This seemed in stark contrast to the commercial sector, where clients often rely on their agencies for assistance with positioning as much as with the operational implementation of campaigns.

**DM skills  
subordinate to  
political know-how**

In politics the nature of the relationship between the parties and their hired advisers seemed very different from the situation in the commercial sector. When advice was sought it was not necessarily acted on, and when companies were used to assist with the execution of campaigns it was in the role of contractors rather than of outsourcers. The main reason for this

**Communication strategies minimise risk of offence**

appears to be the need, as in a war, to be able to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances. This contrasts with the more stable environment which characterises most commercial work, where campaign content and execution can be planned well in advance and can usually be implemented without interruption from unexpected external events.

Another key difference, it was argued, was that the establishment of awareness does not have the same importance in political communications, at least for the major parties, as it does for many commercial organisations. **By contrast the fact that votes for your competitor count against your chance of success on election night requires you to take far more care not to offend potential prospects** than is the case in the commercial sector. In both sectors you may wish to define a 'position' or niche for your brand. But in politics you cannot be successful if your appeal is limited to that niche. Both these differences can result in campaigning strategies which aim to minimise risk of causing offence rather than maximise conversion.

**Communication effectiveness measurable only at campaign level**

Perhaps the greatest difference between the use of direct communications in political campaigning and in the commercial sector is that it is impossible in political campaigning to monitor the impact of different strategies at the individual level. Thus while in the commercial sector it is usually possible to identify which individuals responded in terms of enquiries, orders or new account openings, the campaign organiser can never know the party for which individual electors entered a 'X' in the privacy of the ballot box. Campaign effectiveness can therefore only be measured at the level of electoral ward, in local elections or at the level of the parliamentary constituency in general or European elections.

## **Data**

Just as in the commercial sector, the political parties have struggled to construct truly integrated databases where all the information about a 'prospect' or 'supporter' is held on a single system.

None of the three parties has yet managed to integrate the database it uses for communicating with donors with that used for communicating with electors. All have placed this integration on the list of improvements which they would like to make to their systems ahead of the next general election.

**Labour first to build national database**

Labour was the first party to construct and maintain a national database to support its central communications initiatives. In 1992 and 1997 this national database gave it an advantage over the Conservatives, who were handicapped by the federal nature of their party constitution. Under this constitution Central Office could only 'advise' local constituencies and undertake communications on their behalf. One of the key changes, implemented in response to the 1997 defeat of William Hague, was to amend the constitution to enable Central Office to plan and implement national campaigns without having to 'persuade' each local association to sign up for them on an individual basis.

As with commercial organisations, parties have access to a mixture of both 'prospect' and 'customer' information. The electoral register, of which they are entitled to a free copy, provides the 'prospect' information

### Constituency parties lack online access

while canvass returns contribute the ‘customer’ data. But while the ‘prospect’ data, ie the electoral register, can be held centrally, that part of the ‘customer’ data which is not collected from centralised telephone calling — that is to say the returns of local canvassing — is held locally. By contrast with the situation in a bank or retail chain, the local ‘branch’, ie the constituency association, does not have online real-time access to the central database. The updating of the central database with the results of canvassing and direct marketing communications occurs typically at intervals of a month to a year. Thus communication managers are often using data of much more limited currency than would be case with their commercial counterparts.

This gap does mean that locally originated communications can often be more targeted than those which originate from the central communications operation.

One of the advantages that the Labour Party believes it holds over the Conservatives is that it has tracked party support on its central database for longer than the Conservatives have. It believes the greater depth of its historical data is a key source of competitive advantage.

The data held on the electoral register consist of the names and addresses of electors. The file also contains ‘attainer’ information. This information is required by the electoral registrar in order to determine the date at which young people are first eligible to vote. This information is considered to be particularly valuable, and special mailings to first-time voters are an important element in each party’s election campaigns. Although the date when an elector was first registered at their current address is not contained on the published register, it can be deduced from careful comparison of one year’s file with another. The author’s impression is that the parties have not recognised the value of this information, and in particular the strength of the correlation between ‘years at address’ and age, the latter being a variable with which all are particularly keen to enrich their databases.

### Identification of attainers

### Targeting electors by age

All parties have either implemented or have plans to implement some form of modelling system for predicting age. This may be a model bought in from an external supplier or a simple look-up table using systems which infer age from first names alone. Age is seen as important for a number of reasons. Older people need to be targeted with communications regarding postal votes. Older people are more likely to vote. Older people are more likely to have fixed political allegiances, and thus be less responsive to ‘conversion’ communications. At least one party recognises that the salutation which is appropriate for older voters is very different from that which they should be using for younger ones. But no party seems to have recognised the benefit of using age to determine the optimal time of day and week to schedule a phone call.

One advance which could well be introduced in advance of the next election by more than one party is to infer the ethnicity or preferred language of an elector from his or her first and family names.

Most registers are released without postcodes; however, all parties have systems for adding these to the address. All three have also now taken on board the Mosaic geodemographic classification which allows them to

**Mosaic**

infer the salient characteristics of each voter's immediate neighbourhood from their postcode. This information is particularly valuable for Labour and the Conservatives since, as can be seen from Table 1, which was supplied to ITN News by MORI, their support is more strongly aligned to the different Mosaic categories than is the Liberal Democrats' and because they rely to a greater extent on centralised communications. When the Liberal Democrats won few seats, they knew their make-up in detail. But with 62 MPs and an increasing number of other target seats they too are beginning to recognise that even with their level of community-based activity geodemographic classifications still have a useful role to play.

**Conservatives use outsourced model**

While the Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties used these items of information as individual selection filters, the Conservatives relied heavily during the campaign on the results of a formal mathematical model, built by Experian, which combined the values in a number of these fields, as well as information from other published sources, to generate an overall 'propensity to vote Conservative' score. An additional model helped them to identify electors who had the highest propensity to vote.

A final difference is that whereas the Conservatives used information from public sources, such as shareholders' files and directors' files, to undertake communications on highly targetable themes, Labour undertook such communications to names and addresses that it bought from specialist list-rental companies.

**Applying segmentation at the constituency level**

Although information of this sort had been used in the targeting of communications in previous general elections, the 2005 general election

**Table 1:** Voting intentions by selected Mosaic categories

	% share of respondents who are 'certain to vote'			
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other
Top five geodemographic categories: Labour				
F36 Metro multicultural	15.4	62.7	16.9	5.0
G42 Low horizon	12.5	62.5	15.6	9.4
G43 Ex-industrial legacy	15.9	59.1	11.8	13.3
I50 Cared-for pensioners	31.3	56.3	10.4	2.1
F37 Upper-floor families	18.3	55.6	13.9	12.2
Top five geodemographic categories: Conservative				
A08 Just moving on	56.0	20.0	4.0	20.0
A03 Corporate chieftains	55.8	14.2	25.8	4.2
J51 Sepia memories	54.8	25.8	19.4	0.0
B14 In military quarters	53.8	15.4	30.8	0.0
K58 Greenbelt guardians	53.4	18.6	18.0	9.9
Top five geodemographic categories: Liberal Democrat				
K57 Summer playgrounds	27.8	16.7	38.9	16.7
E31 Caring professionals	18.5	35.1	35.1	11.3
E32 Dinky developments	28.3	25.7	34.5	11.5
E34 University challenge	38.9	27.8	33.3	0.0
A02 Cultural leadership	36.9	23.8	32.5	6.8

Note: Based on 30,000 face-to-face interviews conducted by MORI during the calendar year 2004.

**Evaluation of winnable seats**

appears to have been the first in which demographic information was used to make strategic assessments about individual constituencies.

Historically, for example, the Liberal Democrats targeted their resources at seats which they thought were winnable on the basis of the closeness of the result in the previous general election, the parliamentary constituency of Southend West being cited as an example. It was never the type of seat which the Liberal Democrats could have expected to win, even though they came close to winning on many occasions. More recently the party has extended the criteria used to select its target seats to include the quality of the candidate, the dedication of the local association, the professionalism of the local campaign team and the share of the vote achieved in recent by-elections. On the basis of these extended criteria Hornsey and Wood Green, a seat which the Liberal Democrats subsequently won on a swing of 15 per cent, was added to the target seat list in 2003. With due deference to Lynne Featherstone MP and her campaign staff, a contributory reason for the large swing to the Liberal Democrats in 2005 in this seat was its geodemographic composition. Hornsey and Wood Green is very similar in terms of its geodemographics to a number of other seats such as Cambridge, Bristol West, Cardiff Central and Manchester Withington, all of which changed hands as the result of heavy swings from Labour, and all of which feature high concentrations of the geodemographic category 'urban intelligence'.

**Use of analogue models**

All parties are now experimenting with new ways of either clustering seats into families based on the similarity of their demographics or using tools to find similar 'nearest neighbours' in terms of their demographic profile. Table 2 illustrates how such a system can be used to assess the performance of the three main parties in the constituency of Reading East,

The results of these data-mining exercises contribute to the content of the constituency briefings, which play an important role in setting the

**Table 2:** Analogue model using geodemographic data to evaluate party performance

READING EAST			Reading East	Analogue constituencies	Reading East	Performance in Reading East
PA05 code	Analogues ranked by dissimilarity	Dissimilarity	% of vote 2005			
461	Reading East	0.00	Con	30.91	35.43	4.51
139	Cheltenham	17.57	Lab	31.57	34.35	2.78
441	Oxford West & Abingdon	19.60	Lib Dem	31.84	24.18	-7.65
462	Reading West	20.61	% of three party vote 2005			
34	Bath	20.97	Con	32.78	37.71	4.93
349	Leeds North West	21.10	Lab	33.47	36.56	3.09
601	Warwick & Leamington	21.79	Lib Dem	33.75	25.74	-8.02
141	Chester, City of	22.43				
523	St Albans	22.49	SNP	0.00	0.00	0.00
645	York, City of	23.39	PC	0.35	0.00	-0.35
125	Cardiff Central	23.64	BNP	0.00	0.00	0.00
303	Hertford & Stortford	24.29	UKIP	1.52	1.93	0.41
603	Watford	24.53	Green	2.35	3.53	1.17
62	Birmingham, Selly Oak	24.85	Turnout	64.17	60.31	-3.85
275	Guildford	25.11	Swing	3.30	6.95	3.64
440	Oxford East	25.27				

## Constituency briefings

strategy for the local campaign. In these briefings party officials provide candidates, sitting members and constituency officers with demographic profiles of their constituencies. The information contained in these briefings may include information on which other constituencies are demographically similar to the target seat, which population groups are over-represented, how many electors fall into important target groups such as potential 'floating voters', 'core voters' and electors unlikely to vote and where within the constituency core supporters are likely to be located. This information is used increasingly to identify and agree policy issues that are likely to be of especial interest within the constituencies, and hence the parts of the party manifesto that should be emphasised in the candidate's election address.

## Selection of candidates

While nominally the selection of candidates is a matter for local associations, at least one party believes that this information will become used as an input into the matching of prospective candidates to local associations. For example Michael Heseltine, who had previously represented the Devon constituency of Tavistock, was in terms of personality much better suited to represent the Thames Valley seat of Henley, to which he transferred during the later stages of his political career.

## Applying segmentation to personal communications

The various fields on the parties' databases are used to segment communications not just during Westminster campaigns but also during elections for the European and Scottish parliaments and the Welsh Assembly.

The focus of segmentation in these different campaigns is subtly different. In the Westminster campaigns it is important for the parties, the Conservatives in particular, to reach out beyond their core heartland of support to win over voters who, in terms of age or Mosaic, are not necessarily natural supporters. Given the even lower turnout in European elections, their key focus is to get known supporters to the polling station.

## Tension between targeting core or swing voters

The tension between mobilising core supporters and appealing to a broader constituency is one which reaches to the heart of the Conservative Party and underpins much debate on strategy, even to the issue of deciding which individual would be best suited to become its leader. A previous version of their targeting system, 'Pike', developed and deployed under party chairman Chris Patten for the 1992 election before constitutional changes allowed greater freedom to Central Office, foundered on the difficulty of requiring local associations to take a decision on this matter. In 2005 the tension appears to have been resolved by agreeing the need for two linked but distinctively different campaigns, one to mobilise what on the basis of its demographics would appear to be a hard-core electorate, a second targeted at people who may well not have voted Conservative at the previous election but whose demographics suggested they would be responsive to the key policy issues promoted by the then party leader Michael Howard.

A more difficult tension, which the Conservatives found it less easy to resolve in 2005, was whether the objective of their campaign was to form

**Targeting more or fewer seats**

the next government or to reduce the Labour majority by the largest amount possible. The resolution of this debate was critical to the planning of the campaign selections. Resources could either be focused on fewer constituencies, in which case each would receive a larger volume of mailings or telephone calls (or a greater frequency of contact to the same number of electors) or on a much larger number. Some, including Charles Saatchi, were known publicly to have argued that to focus only on those seats the party was most likely to win was in itself an admission of defeat. The counter view was that unless the party concentrated its resources on seats it had a realistic chance of winning, it could end the campaign little closer to power than when it started.

This debate was further complicated by a number of sitting MPs requesting that the list of seats targeted for special communications activity should include the very ones that they were themselves defending — particularly those in which they were being challenged by Liberal Democrats. Such considerations must seem very odd to campaigners in countries using proportional representation!

**Segmentation of political messages**

Notwithstanding this specific source of confusion, the general impression left from the interviews was that during the 2005 general election the major parties were much more organised than ever before in terms of which seats they should target, at which electors in those seats they should target their communications and what types of communication should be sent to them. By contrast one gained the impression that it is only now this level of competence has been reached that the parties begin to consider in any detail how to apply segmentation to the nature of the communication that is to be sent to the selected target electors. This evolution mirrors the use of segmentation in the commercial sector, where the use of geodemographic data for recruitment mailings preceded its use and that of customer-level data in customer communications by about a decade.

**Dangers of excessive personalisation**

The use of data to segment the content of political messages is seen by the parties to be inherently risky. All pointed out that they were exposed to a huge risk if (or indeed when) the media could identify them making contradictory statements to different segments of the electorate. Often the supposed dangers of segmentation were in reality the dangers of personalisation beyond the level that could be supported by the accuracy of the available data. Nevertheless the Conservatives in particular recognised that given the very much broader profile of the audience parties communicate with as compared with commercial organisations, it makes no sense at all to expect them to engage with the same language, the same visuals and the same copy layout, and that in many respects it was insulting to electors if one did not take the trouble to focus on those policy issues that one could have predicted would be of particular relevance to them.

One difficulty that the parties appeared to experience in implementing this form of segmentation was that while they could relate to different Mosaic segments in terms of demographics and lifestyles, they had difficulty mapping these segments on to the issues in their manifesto. For example when 'Europe' or 'law and order' were selected as campaign

**Geodemographic coding of research surveys**

themes by the Conservatives, they did not find it easy to identify to which demographic segments their policy position on these issues would prove attractive. Likewise it was not obvious to them to which demographic groups their policy position on pensions would be attractive. Would it be to people who were already pensioners, people who were approaching retirement or people thinking about saving for retirement?

The issue the parties experience in relating specific issues in their portfolio of policy positions to the demographic or geodemographic segments on their database is analogous to the situation that a bank might have in deciding which of the various products it should cross-sell to its individual customers based on their segment. The solution, of course, is to link information on attitudes to the policy positions to the information about electors held on a single database. The most obvious way to do this is by appending whatever codes are held on Voter Vault or EARS (the Election Agent Record System developed by the Liberal Democrats) to the responses to the opinion surveys commissioned by the parties. Although the parties are receptive to this in principle, **it would seem that the mechanics of coding survey respondents by Mosaic or other discriminators had not been thought through early enough in the campaign cycle.**

From the responses to the interviews it would seem that such an initiative will probably be implemented in time for the next general election, by when it would be surprising if the copy and content of communications were not personalised if not at the individual level at least at segment level.

**Appropriateness of channels for different segments**

In addition to the segmentation of the content of communications, there are a number of other practices which the parties could learn from the commercial sector. For example, there seemed little awareness that different elector segments might be more or less responsive to different communication channels. The 2005 general election saw a huge increase in the volume of electronic communication, typically with existing supporters. But there is little appreciation of the segments that can be identified on the database that are likely to be most receptive to mail versus telephone or door-to-door canvassing versus direct marketing. **Likewise it did not seem that the parties made any attempt to schedule contacts with different groups at different times of the day or week.**

**Liberal Democrats develop local leaflet copy**

Because hand-delivered leaflets are an important part of the media mix, it is also possible to target political messages based on characteristics of the distribution round. This is particularly relevant to the Liberal Democrats, for whom hand-delivered leaflets represent a larger proportion of campaign activity. The view of the Liberal Democrats is that segmentation at this level is now made very much more practical thanks to improvements in printing technology. The chief way in which this technological opportunity is exploited is by running a more varied set of news stories in hand-delivered leaflets. Whereas a leaflet distributed across the entire constituency might have previously featured a single set of stories or issues, **now it is possible to adapt the copy to feature more different stories but each more relevant to a local audience.**

This degree of segmentation fits very well with the Liberal Democrats'

strength as the party which deals with local issues locally, a position which, despite the predictions of those who believe communities are no longer bounded by space, is clearly attractive in many areas of the country — not least Blaenau Gwent, captured by an Independent, Peter Law, in 2005, and in Wyre Forest, where in 2001 Richard Taylor, a local doctor, won the seat on the back of a campaign against the closure of the local hospital.

### The parties' evaluation of the effectiveness of segmentation tools

Each of the parties was of the opinion that the scope of the data-driven campaigning they undertook during the campaign can only increase in importance in future elections. In this they are no different from commercial organisations. Because of their limited staff resources and the infrequency of campaigns, however, the pace of this adaptation is difficult to accelerate and it has to be based on evolution rather than revolution.

Advances based on evolution not revolution

Labour's view was that these techniques delivered an advantage to it in 1997 and 2001, but that in 2005 they did not provide a source of competitive advantage. Although the Conservatives performed better in Labour marginals in 2005 than they did in safe seats, unlike the situation in 1997 and 2001, there are strong arguments to support the belief that some of this reflected a tendency in an electorate that previously gave tactical support to whichever candidate had the best chance of denying a Conservative victory to now 'gang up' behind whichever candidate could defeat the Labour candidate.

Conservatives target Liberal Democrat seats

But the argument that the Conservatives profited from their improved use of these techniques is supported by the success of their campaigns in a number of Liberal Democrat held seats, such as Newbury and Guildford, and perhaps more importantly by their ability to withstand pressure from the Liberal Democrats' 'decapitation' strategy, applied in seats such as West Dorset, Maidenhead and Haltemprice and Howden. Too easily in the past the Conservatives have performed badly in places where their local organisation was weak. By 2005 they had become capable of deploying resources where they were needed most.

Advocates principally younger MPs

Both the Conservatives and Labour made the observation that the effectiveness of these targeting systems was very much greater where they enjoyed the positive endorsement of the local candidate. Indeed, the success of these techniques in retaining the seats of individual MPs was seen to be building up a corps of internal advocates within the organisation. Those least likely to see the benefit of the techniques were older MPs, particularly those in safe seats, together with ministers, most of whom had by necessity to delegate responsibility for local campaigning to other people. But the success of these tools reflected well on the party chairman responsible for their introduction, perhaps a reason why in 2005 the existence of these systems was much less jealously guarded from the media than it was in 2001 or 1997.

One of the curious features of the 2005 campaign was the much greater variability of the swing from seat to seat. For example, in 2005 Labour increased its majority in the only two new seats it won in 2001, Dorset

South and Ynys Mon. It was noted by the Labour Party that good results were achieved by MPs who took an active interest in local affairs throughout their term in parliament and who were actively involved in the organisation of local campaigns.

### **The attitudes of party colleagues**

Particularly for members of the Labour Party, it might be supposed that people had some misgivings about systems developed to meet the needs of commercial organisations being used in such an emotionally laden field as political campaigning.

All parties stated that they had not received any unfavourable comments either from local activists or from fellow headquarters staff. Though their workers were happy to use segmentation tools, there was concern lest by characterising large segments of the population as though they were the same, the parties drew too stereotypical a view of individual voters. To the extent that it was revealed, the commercial imagery which underlies geodemographic classifications was generally found amusing rather than offensive, though this may have been the result of the care with which it was explained in campaign meetings. One label capable of generating offence was 'white van culture'. Not surprisingly, this was also the most memorable one.

Although the parties used geodemographics as one element of their targeting, there was no 'corporate' view of segments that the parties particularly felt they should be targeting. Nevertheless that is not to say that the groups they may have felt most at risk of losing, 'urban intelligence' in the case of the Labour Party and 'symbols of success' on the part of the Liberal Democrats, were not recognised in other guises. Parties were aware that their 'position', in the terminology of marketers, was in a process of continuing change and hence that policy positions taken, as for example support for or against the Iraq war, would result in very substantial shifts in support among particular segments and in those seats in which those segments were especially concentrated. Had geodemographics been used on tracker polls, the author believes these changes would have been easier to identify, to quantify and to articulate within each party.<sup>3</sup>

A key point which all the parties recognised was that the use of uniform criteria for selecting target segments assumed that the performance of parties among different segments was consistent across the whole of England. The parties recognised that this was an assumption they had not tested and that in practice a number of regional differences may now operate, resulting for example from different regional patterns of immigration, the size of the government sector and the health of the local economy.

### **The application of segmentation to government communications**

A final question that was put to the parties was whether the effective use of segmentation in party political communications might encourage politicians to support the use of segmentation in a wider range of

**Attitude to use of  
'commercial' tools**

**No strategic  
view of target  
geodemographic  
types**

**Uniform national  
patterns assumed**

## Relevance to targeting of government institutions

government communication strategies than is the case as present. As the demand for public services increases, there are many branches of government which now recognise that resources spent on preventive campaigns may be the only effective method of limiting demand to a level that supply can meet. Given that the demand for most government services is even more uneven in terms of demographics than is the case for commercial services, there is a strong argument for applying greater selectivity to this form of communications.<sup>4</sup>

The general response to this observation is that politicians have to be very careful to avoid any potential source of complaint about ‘postcode targeting’. Unfortunately the electorate, and to an even greater extent the media, are not sufficiently sophisticated at present to understand the distinction between the targeting of communications and the targeting of services. The other limiting issue in this regard is that the politicians most likely to have personal experience of the benefits of the use of segmentation in political campaigning are most likely to be young, new to parliament and fighting marginal seats, a profile which is least likely to describe the holders of cabinet responsibility for policing, health and education. **Nonetheless Caroline Flint of the Department of Health has been on record advocating the use of these tools in the public sector as a result of her experience of using them in party political campaigning.**

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## Notes

1. For example, the author has been unable to find any literature on this subject. Butler and Kavanagh, which is the most comprehensive account of the previous general election campaign, makes no reference to the application of segmentation to direct communications, although 24 pages are devoted to ‘Politics on the Air’ and ten to the ‘E-campaign’. See Butler, D. and Kavanagh, D. (2000) *The British General Election of 2001*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.
2. Channel 4 News, BBC News 24, BBC *Breakfast Daily Politics*, BBC *Newsnight* and Bloomberg Television all covered the use of these techniques, which also featured in *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*.
3. In practice a sufficiently large sample of respondents to voting intention questions were geodemographically coded by MORI that it was evident that Labour was leaching support to the Liberal Democrats, particularly in ‘urban intelligence’ and in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, and that the potential loss of many university seats could have been forecast.
4. One of the few publicised examples of such a campaign, that relating to diabetes screening in Slough, appears in the *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, Vol. 7, No. 1. See Farr, M. and Evans, A. (2005) ‘Identifying “unknown diabetes” using geodemographics and social marketing’, pp. 47–58.