

SPECIAL REPORT:

Big Data, Republican Campaigns and 2016



By: Steve Parkhurst



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Use the Hashtag **#AmRenData** for this report

I spoke recently with Information Week writer Debra Donston-Miller for an article she was writing about Big Data and the role it would play in the 2016 Presidential election. This got me thinking quite a bit about Big Data and its role in the political world. This report is a result of that interview (that interview has not yet been published as this report was released), but many of the things I told Debra Donston-Miller are included in this report, verbatim.

INTRODUCTION

“Analog-era minds have a hard time processing a key product of the digital era: the staggering amount of information being created, collected and correlated.”

- L. Gordon Crovitz, “Why 'Big Data' Is a Big Deal”, *Wall Street Journal*

Big Data can be daunting and complex, but it does not need to be feared. Just look at the descriptions of Big Data, and you will understand why many people have to take an aspirin before delving much further:

Hollis Thomases, writing for *Inc*, defines some Big Data specifics in her column “Why 'Big Data' Is a Big Deal”:

“Big Data is so voluminous, the byte sizes it refers to are terms we pedestrian folk don't typically even hear—things like 'petabytes,' 'exabytes,' and 'zettabytes.' Managing all of this data generates its own set of problems—things like storage, security and data protection, and compliance—but it also creates opportunities.”

Six Provocations for Big Data was a paper prepared by Danah Boyd and Kate Crawford for an Oxford Internet Institute Symposium in September 2011. Boyd and Crawford wrote:

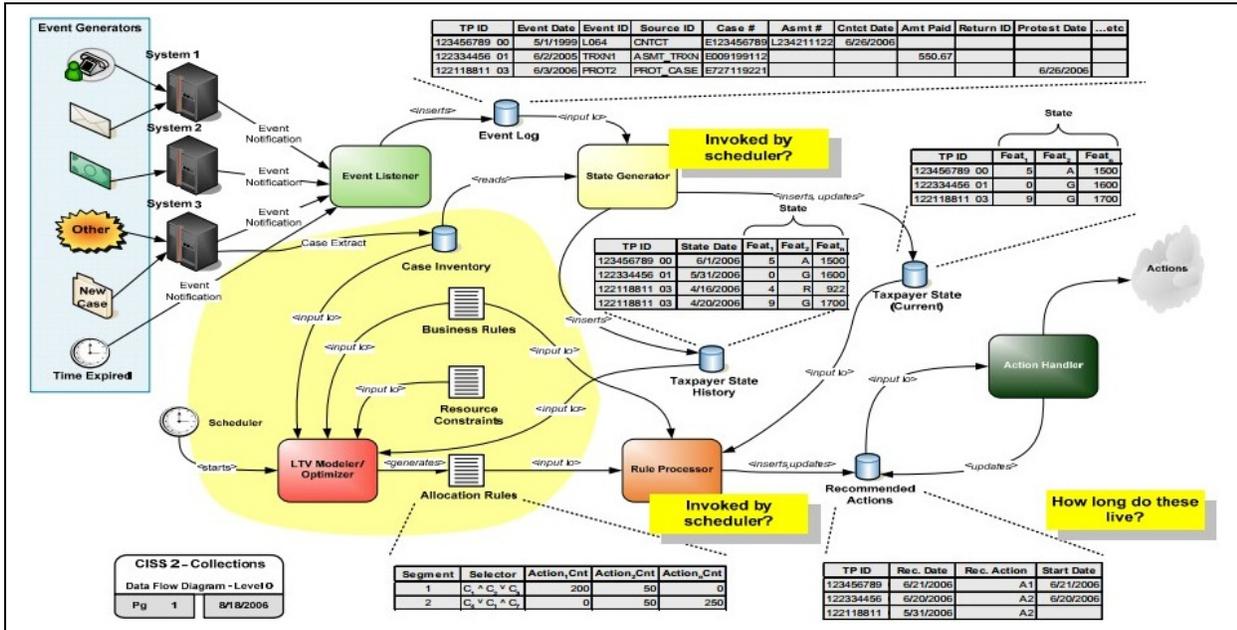
“The era of Big Data has begun. Computer scientists, physicists, economists, mathematicians, political scientists, bio-informaticists, sociologists, and many others are clamoring for access to the massive quantities of information produced by and about people, things, and their interactions.”

Deborah Gage in “The New Shape of Big Data” for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote about Chid Apte, the director of analytics research, business analytics and math sciences for IBM. Gage wrote, “engineers are using advanced algorithms ‘to model and get insights into relationships.’”

Finally, Barbara Trish described Big Data for *Campaigns & Elections* in this way, “Massive data sets integrate information from multiple sources, sometimes produced with mining techniques and presented on mashup applications.”

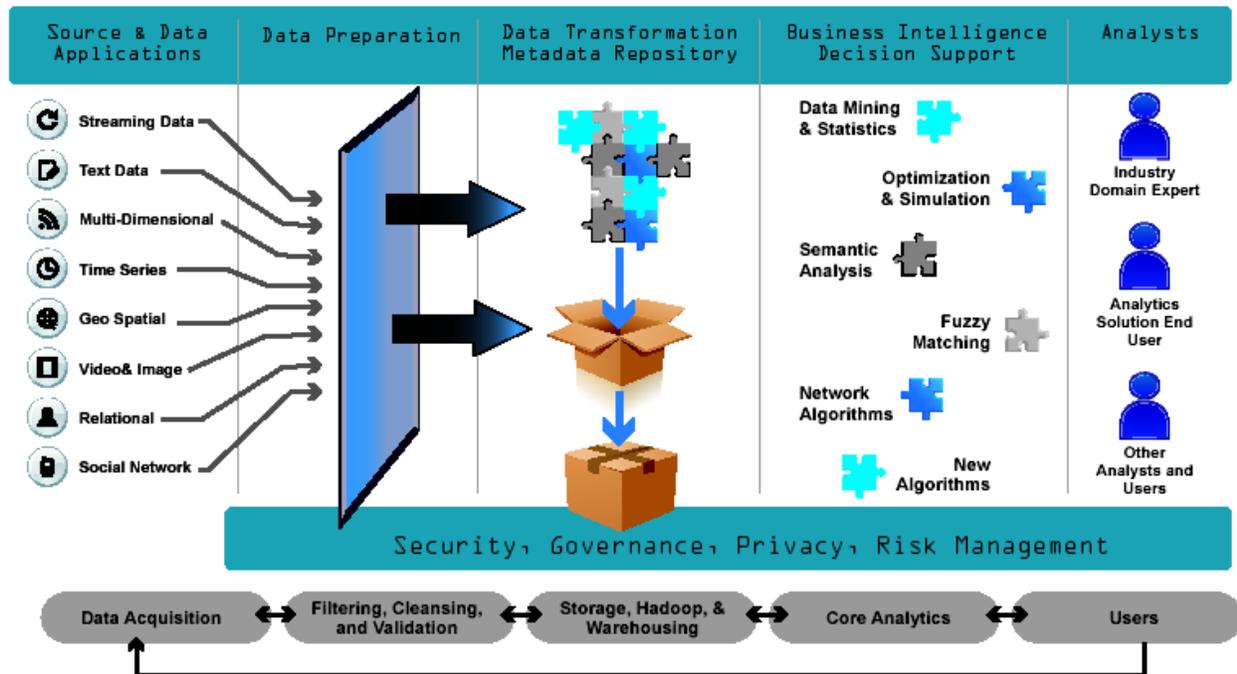
There. That should have cleared it up for you.

If those descriptions clear up Big Data for you, and if you understand the image below, a visual of Big Data being put to work in New York State, then by all means, stop reading now and move on to your next project.



The Role of Data Mining in Business Optimization by Chid Apte, IBM Research

Or maybe this is a little less complicated:



Demystifying Big Data, Prepared by TechAmerica Foundation's Federal Big Data Commission

If you are continuing to read here, you probably have questions at this point. Do not freak out. For as complex as these descriptions and images may seem, most people will never need to get into this level of understanding. For most, the final product will be the real interest. There is a great saying

that laws and sausages are two things no one would want to see being made. One could now add Big Data to that rule. You may not want to see Big Data “made” but it is becoming an essential tool for organizing, visualizing and targeting both voters or customers, and it is here to stay.

So what is Big Data? How does it relate to political campaigns? How will it affect the 2016 Presidential election?

You have come to the right place for answers to those questions.

BIG DATA IN DETAIL

“Big data is a resource and a tool. It is meant to inform, rather than explain; It points us toward understanding, but it can still lead to misunderstanding, depending on how well or poorly it is wielded. And, however dazzling we find the power of big data to be, we must never let its seductive glimmer blind us to its inherent imperfections.”

- *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*

Big Data is the new version of the database. But, these are not traditional databases, those hosted on a single disk or a single computer. Typically, many servers are involved and the actual data is hosted in the cloud, accessible across platforms (computers and/or devices) from anywhere, for many people to tinker with and attempt to perfect. One might say, these are databases on steroids.

Big Data allows for the more complicated task of running analytics, but these are not typical analytics. Like the databases, these analytics are on steroids and the final product that results is larger and more complex than anything seen before. The analysis and visualization spurred on by Big Data can be very useful, and they can save a huge amount of wasted time and effort, while potentially increasing organizational efficiency at the same time.

Big Data was born in the business world. In the early days of the concept, only big businesses could afford the complicated infrastructure, not to mention the expertise needed to create a product and to make the product useful. The experts in the Big Data field have been called Data Scientists, among other names. Authors Viktor Mayer-Schonberger and Kenneth Cukier in their book *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*, introduced what they termed an Algorithmist:

“These new professionals would be experts in the areas of computer science, mathematics, and statistics; they would act as reviewers of big-data analyses and predictions. Algorithmists would take a vow of impartiality and confidentiality, much as accountants and certain other professionals do now. They would evaluate the selection of data sources, the choice of analytical and predictive tools, including algorithms and models, and the interpretation of results. In the event of a dispute, they would have access to the algorithms, statistical approaches, and datasets that produced a given decision.”

Talk about a serious gig, no pun intended.

BEFORE BIG DATA

Political campaigns relied on Number Crunchers in the past. Number Crunchers became Data Scientists and Algorithmists in this new age of data analysis and playing with numbers. Number crunching was simple in comparison to what the brethren of crunchers attempt to do today.

In the past, when it came time to target voters for instance, it stood to reason that if you had a neighborhood or a community that voted for one party or the other with 80% of the vote, the more people you could register to vote in that neighborhood or community, the better the likelihood of your getting that 80% of the vote, if you could also get those new registrants to the polls.

The Old Model

Registered Voters	Ballots Cast at 60% Turnout		80% of the vote
3,000	1,800	=	1,440 Total Votes
4,000	2,400	=	1,920 Total Votes

(Ratio of Ballots Cast per 1,000 Registered Voters changes)

As you can see in the chart above, registering an extra 1,000 voters in an 80-20 neighborhood, potentially yields an extra 480 voters.

Then, neighborhoods started to blend and it started to be more and more difficult to find the 80-20 neighborhoods.

Micro-targeting came along and all of sudden it was the new rage. At that point, consultants could tap consumer databases and identify homes by things such as magazine subscriptions or cable company subscribers, and we could find homes that subscribed to Mother Jones or to Forbes, or homes that were paid customers of Dish Network or DirecTV. Consumer databases contained such data as homes with mortgages or renters, important knowledge if you want to drive a message about property rights or economic development. The data derived from those facts were obvious, most of the time.

Finally, and we are just now in the beginning stages of seeing the real capabilities, a wave of data was available that tracked the websites a person would visit and then track their social media profiles. Now influence can be tracked. If someone is going to say something great about your candidate, better for them to have 5,000 friends or followers than 500, in theory anyway. If that 5,000 consists of spambots and others who do not re-post, retweet or care about what is being said, the power of the 500 can actually be greater. Big Data can tell you who is who, why, when and how often.

All of this knowledge, from magazine subscriptions to online habits to home ownership or apartment rental status, this is all part of the Big Data experience.

“Big Data is notable not because of its size, but because of its relationality to other data.”

- Danah Boyd and Kate Crawford, *Six Provocations for Big Data*

EXPERIMENTS: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

“If big data teaches us anything, it is that just acting better, making improvements – without deeper understanding – is often good enough. Continually doing so is virtuous.”

- *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*

In the *Wall Street Journal*, Deborah Gage wrote about Gareet Singh, a software developer and mathematician in Palo Alto, California. Gage wrote, “Data is so complex that using the same old methods, asking the same old questions, doesn't make sense, says Mr. Singh.” And as David Meer points out in the Spring 2013 issue of *strategy+business*, Big Data “requires the right analysts asking the right questions to make the right decisions.” That is a lot to get right, and a lot of right questions to ask, and that sort of expertise will come with a price.

Big Data can not and will not replace people involved in the processing of data, not yet anyway. As pointed out in the book *Big Data*:

“Big data is not an ice-cold world of algorithms and automatons. There is an essential role for people, with all our foibles, misperceptions and mistakes, since these traits walk hand in hand with human creativity, instinct, and genius. The same messy mental processes that lead to our occasional humiliation or wrongheadedness, also give rise to successes and stumbling upon our greatness.”

When the right people are in place, the next step becomes the most important: Asking the right questions is the only way to really get something of value from Big Data.

Campaigns and consultants will have to be sure to distinguish between the subtle differences of *Will this sell?* vs. *What will sell?* For instance, if a campaign starts out by asking, “Will tax relief sell,” this is very different from your data actually showing you that immigration, education and property rights “will sell.” This will mean thinking beyond original instincts and instead listening to what the data is saying.

Sure, this could lead to what L. Gordon Crovitz dubbed in the *Wall Street Journal* as “data-driven pandering.” But there is a difference between pandering and targeting. If a campaign has four core issues it is running on, choosing the order of priority for mentioning those issues to voters is different from pandering or flip-flopping depending on who you are trying to talk with or persuade.

For instance, let's pretend a campaign's four core issues include tax cuts, protecting property rights, protecting gun rights, and education reform. And let's assume the campaign message involves those four issues. Finding a segment of anti-gun voters via Big Data and appealing to them with an anti-gun message, when you are clearly trying to protect gun rights, would be pandering. However, highlighting your other priorities to those voters, while not mentioning your gun rights position, is not pandering. If you can make the case to those voters that their economic interests (tax cuts) are more important than the anti-gun vote, that's simply targeting persuadable voters with the right message.

EXPERTISE: IT COMES AT A PRICE

“As big data transforms our lives – optimizing, improving, making more efficient, and capturing benefits – what role is left for intuition, faith, uncertainty, and originality?”

- *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*

But how do you take data derived by the business world and make it useful for a political campaign? That's a great question. And that is where price comes into play when talking about analyzing and utilizing Big Data.

Data Scientists or Algorithmists are not specific to political campaigns - they read and analyze data pertaining to anything. Give them data, and they will get to work. They are accustomed to big salaries and real jobs. Anyone who has been involved in a political campaign knows that despite best efforts otherwise, campaigns do not operate like businesses. The bizarre hours and overall unpredictability alone would drive most people crazy.

“An election campaign may be the perfect incubator for new companies. ‘The political process has many similarities to the world of start-ups,’ says Seth Bannon, a founder of Amicus. ‘It is fast-paced, there’s lots of uncertainty, and anyone working in it has to be comfortable doing what they do without much oversight, for long hours and not much pay.’”

- “The Obama start-ups”, *The Economist*, December 1, 2012

Imagine the Obama 2012 Data Scientists that were looking at up to 80 data points on some voters. In the hands of inexperienced users, that data would not have been worth much. In the hands of the pros, this data represented a map to the minds of certain voters, and a matching set of keys to unlock the doors to those minds.

As noted in *Six Provocations for Big Data*, the amount of data can be so vast that the right expertise can help to avoid “apophenia: seeing patterns where none actually exist.” Just think about it, if you looked at a bunch of phone polling responses where the respondents all answered “Yes, I plan to vote,” that “pattern” could be perceived as a goldmine. Until you realize the respondents were never asked who they were going to vote for. If it turns out those voters are voting 70-30 for your opponent, well, that can make for a long day. It is possible to be buried in data and still starved for information.

This all sounds simple, but the experts know what to look for, and how to utilize what they find.

IS BIG DATA COST EFFECTIVE FOR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS?

Big Data can require a lot of monetary resources to find out what voters care about. But, it will still take even more money to reach the voters with the message that you develop. So considerations have to be made. It is pointless to spend 80% of a campaign budget on analytics and data, and have next to nothing left to actually get a message to the target audience.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN 2008 vs 2012

Will Big Data take the same route as Social Media? Campaigns and candidates are often late to adapt to new capabilities. For instance, Social Media came a long way from 2008 to 2012. I remember trying to get candidates to adopt Twitter during the 2008 campaign cycle, and that was a struggle. Some candidates gave in and joined Twitter, but they felt that Twitter was only another outlet for information distribution, as opposed to a way to engage people and take part in conversations, the very essence of a Web 1.0 mindset in a Web 2.0 world.

Fast-forward to today. Any campaign getting off the ground begins with a Twitter account as one of the first three elements of a digital campaign. And it is not uncommon now for a Facebook page to be used instead of a website. The HTML and App functionality in Facebook can make the pages look and act exactly as a website would.

Big Data as such became a factor in the 2012 election process. It is safe to say that Big Data is headed in the same direction in 2014 and 2016 as Social Media went from 2008 to 2010 to 2012; that is, from skepticism to necessity.

OBAMA 2012

Big Data was so key in 2012, especially when viewed from the prism of "Romney's race to lose." When we realize that Obama increased his numbers with some groups in 2012 from 2008, for instance with young voters, there was obviously something deeper going on with data. In the election aftermath, as the stories began to be told, it was apparent that Obama's team was dealing with numbers, names and data that even Romney's team acknowledged they didn't know existed.

Big Data, when analyzed correctly, can not only measure a person's persuadability (their ability to be persuaded), but also what message would actually persuade that voter. This happens by measuring online trends, such as purchases, social media discussions, magazine subscriptions and even visits to the voters front door via a campaign canvasser. As noted by Sasha Issenberg in his December 2012 feature for *MIT Technology Review*, "The campaign didn't just know who you were; it knew exactly how it could turn you into the type of person it wanted you to be."

According to L. Gordon Crovitz in a *Wall Street Journal* column, "Obama's 'Big Data' Victory," writes that Obama's campaign had "some 80 pieces of information" on some of the voters they were targeting. The more the Obama team knew about voters, the more they could determine who to target, or not, and what message might work for each of the voters they wanted to go after.

The Obama campaign had a huge tech staff, in fact Linda Feldmann wrote for *The Christian Science Monitor*, "OFA's analytics department of more than 60 full-time people kept the campaign informed on how it was doing on a daily basis." Yes, that is 60 people, just looking at analytics. I have had campaigns where 60 people showing up was a good kick-off event or a great block-walking team on a Saturday morning.

Big Data will change the game, and looking at 2012 shows that it already has.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY FALLS BEHIND

The Democrats had a clear advantage with Big Data. Team Obama used that advantage to clobber Republicans in 2012. For instance, Michael Scherer noted this campaign operation in his article “How Obama's data crunchers helped him win”:

“Online, the get-out-the-vote effort continued with a first-ever attempt at using Facebook on a mass scale to replicate the door-knocking efforts of field organizers. In the final weeks of the campaign, people who had downloaded an app were sent messages with pictures of their friends in swing states. They were told to click a button to automatically urge those targeted voters to take certain actions, such as registering to vote, voting early or getting to the polls.”

If that example is not like a 2 iron right between the eyes, you’re doing it all wrong.

Bethany Mandel wrote a column, “Is the GOP Digital Team (Still) in Denial?” for *Commentary*. A column that summed up 2012, while also offering a bone-chilling view of the future. In her column, Mandel demonstrated two of the very stark differences in the thinking of their side vs. our side:

“While digital efforts were the primary focus of the Obama campaign from the beginning, with data miners and tech gurus culled from Silicon Valley, they were a relatively late addition to the Romney effort. Its digital operation was staffed after the rest of the campaign, with an operation that seemed remarkably inefficient for a campaign that was supposed to do things with the rigor of Romney’s research-intensive firm, Bain Capital.”

It is important to note that while our side needs to get better, we need to do more than just catch-up to the their side. We need to be better than the alternative. We have to take these ideas seriously. Our side has ideas that can help all Americans realize the American Dream. We need to communicate those ideas.

Big Data will allow us the ability to narrowcast, that is, to broadcast via Big Data tools to smaller segments of the population. This allows us to personalize our message and show the relevancy of our cause. By doing this at the individual level, we can speak right to people that we want to engage with. This is the future.

“BarackObama.com includes 87 different tracking cookies dropped on visitors—more even than on the Best Buy website. The software includes categories such as ‘ad scripts,’ ‘behavioral trackers’ and ‘analytics.’ MittRomney.com had 48 such tracking services on its site.”

-L. Gordon Crovitz, “How Campaigns Hypertarget Voters Online.” *Wall Street Journal*

87 vs. 48. That is almost 82% more tracking cookies generating data for Obama 2012. And that is only one measure from one of the Obama vs. Romney 2012 metrics.

It is not enough for us to merely catch up.

We need to be better.

THE FUTURE

There will be data testing in the run-up to 2014. There have already been debates this year on issues like the sequester, the second amendment and immigration, for example, and I'm sure the big data clouds are filling up with usable data. The data drill-down is no doubt tracking where voters are looking and what those voters are saying, especially online. And, with the capability now to measure who said what, and to how many people did they say it that in turn reacted to them, these new influentials or influencers are going to be watched, and possibly even catered to as campaigns begin to drive messages.

With 2016 in mind, in mid-April 2013, I'm sure Vice-President Joe Biden's team was watching the online traffic during the second amendment debate and votes, including the tears shed by Biden during Obama's reactionary press conference. Likewise, that same week Senator Marco Rubio's team was surely watching the online traffic from his seven Sunday show appearances along with his appearance on Rush Limbaugh's show later in the week as he talked about immigration reform.

From messaging to strategy to voter contact to online engagement, Big Data will be huge. Big Data won't replace the traditional nuts and bolts involved with winning Iowa in January 2016, but it will allow even greater ability to know who will caucus and for whom they will caucus. Old school phone banking and door-to-door canvassing will identify a small percentage of voters, and Big Data opens up many more possibilities now for targeting and messaging, and 2014 and 2016 will see real advancements and uses in this realm.

And whether we are talking about phone banking, canvassing or Big Data, quality is always going to matter now more than ever.

There are 15 and 16 year old individuals right now worrying about upcoming freshman and sophomore year finals. The data hawks are no doubt following and tracking them too, because those young people will be able to cast ballots for the first time in 2016, and it is well known that a person stays loyal to the party they vote for that very first time. Big Data wants to know who and what those kids care about.

“These methods will also end up empowering better-financed campaigns. The databases are expensive, the algorithms are proprietary, the results of experiments by campaigns are secret, and the analytics require special expertise. The Democrats have an early advantage partly because academics and data analysts tend to be Democrats. Money will solve that problem. This will shift power in both parties even more toward the richer campaigns and may well be the final nail in the coffin of public financing for presidential campaigns.”

- Zeynep Tufecki, “Beware The Smart Campaign”, *NYTimes.com*

GOOD ADVICE FOR US ALL: BE DARING

As political campaigns continue to transition into something more like business operations, it will often be necessary to think more like a business owner, instead of a typical campaign manager, campaign consultant or even a candidate. Hollis Thomases offers a few words that I believe are worth adhering to:

“So instead of brushing it off as something that only applies to huge companies, savvy business owners should be thinking about putting Big Data to work. Move beyond Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, URL shortener stats, and ordinary social media sentiment tools, and get good at normalizing data mined across all outposts.”

We will need to be daring, we will need to take bigger risks. In essence, we need to be daring. As I mentioned before, it is not enough for us to merely catch up.

We need to be better.



NOW, GET TO IT

“Direct mail guys believe the data is the value and what Team Obama discovered is that the tools to analyze the data are the value.”

- Erick Erickson, “Rush Limbaugh and the Need for Spine.” *RedState.com*

Big Data authors Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier have peered into the future and compared it to the past, and their observations should prepare us all for the road ahead:

“The change we face is in some ways even greater than those sparked by earlier epochal innovations that dramatically expanded the scope and scale of information in society. The ground beneath our feet is shifting. Old certainties are being questioned. Big data requires fresh discussion of the nature of decision-making, destiny, justice. A worldview we thought was made of causes is being challenged by a preponderance of correlations. The possession of knowledge, which once meant an understanding of the past, is coming to mean an ability to predict the future.”

Just as Social Media was a tough sell to some candidates in 2008, getting some candidates and senior staff to buy in to Big Data and accept its answers is the new challenge for consultants. As writers Steven Rosenbush and Michael Totty keenly observed in their *Wall Street Journal* article, “How Big Data Is Changing the Whole Equation for Business”:

“Lots of obstacles remain. Some are technical, but business as usual also can stand in the way. In most companies, decisions are still based on HIPPO—the highest paid person's opinion—and persuading an executive that data trumps intuition can be a hard sell.”

It can be really difficult to break the old habits of a traditional radio and television ad campaign, supplemented with some generic direct mail. For the consultants willing to believe what the analytics from Big Data is telling them, the campaigns of the future will be much different. Not all political consultants will be able to swallow their pride and accept that there is a new model; a new way to play the game. A political consultant will need a much different skill-set to go from the old model of 100,000 voters getting the exact same message, to 100,000 voters being broken down into 10 sub-groups of 10,000 voters and talking to each of those groups in a way that resonates.

The message will not change. That is the lesson here. But instead, what matters to each voter will vary, and knowing how to speak to those voters and what will matter to them is the great advantage of this current new era called Big Data.

“That data-driven decisionmaking played a huge role in creating a second term for the 44th President and will be one of the more closely studied elements of the 2012 cycle. It's another sign that the role of the campaign pros in Washington who make decisions on hunches and experience is rapidly dwindling, being replaced by the work of quants and computer coders who can crack massive data sets for insight.

As one official put it, the time of "guys sitting in a back room smoking cigars, saying 'We always buy 60 Minutes'" is over. In politics, the era of big data has arrived.”

- Michael Scherer, “How Obama's data crunchers helped him win.” *Time*

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Thank you for reading this special report: Big Data, Republican Campaigns and 2016. I'd like to encourage you to get your hands dirty in Big Data to the extent that it makes sense for you, your campaigns or even your business. I am available to answer questions or to discuss the topic further should you be interested.

Be better. Be daring.

Thank you again,

Steve Parkhurst
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Please feel free to share this report with others. If you write or blog about this report, please do so freely, but with attribution to either Steve Parkhurst, @AmRenConsulting or AmRenConsulting.com.

If you know someone wanting to run for office or even just thinking about it, we would love to visit with them and see if our unique campaign vision is right for them. We can answer questions and talk about the sort of preparations needed to run for office.



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