If you're a social media user with clout, US politicians have you in their sights

A new data tool could help Democrats match email addresses to Facebook and Twitter accounts in search for opinion formers as Republicans also think digital

By Ben Jacobs

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It used to be that the voters most in demand by campaigns were "soccer moms" and "Nascar dads" – people who met a precise and narrowly focused demographic niche.

In 2016 though, the most important voters may be the ones with high Klout scores.

Earlier this year, NGP-VAN, the dominant provider of software and data for Democratic political campaigns and US progressive causes, added social media information to its extensive voter database. Stu Trevelyan, NGP-VAN's chief executive, and Mike Liddell, the company's director of digital services, told the Guardian how the company plans to tap into "social data" to help campaigns identify and woo potential voters.

Social media is the last major remaining "untapped data source" for political campaigns, according to Trevelyan, who thinks his company's new tool will be a game-changer.

Since January, NGP-VAN has been able to take the voter email addresses collected by political campaigns and link them to Twitter and Facebook accounts. The tool isn't perfect – it has a roughly 50% match rate – but it still means that this information is available for an increasing number of voters and the result could have a major impact on political campaigns in 2016.

Candidates are also gearing up for next year's US presidential election to place greater emphasis on technology and online outreach. One of Republican candidate Rand Paul's biggest coups so far was wooing the digital strategist Vincent Harris away from his GOP rival Ted Cruz, and on the Democratic side Hillary Clinton has hired the longtime Google executive Stephanie Hannon to be her chief technology officer.

NGP-VAN, which works almost exclusively with progressive causes, hopes its connection tool will allow the Democratic candidate – whether that is Clinton or someone else – to tap into

information from social media networks as well as data that has previously been publicly available.

It has long been possible to line up information from a wide variety of sources including voter history, past donations, demographic information and responses to canvassers from past campaigns.

But, by combining this with social media information, campaigns now target specific kinds of supporters; for example, they could ask only supporters with more than 500 Facebook friends to host fundraisers, or identify swing voters with more than 1,000 Twitter followers.

The idea is to expand the definition of "influentials" – the kinds of voters who campaigns spend extra effort courting – to "e-fluentials" – those with the same influence over digital networks. These can be a lot harder to identify than traditional community leaders such as state legislators or union officials. Often those most active on social media are not plugged into the established order – the exact reason many are attracted to social media in the first place.

Reaching social media "power users" isn't a new concept. The Obama campaign used Facebook in 2012 to allow supporters to give the campaign access to their list of friends. The campaign then used that data to ask the supporters to contact their friends with a specific request. However, amid user outcry, Facebook has since changed its API and made it impossible for future campaigns to do the same.

At this stage, NGP-VAN's new tool has still been used mostly for fundraising. In particular, it allows campaigns or advocacy groups holding fundraisers to identify everyone who has given $2,000 in the past year and has more than 500 Facebook friends in a certain radius. These people can then be targeted not only to give but to recruit their friends to donate as well.

It can also allow campaigns to monitor what potential voters are saying about them in real time, by filtering posts based on keywords such as candidates' names, and monitor how advertising and messaging is being received.

Despite the privacy implications of such an approach, officials at NGP-VAN said they were not worried this might be considered "creepy". "This is Twitter," said Liddell. "This is what people are saying publicly. We aren't pulling in any data that is kind of personal or private that the user hasn't already decided they want to disclose."

Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, told the Guardian NGP-VAN's use of data was "fairly benign", and agreed that the information was what "people are fully aware is public".

But Sanchez did note that this information, combined with other data, could end up revealing far more personal information than people realized.