

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/election-2014-results-show-limits-of-big-data-1415585721>

 **ARTICLE FREE PASS**  
Enjoy your free sample of exclusive subscriber content.

**\$12 for 12 Weeks**

**SUBSCRIBE NOW**

POLITICS AND POLICY

## Election 2014: Results Show Limits of Big Data

Political Environment More Important Than Most Well-oiled Machine



Voters cast their ballots at the Denver Elections Division Building on November 4. *GETTY IMAGES*

By **PATRICK O'CONNOR** and **DANTE CHINNI**

Nov. 9, 2014 9:15 p.m. ET

**WASHINGTON—North Carolina Sen. Kay Hagan used groundbreaking data analysis and a large volunteer network to boost turnout among blacks, young voters and supporters**

in key counties that Democrats need to win statewide races.

The data-driven tactics weren't enough. Ms. Hagan fell short in her bid for re-election Tuesday in a race that helped swing the balance of power in the Senate to Republicans.

The 2014 midterm elections underscored the potential—and the limits—of voter mobilization, a part of electioneering that has drawn unprecedented investments in recent years in data-gathering and analysis techniques aimed at better understanding and motivating voters.

---

MORE FROM CAPITAL JOURNAL

---

This  
year's

- **GOP Weighs How to Flex New Muscle** (<http://online.wsj.com/articles/gop-weighs-how-to-flex-new-muscle-1415579044>)
- **Upgraded Health Site Faces Test This Week** (<http://online.wsj.com/articles/health-care-website-update-seen-reducing-strain-on-system-1415561769>)
- **Sign Up:** Capital Journal newsletter ([http://online.wsj.com/public/page/email-setup.html?sub=capital\\_journal\\_daybreak](http://online.wsj.com/public/page/email-setup.html?sub=capital_journal_daybreak))

elections showed that while campaigns have become more sophisticated in targeting voters, the broader political environment remains a more important factor than the most well-oiled turnout machine.

In most of the top Senate battlegrounds, Democrats achieved their goal of expanding the electorate, turning out hundreds of thousands of voters who didn't cast ballots in 2010.

Republicans made big gains of their own in using data to reach voters and understand voter sentiment.

Nationally, turnout dropped from 40.9% of the voting-eligible population in 2010 to 36.4% this year, according to a preliminary analysis by Michael McDonald, an associate professor at the University of Florida. That suggests a national climate in which any campaign faced a hard time persuading intermittent voters to participate. The exception: eight of the 10 states holding the most-contested Senate races, where turnout was up slightly.

In the end, the Democrats' investments in turnout proved insufficient against bigger forces, among them the unpopularity of a president who weighed on his party's

candidates and the more consistent voting habits of Republican-leaning voters, who turn up in larger numbers in midterm election years than do Democratic constituencies.

Democrats said that GOP improvements in collecting and analyzing voter data weren't solely responsible for their wins.

"Republicans could have carried a Commodore 64 [computer] on a wagon behind them going door-to-door," said Guy Cecil, executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, at a postelection briefing sponsored by the newspaper CQ Roll Call. "It wasn't going to change the fundamental dynamic of the election."

Republican Party officials, by contrast, attributed their success to a renewed focus on mobilizing voters, particularly people who don't turn out in nonpresidential years. "If we had not been laser-focused at turning out low-propensity voters in states like Iowa and Colorado, we would have not been victorious," Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus said Friday at a breakfast sponsored by the Christian Science Monitor. "The ground game matters. Our unprecedented investment in data matters."

In North Carolina, turnout rose only slightly, from 39.2% in 2010 to 40.7% this year, even though the contentious Senate campaign dominated headlines and tens of millions of dollars were spent in trying to persuade people to vote. And when Republican Thom Tillis won, it was with fewer votes than GOP Sen. Richard Burr had tallied in a noncompetitive election four years earlier.

It is impossible to know how much voter-turnout machinery might have boosted support for each candidate, but the early data suggest that Ms. Hagan won the lion's share of new voters.

Turnout was up significantly in the five counties Democrats rely on for votes, but not enough for Ms. Hagan to win.

In Georgia, where both parties also spent large sums on a hard-fought Senate race, turnout fell by more than 5 percentage points. Republican David Perdue breezed to victory in the Senate race while collecting 130,000 fewer votes than GOP Sen. Johnny Isakson did four years earlier in his own noncompetitive re-election.

It is impossible to know what support would have materialized for each candidate

without the big voter-turnout efforts, but evidence of their power this year is thin.

For the GOP, the 2014 midterms marked an important turning point. After years of uneven investments in data-gathering, RNC officials agreed to invest in a large voter-identification effort that was unprecedented in scale for a midterm election.

The project, led by two veterans of George W. Bush's re-election team, began with a national survey of 10,000 voters and required calls to 1,000 voters in each of 20 or more states each week to gauge their thoughts on the election.

Each voter was ranked on a 100-point scale to predict the likelihood he or she would vote and would support a Republican candidate. The RNC team used the data to inform strategic decisions about which voters to contact and what to say when they did.

"The political team, to their credit, totally bought into the system and used the numbers for everything," said Brent Seaborn, who helped design the program with Bill Skelly, an adviser to the RNC.

Still, there was some skepticism about this new approach. Campaign officials in Colorado expressed shock in September when the RNC's data projections showed the Republican Senate candidate, Rep. Cory Gardner, opening up a lead.

Weeks later, polls also showed a similar move for Mr. Gardner. In a similar vein, RNC data showed the race in Georgia tighten for Mr. Perdue before public-opinion surveys.

In North Carolina, Republicans saw Democrats outpacing them during the 10-day period of early voting. Participation by black voters during the early-voting phase jumped 45% from 2010.

There was a similar jump among voters not affiliated with either party, and Democrats accounted for roughly half of all voters who cast an early ballot.

With that data in hand, Republicans stepped up their turnout efforts. But the RNC team was still projecting a victory by Mr. Tillis that seemed to hold up in the face of the Democrats' superior turnout efforts.

Despite increasing turnout among key demographic groups, Democrats still hadn't closed Mr. Tillis's lead, due to a group of voters whose support for the Republican never

wavered.

The night of the election, Republican officials watched nervously as the results poured in from North Carolina. With just 1% of the votes tallied in North Carolina, RNC officials started to worry they already were missing the mark.

Mr. Seaborn asked an aide to dig into the numbers. After a jargon-y assessment from the data-cruncher, Mr. Seaborn asked him to clarify his response. The aide replied, “We are going to win.”

---

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).