How political tech will shape the 2014 election

By Anne Farris Rosen - Tech Page One\

 Dale Emmons remembers the day six years ago when he witnessed technology begin to transform politics. The Kentucky-based political consultant attended a Barack Obama for President rally and the audience was asked to text a central cell phone number.

"My phone instantly was connected to hundreds of others," recalls Emmons, a former president of the American Association of Political Consultants. "With this technology, the Obama campaign put hooks into people and raised millions of dollars from lots of small contributors. I saw then that technology was here to stay, and I knew what a helpful tool it would be."

The presidential candidates made even more prolific use of data and mobile technology in 2012 and today races, from statehouse to Congress, are using a plethora of data-driven digital tools to mobilize voters, recruit volunteers, raise money and advocate on issues. "It's here to stay for every campaign because it's cost-efficient, effective and allows you to reach directly to targeted voters," Emmons says.

Technology in 'the mix' in 2014

Consultants agree that the upcoming 2014 and 2016 elections—both expected to be as polemical and polarized as recent national contest—will continue to see an infusion of technology-based communications through smartphones, computers, and tablets to augment and refine the traditional outreach efforts of door-to-door canvassing, telemarketing, television advertising and direct mail.

"Technology is transformative because it didn't just come in and take over," says Brian Franklin, president of Impact Politics, based in Weston, Fla. Instead, technology blended into the traditional forms of political campaigning. "It grabbed a chunk of the mix.

Franklin's firm synchronized television and online video ads for Democratic candidate Patrick Murphy during his successul campaign to beat a Florida Tea Party-backed congressman in 2012. Voters move from email to television to the phone to the Internet, sometimes at the same time," Franklin notes. "When they bobble back and forth, you want to be there."

Franklin thinks campaigns will continue to use a holistic approach of mixed media and outreach strategies.

From grassroots to political machine

Donald P. Green, professor of political science at Columbia University, says that's important because studies have shown that the new technology is limited in its ability to motivate voters. "The old stuff works best," Green says. "People much prefer to be left alone altogether, but the face-to-face canvassing still works the best." The exception, he says, is with volunteers and raising money, where technological outreach enables organizations to quickly grow and develop.

Political consultants, however, are sold on the idea of technology as an advantage.
Three weeks ago, Targeted Victory, known for providing digital expertise to national Republican

campaigns, introduced what it calls the first self-serve advertising product built specifically for politics: in essence a way for homegrown campaigns as small as statehouse races to play like the big boys. Organizers can create microtarget online videos and Facebook ads using pre-roll video uploaded from a file, YouTube or Facebook exchanges. The campaign can then choose which audience receives the ad based on party, gender, age, and geographic location.

"In ten minutes, they can create a targeted ad," brags Michael Beach, co-founder of the Alexandria, Virginia-based firm. He said his firm may eventually accommodate even smaller campaigns such at the municipal level.

Adapted from commercial advertising, microtargeting is a way to track thousands of consumer and behavioral data points for Internet users. When combined with more traditional demographic data, from voter registration rolls for example, the result is a most highly detailed portrait of the electorate, especially useful in closely contested races.

"Once you've identified who's on the fence, you can hit them with laser forceFOCUS?," Franklin said. The targeting also produces instant feedback because it can track how long someone watches a video and whether they shared it on social media or clicked to another related video.

Could political tech adoption slow?

Challenges abound with the new technologies including effective and meaningful handling of the data and not losing sight of an effective and creative message. And some, like Franklin, believe the adoption of campaign technology will be slower than anticipated because of entrenched business practices in the advertising and media-buying world.

Beach says the use of campaign technology is not an either-or proposition. "They are using all the tools combined, and it's dictated by each campaign's need," Beach notes. Emails are very effective at raising money, microtargeting is effective in battleground states and close elections, television is effective where party supporters are concentrated in an area, and Facebook and Twitter are still strong ways to gain word-of-mouth support.

Emmons predicts there will also be increased use of phone videos and YouTube captures by campaign trackers to focus on a candidate or collect opposition research. That calls for discipline in the message and the candidate, he says.

New still-unknown technologies will surface as well. "There's hundreds of millions of dollars being spent so that will invite more innovation," says Emmons.