

Obama's clever mastery of technology mobilises voters

Electoral rolls swell by four million, most of them Democrats, reports **Karen McCarthy** from New York

THIS is not an election, it's a movement," said Melvin Colbert, a 20-year-old student supporter of Senator Barack Obama who frantically worked to get everyone in Atlanta registered to vote before the deadline last week.

"It was crazy," he laughed. "There were people in stores and gas stations, dorms, cafeterias. Everywhere people were getting people ready to vote." Further north, the same fervour gripped the battleground state of Ohio. First-time voter Jessica Boebel, a 20-year-old international studies student at Ohio State University, led the offensive, dishing out voter forms and running shuttles to registration locations. She was one of 10,000 students who watched Bruce Springsteen perform for Obama, and one of many who slept outside polling stations to cast an early ballot for the man she calls her "ideal candidate".

The voter rolls swelled by more

than four million in traditional Republican strongholds like Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia. The majority of new voters registered as Democrats.

These unprecedented results were not owing to the traditional efforts of campaign die-hards to convert passers-by on street corners. This year's success was fuelled by innovative strategies introduced by the Obama camp that have revolutionised how campaigns mobilise their base.

Millions joined an email and text message list that pumps out the senator's views multiple times a day. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have been exploited to enlist millions of supporters. Mini-documentaries refuting Senator John McCain's attacks are posted on YouTube. His website provides phone numbers, flyers and talking points to make neighbour-to-neighbour canvassing as easy as painting-by-numbers. Checking a box will provide the

names and addresses of editors at local newspapers along with discussion points to pen a letter.

"We've been using texts and emails in a high-profile way for a while," said campaign spokesman Nick Shapiro.

To extend the reach, every text goes out with the imperative "Fwd msg".

"He's harnessed the technology and mastered it," said Tanya Spicer, a 40-year-old convert in Atlanta. "I can be running around getting on with my life when, out of the blue, I get a text message, so I'm connected and staying connected."

Spicer was going to leave the Democratic party before Obama got the nomination. She joined his email list and was so impressed by the constant flow of information about issues that mattered to her that she decided to become a campaign volunteer.

In the swing state of Pennsylvania, the Illinois senator leads with an astonishing 13.8-point lead.

The call to action was issued last

week by text. "It's the LAST DAY to register to vote in PA. Forms must be postmarked or handed in TODAY. Tell friends to visit VoteForChange.com or call 877-572-6226. Fwd msg!" Across the country people have become well informed.

Zachary Raffensperger, 20, is a student at the University of Pittsburgh and a first-time voter who has been getting news from the Internet. He's voting Obama because of the potential for change. He thinks McCain is too old and hasn't enough to show for more than 20 years in the Senate.

"Barack Obama gives me hope in the system," he said, even though he's not convinced the candidate can deliver everything his emails promise. "He's a step in the right direction."

Independent voter Tony Weaver, 42, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, been persuaded by what he's read of Obama's economics policies.

Dan Taylor is a 28-year-old defence contractor and right-wing voter in the

Republican stronghold of Virginia, where Obama has a five-point lead.

He disagrees with many of Obama's choices, but his preference for the senator's healthcare bill and his distaste for the Republican party's fiscal irresponsibility is making him lean Left.

In North Carolina, a Republican stronghold since 1976, right-wing voters like Jay Blount, a 33-year-old former army captain, are leaning towards Obama. Blount disagrees with Obama's social policies, but this is outweighed by his distrust of a system that's set up to facilitate millionaires over natural born leaders.

Chalmers Champion, a 26-year-old small business owner with a strong work ethic, is voting McCain.

Chalmers is proof no amount of information will gain sympathy from the Right. But the word on the street shows Obama's relentless determination to get average Americans informed, organised and focused may change an election and, later, a country.



Barack Obama using a mobile on his campaign plane. Picture: Getty