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Wall Street Journal
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Advocacy and voter-registration groups are gathering a trove of data from protests by tracking the cellphones of participants and sending them messages about registering to vote or taking other actions. The tactics, which one user called “deeply spooky yet extremely helpful,” are the latest example of ways political groups are using cellphone data to target voters.

Tracking individuals through location data gathered by apps on their phones, often referred to as geofencing, has been used by businesses for years and has more recently caught on among political groups. That data allows firms to reach people’s phones with ads or other messaging—in real-time or later—without identifying individuals, proponents say.

Political groups say [the protests following the killing](#) of George Floyd while in police custody, along with [earlier lockdown protests](#), are opening up fresh opportunities to reach people who may not be registered to vote or weren’t previously politically active.

“When these protests emerged, it was eye-opening for folks to understand, wow, people are gathering again,” said Quentin James, founder and president of the Collective, which works to elect African-Americans. Mr. James’s group is using the data gathered to target voter-registration messages to people who have been at protest locations. “We want to make sure we’re using all available tools in our toolbox to make sure we’re reaching the right people. Reaching those individuals is especially critical, groups say, since in-person voter registration drives were halted by the coronavirus. Plus, with Americans staying home for the past few months to prevent the virus’s spread, organizations have little other recent data about people’s movements.

Geofencing has become [increasingly common in politics](#), and was expected to play a big role in the 2020 election even before a pandemic and social unrest upended the campaign season.

Some argue that collecting protesters’ location data is akin to surveillance.

X-Mode Social Inc., which collects location data from software built into about 300 apps, has rejected requests for data on phones in protest locations, according to Joshua Anton, its chief executive. Mr. Anton [wrote on LinkedIn](#) last week that X-Mode believes in “withholding [data] from use cases we believe could bring harm,” also citing its decision not to monitor religious institutions or elections. He asked peer firms “to protect the data of those fighting against racial inequality.”

Keith Chen, a behavioral economics professor at University of California, Los Angeles, who has used cellphone data in his research, said such data can be useful. But given the lack of rules around informed consent—protesters may not even know their data is being used—he said there is little to protect others from using data to identify individual protesters.

“To the degree that this becomes very common, I do worry that it starts to put a chill on people’s willingness to peaceably assemble,” said Mr. Chen of the protest data gathering.

Privacy experts suggest those who don’t want to be tracked can turn off location services on their phones or adjust app location privileges in cellphone settings.

IQM Corp., a political ad-tech firm, has received a number of requests from PACs and advocacy groups to geofence recent protests, said Kris Qiu, the company’s co-founder and chief operating officer. Mr. Qiu said both liberal and conservative groups have contacted him.

When asked whether the presidential campaigns have sought to use recent protester data to target messages, presumptive Democratic candidate Joe Biden’s campaign declined to comment. The Trump campaign didn’t respond to calls for comment.

Democratic voter-registration outfit Field Team 6 is using [Facebook](#) Inc. advertising tools to direct ads to users within a specific geographic area of recent protests, said founder Jason Berlin. The group switched to digital earlier this year after coronavirus halted its voter-registration efforts at grocery stores, college campuses and other physical locations. Mr. Berlin's group targeted voter-registration ads to Facebook users whose cellphones were present in the areas of demonstrations in Detroit, Houston, Raleigh and Tallahassee, cities located in battleground states the group is focused on for the November presidential and Senate races.

"It's deeply spooky yet extremely helpful," Mr. Berlin said. "We're actively looking at where the protests are popping up and then readjusting our targets."

Shomik Dutta, a former Obama aide and co-founder of Higher Ground Labs, a progressive political tech incubator, said he would encourage Democrats to use geofencing to reach more voters, but said it is important that companies operate legally and obey privacy laws.

He noted that Republicans are using geofencing to their advantage, such as the [Trump campaign's data-gathering efforts](#) to better reach voters at rallies and other events.

The Collective worked with VoteMAP, a technology firm specializing in audience creation and mobile outreach for progressives, to collect location data up to a mile around protests in Columbus, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Washington, D.C., between May 29 and May 31, said Jeremy Fair, co-founder of VoteMAP, which is owned by technology firm Datum Tech Inc.

In efforts to better understand where the mobile-phone users are based, VoteMAP examined device location 48 hours before the protest and 48 hours after, Mr. Fair said. VoteMAP worked with at least one other client, progressive group the Committee to Protect Medicare and Affordable Care, to gather location data from cellphone users at lockdown protests several weeks ago in attempts to determine the potential spread of coronavirus from users gathering at the demonstrations.

Mr. Fair said VoteMAP accesses and aggregates data from thousands of apps that may include gaming, entertainment and weather. VoteMAP says the app publishers are responsible for terms and compliance with necessary laws and privacy practices.

In the past two weeks, VoteMAP has served ads to more than 14,000 mobile devices believed to be in protest areas. "Let's keep the same energy in November...at the ballot box...Vote Black voices and representation in power," flashes the Collective's ad on three different slides, with the last including a link to register to vote, according to images of the ad reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

The Collective's Mr. James said its "Vote to Live" campaign will run through September and aims to register 250,000 black Americans. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg donated [\\$2 million in March](#) to the Collective's efforts to register more black voters.

"We never had the funding and the resources to really engage in these types of techniques before," The Collective's Mr. James said. -- *Wall Street Journal*

Nikil Saval was taking a moment to breathe. Six days had passed since [the Pennsylvania primary election](#) and [results showed Saval with a commanding lead](#) over three-term State Sen. Larry Farnese in the Philadelphia-based First

Senate District. But there were still [thousands and thousands of mail ballots to be tallied](#).

Saval sat in Washington Square, watching his 20-month-old son, Ishaan, bounce a green rubber ball and coo at passing dogs. A woman approached, recognizing him despite the mask he wore to fend off [the coronavirus](#). “Are you ... ,” she started to ask, seeming unsure about how to complete the question. Saval helped her out. Yes, he was the candidate leading in the race. She offered congratulations. “This has been the craziest thing,” Saval said after she moved on. “I’m pretty uncomfortable with the whole candidate-centric part of the American political process.”

This passing moment in Philadelphia politics shines a light on how unusual the 37-year-old’s victory is: a candidate derided as an outsider in a parochial city, capturing a seat held for decades by a reliable Democratic machine player. It also lays bare the bookish nature of Saval, a writer-turned-politician who uses phrases like *candidate-centric* to restlessly describe his new career.

Saval was born in Los Angeles to parents who immigrated from India and ran a local pizza parlor franchise in Santa Monica. He spent some time working the register there but now regrets never learning how to make a pizza. He worked in publishing and magazines and moved to Philadelphia when his now-wife started graduate school here in 2011. They live in Queen Village. Saval, a self-described democratic socialist, worked in the city on Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign. He and other local Sanders supporters then started [Reclaim Philadelphia](#), a political organization that has played a key role in helping elect progressives, including District Attorney Larry Krasner in 2017 and City Councilmember Kendra Brooks in 2019. Reclaim also helped Saval win Democratic control of [South Philadelphia’s 2nd Ward](#).

Farnese, 52, and his political mentor, former State Sen. Vince Fumo, repeatedly cast Saval as an outsider, sometimes in ways Saval saw as “codedly racist” and aimed at the color of his skin. Farnese, in a letter to all the Democratic committee people in the district, declared himself “a proud native son of our community,” while also touting his grandfather’s immigration from Sicily.

Fumo, who represented the 1st District for three decades before [going to federal prison](#) on corruption charges in 2009, was incensed last month when Saval cited on Facebook a 2016 federal indictment that [accused Farnese of bribery](#) in a ward-leader election. Farnese denied wrongdoing, fought the charges, [and was acquitted in 2017](#).

Fumo responded to the post, calling Saval, “a real a—hole” and noting the acquittal. “Why don’t you go back to your Socialist Party and to NY, where you came from?” Fumo posted. “The outsider rhetoric is coded,” Saval said this week. “It’s not just that I’m not from here. It’s that I’m not from here in a deeper sense. I’m just glad it didn’t work.” Fumo denied any racist intent, suggesting the claim is too common in politics these days. “I guess that’s the word you use now,” he said. “He’s still an outsider.”

That conflict showed [the new Philadelphia vs. old Philadelphia nature of the race](#). Fumo once helped design the district’s borders so he could play up progressive policies to Center City liberals and a more traditional middle-of-the-road approach in old-school South Philadelphia. “The area of South Philly that you could always count on, the little old ladies, has changed with the quote-unquote progressives moving in,” Fumo said. “They moved in because the rent was cheap.”

Farnese’s campaign said he was not ready to comment on the election results. [The district stretches north and east](#), from Philadelphia International Airport through South Philadelphia, and Center City to Fairmount and Port Richmond. There is no Republican on the Nov. 3 general election ballot in the 1st District, where 72% of the voters are registered Democrats.

Saval pitched himself as a far more progressive voice for the district, with campaign literature promising an economy, health care, education, and housing “for all.” He capitalized on his newness, saying he is not a “career politician” and is willing to take on political machines. Farnese tried to counter with his record, saying he took progressive positions before they were popular across the district. He outspent Saval on television ads, trying to hammer home that point.

State Rep. Elizabeth Fiedler, a former WHY? reporter, is part of the recent progressive wave Fumo laments. Another self-described democratic socialist, she [ran for the state House two years ago](#) in South Philadelphia, defeating an opponent who had worked for Farnese and Fumo. Fiedler, who faced no opposition in the Democratic primary as she seeks a second term, met Saval about six years ago when they were both journalists. She didn’t expect to enter politics back then, and didn’t expect it of Saval either.

Her race two years ago demonstrated how fresh ideas could capture attention in old neighborhoods. Among her supporters were people who didn’t expect her to win. “It shouldn’t be a question of: Does this person fit a model of who we’ve been told an elected official should look like?” she said. “For a very long time there have been forces across the spectrum pushing the idea that this is impossible.” That perception, she added, can be surmounted with hard work.

“He is a person who is hardworking, true to his word, and operates from a place of compassion” Fiedler said of Saval. Saval did benefit from some old-school Philadelphia political maneuvering, especially as the primary approached. Local 98 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, one of the best-funded political action committees in the state, gave him \$50,000 in the 11 days before the primary. That amounted to about 14% of Saval’s overall fund-raising.

Local 98 is headed by John “Johnny Doc” Dougherty, a longtime Fumo foe who was defeated in the 2008 Democratic primary when Farnese [first won the seat](#). Dougherty, who has pleaded not guilty as he now [faces his own federal indictment](#), had clashed with Farnese recently about the closure of a refinery in South Philadelphia.

Frank Keel, a Local 98 spokesperson, said the union bet big on Saval late in the game after doing some “homework” on the race. “He’s a smart, young, progressive, pro-labor candidate who will fight for our issues in Harrisburg, unlike the other guy,” Keel said. Local 98 members circulated at South Philadelphia polling places on election day, sporting their well-known “big-head” pictures of Saval, a tactic where a large picture of a candidate’s face is mounted on poster board and attached to a long stick. “It’s as surprising as any number of things that happened in this campaign” Saval said of the big-head treatment. “I’m happy to represent the labor movement in our work. That’s where I come at it.”

Saval credits his previous work in local politics for developing a base of 500 volunteers who made thousands of phone calls to voters during a campaign in which traditional political tactics — knocking on doors, sitting down for coffee meetings and rallies — were not acceptable for a pandemic era. “We connected with hundreds of people across the district,” he said. “We had a message and a vision that people wanted and thought was the right direction to go in as a district.” -- [Philadelphia Daily News](#); also in [Philly.com](#), [Amanda Cappelletti’s amazing win over Daylin Leach shows Pa. Democratic women are now a force](#)



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