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Chapter 8

Targeting Campaign Messages

Good for Campaigns but Bad for America?

Michael M. Franz

In contemporary American politics, data on voters has become a valuable asset. Candidates ask sophisticated questions about their constituencies: where are the voters needed to build a winning coalition? How many voters are "persuadable" in the sense that they are dissatisfied with their own party and willing to vote for candidates of the competing party? Are core supporters in need of a "nudge" to help stay with the team, and where are these voters in the district or state? In an age of expanding technological options, candidates are turning to an army of data experts to mine the available lists of voters to find every possible vote. It is this development in American elections that is the focus of this chapter.

Think of it this way: the groups you contribute money to, or the magazines you subscribe to, might help candidates determine what political positions you care about. Whether you like dark beer or light beer, for example, what clothing store you frequent, and what car you drive might be related to your support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whether you watch sports or mysteries might be relevant as well, and whether you like CBS over NBC for your favorite comedy shows could act as a "tell" of what position you take on health-care reform. Indeed, our consumer habits and entertainment preferences match well with many other preferences in our daily life, including our political ones. Because of this, candidates, parties, and interest groups can determine quite a bit about voters by looking to their behavior as consumers and citizens. Because candidates cannot ask every voter for support, they sort constituents into categories that allow for an efficient targeting of their resources.

Is this good or bad for American democracy? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this new reliance on data? This chapter begins with a discussion of how campaigns target voters in various ways, from broadly targeting general groups to geo-targeting areas based on how they voted in the past. The chapter then turns from a discussion of these long-standing approaches to finding potential votes to a discussion of more recent techniques that involve more finely grained targeting of specific individuals based on extensive data analysis. The chapter then reviews how campaigns use data on viewer characteristics of certain television programs, or show genres to target more precisely a desired audience with their 30-second ads. All of these advances in the use of technol-

ogy by campaigns are attempts to allocate resources more efficiently, and there is much to like about these developments from the standpoint of campaigns. The chapter concludes, however, by raising some concerns about these developments, asking the reader to speculate further on what harm can come from such extensive data mining.

Microtargeting

Campaigns are strategic. When a candidate and her staff meet to discuss tactics for winning an election, a lot of factors are on the table. Whom should we target? What should we say? How should we say it? In general, campaigns use three major approaches to engage the electorate: mobilizing one's base or a set of likely supporters to turn out on Election Day, priming a set of issues so as to focus the campaign on policies that advantage the candidate, and persuading swing voters that you are the better candidate.¹ Mobilization and persuasion usually mean talking to specific audiences, while priming concerns what you say in those conversations.

Whatever the goal, a campaign can take a number of different approaches. First, whether for purposes of mobilization or persuasion, candidates can target broadly. For example, if presidential candidates want to target young people, they could appear on MTV or campaign with a popularity celebrity. If candidates want to target African American voters, they could appear on BET, speak at the NAACP annual convention, or give a Sunday lecture in a predominately black church. These types of appearances will always be covered by the national media, easily reaching a targeted demographic group. State-level candidates can take generally the same approach, but on a smaller scale. To reach younger voters, the candidate might schedule stops at local colleges or universities. Or to reach older voters, she might speak at retirement communities or advertise in newspapers. None of this requires much more than a strategy session and some common sense.

A second, and more finely grained approach, is to use precinct data to identify neighborhoods that are particularly balanced in their vote for Republican or Democratic candidates (swing precincts, with persuasion as the goal) or to find precincts that more consistently benefit one's own party (if mobilization is the goal), thereby ignoring neighborhoods that disproportionately favor the other party. Such geographic targeting is a traditional approach for reaching specific voters, and it is generally costless—all one needs is the ability to download past election tallies from the state elections office and sort precincts by election outcomes. An experienced intern can provide a list of target precincts with a few hours of work in an Excel spreadsheet.

This type of targeting, however, potentially leaves a lot of voters living in safe precincts ignored by the campaigns, even though these voters might be open to persuasion. A disaffected Republican in a deep blue precinct, for example, may never be contacted by a Republican candidate. In simple terms, while the

geo-targeting is easy and quite precise, it leaves lots of voters on the table. Of course, some recent research has highlighted the tendency of Americans to "sort" themselves into locales with political preferences that match their own.² Think of the liberal who refuses a new job in the Deep South because of a fear of living in a red state. This should mean that geo-targeting may reach a more homogenous set of voters than in years' past. Subsequent research has demonstrated, though, that within counties there is much variation in the political preferences of voters, and employment and economic opportunities often prevent or dissuade voters from sorting more aggressively into red or blue neighborhoods. In short, there is ample partisan diversity within neighborhoods across the country.³

Microtargeting is one approach that looks for voters across the district or state, regardless (or in spite of) their residence. Consider the most simplistic method. Using the voter registration files in a state, which has one entry for every registered voter, a campaign can contact registered Independents (for persuasion) or like-partisans (for mobilization). One can even use turnout history as a proxy for engagement, where a Democrat who only occasionally votes might be a persuasion target for a Republican campaign, and vice versa. A Democrat who always votes in his party's primary, by contrast, is unlikely to be persuaded by a Republican's message. With this approach, every voter in the state or district is identified and categorized. This helps not only with mobilization and persuasion but priming, as a campaign can approximate what types of campaign appeals are most likely to "work" on different audiences.

One complication is that not every state records a voter's party identification. In fact, only twenty-eight states and Washington, D.C., do so. Another eleven states track which primary a voter participated in, and this can help a campaign approximate the partisan preference of the voter (i.e., a consistent voter in Democratic primaries vs. a voter who over time moves back and forth across party primaries). In states with no party registration or tracked primary participation, only turnout history ends up helping candidates figure out which voters to approach, but it gives no help in identifying the voter's party leaning.

All told, this form of micro (read individual-level) targeting is quite precise, but it also still leaves some voters untouched. A regular-voting Republican might be disaffected by the issue positions of the Republican candidate in a given election and thus might make a good persuasion target for the Democratic candidate. But the voter registration file does very little to identify such voters. Enter a much more bulked-up approach that relies on leveraging an extensive amount of data. The process looks something like this:

Step 1: Conduct a large survey in the state that is being targeted. For presidential campaigns, this might be a set of battleground states, and for Senate campaigns it could be the entire state or part of the state. Ask a series of questions about political attitudes and consumer habits. What party does the respondent identify with, and how often does she vote in presidential and mid-term elections? What types of policies does the respondent support? What types

of magazines or hobbies does the respondent have? The goal here is to link the non-political attitudes and behaviors to the political positions of the respondent, establishing a connection that can be generalized. One can then predict the probability that a respondent will head to the polls on Election Day, vote for the Democratic or Republican candidate, or support particular issue positions. Most importantly, the predictors could be a set of behaviors unconnected to politics—for example, people who shop at Target in preference to Wal-Mart tend to support greater investments in education; regular runners are more likely to support health-care reform and a single-payer system.

Step 2: Obtain the list of registered voters in the state. As noted above, these data are already available to campaigns who want a less precise form of targeting based only on party identification or turnout history. Ten to fifteen years ago, however, the parties tried to be the keepers of these large datasets, using them to help presidential candidates target across the fifty states. The Democrats under the direction of their party chairman, Howard Dean, created a voter file called Vote Builder that housed the voter registration records of over 150 million Americans. Dean's predecessor, Terry McAuffly, had invested resources in an earlier iteration known as Demzilla. The Republicans had their own voter list called the Voter Vault.

For both parties, however, maintaining the list proved unwieldy and too costly. Since 2002, the parties have been unable to raise large contributions called "soft money," so they were forced to maintain the voter databases with their regulated contributions. Moreover, campaign finance laws prevent the party committees from coordinating extensively with allied interest groups (like unions for Democrats or business associations for Republicans). As a consequence, Democrats after the 2004 elections helped to create a for-profit company called Catalist, and Republicans in 2011 formed a similar group, the DataTrust. (The Democrats still house their own file called the Voter Activation Network, and Republicans have worked to create DataTrust in a way that gives some power to Republican Party leaders in how the data are accessed.) Both companies act as holders of the data, which they update regularly, and candidates and other groups can purchase the data for a fee, without the added hassle of transforming the data into a workable and readable format.

Step 3: With the polling data and the list of registered voters in hand, the next step is to purchase the consumer histories of voters in files maintained by credit card companies. These are purchased from commercial marketing firms like Experian Americas and InfoUSA. If you have ever obtained your own credit report, you know that these vendors hold an extensive amount of data on what credit cards we have and how much debt we owe. Catalist and the DataTrust, along with others, purchase the information and merge it with the voter lists. This produces a large file with voters' party registration status and voter turnout history, along with information obtained from the consumer and marketing data.⁴

Step 4: Using the merged database and the links established in Step 1, create profiles of voters that might be the focus of a persuasion or mobilization target.

This is essentially a data-driven exercise in which you look for strong relationships that allow you to segment the electorate into useful categories. For example, if Social Security is a key issue for the campaign, the analysis might identify the types of voters who are most open to persuasion on a particular Social Security reform. The survey analysis is critical in this regard. For example, if the analysis of the survey data showed that subscribing to hunting and fishing magazines raised the probability of supporting cap-and-trade policies, one could identify the voters in the registration file with such magazine subscriptions. Or Democratic candidates might find Republicans most amenable to a specific policy appeal about education or the War on Terror. The "segments" produced will vary across elections and years, but in general the goal is the same: locate any voter who might be a persuadable. Additionally, locate disaffected partisans who need reassurance from their own candidate to stick with their party.

There are some important caveats, however. First, the consumer database is not a deterministic predictor of political behavior. Some data on voters' consumer patterns or organizational memberships might be outdated, for example. Moreover, all of this work is meant to label a voter as "probably" supporting a candidate or issue positions. A voter might be labeled as having a 70 percent chance of voting for the Republican or a 76 percent chance of opposing Obama's health care law. Thus, the goal with analysis is to improve the odds of finding and reaching voters with effective appeals, but you are not guaranteed of having success.

A second caveat is related, in that a lot of this work is time-consuming, and it certainly is not cost free. The voter registration list, which can usually be obtained from the party or the state elections office for a small fee or for free, has explicitly political information that might be sufficient, as noted above. In states that record party registration or primary election turnout, knowing whether a voter is a Democrat or Republican, and the number of elections he has voted in, might tell you all you want to know. In other words, a Republican might target a registered Democrat who did not vote in an election year where the nominee was considered too liberal. This might suggest a swing voter turned off by the behavior of his own party. Indeed, this particular—and more simple—approach is probably the more common one, as the increased gain in information useful for persuasion and mobilization from consumer-based microtargeting is still not known.

At the end of the day, the goal of microtargeting is to improve on targeting strategies of the past, with the understanding that persuadable Democrats can be located even in neighborhoods largely populated by strong Republicans. The analysis helps instruct whom to call on the phone, what to put in your mailed literature, and what types of appeals will work when knocking on doors. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd Shields looked for evidence of different policy appeals in the 2004 presidential election, and found considerable diversity. They argue that candidates can use certain issues—what they call "wedge" issues—to appeal to a certain segment of the opposing party. Perhaps a Republican is in favor of

federally-funded stem cell research, in opposition to her party's stance; and she may hold this position in spite of supporting the party on most other issues. If a Democratic candidate can isolate Republicans who fit this profile—using the steps outlined above—he can send targeted mailings about his support for stem cell research, with the hopes of convincing the recipients to vote Democratic. Indeed, Hillygus and Shields found that “mail sent to persuadable voters [in 2004] was more likely to contain wedge issues than that received by the partisan base. . . . Persuadable voters—Independents and weak partisans—received the highest percentage of divisive-issue content.”⁵

Such targeting, more broadly, can be seen as both good and bad. On the plus side, this is a process in which many voters are actively sought after and not assumed obvious supporters or opponents. This has the effect of encouraging campaigns to be more engaged with the voting electorate. Indeed, in recent years, political consultants have adopted a whole host of new strategies that put the emphasis back on direct contacts with voters—strategies inspired, in part, by research in political science—under the presumption that a direct connection is far more impactful than a massive and impersonal media blitz on television.⁶

Targeting Television Messages

The above discussion has focused on what campaigns are doing in their peer-to-peer contacts in the home, with mailed literature, and through phone calls. But targeting also occurs with television advertising, and such targeting can be enhanced with the kind of data noted above. There are, however, real limits to the level of precision that can come with targeting television buys. Because television targeting is a bit blunter—we know the “types” of people that watch certain program genres as opposed to individual viewing habits—we can term this type of targeting “macrotargeting.”⁷

Indeed, macrotargeting is almost a requirement in contemporary politics, given the changes in Americans' viewing habits. Let's review the evidence step-by-step. First off, Americans are watching more television than ever before. Nielsen estimated that in 2009, the typical household watched television each day for over 8 hours and 20 minutes, and the average person watched just under 5 hours. These were the highest levels of television viewing since Nielsen began collecting data. Figure 8.1 shows these numbers by year for the available data back to 1950. In that year the typical household watched just over 4 hours and 30 minutes a day. To be sure, the advent of DVR as reflected in Nielsen's estimates since 2005 amplifies these numbers, but even when excluding the 2005–2009 period, the number of household viewing hours was still on the rise in recent decades.

Increased exposure to television, however, is important particularly in light of the declining viewing of political news on television. The logic here is simple. As cable diffused into almost every American home, viewing options diversified. This created the opportunity for people to choose explicitly non-political entertainment, and many have. One piece of evidence in this regard

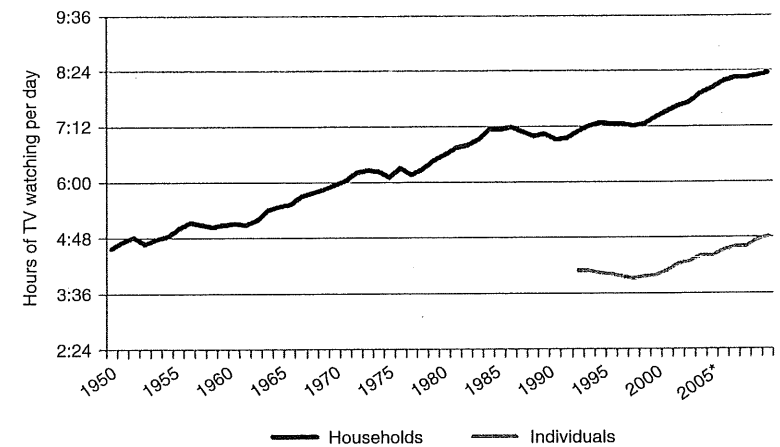


Figure 8.1 Television viewing hours are on the rise

Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Note: 2005–2009 includes live viewing plus 7-day playback on a DVR device.

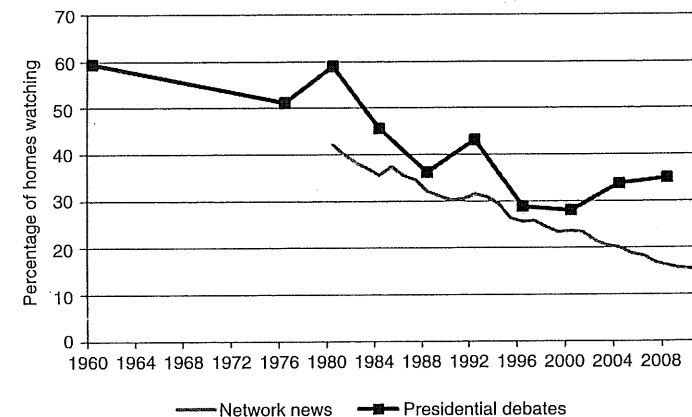


Figure 8.2 Viewing of news and debates declines

Source: Nielsen Media Research.

is the decline in viewership of national network news and presidential debates. The percentage of homes tuned into these sources of political information is shown in Figure 8.2.

In 1980, 40 percent of America homes watched the nightly national news on ABC, NBC, or CBS. There has been an almost unabated decline in these numbers; in 2010 only 15 percent of American homes watched the national news. This represents about 23 million people. (The 40 percent share in 1980 translates into over 52 million viewers.) Of course, some viewers in recent years have switched to cable news, but this explains only part of the lost audience for the network news, as the decline in viewing pre-dated the launch of Fox News and MSNBC in the mid-1990s. Moreover, the average number of Americans watching Fox, MSNBC and CNN on any night during primetime in 2011 was about 3.4 million total, not a particularly high number.⁸

The decline is reflected also in the number of homes that tune into presidential debates on the three major networks. An average of 60 percent of American homes watched the four Kennedy–Nixon debates in 1960. This represented about 28 million homes. In the highly contentious Gore–Bush contest in 2000, which featured three debates, about the same number of households tuned in, but this now represented—forty years later—only 28 percent of American households. Even viewership of the Obama–McCain debates in 2008 was lower than viewership of every other debate between 1960 and 1992.

These declines in the consumption of explicitly political information are reflected in more comprehensive analyses of Americans' exposure to news. In 2010, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press published a report based on their extensive polling of Americans.⁹ Their report showed a decline in consumption of local news broadcasts, radio, and print newspapers. For example, 56 percent of Americans reported reading a newspaper in 1991, but the percentage dropped to 31 percent in 2010. Fifty-four percent reported listening to the radio for news in 1991, but only 34 percent did so in 2010. Pew did report, however, a sharp increase in the number of Americans who get their news online, which has increased from 24 percent in 2002 to 34 percent in 2010. Forty-four percent reported getting news online or through a mobile device in 2010, the first year mobile-application use was asked about.

These trends have direct consequences for campaigns that have traditionally aired lots of ads on broadcast television stations. More viewing hours across a wider range of television programming has forced candidates to buy more ads in the hopes of reaching potential voters. Whereas ten years ago 100 ads on local news could reach a certain percentage of the electorate in the final week of the campaign, it might take 150 or 200 ads (or more) to reach that same threshold now. Viewers are simply harder to reach as they spread out across more television channels. Moreover, while viewing hours are higher than in years past, many people watching recorded television programs on a DVR are likely to skip past commercials, making the ad a wasted appeal.

This can be seen clearly with some comparable advertising data across the last ten years. Figure 8.3 plots pairs of states and media markets for Senate races between 2000 and 2010. Because Senate terms are six years, we can best compare advertising trends by looking at the average number of ads in a media

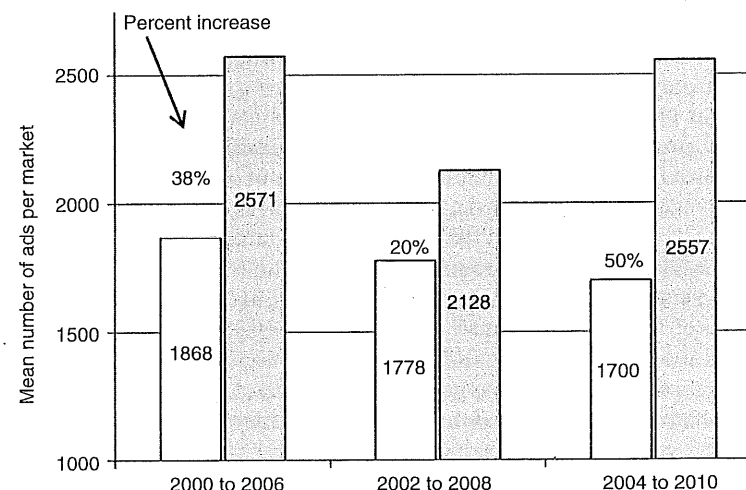


Figure 8.3 Ads by candidates in Senate races increase

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project and Wesleyan Media Project.

market for Senate candidates in 2000 and 2006; 2002 and 2008; and 2004 and 2010. The figure shows paired markets for ads aired by candidates between September 1 and Election Day.¹⁰ The results show increases in all three pairs of Senate elections. In 2000, for example, candidates aired an average 1,868 ads, but by 2006 the number of ads grew to 2,571—a 38 percent increase. The 2008 Senate campaigns saw a 20 percent increase in ads over 2002, and the 2010 Senate campaigns saw a 50 percent increase in ads over 2004.

All told, the evidence points to candidates airing more ads. This may seem counter-intuitive given the spread of the Internet and the potential to reach voters through social media. Indeed, these technological advances would seem to make buying ads on television less important. But consider again Figure 8.1. Television is a critical part of Americans' daily lives, now more than ever, and because viewership is so high, campaigns are able to reach many voters quickly. Of course, viewers' diffusion across a wide number of channels has forced candidates to invest even more in television ads. This is an incredibly important trend in American politics. As much as journalists and citizens talk about Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms, television is still king.

Indeed, the move from broadcasting to narrowcasting¹¹—that is, the increased viewing options for Americans—brings with it the challenge of a greater ad budget, but also the opportunity to target specific audiences. As noted above,

the data on television viewing is not as precise as the voter targeting data that the parties own. For example, candidates do not know the viewing habits of specific voters like they know their consumer buying patterns. Nonetheless, there are powerful survey data that capture the viewing profile of either specific shows or program genres. Scarborough Research, for example, surveys over 100,000 Americans in election years, asking them which television programs they watch. The company can describe the viewers of over two dozen program types, ranging from soap operas to science fiction. This level of detail can tell a campaign quite a bit about the type of show to target if a particular type of viewer is the intended audience.

For example, Figure 8.4 plots the percentage of male respondents between the ages of 18 and 44 and female respondents over the age of 44 who reported regularly watching twenty-three different television genres in 2008. Indeed, the type of message that might appeal to younger men (say, for example, lower taxes) might be different than the type of message that might appeal to older women (i.e., investments in education). As might be expected, younger men were least likely to report watching daytime soap operas or talk shows, but these were the genres with the highest female viewing. Young men were much more likely to watch music videos, science fiction, and sports programming, all of which had considerably fewer older female viewers. Tailoring different ads to

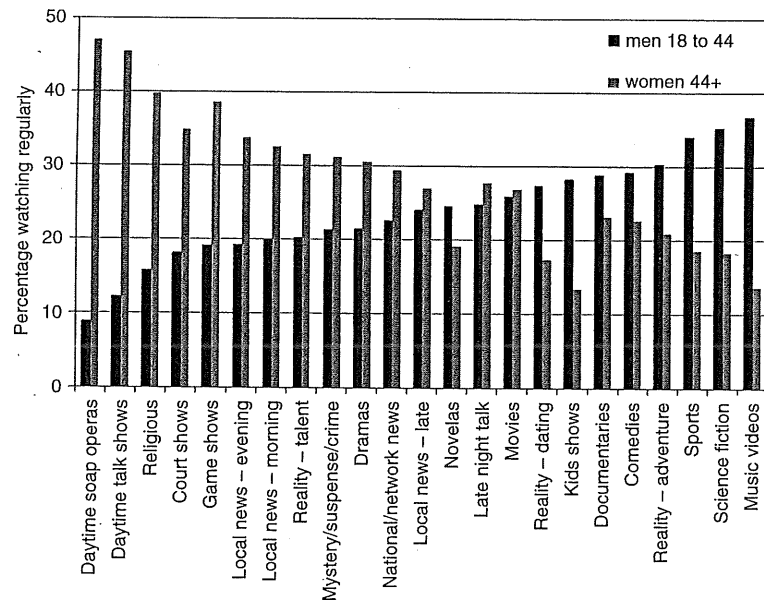


Figure 8.4 Different audiences watch different types of television

Source: Scarborough Research.

different genres of programming is a good way to reach varied audiences. And those tailored messages are consequently less likely to reach an audience not meant to see them.

Although the data shown in Figure 8.4 are intuitive, they nonetheless illustrate the potential usefulness of having data on television viewing patterns. Campaigns can learn, among other things, which programs Democrats tend to watch in disproportionate numbers over Republicans (such as daytime talk shows like *Dr. Oz* and court shows like *Judge Judy*). And across all of the genres asked about in the Scarborough data, Democrats watch more television than Republicans, a gap that diminishes on the weekends. This implies overall that Republicans will have a harder time finding television shows with large percentages of likeminded partisan viewers.

Indeed, this was an insight first noted by Bush advisors in the 2004 election.¹² Bush's team identified the times of day during which Republicans watched in greater numbers, along with the types of shows with a greater Republican audience. The survey data also reveal considerable variation across media markets and states, allowing campaigns to find shows with a particular audience in a particular state, at a cost far less than blanketing a battleground state with ads. To borrow a war metaphor, think of this strategy as one using smart bombs over carpet bombs. Moreover, Hillygus and Shields argue that "candidates [in 2004] focused on consensual policy issues when communicating with a broad-based audience in television ads, but were willing to make wedge appeals in narrowly targeted campaign messages [off the air]."¹³ However, with a richer set of data on who is watching which shows, candidates are free to highlight wedge-issues on television as well.

Of course, these differences in the audiences for particular programs are not overwhelming—a lot of self-reported Democrats and Republicans show up in the audiences of all programs genres—and the genre categories themselves are often too broad (e.g., dramas, comedies, and movies) to be able to target very distinct audiences. Nonetheless, the Scarborough data also ask about a cross-section of specific shows (e.g., *How I Met Your Mother*, *CSI*, *The Office*), meaning candidates can work with the available data to establish a genre or program list that becomes the focus of a particular ad buy. And other surveys are available from different sources that can supplement these data or provide a finer grain of detail. Nielsen collects data on viewer characteristics, for example, and Lovett and Peress used data from the Simmons National Consumer Survey to estimate the partisanship of viewers of over 700 programs.¹⁴

The availability of data is quite empowering to campaigns who want to more efficiently allocate their advertising dollars. But as with microtargeting, these tactics are still somewhat new, and not all campaigns employ these macrotargeting techniques. Indeed, while presidential campaigns have moved to adopt such strategies, as noted with the Bush campaign in 2004 (and as will be described with more evidence below), congressional campaigns writ large have not yet embraced the strategy of precision targeting of political ads.

For one, despite the noted drops in political news consumption on television, it turns out that local news is still preferred by most Americans to other sources of news. In the same Pew Report from 2010 noted above, 58 percent of respondents reported watching news on television, and this percentage is higher than for all other forms of news consumption. While this percentage was down from 68 percent in 1991, campaigns still find it important to buy ads on local news broadcasts.

Moreover, the same Scarborough data reveal the benefits of advertising on local or national news broadcasts. According to the survey results, regular viewers of local and national news have a higher likelihood of turning out to vote in state and presidential elections than do viewers of most other genres. The only other genres with similar turnout numbers are documentaries, religious programs, dramas, mysteries, and sports, and the total viewing audience for many of these genres is considerably lower than for news programs.

Figure 8.5 plots the percentage of all ads aired on news broadcasts between 2000 and 2010. In total, these data categorize over 10 million ad airings in the last six election cycles. For congressional and gubernatorial races in this time period, just under 60 percent of all ads aired appeared on news programs (including local and national), and this percentage has not changed in any appreciable way in the last six elections. There is, indeed, remarkable consistency across years. On the other hand, the percentage of ads aired during news during the presidential campaign of 2000 was much higher (about 64 percent) than in subsequent elections, including the 2008 presidential race, in which just over 50 percent aired during news programming.¹⁵

In general, presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial candidates air an additional 15–18 percent of their total ads on talk shows (like *The Tonight Show* and *Jimmy Kimmel*) and on game shows, and these percentages have not changed much in the last six elections. (This is not shown on Figure 8.5.) As such, the drop in ads on news from presidential candidates is indicative of a broader ad-buying strategy than was evident in earlier elections. For example, presidential candidates in 2000 bought about 77 percent of all ads on news, games shows, and talk shows. This dropped to 69 percent in 2008. As candidates look elsewhere for a different type of audience, we should expect these investments in traditional programming to continue to drop in 2012 and beyond. That said, the movement toward macrotargeting is not yet evident in congressional and gubernatorial races.

It should be noted, however, that the data used here are imprecise. The over 10 million ads represented in Figure 8.5 are only those aired on broadcast stations in available media markets and on national cable stations. The numbers exclude ads aired on local cable (e.g., the Golf Channel on TimeWarner in Bangor, Maine), and there is some evidence that candidates are using these outlets more frequently. Exactly how much is almost impossible to know, however. The conventional wisdom says that of all political advertising on television, about 5–20 percent is currently bought on local cable channels, and these

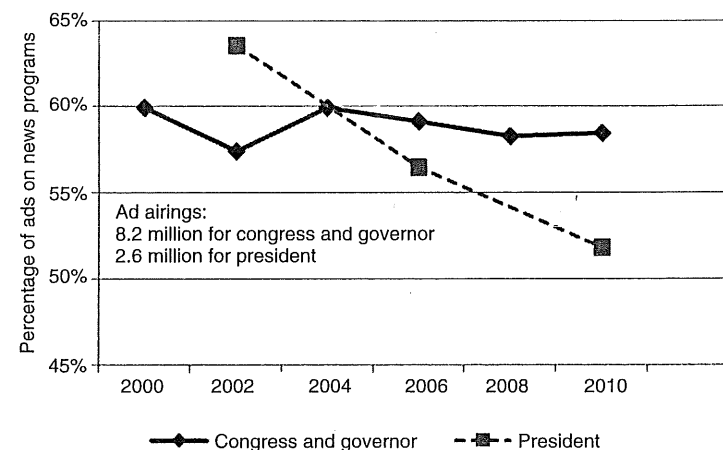


Figure 8.5 Ads on news less prevalent in presidential elections

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project and Wesleyan Media Project.

percentages are likely to rise in coming years. Local cable is macrotargeting by its very definition, as candidates determine which niche-viewing audience to target in each media market. Because there are no available data to compare across campaigns, there is no way of assessing how Democrats or Republicans are targeting voters on local cable.

Still, the trends reported here at the presidential level point to real changes that are probably much more noticeable at the local cable level. Thus, the numbers reported in Figure 8.5 underestimate the amount of macrotargeting in American politics. It is likely that the lack of trend in the congressional setting means the targeting on local cable has not yet reached the level of presidential campaigns, but it is undoubtedly happening to some extent. And it will continue to accelerate. As campaign strategist Amy Gershkoff has noted:¹⁶

[A] broadcast-only strategy no longer works effectively for most campaigns. In 1970, you could buy 1,000 gross rating points per week and reach the average voter 10 times and you could reach 90 percent of voters this way. Today, in some states, if you're up on broadcast TV, your 1,000 points per week might reach less than 40 percent of voters . . . So what's the solution? We have to start thinking about media strategy in a new way. We can't continue to make broadcast TV the centerpiece of campaigns' paid media strategy, have cable TV be the oddball cousin of paid media strategy and treat Web videos as the weird kid at family reunions who sits in the corner and eats paste . . .¹⁷

In future election cycles, many campaigns will take to heart Gershkoff's message, and we will see the spread of modern ad-targeting strategies, up and down the ticket, fundamentally transforming the way campaigns reach voters.

Discussion

The movement in campaigns towards more precise targeting of voters—whether on television, online, or through peer-to-peer contacts—is seen most often as a triumph of data and a move towards greater efficiency in the allocation of resources. The additional use of Facebook and Twitter to reach voters of a very specific profile—what some call “nano-targeting”—is another development in this direction. Anyone who watches shows on Hulu or the networks' websites will be familiar with the kind of targeting that can happen online; more and more, campaigns are buying ads that appear at the beginning of these videos, though what types of candidate ads we see (those favoring Republicans or Democrats) depends on what we do online. And banner ads appear at the top or on the side of web pages a lot more in recent elections, though the candidates we see in such ads depend, in part, on whether the algorithms think we are liberal or conservative. The use of these techniques is very much a part of what candidates in the 2012 presidential election are doing to find and appeal to voters.¹⁸

Campaigns in contemporary elections can achieve a lot of precision with fewer resources and can “waste” fewer contacts on voters who will never, under any circumstances, vote for that candidate. One additional appeal of macro-targeting with television ads is more bang for fewer bucks.¹⁹ Advocates of precise local cable buys point specifically to the cost savings over a set number of advertisements on local broadcast shows, though this is not a given in all media markets.

And yet, with all of these advantages for campaigns, there are some important caveats that should inspire some pause. First, microtargeting, and to a lesser extent macrotargeting, has the potential to reinforce voter polarization. The conventional wisdom is that American voters are as polarized politically as the politicians in Washington, but the truth is more complicated. On the one hand, a lot of Americans take middle-of-the-road positions on contentious issues of the day.²⁰ On the other hand, while self-identified independents make up over 35 percent of the electorate, the vast majority of these voters leans in a liberal or conservative direction and act politically in line with that lean. As such, the percentage of “true” independents is usually less than 10 percent of the electorate.²¹ As voters are explicitly targeted based on their political profile, Republicans and Democrats can move potentially farther apart on issues, especially in the absence of a counter-narrative by the other side.

This is largely the story as told by Markus Prior in his book *Post-Broadcast Democracy*.²² As television channels have spread, and options for entertainment

diversified, the less politically engaged encountered less news programming than in years when there were only three television stations. As these citizens encounter politics less often (with their interest in and knowledge of politics declining even more), candidates can more freely ignore them in their contacts. Hillygus and Shields put it this way: “More than ever before, presidential candidates can now ignore large portions of the public—nonvoters, those committed to the opposition, and those living in uncompetitive states.”²³ Moreover, engaged partisans can now easily self-select to news shows and commentary that match their political preferences, and campaigns can ignore committed opposition partisans completely. The result is a greater likelihood of either being ignored by both sides or being deemed as not worthy of contacting by one side.

John Zaller notes additionally that campaigns, especially presidential election campaigns, are often balanced efforts with Democratic and Republican candidates spending similar amounts. The presumption here is that voters are exposed to ads from both sides and therefore the impact of a candidate's ads might be small.²⁴ As candidates more finely target their campaign appeals, though, the overall balance of appeals may be the same (i.e., 2,000 ads aired in a market from both candidates in a race), but who sees those ads is imbalanced, with Republican voters and conservative-leaning Independents seeing only Republican-sponsored ads and Democrats and liberal-leaning Independents seeing only Democratic-sponsored ads. Because imbalances in messaging can move voters in the direction of the imbalance, microtargeting can have the impact of pulling different voters in opposite directions.

Of course, the evangelists of micro-targeting would argue that it might reduce polarization, as disaffected partisans can be found by campaigns and targeted for persuasion. It should be noted also that if a campaign does not microtarget using consumer data and relies only on party registration and turnout in a state's voter file, it is not possible to know whether a voter is a disaffected partisan or an independent that leans left or right. This can have the effect of increasing the odds that many voters are seen as “in play” by both candidates. On the other hand, the 2008 election generated turnout of only 62 percent of the eligible voters, implying that whole swaths of the electorate simply do not care about elections (or have time to vote), and these are the types of voters who might be left out of the discussion in an electoral environment where microtargeting is on the rise.

Second, and related, microtargeting and macrotargeting can expose voters to different issue appeals, and this can lead voters to have divergent senses of what the campaign is about. One of the virtues of so much advertising on local news is that voters of all stripes get a similar set of appeals from the candidates in a race. If a Democrat airs an ad about health care on local news, Republicans and Independents see the ad also. As such, voters across the political spectrum can correctly perceive campaigns' issue agendas. Some research even demonstrates that Republicans and Democrats often talk about the same set of issues,

especially in competitive elections.²⁵ Additional scholarship notes that candidates often act legislatively in line with what they advertised about in a campaign. That is, candidates who talked a lot of Social Security in their ads make that issue more of a priority when in office. This is seen as good from a democratic perspective—campaigning and policy-making are linked.²⁶

With targeted appeals, however, a candidate can focus on selling different issues to different audiences. Republican candidates can prime social and moral issues when contacting households that have been identified as devoutly religious, or when advertising on shows with an audience that attends church. The same candidate can then advertise on economic issues—and with a less polarizing message—when reaching out to moderates and swing voters. This has lots of virtues in terms of the efficient allocation of messages, but it also comes with concerns. Can candidates be different incarnations to different blocs of voters? What if we factor in the role played by interest groups, particularly Super PACs? Can allied groups or party advertising emphasize one message to one audience, while the candidate focuses her efforts on other voters and with a different set of appeals? Does this have the potential to skew what voters think a candidate or campaign was about? In light of this, the outcome of an election can mean different things to different voters. How do candidates understand their victory, then? Might this complicate the ability of candidates to act on the perceived mandate of electoral success?

Finally, there are concerns about privacy. Campaigns are using the data from credit card companies to sort voters into different profiles, and nothing about this is illegal. But how would voters feel knowing that candidates have access to their purchasing history? We expect this at grocery stores and department stores—even if we do not like it—but are voters aware of the level of personal detail held by the candidates? What do the volunteers who knock on doors know about the people they are contacting—their magazine subscriptions, coffee preferences, favorite type of underwear? It is unlikely that this level of detail is loaded onto any iPad volunteers carry around while knocking on doors, of course, but if the data crunchers in a campaign identify a link between a particular consumer pattern and political behavior in a state, you can be sure that this will enter into the contacting decisions of candidates. In a world where Americans are concerned more than ever about privacy and the protection of personal information—what with the rise in identity theft—the fact that politicians and campaign consultants can purchase such personal information about voters might give some people cause for concern.

Consider the strategy of President Obama in his re-election campaign. His campaign team in 2012 pushed supporters accessing the candidate's website for volunteer opportunities or donations to log on using their Facebook username and password. This allowed the campaign, subject to a clickable approval by the Obama supporter, to access one's personal Facebook profile, including birth date, likes/dislikes, and list of friends. Such information was used to help target supporters with specific appeals.

Conclusion

All told, campaigns are moving to take stronger advantage of any and all available data in the pursuit of electoral victory. Many now use lists of voter files appended with personal information to establish a link between what voters buy, or where they contribute money and how they act politically. Candidates then use that information to target voters in commensurate ways. That is, this sophisticated data mining instructs whom campaigns contact and what they say. This is a long way from the campaigns of 20 to 30 years ago, where door knocks or voter contacts were limited to the counties or precincts in which the party had done well in the past.

This sophisticated use of data has moved, in part, to the world of political advertising. We have only suggestive data on this, but it is instructive. As television transforms in the future, with further integration with the Internet, and with greater diffusion of satellite television, candidates will find many opportunities to target more precisely over the airwaves. Indeed, one goal is to obtain cable subscriptions and merge them with voter files, allowing candidates and allied groups to buy local cable spots that are targeted to specific households. The ability to target local cable at the neighborhood level is now possible, but an even finer grain of detail would enhance the efficiency of such ad buys.

And while precision targeting is efficient and perhaps more effective, it does come with certain question marks and concerns. Most of these concerns are normative, or need testing with data, but they are things to look for in future cycles. Does targeting for purposes of mobilizing one's base mean that core Democrats and Republicans lose the opportunity to see ads or hear from candidates of the other side? In the old days, the campaigns broadly targeted and voters saw the efforts of both sides. Even if a voter was never going to vote for a Democrat or Republican, he or she was quite familiar with the content of that candidate's ads and campaign appeals.

Moreover, in a world of microtargeting, can campaigns look differently to different sets of voters? Might the targeting of core supporters merely reinforce the self-selection that happens now in the use of partisan media such as MSNBC or Fox News? And what becomes of the chronic non-voters? They are currently exposed to some campaign messages incidentally when they tune into local news for weather or sports. If campaigns, for reasons of efficient allocation of resources, learn how to ignore non-voters, might this simply reinforce those citizens' sense of disengagement with politics? What will draw them in?

A lot of these concerns might not strike people as worrisome—who cares about non-voters?—but they are worth thinking about and discussing. What are the long-term implications of all of this leveraging of data? As with all changes in technology, the benefits are clear and the advocates are loud. Campaigns are looking to become sleeker and more sophisticated. The ultimate goal is 50 percent of the vote plus 1 voter. There is nothing high and mighty

about what a political campaign hopes to accomplish, at least not to the political consultants who value microtargeting. The “public good” component of democracy is more clearly felt at the level of policy-making. Candidates must first win before they can try to change policies to help people. All of this is true. And yet there is nothing wrong with a bit of skepticism here. A lot of good can come from serious conversation about the potential drawbacks of this new era of campaign ad targeting.

Notes

- 1 John Sides and Jake Haselswerdt, “Campaigns and Elections,” in *New Directions in Public Opinion*, ed. Adam Berinsky (New York: Routledge, 2012), 241–257.
- 2 Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).
- 3 Wendy Tam-Cho, James Gimpel and Iris Hui, “Voter Migration and the Geographic Sorting of the American Electorate,” Working Paper.
- 4 One challenge for the data crunchers in this step is correctly merging the two files. Voters often have different spellings of names (i.e., Matt or Matthew) and as voters move, even within state, it might be hard to correctly link the files. Imagine a Bill Smith in Boston. There are lots of people with this name, and it takes considerable work to pair the voter registration information with the correct consumer. One approach is match on name and variations of name, along with birthdate.
- 5 D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd Shields, *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 175.
- 6 Alan Gerber and Donald Green, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review* 94 (2000): 653–663.
- 7 Travis Ridout, Michael Franz, Kenneth Goldstein and Will Feltus, “Microtargeting Through Political Advertising,” *Political Communication* 29 (2012): 1–23.
- 8 This figure comes from the same source as the data in Figure 2.
- 9 The numbers reported for this report are from Pew Research Center, “Americans Spending More Time Following the News,” September 12, 2010, accessed March 15, 2012, www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/652.pdf.
- 10 The graph excludes party and interest group advertising. This may be something to control for if we want a direct comparison across years, and if we think that greater group or party spending would decrease candidate advertising. Interest groups and parties were more aggressive in 2008 and 2010, and so the noted increase in candidate ads that year actually understates the amount of increase across markets.
- 11 These are terms used to explain the move from three major channels on broadcast networks to the literally hundreds or thousands on cable. See Martin Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 90–91.
- 12 Douglas Sosnik, Matthew Dowd and Ron Fournier, *Applebee’s America: How Successful Political, Business, and Religious Leaders Connect with the New American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 45–51.
- 13 Hillygus and Shields, *Persuadable Voter*, 169.
- 14 Mitchell J. Lovett and Michael Peress, “Targeting Political Advertising on Television,” unpublished manuscript (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 2010).
- 15 All of the plotted values in this figure include primary and general election ads.
- 16 For the quote below, GRPs are a measure of the size of the audience for a television program. One rating point, on average, is equal to 1 percent of the television household audience in a particular media market. For example, if an ad were aired 40 times, each with an average 10-point rating, that ad would achieve a total 400 GRPs.
- 17 Amy Gershkoff, “Memo to Democratic Campaign Managers: Times are a’Changin’ and So Should Your Paid Media Strategy,” *Roll Call*, June 8, 2010, accessed March 29, 2012, <http://thehill.com/opinion/op-ed/102023-memo-to-democratic-campaign-managers-times-are-achangin-and-so-should-your-paid-media-strategy>.
- 18 Jeremy Peters, “As TV Viewing Habits Change, Political Ads Follow Would-Be Voters Online,” *New York Times*, April 2, 2012, A10.
- 19 Thomas Heath, “Value Added: A Political Junkie’s Foray Into the Ad Wars,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2009, accessed March 9, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/23/AR2009082302445.html.
- 20 Morris Fiorina, with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2011).
- 21 Indeed, in recent elections, partisan-based voting by the electorate is up; presidential coattails are stronger in recent years; and the incumbency effect is lower than in previous years. All of this suggests that voters are not as independent as is commonly assumed. Still, they may be persuadable by the opposing party through wedge appeals, and some research demonstrates that Republicans and Democrats do respond to even television ads from the opposing party. See Travis Ridout and Michael Franz, *The Persuasive Power of Campaign Advertising* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
- 22 Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choices Increase Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 23 Hillygus and Shields, *Persuadable Voter*.
- 24 John Zaller, “The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revisited,” in *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*, ed. Diana C. Mutz, Paul M. Sniderman, and Richard A. Brody (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 17–78.
- 25 Noah Kaplan, David K. Park and Travis N. Ridout, “Dialogue in American Political Campaigns? An Examination of Issue Engagement in Candidate Television Advertising,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006): 724–736.
- 26 Tracy Sulklin, *The Legislative Legacy of Congressional Campaigns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).