

# **The Evolution of American Microtargeting: An Examination of Modern Electoral Messaging**

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**Researcher's note:** The original intent of this work was slightly different than what follows. In an effort to provide information on the current state of microtargeting, I had planned to research the campaign tactics of the 2012 Obama and Romney presidential campaigns in Ohio. This goal quickly became unattainable due to time restrictions and a lack of available interviewees. Several requests for interviews went unanswered, and state political parties were not able to provide adequate information on the efforts of the campaigns. Through searching the Internet for information on campaign officials responsible for the Ohio presence of the Romney and Obama campaigns, I found that many of them have now gone into the private sector, working for firms which specialize in targeted messaging for non-profits or other entities. Their transition into the private sector demonstrates the increasing economic and political values of targeting based upon personal information, and could provide one explanation for their hesitance to provide an interview. Additionally, Eitan Hersh, a researcher whom I was able to reach via email and whose work I have utilized, informed me that little scholarly work has been done demonstrating the evolution of political targeting from its infancy to modern state, stating that 2012 data was going to be especially scarce<sup>1</sup>. Hersh himself was actually involved in a study paid for by the Obama for America campaign in an attempt to better understand the intricacies of their strategy and how it worked. The fact that the campaign itself felt the need to pay for this study perhaps demonstrates the relatively new strategies and technology at hand. This newness has caused me to change my focus to what microtargeting is, what led to its usage, and important factors impacting its future implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal E-Mail correspondence with Professor Eitan Hersh on 09/09/2014

## **1960 to 2000:**

### **A Narrowing of Focus**

The usage of targeted messaging by political campaigns has seen a drastic evolution over the past half-century. Through advancement in campaign technology, and an increasingly large amount of personal information up for sale to organizations willing to pay for it, campaigns have continually narrowed their scope from targeting large demographic groups to targeting each voter individually through a process called microtargeting. Microtargeting, defined by journalist Steven Levy, is “a way to identify small but crucial groups of voters who might be won over to a given side, and which messages would do the trick” (Levy 2013). Microtargeting as we know it today finds its roots decades before its modern iteration’s advent, coming as a result of the Republicans’ Southern Strategy implemented in the 1960’s.

During the 1960’s, Republicans faced a new political reality: demographic shifts made winning in the South necessary in order to capture the presidency. The 1960 election saw presidential candidate Richard Nixon state that he believed in the Civil Rights Movement which was taking place, a stance which put him at odds with many Southern voters. When Nixon ran again in 1968 after his unsuccessful try in 1960, his team started to look at changing the candidate’s positions on certain issues in order to sway voters in crucial states. This decision to tailor messaging in order to specifically win white, Southern voters was referred to as the “Southern Strategy.” These white voters made up a large majority of the states’ electorate due to lingering voting restrictions which kept African-Americans from being able to cast a ballot, even in counties where

they formed a majority of the population. The issue which was seen as the most important to this group of Southern white voters was civil rights legislation, and the 1968 election saw candidate Nixon claiming that some civil rights legislation was going too far and that some should even be repealed. This new framing of the issue won over persuadable voters in the South, as civil rights proved to be an issue which could be used to cause a voter to cast a ballot against the party with which they were affiliated. These issues are commonly referred to as wedge issues, as they are used to drive a wedge between a voter and his or her party (Hillygus et al. 2008).

The Southern Strategy demonstrated one of the earliest large-scale efforts to target voters based upon their personal data. In Nixon's case, this targeting was very broad, simply putting voters into the categories of Northern and Southern. The assumption was that all of the Southern states would be winnable if the civil rights issues were stressed due to the states' restrictions on African-American voting and the general attitude towards the issue in those states. The effectiveness of this approach pointed to the potential for grouping voters based upon facts such as their location and race.

Nixon's successor, President Gerald Ford, realized the potential in the narrowing of campaign targeting. Ford faced a difficult reelection bid in 1976, in part due to his pardoning of President Nixon. The Ford campaign decided to take the targeting of voters slightly further, using polling data to determine which issues would resonate with voters in more specific demographic subsets than just their state of residence. A memo from Ford campaign officials discussed the necessity of appealing to female suburban voters, to whom environmental issues were proving to be of the utmost importance (Hillygus et al. 2008). The memo suggests that President Ford begin to speak favorably about

environmental legislation and should make moves which would appease this group, but also warns that the president must not alienate working-class Republican voters who may see the legislation as threatening manufacturing jobs. This same memo also shed some light upon the shift away from campaigning on racial issues, as polls demonstrated that voters did not list it among their top concerns. Thus, focusing campaign time and resources on racial issues would not prove effective in swaying many persuadable voters (Hillygus et al. 2008).

This targeting of general demographics continued through both the 1980's and the early 1990's, with little in the way of evolution. President Clinton began to lay the groundwork of modern microtargeting during his reelection campaign in 1996 when the campaign divided potential voters based on demographic data and sought to target messages specifically for each group. The campaign further divided voters into nine categories based upon voters' likely political affiliation, with each grouping having charts demonstrating which issues would resonate with them (Sosnik, et al 2006).

However, Clinton's 1996 campaign became known for more than just a new way of looking at demographic data. It was also the first presidential campaign with well-documented usage of consumer data to help build voter profiles. Up until the 1996 presidential election cycle, messaging had targeted voters based upon commonalities in their general demographic information, e.g. marital status, ethnicity, and location. The idea was that even if some individuals in these broad groups would not respond to certain messages, a majority of those in the given group would. This kind of messaging was based upon the general voting patterns of the demographics of each grouping. Hoping to utilize information more specific to each voter, the Clinton campaign hired the firm

Claritas, which specialized in collecting consumer data for corporations' advertising. Firms such as Claritas would utilize a variety of methods to obtain this information, such as purchasing lists of subscribers to magazines and conducting polling (Sosnik, et al 2006).

The data collected by this firm has been referred to as "lifestyle" data: combining an overview of individuals' purchasing habits and affiliations in order to create a voter profile for each person. Clinton's team merged this lifestyle data with their political data to create a more complete file on each likely voter. Joining with Claritas allowed the campaign to capitalize on demographic facts such as Democrats being heavier TV-watchers, and late-night television shows drawing a younger viewing audience. Using this data, the campaign recognized that an appearance on late-night television would help Clinton to shore up support among younger liberal voters, spurring the campaign to arrange for Clinton to make several appearances on these programs during the campaign (Sosnik, et al 2006).

While lifestyle data had never been used before to this magnitude in a presidential campaign, the political establishment had known for years that there existed links between certain behaviors and voting preference. According to Eddie Mahe, a Republican consultant, the Republican National Committee began to run inquiries into voting behavior and consumer habits during the 1970's. One of the revelations from this research which Mahe recalls was the finding that people who purchased Mercury automobiles were more likely to vote Republican than those who purchased any other kind of automobile (Gertner 2004). The problem was that the parties did not know how to utilize this data in a way which would help them win votes. While Clinton's 1996

campaign began to utilize this data to win over certain groups, the technology still did not exist to fully capitalize on its potential.

While the following presidential election in 2000 did not see advancements in the utilizing of lifestyle data, it did mark the beginning of a new trend in campaign targeting. While campaigns in the past had focused heavily upon winning over independents already likely to vote for their candidate, this election saw a shift in that strategy. After eight years of the Clinton presidency, the electorate's top four concerns going into the 2000 presidential election gave the Democrat candidate an advantage in three of them. The issues of education, prescription drug costs, and Social Security reform were three of the four most cited issues, and all three had Gore holding a lead over Bush in the public's confidence that the candidate would handle them best. This meant that a campaign on just the issues seen as most important by the electorate would give Gore an advantage over Bush. Only the issue of tax cuts saw George W. Bush holding an advantage over Gore in the polling (Ceaser, Busch 2001).

The Bush campaign recognized that they would not be able to win running on the issues where Republicans held a lead over Democrats. Issues where public polling indicated a Republican advantage were, for the most part, not being cited as important issues during the 2000 election, making campaigning on them inevitably ineffective. Instead, the Bush campaign formulated a plan to make inroads on the issues where Gore drew the most strength. Labeling his ideology as "compassionate conservatism," Bush sought to win over likely Gore voters with his stance on one of the three issues, utilizing the lifestyle data of each voter to decide which of the issues would be most effective to use (Ceaser, Busch 2001). Gore, on the other hand, had to combat two major hurdles: 57%



of Americans claiming that the country was on the wrong moral track; 60% of Americans having an unfavorable view of President Bill Clinton (Ceaser, Busch 2001). To combat these problems, Gore broke with Clinton's tone on the campaign trail, opting for a more populist message that provided a contrast with Clinton's "Third Way" liberalism. The selection of Joe Lieberman as Gore's pick for Vice-President continued Gore's movement away from the sitting President, as Lieberman was a moderate with a history of criticizing Clinton. Lastly, Gore made sure that cameras would catch him kissing his wife, a tactic to quell voters' fears about more infidelity in the White House. The uphill battles faced by both campaigns resulted in the closest election of the modern age, with Vice President Gore winning the popular vote but losing the electoral vote to Bush based upon a 2000 Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* (Ceaser, Busch 2001).

**2004:**

### **The Synthesis of Data and Technology**

The presidential election in 2004 is notable for the creation of modern-day microtargeting, capitalizing on innovations in messaging technology. Both the Republican George W. Bush and Democrat John Kerry campaigns sought to amass a large amount of demographic indicators for each voter, allowing them to target messages for incredibly specific subsets of voters based upon their gender, income, religious affiliation, and the lifestyle data provided by consumer research firms. Much of this information was a result of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act, which allowed citizens to register to vote when applying for a driver's license. Access to registration information became even easier with the 2002 Help America Vote Act. This act was particularly helpful as it mandated the creation of a single national registry of all registered voters (Hillygus et al. 2008). Having voter registration tied to driver's license registration meant that all of the information required for the license was also present on the voter registration file. This made a large amount of personal demographic data available to political groups when they purchased the voter registration files. Mirroring this increase in voter information was the amount of individual consumer information which was made available to organizations. Data-gathering companies had become much more commonplace for the express purpose of collecting and selling individuals' consumer habits to campaigns. Lifestyle data was then used by the campaigns to supplement information gained through the voter registration records (Sosnik, et al 2006).

Combining all of this available information, both the Republican and Democrat parties had compiled a comprehensive database containing information on every American voter by 2004. Voter Vault became the name for the Republicans', while Datamart was the Democrats' (Gertner 2004). Profiles for the voters within the Datamart and Voter Vault systems could contain hundreds of data points for a single person based off of the information collected. The hope was that by collecting information on voters as individuals, campaigns would be able to identify individuals whose voting patterns differed from the general pattern of a demographic of which they were a part. An example of this would be a potential Democrat voter living in a Republican household. Under previous methods, such a voter would have been labeled a likely Republican and been targeted as such. Once campaigns utilized microtargeting, having information on such a voter as an individual allowed them to recognize his or her actual political leaning. In order to ensure success during the final months of the race, the Bush campaign sought out the membership lists of churches and other organizations during the first months of 2004. Additionally, volunteers were recruited to canvass and interview voters with the goal of adding this newly-acquired information into the databases (Gertner 2004).

While a large amount of data is beneficial in determining which voters to target with which messages, the new forms of political outreach allowed campaigns to better persuade voters. Recent studies have documented the continuing decline in television ads' effectiveness for election campaigns. Considering the immense cost associated with these ads, many campaigns have shifted focus to direct mail, canvassing, phone banks, social media, and text message methods. Studies conducted on these new techniques have demonstrated the effectiveness of both phone and face-to-face contact with campaigns,

suggesting that utilizing both can lead to a bump from 1 to 4 points in the final popular vote. It has also been found that face-to-face canvassing does produce a stronger positive reaction than phone contact, but the latter's effectiveness is still present (John, Brannan 2008).

Coming out of the 2000 national elections, the Republican Party recognized that superior grassroots organizing utilizing the new emerging targeting techniques had allowed the Democrats to outperform their expected turnout. Gearing up for the 2004 race, the Republicans aimed to expand their own data collection and voter contact. Looking over voting patterns from the previous election cycles, Bush strategists realized that the number of people with independent voting records had shrunk from 16% in 1988 down to 7% in 2002. This meant that voter targeting would have to shift focus to creating new Republican voters in states where the contest was bound to be close. Karl Rove, a Senior Advisor for the Bush administration, crafted a plan for the campaign to find these new voters in districts where demographic data suggested a large Republican advantage. Once districts falling into this category were identified, the campaign would then look for those which had seen Republican candidates underperform compared to what the demographics predicted. Those districts were then targeted heavily, as the information suggested that while people in the district would favor Republican candidates, there was a lack of political interest (Ceaser, Busch 2001).

The Bush campaign began to analyze its data on voters and divided the entire population into segments based upon demographic data. Within each of these segments, individuals were then ranked based upon the likelihood that they would vote and the likelihood that they would vote specifically for President Bush. This allowed for the

campaign's messaging to be sent only to those who needed persuading, saving the campaign from wasting resources on voters already likely to vote for Bush and those unlikely to do so (Ceaser, Busch 2001).

To create a database of voters, the Bush campaign utilized the Republican National Committee's (RNC) donor and volunteer lists as a starting point. They hired the marketing research firm Axiom, which had lifestyle information on 95% of all those in the RNC's database, giving the Bush campaign information on approximately 5.7-6 million voters. Utilizing this data, the campaign called roughly 5,000 voters with a survey, asking questions designed to find out which issues had the most traction with voters. Between the data provided by Axiom and the survey, the campaign claimed the ability to predict voter behavior with 80-90% accuracy (Sosnik, et al 2006).

It is worth noting that the 2004 election cycle saw a vast majority of the campaigns' efforts focused on states generally perceived as "swing states," having awarded their electoral votes to each of the parties at some point in the recent past. It is estimated that both the Bush and Kerry campaigns spent an average of 8.7 million dollars on these 16 states alone, and did not want to invest too heavily in states unlikely to change their voting preference, with the latter seen as "non-competitive." This disparity between swing states and non-competitive ones can also be seen in the amount of direct mail received by residents. On average, those living in swing states received over twice as many pieces of direct mail from campaigns as those living in non-competitive ones. Both campaigns neglected targeting voters with inconsistent voting activity, targeting active voters more than seven times as much as inactive. Similarly, voters in swing states

received almost 11 times as many door-to-door visits from a campaign as did those living in non-competitive states (Sosnik, et al 2006).

Also important is that the targeting of both 2004 campaigns rarely overlapped, even when the campaigns were discussing the same issue. Data shows that while both the Kerry and Bush campaign sent out mailings concerning taxes, only 31% of those receiving mail on tax issues received mail from both candidates. Of all the issues discussed, this percentage of overlap is the highest, demonstrating that targeting on the same issue yielded vastly different sets of voters for each campaign. This difference was a result of the campaigns' ability to recognize the voters most likely to vote for their candidate, and then aiming to target only them. Furthermore, the Bush campaign sought out people coded as "navigators," who were most likely to discuss Bush with family and friends. These people were considered to have the greatest chance of winning votes for the President, and they were specially targeted with emails and mailers encouraging them to discuss President Bush with others. Studies have also found that these people, considered as influential in their communities, are more likely to have others ask them for political advice than any other kind of advice. The Bush campaign is said to have had a list of 7 million volunteers and 2 million navigators who were contacted by the campaign (Sosnik, et al 2006).

Additionally, studies show that each campaign had a certain set of issues that it was most likely to advertise. For example, Kerry's campaign was almost four times as likely to campaign on health care issues as Bush's, while the Bush campaign was nine times more likely to address gay issues in its advertisements. Bush's opposition to gay marriage was generally referred to within the context of "family" or "traditional" values.

Additionally, Bush was advised to frame his decision to invade Iraq as part of a larger “War on Terror,” as voters were mostly against the war. This framing connected the war to values to which voters responded (Hillygus et al. 2008).

Studies have also found that contrary to conventional wisdom, both the Kerry-and Bush campaigns focused a majority of their targeted messaging on wedge-issue voters instead of spending financial resources on messaging to shore up support with their own base. These voters are affiliated with a certain political party, but have demographic data suggesting that they disagree with that party on at least one major issue. In a majority of cases in 2004, messages were actually targeted to appeal to voters of the opposite party whose affiliation was not seen as especially strong. Thus, the campaigns sought to use crucial issues as a way to break off parts of the opposition’s base voting block (Hillygus et al. 2008). According to the data, Bush’s campaign was much more effective at this than Kerry’s, as 11% of Democrats voted for Bush while only 6% of Republicans voted for Kerry. Bush’s defection rate in this election marks one of the lowest in the age of modern polling (Ceaser, Busch 136).

At the same time, both campaigns avoided touching upon issues where the public disagreed with their candidate. This was especially evident at the Democratic Convention during the 2004 cycle, where the issues of gun control and abortion were downplayed or not mentioned by the major speakers. These were issues where Bush’s stance was found to be favored by the public, causing Kerry to avoid campaigning heavily upon them in order to win over swing voters (Ceaser, Busch 117).

## **2008-Present:**

### **Social Networks and Advancing Technology**

The 2008 presidential election is notable for the large amount of campaigning that took place during the Democratic primaries. The two candidates consistently winning these contests were Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. For Senator Obama, the eventual victor of the primary and general elections that year, the biggest challenge was proving that he had the experience for the job of President. Luckily for the Obama campaign, the organization's polling showed that President Bush's unpopularity caused a large amount of voters to want a candidate promising a change from the status quo. Due to this unpopularity caused by a poor economy and dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, Obama's team decided that the best way to sell the candidate was to portray him as "not Bush" (Lizza 2008). During the primary season, this necessitated connecting Senator Clinton to President Bush as often as possible. Adopting a slogan of "Change we can Believe in," Obama's team painted him as a Washington outsider running against a career politician who had voted in favor of the then-unpopular war in Iraq. This framing of his perceived lack of experience allowed the campaign to turn his biggest negative into a positive (Lizza 2008).

Continuing into the general election, the Obama campaign once again cast its opponent as being a Washington insider with ties to President Bush. Initially, the campaign worried about facing off against Senator McCain in the general election. The worry was that McCain's record in the Senate would be well-known enough to make voters believe he was a true moderate willing to buck the system. However, polling done



by the campaign's top pollster showed that McCain was most defined for the electorate by his statements during the Republican primaries, not by his history in the Senate. This gave the Obama campaign the opportunity to define McCain how they wished, opting once again to draw parallels between the opposition and President George W. Bush (Lizza 2008). The Obama campaign also decided to tap Senator Joe Biden as Obama's running mate, hoping that this choice would address fears about Obama's experience and lack of foreign policy experience compared to McCain (Heilemann, Halperin 2010<sup>2</sup>).

Discontent with outgoing President George W. Bush's handling of the economy and Iraq War meant that many states long seen as heavily Republican could possibly be in play during the 2008 presidential election. Ignoring the commonly-held political wisdom that the Southern states were guaranteed to go for the Republican candidate, the Obama campaign expanded its operations into Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia. In order for the campaign to win over previously Republican voters, the Obama campaign recognized the need for supportive voters to attest to the character of Senator Obama. To do this, they utilized a similar strategy to the "navigators" that the Bush campaigns had employed, locating Obama supporters in the South who would be able to convince voters hesitant to cast a ballot for a Northern liberal politician. One field organizer in the region referred to these influential supporters as "character witnesses" (Fineman 2008). In the end, the campaign's overall strategy appears to have been mostly successful, with both North Carolina and Virginia going for Barack Obama. This was the first time that the latter had voted for a Democrat since 1964.

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<sup>2</sup> The veracity of *Game Change* has been called into question due to its reliance on anonymous sources. This researcher feels confident in the credibility of its statements with regards to the selection of vice presidential candidates during the 2008 election.

The Obama campaign's expansion into these states was seen by many analysts as a redrawing of the accepted political map, with some assuming that the states would now become swing states in future elections. Obama's 2008 election did bring with it some good voter demographic news for the Democrats. During that election, Senator Obama had been able to win 66% of the votes cast by young adults, while African-Americans and those of Hispanic background voted in larger numbers than ever before. These three groups are statistically more likely to vote Democrat, and their increased presence in the 2008 race was a large factor in Obama's victory, and attributed to their identifying with the candidate due his ethnic background (Kiss 2008). Since this increase in minority turnout, voter identification legislation at the state level has come under scrutiny. Voter identification laws require that citizens present a state-issued identification card before being able to cast their ballots. Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union allege that the proposing of these laws is meant to discourage minority voting, as minorities would have less access to these forms of identification (Prince 2014). Their claim is that Republican lawmakers are using these laws to keep a large portion of the Democrats' likely supporters from being able to vote<sup>3</sup>. Despite these concerns, new voting laws drawing complaints from outside groups continue to spread throughout states such as Indiana and Ohio (American Civil Liberties Union 2014).

In addition to minority voters, young voters also received a great deal of attention in 2008. Young voters were seen by the Obama camp as being highly targetable, and a strategy was crafted to ensure strong support from this demographic. One part of this

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<sup>3</sup> Voting laws and possible voting suppression are topics I acknowledge as having a great effect on the American electoral system. While I am not able to cover this kind of potential targeting in my work here due to its breadth, please see the works of Tova Andrea Wang for more information.

strategy was compiling a list of over three million cell phone numbers which were provided to the campaign consensually by the owner. The campaign promised those who signed up that they would receive campaign news via text message before the news was provided to the media (Kiss 2008).

Additionally, online campaign presence saw a dramatic increase during the 2008 election. A Pew Research Center study from that year found that 46% of Americans utilized e-mail, Internet, or text messages to gain knowledge of the presidential campaigns, discuss the election, or mobilize others to volunteer (Dutta et al. 2008). The Obama campaign appeared much more prepared to utilize this increase in Internet usage for political activity, putting a great deal of focus on their presence on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. During the primary, the campaign's efforts led to a lead in Facebook followers of 250,000 to Clinton's 3,200. In the general election, Obama's number of followers on the site rose to over 2 million, while the number of Twitter followers reached 112,000. McCain's Facebook profile saw over 600,000 followers, with only 4,600 on Twitter. Obama's YouTube profile also uploaded almost six-times as many videos as McCain's, and had almost four-times as many subscribers (Dutta et al. 2008).

This usage of online social networking sites allowed supporters to easily share campaign information and advertisements with their friends. The Obama application for smartphones even allowed for the user to send out messages supporting Obama to all of his or her contacts. For a candidate who initially struggled with voters being unaware of his history, social networking provided an easy and accessible platform to inform the public of Obama's past and credentials. While the Internet had been utilized in political

campaigns before, the 2008 election marked the first time its primary utilization had been for aims other than fundraising (Dutta et al. 2008).

Understanding the importance of voter turnout on Election Day, the Obama campaign organized a state-of-the-art get-out-the-vote apparatus referred to as “Project Houdini.” Under this program, volunteers would be stationed at polling locations to check-off targeted voters on a roster when they came to the polls. Each of the voters on the roster for that precinct would be assigned a four-digit code, which the volunteer would input into the campaign’s system via a hotline called throughout the day. The goal of this program was to give the campaign updates of who had voted in almost real-time, keeping them from wasting resources calling or contacting those who had already voted. In practice, however, the influx of calls from volunteers was enough to shut down the hotline. The failure of the automated system forced volunteers to report the voter codes to local campaign offices, where the codes were then entered into the system manually by another volunteer (Herbert 2008). Since this program was only utilized for precincts labeled as a high-priority, the failure of the system did not completely derail the campaign’s efforts at voter turnout (Jacobs 2012). Despite the crashing of the hotline, the Obama campaign’s contacting was still more pervasive with McCain, with 28% of voters claiming to have been contacted by the Obama campaign, while only 22% said the same of the McCain campaign (Herbert 2008).

For the 2012 presidential election, the campaign of Republican candidate Mitt Romney recognized the need to compete with President Obama in both online targeting of voters and in get-out-the-vote operations on Election Day. From 2008 to 2012, Americans continued to watch less live television, choosing instead to watch

programming in a variety of ways, i.e. DVR. Some estimates predicted that up to one-third of voters in 2012 did not see political advertisements aired on television, with digital consumption of programming beginning to act as a full substitute to live television rather than just a supplement (Peters 2012).

During the month of April, 2012, the Romney campaign had created two different commercials which they had been airing on television in the state of Wisconsin for the primaries. One of the ads discussed Romney's business background and experience, making it a more positive political ad. The second one was a negative ad criticizing Senator Rick Santorum, an opponent in the Republican primaries. Knowing that this ad would not be seen by almost a third of the electorate, the Romney campaign began running polls in order to determine which groups of voters were least likely to be watching live television. These groups were then selected for online advertisements. Additional research with the digital strategy firm Targeted Victory determined that the most persuadable group which was also the least likely to watch television was voters over the age of 18 who were dissatisfied with the Obama administration and tended to lean Republican (Peters 2012).

Adding to the complicated nature of online political advertising was the fact that characteristics of likely Romney supporters varied by state as well. In Michigan, for example, online users who frequented music sites to listen to Christian music were much less likely to support Romney during the primary. The campaign assumed that these voters most likely supported Senator Rick Santorum during the primary contests. This meant that advertising on those sites did not feature Romney's ad criticizing Santorum, as that message was likely to be poorly received. Instead, these users would see the ad

discussing Romney's business experience (Peters 2012). This strategy for picking messaging based upon an Internet user's lifestyle data would continue into the general election as well.

With the McCain campaign focusing little on online interaction during the 2008 contest, the Romney campaign had little information regarding what online behaviors would reflect a stronger likelihood of leaning Republican in general. Thus, its online advertisements were created to collect data on those individuals who interacted with it. The advertisements contained a video which would start playing after the user hovered the cursor over the advertisement for three seconds. Using this technology, the campaign gathered information on not only who was initiating the playing of the video, but also how long he or she watched and whether the user clicked for further information. After cross-referencing this interaction with the personal data collected on the voters, the campaign determined several characteristics which made an online user more likely to vote for a Republican. According to this information, these voters liked to take online quizzes concerning news and entertainment, share photographs, and are interested in technology, home repair, child care, and literature (Peters 2012). Voters less likely to vote Republican were those interested in video and casino games, martial arts, jazz, and bowling (Peters 2012).

The e-mails sent by the Obama campaign during the 2012 election were also able to track similar data as the Romney campaign's advertisements. The Obama campaign was able to see who had opened a particular campaign e-mail and when. They were also able to track which links within the body of an e-mail were clicked by a given recipient. The campaign would utilize this data to judge a voter's interest in learning more about

President Obama and his platform. It would then send fewer e-mails to those consistently not engaging with the correspondences (Peters 2012).

When it came to microtargeting voters, the Obama campaign in 2012 sought to fix some of the problems which had plagued the 2008 campaign's efforts to microtarget online. During that previous election, Obama's online messaging was not refined for each voter based on data collected on him or her, while direct mailings were. This was due to the campaign's inability to combine the e-mail addresses provided to the campaign with the existing voter profiles used for microtargeting. Thus, e-mails from that campaign had stuck with general messaging on popular issues (Peters 2012).

For the 2012 campaign, the Obama campaign launched Project Narwhal, a sophisticated system designed to link a voter's online habits and contact information with the rest of the microtargeting data compiled on him or her. The campaign would then be able to personalize messaging to each voter through not only direct mailing, but also through e-mails dealing with specific issues. The accumulation of this massive amount of data in one single system allowed for easy usage of it in every part of the campaign, whereas previous campaigns had stored it across multiple servers necessitating physically transferring data from one to another (Issenberg 2012).

While the Romney campaign certainly targeted voters based upon their voter profiles, as demonstrated by the usage of specific ads in the Wisconsin primary, it labeled its Election Day turnout project as its secret weapon, and as its answer to the Obama campaign's Project Narwhal. In fact, the name ORCA was chosen due to the Orca being the primary predator of the Narwhals (Jacobs 2012). Despite Project ORCA being billed

as the Romney campaign's response to Project Narwhal, its aim was much more in-line with what Obama had tried in 2008 with Project Houdini. The program would allow for poll-watchers to log in real-time which voters had already cast their ballots via an application or website for phones. This focus primarily on Election Day turnout left Romney incredibly vulnerable to technological glitches derailing the largest part of his strategy. When Election Day came, the system crashed, causing the campaign to fly blind throughout the entirety of the voting process on that day. Ironically, this was the same issue which derailed the Obama campaign's Project Houdini. Obama campaign officials stated that the failures of Houdini in 2008 had demonstrated that the technology was not yet ready for usage on such a large scale, which ORCA's failure only further proved (Jacobs 2012).

The failure of ORCA meant that the Romney Campaign had almost no idea which voters had cast a ballot, and which likely Romney supporters still needed to be contacted in order to ensure voting. Despite the 2008 campaign's failures when it came to this kind of voter contact on Election Day, the 2012 Obama campaign did develop a new project for logging which voters voted on Election Day. Project Gordon, named after the man credited with killing Houdini, also utilized smartphone reporting instead of phone calls, allowing for faster reporting of data. The 2012 campaign, however, did not make it as much of a centerpiece of their strategy as they had in 2008, as they were wary of the possibility of crashes, such as the ones experienced by Project Houdini and Project ORCA. While there have not been reports of Project Gordon crashing on Election Day 2012, its limited usage and scope during that campaign also makes it hard to judge its effectiveness (Jacobs 2012).



Following the surge in popularity for social networking sites, the 2008 and 2012 campaigns began to utilize these mediums as ways to more easily target voters based upon their web usage information. Starting with the 2008 election, Facebook, the world's most popular social networking site, began to allow political firms access to users' profile data to help facilitate targeted advertisements. The Obama campaign in particular made effective usage of this, hoping to engage young voters (Dutta, Fraser 2008). In the 2012 Republican primary, Representative Michelle Bachmann's campaign utilized this Facebook information by advertising to those who had "liked" Christian rock artists on the site, claimed to like the Tea Party, or who had posted a status about favoring tax cuts. The hope was that Facebook users falling into these categories would be much more receptive to Representative Bachmann's conservative stances (Dwoskin 2014).

Twitter, another popular social networking site, has also seen a large amount of political usage since 2008. During the 2012 presidential campaign, the social networking site Twitter saw 10 million tweets during the first presidential debate, and then 20 million on Election Day (Zhang, Seltzer, Bichard 2013). These numbers suggest that voters are increasingly turning to the Internet to voice their political affiliations and interactions, seeming to make it a prime medium for political campaigns. Due to the relatively new nature of this political usage of social networking sites, political scientists are still unsure of the actual effects it has on voters. One of the leading criticisms of political activity on social networking sites is that the overwhelming amount of data available to voters forces them to seek out information which backs-ups their already-held positions. If true, this would imply that campaign targeting on the Internet is ineffective as the users will only seek out things with which they already agree.

Due to the increasing importance of the Internet as a campaign platform, its effectiveness at winning over new voters remains crucial. One of the more recent studies in this field has aimed to answer questions concerning social networking sites and political behavior, offering both hope and discouraging information for campaigns' usage of the platforms. The study took place during the 2012 presidential election, which included a large amount of social media content from both parties. This study did find that engaging in political activities on social networking sites had a positive relation to offline political involvement. However, the same study also found that only the social networking site Facebook saw a positive relationship between usage and an increase in political interest (Zhang, Seltzer, Bichard 2013).

This same study also researched the extent to which social networking sites encouraged selective exposure and avoidance of political information. The study found that both Facebook and Twitter had a positive relationship with users selectively seeking out information which aligned with their previously-held beliefs. This would imply that campaigns' social media presence is being primarily accessed by those already likely to be voting for a candidate. The study did, however, also find that there was no positive relationship between the usage of a social networking site and the selective avoidance of information which contradicts one's political beliefs. This is slightly encouraging for campaigns, as it means that while undecided voters will likely not be seeking a candidate's social media presence, they will also not be avoiding anything that may happen to be presented to them (Zhang, Seltzer, Bichard 2013). Lastly, this study found that only the usage of the site YouTube had a positive relationship with strong party

affiliation (Zhang, Seltzer, Bichard 2013). The reasons for this connection are not examined, and I was unable to find other studies covering the link.

Researchers have also found that campaigns' usage of social networking sites do not have a large influence when it comes to persuading voters on certain issues. One study found that less than half of all users follow officials with opposing viewpoints from their own, leading to a lack of access to opposing ideas. Additionally, the study demonstrates that those faced with opposing information when online are likely to find opposing data to simply rebut the claim, thereby not allowing for an opposing argument to be fully considered or adopted. This finding undermines campaigns' recent forays into using social networking sites and online presence as a way to help find persuadable voters (Johnson, Zhang, Bichard 2011).

## **Analysis and Predictions**

The 2012 presidential campaigns featured a variety of the microtargeting tactics first established during the 2004 election, but also introduced new trends into the election process. While some of these tactics failed to garner the desired response, others have the ability to further influence the ways which campaigns interact with the American electorate. Voter turnout operations, and online campaigning both fall into the latter category.

The move towards campaigning on social media sites began during the 2008 Democratic primaries. Since then, campaigns have continued to pursue a greater amount of online activity and outreach, using it to both campaign and to help organize volunteers for events. Campaigns have pointed to the movement of the population away from television consumption as a reason to invest more heavily in online advertising while cutting back on television. By some estimates, a third of those who would have seen political television commercials in 2008 would not see any in 2012, demonstrating the increasing substitution of the Internet for television (Peters 2012). Thus, it would appear that turning to online messaging would allow campaigns to fully access those voters who have left the television-watching demographic.

Unfortunately for the campaigns, the studies cited in this work have demonstrated a great deal of challenges facing attempts to advertise on both social media and the internet in general. Internet advertisements suffer from a low amount of actual interaction, with between 1 and 500 and 1 in 1,000 online advertisements being clicked on by a user (Rampell 2014). Additionally, users of social networking sites have been found to

selectively avoid following the online profiles of elected officials with differing viewpoints, preventing campaigns from reaching most of the voters who are not already supportive of the candidate (Johnson, Zhang, Bichard 2011). These findings would indicate that campaign advertising online is not only reaching fewer individuals than previous television ads had in the past, but also that campaigns' advertising on social networking sites should be intended solely for those already likely to support a candidate, aiming to encourage actually going to vote.

Further evidence supporting the assertion that online messaging is effective almost exclusively for those already likely to support a candidate can be found in the study detailing the connections between social networking sites and political behavior. That study found a lack of a positive connection between usage of most social networking sites and political interest. Additionally, there was no positive connection between usage of social networking sites and party affiliation (Zhang, Seltzer, Bichard 2013). This means that targeting online would be primarily reaching voters who lack political interest and are not affiliated with one of the two major parties. Unaffiliated voters lacking political interest are the ones typically targeted as likely supporters, with the campaigns using data to find the voters in this category likely to support their candidate. Since 2004, campaigns have been utilizing microtargeting to target both these likely supporters and wedge-issue voters, but the data on online messaging signals and end to that trend. Campaigns' usage of social networking sites has thus far centered upon finding voters who are already likely to be supportive of their candidates, suggesting a shift away from targeting wedge-issue voters as campaigns continue to focus more on internet contact (Peters 2012).

This narrowing of targeting to just those voters already likely to vote for a candidate suggests a shift towards campaigns aiming to simply mobilize their base in any given election. While the 2004 and 2008 campaigns focused on targeting both likely supporters and wedge-issue voters, voter turnout during the presidential elections saw increases over the previous cycle. With 2012, and the increased emphasis on this kind of online messaging, voter turnout fell compared to 2008, marking the first presidential election drop-off in voter turnout in three cycles (McDonald 2013). While this change in messaging can hardly account for the entirety of that drop, the implications of this shift seem to point towards it being a contributing factor to some degree.

Another trend worth noting is the usage of voter turnout programs on Election Day. Despite the fact that Project Houdini failed to work in 2008, both Romney and Obama crafted new systems focused on tracking voting during the 2012 race. This demonstrates that political campaign operatives do not see voter turnout tracking as a flash in the pan, but as a crucial part of the future of electoral strategy. Early voting has become more popular in recent elections, facilitating larger turnout among minority voters. Efforts by Republican lawmakers in states such as Ohio to limit this early voting have drawn accusations of voter suppression, claiming that the laws are intended to keep Democrats from capitalizing on their advantage with minority groups. Despite these attempts to limit early voting, it appears that campaigns are still preparing for continuing expansion of the early voting programs through the development of these voter tracking systems (Prince 2014). As the voting period is extended, campaigns will need to have a running estimate of how many votes have been cast in favor of a candidate to increase the efficiency of voter contact.

Finally, the increase in the amount of personal data being available to campaigns is likely to continue unabated as voters continue to increase their online activity. Sites of all kinds have begun to notice the profitability of collecting and selling the data of their users to campaigns and marketing firms, even if their content seems unrelated to politics. One recent example of this would be the online music site Pandora, which recently announced that it would begin tracking which music was being listened to in a certain area and then compare that data to the area's electoral turnout. The hope is that the site will be able to find out which musical artists and styles indicate a likelihood of supporting Republican or Democrat candidates. The site would then sell this information to campaigns and political organizations, where it would be used for online microtargeting efforts (Dwoskin 2014).

This trend in the availability of personal information shows no signs of slowing down, and national parties will likely continue to pass along existing profiles of voters to their presidential campaigns, keeping campaigns from having to start from scratch. Despite this increase in the amount of data available, studies are pointing to campaigns targeting fewer voters on an increasingly fewer amount of issues. Microtargeting, while credited with several major electoral wins, seems to have turned the corner on its ability to target a variety of voters as campaigns continue to shift towards more online activity. The possibility that American presidential campaigns have reached a point where their tactics are limiting the size and ideological diversity of the electorate is alarming, especially when voters' personal data is more accessible than ever. While the decline in voter turnout in 2012 was due to a host of factors, my findings suggest that these campaign tactics played a role. A vibrant democracy requires that citizens remain highly

informed and that they voice their opinions through voting. If the trends suggested by this research continue, campaigns' tactics will be working against those very goals. Such tactics may work well in achieving electoral victory, but will ultimately lead to an undermining of American democracy.



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