BINDERS FULL OF VOTERS: HOW INFORMATION GATHERED THROUGH TRACKING WAS USED TO TARGET VOTERS IN THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Zijun (Jenny) Pang, Christina Pollalis and Alessandra Saluti
Wellesley College
106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA, 02481, USA

ABSTRACT

Modern technology and the accessibility of online databases have expanded the reach of information tracking, which played a strong role in the American presidential elections in 2012. Using technological strategies and databases, individual's online activity and offline behavior was tracked and translated into campaign strategies to better target voters. This allowed the campaigns to become more efficient and transmit a more effective message on both the individual and national level. However, the rapid increase of tracking raises questions about privacy, monetary cost and the effectiveness of these strategies, as well as the changes to the election system that they are facilitating.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the months leading up to the 2012 U.S. presidential elections, most voters received countless e-mails from campaigns, phone calls from volunteers, and literature that was specific to their geographic location, political leanings, and lifestyle. The strategies that political campaigns employed to produce such specifically targeted information are rooted in American political history. In early 960, the wide use of market segmentation for commercial goods influenced political marketing. John F. Kennedy and other presidential candidates used mass consumer data and pollsters to track voter behaviors, create voter categories, and hone campaign messages [11]. At that time, the focus of tracking was mostly limited to large groups like voting precincts. However, as the accessibility of technological tools increases and voter's online behavior can be monitored more easily, the focus of tracking has shifted from larger systems to smaller ones, like the habits and preferences of individuals. Modern technology has greatly facilitated this shift and led to an unprecedented expansion of tracking, which has served to increase the efficiency, speed, and precision of political campaigns. In this paper, we will define the technical aspects and outcomes of tracking, especially as it relates to micro-targeting. We will use cases from the 2012 presidential campaign to evaluate the effectiveness of tracking for campaigns and their consequences for future democratic elections.

2. DEFINITION OF TRACKING AND TARGETING

Modern tracking describes the monitoring of a person's online activity and the storage of his digital footprints in a database. The main goal of tracking voters' digital paths is for more precise targeting, or gathering information about individuals and groups to tailor campaigns more effectively. By tracking these online paths, campaigns are able to have access to our personal details, including home foreclosure status, ethnicity, vacation destinations, and beer preference [4]. In addition, as it has become such a common method to improve outreach, tracking user's internet activities has become an effective business model. Many

companies, including Strategic Telemetry, VAN (Voter Activation Network), and AdRoll offer services that are aimed at tracking internet activity and the storage of the gathered information [8].

Figure 1. A list of third party websites that use cookies to track users who visited the official Obama website
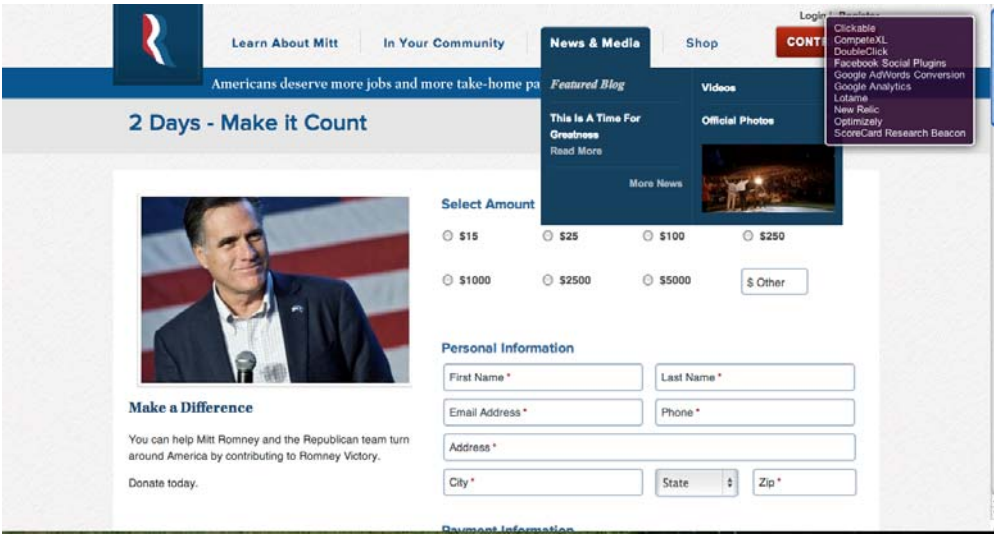

Figure 2. A list of third party websites that use cookies to track users who visited the official Romney website

3. TECHNOLOGY BEHIND TRACKING

This information about individual's internet activity is gathered through the placement of cookies, or digital markers which are placed after a user visits a Web site or makes a purchase. Cookies are small text files that a Web Server stores on a user's hard disk. They are used to store specific web server or client information on a user's machine, which they later on retrieve [2]. Essentially, cookies work as a convenient way to transfer information from one data exchange to another. Cookies enable a record of every site that a user accesses in order to build individual profiles. They also inform campaigns which advertisement, email link, or ad banner motivated people to visit campaign websites--an immediate feedback on which online marketing technique is

156

effective. These statistics inform campaigns on which keywords to include in email subject lines and which anchor texts to use in order to increase link popularity. This online profile is also matched with other accessible online data, such as Facebook profiles, as well as offline data, which campaigns can purchase from third-party companies and may include details like voting frequency and consumption patterns [12]. A market has been created from the handling of both offline and online tracking data, strengthening companies like Acxiom [5] and InfoUSA [7]. Together, data scientists, data miners, and political strategists assign a few summary numbers to each potential voter that predicts the likelihood that she will vote, how she will react to direct contact from campaigns, and political stance. These teams conduct analysis, through the use of algorithms, on this data to glean useful correlations between people's offline behavior and their political leanings.

4. TRACKING AS A TOOL FOR TARGETING

4.1 The Grassroots Level

However, the process of targeting voters does not rely exclusively on technology and databases. The middlemen that use the information gathered during tracking to microtarget voters are the volunteers and staff working for each campaign. For example, a union volunteer logged into the AFL-CIO election website with her Facebook account. Computers matched her list of friends with pre-existing voting data from the campaign which then pointed her to a company colleague that had never voted before. She was able to convince him to vote based on mutual trust, which he confessed was mainly due to their common backgrounds. This connection enabled the leveraging of a "trust network" in order to effectively target a voter [4]. Ultimately, tracking data is transformed into concrete targeting through these kind of personal and traditional means, including door-to-door canvassing and phone banking. The technological tools that these volunteers use, including VoteBuilder (shown in figure 3) and MiniVan (shown in figure 4) [8], are powerful because they allow users to have access to voter profile databases; the detailed information about each voter serves to inform volunteers about which issues to address when contacting voters. These databases are updated not only from tracking online, but also actual contact experiences. For example, if a voter did not answer the door or call and could not be contacted, campaign volunteers log that information, so that voter can eventually be reached.

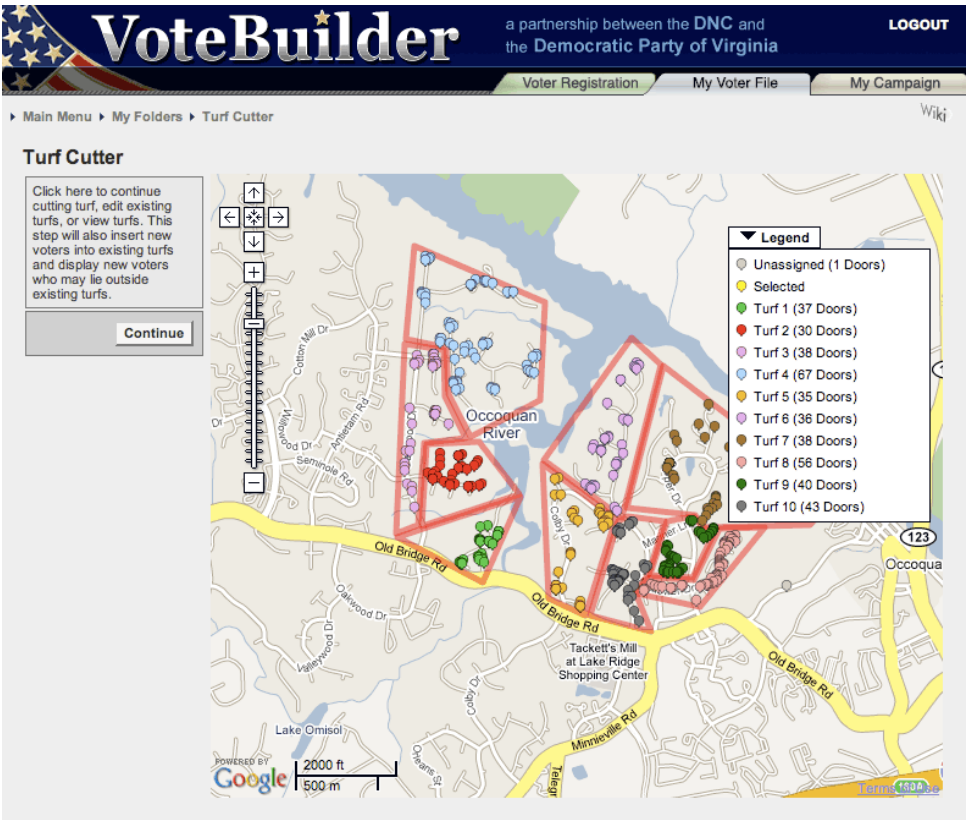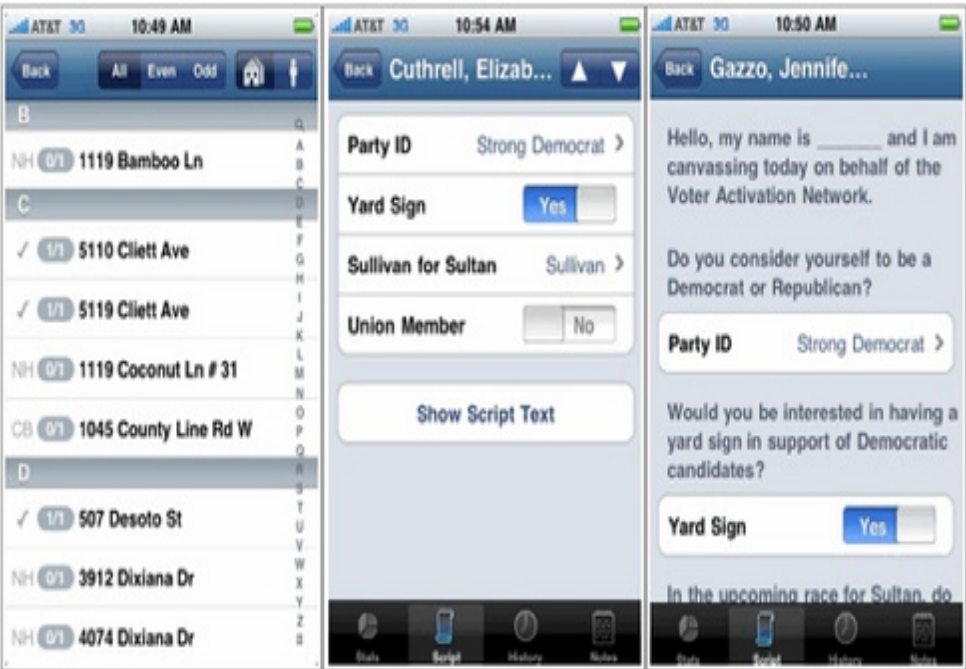Figure 3. The VoteBuilder website

Figure 4. The VoteBuilder map

Figure 5. MiniVan mobile application

4.2 The Campaign Level

Besides using tracked data to target voters on a personal level, campaigns also leverage enormous amounts of "big data" to guide the direction of the campaign from the regional to the national level. Everyone's political "scores," which represent their political alignment and voting preference, are later aggregated to form conclusions about geographic voting trends. These then determine the content of campaign speeches and the destinations of the campaign trail in order to better target "battleground" areas. For example, the swing state of Ohio was split into four geographic regions: the West emphasized defense spending, the North was dominated by the auto industry, the eastern coal miners were concerned about energy policies, and the central region emphasized the importance of financial regulation and education grants [10]. Information gathered through tracking allowed the candidates to speak to all four regions, but in the North, for example, Obama's speeches emphasized competitiveness of American manufacturing and in the East he trumpeted clean energy. The Obama campaign also directed million-dollar advertisements using iterative random controlled experiments and tracking to record outcomes. Other advanced forms of microtargeting include the various kinds of video advertisements are aimed at voters based on voter data. The Romney campaign, for example, had two main advertisements: the first was a strong-spoken video that emphasized the return of "American optimism" that was aimed at committed party members to encourage a large turnout; the second, which emphasized his role as a family man, was aimed at undecided voters that tend to vote more on character, according to their "scores" [12]. Armed with county and city-level voter data, the campaign tailored the airing of these ads to appeal specifically to the right audience and later used tracking data to reaffirm their broadcast decisions.

5. EVALUATION

The strategies and devices that campaigns are using to track and microtarget voters would clearly be impossible without the globalization of portable technology. In the relatively elite American political sphere, especially, these tools are essential to gathering and analysis mass amounts of data. However, it is that fact that these strategies affect such a large population that makes microtargeting so controversial. The criticisms directed at the collection of data and the implementation of information gleaned from this data can be separated into two spheres. The first argues that these strategies are counterproductive because the opportunity cost is too high. The implementation of these strategies is indeed very costly. In addition, the invasive nature of microtargeting raises the question if the benefits (voter outturn) outweigh the risk that the general population will feel that their privacy has been violated. That said, the second major criticism has to deal with the societal reaction to tracking and microtargeting.

5.1 Campaign's Perspective

Tracking and micro-targeting have been criticized for their high costs and seemingly aggressive nature. However, these mechanisms have been readily adopted by campaign and it is important to recognize their benefits as well as their downsides. Results of campaigns often hinge on independent, undecided, or unlikely voters. These are groups that are usually immune to traditional direct appeals and need more subtle and sophisticated arguments. Tracking enables campaigns to know exactly which issues are important to these voters. In turn, voters receive information on the issues they prioritize. This process increases efficiency in money and time for both sides. However, the two biggest critiques of tracking are aimed at its costs and privacy violations. Both parties have spent a combined $13 million on data acquisitions alone and maintained large in-house technology experts for data analysis of online and offline data to construct detailed profiles. Digital marketing was predicted to reach $160 million between the two campaigns, 10% of 1.6 billion combined campaign expenditures [3]. Though they vowed to not acquire intrusive data and restrict access to databases on a need-base use, both campaigns used third-party companies extensively [11].

These strategies, however, are sometimes counterproductive. The first national representative survey to explore Americans' opinions about political targeting showed that 86% of adult Americans are more likely to vote against a candidate that uses localized targeted ads, voicing their preference for more broad-based issues. Similarly, 85% adults would express anger if they knew campaigns tailor ads based on their Facebook

profiles [11]. This sense of unease toward tracking and microtargeting is shared by most Americans, who often feel as though their privacy has been violated. For example, a week before election day, voter Priscilla Trulen received a voicemail message from a presidential campaign, which reminded her that she had an absentee ballot that she had not mailed in yet [9]. In an interview, she expressed her discomfort that "Big Brother" had access to her confidential information [9]. This kind of mistargeting, the misjudging of voter's preferences or voters realizing they are being pandered to, can reverse the support that a candidate has gained [6]. Yet, in an interview with PBS Frontline, the CEO of Aristotle, nation's leading company on political tracking data, assured that, "...money spent on voter information is [...] effectively spent" [3]. Therefore, the risk of repelling voters through aggressive data collection and microtargeting is outweighed by the potential benefits of these strategies.

5.2 Society's Perspective

For campaigns, the big question may be whether tracking persuades voters and increases voter turn-outs, but for society, it is about how tracking is changing the election system. Tracking has made political campaigns look more like Target, Google, and retail banks: commercial entities that monitor personal data to tailor their services based on pinpointing a customer's needs. The question is whether tracking is, ironically, pinpointing and narrowing the amount of information voters are exposed to and confining the dissemination of information. This may jeopardize the holistic integrity of a candidate's campaign, encouraging proverbial "flip-flopping" and letting candidates amplify certain messages but remain silent about others depending on their audience. The tracking and selling of political data may also discourage citizens from discussing and expressing their political views online. Further, by categorizing voters, campaigns gradually ignore voters they deem unlikely to vote, which are usually the unregistered, uneducated, and impoverished [11]. The integration of tracking into modern political campaigns represents the difficult balance between the power and limitations of technology.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we began by defining tracking and targeting and examining the technologies employed, such as cookies, scraping Facebook profiles, mobile applications, location-based ads, and big data analytics. Targeting politicizes tracking and data at both the grassroots and the larger campaign level. Different applications utilize tracking data to help strategize volunteers' door-knocks and mobilize identified voters to broaden the campaign's network. On the campaign, aggregate statistics decide location-based ads broadcasts, which online and offline sites and platforms to use. These, in turn, determine the content of political speeches, as well as the destinations of candidates' visits.

 As tracking and political campaigns become inseparable, tracking's value to campaigns and to the greater society is evaluated. Though theoretically tracking should increase efficiency of time, money, and spread of information for both voters and campaigns, privacy violations and voters' mistrust of tailored information increasingly render tracking ineffective, especially if voters realize they are being targeted. The anecdotal evidence as presented suggests that tracking may entail broader consequences for the democratic elections: potentially, it can limit the type of information candidates give and voters receive, limit online political activity, and limit the types of voters that campaigns consider, undermining a sense the implied egalitarian nature of democratic elections. Though there are discussed methods to counter these concerns, like requesting individual permission for online tracking or full disclosure of tracked information by campaigns, it is inevitable that these issues will dominate the political media landscape for future US elections.

REFERENCES

[1] Ashkenas, A., Ericson, M., Parlapiano, A., and Willis, D. (2012). <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/campaign-finance>.

[2] "Cookie Theory." *Cookie Theory*. 2013. Web. 6 Feb. 2013. <http://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ms970178.aspx>.

[3] "The Digital Campaign." *PBS*. 2013. Web. 06 Feb. 2013. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digital-campaign/>.

[4] Duhigg, Charles. "Campaigns Mine Personal Lives To Get Out Vote." *The New York Times*. The New York Times,13 Oct. 2012. Web. 13 Nov. 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/us/politics/campaigns-mine-personal-lives-to-get-out-vote.html?pagewanted=2>.

[5] "Global Homepage Marketing Technologies Acxiom."*Acxiom*. 2013. Web. 06 Feb. 2013. <http://www.acxiom.com/>.

[6] Hersh, Eiten. (2012). "Targeted Campaign Appeals and Value of Ambiguity." <http://www.eitanhersh.com/uploads/7/9/7/5/7975685/targeting_effects_aug2012.pdf>.

[7] "InfoUSA.com." *Mailing List*. 2012. Web. 06 Feb. 2013. <http://www.infousa.com/>.

[8] Kuehner-Hebert, Katie. (2012). "Cover Story : The Direct Marketing Election" <http://www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/election-2012-barack-obama-mitt-romney-microtargeting-retargeting-mobile-marketing-social-media-voter-databases/2>.

[9] Laasby, Gitte. (2012). "Unprecedented micro-targeting by campaigns creeps out voters" <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/unprecedented-microtargeting-by-campaigns-creeps-out-voters-007f111-177062301.html>.

[10] Pikington, Ed. (2012). "Battle for Ohio: campaigns micro-target their message in state's four corners" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/25/battle-ohio-campaigns-micro-target>.

[11] Turow, Joseph, Michael X. Delli Carpini, Nora Draper, and Rowan Howard-Williams. "Americans Roundly Rejecting Tailored Political Advertising", *New York Times*. Annenberg School for Communication: University of Pennsylvania, July 2012. Web. 15 Nov. 2012. <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/business/24adco.pdf>.

[12] Vega, Tanzina. (2012). "Online Data Helping Campaigns Custom Ads" <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/21/us/politics/campaigns-use-microtargeting-to-attract-supporters.html?pagewanted=all>.