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Every Data Point Counts: Political Elections in the Age of Digital Analytics

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Every Data Point Counts: Political Elections in the Age of Digital Analytics

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements of the University Honors Program
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Julian Kehle
Samir Naimi (Faculty Mentor)
May 6, 2019
Every Vote Counts

Political Elections in the Age of Digital Analytics

Julian Kehle
Mentored by Samir Naimi
Synthesizing the investigative research and cautionary messages from experts in the fields of technology, political science, and behavioral science, this project explores the ways in which digital analytics has begun to influence the American political arena. Historically, political parties have constructed systems to target voters and win elections. However, rapid changes in the field of technology (such as big data, artificial intelligence, and the prevalence of social media) threaten to undermine the integrity of elections themselves. Future political campaigns will utilize profiling to micro-target individuals in order to manipulate and persuade them with hyper-personalized political content. Most dangerously, the average American voter does not understand how these technologies will influence elections. This research project simplifies the complex technological and sociopolitical landscape in order to educate the public on the issue. Even more important than understanding the problem is arming people with practical solutions to combat this intimidating problem. Therefore, this project utilizes the language of visual design to turn something complex and intimidating into something approachable and empowering. This academic and creative contribution aims to ensure that American elections remain free and fair.
Politicians no longer see you as a voter. You’re a data point to them.

Rapid developments in artificial intelligence, big data, and social media are transforming American elections. Political strategists now have unprecedented amounts of personal data to predict highly intimate details about you. Your personality and emotions will be used against you as a political weapon.

The future of digital advertising is hyper-personalized digital advertising that targets subtle, actionable details and manipulates the masses.

A Recipe for Disaster

Experts predict that political elections will undergo change in the near future. The main factors are already in play:

Historical Precedent

Computer systems researchers are struggling to combat the emerging threats to data security and privacy. This trend is not new, it’s become more widespread.

Psychographics

Psychographic profiling is a type of micro-targeting technology where data scientists predict an individual’s personality and then design advertisements based on highly intimate details about you, most of which you never know or consent to share.

Political consulting firms use psychographics to predict your personality. They then design an advertising campaign based on that profile. This campaign influences your vote.

A different type of politician

Political elections have always been greatly influenced by money, but in today’s digital age, you are a voter in the U.S.

VOTE

FOR ME

What Can I Do?

Understand the information that companies have collected on you and how it may be used to persuade you

Send an email to your Representative or Senator asking for updated federal election campaign laws

Support tech companies that are taking positive steps toward digital ethics

A Prediction of the Near Future

1. Smart devices collect data on you

You know how much the music you listen to or your social media habits, and your devices know your behavior when you’re not there.

2. Political consulting firms use psychographics to predict your personality

They use psychographics to design advertising campaigns based on their pre-existing biases, then manipulate election results.

3. You are shown machine-generated, hyper-personalized ads

Political advertising and social media are merging. Machine-generated ads can be personalized to your tastes and interests.

4. You vote (or you don’t)

Your vote may be decided by your spending habits or Facebook likes and dislikes. You may be denied the right to vote.

Imminent Attack on Democracy

No public debate

Everyone shares access to the same information; there is no public debate or discussion. Instead, advertisers release their message and politicians make personal attacks.

Lack of accountability

When political messages can be personalized to your tastes and interests, it’s nearly impossible to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

A different type of politician

Political elections have always been greatly influenced by money, but in today’s digital age, you are a voter in the U.S.

What made the difference in the 2016 election was not what the candidates said, but how it may be used to persuade you.

The Internet of Things

The Internet of Things is 10 billion devices connected to the IoT in 2015. By 2020, there will be 50 billion devices connected to the IoT.

AI-Generated Advertising

Artificial intelligence can now change behavior in an instant. AI-generated advertising uses technology and data to manipulate your emotions and actions. It’s like being on a reality show that you don’t know you’re on.

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Artificial Intelligence Meets Advertising

Political candidates already collect thousands of data points on every voter. New artificial intelligence technologies will allow politicians to use personal data to create social media advertisements that are hyper-personalized to an individual’s political views and prejudices.

Everything from the copy, the font, and the color scheme will be machine-generated to evoke a desired response from the recipient of the ad.

This is what it will look like:

**Working together toward health care reform**

Name: Karen Miller  
Age: 52  
Political party affiliation: Democratic  
Occupation: Accountant  
Religion: Catholic  
Marital status: Married  
Annual income: $85k

**Health care that Americans deserve**

Name: Samuel Ramos  
Age: 31  
Political party affiliation: Independent  
Occupation: Web developer  
Religion: Atheist  
Marital status: Unmarried  
Annual income: $75k

**WANT TO LOSE YOUR HEALTH CARE PLAN AND YOUR DOCTOR? THEN DON’T VOTE FOR ME**

Name: Ahmad Naser  
Age: 63  
Political party affiliation: Republican  
Occupation: Psychiatrist  
Religion: Muslim  
Marital status: Divorced  
Annual income: $190k

**let’s imagine a future of health care for all**

Name: Katie Lin  
Age: 24  
Political party affiliation: Democratic  
Occupation: Product designer  
Religion: Buddhist  
Marital status: Unmarried  
Annual income: $65k

**A bright future of health care is ahead**

Name: Jasmine Aria  
Age: 36  
Political party affiliation: Republican  
Occupation: Retail manager  
Religion: Atheist  
Marital status: Married  
Annual income: $70k

**I care about health care**

Name: Tyler Bateman  
Age: 19  
Political party affiliation: Democratic  
Occupation: Student  
Religion: Christian  
Marital status: Unmarried  
Annual income: N/A
Exhibit at the Thomas P. Kelly Student Art Gallery
(Presented at LMU’s 11th Annual Undergraduate Research Symposium)
Interactive Component of the Exhibit