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

Julian Kehle
juliankehle@comcast.net

Samir Naimi
Loyola Marymount University, snaimi@lmu.edu

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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 how we conduct politics. Political advertisements now use 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 political advertising is hyper-personalized: digital marketing that targets vulnerable citizens and manipulates the masses.

A Recipe for Disaster

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

1. **Psychographics**
   - Psychographics is a term used to describe a system of identifying and categorizing people based on their personality traits and behaviors. This system can be used to predict how individuals will react to political campaigns.

2. **The Internet of Things**
   - The Internet of Things (IoT) refers to the network of physical objects embedded with sensors, software, and connectivity. These objects collect data on users' personalities and emotional states, which can be used to create hyper-personalized ads.

3. **AI-Generated Advertising**
   - Artificial intelligence is being used to create advertising that adapts to individual preferences and behaviors. This allows for targeted marketing campaigns that can influence voters.

A Prediction of the Near Future

1. **Smart devices collect data on you**
   - Your phone knows what you’ve been using. Your personal information and your preferences are known when you use services like Facebook. The more information you provide, the more targeted the ads you see will be.

2. **Political consulting firms use psychographics to predict your personality**
   - Political consulting firms use data analytics to predict how voters will behave. This can involve analyzing behavioral patterns and personal characteristics to tailor messages to specific populations.

3. **You are shown machine-generated, hyper-personalized ads**
   - Political campaigns use data analytics to show individualized ads based on psychographics. These ads are finely-tuned to your personality and emotional state.

4. **You vote (or you don’t)**
   -Political advertising is becoming more personalized than ever before. There’s a high possibility that a political campaign will target you specifically and persuade you to vote for a candidate or a cause.

Inimmant Attack on Democracy

**No public debate**
- Everyone deserves access to the same information to engage in a healthy debate. However, political campaigns now use data analytics to control the narrative.

**Lack of accountability**
- When political narratives are controlled, it allows political parties to avoid responsibility for their actions. This can lead to a loss of transparency and reduce the effectiveness of public scrutiny.

What Can I Do?

1. Understand the information that companies have collected on you and how it may be used to persuade you
   - Learn about what data companies have collected about you, and how it's being used to influence your decisions.

2. Send an email to your representative or senator asking for updated federal election campaign laws
   - Request that your representative or senator take action to update laws that govern political campaign advertising.

Support tech companies that are taking positive steps toward digital ethics
- Support companies that prioritize user privacy and data protection.
- Invest in companies that prioritize ethical practices and responsible data use.

A different type of politician
- The rise of political consultants and data analytics has made traditional politicians less relevant. New forms of digital campaigning are emerging to take advantage of these technologies.

TRUTH-O-METER
- Politicians no longer see you as a voter. You’re a data point to them.
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:

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

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

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

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

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

- **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