Politics in the Facebook era: Examining the effects of voter ‘micro-targeting’ in the 2016 US presidential election

By Michela Redoano

The ways we access news and, with it, the nature of political communication have radically changed since the advent of social media. Predictive analytics provide social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, with new tools for targeting voters at extremely granular levels.
Political micro-targeting via Facebook was particularly effective when based on ideology, gender and educational level, but much less so when based on race or age.
Facebook Marketing API, an ethical and completely privacy-preserving technology, provides novel and highly valuable data in this pursuit; the computer science literature has used this technology to address important socio-economic problems, such as the gender divide worldwide.

We employ this measure to investigate: (i) how intensely the presidential campaigns micro-targeted politically relevant audiences on Facebook, and (ii) what effect, if any, such campaigns had on voters who relied on social media for their political news. The Facebook price data measure the intensity of political campaigns at the audience level. To complete the analysis and to estimate the effect of such campaigns on individual voting outcomes, we exploit the American National Election Survey database (ANES 2017) to derive measures of exposure to Facebook political campaigns based on respondents’ Facebook habits. We then match each respondent to Facebook audiences based on demographic, political and location details, and we compute a personalised measure of treatment to political campaign on Facebook.

Overall, reading political news on Facebook affects our voting choices. Our study indicates that advertising on Facebook is an effective way to persuade and mobilise voters, but this effect only surfaced in the direction favouring Mr Trump. In the context of the 2016 US presidential elections, we find that political micro-targeting was particularly effective when based on ideology, gender and educational level, but much less so when based on race or age.

More specifically, targeted Facebook campaigning increased turnout among core Republican voters, but not among Democrats or independent voters. Figure 1 plots the differential marginal effect of campaign exposure on voter turnout between regular Facebook users and non-users as a function of campaign intensity for three groups of potential voters: Democrats, Republicans and swing voters (i.e., the moderate, undecided or uninterested voters). The results show a clear positive effect of the Facebook campaign on turnout among Republican supporters, but not on the other two groups (Democrats and swing voters). Our estimates indicate that exposure to political ads on Facebook increases the likelihood of voting by between 5 percent and 10 percent. Note that this difference vanishes as the campaign became less intense. This suggests that Trump (or someone on his side) was effective in mobilising his core supporters to turn out.

The findings show that Facebook ads persuaded undecided voters to support Donald Trump, and persuaded Republican supporters to turn out on election day. By contrast, ads to support Hillary Clinton had no effect.
A second finding indicates that targeted Facebook campaigning increased the probability that a previously non-aligned voter would vote for Trump; as shown in Figure 2, if the voter used Facebook regularly, this probability increased by at least 5 percent. Similar effects emerged among those who do not have a university or college degree.

A third result shows that this micro-targeting was ineffective for Clinton, failing to boost turnout or to sway voters in her favour, (Figure 3).
Further results show that targeted Facebook campaigning appears to have reduced the probability of a voter changing his mind about which candidate to support. This was true among males, those without a college education, and those who initially declared themselves to be aligned with the Republican party. These findings provide support for the hypothesis that exposure to social media strengthens polarisation. Our analysis also suggests that reading political ads on Facebook does not make individuals more politically informed, but accessing news on newspapers and surfing the Internet does – as evidenced by a simple test we employed to measure respondents’ improvement in political knowledge during the US presidential campaign.

Overall, our results show that social media effectively empowered politicians to influence key groups of voters in electoral races. These findings provide further evidence that recent political outcomes, such as Brexit and the election of President Trump, might be largely due to the effective use of data analytics.

Footnotes

1 publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1630/163002.htm.
3 For a list see sites.google.com/site/michelaredoano/media.

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References

Though Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has said it is “crazy” to think that Facebook ads swayed the vote, new research shows that the social platform had a significant effect on the 2016 US presidential election.