Election 2020: Political Advertising and Social Media

By Marietje Schaake and Rob Reich

VOTERS ARE BEING INUNDATED WITH POLITICAL ADVERTISING on social media and online platforms during the 2020 election season. Campaigns, PACs and third parties have added new tools and tactics for gathering data on voters and targeting them with advertising, and now they can pinpoint niches of potential voters on social media in ways unknown in prior election cycles.

Where once advertising conveyed reasons to vote for a candidate, now it frequently aims to convey misinformation, undermine trust, and depress turnout. The risk is that the spread of misinformation through such means could influence the U.S. vote, cast doubt on the democratic process and raise suspicions about the accuracy of the election outcome. Twitter and Facebook have made some last-minute policy changes to establish some guardrails against the unlimited use of political ads.

This issue of online political advertising is one of the topics in the eight-week Stanford University course, "Technology and the 2020 Election: How Silicon Valley Technologies Affect Elections and Shape Democracy." The joint class for Stanford students and Stanford's Continuing Studies Community enrolls a cross-generational population of more than 400 students from around the world.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The digital age and Silicon Valley technologies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of the political debate and politics, including electioneering and campaign advertising.

- As reflected in the Cambridge Analytical scandal, political consultants can now wield microtargeting for political misinformation or disinformation purposes.

- Moving forward, a principle-based set of regulations would be helpful to deal with social media technologies and trends during election cycles and beyond.

The October 14 class session on "Political Advertising and Microtargeting" featured guest experts Heidi Tworek and Matt Rivitz. Tworek is an associate professor of international history and public policy at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and researcher of media, health communications, international organizations, and transatlantic relations. Rivitz started the Sleeping Giants Twitter account shortly after the 2016 election to persuade companies to remove advertisements from far-right news outlets.

Introduction

Political advertising and mobilization is not a new phenomenon, harkening back to the age of pamphleteering and the newspapers well before TV changed mass media consumption habits and political campaigns. In 1952, a turning point occurred when presidential candidate and war hero Dwight Eisenhower purchased television ads designed to portray him in favorable terms.

Since then, political advertising has evolved considerably, with a growing emphasis on negative or smear campaigns, which are considered legal in the context of First Amendment protections of speech.

In recent years, federal campaign finance laws have regulated political ads on traditional media channels. One may recall TV ads that close with the tagline, "I'm George Bush, and I approve this message," for example. Those regulations do not apply to political advertisements paid for by people or organizations not formally connected to a candidate – and these unaffiliated messages have proliferated on social media.

Discussion

The digital age, social media and search companies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of ordinary democratic politics. The primary reasons include:

• The 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* case changed campaign finance rules by equating money with speech. This transformed campaign finance restrictions by equating money with speech and thereby enabling corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited funds on political ads.

• Campaign data science teams can assemble data-rich profiles of people to target with particular messages and then create extraordinarily detailed voter profiles in order to maintain and sustain interest in a particular candidate.

• Online issue ads and advocacy advertising in 2020 have far surpassed prior campaign electioneering methods. Now, digital technology allows communication to a wide audience at nearly zero cost when posting information rather than paying for advertising.

• As reflected in the Cambridge Analytical scandal, political professionals can wield microtargeting for political misinformation or disinformation purposes in order to cloud the minds of people who might vote, get them to stay home, undermine trust in election procedures, or lose confidence in their preferred candidates.

During the 2016 campaign, Facebook's chief security officer Alex Stamos discovered that Russian operatives spent about $100,000 to buy 3,000 ads meant to benefit then-presidential candidate Donald Trump by sowing racial divisions. These were issue ads that didn't mention Trump by name, so they were not required to be reported to the Federal Election Commission.

A relatively small investment of money on online ads can have a massively outsized payoff. The number of impressions these ads garner is multiplied when the people who received them share the content with their friends and contacts, making viral content out of initially small amounts of political advertising.

As a result, paid content can become organic viral content – and the methods of paying for such content is now even more complex. When Michael Bloomberg was a Democratic candidate in the presidential primary, he hired social media influencers to create their own content that praised him. So, instead of paying for a political ads by handing money over to a platform, Bloomberg instead funded influencers to create seemingly authentic content – but in a contractual sense – aimed at boosting his image.

Simply banning political advertising may inadvertently give incumbents re-election advantages, rather than giving opportunities to relatively unknown political newcomers.

During this election season, domestic political groups are adapting tactics that they've learned from the foreign actors who intervened in the 2016 election. For instance, the Trump-aligned Freedom Works group created by the billionaire Koch brothers has already promoted 150 Facebook ads directing people to a page with a picture of LeBron James denouncing poll closures as racist. The purpose was to deceive people into thinking James was discouraging people to vote by mail. After the Washington Post reported this, Facebook removed the page for violating its voter interference policy, but by then, the ad had already been viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

Unlike TV ads required to say a particular candidate approved this advertisement, no similar disclosure

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messages are mandated for the overwhelming majority of political ads on social media platforms.

Some policy changes have been made. Twitter banned political ads roughly a year ago and Facebook recently announced that it would temporarily suspend all political advertising in the period after the November 3, 2020 election.

One nuance is that political incumbents usually have a significant advantage in an upcoming election because they have name recognition and access to other media outlets if they cannot use political ads on social media. So, banning political advertising could systematically advantage incumbents. Also, experienced campaign teams could employ other creative methods to effectively reach internet users despite political ad limitations. Challengers often need to use political ads in order to build awareness and name recognition.

In Canada, a framework for greater election security is offered in the Elections Modernization Act of 2019, which addresses the role of third parties in elections by creating spending limits during an election campaign and requiring third parties to report on their activities and advertising during elections. Political parties and third parties now must identify themselves in ads during election campaigns, and publishing or making false statements is prohibited.

Transparency and disclosure are key issues for social media companies to improve in general, and specifically as part of political campaigns in this highly technological

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age where voters encounter vast amounts of information online. Stronger governmental oversight of social media platforms would be a starting point. Otherwise, social media platforms are creating their own rules without actual transparency and accountability.

Microtargeting of ads on social media is another characteristic of the impact of social media on political advertisements. The use of collected data to target voters is more impactful than in the bygone days of print subscriber lists as it offers highly precise targeting on vast scales across multiple platforms. Now, people seeking to persuade voters can narrowly segment and target people down to, for example, their zip code, housing block, gender, hobbies, likes, media consumption and search results.

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Final Thoughts

As the 2020 election enters its final chapter, public pressure is increasing to address the power of social media companies in shaping political debate. The Pew Research Center notes that 54% of the American public is in favor of social media platforms banning political ads, and 77% of them believe data collected on users should not be allowed for political ad targeting.

In 2021, Congress is due to consider several bills that could remedy some of these issues – the bipartisan Designing Accounting Safeguards to Help Broaden Oversight and Regulations on Data Act and the Banning Microtargeted Political Ads Act.

Both civil organizations and policymakers can put pressure on large corporate advertisers to not associate their brands with particular kinds of negative speech and content posted on online platforms. Sleeping Giants uses this model and is also part of the larger #StopHateForProfit campaign led by civil rights leaders in an effort to persuade social media companies to ban hateful messages. For scholars and experts, it's important to obtain more empirical information on the effects of online political ads, microtargeting and content.

Moving forward, a principle-based set of regulations would be helpful to deal with social media technologies and trends during election cycles and beyond. Such an approach should be based on nondiscrimination, fairness, privacy, transparency, information access,

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the integrity of the democratic process, human rights, security, justice and accountability. Finally, oversight bodies need to be equipped with the proper resources to enforce these measures.

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The views expressed in this issue brief reflect the views of the authors.

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