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A Response to Working Hypothesis: Internet and Politics 2008

Essay by Sunshine Hillygus, December 9, 2008 in response to Internet and Politics 2008: Moving People, Moving Ideas

Additional responses include: *The New Activism: Why Volunteering Declined in Campaign 08*, by Ari Melber, *Participation and Polarization in the Networked Public Sphere*, by Henry Farrell, *The Revolution of the Online Commentariat*, by Peter Daou, *Not the Digital Democracy We Ordered*, by Matthew Hindman, and *From the Bottom-Up: Using the Internet to Mobilize Campaign Participation*, by Dana Fisher.

An emerging social science literature has examined the impact of new information technologies on electoral politics. Research has shown, for instance, that new technologies have transformed the way citizens acquire political information, discuss the political realm, and participate in political activity. Others have traced changes in the way candidates communicate with voters, raise money, and try to make political news. Fundamentally, however, most research on the topic has focused on how information technology has changed the style, but not necessarily the substance of political campaigns. In our recently published book, The Persuadable Voter (Princeton University Press, 2008), Todd Shields and I argue that new technologies have shaped not only how candidates communicate with voters but also who they communicate with and what they are willing to say.

In particular, the ability to microtarget communications to small segments of the electorate—through direct mail, email, text messages, personalized website ads, and so on—has led to dog whistle politics, in which candidates communicate messages that can be heard only by intended targets, like the high-pitched dog whistle that can be heard by dogs but is not audible to the human ear. By microtargeting controversial messages, candidates don't have to worry about alienating voters who disagree. As a consequence, we see a very different policy agenda communicated in the "ground war" than in the "air war." In the 2004 presidential election, for instance, less than 1% of television ads talked about divisive issues like gay marriage, abortion, stem cell research, and the like. In contrast, more than 25% of the direct mail sent by the candidates and parties mentioned such issues.

Such microtargeting is possible because campaigns have created massive databases that include information about every registered voter in the country. The cornerstone of these databases is the voter registration file, which typically includes a voter's name, address, party registration, vote history, and other information. Since the 2002 Help America Vote Act , this information has been compiled into computerized, statewide electronic files. Matched to these files are information from consumer databases, census files, political polls, and other sources. Campaigns then use this information to statistically predict who will turnout, how they are likely to vote, and what issues they care about. This allows campaign strategists to more efficiently and effectively target their communications. This means that individuals unlikely to vote or unlikely to vote for the candidate are completely ignored. And the all-important persuadable voters can be targeted with messages only on the issues on which they agree with candidate. As a result, campaign dialogue is fragmented, with different voters receiving very different campaign messages.

Some politicos and academics have called microtargeting a welcome development in American politics. It's thought that personalized contact might increase interest and participation in the electorate. Microtargeted communications have been credited with engaging citizens because they connect with voters based on the issues they care about the most. Unfortunately, microtargeting has potential negative consequences as well.

The ability to microtarget creates incentives for candidates to focus attention on the issues that will help them win a particularized segment of the electorate, irrespective of whether those issues are a concern to the broader electorate. It is hard to imagine that snowmobiling policy topped the public's list of political concerns in 2006, for instance, but the Republican National Committee targeted working-class snowmobilers with the message that the Democrats' environmental views stood in the way of better snowmobiling opportunities.

Microtargeting also has implications for the quality of public dialogue in the campaign. Targeted voters receive information about the issues they care about but may be unaware of the other issue priorities being targeted to others. In 2004, the Bush and Kerry campaigns took positions on at least 75 different issues in direct mail. The electorate clearly did not have a thoughtful, sustained, or public debate on each of these issues.

The fragmentation of campaign dialogue also makes it difficult to interpret the eventual election outcomes. Any interpretation of what the election was 'about' will be incomplete because there was a multiplicity of policy agendas presented by the candidates. And there may be negative implications for governing as well. Presidents often hope to use their electoral 'mandates' as leverage to implement their campaign promises. Unfortunately, a fragmented and diverse policy agenda undermines the potential for an election to signify public support for any particular policy. The strategic decisions that help candidates win elections do not always translate into successful governing coalitions. Voters supporting different policy interests might come together temporarily for electoral purposes, but their solidarity will be severely tested when it comes to policy-making. Once the pressure of governing becomes real, electoral coalitions are likely to break, leaving the governing party without substantial leverage to accomplish their goals.

There is little doubt that information technologies have transformed electoral politics in many ways – and in many ways for the good. But we must also consider some of the potentially negative consequences of such transformations on the basic interaction between candidates and citizens in the democratic process.

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