

## DATA-DRIVEN MICROTARGETING

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### Definition

Data-driven microtargeting refers to the granular targeting of voter groups and even individual voters through online ads and other more subtle appeals, based on comprehensive data as well as an accurate interpretation of it through psychological or other profiling methods and models (Kruschinski & Haller 2017). Political microtargeting can be defined as a particular political communication strategy located in the intersection of a) segmentifying specific voter groups (and even individuals), b) tailoring messages according to these segments and, c) conveying messages to these groups (or individuals) (van Dalen 2024). Since microtargeting is deployed to interact with different individuals in large groups, it can work most efficiently through digital and algorithmic means. Data-driven microtargeting in politics, therefore, is a method of digitally (or algorithmically) modified propaganda based on digital traces, detailed data and profiling that does not only target specific voter segments but also constantly tests effectiveness of this communication based on digital means (Baldwin-Philippi 2017; Lavigne 2022). Data-driven microtargeting can also be defined as a type of personalized political communication based on digital data and means (Decker 2025).

### Context

With the development of political marketing, opinion polls as well as advertising, since the 1930s, economic and political entrepreneurs have faced situations that require targeting specific consumer and voter groups with different messages. They deployed data from various conventional sources to tailor their messages accordingly, even before the upraising of digital data (Sosnik et al. 2006). In commercial realms, the need to appeal to individual tastes gained a new economic importance, following the rise of flexible production and post-fordism. These transformations required “microtargeting” strategies in commercial marketing (Agan 2007). With the rise of social media and new online surveillance capacities companies and political parties started to obtain huge amounts of data, not only on clusters of people but also about individuals and their online searches and behaviours. This transformation triggered a debate on “microtargeting” in politics as early as mid-2000s with scholarly and journalistic attention focusing on the sophisticated use of digital data in American presidential elections (Howard 2006; Shaw et al. 2024).

Data-driven microtargeting works with similar principles embraced by social media platforms and the broader “surveillance capitalism”: digitally accumulating huge amounts of behavioural data about individual users, accurately interpreting the psychological and behavioural patterns in this data and algorithmically providing incentives to direct current or future behaviour for preferred goals such as keeping the user for longer periods of time on the platform and directing them for particular consumer choices (Zuboff 2019). These digital techniques are increasingly deployed for political purposes. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is emblematic in this respect, showing that the political consultancy firm was illegally collecting personal data in order to analyse voter's psychological profiles and send personalized political messages during the 2016 US Presidential campaign (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison 2018).

The problem with the data-driven microtargeting is that its effective use depends on considerable resources and mostly resource-rich political contenders and established parties may fully benefit from this strategy. Therefore, data-driven microtargeting may deepen problems of resource asymmetry in democratic settings (Anstead 2017; Kruchinski & Haller 2017), even though its smart and efficient use may provide new and/or minor parties and actors with a competitive edge (Kreiss 2017). However, most notably in semi-democratic regimes, it can be expected that microtargeting may deepen the “uneven playing field” since incumbents in these regimes tightly control resources as well as the institutional context (Levitsky & Way 2002). Although evidence is scant, data-driven microtargeting may also be useful for autocratic incumbents in need of information regarding the attitudes towards the autocratic regimes among the citizenry in more hegemonic and barely competitive political systems (Kalathil 2020). More hegemonic autocratic regimes may use microtargeting for identifying vulnerable segments of population to regime propaganda and broadening the regimes’ support base.

Democracies aim at controlling microtargeting by regulating the use of personal data and advertising or by protecting the freedom of expression (Dobber et al. 2019). Although the risks posed by microtargeting for democracy is widely discussed (Zuiderveen Borgesius 2018), the alarmism around it may be exaggerated since the evidence regarding its electoral effectiveness is still debatable (Baldwin-Philippi 2017). One of the problems with political microtargeting and broader tailored personalized political communication, however, is that it may become one of the factors that undermines a shared public sphere that has facilitated mass democracy so far by confining voters into self-referential individual echo-chambers (Bayer 2020).

### **Related terms**

Data-driven campaign; Deepfakes; Digital engagement; Digital party; Digital sovereignty; Online Disinformation; Personalization; Platform politics; Virtual communities

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