The persuasiveness of political targeting

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Chapter 6

Through the Looking-Glass, and What We Found There

Discussion and conclusion

As O'Shaugnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2003, p. 9) point out: "Information on the target audience is like headlights to the night driver; they illuminate the road ahead but do not eliminate the need for good judgement." This quote highlights the essential role of both voter data and strategic decision-making in successful political campaigns. Just as a driver must select the appropriate beam, be mindful of their destination, anticipate potential hazards, and adapt to changing traffic conditions, political campaigners must also determine whom to target, understand the impacts of their targeting, be cognizant of the potential backlash from (mis)targeting, and be aware of the dynamic effects of advertising over time. Based on an extensive literature review and three empirical studies, this dissertation advances our understanding of the persuasiveness of (repeated) exposure to targeted political advertising. It addresses a more nuanced prediction of voters' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses during the dynamic stages of a political campaign and thereby contributes to the development of more effective political communication strategies.

In this chapter, I will integrate and critically discuss the findings from the literature review in Chapter 2 and three empirical studies in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. This synthesis will highlight intersecting implications, which could offer deeper insights into the persuasiveness of political targeting in the digital era. Subsequently, I will elucidate the theoretical, methodological, and societal implications of these findings in a broader sense, discussing how this dissertation contributes to existing frameworks and theories within the academic discourse and how the knowledge generated through this dissertation may influence policymaking, industry practices, and public understanding. In the final section, I will critically reflect on the limitations inherent in the scopes of the three empirical studies and how these limitations inform future research directions, particularly during the evolving media landscape shaped by artificial intelligence.

Discussing the results

Reflecting on the framework, propositions, and literature review in Chapter 2, this section will discuss the results of the three empirical studies from four key perspectives. First, to provide an overview of the contextual background, I discuss

the use of political targeting in the Netherlands based on the donated voter data in Chapters 3 and 4. Second, I discuss the effects of repeated exposure to online political ads to understand how the frequency of ad exposure persuades voting behavior and how individual-level characteristics moderate this persuasiveness (Chapter 3). Third, I address the effects of the congruence between the issues discussed in an ad and the voters' interests and concerns on vote choice, along with the underlying mechanisms (Chapter 4). Fourth, I evaluate the effectiveness of different combinations of party-based and issue-based targeting to determine which approach yields stronger persuasion outcomes, as well as examine the temporal evolution of voter response states (Chapter 5). This comprehensive discussion integrates empirical findings with theoretical insights to offer a nuanced understanding of the persuasiveness of political targeting.

The use of political targeting in the Netherlands

Before discussing the empirical evidence regarding the persuasiveness of political targeting, it is essential to first examine the descriptive statistics pertaining to the actual utilization of political targeting observed in real-life election campaigns. This will provide a clearer context for understanding the subsequent discussion on political targeting's effects. Chapters 3 and 4 each utilized different methodologies during the 2021 Dutch General Election to study political advertising across various online platforms and channels. Together, these chapters provide a view of the strategies and reach of online political advertising.

Chapter 3 employed browser tracking to meticulously record the total number of Facebook ad exposures from various parties over the course of two and a half months leading up to election day. Consistent with US findings (Ridout et al., 2021), the data revealed a similar trend in the Netherlands: as election day approached, the average number of ads received by participants increased, reaching a peak the day before the election. The quantity of Facebook political ads between established and new political parties also differentiated. Notably, three of the seven new parties did not engage in any political advertising on Facebook, compared to only three out of the fifteen established parties. This distinction underscores that, in the Netherlands, establishing parties still dominate in the adoption of online political advertising, while new parties may lack either the resources or the strategic framework to leverage these digital platforms as effectively (Gibson & McAllister, 2015).

Chapter 4 implemented a mobile experience sampling method to capture political ads that voters encountered daily across various devices, platforms, and channels. This method offered a broader scope compared to the browser tracking method used in Chapter 3, which was limited to capturing political content on Facebook. Similarly to Chapter 3, Chapter 4 also noted an escalation in the volume of ads as election day approached. Additionally, this study investigated the strategies of political targeting employed in these ads and observed that, in this particular setup, issue-based targeting was not prominent during this election. In other words, voters did not necessarily receive online political ads only concerning issues they considered important. This observation aligns with other studies suggesting that Facebook ads tend to be less focused on specific issues compared to television ads (Fowler, Franz, & Ridout, 2021). This pattern suggests that in the digital realm, political parties and online advertising platforms either tend to deemphasize issue-related targeting or are less able to effectively engage in such targeting.

Chapter 3: Repeated exposure affects voting behavior, with a greater effect on the less-resourced

The literature review in Chapter 2 reveals a significant gap concerning repeated exposure to targeted political ads, which is often overlooked in static research designs. To address this gap, Chapter 3 employed a browser tracker and panel surveys to examine the impact of the quantity of repeated exposure to online political ads from a specific party on voter behavior. The findings reveal that an increase in exposure to online ads promoting a specific political party has a positive, but small, impact on the likelihood of an individual voting for that party. It aligns with the persuasive impacts attributed to visibility in media coverage (Hopmann et al., 2010), and also resonates with the small average effects generally associated with political advertising (Coppock et al., 2020). This finding serves as a crucial foundation for subsequent empirical research on the effects of specific campaigning strategies.

Additionally, considering the previous literature's oversight of the role that individual-level developmental factors play in the persuasiveness of political advertising, Chapter 3 addresses this gap by investigating the conditional effects of voters' political knowledge and online privacy literacy. It is found that the effect of political ads on vote choice tends to be more pronounced among voters with lower levels of political knowledge and online privacy literacy. In other words, less

knowledgeable and literate voters are more susceptible to the influence of repeated exposure to persuasive advertising messages. This offers insights not only into the conditional persuasiveness of online political advertising across different voter groups but also into the potential targeting criteria based on the developmental characteristics of voters. Overall, this refines the understanding of digital campaign strategies and contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of democratic engagement in the digital age.

Chapter 4: Congruency affects persuasiveness through cognitive mechanisms

The literature review in Chapter 2 found that existing literature in the field has mainly focused on researching the effects of targeting demographic voter data such as age, gender (Haenschen & Jennings, 2019; Holman et al., 2015; Winfrey et al., 2014), ethnic identity (Elder & Phillips, 2017; Hersh & Schaffner, 2013; Ostfeld, 2017), and psychometrics (Krotzek, 2019; Zarouali et al., 2020), while very few have examined targeting based on issue preferences. Chapter 4 employed a hybrid approach, combining a mobile experience sampling method and panel surveys, to examine the impact of issue-based targeting on vote choice through cognitive and affective responses. The results reveal that although a single exposure to issue-based targeting does not directly secure voter support in the election, the perception of ads does. This indirect effect underscores that the persuasiveness of issue-based targeting is not inherent in the ad itself but rather in how this content is perceived by the voters. Voters perceive online political ads that address issues of concern to them as more interesting, informative, and persuasive, irrespective of which party sponsors the ads. This means that when an issue is personally relevant, voters react positively to the ad regardless of their party identification. Additionally, issue-based targeting only elicits a positive affective evaluation of the promoted party when the party is already favored by the voter. This indicates that affective responses are impacted by the ad source and that targeting both party and issue preferences yields the most positive affective reactions. The findings support our assumption and align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), suggesting that online ads that tailor their content to match voters' interests can enhance persuasiveness through cognitive engagement, following the central route, while affective responses are triggered by the ad source and are processed through the peripheral route.

Chapter 5: Combining yields more persuasive targeting

The theoretical framework presented in the literature review in Chapter 2 posits the need to assess individual-level response dynamics associated with political targeting. Findings in Chapters 3 and 4 highlight that exposure to political ads increases the likelihood of voting for the promoted party, especially when voters have a positive perception of each congruent ad. Following the prior chapters, Chapter 5 employed a longitudinal experiment to assess the effects of distinct combinations of party- and issue-based targeting and mistargeting in a dynamic manner.

Overall, political targeting significantly leads to more positive ad perceptions compared to mistargeting. Among various targeting approaches, a combination of party- and issue-based targeting yields the most positive ad perceptions compared to using solely party-based or issue-based targeting. The least positive ad perceptions are associated with a combination of party- and issue-based mistargeting, which is in line with the findings from a vignette study (Vliegenthart et al., 2024). Interestingly, the results also reveal no significant difference in ad perceptions between exposure to solely party-based targeting and issue-based targeting; that is, voters find an ad targeting either their party identification or their issue position to be equally interesting, informative, and persuasive. A possible explanation for this finding lies in the dynamic nature of the Dutch political landscape, where parties frequently update their stances, and new parties emerge while existing ones may either split or merge. This fluidity leads to variations in voter behavior across different elections, coupled with comparatively weak party loyalty among the electorate.

Furthermore, Chapter 5 explores the temporal dynamics of repeated exposure to targeted and mistargeted political ads. The longitudinal experiment assessed the trajectory in ad perception as participants were repeatedly exposed to distinct combinations of targeting or mistargeting. The results indicate a positive quadratic trajectory in the development of ad perceptions with repeated exposure to online political ads, applicable to both successful targeting and mistargeting. In other words, across all targeting practices, ad perceptions generally decline daily at a diminishing rate and later increase. This shows a significant departure from prior studies demonstrating a negative curvilinear relationship associated with repeated exposure due to ad fatigue. An explanation is that combining repeated exposure with longer interstimulus intervals may mitigate wearout effects, which

underscores the need for taking into account the temporal factors when studying the underlying processes that contribute to mere exposure effects.

Implications

In this section, I will first discuss how this dissertation contributes to the existing body of literature and theoretical frameworks. Subsequently, I will explore the implications of political targeting on democratic processes, as well as provide recommendations for political parties and other stakeholders on how to implement political targeting strategies effectively to encourage well-informed decision-making among voters and contribute to a healthy democracy.

Theoretical implications

Overall, this dissertation affirms significant, albeit small, persuasive impacts of political advertising, aligning with existing research (Coppock et al., 2020). Although these effects are small in magnitude, they can lead to substantial differences in electoral outcomes. This dissertation operationalizes the measurement of electoral outcomes in a multi-party system using two distinct metrics: propensity to vote and actual vote choice. The findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between these two metrics in multi-party contexts, where the stability of the party system is often compromised by frequent new party formations, splits, and mergers. In such a fluid political landscape, voters may encounter multiple parties on the same side of the political spectrum, but ultimately, they make a singular, definitive vote choice. Even minimal shifts in voters' vote intention, induced by political advertising, can be pivotal in determining parties' allocation of seats in parliament. Hence, the small effects of political advertising warrant careful consideration due to their potential to influence parliamentary compositions in multi-party proportional systems. Meanwhile, the small positive effect of online political advertising on voting behavior is not limited to proportional systems but extends to majoritarian systems. In tightly contested elections typical of majoritarian contexts, even minor shifts in voter preferences can be decisive. Here, the small effects of political advertising can be crucial in reinforcing support among base voters and swaying undecided voters, thereby potentially altering the overall election outcome.

In addition, political campaigns are not isolated attempts but continuous interactions, where voters constantly encounter diverse campaign messages from different parties leading up to election day. Given that a single exposure to a political campaign message is rarely effective in isolation, the importance of small effects is magnified when considered in the context of continuous exposure. Over repeated exposure, these small, cumulative effects can lead to substantial shifts in the political landscape. This research specifically investigates the effects of the quantity of repeated exposure to ads promoting a political party and the corresponding likelihood of voting for that party, providing robust support for the Mere Exposure Theory (Zajonc, 1968). This theory suggests a positive relationship between the frequency of exposure to a stimulus and an individual's preference for it. Building on this foundation, the dissertation further explores the temporal trajectory associated with repeated exposure, examining how the distribution of political advertising over time, as experienced in real-life media consumption, impacts the evolvement of voter responses. Contrary to prior research that points to potentially negative outcomes such as ad fatigue or wearout — which suggest diminishing returns or even adverse effects from repeated exposure — this dissertation found that the negative impacts of repeated exposure diminish over time. As voters become accustomed to receiving political information frequently, their responses to such ads may shift from negative to positive. This finding offers a novel perspective on the mere exposure effect and suggests that repeated exposure should be reevaluated over time to understand its full implications for voter behavior and campaign strategies.

Most importantly, this dissertation offers conclusions that define more persuasive targeting strategies, filling a critical gap in the literature regarding optimal targeted advertising strategies in the political arena. This dissertation addresses this question through a dual approach. First, the dissertation, through an application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in a political context, examines the process of issue appeals impacting voter responses, considering the moderating effect of party appeal. This dissertation confirms that the central processing route is activated when voters are exposed to political ads that discuss issues of high personal relevance and concern, thereby affecting vote choice through cognitive effort in processing the information. In contrast, the presence of a party as the ad source tends to moderate the effects of issue-based advertising on affective responses, indicating that the peripheral processing route is triggered when the ad

source is favored. This highlights that cognitive and affective response states should be evaluated separately because they inform decision-making in different ways (Millar & Tesser, 1989). By leveraging the insights from the Elaboration Likelihood Model, this distinction highlights that party-based and issue-based targeting engage different psychological mechanisms to influence voting behavior.

Second, this dissertation fills the gap regarding the effectiveness of various applications of targeting criteria. Drawing on insights from a literature review on online behavioral advertising (Boerman et al., 2017), the level of targeting is contingent on the number and type of personal data used for targeting. In terms of the most effective number of voter data targeted, this dissertation stands in contrast to previous research. While a study suggests that utilizing a single targeting criterion is the most effective (Gahn, 2024), this dissertation demonstrates that the combined use of both party-based and issue-based targeting strategies elicits more positive ad perceptions among voters. This divergence from prior research could be attributed to differences in the types of voter data under discussion, given that Gahn's study (2024) did not include both party identification and issue position as targeted voter data. Therefore, I argue that the integration of both party identification and issue positions in political ads appears to resonate more effectively with voters. Regarding the voter data targeted, this dissertation compares the effectiveness of party-based versus issue-based targeting. This dissertation found no significant differences in ad perceptions when only one of the two targeting strategies is present, indicating that both strategies may be equally effective. This adds depth to our understanding of the persuasiveness associated with the number and type of personal data used for targeting.

Societal implications

With the empirical evidence now at our disposal, here we reexamine the societal implications of political targeting. As discussed, political targeting acts as a double-edged sword. It has the potential to enlighten and mobilize voters, and to normalize inter-party competition; meanwhile, it also poses risks such as manipulating electoral outcomes and marginalizing certain political actors from democratic participation. In terms of the threats, the data donation approach utilized in this dissertation has provided insights into the actual practice of political targeting in real life. The descriptive statistics reveal that, under relatively more stringent EU regulations governing the use of personal data in political campaigns,

political targeting is not as sophisticated as theorized. Specifically, voters do not necessarily receive ads that are congruent with their party affiliations or specific issue preferences. On top of this, the persuasive impact of online political advertising in real-world scenarios is generally small. These findings invite a reevaluation of the perceived threats of political targeting and underscore the importance of continuing to monitor, assess, and refine targeting practices to safeguard the democratic process.

This dissertation also provides important insights into the persuasiveness of political targeting, offering guidelines for political practitioners using targeting strategies to mobilize political participation, inform citizens about political issues and standpoints, and allow for more effective messaging and efficient resource allocation throughout a campaign. Recommendations are twofold. First, the significance of issue-based targeting has been underscored. Digital techniques provide a unique opportunity to identify and communicate with voters who have congruent issue preferences, a potential that remains largely untapped. Despite the technological capabilities, current practices in online targeting often overlook issue-based appeals. Research indicates that Facebook ads tend to be more partisan and less focused on particular issues than their television counterparts (Fowler, Franz, & Ridout, 2021). To harness the full potential of online advertising, political campaigners and online platforms could make use of issue-based targeting. By focusing on issues that resonate personally with voters, campaigns can engage more deeply with their voters, fostering a better-informed electorate, encouraging more meaningful political discourse, and leading to more effective voter engagement, ultimately strengthening the democratic process.

Second, a deep understanding of how voters' perceptions in response to advertising messages evolve is essential for designing effective political campaign strategies. The data donation studies in this dissertation demonstrate that political parties typically intensify their advertising efforts in the one to two weeks leading up to election day, peaking on the final day. This timing suggests that parties believe this period is most effective for influencing voters through online ads. However, our findings indicate that voters' perceptions toward the ads change with repeated exposure, and likely experience a decrease at the beginning. An exploration of the trajectory of voters' ad responses over time could provide critical insights into the most effective and ineffective timing and frequency of ad placements. This may help parties' literacy campaigns to tailor their

communication strategies effectively, ensuring that messages are delivered at optimal times to maximize voter engagement. By understanding the dynamics of voter response to ads, political campaigns can better schedule their outreach efforts to avoid ad fatigue and enhance the overall impact of their messaging.

What lies ahead?

This dissertation opens up several new directions for further investigation. In this section, I will explore the potential research trajectories that have emerged from the findings as well as aspects that have not been examined within this dissertation. This exploration is vital for advancing the field and for understanding the broader implications of our current knowledge of the persuasiveness of political targeting.

The reciprocal process of political targeting

Media effects are dynamic and transactional. The principal takeaway from this dissertation is the dynamics of repeated exposure to targeted political ads. Our findings confirm that repeated exposure does indeed have persuasive effects, and these effects vary based on the frequency and timing of the ad exposure. However, we should note that political targeting represents a more sophisticated form of political campaigning. It involves not only repeated exposure but also the reciprocal processing of voter data. In other words, voter characteristics can be specifically targeted by politicians, which in turn alter or reinforce these characteristics. For example, using political targeting, a voter's response to prior ads can be collected as new voter data, which then informs the subsequent targeted ads. In such scenarios, targeting based on existing party identification can reinforce an individual's current party identification over this reciprocal process. Furthermore, individual-level characteristics such as political knowledge, party identification, and issue stances might also evolve through repeated exposure to targeted ads, leading to a more complex situation. Future research could employ agent-based modeling to simulate this process, thereby illustrating the potential changes at both the individual and societal level.

Grained use of targeting

This dissertation did not explore the sophisticated use of micro-targeting such as targeting complex psychometric data and more combinations of diverse voter data.

On the one hand, psychometric profiling, considered to be a highly potent targeting strategy, has attracted considerable attention in recent years. The effectiveness of this approach has shown mixed results across different electoral contexts. An experimental study in the US found no evidence that Facebook ads matching voters' personalities increased voting propensity (Krotzek, 2019). In contrast, a study in the Netherlands reported that online political ads customized to personality traits positively affected voting propensity (Zarouali et al., 2020). The varying results observed in studies on the effectiveness of psychometric targeting warrant further scholarly investigation with a comparative, cross-national approach. On the other hand, exploring diverse combinations of voter data beyond mere party and issue preferences could fill in gaps in our understanding of political targeting as a campaign strategy. This dissertation did not dig into these targeting strategies because such practices are not permitted in the EU and have rarely been identified in actual political campaigns. Nevertheless, the investigation into refined targeting strategies should continue, and the reasons are twofold. First, despite frequent regulatory updates aimed at tightening controls, their effectiveness often remains questionable. For instance, a study investigating how Meta enforces its political advertising policies in 16 European Union countries reveals substantial deficiencies (Bouchaud & Liénard, 2024). Over 60 percent of ads moderated as political by Meta did not align with its guidelines, and only 7.7 percent of undeclared political ads were moderated. Moreover, despite regulations prohibiting targeting based on sensitive categories such as race, ethnicity, religious views, and sexual orientation, political advertisers have devised methods to circumvent these restrictions. A study analyzing Facebook ads during the 2022 US midterm elections uncovered that political campaigners effectively bypassed the prohibition of sensitive targeting through the use of proxy attributes (Sapiezynski, Kaplan, Mislove, & Korolova, 2024). An example would be targeting users with an interest in specific cultural events that might indirectly reveal their ethnic background. This method allows campaigners to continue targeting specific voter information subtly, thus challenging regulations designed to prevent such practices. Second, the landscape of political campaigning is rapidly evolving with the advancement of artificial intelligence technologies over the past years, shifting from data-driven methods to AI-driven strategies, presenting new challenges and opportunities for the practice of political targeting. As technology evolves, the capacity for more precise voter segmentation and more personalized message tailoring can significantly shape

democratic outcomes. To effectively investigate these changing technologies, collaborations between technologists, political scientists, and ethicists are needed to provide a multidisciplinary perspective on the benefits and potential risks of AI-driven political campaigning.

Combining with other communication strategies

This dissertation, along with the broader scope of existing literature on related topic, has primarily focused on the utilization of voter data in political campaigns. Nevertheless, there is a pressing need for future research to delve deeper into how this voter data specifically influences the content of political ads. Political targeting, when combined with various other campaign strategies, unfolds as a complex and rich field for investigation. For example, recent studies have brought attention to the integration of voter targeting techniques with emerging generative AI technologies such as deepfakes and robocalls (Berghel, 2024; Dobber et al., 2021; Simchon, Edwards, & Lewandowsky, 2024). These technologies, when paired with targeted data, have the potential to reshape the structure of political communication in profound ways.

Moreover, as regulations become stricter, many online platforms have begun to step away from supporting political advertising. However, this does not mark the end of political advertising; rather, it continues to manifest in various other forms. This shift compels an exploration into alternative avenues through which political messaging is propagated, such as through indirect endorsements, sponsored content, or the strategic use of influencers and grassroots movements. The role of these content creators on social media platforms introduces another dimension to how political messages are crafted and disseminated, which adds layers of complexity to the modern political campaigning environment. This urges further scholarly attention and investigation to assess the impacts of all the paid and free publicity along with targeting strategies on democracy and public opinion formation in the digital age.

Final remarks

Political targeting is not a new phenomenon and is likely to persist as long as political campaigning exists. The essence of political targeting lies in the inherent

need for persuasion, which arises because voters are unique, each with their own identities and concerns. This diversity necessitates narratives to effectively communicate with different groups. The question then becomes: How can a narrative stand out to persuade targeted voters? The answer lies in connecting and resonating with voters' backgrounds, stories, and thoughts. There are straightforward approaches to targeting, such as reaching out to those who already support you. More strategic approaches involve connecting with those who share similar concerns or values. At its core, the logic of targeting is based on the principle of heterogeneity — identifying and engaging those who will respond more positively to specific stimuli than others. Effective political targeting thus involves several key steps: identifying characteristics of susceptible voters, locating voters who exhibit these characteristics, ensuring that these voters receive the message, and monitoring the dynamics of voter responses to adjust strategies accordingly. This process demonstrates the critical interplay between understanding voter diversity and implementing targeted communication strategies in political campaigns.

What has this dissertation uncovered? Political ads, in particular those targeting party and issue preferences, have a small, but positive impact on voters. More specifically, the frequency of exposure to ads promoting a political party directly correlates with increased persuasion among voters to support that party. For specific targeting criteria, aligning with voters' key issues garners persuasive effects through cognitive efforts to process the message, while connecting with voters' partisan identity achieves persuasion through affective responses to the ad source. Both strategies are effective; however, combining them elicits the most positive reactions to the message. When these strategies are assessed with repeated exposure, voters tend to perceive the ads congruent with both their party and issue preferences as more interesting, informative, and persuasive.

The implications of this dissertation significantly contribute to filling gaps in existing literature and charting new directions for forthcoming research. Indeed, political targeting is not a new topic, and its practice has become heavily regulated and lacks sophistication and accuracy. However, this should not deter ongoing discourse. As new voter data continually become available and innovative technologies emerge for tailoring messages, the landscape of political targeting is ever evolving. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for systematic comparative research that spans different countries and electoral contexts. These perspectives

associated with political targeting necessitate further investigation to provide new insights into how political targeting impacts contemporary democratic processes. Navigating this intricate terrain is akin to driving on a dark road where both the headlights and the driver's astute judgment are crucial for illuminating the path ahead and making well-informed decisions. The journey towards a deeper understanding and refinement of political targeting continues, with the destination still on the horizon.