Political science

with Professor Colin Bennett

Talking *points*

Comprehension

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks of political micro-targeting for voters, political parties and democratic processes?
2. What are the arguments for and against recording voters' fingerprints to verify their identity when they vote?

Application

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of social media (and their algorithms) for election campaigning?
4. In what ways could personal data on social media be abused by political parties and their candidates?

Analysis

5. Why do you think online 'echo chambers' have proliferated in recent years? What are the dangers of these? Consider political, psychological and business perspectives in your answer.

Evaluation

6. To what extent do you think that political parties and candidates should only communicate with voters who have consented to receive their messages?
7. Misinformation is becoming increasingly prevalent, which is damaging democratic processes. What measures do you think could be most effective in combating misinformation? Consider policy, technological, legal and financial mechanisms in your answer.
8. What do you think the 'perfect' system with regards to political parties' access to and use of personal data would look like? How would it be regulated?
9. What information about you exists online? How might a political party judge you based on your online presence?

Activity

Imagine you are leading an election campaign for a political party in your school, city or country. Write 10-15 statements that indicate your party's stance and aims for several topics (your party's statements do not necessarily have to follow your own personal beliefs). For instance:

- *"My party believes the school day should start 20 minutes later because research has shown that teenagers are less productive in the morning."*
- *"My party is committed to reducing homelessness through boosting social housing and rehabilitation services."*

Construct a survey that collects demographic information (e.g., gender, method and distance of travel to school, extracurricular activities, etc.) and asks respondents how likely (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely) they are to vote for your party based on each declaration.

Ask your classmates to anonymously complete your survey. Analyse the results and look for correlations between opinions of statements and demographic data. For example, are respondents with a garden more likely to support environmental initiatives? Do respondents who participate in lunchtime clubs support a longer lunch break?

How could you use this information to develop a micro-targeting campaign? How would you tailor your political messaging for different demographic groups?

Finally, consider the ethical implications of this exercise. Do you think that such data helps political parties cater specifically to voters' needs, or does it encourage them to mislead voters on certain issues?

More *resources*

- Find out more about Colin's work on privacy and digital technologies: **www.colinbennett.ca**
- Smith's website highlights privacy and surveillance issues in Africa: **www.privacyinafrica.com**
- This TEDx Talk explores the erosion of data privacy and the importance of informed consent for collecting data: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iPDpV8ojHA**
- This article explores the impacts and effects of micro-targeting in political campaigns: **news.mit.edu/2023/study-microtargeting-politics-tailored-ads-0621**
- Colin and Smith wrote a report about privacy, voter surveillance and democratic engagement: **privacyconference2019.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Privacy-and-International-Democratic-Engagement_finalv2.pdf**