The Effects of Modern Data Analytics in Electoral Politics: Cambridge Analytica's Suppression of Voter Agency and the Implications for Global Politics

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Introduction

Each technological revolution, such as the advent of radio, television, the internet, and social media, has informed how politics and people engage in democratic processes. The Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate became the focal point of one such revolution when radio listeners and television viewers were perceived to be divided on the outcome of the debate. To explain this, later research suggested that television viewers weighed personality, rather than policy, more heavily than radio listeners (Gershon 2016). This changed how voters chose candidates and thus how those candidates campaigned - it changed politics. Moreover, it highlighted the importance of technology in politics. This issue has proven itself perennial, and has today reached a point where the technologies of persuasion have become so capable that their use has been construed as information warfare by senior US national security officials (Cadwalladr 2018), and as a credible cyber-threat.

This paper maps the impacts of this modern technological revolution on individual, national and global politics. Specifically, this paper examines the effects of social media driven data analytics on voter micro targeting and electoral politics using Cambridge Analytica's (CA) involvement in the 2016 US Presidential election and the 2010 Trinidad and Tobago General election to illuminate the electoral strategies and outcomes associated with their use of new data analytical processes. It hypothesizes that, if unchecked, the voter targeting technologies employed by Cambridge Analytica erodes voter agency. This could have many spin off effects, however, this paper argues that it will likely embolden populism in the US and similarly democratic states as well as encouraging a withdrawal from globalism and economic integration more generally.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first defines data analytics and other key concepts in the context of this paper. The second is a case study of Cambridge Analytica's activities whose aim is to demonstrate that the voter targeting strategies that Cambridge Analytica developed in 2014 and 2015 are substantially more effective than previously existing strategies and thereby pose a greater threat to individual political agency. The third section discusses the relationship between voter agency and politics on a national and global scale.

Definitions and Context

Individualized and personalized data are terms to describe data that is tied to a specific and identifiable person. Unlike data collected through scientific and focus group study, personalized data can be used to target individuals rather than demographic groups. This allows for a far more granular approach political persuasion, whereby demographics can be sub-sectioned into smaller, more internally similar targets. This form of application of personalized data is called micro targeting.

Data analytics is broadly defined as the processing of data into usable conclusions about anything for which we collect data. However, in this paper, data analytics refers specifically to the processing of individualized personal data from sources such as Facebook, MasterCard, Google, and AT&T among others, and compiled by companies such as Cambridge Analytica, Axiom, and Oracle. The personalized data industry has primarily served commercial marketers who, for example, use Oracle's services to better target potential customers. However, it is the relatively recent breakthroughs in data processing methodologies and applications of these technologies in political campaigns that gives cause for this paper's examination of the subject.

Cambridge Analytica's inception and involvement in the U.S. and Trinidad and Tobago

Political campaigns have been targeting "swing" states and voters for quite some time. However, since the Bush W. presidency, data analytics has taken a significantly more prominent role in refining this strategy. This is owed in no small part to the emergence of social media and the vast expansion of individualized data collection and its availability. Furthermore, unlike television and internet news sites, social media provides a platform on which individualized ad campaigns can be brought to highly granularized audiences. During the 2016 US presidential election, Cambridge Analytica ran an estimated 4,000 distinct advertising campaigns each tailored specifically to a small, persuadable, and relatively homogeneous group of people (Persily 2017).

Founded by Steve Bannon and billionaire political activist Robert Mercer, Cambridge Analytica was a subsidiary of the SCL Group who self-describe as a "global election management agency" but whose defense arm specialized in "psychological warfare" (psyops) and "informational dominance" and held contracts with UK and US defense agencies (Cadwalladr, 2018). Methodologically, the company was based upon groundbreaking personality research from the Cambridge department of psychology titled: "Computer-based personality judgments are more accurate than those made by humans" (Youyou, Kosinski, and Stillwell 2015). Many security organizations showed significant interest in this research and its accompanying dataset, with Boeing and DARPA both ending up supporting the work of one of the study's original authors (Cadwalladr 2018).

Though Cambridge Analytica has tried to obfuscate their involvement in many political campaigns, most notably Leave.EU, two former high ranking employees, Research Director for the SCL group Christopher Wylie, and CA Director of program development Brittany Kaiser, have come forward as whistleblowers speaking before US and UK senate committees. Their testimonies have shed light on the internal motivations and activities of Cambridge Analytica and SCL, both of which are relevant to understanding the relationship CA shares with electoral politics.

Wylie, who worked personally with Steve Bannon, the CEO of Breitbart and chief campaign strategist for Trump, and was one of the data scientists primarily responsible for the creation of CA's targeting tools, alleges that Bannon and co-founder Mercer sought to bring established military methodology regarding information operations to data analytics. The reason for this, as Wylie puts it, was Bannon's desire to change U.S. politics:

"When Bannon uses the term culture war he uses it pointedly and they were seeking out companies that could build an arsenal of informational weapons that could fight that war, which is why they went to a British military contractor which specialized in information operations."
(Judiciary Committee 2018)

Indeed, Bannon has argued publicly in support for populism. For example, at the Munk debate titled *The Rise of Populism*, he argued for economic nationalism, a withdrawal from globalism, and importantly, "the deconstruction of the administrative state" (2018). Furthermore, pre-debate, when asked by the debate host why he thinks his and Trump's populist movement in the US will be more durable than previous populist movements Bannon answers by saying: "because we won social media" (2018). This suggests that Cambridge Analytica was founded not simply as a profit seeking enterprise but as a site for political activism, or more aptly, upheaval. It makes sense, then, that Wylie perceives CA as "a full scale propaganda machine" (The Great Hack 2019). Here, the first conclusion of this case study is that CA uses data analytics to further their own political agenda and not merely as a service to their clients in administering electoral politics. This is best exemplified by the parties with which CA partnered, most of whom were populist, including both Trump and Leave.EU. Brittany Kaiser also testified that she refused to meet with Marine Le Pen of France and the AfD party of Germany despite CA itself favorably viewing relations with them (Oral evidence: Fake News, HC 363 2018).

With the issue of ulterior motive and the co-option of data analytical tools qualified by this study of Cambridge Analytica's origins and motives, this paper now seeks to quantify the potential impact of this tool by examining the effects of its application in the 2016 US presidential election. By comparing data from self-reported personality assessments with the Facebook data of according individuals, CA was able to find correlations that allowed them to construct psychological profiles of Facebook users based solely on their online activity. By applying this technique, CA claimed to be able to create more individualized advertising, which the CEO, Alexander Nix, described as the opposite of blanket advertising (Rathi 2019).

Some have argued that in sum, the CA's actual ability to predict personality using Facebook data was weak (Rathi 2019) and that data analytics can do little to profoundly influence people until the technology progresses. However, since Trump's election, other research has corroborated the effectiveness of advertising tools that use data driven psychological assessments like those pioneered by CA (Matz et al. 2017; Ward 2018). One such study showed that online commercial advertising that applied this microtargeting technique garnered 40% more clicks and 50% more sales than conventional targeted advertising (which uses your purchase history and online behavior to display relevant ads but does not create personality profiles on individuals) (Matz et al. 2017). This suggests that Cambridge Analytica's methodology likely had a significantly greater effect compared with existing targeting

strategies during the time of the 2016 US presidential election. In this same paper, the authors note with gravity that such technologies “could be used to covertly exploit weaknesses in their character and persuade them to take action against their own best interest.” (Matz et.al. 2017)

Most people are likely unaware of the extent to which their advertising is psychologically personalized, which, coupled with the third-person effect - whereby people underestimate their susceptibility to advertising be it political or otherwise - creates an environment that makes detecting CA’s manipulative campaigns exceedingly difficult, thus reducing the individual’s capacity for autonomous rationalization (Ward 2018). Brittany Kaiser further emphasizes the severity of CA’s methods in her testimony to the U.K. parliament saying: “I do know that their targeting tool used to be export controlled by the British government. So that would mean that the methodology was considered a weapon, weapons grade communications tactics.” (The Great Hack 2019)

While it is not possible to know fully the extent to which Cambridge Analytica’s involvement in the Trump Campaign contributed to its success, this case study suggests that its role was not trivial. It is true that political strategists have long been using focus groups and other tools to target and manipulate specific voters for political gain. However, as the tools of these strategies improve we must eventually ask where the line should be drawn. When the political arena moved from the radio to the television many lamented the fact that voting became more dependent on personality rather than policy. Today, we have reached a critical point where personality and emotion have been harnessed so effectively that voters are persuaded perhaps more than ever before to unwittingly vote (or not vote) without autonomous rational consideration of their own interests. Take Cambridge Analytica’s role in the 2010 Trinidad and Tobago General election for example. Alexander Nix, the CEO of CA described their involvement and impact therein as follows:

“We were working for the Indians, we went to the client and we said we want to target the youth and we want to try and increase apathy. The campaign had to be non- political, because the kids don’t care about politics, it had to be reactive because they’re lazy. So we came up with this campaign that was all about being part of the gang, doing something cool, being part of a movement, and it was called the “Do So” campaign. Do So, don’t vote. It’s a sign of resistance against not the government but politics and voting... We knew that when it came to voting all the afro Caribbean kids wouldn’t vote, cause they Do So, but all the Indian kids would do what their parents told them to which, is to go out and vote... The difference in 18 to 35 year old turnout was like 40% and that swung the election about 6%, which was all we needed in an election that’s very close.” (The Great Hack 2019)

This statement makes explicit the threat to democracy that Cambridge Analytica’s approach and strategies pose, more so than any whistleblower’s testimony. Ultimately, Cambridge Analytica has pursued campaigns of voter suppression, inflammation, and misinformation all of which are designed to disorient, coerce, and take advantage of voters. There have always been political actors with mal intent like CA, however, the development of increasingly effective tools brings the issue to a head, where, if we wish to preserve voter agency we must monitor and constrain applications of data analytics in the democratic process.

Voter agency, national democracy, and international order

Though there is always a link between the lived political realities of individuals and the behavior of their governments on the world stage, that link is not always clear. To even define democracy is difficult, however, this section uses some methodological tools from the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index project to link the reduction in voter agency yielded by CA's voter microtargeting to the democratic health of a state.

Firstly, one of the most heavily weighted questions in the EIU's Democracy Index Report is "Whether national elections are free and fair" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2018). American political scientist Robert Dahl qualifies this in part with the criteria that "coercion is comparatively uncommon" and that voters have access to a reasonable quality and quantity of alternative sources of information (Dahl 1998). Through the case study of Cambridge Analytica, we see that data analytical microtargeting limits people's ability to act autonomously and rationally. In current U.S. politics, this can be described as a combination of friction and flooding (Roberts 2014), whereby internet users face an onslaught of targeted content that floods their various media feeds with distracting content that then decreases the proportional presence of alternative sources of information thereby creating friction to the access of that information. Brittany Kaiser describes this process saying: "We bombarded them through blogs, websites, articles, videos, ads, every platform you can imagine, until they saw the world the way we wanted them to" (The Great Hack 2019). These tactics violate both of Dahl's stipulations by constraining access to alternative information through what are in essence coercive means. Here, CA's strategies impede democracy on the national level.

On an international level this could have many consequences. To begin with, CA's personality oriented strategies dictate that those susceptible to being influenced by fear, for example, will be fed fear. Since fear is most easily attributed to the 'other,' be it minorities, migrants or the political elite, it is likely that the proliferation of CA's emotionally charged strategies could embolden anti-migrant and anti-neoliberal sentiments leading to a populist will to withdraw from globalism and alienation of immigrants.

One may argue that this view is unidimensional and that the personal and emotional basis of CA's data analytical strategies may also have positive effects for those that respond better to positive emotion, such as people high in agreeableness. Unfortunately, while this may be true for select individuals, research in affective politics suggests that anger, disgust, and fear are more effective political mobilizers than other emotions (Weber 2013). This means that those emotions, as has been the case since before the internet, will likely be the most frequently deployed by data analytical microtargeting ad campaigns.

Secondly, if democracy is in fact undermined on the national level in places where firms like CA operate, it is likely that global politics will be increasingly characterized by instability. If Cambridge Analytica's operations did actually support the Trump or Leave.EU victories then the world may have to prepare for more similar political upheavals. Like Alexander Nix says in reference to Trump's victory: "If there's one singular takeaway from this event, that is that these sorts of technologies can make a huge difference and will continue to do so for many years to come." (The Great Hack 2019)

In sum, the data analytical methodologies for microtargeting individual personalities developed and implemented by Cambridge Analytica are powerful tools of manipulation. They undermine individual agency and rational choice and consequently ail democracy on the national level. Furthermore, due to their basis in personality psychology, their deployment of emotional messaging is more impactful than previous methods, which is likely to result in the increased effectiveness of fear and anger-based political mobilization. This may have run off effects internationally, causing the alienation of migrants and elites, emboldening isolationist immigration policies and a withdrawal from neo-liberal economic globalization. International democratic norms may also suffer as democracies lose standing with regards to freedom from coercion and access to varied and alternative information. With all their expanded capabilities, it is more important now than it has been since before the Second World War that powerful political influencers be held in check and forced to observe the democratic value of the people. As Christopher Wylie puts it:

“If you do not respect the agency of people, anything you do after that point is not conducive to democracy.” (The Great Hack 2019)

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