

Discussions on “New Challenges to Political Privacy: Lessons from the First U.S. Presidential Race in the Web 2.0 Era”

Yang Yu, Zhouxiang Cai, Junli Wu

Politics is an important part of people’s life in America. Over the past several decades, the emergence of new Data Technology and the Internet has drastically changed the way political elections and campaigns work in America. While the abundant amount of data on the electorate has provided the politicians and political candidates great tools to run their campaigns more effectively, there is little effort from the government ensuring the data collected from citizens is used in a transparent and responsible way. The authors of the paper examined the history of data science in political campaigns and the current lack of regulations on the use of data collected for political purposes. From a privacy point of view, the authors then raised concerns on how the current practice on political data may pose a threat to ordinary citizen’s privacy and democracy.

Starting from the 1960s, political campaigns in America began to focus on the electorates. The campaigns soon adopted newly emerged computer technology and internet technology to build large nationalized databases on the electorates. With dedicated firms offering data analytics for political campaigns, elections become more expensive and the dominance of the bipartisan structure of American politics become more pronounced. In recent years, more and more players have entered the political data arena ranging from private consulting firms to technology providers and many different private or public entities. Thus, it is difficult to ensure the fair usage of all the data collected on the citizens given the number of people and entities having access to the data.

The US didn't have regulation with respect to the use of data on citizens before 2006. In 2006, the non-state actors, candidates and parties' ability to speak to citizens was protected by the First Amendment. These are some special features of these regulations. For example, The regulation for the official state agencies and parties are different. Besides, these regulations do not extend to the actions of candidates because candidates for higher office have a right to free political expression. There are still many issues hanging over the political data. For example, the lack of transparency with respect to data practices and the increasing sophistication of database technology all force us to rethink the regulatory context around political data.

We discussed four reasons that citizens and scholars should care about the profusion of political data. As the professor pointed out during the discussion, political organizations collecting data for political usages are different in nature with companies collecting data for commercial use, such as advertising companies. Citizens can legally examine the FBI files but have no legal right to see what the campaign knows about them which is troublesome because the government is not only formed by people who are interested in the public good (social welfare) but also includes parties such as lobbying groups and groups that want specific laws to be passed. Political data can reveal levels of detail about policy preferences and ideological perspectives of individuals. We then discussed two related research papers on public privacy and the endowment effect on privacy issues. These studies added some details and support the claim made by Kreiss. Although in the "What is Privacy Worth" paper, we can conclude that the respondents show an endowment effect, it is unclear how they value their privacy which is common in our daily life. Even for ourselves, it's difficult to give an accurate estimation of privacy. At last, we discussed the damage of political data on democracy, including electorate

segmentation, narrowed political representation and gerrymandering. All of them can potentially damage social welfare.

In the Web 2.0 Era, data science and the Internet affect the way political elections work in the US. However, the lack of transparency and security in political data raises significant concerns for citizens. As a start, data should be made transparent to the public. Citizens should know what data is used about them. Parties and candidates should introduce more privacy statements about the usage of personal data. We should have much more scholarly work to join political data-related research since it's an important field. Political data also have a strong relationship with computer science. Computer security and data encryption would help to ensure that databases of citizens are more accurate and private. Data Science would help us to understand what political data is collected about citizens and what is it used for.