

**Advertising Democracy: Audience Segmentation and Targeted Emails in the 2012
US Presidential Election**

Major Research Paper

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Abstract

Segmentation and targeting practices are staples of modern political campaigns. This paper examines segmentation and targeting literature to describe the construction of audiences, privacy and regulatory issues. The central research question examined is: *How is targeting manifest in the narratives of the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign emails of the Democratic and Republican parties?* This question is addressed using a qualitative content analysis of different variations of five widely disseminated email messages from each campaign, and identifies various examples of targeting, including that based on age, gender and location. The findings suggest that targeting occurred based on donation history, location, age and gender, and offered several signs pointing to potential trends such as an emphasis on personality, emotional appeals and contests that may be confirmed with future research.

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Introduction

In an October 2012 *New York Times* article it was reported that political campaigners in the United States were placing cookies on voters' computers "to see if they frequent evangelical or erotic Web sites for clues to their moral perspectives," and using the information gathered to tailor messaging to individuals visiting political party websites. It also reported that the Democratic and Republican campaigns had bought third party data about voters and studied their online exchanges on social networks in order to better tailor communications with the electorate. Such online political campaigning practices are not new. They have been developed over the last few election cycles to become a mainstay of contemporary election campaigns in the United States and elsewhere. While awareness of these practices is growing, the public does not yet have a good grasp about the types of data political parties are gathering online about individuals, and how this information is used to influence target audiences.

In 2008, the *Barack Obama for President* campaign made history by being the first major presidential candidate campaign to reject public campaign funds since the system was created in 1976 (Nagourney & Zeleny, 2008), instead opting to fundraise privately from individual donors. While much of this was done with the help of door-to-door canvassing and phone banks, the campaign was one of the first to create a voter database in order to contact individuals with contest offers, requests for donations, and other information that could be used to target individuals (Kreiss, 2012a, 2012e). Much of this data was gleaned from individuals who visited the campaign's site, with supporters being asked to input their email address and ZIP code when visiting the

Obama campaign website, when signing up for an account, and when registering to be a volunteer (Beckett, Mar. 27, 2012).

The campaign also took note of *how* people interacted with the campaign's email messages, including whether the supporter contributed to the campaign, how much they donated, and other pertinent information. Additional information gathered from third party organizations that had gathered data about individuals through the use of cookies placed on computers was paired with offline publicly available information to create voter profiles. This information helped the Obama campaign to reach out to voters with unprecedented accuracy, thereby putting a new focus on online campaigning that had not been previously seen.

Seeing the 2008 fundraising results of the Democrats' sophisticated database—more than \$500 million in online donations in 21 months (Vargas, 2008)—the Republicans put additional resources into online targeted advertising for the 2012 election in an effort to remain competitive (Scola, 2012). While Mitt Romney failed to win the election, online campaigning is now a staple in each of the major parties' presidential campaign strategies. While the format has yet to be perfected and methods are quickly evolving, contemporary online campaigning involves sending emails containing targeted messaging to specific groups of supporters aimed at convincing them to undertake particular behavioural action—whether it is donating money, volunteering or voting. A central facet of many of these targeted email messages is the presence of strong narratives based on themes, topics, and personalities (such as Michelle Obama or Ann Romney).

The central research question guiding this study is: *How is targeting manifest in the narratives of the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign emails of the Democratic and Republican parties?* The findings emerging from an empirical examination of this question are based upon a qualitative content analysis of a small sample of some 30,000 political campaign email messages from the 2012 United States presidential election campaign collected by the ProPublica Message Machine Project.¹ For this study, convenience sampling was used to choose five email series from the Barack Obama campaign and five from the Mitt Romney campaign. The purpose of this preliminary study is to examine how narrative manifests in the targeting that is occurring in campaign emails, and to identify themes that emerge that may be consistent with wider trends. Hence, the objective of the analysis was not to identify the frequency of targeting, but rather to serve as an exploratory study to ascertain whether ProPublica's quantitative results—that targeting had occurred based on the donation history, age, and location—held up in a qualitative examination. Put simply, my aim is not to generalize but to examine the rich narrative that manifests in the email messages that may be reflective of wider trends that would be discovered in future quantitative and qualitative research.

Michael Patton (2002) asserts that a major difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that the latter is concerned with “purposive sampling” (p. 273). He says that while quantitative research is usually concerned with larger samples selected at random, qualitative research focuses on a few small samples that are purposefully chosen for being information-rich, and “one can learn a great deal about issues of central

¹ ProPublica is “an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest.” See [<http://www.propublica.org/about/>]. The Message Machine Project includes a collection of more than 30,000 political emails from the 2012 presidential election that ProPublica has collected to track differences and analyzed to discover targeting methods. See [<http://projects.propublica.org/emails/>]

importance to the purpose of the inquiry”. Qualitative content analysis was used in this instance because, as Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon (2005) point out, it “goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings” (p. 1278). This includes both explicit and inferred communication, and provides a subjective interpretation of the content “through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Constructing and Regulating Audiences in Online Campaigning

The 2012 American presidential election saw a surge in online campaigning with a total of online advertisement spending exceeding \$160 million—six times more than in the 2008 election (Abse, 2012). Online advertising practices are now a staple of modern U.S. campaigns and are used in recruiting volunteers, fundraising, persuading audiences, as well as to mobilize voters to get out and vote (Abse, 2012). Campaigns now collect massive amounts of information about individuals from both online and offline sources, and use this data to target communications at specific audience segments. As Turow, Delli Carpini, Draper, and Howard-Williams (2012, p. 3) put it, the Internet allows campaigners to “ensure the ‘right’ people are being targeted with the ‘right’ advertising,” thus enabling them to reach out to potential voters in highly personalized ways that were unimaginable before.

These tools may help with the art and science of political campaigning, but there seems to be a disconnect between how Americans want their information handled online, and how political campaigners are actually gathering and using it. For example, in their

study of the views of some 1,200 American households toward tracking by online advertisers Hoofnagle, Urban, and Li (2012) found that 60 percent of respondents wanted data collection regulation. This finding was supported by Turow et al. (2012) in a study that looked at attitudes towards tailored political ads which found that 86 percent of some 1,500 English and Spanish speaking Internet users in the United States “considers political ads to be different from the other categories of tailored content: far more people reject political ads at the outset” (p. 11).

O’Shaughnessy (2001) suggests political advertising is unique because it is in the business of selling “abstract and intangible product(s)” (p. 1048). Politics affirms personal values and is “part of the social self construction of the individual. Voting for a particular party can be, and certainly has been historically, a source of social identity” (p. 1049). Therefore, when a political party or government “sells” different versions of the truth, there may be ethical and privacy issues relating to personal and national identity that arise if manipulation is perceived.

There are a number of difficult questions regarding privacy and the practice of using commercial marketing techniques to collect data about individuals who may be unaware that such practices are occurring. For example, what information ought to be collected? What sort of permissions should be in place? For how long should the data be kept? While there has been some literature on current online political campaigning practices in recent times (Kreiss, 2012a), (Turow, 2011), the extent to which online political communication practices of data collection, segmentation and targeting are influencing election practices in liberal democracies is still unknown.

Constructing audiences through segmentation and targeting

Both the commercial and the political marketplace are made up of people with differing “attitudes, personal characteristics, product needs, and media habits,” (Davis, 2011, 468). Today, most commercial companies hire third party data collection businesses to buy lists of accumulated information (e.g., demographic information such as location, age, sex, class and behavioural patterns including online history and purchasing patterns) about individuals that is gathered from both on- and offline sources (Barnett and Mahoney, 2011; Yan et al., 2011). Audience segmentation is a marketing approach that involves using scientific data—obtained through focus groups, polling, demographics, behaviour observation and other means—to break down the general public into smaller, more manageable groups in order to better target individuals with messaging (Bennett and Manheim, 2001). This information is then analyzed and is used to create segments of customers to be given to the client organization—e.g., home buyers or young male sports fans. The segments are then ranked by the organizations in terms of desirability and communication messaging is tailored to the appropriate segments.

Segmentation is usually part of a larger strategic communication plan, which also involves developing and testing messages, personalizing correspondence, and using market research and focus groups to identify vulnerabilities in the competition in order to exploit this information in messaging (Bennett and Manheim, 2001). The assumption here is that members of these groups are likely to respond and behave in the same way to particular messages, with more relevant messages leading to more efficient campaigns (Davis, 2011).

While such strategies are not new, the segmentation of publics has taken on new

significance given the vast amount of user data that can be gleaned online. Turow (2011) identifies the growing emphasis on obtaining data about online audiences, the growth of the data collecting industry, and the increase of technologies that pair advertising with individuals based on data profiles as new developments in the online advertising world that lead to more enhanced segmentation. He proposes that advertisers now believe that the best way for a brand to engage with audiences “is to follow them with messages that are customized so as to be as relevant as possible to their behaviors, backgrounds, and relationships” (Turow 2011, p. 118).

Joel Davis (2011) offers a perspective from the advertising industry that there is no such thing as the “average consumer” (p. 468) and that marketers simply need to identify naturally occurring groups of consumers, understand them, and then target those groups with communication. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh (2007) suggest that politicians can use segmentation and targeted communication practices developed by the advertising industry—i.e. knowledge about the average citizen—to build necessary consensus with the public on important issues. In political campaigning, this involves looking at all aspects of a likely voter and fitting them into one of these groups, crafting relevant political messaging, and sending it to email addresses within the group (Abse, 2012).

According to Gandy (1993) segmentation and targeting by marketers is premised on the assumption that market segments are out there to discover and “all that remains for the analyst to do is to find the data and the analytical approach that reveals their underlying structural composition” (p. 77). This can be problematic if politicians are basing policy on incorrect observations about the electorate. Barnett and Mahoney (2011)

concur, adding that segmentation is instrumental in *constructing* publics and segments are therefore not value neutral. Moreover, marketers sometimes ignore the fact that segments change, and are not based on permanent criteria or stable preferences. Turow (2011) complements this view by pointing out that segmentation is often based on arbitrary information, with data banks tending to highlight certain titbits of information while largely ignoring the contextual background of individuals. Consequently, an individual may be labelled as low-income, with the context for *why* that individual is low-income remaining unspecified. It may be further argued that data banks do not accurately show what Chris Anderson (2006) calls the “long tail” of the web.² While information about individuals is captured by many websites, the web is so fragmented that no matter how much information one captures key data are always being left out.

Turow (2011) cautions that the way in which audiences are segmented can lead to “narrowed options and social discrimination” (p. 89) resulting in preferential treatment.

He writes,

Those considered waste are ignored or shunted to other products the marketers deem more relevant to their tastes or income. Those considered targets are further evaluated in the light of the information that companies store and trade about their demographic profiles, beliefs, and lifestyles. The targets receive different messages and possibly discounts depending on those profiles. (p. 88)

Turow (2011) claims this process of developing hierarchies of online segments to target advertisements has negative implications for democratic politics, as it funnels people into “reputation silos” (p. 118) that control how they participate online. He further explains that the packaged information given to individuals reflects “preconceived views of the

² The long tail of the web refers to Anderson’s theory that the modern market is shifting from mass consumption to millions of niche markets due to fewer physical constraints on the web and other factors such as peer-to-peer marketing. See [<http://www.thelongtail.com/about.html>] and Anderson (2006).

world” resulting in people being offered “opportunities based on those reputations” (p. 191).

Barnett and Mahoney (2011) maintain that such activities risk blurring the line between using segmentation to “nudge people towards change or using segmentation to engage people in ‘talk’ about issues and controversies” (p. 3). For instance, if a political party uses the right persuasive approach—an emotional appeal, for example—they may be able to convince someone to adopt an opinion that may be counter to their better interest. Rather than providing facts and information to their constituents, a political party may select certain bits of information while rejecting other important information in order to promote its own political interest. For example, by framing the healthcare debate as an infringement of personal rights that will cause long-term harm to the economy, some people who may benefit from a national healthcare plan who do not have coverage may decide they are anti-Obamacare and may write their representative to request they vote against the plan.

Echoing Gandy’s (1993, 2001) claim that segmentation by commercial marketers is detrimental to the discursive public sphere because it excludes some consumers, Kreiss and Howard (2010) posit that while targeted communication may increase voter turnout among certain segments of the electorate it “also allows political actors to identify which citizens should be left entirely out of the conversation” (p. 1044). Excluding people because they are unlikely to act in a certain way denies voters information that they may need to make an informed decision. Campaigns will not spend precious resources on people who are unlikely to vote, which is often the poor and minority populations (Kreiss and Howard, 2010). Entman and Herbst (2001) warn that this can lead to elites having

“extraordinarily greater opportunities to gather and share political information among themselves, while the bottom 85 percent fiddle with their remote controls and joysticks” (pp. 222-223).

Warner and Neville-Shepard (2011) maintain that within liberal democracies effective dialogue and deliberation can only occur when individuals and groups see the validity of their opponents, and treat them as competitors with competing, albeit legitimate, views. They state that debate becomes unhealthy when opponents are viewed as enemies to be defeated “rather than opponents in a civil argument” (p. 203). The use of segmentation in the political domain may result in fragmentation because “the logic of segmentation emphasizes the value of difference over the value of commonality” (Gandy 1993, p.19). In line with this assertion, segmentation may lead to weakening of democratic conversation because it is much more difficult to debate issues when participants are separated and given different talking points, especially if many people are excluded from the conversation.

Privacy Issues

Privacy is difficult to define. Westin (1970) describes it as a voluntary withdrawal of a person from society, and “the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others” (p. 7). He classifies privacy into four categories:

- *solitude*, where a person is separated from a group and is free from observation;
- *intimacy*, where individuals act in a small group (husband and wife, for example) and are secluded from others;
- *anonymity*, when individuals can be in public but are free from surveillance and identification; and
- *reserve*, which is when an individual can limit the communication about his or herself and create a “psychological barrier” (p. 32) against unwanted intrusion.

Gandy (1993) refers to privacy as an unattainable universal value “perceived to be at risk” and suggests that informational privacy is rooted in “the fear that individuals will no longer be able to exercise control over access by others to information that defines them” (p. 138). Solove (2002) claims the goal of protecting privacy is actually a defence against certain unwanted disruptions, which includes control over personal information, or “the ability to exercise control over information about oneself” (p. 51).

Nissenbaum (1998) contends that definitions of privacy should be more encompassing and include public information that is not sensitive in nature. While this might seem paradoxical—that public information can lead to privacy violation—she asserts that public and private are no longer distinct realms and that the introduction of information technologies has created a new context for data by shifting it from one usage to another. While individuals may want to provide information about religious beliefs to a charity, for example, they may not want that information to be in the hands of government or marketers. Nissenbaum refers to this as the “contextual integrity” (p. 21) aspect of data. In her view, data aggregation by marketers poses a massive violation of privacy because it “almost always involves shifting information taken from an appropriate context and inserting it into one perceived not to be so” (p. 26). Jeffrey Rosen (2000) agrees, noting that people correctly fear that when these individual pieces of information are brought together and treated as genuine representations, they can create inaccurate pictures of complicated personalities (p.167).

Privacy in the political domain is particularly important because, as Kreiss (2012d) points out, it

helps ensure robust political debate by providing citizens the opportunity to form their own viewpoints, craft arguments, and develop political identities free from surveillance and public pressure, all of which also preserves a space for dissent from prevailing social norms (para. 11).

While Internet users may not have access to how their information is being used, there is also the matter that people generally do not read online privacy policies (Beldad, de Jong & Steehouder, 2010). The Federal Trade Commission has confirmed that American citizens have very little knowledge of how their information is being used and how they are being tracked (Turow, 2011, p.184-185).³ Woo (2006) indicates that “invading entities” (p. 954)—state, commercial entities, and other authorities and organizations of power—have become more difficult to identify online, which further confuses people. Ignorance of data collection methods allows privacy violations to occur unnoticed and could potentially weaken an individual’s desire to engage in debate. To this end, Kreiss and Howard (2010) assert that “political privacy, and with it a freedom of association, is uniquely at risk with the increasing sophistication and use of voter databases” (p. 1043). They suggest that rich public debate requires privacy that is free from surveillance⁴ and therefore pressure to conform to the dominant powers.

The gathering of personal information by political parties without the knowledge of individuals presents a unique threat because there is no way to opt out of databases or to control “the circulation and use of [users’] private data” (Kreiss and Howard, 2010, p.

³ While there are ways to prevent data collection, for example by setting preferences on a computer to prevent cookies from being stored or by providing false information, “there is little evidence that a substantial percentage of the Internet population does it” (Turow, 2011, p. 173).

⁴ As Westin (1970) claims, “Surveillance is obviously a fundamental means of social control” (p. 57) because it exerts a restrictive influence over human behaviour that causes people to abide by societal norms.

1042). Indeed, even if such information is not used, the fact that it exists might be enough to sway some people away from participating fully in the democratic process.

Marketers claim the fear that scholars and consumers have about a loss of privacy is emotional and not rooted in any real threat to individuals or society (Turow, 2011, p. 172). However, Kreiss and Howard (2010) suggest that such unease may be a well-founded concern given the extent to which “an increasing number of political databases are lost, accidentally exposed online, or hacked” (p. 1042). Recently, the Romney and Obama political campaigns were criticized in the media when it was discovered that they had access to sensitive data about individuals including visits to pornography sites and tendencies to engage in online gambling (Duhigg, Oct. 13, 2012).

Regulatory issues

Commercial advertisers in the United States use a self-regulating approach to online privacy and the protection of information, with general standards employed to protect sensitive information,⁵ allowances to opt-out of cookies, information about children⁶ and rules for displaying behavioural tracking icons with information about data collected, for example. Political parties, on the other hand, do not have to adhere to the same standards for data collection and maintenance (Turow, 2011).⁷ As Kreiss and Howard (2010) point out, despite the vast amounts of data collected and generated by political campaigns in the United States, “these entities face almost no regulations with respect to the collection, use, storage, and dissemination of data on citizens” (p. 1039). In addition to an absence of

⁵ See “Self-regulatory Principles for Online Behavioral Advertising,” July 2009, Retrieved from http://www.iab.net/public_policy/behavioral-advertisingprinciples (Accessed November 8, 2012)

⁶ See, for example, the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, 1998. <http://www.ftc.gov/ogc/coppa1.htm> (Accessed November 8, 2012) .

⁷ In Canada, the broadcasting arbitrator regulates election broadcasts. However, no formal regulations exist for online election campaigning.

regulation, Kreiss and Howard cite as concerns the lack of transparency around political parties and campaigns, and the fact that little is known about what they “collect, purchase, and generate, as well as how it is used in practice” (p. 1034).

Gandy (1993) suggests one possible reason consumers provide information to marketers despite a fear of privacy violation is because of a structural power imbalance:

The power that the individual is able to exercise over the organization when she withholds personal information is almost always insignificant in comparison with the power brought to bear when the organization chooses to withhold goods or services unless the information is provided (p. 19).

While individuals may not want political campaigners to track their personal information, the desire to visit a candidate’s website or to attend a local event may require the provision of such details. If they withhold information, they are required to exclude themselves from political activities and therefore from meaningful participation in the public sphere. According to Woo (2006) it is difficult to make an informed choice about whether to provide personal information in order to gain access to the information and services of a website because most individuals are not aware of how their information will be used.

Political campaigning and emails

Political campaigns use segmentation strategies to send carefully crafted emails with particular wording that seeks to spark a specific behavioural action in targeted groups (Kreiss, 2012a). Such messages often consist of requests for campaign donations, spreading awareness about the candidate, and/or mobilizing volunteers (Kreiss, 2012a). Truong and Simmons (2010) suggest that emails can facilitate brand encounters and strengthen consumer-brand relationships and, therefore, can be a particularly powerful

tool for high profile politicians. The key advantage to email advertising, states McStay (2009), is its level of intimacy. It is a permission-based format, and is currently the most popular format of direct response marketing online. Aside from being cost-effective, targeted email messaging can lead to greater efficiency in communication by providing more relevant information to individuals.

Describing how, through a series of trial and error experiments spanning back to the 2004 Howard Dean campaign for Democratic nominee for president, a core group of party staffers developed tools to identify voters, persuade audiences, and to mobilize support, Kreiss (2012a) explains how a market-based approach to advertising—including the segmentation and targeting of audiences online—came to play an important role in the political campaigning of the Democratic party in the United States. When Barack Obama began his presidential campaign some four years later, a Voter Activation Network (VAN) linking state and federal voter information files was in place (p. 104). Linking data from private data firms and combining it with information gathered from the campaign's website, public voter information files, social media sources and communications, provided the Obama campaign with data on “more than 250 million Americans” (Kreiss and Howard, 2010, p. 1033).

This information was used for multiple purposes relating to the targeting of communications. For instance, Kreiss and Howard (2010) note,

Staffers also used data as an external management tool to generate the actions they desired from supporters. As supporters interacted with the campaign's media, data rendered them visible to staffers. Transforming user actions into data enabled staffers to create abstract representations of supporters that they then used to produce resources for the campaign (p. 23).

These abstract representations were used to divide supporters into segments. In 2006, twelve segments were created, which included “suburban values” voters, “latte-drinking young urbanites” and “angry catholic manufacturers” (p. 110). In the 2008 Obama campaign, the segments were broader and identified “which individuals were open to persuasion, and which citizens were likely to turn out” (Kreiss and Howard, 2010, p. 1033). In 2012, the Obama campaign spent \$16.3 million, and the Romney campaign \$9 million, on “lists” from a variety of data collection companies, including Lexis Nexis, Infogroup, Data Trust, and CMDI (Washington Post Sept. 25, 2012). These lists were used to determine how persuadable potential voters were and to try to convince them to undertake certain behavioural actions (Romano, Jan. 2, 2012). Many of these segments of supporters were targeted most effectively—efficiently and with a high success rate—through email messaging (Kreiss, 2012a).

In order to increase the probability of the recipient taking a desired action, the Obama email campaigns were put through trials involving the testing of email subject lines, wording, and format to ensure the most “click through” rates⁸ (Kreiss, 2012a, p. 23). The campaign email messages were often very similar with slight variations in wording depending on the segment to which the intended recipient belonged. According to Kreiss (2012a),

If an individual was a first-time subscriber to the e-mail list, for instance, they received a different request from the campaign than a long-time volunteer. The campaign could generally predict the aggregate outcome of each e-mail solicitation for money and volunteers, *and the optimal targeting and design to achieve it*, given detailed supporter data and sophisticated systems that tracked when individuals opened e-mails and took online action (emphasis added, p. 24).

⁸ The term click through rate in email campaigns refers to either the total number of clicks by an email recipient or the total number of unique individuals who had clicked on links within an email. See [<http://www.iab.net/guidelines/508676/508905/79176>]

In addition to predicting the likely outcome of email messages, exhaustive testing led to the development of the standard, optimal campaign email format. This structure involved providing small paragraphs with hyperlinks for the user to click in order to take a particular action, and the use of narratives that “tell the story of the campaign” (Kreiss, 2012a, p. 64) from a personal point of view.

The named sender (e.g., Michelle Obama, Barack Obama, or a chief staff member) was usually chosen because they had tested positively with a particular demographic segment, with campaign staff developing compelling personas for the most visible people in the campaign (Kreiss, 2012a). These efforts ultimately led to “the extraordinary mobilization around Obama into the money, message, and votes the campaign needed” (Kreiss, 2012c, para. 2).

Political campaigns use this type of data to “win” campaigns while promoting their own political policy, not to better democracy or to benefit voters. Turow claims, “How we get our politics, where we seek our identity, how we frame ourselves and our relationship to the world—these simply were not part of the business agenda” (p. 69). Instead, and as Kreiss (2012a) argues, targeted emails are created to *limit* the actions of individuals, not to enhance participation. Gandy’s (1993) claims some twenty years earlier appear to support this assertion. Commenting on power and predictability in marketing, he wrote:

Predictability, the reduction of uncertainty about individual behaviour, is a valued aspect of social systems and the social relations within them. Power may be seen as the ability to act in such a way as to induce a desired and predictable reaction (p. 45).

Gandy suggests that predictability leads to a loss of agency for the individual.⁹ The central concern here is that “neither virtue nor ethical value can be genuine if it is the product of force, fraud, or manipulation” (Lund 1996, p. 480). Bennett and Manheim (2001) expound on this notion claiming that segmentation and targeting has become a scientific method used to shape images to promote (or undermine) narrow political goals.

Despite the growing use of audience segmentation techniques to target communications to voters, it is still relatively unclear *what* information political parties have about voters, and *how* it is being used to segment audience and to target communication. Campaign teams will not share such details lest the opposition get wind of their tactics (Beckett, Mar. 27, 2012; Larson, 2012a). In May 2012,¹⁰ ProPublica launched the Message Machine project, the most comprehensive publicly available sample of campaign email messages from recent U.S. elections. Much of the analysis undertaken by ProPublica has involved quantitative analyses of some 30,000 political email messages from the 2012 presidential campaign to identify how the Democratic and Republican campaigns sought to customize their email messaging (Larson, 2012b). Their findings suggest that the targeting of email messages was most frequently based on whether the intended recipient had made a previous political donation. Voters were also targeted by location and according to age.

In this study a qualitative content analysis of a sampling of the information provided by the ProPublica Message Machine project is employed to identify: *How is*

⁹ Lund (1996) describes agency as “the idea that individuals are both authors of and actors in a life that features the pursuit of projects and goals reflecting their values and beliefs” (p. 480) and says it is a crucial feature of modern, liberal democratic societies

¹⁰ In March, 2012 ProPublica launched the Message Machine with one email series only. The organization re-launched the Message Machine in May to include any mailings from either campaign that were submitted by readers.

targeting manifest in the narratives of the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign emails of the Democratic and Republican parties? The findings emerging from an empirical examination of this question have implications for understanding the role of election campaigning in contemporary liberal democracies.

Sampling

As specified above, the ProPublica Message Machine project collected some 30,000 political email messages from the 2012 U.S. presidential election. It should be noted, however, that far more email messages from the Obama campaign (1689 distinct email series not including their many different versions) were submitted to the Message Machine project than from the Romney campaign (446 email series not including different versions).¹¹ The total collection consists of approximately 2,000 distinct mailings (email series) and more than 4,000 variations (Larson, 2012a). For the most part, email messages in a specific “series”—an email and all of its many different versions sent to different recipients—have similar wording and address the same topics. ProPublica has placed these messages of a series side-by-side to highlight differences among them. In some cases, they identified up to 16 different versions of the same email message.

For this study, five email series from both the Obama and Romney presidential campaigns were chosen from the Message Machine project. Email series are defined as a particular email send-out that has been identified by ProPublica to be about a particular topic, for a specific purpose at approximately the same time. While the email messages in a series are very similar, different variations on these email messages are sent out and

¹¹ There were also emails in the Message Machine from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the Democratic National Committee, and the Democratic Senatorial Committee, but these are not included in this qualitative study.

they will be referred to as a series' "versions". Therefore, while an email series may be about a particular topic, such as President Obama's birthday, the different versions may have important alterations among them. The five email series chosen from the Obama campaign were:

1. "Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland" (12 versions)
2. "Hi" (7 versions)
3. "This is bad." (5 versions)
4. "William: See how many folks named [name] voted" (2 versions)
5. "Good morning" (3 versions)

The five email series examined from the Romney for President campaign were:

1. "Paul Ryan wants this debate" (2 versions)
2. "3 weeks left" (3 versions)
3. "Today we need your vote" (5 versions)
4. "By midnight" (4 versions)
5. "Today only" (3 versions)

The email series from each campaign were chosen through convenience sampling, which is concerned with obtaining data that is readily available (Koerber, McMichael, 2008, p. 463). This method was chosen because ProPublica obtained the emails on a voluntary basis from the campaign email recipients, and it is not a complete representation of campaign emails from the 2012 presidential election. Regardless, the Message Machine provides the most complete sample of campaign emails to date. The emails from the two campaigns in the sample for this study were chosen on the basis of whether they included variations and contained enough material to fill in the categories in the data table. A total of 29 email messages from five email series from the Obama campaign, and 16 email messages from five email series from the Romney campaign were examined. The total number of email messages in the sample was 45. The email messages/series were coded in accordance with 11 factors listed below in Table 1.

Table 1: Criteria for assessing campaign emails

Factor Coded	Purpose
Email message subject line	Identify individual email version
Brief content summary	Identify key message of email version
Date sent	Identify individual email version
Number of variations	Identify individual email version
Signed by	Identify purported author of message
Actions requested	Identify behavioural action desired by campaign
Enticement for actions	Identify potential motivational tactics by campaigns to get recipients to undertake an action
Facts and stats	Identify given information about candidates, policy, etc.
Major variations	Identify differences among email versions
Targeting clues	Identify any explicit or implicit behavioural, demographic, or other targeting in the email
Additional comments	Identify any additional information that does not fit nicely into the other categories

Given that the objective of this study is to examine how *targeting was manifest in the narratives of the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign emails of the Democratic and Republican parties*, the factors listed in Table 1 were selected for detailed examination because they serve to identify differences among the versions of an email series, and they help determine how targeting may be occurring. For instance, the purported author of email messages may differ in accordance with the intended recipients. Likewise, different groups of individuals may be provided with different enticements (e.g., emotional appeals for one recipient versus rational appeals for another), and may be asked to undertake different actions (e.g. donating different amounts of money). Table 2 serves as an example of the manner in which email messages were deconstructed using the coding schema.

Table 2: Example of data table for an email series

Subject Line	Brief content summary	Date Sent	Version #	Signed by	Actions Requested (When/What)	Enticements for Action	"Facts" and Stats	Major variations	Targeting Clues	Additional comments
Donate funds to counter billionaire Republican donor	A Republican donor has given \$100,000 to the Republicans . Please donate.	Aug. 4, 2012. 6 pm ET	1	President Obama	Donate money today	Help us beat the Republicans.	None.		Current supporters. Likely anti-republican supporters.	Obama seems more combative against Repubs. than against Romney.
Donate funds to counter major donation	A Republican donor has given a huge donation to Romney. Please donate to keep Obama president.	Aug. 4, 2012. 5 pm ET	2	Michelle Obama	Donate money before midnight	Help my husband so he can keep serving you.	Obama has created X amount of new jobs.	Quick pay option. Talks about new jobs,	Previous donors because of quick pay option. Explicitly mentions prev. donors.	Michelle talks about the "good work" Obama has been doing.

Results and Discussion

The email messages in the sample were examined to determine whether the types of targeting identified by ProPublica – age, donation history, and location – were reflected in the narratives contained within the email messages from the two campaigns. The email messages were also examined for signs of gender targeting. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Identified targeting in email messages, by type and campaign

Category	No. of email messages with signs of targeting in Obama Campaign	No. of email messages with signs of targeting in Romney Campaign
Donation History	5	2
Age	0	3
Location	12	3
Gender	6	3

The discussion below provides a detailed account of the findings emerging from the analysis of the email message samples from the Obama and Romney campaigns

Democrats: Findings from the Obama campaign

A. Donation History

The analysis of the sample emails from the Obama campaign identified evidence of the targeting of individuals on the basis of their donation history in three of five email series.

The “Good Morning” series contained three versions, one of which (version 2) included references to past donation history. The email provides information about a contest in which individuals can win a trip to meet Barack Obama and Bill Clinton in New York and then asks for a donation for entry to the contest:

Because you've saved your payment information, your donation will go through immediately:

QUICK DONATE: \$X

QUICK DONATE: \$X

QUICK DONATE: \$X

QUICK DONATE: \$X

QUICK DONATE: \$X

Or donate another amount: [url]

ProPublica did not provide specific dollar amounts in their analysis, but they did indicate that individuals are asked for different amounts based on their previous donations, starting at \$3, with some previous donors being asked for \$500 (Larson, 2012a, Oct. 18). The structure of the text is also telling. The quick donate amounts were clickable links that email recipients could use to easily donate funds. Individuals had to click an external link to input another amount to donate, and it appears that it was easier for them to click one of the suggested amounts. The same exact wording and structure is also seen in version 3 of the "Hi" email series.

Targeting based on donation history was also seen in versions 3, 4, and 5 of the "This is bad" email series. For example, version 4 reads:

You're someone who stepped up to support this campaign in 2008, and you better believe we're counting on you this year, too. Time's running out -- please help us out with a donation of \$X or more today: [url]

This email specifies that the recipient was a previous donor and even recognizes when the donation had occurred. However, rather than providing several options, the individuals is asked for a specific amount "or more".

The narrative structure of the messages contained within versions 3 and 5 of the “This is bad” email series are similar to those seen in “Hi” and “Good Morning” email series insofar as five Quick Donate options and an “another amount” option are present. However, versions 3 and 5 differ from the other donation history targeted email messages in other series and from version 4 from the same series in the narrative leading up to the quick donate options. Version 5 of the “This is bad” series states:

You’re one of our most committed supporters. Because you’ve saved your payment information, your donation will go through immediately. It matters more today than it will later.

Version 3 of the same series is identical except reads, “one of the campaign's most committed supporters” instead of “one of our most committed supporters”. Versions 3 and 5 are more personalized than other versions, and reference the importance of immediate donations. Emails from “Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland” and “William: See how many folks named [name] voted” email series did not include any targeting based on donation history.

B. Age

ProPublica determined that the email messages in the “Good morning” email series might have been targeted based on the recipient’s age. However, my analysis of the narratives of the email messages in this series failed to find any evidence to support this conclusion.

ProPublica indicated that version 3 of the email was sent to people aged 18 to 27 and speculated that a phrase in the email indicating that the campaign would “pick up the tab for you and a guest,” for hotel and flight costs if the recipient won the contest was included because younger people seemingly have less disposable income. This line was

not included in other email versions. However, age is not explicitly mentioned in the email and evidence was not found in the narrative to support this assumption.

No indications of possible targeting based on the age of the intended recipients were identified in any of the other email series from the Obama campaign.

C. Location

Location targeting was found in all of the 12 versions of the Obama campaign's "Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland" email series. Both the subject line and the content of the email messages within this series reveal people being targeted on the basis of their geographical location. The information provided in Table 4 provides a breakdown of the target locations, the requested activity, and the enticements to action contained in the email messages in this series. None of the email messages comprising the other four email series contained explicit references to location.

Table 4: Location targeting in "Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland"

Email Message	Location of Targeted Recipients	Requested Activity	Enticement
Version 1	Maryland	Volunteer by "taking trips to register voters...[or by] getting on the phone to reach out to people about this election."	"There's no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action."
Version 2	Arizona	Volunteer to canvass in West Phoenix or South Mountain.	"There's no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action."
Version 3	Illinois	Come to a party in Chicago Get to know other volunteers and	Time is running out, attending will deeply connect you to organizing of

		organizers where you live	campaign and help you play an important role.
Version 4	Oregon	Come to a celebration in Portland.	Time is running out, attending will deeply connect you to organizing of campaign and help you play an important role.
Version 5	Nevada	Come to a celebration in Las Vegas, or check out other events near you.	Time is running out, attending will deeply connect you to organizing of campaign and help you play an important role.
Version 6	Ohio	Volunteer “for canvasses, phone banks, and to reach out to voters one on one” in Columbus	“There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action.”
Version 7	Massachusetts	Come to a celebration in Cambridge.	Time is running out, attending will deeply connect you to organizing of campaign and help you play an important role. “There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved this weekend.”
Version 8	New Jersey	Come to an event in Cherry Hill to volunteer to attend “canvasses, phone banks, and to reach out to voters one on one”	“There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action.”
Version 9	New York	Volunteer by “taking a trip to Pennsylvania to register voters and reach out to people”	“There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action.”

Version 10	Massachusetts	Come to a house party in Watertown. Get to know other volunteers and organizers where you live	Time is running out, “There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved this weekend.” It will deeply connect you to organizing.
Version 11	Nevada	Come to a celebration in Reno. Get to know other volunteers and organizers where you live	Time is running out, “There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved this weekend.” It will deeply connect you to organizing.
Version 12	Massachusetts	Come to a house party in Medford. Get to know other volunteers and organizers where you live	Time is running out, “There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved this weekend.” It will deeply connect you to organizing.

Different enticements were used to persuade recipients to comply with the actions requested. The claim that “There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action” (versions 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) seems to be oriented toward appealing to supporters’ desire to be included in an historic event, and to be an Obama insider. Another claim was that time was running out (present in versions 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12) presumably served to foster a sense of urgency among the recipients, potentially nudging some individuals who may have planned to support the campaign but who had not yet done so to act. Version 3 claimed that effective organizing started with the individuals’ volunteering in their home state:

With less than 100 days left, we're running out of time to get people in Illinois and across the country engaged around this election and ready to vote this fall -- and that starts with getting to know the other volunteers and organizers where you live.

Six of the 12 messages in the series told recipients that attending a particular social event would help them become more involved in, and important to, the Obama campaign (versions 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12). Version 10 appealed to location-based volunteering as well:

At the house party in Watertown on Saturday, you'll have a chance to get more deeply connected to the organizing that's happening where you live, and play an important part in it.

D. Other targeting (Gender)

Other forms of targeting not explicitly identified by ProPublica were identified in this narrative analysis. Evidence of the potential targeting of female voters was identified insofar as First Lady Michelle Obama was attributed as sender of six of seven email messages from the "Hi" email series. These particular email messages contain the brand voice of Michelle Obama, where she spoke extensively about her husband. In version 5, she speaks specifically about Obama's good qualities as a husband:

Barack is the same guy I fell in love with and married nearly 20 years ago. I didn't fall in love with him just because he's cute, smart, and funny -- though he is all

The emphasizing of her husband's reliability and likeability, and the approach in this message appears to be a direct emotional plea to women—particularly wives and mothers. It is unlikely that the campaign would target men with the word "cute". Versions 1 and 6 of the seven messages in this series stressed the value of coming together as a group—it is plausible this non-combative message was targeted towards women.

Given the emphasis on female voters in the 2012 presidential election (Huetteman and Shear, 2012; Bassett, 2012), one would expect women to be targeted. It is perhaps surprising, then, that there was no other evidence of gender targeting in the other four email series from the Obama campaign.

Republicans: Findings from the Romney campaign

A. Donation History

Two instances of targeting based on donation history were identified in Romney campaign emails, both within the same email series. In the “3 Weeks Left” email series, version 1 referred to the “sustained support” of the recipient: “We couldn't have gotten this far without your support, and it will take your sustained support to defeat Barack Obama.” It seems plausible that this email was likely sent to previous donors or volunteers. Version 3 of the emails in this series had a similar message: “We couldn't have gotten this far without supporters like you, and with your continued efforts, we will see a Romney presidency become a reality. Help us keep this momentum going.”

The findings from the analysis of the sample emails suggests that targeting on the basis of donation history was less obvious in the Romney campaign emails than the Obama campaign emails because the Romney emails did not explicitly mention that recipients were previous donors. Instead, they seemed to address the significant role of donating, and the importance of continued support. Further, there were no quick pay options in emails from the Romney campaign in the sample.

B. Age

As with the Obama campaign emails, little evidence of targeting based on the recipients' age was identified in the Romney campaign emails. It seems plausible that the emails in the "Today we need your vote" series may have been targeted at adult Americans further along in a traditional lifecycle who have children and grandchildren given that most versions of the email messages in this series referenced having a family. For example, version 1 of the email in this series reads, "I am asking for your vote tomorrow -- because it matters for your family and our country's future" with another paragraph in the email reading:

Our children will graduate into exciting careers that are worthy of their qualifications. Our seniors will be confident that their retirement is secure. Americans will have good jobs, good pay, and good benefits. Our veterans will come home to a bright future. We will have confidence that our lives are safe and our livelihoods are secure.

It is unlikely that this email was sent to a younger adult audience or student population with no thoughts of children and retirement. Version 2 from the same series contains a line that reads, "Today is the day we decide what kind of country we are going to give our kids and grandkids." A line in version 3 reads "Your vote matters. It matters for your kids and their kids."

While these messages technically could have been sent to anyone, it seems unlikely the Romney campaign would specifically mention the recipient having children if they did not, and they would likely have used a more relevant or entertaining appeal to convince them to vote.

C. Location

Location targeting was identified only in the "Today Only" email series. Each of the three emails in this series described a contest where individuals could donate money for a

chance for them and a friend to win a flight to Ohio and accommodations to meet up with Romney and Paul Ryan on the campaign trail. The contest was open to all legal residents in the fifty states, but the email was likely targeted to individuals not living in Ohio as the email mentioned a flight to the state. None of the other emails from the Romney campaign referenced location or had implicit targeting clues related to location.

D. Other: Gender

Three examples of potential gender targeting in the Romney campaign emails were identified—two from Ann Romney and one from Katie Packer Gage. In the “Today we need your vote” email series Ann Romney was named as the sender for one version of this particular email message (version 4). Despite the fact that all messages in this series asked people to vote for Mitt Romney, the Ann Romney version had very a different narrative compared to the other versions, which had either Mitt Romney (versions 1, 3, and 5) or Paul Ryan (version 2) as the sender. The email messages from Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan included an element of community and how recipients could vote for change (versions 1, 2, 3), version three was patriotic, and has a line that reads, “We’re all in this together. A better future for America can begin today.” Version 5, from Mitt Romney, emphasized a sense of duty, and highlighted the role of Americans in electing politicians, “America’s future is up to you.”

The Ann Romney version had an entirely different enticement for action: “Your voice counts in this election and it needs to be heard. This is your opportunity to make a difference in our nation’s course.” Unlike the other emails, it has a positive message and lacks a competitive aspect by not denigrating the Obama administration and policies. Instead, it was about the *opportunity* to be heard. It seems plausible that this message was

addressed to women who do not feel their issues have been adequately addressed in the political arena and who needed an affirmation that their political opinion was of consequence.

Within the “3 weeks left” email series there is one message (version 1) that is signed by Ann Romney, but the contents of the email message offers little implicit clues regarding gender. The email claims, “It's an important night for Team Romney-Ryan and an important night for our country” and that Ann hopes “you'll tune in to watch and cheer for Mitt. But more importantly, I hope you'll mark the occasion by making your own contribution to our cause”. The latter is the exact line used in version 3 from this series for which Campaign Manager Matt Rhoades is the identified email sender.

Finally, an email from Deputy Campaign Manager Katie Packer Gage, version 2 in the email series “By midnight”, appears to be targeted towards women insofar as it differs from the two other versions sent by Digital Director Zac Moffat (version 1) and Craig Romney (version 3). The Moffat version is simple, short and straightforward and explains the contest. The Craig Romney version emphasizes the role that supporters play in helping out his dad. Conversely, the Katie Packer version attempts to sell Mitt's personality and family life, “Mitt's a warm, friendly guy -- and a very proud grandpa -- who just happens to be running for president” and attempts to humanize him, “I'm sure you'll find him to be as grounded and down to earth as I do.” The other emails in the Romney sample—the remaining 14 of 16 emails—did not appear to address women specifically.

Discussion Themes: Personality, emotional appeals (antagonism, inclusivity), contests and entertainment

The analysis of the sample 45 email messages analyzed identified 34 instances of targeting. The findings from this qualitative study offers some tentative support to the results of ProPublica's quantitative study insofar as my findings also point toward probable targeting on the basis of donation history, and location. While ProPublica also found targeting based on age, I found inconclusive, non-substantial evidence of potential targeting based on age. Unlike the ProPublica findings, however, I found potential evidence of possible gender-based targeting.

There were a number of themes that became apparent while examining the messages in the ten email series. The first is that the email messages in the sample contained relatively little information or details about the candidates and their policies. Indeed, only 14 messages, of which 13 were from the Obama campaign (12 were the same line from the same email series), were identified as containing any such information. Instead, the email messages in the sample tended to focus on the virtues of the candidates (1 of 29 emails from the Obama campaign versus 9 out of 16 emails from the Romney campaign), emotional appeals (11 for the Obama campaign, 11 for the Romney campaign), the negatives of the opposition (5 for the Obama campaign, 7 for the Romney campaign), and contest offers and entertainment (10 for the Obama campaign, 6 for the Romney campaign).

Overall, there were more appeals based on image and personality than rational appeals as to why a candidate was better suited to office. Email recipients were not directed to supplementary material about the candidates or their policies. Instead the

email messages contained entertaining material and “horse race” information about the election—that is, whose numbers were ahead and by how much. For example, the most frequently identified category of “facts” was in reference to fundraising. Additionally, the most common action requested was for individuals to donate funds—of 45 emails in the sample, seven (15 for the Obama campaign, 11 for the Romney campaign) asked individuals to donate. These findings are discussed in more detail below.

Obama campaign

i. Personality

It is common knowledge that despite appearing to be signed by either Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, or a chief of staff, it is campaign staffers that actually write and send emails. The personalities of these individuals are leveraged to appeal to the audience depending on which group is being targeted. Evidence of this practice was observed in the sample email messages analyzed for this study. Specifically, five email messages from the Obama campaign with nearly identical or minor variations were found to be signed by different people. Within the sample email series from the Obama campaign three of the five series had the same person sending the email – “Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland,” sent by Jeremy Bird, National Field Director for Obama for America; “Good morning,” sent by Bill Clinton; and “William: See how many folks named [name] have voted”, sent by Yohannes Abraham, deputy national political director, Obama for America. Despite similar wording in the emails, there were different email signees in two series: “Hi”, was predominantly from Michelle Obama with one version

from Barack Obama; “This is bad.” with senders Deputy Campaign Manager Julianna Smoot, Joe Biden, and simply “Obama for America”.

Personalities played a large role in the Obama campaign emails. One email in particular had references to Barack Obama’s personality, in which he was framed as relatable and a good leader. In version 5 of the “Hi” email series, he is described as “smart, and funny”, decent, compassionate and with conviction. He is described as leading the country forward, and a selfless individual, “he was raised to believe that success isn't about how much money you make, but how much of a difference you can make for other people.”

While other emails in the sample did not explicitly mention aspects of Barack Obama’s personality, it is possible that the individuals who supposedly sent the emails could play a role in their success. There were nine different senders in the sample: Michelle Obama, Barack Obama, Julianna Smoot, Bill Clinton, Joe Biden, Yohannes Abraham, Jeremy Bird and generic “Obama for America” and “Obama Victory Fund 2012” tags. The email messages from individuals had a unique personality and voice. Michelle Obama, for example, was a supportive and championing wife (see discussion in *D. Other targeting*). Barack Obama was the sender in only one email, in which he professionally notified recipients of an upcoming fiscal deadline. Jeremy Bird organized people and encouraged them to volunteer in “Saturday: Celebrate the President’s birthday in Portland”. Yohannes Abraham has a young, upbeat voice in “William: See how many folks named [name] voted”, which tells people to check out a “cool” and “fun” link and asks them to pass it on to their friends in swing states. In “Good Morning”, Bill Clinton

warmly invites people to enter a contest to meet him and President Obama. In versions 1 and 2 he says, “I hope you take us up on this. I'd love to meet you”.

ii. Emotional appeals

Eleven of the campaign emails from the Obama team contained emotional appeals, and they were used to create a tone of urgency. The “Hi” series, predominantly from Michelle Obama, contained six of the emotional appeals, played on the family image of Obama, and contained the emotionally charged claims that “Barack needs you with him now more than ever” (versions 1, 2, and 3), Michelle “believes” in you to help (version 4), “Barack is counting on you” (version 6), and that recipients ought to “Show you're standing with Barack when it really matters” (version 5).

Fear tactics were used in the ominously titled email series “This is bad:” which includes the remaining five emotional appeals. Four of the subject lines even used the word “dangerous” (versions 1, 3, 4 and 5). The emails claim that Romney and the Republicans have more money in the bank than the Obama campaign, and emphasize how much of a disadvantage this is. In version 2, an elaborate example is given wherein Julianna Smoot, Deputy Campaign Manager, says the Republicans have a “massive advantage” and asks recipients for a donation: “A \$X million disadvantage means we could have to fight back against an estimated 780 30-second ads in a battleground state like Colorado. With only 11 days left, that's a devastating prospect.”

By using terms like “devastating”, “massive advantage” and by giving an example of how the money could be used to “drown out” voices of Obama supporters, the email plays to the emotions and fears of recipients without providing factual evidence or

justification for claims. The sense of urgency and fear also lent itself to an antagonistic tone that was seen in several emails.

a. Antagonism

There seemed to be an “us-versus-them” mentality in five of the Obama campaign emails within the sample. It was prevalent in all versions the “This is bad:” email series.

Versions 1, 3, and 4 described how “as we head into the final push, Mitt Romney and the Republicans have \$X million more in the bank than we do”. Version 5 had the same line, but had “our side” written at the end of the sentence instead of “we do”. This email highlights that recipients of the email should be worried because the Republicans may be ahead, and that it is their duty to fight back against the party by donating money. Version 2 was still more antagonistic, as it provided a hypothetical situation (quoted in “emotional appeals” section) where the Republicans could use their advantage for malicious purposes. Version 2 of the email also says:

Help close that cash-on-hand gap so our voices don't get drowned out in a tidal wave of negative ads chip in \$X or more now.
I know this campaign has asked a lot of you. That's why it's so important that you step up now, when this race is so close.

This quotation warns that the Republicans will drown out the voices of email recipients and likens the election to a race in which recipients can play an important role. While this email series appeared antagonistic to the opposition, others appeared to be more inclusive.

b. Inclusivity

The majority of email messages analyzed within the Obama campaign email sample emphasized inclusivity in two ways. First, by addressing the group of supporters and asking them to interact with one another. Second, by telling the email recipients that they

are important to the campaign. Every email series had an element of inclusivity, with 25 of 29 emails in the series including one of the two inclusive appeal forms.

In the email messages making up the “Hi” email series from the Obama campaign, the content was oriented toward fostering a sense of inclusion and camaraderie. An email from Michelle Obama (version 2) emphasizes the grassroots nature of the campaign and that every donation is important, “It’s not about how much you can give -- any donation matters because, in this grassroots campaign, you’re never giving alone”. Version 6 asked recipients to donate in order to “come together” before a deadline. All seven versions in the series had an identical post-script that emphasized the role supporters played in the historic nature of the campaign, “P.S. -- We're incredibly close to something historic: 10 million grassroots donations this year. Can we do it before midnight? You decide.”

The “Saturday: Celebrate the President’s birthday in Portland” email series also had highly inclusive appeals with an aspect of community building among current supporters that was conducive to opening up audience engagement. Most emails in the series invited recipients to an event to celebrate the President’s birthday with other supporters and to help organize and discuss the future (versions 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12). Emails also promote political discussion (in all email variations), “The President is a big believer in talking one on one with our neighbors, family, and friends to bring them into the political process. There’s no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved this weekend.” Other emails in the series (versions 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10) encouraged recipients to get connected, and offered the enticement that they could become more important to the campaign, “...you'll have a chance to get more deeply connected to the organizing that's happening where you live, and play an important part in it.”

Other emails had elements of inclusive messages as well. In the “This is bad:” email series, recipients are told they can help to determine the outcome of the election and that they can have their voice heard “but only if everyone gets on board and does their part” (version 2). Versions 3 and 5 of this email tell the recipient they are important, “You're one of the campaign's most committed supporters.” Version 2 of “WILLIAM: See how many folks named [name] have voted” asks recipients to “help get the word out and help win this thing”. Finally, in the “Good morning” series, Bill Clinton tells recipients that they should enter a contest because “I'd love to meet you.”

iii. Contests and Entertainment

Contests and entertainment were another prevalent topic in the emails. From the Obama campaign, two of the five email series (eight emails in total) were sent for the purpose of eliciting donations through contest offers. The “This is bad:” series asks recipients to donate in order to enter a contest to win a flight and hotel to Chicago on Election Night to meet Obama and to watch his speech from special seats up front. Another email series, “Good morning” promotes a contest where the winner gets a flight and hotel in New York so they can meet Obama and Bill Clinton on the campaign trail. Both contests offer a flight, hotel room and meeting with the president for a prize.

One email in the sample used entertainment to entice email recipients into responding a certain way. The email “William: See how many folks named [name] have voted” included a hyperlink to a website that told individuals how many people of a certain name had voted in advance in the United States. The first version told recipients

to vote and to tell their friends to vote. It referred to the website as “cool”. The other version emphasized that recipients should share the link with their friends:

People are fired up to vote this year 30,542,975 folks have already made it to the polls.

That includes 9,264 people named Agnes. And 37 people named Michelangelo. And 7,832 people named Monique. And 1,849 people named Eli. And my personal favorite: 124 people named Yohannes.

Find out how many people out there named have already voted.

Once you've done that, share the page with your friends, especially those who live in battleground states so they can see how many people with their names have already voted, and then go vote themselves.

Yeah, it's fun. But it's a great way to get out the vote, too because each person you share with will get a link that will help them find out when and where they can vote.

Both versions of the email asked recipients to share the page with their friends. It explicitly acknowledged that part of the strategy of sending out the link was that because it was “fun” it was a good way to get people to vote. Rather than appealing to people’s reason—that voting would be a great way to get involved in the democratic process or that voting will help you decide who makes important decisions that affect your life—the email offered entertaining content to try to entice supporters to become involved and to spread the word to vote, and it encouraged them to use entertaining persuasion techniques with their friends.

Romney campaign

- i. Personality

None of the Romney campaign emails within the sample had a consistent sender. The emails were signed by a variety of individuals, although the contents of the emails and the wording did not differ very much. In the email series “3 weeks left” different individuals (Ann Romney, Paul Ryan, and Campaign Manager Matt Rhoades) were identified as senders of the each of the three message versions. Despite supposedly originating from different individuals, the email messages essentially make the same points—that email recipients should donate money.

Of the 16 Romney campaign emails, nine attempted to build up the personality of Mitt Romney. In versions 1 and 2 of “Paul Ryan wants this debate” Mitt’s success in the first presidential debate is lauded, as he “crushed it” (version 2). In “3 weeks left” version 1 asks recipients to watch the debate to “cheer for Mitt”, while versions 2 and 3 refer to Romney’s “commonsense solutions” and version 3 refers to his “clear-eyed leadership”. In version 1 of “Today we need your vote” Romney describes his past success, “Throughout my life, I’ve led turnarounds of every kind. I pledge that Paul Ryan and I will bring real change to America from Day One” and in version 3 he says he is “ready to get to work”. In version 2 of the same email, Paul Ryan says that Mitt Romney is “someone who will wake up every morning thinking about how to save the country -- not whom to blame. Mitt Romney will take responsibility as a leader and face the tough issues head-on.” In the email series “By Midnight”, version 2 from Katie Packer most explicitly mentions Mitt’s personality, whom she describes as “a warm, friendly guy -- and a very proud grandpa -- who just happens to be running for president” and “grounded and down to earth”.

The personalities of other individuals were leveraged as well. There were seven email senders, including Mitt Romney, Ann Romney, Craig Romney, Paul Ryan, Matt Rhoades, Zac Moffat, and Katie Packer Gage. The voices of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan were fairly well utilized—Ryan is seen to be championing Mitt and describing the good people he’s met on the campaign trail in “3 weeks left” (version 2), “Today we need your vote” (version 2), and he invites people to enter a contest to meet him and Mitt in “Today only”. Mitt Romney is seen as supportive of Paul Ryan and critical of the Obama administration in “Paul Ryan wants this debate” (version 1), hopeful for a full recovery of America in the future if he is elected in versions 1, 3, and 6, and he invites people to enter a contest to meet him and Ryan in “Today only” (versions 2 and 3). The emails from Mitt’s family differed in their approach—the email from Craig Romney (“By Midnight, version three) references the family tie, asking recipients to donate some money for a chance to win a contest to meet “dad”. Conversely the emails from Ann Romney did not mention her relation to Mitt, and did not build up his personality or home life.

ii. Emotional Appeals

There were examples of emotional appeals in 11 of the 16 Romney campaign emails in this sample. The appeals were predominantly focused on the fears supporters had about a second Obama presidency, and the emails implied that another Obama presidency would cause the economy to decline and would lead to job loss. One approach was to offer hope about the future—in “Today we need your vote” Mitt Romney promises a future with “exciting careers”, secure retirement, “a bright future”, and safe and secure livelihoods (version 1). Another approach, seen in “Today we need your vote” (versions 1 to 5) was to appeal to recipients’ sense of duty, which included the appeals that “Your vote matters”

(version 3) and “America’s future us up to you” (version 5). This was also seen in “3 weeks left”, where recipients were told, “your sustained support is critical” (version 3), and in “By Midnight”, where Craig Romney appeals to recipients’ realization that the Romney-Ryan team is “counting on your support” (version 3).

a. Antagonism

The emails were also persistent in putting down the opposition, which is not surprising given that Obama was an incumbent and the economy is struggling. Examples of antagonism against, or negative references to the Obama campaign were seen in seven of the campaign emails. In the “3 weeks left” email series versions 1 and 2 of the email refer to perceived failures of the Obama administration, leading to a choice between “four more years of what simply hasn't worked, or a new path leading to a real recovery”. Version 3 of the email pits the two candidates against one another more aggressively, and describes “Mitt Romney's commonsense solutions, or four more years of President Obama's failed policies.”

In the “Today we need your vote” email series, the version 2 email by Paul Ryan describes Obama’s “failed policies” and says that Americans “deserve better than that”. In the “Paul Ryan wants this debate” email series (version 1) the message is more of the same, “Tonight offers us a very clear choice: Four more years of failed policies and irresponsible spending, or a new path leading to 12 million new jobs and a stronger middle class.” The same email version also attacks Obama running mate Joe Biden, taking a quotation out of context in which he said the middle class had been “buried” over the last four years, adding that “He and the president don't have a record to run on or a plan to make things right again.” In version 2 of the same email, the message is more

aggressive and again creates a sense of an “us-versus-them” mentality by saying that “One way offers a dynamic, pro-growth economy that fosters opportunity, whereas the other continues down the path of increased government dependency and stagnant economic growth”, that “we predict that Joe Biden will resort to misrepresenting and attacking Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan's positions”, and that donors will help to “defeat Barack Obama and Joe Biden on November 6th”. None of these arguments have been given a context or were linked to any supplementary material, and there was no evidence given for claims.

b. Inclusivity

In the Romney campaign emails, inclusivity tended to manifest as references to how many people supported the Romney campaign and by telling recipients of emails that they were important to the outcome of the election. In total, there were 10 emails in the sample that were identified as having references to inclusivity. References to the size of the support base was seen in version 3 of “3 weeks left”, where Matt Rhoades claims that “over 108,000 volunteers have already stepped up and made nearly 40 million voter contacts. That's 13 times more doors and 3.5 times more phone calls than at this time in 2008.” There was also a reference in version 1 of “Today we need your vote” from Mitt Romney, where he says:

These last few months, I've watched our campaign become a nationwide movement.

It's not just the size of the crowds -- it's the depth of our shared conviction, the readiness for new possibilities, and the belief that we can do better than we've done these past four years.

Recipients were told that they were important to the campaign in all three versions of the “3 weeks left” email series. They were told that the party “couldn’t have gotten this far without your support” and that “sustained support” is needed to defeat Barack Obama and to ensure a Romney presidency (versions 1, 2, and 3). In both versions of “Paul Ryan wants this debate” recipients are told that their donations will help to defeat Barack Obama and Joe Biden. Finally, in all five of the “Today we need your vote” email series recipients are told they have an important role to play in the outcome of the election because their vote counts in the election (versions 1, 2, 3 and 4), “we’re all in this together” (version 3), and “America's future is up to you” (version 5). Version 3 in the series particularly emphasizes the importance of voting:

Your vote matters. It matters for your kids and their kids. It matters for 23 million Americans struggling for work. And it matters for the future of our nation and the strength of our economy. Paul Ryan and I have a plan to lead America to a real recovery, to prosperity and opportunity.

iii. Contests and entertainment

There were two contests in email series from the Romney campaign in the sample in which supporters could donate money in order to meet Mitt Romney. In the “Today only” email series, recipients were urged to donate money to enter a contest where the winner gets a flight to Ohio to meet Romney and Ryan on the campaign trail. In version 1, Paul Ryan tells recipients:

Mitt and I will be touring the great state of Ohio on Tuesday and we are looking for some company.

So for today only, if you make a donation of \$X or more, you will be entered for a chance to join us on the road.

In all three versions of the email, recipients are told that this is an offer limited to today, and “time is running out” (versions 2 and 3).

A very similar contest is offered in the “By midnight” email series, where individuals are told to “Donate \$X before midnight tomorrow to be automatically entered” in the “On Board with Mitt” contest for a chance to meet “Mitt on the campaign plane at 30,000 feet”.

There were no examples in the emails of this sample of the Romney campaign using entertainment as a motivator to encourage behavioural action by email recipients.

**Conclusion:
Targeted emails and the fragmentation of democracy’s narrative**

In an episode of the *West Wing*, character Josh Lyman is working on the campaign of Senator John Hoynes hoping to be the Democratic Party's nominee for president of the United States. Josh has a moral crisis as a result of the lack of policy discussion by the campaign:

JOSH: Senator, you're the prohibitive favorite to be the Democratic Party's nominee for President. You have 58 million dollars in war chest with no end in sight, and... I don't know what we're for.

HOYNES: Josh.

JOSH: I don't know what we're for, and I don't know what we're against. Except we seem to be for winning and against somebody else winning.

*HOYNES: It's a start.
(Sorkin, 2000).*

The dialogue illustrates an interesting component of political campaigning—that campaigns are being run on the basis of winning or losing, rather than on policy issues,

deliberation and on what qualifies the candidate to best represent the needs of the electorate. Segmentation and targeting practices have provided politicians new ways to mobilize and persuade audiences, and it appears that they have used this opportunity to run campaigns based on image, entertainment and personality. Both the Republican and Democrat campaigns in the 2012 presidential election sent supporters emails with emotional appeals promoting individual personalities and demonizing the opposition, with little information provided about their policy or goals.

Kreiss (2012a) argues that campaign emails are sent from whichever personality from the campaign has polled the highest with a certain segment, with personalized narratives created and tested to achieve the greatest efficiency in obtaining desired behavioural actions. This study has sought to build upon this observation. It has shown that narratives within emails included entertainment, emotional appeals, and rhetoric about the campaign “race” that involved facts about which candidate is ahead and how email recipients could help them win. Both campaigns warned of a grim future that included an opposition president, where voices are drowned out and the economy is poor, thereby reinforcing an already extreme polarization among political parties. A definite emphasis on beating the opponent was identified, with emails appealing to supporters to volunteer and donate so that they could help their candidate win. This is what Warner and Neville-Shepard (2011) were describing in their warning about deliberations becoming unhealthy when people who disagree with a group are seen as enemies that need to be defeated.

Future research needs to be undertaken into how political parties are segmenting and targeting audiences based on data collection. While emails are one form of political

campaign communication, it would be wise to extensively research other methods such as banner advertisements, mobile advertisements, and online video game advertisements.¹²

The findings from this study may be indicative of a wider trend of emotional appeals in campaign emails, including the use of the voices of specific people who had polled well with the segment and emails played on the fears of the electorate. For example, the Obama campaign referenced hypothetical negative ads that the Republicans *could* potentially buy, and the Republicans played on Americans' fear of job loss and a poor economy. Perhaps most extremely, Michelle Obama appealed to the emotions of women, calling Barack "cute" and "funny".¹³ The emails and their compelling narratives are entertaining, combative, emotional and sometimes even fun, and none provide adequate information about the leaders or their policies, nor do they let audience know that they are being targeted by information that is gleaned while visiting campaign websites, sharing with their friends on Facebook, or from third party data collection companies.

The findings of this study suggest that the Republicans have begun to grasp the importance of email campaigning but have fallen short in some of the key elements that make the format so effective. The evidence to support this conclusion is that while there were nine different senders in the Obama campaign, with distinct personalities that spoke in highly personal ways, the Republican emails had seven different senders that had less distinct personalities. While in the Obama campaign three out of the five series had one consistent sender with a unique voice, none of the Romney campaign emails had a

¹² Marcus Schulzke (2012) has already done a great examination of the Obama campaign's 2008 online advertisements in video games.

¹³ It seems unlikely that women would care more about a "cute" president than one who has a sound policy, and this may be indicative of sexist approaches in advertising, which is far beyond the scope of this study.

consistent sender, despite the fact that the text was relatively the same. The Romney campaign emails were more generic, then, so as to be more easily adapted to a variety of senders. The Obama campaign also leveraged Michelle Obama better in the sample, as she appeared to be colourful, personable, and very proud of her husband. The Republican campaign showcased an Ann Romney that did not mention any familial relation to Mitt, and did not speak to his personality or home life. Narrative is key and it appeared from the small sample that the Romney campaign did not grasp this; that said, it is an inconclusive claim given the constraints of the study and should be proven or disproved in a future study.

The question that this study set out to address was: *How is targeting manifest in the narratives of the 2012 U.S. presidential election campaign emails of the Democratic and Republican parties?* I have provided some qualitative evidence that seems to support ProPublica's quantitative claims about targeting that is based on location and donation history. I have not found strong evidence of targeting based on age, although this may be revealed in a larger sample. I have also found evidence for possible targeting by gender, which should also be tested in a larger study. There were additional themes observed in the sample that may be reflective of current trends in political campaigning online, including an emphasis on personality rather than policy, there was an abundance emotional appeals (with antagonistic and inclusive approaches), and a reliance on contests and entertainment to get email recipients to support the campaign.

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Appendix: Sample email from each campaign

A. From “Saturday: Celebrate the President’s birthday in Portland” (version 1). Retrieved from <http://projects.propublica.org/emails/mailings/saturday-celebrate-the-president-s>

The screenshot shows the ProPublica Message Machine interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links like 'Home', 'Our Investigations', 'Tools & Data', 'MuckReads', and 'About Us'. A search bar is also present. The main content area is titled 'Message Machine' and 'Reverse-Engineering the 2012 Campaign'. The specific email being analyzed is 'Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland'. A yellow callout box asks if the user has a version of this email and provides an email address for reporting. The interface displays two versions of the email side-by-side for comparison. The left version is for 'Portland' and the right version is for 'Phoenix'. Each version shows the subject, from, sent date, and the body text of the email. The body text includes information about the President's birthday, local events, and RSVP details. At the bottom, there is a 'Donate' button and a 'Steal Our Stories' section with various links and information.

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Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Portland

Search Emails **SEARCH**
For example, [dinner](#) or [Sarah Jessica Parker](#)

Did you get a version of this email, or any other campaign email? Join this project to see how political campaigns are targeting you by forwarding it to emails@messagemachine.propublica.org. If you're already signed up, [log in](#).

12 email variations

4 recipients

Subject: Saturday: Volunteer on the President's birthday
From: info@barackobama.com
Sent: Aug. 2, 8:43 p.m. ET

3 recipients

President Obama's 51st birthday is coming up this Saturday, August 4th.

2 recipients

To celebrate, ~~Marylanders are taking trips to register voters in Virginia and Pennsylvania, and are getting on the phone to reach out to people there about this election. You should join us.~~

2 recipients

It's going to be a day of action -- getting ~~Virginians, Pennsylvanians,~~ and other people across the country ready to vote this fall.

2 recipients

Can you help organize for the President's birthday?

Here are the details:

2 recipients

What: ~~Volunteer on the~~ President's birthday
Where: ~~820 Ritchie Highway Severna Park, MD 21146~~

2 recipients

When: Saturday, August 4th 9:30 am

And, ~~check out all the events near you this weekend.~~

2 recipients

The President is a big believer in talking one on one with our neighbors, family, and friends to bring them into the political process.

2 recipients

There's no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action.

2 recipients

So RSVP now to ~~volunteer this~~ Saturday, and come pitch in:

[url]

Jeremy

2 recipients

Jeremy Bird National Field Director Obama for America

2 recipients

P.S. -- If you haven't signed the President's birthday card yet, you should do that, too.

Compare variations

Subject: Saturday: Celebrate the President's birthday in Phoenix
From: info@barackobama.com
Sent: Aug. 2, 6:43 p.m. ET

President Obama's 51st birthday is coming up this Saturday, August 4th.

To celebrate, ~~Arizonans are coming together to go door to door to reach out to people one on one about this election. You should come out to the events in Phoenix on Saturday.~~

It's going to be a day of action -- getting ~~Arizonans~~ and other people across the country ready to vote this fall.

Can you help organize during the President's birthday in West Phoenix or South Mountain? Here's all the info:

What: ~~Canvass for~~ President Obama's birthday
Where: ~~OFA-AZ West Phoenix office 6544 W. Thomas Road, Suite 19 Phoenix, AZ 85033~~
When: Saturday, August 4th 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

RSVP ~~here~~

Meet at: ~~Esteban Park 3345 E. Roeser Road Phoenix, AZ 85040~~

When: Saturday, August 4th 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

RSVP ~~here~~

The President is a big believer in talking one on one with our neighbors, family, and friends to bring them into the political process.

There's no better way to mark his birthday than by getting involved in the day of action.

So RSVP now for ~~a canvass in Phoenix on Saturday~~ and come pitch in:

[url]

Jeremy

Jeremy Bird National Field Director Obama for America

P.S. -- If you haven't signed the President's birthday card yet, you should do that, too.

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B. "Paul Ryan wants this debate" (24 emails, 2 variations). Retrieved from <http://projects.propublica.org/emails/mailings/paul-ryan-wants-this-debate>

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Search Emails

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For example, dinner or Sarah Jessica Parker

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2 email variations Compare variations

13 recipients	Subject: Paul Ryan wants this debate From: info@mittromney.com Sent: Oct. 11, 5:30 a.m. ET	Subject: Two paths From: info@mittromney.com Sent: Oct. 11, 9:19 p.m. ET
11 recipients	<p>Romney-Ryan Biden admits the middle class has been "buried" over the last four years. He and the president don't have a record to run on or a plan to make things right again.</p> <p>Tonight offers us a very clear choice: Four more years of failed policies and irresponsible spending, or a new path leading to 12 million new jobs and a stronger middle class.</p> <p>That's why Paul Ryan wants this debate — and why I know he'll do us proud. Americans can't afford a rerun of the last four years — donate now to make sure they won't have one.</p> <p>Mitt Romney</p> <p>Paid for by Romney for President, Inc. www.MittRomney.com</p>	<p>Romney-Ryan Friend,</p> <p>Given Mitt Romney's success in last week's presidential debate of explaining the Romney-Ryan vision for America, we can expect Joe Biden to be well prepared for tonight's face-off.</p> <p>The Obama Administration doesn't have a record to run on. Instead of focusing on the failed policies of the past four years, we predict that Joe Biden will resort to misrepresenting and attacking Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan's positions.</p> <p>Tonight, Paul Ryan will present to Americans the clear choice they have about which path they want to follow for the next four years. One way offers a dynamic, pro-growth economy that fosters opportunity, whereas the other continues down the path of increased government dependency and stagnant economic growth.</p> <p>This election will not be decided by a single debate, however. The American people will decide it, and they know we can't afford four more years like the last four years.</p> <p>Please donate now to show your support for Paul Ryan in tonight's debate, and help defeat Barack Obama and Joe Biden on November 6th.</p> <p>Matt Rhoades Campaign Manager Romney for President, Inc. Paid for by Romney for President, Inc. www.MittRomney.com</p>

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