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Introduction

> What does an elected representative see when he or she sees a constituency?
> And, as a natural follow-up, what consequences do these perceptions have
> for his or her behavior?
>
> – Richard Fenno, *Home Style*

> Officials of the modern state...assess the life of their society by a series
> of typifications that are always some distance from the full reality these
> abstractions are meant to capture...These typifications are indispensable
> to statecraft. State simplifications such as maps, censuses, cadastral lists,
> and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping a
> large and complex reality.
>
> – James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*

In the 1970s, political scientist Richard Fenno followed members of
Congress on tours around their districts. Fenno observed how they inter-
acted with voters so that he could study how politicians perceive their
constituents and how these perceptions guide their behavior. As Fenno
noticed, politicians have intuitions about which voters are supporters and
which are opponents, what issues voters care about, and how the politi-
cians ought to present themselves to the diverse audiences they encounter
across their districts. But perceptions like these can be vague and dis-
torted. Distorted as they may be, these perceptions guide politicians in
their efforts to represent the public.

In contemporary politics, perceptions of voters are not merely vague
ideas carried around in the heads of politicians; perceptions are also
recorded in detailed electronic profiles that describe each constituent
within a jurisdiction. As is now well known, political parties in recent

years have built databases to facilitate targeting strategies. These databases list the names and contact information for all voters in a district, along with information about their personal traits, their neighborhoods, and their history of political participation. Politicians and their campaigns use these lists to perceive the electorate. The lists help them understand who their supporters are, what issues different voters care about, and how they should present themselves to voters in their campaign appeals. This large-scale collection of data influences how politicians perceive voters, and in turn, it affects how they interact with voters.

In this book, I examine how politicians, in the context of their campaigns, perceive voters and how those perceptions translate into the relationship politicians build with their electorates. During recent election cycles, I have looked under the hood of campaign databases and I have surveyed thousands of campaign workers who use these databases. I have done so in order to gauge the perceptions of the electorate that come from campaigns creating a digital profile of each voter, and to study how these perceptions affect the choices campaigns make.

The aspect of politics that is currently most influenced by these new databases is direct voter contact, which incorporates campaign strategies such as door-to-door canvassing, telephone appeals, and direct mail. These strategies of the "ground campaign" have become increasingly prominent in campaign politics, and the effectiveness of these strategies has been a topic of much scholarly research in the last fifteen years. Direct contacting efforts can accommodate fine-grained strategies in which one household receives a communication while the household next door does not. These strategies are informed by campaign databases that are used to estimate the political dispositions of voters. I focus on how the perceptions of politicians as captured in individual-level campaign databases affect which voters receive direct appeals and why they receive them.

However, the elite perceptions I study in this book have consequences for politics that extend far beyond strategies of voter contact. As I show, the way campaigns perceive voters in their databases holds important lessons for our understanding of public policy and the future of political representation. For example, I will describe how the data that are collected in political campaign databases are being used in governmental functions as well. The same individual-level databases used in campaign targeting have been widely adopted by congressional offices to field constituent service requests.[1] When constituents seek information or assistance from a Congress member's office, their personal information is often linked to the same targeting records that appear in campaign databases.

As another example, the federal government has recently used political targeting databases to estimate the racial composition of voters who lack photo IDs in order to evaluate the legality of voter identification laws.[2] In the coming years, one can expect that the databases studied here, which are designed primarily to facilitate campaign targeting, will be used increasingly in official government functions like these. Consequently, this book's attention to politicians' perceptions of voters as they appear in targeting databases is but a first step in studying the consequences of new, individual-level voter profiles. The same perceptions that affect the targeting decisions studied here are likely to influence decisions in official government business into the future.

Furthermore, though microtargeting databases are currently used primarily for strategies like door-to-door canvassing and phone banks, perceptions formed through these databases are already beginning to influence television advertisements and other avenues of mass appeals. Campaigns are just now beginning to aggregate individual-level databases to geographic levels that can be targeted with cable TV ads.[3] In the future, it is quite likely that ads will be targeted to individual cable boxes. As media appeals become increasingly amenable to fine-grained targeting, the perceptions of voters that are garnered from microtargeting databases will inform media appeals just as they inform direct contacting appeals. Accordingly, this study of elite perceptions applies not only to individual-level campaign contact but also to frontiers in congressional representation and mass media advertising.

A campaign's chief goal in perceiving the public is to form predictions about which members of the public are supporters, which are likely to show up to vote, and which are persuadable. What kinds of information do campaigns rely on to form predictions like these? As I assess how voters appear to campaigns in targeting databases, it immediately becomes clear that *public* records – primarily individual-level records from the voter registration system, but also data from the Census Bureau and state licensing agencies – play a key role in shaping their perceptions. Public records and the laws that generate them turn out to be *the* essential ingredient for understanding elite perceptions as well the consequences of those perceptions for political outcomes. Thus, the story told in this book is not just a story about campaign strategy; it is a story about how policy decisions affect politics.

The reasons why even sophisticated campaigns perceive voters through the lens of public records may be surprising. For one, alternative sources of data, like commercial records, have comparatively limited predictive

power in helping campaigns gauge voters' politically relevant character-istics. For another, public records can be *designed* to be helpful to cam-paigns. Administrative records are designed by election-seeking politi-cians who are cognizant of the data's political value. I uncover evidence that politicians pass laws calling for the collection of personal data explic-itly so that the data can be used by political campaigns.

Critically, public records used by campaigns to perceive voters vary substantially across the U.S. states, because each state has primary con-trol over the election system within its jurisdiction. This means that the perceptions formed by elites about voters also vary by state. I exploit this variation to investigate how different kinds of perceptions lead to differ-ent strategic decisions. I form predictions about how campaigns interact with voters based on the laws that govern the flow of public records in a given jurisdiction. These laws serve as *levers* that influence how cam-paigns interact with the electorate. When a particular data law is in effect, campaigns perceive voters one way and engage with them one way; when the law is not in effect, they behave differently. As with other aspects of the law, seemingly small policy differences can have consequential effects on the conduct of campaigns and the outcomes of elections.

For example, in some states, campaigns can obtain public records of individual voters' race or party affiliation; in other states, they cannot. When public records are available that provide a clear signal of partisan-ship, I hypothesize that campaigns focus more on mobilizing partisans and less on targeting geographies or persuading undecided voters. I also suggest that they have less unintended contact with partisans of the other party. Similarly, when public records provide a clear signal of racial iden-tity, I will show that campaigns focus more on mobilizing voters because of the voters' race, and less on targeting geographic areas with homoge-nous racial groups. These decisions by campaigns are predicted to have a number of downstream consequences for voter behavior as well. For example, in places where campaigns do not have accurate, individual-level signals of partisanship or race available from public records, the population of mobilized voters tends to be concentrated in geographic areas where voters are homogenous. In places where public records allow campaigns to identify individual voters who are likely supporters, turnout is less geographically contingent.

In short, the public information environment, which varies within the United States, affects campaigns' perceptions of voters and in turn affects with which voters campaigns interact. The goal of this book is to reveal new explanations for how campaigns engage with the electorate by

developing an understanding of how they form perceptions of voters and how those perceptions guide their strategic choices.

By observing how elite strategies and mass behaviors vary based on the ways elites perceive the public, this book not only offers a new framework for understanding campaign strategy and not only draws a connection between the public policy of data collection and elite perceptions, but also explores a new way in which geography and federalism shape our politics. Voters experience elections differently across the country for a number of reasons. Voters who live in red states or blue states, battleground states or safe states, can have very different political relationships because of where they live. Here, I show that subtle, seemingly mundane data policies, which vary by state, have a clear set of ramifications for how voters experience elections. Campaigns perceive voters differently depending on the policies of the jurisdictions in which voters live, which helps us understand a new way in which geography shapes politics.

An Example

To build some intuition of the case I will make in this book, consider as an example the attempt by the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns to mobilize young voters. Because young people so strongly supported Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, his campaign attempted to mobilize voters under the age of twenty-five. In swing states, the campaign's volunteers and staff engaged millions of young voters and personally encouraged them to participate in the political process. The campaign *wanted* to mobilize youth because it knew young people were supporting its candidate. It *could* do this effectively because the public record identified the age of every registered voter. In nearly every state, the age of a registered voter is a matter of public record. This means that when campaigns perceive voters, they perceive an accurate estimate of each voter's age. They can use this perception to inform their strategy for door-to-door canvassing, phone banks, and mail and e-mail messages.

In the absence of individual-identifying age data, consider what the campaign might have done instead. It might have pursued a coarser strategy, like mobilizing residents of college towns. If it had done so, a different subset of the electorate would have been engaged. According to confidential strategy memos from the 2008 Obama campaign, the campaign actually focused specifically on mobilizing young voters who did not reside in college towns, including women in their twenties living in rural areas and African-American youth living in urban areas. Without

individual-identifying age data, the campaign would have perceived its
target audience differently, leading to a different set of strategies and a
different set of voters who would be mobilized.

Thus, a twenty-year-old woman in rural Ohio may have received atten-
tion from the Obama campaign not just because she was likely to be a
supporter but because a particular dataset enabled the campaign to find
her. The existence of a public record about her birthdate affected the
campaign's decision to contact her in the first place, and also affected
how the campaign engaged her (through direct contact, such as door-
to-door canvassing or phone calls) and the type of message she received
(a get-out-the-vote message geared toward her identity as a young per-
son). In contrast to perceptions of age, campaign perceptions of attributes
like voters' party, race, and degree of persuadability are less precise and
vary considerably across jurisdictions, which means there will be sub-
stantial variation in the strategies campaigns pursue based on the data
available to them.

Relevant to this example are two important questions. First, why can
campaigns perceive voters' ages in the first place? The main administrative
rationale for the public collection of age data is that knowing a person's
age is necessary to determine whether that person is eligible to participate
in elections. But for this purpose, administrators actually need a binary
measure: whether or not a prospective registrant is over the age of eigh-
teen. There are auxiliary reasons administrators want to know birthdates
(e.g., they may also use this information to validate the person's identity
at the polls), but these reasons are separable from the need to make the
information a matter of public record that can be used by politicians for
electioneering. As I argue, a key part of this story is that through care-
fully crafted laws pertaining to election data, politicians have repurposed
administrative personal information to serve their electioneering needs.
Indeed, sometimes they seem to collect personal information for no other
reason than to provide data to their campaigns.

A second question raised by the example is this: Why should age and
not some other voter characteristic be used as the basis of campaign
engagement? Age was correlated with Democratic support in Obama's
elections, but so were educational attainment and ideology and attitudes
about gay rights and positions on military intervention. However, none
of these characteristics were utilized by the Obama campaign the way
age was. The Obama campaign did not place phone calls and pay home
visits because a voter was known to have an advanced degree, identify as a
liberal, support gay marriage, or oppose foreign wars. Beyond small-scale

surveys, no records existed that would identify individuals as having these traits. And no information that the Obama campaign did possess was particularly good at proxying for traits like these. The point is that the basis for voter engagement depends not on what campaigns would like to do in theory, but on the data they can access that allows them to form impressions about the electorate. Because the data that campaigns access often come from public records, the laws within a jurisdiction that govern how personal information is collected and disseminated serve as levers that affect how and why political campaigns engage with some voters but not others.

The Perceived Voter

The theory of campaign contact that I present is labeled the Perceived Voter Model. The hypotheses I test about campaign strategy stem from understanding the perceptual biases inherent in strategic decisions that are informed by a limited set of information. I trace the path from the data campaigns gather, to the perceptions they form with those data, to the strategies they pursue based on those perceptions. When one starts from the perspective of elite perceptions, an entirely different set of hypotheses emerge about how elites make strategic decisions than if one ignores the informational roots of decisions. Campaigns are predicted to interact with voters not because the voters are, for example, strong Republicans, African American, or persuadable in their attitudes, but because a campaign uses a specific set of data to perceive which voters may have these traits. Their perceptions of these traits may be quite distorted and lead to a different set of voters being engaged by campaigns than one might otherwise expect.

To understand how campaigns think about voters, my focus is not on real *voters* per se, but rather on *perceived voters*. These are the people politicians think about when seeking office. *Perceived voters* compose the electorate from the *campaign's-eye-view*. They are not people; they are avatars generated from whatever data a political campaign, candidate, or party can surmise. By developing a model of campaign strategy based on *perceived voters*, I generate a set of predictions about strategic behavior different from prior research in this field, which has largely ignored the informational hurdle that campaigns face in perceiving the political dispositions of voters.

By distinguishing voters from *perceived voters*, I draw attention to the barrier that exists between a politician who seeks to represent voters

and the voters he or she represents. Campaigns do not perceive voters as
voters perceive themselves. This means that to understand the decisions
campaigns make, one cannot study campaigns from the voter's-eye-view,
such as through public opinion surveys. *Perceived voters* cannot be sur-
veyed. They are rows in spreadsheets in computers in campaign offices.
They are also stereotypes and generalizations that politicians carry in
their heads, as Fenno (1978) noted. But increasingly, as the population
grows and data become more available and usable, *perceived voters* are
zeros and ones in computers.

To characterize the strategy of voter engagement, I study these zeroes
and ones. The data I analyze in this book comes not from surveying voters
but by studying *perceived voters*: I look at the actual data that campaigns
are looking at when deciding which voters to contact and deciding how
to communicate with them, and I survey the actual people who are using
data to target voters. Through these resources, I am able to approach
questions about the roots and consequences of elite perceptions. Elites
no longer perceive the electorate simply by following gut instincts and
taking occasional polls, but also by assembling large amounts of data to
profile individual voters. I partner with the companies and organizations
that build these profiles so that I may study how perceptions garnered
from voter databases affect strategic behavior.

1.1 THEORETICAL ANCHORS AND EXTENSIONS

At the most basic level, this book will help readers understand why vot-
ers are targeted by campaigns in the way that they are. When a voter
receives a phone call from a campaign with a certain message, why did
that particular voter receive that particular message? Over the last fifteen
years, experiments in political science have helped explain that individual-
level targeted appeals such as door-to-door canvassing, telephone calls,
and mailers do indeed have measurable effects on the behavior of voters
(Green and Gerber, 2008). Collectively, we know much less about *why*
some voters are targeted by real-world campaigns while others are not,
and *how* targeted appeals to specific audiences might affect the compo-
sition of the electorate. In this book, I help shed light on why particular
types of voters, bearing particular characteristics, are subjected to appeals
while others are not. I focus on the strategy of voter contact, not the
effectiveness of voter contact, and I demonstrate that strategic choices
are constrained by the policy lever of public records laws.

In exploring this phenomenon, I contribute to a broader literature about campaign strategy and voter engagement. One major question in the study of campaign strategy is how strategic choices are constrained by institutional rules. For example, scholars have formed predictions about how campaigns pursue voters, given the constraints imposed by the Electoral College (Shaw, 2006), the party nomination process (Cohen et al., 2008), campaign finance laws (Box-Steffensmeier, 1996), and single-member districts (Cox, 1990). I build on this literature by focusing attention on a set of institutional rules to which scholars have paid little attention but which have a predictable and clear set of consequences for how political campaigns interact with the mass public. Public laws about the collection and distribution of personal information affect how politicians perceive their constituents and consequently how they engage with voters during their campaigns. I thus reveal a new link between institutions of American politics: the institutions that are responsible for collecting and distributing public records (i.e., state legislatures, election administrations) affect the institutions responsible for winning elections (i.e., political parties).

As a study of campaign targeting, this book also shares a theme with Hillygus and Shields (2008). Hillygus and Shields mainly study the subset of voters who are responsive to persuasive campaign appeals, but they also theorize about the informational roots of campaign contact decisions. I build on their research in microtargeting insomuch as I study the perceptual biases that result from the constrained set of data that inform elite perceptions and the consequences of these perceptions when campaigns microtarget voters.

Separate from themes associated with research on electoral campaigns, there are two other broad themes in political science that are closely connected to the argument of this book. The first theme that I build on relates to the institutions of government that generate the public records that become so crucial to campaign perceptions. I argue that among the reasons that political campaigns rely on public records to perceive the electorate is that politicians have designed the system of public records to benefit their campaigns. In doing so, politicians have taken the voter registration system and open record laws – two policy areas that were established with the intention of *limiting* political influences in governance – and transformed them into publicly subsidized campaign resources.

In crafting this argument, I build on research about the political influences in bureaucratic organizations (Keyssar, 2009; Waarden, 1992;

Lowi, 1979; Hasen, 2005; Tokaji, 2008; Balkin, 2008) and research about how public policies, developed over a long period of time, affect the ways citizens and organizations mobilize for political ends (Hacker and Pierson, 2011; see also Campbell, 2003; Mettler, 2002; Patashnik, 2008; Hacker, 2002; Baumgartner, Leech, and Mahoney, 2003; Lessig, 2006; Winner, 1980). To understand why organizations, such as parties or interest groups, build certain kinds of coalitions and not others, one must investigate how the policy environment affects their choices. I show that policies about the collection and regulation of personal data affect the ways political parties build electoral coalitions.

The second theme I build on deals with heuristics, or information "shortcuts." I characterize public records as shortcuts that help campaigns form impressions about a voter's political dispositions. A theory of information shortcuts can help explain why decision makers need to resort to certain informational inputs in the first place, why they end up using one set of inputs over others, and the consequences for their use of information shortcuts on decisions they make. Prior research engaging this line of inquiry begins with Downs (1957), but includes a diverse body of research on mass behavior (Popkin, 1993; Lupia, 1994; Bartels, 1996; Althaus, 1998; Alvarez, 1999; Lau and Redlawsk, 2006) and elite behavior (Krehbiel, 1991; Geer, 1996; Miler, 2009).

I argue that the way political campaigns use public records to evaluate voters is parallel to other types of decisions made using information shortcuts. For example, before they go into the voting booth and cast a ballot, ordinary voters use shortcuts like party affiliations, endorsements, and demographics to make quick judgments of politicians; they do not make voting decisions based on an encyclopedic knowledge of politicians' roll-call votes or policy platforms. The particular shortcuts that voters use can lead them to different voting decisions than if voters used alternative shortcuts or if they had encyclopedic-like knowledge of candidates' positions. Similarly, I argue that political campaigns operating in large populations rarely have encyclopedic knowledge of the dispositions of voters in their electorates. Instead, they cling to a particular set of shortcuts, which affect the way they perceive voters' dispositions and the way they act upon those perceptions. The consequences of their perceptions can be predicted once one has knowledge of the data that inform their perceptions.

It is not self-evident that public records, such as information found in voter registration files, should serve as a critical shortcut for campaigns' perceptions of voters. On the contrary, many historical and contemporary depictions of campaigns assume that campaigns have intimate knowledge