

Big-data practical example – Data-driven election campaign

During election campaigns, political parties and their campaign aides increasingly rely on big data. They analyze purchased profile databases, create their own apps and websites that capture data, and make use of accessible voter registries. For example, they use the data obtained and analyzed for social media communication and can selectively address well-defined groups there. The following text explains which data the campaign aides use and how they obtain these data, and it lists some well-known examples.

What examples are there?

One of the first and most well-known examples of a data-driven election campaign is that of Barack Obama in 2012. As the U.S. president running for a second term, Obama relied on big-data analyses and intensive social media activities. In addition, the Democratic Party, for which Obama was campaigning, attracted a large number of volunteers who engaged in social media as promoters without being recognized as such.

What does this have to do with big data?

The starting point of this illustrative campaign was, first, that it accessed available voter registries. In the United States, to prevent election fraud each state maintains official voter files that are then made available to the parties. These registries include not just the name, address, and telephone number, but, depending on the state, sometimes also the ethnicity and the party preference expressed in the primary elections. This information already provides a comprehensive database. Second, the parties expanded these databases, such as by purchasing marketing and lifestyle data from companies that specialize in selling well-prepared data of vast numbers of users. These data include information on people's lifestyles, such as appearance or clothing and cultural preferences. The Democratic Party thus built up an internal database that contained comprehensive profiles of eligible voters. Campaign aides then expanded the databases with the results of their phone surveys and door-to-door canvassing.

How are the data and the created profiles used in the election campaign?

By analyzing the resulting meaningful profiles, the campaign aides identified how the eligible voters' interests and characteristics affected their voting behavior. The aides then developed strategies for reaching voters most successfully, including online channels and platforms. Experts refer to this approach as microtargeting. On the one hand, it should identify the people who can be persuaded to vote for the party or whose political interests can be promoted. On the other hand, it should avoid addressing voter groups that have already firmly decided to vote for someone else. The efforts to win over these voters would not be worthwhile.

Interested voters were able to log onto the specially established my.barackobama.com campaign website with their Facebook accounts to support Obama. If they allowed the Obama campaign to access their friends lists and other information, this opened up additional opportunities for the campaigners. The declared objective was to encourage users to talk about the election among their friends.

The posts made in this way reached users as if they were personal recommendations. Market research findings show that personal recommendations are trusted more than perhaps neutral representations or clearly identifiable advertising. For this reason, the campaign was also particularly successful in persuading undecided people to vote for Obama in a personalized manner.

In Germany, so far there is still very little solid information on the use of microtargeting and data-driven campaigns. The active players such as the parties and social networks would have to provide information on whether and how they engage in microtargeting in order to gain more transparency on this issue. However, they remain silent in order to keep their trade secret and to avoid violating existing law. The approach as practiced in the United States would violate the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union.

Criticism of data-driven campaigns

As became apparent four years later, the company Cambridge Analytica accessed up to 87 million Facebook profiles including for the 2016 U.S. election campaign to better assess eligible voters' values and political views and to predict voting behavior as accurately as possible. However, the company used the data for its customers without obtaining the Facebook users' consent in advance. This action violated applicable law, and the issue became a scandal. However, it also became clear that companies like Facebook have difficulties preventing data misuse.