

VOTERS EXPRESS DISPLEASURE AND APATHY AT CUSTOM-MADE POLITICAL ADS



The results of a study by professors at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania reflected that of all the respondents, only a miniscule 14 percent did not object to have ads targeted specifically to them and their interests. An overwhelming 86 percent said that they did not approve of political advertisements being tailor-made to their likes and dislikes. With the advent of modern technology that allows marketers to precisely target their objected audience, national and local political campaigns are also using such innovative technology to tailor their advertising. The process that the political campaigns are using is called microtargeting. As is obvious from the name it allows the campaigners to target their audience to the micro-most aspects of their lives. Innovative technology gives them access to such details about the voters as the charitable donations they make, the credit cards they use and how much they spend on it, the Congressional district where they live and other relevant information. All this is amalgamated with voter registration records and the results allow campaigns to focus their campaigns on specific targets. One person may see an ad that talks about the candidate's employment message and how he intends to address the unemployment problem in his area, another may see a candidate assuring that he is concerned about their rights to health care. The fact is that both the ads are using microtargeting in some form or the other. "The overall sense is that there is a real discontent about this," said Prof. Joseph Turow of the Annenberg School. "You have a real disjuncture between the American public and the campaigns that are on a trajectory to increase it." It is just not the disapproval over the ads or that an overwhelming majority expressed their displeasure that should be a matter of worry for the politicians. What they should be more concerned about is that almost 64 percent said that they would be disinclined to vote for a candidate if they knew that he had solicited information about them and their neighbors, with the explicit purpose of wooing them through ads based on the information thus garnered. The study was conducted earlier this year, between the last week of April and the first week of May. It included interviews in English and Spanish with 1,503 adult Internet users. The survey also observed attitudes toward political advertising on social media sites like Facebook. 70 percent of the respondents said that chances of their voting for a candidate would diminish considerably if they found out that the campaign was using Facebook to find out "liked" friends and sent them ads. "People take politics seriously," Professor Turow said. "Even more seriously than advertising, discounts and news." Professor Turow said that in 2009 during a similar study conducted by him a majority of the respondents had voiced strong objections to having their activities and interests and friends tracked online. Since then the issue of Internet privacy is gaining importance. Industry groups like the Interactive Advertising Bureau, government agencies including the Federal Trade Commission, the Commerce Department and the White House, and privacy advocates have all agreed to mutually work on creating a policy that would be acceptable to both advertisers and users concerned about Internet privacy. In March, the Federal Trade Commission introduced a legislation, that advised technology companies, to use their discretion and offer a "Do Not Track" mechanism to the users, that would allow them to decline to having their personal information collected online. "Compliance with Do Not Track would be voluntary, so each entity, whether political or commercial, would make its own decision about whether to comply," said Ed Felten, chief technologist at the commission. Some personal interviews saw people expressing mixed emotions about custom-made political ads, and the gathering and use of individual information. Roman Kickirillo, 42, an engineer in Franklin, Tenn., said he was least concerned about what the politicians did with their ads and said that his attitude was one of "total indifference." It would bother him however, if the messages were conflicting and not consistent. "I might never find out that they were saying the opposite because they think that's exactly what I want to hear," he said. An elderly retiree, 77 year old Doug Sheaff, living in Bristol said more than what the ad said, he'd be more worried about how the data was collected. "As long as it's publicly accessible information that they are getting and they are able to tailor the message, I have no problem," Mr. Sheaff said. "The other question is, are they building up a file on me." Carol Stewart, 49, from New Boston, Texas, said that economic crisis caught up with her resulting in her being unemployed. She says that on the e-mails, on Web sites and on the right-hand column of Facebook pages, there are ads specifically targeting you. "You visit the site and they know everything about you," Ms. Stewart said. "I don't like that." "When I got the discount card at the grocery store I knew they were going to track my habits," Ms. Stewart said. "But these politicians out here? I didn't agree to let them into my life."