Voter Data Commercialization: A Timeline

Political Machines, Early Voter Data

Early 20th Century

Political machines in major cities begin systematically collecting and using voter data (often informally) to target campaign efforts and mobilize voters. This involves tracking individuals voting history, party affiliation, and even personal details to influence

their votes

State Public Voter Roll

Access 1920s

Several states follow California's lead, implementing similar laws that make voter rolls publicly accessible. This strengthens the role of voter data in ensuring transparency and fair elections.

Simulmatics, Data >> Politics

1960

The Simulmatics
Corporation uses voter data
and early computer
technology to predict
electoral outcomes and
model voter behavior for
John F. Kennedy's
campaign. Demonstrated
the potential of data-driven
strategies in political
campaigns and
foreshadowed
commercialization.

Direct Mail, Targeted Ads

19809

The widespread use of direct mail in political campaigns boosts demand for voter data. Campaigns use voter registration data to target specific demographics, intiliating voter data's role in marketing.

Online Voter Registration

2000s

Many states begin adopting online voter registration, streamlining the process and digitizing voter data, making it more accessible and easier to collect. The move to online registration provides more immediate access to voter data, making it even easier for data brokers to acquire and monetize this information.

Tech Advances & Commercialization

2010s

Advances in big data analytics, digital advertising, and political micro-targeting make voter data more valuable than ever. States increasingly sell voter rolls to data brokers, who combine them with other datasets (including social media data) to create detailed personal profiles for marketing and political purposes.

Increased Scrutiny and Legal Battles

2020

As voter data becomes more accessible and widely used for non-political purposes, privacy advocates and legal challenges emerge. The Katz-Lacabe v. Oracle America, Inc. case highlights how voter data, combined with other personal information, can be exploited for commercial gain.

California's Direct Primary

Law 1913

California enacts the Direct Primary Law, allowing voters to directly choose party candidates rather than political party leaders. This law promotes electoral transparency and requires public voter registration lists to ensure fairness in primaries.

Rise of Consumer Surveys, Research

1930s-1950s

The development of consumer surveys and market research lays the groundwork for techniques later applied to voter data. This period sees the rise of demographic segmentation and psychographic profiling to understand and target consumers.

Data Collection for Campaigns

1970s

Political campaigns begin using polling, demographic analysis, and early computer technologies to gather and analyze voter data. Campaigns like Nixon's rely on this data to segment and target voters more effectively.

National Voter Registration Act

1994

The Motor Voter Law simplifies voter registration by allowing individuals to register when renewing a driver's license or applying for public assistance. This dramatically increases voter registration numbers.

Help America Vote Act, Central Lists

2002

HAVA mandates the creation of centralized, statewide voter registration databases to improve accuracy and reduce fraud. Centralized databases enhance the availability and quality of voter data, accelerating its commercia

Cambridge Analytica Scandal

2016

The Cambridge Analytica scandal reveals how personal data, including voter data obtained through Facebook, can be harvested and weaponized to influence electoral outcomes. This scandal prompts widespread debates about the ethics of voter data use in elections and sparks calls for stricter data protection laws worldwide.

Ongoing Debates and Efforts

Present/Future

Debates continue about the ethical implications of voter data use, the role of data brokers, and the need for stronger data protection laws. Legislative efforts are underway to regulate the use of voter data and increase transparency in political advertising. The use of Al and machine learning in political campaigns raises new concerns about fairness and manipulation.

Voting Rights Act, Expanded Data

1965

The Voting Rights Act increases voter registration, particularly among minority communities, making voter rolls a more comprehensive dataset. The law also mandates federal oversight in certain states, increasing public access to voter data.

List-Building and Direct Marketing

1970s-1980s

The rise of list-building companies and direct marketing techniques further fuels the demand for voter data. These companies compile and sell lists of individuals with specific characteristics, including data derived from voter rolls

Social Media and Microtargeting

2010s

Social media platforms like Facebook become major sources of voter data, allowing campaigns to gather vast amounts of user data and use it for highly targeted political advertising. Enables unprecedented levels of granularity in targeting voters based on their online behavior, preferences, and social connections.

CCPA and Privacy Laws

2022

The CCPA introduces new privacy protections for California residents, allowing them to opt out of the sale of their personal information, including voter data. Other states, like Virginia and Colorado, begin passing similar legislation. These emerging privacy laws signal the beginning of a regulatory shift aimed at controlling commercialization.

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