

Politics This Morning: Election 2015 ushered in ‘database,’ microtargeting politics

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Published: Monday, 11/09/2015 12:00 am EST

If the 78-day election campaign showed anything, it is that political parties are using sophisticated database-driven microtargeting techniques to help them win elections, and that’s not necessarily a good thing, says University of Alberta political science professor Steve Patten.

“The 2015 general election campaign confirmed the arrival of the era of database politics in Canada. All of the country’s major parties now rely on massive databases, data analytics and predictive modeling, and data-driven microtargeting to maximize their opportunities for electoral success,” Prof. Patten writes in *Canadian Election Analysis 2015: Communication, Strategy and Democracy*. “More than ever before, parties are able to derive intelligence on the electorate from polling and data mining, and this research informs party strategy, including the crafting of messages that are likely to win the support of key segments of the electorate.”

Prof. Patten notes that the Conservative Party was first out of the gate to use microtargeting effectively. Its database, Constituent Information Management System, was developed over the last 10 years and has “considerably more personal information on voters” than the other two main parties: the Liberals’ database Liberalist and the NDP’s database Populus. By the time the 2015 election started, Prof. Patten writes, the Liberals and the NDP “invested heavily in training local campaign teams to collect and employ data in voter persuasion and mobilization. Both parties developed in-house analytics operations, with the Liberals spending three times what they had invested in data and data analytics in 2011.”

Prof. Patten says that while parties are still learning how to use the information to their best advantage, microtargeting has allowed them to enhance their “get out the vote” effort and in the process influencing some results in close, battleground ridings. “As the scope and detail of the information in databases expands, and parties become more

proficient at employing microtargeting in voter persuasion, highly personalized targeted campaign messages will rival the importance of the messaging of the national campaign and party leader tours,” Prof. Patten writes. “This will make campaign communications less and less transparent.”

The move to data-driven microtargeting “shifts the focus of partisan campaigns from the work of public persuasion and the building of a national consensus toward what could be described as manipulative exercises in private persuasion,” Prof. Patten says. “Concerns have also been raised about the fact that party databases are not governed by either of Canada’s two core privacy laws. The loss of transparency, the manipulative character of targeted persuasion, and privacy concerns suggest data-driven microtargeting is not making a positive contribution to Canadian democracy.”

Prof. Patten was one of 66 experts across the country who contributed to the *Canadian Election Analysis 2015* e-book, published by UBC Press and Samara Canada. The e-book is available online today from [UBC Press’s website](#). The content, written by 66 experts from across the country, will also be released on [Samara’s blog](#) as a series, one article per day.

“*Canadian Election Analysis 2015* represents the first time in Canadian history that our leading political scientists, communications scholars and practitioners have come together to publish a collection of innovative, unique and accessible analyses of the federal election—just days after Oct. 19,” wrote Samara executive director Jane Hilderman in a statement.

Edited by **Alex Marland**, associate professor of political science at Memorial University, and **Thierry Giasson**, associate professor of political science at Université Laval, the collection features work from experts spanning 31 different universities in what they call an “unprecedented” collection for its diversity and timeliness.

Among the other topics explored are the changes to the leaders’ debate format, the success of visible minority and indigenous candidates, polling, strategic communications, the use of digital tools in the



campaign, and the future of electoral reform. The authors explain how Canadian democracy has been affected in 800 words or less.

Contributors include *The Hill Times* deputy editor **Mark Burgess**, the University of Calgary's **Tom Flanagan**, the University of Toronto's **Nelson Wiseman**, the *Toronto Star*'s **Susan Delacourt**, Canadian Press reporter **Jennifer Ditchburn**, Carleton University's Chris Waddell, *The Hill Times* columnist **Warren Kinsella** and Abacus Data CEO **David Coletto**.