

Understanding the “Micro” in Micro-Targeting:
An Analysis of the 2018 Ontario Provincial Election

By

Lauren Yawney
B.A., University of Victoria, 2017

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Political Science

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University of Victoria

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Abstract

There is a breadth of research on micro-targeting in American elections, while the practice is under-researched in Canadian federal elections. Additionally, there is no academic commentary on micro-targeting at the Canadian provincial election level. This thesis draws on this gap in literature to investigate how micro-targeting is used at the provincial campaign level by parties and candidates. My research was conducted through an analysis of emails, Facebook ads and Facebook posts by the Liberal, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic Party candidates in 8 ridings in the 2018 Ontario election. I drew hypotheses about the types of “micro” appeals in provincial micro-targeting from the work of Kreiss (2017), Giasson and Small (2017), Marland and Matthews (2017), Munroe and Munroe (2018), Delacourt (2015) and Carty, Cross and Young (2000). From this research, I argue that provincial micro-targeting is nowhere near the level of specificity that is found in Canadian federal elections, let alone American elections. Parties rely on appeals to very broad groups and areas, such as occupations and “the North.” Parties do not use the information contained in voter management databases to target campaign appeals on social media or other media, and instead rely on these systems more for get-out-the-vote activities. This thesis contributes to the growing research on micro-targeting and the use of Facebook for political campaigning, while also remaining conscious to the fact that these technologies are constantly changing and advancing.

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Acknowledgments

Firstly, I'd like to thank Colin Bennett for all of his support throughout my time at UVIC. Without Colin I wouldn't have been able to learn as much about privacy and micro-targeting as I have, and my life and research would probably be completely different. I greatly appreciate all the opportunities Colin has provided me with over the past few years. I'd also like to thank Matt James. In addition to providing kind and helpful feedback, Matt has taught me more about grammar than any English class ever has. I also owe tremendous gratitude to Jacqueline Quinless, as without her NVivo help I may have not made it through the content analysis portion of my thesis as calmly as I did. I must also mention Joanne Denton, because without her I would still be trying to figure out how to fill out forms to graduate.

I'd also like to thank my family, Mark Yawney, Julie Yawney and Kristen Yawney for all of their support throughout both of my degrees. I greatly appreciated all of your curiosity about my topic of study, whether or not you always believed or were interested in what I was talking about all the time. I'd also like to mention my cat Topaz, whose head butts and cuddles were very appreciated, despite her inability to read this dedication.

To my entire cohort, thank you for being extremely friendly. While we might not have all agreed on everything, it was so nice to have people to talk to about classes, life, and the somewhat arduous adventure that is grad school. I would specifically like to thank Jessica Percy Campbell and Smith Odoru-Marfo – I really appreciated your friendship, belief in my intelligence, and mutual acceptance of our membership in the cult of privacy paranoia. Thank you as well to both Sarah Fleck and Luke Travers, as their friendship has always provided me with an abundance of fun and laughter.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Andrew Prosser – my best friend, my partner, my everything. I am positive that without your support, reassurance and willingness to listen to both my most impassioned rants and worst mental breakdowns, I would not have come out of this degree relatively unscathed. You know I'm not the best with words, but I will always be grateful for you being there for me and believing in me every time I did not believe in myself. Your influence has made both myself and my work infinitely better (especially my overuse of "in order to" and "the ways in which").

“Does Big Brother exist?” “Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party.” – George Orwell, 1984

Introduction

While political marketing has been a common tactic in campaigns since the early 20th century (Delacourt, 2015), micro-targeting is a relatively new concept that has gained increasing dominance over electoral campaigns since the early 2000s. Micro-targeting refers to a range of different campaign practices and technologies, such as the collection of voter data, the use of algorithms for the segmentation of the electorate and the actual process of sending targeted messages. Micro-targeting arose as a concept in political campaigning during the 2004 Bush campaign as the result of a campaign data analyst named Alexander Gage. Gage worked with the data-mining firm Acxiom and collected a range of information about Michigan voters, which he then categorized into segments based on individual characteristics. He presented this information to the Bush campaign in a PowerPoint entitled “MicroTargeting,” and a sceptical Karl Rove, Bush’s campaign advisor, was convinced enough to purchase a year of voter contact research (Issenberg, 2012). While Gage and Rove may have had a seemingly clear understanding of what micro-targeting is, there is no consensus in the contemporary literature on what micro-targeting may mean in practice.

In the United States (U.S.), micro-targeting is a well established campaign tactic used by both parties. Both of Obama’s electoral victories are credited with the data-prowess of his campaign’s NGP VAN software (Bimber, 2014), and data analytics firms such as Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ have been in the news due to their perceived roles in the Trump campaign (Cadwalladr, 2017; Chester & Montgomery, 2017). American micro-targeting is seen as the “gold standard” of micro-targeting sophistication, with lax privacy and electoral finance laws allowing for expansive political data regimes (Hersh, 2015; Kreiss, 2016).

Discussions of micro-targeting are not limited to American elections, with books such as *Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them* by Susan Delacourt (2015) and articles such as “Federal Election 2015: How Data Mining is Changing Political Campaigns” (Ormiston, 2015) calling attention to this campaign tactic in Canadian elections. This commentary frames Canadian micro-targeting as something all-encompassing and unavoidable, which will continue to advance in coming campaigns. Recent links between the Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Christopher Wylie and the Liberal Party (Curry & Freeze, 2018) and the use of AggregateIQ by the Liberal Party of British Columbia (B.C.) (MacLeod, 2018) are also bringing this and other behavioural marketing practices to the public’s attention. My research seeks to take advantage of the attention being paid to these issues to understand better how micro-targeting is actually practiced in Canadian elections.

Research Questions

The core research questions my thesis will answer are: “how can micro-targeting be understood in Canadian provincial elections?” and “how is it practiced?” These questions will be answered through the sub-question “is micro-targeting being used at the provincial level by parties and candidates in Canada, and if so, how and to what extent?” which will be addressed through analyzing what the “micro” appeals are in micro-targeting used by the Ontario parties. These questions will be used to situate this thesis in the literature around Canadian elections, specifically on voter behaviour and the use of social media in politics, by highlighting how different sociological and structural factors may influence how micro-targeting is practiced.

Research Methodology

The theoretical framework underlying my research is rational choice institutionalism. Rational choice institutionalism assumes and emphasizes that actors in politics will have a fixed

set of interests that they seek to maximize strategically in political outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Rational choice institutionalists do not believe that institutions directly shape the behaviour of actors, but rather influence how he or she chooses the best course of action for achieving his or her preferences (Lowndes, 2002). For example, in Ontario politics, there is a range of social and institutional factors, such as stringent financial and lax privacy legislation, that create a context in which micro-targeting is an effective and efficient way to gain the most electoral advantage. Lax privacy laws allow parties to collect information on voters unrestricted, and the stringent financial laws create a context in which it is necessary for parties to determine how to campaign with their limited resources most effectively. Micro-targeting offers a solution to that problem by allowing parties to segment voters and focus only on those who are likely to be convinced of the party's message. Therefore, the underlying assumption of my research is that micro-targeting will be used out of self-interest to expand the candidates' interests, specifically winning the election.

Methods

For my research, I conducted a case study of the 2018 Ontario election. This province was chosen due to the timeliness of the provincial election, which was scheduled for June 7, 2018. By analyzing a current election, I had better access to any micro-targeted messages due to my ability to monitor the campaigns as they were actually happening.

Additionally, the evident importance of the 2018 election to Ontario politics also makes it an interesting election to study, as the results are being heralded as historic. Ontario elected a Progressive Conservative (PC) majority government led by new Premier and former Toronto city councillor Doug Ford. Voter turnout in this election was 58%, which is the highest turnout seen since 1999 (Dunham, 2018). As well, the Green Party won their first seat in parliament with the

election of leader Mike Schreiner in Guelph (Nielsen, 2018). On the other hand, the Liberal Party also received an unprecedented loss in this election. While former premier Kathleen Wynne managed to maintain her seat in Don Valley West, the party did not receive enough seats to be recognized as an official party in the legislature.¹ This loss will impact the party significantly until the next election cycle, as they will no longer receive public funding for research and other tasks and will not be recognized during parliamentary question period (Vomiero, 2018). Furthermore, The New Democratic Party (NDP) gained official opposition status, which is a position the party has not held since 1987 (Dunham, 2018). The general public dissatisfaction with the Liberal Party and Kathleen Wynne benefitted the Greens and the NDP, in addition to helping the PCs win the election.

While the general public orientation towards change makes this particular election interesting to study, there are also reasons Ontario politics is interesting to study more generally. For example, several structural factors of Ontario's electoral legislation may impact micro-targeting. Ontario has no provincial privacy legislation that applies to political parties, and it banned corporate and union donations in 2017 (Crawley, 2017).² While there is no legislative impetus for the parties to protect voter privacy, some parties have adopted internal privacy policies. These factors, as well as others, will be discussed more substantively in Chapter Two.

Beyond the societal and legislative factors that make the 2018 election interesting, the attention being paid to this election in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal is also of note. Specifically, ProPublica was researching this election by collecting political ads seen on Facebook by multiple users (Radwanski & Cardoso, 2018). Therefore, it is important to mention

¹ To maintain official party status, the Liberals needed to win at least 8 seats. However, the party only managed to win 7 (Vomiero, 2018).

² These factors are discussed more substantively in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

how my research can be differentiated from the crowdsourcing of political ads undertaken by ProPublica. While I did not have access to the same amount of information as ProPublica, I was able to interact with the ads (through clicking, watching videos, etc.) and also “liked” the pages of the different parties and candidates; arguably, ProPublica simply captured the image and targeting criteria of messages without requiring engagement with the advertisement. This difference means that information about my “reaction” to ads was collected and likely used for future targeting efforts, which may not have occurred through the general crowdsourcing of messages. Further differences between my research and ProPublica’s can also be seen in the actual process of how I conducted my case study.

To study the election, I conducted a content analysis of emails, social media postings and advertisements in specific ridings for the campaigns of the Liberal Party, NDP and PCs in Ontario, which are the most electorally competitive parties in the province. Weber (1990) defines content analysis as a research method used “to make inferences about the sender of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message based on analysis of the text” (as cited in Zhao, 2014, p. 2). Overt and implied messages are inferred from the text, as well as characteristics of the sender and the intended audience (Zhao, 2014). Content analysis is therefore particularly useful for my research as I am attempting to track assumptions made about particular groups that are embedded in messages or the targeting criteria associated with the messages. These assumptions will highlight whether or not micro-targeting is being used by establishing if and how campaigns are differentiating messages based on the intended audience.

The ridings I studied are Peterborough-Kawartha, Brampton Centre, University-Rosedale, Don Valley West, Hamilton Centre, Etobicoke North, Sudbury, and Eglinton-

Lawrence. The ridings chosen can be divided into three categories based on their importance to the research question: new ridings, leadership ridings and special interest ridings.

The new ridings are Peterborough-Kawartha, Brampton Centre, and University-Rosedale. These ridings were created with the re-drawing of ridings in the *Representation Act, 2015* and were likely to have increased competition due to the lack of an incumbent (Sayers, 1998). Peterborough-Kawartha is made up of ridings that were Liberal and PC in the previous election (“Peterborough-Kawartha,” 2018) and Brampton Centre is made up of ridings that were Liberal and NDP in the previous election (“Brampton Centre,” 2018). The differences in the election results of the ridings that make up these new ridings introduced an opportunity for competition, as there is a lack of clear party preference. University-Rosedale is made up of ridings that were Liberal in the last election, but the NDP does have a presence in one of the ridings that make up this riding, Trinity-Spadina. Trinity-Spadina was won by the NDP consistently from 1999 until 2014 when the riding went Liberal (“Trinity-Spadina,” 2014). This riding is generally assumed to be Liberal (“University-Rosedale,” 2018), but the history of NDP dominance in one of its composite ridings introduces competition.

The leadership ridings are Don Valley West, with Kathleen Wynne running for the Liberal Party; Hamilton Centre, with Andrea Horwath running for the NDP; and, Etobicoke North, with Doug Ford running for the PCs. The leadership ridings are important to include because there is likely to be an increased level of competition due to the nature of the candidates running. The party leaders would want to win their specific ridings to avoid a by-election (Thanh Ha, 2013), and therefore are likely to focus more efforts on these areas.

The specific interest ridings are Sudbury and Eglinton-Lawrence. Sudbury is part of Northern Ontario, an area that is generally considered more rural than other areas of Ontario

(Cross, Malloy, Small & Stephenson, 2015), despite Sudbury itself being a larger city with over 100,000 residents. Eglinton-Lawrence is an urban riding in Toronto that was noted as a key riding in personal correspondence with Mitch Wexler, CEO of Politrain Consulting. Wexler noted that he ran the PC campaign there (Wexler, personal communication), so it was likely that this riding would have some level of micro-targeting due to his experience using targeted campaigning tactics in federal Conservative party campaigns in the past (Delacourt, 2015). All of these new, leadership and special interest ridings will be my sample population to study the use of micro-targeting in the 2018 Ontario election.

To conduct my content analysis in each of these ridings, I created email accounts to subscribe to the email lists of all three parties and candidates, and “liked” each party and candidate in each riding on my personal Facebook page. The content was collected from the period of May 1, 2018, until the day of the election, June 7, 2018. To collect email content, I created a separate email account for each of the ridings listed above and changed the characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) of each of the “people” associated with each email.³ The purpose of differentiating the characteristics and location associated with each email, as well as using my personal Facebook account, was to test if the parties’ would send different content based on what they think they know about each account, using human decision makers and database algorithms. To collect Facebook advertising content, I monitored my own personal news feed and took screenshots of any ads encountered on either the desktop website or smartphone app. I also monitored my personal Instagram page for any targeted advertisements, as Facebook owns Instagram and allows for advertising on both platforms (Facebook business, n.d.).

³ A list of the different emails and associated demographics can be found in *Appendix 1*.

Facebook was chosen over other social media platforms because it is the most common social media network used by Canadians, with 84% of Canadian adults having a Facebook account in 2017 (Mai, 2018). Ontario has the most social media users of all the provinces, with 67% of Ontario residents having an account on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube or Instagram (Clark, 2018). Facebook was also highlighted as a key platform by several academic authors, such as Giasson and Small (2017) and Kreiss (2017), whose research is crucial to this thesis. As well, the prevalence of Facebook in the controversies around fake news and Russian meddling in the 2016 United States (U.S.) election show that this platform is effective for communicating with voters, and potentially crucial for influencing them as well.

Once I had collected all of the Facebook and email content, I analyzed the messages with reference to five distinct hypotheses, which will be discussed substantively in the third chapter of this thesis. These hypotheses are: (1) The messages are not individually targeted and rather re-affirm party identification; (2) There are differences between the goals of communication on different platforms; (3) There are differences in the message sent to different ridings or areas; (4) There are differences in the messages to different demographic groups; (5) There are differences in the messages sent to the different ridings/areas and demographic groups, with different policy content being attributed to each message.⁴

I then utilized the NVivo Qualitative Analysis software to analyze the different messages with reference to the aforementioned hypotheses. Screenshots of the different emails and Facebook/Instagram ads were converted into readable PDFs and imported into NVivo, and the Facebook posts were captured by the NVivo NCapture browser extension and imported. I coded

⁴ The codes associated with each of these hypotheses can be found in *Appendix 2*.

each source with reference to 41 nodes,⁵ which are included in *Appendix 3*. To establish coding reliability I referenced back to sources I had previously coded when coding new sources to ensure all were coded to the same standard and code definition.

Once all the sources had been coded with the preliminary nodes, I established compound nodes for each of the different hypotheses. I created compound nodes by combining each of the nodes created for the criteria associated with each hypotheses⁶ using standard formal logic connectives of AND and OR. For example, I set up the program to create a new node for Hypothesis 3 (There are differences in the message sent to different ridings or areas) by having this node apply to *only* the sources that included the codes of demographically targeted appeal AND policy promise. The software then created new amalgamated nodes that were applied to sources that now referenced *only* sources that contained both of these criteria. I then created cases for each of the parties and ridings I was analyzing in my research. This process allowed me to create tables, called Node Matrices, which displayed different cases with reference to the different hypotheses. The Node Matrices again utilized the logical connective of AND and produced tables containing all sources that were coded with the particular case and criteria. For example, the Node Matrices displayed the number of sources that were coded with both the codes of Liberal Party, PC or NDP, AND the new, amalgamated codes of each of the hypotheses. Under the section of the table for each hypothesis, the Matrices displayed the number of sources that were coded at, for example, the Liberal Party AND Hypothesis 1. These tables allowed me to isolate *only* the sources that had been coded with all or most of the hypotheses' criteria, and coded as one of the parties.

⁵ Nodes are the name given for codes in the NVivo software.

⁶ The hypotheses and associated criteria used for the coding process are contained in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Contributions to Knowledge

Research on micro-targeting in Canada has primarily focused on the federal level, with the success of Liberal and Conservative micro-targeting being highlighted by academics (Patten, 2017; Munroe & Munroe, 2018; McKelvey, 2015; Marwah, Triadafilopoulos & White, 2013; Flanagan, 2007) and journalists (Bryden, 2016; Delacourt, 2016). Despite academic attention to this practice at the federal level, micro-targeting is still a largely understudied practice in Canadian elections; there is comparatively little to no academic research in provincial elections.⁷ My research seeks to fill this gap in the literature by studying micro-targeting in an on-going provincial election. The purpose of my research is to provide a better understanding of what the “micro” of micro-targeting means in Canadian elections, and whether or not it is as pervasive as some commentators (Delacourt, 2015; Patten, 2017) argue.

Chapter Structure

My thesis contains five chapters. This first chapter serves as an introduction to the topic and research purpose, while also providing a discussion of my research methods. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with the research questions driving this study, as well as the assumptions and methods used to answer these questions.

The second chapter provides the broader context relevant to this research, focusing on voter behaviour in Canada and political trends and culture in Ontario. By providing an overview of the relevant literature on Canadian politics, I analyze how structural and social factors of Canadian politics may influence micro-targeting in Canadian provincial elections. Additionally,

⁷ There has been some journalistic analysis on if or how provincial parties are using micro-targeting, but this commentary is relatively new and is limited to only a few authors (Macleod, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Radwanski & Cardoso, 2018).

this section will provide the background contextual information needed to understand Ontario politics leading into the 2018 general election.

The third chapter provides an overview of the literature around micro-targeting and the different hypotheses that will be driving my research. By describing some of the different ways micro-targeting has been used in the literature, I will use this lack of precision to establish the different hypotheses for my research. This information will be used for the case study being presented in the following chapter.

The fourth chapter contains the case study of the 2018 Ontario election. In this section, findings will be differentiated into sections based on each of the different hypotheses, including tables of findings and visual representations of some of the messages received. Tables will be differentiated based on the criteria given in Chapter Three and the codes included in *Appendix 2*. This chapter will begin to answer the research question of “is micro-targeting being used at the provincial level by parties and candidates in Canada, and if so, how and to what extent?” The purpose of this section is to provide a summary of the research findings in each area, as well as analysis on the use of micro-targeting in the election.

The fifth and concluding chapter contains commentary on what my case study suggests about the use of micro-targeting in provincial elections. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the overall research question of “how can micro-targeting be understood in Canadian provincial elections?” This chapter will conclude with a brief commentary on the potential limitations of my study and areas for further research.

Ch. 1: Sociological Influence, Structural Influence, or a Combination of the Two?

Comparing Voter Behaviour in Canada and Ontario

Introduction

The 2018 Ontario election was rife with controversy both before and during the actual campaign period. The resignation of PC leader Patrick Brown over allegations of sexual misconduct (Platt, 2018a) caused the party to call an election for a new leader just three months before the provincial election (CBC News, 2018a). As well, in January it was discovered that the PC database had been breached sometime during November (CP24 Web Staff, 2018; Russell, 2018). Adding to the party's data issues, Brampton East PC Candidate Simmer Sandhu was forced to resign in late May after an internal data-breach of 60,000 names and addresses from his former employer, who controls the 407 highway tolls. This revelation caused Ontario Election's watchdog to look into the PC campaigns to determine whether or not any candidates were using this stolen data (Mahoney & Howlett, 2018).

The other parties were not immune to scrutiny, with the media and the PCs attacking the NDP based on candidates' controversial postings on social media (which were all posted years previous to the campaign), including the sharing, and perceived endorsement, of a Hitler quote and statuses stating disapproval of both wearing a poppy on Remembrance Day and celebrating Christmas (Platt, 2018b). While the Liberals did not have any major scandals, Kathleen Wynne had low approval ratings in the province and the lowest approval rating of any premier in Canada going into the election (Shum, 2018).

The numerous controversies of the campaign, from all parties, did not entirely detract from the general policy focus of all the campaigns. The critical issues in the election all related to affordability (Crawley, 2018b). Increasing hydro rates, gas prices, car insurance and general

taxation vs. public spending (heralded by the Liberals as “care vs. cuts”) were highlighted to varying extents in each party platform. A key claim of the Ford campaign, reminiscent of the Trump campaign, was that he would “make Ontario great again” and bring the province back to its previous status as a significant player in the national government and economy. The Liberals and NDP responded to this claim by arguing that the cuts to taxes and gas prices promised by the Ford PCs would come at the detriment of public services such as healthcare.

While contemporary scandals and issues played a definite role in the 2018 Ontario election, historical trends in Canadian and Ontario politics also have an influence. The overall necessity of parties to segment voters as a result of the electoral system (Cairns, 1968) has an impact on any election, especially concerning micro-targeting. The goal of this chapter is to summarize this contextual information relevant to my research question. Beginning with a review of the literature around traditional understandings of Canadian voters and parties, I will discuss the context of Ontario politics and how unique aspects of the province may have had an influence on micro-targeting in the 2018 general election.

Canadian Parties and Voters: Divide and Conquer

The literature around the delineation of voters in Canada has focused on several themes, with one of the focuses being the influence of the electoral system on how parties target voters. Cairns (1968) argues that, at the federal level, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system leads to the creation of government from a plurality of votes in the electorate, often failing to create a majority. The electoral system interacts with the differences between demographics (such as religion, ethnicity and language) and regions of the country, with specific segments of votes in particular areas being more important than others in the quest for electoral success. As an effect of FPTP, parties must segment voter interests to gain a plurality of votes in key ridings

(Cairns, 1968). Over different party systems, the regionalizing effects of the electoral system that led to increased importance for particular segments of voters have led parties to switch between an emphasis on brokerage politics and regional outreach (Carty, Cross & Young, 2000). The electoral system creates increased importance for particular areas, and the sociological makeup of these different areas influence how parties may choose to appeal to voters.

As an effect of the electoral system, regional outreach, or regionalism, is also prominent in the literature on Canadian voting behaviour. For Cochrane and Perrella (2012) and Henderson (2004) regions can be cross-provincial or independent of provincial boundaries; regions are defined in terms of individual proximity and connection to the people, institutions and features of a given area (Cochrane & Perrella, 2012; Henderson, 2004). The differences between regions, through geography, economics and demographics, interact with the electoral system differently at different levels of government; these differences introduce a discontinuity in the number of parties, party prevalence, and voting patterns when comparing federal and provincial elections (Johnston, 2017). While the regional grounding of a riding is important, it also interacts with the sociological factors of the area.

In addition to regional segmentation, parties also segment voters based on demographic characteristics. One such example of this phenomenon is voter segmentation based on language appeals (Johnston, 2017). At the federal level, the Conservative party has tended to appeal to English Canada as a way to gain an increased level of support (Johnston & Ballantyne, 1977; Johnston, 2017), whereas the Liberal party tends to gain support from Quebec and French Canadians (Cairns, 1968). Another example is the segmentation of voters based on appeals to ethnicity (Harrell, 2013; Marwah, Triadafilopoulos & White, 2013; Johnston, 2017). The settlement patterns of ethnic minorities in predominately urban swing ridings make this group

influential to party success (Marwah, Triadafilopoulos & White, 2013). The influence of ethnicity has seen all of the parties embracing a policy of multiculturalism and ethnic outreach to gain a plurality of support (Marwah, Triadafilopoulos & White, 2013; Harrell, 2013). Federally the Liberals have been most effective in allying themselves with “ethnic” or minority voters (Clarkson, 2005), but the Conservatives have also been able to gain some support from this group (Bittner & Koop, 2013; Marwah, Triadafilopoulos & White, 2013).

Beyond language and ethnicity, there is also some reference in the scholarship to demographic segmentation based on class. Cairns (1968) and Johnston (2017) argue that class has not been influential in Canadian politics due to an emphasis on regional appeals, but other authors do find a role for class in party outreach. Wilson (1974) argues against Cairns’ claims and shows that class-based affiliations were more salient in determining voter behaviour than religion or ethnicity. Furthermore, Gidengil (1989) highlights how class and regional considerations can be understood as co-constitutive factors influencing voting behaviour, with different class concentrations emerging in different regions based on their role within the national economy.

While the aforementioned literature mentions trends in Canadian voter and party behaviour more generally, these trends are also replicated at the provincial level. Ontario also uses a single member plurality (SMP) voting system, which interacts with the sociological makeup of Ontario in similar ways as at the federal level. Parties are therefore incentivized to segment voters based on location, ethnicity, language, or a combination of all of these criteria. However, other provincially specific factors also play a role in Ontario parties’ segmenting of voters; these factors will be discussed in the following sections.

Ontario's Political Culture: Changing Times

Wiseman (2007) once heralded Ontario political culture as “Archetypal English Canadian,” but contemporary politics suggests that the province is moving away from this classification (McGrane & Berdahl, 2013). Due to the influx of Loyalist soldiers from the American War of Independence, Ontario politics is historically linked to Tory ideology, meaning there is an attachment to traditional values, institutions and hierarchies (Woolstencroft, 2016; Wiseman, 2007). Traditionally, Ontario politics has been characterized as progressive conservative, valuing loyalty and pragmatism (Woolstencroft, 2016; Wiseman, 2007). However, McGrane and Berdahl (2013) argue that Ontario political culture is moving towards being more centre-left. Ontario voters are seen as being more alienated from the political system and less trusting of government than voters in other provinces (McGrane & Berdahl, 2013). On the other hand, Bricker and Ibbitson (2013) argue that Ontario political culture is now marked by populism, with voters rejecting the traditional politics of the Laurentian Consensus elite (i.e., the pragmatic and loyal culture) in favour of economic concerns and less government. The influence of populism can be seen directly in the platforms of the PCs, as well as how the PCs and Conservatives create unlikely coalitions of voters in both urban and rural Ontario on the basis of these economic concerns (Bricker & Ibbitson, 2013).

This trend towards a rejection of traditional elites and distrust of government has also been reflected in a lack of trust in the more traditional economic values of the province. Because the province has traditionally been wealthy, politics has generally revolved around maintaining wealth and efficiency in managing government (Cross et al., 2015). However, due to an economic downturn, the province has begun receiving equalization payments from the federal government, making it a “have not” province (Woolstencroft, 2016; Cross et al., 2015). The role

of efficiency has also been questioned in contemporary politics due to scandals and deficits in the 2000s (Woolstencroft, 2016). Potentially as an effect of the economic downturn, Ontario voters are argued to be less supportive of market liberalism and more concerned with post-materialist values (McGrane & Berdahl, 2013). However, the populist rhetoric of the PCs suggests that this change is not universal.

Despite changing values, Ontario voters have had generally stable party preferences. The province has traditionally elected the PCs, which has led to stability in government over multiple elections (Cross et al., 2015). The parties have tended to avoid radical ideological appeals and remain fairly centrist (Cross et al., 2015). However, the PCs abandoned this centrist campaign strategy with the election of Mike Harris as party leader in 1990 (Cameron, 2000). During this time, the party relied on populist appeals such as Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" (Cameron, 2000). After Harris's election as Premier in 1995, the PCs lost support between 1999 and 2003 due to radical changes to policies made during his time in office (Henderson, Brown, Docherty, Kay & Ellis-Hale, 2013). The party abandoned its previous pragmatic values from this time on, likely contributing to the Liberal dominance of Ontario politics from 2003 to 2018. Doug Ford continued this trend towards "common sense" and populist appeals throughout his campaign, and the general dislike for the Liberals likely influenced those previously wary of the populist PCs to end up supporting them.

Even with the PC's abandonment of centrist, pragmatic appeals, the general history of pragmatism in Ontario politics provides a context that encourages the use of micro-targeting. The parties are already embedded in a culture that emphasizes rationality and "the most bang for your buck" sort of appeals, so micro-targeting offers a direct means of effectively using resources. Parties can determine swing voters and important ridings, reducing the amount of resources

wasted on areas where the party is unlikely to gain electoral advantage. Parties can then appeal directly to the values and interests of these voters, whether those are more materialist (i.e., economic) or post-materialist values.

A Demographic Balancing Act

The ability of a party to “know” the specific interests of an individual usually relies on the use of demographic information about the individual (Information Commissioner’s Office, 2018). In the case of Ontario, there are several different demographic distinctions to take into account when targeting voters.

Language and religion are two of the three main cleavages in Ontario politics, followed by the divide between rural and urban ridings (Wiseman, 2007). While English is the majority language in Ontario, 11.3% of the population claimed to be able to speak French in 2011 (Dyck, 2016). Ontario has received 2.5 million immigrants in the 25 years previous to 2016, with the Philippines, China and India being the most prominent immigrant countries; immigrants from these countries and others have also brought along languages such as Chinese, Tagalog, German and Urdu (Dyck, 2016). Additionally, in 2011, 65% of the population identified as Christian (half of those identified as Roman Catholic) and 23% identified as non-religious. The rest of the population identified as Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh or Buddhist (Dyck, 2016).

The vast range of diversity within the province also incentivizes parties to use micro-targeting. Parties have to attempt to create coalitions between a broad range of groups by isolating specific interests and appealing to those interests with policy promises. The geographic location of these different groups also incentivizes micro-targeting. A majority of new immigrants settle in the general Toronto area (GTA) (Dyck, 2016), which includes large, generally important ridings for forming the government. The settlement patterns of new and

immigrant Canadians, therefore, make it necessary for the parties to appeal to at least one segment of these ethnic groups – and micro-targeting allows for the parties to specifically segment these groups and target them most effectively.

Stability Leads to Competition: The Party Context in Ontario

While the social context of Ontario politics, such as the political culture and demographic makeup, influence micro-targeting, the party context plays a role as well. The Ontario Liberals and PCs are not affiliated with their federal counterparts, whereas the federal and Ontario NDP are connected (McGrane, 2017); these connections (or lack thereof) are influential to micro-targeting due to the provincial party's ability to access the federal party's database. Additionally, Ontario has one of the most stable party systems in Canada, with all the parties remaining consistent in their name and general election standings until 2018 (Malloy, 2016). The Liberals and the PCs are the most dominant in the Ontario party system, with the NDP regularly remaining a third-place party (Malloy, 2016). The overall stability of the system, therefore, requires parties to effectively segment and persuade swing voters to gain an electoral advantage.

Despite general electoral stability, there can be a division between the provincial and local level campaigns in Ontario. Because of the SMP electoral system in the province, elections are fought on both the provincial and constituency level (Cross et al., 2015). Local level candidates have to determine whether to focus more intensely on the leader or the local candidate's identity and how much to emphasize local level issues not part of the provincial platform (Cross et al., 2015). The central party operatives have to determine which ridings to focus the most resources on to win the overall election (Cross et al., 2015). Micro-targeting can, therefore, be useful to local candidates in targeting niche issues in their riding, and to the central party for dividing its resources among the ridings it is most likely to win. The parties each have

different means of dealing with these tensions, through focusing on particular policy orientations and ridings in their campaigns.

The Progressive Conservative (PC) Party

The PCs have traditionally been in power in Ontario politics, which is one of the reasons that Ontario political culture is characterized by stability (Woolstencroft, 2016). During its 42 years in power, the party's policies were characterized by a lack of ideology and a commitment to pragmatism (Malloy, 2016), but the party abandoned this preference from Harris's leadership onwards (Cameron, 2000; Henderson et al., 2013). From Harris onwards, the party has been categorized as more populist, relying on appeals to "common sense" and a lack of an apparent campaign platform rather than the more traditional, pragmatic appeals (Bricker & Ibbitson, 2013). The party is often characterized as being elite-focused and opportunistic, despite also leaning towards some aspects of populism (Malloy, 2016).

During the mid-20th century, Toronto was a massive base of support for the PCs, but this dominance has been declining since the 1990s (Malloy, 2016). PC support in northern Ontario has been declining since the 1980s (Malloy, 2016) but when elected in the north, the PCs are generally popular in areas that are closest to southern Ontario (Comeau, 2016). In the GTA, suburbs are usually competitive races between the PCs and the Liberals. However, the PCs have previously been unable to create the same coalitions of conservative and immigrant voters in these areas that Stephen Harper did federally (Malloy, 2016). During the 2011 election, the PCs had strong bases of support in rural ridings in the southwest and east and were trying to establish more of a presence in the center of the province (Cross et al., 2015).

The Liberal Party

In 2014 Liberal Party leader Kathleen Wynne was elected as Premier, with her election being somewhat attributed to an inability of the other parties to reach out to voters effectively (Esselment, 2016). During Wynne's stewardship, the party has generally remained in the centre and embodies the pragmatism rampant in Ontario politics (Malloy, 2016). The Ontario Liberal Party (OLP) bears a resemblance to its federal counterpart through its generally centrist orientation and tendency to campaign to the left when necessary (Malloy, 2016).

The Liberals are generally elected in urban ridings but also do well in Northern cities. Southwestern Ontario was traditionally a large area of support for the Liberals, but they lost a majority of their seats in this region in 2011 and 2014 (Malloy, 2016). During the 2011 election campaign, the Liberals focused primarily on urban ridings in Toronto and the Golden Horseshoe (Toronto, Hamilton, Oshawa and Niagara) areas (Cross et al., 2015). The campaigns were more locally focused, and this emphasis created a divide between the provincial and riding level campaigns (Cross et al., 2015).

The New Democratic Party (NDP)

The NDP has generally remained in third place in Ontario politics. The NDP has only held the Premiership one time in Ontario history (in 1990), and their election is attributed more to dissatisfaction with the other parties than an acceptance of their social democratic values (Cross et al., 2015). During their time in power, the NDP moved more towards the center and accepted the Ontario tradition of pragmatic governing (Cross et al., 2015). In contemporary politics, the party is very similar to the federal party under Jack Layton. Leader Andrea Horwath has emphasized the interests of middle-class Ontarians and de-emphasized appeals to social democratic ideology and class conflict (Malloy, 2016).

NDP support is dispersed paradoxically between highly populated urban ridings in Toronto and Hamilton and thinly populated ridings in northern Ontario (Malloy, 2016). NDP support in northern Ontario has been rising since 2003, with the region electing more NDP candidates than Liberals in 2014 (Comeau, 2016). The northern support can be somewhat attributed to protest voting, but there is also support in the region for workers' rights (Comeau, 2016).

During election campaigns, the NDP is the most likely of the three main parties to focus more on the party and leader, even at the local level (Cross et al., 2015). During the 2011 election campaign, the party focused on north and southwestern regions in an attempt to gain electoral momentum. Despite losing the election in these areas, the party managed to come second place in 6 of the 14 ridings, showing a general level of support for the party in these areas (Cross et al., 2015).

Ontario's Legislation and Micro-targeting "by the Book"

Together with the societal and party context of Ontario, the legislative context also influences the use of micro-targeting in elections. While the social context provides the incentives and opportunities to use micro-targeting, the legislative context influences how micro-targeting can be undertaken in elections. The relevant legislative areas to micro-targeting in the 2018 Ontario election are privacy and electoral finance regulations.

Privacy Priorities or Just PR?

The privacy regulations in Ontario will likely influence the parties' use of micro-targeting. The Ontario *Election Act* places some regulations on the use of voter lists. Under the *Election Act*, the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) provides political parties and Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) with voter lists containing voters' full names, unique identifiers,

and mailing and permanent addresses. This information is provided in either an electronic or printed copy, as decided by the CEO, and the information received may only be used for electoral purposes (*Election Act*, 1990). Parties and MPPs receive these voter lists as soon as possible after an election has been called, and there is also the Register of Electors that is updated annually can be accessed upon request. Voter lists must be destroyed and a certificate of destruction must be filed with Elections Canada. However, parties are not required to remove information that has been integrated into party databases (Elections Ontario, 2017).

While the Ontario *Elections Act* does provide some regulation on information on voter lists, there is no substantive mention of party databases. Despite the lack of regulations, the three main parties have adopted internal privacy policies.⁸ The general outlines of the policies are given in *Table 1*.

The party privacy policies are generally quite similar, and none substantively protect voter information and privacy. All of the parties' policies only apply to information obtained on the website and do not mention their respective databases. Interestingly, the Liberals claim to abide by the Ontario *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA) (Ontario Liberal Party, n.d) and the PCs claim to abide by the federal *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* (PIPEDA) (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, n.d.), despite each of these pieces of legislation having no jurisdiction over the parties' collection of voter information.⁹ While the creation of the policies seems to show some respect for voter privacy on behalf of the parties, the lack of substantive privacy protections for individuals'

⁸ The Ontario NDP policy was inaccessible as of November 10, 2017.

⁹ While the Federal government appeared to be making more substantive efforts to regulate data collected by political parties with the *Elections Modernization Act*, the act does not contain any increase to rights or enforcement powers for the regulation of data (C.J. Bennett, 2018).

information makes the policies seem to be more of a PR move than an actual commitment (C.J. Bennett, 2018).

Parties	What kind of information does the policy apply to?	How is this information used?	Application to particular legal principles?	Privacy officer named?
Liberal Party (Ontario Liberal Party, n.d)	Information collected on the website	For running the website and campaign advertisements	FIPPA	No
Progressive Conservative Party (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, n.d.)	Information voluntarily provided on the website	For communication, volunteering, online activism and providing information	PIPEDA and "the ten principles found in the Canadian National Standard for the Protection of Personal Information" (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, n.d., n.p.)	No
New Democratic Party (NDP) (New Democratic Party of Ontario, n.d.)	Information collected on the website	For running the website	No reference	No; questions directed to info@on.ndp.ca or a mailing address

Table 1: Summary of the information contained in the privacy policies of the three main Ontario parties.

What does this mean for 2018? The lack of substantive privacy regulations placed on the parties may allow for the collection of more extensive amounts of information on voters. Parties have no obligation to remove information, thus allowing for parties to continually amass information on the population. Across different elections, this process could result in increasing amounts and depth of information about an individual's interests. Parties may, therefore, be better able to segment individuals based on their interests and use this information to increase the persuasiveness of their messages.

Money, Money, Money

While lacking privacy legislation may have an impact on micro-targeting in the 2018 election, arguably the new electoral finance legislation will have a more significant influence. With the election of Kathleen Wynne, the new Liberal government introduced the *Election Finances Statute Law Amendment Act, 2016*. This legislation introduced new limitations on electoral finance that will be in effect during the 2018 general election. The act brings in several fundamental changes that will have an impact on the amount of money being raised by the Ontario parties in 2018. These changes have already led to a decrease in the amount of money raised by the parties in 2017, compared to previous years (Crawley, 2018a).

The new amendments entirely ban corporations, unions and groups unaffiliated with political parties from donating to parties or campaigns (Government House Leader's Office, 2016). As well, the limit on total donations from individuals has been lowered from \$33,250 to \$3,600 in an election year (Government House Leader's Office, 2016). The restrictions on political donations from individuals and organizations have been accompanied by the creation of a taxpayer subsidy for parties, arguably to replace the lost revenue from corporate and union donations. With the new subsidies, parties that received at least 2% of the vote in the previous election now receive \$2.71 per vote (Crawley, 2017).

What does this mean for 2018? The new restrictions on political donations were likely to impact the campaigning of the parties in the 2018 general election. The spending limits for the election are between around \$40,000 to \$140,000 per riding,¹⁰ with an overall spending limit of \$12, 827, 677 (Elections Ontario, 2018). In 2017, the taxpayer subsidies for the parties were \$5.06 million for the Liberals, \$4.09 million for the PCs and \$3.1 million for the NDP; the 2018 subsidies are expected to be 6% lower (Crawley, 2017). These subsidies are significantly less

¹⁰ Based on the amount of eligible voters in the riding multiplied by \$1.30 per voter (Elections Ontario, 2018).

than the total money spent in the 2014 campaign, in which the Liberals spent \$8 million, the PCs around \$9.5 million and the NDP \$4.6 million (Crawley, 2017). The parties had to attempt to make up this gap, or they were forced to campaign with less financial resources than in previous years.

One way parties were expected to make up the deficit was by relying on public donations, but these are in decline from previous years (Crawley, 2018a). Despite the general decline, the PCs were already able to raise \$945,970 in public donations from the beginning of 2018 until the end of May, which is significantly higher than their competition. In the same time period, the Liberals raised \$488,542 and the NDP raised \$317,305 in donations (Crawley, 2018c).

The decline in financial resources may have an impact on micro-targeting in a few different ways. The parties may use targeting more extensively to reach out to individuals whom they believe are supporters and are likely to donate to the campaign to show their support. Parties have traditionally used email as a primary means of attracting donations (Marland & Matthews, 2017), so there may be a continuation or expansion of this practice in this election. Additionally, the parties may rely on more affordable campaign resources such as Nationbuilder¹¹ more extensively than purchasing data at upwards of \$3,250 a riding. Furthermore, parties with access to more financial resources may rely on more sophisticated targeting techniques.¹²

The incentive of the taxpayer subsidy may also lead to parties campaigning more intensively to increase their overall share of the vote and share of subsidies. Katz and Mair (1995) argue that the party reliance on state resources leads to parties becoming less attentive to

¹¹ A basic version of Nationbuilder software can be licensed for as little as \$29 USD per month (McKelvey & Piebiak, 2016).

¹² The impact in the differences in financial resources may have is discussed more in Chapter 3 *Hypothesis 6*

the needs of the electorate. However, the vote percentage caveat of the Ontario subsidies may lead to parties campaigning more intensely overall to increase their overall vote share.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a variety of background information necessary to understand Ontario politics. The electoral system interacts with social factors at both the federal and provincial level in ways that incentivize segmentation of the electorate in particular ways. The SMP electoral system influenced how the parties appealed to the electorate by incentivizing the parties to focus on particular ridings and blocks of voters to gain a plurality of the vote. This interaction may have impacted the different parties' use of micro-targeting, and if it was used at all.

While the influence of the electoral system may produce similar trends at both the federal and provincial level, the more unique aspects of Ontario's social and legislative context may also have influenced the use of micro-targeting by the parties. Some authors suggest that Ontario voters are moving away from materialist values and market liberalism, suggesting that parties will have to account for more diverse interests in their appeals (McGrane & Berdahl, 2013). Other authors argue that Ontario politics are now marked by the populist appeals towards common sense of the Harris PCs, with voters being distrustful of government and elites, and concerned with economic issues such as balancing the budget (Bricker & Ibbitson, 2013). This diversity in values may also be exacerbated by the demographic makeup of the province, with the influx of immigrants from varying countries (and the settlement patterns of said immigrants) structuring the way parties should appeal to voters. Immigrants have previously been supportive of the Liberals at both the federal and provincial level, but the ability of the Conservatives to create a coalition of rural, urban and immigrant voters has also been influential (Bricker &

Ibbitson, 2013; Marwah, Triadafilopoulos & White, 2013). While the PCs and Liberals have traditionally dominated Ontario politics, the unpopularity of Kathleen Wynne may have aided in the rising prevalence of the NDP. Wynne's unpopularity also likely impacted the party to attempt to identify swing voters and gain support wherever possible. Despite the tendency of voters to move away from the PCs in previous elections, the Liberal unpopularity likely helped both the PCs and the NDP to gain votes by also targeting traditionally Liberal voters.

Additionally, the new regulations on party finance were also likely to have an impact on the amount of resources with which each of the parties could campaign. It was, therefore, interesting to study if this factor also had an impact on *how* the parties campaign. The lack of financial resources, in comparison to other elections, may have led to the parties relying more heavily on digitally-based campaigning such as social media, email, and the use of campaign management platforms such as Nationbuilder.

All of the structural and social factors at play in the 2018 election likely impacted the micro-targeting used by the parties. It is necessary to keep these factors in mind for the discussion of the trends in micro-targeting scholarship discussed in the following chapter.

Ch. 2: Micro-targeting and Internet Politics in Canada: Very Specific or Broadly Based?

Introduction

Ontario politics has previously been defined as relatively stable and centrist with a progressive conservative tendency (Cross et al., 2017; Wiseman, 2007), however current politics suggest a trend towards populist “common sense” values and distrust of government and elites (McGrane & Berdahl, 2013; Bricker & Ibbitson, 2013). This difference in contemporary values also interacts with the electoral system, legislative context and general tendency towards pragmatism in political campaigning to provide the impetus for parties to use micro-targeting to segment voters in the province. This incentive leads to the question, what is micro-targeting?

Micro-targeting is used to refer to a range of different practices and technologies. While micro-targeting applies most generally to the use of voter information for targeted campaigns, the actual implementation of this process will differ across countries, provinces/states, and even election cycles. The lack of precision in the different ways that micro-targeting is used in the literature introduces a challenge when trying to analyze this practice in elections.

This chapter will discuss the literature around micro-targeting and provide the hypotheses which will be investigated in Chapter Four. By reviewing the literature around the use of the Internet and social media in Canadian politics and micro-targeting, I will demonstrate the lack of precision that can be found in the different ways micro-targeting is used. My research seeks to investigate how micro-targeting can be understood as a practice in an election, drawn from the research of key scholars in the field. Within my discussion of each hypothesis, I will provide the key criteria that will be used in the data coding and analysis to analyze how micro-targeting was observed in the 2018 Ontario election and explain some of the patterns found.

Candidate A added you as a Friend: A Brief Discussion of Social Media and Political Campaigning in Canada

The use of social media in politics has been facilitated by the move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. This transition encompasses the movement of the Internet from being understood as a mass information medium (Web 1.0) to a mass communication medium (Web 2.0) (Vergeer, 2013; Cross et al., 2015), allowing for interaction between users. In Web 2.0, campaigns can interact with voters more frequently than may be possible in the offline world. As a result of this transition, research has been conducted on the ability of citizens to better interact with politicians through the use of social media (Kreiss, 2015; W.L. Bennett, 2012; Small, 2007). Due to the expansion of the Internet and social media, the use of Facebook and other platforms by election campaigns is an area of increasing relevance in the literature around Canadian elections.

For example, Small (2011) analyzes Twitter use by Canadian federal party leaders in 2009, finding that a majority used this platform to update the electorate on their plans and whereabouts. Campaigns will use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Instagram to facilitate greater voter outreach and create a perceived level of dialogue and interaction between candidates and the electorate (Small, Jansen, Bastien, Giasson, & Koop, 2014). However, Chen and Smith (2011) found that in 2008 Canadian parties generally used Facebook and social networking sites (SNSs) to provide information, highlight the party image or generate funds. Additionally, the use of social media in campaigning is not always found to be effective, with the potential for people to be sharing content for amusement, as opposed to engagement, being noted by Newman (2016). As well, research has been conducted on the impact of social media on the potential polarization of the electorate (Gruzd & Roy, 2014).

Despite potential negatives of the use of social media in campaigns, it has become an extremely pervasive and fruitful aspect of contemporary political campaigning. While Chen and Smith (2011) highlight Facebook as more of a platform to broadcast information, and Small (2008) argues that in the 2008 campaign parties were not using their Facebook pages to their full potential, the Facebook platform has changed drastically since the 2008 campaign. Parties are now able to both interact with the electorate and collect information on the electorate on the platform (C.J. Bennett & Bayley, 2012) by making use of a variety of different applications and tools. The basis of these tools is the Edgerank algorithm, which one could describe as the lifeblood of the Facebook platform.

Advertising on Facebook: The EdgeRank Algorithm

Facebook's user homepage is called the News Feed. The News Feed contains posts and updates from "friends" and "pages" a user follows. This page is curated¹³ through an algorithm called EdgeRank that arranges content based on what it deems will be most relevant to the individual user (Montgomery, 2015). To curate content, the algorithm determines events and content that can be categorized as an edge, which is made up of a comparison between two factors: an individual user's activity and another user's News Feed (Bendor & Thomas, 2014). Each piece of content posted to Facebook by users is defined as an Object (Kincaid, 2010). User interaction with Objects (through liking, commenting, etc.) produces relations that Facebook then uses to rank these edges (Kincaid, 2010). Objects with higher amounts of interaction receive higher scores and, as a result, are placed more central to the News Feed (Kincaid, 2010).

¹³ Curation on Facebook refers to a process by which the algorithm sifts through large amounts of content to show users only the information that it deems relevant to the user's interests and likely to increase user interaction on the platform ("The Invisible Curation of Content," 2018).

The relevance of edges is further differentiated by three categories: affinity score, weight and time decay. Affinity score provides an assessment of the perceived interactions between the creator of the content or event, and the users to whom this information will be disseminated. Weight evaluates the engagement with an event or content based on individual behaviour such as “clicking, liking, following, reading, listening, and viewing” (Bendor & Thomas, 2014, p.2). Different activities are weighted differently based on the creation and consumption of content, as well as how individual users came upon that content. For example, clicking an ad directly is weighted more than clicking through a Fan Page (Bendor & Thomas, 2014). Time decay reflects the value of an edge relevant to the time of creation and engagement. New edges and edges recently interacted with are privileged over other less current or less interacted with edges (Bendor & Thomas, 2014). EdgeRank also considers individual users’ relationships when calculating the score of an edge. Interactions and content posted by an individual on a users’ close friends list or customized list based on user interest will have higher priority than those produced by other “friends” (Bendor & Thomas, 2014).

EdgeRank introduced a subsidiary algorithm called GraphRank in 2011, which allows for shared individual interests such as movies and books to be included in edge calculation (Bendor & Thomas, 2014). The in-depth workings of the EdgeRank algorithm are opaque, and Facebook has yet to provide any comment on it directly. Overall EdgeRank highlights content that has either a high level of user engagement overall or content that will attract a user to increase his or her level of platform engagement.

Complimentary to the ranking of Objects from users’ friend lists and followed pages, EdgeRank is also used to curate advertisements. Through the collection of Objects, edges, individually provided data and posted content, Facebook allows marketers to access an enormous

amount of data on individual users. Through the linking of different data and data points, advertisers can determine an individual's "interest graph" (Montgomery, 2015, p. 775) and "social graph" (Montgomery, 2015, p. 775), representing the interactions and relationships a user has with other users. This information is then operationalized to target advertisements more effectively (boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Using this information, Facebook provides advertisers the ability to create different "audiences" for their ads. There are three different audience options available: core, custom and lookalike. Core audiences include individuals selected by the advertiser to receive an ad, based on factors such as demographics,¹⁴ location,¹⁵ interests¹⁶ and behaviours¹⁷ (Facebook Business, n.d.). Custom audiences allow for the utilization of imported customer lists by linking the information provided by the advertiser to existing Facebook accounts (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018; Facebook Business, n.d.). This information may come from customer logs, site visitor reports and lists of mobile App users (Facebook Business, n.d.).

Both of the previous two audience creation options can be used as a basis for the third option, Lookalike audiences. Lookalike audiences allow for the creation of a new audience based on information already known about *current* customers. The algorithm then creates an audience based on these factors, which includes people who are similar in demographics or interests to the Core or Custom audience (Facebook business, n.d.). Unlike the two previous options, Lookalike

¹⁴ Described by Facebook as "[f]ind people based on traits like age, gender, relationship status, education, workplace, job titles and more" (Facebook Business, n.d., n.p.).

¹⁵ Described by Facebook as "[r]each people in areas where you want to do business. You can even create a radius around a store to help create more walk-ins" (Facebook Business, n.d., n.p.).

¹⁶ Described by Facebook as "[f]ind people based on what they're into, like hobbies, favorite entertainment and more" (Facebook Business, n.d., n.p.).

¹⁷ Described by Facebook as "[r]each people based on their purchase behaviors, device usage and other activities" (Facebook Business, n.d., n.p.).

audiences frequently change due to the algorithm adapting to and learning from new information such as user behaviour (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018).

Beyond the Audience creation tools that allow advertisers to utilize Facebook data and import their own, Facebook also offers a Partner Categories program that enables advertisers to use data acquired from data brokers (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018). This feature utilizes demographic data from offline behaviour to better target potential customers. The majority of this information seems to be available in the Audience Insights platform, which allows advertisers to create audiences based on more extensive demographic information¹⁸ and learn more information about their target audience (Faizullabhoy & Korolova, 2018).

In conjunction with general advertising technologies, Facebook also offers technologies specifically for political campaigns. The majority of the policies seem to allow for similar methods of advertising to the general advertising technologies but are marketed explicitly for political campaigning. Facebook claims to have technologies available to help with campaigning from the start of the campaign until Election Day ("Ad Campaigns," n.d.). Facebook allows political campaigns to utilize all of the audience creation features available to advertisers; there is evidence that political parties are using all of these audience creation tools, with specific reliance on the Lookalike function (Bartlett, Smith & Acton, 2018). British parties specifically are importing voter email and telephone lists to be used in the creation of audience – reaching out to

¹⁸ Audience Insights provides advertisers with four different categories of customization for their audience: demographics, page likes, location and activity. Demographics include information such as lifestyle, relationship status, education and job title. Page likes are differentiated into categories of interests, and also offers predictions on what pages may also be of interest to your audience. Location tracks cities, countries and language. Activity tracks when and how users interact with the platform (Audience Insights, n.d.). There also used to be a fifth category offered, called Household, which allowed for audience customization based on estimated income, home ownership, household size, house market value and spending methods. However, this feature was removed sometime after April 2018.

targets they already know (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018). Ads can be displayed on both the Facebook and Instagram platforms. Additionally, Facebook allows campaigns to track individual users' interactions with the ad, allowing campaigns to evaluate the effectiveness of different messages based on criteria such as click-through rates ("Activate," n.d.).

The information about social media and its use in politics is important to the context of this thesis, but it is also not the primary focus. Social media offers one means through which micro-targeting can be accomplished – but what constitutes micro-targeting?

What is Micro-targeting?

In commercial behavioural marketing, micro-targeting can be understood as “shaping the product not around mass consumers, ... but one unique person: you, the target customer” (Delacourt, 2015, p. 234), but it is unclear if this definition fits with how the practice has adapted for use in political campaigns. In politics, micro-targeting is used to refer to campaign practices such as canvassing with the use of information gleaned from voter databases (Watters, 2015; Bryden, 2015) to individualize campaign targeting using voter data (Delacourt, 2015; Issenberg, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2016; Nickerson & Rogers, 2014; Issenberg, 2015; C.J. Bennett, 2015). This process involves the collection of voter information to segment the electorate into different categories based on interests and demographic attributes to infer potential political interests and persuadability (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018).

While the general process of micro-targeting may be similar in American and Canadian campaigns, the U.S. is somewhat of an anomaly in the world of micro-targeting. American political databases are much more extensive than those used in Canada, and there is also a large

variety of commercial political management platforms available to American parties.¹⁹ The information in U.S. party databases has been combined with algorithms to predict how voters will react to specific campaign outreach, such as online messages and advertisements (Ridout, 2009; Nickerson & Rogers, 2014; Borgesius et al., 2018). American micro-targeting has also been arguably able to use psychographic segmentation based on the “OCEAN” personality traits of openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (González, 2017). However, there is also some skepticism in the American scholarship around whether or not micro-targeting is an effective campaign tool, to the extent that the hype around it suggests (Endres & Kelly, 2017; Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2012; Kreiss, 2017; Baldwin-Philippi, 2017).

In Canada, micro-targeting has been imported to elections from American campaigning, but to nowhere near the same extent. This practice is still somewhat under researched in the scholarship, with some attention from both academics and journalists. The research that is available revolves generally around analysis on party databases and voter segmentation.

The three main federal parties have extensive databases that are unregulated by Canadian privacy legislation. The Conservative Party’s Constituent Information Management System (CIMS) database is credited with the Conservative dominance of electoral politics from 2008 to 2015. The Liberal Party’s database Liberalist was partially credited with Justin Trudeau’s election to Prime Minister in 2015 (McKelvey, 2015; Delacourt, 2015; Munroe & Munroe, 2018). The NDP also created a database before the 2015 federal election called Populist (Patten, 2017). Liberalist is based on the Obama campaign’s NGP VAN software, CIMS is based on the Ontario Progressive Conservative’s database Trackright, and Populus is based on the foreAction

¹⁹ Some examples of the different types of political campaigning applications and platforms available to American campaigns can be found at <https://www.capterra.com/political-campaign-software/>

platform (McKelvey, 2015; Munroe & Munroe, 2018; Patten, 2017). These databases generally include information collected through the provision of voter lists from federal/provincial elections offices, purchasable consumer data (such as membership cards, magazine subscriptions, etc.), publicly available user-generated content (such as that available on social media) and information collected through canvassing activities (C.J. Bennett & Bayley, 2012).

These databases are continuously used and updated across different election cycles, allowing for the collection of vast amounts of voter information over time. However, campaigns have also started to use voter management software such as Nationbuilder in addition to their own databases. Nationbuilder, for example, allows for the integration of information about both party and voter interactions (McKelvey & Piebiak, 2016). Campaign messages can be streamlined across different platforms easily, and real-time user interaction can be tracked and analyzed (McKelvey & Piebiak, 2016). This switch towards more integrative, interactive voter management platforms has seen parties also creating their own versions, with the Conservatives bringing out a new Medallion platform in April 2018 (Conservative Party of Canada, 2018).

Canadian parties also segment and “score” voters based on their likelihood of supporting the party as part of the use of databases and voter management platforms. CIMS, for example, tracks supporters and party members, in addition to undecided voters and non-supporters. When someone is canvassed through either door-to-door or phone methods, they are assigned a score between -15 (for non-supporters) and +15 (for supporters) (Conservative Party of Canada, n.d.). Liberalist distinguishes ridings based on winnability, while also allowing for the scoring of voters on the platform and MiniVAN smartphone app (Munroe & Munroe, 2018; Patten, 2017). Ridings can be divided into six different categories based on levels of support: platinum, gold, silver, bronze, steel and wood; the platinum riding category includes ridings the Liberals kept

during their 2011 electoral defeat, and the wood category includes ridings where the party is unlikely to gain support, such as in rural Alberta (Delacourt, 2015, p. 299). While little is known about the Populus database, foreAction claims that once an individual's data has been recorded, the user can track campaign interactions with this individual ("Political engagement," n.d.). Populus also allows for the scoring of voters but based on less information than both CIMS and Liberalist (Munroe & Munroe, 2018).

Local level campaigns are also able to use the federal databases, with access limited based on the central campaigns' decision about the importance of the riding, and the available training resources (Patten, 2017; Munroe & Munroe, 2018). However, little is known about the ability of provincial parties to engage in micro-targeting themselves. There is no commentary on how provincial campaigns may be using these practices, especially when there is no clear link between the parties and their federal counterparts (as is the case with the Ontario Liberals and PCs). This gap in knowledge provides the impetus for my research.

How "Micro" is Micro-targeting?

While there is some understanding of the use of political databases in the literature around Canadian elections, the majority of this research lacks precision. Parties are using micro-targeting to some extent, but it is not clear to what extent and *how* it is used in practice. The lack of precision in the way that micro-targeting is used in the literature has led different scholars to emphasize different aspects of micro-targeting in their understandings of how it is used in practice.

From different scholars' understandings of the nature of micro-targeting, I have taken different hypotheses about what sorts of micro-targeting might be observed in practice. These hypotheses have some similarities between them, but there are also tensions between

assumptions on what is “micro” about micro-targeting. The hypotheses for micro-targeting in the 2018 Ontario election are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The messages are not individually targeted and rather re-affirm party identification.

This hypothesis follows from the research of Kreiss (2017), who finds that messages that constituted micro-targeting in the 2016 Presidential election were more generalized and tended to reinforce group identity and general party identification. This understanding of micro-targeting was adapted from the classification of commercial realism by Schudson (1968), in which advertising campaigns provide a simplified and idealized version of life that highlights individuals’ membership in social groups (as cited in Kreiss, 2017). For Kreiss, micro-targeting does not constitute messages that offer critical debate over issues of considerable controversy or interest and instead are used (in the U.S.) to mobilize and support certain interests and values (2017). However, there is no reason to believe that this finding will not be replicated in Canadian elections.

Under this hypothesis, micro-targeting can be understood as messages that appeal to a very general group, such as people over the age of 18, and reinforce party identification and support. Key criteria are as follows:

- Messages present progress towards a better, more inclusive Ontario; negative ads represent the opponent as in opposition to this vision.
- Messages establish some level of moral high ground over opponents.
- Messages reaffirm party identification (ex: “people who like the page ‘Kathleen Wynne,’” etc.).

Hypothesis 2: There are differences between the goals of communication on different platforms.

This hypothesis follows from the research of Giasson and Small (2017) and Marland and Matthews (2017). These authors find general similarities in the content of messages across platforms, but the primary purpose of communication on each of the platforms will be different. For the purpose of my research, I will be focusing on these scholars' findings related to the parties' Facebook and email communications.

Giasson and Small (2017) conducted interviews with party informants from the federal Conservatives, Liberals and NDP to determine how parties use Web 2.0 technologies during and between election periods. Informants stated that for Facebook, the goal of campaign communication was to broadcast campaign messages and make the leader more personable (Giasson & Small, 2017). This finding is similar to that of Small (2014), who found that campaigns use Twitter as a means to broadcast messages, as opposed to interacting with the electorate.

Facebook was also highlighted as important by informants for the possibility of collecting information on voters, through the use of Facebook's advertising metrics and user-generated content (Giasson & Small, 2017). At the time of writing, this information was allowed to be input into campaign databases, but updated Facebook policies no longer allow for the collection of data from Facebook ("Advertising policies," n.d.). While campaigns can use Facebook to collect information about voters' interests effectively, the findings of Giasson and Small (2017) suggest that messages shared on Facebook follow the messages broadcast in the general campaign, and are not specifically targeted to individual interests.

Much like Facebook, the parties' use of email for voter communication does not appear to be targeted to individual voter interests. Marland and Matthews (2017) conducted a content analysis of the emailed messages from the federal Conservatives, Liberals and NDP from Oct.

16, 2013 to Oct. 15, 2014 to analyse how parties are using email to communicate with voters. These scholars found that messages from all of the parties followed a similar general pattern of including a personalized greeting (ex. “Friend,” the recipient’s name, etc.) and a call to action, with the vast majority requesting a donation (Marland & Matthews, 2017).

The interviews with campaign informants conducted by Giasson and Small (2017) reiterated the importance of email for donation requests. According to the informants, the main objectives of email communications with voters are generating resources, broadcasting campaign messages to the electorate and mobilizing supporters through calls to action to be undertaken either online or offline (Giasson & Small, 2017).

From these findings, a different hypothesis of micro-targeting can be derived. Messages are not substantially differentiated in content, but there will be differences in the focus of the message across platforms. Appeals on different platforms will emphasize different outreach goals (such as donations, broadcasting events, etc.) that will not be as prevalent on other platforms. Key criteria are as follows:

1. Facebook posts and ads²⁰
 - Messages are not specifically targeted and do not differ substantially from the general campaign messages on other platforms (ex. television, email, etc.)
 - Messages are meant to broadcast and promote the campaign events to the general population (ex. debates, leadership tours, etc.)
 - Messages are used to personalize the leader or candidate.
2. Emails

²⁰ Ads will include the advertisements seen on both Facebook and Instagram, as Facebook owns Instagram and the same data policies and targeting technologies apply to both platforms.

- Messages are meant to aid in generating resources and follow a common template (i.e. all messages are very similar in structure and general content)
- Messages are not targeted, and the policy content does not differ substantially from messages given on other platforms
- Messages are meant to mobilize the population through calls to action both online and offline (ex. voting, signing petitions, etc.)

Hypothesis 3: There are differences in the message sent to different ridings or areas.

This hypothesis follows from the research of Munroe and Munroe (2018) during the 2015 Federal election. These authors conducted participant observation and interviews with campaign officials in the Vancouver area during the 2015 Federal election and found significant differentiation between the use of data in different ridings based on the importance of the riding to the general campaign effort (Munroe & Munroe, 2018). The level of data used in a riding is reflective of the influence of the central party in the local campaign, as well as the importance of the riding to the central campaign (Munroe & Munroe, 2018). Therefore, the differences between the perceived importance of different ridings to the central campaign will create differences in the types of messages that can be sent in different areas.

This hypothesis emphasizes differentiation in messages between ridings or areas based on local campaign interests and perceived campaign importance. The key criteria are as follows:

- Messages are targeted to the residents of the specific area (i.e., the messages are targeted to the population of a particular area and not the general provincial population).
- Messages will state how a campaign policy will benefit the residents of the riding or area specifically.

- Ridings that are important to the centralized campaign will have more targeted messages than other areas.

Hypothesis 4: There are differences in the messages sent to different demographic groups.

This hypothesis follows from the research of Delacourt (2015) into the campaigning tactics of the federal Conservatives, Liberals and NDP in the 2011 and 2015 election campaigns. Using information from party insiders, Delacourt (2015) argues that the Conservatives' CIMS and the Liberal's Liberalist databases allow for the targeting of specific demographics across the country. The Conservatives used demographic targeting to send cards to individuals with the last name Lee for Chinese New Year (even if they did not have any Chinese heritage) (Delacourt, 2015, p. 257) and the Liberals differentiated specific demographics across the country to target with messages about specific policies relevant to their interests, such as a childcare benefit ad only being shown to parents (Delacourt, 2015, p. 304). The parties may also use voter demographics to engage in suppression techniques similar to those seen in the U.S., such as preventing individuals from voting (through robocalls or mail outs) or convincing them not to vote (Bronskill, 2015). Micro-targeting based on demographics has been used in the U.S. by exploiting individuals' previously held fears and biases to influence how they will vote (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018).

Under this hypothesis, different demographics are targeted with messages that directly or indirectly align with their interests. While these messages may be targeted to only specific areas, the same messages will be sent to the same demographics across the country/province, thus leading to a lack of specific geographic targeting as under the previous hypothesis. Micro-targeting, therefore, allows for the specific targeting of particular demographics across the population. Key criteria are as follows:

- Messages are specifically targeted to a particular demographic group (ex. ethnicity, class, gender, life status such as parents, students, seniors)
- Message policy content is differentiated between different demographic groups
- Messages outline how policy content will specifically benefit the target demographic group

Hypothesis 5: There are differences in the messages sent to the different ridings/areas and demographic groups, with different policy content being attributed to each message.

This hypothesis follows from the research of Carty, Cross and Young (2000) in their analysis of the fourth party system. Like Munroe and Munroe (2018), Carty, Cross and Young (2000) identify a vital role for the local campaign due to the relationship between the central and constituency campaigns. While the central campaign manages the general messages, the local campaigns determine the key ridings and demographics that need to be targeted to win the election (Carty, Cross & Young, 2000). The central campaign also controls the main party database but relies on local constituency campaigns to import data from their ridings to boost the overall breadth of the campaigns' voter tracking (Carty, Cross & Young, 2000). The local campaign determines whom the party needs to target to win a specific riding, and the centralized campaign provides the local campaign with the resources to engage in this targeting.

Despite the similarities to Munroe and Munroe's (2018) understanding of the relationship between the central and local campaigns, Carty, Cross and Young (2000) argue that messages can be much more targeted than the former seem to suggest. In the fourth party system, Carty, Cross and Young (2000) note that changes in technologies have allowed parties to send specific, targeted messages to key ridings and voters. The Internet has allowed parties to expand their voter communication in three key areas: collecting and using voter data, communicating with

voters via Internet platforms, and expanding the use of telephone technologies (Carty, Cross & Young, 2000). Despite writing before the creation of the more sophisticated technology used today, Carty, Cross and Young (2000) argue that technological advances have allowed parties to engage in private messages with key voters that will differ between riding, demographic and interest groups.

This hypothesis sees micro-targeting as the most targeted of the four previously given. Messages are specifically, individually targeted in ways that seem to match the American understanding of micro-targeting that has been discussed earlier in this chapter. The key criteria are as follows:

- Messages are specifically targeted to a certain riding/area and demographic group
- Messages include a policy promise that will benefit the area/demographic group locally
- Messages differ in appeal content (i.e., policy promise) between different areas and demographic groups

Hypothesis 6: There will be differences in the styles of micro-targeting and how individualized appeals are based on differences in party resources.

Beyond data, Munroe and Munroe (2018) note that there will be differentiation in the practices and types of appeals made by campaigns based on access to more general resources such as money, expertise and volunteers. In Ontario, elections are fought on both the provincial and constituency level (Cross et al., 2015), establishing a role for both levels in the actual process of running a political campaign. The central party operatives have to determine which ridings to focus the most resources on to win the overall election, and the local level candidate determines the focus on either locally specific issues or issues presented by the general campaign (Cross et al., 2015). From the research of these scholars, a subsidiary hypothesis can be

established; micro-targeting will differ in the types of appeals made based on the party's access to resources at the centralized campaign level. Parties with more resources may be able to focus on an increased number of ridings, or focus on specific ridings more intensely. The key criteria that need to be considered for this hypothesis are:

- The party's overall financial status before the election.²¹
- The party's access to campaign resources (ex: access to centralized databases, connections to key experts, etc.)

Conclusion

The different hypotheses I have outlined have some similarities between them, but generally seem to disagree on what is “micro” about micro-targeting, and how it is applied in practice. There may be differences between the types of people who are targeted, as well as how specific the characteristics of the target group may be. By considering some of the ways micro-targeting has been used in the literature by different scholars, my research seeks to bring together these prior findings to better understand the use of micro-targeting in practice in a provincial election.

The hypotheses outlined in this chapter are not an exhaustive list of the different ways that micro-targeting is understood in Canadian politics, let alone politics more generally. However, I believe that they are the most relevant to my research due to the focus on specifically Canadian campaigns, with the exception of Kreiss (2017). While Kreiss relates his research to the U.S., I believe his work is relevant due to the timeliness of the research and his status as a key figure in micro-targeting research. As well, there are no apparent reasons why Kreiss's

²¹ The previous chapter includes a discussion of the financial standings of the parties relative to subsidies and individual donations.

findings of micro-targeting reinforcing party identification would not be applicable in Canadian elections.

The background sociological and structural context of Ontario politics influence how micro-targeting may be practiced in the election, and the hypotheses provide a series of lenses from which one can try to understand what micro-targeting actually looks like in practice. Having now provided all the background information necessary to understand my research questions and motivations, the following chapters of this thesis will now focus primarily on my data analysis and research findings. The hypotheses given in this chapter will structure my analysis of the messages received in the 2018 election, with a specific section being devoted to each hypothesis. The following chapter will analyze the messages sent by the parties throughout the election to answer the question of “what is the ‘micro’ in micro-targeting?”

Ch. 3: Different Levels of “Micro” Targeting in the 2018 Ontario Election

Introduction

To analyze the use of micro-targeting in the 2018 Ontario election, I conducted a content analysis of Facebook and Instagram ads, Facebook posts and emails from the three main parties in eight different ridings from May 1st to June 7th, 2018. Overall 2,413 messages were coded in relation to the hypotheses outlined in the last chapter, and the specific criteria associated with each hypothesis will be re-introduced in the subsequent discussion of the findings. The Liberals sent an overall total of 706 messages, the PCs sent 856 and the NDP sent 851 across email, Facebook posts and Facebook/Instagram ads during the election period.

To test for differences in campaign messages, I attempted to differentiate the demographic characteristics of each account. Email accounts were differentiated by ethnicity, gender and age. The names chosen for each of the “people” associated with each account were based on the ethnicity I wished to portray. For example, in Don Valley West there is a large Pakistani population, so the account associated with this riding was named Afzal Hassim – a name that is of Pakistani origin. The accounts were gender balanced with four males and four females, and this was conveyed through the use of stereotypically male or female names, based on the cultural background the account was supposed to portray (ex: Grace, Craig, Angela, etc.). I attempted to convey age based on the email addresses as well. For example, for the account for University-Rosedale, the email address was gracechang1990@gmail.com, from which one could assume the individual is 28. Facebook was monitored through my own personal Facebook account, with the location changed to state that I live in Toronto. Any ads that showed up throughout the election period were clicked on, and emails were checked weekly, with all emails being opened. For all of the hypotheses, the messages were categorized both on the actual

content of the message and the information about targeting criteria that were provided by Facebook's "Why am I seeing this?" tool.

An important factor to note is that the targeting of ads and emails is generally conducted through the use of algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI) and voter management software, so it may not actually be the party or the campaign making decisions about who to target; instead, the algorithm will learn who and how to target based on voter engagement ("Activate," n.d.; Information Commissioner's Office, 2018). It was therefore important for me to open emails regularly and interact with the Facebook ads to show the algorithms that the "people" were engaged and receptive to the messages.

After collecting and coding messages,²² I did find variation in the different types of targeting parties engaged in – but perhaps not as expected. To provide a clear picture of how micro-targeting was used in the election and what it can be taken to mean, each of the hypotheses needs to be examined individually with reference to examples of messages sent by the parties.

Do messages re-affirm party identification?

The criteria associated with this hypothesis were as follows: messages present progress towards a better, more inclusive Ontario and negative ads represent the opponent as in opposition to this vision; messages establish some level of moral high ground over opponents; and, messages reaffirm party identification (such as, "people who like the page 'Kathleen Wynne,'" etc., in which the ads would only be shown to people likely to already support the candidate or party). For an appeal to the former two criteria to be convincing, the recipient had to already be perceptive to the values of the party. Therefore, these messages all had the underlying purpose of re-affirming party identification.

²² A more substantive discussion of how the coding process was done is given in the Methods section of Chapter One and the codebook is included in *Appendix 3*.

For a message to support this hypothesis, it had to contain one of these criteria *and* not be associated with a particular group appeal, such as demographics or geography. While some messages did contain some policy appeal, these appeals were not the primary purpose of the message. Messages were coded based on *the primary purpose of the appeal* to avoid double coding different sources. To expand on this point, messages could include a particular policy message in their appeal, but this policy message was used as an example of the *real* appeal being made. For example, the Liberals made an appeal to progress by referencing a policy they had brought in while in government. While this appeal noted a specific policy, the purpose of the overall appeal was to convince voters that the party was positive for progress in the province. These types of appeals were displayed at both the provincial and local campaign level.

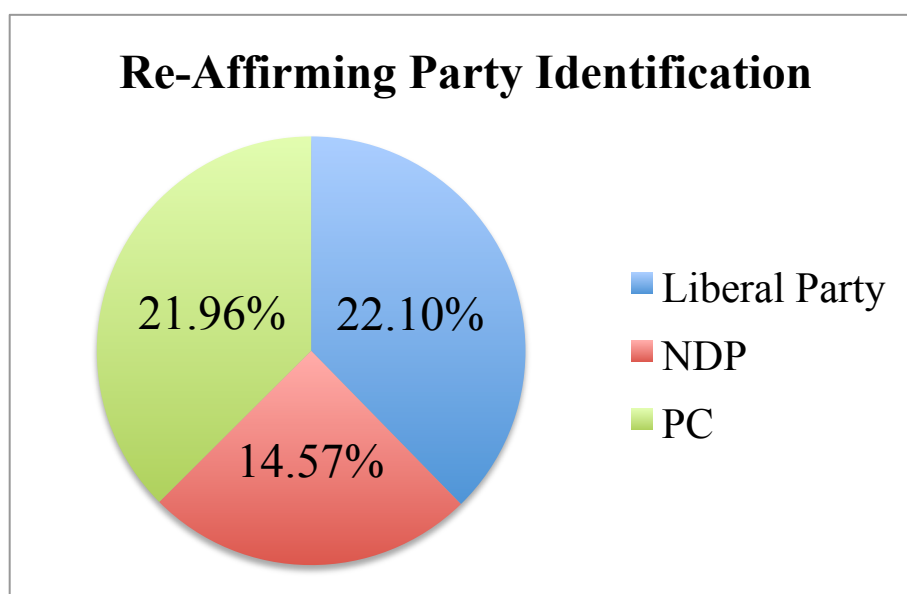


Table 2: The percentages of total messages sent by each party that included appeals aimed at reaffirming party identification.

Positive/negative to progress

While the parties differed in the actual implementation of these appeals, the general tendency was towards appeals to/against progress that would serve to reinforce party identification. Parties generally referenced their policies in their appeals, and individuals would

have to accept the values at the heart of these policies to view a policy as either negative or positive to progress.

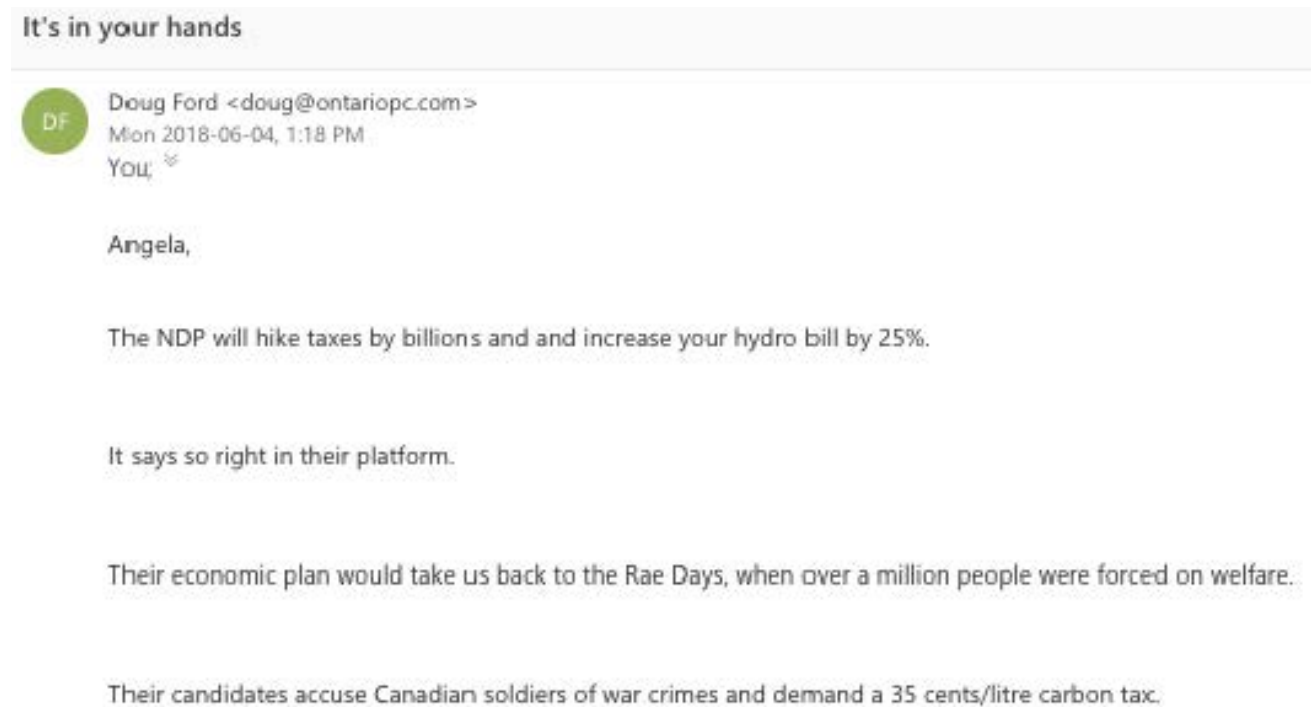


Figure 1: Email from the PCs denouncing NDP economic policies.

The PC appeals showed how other parties might be negative to progress, such as references to how the NDP's economic policies would negatively impact Ontario residents (*Figure 1*). Liberal appeals focused on framing the party as positive to progress through reference to initiatives brought in while the party was in government. However, once Kathleen Wynne conceded, posts began calling for people to vote Liberal to prevent a majority government (*Figure 2*), which is framed as negative to progress. Unlike the other two parties, the NDP used appeals to progress that did not specifically reference policy, such as the "change for the better" campaign slogan and video. The party shared ads (*Figure 3*) and posts that highlighted this message, one unaccompanied by any specific policy promises. PCs used emails and the Liberals used Facebook posts for a majority of their appeals, whereas the NDP utilized email, Facebook posts and Facebook/Instagram ads.



Figure 2: Liberal Facebook post calling for people to vote Liberal to prevent an NDP or PC majority government – something that is framed as inherently negative.

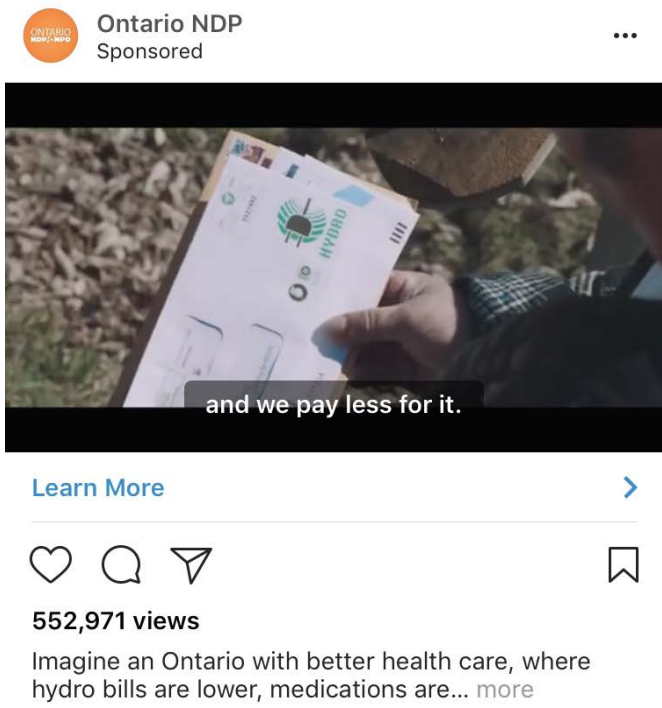


Figure 3: NDP Instagram ad showing their “change for the better” campaign message.

Moral high ground

Moral high ground was the most prevalent type of appeal for all of the parties, and almost all of the messages were found in Facebook posts. Each of the appeals made by the parties generally aligned with each party's ideological values.

For example, the PCs used Facebook posts appealing to moral high ground to attack the NDP based on “controversial” views of NDP candidates (*Figure 4*), such as “hating” wearing poppies and police. The Liberals attacked the PCs in Facebook posts by highlighting instances Doug Ford “mansplained” (*Figure 5*) and commented on the difficulty of debating with two female leaders. The Liberals also used Facebook posts to establish moral high ground over the NDP by critiquing the party as “too committed to ideology” for refusing to implement back to work legislation.

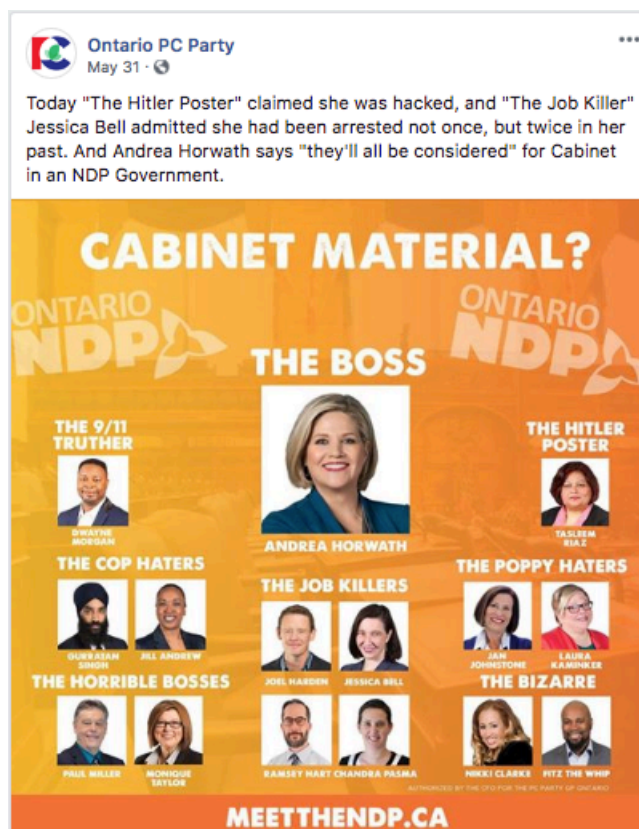


Figure 4: PC Facebook post attacking the NDP based on candidates' controversial beliefs and posts.



Figure 5: Liberal Facebook post attacking the PCs based on Doug Ford's "mansplaining" and perceived general sexism.

Guess how many women are running for us! [Inbox](#) x

[Ontario NDP HQ](#) <contact@ontariondp.ca> [Unsubscribe](#)
to me x

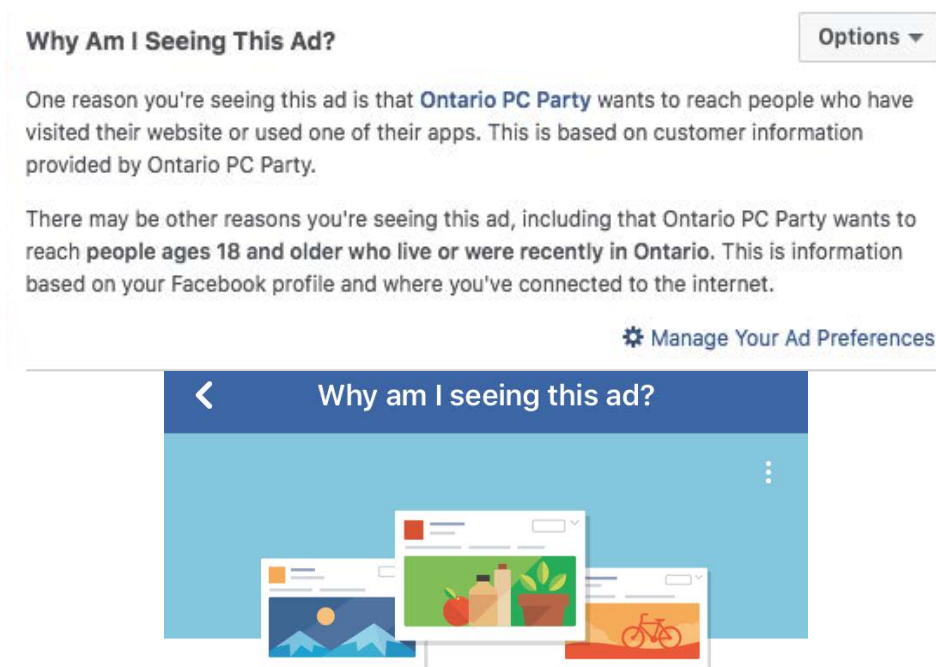


Figure 6: Email from the NDP highlighting how many female candidates they are running.

The NDP used more implicit appeals to moral high ground, such as a reference to the fact that they were running the most female candidates (Figure 6). While this may be considered an

appeal to a specific (i.e., feminist) interest, this message was sent to six of the eight email accounts; of these accounts, three were meant to appear female and the other three were meant to appear male. Due to the gender balance of the accounts that received the emails, there was no demographic targeting based on gender, at least for this message.

Party identification



One reason you're seeing this ad is that [Ontario Liberal Party](#) wants to reach people who like the page "**Kathleen Wynne**".

There may be other reasons you're seeing this ad, including that Ontario Liberal Party wants to reach **people ages 18 and older who live in Ontario**. This is information based on your Facebook profile and where you've connected to the internet.

Figures 7 and 8: Targeting criteria associated with Facebook ads.

The parties also used ad targeting criteria to reinforce party identification. One of the ways all of the parties targeted people was by sending ads to people who like their page or “have

visited [the party website] or used one of their apps...based on customer information provided by [the party]” (Facebook, n.d.) (*Figures 7 and 8*). The Liberal party also used targeting criteria such as “[reaching] people based on their activity on the Facebook family of apps and services...sharing links to [the Liberal party] website, interacting with [the Liberal party] content (such as clicking ads, watching videos or saving content) or directly interacting (such as messaging) with [the Liberal party]” (Facebook, n.d.) (*Figure 9*). Liberal ad targeting was also done through the use of “lookalike audiences” (*Figure 10*).



One reason you're seeing this ad is that [Kathleen Wynne](#) wants to reach people based on their activity on the Facebook family of apps and services. This includes sharing links to their website, interacting with their content (such as clicking ads, watching videos or saving content) or directly interacting (such as messaging) with them.

There may be other reasons you're seeing this ad, including that Kathleen Wynne wants to reach **people ages 22 and older who live in Ontario**. This is information based on your Facebook profile and where you've connected to the internet.

Figure 9: Liberal ad targeting criteria.

These criteria served to reinforce party identification by specifically reaching out to people who are already at least somewhat interested in the party and are more likely to be perceptive to the messages of the party. These appeals could also be combined with very general targeting criteria, such as “people ages 18 and older who live or were recently in Ontario”

(Facebook, n.d., n.p.) (*Figure 7*). Riding level candidates also used criteria targeting people who “like their page.”

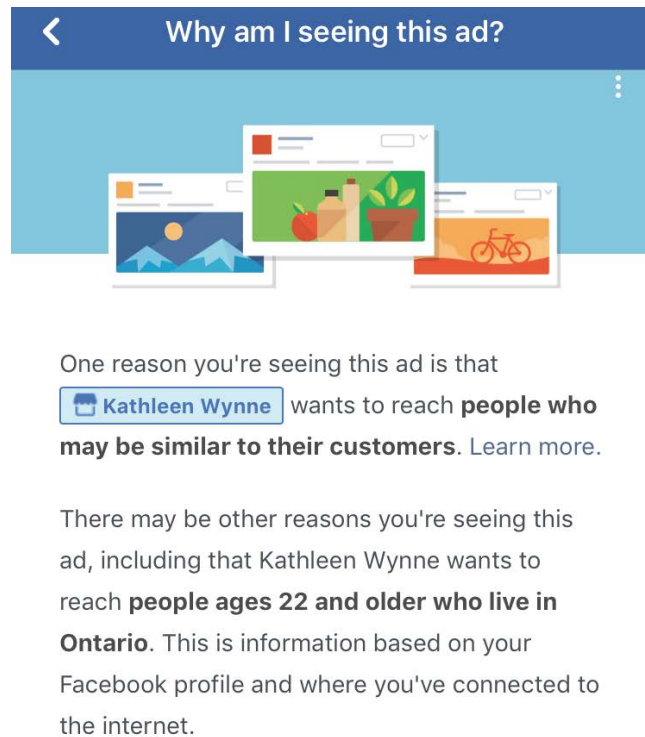


Figure 10: Liberal ad targeting criteria using lookalike audiences, in addition to people broadly 22 and over.

General findings

The parties all seem to be targeting very broad groups in similar ways, with emphasis on appeals that reinforce party identification. While the appeals to progress and moral high ground do not inherently mention party identification, a voter would have to agree with the underlying values being appealed to in order to believe an appeal actually shows progress towards a better Ontario or moral high ground. Ad targeting criteria are also generally very broad, with the parties relying on Facebook analytics to show ads to people who “like” their pages or are similar to their supporters; these ads would therefore mostly be sent to people already receptive to the party message. Additionally, all of the parties seem to be using some mention of policy as an example

of their appeals. However, the policy message is not the central focus of the appeal and instead is used as an example of the party's progressiveness or moral high ground.

Do different platforms have different communication goals?

Messages were coded in relation to the particular goals of the platform it was received on, following the research of Giasson and Small (2017) and Marland and Matthews (2017). Email messages that supported this hypothesis included the following criteria: messages are meant to aid in generating resources and follow a common template; messages are meant to mobilize the population through calls to action both online and offline; and, messages are not specifically targeted and do not differ substantially from the general campaign messages on other platforms. Messages found on either Facebook posts or ads that supported this hypothesis have the following criteria: messages are meant to broadcast and promote the campaign events to the general population; messages are used to personalize the leader or candidate; and, messages are not specifically targeted and do not differ substantially from the general campaign messages on other platforms.

For the majority of messages collected, the parties tended to rely on the aforementioned goals for each respective platform. However, across both platforms, there was also a tendency for the parties to use very general campaign messages, specifically the NDP's use of their "change for the better" campaign message. While the parties generally use the platforms in specific, predictable ways, the purposes are not as distinct as Small and Giasson (2017) and Marland and Matthews (2017) seem to suggest.

Email

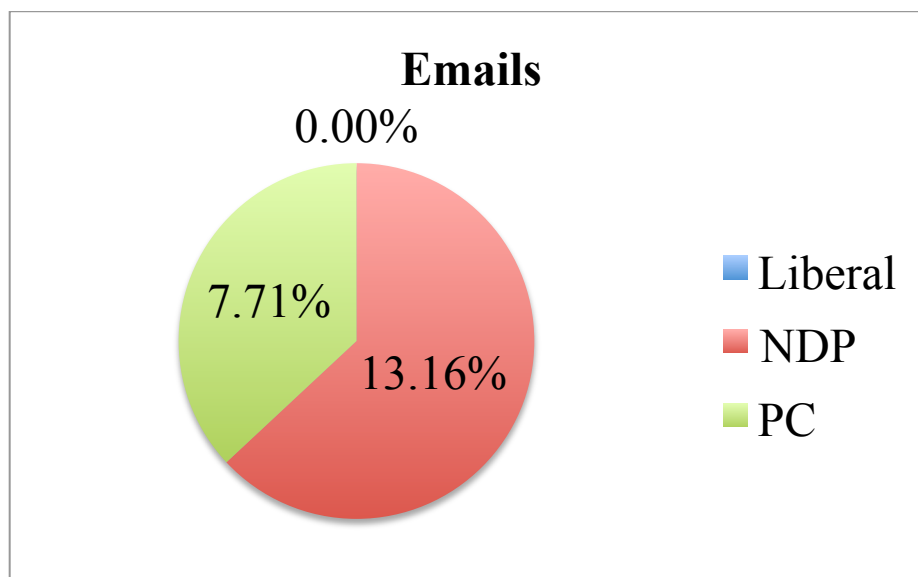


Table 3: The percentages of total messages sent by each party over email that contained either a general appeal, an appeal to generate resources or a call to action.

Email was generally the least used communication platform for all of the campaigns. The Liberals did not send any email messages; the PCs sent only 17 emails throughout the entire election period, with these messages just being sent to two of the eight accounts. The NDP sent around 93 emails between May 1 and June 7, 2018, with the majority of the emails being the same across the different accounts. It could be possible that the lack of emails from the Liberal party was due to the demographics of the accounts chosen. All of the emails were different in ethnicity, gender and location, with some accounts also differentiated by email provider (gmail.com vs. outlook.com). However, the particular demographics chosen in particular areas may not have been included in groups that the Liberals were targeting in that area. Therefore, I cannot conclude definitively that the Liberals did not send any emails overall during their campaign, but rather that they did not send any to these particular groups or ridings.

For the emails received, the NDP and PC emails differed in their sophistication of appearance, with the PCs foregoing graphics and interactive features (such as those used by the

NDP) in favour of plain text (*Figure 1*). While the templates of the emails differed between the parties, emails within campaigns generally followed the same or similar templates throughout the election period.

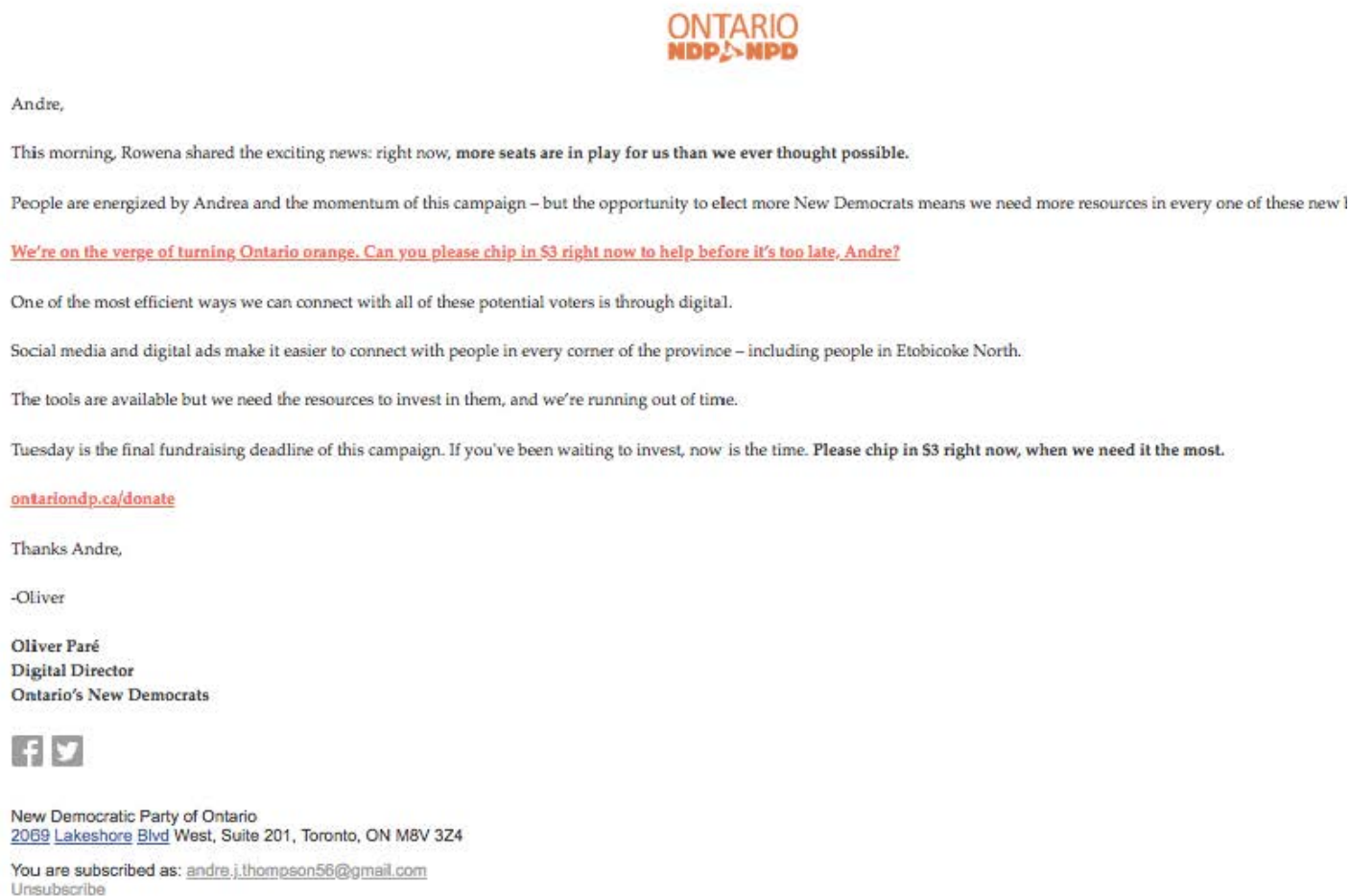


Figure 11: NDP email calling for donations specifically for the purpose of digital campaigning.

Overall, for the PCs and NDP, the key goal of email communication was the collection of donations. A particularly interesting example is shown in *Figure 11*, where the NDP notes their need to invest in online ads to remain competitive in the election. Interestingly, both the parties seemed to rely on the Obama campaign's tactic of collecting smaller donations (Eggen, 2012), with each email generally requesting only \$1 to \$5 in donations.

The campaigns also used emails to advertise campaign activities relating to the party leader, such as campaign office openings. This tactic was also replicated at the riding level, with candidates in Peterborough-Kawartha, Sudbury, Don Valley West and Hamilton Centre using emails primarily to advertise campaign events. These broadcasted events generally also included a link to RSVP, suggesting that they were meant as a combination between a call to action and a broadcast/advertisement of campaign events. Riding level candidates also used email for calls to action, such as volunteering, donating and/or voting.

Facebook Ads and Posts

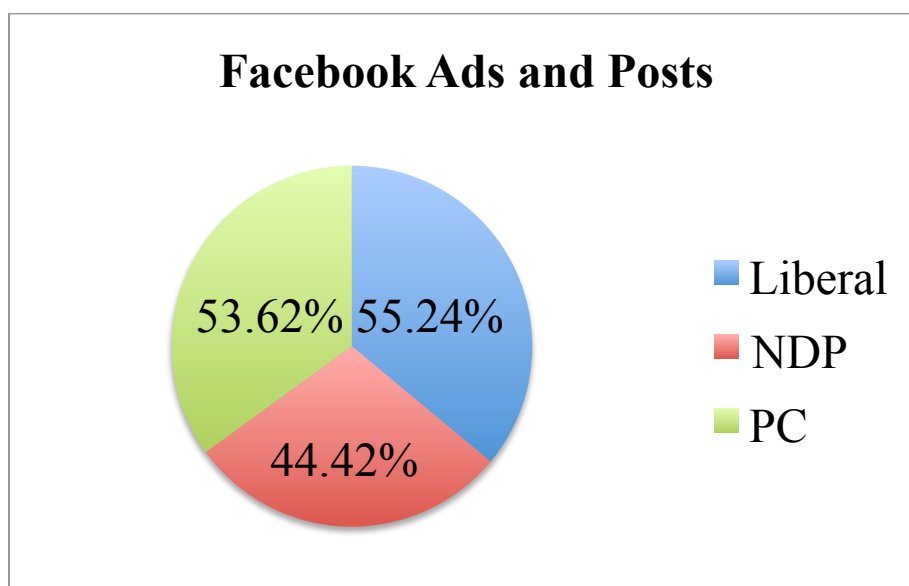


Table 4: The percentages of total messages sent by each party over Facebook ads or posts that contained a general appeal, an appeal to broadcast and promote campaign events, or an appeal to personalize the leader and/or candidates.

There were significant differences between the parties' uses of Facebook ads, and the time in which the ads were shown during the election period. PC ads were shown before the election officially began (May 9), with very few being shown for the majority of the election period. The Liberals did not appear to have any Facebook ads before the election writ, but focused more on Instagram ads on the days around the second leader's debate. While the NDP did engage in ads more extensively than the PCs, none of the ads support this hypothesis.

Interestingly, the Liberals tended to use ads on Facebook and Instagram in the way that Marland and Matthews' (2017) research suggests parties use email. The majority of Facebook ads called for individuals to pledge their support to the party (*Figure 12*), sign a petition or find out where they could vote. This finding is interesting, and perhaps suggests that the party chose to forgo email in an attempt to reach a broader audience through the use of social media analytics, as shown by the targeting criteria of each ad.



Figure 12: Liberal Facebook ad calling for people to pledge their support for the party.

For the NDP and the PCs, the primary goal of Facebook posts seemed to be broadcasting of campaign messages and events. The PCs focused on broadcasting campaign events through news network style videos (*Figure 13*), for which the party was criticized (CBC News, 2018b). Riding level candidates also used Facebook posts to advertise campaign events, whether those were local (*Figure 14*) or provincial events.

All the parties also used Facebook posts to personalize the leaders through an emphasis on their families and family life. Both the PCs and the NDP referenced leaders' families and personal lives to present themselves as "every day" parents and children, particularly around

Mother's Day. The NDP also used posts to personalize their individual candidates through reference to their roles in the community.



Figure 13: Facebook post from Ford Nation that includes a news network style video.



Figure 14: Facebook post from the University-Rosedale Liberal candidate promoting a local campaign event.

The Liberals' appeals changed throughout the election period, with the party trying to combat Wynne's unpopularity earlier in the campaign and around the debates. Like the PCs and the NDP, Facebook was also used by the Liberals to personalize Wynne as "an every day mother

and grandmother” through appeals to her family and even a post on a muffin recipe (*Figure 15*). Later in the campaign, after Wynne conceded that she could not win the election, Liberal posts tended to focus more on promoting the party’s accomplishments more generally, rather than concentrating on Wynne specifically.



Figure 15: Personalization of Wynne through the posting of her muffin recipe.



Figure 16: Facebook post from the PCs highlighting a call to action, an appeal goal usually attributed to email.

Beyond personalizing the candidate and broadcasting campaign messages, Facebook posts were also used by candidates and parties in line with goals attributed to email communication by Marland and Matthews (2017) and Giasson and Small (2017). Posts were used to provide calls to action, asking voters to either vote, volunteer or request a lawn sign (Figures 16 and 17).



Figure 17: Facebook post from the NDP highlighting a call to action, an appeal goal usually attributed to email.

General findings

The parties seem to be using the different platforms in line with the goals noted by Marland and Matthews (2017) and Giasson and Small (2017), but there is also a tendency for parties to use the same appeals on different platforms (ex: calls to action on email and Facebook). This finding suggests that parties and candidates may not have had rigid distinctions on the purpose of different platforms for campaign communication. While the Liberals did not send any emails to the accounts I used, the party seemed to use Facebook ads to achieve the communication goals generally associated with email. The PCs and NDP use email and Facebook in similar ways, with a general tendency to generate resources over email and

broadcast campaign events on Facebook posts. Facebook ads were less prevalent for these two parties, which is an interesting difference when compared to the Liberals. Overall the parties use the platforms in different ways and for different purposes, but there is some overlap in the appeals made across the different platforms.

Are there differences in the messages sent to different ridings/areas?

Messages that support this hypothesis have both of the following characteristics: messages are targeted to the residents of the specific area and messages state how a campaign policy will benefit the residents of the area specifically. While I was initially looking for riding specific appeals, the parties generally relied on appeals directed to a particular town or area. From the messages collected, it also became clear which towns and areas were seen as key to specific campaigns. This hypothesis is the first of the more “micro” targeted types of appeals, with differentiations made between different appeals to people based on their geographic locations.

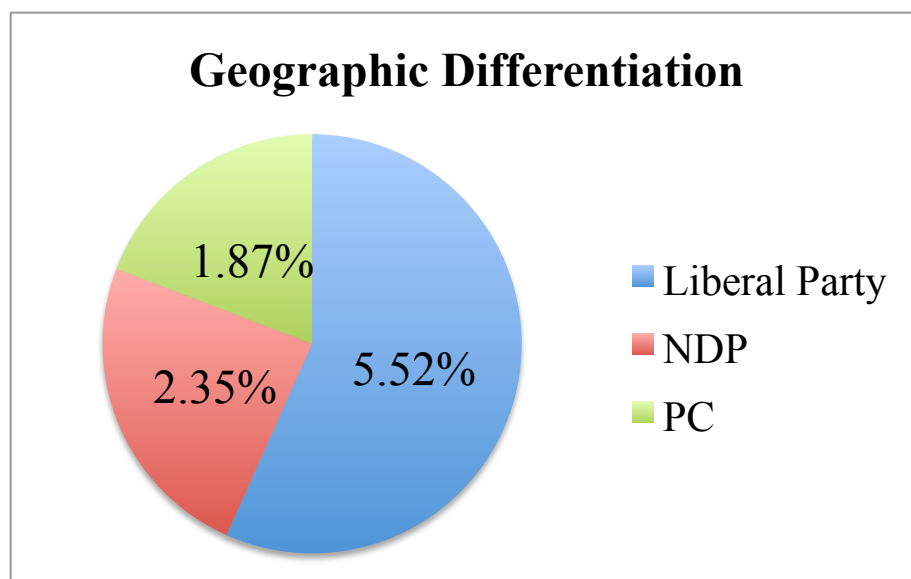


Table 5: The percentages of total messages sent by each party that included an appeal to a specific riding with a specific policy message.

For all the parties, a majority of the policy promises given in appeals seemed to come from the general campaign. Messages came from either the party leader or the general party, suggesting, as argued by Munroe and Munroe (2018), that the centralized campaign was determining which areas were important. All of the messages were either sent by email or in a Facebook post. Interestingly, there were no Facebook ads that relied on specific, geographic targeting for the ridings I surveyed; this gap may have been a result of my Facebook “location” being set to Toronto, as I received some ads targeted to Toronto more generally, but not from any of the ridings being researched.

Both the PCs and the NDP seemed to be using email in a somewhat targeted manner. The PCs only sent emails to the accounts associated with Eglinton-Lawrence and Hamilton Centre, which were interestingly one from gmail.com and one from outlook.ca; the NDP did not send any emails to the Eglinton-Lawrence account. Additionally, the NDP stopped sending emails to the account associated with Don Valley West after May 18th. These factors seem to suggest that parties may have targeted emails only to specific ridings to maximize the use of the resources, devoting more attention to areas it was more likely to win. However, the AI targeting used by the PCs may have determined that the accounts were all held by the same individual IP address, suggesting higher technological sophistication than that of the NDP.

While email may have been used to some extent to target particular ridings, Facebook posts offered the more interesting appeals to specific areas. The Liberal party appealed mostly to the Southwestern Ontario region. For example, the party used appeals to the expansion of LRT (light rail transit) in the Toronto-Waterloo area, expanding infrastructure to what they call “a tech ecosystem that rivals Silicon Valley” (*Figure 18*). Additionally, Wynne specifically

highlighted a policy promise not expressed by the central party, which included bringing Toyota manufacturing to Cambridge and Woodstock to increase jobs in the area.



Figure 18: Liberal Facebook post focusing on LRT in the Toronto-Waterloo area.

For the PCs, the campaign was focused more broadly on the North. The party had several Facebook posts highlighting specific policy promises in this area (*Figure 19*), with a specific platform for the area as well. The party also appealed to the Toronto-York region based on a policy promise to expand the Yonge subway line into that area.



Figure 19: PC Facebook post noting specific policies for the North meant to benefit only the North.



Figure 20: NDP Facebook post noting campaign promise to build a new hospital in Brampton.

The NDP was the most clearly focused on a specific riding, with the Brampton area of clear importance to the party. The riding received multiple visits from Horwath and federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, as well as the promise of a new hospital (Figure 20). Like the PCs, the NDP also had a specific policy platform directed at the North. Additionally, Horwath also made Facebook posts committing to policy to remove mercury from the drinking water on the Grassy Narrows Indigenous reserve.

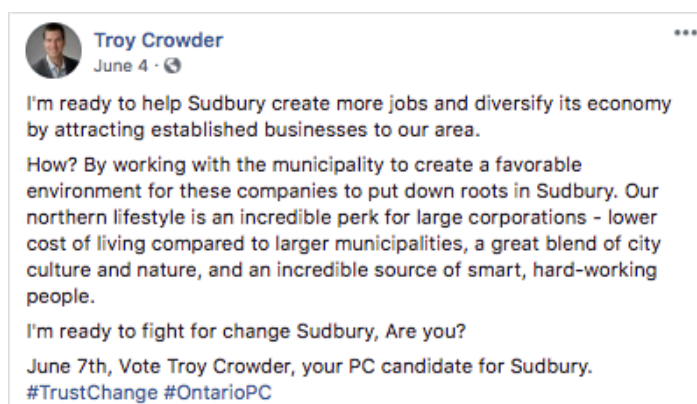


Figure 21: Sudbury PC candidate's Facebook post highlighting his policy promise to stimulate the economy in the area.

Interestingly, geographic appeals from riding level candidates came from the same ridings across all of the parties – but these appeals only made up a small number of Facebook

posts. The appeals came from candidates in the Northern ridings and the NDP-focused Brampton. In Sudbury, PC candidate Troy Crowder referenced promises to lower costs of living, with most of his appeals focused on increasing economic prosperity in the area (*Figure 21*). Liberal candidate Glenn Thibeault was more specific in his appeals, announcing funding for hospice care in the area and a new PET scanner in the hospital (*Figure 22*).

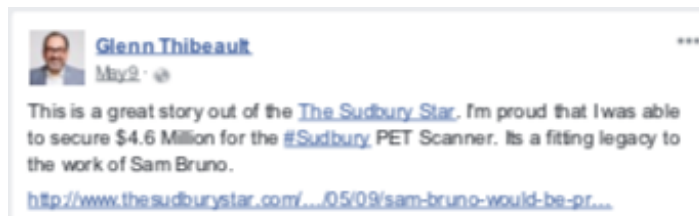


Figure 22: Sudbury Liberal candidate's Facebook post highlighting his policy promise of a new PET scanner for the riding.



Figure 23: Peterborough-Kawartha Liberal candidate's geographically targeted policy appeals based on things he has accomplished for the riding while in office.

In Peterborough-Kawartha, Liberal candidate Jeff Leal focused most of his Facebook posts primarily on what he has done for the riding during his time in office through reference to his own “record of accomplishments” for the area (*Figure 23*). Leal’s PC opponent Dave Smith was less specific in his riding-based appeals by referencing how provincial-wide policy would help lower the cost of living in his riding (*Figure 24*).

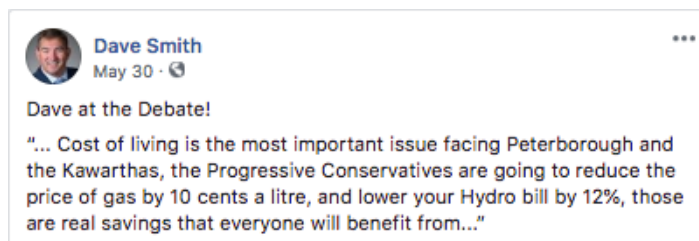


Figure 24: Peterborough-Kawartha PC candidate’s more general policy appeal to the riding based on the party-wide policy of increasing affordability.



Figure 25: Brampton PC candidate’s riding targeted appeal based on the policy promise of lowering car insurance rates in the area.

In the NDP-focused Brampton, PC candidate Harjit Jaswal referenced working with Doug Ford to decrease the cost of car insurance in the area (*Figure 25*), which is also an appeal echoed by the NDP candidate Sara Singh. Singh also focused on party level commitments, referencing the creation of the new hospital.

General findings

Based on the findings, there were clear geographic areas that the campaigns chose to focus more attention on during the campaign. It appears that the determination of the “importance” of the riding was one made at the central campaign level, as noted by Munroe and Munroe (2018); this fact is evidenced by the central campaigns creating a specific policy platform for an area, or the campaign leader noting a specific policy promise for an area. For the Liberals, the Southwestern Ontario region was important, for the PCs the North, and for the NDP, the North and Brampton. The geographic targeting by local level candidates was also undertaken in Northern areas and Brampton, solidifying these regions as important to the overall campaigns. Interestingly, the overall Liberal campaign did not appear to have focused on the North; however, the local Peterborough-Kawartha candidate did emphasize his (Northern) riding in his policy appeals. This finding could suggest a continuation of the divide between the local and centralized campaigns, as found by Cross et al. (2015) in the 2011 campaign.

Are there differences in the messages sent to different demographics?

The messages that support this hypothesis are targeted to a particular demographic group and were differentiated based on policy content; each of the messages outlines how the policy will specifically benefit the target demographic group. The demographic groups I was coding for were based on ethnicity, gender, age, income level or occupation – however, as the findings will show, not all of these groups were found. This hypothesis represents a more specifically targeted

message than the previous hypothesis, as targeting requires more information about the individual than just her or his location. Interestingly, messages that support this hypothesis make up the most of the more targeted appeals, as opposed to appeals based on geographic location or a combination of geographic and demographic information. This finding suggests that the parties were more interested in targeting particular types of people than particular areas when trying to swing voters.

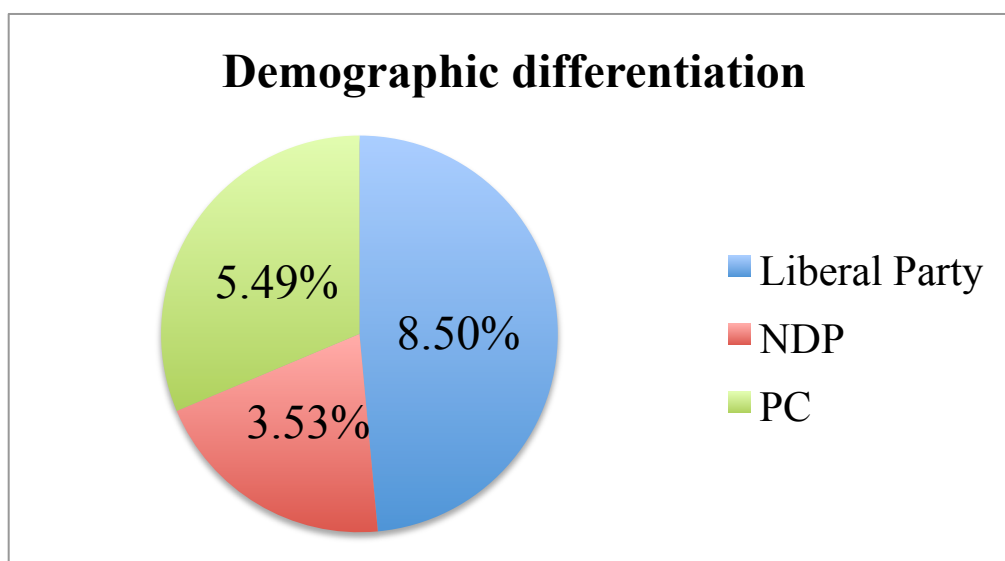


Table 6: The percentages of total messages sent by each party that included a specific policy appeal to a particular demographic group.

Both the NDP and the PCs did not have any email messages that supported this hypothesis. Despite the use of “ethnic” and stereotypically male/female names for several of the accounts,²³ there did not appear to be any specific targeting based on perceived membership in a specific group. Notably, the two accounts that did receive emails from the PCs were meant to appear to be of Jewish and Portuguese descent (as the names were Craig Rozansky and Angela Perreira), so this could show an implicit preference for these groups. While the accounts were also meant to appear to be of opposite genders, the content of the messages sent to these accounts

²³ Account names and addresses are listed in *Appendix 1*.

was the same. These factors seem to suggest that there was no targeting based on specific “minority” group or gender interests.



Ontario PC Party
May 3 · 🌐

Help is on the way for Ontario families.

We'll cover up to 75% of your family's childcare expenses, or \$6,750 per child, up to age 15.

Eligible programs include:

- ✓ Licensed care
- ✓ Independent care
- ✓ Babysitters
- ✓ Nannies
- ✓ After school programs

DOUG FORD FOR THE PEOPLE

FordNation
May 10 · 🌐

The PC's will put more money in your pocket. We will deliver a tax cut to middle class families by reducing the second, middle class tax bracket by 20%. Saving taxpayers as much as \$786/yr. Our plan is affordable, responsible and modest.

Figure 26: PC demographic appeals to middle-to-low income families based on policy to increase affordability.

For all of the parties, all of the messages that supported this hypothesis were found on Facebook posts. There were a few trends in the appeals made across the parties, as all of them tended to focus on issues of affordability for different groups, explicitly noting the influence higher living expenses have on middle-to-low income families and individuals. For instance, PC appeals highlighted middle-class tax cuts and childcare coverage (*Figure 26*). Wynne’s campaign, on the other hand, specifically highlighted affordability policies benefitting families of young and new mothers on at least five occasions (*Figure 27*), segmenting “middle-income families” further than the PCs by focusing on a particular type of family. Horwath’s campaign

chose to appeal to the same groups as the other parties with more general affordability issues based on Hydro prices (*Figure 28*). All of the parties also referenced different policies for seniors and transit users, generally focusing on dental care and transit expansion respectively.

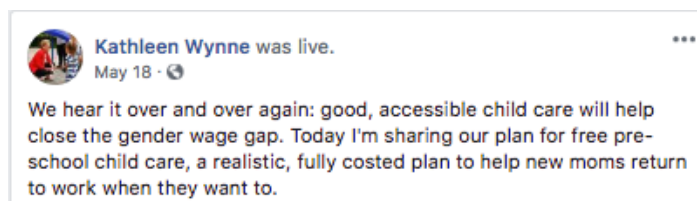


Figure 27: Liberal demographic appeal to middle-to-low income families, specifically focusing on policies to benefit new and young mothers.

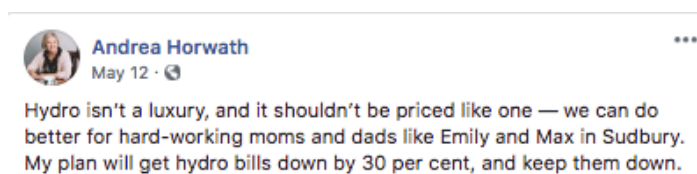


Figure 28: Horwath's appeals to affordability issues for middle-to-low income families based on hydro prices.

Where the parties differed in their appeals, the groups that they appealed to seem to line up with those who are generally assumed to be supporters of the parties. The demographic group that the Ford campaign seemed to focus on was small business owners, with several posts highlighting policies for this group (*Figure 29*). Ford also, interestingly, appealed to police (*Figure 30*), suggesting an implicit appeal to the conservative value of “law and order.”

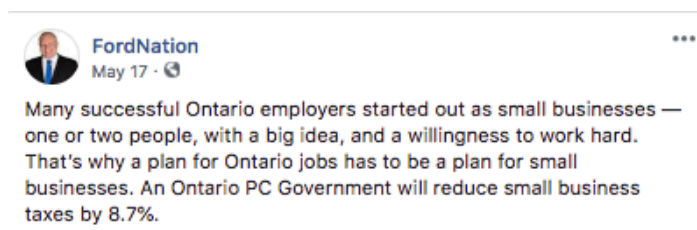


Figure 29: PC policy appeals aimed at small business owners as a demographic group.



Figure 30: PC policy appeal aimed at police officers as a demographic group.

Riding level PC candidates appealed to similar groups as the centralized campaign with policy promises ending income tax for minimum wage earners and various cuts for farmers (Figure 31). Some candidates also chose to highlight a campaign-wide policy through their own original Facebook posts, such as funding for support for children with autism and their families (Figure 32).



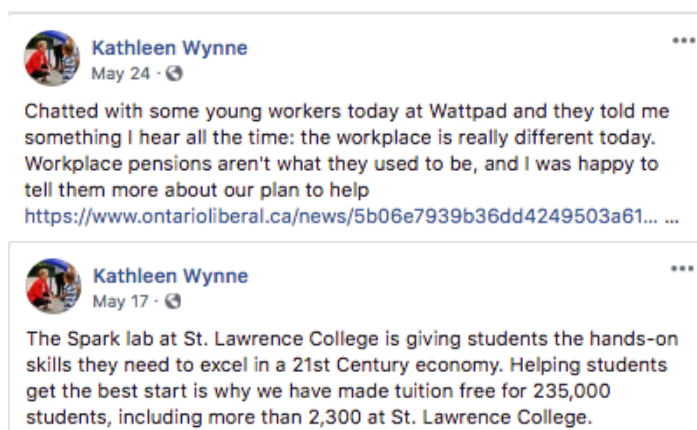
Figure 31: PC candidate's appeal to farmers as a demographic group, a similar appeal to small that made to small business owners.



Figure 32: PC candidates' original Facebook post highlighting a campaign-wide policy that appeals to parents of children with autism as a specific demographic group.

Alternatively, the Liberals made several appeals to younger voters through policies directed at young professionals and students (Figures 33 and 34). At the riding level, Sudbury candidate Glenn Thibeault focused also focused on people with disabilities as a demographic

group, by specifically referenced how a campaign-wide policy would benefit this group in his riding (*Figure 35*).



Figures 33 and 34: Liberal appeals to students and young professionals as a demographic group.

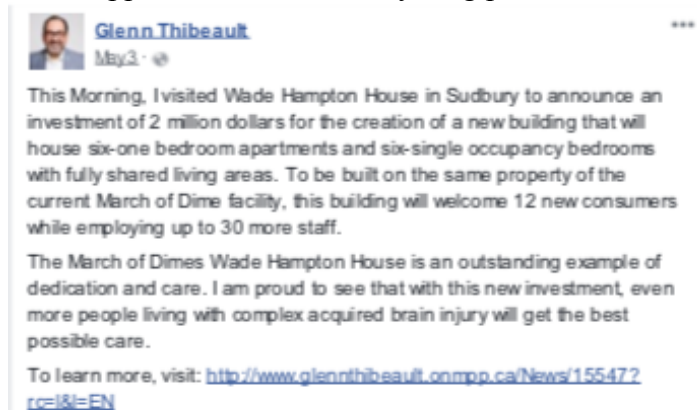


Figure 35: Sudbury Liberal candidates' post highlighting a campaign-wide policy to increase funding for individuals with disabilities, with specific reference to individuals in his riding.

The NDP expanded their appeals to other groups not mentioned by the other parties. There were appeals to French Ontarians, shown by posting policies in French,²⁴ LGBTQ2S rights (*Figures 36 and 37*), and trades workers. Riding level NDP candidates also echoed appeals to these broader social groups, and focused more intensely on income or occupation-based demographic groups such as students, trades workers and lower-income individuals.

²⁴ While the Liberals also had some posts in French, the NDP were the only party who specifically listed their policies in French.

Interestingly, the candidate in Peterborough-Kawartha, Sean Conway, did not have appeals to the Indigenous community, despite his Indigenous heritage.



Figures 36 and 37: NDP appeals to expanded social groups.

General findings

Overall, the parties are not targeting extremely specific demographic groups, as opposed to what the literature argues to be occurring (for example, Delacourt, 2015). The parties' appeals tended to focus on what I call income and occupation based groups, such as middle-income families and small business owners. Class was used by all of the parties as a particularly salient demographic factor, with an emphasis on policy based on affordability issues.

Where the parties differed in their appeals, these appeals tended to align with occupations that traditionally support the parties; the PCs appealed to small business owners and law enforcement, the Liberals appealed to young professionals and students (both of which would be just beginning their careers), and the NDP appealed to trades workers. The NDP was also the only party to specifically appeal to particular social groups based on policy, through their appeals to French Ontarians and LGBTQ2S individuals. Two riding level candidates appealed to individuals with disabilities as a demographic group, with PC candidate Robin Martin appealing to children with autism and their families and Liberal candidate Glenn Thibeault promising funding increases for this group.

Interestingly, all of the appeals also came from Facebook posts, as opposed to Facebook ads or targeted emails. None of the email accounts were targeted based on demographic criteria, despite the attempts to clearly show each account as a member of a particular ethnic group or gender. As well, there were not targeted ads from the parties across my Facebook feed, despite the parties (via Facebook) having access to information on my demographics and interests.²⁵ However, it is important to note that it is also possible that parties could have been targeting more specific demographic groups, but none of my sources of data fit into the specifications of said groups. Despite this potential lack of data, from the messages I was able to collect, it appears that the parties relied on very broad demographic differentiation based on income levels and occupation.

²⁵ This information was something arguably available to advertisers more generally, let alone just political parties and candidates, as I received several targeted Facebook ads for restaurants in Toronto that aligned with my interests extremely well. For example, I received multiple ads for Korean and Japanese restaurants and bakeries, which is notable as these are my favourite types of food.

Are there differences in the messages sent to the different ridings/areas and demographic groups, with different policy content being attributed to each message?

The messages that support this hypothesis are targeted to a specific area and demographic group and include a policy promise that will benefit the demographic group in their local area. Messages also differ in appeal content (i.e., policy promise) between the different areas or demographic groups. This hypothesis can be differentiated from the previous because messages will have appeals to policy that will only benefit *a particular demographic group in a particular geographic area*, as opposed to benefitting everyone in a particular area (*Hypothesis 3*) or a particular demographic group across the province (*Hypothesis 4*). While the appeals were not generally relegated to only a single geographic area, the appeals were direct at a small enough number of areas that would it not constitute a policy promise to a particular demographic group with benefits across the province.

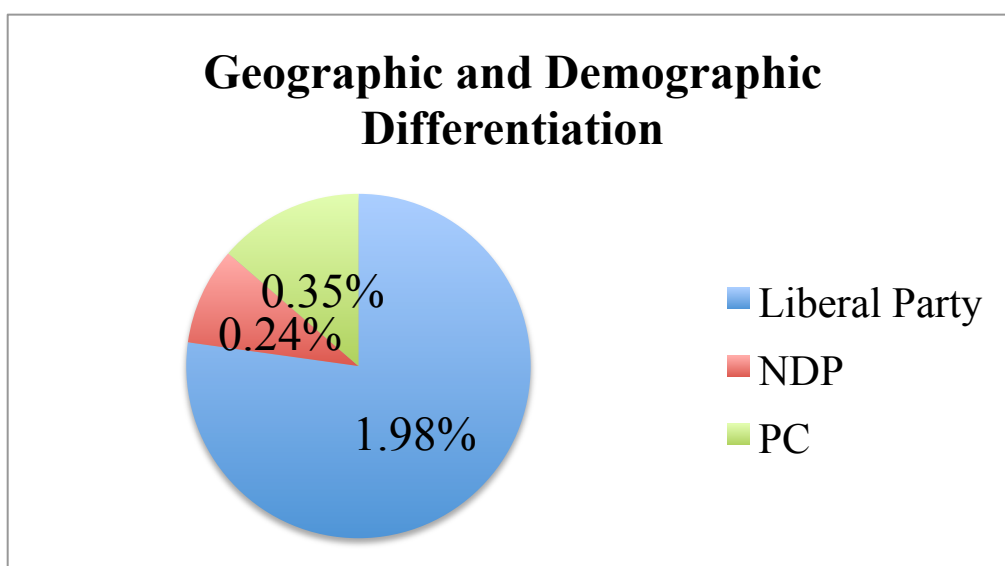
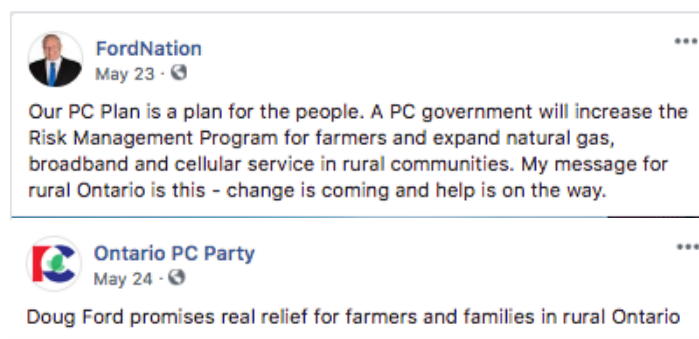


Table 7: The percentages of total messages sent by each party that included a policy appeal to a specific demographic group in specific geographic areas.

Messages that support this hypothesis are the most targeted, and make up the smallest overall percentage of the messages. However, 1.98% of messages from the Liberal party are still a significant amount when one takes into account the total number of messages sent (706

messages). This finding is interesting, as one would potentially expect that one person would see only a small number of specifically targeted messages, if the messages were targeted correctly.

For all of the parties, any messages that could be categorized under this hypothesis were found in Facebook posts. The PCs appealed to a demographic group in a very general area, namely farmers in rural Ontario (*Figures 38 and 39*). While “rural Ontario” could constitute a vast area, the policy promise is directed explicitly at the segments of rural Ontario that are infrastructurally underdeveloped – which is arguably a particular subset of rural Ontario. Paradoxically, the other PC message supporting this hypothesis came from University-Rosedale candidate Gillian Smith, who targeted transit users in the GTA (*Figure 40*).



Figures 38 and 39: PC policy appeals to farmers in rural, underdeveloped Ontario, which arguably constitutes a small area of the province.

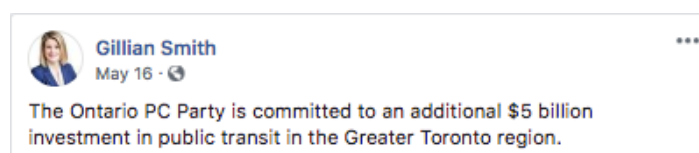
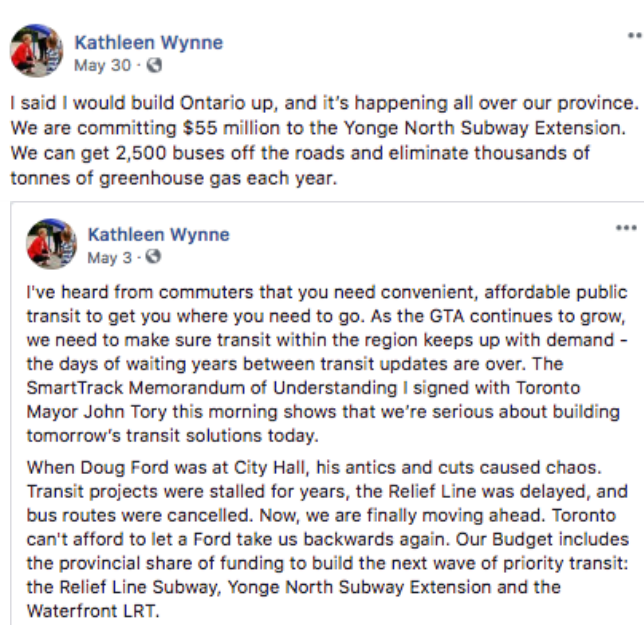


Figure 40: University-Rosedale PC candidate’s appeal to transit users in the Toronto area.

The Liberals and the NDP also focused on transit users, but in different geographic areas. The Liberals highlighted several policies that will benefit transit users and environmentally conscious individuals in the Yonge-North area and commuters in the GTA (*Figures 41 and 42*). The NDP also mentioned Toronto in posts from both the general party and the University-

Rosedale candidate, but also noted a policy promise to bring LRT to Horwath's riding of Hamilton (*Figure 43*).



Figures 41 and 42: Liberal appeals to transit users as a demographic in the specific areas of Yonge North and the GTA.

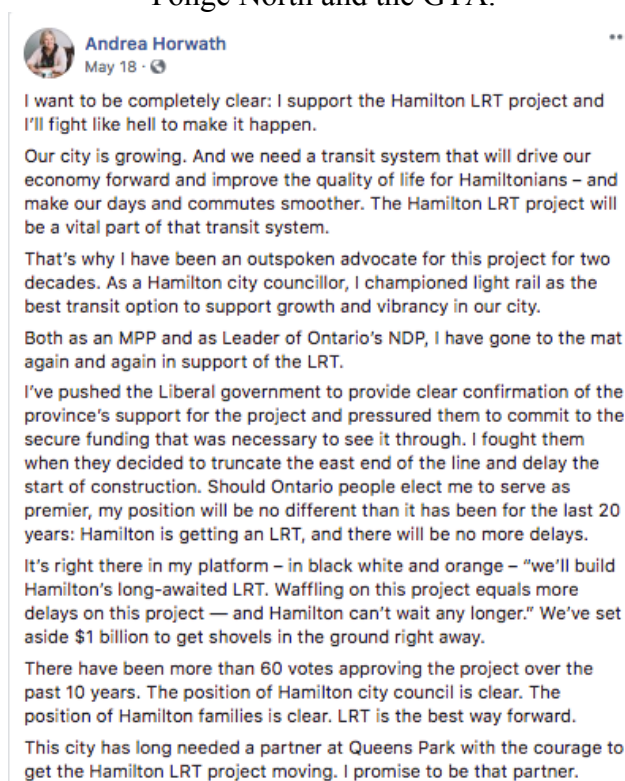


Figure 43: NDP policy promise to transit users as a demographic group in Horwath's home riding of Hamilton.

Like the PC example of “rural Ontario,” “transit users” constitute a very broad demographic group; however, this distinction does also denote a particular subset of the population. While many people may benefit from the expansion of transit, this policy is arguably less of a concern to individuals of higher income, as these individuals can afford to drive to work and park for the day. It is, therefore, likely that these individuals will also be less concerned with the efficiency and expansiveness of the transit network, even if they inherently benefit from these changes. Consequently, the appeal to “transit users” applies to a lower income demographic group, as these individuals rely on the transit system more heavily than other income groups.



Figures 44: Peterborough-Kawartha Liberal candidate’s appeals to individuals and local groups involved in the arts within his riding.

While transit users in different areas may have been a targeted group for the Liberals at the general campaign level, some individual Liberal candidates targeted particular demographics

with policies that would be brought in to benefit these groups in their riding. Peterborough-Kawartha candidate Jeff Leal highlighted funding for the Arts community in the Peterborough area that he will bring in if elected (*Figure 44*). The candidate from Sudbury, Glenn Thibeault, focused more on appeals to the North more generally, but noted how specific policies would benefit workers in the entertainment industry in Sudbury (*Figure 45*). It is not clear whether the policy is a party-wide policy or not, but Thibeault seems to suggest that the policy is something he specifically is enacting if elected.



Figure 45: Sudbury Liberal candidate’s policy promise to workers in the entertainment industry in his riding.

General findings

Much like with the previous hypothesis, messages from all of the parties were much less targeted than I expected. All of the appeals found were sent via Facebook post, which is a medium that would be accessible to all Facebook users and not just those to whom the appeal was directed. As well, the groups that the parties were targeting in said appeals were also fairly broad; the PCs targeted the very broad area of “rural Ontario,” and the NDP and Liberals targeted the very broad group of “transit users.” However, each of these appeals could be analyzed to show that the policy message was meant to only appeal to a particular segment of “rural” Ontario or the general population. Even at the riding candidate level, parties are appealing to similarly broad groups and areas. These appeals are still broader than those

suggested in the literature around micro-targeting, indication that the appeals Ontario parties make are not extremely precise, individually targeted or refined.

Are there differences in the styles of micro-targeting based on differences in party resources?

This hypothesis did not relate specifically to the message content, but rather the types of appeals used by the parties in relation to their “preparedness” for the election more generally. For this hypothesis to be supported, the findings had to suggest that there are differences in the types of appeals made based on the party’s access to resources at the centralized campaign level; parties with more resources may be able to focus on an increased number of ridings, or focus on specific ridings more intensely. The key criteria that were considered, in relation to the overall spread of messages across the previous hypotheses, are: the party’s overall financial status before the election and access to campaign resources (such as, access to centralized databases, connections to key experts, etc.).

From the findings of the different hypotheses, it can be surmised that increased resources did have some impact on the styles of micro-targeting used by the parties. The Liberals had the most amount of money going into the campaign from voter subsidies.²⁶ However, the overall breadth of the party’s appeals suggests that this money was not used to fund extensive, individualized targeting. Despite this finding, it is important to note that the sophistication in the level of targeting achieved by the Liberals, when compared to the other parties, suggests that these resources were at least somewhat useful for general targeting purposes.

The PCs had the second most amount of money from subsidies going into the election, and also raised much more money in donations than the other parties (Crawley, 2018a). The

²⁶ A discussion of the financial standings of the parties prior to the election can be found in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

NDP had the least amount of money going into the election, with the party being third in the amount of subsidies given and donations they had brought in (Crawley, 2018a). Despite the comparative lack of money, the NDP managed to send similar types of appeals as the PCs. This similarity suggests that the NDP's relative lack of funds did not significantly impact their targeting abilities.

The lack of differences in targeting abilities, despite clear differences in financial resources, may help to explain the emphasis on Facebook by each of the parties; this platform provided equal opportunity for campaigns to reach potential supporters. Creating a Facebook page is completely free, providing an extremely cost-effective way to appeal to voters through Facebook posts. As well, Facebook ad pricing is done on a "pay what you want" basis where advertisers can set daily and lifetime budgets for their ads. These budgets can be anywhere from \$5 to \$50,000 a week depending on the resources available to an advertiser and how aggressive they want to be with their marketing ("Budgets & Bidding," n.d.). As opposed to buying a particular amount of advertisement space, Facebook allows advertisers to stipulate how much they want to spend to have their ads shown – the more money spent, the more frequently people will see the ad ("Budgets & Bidding," n.d.). Therefore, the affordability of different marketing techniques on Facebook provided parties with a somewhat level playing field with which they could target voters – regardless of their financial standings.

Beyond financial resources, it is possible that access to a more extensive federal database had an influence on the micro-targeting styles of the provincial parties – but it is also not clear that databases offered any significant comparative advantage. While the PCs had created and used their own database (Patten, 2017), it seemed that the party was using the same database as the federal Conservatives, CIMS, due to claims that their version had been hacked (CP24 Web

Staff, 2018). It is unclear how much of the databases' information the party had access to and if riding level candidates also had access to the CIMS system. It is also unclear if the party was using the new CIMS-based platform, Medallion. The Liberal party had access to and used the federal Liberalist database (Liberal Party, personal correspondence), suggesting that they had access to extensive data about the electorate. However, it is not clear how much of this information was accessible to the riding level candidates. The NDP arguably had access to the federal Populus database due to the connection between the provincial and federal parties, but again the level of access is unclear.

Whether database access was limited or not, the broadness of the appeals suggests that parties were not using individualized information, even if they had access to it. Liberalist is perceived as the most expansive of the databases since 2015 (Delacourt, 2015), yet the Liberals' appeals were not significantly more individually targeted than the other parties. The Populus database is much less extensive than both CIMS and Liberalist, which could account for the comparative lack of NDP posts that were more individually targeted. The general tendency for the NDP to have a smaller percentage of overall messages than the other parties in all of the more targeted categories (*Hypotheses 3, 4 and 5*) suggests that the lack of sophisticated data may have disadvantaged the NDP in this election. However, the PCs only had minimally higher percentages of the more targeted posts as the NDP, suggesting that CIMS also did not offer a clear advantage for the party. The lack of specifically targeted messages for all of the parties indicates that these voter relationship management systems are more effective in identifying and mobilizing voters, as opposed to individually targeting voters.

Conclusion

While the outcome of the 2018 Ontario election may have been historic, the means through which the campaigns were undertaken seem to be less than revolutionary. My findings show that while some micro-level appeals may be happening, they are not as nefarious as “individually targeted Facebook ads” and generally tend to rely on campaign-wide policies aimed at broad groups, as opposed to riding level campaign promises. While different micro-targeting styles were used, the tendency towards the more general appeals by all of the parties seems to suggest that micro-targeting in provincial elections is not very “micro” at all.

The overall similarities between the parties’ messages suggest that increased resources did not play a significant role in differentiating the micro-targeting styles of the parties. The most commonly used platform was Facebook, with the majority of messages coming from posts made on the website. While the parties’ messages clearly followed Marland and Matthews’ (2017) and Giasson and Small’s (2017) finding that parties have particular goals for communication on specific platforms, my findings suggest that these “communication goals” can apply to more than one platform (i.e., Facebook and email can be used for calls to action).

Interestingly, of the more individualized appeals, all of the parties tended to focus more on demographically based appeals. Demographic groups are relatively broad, generally focusing on income and occupation groups. These groups are not as specific as “divorced, environmentally concerned soccer moms in Seattle,” a type of segmentation argued to be possible in American micro-targeting (C.J. Bennett, 2015). The evident lack of extensive individual knowledge about voters, as reflected by the broadness of the demographic targeting, suggests that the parties either do not have extensive individual information about voters, or do not have enough resources to use this information effectively. Despite the historic nature of the

election results, the actual process of micro-targeting during the election was much short of historic.

Having now analyzed what micro-targeting looked like in the 2018 Ontario election, I can now offer some commentary on how to understand this practice in Canadian provincial elections more generally. The following chapter will offer my concluding remarks, as well as suggestions for future research.

Conclusion

Different Elections, Same Old Style of Campaign

The goal of this thesis was to analyze how and to what extent micro-targeting was used in the 2018 Ontario election. Through content analysis of Facebook ads, posts and emails from the three major Ontario parties throughout the 2018 election period, I have found a lack of individually targeted ads and a preference for general appeals to broad groups. The previous chapter looked to answer the question “what is the micro in micro-targeting?” and from my findings, the answer seems to be that what constitutes “micro” targeting is actually quite “macro.” Parties tend to rely on broader appeals to more general groups and associations, such as occupations and class. There is no evidence of targeting specific subsets of the population, such as East Indian business owners in Brampton or financially stable Jewish men who live in Forest Hill. Parties instead chose to appeal more to “people over the age of 22 in Ontario” or “people who live in Toronto.” These categories were about as “micro” as it got.

While the parties may be privileging particular demographics and areas over others in their appeals, these appeals are publicly accessible on their Facebook pages. The policies are also generally crucial aspects of the party platforms as opposed to niche locally directed policies. Parties are, therefore, likely only using databases more for door-to-door canvassing and GOTV activities, as opposed to specifically targeting individuals. Any use of this information is clearly nowhere near the argued sophistication of Canadian federal campaigns, let alone American campaigns. At least at the provincial level, parties are not “shopping for votes” by using individual interests, as Delacourt (2015) and others suggest.

Despite my findings suggesting a lack of “micro” appeals in micro-targeting by Ontario parties, there are still lessons about the general nature of micro-targeting in Canadian provincial

elections that can be recognized. The first of these lessons is that while parties have access to sophisticated advertising functions on Facebook, it is clear that they are not using these technologies to the same extent as other advertisers. Restaurants and retailers can target individuals based on their interests, age, gender, page likes and other factors – information parties arguably also have access to but are not using to target voters. While Facebook was still a key platform within the campaign, parties are tending to rely more on posts on public Facebook pages than on ads and analytics when targeting messages. These messages are accessible to everyone, and even if the text suggests targeting towards a particular audience, these appeals are still not targeted in a particularly meaningful way. At least in Ontario, Facebook use by parties can, therefore, be seen as more of a digital broadcast medium, as opposed to an individualized, voter specific, communication medium.

These findings suggest that parties use Facebook more as an additive to other campaigning activities, as opposed to a platform informing a completely new campaign strategy. Social media and technology are being used more extensively by parties as a useful resource during the campaign, as social media advertising and outreach is more cost-effective than other more traditional forms of campaign outreach such as canvassing and sending mail outs (Small, 2008). However, parties use Facebook to send messages that are also provided over other media such as T.V., email and direct mail. The digital aspects of the campaign are not the primary campaign focus and are not changing the fundamental nature of campaigns – parties are still relying on the same sorts of appeals and strategies from the third party system, just implementing them in different ways. Facebook is not used to target individual voters based on individual interests, but rather to broadcast messages also seen on other communication media.

While parties may not be using sophisticated social media marketing to target voters, other actors outside of the party realm may be doing so. Dommett and Temple (2018) found that in the U.K., political groups (unaffiliated with parties) were buying Facebook ads and quasi-campaigning for parties. These groups, known as “satellite campaigns,” would mobilize and target voters with the party message, without being prompted to or directed by the centralized campaign (Dommett & Temple, 2018). While this research is from the U.K., I did find some evidence of third-party groups campaigning for or against parties within the Ontario election.²⁷ Additionally, some evidence has come out suggesting that the group Ontario Proud used Facebook to campaign against Kathleen Wynne and bragged about their ability to micro-target hundreds of thousands of voters in areas around the province (“Here is ontario proud’s top secret fundraising pitch to big money corporate donors,” 2018). There is a definite potential that this and other satellite groups may have engaged in more extensive targeting than the actual parties, but this research was beyond the scope of this thesis. The phenomenon of satellite campaigning may become more influential in micro-targeting, especially when one considers the ability of anyone, include foreign actors, to engage in political campaigning on platforms such as Facebook.

While I, and others, argue that parties are using Facebook as a medium to continue traditional campaigning activities, as opposed to it shaping a new kind of voter outreach, it is important to note potential limitations with my findings. One such example is the use of algorithms in voter targeting, which would take into account things like my I.P. address and where I have accessed the Internet in its judgement about how to target my email accounts. For example, from this information, the algorithm could have surmised that the same person or I.P.

²⁷ These sources are referenced in the codebook in *Appendix 3*.

address held all the accounts. Therefore, it is plausible that had I used different computers and/or different Internet access points, I may have received different messages.

Although my I.P. address may have been a factor in the messages I received, it is also plausible that the nature of the election itself also influenced the messages I collected. This election was exceptional due to the overwhelming dislike of Kathleen Wynne and the Liberal party more generally. The general feeling amongst voters that it was time to change the ruling party may have reduced the value of micro-targeting, as the NDP and the PCs may not have had to try as hard to persuade voters to vote for them instead of the Liberals. It would be interesting to see if the use of micro-targeting by parties is different or more extensive in an election where voters are less biased against a specific party.

If given the opportunity to conduct this research again, I would test micro-targeting by providing the parties with more information about the different people/accounts. For my research, parties only had names, emails, addresses and petitions signed for each of the various email accounts, and just had information about my personal Facebook account. Therefore, the majority of testing for micro-targeting occurred through my use of email. Further information could be provided to the parties through the use of multiple Facebook accounts or the creation of public Twitter accounts linked to the emails or Facebook pages. While it is against Facebook policies to create fake accounts, other studies could use the accounts of a team of researchers to track advertisements. This research could be similar to the crowdsourcing and analysis of ads being undertaken by the Who Targets Me project and ProPublica. However, these projects do not necessarily lead to a representative sample, as it is generally people who already are concerned about advertising on Facebook that are likely to contribute to these projects. Another option would be the use of Facebook's new page info tool, which allows individuals to track *all* of the

ads being shown by a page (“Introducing a new info and ads section on pages,” 2018); but it is not clear that these pages will have all of the ads shown, as for some campaigns this could be thousands of different messages. While this area of research is essential, those engaged in it have yet to determine a fully representative method for collecting campaign messages.

Beyond increasing the amount of information the parties have access to about the different accounts, I would also have liked to conduct interviews with campaign officials to verify my findings. I was able to conduct one interview, and while it was fascinating, one interview did not provide enough information to be included in my final project.²⁸ If given more time, I would have tried to gather further interviewees, ideally from all of the major parties.

Future studies are likely to be conducted that include the changes I would have made to my research. The 2018 election will likely be the subject of intense scrutiny, with the almost complete annihilation of the Liberals from provincial parliament and electoral gains made by the NDP and Green party being analyzed by scholars of Ontario politics for years to come. With the PC majority government, Ontario has ended a fifteen-year period of Liberal electoral dominance and seemingly moved back towards the historically favoured party in the province. The party standings coming out of this election are interesting and somewhat unprecedented, but the process of campaigning in this election is much more “standard procedure.”

For Ontario parties in the 2018 election, micro-targeting is much more of a continuation of traditional third party system campaigning tactics than a radical change in practice. However, the use of micro-targeting and social media in campaigning will change and expand in the elections to come. What has been the case in this most recent Ontario election is unlikely to remain for the next election in the province, let alone the next Canadian provincial election more

²⁸ I received approval from Human and Research Ethics to conduct interviews as a component of this thesis.

generally. Facebook is unable to monitor how actors use of their platform for political gain, with a new story about “fake news” influencing the Brazilian election (Phillips, 2018) or advertisers targeting people interested in a “white genocide” popping up every day (Biddle, 2018). Future research needs to be conducted into whether or not these examples are outliers, or if this is the new norm for political campaigning. As social media tightens its grip on society and the political process, micro-targeting may turn into a vice for our democratic processes.

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Appendix 1: Email Demographics

Riding	Email Address	Account Name	Postal Code	Demographic group
Peterborough-Kawartha	carolsimons82@gmail.com	Carol Simons	K9H 1V4	Female, white
Brampton Centre	sunjitsandhucanada@gmail.com	Sunjit Sandhu	L6S 3L3	Male, East Indian
University-Rosedale	gracechang1990@gmail.com	Grace Chang	M5S 2N3	Female, Chinese
Don Valley West	hassim_afzal@outlook.com	Afzal Hassim	M4S 2P2	Male, Pakistani
Hamilton Centre	angela.perreira12@outlook.com	Angela Perreira	L8N 2A7	Female, white (of Portuguese descent)
Etobicoke North	andre.j.thompson56@gmail.com	Andre Thompson	M9V 5B1	Male, Black
Sudbury	kralbinati@gmail.com	Karen Albinati	P3A 2G2	Female, white (of Italian descent)
Eglinton-Lawrence	rozanksy.craig@gmail.com	Craig Rozansky	M6C 2J4	Male, Jewish

Appendix 2: Email Petitions Signed

Riding	Account Name	Postal Code	PC Petitions	Liberal Petitions	NDP Petitions
Peterborough-Kawartha	Carol Simons	K9H 1V4	No tax for minimum wage earners	N/A	Demand better for Ontario workers
Brampton Centre	Sunjit Sandhu	L6S 3L3	Clean up the hydro mess	N/A	Stand up for seniors
University-Rosedale	Grace Chang	M5S 2N3	Make Ontario open for business	N/A	Put people back at the heart of politics
Don Valley West	Afzal Hassim	M4S 2P2	Stop the carbon tax	N/A	Pay less. Own more. Hydro
Hamilton Centre	Angela Perreira	L8N 2A7	No tax for minimum wage earners	N/A	Pharmacare for everyone
Etobicoke North	Andre Thompson	M9V 5B1	Audit Kathleen Wynne	N/A	Demand better for Ontario workers
Sudbury	Karen Albinati	P3A 2G2	Balance the budget	N/A	Stop prepay hydro meters
Eglinton-Lawrence	Craig Rozansky	M6C 2J4	Make Ontario open for business	N/A	Make mental health a priority

Appendix 3: Codebook Nodes

Node	Description	Sources	References
Afzal Hassim	Emails sent to the address hassim_afzal@outlook.com	2	2
Andre Thompson	Emails sent to the address andre.j.thompson56@gmail.com	80	179
Angela Pereira	Emails sent to the address angela.perreira12@outlook.com	41	69
Carol Simons	Emails sent to the address carolsimons82@gmail.com	4	9
Craig Rozansky	Emails sent to the address rozansky.craig@gmail.com	24	62
Grace Chang	Emails sent to the address gracechang1990@gmail.com	1	2
Hypothesis 1	Compounded node of the 5 child nodes; based on Hypothesis 1	176	907
Moral high ground	Messages establish some level of moral high ground over opponents	70	216
Negative to progress	Messages represent the opponent as in opposition to the progress and betterment of Ontario	42	110
Not specifically targeted appeal	Messages are targeted to a very general group (ex: people over the age of 18 in Ontario) or do not have a clear appeal to any group	54	58
Progress towards a better Ontario	Messages present progress towards a better, more inclusive Ontario	76	173
Reaffirm group identity	Messages reaffirm group identity (ex: people who like the page “Kathleen Wynne”.)	59	350
Hypothesis 2	Compounded node of the 2 platform nodes; based on Hypothesis 2	284	1806
Emails	Compound node of the platform and the different characteristics	159	179
Call to action	Messages are meant to mobilize the population through calls to action both online and offline (ex. voting, signing petitions, etc.)	168	517
Email	Messages sent to any of the subject emails	162	333
General campaign message	The content of the message or the actual post itself is identical to that shown on other platforms	153	688
Generate resources	Messages are meant to aid in generating resources and follow a common template (i.e., all messages are very similar in structure and general content)	113	132
Facebook ads and posts	Compound node of the platform and the different characteristics	31	1234
Broadcast and promote campaign events	Messages are meant to broadcast and promote the campaign events to the general population (ex. debates, leadership tours, etc.)	65	673

Facebook ad	Ads shown on Facebook	111	111
Facebook post	Posts made on the Facebook pages of the parties or candidates	24	35
General campaign message	The content of the message or the actual post itself is identical to that shown on other platforms	153	688
Instagram ad	Ads shown on Instagram	29	29
Instagram post	Post on the candidate or party's Facebook page that have been shared from Instagram	3	56
Personalize leader or candidate	Messages are used to personalize the leader or candidate through references to their lives outside politics (ex: status as parents, hobbies, etc.)	28	180
Hypothesis 3	Compounded node of the 3 child nodes; based on Hypothesis 3	17	76
Policy promise	Messages contain an appeal based on a particular policy the party/candidate will enact if elected	77	375
Riding targeted appeal	Messages are targeted to the residents of the specific area (i.e., the messages are targeted to the specific population and not the general campaign).	53	254
Hypothesis 4	Compounded node of the 2 child nodes; based on Hypothesis 4	21	140
Demographically targeted appeal	Messages are specifically targeted to a particular demographic group (ex. ethnicity, class, gender, life status such as parents, students, seniors, etc.)	81	367
Policy promise	Messages contain an appeal based on a particular policy the party/candidate will enact if elected	77	375
Hypothesis 5	Compounded node of the 3 child nodes AND NOT the other hypotheses; based on Hypothesis 5	7	19
Demographically targeted appeal	Messages are specifically targeted to a particular demographic group (ex. ethnicity, class, gender, life status such as parents, students, seniors, etc.)	81	367
Policy promise	Messages contain an appeal based on a particular policy the party/candidate will enact if elected	77	375
Riding targeted appeal	Messages are targeted to the residents of the specific area (i.e., the messages are targeted to the specific population and not the general campaign).	53	254
Karen Albinati	Emails sent to the address kralbinati@gmail.com	8	8
Political candidate	Messages sent by a political candidate	43	123
Political party	Messages sent by the general party	83	140
Third party	Messages sent by a third party that is not up for election	18	32