

Americans roundly reject tailored political advertising as politicians embrace it: study

July 25 2012, By Joseph J. Diorio

(Phys.org) -- A large majority of Americans are dead-set against the practice of tailored political advertising at the very time in the 2012 election that the activity is seeing unprecedented growth. In fact, a high percentage of Americans dislike tailored political advertising so much they say their likelihood of voting for a candidate they support would decrease if they find out the candidate engages in it.

That is one of several eye-opening results from the [first national survey on tailored political advertising](#), conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. Among the findings:

- Fully 86% of Americans say they do not want “political advertising tailored to your interests.” The number is far higher than the still-quite-high proportions of the population who reject other forms of tailored communication: “ads for products and services that are tailored to your interests” (61%), “news that is tailored to your interests” (56%), and “discounts that are tailored to your interests” (46%).
- 64% of Americans say their likelihood of voting for a candidate they support would decrease (37% say decrease a lot, 27% say decrease somewhat) if they learn a candidate's campaign organization buys information about their online activities and their neighbor's online activities—and then sends them different political messages it thinks will appeal to them. [This activity is common during the 2012 election.]

- 70% of adult Americans say their likelihood of voting for a candidate they support would decrease (50% say decrease a lot, 22% say decrease somewhat) if they learn a candidate's campaign organization uses Facebook to send ads to the friends of a person who "likes" the candidate's Facebook page. The ads contain someone's profile photo and proclaim they support the candidate. [This activity, too, is taking place during the 2012 election.]

- 77% of Americans agreed (including 35% who agreed strongly) that "If I knew a website I visit was sharing information about me with political advertisers, I would not return to the site." [Many sites, independently or through third parties, do share such data.]

- 85% agreed (including 47% who agreed strongly) that "If I found out that Facebook was sending me ads for political candidates based on my profile information that I had set to private, I would be angry." [Facebook does do this.]

"This election year marks a watershed moment for online advertising. In unprecedented ways, and to an unprecedented extent, campaign organizations across the American political spectrum are using hundreds of pieces of information about individuals' online and offline lives to ensure the 'right' people are being targeted with the 'right' messages," says Joseph Turow, Ph.D., the Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication and lead researcher on the study. "Yet, we found that contrary to what marketers claim, the vast majority of adult Americans do not want political campaigns to tailor advertisements to their interests."

Targeting advertising is the analysis of data about a population to determine who should receive a persuasive message, how, when and for what reasons. Tailored advertising means shaping a persuasive message for a particular individual based on conclusions the targeting process

generated about that person's interests and values. Critics say this threatens privacy and undermining democratic values. Marketers, including political campaign consultants, defend the practice by insisting it gives Americans what they want: political advertisements and other forms of content that are relevant to their concerns.

Prof. Turow and his colleagues – Michael X. Delli Carpini, Ph.D., Professor of Communication and Walter H. Annenberg Dean; and doctoral students Nora Draper and Rowan Howard-Williams—wrote the questions for the 20 minute survey. Princeton Survey Research Associates International conducted 1,503 telephone interviews (landline and cellular phones) with a representative sample of internet-using adult Americans via between April 23 and May 6, 2012.

“The findings represent a national statement of concern,” says Turow. “We have a major attitudinal tug of war: the public’s emphatic and broad rejection of tailored political ads pulling against political campaigns’ growing adoption of tailored political advertising without disclosing when they are using individuals’ information and how. Our survey shows that in the face of these activities, Americans themselves want information.”

For example, respondents want to know what political campaigns know about them that lead to a tailored ad, and how they learned it. When asked “If a political campaign sends you an online ad that’s relevant to you, would you want to know what the campaign knows about you that led to the ad, or do you not care?,” 65% said they would want to know. Further, when asked if they “would want to know where the campaign got the information to make it relevant, or do you not care?” 76% said they would want to know.

Most respondents also say they want political candidates’ websites to ask permission when using their information. 91% of Americans say no

when asked if it's OK for a political candidate's website to sell information they provide to the site. 63% of them say no even when told that the site's privacy policy would inform them it was selling the information. But when Americans are given the opportunity to "opt in" every time a candidate's political website wants to sell information they provided to the site, the percentage who then say no drops 38% of the entire sample.

"It's hard to escape the conclusion that our survey is tapping into a deep discomfort over behavioral targeting and tailored advertising when it comes to politics," says Prof. Turow. "Political campaigning is moving in a direction starkly at odds with what the public believes should take place. We suggest how this divide may in coming decades erode citizens' beliefs in the authority of elections. We also suggest steps toward lifting the hood on the new world of political marketing in the interest of public discussion regarding Americans' understanding of their evolving political system and where they would like to see it go."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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