

Hersh, Eitan

Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; 270 pp. \$ 29.99, ISBN: 9781107501164

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Over the past decade and a half, there has been a lot written about data and democracy in the context of U.S. elections. There are studies that look at the industry and practices of targeting, such as Phil Howard's *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen*, and Rasmus Nielsen's *Ground Wars*, which provides an exemplary history of the databases that underlie much of contemporary field campaigning and reveals how voter data shape how campaigns use people as media for their strategic ends.

In general, these accounts, as well as my own, examine what political actors *say* they do with data, not *actually* do. And, even in the best field studies, researchers have generally been limited to *observing* what practitioners do with data, not actually *participating* in the practices of the modelers behind their curtains. Observing is not invalid methodologically, of course, but we have lacked a book-length, behind-the-scenes account of the data in contemporary politics that begins with working with the actual data itself.

Until now. Eitan Hersh has written an essential book for anyone interested in the ways contemporary politics is actually and subtly data-driven. Empirically, it is the first book to go inside a major firm—the Democratic Party-allied Catalist—and actually work with its data, while supplementing this with survey data from users of the firm NGP VAN's field tools (which are in use within Democratic campaigns at all levels of office.) In sum, *Hacking the Electorate* is the first book-length account in the literature to actually have access to the data that contemporary campaigns themselves use. Analytically, Hersh develops the "Perceived Voter Model," which reveals how campaigns perceive the electorate through data and how these perceptions shape their subsequent decision making and ultimately action in terms of contacting and mobilizing voters.

On both empirical and analytical grounds, I believe this is a major work, and it should have broad audiences not only among students of U.S. electoral politics, but also scholars interested in the data-driven practices of contemporary campaigning more broadly. Even more, I believe that Hersh's perceived voter model has wide applications in terms of explaining how contemporary *organizations* more generally, in industries from journalism to marketing, use available data to perceive their audiences and subsequently make decisions based on what they see. Hersh's framework that details how the categories of available data intersect with practices of perception and representation is broadly portable across contemporary industry contexts.

Hacking the Electorate's theoretical contribution is the campaign version of James Scott's masterful *Seeing Like a State*, who Hersh quotes to open the book. Broadly, Hersh reveals how the categories of data available to campaigns shape their

perceptions of voters and subsequent communication practices. Campaigns see the world through the data they have access to, and that in turn shapes which voters they communicate with, what they say, and how they say it. Within this broad analytical framework, Hersh reveals a number of important things. First, Hersh shows that, contra much of the literature, campaigns do not have a precise and intimate knowledge of the electorate and mostly rely on publicly available records to predict the attitudes and behaviors of citizens, such as their likeliness to support particular candidates or be persuadable in response to strategic appeals. Public records, such as voter registration files and census information, are the most important from the perspective of campaigns, Hersh shows, because they are the most reliable sources of information and predictive of the political outcomes that campaigns care about. Other data sources, such as commercial records, only have a tenuous relationship to politics and often are modeled in and of themselves. Indeed, Hersh convincingly argues that public records are *designed*, in part, with electoral ends in mind by politicians. Hersh demonstrates the perceived voter model empirically by showing how data that are differentially available to campaigns depending on state—such as party registration and race/ethnicity data—result in different patterns of voter contact. Moreover, he shows how persuasion remains elusive for campaigns, precisely because they lack the attitudinal data in their voter files they need for this purpose. As Hersh notes, because campaigns lack detailed psychological portraits of registered voters, “the following variables contain nearly all of the predictive power in all targeting models: vote history, party registration, gender, age, geography, race, marital status, presence of children, Census measures (like percent urban, percent black), and precinct data” (152).

All of these findings suggest that some of the more extreme concerns over the erosion of political privacy and voter manipulation are over-blown. The field has been haunted by doomsday accounts of managed citizens, political surveillance, and the engineering of the electorate since the origins of digital politics two decades ago. And yet, Hersh’s book shows that these accounts are far more speculative than empirical. Hersh’s careful work on persuasion, for instance, reveals how campaigns find it hard to identify low information and cross-pressured voters given that they lack reliable data on these things in their voter databases. This has broader implications. Those deep-seated fears about voter manipulation through targeting and candidates speaking out of two sides of their digital mouths are over-blown. Campaigns do not really know what to say to whom to change voters’ minds and even face significant electoral risk in targeting the wrong people (a fact which leads them to focus on known voters).

Instead, Hersh makes a number of recommendations that move the academic debate *away from privacy* and toward things that have received comparatively less attention, but are more important, what I think of as questions of *representation* and *democratic inclusion*. First, Hersh notes that there is an inherent conflict of interest in the fact that elected officials repurpose public data for political purposes. Hersh shows how there has been little public scrutiny of the public records that politicians seek to make available for electoral purposes, extending down to the categories of information that government agencies collect and politicians may use in ways that voters could perceive as coercive. Moreover, Hersh also shows that data can spillover

from campaigns to constituent services, and this raises significant concerns about potentials for abuse (such as an elected official being more responsive to constituents that are of the same political party.)

With respect to democratic inclusion, Hersh smartly synthesizes various strains of the debate over micro-targeting, including from those scholars who argue that data can facilitate democratic representation (in terms of candidates prioritizing positions on the basis of knowing the preferences of voters and seeking to mobilize those voters to participate) and the prevalent concerns of others that micro-targeting will simply leave broad swaths of the public untouched as candidates use data to narrowly make appeals to their own particular factions. Hersh's suggestion, which to me is entirely sensible, is to refocus the debate around public records—both because we have greater agency over them and because we can consider many different categories of public data and query whether they are good or bad from a normative democratic perspective in the context of electoral politics. Hersh urges creating a commission to oversee targeting in constituent services, before arguing that voters should have a say in the compilation and maintenance of the profiles of them compiled by campaigns, parties, and firms. This would enable voters to see how they are represented and change and update information about who they are and what they care about, and ultimately create the possibility that campaigns can perceive voters more accurately. These things may serve the ends of democratic inclusion by helping campaigns more accurately segment voters and try to reach those who may be open to their appeals.

It is hard to overstate the range of theoretical and empirical insight in this relatively slim volume. I think Hersh has written the best book about data in politics in the literature, and it should be the cornerstone for all subsequent studies. It should also receive a large audience among those journalists and members of the public interested in understanding contemporary democracy. Even more, Hersh's fundamental insight that basic categories of data have effects on how actors perceive the world and ultimately how they act in it is one that is broadly applicable to many other domains of social life. It is an important insight—and scholars can build from it in many other contexts.

Diana C. Mutz

In-Your-Face-Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 263pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-16511-0

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In her book, *In-Your-Face-Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media*, Diana Mutz argues that way we experience conflict on television has important effects on political communication. Mutz's examination of "in-your-face politics" combines two very different facets of the term: