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Q-Step Essay

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Is data good for democracy?

Democracy is, by definition, the power of the people; so, is the increased use of data within parliamentary democracies reinforcing this power or diminishing it? The extent to which the data used actually is to the benefit of the general public is highly questionable due to implications of micro-targeting in election campaigns, polling and the disillusionment with the government that the use of private data may cause. However, it could also be considered that the enhanced use of analytics within modern democracies enables governments to tailor policies and make major decisions based on the perceived feeling of the general public.

i.   Micro-Targeting in Election Campaigns

Firstly, the positive and negative impact of data on democracy can be analysed by considering its usage in election campaigns-the primary source of influence on the people's power in a democratic state. In recent elections, the use of personal data has been used in analytics and micro-targeting in order for candidates to gain the votes they need to get into power. Micro-targeting involves approaching potential voters with the message that appeals to them the most; for example, someone found to have an interest in the environment (through search history data, occupation, surveys, etc.) may be approached by the candidate's party with the benefits of their stance on climate change. Upon research, it appeared evident that Obama's election campaigns in 2008 and 2012 were somewhat of a step up from previous use of data in campaigning showcased by his incorporation of a large analytics unit, headed by Jim Messina, into his campaign team.

Micro-targeting is often aimed at those likely to vote for the party but less likely to actually go out and vote, or those 'on the fence' between the opposing sides but can be more or less counted on to cast a ballot. Therefore there is a function of micro targeting in increasing voter turnout and encouraging political engagement.

Political engagement is pivotal to any well functioning democracy and therefore by tailoring campaign methods to encourage political participation, a higher turnout can be expected and therefore the successful government's mandate is strengthened, the electorate have greater trust in the government and satisfaction with democracy increases[1]. In US elections from 2004, approximately when data began to be incorporated in a more significant manner in campaign, the turnout was marginally higher than average. The average turnout between 1980 and 2012 was 56.2%, however in 2008, the highest turnout in 32 years was reached at 61.8%[2]. Although there may be other factors at play in terms of this election; possibly a change in government, the candidates themselves or economic circumstances at the time.

A counter to this benefit is the negative effect of voter apathy being accentuated due to considering some votes as a given. Campaigns are unlikely to target those who appear to have already decided who they are voting for, are unlikely to vote or are in an area where the vote wouldn't matter as much (for example, safe seats in the UK such as Witney, a Conservative stronghold, or states in the US where particular states are renowned for voting a certain way, e.g Texas and the Republican Party). This can decrease levels of political engagement and result in a lower turnout, therefore placing the democracy at risk, though, the non-proportional democratic systems are partially responsible for adding to this effect.

Another benefit of micro-targeting on democracy is the increased ability the voters have to understand each party's stance on the issues that matter most to them as an individual. Therefore, the electorate can have greater political understanding and be able to make a more logical and thought out decision based on their beliefs. By providing the electorate with greater knowledge on issues that matter, democracy is improved because the voters have an increased level of participation in the election process.

On the contrary, it could be considered that micro-targeting can mislead voters, causing them to believe certain issues hold more significance in the government's manifesto than they

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[1] https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/d83ddd59-0a00-4535-a117-55a859e6a630.pdf (pages 11, 12 and 13, accessed 13/02/17)

[2] https://arxiv.org/pdf/1311.7326.pdf

really do. For instance, if a voter was targeted on a longer term policy, such as climate change, they may ignore more relevant policies such as economics and therefore 'vote for the suboptimal candidate based on the issue for which they have experience.'[3] . This subsequently is damaging to democracy as the candidate voted for may not accurately reflect the voters views on the whole, but only in a certain niche.

In addition, it could be viewed that the micro-targeting of potential voters is somewhat discriminatory to third parties or smaller parties with less funding than the 'main' candidates, as the cost of micro-targeting and, ideally, the employment of a specific analytics department is quite substantial. Therefore, the idea of a pluralist democracy is flawed to a degree and the candidate with the best policies that would appeal to a large subset of the electorate could potentially be entirely ignored.

Overall, despite the range of arguments against micro-targeting, including the marginalisation of 'outsider' candidates and the narrow scope of issues the voter could be persuaded by, I would be inclined to believe that micro-targeting causes marginally more good than harm to democracy. Electoral participation is vital for a democratic system to function well and with the UK currently suffering a possible participation crisis, an implementation of this technique on a greater scale in this country could work to encourage participation. Additionally, micro-targeting allows for voters to be informed on the issues that they have experience and interest in, henceforth giving them the ability to make a more informed, thought through decision on how to cast their vote to effectively voice their opinion.

ii. Polls

Polls have been a mainstay in politics for a very extensive period of time, however in recent years the number of polls appears to have vastly increased and provide perspectives in a broad range of scenarios.

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[3] http://www.mindlessphilosopher.net/progress/strauss_implications%20chapter.pdf (page 22, accessed 15/02/17)

Polls may be seen as an improvement to democracy as they allow the incumbent government or campaigning candidates to modify their policies in order to fit with what the public are concerned about and gauge the overall consensus on a policy. This is beneficial as it means the electorate can have their opinions heard and considered by those in power and thereby enhancing the power of the people.

Alas, opinion polls have the ability to shape the public's views on particular candidates in an election; effects such as the 'band-wagon effect' and the 'underdog effect'. Both propose contrasting results yet both have ground to damage democracy. Firstly, The 'underdog effect' debatably has been seen in recent elections such as the US presidential election and occurs when voters support the candidate that looks likely to lose. Whereas the 'band-wagon effect' involves voters 'preferring not to make an informed choice before voting and simply choose to mimic the behaviour of other voters instead' [4].

The 'band-wagon' gives polls the ability to become a 'self fulfilling prophecy' and are perpetuated by the media subsequently reporting only the front runners in an election race and therefore reducing the likelihood of a voter hearing all possible perspectives on certain policies and taking into account all possible candidates. This feeds into people's reluctance to vote for third party candidates and encourages tactical voting; therefore causing obvious harm to a democracy as the electorate do not vote truly with their conscience.

Furthermore, the reliability of opinion polls is very questionable. This causes additional scepticism about the benefit of polling as voting behaviour can be altered without a sufficient enough basis. An average of 9% of those contacted actually respond to a poll[5], therefore the demographic reached would be fairly exclusive. Although modelling is used to account for deficiencies in polling data, it is unlikely that they can do so with a high degree of accuracy. Generally, many recent forecast polls have also shown flaws in pollsters methods: the US

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[4] https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/media-spotlight/201512/riding-the-bandwagon-effect (accessed 14/02/17)

[5] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/21/the-challenges-of-polling-when-fewer-people-are-available-to-be-polled/(accessed 14/02/17)

election opinion polls predicting a Clinton win [6]; the EU referendum predicting a 'remain' vote [7].

In summary, despite polls seeming to help inform politicians about the public's feelings about particular issues, I think opinion polls are generally a poor use of data in democracy. Polls have the ability to sway voters and alienate candidates who could have policy ideologies that align with a portion of the electorate. This is a harm to democracy as the people's voting power is tainted with external influences that are, on the whole, somewhat inaccurate and unreliable.

iii. Surveillance Data

Another interesting argument against the supposed good that data does for democracy is the disillusionment with the government that can accompany an increase in data collection and usage. For this point, a significant example is the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 which provided: an 'updated framework for investigatory powers to obtain communications and communications data'; made 'provision relating to the security and intelligence agencies' retention and examination of bulk personal datasets'; and 'governs the powers available to the state to obtain communications and communications data' [8]. This act was generally poorly received by the public, some dubbing it the 'Snoopers' Charter' and claiming that it was too great of an extension of surveillance powers.

Although being a substantial degree greater in its powers of surveillance, North Korea is a very obvious example of the dangers of gathering such excessive data on citizens of the state. Constitutionally, North Korea defines itself as a 'democratic republic' [9]; yet places last out of 167 countries on the 2016 Democratic Index [10] with a score of 0 for civil liberties and pluralism, deeming it an authoritarian state. Civil liberties are a cornerstone in democracy and

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[6] http://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/2016/election/poll-tracker/ (accessed 15/02/17)

[7] https://ig.ft.com/sites/brexit-polling/ (accessed 15/02/17)

[8] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/25/pdfs/ukpgaen_20160025_en.pdf (page 9, accessed 15/2/17)

[9] https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Peoples_Republic_of_Korea_1998.pdf?lang=en (page

[10] http://pages.eiu.com/rs/783-XMC-194/images/Democracy_Index_2016.pdf (page 11, accessed 14/2/17)

without these a democracy would be very significantly damaged, therefore it could be argued that the increase of surveillance to supply data on citizens detracts from civil liberties and consequently is harmful to democracy.

Despite this, it could be potentially viewed as beneficial to democracy in the aspect of protecting against counter-terrorism. In any government, those in authority must assume the responsibility for the safety of citizens of the state and therefore the collection of data in order to do this is a necessity. Though it may be questioned as to what extent it is necessary to collect data on this scale, without this protection, the government would find itself in somewhat of a predicament in the case of a potentially preventable terror attack and a lack of trust in the government may ensue. Therefore, surveillance data could overall be rendered good for democracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, data usage in democracies clearly has its benefits and detriments, though on the whole, with a degree of control, data can be used to efficiently enhance democracy. By informing voters on the policies that they care most about though the methods of micro-targeting, and by keeping informed about the people's opinions on matters in government through polling, the use of data amplifies the voice of the people. However, an element of caution must be taken, if data is too heavily relied upon, such as disillusionment with the government and political apathy may arise and therefore forming a barrier between the people and power they must have to create an optimal democracy.

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