Integrity instead of deceit: how to improve the delivery and content of political campaigns

We do not know how the electorate has been influenced by new political campaigning techniques. However, the central issue is not how we are influenced but that political campaigns are characterised by attempts to manipulate the electorate to increase votes and profits. ***Bethany Shiner (Middlesex University)*** *argues that focusing on whether, how or why the electorate is influenced distracts from the question of how to make political communication more transparent, more honest and more respectful of the electorate.*

To explain the unexpected UK-EU referendum outcome, rhetoric gravitates to how some parts of the electorate decided their vote on the basis of lies, manipulation and ignorance. That may well be true but such an explanation is problematic, not only because it is pejorative, but because it misplaces the central issue. The primary focus should not be the influence of campaigns; it must be the intention of campaigns.

Ideally, in an age of emerging and hard to detect online campaign techniques, effective regulation will partly rely upon an understanding of how people are influenced and therefore what the best method of protecting the democratic process from manipulation, corruption or interference (including foreign interference) is. This would be the most responsible and appropriate approach but it requires consultation with emerging research to update our understanding of human behaviour and influence. It is, however, not a necessary approach if our concern is that the democratic process can be all to easily "hijacked". Instead of saying 'if only people were better educated and less susceptible to manipulation' we should firstly say 'if only political campaigns were characterised by integrity instead of deceit to increase power and profit'. Re-directing the concern away from whether or not people vote on the basis of disinformation and emotional manipulation will allow us to focus energies upon establishing integrity and trust in the democratic process.

This shift is all the more important when we do not know how we are influenced and cannot coherently account for how we respond to digitally delivered material on social media and therefore the extent of that influence on our decision-making. This was most recently demonstrated by research into public perceptions of political finance regulations and online political campaign tactics commissioned by the Electoral Commission. Participants said that online material "stuck" in their mind more than a flyer through the door and that social media had a particular impact because on Facebook you casually scrolling through the material at a time when you are not politically tuned in. Participants also reported that they viewed digitally delivered material as being less trustworthy. Can we reconcile, on one hand, a much more persuasive medium that influences us at times when we are not in our political mindset when, on the other hand, we also self-report being more cynical of online material? The researchers concluded that people "are unlikely to be aware of the extent to which they may be influenced by digital campaigning material".

Although the research was deliberative it cannot provide a complete explanation as we are all limited in being able to offer accurate insights into our own decision-making because of the process of rationalisation. Of course, the primary problem with saying that although people vote, they do not know why they vote the way they do and cannot explain it, is that it demolishes the concept of autonomy. The point being that electorate behaviour is much more nuanced than rational or irrational decision-making. Much more sophisticated research is needed to get 'inside the mind of the voter'. Of course, the only problem with gaining more insight into how we are influenced is that another profit-driven political consultancy firm will be able to take advantage of it, just as Cambridge Analytica et al did with research into behavioural science. That is as long as the legal and regulatory regime remains behind emerging technology and for as long as we remain unable to hold our politicians effectively politically accountable for attempting to deceive, mislead and lie to the public for the purpose of their own power gains. And, that is precisely why the emphasis should not be upon the concern that people are apparently gullible, uninformed and easily influenced – it should be upon the prevalence of political campaigning practices that take advantage of new technologies, as well as old, to deliver knowingly dishonest campaign messages in a bid to win the most votes. Taking a principle-based approach to establishing more trust in the democratic system better helps us future-proof against the effects of emerging technologies that have the capacity to be even more harmful.

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The current regulatory regime that applies to data use, campaign spending and political advertising is flawed in several ways and continues to rest upon unsatisfactory explanations of influence. The law assumes that as long as there is a level playing field when it comes to campaign spending and as long as the electorate is not bombarded with broadcasted political campaign advertisements, then that creates enough space for the electorate to make up its mind without undue pressure or influence. This approach is out-of-date in three regards. Firstly, social media is the most significant source of information now, not the television or radio. Secondly, this approach assumes an element of electorate rationality that is too simplistic. Thirdly, this does not speak to the issue of content. Expanding on the third point, in 1997 it was decided that political campaign adverts would no longer be regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority because political adverts are too subjective and it was unclear how the incoming Human Rights Act 1998, which protects freedom of expression, would apply. However, it was suggested in 1998 by the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life that as an alternative to regulation there should be a Code of Best Practice for political advertising in the non-broadcast media. This was not acted upon but the idea of a Code of Conduct has recently re-emerged in the Committee on Standards in Public Life review of intimidation in public life and the Constitution Society report on data and democracy.

Whether a Code of Conduct will contribute to resolving the problem of diminishing trust in the democratic process is hard to tell because the idea has not been fleshed out but it could address the fact there is no political consequence for knowingly deceiving, lying and misinforming the public during election campaigns (recall Remainer scaremongering). Participants in the commissioned research spoke of being "desensitised" and "immune" to political campaigning and of feeling "disillusioned" by UK politics. The resentment created by the false promises of the EU-UK referendum campaign that were immediately dropped after the result (remember the £350 million for the NHS) is not specific to Brexit – it is a response not only to new campaigning practices that include micro-targeting but also to the lack of political accountability for knowingly peddling lies. Indeed, participants suggested that political candidates found to have breached laws applicable to campaigns should be disqualified.

It seems that the scandal around data misuse for political purposes and deceitful practices during campaigns has served as an illustration of the huge distance between those elected to represent and those being represented – with companies exploiting that gulf for profit. Tweaking the regulatory system will not fix this problem. Focusing on whether, how or why the electorate is influenced misses the opportunity to think about how to make political communication more transparent, more honest, and more respectful of the electorate. Until we tackle this fundamental issue – whether through codes, regulations, or civil or criminal sanctions – the same campaign practices are likely to continue dominating the relationship the electorate has with its representatives. If a snap election or second referendum was to be called, the same would probably happen again.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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