

Targeted Digital Voter Suppression Efforts Likely Decrease Voter Turnout

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As the nation commemorates Martin Luther King Jr. and the 60-year legacy of the Voting Rights Act, a forthcoming study in PNAS highlights a stark irony: in the 2016 election, "Martin Luther King Jr." was used as a digital targeting keyword to identify nonwhites and to suppress their votes.

Prior investigations and intelligence reports have raised concerns about digital targeting by undisclosed groups—including foreign election interference campaigns—and their impact on US elections but have offered no evidence that such targeted digital campaigns affected voting. This study provides systematic, empirical evidence of undisclosed groups' geo-racial targeting patterns and links targeted digital voter suppression to decreases in actual voter turnout in the 2016 US presidential election.

Using a custom-built "reverse engineering" tool, the study directly measured individual-level digital ad exposure among 10,441 individuals representing the US voting-age population for six weeks leading up to the election. Each person's digital ad exposure was then linked with the same individual's verified turnout records. The study finds that exposure to voter suppression ads, such as "Boycott the Election," was associated with a 1.9% drop in voter turnout across the population, with substantially larger effects among the targeted population—nonwhites in racially minority-majority counties in battleground states.

Key Findings

1. Geo-Racial Targeting

- Nonwhites in racially minority-majority counties in battleground states received substantially more digital voter suppression ads than their counterparts, whites in white-majority counties in non-battleground states.
- Educational attainment and income were not associated with voter suppression exposure.

2. Decreases in Voter Turnout

- **Population-Level Effects:** Individuals who were exposed to digital voter suppression were less likely to turn out when compared to those who were not exposed to voter suppression. Digital voter suppression likely decreases voter turnout by an average **1.9%** across the population, equivalent to **4.7 million fewer votes**.
- **Target-Level Effects:** The effect was far more severe among the geo-racially targeted segments. Among nonwhite voters in minority-majority counties within battleground states, turnout was 14.2% lower than that of their counterparts.

Definitions

- *Undisclosed group:* A campaign or ad sponsor that did not file a report to the Federal Election Commission (FEC).
- *Racially minority-majority county* (or “minority county”): A county where nonwhites consist of more than 50% of the total population of the county.
- *Battleground state:* A state where the state-level vote margin is less than +/-5% in the 2016 presidential election: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin

Why We Should Care

Why This Study Changes What We Know About Digital Political Influence

· Independent, “Third-Party,” Data Collection Alters Evidentiary Landscape

Unlike government reports and other investigations that relied on data provided by social media platform companies, this study collected population-level, individual exposure data using novel methodological techniques, independently of the government, platform companies, or any other organizations.

Such data had not existed in the 2016 presidential election—until this project. The study alters that evidentiary landscape.

· Direct Empirical Evidence for Targeted Digital Voter Suppression and Its Impact: Campaigns Are Not About Persuasion or Mobilization

By measuring direct exposure and by linking it to actual voter turnout records at the individual-level, the study offers direct, systematic, empirical evidence for how undisclosed groups—including foreign election interference campaigns—utilized targeted digital ads to influence the election, making visible how digital political influence operates below the threshold of public scrutiny. The study also provides evidence for whether and how voters are affected by targeted digital voter suppression campaigns in the 2016 presidential election based on real-world observations.

The study shows that targeted digital advertising can be used not only to persuade or mobilize voters, but also to secretly discourage participation among specific segments of the electorate.

· Russian Election Interference Went Beyond Sowing Division: Asymmetric (de)Mobilization

The study also challenges the prevailing view that election interference efforts primarily aim to inflame polarization by targeting both sides of the ideological spectrum. The study points out additional and more election-specific strategies: Asymmetric demobilization. Only certain types of voters were disproportionately exposed to messages discouraging turnout, while others were not.

The Future

How We Can Close Policy Loopholes

The study highlights a growing mismatch between existing election oversight frameworks and the reality of the data-driven, microtargeted, algorithm-based information environment.

- Addressing Voting Rights in the Algorithmic Information Environment: U.S. election law and civil rights protections were largely designed to address visible and place-based barriers to voting, such as access to registration, polling locations, and overt intimidation. By contrast, contemporary political campaigns rely on data-driven modeling, microtargeting, and automated advertising systems that determine who receives which messages, often without transparency or accountability.
- Updating Campaign Finance Regulations and Oversight: Current regulatory approaches tend to focus on campaign spending totals, message content, or platform-level ad archives. They rarely address who is targeted, how targeting criteria are constructed, or how voter suppression messages circulate in the evolving information environment.

Closing these loopholes will require policy approaches that recognize how digital political influence works in the current information environment. Safeguarding democratic participation depends not only on access to the ballot but also on transparency and accountability in the systems that shape political communication itself.