The Use of Voter Data
in the Netherlands

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A strange banner

In the first weeks of 2017, a strange banner appeared on websites in 51 countries around the world, including Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands. The banner says in Dutch: ‘After March 15 we are going to cleanse the Netherlands’. March 15 is national election day in the Netherlands. The sender of the banner appears to be the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), a right-wing party led by Geert Wilders. The ad is designed in their style of branding. Yet the audience for this ad does not consist of people who want to get rid of immigrants. Instead, immigrants (and journalists) are the audience of the banner. It got 11,000 views worldwide before it is taken offline. What is going on?

![Fake test banner created by Denk](source: www.nporadio1.nl/achtergrond/10220-Denk-plande-een-nepnieuwscampagne)

The political ad is a fake. It is a product of the mind of Farid Azarkan, campaign leader of political party Denk (a left-wing party, aimed at immigrants and their children), and his campaign team. Denk's campaign team ordered the design of a banner with the face of Wilders, the logo of PVV and the controversial text. The team wanted the ad to appear online on two popular news websites in the Netherlands, nu.nl and telegraaf.nl. The banner was intended to lead to the website of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV).
This will never happen, but another ad with the same text is tested online shortly. The online marketer who is responsible for Denk's online campaign uses the test ad to find out if the algorithms of Google Adwords will allow the banner. They do, but before the real ad is supposed to appear online, the idea is deemed too controversial by the leaders of Denk and is abandoned.

The public will only find out about the existence of the fake banner months later, when the online marketeer who created the test banner gets into an argument with Azarkan (about matters which have nothing to do with the fake ad). Public radio show Nieuw BV covers the story.¹

Even though the plan was quickly dismissed and never broadly executed, there is a huge amount of public outrage. For many people who have been critical towards the influence of online targeting on democracy, the plan by Denk proves their point. They fear that microtargeting will increase the rise of disinformation and make the political process less transparent, for nobody will know what ads other people have come across online. As the Denk test banner makes vividly clear, online ads can be misused to spread misinformation and increase fear for certain groups within society.

Alarmist attack ads are often used to keep people from voting, for example when Donald Trump reminded black democrats of Hillary Clinton's supposed comment of African-American youth being 'superpredators', but in this case it is meant to have an psychological impact on their own supporters; to get them scared enough of PVV to go out and vote Denk. Geert Wilders presses charges against Denk for slander. Azarkan is not prosecuted.²

**Transparency by (self-)regulation**

Do the Dutch have a problem when it comes to fake news and political ads? The Dutch Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK), Kajsa Ollongren (Democraten '66 or D66, a centrist party with a strong focus on democracy), thinks so. Her Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) safeguards the core values of democracy in the Netherlands. Minister Ollongren believes those values might be at stake with the rise of online disinformation that can destabilize the democratic order, as does the European Commission, that released an Action Plan against disinformation in December 2018.³

In 2019, the Dutch elected the members of the provincial councils, the water boards and the European Parliament. Minister Ollongren wanted to make sure that the elections take place in a free and honest way. The Dutch Government released a plan to defend democracy against disinformation. The plan consisted of three lines of action: prevention, consolidation of information position and, if needed, reaction. The Minister wrote that she wants to focus on creating more transparency on online platforms by increasing the use of (self-)regulation.⁴

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¹ [https://www.nporadio1.nl/achtergrond/10220-Denk-plande-een-nepnieuwscampagne](https://www.nporadio1.nl/achtergrond/10220-Denk-plande-een-nepnieuwscampagne)


⁴ [https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2019/10/18/actielijnen-tegengaan-desinformatie](https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2019/10/18/actielijnen-tegengaan-desinformatie)
For the Minister, one of the ways to fight disinformation is to mandate transparency about political digital ads. Right now little is known about the advertisers, or about the agencies that place the ads and the groups they are targeting. Transparency is not a solution for the creation and promotion of disinformation or highly targeted ads, she acknowledges, but it does create a barrier to secretly influence election via paid content. Stipulating transparency also provides the Government with more democratic control in a neutral way. For when it comes to political parties, the Government in the Netherlands tends to be very careful not to interfere, to ensure a free political debate in a pluralistic society. There are very few specific rules in the Netherlands with regard to online political advertising. There is a relative lack of regulation on political advertisements and even on political parties in general, due to the belief that the Government should not interfere with political parties and the general political debate, if it can be avoided.

The political system

Let's start with some background on the Dutch political system. The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy. Normally once every four years the Dutch citizens entitled to vote (Dutch nationals aged eighteen and older) elect the people who will represent them in Parliament. Parliament's duties include scrutinizing the work of the Government and making new laws in cooperation with the Government. The Dutch Parliament consists of two chambers: the Senate (Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal) and the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal). The members of the Senate are elected indirectly by the members of the provincial councils. The House of Representatives are elected directly by the Dutch people. Provincial elections take place every four years. So do municipal elections, which are also open to non-nationals, like expats. The Dutch also get to vote for their representatives in the European Parliament, as do expats who are born in the European Union.

The Netherlands has a proportional representation system. Every vote counts for the allocation of seats in Dutch Parliament. When it comes to microtargeting, this makes things harder for marketers. Unlike certain key districts in the USA, for example, that can play a decisive role in a general election, all Dutch votes matter equally.

The Netherlands has a multiparty democracy. The Dutch are used to being ruled by a Government that is made up of a number of parties, a so-called coalition, and they have many parties to choose from. In 2020, fifteen political parties are represented in the House of Representatives and thirteen in the Senate. Ten of them are represented at the European Parliament. In 2020, there are twelve national parties that are not represented in either chamber that do have seats in municipalities or Provincial Councils. Most municipalities also have one or more local parties on board.

Political Parties Act

It is relatively easy to start a political party in the Netherlands. The Government will not interfere with this freedom, unless it has a very clear grounds for doing so. This is one of the reasons why there is little regulation on political parties. One exception to the rule is the Wet financiering politieke partijen. This law sets criteria for subsidies and outlines for financial transparency. Influential organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and The Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) have warned multiple times that this law is not effective to fight corruption. Their main point of
criticism is the lack of transparency on financing and expenses of political parties. This is an important issue when it comes to the use of voter data, as is underlined in a report that was conducted by the Instituut voor Informatierecht (IViR, Institute for Information Law) of the University of Amsterdam, at Minister Ollongren's request.\(^5\)

Political parties in the Netherlands in general have very limited funds. However, the apparent ineffectiveness of the current law suggests that if a very rich party, for example an Saudi Arabian organization, decides to interfere in Dutch politics by donating enormous amounts of money to a certain political party, very little would be known about the way in which the party spends the money. So if the leaders of the party would choose to spend it on microtargeting, this would largely go unnoticed. While the parties are obliged to be transparent about income and debts, they are free to spend their recourses however they like.

This hypothetical threat to democracy has gained in relevance since the Dutch investigative journalism television program Zembla showed in April 2020 that Thierry Baudet, leader of the right-wing party Forum voor Democratie (FvD), worked in close cooperation with a Russian with links to the Kremlin. In a private WhatsApp group Baudet wrote about 'working his ass off' for Russian propagandist Vladimir Kornilov and joked about the need to get paid more.\(^6\) In 2019, his party Forum voor Democratie became the biggest party in, after spending 1,1 million euros on online advertising, according to magazine De Groene Amsterdammer.\(^7\) However, no evidence was found that Baudet was paid by a Russian organization.

Screenshot from 'Baudet en het Kremlin', a television documentary by Zembla (BNNVARA). The screenshot shows a conversation in a WhatsApp group in which FvD-leader Baudet writes

'Maybe Kornilov wants to pay something extra' (wink).

source: https://www.bnnvara.nl/zembla/videos/543244


\(^6\) https://www.bnnvara.nl/zembla/videos/543244

\(^7\) https://www.groene.nl/artikel/propaganda-op-maat
The Government wants to implement a ban on foreign gifts to Dutch political parties in the new Political Parties Act, the Wet op de politieke partijen (wpp), that is currently being constructed.\(^8\) Gifts from non-EU-country's will be forbidden, gifts coming from other EU-country's need to be made public. The new Political Parties Act will include new transparency obligations for political parties with regard to digital political campaigns and political microtargeting. Whether political parties and the institutions that belong to the parties, like scientific organizations that do research at the request of the parties, can be obliged to publish an overview of their political ads, is still subject to debate.

The current bill has been sent to the Council of State, which will advise on it. The wpp will be submitted later in this government term to the House of Representatives. Only then will the text be made public. The wpp should come into effect in 2022.

Effect of the GDPR

At the current moment the potential problem of microtargeting seems to be relatively small in the Netherlands. There are a couple of reasons for this. One is the lack of funds of political parties, as mentioned above. Another is the multiparty system, that makes microtargeting harder and less effective. Yet another reason is the current awareness of privacy-issues amongst politicians. This has everything to do with the coming into effect of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018.

Europe’s privacy rules hinder microtargeting. The GDPR makes it much harder for political parties to buy data about people and the GDPR’s transparency requirements makes it easier for journalists and researchers to find out more about what political parties and marketing companies do with personal data.\(^9\) The new European law has also highly raised awareness of the importance of online privacy in the Netherlands. While in former national and municipal elections some political parties used microtargeting without thinking twice about it, the issue is now much more on top of mind. Political parties are more careful about not being associated with messing with personal data (which, it should be noted, is not the same as not making use of microtargeting at all, but rather with making sure that they are not being found out).

A good example of this would be the case of D66, the party that stands for democracy. In 2018, in the campaign for the municipality elections, a local division of D66 worked with a digital advertising company to target specific groups in The Hague, like 'young Moroccan mothers' and 'members of the LGBTQ community'. As we will see, D66 is nowadays very active on the issue of obligatory transparency for political parties regarding online ads. The national bureau of D66 has recently called this collaboration a mistake, but they must have known about it at the time, since there was a confidentiality clause that forbade D66 The Hague to talk about their engagement with this firm, as was discovered by journalists from magazine De Groene Amsterdammer and radio show Argos.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/02/07/ministerraad-stemt-in-met-wijziging-van-de-wet-financiering-politieke-partijen

\(^9\) https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/regulation-online-political-micro-targeting-europe

\(^10\) https://www.groene.nl/artikel/propaganda-op-maat
The GDPR is probably not completely solving the problem of privacy violations. It is, however, succeeding in making the use of personal data less desirable from a social point of view. By using new technology, people might always find ways to work around a law, but they cannot control the effect that the law has on the public’s awareness of the issue at stake. When it comes to the GDPR, this effect seems to be quite strong.

National Laws on political advertisements

There are no specific restrictions concerning the type of political content that can be broadcast during elections in the Netherlands. Dutch law does not specifically regulate online political advertising during elections and referenda. The advertising industry has established a sectoral code for social media advertising, the ‘Reclame code commissie sociale media’. That code also specifies that advertisers should provide transparency, and also includes a prohibition on manipulation. Political advertising is however not yet explicitly addressed, though it can be thought to be included.

Ideas and plans to regulate microtargeting

In January 2019, D66 proposed to make non-personalized digital ads a default. Online advertising agencies would need permission to show anyone targeted ads. D66 was also the first party to plead for obligatory transparency regarding digital advertising, as well as a duty of care for online platforms, a ban on misleading political ads and more rights for social media users. Members of the opposition requested the Government in February 2019 to oblige Facebook to guarantee total transparency about the origins of political ads. Parliament passed this motion. In March, they also requested the Government to regulate by law that only persons and organizations that are based in the Netherlands can place a political ad. Parliament passed this motion too. Whether or not parties can be obliged to document their ads, is still open to debate. Although Facebook, Google and Twitter have committed themselves to the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation and are building ad archives, this is a non-binding commitment and no legal obligation. It might be possible to oblige social platforms to keep ad archives, but this is also still open to debate.

Which data are being used?

So how are voter data are being used in Dutch politics? First, it is important to note that there are no such things as voter files in the Netherlands. It makes no sense for political parties to collect voter files, for any Dutchmen who is eighteen and older is allowed to vote and will receive a call to vote by mail on their house address. The same goes for expats when it comes to municipality elections and expats born in a EU-country

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11 https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/regulation-online-political-micro-targeting-europe
when it comes to electing members of the European Parliament. Nowhere is it registered who votes for what party. However, after the elections the votes per voting stations are made public, and this can be valuable information for some marketers, as we will see later.

When it comes to campaigning, the political parties principally have to rely on registered data from their members and financial donors. Then there are those who have shown interest in the party in the past, for example by liking or following the party on Facebook, or their leaders. Some party leaders are much more popular on social media than their parties. For example, GroenLinks (left-wing, green party) leader Jesse Klaver has way more Facebook followers than his party. It has to be said that this might have less to do with his charms than with the Facebook algorithms, that since 2018 tends to rank personal pages higher than that of official institutions\(^{17}\), which created some problems for parties that had put their money on promoting the official party pages.

Privacy policies

All national political parties have a privacy page on their website. Here they explain how and why they make use of personal data, what kind of data they use and how one can object to the use of one's data. Some privacy pages are very elaborate, others short and vague. Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA, left-wing party) for example, sums up what data they use when somebody visits their website or donates money to the party\(^ {18}\), but they don't mention the use of Facebook in their privacy and cookie policy, even though they do use Facebook and Instagram in their campaigns, like virtually all Dutch political parties.\(^ {19}\) The PvdA website offers people who lost their income due to the COVID-19 crisis, to send a text message to party leader Lodewijk Asscher by WhatsApp, but forgets to inform them if their message and phone numbers will be saved.\(^ {20}\) GroenLinks\(^ {21}\) and D66\(^ {22}\) also offer a WhatsApp service to share their viewpoints and news. GroenLinks calls subscribers to this service ‘apptivists’.

\(^ {17}\) https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104413015393571
\(^ {18}\) https://www.pvda.nl/privacy-en-cookiebeleid/
\(^ {19}\) https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=NL&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&view_all_page_id=113895885305052&sort_data[ direction]=desc&sort_data[mode]=relevancy_monthly_grouped
\(^ {21}\) https://groenlinks.nl/privacy
\(^ {22}\) https://d66.nl/uw-privacy/
Both parties promise to save the phone numbers of the users for the sole purpose of sending messages and that they won't connect them to other data. Messages are kept for 3 months by GroenLinks and for 6 months by D66. The data are not shared with third parties. D66 adds a promise that if you sign off of the D66 WhatsApp service, they delete your number and all messages that are sent in the past.

Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD, right-wing liberal party) has an elaborate online privacy protocol that explains how they use Facebook Pixel, Google Ads, Analytics en DoubleClick, plus trackers from a firm called Squeezely Technology, to track visitor behavior on their website. The protocol states, among other things: 'Google Ads is taking care of ads that are visible in Google Search and the Google display network. The functionality 'Keep track of conversions' enables us to check how effective ad clicks are in generating valuable actions on our website.'

Forum voor Democratie (FvD) mentions Facebook cookies 'that are needed for liking messages and updating your status', without informing their website visitors how much information they actually share with Facebook, as we will see in the chapter about 2020. They also mention placing Twitter-cookies on visitor's pc's to make (re)tweeting of articles possible. These cookies will only be placed if you are logged on in Twitter while visiting to FvD website and give permission.

GroenLinks sends messages and calls to actions to their ‘apptivists’

source: https://jongenjewilwat.nl/waarom-jongeren-niet-stemmen/img_1087/

23 https://www.vvd.nl/privacyprotocol/
Databrokers

If Dutch political parties make use of databrokers besides Facebook or Google, they are very quiet about it. Some of the big databroker firms are active in the Dutch consumer market and especially credit managing, like Experian, Focum and Lindorff & Intrum, but none of them advertises working for political parties. In the past, only one brand name kept appearing in the media with regards to microtargeting in Dutch politics: OptimusAd, a small digital marketing business in The Hague that is now called TechAds. OptimusAd buys anonymized datasets from foreign companies that analyse online customer behavior and uses these data sets to show banners to targeted groups of people. OptimusAd used to work for a couple of Dutch political parties, including the national party Denk, and local divisions CDA Heerenveen and D66 The Hague. The owner told national news paper Volkskrant he has no competition in the Netherlands. He recently said to magazine De Groene Amsterdammer he stopped serving political parties as his clients.24

Data Protection Authority investigation

Because of the coming national elections in 2021, the Dutch Data Protection Authority (Autoriteit Persoonsgegevens, or AP) announced in February 2019 that they would start an exploratory investigation into the use of personal data in election campaigns. They required information from each national political party about the way they use personal data in their campaigns and told them that they are especially alert at the use of third party service providers that are hired to help campaigning. Though the issue is still on their agenda, due to limited capacity, the AP has chosen to focus on COVID-19 related issues for the time being.

Microtargeting in Dutch politics in 2017

Political scientist Tom Dobber of the University of Amsterdam researched microtargeting in the national election campaigns in the Netherlands in 2017. He and his colleague interviewed eleven campaign leaders to find out what barriers and facilitators for the adoption and use of 'political behavioral targeting' (PBT) techniques Dutch political parties perceive.

He found that all of the campaigns make use of Facebook to target their audiences. Some parties occasionally post content targeted to broad age groups, while other campaigns frequently post content tailored to more specific groups. Some of them make use of the Facebook service called 'custom audiences', that enables them to create an audience based on an uploaded list of e-mail addresses or phone numbers of their party members. Some also use the Facebook service called 'lookalike audiences'. This service enables them to upload a list of e-

25 https://www.groene.nl/artikel/propaganda-op-maat
26 https://autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl/nl/nieuws/verkennend-onderzoek-naar-gebruik-persoonsgegevens-verkiezingscampagnes
27 https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/two-crates-beer-and-40-pizzas-adoptions-adoptive-political-behavioural-targeting
mail addresses or phone numbers to Facebook, that will automatically scan the social platform for user that have the same political behavior and characteristics as the people who's information was uploaded by the party. By using data from their own party members, the parties might be able to find others who are open to their message. Some campaigns also employ ‘dark posts’, a Facebook function that enables campaigns to opaquely target specific audiences, while its messages are not visible to untargeted Facebook users. Certain messages about gas extraction, for example, are only relevant to the inhabitants of Groningen, the campaign leader of PvdA explained to Dobber.

The small budgets are the main reason why the parties don't collaborate with expert political consultants to enhance their microtargeting campaigns. The same goes for canvassing apps: most campaign leaders would like to make use of an app that would allow campaigns to directly process information from canvassers, but they find it too expensive.

DIY microtargeting

Two campaigns stand out for having developed their own PBT-tools in 2017 (because of their small budgets). The first is GroenLinks, who claim to have paid 'two crates of beer and 40 pizzas' to their app programmers. The apps facilitates large scale collection of personal data. It also provides an infrastructure for volunteers to campaign without the need of campaign leader. Their campaigner tells Dobber: "We use the election results per voting location and use that information to establish the GroenLinks mindedness of a neighborhood. Then we can prioritize which addresses to visit and which to ignore. When we visit addresses, our volunteers use the app to answer the following questions: 1. Is anyone home? 2. Does she want to talk? 3. Is she going to vote? 4. Is she planning to vote for GroenLinks? 5. What is the most important theme to her? 6. How GroenLinks minded was she? If she considers to vote for GroenLinks, two questions follow: 1. Do you want to stay informed of our campaign by e-mail? 2. Can I have your phone number, so we can ask you to do canvassing talks?" The answers to the questions are collected in the app.

The other campaign that makes use of a in house-built tool is de Socialistische Partij (SP, left-wing). Their system combines previous election results, census data and their own membership Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) data. Plotted on a Google Map, they can identify interesting areas for them to canvass.

Using big data for good

In their article, the researchers remark that an interesting cultural phenomenon takes place: many of the campaign leaders worry about the perceived low level of political knowledge of the average Dutch voter. They believe microtargeting techniques can have a positive effect, by raising interest in people for politics by stirring the conversation to issues that are relevant to them. This resonates with the idealism of de Politieke Academie (see page 17), an NGO that uses voter data to make politics more relevant for the general public.

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29 https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/two-crates-beer-and-40-pizzas-adoption-innovative-political-behavioural-targeting
It should be noted that the interviews by Tom Dobber took place before the GDPR came into effect and before the Cambridge Analytica scandal took place. The attitudes of the campaign leaders towards microtargeting might have changed due to the public awareness of privacy issues regarding microtargeting. Under the GDPR, GroenLinks can no longer use their app to collect personal data as they did in 2017, when they were still very heavily inspired by Obama’s modern campaigning methods (their digital campaign leader at the time used to be an intern at Obama's campaign in 2008). They might not even feel regret about this, since they have lately taken a different, more privacy-minded direction. For example, on their privacy page it is stipulated: 'We don't make use of cookies to track your surfing habits by GroenLinks or third parties. Therefore we don't have to bother you with a cookie mention.' Also: 'We use only social media, we don't add extra data. When considering to profile ourselves on a new platform we take the privacy of our followers very seriously.'

SIM cards

During the 2017 national elections, one political party chose a very different approach to target their audience. Denk targets users of a Lebara SIM card. The type of SIM card is a so-called first party data, data that is shared to make sure that a website will come across at a certain device. Immigrant party Denk assumes their target group will possess a Lebara SIM card or something similar, because these type of SIM cards are used to call cheaply outside the EU. Therefore they hire OptimusAd to target Lebara SIM card users with their banners.30

Attitude shift in 2018

The 2018 municipal elections in the Netherlands happen to coincide with the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The impact of Cambridge Analytica on the Netherlands wasn't very big: of the 87 million leaked profiles, a maximum of 90 000 Dutch user profiles are possibly improperly used by Cambridge Analytica. But political microtargeting techniques similar to those employed by Cambridge Analytica have been used by almost all political parties in the Netherlands during the municipal elections, and are on offer from a host of databrokers.31

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, combined with a couple of political scandals, speed up a different attitude towards microtargeting. One is a relatively innocent story of a student, Jochem Stoeten, who tries to become a member of the municipality of his hometown, Enschede. Because the odds are not in his favor, he hires the owner of ,, the guy who came up with the SIM cards targeting for Denk. Stoeten's campaign consists of targeting four target groups: 40 percent local businessmen, 20 percent students, 20 percent elderly and 20 percent people that are in need of health / youth care. These are the groups that Stoeten wants to represent as a member of the city council32.

Facebook ad for Jochem Stoeten in the run-up to the 2018 municipal elections. The banner text reads, "Enschede is buzzing and I love it buzzing."
(screenshot taken in March 2018, the ad is no longer online)

The marketer buys up banner space at an ad exchange. He uses anonymized datasets to get the targeted messages across. But even though some students tell Stoeten that they came across his banners while playing a game or visiting a local news website, the campaign backfires: Stoeten's party doesn't do well in the municipal elections and he is not elected. De Volkskrant publishes a story on the Stoeten campaign. He is made fun of by some on social media, because he has tried to influence people online and they didn't buy it. Volkskrant columnist Sheila Sitalsing writes that his loss is a relief, for it means that we not as sensitive to microtargeting as some media have suggested.\(^{33}\)

All of this might have an effect on other politicians. For as we have seen, Stoeten is not the only one to hire this particular firm during the 2018 municipal elections. According to the owner, local divisions of several

\(^{33}\) [https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/wat-het-fiasco-rondom-jochem-stoetens-campagne-zegt-over-de-subjecten-van-micromikken-bd9a0bd5/](https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/wat-het-fiasco-rondom-jochem-stoetens-campagne-zegt-over-de-subjecten-van-micromikken-bd9a0bd5/)
national parties make use of his services, even though some of them publicly condemn the use of data for political purposes.34

2020: 'No rules online'

An investigation by magazine De Groene Amsterdammer and radio show Argos in the spring of 2020 shows an interesting divide between what political parties believe is the right thing to do and a fear of what will happen if other parties behave less ethically.

'We are all like racing cyclists,' says Mark Thiessen, former campaign strategist for VVD, in the resulting article. 'All of us try to get as far as possible and cycle as fast we can, within the rules of the game. But there are no rules online. I hold back, but it is frustrating to see one's competitors moving one by.'35

The kind of 'doping' that he is referring to, is a cocktail of political targeting via Facebook and Instagram, based on data that are sometimes delivered to social media by the political parties themselves. Private matters that are shared on dating apps like Grindr or Tinder can be ingredients to the mix as well, according to the article, but their source is once again the same marketer and they seem to have taken his word for it. The article describes how conservative parties like FvD, CDA (Christen Democratisch Appèl, right-wing Christian party) and VVD, and local parties, like Groep de Mos in The Hague, are the least reserved when it comes to targeting citizens. They have the most trackers on their website and they use them to send data to Facebook.36

Made2Matter

FvD and VVD work with the Austrian marketing bureau Made2Matter, that specializes in targeting people on the basis of their emotions. On their website, they write: 'We have created a proprietary scientifically robust online research tool that measures for the first time quantitatively how people feel and think. EmoLogic™ makes it possible to measure emotions that are mostly in the subconscious and therefore can not be verbalized. We put the cognitive answers in relation and can therefore identify roadblocks for trust.'

34 https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/microtargeting-moest-deze-student-helpen-in-de-gemeenteraad-van-de-vvd-te-komen-zo-probeerde-hij-dat-b61857ee/
35 https://www.groene.nl/artikel/propaganda-op-maat, my translation
36 https://www.groene.nl/artikel/propaganda-op-maat
Forum voor Democratie and Facebook

A little earlier, in April 2020, journalists from online investigative journalism platform Brandpunt+ find out that Forum voor Democratie (FvD) pays Facebook for each new member that has applied for a membership through a Facebook ad, thereby violating the GDPR and the rules about using cookies in the Dutch Telecommunicatiewet (telecommunication law). The findings are based on Facebooks public ad library on FvD. Keeping ad archives are not yet obligatory for European political advertisers, although there has been a discussion in the Netherlands about making it obligatory (see 'Ideas and plans to regulate microtargeting').

FvD uses a conversion campaign to recruit new members. If Facebook users watch a video made by FvD, they are targeted with political advertisements from FvD. People that visit the FvD website are also targeted on Facebook. Facebook not only knows if someone visits the FvD website, but also if they become a member of the party, as the image below shows.

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37 https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=NL&impression_search_field=has_impressions_lifetime&view_all_page_id=609816282477420

38 https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/platform-ad-archives-promises-and-pitfalls
The article cites civil rights organization Bits of Freedom saying that one's political conviction is sensitive information and deserves special protection within the law. Sending this information to Facebook is a violation of the Dutch privacy law.

Canvassing in high potential streets - according to big data analysis

Microtargeting can also be used in a more idealistic way. Stichting Politieke Academie is an Amsterdam-based NGO that uses big data driven microtargeting to strengthen democracy. The organization works for political parties, individual politicians, governments and NGO's and claims to be politically neutral. Politieke Academie has existed for years as a political training company. In 2013 they chose to make strategic data-analysis their core business. Politieke Academie provides their customers with detailed maps that show which blocks or streets are inhabited by people who have a high chance of voting for their party, who have a hidden potential for the party and who have very little or no chance, making campaigning more effective.

source: [www.npo3.nl/brandpuntplus/fvd-ledenwerving-facebook](https://www.npo3.nl/brandpuntplus/fvd-ledenwerving-facebook)

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39 [https://www.npo3.nl/brandpuntplus/fvd-ledenwerving-facebook](https://www.npo3.nl/brandpuntplus/fvd-ledenwerving-facebook)
Aggregated data

By means of pattern recognition 'and a little AI', Politieke Academie claims to be able to estimate for every six digit zip code the chance of interest in a certain political party. In the Netherlands, a six digit zip code in most cases refers to a single street or only a part of a street. There are even six digit zip codes that refer to a single house, but data are not available in that case, since that would be a violation of the GDPR. Political parties in the Netherlands are hyper alert when it comes to using personal data, says director Frank van Dalen of Politieke Academie. 'The moment we would tell them that we use personal data, even if it would be in a legitimate way, red flags are raised. So we need to clarify really well what we do and don't do.'

More open data are available everyday in the Netherlands, especially governmental data. In 2013, Dutch authorities proclaimed they will make as many governmental data publicly available as possible. For Politieke Academie, an organization that only works with complete datasets that cover the whole country, this is an interesting development. Most of Politieke Academie's data come from het Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS, Statistic Netherlands), het Kadaster (The Netherlands' Cadastre, Land Registry and Mapping Agency) and Cendris (customer data solutions by the national post delivery service). Cendris sells demographic data that CBS doesn't have on offer. CBS does provide data on the age, household and ethnicity of the people within a certain zip code, but due to their privacy policy, data on income is only available if there are at least a 100 persons in one zip code, which is almost never the case. So Politieke Academie buys these data from Cendris. CBS also doesn't have data on religious interests and education level.

Van Dalen explains what Politieke Academie does. 'We combine election results per voting station with data that are either open or legally for sale. Sometimes we will use data from databrokers, but we are only interested in data about the whole population. We haven no interest in subsets. And we never use individual data, only aggregated data. Data about an individual mean nothing to us. We need to know what is common in a certain area.' So whereas a certain area might be marked as 'high potential' for a client, there's always a chance that some of the house-owners will be less enthusiastic about the political party in question. How the AI calculates the chances, is what Van Dalen calls 'a black box'. Furthermore, he cannot disclose information about his clients and can therefore not make public which political parties make use of his services.

Political DNA

Politieke Academie also provides political parties with a 'DNA-profile' of their voters, but they don't do social profiling, emphasizes Van Dalen. 'The data come first. Social profiling is finding out who your voters are. What we do, is finding out where your voters live. We won't advise VVD to look for expensive houses, because people in expensive houses tend to vote VVD. We will tell them that in this community, living in an expensive house is an identifier for voting VVD. This makes a big difference. We are only interested in demographical factors with a statistic relation. So if half of your voters drives a red car, that is still not an identifier to us. Or if it is, it will show up in the DNA, which is basically a residual of our main service, marking high potential zip codes.'

What does that difference mean? An example derives from the municipality elections a few years ago. Social profilers used to tell PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid, leftwing social democratic party) that their supporters in Eindhoven were mostly migrant families from Morocco and Turkey. Van Dalen: 'We found out that the DNA-profile of the PvdA supporter said: socially weak background and big families. This could mean migrant family, but not necessarily, and not all of them. This discovery lead to a different approach in communication.' Van Dalen says that his methods are beneficial for voters. 'It means a voter is being approached by a party that he or she feels a connection to. They will provide the voter with information and communication that is relevant to that person. So our methods improve the relevance of politics in the daily life of citizens.'

Even as that may very well be so, it has to be noticed that as with all forms of microtargeting, there is always a risk of marginalization or discrimination of certain groups that are less appealing to campaigners, and of fragmenting the public debate.41

Data abuse

Political parties in the Netherlands are relatively poor and election time is limited. So when a party is interested in the dataset of the competitor, it is up to Van Dalen and his colleague Joost Smits to quickly change their minds. Van Dalen: 'We tell them to use their limited amount of time, money and human recourses to concentrate on their own target group. Make sure that they will go out and vote. Convince the people who are likely to vote for your party to do so. Don't focus on the competition. That would be a complete waste of your money.' Even though Van Dalen is not principed against selling the competitor's dataset if a client is really eager to buy it, he has thus far always been able to convince his client otherwise.

Voters not adrift

Contrary to the media, at Politieke Academie nobody believes that voters are adrift. 'Our data analytics tell a different story. People's minds are less flexible than journalists tend to think. Their votes are based on a vast set of morals and values. They don't change overnight from libertarian to socialist.'

Yet canvassing is anything but a waste of time, he says. For one, political parties need to make sure that their supporters go out and vote. They have to be reminded of the upcoming elections by a member of their party. 'They might tell pollsters something else, because they are angry at the party leader for something that was said earlier. But when it's time to vote, their preferences are more stable than most people think.'

Also, it is important to find and convince the limited group of people who are more likely to change party. Research by Politieke Academie shows that their choice is between two or three parties in the Netherlands. Since Politieke Academie has no data on the people behind the front doors, the best that canvassers can hope for, is a promising zip code. As the video down below shows, the data sets are pretty accurate.
Case study: GeenPeil and the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement Referendum

Using big data and an app to create the perfect conditions for volunteers to meet their equals

Wet raadgevend referendum

On the first of July 2015, a new law came into effect, de Wet raadgevend referendum, that made it possible for any Dutch citizen to demand a consultative referendum on any topic, as long as 300.000 people shared the same demand. Those 300.000 people needed to sign a petition and share their personal details. Right away, the popular rightwing weblog GeenStijl ('without style') decided to demand a referendum on a trade agreement between the Netherlands and Ukraine, a topic that would normally not cause much commotion in the Netherlands. Ratification of the agreement was pretty much considered a done deal in politics. The GeenStijl campaign was called GeenPeil, which roughly translates to 'without survey'. Their goal wasn't to prevent the planned trade agreement from happening, they said; what they wanted was to show how this new democratic instrument, de Wet raadgevend referendum, could be misused for any purpose.\(^{42}\) A week before the deadline, they had found 196.000 people through their website willing to support the initiative. Volunteers collected another 231.000 signatures on the streets. The referendum was a fact.

Army of volunteers

The consultative referendum would take place on April 6, 2016, but in order to make the outcome binding, the law required a turnout of at least 30 percent. The first campaign had taught GeenPeil that an online campaign wouldn't do the trick. They needed to go canvassing to boost the turnout of voters. But unlike a political party, GeenPeil didn't have campaign teams or a steady brigade of volunteers at their disposal. They turned to the volunteers who had helped to collect signatures, the so called 'Leger des Peils' ('the survey army'), and asked them to create local campaigns. 3208 people, 30 percent of them under 30, throughout the country, signed up for the 'army'. Most were against the trade agreement, but not all of them. Because they were asked to self-organize their local campaigns, they needed digital tools to maximize the effects of their actions.

Microtargeting campaign

GeenPeil ordered a political microtargeting campaign from Politieke Academie. Since the volunteers held a broad variety of political preferences, Politieke Academie developed 18 profiles, combining three kind of campaigns (for, against or neutral) with six kinds of political personalities. These profiles were modeled on big data and coupled to past election results and statistical relations between political parties. Every member of the 'army of volunteers' was deemed a certain political type. Every campaign had their own material.

The volunteers got access to an app that showed them which places on their maps where most relevant to go campaigning, based on their level of volunteering work and their kind of 'political type'. Volunteers could then claim certain parts of their area, so they wouldn't overlap with the canvassing work of others. They

\(^{42}\) [https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/41103/Weevers%2c%20Jesse-s1158937-BA%20Thesis%20POWE-2016.pdf?sequence=1](https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/41103/Weevers%2c%20Jesse-s1158937-BA%20Thesis%20POWE-2016.pdf?sequence=1)
would choose areas where inhabitants were planning to go vote for the referendum, and where they would find a match with the volunteers. 'Oil and water don't mix,' says Frank van Dalen, director of Politieke Academie. 'We did not want our volunteers to end up in neighborhoods with people that they had nothing in common with. Based on their profiles and our knowledge of voting history in Dutch neighborhoods, we made sure they would end up meeting folks who were more or less like them. It made all the difference in the world.'

It is hard to say for certain if it did, for the effects of microtargeting are difficult to measure. This is what we do know:

GeenPeil succeeded.
1.261.038 households were visited.
70 percent of the volunteers used the app.
81 percent of the volunteers used microtargeting to campaign for a 'no' at the referendum.
The turnout of the referendum was 32.28 percent.
61 percent voted 'no'.

In July 2018, de Wet raadgevend referendum was withdrawn. Joost Smits of Politieke Academie wrote a peer reviewed analysis of the GeenPeil campaign, in which he explains their methods and why he believes they made a big difference.

What does this campaign tell us? It can be thought of as a neutral, democratic process and Politieke Academie has gone out of their way to frame it that way. Even so, it could easily be abused by organizations with their own agenda, for instance, in this case, organizations with pro-Russian ties. It should be noted that one of the prominent 'No' campaigners was Thierry Baudet, the leader Forum for Democratie (FvD), which used to be a think tank at the time. When Baudet feared the outcome of the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement Referendum would be ignored by the Government, he changed FvD into a political party. He is currently accused of being too closely linked to the Kremlin, never criticizing any decision made in Moscow.

As usual, the threat lies not so much in the technology as in the way it is being put into use. While there seems to be little wrong with sending volunteers to neighborhoods where they would easily fit in, would they choose to live there, for the sake of the democratic process it does seem important that the persons that open their door have some clue about how they are being manipulated. It seems such a coincidence to meet someone who looks like them, acts like them and even thinks like them about urgent matters! Of course it isn't and they deserve to be aware of it.

43 https://www.eerstekamer.nl/wetsvoorstel/34854_intrekking_van_de_wet
45 https://www.bnnvara.nl/zembla/artikelen/baudet-en-het-kremlin