



Understanding the Privacy Practices of Political Campaigns: A Perspective from the 2020 US Election Websites

Motivation

- Election campaigns collect large volumes of data from various sources for voter profiling.
- They also do so to comply with donor disclosure regulation enforced by the Federal Election Commission (FEC).
- However, as non-profits, they are not regulated under any data privacy laws (e.g. CCPA).

Methodology

- Collect candidates from FEC database.
 - Find candidate's Ballotpedia profile using search attributes like name and state.
 - Extract candidate's web URL and save their website to our local database using a website crawler.
 - Extract data types collected by each website, their privacy policies, URLs for further analysis.
 - Analyze the security and privacy practices and aggregate results.
-  Fully automated
  Semi-automated

Security Findings

687/1504 (45.7%) have trackers but no privacy policy.

168 (8.2%) did not use HTTPS, 86 of which collect PII's.

38 websites were hosted outside the U.S.

Dataset



House

Active* – 952/1052
Inactive# – 710/2252

* - general election campaigns
- campaigns up to primary election

Senate

Active – 112/118
Inactive – 151/406
Incumbent+ – 68/68

President

Active – 4/4
Inactive – 63/1204

+ - currently in office

Total

2060/5036 (40.9%)

Data Collection Findings

1462 (70.97%) collected Personally Identifiable Information (PIIs).

12 collected PII's of parents or friends. 2 collected PII's of user's partner.

61 (2.96%) collected socio-economic opinions with PII's, associating individuals with political leanings.

Email/name, phone and location were the most collected data types.

Privacy Policy Findings

1499 (72.77%) did not have a privacy disclosure. 968 (64.58%) of them collect PII's.

222/493 (45.03%) did not fully disclose all PII's in their privacy policy

Campaigns may be inadvertently sharing data due to privacy policy conflict with fundraising platform.

None discuss what happens to data after campaign concludes.

3/26 campaigns we signed up in shared our email address without a privacy policy.

Observations

- Current lawmakers (144 election winners, 9 incumbents) did not have a website privacy policy.
- 56/153 (36.6%) of the lawmakers serve in privacy-related committees, which help formulate privacy laws.

Campaign Responses

- We received 20 wide-ranging responses during our finding disclosure.
- Reasons for not having a privacy policy included lack of expertise, campaign no longer being active (although the website still was), and a lack of federal law asking for one, with one candidate even asking us to convince their party for change.
- Campaigns also asked us for privacy policy templates in their responses, revealing a lack of resources and technical know-how.

Lessons

- Proper disclosure of data collection/sharing required to inform users how their data is used.
- Voter data is vulnerable to current and future exploits, as no campaign discusses what happens to collected data once campaign concludes.
- Campaigns must allocate resources to enhance their privacy practices.

Authors: Kaushal Kafle¹*, Prianka Mandal¹, Kapil Singh², Benjamin Andow³, Adwait Nadkarni¹

Affiliation: 1 – William & Mary, 2 – IBM Research, 3 – Google

Contact: @ – kkafle@wm.edu