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.

**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

- **Total**
  - 2060/5036 (40.9%)

**Data Collection Findings**
- 1462 (70.97%) collected Personally Identifiable Information (PIIs).
- 61 (2.96%) collected socio-economic opinions with PIIs, associating individuals with political leanings.
- 12 collected PIIs of parents or friends. 2 collected PIIs of user’s partner.
- 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 PIIs.
- 1462 (70.97%) collected PIIs.
- 222/493 (45.03%) did not fully disclose all PIIs in their privacy policy.
- None discuss what happens to data after campaign concludes.
- Campaigns may be inadvertently sharing data due to privacy policy conflict with fundraising platform.

**Security Findings**
- 168 (8.2%) did not use HTTPS, 86 of which collect PIIs.
- 687/1504 (45.7%) have trackers but no privacy policy.
- 3 website were hosted outside the U.S.
- 61 (2.96%) do not have a privacy disclosure.
- 1462 (70.97%) collected PIIs.
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**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.

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