Who Does(n't) Target You?

Mapping the Worldwide Usage of Online Political Microtargeting

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Theory & Research questions

Political campaigns around the world invest substantial portions of their budgets into paid advertising on social media to target potential voters. As a result, online political microtargeting (PMT) has become an inherent strategic component of political campaigns which allows them to leverage the platforms' user data and ad delivery systems to identify and reach most receptive or persuadable audiences for their messages. Especially, the Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram have become central channels for PMT because they offer access to millions of potential voters and granular targeting and exclusion options (Kruikemeier et al., 2022). Therefore, scholars acknowledge that political advertising has transformed and debate implications around privacy violations, voter manipulation, and influence on elections (Borgesius et al., 2018).

There is a growing literature on PMT focusing on democratic implications and single-case studies (Kruikemeier et al., 2022). However, a comprehensive understanding of PMT and an international comparison of its uses by different parties in different countries is lacking. With this study we aim to bridge these gaps and answer three research questions: How widespread is PMT on Facebook and Instagram in countries around the world and which targeting and exclusion strategies do political campaigns employ (RQ1)? Based on theories of campaign professionalization and modernization (Plasser & Plasser, 2002), we expect that PMT strategies will differ by countries (political context; regulatory frameworks) and parties (party ideology; founding year) so that we further ask: Are there differences in the targeting and exclusion strategies across countries (RQ2) and political parties (RQ3)?

Method

To address these questions, we introduce a semi-automatic method to identify political advertisers on Meta and draw on a dataset which includes the targeting and exclusion strategies of 54k political advertisers who ran more than 2.5 million ads and spend a minimum of $418M on Meta platforms between August 2020 and December 2022 across 95 countries during 113 national elections. This data builds on the Meta Ad Targeting dataset, which contains ad-level information on targeting criteria in countries worldwide. Four main approaches were involved in determining our final datasets (see Figure 1): (1) hand-annotation of top spenders and a random sample, (2) multi-source direct link matching (3) multi-source matching algorithm, and (4) self-assigned political tags.

We distinguish between four targeting and exclusion strategies: location, socio-demographic, interest/behavior, and custom/connected audiences. Each of these strategies have different targeting and exclusion criteria, which can be selected by political advertisers (see Figure 2). A combination of three or more targeting criteria is used as a proxy measure for PMT.

Our main variables of analysis are 1) the proportion of a political party's or election's advertising budget allocated to ads with one of the above mentioned four targeting or exclusion strategies, and 2) the proportion of spending by a political party or election on ads characterized by the absence or presence of numbers of targeting or exclusion criteria (none, one, two, or three or more). These metrics are computed by aggregating the total expenditure by the party or election and dividing it by the amount spent on ads with specific targeting or exclusion strategies (or combinations of criteria).

Results & Discussion

Regarding RQ1, we found that PMT is used in almost all countries and elections across the world (see Figure 3). However, campaigns predominantly use simpler targeting strategies like location and socio-demographic criteria. Location targeting is particularly common. Campaigns generally favor targeted advertising over exclusionary tactics and usually allocate more budget to ads with single targeting criteria, indicating limited use of PMT.

For RQ2, we found that democracy levels and electoral systems affect PMT usage (see Figure 5). It is prevalent in both democratic and autocratic regimes, and especially in proportional representation systems. Data protection laws and media spending restrictions are also decisive (see Figure 6) so that stricter regulation often trigger sophisticated PMT. Last, wealthier nations with stricter privacy laws and a larger Meta user base are more likely to use PMT.

Concerning RQ3, we find that PMT adoption doesn't vary significantly between right or left-leaning parties (see Figures 7 and 8). However, we do find that left-leaning parties spend more money on targeting women, younger people, and those interested in the environment, whereas right-leaning parties advertise on men, and older citizens, indicating targeting of sympathetic voters. Our results also show that older, more established parties tend to spend more on each of the four targeting strategies and on PMT (see Figure 9). Thus, established parties may have better resources for more sophisticated targeting.

In the presentation, further results will be discussed against the backdrop of mentioned theories, and consequences for democratic processes and regulatory interventions will be explained.

Literature

Zuiderveen Borgesius, F. J., Möller, J., Kruikemeier, S., Ó Fathaigh, R., Irion, K., Dobber, T., Bodo, B., & Vreese, C. de. (2018). Online political microtargeting: Promises and threats for democracy. *Utrecht Law Review, 14*(1), 82–96.

Plasser, F., & Plasser, G. (2002). *Global Political Campaigning: A Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and Their Practices*. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Kruikemeier, S., Vermeer, S., Metoui, N., Dobber, T., and Zarouali, B. (2022). (Tar)getting you: The use of online political targeted messages on Facebook. *Big Data & Society, 9*(2).
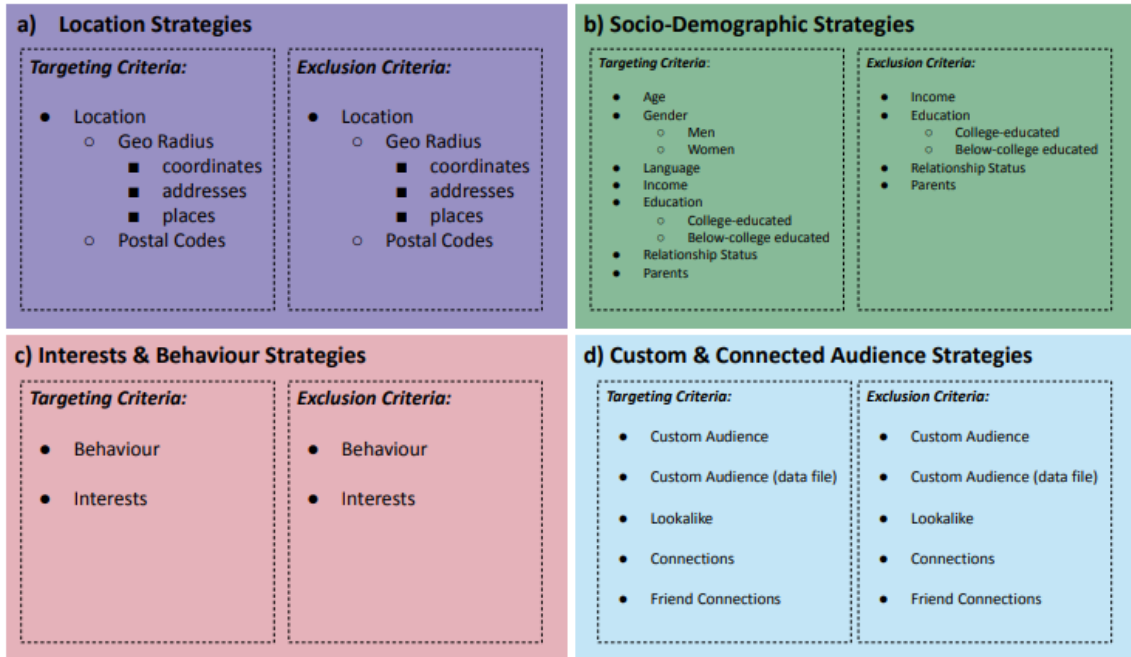
Attachment

Figure 1. Four-Tiered Process from Data Collection to Matching of Political Advertisers
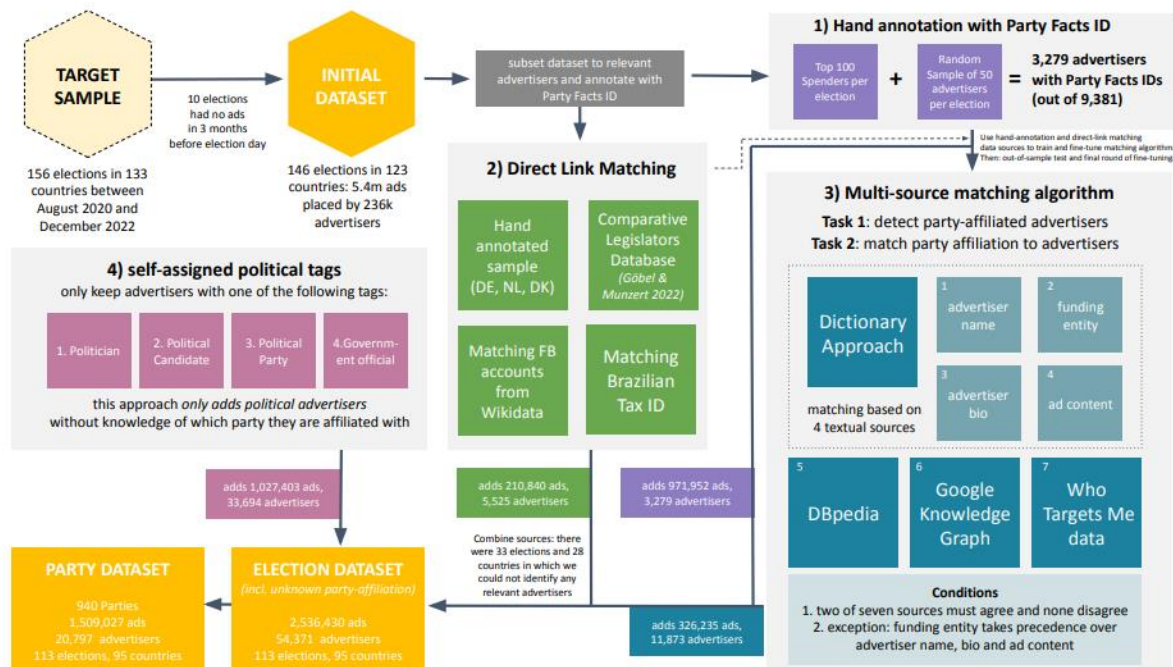
Note: The flowchart illustrates our four-tiered methodology employed to convert the target sample — all elections taking place between August 2020 and December 2022 — into the final datasets at both the election- and party-level.

Figure 2. Grouped Targeting and Exclusion Strategies

a) Location Strategies

Targeting Criteria:
- Location
  - Geo Radius
    - coordinates
    - addresses
    - places
  - Postal Codes

Exclusion Criteria:
- Location
  - Geo Radius
    - coordinates
    - addresses
    - places
  - Postal Codes

b) Socio-Demographic Strategies

Targeting Criteria:
- Age
- Gender
  - Men
  - Women
- Language
- Income
- Education
  - College-educated
  - Below-college educated
- Relationship Status
- Parents

Exclusion Criteria:
- Income
- Education
  - College-educated
  - Below-college educated
- Relationship Status
- Parents

c) Interests & Behaviour Strategies

Targeting Criteria:
- Behaviour
- Interests

Exclusion Criteria:
- Behaviour
- Interests

d) Custom & Connected Audience Strategies

Targeting Criteria:
- Custom Audience
- Custom Audience (data file)
- Lookalike
- Connections
- Friend Connections

Exclusion Criteria:
- Custom Audience
- Custom Audience (data file)
- Lookalike
- Connections
- Friend Connections

Note: The illustration shows how we grouped the various targeting and exclusion criteria in the Meta Ad Targeting dataset into four distinct targeting strategies.

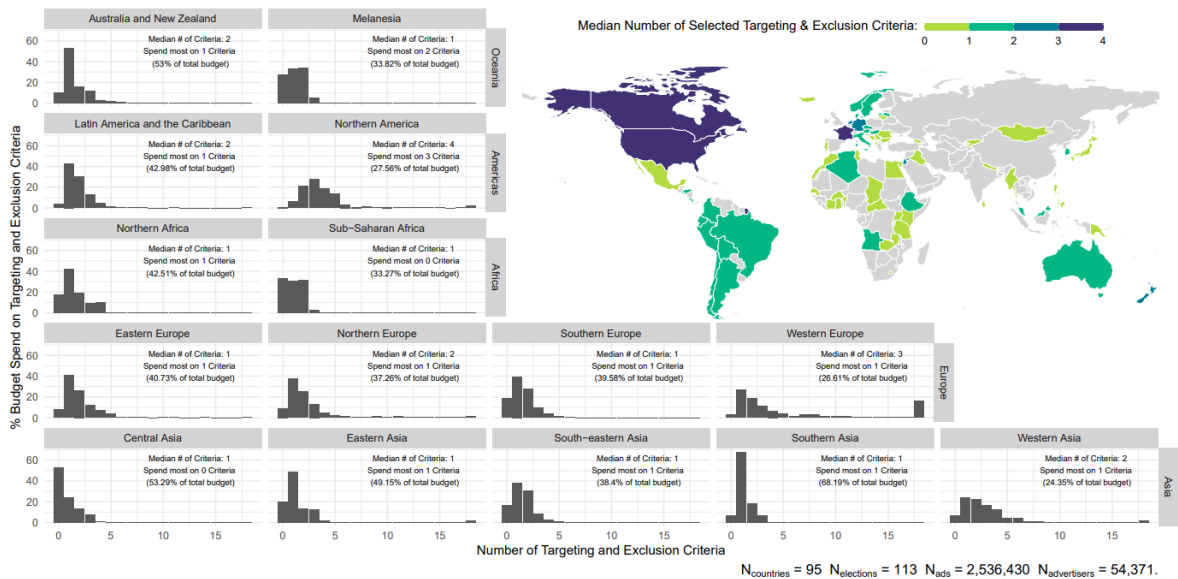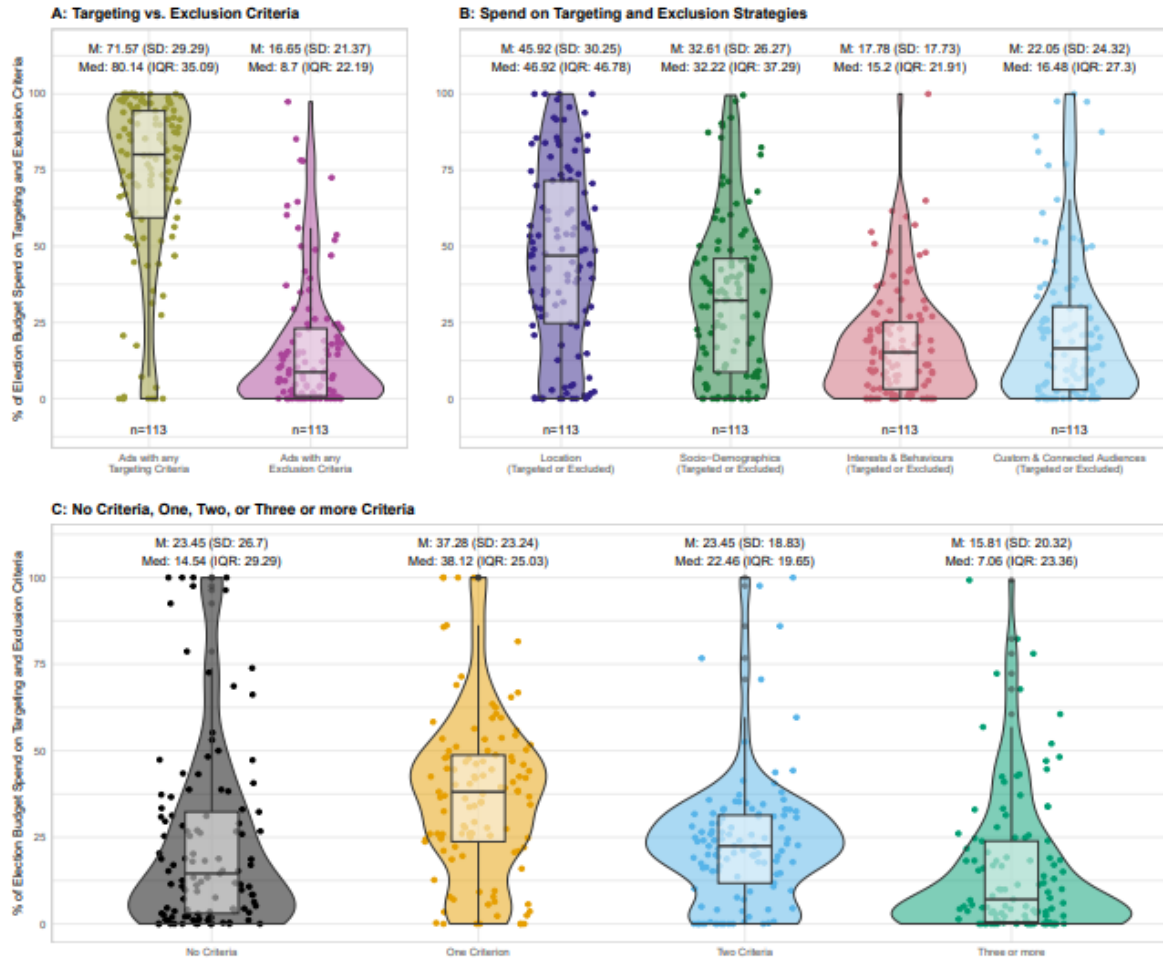**Figure 3.** Sample of Political (Micro-)Targeting across the World

$N_{countries}$ = 95 $N_{elections}$ = 113 N_{ads} = 2,536,430 $N_{advertisers}$ = 54,371.

Figure 4. Percentage of Election Budgets Spend on Targeting & Exclusion Criteria

A: Targeting vs. Exclusion Criteria

M: 71.57 (SD: 29.29)   M: 16.65 (SD: 21.37)
Med: 80.14 (IQR: 35.09) Med: 8.7 (IQR: 22.19)

y-axis: % of Election Budget Spend on Targeting and Exclusion Criteria

n=113 — Ads with any Targeting Criteria
n=113 — Ads with any Exclusion Criteria

B: Spend on Targeting and Exclusion Strategies

M: 45.92 (SD: 30.25)   M: 32.61 (SD: 26.27)   M: 17.78 (SD: 17.73)   M: 22.05 (SD: 24.32)
Med: 46.92 (IQR: 46.78) Med: 32.22 (IQR: 37.29) Med: 15.2 (IQR: 21.91)   Med: 16.48 (IQR: 27.3)

n=113 — Location (Targeted or Excluded)
n=113 — Socio-Demographics (Targeted or Excluded)
n=113 — Interests & Behaviours (Targeted or Excluded)
n=113 — Custom & Connected Audiences (Targeted or Excluded)

C: No Criteria, One, Two, or Three or more Criteria

M: 23.45 (SD: 26.7)   M: 37.28 (SD: 23.24)   M: 23.45 (SD: 18.83)   M: 15.81 (SD: 20.32)
Med: 14.54 (IQR: 29.29) Med: 38.12 (IQR: 25.03) Med: 22.46 (IQR: 19.65) Med: 7.06 (IQR: 23.36)

y-axis: % of Election Budget Spend on Targeting and Exclusion Criteria

No Criteria   One Criterion   Two Criteria   Three or more

$N_{countries} = 95$ $N_{elections} = 113$ $N_{ads} = 2,536,430$ $N_{advertisers} = 54,371.$

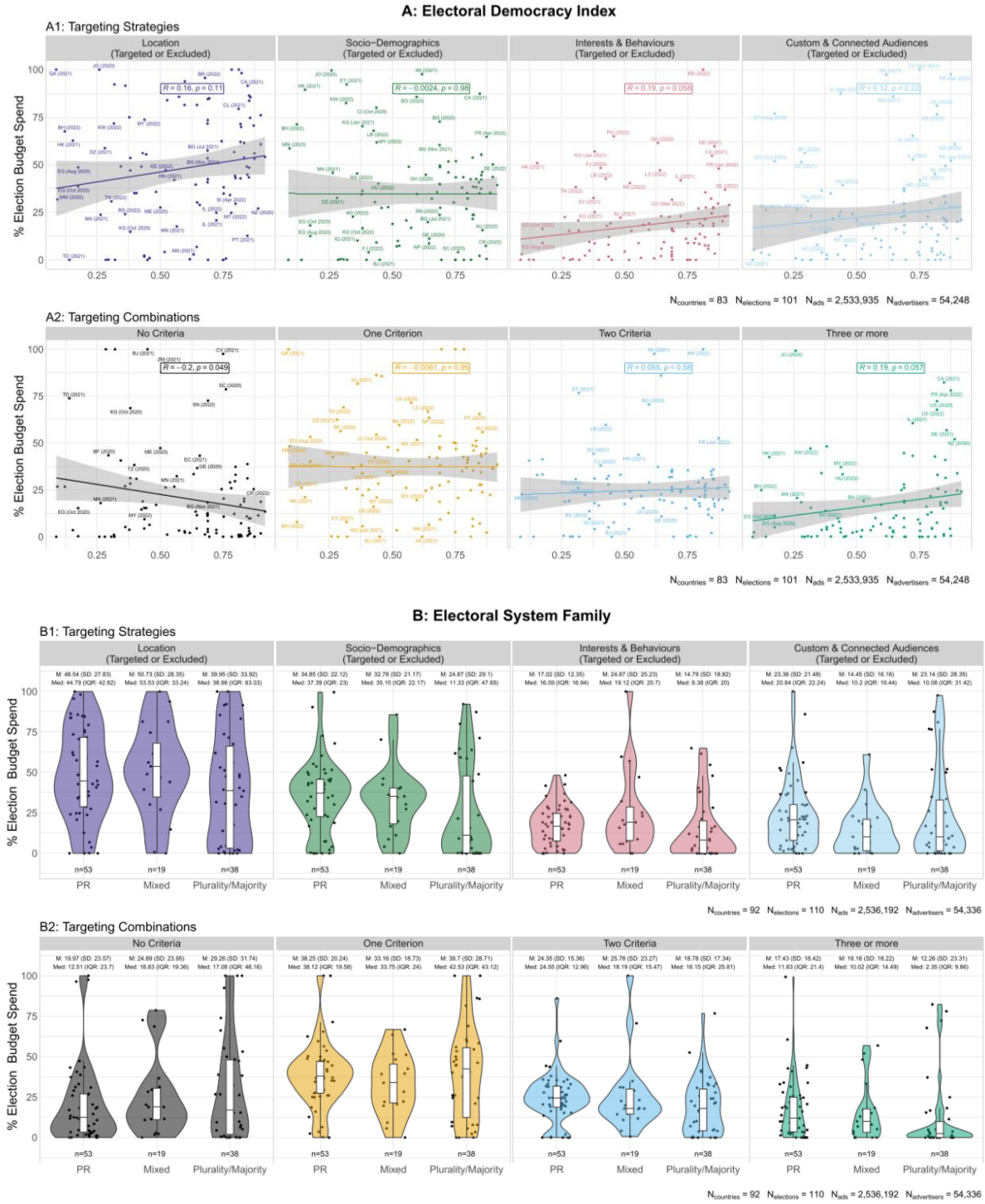**Figure 5.** Targeting Strategies and Combinations by Political Factors

Figure 6. Targeting Strategies and Combinations by Regulatory Factors
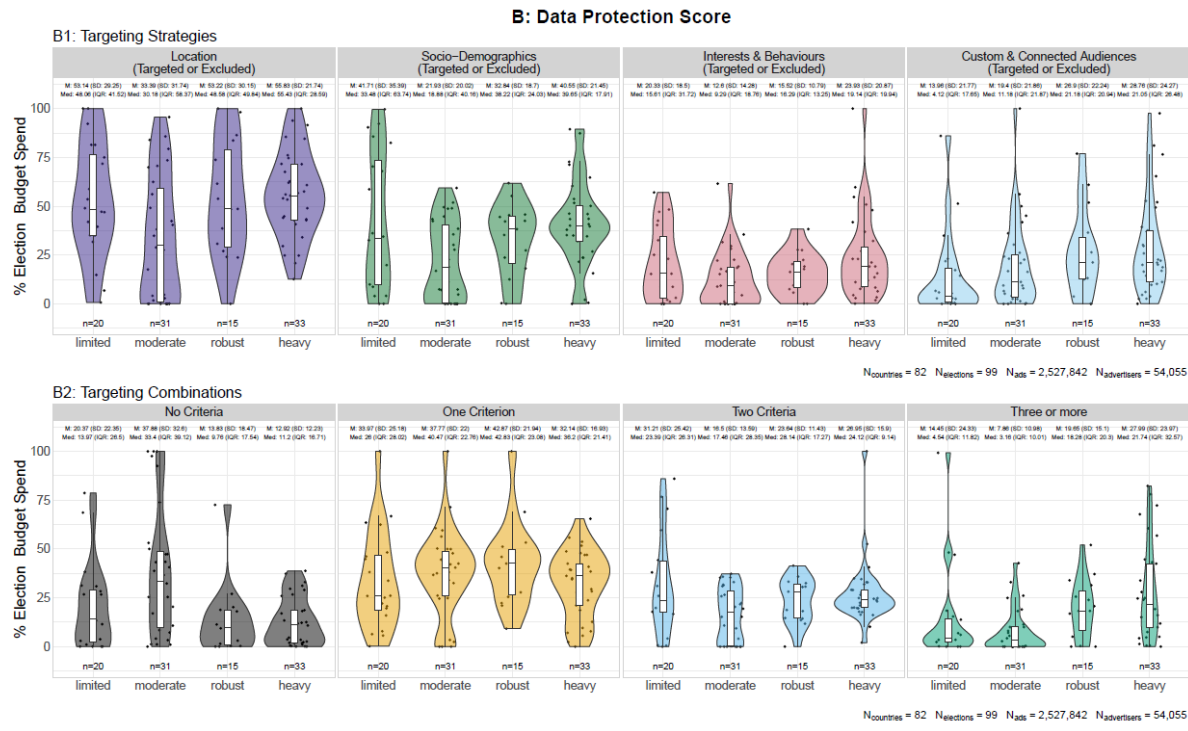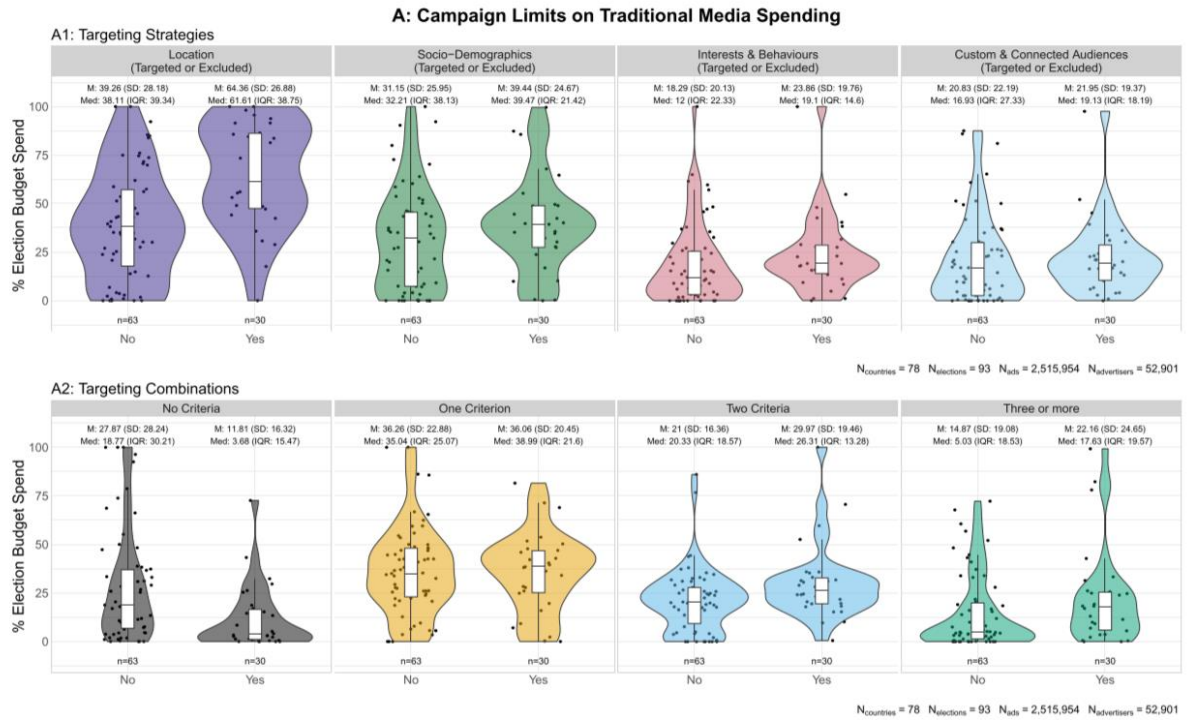
Figure 7. Targeting Strategies and Combinations by Resource & Reach Factors

Figure 8. Targeting Strategies by Left-Right Ideology and Foundation Year