Donate To Help Us Fight Back: Mobilization Rhetoric in Political Fundraising

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Abstract

How do campaigns differentially target donors and voters? We show that fundraising messages are an important class of electoral persuasion that reveals how campaigns perceive and target their "financial electorate." Because candidates' voters and donors can differ significantly, we theorize that rhetoric is chosen strategically for the target audience. Using data from the Facebook Ad Library for U.S. congressional candidates in the 2020 general election, we distinguish ads by persuasion targets. Then we use text analysis to test whether donor-targeting messages are, on average, more toxic, negative, and likely to reference a polarizing political figurehead (Donald Trump). While these expectations were largely borne out, there was significant variation by party and chamber. For example, Republican House candidates' appeals were more toxic than Democrats' and even more so when soliciting money. As the scramble for donations intensifies, these characteristics of appeals for cash may further polarize the electorate.

Electoral persuasion takes many forms, but the literature's primary interest has been in persuasion that affects voters' turnout and vote choice (Brader 2005; Arceneaux 2007; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Gerber et al. 2011; Bailey et al. 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2018). In contrast, persuasion rhetoric that targets *campaign donors* has not received much attention relative to its importance, although the financial resources required to run a campaign are increasing with every election, and campaign chests enable the persuasion and mobilization of voters.

While the sender of messages that target voters and donors may be the same, these messages' intended recipients are very different. Direct donation solicitations do not necessarily explicitly

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target voters who can cast a ballot for the given candidate. The financial electorate,[1] as opposed to the voting electorate, falls under the "monetary surrogacy" representation (Mansbridge 2003). Donors can be non-constituents as long as they satisfy the legal constraints; for example, Gimpel et al. (2008) show that almost two-thirds of congressional campaign cash flows from out-district. What's more, unlike the one-person-one-vote principle, the impact of monetary contributions can vary widely depending on the donor. And in general, donors are more resourced and ideological compared to voters (Verba et al. 1995; Francia et al. 2003; Hill and Huber 2017; Carey et al. 2022).

Given these features of the political environment, we ask the following: how do campaigns differentially target donors and voters? This paper fills the gap in the literature using data from the Facebook Ad Library for U.S. congressional candidates in the 2020 general election. This dataset provides a transparent and comprehensive set of online advertisements that target more broadly than direct mail or email appeals. Our primary motive is to show that persuasion that targets donors systematically differs from those targeting voters. Using text analysis, we find that donor-targeting messages are typically more toxic, negative, and likely to reference a polarizing political figurehead (Donald Trump), with some variations by party and chamber.

We argue that as the scramble for donations intensifies, a flood of negative sentiment, toxicity, and polarizing tactics in donor-targeting ads—especially online, where they are less regulated—may further polarize the electorate. These are instances of elite political communication that influence public agenda and mass political behavior (Zaller 1992; Lewandowsky et al. 2020), and the differences we analyze have important implications for mass behavior and the discursive environment on digital platforms.

1 Strategic Campaign Messages for Donations

American elections have always been comparatively expensive, but in recent years, the rate of increase in spending has been particularly striking. Congressional campaigns spent more than $8.7 billion in the 2020 elections (Evers-Hillstrom 2021) which is twice that of 2016 at $4.1 billion. In addition, the Center for Responsive Politics estimated that 4.7 million Americans donated to federal campaigns in 2020, compared to just 1.7 million in 2016.[2] All in all, campaigns are desperately trying to reach and persuade individual donors to keep their apparatus running.

However, there has been relatively little research on how politicians try to solicit money from potential donors although candidates' messages are often the primary driver of donations (Magleby et al. 2018). Some work has examined how politicians differentiate across donors. Hassell (2011), for example, shows that campaigns recognize that viable financial electorates differ between the primary and general stages, and they tailor their appeals accordingly. In addition, Hassell and Monson (2014) and Gaynor and Gimpel (2021) show that direct appeals to donors often specif-

[1] Hill and Huber (2017) uses the term 'donorate.'
[2] https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/donor-demographics

ically target previous or frequent donors, rather than casting a broad net. Fowler et al. (2021) examine differences between political ads on TV versus online, finding that the former is comparatively less negative but more partisan. The only paper that, to our knowledge, mentions how donor- and voter-targeting rhetoric may differ is Hassell and Oeltjenbruns (2016), which shows that negative rhetoric is more prevalent in campaign emails with donation requests, controlling for characteristics such as election dynamics, incumbency, predicted electability. But how about in cases where campaigns target more broadly, as opposed to messages that are concentrated on known supporters?

Strong emotions such as anger are used strategically by campaigns and can mobilize, sustain partisan solidarity, and trigger information-seeking behavior (Marcus et al. 2000; Brader 2006; Druckman and McDermott 2008; MacKuen et al. 2010; Valentino et al. 2011; Webster 2020; Webster and Albertson 2022). We also know that donors are ideologically sophisticated and more extreme (Barber et al. 2017; Bafumi and Herron 2010; Hill and Huber 2017) even when compared to partisans. Combined with the fact that stronger mobilization of donors may lead to higher amounts donated, we expect campaigns to draft highly partisan messages that are both highly negative and polarizing so that they grab attention and stimulate the financial electorate.

Given these factors, we test three hypotheses regarding the distinction between persuasion rhetoric targeting donors and voters. Based on the understanding that politicians are strategic players who may employ negative and polarizing rhetoric for greater engagement (Hassell and Oeltjenbruns 2016; Ballard et al. 2022), we hypothesize that appeals for donations will (1) contain higher levels of negative sentiments such as anger, (2) contain higher levels of toxicity, and (3) will refer more to Donald Trump, who was a key polarizing political figurehead at the time. We also investigate themes and topics associated with appeals for donors and voters.

2 Data and Methods

The dataset consists of advertisements that politicians fielded on Facebook (now Meta). We gathered this data using the Facebook Ad Library, a public archive of all ads run on the platform. This dataset provides a wealth of opportunity in that it is not necessarily targeted toward existing donors, unlike those ads fielded through emails. It also provides transparent and tractable metadata, such as target state-level geography/demographics, date, reach, and amount spent. Moreover, U.S. residents are inadvertently exposed to Facebook ads—which are injected into their timelines—in contrast to emails for which individuals may have voluntarily signed up.

We downloaded all ads for candidates in the U.S. congressional general elections in the 2020 cycle.[3] Although citizens and activists may also initiate persuasion (Mutz et al. 1996) by setting up fundraisers independently from the campaign personnel, we restrict the data to official campaign

[3]We define the 2020 cycle as all ads between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2020. We leave out Senate candidates not up for election.

messages. We also drop independent and third-party candidates from the analysis, limiting our sample to Democrats and Republicans.

Because politicians field the same ad content across different target geographies, demographics, and times, we deduplicate the ads by the candidate and unique content and summarise targets by averaging across the same ads. This leaves us with 26,113 Senate ads and 43,866 House ads. The number of unique ads for each candidate varies dramatically across individuals, with some running no ads whatsoever and others running hundreds of unique ads.[4]

Text-as-data methods can be applied to uncover patterns in text data, quantifying aspects of speech and scaling actors on theoretically relevant dimensions. They have a variety of applications in social sciences (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Gentzkow et al. 2019; Grimmer et al. 2022). In this paper, we use sentiment analysis and the detection of toxicity using the Google Perspective API (Rieder and Skop 2021),[5]

We first classified ads that target donors (which we will call donor-targeting ads) and voters (voter-targeting ads) by (1) detecting keywords such as "chip in," "pitch in," or "donate," as well as (2) identifying whether the ad explicitly embeds links from fundraising platforms such as ActBlue and WinRed (Kim 2022; Kim and Li 2022).[6] Donor-targeting ads contain text such as "Send a message to Mike Pence by helping us flip a seat from red to blue in his own backyard. Chip in today to help Christina Hale win in November." On the other hand, voter-targeting ads contain text such as "My opponent Marcy Kaptur has been in office for 37 years. Public Office is supposed to be about service not a career. It is time for #TermLimits!"

To verify that voter-targeting ads do target the voting electorate, we first analyze the proportion of such ads that target in-state donors and prospective voters. Figure 1 shows the proportion of ads targeting in-state Facebook users. As should be the case, across both chambers and both parties, voter-targeting ads have a much greater probability of targeting in-state users, indicating that when candidates do target ads to out-of-state Americans, they are much more likely to be actively courting donations. On average, donor-targeting ads target in-state users at 62.2%, while voter-targeting ads target them at 91.3%. Given that the eligible electorate might be temporarily living out-district, we do not further restrict by geographic targets.

3 Toxicity, Negative Sentiment, and References to Trump

Figure 2 displays differences in toxicity across advertisement types. We see that for House candidates, toxicity is higher in donor-targeting ads for both parties (5.7% and 6.0% increase re-

[4]For example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D, NY-14)'s campaign featured 510 unique ads which were cumulatively run 48,171 times.

[5]Perspective API is a model trained to classify online speech, focused on detection of toxic and abusive comments. Toxicity is defined as "rude, disrespectful, and or unreasonable," and the classifier is trained on evaluations from human subjects.

[6]For full steps of the rule-based classification, see Supporting Information.

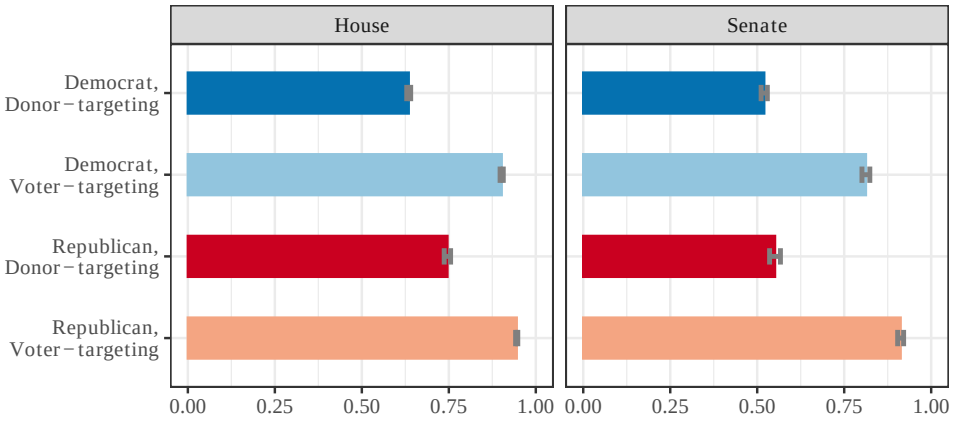


Figure 1: Proportion of In-state Targeting by Type of Facebook Ads

spectively for Democrats and Republicans compared to voter-targeting ads), but not for Senate candidates. In the U.S. House, we observe a clear hierarchy by party and target: toxicity is high in the order of Republican donor-targeting ads (13.5%), Republican voter-targeting ads (12.7%), Democratic donor-targeting ads (11.3%), and Democratic voter-targeting ads (10.6%). Republican ads are overall more toxic than Democratic ads for Senate candidates as well. Another way to put it is that within donor- or voter-targeting House ads, Republican ads are respectively 19.9% and 19.6% more toxic than Democratic ads. For Senate, the numbers are 11.6% and 21.8%.

OLS regressions that predict toxicity while conditioning on characteristics such as incumbency or campaign dynamics confirm that, on average, Republican-sponsored ads contain higher levels of toxic language (Table 1(a)). In addition, a within-candidate model reveals that donor-targeting ads are more toxic (Table 1(b)).[7][8]

An analysis of the presence of emotionally charged words, summarized in Figure 3, shows that in both chambers/parties, words associated with anger are more prevalent in donor-targeting ads compared to voter-targeting ads, with the 95% confidence interval also displayed. The evidence is more mixed for disgust and fear, which are two other prominent negative emotions. For House candidates, they are more likely to be used in donor-targeting ads, but such differences are not observed among Senate candidates.

[7]Note that 118 candidates (16.4%) only had either voter-targeting or donor-targeting ads, so they did not impact the model results.

[8]To check if particular candidates were driving the results, we also ran leave-one-out fixed effects models at the candidate level. For most of the 720 candidates, statistical significance still held if the candidate was excluded from the dataset, except for four: Raphael Warnock (Democratic Senator, Georgia), Jaime Harrison (Democrat, unsuccessful Senate challenger to Lindsey Graham, South Carolina), Rishi Kumar (Democrat, unsuccessful House challenger to Anna Eshoo (Democrat) for CA-18), Ammar Campa-Najjar (Democrat, defeated in an open-seat race by Darrell Issa (Republican) for CA-50). This seems to be driven by the large number of unique ads that these candidates run, relative to some Republican candidates, who had higher levels of relative toxicity in donor-targeting ads but ran smaller number of ads. However, a within-candidate regression with candidate/type average-summarized model was still borderline significant ($p < 0.1$)

Dependent Variable:	Toxicity
Republican	0.0211^{***}
	(0.0032)
Donor-targeting	0.0055^{**}
	(0.0027)
Senate	0.0047
	(0.0029)
Incumbent	-0.0027
	(0.0026)
Open seat	0.0029
	(0.0063)
Electoral safety	5.94×10^{-5}
	(0.0001)
Male	-0.0038
	(0.0031)
First ad delivery date	1.83×10^{-5} ***
	(6.29×10^{-6})
Republican × Donor-targeting	-0.0013
	(0.0038)
(Intercept/state dummies excluded for brevity)	
Fit statistics	
Observations	61,007
R^2	0.02776
Adjusted R^2	0.02684

Clustered (candidate) standard-errors in parentheses

(a) Clustered S.E.

Dependent Variable:	Toxicity
Donor-targeting	0.0043^{**}
	(0.0020)
First ad delivery date	-1.71×10^{-5} ***
	(6.48×10^{-6})
Fixed-effects	
Candidate	Yes
Fit statistics	
Observations	61,007
R^2	0.09881
Within R^2	0.00114

Clustered (candidate) standard-errors in parentheses

(b) Candidate Fixed Effects

Table 1: Predicting Toxicity via Simple Linear Regression

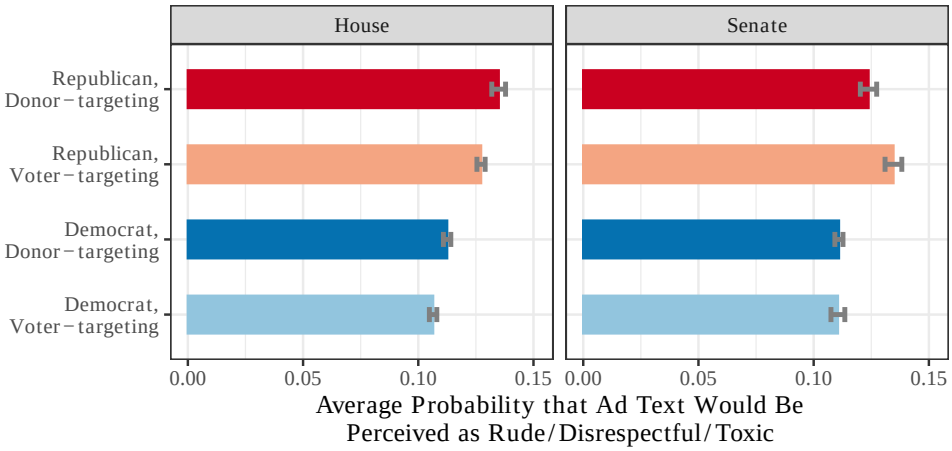
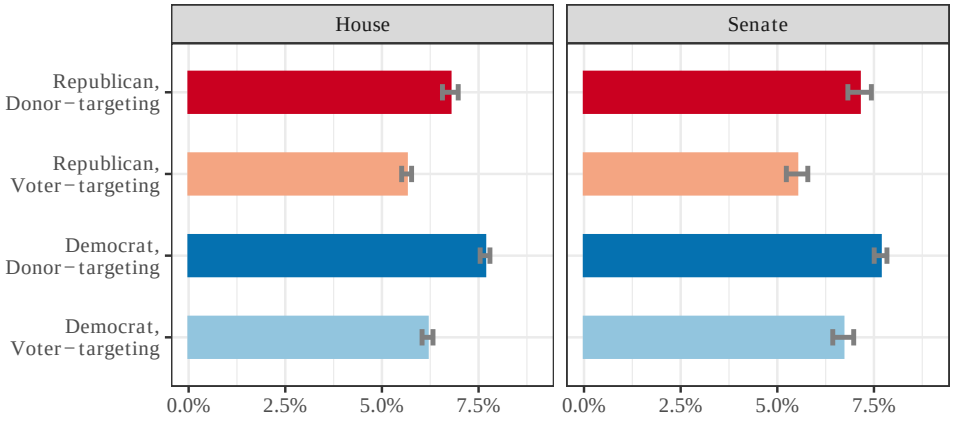


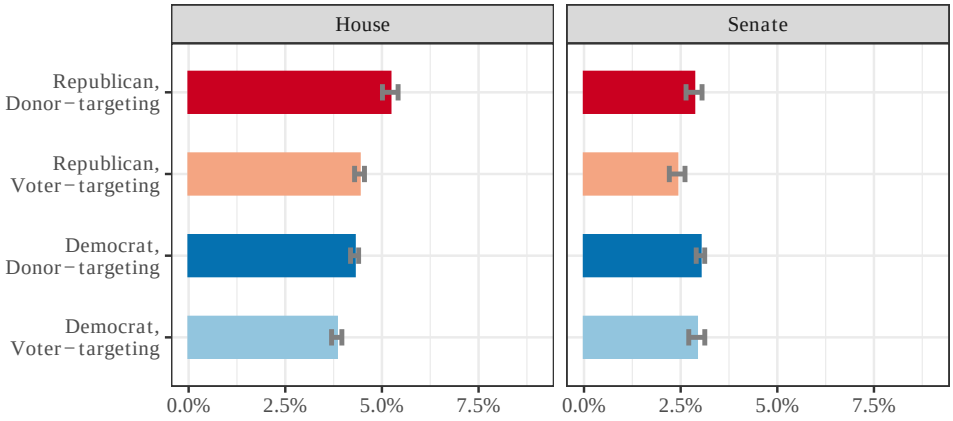
Figure 2: Level of Language Toxicity by Facebook Ad Type

Next, we examine the prevalence for references to Donald Trump. Trump, the incumbent president at the time when these ads were fielded, was the most prominent polarizing political figurehead. Is there a systematic difference in which types of ads mention Trump? Figure 4 shows that for both chambers and parties, donor-targeting ads are significantly more likely to reference Trump than voter-targeting ads—roughly one out of five ads that target donors mention Trump. There is also some variation by chamber and party: for Senate ads, there is a clear hierarchy in

(a) Words associated with anger



(b) Words associated with disgust



(c) Words associated with fear

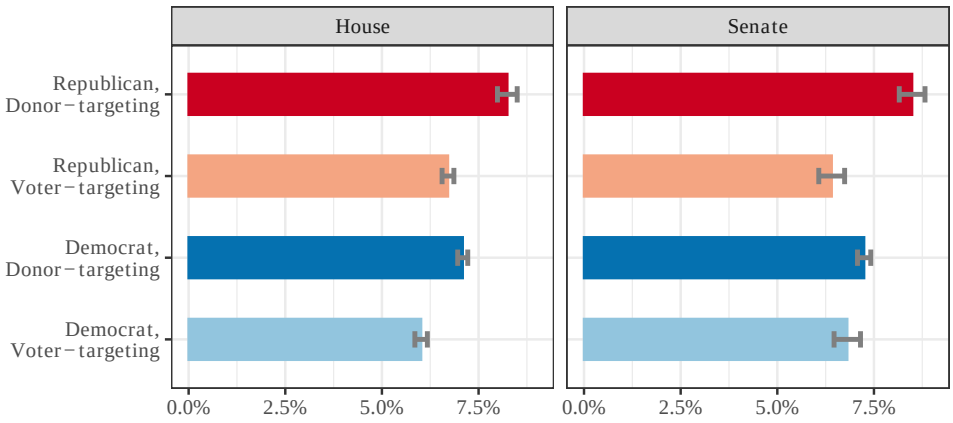


Figure 3: Presence of Words Associated with Negative Emotions by Types of Facebook Ads

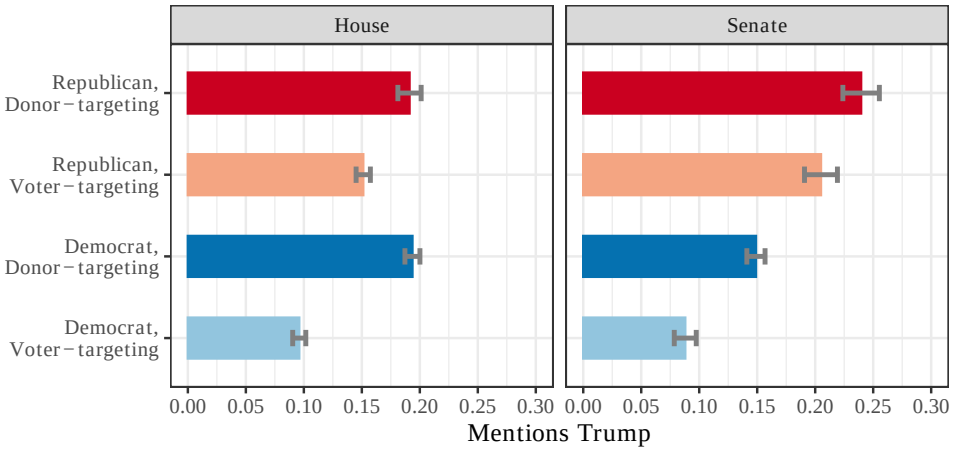


Figure 4: Mention of Trump by Facebook Ad Type

the order of Republican donor-targeting ads, Republican voter-targeting ads, Democratic donor-targeting ads, and Democratic voter-targeting ads. Within House donor-targeting ads there is not much difference between the two parties, but Republican candidates exhibit a greater propensity to feature Trump in their voter-targeting ads compared to Democratic candidates.

4 Conclusion

This paper has established important insights on campaign-driven persuasion rhetoric that targets voters and donors. We have shown that donor-targeting messages are, on average, more negative, toxic, and likely to reference a polarizing political figurehead—in this case, Donald Trump. Moreover, compared to voter-targeting messages, candidates rely less on substantive policy issues when they target potential donors. In addition, we document significant variation by party and chamber; specifically, Republican candidates' language was more toxic than Democrats'. This is consistent with the academic assessment of GOP's recent turn towards extremism (Skocpol 2020).

The next natural question is the following: does this matter? Do differences in rhetoric for the financial electorate create differences in political behavior? Are specific types of appeal more or less effective among different groups of donors? For example, Haenschen (2022) shows experimentally that Facebook ads did not have strong turnout effects.

While we do not have a definite answer, we believe that ads, as another type of elite political communication, are likely to have long-term repercussions. Electoral persuasion effects can be moderated by audience (Suhay et al. 2020), and the pouring solicitations for money can serve as another kind of "partisan media" that can further polarize citizens and make governing difficult (Levendusky 2013). This is especially true because online ads can target more broadly and reach more than just habitual donors. In addition, since small-donor-based strategies have proven to

be somewhat viable (Alvarez et al. 2020), it is likely that campaigns will increasingly douse the average American voter with polarizing appeals for donations. Note that small dollars online were already flowing more towards polarizing candidates (Karpf 2013).

To be sure, harsh language may invigorate democratic debate or promote engagement (Schudson 1997; Sydnor 2019), and name-calling and insults are generally viewed as a milder form of incivility (Sobieraj and Berry 2011) compared to outright hate speech (Siegel 2020). However, disrespectful discourse may silence or demobilize citizens, or accelerate democratic backsliding (Kalmoe 2014; Jamieson et al. 2017; Finkel et al. 2020). Although here we do not identify causal effects of political ads with toxic language, existing works suggest that our findings are consistent with the view that U.S. political elites are chipping away at the quality of democracy.

These findings may hold concerning implications for democratic backsliding in the U.S.. Recent analyses have shown that surprisingly many Americans are willing to trade democratic principles for conflicting considerations such as partisan loyalties (Graham and Svolik 2020). Recent events, such as the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, have made it clear that American democracy is not as secure as was previously believed. The content of the candidates' advertisements serves as a reminder that rancor and hostility are becoming increasingly normalized as part and parcel of political competition in the United States—and particularly because online ads are less regulated than traditional TV ads (Fowler et al. 2021).

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