

The technology that powers the 2020 campaigns, explained | MIT Technology Review

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Campaigns and elections have always been about data—underneath the empathetic promises to fix your problems and fight for your family, it's a business of metrics. If a campaign is lucky, it will find its way through a wilderness of polling, voter attributes, demographics, turnout, impressions, gerrymandering, and ad buys to connect with voters in a way that moves or even inspires them. Obama, MAGA, AOC—all have had some of that special sauce. Still, campaigns that collect and use the numbers best win.

That's been true for some time, of course. In 2017, Hillary Clinton lamented that the Democratic National Committee had supplied her team with out-of-date data. She blamed this in part for her loss to Donald Trump, whose campaign sat atop an impressive Republican data-crunching machine. (The DNC retorted that it wasn't the data, but how it was used, that was inadequate.)

In 2020, campaigns have added new wrinkles to their tactics for gathering and manipulating data. Traditional polling is giving way to AI-powered predictive modeling; massive data exchanges, once considered questionably legal, allow campaigns, PACs, and other groups to coordinate their efforts. And who can forget microtargeting? Both campaigns seek to arm themselves with comprehensive views of each potential voter and are using algorithms to segment and target voters more specifically and strategically. Here is our guide to what's new and improved, and what it means for you, the voter.

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