

Parties' voter targeting strategies: What can Facebook ads tell us?

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Abstract

Digital political advertising on social media is an integral part of modern election campaigns. It gives political parties a powerful new tool to target voters, but which voters do they pursue? Tapping into an ongoing debate about party strategy, we examine whether parties seek to maintain their existing demographic and regional strongholds, or whether they aim to expand their voter coalitions. While the (intended) audience of other campaign activities is often unknown, data from the Facebook ads archive provide information on their recipients' gender, age, and subnational region. Our analysis across five countries, which further brings in recent survey and electoral data, suggests that coalition maintenance is the dominant party strategy for demographic groups. Parties that receive more support from a given gender or age group run ads that reach more members of that demographic group. Consistent with the literature that shows a gender and age gap in voting, left-wing parties are more likely to advertise to women than right-wing parties, and green parties disproportionately reach younger voters. The results for geographic groups are mixed. We do find that parties in majoritarian electoral systems pursue a narrower regional audience than their counterparts in proportional systems. This study is one of the first to explore the potential and limitations of Facebook ad audience data to speak to a targeting literature in need of more comparative research on multiparty systems.

Introduction

Digital political advertising is growing rapidly. In 2016, US election campaigns spent 14.4% (or \$1.4 billion) of their total advertising budget on digital ads, close to a tenfold increase from the previous election, and this number is expected to have doubled for 2020 (Borell Associates Inc. 2017). Similarly, campaign spending on digital ads in the UK has risen from just 2% in 2014 to around 43% in 2017 (The Electoral Commission (UK) 2018). And in Austria, parties paid Facebook and Instagram €1.5 million in the run-up to the 2019 election, a share of roughly 14% (apa 2019). Social media are central to this increase in spending, as Facebook dominates the digital political ad market with Google.

Targeting - a party's decision about which voter groups to prioritise in campaign efforts - is crucial for any election campaign. It influences campaign messaging, the choice of communication channels, and relates to the broader strategic question of whom a party or candidate aims to reach and represent (Franz 2013). With the possibility to reach users based on their individual characteristics, social media and digital campaigning have provided the means to apply targeting in a more encompassing and fine-grained way, raising concerns about increased social fragmentation, polarization, and voter manipulation (Chester and Montgomery 2017).

This study makes a twofold empirical contribution to research on targeting. First, we speak to the substantive question of how party families differ in their targeting behaviour, focusing on gender as well as younger and older voters. Second, we engage with the ongoing debate about the relationship between a party's electoral support and its voter targeting strategy by exploring whether parties tailor their campaign efforts to maintain or to expand their voter coalitions.

Historically, targeting decisions have been among the best-kept secrets of election campaigns. As the intended audiences of traditional campaign activities (e.g. election posters or television ads) are unknown, researchers have had to rely on resource-intensive data sources, such as interviews with campaign professionals (e.g. Albright 2008) or surveys on campaign contact (e.g. Beck et al. 2018).

We use new comparative data from the Facebook Ad Library on the audiences of political ads on Facebook and Instagram to examine targeting strategies. These data provide us with a rare, comparative insight and shine a light on an increasingly important campaign tool. However, as for most data used in targeting research, it only offers information on the behaviour or impact of said campaigns, not the targeting intention behind them. The observed ad audiences can certainly be the result of parties' conscious targeting of the observed groups, but

they may also be the product of alternative targeting criteria or of Facebook's outreach algorithms. Although this limitation warrants caution, we argue that analysing the correspondence between parties' ad audiences and their electoral support can help us to understand overall voter coalition strategies.

We find compelling evidence that parties use digital ads on Facebook and Instagram to target their existing demographic coalitions. Parties that receive more support from female, male, younger, and older voters, run ads with a higher audience share of these groups. In line with studies showing a gender and age gap in voting, ads by left-wing parties are more likely to be seen by women, and green parties disproportionately reach out to younger voters. The evidence is less clear-cut for geographic coalitions, but also suggests that, where regional audience shares do correlate with electoral support, parties favour their regional strongholds in their outreach. Finally, we observe that parties seem to pursue a narrower regional targeting strategy in majoritarian electoral systems.

Targeting

In the run-up to an election, a party faces many strategic and consequential campaign decisions. One of the most pivotal concerns targeting, i.e. which voters to prioritise in order to maximise electoral support (Franz 2013). Targeting has important implications for the drafting of the campaign message as well as for the allocation of scarce campaign resources, such as on which doors to knock and where to show advertisements.

The professionalization and marketization of campaigning, the individualization of voting behaviour, and the shrinking of traditional constituencies has made targeting a particularly critical component of modern election campaigns (Farrell and Webb 2000; Magin et al. 2017). As the supporters of a party have arguably become less discernible, identifying one's potential voters and the appropriate strategies to target them is now "the most important campaign tactic," according to practitioners (Strömbäck et al. 2013, 46).

Traditionally, targeting relied on voter data at the aggregate level, e.g. by geographic region, or demographic information on television and newspaper consumers. In the early 2000s, microtargeting, the targeting of voters based on their individual-level characteristics (Franz 2013), started to play a role in US campaigns, which invested heavily in extensive voter databases (Panagopoulos 2016). More recently, microtargeting has become more widespread with the rise of digital advertising based on social media and internet user data (Chester and Montgomery 2017).

Expectations

Rohrschneider (2002, 368) observed that “there is a surprising dearth of works which analyse how parties design a targeting strategy.” Little attention is devoted to how parties appeal to different segments of the electorate. The situation has only improved slightly, despite the importance ascribed to targeting in the campaign modernisation literature (Farrell and Webb 2000; Strömbäck et al. 2013; Magin et al. 2017).

This study contributes in two ways. First, it speaks to extant work on the relationship between political parties and social groups, specifically women and men, and younger and older voters. The literature on the modern gender gap shows that women are more likely to vote for left-wing parties than men or, inversely, that men are more likely to vote for right-wing parties (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014). Similarly, there is evidence for an age gap, with younger voters more likely to vote for Green parties and less likely to support conservative parties, and the reverse for older voters (Goerres 2008; Dolezal 2010; Tilley and Evans 2014). Yet, we know very little about whether parties actually target these groups (for exceptions, see Campbell and Childs 2015; Stuckelberger 2019).

Second, our study contributes to the literature on parties’ overall targeting strategies. A key strategic decision for parties is whether to invest their resources in maintaining their support base or in gaining new voters (e.g. Rohrschneider 2002; Albright 2008; Panagopoulos 2016). We follow Panagopoulos and Wielhouwer (2008) and focus on the choice between a “coalition maintenance strategy,” which targets the demographic or regional groups that have made up the party supporters in the past, and a “coalition expansion strategy” aimed at expanding this coalition to other voter groups. Some scholars conceive of this dilemma as a choice between mobilising partisans or chasing independents (e.g. Rohrschneider 2002; Albright 2008).

In the European context, this dilemma is normally discussed in relation to the structural transformations that mainstream parties have faced since the 1970s and ‘80s. As core coalitions have shrunk, social democratic and denominational parties have been compelled to change their targeting focus from coalition maintenance to coalition expansion (Rohrschneider 2002; Mair et al. 2004). Kirchheimer’s (1966) ideal type of a catch-all party has popularized the notion that this has become the main strategy of modern parties towards social groups. Parties focus on coalition expansion, so the argument goes, because demographic factors are no longer of real interest for targeting strategies, given the dilution of parties’ social bases (Kirchheimer 1966; Rohrschneider 2002; Smith 2009). However, research on the realignment of social classes has shown that parties still rely on particular social coalitions (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2018), underlining the continued importance of a coalition maintenance strategy and

social groups more generally – even if the types of groups that matter to parties may have changed (Mair et al. 2004).

The behaviour of parties in light of declining working class and denominational constituencies cannot be generalized to gender and age groups, because, as discussed, the latter show consistent electoral alignment and importance. The European literature on party behaviour towards gender and age groups is still scarce. Evidence from the UK suggests limited differences between parties in terms of their gender targeting in campaign messaging (Campbell and Childs 2015).

Most empirical work on targeting analyses US parties' mobilisation efforts by means of surveys on campaign contact. The findings of this body of work are inconclusive, but suggest that, in addition to a bipartisan focus on likely voters, parties tend to contact their existing voting demographics (i.e. a coalition maintenance strategy) (Gershtenson 2003; Panagopoulos and Wielhouwer 2008; Beck et al. 2018). Consistently, studies find a stronger age effect for the Republican party, which has an older electorate. However, this does not bear out for gender groups, who, despite the gender gap in voting, seem to be contacted at similar rates by both parties (Gershtenson 2003; Beck et al. 2018).

One might expect that microtargeting makes a coalition expansion strategy more likely, because it allows parties to identify individual potential voters that do not belong to the traditional coalition, and reach out to them with hidden appeals to their specific concerns (Hillygus and Shields 2009; Panagopoulos 2016). However, neither the reviewed campaign-contact literature nor the first studies on digital microtargeting corroborate this. Fowler et al. (2021), in one of the first systematic analyses of Facebook ads library data, argue that “the capabilities of social media push candidates toward using ads more for mobilisation than persuasion.” Social media ads facilitate the identification of partisans, which allows for more partisan messaging, and provide community organizing and fundraising opportunities targeted at the base. Studying digital microtargeting in the 2019 UK election, Power and Mason (2021) observe no clear focus on partisans, but find evidence for demographic coalition maintenance, as the Conservatives and Labour disproportionately targeted older and younger voters, respectively.

Although the results are not clear-cut and are geographically limited, the literature leads us to anticipate a coalition maintenance strategy. This expectation should hold especially true for countries with a more fragmented and volatile multiparty system, where parties first and foremost need to retain and appeal to their strongholds. By focusing their targeting efforts on voters similar to their current supporters, parties' political messaging is more likely to be

effective. They do not experience the same pressures to equalize their weaknesses among particular voter groups as their counterparts in a two-party system. If coalition maintenance is the dominant strategy, we should observe a correspondence between parties' voter coalitions and their ad audiences:

H1: The more votes a party receives from a demographic group, the more it advertises to members of this group.

H1a: The more votes a party receives from women (men), the higher the female (male) ad audience share.

H1b: The more votes a party receives from younger people, the higher the ad audience share of younger people.

H1c: The more votes a party receives from older people, the higher the ad audience share of older people.

So far, we have laid out an argument about how parties target demographic groups, but its underlying logic of coalition maintenance can be extended to geographic targeting as well. That is, a party is likely to target some subnational regions more than others, given its limited campaign resources and the incentives produced by the electoral institutions in place. We expect that, as for demographic groups, parties are likely to focus their ads on geographic strongholds.

H2: The more votes a party receives in a region, the more it advertises in that region.

While not the main focus of this study, the analysis of geographic audiences might enable us to shine a light on how party targeting behaviour varies by electoral system. There is little comparative empirical research on the effect of electoral institutions on party strategy (Lago et al. 2019). There is, however, evidence that suggests that parties competing under single-member plurality (SMP) direct their resources to a narrower set of districts (Johnston et al. 2012). Presumably, this translates to their expenses on digital ads as well. Such pressures do not exist, or at least not to the same extent, under a system of proportional representation. This suggests that geographic targeting efforts will be more pointed in majoritarian systems.

H3: Geographic ad audiences are more concentrated in majoritarian than in proportional electoral systems.

Data and Operationalisation

We use data from the Facebook ads archive, which provides information on the receiving audiences of ads run on Facebook services (including Instagram) by parties during an election campaign. Facebook offers parties different targeting methods. Audiences can be selected based on demographic criteria such as gender, age, and region, or on users' interests as expressed through the pages or ads with which they interact (Edelson et al. 2019). Parties can also use existing lists of supporters, gathered, for example, through website traffic or Facebook engagement, to target a "custom audience." Based on such lists and the characteristics shared by their existing supporters they might also target "lookalike audiences" (Edelson et al. 2019). A high share of a female or young audience could therefore be the result of a conscious targeting decision. However, it is important to note that we only have information on the output, i.e. the voters that have seen the ads, and not on the target groups that campaigns selected. Other selection criteria or the Facebook algorithm aimed at optimising user behaviour could play a role as well (Facebook for Business n.d.).

While acknowledging these limitations, we nevertheless argue that Facebook ad audiences are an important new tool for understanding targeting strategies. First, the use of ad audiences is consistent with the main body of targeting research, which has relied on similar behavioural data to infer targeting strategies. Targeting strategies concern parties' *intentions* to prioritise particular voters in their campaign activities. Targeting research therefore faces the challenge of capturing the motivations and internal decision-making processes of difficult-to-access elite actors around strategically sensitive information. Methods to access this information more directly do exist, for example through resource intensive elite interviews (Albright 2008; Anstead 2017; Dobber et al. 2017; Stuckelberger 2019; 2021) or, more recently, by means of data on Facebook ads collected by third parties, which use a browser plugin that records the targeting information that Facebook reports to users under "Why am I seeing this?" (Edelson et al. 2019). While such initiatives are promising, these data suffer from limitations, including unrepresentative samples of the broader ad population and legal challenges from Facebook (Beraldo et al. 2021). As a result, most research has relied on the behaviour of parties to infer targeting strategies indirectly, using indicators such as the characteristics and audiences of TV slots chosen for advertising (Fowler et al. 2016), or survey responses about campaign contact (Beck et al. 2018). Compared to these behavioural data sources, Facebook data have

the advantage that they do not rely on the recollection of voters, are relatively easily accessible¹, and allow for comparative research, which is particularly rare in targeting research.

Second, the targeting capabilities of Facebook advertisements are a central feature of this campaign instrument. Parties are rational actors that want to spend their limited resources strategically. We can therefore assume that that parties will exploit all tools available to them to reach their intended audiences.

Third, existing research provides insights into how parties use this targeting power. Indeed, they use the audience characteristics that we can observe in their targeting efforts. Demographic and geographic characteristics are powerful predictors of voting, straightforward to use, and consistent with traditional forms of targeting, particularly in countries with little experience with microtargeting. Studies on the practice of microtargeting on Facebook repeatedly point to demographic characteristics, particularly age, as central criteria used by parties for Facebook targeting (Baldwin-Philippi 2017; Dobber et al. 2017). Based on third-party data that includes information on the actual targeting criteria used, Edelson et al. (2019, 9) report that “91% of ads in the overall ProPublica data set had some kind of geographic targeting, and 92% had age or gender targeting.”

Fourth, even if parties use lookalike audiences rather than actually targeting a particular demographic group, the data still provide information on the overall coalition strategy. Independent of the applied targeting criteria, consistency between the observed audiences and parties’ voter bases would suggest a desire to reach an audience similar to their existing voter base.

Our analysis focuses on five established democracies that held national parliamentary elections in 2019-2020, immediately after data on Facebook ads became available: Austria, Canada, Ireland, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (UK).² The countries are similar on key political characteristics - i.e. established democracies with multiparty but not highly fragmented party systems - but, crucially, provide key variation by electoral system, which allows us to examine whether the electoral rules have an effect on parties’ geographic outreach. We focus on the main parties in each country (vote share >2%) and only include ads ran by a party’s Facebook page or that of its top candidate (the party leader, e.g. Kurz for the Austrian ÖVP).³ Because we are interested in national strategies and geographic ad concentration, we do not include regional pages (e.g. Labour Scotland). Ads were collected from the day after the

¹ See Appendix (A) for a discussion of the data access process.

² Other potentially eligible countries are excluded due to lack of comparable data (e.g. Greece) or because national and European elections coincided (e.g. Denmark, Spain).

³ In Switzerland, parties do not compete for the role of head of state and therefore top candidates do not exist.

announcement of the election up to the day before the election.⁴ This results in a data set of 50'671 ads across 28 political parties.⁵

Parties often run the same ad multiple times. For our purposes this is not a concern, as we are interested in the ad audience, which might vary across different iterations of the same ad. The data include information on the content of each ad, its start and end date, the amount of money spent on it, and the number of people to whom it was shown. Critically, it contains information on the demographic groups that the ad was shown to: the share of men and women, and the share of various age groups, including younger (18-34) and older voters (>55).⁶ The group of young people is often limited to the 18-29 year olds (e.g. Endres and Kelly 2018). Constrained by the original data categories of 18-24 and 25-34, we opt for a more inclusive classification, particularly because we also seek to calculate parties' electoral support among this group (see below). The data also contain information on the audience's geographic region. Typically, this corresponds more or less to the electoral district, but in the UK it is provided at the regional level, i.e. England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.⁷ To measure a party's campaign outreach, we use the weighted average of the ad audience share of each group. We weight each ad by the amount of money spent on it, using the average of the lower and upper band indicated in the data. This dependent variable is standardised to allow for direct comparisons across groups.

We include three independent variables. First, we organise parties into the main party families (Social democrats, Greens, Liberals, Conservatives, and Radical right), using the ParlGov data set (Döring and Manow 2019). Second, we include information on the demographic support for parties, taken from the European Social Survey, combining rounds 8 (2016) and 9 (2018). For Switzerland, Canada, and some smaller parties, we rely on national election surveys (Selects 2017; The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems 2018; 2019).⁸ As with the dependent variable, the electoral support from a given group has been standardised.

⁴ In the case of Switzerland's fixed election calendar, ads were collected from the day that data became available.

⁵ The list of parties and Facebook pages can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix. Switzerland is the only country for which declaring ads as political is voluntary for campaigns (Facebook for Business n.d.). Most parties have committed themselves to transparency, with the exception of the Swiss People's Party, whose ads are therefore missing (Fichter 2019).

⁶ Middle aged people (35-54), typically described as a group of "average voters," are not seen as a distinct voter group in the political behaviour literature. They are therefore not included in the analysis.

⁷ See Table A2 in the Appendix for a list of the regions by country.

⁸ Due to a lack of participation in previous elections, we use survey data on UKIP supporters for the Brexit Party, which are similar in terms of ideology and organisation. The same applies to previous support by geographic region.

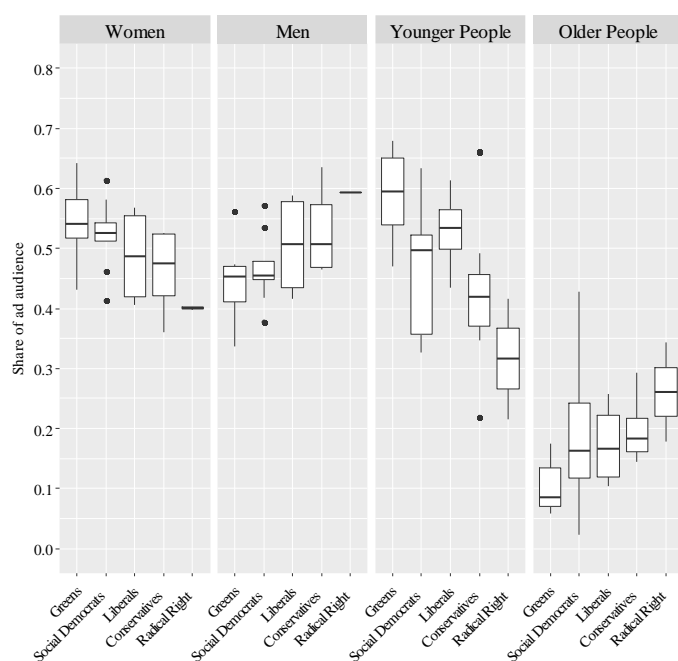
Third, the support for a party in a geographic region is measured as the party's vote share, using official statistics.

Analysis

In the first part of this analysis, we compare parties' ad audiences to the gender and age gap in voting. Figure 1 confirms that ad audiences vary by party family, reflecting known patterns in electoral behaviour. For gender groups, a left-right opposition emerges. While ads from Social democrats and Greens have a primarily female audience, for right-wing party families the opposite is true, particularly for Conservatives and the Radical right. These differences among ad audiences are consistent with the modern gender gap (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014). Interestingly, this left-right gender divide does not exist for older voters - even Liberals and Conservatives have a higher female than male audience among older voters (see Appendix, Figure A1). This is in line with the literature on voting behaviour, which suggest that the gender gap is smaller or even reversed for older voters (Shorrocks 2018). It indicates that we should pay attention to the interaction of gender and age when studying targeting behaviour.

Unsurprisingly, Figure 1 shows that younger voters are far more important on Facebook and Instagram, constituting almost 50% of the audience, compared to ~20% for older users. The Greens, who are particularly popular among a younger electorate, are the party family with the youngest audience. On average, 60% of their Facebook ad audience falls into the younger category, compared to below 45% for Conservatives and the Radical right. By contrast, the Greens have the lowest outreach among older voters. Overall, these results indicate that, similar to voting patterns, gender and age structure parties' outreach to voters.

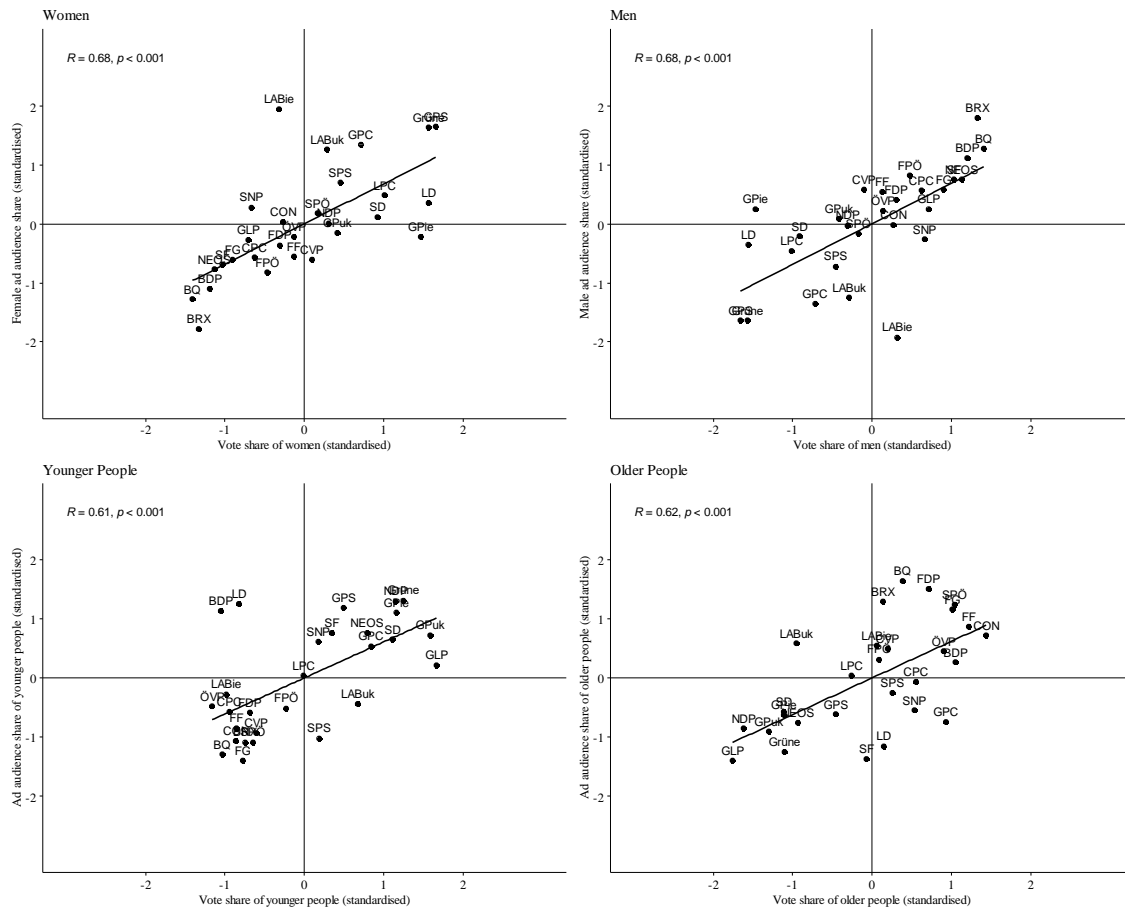
Figure 1 Demographic ad audiences by party family



Note: Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (N: 50'671).

Next, we examine whether the data on ad audiences are consistent with a coalition maintenance or a coalition expansion strategy. Figure 2 shows the results for gender and age, where the x -axis indicates a demographic group's electoral support for each party in the previous election, and the y -axis indicates the group's share among the party's ad audience. The results for women and men, younger voters, and older voters all show a clear positive relationship. The higher the voter support among a group, the higher its ad audience share. This supports our first hypothesis and suggests a targeting behaviour that is in line with a coalition maintenance strategy: in general, parties reach out to those voter groups among which they already have substantial support. The strength of this relationship varies by country, however (see Figures A2-A5 in the Appendix). And, naturally, the degree to which individual parties pursue a coalition maintenance strategy varies. For a few parties, the ad audiences actually suggest a coalition expansion strategy. This seems to be the case for BDP, a small Swiss party, and for the Liberal Democrats in the UK, which had below-average support among younger voters, but seems to target them at an above-average rate. The British Labour Party appears to use a similar strategy for older voters.

Figure 2 Demographic audiences



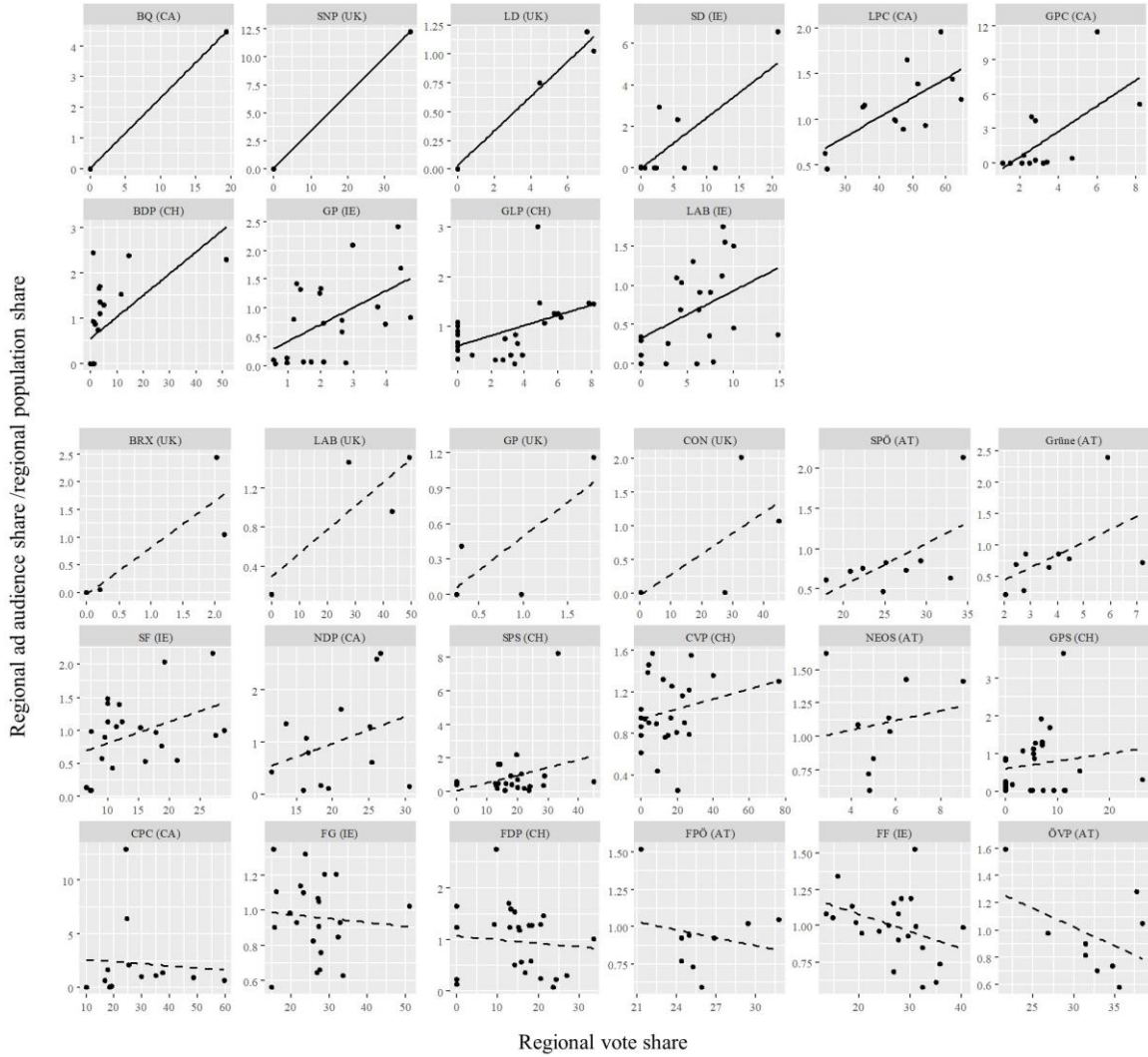
Note: Figure displays for each party the (country level) standardised average. Data on ads targeting stem from the Facebook Ad Library (N: 50'671). Voter data are based on ESS (2016, 2018), CSES (2018, 2019), and Selects 2017.

We also explore geographic ad audiences and the extent to which parties' ads are shown more in their geographic strongholds. Because regions with large populations are more likely to make up a greater share of an ad's audience, we control for population size by dividing a region's ad audience share by the region's population share (i.e. a score above (below) 1 indicates that a region has a higher (lower) audience share than its population share would suggest).

Figure 3 shows the correlation between this measure of regional ad audience (controlling for population size) and the vote share that a party secured in a region. For some parties, we observe a strong deviation, such as the Green party in Canada. 70% of their ad audience resides in British Columbia, where they previously scored their best results, and which only makes up 13% of the total population. For other parties, like Fine Gael in Ireland, the results show relatively small deviations from the population share of a region, which might suggest that such parties do not geographically target their ads. When there is a deviation from the population share of a region, however, parties seem to focus more on their strongholds. 22

of the 28 parties show positive coefficients, with the ten statistically significant coefficients all being positive (indicated with solid lines). This provides mixed but tentative support for our second hypothesis. Only for some parties do we find that the geographic ad audiences correlate with electoral support, but in the cases where they do, the results suggest a targeting behaviour that is in line with our hypothesis of coalition maintenance.

Figure 3 Geographic audiences



Note: Correlations that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) are shown in the upper part of the graph and indicated with solid lines. The order of the graphs is based on the correlation coefficient. Data on ad audience stem from the Facebook ad library (N: 50'671). Vote share data and data on regional population is based on official statistics.

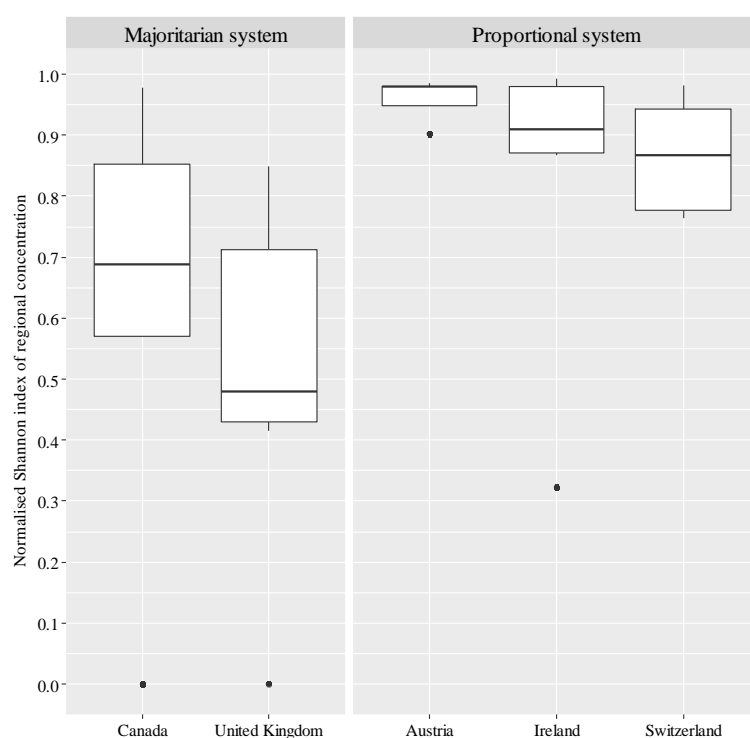
Correlations between vote share in a region and a region's ad audience seem higher for parties in Canada and the UK, countries with single-member district plurality electoral systems. Figure 4 unpacks this dynamic further and shows the extent to which ad audiences are distributed across different regions, using the normalised Shannon index as a measure of regional concentration.⁹ Indeed, parties in majoritarian systems have a substantially lower index, which indicates more concentrated audiences.¹⁰ Parties in proportional systems, by contrast, have ad audiences that are more equally distributed across regions. A robustness check using a more fine-grained measure of disproportionality corroborates this finding.¹¹ The index value approaches 0 for SNP (UK) and BQ (Canada), which is not surprising given these parties' regional character. A notable outlier is the Irish Social Democrats, a small party that concentrates its resources on a limited number of regions. Overall, this provides support for our third hypothesis that geographic audiences are more concentrated in majoritarian, disproportional systems, which suggests that the rules around elections affect parties' targeting strategies.

⁹ This index has previously been used to measure the diversity of issue attention and has the advantage that, when normalised, it can be used to compare geographic concentration across countries with different numbers of regions (Boydston et al. 2014).

¹⁰ The finding has to be qualified somewhat by the data quality on the UK, where data were only available at the highest regional level.

¹¹ The correlation between the Least squares index of disproportionality and our measure of geographic concentration based on the Shannon index is -0.95, with $p < 0.05$.

Figure 4 Geographic concentration of parties' ad campaign



Note: Figure displays the boxplots of parties' normalised Shannon index of regional concentration. Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (Total N: 50'671).

Conclusion

This research note enhances our understanding of targeting behaviour by using a novel data set on parties' digital advertisements on Facebook and Instagram. First, in line with prior research on voting behaviour, our results reveal a left-right divide in the gender audiences of Facebook campaigns. They also highlight the distinctiveness of Green parties, whose outreach is particularly skewed to younger voters - and away from older voters - compared to other party families. Second, we show that parties have ad audiences that reflect their voter base. The more support a party receives from a particular gender or age group, the higher that group's audience share. The results for regional audiences are mixed, but suggest that ad audiences in some cases also correspond to geographic patterns in electoral support. This relationship is conditioned by the electoral system, as parties in majoritarian systems show more concentrated ad audiences. Overall, our findings suggest that, consistent with the coalition maintenance strategy, parties tend to invest in online ads for the voter groups among which they already have strong support, in order to maintain and strengthen existing demographic and regional coalitions.

This comparative study offers several important contributions to the targeting literature, which has mostly relied on country case studies that have produced mixed results. Our findings align well with recent work on the ground game in the US and digital microtargeting, which similarly highlight the centrality of coalition maintenance and mobilisation. They also confirm the continued importance of demographic groups for party strategy, especially with regard to age and gender. With topics such as climate change, population aging, and gender equality becoming more salient, these groups are unlikely to lose significance. Microtargeting and the ease with which these groups can be reached online might further reinforce these demographic divisions. The role that these broad groups play also indicates a continuity between microtargeting and previous targeting behaviour.

Although this study has shown the potential of the Facebook ads archive for comparative research on party and campaign strategies, its use comes with limitations. The main challenge is that we do not have data on the criteria that parties use to target the observed audiences. Keeping this in mind, we have argued that Facebook political ad data can inform targeting research, because (1) absent more direct measurements, behavioural data are a helpful and proven instrument for studying targeting strategies, (2) parties will surely exploit the targeting options provided to them by Facebook, given their limited campaign resources, (3) existing research shows that demographic and geographic audience characteristics are among parties' used targeting criteria, and (4) the observed patterns would not exist if party campaign strategies were incoherent or, even more so, mainly aimed at actively reaching out to voters outside of their demographic and regional strongholds.

Future research can build on our study. Logical extensions would be to explore other countries, electoral systems, and digital campaigning platforms (e.g. Google). Similarly, one could study the behaviour of regional and local candidates and parties, which have arguably become more important. Crucially, we need information on the actual targeting criteria that political actors use in order to test the presented results and to understand the democratic implications of microtargeting. With various national and EU-level regulation efforts underway (European Commission 2021), there is hope for increased transparency on microtargeted ads, including their targeting criteria. In combination with studies based on interviews and the content of ads, this could help to uncover more fine-grained coalition expansion strategies, which our data on broad demographic groups might have missed. Future research should also aim to identify the factors that lead a party to choose a particular coalition strategy, and the extent to which it is a function of party resources and the fundraising or persuasive purpose of an ad campaign. Such insights may help to unpack the normative implications of our findings

and enhance our understanding of whether microtargeting can equalise or normalise power differences between parties, and if it reinforces discourse fragmentation and political polarisation.

Data availability

The replication data and scripts are available at Harvard Dataverse:

<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NPILTP>.

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Appendix

(A) Data information

To access the API of the Facebook Ad Library one needs to register with an identity document, create a Facebook developer account, and create an app (<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/api>). The app does not need any content, but one needs to indicate a URL that describes the privacy policy of the app.

To search the API and find the Facebook page IDs of the relevant political parties, we have used the information from the Facebook Ad Library reports, which summarise expenditures by actors on the platform (<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/>). For the script used to access the data see the replication data.

(B) Cases

Table A1 Analysed parties

Country	Party	Facebook page	Party family	
Austria	FPÖ	FPÖ	Radical Right	
		Hofer		
	Grüne	Grüne	Greens	
		Kogler		
	NEOS	NEOS	Liberals	
		Meinl-Reisinger		
	ÖVP	ÖVP	Conservatives	
		Kurz		
	SPÖ	SPÖ	Social Democrats	
		Rendi-Wagner		
	Canada	BQ	BQ	Social Democrats
			Blanchet	
CPC		CPC	Conservatives	
		Scheer		
GPC		GPC	Greens	
		May		
	LPC	LPC	Liberals	
		Trudeau		
	NDP	NPD	Social Democrats	
		Singh		
	Switzerland	BDP	BDP	Conservatives
		CVP	CVP	Conservatives
FDP		FDP	Liberals	
GLP		GLP	Greens	
GPS		GPS	Greens	
SPS		SPS	Social Democrats	
Ireland	FF	FF	Conservatives	
		Martin		
	FG	FG	Conservatives	
		Varadkar		
	GP	GP	Greens	
	LAB	LAB	Social Democrats	
	SD	SD	Social Democrats	
	SF	SF	Social Democrats	
	United Kingdom	BRX	BRX	Radical Right
			Farage	
		CON	CON	Conservatives
			Johnson	
GP		GP	Greens	
LAB		LAB	Social Democrats	
		Corbyn		
	LD	LD	Liberals	
	SNP	SNP	Social Democrats	

Note: Party families are taken from the ParlGov database (but Sinn Féin (SF) as Social Democratic not Communist). No Facebook data is available for the Swiss party SVP.

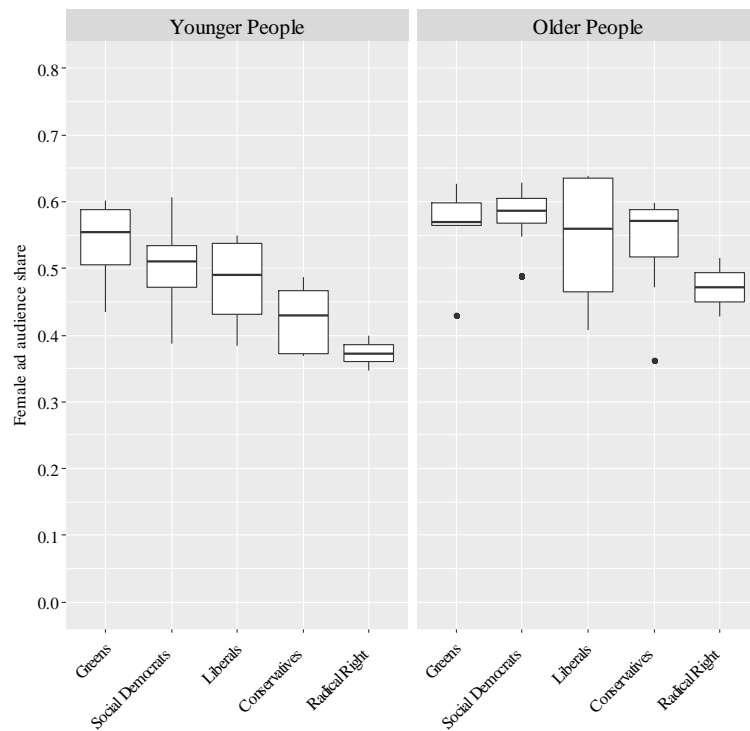
Table A2 Regions

Austria	Canada	Ireland	Switzerland	United Kingdom
Burgenland	Alberta	Carlow-Kilkenny	Aargau	England
Kärnten	British Columbia	Cavan-Monaghan	Appenzell Ausserrhoden	Northern Ireland
Niederösterreich	Manitoba	County Clare	Appenzell Innerrhoden	Scotland
Oberösterreich	New Brunswick	County Cork	Basel-Landschaft	Wales
Salzburg	Newfoundland and Labrador	County Laois	Basel-Stadt	
Steiermark	Northwest Territories	County Louth	Bern	
Tirol	Nova Scotia	County Mayo	Freiburg	
Vorarlberg	Nunavut	County Meath	Genf	
Wien	Ontario	County Offaly	Glarus	
	Prince Edward Island	County Tipperary	Graubünden	
	Quebec	Donegal	Jura	
	Saskatchewan	Dublin	Luzern	
	Yukon	Galway	Neuenburg	
		Kerry	Nidwalden	
		Kildare	Obwalden	
		Limerick	Schaffhausen	
		Longford-Westmeath	Schwyz	
		Roscommon	Solothurn	
		Sligo-Leitrim	St.Gallen	
		Waterford	Tessin	
		Wexford	Thurgau	
		Wicklow	Uri	
			Waadt	
			Wallis	
			Zug	
			Zürich	

Note: Regions for which data was available in each country.

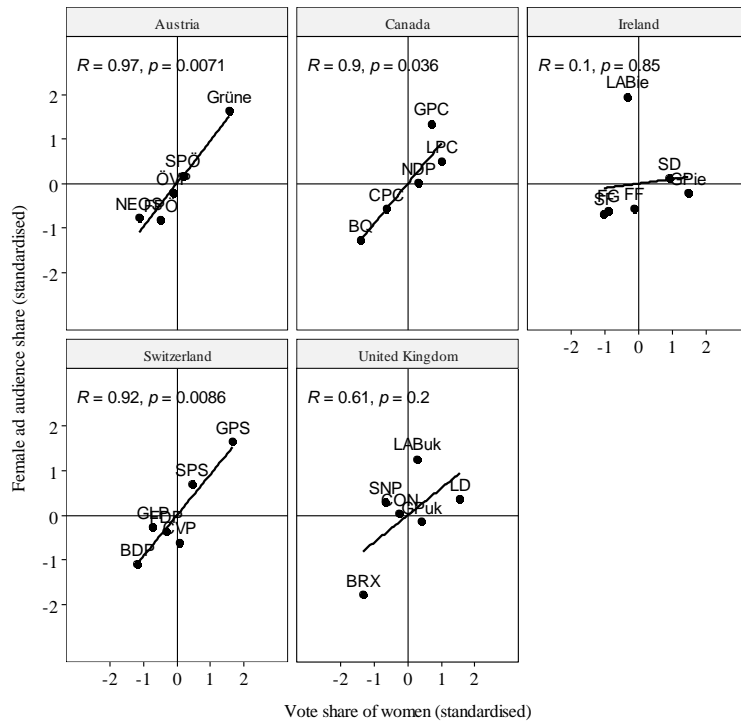
(C) Analysis

Figure A1 Female ad audience among younger and older people



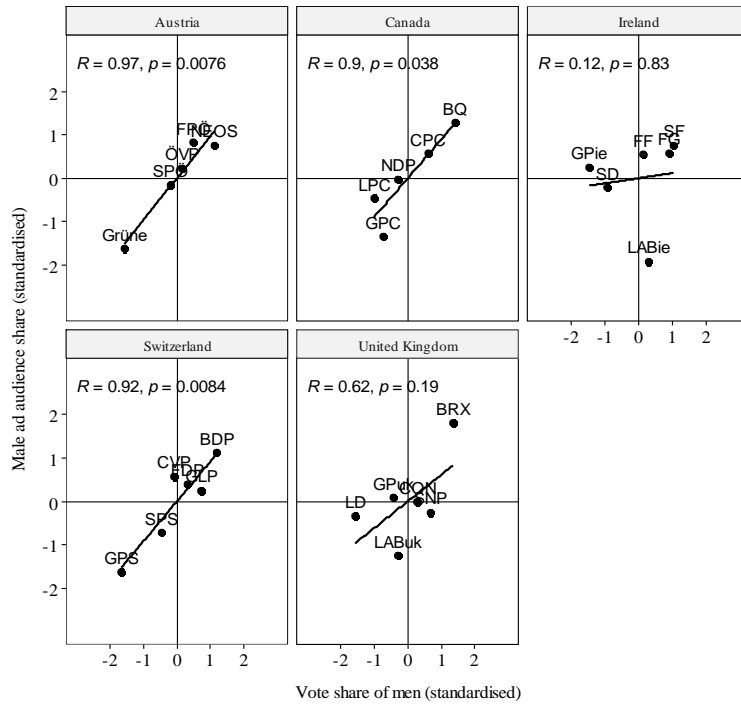
Note: Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (Total N: 50'671).

Figure A2 Female ad audience and vote share (country plots)



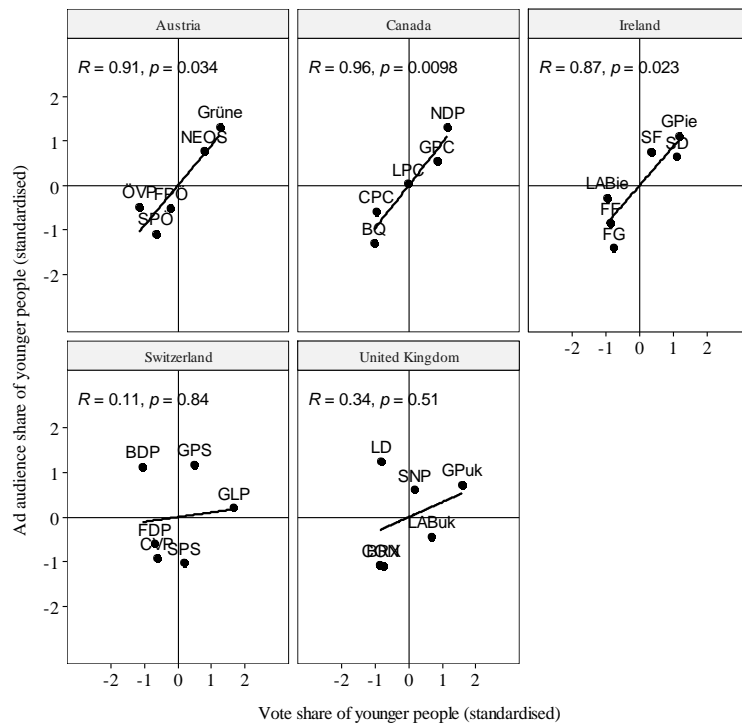
Note: Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (N: 50'671).

Figure A3 Male ad audience and vote share (country plots)



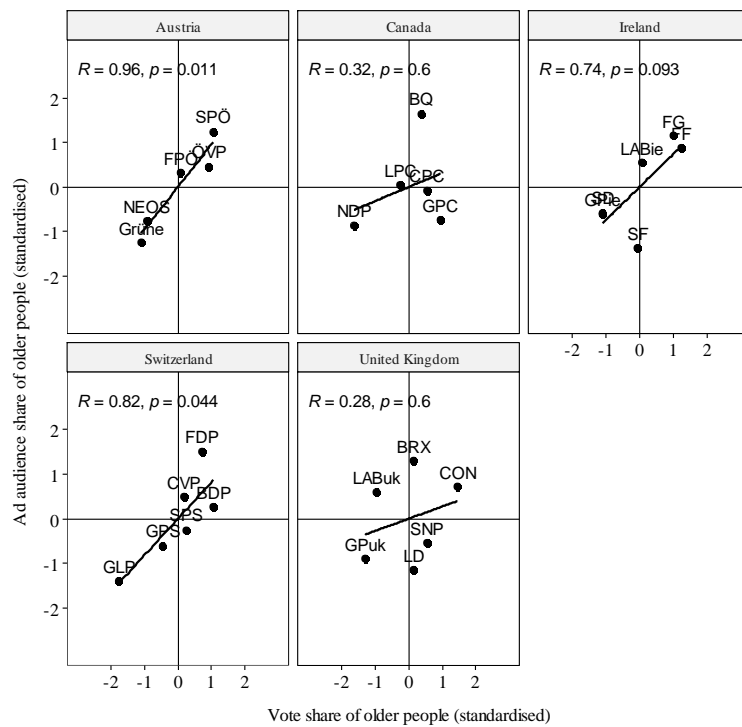
Note: Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (N: 50'671).

Figure A4 Younger people's ad audience and vote share (country plots)



Note: Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (N: 50'671).

Figure A5 Older people's ad audience and vote share (country plots)



Note: Data stem from the Facebook Ad Library (N: 50'671).