

A shadow digital campaign may prove decisive in 2020—and Donald Trump has a clear advantage



Image: Ecolivia <https://www.greenpolicy360.net/w/Ecolivia>

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I think for the first time in history, the data operation ran everything from TV buying to where we were on the ground to all of the different operations. And so, having that data right there, we could start to where the persuadable targets are, [Get out the Vote], everything we needed to know.

Pennsylvania and Michigan... I started to see data and started to track it. We were making thousands of live calls, web tracking... and it was building and it's building what's called models and universes. What we can start to see is, 'we're in play in Pennsylvania' and 'in play in Michigan'. Let's buy in these areas.... And by the Friday before the election, I had predicted that we were going to win 305 electoral results."

-- Trump Campaign Director Brad Parscale, [interviewed](#) on Fox News, November 16, 2016

Marketing is big business in the U.S. and the Trump campaign is positioned to have the biggest digital marketing operation in history.

Today, with a reported database of 20 million active supporters, Brad Parscale, Trump's campaign manager and digital guru, is confident. Parscale is predicting that the campaign will raise \$1 billion, three times as much as they were [able to raise in 2016](#), when Trump claimed to be self-financing his campaign and fundraising only became a coordinated Republican effort late in the game.

As Parscale explained on Fox News shortly after the election, his strategy began and ended [“with the data.”](#) The campaign decided to spend its limited resources in swing states late in the race, arguably pushing them over the top. Months later, Trump rewarded Parscale with the top job for 2020. The president, a self-described marketing genius, had found his own marketing genius in Parscale. And Parscale succeeded personally beyond his wildest dream when he took his little marketing company and hitched it to Trump.

Digital marketing has become ubiquitous in Americans' lives as the age of Madison Avenue relying on TV and print advertising has given way to smarter, more narrowly targeted internet campaigns. Republicans appear to understand this shift well while Democrats have yet to show that they really [‘grock’](#) how digital marketing targets and delivers messages to targeted audiences.

Reaching, Acquiring, Engaging and Converting Voters

Hillary Clinton's team made 66 thousand visual ads. My team made 5.9 million ads. Those are ads targeted directly to people the way they want to consume them. I stopped looking at people as demographics, groups, personas. I said: let's look at people as individuals, how do they act. Because two people who look the same, might act differently. -- [Brad Parscale on 'Micro-targeting'](#)

As a former president of one of the largest marketing services companies in America, I can tell you that the Democratic party is far behind the curve. While the Democrats continue to rely heavily on old-school techniques of grassroots organizing, union get-out-the-vote drives and appealing to people with ad hoc causes, the Republican playbook has leaped ahead.

Today's political battles are fought largely through interactive social media. Digital life has become almost indistinguishable from real life, especially for those who grew up with the internet. Every move we make in this world creates valuable data waiting to be harvested. Personal patterns emerge. Political beliefs are packed into your profile. All of this allows marketers like Parscale to finely tune their pitches for specific groups of voters.

When your angry old uncle or MAGA-loving grandpa attends a Trump rally or answers a text message, their contact information is being harvested for Parscale's sprawling database. When they surf the web, visit popular conservative news sites or click on trending topics about hot button issues for the right, their personal data are, thanks to lax privacy standards across the industry, sifted, sorted and grouped into preferences for targeting.

This is the world of psychographics—a qualitative approach to defining consumers psychological attributes. Psychographic profiles —measures of an individual’s activities, interests and opinions, or AIO variables in industry-speak—were once used to sell sneakers and deodorants but have now become a potent tool for voter outreach and persuasion.

This is marketing 101 and the Democrats are only beginning to get into this high stakes game. Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean has been given the task, as of early 2019, to launch [a new voter database](#). Dean called it “a big breakthrough” that will aim to compete with what the Republicans have spent years putting in place. “I’d sort of given up that we could get it done,” Dean told the Associated Press.

The Guru

Brad Parscale is a six foot, eight inch balding libertarian out of Topeka, Kansas via San Antonio, Texas. Before becoming Trump’s digital 2016 campaign director, he was a hungry young businessman and [digital marketing whiz](#). When the opportunity of his life sat down next to him on a flight to New York in the person of Eric Trump, Parscale jumped on the opportunity to move up.

In early 2015, Donald Trump asked Parscale if his firm, Giles-Parscale, could build a website for \$1500. When Trump launched his campaign in June 2015, he paid Parscale \$10,000 to build out of his campaign’s site.

“I just made up a price,” [Parscale later told *The Washington Post*](#). He promised Eric Trump that the money would be refundable if the work proved unsatisfactory.

Parscale realized that there was some real upside potential here. Trump, a tall man, had to look up to talk to Parscale, which seemed to impress him. Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, soon asked him what he could do with Facebook and its marketing platform. Parscale Strategy, a spinoff of Giles-Parscale, kicked into high gear on the Facebook front.

Facebook: A Game-Changer

Earlier this year, during a talk to a Romanian audience titled, “Let’s Make Political Marketing Great Again,” Parscale hinted at how he plans to leverage his experience from 2016 to run a billion-dollar campaign during the 2020 cycle.

Forbes [reported that](#):

The Trump team gained access to the Republican National Committee’s Data Trust, a collection of more than 200 million voter files gathered through a massive operation begun in the wake of Romney’s 2012 Presidential defeat. It was like a “Christmas present”, Parscale remembers. The team now had a way to “know what Americans think”. But Parscale and his team still needed an efficient way to target them. “And this other Christmas present showed up: these guys from Facebook walked to my office and said: ‘we have a beta ... it’s a new onboarding tool ...

you can onboard audiences straight into Facebook and we will match them to their Facebook accounts’.”

Parscale’s strategy aligned perfectly with Facebook’s algorithms, importing lists of supporters gleaned from Trump rallies and those ubiquitous on-line ads. In his world, data–voters’ contact info–was gold. In 2016, Cambridge Analytica mined millions of users’ Facebook data after acquiring them from [a researcher who told the social media giant](#) that he would use it exclusively for academic purposes.

The Associated Press [reported](#) last year that Data Propria, “a company run by former officials at Cambridge Analytica,” has “quietly been working for President Donald Trump’s 2020 re-election effort.” But Parscale’s operation no longer relies on such vendors. It has become a multi-platform, multi-app shop utilizing direct, one-to-one communications, interactive messaging, mobile content and live events. In 2020, one might call this database-coordinated marketing campaign the ‘Secret Sauce 2.0’.

Some of Parscale’s techniques are proprietary, but others are simply industry best practices. “I always wonder why people in politics act like this stuff is so mystical,” Parscale [told reporters in 2016](#). “It’s the same shit we use in commercial, just has fancier names.”

While the Republicans romped online, the Democrats stalled out in 2016. Hillary Clinton’s email travails became the ‘whatabout’ attack line of the campaign. Unfortunately for the Democratic Party, Hillary and Bill had an aversion to hiring Obama’s successful digital team and brought in their own consultants–young, inexperienced, and lacking a firm grasp of important security practices. An email server was set up in a closet. It would later be breached. The results were disastrous.

The Coming Onslaught...

What we need to do is create technology, an app on your phone [that] will help execute any type of volunteer programs... once we have data back. The volunteer app would be powered by and fed into the campaign’s data-gathering operation through the use of a large scale machine learning system. So, when knocking on a door, the team already knows what issues the person cares about, and the takeaways from their discussion will help improve the campaign’s advertising program. -- [Parscale on ‘Individual ad targeting’](#)

Opposition research on whomever emerges from the Democratic primary are yet to come, but it is already clear that the party is not prepared to fight back with its own state-of-the-art political marketing apparatus.

Parscale revealed to the [Palm Beach Post](#) that in 2016, he created as many as 100,000 ads a day, testing different images, colors and wording to see which were the most effective for particular voters. “We will continue to make content that is tailored for you and the message you need to hear from the president,” he said, promising that during the course of the campaign, millions of personalized messages from the president will be arriving daily on cell phones, in emails, and via news feeds.

This time around, Parscale's systems are mostly ready to go at this very early date. They've been engineered and tested. His team will use various performance metrics to track their successes, optimize their programs as they go, and maximize their spending clout.

They're running their plan right now.

[Via the Palm Beach Post:](#)

At a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on March 28, Parscale walked onto the stage, raised his cell phone above his head and asked the audience to pull out their phones and text TRUMP to 88022. In a video clip of the rally, Trump supporters behind Parscale can be seen taking their phones out and texting.

"The power of bringing our party together is in that phone," Parscale told the crowd in Miami. Recently, the campaign has been relentlessly texting supporters, asking them to sign a digital birthday card for the president. However, signing requires turning over your contact information and cell phone number.

"The whole game will be different" in 2020, [said Parscale](#). Back in 2016, "the most people [the Republican National Committee] could contact to show up [to vote] without using television, advertising or some kind of mass media was 2 million people." By 2020, "we're gonna have 50-60 million... that's a gigantic advantage, because the Democrats can't do that." [Parscale expects to have](#) a least 50 million personalized direct voter contacts in their database (62 million voted for Trump in 2016). "We will have a formidable ground game, one volunteer for every 13 swing voters, and a data operation that cannot be replicated," Parscale told *Face the Nation* earlier this year.

[According to The New York Times](#), in the first five months of this year, the Trump campaign had already pumped \$4.9 million into Facebook ads, triple the figure of Elizabeth Warren, the Democratic candidate who spent the most.

But swing voters aren't the only ones being targeted by the Trump campaign. The numbers from 2016 tell us those who stayed home in 2016—[40 percent of eligible voters](#)—represent a huge untapped source of votes for Parscale and his team to win over.

Those non-voters are being identified and targeted right now by the GOP's marketing operations. Their data are being mined and put into Parscale's databases in preparation for the next phase of the campaign. They will be flattered, told of Trump's many awe-inspiring achievements and repeatedly warned about the horrors that will occur should Democrats get back in power.

It was recently revealed that part of Team Trump's Facebook strategy to convert users into supporters is a series of targeted ads depicting members of various demographic groups that tend not to be supportive of Trump—among them bearded hipsters, young women and people of color—gushing over how great he is. These testimonials by "real Americans," it turns out, are not only stock photos but some of them are [Turkish stock photos](#).

