



Loopholes in Political Advertising Regulations

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Well-informed voters depend on honest disclosures in order to understand who is financing candidates, but campaigns are often able to skirt the rules. How can we best use big data in order to close loopholes in political advertising regulations?

Challenges

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates radio and television broadcasts and requires sponsorship identification for all campaign ads. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) regulates political ads for print media and requires disclaimers identifying the attribution of all campaign-related public communications. However, similar requirements do not exist for digital ads.

Furthermore, while campaigns, political parties, and political action committees (PACs) are legally required to disclose their donors, political non-profits are not. As such, even ads that can be clearly tied to a single political entity may not be clearly attributable to individual financing sources.

Traditional PACs are limited in terms of how much they can donate to candidates and parties. Super PACs, otherwise known as independent expenditures only committees (IEOCs), do not have these spending restrictions, but they are prohibited from coordinating with or directly donating to candidates or parties. In reality, however, coordination is infrequently investigated, and there is no minimum fine for offenders.

Even in situations where all political campaign and advertising regulations are followed, the information contained within disclosures are unlikely to be available in real-time. This means that information regarding

donors may not be released in accessible formats or be finalized until after an election has already occurred.

Our Solution

Instead of explicitly tracking financial disclosures, Code for Democracy tracks political ads in order to uncover common narratives between ads. By looking at affinities between groups and messages, we can trace narratives from dark money groups to groups with more transparent financing methods and better understand the relationships between actors.

Further Reading

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