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Accepting Exclusion: Examining the (Un)Intended Consequences of Data-Driven Campaigns

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Abstract

Using citizens' data not only enables precise targeting of campaign messages online, but also the deliberate exclusion of certain groups of citizens. This study asks (a) to what extent have citizens been excluded from political (online) ads during the Dutch 2021 and 2023 election campaigns and (b) how acceptable citizens find the practice of exclusion. To answer these questions, we use data from the Meta Ad Targeting dataset to investigate any employed exclusion criteria by parties and rely on survey data collected during the 2023 Dutch general election to learn about citizens' opinions. Our study reveals that political parties across the spectrum allocated less budget to targeting and excluding citizens in 2023 compared to 2021. Predominantly, exclusion is based on age, gender, and place of residence, with criteria such as political views, migration background, and religious beliefs being relatively uncommon. Despite citizens considering all forms of exclusion unacceptable, they view exclusion based on political views as the most tolerable. Moreover, individuals leaning towards the political right exhibit greater acceptance of exclusion, particularly based on migration background. In scrutinizing the extent of citizen exclusion from political campaign messaging and citizens' perceptions, we contribute to the discourse on the unintended consequences of data-driven campaigning.

Keywords

citizens; data-driven campaign; exclusion; information asymmetry; meta ad targeting dataset

1. Introduction

Engaging with content of your favourite football team or sharing your dietary preferences on Facebook should not exclude you from seeing certain political ads, but oddly enough, it can in the world of data-driven campaigning (DDC) strategies (Van Cauwenberg, 2023). DDC is now commonplace in nearly all modern election campaigns and appears in various forms (Dommett et al., 2024; Votta, 2024). For example, tailoring political messages and advertisements to groups of people or individuals who meet certain criteria that have been determined from data is a common practice. DDC tactics typically align with common campaign objectives: persuading, mobilizing targeted groups, or reinforcing their position on an issue (Lavigne, 2021). When campaigns decide to target citizens with specific messages it also implies that others are being excluded from seeing these messages by consequence. However, not only does DDC allow political parties to choose who they want to reach, it also explicitly allows them to exclude certain groups of people, for example, those considered unlikely to be persuaded or mobilized. These decisions can be based on characteristics like age, gender, location, (inferred) political affiliation or ethnic background, online behaviour, or personal interests (Speicher et al., 2018; Van Cauwenberg, 2023). Thus, intentions behind the use of DDC are not just about optimizing message delivery to particular audiences but also about strategically excluding certain demographics to maximize campaign efficiency.

This dual capability of DDC—implicit and explicit exclusion—highlights the importance of understanding the motivations behind these strategies. This aspect of deliberately withholding specific political content based on data points has not been studied in the context of DDC yet, although the potential of discriminatory targeting practices on Meta's Facebook has been recognized (Speicher et al., 2018). Despite this, digital political advertising has been barely regulated when compared to political campaigning via traditional media channels (Helberger et al., 2021), and some EU-level regulations have emerged in recent years (van Drunen et al., 2022). The EU has recognized the potential negative impact of intransparent advertising and now through the Digital Services Act (DSA) mandates very large online platforms to maintain ad libraries so that citizens, researchers, and broader civil society can see which kinds of advertisements are targeted at whom (van Drunen et al., 2022). The EU also recently adopted the transparency and targeting of political advertising (TTPA) legislation which further regulates how parties and candidates are allowed to use targeting during election campaigns (van Drunen et al., 2022). This legislation includes provisions that aim to increase transparency in ad targeting practices and ensure that political advertisements disclose relevant information about their targeting criteria. Additionally, it seeks to implement a European ad repository that would aim to ensure transparency across platforms in a standardized way.

These regulations are essential frameworks aimed at safeguarding election campaigns (Gibson, Dommett, et al., 2024b), which are crucial moments for citizen engagement in politics. Here, political actors use a variety of methods to inform, persuade, and direct citizens' attention towards political problems, including political online advertisements (Vliegenthart & Kruikemeier, 2017). The exclusion of certain citizens from these advertisements may save political parties campaigning resources in terms of personnel and money (Dommett et al., 2024). However, this approach may be harmful to citizens due to unequal distribution of political information (Bayer, 2020) and influence citizens because the frequency of exposure to political advertisements affects their party preferences (Chu et al., 2024). Being deliberately excluded from receiving political ads makes it arguably harder for citizens to grasp the wealth of political issues or their relative importance. Information inequality could result in different groups of citizens having increasingly varying

political outlooks and might even pose challenges in reaching a consensus (Mazarr et al., 2019). While it is undisputed that there are more ways to become politically informed than via political ads on social media, disengaged citizens tend to learn about election campaigns as a by-product of spending time on social media even though they are not seeking political information there (Morris & Morris, 2013). This makes access to political content on social media important. Some level of information inequality among citizens has always existed, but the difference lies in the scale and precision with which DDC enables restricted access to political online ads. Regarding scale, DDC can leverage extensive (inferred) data points by citizens to customize the political information they see. Additionally, this data is often collected without citizens' consent. Regarding precision, advertisements can be adapted and targeted based on real-time feedback, for example by monitoring clicks (Dommett et al., 2023). While traditional media can also evaluate and adapt its content, it tends to be slower and more costly by comparison. The full extent of information asymmetries and their real-life implications remain to be fully determined. However, tech-enhanced exclusion of citizens seems to be incentivized by major platforms like Meta (Votta, 2024).

This presents a threefold problem: Firstly, while parties decide the exclusion patterns for their targeted ads, they shift some power to major corporations by using their (social media) platforms and their algorithms to display information (Klinger et al., 2023; Votta, 2024). Second, while certain discriminatory practices have been banned (e.g., targeting ethnic backgrounds; see Speicher et al., 2018), some inclusion or exclusion proxies can circumvent these bans. For example, Speicher et al. (2018, p. 8) report that targeting white individuals can be achieved by focusing on inferred interests in hiking or conservative political views, while targeting Asians on Facebook can be based on, for example, eating habits. Thirdly, insights into citizens' awareness of targeting in political advertising are emerging (Minihold et al., 2024) but opinions on being deliberately excluded remain largely unexplored. To comprehensively grasp this phenomenon, we require additional information regarding its prevalence across the political spectrum. Equally important is understanding citizens' perspectives on this issue, as they contribute data that determines their inclusion or exclusion from political information. This study thus combines insights from the Meta Ad Targeting dataset with a survey to examine (a) exclusion strategies by political parties during the Dutch 2021 and 2023 election campaigns and (b) how citizens perceive the usage of different exclusion criteria. Studying the prevalence of citizen exclusion from political information and their perceptions not only adds to the current discourse, but also sheds light on the implications of DDC. Ultimately, the technological infrastructures in which DDC is embedded might make it more difficult for citizens to access information, thereby affecting how they can participate in politics (Odzuck & Günther, 2022).

2. More Than the Flipside of Targeting

Scholars have recently shown significant interest in the potential of DDC, defined as a practice to "access and analyse voter and/or campaign data to generate insights into the campaign's target audience(s) and/or to optimize campaign interventions" (Dommett et al., 2023, p. 2). While categorizing the electorate based on party support likelihood is a longstanding campaign practice (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019), with campaign communication largely shifting online, political parties are afforded new avenues for (dis-)engagement due to a wide array of data points. Political parties can access citizens' self-reported information such as demographics, online interests, and behaviours. Moreover, they can leverage this data to infer additional online interests or identify look-alike audiences (Ghosh et al., 2019). While there are some potential upsides to tailoring messages to particular groups in order to involve them in the political process, data-driven targeting techniques tend to be perceived as posing a range of threats to citizens and society, such as

misleading voters about the true priorities of political parties (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). However, DDC practices may not always exhibit the sophistication commonly feared due to limited campaigning resources (Dommett et al., 2024). Yet, data-driven targeting and exclusion from political information occur worldwide (Votta et al., 2024). As the technological landscape makes pinpointing certain individuals easier, avoiding non-persuadable voters could be a campaign optimization strategy (Gorton, 2016). We refer to this as implicit exclusion from political information online as certain people are not being selected to view certain political content, while explicit exclusion involves deliberately withholding information from specific individuals based on predefined criteria or characteristics and is the main focus of this study.

In the scenario where Party A targets individuals interested in couscous for their campaign message, implicit exclusion occurs for those who have not been identified with this interest. This strategy risks overlooking individuals who might share the interest but have not expressed it online in a manner captured by social media algorithms. Moreover, research indicates that inferred criteria are often inaccurate in classifying users (Sabir et al., 2022). In contrast, Party B explicitly excludes people interested in couscous from seeing their campaign messages. Thus, those explicitly excluded have no opportunity to view Party B's campaign content due to their interest in couscous. However, individuals not explicitly excluded still have the chance to see the political content. Figure 1 illustrates the contrast between implicit and explicit exclusion by political parties online.

While the example of interest in couscous might seem trivial, this example illustrates how technologically-enhanced exclusion practices can manifest on online platforms. For instance, as revealed by Belgian newspaper *Apache*, a Belgian far-right party, Vlaams Belang, employed couscous as a criterion for excluding certain individuals from their campaign messages, in addition to other interests (Van Cauwenberg, 2023). While their rationale remains undisclosed, specific interests serve as workarounds when precise targeting is not possible (Speicher et al., 2018). For example, Meta does not support exclusion based on migration background or religious beliefs (as of the year 2020), but platforms like Facebook offer alternative paths to achieve similar outcomes. As political campaigning increasingly shifts online, particularly relying on the technological infrastructure of social media giants like Meta, it is crucial to scrutinize the implications of exclusion facilitated by these platforms. They wield significant influence over the accessibility of data for monitoring, evaluating, and disseminating targeted political communication (Klinger et al., 2023; Roemmele & Gibson, 2020).

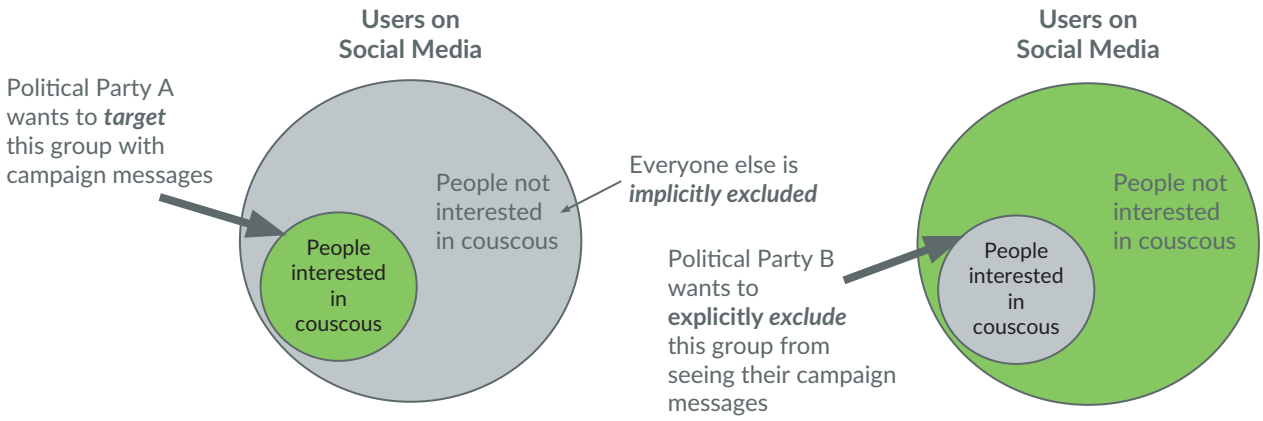

Figure 1. Implicit and Explicit Exclusion.

3. Data-Driven Exclusion and Political Orientation

Political parties decide what to post, how often to do so, and who their target audience on social media platforms should be. They are informational gatekeepers online, separate from traditional actors like news media (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020, p. 598; Stromer-Galley, 2019). For citizens, some degree of gatekeeping is important to avoid information overload. However, gatekeeping information can influence campaigns, public and political attitudes, and voting behaviour (see Soroka, 2012). Using the technological infrastructure of Meta, such as their exclusion criteria or algorithms, parties can opt to exclude citizens deemed less valuable for a political campaign (what is known as "political redlining"; Gorton, 2016; Howard, 2005). This strategy highlights the "perceived" electorate in a digital context (Hersh, 2015). Some citizens might be perceived as less "valuable" because they are less likely to vote and others are harder to classify or collect data about and are therefore more systematically excluded—or "redlined." By analyzing who political advertisers choose to target or exclude, we gain insight into how they perceive and segment the electorate and whether they view certain groups as more susceptible to their messaging. This would incentivize political parties to focus their resources on persuadable or mobilizable citizens, or target opponents to de-motivate or demobilize them. In essence, political parties engage in strategic activities that serve their campaign goals (Stromer-Galley, 2019). For example, segmentation enables parties to conduct what they may see as more cost-effective campaigns, akin to targeting specific citizens (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Additionally, excluding certain citizens from seeing potentially offensive messages may serve as a strategy to avoid backlash, particularly if the campaign message tends to be uncivil (Votta, Noroozian, et al., 2023).

The decision of whom to exclude requires parties to depend on a measure of "relevance." Meta assists campaigners in identifying relevant audiences and even provides financial incentives for engaging with them. For instance, a study on targeted ads on Meta's Facebook and Instagram revealed that individuals with lower education levels, females, and those under 24 years old are more costly for Dutch political parties to reach compared to other segments (Votta, 2024). As a result, these groups are likely to receive less political information via political ads on Meta as they are implicitly excluded.

While political redlining may be present among all political parties, parties with a pronounced out-group/in-group rhetoric might be particularly inclined to use technological infrastructure to further distinguish between citizens. This "us" vs "them" rhetoric is especially present among populist radical right parties who want to exclude non-native groups based on their cultural background (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Next to this symbolic exclusion, Filc (2009) distinguishes between material and political forms of exclusion with the latter being especially relevant for our study. The political dimension of exclusion, as articulated by Dahl (1971) and later explored by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013, p. 161), revolves around two key dimensions of democracy: "Political exclusion means that specific groups are prevented from participating (fully) in the democratic system and they are consciously not represented in the arena of public contestation." This suggests that certain groups are deliberately left out of public discussions and decision-making processes. To accomplish this in DDC, certain citizens are excluded from receiving political advertisements. Given the lack of insights into who excludes citizens and how, we ask:

> RQ1: How and by whom have citizens been excluded by political parties during the Dutch 2021 and 2023 election campaigns from political advertisements on Meta?

4. Information Asymmetry and Accepting Exclusion

Political parties serve an important function as information distributors, particularly during election campaigns. While political parties in the Netherlands use a wide range of traditional media for campaigning, such as posters and flyers, online campaigning with ads has grown in popularity in recent years due to low costs and the ability to reach large segments of the audience quickly through direct communication (Vliegenthart & Kruikemeier, 2017). Expanding on Dahl's (1971) insights into the significance of political campaigns for political participation and deliberation among citizens, Gibson, Dommett, et al. (2024b) outline three implications of political micro-targeting, a distinct manifestation of DDC, for democracy. Firstly, targeted campaign communication should promote diverse opinions and avoid false claims to ensure fair deliberation and equal participation. Secondly, it should mobilize underrepresented groups to vote and avoid discouraging participation. Lastly, targeting rules should be perceived as fair by citizens to maintain trust in the political process. Explicitly excluding citizens from receiving political content contradicts the aim of discouraging participation, as it prevents the consideration of all interests (Dahl, 1971). When a political party excludes certain citizens from receiving political information, those individuals have fewer opportunities to familiarize themselves with specific issues promoted by that party. Consequently, they may struggle to express discontent with a particular political message or issue if they are not exposed to it.

Online informational inequalities may be amplified when election campaigns occur on platforms that combine political content with personal voter data to decide where political messages are disseminated (Klinger et al., 2023, p. 111). This information asymmetry describes that some voters receive certain information in their online feed while others do not. This may not only impact open and equal communication, as not everyone is exposed to certain information on online platforms (Odzuck & Günther, 2022), but may also limit citizens' choices regarding whether or not to engage with specific political online content. This "paternalistic distinction between citizens" (Bayer, 2020, p. 10) may affect their opportunities for political participation, as some citizens are included while others are excluded. Furthermore, citizens may overestimate their understanding of DDC (Minihold et al., 2024), potentially blinding them to implications like the exclusion of individuals from seeing certain content. This limits the likelihood of citizens taking action to mitigate the implications of online information asymmetry. However, participating on specific social media platforms involves self-selection. This means that while individuals may be excluded from certain information on these platforms, they are not necessarily cut off from political information available elsewhere.

While studies examining citizens' perceptions of DDC strategies are emerging, there remains a gap in research concerning their attitudes towards data-driven exclusion. Understanding citizen perceptions is crucial, as targeting-aware individuals who hold strongly negative views toward DDC may even avoid political advertisements (Minihold et al., 2024). However, citizens seem to be more accepting of general targeting rather than being individually targeted, especially in nations with robust data protection regulations (Vliegenthart et al., 2024). Moreover, they are more positive towards advertisements from their preferred political parties, potentially reinforcing their partisan affiliations (Lavigne, 2021). Motivated reasoning suggests that partisan bias can outweigh negative attitudes (e.g., towards DDC; see Vliegenthart et al., 2024) in order to uphold party allegiance. This rationale may also extend to accepting DDC exclusion, especially if it is implemented by a favoured political party. We thus ask:

RQ2: How do citizens perceive the usage of different types of exclusion criteria by their favoured party on Meta?

Acceptance of various inequalities, particularly in terms of class, gender, sexuality, and immigration/ethnicity, is associated with a right-wing orientation, particularly evident in the Netherlands and Croatia (Lindqvist, 2024). However, the degree of acceptance of informational inequality among individuals with differing political orientations remains ambiguous. Nevertheless, citizens leaning towards the right tend to exhibit greater tolerance towards various political microtargeting strategies (Gibson, Bon, & Dommett, 2024a), which may extend to the exclusion of certain citizens based on specific characteristics. We hypothesize that:

H1: Individuals who lean towards right-wing ideologies are more likely to accept exclusion in political advertisements by their preferred political party.

5. Method

5.1. Sample

We relied on the Meta Ad Targeting dataset from 2021 and 2023 and on an online survey collected before the Dutch 2023 general election (Meta, 2022a). The Meta Ad Targeting dataset is an enriched copy of Meta ad library data, updated monthly, and includes additional variables specific to targeting and exclusion criteria employed by political advertisers. For a detailed description of these additional variables, consult the official documentation (Meta, 2022b).

We collected 25,442 political ads one month before election day that ran on both or either Facebook, 6.6m users in 2024 or a third of the Dutch population (Statista, n.d.) and Instagram (4.7m users) from 478 official accounts affiliated with one of a total of 18 Dutch political parties in our sample. Which Facebook and Instagram account belongs to which political party has been hand-coded using previous data collected during the 2021 parliamentary election (Dutch Election Observatory, n.d.) as well as in collaboration with Who Targets Me (https://whotargets.me/en). Collectively, we can thus estimate that 4 million euros was spent in both the Dutch 2021 (2.53 million) and 2023 (1.42 million) election campaigns. The ads placed by political parties were seen at least 481 million times (i.e., here we use the lower bound of impressions), meaning that each resident in the Netherlands saw an ad 27 times on average, though in practice a smaller fraction is likely to have seen a majority of these ads.

The survey was conducted in the Netherlands by I&O Research and approved by the Ethics Review Board at Wageningen University and Research (filed as 2023-047). This dataset is from a larger research project using a seven-wave panel survey study. We analyze data from a single wave. The data was collected in mid-October 2024. After listwise deletion of non-response variables, the final sample ($N = 1379$) consists of 44.7% female respondents. On average the respondents were between 50 and 64 years old, 28.9% had lower education, 31.8% had middle education, and 39.3% had higher education; the sample is at large representative of the Dutch population in regard to gender, age (18+), regions, and education.

6. Measures

This study uses two data sources: The Meta Ad Targeting dataset and a survey study. Detailed information about both datasets, as well as detailed measures, can be found in the Supplementary File.

6.1. Meta Ad Targeting Dataset

6.1.1. Dependent Variables

The Meta Ad Targeting dataset includes seven categories: age, gender, and languages can only be used for targeting while custom audiences, lookalike audiences, place of residence, and detailed criteria can be used for both targeting and exclusion. The "detailed" criteria (as Meta calls these criteria in their ad manager) encompass a diverse range of inferred-interest categories, online behaviours, educational levels, and relationship statuses, and they can be found listed in the "include" and "exclude" variables in the Meta Ad Targeting dataset (Meta, 2022a). The criteria listed under the variable "include" are audiences that were specifically selected and targeted (this is what we refer to as "implicit exclusion," as those that are not targeted are consequently excluded); the criteria listed under "exclude" are those that were deliberately left out, or what we refer to as "explicit exclusion" throughout the article. These variables include potentially sensitive criteria such as individuals interested in "Jesus," indicating religious viewpoints, and past location data, like individuals who previously lived in Morocco, suggesting a Moroccan migration background. To identify these "proxies" (Speicher et al., 2018) for sensitive targeting criteria, we analyzed all 1527 detailed criteria used during the 2021 and 2023 election campaigns and manually categorized them based on their likely intent. We developed a codebook (see Supplementary File) focusing on five items asked in our survey, with adaptations based on coding observations. Categories included general interest in politics (without revealing political viewpoints), other demographics beyond age, gender, or location, and a broader "other" category. Initially, two authors coded the top 200 criteria independently with a satisfactory intercoder reliability of 0.83 (Krippendorff's Alpha). Disagreements in codes were resolved, and the remaining 1327 criteria were coded collaboratively, which involved going over the list of targeting and exclusion criteria and annotating them together, ensuring consensus. Our final analyses use the categories age, gender, and place of residence from the Meta Ad Targeting dataset and the manually coded proxies for migration background, political viewpoints, and religious beliefs based on Meta's "detailed" targeting and exclusion criteria.

Since the Meta Ad Targeting dataset only offers spending within broad boundaries (e.g., 0 to 99 euros spent on an individual ad), we calculate the median value between each spending pair. To determine the share of the total budget allocated to exclusion criteria for each party (as well as overall), we divide the median spending by the total spending. An ad is considered to implicitly exclude citizens if it employs at least one targeting criterion beyond the default demographics, which encompass all adult (18+) citizens, regardless of gender, and from every region of the Netherlands. Conversely, an ad is classified as explicitly excluding if it uses any exclusion criteria.

6.2. National Survey

6.2.1. Dependent Variable

To measure citizens' acceptability of exclusion, we employed a battery of five items, similar to those used by Kozyreva et al. (2021) and Dommett et al. (2022). Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of their preferred political party excluding other citizens based on their (a) age and gender, (b) place of residence, (c) migration background, (d) political views, and (e) religious beliefs from political messages and advertisements online on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = *totally unacceptable* to 7 = *totally acceptable*). Opting for five exclusion categories allows us to cover a spectrum from highly sensitive to less sensitive information, encompassing data likely to be either self-reported or inferred. The items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.91; $M = 2.30$; $SD = 1.45$). Furthermore, we treated each exclusion criterion as a separate outcome variable to be predicted.

6.2.2. Independent Variable

To measure the political orientation of respondents, we asked how they would place themselves on a scale from 1 (*left-leaning*) to 11 (*right-leaning*; $M = 3.34$; $SD = 2.77$).

6.2.3. Controls

We controlled for the respondents' age, gender, education, and trust in the government, media, parliament, and democracy (trust index: $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.32$, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.86).

7. Results

7.1. Who Excludes and How

We first examine differences in the allocation of budget for the implicit and explicit exclusion of citizens by political parties during the Dutch 2021 and 2023 election campaigns on Meta platforms (Figure 2). Notably, from 2021 to 2023, there is a substantial decline in budget allocation towards age and place of residence, with percentages dropping from 37.3% to 31.3% and 55.8% to 35.9%, respectively. This suggests a decreasing focus on these demographics over time. More detailed targeting criteria such as political viewpoints (e.g., interests in veganism), migration background (e.g., Surinam), and religious beliefs (e.g., Halal) are comparatively rare. For more details on what exact targeting criteria political parties were using, the reader is encouraged to visit the election dashboard created by one of the authors (Votta, Hofman, et al., 2023).

Figure 3 presents the percentage of total party budgets spent on implicit and explicit exclusion from political advertisements on Meta by various Dutch political parties during the 2021 and 2023 elections. The parties are arranged from left to right ideologically. For both election years, the graph highlights significant variances in budget allocation towards exclusion strategies across different categories. Notably, the data shows that parties across the political spectrum are focusing heavily on particular age groups and places of residence (e.g., postal codes or one of the Dutch provinces). However, if we look beyond those five exclusion categories that align with the survey data, we see that exclusion based on custom audiences and lookalike audiences is also fairly

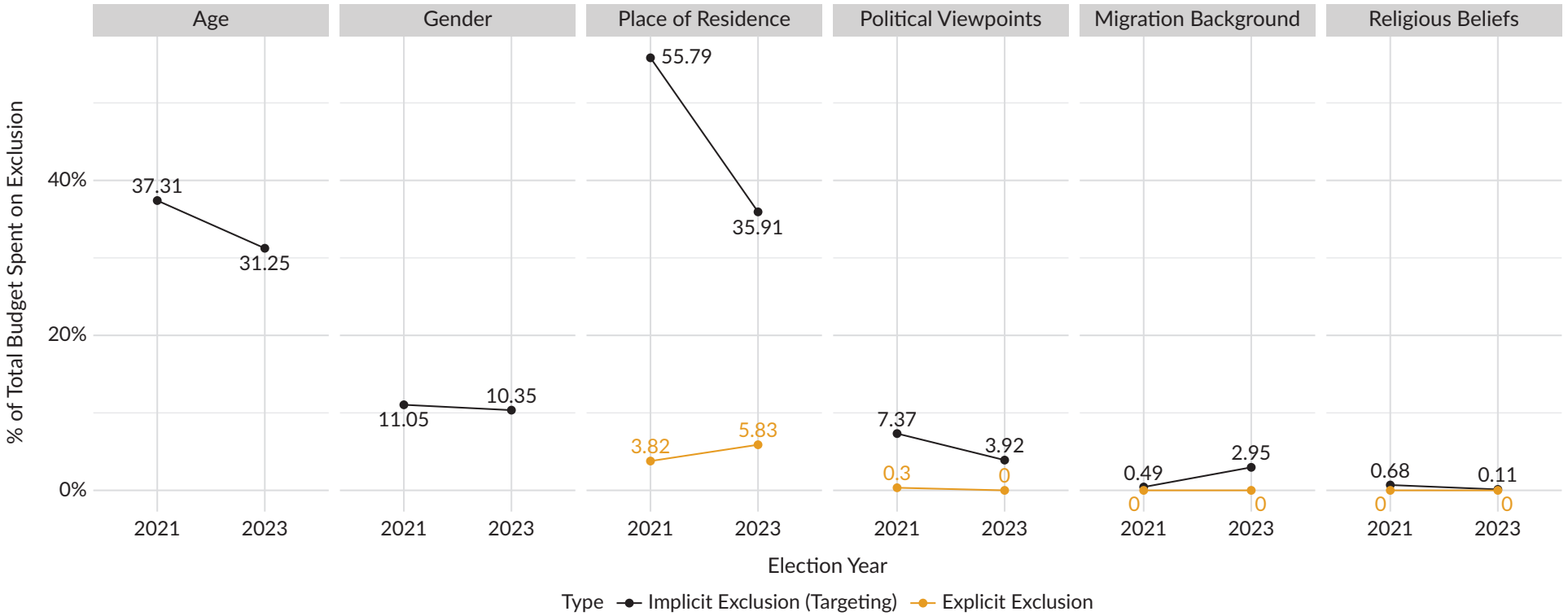

Figure 2. Election budgets spent on exclusion strategies. Notes: Age and gender can only be targeted directly by choosing specific age groups or genders (or none); there is no option to explicitly exclude based on the given age and gender categories on Meta and that is why there are no explicit exclusion lines for either age or gender in the graph.

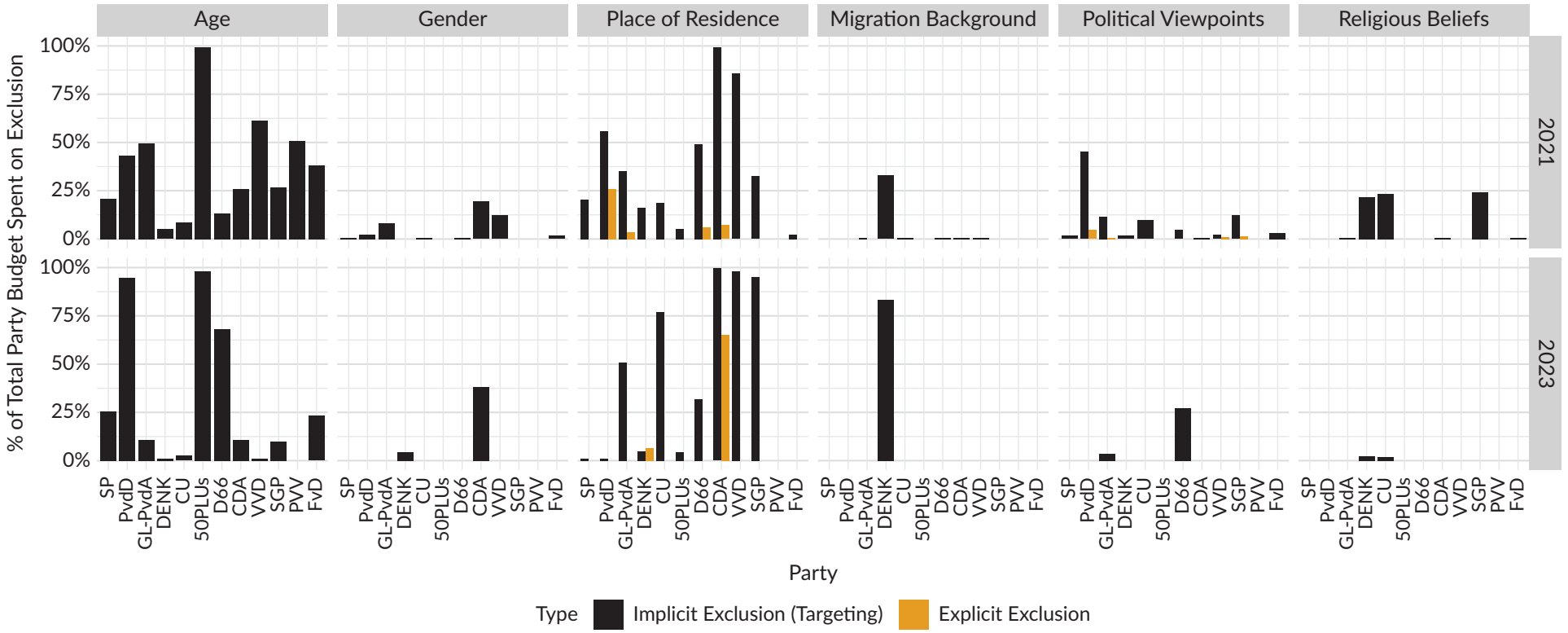

Figure 3. Budgets spent on exclusion strategies per party. Notes: Age and gender can only be targeted directly by choosing specific age groups or genders (or none); there is no option to explicitly exclude based on the given age and gender categories on Meta and that is why there are no explicit exclusion bars for either age or gender in the graph.

common (up to 32% of total budgets; see Supplementary File, Figure C2). Custom and lookalike audiences can be seen as more sophisticated targeting methods that are not possible to use via traditional targeting methods. Custom audiences include lists of information such as phone numbers, or e-mail addresses which can be matched with the Meta user base in order to find these particular individuals on the platform to target or exclude them from political messages. Lookalike audiences are algorithms employed by Meta to find users with similar characteristics as the provided custom audiences to target or exclude them (Bossetta, 2018).

7.2. Who Accepts Exclusion

Next, we examine the survey data collected during the 2023 Dutch election to examine who is more accepting of excluding specific demographic groups from political advertisements. The distribution shapes and central tendencies in Figure 4 highlight the relative convergence of social acceptability across various exclusion categories. While all exclusion is seen as relatively unacceptable, there are some important differences to highlight.

For instance, exclusion based on migration background is largely viewed as unacceptable, reflected in the highest disapproval at 80.1% ($M = 2.14$). In contrast, political views, while still generally viewed unfavourably for exclusion, evoke a less intense reaction, with 67.4% deeming it unacceptable ($M = 2.61$). While still skewed towards unacceptability, we note a broader spread across the scale compared to other categories. This understanding of public sentiment underscores a heightened acceptance of exclusion based on political alignment, potentially because of its direct relevance to the context of political advertisements. Nonetheless, the overall trend across all categories underscores a societal preference for inclusive rather than exclusive approaches in political advertising. Overtly discriminatory strategies based on inherent personal characteristics are broadly rejected by the public, even if they are done by their own preferred political party.

To test whether individuals who lean towards right-wing ideologies are more likely to accept exclusion in political advertisements by their preferred political party (H1), we run two models. Table 1 shows two linear

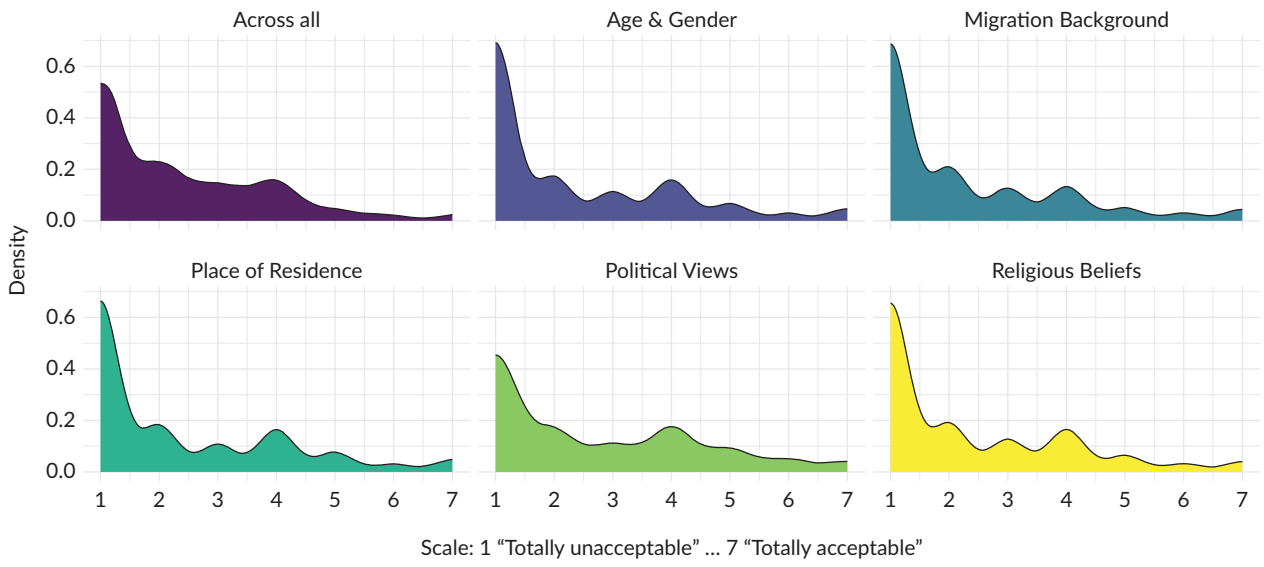

Figure 4. Distributions of acceptability ratings per exclusion criteria.

regressions used to analyze the acceptability index. In Model 1 we control for age, gender, education, and general trust. Model 2 extends this analysis by incorporating the left-right self-placement of respondents as an additional predictor. Right-leaning individuals tend to be more accepting of exclusion (b = 0.06, SE = 0.01, $p < 0.001$). Examining the five exclusion categories—age and gender, place of residence, migration background, political views, and religious beliefs separately—we notice a significant trend: Individuals leaning towards the political right exhibit a notable acceptance of exclusion based on migration background (see Figure 5).

Table 1. Linear Regression Models Predicting Acceptability of Exclusion.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	M	(*SD*)	*M*	(*SD*)
(Intercept)	3.77 ***	(0.20)	3.35 ***	(0.22)
Age 25–34	–0.32	(0.16)	–0.32	(0.16)
Age 35–49	–0.66 ***	(0.16)	–0.67 ***	(0.16)
Age 50–64	–1.21 ***	(0.15)	–1.24 ***	(0.15)
Age 65+	–1.52 ***	(0.15)	–1.53 ***	(0.15)
Female	–0.27 ***	(0.07)	–0.23 **	(0.08)
Gender neutral	–1.17	(1.37)	–0.96	(1.36)
Middle education	–0.03	(0.10)	–0.04	(0.10)
High education	–0.08	(0.11)	–0.04	(0.11)
Trust index	–0.07 *	(0.03)	–0.04	(0.03)
left/right placement			0.06 ***	(0.01)
Adj. R^2	0.12		0.13	

Notes: N = 1379; age category: 18–24 is the reference category; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

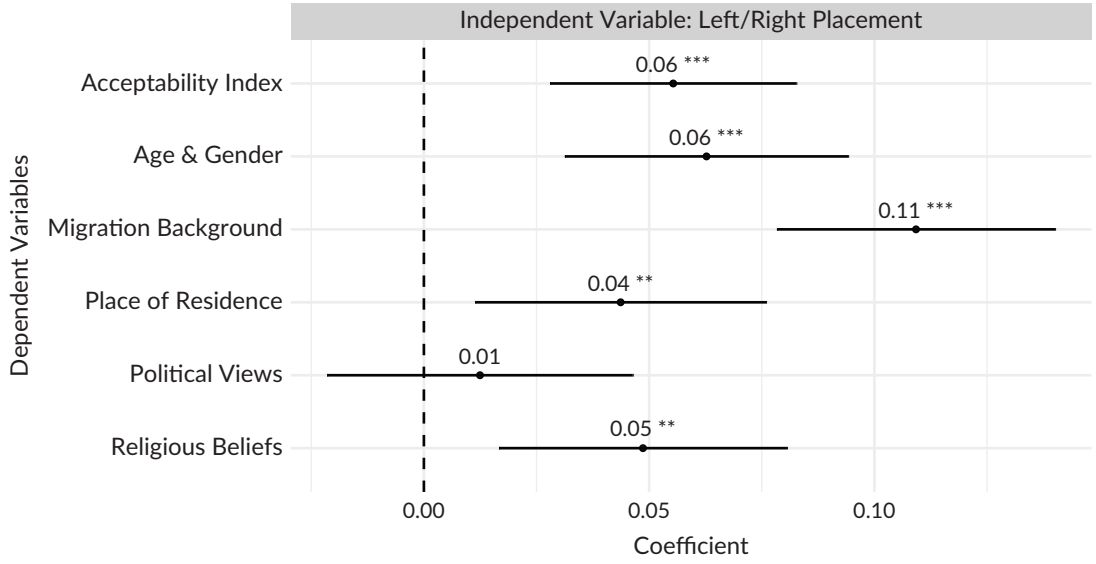

Figure 5. Predicting acceptance of various exclusion categories using citizens' political left/right placement. Notes: Graph shows separate linear regression models, using each a different acceptability of exclusions as dependent variable but the same left/right placement independent variable; model controlled for age, gender, education, and general trust of participants; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

This article investigates how political parties use citizens' data on Facebook and Instagram to exclude citizens and explores how citizens perceive this exclusion. By employing a novel methodological approach that integrates the Meta Ad Targeting dataset from 2021 and 2023 with survey responses collected before the Dutch general election of 2023, this article not only scrutinizes party practices but also contrasts them with the perspectives of potentially affected citizens.

We found that Dutch parties across the political spectrum use citizens' data to decide who gets to see which political advertisement on Instagram and Facebook and who does not. However, this practice was more prevalent in 2021 than in 2023. Few parties explicitly exclude specific citizens, with the majority adopting a more implicit approach by refraining from targeting certain citizens. Detailed exclusion criteria such as using citizens' political viewpoints, migration background, and religious beliefs are rarely used by political parties. However, our study reveals a growing trend in the use of "custom audiences" for the intentional exclusion of specific citizen groups. While citizens generally deem all forms of exclusion (based on age and gender, place of residence, migration background, and religious background) unacceptable, they consider exclusion based on political views to be the most acceptable. Interestingly, citizens who describe themselves as politically right-leaning are more accepting of exclusion overall, especially of excluding citizens based on their migration background.

Two insights emerge from our examination of party practices in excluding citizens from viewing online political campaign messages and advertisements based on their data. Firstly, we observe that political parties overall spend less budget on implicitly excluding (targeting) specific demographic groups in 2023 compared to 2021, especially based on age, gender, location, political views, and religious beliefs in their campaigns on Facebook and Instagram. Exclusion based on more sensitive data rarely happens. While this may suggest a change in strategy or priorities in how parties engage with voters, it is plausible that newly introduced targeting regulations, such as the DSA, prompt parties to adapt their behaviour during their 2023 campaign compared to 2021. Additionally, increased public awareness surrounding the topic of targeting may have made most Dutch parties cautious of engaging in DDC, as issues related to privacy protection and transparency are widely discussed (Gibson, Bon, & Römmele, 2023). Secondly, more detailed exclusion criteria, such as political viewpoints, migration background, and religious beliefs, are rarely employed, with one notable exception being the Dutch party DENK. This party, which specifically targets citizens with a migration background, increased its budget allocation to implicitly exclude (i.e., target) certain citizens based on migration background. However, overall, parties are less likely to use more detailed criteria when excluding or targeting citizens in their online advertising campaigns. This is in line with previous research that sophisticated targeting rarely happens due to limited party funds or personnel (Dommett et al., 2024) and simple targeting and exclusion prevails (Votta et al., 2024).

In the second part of this study, we explore how citizens perceive the exclusion of others by their preferred political party. Firstly, citizens overwhelmingly consider it unacceptable to exclude others based on their characteristics, with the strongest aversion to exclusion based on migration background (80%) and the least aversion to political views (67%). This finding aligns with previous research (Dommett et al., 2022; Kozyreva et al., 2021) and suggests that exclusion based on political views may seem more reasonable to citizens, as it is more closely tied to political advertising practices, potentially leading to it being viewed as more

acceptable. Secondly, we find that individuals on the right end of the political spectrum generally find exclusion more acceptable, particularly when it involves excluding other citizens based on their migration background. This finding is important as it underscores how political ideologies can shape attitudes toward exclusionary practices within the context of data-driven political advertising. Specifically, it suggests that while some individuals might find it acceptable to exclude certain groups from political advertisements, this acceptance could also reflect a broader willingness to exclude these groups from public discussions based on their migration background. Contrary to our findings, Kozyreva et al. (2021) found no difference in attitudes towards algorithmic personalization based on political leanings. However, it is possible that referencing the exclusion by "your preferred party" in our question may have triggered in-group/out-group thinking among respondents as explained through social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This effect seems to be particularly pronounced among right-wing partisans, whose preferred parties often promote polarized "us vs. them" rhetoric (Mudde, 2007).

8.1. Limitations and Future Research

While this study employs a methodologically advanced and unique approach to examining exclusion in DDC, it is not without its limitations. The categorization of the "detailed targeting criteria" into the five exclusion characteristics was done carefully to avoid attributing undue meaning to certain criteria. However, we cannot be completely certain about the motivations behind every exclusion criterion used by political parties, nor who is targeted or excluded using "custom audiences" as this would require qualitative interviews with campaigners. As a result, we categorised many exclusion criteria as "other" as their meaning could not be confidently determined. Legislation like the recently adopted TTPA, which reaffirms the necessity for adequate ad transparency measures, along with the planned European ad repository, could provide more opportunities to study targeting and exclusion strategies also between social media platforms (van Drunen et al., 2022). Furthermore, our study focused exclusively on the acceptability of exclusion by preferred parties. While this provides valuable insights, future research could broaden the scope by comparing it with the acceptance of exclusion by other political parties. We find that "custom audiences" are increasingly used to explicitly exclude certain citizens. Unfortunately, we lack information about the composition of these "custom audiences," as this knowledge is confined to Meta and the political parties using them. While it would certainly be interesting to unpack these custom audiences in future research, it is likely they will remain a black box. Nevertheless, future research could investigate another important aspect that we were unable to study: the extent of information asymmetry caused by exclusion practices and its actual impact on citizens. This is important because understanding how exclusion influences the distribution of information can reveal potential biases in citizens' knowledge and perceptions, with implications for democratic processes and social cohesion.

Overall, our findings highlight the prevalence of exclusion over time and across various political parties. While our study indicates that exclusion proxies may be used to circumvent bans on discriminatory targeting practices, it also suggests that parties infrequently employ sensitive exclusion criteria. However, ultimately, we need better transparency measures to assess this more accurately, especially in regards to custom audiences. Moreover, although citizens generally oppose such exclusions, there are nuanced differences in attitudes based on party affiliations. Despite ongoing concerns about the power dynamics in political communication on digital platforms, our study offers a hopeful perspective, noting a possible positive impact of stricter regulations implemented in recent years. Thus, our research contributes to the ongoing discussion

on the unintended consequences of data-driven campaigns. Future studies could build on these insights by assessing the effectiveness of regulatory measures and investigating how various exclusion practices—beyond those related to personal interests such as favorite sports teams or dietary preferences—affect democratic engagement.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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