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Western Balkans University, Albania
Philippe Rochat,
Liechtenstein Institute, Liechtenstein

*CORRESPONDENCE
Andrew Barclay
✉ andrew.barclay@sheffield.ac.uk

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Mapping public attitudes toward the regulation of data-driven campaigning across five democracies

Glenn Kefford[1], Andrew Barclay[2]* and Simon Kruschinski[3]

[1]Independent Researcher, Brisbane, QLD, Australia, [2]The School of Sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom, [3]GESIS - Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Cologne, Germany

Introduction: After a number of high-profile scandals, there have been heightened focus on the way political organizations such as political parties use data and technology as part of their election campaigning activities. This has been reflected not only in the scholarly literature, and in popular commentary in the media but, most importantly, policymakers across the democratic world have increasingly been devising legislation and regulation to offset perceived harms and to limit perceived problematic practice. In this article, we contribute to the burgeoning literature which seeks to understand how democratic citizens cross-nationally perceive data-driven campaign practices.

Methods: Drawing on original survey data, we show how respondents (n = 5040) from five advanced democracies (Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany), perceive data-driven campaigning, and whether various regulatory responses should be imposed, using descriptive data and linear models.

Results: We demonstrate that there is considerable unease with some of the practices now commonplace in the campaigning practices of political parties, although attitudes toward the regulation of DDC differs between countries and citizens. In particular we show that respondents from Germany are distinctive in both their opposition to data-driven practices, but also in their opposition to the regulation of political parties.

Discussion: These findings point to the need for regulation to be tailored to national contexts and for organizations such as political parties that use these practices to better communicate with citizens why and how they use these practices.

KEYWORDS

data-driven campaigning, election campaigns, electoral regulation, microtargeting, policy preferences

Introduction

Interest in the use of data in election campaigns has grown significantly in recent years. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, data privacy breaches and new tools made available by social media companies, have all contributed to increased academic and policymaker attention toward so called Data-Driven Campaigning (DDC) practices (Kefford et al., 2023; Dommett et al., 2024b), especially political microtargeting (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018) and voter profiling (Gorton, 2016). Whilst some scholars and commentators have pointed to the possible benefits of campaigns using data in facilitating better

quality communication between parties and voters (Dommett et al., 2024b), far more common have been arguments that these practices endanger liberal democracy. This includes arguments that DDC can undermine voter privacy (Bennett, 2013), encourage subversive campaign tactics (Montigny et al., 2019), fragment the public sphere (Gorton, 2016) and incentivise divisive campaign messages (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018).

This anxiety has moved considerably beyond academic theorizing. In fact, it has increasingly underpinned policy debates, with policymakers across the democratic world advocating for strong regulatory responses to the perceived threats associated with DDC, and to limit the perceived harms of these practices Information Commissioner's Office, 2020; Lomas, 2022; Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2019) Indeed, in 2022, the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), Wojciech Wiewiórowski, called for a "full ban of microtargeting for political purposes" European Data Protection Supervisor, 2022, p. 13). Within this context, strikingly little attention has been paid to what citizens think about political parties using their personal data,[1] and even less research has examined voters' attitudes to the type of regulation that they would like to see introduced. This is important for a number of key reasons. First, we do not know what citizens cross-nationally perceive to be problematic about campaigns using data. Are publics broadly consistent in their views of what should and what should not be allowed in this area, or are these varied due to differences in how political parties use data, or perhaps also due to national level norms such as different historical approaches to regulation and the role of the state? This is especially significant given that in some geographic regions, such as Western Europe, regulatory frameworks are a combination of the supranational, most notably European Union regulations, and national level regulations (Brkan, 2022). Second, we do not know whether the various regulatory frameworks proposed, or in some cases have been introduced, are consistent with how citizens would want these practices to be addressed, if at all. Put simply, we have limited understanding of how citizens view these practices and the hypothetical and actual regulation of these practices at the national level, and almost nothing at the cross-national level. This is problematic not only for scholarly understanding but also for the implementation of regulation of election campaigns.

To deepen understanding of how citizens perceive DDC by political parties and to evaluate regulatory responses, we draw on a cross-national survey ($n = 5{,}040$) in five advanced democracies; Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, the United States (US) and Germany. We have three central research questions driving this exploratory analysis. First, what do citizens cross-nationally perceive to be problematic DDC practice? Second, what are the sources of individual-level variation in terms of these attitudes? Finally, how do citizens' attitudes toward the regulation of DDC vary cross-nationally? Presenting new data, we offer new comparative insight into public attitudes toward DDC by political parties. In doing so we demonstrate significant differences in what is perceived to be problematic practice and the types of regulatory responses citizens favor. These findings make a significant contribution to our understanding of DDC, and especially the demand-side for regulatory intervention. In particular, they demonstrate important variations cross-nationally in both perceptions of problematic practice and preferences around potential regulatory responses to address them.

Citizen data, campaigning and democracy

Election campaigns are increasingly described as data-driven. This term encompasses a range of different ways in which parties harness data within their campaigns (Dommett et al., 2024a), but typically it has focused on how parties collect various forms of data on voters to target them with specific messages (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Rubinstein, 2014), especially on social media platforms (Bennett, 2015; Bossetta, 2018; Harker, 2020). As popular knowledge of DDC increased in earnest, especially in the aftermath of the Obama presidential campaigns, these practices were initially perceived as a significant yet benign innovation (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). More recently, however, DDC has increasingly been framed as presenting a series of potential harms to democratic societies. The increasing usage of personal data and digital technology is said to be posing threats to individual citizens as well as potentially undermining the quality of the democratic process more broadly (Bennett and Lyon, 2019). These threats are myriad, but a particularly prominent example is the risk presented to citizens' privacy, in a process Bennett refers to as "voter surveillance" (2013, p.2). Such concerns were amplified by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where the data of millions of Facebook users was said to have been "harvested" and "exploited" by the company to understand their preferences without their knowledge or consent (Susser et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the fact that some of the specific claims of Cambridge Analytica appear to have been exaggerated Information Commissioner's Office, 2020, they nevertheless are illustrative of a growing concern that political campaigns are going to greater lengths to gather personal data in a manner which could be perceived as invasive. Alongside privacy, a related concern is that voters are frequently unaware about which of their data parties possess, how they have acquired and how they use it. This lack of transparency has the potential to create confusion, sow discord and reduce trust in key institutions such as political parties (Montigny et al., 2019).

At a societal level, DDC presents a series of potential harms to the political process which are rooted in the fragmentation of democracy and political engagement. There is, for example, the risk of so-called political redlining (Cotter et al., 2021), or in effect excluding a larger number of voters as parties are able to better identify the voters which are most strategically important to their success. More generally, Gorton (2016) has argued that more fine grained targeting online allows parties to in effect bypass the public deliberation that would arise when campaign messages are exposed to the wider electorate. This is arguably a democratic harm in and of itself as it encourages parties to withdraw from their role as participants within the "marketplace of ideas" (Ferree et al., 2002), but it also has the additional effect of creating new incentives for their campaigns to be actively harmful. By avoiding a level of

1 Notable exceptions to this include Gibson et al., 2024 and Kozyreva et al. (2021).

public scrutiny and being able to communicate specific messages to specific voters, political parties are said to be emboldened to include more emotive and divisive messages in their campaigns (Bennett and Lyon, 2019; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018), and this could extend to employing misinformation and disinformation (Jamieson, 2013; Morgan, 2018). Elsewhere, some have suggested that the added importance of technology and data scientists risks the "outsourcing" of political activity to professionals and provides social media platforms with increased political power, thereby undermining the role of political parties as democratic bodies (Tufekci, 2014; Gibson et al., 2024). Similarly, advancements in AI raise concerns that the technology provides parties with the capacity to easily and cheaply detect the issues which can most effectively persuade voters without any human agency (Hackenburg and Margetts, 2024).

In response to these perceived harms, academics and policymakers across the democratic world have increasingly been devising legislation and regulation to offset them (Kettemann, 2020). While not always directly relating to campaign practices by political parties, some legislative efforts have already been made to curtail "problematic" data use. The best example of this is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) introduced by the European Union in 2018, which is generally regarded as the most comprehensive and restrictive data protection framework currently *in situ* worldwide (Hankey et al., 2018). The EU has continued to introduce a series of other proposals more recently in an attempt to regulate other aspects of DDC beyond data protection through a Proposal on Transparency and the Digital Services Act (DSA; Brkan, 2022). The proposal on transparency places an obligation on advertisers to indicate that their ad is political in nature, and give information about who sponsored it (Brkan, 2022). Beyond this transparency measure, it also prohibits targeting on the basis of special categories of personal data without expressed consent, although there is an ongoing discussion as to the extent to which political ads should be at least partially exempt (Brkan, 2022, p. 367). Similarly, the recently adopted Digital Services Act also adds to GDPR by ensuring that the recipients of targeting can identify: i) that a message is an ad; ii) who the ad is for; and, iii) information about why they are being shown a particular ad (Digital Services Act 2022). The DSA also requires large online platforms to create a repository of ads which they publish, and encourages them to contribute to a code of conduct establishing good practice (Brkan, 2022). Last, the European Union has introduced a new regulation aimed at enhancing the transparency and targeting of political advertising to counteract information manipulation and foreign interference in elections (European Parliament, 2024). This regulation mandates that political advertisements must include a transparency label and a readily accessible transparency notice, clearly identifying the advertisement and providing essential information such as the sponsor, related election or referendum, financial details, and any targeting techniques used. Data used for targeting must be collected directly from individuals, who must provide explicit consent for its use in political advertising. Additionally, sensitive personal data, such as those revealing racial or ethnic origins or political opinions, are prohibited from being used for profiling. These measures are designed to safeguard the right to privacy and uphold the freedoms of opinion and speech, ensuring that political advertising is conducted transparently and ethically within the EU.

By the standards evident in many mature democracies, these developments at the supranational level represent a notably interventionist approach to legally curtail the suggested threats posed by DDC. As an example of this, the United Kingdom - who have adopted GDPR almost in its entirety as a part of British law despite no longer being an EU member state (UK GDPR 2018) - exempt political parties from the restrictions on targeting using personal data (Barclay et al., 2023). Elsewhere, many other countries give political parties much more room to campaign using voters' personal data. Australian parties, for example, are almost entirely exempt from the country's privacy laws, and this has significant implications for targeting (Kefford, 2021). Campaigns in the US work in uniquely favorable conditions as their freedom to campaign is protected under the First Amendment of the US Constitution (Rubinstein, 2014; Bennett, 2016), and data held by third parties is not covered by privacy law (Bennett, 2016). Canadian parties do not have their rights enshrined in the same way as their US counterparts, but in practice are very similar to those operating in the Australian system in that political parties are not meaningfully constrained in using data for political purposes (Dommett et al., 2024b; Kefford, 2021).

Put differently, DDC is currently regulated considerably more robustly in the EU compared to other mature democracies. However, the calls for greater regulation around data usage remain strong and widespread outside of the EU. As Dommett (2019) has noted, the principle data protection authority in the UK launched an enquiry into the ways in which data analytics can be harmful for British democracy Information Commissioner's Office, 2020, and similar concerns were expressed by Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics (2018), and the US Senate Select Committee on U. S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2017. In other words, while the EU have been by some distance the most proactive actor when it comes to offsetting the perceived harms associated with DDC, it is an active concern for lawmakers elsewhere, even in countries where presently there is little regulation in situ.

Within this context, there have only been a small number of quantitative studies examining citizens' views toward DDC, and those which exist tend to focus on the US (Turow et al., 2012; McCarthy, 2020). For example, Pew Research Centre, 2020 has shown that a large majority of US citizens have a negative view of social media platforms showing political ads on the basis of the data they hold on their users. Indeed, a survey in the same year also showed that a majority of US voters were against any form of political advertising being hosted on Facebook (McCarthy, 2020). Emerging academic research indicates that this skepticism is not simply a US phenomenon (Gibson et al., 2024), however, and there is good reason to think that attitudes are likely to be different outside the US.

Even if one were to assume that attitudes toward parties using data were universally negative (which they are not), there are reasons why citizens might simultaneously oppose further regulation to be introduced. In particular, there is the concern that restricting parties' ability to direct messages toward particular groups using their data infringes upon their freedom to communicate with voters, a trade off which is recognized by, for example, the Council of Europe (2022). Furthermore, there is scope for citizens to want greater regulation for certain specific features of DDC, whilst opposing regulation in other respects.

There are also reasons to expect that attitudes toward regulation may vary according to individual level factors. For example, recent scholarship has demonstrated that both younger and male citizens in the US are more open to microtargeting (Gibson et al., 2024). The same study also indicated that partisan alignment was an important predictor of acceptability, in that right-leaning voters were more open to microtargeting. Comparative research has found that these relationships are also borne out in twenty-five other democracies across the globe (Vliegenthart et al., 2024). Moreover, the typology of the literacy of data-campaigning developed by Minihold et al. (2025) showed that of German citizens, older cohorts are more likely to have both lower acceptance and knowledge about microtargeting, but that there are no significant gender effects for either awareness or acceptance.

However, there remain questions about whether these relationships i) hold for attitudes toward the use of DDC and its regulation, and ii) whether they vary across citizens or countries. This is particularly so when it comes to ideology, and how this relates to the role of the state as a safeguard for voters' privacy. Views toward the scope of the state in intervening in economic activity and individual's behavior is central to citizens' political ideology, with those on the political right typically being more opposed to intervention. But the strength of this link and its salience in dividing citizens is not uniform across different contexts. In the US, for example, attitudes concerning freedom of the individual and distrust of government intervention are highly politically salient and are important in shaping its laissez-faire data-protection regulatory regime (Bygrave, 2010). Such norms are not as widespread in European countries by contrast, where data-protection regimes have tended to be more robust, and attitudes toward the importance of individual privacy play less of a role (Bygrave, 2010). Taking this into consideration, we would anticipate that citizens' ideology would shape attitudes to DDC and its regulation differently across different contexts. Moreover, it also illustrates the possibility for voters to be both opposed to DDC on privacy grounds, whilst simultaneously being against its regulation because of a broader skepticism of the role of the state in restricting how political parties should be able to campaign. Taken together, this demonstrates the need to first, understand, what voters perceive to be problematic practice, and then second, to determine what measures they would like introduced to deal with these perceived problems.

With this in mind, our analysis is guided by the following research questions:

(RQ1) What do citizens perceive to be problematic about DDC?

(RQ2) What individual level characteristics predict variation in attitudes toward the regulation of DDC?

(RQ3) To what extent do perceptions of DDC and its regulation vary between countries

Data, cases and method

Our analysis relies on data from a survey fielded in five advanced democracies, exploring public perceptions of DDC practices and regulatory proposals. The data consisted of a total of $N = 5{,}040$ respondents in Australia ($n = 1{,}003$), Canada ($n = 1{,}002$), Germany ($n = 1{,}012$), the UK ($n = 1{,}023$), and the US ($n = 1{,}000$). The online survey ran from the 4th to the 7th September 2021 and was distributed by Lucid. The response rate was 70%, and the data was stratified on age, gender and education level to ensure that the country samples are comparable to the general population of each country.

The survey contained a range of items designed to capture citizen's knowledge and perceptions of political parties using data. Each of these were asked through a 5-point likert scale from 1 (e.g., strongly disagree; completely unacceptable) to 5 (e.g., strongly agree; completely acceptable). "Middle" response categories were labeled "undecided," given the absence of a don't know option, allowing respondents a non-directional response. To measure awareness toward DDC, we asked how likely it was that parties were using data for campaign practices, such as audience analytics, or targeting. General acceptability of DDC was measured by asking respondents about their broader stance toward parties collecting data for political purposes across five items. More specifically, we asked how acceptable it was to collect nine different types of personal data, as well as the acceptability of four different modes of data collection (i.e. from face-to-face contact, from being purchased from third parties etc.). To measure respondents' support for regulatory proposals for DDC, we asked respondents the extent to which political campaigning should be exempt from regulation on free speech grounds, and then were asked to indicate the importance of five regulatory responses on a 5-point scale (1 - very unimportant; 5 - very important). Those who indicated strongly that they were opposed to regulation in the first item were assumed to be against any of the specific regulatory measures. Sociodemographic information about the age, gender, location, party preference, and political ideology (1 - extreme left; 10 - extreme right) of respondents were also collected.

As well as presenting aggregate perceptions of DDC between countries, we also conduct a series of linear regression models which predict support for different measures that governments could take to regulate DDC. These include banning parties from buying personal data, requiring greater transparency, mandating political ads to be fact checked, limiting spending on political ads and requiring online ads from parties to be clearly marked. We use age, gender and ideological position (self-declared on a 0–10 scale) as independent variables, and we also examine interactions between countries and ideological position. Whilst we acknowledge that our outcome variables are strictly ordinal, the use of parametric statistics with likert scales such as our outcome variables have been shown to be appropriate (Norman, 2010).

The country cases were selected for a number of key reasons. First and foremost, while similar in many ways, they exhibit significant variation on key systemic and regulatory dimensions. This allows us to investigate whether significant variation is expected cross-nationally and to theorize what is likely to be driving such variation, or uniformity. In particular, our five cases vary across many of the key variables commonly associated with campaigning, especially that of political parties. In terms of systemic variables, this includes variations in the electoral systems (mixed; majoritarian), systems of government (federal; unitary), party systems (multi-party; two-party). Further,

our five case study countries offer a cross-section of highly regulated to weakly regulated cases in relation to campaign practices around DDC. As discussed above, the US and Australia have some of the weakest regulatory regimes in place to deal with DDC. The Canadian regime is, arguably, slightly stronger, mainly due to variations at the provincial level. While, in contrast, the UK and especially Germany, have far stronger regimes in place (Dommett et al., 2024b). Both employ the GDPR framework, however, Germany takes things much further than the UK by including significant national restrictions on parties and does not make them exempt from broader frameworks.

Results

As a starting point, we present descriptive results showing how attitudes different cross-nationally. We first asked respondents about how likely they thought political parties were using their data for understanding, targeting and manipulating voters (see Figure 1). Overall, public perceptions of what parties are using data for is relatively consistent, with German respondents suggesting parties were slightly less likely to be using data in these ways. The relatively high score cross-nationally for the view that parties are using data to manipulate voters is important to point to but also unsurprising given the avalanche of media stories suggesting large-scale manipulation was not only possible, but had actually occurred (NPR, 2019; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018).

In terms of what respondents perceived to be acceptable practices using data, the evidence suggests respondents in our five countries were moderately supportive of parties using data to better understand voters and if it was for the public good, but views were more mixed in regards to whether respondents voting being affected by knowing parties are collecting data on them (see Figure 2). Germany again is notable for having the lowest level of acceptability for each of these options which likely reflects the significantly different context for the use of data in election campaigns in Germany compared to our other cases. Moreover, the scores for whether respondents cared about what data parties had on them is surprisingly high.

Turning to the acceptability of parties using specific voter information, we find citizens cross-nationally are far from enthused about parties using these data generally but there is important variation as to which data was perceived to be less acceptable (see Figure 3). Most basic demographic information is seen as moderately acceptable cross-nationally, with age and gender recognized by citizens in all countries as the most acceptable information for political parties to use. Political views, relationship/marital status and ethnicity are also seen as moderately acceptable at the aggregate level by citizens in all countries, although German respondents were significantly less supportive compared to our other four cases. The data perceived to be most unacceptable for parties to use are religious views, household income, sexual orientation, and especially online browsing history. Again, citizens of Germany had the lowest levels of acceptability.

Looking at the findings about the acceptability of parties' acquisition of data, we find that citizens find data that comes from individual voters themselves and public authorities as the most acceptable sources (see Figure 4). Unacceptable sources included data that comes from social media companies and data bought from vendors. In each of these categories, there are limited country-level differences, except for data coming from public authorities, which is seen as a notably more unacceptable source in Germany in comparison to the other countries. The result for data from social media companies is noteworthy and emphasizes the point about browsing history in Figure 3. The evidence therefore suggests there is citizen unease - understandably so - with how organizations interact with these social media companies and how their movements are tracked online.

Moving to the issue of regulation, we can see the cross-national descriptive statistics in Figure 5. In general, respondents are broadly favorable to regulation. Stronger levels of regulation is the modal response for each of the options presented to respondents, although it should also be noted that there are substantial levels of support for the view that political campaigning should generally be unregulated on free-speech grounds. Notwithstanding the generally fairly high levels of support for regulation, there are some modest differences when it comes to support for specific measures, and it appears that there is more widespread support for positions which are not as interventionist in compelling parties to change how they campaign. The most popular options in each country are ensuring that parties are transparent about their campaigning, and that the content of the messages they use are subject to fact-checking to ensure that they are not making misleading claims. By contrast, there is less (albeit still substantial) support for campaigns being subject to financial limits on their spending on political advertising, and that they should be prevented from buying voters' data.

Figure 5 also shows there to be some country-level differences, albeit ones which are fairly modest in size. Australian and Canadian respondents tended to be most supportive of regulation and least inclined to see political campaigning as a free speech issue which should be protected from government oversight. Other differences can be found with respondents from the US and especially Germany, who are less likely to advocate regulation compared to the other countries in our sample.

Beyond these descriptive findings, we also tested the effect of several individual level factors on attitudes toward regulation. We show the results of a series of OLS regressions in Table 1, showing the relationship between gender, age, ideological self-placement (measured in terms of left to right) and country of residence to examine whether the differences that we observed in Table 1 were also borne out in the multivariate analysis.

Taking first the gender effects, we found that women were significantly more in favor of regulation of DDC than men according to each of our measures. This tallies with the emerging evidence presented by Gibson et al. (2024) who find that women are generally more concerned about these practices. The effect size is broadly similar across each of our models, but there is partial evidence that the gender effect is slightly larger in respect of parties being prevented from purchasing voter data.

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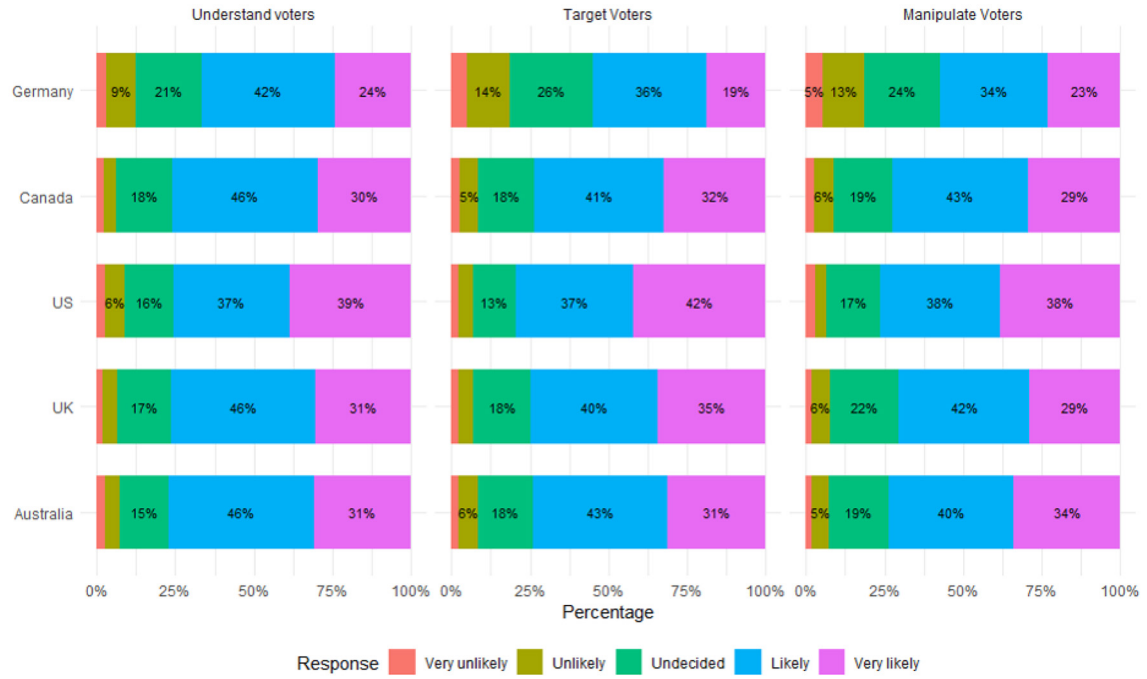


FIGURE 1
Respondents' perceptions of parties' data use ($N = 5{,}040$). Distribution of responses to the question "How likely (very likely; likely; undecided; unlikely; very unlikely) do you think it is that parties use information about citizens in their campaigns for the following purposes?" Charts showing survey means can be found in supplementary materials.

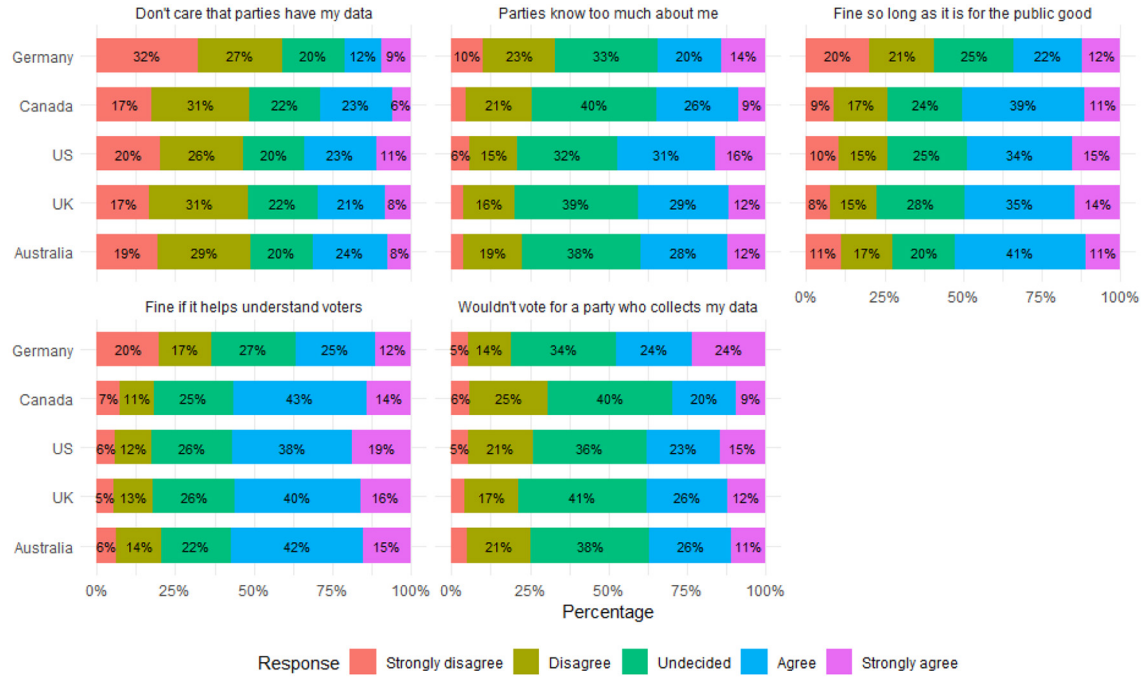


FIGURE 2
Respondents' acceptability of parties' data use ($N = 5{,}040$). Distribution of responses to perceptions of how acceptable it is that parties could be using data for these purposes (strongly disagree; disagree; undecided; agree; strongly agree). Charts showing survey means can be found in supplementary materials.

Looking toward other differences, we once again corroborate the findings of Gibson et al. (2024) by showing that older voters are more in favor of regulation than younger ones. The effect sizes are similar across each of the models. Our expectation from previous research was that ideology would matter insofar as right leaning citizens would be more likely to oppose regulation,

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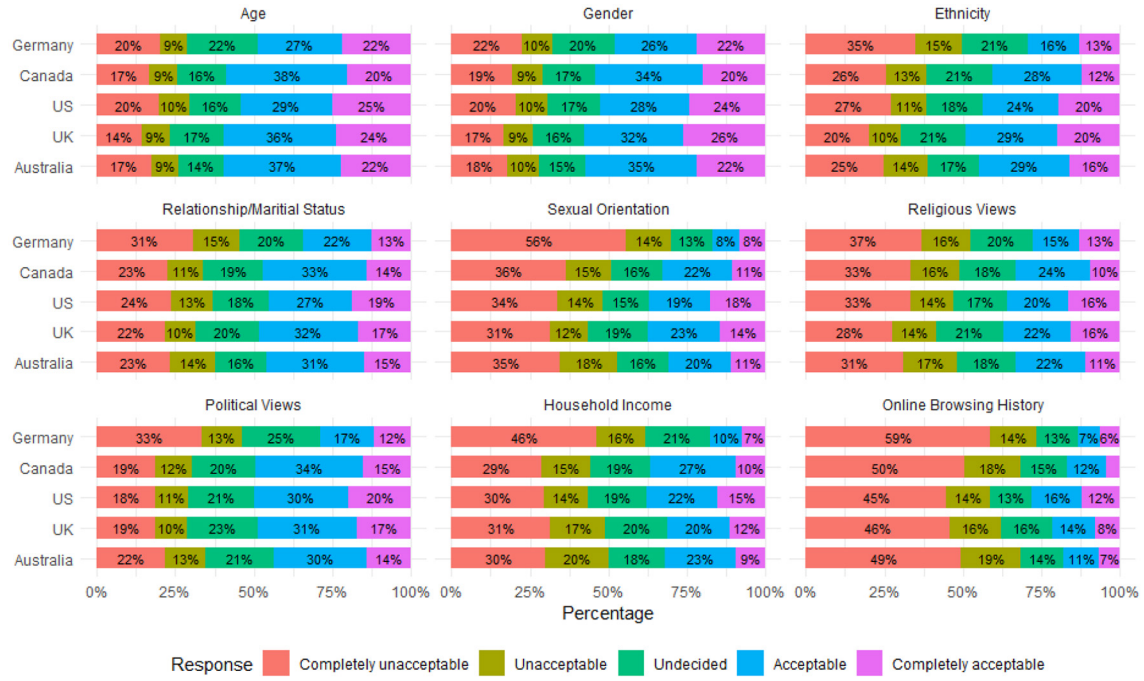


FIGURE 3
Respondents' acceptability of parties' use of voter information ($N = 5{,}040$). Distribution of responses to perceptions of how acceptable it is for parties to collect and use these specific types of data (completely unacceptable; unacceptable; undecided; acceptable; completely acceptable). Charts showing survey means can be found in supplementary materials.

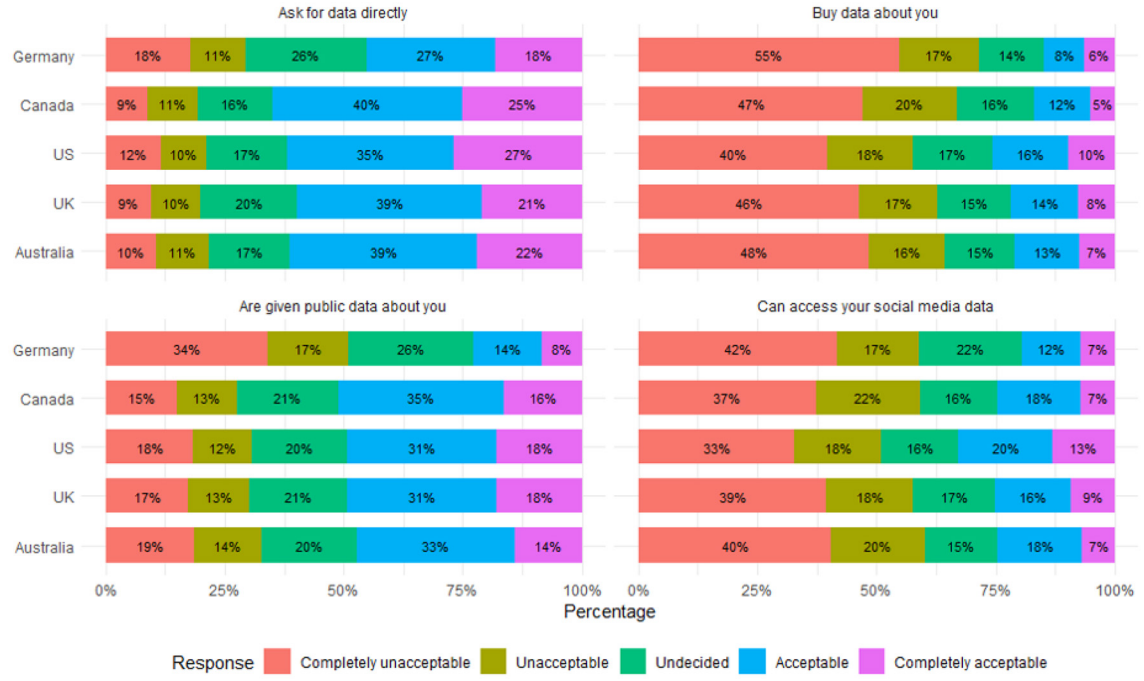


FIGURE 4
Respondents' acceptability of parties' use of data sources ($N = 5{,}040$). Distribution of responses to perceptions of how acceptable it is for parties to collect data from these sources (completely unacceptable; unacceptable; undecided; acceptable; completely acceptable). Charts showing survey means can be found in supplementary materials.

and this is also supported consistently by our findings. We examine the varying effect of ideology between countries in the following section.

Finally, we also included respondents' country of residence to explore whether the differences we found in the descriptive results are borne out in the multivariate analysis. The differences

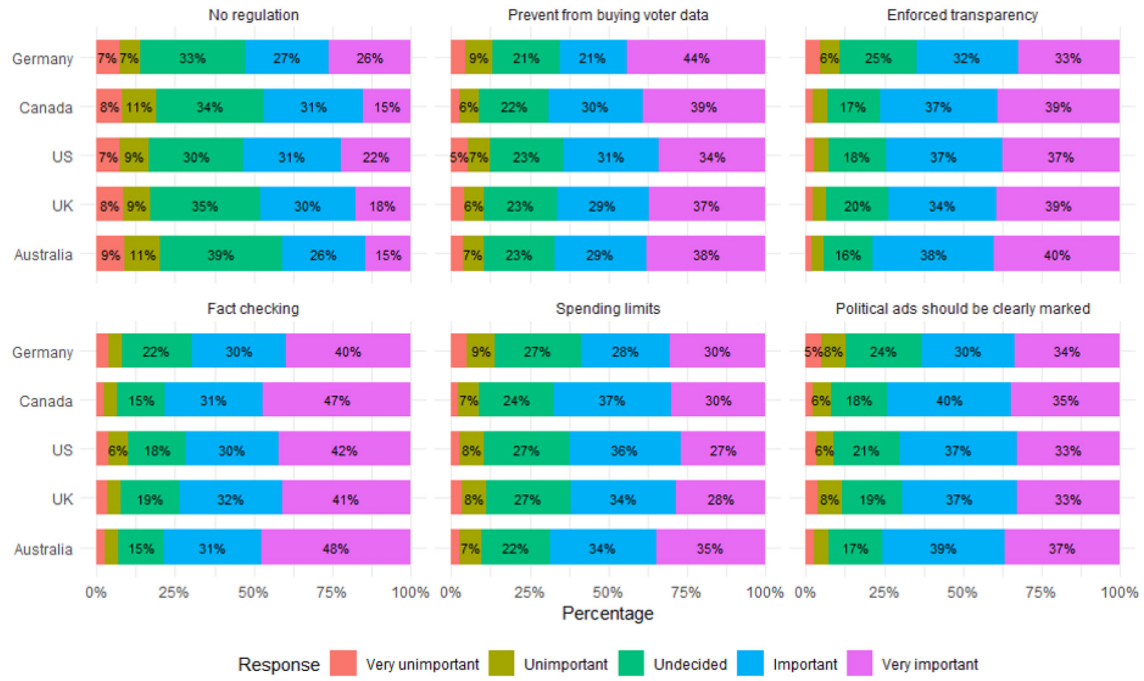


FIGURE 5
Respondents' importance of data regulations ($N = 5{,}040$). Distribution of responses to perceptions of importance attached to different regulatory responses to data use (very unimportant; unimportant; undecided; important; very important). Charts showing survey means can be found in supplementary materials.

here are not quite as uniform as we find for other predictors included in the model, but we do observe a series of significant differences and this is most commonly the case for German and American respondents. Interestingly, we found significant differences between Australian citizens (the reference category) and each of the other countries in that they were the least opposed to regulation on free speech grounds, and this was particularly pronounced for the US and Germany. This is reflected in differences in support for specific forms of regulation, where American and German respondents are consistently more opposed to regulation.

As discussed above, we have reasons to suspect that some of these individual level factors would have differential effects across different contexts. In particular, we anticipate that ideology, and the link that this has on attitudes toward regulation will not be uniform across countries. This is largely based upon the findings of previous studies, which shows that the association between ideology and viewing microtargeting as acceptable is stronger in the US compared to various European countries. We tested for such variation by interacting the effect of a respondent's ideological position with their country of residence for each of the above multilevel models. We then plot the marginal effect predictions of supporting regulation for each point on the 0–10 ideology scale in Figures 6–11. Several aspects of these findings are noteworthy. Firstly, the relationship between ideology and support for regulation is broadly linear in each instance. To a degree this would be expected given when we have already found in the above section, but it would've been possible, for example, that far left respondents would've been more opposed to regulation than center-left respondents, and our findings consistently show that this isn't the case. Most importantly however, we find that variation by ideology is considerably weaker in Germany and the US compared to the other three countries in our sample; the shallower trajectories for these countries show that the difference between the most left and most right wing respondents are smaller. A closer inspection reveals that this is largely driven by differences in the attitudes of left-defining voters across countries. There are few (and small) detectable differences between countries when it comes to the most right wing respondents, but there are large and highly significant differences in terms of those who are furthest left (Figures 6–11).

These findings can be interpreted through mainly two lenses: First, cultural and normative differences play a role for robust data protection regimes in European countries, like Germany, emphasizing personal integrity and "information self-determination" while in parallel leading to skepticism about state intervention in data protection and free speech (Bygrave, 2010). Conversely, the US discourse focuses more on individual autonomy and the tension between privacy and societal needs. In the US, privacy is often seen as an individual right, whereas in Germany, it is linked to broader democratic participation. This ideological difference may explain the opposition to regulation in both countries, albeit for different reasons. Second, the historical and cultural contexts play a role since Europe's history with totalitarian regimes influences the citizens' refusal of parties using private information while being against state regulation of free speech. There is a broader skepticism in countries like the US and Germany regarding the state's role in regulating political activities, reflecting concerns about overreach and infringement on free speech, despite a simultaneous recognition of privacy issues. In sum, the opposition to DDC regulation in Germany and the US highlights complex interactions between cultural

TABLE 1 Regression output predicting regulation preferences.

	Campaigns should not be regulated		Ban data purchasing		Make transparent		Fact checking		Spending limits		Clear imprint	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Female	**−0.17*****	(0.03)	**0.26*****	(0.04)	**0.15*****	(0.04)	**0.20*****	(0.04)	**0.13*****	(0.04)	**0.14*****	(0.04)
Age	**−0.04*****	(0.01)	**0.14*****	(0.01)	**0.12*****	(0.01)	**0.16*****	(0.01)	**0.15*****	(0.01)	**0.15*****	(0.01)
Ideology	**0.13*****	(0.02)	**−0.13*****	(0.02)	**−0.14*****	(0.02)	**−0.14*****	(0.02)	**−0.14*****	(0.02)	**−0.12*****	(0.02)
Canada	**0.39****	(0.15)	−0.08	(0.19)	−0.19	(0.19)	−0.07	(0.19)	−0.06	(0.18)	0.03	(0.19)
Germany	**0.85*****	(0.14)	**−0.74*****	(0.19)	−0.96***	(0.19)	**−0.88*****	(0.19)	**−0.92*****	(0.18)	**−0.81*****	(0.18)
UK	**0.35***	(0.15)	−0.23	(0.19)	−0.24	(0.19)	−0.23	(0.19)	−0.29	(0.18)	−0.13	(0.19)
US (Ref: Australia)	**0.68*****	(0.14)	**−0.75*****	(0.19)	**−0.65*****	(0.18)	**−0.67*****	(0.18)	**−0.68*****	(0.18)	**−0.64*****	(0.18)
Cons	**2.90*****	(0.12)	**3.43*****	(0.16)	**3.87*****	(0.16)	**3.75*****	(0.16)	**3.65*****	(0.16)	**3.61*****	(0.16)

N = 5,040. * denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.05$, ** at $p < 0.01$, *** denotes at $p < 0.001$. Figures in bold represent statistically significant differences.

norms, historical experiences, and ideological beliefs, suggesting a landscape where privacy and free speech are weighted differently across contexts.

Discussion, limitations, and conclusion

In this article, we have presented findings from one of the first cross-national analyses which sought to understand citizen attitudes to DDC practices and regulation related to these practices. We draw on a cross-national survey involving 5,040 respondents from five advanced democracies: Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, the United States (US), and Germany. First, our results show that attitudes toward the use of DDC differ between countries. Public perceptions of what political parties use data for are relatively consistent across the surveyed countries, though German respondents suggested parties were slightly less likely to use data for understanding, targeting, and manipulating voters compared to respondents from other nations. Moreover, Germans expressed the lowest levels of acceptability for various types of voter information being used by parties, reflecting a significantly different context for data use in election campaigns in Germany. The differing attitudes toward the use of DDC across countries reflect varying national contexts and historical experiences with data privacy and political regulation. For instance, German respondents' lower acceptance levels can be linked to the country's stringent data protection laws and historical sensitivity to privacy issues due to past experiences with state surveillance (Bygrave, 2010). This aligns with the findings of Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2018), who argue that robust data protection frameworks like the GDPR shape public attitudes by emphasizing privacy concerns and regulatory safeguards.

Second, respondents' attitudes toward the use of DDC differ between certain groups of citizens. Men and younger people were less concerned with data use by political parties than women and older people. Additionally, German respondents were more likely to supportive of regulation and against parties using personal data in campaigns, whereas US and UK citizens were marginally more supportive of data use. This pattern of heterogeneity of public opinion on DDC. Gender and age differences, with men and younger individuals being more accepting of data use, mirror trends observed in previous studies, such as those by Gibson et al. (2024), which found younger, male citizens to be more open to microtargeting. This suggests that demographic factors significantly influence perceptions of DDC, possibly due to varying levels of digital literacy and trust in digital technologies (Minihold et al., 2025).

Third, respondents' attitudes toward the regulation of DDC differ between countries and citizens. Stronger levels of regulation were generally favored, with Canadian and Australian respondents showing the strongest support for regulatory measures. Interestingly, German respondents ranked proposed regulatory measures as less important compared to other countries, despite being more likely to be opposed parties using their data in campaigns. It is not straightforward to explain this counterintuitive finding purely on the strength of our data. One plausible reason is that Germany is the only country included in our data that has a

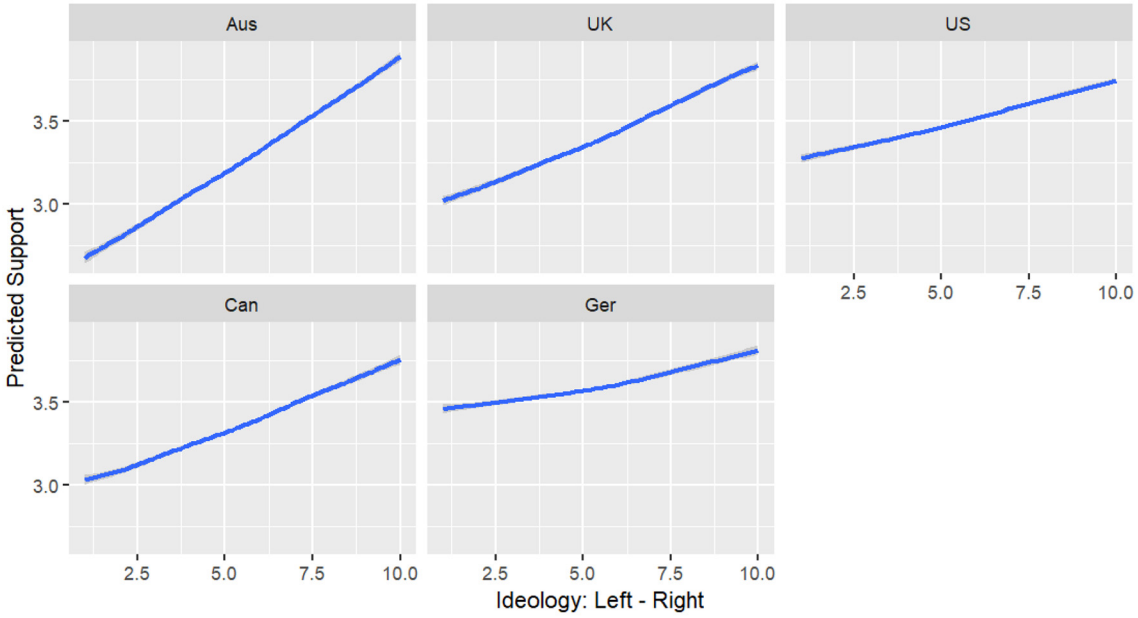


FIGURE 6
Free speech. $N = 5{,}040$. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

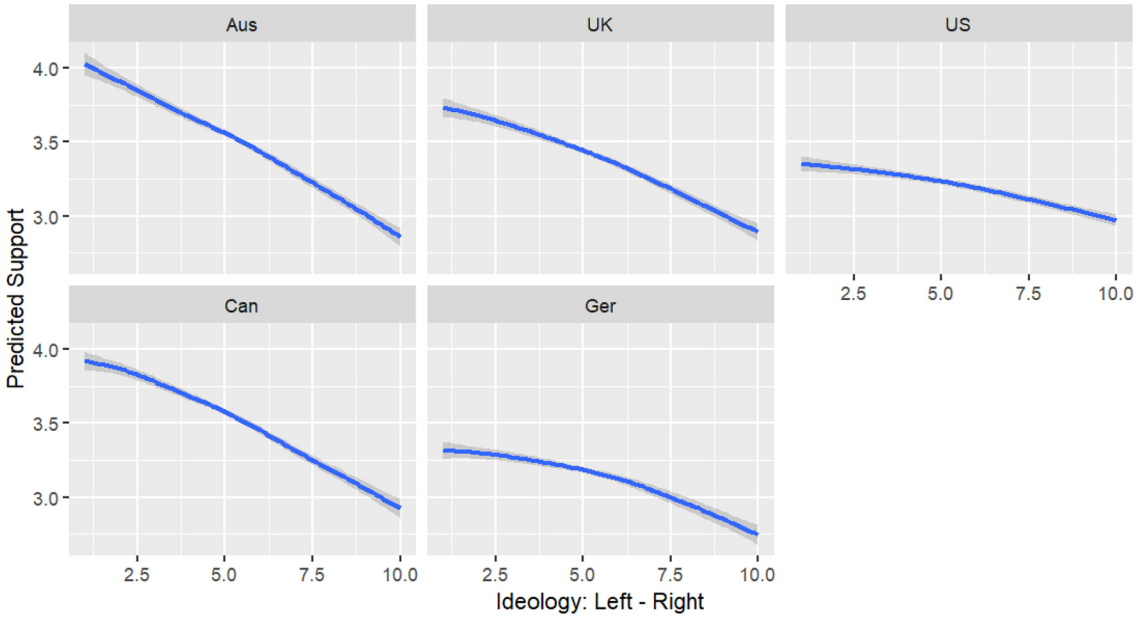


FIGURE 7
Buying data. $N = 5{,}040$. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

history of autocratic rule, and so it would make sense in this context that citizens would be both more likely to oppose parties having and using personal data, whilst simultaneously being against legislative restrictions on the activity of political parties more broadly. Whether this mechanism accurately explains the German findings must necessarily be speculative without further research, that the finding exists in the first place suggests of a landscape where cultural norms, historical experiences, and ideological beliefs shape attitudes toward DDC regulation differently across contexts. The strong support for regulation in Canada and Australia contrasts with the more skeptical views in Germany and the US, and this can be interpreted through the lens of differing national experiences with data breaches and privacy legislation, as noted by Dommett et al. (2024b). The ideological divide, with right-leaning individuals generally opposing regulation, is consistent with Bygrave, 2010 findings on the political salience of individual freedom vs. state intervention, particularly pronounced in the US. The landscape of regulation preferences reflects broader societal debates on balancing privacy, free speech, and the role of the state in democratic processes.

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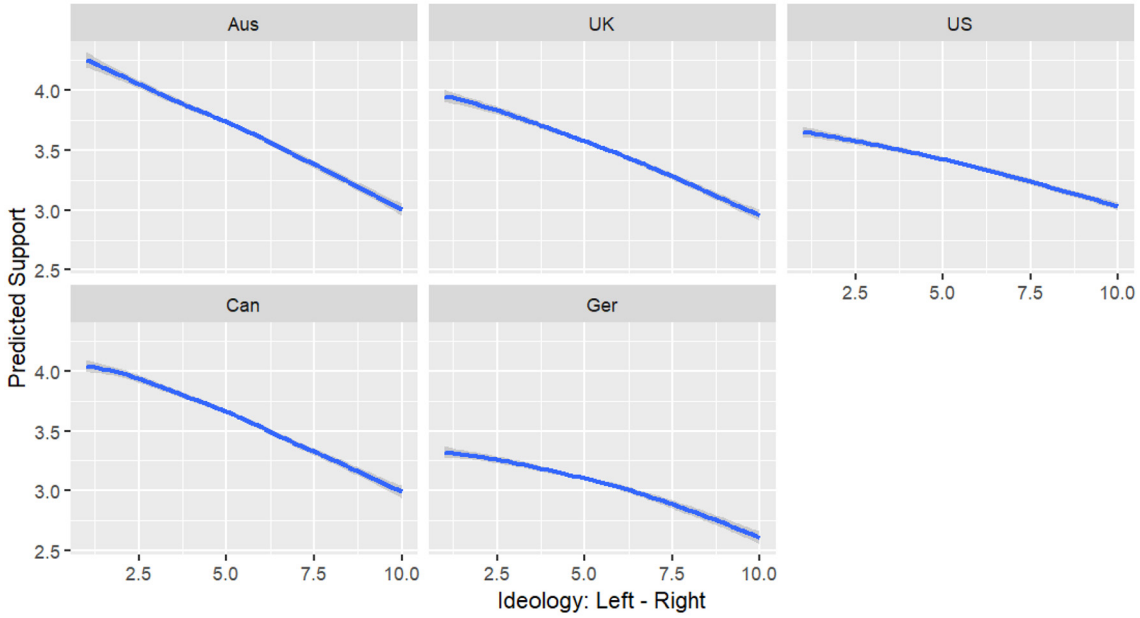


FIGURE 8
Transparency. $N = 5{,}040$. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

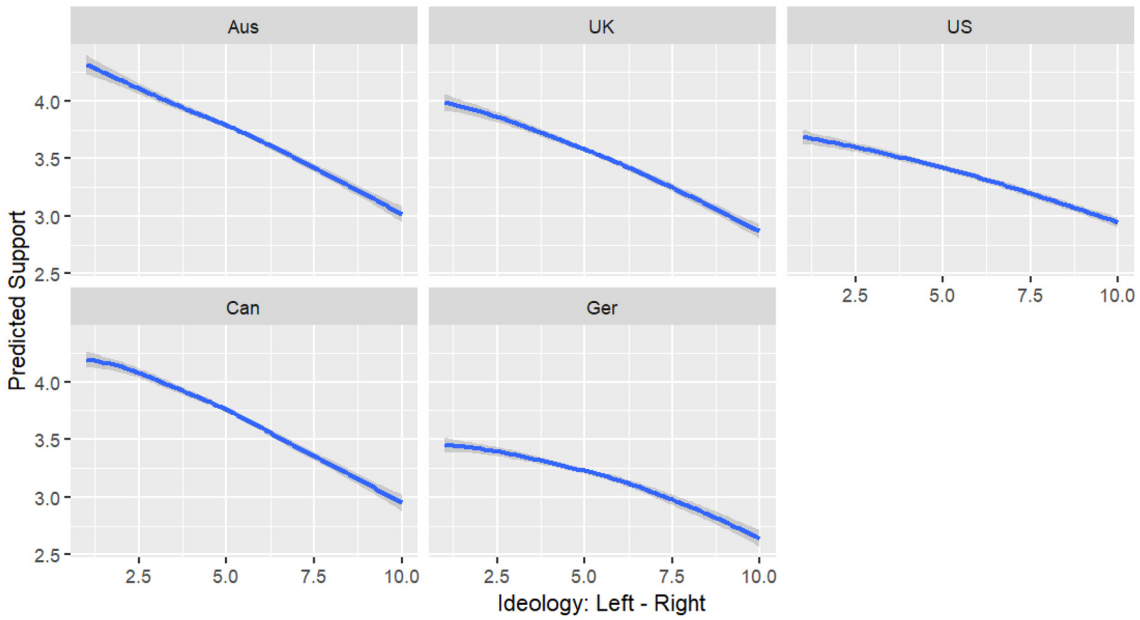


FIGURE 9
Fact check. $N = 5{,}040$. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Overall, our findings largely tally with the emerging evidence of public attitudes toward using data within campaigns. There is broad support for some increases in regulation, but there is also substantial variation according to (i) the specific regulation proposed; (ii) an individual's personal characteristics in terms of their gender, age and ideological position, and; (iii) the national context that an individual is based in, including how these contexts interacts with individual level characteristics. Specifically, we find that men, older citizens and those who lean toward the political right are all less supportive of regulation, both on free speech grounds and also when presented with individual examples of regulatory action. We also found variation in terms of these individual examples; regulation which is less 'interventionist' in terms of substantially changing parties' behavior (for example in enforcing greater transparency) is favored above, for example, an outright ban of purchasing voter data. These differences are, however, fairly modest in size.

In offering these findings, we also acknowledge certain limitations to our analysis. The most important of these is the specification of the models. Although our data allowed us to

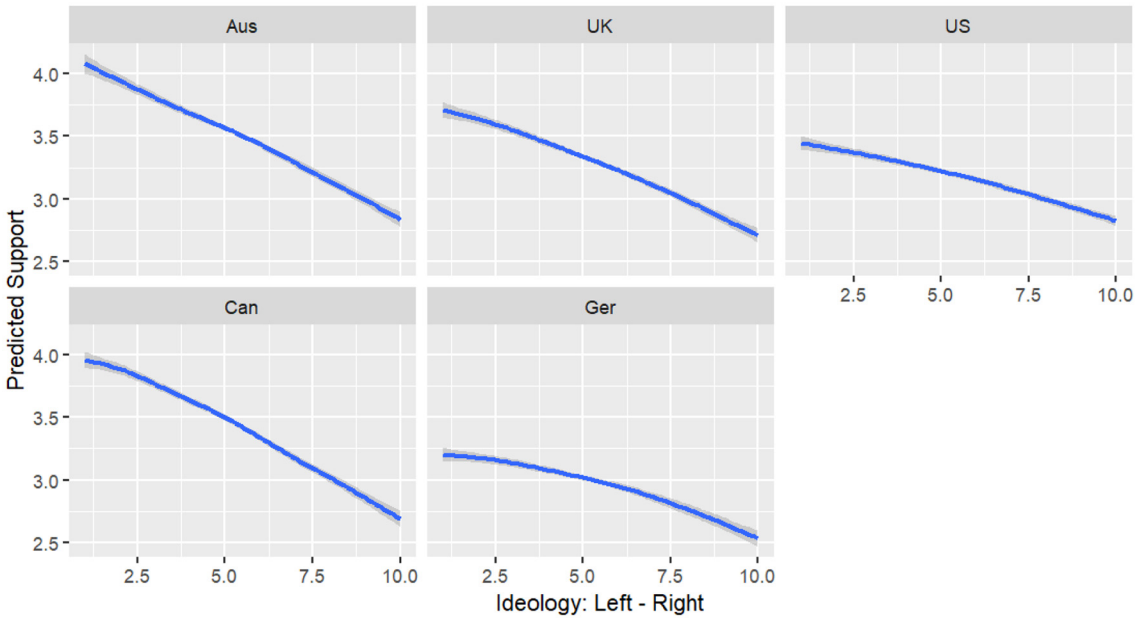


FIGURE 10
Spending. $N = 5{,}040$. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

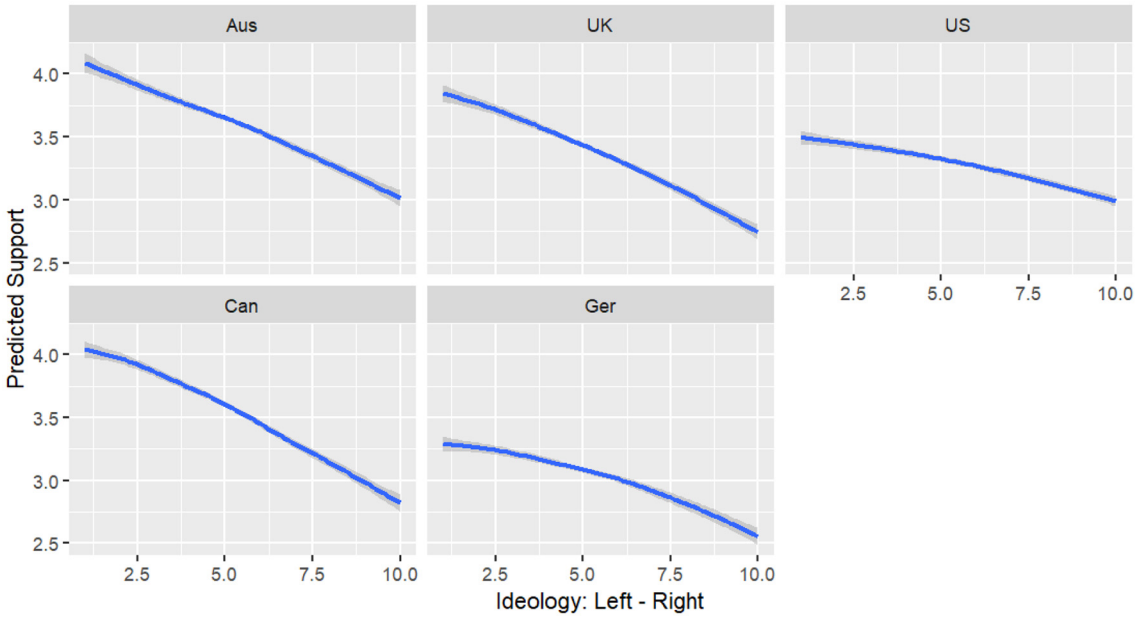


FIGURE 11
Social media posts marked. $N = 5{,}040$. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

examine some of the individual-level characteristics that other studies have shown to be key in determining attitudes toward DDC, ideally we would have been able to explore a wider suite of covariates which would give us a more thorough insight into the factors that structure these attitudes. The emerging education divide which is increasingly structuring the political attitudes of western democracies (e.g., Sobolewska and Ford, 2020) in particular is likely to influence voters' approach to the regulation of DDC (Vliegenthart et al., 2024) and therefore not including education as a feature of our analysis is a non-trivial omission. Given the general trend of declining political trust in most democratic contexts Valgarð*sson et al., 2025, exploring trust as a predictor of regulation support would have been one fruitful line of enquiry. Moreover, the need to impute attitudes toward specific forms of regulation for those who strongly opposed all regulation on principle was not ideal.

Further, given the use of an online panel, there is reason to think that the responses may be less likely to be supportive of

regulation than we may find in other panels. This is likely to relate to the digital literacy of those who participate in online panels and their perceived knowledge of data and digital technology more broadly. There is also the question of context when the survey was fielded. While the debate about the effect of data and microtargeting on election outcomes was arguably less salient than in prior years, it is still likely to have shaped perceptions of these issues. Whether similar results would emerge from a survey conducted in 2024 is debatable. Future research should explore longitudinal changes in public attitudes as DDC practices and regulatory landscapes evolve. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into how public perceptions shift over time, particularly in response to new regulatory measures and technological advancements.

Another important consideration is the dynamic nature of how political campaigns are evolving in response to technological advancements. At the time of fielding the survey, voters in mature democracies would have been most likely to have encountered the importance of data and campaigning within the context of Cambridge Analytica, the possibility of personal data being used without their knowledge, and a range of associated risks beyond that. Whilst these risks have certainly not gone away in the subsequent period, they are in concert with the rise of AI and a range of possibilities in which campaigns could be harnessing continuously evolving new technologies in a way that could influence attitudes toward their regulation. We contend therefore that our study is an important starting point at a particular point in time, rather than the end of the conversation as regards the public opinion of campaign regulation.

Notwithstanding these limitations however, our findings represent a significant extension of emerging evidence surrounding public attitudes toward political campaigning using data, and how voters would like to see the pitfalls associated with such campaigning addressed. Therefore, they make a significant contribution to our understanding of DDC, especially from the demand-side perspective for regulatory intervention. This understanding is crucial for policymakers aiming to design effective and culturally sensitive regulations, as emphasized by Rubinstein (2014) and Bennett (2013). Our study underscores the need for tailored regulatory approaches that reflect the unique cultural and historical contexts of each democracy. Policymakers should consider these variations when crafting regulations to ensure they address public concerns effectively and gain broad acceptance. Future research should explore longitudinal changes in public attitudes as DDC practices and regulatory landscapes evolve. Additionally, examining the impact of demographic factors, such as age, education, and political ideology, on attitudes toward DDC could provide deeper insights into the public's regulatory preferences. These findings are crucial for informing the development of effective regulatory frameworks that align with public expectations and enhance the legitimacy of electoral processes in the digital age.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon reasonable request.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because respondents are fully anonymised, the research poses no risk to respondents, the focus is not on a sensitive issue and on a public-domain topic. Respondents already consented for their responses to be used in research when agreeing to undertake surveys sent to them by Lucid. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

GK: Funding Acquisition, Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project Administration. AB: Visualization, Formal Analysis, Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project Administration. SK: Formal Analysis, Validation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project Administration.

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Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1919560/full#supplementary-material

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