FICTITIOUS PERSONAS AND POLITICAL MARKETING IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Many political party strategists draw on Big Data to target specific groups of voters. This predominantly quantitative approach is useful for mobilising support, yet there are alternatives that help bring these voter segments to life. Pioneered in Australia (1996) and perfected in Canada (2006 to 2008), the use of fictitious voter personas in political marketing and communications holds several notable advantages. By personifying the segments – using names like "Phil and Jenny" or "Dougie" – strategists foster both internal cohesion and external consistency around their messaging. The technique is also useful for policy development. Grounded in an extensive review of campaigns and in-depth interviews, this article analyses the use of personas by the Conservative Party of Canada, pointing to the strengths and shortcomings of the approach.

KEY WORDS

Political Marketing; Political Communications; Canadian Politics; Fictitious Personas; Voter Segmentation

INTRODUCTION

In the lead up to the 2006 Canadian federal election, the Conservative Party was on the cusp of forming government. To win the campaign, polling suggested they needed to connect with voters in a handful of key demographic groups including suburban workers. Enter Patrick Muttart, a political strategist who would go on to play a key role in the party's historic victory. Borrowing lessons from the Australian Liberals' campaign a decade earlier, Muttart went beyond traditional, data-driven approaches to voter segmentation. In tandem with the party's pollsters, he created fictional characters to represent different groups the Conservatives needed to attract. The most famous of these personas was "Dougie": a stereotypically hard-working, blue-collar white guy who loved hockey, beer, Tim Hortons coffee, and hanging out at the hardware store. By crafting policy and communications that appealed to Dougie and several other fictitious voter personas, the Conservatives were able to identify the right messaging to attract just enough voters to win a minority government. Afterward, these personas proved useful in crafting policies and programs that responded to the needs of those same voters. This success, in part, helps to explain the Conservatives' ability to secure a majority government three years later. But how did this strategy work, and what does it tell us about the intersection of campaign management, political marketing, and democracy? How do these fictitious voter personas differ from previous uses of personas by politicians and what unique benefits do they offer relative to other types of personification?

Despite the relative effectiveness of fictitious voter persona techniques like these, there is sparse academic work on their development and use. This paper builds upon existing literature by analysing how these personas are used in political communications and marketing, examining their applications for: persuasion and mobilization; voter segmentation and microtargeting; and policy-making and internal communications. Whereas earlier research primarily focuses on the Jungian model of personas — how politicians strategically present themselves to the public — our research examines the use of fictitious personas by political actors to achieve their electoral and policy goals (Giles 2020). Our research is grounded in extensive secondary research and a novel set of interviews with key political communications and marketing experts from Canada, centred on the 2006 and 2008 Conservative Party campaigns. We find that the use of fictitious voter personas aligns with the rise of market-oriented parties within Canadian politics, helping parties to streamline political marketing and focus political communications, both internally and externally. This persona approach simplifies an otherwise complex and diverse political environment, making it easier for political parties to identify voter segments, successfully reach them, build a minimum winning coalition, and deliver on campaign promises. We close by highlighting the normative implications that fictitious voter personas carry within liberal democracies like Canada. By playing on stereotypes that emphasise dominant societal groups, these personas can also marginalize groups that are not depicted. This includes the propensity for fictitious voter personas to ground political discourse in mainstream, often exclusionary, conceptions of what it means to be "a typical citizen."

LOCATING 'DOUGIE' WITHIN PERSONA STUDIES

Founded in 2015, Persona Studies has helped to create an interdisciplinary space for scholars to analyse personas from various angles, drawing together different, but parallel, research on the topic (Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 8). Many in the field share a broad conception of personas as a performative presentation of a common self, harking back to the term's etymological roots as a reference to the masks worn in ancient Greek dramas (Nöe 2012; Marshall & Barbour 2015 p. 2). Literary scholars may seek to examine the construction of personas by writers (Duncan 2019; Luckhurst 2019). Psychologists are inspired by the work of Carl Jung who examined personas as a mask through which one feigns individuality, acting out a role to connect to others while also concealing the subconscious self (Jung 1969). Other disciplines, such as media and cultural studies or celebrity studies, focus more on how personas are mediated, often examining how actors use new media to present themselves (Corner 2000; Marshall et al. 2019). While many actors aim to develop new personas to the general population, many scholars identify the work of mediation occurring in "micro-publics": networks of friends and followers that develop around an individual persona (Marshall 2014, p. 164). These micro-publics, which frequently emerge on blogs and social media, allow public figures to create content around their desired persona while also narrowing their audience to a specific group in way that can still reach a high volume of people. Meanwhile, user-interaction design scholars tend to study the utility of fictional personas when it comes to creating products and services.

Several scholars have developed nuanced interdisciplinary frameworks to bridge these fields of study. Of these, David Giles's (2020) typology of persona studies distinguishes between four approaches: (i) the Jungian model, which conceptualises persona as a continuous performance by an individual; (ii) the generic persona, a cultural archetype that sometimes involves specific roles and that multiple people can inhabit, such as a blue-collar worker or a baby-boomer ; (iii) the fictitious persona, crafted for a specific purpose such as a character in art or a targeted consumer in marketing; and (iv) the attributed persona, where characteristics of a

human are applied to an inanimate object, institution, or concept, such as the identities adapted by large corporations like Walt Disney.

Most research on the use of personas in politics has conformed to the Jungian model. In the introductory article to their special edition of Persona Studies, the editors noted most political persona research examines how politicians present themselves, focusing primarily on authenticity, political marketing, and their use of presentational media (Marshall & Henderson 2016). While this research has improved our understanding of how politicians mediate their own identities in public, there is also room to examine other uses of personas in politics. Although there is some initial work done in this area (see Smith 2017), existing literature remains sparse. In this article, we focus on the use of fictitious personas in politics and how political parties use these as a tool to achieve their electoral and governance goals. In particular, we examine how politicians simplify the broader electorate into a series of individual caricatures we call 'fictitious voter personas', and the impacts this could have on our political processes. To do this, we must examine the role of these personas in political marketing and how it originated as an innovative tool.

THE ADVENT OF FICTITIOUS PERSONAS AND VOTER PROFILES IN POLITICS

As a type of voter profile, fictitious voter personas capture the essence of a subset of the electorate by creating an easily recognisable character or avatar. They act as "shorthand" for those seeking to reach the voter segments they personify [Boesenkool interview]. These personalities carry familiar names that symbolise what it means to be part of a specific psychographic group. By embodying the details of a desired voter segment in a simplistic and straightforward manner, fictitious voter personas help unify campaign teams around a common, shared perception of their ideal voters. This factor helps explain the appeal of fictious personas as a political marketing tool, designed to calm internal debates within campaigns while simultaneously helping shape external communications across the entire campaign team.

These types of personas are distinct from those that are used for other, mostly rhetorical purposes. There are generic personas that exist at the national level, like Uncle Sam (US) or Johnny Canuck (Canada). Others are cultural icons, like Rosie the Riveter (US) or Yvette (Canada), or broader demographic groups like soccer moms or Laurentian elites (Canada), or stock characters like Essex Man or Mondeo Man (UK). While all are constructed, fictitious voter personas used in politics differ from these generic versions in that the former are often developed and deployed using systematic marketing techniques, as described below. In this sense, they more closely resemble "lifestyle segments" (for example, see PRIZM, Environics Analytics 2022) or "composite profiles" or "user journeys" developed by marketing firms [Velji interview]. To develop an understanding of fictitious voter personas as a political communications tool, we must examine other fields of research, including interaction design.

As a marketing tool, fictitious personas emerged in the 1990s. Digital product designers and programmers use them to create products that better meet the needs of their desired users (see Pruitt & Grudin 2003). Cooper is considered a pioneer of this method, exploring how to develop and employ fictitious personas in his classic *The Inmates are Running the Asylum* (2004). Through his work, Cooper outlines how fictitious personas help designers focus on crafting products that meet the goals of specific users. Cooper offers the example of designing an automobile with three different potential users: a parent, a carpenter, and a junior executive (p. 124). Instead of building a vehicle that meets the goals of each individual user — an eclectic mix between a minivan, pickup truck, and sports car — Cooper argues designers should make an individual product tailored to the goals of each person (p. 125). Fictious personas help bring

designers and programmers into the mindset of their user, ending internal feature debates over what a vague user could want and instead focusing on what one individual persona would desire (pp. 132-133). To accomplish this, Cooper outlines some practices for fictitious personas based on his practical experience: making them as specific as possible (p. 128), focusing on precision over real-world accuracy (pp. 129-130), and creating a larger 'cast of characters,' a set of three to 12 personas that reflect the overall population that interact with the product (pp. 135-137).

Grudin & Pruitt (2002) recognised the potential of fictious personas as a marketing tool but criticised Cooper's reliance on anecdotal evidence and logic over data (p. 146). Instead, they suggested integrating persona-making with ongoing quantitative and qualitative data collection. This would involve creating fictitious personas through quantitative market segmentation and then further developing high-priority personas through methods such as field research and focus groups (p. 148). Given the emergence of market-oriented political parties in the late-twentieth century (Lees-Marshment 2001), it should come as little surprise that political strategists would adopt fictitious personas as a means of identifying and mobilising their supporters. Designing commercial products has parallels with designing policies, programs, and services. Understanding what a user or consumer might need dovetails with what a citizen or voter might want. As with many conventional marketing techniques, the importation of fictitious voter personas into the democratic process has been uneven and, at times, controversial (see Savigny 2008).

The first recognised use of the technique in the current literature appears attributable to Liberal leader John Howard's team in the 1996 Australian federal election. Lead strategists "wanted a precise picture of a typical middle-Australian voter to give to Liberal candidates across the country" (Williams 1997, p. 64). To do so, they commissioned psychographic research that helped them invent a fictional young couple named "Phil and Jenny." Married with a child just starting school, both worked hard but struggled to make ends meet while caring for their son. In fact, they felt like they were falling behind others in society. Phil and Jenny were the personification of the working class "battlers" that came to dominate Australian political discourse. Howard, himself, described a battler as "somebody who finds in life that they have to work hard for everything they get… somebody who's not earning a huge income but somebody who is trying to better themselves" (Delacourt 2016, p. 181). As journalist Pamela Williams (1997) reported,

> The Phil and Jenny story was supported by meticulous research. Fictional the couple may have been, but their concerns and aspirations epitomized those of tens of thousands of real voters. Over the next year [leading up to the 1996 election], they became [the campaign team's] touchstone, the subjects of endless discussion in party meetings, the template family every Liberal candidate knew about… Their names became a code for the entire [Liberal] campaign (p. 65).

Outlined in detail below, Conservative Party strategist Patrick Muttart iterated on this approach in Canada, combining rich market research with thick descriptions of the party's key voter demographics.

THEORY AND CONTEXT

In this study, we ask: How have fictitious voter personas been employed in political communications and marketing in Canada? And what are the implications of this approach to voter segmentation & microtargeting, policymaking, internal communications, and democratic

discourse? To understand why political parties implement fictitious voter personas as communications and marketing tools, it is important to understand the context in which they emerged. Specifically, we must understand how parties began to adapt broader marketing techniques as part of their outreach efforts. For this, we employ Jennifer Lees-Marshment's (2001) framework of political marketing, in which she identifies three different types of political parties based on the extent to which the party has adapted marketing concepts and techniques.

For Lees-Marshment (2001), product-oriented parties are organisations that position their brand, platform, leaders, and candidates as being inherently attractive, regardless of whether their product is popular or unpopular with voters. These parties typically do not use market intelligence in their appeals to voters, instead promoting their ideals and policies based on the party's perception of their strengths. Sales-oriented parties are different, in that they create their predetermined political product but then use market research to package and advertise their product to voters. In this sense, sales-oriented parties do not change their behaviour or product in response to the wishes of voters but use sales techniques to improve their communications and potentially win over more public support. By contrast, market-oriented parties change their behaviour in response to public wants and desires, gathering intelligence prior to constructing their political product and then designing their product to satisfy voters. This is where personas become useful; as in interactive design, visualising end users' (voters') needs and preferences is crucial to refining and selling the party's brand. While Lees-Marshment (2001) was careful not to describe these three categories as stages in the evolution of political parties, the technological advances required for parties to become market-oriented were only developed in the late twentieth century. This timing coincides with the emergence of market-oriented parties and the use of fictitious voter personas in Canadian politics.

Whereas American parties were quick to develop comprehensive voter information databases in the mid-1990s, Canadian parties did not follow suit until 2004 (Patten 2017, pp. 53-54). Following the merger of the Progressive Conservatives and the Reform Party, the newly formed Conservatives were the first to develop their own database in the form of CIMS: the Constituent Information Management System (Delacourt 2016, pp. 243-46). Over the ensuing decade, following the Conservatives' lead, various parties assembled their own voter identification systems by correlating data collected through internal and public polling, door-to-door canvassing, government data, commercial consortiums, and eventually social media. As Patten (2015) describes

> These databases are used to identify those individuals who are likely supporters or could be persuaded to become supporters… The backbone of party databases is the electronic voters list—containing the name, address, gender, and date of birth of each eligible voter—provided by Elections Canada. The parties merge this list with their membership and donor records, and then employ a range of techniques to gather and input information on voters' cultural background, occupation, policy concerns, and more (p. 14).

These voter management systems enabled the parties to move from separate demographic and attitudinal insights toward a more comprehensive psychographic approach (Delacourt 2016; Marland & Giasson 2017; Patten 2017). Narrowcasting became even narrower as parties transitioned away from cable television and robocalls to email, text, social media, and other forms of private communications (Lalancette, Raynauld, & Crandall, 2019).

Analytics innovations continued, with Facebook's algorithmic innovations that allowed parties' analytics and communications gurus easier and more comprehensive access to finely

tuned voter segments (Kruschinski et al. 2022). Parties also developed their own apps that combined market intelligence and communications tools (Patten 2017). The more qualitative, artful approaches to campaign strategy and communications were sidelined in this process, in favour of quantitative techniques driven by artificial intelligence.

Overall, as communications and information management technology have become more automated, sophisticated, and less expensive, parties have continuously narrowed their focus and appeals to smaller and more specific voter segments. This "hypersegmentation" allows parties to reduce an electorate of over 23 million to a much smaller pool of target voters (Turcotte 2012, p. 85). They have also professionalised Canada's political parties, with analytics and communications experts being fully integrated into the party's permanent campaign apparatus. Where voter targeting was once the domain of local, elected officials or contracted public consultants, it is now the purview of prominently placed permanent staff within the party itself (Paltiel 1996, p. 405). While some Canadian strategists began using marketing techniques as early as the 1950s (Delacourt 2016, p. 27), key campaign staff within Stephen Harper's Conservative Party are often credited for building Canada's first market-oriented party. Harper's team adapted numerous marketing concepts and techniques to shape their party's new brand (Delacourt 2016, p. 187, pp. 194-195). This included the use of fictitious voter personas designed to ensure the party appealed to accessible voters and approached its political marketing with due discipline.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the use of fictitious voter personas in Canadian politics, our study builds on existing literature with first-hand accounts of campaign directors and a series of interviews with key party strategists and private sector marketing firms from the early-twenty-first century. A full list of interviews is provided in the Appendix. All our interviewees concurred that Harper's communications director, Patrick Muttart, was a pioneer of the approach in Canada. As we will discuss, he borrowed concepts and tactics from strategists in other countries and may not be the first to employ fictious voter personas in this sort of sophisticated way. But his disciplined approach is archetypal and worthy of a detailed case study.

Muttart was an ad executive with a keen eye and interest in politics when he joined the Conservative Party war room in 2004. He was a student of conservative campaigns from the United States, Britain, and Australia (Wells 2006, p. 155) In particular, Muttart was drawn to the success of teams behind Richard Nixon, Margaret Thatcher, Newt Gingrich, and John Howard in terms of securing the support of working-class voters (Marland 2012, p. 66). He brought these lessons and experience with persona-crafting from the private sector to Harper's team when assumed a lead strategist position in 2006.

Journalist Paul Wells (2006) recounts how, in surveys leading up to the 2006 federal election, Muttart discovered that a couple with one or two children probably voted Liberal, but that a couple with three children was 50 per cent likelier to vote Conservative, and that the odds increased with every child after three. He turned data like these into archetypes, imaginary people who would be either open or immune to [Conservative Party leader Stephen] Harper's appeals (Wells 2006, pp. 213-14). Muttart's success in that campaign and the subsequent one in 2008 helped popularise the use of fictitious voter personas across Canada, particularly among conservative parties. Based on information from our interviews, as well as existing literature, the BC Liberal Party, Manitoba Progressive Conservatives, Ontario Progressive Conservatives, Ontario Liberals, Saskatchewan Party, and Wildrose Party all implemented personas at some point after Harper's successful 2006 federal election campaign (Walton & Wingrove 2012;

[Hamish Marshall interview; Dan Arnold Interview]). For these reasons, we focus primarily on the case study of the Conservative Party of Canada, using Harper's team to illustrate the impact fictitious voter personas have on the marketing, communications, and policymaking.

RESULTS

Persona-making

The process for assembling fictitious voter personas differs from organisation to organisation. One of our interviewees from a private sector consulting firm described using large sample attitudinal surveys as the foundation for a detailed factor analysis; this produces a series of relatively homogeneous segments, ideally four to six in total, which the analyst then labels using creative names and detailed backstories [Large interview]. As David Coletto, CEO of Abacus Data describes, "Personas are a specific form of segmentation. They add another layer to demographic, psychographic, geographic, and behavioural approaches. They go beyond data to get to the emotional, helping to describe how people see the world and uncover the differences that matter. Some of this is driven by data, some of it is qualitative art" [Coletto interview]. Coletto points to the importance of understanding different worldviews when crafting fictitious voter personas, citing Hetherington & Weiler's book Prius or Pickup? (2018) as a guide for understanding people with fixed and fluid mindsets.

For others, the process is less quantitative and reductive and more qualitative and intuitive. One of our interviewees engages exclusively with staff throughout the client organization when constructing fictitious voter personas, rather than the target audience themselves. This helps surface a number of assumptions and stereotypes about the groups they want to reach [Hamilton interview].

Muttart's approach to creating fictitious voter personas involved a combination of quantitative (factor) analysis of surveys and qualitative observation of voters through focus groups. This technique is familiar to consumer marketing professionals, who often use surveys to identify their audience then invite people who fit those profiles to meet with researchers in focus group settings to experiment and isolate factors that drive them [Velji interview]. "The problem with data," Muttart argues, "is that everyone has access to the same numbers and analytics. While important, data doesn't give you a true competitive advantage… The qualitative aspect is equally important; it helps you make sense of what to pay attention to and how to make sense of it" [Muttart interview].

Fictitious voter personas do not capture every voter segment. Typically, they embody the characteristics of voters they want to attract or avoid. One of Harper's first campaign strategists, Tom Flanagan (2009), described his team's approach to voter targeting as consisting of several stages. First, the party must identify the universe of persuadable supporters, separating "core supporters" (who are committed to voting for the party) and "swing voters" (who might vote for the party) from "confirmed opponents" (who would never cast a ballot for one of their candidates). This "demographic triage" is done through a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups.

Next, the party's researchers must sketch the "demographic contours" of its core and persuadable supporters (Flanagan 2009, p. 163). Political strategist Stephen Carter refers to this process as developing "audience structures" to understand your "winnable universe" [Carter interview]. In the 2006 federal election campaign, the universe of Conservative support included: men; people from the West and Ontario; those who live in rural and suburban areas; religious folks; married people; middle-aged voters; and self-employed and private-sector

workers. These characteristics were "additive," according to Flanagan (2009), in that the more of these characteristics a particular person possessed, the more likely they were to vote Conservative. Pollsters like Dmitri Pantazopoulos would generate key voter segments using survey data, and the team would then use their judgment and instincts to "whittle down" those segments to a small set of target groups [Boesenkool interview]. Once the target groups were established, strategists would create avatars as a means of personalising them and "bring them to life" (Flanagan 2009, p. 162). Flanagan (2009) offers some examples of Muttart's personas:

> "Steve and Heather" typified one part of our core support: in their forties, married with three children, Protestant, with Steve owning his own business.
>
> Another core voter was "Eunice," a widow in her seventies, also Protestant, living on a modest pension but owning her own home.
>
> "Dougie" — single, in his late twenties, working at Canadian Tire — represented one type of swing voter. He agreed with us on issues such as crime and welfare abuse, but he was more interested in hunting and fishing than politics and often didn't bother to vote. He was potentially supportive but hard to reach.
>
> "Rick and Brenda," a common-law couple with working class jobs, represented another set of swing voters...
>
> ...as did "Mike and Teresa," who probably would be Conservative core supporters except for their Catholic background.
>
> And to exemplify people who would never vote for us, there was Zoe (affectionately named after the President's daughter in "West Wing"), twenty-five, single, with a degree in sociology, practicing yoga and eating organic food in her central-city apartment;
>
> and "Marcus and Fiona," a high-income couple with no kids, professional jobs, feeling part of the establishment and loving it (pp. 223-224).

Once the personas were developed, they remained fairly firm over time [Muttart interview]. However, as the Conservative campaign team moved from election to election, they did note how some of the fictitious voter personas could evolve over their life cycles. For example, "Dougie might get together with his girlfriend, Denise, and have a kid. Fifty years later, she might be Eunice." [Brodie interview].

There are clear parallels between this persona approach and the one employed by Howard's team in Australia; Rick and Brenda resemble Phil and Jenny, for instance. This is no coincidence, as Muttart and several other members of Harper's campaign team met with Howard and his strategists several times in 2005 (Turcotte 2012, p. 86). According to Muttart, Phil and Jenny were too broadly defined to be a target segment; more data and detail was needed [Muttart interview].

Discussed below, these personas served two key functions for the Conservative campaign team: (1) as an internal communications tool and (2) as an external brand management system.

Internal communications

By simplifying an entire voter segment into a single, fictional character, fictitious voter personas allowed campaign strategists to communicate effectively and efficiently with their staff. As Pruitt and Grudin (2003, p. 3) explained, "their greatest value is in providing a shared basis for

communication." In our interview with Muttart, he described the purpose of personas as straightforward and amazingly simple: we wanted our policy team to be able to develop policies for the types of people that we needed to vote for us… Using the data we had, we built the most realistic personas we could, recognising they're not perfect. We wanted to put a name, face, location, housing type, and lifestyle in front of our policy people so they could visualize the impact of our platform on them… They were very blunt instruments to focus the minds of our staff [Muttart interview].

As central campaign teams continue to expand in size — typically consisting of the party leader, their campaign director, senior advisors, communications staff, pollsters, and policy analysts — the ability to precisely communicate large amounts of information and ensure each team member is on the same page has become more valuable. Fictitious voter personas help to unite campaign teams behind a series of focused messages aimed squarely at the target audience. As Boesenkool [interview] cautions, "You have to commit and believe in the profiles as a chief strategy for them to work. They may not make much sense to the ground war people. But it is a huge deal for policy and advertising teams."

User experience (UX) professionals see similar benefits. Cooper (2004) notes that fictitious personas can help settle debates between designers and programmers over the proper course of action. Many programmers like to think of designing for a general user, rather than a specific segment or person. Unchecked, this can lead to design choices aimed at satisfying broad, generalised demand, rather than the needs and wants of a narrower target audience (p. 132). As one of our interviewees put it, fictitious voter personas become shorthand and are "socialised into the organization, its culture, as a language to help understand the key market demographic" [Large interview].

In our interviews with Canadian political strategists, we found Cooper's findings prescient. Instead of allowing focus to drift toward winning the support of the broader electorate, personas ensure the desires of specific voter segments are at the heart of policy and communications decisions. It is not about what the mythical median voter wants; rather, it is about what specific symbolic characters, such as Dougie, want. As one of Harper's lead strategists, Ken Boesenkool describes, "if a policy didn't speak to the target groups — core and swing — it didn't go into the platform" [Boesenkool interview].

By familiarising campaign members with their fictitious voter personas, strategists can more effectively communicate to policymakers and communications staff about who their "product" is for. This is particularly important when the target audience differs significantly from the campaign staff, themselves. As Flanagan (2009, p. 224) recalls, Muttart used these personas to get staff and advertisers to step outside themselves and into the mindset of the target audience: "You buy your coffee at Starbucks, but these people get their coffee at Tim Hortons" (see also: Delacourt 2016, p. 199). Noting the gap between the party's campaign team and the demographics they were targeting, one of Harper's key lieutenants, MP Jason Kenney, noted "the funny thing is, our war room is awash in Zoes" (in Wells 2006, p. 214). According to Muttart, he used personas to remind staff that "we are aliens as a subset of the population, the things that are important to us are not important to other people… We need to check our personal biases and get inside the heads of people who could be our voters" [Muttart interview]. When Brodie questioned him about why he insisted on being so precisely detailed with his descriptions of each persona, Muttart responded that "it's because people that do our ads and policy don't have any idea how these personas live in real life. They need to know them" [Brodie interview].

The specificity of fictitious voter personas — with Muttart providing their name, gender, job, home type, priority issues, amongst other details — helped staff identify with them. Instead of presenting voter segments through charts, graphs, and numbers, these personas allow strategists to present data in the cast of an everyday person. As Brodie put it, it is easier to understand who you are creating policy or writing speeches for when you can see their face and imagine their everyday lived reality [Brodie interview]. Some of the fictitious voter personas were even named after family or friends from real life, an attempt to ground the characters in reality. Couples Marcus and Fiona, and Mike and Teresa, were acquaintances of Muttart, for instance [Muttart interview].

Multiple strategists interviewed recalled a variety of methods used on the campaign to introduce fictitious voter personas to political staff and emphasize their importance. More conventional methods included PowerPoint presentations, print-out sheets containing information about each persona on them, and briefing sheets given to scriptwriters. However, some more unconventional methods stand out, such as printing personas as posters and placing them on the wall or handing out hockey cards with personas on them to policy drafters [Muttart interview]. These mirrored approaches employed by Microsoft designers earlier in the decade (see Pruitt & Grudin 2003 and Grudin & Pruitt 2002 for examples).

Once in government, the Conservative policy team even printed "Team Dougie" t-shirts [Brodie interview]. Regardless of the method, the goal of each action was clear: to ensure that every member of the campaign team, from policymaking to communications, possessed the same understanding of specific fictitious voter personas and kept them front of mind when campaigning. This helps mitigate against the principal-agent problem that can plague even the best-resourced and disciplined campaign teams (Enos & Hersh 2015; Marland & Wagner 2020). And it allowed the campaign organisers to "centralise the messaging but decentralise the execution" [Brodie interview].

From this initial focus on policy, Muttart and the rest of Harper's team recognised the benefits of fictitious voter personas from an external communications perspective, i.e., in crafting language and choosing channels to reach prospective voters.

Policy development and communications

As a result of Muttart's innovation, Conservative campaigns in 2006 and 2008 became more tightly focused on the interests of their target voters. Staffers, who now possessed a better and unified understanding of their audience segments, were subsequently able to tailor their political 'product' to the satisfaction of the personas. According to Marland (2012), "Policies were designed to appeal to residents in middle-class suburbs who had conservative leanings, particularly those in the 905 area code region around Toronto. This produced a sharp contrast between the Liberals' macro policies and the Tories' micro-targeting" (p. 66).

According to our interviews, for example, policy staff were encouraged to look at an image of Dougie, alongside other fictitious voter personas, during policy brainstorm sessions and ask themselves questions about how he felt about the policies in question, such as whether the policy appealed to him or whether he could understand it. The purpose of the exercise was to remove the bias of the political staffers from the process and focus on the desires of their voters. After all, as a couple strategists noted, most of the staffers working in the room were not "Dougies." Rather, many were closer to being "Zoe," "Fiona and Marcus," or other high-earning, urbanite personas that fell outside of the party's universe of voters. By looking at each policy through the eyes of Dougie, the fictitious voter persona process helped to create policies which

directly appealed to target voter segments, such as particular boutique tax credits (Delacourt 2016, p. 212).

On the communications side of the campaign, personas helped staff tailor their message to better appeal to desired voters. Conservative staffers would look at Dougie and other target personas, visualising what messages would best resonate with them. For example, Boesenkool recalled that Dougie, who typically lacked a general interest in politics, "would only vote if he was a bit angry. So, we would add a bit of edge to [Harper's] comments when we knew he was speaking to Dougie." [Boesenkool interview]. Other times, the team would adjust the leader's wardrobe or remind him to smile when appealing to women encapsulated by personas like Teresa or Brenda [Boesenkool interview]. Earlier research revealed that key strategists found the Conservatives' pre-election advertising catered too much to "Zoe" and other anti-personas that the party did not need to win (Delacourt 2016, p. 197). Instead, staff were encouraged to think of each piece of communications, from press releases to ads, as a letter to Dougie and personas they sought to win over (p. 198).

Fictitious voter personas also helped capture everyday aspects of life that other marketing practices may have neglected. For example, not only did strategists know each persona's age and demographic background; they kept track of minute details of their everyday life, such as whether they lived in an apartment or condo, what type of car each persona might drive, which restaurants and stores they frequent, and what type of beverages they consume. These sorts of locations and props provide useful visuals for campaign ads. By keeping track of this information, staffers were able to craft messages which were rooted in the everyday experiences of the people whose votes they sought. As Coletto notes, this part of the persona-crafting process contains elements of identity-building, helping to forge emotional links between parties and particular groups of citizens [Coletto interview].

All aspects of the campaign would come together during policy announcements from Harper, the party leader. For these events, senior staff would create one-page documents known as message event proposals (Marland 2020, p. 164). Each proposal stated which voter segment was the target for the respective announcement, even listing the specific name of the targeted fictitious voter persona [Boesenkool interview]. When these events occurred in swing ridings specifically, one strategist mentioned that speechwriters chose to highlight particular policies that would resonate with particular personas. In these ways, these personas helped unify the different tasks that each section of the campaign team was performing into a single cohesive package — bringing carefully crafted policies and communications together to create a political product custom-tailored for Dougie and his cohort of friends.

Beyond the leader, fictitious voter personas may help keep candidates, surrogates, and other "brand ambassadors" on message by simplifying information about target voter segments (Marland 2016). By packaging the political product to appeal to specific personas, it becomes easier for brand ambassadors to understand the targeted audience and tailor their messaging accordingly. This approach is typically combined with other forms of brand discipline, such having party leadership provide generalized campaign templates to local candidates (p. 175). However, branding is ultimately improved when ambassadors understand the importance of brand consistency (p. 177). Fictitious voter personas provide a unique way to communicate this importance to brand ambassadors, while additionally ensuring that their messaging is simplified down to the lowest common denominator amongst their supporters. This results in enhanced external brand management.

In these ways, fictitious voter personas help build what Tom Flanagan (2014) calls a "'minimum winning coalition,'" where parties do not focus on gaining broad support but instead

prioritise building a solid base with the minimum number of voter segments needed to win (p. 71). Larger coalitions place more expectations and demands upon the government due to the increased number and diversity of supporters it relied upon to win. By contrast, minimum winning coalitions create fewer internal challenges since there are fewer supporters to satisfy and, thus, less chance for conflicting or contradictory demands to sidetrack one's agenda.

Nonetheless, once they reached government following the 2006 election, the Conservatives found it challenging to carry the fictitious voter personas forward into policymaking. "Governing involves working with far more segments, and multiplying the personas was too tough," according to Brodie [Brodie interview]. "Personas were still present in terms of agenda-building and policymaking, though. Dougie's picture remained in our offices. The skilled trades agenda was attributable to him... It was a good way to keep marketing and policy focused on the humans they were affecting" [Brodie interview].

DISCUSSION

The use of fictitious voter personas in the 2006 and 2008 Conservative Party campaigns turned out to be a short-lived experiment. With the advent of Facebook and the arrival of Big Data, many party strategists drifted away from the more qualitative techniques pioneered by Muttart and the rest of Harper's team. Instead of personifying voter segments, focus shifted to building "coalitions" of faceless segments, based on psychographic characteristics [Boesenkool interview].

Campaign finance restrictions in Canada also make it difficult for parties to raise and spend enough for extensive focus group research; surveys remain the most affordable market research tool. As Brad Lavigne, former New Democratic Party National Campaign Director noted, "You need rich backstories to make [personas] work. To get to where Patrick [Muttart] did, you need a tremendous amount of research. Not easy work. It takes a long time, it's expensive, and it's difficult. And you need to train people to use them properly, too" [Lavigne interview]. For this reason, very few political parties in Canada can afford to employ any segmentation methods whatsoever, let alone fictitious voter personas. This is particularly true at the provincial and municipal levels [Velji Interview; Carter Interview].

Other strategists are leery of investing the extra time and resources for little marginal benefit, and even increased risk. The Conservatives 2006 and 2008 campaigns were somewhat unique in that the party needed to make inroads in a small number of voter segments to eke out slim victories. The use of fictitious voter personas may not be as effective if a party needs to pick up a much larger number of votes or seats; in those cases, a broader, geographic approach may be more effective. One sceptic acknowledged the value of these personas "to get everyone in the campaign thinking on the same page and focusing people on what matters and how to communicate" [Arnold interview]. "But if you really wanted to do personas properly, you'd need twenty of them to cover the major psychographic groups for people under forty alone... If you get too narrow with the persona, you'll miss the ability to reach the other people in that demo. You lose the bigger picture and the nuance" [Arnold interview].

According to Carter [interview], "When we run the ground game, it's all about variables and neighbourhoods. We don't have the capacity to deliver different brochures to each person in each house. We need to communicate in the macro. So, why take the extra step of dividing the electorate and naming the segments? What if it all leaks? And you get slammed for it. We want everyone to feel welcome, not just people that fit some fictional persona."

The result has seen strategists focusing their broadcast messages on broad groups like "the middle class" while narrowcasting to very specific micro targets through social media and on-the-ground get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns [Coletto interview; Carter interview]. Others have returned to geographic campaigns, tailoring messages on a regional or neighbourhood basis [Marshall interview]. According to a Liberal Party strategist working on the 2019 federal election campaign, "We went beyond personas. Big Data analysts had developed the predictive modelling for us so we could identify which voters were likely to support us. Then it was our job to get out the vote. We'd use Facebook's algorithms to microtarget online; no need for personas, really, as the algorithm did it for us. No need to put up eight faces on the wall" [Arnold Interview].

Another risk of fictitious voter personas, highlighted in our interviews, is the ability to ignore or potentially stereotype social groups into the persona creation process. Ultimately it would be impossible to embody the plurality of a country in a dozen personas. While the intent behind personas is to specify your target audience, issues can arise when the nuanced realities and perspectives of marginalised constituencies are excluded from the persona process. As Brodie [interview] noted upon reflection, "We didn't carry the personas into our ethnic and new Canadian outreach strategies. All of the personas were white…. I wish we could have done that extension. It would have forced us on the market research side to get more precise about the broad ethnic vote. It could have been a good educational tool for our team."

Insights from interaction design expand on this risk of erasure or misrepresentation by explaining how, when fictious personas are based on societal stereotypes, this forecloses the possibility of deep engagement and identification with the character (Nielsen 2019, p. 58). In politics, such a practice is not only harmful to the users of fictious personas, who fail to understand the distinctive views of a specific constituency, but also to the people that become stereotyped by the approach or who are typically already marginalised within society. Nielsen (2019, p. 14) and Chapman & Milham (2006) criticise previous approaches to personification for relying too heavily on stereotypes and for exclusively examining the behaviour of target users rather than viewing them as whole persons.

These risks relate to concerns about the impacts of political marketing on democracy, more broadly. Many scholars, including those who support using marketing tactics in politics, acknowledge political marketing can negatively affect democracy if used solely to further the interests of political elites (Giasson et al. 2012). Savigny (2008) argues the underlying assumptions of political marketing—which she asserts is rooted in neoclassical economic theory and rational choice individualism —disconnect voters from politics, creating a marketing malaise on democratic engagement. Segmentation techniques specifically run the risk of prioritizing particular voices to the exclusion of others. Given the risk of stereotyping, the use of fictitious voter personas by self-interested parties could contribute to a decline in democratic participation among people who are already among the most marginalized.

However, this risk does not mean that we should write off the potential of fictitious voter personas, writ large. As others note, political marketing practices can benefit democracy when used relationally, encouraging politicians to be more responsive to public opinion and strengthen relationships with citizens (Giasson et al. 2012; Henneberg et al. 2009). Such actions could combat apathy and disaffection among citizens, bring attention to historically marginalized groups, and act as a counter to democratic malaise instead of furthering it. Fictitious voter personas could contribute to this by personalizing the experiences of everyday people and encouraging politicians to listen and empathize with their concerns. Specifically, marketing practitioners could adopt measures in the creation process to ensure parties remain

invested in their fictitious voter persona as a holistic concept that represents the lived experiences of many citizens, and to ensure that designers avoid relying on their own prejudices when crafting their narratives. Nielsen advocates an "engaged perspective" towards fictious personas, where designers use characters and storytelling methods to develop vivid and realistic descriptions of personas meant to solicit empathy from those using them (2019, p. 14). Such methods should draw on data but can also draw in fictitious aspects to support one's understanding of a persona, using the combination of fact and fiction to craft a character-driven story that invites the audience and users to engage and identify with the persona at hand (pp. 60-61). In this framework, fictious personas become rounded characters, representing more than merely the behaviour of specific constituencies but also representing their knowledge, beliefs, intentions, ideology, psychological characteristics, values, and emotional relationships (Nielsen, 2019, pp. 14-15, pp. 60-61). This approach could offer a way forward for political practitioners to better understand the constituencies they seek to represent, rather than perpetuating their exclusion. More research is needed to fully understand how this approach can be implemented and its potential implications on democratic discourse.

It is also important to underscore the value of fictitious voter personas as tools for external and internal political management in campaigns. These need not supplant Big Data, narrowcasting, or other techniques (Howard 2015). These personas amplify the effectiveness of other methods. Strategists can create and deliver a unified product that resonates with their desired voter segments and maintains brand consistency. Simultaneously, the internal use of fictitious voter personas among political party leaders, policymakers, and communication staffers ensures that political teams are unified in working towards the same targets. As a tool of internal management, our findings suggest that these personas, when used correctly, could act as a potential solution to the principal-agent problem that can plague political organisations.

An added benefit is that political actors can develop strategies to reach the communities and groups that are vital to their success. While other segmentation tactics can also accomplish this, fictitious voter personas offer the unique benefit of allowing marketing practitioners to personalize these groups according to their lifestyles. Given the volume of detailed information that goes into creating a persona, this allows political actors to identify pre-existing micro-publics that centre around their fictitious voter personas and to mobilize citizens through these micro-publics in an effective manner. Whereas many politicians seek to cultivate a micro-public around their own mediated image, fictitious voter personas offer an opportunity to organise the electorate into pre-existing micro-publics which they can then address through further outreach.

In short, the Canadian case illustrates both the advantages and drawbacks using fictitious voter personas in political campaigns. This information also advances the field of personas studies by shifting our understanding of how political actors use personas. Whereas previous examples focus on the use of Jungian personas to cultivate a particular image of politicians to the public, our research shows the effectiveness of fictitious personas in segmenting and mobilising the electorate. These tactics and outcomes differ from other uses of personas, creating differential effects on liberal democracy, both positive and negative.

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APPENDIX 1. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES.

Arnold, Dan (Lead Research Strategist for Liberal Party in 2015 election, and Director of Research in 2019 and 2021 elections).

Brodie, Ian (Professor of Political Science, University of Calgary and former Chief of Staff, Prime Minister's Office).

Boessenkool, Ken (Professor of Practice, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University).

Carter, Stephen (President, Decide Campaigns).

Coletto, David (Chair and CEO, Abacus Data).

Large, Ian (Executive Vice-President, Alberta, Leger)

Lavigne, Brad (Partner and Vice-President, Western Canada, Counsel Public Affairs).

Marshall, Hamish (Partner, One Persuasion Inc.).

Muttart, Patrick (Senior Vice-President, External Relations, TC Energy, Houston, Texas).

Velji, Zain (Partner, Northweather).