

Evidence of Systematic Political Bias in Online Search Results in the 10 Days Leading Up to the 2018 U.S. Midterm Elections

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Summary

A report (<https://bit.ly/1REqzEY>) published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2015 demonstrated that search-engine search results that favor one candidate can easily shift voting preferences among undecided voters by 20% or more – by up to 80% in some demographic groups. The report also showed that this manipulation can easily be masked so that it is invisible to users. Subsequent research has shed further light on this effect, dubbed the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME), and several investigations, including one by the European Commission, have confirmed that search results by Google, the search engine used to conduct about 90% of searches worldwide, are often biased in ways that serve the company's financial or political goals.

In the present study, an anonymous, Nielsen-type network of field agents was recruited that allowed election-related searches on Google, Bing, and Yahoo to be preserved during the 10 days preceding the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. Data collection focused mainly on three hotly contested Congressional races in Republican districts in California, all of which were won by the Democratic candidates. 47,294 searches were preserved, along with the 392,274 web pages to which the search results linked. Search suggestions and answer boxes were also preserved.

Based on crowd-sourced bias ratings, we found that Google search results were significantly more liberal than non-Google search results on all 10 days leading up to and including Election Day and in all 10 positions of search results on the first page of search results. This finding was further supported by calculating the political bias of the news sources used in the search results, based on ratings of 976 online news sources published in 2017 by Harvard's Berkman Klein Center (Faris et al., 2017, <https://is.gd/eypSw3>). On a scale from -1.00 (conservative) to +1.00 (liberal), the mean bias level of Google search results ($M = 0.14$, $n = 210,088$) was significantly higher than the mean bias level of non-Google results ($M = -0.13$, $n = 14,506$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.52$). A computational SEME model suggests that this level of bias in search results nationwide could have shifted upwards of 78.2 million votes toward Democratic candidates (spread across hundreds of state and regional races) in 2018 without user awareness.

The study demonstrates the feasibility of creating large-scale monitoring systems to detect bias in online content in real time, sophisticated enough, we believe, to expose election manipulations by online platforms as the manipulations are occurring. The study also suggests that Google's search algorithm may have shifted large numbers of votes toward Democratic candidates in the midterm elections with no one knowing this had occurred.

Personal note: The author sympathizes with Google's liberal bent, but he also believes that no private company should have the unfettered power to subvert free-and-fair elections, especially in ways that are invisible to the electorate.