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Studying Google's effects on voters

A psychologist says search results steer people to the left. Conservatives cheer.

BY EVAN HALPER

WASHINGTON — The idea that Google is subtly pushing masses of voters to the left has the ring of conspiracy, and thus the work of Robert Epstein is warmly embraced by conservative lawmakers — as well as a president — convinced that Big Tech is plotting against them.

Yet even some scholars who think the San Diego-based psychologist is wrong about the political impact of search engines — he believes bias built into Google's processes could have cost Republicans three California congressional districts in the last election — have started paying attention to his detailed work on how voters respond to tens of thousands of search results.

At a moment when misinformation about search engines and social media bias is rampant, with both the left and the right amplifying unsupported claims, Epstein is asking the right questions, they say, about the unseen power of algorithms and how little most Americans understand about the way they work.

[See Epstein, A7]

Studying effects of Google searches on voters

[Epstein, from A1]

The saga of the persistent San Diego psychologist versus the tech giant is a long-running one, full of twists. As Big Data shapes our opinions in ways scholars are only beginning to comprehend, his work has increasingly caught attention.

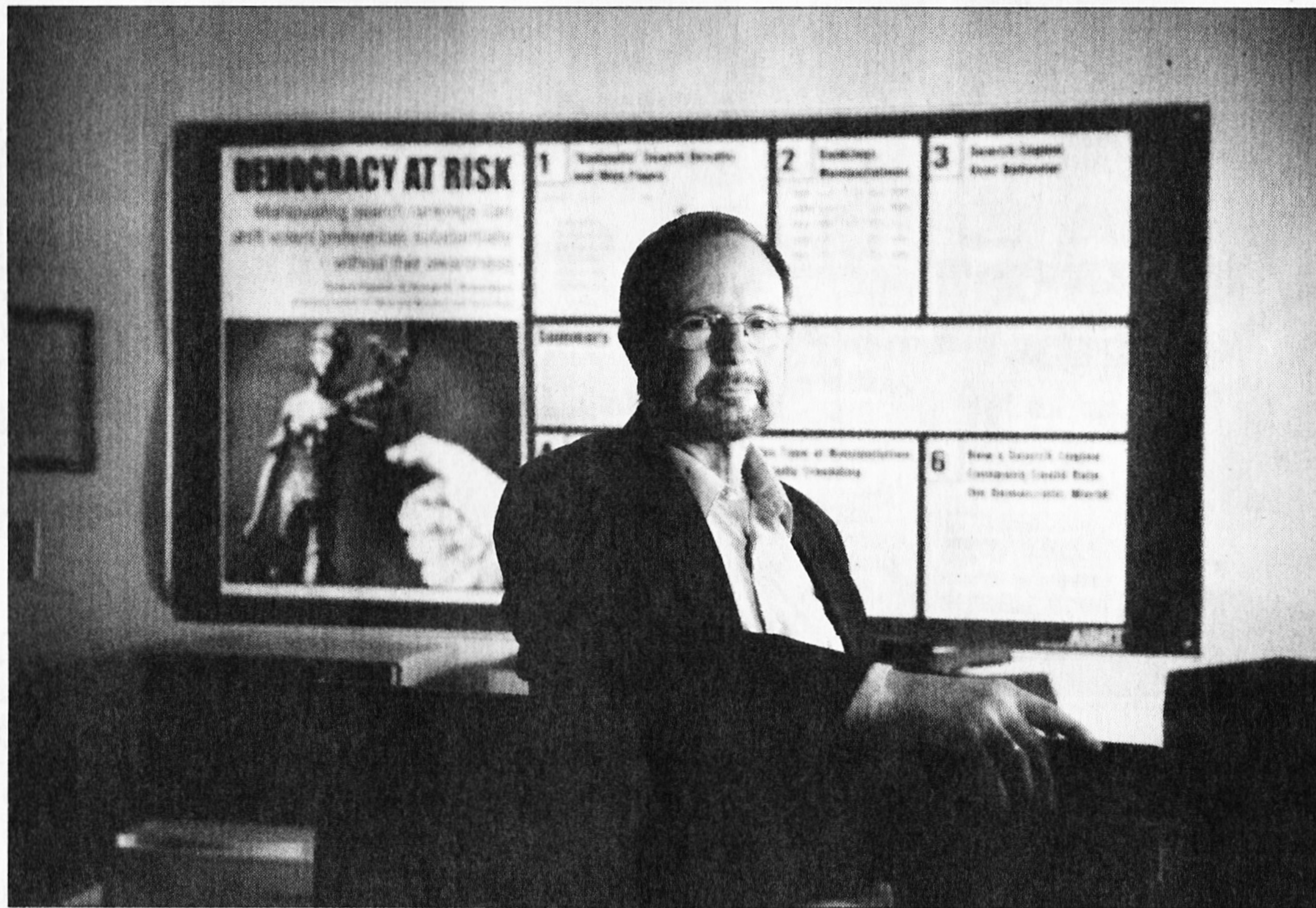
"The larger issue he is looking at is extremely important," said Ramesh Srinivasan, a professor of information studies at UCLA who focuses on the relationships between technology and politics. Srinivasan is not convinced by the claims from conservatives that the GOP is being victimized, but he argues scholars need to look more deeply at how search engines can shape the views of those who use them.

"We turn to these efficient technologies," he said, "to do almost everything these days without knowing why we see what we see from them or what data is collected about us and how it is being used."

Epstein, a former Psychology Today editor in chief who runs a nonprofit institute in California, calls the phenomenon he has explored the search engine manipulation effect.

"These are new forms of manipulation people can't see," he said. The technologies "can have an enormous impact on voters who are undecided. ... People have no awareness the influence is being exerted."

Google dismisses his research as the work of a misguided amateur. Company Chief Executive Sundar Pichai said at a House Judiciary Committee hearing in December that Google had investigated Epstein's find-



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

PSYCHOLOGIST Robert Epstein believes bias built into Google's processes could have cost Republicans three California congressional districts in the last election.

ings and found his methodology flawed.

Company officials, while declining to comment about Epstein on the record, offered background material asserting that Google algorithms are politically blind and respond to searches with news content based on its timeliness, relevance and authoritativeness.

In his latest study, which he and a co-author plan to present in April at the 99th annual meeting of the Western Psychological Assn., in Pasadena, Epstein tracked 47,300 searches by dozens of undecided voters in the districts of newly elected California Democratic Reps. Katie Porter, Harley Rouda and Mike Levin.

Mainstream outlets, including the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times, dominated the

Google search results. By contrast, searches conducted on Yahoo and Bing more often showcased links from deeply conservative outfits such as Breitbart.

Using a model he has developed to gauge the subliminal effect of what he sees as tilted search results, Epstein projected that 35,455 voters who'd been on the fence were persuaded to vote for a Democrat entirely because of the sources Google fed them.

That conclusion is subject to much dispute.

Srinivasan questions how many undecided voters use Google to help decide how to cast ballots.

Safiya Noble, a UCLA professor and author of "Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism," is troubled by what she sees as an argu-

ment that search engines ought to counterbalance the content of large, well-resourced and highly trained newsrooms with "disinformation sites" and "propaganda outlets."

Epstein says the large readership that sites such as Breitbart receive should earn them more prominent Google exposure. "It is astonishing that Breitbart and some similar websites are not more present, given the enormous traffic some of these websites get, Breitbart especially," he said. "What you are seeing here might be indicative of a kind of blacklisting."

Google, he says, is trying to make judgments "based on some measures of what they consider to be quality. They have said this publicly. They are trying to judge what is good and bad."

Google executives, for their part, argue it would be corporate suicide to use their influence over voters to sway elections.

But many analysts say that is not the point. Even if Epstein is wrong about the effects of Google's searches, the real issue, they say, is how little people know about the ways the company's algorithms manipulate what users see. Google engineers design their algorithms for a host of reasons — mostly related to boosting profits — and users just accept the top links as the most trustworthy and authoritative information on a topic.

"We need to understand the potential political impact of these underneath-the-hood choices" by tech companies, said Jacob Shapiro, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton. "The question we should be asking is, what do we need to do to nail down how consequential this is? And what systems do we need to create as a society to minimize the negatives?"

Noble agrees with that broader point that Google should not be guiding crucial societal questions, such as how we vote.

"We use these search engines as if they are arbiters of truth, and they are not," she said. "They are global advertising platforms. They are not fact checkers or public interest technologies. ... The minute you start to engage these broader social issues on a search engine, you run up against its limits."

The fix, Noble says, involves giving people viable alternatives to Google that are not designed for profit but for the public interest.

Epstein calls for "a worldwide passive network of

monitoring systems to keep an eye on emerging technologies and what they are showing and telling people." Other scholars suggest equally bold government interventions, some of which align with Democratic presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren's plan to break up big tech companies.

But Congress is right now focused on using the potential flaws in search engines as a springboard to air political grievances and launch partisan attacks.

The December hearing into Google was consumed by theatrics. Republicans, citing Epstein, presented themselves as victims of a cynical conspiracy, sometimes conflating his work with unrelated perceived biases. The committee's top Democrat, Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York, declared political bias in search engines a "fantasy dreamed up by some conservatives."

Epstein may be discouraged, but he isn't helping turn down the temperature. He supported Hillary Clinton, but he's become a frequent guest on right-wing media. Tucker Carlson sings his praises on Fox News. He gives talks at tea party meetings.

He starred in a documentary called "The Creepy Line" that was produced by Peter Schweizer, author of "Clinton Cash," who is among the journalists most reviled by Democrats.

"I have become a darling of conservatives, which is driving me crazy," Epstein said. "But they love me because I am saying things they want to hear. People I am closer to politically don't want to hear what I have to say."