

# What is political? The uncoordinated efforts of social media platforms on political advertising.

*By Samuel Cipers, PhD Researcher at Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Trisha Meyer, Professor in Digital Governance and Participation at Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.*

In this analysis, we reflect on social media platforms' policies and guidelines on political advertising. These entities are voluntary signatories to the Code of Practice on Disinformation. This blogpost, embedded in a broader study of platform actions on disinformation, analyses the initiatives of Meta, Google, TikTok, and Twitter. While some choose to allow and regulate political advertisements, others ban them from their platforms. We dig deeper into their policies, how platforms define what is political content and think about possible outcomes and differences between different outlets. In the context of ongoing EU negotiations on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, this study demonstrates that (currently) "political" advertisements are not defined in their content or scope, which not only leads to different approaches, but also allows these tech actors to cherry-pick their decisions on what constitutes "political speech" and – advertisements.

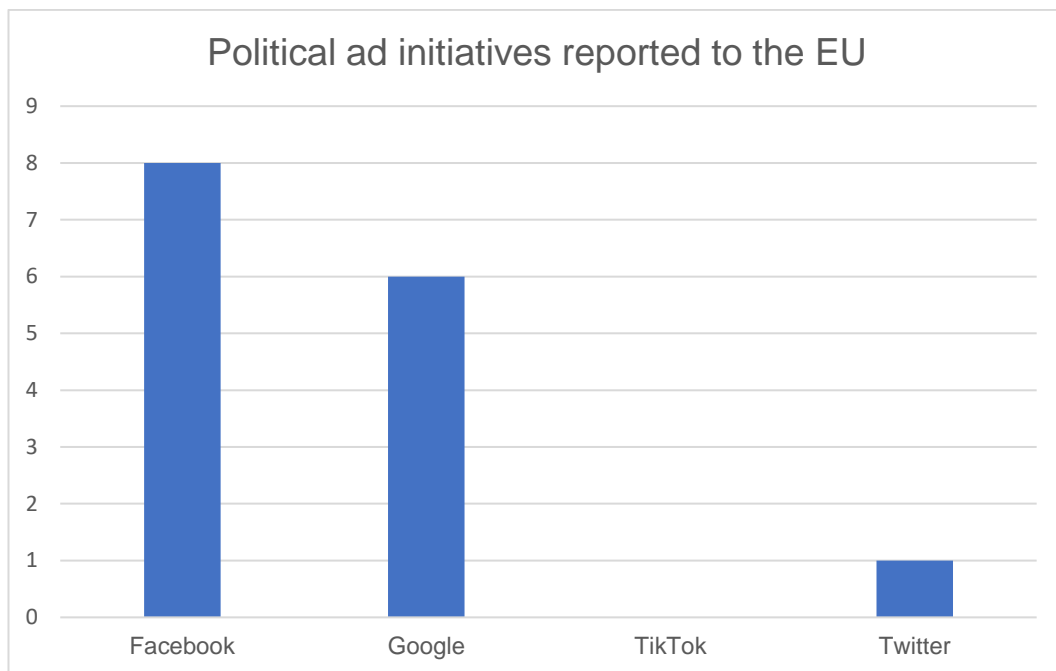
Until recently, virtually anyone could run advertisements of a political nature on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or search engines like Google. This open, unchecked service proved to be a major headache for governments and users, as populist anti-democratic forces and malign actors embraced this opportunity to disinform, misguide users, and exploit political discontent. The 2016 US presidential elections, the Brexit referendum and the "Cambridge Analytica" scandal raised salience of (misuses of) platform advertisement (and content moderation) models. In this review, we analyse the initiatives on political advertising of Meta (Facebook & Instagram), Google, TikTok, and Twitter since 2020.

For this purpose, we examined all the monitoring reports that these actors delivered to the European Union, an initiative outlined in the Code of Practice on Disinformation. All these reports can be found [here](#). From these reports, we distilled platform initiatives aimed at the COVID-19 pandemic, electoral/political advertising, influence operations, and other cases. These cases were further categorised according to how they counter disinformation. In this analysis, we focus solely on self-reported initiatives aimed at political/electoral advertisements (whether they are disinformative or not) of Meta, Google, TikTok, and Twitter from January 2020 until April 2022 (being the last reports available at the time of writing) – supplemented with a deep dive into these actors' community guidelines and policies.

## Comparing the platforms

When gathering the data, we immediately noticed major discrepancies between the different platforms. Indeed, the voluntary fashion in which these actors became signatories of the Code of Practice on Disinformation (at least in its initial iteration) seems to be reflected by each platform taking their own approach to tackling disinformation and developing their own policies regarding political advertisements. They differ greatly in terms of types and numbers of initiatives to address the misuse of political advertisements reported to the European Union.

Figure 1: Initiatives on political advertisements self-reported to the European Commission



### *Banning political ads: the cases of TikTok and Twitter*

At first glance, the graph might suggest that TikTok and Twitter do not regulate political advertisements. It is important to note that these reports were set up to monitor platform activity in the context of the Code of Practice on Disinformation, but also more specifically on COVID-19 disinformation. However, there is another explanation for the lack on (reporting on) initiatives for TikTok and Twitter: they ban political advertising all together.

Twitter identifies political advertisements based on their content: *"We define political content as content that references a candidate, political party, elected or appointed government official, election, referendum, ballot measure, legislation, regulation, directive, or judicial outcome. Ads that contain references to political content, including appeals for votes, solicitations of financial support, and advocacy for or against any of the above-listed types of political content, are prohibited under this policy."* Twitter defines what content constitutes political advertisements, in addition to prohibiting the accounts of *"... candidates, political parties, or elected or appointed government officials"*([same link](#)) of having access to the advertisement tools provided by the platform.

Its Chinese video-based counterpart TikTok does not go through the length of defining what is political content in the eyes of the platform. They restrict accounts of candidates or nominees for public office, political parties, elected or appointed government officials (and their spouses), and royal family members from advertising. While Twitter defines and bans certain advertising content and use, TikTok restricts certain users by not allowing them to run ads. On the surface Twitter's and TikTok's approach might seem similar, but there is a difference that deserves further empirical investigation in the future.

Some critics have stated that banning political advertisements on social media platforms could lead to unfavourable outcomes. For example, a petroleum company could run an ad on their fuel-products for consumers' cars, but issue-based groups on climate cannot run ads on the need for judicial action against

petroleum companies. Moreover, smaller and less-known candidates lose the possibility to raise support with limited resources (compared to traditional campaigning) ([Stewart, 2019](#); [Yaraghi, 2020](#)).

Additionally, banning political advertisements does not equate banning politics altogether: political parties, candidates, and representatives are free to directly engage with the public on their accounts, pages, and channels. Candidates from bigger and more successful parties often benefit from the help and coordination of professional social media advisors and teams, giving them an advantage over regular users and candidates, parties, or issue groups with less resources.

### *Regulating political ads: the case of Meta and Google*

Another glance at the graph tells us that Meta and Google reported substantially more initiatives on political advertisements the last two years. Meta and Google allow political advertisements if these follow the platforms' policy guidelines on political and issue-based ads. Both actors indicate that they take into account the national (election) regulations of the country where the advertiser is based (and when adapted to online contexts). Let's look at how these platforms regulate political advertisements and what sets them apart.

Meta [defines](#) ads on social issues, elections, or politics as follows:

- *"Made by, on behalf of or about a candidate for public office, a political figure, a political party, a political action committee or advocates for the outcome of an election to public office; or*
- *About any election, referendum or ballot initiative, including "go out and vote" or election campaigns; or*
- *About social issues ([Social issues are sensitive topics that are heavily debated, may influence the outcome of an election or result in/relate to existing or proposed legislation](#)) in any place where the ad is being published; or*
- *Regulated as political advertising."*

To launch political, electoral, or issue-based ads, one needs to be authorised to do so. This means completing the ad-authorisation process, which is only available for advertisers residing and located in the target country. In addition, the advertisement itself must have a disclaimer stating the name and entity that paid for the ad.

Meta, in conformance with the revised Code of Practice on Disinformation and similar to other social media platforms, runs an "ad library" where all advertisements on the platform can be found. Interestingly, the library includes ads even if the issuer failed to comply with the authorisation process or Facebook's policy guidelines. We commend Meta for making it possible to research refused advertisement campaigns, as they might reveal coordinated inauthentic behaviour or groups wishing to influence political and/or electoral processes.

Information on political and electoral advertisements are provided and included whether they are active or inactive; who paid for the ad; whether they were approved or disapproved; the range of "impressions" the ad received; a range indicating the amount of money spend on an ad; demographic information on users who have been reached by the ad; and the location(s) where the ad was viewed.

Google immediately clarifies that regulation on political advertisements is based on location. In some countries, Google requires the advertiser to run through a verification process. In case of an EU country, this is the "EU election ad verification" process. Election advertisements need to be accompanied by a disclaimer identifying who paid for the ad. Note that Meta, in its advertisement policies and community guidelines, does not distinguish between political, electoral, and issue-based ads, which all need to be accompanied by the same disclaimer. The search engine giant only places restrictions on electoral ads.

Google, like Meta, complies with lawful restrictions on online electoral communication, such as in Canada, France, the Philippines, Singapore, and South-Korea. If the country of the issuer of any political or electoral advertisements has no regulation in place, one can run a political ad if it complies to Google's other ad policies, implying that Google has no specific regulations or policies on political advertisements. Aside from some minor differences, Meta and Google do not seem to diverge that much in their regulatory approach on this matter.

Similarly, they both provide an ad library. In Google's case, this is called "Ads Transparency". Whereas Google only saves electoral advertisements in their database, Facebook includes all ads that were/are active on the platform (fashion, real estate, and many more).

## What is "political"?

The four researched social media platforms all have some form of political ads-related policy in place, ranging from banning political ads altogether (Twitter and TikTok) to allowing political advertisements under certain conditions based on location of the advertiser.

Figure 2: Summary of platforms' action on political advertisements

Platform	Meta	Google	TikTok	Twitter
Ban/Policy?	Ad Policy	Ad Policy	Ban	Ban
Defines "political ads"	Based on profile advertiser and content	Electoral ads	Based on profile advertiser	Based on profile advertiser and content

Treating social issue based non-profit organisations in the same way as well-resourced political parties, as is the case for Meta or Twitter, could potentially benefit the latter, while Google's specific focus on electoral ads might open up possibilities for malicious actors to circumvent additional scrutiny by "repackaging" their message as electorally unrelated. By simply denying political actors access to the advertisement tools on the platform, TikTok does not seem to define what constitutes a political ad. Twitter, on the contrary, goes to greater lengths and defines political content (similar to Meta) in order to decide whether to ban certain advertisements or not. The outright banning of political advertisements might seem like an honourable effort in combatting misuse, but several concerns were raised above.

The differences between all social media platforms reveal that political advertisements are not currently defined in their content or scope. Social media platforms have the power to define what constitutes paid "political" speech through their advertising policies. Promoting political debate, while safeguarding speech yet avoiding polarisation, is a balance that has yet to be struck in online spaces. This analysis has shown the clear need to define political advertising at European level, in which both the profile of the advertiser, as well as the nature of the content, are considered. We would also encourage to include rejected campaigns in the ad libraries (with reasoning) to add transparency and facilitate monitoring of shifts in narratives, influence campaigns, but equally potential unintended repressive consequences. Finally, we recommend further attention is given to the ways in which political accounts are self-regulated on platforms – not to intervene in speech (beyond what is legally required), but to ensure level playing fields between political actors.