

# Facebook's new political-ad policy already showing cracks, loopholes



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If you create a system, someone will try to game it—that's true of everything from *Candyland* to the tax code. And so we should not be terribly surprised that Facebook—which is desperately trying to create some kind of coherent system for political advertising and speech as the United States careens headlong into the 2020 election season—already has players pushing to exploit loopholes in its policy.

Facebook confirmed earlier this month that while it attempts to fact-check certain kinds of posts and articles, posts by politicians are exempt from review on that basis, as are ads posted by campaigns. But while the social media giant doesn't care if politicians lie outright in their ads, the company does have *some* standards: nob—including politicians—is allowed to post ads that intentionally try to suppress voter turnout.

So when The Washington Post found a targeted ad campaign on Facebook seemingly designed to mislead voters, the paper had questions.

"Official records show that your voter registration is incomplete," an ad targeted to Arizona voters said. The ad exhorted those who saw it to "Follow the link below to complete your voter registration NOW!"

The Post found that the ad, along with about two dozen other similar messages in the past five months, was purchased and run by a pro-Trump super PAC. When the WaPo reached out to Facebook about the advertisements, which seem to violate Facebook's policies, Facebook said it would remove four of the messages and submit others to third-party fact-checkers for verification.

## **It all depends on the messenger**

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg faced intense questioning about the company's political-advertising policy during an appearance on Capitol Hill last week.

During the five-hour hearing, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) specifically challenged Zuckerberg: "So there is some threshold where you will fact-check political advertisements? Could I run ads targeting Republicans in primaries saying that they voted for the Green New Deal?" referencing her own progressive policy proposal package.

Zuckerberg was unsure of the answer. He responded, “I don’t know the answer to that off the top of my head. I think probably.”

So a left-leaning PAC, The Really Online Lefty League (TROLL), did exactly what its name suggests: it bought a stunt ad claiming Sen. Lindsay Graham, a staunch Republican from South Carolina, supports the Green New Deal.

Sen. Graham, of course, ardently opposes the proposal, and Facebook did indeed fact-check that ad and suspended its paid distribution.

A Facebook spokesman told Reuters that—since the ad came from a third-party political action group, rather than directly from a politician—it was eligible for review and removal. Had Rep. Ocasio-Cortez herself decided to run such a spot, however, it’s not clear that Facebook would have taken any action.

## Nobody’s happy

The poor reception Facebook is receiving for its contorted policy isn’t only coming from lawmakers and the general public. Dissent is coming from inside the big blue house, too.

The New York Times reports today that more than 250 employees so far have signed onto an open letter to Zuckerberg, posted to the whole company on its internal social network, that strongly objects to the political-ad policy.

“Free speech and paid speech are not the same thing,” the employees wrote in the letter, continuing:

*Misinformation affects us all. Our current policies on fact-checking people in political office, or those running for office, are a threat to what FB stands for. We strongly object to this policy as it stands. It doesn’t protect voices but instead allows politicians to weaponize our platform by*

*targeting people who believe that content posted by political figures is trustworthy.*

The employees suggest instead that political advertising should be held to the same standard as other advertising (which it used to be). Political ads should also be visually distinct and have their ability to narrowly target extremely granular populations limited, the letter suggests.

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