Political Ads 2020: Spring Monitoring Report

Background

This is the third in a series of reports produced as part of the Digital Advertising Accountability Program's (DAAP) political advertising transparency project. DAAP monitors websites and mobile apps for express advocacy political advertising, which is advertising for the election or defeat of a specific candidate for federal or statewide office. The following information was derived from our monitoring of websites and mobile apps for compliance with the Application of the Self-Regulatory Principles of Transparency & Accountability to Political Advertising (Political Advertising Principles), best practices in this space. For this report, we analyzed 1,071 political ads and their associated political advertisers across the United States from January 1, 2020, to April 20, 2020 – our total dataset.

The date range for our total monitoring encompasses the “Super Tuesday” contest on March 3, 2020, which featured a number of state Democratic primary contests. The data includes ads encountered on social media platforms, websites, and search engines. Please note that while many of the following tables add up to our complete set of 1,071 ads, some tables may not if an aspect of an ad was unreadable or unknowable.

We note that as a result of our monitoring, we found that some political advertisers fall far short of full compliance with political advertising transparency best practices. Though many political ads contain notice and “enhanced” notice of their political nature, nine percent of advertisers did not appear to provide any kind of notice or enhanced notice.

The Results

Table 1. Political Advertisement Platforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform of Political Ads</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Web</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Engine</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. State-Specific Political Ads

This table includes ads with a specific state “association,” which means that the ad met at least one of the four following criteria:

- The text of the ad explicitly mentioned a state,
- The candidate was running for statewide office in a specific state,
- The ad appeared on a state-specific website (e.g., local news websites), and/or
- The ad otherwise appeared to target a specific individual or group in a given state (e.g., targeted advertising).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform of Political Ads</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Top Ten Advertisers
This table identifies the top advertisers, or the person or entity that paid for an ad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Advertiser</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warren for President</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump Make America Great Again Committee</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Bloomberg 2020</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy McGrath for Senate</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Galloway for Missouri</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biden for President</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie 2020</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaime Harrison for U.S. Senate</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Merkley for Oregon</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booker for Kentucky</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. “Enhanced Notice” or “Notice” Provided
For the purposes of this document, “enhanced notice” means any indication of an ad’s political nature, such as a link, icon, or combination of words and phrases (e.g. paid for by John Smith for President). “Notice” means any explanation, linked from an enhanced notice, that provides insight into the ad. Of this dataset and the parameters we defined during our monitoring period, approximately nine percent of political ads during this time period did not provide adequate and enhanced notice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliance Issue</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ads with “enhanced notice” and notice</td>
<td>781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads with “enhanced notice” but no notice</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads with “enhanced notice” but notice unknown</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads with neither notice nor “enhanced notice”</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Use of AdChoices Icon
This icon identifies an ad that is collecting or using interest-based advertising data. AdChoices is a self-regulatory program that encourages online advertising platforms to identify where data is collected and used for interest-based, or behavioral, advertising.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of AdChoices Icon</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AdChoices Icon provided</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AdChoices Icon not provided</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>974</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We noticed that many political ads deployed the familiar AdChoices icon as enhanced notice where we would have expected an icon or wording indicating that the ad was political. Further, we note that no ad in our dataset used the purple PoliticalAd icon enhanced notice, which is intended to be the symbol for enhanced notice of express political advertising.

Table 6. Types of Political Advertisers
The chart below indicates the entities responsible for the advertisement. Most ads in our dataset were paid for by the individual campaigns themselves (85%), while 14% were paid for by committees. Six of the ads in our dataset are classified as “unknown” because we were unable to definitively determine which entity paid for the ads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entity Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaign</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Nonprofit</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7. Federal or State Contest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Contest</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Types of Federal Contests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Contest</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senator</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressman</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>984</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Types of Statewide Contests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Contest</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attorney General</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lt. Governor</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. Political Party Affiliation

This table identifies the political party affiliation of the advertiser by locating “Republican” or “Democrat” as part of the advertiser’s name or noting that the candidate is running on a specific party’s ticket. Our results show that 80% of the ads in our dataset were affiliated with the Democratic party, which can likely be attributed to the highly contested Super Tuesday races.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party Affiliation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Party</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Party</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11. Top Ten “Pro” Ads

This chart identifies the candidates with the greatest number of ads advocating for their election.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Warren</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Bloomberg</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy McGrath</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Galloway</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Biden</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie Sanders</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Merkley</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaime Harrison</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete Buttigieg</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12. Top “Anti” Ads

This chart shows the candidates with the greatest number of ads advocating for their defeat. Here, we note that some “anti” ads featured more than one candidate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mitch McConnell</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey Graham</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Biden &amp; Bernie Sanders</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuck Schumer</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Parson</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kris Kobach</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joni Ernst</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Parson</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Schmitt</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>