

POLITICAL ADS 2020: FEB. & MAR. REPORT

Background

This is the second in a series of reports as part of the Digital Advertising Accountability Program’s political advertising transparency project. The following information was derived from our monitoring of websites and mobile apps for express advocacy political advertising (that is, advertising for the election or defeat of a specific candidate). The data describes ads encountered across the United States from February 21, 2020, to March 16, 2020. We note that this range 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. Because of difficulties sampling, we cannot generalize our data to the larger population or assess it for statistical significance. Rather, the summaries below represent a snapshot of activity on the web and in mobile apps as we have encountered them and are offered for illustrative purposes only. Note also that while many tables add up to our total sample of 348, some may not, for example where an ad was counted but one aspect of it was unreadable or unknowable.

As you will see in Tables 3, 11, and 12, this reporting period was heavily affected by events in the Democratic presidential primary process. Several major primaries and caucuses occurred during this period, leading all but two major Democratic candidates to drop out of the primary contest. As a consequence, candidates whose ads featured prominently in early monitoring sweeps but disappeared from future assessments remain high on several of our lists. Additionally, we observed more ads focused on contests for state offices this time. Whether this is coincidence, a result of changes based on the relative reduction in federal-related ad campaigns because of the tightening primary race, or caused by some other variable is unknown.

The Results

Table 1. Where we found political ads online.

During this monitoring period, and in contrast to the findings from our [first report](#), more political ads were identified on social media rather than non-social media websites.

Type of site/service	Number of ads seen
Social media	234
Non-social media website	86
Search engine	28
<i>Total</i>	<i>348</i>

Table 2. (to the right) How many ads were associated with which states.

“Associated” in this context means that the ad met one of the four following criteria:

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

State	Number of ads seen
Kentucky	41
Missouri	39
Colorado	20
Oregon	20
California	19
Michigan	19
Massachusetts	18
Texas	14
Vermont	12
New York	11
Florida	10
South Carolina	10
West Virginia	10
Illinois	8
Kansas	7
Oklahoma	7
South Dakota	7
Arizona	6
Idaho	6
Virginia	6
Louisiana	5
North Dakota	5
Tennessee	5
Mississippi	4
Nevada	4
Utah	4
Arkansas	3
Delaware	3
Washington	3
Alaska	2
Hawaii	2
Minnesota	2
Montana	2
New Mexico	2
North Carolina	2
Ohio	2
Rhode Island	2
Indiana	1
Iowa	1
New Hampshire	1
New Jersey	1
Pennsylvania	1
Wyoming	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>348</i>

Table 3. The top ten advertisers (the person or entity that paid for an ad). We note that two advertisers tied for tenth place.

Advertiser name	Number of ads seen
Warren for President	66
Mike Bloomberg 2020	47
Amy McGrath for Senate	31
Bernie 2020	28
Trump Make America Great Again Committee	19
Biden for President	17
Jon Hoadley for Congress	16
Booker for Kentucky	13
Nicole Galloway for Missouri	10
Jaime Harrison for US Senate	6
Jeff Merkley for Oregon	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>253</i>

Table 4. Whether the political advertiser provided any “Enhanced Notice” and “Notice” to users.

For the purposes of this document, “enhanced notice” means any indication of a particular ad’s political nature, such as link, icon, or combination of words and phrases. “Notice” means any explanation, linked from an enhanced notice, that provides insight about the ad.

Notice type	Number of ads seen
“Enhanced notice” & “notice”	282
“Enhanced notice,” but no “notice”	29
Neither	37
<i>Total</i>	<i>348</i>

Table 5. Use of AdChoices icon.

We noticed that many political ads deployed the familiar AdChoices icon as its 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 PoliticalAd icon as enhanced notice.

Form of “enhanced notice” in ads	Number of ads seen
Used AdChoices icon	41
Used other form	270
<i>Total</i>	<i>311</i>

Table 6. Types of entities that paid for political ads in our dataset.

Note that, unlike in our prior report, we have one “unknown” entity. In this case, we could not definitively determine which entity paid for an ad.

Type of advertiser	Number of ads seen
Campaign	331
Committee	16
Unknown	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>348</i>

Table 7. Types of contest (federal or state).

Type of contest	Number of ads seen
Federal	323
State	25
<i>Total</i>	<i>348</i>

Table 8. Types of federal contests.

Type of federal contest	Number of ads seen
President	181
Senator	94
Congressman	48
<i>Total</i>	<i>323</i>

Table 9. Types of statewide contests.

Type of statewide contest	Number of ads seen
Governor	17
Attorney General	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>25</i>

Table 10. Ads where the advertiser was related to a particular political party.

For example, an advertiser may have “Republican” or “Democrat” as part of its name, or the advertiser may be a candidate for office running on a specific party’s ticket.

Political party	Number of ads seen
Democratic Party	309
Republican Party	38
<i>Total</i>	<i>347</i>

Table 11. The top ten candidates for whom we encountered “pro” ads—that is, ads advocating for the **election** of this particular candidate. We note that two candidates tied for thenth place.

Candidate name	Number of ads seen
Elizabeth Warren	66
Mike Bloomberg	47
Amy McGrath	31
Bernie Sanders	28
Donald Trump	21
Joe Biden	17
Jon Hoadley	17
Charles Booker	13
Nicole Galloway	10
Jaime Harrison	6
Jeff Merkley	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>256</i>

Table 12. The ten candidates for whom we encountered “anti” ads—that is, ads advocating for the **defeat** of this particular candidate.

Candidate name	Number of ads seen
Mitch McConnell	31
Donald Trump	13
Lindsey Graham	4
Mike Parson	4
Eric Schmitt	4
John Cornyn	2
Kris Kobach	2
Ann Wagner	2
Joe Biden	1
Pete Buttigieg	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>64</i>