

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

Platform of Political Ads	Count
Social Media	575
Open Web	384
Search Engine	112
Total	1071

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).

Platform of Political Ads	Count
Missouri	107
Kentucky	94
Oregon	54
South Carolina	51
California	47
Nevada	38
Iowa	38
Minnesota	33
Florida	33
New York	29
Michigan	28
Kansas	27
Tennessee	26
Colorado	25
Texas	24
Massachusetts	24
Mississippi	24
South Dakota	23
Idaho	22
New Mexico	21
Oklahoma	21
West Virginia	20
Alabama	17
Arkansas	17
Vermont	16
Louisiana	16
Arizona	15
Virginia	15
New Hampshire	13
Pennsylvania	13
Ohio	13
Illinois	13
Montana	12
North Dakota	11
Washington	10
Rhode Island	10
Delaware	9
Washington	8
Maine	8
Hawaii	7
North Carolina	6
Georgia	6
Alaska	6
Maryland	5
Utah	4
Wyoming	3
West Virginia	3
Connecticut	2
Wisconsin	2
New Jersey	1
Indiana	1
Total	1071

Table 3. Top Ten Advertisers

This table identifies the top advertisers, or the person or entity that paid for an ad.

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

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.

Compliance Issue	Count
Ads with “enhanced notice” and notice	781
Ads with “enhanced notice” but no notice	150
Ads with “enhanced notice” but notice unknown	43
Ads with neither notice nor “enhanced notice”	93
Unknown	4
Total	1071

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.

Use of AdChoices Icon	Count
AdChoices Icon provided	262
AdChoices Icon not provided	712
Total	974



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.

Entity Type	Count
Campaign	916
Committee	148
Unknown	6
Other Nonprofit	1
Total	1071

Table 7. Federal or State Contest

Type of Contest	Count
Federal	985
State	86
Total	1071

Table 8. Types of Federal Contests

Type of Contest	Count
President	585
Senator	263
Congressman	136
Total	984

Table 9. Types of Statewide Contests

Type of Contest	Count
Attorney General	11
Governor	71
Lt. Governor	4
Total	86

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.

Political Party Affiliation	Count
Democratic Party	850
Republican Party	216
Unknown	5
Total	1071

Table 11. Top Ten “Pro” Ads

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

Candidate	Count
Elizabeth Warren	188
Donald Trump	145
Mike Bloomberg	87
Amy McGrath	71
Nicole Galloway	60
Joe Biden	57
Bernie Sanders	41
Jeff Merkley	31
Jaime Harrison	24
Pete Buttigieg	23

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.

Candidate	Count
Mitch McConnell	75
Donald Trump	46
Lindsey Graham	23
Joe Biden & Bernie Sanders	21
Chuck Schumer	11
Mike Parson	9
Kris Kobach	7
Joni Ernst	7
Michael Parson	4
Eric Schmitt	4