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ElectionGraph

*Inauthentic Influencers: A deep-dive on
outside groups buying social media ads
that mention presidential candidates*

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ElectionGraph Report

Inauthentic Influencers: A deep-dive on outside groups buying social media ads that mention presidential candidates



Institute for Democracy,
Journalism & Citizenship

Overview

More than 2,200 Facebook pages have run ads since last fall mentioning U.S. presidential candidates — collectively exceeding 1 billion impressions as of the end of April — according to a new analysis by the IDJC ElectionGraph Project at Syracuse University’s Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship.

One troubling subgroup identified in this analysis are “inauthentic actors” — seemingly unique pages with thin origins that bear hidden connections to other groups carrying identical messages.

- Several include false or misleading information in their ads. This includes ads with deep-faked voices of Donald Trump and Tucker Carlson. Facebook caught some and banned pages from running future ads, but they did not prevent the ads from running, and they did not catch all of them.
- Conservative and liberal voters typically are targeted with differentiated messaging.
- Some of the ads appear more focused on obtaining partisans’ credit card information than informing or activating voters.
- Some within the same networks exist contemporaneously, while others appear to spring up to carry on after a connected page shuts down.
- Connections between the groups are not obvious to users. The analysis traced most of the connections through data disclosed to the platforms — and in a small number of cases found the matches through comparisons of ad content.

This subset overlaps a larger, mostly legitimate ecosystem of Facebook pages whose ads are openly coordinated and disclosed by campaigns or advocacy groups. Combined, these authentic and inauthentic actors represent just a portion of all coordinated pages related to elections.

- This research analyzes only ads that have run on Facebook and Instagram from last September through April and mention U.S. presidential primary candidates by name.
- The research is supported by a grant from Neo4j and use of the company's graph database technology and experts.
- While Meta currently allows approved organizations to access ad data, it is not required to be made available and is not similarly trackable on TikTok, Google, YouTube, or Snapchat.
- The findings nevertheless provide a framework to visualize the firehose of information and misinformation coming at voters from groups with a jumble of motives, ties and trustworthiness ahead of the 2024 elections.

Summary

This report identifies \$18.7 million spent by 2,203 groups on Facebook and Instagram on ads that mention President Joe Biden, former President Donald Trump, and other presidential primary candidates by name between September 1, 2023, and April 30, 2024. Combined, they have accrued more than 1 billion impressions. The majority of the groups are known organizations tied to campaigns or advocacy efforts but often not to the campaigns of the presidential candidates themselves.

- Within the overall set, the analysis finds 158 networks of Facebook pages that are interconnected. Combined, these pages spent about \$8.5 million on ads, which translates into an estimated 504 million impressions.
- While a majority appear legitimate, several display questionable attributes or markers of scams. One is a cluster of pages with different names that contain words such as “prayers” and “heritage” and Facebook pages that appear disconnected but share common features such as administrator email addresses, telephone numbers, or URLs. Another network identified is comprised of group names with variations on themes of “liberty” and has spent over \$1.5 million on ads. Combined, these groups seem to have ties to financial or health benefit scams and Pro-Trump “MAGA” (Make America Great Again) “swag” (e.g. hat, flag, coin) scams.
- Our analysis of the ads overall from this period find women somewhat more likely to be targeted than men, and older Americans more likely to be targeted than younger Americans.
- Conservative-leaning pages spent an estimated \$8.6 million on ads translating to 599 million impressions. Progressive pages spent roughly \$6.5 million translating to 283 million impressions.
- The economy receives the largest amount of ad spend for all ads run by Facebook pages in the data we analyzed but is only the top issue for progressive pages. Immigration tops ad spend for conservative pages, followed by the economy, safety and crime, and foreign policy. Progressive pages focus more on health, social and cultural issues, and women’s issues including abortion rights.
- Spending on these ads focus significantly more on engagement (such as urging the viewer to complete a poll or share a post) or fundraising, compared with messages urging people to vote.

Inauthentic Influencers: A deep-dive on outside groups buying social media ads that mention presidential candidates

Introduction

Advertising continues to be a mainstay of political persuasion and political campaigning. Over the past decade, the amount of money spent on ads running on social media platforms and search have outpaced that of traditional advertising on television, cable, print, and radio. In this report, we dive into the many organizations, groups, businesses, and even ordinary people that run ads on Meta's platforms of Facebook and Instagram around the U.S. presidential primary campaign.

At the bottom of this report we detail the methods we used to generate these insights. A list of Facebook pages with data and links to their ads is available on an interactive dashboard: electiongraph.ischool.syr.edu.

Influence Campaigns Around the U.S. Presidential Election

We identified 2,203 Facebook Pages that ran ads on Facebook and Instagram during the primaries.[1] We estimate that \$18,740,098 was spent on ads that mentioned the presidential primary candidates.[2] That translates into an estimated 1,098,358,187 impressions (the number of times an ad “entered a screen” [3]).

To identify advertisers that ran ads around the presidential primaries, we opted for a unique approach. Rather than analyzing all political ads currently running on the platform, we focused on ads that explicitly mention any of the presidential primary candidates, from Donald Trump to Asa Hutchinson, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to Marianne Williamson, and Joe Biden to Dean Phillips.

Our analysis focuses on the campaign period between September 1, 2023, to April 30, 2024. This time span captures the pre-primaries and the key primaries stage of the presidential campaign. By focusing only on ads that mention the candidates, we are able to identify those that are intentionally signaling their engagement with the campaign.

We captured a wide variety of pages of 220 different types: authors and bloggers, businesses and brands, nonprofit organizations, political action committees, political candidates and government officials, and news and media pages.

[1] We found 49 pages that ran ads in currency that was not U.S. dollars, including currencies from Vietnam, Nigeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Canada, Brazil, and the European Union. The total amount, however, was small (only \$1,035.12).

[2] We can only provide an estimate of the amount of money spent on Facebook and Instagram because Meta provides a “lower bound” and an “upper bound” of money spent. We take the midpoint, and sum that to arrive at the estimated amount spent.

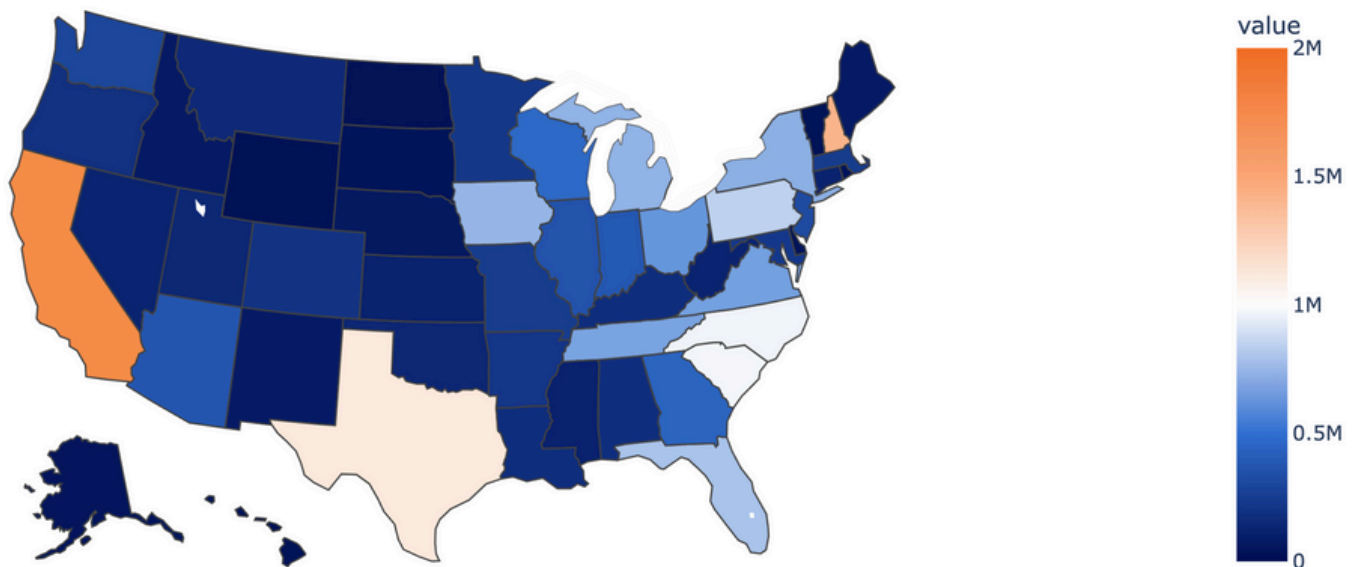
[3] See <https://www.facebook.com/help/274400362581037>

Targeting Patterns

The states that were most targeted by ads run from these pages include the most heavily populated states of California, Texas, New York, and Florida (see Figure 1). We also find that the early primary and caucus states were targeted, including Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina.

It is noteworthy that New Hampshire received substantially more targeted spending than did Iowa and Nevada, even though all three were pivotal first-vote states. We also find that Pennsylvania, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio were heavily targeted, likely because they will be pivotal swing states in the General Election.

Figure 1: Outside Organization Meta Ad Spending by State



Meta provides high-level demographic targeting data of ad buys. Overall, women are slightly more likely to be targeted than men, and older Americans are more likely to be targeted than younger Americans (See Figure 2). Given that older Americans are more likely to vote and be politically engaged than younger Americans [4], and that women are more likely to vote than men [5], these findings make sense.

We find that the majority of ad buys are more likely to be advocating rather than going on the attack (See Figure 3). That is, ads are more likely to be positive by advocating for a candidate, party, politician, or policy position, rather than going negative and attacking a person or position. Thus, while the ads are overwhelmingly positive, they are not especially substantive; we find that less than 40% of the ads are focused on public policy.

Figure 2: Outside Organization Ad Spending on Demographic Targets

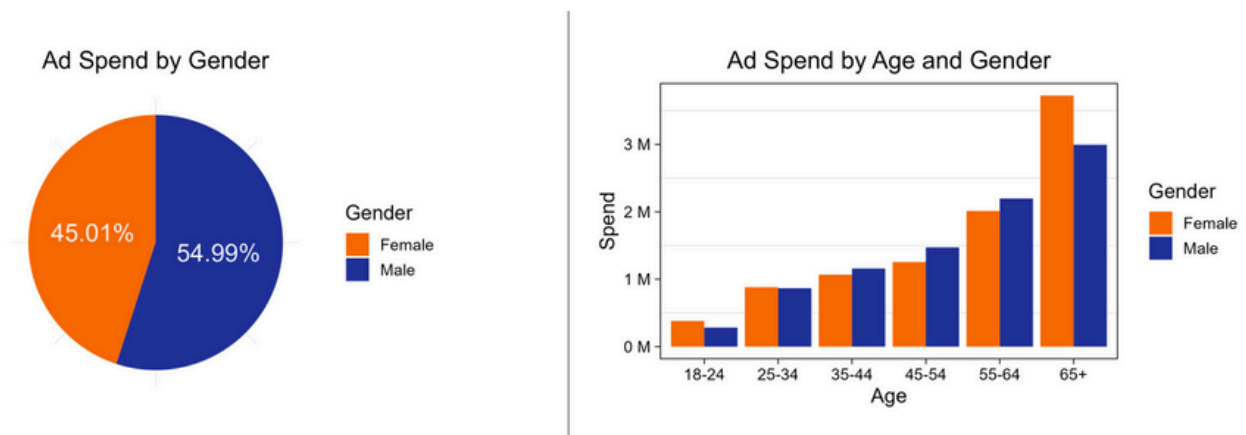
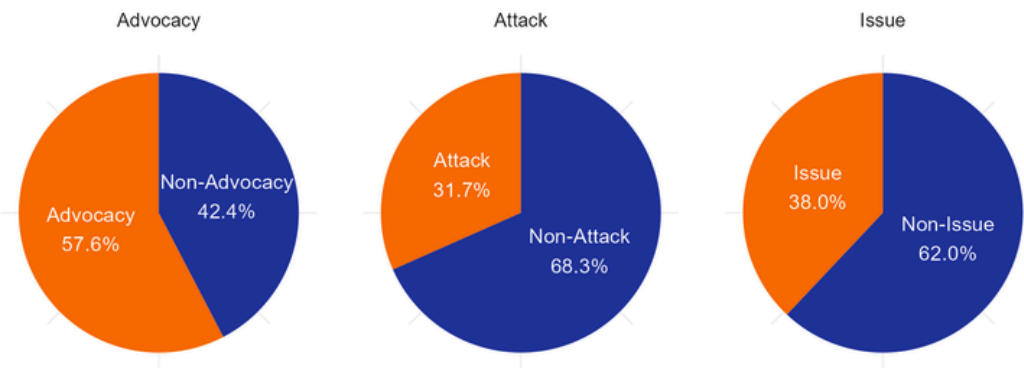


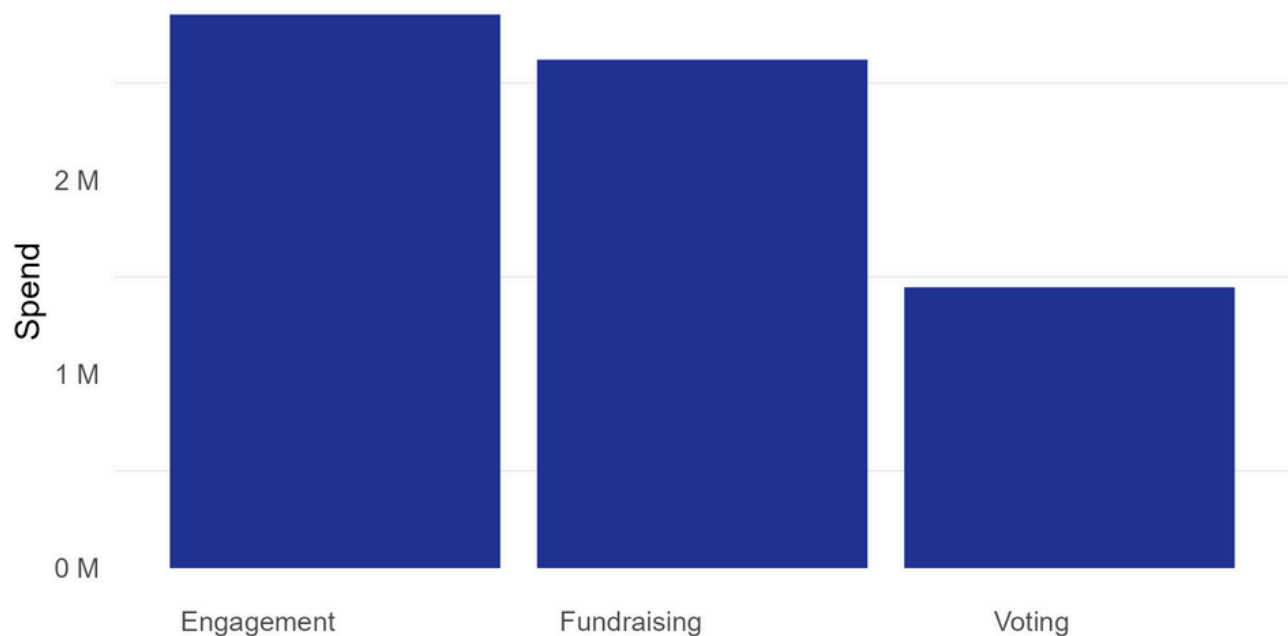
Figure 3: Outside Organization Ad Message Type



Ads that run on Facebook and Instagram typically have some type of call-to-action that urges people to click a link to engage: giving money or watching a video or getting out to vote. We categorized all ads on these three types of calls to action: fundraising, engagement, and voting. We find that almost \$2.5 million was spent on engagement (complete a poll, like, share the post etc.) followed by fundraising and then voting (see Figure 4).

These results make sense, as although primary voting occurred during this time period, it was spread over several months. The focus of these organizations would likely be on identifying supporters at this stage of their campaigns. As all ads provide an outlink to a website, those typically invite visitors to provide their email address and name to learn more about the organization and to get involved. Organizations also tend to target people in ads they believe are supporters so as to solicit contributions in support of their cause.

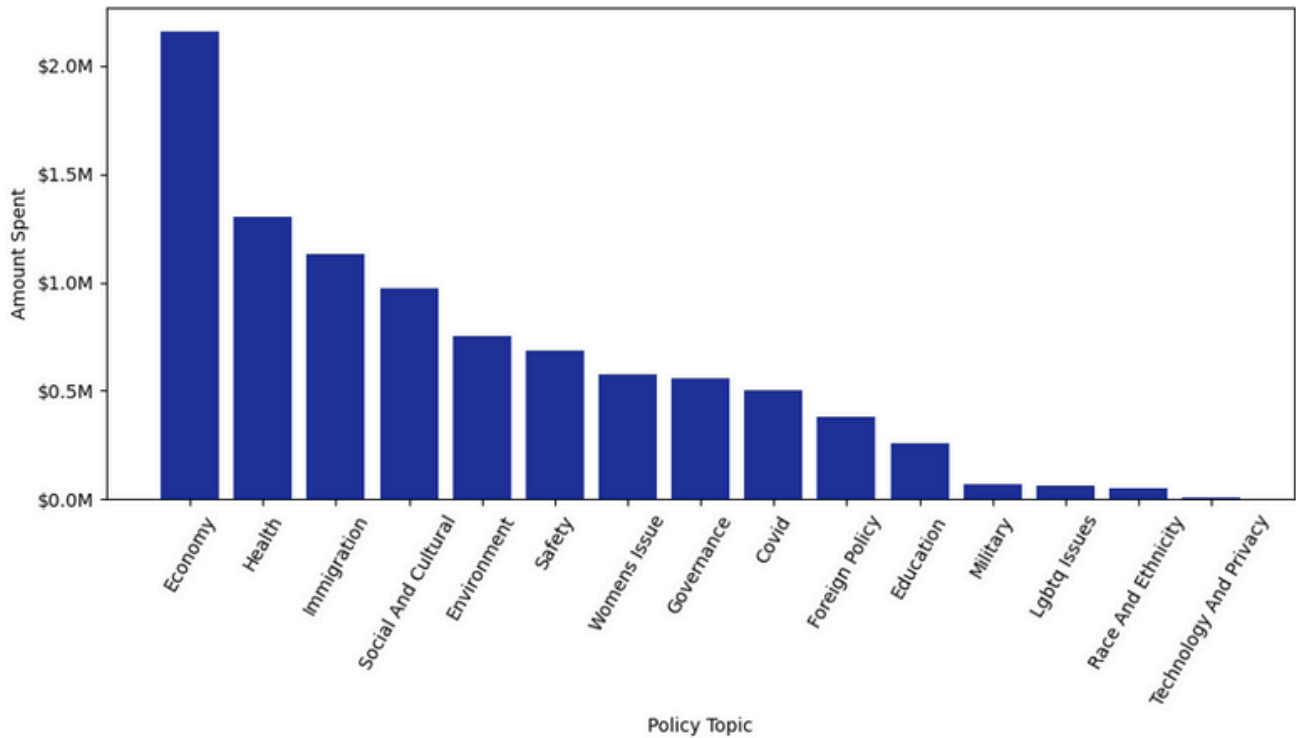
Figure 4: Outside Organization Calls to Action in Ads



Overall, the ads that are on policy topics touch on a broad range of issues. The economy dominates, but health, immigration, social and cultural issues, and the environment are also top policy topics (See Figure 5).

These also top national public opinion polls on issues that voters are most concerned about and that politicians and candidates are also pushing.

Figure 5: Outside Organization Policy Topics in Ads



[4] See Pew Research's Report on voter turnout between 2018 - 2022:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/07/12/voter-turnout-2018-2022/>
[5] See the Center for American Women and Politics website:
<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout>

Partisan-Leaning Facebook Pages

We analyzed Facebook pages to determine their ideological lean. We defined ideological lean on two dimensions: conservative and progressive. We opted for these labels, rather than the political party labels of Republican and Democrat, so as to encompass a broader range of political perspectives. This allowed us, for example, to capture perspectives that might align with the Green Party under a progressive category and libertarian perspectives as under the broader conservative category.

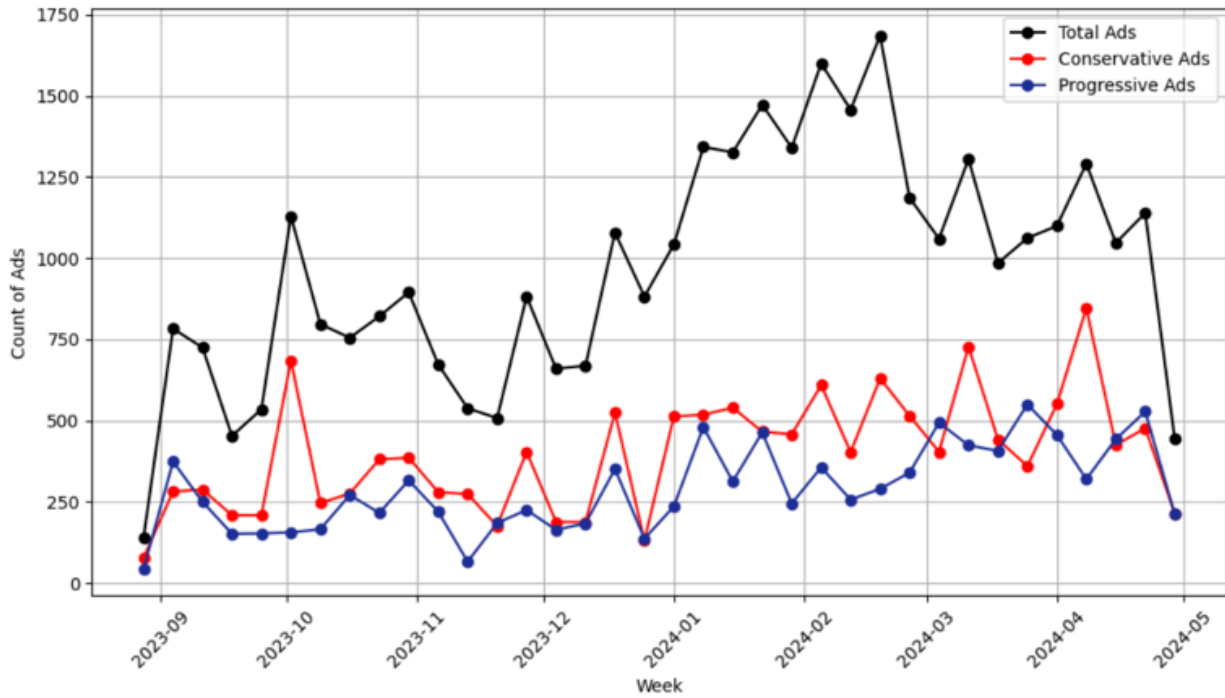
We added a cross-ideology category to capture pages that seemed to cross partisan ideologies. This was used especially for pages related to Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and No Labels, as these articulate policy positions from both ideological perspectives. We had a “none” category for pages that did not advance an ideological perspective.

We also have dozens of Facebook Pages that ran ads that have subsequently been deleted. While the ads are in the corpus, we can no longer access their Facebook page. For those, we have a “no longer available” category. For full details of our approach to categorization of partisan-lean, see the Methodology Section at the end of this report.

We estimate that conservative-leaning pages spent \$8,617,747 and progressive pages spent \$6,476,777 on ads on Meta’s platforms. This translates into an estimated 598,666,395 impressions from conservative pages and 283,223,798 from progressive pages. Thus, conservative-leaning pages are spending more on ads and also getting more impressions for those ads than progressive-leaning pages.

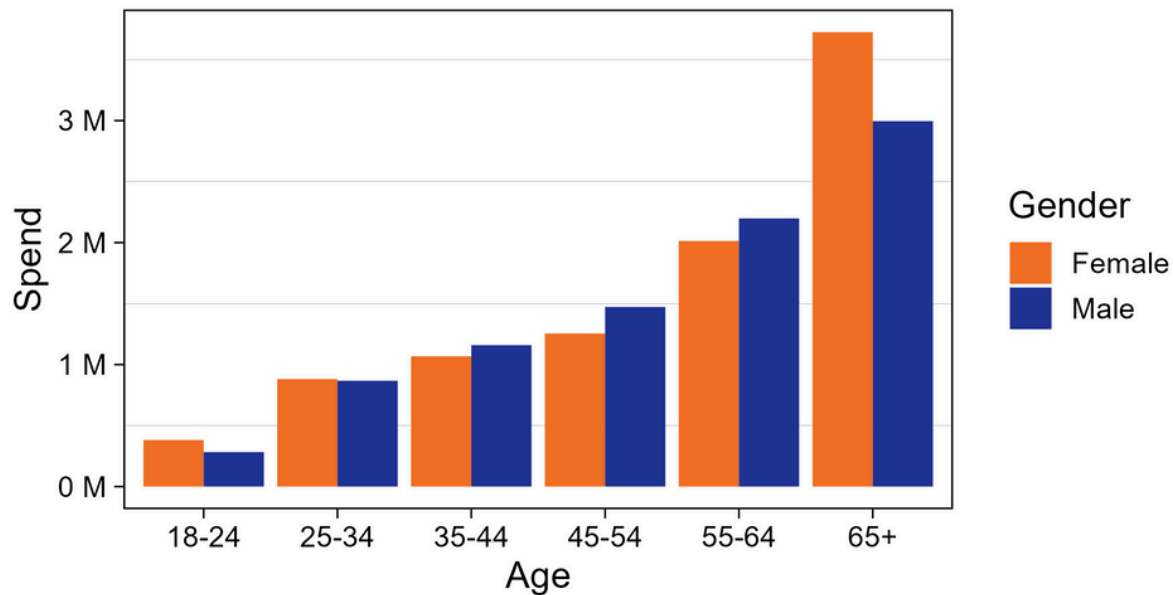
Unsurprisingly, there is a spike in overall ad buys that mention the presidential candidates starting in January, and the ads drop off by March as the presumptive nominees for the major parties (Trump and Biden) were established (See Figure 6). There is a noticeable spike in spending in October, driven largely by conservative ad buys. Conservative-leaning pages outspend progressive-leaning pages throughout most of the time period.

Figure 6: Partisan-Leaning Ad Buys on Meta Platforms Over Time



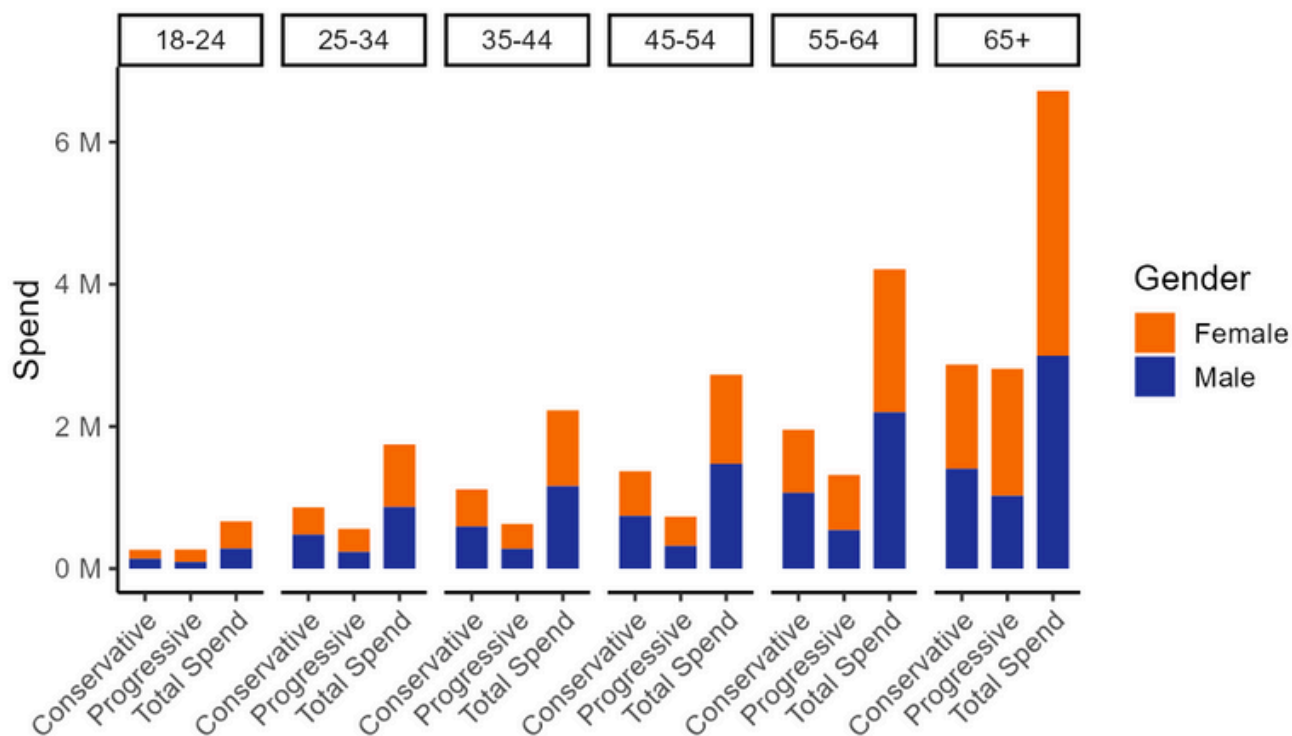
We analyzed the ad targets for gender and found that conservative-leaning pages are significantly more likely to target men than progressive-leaning pages (See Figure 7). These results align with trends in party identity among men and women [6].

Figure 7: Partisan-Leaning Ad Targets by Gender



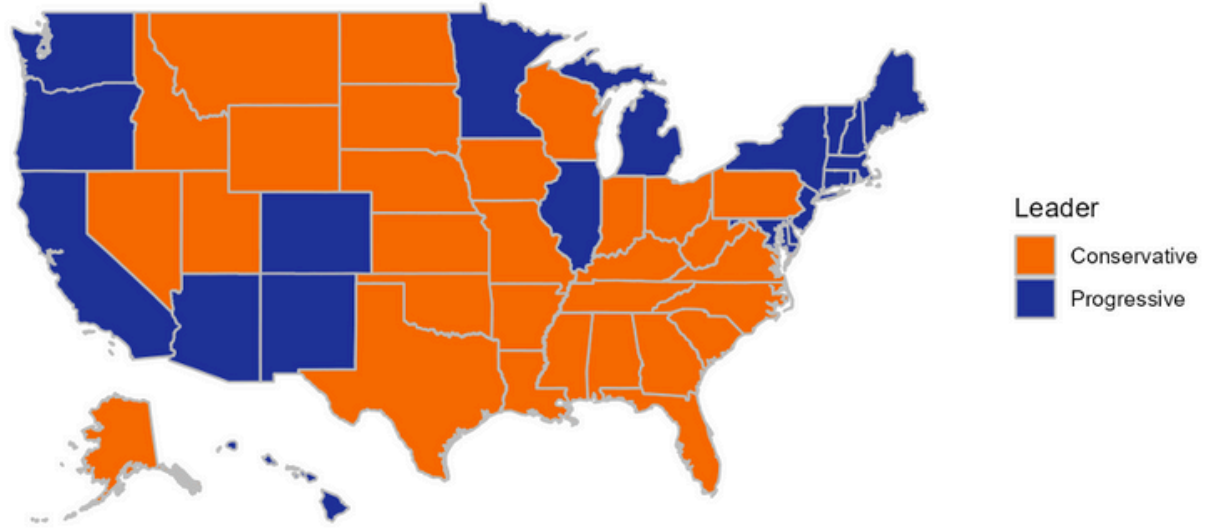
When comparing age and gender targeting by partisan pages as compared with all pages, we note a few trends. Overall, influence campaigns are targeting older people (See Figure 8). Our findings also comport with national trends in voter ideology: progressive-leaning pages are more likely to target older women, while conservative pages are more likely to target older men.

Figure 8: Comparing Ad Targeting by Age and Gender by Partisan Groups



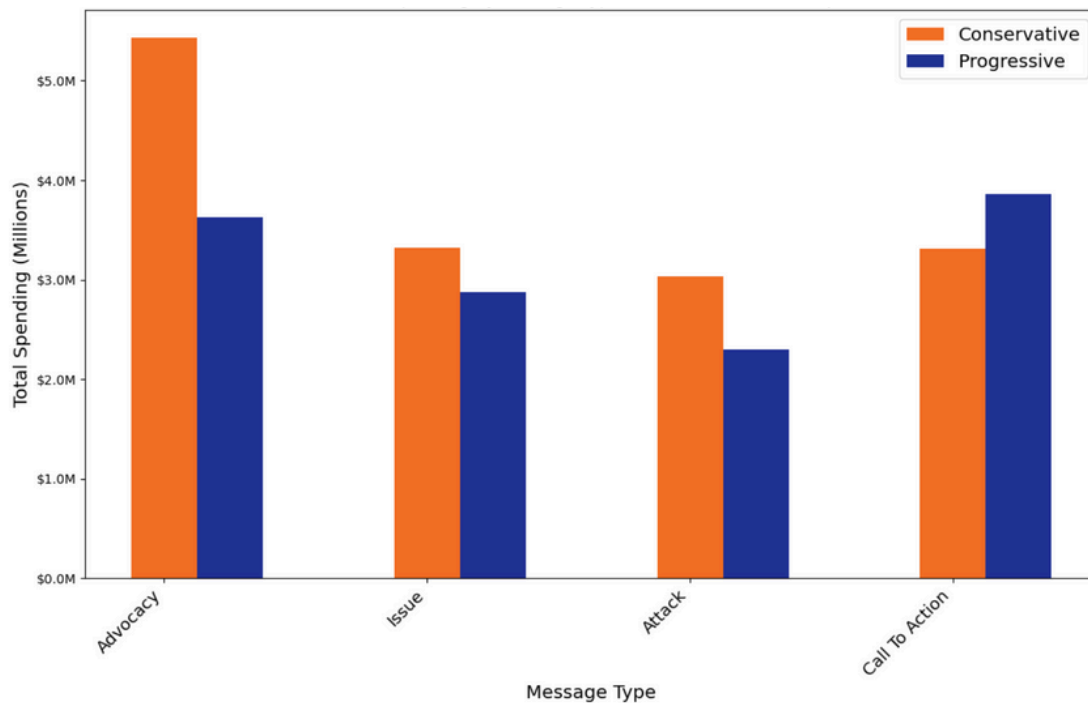
We analyzed the amount spent in each state on ads by Facebook pages with a partisan lean (See Figure 9). A few noteworthy findings: conservative pages are out-spending progressive pages in more swing states, including Nevada, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia. Progressive-leaning pages are outspending conservative pages in the pivotal states of Arizona and Michigan, as well as Colorado and Minnesota.

Figure 9: Partisan-Leaning Ad Spending by State



We analyzed the messaging in the ads of partisan pages. Of note, conservative-leaning pages run more attack ads than do progressive ads, but they also advocate more for their own candidates and policy positions given their larger ad presence (See Figure 10). Ads from progressive pages are more likely to urge targets to engage in some kind of action in the main text body of the ad. Progressive pages tend to run ads that are more substantive in that they are more likely to mention policy issues.

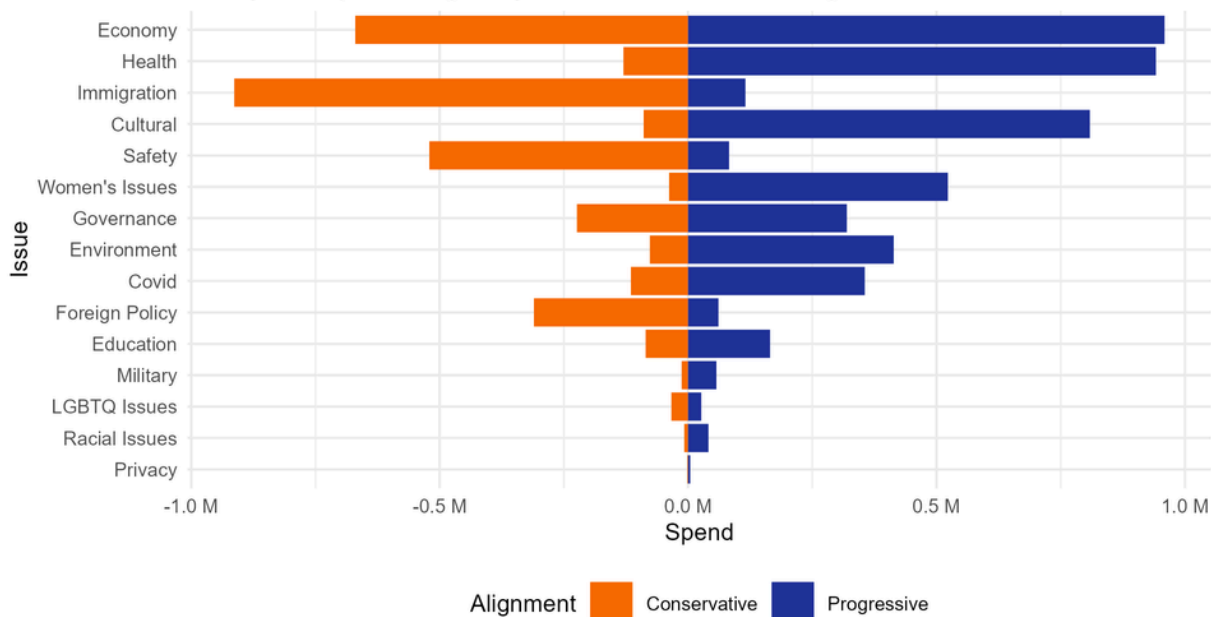
Figure 10: Partisan-leaning Ad Spend by Ad Message Type



We also analyzed the policy topics mentioned in the ads. We mapped the 10 most mentioned policies, comparing the progressive and conservative leaning ad spend to all of the ads in our collection (See Figure 11).

While the economy receives the largest amount of ad spend for all ads run by FB pages in our corpus, it is only the top issue for progressive pages. Conservative pages focus most on immigration followed by the economy, safety and crime, and foreign policy. Progressive pages are focused more on health, social and cultural issues, and women’s issues (like abortion).

Figure 11: Comparing Conservative and Progressive Policy Topics



[6] See the Pew Research Center Report on Partisanship in the US: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/09/age-generational-cohorts-and-party-identification/>

Coordinated Campaigning

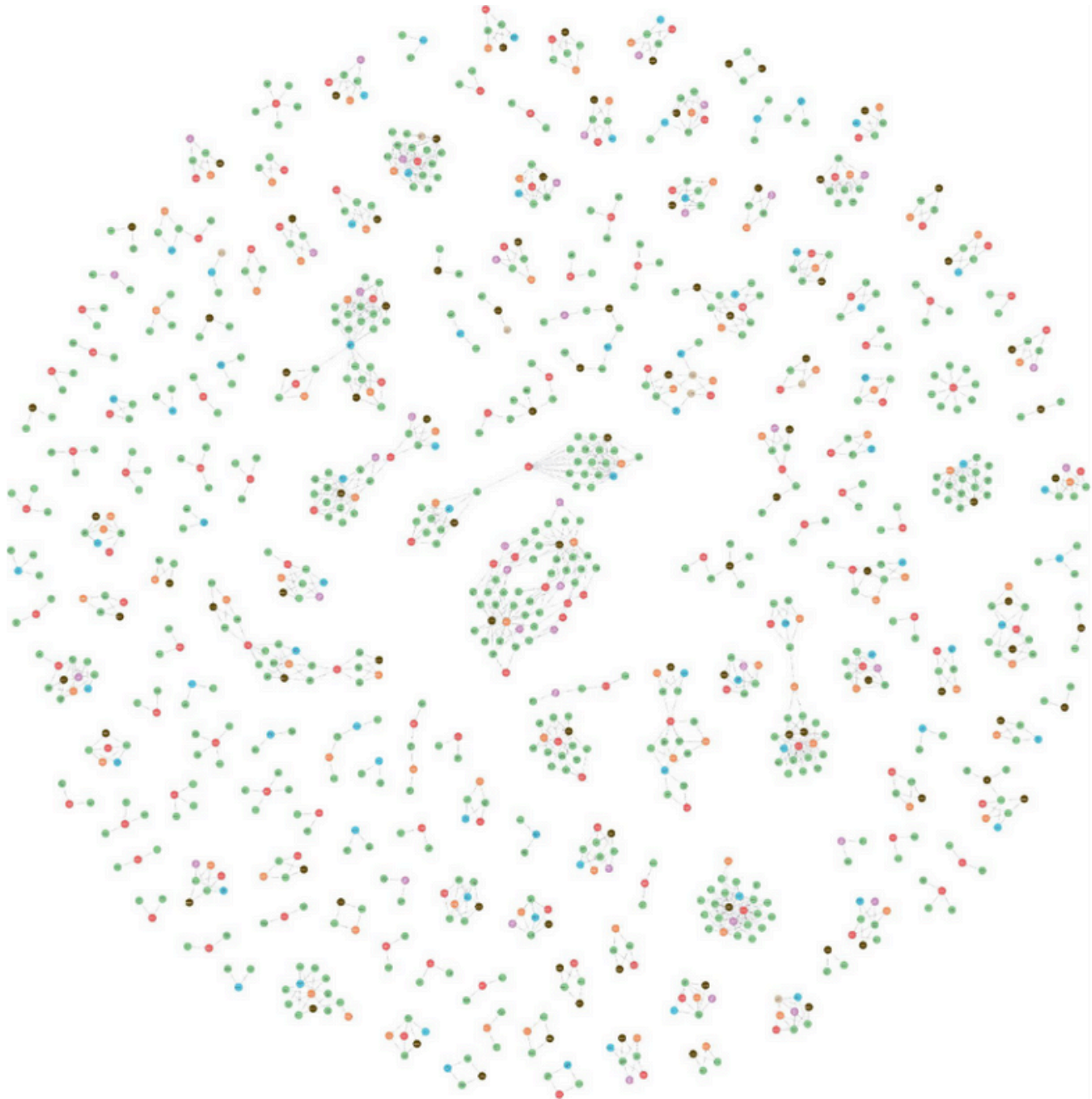
One of our key questions for this research report is about coordinated campaigning. We wanted to understand if Facebook pages were coordinating their messaging.

Of particular interest were Facebook pages running ads that are clearly coordinating messaging but are “inauthentic.” By this, we mean that the pages appear to be independent and the ads also appear to be unconnected, such as by not including a disclaimer or listing a unique sponsor for the ads and obfuscating who is behind the ads. Yet, they share information that suggest they are working together or are actually originating from the same organization.

To do this analysis, we combined different data sources. That data we collected from the Meta Ad Library through the API returns information about the ads, but only limited information about the Facebook page or who is administering it. To get that information, we scraped Facebook pages that ran ads that mention the presidential primary candidates using tools made available through Apify.com.

We found 158 networks of interconnected Facebook pages (See Figure 12). Combined, these pages spent an estimated \$8,487,872 on ads, which translates into an estimated 503,989,017 impressions.

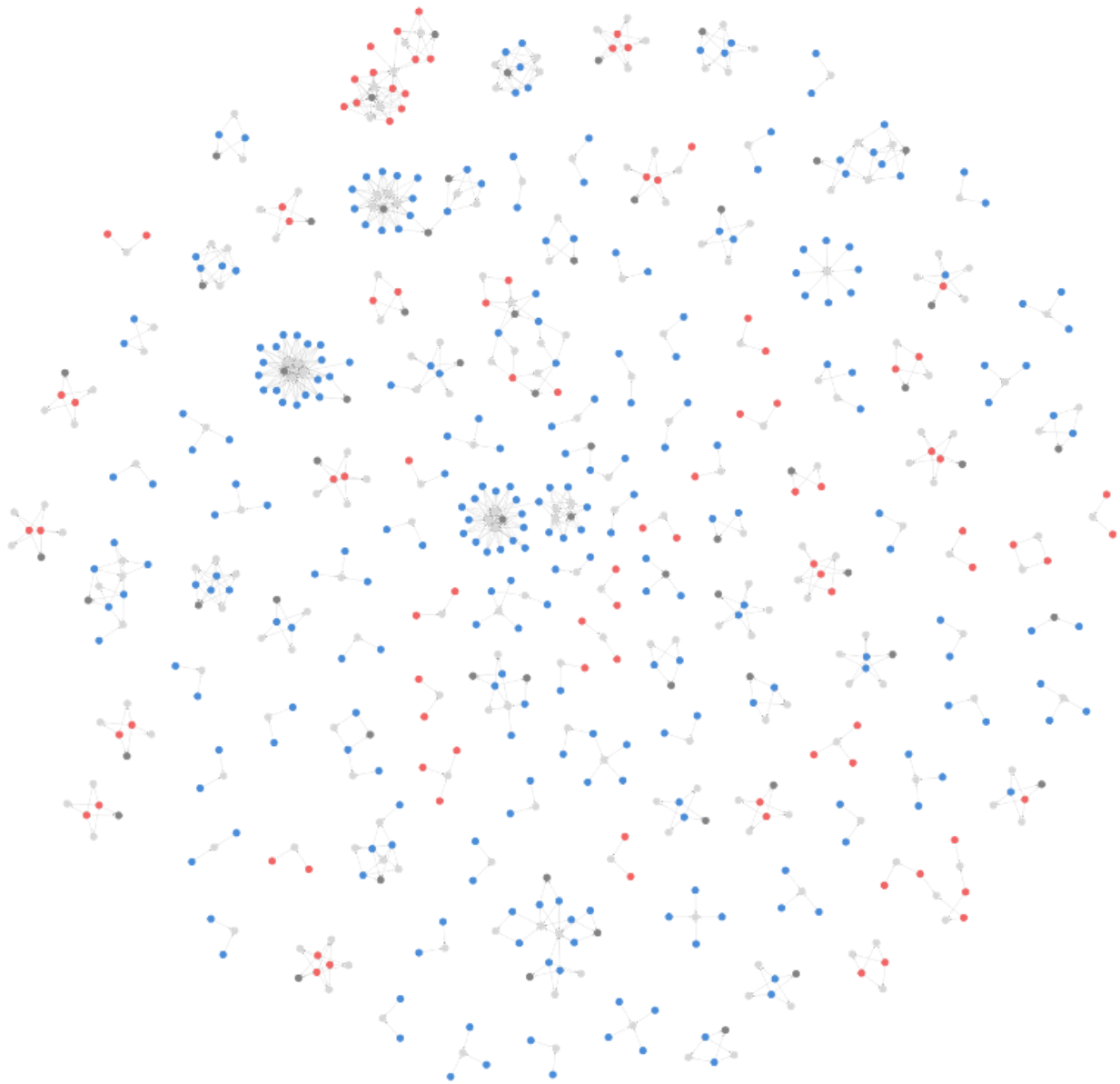
Figure 12: Networks of Two or More Facebook Pages that Share Features



Note: Figure Created with Neo4j ®

We also explored the partisanship of the networks. We expected that networks would primarily link to pages that shared a partisan ideology. In general, that is what we find (See Figure 13). However, there are some large networks with linkages across partisanship. We explore a few of these in more detail next.

Figure 13: Networks of Two or More Pages by Partisan Lean



Note: Figure Created with Neo4j ®

Key



= red nodes

conservative



= blue nodes

progressive



= grey nodes

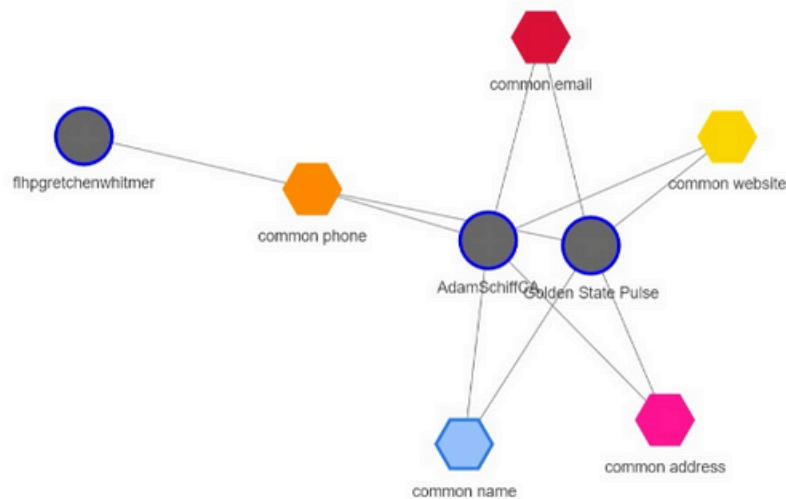
shared attributes

Legitimate Networks

Many of the networks are legitimate political Facebook pages. Most of the small networks on the outer edges of the network are candidate, campaign, and political action committee pages interconnected with one or two affiliated pages.

One example is the “Adam Schiff” network (see Figure 14). It includes a Facebook page of California Representative Adam Schiff, who is running for reelection, that is connected to a Facebook page labeled Golden State Pulse through shared contact information. The Golden State Pulse page is labeled a political organization and is managed by Adam Schiff for Congress (See Figure 15). In the network, though, a telephone number connects a third page, “flhpgretchenwhitmer,” that stands for the Fight Like Hell page tied to Gretchen Whitmer, Governor of Michigan. This is labeled a political organization and is the political action committee that Whitmer leads. The Golden State Facebook page has no posts, but is running ads in support of Schiff’s campaign. The ads though are distinct from those associated with the Adam Schiff page. The “Fight Like Hell” page’s ads focus on Whitmer’s efforts to elect Democrats. The pages likely share a telephone number because they are working with the same vendor or consultant.

Figure 14: The “Adam Schiff” Network of Facebook Pages Running Ads



Advertiser Exists Progressive Advertiser Exists Conservative Advertiser Exists Other Advertiser Removed Progressive Advertiser Removed Conservative Advertiser Removed Other

A Common Email A Common Address A Common Phone A Common Website

Note: Figure Created with Neo4j ®

Figure 15: Facebook Pages and Example Ads in the “Adam Schiff” Network

Adam Schiff
 Candidate for U.S. Senate. Father, husband, triathlete, and sometimes comic. California Congressman.

Featured
 Adam Schiff
 In the March primary, you get to vote for your next Senator twice.

Fight Like Hell PAC
 Political Organization

Posts
 Fight Like Hell PAC
 Most of the story. Keep fighting like hell for what you know is right.
 Dec. 11, 2023

Golden State Pulse
 Political Organization

Posts
 Golden State Pulse
 Golden State Pulse updated their cover photo.

PROTECT OUR MAJORITY
 Join Gretchen Whitmer to help our endorsed Senate candidates win and

Hi there, it's Gretchen Whitmer.
 The elections are less than one year away and every path to victory for Democrats starts with our grassroots team. Will you join our team and make a contribution to Fight Like Hell PAC today?

This network of pages share a set of common email addresses and web addresses. Thirteen of the pages have been deleted. The rest generally have few posts. Exceptions include a page called Truly American, and a page that uses the name and likeness of a nationally known TV meteorologist. Truly American, for example, started posting on March 13th, and are entirely reposts of their ads. The ads include selectively edited videos of Biden showing him to look old, lost, and frail, and more recently selectively edited videos that make it seem that celebrities were crying at speeches delivered either by Melania Trump or Ivanka Trump (See Figure 17). Overall, the Facebook pages in this network exist solely to run ads on Facebook and Instagram. They do not appear to serve any other organizational function.

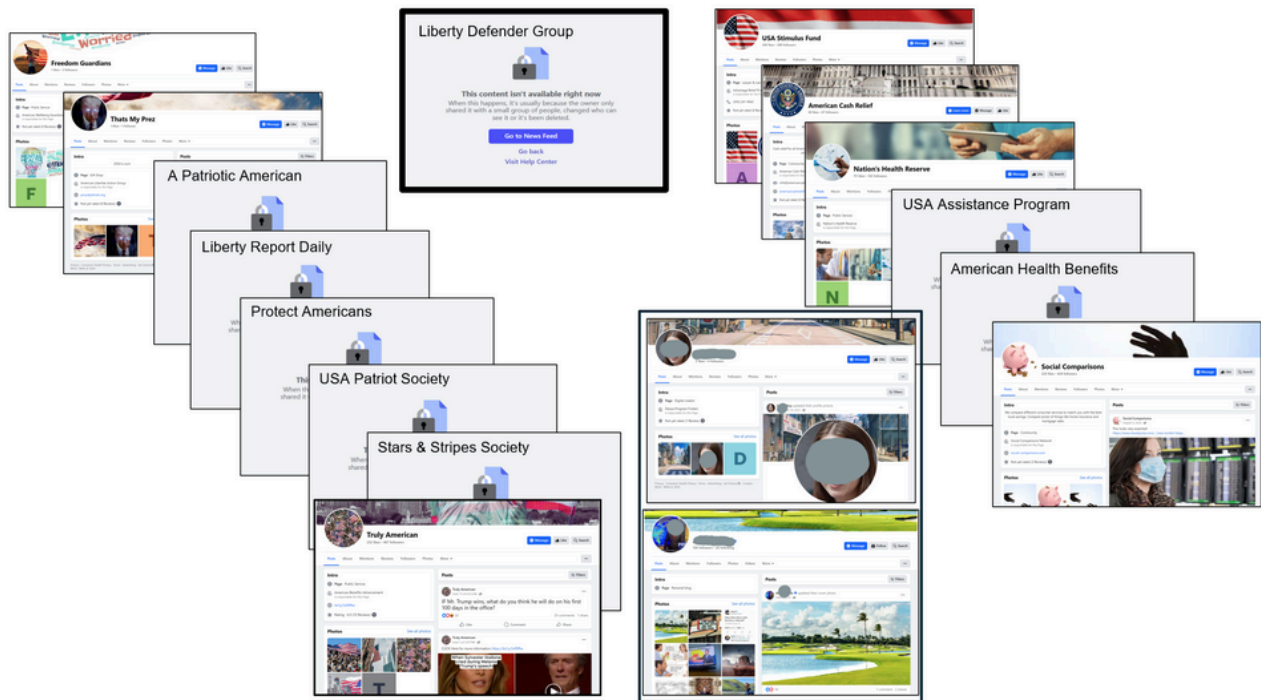
Figure 17: Facebook Ads from a Facebook Page from “Truly American”



The network is interconnected through common phone numbers, email addresses, websites, or physical addresses. For example, the Facebook page bearing the name of a TV meteorologist includes a street address with a now-deleted individual’s Facebook page under the name Jordan Michaels. It also shares in common a telephone number to Jordan Michaels and to a page called American Benefits News. Those two, in turn, share common email addresses and website with additional pages that are either health benefits (See Figure 17, pages on the right) or pro-Trump (pages on the left).

Although the pages share common email addresses and website links, their names and who is responsible for them is unique for each page. Moreover, the publicly-available information about these organizations is sparse. Searching for information about them returns no clarifying information. In short, it is unclear who runs each page and associated ads or why they are interconnected.

Figure 18: A Portion of the Facebook Pages in the “Liberty Defender Group” Network



We examined whether ads in this network were highly similar, as further evidence of coordination. Indeed, we found 20 instances where two or more pages ran highly similar ads from seemingly independent pages. One such example are ads from Freedom Guardians and Liberty Defender Group (See Figure 19). These pages ran pro-Trump, Make America Great Again (MAGA) ads that follow a similar structure.

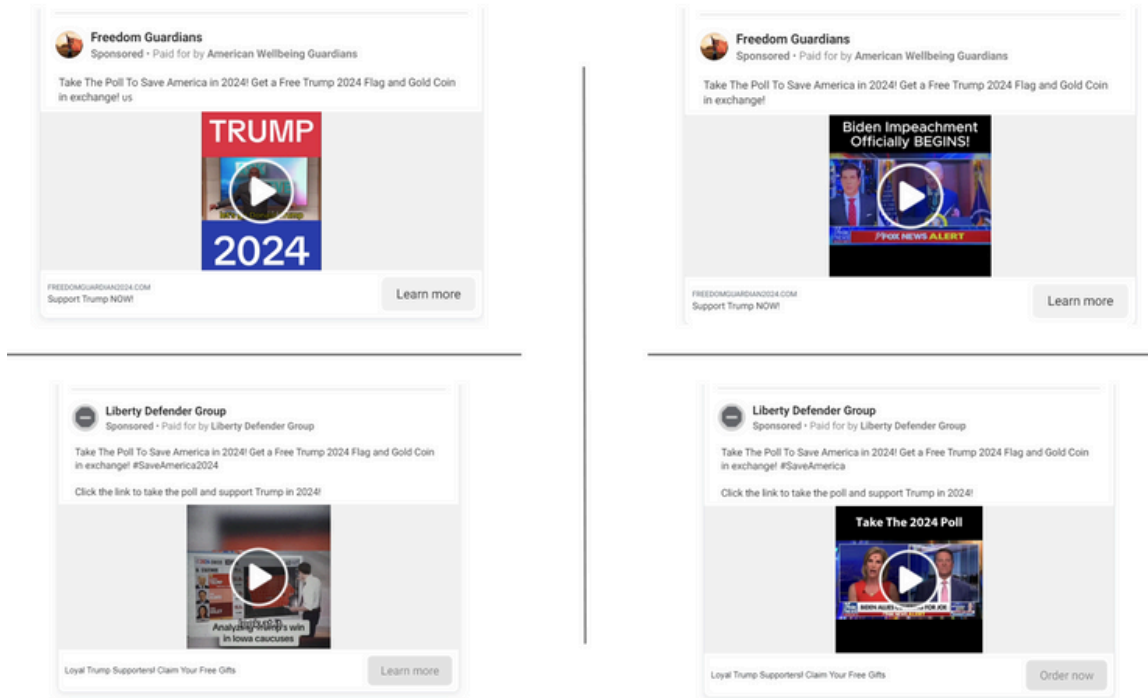
The text of the ad urges people to take a poll in support of Donald Trump. In exchange, they are promised to get a free flag and coin. Videos of the ads start with clips from Fox News or speeches from Donald Trump. They then switch to a voiceover that urges “true” Trump supporters to click a link to take a poll to register their support for Trump in exchange for a free Trump flag, hat, or coin. Users who follow the link to a website are asked four questions about their support of Trump, and then re-directed to a new page to fill out a form with their contact information to receive the swag, and then must provide a credit card number purportedly to cover shipping and handling.

An article in Forbes from March reported that these MAGA swag ads are scams [8], and people who turn over their credit card get surprise recurring charges on their credit card that can amount to hundreds of dollars. In the fine-print is a pre-selected check-box to join a pro-Trump club. There is no evidence that these pages or ads are connected in any way to the Trump campaign.

In our review of hundreds of ads run by pages in this network, we note that many follow the pattern we identified in these near-identical ads from Liberty Defender Group and Freedom Guardians.

Although the Liberty Defender Group page was removed from Facebook for violating their policy on scams and their account was deleted in early March, according to Forbes’ reporting, Freedom Guardians’ Facebook page has not been deleted, although a disclaimer on their Meta ad library page notes that the account has been disabled for not following advertising standards. Other pages, such as Liberator’s United, however, are active and presently running ads with the same message and promotion as the suspended accounts.

Figure 19: Highly Similar Facebook Ads from Different Pages Running Pro-Trump Swag Scam Ads



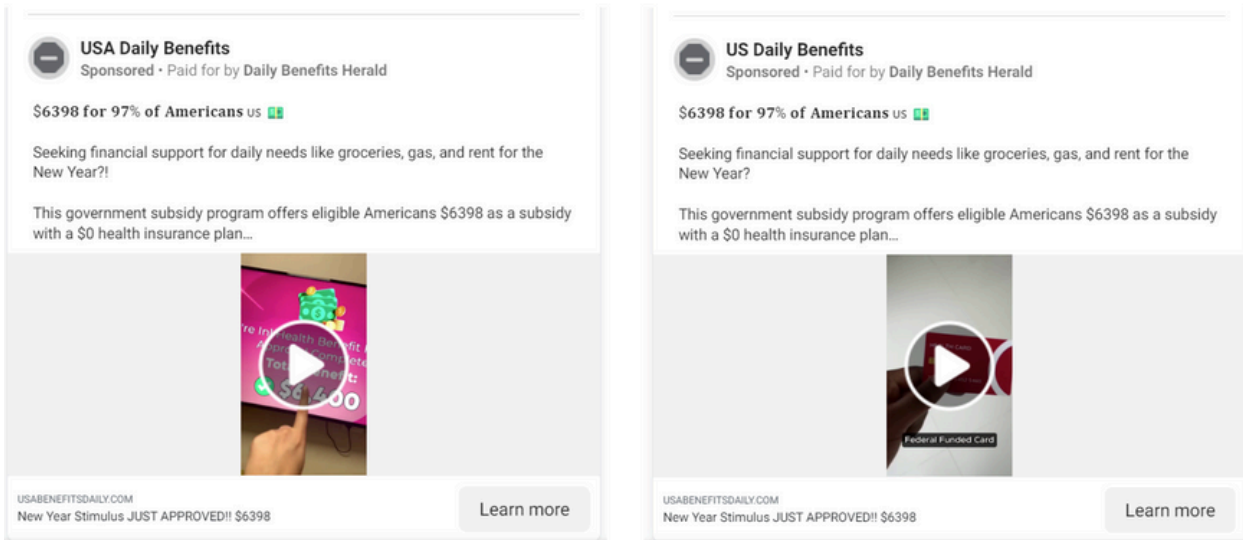
Within this network, we also found highly similar ads from different Facebook pages that pushed questionable health care financial benefits (See Figure 20). These ads urge targets to take advantage of a “\$6398” benefit from a purported government subsidy if they click a link to learn more. The ads from USA Daily Benefits and US Daily Benefits web pages share the same sponsor, but the pages are deleted. The link at the bottom of the ad to “Learn More” resolves to a broken website. Who is actually behind these ads is unclear.

These health benefits ads are less consistent in their messaging and structure than the MAGA swag scams. One ad from US Care Guide is of a selectively edited video of President Biden that appears as a breaking news story about a new government program, with a voiceover of what sounds like a news anchor but evolves into a sales pitch that directs people to get their benefit.

An ad run by Health Benefits Program says that “Obamacare is offering \$1400 plus Flex card benefits to help cover the costs of groceries, gas, rent, and even bills!” The ad shows a woman calling to get her benefit, and urges people to call the number in the link to get their “Free Flex Card & \$1400”.

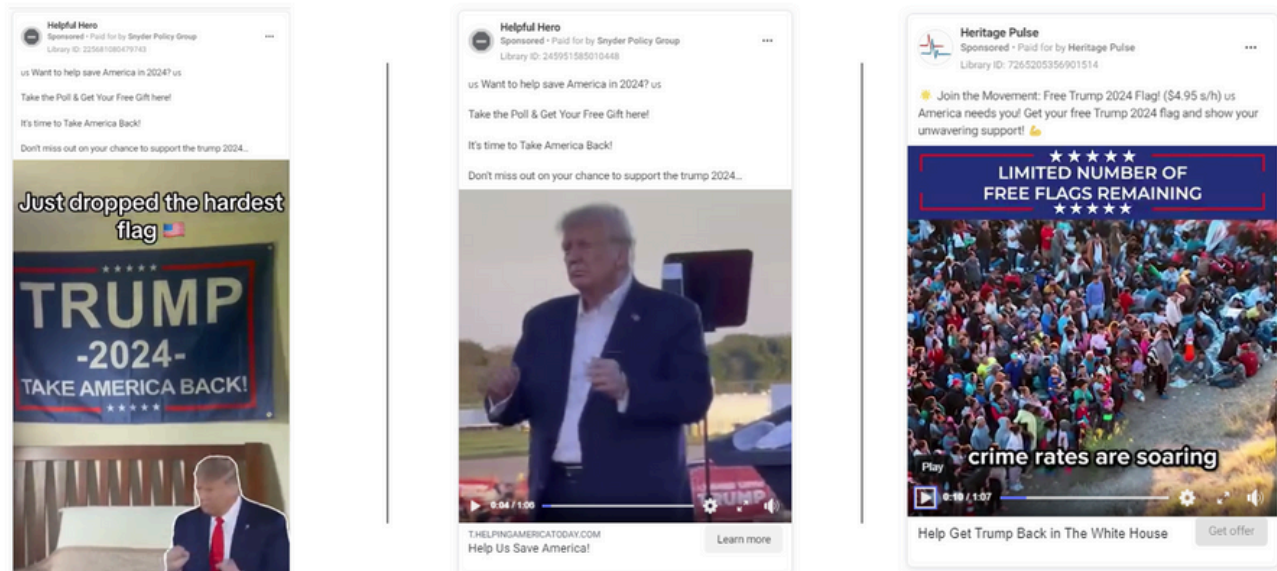
Politifact, a fact-checking site run by The Poynter Institute, reported that these ads are scams [9]. They note that Meta has banned pages running similar ads on Facebook.

Figure 20: Example Ads Running a Questionable Health Benefit Promotion



In addition to the deceptive ads described above, we also found audio deep fakes. Heritage Pulse ran multiple ads with voice deepfakes of Donald Trump (Figure 21). Helpful Hero ran ads with voice deepfakes of both Donald Trump and Tucker Carlson. Facebook banned Heritage Hope from running ads. Helpful Hero’s ads have no disclaimer that the page violated their ad policies, but the page has been deleted.

Figure 21: Example Ads of Deep-Faked Voiceovers of Trump and Carlson



[7] View the network and related pages and ads on the IDJC ElectionGraph dashboard:
https://electiongraph.ischool.syr.edu/fb_page/id_104643729293213

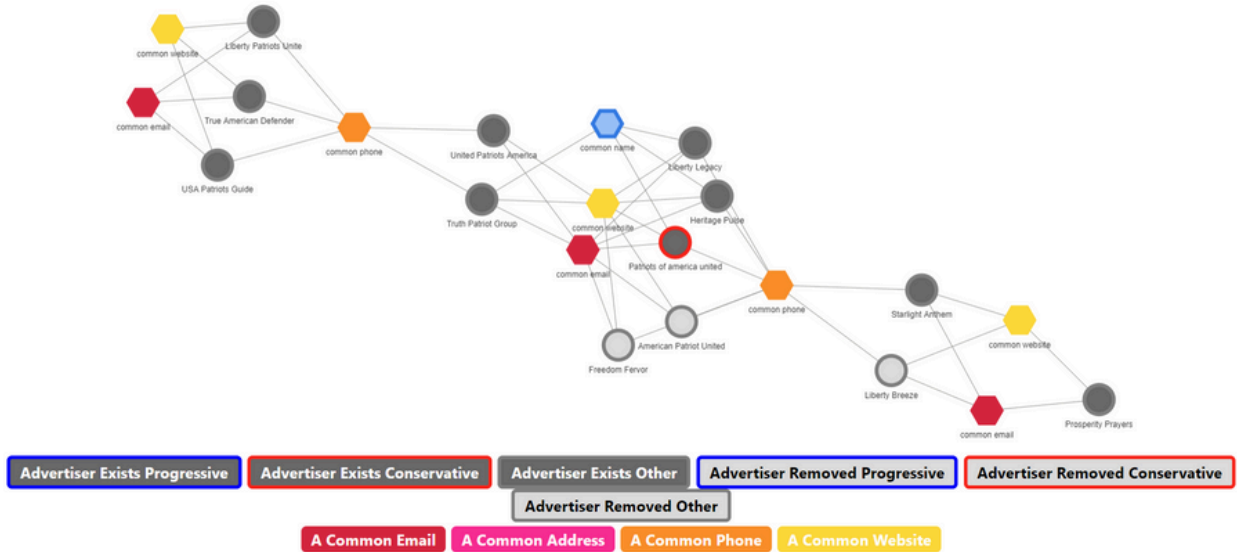
[8] Deepfaked Celebrities Hawk a Massive Trump Scam on Facebook and YouTube" from Forbes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XpAsT8by5o>

[9] "No, the government is not offering a \$5800 subsidy for all Americans" from PolitiFact:
<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2024/may/17/facebook-posts/no-the-government-is-not-offering-a-5800-subsidy-t/>

Liberty Breeze and Company

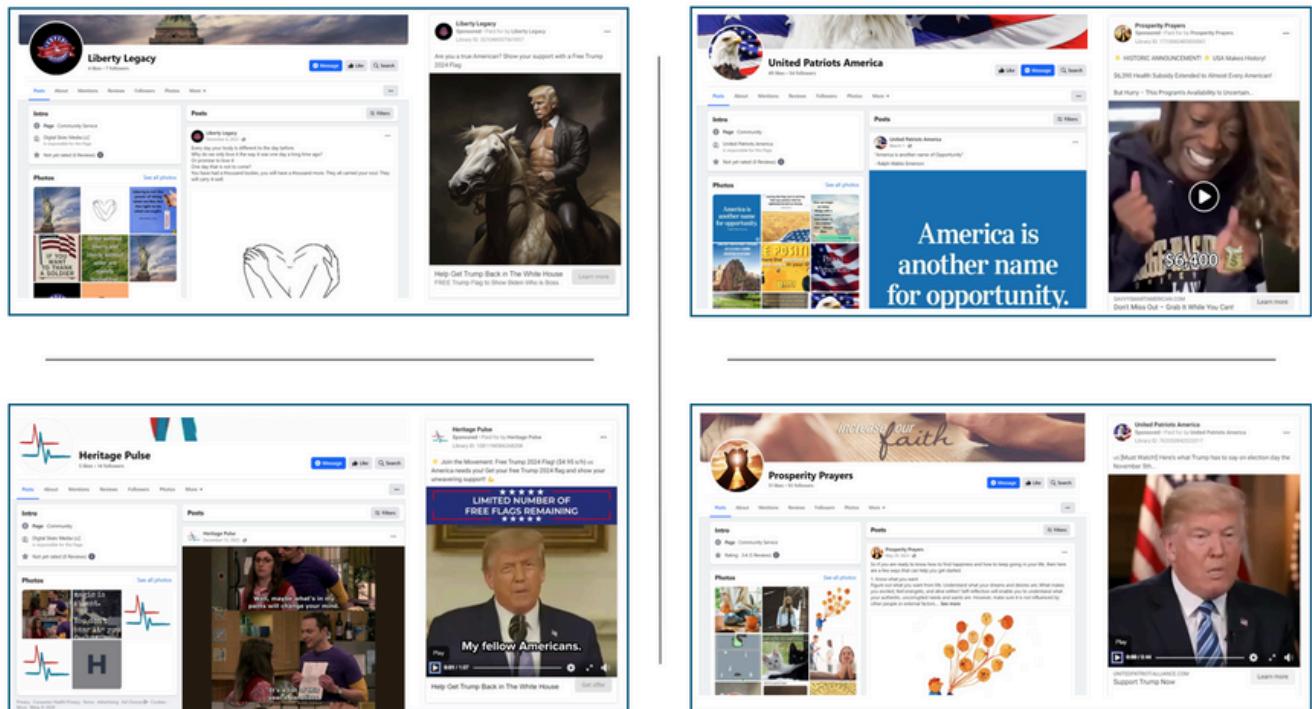
We identified a second large network running MAGA swag scam ads. This group we call the Liberty Breeze group. It includes 13 different Facebook pages that are interconnected by shared telephone numbers (See Figure 22) [10]. All run MAGA swag scam ads, except for one called “Prosperity Prayers” that ran financial benefit ads (See Figure 23). This network spent an estimated \$38,344 from September to April.

Figure 22: “Liberty Breeze” Network of Pages



Note: Figure Created with Neo4j®

Figure 23: Example Pages and Ads Running in the Liberty Breeze Network



Similar to the Liberty Defender Group network, this network consists of a set of Facebook pages that are active and a set that have been deleted after running ads, possibly because they were violating Facebook’s ad policies around scams and were removed, or because the purpose of the page had been fulfilled and the creators deleted it. Unfortunately, Meta does not provide any details as to the reasons why pages are no longer available on the platform. Meta continues to make the ads that ran on the Instagram and Facebook platforms available, however, through the Meta ad library.

[10] View the network and related pages and ads on the IDJC ElectionGraph dashboard: https://electiongraph.ischool.syr.edu/fb_page/id_140790212460828

Shared ads between the “Liberty Defender Group” network and the “Liberty Breeze” network

Because of some of the noteworthy similarities in ads that we observed through our manual exploration of the two networks, we further examined the text of the ads between the “Liberty Defender Group” network and the “Liberty Breeze” network. Our question was whether there was any chance the two were somehow connected as evidenced by shared identical or near-identical ads.

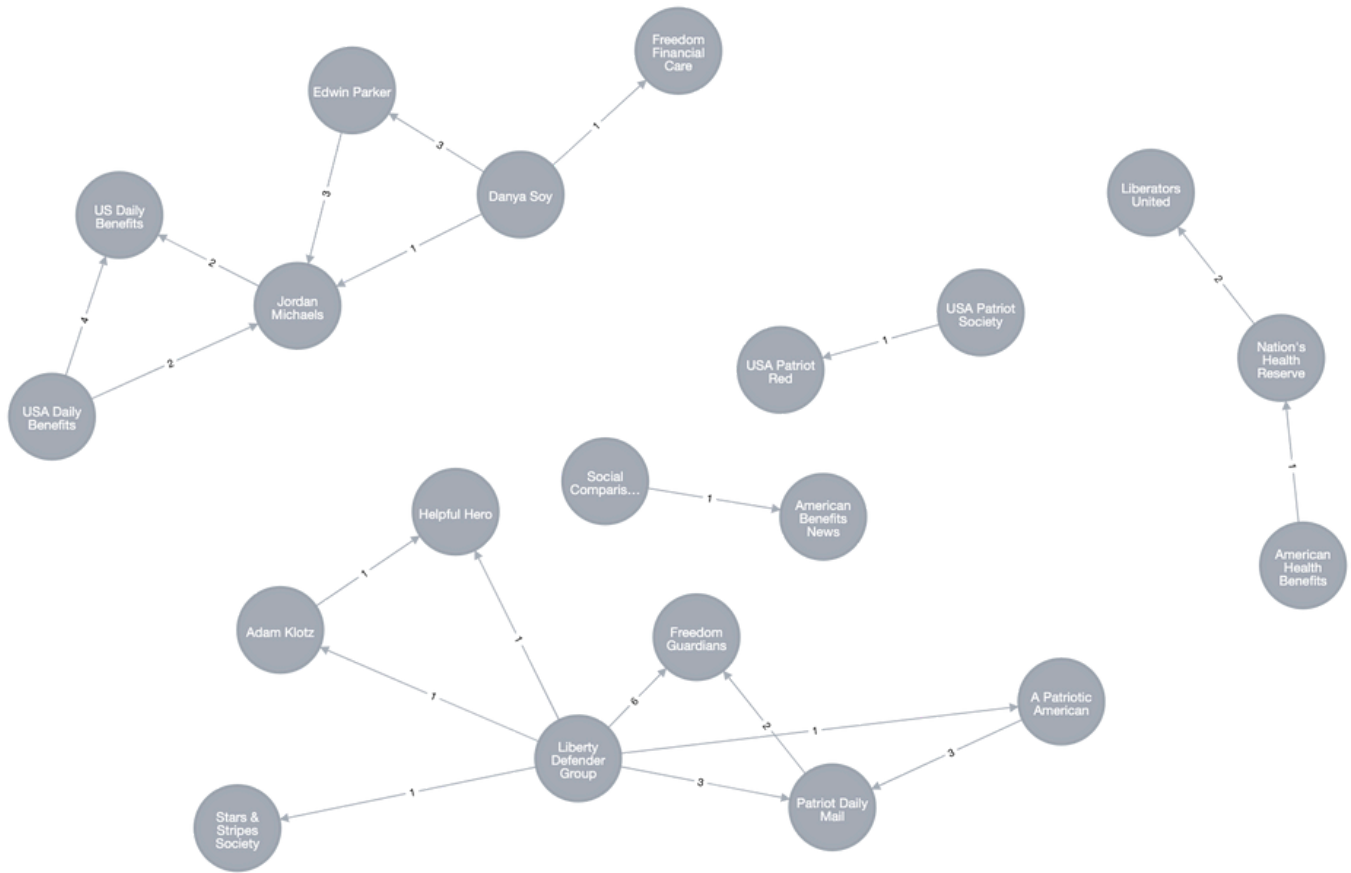
What we find is that the two groups do, indeed, share ads even though they are not connected by other elements (e.g. administrator email address). We note that this analysis focuses only on the text in the ad and not any video narration or text in visuals.

Within the Liberty Defender Group network, we see two larger clusters of pages running highly similar ads (See Figure 24). The network of 6 pages that includes a page with the name “Jordan Michaels” and US Daily Benefits are running financial benefit scam ads. The network of 7 pages that includes Liberty Defender Group and Freedom Guardians are running MAGA swag scam ads.

When we look across the Liberty Defender Group network and the Liberty Breeze network, we find that there are pages that share highly similar ads (See Figure 25). The Liberty Defender Group page (deleted and no longer running ads) shares in common ads with a page called A True American Defender, which remained active during this time period, and with Stars & Stripes Society and Liberty Breeze, which were deleted after running ads (See Figure 26).

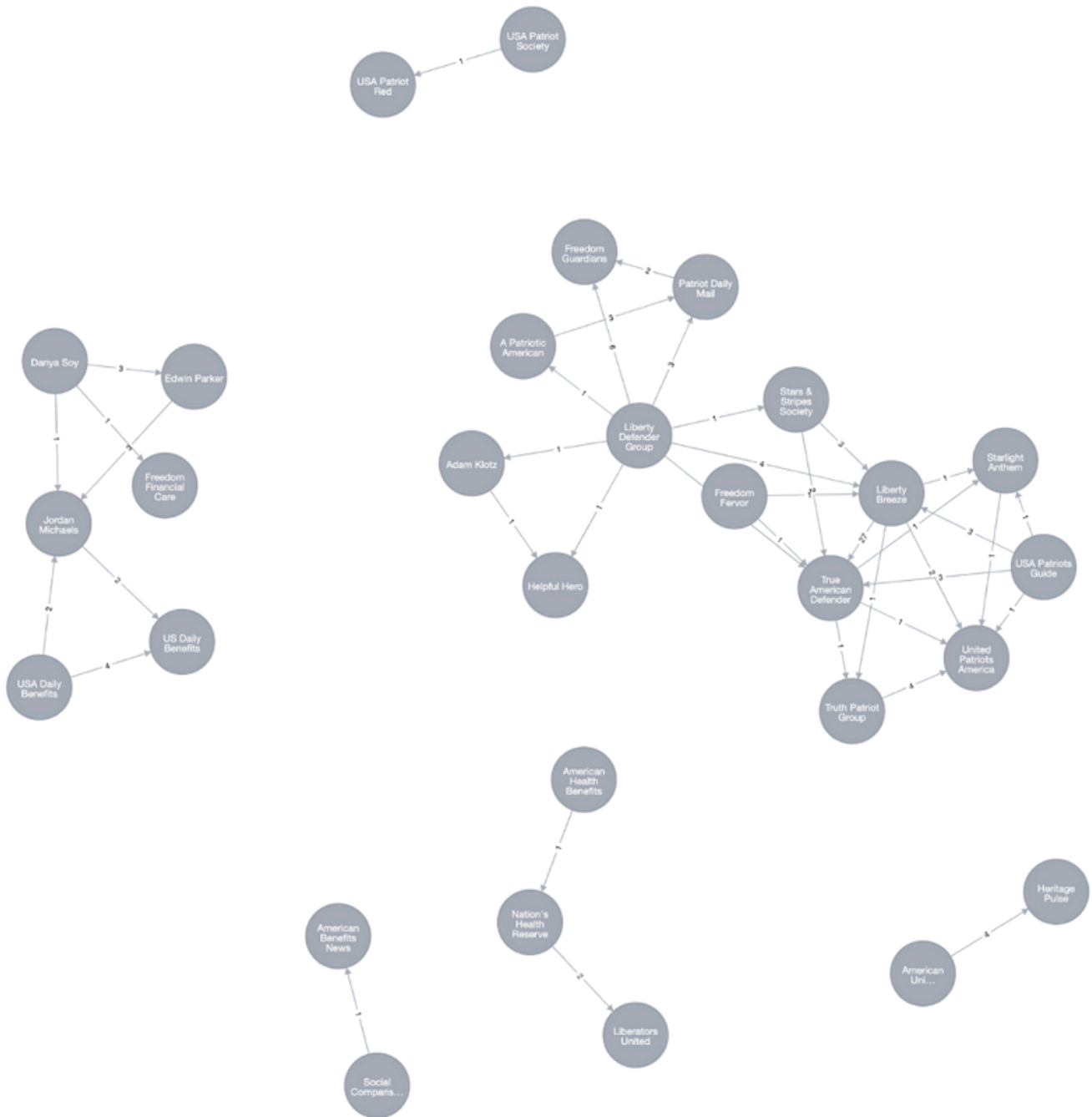
What this analysis suggests is that while journalists and fact-checking sites have reported on aspects of these scams, our research finds that the scams are somehow interconnected, and that new pages are being created to continue running scams, even as Meta works to prevent or cease scams on the public.

Figure 24: Network of Pages Running Highly Similar Ads in the “Liberty Defender Group Network”



Note: Figure Created with Neo4j ®

Figure 25: Network of Pages Running Highly Similar Ads between the “Liberty Defender Group” Network and “Liberty Breeze” Network



Note: Figure Created with Neo4j ®

Figure 26: Examples of Highly Similar Ads Running Across Scam Networks

Liberty Defender Group
Sponsored • Paid for by Liberty Defender Group

us Patriots, we need you! Take our short poll to confirm your support for Donald Trump in 2024 us And as a thank you, we'll send you a FREE Limited Edition Gift completely Free.

Support Trump Now!
Are you with us?

True American Defender
Sponsored • Paid for by True American Defender

us Patriots, we need you! Take our short poll to confirm your support for Donald Trump in 2024

us And as a thank you, we'll send you a FREE Limited Edition Gift completely Free.

Learn more

Stars & Stripes Society
Sponsored • Paid for by Stars & Stripes Health Group

us Patriots, we need your help! Take our quick poll to confirm your support for Donald Trump in 2024 us And to say thanks, we'll send you a FREE Limited Edition Gift completely Free.

100 free Trump gift.

Support Trump Now!
Are you with us?

Learn more

CONCLUSION

A surprisingly large number of organizations, from known political candidates and organizations to unknown organizations and individuals, are running ads on Facebook and Instagram focused on the U.S. presidential election.

Conservative-leaning pages outspent progressive-leaning pages between September and April, and their target and topic focuses are distinct, reflecting differences in the priorities and demographics of these ideological positions.

We found evidence of coordinated messaging by actors, some that are legitimate and others that seem to be efforts at scamming the public. Coordination, whether among legitimate groups or ones that are obscuring their identity and connections, amplifies or validates ideas with their intended audiences -- fact-based and misleading.

Some of the scam videos are deceptive; some that are health benefits scams use visual trickery to mislead viewers into thinking they are watching news. MAGA swag scam messages amplify false and misleading information about immigration, violence in cities, and election integrity.

We also found that the benefits scam sites tended to come from Facebook pages that were progressive-lean to their messaging, while, the MAGA swag scam ads were run from pages that were conservative-leaning. Surprisingly, though, we found that these scam ads were run by pages that were part of a larger, coordinated network running both types of ads. Who is behind the scam ads is unclear. What is clear is that that Meta's efforts to prevent these scams is challenged by a seeming proliferation of new pages as older pages get banned.

We found evidence of deep fakes in the MAGA swag scam ads, isolated to just a few pages running them. Although Facebook eventually detected and stopped those pages from running ads that created Trump voice deep fakes, we found evidence of Tucker Carlson voice deepfakes that may have gone undetected.

Unfortunately, our analysis only focuses on Meta. It is the only social media platform that makes ad data available to researchers. Left unknown is what advertisers on Google, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat and other social media platforms are saying and to whom.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

How People Run Ads on Meta

In order to understand this analysis, we break down the steps Meta requires for people who want to run ads on their platforms.

Running ads on Meta platforms requires several steps. When an advertiser buys ad space on Facebook and Instagram, Meta requires the ads be tied to a Facebook Page. If they want to run ads on social issues, election, or politics, a person from the organization responsible for the ad management must confirm their identity [11]. They must provide a valid, working email address and phone number for two-factor authentication to log in. They also must confirm their identity by submitting a photo of the front and the back of government-issued I.D. They also need to enter a mailing address. The mailing address and the ID address do not need to match, but the address must be in the country the advertiser wants to advertise in.

Finally, they must correctly answer a series of questions about their identity generated from a credit check organization, such as correctly identifying a previous address or employer. Once the individual has successfully gone through these steps, then they can run ads. If they run ads that Meta deems are social, political, or election-focused but the advertiser fails to label them as such and go through the identification process, then Meta has the right to deny the ad buy, stop the ad buy, or prohibit the organization from running political ads in the future.

Organizations can provide additional information to verify their identity. They can provide their government or military website and email address, their Federal Election Commission registration number, or their Employer Identification Number, which to be labeled a “Confirmed Organization”. Those organizations or individuals that do not have this information, will need to provide a Page Owner for the Facebook Page in order to run ads. The Page Owner must have a valid email address and phone number.

Anatomy of a Meta Ad and a Facebook Page

When we collect ads from the Meta Ad Library API, we receive several data elements. These include the Library ID, the platforms the ad ran on (Facebook, Instagram), the audience size, the proportion of ad spent by demographics on age, gender, and region, the amount spent on the ad not as a single dollar amount but in a lower and upper bound, the impressions of the ad not in a lower and upper bound, the Facebook Page that ran the ad, the sponsor (the ad account that paid for the ad), the text in the ad, and a URL to any videos or images that are in the ad.

In addition to this information, we also collected information that is in the “Disclaimer” of the ad, which can be viewed when looking at additional details about the ad (See Figure 27). We collected the phone number, email address, physical address, and website URL of the advertiser.

Figure 27: Example Ad with Data About the Advertiser

The screenshot displays the 'Ad Details' for a specific advertisement. On the left, key statistics are listed: Library ID 949510953282896, Active status, started on April 25, 2024, platforms (Facebook and Instagram), categories, an estimated audience size of over 1 million, an amount spent between \$40K and \$45K, and over 1 million impressions. Below these stats is a preview of the ad itself, which is sponsored by Patriot Sanctuary (Benefits Sanctuary Initiative) and promotes a free Trump 2024 hat and gold coin. The ad image shows a woman's face in front of an American flag. On the right, the 'About the disclaimer' section explains that advertisers must disclose who paid for the ad. Below this, the 'Information from the advertiser' section provides contact details: a disclaimer for Benefits Sanctuary Initiative, a phone number (+17023575010), an email address (admin@informedempowerment.com), a website URL (https://informedempowerment.com/benefitssanctuaryinitiative), and a physical address in Las Vegas, NV.

Categorizations of Ad Content

This section is for the data nerds. As we report, we categorize the content of the ads on several dimensions. We look at whether it's an attack ad, an advocacy ad, and if it focuses on policy issues. We also look at whether it's a call to action, and we have three distinct categories of fundraising, voting (including registering to vote, suggestions of where to vote, and reminders about voting), and engagement (this captures both online and in person campaign-related activities, including clicking on a poll, watching a video, or attending an in-person event).

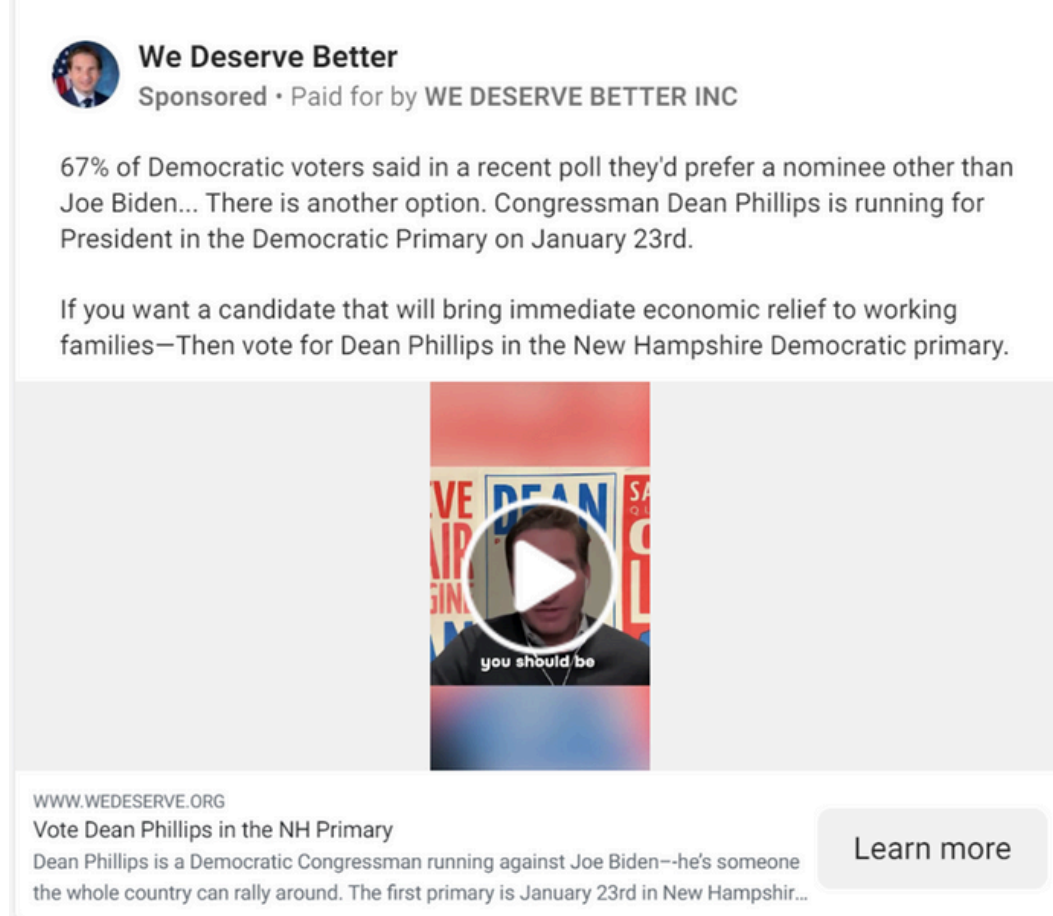
We built 16 different policy topic classifiers that include COVID, economy, education, environment, foreign policy, governance (which focuses on questions of how government can or should function, from Supreme Court nominations to questions of how elections are run), health (other than COVID), immigration, LGBTQ+ issues, military, safety (including issues around crime, as well as discussion of gun regulation and the Second Amendment), social and cultural issues in general, race and ethnic issues, women's issues, and technology and privacy.

Our approach to building classifiers is to use supervised machine learning. Trained raters (usually undergraduate students) categorize samples of social media posts and ads from prior elections based on the category type, which has been defined and explained in a detailed codebook. The raters review the messages independently, and then adjudicate any disagreements. That final data file becomes our training data for building a computational model.

We use Google's BERT model to train the model. BERT is a relatively small Large Language Model that we found substantially boosted the accuracy of the model over other approaches (such as Support Vector Machines). The performances of each model vary. All models, except for a few achieve performance that has an F1 of at least .7. The policy topics of governance, race and ethnicity only achieve a performance of at least .6. For details of our models to take the types of messages (attack, advocacy, and issue), and our overall approach, see our recent publication[\[12\]](#).

The element of the ad that is classified is labeled the “Creative Ad Body” in the dataset we get from the Ad Library API. This data element corresponds to the text that is typically seen at the top of an ad. So, for example, in the ad from Dean Phillips’ Political Action Committee We Deserve Better, the text above the video would be classified (See Figure 28). Video content is not made available from Meta through the API.

Figure 28: Dean Phillips Ad with “Creative Ad Body” Text



The image shows a Facebook advertisement for Dean Phillips' campaign. At the top left is a profile picture of Dean Phillips and the text "We Deserve Better". Below this, it says "Sponsored · Paid for by WE DESERVE BETTER INC". The main text of the ad reads: "67% of Democratic voters said in a recent poll they'd prefer a nominee other than Joe Biden... There is another option. Congressman Dean Phillips is running for President in the Democratic Primary on January 23rd." Below this is another line of text: "If you want a candidate that will bring immediate economic relief to working families—Then vote for Dean Phillips in the New Hampshire Democratic primary." In the center is a video player with a play button icon and the text "you should be" at the bottom. Below the video player, there is a URL "WWW.WEDESERVE.ORG", the text "Vote Dean Phillips in the NH Primary", and a short paragraph: "Dean Phillips is a Democratic Congressman running against Joe Biden--he's someone the whole country can rally around. The first primary is January 23rd in New Hampshir...". To the right of this text is a "Learn more" button.

Categorization of Partisan Lean

To determine ideological lean, each Facebook page was reviewed by two members of the team independently. Where the team members disagreed, then those pages were reviewed further and discussed to determine a final categorization. Approximately 30% of the pages required additional scrutiny when the two reviewers disagreed. We considered the page name, the description of the page, and generally the first ten posts, including the images and videos on the page and posts. We did not consider the ads in determining the ideological lean. For political candidates or politicians, we also did a Google search of their name to determine political party affiliation when it was not clear on their website. This was common as many candidates do not make their party affiliation clear. For news/media outlets, we also considered the ideological lean by using the [Ad Fontes Media](#) website.

[11] See Facebook’s “Confirm your identity to run ads about social issues, elections or politics” <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/2992964394067299?id=288762101909005>

[12] Stromer-Galley, J., & Rossini, P. (2023). Categorizing political campaign messages on social media using supervised machine learning. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. Doi: [10.1080/19331681.2033.2231436](https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2033.2231436).

ABOUT IDJC'S ELECTIONGRAPH PROJECT

This is the second report of a yearlong research project by the Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship and a team from Syracuse University's [School of Information Studies](#) to examine trends in the U.S. presidential race and other top 2024 contests including races for U.S. Senate and key congressional districts.

IDJC's ElectionGraph Project seeks to illuminate hidden trends and actors spreading and influencing inaccurate information targeting U.S. voters through social media. It is supported by a grant from Neo4j and use of the company's graph database technology and experts.

- The analysis was conducted by collecting ads run on Facebook and Instagram through the Meta Ad Library API through a data licensing agreement with Meta.
- We used search terms of the candidates' names and their Facebook page accounts to collect ad activity by the candidates as well as mentions of the candidates in other organizations' ads.
- We used python and Neo4j® software to generate the analyses, and Neo4j's Bloom® tool to generate the figures and graphs.

[Jennifer Stromer-Galley](#), professor at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University and a nationally recognized expert in political campaigns and misinformation, leads the researchers in collaboration with the IDJC's Kramer Director [Margaret Talev](#), a Newhouse professor of practice and journalist specializing in American politics, elections and the White House, and research director [Johanna Dunaway](#), a political science professor at the Maxwell School and expert in political communication, partisan polarization and mass media.

You may visit our [website](#) or email our team at democracy@syr.edu with questions or suggestions. For media inquires, please email Keith Kobland — the Associate Director of Media Relations — at kkobland@syr.edu.

