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# **ElectionGraph**

***IDJC Report: After Butler – Spending,  
Scams, and Negative Ad Attacks on  
Social Media in the U.S. Presidential Race***

**PREPARED BY:** 

Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy,  
Journalism & Citizenship

**MEDIA INQUIRIES:** 

[kkobland@syr.edu](mailto:kkobland@syr.edu)

**FOR MORE INFO:**

[democracy@syr.edu](mailto:democracy@syr.edu)



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# ElectionGraph Report

## IDJC Report: After Butler — Spending, Scams, and Negative Ad Attacks on Social Media in the U.S. Presidential Race



Institute for Democracy,  
Journalism & Citizenship

## Overview

Negative social media advertising in the presidential race jumped rather than declined after the July assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump, despite calls from both major parties to tone down heated rhetoric, according to an analysis by the ElectionGraph project at Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship. The analysis finds Trump's own ads played a significant role in that shift.

This report also summarizes overall spending and geographic targets by the Trump, Biden-Harris and now Harris-Walz campaigns via ads on Meta platforms; compares disparities in spending; and revisits the status of apparent credit card scams targeting politically active partisans on social media.

The analysis covers a year of spending, from September 2023 through August 2024. It examines only ads that have run on Facebook and Instagram and mention U.S. presidential primary candidates by name. 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.

This research is supported by a grant from Neo4j and use of the company's graph database technology and experts.

## Summary

The Democratic ticket has been outspending the Trump campaign 10-to-1 on Meta platforms since last September — roughly \$50 million to \$5 million — according to the analysis.

- That gap jumps to 12-to-1 in the crucial swing state of Pennsylvania.
- In other battleground states, Trump’s social media ad spending has focused more on Georgia and Arizona, while his Democratic rivals more focused on “blue wall” states of Michigan and Wisconsin.
- The overall spending difference has translated to a 4-to-1 difference in impressions on the social media platforms, or about 1 billion impressions for Democrats compared with 250 million impressions for the GOP ticket.
- This gap doesn’t take into account Trump-related spending on messaging on X (formerly Twitter), or on his own Truth Social network or other media platforms. Still, the gaps are noteworthy because Facebook and Instagram reach a wide cross-section of the public and because Trump was more dominant on Facebook and Instagram in 2020 than was now-President Joe Biden.

After the first of two purported assassination attempts on Trump’s life, at a July rally in Butler, Pa., there were calls across the political spectrum to tone down heated rhetoric.

- But while President Biden was slightly more negative in his ads than former President Trump last fall and this spring, by this summer Trump was substantially more negative than either Biden or his replacement at the top of the ticket, Vice President Kamala Harris. Nearly 70% of Trump’s ads included attacking, being uncivil or both.
- Trump outpaced Biden and Harris combined by about 5-to-1 in ads categorized as uncivil.
- Outside organizations advertising on the Meta platforms meanwhile were substantially more negative toward Trump in the weeks before and the weeks after, with a noteworthy drop in the immediate days after the assassination attempt in June.

In addition to campaigns' spending, nearly 3,500 Facebook pages from outside organizations have spent \$55 million over the past year in an effort to influence the public this election season.

- They're targeting battleground states and large states with donor bases: California, Texas, Florida, and New York. They're focused toward women more than men, especially older women.
- Progressive organizations are slightly outspending conservative organizations, roughly \$28 million to \$20 million in ads that mention a presidential candidate.
- Progressive pages are much more likely to mention public policy in their ads than conservative pages, suggesting that the latter focus more on personality and character messages over policy.

The data shows the Trump and Biden/Harris teams have adopted different approaches to their Meta ad spending.

- Trump has been emphasizing economic messages over most everything else, while Biden focused on the economy and health in nearly equal measure.
- When Harris became the nominee, she reprioritized the messaging to health care and women's choice and access as her top issue, followed by the economy.
- Overall, the Trump campaign is targeting older voters, while the Biden and Harris campaigns focused more on younger and middle-aged voters. Trump is targeting men more than women, especially younger men, while Harris is continuing Biden's focus on women across all age groups.
- The level of negative advertising increased over the past year as well, increasing on both sides after the first assassination attempt on Donald Trump.
- Of the swing states, the two campaigns are putting their ad resources heavily into Pennsylvania, but the Democratic ticket is focused more on Michigan than the Republican ticket, which is focused more on Georgia.
- Foreign policy received very little attention in the campaign's advertisements. Instead, the economy dominates for both campaigns. The Biden and Harris campaigns also focused substantial resources on health care, including women's health.

The report also continues to find a pattern of “coordinated inauthentic behavior” among some outside organizations, including a large network of Facebook pages running ads aimed at scamming the public.

- The analysis finds an estimated \$5 million spent on ads that are potential scams, or roughly 4% of the overall ad spend by outside organizations.
- This translates into an estimated 234 million impressions.

# **IDJC Report: After Butler – Spending, Scams, and Negative Ad Attacks on Social Media in the U.S. Presidential Race**

The 2024 U.S. presidential campaign ElectionGraph has been tracking for a year since the primary contests has been historic on many fronts, from a former president’s attempt to retake the highest office amid criminal charges after losing in 2020 and President Biden’s decision to drop his re-election bid after a disastrous debate performance and Democrats’ speedy move to nominate Vice President Kamala Harris in his place. The two nominees identified somewhat surprising choices for their vice presidents, Ohio Senator and author JD Vance to partner with Trump, and Minnesota Governor and coach Tim Walz with Harris. An attempt on President Trump’s life in late June at his campaign rally in rural Pennsylvania was followed by shortlived calls from both sides to tone down the animosity and uncivil rhetoric. A different suspect was charged in a second alleged assassination attempt on Trump in Florida in September.

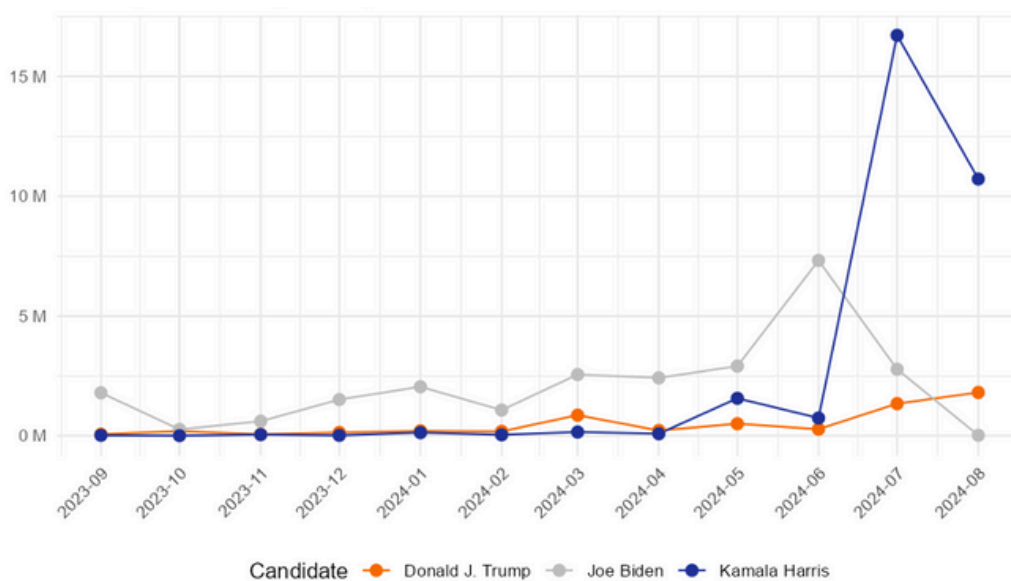
In this report we dive into the advertising on Meta platforms Instagram and Facebook by the presidential candidates to understand their campaign strategy and their tone. We also examine the outside organizations trying to influence the public this election season. Methods used to generate these insights are described at the end of this report.

# The Presidential Candidate's Meta Strategy

Biden's campaign spent an estimated \$25,308,682 on Facebook and Instagram advertising between September of last year and this August [1]. (He dropped out of the race in late July.) This translated to an estimated 788,159,955 impressions—views of the ads on the two platforms [2]. The campaign of Harris, who became the Democratic nominee, already has spent an additional \$23,557,053, translating into roughly 699,436,208 impressions. In total, the Biden/Harris, Democratic presidential ticket has spent an estimated \$51,074,549, resulting in approximately 1,508,184,894 impressions. By comparison, over the same time period, Trump spent an estimated \$5,863,324, translating into 261,460,300 impressions.

Looking at the spending by month (Figure 1), we note that the Democratic campaign ramped up spending substantially in the month of July when Harris entered the race.

**Figure 1: Monthly Official Page Ad Spend**



[1] We must estimate 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.

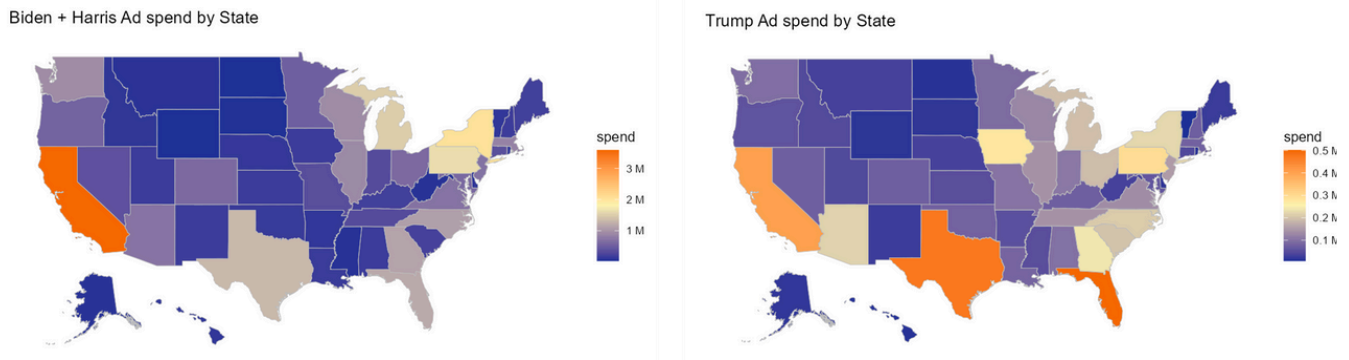
[2] We must estimate the number of impressions from ads on Facebook and Instagram because Meta provides a “lower bound” and an “upper bound” of impressions. We take the midpoint, and sum that to arrive at the estimated impressions.



# State Targeting by the Presidential Candidates

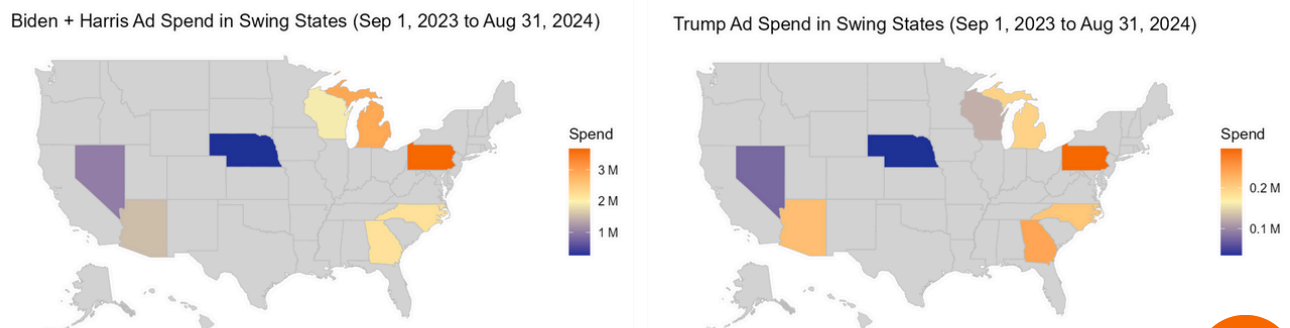
The two major party general-election campaigns have distinct state targeting patterns (Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, both are targeting key swing states, such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. Of note, however, is that Trump's largest ad spends focus on Florida, Texas, and California, whereas, the Democratic ticket focused on California and New York. These states are often gold mines for fundraising, and we have noted similar spending patterns in our research of Meta-focused advertising in 2020. We also note that during the primaries, Trump spent significant resources on Iowa.

**Figure 2: Candidate Ad Spending**



When looking at just the key swing states that will decide the Electoral College vote, we find strategic differences in the focus of the two campaigns (Figure 3). While both campaigns are heavily focused on Pennsylvania, the Democratic ticket is putting proportionally more of their ad spending into Michigan than is the Republican ticket. Note the differences in scale between the two parties. The Democratic presidential ticket has spent an estimated \$3,672,763 between September last year and the end of August, while the Trump campaign has spent \$295,522, that's a 12-fold difference in spending between the two campaigns on Meta platforms in just that state. Trump is proportionally spending more of its ad buy on Georgia, Arizona, and North Carolina.

**Figure 3: Candidate Swing State Ad Spending**

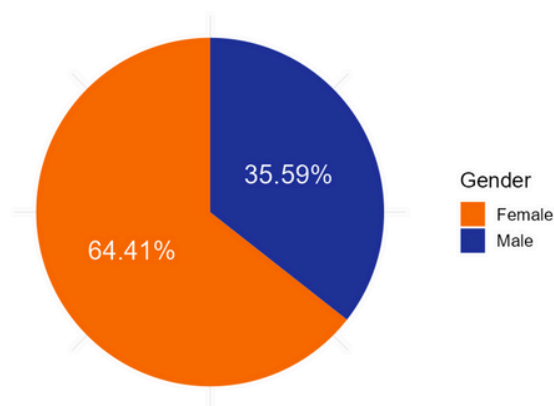


# Demographic Targets of Presidential Candidate Meta Ad Spending

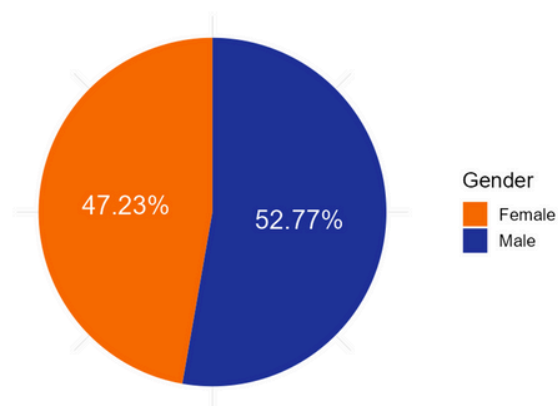
As we reported [in August](#), Harris’s campaign targeted women at a higher rate than Trump, continuing a trend from the Biden campaign. Looking at ad spending from September last year until the end of August this year (Figure 4), we see that the Democratic ticket’s ad buys target women nearly 3-to-1, while the Trump campaign is focused slightly more on men.

**Figure 4: Candidate Ad Spend Targets by Gender**

Biden + Harris Ad Spend by Gender

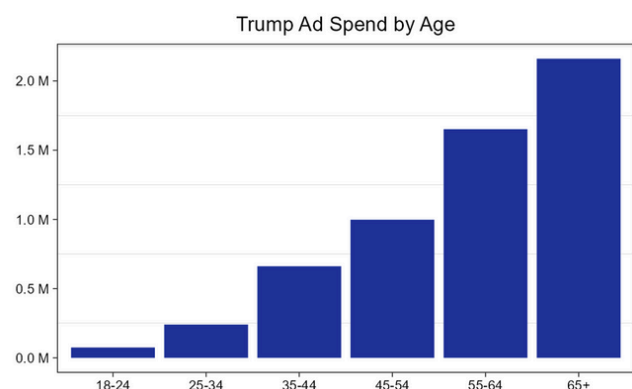
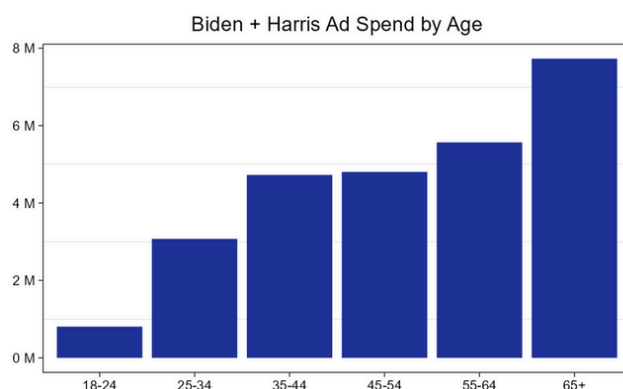


Trump Ad Spend by Gender



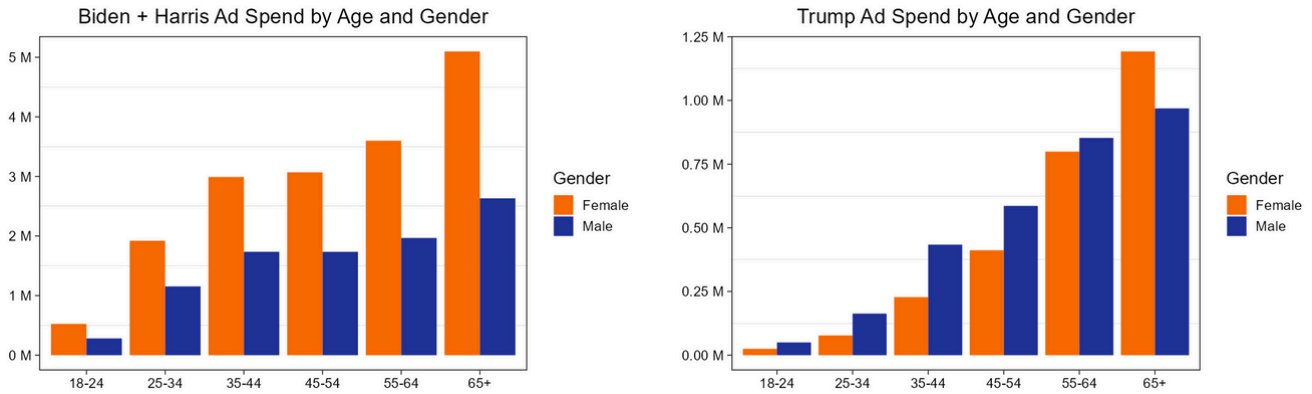
The age targets also reflect differences in strategy between the two campaigns (Figure 5). The Trump campaign is targeting primarily older voters, while the Harris campaign is targeting younger and middle-aged voters at a higher rate.

**Figure 5: Candidate Ad Spend Targets by Age**



Their strategy becomes even clearer when we look at the combined gender by age distributions for each campaign (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Candidate Ad Spending Targets by Age and Gender**

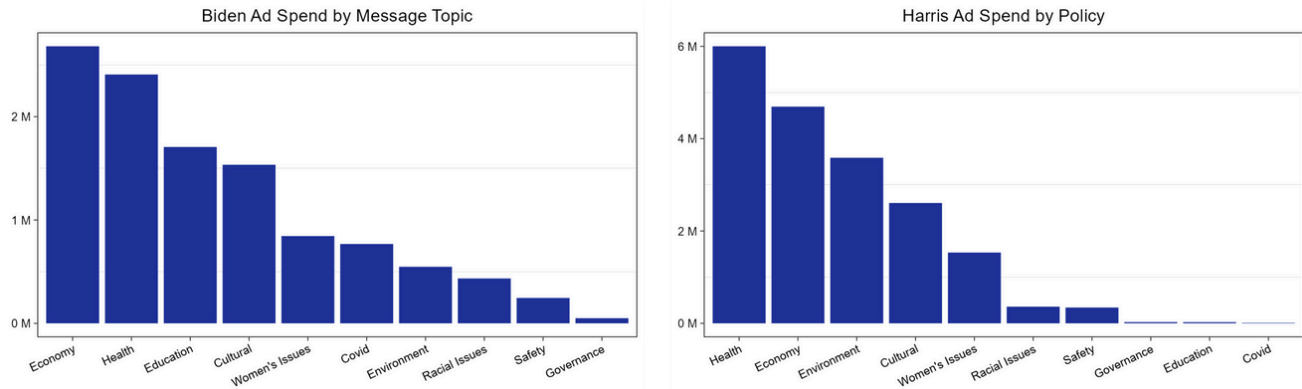


## Policy Messaging of the Presidential Candidates

We have been tracking sixteen different policy topics that the candidates have been discussing this election. Even though the global stage is fraught with wars on Europe's Eastern edge between Ukraine and Russia and in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine and increasingly Lebanon, foreign policy received virtually no mention in their digital ad buys. Instead, the focus is on domestic issues, including the economy, cultural issues, health care, and immigration.

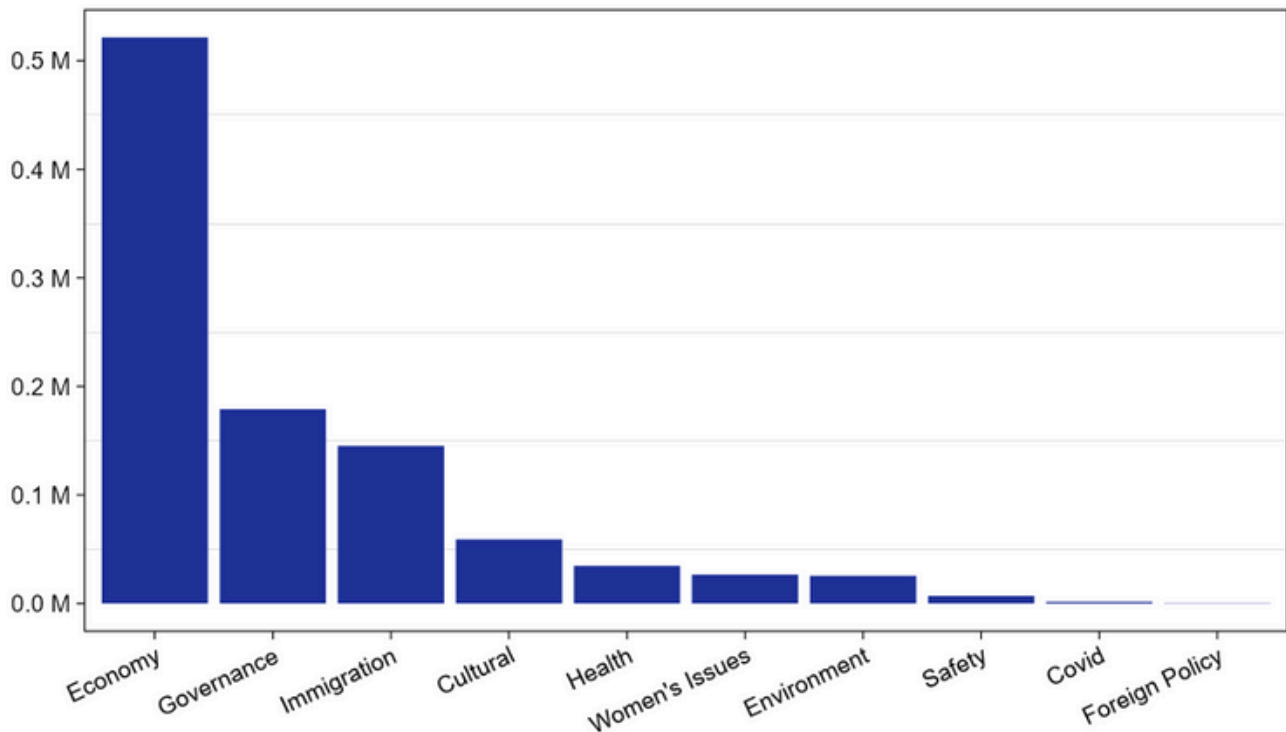
First, we look at Biden and Harris and compare their policy focus. We analyzed Biden's policy mentions in his ads between September first and the beginning of July, and then Harris from July 1 through the end of August (Figure 7). We note that Biden's focus is on the economy, with health care a very close second. For Harris, her ads focus on health care followed by the economy. The environment also emerges as the third policy topic of focus for her, while for Biden it was a distant 7th. Biden's third-most talked about issue was education, but that has not yet been much of a focus of her spending.

**Figure 7: Democratic Ticket Policy References in Ad Spending**



For Trump, his topic focus is on the economy (Figure 8). A very distant second topic is governance issues and immigration. "Governance" messages relate to how the government works, including administering elections.

**Figure 8: Trump Ad Spending by Message Topic**

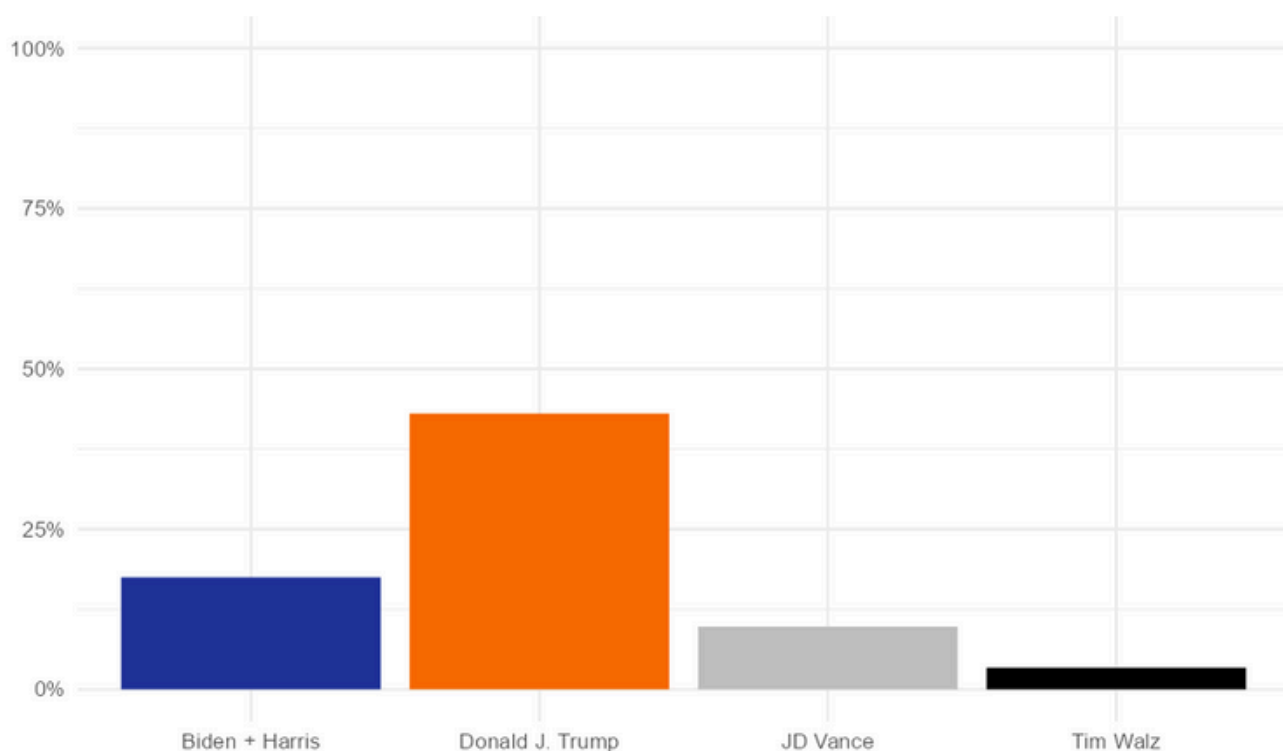


## Negative Messaging by the Presidential Candidates

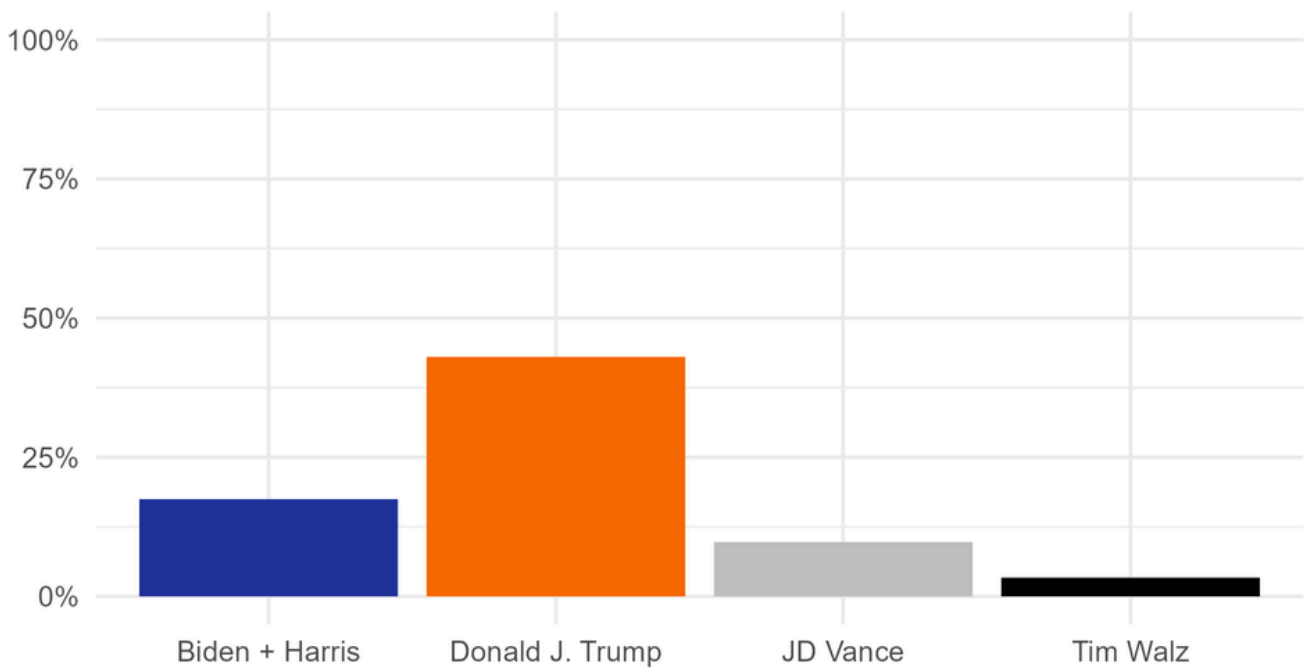
Given the tumultuous nature of this race, we have been tracking negative messaging in the campaign. We define negativity in two ways: attack messages, which are messages that critique an opponent, person, group or organization; and uncivil messages, which use hostile, denigrating, or derogatory language to reference an opponent, person, group, or organization.

We find that as a percentage of ad spend, the ads that run from the official Trump Facebook page on Facebook and Instagram are substantially more likely to be attack ads or uncivil ads than his running mate, or either Harris or Walz (Figure 8 & 9). We estimate 53% of Trump's ad buys are attack ads, compared with 17.5% for the Biden/Harris ticket. We estimate that 54% of Trump's ad buys are uncivil, compared with 11.5% for Biden/Harris. Note that ads can be both attacks and uncivil, so some are double-counted in those percentages.

**Figure 8: Spend on Attack Message by Candidate**

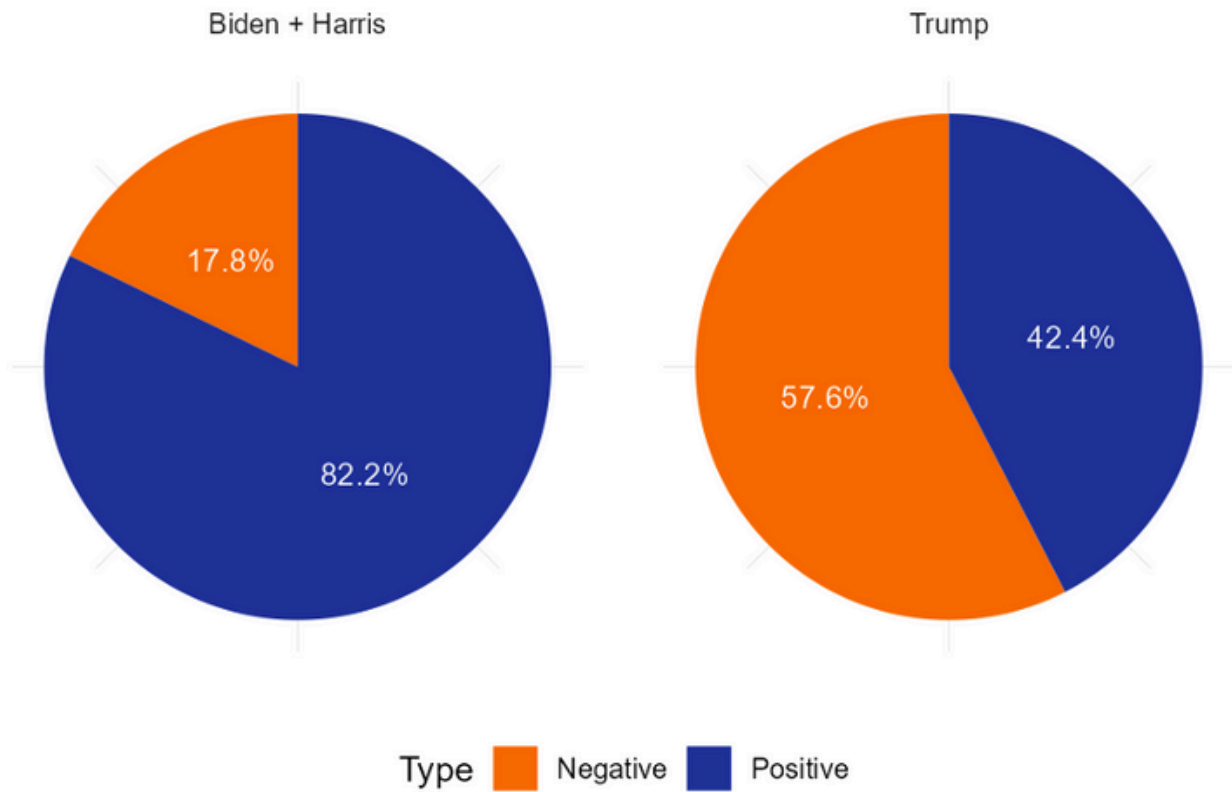


**Figure 9: Spend on Attack Message by Candidate**

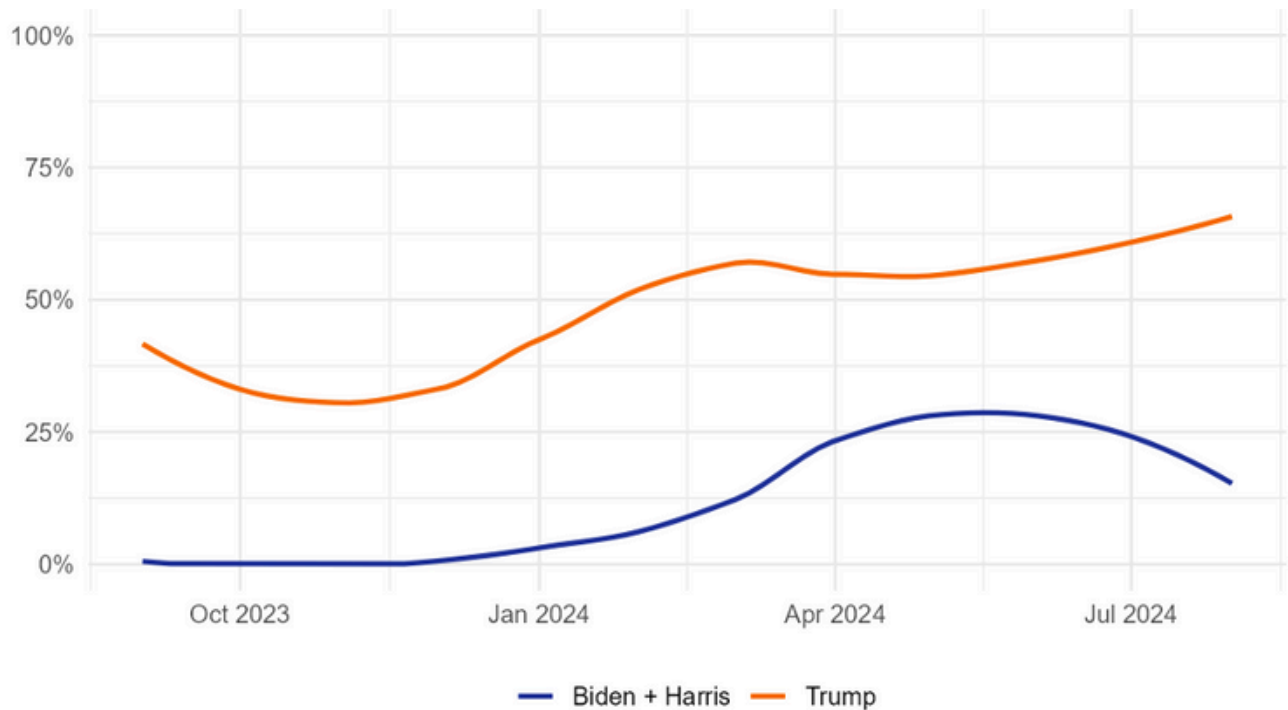


When we combine attack and uncivil ads into “negative” ads and track the amount of spend on these ads by just the presidential candidates we find that Trump is overall more negative than Biden and Harris (Figure 10). Nearly 60% of his ad spend is on negative ads, compared with about 20% for Biden and Harris. We also see that both campaigns get more negative once the primary voting begins in February, but Trump gets substantially more negative over time, with roughly 70% of his messages either uncivil, an attack, or both (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Negative vs Positive Spend by Candidate**



**Figure 11: Negative Spend Percentage by Candidates**



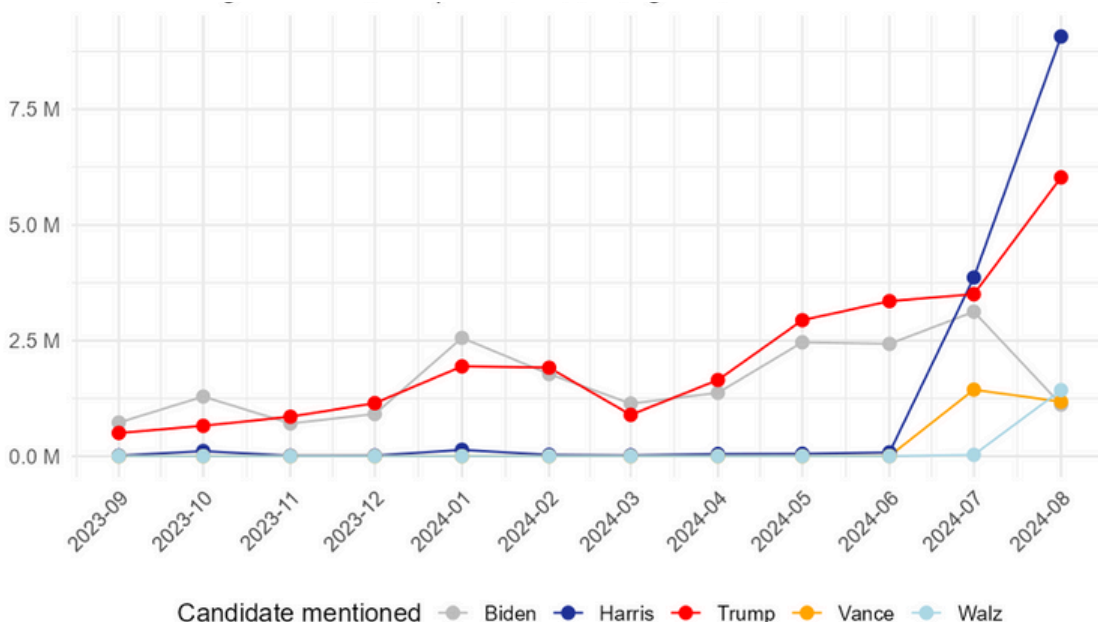
# Outside Organizations and their Strategy

Outside organizations, including ordinary individuals, Political Action Committees, the parties, and shady and unknown organizations are spending heavily on Facebook and Instagram to sway the public.

We identified 3,483 Facebook pages that ran ads on Facebook and Instagram during the pre-primaries, primaries, and the summer conventions (last September through this August). We estimate that \$55,082,945 has been spent by outside organizations on ads that signal their engagement with the presidential campaign by mentioning any of the candidates for president and vice president, translating into roughly 3,025,237,242 impressions.

Looking at outside organizations and their spending over time, spending increases notably in May with Harris drawing the focus of mentions in advertising, surpassing Trump in July (Figure 12). The vice-presidential nominees, Vance and Walz, also receive some mentions when they are picked to run. In the month of July, we find that outside organizations spent an estimated \$3,124,395 on ads that mention Biden, \$3,864,775 that mention Harris, \$3,503,236 that mention Trump, \$1,438,880 that mention Vance, and \$29,999 that mention Walz. In the month of August, we find that outside organizations spent an estimated \$1,127,841 on ads that mention Biden, \$9,229,752 that mention Harris, \$6,263,843 that mention Trump, \$1,229,721 that mention Vance, and \$1,428,807 that mention Walz.

**Figure 12: Outside Organization Ad Spend Mentioning Candidates**

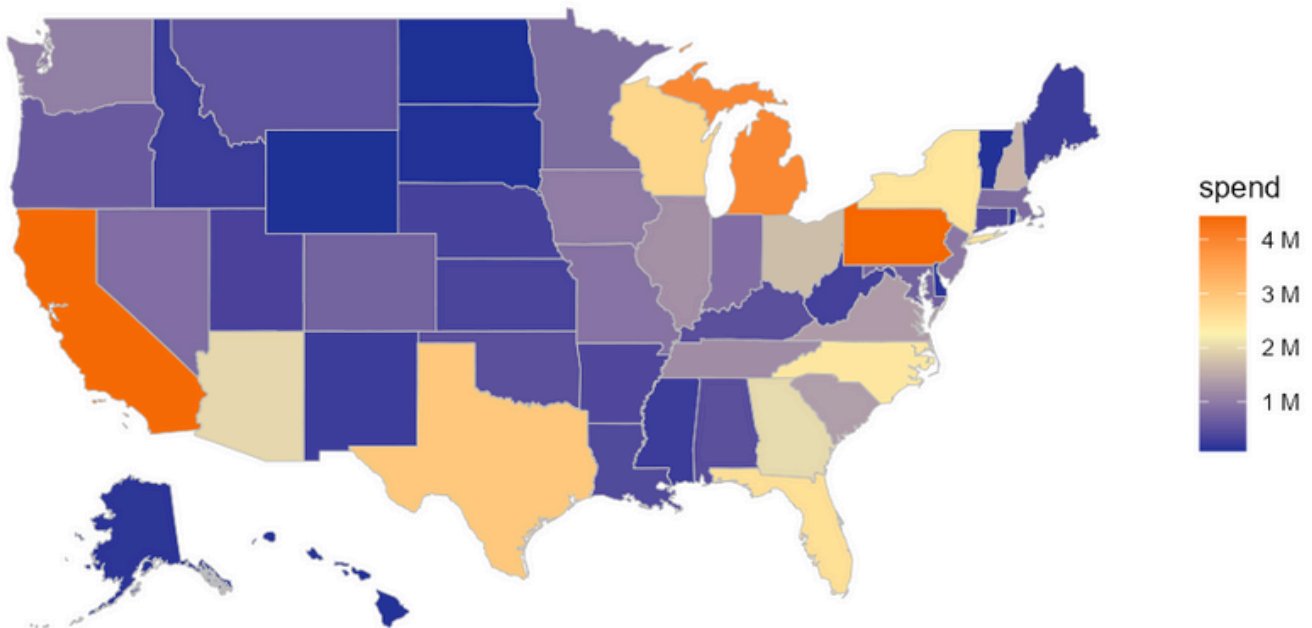




## State Targeting by Outside Organizations

Similarly to the presidential candidates, we see that outside organizations target the most populous states and key swing states (Figure 13). California, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, followed by Texas, Wisconsin, Florida, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, New Hampshire, and Arizona receive the greatest ad spend focus.

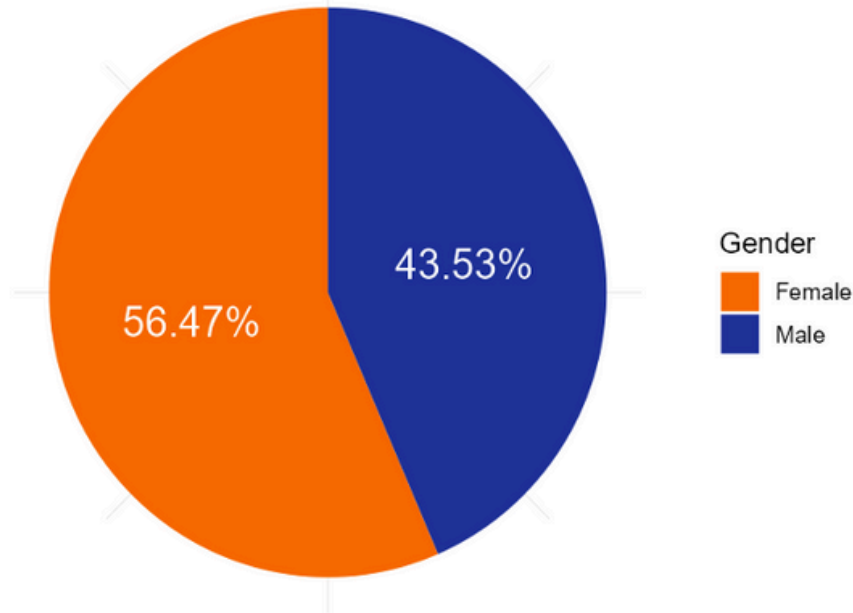
**Figure 13: Third Party Orgs Ad Spend by State**



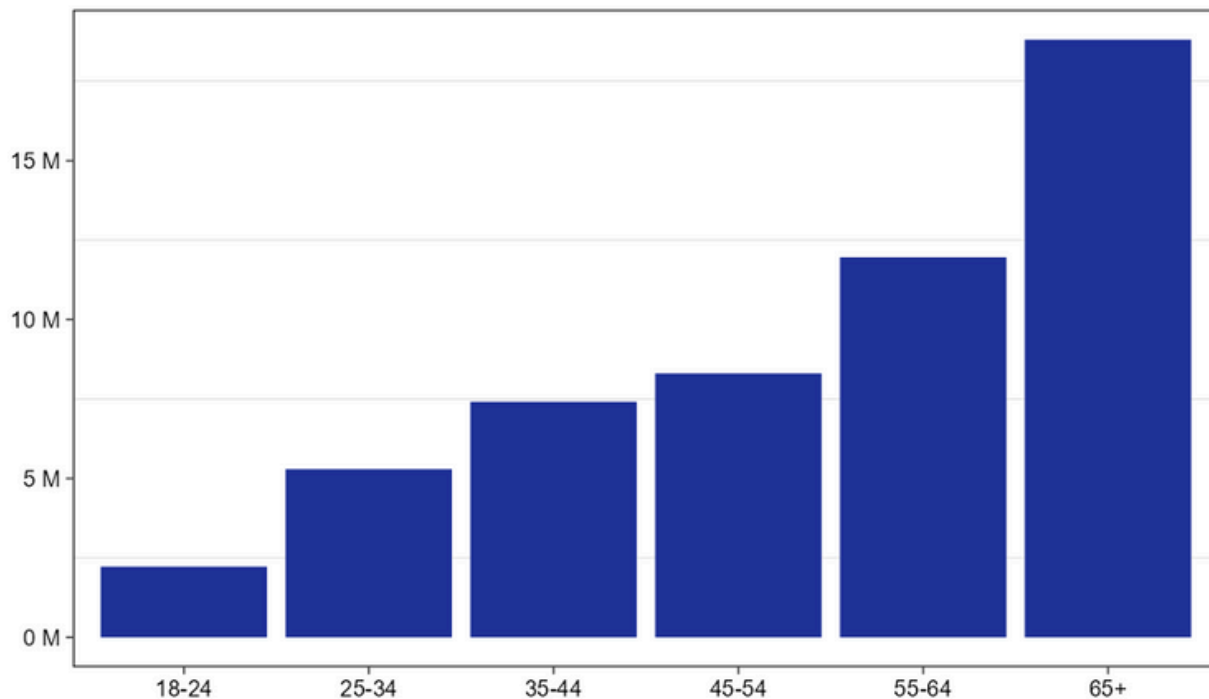
# Demographic Targeting by Outside Organizations

In total, ads target women at a slightly higher rate than men (Figure 14), and the ads skew towards the oldest demographics on Facebook and Instagram (Figure 15).

**Figure 14: Third Party Orgs Ad Spend by Gender**

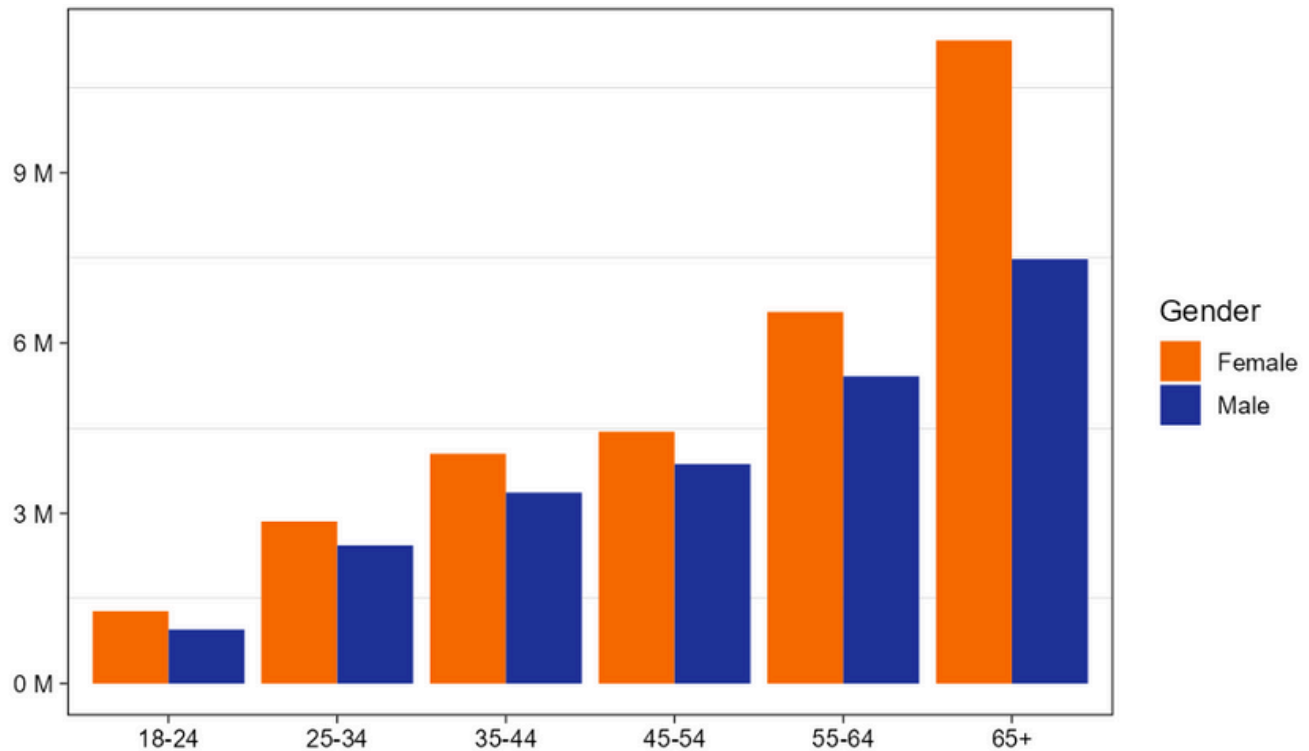


**Figure 15: Third Party Orgs Ad Spend by Age**



When looking at the age by gender breakdowns, a noteworthy pattern emerges, however (Figure 16). Older women in particular are targeted with these ad buys.

**Figure 16: Third Party Orgs Ad Spend by Age and Gender**



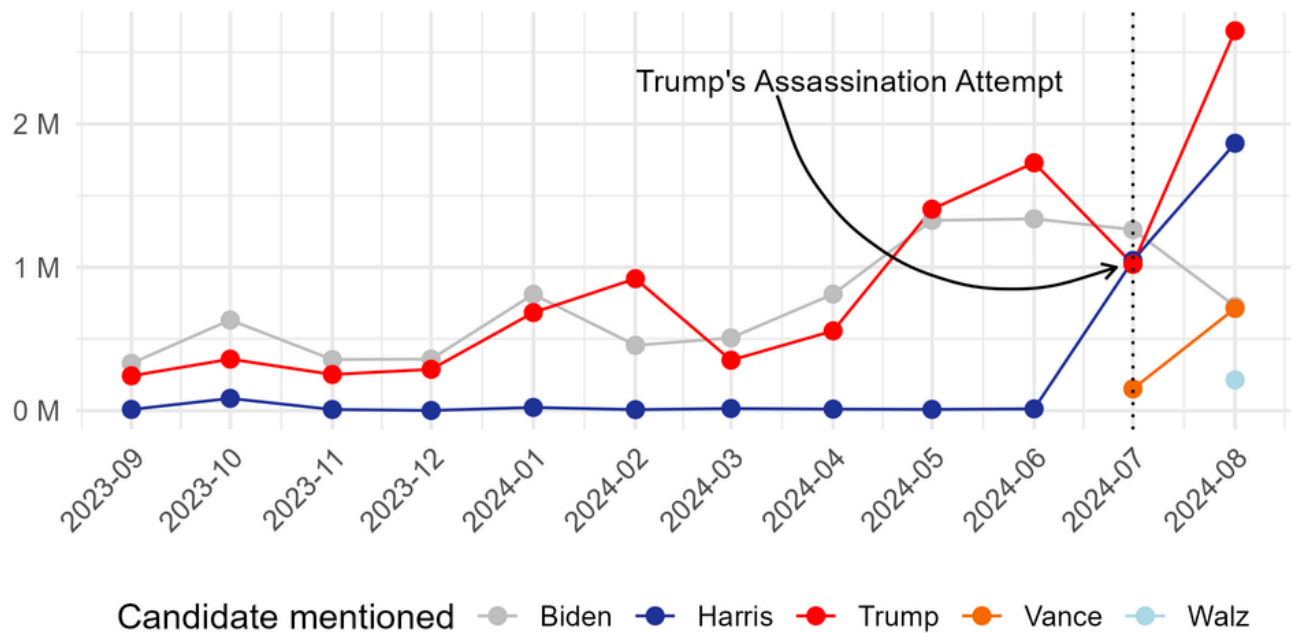
## Negative Messaging by Outside Organizations

We also tracked how negative the campaigning has been by outside organizations. We estimated that \$19,091,291 was spent on negative advertising that mentions the presidential candidates and/or their vice presidents, translating into 1,123,666,150 impressions.

Of note is that negative ads that mention Trump and negative ads that mention Harris increase substantially between July and August, even after the attempted assassination of Trump July 13th (Figure 17). We find that ads during the pre-primaries are slightly more negative towards Biden than Trump, although in February there's a noteworthy increase in negative ads that mention Trump. By May, more negative ads run about Trump than Biden. After the assassination attempt and Harris' entry into the race, while more negative ads begin to run about Harris, a larger portion are focused on Trump.

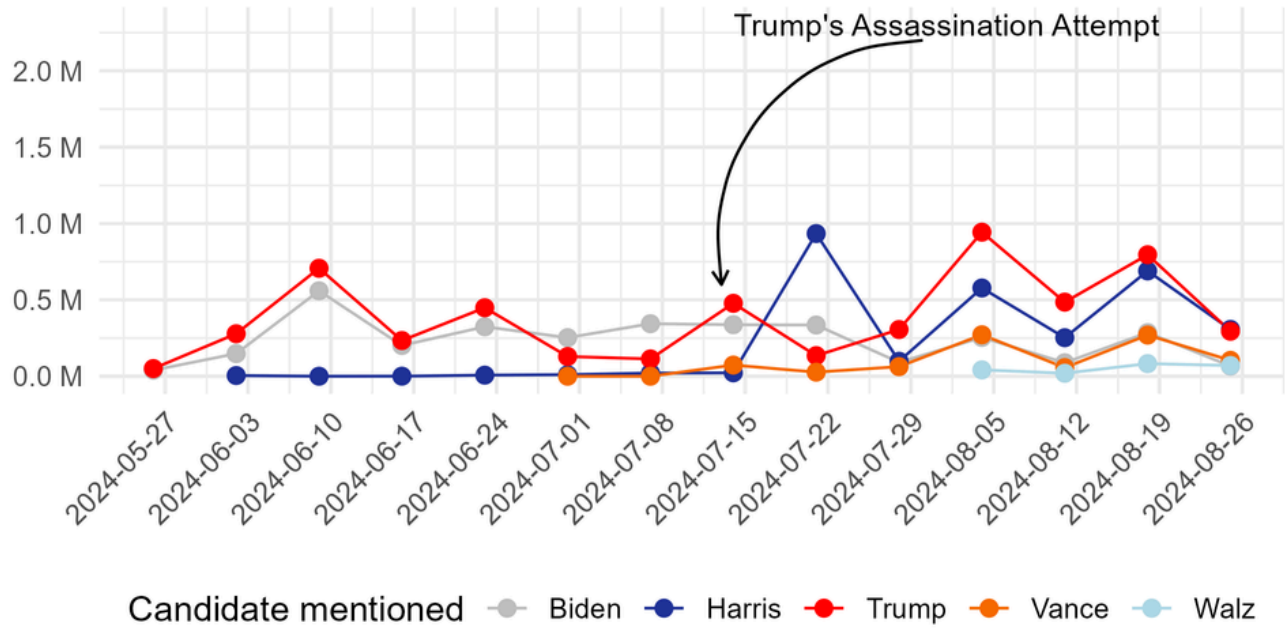
In the month of July, we estimate that outside organizations spent \$1,262,261 on negative ads that mentioned Biden, \$1,047,817 that mentioned Harris, \$1,020,482 that mentioned Trump, and \$151,847 that mentioned Vance. In August we estimate that outside organizations spent \$730,874 on negative ads that mentioned Biden, \$1,894,044 that mentioned Harris, \$2,703,714 that mentioned Trump, \$730,271 that mentioned Vance, and \$214,395 that mentioned Walz.

**Figure 17: Negative Ad mentioning Candidates by Outside Org Spend by Month**



Looking more closely at the summer, we note that immediately following the attempted assassination, there is a spike in negative ads by outside organizations that mention Harris, and then it drops down at the end of July. Meanwhile, negative ads increase that mention Trump through August.

**Figure 18: Negative Ad mentioning Candidates by Outside Org Spend by Week**

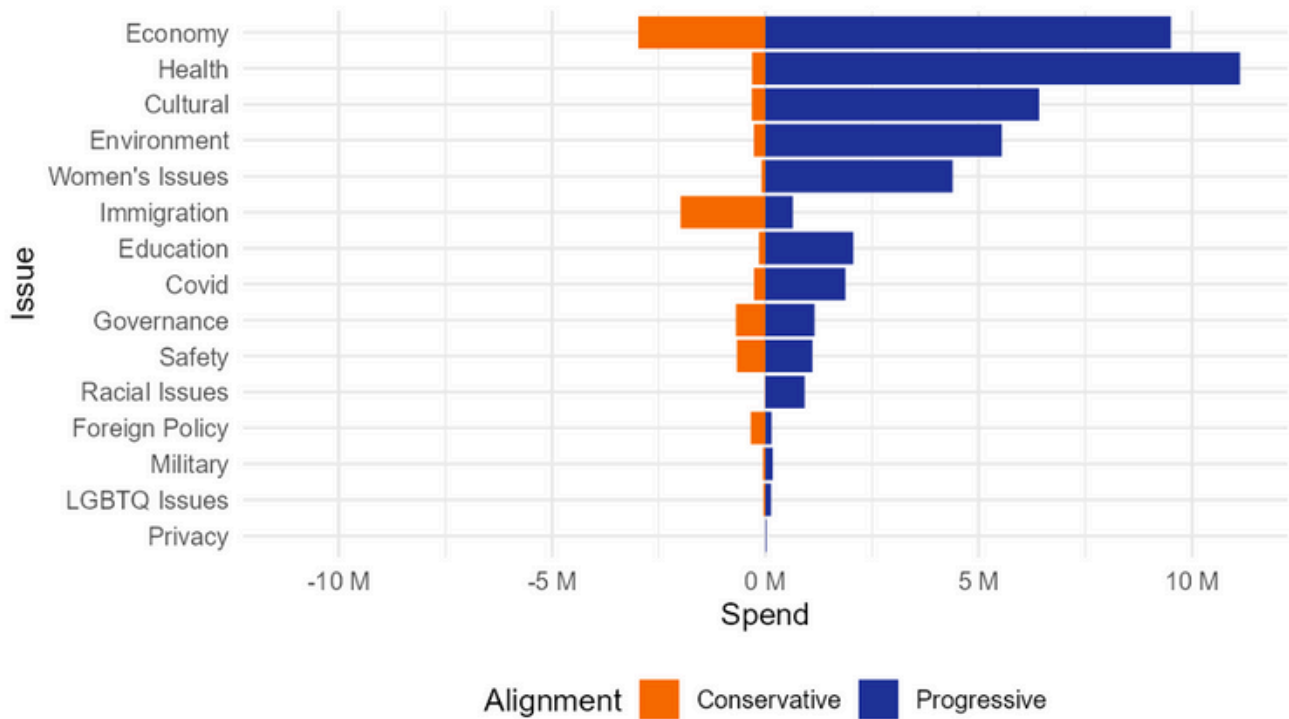


# Partisan Outside Organizations

We identified 1,614 pages that lean conservative, and 925 pages that lean progressive. We identified partisanship through an algorithm we built and that is described in the Methodological Approach Section. We estimate conservative pages have spent \$20,460,236 and progressive pages have spent \$28,019,605 running ads that mention a candidate. Conservative pages' ads and progressive pages' ads have each garnered over a billion impressions: 1,348,323,830 for conservative pages and 1,276,006,810 for progressive.

We find distinct differences in the policy topics. Generally, conservative pages' ads are not mentioning policies. When they do, they focus largely on the economy and immigration. Progressive ads are more likely to mention policies, and they emphasize health (including women's health) followed by the economy. Note that it is possible for an ad to mention multiple categories, for example economy and immigration, or health and women's issues.

**Figure 19: Ad Spend by Message Topic: Conservative vs Progressive**



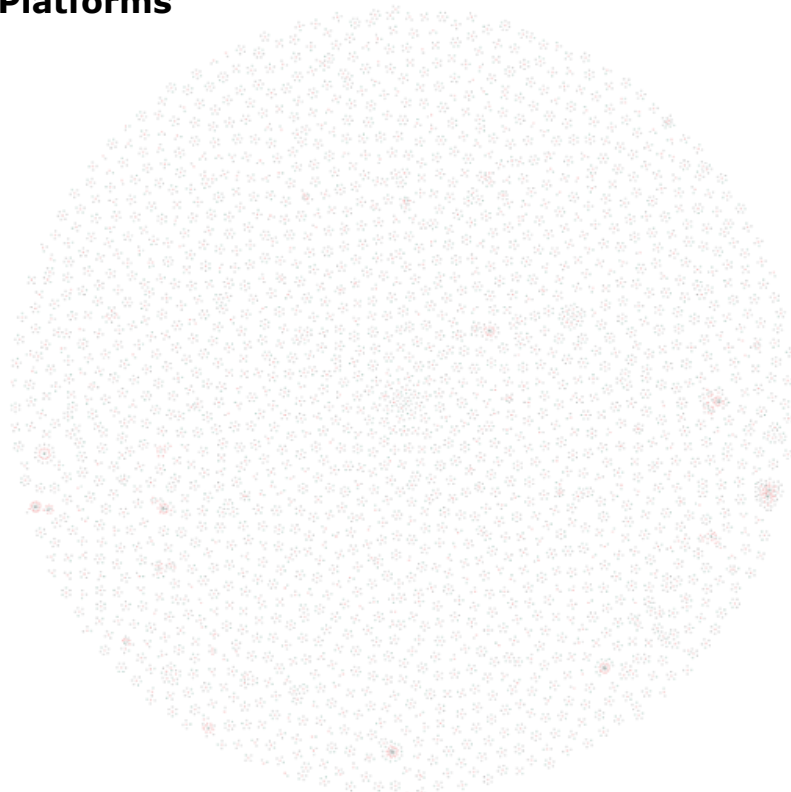
## Coordinated Campaigning

Of interest in our project is the extent to which seemingly independent Facebook pages are coordinating their messaging. While some coordination is legitimate, we are interested in coordinated inauthentic behavior, where the organizations are attempting to deceive some aspect of their strategic messaging: their identity, their goals.

To do this analysis, we had to combine 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 scrapers made available through Apify.com. We combined page data including postal address, telephone number, email address, and website to find linkages across pages.

We find 252 networks of Facebook Pages where at least 2 pages are interconnected (Figure 20). The largest network has 55 Facebook pages.

### **Figure 20: Outside Organization Coordinated Ad Spending Networks on Meta Platforms**

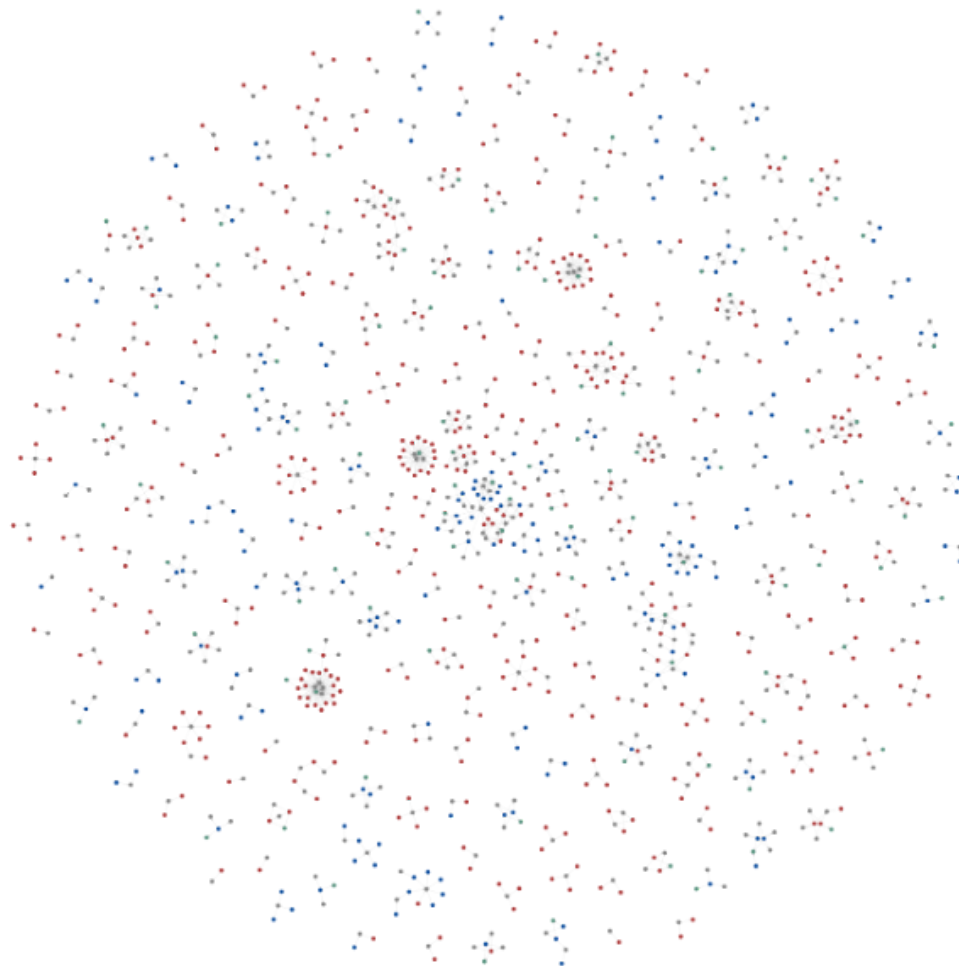


**Note:** Figure Created with Neo4j ®

# Partisan Networks

We also explored the partisanship of the outside organizations that were coordinated. We continue to find that there is little overlap in networks with pages identified as being conservative or liberal (Figure 21). Where we find such networks, we have identified those to be coordinated inauthentic networks, which we discuss later in this section.

**Figure 21: Partisan Outside Organization Coordinated Ad Spending on Meta Platforms**



**Note:** Figure Created with Neo4j ®

## Key

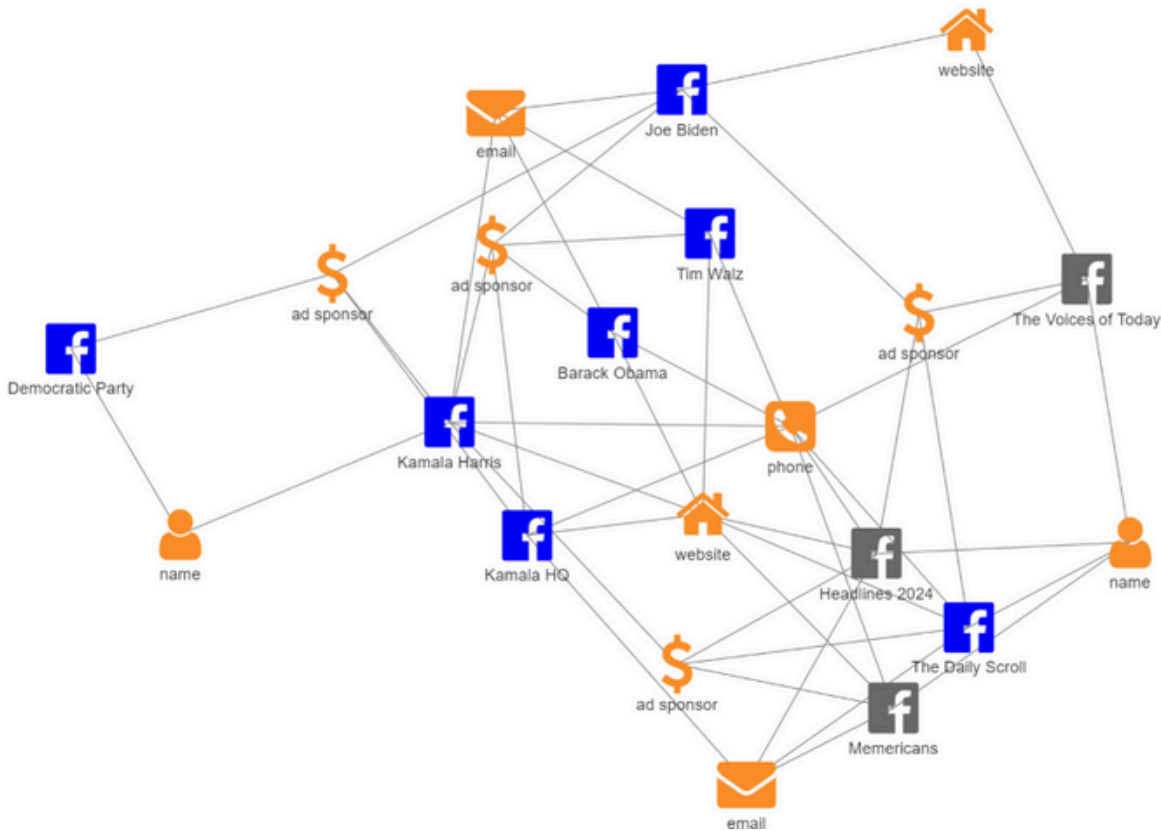
- 
- |   |              |              |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| ● | = red nodes  | conservative |
| ● | = blue nodes | progressive  |
-



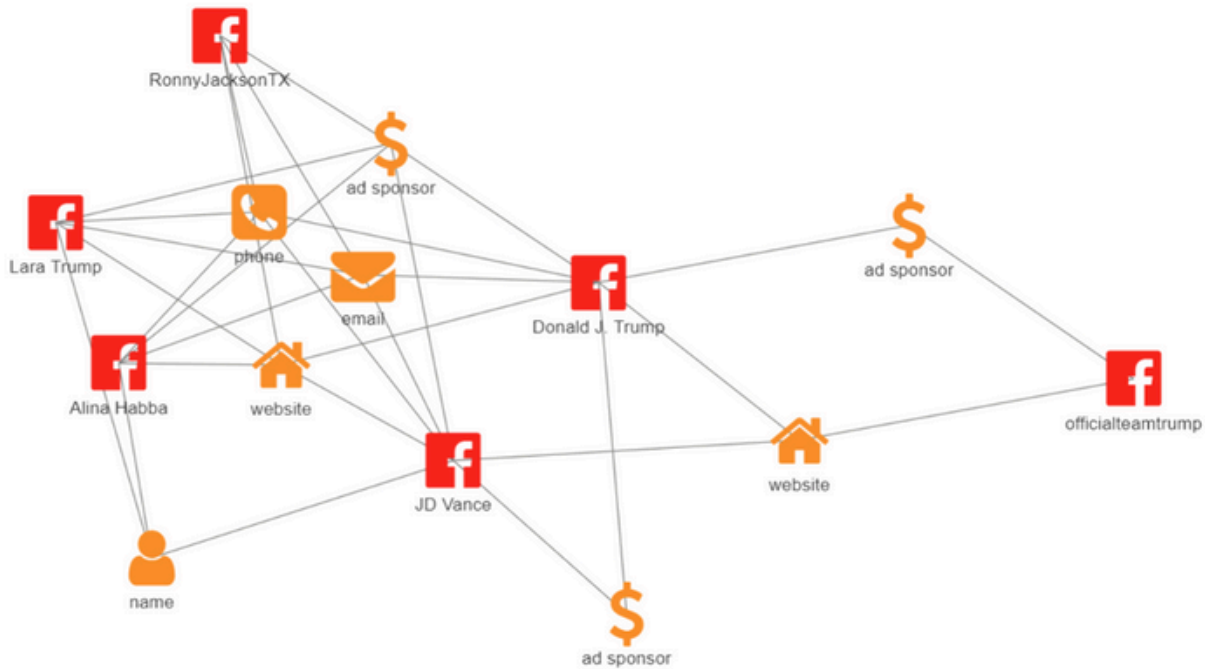
# Presidential Candidate Coordinated Networks

We also identified that the presidential campaigns for Trump and Harris each comprise their own coordinated networks. The Biden/Harris campaign includes a coordinated network of pages that include Kamala Harris, Kamala HQ, Joe Biden, Barack Obama, Tim Walz, and three pages with little content but are running ads in support of Harris: The Voices of Today, Headlines 2024, Memericans, The Daily Scroll (Figure 22). Overall, these pages have spent a combined \$17,819,479 on ads and have 823,002,770 impressions. On the Trump side, that network includes Donald J. Trump, officialteamtrump, JD Vance, as well as Lara Trump, his daughter-in-law and now head of the Republican National Committee, Alina Habba, a campaign manager, and surprisingly, RonnyJacksonTX, a candidate for a Texas House race (Figure 23). They have spent an estimated \$7,710,243 and had 341,786,777 impressions.

**Figure 22: Democratic Ticket Coordinated Network**



**Figure 23: Republican Ticket Coordinated Network**



## Scam Networks (Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior)

One surprising finding from our last report was the existence of several networks of coordinated Facebook pages with unclear motives, including known “pink slime” news sites and scams. One “pink slime” site—so called for being problematic filler in the news media space—Metric Media has been identified by Newsguard and others for creating websites focused on battleground states and generating news content that appears legitimate but that actually has a conservative slant and unclear origins [3]. Of the scam sites, we previously identified two independent networks, one we called the “Liberty Defender Group” because a Facebook page with that name ran a surprising \$1.3 million in ads between September and the end of February, making it one of the top advertisers around the presidential election at that time. In June that network had 38 different pages. The other was a network of 13 pages we called “Prosperity Prayers” that ran similar scam ads, including deep faked likenesses of Trump and Tucker Carlson.

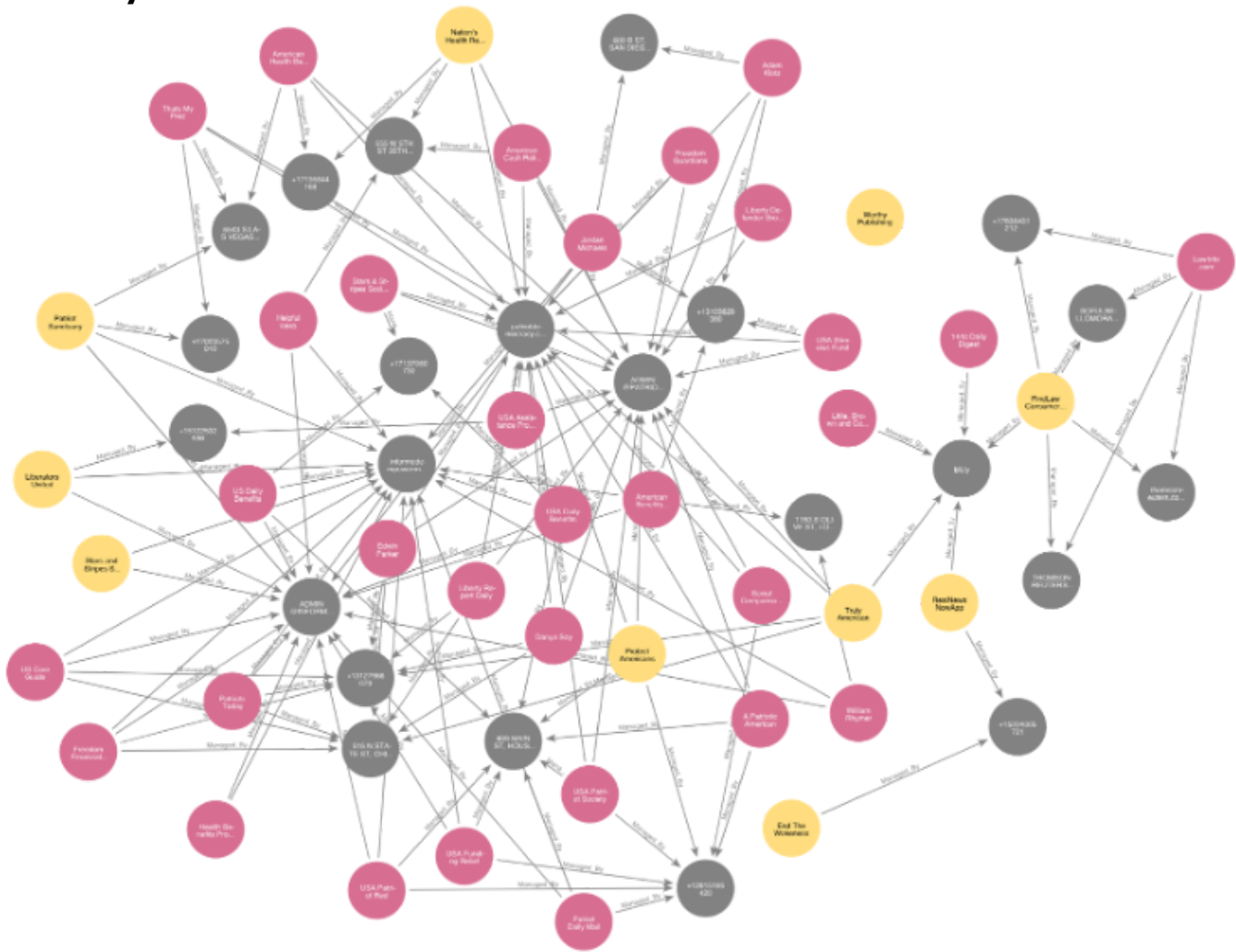
Since that last report, we built a classifier to identify ads that seemed to be running a scam (See the Methodological Approach Section). Using that classifier, we identified which ads in our corpus are likely a scam ad. We identified over 14,274 ad buys running from 239 different Facebook pages that are likely to be scams. We estimate \$5,021,713 was spent on those ads, or roughly 4% percent of ad spending that mentions a presidential candidate by an outside organization. We estimate this translated into 234,277,041 impressions.

One challenge is that our classifier identifies several ads that appear to be scams but are from legitimate organizations or people (for example Moveon.com, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and Lara Trump) inviting supporters to take a poll and get something from the campaign in exchange. This is concerning because it means that scammers may be hard to differentiate from legitimate campaign tactics to engage supporters.

Next, we focus on the “Liberty Defender Group” because the network remains active, even though the Liberty Defender Group page was removed by Facebook this spring. New pages launched in August, while others were either taken down or removed by Facebook. In total, we have identified 55 pages that are or have been part of his network. In April, 38 pages were active but by August only 11 pages were active, although 8 of them were new since April, suggesting that the scam network is one step ahead of Meta and its efforts to stop these scams. Overall, this network of pages has spent an estimated \$2,585,882 garnering 142,123,149 impressions.

This network shows the pages that were removed (either by Facebook or self-deleted) in May (Figure 24). The yellow nodes are the functioning pages, pink nodes are removed pages, and the grey nodes are linkages, such as postal address or website, that are shared among pages in the network.

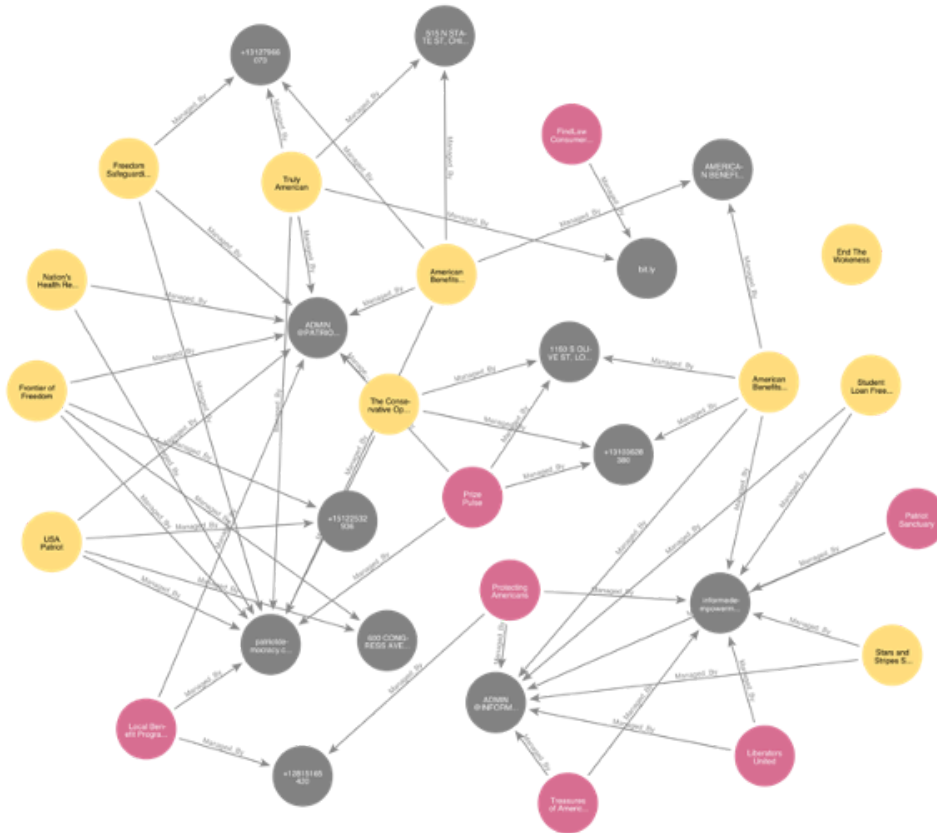
**Figure 24: Liberty Defender Group Network of Active and Deleted Pages in May**



**Note:** Figure Created with Neo4j ®

By August, the network had shrunk, but there are still 11 active Facebook pages, with 7 removed (Figure 25).

**Figure 25: Liberty Defender Group Network in August**



**Note:** Figure Created with Neo4j ©

Also of note is 8 of the 11 active pages were new in August (Figure 26). The below network shows new pages added in August in blue, while existing pages from prior months are in yellow (grey nodes are shared elements).

**Figure 26: Liberty Defender Group Network New Pages in August**



**Note:** Figure Created with Neo4j ©

One Facebook page in the network is Frontier of Freedom. The page spent an estimated \$5,339 running ads between May through September. Like similar ads in the network, one ad [4] attacks Democrats and promotes Trump’s agenda, and makes false statements about immigrants engaging in “horrific crimes” (Figure 27) At the end of the ad, the announcer urges viewers to click the link to fill out a poll to claim a Trump 2024 flag to show support for Trump (There is no evidence these are tied to the Trump campaign). The URL to the link is four-question poll of support for Trump or Harris, and then contact information is requested. After completing that, it resolves to a new page that asks for credit card information to cover Shipping & Handling. Hidden at the bottom of the page is a statement that by giving your credit card, you agree to pay \$79.97/month for a membership to the Patriot American Club (Figure 28).

**Figure 27: Active Scam Ad Campaign in August**



The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook advertisement. At the top, the ad is from 'Frontier of Freedom', a sponsored post paid for by 'Benefits Frontiers Group'. Below the header, the text reads: 'Take this quick 5 second poll to help Trump win in 2024 and get your free gifts!'. The main visual is a video player showing a man with a white beard and glasses pointing towards Donald Trump, who is in the background with his hand raised. The word 'SHOW' is overlaid on the video. At the bottom of the video player, there is a URL: 'HTTPS://PATRIOT-SANCTUARY.COM', the text 'Help Trump Win in 2024 and Get a Free Flag!', and a 'Learn more' button.



## Figure 28: Fine Print Text Revealing the True Cost of a “Free” Gift

I understand and agree to the following: By clicking the green button below, I will immediately be charged only \$4.97 S&H to ship my FREE Trump products, which are a welcoming gift for joining the Patriot American Club. I will also be charged \$79.97 for my 1st month membership within the next 48 hours, but with the FREE Trump products and the \$150 Gift Card to the Best Proud Republicans Club on the web, it is really costing me nothing to become a member and show my support! That by being a member of the Patriot American Club, I will receive the \$150 Gift Card EVERY MONTH within The Patriot American Store, have access to Exclusive Member Perks, Merchandise, & Much More! That my credit card will be billed for \$79.97 monthly for my membership. I also understand that I am free to cancel my membership at any time by simply contacting Customer Service at [support@patriotamericadeals.com](mailto:support@patriotamericadeals.com) and I will not be charged further. See Terms of Service at the bottom of this URL for cancellation and refund policy and more details.

More puzzling are ads run by pages in this network that announce reward cards or financial benefits tied to “Biden administration” benefits programs or the Affordable Care Act. One page, Freedom Financial Care, ran an ad that announces a \$1200 government assistance program. A link at the bottom of the ad resolved to a web page. After asking for age, it asks for contact information. Above the “Submit” button it discloses by clicking the link the user gives permission to be contacted by companies with names like Health Benefits Program and Vital Insurance Plans (Figure 29).

## Figure 29: Fine Print Text of Marketing Scam For “\$1200 Government Assistance”

By submitting your information and clicking below, you represent that you are at least 18 years old and provide your express written consent to be contacted by Senior Giveback Plan, Health Benefits Programs, Vital Insurance Plans, and/or its [partner companies](#) at the number and email you provided (including any wireless number) regarding various insurance products through the use of automated telephone dialing systems, pre-recorded messages, and/or text messages even if you are on any State and/or Federal Do Not Call list. Consent is not a condition of purchase and may be revoked at any time. Your consent is not a condition of purchase. This program is subject to our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use](#).

Below that, in smaller print it notes that the user agrees to receive marketing calls and text messages (Figure 31). From whom is unclear [5].

## Figure 30: Additional Fine Print Text to Receiving Marketing Calls

By sharing your contact information you (1) agree to receive marketing and promotional calls from, or on behalf of one or more of our marketing partners listed via live agent, artificial or prerecorded voice, and SMS text at my residential or cellular number, dialed manually or by autodialer, and by email and (2) agree to our [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Message and data rates may apply. Consent to be contacted is not a condition to purchase. I also understand that if I do not want to give this consent, I can call Senior Giveback Plan at (855) 615-0541 to speak to an agent.

Our goal is to provide exceptional service. One of our agents may reach out to you to discuss your order, ask for feedback, and / or see if you need any assistance with your products, services, or plans, at the phone number you provided regardless of your do-not-call list status. You may opt out of further contact at any time by simply telling our customer service team that you would no longer like to be contacted. In the event that our team is unable to reach you by phone, they may send you a text message letting you know that we called. Both our text messages and phone calls may be sent or connected utilizing automated software. Carrier charges may apply. You may opt out of any future contact via text message by replying anytime with “STOP”.

In terms of the Liberty Defender Group network’s spending, we find that the set of pages spent an estimated \$2,585,882 on ads on Meta platforms, which translates into roughly 142,123,149 impressions.

When we map the network’s spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram over time we note a surge in December and January, then a notable drop-off until this summer (Figure 31).

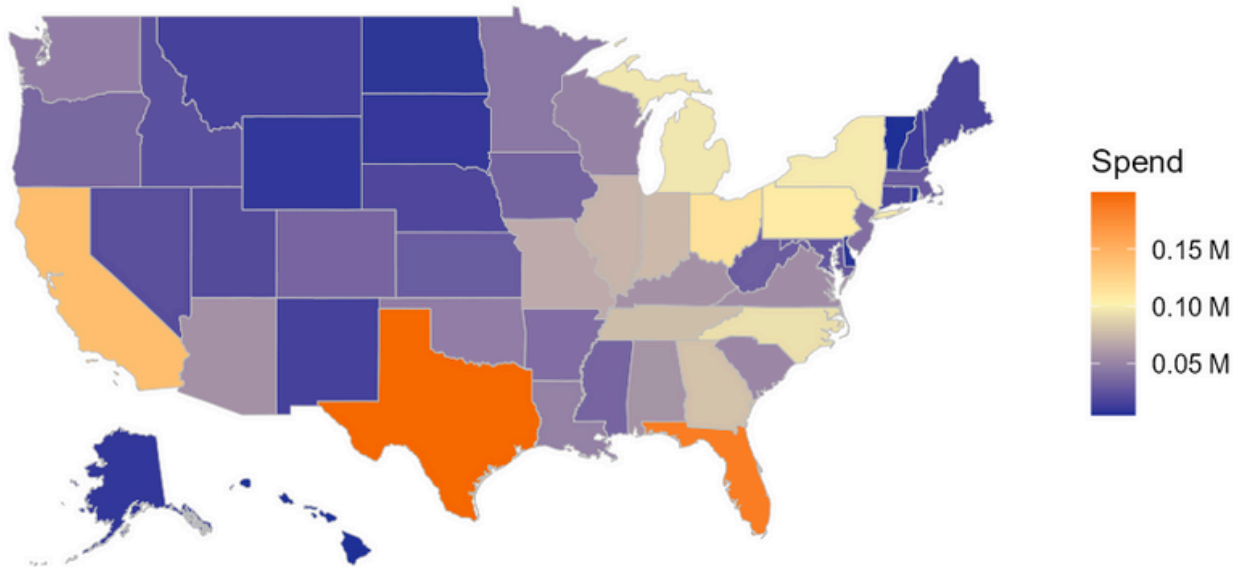
**Figure 31: Liberty Defender Ad Spend By Month**





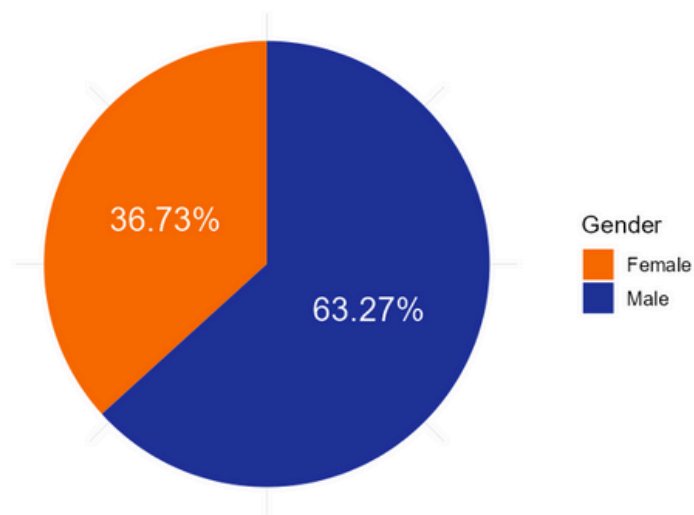
The states most targeted are populous states, including Texas, Florida, and California (Figure 32). Several battleground states also receive attention, including Michigan, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania.

**Figure 32: Liberty Defender Network Ad Spend by State (Sep 1, 2023 to Aug 31, 2024)**

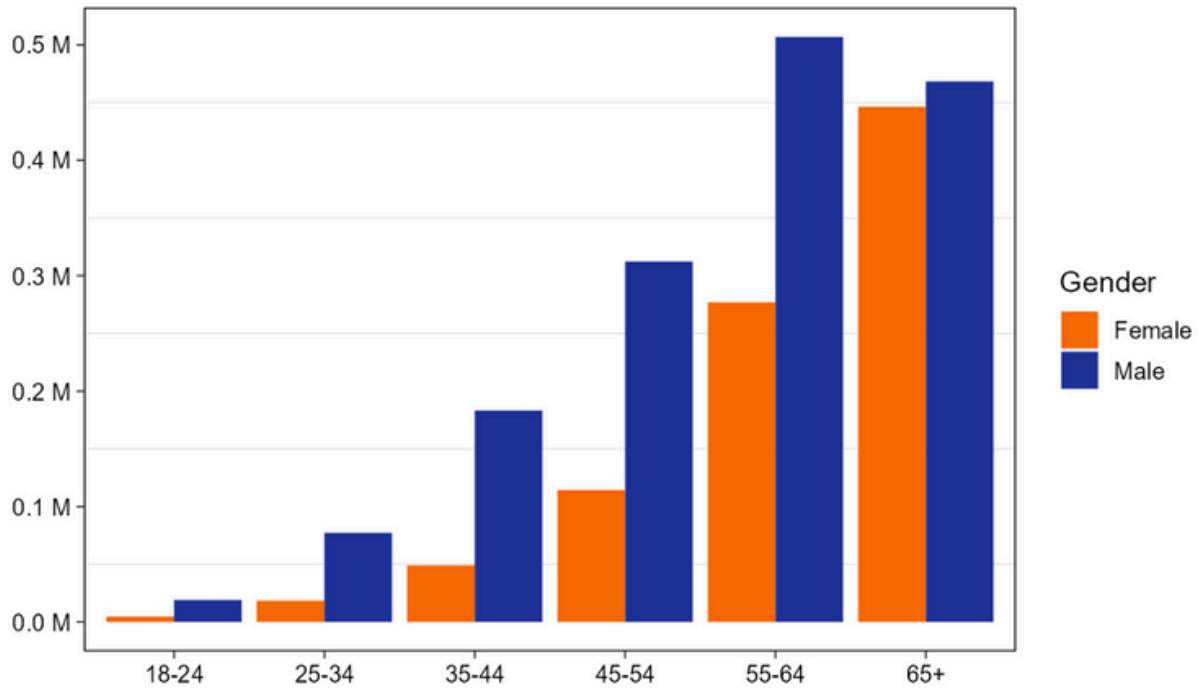


Men are overwhelmingly the targets, especially older men, although women over 65 are also actively targeted (Figure 33 & 34).

**Figure 33: Liberty Defender Network Ad Spend by Gender**



**Figure 34: Liberty Defender Network Ad Spend by Age and Gender**



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[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jun/20/fake-news-websites-us-election>

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=3341527435991943>

[5] A hyperlink about "partner companies" takes you to <https://seniorgivebackplan.com/marketingpartners.html>. There a list of over 100 "marketing partners" are listed, from Aetna to Blue Ridge Data Systems to TruSource Mktg.

## Conclusions

A year into the presidential campaign, we find that the Democratic presidential ticket and outside progressive organizations are outspending the Republican ticket and conservative organizations. The reasons for this are unclear, given that Facebook and Instagram remain popular social media sites for the broader public. Pew research finds that 68% of U.S. adults use Facebook and 47% use Instagram, making it the two of the top 3 platforms (only YouTube has more users at 84%) [6].

We note that older voters are still the primary targets of social media advertising. Men are the targets of Republican and conservative pages while women are the targets of Democratic and progressive pages. This likely reflects the reality of the parties – men are more likely to be drawn to the Republican ticket, while women are drawn to the Democratic ticket. That older voters are targeted reflects the reality of the campaign: older voters are more likely to turn out.

The level of incivility and negative advertising is remarkable, and only increased after the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in June. Outside organizations ran more negative ads mentioning Trump than Harris. We note, however, that Trump’s ads are substantially more uncivil than his running mate or the Democratic ticket.

The continued existence of scammers capitalizing on the enthusiasm of voters this election is troubling. Given the number of pages that are no longer active in the “Liberty Defender Group” network suggests that Meta is working to prevent the scammers. It is also evident that as one page gets removed, another one crops up to take its place, highlighting the challenges for the tech company in monitoring and preventing scammers from taking advantage of the public.

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[6] <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>

# 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 wanted to run ads that were on social issues, election, or politics, a person from the organization responsible for the ad management would need to confirm their identity [7]. They must have a valid, working email address and phone number for required two-factor authentication. 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.

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

# 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, 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. We collected the phone number, email address, physical address, and website URL of the advertiser.

## Ad Details

The screenshot displays the 'Ad Details' for a political advertisement. On the left, key statistics are listed: Library ID: 949510953282896, Active status, started on Apr 25, 2024, platforms (Facebook and Instagram), categories, estimated audience size of >1M, amount spent of \$40K - \$45K, and impressions of >1M. Below this is a preview of the ad content, showing the 'Patriot Sanctuary' logo, a sponsored message about a Trump 2024 hat giveaway, and a partial image of a woman's face. On the right, the 'About the disclaimer' section explains that social and political ads require advertiser disclosure. Below that, the 'Information from the advertiser' section provides contact details for the Benefits Sanctuary Initiative, including a phone number (+17023575010), email (admin@informedempowerment.com), website (https://informedempowerment.com/benefitssanctuaryinitiative), and address (6543 S Las Vegas Blvd, Las Vegas, NV 89119, US).

Library ID: 949510953282896

- Active
- Started running on Apr 25, 2024
- Platforms
- Categories
- Estimated audience size: >1M
- Amount spent (USD): \$40K - \$45K
- Impressions: >1M

**Patriot Sanctuary**  
Sponsored • Paid for by Benefits Sanctuary Initiative  
Library ID: 949510953282896

We're giving away a FREE Trump 2024 Hat & Gold Coin collectible for anyone that takes the poll! #Trump2024

### About the disclaimer

When an advertiser categorizes their ad as being about social issues, elections or politics, they are required to disclose who paid for the ad. [Learn more](#)

#### Information from the advertiser

This information was submitted by the advertiser.  
Submitted Mar 5, 2024

- Disclaimer  
Benefits Sanctuary Initiative
- Phone number  
+17023575010
- Email  
admin@informedempowerment.com
- Website  
<https://informedempowerment.com/benefitssanctuaryinitiative>
- Address  
6543 S Las Vegas Blvd, Las Vegas, NV 89119, US

Visit the Help Center to learn about what we require from advertisers to run ads about social issues, elections or politics. [Learn more](#)

## Categorizations of Ad Content

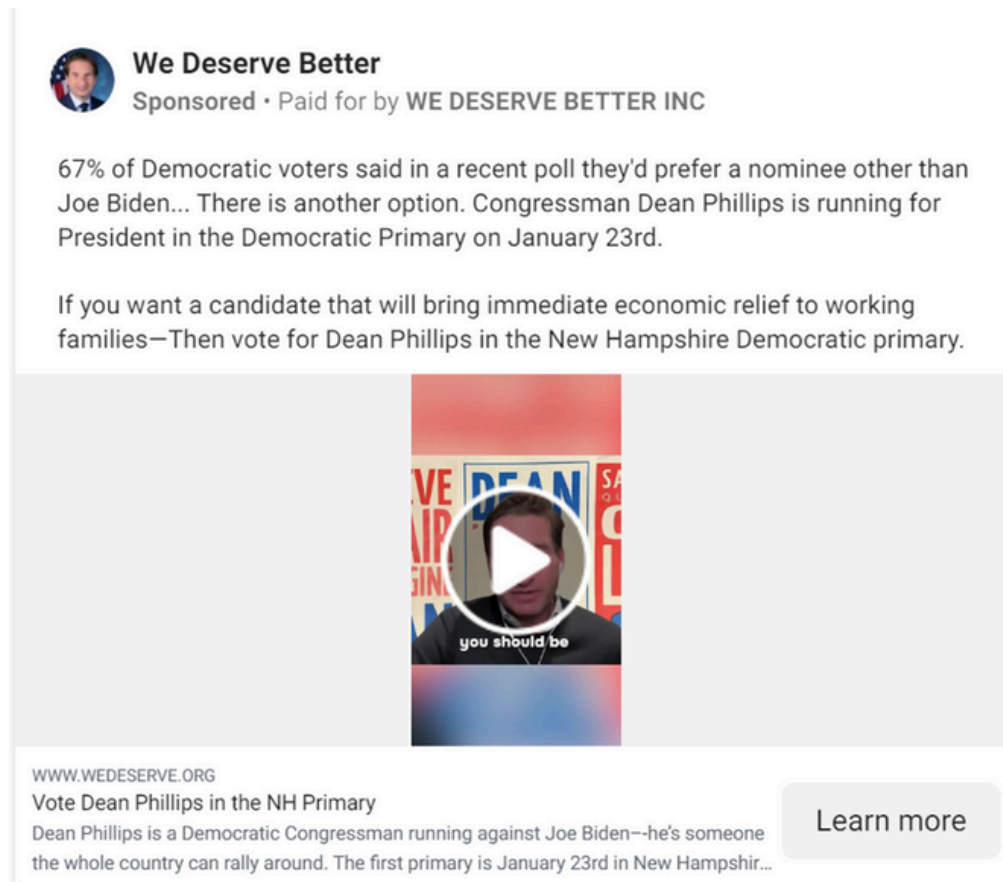
This section is for the data nerds. As we report, we categorize the content of the ads on several dimensions. We look at whether it's an attack ad, an advocacy ad, and if it focuses on policy issues. We also look at whether it's a call to action, and we have three distinct categories of fundraising, 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 (Stromer-Galley & Rossini, 2023).

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 this ad from Dean Phillips’ Political Action Committee We Deserve Better, the text above the video would be classified. Video content is not made available from Meta through the API.



The screenshot shows a Facebook advertisement for 'We Deserve Better'. At the top left is a profile picture of Dean Phillips and the name 'We Deserve Better' in bold. 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 partial sentence: '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.

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Reference: 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).

## 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 10 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. For news/media outlets, we also considered the ideological lean by using the Ad Fontes Media website. For example CNN is rated as a left-leaning site, and so we categorized it as such.

## Categorization of Scam

To determine if an ad is potentially a scam we took the set of ads we collected between September and February and ads that were part of the Liberty Defender Group network were reviewed and tagged if they appeared to be running a credit card scam or some other scam. The ads all shared similar language and features, inviting ad targets to either get something free or receive a benefit in exchange for taking a poll or doing an activity. Using those ads as the training data, we built a classifier using the pre-trained language model BERT. We found the model performed excellently, accurately classifying new ads 93% of the time. The one error we note is that sometimes legitimate candidates use similar language as scammers – inviting people to do some activity to get something from the campaign. For us, this similarity is concerning because it means that unsuspecting people may get pulled into a scam thinking that it's a legitimate political organization because the language is so similar.



## ABOUT IDJC'S ELECTIONGRAPH PROJECT

[ElectionGraph](#) is a project of the Syracuse University Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship (IDJC).

IDJC is led by Kramer Director Margaret Talev, a Newhouse professor of practice and journalist specializing in American politics, elections and the White House. Johanna Dunaway, a political science professor at the Maxwell School and expert in political communication, partisan polarization and mass media, is IDJC research director.

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 ElectionGraph research team in collaboration with the IDJC. The research team includes: research software engineer Jon Stromer-Galley; doctoral student Saklain Zaman; masters students Amol Borkar, Jill Karia, Sampada Regmi, Chinmay Maganur; and undergraduate students: Sita Camara, Alexa Kocur, Luisana Ortiz, Kayla Ramos, Tyler Toledo, and Stella Whitefield.

ElectionGraph 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.

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

