**Dec. 10
2024**

ElectionGraph

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ElectionGraph Report

Final 2024 Report: The Breadth and Scope of Online Ads

Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship

Overview

The Biden, Harris and Trump campaigns, combined, are responsible for more than 6 billion ad impressions on Meta platforms that shaped the political instincts of U.S. voters over the course of the 2024 campaign, according to an analysis by the ElectionGraph project at Syracuse University's Institute for Democracy, Journalism and Citizenship.

Joe Biden's and Kamala Harris' campaigns together outspent Donald Trump's by about 6-to-1 for campaign ads, from September 2023 through Election Day Nov. 5, 2024. During the more intense general-election period this year, between roughly Labor Day and Election Day, Harris outspent Trump on Meta's Facebook and Instagram by more than 4-to-1.

This analysis finds Trump's general-election ads on Meta platforms used considerably less negative language than Harris' during that final stretch — and were less negative than Trump's own earlier ads.

However, over those closing weeks, the report also identifies an infusion of more than $6 million in heavily negative ads on Facebook and Instagram aimed at undercutting Harris, funded by dark-money groups backed by Tesla CEO Elon Musk. Musk, the world's richest man, also controls X (formerly Twitter) and has emerged as a close adviser to now-President-elect Trump.

Besides Biden, Harris and Trump, another 4,377 Facebook pages of groups and individuals that ran ads mentioning any presidential candidate throughout the course of the election accounted for 5 billion impressions.

This gives us a powerful, though incomplete, sense of how inescapable election-related messaging was for social media users in this high-stakes election — whether the ads were originating from the candidates themselves or third-party, dark money, transparent, murky, truthful, malign, conspiracy-minded or scam influencers.

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 is the final installment in this year-long research project supported by a grant from Neo4j and use of the company's knowledge graph database technology and experts.

Summary

- The Biden and Harris campaigns spent more than $140 million combined on a network of Facebook pages, translating to more than 5 billion impressions. The Trump campaign spent an estimated $24 million garnering less than 1 million impressions.

- Reports show Musk's money helped fund several initiatives and political action   committees (PACs) that ran ads during this election.

- This report looks at spending on Meta related to Musk-backed Progress 2028, Building America's Future PAC, Future Coalition and FC PACs, The Duty to America PAC, The Fair Election Fund, RBG PAC, and America PAC. Besides the economy and illegal immigration, patterns of note include messaging aimed at eroding Democratic support among Black Americans who smoke menthol cigarettes; and parallel ads around the war in Gaza — in Michigan, playing up in Harris' support for Israel in an apparent effort to erode Arab and Muslim voter support, while in Pennsylvania, playing up her concern for Palestinians in ads to turn off Jewish voters.

- Trump's own ads were less likely than Harris' to mention specific policies. When they did, they focused on the economy, immigration, and election integrity. Harris' call-to-action ads focused more on fundraising, while Trump's ads focus more on urging people to vote.

- Conservative and progressive groups spent at roughly the same amounts on Facebook and Instagram ads.

- Negative messaging by outside organizations mentioned Harris in several key battleground states, whereas negative messaging that mentions Trump focused largely in Michigan and Pennsylvania. Younger people were more likely to be targeted by these negative ads.
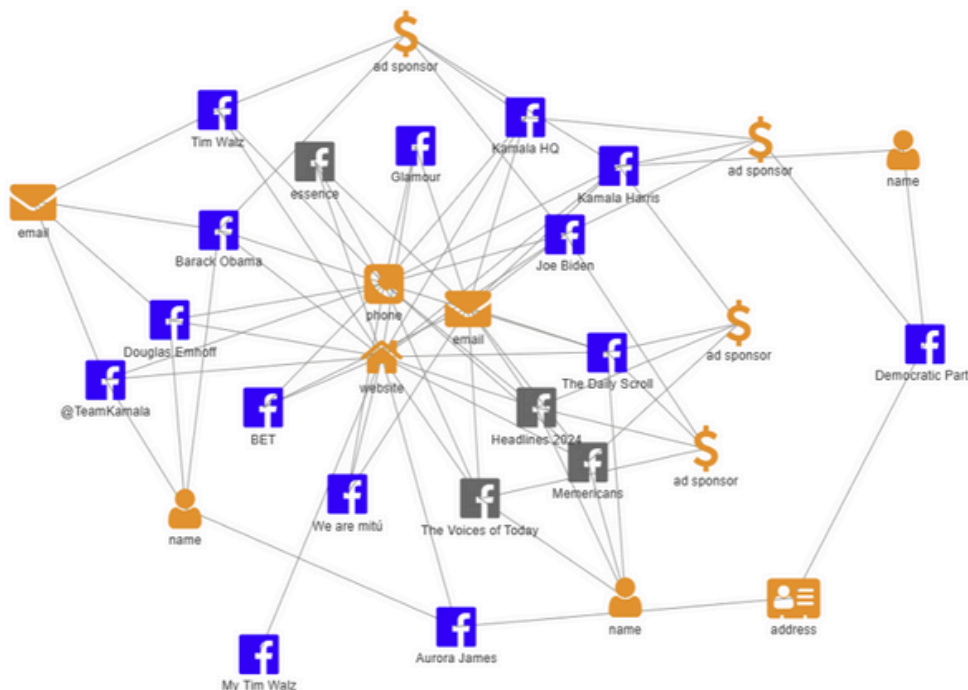
The Campaign Overall

From September 2023 through 2024's general election day, our analysis estimates that the Harris and Biden campaigns spent a combined $140,446,791 in ads on Facebook and Instagram on their network of Facebook pages, translating into 5,186,759,078 impressions. By comparison, Trump's campaign spent only $23,912,674, garnering 828,310,808 impressions (See Figure 3).

Using Neo4j knowledgraph software, we connected ads and their associated Facebook pages that shared meta-data elements, such as an administrator telephone number, email address, name, or a website URL. The network of Facebook pages that we identified that are tied to Harris include "cause" pages created solely for the purpose of running ads on Facebook, as well as ads that ran on the BET Facebook page (Figure 1).

The Trump campaign had a much smaller network of pages that hosted campaign ads, and it extended only to people associated with Trump, including Lara Trump, his daughter-in-law and a head of the RNC, and Trump lawyer and adviser Alina Habba (Figure 2).
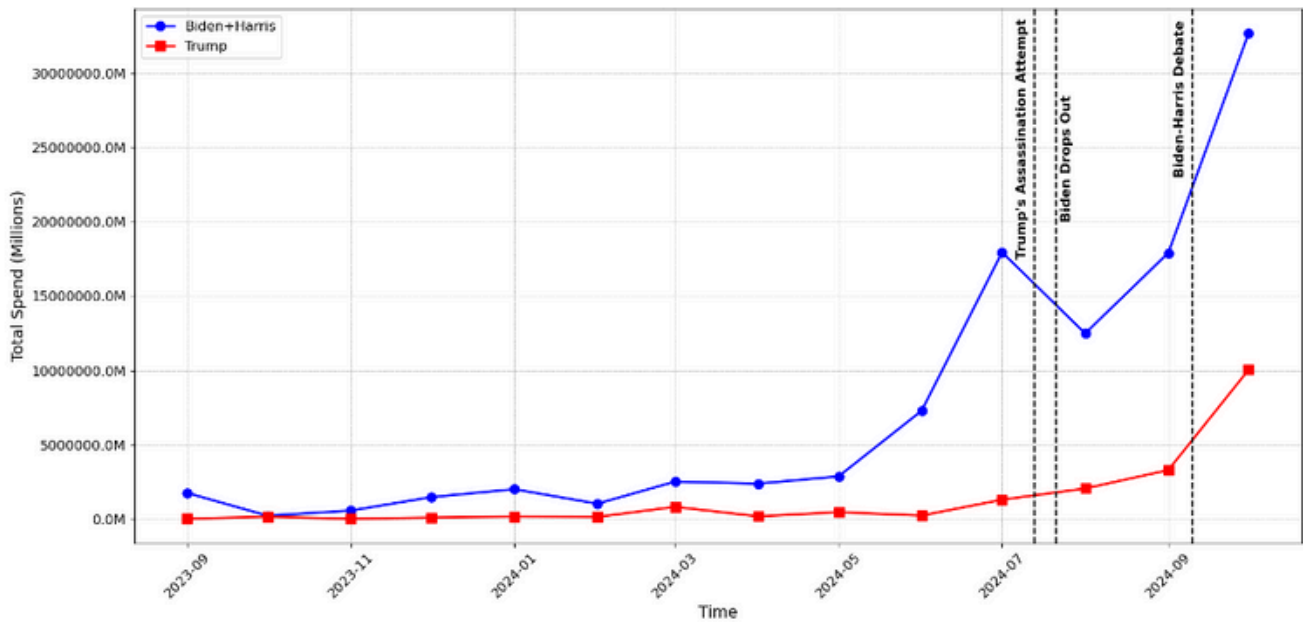
Figure 1: **Kamala Harris' Network of Pages Running Harris Campaign Ads**

Figure 2: **Donald Trump's Network of Pages Running Trump Campaign Ads**
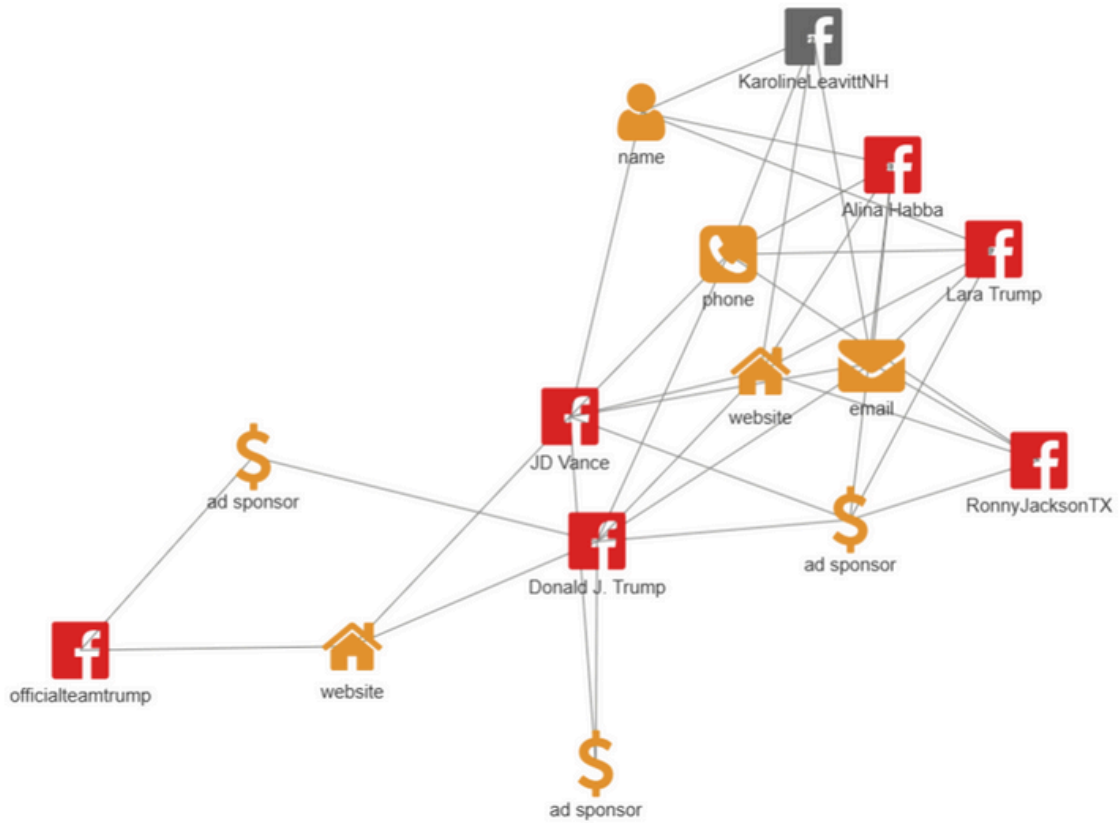

***Figure 3:*** **Spending on Ads Over Time**

When examining the strategy of the campaigns, a few differences stand out. Focusing first on the geographic regions that the campaigns targeted, we note that Biden and Harris spent relatively more in California, Washington, New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois (Figure 4). Trump spent more in North Carolina, Iowa, and Maine.

Figure 4: **Harris and Trump Ad Spending by State Sept. 2023 - Election Day**
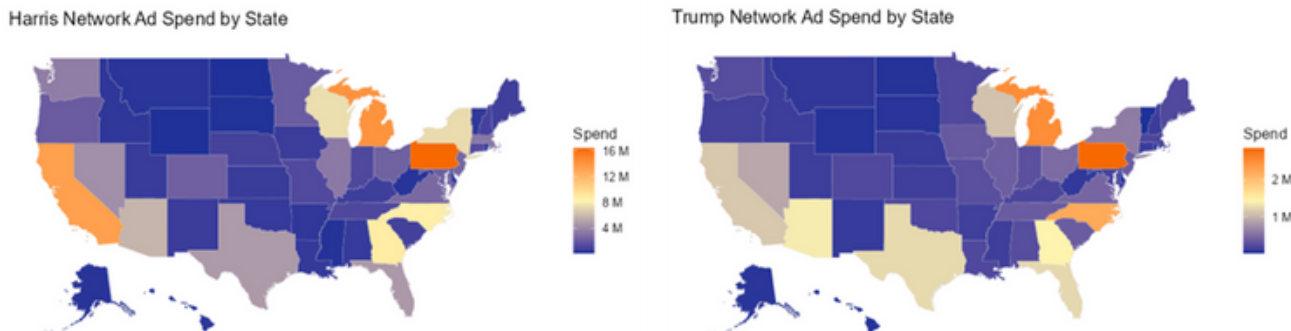
The campaigns ultimately had distinctly different gender and age targets (Figure 5). The Biden and Harris campaigns focused substantially more targeting women, while Trump focused nearly evenly on women and men.

Figure 5: **Harris and Trump Gender Targets Sept. 2023 - Election Day**
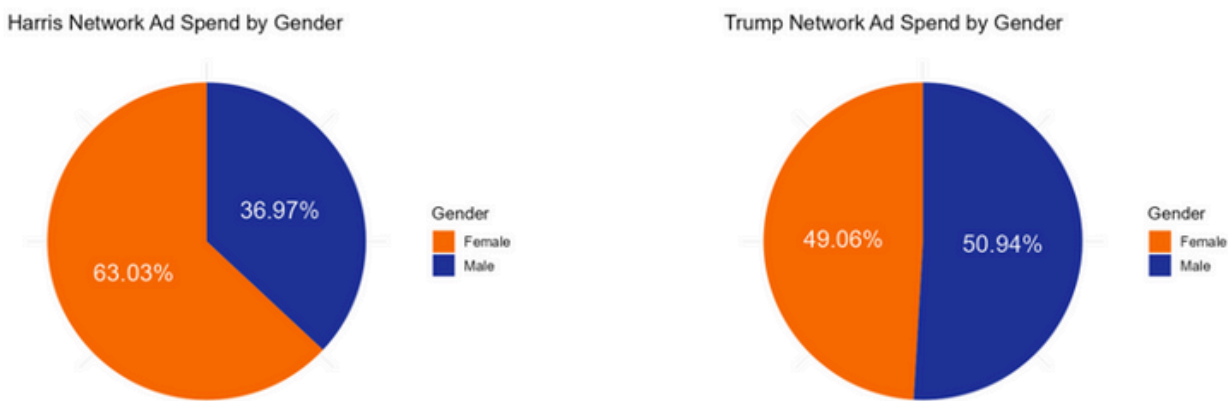
The age targets between the two campaigns is noteworthy for its differences (Figure 6). The Trump campaign targeted older members of the public, while the Biden and Harris campaigns targeted younger voters, except for women 65 and older. The Trump campaign also targeted middle-aged men at a higher rate than women, except for women 65 and older who were targeted more.

Figure 6: **Gender and Age Targets Sept. 2023 - Election Day**

Harris Network Ad Spend by Age and Gender


Trump Network Ad Spend by Age and Gender
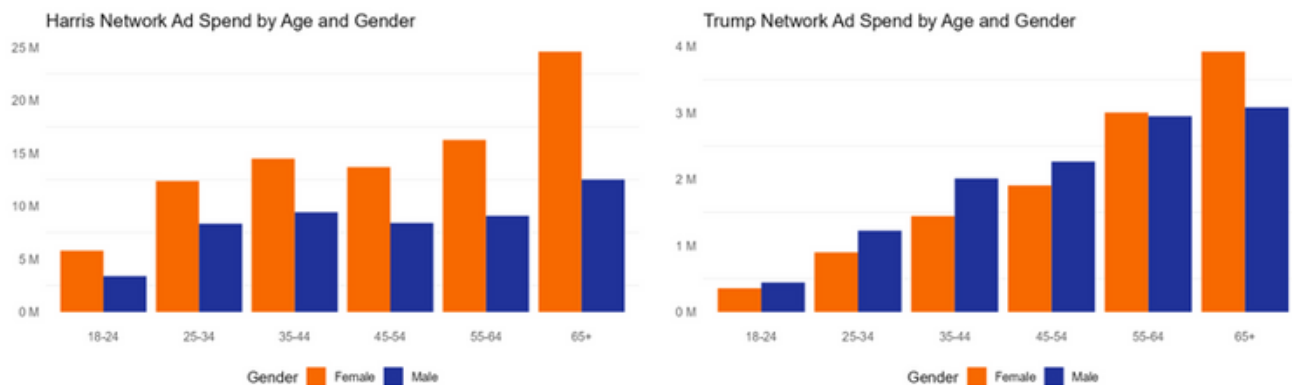
General Election

We also looked at the campaigns just during the general election, from Sept.1 to Nov. 5, 2024. Given that President Biden was the Democratic nominee until he stepped aside on July 21, and that strategy by the campaigns tends to shift from the primaries and conventions into the general election, we explore the general election in more detail.

First, we note that the spend differential between Harris and Trump remained substantial on Meta platforms. We estimate Harris' campaign ran ads on Facebook and Instagram across multiple Facebook pages totaling $70,098,025 (2,468,527,470 impressions). Trump's network of pages that ran his campaign ads spent an estimated $15,541,831 (369,548,031 impressions).

Looking at the battleground strategy by the campaigns during the general election, a few elements stand out (Figure 7). It's not a surprise that both campaigns spent heavily in Pennsylvania followed by Michigan. It's noteworthy, though, that Trump's campaign focused more on Arizona and North Carolina proportionally in their own ad spending priorities than did the Harris campaign.

Figure 7: **Harris and Trump Battleground State Ad Targeting Strategy**

Harris Network Ad Spend in Swing States

Trump Network Ad Spend in Swing States
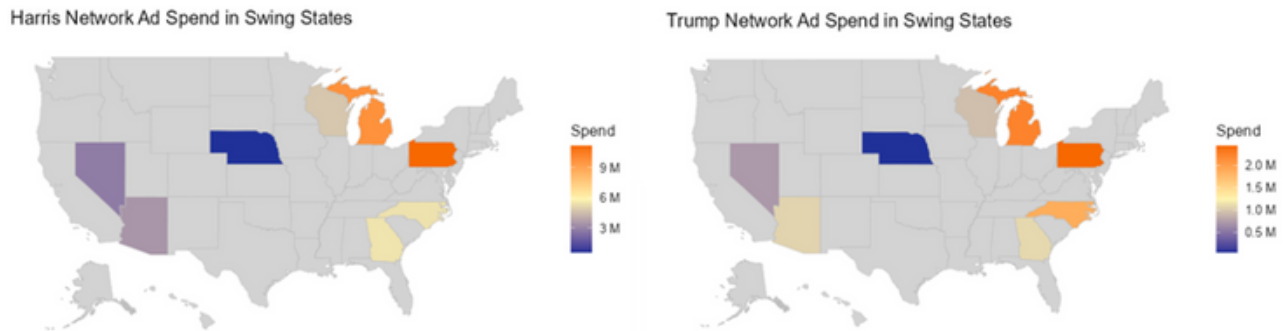
In terms of gender and age targets during the general election, first, we note that the Harris campaign focused on younger voters, especially 25-44 year olds, and especially women (Figure 8). The Trump campaign focused more of their ad buys on older voters.

Figure 8: **Gender by Age Targets During the General Election**

Harris Network Ad Spend by Age and Gender

Trump Network Ad Spend by Age and Gender
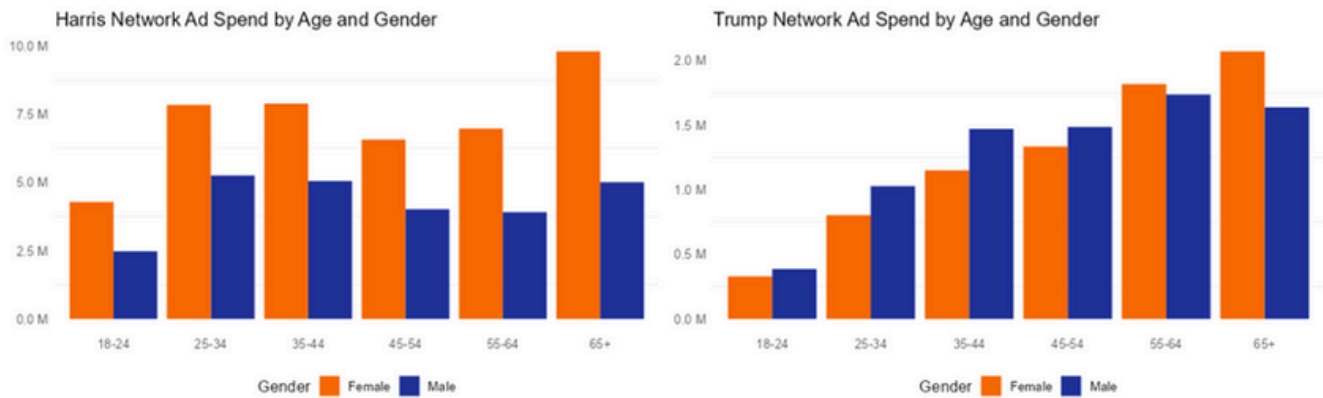
The campaigns emphasized distinctly different policies in their advertisements (Figure 9). We used algorithms that we built (see Methodology section) to categorize if any contains mentions of policies, including economy, education, health, and immigration. Surprisingly, we find that Trump's ads are light on policy as compared with Harris. When Trump's ads mention policy, the focus is only on three: economy, immigration, and governance. The governance category includes topics around election integrity, cabinet picks, and other aspects of the process of governance. Harris also focuses on the economy, while immigration and governance are rarely policy topics. Instead, her ads focus on cultural issues, health, and women's issues.

***Figure 9:* Harris and Trump Topics in Ads During the General Election**
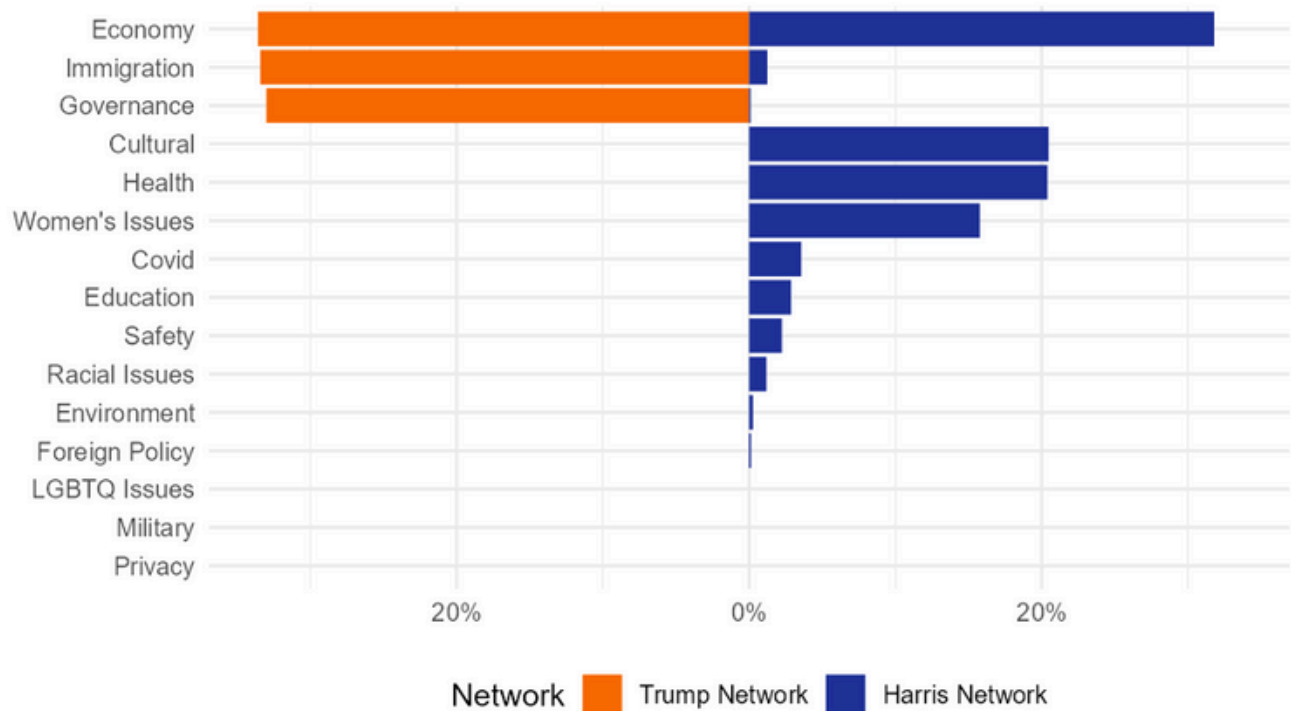
We further analyzed what the focus of the ads are for Harris and Trump. We developed classifiers that measure the content in the ad to determine its type: call-to-action, attack, advocacy, issues, and image (i.e. persona). Attack ads are negative ads, while advocacy ads are positive ads. Issues are ads that focus on policies, while image ads focus on the character of people – the candidate, their opponent, other political elites and the parties. Calls-to-action is a broad category that captures messaging that urges the public to get engaged. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

We analyze their message type as a percent of their ad spend, given that the Harris campaign is spending substantially more than the Trump campaign (Figure 10). Of note, is that Trump's campaign is especially focused on calls-to-action, and then advocacy – ads that talk favorable about Trump. By comparison, while Harris' campaign also focuses on advocacy ads, they are more likely to focus on issues than Trump's ads.

Figure 10: **Harris and Trump Ad Message Type**
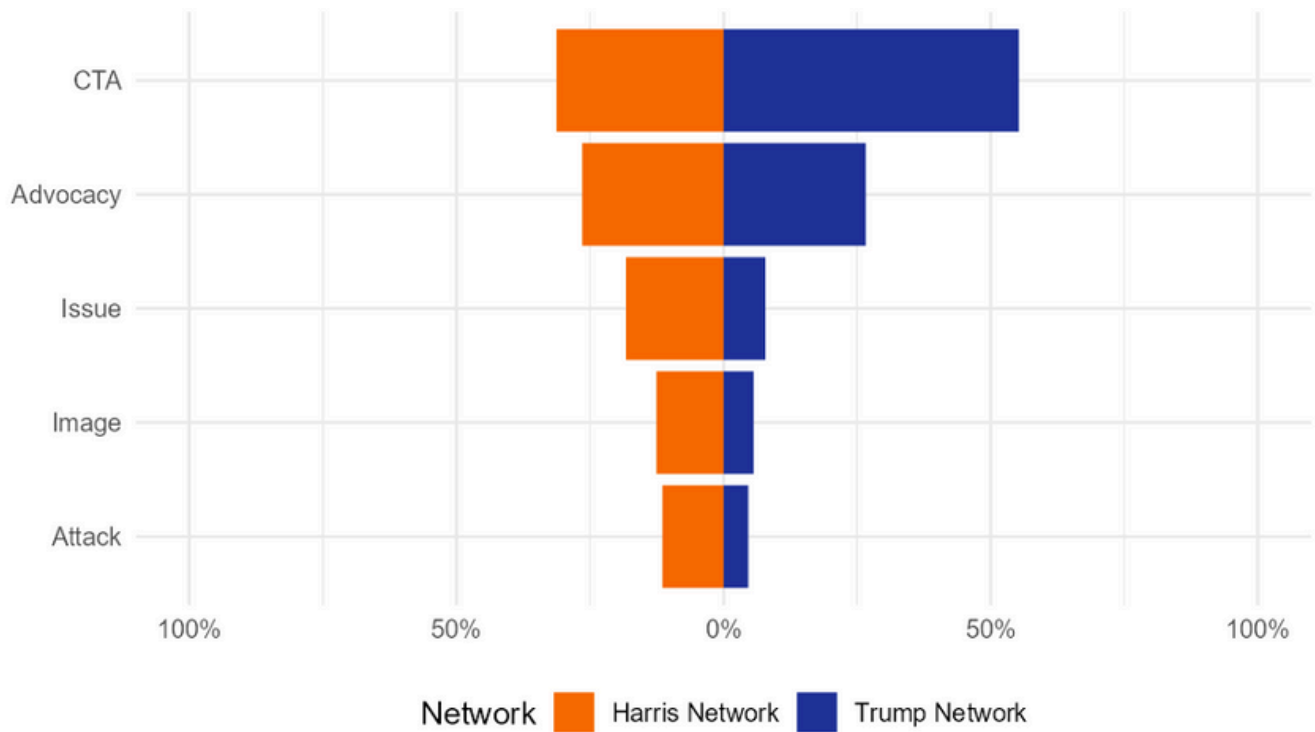
With regard to calls-to-action, we also categorized what the call-to-action focus is in the ads (Figure 11). We note that Harris' ads focus more on fundraising than do Trump's while Trump's ads focus more on urging people to vote.

Figure 11: **Harris and Trump Spend by Calls to Action Types**
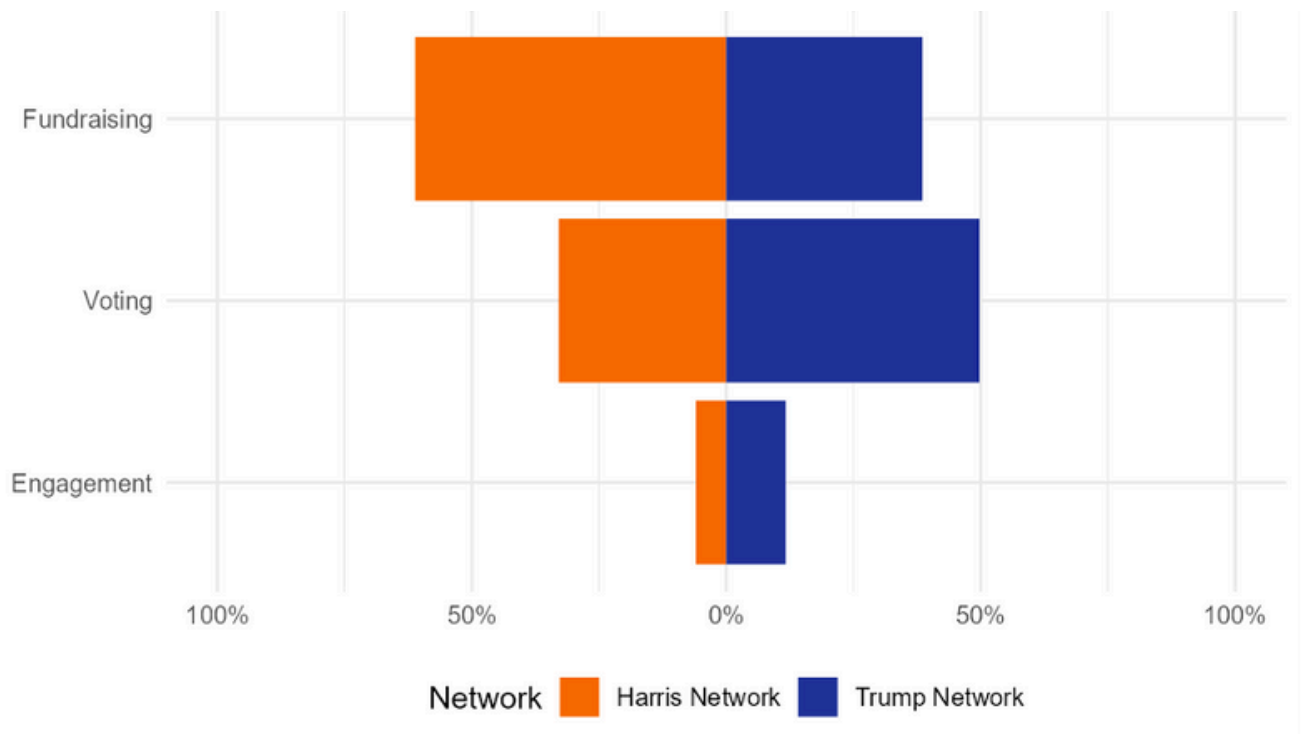
One concern we have been highlighting throughout the campaign is how negative it has been. We have analyzed the content of the ads in terms of the tone. We created classifiers (see Methodology) that categorize if the ad is an attack on an opponent, party, or other group or individual (such as the news media). We also categorize the ad's incivility - whether it's unnecessarily derogatory in tone.

A surprising finding is that Trump's ads were less negative in the general election than in his prior campaigning (Figure 12), and he was even less negative than Harris in her ads. Trump primarily fundraises in his ads, speaking positively about his candidacy rather than attacking others.

Figure 12: **Negative vs. Positive Ad Spend by Candidate**
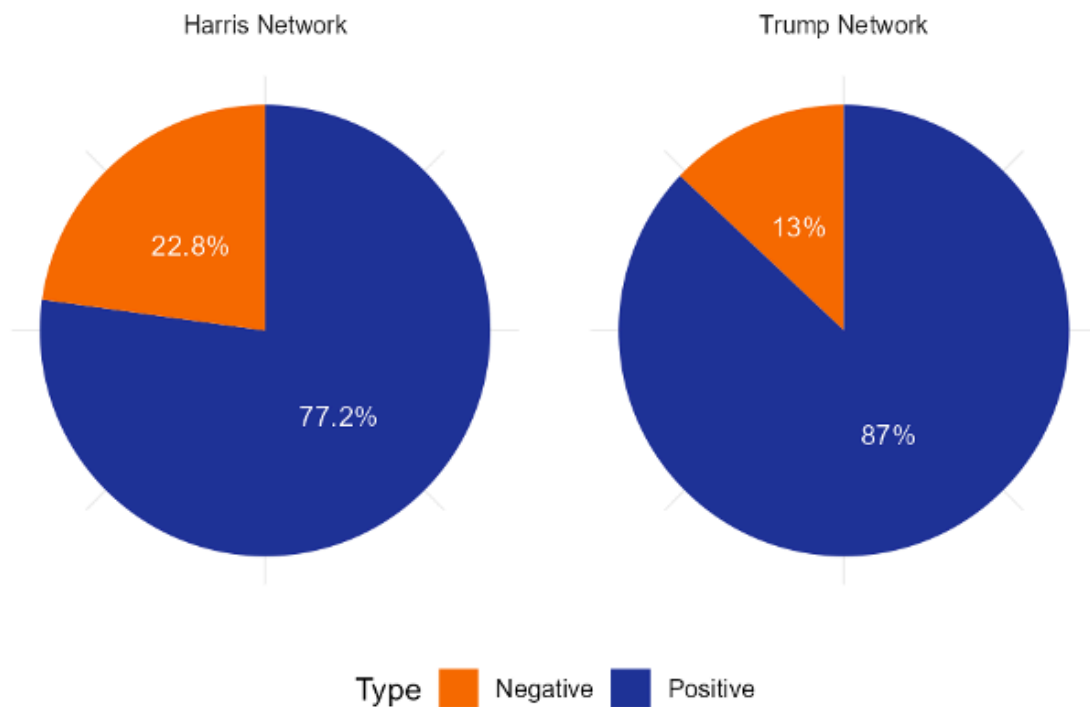
When we look at their negative ad spending over time, we find that both campaigns run negative ads around the debate, but it drops off as election day approaches, especially from Trump (Figure 13).

***Figure 13:*** **Negative Spend Percentage by Candidates**
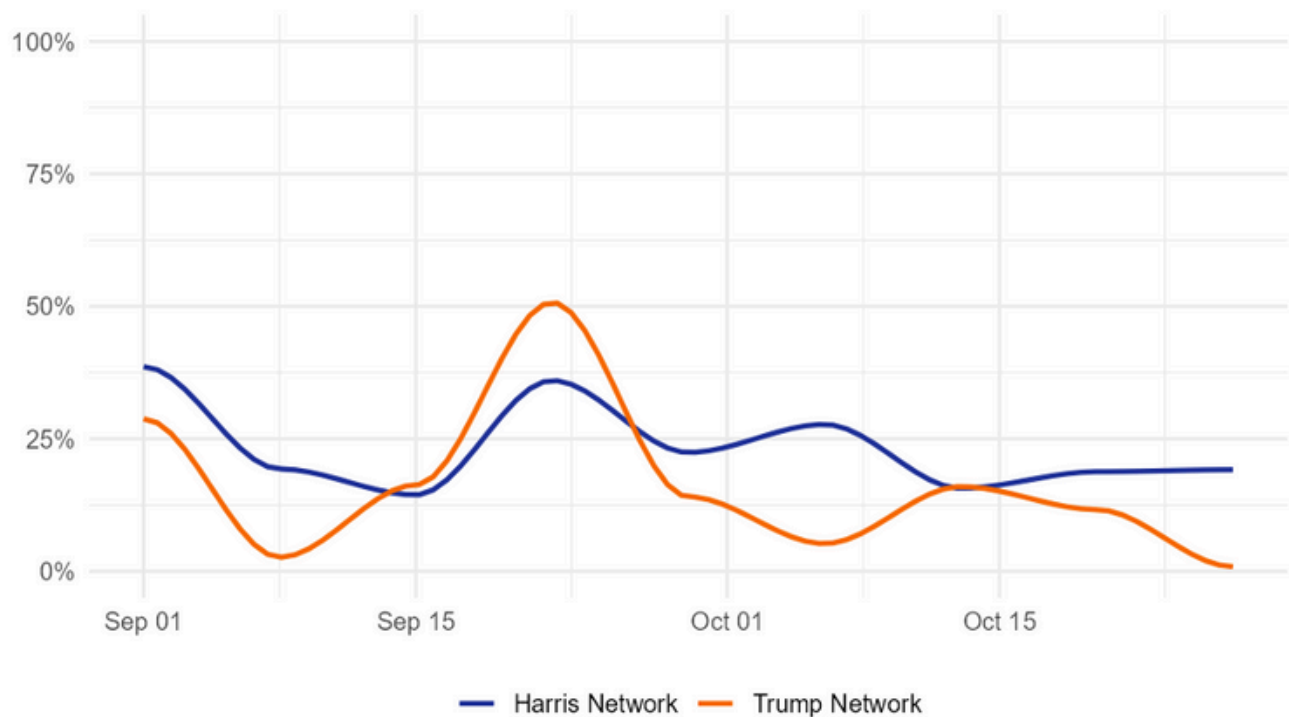
Outside Organizations

In addition to the campaigns, we also tracked the ads run on Facebook and Instagram by outside organizations, which includes the parties, political action committees (PACs), Super-PACS, as well as individuals and shady groups with unclear origins and sometimes unclear motives. Using the Meta Ad Library API, we tracked all ads that mentioned any presidential primary, general election, and vice presidential candidate, including third party candidates. We used this strategy because naming a candidate signals engagement with and a potential effort to influence the presidential campaign.

We found 4,377 Facebook pages that ran ads that mentioned any candidate throughout the course of the election, from September 2023 through election day. We estimate that $93,513,891 was spent by these pages from outside organizations, translating into 5,023,477,024 impressions. Almost half of that was spent during the general election. We estimate that $44,556,337 was spent between September 1st, 2024 and election day by these groups and individuals.

The targeting strategies by outside organizations during the general election reflect the focus of the campaigns, in that battleground states received substantially more than the rest of the states (Figure 14).

*Figure 14:* **Organizations' Ad Spend by State During the General Election**
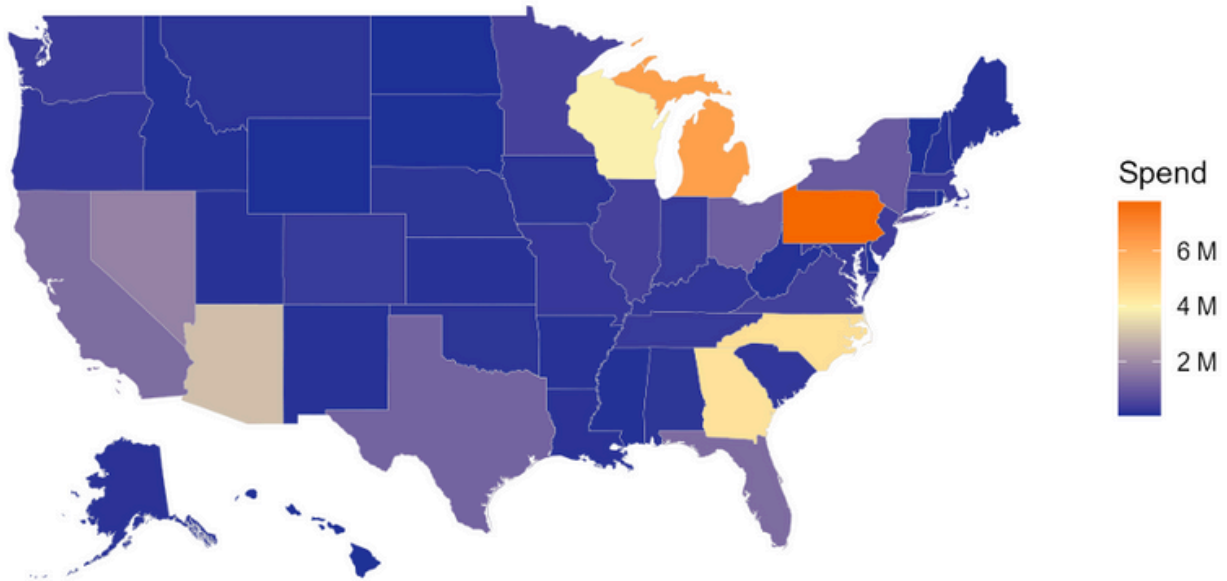
It is noteworthy that women are more likely to be targeted with ads from these outside organizations, and that younger Facebook and Instagrams are the focus overall (Figure 15).

Figure 15: **Gender and Age Targets by Outside Organizations**
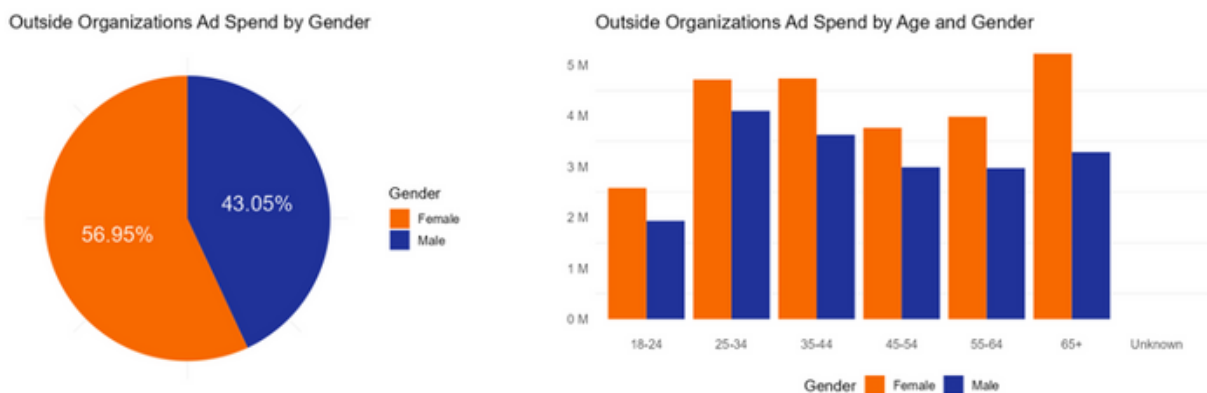
The policy focus of the outside organizations is primarily on the economy, and then cultural, health, and women's issues (Figure 16).

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Figure 16: Organizations Ad Spend by Policy During the General Election
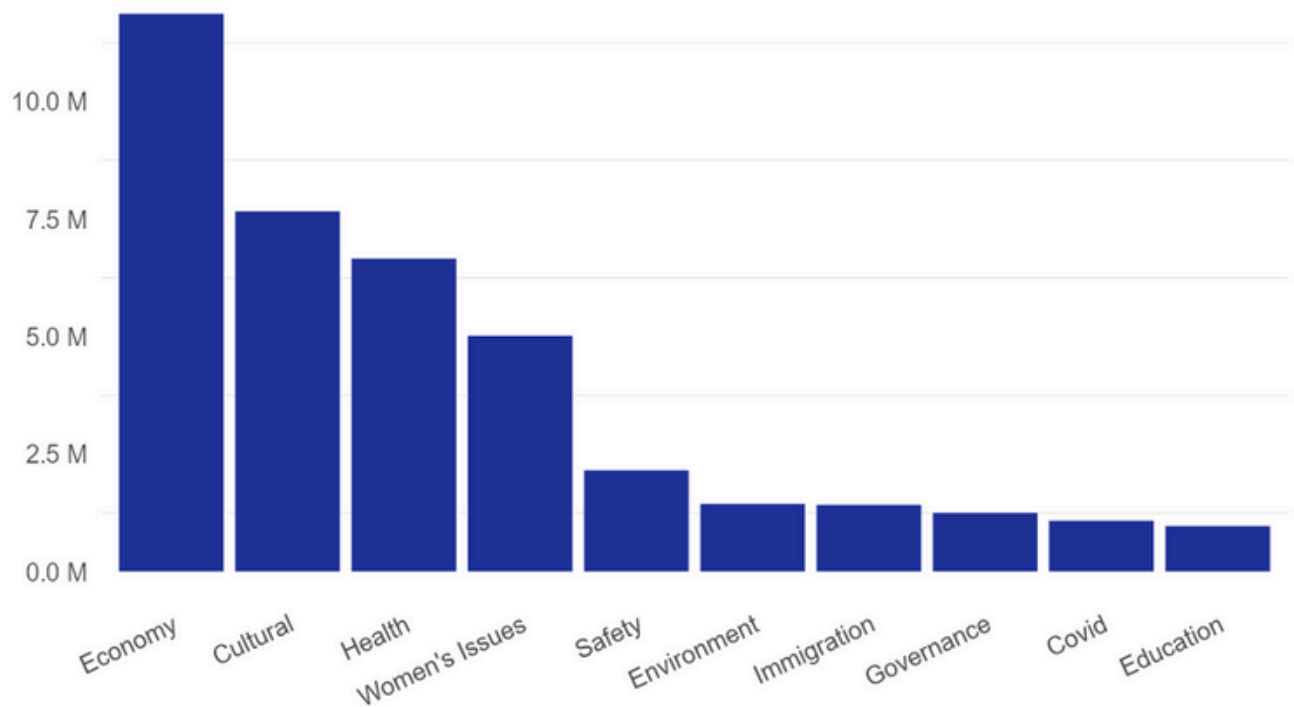
We examined outside organizations' negative ads around the Harris and Trump campaigns (Figure 17). We find that outside organizations ran an estimated $9,595,521 on negative ads that mentioned Trump (469,189,883 impressions). We found a similar amount, $9,261,580 on negative ads that mentioned Harris (494,068,785 impressions). The ads got substantially more negative in the run-last two weeks of the election.
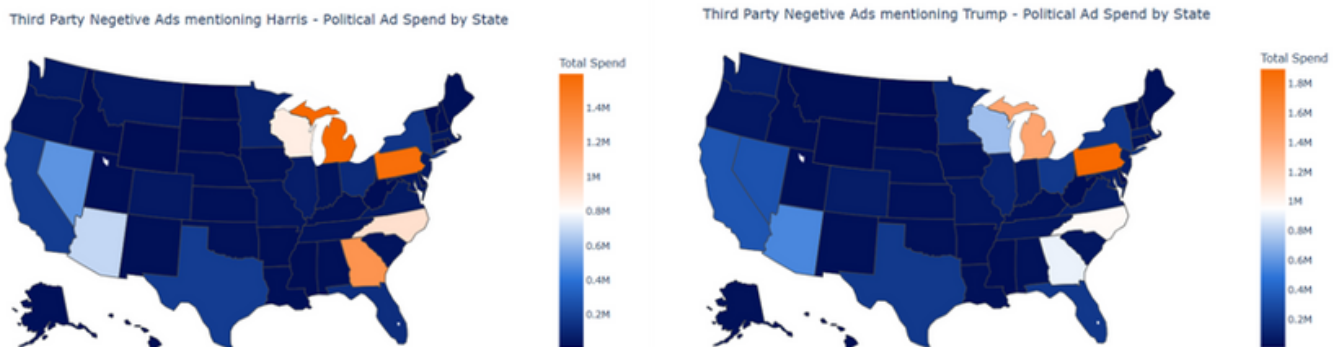
Figure 17: **Negative Spend by Outside Organizations**
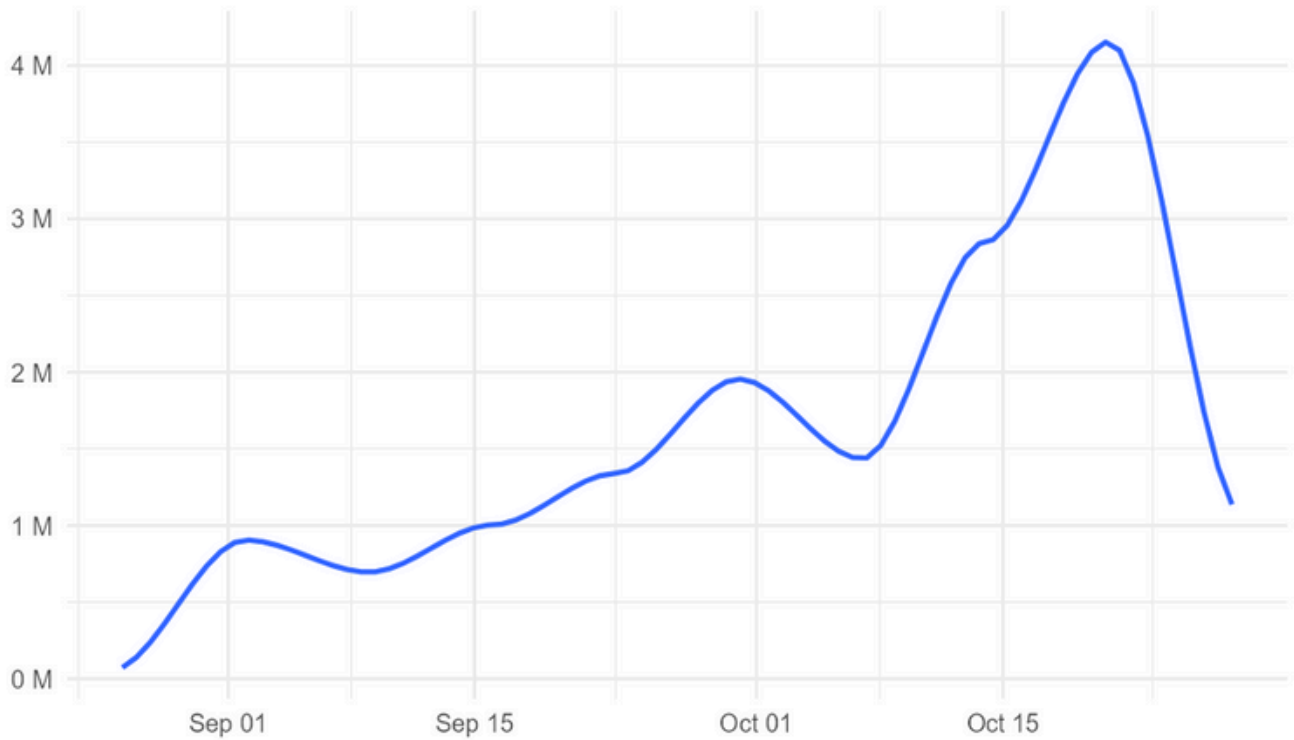
We note some strategic differences in negative ad buys (Figure 18). While key battleground states receive the bulk of the targeting, such as Michigan and Pennsylvania, which received negative ads about both Trump and Harris, negative ads mentioning Harris were more likely to run in Georgia, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Nevada.

Figure 18: **Negative Ad Buys by State from Outside Organizations**

Third Party Negetive Ads mentioning Harris - Political Ad Spend by State

Third Party Negetive Ads mentioning Trump - Political Ad Spend by State

Coordinated Campaigning

We also tracked coordinated messaging across Facebook pages that ran ads on Instagram and Facebook. We do so because research suggests that tracking coordinated behavior can help surface actors who are pushing problematic information. Including the presidential campaigns, we identified 329 distinct networks between September 1, 2023 and Election Day.

To show some of the connected networks, Figure 19 shows the networks that have four or more interconnected pages.

Figure 19: **Networks of Facebook Pages in Which Four or More Pages Share Contact and Ad Sponsor Elements**
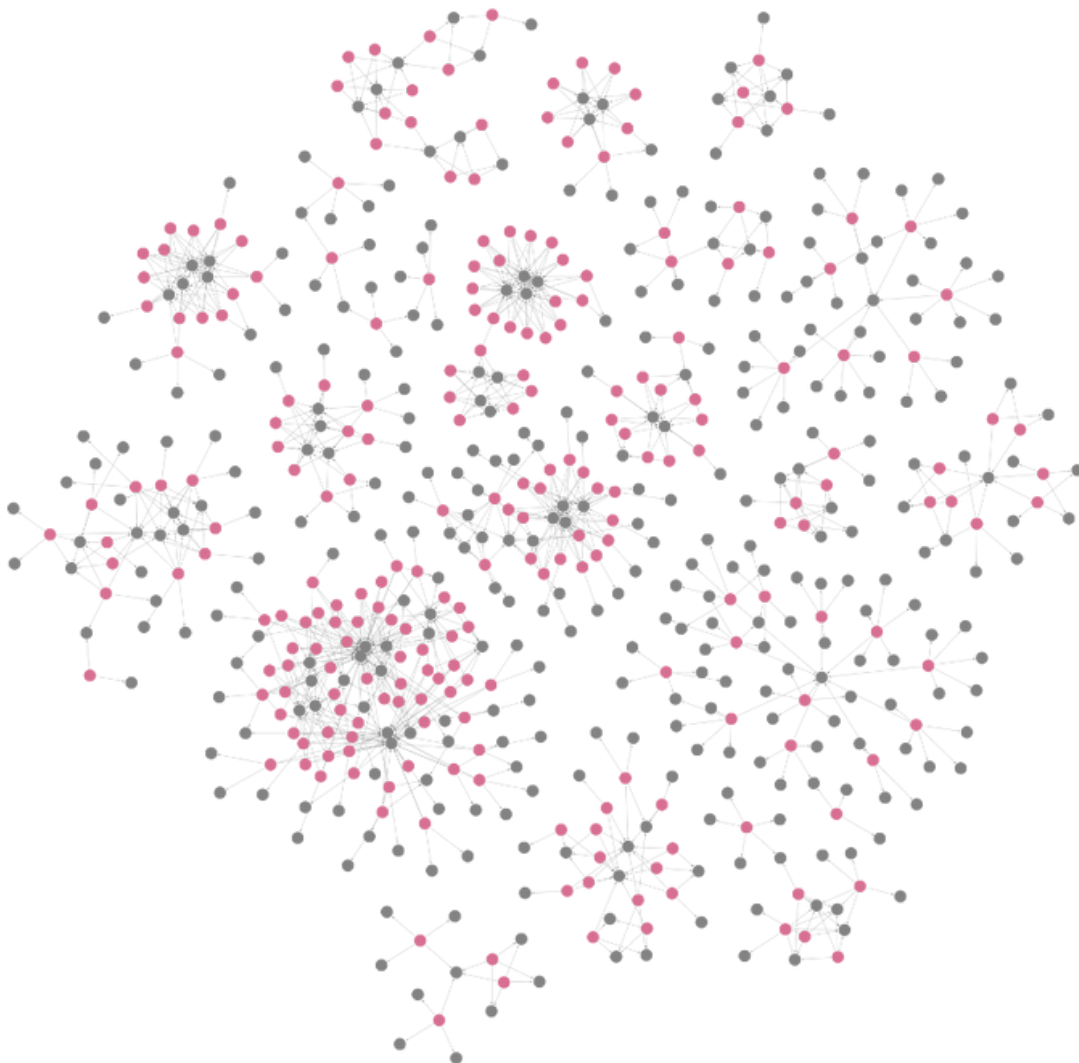
We also examined the partisan-lean of Facebook pages that ran ads around the election (see Methodology). Given that Trump was outspent by Harris on Meta platforms, we examined whether conservative groups made up the difference. They did not; indeed, we find a noteworthy spending differential between partisan pages during the general election: conservative pages are outspent by progressive pages on Facebook and Instagram advertising roughly 3 to 1. Conservative pages we estimate spent $28,055,780 (1,222,393,460 impressions), whereas progressive pages spent $91,458,342 (3,932,764,449 impressions).

Similar to the Harris and Trump campaigns, we find that conservative pages run ads targeted at men and women almost equally, but progressive pages target women at a much higher rate (Figure 20).

Figure 20: **Gender Targets for Conservative and Progressive Pages**
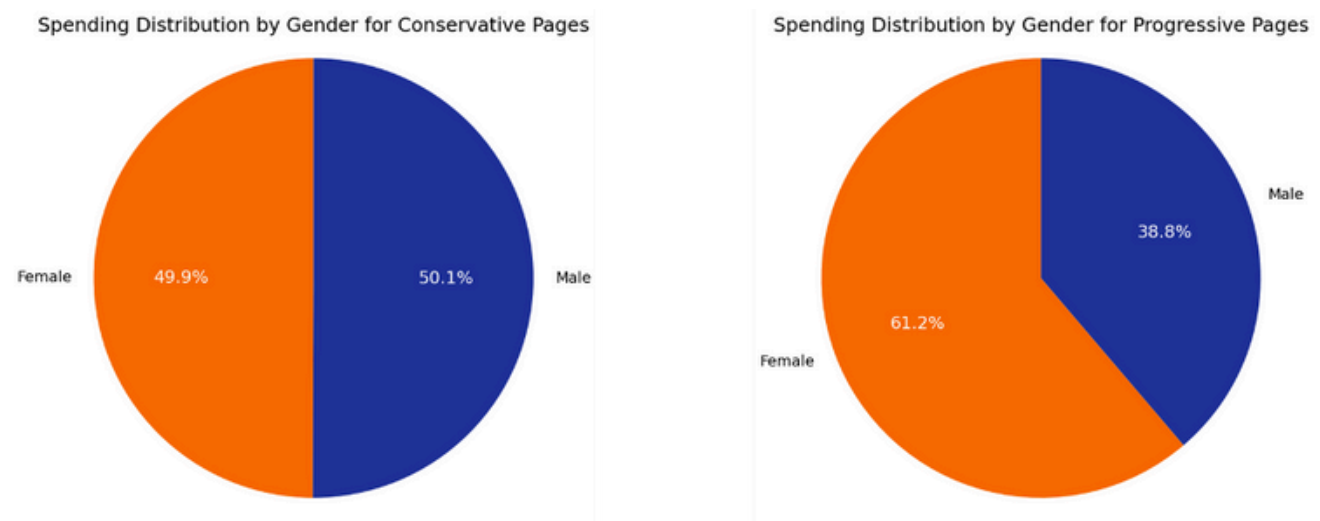
As we have noted in past reports, we found scammers also active in the campaign. We identified several clusters of coordinated pages running ads that engage the partisan ideology of campaign season to draw people in and milk them out of their credit card numbers and other personally identifying information to sell (i.e. "data harvesting"). We developed a classifier to help us identify scam ads (see Methodoloyg), though it also picks up some legitimate ads because candidates and outside organizations also tactically want personal information from people to elicit contributions and connection. Nevertheless, we identified over 200 clusters of Facebook pages that had at least one ad that our classifier detected was a scam ad. We also find that scam ads tend to distinctly target older people (Figure 21).

Figure 21: **Spending of Scammers by Gender and Age Group**
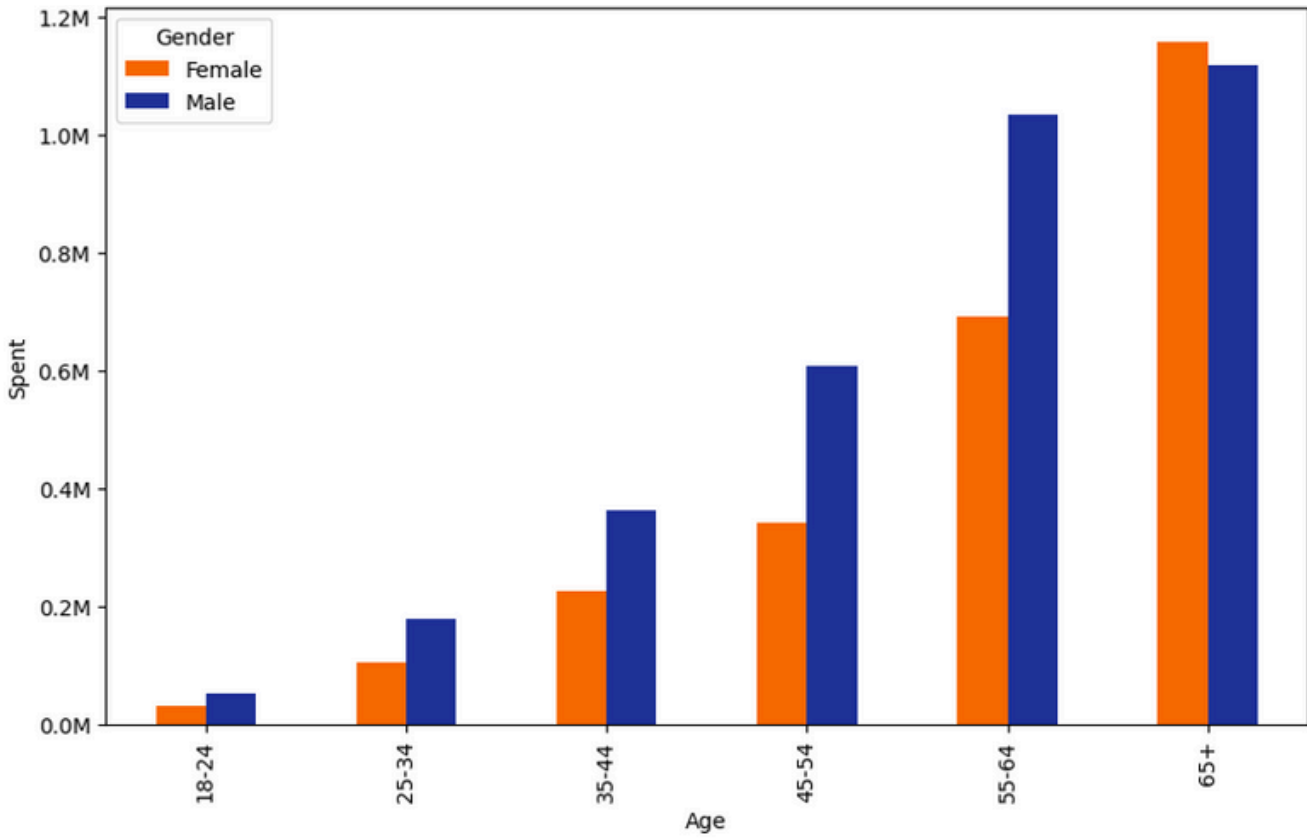
Elon Musk's Many PACs

Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, owner of X, and the wealthiest man in the world joined the Trump campaign during the general election, supporting political action committees in an effort to get Trump elected. Open Secrets [1] and the *New York Times* [2] reported in October that Musk funded a dark money group called Building America's Future with over $100 million based on Federal Election Commission reports. That group in turn has funded several PACs and initiatives, including The Fair Election Fund, Future Coalition PAC, The Duty to America PAC, as well as an apparently left-leaning initiative called Progress 2028, meant to mirror the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 policy document, a guide for a conservative agenda.

In addition to these PACs, the *New York Times* reported [3] on December 5th that the most recent FEC reports revealed that Musk also funded a super PAC called the "RBG PAC" – a nod to Ruth Bader Ginsberg, former Supreme Court justice, but that the bulk of his money went towards a PAC he started, called America PAC.

All of these PACs and initiatives ran ads on Facebook and Instagram during the election, totaling an estimated $6,481,346, which garnered 286,061,513 impressions. We also examined through the GoogleAds Transparency Center the extent to which these PACs ran ads (under their names) on Google. We found that Future Coalition PAC ($137,000), Duty to America PAC ($1,083200), RBG PAC ($3,412,000), and America PAC ($2,668,100) ran ads on that platform, but that Fair Election Fund, Building America's Future, and Progress 2028 did not – suggesting that Facebook and Instagram were key strategic platforms for their campaigning. We examine their ad buys, messaging, and strategy on Meta platforms.

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[1] https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2024/10/pro-trump-dark-money-network-tied-to-elon-musk-behind-fake-pro-harris-campaign-scheme/

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/15/us/elections/trump-money-building-americas-future.html

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/05/us/politics/elon-musk-trump-rbg-election.html
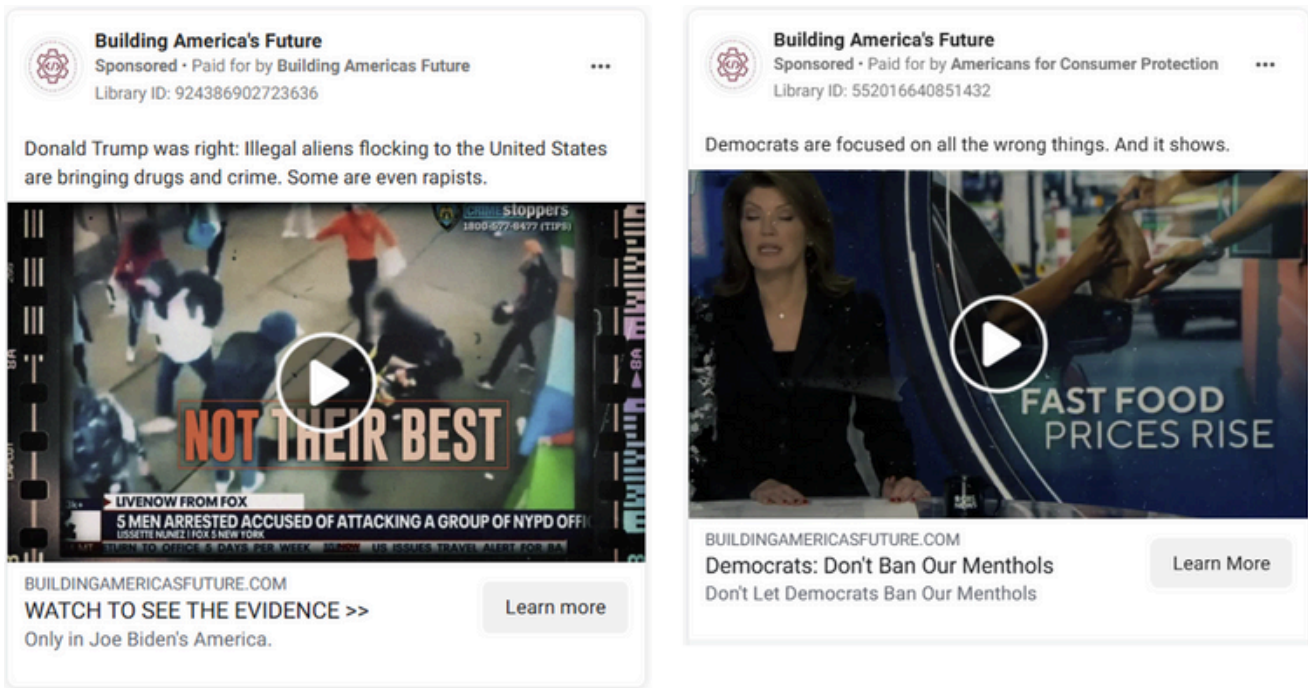
Building America's Future PAC

Building America's Future PAC describes itself as a "nonprofit organization" on its Facebook page that "supports policies and ideas that make America's future strong." The Facebook page itself has been dormant since July 4th, suggesting that its purpose has been primarily as a vehicle for running ads to Meta platform users. Meta reports that the PAC has spent an estimated $1,581,041 on ads since 2018.

The PAC ran 50 ads starting in April 2024 through Oct. 29, 2024 that mentioned a presidential candidate, and we estimate they spent $203,975 on those ads garnering 6,012,975 impressions. They ran ads from two ad sponsors: Americans for Consumer Protection and Building America's Future. The ads mention only two policy topics: immigration and banning menthol cigarettes.

In April, they ran three ads emphasizing that illegal immigrants bring crime, drugs, and are rapists, underscoring that "Donald Trump was right." In August through November, the ads focused solely on attacking Democrats for efforts to ban cigarettes. The ads argued that Democrats ignored real problems while focusing on things that people enjoy (Figure 22).
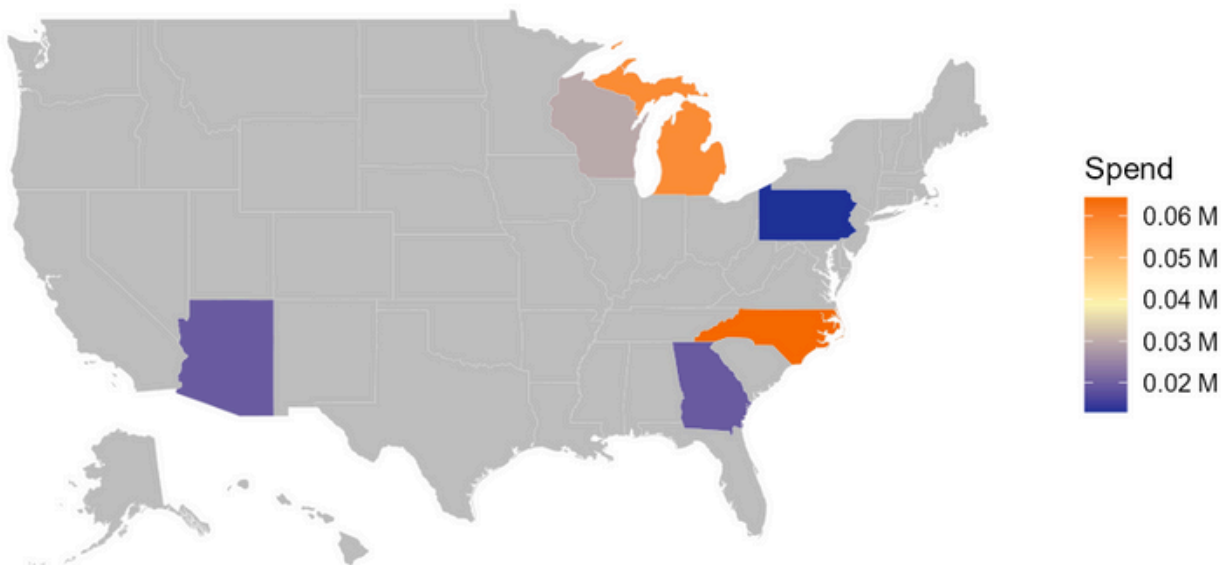
This ad campaign is noteworthy for focusing on menthol cigarettes. Research suggests that 81% of Black smokers smoke them, as compared with 34% of white smokers [4]. Thus, this ad campaign is likely targeting Black voters in an effort to turn them away from candidates on the Democratic ticket. The ads also targeted men at a higher rate, 57% to 43% of women, and younger Facebook and Instagram users.

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Figure 22: **Building America's Future PAC Example Ads**

This PAC focuses on key battleground states, especially North Carolina and Michigan (Figure 23).

Figure 23: **Building America's Future Ad Spend by State**

[4] https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-menthol-cigarettes-have-disproportionately-affected-black-americans

Future Coalition PAC

If you search Facebook for a "Future Coalition PAC" page, what you land on is Facebook's generic "This content isn't available right now." The page once existed but was either deleted by the organization or removed by Facebook. Our analysis of its network ties suggests that another page, "FC PAC," shared an administrator email address, website URL, and contact phone number. This new page was launched Sept. 29 and was described as a political organization with no page description. It has eight followers and no content. The ads for Future Coalition PAC are preserved in the ad library and the only ad sponsor was Future Coalition PAC. FC PAC's ad sponsor was only FC PAC. Meta estimates that Future Coalition PAC has spent $117,676 since 2018; FC PAC spent $412,705. We also found that his PAC ran ads on Google, approximately $137,000 targeted at Michigan, Sept. 1-Oct. 29.

In total, the two Facebook pages ran 44 ads starting at the beginning of September that mentioned a presidential candidate. They spent an estimated $338,578 for 20,846,484 impressions. In our analysis, this PAC's ads focus only on foreign policy. Approximately half of the ad spend is on negative messaging.

A close look at the ads from both pages shows problematic messaging. FC PAC in late October ran a series of ads around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some of the ads declare Harris sympathetic to Israel (Figure 24). Other ads declare Harris sympathetic to the Palestinians (Figure 26). The ads make virtually the same argument, just switching which group Harris allegedly supports.

Equally noteworthy is who is targeted. In the ads that declare Harris is supporting Israel, they target Michigan (Figure 25). The ads portraying her as sympathetic to Palestinians ran in Pennsylvania (Figure 27). Michigan is home to a large Muslim population while Pennsylvania is home to a large Jewish population, both important demographics in those battleground states.

Figure 24: **FC PAC Ad Declaring Harris Supports Israel**

Figure 25: **Age, Gender, and State Target for the Pro-Israel Ad**

Figure 26: **FC PAC Declaring Harris Panders to Palestine**

Figure 27: **Age, Gender, and State Targets for Panders to Palestine Ad**

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The deleted Future Coalitions PAC page showed an equally problematic pattern. Although they ran more ads targeted at Michigan that declared Harris supports Israel, the page also ran ads targeted in Pennsylvania that declared Harris supports Palestine (Figures 28 - 31).

Figure 28: **Future Coalition PAC Ad Arguing Harris Stands with Israel**

Figure 29: **Age, Gender, and State Targets for Pro-Israel Ad**

Figure 30: **Future Coalition PAC Ad Arguing Harris is Pro-Palestine**

Figure 31: **Age, Gender, and State Targets for Pro-Palestine Ad**


This PAC's ads focused not just on battleground states. The ad buys were in former rust belt states and several bible belt states, but Michigan and Pennsylvania received the greatest focus (Figure 32).

Figure 32: **Future PAC Ad Spend by State**
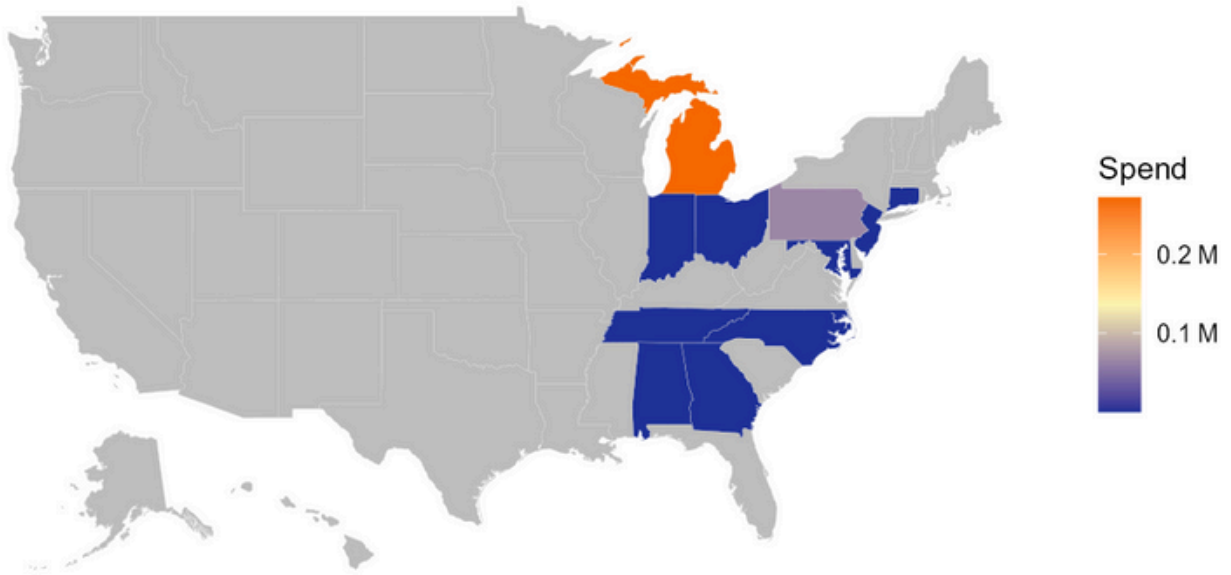
This PAC is notable in targeting especially younger Facebook and Instagram users of both genders (Figure 33).

*Figure 33:* **Spending by Gender and Age Group**
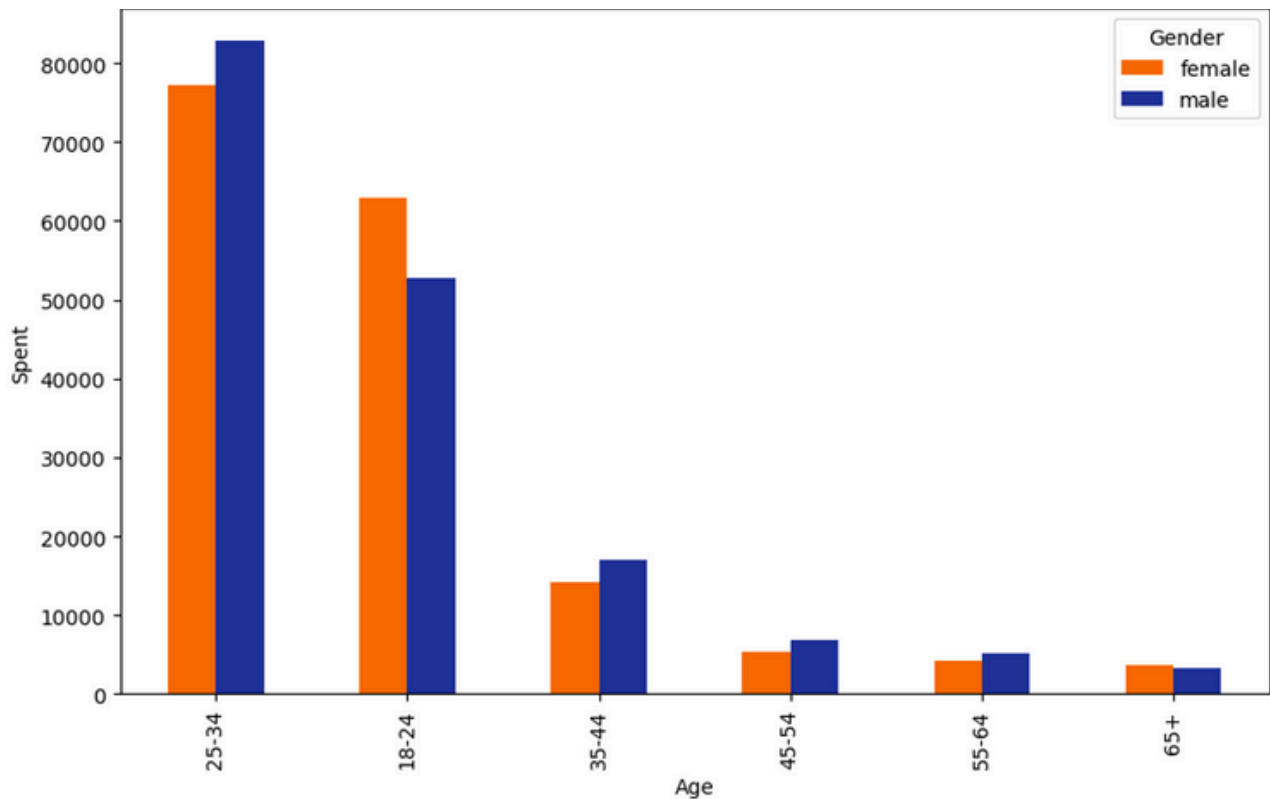
The Duty to America PAC

This was a heavily active advertiser on Facebook and Instagram. The Facebook page is labeled a "political organization" and describes itself in all capital letters as "AN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO ELECTING LEADERS WHO UNDERSTAND AND ARE FOCUSED ON SOLVING THE CHALLENGES FACING THE FAR TOO MANY AMERICANS WHO FEEL LEFT BEHIND BY POLITICIANS AND THAT THEIR AMERICAN DREAM IS OUT OF REACH." It was launched on August 19th and has no content, thus functioning solely to run ads on Meta platforms. We also found this PAC in the Google Ads Transparency Center. Google reports they spent $1,083,200 between Sept. 2-Nov. 4. Their primary targets were Michigan and Pennsylvania, followed by Georgia, North Carolina, Arizona, and Nevada in that order. In other words, key battleground states.

Our analysis identified 656 ads that ran on Facebook and Instagram that mentioned a presidential candidate. They began running these ads at the beginning of September, and the sponsor of the ad is "Duty to America PAC". They spent an estimated $767,472 and generated 54,623,174 impressions.

The majority of their ad spend was on ads talking about the economy. The ads attack Harris on her economic policies. One ad contrasts her with Bernie Sanders and his economic message, declaring that she backtracked on promises that he never would (Figure 34). Another ad notes that Harris made promises and then broke them, including better jobs, healthcare, and tuition breaks.

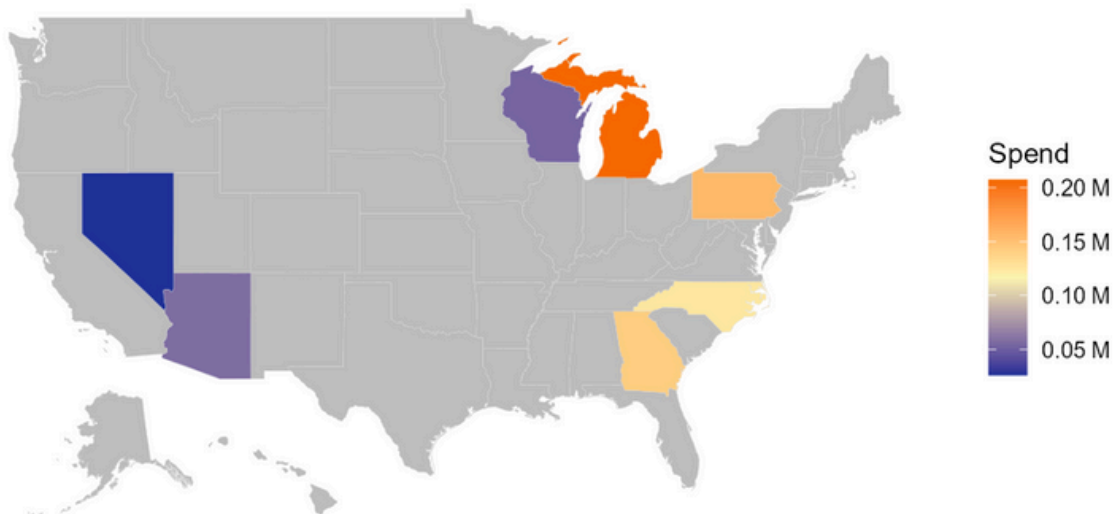*Figure 34:* **Duty to Ameria PAC Example Ads**
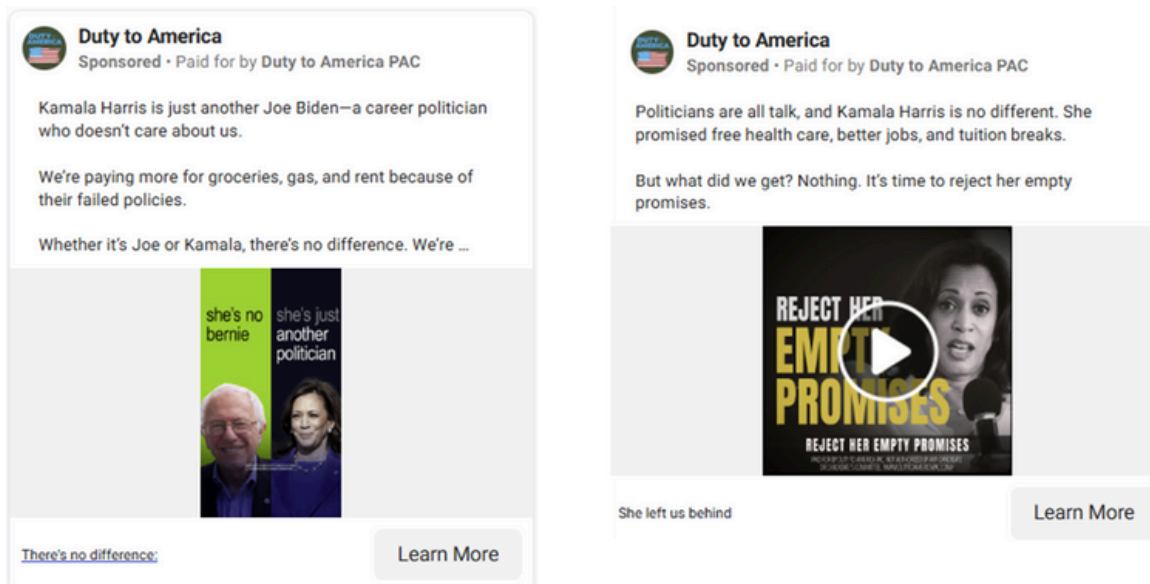
These ads are overwhelmingly negative, according to our analysis (Figure 35).

*Figure 35:* **Proportion of Negative to Non-Negative Spend**
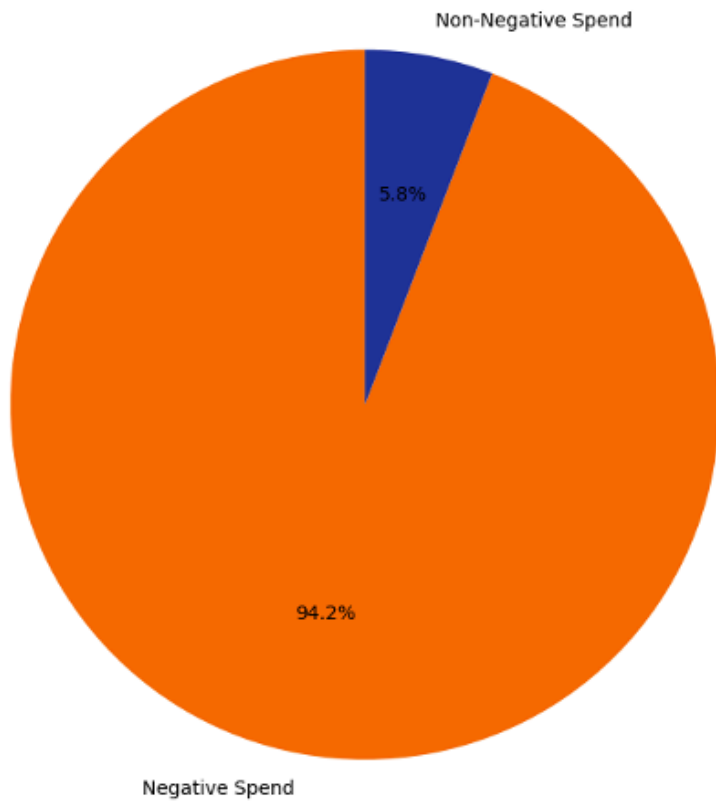
This PAC's ad campaign around the election focused on battleground states, but especially Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia (Figure 36).

Figure 36: **Duty to America Ad Spend by State**

Also, of note, this PAC focused overwhelmingly on men, especially younger men (Figure 37). Many of the ads feature a video of two young white men sitting at a bar talking about politics. In the different versions, they complain about Harris not making good on her promises. They sound disaffected and frustrated - an effort to appeal to younger male voters who might lean Democrat but are lukewarm on Harris as a candidate.

*Figure 37:* **Duty to America Spending by Gender and Age Group**
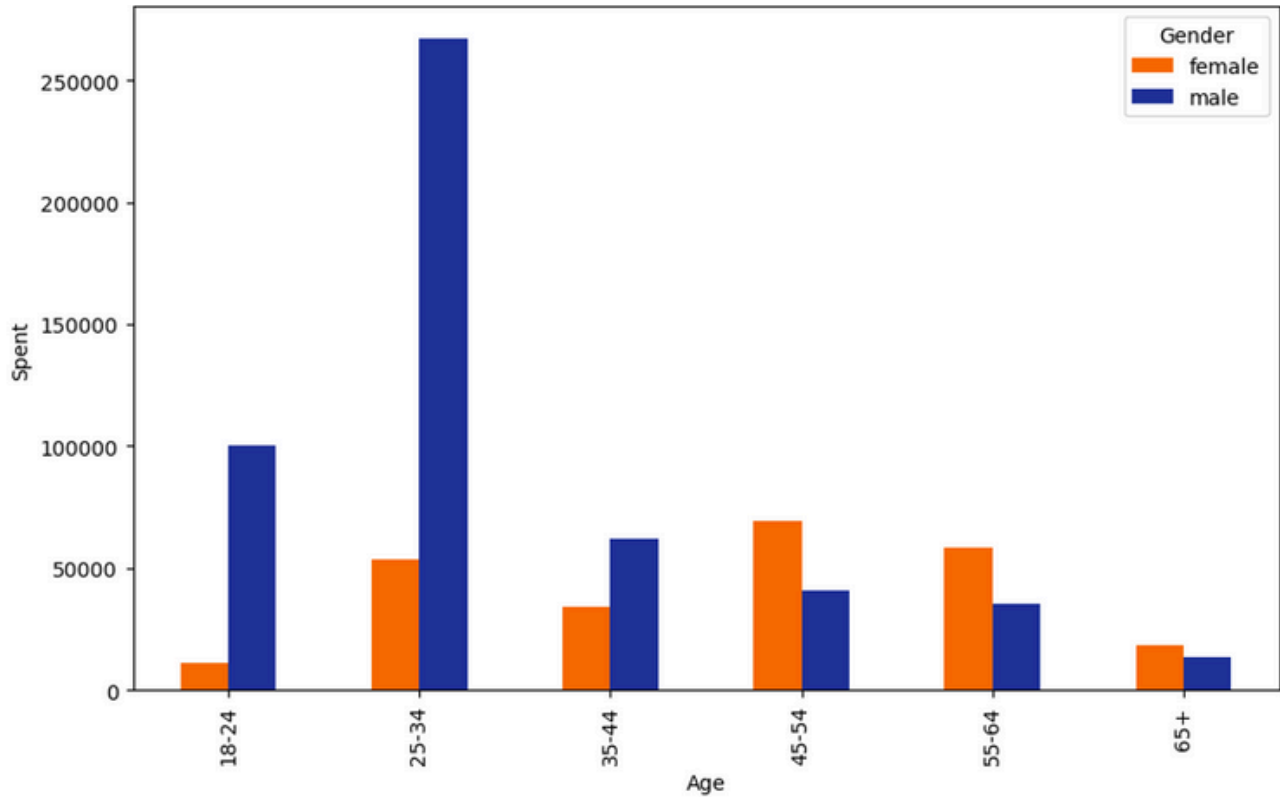
The Fair Election Fund

A small initiative that was tied to Musk focused on a fund that paid people for tips about potential violations to election law, including ballot tampering and ineligible people attempting to vote. The Facebook page is described as a "nonprofit organization" created by IMGE LLC, which the *New York Times* reported [5] is responsible for many of these Musk-funded political initiatives. It describes itself as wanting to "hear from concerned citizens who have witnessed fraud/abuse in our elections. Report corruption & you could be eligible for payment from a $5M fund." The source of the fund or how one becomes eligible is not noted. The page was created in April.

We found four ads that ran on Facebook and Instagram that mentioned a presidential candidate. These ads cost an estimated $4,898 and garnered 332,998 impressions. We found that the ads were generally negative (three of the four ads) and only ran in North Carolina. The ads focused on older North Carolinians, and men moreso than women (Figure 38).

Figure 38: Fair Election Fund Spending by Gender and Age Group

[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/15/us/elections/trump-money-building-americas-future.html
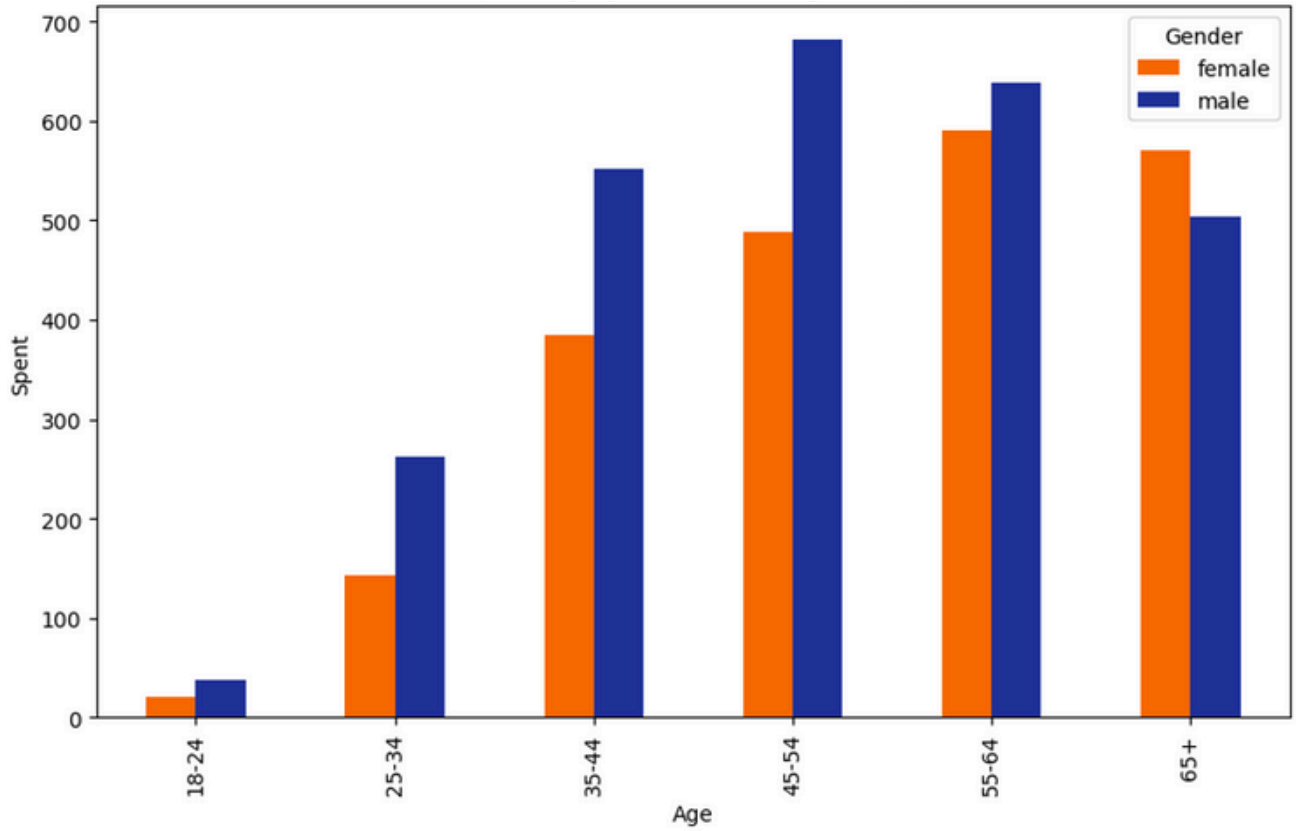
Progress 2028

The Musk-backed project that received attention at the end of the campaign was Progress 2028. The Facebook page, which launched September 27th, and is labeled a "political organization" has no description. It has just one post from October 28 that is of an *NBC News* story about a judge in Virginia blocking an effort by the governor to remove voters from the voter registry. The governor wanted to remove alleged noncitizens based on whether they checked they were not a citizen or left it blank when they filled out a Department of Motor Vehicles form. The Facebook post writes of the news story: "Did you see the news? The Biden-Harris DOJ successfully challenged Virginia's 'non-citizen' voter removal program and won! This ensures that no undocumented immigrant is unjustly stripped from voter rolls." The post drastically overstates the judge's ruling and the issue in Virginia, framing the news as support of Harris policies for non-citizen immigrants to vote–a position she does not hold.

We found 646 ads from this initiative that mentioned a presidential candidate. The ads began in early October, and approximately $803,427 was spent on the ads, translating into 60,973,684 impressions. We searched the Google Ad Transparency site and did not find any hits for "Progress 2028."

As news reports [6] highlighted, the ads portrayed Harris' policies as favorable to illegal immigrants, as supporting banning guns, and eliminating hydro-fracking (Figure 39). The ads rhetorically appear to be supportive of Harris, but they mislead her policy positions and seem to have targeted people, such as Democrats who might be soft on Harris, and thus who might be turned off by such a message.

Figure 39: **Progress 2028 Ad Example**
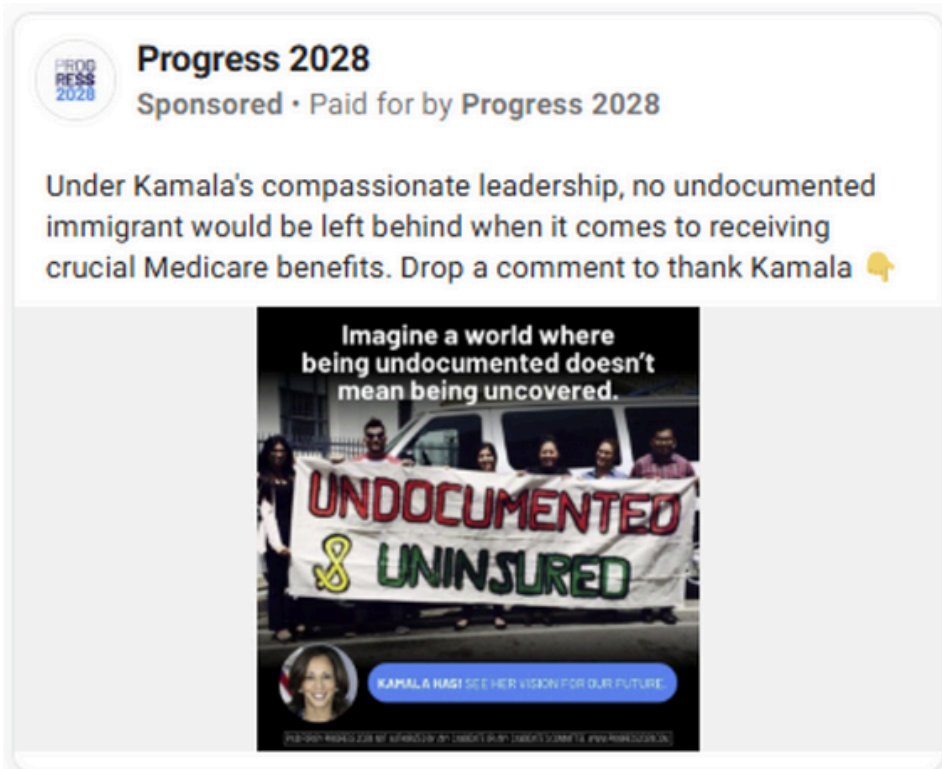
Like the other Musk-supported PACs and initiatives, the battleground states were targeted, especially North Carolina and Pennsylvania (Figure 40).

Figure 40: **Progress 2028 Ad Spend by State**
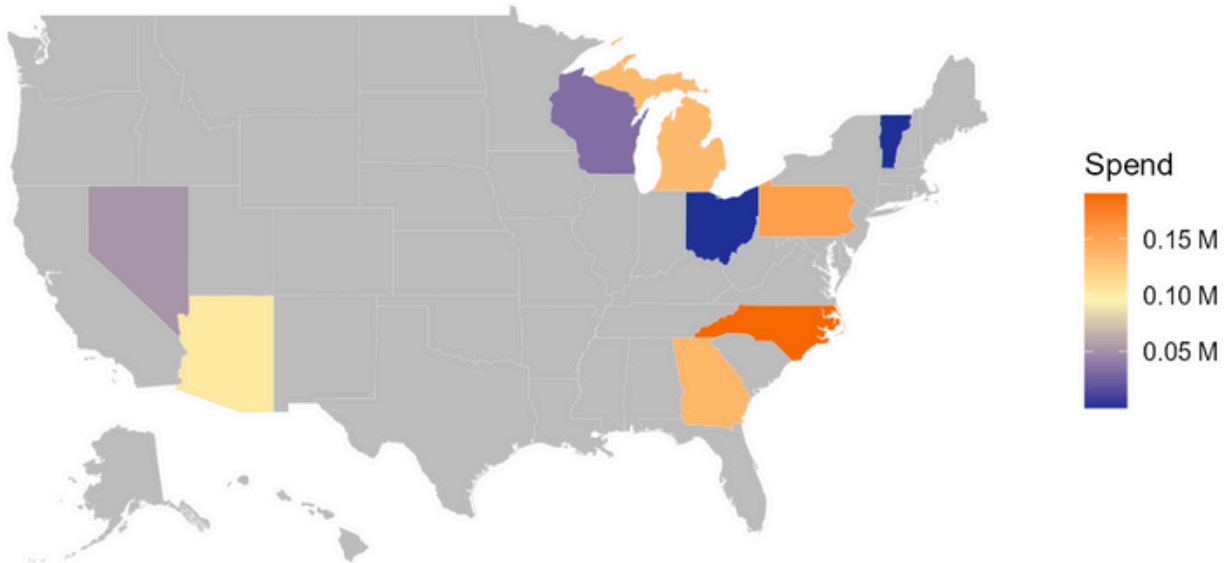
The ads targeted younger Facebook and Instagram users, and targeted women overall at a higher rate (Figure 41).

Figure 41: **Spending by Gender and Age Group**
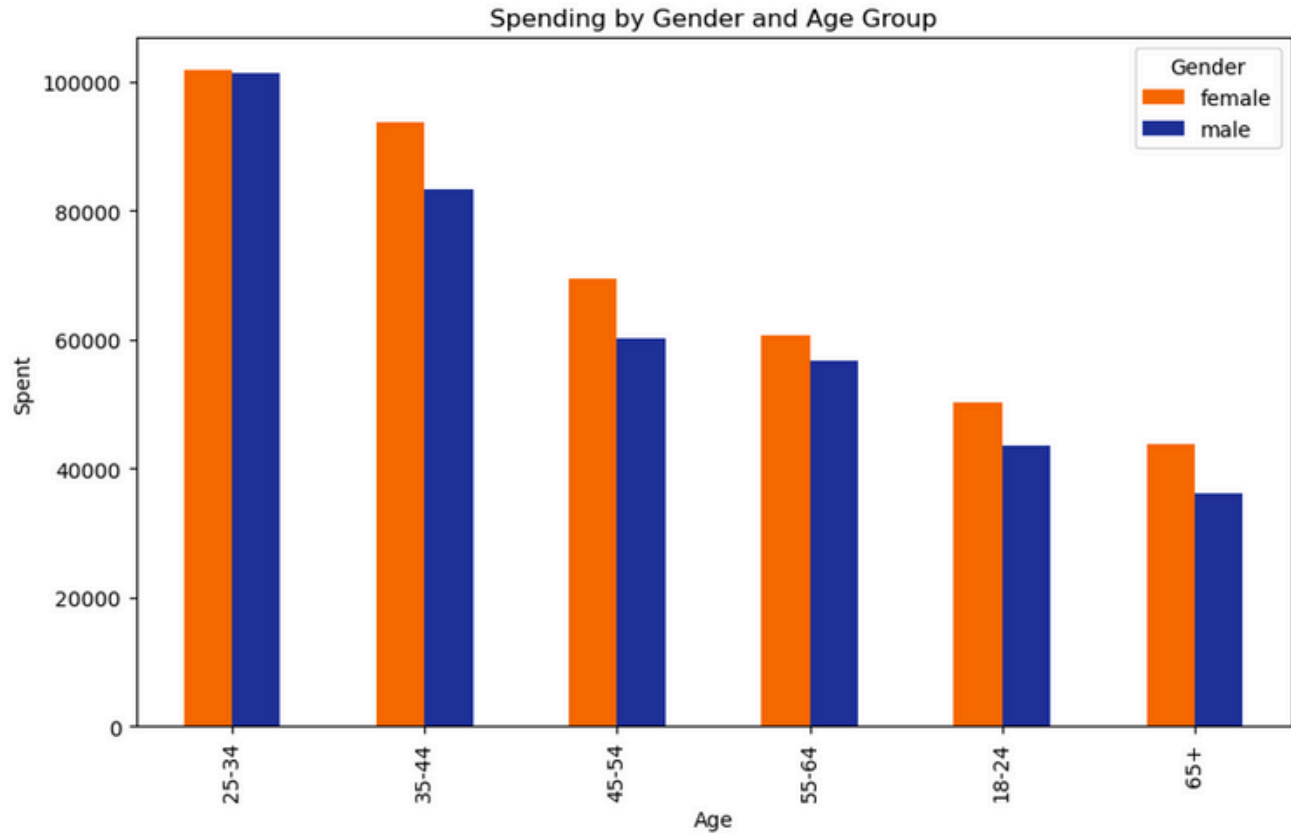
This ad strategy suggests to us an effort similar to what Trump was reported by the *Atlantic* [7] to have done back in 2016 – to use Facebook ads to target Democratic voters who might be soft in their support for Clinton, specifically younger women and Black voters. They ran ads in battleground states, for example, that targeted Blacks with messages intended to remind them of the Clinton's "tough on crime" stance that jailed Blacks disproportionately.

[6] https://www.npr.org/2024/10/30/g-s1-31042/elon-musk-kamala-harris-facebook

[7] https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/04/how-facebooks-ad-technology-helps-trump-win/606403/

RBG PAC

The Facebook page for RBG PAC features an image in the banner of both Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Donald Trump (Figure 42). The page is labeled a "Political Organization" and the description makes the misleading claim that "RBG believed abortion laws should be decided by the states, not the federal gov't" followed by "Trump also doesn't support a federal abortion ban. Great minds think alike." The page was created just a month ago, on October 8th and has no content, but the comments left on it are overwhelmingly disparaging of the group.

Figure 42: **RBG PAC Facebook Page**

We estimate the page spent $1,095,089 for ads on Facebook and Instagram, translating into 52,665,924 impressions. The ads are positive, reassuring targets that Trump does not support a federal ban on abortion, and supports abortions to protect the life of the woman as well as in situations of rape and incest. The ads that were captured in our dataset ran only in 4 states: Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they overwhelmingly target women (79% to 21%), but especially younger women.

America PAC

This group is labeled a "Political Organization" on its Facebook page but provides no description. Created May 17th, the page has actively posted content since its inception, including featuring Pennsylvanians that won Elon Musk's controversial lottery scheme.

We estimate that this PAC has spent $3,267,907 on ads on Facebook and Instagram that mention any of the presidential or vice presidential candidates, earning 90,607,274 impressions. This PAC's ads focus primarily on the economy and immigration and urge people to get-out-the vote. One ad describes Harris as "border czar" and tells people that the immigration crisis is costing them money (Figure 43).

Figure 43: **America PAC Example Ad**

The ads ran in all of the key battleground states, but much of the focus was on North Carolina and Georgia. Men and women were targeted roughly equally, but older women were more likely to be targets.

Conclusions

U.S. presidential elections are an outlier on the global stage with their remarkable length and extraordinary expense. This election shattered the record [8] on spending around the campaign, raising renewed questions about the influence of dark money in the political process. Although many worry about foreign influence in our elections through messaging on social media, significant potential meddling occurs through the hidden flow of money to dark-money super PACs who then run ads on social media platforms with generic names and unclear identities.

The lack of clear labeling, disclosures, or clues to help the public navigate the cloudy information environment leaves them vulnerable to efforts aimed to mislead. Platforms like those owned by Meta are not required to enforce any restrictions on political ads that are explicitly working to change opinions around political campaigns from groups that are not registered with the Federal Election Commission, for example.

There are not even any requirements from Meta that Facebook pages from political actions committees clearly signal to the public that the pages are in fact PACs, as we saw from the Musk-aligned groups. Some, like Building America's Future PAC, described itself as a non-profit. There is no "Political Action Committee" label on Facebook for such political groups, revealing flaws in the transparency efforts even within Facebook to help the public discern a group's origins and intentions.

Our analysis of Musk-funded groups that ran digital ads on Facebook and Instagram are not easily discoverable. We note that this particular network of PACs and initiatives show none of the tell-tale signals of a coordinated campaign through our investigative efforts. The ads and Facebook pages launched by these PACs do not share organizational contact information or ad sponsorships that would help surface efforts at coordination, except for Future Coalition PAC and Duty to America, which share a contact telephone (Figure 44). For organizations like this and other dark money PACs, the way to surface them is by following the money, but expenditure reports lag the campaign, and rely on the organizations to report their expenditures to the Federal Election Committee.

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Figure 44: **A Small Network Linking FC PAC to Duty to America PAC**
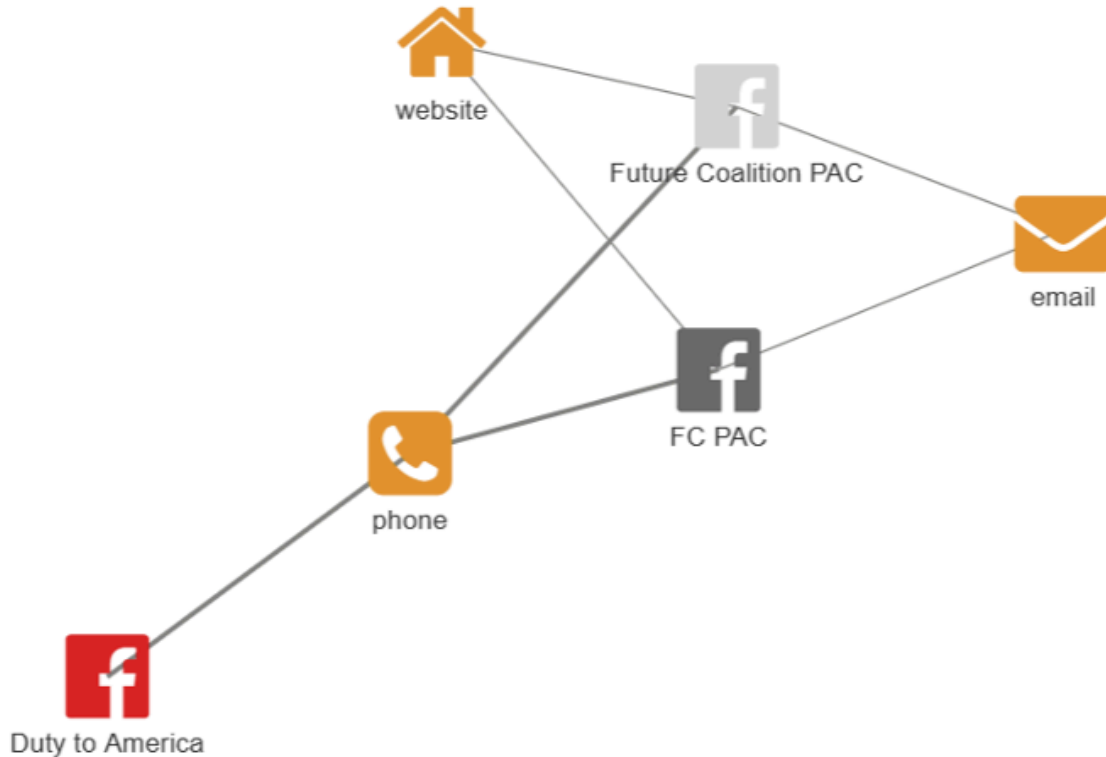
It also is noteworthy that the Progress 2028 Facebook page has comments from visitors highlighting that the page is an effort by Musk to mislead voters about Harris' record. The other pages did not have similar notes from visitors to the pages, suggesting that the news coverage about Progress 2028 had some impact in highlighting the deceptive ad tactics, but that the other pages and their ads went largely under the radar. This just further underscores the importance of journalists in uncovering these deceptive advertisements, even as the platforms allow it, and the government fails to legislate better transparency in support of public decision-making.

[8] https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2024/11/outside-spending-on-2024-elections-shatters-records-fueled-by-billion-dollar-dark-money-infusion/

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 [8]. 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.

[8] 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.
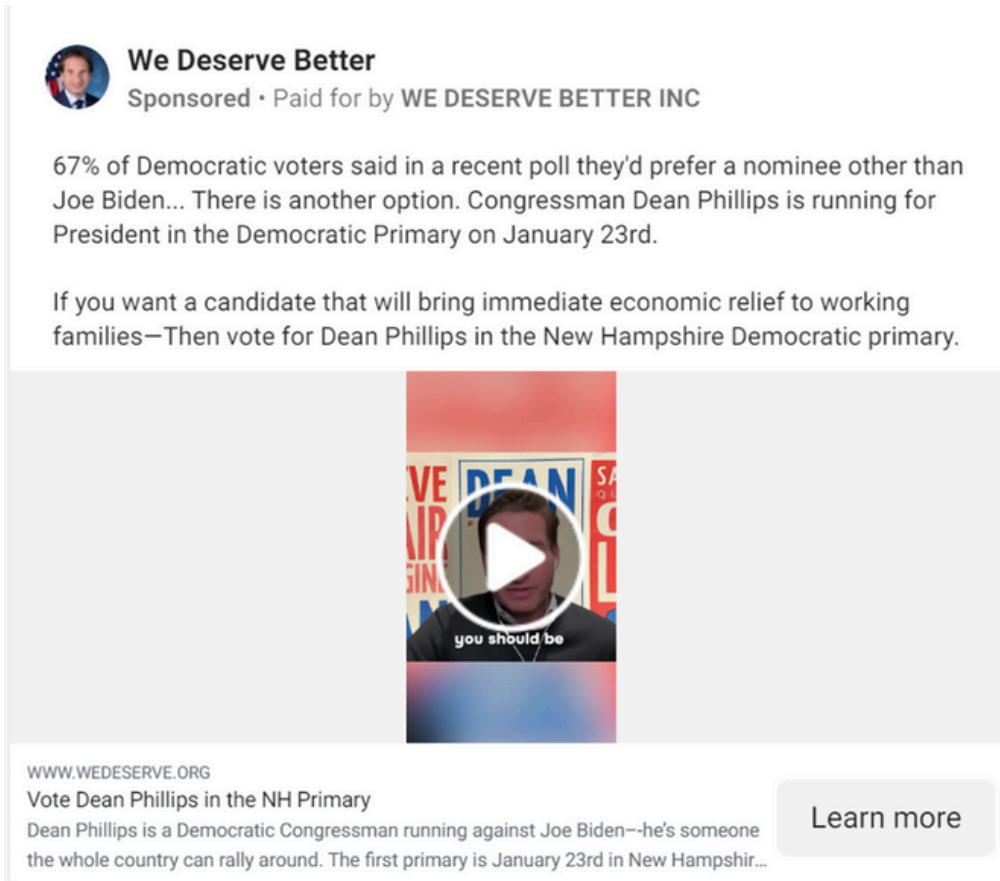
Categorizations of Ad Content

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 mode 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.

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.

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 Ads

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 pool 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).

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. Emma Carroll Hudson is IDJC's digital communications specialist.

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.

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 with questions or suggestions. For media inquiries, please email Keith Kobland, Associate Director of Media Relations, at kkobland@syr.edu.