

U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Urges Google to improve ad policies and combat election-related disinformation

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WASHINGTON, D.C — U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin joined her colleagues, led by Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Mark Warner (D-VA), to urge Google to improve its ad policies and combat election-related disinformation and voter suppression. Reports indicate that the company has profited from political ads that spread voting and election disinformation. The senators sent a letter to CEO Sundar Pichai calling on Google to take immediate action.

While the 2020 general election occurred a month ago, efforts to undermine the election by spreading disinformation persist. This is happening despite both Attorney General Barr stating that the Department of Justice has uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud, and high ranking officials at the Department of Homeland Security stating that the 2020 general election was the most secure in American history. Stopping the ongoing spread of election-related disinformation is critical to maintaining Americans' faith in our elections, the cornerstone of our democracy.

In addition to Baldwin, Klobuchar and Warner, the letter was signed by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Angus King (I-ME), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Chris Coons (D-DE), Jack Reed (D-RI), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Cory Booker (D-NJ).

“Millions of Americans rely on Google to find voting and election-related information. It is imperative for the integrity of our democracy that they are not met with disinformation. Google’s stated policy is to reject ‘ads or destinations making demonstrably false claims that could significantly undermine participation or trust in an electoral or democratic process.’ However, a recent study by the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) found that Google services ads on 145 out of 200 websites GDI examined that publish disinformation,” the senators wrote.

The letter echoed concerns from outside organizations about the use of Google’s ad platforms to promote voter suppression.

“Google finances misinformation by placing adverts for respected brands – without their knowledge – on websites that spread untruths. It is vital legislators unveil the scale of Google’s knowing participation in the global misinformation industry, the amount by which it has profited, and to come up with solutions that put an end to the systemic undermining of democracy and public safety,” **said Imran Ahmed, CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate.**

“Disinformation in political advertising is a security problem, and Google and other ad platforms need to start treating it as such. When loopholes and vulnerabilities in systems for detecting political or disinformation content are found, companies need to act quickly to protect users from attacks that diminish trust in our democratic system,” **said Laura Edelson, Researcher, Online Political Ads Transparency Project, NYU Tandon School of Engineering.**

“Google is among the most widely used Internet platforms. It mediates information access for more than a billion users around the globe. Unfortunately, there are bad actors — those who wish to manipulate people for political or financial motives — who understand how to use Google’s search and advertising features to achieve

their objectives.” **Dr. Kate Starbird, Associate Professor of Human Centered Design & Engineering, University of Washington.**

Full text of the letter can be found [HERE](#) and below.

Dear Mr. Pichai:

We write to express serious concerns regarding recent reports that Google is profiting from the sale of ads spreading election-related disinformation. Google is also helping organizations spreading election-related disinformation to raise revenue by placing ads on their websites. While Google has some policies in place to prevent the spread of election misinformation, they are not properly enforced and are inadequate. We urge you to immediately strengthen and improve enforcement of your policies on election-related disinformation and voter suppression, reject all ads spreading election-related disinformation, and stop providing advertising services on sites that spread election-related disinformation.

Millions of Americans rely on Google to find voting and election-related information. It is imperative for the integrity of our democracy that they are not met with disinformation. Google’s stated policy is to reject “ads or destinations making demonstrably false claims that could significantly undermine participation or trust in an electoral or democratic process.” However, a recent study by the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) found that Google services ads on 145 out of 200 websites GDI examined that publish disinformation.

Similarly, a recent report from the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) found that Google has been placing ads on websites publishing disinformation designed to undermine elections. In examining just six websites publishing election-related disinformation, CCDH estimates that they receive 40 million visits a month, generating revenue for these sites of up to \$3.4 million annually from displaying

Google ads. In addition, Google receives \$1.6 million from the advertisers' payments annually. These sites published stories ahead of the 2020 general election that contained disinformation alleging that voting by mail was not secure, that mail-in voting was being introduced to "steal the election," and that election officials were "discarding mail ballots."

In August, media reports indicated that Google refused to remove search ads promoting false information about mail-in ballots which appeared in response to searches for "mail-in voting" in numerous battleground states, including Arizona and Georgia. The most common variation of that ad said, "think mail-in voting and absentee voting are the same. Think again! There are different safeguards for each." The ads then directed users to a website that stated voting by mail results in "lost votes and lost rights." These ads also seem to violate Google's policy since both the ads and the destinations make demonstrably false claims about the security of the voting by mail process.

Researchers also discovered loopholes in Google's political ads policy, which allowed them to place ads targeted at election-related searches without going through the political ad review and verification process. In one instance, researchers paid to place ads that appeared on the search results page when users entered a search including the words "should," "vote," and "Biden" - these ads read, "you shouldn't, he'll destroy this country." This loophole could allow foreign adversaries to run ads with disinformation targeting elections without detection. It also allows advertisers placing these kinds of ads to circumvent Google's ban on microtargeting for political ads. In response to these findings, Google said it planned to increase the amount of human review that goes into evaluating landing pages for ads that potentially fall under the election policy. But months later when researchers placed the same kind of ads just a week before Election Day, Google still allowed them to run.

In light of these concerns, we respectfully request you answer the following questions by December 18, 2020:

1. Why did the websites identified by the CCDH not violate Google's policy for ads or destinations? Will Google re-evaluate this policy and how it is being enforced? Will Google commit to not running display ads on websites that publish demonstrably false information about voting or elections?
2. Why did the ads reported by the University of Washington, that Google refused to remove in August, not violate Google's policy for ads that make "demonstrably false claims?" How much revenue did Google receive from the ads it reviewed and decided not to remove?
3. Will Google commit to developing and enforcing a more comprehensive policy for ads that contain election-related disinformation or voter suppression content?
4. Will Google commit to establishing a policy clearly defining political ads to include issue ads and ads that appear in searches targeting people searching for political content?
5. What specific steps is Google taking to improve its evaluations process for landing pages and ensure that landing pages for ads are not redirecting people to websites with disinformation?

It's been four years since Russia bought online ads to influence American voters. Now, the 2020 election cycle has once again made clear that we must do more to prevent disinformation from undermining the integrity of our elections. Still, Google continues to operate with a narrow and incomprehensive political ads policy that has major loopholes. It is also failing to enforce even this inadequate policy. As a result, the company is profiting from ads that spread voting and election disinformation and helping disinformation sites profit from their lies. Our democracy deserves better.

Sincerely,



An online version of this release is available [here](#).