

U.S. Sen. Johnson: Asks Google for answers about political bias on platform

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WASHINGTON — U.S. Sens. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) and Mike Lee (R-Utah), members of the Senate Commerce Committee, sent a letter to Google CEO Sundar Pichai Thursday asking for answers regarding alleged political bias within the company's search function.

“At the [House Committee on the Judiciary] hearing, many Members of Congress questioned you regarding alleged political bias within the search function of your platform. You reiterated several times in your verbal testimony that ‘any work we (Google) do around elections is non-partisan,’ and any form of political bias occurring on the platform ‘goes against Google’s core values.’ Unfortunately, for you and the democratic discourse in this country, there are numerous examples to support that the contrary is occurring,” the senators wrote.

“The integrity of our elections is of the utmost importance. Voters depend on platforms like Google to research and gather information about elections—who the candidates are, what those candidates support, voter registration deadlines, election dates, polling locations, etc. If it is true that Google is using its market power and search algorithms to surreptitiously influence election results, that would be a serious violation of the public trust.”

Full text of the letter is below, and can also be found [here](#).

August 6, 2020

Sundar Pichai

Chief Executive Officer

Google LLC

1600 Amphitheater Parkway

Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai:

We watched, with interest, the recent House Committee on the Judiciary hearing examining the market power of your company, Google LLC, along with Amazon, Apple, and Facebook. In particular, we were astonished when Ranking Member Jordan asked: "...can you today assure Americans you will not tailor your features in any way to help – specifically help one candidate over another. And this is what I'm concerned about is you helping Joe Biden over President Trump," and you answered unequivocally, "We won't do any work, you know, to politically tilt anything one way or the other. It's against our core values."^[1] We are writing today to give you the opportunity to conduct a thorough review with your management team to determine the veracity of that answer, and correct the record if necessary.

At the hearing, many Members of Congress questioned you regarding alleged political bias within the search function of your platform. You reiterated several times in your verbal testimony that "any work we (Google) do around elections is non-partisan," and any form of political bias occurring on the platform "goes against Google's core values." Unfortunately, for you and the democratic discourse in this country, there are numerous examples to support that the contrary is occurring.

Since the 2016 election, there have been reports and mounting evidence that Google is using its market position and search algorithms to achieve political results. For example, reports of a leaked video from a 2016 internal meeting in

which you and other high-level executives at Google expressed dismay at President Trump's election,^[2] emails that showed your company's efforts to turn out Latino voters who you thought would vote for Hilary Clinton,^[3] and a study conducted by the American Institute of Behavioral Research and Technology (AIBRT) that claims that biases within Google's search function could have influenced millions of undecided voters to vote for Hilary Clinton.^[4]

In more recent days, conservative outlets have continued to face diminished search results on Google. Breitbart News' editor-in-chief Alex Marlow said during an interview last week that Google was limiting exposure of Breitbart News in Google searches, so much so that Breitbart's visibility index is down 99.7% since 2016 and overall their Google traffic is down nearly two-thirds.^[5] Additionally, just two weeks ago, users were unable to access a number of websites from Google search, many of which were conservative websites such as Breitbart, the Drudge Report, the Bongino Report, and the National Pulse. Your company reported it was a "bug" or "glitch" and had been fixed. However, an ex-Google engineer alleges that this so-called "glitch" could have exposed your company's use of blacklists.^[6] Despite your continued denial that Google does not use blacklists, it appears that you do employ the use of blacklists to remove certain sites or prevent others from surfacing in certain types of results.^[7] While not all blacklisting is politically-motivated, the American people deserve 100% assurance that Google can be trusted to be the neutral platform that you, the Chief Executive of the company claim it to be. This is especially true around sensitive and fundamental topics like politics and free elections.

The integrity of our elections is of the utmost importance. Voters depend on platforms like Google to research and gather information about elections—who the candidates are, what those candidates support, voter registration deadlines, election dates, polling locations, etc. If it is true that Google is using its market power and search algorithms to surreptitiously influence election results, that would be a serious violation of the public trust.

Your company wields a considerable amount of power, and it is up to Members of Congress to provide the necessary oversight to ensure the integrity of our elections remains intact. We take this responsibility seriously, and require assurances that you will not allow any sort of electioneering or use of politically-biased algorithms

on your platform.

Google's "U.S. Public Policy: Transparency" page says, "*At Google, we believe it is important to have a voice in the political process to ensure the Internet remains a powerful engine for growth and innovation. Our engagement with policymakers and regulators is guided by a commitment to ensuring our participation is always open, transparent and clear to our users, shareholders, and the public.*"^[8] Based on last week's hearing, and previous hearings at which representatives from your company have testified, we do not believe that Google is acting with full transparency nor in a politically neutral manner.

In order to begin rectifying doubts about your company's transparency and political neutrality, please respond to the below questions by August 20, 2020. It is our hope that you take a deep look at your company's policies and actions before responding to this letter. Please ensure that your answers are complete and truthful.

QUESTIONS:

1. In an internal email leaked to the Wall Street Journal in 2018, a Google employee used the phrase "ephemeral experiences." Those are the kinds of experiences people have online when content is generated "on the fly" and then disappears: search results, search suggestions, newsfeeds, and so on. AIBRT has monitored Google search and found evidence of this type of politically biased activity. Combined with other research on how effective search can be in changing user attitudes, AIBRT estimates that Google's surreptitious use of "ephemeral experiences" and other search manipulation could have shifted at least 2.6 million votes to Hillary Clinton in 2016 and upwards of 78.2 million votes to Democratic candidates in 2018. Do you unequivocally deny that Google used these techniques in 2016 and 2018?
2. Do you unequivocally deny that no one in Google is working on similar politically motivated search manipulation for the November 2020 election?
3. If you deny these allegations, what controls does Google have in place to ensure that no one in Google has gone "rogue," and inserted this type of politically motivated activity into Google search?
4. If you deny these allegations, how do you explain AIBRT's documented research?

5. Does Google design, use, or operate blacklists?
 1. What is the intended purpose of the use of blacklists?
 2. Has Google or any of its employees placed terms or sites on blacklists for political reasons?
6. B.J. Fogg wrote a book in which he discusses persuasive technology, which involves interactive computing systems designed to change people's attitudes and behaviors^[9]. Does Google deploy "persuasive technology"?

Sincerely,

Senators Johnson and Lee