

Opposing Extremes on Political Ad Policies

Keri Snyder

Lebanon Valley College

Twitter and Facebook are two social media platforms that have “few rules, if any, governing them” (Stewart, 2019). It is for this reason that political advertising on these platforms is so complicated. Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, recently banned political ads from Twitter, realizing how powerful internet advertising can be. On October 30, 2019, Dorsey tweeted, “While internet advertising is incredibly powerful and very effective for commercial advertisers, that power brings significant risks to politics, where it can be used to influence votes to affect the lives of millions” (@jack). Dorsey claimed that Twitter “is recognizing that advertising on social media offers an unfair level of targeting compared to other mediums” (Lerman & Ortutay, 2019). While there is truth in this statement, not everyone sees eye to eye on the matter. Political campaigns use Facebook significantly more than Twitter, but Facebook allows politicians to lie in ads, which creates misinformation spread on social media. Dorsey decided to ban political ads from Twitter with the belief that political message reach should be earned, while Facebook continued to hold firm its political ads policy keeping free speech a priority, but complications come with both platforms’ decisions.

Political campaigns primarily use Twitter “to get a message out to journalists, political activists, and influencers” (Stewart, 2019). These groups of people matter, but they are not as relevant to politicians as potential supporters and voters are. Political advertising is used to reach new people who may someday give you monetary support to help keep your campaign running. Stewart (2019) wrote that the platform is not particularly effective “in terms of paying for ads to reach broad swaths of the public or raise a bunch of money.” Facebook, on the other hand, is a potent tool for political campaigns. The platform is very helpful in “build(ing) out the email lists that they (campaigns) heavily rely on for fundraising” (Stewart, 2019), which Twitter does not particularly aid in. Lerman and Ortutay (2019) stated that company records show “candidates

spend significantly more purchasing ads on Facebook than on Twitter.” This statement may be of concern to some people, as Facebook is known to allow politicians to lie in their advertisements.

Despite the uproar it has caused, Twitter is not the first social media platform to ban political ads. According to Feiner (2019), “Chinese video app TikTok became the first major social media platform to ban political ads from its platform.” Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitch have also banned political advertising. Doing so does not mean that politicians are banned from these platforms altogether. It just means that politicians cannot advertise on these platforms.

WebFinance Inc. (2019) defines freedom of expression as the “right to express one’s ideas and opinions freely through speech, writing, and other forms of communication but without deliberately causing harm to others’ character and/or reputation by false or misleading statements.” Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, has referenced free expression time and time again when asked to discuss his decisions regarding Facebook’s political ad policy. The platform “argued it should not be the one to make decisions about its users’ speech and that politician’s speech is newsworthy” (Feiner, 2019). If Facebook is not making these decisions, then who is? Zuckerberg recently “told Congress...that politicians have the right to free speech on Facebook” (Lerman & Ortutay, 2019). Looking at both platforms’ decisions, it seems like there is an area of compromise being overlooked, as Twitter and Facebook are in opposing extreme positions.

Dorsey’s decision to ban political ads from Twitter came from his “growing concern about misinformation spread on social media” (Lerman & Ortutay, 2019). Dorsey’s belief that political message reach should be earned was also a factor in his decision. He tweeted an entire thread about why the platform was going through with banning political ads. One of Dorsey’s tweets from this thread reads, “A political message earns reach when people decide to follow an account or retweet. Paying for reach removes that decision, forcing highly optimized and

targeted political messages on people. We believe this decision should not be compromised by money” (@jack). Ned Segal, CFO of Twitter, retweeted Dorsey’s thread and added, “This decision was based on principle, not money” (@nedsegal). Dorsey made his intentions very clear over Twitter the day he announced the decision. Stewart (2019) wrote that “political advertising makes up a very small fraction of Twitter’s revenue.” This decision would not have an effect on the platform financially speaking. Dorsey also tweeted that he “considered stopping only candidate ads, but issue ads present a way to circumvent” (@jack). He did not want to make it easier for people to find a way around the ban, as it is likely that some ads will get through that break the rules. Dorsey added, “it isn’t fair for everyone but candidates to buy ads for issues they want to push,” validating his decision further (@jack). While many users are in support of this, the decision also brought with it much obvious disapproval.

Dorsey’s decision received Democratic praise as well as placed him in a good light, morally speaking. The ban is considered a “moral victory,” as it presents Dorsey with an opportunity to be very transparent with Twitter users about the company’s intentions (Stewart, 2019). According to Feiner (2019), “Dorsey said it would be ‘not credible’ for Twitter to tell users it’s committed to stopping the spread of misinformation while allowing advertisers to target users with political ads just because they’ve paid Twitter to do so.” This information makes Dorsey appear very honest and transparent, but the cons that come with this decision significantly outweigh the pros.

Defining what is or is not political is much more complicated than it seems. Dorsey will be facing challenge after challenge with this ban in place, as he will have to decide where to make exceptions and what types of ads to allow. Lerman and Ortutay (2019) wrote that “the company said it will make some exceptions, such as allowing ads that encourage voter turnout.”

Still, deciding which ads to allow cannot be done without complications. Defining what is or is not political also includes determining whether controversial organizations such as “Planned Parenthood and the NRA will be able to run ads” (Stewart, 2019). Banning political ads from Twitter may hurt more people than it will help. According to Stewart (2019), the ban “might favor incumbents and well-known political candidates over challengers and upstart campaigns,” so political challengers with smaller followings will be at even more of a disadvantage. Romm and Stanley-Becker (2019) stated that “the political ad ban also might not have much impact on widely followed accounts, including President Trump’s, whose tweets already reach more than 66 million users each day.” As mentioned before, politicians can still use Twitter. They just cannot advertise on the platform.

Dorsey admitted that his decision would affect issue-based ads, which is more of a problem than it sounds like. Banning issue-based ads will affect “ads that advocate for or against legislative issues such as climate change, health care, and immigration” and “touch nonprofits, advocacy groups, and trade associations of all political stripes” (Stewart, 2019). The problem that Dorsey was trying to avoid was ads getting through the ban that break the rules, but this is an issue in itself that will not be solved by banning issue-based ads in addition to political ads. Unfortunately for Dorsey, if they want to badly enough, campaigns will find ways around the ban. In contrast to the Democratic praise, Republicans do not support Dorsey’s decision to ban political ads from Twitter. His decision is not directed toward a specific political party. Still, Brad Parscale, Trump’s 2020 presidential campaign manager, called the ban “another attempt by the left to silence Trump and conservatives” on Twitter (@parscale).

With news of Dorsey’s decision, “the pressure is on for Facebook to change its controversial policy that allows politicians to lie in ads on the social media network” (Stewart,

2019). However, Facebook held firm its political ads policy and is continuing “to defend running paid political ads, even false ones, as a free speech priority” (Lerman & Ortutay, 2019).

Zuckerberg stands by the company’s policy in saying, “when its not absolutely clear what to do, we should err on the side of greater expression” (Feiner, 2019). There must be a middle ground between Facebook failing to fact-check political ads and Twitter banning them from the platform altogether. Much like Twitter, Facebook’s decision is not financially motivated. Lerman and Ortutay (2019) wrote that Zuckerberg said political ads “make up less than half of a percent of Facebook revenue.” It is hard to believe that Facebook’s intentions behind their political ads policy are positive because it seems to be hurting more and putting more people at risk than it is helping. Sure, politicians will benefit, but knowing that they have the right by Facebook to openly lie as they wish should raise several red flags. Facebook’s policy does allow politicians with smaller online followings to reach more potential voters and supporters. Still, despite this, there should be at least some kind of standard for fact-checking ads before they are posted all over the platform, possibly spreading misinformation to anyone who sees it.

Political campaigns likely see Facebook’s decision as a positive, as they “spend a lot of money on Facebook to build out the email lists that they heavily rely on for fundraising” (Stewart, 2019). The primary concern with Facebook’s policy is that politicians are allowed to lie freely in ads. The most severe backlash has come from Democrats, who have expressed concern that the policy “gives President Trump free rein to use major social media platforms as disinformation machines” (Timberg, Romm, & Harwell, 2019). This issue first began in early October when Joe Biden “asked Facebook to remove a Trump campaign ad that contained multiple falsehoods,” which they declined to do (Romm & Stanley-Becker, 2019). It is alarming that after blatantly being told their platform was helping to spread this misinformation to further

audiences, Facebook continued to keep the ad and denied Biden's request. With politics being as high-strung as they have been these past few years and currently, this is a problem worth addressing. Continuing to do nothing about the issue at hand will only create additional problems and worsen the existing ones.

The two platforms could not be in more opposite positions, which are both extreme. While Facebook is allowing candidates to lie in their political ads, Twitter is not allowing political ads on the platform at all. There must be an area of compromise between these two opposing decisions. Lerman and Ortutay (2019) wrote that "the presidential campaign for former Vice President Joe Biden said it was 'unfortunate' that companies would think the only option was to completely ban political ads." It is hard to say which platform is making the right decision because both platforms have received some forms of backlash. There is no way to please everyone, but there must be a way to meet in the middle. As mentioned previously, Twitter and Facebook both do not have extensive rules and guidelines. For the most part, users are free to do as they please. That is the tricky part of internet advertising and social media in general. The lack of rules may have had a factor in the shock that some people felt once hearing the news of Dorsey's decision to ban political advertising from the platform altogether. There is so much information online that most everyone has access to, so creating standard guidelines for social media platforms is a hard task at hand. Something clearly needs to be done.

Political campaigns use Facebook significantly more than Twitter, but Facebook's political ads policy creates the opportunity for misinformation spread. Dorsey decided to ban political ads from Twitter with the belief that political message reach should be earned, while Facebook continued to hold firm its political ads policy keeping free speech a priority. Complications come with both platforms' decisions. Still, the issue is "part of a broader debate

over social media, online advertising, and political speech — and whether the government needs to get involved” (Stewart, 2019). The dispute between Twitter and Facebook is only the beginning of a much larger discussion. Online platforms do not handle political advertising the same as other forms of media. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has “extensive guidelines for television and radio broadcasters around political advertising,” most of which “don’t apply to online platforms” (Stewart, 2019). The recent uproar online caused by allowing or banning political advertising to any extent may have people thinking if the FCC needs to step into online platforms as well.

Works Cited

- Feiner, L. (2019, October 30). Twitter bans political ads after Facebook refused to do so. Retrieved from <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/30/twitter-bans-political-ads-after-facebook-refused-to-do-so.html>.
- Jack. (2019, October 30). “We’ve made the decision to stop all political advertising on Twitter globally. We believe political message reach should be earned, not bought. Why? A few reasons... .” [Twitter Thread]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/jack/status/1189634360472829952?s=20>.
- Lerman, R., & Ortutay, B. (2019, October 30). Twitter bans political ads ahead of 2020 election. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/63057938a5b64d3592f800de19f443bc>.
- Nedsegal. (2019, October 30). “Since we are getting questions: This decision was based on principle, not money. As context, we’ve disclosed that political ad spend for the 2018 US midterms was <\$3M. There is no change to our Q4 guidance. I am proud to work @twitter! #LoveWhereYouWork.” [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/nedsegal/status/1189651487065923584?lang=en>.
- Parscale. (2019, October 30). “Twitter bans political ads in yet another attempt by the left to silence Trump and conservatives. Wouldn’t be surprised if @twitter lifted the ban after 2020.” [Twitter Post]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/parscale/status/1189656652250845184?lang=en>.
- Romm, T., & Stanley-Becker, I. (2019, October 31). Twitter to ban all political ads amid 2020 election uproar. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/30/twitter-ban-all-political-ads-amid-election-uproar/>.

Stewart, E. (2019, November 5). Twitter chose to ban political ads. But pressuring Facebook to do the same could backfire. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/11/5/20943751/twitter-political-ads-ban-facebook-strategists-acronym-democrats-trump>.

Timberg, C., Romm, T., & Harwell, D. (2019, October 10). A Facebook policy lets politicians lie in ads, leaving Democrats fearing what Trump will do. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/10/facebook-policy-political-speech-lets-politicians-lie-ads/>.

WebFinance Inc. (2019). What is freedom of expression? definition and meaning. Retrieved from <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/freedom-of-expression.html>.