



REVEALING MONEY'S INFLUENCE ON POLITICS

December 23, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House of Representatives
The Capitol, H-232
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
The Capitol, S-230
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader, House of Representatives
The Capitol, H-204
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles E. "Chuck" Schumer
Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
The Capitol, S-221
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Congress Should Pass the "For the People Act"

Dear Madam Speaker, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

We write to express our strong support for the "For the People Act" (H.R.1/S.949), a comprehensive pro-democracy bill that would help voters understand who's trying to influence them and keep disinformation actors from tampering with federal elections.

The weaponization of disinformation in politics has become a threat to our democracy. From unfounded claims about voter fraud to vaccine conspiracy theories, disinformation is used to undermine our trust in institutions, increase polarization, further disenfranchise marginalized communities, and hinder progress to advance the public interest.

Disinformation in politics is not a new phenomenon. But digital platforms – and the new technologies that power them – have dramatically increased the ease of creating and spreading deceptive political messages, often with little or no transparency on the voter's end.

Despite the growing importance of platforms as a medium for political campaigns¹ and their role in amplifying electoral disinformation, the regulatory landscape has failed to keep up. Under current law, digital political ads still don't require on-ad disclaimers showing who paid for them; electioneering communications online are not subject to federal filing and disclaimer requirements; platforms allow advertisers to target narrow subsets of voters with propaganda – without having to disclose who is doing the targeting and how; and campaigns can secretly leverage influencers, social media bots, troll farms, and fake accounts to amplify political messages and sway voters.

¹ According to data by the Wesleyan Media Project, digital advertising constituted about 27% of total ad spending in the 2020 presidential race, up from 20% in 2018, 14 in 2016, and 1% in 2020.

These gaps in disclosure regulations leave significant room for malicious actors – both domestic and foreign – to undermine the integrity of the electoral process. They also rob voters of the ability to know who is trying to influence them, the ability to compare candidates, and ultimately erode trust in the political system.

Evidence from the 2020 election shows that expecting platforms to meaningfully prioritize the integrity of our elections over profit is a self-defeating strategy. Researchers at New York University's Ad Observatory [show](#) that Facebook routinely omits political ads from its ad archive and leaves out labels saying who paid for each ad. Furthermore, a separate analysis of Facebook's ad transparency data conducted by Avaaz [exposes](#) that the social media giant allowed political advertisers to target hundreds of misleading ads about President-elect Joe Biden and the U.S. Postal Service to sway swing-state voters.

The "For the People Act," passed by the House almost two years ago, would fight online political manipulation, provide more transparency for voters, and protect the integrity of democracy by:

- Expanding disclosure rules to online "electioneering communications" (i.e., political ads that mention a candidate, without explicitly asking voters to support or oppose them);
- Requiring large online platforms to maintain a public database of all online political ads shown to their users – and to provide information on who the ads targeted, the buyer, and the rates charged;
- Clarifying that digital political ads are subject to the same disclaimer requirements as offline communications;
- Requiring online platforms to make all reasonable efforts to prevent foreign individuals and entities from purchasing political advertisements to influence the American electorate.

Increasing transparency and fighting online political manipulation has long been MapLight's core priority. Passing H.R. 1 is urgently needed to assure the Constitutional right to disclosure regarding who is trying to influence elections, hold digital platforms accountable, and ensure that political advertisers fully disclose their activities. For this reason, we ask Congress to fast-track this bipartisan democracy-enhancing legislation in both chambers of Congress when you reconvene in January.

Sincerely,

Daniel G. Newman, MapLight President and Co-Founder
Ann M. Ravel, Digital Deception Project Director at MapLight