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Securing Political Ads on Social Media from Hacks & Lies Has Chance to Not Be Dominated by Partisan Interests

By Robert Weiner (Page 1 of 1 pages)

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By Robert Weiner and August Clarke

The content and purchasers of online advertisements are a mystery to the public because of outdated laws that have failed to keep up with big tech companies. It's confusing and hard to regulate-- privacy, honesty, and free speech don't mix easily.

The entire nation and body politic are still grappling with the allegations that Russia had attempted to influence the 2016 Presidential election by buying and placing political ads on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. To solve this, liberal and conservative lawmakers have proposed legislation such as the Honest Ads Act and Helping State and Local Governments Prevent Cyber Attacks Act which would prevent foreign operatives from interfering in our elections and hold social media companies to higher standards. Passing this legislation is like bandaging an already painful cut; the results may not occur overnight, but the wound will ultimately heal.

Our federal government cannot keep depending on social media companies to take their own measures to counter the spread of the misinformation they oversee. On Nov. 15, Twitter announced that it would ban political advertisements, following in the footsteps of Microsoft, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitch. Five days after, Google announced it would restrict how precisely political advertisers can target an audience on its online services. However, these measures are considerable shortcomings and won't fix all the problems that persist in our electoral processes. Without the proper rules and regulations to safeguard our elections our country will continue to skate on thin ice.

In our elections, groups of people have fallen victim to political manipulation and targeted propaganda where potential voters are being misled by unvirtuous political operators; whether they are foreign or American. As a result, we find ourselves in a quasi-political reality; where true information is often brushed aside and lies are pumped to the surface. And with the 2020 Presidential election less than a year away; the timing to pass legislation could not be more perilous. For too long, Twitter, Google, and Facebook have followed their own rules, costing our elections and the state of democracy unforgiving damage.

Republicans and Democrats in Congress have come up with solutions to address big social tech companies that wield foreign powers free will in our politics. Senators Mark Warner (D-Va.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Mn.) and Lindsey Graham (R-Sc.) have referred legislation to the Senate Rules and Administration committee titled, The Honest Ads Act, which would prevent foreign actors from influencing our elections by ensuring that political ads sold online are covered by the same rules as ads sold on TV, radio and satellite. This bill would enhance the integrity of our democracy by improving disclosure requirements for online political advertisements. It would require digital platforms to maintain a public file of all electioneering communications purchased by a person or group who spends more than \$5 hundred total on ads published on their platform. Requiring online platforms to make all reasonable efforts to ensure that foreign individuals and entities are not purchasing political advertisements to influence the American electorate.





Klobuchar and Graham also introduced bipartisan legislation to help states block cyber-attacks, secure voter registration logs, and voter data, upgrade election auditing procedures, and create secure and useful information sharing about threats. In June, Klobuchar introduced the Helping State and Local Governments Prevent Cyber Attacks Act to help combat foreign interference by providing state and local governments with the information and resources they need to keep our elections secure and improve voter confidence.

Our federal government must fully commit to its constitutional responsibilities and pass legislation. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) whose head of the Senate Rules Committee, must bring up a vote on the Honest Ads Act and the Senate must pass the Helping State and Local Governments Prevent Cyber Attacks Act to the House where they must do the same.

When our democracy begins to portray irreparable damage, working against party lines becomes less important and time becomes imperative. Saving our elections from interference does not just show a temporary moment of hope for our country. Rather, it proves more as a rare display of unity; that maybe we aren't so politically adverse than we think we are. How concerned our government is with its elections proves not to be a measure of partisanship. Instead, it's measured by a shared belief - that when our democracy is tested our leaders will defend it.

If President Trump and his administration can negotiate a new NAFTA agreement with Speaker Pelosi and the Democrats amid impeachment proceedings, then Congress can pass this legislation before our country seeps into further self-doubt ahead of the 2020 presidential election. Our government cannot stay behind the curve as it did in 2016.

Robert Weiner was a Clinton and Bush White House spokesman, spokesman for the House Government Operations Committee, and senior staff for Congressmen John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, Ed Koch, and Sen. Edward Kennedy. August Clarke is Policy and Research Analyst for Solutions for Change and Robert Weiner Associates.

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