

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 7, 2020

Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Google
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

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."¹ 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.²

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.³ 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."⁴

¹ Update to Google Political Ads Policy, Google (November 2019) <https://www.blog.google/technology/ads/update-our-political-ads-policy/>

² GDI Primer: The US (Dis)Information Ecosystem, Global Disinformation Index, (October, 2020) https://disinformationindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GDI_Election-2020-Primer_Digital.pdf

³ Center for Countering Digital Hate, Google Is Profiting from Misinformation Delegitimizing the US Election, available at https://252f2edd-1c8b-49f5-9bb2-cb57bb47e4ba.filesusr.com/ugd/f4d9b9_3863e3c78940496fadd6c571b61cbb43.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

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.⁵ 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.⁶

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?

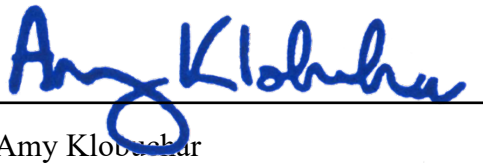
⁵ Isaac Stanley-Becker, Google greenlights ads with ‘blatant disinformation’ about voting by mail, The Washington Post (Aug. 28, 2020), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/08/28/google-ads-mail-voting/>.

⁶ Patrick Berlinquette, Running Political Ads on Google That Spread Disinformation Is Still Really Easy, OneZero (Oct. 28, 2020), available at <https://onezero.medium.com/running-political-ads-on-google-that-spread-disinformation-is-still-really-easy-9536001f157a>.

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,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Angus S. King Jr.
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



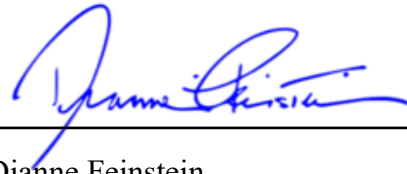
Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator