

December 2020

# A Look at Facebook and US 2020 Elections

# Contents

01	Election by the Numbers	3
02	Summary	4
03	How Facebook Has Changed	5
	Preventing Election Interference	5
	Creating Rapid Response Tools and Teams	8
	Fighting Misinformation and Voter Interference	9
	Addressing Movements Tied to Violence	11
	Adapting to the Unique Circumstances of This Election	12
	Improving Transparency and Privacy	13
	Empowering Voters Through Reliable Information	15
04	Next Steps Going Foward	19
05	Appendix	21

# US 2020 Presidential Election by the Numbers

## BETWEEN MARCH 1 AND ELECTION DAY

Displayed warnings on

**180M+**

pieces of content debunked by third-party fact-checkers that were viewed on Facebook by people in the US

Removed more than

**265,000**

pieces of content on Facebook and Instagram in the US for violating our voter interference policies

Rejected ad submissions

**3.3M**

times before they could be run for targeting the US with ads covering Social Issues, Elections and Politics without completing the authorizations process

Helped an estimated

**4.5 million**

people register to vote this year across Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger and helped an estimated

**100,000**

people sign up as poll workers\*

**140 million**

people visited the Voting Information Center since it launched, with over

**33 million**

people visiting it on Election Day alone

Since October 2019,

**took down  
influence operations**

targeting the US, including 5 networks engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) from Russia, 5 from Iran, 1 from China, and 5 domestic US-origin networks

Removed more than

**4.5 billion**

fake accounts in 2020 — almost all identified before anyone flagged them to us



# Summary

Elections changed. So did Facebook.

We've become much more proactive in blocking attacks and anticipating new ones. We have improved our efforts in combating misinformation and voter interference. We have infused more transparency into ads about social issues, elections or politics. We have doubled down on helping more Americans register to vote. And we have made it easier for voters to get the information they need to make their voices heard.

We knew the 2020 US election would be unlike any other. That's why we prepared with a unique set of products and policies. What follows is a summary of our efforts ahead of and during Election Day, along with ways we are continuing to learn, adapt, and improve.

# How Facebook Has Changed

## PREVENTING ELECTION INTERFERENCE

Over the last few years, we built teams and automated systems to proactively find and remove deceptive networks and fake accounts. We started preparations for the 2020 election nearly two years in advance, which enabled us to identify emerging threats and put systems in place to prepare. Among the threats we expected to see in the lead-up to the November election were: perception hacking, the shift from larger-scale operations to narrower campaigns that try to slip under the radar and leverage unwitting authentic people, and also blurring lines between authentic public discourse and manipulation by co-opting domestic groups to amplify and join influence operations. As Facebook's teams and our peers at other technology companies, government and civil society prepared for these scenarios, we were able to detect and stop these efforts before they had a significant impact.

From late 2019 until now, we found and removed almost a dozen foreign operations backed by Russia, China and Iran that used fake accounts to deceive users and undermine trust in the United States. We also removed five such operations run domestically by actors within the US. We removed these networks under our policy against coordinated inauthentic behavior, announced each of these takedowns publicly, and shared information with independent researchers so that they could review and draw independent findings. We also rolled out Facebook Protect, an enhanced cybersecurity program that helps campaigns, elections officials and journalists protect themselves against hacking and other direct targeting.

One of the most important lessons of 2016 was that election protection is a whole-of-society challenge — no single institution or sector can solve it alone, and threat actors will try to exploit any gaps they can find.

That's why, for both the US midterms in 2018 and the 2020 election, we worked closely with our counterparts at the other technology platforms, with our government partners from the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), as well as state elections officials and attorneys general, and with independent researchers. In the final weeks before Election Day, we met weekly with our counterparts in industry and government to discuss the threats and ensure we were all responding as quickly and effectively as possible.

---

**From late 2019 until now, we found and removed almost a dozen foreign operations backed by Russia, China and Iran that used fake accounts to deceive users and undermine trust in the United States.**

An example of this collaboration was a network we identified early in 2020 that operated on behalf of the Russian actors. They masqueraded as a Ghana-based NGO that tricked unwitting people in Ghana and Nigeria who were tasked to post on various issues, including racial divisions in the US. We [disrupted](#) this network in collaboration with Twitter and shared information about it with law enforcement and researchers at Graphika. As a result, Graphika, in collaboration with other researchers, conducted an independent assessment and we all worked closely with investigative journalists at CNN to expose the full extent of the operation.

Notably, we saw that these malicious campaigns try to use the fact that they are getting caught to create a perception that they are everywhere, manipulating our public debate. This type of “perception hacking” was one of the threats our teams were particularly concerned about in the lead-up to the election. In the last days before the vote, based on the information from the FBI, we investigated and disrupted an attempt by a single fake account to seed false claims about compromised election systems in



the US. As part of this effort, we worked together with other technology companies and law enforcement to further investigate and [disrupt](#) an Iranian-backed operation that was carried out primarily via email.

Over the course of the year, we saw foreign threat actors shift their techniques, moving away from running large networks of fake accounts to running smaller, off-platform websites that they used to try to trick unwitting journalists into writing for them. This appeared to be an adaptation to get around the defenses that had been put in place across society. Working together with the FBI and our partners in industry, we exposed and removed Russian operations to do just that before they were able to build their audiences.

We also continued to enforce against domestic actors engaged in deceptive behavior. We removed CIB operations controlled from right here in the US, exposing their campaigns and sharing information with researchers and industry peers. In addition to investigating sophisticated influence operations, we also expanded our Inauthentic Behavior enforcements to stop actors looking to profit off deceptive behaviors. Earlier this fall, we published our first [Inauthentic Behavior report](#), detailing the trends we were seeing and sharing examples of these adversarial tactics so the public is aware of the activity we disrupted.

Finally, because influence operations are most effective in an information vacuum, we used our Voting Information Center to amplify accurate information about important election deadlines, how and when to register, how to vote, and details about the protections around voting. We highlighted facts about voting to help educate the public, helping inoculate them against delegitimizing claims regardless of the actor behind them.

We applied the hard lessons we learned from 2016 to 2020. Threat actors — both foreign and domestic — tried to target the US election. However, because of the concerted response from industry, government, academics and the research community, these influence operations were largely unsuccessful. We know bad actors will keep trying, and we will stay vigilant, but it's a reminder that while the threats of these operations are very real, they can be countered by determined defenders who coordinate regularly.

## CREATING RAPID RESPONSE TOOLS AND TEAMS

Since 2016, we have tripled the size of our teams — with more than 35,000 people across the company now focused on safety and security. And we now have more than 40 teams contributing to our elections work. We've also built an advanced system combining people and technology to review the billions of pieces of content that are posted to our platform every day. We use state-of-the-art AI systems in addition to user reports to help us identify content that may go against our policies, and remove it if it violates.

Our Elections Operations Center, launched in 2018, has been another important tool in our efforts this year. It is staffed by subject matter experts from across Facebook — including from our threat intelligence, data science, engineering, research, operations, policy and legal teams — in order to stay vigilant in following developments and address potential

# 35,000+

people across the company now  
focused on safety and security

# 40+

teams contributing  
to our elections work

## We use state-of-the-art AI systems

in addition to user  
reports to help us  
identify content that  
may go against our  
policies, and remove  
it if it violates.



abuse in real-time. Since its inception, the operations center has helped us navigate major elections in Indonesia, Brazil, India, Europe and many other parts of the world.

In 2020, our Elections Operations Center ran for the month ahead of the general election, as well as for every caucus, primary, party convention, and the presidential and vice presidential debates. Heading into Election Day, and in the days after as states continued to count votes, the teams worked to identify and stop suspicious activity — watching for threats in the form of organic content and issue ads, proactively detecting violating content including voter interference, and investigating attempts at foreign and domestic interference. This important initiative allowed us to quickly identify and address any of these threats or potential abuse on our platforms and take any necessary action.

---

**Since 2016, we've continued to improve our efforts to reduce misinformation and combat voter interference.**

## **FIGHTING MISINFORMATION AND VOTER INTERFERENCE**

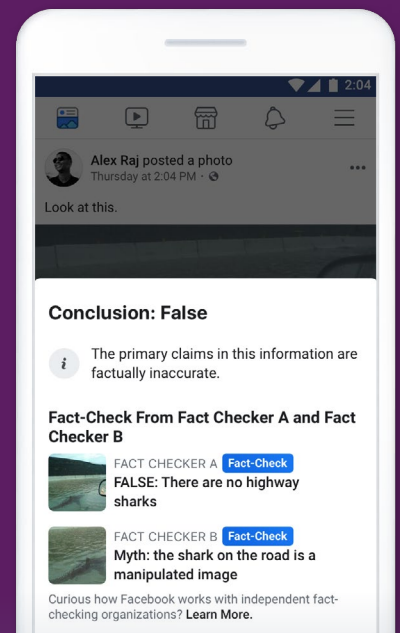
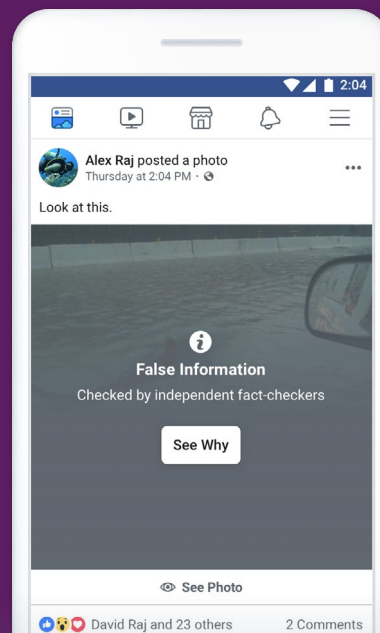
Since 2016, we've continued to improve our efforts to reduce misinformation and combat voter interference. Over the last three years, we worked with civil rights organizations and our own civil rights auditors to strengthen and expand our voter interference policies to account for new trends and tactics that are being used to try to suppress and intimidate voters as well as to account for the realities of voting during a global pandemic.

Our [Community Standards](#) outline what is and is not allowed on Facebook. These standards apply to both organic content and advertisements, and cover topics that may be implicated in the context of voting and elections, like voter interference, voter fraud, electoral violence and incitement and hate speech.

Any attempt to interfere with or suppress voting goes against our policies, and we work to proactively identify and remove this type of harmful content, even if it comes from a politician. In the months leading up to the 2020 US election, as political rhetoric heated up, we did even more — expanding our policies around voter interference and intimidation. Among other changes, we banned calls for coordinated interference that would affect someone’s ability to participate in an election, as well as other calls for people to engage in poll watching when those calls used militarized language or suggested that the goal was to intimidate, exert control or display power over election officials or voters. In total, we removed more than 265,000 pieces of content on Facebook and Instagram in the US between March 1 and Election Day for violating our voter interference policies. We also worked closely with state election authorities and the attorneys general to hear directly from them if they saw voter interference attempts. And we worked quickly to review this content and remove it if we determined it violated our policies.

We also attached informational labels to content that discussed the legitimacy of the election or claimed that lawful methods of voting like mail-in ballots would lead to fraud. These labels included information from the Bipartisan Policy Center that addressed the underlying claim.

Facebook is the only company to partner with over 80 fact-checking organizations around the world



We've continued to grow our fact-checking network, making Facebook the only company to partner with over 80 fact-checking organizations around the world. We also added two additional US fact-checking partners that review content in Spanish. Between March 1 and Election Day, we displayed warnings on more than 180 million pieces of content in the US based on the judgment of fact-checkers. On Election Day, our third-party fact-checking partners in the US had a single-day record high of new fact-check articles submitted since we launched the program four years ago. Today, when Pages and Groups repeatedly share content debunked by our independent fact-checking partners, we reduce the distribution of all of their posts in News Feed and remove them from the recommendations we show people. Pages can also lose their ability to monetize and advertise.

## **ADDRESSING MOVEMENTS TIED TO VIOLENCE**

After studying movements and organizations that had celebrated violent acts, shown a willingness to use weapons or had individual followers with patterns of violent behavior, we expanded our Dangerous Individuals and Organizations policy this summer to address militarized social movements and violence-inducing conspiracy networks, such as QAnon. Since then, we've identified over 600 militarized social movements, removing more than 2,400 Pages, 14,200 Groups and about 1,300 Instagram accounts they maintained. In addition, we've removed about 1,700 Pages, 5,600 Groups and about 18,700 Instagram accounts representing QAnon. We also banned praise, support or representation of these groups in advertising.

In the fall, we started redirecting people who search for terms related to QAnon with credible resources in two ways. When someone searches for terms related to QAnon on Facebook and Instagram we direct them to credible resources from the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), the academic research network of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism about the realities of QAnon and its ties to violence and real-world harm. Additionally, when someone searches for child safety hashtags like #savethechildren and #saveourchildren, we direct them to credible child safety resources.

## ADAPTING TO THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THIS ELECTION

This contentious election cycle was made even more challenging by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Given the increase in voting by mail, we prepared for a period of uncertainty following Election Day as the vote count continued. This was part of the scenario planning work we did well in advance of US citizens starting to vote. To ensure we could adapt to changing circumstances in real-time, we developed a range of capabilities we could implement if needed to ensure we could handle any abuses on our platform. We had a similar playbook of temporary measures that we deployed during the 2018 midterm elections and in other elections around the world.

In the days following the election, we did see an increase in reports of inaccurate claims about the election. While many of these claims had low engagement on our platform, we took additional temporary steps to keep this content from reaching more people. These included further demotions for content on Facebook and Instagram that our systems predict may be misinformation, including debunked claims about voting. We also limited the distribution of live videos that may relate to the election on Facebook. And when people tried to share a post on Facebook and Instagram that featured an informational election label, they saw a message encouraging them to visit the Voting Information Center for reliable election information.

---

**When people tried to share a post on Facebook and Instagram that featured an informational election label, they saw a message encouraging them to visit the Voting Information Center for reliable election information.**

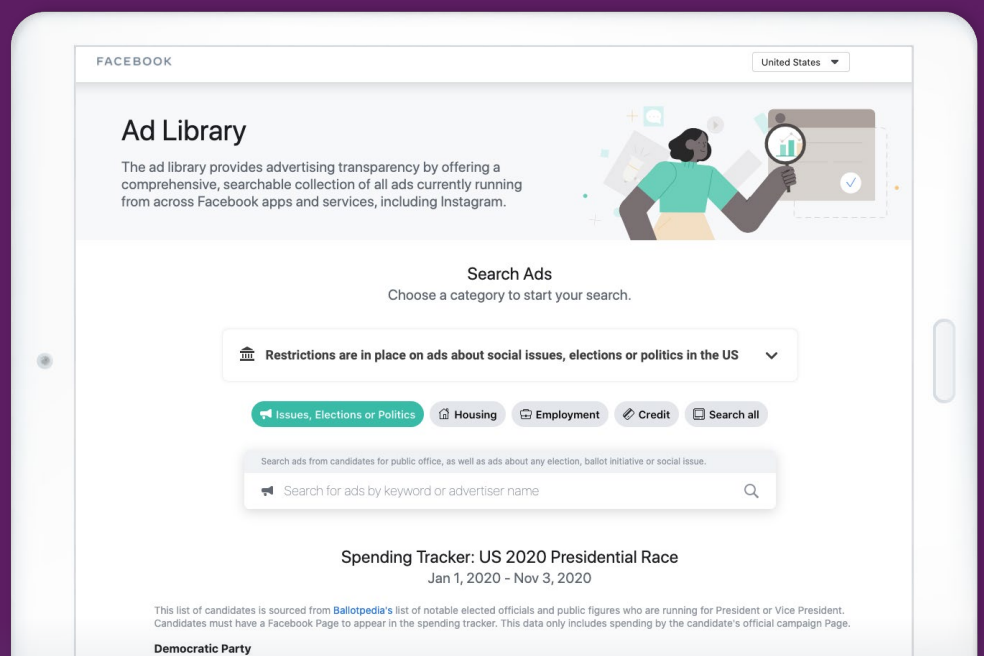
## IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY AND PRIVACY

Over the past four years, we've also been more transparent about advertising on our platforms.

In 2018, we started requiring advertisers to verify their identity and location before running ads about social issues, elections, or politics. Information about the individuals behind the ads isn't enough, which is why, in 2019, we introduced additional requirements for the organizations behind these ads. These requirements include requiring information that we can validate off Facebook, like an FEC Committee ID or a Tax ID. Between March 1 and Election Day, we rejected about 3.3 million ad submissions that targeted the US without completing the authorization process before they could run.

In 2018, we created a publicly available, searchable [Ad Library](#) where every political and social issue ad that runs on Facebook is stored for seven years. More than 2 million people visit the Ad Library every month. It provides information around political and issue ads, including who paid for them, where they ran and who they reached.

More than  
2M people  
visit the Ad Library  
every month



To give people more control over the ads that they see, we made it possible for people to see fewer social issue, electoral and political ads on Facebook or Instagram that had a “paid for by” disclaimer on them.

In the immediate pre- and post-Election Day periods, we took additional steps to maximize transparency and reduce opportunities for confusion and misinformation. We announced we would not allow ads that prematurely claim victory or attempt to delegitimize the election. In the last few days of an election, we recognized that there may not be enough time to counter new claims in ads. That’s why we permitted ads to run through Election Day as long as they were public prior to the final week. And, we blocked the creation of new ads about social issues, elections or politics. Ads that ran during this time could be found in our publicly available and searchable Ad Library, allowing fact checkers, journalists, researchers and voters alike to scrutinize them. While we experienced some unanticipated technical issues affecting campaigns from both political parties, these were largely resolved, and the vast majority of these ads ran as intended in advance of the election.

After the polls closed on November 3, we temporarily paused running ads about social issues, elections, or politics in the US. While ads are an important way to express a voice, we took this additional step to reduce opportunities for confusion or misinformation.

Beyond advertising, we also required the people who manage Pages with large numbers of followers to be verified. Anyone who managed a large Page and did not clear the process was no longer allowed to post or run ads. This was designed to make it much harder for people to administer a Page using a fake account, which is against our policies.

We also labeled posts from entities that we believe are state-controlled media outlets to make sure people know if the news they read is coming from a publication that may be under the influence of a government. We also blocked ads in the US from these publishers out of an abundance of caution.

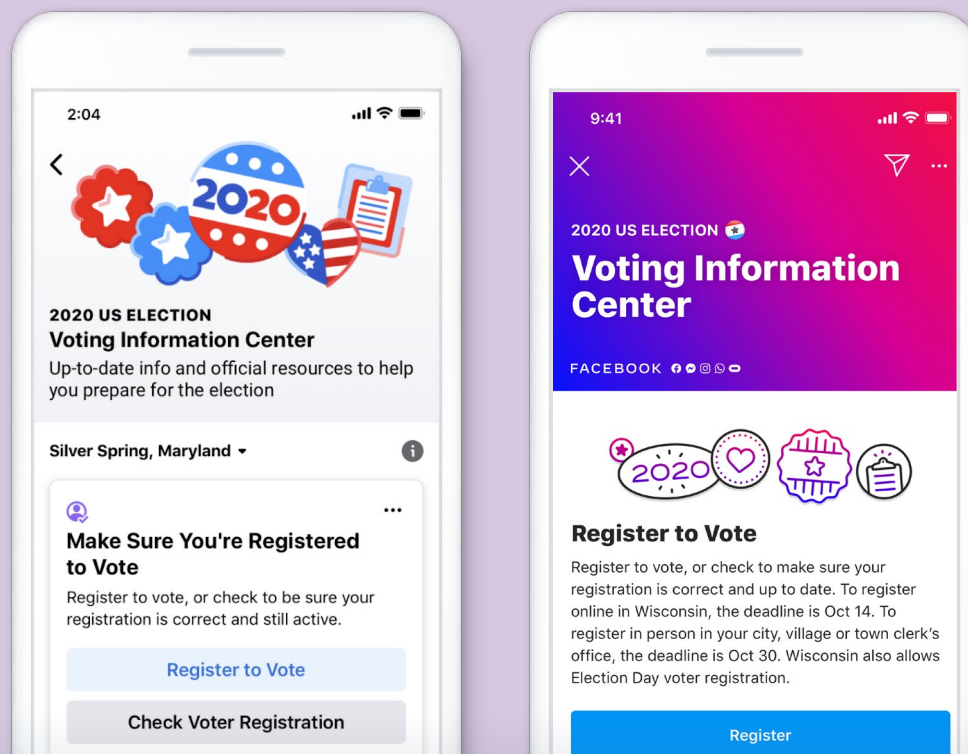


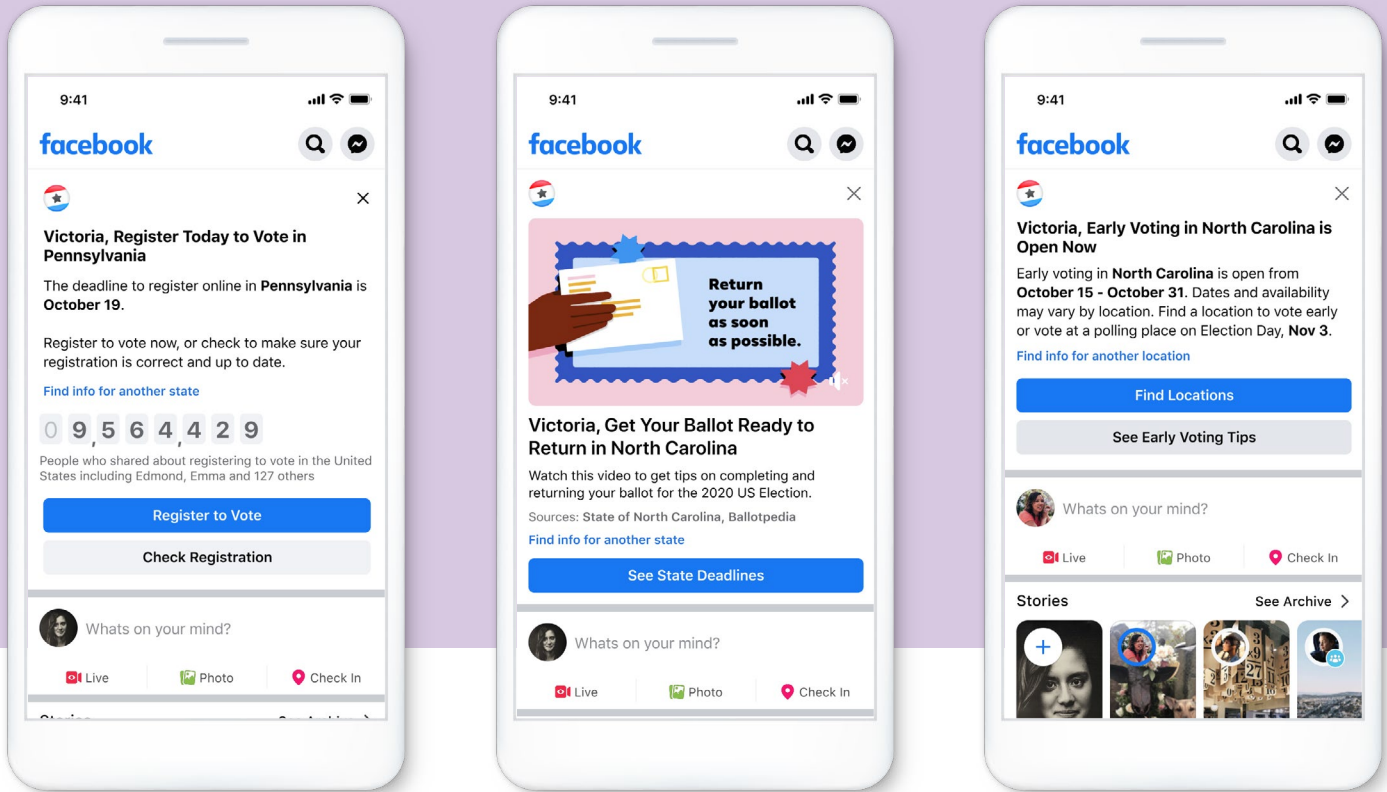
Finally, we continue to focus on privacy. Since 2018 we have changed the way third-party companies access data on Facebook. Tools like App Review and Data Use Checkup help hold developers accountable to our policies. We also entered into a new agreement with the FTC that changes how Facebook protects people's privacy.

## EMPOWERING VOTERS THROUGH RELIABLE INFORMATION

While we've been working to prevent election interference on Facebook and increasing transparency, we've also been doing more to educate and empower voters.

We ran the largest voting information campaign in American history, connecting people with reliable information about voting from state election authorities and nonpartisan civic partners. We set an ambitious goal of helping 4 million people register to vote — double the 2 million people we helped register in both 2016 and 2018. As a result of putting

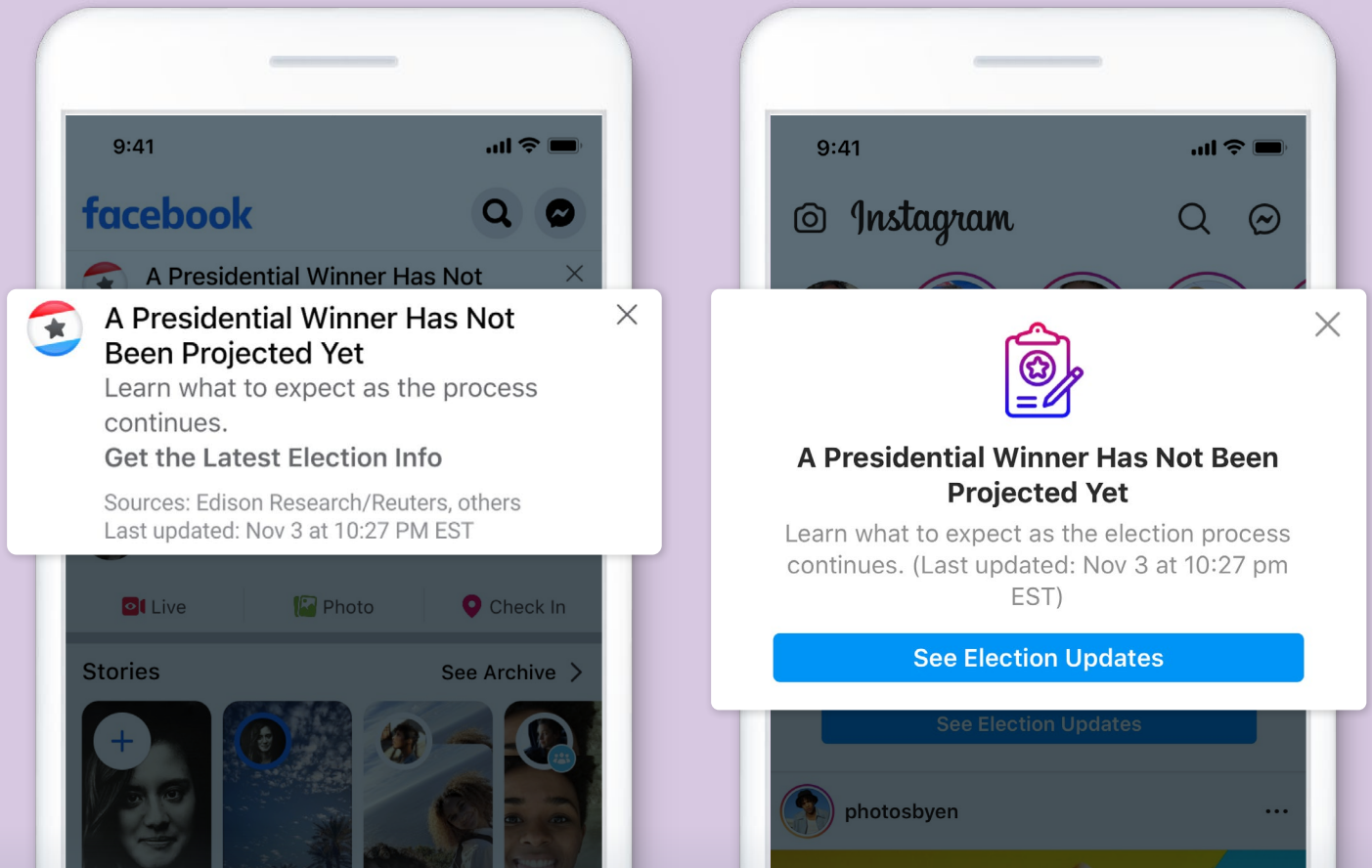




the full force of our apps behind this effort, we exceeded our goal and estimate we helped 4.5 million people register this year across Facebook, Instagram and Messenger, based on conversion rates we calculated from a few states we've partnered with.

To help people get the information they needed, we launched our Voting Information Center on Facebook and Instagram with state-by-state content about how to register, request a mail-in ballot, check polling places and more. Since it launched, 140 million people visited the Voting Information Center, with over 33 million people visiting it on Election Day alone.

We also showed voting information at the top of the Facebook, Instagram and Messenger apps to people of voting age nearly every day between Labor Day and Election Day. These notifications provided reliable information about how to register and connected people with their state authorities — or our nonpartisan partner Democracy Works in states that



don't have online registration — so people could register off-platform. They also included information about different voting options, including voting by mail, early voting, and voting on Election Day, as well as facts about voting on significant issues from the Bipartisan Policy Center. And we sent information to voters living outside the US, including military members and their families, to help them find tools to vote.

We also created Voting Alerts for state and local authorities to send updates about the voting process to their constituents. These notifications were sent to people in their jurisdictions and were included in the Voting Information Center. For example, the State of Alaska used Voting Alerts three weeks before Election Day to tell Alaskans they were no longer required to have someone witness them signing their mail ballot and have the witness also sign.

Beyond helping people register and vote, we knew one of our responsibilities was helping people sign up as poll workers to fill the shortage caused by the pandemic. To make it easier for people to sign up with their state and local election authorities for this critical role, we ran notifications at the top of the Facebook and Instagram apps to people in the US over the age of 18. We estimate this helped more than 100,000 people sign up as poll workers, based on conversion rates we calculated from a few states we've partnered with. We also offered free ad credits to every state election authority, so they could recruit poll workers across our platforms.

Once polls closed, we used the Voting Information Center as a source of reliable information on election results to help people understand the vote-counting process. We included results of the presidential, Senate and House races from the National Election Pool, Edison Research and Reuters. When President Trump declared premature victory while votes were still being counted, we started running top-of-feed notifications on Facebook and Instagram so that everyone knew the winner had not been projected. We also started applying labels to both candidates' posts automatically with this information. The notifications and labels directed people to the Voting Information Center for the latest state-by-state results.

After Reuters and a majority of independent decision desks at major media outlets projected a winner, we updated the notifications running across the top of Facebook and Instagram to show that Vice President Biden was the projected winner of the election. We also started applying labels with this information on presidential candidates' posts with a link to our Voting Information Center to see more about the election results.

We could not have done this without the help of state election authorities, civil society organizations like the Bipartisan Policy Center and Democracy Works, and other organizations that provided their expertise and support.

# Next Steps Going Forward

All of this gives us an idea of the impact we had on the 2020 US election, but we still don't have the full picture.

That's why, earlier this year, we launched a [new independent research initiative](#) with nearly 20 outside academics to look specifically at the role Facebook and Instagram played in the election. This will examine the impact of how people interact with our products, including content shared in News Feed and across Instagram, and the role of features like content ranking systems, with three guiding principles: independence, transparency and consent. Initial findings — whatever they may be — will be published next year, unrestricted by Facebook and freely available to the public.



**We launched a new independent research initiative with nearly 20 outside academics to look specifically at the role Facebook and Instagram played in the election.**

This research won't settle every debate about social media and democracy, but we hope that it will shed more light on the relationship between technology and our elections. It will also help us build toward the future — which must include rules set by governing democracies, not private companies, on a range of critical issues.

Next year, we hope progress can be made in Washington, DC, in updating the rules of the internet. When the current session of Congress began in 2019, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg published a [Washington Post op-ed](#) urging policymakers to update regulation in four key areas: elections, privacy, data portability and content. Since then, we have begun to put forward our ideas and suggestions for what regulation in these areas could look like.

On all of these regulatory issues, we believe our work over the past two years has laid a strong foundation that can lead to progress in 2021 on updating the internet's rules. We look forward to working with Congress and other experts on these complex issues.



# Appendix

## Elections Integrity Timeline

### Key Elections Investments and Improvements

- DECEMBER 2016** Launched third-party fact-checking program
- APRIL 2017** Announced new tool to help people spot false news on Facebook
- AUGUST 2017** Banned Pages that repeatedly share false news from running ads
- SEPTEMBER 2017** Removed first network of accounts for violating our Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior policy
- OCTOBER 2017** Announced new authorization requirements before advertisers can run ads about elections or politics on Facebook or Instagram
- DECEMBER 2017** Launched 'Related Articles' to give people more information on content rated false by third-party fact-checkers
- APRIL 2018** Announced Election Research Commission to study social media's role in elections
- APRIL 2018** Updated our Community Standards to include internal guidelines used for decisions about content
- APRIL 2018** Introduced appeals for some content that we may have mistakenly removed
- MAY 2018** Began partnership with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab to study and investigate disinformation campaigns around the world, and continued to expand these external partnerships throughout 2018 and beyond
- MAY 2018** Launched the Ad Library (with social issue/political ads archived for 7 years) and began requiring that advertisers running social issue/political ads confirm their location in the US and place "Paid for by" disclaimers on these ads
- JUNE 2018** Allow people to see the ads a Page is running across Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger even if those ads aren't shown to you
- JUNE 2018** Announced new Pages transparency feature showing Page creation and name change dates
- AUGUST 2018** Launched new Pages authorization requirements beginning with high reach Pages in the US
- SEPTEMBER 2018** Expanded fact-checking to photos and videos
- SEPTEMBER 2018** First physical Elections Operations Center for monitoring ahead of key elections
- SEPTEMBER 2018** Added "People Who Manage This Page" section to show country locations in Page Transparency
- OCTOBER 2018** Expanded voter suppression policies and announced new way for users to report potential voter suppression
- OCTOBER 2018** Rolled out the Ad Library report to make it easier to see who is spending money on social issue/political ads on Facebook
- MAY 2019** Launched fact-checking of Instagram content
- JUNE 2019** Rolled out our ads authorization process for more advertisers globally
- JUNE 2019** Launched policy banning paid advertising that suggests voting is useless or meaningless, or advises people not to vote
- AUGUST 2019** Announced that organizations running social issue/political ads in the US now have to go through a stricter authorization process, including providing information such as Tax ID or FEC Committee ID number
- SEPTEMBER 2019** Introduced the Deep Fake Detection Challenge to develop new ways of detecting and preventing manipulated media
- SEPTEMBER 2019** Expanded policy to ban ads that suggest voting is useless or meaningless, or advise people not to vote
- OCTOBER 2019** Launched Facebook Protect to give campaigns, elected officials, their staffs, and others increased security protections

## Elections Policy One Pager

### Facebook's Policies for Elections and Voting: What You Need to Know

Elections have changed since 2016, and so has Facebook. We have more people and better technology to protect our platforms, and we've improved our content policies and enforcement.

Our [Community Standards](#) outline what is and is not allowed on Facebook. These standards apply to both organic content and advertisements, and cover topics that may be implicated in the context of voting and elections, like voter interference, voter fraud, electoral violence and incitement and hate speech.

Our [Advertising Policies](#) are more restrictive than our Community Standards and apply to all advertisers, including politicians and political campaigns. We prohibit ads that discourage voting, prematurely claim victory, attempt to delegitimize the election, or are inconsistent with health authorities on voting safely.

The following is an overview of how we've improved our Community Standards and Advertising Policies to protect election integrity and prevent abuse. This is how we're promoting reliable election results; stopping voter interference and fraud; combating hate speech, violence and incitement; and adopting stronger rules and greater transparency for political ads.

#### 1 Promoting Reliable Election Results

We have a responsibility to help people understand the election process this year, particularly as more people vote by mail due to the pandemic and experts predict that election results will take longer to count.

##### Before Election Night:

- We're connecting people with facts about voting from the Bipartisan Policy Center, including that voting by mail has a long history of trustworthiness and election results might take longer than usual.
  - These facts appear in our Voting Information Center (VIC), and we'll include labels on relevant posts about voting directing people to these facts and more information in the VIC.
- We'll remove posts that claim that people will get COVID-19 if they take part in voting, and we'll attach a link to authoritative information about the coronavirus to posts that might use COVID-19 to discourage voting.
- We have an unprecedented global fact-checking network with 10 partners in the US—three of which fact-check in both English and Spanish. When a fact-checker rates a post as false, we reduce its distribution and show a label with the fact-checker's assessment. We displayed warnings on

December 2020

A Look at Facebook  
and US 2020 Elections

FACEBOOK

