This Election Year, the Political Ad Whack-a-Mole Game Will Continue

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T he role of political advertising in social media will be a key discussion topic in 2020—an easy prediction to make. Kantar Media expects that US digital political ad spending will reach $1.2 billion this year, and we believe the social platforms that continue accepting political advertisers will be major beneficiaries of that spending.

It appears now that Facebook will be one of them. "While Twitter has chosen to block political ads, and Google has chosen to limit the targeting of political ads, we are choosing to expand transparency and give more controls to people when it comes to political ads," wrote Rob Leathern, Facebook's director of product management, in a January 2020 blog post.
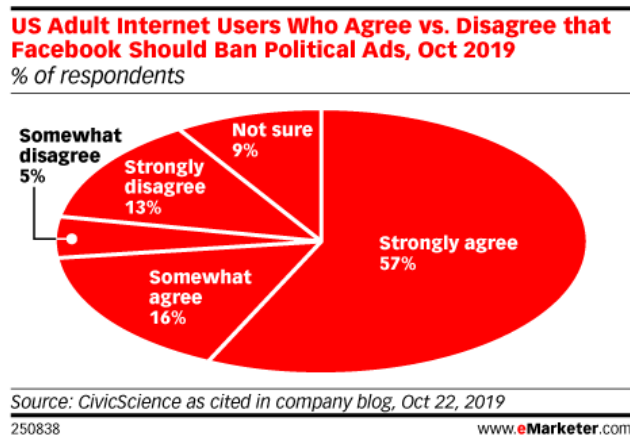
Facebook's stance could still change as 2020 progresses, but we think focusing on what that company will or won't do is actually the wrong approach. That's because the issue of political speech (paid and unpaid) isn't just a Facebook issue: Putting curbs on political ads is something the entire digital ecosystem needs to deal with, thanks to the massively outdated campaign laws in the US.

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This year, there will be many debates over what is and isn't a political ad in digital media, along with a lot of false starts as the challenge of coming up with a definition becomes more apparent. (Twitter's experience thus far is a good road map.)

A big part of the challenge is that reining in political content in general is all but impossible. Even if all the social properties banned political advertising and found a way to define it that pleased most people, there would still be plenty of opportunities for organizations and candidates to push their messaging out via viral organic content.

As a result, we expect organizations and candidates will take full advantage of the disarray over political content and advertising in social media, leaving the platforms to play a continual game of whack-a-mole.

Those machinations—and the political motivations behind them—will leave consumers unhappy. In an October 2019 CivicScience survey, 57% of US adult internet users said they strongly agreed that Facebook should ban political ads.

US Adult Internet Users Who Agree vs. Disagree that Facebook Should Ban Political Ads, Oct 2019
% of respondents

Somewhat disagree 5%
Strongly disagree 13%
Not sure 9%
Strongly agree 57%
Somewhat agree 16%

Source: CivicScience as cited in company blog, Oct 22, 2019
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www.eMarketer.com

And in a separate study from November 2018, CivicScience found that 54% of US Facebook users would "gladly do away with all political posts on Facebook" if they could.

There's little to suggest that social media users feel any better about that topic today. And, unfortunately, there is little to suggest that a clear end to the debate over political speech in social media is in sight.