Abortion and Trump top topics for federal candidate political ad spending on Facebook and Instagram

*Ad Observatory data provides insight on messaging associated with winning campaigns by party and other factors*

By Austin Botelho

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2022

Trump-endorsed congressional candidates who spent on Facebook and Instagram ads focusing on the economy, Trump, and Ukraine fared better electorally in the 2022 midterms elections than those who focused on education, law enforcement, and abortion, according to a new analysis of the ad spending by topic of congressional candidates by NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy (C4D). Overall general election federal candidates spent $36 million on political ads on Meta.

C4D collects data on Meta political ad spending from a variety of sources, applies machine learning, topic modeling, and other types of tools to develop messaging insights on Ad Observatory. This includes analysis of political ad messaging by topic. This public dashboard is designed for journalists and researchers to have access to these insights to power investigations such as this midterms analysis. See Ad Observatory methodology. This analysis covers political ad spending on Meta from January 1, 2022 to November 18, 2022.

Spending by federal candidates on political ads on Meta was just one factor—and a relatively small one—of digital political ad spending in the 2022 midterms elections, estimated at $1.2 billion for Meta and Google combined, according to Kantar Media. (This includes spending on political ads by third party groups.) OpenSecrets estimated the overall political spending on federal races was $9 billion this cycle. However, Meta remains a significant focus for political advertising and little is known about its messaging content and tactics.

Other key findings from C4D’s analysis include:

- Eight out of ten U.S. House and Senate general election candidates, or 681 out of 807, ran political ads on Meta this year, spending a combined estimated $36 million.
- Overall, candidates spent $3 million on abortion-related ads, the second most spent on any topic after elections which is commonly mentioned to get out the vote.
- Democrats focused on abortion and Trump while Republicans focused on the economy and immigration
- Trump, despite not being on the ballot, loomed large as the third highest topic.
- Democrats far outspent Republicans on Meta ads this cycle and third party candidates barely register compared to the major parties.
- Spending on abortion and immigration by Trump endorsed candidates was more associated with underperformance than by overall Republicans

**Trump endorses focused spending on the economy and immigration**

Post-election analysis focused on the lack of an anticipated red wave, the underperformance of Republican candidates relative to polling. Historically, midterm elections are unfavorable for the president's party and key indicators including inflation and President Biden’s approval ratings suggested these midterms would follow suit. The lack of this red wave was particularly noticeable with the subset of candidates endorsed by former President Donald Trump. C4D researchers used data from Ad Observatory (AdObservatory.org), combined with polling and election result data, C4D researchers to generate novel insights about this group.

Using a report from Politico that identified the 18 Trump endorsees running in the most competitive races, the C4D team broke down the nearly $650,000 combined spending on Meta ads by this group. The figure below shows topics with at least $2,000 in spending. Ads can contain multiple topics so the amount spent on all the topics is greater than the total spent. More about our topic methodology can be found here.

The largest focus of this group by far was the economy followed by immigration and law enforcement.
Six (33%) of the Trump endorsees overperformed in their races whereas eleven (61%) underperformed.[1] Trump endorsees underperformed at rates far higher than Republicans overall (61% vs 38%).

To determine performance we measured the vote share a candidate received above or below their district’s 2022 Cook Partisan Voter Index score.[2] For example, if a Republican candidate in an R+7 district won 63% of the vote, their overperformance would be 6%, had they won 52% of the vote, they would have underperformed by 5%.

Trump-endorsed candidates that overperformed spent considerably more on average on the ads related to the economy, Trump, and Ukraine, while those that underperformed overspent on education, law enforcement, and abortion.

This maps closely to overall Republican spending by topic though, by comparison, Trump endorseses messaged more about immigration and less about elections.
The ad topic spending associated with overperforming differed vastly between Trump-endorsed candidates and Republicans overall. While some topics like the economy yielded similar results across the two, others like abortion, immigration, and the judicial branch fared worse when addressed by Trump-endorsed candidates. Conversely, Trump-endorsed candidates that overperformed spent relatively more on Trump, Ukraine, and the military than their Republican overperformers. This difference in focus among GOP candidates overall and Trump-endorsed candidates specifically suggests that Trump-focused, “America First” messaging may be advantageous in cases of high profile Trump endorsees, but perhaps otherwise detrimental.

Eighty-four percent of general election candidates ran ads on Meta

Of the 807 Federal level candidates running in the 2022 midterm elections, 681 (84%) ran ads on Meta this year. They spent a combined $36 million, not including spending by PACs and partisan organizations.

The chart below breaks down this spending by party and topic, where discernible. Unsurprisingly, abortion garnered the second most spending by topic accounting: roughly $3 million. Despite not being on the ballot, Trump loomed large as the topic with the third highest estimated spending. Democrats far outspent Republicans on Meta ads this cycle and third party candidates barely register compared to the major parties. Further research on partisan ad strategies could help explain these discrepancies.
Democrats focused spending on abortion and Trump

The 310 Democrat candidates with Meta ad campaigns spent a combined $29.1 million. The topics with more than $200k in spending are shown below. Democratic candidates spent the most on abortion and election related ads.

![Congressional Democrat combined spending by topic](chart)

Among this list, 168 (54%) overperformed and 127 (41%) underperformed relative to their district’s partisan lean. Based on the average spending gaps between over and under performers, the election topic was by far the most correlated with overperformance, whereas law enforcement and Ukraine were correlated with underperformance.

![Average spending disparity between Democrat over/under performers by topic](chart2)

The C4D team's analysis of midterm candidates' use of Meta political ads and topics is a starting place. In this analysis, we showed how topic modeling data can be used aside vote share data and the Cook Partisan Voter Index to show the different priorities of campaigns and voters. As future commentators consider the major takeaways from the 2022 midterms, such tools can be used to deepen understanding of the role Meta ads spending plays in the course of election campaigns. Some ideas for further analysis include:

- Combining Ad Observatory Meta political ad data with information about spending on other social media platforms.
- Identifying sets of candidates’ spending on particular topics and conducting a deep qualitative analysis of political ad content.
- Analysis of Spanish-language political advertising in the 2022 election.

Please reach out to the C4D team with questions about this analysis or questions about data available on Ad Observatory.
About NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy

Cybersecurity for Democracy is a research-based, nonpartisan, and independent effort to expose online threats to our social fabric — and recommend how to counter them. It is a part of the Center for Cybersecurity at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering.

Would you like more information on our work? Visit Cybersecurity for Democracy online and see how tools, data, investigations, and analysis are fueling efforts toward platform accountability.

About the author

Austin Botelho is a research engineer with the Cybersecurity for Democracy team at NYU’s Tandon School of Engineering. He developed a specialty in online harm detection using machine learning through previous work at Anti-Defamation League and research at the Oxford Internet Institute and The Alan Turing Institute.

Footnotes

[1] Candidates that did not have opposition from a mainstream party or performed as expected were not labeled as over or under performers.

[2] Vote shares collected from Edison Research for the National Election Pool via the BBC.

[3] The largest categories were Uncategorized and Donation which were dropped from the visualization because they are more procedural in nature.

For more information about NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy:
info@cybersecurityfordemocracy.org | cybersecurityfordemocracy.org | Twitter: @cyber4democracy