

A Brief History of Tech and Elections: A 26-Year Journey

From the first campaign websites to the deplatforming of a president and beyond--a brief history of how tech companies have approached elections around the world

By: Katie Harbath and Collier Fernekes

The first political campaigns to utilize the internet were President Bill Clinton's and Republican nominee Bob Dole's in 1996. In the 26 years since, technology has had a huge impact on elections around the world - for better and for worse.

With the advent of social media in the early 2000s, new platforms emerged nearly every year that would transform how candidates communicated, voters engaged, and the media covered the day-to-day horse race.

For the first 20 years, many platforms embraced their role in the democratic process. They proactively touted their partnerships with media organizations in helping people get news and information. They boasted how candidates found their platforms indispensable in reaching voters. They co-hosted debates, shared data on how much people were talking about candidates and issues, and helped register voters.

The 2016 elections changed everything. Donald Trump put companies' content policies to the test. Seemingly overnight, tech platforms turned from positive forces in democracy to negative ones after elections in the Philippines, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and the shock of Trump's upset win in the United States happened. Gone were the posts bragging about how Trump's online strategies helped him win (unlike when President Barack [Obama won in 2012](#)); in their place came announcements about preventing foreign interference, protecting against mis- and disinformation, and building political ad databases.

This report analyzes the public announcements made by technology companies over the past 26 years. We chronologically catalog which companies were founded during that timeframe and their public messaging about their election roles. We also document how platforms transitioned from touting their importance to candidates' voter outreach to the deplatforming of a sitting president of the United States for violating their community standards.

This report is not a comprehensive examination at how campaigns used technology over the years; many online tools such as email, websites, fundraising platforms, and texting are not covered. We also do not go deep into the effects of bloggers or the mainstream media on the political process. Instead, the report offers a snapshot of campaigns from the tech companies' point of view.

We analyze a [database of links](#) released by the Bipartisan Policy Center in August 2022, and updated since. This task involved curating all the public announcements from tech companies about their election work, and we supplemented it with searches in LexisNexis and interviews

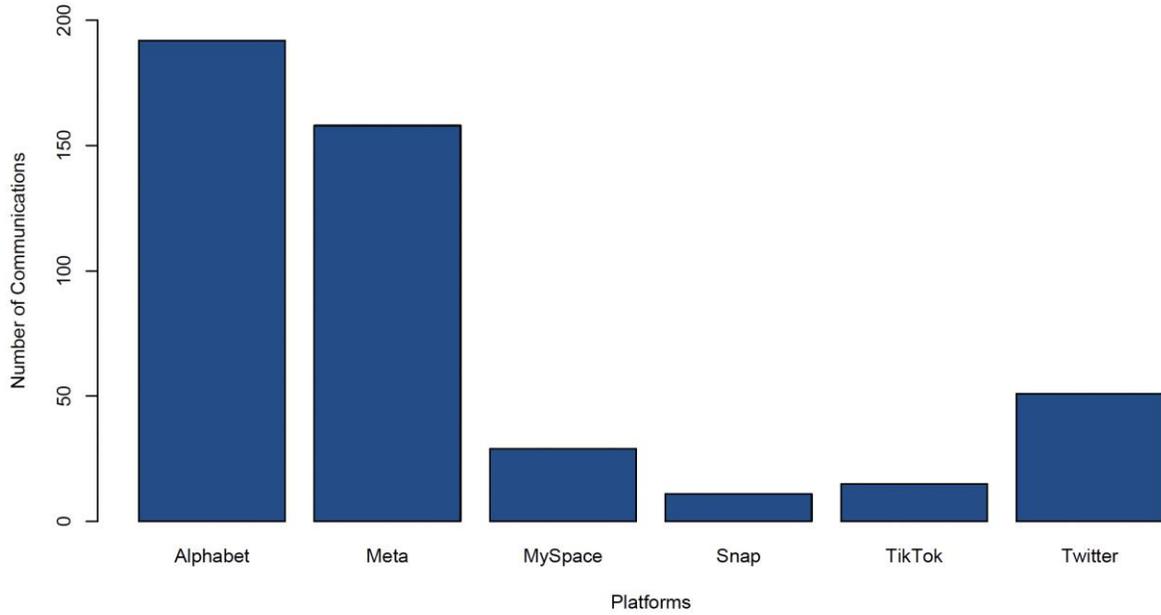
with professionals who worked on these efforts at various platforms - including one of this report's authors, Katie Harbath. Harbath was a public policy director at Facebook for 10 years, where she built the teams working with politicians and governments on how to use the platform. She also coordinated the company's work on elections around the globe from mid-2013 to late 2019. In addition, Harbath was a digital strategist for various Republican campaigns in the early 2000s, including at the Republican National Committee and the National Senatorial Committee. Wherever we could, we linked the existing releases or news stories, and where we could not, we provided a footnote with the appropriate citation from LexisNexis.

OVERVIEW

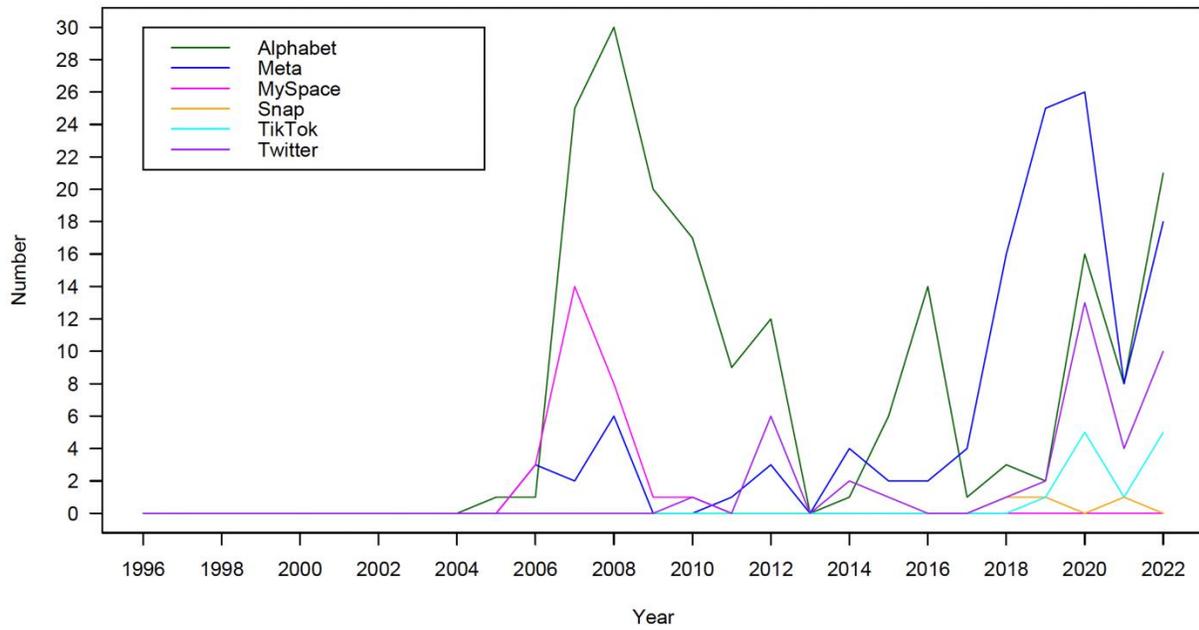
In the following pages, we provide a brief history that has many twists and turns as different platforms come on the scene and then both embrace and grapple with their role in political discourse around the world. While much has changed from the 1990s to today, some key themes emerge:

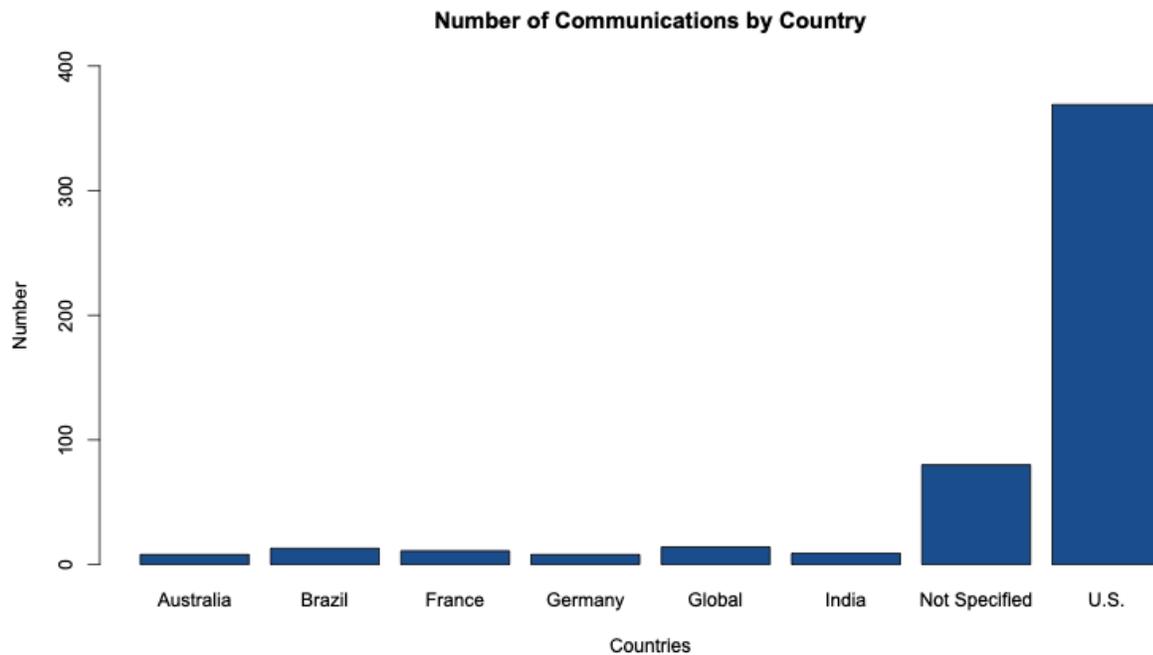
1. **Alphabet and Meta released the most announcements.** Alphabet (made up mainly of Google and YouTube) and Meta (consisting of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) originated the bulk of announcements over the years. Twitter was a close third.
2. **Meta became the most vocal starting in 2017.** Following the 2016 election and the questions around misinformation, Russian interference, and political ad transparency, Meta (then Facebook) became the most vocal platform about what it was doing to protect elections.
3. **The focus shifted from candidate use to integrity issues.** In the beginning, much of the platforms' focus was either on highlighting how candidates were using their sites to communicate with voters or how they were helping people to vote. After the 2016 election, there was a clear shift to talking about integrity efforts, such as combating mis- and disinformation or providing transparency around political ads and less about what the candidates were doing.
4. **Authoritative information.** Despite those shifts, the one area that seems consistent across the years is platforms' commitment to helping people get the information they need to participate in the political process.
5. **Most communication centered on U.S. elections.** Although the platforms, especially Meta, have communicated a lot about their work in international elections, the United States - especially in presidential election years - has been the focus of the platforms' announcements.
6. **Shift to streaming.** More and more political campaigns are running ads on audio- and video-streaming services where they can use the same data-mining techniques they use elsewhere to target voters. However, these services have no transparency tools and are not regulated, making it extremely hard to track who is buying ads, what those ads are saying, and who they are targeting.

Number of Communications by Platform



Number of Communications by Platform and Year





THE BEGINNING

Pre-2004

Companies Founded:

- 1975 - Microsoft
- 1985 - AOL
- 1994 - Amazon
- 1994 - Yahoo
- 1997 - Netflix
- 1998 - Google
- 1999 - Blogger
- 2000 - Pandora
- 2002 - Meetup
- 2002 - Friendster
- 2003 - MySpace
- 2004 - Gmail
- 2004 - Facebook
- 2004 - Audioblog
- 2004 - Okrut

Milestones

- 1994 - First e-commerce transaction
- 1996 - Microsoft teams with NBC to launch Decision'96 website

- 1996 - First presidential campaign websites
- 1998 - First online political donation
- 2000 - First podcasts distributed through RSS
- 2000 - Google debuts Google Ad Words
- 2001 - Googlebombing

It is nearly impossible to find accessible links at this point to any tech company announcements in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Most of what we found was either through LexisNexis or news stories that discussed the platforms' activities. The first eight years of online campaigning, while significant, were limited compared with today. Throughout 1996, news stories [marveled at the first presidential campaign websites](#) and regularly discussed how news organizations were launching online versions of their coverage.



Image courtesy of [4President.us](#)



Image courtesy of 4President.us

Microsoft teamed with NBC to create MSNBC in the summer of 1996, bringing an online presence along with it - including a Decision '96 section where voters could get information about the election. [This is the earliest instance](#) of a tech company announcement about elections that we could find.

CompuServe hosted an online Q&A with House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1996 that it said was one of the “best attended” chats that year.¹

Despite the 2000 election’s importance to current-day American politics, the 2000 election remained somewhat quiet on the tech company front - until reporting emerged in September 2000 on an interesting phenomenon called Googlebombing. An online humor magazine had manipulated Google’s search results so that if you searched for “dumb motherf****r” [*asterisks ours*] you would be redirected to a George W. Bush merchandise store. Google called the prank an anomaly and said it was working to improve online security. This example is likely one of the

¹ Art Kramer, “Internet Was All-Purpose Clearing House in 1996,” Cox News Service, January 1, 1997. LexisNexis Academic.

2005 - 2006

Companies Founded:

- 2005 - YouTube
- 2006 - Twitter

Milestones

- 2005 – President Bush Googlebombed
- 2006 - First Facebook political ads
- 2006 - Facebook launches news feed
- 2006 - George Allen gaffe posted to YouTube

In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, there was no doubt that internet campaigning was here to stay: “eCampaign” departments started to be formalized inside the party committees. Congressional offices and campaigns began hiring digital directors and conducting meetings with bloggers.⁶

Google continued to face the growing threat of Googlebombing, accompanied by accusations from the right that the company was politically biased for failing to prevent the manipulation of search results. Marissa Mayer - then Google’s director of consumer web products - [denied any bias, but instead blamed problems with its algorithms](#). “We don’t condone the practice of Googlebombing or any other action that seeks to affect the integrity of our search results,” Mayer said. “But we’re also reluctant to alter our results by hand in order to prevent such items from showing up.”

Two years after its founding, Facebook became a significant player on the political stage. This change began on college campuses as student candidates created Facebook groups for their campaigns, even buying ads. In 2006, Facebook announced various election issue groups, with Mark Zuckerberg stating that “[i]n the upcoming election, the free, unrestricted and unmanipulated flow of information is also vital to democracy.” In November, Facebook posted a [blog post](#) encouraging people to vote and shared an “[election pulse](#)” dashboard that listed how many users were supporting which candidates on their profiles.

⁶ “Blogometer: Live from Blog Row,” The Hotline, October 21, 2005. LexisNexis Academic.

facebook login register help

Facebook Blog

Displaying the last 10 posts.

Vote!
by Ezra Callahan 8:14pm Monday, Nov 6



Nearly 1.5 million people have made their voices heard with our Election 2006 network. Those voices certainly aired a wide range of views: Some took stances on the Iraq War (stay or leave), abortion (pro-choice or pro-life), and gay rights (for or against). The largest lot of you guys support lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18. Check out the Election Pulse; everything from the planet formerly known as Pluto to Stephen Colbert saw their supporters rally behind them.



Uncle Sam may look like he's poking you, but in reality he wants you to vote.

Beyond the groups, your voices gave support to hundreds of candidates running for governorships and US Congress seats. A new form of online campaigning is starting to emerge.

But really none of this matters if you don't go out and vote. Election 2006 had one goal in mind: to get you engaged with the election so you'd get into the booth today to cast your ballot.

So make your pokes and wall posts count—get out there and vote!

Ezra, the project manager for the Election 2006 network, is busy arguing politics around the office before heading off to the polls.

Monthly Archive:
November (1)
October (5)
September (7)
August (4)

Subscribe to this Blog:
Facebook Blog (Atom)
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Email:
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 Everyone can join.
[Site Tour](#)
 Learn about Facebook.

MySpace, meanwhile, announced a [voter registration campaign](#), and Virginia Gov. Mark Warner [made a brief appearance](#) in the online virtual world Second Life.

The most significant milestone of the 2006 election era was a video of then-[Sen. George Allen of Virginia](#). Allen was seeking re-election and was considered a front-runner for the 2008 GOP presidential nomination, until a critical day in August. Allen was followed on the campaign trail by a “tracker,” a person sometimes hired by an opponent who attends campaign events with a video camera or audio recorder in hopes of catching the candidate saying or doing something potentially embarrassing. Allen called out this tracker using a racial slur, and the video was promptly uploaded to YouTube. At the time, YouTube was still a nascent video-sharing platform created just a year before, and the video of Allen promptly went viral. It was the first warning sign to candidates that anything they say could immediately be seen by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people. YouTube did not comment on the incident but would come to embrace candidates’ use of the platform in 2008.



George Allen introduces Macaca

Image from [YouTube](#)

OPTIMISTIC ERA

2007 - 2008

Companies Founded:

- 2007 - Tumblr

Milestones

- 2007 - iPhone Launch
- 2007 - Facebook launches pages and it's ad platform
- 2007 - MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook hires to focus on supporting political figures political hires
- 2008 - YouTube/CNN presidential debate

By 2007, it was MySpace's time to shine. At the time, MySpace was the largest social networking site and in March 2007, it [announced a section dedicated to politics](#) with an emphasis on the 2008 presidential election. It partnered with MTV for [a series of one-on-one dialogues](#) with the leading presidential candidates and America's youth on college campuses. In 2008, MySpace was the first platform to [ink a partnership with the Committee on Presidential Debates](#) to create MyDebates.org, a new website that would "house interactive tools for viewers to virally engage in the political process, including a personalized issue scorecard, polling, reportable national statistics, live web streaming and much more."⁷ Candidates were flocking to set up accounts on the site, as well as on Facebook and YouTube.

Then-Sen. Barack Obama would revolutionize the use of the web similarly to how Howard Dean had in 2004. Chris Hughes - one of the Facebook co-founders - [left the company in 2007 to work on Obama's presidential campaign](#) and promptly incorporated many of the lessons he learned while building the social network.

With more candidates using MySpace, Google, YouTube, Facebook and other platforms, the companies started pulling in more resources and people-power to provide customer support to those campaigns, as well as identifying potential partnerships to get more political content on their sites.

In March of 2007, YouTube launched CitizenTube and invited the presidential candidates to campus.⁸ In 2008, YouTube would be the first to start a [regular series of blog posts](#) highlighting the content that candidates were posting to the platform. It also started media partnerships, beginning with the New Hampshire primary in January 2008. In addition, YouTube made a point to highlight how the platform was being used around the world: [This post about the Kenyan election in 2008](#) was one of the earliest we could find. [John Edwards announced his presidential candidacy](#) on the platform in January 2007, and the company began a special section called YouChoose '08. It was also [the first to co-sponsor major primary debates](#) for both the Democrats and Republicans with CNN, where the candidates famously [got a question from a snowman](#).

⁷ "MySpace and the Commission on Presidential Debates Launch MyDebates.org," Wireless News, September 23, 2008. LexisNexis Academic.

⁸ Jose Antonio Vargas and Sam Diaz, "Online Firms Boot Up for Political Campaigns] The Washington Post, March 17, 2007. LexisNexis Academic.



GOP Debate: The classic "raise hand" question

Image courtesy of [YouTube](#)

Facebook transformed in the middle of the 2008 campaign by [announcing the creation of pages and an ad platform](#) in early November 2007 that allowed candidates to better connect with voters. Later that month, it [launched a partnership with ABC News](#) to create a U.S. politics application where people could share their support for their favorite candidate, learn how to register to vote, and join debate groups. Facebook also began ads to help people register to vote and [did the first "I Voted" Election Day reminder](#) at the top of the news feed.

Election Day in America

[Back to The Facebook Blog](#)



Election Day in America

by [Adam Conner](#) Tuesday, November 4, 2008 at 12:01am

Today is Election Day in America, when all attention focuses on democracy's essential moment: voters stepping into polling booths and making their choices. As many as 130 million people, perhaps even more, are expected to [cast ballots](#), in what many experts predict will be the highest level of voter turnout in the U.S. in at least 40 years.

Our new [Election 08 Page](#) helps you be part of the Election and enhance your experience on Facebook. Use our map tool to find your polling location, give an Obama or McCain [gift](#) to a friend and update your status to encourage your friends to get out to the polls. Use the "I Voted" button at the top of your News Feed and watch as the [Facebook vote dashboard](#) tallies voters in real-time.



As of 12:01AM, Election Day

For some of you, it's not too late to register. If you live in [Idaho](#), [Iowa](#), [Maine](#), [Minnesota](#), [Montana](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Wisconsin](#) or [Wyoming](#), you can register today at your polling location.

And if you or anyone you know experiences any problems voting, call the [Election Protection Coalition](#) at 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683).

After you vote, head to your local [Ben & Jerry's](#) for a free ice cream cone and watch the results come in as America picks its next President.

Adam, an Associate on the Public Policy team, is getting out the vote.

Facebook had a presence at the Democratic and GOP conventions similar to Microsoft, UStream.tv, and Google/YouTube. In another sign of tensions to come for the company, [Randi Zuckerberg](#) - Mark's sister and a Facebook employee at the time - was outspoken [about how Democrats embraced Facebook at their convention](#) and the Republicans did not at theirs. The GOP forcefully disagreed, saying it had incorporated "new" media into its plans and that Zuckerberg was wrong.

Regardless, Barack Obama won in 2008 in what was heralded as the "[Facebook election](#)" - the first election where "all candidates—presidential and congressional—attempted to connect directly with American voters via online social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace."

2009 - 2010

Companies Founded:

- 2009 - WhatsApp
- 2009 - Foursquare
- 2009 - Pinterest
- 2009 - Bitcoin
- 2010 - NextDoor

Milestones:

- Google's first transparency report

2008 may have been dubbed the MySpace or Facebook election, but going into 2009, YouTube was the platform that communicated the most about candidates around the globe. It also tracked the trends and insights on what candidates and issues people were searching for across its platform.

YouTube highlighted televised election programming in Spain, the U.K., Greece, and Poland. In Israel, voters [used the video platform to pose questions to candidates for prime minister](#). Before the election in India, YouTube highlighted the Google elections center where people could get news and information about the candidates running for Parliament. As the U.S. midterms approached, it highlighted the platform's use for gubernatorial debates, as well as trends and insights about the most-watched videos.

As Google and YouTube built up their teams, [AOL also started to go after the political advertising](#) funds that were expected to start flowing to the platforms.

These platforms once again helped people to register to vote and see alerts about Election Day details. For the first time, Foursquare and Twitter made announcements highlighting their efforts. [Foursquare created a way for people to check into their polling place](#) to get an "I Voted" badge, while [Twitter highlighted different accounts](#) and hashtags that people could follow to get the latest election coverage.



Check-In and include #ivoted in your shout out to get your limited edition iVOTED badge

GO VOTE

Currently in **Washington, DC**



Top Locations: New York City, NY • Las Vegas, NV • Albuquerque, NM • Dallas, TX • San Francisco, CA • Chicago, MA • New York

Check-ins throughout day
 PLAY Central standard time Mountain Standard Time

123,489 Total Check-ins **7,849** Number of different venues checked-in **73%** Gender of check-ins **27%** Gender of check-ins

Powered by Foursquare Designed by JESS3

Buzz [VIEW ALL](#)

JESS3 #ivoted is civic participation and technology fully realized.
by **jessethomas**

About

Foursquare partnered up with data visualization experts at JESS3 to create a live, interactive map of each check in at polling sites during the November 2010 elections. Users earn a custom designed badge for voting and can see a special set of data about election. [Read more here...](#)

Go Vote

Well, it's time to Go Vote! Make sure you're registered, know who's running in your district and state and note the address of your local polling place and you'll be all set. Vote411.org offers up all the information you'll need to ready yourself to exercise your civic duty and let your voice be heard. [Find out about more voting resources here...](#)

GO VOTE

Partners



Foursquare [polling place check-in](#)

2011 - 2012

Companies Founded:

- 2011 - Snapchat
- 2012 - Medium
- 2012 - Oculus
- 2012 - Coinbase

Milestones

- Arab Spring
- Return of Santorum/Googlebombing controversy
- President Obama does Q&A with Zuckerberg
- Google and Facebook co-sponsor primary debates
- Official convention activations by companies
- Obama sets records with convention speech, thank-you post
- Facebook Nature Study shows value of the “I Voted” button
- First congressional hackathon

Early 2011 through 2012 was arguably the pinnacle of optimism over technology’s role in democracy. The [Arab Spring](#) - a series of anti-government uprisings that started in Tunisia and spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain - began early in the new year. [Social media played a huge role](#) in helping the protesters to organize and to post minute-by-minute updates to the rest of the world. Someone in Egypt even [named their baby “Facebook”](#) to honor the platform’s role in the revolution.

Back in the United States, politicians such as [President George W. Bush](#), [President Barack Obama](#), and [Reps. Eric Cantor, Paul Ryan, and Kevin McCarthy](#) all headed to Facebook to be interviewed by executives. Obama also did a [Twitter](#) town hall. [Congress held its first official “hackathon.”](#) Digital music service Pandora announced in 2011 [it would host political ads.](#) [Google](#) and [Facebook](#) sponsored GOP presidential primary debates in 2012 (the Democrats held none with Obama running unopposed for re-election, .)

Facebook’s Profile



Facebook

Tune into Facebook Live on Monday at 2 p.m. PST for a live discussion with [George W. Bush](#) from Facebook headquarters. He will be talking about his new book, “Decision Points.” Watch at <http://apps.facebook.com/facebooklive>.



Live Discussion with George W. Bush

Location: <http://apps.facebook.com/facebooklive>
Time: 2:00PM Monday, November 29th

15 hours ago · Like · Comment · Share

8,275 people like this.



PRESIDENT OBAMA
facebook townhall
wednesday april 20, 2011

- Wall
- Info
- facebook townhall
- Events
- Welcome
- Video
- Photos (16,022)
- Privacy Policy
- More-

About
This is the White House page on Facebook. Comments posted on and messages r...
More

980 611

The White House 
Government Organization · Washington, District of Columbia

two easy steps:
1:  the white house page
2: RSVP for the special event

president obama's facebook townhall



President Obama Invites You to his Facebook Townhall [HD]
The White House

wednesday, april 20 1:45pm pdt / 4:45pm edt

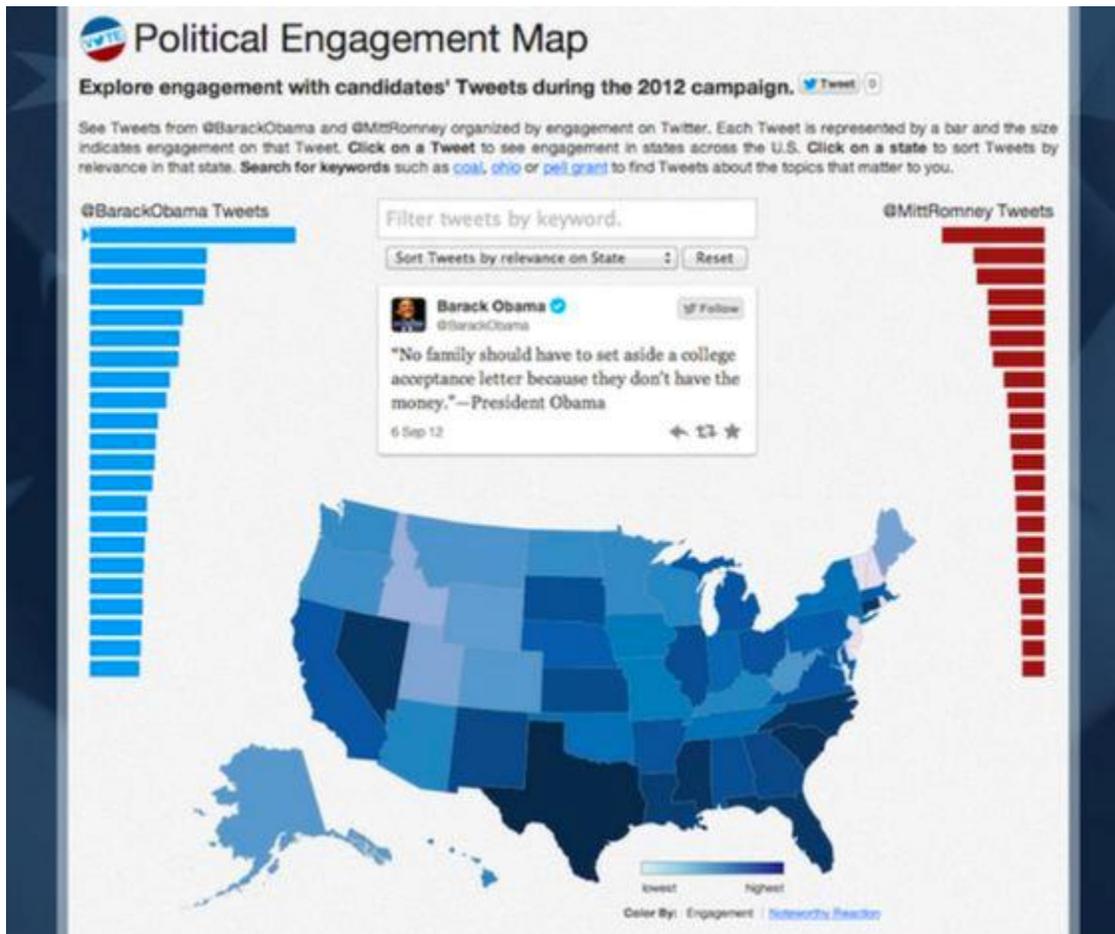
where? well, everywhere!
this special event will be live streamed for everyone

we want to hear from you
click  above to get started and learn more about this townhall

One of the few controversies during this time was [the resurrection of results when searching for Sen. Rick Santorum](#) on Google, Yahoo, and Bing. The problem first surfaced in July 2006, when [Dan Savage began an online campaign](#) against Santorum. Despite its unflattering stance toward the senator, Savage's website popped up first when users searched Santorum's name. In 2011 when he was running for president, the senator became more vocal about how none of the search engines would fix the top results, and he accused them of bias.

Entering the 2012 election year, these platforms - especially Google - once again [released data](#) on how much people were talking about the candidates and issues as voters went to the polls in the primaries. [Facebook put out tips](#) for the candidates on how to use the platform and

[announced an election app](#) with CNN. Twitter debuted a [political engagement map](#). Amazon released a [heat map](#) where people could see the most popular political books by state.



The platforms were present at both party conventions, with the media saying social media helped make the gatherings “[a convention without walls](#).” The platforms provided people with authoritative information again on how to vote, and [Facebook even released a study in Nature](#) magazine showing how its “I Voted” button helped to boost turnout.



Facebook and Twitter space at the 2012 convention.

After President Obama declared victory on Election Day, he posted on Twitter and Facebook a photo of him and the first lady hugging that was simply titled “Four more years.” It became [the most tweeted and liked posting](#) to date. [Hundreds of stories ran before and after the campaign](#) on the president’s revolutionary use of technology.



Barack Obama
10 hours ago

Four more years.



Like · Comment · Share

392,119

3,203,935 people like this.

View previous comments

1 of 152,155

Everyone wanted to know how they could do the same.

2013 - 2014

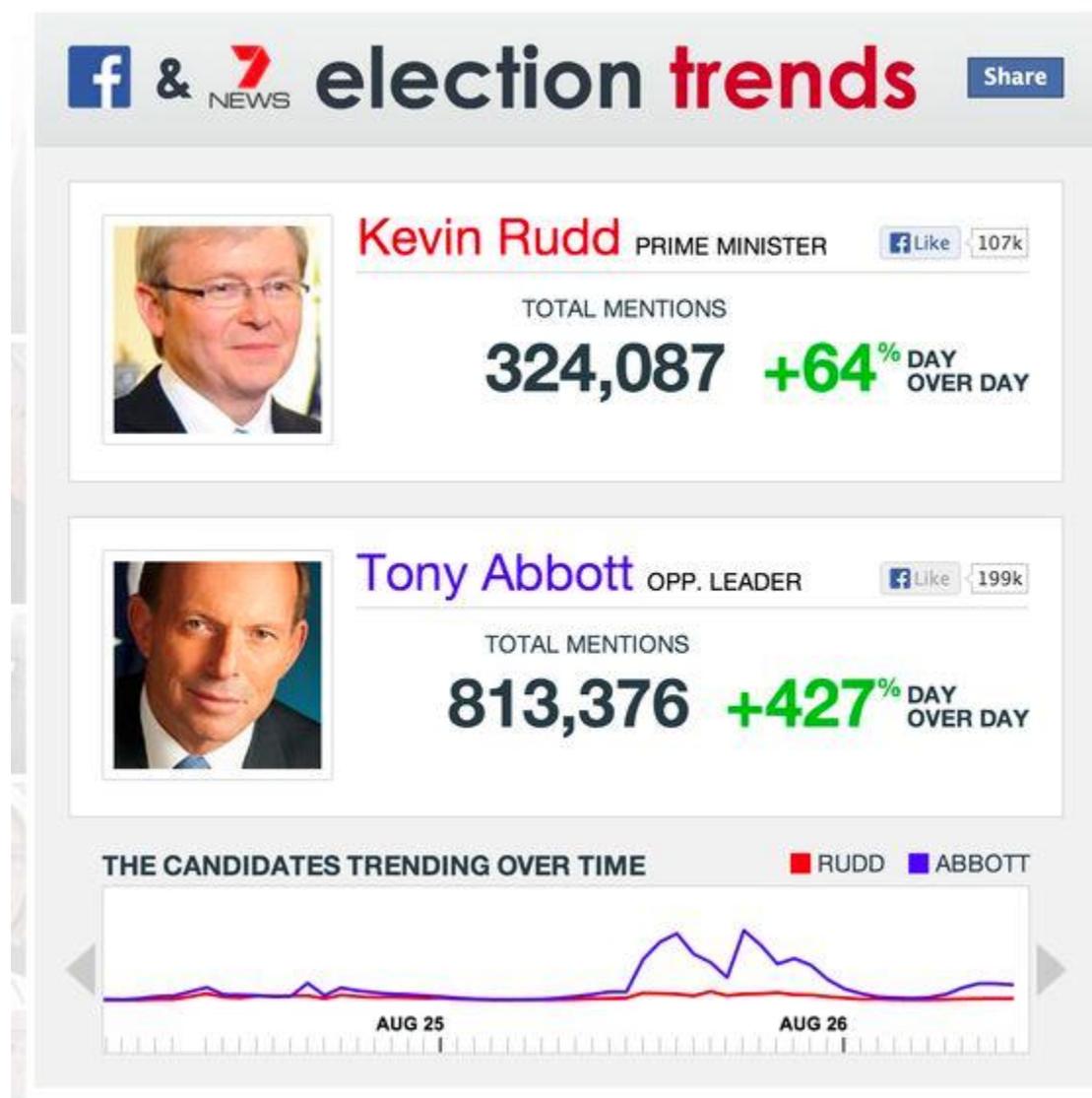
Companies Founded

- 2013 - Vine
- 2013 - Telegram
- 2014 - Justin.tv/Twitch
- 2014 - First non-fungible token

Milestones

- Facebook questioned about “I Voted” Button

2013 was a somewhat quiet year for the companies on the elections front. In Australia, the parties capitalized on the lessons learned from President Obama's 2012 campaign with the Liberal Party federal director [saying in a speech afterward](#), "Social media was more important in this election than any previous one and the Liberal Party devoted a much greater proportion of our campaign resources to it than we have in the past."

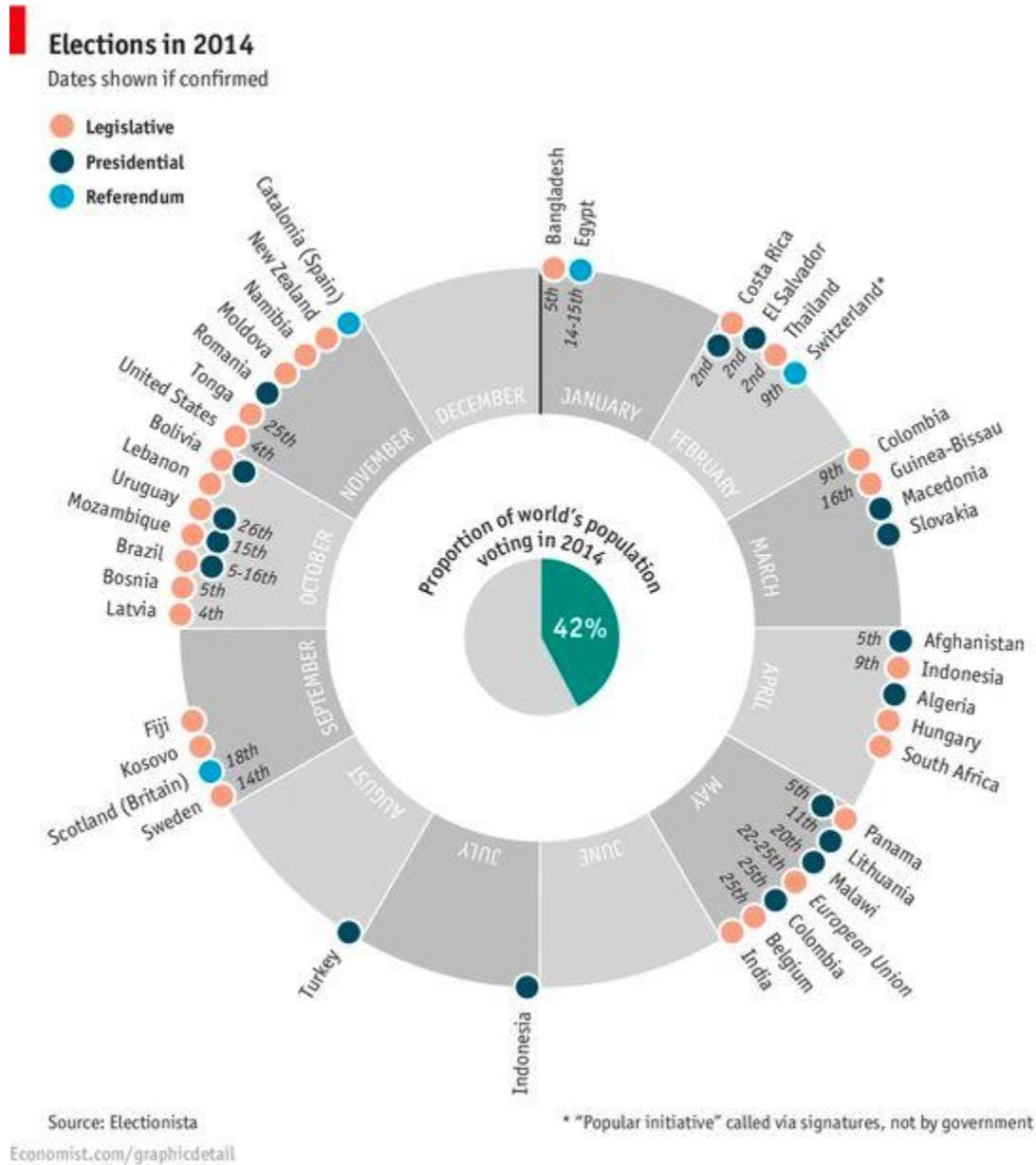


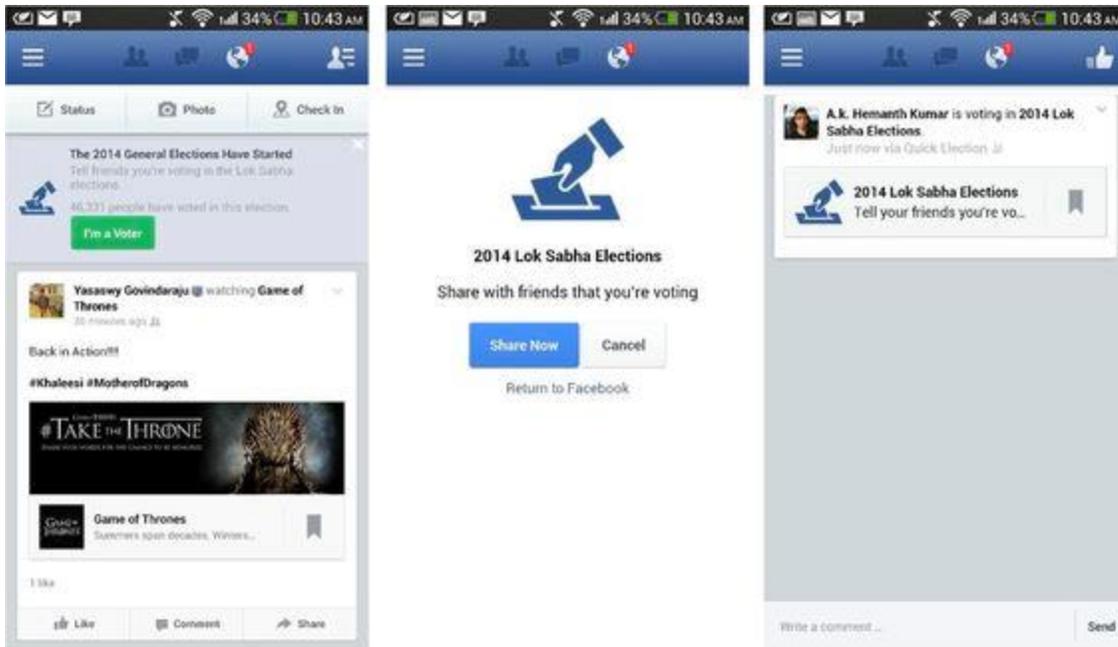
[Questions were raised](#) about the Liberal Party's use of a Facebook app and what data it was collecting from users.

Social media - especially Facebook and Twitter - [were also used](#) in the 2013 German elections. The U.S. [Congress held its second hackathon](#).

Then came 2014 - a year in which [nearly half of the world went to the polls](#). For many countries, social media was playing a big role in their elections for the first time. In India, candidates

embraced social media. Facebook and Twitter released data on what people were talking about on the platform, did a livestream partnership with NDTV to interview the candidates, and launched their “I Voted” button for the first time overseas.





That work extended to many of the other major elections that year, including in the European Union, Colombia, Indonesia, the Scottish independence referendum, Brazil, and New Zealand.



GENERAL FACEBOOK STATS

NUMBER OF FANS



Ahead of the U.S. midterms, [the platforms were doing a lot of the same things](#) they had in 2012. Their efforts included providing people with authoritative information about how to vote, insight into what candidates and issues people were talking about, and election results.

For one of the first times, [Facebook faced pressure on its “I Voted” button](#) and questions around what, if any, research it had done in 2012. This issue was on people’s minds after the company was questioned earlier that year about a study it had done to see which changes to the news feed could make people happier or sadder - [a controversy called “emotional contagion”](#) after a phrase in the report.

THE RECKONING

2015 - 2016

Companies Founded

- 2015 - Meerkat
- 2015 - Periscope
- 2015 - Discord
- 2016 - TikTok

Milestones

- The explosion of livestreaming - Meerkat, Periscope, Facebook Live
- Donald Trump's Muslim ban comment
- Primary debate co-sponsorships by Facebook, Google, and Twitter
- Philippines and Brexit elections
- Trending topics controversy for Facebook
- Major party convention activations
- Onsite presence at general election debates
- Facebook's launching of fact-checking program

The 2015-2016 period was a turning point for the companies. These were the last years they co-sponsored debates or highlighted how politicians were using their platforms.

2015 saw a series of elections in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Argentina. Google and YouTube highlighted how [they were helping people get information for the election](#) in the United Kingdom while Facebook [partnered with Sky News to](#) livestream a series of debates on its platform. Facebook even partnered with a design studio [to light up the famous London Eye](#) as a donut chart to show how much people were talking about the political parties on the platform.



Image courtesy of [Bompas and Parr](#)

Livestreaming exploded during these years. At the popular SXSW conference in 2015, everyone was talking about an app called Meerkat where people could livestream from their phones. Some went so far as to declare that 2016 would be known as the “[Meerkat election](#).” Although that app fizzled out once Facebook launched Facebook Live and Twitter introduced Periscope,

livestreaming was here to stay. Then-candidate Donald Trump was one of the first politicians to use it, [livestreaming his arrival](#) to the August 2015 Republican primary debate in Cleveland - of which [Facebook was a co-sponsor along with Fox News](#). Trump and the presidential candidates regularly livestreamed their rallies. Trump even [streamed the third debate on his website](#) with his own people providing commentary and analysis. Many wondered if it was a glimpse into what might become Trump TV.

In addition, Facebook sponsored a primary debate where it wove insights and data about what people were discussing on the platform into moderator questions. [YouTube](#) and [Twitter](#) also co-sponsored primary debates, doing similar things with their data.

Around this time, questions about candidates and content moderation started to rise, starting with [Donald Trump's December 2015 statement and social media posts](#) about supporting a ban on Muslims coming into the United States. It was the beginning of a debate around politicians and speech that continues to this day.

This controversy did not stop the tech companies from coming out in full force for the general election in 2016. YouTube, Twitter, Google, Facebook, and others all had activations at both conventions and were sponsors helping to stream the proceedings on their sites. They provided behind-the-scenes coverage as well as data on what people were talking about the conventions on their platforms.

[For the first time in the general election debates](#), Facebook and Google provided data to the moderators about what people were talking about online that they could use when posing the questions. Facebook was on the ground to provide journalists and others with the ability to go live from behind the scenes. Snap was onsite to cover each debate for its “Live Stories” product. The first general election debate was, at the time, [the most tweeted ever](#).

Instagram got in on the action as well, partnering with CNN on a series of activations, including a [portrait series of the candidates](#) and [projecting the election night results](#) on the Empire State building.



Image courtesy of [CNN](#)

In addition, [Microsoft was using predictive tools to forecast the election](#). [Vimeo](#), [Pandora](#), [Nextdoor](#), [Twitch](#), Google, Facebook, and Twitter also provided people with information on registering to vote and how to vote on Election Day.

Things became rockier for the companies as 2016 went on. A [controversial election in the Philippines](#) saw a candidate win who regularly utilized online harassment to silence his critics. [Facebook was accused of](#) suppressing conservative content in its trending topics section. The United Kingdom stunned the world by voting to leave the European Union, leading many to wonder [how the Brexit campaign had used social media](#).

By fall, *The Economist* was running stories [about an era of post-truth politics](#). And, after Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election, the platforms went overnight from being celebrated for their role in campaigning to being vilified. Stories surfaced of [Macedonian teenagers spreading fake news to make money](#). The Trump campaign said [Facebook was the key tool for its victory](#) - leaving many to wonder what sort of ads he actually ran, what they said, and who they targeted. Many were concerned that the campaign had [run ads to suppress the Black vote](#) — an accusation campaign officials denied.

**The
Economist**

SEPTEMBER 10TH-16TH 2016

How to fix the National Health Service

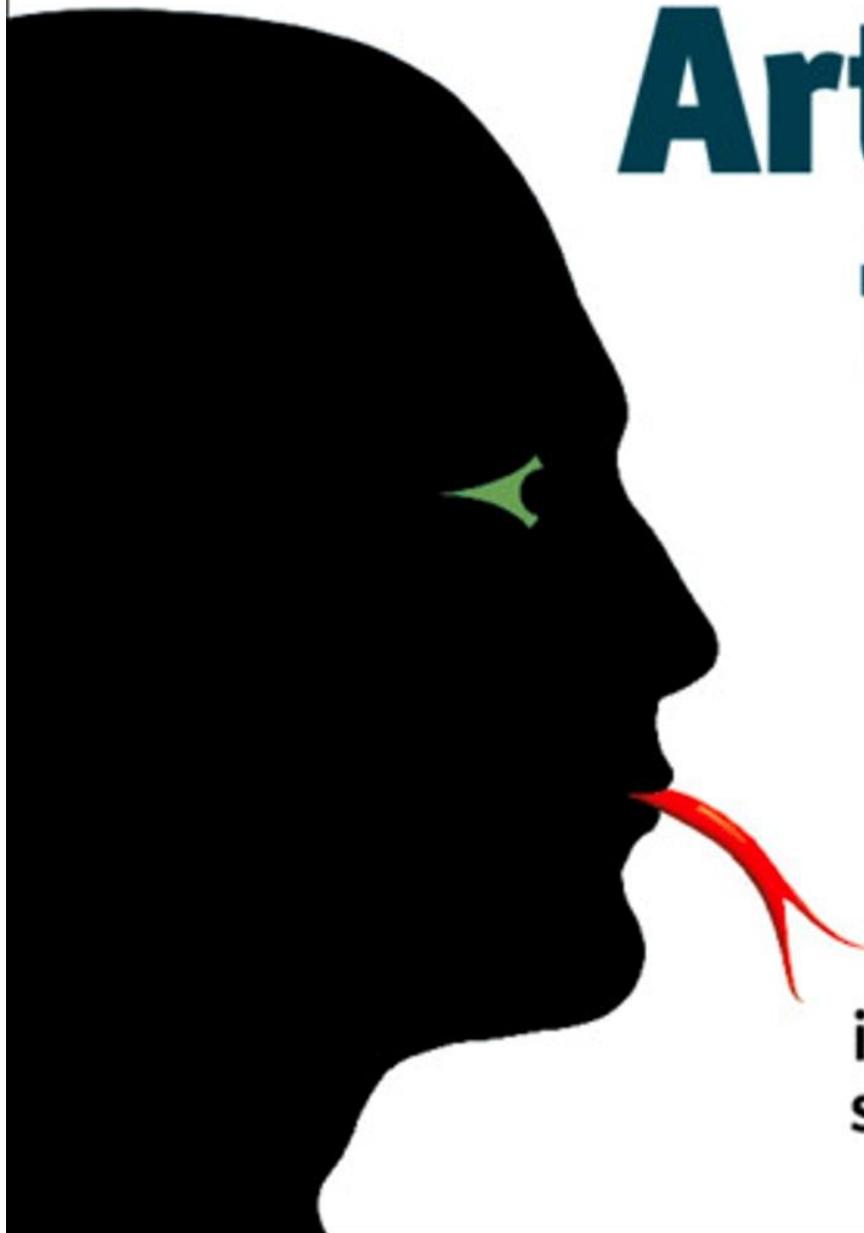
What is Gulenism?

Introverts: overlooked and undervalued

Rise of the wooden skyscraper

Art of the lie

**Post-truth
politics
in the age of
social media**



By December [Facebook launched the first version of its fact-checking program.](#)

2017 - 2018

Companies Founded:

- 2018 - Parler

Milestones:

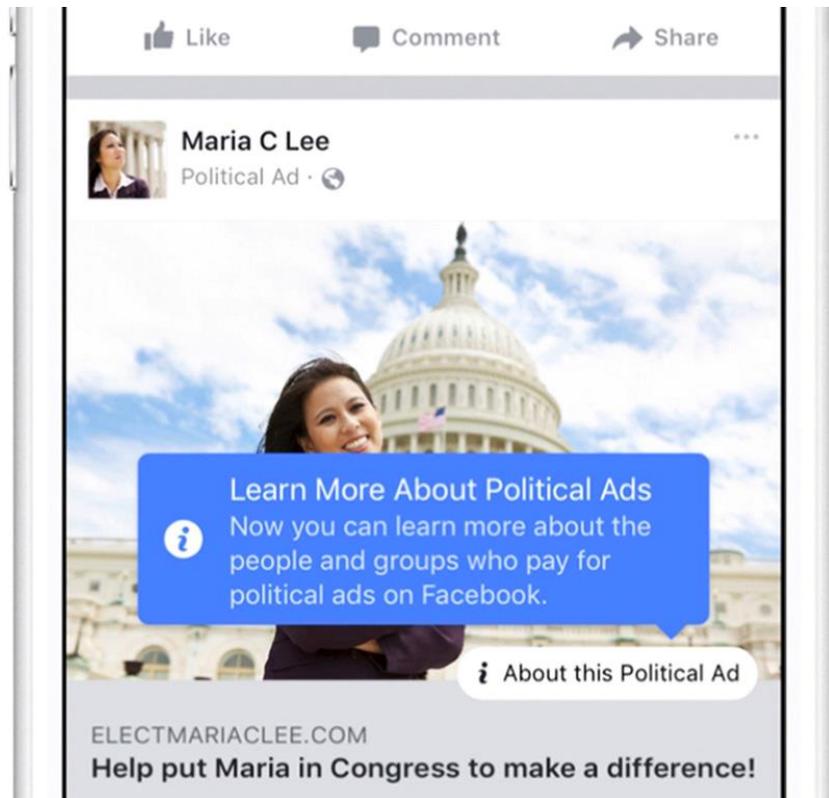
- Russian interference found on platforms
- Company executives testify before Congress and other legislative bodies
- Cambridge Analytica news story broke
- Political and issue ad transparency dashboards appear
- Misinformation labels debut
- Integrity teams are formed
- Facebook changes its approach to the political sales team
- Election operation centers or war rooms
- Trump caravan ad is removed
- Instagram launches I Voted stickers
- Snapchat helps users to register to vote
- First coordinated inauthentic behavior reports
- Less political content is shown in the Facebook feed

2017 and 2018 saw a dramatic shift in how technology companies approached elections. The focus was no longer on showcasing how their platforms could help candidates engage with voters, but rather on how they were addressing the harms that could appear on their platforms.

In early 2017, the focus was on people - such as those in Macedonia - who were spreading fake news for money. Critics [began to urge platforms](#) to make online political ads more transparent. In April, [Facebook released a paper](#) that outlined its understanding of organized attempts to misuse the platform.

It was not until early September 2017 that [Facebook first released](#) a statement showing that it had found ads on the 2016 U.S. election originating in Russia.

A flurry of activity followed as other platforms such as [Google/YouTube](#), [Tumblr](#), and [Twitter](#) said that they too had found similar actions. [Facebook, Google, and Twitter executives testified to Congress](#) about the matter. The companies [announced that they would launch political ad libraries](#) to help bring more transparency to the advertising being run on the platforms - including verification efforts to ensure that foreign entities could not place ads. [Zuckerberg announced additional measures the company would take](#) to protect the integrity of elections, including working more closely with election commissions and increasing the sharing of threat information with other companies and the government.



Mock-up of Facebook political ad transparency tools as announced in 2017

In 2018, the heat turned up for Facebook when it was revealed that a firm called Cambridge Analytica [had used data from Facebook users](#) to build voter files that were then used to place targeted ads. This development increased questions about the role of data in campaigning and whether Facebook and other platforms were doing enough to protect the security of elections on their platforms. [Mark Zuckerberg apologized for the incident on CNN](#).

The company also started a series of blog posts and briefings called “Hard Questions” to address how the platform was trying to address some of these difficult questions around protecting democracy. [In this one from late March](#), executives focused on four areas that they were working on:

- Combating foreign interference,
- Removing fake accounts,
- Increasing ads transparency, and
- Reducing the spread of false news.

Meanwhile, the midterms were underway in the United States, and [Mexico went to the polls](#) in July [and Brazil in October](#). [Facebook launched its war room](#) to help address problems in real-time.



Image courtesy of [Facebook](#)

Facebook was the most outspoken during this time about all the things it was doing, but the company was not alone. The platforms were still [helping people to register to vote](#). Amazon began [an election update feature on its Alexa devices](#), [Apple created a midterm news section](#), and YouTube was [focusing on how people could follow news organizations to get election updates](#).



As the year ended, the companies turned their attention to the elections happening globally in 2019, [such as in India](#). Facebook also announced [an update to the Civil Rights Audit](#) that it had committed to in May, including updated content policies it had done that year around voting information.

2019 - 2020

Companies Founded:

- 2020 - Clubhouse
- 2020 - Meta (Facebook) Oversight Board

Milestones

- Twitter bans political ads
- TikTok does first election post about banning political ads
- Mark Zuckerberg gives Georgetown speech
- Mark Zuckerberg makes a donation to help election officials
- Labels with information about the election process are launched
- People are encouraged people to be poll workers
- Campaigns engage paid influencers
- Facebook civic integrity team is disbanded

The beginning of 2019 took most tech companies overseas to work on numerous elections, such as those in [India](#), [Indonesia](#), [Thailand](#), [Australia](#), [Israel](#), [Australia](#), the [EU parliament](#), Cameroon, [Kenya](#), [Nigeria](#), [Senegal](#), and [South Africa](#).

For the United States, 2019 ushered in the lead-up to one of the most turbulent and polarizing elections in American history. Free speech issues came into the spotlight. In September 2019, Nick Clegg, Meta's vice president of global affairs and communications, [spoke at the Atlantic Festival](#) about Facebook's approach to political speech - including the fact that content from politicians was not eligible to be fact-checked on the platform. A few weeks later, Mark Zuckerberg gave a speech at Georgetown University about "[Standing for Voice and Free Expression](#)."



Mark Zuckerberg at Georgetown University

These speeches led to an intense discussion in the tech and political worlds about the role of online political advertising - particularly microtargeting. Some wanted platforms to ban the targeting of political ads - valuable tools that campaigns and political parties did not want to lose. This debate led to platforms taking different approaches. [Twitter chose to ban political ads](#), [Google reduced the number of targeting options](#), and Facebook [announced more transparency and control](#) over political ads.

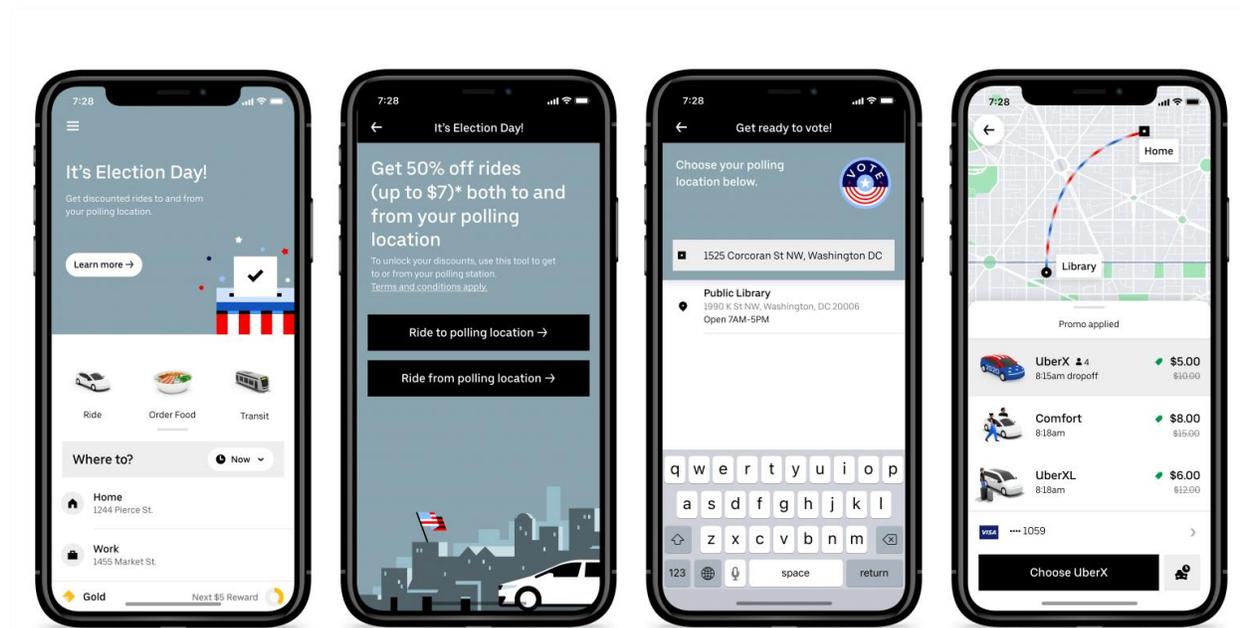
In addition to announcements about political ads, in late 2019 platforms like [Meta](#) and [Apple](#) began to market their earlier updates to election integrity efforts to stay ahead of the game. Most content from tech companies focused on political ads, with even new companies like [Tik Tok](#) making their first announcement about political ads on the platform.

The COVID-19 pandemic - declared in March 2020 - became a further catalyst for change and adjustments surrounding election information from tech platforms. The companies pushed out authoritative information on voting, with [Google](#), [YouTube](#) and other companies releasing products showing how to vote in a user's local jurisdiction. [Meta faced controversy](#) in June when it did not take down a post of President Trump's in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis. Also that month, [Meta](#) announced the creation of its Voter Information Center, an interactive product with information from independent fact-checkers to provide authoritative information to voters. This involved applying labels created by multiple nonpartisan and bipartisan organizations - including the BPC - to certain posts when they included keywords or information about elections.

On July 29, 2020, tech executives found themselves again answering questions from members of Congress - this time from the House Judiciary Committee, which held [part 6 of a hearing](#)

[series](#) on online platforms and market power. Members asked questions about the company’s efforts around the election and content moderation.

Meanwhile, companies like [Uber](#) and [Lyft](#) were announcing efforts to help people get to the polls. [Amazon](#), [Twitch](#), [Hulu](#), [Discord](#), and [Pandora](#) all made announcements about helping people to vote as well. Meta [announced a new research initiative](#) to “understand the impact of Facebook and Instagram on key political attitudes and behaviors during the U.S. 2020 elections.”



Uber’s interface to help people get to the polls in 2020

As the primaries came to a close and former Vice President Joe Biden secured the Democratic Party presidential nomination, activity became more contentious on the platforms. Then-President Donald Trump had already made claims that the election would be fraudulent if he did not win the general election. As Election Day approached, companies geared up for a slew of misinformation about the election administration process and increased their efforts to get authoritative information to the public, such as the fact that ballots would take longer to count and the public would likely not have final results on election night.

On November 7, the media declared Biden the winner of the 2020 election based on projected Electoral College tallies, but President Trump refused to concede. In fact, Trump posted on his social media accounts that he had won, causing the platforms to add a label that Biden was the projected winner. Facebook and Google [put a temporary ban on political ads](#) that extended through the inauguration. This became a challenge for the Senate runoff elections in Georgia, causing the platforms [to make an exception](#) for ads about that race.



Donald J. Trump ✓

1h · 🌐

I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!



Joe Biden is the projected winner of the 2020 US Presidential Election.

Sources: Reuters/NEP/Edison, others

[See Election Results](#)



Like



Comment



Share



👍❤️😂 547K

127K Comments 33.7K Shares

A NEW ERA ...

2021 - 2022

Companies Founded:

- 2021 - Gettr
- 2021 - Truth Social

Milestones:

- January 6 insurrection
- Georgia Senate runoff
- President Trump is deplatformed
 - Oversight Board and updated Facebook policies on deplatforming
- Facebook and Twitter whistleblowers
- Facebook's Oversight Board accepts the case to look at Meta cross-check system
- First campaign NFTs and crypto donations

2021 started with the Georgia Senate runoffs and immediately turned to the congressional count of the electoral votes in the 2020 election on January 6, 2021. As a group of Donald Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol, several high-ranking members of Congress and the administration pleaded with the president to call off his supporters; he eventually released a video on his social media accounts informing his supporters that they should leave the Capitol and go home.

However, the platforms found the president's continued rhetoric to be too inflammatory and, on the evening of the attack, many temporarily suspended Trump's accounts. The next day, [Twitter](#) and [Meta](#) banned his accounts indefinitely due to the ongoing threat of his inciting further violence. Months after deplatforming President Trump, Facebook asked its Oversight Board to [revisit the decision](#); the board kicked the decision back to the platform for Meta to come up with a policy for situations such as this. A few weeks later, [Meta released a policy](#) that upheld the ban for two more years. This means the company will revisit the suspension in January 2023.

The decision to deplatform President Trump led to the founding or growth of new conservative platforms such as Parler, Gettr, and Truth Social (which would become President Trump's new official online platform) that emerged as bastions for "free expression" and explicitly cater to those on the right.

January 6 also highlighted how the integrity challenges for the platforms have evolved from fighting foreign interference to trickier issues of rising nationalism, intolerance, and vitriol in the domestic political sphere. Questions emerged following the insurrection on [the role that social media played](#) in helping protesters to organize and what the companies should have done to prevent the violence.

The tech giants found themselves in front of Congress yet again when, in March 2021, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce held a hearing on [social media's role in promoting extremism and misinformation](#). [Another was held](#) in July by the House Judiciary Committee. In October 2021, former Meta employee and whistleblower Francis Haugen called out the company for its approach to safety and integrity issues on Facebook and Instagram, including how they approach speech by politicians as well as teen safety.

In 2022, tech companies have focused on preparations for the midterm elections. Eight companies -- [Meta](#), [Twitter](#), [Google](#), [YouTube](#), [Tik Tok](#), [Salesforce](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Nextdoor](#) -- have already made announcements. In those announcements, they focused on how they are helping to promote authoritative information on where, when, and how to vote; their election content policies; their approach to political and issue ads; and the partners they work with.

Tech companies will keep updating their policies and products leading up to the midterm elections, but the response will most likely not be as robust as during presidential election years.

Tech Company 2022 Midterm Election Announcements

A comparative look at what the companies focused on in their press releases

Company	Authoritative Info	Account Security	Labels	Recommendations	Fact checking	Media/Digital Literacy	Foreign Interference	Political and Issue Ads	Electoral Policies	Languages	Content Creator	Employee Engagement	Partners	Ride to the Polls	Team Size/Money Spent
Coinbase	●														
Google	●	●				●	●	●	●				●		
LinkedIn	●						●	●	●				●		
Lyft	●											●		●	
Meta	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●			●		●
Nextdoor	●		●					●					●	●	
Salesforce												●			
TikTok	●		●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●		●		
Twitter	●	●	●	●		●		●	●	●			●		

[Download data](#)

NOTE: This is not comprehensive of everything companies are doing on elections. This is just a look at what they chose to focus on in their official communications on their work around the U.S. midterm elections.



Moreover, audio- and video-streaming companies are starting to get more into the mix, as the [New York Times reports](#) that “powerful data-mining techniques that campaigns routinely use to tailor political ads to consumers on sites and apps are making the leap to streaming video.” Spotify earlier this year [quietly brought back political ads](#) on its platform, and [Hulu recently faced pressure](#) to allow issue ads after it denied Democrats’ desire to run ads on the Supreme Court abortion decision. Further complicating things is that these streaming services have no ad transparency tools, so it is impossible to know who is running ads, what those ads say, and who they are targeting.

The United States is not the only focus of these companies, with elections in [France](#), [India](#), [Australia](#), [Philippines](#), [Brazil](#), and [Kenya](#) also top of mind. Brazil’s election in October is of utmost concern, given President Jair Bolsonaro’s attempts to sow distrust in the electoral process - similar to those of former President Trump.



Instagram voting stickers for the 2022 French election



TikTok's 2022 Kenyan Election Guide

Back in the United States, in September 2022, Twitter's former chief of security Peiter "Mudge" Zatko came forward as a whistleblower in regard to Twitter's alleged lack of protections for user data. He testified in a [hearing](#) before the Senate Judiciary Committee on September 13, 2022 about how he thinks Twitter has security failures. The day after, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs held a hearing on [Social Media's Impact on Homeland Security](#).

While there rightfully remains a strong focus on the existing social media platforms, it is important to also look toward new and emerging technologies that campaigns are utilizing. These include accepting [donations in cryptocurrency](#) and [offering NFTs](#) to donors as rewards.

Coinbase - a cryptocurrency exchange platform - [launched an app integration in September](#), where users could see the positions on crypto that the politicians in their area have taken and how to register to vote; the platform hopes to facilitate crypto donations for pro-crypto candidates.



Coinbase's new political integration into its app

Conclusion

In less than a generation, American voters have witnessed the novelty of campaign sites on the web, a president of the United States being lauded for his use of technology, and a president being kicked off technology platforms for allegedly inciting violence. Much of this occurred in just the past 10 years.

It's been a dizzying ride. Although the introduction of technology initially brought optimism about its potential to increase political participation, we are still in the middle of figuring out how to mitigate the real harms that technology can inflict upon democracy. Although tech regulation at the federal level in the United States has been elusive, some state governments as well as many overseas - including in Europe - have passed legislation designed to rein in tech companies. Whether that legislation will be impactful—or well targeted without significant unintended consequences—is yet to be seen.

Regardless of regulation, the companies still face questions about what they are doing on their platforms to protect the integrity of not just elections but also democracy as a whole. They continue to roll out policies, products, and initiatives meant to help people access accurate information about how to vote as well as prevent bad actors from exploiting the platforms.

As soon as the 2022 U.S. midterms conclude, the focus will land on whether Meta will allow Donald Trump back on the platform in January 2023. Candidates for the 2024 presidential election will start announcing their campaigns and continue to use these platforms to reach voters. In 2023, people will go to the polls in countries like Nigeria, Turkey, and Argentina. In 2024, there will be a tsunami of elections never before seen in the world. For the first time ever during the same year, people will not only participate in a U.S. presidential election but will also go to the polls in India, Indonesia, Ukraine, Taiwan, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. This will be an unprecedented number of elections to protect online and offline - the success of which could alter the geopolitical order.

This is a living history, and we will continue to update this brief history as we make our way through crucial moments. In the meantime, we will continuously update our database as new efforts are announced or older reports are discovered. If you have anything to add, please reach out to either Katie Harbath at kharbath@bipartisanpolicy.org or Collier Fernekes at cfernekes@bipartisanpolicy.org.

Additional Resources

[Tech and Elections History Database](#)

Pinterest Boards (with images from tech and elections)

- [2004](#)
- 2005: No pins yet for this year.
- [2006](#)
- [2007](#)
- [2008](#)
- [2009](#)
- [2010](#)
- [2011](#)
- [2012](#)

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- [2019](#)
- [2020](#)
- [2021](#)
- [2022](#)

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