Facebook blocks ads in midst of US primary elections

David Moore—SEP candidate for Senate in California
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David Moore is the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Senate in the California midterm elections. He will appear on the ballot in the June 5 primary elections. For more information on the campaign, visit socialequality.com/2018

In the lead up to the California primary elections on June 5, Facebook escalated its campaign of censorship by implementing a new policy requiring anyone placing political ads to verify their identity and address. The anti-democratic measure threw a lengthy and arbitrary procedure in front of the numerous smaller candidates running across the country, to the benefit of incumbents and other well-heeled candidates.

Under the new policy, Facebook is demanding from an individual placing an ad: the front and back photos of his driver's license or passport, the last four digits of his social security number, and a mailing address. To verify the mailing address, the individual must send a physical letter that should arrive within 10 days. This applies to all those placing ads related to elections or "any national legislative issue of public importance" in any place where the ad is being run, including ads relating to "civil rights," "education," "immigration," "poverty," "foreign policy" and the all-encompassing "values."

Facebook has used this policy to block my own campaign ads for Senate and those of Kevin Mitchell running for Congress in the 51st District. As of this writing, Facebook is preventing any campaign ads for seven days.

The full impact of this policy is hard to measure. The *Tampa Bay Times* lists at least a dozen candidates in that state who have been affected, and many more are scattered throughout the country. The policy was enacted although inconsistently enforced on May 24, only 12 days before the June 5 primaries of eight states, including California, cutting many candidates off from Facebook advertising in the crucial final days of their campaigns.

The measure sharply favors established candidates. Some political pages were informed in advance of the changes and given the opportunity to go through the approval process before it was enforced. Many candidates running for the first time only learned about the policy after our ads started being denied. Moreover, larger campaigns can afford advertising on TV, radio and in newspapers while they wait for Facebook to approve them for political advertising.

Facebook's policy has an entirely arbitrary character. The mailing address of all candidates, as well as any political committee legally allowed to spend money on elections, is publicly available online at the Federal Election Commission. The identity and address of the ad purchaser is also already available to Facebook in the credit card information used to purchase an ad.

In a May 24 communication, "Hard Questions: Why Doesn't Facebook Just Ban Political Ads," the company claimed these measures were necessary for "greater transparency" to combat "bad actors abusing our systems."

What a farce! The entire premise of the changes is to direct the public response to events through established channels.

The document lists twenty "issues," outside of elections, where any advocacy falls under the political ad policy. For example: "An ad from an immigration lawyer would not be tagged as an issue ad," they write, "but if essentially the same ad were to also advocate for immigration reform in any way, it would be considered political and be subject to our policy."

If you're an anti-immigrant political action committee that already filed its paperwork, Facebook is

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happy to sell you ads immediately. If you're a student in a border town outraged by the latest execution of an unarmed immigrant by Border Patrol, you must wait 10 days. If you're a state governor who cut education funding, Facebook will post your ads immediately. If you're a newly formed strike committee, Facebook will need more than a week to confirm your address.

Facebook justifies its actions with reference to "the Russian-backed ads" during the 2016 election designed to "stoke partisanship or fear as well as manipulate and deceive." Under the guise of the conspiracy theory that $100,000 in Facebook ads from Russians played a significant part in the 2016 election, while the candidates and their political action committees spent over $1.8 billion, Facebook has moved to censor "divisive content."

In January, Facebook announced it was deprioritizing news and political content on users' News Feed, in particular those focusing on "divisive national issues." Instead Facebook would show users "trustworthy" sites.

Facebook's actions are part of a series of measures adopted by Internet and social media companies, under the pressure of the state and intelligence agencies, to censor the internet. These measures were initiated by changes in Google's search algorithms which begun in April of last year. Demands for censorship have been led by the Democratic Party, including my opponent in the elections, Dianne Feinstein.

As the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Senate, I call for an immediate end to all forms of Internet censorship. The defense of the most basic democratic rights, including the right to free speech, must be connected to the independent mobilization of the working class against the Democratic and Republican parties, on the basis of a socialist program—including the transformation of all the major internet and social media companies into democratically-controlled utilities, run in the interests of social need, not private profit.

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