

Facebook planning to ban ads which discourage voting in US elections

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On June 30, Facebook announced plans to begin banning ads that discourage people from voting in US elections. In a Newsroom blog post called “A Second Update on Our Civil Rights Audit,” COO Sheryl Sandberg announced Facebook’s anti-democratic policy by writing that a cross-functional team had been dedicated to a full-time effort “to protect elections” by blocking “don’t vote” advertising.

Sandberg presented the “don’t vote” ad ban along with a series of new “civil rights” censorship measures. Among them are strengthening Facebook’s “ban against white supremacy” by blocking not only the posts of white supremacists, but also any “praise, support and representations” such as sharing slogans and symbols of “hateful content” by other users.

Other measures are being intensified with the supposed aim of “fighting discrimination” in Facebook housing, employment and credit ads by blocking targeting by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, gender or zip code. Sandberg also wrote that Facebook is building a team to protect against “misinformation related to the census” in 2020 that will be enforced by artificial intelligence.

Specifically, on the 2020 elections, Sandberg wrote that the Facebook team is “already working to ban ads that discourage people from voting, and we expect to finalize a new policy and its enforcement before the 2019 gubernatorial elections. This is a direct response to the types of ads we saw on Facebook in 2016. It builds on the work we’ve done over the past year to prevent voter suppression and stay ahead of people trying to misuse our products.”

The reference to the 2016 elections is important because the practice of annual “civil rights audits” at Facebook is one of the responses to relentless and unsubstantiated criticisms—emanating from the US intelligence establishment—that the social media company enabled

Russian meddling and facilitated the victory of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the last presidential election. Among the many absurd assertions about “Russian interference” has been the claim that “inauthentic behavior” by “bad actors” spread divisive ideas that upset the otherwise smooth functioning of American democracy.

Among the claims of this false narrative from 2016 is that African Americans in particular were the target of a voter suppression campaign conducted by the Russians. The report of special counsel Robert Mueller asserted—without substantiation—that the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) created false social media identities “with the goal of sowing discord in the US political system.”

Additionally, several reports prepared for the Senate Intelligence Committee last December claimed that the IRA conducted a social media “voter suppression campaign” by posing as fed-up Americans and targeting African-American and Democratic Party voters. Among these reports is one entitled “The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency” published in December by New Knowledge, a cybersecurity company from Austin, Texas that is managed by former State Department and US military intelligence staffers.

In this report—based on data provided to the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence by Facebook, Twitter and Alphabet (Google’s parent company)—claims of “voter suppression tactics targeting African-American voters” on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram by the IRA are advanced without substantiation. In one revealing assertion, the New Knowledge report says that these social media posts included “advocating Black voters stay home, or vote for Jill Stein,” the Green Party’s 2016 presidential candidate.

This statement says more about the objectives of the bogus “Russian meddling” campaign than all of the reams

of documents and transcripts of testimony over the past two and a half years. Here, one can see how the US intelligence community and the Democratic Party establishment are teaming up with their supporters in Silicon Valley to censor content on social media that encourages the public to reject the two-party system.

Among the many specious rationalizations for the outcome of the 2016 elections was that the refusal of voters to turn out for Democrat Hillary Clinton, as well as those who voted for Stein, helped secure the victory of Republican Donald Trump.

The irony that banning “don’t vote” political ads is being presented as part of Facebook’s efforts to advance “civil rights on our platform” was evidently lost on Sandberg. Her claim that any advertising campaign advocating a boycott of the US elections will be shut down as a “misuse of our products” is actually an overt act of political censorship and an attack on civil rights.

The tactic of vote boycotting is an entirely legitimate policy for parties and individuals who find no one to vote for in an election and wish to offer an alternative political program to voters. This is particularly the case in the United States where the two capitalist parties hold a monopoly over electoral politics and masses of people are left with a choice between two equally despised candidates, as was certainly the case in the 2016 elections. Those claiming that “don’t vote” campaigns must be banned are, in reality, trying to ensure that one of the two parties are voted for as the “lesser of two evils” i.e. the Democrats.

Although it may come as a surprise to Sandberg and her intelligence community advisors, abstention is actually one of the choices in all democratic systems. In every democratic process—including those of a non-governmental character governed by Robert’s Rules of Order where the majority rules—abstention is one of the three options available to voters. Election boycotts are regularly campaigned for in countries around the world, except for those countries with compulsory elections.

As a matter of fact, the number of voters who abstain in US presidential elections—that is, the number of registered voters who do not go to the polls and cast a vote on election day—is a substantial percentage of the population.

For example, according to the US Census Bureau there were 245.5 million Americans ages 18 and older in November 2016 with about 157.6 million of them registered to vote. Leaving aside the fact that there were 87.9 million American adults who are not registered to vote—greater than the number of votes for either of the

two candidates running for president—according to the Office of the Clerk of the US House of Representatives, the total number of people who voted in 2016 was 136.8 million.

This means that nearly 21 million people abstained from voting for either Clinton or Trump in 2016. This number is many magnitudes greater than either the number of votes in critical Midwest industrial states (approximately 80,000) that swung the electoral college to Trump as well as the number of popular votes that Clinton won over Trump (2.86 million).

As analyzed here on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the election of Donald Trump was not the product of “Russian interference,” voter abstention or votes for third party candidates. Clinton ran a reactionary campaign based on identity politics and proved incapable of attracting popular support, particularly in the Midwest. Trump’s election was also the product of a rejection of the Democratic Party after eight years of the Obama presidency where the promised era of “hope and change” never arrived.

In the run up to the 2020 elections, Facebook is intervening on behalf of a faction of the ruling elite to block alternatives to the Democratic Party. Under conditions where masses of people are entering the class struggle, moving to the left and toward socialism, this intervention is taking the form of censorship of oppositional and left-wing political perspectives.

Facebook’s policy that all “don’t vote” campaigns must be silenced is politically reactionary. It is ultimately directed at diverting workers, students and youth—who are striving to find the genuine socialist alternative to the two parties of American capitalism, the Socialist Equality Party—back into the dead end of support for the Democratic Party.



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