

Who Targets Me?

Political Advertising on Facebook in the 2019 Election

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What we wanted to know

Political advertising in federal election campaigns has increasingly shifted from television and radio to online platforms, from 86% of advertising spending by political parties in 2011 to 76% in 2015 (*Elections Canada, 2011/2015*). After Google withdrew from political advertising for the 2019 election campaign, Facebook served as the election's primary online advertising platform (*Delacourt, 2019; Maher, 2019*). Six in ten Canadian adults report using Facebook News Feed with 36% checking it every day — more than any non-Google platform (*Ryerson Leadership Lab, 2019*). **This study sought to investigate:**

- 🌐 The effectiveness and compliance of Facebook with Canada's new political advertising law. Specifically, it sought to determine the demographics of voters being targeted, as well as the methods and messages used to target them.
- 🌐 How Canadian political and third parties used Facebook advertising during the 2019 campaign.

How we did it

- 🌐 **305 Canadians** were recruited without incentive from an online research panel to install the **Who Targets Me** web browser extension.
 - 🌐 Participants provided demographic information (postal code, age, gender, political spectrum, etc.).
 - 🌐 The extension collected **8,142 advertisements** from participants' Facebook News Feed from October 14-21, 2019 along with targeting method where available (see next section).

Key terms and what they mean

Facebook advertisement

Paid posts of text, images and/or videos that appear in a Facebook News Feed alongside other non-paid posts.

Political advertisement

Advertisements from political entities (parties, party leaders, candidates and third parties) that promote or oppose a party or a candidate, or that take a position on political or electoral issues.

Political advertisement law

Amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* made in 2018 added new requirements for online platforms selling political advertisements to publish a registry of all political advertisements with information about who authorized the advertisement.

Key terms and what they mean

Targeting method

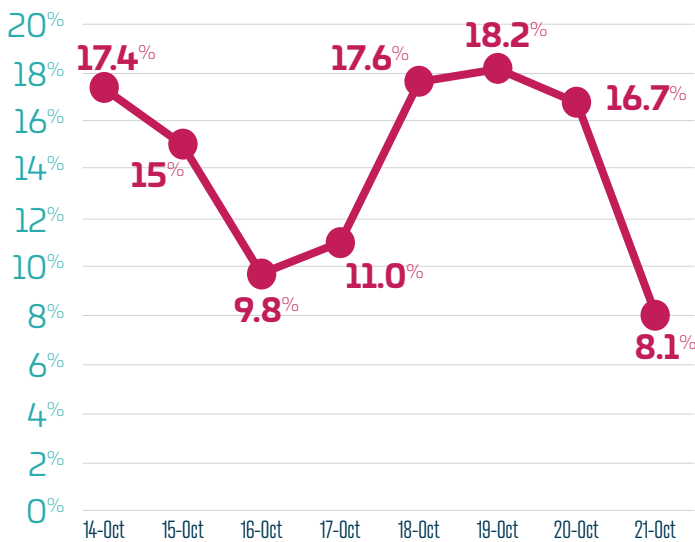
Facebook provides four broad methods (which can also be combined) to target advertisements to specific audiences:

- 🌐 **Demographics** such as location, age, gender, language and/or education level provided by Facebook users.
- 🌐 **Interest** through the pages and/or advertisements that users interact with (e.g., leader/party pages, the environment, business, etc.).

- 🌐 **Custom audience** of specific users created by matching uploaded personal information (e.g., name, email, phone number, postal code) with Facebook's user data.
- 🌐 **Lookalike audience** through which Facebook identifies the attributes and/or interests of a custom audience and delivers the advertisement to a new audience that is similar.

What we found

Figure 1. Political advertisements as a percentage of all Facebook advertisements by date



In the week leading up to the election, approximately 13% (n=1,085) of the 8,142 Facebook advertisements observed were political (see **Figure 1**).

This overall picture masks considerable variation in political advertising by riding. A minimum of 20 advertisements were observed in 71 of 338 ridings. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of total advertisements that were political in these 71 ridings. In eight (11%) of those 71 ridings, there were no political advertisements observed. In comparison, in the five ridings with the highest percentage of political advertisements, between 50% and 96% of advertisements were political (see **Figure 3**). All five ridings were closely contested by multiple political parties. For example, in the swing riding of Drummond in the province of Québec, the 29 political advertisements were from five different political parties.

Figure 2. Distribution of federal ridings by percentage of total Facebook advertisements that were political

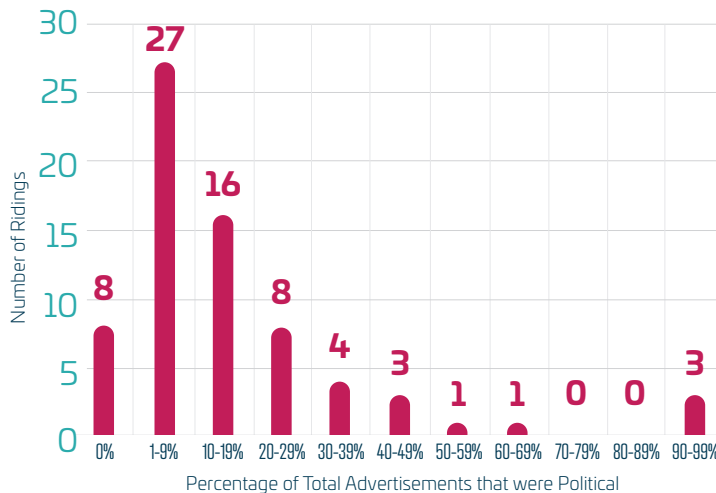
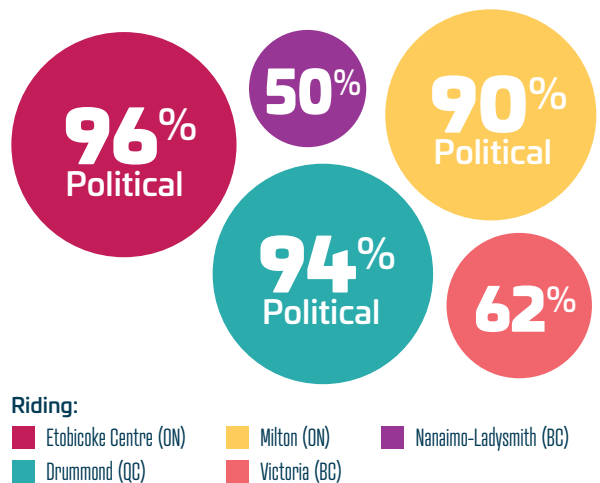


Figure 3. Advertisement breakdown of top five targeted ridings



What we found

The political parties deployed a variety of advertisement targeting methods to reach voters (see **Figure 4**). Just under half of the Liberal Party's advertisements (20 out of 41 advertisements) targeted specific voters, either those that visited the party's websites or lookalike audiences. The remaining half were targeted only by location. In comparison, the Conservative Party (4 of 29 advertisements) and the NDP (1 of 4 advertisements) targeted specific voters less often. Most of these advertisements targeted location or a combination of location and age range. None of

the other political parties or major third parties were observed using custom or lookalike audiences, instead they were focusing primarily on location, age and interest.

This analysis is the first in Canada to review how political entities are using Facebook's targeting tools. This study is also the first attempt to better understand the impact of advertising in targeted ridings has on the frequency of political advertisements displayed on Facebook.

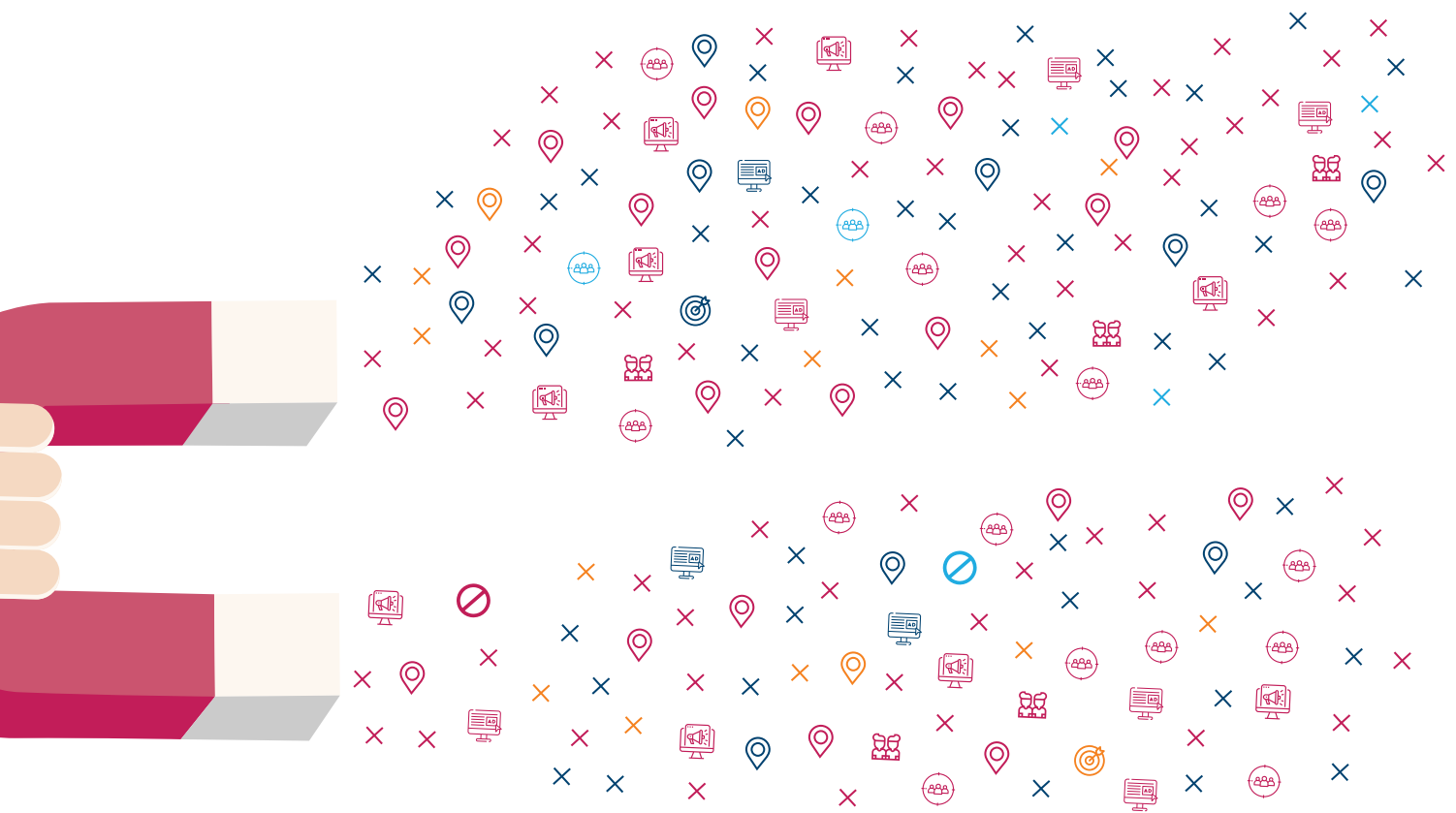


Figure 4. Targeting methods used by political parties and their leaders

Total Advertisements:

Liberal Party: **103**

Conservatives: **75**

NDP: **17**

Bloc Québécois: **6**

Green: **0**

Advertisement Targeting Methods:



No targeting
(only > age of
18 in Canada)



Location
targeting



Age range
and location
targeting



Interest
targeting



Website
visitor
targeting



Custom
audience



Lookalike
audience



Targeting
info not
available



What this means for the election

- Political entities use targeting options on Facebook differently from one riding to the next. For example, in this study 62% of the advertisements from the riding of Victoria (BC) were political compared to none in the neighbouring riding of Chilliwack—Hope (Figure 3).
- The Liberal, Conservative and NDP parties all used the personal information of voters to target Facebook advertisements. The Liberal Party deployed more precise targeted advertisements than the other parties. Further investigation is needed to determine whether this provides an explanation for the much smaller average advertisement cost that the Liberal Party ran compared to the other parties (Andrey & Bardeesy, 2019; Owen et al., 2019).
- Based on the data collected, Facebook complied with Canada's political advertisement law contributing to greater transparency. The study did not collect any advertisements from registered political entities that were not included in Facebook's registry, nor were any advertisements from political parties identified during the advertising blackout period required by the Canada Elections Act.
- The data presented is derived from participants using Facebook News Feed on Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox. The data collected certainly did not encompass all the election's political advertisements, and political entities may have deployed different advertising methods on mobile devices or on Facebook's other platforms such as Instagram.

What's next

- 1** Expand legal transparency requirements: Facebook voluntarily posted more details in its political advertising registry than required by law, providing each advertisement's approximate cost and total number of times the advertisement was viewed. To facilitate greater transparency, these steps should be legal requirements. In addition, each advertisement's targeting method(s) should be included in the advertising registry, including reporting location targeting criteria at a riding or postal code level.
- 2** Ban the use of personal information without consent to target online advertisements: Federal privacy laws do not apply to Canada's political parties, and Elections Canada is required to provide registered parties and candidates with voters' names and addresses to facilitate communication. This enables parties and candidates to micro-target online advertisements to specific lists of voters without their consent. This practice not only risks undermining public trust in voter registration but is inconsistent with Canadians' expectations — in fact, 63% of Canadians support banning targeted online advertisements during elections altogether (*Ryerson Leadership Lab, 2019*).
- 3** Continue research and engagement on the impact of online advertisements: This project did not seek to understand the impact of advertisements on voting behaviour. It remains an open question how impactful they are in doing so and the role of public or platform policy in preventing disinformation through paid advertisements.