

Statement via the Bipartisan Working Group on Digital Political Media & Democracy

Convened May 22-24 at the Harris School of Public Policy
University of Chicago

CHICAGO (September 16, 2019) – Abusive and dishonest applications of digital media in political campaigns and advocacy pose substantial threats to vital democratic norms and institutions.

Unfortunately, American policy makers, to date, have been largely unable to effectively address these threats, at least in part because they have been unable to identify, in today's highly polarized and contentious political environment, meaningful principles and policies that might receive the bipartisan support necessary for adoption.

In an effort to identify effective principles and policies that could receive bipartisan support, a diverse group of political digital media practitioners met at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy on May 23rd and 24th for extended discussions. Topics included regulation, privacy, transparency, civility, honest practices and other matters pertaining to appropriate guardrails for political use of digital media.

In the course of these meetings, the assembled bipartisan group found significant areas of common ground across party lines. Among them were several principles pertaining to political digital advertising. These principles are identified below.

The undersigned participants in the aforementioned discussions – representing a substantial politically-diverse majority of the participants – wish to publicly urge policy makers, and all political practitioners, to adhere to these principles. We believe that these principles -- and policy changes based upon them – are likely to receive broad bipartisan support and will help meet the challenges posed by abusive practices.

- Each election cycle, millions of dollars are spent on digital political advertising without transparency – not even the funding sources of the ads are disclosed. The funding sources of digital political ads on all platforms and systems must be made transparent. Voters are entitled to know who is paying for these ads.
- More generally, in order to successfully combat both foreign and domestic bad actors seeking to influence elections, requirements for oversight and disclosure must be made uniform across all digital advertising platforms and systems.
- All political digital practitioners must accept an ethical and moral responsibility to never use digital content that incites violence or that is maliciously 'manufactured' to intentionally misrepresent actual events.
- Stronger transparency requirements, if properly designed and executed, can help counter the efforts of bad actors and impede foreign interference in elections. However, it is critical to the democratic process that such requirements carefully target bad actors and not force

unnecessary disclosure of legitimate competitive information that is strategically valuable to candidates and campaigns.

Political digital media professionals of both parties share the concerns of millions of Americans about the threats posed to vital democratic norms and institutions by abusive and dishonest applications of digital media. Drawing upon our collective experience and expertise, and by working together across party lines to identify pragmatic bipartisan solutions, we believe we can make a meaningful contribution to the health and quality of the nation's political discourse. We intend to continue to function as a bipartisan working group on political digital communications and democracy, for the purpose of highlighting, for policy makers and others, important areas of common ground.

Thank you to the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy Project on Political Reform for convening our initial conference, to the Harris School's Center for Survey Methodology for co-hosting it, and to Democracy Fund for the financial support that made the conference possible.

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