

# Benchmarks for Evaluating Political Ads Definitions

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## Extended Abstract

The political campaigning landscape has changed significantly with the digitalisation of our public sphere, which has created new opportunities for political participation, but also significant risks to the integrity of elections and the political debate. The lack of transparency of which ads are shown to whom, why, and who paid for them, further creates a situation where anyone can distort the political debate and easily evade public interest scrutiny.

To be able to monitor sponsored political ads social networking services try to regulate political advertising. For example, Meta allows political ads, but advertisers have to verify their accounts, have to self-label their political ads and they can only send political ads in the country they reside. On the contrary, Twitter ban all political advertising altogether. Many of these measures are positive developments, but *they assume we can reliably detect political ads*.

This is not the case, since at the moment, each ad platform has a different definition for political ads, and the European Commission, which is trying to regulate online platforms through the Digital Services Act – DSA [2] and the European Democracy Action Plan – EDAP [1], is currently gathering working definitions of political ads from civil societies for a deeper analysis. However, “*what is a good definition for political advertising?*” is still an open question.

**Benchmarks:** We propose the following benchmarks to assess the quality of political ad definitions: *Agreement* – do users agree on what ads are political and which ones are not? *Influence* – is the definition able to capture ads that can influence people’s voting behavior? *Divisiveness* – is the definition able to catch ads that are divisive across different racial, age, and gender groups of people? *Humanitarian aid* – is the definition able to distinguish between advocacy ads on different social issues that try to influence opinions and legislation and operational ads that only try to mobilize users to help people in need.

**Data collection and experiments:** We assess the quality of the four definitions political advertisement: Twitter definition [6], Meta definition [4], European Parliament definition[5] and European Commission[3]. To do it we download all Meta Ad library ads published during July 2022 and randomly selected 500 unique ads (Meta dataset).

After, we set up surveys on Qualtrics <sup>1</sup> where for each ad, we ask respondents questions about the ad’s message. We hired workers through Prolific <sup>2</sup>, and we redirected them to fill out the survey. Each worker answered questions about 25 random ads.

In the first study, we asked workers to label ads according to the definition. In the second study, we asked workers three questions. Do you think, through this message, **the advertiser intended** to influence a legislative or regulatory process or voting behavior at the national, regional, local, or at political party level, and their outcome? Do you think **this message** could influence (with or without a direct intensity of an advertiser) a legislative or regulatory process or voting behavior at the national, regional, local or at political party level, and their outcome? Do you think this ad is divisive across different ethnic, social, and age groups of people?

In the third study, we created a survey with the following two questions. Does the message of the ad have an **operational focus**, such as encouragement to participate, donate or promote a

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.qualtrics.com>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.prolific.co>

development project or humanitarian aid? Does the message of the ad have an **advocacy focus** such as promoting certain causes by persuading citizens and state actors into promoting and adopting certain public policies across different areas such as the economy, election systems, environmental politics, or law? Since the third study was only about social issues ads, we selected 100 unique ads published by only NGO and charity organizations (NGO dataset).

**Results:** In the first study none of the definitions manages to achieve agreement among workers of more than 70%. The Twitter definition has the highest percentage of ads that workers agreed on (66.7%). Conversely, Meta has the lowest - 62%.

We evaluate definitions by second and third benchmarks in the second study on two datasets. All four definitions were able to catch more than 80% ads that could influence people's voting behavior, and around 80% and more of advertisements that are divisive were detected as well on Meta Dataset.

The fourth benchmark's results show that European Parliament and Twitter definitions outperformed others in not to labeling operational ads as political, but they were able to catch only 59% of advocacy ads. On the opposite, with European Commission definition, more than 70% of advocacy ads were labeled as political and it shows the worst performance with operational ads (19% political). Meta definition shows the most stable results on the fourth benchmark with mislabeling 9.5% of operational digital ads and catching 62% of advocacy ads.

Meta definition outperformed others in the second and third benchmarks. It also showed the most stable result in the fourth benchmark. However, this definition has the lowest agreement among annotators. On the opposite, Twitter definition, while having the highest agreement, has the lowest result in other benchmarks. The main difference between these two definitions is ads about social issues. Meta includes them in the definition, while Twitter does not. It shows that considering ads about social issues as political helps to catch problematic ads that are divisive and can influence people's voting behavior. Nonetheless, these ads create a more disagreement among workers and require a more detailed description.

## References

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