

# **Durbin Joins Colleagues To Urge Online Platforms To Take Additional Measures To Stop Voting Related Misinformation And Disinformation**

September 22 2020 9:08 AM



WASHINGTON – U.S. Dick Durbin (D-IL) joined Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) in leading 15 of their colleagues in sending a letter to Facebook, Instagram, Google, Twitter and YouTube, urging executives to take further measures to stop voting related misinformation and disinformation. The Intelligence Community has confirmed that Russia is trying to influence and undermine the election through social media and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has warned that foreign actors may leverage limited understanding regarding the mail-in voting processes to mislead and confuse the public. The July bulletin, that DHS halted the release of, found that Russia continues to target presidential candidates to influence the election. A September bulletin issued to law enforcement warned that Russia is amplifying criticism of the vote-by-mail process in order to undermine the election.

“As our country grapples with the spread of information designed to sow division and reduce Americans’ confidence in the integrity of our elections, weak policies and poor enforcement of platform rules are damaging our democracy,” the Senators wrote.

“One report found that in 2019 alone, politically relevant disinformation reached over 158 million American users. Another recent report showed that nearly half of all top-performing posts on Facebook that mentioned voting by mail were false or misleading. Some researchers have concluded that despite efforts from online platforms to curb the spread of disinformation, more disinformation is reaching users ahead of the 2020 election than before the 2016 election,” they continued.

“We appreciate the steps you’ve taken since the 2016 elections to make your platforms more resilient against foreign interference, including working more closely with federal agencies and election officials. In the 47 days before the general election, we urge you to take additional actions to stop the exploitation of your platforms and protect the integrity of our democracy.”

Durbin and Klobuchar were joined by Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), Jack Reed (D-RI), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Brian Schatz (D-HI), Tina Smith (D-MN), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA).

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below:

September 17, 2020

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg, Mr. Mosseri, Mr. Pichai, Ms. Wojcicki, and Mr. Dorsey:

As our country grapples with the spread of information designed to sow division and reduce Americans’ confidence in the integrity of our elections, weak policies and poor enforcement of platform rules are damaging our democracy. Therefore, we write to express serious concern regarding election related disinformation and misinformation on your platforms.

Since 2016, your companies have taken important steps to stop the spread of false information related to elections and voting. While we appreciate the public airing of this information, foreign adversaries continue to target our elections and influence voters through social media. Accordingly, we strongly urge you to take additional action to ensure that the ads you sell and content you publish do not harm our democracy.

The Intelligence Community has confirmed —and according to the New York Times, some of your platforms have also confirmed — that our elections are being targeted by Russia and other foreign adversaries. At the same time, we are facing a global pandemic

that is changing the way Americans vote. Unprecedented steps are underway to make it safe and easy to vote, including increasing our country's capacity to allow Americans to cast a ballot by mail.

As some are working around the clock to ensure every voter can cast their ballot safely and securely, there is an epidemic of misinformation online about the voting process, including harmful lies about voting by mail. In July, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned that while the "disinformation risk to mail-in voting infrastructure and processes is similar to that of in-person voting...threat actors may leverage limited understanding regarding mail-in voting processes to mislead and confuse the public." And the July intelligence bulletin noted that "Russia is likely to continue amplifying criticisms of vote-by-mail and shifting voting processes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic to undermine public trust in the electoral process."

As you know, your platforms are a major source of information for many Americans. While your ability to identify and remove coordinated campaigns has improved since the 2016 election, disinformation is still thriving online and millions of users continue to see content created by foreign adversaries before it is removed. One report found that in 2019 alone, politically relevant disinformation reached over 158 million American users. Another recent report showed that nearly half of all top-performing posts on Facebook that mentioned voting by mail were false or misleading. Some researchers have concluded that despite efforts from online platforms to curb the spread of disinformation, more disinformation is reaching users ahead of the 2020 election than before the 2016 election.

It is particularly concerning that there are platforms accepting payment for publishing political ads that contain misinformation about the voting process. Companies should not profit from efforts to disenfranchise voters.

In order to protect the right to vote and to help ensure our elections are free and fair, we urge all of your platforms to immediately implement the following measures ahead of the 2020 general election:

- Reject any political or issue ad that contains false or misleading claims about the voting process, including the voting by mail process.
- Broaden platform policies for content removal about misinformation on voting and elections.
- Immediately remove the posts of any elected official, government official, or political party which contains falsehoods, conspiracy theories, or misrepresentations about the voting process, including voting by mail.

- Immediately remove posts that contain intimidating or threatening messages about voting, or intimidating or threatening posts that are targeted at voters.
- Increase cross-platform coordination for tracking, monitoring, and taking down disinformation campaigns, which often work across platforms simultaneously to amplify their message.
- Increase collaboration and communication efforts with public and private sector stakeholders, independent researchers, and civil society organizations to identify and eliminate threat actors.

We appreciate the steps you've taken since the 2016 elections to make your platforms more resilient against foreign interference, including working more closely with federal agencies and election officials. In the 47 days before the general election, we urge you to take additional actions to stop the exploitation of your platforms and protect the integrity of our democracy.