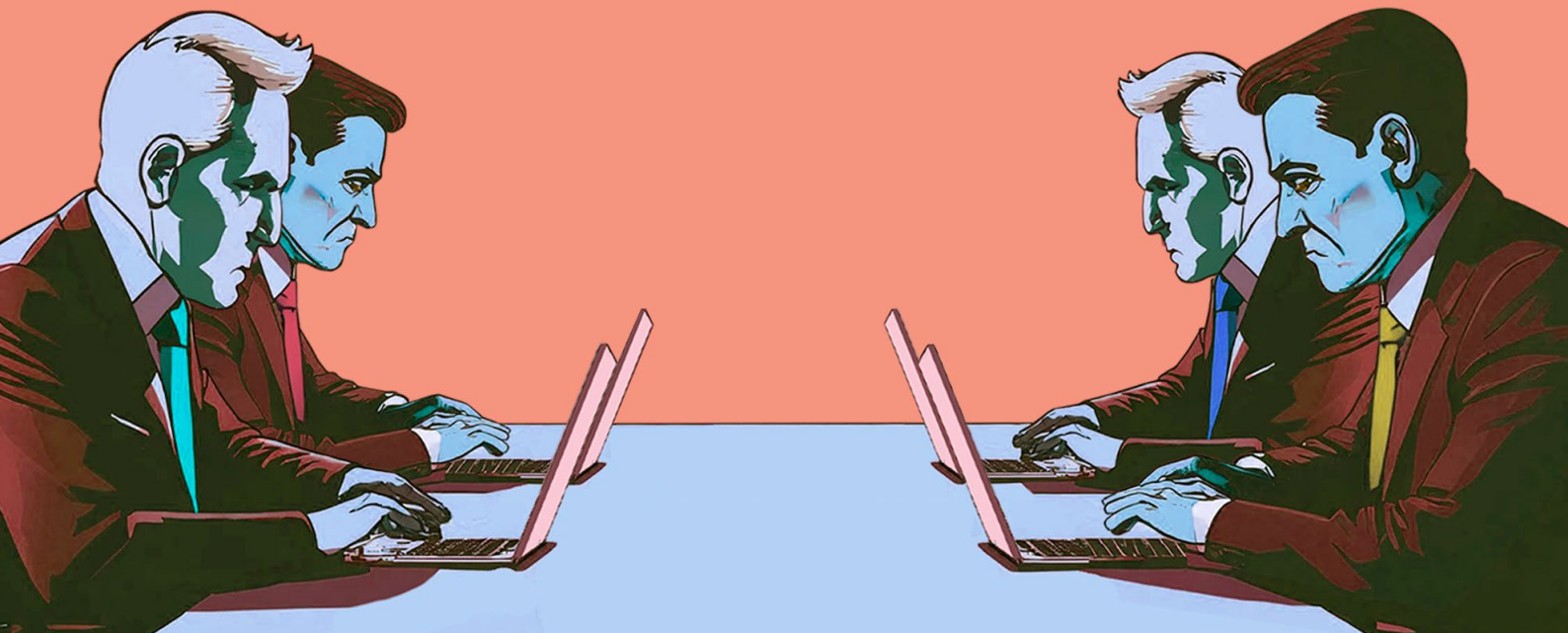


Elections Monitoring 2024: FRANCE

Electoral Integrity and Political Microtargeting in the European Parliament Elections: An Evidence-Based Analysis

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VoxPublic



About the project

This research paper by *VoxPublic* was prepared as a contribution to the project ‘Electoral Integrity and Political Microtargeting: An Evidence-Based Analysis in Six EU Member States’, coordinated by the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties).

The research project monitored online political advertising in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections in six EU countries: Bulgaria (BHC), France (VoxPublic), Germany (Reset Tech), Hungary (HCLU), Poland (PAF) and Spain (Xnet), supported by Who Targets Me (WTM) as technical partner. The project relied primarily on data collected during the European Parliamentary elections campaign from political advertisements promoted on Facebook by political entities. Researchers scrutinised whether political actors follow national campaigning rules and European data protection rules by examining data voluntarily donated by citizens through a privacy-friendly desktop browser extension.

The project was co-funded by Civitates and the Open Society Foundations.

Any views and opinions expressed by the author of this research paper are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views and opinions of Liberties or the co-funders.



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Executive Summary

- The far right in France has gained significant influence in recent years and has become the country's major political force.
- In the 2024 EP elections, the far-right won 35 seats out of 81, while Macron's moderate right party won 13 seats and left-wing parties secured 27.
- The French media landscape is fragmented with digital platforms like Google, Meta (Facebook), and X (Twitter) gaining an increasingly bigger role in disseminating news.
- Online political advertisements are forbidden in France during the official campaign period, but social media plays a role regardless, as political figures maintain large followings. Nevertheless, only 14.6% of respondents reported engaging with election-related content on Facebook during the 2022 campaign.
- Facebook is the leading social network in France, making it the most effective online platform for awareness and political mobilisation.
- Due to strict campaign spending limits and campaign finance disclosure regulations, and because both official and unofficial (covert) political marketing is closely monitored to maintain election integrity, gross violations of the advertising ban were not expected.

- Our investigation found:

Political parties respected the advertising ban.

Political ads on Facebook are not a major strategy for French political parties. Since 2019, political parties have spent only €300,000 on Facebook ads. This is a very small portion of their campaign spending.

As political microtargeting is currently not a real issue in France, it was difficult to convince Facebook users to donate data for the purposes of this research. There were only 40 installations of the Who Targets Me extension, which cannot be considered representative of the French population, as nearly half of respondents self-reported holding far-left ideologies.

For several years, the National Rally (RN), a far-right party, was the main producer of political ads on Facebook. Far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella have large social media followings and maintain around fifteen active pages.

We find it likely that due to the polarising nature of social media algorithms, it may be more difficult for moderate parties to reach audiences, both organically and through paid advertisements, than for far-right parties.

There are concerns that French political advertisers may try to exploit users' vulnerabilities through psychological profiling and microtargeting, evoking anger or fear related to issues like immigration.

I. Country Context: France's Political and Media Landscape

Political and Electoral Landscape:

France's political system is characterised by its regular electoral cycles, with both presidential and legislative elections occurring every five years. The President is elected through a two-round system, with the next presidential election scheduled for spring 2027. Legislative elections, held to elect Members of Parliament (MPs) to the French National Assembly, typically follow a few weeks after the presidential election. However, the President has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, as was the case in June 2024 following the European elections. The dissolution led to the election of new MPs, who will serve for five years unless another dissolution is declared.

The political landscape in France has seen a significant rise in the influence of the far-right. In the 2022 presidential election, Marine Le Pen, the leading far-right candidate, garnered over 40% of the vote, and the far-right secured

88 seats in the National Assembly. In the most recent legislative elections, the far-right increased its presence to 130 MPs, although they do not hold a majority. This has created a precarious and unstable political environment, with the government likely to rely heavily on regulatory acts to pass new laws.

Media Landscape:

As of 2024, France's media landscape is marked by fragmentation and the growing dominance of digital platforms over traditional media like television and print. Major tech companies such as Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), and X (formerly Twitter) play a significant role in information dissemination, raising concerns about misinformation and the polarisation of public opinion. The increasing reliance on digital platforms has led to the rise of independent and alternative media outlets, which offer diverse perspectives and carry out investigative journalism. However, this shift has also contributed to the creation of filter bubbles, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints.

France's media system has been criticised for its declining quality and the growing influence of the far-right in mass media. Over the past 15 years, the demand for information has surged due to the digital revolution, but the overall quality of media content has declined. This trend raises concerns about media pluralism and the preservation of independent, quality journalism in the country.¹

1 <https://fr.boell.org/fr/2024/04/25/liberte-des-medias-en-france-peril-sur-linformation-entre-crise-concentration-et-dependance>

Social Media vs. Traditional Media:

While political ads are forbidden during official campaign periods in France, the influence of social media in political campaigns has been growing steadily. For instance, during the European elections, the far-right party heavily utilised TikTok, with key figures like Jordan Bardella and Marine Le Pen amassing significant followings.² However, despite the growing presence on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, the overall influence of social media in shaping electoral outcomes remains moderate. During the 2022 presidential campaign, only 14.6% of respondents reported engaging with election-related content on Facebook, with even lower engagement on platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok.

The Significance of Facebook and YouTube:

In January 2024, Facebook continued to be the leading social network in France, with a user base significantly larger than that of other social media such as Instagram or YouTube. For instance, Facebook has 6,400,000 more users than Instagram. This makes Facebook a crucial platform for reaching a broad and diverse audience, particularly in political campaigns focused on awareness and social mobilisation. While YouTube is also widely used, especially for video content, it lacks the direct

social interaction capabilities of Facebook, which gives Facebook an edge in terms of communication and engagement.

II. 2024 Elections: Overview and Regulations

Election Results and Campaign Themes:

In the 2024 European Parliament elections, the far-right made significant gains, securing 35 of France's 81 seats, with 31% of the vote. President Macron's party won 13 seats, while left-wing parties collectively secured 27 seats.³ The elections were widely considered free and fair, with strict regulations in place governing campaign funding, media access, and other aspects of the electoral process.

The European elections in France were heavily influenced by national political dynamics. With President Macron in a weakened position during his second term, the elections were used to highlight issues like immigration and purchasing power, topics that were widely discussed in the media.

2 <https://theconversation.com/jordan-bardella-et-tiktok-histoire-ephemere-ou-strategie-politique-payante-232575>

3 https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2024/06/09/europeennes-2024-les-resultats-en-sieges-pays-par-pays-et-la-composition-du-futur-parlement_6238276_4355770.html

Regulations on Political Ads:

France has stringent regulations regarding the funding of political campaigns, including clear guidelines on spending limits and the disclosure of campaign finances.⁴ Political ads are subject to strict controls, with transparency requirements ensuring that voters are informed about the sources of political messaging. The use of unofficial or covert political marketing is also closely monitored to maintain the integrity of the electoral process.⁵

III. Description of data analyzed

In France, political advertising is strictly regulated by law. Since 2018, the law on combating the manipulation of information prohibits political ads on social networks during electoral campaigns and until the end of general election periods. The role of social media in political life remains a central issue, but it manifests differently compared to many other countries. Political ads—strictly defined as campaigns funded by major parties—on social

networks, especially Facebook, are rare and do not represent a significant investment.⁶

Facebook's political ad library has provided access to political ads from various actors since 2019.⁷ Focusing on political parties and the period between 1 January 2024 and 15 August 2024, which was marked by numerous political issues, Facebook recorded a total expenditure of €89,001 in France by political parties. It is important to note that this amount includes the ad campaign by Renaissance and the government titled 'La France aux urnes!' ('France to the polls!'), which accounts for 50% of the recorded expenditures in Facebook's ad library during this period. However, this campaign is more related to civic education than a true electoral campaign. By comparison, political parties in the United Kingdom spent £13,466,609 during the same period. Consequently, the topic of political ads on social networks is less prominent in France, and mobilisation around this issue remains limited. Despite several communication efforts, we recorded only about 40 installations of our analysis tool (Who Targets Me browser extension), which is not very representative of the French population, especially since nearly half of the accounts (14

4 https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/01/27/les-comptes-de-campagne-de-l-election-presidentielle-2022-valides-avec-des-reserves_6159507_823448.html?random=1649372177

5 <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000047062308>

6 <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/167836590566506?id=288762101909005>

7 <https://www.csa.fr/Informer/Collections-du-CSA/Focus-Toutes-les-etudes-et-les-comptes-rendus-synthetiques-proposant-un-zoom-sur-un-sujet-d-actualite/La-publicite-politique-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux-etude-du-CSA-de-la-bibliotheque-publicitaire-de-la-plateforme-Facebook>

out of 39) declared themselves as being on the far-left side of the political spectrum.⁸

IV. Expenditure

The analysis of the data collected does not allow for broad conclusions. However, we can observe that political parties seem to comply with legal obligations by avoiding the distribution of political ads during campaign periods. Additionally, the few cases of observed foreign influence are primarily related to the war in Ukraine. Overall, it can be stated that in France, political ads on Facebook are not a major strategy for political parties. Since 2019, political parties have spent only €300,000 on these ads. Political party or government expenditures can reach much higher amounts for campaigns. For example, in 2022, the main political parties spent approximately €80,000,000 on their campaigns for the presidential elections. However, certain trends indicate differentiated strategies in social media advertising.

First, for several years, the National Rally (RN), a far-right party, has been the primary producer of political ads on Facebook. Combining the three main accounts linked to the RN—those of Marine Le Pen, Jordan Bardella, and the party itself—these accounts spent €20,889 between January 2024 and August 2024, and maintain around fifteen active pages. There are also ads funded by other

far-right actors, such as the Reconquête party. Second, centrist and left-wing parties use political ads on Facebook very sparingly—less than 10% of total spending across all parties combined. However, this year, some parties, like EELV (Europe Écologie Les Verts), have begun to exploit them more.

The difference in approach between the far-right and other parties warrants in-depth analysis. Indeed, this financial mobilisation by the far-right aligns with the natural tendency of social networks to favour extreme content. David Chavalarias, author of the book *Toxic Data*, hypothesises about the responsibility of algorithms, particularly those of Facebook, in the radicalisation and polarisation of public opinion. He argues that “the evolution of recommendation algorithms... has amplified users’ exposure to negative content, which is the domain of extreme groups. This context is a trap for moderate parties, which are encouraged to increase the proportion of negative content”.⁹ In other words, there is a reason to think that on social media platforms, it is easier for far-right parties to reach their potential voters organically, and maybe even by paid advertisements, than for moderate parties who share moderate messages.

⁸ https://trends.whotargets.me/countries/FR/explorations/ad-spending?report_id=ba1af23b-516a-407d-b85c-00f359fc8014&start_date=2024-07-27&end_date=2024-08-25

⁹ Chavaliras, D. (2022): *Toxic Data*, Flammarion, p.180. <https://www.goodreads.com/fr/book/show/61213335>

V. Targeting

The key issue revolves around the thematic analysis of content. A method to influence public debate without directly encouraging a partisan vote before elections could involve imposing one's viewpoint and agenda on social media. There are concerns that political advertisers in France may exploit voters' vulnerabilities through psychological profiling and micro-targeting. For example, ads might evoke emotions like fear or anger, especially on sensitive issues such as immigration. Right-wing parties like the Rassemblement National could target ads focused on nationalist and immigration concerns, particularly in regions with higher unemployment.¹⁰

In France, there is no specific law directly governing the targeting of political advertising on social networks. However, political advertising rules are governed by the French Electoral Code, which regulates 'propaganda' during election campaigns (articles L. 52-1 et seq.).

The European Union's Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising (TTPA) aims to harmonise some of the rules at EU level, imposing obligations on political advertising service providers, ad publishers and

data controllers.¹¹ This regulation will introduce restrictions on targeting techniques using personal data without the explicit consent of users, in order to strengthen transparency and personal data protection in political advertising.¹² It will also add new obligations and controls for the players involved.¹³

10 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/fr/article/20230202STO71504/l-importance-des-nouvelles-regles-de-l-ue-en-matiere-de-publicite-politique>

11 <https://siecledigital.fr/2024/02/29/la-legislation-encadrant-la-publicite-politique-adoptee-par-le-parlement-europeen/>

12 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/press-room/20240223IPR18071/le-pe-adopte-de-nouvelles-regles-de-transparence-pour-la-publicite-politique>

13 <https://www.senat.fr/ue/pac/EUR000007563.html>

Contacts

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VoxPublic is a non-profit organisation composed of a permanent team of four advocacy specialists based in Paris. It is governed by a seven-member executive board and receives support from an active community of volunteers and ‘VoxPublic Agora’ members. The association works on empowering French civil society organisations and citizen initiatives in their advocacy actions.

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Civil Liberties Union for Europe

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a Berlin-based civil liberties group with 22 member organisations across the EU campaigning on human and digital rights issues including the rule of law, media freedom, SLAPPs, privacy, targeted political advertising, AI, and mass surveillance.

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