Elections Monitoring 2024: GERMANY
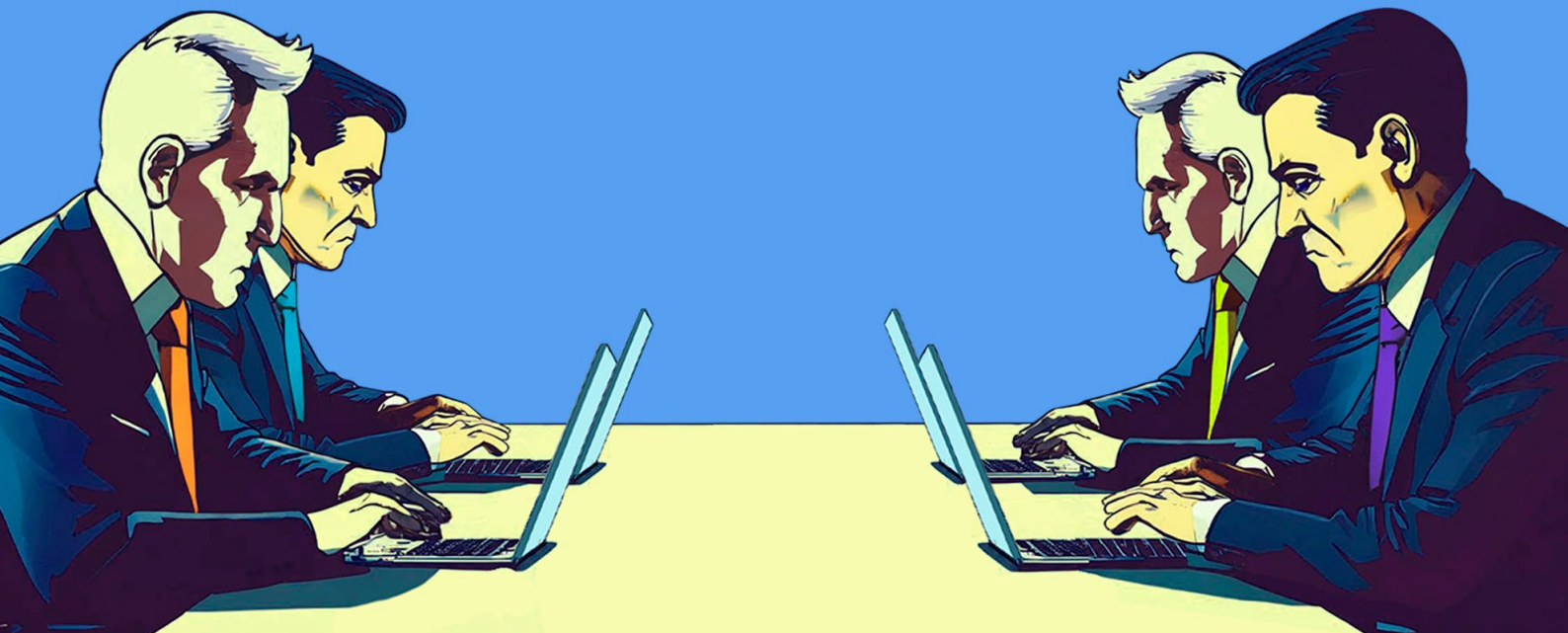
Electoral Integrity and Political Microtargeting in the European Parliament Elections: An Evidence-Based Analysis
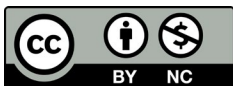
November 2024

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About the project

This research paper by **Reset Tech** 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.

Reset Tech, however, received no funding to contribute to the project. 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

- Political ads on digital platforms have become crucial tools in the electoral process, significantly impacting the civic discourse.

- Regulation is essential to safeguard the democratic process from the potential harms and risks posed by political ads.

- Political ad regulations are set to take effect in 2025.

- The 2024 European Parliament election (EP election) was analysed to gain insight into the political ad landscape in Germany, with a specific focus on Meta's ads library.

- Our main findings show:

  > Major political entities such as the European Parliament are among the largest spenders.

  > Political parties allocate substantial funds to advertising, with newer parties investing more relative to their size.

  > Far-right parties spend comparatively less, prompting questions about transparency or whether platform algorithms favour their content, reducing the need for additional paid dissemination.

- To ensure effective regulation of political advertising on social media in Germany, policy recommendations include extending the scope of the Targeting and

Transparency of Political Ads Regulation (TTPA) to include spending caps and centralising enforcement under the BNetzA. This approach will help avoid regulatory blind spots and improve efficiency.

2024 European Parliament Election in Germany

The EP election in Germany, held on 9 June 2024, was notable as the first post-Brexit European Parliament election and the first national election since the 2021 federal election. In 2021, the Christian Democrat Union (CDU/CSU), led by Armin Laschet following Angela Merkel's 16-year term as Chancellor, was defeated by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) under Olaf Scholz. Scholz then formed a 'traffic light coalition' with the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Alliance 90/the Greens. In the 2024 EP election, the opposition party CDU/CSU was again the largest, securing approximately 30% of the vote, a slight increase from their performance in the 2019 EP election.

The federal government parties—SPD, Greens, and FDP—all experienced a decline in vote shares, with the Greens experiencing the most significant losses following their strong performance in 2019. The far-right AfD surged in votes and seats, finishing second and securing majorities in most former East German

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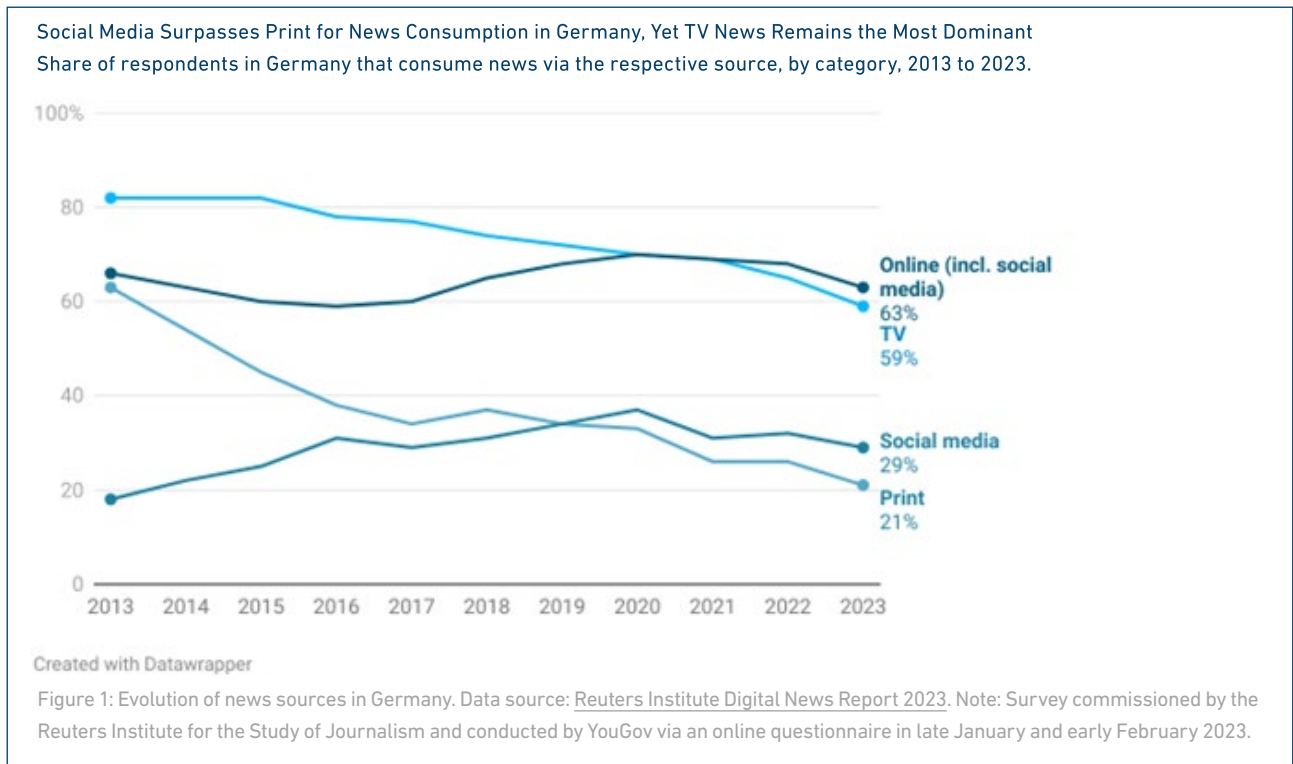AN EVIDENCE-BASED ANALYSIS

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districts. Additionally, the newly formed pro-Russian populist party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht gained considerable support, particularly in the former East German states.

Media Market, News and Social Media Consumption in Germany

In Germany, as in many comparable countries, online news has surpassed TV as the primary news source. However, social media's role in news consumption has not increased in recent years. Strikingly, the use of all news sources has declined, which may be linked to a growing trend of general news avoidance. According to the latest Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, public broadcasters play a major role in providing news in Germany.

Approximately 60% of German internet users aged 16 to 64 report using **Facebook** on a monthly basis, highlighting its significance as a platform for analysing political advertising. Note that this data is based on a GWI survey from 2022, which questioned internet users aged 16 to 64 about their monthly usage of various platforms. **YouTube** was not included as an option in this survey. As of June 2024, **Facebook** was Germany's leading social media platform by page views, followed by **Instagram** by a considerable distance, gaining around 17.7% of page views. The share of **X** (formerly Twitter) has declined slightly, amounting to 4.9% of page views, according to StatCounter's web traffic analysis.

As of early 2024, **Facebook** has 23.90 million users in Germany, representing approximately 28.7% of the total population. However, according to its data, the platform has seen a

Figure 1: Evolution of news sources in Germany. Data source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023. Note: Survey commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and conducted by YouGov via an online questionnaire in late January and early February 2023.

decline in reach. From January 2023 to January 2024, the total audience size in Germany, expressed in potential ad reach, fell by 600,000 users (a 2.4% decrease). Additionally, between October 2023 and January 2024, the number of users reachable through **Facebook** ads decreased by 2.2 million (an 8.4% decrease). Despite these reductions, **Facebook**'s ad reach still accounts for 30.8% of Germany's internet users at the beginning of 2024.

During the 2024 EP election campaign, political parties targeted **Facebook**'s potential audience in Germany. The following section gives an overview of the main political parties, their campaign strategies and advertisement slogans.

Political Ads in the 2024 European Parliament Election Campaign

In the EP election, Germany's major parties presented distinct visions for Europe, using both offline and online platforms to campaign with their slogans and messaging.

The CDU/CSU campaigned under the slogan "In Freiheit. In Sicherheit. In Europa." ("In Freedom. In Security. In Europe."), emphasising a vision of a strong, united Europe capable of addressing internal and external challenges.

The SPD, with the slogan "Deutschlands stärkste Stimmen für Europa" ("Germany's Strongest Voices for Europe"), focused on Germany's influence in building a more inclusive Europe rooted in social justice, sustainability, and democracy.

The Greens ran with the slogan "Machen, was zählt" ("Do What Matters"), urging decisive action on climate change, equity, and democratic integrity.

The FDP, led by Dr. Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, promoted "Streitbar in Europa" ("Contentious in Europe"), advocating for a simpler, more market-oriented EU that prioritises economic liberalism and innovation.

Die Linke's slogan, "Gerechtigkeit geht #nurmitlinks." ("Justice #onlywiththeleft."), emphasised social justice and equality, arguing that true fairness can only be achieved through leftist policies.

The AfD, with "Europa neu denken. Unser Land zuerst" ("Rethink Europe. Our Country First"), promoted a far-right vision that prioritised national interests and advocated for a reformed EU with greater autonomy for member states and a focus on Germany's needs.

Data and Methodology

Our analysis of the EP election draws primarily on two sources: the data recorded by the Who Targets Me (WTM) browser extension and the Meta Ad Library.

Who Targets Me is a browser extension that tracks the political ads users are targeted with on Meta platforms. The charts below illustrate

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the demographic profile of the WTM user base in Germany, which is predominantly younger, male, and leans left-of-center on the political spectrum.

Self-Reported Political Affiliation of Who Targets Me Users in Germany

Created with Datawrapper

Source: WTM aggregated user data. Note: 232 users did not declare.

Gender of Who Targets Me Users in Germany

Created with Datawrapper

Source: WTM aggregated user data.

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Age of Who Targets Me Users in Germany

18-24 years old	183
25-34	1,001
35-44	602
45-54	314
55-64	152
65 and older	33

Created with Datawrapper
Source: WTM aggregated user data.

Expenditure Analysis

The following analysis focuses on the complete dataset of political ads from the Meta ads library. Analysts manually categorised the data to map advertisers and their associated pages, as listed by Meta, onto Germany's main political parties. The last section uses data from WTM, focusing on the ads that appeared in its users' **Facebook** feeds.

The total number of categorised advertisers, including major political parties, smaller parties, and other political entities such as influencers and pages not officially identified as political parties, reached 10,311. Between 10

Political Ads on Facebook in Germany
Number of advertising pages and total ad spend for pages categorised as political ads in Germany.

Political party advertisers Other political advertisers

689
Total:
10,311
9,622

Total categorized advertisers

2,489,851
Total:
5,363,108
2,873,257

Total spent in this period

Created with Datawrapper
Source: Meta ads library and WTM categorisation database.

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March and 9 June 2024, these pages collectively spent €5,363,108, equating to an average daily spend of €58,294.

According to the Meta ad library, the 9,622 advertisers and pages associated with the 16 main political parties, as categorised by WTM for this project, spent €2,873,257 on ads between 10 March 10 and 9 June 2024. The remaining expenditure came from entities

categorised as 'political players' that significantly raised awareness about the EP elections, such as the European Parliament or the European Commission. The average daily spending amounted to €31,231, with the highest single-day expenditure being €162,759.

Spending by Political Advertiser Category in Germany From Sunday, 10 March to Sunday, 9 June 2024

PARTY/GROUP	ACTIVE ADVERTISING PAGES	AVERAGE SPEND PER PAGE	SHARE OF SPENDING IN PERCENT	TOTAL SPEND IN EUROS
Political players	174	11855	38.35	2062759
CDU	593	938	10.35	556471
Government	69	6502	8.34	448652
SPD	524	852	8.3	446350
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	274	1580	8.05	432943
Volt Deutschland	4	78989	5.88	315957
FDP	195	1445	5.24	281743
Other parties	308	726	4.16	223616
AfD	199	744	2.75	148115
Die Linke	116	1209	2.61	140271
Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht	8	15868	2.36	126943
Freie Wähler	122	821	1.86	100193
CSU	21	2869	1.12	60249
Piraten Partei	5	5145	0.48	25723

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PARTY/GROUP	ACTIVE ADVERTISING PAGES	AVERAGE SPEND PER PAGE	SHARE OF SPENDING IN PERCENT	TOTAL SPEND IN EUROS
NPD/Die Heimat	8	929	0.14	7433
Die PARTEI	3	262	0.01	786

Table 1: Ad spend by political advertiser category. Source: WTM based on Meta Ad Library.

Top 20 Advertisers During the Election Campaign Period: 10 March to 9 June 2024.

RANK	CATEGORY	ADVERTISER	TOTAL SPEND IN EUROS
1	Volt Deutschland	Volt Deutschland	306818
2	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN	243645
3	Politische Player	Campact e.V.	226493
4	Politische Player	European Parliament	216069
5	Politische Player	Greenpeace Deutschland	186632
6	CDU	CDU	180636
7	FDP	FDP	160535
8	Politische Player	Plan International Deutschland	134745
9	Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht	Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht - Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit	125979

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RANK	CATEGORY	ADVERTISER	TOTAL SPEND IN EUROS
10	Politische Player	Europäisches Parlament - Verbindungsbüro in Deutschland	110952
11	Politische Player	Wahlleitung	94193
12	Die Linke	Die Linke	88603
13	Politische Player	Green Planet Energy	86266
14	SPD	SPD-Fraktion im Bundestag	77325
15	Politische Player	UNO-Flüchtlingshilfe	76063
16	Politische Player	Save the Children Deutschland	73317
17	Politische Player	UNICEF Deutschland	70917
18	Government	land.nrw	70490
19	Politische Player	WWF Deutschland	67791
20	Politische Player	Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (INSM)	61760

Table 2: Ad spend by political advertiser pages in Germany. Source: WTM based on Meta Ad Library.

Focusing on the main political parties and their advertising pages, the table below shows that the center-right Christian Democratic Union leads the rankings with €556,371 in spending. This figure excludes the CDU's sister party, the CSU, which spent an additional €60,249. According to the WTM database of political advertisers in the Meta ad library, the CDU also has the highest number of active pages.

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The SPD follows with a total expenditure of over €446,000 between 10 March and 9 June. The Greens rank third, with fewer active advertising pages, but a higher average spend per page. Notably, the small and relatively young party, Volt, spent a significant amount. Despite Volt being a newer party, it has more active pages in the WTM database and spent more on Meta ads than most other long-established parties, including the FDP, the AfD, and the Left—all of which are represented in the German national parliament.

Surprisingly, the far-right party AfD spent less than anticipated, considering its traditional focus on online platforms for messaging. Despite having 199 active pages in the database, the AfD spent €148,000—the party's substantial and active followership results in high organic reach and engagement for its content. One hypothesis is that the AfD may rely less on paid promotions to boost its reach due to its existing solid audience.

Spending by Major Political Parties in Germany From Sunday, 10 March to Sunday, 9 June 2024

RANK	PARTY/GROUP	ACTIVE ADVERTISING PAGES	AVERAGE SPEND PER PAGE	SHARE OF SPENDING IN PERCENT	TOTAL SPEND IN EUROS
1	CDU	593	938	19.37	556471
2	SPD	524	852	15.53	446350
3	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	274	1580	15.07	432943
4	Volt Deutschland	4	78989	11.00	315957
5	FDP	195	1445	9.81	281743
6	Other parties	308	666	7.14	205158
7	AfD	199	744	5.16	148115
8	Die Linke	116	1209	4.88	140271

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RANK	PARTY/GROUP	ACTIVE ADVERTISING PAGES	AVERAGE SPEND PER PAGE	SHARE OF SPENDING IN PERCENT	TOTAL SPEND IN EUROS
9	Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht	8	15868	4.42	126943
10	Freie Wähler	122	821	3.49	100193
11	CSU	21	2869	2.10	60249
12	Piratenpartei Deutschland	5	5145	0.90	25723
13	Familien-Partei Deutschlands	2	10780	0.75	21560
14	NPD/Die Heimat	8	929	0.26	7433
15	Die PARTEI	6	416	0.09	2496

Table 3: Ad spending by political parties in Germany. Source: WTM based on Meta Ad Library.

Advertisers and Ad Targeting Analysis

Ahead of the EP election, the Berlin data protection officer *(Berliner Beauftragte für Datenschutz und Informationsfreiheit)*, Meike Kamp, demanded that German political parties refrain from using controversial microtargeting on social media platforms during the campaign. However, despite this demand, the parties were expected to continue using targeted social media advertising.
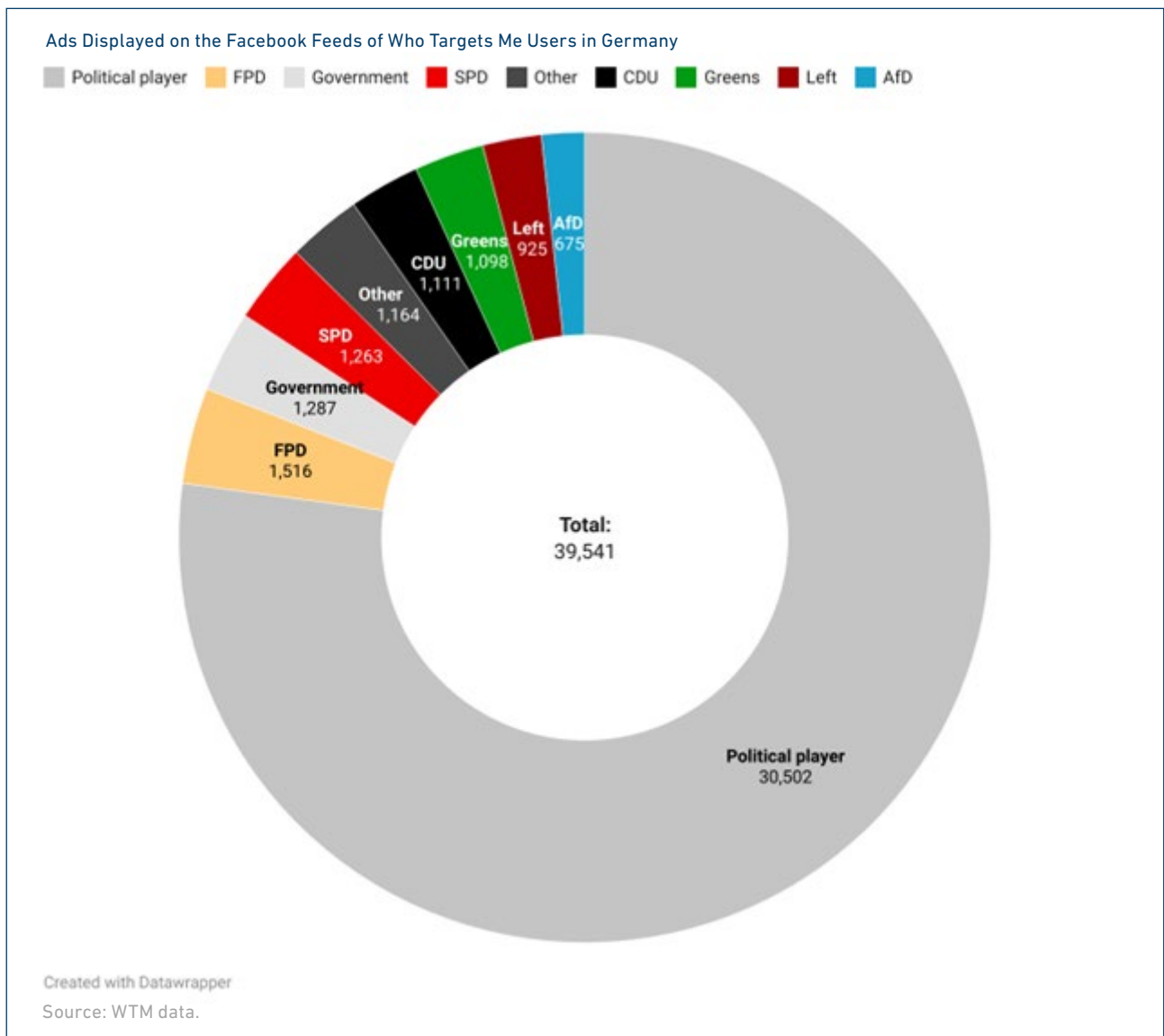
Analysing the data sample of political ads collected from the feeds of WTM users, who provided their ad data via a desktop browser extension, offers valuable insights. However, it is important to note that this sample does not provide a fully representative view of the broader ads market in Germany.

Political party ads appear significantly less frequently in the **Facebook** feeds of users with the WTM browser extension installed than ads by political entities. The latter category, which includes significant information campaigns by the European Parliament and

ads from leading news outlets, is dominant. Among this non-representative sample of WTM browser extension users, 1,516 ads by the FDP appeared in **Facebook** feeds—the highest value among the political parties.

Monitoring compliance with GDPR requirements, particularly concerning potential violations related to microtargeting, falls outside the scope of this project. Nonetheless, we would like to bring to readers' attention the complaints filed by the non-profit organization NOYB—European Center for Digital Rights with the Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information regarding these issues during the 2021 Federal Elections campaign. Reset sees no signs that targeting practices would have significantly changed in the 2024 EP campaign.

Ads Displayed on the Facebook Feeds of Who Targets Me Users in Germany

Political player · FPD · Government · SPD · Other · CDU · Greens · Left · AfD

Greens 1,098 · Left 925 · AfD 675 · CDU 1,111 · Other 1,164 · SPD 1,263 · Government 1,287 · FPD 1,516

Total: 39,541

Political player 30,502

Created with Datawrapper
Source: WTM data.

Regulatory Environment

Political advertising on social media in Germany is largely unregulated until the Targeting and Transparency of Political Ads Regulation (TTPA) becomes applicable from October 2025 onwards. Political advertising on social media remains undefined in national law, except in §11(1) of the bylaws of the State Media Authorities *(Landesmedienanstalten)*.

Key laws and regulations that touch upon this subject are, however, 1) the national Digital Services Act (*Digitale-Dienste-Gesetz*; DDG), which transposes the EU-wide Digital Services Act (DSA) into domestic law and replaced the previous Telemedia Act (*Telemediengesetz*; TMG)—2) the Interstate Media Treaty (*Medienstaatsvertrag*; MStV), and 3) the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Because media policy jurisdiction resides with the 16 German States (*Bundesländer*) and not the federal parliament, the MStV regulates the rights and obligations of broadcasters and telemedia providers in Germany. This regulation covers media intermediaries, video streaming services, video sharing platforms, like **YouTube**, voice assistants, smart TV services, and arguably blogs. According to §8(9) of the MStV, political advertising—specifically the dissemination of political advertising through radio or television—is prohibited on broadcasting services. This prohibition also extends to broadcast-like telemedia, which can be largely described as on-demand services of broadcasted content, such as media libraries of TV channels. However, this prohibition does not apply to platforms like **YouTube**, as it does

not fall under the category of "journalistically and editorially designed" content services as required by the MStV. Social media platforms, including **YouTube**, are exempt.

Nevertheless, under §22(1) of the MStV, there are transparency obligations for political advertising. While the provision does not prescribe a specific label, it requires that the advertiser or the commissioning entity be clearly identified. This transparency obligation applies specifically to adverts based on financial transactions or other exchanges rather than more organic content or political communication, which may still influence election outcomes.

In response to this lack of regulation, there have been attempts to encourage major parties to sign a voluntary code of conduct before any formal regulation. For example, D64, a civil society association, developed a 'Code of Conduct for digital campaigning' to enhance accountability and commitment to democratic values ahead of the 2021 federal election. Similarly, Campaign Watch led an initiative that was adopted by all major parties except the AfD. These voluntary self-regulation efforts were explicitly aimed at encouraging regulatory intervention by parliament.

Lastly, since the DSA has come into force and is being implemented by the DDG, platforms are now required to comply with obligations relating to the advertisements shown on their interfaces. While platforms must include their "systems for selecting and presenting advertisements" in their risk assessments under Art. 34 DSA, this is unlikely to substantially change how political ads reach users

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in Germany. However, the additional transparency requirements and the mandated ad repository under the Art. 39 DSA, if enforced properly, will enable the first systematic and comprehensive monitoring of political ads on platforms in Germany. One challenge remains with platforms like TikTok, which, according to their Terms of Service, do not allow political advertising.

Reset Tech, therefore, welcomes the TTPA and the increased transparency requirements it will introduce. After a stakeholder consultation in the spring of 2024, the German Ministry for Digital and Transport is now working on implementing the TTPA by assigning responsibilities for its various parts—such as data protection, telemedia matters, and informing the electorate about election-related information—to various regulatory bodies and authorities. While some provisions of the TTPA have already been in effect in Germany since 9 April 2024, it will be fully implemented from 10 October 2025. Unfortunately, this means the TTPA will not be in place in time for the upcoming German federal election.

Compliance

Based on the data set compiled by WTM through the data provided by browser extension users and our review of **Facebook**'s Ad Library for Germany, the overall adherence to the labelling requirements under §22(1) MStV appears to be inconsistent. In 2023, the Commission for Licensing and Supervision ('*Kommission für Zulassung und Aufsicht*'; ZAK) of the German State Media Authorities filed

a formal complaint against Google's **YouTube,** alleging that it fails to meet the transparency requirements of the MStV. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of the TTPA in increasing transparency of political advertising on platforms in Germany, even if it were already in effect.

Other organisations have extensively researched platforms' compliance with ad repository obligations under the DSA. For example, **X** does not have an ad repository in place. Additionally, in February 2024, Gesellschaft Für Freiheitsrechte filed a complaint against **LinkedIn** for violating Art. 26(3) of the DSA.

Recommendations

It is commendable that the TTPA introduces, for the first time, a legal definition of political advertising in Germany. Naturally, we welcome the continuous and proactive involvement of civil society organisations in both the implementation and compliance monitoring of the TTPA. Reset Tech hopes that the growing dialogue between regulators and civil society seen under the DSA, particularly with Germany's Digital Services Coordinator, the Federal Network Agency (*Bundesnetzagentur*; BNetzA) will similarly enhance engagement in the context of the TTPA.

It is especially welcome that the TTPA extends its reach beyond political advertising to include all forms of digital dissemination. This is significant as it addresses the valid concerns raised by civil society during the 2021 federal election regarding political communication

via messaging services like WhatsApp and Telegram. Despite the logistical challenges of enforcing transparency for analogue ads, the TTPA's focus on online platforms provides crucial security for regulating political advertising across different types of media.

While the TTPA shows progress, it does not fully address the challenges posed by political advertising on social media platforms. Several key areas remain outside its scope and require legislative attention to prevent regulatory blind spots. One notable omission is the lack of spending caps for political advertising. Without spending restrictions, there is a risk that the candidate or party with the largest ad budget could disproportionately influence public opinion and potentially gain an unfair advantage in an election. As the Stiftung Neue Verantwortung (now Interface) has previously argued: "In many countries, similar rules are already in place for political parties and other political groups, which must report on their income, especially donations, and their expenditures."

Lastly, although the transparency requirements introduced by TTPA are intended to make political ads more visible to those who pay attention to the mandated 'transparency notice', research shows that despite labels, political advertising is primarily recognised by individuals with high levels of digital and media literacy. This suggests that the labelling requirements may be more effective for certain groups rather than the general public. Further research is required to determine how well the new transparency notice under TTPA actually

increases the recognition of political ads across the broader society.

On a procedural level, we recommend consolidating as many competencies under the TTPA as possible within the BNetzA. The BNetzA should hold these requirements with minimum exceptions, given the drawbacks of a decentralized and therefore costly enforcement structure. These drawbacks include: 1) decreased regulatory effectiveness due to enhanced coordination efforts, and 2) reduced opportunities for consumers to file complaints and seek recourse.

Contacts

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Reset Tech is a fully independent global enterprise with not-for-profit operations in North America, Europe, and Australia. The organisation's mission is to guard against these digital threats to our security, safety, and fundamental rights. It seeks to 'reset' the connection between media and democracy to restore the promise of technology that works for people and free expression. Visit reset.tech for more information.

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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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