

What's the Deal with Political Advertising?

A guide from Media Smart in partnership with the Advertising Association.



So what is political advertising, anyway?

Political ads can be about societal issues or about topical themes, like climate change, immigration, or the cost of living. On top of this, political parties also produce ads to highlight their policies, particularly before a local or national election, ultimately to convince you to vote for them.

You can learn more about political literacy at [Shout Out UK](#).

Tell me about rules for political advertising on broadcast TV or radio?

Legally, political ads aren't allowed on traditional broadcast TV or radio channels but the law does allow political parties airtime to broadcast party political messages. This doesn't count as advertising.

Find out more at [Ofcom](#).

Who regulates election ads?

This is a tricky question as there is no single regulator for political ads. Ofcom enforces the political ad ban on TV and radio. The Advertising Standards Authority ([ASA](#)) only regulates commercial advertising content, not political advertising. The Electoral Commission oversees election spending limits, transparency and imprints but not the content itself. The ICO plays a role in data protection and privacy and how political adverts profile and target voters.

The Electoral Commission creates the guidance surrounding imprints and monitors whether political messages have the right labels. For serious breaches of electoral law, they can refer cases to the police.

Find out more at the [Electoral Commission](#).

How much can campaigns spend on advertising?

Political candidates have limits on how much they can spend and where their funding can come from depending on the size and type of seat being contested. After the election, candidates must submit a spending return, listing out campaign costs and donations.

Learn more about spending rules through the [Electoral Commission](#).

Tell me about Truth in Politics

Political campaigns aren't subject to the same rules as commercial advertising. Unlike commercial adverts, political adverts don't have to follow the same ad standard rules about being truthful and non-misleading. Some people think that political ads should be regulated more (See [Reform Political Advertising](#)).

However, other laws do apply to political adverts – for example, making false statements that damage a candidate's reputation could be defamation. This applies whether it's in print or online.

Learn more about electoral law through the [Electoral Commission](#) or the UK Government.



Why am I seeing political ads online?

Political campaigns can combine your electoral register data, purchased legally, with widely available information on your internet activity – from tracking your browsing behaviour via cookies for example. That's why it's so important to look for diverse news sources to make sure you see more than one point of view.

You can learn more about data protection and digital advertising via the [ICO](#).

Fighting back against misinformation

[Internet Matters](#) found that just half (53%) of young people who see news, politics or current affairs content online say they feel confident telling whether that information is true or false.

Democracy only works if we know what we're voting for, so it's vital that you exercise your critical thinking skills when looking at political adverts and news sources. Use fact checking websites like [BBC Verify](#), C4's [FactCheck Blog](#), [Full Fact](#), or [The Ferret](#).

You have a vote!

You have a say in our political process. Political literacy means having the knowledge and skills to understand how our system works – and how politics affects all of us. Political ads are just one part of this story.

Learn more about political literacy via [Teaching Citizenship](#).

You can't believe your eyes

In an era of AI and deepfakes, it's important to assess and check any videos or images you see online. Unless they are from genuinely trustworthy news sources, it's difficult to know whether they have been manipulated, taken out of context or targeted to you. AI fake videos of people, or deepfakes, can make a politician look like they said something they never said, meaning false information can be spread quickly.

The Online Safety Act 2023 tackles harmful online content, including deepfakes. Separately, platforms such as [Google](#) and [Meta](#) require all political ads on their platforms to inform people if AI or other digital methods were used to alter or create content. [TikTok](#) also bans AI alterations of public figures in posts used for endorsements.

Keeping online political ads transparent

An imprint is a label showing who created and promoted a political message. This helps you know who is trying to influence your vote. [New laws](#) require digital ads to include them. You can check imprints on social media posts to see who paid for and produced the content, and platforms like Meta and Google have ad libraries that allow you to check election ads.

Speaking of media literacy...

You're probably wondering who's behind this guide? [Media Smart](#) is an education programme from the advertising and media industry. We've partnered with the [Advertising Association](#), the UK advertising industry trade body, to help people, especially those getting ready to vote for the first time, understand the ads they might see around election time.



Do you live in Scotland?

You can vote in Scottish Parliament and local council elections from age 16. You will often see more of these messages when it is nearly election time, through online platforms or in person around you.

What are the rules on transparency?

Like the rest of the UK, digital imprints are required on campaign material for Scottish Parliament and local council elections. However, Scotland goes further: unpaid online posts by third-party groups campaigning to influence voters — even if they're not registered with the Electoral Commission — must also carry an imprint.

The Electoral Commission regulates compliance with these rules.

