

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 parties pay for ads before local or national elections to make people aware of their policies, their positions on certain topics, and ultimately to convince you to vote for them. You can learn more about political advertising at [Shout Out UK](#).

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

Political ads aren't allowed on traditional broadcast TV or radio channels, and this is set out in the Communications Act 2003. Instead, TV and radio shows give political parties airtime as part of their broadcasts, and this does not count as advertising. Find out more at [Ofcom](#).

Who regulates election ads?

Brand ads are regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), who make sure ads in the UK stick to the rules. You might think the ASA regulates political ads, too - but they don't. That's because the ASA is a non-government organisation funded by the advertising and media industry, so it's not the right authority to lead political advertising regulation. Find out more at the [ASA](#).

Tell me about Truth in Politics

Commercial ads are subject to rules that require them to be truthful and not misleading. Political campaigns don't have to follow the same rules. Some people think that political ads should be more regulated - and you can find out more about that at [Reform Political Advertising](#). At the moment, making false statements about a candidate's character is illegal, whether you do it in print or online, and the police would get involved. Learn more about electoral law through the [Electoral Commission](#).



How much can campaigns spend on advertising?

Political candidates have limits on how much they can spend, and where they can get their funds from (based on their constituency). After the election candidates have to submit a spending return, listing out campaign costs and donations. Learn more about spending rules through the [Electoral Commission](#).



Why am I seeing political ads online?

Political campaigns can combine your electoral register data with widely available information on your internet activity - from tracking your 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](#).



You can't believe your eyes

In an era of AI and deepfakes, it's important to assess and check any images you see online. Unless they are from genuinely trustworthy news sources, it's difficult to know whether they have been manipulated or taken out of context. That's why [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 around public figures if posts are endorsements.

Keeping online political ads transparent

If you look at a physical campaign flyer, you'll see an imprint. An imprint tells you who's responsible for publishing campaign material, and who they're promoting. New [laws](#) mean that digital ads now need imprints to help you understand who's trying to influence

your vote. You can check imprints on social media posts to see who paid for and produced the content. Social media platforms have ad libraries that allow you to check election ads.

Fighting back against misinformation

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. Double check info if an advert seems suspicious or looks like click-bait. And, by the way, that "free" newspaper that just landed on your doorstep during election season might be funded by a political party. Use fact checking websites. Learn more at [BBC Verify](#), [The FactCheck Blog](#), [All Fact](#), or [The Ferret](#).

Strengthen your political literacy muscles

You have a say in our political process, and political literacy is about having the knowledge and skills to understand our political system, and how politics affects all of us. Political ads are just one part of this story. Learn more about political literacy via [Teaching Citizenship](#).

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.

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