



The Astroturfing Election

Digital Political Advertising in the 2025 Australian Federal Election

June 2025 | Sam Jeffers, Belinda Noble





About Who Targets Me

Who Targets Me was created in 2017 to open dialogues and campaign for more transparency in the digital age. Its key mission is to create a new set of norms and laws where:

- Social media and technology companies publish comprehensive information about all political advertising content, targeting and spending
- Laws governing elections are updated to account for data-driven digital campaigning
- Regulators are given tough new powers to enforce these laws

Who Targets Me routinely captures spending, targeting and messaging information from the ads of over 100,000 political and issue advertisers worldwide, from over 650 parties in over 50 countries. Nearly 100,000 people have [installed their browser extension](#)¹, which helps users understand more about the political ads they're targeted with.

This currently includes over 3,700 party, candidate and advocacy group advertisers in Australia. This information is made available on [public dashboards](#)² and is often cited in media reports and academic studies.



About Comms Declare

Comms Declare represents more than 100 organisations and hundreds of communications professionals who have declared they will not promote:

- The growth of fossil fuels
- High greenhouse gas pollution as 'business as usual'
- Deception, distraction or spin around science or climate actions.

Members include award winners Paper Moose, Republic of Everyone, Silver Lining, Third Hemisphere and Compass Creative. Comms Declare encourages agencies to work for the good of the climate in recognition that Australia is one of the world's largest fossil fuel exporters.

www.commsdeclare.org

Executive summary

Digital political advertising played a major role in the 2025 Australian Federal Election, with an estimated **\$49.5 million** spent on Meta and Google platforms in just six weeks.

Energy policy was a dominant theme, with pro-climate groups significantly outspending their anti-climate counterparts—**\$2.4 million vs \$640,000**—and making energy a key issue, especially in marginal suburban seats.

Labor was the largest spender, outpacing the Coalition, particularly in the final phase of the campaign. Meanwhile, Clive Palmer’s “Trumpet of Patriots” poured millions into digital ads with little electoral return.

Non-party campaigners—particularly unions, climate advocacy groups, and industry-backed organisations—played a powerful role, sometimes overshadowing official party messaging.

Despite concerns seen in other democracies, **no major incidents of disinformation or AI abuse were observed**, though some limitations in platform transparency remain.

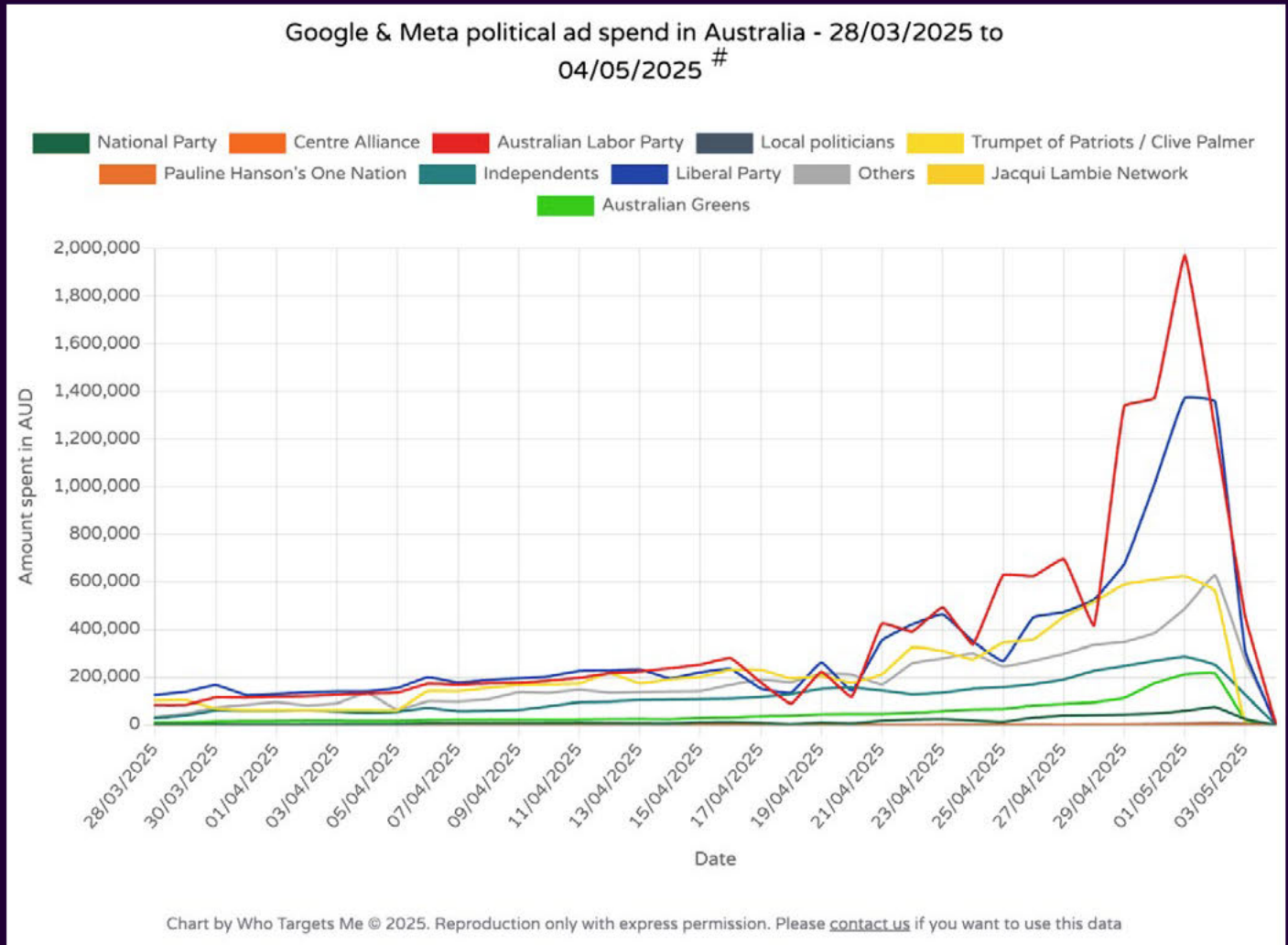
Policy recommendations include:

- A unified transparency standard across platforms.
 - Clear expectations for platform conduct during elections.
 - A review of the impact of third party advertising.
 - New oversight of influencer and verified account-based campaigning.
 - Ensuring diversity and fairness in the digital political ad market.
 - National truth in political advertising laws.
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Analysis

Spending on social media ads

Between Anthony Albanese calling the Federal election on March 28th and polling day on May 5th, Australian political parties, candidates, non-party groups and others spent at least \$49.5m on political advertising on Meta (Facebook and Instagram) and Google (including YouTube).



Meta and Google Ad Spending by group

The amount outlayed is significantly higher than comparable countries. Based on data tracked by Who Targets Me, we can see that:

- Germany's 2025 campaign included around €13m of social media ads (\$23m AUD), despite a population over three times that of Australia and a much longer election period.
- Canadian parties and candidates spent \$13m CAD (\$14m AUD), again, with a larger population (though a similarly short campaign).
- Parties in the UK spent \$20m during their six week campaign, with a population almost 3 times bigger.

In all cases, Australian voters saw far more political social media ads than their counterparts in similar countries. Given this high level of spending, the prominence of outside groups, and the outsized contribution of a single wealthy player, Australia's digital campaign appears to be much more "US-like" than seemingly equivalent European or Commonwealth parliamentary democracies.

In terms of spending, Labor led the way, with just over \$14m spent, while the Coalition followed close behind, with a combined ad spend just under \$13m. As in previous elections, Clive Palmer (this time rebranded as “Trumpet of Patriots”) spent big with no return, with outside actors and campaign groups the fourth largest spenders, at over \$7m.

Party/Group	Pages active during period	Avg. spend per account (AUD)	Share of Google/Meta	Total spend (AUD)
Australian Labor Party	247	\$58,013	60.16% / 39.84%	\$14,329,292
Liberal Party	218	\$56,467	56.07% / 43.93%	\$12,309,840
Trumpet of Patriots /Clive Palmer	7	\$1,232,184	84.04% / 15.96%	\$8,625,287
Others	185	\$39,173	28.38% / 71.62%	\$7,247,034
Independents	139	\$32,192	29.20% / 70.80%	\$4,474,650
Australian Greens	94	\$19,881	50.68% / 49.32%	\$1,868,834
National Party	31	\$19,619	57.29% / 42.71%	\$608,201
Pauline Hanson's One Nation	24	\$1,957	0.00% / 100.00%	\$46,962
Local politicians	32	\$1,195	0.00% / 100.00%	\$38,229
Jacqui Lambie Network	2	\$7,025	99.72% / 0.28%	\$14,050

For the first month of the campaign, the Coalition had a narrow lead in ad spend, but was overtaken by the ALP for the final two weeks, with the party spending nearly 50% more than the Coalition in the final two days of active campaigning. All party spending peaked on May 1st, at just over \$5m that day as final persuasion messages were bought.

Top 20 individual pages/accounts by ad spend during the campaign

When looking at individual accounts and channels, the Coalition held nine of the top 20 advertising accounts, with Labor only having four.

Labor's spending was more concentrated and centralised in fewer accounts, whereas the Liberals delegated spending more broadly, using their state party accounts. For example, Labor's highest spending state party (NSW) spent only 1% of the party's advertising during the campaign, whereas the Liberals' (Victoria) spent nearly 17%. The result of this appears to be an imbalance in resources between the two parties that was reflected in the result, where Labor was able to get money into the places it wanted to win more effectively than the Liberals.

	Party or Group	Advertiser	Platform	Days active	Highest/Lowest day (AUD)	Total spend (AUD)
1	Australian Labor Party	Australian Labor Party	Google	37	\$1,226,400/\$0	\$7,399,685
2	Trumpet of Patriots / Clive Palmer	Trumpet of patriots	Google	37	\$509,250/\$8,250	\$7,227,639
3	Liberal Party	Liberal Party of Australia	Google	37	\$578,400/\$10,500	\$3,402,486
4	Australian Labor Party	Australian Labor Party	Meta	36	\$426,924/\$738	\$3,052,334
5	Trumpet of Patriots / Clive Palmer	Trumpet of Patriots	Meta	25	\$126,692/\$6,563	\$1,374,829
6	Liberal Party	Liberal Party of Australia (Victorian Division)	Google	37	\$103,800/\$450	\$1,271,454
7	Liberal Party	Liberal Party of Australia	Meta	35	\$205,774/\$5,513	\$1,134,192
8	Others	A C T U	Google	36	\$88,650/\$5,914	\$902,378
9	Australian Labor Party	Australian Labor Party National Secretariat	Google	36	\$205,950/\$300	\$835,327
10	Liberal Party	Liberal National Party of Queensland	Google	36	\$93,450/\$2,657	\$819,679
11	Independents	Climate 200	Meta	36	\$49,475/\$511	\$743,021
12	Liberal Party	Teals Revealed	Meta	37	\$74,347/\$47	\$568,108
13	Others	Australian Unions	Meta	37	\$52,611/\$347	\$467,997
14	Australian Labor Party	Don't Risk Dutton	Meta	25	\$56,642/\$20	\$440,401
15	Liberal Party	LNP - Liberal National Party	Meta	35	\$38,800/\$138	\$392,688
16	Liberal Party	Liberal Party of Australia (NSW Division)	Google	15	\$53,400/\$150	\$353,250
17	National Party	The Nationals	Google	37	\$48,750/\$1,028	\$337,964
18	Others	Advance Australia	Meta	37	\$25,035/\$108	\$323,552
19	Liberal Party	Liberal Party of Australia (NSW Division)	Google	37	\$17,850/\$150	\$312,163
20	Others	Hothouse Magazine	Meta	37	\$21,432/\$2,885	\$307,284

Notable in this list is the high placing of some of the non-party advertisers - the Australian Unions (pro Labor), Climate 200 (anti-Liberal, pro-Independent, pro-climate), Advance Australia (anti-Labor) and Hothouse Magazine (pro-Independent, pro-climate). Alongside these sit accounts specifically set up by the two main parties to attack opponents - “Don’t Risk Dutton” from Labor and “Teals Revealed” from the Liberals.

Don't Risk Dutton
Sponsored • Paid for by Australian Labor Party
Library ID: 1387873885563752

Peter Dutton has committed to “axing” free TAFE so he can pay for his \$600 billion nuclear scheme. He cuts, you pay.

**DUTTON WILL CUT
FREE TAFE
TO PAY FOR
NUCLEAR**

Authorised by S. Staikos, Australian Labor Party, 438 Docklands Drive, Docklands VIC 3008

HECUTSYOU.PAY.COM.AU
Dutton Cuts. You Pay

[Learn More](#)

Labor’s “Don’t Risk Dutton” account, advertising on the potential cost of the Liberals’ proposed nuclear power programme.

Teals Revealed
Sponsored • Paid for by Liberal Party of Australia
Library ID: 1346887906590270

WARNING KOORYONG: A vote for Teal MP Monique Ryan, is a vote for extreme Greens policies.

Monique Ryan pretends to be reasonable, but really aligns with the extreme policies of the Greens, who want to increase taxes (including the GST), cut funding to defence, and decriminalise hard drugs including ice and heroin....

**WARNING
KOORYONG**

**A VOTE FOR TEAL
MONIQUE RYAN
IS A VOTE FOR
EXTREME GREENS
POLICIES**

THE AUSTRALIAN 9 Sep 2023

**Teals ally with 'radical,
extremist Greens'**

TEALSREVEALED.COM
Seven Facts about Monique Ryan | Teals Revealed
Get the facts about Monique Ryan and her record.

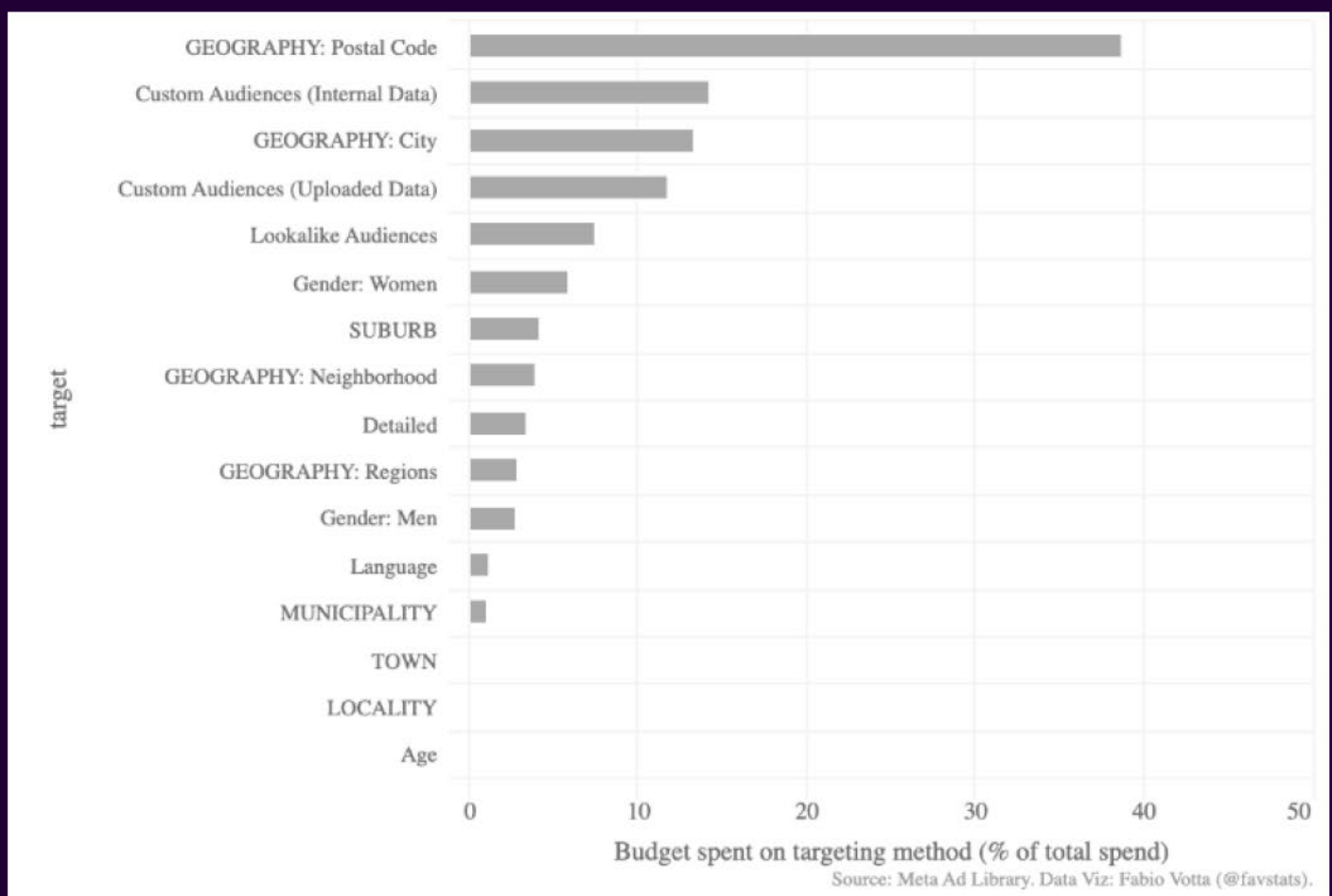
[Learn more](#)

An ad from the Liberals’ “Teals Revealed” page, arguing that independents like Monique Ryan are allied with “extremist Greens”.

Outside the top 20, many of the higher spending advertisers were state and local parties, and individual candidates, with pro-climate Independent candidates, in particular, spending bigger than the equivalent Labor and Coalition candidates, and very often considerably more than their direct opponents. This reflects the need for Independents and pro-climate voices, often locked out of access to mainstream media, to use social media to reach voters.

How did campaigners target their ads?

As you would expect in a parliamentary democracy, Australian political advertisers primarily used postal codes and other geographical methods to target their ads. The chart below shows the aggregated targeting methods used by all Australian political advertisers during the final month of the campaign.

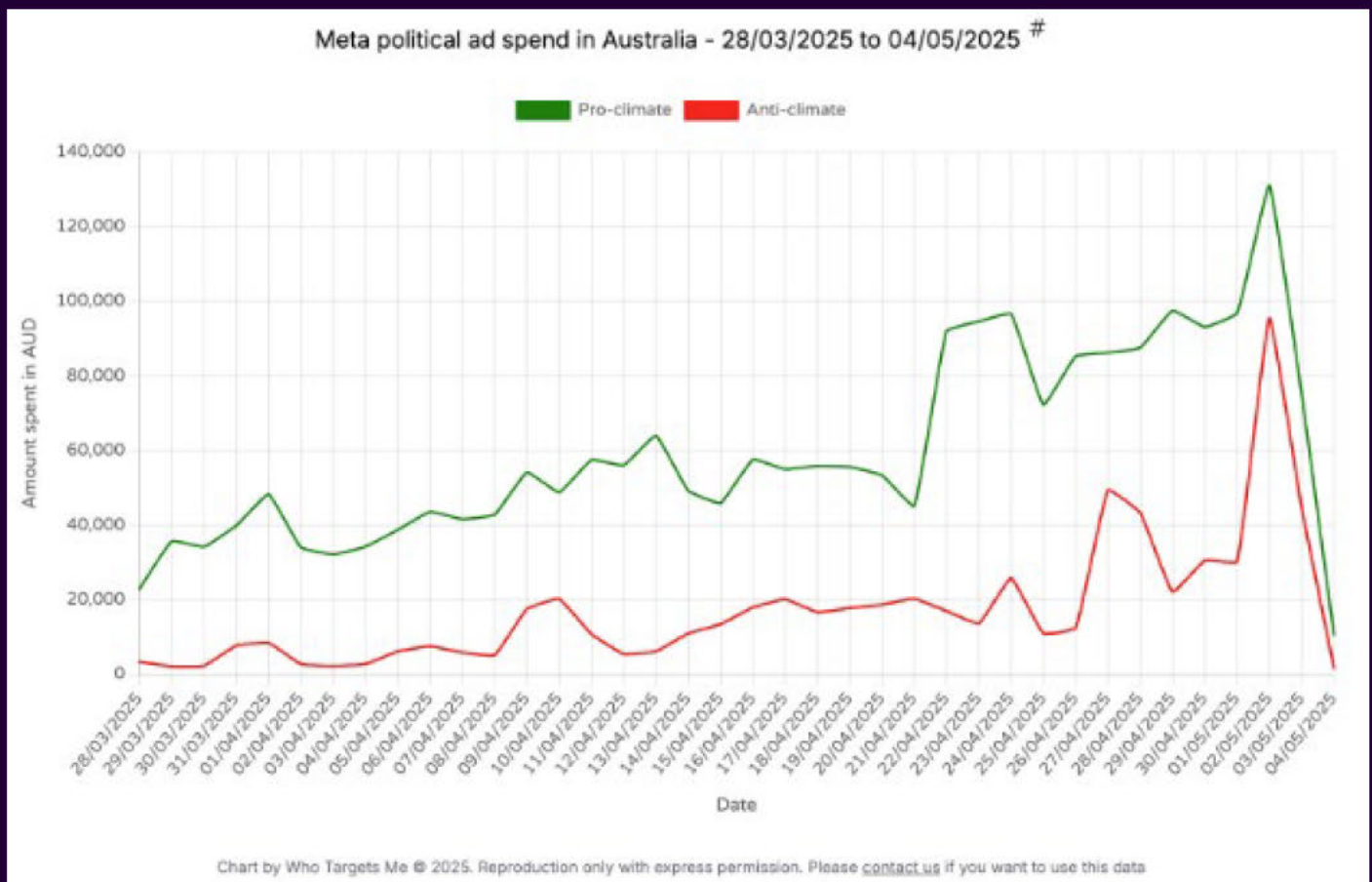


[All targeting dashboards used for this analysis can be found here](#)

Pro and anti-climate narratives in advertising

When we break the targeting data down further, we observe that those on the political right, as well as the anti-climate groups we tracked, seemed to use simpler targeting methods, whereas Labor and the larger pro-climate advertisers appeared more reliant on so-called “custom” and “lookalike audiences”. One hypothesis for this is better long-term organisation among these latter groups, who may have collected data for a long time prior to the election being called. By comparison, anti-climate industry groups don’t seem to collect voter data in the same way (e.g. via canvassing) and paid for their lack of sophistication and wider public outreach.

Looking more closely at the geographical targeting used by parties, we see the most contested divisions being primarily suburban, with seats such as Bennelong, Fowler, Paterson, Dickson (where Peter Dutton lost his seat) and Chisholm among those where most money was spent. All of these were predicted to be competitive by election forecasters, and the levels of advertising in these types of seats reflected this.



[Meta political ad spend in Australia - 28/03/2025 to 04/05/2025](#)

Our analysis shows that, on Meta, pro-climate advertisers outspent their opponents 3:1³. Eight pro-climate groups spent over \$100,000 during the campaign, with the 56 pro-climate pages we identified as actively advertising spending a total of \$2.4m across the six week period.

Group/page	Total spend
Solutions	\$293,378
Liberals Against Nuclear	\$245,938
Clean Energy Council	\$209,973
Greenpeace Australia Pacific	\$157,818
Parents for Climate	\$122,862
The Climate Council	\$122,093
Australians for Affordable Energy	\$108,776
Australian Conservation Foundation	\$107,151

Their campaigns collectively called for urgent action on climate change, often by highlighting the financial burden on Australians caused by the knock-on effects of higher fossil fuel energy costs and increases in insurance rates.


Solutions
 Sponsored • Paid for by Solutions for Australia

☀️ Let's protect the Australian way of life with clean energy. ☀️

Our bushlands and native wildlife are part of our way of life. The best way to preserve them is by using clean, safe renewable energy to power our communities.

👉 SHARE if you want to protect our way of life with energy made fro...



Let's Protect Our Way of Life

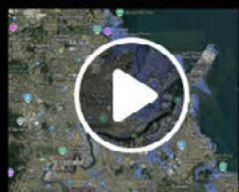

Solutions
 Sponsored • Paid for by Solutions for Australia

Climate change is fuelling more extreme weather and every Australian is paying the cost.

From rising insurance premiums to soaring grocery prices, these events are putting pressure on the budgets of hard-working Australians.

If we want to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, we can't afford ...

77% of homes at highest risk of flooding are uninsured in Australia.



CLIMATE COSTS US ALL

Two ads from Solutions, whose messages focused on a variety of climate-related topics throughout the campaign.



Another theme was nuclear energy, prompted by Peter Dutton’s enthusiastic promotion of it, and taken up by a number of pro-nuclear groups. Opponents of nuclear were prominent too, with accounts such as “Energy for Australia” producing ads arguing that nuclear power would increase (scarce) water use and be expensive, leading to higher bills. As shown above, Labor also ran a number of ads on this theme, including from their anti-Liberals attack pages. Overall, nuclear was one of the most contested policy areas in digital ads during the campaign.

By contrast to the high spending of pro-climate organisations and campaigners, only three anti-climate groups spent more than \$100,000, and the 53 pages we tracked during this study spent only \$640,000. The largest pages were:

Advertiser	Total spend (AUD)
Nuclear for Australia	\$236,935
Change the Government	\$164,593
Australian Energy Producers	\$123,779

Most of the significant anti-climate advertisers represented industry bodies in one form or another (gas, nuclear, mining, coal), and were quite transparent about rejecting net zero on either energy continuity grounds (“coal keeps the lights on” said Coal Australia) or economic opportunity (“Responsible mining serves the Victorian economy” said the Mining Council of Australia).

Australian Energy Producers
Sponsored • Paid for by Australian Energy Producers
Library ID: 1015230170235449

If the Greens get more power, you'll pay more for your power.



**IF THE GREENS
GET MORE POWER,
YOU'LL PAY MORE
FOR YOUR POWER.**

The Greens want to ban all new gas projects
- risking shortages, blackouts and higher bills.*

*Energyquest - Impact of no investment in gas capacity, Sept 2020.
Authorised by S. McElduff, Australian Energy Producers Ltd. Copyrights

AUSTRALIARUNSINGAS.COM
The Greens' gas ban
risks higher power bills.

[Learn more](#)

Gas lobbyist, Australian Energy Producers,
on Facebook.

Mums for Nuclear
Sponsored • Paid for by Mums for Nuclear

From groceries to school shoes to energy bills — everything's going up.

And when electricity becomes more expensive, it affects every part of family life. The good news? It doesn't have to be this way. Nuclear energy offers a low-cost, stable source of power that doesn't rely on the weather or international fuel markets.



NUCLEARFORAUSTRALIA.COM/PETITION
We're not activists or lobbyists, but we know nuclear is our future.
Affordable energy means more left for what really matters: family.

[Learn More](#)

Mums for Nuclear
March 2 at 10:11AM · 45

Nuclear energy is clean energy. It has the lowest emissions of any energy source including solar and wind.

Together with renewables, it is essential for Australia to reach net zero.

**Nuclear energy
is Clean energy**



Mums for Nuclear, part of the Nuclear for Australia lobby group, on Facebook.

More emotively, “Mums for Nuclear” ran ads falsely associating nuclear power with lower household costs. The campaign spent \$33,000 on Meta and targeted its ads nationwide. The group stopped advertising after the Australian Electoral Commission contacted them for failing to include political authorisations.

In addition to standalone anti-climate advertisers, Clive Palmer's Trumpet of Patriots made a significant number of false claims in both their Meta and Google ads about the "high cost" of net zero policies. Incorrect claims included that governments had spent \$38bn on net zero, and planned to spend \$642bn in future, as well as that China is building "750 coal fired power stations" (i.e. why bother with net zero at all). Another YouTube ad used decades-old science to claim Greenland is getting cooler. The majority of the party's ads were fronted by Suellen Wrightson, the party's leader, who only registered 3.6% of the vote in the division of Hunter, where she stood. Despite Trumpet of Patriots' advertising having little effect in the election result - the fact that political advertising can be used to spread climate lies is a loophole that needs to be closed through national truth in advertising legislation.

Foreign influence, disinformation and AI in political advertising

Australia appears to have been fortunate in avoiding significant incidents in digital advertising that might have threatened confidence in the election. Our research suggests there was no widespread effort to use social media ads to manipulate the election through foreign influence, disinformation campaigns or the misuse of AI. The one caveat to this is what we can't see. For example, Google's narrow definition of political advertising means it is possible groups were active around the margins, though we haven't seen any reports of such influence campaigns. The same may be possible for programmatic advertising, though again, we are unaware of any real-world examples at this time.



The ability to disseminate large-scale disinformation to undermine scientifically established facts poses an existential risk to humanity and endangers democratic institutions and fundamental human rights."

United Nations

Policy recommendations for government

1. Set a high, consistent bar for transparency for social media advertising in elections

Digital political advertising transparency has improved since it was first introduced by Meta and Google in 2018, but still suffers from a lack of consistency.

There are significant differences in the way platforms have chosen to implement transparency (through ad libraries, spending reports and APIs). There are also large differences in scope between what each social media platform considers to be “political”.

Alongside this, some platforms and services have decided to sit outside of the paid political advertising market (for example TikTok and Microsoft), while others have chosen to accept them, while providing little or no transparency (e.g. many programmatic networks, as well as websites which sell ads directly). Despite the ban on political advertising on TikTok, it was clearly used to carry political messages.

Regulation should create a common definition for political advertising, to include all ads by or about parties and candidates, issues of political and electoral significance. It should mandate strong verification for such advertisers and high, standardised levels of transparency for their ads.

By creating a common standard and approach, the political ad market is made more trustworthy, as well as fairer and more competitive, as services can have the confidence that they will not be singled out for criticism for their approach.

2. Define and enforce expectations for large platforms around the protection of elections

In its current form, the voluntary Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation acknowledges that elections are important moments of heightened disinformation risk, but makes no provision for centralised coordination or rapid response in the event of an emerging democratic threat.

Creating a mechanism that formally brings together platforms, the Australian Electoral Commission, Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, civil society and representatives of the security services (to protect against threats to the democratic process from overseas) in a binding, predictable way in the lead up to elections, would give Australia both a pragmatic solution to meet these potential threats and would build confidence in election processes.

3. Research and respond to the level of non-party campaigning in elections

While taking care to protect speech, ensuring that the majority voices heard during election campaigns are from those standing for office is important. Most voters are aware of parties and politicians, because they have established brands and track records. By contrast, third party advertising is less well understood and “read” by voters.

Although non-party advertising can allow minority voices and viewpoints to be heard, the primary uses in the recent Federal election were either negative attack pages, such as those by Advance and paid for by wealthy individuals and lobby groups or were previously entirely unknown, such as Hothouse Magazine.

The requirement for political advertisers on Meta to be verified and identified is open to manipulation and should be strengthened. Our research found at least one political account where the contact was the spouse of the advertiser, and the address was a virtual office.

Also widespread was astroturfing and the use of multiple Meta accounts by one group. For example, Advance and Climate200 ran Facebook pages disguised as news platforms. Advance ran several unbranded Facebook pages to target the Greens and community independents. We won’t know the full extent until electoral spending is disclosed later in 2025.

The government should evaluate the role and value of third party advertising to voters, and look at whether spending limits or other restrictions are appropriate in order to maintain a healthy, democratic balance.

4. Ensure a diverse market for political advertising

With nearly \$50m spent across Meta and Google, Australians should worry about the dominance of these two companies over online political advertising. In 2021 the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) found that over 90% of ad impressions traded via the ad tech supply chain passed through at least one Google service.

The absolute absence of other large players, particularly TikTok and Microsoft, from the political advertising market, as well as the relatively small size of other digital advertising networks (X and programmatic advertising) gives enormous market setting power to the two largest platforms both in terms of pricing, and de facto policy (for example around advertising transparency standards and rules). It also makes Australia vulnerable to further withdrawals from the market (as Google has done in Canada, and will soon do in the EU). The political advertising market can be controversial, but a political advertising monopoly would be worse.

5. Respond to the changing nature of political advertising, such as via influencers, verified accounts and the rise of AI

As campaigns explore new ways of reaching voters, there has been an increased focus on influencers through non-traditional forms of advertising, including influencers. This is a generally under-regulated market, with weak transparency and little accountability.

With the rise of AI-generated media, it's essential to label such content clearly to prevent the spread of misleading information. Platforms should implement measures to identify and label AI-generated political ads.

OpenAI CEO, Sam Altman has said he is open to advertising being offered on ChatGPT. The potential for political advertising to be embedded in AI search results adds another future risk for voters and lawmakers to navigate. Common transparency standards, verification requirements and other rules can help protect voters and democracy, should the market further change.

6. National truth in political advertising laws

While we prefer spending caps and full platform transparency to new laws, it's clear that the 2025 election campaign allowed political parties and third party advertisers to spread half-truths and lies about climate change, energy policy and net zero to millions of people.

Truth in political advertising laws would go some way to ending climate and energy policy being used as a political pawn in the so called "climate wars". However, it also risks overreach and misuse.

South Australia has had truth in political advertising laws for decades and the ACT has had similar laws since 2020. The Australia Institute found that 9 in 10 Australians support national laws. Without other reforms, new truth in political advertising laws may be the best option.

¹<https://whotargets.me/install>

²<https://trends.whotargets.me>

³In almost all cases, Google does not include "issue" advertisers in their definition of political advertising, meaning that just one of the top 20 accounts in our dashboard was advertising on their services.