DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

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When Silence Isn't Silent:

Digital Political Advertising and Enforcement Challenges in Sri Lanka's 2024 Parliamentary Elections

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The Strengthening Resilience Against Disinformation in Sri Lanka project is co-funded by the European Union and implemented by Democracy Reporting International and Factum. The project aims to reinforce Sri Lanka's democratic and electoral frameworks and protect human rights by prioritising inclusivity and responsible political discourse on social media through monitoring and debunking online harmful content. Leveraging collaborative efforts of civil society organisations in Sri Lanka, this initiative capacitates fact-checkers and media outlets, creates counter-narratives, and strengthens the technical expertise of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL).

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Executive Summary

Online political advertising has become a central component of electoral campaigning in Sri Lanka, reshaping how political actors mobilise voters, frame political issues, and allocate campaign resources. The scale, speed, and targeting capacities of social media platforms have increased the reach and strategic importance of paid digital advertising, while simultaneously challenging transparency, accountability, and the effectiveness of existing electoral regulations. This study examines how these dynamics unfolded during Sri Lanka's 2024 parliamentary elections, by analysing political advertising on Facebook and Instagram between 1 October and 15 November 2024.

To examine these dynamics, the study focuses on three interrelated dimensions of digital political advertising. Specifically, it analyses political advertising activity over time, with particular attention paid to ad deployment and activity during the legally mandated silence period; it explores advertising strategies across political parties by comparing advertising volume and average impressions per advertisement; and it examines the currencies used to finance political advertising.

Key findings:

- We collected a total of 22,974 political advertisements published on Facebook and Instagram between 1 October and 15 November 2024. These ads were posted by 2,292 unique advertiser accounts, including accounts with clear political affiliation (998) and third-party accounts (1,294) – users that cannot be directly linked to any recognised political party or candidate.

- As expected, political advertising intensified ahead of the election, but did not fully cease during the legally mandated silence period. Despite a sharp decline, 6,712 ads (29 per cent of all Facebook and Instagram ads) remained active at some point during this period, in clear violation of electoral regulations.

- Of the 6,712 ads, approximately 6,300 (around 94 per cent) were removed by platforms at different points during the silence period. However, 412 political ads remained active until election day.

- Ads linked to the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) parties accounted for the highest volume of political advertising on Facebook and Instagram, publishing 3,189 and 2,112 ads, respectively – 1.8 times more than all other parties combined.

- A greater volume of ads did not necessarily translate into greater reach. Ads associated with smaller and newer parties, particularly the United Democratic Voice (UDV) and Sarvajana Balaya (SB), achieved substantially higher average impressions per ad (87,344 and 50,507, respectively) than more established parties.

- Silence period violations were concentrated among the most active advertisers. Ads attributed to the SJB recorded the highest number of non-compliant ads (761), followed by ads linked to the NDF (472) and the National People's Power party (NPP) (307).

- Political ads in the sample were created using 30 different currencies, predominantly US dollars (16,694 ads) and Sri Lankan rupees (6,145 ads), alongside other currencies such as euros, Australian dollars, British pounds, and Canadian dollars. While the use of foreign currencies does not in itself indicate non-compliance with Meta's political advertising guidelines, and may simply reflect advertisers' payment preferences or diaspora-driven political engagement, the wide range of currencies observed nonetheless raises questions about whether all advertisers targeting Sri Lanka were in fact locally authorised, as required under platform policies.

These findings point to two interrelated gaps – limitations in platform self-regulatory mechanisms, which are insufficient on their own, and shortcomings in the application of national electoral regulations to platform-mediated campaign environments, where existing regulation fails to be meaningfully implemented. In response, this study puts forward a set of targeted policy recommendations to strengthen platform enforcement, improve regulatory coordination, and safeguard electoral integrity in Sri Lanka's digital campaigning ecosystem.

Introduction

Political advertising has become a central instrument in contemporary election campaigns, shaping how political actors are perceived, how issues are framed, and which political narratives come to dominate the public sphere. By default, political advertising is not a neutral channel of communication but, rather, one that actively constructs political realities by mobilising voters, persuading undecided audiences, and setting the agendas of electoral debate. In the digital ecosystem, these effects operate through specific mechanisms, namely the scale, speed, and micro-targeting capacities of platforms, which substantially alter the balance of political communication. By enabling political messages to circulate widely within very short timeframes, to be tailored to specific audiences, and to reach different segments of the electorate unevenly, these dynamics amplify certain narratives, marginalise others, and obscure the traceability of who communicates what, to whom, and with what resources. In turn, this suggests areas of concern around transparency and accountability, raising questions about how existing regulatory frameworks engage with platform-driven political campaigning.[1]

Sri Lanka's 2024 parliamentary elections took place in a campaigning environment where digital platforms were deeply embedded in everyday political communication. High social media penetration and the prominence of platform-mediated news consumption continued to reshape campaign strategies, increasing reliance on digitally distributed political advertising. For emerging political actors with limited access to traditional media channels, digital advertising offered a scalable and relatively low-cost means to reach voters and tailor messages to specific constituencies.[2] At the same time, the growing role of digital advertising has led to uneven voter exposure, limited transparency around targeting practices, and challenges for effective oversight in fast-moving online environments.

Sri Lanka has several regulatory instruments in place to govern electoral campaigning and political advertising. The regulatory framework for parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka is anchored in the Parliamentary Elections Act, No. 1 of 1981,[3] which establishes core rules on campaign conduct, including restrictions on canvassing and on holding processions in support of a candidate or party. Further, the Media Guidelines issued by

1. Muragala | CPPP, "How digital spaces are redefining democracy in the 2024 election", 10 November 2024; Ira Kumar, Vikram Parekh & Neera Kumar, "The influence of social media on elections: Expenditure, campaign strategies, outcomes, and bias", Journal of Marketing & Social Research, Volume 2, Issue 2, pp. 432-450.

2. Ofei Ofei, Ofei Emanuell Kayode, Agbukor Lucky Apheakuye & Eki Precious Okunorobo, "A Review of Social Media as Alternative Medium for Political Participation", International Journal of Research Publication and Review, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 489-497.

3. Blackhall Publishing, "Laws Of Sri Lanka: Consolidated and Annotated – Parliamentary Elections Act".

the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) under Article 104 B(5)(A) of the Constitution outlines instructions for promotions, campaigns and media behavior during elections including a mandatory **48-hour "silence" period** prior to polling day and on election day itself.[4] During this period, **all forms of campaigning are prohibited,** including political advertising in the digital sphere. Within this regulatory framework, the ECSL has further specified requirements for political campaigning by introducing additional restrictions related to campaign content, symbolism, and the timing of campaign activities. More recently, Sri Lanka enacted the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023,[5] which provides a mandate for the Election Commission to introduce per-voter spending limits for each election, with the aim of promoting a more level playing field and enhancing transparency, including in relation to spending on digital political advertising. The Election Commission declared the maximum authorised amount of expenditure for each electoral district during the parliamentary elections in 2024.[6]

Beyond statutory regulation, digital platforms have their own policies and guidelines to govern political advertising. These platform-level rules typically operate through self-regulatory mechanisms, including transparency disclosures, such as the identification of sponsors, funding sources, information on targeting practices, and specific content restrictions during sensitive electoral periods.[7]

Despite these legal frameworks and platform policies, the regulation of online political advertising in Sri Lanka remains challenging. In response to the above, this study examines the scale and patterns of political advertising during the 2024 parliamentary election campaign on Facebook and Instagram, two of the most widely used social media platforms in the country.[8] Taken together, our findings allow for the identification of gaps in platform governance and compliance with local legal frameworks and provide an evidence base for policy recommendations directed at tech platforms, the ECSL, and civil society actors.

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4. Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, "Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka: Media Guidelines Under Article 104B (5)(A) of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka", 26 July 2024.

5. Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, "Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, No. 3 of 2023", 24 January 2023.

6. Election Commission of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, "Parliamentary Election – November 14, 2024: Provisions under the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No 3 of 2023", 17 October, 2024.

7. Meta Transparency Center, "Ads about social issues, elections or politics", 5 June 2024; TikTok Business Help Center, "Politics, Governments, and Elections", October 2025; Google, "List of Ad Policies – Advertising Policies - Political Content".

8. Simon Kemp, "Digital 2025: Sri Lanka", DataReportal, 3 March 2025.

Main Findings

Our analysis is structured around three analytical dimensions, each examining political advertising from a distinct but interrelated perspective. First, we analyse political advertising activity over time, with particular attention paid to patterns around the legally mandated silence period. Second, we examine parties' advertising strategies, by comparing the volume of ads and impressions generated by each party. Third, we explore the currencies used in political advertising, to better understand how political ads are financed.

Overall, we collected a total of 22,974 political ads published on Facebook and Instagram between 1 October and 15 November 2024. These ads were posted by 2,292 unique advertiser accounts, including accounts with clear political affiliation (998) and third-party accounts (1,294), defined as users that cannot be directly linked to any recognised political party or candidate, but that disseminated political content.

Figure 1. Distribution of accounts publishing political ads

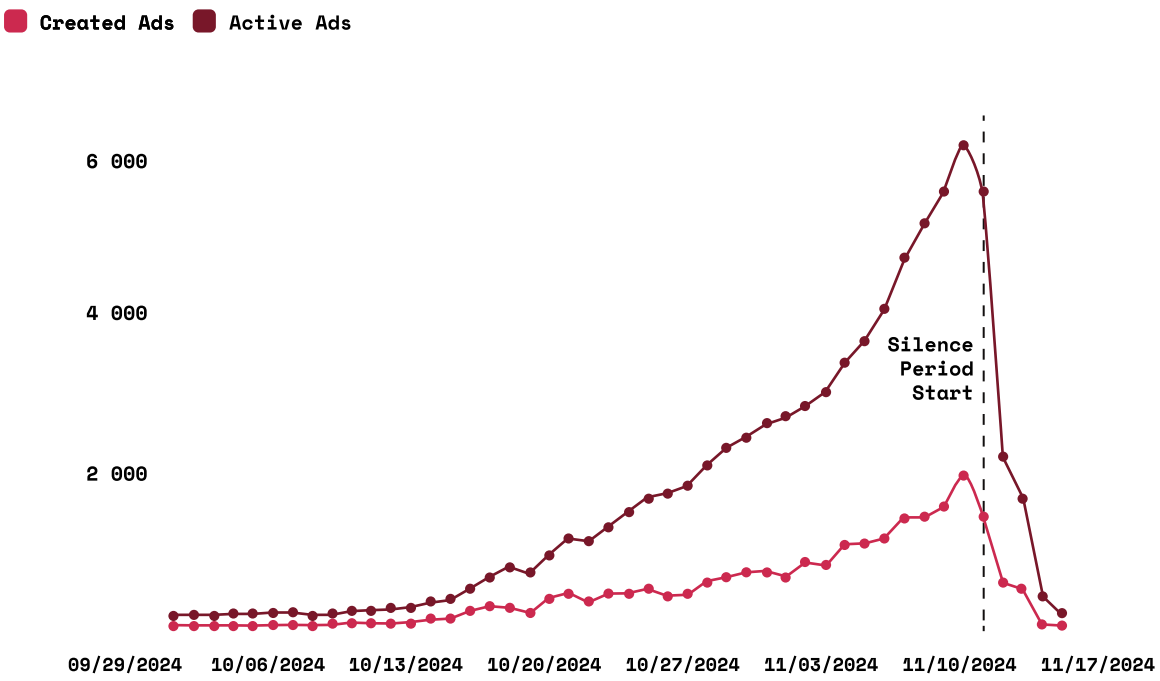
Already at this aggregate level, our findings show the extent to which political messaging in Sri Lanka is channeled through accounts without a clear political affiliation, as 56.4 per cent percent of all ads published come from such accounts, complicating the identification of responsible actors and raising concerns about transparency, accountability, and the effective enforcement of campaign finance regulations.

Political advertisement activity

Patterns of political advertising over time provide critical insights into how digital campaigning evolves during key moments of the electoral cycle, helping to identify gaps in both regulatory oversight and platform enforcement.

Figure 2 shows that between 1 October and 15 November 2024, political advertising activity on Facebook and Instagram intensified in the weeks leading up to Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections, peaking on 10 November. Both the total number of active ads (all political ads visible during the observation period) and, within this group, the number of newly created ads (launched between 1 October and 15 November 2024), increased as election day approached, indicating a growing concentration of digital campaigning during periods of heightened voter attention. This pattern suggests that political actors, both those with a clearly stated political affiliation and those without, relied on social media platforms as key channels for voter outreach, particularly during the final phase of the campaign.

Figure 2. Temporal distribution of active and newly created political ads

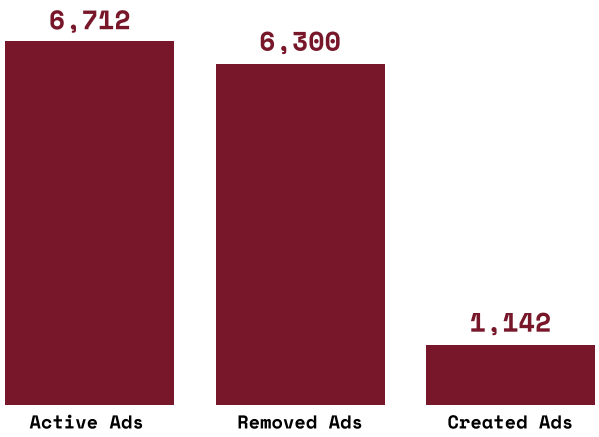


Political advertisement activity across the silence period

As the 14 November election day approached, political advertising activity declined sharply. This decline did not, however, translate into a complete cessation of political advertising, as required by electoral regulations during the legally mandated silence period, which begins 48 hours prior to election day (from 11 November until the close of polls on 14 November). Specifically, a total of 6,712 ads (approximately 29 per cent of all ads in the dataset) were active at some point during the silence period, meaning they remained visible during a timeframe in which political advertising is prohibited. Within this group, 1,142 ads (around 5 per cent of all ads observed during the analysis period) were newly created during the silence period itself, representing clear instances of advertising launched within a legally restricted window.

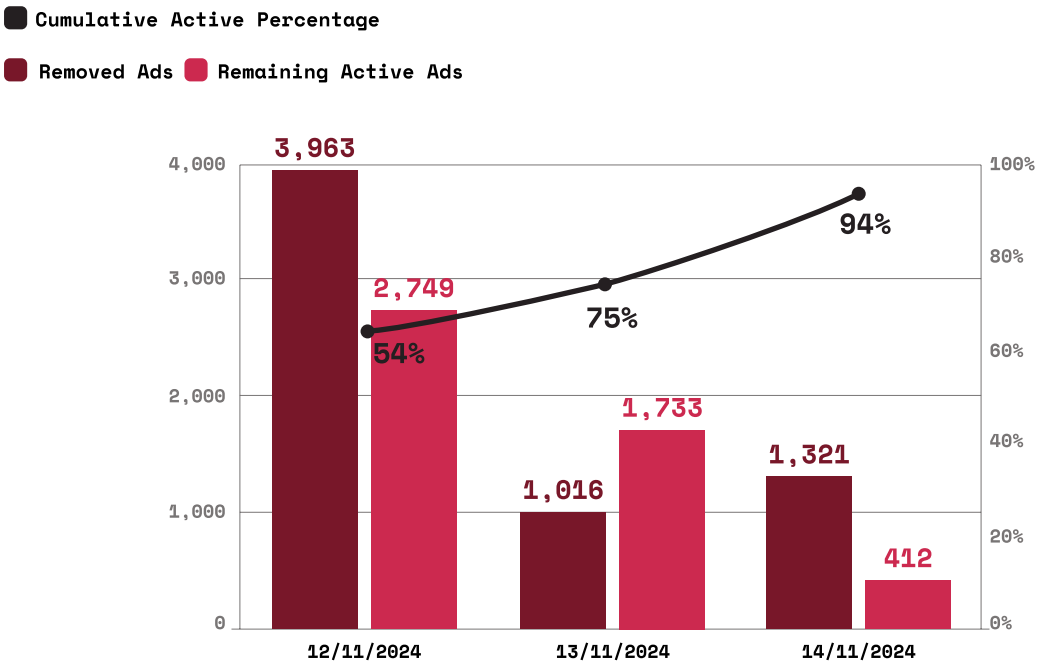
In response to the ads that remained active during the silence period, Figure 3 illustrates a relatively high degree of platform enforcement at an aggregate level. Of the 6,712 ads that were active at some point during the silence period, approximately 6,300 (around 94 per cent) were ultimately removed.

Figure 3. Number of total active, newly created, and removed political ads during the silence period



Day-by-day analysis shows, however, that enforcement was neither immediate nor complete. Figure 4 reveals significant delays in enforcement during this critical window. On the first day of the silence period, only 2,749 ads had been removed, while 3,963 remained active following these takedown efforts. Even on election day, 412 political ads were still active, despite the legal prohibition on campaigning during this period.

Figure 4. Number of active and removed, and the percentage of removal of political ads during the silence period, by day



These findings suggest limitations in both regulatory oversight and platform-level enforcement, resulting in residual digital campaigning during a period in which voters were legally entitled to a campaign-free environment.

Advertising strategies across political parties

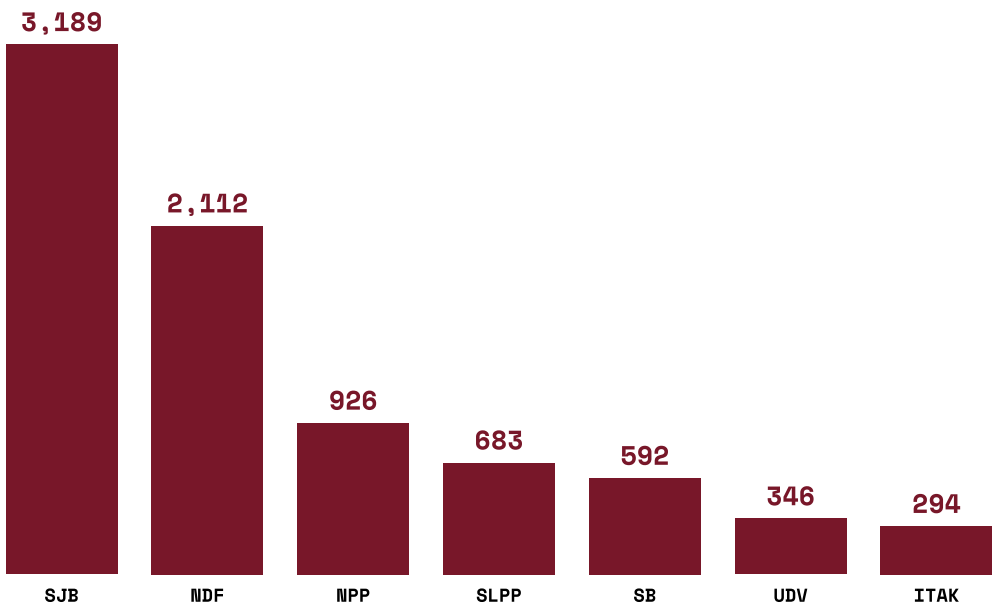
A second analytical dimension focuses on the political actors behind sponsored ads, examining their strategies in terms of both the volume of ads published and the average impressions generated per ad.

To identify ads associated with major political parties, we classified them by party affiliation, using a predefined lexicon (a detailed explanation of this process is provided in the “Methodology” section). Using this approach, we were able to confidently attribute 8,322 ads (36.2 per cent of the total), revealing meaningful variations in advertising volumes and reach across political parties.

Figure 5 shows that ads attributed to the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) accounted for the highest volume of political ads on Facebook and Instagram during the campaign. In contrast, despite winning the election by a substantial

margin, only 926 ads were associated with the National People's Power (NPP), indicating a markedly different approach to the use of paid digital advertising.

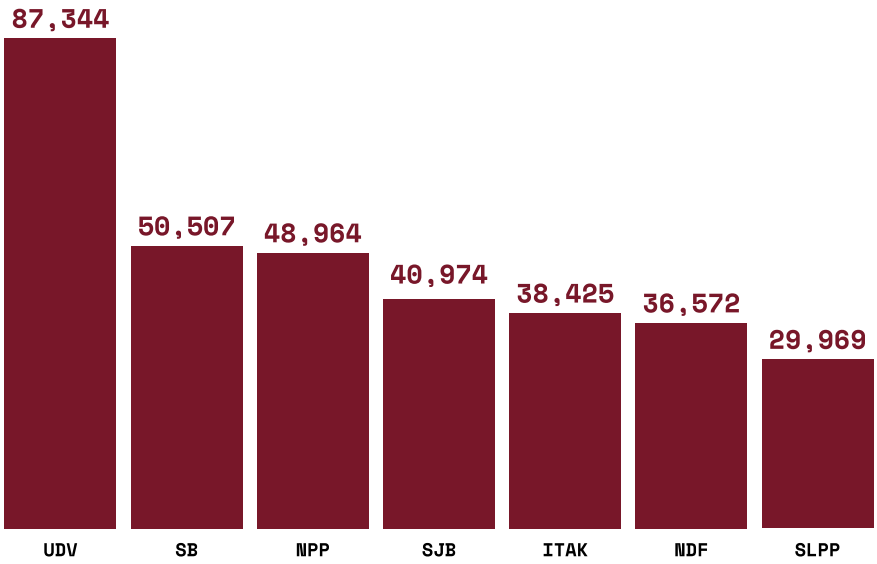
Figure 5. Number of political ads across political parties



A higher volume of ads, however, does not necessarily translate into greater audience reach, as reach on digital platforms is shaped not only by posting activity, but also by how much is spent on each ad and by how platform algorithms optimise and prioritise ad delivery. Accordingly, as part of the advertising strategy, we complement the analysis of ad volume by examining average impressions.

Figure 6 reveals a markedly different pattern from that shown in Figure 5. Ads associated with smaller and newer parties, most notably the United Democratic Voice (UDV) and Sarvajana Balaya (SB), achieved substantially higher average impressions per ad than more established parties, with averages of 87,343.9 and 50,506.8 impressions per ad, respectively. Additionally, ads attributed to the NPP achieved higher average impressions than several larger competitors, despite running a comparatively limited number of ads (48,964.4 impressions per ad).

Figure 6. Average impressions per ad across political parties



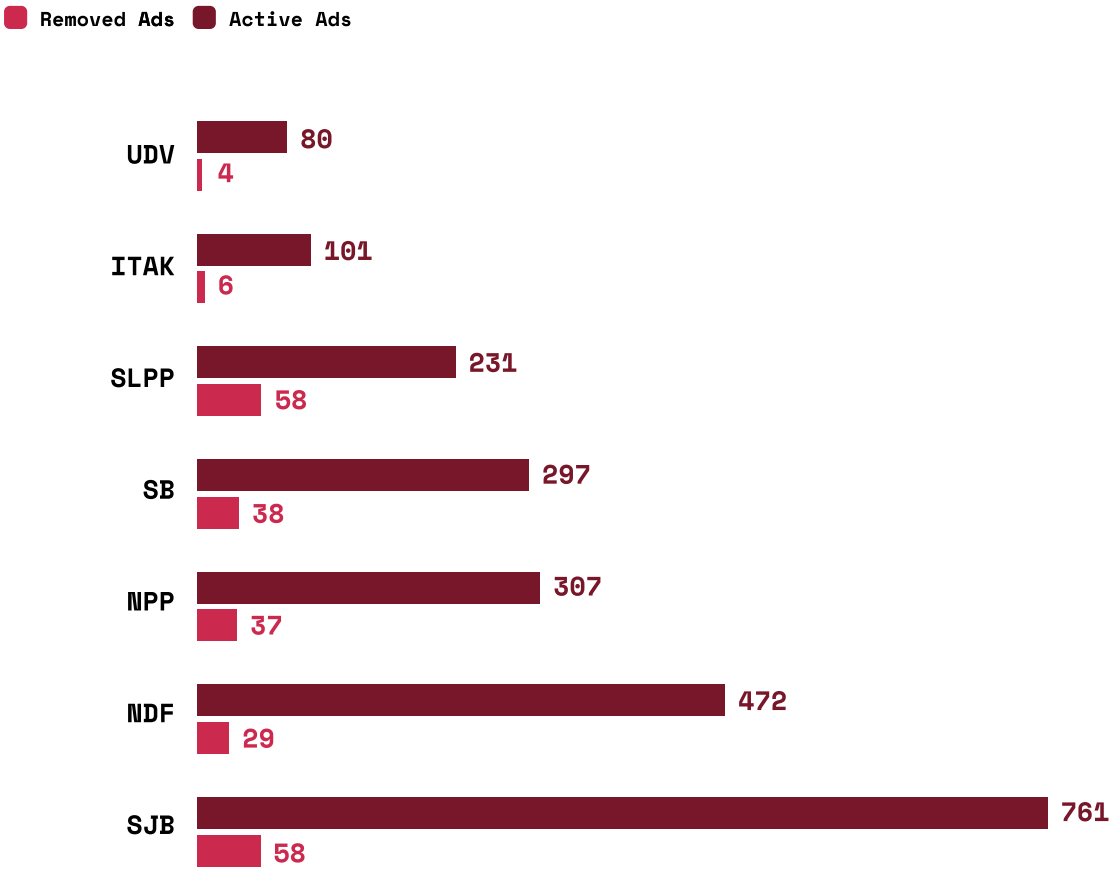
Based on the analysed subsample, these findings may indicate a more intensive deployment of resources per ad by those parties, potentially reflecting greater spending per ad, more concentrated budget allocation, more effective targeting strategies, or stronger creative performance.

Silence period analysis

As an additional step, we examine party-level behaviour during the legally mandated silence period.

Our data shows substantial variation between parties in terms of silence period violations. While all parties ran ads in violation of the silence period, these were disproportionately associated with parties with the highest overall advertising volumes. Our sample shows that the highest number of non-compliant ads were attributed to the SJB with 761 active ads, of which 58 were newly created during the restricted period. This was followed by ads attributed to the NDF, with 472 ads, including 29 newly created, and to the National NPP, with 307 active ads, including 37 newly created during the silence period.

Figure 7. Created and Active Ads by political party during the silence period



Political advertising financing

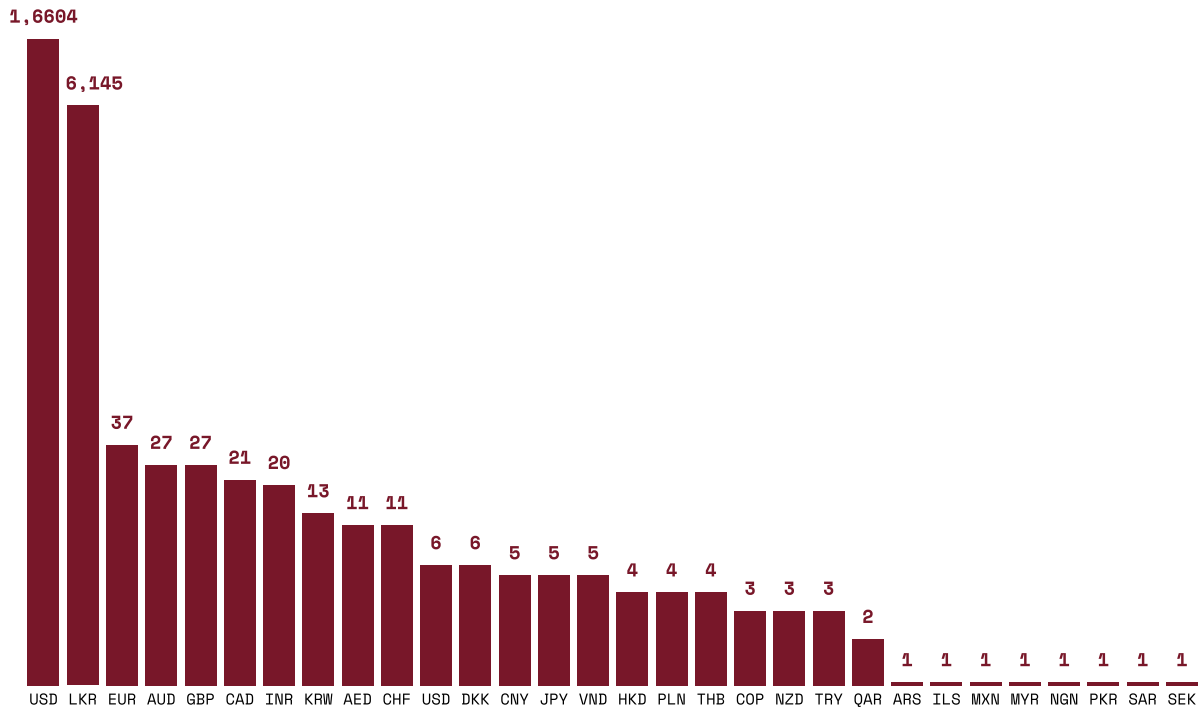
In addition to temporal patterns and advertising strategies across political parties, the financing of political advertising and its transparency constitute a third and final key dimension of digital campaigning. Under Meta's guidelines, advertisers running ads related to social issues, elections, or politics are required to undergo an authorisation process that verifies their identity and location.[9] These policies require political advertisers targeting Sri Lanka to be locally authorised and to disclose information about payment sources. In parallel, Sri Lanka's Regulation of Election Expenditure Act establishes statutory ceilings on campaign spending, reinforcing the importance of transparency and accountability in the financing of political advertising.

9. Meta Transparency Center, "Ads about social issues, elections or politics", op. cit., note 8

However, because spending data in Meta's Ad Library is disclosed only in broad ranges and are is aggregated at the level of individual advertisers or political parties, this study cannot directly assess compliance with statutory spending ceilings. Instead, the analysis focuses on financing-related indicators that are observable through the platform, primarily the currencies used in political advertising, as a proxy for underlying funding mechanisms, and as a way to examine potential limitations in the practical implementation of advertiser authorisation requirements. As shown in previous sections, platform enforcement mechanisms may not always operate as intended in practice.

Figure 8 shows that political ads in the sample were created using 30 different currencies, highlighting the diversity of payment mechanisms used during the campaign period. The majority of ads were paid for in US dollars (USD) (16,694 ads, 72 per cent) and Sri Lankan rupees (LKR) (6,145 ads, 27 per cent), while a range of other currencies were used only marginally, including euros (EUR), Australian dollars (AUD), British pounds (GBP), Canadian dollars (CAD), Indian rupees (INR), and South Korean won (KRW), among others.

Figure 8. Distribution of political ads across currencies



The use of a wide range of foreign currencies suggests that political advertising during the campaign period was financed through diverse currencies. The use of foreign currencies does not, in itself, constitute non-compliance, and may reflect advertisers' payment preferences or the transnational nature of political engagement, particularly in contexts

with large and politically active diaspora communities (e.g., in Canada, the EU, India, South Korea, the United States, or the United Kingdom).

At the same time, the prevalence of non-local currencies raises questions regarding the effective implementation of advertiser authorisation requirements, in line with platform-level enforcement challenges identified in previous sections. Specifically, it highlights uncertainty about whether all advertisers targeting Sri Lanka were effectively locally authorised in practice, as required under platform policies, and whether sufficient transparency exists regarding the origin of campaign funding. In the absence of more granular data on advertiser identity, location, and funding sources, it remains difficult to distinguish between legitimate diaspora-driven campaigning, advertisers' payment preferences, and potential instances of non-compliance or foreign-funded political advertising by actors not authorised to operate locally.

From Findings to Policy Action: Recommendations for Strengthening Digital Electoral Integrity

The findings of this study reveal a persistent gap between platform-level policy commitments and the effective implementation of Sri Lanka's electoral regulations in online environments.

Most notably, political advertising activity continued during the legally mandated silence period, in direct contravention of Sri Lanka's election law. Meta's systems neither automatically halted the delivery of existing ads nor prevented the approval of new ads during that window, resulting in a failure to operationalise national legal requirements at the platform level. During this period, 6,712 ads remained active, and, of these, 1,142 were newly created during this legally restricted window, indicating that digital campaigning persisted at a time when electoral law required a campaign-free environment. Despite platform enforcement mechanisms, 412 political ads remained active until election day.

In assessing which actors were associated with silent period violations and how these violations occurred, ads attributed to all political parties identified in the sample recorded violations during this time. These violations were disproportionately concentrated among ads associated with parties with the highest overall advertising volumes, including the SJB, the NDF, and the NPP.

In parallel, financing-related disclosures point to potential limitations in the practical implementation of advertiser authorisation and funding transparency requirements. The use of more than 30 different currencies suggests that political ads were financed through diverse, and often non-local, payment arrangements. While this does not in itself indicate non-compliance, it nonetheless signals potential limitations in social media platforms' ability to verify advertiser location, particularly in light of the platform-level enforcement challenges identified earlier in this analysis. Specifically, it calls into question whether all advertisers targeting Sri Lanka were effectively locally authorised in practice, as required under platform policies.

Taken together, these findings indicate a dual enforcement gap; platform self-regulation is insufficient on its own, and national electoral regulations lack effective mechanisms for enforcement in platform-mediated campaigning environments. Therefore, this study advances a set of targeted policy recommendations aimed at strengthening platform enforcement, improving regulatory coordination, and enhancing electoral integrity in Sri Lanka's digital campaigning ecosystem.

Tech Companies should:

- Implement automated enforcement mechanisms aligned with Sri Lanka's election calendar, including the mandatory suspension of political advertising during legally defined silence periods and on polling days;
- Apply enhanced verification and review processes for political advertisers and ads, including robust identity checks, compliance with platform policies and local election laws, and structured data-sharing arrangements with the Election Commission, through transparent and secure agreements;
- Ensure meaningful transparency and research access to political advertising data, by introducing or strengthening tools, such as Meta's Ad Library API, enabling independent scrutiny of ad content, targeting, spending, and reach; and
- Adopt internal election-integrity safeguards that override monetisation incentives during election periods, ensuring that regulatory compliance, voter protection, and democratic integrity take precedence over advertising revenue.

The Election Commission of Sri Lanka should:

- Establish formal data-sharing agreements with tech companies to enable real-time monitoring of political advertising, ensuring transparent and timely access to data on digital electoral expenditures by political parties and candidates;
- Provide clear guidance on the regulatory requirements governing political advertising on digital platforms for political parties, independent groups, and candidates;
- Establish multi-stakeholder mechanisms involving political parties, election observers, and tech companies to support transparent and consultative enforcement of electoral regulations on political advertising; and
- Strengthen institutional capacity within the Election Commission and establish robust mechanisms to monitor and enforce electoral expenditure regulations, including expenditures related to digital campaigning.

Civil society organisations should:

- Continue independent monitoring of digital political advertising, and advocate for stronger platform accountability through robust oversight mechanisms;
- Establish cross-sector research consortia to enable real-time detection of coordinated advertising campaigns, foreign or proxy funding, voter suppression narratives, and disinformation-driven political advertising; and
- Conduct comprehensive public awareness campaigns on voter literacy, with a focus on political advertising on digital platforms and its impact on electoral integrity.

Methodology

This study examined political advertising activity on Facebook and Instagram during Sri Lanka's 2024 parliamentary elections. Data was collected using the Meta Ads Library API for the period 1 October to 15 November 2024, capturing all ads active at any point from the announcement of the parliamentary elections through election day. The final dataset comprises 22,974 ads, published by 2,292 unique advertiser accounts.

To capture the different dimensions of digital political advertising, the study adopted multiple analytical approaches. For the analysis of temporal patterns of political advertising activity and financing-related indicators, we used the full dataset (22,974 observations), including all political ads that were active at any point between the period of analysis, allowing for an assessment of overall advertising volume over time and aggregate patterns related to funding disclosures.

To examine compliance with the legally mandated silence period, we utilised two temporal variables – the ad's creation date and delivery end date. We classified ads as active during the blackout period if they were created on or before 14 November 2024 and had a delivery end date after 11 November 2024, thereby overlapping with the 48-hour silence period preceding election day.

To analyse advertising strategies across political actors, we grouped ads by political affiliation, using a lexicon-based approach aligned with the major parties contesting the election. This classification was based on the textual content of the ads as provided in Meta's Ad Library, including the main ad text, headlines, link captions, and descriptions. By examining these text elements, we were able to identify references to political parties and assign ads to the relevant actors. While this approach enables large-scale and systematic classification, it depends on the presence of identifiable textual indicators. Ads consisting solely of images or videos without accompanying text could, therefore, not be classified. Ultimately, 8,322 (36.2 per cent) of ads were successfully assigned a party affiliation, forming the basis for the party-level analysis of advertising volume and impressions.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, as mentioned before, the Meta Ads Library reports expenditure only in broad ranges, rather than exact amounts, which precludes precise financial analysis and prevents the assessment of compliance with statutory spending ceilings.

Second, political party affiliation could be confidently identified for only a subset of ads, due to missing, minimal, or ambiguous textual information, particularly in ads consisting primarily of images or videos.

Lastly, the analysis is limited to sponsored political ads on Facebook and Instagram, and does not capture political advertising on other digital platforms or organic, non-sponsored political content. Despite these constraints, the dataset provides sufficient coverage to identify meaningful patterns in digital campaigning and to assess platform-level governance and enforcement practices during Sri Lanka's 2024 parliamentary elections.