

Liberals highest spender in Meta ads so far, PCs focus on 'broad buys'



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Ontario Liberal Leader Bonnie Crombie appears at a campaign event in Scarborough, Ont. on Thursday, February 6, 2025. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Chris Young

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The Ontario Liberals are taking the election campaign digital, vastly outspending all other parties on Facebook and Instagram in what experts are calling a “targeted” approach to reaching voters.

As we approach the final week of the Ontario election campaign, advertising is expected to ramp up and become more aggressive, with parties focusing on their ballot box issues and attacking their opponents.

Already, it's estimated that about a million dollars have been spent overall during the election campaign on Meta advertising, with about 60 per cent of that coming from the Ontario Liberals.

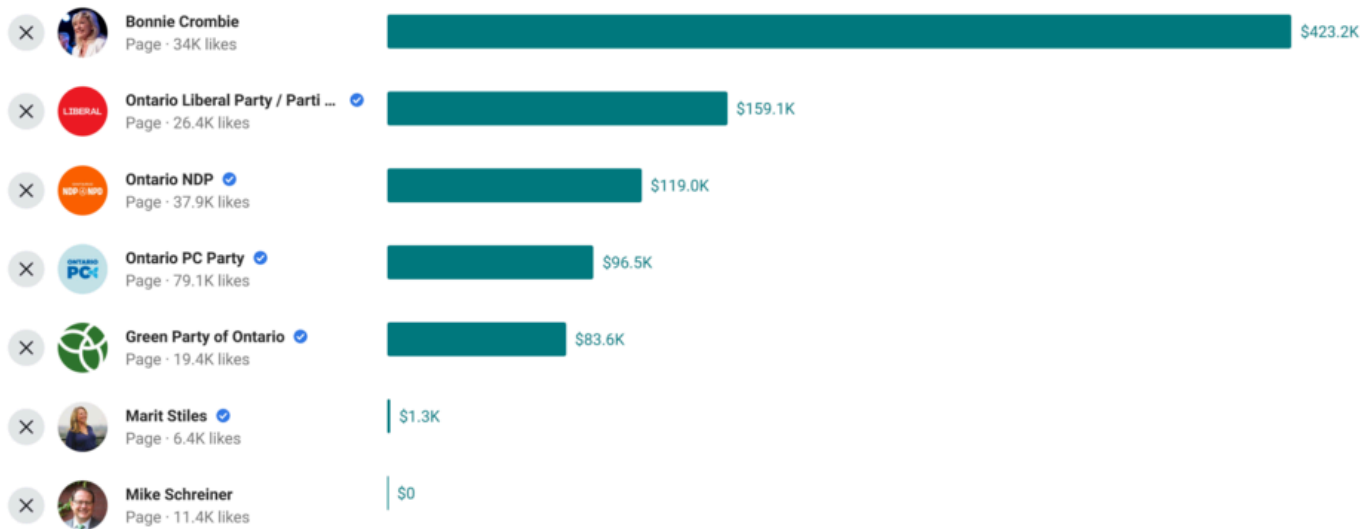
According to public-facing data, between Feb. 10 and Feb. 16, the party spent \$117,405 on Facebook and Instagram digital ads. Under a separate profile created for Leader Bonnie Crombie, an additional \$130,076 was spent.

The types of ads fluctuate between issues-based graphics and videos, attack ads against PC Leader Doug Ford, and public service announcements about voting featuring photos of a puppy.

“Don't get distracted! Voting is easy and advanced polls open this weekend,” one such ad says.

According to Managing Principal of EOK Consults Harneet Singh, Crombie was always the highest spender on Meta advertising, even before the election. Between Jan. 18 and Feb. 16, the Ontario Liberals spent over \$582,000 between their party and leader's profiles on Meta.

“Overall, their digital strategy is consistent, creative,” he said.



A screenshot of Meta spending between Jan. 18 and Feb. 16, 2025. PC Leader Doug Ford does not have an individual profile and is not listed.

The Liberals, Singh said, as well as the NDP are using Meta to geo-target their advertising, targeting certain areas and types of voters.

“The audiences are granular, which is what a modern campaign should do,” he said.

“But the PCs have what I call the spray and pray strategy ...You have a bunch of creatives, different messages from the campaign and policy and you try to reach as many people as possible.”

Dr. Tamara A. Small, a professor of political science at the University of Guelph, says that while digital advertising allows for more flexibility and intentionality, television is a bit of a “blunt instrument for advertising.”

“Just because it's so broad, it doesn't have that kind of precision,” she said. “You use a television ad, you're trying to have a broad message that is not going to offend the vast majority.”

Small said that political parties spend a good chunk of change on advertising, likely about 50 per cent of their spending limits during an election. Using the last federal election as a guide, Small said about 30 per cent of that would be for digital advertising.

The advantage is that digital ads are cheaper to make and can be done in-house without having to outsource resources, allowing campaigns to adapt to the most recent news or developments.

"It's not about the eyeballs at all, it's about the right eyeballs," Small said of targeted ads. "It's about sending it to people who you think this message will resonate to, and that will be of use to you as opposed to an onslaught of everybody's eyeballs."

Who are they targeting?

Singh's analysis shows that the Liberals are targeting urban ridings throughout the Greater Toronto Area, as well as in Ottawa, in what he says is likely an attempt to bring back their previous red seats while trying to expand into new territory.

The Liberals have also invested in expensive television ads, along with the PCs, running two ads during the Super Bowl and will be debuting a new ad during the Canada-U.S. 4 Nations Face-Off on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the NDP, which spent \$59,203 on Meta ads between Feb. 10 and Feb.16, is focusing on key battlegrounds like Hamilton, downtown Toronto and Northern Ontario. It is also doing issue-based advertising, targeting drivers for congestion or highway ads, for example.

A spokesperson confirmed the party is doing a lot of "targeted buys," but that they do have some "broad buys" on radio.

The Ontario Green Party is focusing primarily on their ridings of Guelph and Kitchener Centre, but also up north near Wellington and Halton Hills, Singh said.

The PCs, meanwhile, "have this broad approach of visibility over voter persuasion," Singh added.

In the last week, the PC Party has spent just \$33,437 on Meta ads, with the majority of them either touting its "Protect Ontario" campaign slogan or attacking Crombie and the Liberals. The majority of the ads have text that reads "only Doug Ford will" before naming an issue or campaign promise.

The PC leader himself does not have a Meta profile, unlike the other party leaders.

"Doug Ford has been more of what we're used to in Ontario, a kind of brokerage politician that tries to have the broadest possible coalition of voters," Alex Chreston, vice president with Crestview Strategy.

"He tries to be that kind of government for all people, whereas the trend in general in politics is moving away from that and more towards really focusing just on a specific constituency."

Instead, the PCs have been releasing a series of YouTube, social media and television ads, with two high-priced ads appearing during the Super Bowl early in the campaign.

It's unclear how much a spot like this would cost, but an auditor general report in December suggested the PC government, led by Ford, spent about \$43.2 million on an ad campaign that included television advertisements in "expensive time slots," including during NHL games and the Super Bowl.

Chreston said there may be less need for the PCs to use targeted ads as they've been leading in the polls and don't need to "fight for a micro-group."

"You can kind of tell what they're trying to do based on the kind of advertising," he added, noting the Liberals are trying to get a greater bang for their buck while targeting ridings they can potentially retake.

The next week will be about trying to seal the deal, Chreston added.

"Campaigns will sort of save their money for the last ditch to really get people when they're actually paying attention."

As such, experts say Ontarians can expect more aggressive advertising over the next seven days, with campaigns tending to start more positive than they end.