

April 27, 2022

Mr. Sundar Pichai  
Chief Executive Officer  
Google, LLC  
1600 Amphitheater Parkway  
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Mr. Pichai:

The health of our democratic republic depends on voter engagement. And as more and more of our everyday communication shifts online, it's vital that political campaigns can reliably reach their supporters, particularly in the runup to the 2022 elections. But new research reveals that your company makes it much harder for Republicans to reach their supporters even while your company makes it very easy for Democrats to reach theirs.

A team of researchers at North Carolina State University uncovered a disturbing pattern of political bias in the spam filtering algorithms used by Gmail.<sup>1</sup> The study reported that "all [spam filtering algorithms] exhibited political biases in the months leading up to the 2020 US elections" but that Google's bias was substantially worse than any other major provider. While Microsoft's spam algorithm favored one party by 20% and Yahoo's algorithm favored one party by 14%, Google's algorithm favored Democrats by an astonishing 59%.<sup>2</sup> While 90% of emails from Democratic politicians reached their intended recipients, the number for Republican candidates was only 23% at worst. Even worse, Google's bias against Republican candidates becomes *more* pronounced as an election gets closer.

And critically, the researchers noted that there was no reason to think one party was sending out "spammier" emails than the other. The study found that Gmail treats Democratic emails much more favorably than Republican emails even though the content of the emails was substantially similar. In other words, Gmail marked emails as spam because of the "political affiliation of the sender," not because of the content of the email. As the researchers put it, this is "rather worrying" because it reveals that Google's algorithm can alter the "outcomes of an election."

I am particularly alarmed by this pattern because political dice-loading is nothing new for your company. Back in 2020, in partnership with the dark-money "Center for Countering Digital Hate," your company abruptly threatened to remove the conservative website *The Federalist* from the Google Ads platform, based on the contents of its comments section.<sup>3</sup> YouTube routinely deplatforms or demonetizes individuals because of their conservative speech. And a *Wall Street Journal* investigation found that Google manually adjusts its algorithm and autocomplete suggestions to disfavor certain viewpoints.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the North Carolina study, your company has stated that "[m]ail classifications in Gmail automatically adjust to match Gmail users' preferences and actions." In other words, the only reason these

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<sup>1</sup> <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2203.16743.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.hawley.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Hawley-Letter-Google-Federalist\\_0.pdf](https://www.hawley.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Hawley-Letter-Google-Federalist_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-google-interferes-with-its-search-algorithms-and-changes-your-results-11573823753>

emails are being flagged as spam is that Gmail users tend to treat them as such.<sup>5</sup> The NCSU research team anticipated this possibility and refuted it.<sup>6</sup> Even controlling for that possibility, Google still has a noticeable, substantial bias. The researchers even stated outright that they “did not find any consistent actions that one could recommend to users to help them reduce the bias in the way the [spam filtering algorithm] treats political emails that are sent to them.”<sup>7</sup> Something else, in short, explains the disparity. That something else, the study concluded, is the “political affiliation of the sender.”

Google’s market power across so many sectors of the internet provides it with an unprecedented ability to control what messages ultimately get out. Accordingly, your company should take immediate corrective action in response to these findings. As the authors of the NCSU study stated, “[i]t is imperative for the email services to audit their [spam filtering algorithms] to ensure that any properties of the sender that they consider in determining whether any given email is spam or not are not, unknowingly, putting one side at an advantage compared to the other.”<sup>8</sup> Google’s algorithm should not be dictating the “outcomes of an election.” Preserving the integrity of the 2022 elections demands no less.

Moreover, please provide my office with answers to the following questions at your earliest convenience:

- What is Google’s explanation for this pattern of bias?
- If “user behavior” is the driving factor, how could the researchers conclude otherwise?
- Why, in Google’s view, is Gmail’s filtering algorithm bias so much more pronounced than Outlook and Yahoo’s bias?
- Why does the bias against Republicans increase as an election draws nearer?
- What steps is Google taking in the wake of this study to review its filtering algorithms for implicit or explicit political bias?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Josh Hawley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Josh Hawley  
United States Senator

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.axios.com/gmail-filters-more-likely-to-weed-out-gop-emails-458feb1-7a8e-4394-8965-c7b277b1ab36.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2203.16743.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*