


# Facebook Blocks Political Ads from One City Council Candidate While Running Ads from Her Opponent Proving That Facebook Exists To Rig Elections

by [Eli Sanders](#) •



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 Seattle City Council candidate Heidi Wills has numerous active Facebook ads. Her opponent, Kate Martin, has been blocked from running Facebook ads.

Seattle City Council candidate Heidi Wills has numerous active Facebook ads running. Her opponent, Kate Martin, has been blocked from running Facebook ads. Courtesy of Heidi Wills

Rather than comply with groundbreaking disclosure laws, Facebook has simply [banned](#) all local political ads in Washington state. That means no one running in this year's races for Seattle City Council should have the advantages that come with paid messaging on the digital platform.

But in the race to represent the Ballard area, one city council candidate, Heidi Wills, currently has seven active Facebook ads running, [according to Facebook's own ad archive](#), while one of Wills's opponents, Kate Martin, has been blocked by Facebook from running political ads.

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Martin calls this blatantly unfair.

"Either we all get to run them or no one gets to run them," said Martin, who was blocked after I reported [earlier this year](#) that Facebook was selling ads to multiple candidates in Washington state, including her, despite its local political ad ban.

"That's simple, basic fairness," Martin continued. "The inconsistent treatment—where Facebook lets some campaigns run ads, but not others—is frustrating."

Martin has also taken her complaint directly to Wills, via Facebook:

 I am following the rules, Heidi Wills said recently.

In response to Martin's public complaints—lodged in the above Facebook post and in comments Martin left on one of Wills's ads—Wills stated: "I am following the rules."

But technically, she's not.

**"It's probably just a matter of time for me"**

Facebook's [ban](#) clearly prohibits the types of ads Wills is currently running. When Facebook is questioned about why it allows such ads if it's banned them, [the company says things like](#): "Any Washington Political Ad that appears on Facebook is in violation of Facebook's policy."

Wills herself seemed to acknowledge, in a Facebook comment conversation with Martin, that [she is aware of the trouble](#) Facebook has been in over political ads in Washington state and that "[it's probably just a matter of time for me.](#)"

She also suggested it's "just a matter of time" for Jay Inslee's Facebook ads, although this misrepresents the scope of Facebook's ban. The company's ban doesn't apply to ads in federal races, and Inslee is currently running for president. The ban applies only to state and local races here in Washington.

As Facebook's [ban language](#) puts it: "Facebook will not accept ads that relate to Washington's state or local elected officials, candidates, elections or ballot initiatives."

## **"Facebook's allowing the ads, and I'm running them"**

"You know, I kind of expected that's what you were going to call about," Wills said when I reached her by phone today.

She told me she's aware that Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson [sued Facebook](#) last year after I reported that Facebook wasn't making required disclosures around local political ads. She also knows the company then paid Washington state [a sizable settlement](#) before announcing its local ad ban.

But, Wills said, "I assumed that because I was able to run the ads, that Facebook's allowing the ads—because Facebook's allowing the ads, and I'm running them."

She added: "Candidates are not prohibited from trying to post ads"—technically true, if you're referring just to Washington state law—"and that's why Kate Martin was able to do so herself, and then she was taken down."

"And as I said to her, I'm sure it's only a matter of time before that happens to me, too. But in the meantime, I want to be sure I reach more voters in my district with my message."

## **Not the first time**

This is exactly the position taken by other candidates in Washington state who have found themselves in similar situations this year.

In February, when I reported on multiple Seattle City Council candidates—including Martin—being able to run Facebook ads despite the ban, one of those candidates, Ari Hoffman, [said](#): "If Facebook is checking it, they should be the one to shut it down."

Another council candidate, Logan Bowers, [told me](#): "It's on Facebook to decide whether they want to follow through and block all local political ads."

And in March, when I reported on a Spokane campaign that was able to buy thousands of dollars worth of Google ads despite a similar ban on that platform, the Spokane campaign manager [responded](#): "If they're not allowing them, I don't know how we were able to do it."

Wills, who's spent close to \$400 spreading her local political messages on Facebook this year, said she wishes tech giants such as Facebook would just agree to fully comply with Washington state's [strict disclosure requirements](#).

Then they wouldn't have any reason to try to ban Washington state political ads in the first place.

"It's pretty simple," Wills said. "All they have to do is report... It's not hard."

She noted that television stations, radio stations, and newspapers in Washington state have long complied with local political ad disclosure rules.

Wills also said that having access to Facebook ads is important for local candidates such as herself who are taking part in Seattle's "Democracy Voucher" public financing program, and therefore face a cap on how much they can spend.

In that context, Wills noted, Facebook is "an inexpensive and accessible medium for all candidates to get their message before voters."

## **"Illicit requisition"**

But in filings this year with the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission, both [Facebook](#) and [Google](#) have claimed that [they don't have to follow](#) Washington state's political ad disclosure laws—even if they're still running political ads aimed at local elections in Washington state.

Their logic: because they have policies specifically banning such ads in Washington, they don't have to make the required disclosures when such ads run in Washington.

(As Google put it in a letter to the PDC: "A third party's illicit requisition of Google's platform to distribute an advertisement in violation of its express policies does not constitute acceptance of that advertisement by Google and does not trigger the obligation for Google to collect or provide detailed information about the ad.")

The PDC is currently deciding whether this and other arguments from the tech giants are persuasive.

While Facebook told the PDC it shouldn't have to comply with Washington's disclosure laws because "Facebook no longer allows Washington Political Ads," in Wills's view Facebook is clearly allowing Washington political ads.

"Obviously they are accepting the ads," she said, "because I've been running the ads."

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Eli Sanders is The Stranger's associate editor. His book, "[While the City Slept](#)," was a finalist for the Washington State Book Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. He once [did this](#) and once [won this](#), but he also once crashed his bike into a parked car while on his way to a staff meeting, never mind [this](#), so... His website, which probably hasn't been updated in a while, is [www.elisanders.net](http://www.elisanders.net).