AI STACK SIGNAL

ON AIR · MIDTERMS 2026

FREE PLAIN-ENGLISH CHECKLIST · BEFORE YOU VOTE ON NOV 3

$137 MILLION IN AI-MADE ELECTION ADS. ONLY 27% TELL YOU

The Wesleyan Media Project, which tracks political ads, counts 220 ads made at least in part with AI in the 2026 midterms, with more than $137 million spent on them. Most don't carry an AI disclaimer. This guide explains the numbers, why they matter, and gives you a printable "before you share" checklist and what to do if you think an ad is fake.

01
The numbers
What the researchers counted, and how fast it grew.

02
Why it matters
Why a missing label doesn't mean an ad is real.

03
Before you share
Three quick checks, on one page you can print.

04
If you think it's fake
Who paid for it, where to get real voting info, and where to report it.

01 THE NUMBERS

COUNTED BY THE RESEARCHERS

The **Wesleyan Media Project** tracks political advertising in US elections. It has been tracking ads made at least partly with AI tools. Here is what its October 15, 2026 release found.

$137M+

"We now count **220 such ads** in our database on which **more than $137 million** has been spent, and that is almost certainly an undercount given that it is difficult to detect uses of AI."

WESLEYAN MEDIA PROJECT · OCT 15, 2026

220
AI-made ads in the researchers' database

34
states where they have shown up

27%
of them contain a disclaimer

<$50K
spent on AI-made ads in the whole 2024 cycle

2024
LAST CYCLE

Less than $50,000

"For comparison, we identified less than $50,000 in spending on AI-generated ads in the 2024 cycle." ERIKA FRANKLIN FOWLER, CO-DIRECTOR

SEPT 4
2026

164 ads, just under $80 million

The earlier count: "a minimum of 164 political ads generated or enhanced through the use of AI," with spending "just under $80 million." WESLEYAN · SEPT 4, 2026

OCT 15
2026

220 ads, more than $137 million

About six weeks later, the count is up by 56 ads and the spending by more than $57 million. "AI is making its way into the 2026 midterms in a big way this year." FOWLER

! **What these numbers are, and aren't.** They count ads the researchers could identify as using AI, with spending estimates from the ad-tracking firm AdImpact. They don't tell you which ads are fake or false. An ad can use AI and still be accurate.

02 WHY IT MATTERS

QUOTED, NOT PARAPHRASED

Three things in the report matter for anyone scrolling past political videos this week. **Most AI ads aren't labeled, the real number is likely higher, and even experts can't always tell.**

1 · MOST OF THEM DON'T TELL YOU

"Much of the AI use is not disclosed through any type of disclaimer."

Erika Franklin Fowler, co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. The report adds: "Twenty-seven percent of them contain a disclaimer." So roughly three in four don't.

2 · THE REAL NUMBER IS LIKELY HIGHER

"This tracking is undoubtedly an underestimate given there are a lot of ways in which AI might be incorporated that may go undetected."

When the team wasn't sure an ad used AI, it left the ad out, "and so our estimates of ad counts and spending are likely on the low side."

3 · EVEN THE TRACKERS CAN'T ALWAYS TELL

"...sometimes it is difficult to discern whether an image was created by AI or not."

If trained researchers can't always spot it, you don't have to either. That's why the checks on the next page don't ask you to "spot the fake." They ask you to check where it came from.

HOW THE RESEARCHERS DECIDE AN AD USED AI

- The ad says so in a disclaimer, or
- news reports or AdImpact (the firm whose spending data they use) say it includes AI-generated or AI-enhanced content, or
- their own coders flagged it as likely using AI and the team confirmed it.

✓ **The takeaway:** a missing AI label tells you nothing. Treat every clip that makes a big claim the same way, labeled or not, and check where it came from before you pass it on.

03 BEFORE YOU SHARE

PRINT IT, OR SCREENSHOT IT OUR TIPS

You see a political clip that makes a big claim. Before you like, repost or forward it, go down this list. These three checks are **our own plain advice**, not findings from the researchers.

CHECK 1

Look for an AI disclaimer

Read the small print on screen and in the caption, and listen to the end of the ad. Some AI ads say they used AI.

IF YOU FIND ONE
You know AI was used. Now judge the claim, not the picture.

IF YOU DON'T
It proves nothing. Only 27% of the ads counted had a disclaimer. Go to check 2.

CHECK 2

Find the clip on the candidate's own page, or a real news site

Search for it on the candidate's official website or account, or on a news outlet you already know.

FOUND IT THERE
Good sign it's real. Still check what's being claimed.

NOWHERE ELSE?
Be careful. Don't share it until you can find where it came from.

CHECK 3

If it makes you furious in five seconds, pause before you share

A clip built to make you angry fast is built to be shared fast. Strong feelings are the moment to slow down, not speed up.

STILL SURE AFTER A PAUSE?
Share it with where it came from, so others can check too.

NOT SURE?
Don't share. Not passing it on is always an option.

BONUS CHECK · FROM THE FEC

Look for who paid for it

Ads from federal campaigns and political committees must carry a disclaimer, and the FEC says it must be "clear and conspicuous." It has to name who paid for the ad, for example "Paid for by..." No clear "paid for by" line on something that looks like a campaign ad is a reason to be careful.

NEWS.AISTACKSIGNAL.COM/AIADS · CHECKS 1 TO 3: OUR TIPS · BONUS: FEC.GOV

04 IF YOU THINK IT'S FAKE

CALM STEPS, NO TECH NEEDED

You can't always prove an ad is fake, and you don't need to. Here's what you can do. Steps 1 and 4 are our tips. Steps 2, 3 and 5 come from official government pages, linked on the last page.

1 **Don't share it, even to say it's fake** OUR TIP

Reposting a clip to argue with it still shows it to more people. If you want to warn someone, describe it in your own words instead.

2 **Check who paid for it**

Under FEC rules, when a candidate's campaign pays for an ad, the notice "must state that the communication was paid for by the authorized committee." When someone else pays, it "must identify the person who paid for it."

3 **Get voting facts from your election office, not from an ad**

If a clip tells you something about when, where or how to vote, check it with your state or local election office. USA.gov has an office finder "for help with registering, voting, and getting election results."

`usa.gov/election-office`

4 **Report it where you saw it** OUR TIP

Most apps let you report a post or an ad from its menu. Use it, so the people who run the app can look at it.

5 **For federal races, you can file a complaint with the FEC**

The FEC says "Anyone can submit a complaint if they believe a violation of the law has occurred or is about to occur." It has also said the federal ban on fraudulent misrepresentation in campaigns "is technology neutral," which includes "AI-assisted media."

`fec.gov/legal-resources/enforcement/complaints-process`

SEND THIS TO A FRIEND WHO SHARED IT

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"Hey, I couldn't find that clip on the candidate's page
 or any news site, and a lot of AI ads don't say they're AI.
 Might be worth checking before sharing it."
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05 WHERE EVERY FACT COMES FROM SOURCES

WHO SAYS WHAT

FACT OR ADVICE	SOURCE
220 AI-made ads, more than $137 million spent, "almost certainly an undercount"; 34 states; 27% contain a disclaimer	Wesleyan Media Project, Oct 15, 2026
Less than $50,000 on AI-made ads in the 2024 cycle; "Much of the AI use is not disclosed"	Erika Franklin Fowler, Wesleyan Media Project, Oct 15, 2026
Hard to tell if an image is AI; unsure ads left out; how ads are identified; spending from AdImpact	Wesleyan Media Project, Oct 15, 2026
Earlier count: at least 164 ads, just under $80 million	Wesleyan Media Project, Sept 4, 2026
Disclaimers must be "clear and conspicuous" and say who paid	FEC, Advertising and disclaimers
Anyone can submit a complaint; the fraud ban "is technology neutral," including AI-assisted media	FEC, Complaints process; FEC Record
Find your state or local election office	USA.gov
The 3 checks, "don't share it," "report it where you saw it," the message to a friend	AI Stack Signal (our tips)

THE FINE PRINT

- These numbers count ads the researchers could identify as using AI. They don't say which ads are false, and an ad that uses AI can still be accurate.
- This checklist is non-partisan. It applies to every ad, from any side.
- The FEC rules quoted here are federal. The FEC's own site notes it is waiting to regain a quorum, so check fec.gov for its current status.
- General information, not legal advice. AI Stack Signal isn't connected to the Wesleyan Media Project, the FEC or USA.gov.

LINKS

1. Wesleyan Media Project, release of Oct 15, 2026, section "Campaigns Spend More Than $137 Million on AI-generated Ads": mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases-101526
2. Wesleyan Media Project, release of Sept 4, 2026: mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases-090426
3. FEC, Advertising and disclaimers: fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/advertising-and-disclaimers
4. FEC, Complaints process: fec.gov/legal-resources/enforcement/complaints-process
5. FEC Record, Interpretive Rule on artificial intelligence in campaign ads: fec.gov/updates/commission-approves-notification-of-disposition-interpretive-rule-on-artificial-intelligence-in-campaign-ads
6. USA.gov, State and local election offices: usa.gov/election-office

news.aistacksignal.com/aiads

Facts checked against the sources above on November 1, 2026.