

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 11, 2024

The Honorable Gary Peters
Chair, Senate Committee on Homeland
Security and Government Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rand Paul
Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland
Security and Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Chair Peters and Ranking Member Paul—

I write today regarding concerning anomalies in Google’s autocomplete search functionality related to election candidates in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. On July 27th, 2024, Google failed to provide consistent search suggestions related to President Trump in the aftermath of the July 13th assassination attempt near Butler, Pennsylvania. In response to widespread public outcry, Google eventually updated their autocomplete search features and recently admitted to the House Judiciary Committee that these inconsistencies were the result of “out of date” protections and expected results “should have appeared, but didn’t.”¹ In response to an inquiry submitted on July 31, 2024, Google confirmed that “in the immediate aftermath of the...events in Butler, [Pennsylvania], these [autocomplete] systems were still in place and predictions related to the assassination attempt failed to appear. [Google] recognize[s] that these out-of-date systems led to an inadequate user experience.”² This failure to provide relevant and consistent results for users seeking information is only the most recent example in a long line of Google’s attempts to editorialize content related to conservative presidential candidates. In fact, the Media Research Center published a special report which found that Google has influenced or interfered in U.S. elections over 40 times in the last 16 years.³

As one of the dominant search aggregators, Google exercises tremendous influence over the public’s access to knowledge, controlling approximately 80 to 90 percent of the total search engine market share globally. Furthermore, given their advanced technological capabilities, there was no justifiable reason for Google to refrain from updating their algorithms to anticipate increased queries in response to the most recent and relevant assassination attempt in U.S. history. Google got caught playing politics instead of actively working to recommend the most updated and factual results. I am concerned that, if left unchecked, Google will continue to bias suggestions and results against President Trump and other conservatives until a thorough congressional investigation is conducted.

To that end, I am asking the Committee to demand the presence of Google’s CEO, Mr. Sundar Pichai, as well as any relevant software engineering employees, to answer questions regarding Google’s search algorithm, and the processes that the company uses to affect the visibility, ranking, and visual presentation of election/political content in U.S. based search results, news feeds, and on YouTube. Given the Committee’s unique position and responsibility to investigate “the possible existence of collusion...conflicts of interest, and...compliance of...corporations, companies, or individuals or other

¹ James Lynch, “Google Admits to Omitting Trump Assassination Attempt from Search Autocomplete Features,” National Review Online, August 5, 2024, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/google-admits-to-omitting-trump-assassination-attempt-from-search-autocomplete-feature/>.

² Letter from Google VP of Government Affairs & Public Policy, US and Canada, Mark Isakowitz, in response to letter from Senator Roger Marshall, dated August 12, 2024.

³ Gabriela Pariseau and Dan Schneider, “41 Times Google Has Interfered in US Elections Since 2008,” Media Research Center Special Report, <https://cdn.mrc.org/static/pdfuploads/MRC%20Google%20Election%20Interference%20Report.pdf-1710439680476.pdf>

entities with the rules, regulations, and laws governing the various governmental agencies and the Government's relationships with the public,"⁴ I believe that the HSGAC committee is well-positioned to investigate Google's influence on the U.S. government and the upcoming 2024 Election.

Notably, the Committee has investigated Google's influence in the past. In 2014, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (PSI) brought Google representatives before the PSI subcommittee to examine its influence on consumer security and data sharing in the online advertising industry, and the costs incurred to American citizens and industry.⁵ Now, a decade later, I believe it is time to bring Google back to the Committee to revisit its influence on the U.S. government as well as U.S. consumers and their access to information. Additionally, given Google's relationship with the U.S. government in multiple domains, it is critical to inform the public whether Google has recently received any government contracts or federal financial assistance while altering—or refraining from updating—certain search results.

Furthermore, the Committee has historically inquired into social media companies' role in government functions, including a letter to both Google and Facebook regarding the spread of disinformation about the 2020 Census,⁶ and another letter in 2020 to Facebook about content moderation around the Georgia Runoff election.⁷

I believe it is critical for the Committee to continue its tradition of holding Big Tech firms accountable by requiring them to explain their decisions and practices in a public forum. Since the 2024 U.S. presidential election will take place in 55 days, now is the time for the Committee to raise these questions with Google so the public can make informed decisions.

I look forward to working with you to schedule this hearing and obtaining answers to these questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "R. W. Marshall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sen. Roger Marshall, M.D.

⁴ S. Res. 59 (118th Congress, 1st Session), Authorizing expenditures by committees of the Senate for the periods March 1, 2023, through September 30, 2023, October 1, 2023, through September 30, 2024, and October 1, 2024, through February 28, 2025." Considered and agreed to February 15, 2023. Accessed August 10, 2024. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-resolution/59/text>.

⁵ Hearing: Online Advertising and Hidden Hazards to Consumer Security and Data Privacy, 108th Congress, May 15, 2014, <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/investigations/hearings/online-advertising-and-hidden-hazards-to-consumer-security-and-data-privacy/>.

⁶ Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, *Census Oversight Letter to Google*, February 26, 2020, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/200226_Letter_CensusOversight_Google.pdf.

⁷ Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, *Georgia Election Disinformation Letter to Facebook*, November 24, 2020, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/201124_PetersLetter_FacebookDisinfoGeorgia.pdf.