



NOVEMBER 2021

Online Privacy & Voter Mobilization

How Apple's Latest Privacy Measure Impacted Our 2021 Program & How We Can Adapt

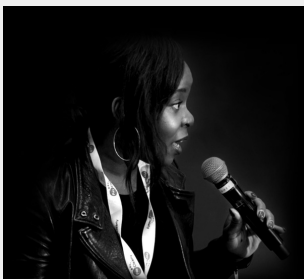
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with support from Ariel Lee and Micha Kubicka

AN INTRO FROM OUR CEO

The **Voter Formation Project** (VFP) is a 501c3 non-partisan organization founded to **modernize** how online campaigns **register** and **mobilize** people of color and other under-represented communities across the country. VFP was founded in late 2020 not only to register and mobilize our communities, but also to be **radically transparent** about our campaigns. We are an organization that will routinely publish our program research findings and observational learnings so that other practitioners can learn from and replicate our successes and avoid our mistakes.

Voter mobilization advertising campaigns typically include a component that drives people to a website to fill out a form. This form either acts as a registration check or as a type of petition to help reinforce the mental commitment the user has made to voting. While we strongly believe in the power of long-term motivational messaging to help encourage voting – and started researching this playbook in 2019 – we still know there is efficacy in using “commit to vote” or “make a plan to vote” campaigns for get-out-the-vote efforts.

Not only do our programs deploy this tactic, but we’ve also improved upon it by building our own landing pages with robust back-end tracking so that we can make smarter decisions about optimizing our advertising campaigns. So we were surprised to find our landing page engagement – particularly in Virginia, which had a statewide contest – was not just lower than last year (which we expected) but lower than previous off-cycle election years. We decided to do some digging to understand what specifically was happening with our media delivery; despite the fact it was an off-year election, and we knew that privacy changes had affected online advertising broadly, something still seemed *off*.



Tatenda Musapatike
CEO, Voter Formation Project

While we do not have full results of the efficacy of our programs, we do have some important learnings about the changing media environment that we now find ourselves in. Because these findings are so critical to how many civic engagement and political advertisers use the Facebook platforms to reach their audiences, we felt an urgency to publish our findings.

Understanding the Impact of Apple's Latest Privacy Framework

Going into our program this year, we knew the performance of our advertising campaigns would likely differ from what we saw in 2020. We expected lower engagement in 2021's off-year local elections compared to 2020's high-turnout general election, and we knew Apple's new privacy framework, [App Tracking Transparency](#), had shifted the media landscape, making it more challenging to drive conversions on our website.

Now that we've wrapped up our 2021 program, we know our predictions were generally accurate: engagement was lower, and conversions were expensive. It will take more time to rigorously interrogate how this year's program impacted our audience's *voting* behavior, but there is still a lot we can learn from our advertising data alone. This year, the topline insight from our ad data is that **Apple's App Tracking Transparency (ATT) framework has meaningfully impacted the media landscape, especially on Facebook.**

In response, we need to think about how we could shift our approach to running and measuring digital programs designed to register and mobilize communities of color. We'll come back to this later, but first, there's a lot to unpack in terms of understanding Apple's new framework and how it likely impacted our program.

A Quick Program Overview

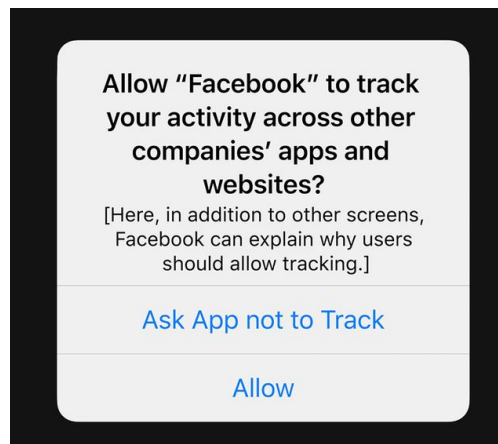
This year, we ran mobilization messaging in Texas and Virginia four weeks ahead of Election Day. In both campaigns, we deployed video and static content with a mix of targeting objectives designed to reach, educate and engage our audiences, **ultimately encouraging them to use our website to make a plan to vote.**

In Texas, we ran our mobilization program for municipal elections in Dallas and Harris counties. We targeted Latina women with bilingual messages, followed by a GOTV text message campaign executed by our friends at Supermajority. In Virginia, we ran mobilization messaging targeted to African American men to get out the vote ahead of the gubernatorial elections.

Apple's App Tracking Transparency Framework

The Nuts and Bolts

In April, Apple released iOS 14.5, an update to its mobile operating system that included a significant new privacy measure. Under the new ATT framework, Apple required all iOS apps to ask users for permission before tracking their activity *across other apps and websites*. If you have an iPhone, you likely remember a few days where every app prompted you to opt in or out of tracking, using a pop-up similar to the one on the right.



(Courtesy: Apple, Inc.)

Before iOS 14.5, iOS apps tracked users' activity across other apps and websites by default. This is still the default for non-Apple devices.

Why ATT matters for advertisers

Apple's update directly impacted the advertising models of Facebook, Snapchat, and other platforms that rely on apps to reach most of their users. By tracking their users across sites and apps *other than those they own* — which ATT now blocks apps from doing for opted-out users — these platforms have been able to build a significant amount of advertising value. The data they collect elsewhere is funneled back to their platforms and matched up with the information they already have about each user, resulting in a trove of granular insights. The platforms then leverage all of this data to predict their users' behavior in service of helping advertisers reach their goals.

For example: when an advertiser sets up a campaign, most platforms require the advertiser to select an "objective," or goal. (See a list of common campaign objectives to the right.) If an advertiser selects the "Conversions" objective, it means they want people to take a specific action on their website (make a purchase, sign up for a newsletter, etc.) after seeing an ad.

COMMON AD CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

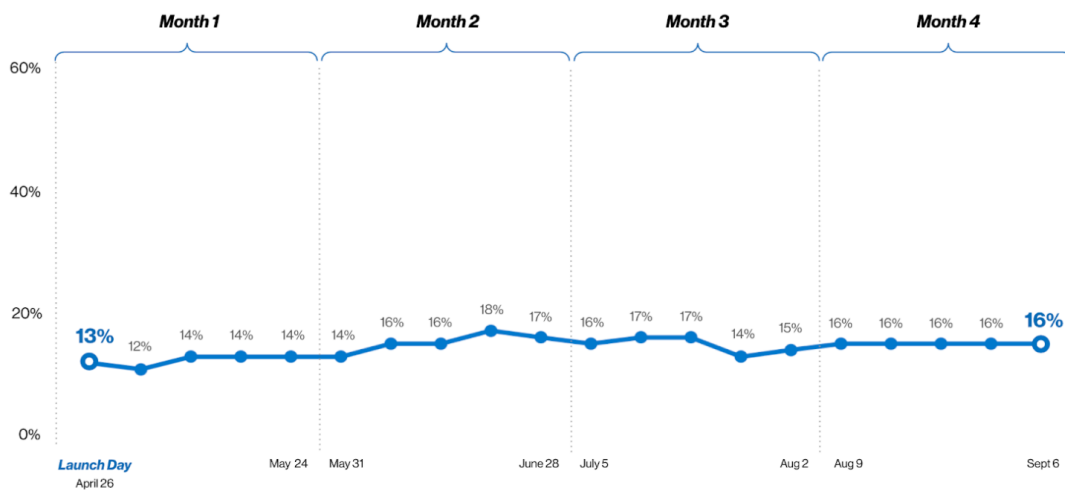
Objective	What the ad platforms do
Conversions	Delivers ads to those most likely to take a specific action, or "convert," on a website after seeing an ad.
Reach	Shows ads to as many people as possible in a given audience
Video Views	Shows videos to those most likely to watch them
Traffic	Shows ads to those most likely to click through to a website

Knowing an advertiser wants to drive conversions, a platform will use its data to predict which members of an audience are most likely to take the desired action (or “convert”) and will prioritize serving ads to those people. The platforms also learn as they’re going: before iOS 14.5 (and still for non-iOS users), a platform would follow each user to a website as they converted after seeing an ad, send that information back to their database, and use the data to further understand the characteristics of those most likely to convert.

Facebook, in particular, built a go-to advertising platform using this model. Because of its wide user base and extensive reach across the web, the platform has a lot of data, making it especially good at predicting its users’ online behaviors and generating a meaningful difference in campaign results based on the objective an advertiser selects.

U.S. Weekly Opt-in Rate Across Apps that Have Displayed the Prompt

% of Mobile Active App Users Who Allow App Tracking Among Users Who Have Chosen to Either Allow or Deny Tracking



Source: Flurry Analytics, Data through 9/6/2021, n= 2.5M daily mobile active app users using iOS versions with ATT framework (iOS 14 and above)
 Note: Opt-in rate = app users who allow tracking divided by (app users who allow tracking + app users who deny tracking) in apps that have shown the prompt



However, Apple's iOS 14.5 privacy update changed the extent to which Facebook, Snapchat, and others can continue using and selling the kind of data that makes this possible. About 47% of smartphone users in the US have iPhones, and about 84% of those users have opted out of tracking when prompted. That leaves platforms with a significant amount of data about folks in the US that they can no longer use.

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The Voter Formation Project's 2021 Program

What Happened

Although we weren't sure the extent to which 2021's political and media landscapes would impact our program, we generally expected it would be expensive to drive conversions on our website. We were correct: across all Facebook Conversion campaigns we ran this year, our average cost per website conversion was about **\$424.***

**Note that this is not indicative of the cost per new voter reached; it's based on the total number of website conversions and the total amount spent across Facebook Conversion campaigns. We counted a website conversion each time someone submitted the "make a plan to vote" form on our site.*

However, we also noticed a trend in the data that we didn't expect to see. Not only was it more challenging to generate conversions, but **Facebook also delivered a lower-than-expected portion of all Conversion campaign impressions to iOS devices.**

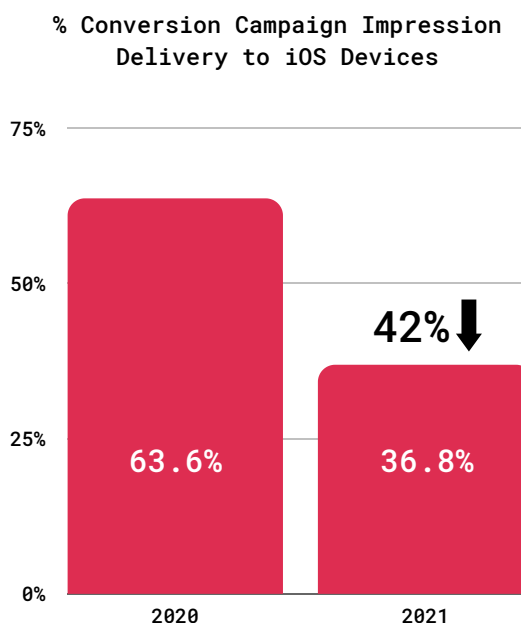
Before we jump into the details of what happened and what this means, a quick note on why we're so focused on Facebook: although Apple's ATT framework has undoubtedly impacted other ad platforms, we noticed the delivery trend outlined below only on Facebook (and not all platforms report their ad delivery by device). Conversion campaigns on Facebook have also been our most successful tactic for driving conversions at scale. Paying attention to how iOS 14.5 has impacted this tactic is especially important.

Facebook Ad Delivery by Device Type

Comparing 2021 and 2020 delivery

Let's start by comparing our 2020 Facebook Ads Conversion campaigns to those we ran in 2021. Last year, before Apple released iOS 14.5, Facebook Ads delivered **63.6%** of Conversion impressions to iOS devices. This year, Facebook delivered only **36.8%** of those impressions to iOS devices.

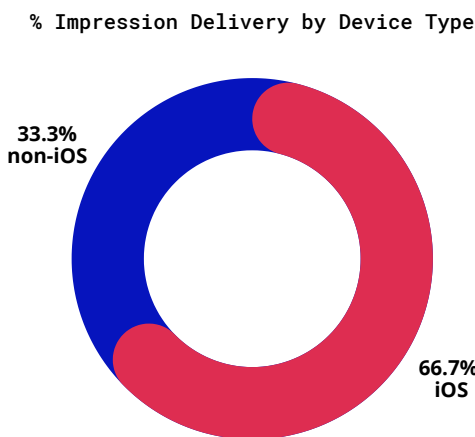
That's nearly a **42% decrease** in Conversion campaign impressions to iOS devices in under a year!



It is important to note that we did not run to the exact same audiences this year and last, so this isn't a perfect comparison. However, this year we ran multiple Facebook campaign objectives (Reach, Video Views, Conversions, and Lead Gen) to the same group of audiences, giving us a baseline to compare delivery by device type across different objectives. These results suggest that Apple's privacy framework has caused Facebook's ad delivery algorithm to suppress Conversion campaign delivery to iOS devices.

Comparing delivery across 2021 Facebook campaign objectives

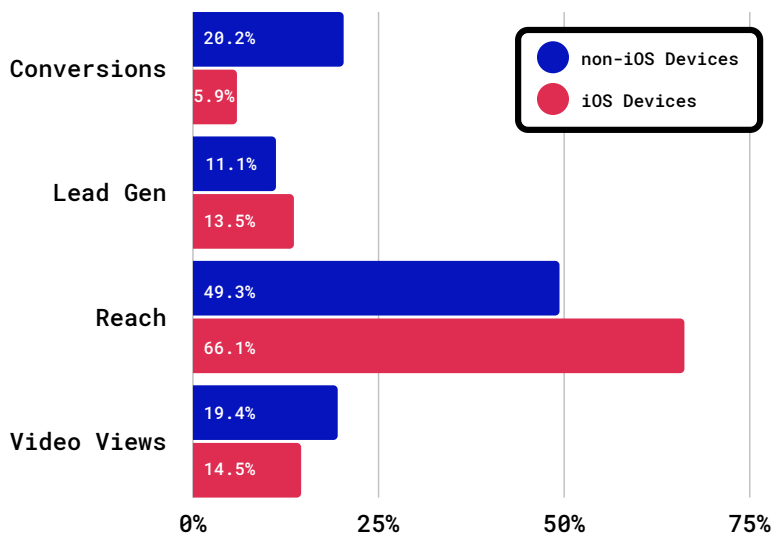
This year, across all campaign objectives, Facebook delivered **66.7%** of all impressions to iOS devices. Additionally, **67.7%** of those we reached were reached via an iOS device, which suggests that Facebook did not deliver a large portion of Conversion impressions to non-iOS devices simply because we reached an audience of predominately non-iOS users.



When we break down delivery by device type *and* campaign objective, the extent to which Facebook suppressed Conversion campaign delivery to iOS devices becomes clear:

Of all impressions delivered to our iOS audience, Facebook delivered only **5.9%** via a Conversion campaign, compared to **20.2%** for our non-iOS audience — a nearly **71%** difference in Conversion campaign impressions by device type.

% Impression Delivery by Device Type and Campaign Objective



These trends also negatively impacted our costs. Because Facebook delivered a disproportionate number of Conversion campaign impressions to our non-iOS audience, demand for ad space was higher on these devices, resulting in Conversion campaign delivery costs that were **44%** higher on non-iOS compared to iOS devices.

Comparing 2021 Facebook Conversion and Lead Gen delivery

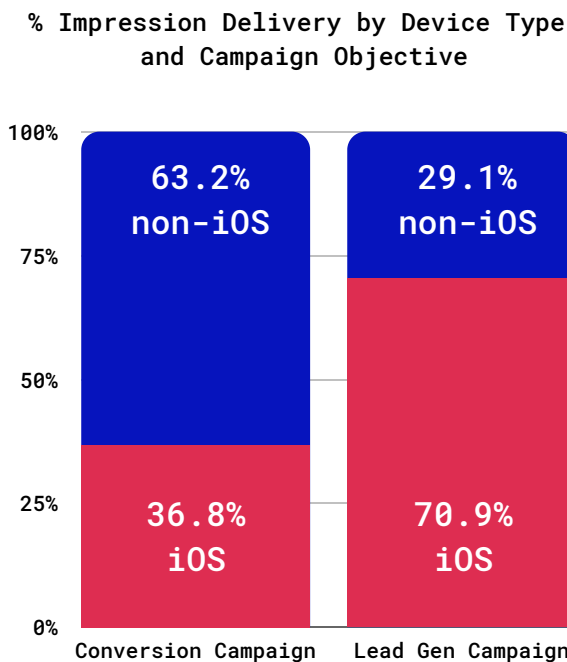
In addition to Conversion campaigns, which direct users to another website to take a conversion action, we also ran Lead Gen campaigns, which allow users to take the conversion action without leaving Facebook. (In our case, folks filled out a “make a plan to vote” form on Facebook instead of our own website.) Both campaign objectives prioritize delivery to those most likely to convert, but Lead Gen campaigns enable Facebook to track all conversions, regardless of device type.

FACEBOOK CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES: CONVERSIONS VS. LEAD GEN

Campaign Objective	What Facebook Does
Conversions	Delivers ads to those most likely to take a specific action, or “convert,” on a website (outside of Facebook) after seeing an ad.
Lead Gen	Delivers ads to those most likely to convert on a native Facebook form after seeing an ad.

When we compare delivery by device between the two campaign objectives, there is a sharp contrast: **while Facebook delivered only 36.8% of all Conversion campaign impressions to iOS devices, it delivered 70.9% of all Lead Gen campaign impressions to iOS devices.**

Because the key difference between the two campaign types is *where* the conversion action takes place, these results strongly suggest that iOS 14.5 is the cause of the disproportionate difference in delivery by device type among Conversion campaigns. Facebook has suppressed delivery to devices that are more likely to block its ability to track the conversion action.



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Planning for 2022

What does the impact of iOS 14.5 mean going forward?

While we see value in simply reaching our audience with messaging about voting, we've centered our programs around **educating first** and **then encouraging** folks to take conversion actions on our website. Understanding how our audience engages with our site gives us an added layer of data to make strategic decisions, and it enables us to measure our impact more rigorously. There is also evidence that folks who make a plan to vote are more likely to turnout than those who are only encouraged to vote.

Apple's update has made it more difficult and expensive to drive conversions, and it's likely only the beginning of what we can expect as the media landscape adapts to more privacy measures in the future. It seems safe to assume that conversion costs will remain higher than they were before iOS 14.5.

In response, it probably isn't the best approach for *anyone* to simply pay more per conversion. Given the delivery trends we outlined earlier, it *especially* doesn't make sense for anyone who's trying to reach communities of color. The racism and biases built into the data we rely on to run our programs mean it's already difficult for us to reach a significant portion of our audience. If we built a Facebook strategy centered around driving conversions, no matter what the cost, we'd further reduce our reach on a platform with a wide user base within our target audience, which isn't an acceptable alternative.

How can we adapt?

Abandoning conversions altogether isn't the right approach, but we can no longer rely on Facebook Conversion campaigns to drive them at scale. Going into 2022, we have some questions we need to interrogate before we will know the best way to approach the new and changing media landscape. Here are some questions we're already asking:

- Could we scale the incorporation of **more native conversion points**, like Facebook's Lead Gen forms, across other platforms? Would the potential benefits outweigh the downsides of driving less traffic to our own website?
- How can we **more intentionally "nurture"** our audiences to conversion, using the corporate marketing funnel as a blueprint?
- How might some of the tools platforms are building in response to iOS 14.5, like **Facebook's Conversion API**, impact our ability to drive more efficient conversions? Are the time and resources required to set this up worth it?
- What **other platforms**, like TikTok and Pinterest, should we test, and what kind of engagement or conversion rates would they generate among different audiences?