

WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2024 REGULAR SESSION

Introduced

House Bill 4191

By Delegate Linville and Hillenbrand

[Introduced January 10, 2024 ; Referred
to the Committee on Technology and Infrastructure
then Judiciary]

1 A BILL to amend the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended, by adding thereto a new section,
2 designated §3-8-12a, relating to the requirements imposed on social media companies to
3 prevent corruption and provide transparency of election-related content made available on
4 social media websites; providing for equal opportunities for all candidates and political
5 parties to speak without policy or partisan-based censorship; and to uphold the integrity of
6 elections by ensuring election-related content hosted, posted, and made available on
7 social media websites is not monetized or otherwise used or manipulated for nefarious
8 purposes.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

ARTICLE 8. REGULATION AND CONTROL OF ELECTIONS.

§3-8-12a. Approval of election information by state’s Chief Elections Official; uniform dissemination of election content; prohibition on untraceable messaging originated by social media platforms; record maintenance; prohibition of monetization of election content; prohibition of modifying visibility of election information based on type of content; due process requirements for restriction of access to social media platforms; civil penalties.

1 (a) This section may be cited as the "Social Media Integrity and Anti-Corruption in
2 Elections Act".

3 (b) The Legislature finds that the State of West Virginia has a compelling interest in
4 ensuring transparency and provision of things of value that advocate for the election or defeat of
5 candidates in West Virginia. Narrowly tailored restrictions on election-related content have long
6 been allowed under First Amendment jurisprudence including the "equal opportunity" provisions
7 applied to the newspaper and print industries, and the "equal time" provisions applied to the
8 television broadcast industry and enforced by the Federal Communications Commission. With the
9 rise of social media platforms over the last decade as major providers of election-related content,

10 there is an unmet need for legislation ensuring transparency and equity. To that end, social media
11 platforms that disseminate election-related information in West Virginia must ensure that, in a
12 limited time frame near a Federal Election, there is:

13 (1) Compliance with the State's campaign finance laws when the platform's actions bestow
14 value for one candidate or political party over that of another candidate or political party; and,

15 (2) An equal opportunity for all candidates appearing on West Virginia ballots to appear in
16 the social media platform.

17 (c) Terms used in this section are defined as follows:

18 (1) "Candidate" means a person who has been nominated for a position on a ballot in a
19 federal election recognizing that federal, state, and local candidates may all appear on a ballot in a
20 federal election.

21 (2) "Chief Elections Officer" means the West Virginia Secretary of State.

22 (3) "Election Content" includes posts, comments, messages, or images, and hyperlinks
23 created or promoted by a social media platform without user engagement, to any of the foregoing
24 where the data conveys information to a social media platform user about candidates or parties
25 associated with a federal or statewide primary, general, or special election.

26 (4) "Political Party" shall have the meaning prescribed in §3-1-8 of this code.

27 (5) "Social media platform" means a user-specific, web-based technology intended to
28 create virtual connection through the internet, which includes any online information service
29 provider, internet search engine, access software provider, internet website, or application that
30 enables users within the State of West Virginia to create, publish, and view content online for no
31 cost to the user.

32 (6) "Untraceable messaging" means the transmission of digital content created or
33 promoted by the social media platform which is not retrievable or reviewable by users,
34 researchers, or any other person or entity, after the message has been first viewed.

35 (d) Between 60 days from any primary, general, or special statewide or federal election,

36 and the date the election is certified, a social media platform shall ensure the accuracy of
37 published Election Content which includes but is not limited to the following:

38 (1) Official dates or deadlines, such as election dates, early voting periods, and deadlines;

39 (2) Voter registration requirements, processes, or procedures;

40 (3) In-person or absentee ballot voting requirements, processes, or procedures;

41 (4) "Get Out The Vote" or "GOTV" information;

42 (5) Polling place locations or hours;

43 (6) Voter identification requirements;

44 (7) Security and integrity of elections;

45 (8) Instructions for receiving, completing, or submitting a ballot; and

46 (9) Information about any candidate on a ballot.

47 (e) Social media platforms shall provide a campaign finance report to the Chief Election
48 Officer of any increase in online visibility or other quantifiable assistance or attempt by the social
49 media platform to influence a user's understanding or opinion regarding any candidate, party, or
50 political party, in the State of West Virginia. Such disclosure report shall be made within forty-eight
51 hours of the online activity in the same manner as reporting other types of electioneering
52 communications according to §3-8-2b of this code, and without regard to the timeframe or
53 minimum expenditure threshold requirements prescribed therein.

54 (f) Social media platforms shall not engage in, use, or make available opportunities for
55 untraceable messaging of any election content.

56 (g) Between 60 days from any primary, general, or special statewide or federal election,
57 and the date the election is certified, a social media platform that terminates, suspends, or
58 otherwise restricts access of a candidate, party, or political party, shall give contemporaneous
59 written notice to affected person or party and to the State Election Commission of the platform's
60 intended action. Such notice shall:

61 (i) Include the proposed grounds for termination, suspension, or other restriction,

62 (ii) The anticipated action execution date (cannot be sooner than five business days from
63 notification); and

64 (iii) Provide the candidate or party details of the appeal process and opportunity to respond
65 prior to implementation of the action by the platform.

66 (h) If the affected party does not appeal within the period given by the platform as the
67 execution date (as previously set forth in this section, the platform must give at least five business
68 days from notification), the platform may proceed with the action. Any candidate or party who
69 appeals within the designated time and disagrees with a social media platform's decision under
70 subsection (g) of this section may file a written complaint with the State Election Commission for
71 further review under the procedures set forth in the West Virginia Code of State Rules 153-21. The
72 State Election Commission may affirm, modify, or overturn any decision made pursuant to this
73 section by the social media platform, and issue penalties pursuant to subsection (l) of this section.

74 (i) This article shall not apply to a social media platform that terminates, suspends, or
75 otherwise restricts access of a candidate or party if the content is:

76 (1) Clearly obscene or pornographic in nature;

77 (2) Illegal under federal or West Virginia law; or

78 (3) An incontrovertible incitement, as determined by the State Election Commission, to
79 commit criminal conduct or violent acts against others.

80 (j) Investigations into alleged violations of this article shall be referred to the State Election
81 Commission and, if the State Election Commission finds that a social media platform violated the
82 provisions of this article, the State Election Commission may:

83 (i) Issue a fine of up to \$100,000, per day, per violation, and until the action is corrected,
84 and

85 (ii) Request that the Attorney General seek injunctive relief to enforce the provisions of this
86 article.

87 (k) Monetary damages assessed under subsection (j) of this section shall be calculated

88 from the date of the first termination, suspension, or access restriction, and shall be collectible by
89 the Attorney General.
90 (l) The Attorney General and Secretary of State may promulgate rules and regulations as
91 necessary to further the purposes of this section.

NOTE: The purpose of this bill is to modify the requirements imposed on social media companies to prevent corruption and provide transparency of election-related content made available on social media websites. The bill provides equal opportunities for all candidates and political parties to speak without policy or partisan-based censorship. Finally, the bill upholds the integrity of elections by ensuring election-related content hosted, posted, and made available on social media websites is not monetized or otherwise used or manipulated for nefarious purposes.

Strike-throughs indicate language that would be stricken from a heading or the present law and underscoring indicates new language that would be added.