

Testimony of Delegate Samuel I. Rosenberg
Before the House Ways and Means Committee
In Support Of
House Bill 465

Election Law - Campaign Material - Disclosure of the Use of Bots

“The evolution of artificial intelligence in particular is changing digital campaigns, and we aren’t prepared for it.”¹

The race for the White House in 2016 exposed substantial vulnerabilities in our election systems. Most notable was the rise of disinformation promulgated on social media by fake accounts. According to a study at the University of Southern California, about 1 in 5 twitter posts about the 2016 presidential election were published by “bots.”² A “bot” is defined in House Bill 465 as “an automated online account where all or substantially all of the actions or posts of that account are not the result of a person.”

The study on the use of “bots” in 2016 found that the presence of social media bots can negatively affect democratic political discussions, alter public opinion, and endanger the integrity of our elections. While social media has increased democratic discussions and public involvement in the political process, we cannot allow it to be manipulated by a few to the detriment of the many.

In 2016, a Melvin Redick of Harrisburg Pa posted a link on Facebook to a brand new website called DCLeaks. DCLeaks, as it’s notoriously known, was the website used by Russian hackers to disseminate stolen emails from the DNC and top Hillary Clinton campaign officials.

Melvin Redick was a “bot” account created to fool American voters, according to a *New York Times* investigation. The profile had pictures of a seemingly regular guy and his daughter, complete with an educational background, birthday and followers.³

¹ Fenwick McKelvey, Elizabeth Dubois, “*Toward the Responsible use of bots in Politics*” Nov. 2017, available at <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/november-2017/toward-the-responsible-use-of-bots-in-politics/>.

² Alessandro Bessi, Emilio Ferrara, University of Southern California, “ Social bots distort the 2016 U.S. Presidential election online discussion

³ Scott Shane, New York Times, “ The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election” Sept. 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html>.

In yesterday's New York Times profile "The Enemy of Bots Aims His Mouse," Ben Nimno, founder of Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, warned of the continued threat of "bots" and foreign election interference.⁴ Most recently, Mr. Nimno has investigated

Iranian disinformation after the United States killed Gen. Qassim Suleimani, and a Russia-linked campaign to blame the United States for the downing of Ukraine International Flight 752, which Iran said it shot down.

HB 465, sponsored by Delegate Alice Cain and myself, would require that the use of a "bot" to publish, distribute, or disseminate campaign material online be disclosed on the campaign material. This simple measure would provide the public with a means of deciphering "real" information from "fake," without infringing on freedom of speech.

This legislation would apply to any candidate, campaign finance entity, individual or participating organization making an independent expenditure or disbursement for electioneering communications, or any agent of these persons. Violators of the requirement would be subject to a civic penalty up to \$500, and the State Board of Elections may seek to remove the "bot" from the Internet.

I urge a favorable report on HB 465.

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⁴ Adam Satariano, "The Enemy of Bots Aims His Mouse", Feb. 10, 2020 available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/09/technology/ben-nimmo-disinformation-russian-bots.html>.