

## Facebook launches oversight board ahead of US election

*'Supreme Court'-style body is unlikely to make any rulings before November 3 vote*

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Facebook will launch its 'Supreme Court'-style oversight body ahead of the US election, according to two people familiar with its plans, after facing rising criticism for its perceived failure to tackle hateful and divisive content.

The independent oversight board, which will rule on what is allowed on Facebook's platforms and whether its policies are fair, will start accepting cases from mid to late October, the people said.

The board was first announced by Mark Zuckerberg in November 2018 and Facebook said last September it would start operations in "early 2020".

Facebook has faced heavy pressure to show that it can self-regulate and that it is prepared for what is expected to be a polarising American election, with experts warning of a potential proliferation of hate speech and incitement to violence on the platform.

But while the oversight board will be operational ahead of the November 3 vote, its rules allow for a 90-day window for it to decide on a case and for Facebook act on the decision.

The appointment of an independent body offloads decisions on the most contentious content on the platform to a third party at a time when Facebook has faced accusations — including from President Donald Trump — that it demonstrates anticonservative bias on its platform and censors rightwing voices. At the same time, leftwing activists and civil rights groups have argued that the platform's policies do not go far enough to curb hateful content, including posts which stir up racial tensions.

In May, Facebook named the first 20 members of the board, with figures from across the political spectrum from Alan Rusbridger, the former editor of the Guardian newspaper, to John Samples, vice-president of the libertarian think-tank, the Cato Institute.

But even before its launch, the board attracted controversy after one of the co-chairs, Stanford law professor Michael McConnell, reportedly read out a racial slur to students before later apologising.

The board will receive cases from both users and Facebook itself, according to its bylaws. There is also an option for Facebook to send urgent “expedited” cases to the board to be heard in a shorter timeframe than the three-month deadline for all other cases.

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While users will only be able to challenge content that has been taken down initially, Facebook itself will be able to challenge removed content but also existing content on the platform via the expedited review.

However, Facebook has no plans to refer expedited cases related to election content, one person familiar with the situation said.

Facebook declined to comment. The oversight board said: “We are currently testing the newly deployed technical systems that will allow users to appeal and the Board to review cases. Assuming those tests go to plan, we expect to open user appeals in mid to late October. Building a process that is thorough, principled and globally effective takes time and our members have been working aggressively to launch as soon as possible.”