

NEWS

# Hulu Demanded Democratic Candidate Cut 'Sensitive' Issues Like Abortion and Guns from Campaign Ad

Suraj Patel, who is challenging two incumbents in New York, also had to remove footage of the Jan. 6th insurrection before Hulu would approve it.

By Caitlin Cruz | 7/13/22 1:00PM | Comments (17)



Photo: Suraj Patel for Congress

Hulu reportedly demanded a Democratic congressional campaign remove at least one of three “sensitive” issues—abortion, climate change, or gun laws—from a digital campaign ad and replace it with “non-sensitive” issues, like taxes or education, before it could run on the streaming service. The 30-second ad had already run on cable channels, but New York candidate Suraj Patel’s campaign viewed Hulu, a streaming platform owned by Disney, as an important avenue to reach younger voters during a midterm election.

The progressive challenger is hoping to unseat Reps. Carolyn Maloney and Jerry Nadler, two long-time Democratic congresspeople, in [Manhattan’s new 12th District](#). The lawmakers were drawn into the same district as part of new redistricting maps following the 2020 census. Competing against two well-known, well-funded candidates whose average supporter is above 55 years old, Patel wanted to reach as many young voters in Manhattan as possible.

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On June 30, the ad, which was part of an [ad buy worth more than \\$175,000](#), went up on cable channels in Manhattan. “From abortion rights to gun laws to climate change, 1990s Democrats are losing every major battle to Mitch McConnell,” says Patel’s voiceover while images of Maloney, Nadler, and Donald Trump appear. “We may have defeated Trump, but Trumpism is on the rise. The incumbents have had 30 years. They failed us.”



The original version of Patel’s ad, which ran on cable news in New York.

It was those first words that apparently rubbed Hulu the wrong way. The same day the spot went live on television, Hulu rejected the ad. A campaign source described to Jezebel a phone call with Hulu in which the streaming giant explained “unwritten rules” about “sensitive” and “non-sensitive” topics. A Hulu representative reportedly told the campaign, “I hate having to make these calls all day to candidates across the country, but we don’t publish the guidelines” about what counts as a sensitive and non-sensitive topic. Hulu did not respond to Jezebel’s request for comment.

“Our path to victory runs through making sure we can reach so many of these disaffected younger people,” Patel told Jezebel in an interview. “This ad is a very important part of that, and Hulu is an incredibly important part of reaching that audience.”

Patel’s campaign sent a letter to Hulu on Tuesday night—[shared exclusively with Jezebel](#)—demanding the company stop “unwritten Hulu policy” that required “censoring” a campaign advertisement before it could be aired on the streamer.

This isn’t the first time Hulu rejected an ad that featured abortion. In May, Hulu [rejected](#) Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux’s (D-Ga.) ad that mentioned her “staunch pro-choice position.” (Bourdeaux [lost her primary](#) at the end of May.)

Hulu said it would allow Patel’s 30-second spot to run if the campaign swapped out those opening words—“from abortion rights to gun laws to climate change”—for “permissible ones such as taxes, infrastructure, and democracy,” according to the campaign source.

“It became very clear that this was a conversation that had to happen by phone, not by email, because they didn’t want it in writing, which is always a kind of red flag,” the Patel campaign source—who didn’t feel comfortable publishing their name because of “dozens” of ads they’ve worked on—told Jezebel. “We were told that there are some new guidelines that they have, and our ad was not approved by their quality control. What had gotten our ad rejected was that we had three ‘sensitive topics’ in the ad, which were abortion, gun laws, and climate change.”

The biggest problems seemed to be the emphasis put on the so-called sensitive issues and the number of issues mentioned. “They told us that we have to replace it, sort of like they wanted to balance out the negativity with something positive, was the sense that I got,” the source said.

The policy was opaque, even as Hulu representatives tried to explain what qualified as a topic area that would kill the ad. “They did tell us that it had something to do with the fact that there’s like a five-second limit or something like that on how long you can stay on sensitive issues,” the source said.

To get his ad on the air, Patel insisted on keeping in abortion and gun laws in light of recent Supreme Court decisions, but took out climate change. The campaign substituted in “democracy” for “climate change,” cut shots of the January 6th insurrection in favor of more subdued B-roll of people holding QAnon protest signs, and sent a revised version to Hulu on July 1.

When the Patel campaign reached out again on July 5, Hulu told the campaign that the second version was approved. It’s embedded below and now running on Hulu.

The updated ad, which is running on Hulu.

The campaign had chosen to highlight abortion, guns, and climate change at the top of the original ad because those are some of the biggest issues at stake in the midterms. “Imagine if I had run an ad campaign in 2002, and Hulu or CNN told me I couldn’t use 9/11 footage or talk about 9/11. Because that’s what January 6th is, and the footage that had to [be] cut from this,” Patel said.

Patel supports a number of progressive positions, including a pathway to citizenship for immigrants, the Green New Deal, and Medicare for All. In his last race against Maloney in 2020, Patel came within 3.4 points of the congresswoman.

Authentically communicating about what potential voters are experiencing is crucial to him. “If you don’t talk about the biggest issues of the day, in my opinion—in this current period, it’s about abortion, climate change, and saving our democracy—then you’re going to sound out of touch,” he told Jezebel, referencing the use of the original ad’s insurrection B-roll. “Because you *would* be out of touch, and you’re not going to mobilize voters.”

The campaign questioned how Hulu deemed what is controversial and what isn’t—after all, the American Revolution was started over taxation. “It’s not a bad ad, you know. It’s definitely not as good as it was,” the campaign source said of the retooled spot. “It just feels wrong, in principle, to have this company telling us what we can’t put into political statements, and nobody knows that they’re telling us that.” Now, they do.

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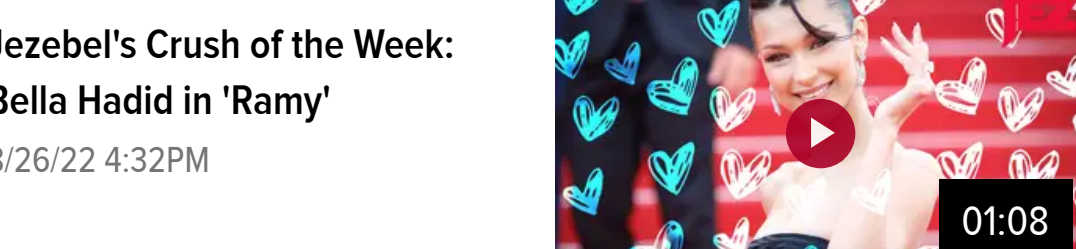
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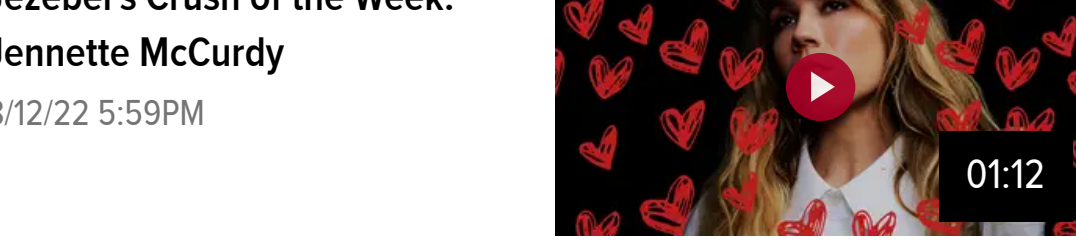
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