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2026 CAMPAIGN OPERATOR BRIEF

The 2026 Political CTV Playbook

How to plan, buy, and execute media on political races in CTV in the most expensive non-presidential cycle in U.S. history. A field guide on supply-side logistics, reach control, transparency, and timing.

Prepared for
Campaign strategists, media directors, and political ad buyers preparing for the 2026 cycle.

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Executive summary

If you're buying political media in 2026, the question isn't whether CTV belongs in your plan. It's whether your plan is built to handle what CTV has become — a market that's bigger, more complex, and less forgiving than the last cycle taught most buyers to expect.

The campaigns that win on CTV this cycle won't be the ones with the most elaborate audience story. They'll be the ones that control reach, lock in scarce supply early, buy through cleaner paths, demand real program-level transparency, and treat legal and platform setup as part of launch — not paperwork that happens before launch.

The numbers explain why this matters. Total 2026 political ad spend is estimated at $10.4 billion — up from $8.9 billion in 2022, and only modestly behind the $11.2 billion presidential cycle in 2024. Broadcast still anchors the mix at roughly $4.8 billion (about 46% share), but CTV and streaming have climbed to $2.7 billion (about 26%). Local TV political revenue alone is projected to hit a record $4.02 billion in a non-presidential year. That's the backdrop. The market is now too big, too concentrated, and too operationally complex to approach with lazy digital-video thinking.

The audience side reinforces it. Streaming captured 47.5% of all TV viewing in December 2025 — the highest share Nielsen has ever measured. But ad-supported TV is still 74.2% of total viewing, and that ad-supported audience is split across streaming, broadcast, and cable rather than living in one place.

The takeaway isn't “streaming wins.” It's that “digital versus TV” is the wrong frame entirely. What you're really planning is a television reach architecture across linear, CTV, FAST, AVOD, and premium live inventory — and that architecture has to be built deliberately.

The pressure is already showing up. The top five battleground states are expected to absorb 32% of national political spend — with Michigan alone projected at $1.0 billion, and Atlanta as the most expensive DMA in the country at $591 million. Candidate receipts through February 2026 were already running 9.4% ahead of the 2022 midterm pace. Polaris (which tracks broadcast and cable political reservations) had $695 million committed across 109 markets, with issue groups accounting for 86% of those early bookings.

In hot markets, political demand can preempt 15% to 20% of commercial inventory in September and October, and push consumer-brand CPMs 20% to 40% higher. Scarcity is not a final-week event. It starts well before anyone calls it a problem.

All of which is why “supply-side logistics” belongs at the top of the 2026 conversation, not in an ad-tech appendix at the bottom of the deck. The term, as we use it here, covers six things: whether the inventory is actually ready for political use, whether it's eligible under your legal and operational rules, whether the path is authorized and direct enough to defend, whether the metadata is rich enough to bid and report against, whether the transaction structure fits the objective, and whether you can actually control frequency, pacing, and accountability once the market tightens.

The industry data backs this up. CTV drove 86% of U.S. ad views and 91% of U.S. programmatic ad views in FreeWheel's 2H 2025 dataset — but only 18% of those programmatic views were guaranteed. That's a premium, finite, unevenly transparent market with more demand pouring in every quarter. In that kind of market, logistics becomes budget strategy.

The good news is that the tools to hold sellers accountable finally exist. IAB Tech Lab's Deals API launched in early 2026 to clean up curated-deal structure. Integral Ad Science's Total TV brought show-, program-, genre-, rating-, and language-level transparency into one product. DoubleVerify rolled out program-level streaming reporting and a Spectrum Reach partnership that extends verified show-level data into streaming inventory.

This is the cycle to raise the bar on procurement. If a seller can't show clean paths, real metadata, and content-level transparency in premium political CTV, that's their problem to solve — not yours to work around.

The market reality of 2026

The spend curve is too large to treat CTV as experimental

The modern political market is large enough that small planning failures now scale into meaningful budget loss. Total U.S. political ad spending was $5.7 billion in 2018, $9.0 billion in 2020, $8.9 billion in 2022, and $11.2 billion in the 2024 presidential cycle. The 2026 base case is $10.4 billion — the most expensive non-presidential cycle in U.S. history. To put it in perspective: Michigan alone is projected to spend more in 2026 than the entire country spent in 2006.

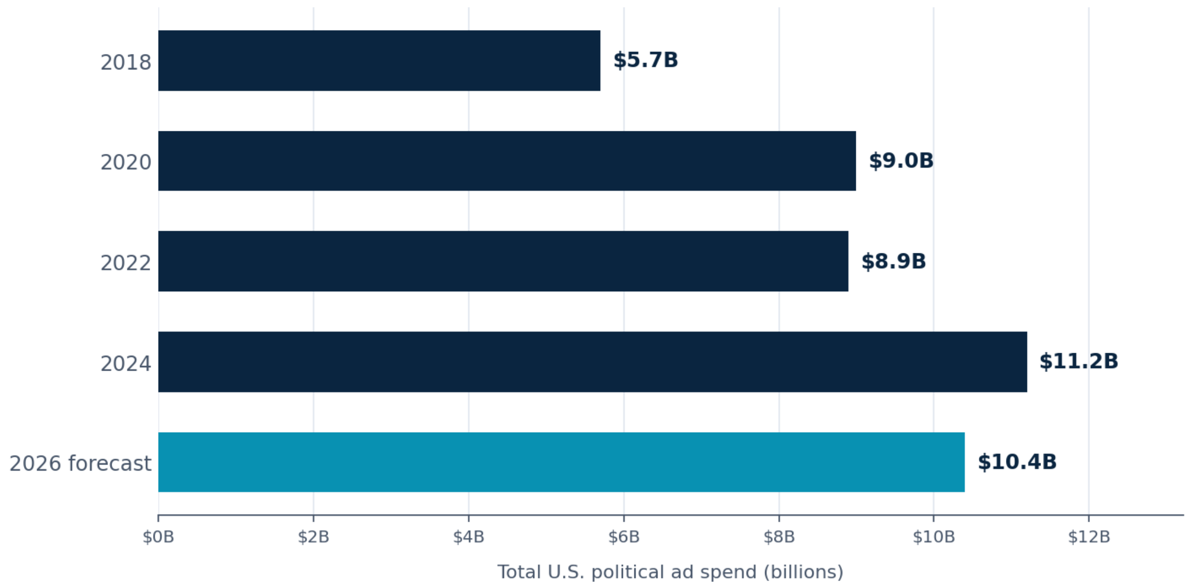

Figure: *U.S. political ad spend by cycle, 2018 to 2026 forecast.*

That curve changes what “good enough” means. A plan that relied on last-minute opportunism or fuzzy app-level reporting could hide its flaws in smaller cycles. In a 2026 battleground market, it can't. The point isn't that every buyer needs to overengineer the stack. The point is that the buyer has to know which levers actually preserve budget under pressure: timing, reserved access, path discipline, reach control, and real reporting.

This is a converged TV cycle, not a CTV-only cycle

The 2026 channel mix is the cleanest starting point for media architecture because it captures both the resilience of regulated TV and the scale of streaming growth. Broadcast still owns $4.8 billion and 46.2% share. CTV and streaming are at $2.7 billion and 25.7%. Digital lands at $1.5 billion (14.3%), cable at $1.2 billion (11.3%), and radio at $0.3 billion (2.4%). CTV is up 122% versus 2022, and the CTV-to-cable ratio in 2026 is roughly 2.3 to 1. A buyer who still treats streaming as a tactical add-on isn't seeing the market clearly. A buyer who treats broadcast as obsolete isn't either.

CHANNEL	PROJECTED SPEND	SHARE	OPERATOR READ
Broadcast TV	$4.8B	46.2%	Still the anchor for scale and candidate-rate economics
CTV / Streaming	$2.7B	25.7%	Essential, but only efficient when bought as incremental TV
Digital	$1.5B	14.3%	Reinforcement, sequencing, and response support
Cable TV	$1.2B	11.3%	Still useful, but structurally weaker than earlier cycles
Radio	$0.3B	2.4%	Tactical and local, not central

Figure: *Where the $10.4B goes: 2026 political channel mix.*

The audience data underneath that mix matters too. Streaming captured 47.5% of all TV viewing in December 2025, versus 21.4% for broadcast and 20.2% for cable. But ad-supported TV still represented 74.2% of total viewing — and that ad-supported audience remained spread across streaming, broadcast, and cable rather than consolidating into one channel. Nielsen's own 2026 upfront framing goes a step further: linear, streaming, and FAST should be planned as one integrated ecosystem. The same logic applies to political. CTV shouldn't be budgeted as its own universe. It should be budgeted as television inventory with different reach, targeting, and control properties.

Battleground concentration distorts both price and availability

The national market is large, but the real fight isn't national. It's concentrated in a small number of states and cities where Senate, governor, House, ballot, and issue pressure pile onto the same premium inventory pool. After Michigan, the top projected states are Georgia, California, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Arizona, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin. The top DMAs include Atlanta, Detroit, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Raleigh, Lansing, New York, Philadelphia, and Cleveland. The top five battleground states alone absorb 32% of national political spend. That kind of concentration changes not just rates, but delivery reliability and how responsive sales teams will be.

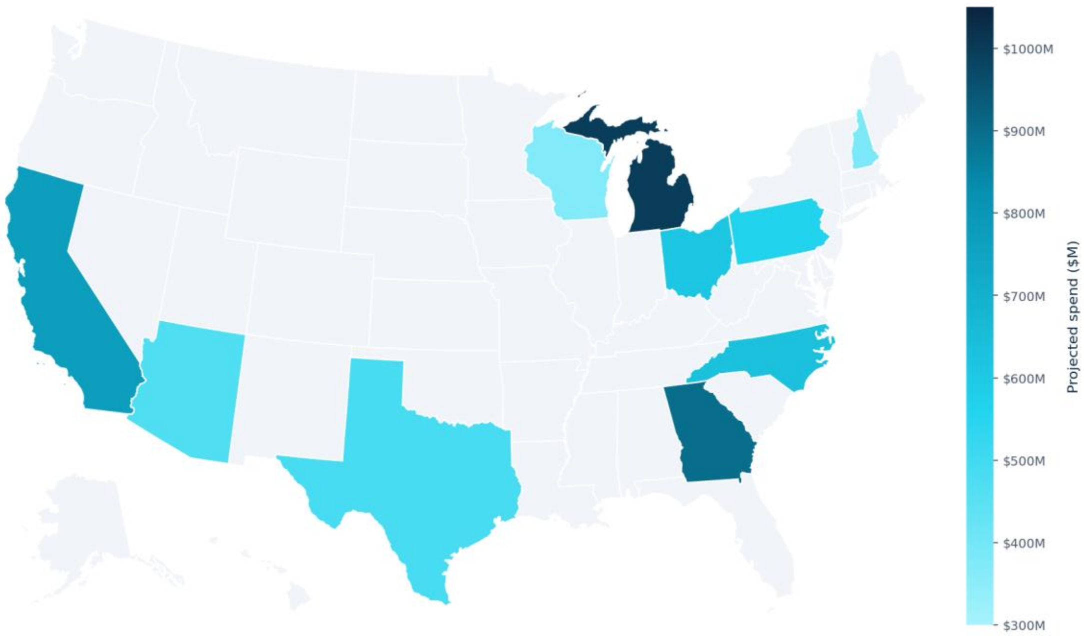

Figure: *The 2026 battleground: top 10 states by projected political ad spend.*

STATE	PROJECTED SPEND
Michigan	$1,000M
Georgia	$900M
California	$773M
North Carolina	$634M
Ohio	$614M
Pennsylvania	$561M
Texas	$488M
Arizona	$470M
New Hampshire	$382M
Wisconsin	$371M

Figure: *Top 10 states by projected 2026 spend ($M).*

DMA	STATE	PROJECTED SPEND
Atlanta	Georgia	$591M
Detroit	Michigan	$432M

DMA	STATE	PROJECTED SPEND
Phoenix	Arizona	$381M
Las Vegas	Nevada	$310M
Los Angeles	California	$285M
Raleigh	North Carolina	$279M
Lansing	Michigan	$279M
New York	New York	$276M
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania	$260M
Cleveland	Ohio	$217M

Figure: *Top 10 DMAs by projected 2026 spend ($M).*

The displacement model is one of the more useful practical warnings in the public market. In competitive DMAs, political demand can preempt 15% to 20% of commercial inventory in September and October, and push consumer-brand CPMs 20% to 40% higher — with Atlanta and Las Vegas flagged as examples where the displacement can be acute. The buyer read isn't that scarcity is a commercial-market problem. It's that premium streaming, local news, and live inventory will not remain equally available across the entire cycle. Scarcity is a conditions problem that gets worse as bookings pile up.

Early bookings and household adoption remove the excuses

The leading indicators are already telling buyers to move earlier. Candidate receipts through February 2026 hit $1.9 billion, 9.4% ahead of the 2022 pace, with $8.6 billion in total system fundraising already equal to 49% of the full 2022 cycle. Polaris had $695 million committed across 109 markets, with issue groups responsible for 86% of those early bookings. That kind of pace means supply pressure builds well before the late-cycle storytelling acknowledges it. Publisher reps lock in earlier and offer less flexibility — not just higher rates.

Household access is no longer the limiting factor either. By 2026, 89.2% of U.S. households will be CTV households, and FAST users in the U.S. will reach 131.4 million — 54% of all CTV users. Local matters too: in September 2025, 73% of local OTT audiences were under 65 versus about 51% of traditional local-linear viewers, and adding local OTT to a traditional Los Angeles linear schedule could deliver up to a 20% reach lift. The audience is there. The operator question is whether the buy is actually additive and controllable.

The operating thesis

Reach control should sit above targeting in the planning hierarchy

The biggest waste line in political CTV is usually not “wrong audience.” It's duplicated exposure across disconnected buying systems. A campaign buys broadcast for speed and legitimacy, layers CTV for household precision, adds premium publisher video or local streaming on top, then reinforces through digital video and social. Plans like that get labeled “omnichannel” on the deck. The lived outcome is often a persuadable household that gets hit too often while adjacent reachable households stay lighter than they should. The more fragmented the execution, the more likely CTV becomes expensive repetition instead of incremental coverage.

The planning implication isn't subtle: build the reach system first, then decide how much targeting helps instead of hurts. For political CTV, the right default is a reach waterfall. Start with highest-value voter universes and highest-confidence TV environments. Push those to efficient reach before widening. Use CTV to extend into lighter-linear or younger ad-supported households, to sequence messages around timing, and to reduce avoidable waste. Only after that should the plan widen into more flexible biddable supply or broader discovery environments. That's how CTV starts acting like incremental television instead of a high-tech frequency accelerator.

Buy CTV as incremental television, not as isolated digital video

This distinction is the heart of the playbook. Political CTV does its best work when it does one of four jobs that traditional linear can't do as efficiently. It can extend into households that are genuinely lighter in linear. It can protect premium contextual environments at the program level. It can help sequence action-oriented messages during early vote and GOTV without depending entirely on broad gross-rating pressure. It can also surface better content and path diagnostics in-flight than traditional station buying often can. What it shouldn't do is imitate a generic audience-targeting pitch and call that innovation.

The tension is real: streaming reaches 88% of households while cable reaches about 21%, yet broadcast still holds 46% of political dollars because political buyers have historically prioritized mass reach, rate structure, and trusted execution. 2026 is the inflection point because the streaming audience is already there — but the buyer still has to make it additive.

The right internal question for every CTV line item, therefore, isn't “How precise is this audience?” It's “What reach or control problem is this line solving that the rest of the plan doesn't already solve?” If the trader or strategist can't answer that question in one sentence, the line item probably belongs back in review.

Supply-side logistics is budget strategy in disguise

“Supply-side logistics” here means more than classic supply-path optimization. In political buying, it's the full operating layer that determines whether your dollars actually reach the inventory you care about under real campaign conditions. That includes supply readiness, inventory eligibility, path directness, metadata richness, transaction structure, and in-flight control. The line between media strategy and media plumbing is now thinner than buyers like to admit. CTV drove 86% of U.S. ad views and 91% of U.S. programmatic ad views in FreeWheel's 2H 2025 dataset, while only 18% of programmatic ad views were guaranteed. Unique programmatic advertisers also grew 21% year over year. More demand entering a premium, finite, unevenly transparent market is exactly the condition where logistics becomes budget strategy.

Splashbay's view here is direct. In hot battleground DMAs, earlier control is more valuable than extra tactical cleverness. Buyers should shift more of the must-not-fail CTV plan into reserved or tightly curated structures, demand cleaner metadata, and review supply-path legitimacy with the same seriousness they already give to audience logic. If a political team waits until execution week to discover that a partner's show-level reporting is weak, deal IDs are mismatched, app identifiers are missing, or app-ads.txt logic is inconsistent — the money is already being spent in the dark.

Program-level transparency is no longer a nice-to-have

Now that the market has real show-level and program-level tooling, the buyer standard should rise. IAS Total TV surfaces genre, rating, language, show, and program-level data in aggregate while also measuring media quality. DoubleVerify's streaming products and Spectrum Reach partnership are designed to provide verified show-level reporting and better contextual alignment at the program level, including in news and live sports. IAB Tech Lab's Deals API adds transparency around curated deals that isn't available in the bidstream alone. These aren't small product announcements. They change what a buyer can reasonably demand from premium streaming inventory in 2026.

A practical rule follows. If your battleground CTV plan is large enough to matter and premium enough to justify reservation, app-level reporting isn't sufficient. It may still be common, but it shouldn't be sufficient. If you can't tell the campaign which programs, genres, or live environments carried the spend, you've reduced your ability to protect budget, message context, and seller accountability.

Supply-side logistics

Define the stack before you buy

Political buyers need a practical checklist, not a concept cloud. For 2026, the supply-side logistics stack should be defined in five layers: readiness, eligibility, directness, metadata, and control.

LAYER	OPERATOR DEFINITION	WHAT MUST BE TRUE BEFORE LAUNCH
Readiness	Seller and buyer systems can actually transact political inventory	Deal IDs, trafficking, approvals, billing, geo logic, and measurement are ready
Eligibility	Inventory qualifies under campaign, platform, and legal rules	Authorized seller status, disclaimer workflow, language, geography, contextual fit
Directness	Path is clean enough to defend	ads.txt or app-ads.txt authorization, sellers.json clarity, acceptable SupplyChain path
Metadata	Bidstream and reporting describe the inventory clearly	App bundle, device type, live indicators, genre, and ideally show or program signals
Control	Buyer can manage the line in flight	Reserved backup options, pacing visibility, make-good terms, frequency controls

Figure: *The supply-side logistics stack: five layers every battleground CTV buy should clear.*

This model tracks where the public standards are heading. IAB Tech Lab's ads.txt project was built to let publishers publicly declare who is authorized to sell their inventory. Its sellers.json and SupplyChain object standards help buyers see who is direct and who is intermediary in the path. The app-ads.txt specification extends the same logic to apps distributed through mobile and connected-TV app stores. IAB's 2021 CTV guidance for ads.txt and app-ads.txt shows how `app.inventorypartnerdomain` and related signals are used to determine whether inventory is authorized, unauthorized, or inconclusive in OTT and CTV contexts.

Metadata quality is a budget lever, not an ad-ops detail

This is one of the most underappreciated truths in premium CTV buying. Good metadata isn't just convenient — it materially improves the market's ability to value and transact inventory. AppBundle and Genre were the most commonly used metadata fields in 2H 2025 bid requests, and those fields are crucial in bridging buyer-seller understanding of what's actually being transacted. Metadata also lets publishers distinguish standout live environments like sports and award shows from generic live shoulder programming, helping buyers access moments when audiences are more engaged. If the bidstream doesn't describe the supply well, the buy is harder to value, harder to curate, and harder to report on with confidence.

This is where political buying needs to grow up fast. A campaign can't complain about opaque outcomes while accepting low-information supply. If a partner can't pass a clean app bundle, reliable device classification, genre, live flags, and decent contextual metadata, that partner should sit lower in the priority stack regardless of how strong the sales story sounds.

Reserved access should do more of the heavy lifting in hot markets

The most common buyer mistake is using the open or loosely curated market as the default and only trying to secure certainty later, once scarcity is obvious. That sequencing makes sense in commodity display. It makes much less sense in premium battleground CTV. Programmatic guaranteed offers a cluster of real advantages in constrained video markets: lower tech tax, priority access to premium inventory, less risk of underdelivery, better match rates through direct publisher relationships, stronger holistic delivery management, and more transparency around placement and context.

TRANSACTION TYPE	BEST POLITICAL USE	STRONGEST BENEFIT	MAIN TRADEOFF	2026 OPERATOR VIEW
Direct IO	Local news, bespoke packages, signature publisher environments	Maximum relationship leverage and custom terms	Manual workflow, inconsistent reporting, slower to adjust	Use where the environment itself is strategic
Programmatic Guaranteed	Premium battleground CTV that cannot fail	Reserved supply with cleaner pacing and stronger control	Requires earlier setup and more disciplined forecasting	Make this a core layer, not a backup
PMP	Curated premium access with some flexibility	Better control than open market, easier scale than IO	Can still underdeliver if metadata or path quality is weak	Strong as a second layer after PG
Open Exchange / broadly biddable	Edge fill, testing, backup pacing, opportunistic scale	Flexibility and speed	Weakest control and highest overlap risk	Use at the edges, not as the spine

Figure: *Buying options and tradeoffs: how the four transaction types should sit in a 2026 plan.*

The right bias in 2026 is clear. In the most pressured markets and must-have environments, PG should take share from looser execution models. PMPs should be curated, audited, and justified. The open market should be treated as a tactical supplement, not as the heart of persuasion or GOTV.

Pod bidding matters because you are still buying television

Connected TV may transact programmatically, but it still behaves like television in ways too many digital buyers underweight. OpenRTB 2.6 introduced ad-pod support for CTV, and the standard now lets pod-bidding signals communicate sequence, total pod length, maximum number of ads in a pod, and relationships among multiple impression opportunities in the same break. That matters because a premium streaming execution isn't just "a CTV impression." It's often a position inside a TV-like break whose quality affects both performance and viewer experience.

There's a second reason to care. In the U.S. portion of FreeWheel's 2H 2025 dataset, 57% of ad views came from live content. Live inventory isn't one thing. Sports, local news, weather, awards, and shoulder content don't carry the same value. Better pod and content metadata helps distinguish them. Political buyers should be asking whether pod-aware transacting is supported, whether slot quality can be signaled or reported, and whether live-event metadata is strong enough to separate premium live moments from generic "live" supply.

Preflight audit

Use the following checklist before any market-partner-deal goes live. Run one row per market-partner-deal combination.

FIELD	OWNER	STATUS	NOTES
Priority market confirmed	Strategy		
Priority inventory class defined	Buyer		
Transaction structure chosen	Buyer		
ads.txt or app-ads.txt authorization checked	Ad ops		
sellers.json checked	Ad ops		
SupplyChain path reviewed	Trader		
App bundle and device type validated	Trader		
Genre / live / program metadata confirmed	Seller		
Program-level reporting confirmed where promised	Buyer		
Geo granularity validated	Trader		
IVT and viewability measurement active	Measurement lead		
Frequency logic documented	Analytics		
Make-good terms agreed	Buyer		
Escalation path documented	Media lead		

How to build the campaign

Build by phase, not by channel silo

The strongest political plans are built around the campaign's job to be done, not around an org chart of media channels. That sounds obvious, but many plans still let broadcast, CTV, social, and digital video get built in parallel and reconciled too late. In a cycle where early bookings are elevated and premium supply is finite, the plan has to be sequenced top-down.

CAMPAIGN PHASE	MAIN JOB	LINEAR ROLE	CTV ROLE	BEST SUPPLY POSTURE
Early definition	Establish presence and signal viability	Broad local legitimacy and earned-media support	Efficient extension into streaming-heavy and younger households	Selective PG plus curated PMPs
Persuasion build	Move persuadables with controlled repetition	Anchor mass reach	Add incremental households and better context control	Increase reserved premium supply
Contrast	Protect narrative under pressure	Maintain broad signal	Tight contextual alignment and reduced overlap	PG and strong PMPs, minimal open-market sprawl
Early vote	Drive timing and action	Fast market-wide urgency	Household reinforcement with less waste	Protect reserved supply, reduce experimentation
GOTV	Compressed urgency with no room for underdelivery	Maximum speed	Reinforcement and audience completion, not frequency inflation	Reserved inventory should carry the load

Figure: *Campaign-phase planning matrix: how linear and CTV roles shift across the cycle.*

This structure reflects the market evidence. When early money is already flowing and battleground spend is concentrated, strategy has to turn into transaction discipline earlier in the cycle.

Separate budget posture from budget size

Budget posture matters more than budget size. Political CTV planning goes wrong when teams think more money automatically solves for optionality. In hot markets, more money only helps if it buys earlier access, better reporting, and more control.

BUDGET POSTURE	COMMON MISTAKE	WHAT TO PRIORITIZE
Lean	Fragmenting across too many sellers and data stories	Fewer partners, cleaner supply, local premium environments, hard frequency discipline
Working statewide budget	Treating PMPs as a substitute for a supply plan	Reserve what is hardest to replace, then use PMPs for flexibility
Large battleground budget	Spending the size advantage on sprawl	Spend the advantage on earlier control, richer transparency, and stronger QA

Figure: *Budget posture, not budget size: how to read your own position.*

One pricing illustration makes the timing point vivid. A July broadcast spot priced at roughly $265 can become effectively $700 to $805 for an outside group in late October once scarcity and outside-group premiums stack up. The exact ratio varies by market and class of time, but the lesson is broader than the example: timing is one of the most expensive variables in political media, and late rescue buying is rarely efficient.

Local OTT, FAST, AVOD, and premium live each have distinct jobs

A serious CTV plan shouldn't treat all streaming environments as interchangeable. Local OTT is especially valuable for political buyers because its audiences skew younger than traditional linear local-news audiences and can add meaningful schedule lift. That makes local OTT and local streaming news a strong option when the campaign needs trust, local relevance, and a younger age profile than linear alone delivers. For adults 18 to 49, streaming now accounts for 66.7% of ad-supported TV time, while linear remains critical for live sports, events, and news. FAST and AVOD should therefore be treated as separate reach layers, not collapsed into a generic “CTV” bucket.

Think in terms of environment roles. Premium live inventory is for urgency, attention, and social proof. Local OTT and streaming news are for trusted context and audience extension. AVOD and major ad-supported tiers are for mainstream scalable reach where overlap can still be controlled. FAST is a useful middle layer when the campaign needs efficient added reach or frequency fill, but it still deserves contextual and path scrutiny — especially when the message is sensitive or polarizing.

Weekly war room cadence

This meeting should exist in every serious campaign once real money is live.

AGENDA ITEM	CORE QUESTION	DECISION OUTPUT
Delivery health	Which lines are underdelivering or overpacing?	Reallocation list
Frequency and overlap	Where is frequency rising without enough reach gain?	Cap and suppression changes

AGENDA ITEM	CORE QUESTION	DECISION OUTPUT
Market pressure	Which DMAs are tightening earlier than forecast?	Reservation or shift decisions
Supply-path quality	Which paths still lack clean metadata or sufficient transparency?	Path cleanup list
Context review	Which programs, genres, or live environments are outperforming?	Inclusion / exclusion updates
Legal and platform ops	Any disclaimer, verification, payer-name, or policy risks?	Incident ownership
Creative freshness	Which messages are fatiguing or blocked?	Refresh schedule

A team that only reviews these issues monthly is learning at invoice speed instead of campaign speed.

Timeline for planning handoff

This timeline is a planning model, not a statutory rule. It should be adapted to market heat, ballot calendar, creative readiness, and campaign type.

#	PHASE
1	Legal and platform setup
2	Reserve must-have supply
3	Launch foundational reach plan
4	Layer curated PMPs for incremental reach
5	Prune overlap and tighten frequency
6	Shift to early-vote timing
7	Protect reserved supply for GOTV

Figure: *Cycle-long sequencing: the seven phases of a 2026 political CTV launch.*

Measurement and QA

Measure to manage, not just to summarize

Political teams often talk about measurement as if it exists mostly to justify spend after the fact. That's a mistake in CTV. The primary job of measurement is to tell the buyer what to fix while the buy is still live. The metric stack should reflect that hierarchy.

METRIC CLASS	WHY IT MATTERS	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE
Incremental reach	This is the main reason CTV is in the plan	Directional proof that CTV is adding households rather than duplicating linear
Frequency control	This is the main protection against waste	Clear caps and weekly overlap review
Media quality	This is the baseline defense against low-value delivery	Accredited IVT and viewability measurement active from launch
Context quality	This turns transparency into buying leverage	Program, show, genre, language, and live signals are visible
Delivery health	This prevents last-minute rescue buying	Stable pacing and clear make-good terms
Outcome linkage	This improves future planning	Incrementality testing or meaningful downstream proxies where possible

Figure: *The 2026 metric stack: six layers, ordered by in-flight usefulness.*

This order tracks the real pain points in streaming. Deduplication, incrementality, and cross-platform measurement remain live buyer concerns. The push from FreeWheel and others toward better transparency and interoperability is in the right direction — but the buyer still has to demand it.

Media quality should be accredited, not implied

The baseline viewability rule still matters. The Media Rating Council guideline for video says an ad can be counted as viewable when at least 50% of its pixels are in view, and that condition is maintained for at least two continuous seconds. That's the floor, not the finish line. Political buyers should use viewability and IVT as minimum media-quality screens, not as proof that the buy is strategically sound. The MRC is also the body that audits and accredits media measurement products, which is why accredited vendors matter more than glossy sales pages in this category.

IAS has MRC accreditation for sophisticated invalid-traffic filtration and reporting in CTV as applied to video impressions, viewable impressions, and related viewability metrics. Its trust center shows accredited CTV coverage across tracked ads, rendered impressions, viewable impressions, and SIVT — with the caveat that CTV accreditation applies to certified traffic only. DoubleVerify is MRC-accredited for invalid-traffic detection across desktop, mobile web, mobile apps, and CTV environments, and its

CTV materials emphasize MRC-accredited CTV viewability. That's the standard a political buyer should expect before material scale.

Program-level visibility is what makes QA useful

Program-level transparency changes the quality-assurance workflow from generic hygiene into real decision-making. IAS Total TV offers show, program, genre, rating, and language transparency alongside media-quality signals. DoubleVerify's 2025-to-2026 streaming stack was built specifically to improve contextual alignment and show-level reporting in streaming TV, and its Spectrum Reach partnership extends that into direct and programmatic inventory across programming that includes news and live sports. Once you can see context at that level, QA becomes actionable: which programs deserve protection, which supply should be cut, which genres align with persuasion work, and which environments are too opaque to trust despite strong surface metrics.

The operator standard should be clear. For premium battleground CTV, app-level rollups aren't enough. At a minimum, the buyer should know whether the seller can provide program, show, genre, language, device, and IVT detail if the spend or context warrants it.

Deal QA sheet

Use one row per live deal.

QA CHECK	PASS / FAIL	NOTES
Inventory is authorized via ads.txt or app-ads.txt		
sellers.json relationship matches expected seller		
SupplyChain path is acceptable		
Device is correctly identified as CTV app inventory		
App bundle is present where expected		
Genre, show, or program signal is present		
Live-event metadata is present where relevant		
IVT measurement is active		
Viewability measurement is active		
Geo strategy is validated		
Reporting granularity supports in-flight action		
Make-good or replacement path is documented		

Supply approval workflow

Each deal or seller should clear these gates before activation. Under pressure, the buyer benefits more from a hard gate than from a long narrative.

#	GATE	IF YES	IF NO
1	Authorized via ads.txt or app-ads.txt?	Continue	Reject
2	Clean seller and SupplyChain path?	Continue	Reject
3	Metadata sufficient for bidding and reporting?	Continue	Fix setup or downgrade priority
4	Program- or show-level reporting available?	Continue	Fix setup or downgrade priority
5	IVT and viewability active?	Approve for activation	Fix setup or downgrade priority

Figure: *Five-gate supply approval workflow.*

Legal and platform guardrails

Candidate economics and outside-group economics aren't interchangeable

The legal structure of the buyer changes the economics of the plan. In March 2026, the Federal Communications Commission reminded stations that lowest-unit-charge (LUC) requirements apply to legally qualified federal candidates and all authorized committees, including certain joint-fundraising committees. The notice also restated that candidate-party coordinated advertisements can qualify for LUC, while independent expenditures cannot. That distinction changes how strategists should think about the mix. Candidate committees can use protected broadcast economics as a stronger anchor. Independent-expenditure and issue buyers need even more discipline in premium video and CTV because they can't assume the same baseline rate protections.

Disclaimer rules belong inside the media workflow

The Federal Election Commission is clear that any public communication made by a political committee must display a disclaimer, and that disclaimers also apply to websites, internet applications available to the general public, and certain internet communications. The FEC's 2022 rulemaking further clarified that disclaimer requirements apply to certain public communications placed for a fee on the internet. For internet public communications where the disclaimer is displayed within a video, the disclaimer must be visible for at least four seconds and appear without the recipient taking any action. Internet disclaimer provisions don't impose the separate stand-by-your-ad rules that apply to television and radio, but they do require comparable audio or visual disclosures. Operationally: disclaimer review isn't a legal afterthought. It's part of trafficking, version control, and launch readiness.

Platform verification is a scheduling dependency

Google requires verification for advertisers who want to run election ads in Google Ads and Display & Video 360, and notes the process may require two steps that can each take up to five business days. Google also warns that policy violations or false information can revoke verification and suspend accounts. On the transparency side, Google's April 2025 policy update says payer names appear in My Ad Center and the Ads Transparency Center, and for verified agency accounts the client payment profile can be used as the payer name if it differs from the verified advertiser name. For agencies and consultants, that means public identity and billing identity need to be reconciled before launch — not after a client notices a discrepancy in a transparency center.

Meta creates a different operational risk. The Meta Ad Library API covers ads about social issues, elections, or politics delivered anywhere in the world during the past seven years, exposing content, page identity, delivery dates, spend range, impression range, and demographic reach data. Users must confirm identity and location, and authorization can take a few days. Advertisers can run ads about social issues, elections, or politics provided they comply with applicable laws and Meta's authorization process. The planning implication is obvious: naming, authorization, and ad-package hygiene are part of public record management — not just paid-social operations.

Guardrail checklist

GUARDRAIL	WHY IT MATTERS	OWNER
Buyer legal status confirmed	Candidate, coordinated party, IE, and issue economics differ	Counsel
Disclaimer language locked before trafficking	Prevents last-minute creative rejection	Counsel / creative
Google election verification completed	Avoids self-inflicted launch delays	Ad ops
Payer naming and transparency surfaces reviewed	Prevents public mismatch and client confusion	Finance / agency lead
Meta authorization completed where relevant	Prevents social-issue or political-ad launch failure	Social lead
Public-record review process established	Google and Meta both create public transparency records	Comms / digital lead
Rate and eligibility documentation retained	Supports LUC, coordination, and dispute resolution	Buyer / legal

The larger operational point: legal and platform compliance aren't separate workstreams in 2026 political media. They're dependencies in the media workflow itself.

How Splashbay can help

Splashbay Media is a CTV-focused ad tech company built for the operating realities described in this playbook. We work with campaigns, agencies, and outside groups to put the principles in this document into practice on real 2026 inventory.

What we bring to a 2026 plan

CAPABILITY	WHAT IT MEANS FOR A POLITICAL BUYER
Curated CTV publisher access	Direct relationships with premium streaming, FAST, and local OTT publishers, including reserved and PMP supply in battleground DMAs
Supply-path discipline	Authorized paths, clean SupplyChain, and seller transparency reviewed before activation, not after
Program- and show-level transparency	Reporting that goes beyond app-level rollups so you can defend context, message alignment, and budget in-flight
Reach and frequency control	Cross-publisher dedup logic and frequency caps designed to stop CTV from becoming expensive linear repetition
Legal and platform readiness	Workflows aligned to FCC, FEC, Google, and Meta requirements, with disclaimer and verification gates built into trafficking
Battleground market intelligence	Live read on which DMAs and inventory classes are tightening earliest, so reservation decisions get made before the panic phase

How to engage

The earlier in the cycle the conversation starts, the more leverage a buyer has. Reservation decisions made in Q1 and Q2 of 2026 will materially outperform the same decisions made in September and October at the same nominal CPM.

Reach out to start a conversation about your 2026 plan:

- Email: jake@splashbaymedia.com or nick@splashbaymedia.com
- Web: splashbaymedia.com
- Meeting Link: https://calendly.com/d/cyqq-wt4-72c/splashbay-ad-curation-meeting

Whether you need a single-DMA Senate buy, a multi-state IE program, or a national issue campaign, we can scope a plan that reflects the supply, transparency, and timing realities of this cycle.