

# Scam ads promoting fake tax breaks prosper on Facebook

April 2 2019, by Amanda Seitz And Mae Anderson

The screenshot shows a Facebook Ad Archive search for "solar energy governor". The search results are displayed in a grid of six ads, all sponsored by "Solar Energy Today". Each ad features a different state governor and promises a \$100 million solar incentive. The ads are for Florida, California, New York, South Carolina, Missouri, and Texas. Each ad includes a photo of the governor, a headline, and a call to action to "Apply Now". The ads are all marked as "Inactive".

**Filter results by**

- Country: All, Brazil, India, United Kingdom, Ukraine, U.S.
- Type of Ad: Political and Issue, News
- Ad Status: All, Active Ads, Inactive Ads
- Pages: All, Choose a Page

**Ad 1 (Florida):** Started running on Jun 11, 2018. Headline: "Solar Energy Today". Text: "ATTENTION FLORIDA HOMEOWNERS: Governor signed budget deal ending a year-long standstill of solar projects in Florida. New Florida Solar Programs offers huge incentives. If you own a home and meet these 3 simple requirements you qualify for". Image: Governor Scott. Call to action: "Apply Now".

**Ad 2 (California):** Started running on Jun 10, 2018. Headline: "Solar Energy Today". Text: "ATTENTION CALIFORNIA HOMEOWNERS: There is a new 2018 policy that your power provider doesn't want you to know about. Governor Jerry Brown will release \$100 million solar incentives for California solar expansion if you are lucky enough to live in an active zip code, you can get paid to go solar. Check it out and see if you". Image: Governor Brown. Call to action: "Apply Now".

**Ad 3 (New York):** Started running on Jun 15, 2018. Headline: "Solar Energy Today". Text: "ATTENTION NEW YORK HOMEOWNERS: There is a new 2018 policy that your power provider doesn't want you to know about. Governor Andrew Cuomo will release \$100 million solar incentives for New York solar expansion. If you are lucky enough to live in an active zip code, you can get paid to go solar. Check it out and see if you". Image: Governor Cuomo. Call to action: "Apply Now".

**Ad 4 (South Carolina):** Inactive. Started running on Jun 7, 2018. Headline: "Solar Energy Today". Text: "The Governor, Henry McMaster, will release \$100 million solar incentives for South Carolina solar expansion. He also announced the 2018 New Solar Energy Policy for South Carolina residents: 30% Solar Tax Credit, Free Solar Installation, and more". Image: Governor McMaster. Call to action: "Apply Now".

**Ad 5 (Missouri):** Inactive. Started running on Jun 7, 2018. Headline: "Solar Energy Today". Text: "The Governor, Eric Greitens, will release \$100 million solar incentives for Missouri solar expansion. He also announced the 2018 New Solar Energy Policy for Missouri residents: 30% Solar Tax Credit, Free Solar Installation, and More Than \$5000 Solar Rebates. Start your solar today". Image: Governor Greitens. Call to action: "Apply Now".

**Ad 6 (Texas):** Inactive. Started running on Jun 8, 2018. Headline: "Solar Energy Today". Text: "ATTENTION TEXAS HOMEOWNERS: There is a new 2018 policy that your power provider doesn't want you to know about. If you own a home and meet these 3 simple requirements you qualify for your own solar panels. Deadline ending soon. Click". Image: Governor Abbott. Call to action: "Apply Now".

In this screenshot made from a Facebook page, a search result for "solar energy governor" in Facebook's Ad Archive shows ads that were falsely promising social media users that they could "get paid to go solar." Hundreds of ads running

on Facebook for more than a year promised that governors across the country had signed off on big tax breaks for U.S. homeowners who wanted to install new solar energy panels. But the tax incentives didn't exist. (Facebook via AP)

Hundreds of ads on Facebook promised U.S. homeowners that they were eligible for huge state tax breaks if they installed new solar-energy panels. There was just one catch: None of it was true.

The scam ads used photos of nearly every U.S. governor—and sometimes President Donald Trump—to claim that with new, lucrative tax incentives, people might actually make money by installing solar technology on their homes. Facebook users only needed to enter their addresses, email, utility information and phone number to find out more.

Those incentives don't exist.

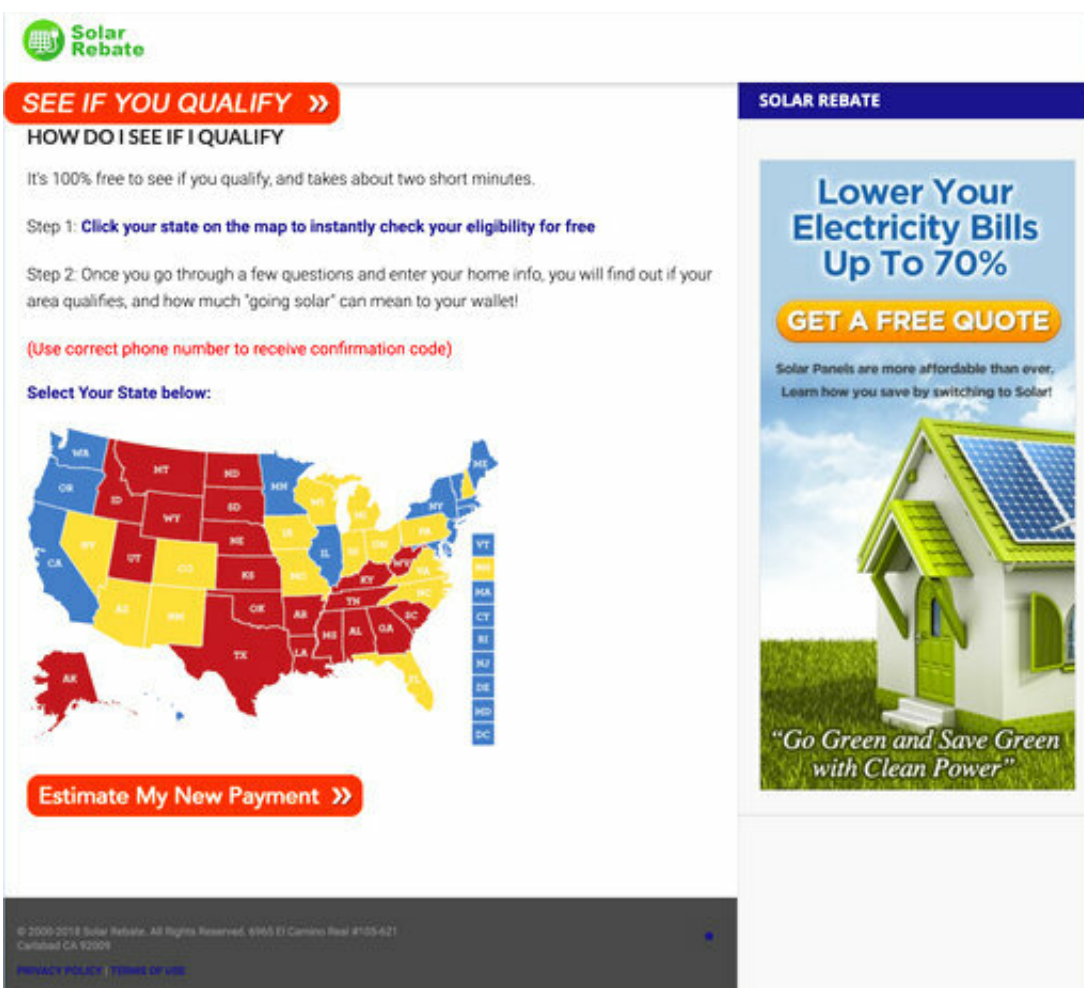
While the ads didn't aim to bilk people of money directly—and it wasn't possible to buy solar panels through these ads— they led to websites that harvested personal information that could be used to expose respondents to future come-ons, both scammy and legitimate. It's not clear that the data was actually used in such a manner.

Facebook apparently didn't take action until notified by state-government officials who noticed the ads.

The fictitious notices reveal how easily scammers can pelt internet users with misinformation for months, undetected. They also raise further questions about whether big tech companies such as Facebook are capable of policing misleading ads, especially as the 2020 elections—and the prospect of another onslaught of online misinformation—loom.

"This is definitely concerning—definitely, it's misinformation," said Young Mie Kim, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who studied 5 million Facebook ads during the 2016 elections. "I keep telling people: We don't have any basis to regulate such a thing."

Experts say websites and apps need to be more transparent about the ads that run on their platforms.



The screenshot displays a website for 'Solar Rebate'. On the left, a navigation bar features a 'SEE IF YOU QUALIFY >>' button. Below it, the heading 'HOW DO I SEE IF I QUALIFY' is followed by text stating the process is 100% free and takes about two minutes. Two steps are listed: Step 1 involves clicking a state on a map to check eligibility, and Step 2 involves answering questions and providing home information. A note specifies to use a correct phone number for a confirmation code. A map of the United States is shown with states color-coded in red, yellow, and blue. A vertical list of state abbreviations is on the right side of the map. Below the map is an 'Estimate My New Payment >>' button. At the bottom left, there is a copyright notice: '© 2000-2018 Solar Rebate. All Rights Reserved. 6965 El Camino Real #105-621, Carlsbad CA 92009' and links for 'PRIVACY POLICY' and 'TERMS OF USE'. On the right side of the screenshot, a vertical banner titled 'SOLAR REBATE' features the text 'Lower Your Electricity Bills Up To 70%' and a 'GET A FREE QUOTE' button. Below this, it says 'Solar Panels are more affordable than ever. Learn how you save by switching to Solar!' and shows an image of a house with solar panels. At the bottom of the banner, it reads 'Go Green and Save Green with Clean Power'.

This screenshot shows a website re-directed from ads promising big state tax incentives placed on Facebook. Hundreds of ads running on Facebook for more than a year promised that governors across the country had signed off on big tax breaks for U.S. homeowners who wanted to install new solar energy panels. But the tax incentives didn't exist. (Solar Rebate via AP)

Last year, Facebook launched a searchable database that provides details on political ads it runs, including who bought them and the age and gender of the audience. But it doesn't make that information available for other ads. Twitter offers its own database of ads and promoted tweets. Google has an archive for political ads only.

The partial approaches allow misleading ads to fester. One problem is the fact that ads can be targeted so narrowly that journalists and watchdog groups often won't see them.

"That allows people to do more dirty tricks," said Ian Vanderwalker, senior counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice's Democracy Program.

In mid-March, some websites linked in the fake solar-energy ads disappeared. After complaints from governors' offices, Facebook inactivated nearly all of the ads and several pages affiliated with them.

"These scammy ads have no place on Facebook," company spokeswoman Devon Kearns said in a statement. "We removed these pages and disabled these ad accounts recently and will continue to take action."

Facebook says it uses an automated process to review the images, text, targeting and position of ads posted to its site. In some cases, employees review the ads. Users can also give feedback if they believe the ads violate company policies.

Governors' offices were alarmed to see photos of top politicians featured alongside claims such as "you can get paid to go solar."

Helen Kalla, a spokeswoman for Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak, said she notified Facebook last month after staffers saw them.

**Solar Rebate**

**SEE IF YOU QUALIFY >>**

**Chicago, Illinois Homeowners are eligible for Solar Panel Program with Great Savings**

February 28, 2016

**EVERY TIME THE SUN COMES UP, YOU COULD BE MAKING AND SAVING MONEY.**

Illinois Solar Programs offer huge incentives, and now you can reap the benefits. Solar energy has never been easier or more lucrative than it is right now, but time is running out.

Solar programs are so popular that the Illinois resident-only fund is running out of money. If you don't **click today** and get connected with a solar panel installation company you could miss out altogether on the biggest money saving tool in energy history. **Click now or miss out.**

**SEE IF YOU QUALIFY >>**

Illinois passed laws giving homeowners the chance to **become energy independent** and some of them are saving money at the same time. Imagine how much money you could save by cutting your energy costs by 70%. That's not a mistake, some homeowners are cutting their energy bills by 70% and you could be among them.

Account Summary	
Previous Account Balance	\$201.42
Payments Received 2/11/16	\$0.00
New Charges	\$18.91
<b>Total Amount Due</b>	<b>\$18.91</b>

**Summary Of New Charges** Click on following page

Department of Water and Power Programs	
Electric Charge, 100% (100%)	\$18.91
<b>Total Utility Charges</b>	<b>\$ 18.91</b>

**Old Bill \$201.42**      **New Bill \$18.91**

**CAN I REALLY SAVE THOUSANDS A YEAR ON ENERGY BILLS?**

The answer is **yes**, but only if you **act now**. Solar programs are so popular that people throughout the United States are signing up at a record pace. If you act now, you could become one of the lucky few. If you wait, you risk missing out on the greatest energy program the United States has ever had.

Homeowners are signing up with solar panel installation companies that are fighting with each other just to install those panels. The installation could be free or low cost, your energy bills could be cut by 50% to 70% and you could even **make money by selling the electricity back to the utility company**. What are you waiting for, **click today and sign up.**

**HOW DO I SEE IF I QUALIFY?**

It's 100% free to see if you qualify, and takes about two short minutes.

Step 1: **Click your state on the map to instantly check your eligibility for free.**

Step 2: Once you go through a few questions and enter your home info, you will find out if your area qualifies, and how much "going solar" can mean to your wallet.

(Use correct phone number to receive confirmation code)

Select Your State below:

**SOLAR REBATE**

**Lower Your Electricity Bills Up To 70%**

**GET A FREE QUOTE**

Solar Panels are more affordable than ever. Learn how you save by participating in Solar!



*"Go Green and Save Green with Clean Power."*

This screenshot shows a website re-directed from ads on Facebook promising big state tax incentives. Hundreds of ads running on Facebook for more than a year promised that governors across the country had signed off on big tax breaks for U.S. homeowners who wanted to install new solar energy panels. But the tax incentives didn't exist. (Solar Rebate via AP)

Facebook took them down days later, although some continued to re-appear days after that complaint. Facebook also yanked ads featuring images of governors in Texas, Illinois, Colorado, Arizona, South Carolina and other states. But the ads had already been running for some

time.

After researching solar-panel options for his two-story home in Mount Tabor, New Jersey, 37-year-old Chris Fitzpatrick saw an ad claiming he might qualify for "free" solar panels because Gov. Phil Murphy planned to release "\$100 million solar incentives." He was skeptical because none of the solar companies he worked with mentioned such incentives, but worried others might not be.

"It's very frustrating because it preys upon innocent people," Fitzpatrick said.

The Associated Press found that some of these ads directed people to solar-energy websites that listed the same business address—a mailbox in Carlsbad, California—that had been used by a company once under investigation by the Federal Trade Commission, the government's consumer protection agency. In 2012, the FTC sued Jason Akatiff and his company—then called Coleadium, also known as Ads 4 Dough—for running fake news websites that marketed unfounded health benefits of colon cleanse and acai berry products, according to court records.

Akatiff settled the allegations without admitting guilt and agreed to a \$1 million fine. Akatiff changed his company's name to A4D Inc. in 2015, according to California business filings.

Akatiff did not respond to messages left with his California business.

Though the FTC can investigate fake ads, sue to stop them and seek compensation for victims, thousands of ads targeting select groups run online daily, making it harder to catch suspect advertisers.

Scam ads are popular in certain industries, such as insurance or solar power, where companies are looking for people they can target later for

products and services, said Peter Marinello, vice president of the Council of Better Business Bureaus Inc.

The scammers sell the personal information they collect to other companies looking for potential customers, Marinello said. "That's how this whole process plays out."

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