

TikTok Politics in Indonesia: Political Communication and Democratic Participation among First-Time Voters

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of TikTok has transformed political communication among young Indonesians, particularly first-time voters who increasingly encounter political information through short-form video content. This article examines how TikTok influences political participation, political expression, and democratic engagement among Indonesian youth. Using qualitative digital discourse analysis, the study analyzes political narratives, campaign content, influencer communication, and user interactions surrounding electoral issues. The article argues that TikTok has expanded opportunities for political participation by allowing young citizens to create and circulate political messages outside traditional media institutions. At the same time, the platform's algorithmic structure may encourage emotionally engaging and simplified political narratives, potentially reducing exposure to diverse perspectives. The study further examines the role of political influencers and user-generated content in shaping perceptions of candidates and public issues. It proposes a framework for understanding TikTok as a hybrid political communication environment in which professional campaigns, influencers, and ordinary citizens interact. The article concludes that TikTok can strengthen democratic participation among Indonesian youth when accompanied by media literacy, transparent political communication, and mechanisms for addressing misinformation.

[Perkembangan pesat TikTok telah mengubah komunikasi politik di kalangan anak muda Indonesia, khususnya pemilih pemula yang semakin sering mendapatkan informasi politik melalui konten video pendek. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana TikTok memengaruhi partisipasi politik, ekspresi politik, dan keterlibatan demokratis di kalangan pemuda Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana digital kualitatif, studi ini menganalisis narasi politik, konten kampanye, komunikasi influencer, dan interaksi pengguna seputar isu-isu pemilu. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa TikTok telah memperluas peluang partisipasi politik dengan memungkinkan warga muda

untuk membuat dan menyebarkan pesan politik di luar lembaga media tradisional. Pada saat yang sama, struktur algoritma platform tersebut dapat mendorong narasi politik yang emosional dan disederhanakan, yang berpotensi mengurangi paparan terhadap beragam perspektif. Studi ini selanjutnya mengkaji peran influencer politik dan konten yang dihasilkan pengguna dalam membentuk persepsi kandidat dan isu-isu publik. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja untuk memahami TikTok sebagai lingkungan komunikasi politik hibrida di mana kampanye profesional, influencer, dan warga biasa berinteraksi. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa TikTok dapat memperkuat partisipasi demokratis di kalangan pemuda Indonesia jika disertai dengan literasi media, komunikasi politik yang transparan, dan mekanisme untuk mengatasi misinformasi.]

Keywords: TikTok, political communication, Indonesian youth, democracy, first-time voters

Introduction

The expansion of social media has altered the relationship between citizens, political actors, and information institutions. Political communication is no longer primarily organized around newspapers, television, radio, or formally mediated campaign events; instead, political messages circulate through networked environments in which professional actors and ordinary users can simultaneously function as producers, interpreters, and distributors of political content. Earlier research established that social media use can be associated with civic and political participation, although the strength and causal direction of this relationship remain contested (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012; Boulianne 2015). Digital platforms therefore should not be treated simply as neutral channels through which pre-existing political messages travel. Their technical affordances, interactional cultures, and mechanisms of visibility influence which forms of political communication become prominent and how citizens encounter political information. This transformation is particularly consequential for younger citizens whose everyday media practices are deeply embedded in social networking environments.

TikTok represents a particularly significant development within this broader transformation because its communication architecture privileges short audiovisual narratives, participatory imitation, personalization, music, humor, and algorithmically curated discovery. Unlike conventional campaign communication, which generally begins with political organizations and proceeds toward relatively identifiable audiences, TikTok allows political messages to emerge through interactions among candidates, influencers, creators, supporters, and users. Cervi, Tejedor, and Марн Lladý (2021) argue that TikTok has generated a distinctive

political communication language in which conventional political discourse is adapted to the cultural conventions of the platform. Subsequent research similarly demonstrates that politicians increasingly employ TikTok to construct personalized political identities and engage younger audiences, although their adaptation to platform affordances varies considerably (Cervi 2023; Cervi, Tejedor, and Garcha Blesa 2023). Political communication on TikTok is consequently better understood as a process of cultural adaptation rather than a simple migration of campaign material from traditional media into a new technological space.

The significance of TikTok becomes more pronounced when political communication is considered from the perspective of first-time voters. Entering electoral politics for the first time involves more than acquiring information about candidates; it also entails developing political orientations, perceptions of political efficacy, understandings of citizenship, and expectations concerning democratic participation. Research on Indonesian youth indicates that social media can facilitate political learning and participation by providing accessible opportunities to encounter political information and interact with political issues (Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020; Saud et al. 2020). These findings are important because young citizens may not approach politics through formal political institutions or conventional news sources. Instead, political awareness may emerge incidentally through entertainment, peer interaction, influencers, memes, and personalized content streams. TikTok therefore occupies an unusual position between entertainment and political communication, allowing political messages to enter everyday media consumption without necessarily being recognized as conventional political communication.

Previous studies provide evidence that this hybrid character can facilitate political expression. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) conceptualize TikTok as an important environment for youth political expression because its participatory and creative features allow political positions to be communicated through visual, performative, and culturally recognizable forms. Moffett and Rice (2024) further demonstrate that politically oriented TikTok expression among young adults is associated with broader civic engagement, suggesting that online political expression cannot automatically be dismissed as superficial participation. This perspective complements the broader literature on connective action, which argues that digital media can lower the organizational barriers to political participation by enabling individuals to personalize political engagement and circulate content through social networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). For first-time voters, therefore, commenting, sharing, producing videos, remixing political narratives, or participating in political trends may constitute meaningful preliminary forms of political socialization rather than merely peripheral online behavior.

At the same time, increased visibility and accessibility do not necessarily produce more informed democratic participation. TikTok's communicative environment rewards content capable of attracting rapid attention, while political issues frequently require contextualization, comparison, and sustained reasoning.

Research on political communication through TikTok shows that emotional appeals, personalization, entertainment, and platform-specific conventions can become central to political persuasion (Zamora-Medina, Suminas, and Fahmy 2023; González-Aguilar, Segado-Boj, and Makhortykh 2023). This does not mean that emotional or entertaining political communication is inherently undemocratic. Rather, the concern lies in the possibility that political visibility becomes increasingly dependent on communicative styles optimized for attention rather than deliberation. When political narratives are compressed into highly shareable audiovisual formats, complex policy questions may be displaced by personality, symbolic representation, humor, and affective identification. The resulting environment can expand participation while simultaneously changing what participation means.

This tension is especially relevant to the Indonesian electoral context. The 2024 election demonstrated that TikTok had become an important arena for political image construction, campaign communication, and public discussion. Susilo et al. (2024) describe the platform's role in transforming political presentation, including the circulation of the “gemoy” political image associated with Prabowo Subianto. Indonesian research also indicates that political parties had incorporated TikTok into campaign preparation before the election, with audience acquisition, content design, message construction, and interaction becoming elements of campaign strategy (Pradana, Mirawati, and Octavianti 2023). Other analyses of the 2024 election suggest that TikTok contributed to the framing of presidential candidates and the construction of distinctive political narratives (Indainanto, Bangun, and Nasution 2025). These developments indicate that TikTok should not be treated merely as a supplementary campaign medium. It has increasingly become part of the political environment in which young voters encounter, interpret, and reproduce electoral narratives.

The role of political influencers further complicates the conventional distinction between political elites and citizens. Influencers possess communicative credibility and audience relationships that differ from those of political parties, while their political messages can appear less institutional and more conversational. Klyver (2025) demonstrates that social influencers can affect electoral dynamics by operating as digital opinion leaders and shaping political agendas. Research on TikTok political influencers likewise shows that political actors can adopt influencer-style communication characterized by personalization, everyday language, and visual intimacy (Cervi 2023; Garcha Beaudoux and Slimovich 2024). In Indonesia, this development matters because first-time voters may encounter political narratives through creators who are not formally affiliated with parties or campaign organizations. Consequently, political influence may occur through a chain of communication involving candidates, campaign teams, influencers, ordinary creators, and audiences. Political communication becomes distributed across actors whose authority is derived not only from institutional position but also from visibility, authenticity, familiarity, and perceived social proximity.

Yet the democratizing potential of TikTok is accompanied by significant informational risks. The same mechanisms that enable users to circulate political messages rapidly can facilitate misleading, decontextualized, or false political narratives. Recent research on Indonesia's 2024 election identifies TikTok as an important environment for the circulation of election-related disinformation, illustrating how the platform's participatory structure can also become a channel for political manipulation (Wulandari et al. 2025). This problem should not be reduced to the existence of false information alone. The more fundamental issue concerns the interaction between misinformation, emotional communication, personalization, and algorithmic visibility. False or misleading claims may acquire political significance when they are embedded within compelling narratives and repeated through socially trusted accounts. The challenge for democratic participation is therefore not simply to increase young citizens' access to political information but to strengthen their capacity to evaluate sources, identify manipulation, contextualize claims, and distinguish political expression from reliable political knowledge.

Against this background, this article examines TikTok as a hybrid political communication environment and asks how its communicative characteristics shape political participation and democratic engagement among Indonesian first-time voters. The analysis adopts a qualitative digital discourse approach, focusing on political narratives, campaign-oriented communication, influencer practices, user-generated political expression, and patterns of interaction surrounding electoral issues. Rather than treating participation as equivalent to voting intention or measurable electoral behavior alone, the study conceptualizes participation as a multidimensional process encompassing political expression, information seeking, interaction, circulation of political messages, candidate evaluation, and engagement with public issues. This approach allows the analysis to connect the Indonesian case with broader scholarship on social media participation while recognizing TikTok's distinctive audiovisual and algorithmic environment. The article consequently focuses on the relationship between platform affordances, political communication practices, and the democratic possibilities and limitations experienced by first-time voters.

TikTok and the Reconfiguration of Political Communication

The central implication of TikTok politics is that political communication increasingly operates through a hybrid system in which institutional campaigns, influencers, and ordinary users participate in the same communicative environment. Conventional political communication assumes relatively distinct roles between sender and receiver, whereas TikTok weakens this distinction because audiences can immediately reproduce, modify, comment upon, and redistribute political narratives. This dynamic corresponds with the logic of connective action identified by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), in which

personalized communication can substitute for some of the organizational structures traditionally required for collective political engagement. TikTok intensifies this process through audiovisual affordances that make political communication simultaneously informational, performative, and interpersonal. Indonesian campaign practices illustrate this transformation: political parties have increasingly treated TikTok as a strategic environment for reaching younger constituencies, while candidates use visual narratives to construct recognizable identities rather than relying exclusively on policy-centered messages (Pradana, Mirawati, and Octavianti 2023; Susilo et al. 2024). Political communication consequently becomes less dependent on institutional authority and more dependent on the capacity to communicate political meaning within platform-specific cultural conventions.

For first-time voters, this transformation can reduce the psychological and communicative distance between politics and everyday life. Traditional political communication often requires citizens to deliberately seek political information, whereas TikTok can introduce political content into an entertainment-oriented media routine. Political messages may therefore be encountered through humor, music, personal storytelling, memes, or creator commentary before users actively identify the material as political. This mechanism helps explain why political expression on TikTok cannot be evaluated solely according to the standards of conventional campaign communication. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) emphasize that young people's political expression frequently occurs through creative and culturally embedded practices, while Moffett and Rice (2024) find a relationship between political expression on TikTok and offline civic engagement. The democratic significance of TikTok consequently lies partly in its capacity to make political participation culturally accessible. However, accessibility should not be equated with substantive political understanding. The platform may lower barriers to expression while leaving unresolved whether users acquire sufficient knowledge to evaluate competing political claims.

Personalization, Influencers, and Political Meaning

Political personalization is particularly consequential in the TikTok environment because political credibility can be communicated through intimacy and perceived authenticity rather than through institutional expertise. Candidates are increasingly encouraged to present themselves as recognizable individuals, while influencers can translate political issues into conversational narratives that appear more relatable to young audiences. Zamora-Medina, Suminas, and Fahmy (2023) demonstrate that TikTok political communication employs different persuasive strategies depending on whether communication originates from political parties or individual political leaders, while Cervi (2023) identifies the emergence of the “influencer-politician” as a consequence of political actors adapting to influencer culture. In Indonesia, this process was visible during the 2024 presidential election,

when candidate identities were communicated through highly recognizable visual and affective frames rather than through policy argumentation alone (Susilo et al. 2024; Indainanto, Bangun, and Nasution 2025). For first-time voters, personalization may make political actors easier to understand and emotionally identify with, but it can also encourage candidate evaluation through symbolic familiarity rather than institutional performance or policy competence.

Influencers further complicate the democratic consequences of personalization because their political authority does not necessarily originate from formal political expertise. Their influence derives from established relationships with followers, communicative consistency, perceived authenticity, and the ability to translate political issues into accessible cultural forms. Klüver (2025) demonstrates that influencers can operate as digital opinion leaders capable of affecting political agendas, while García Beaudoux and Slimovich (2024) show that political influencers on TikTok employ distinctive communicative styles that combine political information with personalized and platform-specific forms of expression. In the Indonesian context, this suggests that first-time voters may construct political perceptions through intermediary actors who reinterpret campaign narratives rather than simply consuming candidates' official messages. The resulting communication structure is therefore multi-layered: political organizations produce messages, influencers reinterpret them, users remix them, and algorithms determine further visibility. Democratic participation becomes more open because more actors can enter political communication, yet accountability becomes more difficult because political responsibility is distributed across actors whose institutional status and motivations may be difficult for audiences to identify.

Algorithmic Visibility, Disinformation, and the Limits of Democratic Participation

The democratic ambiguity of TikTok becomes most apparent when participation is considered in relation to algorithmic visibility. Political messages do not circulate solely because users consciously choose them; their visibility is also shaped by recommendation systems that organize users' exposure to content. This creates a paradox. On one hand, algorithmic distribution can weaken traditional gatekeeping and provide relatively unknown creators with opportunities to reach large audiences. On the other hand, it may privilege content that generates strong attention and interaction, potentially favoring emotionally intense, controversial, or simplified narratives. Existing TikTok research identifies the importance of platform affordances, entertainment, personalization, and emotional appeals in political communication (Cervi, Tejedor, and García Blesa 2023; González-Aguilar, Segado-Boj, and Makhortykh 2023). Indonesian studies of the 2024 election similarly identify misinformation and disinformation as significant problems within young people's social media environments. The issue is therefore not that algorithms

automatically produce political polarization, but that the architecture of visibility can shape the informational conditions under which first-time voters develop political judgments.

Disinformation presents a related challenge because TikTok's audiovisual format can make political claims persuasive without providing the evidentiary context required for verification. Wulandari et al. (2025) demonstrate the relevance of TikTok to the dissemination of election-related hoaxes in Indonesia, while broader scholarship on false information shows that misleading political content can spread rapidly through social networks when it possesses characteristics that encourage attention and sharing. The implication is that media literacy should not be conceptualized merely as the ability to identify whether a statement is true or false. First-time voters also require the ability to evaluate the provenance of political content, distinguish commentary from evidence, recognize strategic emotional appeals, and understand how platform dynamics influence exposure. Democratic participation is substantive only when citizens possess sufficient informational resources to make autonomous political judgments. TikTok can therefore expand participation while simultaneously creating new vulnerabilities, making media literacy and transparent political communication institutional components of digital democratic citizenship rather than optional educational additions.

Conclusion

TikTok has altered the conditions under which Indonesian first-time voters encounter and participate in political communication. Its importance does not derive simply from its popularity among younger users but from the way its audiovisual, participatory, personalized, and algorithmically mediated environment changes the form of political expression. Political participation can occur through creating videos, commenting, sharing campaign narratives, following political influencers, responding to public issues, and circulating political interpretations beyond formal campaign structures. This supports the argument that digital participation should not be evaluated solely through conventional indicators such as voting or party membership. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that greater opportunities for expression do not automatically produce deeper democratic engagement. The political communication environment of TikTok can privilege personality, affect, entertainment, and visibility, potentially weakening the space available for complex policy discussion and sustained deliberation. The democratic value of TikTok therefore depends on how its participatory possibilities interact with users' informational capacities and the quality of political communication circulating through the platform.

The Indonesian case suggests that TikTok should be understood neither as a democratic solution nor as an inherent threat to electoral integrity. It is better conceptualized as a hybrid political communication environment in which institutional campaigns, influencers, citizens, and algorithmic systems jointly shape

political visibility. For first-time voters, this environment creates an important entry point into democratic life because it makes political expression more accessible and culturally compatible with everyday digital practices. Nevertheless, meaningful democratic participation requires more than visibility and interaction. Political actors must communicate transparently, platforms must strengthen mechanisms for addressing misleading political content, and educational institutions should develop media literacy capable of addressing algorithmic persuasion and influencer-mediated communication. Future research should examine how exposure to TikTok political content develops into longer-term political knowledge, efficacy, trust, and offline participation among Indonesian first-time voters. Such research would provide a stronger empirical basis for assessing whether TikTok's expansion of political expression ultimately contributes to democratic deepening or merely transforms the style through which electoral competition is communicated.

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