

Political Influencers and Democratic Discourse in Indonesia: The Changing Role of Social Media Personalities in Electoral Communication

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Abstract

The rise of political influencers has altered the relationship between political actors, media institutions, and citizens in Indonesia. Individuals with large social media audiences increasingly comment on candidates, public policies, and elections, sometimes becoming more influential than traditional political commentators. This article examines the role of political influencers in Indonesian democratic discourse. Using qualitative digital discourse analysis, the study investigates political messaging, audience interaction, endorsement practices, and the relationship between influencers and political campaigns. The article argues that political influencers can expand political communication by making complex political issues more accessible to younger audiences. However, the commercialization of influence creates challenges concerning undisclosed political sponsorship, misinformation, and the distinction between personal opinion and coordinated political campaigning. The study proposes a transparency framework requiring clearer disclosure of political relationships, sponsored content, and campaign partnerships. It also examines the potential of influencers to function as informal political intermediaries between candidates and voters. The article concludes that political influencers represent a significant transformation in Indonesian political communication and should be incorporated into contemporary discussions of electoral transparency and democratic accountability.

[Munculnya tokoh berpengaruh politik telah mengubah hubungan antara aktor politik, lembaga media, dan warga negara di Indonesia. Individu dengan audiens media sosial yang besar semakin sering mengomentari kandidat, kebijakan publik, dan pemilihan umum, terkadang menjadi lebih berpengaruh daripada komentator politik tradisional. Artikel ini mengkaji peran tokoh berpengaruh politik dalam wacana demokrasi Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana digital kualitatif, studi ini meneliti pesan politik, interaksi audiens, praktik dukungan, dan hubungan antara

tokoh berpengaruh dan kampanye politik. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa tokoh berpengaruh politik dapat memperluas komunikasi politik dengan membuat isu-isu politik yang kompleks lebih mudah diakses oleh audiens yang lebih muda. Namun, komersialisasi pengaruh menciptakan tantangan terkait sponsor politik yang tidak diungkapkan, disinformasi, dan perbedaan antara opini pribadi dan kampanye politik yang terkoordinasi. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja transparansi yang membutuhkan pengungkapan yang lebih jelas tentang hubungan politik, konten bersponsor, dan kemitraan kampanye. Studi ini juga mengkaji potensi tokoh berpengaruh untuk berfungsi sebagai perantara politik informal antara kandidat dan pemilih. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa tokoh berpengaruh politik mewakili transformasi signifikan dalam komunikasi politik Indonesia dan harus dimasukkan ke dalam diskusi kontemporer tentang transparansi pemilu dan akuntabilitas demokrasi.]

Keywords: Political influencers, social media, electoral communication, democracy, Indonesia

Introduction

The expansion of social media has fundamentally altered the institutional structure of political communication by weakening the exclusive gatekeeping position historically occupied by newspapers, television, radio, and political organizations. Political information can now be produced, circulated, interpreted, and contested by citizens within the same communicative environment. Earlier scholarship indicates that social media use may facilitate civic engagement and political participation by expanding access to political information and interpersonal political discussion, although the relationship is neither automatic nor uniformly positive (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012; Boulianne 2015). The political significance of social media therefore lies not simply in its capacity to transmit information but in its ability to restructure communicative relationships between political actors and citizens. This transformation is particularly important for younger citizens, whose political socialization increasingly takes place within digitally mediated environments. In Indonesia, where social media has become an important component of youth political communication, digital platforms provide new spaces through which political knowledge, identity, expression, and participation can develop (Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020; Saud et al. 2020).

TikTok represents a particularly distinctive stage in this transformation because its political communication is embedded within an audiovisual platform originally associated more strongly with entertainment than formal political information. The platform's short-video architecture encourages personalization, visual performance, repetition, remixing, and rapid circulation, producing a political communication style that differs substantially from conventional campaign

discourse. Cervi, Tejedor, and Marín Llady (2021) argue that TikTok has developed a distinctive language of political communication, while Cervi, Tejedor, and Garcha Blesa (2023) demonstrate how political actors adapt political messages to the platform's logic of politainment and personalization. TikTok therefore cannot be understood simply as another channel for distributing campaign material. Its technological and cultural affordances shape how political actors present themselves, how citizens encounter political information, and how political narratives acquire visibility. The result is a communicative environment in which political information increasingly competes with entertainment, personality, humor, and emotional performance for users' attention.

The importance of TikTok is particularly evident among first-time voters because political participation for this group involves processes of political learning and identity formation as well as electoral choice. Young citizens entering electoral politics for the first time may have limited experience with parties, candidates, institutions, and policy debates, making informal digital communication an important source of political orientation. Research in Indonesia has found that social media can support political learning, political efficacy, and participation among youth (Ida, Saud, and Mashud 2020; Saud et al. 2020). Intyaswati and Fairuzzab (2023), using survey data from Indonesian college students, further demonstrate that social media use and political discussion are positively associated with online political participation. These findings suggest that political engagement can emerge through digital conversations rather than only through formal political organizations. For first-time voters, TikTok can consequently function as an informal political socialization environment in which candidates, influencers, peers, and content creators collectively contribute to the construction of political meaning.

Previous scholarship also challenges the assumption that online political participation is necessarily superficial. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2023) identify TikTok as an important platform for youth political expression because its participatory culture allows political positions to be communicated through creative, visual, and culturally recognizable forms. Moffett and Rice (2024) similarly identify a relationship between TikTok political expression and civic activity among young adults. These findings are consistent with the broader theory of connective action, which emphasizes how digital platforms allow individuals to personalize political participation and circulate political messages without depending entirely on formal organizations (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The significance of TikTok therefore lies partly in its capacity to reduce the communicative threshold for political participation. Posting a political video, commenting on a candidate's content, sharing campaign-related material, or responding to an influencer may become an initial form of political engagement. However, the democratic value of such participation depends on whether expressive activity develops into informed political judgment rather than remaining primarily symbolic or affective engagement.

The Indonesian context provides an important empirical setting for examining this tension. The 2024 presidential election represented a significant moment in the development of TikTok politics because the three presidential candidate pairs actively employed digital platforms to construct political identities and communicate with younger voters. Indainanto, Bangun, and Nasution (2025) find that TikTok became an important arena for framing the political identities of Prabowo Subianto, Anies Baswedan, and Ganjar Pranowo. Their analysis identifies different narrative constructions: Prabowo was associated with nationalism and leadership, Anies with reform and intellectualism, and Ganjar with populist and humanist imagery. Similarly, Pradana, Mirawati, and Octavianti (2023) demonstrate that political parties such as Golkar had already incorporated TikTok into their preparations for the 2024 election. TikTok thus became embedded within the strategic infrastructure of electoral communication rather than remaining a peripheral medium for informal political expression.

The “Gemoy” phenomenon illustrates how TikTok transformed political image construction through affective and entertainment-oriented communication. During the 2024 election campaign, Prabowo Subianto's political image was increasingly associated with the term “gemoy,” which conveyed a softer, humorous, and more approachable persona than the candidate's historically established image as a former military figure. Susilo et al. (2024) identify TikTok as an important environment in the transformation of this political image, while Indonesian research has examined the “Gemoy” phenomenon as a form of political image construction and personal branding directed particularly toward younger audiences. The importance of this case lies not simply in the popularity of a campaign slogan or visual style. It demonstrates how political identity can be reconstructed through platform-native cultural codes in which dancing, humor, music, facial expressions, and informal presentation become political resources. Political communication consequently becomes increasingly affective: citizens may first encounter a candidate through an emotional or entertaining representation before engaging with the candidate's policy positions.

The growing influence of social media personalities adds another layer to this transformation. Political influencers occupy a position between formal political actors, traditional media commentators, and ordinary citizens. Their influence derives less from institutional authority than from audience size, perceived authenticity, communicative familiarity, and repeated interaction with followers. Garcha Beaudoux and Slimovich (2024) demonstrate that political influencers on TikTok can produce substantial political content through personalized audiovisual communication, while Cervi (2023) conceptualizes the emergence of the influencer-politician as part of the adaptation of political actors to influencer culture. Kløver (2025) extends this discussion by demonstrating that social influencers can function as political opinion leaders capable of affecting electoral dynamics. The Indonesian case makes this development particularly significant because influencers can interpret, endorse, criticize, or repackage campaign

messages in ways that may appear more socially proximate to young audiences than official campaign communication. Political influence consequently becomes increasingly distributed across institutional and non-institutional actors.

The incorporation of influencers into political communication, however, creates a democratic accountability problem. Influencer communication can blur the boundary between personal opinion, organic political expression, paid promotion, and coordinated campaign activity. This problem is particularly significant when political content is delivered through informal communication styles that make institutional relationships less visible. The conceptual argument advanced in Kamaluddin's study of political influencers in Indonesia is useful in this respect because it emphasizes the role of influencers as informal intermediaries while highlighting the risks associated with undisclosed sponsorship, misinformation, and commercialized political influence (Kamaluddin, n.d.). Rather than treating influencers exclusively as threats to democratic communication, the more productive approach is to recognize their intermediary function while asking whether audiences can adequately identify the political and commercial interests underlying their communication. Transparency therefore becomes a central democratic requirement within influencer-mediated electoral communication.

The expansion of political participation through TikTok must also be considered alongside the problem of disinformation. Political communication becomes particularly vulnerable when emotional content, algorithmic visibility, and informal influence interact with misleading information. Juditha (2024) documents the scale of election-related hoaxes during the 2024 presidential election and finds that misleading political content was frequently distributed through digital platforms, including TikTok. Wulandari et al. (2025) specifically examine disinformation surrounding the 2024 Indonesian election on TikTok and demonstrate the platform's role in the circulation of election-related misleading narratives. These findings challenge technological optimism concerning digital participation. Greater access to political communication does not necessarily produce greater democratic competence if citizens are exposed to political narratives without adequate contextual information or verification mechanisms. For first-time voters, the central democratic challenge is therefore not merely access to political information but the capacity to evaluate the credibility, origin, intention, and evidentiary basis of political content.

This article consequently examines TikTok as a hybrid political communication environment in which candidates, campaign organizations, political influencers, creators, and ordinary users interact in the production and circulation of electoral narratives. Using qualitative digital discourse analysis, the study examines political narratives, campaign communication, influencer practices, and user interactions surrounding the 2024 Indonesian election. The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: the transformation of political communication into platform-specific audiovisual narratives, the intermediary role of influencers and creators in constructing political meaning, and the tension

between expanded participation and informational vulnerability. The study contributes to existing scholarship by connecting the literature on youth political participation with research on TikTok political communication and influencer-mediated electoral discourse in Indonesia. It argues that TikTok should neither be understood as an inherently democratizing technology nor as an intrinsically manipulative platform. Its democratic consequences emerge from the interaction between platform affordances, political strategies, influencer practices, audience competencies, and mechanisms of accountability.

TikTok and the Transformation of Electoral Political Communication

TikTok changes electoral communication by transforming political messages from primarily informational statements into audiovisual performances designed to attract attention and encourage interaction. The platform's communicative logic favors brevity, recognizability, emotional resonance, and visual repetition, encouraging political actors to adapt their identities to culturally familiar formats. The Indonesian 2024 election illustrates this transformation particularly clearly. Indainanto, Bangun, and Nasution (2025) demonstrate that the three presidential candidates developed differentiated political frames through TikTok, while Susilo et al. (2024) identify the “Gemoy” phenomenon as a significant example of political image construction. The shift from conventional political discourse toward personalized and entertaining content does not mean that political communication becomes politically irrelevant. Rather, political meaning is increasingly communicated through symbols and affective associations. A candidate's dancing, clothing, facial expression, humor, or informal interaction can become politically meaningful because these elements contribute to the construction of perceived personality. For first-time voters, this environment may make politics more accessible while simultaneously shifting attention from policy competence toward identity and emotional identification.

The “Gemoy” case demonstrates this process particularly well because it transformed an established political figure through a communication style that was more compatible with youth-oriented digital culture. The significance of “Gemoy” was not simply that users found the candidate entertaining; rather, the label provided a condensed symbolic frame through which multiple visual and affective representations could circulate. Political communication consequently became participatory because campaign narratives could be reproduced by supporters, creators, and ordinary users rather than remaining under the exclusive control of campaign organizations. Indonesian studies of Prabowo's political image and TikTok branding similarly identify the importance of the “Gemoy” narrative in constructing a more approachable political persona. This suggests that digital political branding increasingly depends on the interaction between campaign-generated messages and audience reproduction. The campaign may initiate a political frame, but its democratic and electoral significance depends on how users

appropriate, remix, endorse, criticize, or reinterpret it. TikTok therefore transforms campaign communication from a relatively centralized process into an ongoing negotiation over political meaning.

Political Influencers as Informal Electoral Intermediaries

Political influencers occupy an increasingly important intermediary position within this environment because they translate political communication into formats that are more socially proximate to audiences. Traditional political communication relies heavily on institutional credibility, journalistic mediation, or party organization, whereas influencer communication relies on familiarity and perceived authenticity. Garcha Beaudoux and Slimovich (2024) show that political influencers can deliver substantive political information on TikTok while retaining highly personalized communication styles. Kløver (2025) similarly demonstrates the electoral relevance of social influencers as opinion leaders. In Indonesia, the emergence of political influencers suggests that citizens may receive campaign interpretations from actors who are neither candidates nor professional journalists. This creates a multi-step communication structure in which political campaigns generate messages, influencers interpret or endorse them, creators reproduce them, and audiences interact with them. Such a structure can broaden political discussion because more actors can enter the public sphere, but it can also complicate accountability. When political communication passes through several intermediary actors, the distinction between independent commentary and coordinated campaigning becomes increasingly difficult for audiences to recognize.

The intermediary role of influencers is particularly significant for first-time voters because their political learning may occur through actors with whom they already have established parasocial or cultural relationships. An influencer's credibility may therefore derive from previous content unrelated to politics and subsequently transfer into political communication. This mechanism can make complex political issues easier to understand, but it also creates the possibility that political credibility becomes detached from expertise. The argument proposed by Kamaluddin emphasizes precisely this tension: political influencers can function as informal intermediaries between candidates and voters while simultaneously creating risks concerning undisclosed sponsorship, misinformation, and commercialization of political influence (Kamaluddin, n.d.). This perspective complements Indonesian evidence concerning influencers in the 2024 election, including research examining their role in strengthening Prabowo-Gibran's political communication (Nugraha et al. 2025). The democratic issue is therefore not whether influencers should participate in politics, but whether their political relationships and incentives are sufficiently transparent for audiences to evaluate their messages critically.

Participation, Political Expression, and Democratic Engagement

TikTok expands the repertoire of political participation available to young citizens by allowing political engagement to occur through forms that are less institutionally demanding than joining a party, attending a campaign event, or participating in formal political organizations. Political expression can take the form of video production, commenting, sharing, remixing, hashtag participation, and interaction with political personalities. This is consistent with research showing that social media can facilitate political discussion and online participation among Indonesian youth (Saud et al. 2020; Intyaswati and Fairuzzab 2023). It also corresponds with Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik's (2023) argument that TikTok provides young people with culturally meaningful forms of political expression. From a democratic perspective, such participation is significant because it creates additional entry points into political life. A first-time voter who initially encounters politics through entertainment or influencer content may gradually move toward political discussion, information seeking, and electoral decision-making. Digital participation should therefore be understood as a possible pathway into broader civic engagement rather than automatically dismissed as "slacktivism."

Nevertheless, the relationship between online expression and democratic participation remains conditional. High levels of interaction do not necessarily indicate political knowledge, deliberative quality, or sustained civic commitment. The platform's attention economy can reward content that generates immediate emotional responses, while substantive political issues often require contextual explanation and sustained engagement. Research on TikTok political communication has demonstrated the prominence of personalization, emotional appeals, and entertainment-oriented strategies, suggesting that political visibility can become closely associated with communicative performance (Cervi, Tejedor, and García Blesa 2023; Zamora-Medina, Suminas, and Fahmy 2023). The Indonesian election demonstrates this tension because political narratives could become highly visible through humorous or affective content without necessarily generating equivalent attention toward policy details. Democratic participation is consequently strongest when expressive engagement is accompanied by opportunities for political learning and deliberation. TikTok can open the door to political participation, but other informational and institutional resources are required to ensure that citizens move beyond exposure and expression toward informed political judgment.

Algorithmic Visibility, Disinformation, and Democratic Accountability

The final dimension concerns the relationship between participation and the informational conditions created by algorithmic distribution. TikTok's recommendation system can increase the visibility of political content beyond an individual's immediate social network, potentially allowing political messages to

reach audiences that would otherwise remain outside the campaign's communication sphere. This feature weakens traditional gatekeeping and creates opportunities for grassroots communication. However, algorithmic visibility also means that political exposure is partly structured by systems that prioritize content capable of sustaining attention. González-Aguilar, Segado-Boj, and Makhortykh (2023) show how political communication on TikTok can involve spectacularization, personalization, and hostile discourse, while Zamora-Medina, Suminas, and Fahmy (2023) identify distinctive persuasive strategies used by political actors on the platform. In Indonesia, these dynamics become especially consequential when political messages are combined with emotionally compelling misinformation. Juditha (2024) and Wulandari et al. (2025) demonstrate that election-related hoaxes and disinformation circulated extensively through digital media, including TikTok.

Disinformation reveals the limits of a participation-centered understanding of digital democracy. A political environment can be highly participatory while simultaneously producing poor informational conditions for political decision-making. First-time voters may possess unprecedented opportunities to express political opinions while lacking the experience required to assess sources, detect manipulation, or distinguish sponsored communication from independent political commentary. This makes media literacy a democratic infrastructure rather than merely an educational supplement. However, responsibility should not be transferred entirely to individual users. Political campaigns and influencers should disclose relevant sponsorship and political relationships, while platforms should provide clearer mechanisms for identifying and responding to demonstrably misleading electoral content. The transparency framework suggested in the supplied Kamaluddin manuscript is therefore useful because it shifts the discussion from whether influencers are legitimate political actors toward the conditions under which their influence can be democratically accountable. The appropriate objective is not to remove influencers from electoral communication but to make the relationships, incentives, and political interests underlying their communication more visible.

Conclusion

TikTok has transformed political communication among Indonesian first-time voters by creating a hybrid environment in which candidates, campaign organizations, influencers, creators, and ordinary citizens participate simultaneously in political meaning-making. The platform lowers barriers to political expression and provides younger citizens with accessible forms of political participation that include content production, political discussion, sharing, commenting, and engagement with political personalities. The 2024 Indonesian presidential election demonstrates that political communication on TikTok increasingly depends on affective and personalized narratives, as illustrated by the

“Gemoy” political persona and the differentiated framing of presidential candidates. These developments indicate that political participation can no longer be understood exclusively through formal institutional activities. Digital expression and interaction constitute meaningful components of contemporary political engagement, particularly for citizens whose first encounters with electoral politics occur within social media environments.

At the same time, TikTok's democratic potential remains constrained by algorithmic visibility, emotional personalization, influencer commercialization, and disinformation. The same infrastructure that expands political participation can make political communication more vulnerable to simplification and manipulation. Political influencers can function as valuable intermediaries by translating complex issues into accessible narratives, but their democratic legitimacy depends on transparency concerning political relationships, sponsorship, and campaign coordination. For first-time voters, media literacy must therefore encompass not only fact-checking but also an understanding of algorithms, influencer incentives, political branding, and affective persuasion. Future research should move beyond measuring exposure or engagement and investigate whether TikTok-based political participation produces durable changes in political knowledge, efficacy, trust, and offline participation. TikTok should consequently be regarded neither as a technological solution to democratic disengagement nor as an inevitable source of democratic decline, but as a contested political infrastructure whose democratic consequences depend on the quality and accountability of communication taking place within it.

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