

Political Memes and Democratic Participation in Indonesia: Humor, Satire, and Youth Political Expression on Social Media

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Abstract

Political memes have become an increasingly common form of political expression among Indonesian social media users. Through humor, satire, visual references, and simplified political messages, memes allow citizens to engage with political issues without relying on conventional political discourse. This article examines political memes as a form of democratic participation among Indonesian youth. Using qualitative visual and digital discourse analysis, the study explores how memes communicate criticism, political identity, candidate perceptions, and public dissatisfaction. The article argues that political humor can lower barriers to political participation by enabling individuals with limited political resources to enter public debates. However, memes may also contribute to misinformation, political polarization, and the normalization of dehumanizing discourse. The study proposes a framework distinguishing constructive political satire from misleading or harmful political communication. Particular attention is given to the participatory nature of meme production, in which users are simultaneously audiences, creators, and political commentators. The article concludes that political memes should be understood as an important contemporary form of Indonesian political communication rather than dismissed as merely entertainment.

[Meme politik telah menjadi bentuk ekspresi politik yang semakin umum di kalangan pengguna media sosial Indonesia. Melalui humor, satire, referensi visual, dan pesan politik yang disederhanakan, meme memungkinkan warga untuk terlibat dengan isu-isu politik tanpa bergantung pada wacana politik konvensional. Artikel ini mengkaji meme politik sebagai bentuk partisipasi demokratis di kalangan pemuda Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana visual dan digital kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana meme mengkomunikasikan kritik, identitas politik, persepsi kandidat, dan ketidakpuasan publik. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa humor politik dapat menurunkan hambatan partisipasi politik dengan memungkinkan individu

dengan sumber daya politik terbatas untuk memasuki debat publik. Namun, meme juga dapat berkontribusi pada misinformasi, polarisasi politik, dan normalisasi wacana yang merendahkan martabat manusia. Penelitian ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja yang membedakan satire politik yang konstruktif dari komunikasi politik yang menyesatkan atau berbahaya. Perhatian khusus diberikan pada sifat partisipatif produksi meme, di mana pengguna secara bersamaan menjadi audiens, pencipta, dan komentator politik. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa meme politik harus dipahami sebagai bentuk komunikasi politik kontemporer Indonesia yang penting, bukan hanya sebagai hiburan semata.]

Keywords: Political memes, political satire, youth, social media, Indonesia

Introduction

Digital communication has transformed political participation by expanding the spaces in which citizens can articulate opinions, construct identities, and contest political authority. Political expression is increasingly embedded in everyday digital practices rather than restricted to formal institutions, professional journalism, or organized political movements. Social media enables citizens to participate in political discourse through sharing, commenting, remixing, and producing content, thereby weakening the conventional distinction between political communicators and audiences. This transformation is particularly relevant to young citizens, whose political communication frequently takes place through popular-cultural forms rather than institutional political language. In Indonesia, social media has become an important arena for youth political engagement, where political discussion intersects with entertainment, popular culture, humor, and interpersonal communication. The significance of this development lies in its potential to broaden political participation while simultaneously transforming the language through which citizens understand political issues. Political participation is therefore increasingly expressed through cultural practices that may appear informal but nevertheless perform political functions.

Political memes represent one of the clearest manifestations of this transformation because they combine political commentary with visual culture, humor, irony, parody, and intertextual references. Shifman conceptualizes Internet memes not as isolated digital objects but as groups of related content that share characteristics of content, form, and stance and are circulated and transformed by multiple users (Shifman 2013). This perspective shifts analytical attention from the individual meme toward the process of circulation and transformation. A political meme becomes meaningful not merely because of the message initially encoded by its creator but because users reproduce and modify it within particular political contexts. Meme communication is consequently participatory by design. Users can

simultaneously occupy the positions of audience, producer, editor, commentator, and distributor. This characteristic distinguishes political memes from conventional political advertising and makes them especially relevant to understanding how young citizens enter political discourse through everyday digital practices. The political significance of memes therefore derives partly from their ability to combine political communication with ordinary cultural participation.

The political significance of memes can also be interpreted through participatory culture. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) argue that digital environments facilitate the circulation and transformation of cultural content through active audiences rather than passive consumption. Political memes exemplify this condition because their meaning is rarely controlled by a single producer. A meme can begin as commentary on a political event, acquire new meanings through modification, and subsequently become a recognizable cultural reference. This process creates a form of vernacular political communication in which citizens do not require professional expertise or institutional resources to intervene in political discussion. In Indonesia, this participatory character is particularly visible among younger users who employ familiar cultural references to communicate political judgments. Political memes therefore reduce the symbolic distance between politics and everyday digital life. Rather than requiring citizens to adopt formal political vocabulary, memes allow political criticism to be expressed through humor, visual analogy, sarcasm, and shared cultural knowledge. Their democratic relevance lies partly in this reduction of communicative barriers.

The Indonesian experience demonstrates that political memes are not simply a recent consequence of TikTok or other short-video platforms. During the 2019 presidential election, memes circulated extensively as instruments of political criticism, propaganda, and identity construction. Rahardi and Amalia (2019) examined memes associated with the fictional Nurhadi–Aldo presidential candidacy and demonstrated how their textual and visual construction articulated political criticism. Allifiansyah (2017) similarly identified memes as an arena through which Indonesian youth negotiated democratic, social, and political issues. Sujoko (2020) subsequently demonstrated that political satire during the 2019 presidential election appeared through several prominent digital forms, including the Prabowo–Jokowi rap battle, the Nurhadi–Aldo account, and the #2019GantiPresiden discourse. Aminulloh et al. (2022) further showed that political memes operated as propaganda instruments during the same election. These cases indicate that Indonesian memes can simultaneously function as criticism, entertainment, persuasion, and political identity construction.

Political humor can facilitate participation because it changes the emotional and rhetorical cost of entering political discussion. Citizens who perceive politics as inaccessible, conflictual, or dominated by elites may find humorous political content easier to approach than conventional political information. Baumgartner and Lockerbie (2018) found that exposure to political satire was associated with higher levels of political participation, although the effect varied according to the

type of political humor consumed. Nam and Kwak (2014) similarly demonstrated that sarcastic political humor can stimulate political participation through emotional responses to political issues. These findings suggest that humor should not be understood as the opposite of political seriousness. Rather, humor can provide an affective route into political engagement. For young citizens who may otherwise avoid formal political discourse, satire can create an accessible entry point into political awareness and discussion. The democratic relevance of political humor therefore lies not in its capacity to provide complete political information but in its ability to transform political issues into communicatively accessible objects of attention.

The concept of affective publics further clarifies why political memes can become politically consequential despite their apparently trivial form. Papacharissi (2015) conceptualizes affective publics as networked formations that emerge through shared feelings and expressions rather than formal organizational structures. Political memes can create such publics because humor, anger, ridicule, admiration, and frustration provide affective resources through which users recognize themselves as belonging to particular political communities. A meme about a political candidate may therefore communicate more than a proposition about that candidate; it can signal a collective emotional orientation toward political authority. This is particularly relevant to youth political expression because memes often transform complex political disagreements into recognizable affective positions. The meme becomes a form of social shorthand through which users communicate a political attitude without producing an extended political argument. Such communication can strengthen political identity and participation, but it can also intensify antagonism when political communities define themselves primarily through ridicule of opponents.

Political memes also challenge conventional assumptions about the relationship between political knowledge and participation. Traditional models often assume that citizens become politically engaged by acquiring information and subsequently developing opinions. Meme communication introduces a different pathway in which political engagement may begin with recognition, humor, curiosity, or emotional reaction. Ahmed and Masood (2024) found that exposure to political memes mediated the relationship between political social media use and online political participation in an Asian context, suggesting that memes can help translate social media use into political action. Heiss and Matthes (2021) similarly demonstrated that humorous contexts can influence how audiences process political information. These findings are relevant to Indonesian youth because memes may provide a low-threshold route toward political discussion. However, movement from attention to substantive participation cannot be assumed. Meme exposure may generate symbolic expression without producing sustained political learning, collective organization, or offline participation. The democratic value of memes must therefore be evaluated through the quality of engagement they facilitate.

The 2024 Indonesian presidential election demonstrates the increasing integration of memes into electoral communication. Ubaidillah et al. (2025) conceptualize memes surrounding the 2024 election as part of performative politics in an increasingly illiberal setting, particularly in representations of Gibran Rakabuming Raka. Aminulloh et al. (2025) similarly identify political gimmicks on social media as an important feature of the electoral campaign, demonstrating how political figures increasingly depend upon visual and performative communication. The significance of these developments is that memes no longer merely respond to political events; they can become part of the political event itself. A candidate may acquire a recognizable public identity through recurring visual jokes, slogans, or parodies before citizens encounter detailed policy information. This creates a tension between democratic representation and political spectacle. Citizens gain greater capacity to represent political actors, but political actors simultaneously learn to anticipate and exploit memetic culture for electoral purposes.

Despite their participatory potential, political memes can reproduce misinformation, polarization, and dehumanizing discourse. Their communicative efficiency depends upon compression: a complex political issue is transformed into a recognizable image, phrase, joke, or cultural reference. Compression creates accessibility but may eliminate context and nuance. Aminulloh et al. (2022) demonstrate that political memes during the 2019 election were connected to propaganda practices, while Febriana, Wahid, and Seran (2022) identify hate speech, hoaxes, and character assassination within political humor memes. The problem is therefore not humor itself but the communicative conditions under which humor operates. When audiences share memes because they confirm existing political identities, satire can become an instrument of antagonism rather than criticism. When misleading claims are embedded within humorous formats, comedic framing may reduce users' motivation to verify the underlying information. Political memes consequently require a distinction between constructive satire and harmful political communication.

This article examines political memes as a distinctive form of democratic participation among Indonesian youth by analyzing how humor, satire, parody, and visual symbolism construct political meanings and social identities. The study adopts qualitative visual and digital discourse analysis informed by Shifman's memetic theory, Papacharissi's concept of affective publics, participatory culture, and critical discourse theory. The analysis focuses on Indonesian political meme practices associated with the 2019 and 2024 elections and related political controversies. Rather than asking whether memes are inherently beneficial or harmful to democracy, the article examines the conditions under which memes facilitate political expression, criticism, and participation or, alternatively, reproduce misinformation and polarization. The central argument is that political memes constitute a form of vernacular democratic communication: they broaden access to political expression by allowing citizens to intervene through culturally

familiar forms, while simultaneously redistributing the risks of political communication across decentralized networks.

Memes as Vernacular Political Expression and Participatory Culture

Political memes can be understood as vernacular political communication because they translate political issues into everyday cultural language. Their political force does not depend primarily on formal institutional authority but on users' ability to recognize shared references and reproduce them within their networks. Shifman's (2013) conceptualization of memes is particularly useful because it emphasizes content, form, and stance as dimensions through which memetic communication acquires meaning. A political meme therefore operates simultaneously as a message and as an invitation to replication. When users alter an image, replace a caption, or place a political figure within a familiar cultural template, they are not simply copying information. They are repositioning an existing political sign within a new interpretive context. This process explains why memes can communicate political criticism efficiently despite containing relatively little textual information. The political meaning resides partly in the shared cultural knowledge that allows users to understand the reference. For Indonesian youth, such communicative familiarity can reduce the symbolic distance separating everyday digital culture from formal political discourse.

The Indonesian case illustrates this process through the development of meme cultures surrounding electoral controversies. Allifiansyah (2017) demonstrates that Indonesian youth have used memes as a space for articulating reflections on democracy, social conditions, and politics. His use of Giddens's structuration perspective is important because it shows that young people are not merely constrained by digital structures; they also reproduce and transform those structures through their communicative practices. The meme thus becomes a site of agency. Users can take an established cultural image and reinterpret it in response to political events, producing meanings that may differ substantially from those associated with the original image. Such practices challenge the assumption that political participation requires formal political organization. Meme creation can itself become a low-cost intervention into political discourse. Nevertheless, the distribution of agency remains unequal because visibility is influenced by social networks, platform algorithms, celebrity status, and existing audience size. Memes democratize production more effectively than they democratize visibility.

The Nurhadi–Aldo phenomenon provides a particularly revealing example of how participatory meme culture can transform political expression into political satire. Rather than presenting a conventional electoral platform, the fictional candidacy used absurdity and parody to criticize the perceived limitations of the 2019 presidential contest. Rahardi and Amalia (2019) demonstrate that the memes surrounding Nurhadi–Aldo contained forms of political criticism expressed through textual and visual construction. The political value of the phenomenon therefore

did not depend on the fictional candidates becoming actual electoral competitors. Their significance derived from their ability to expose dissatisfaction through parody. In this context, humor served as an alternative vocabulary for political criticism. Citizens could communicate frustration with electoral politics without adopting the language of conventional opposition. The case demonstrates Shifman's argument that memes are not simply objects but processes of collective transformation. Each reproduction potentially extends the political critique by adapting it to another issue, actor, or controversy.

The same participatory logic can produce political communication that is more explicitly partisan. Aminulloh et al. (2022) demonstrate that political memes during the 2019 presidential election functioned as propaganda intended to construct or damage the reputations of presidential candidates. Their use of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is particularly relevant because it directs attention to the relationship between textual construction and broader structures of political power. A meme that appears humorous at the surface level can contain ideological assumptions about who deserves political authority, which candidate represents the nation, and which political group is portrayed as dangerous or incompetent. Memes therefore cannot be treated as politically innocent simply because they are produced by users rather than campaign organizations. Their participatory character may coexist with strategic persuasion. The democratic significance of meme culture consequently depends on whether citizens use memetic forms to expand political debate or whether meme production becomes an informal extension of partisan propaganda.

Participatory culture also changes the temporal character of political communication. Conventional political communication is frequently organized around planned speeches, campaign advertisements, press conferences, and scheduled debates. Memes operate with much shorter cycles. A political statement can be transformed into a meme within minutes and subsequently altered as new events occur. This speed enables citizens to respond rapidly to political developments, creating an environment in which political communication becomes continuously reactive. Such responsiveness can increase political awareness because users encounter interpretations of events while those events remain socially salient. However, speed also reduces opportunities for contextual verification. The same characteristic that makes memes politically responsive can make them vulnerable to inaccurate information. Participatory culture therefore produces a structural tension between immediacy and accuracy. For young citizens, this tension is particularly important because rapid meme circulation can make political interpretation appear complete before sufficient evidence has become available.

The relationship between meme production and political agency is further illuminated by Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013) concept of spreadability. Content acquires communicative value partly through users' willingness to circulate it across networks. Political memes depend on this logic because their influence

cannot be separated from their capacity to travel. Yet spreadability is not equivalent to persuasion. Users may share a meme because it is humorous, recognizable, or socially useful without agreeing with its political claim. This distinction complicates the interpretation of engagement metrics. High circulation may indicate political resonance, but it may also represent ironic sharing or antagonistic engagement. A meme can become widely visible because users are mocking it rather than supporting it. Political communication research must therefore distinguish between circulation, interpretation, and endorsement. In the Indonesian context, such distinctions are essential because political memes frequently operate across partisan boundaries. A meme initially created to support one political position can subsequently be appropriated by opponents as evidence of political absurdity.

The participatory nature of memes also creates opportunities for marginalized or politically disengaged citizens to enter public discourse. Political participation has historically been shaped by unequal access to institutional resources, education, media exposure, and organizational networks. Digital memes reduce some of these barriers because production does not necessarily require formal credentials. A young citizen can comment on a presidential candidate through a meme without possessing the resources to publish an editorial or participate in a televised debate. This does not mean that all meme creators possess equal communicative power, but it does indicate a redistribution of expressive opportunities. The democratic value of meme culture is therefore partly procedural: it expands the range of citizens who can contribute to political discourse. Whether such participation produces substantive democratic outcomes remains a separate question, but the expansion of expressive capacity is itself significant.

The broader implication is that political memes should be treated as part of the infrastructure of contemporary democratic communication rather than as marginal entertainment. They provide citizens with symbolic resources for interpreting political events, constructing collective identities, and contesting institutional authority. Indonesian evidence from the 2014, 2019, and 2024 electoral cycles indicates that meme practices have become increasingly integrated into political discourse. The development from youth-oriented meme culture toward more strategic electoral memetic communication suggests a process of institutionalization. Political actors increasingly understand the value of memeability, while citizens increasingly recognize memes as legitimate instruments of political commentary. This development does not eliminate the distinction between satire and propaganda, but it makes that distinction more important. Democratic analysis must therefore examine who produces memes, how they circulate, what political assumptions they encode, and how audiences interpret them.

Humor, Satire, Affect, and Youth Political Engagement

Political humor has a distinctive democratic function because it permits citizens to criticize authority without necessarily adopting the confrontational language of formal political opposition. Satire works through incongruity, exaggeration, irony, and reversal, allowing audiences to recognize discrepancies between political claims and perceived political realities. Baumgartner and Lockerbie (2018) found that exposure to certain forms of political satire was associated with higher political participation, suggesting that humor can sometimes operate as a mobilizing mechanism. Nam and Kwak (2014) similarly demonstrated that sarcastic political humor can generate negative emotions toward political policies and thereby stimulate political participation. These findings challenge the assumption that humorous communication necessarily trivializes politics. In some circumstances, humor can make political contradictions more visible because audiences are invited to recognize the absurdity of a political claim. The democratic value of satire therefore derives from its capacity to create critical distance between citizens and political authority.

The Indonesian political environment provides several examples of this critical function. Sujoko (2020) identifies the Prabowo–Jokowi rap battle, Nurhadi–Aldo, and #2019GantiPresiden as significant forms of satirical political communication during the 2019 election. These cases demonstrate different modes of political humor. The rap battle translated electoral competition into popular entertainment, while Nurhadi–Aldo transformed electoral dissatisfaction into absurdist parody. The #2019GantiPresiden discourse operated more directly as political advocacy while employing the communicative characteristics of social media. What connects these cases is their departure from formal political rhetoric. Political actors and citizens were represented through humor, cultural references, and simplified symbolic contrasts. This form of communication can attract audiences who might not consume conventional political news. It also demonstrates that political satire does not necessarily emerge outside politics; it can become embedded within political competition itself.

Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics provides an additional explanation for the popularity of political memes. Political publics in networked environments can emerge through shared affect before they develop formal organizational structures. A meme expressing frustration with a political figure allows users to recognize others who share the same emotional orientation. The resulting network may be temporary, but it can still create a sense of collective political identity. For young citizens, this is particularly relevant because political identity is frequently communicated through cultural style. A meme can function as a badge of political belonging, allowing users to signal their orientation without explicitly joining a political organization. The affective character of meme politics consequently lowers the threshold for collective identification. However, it also creates a danger: when political identity is organized primarily around shared

negative feelings toward an opponent, the resulting public may become more antagonistic than deliberative.

The emotional dimension of political memes is particularly significant because humor can convert political cynicism into communicative activity. Citizens who distrust political institutions may not necessarily withdraw from politics; instead, they may express their distrust through satire. Ahmed and Masood (2024) demonstrate that political memes can mediate the relationship between social media use and online political participation, particularly in the presence of political cynicism. This finding is theoretically important because it suggests that cynicism does not always produce political disengagement. Under certain conditions, cynicism can motivate citizens to use humor as a way of commenting on politics. In Indonesia, where political satire often emerges around perceptions of elite privilege, corruption, electoral manipulation, and political inconsistency, memes can provide a symbolic mechanism for expressing dissatisfaction without abandoning political discussion altogether. The meme therefore becomes a bridge between skepticism and participation. Its democratic contribution lies in keeping citizens communicatively engaged with political issues even when institutional trust is weak.

Nevertheless, humor can produce different political effects depending on whether audiences recognize the underlying satirical intention. Heiss and Matthes (2021) demonstrate that humorous contexts can shape the processing of political information, indicating that humor does not uniformly reduce cognitive engagement. In some cases, humor may increase attention because audiences must interpret the relationship between the joke and the political issue. Yet ambiguity also creates risks. Satire depends upon shared interpretive knowledge, and audiences may misunderstand irony as factual communication. A meme that criticizes a political claim through exaggeration can be circulated by another user as if the exaggerated claim were genuine. This problem becomes more significant when memes move rapidly across communities with different political assumptions. The communicative strength of satire—its ambiguity—can consequently become its epistemic weakness. Democratic meme culture requires audiences capable of recognizing not only what a meme says but also what communicative stance it adopts toward the statement.

Youth political engagement through memes should therefore be understood as a process of political socialization rather than merely a form of entertainment. Young citizens may first encounter political issues through humorous content before developing more explicit political positions. The meme provides a familiar cultural frame through which an unfamiliar political issue becomes intelligible. This does not mean that memes replace journalism, education, or institutional information. Rather, they can serve as an initial interpretive layer. A young user who encounters a meme about an election controversy may subsequently search for information, discuss the issue with peers, or compare competing interpretations. Conversely, the user may simply share the meme without further engagement. The

outcome depends on the surrounding informational environment. Memes therefore have the potential to initiate political learning, but their contribution to democratic competence is conditional on access to credible information beyond the meme itself.

The distinction between constructive satire and destructive humor is consequently essential. Constructive satire challenges political authority by exposing contradictions, hypocrisy, incompetence, or institutional failure. Destructive political humor, by contrast, may attack the identity or humanity of political opponents without contributing meaningful criticism. Febriana, Wahid, and Seran (2022) demonstrate that Indonesian political humor memes can contain hoaxes, hate speech, and character assassination. Such content illustrates how humor can normalize harmful political discourse by making aggression appear playful. Once political opponents are repeatedly represented as stupid, disgusting, corrupt, or subhuman, the boundary between political criticism and symbolic violence becomes blurred. The democratic problem is not that citizens mock politicians; satire has an important historical role in democratic politics. The problem arises when humor eliminates the possibility of legitimate disagreement by defining opponents as inherently illegitimate.

Political humor therefore has a double democratic capacity. It can widen political participation by making political communication accessible, emotionally engaging, and culturally relevant, but it can also narrow political discourse by strengthening affective polarization. The Indonesian experience demonstrates both possibilities. The satirical critique of electoral politics associated with Nurhadi–Aldo illustrates how humor can challenge established political narratives, while partisan memes and character-based attacks demonstrate how humor can reproduce political antagonism. The key variable is not the presence of humor but its discursive direction. When satire encourages audiences to question power, it can contribute to democratic criticism. When it merely confirms the superiority of one's own political group, it becomes an instrument of identity maintenance. Political memes should therefore be evaluated according to whether they expand citizens' interpretive agency or simply intensify pre-existing affective divisions.

Political Memes, Electoral Power, Misinformation, and Democratic Accountability

Political memes should ultimately be understood as sites of symbolic struggle over political representation. Fairclough's critical discourse approach is valuable because it treats communication as embedded within relations of power rather than as neutral transmission. A meme representing a politician as incompetent, corrupt, heroic, or authentic does more than communicate an opinion; it constructs a particular social representation of political authority. Aminulloh et al. (2022), using Fairclough's framework, demonstrate that Indonesian political memes during the 2019 presidential election were employed to construct and deconstruct the

reputations of presidential candidates. The visual simplicity of memes can obscure this ideological dimension because their political assumptions are compressed into familiar images and short phrases. Yet the compression itself is political. By selecting one characteristic as representative of a candidate, the meme determines what audiences are encouraged to notice and what they are encouraged to ignore. Memes therefore participate in agenda setting at the level of representation.

The 2019 election provides an especially clear example because meme production was closely connected to the intense polarization between supporters of Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto. Political memes could simplify complex political positions into binary symbolic contrasts, thereby reinforcing partisan identities. Aminulloh et al. (2022) show that memes functioned as propaganda designed to influence public opinion, while Sujoko (2020) demonstrates that satire and critical discourse operated across several social media accounts. These findings reveal an important distinction between citizen participation and democratic deliberation. A meme may increase the number of citizens participating in political communication while simultaneously reducing the complexity of the political debate. The democratic sphere can therefore become more participatory and less deliberative at the same time. This paradox is central to understanding meme politics. Increased expressive capacity should not automatically be interpreted as an increase in democratic quality.

The 2024 presidential election indicates that this relationship between memes and electoral power has become increasingly institutionalized. Ubaidillah et al. (2025) argue that memes surrounding the election were part of performative politics, particularly in relation to Gibran. Political actors increasingly operate within a communication environment where political identity must be visually recognizable and culturally shareable. This encourages political communication that emphasizes personality, symbols, humor, and performance. Political figures can become meme subjects even when they do not directly control the representations produced about them. Yet political actors can also strategically adapt to this environment by cultivating styles that are more compatible with memetic circulation. The relationship between political elites and meme culture is therefore reciprocal. Citizens represent political actors through memes, while political actors increasingly design their public performances with the possibility of memetic reproduction in mind. Electoral politics consequently becomes partly a struggle over memeability.

The concept of performative politics is useful because it explains why political memes can affect perceptions even when they do not communicate explicit policy positions. A candidate represented repeatedly through humorous or familiar imagery can acquire an affective identity that influences how subsequent information is interpreted. The audience may perceive the candidate as relatable, ridiculous, strong, youthful, or authentic before evaluating specific policies. This process is particularly consequential among young voters whose political information environments are saturated with visual content. The meme therefore

functions as a framing device. It does not necessarily tell users what policy to support, but it provides a symbolic lens through which political information can be interpreted. Political communication becomes less about presenting complete arguments and more about establishing the emotional and cultural frame within which those arguments will later be evaluated.

The same mechanisms create opportunities for misinformation. Memes are structurally conducive to simplification because their effectiveness depends on rapid recognition. A misleading claim can therefore be transformed into a visually memorable statement that travels more easily than a detailed correction. The problem becomes more complex when humor is involved because users may not treat humorous content as a claim requiring verification. The comedic frame can provide a form of rhetorical protection: when challenged, the creator can characterize the content as “just a joke,” while audiences may nevertheless absorb its political implication. This ambiguity makes political memes particularly challenging for conventional fact-checking. Correcting the factual claim may not undo the emotional or symbolic association established by the meme. Democratic accountability therefore requires attention to both factual accuracy and symbolic framing.

The relationship between memes and misinformation also raises questions about political responsibility. In conventional campaign communication, the origin of a political message can often be traced to a party, candidate, campaign organization, or media institution. Meme communication distributes authorship across numerous users. A political meme may be created anonymously, modified by another user, reposted by an influencer, and eventually incorporated into partisan communication. Responsibility becomes difficult to assign because the communicative chain is fragmented. This fragmentation does not mean that accountability is impossible, but it requires a different framework. Users need greater awareness of the provenance of political content, while platforms and political organizations need clearer standards concerning coordinated manipulation. The democratic objective should not be to eliminate anonymous political expression, which has legitimate value, but to reduce the ability of coordinated actors to disguise strategic political communication as spontaneous citizen expression.

Another important concern is dehumanizing political discourse. Political memes can transform opponents into caricatures whose only recognizable characteristic is their supposed stupidity, corruption, or moral inferiority. Such representations can contribute to affective polarization because repeated exposure to hostile stereotypes strengthens group boundaries. Febriana, Wahid, and Seran (2022) provide evidence of this problem in Indonesian political humor memes, identifying hate speech and character assassination alongside humorous political content. The issue is significant because democratic participation depends not only on the right to criticize but also on the continued recognition of opponents as legitimate participants in political life. Satire can be harsh without becoming

dehumanizing. The democratic boundary is crossed when humor ceases to criticize political conduct and instead portrays entire individuals or groups as inherently unworthy of political recognition.

The analysis therefore suggests a three-dimensional framework for evaluating political memes: expressive participation, critical satire, and democratic accountability. Expressive participation concerns whether memes expand citizens' capacity to enter political discourse. Critical satire concerns whether humor encourages scrutiny of political power and institutional behavior. Democratic accountability concerns whether the meme preserves informational integrity, avoids dehumanization, and allows audiences to identify the political interests embedded in its circulation. These dimensions need to be considered together because a meme can perform strongly on one dimension while failing on another. A highly creative meme may expand participation but disseminate misinformation. A factual meme may provide information but intensify political hatred. A humorous meme may criticize an elite effectively but reproduce discriminatory stereotypes. The democratic quality of meme communication therefore depends on the balance among participation, criticism, and accountability.

Conclusion

Political memes have become an important form of democratic communication in Indonesia because they provide young citizens with culturally accessible mechanisms for expressing political judgments, constructing identities, criticizing elites, and responding to electoral controversies. Their political significance can be explained through Shifman's memetic theory, which emphasizes the circulation and transformation of digital content, and through participatory culture, which recognizes users as active producers rather than passive recipients. Indonesian cases from the 2014, 2019, and 2024 political cycles demonstrate that memes can function simultaneously as satire, criticism, propaganda, identity construction, and electoral performance. The Nurhadi–Aldo phenomenon illustrates how parody can express dissatisfaction with established electoral competition, while the 2024 election demonstrates how meme culture has become increasingly connected to performative political communication. These developments indicate that memes should no longer be dismissed as political entertainment. They are part of the communicative infrastructure through which citizens and political actors negotiate political meaning.

The democratic potential of memes, however, remains conditional. Humor can lower barriers to political participation and create affective publics, but it can also reinforce polarization, misinformation, and symbolic hostility. The central analytical issue is therefore not whether memes are democratic or undemocratic but what communicative functions they perform and what political conditions shape their circulation. Constructive satire can create critical distance from political authority and encourage citizens to question political claims, whereas harmful

memes can reduce political communication to partisan identity and antagonistic representation. The Indonesian experience demonstrates that these possibilities coexist within the same digital environment. Meme culture should consequently be understood as politically ambivalent: its participatory architecture expands expressive agency while simultaneously creating new opportunities for manipulation.

For Indonesian democracy, the challenge is to develop forms of digital political literacy capable of addressing the distinctive characteristics of memetic communication. Citizens need not only the ability to verify factual claims but also the capacity to recognize satire, identify political framing, understand visual symbolism, and distinguish organic participation from coordinated political persuasion. Political education should therefore address memes as legitimate forms of political communication rather than treating them merely as entertainment. Future research should examine longitudinally whether meme-based political expression develops into sustained political knowledge, civic participation, and offline political engagement among Indonesian youth. Further research should also investigate how algorithms influence the visibility of political memes and how political organizations increasingly incorporate meme production into electoral strategy. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing whether Indonesia's expanding culture of political expression will strengthen democratic pluralism or deepen the affective and informational fragmentation of the public sphere

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