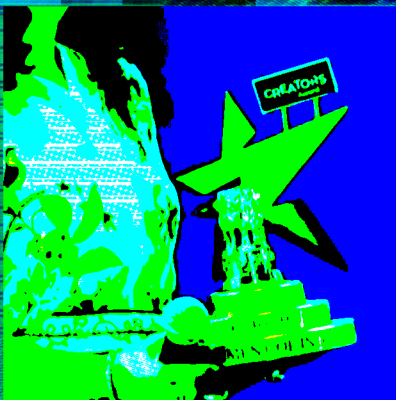


# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ARE SCALING SURROGATE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN GLOBAL MAJORITY ELECTIONS



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# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ARE SCALING SURROGATE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN GLOBAL MAJORITY ELECTIONS

## Authors

Shahzeb Mahmood  
Apon Das  
Dhara Mungra

## Analysts

Naman Surana  
Margi Yadav  
Dvani Shah

## Designer

Subinoy Mustofi Eron

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, social media platforms have emerged as crucial stakeholders in national elections globally, raising concerns over the level of influence wielded by social media influencers in shaping public opinion and political narratives. This report examines the involvement and impact of the influencers in election processes in Global Majority countries. Specifically, the report explores data investigations on influencer-politician dynamics and analyzes platform policies to identify systemic limitations in the status quo. Key findings include:

- The growing demand for influencers in scaling political campaigns diminishes the traditional role of media as a fourth estate. Influencers often portray candidates in a more relatable light through personal anecdotes or covert messages, enabling political figures to avoid probing inquiries typically posed by professional journalists. This, in turn, weakens the public's capacity to hold elected officials to a higher moral standard.
- On average, influencer-led political content results in 50-70 percent higher engagement rates than non-political content in Global Majority countries.
- Platform policies and national election regulations do not clearly outline transparency requirements for influencer-led political content, allowing candidates to skirt campaign rules. It is often unclear whether influencers were compensated by or hold ideological alignment with political entities. This ambiguity fosters an “information black market” for surrogate political campaigns, frequently characterized by hyperpartisanship and tendencies towards disinformation and propaganda.
- Influencers are not incentivized to disclose their paid affiliation

with political campaigns. Partisan promotional content can deceive voters into thinking these are independent, ideologically aligned opinions, particularly because of how influencers build their personal brand around “authenticity” and “transparency.”

The report is divided into seven sections. With the first section introducing the report, the second section delves into the motivations driving politicians and electoral candidates from the Global Majority to actively engage with social media influencers, and examines how these influencers are incorporated into political structures. We find that political actors leverage influencers’ personal rapport with their followers to translate complex political messages into hyper-engaging narratives. Often, these narratives target specific grassroots constituencies that otherwise would be inaccessible, and allows political actors to bypass traditional media guardrails and campaign rules to disseminate hyper-partisan messages. In return, the influencers may receive payments and monetization opportunities, or promote candidates who align with their own ideology; however, in some circumstances, we find they have been coerced to support candidates.

In the third section, the report examines the risks associated with influencer-led political content, including the absence of legally-binding disclosure and transparency mandates, and the proliferation of a “black market for political information,” creating the potential for manipulation and deceiving the public. In the fourth section, we demonstrate how the influence-for-hire

model has been replicated in six other Global Majority countries, and provide case studies from India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In the fifth section, we conduct a comprehensive analysis of content policies from Meta, TikTok, YouTube and X and to understand the level of transparency mandated for influencer-generated political content, and the associated enforcement challenges. Our findings reveal platforms typically lack robust, clearly defined policies that require influencers to disclose sponsored content featuring political figures or messages. In addition, we analyze regulatory mandates in select countries, underscoring the necessity for stricter campaign regulations, applicable to both online and offline spaces, aimed at safeguarding democratic processes and information integrity during elections.

In the sixth section, we propose several recommendations for platforms to incorporate robust policies on political content, including disclosure, definitions, reporting mechanism and human moderation, and consequences for non-compliance. We conclude in the seventh and final section.

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**01**

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, social media platforms have become a centerpiece for elections worldwide, especially with its promise to democratize political dialogue and amplify diverse perspectives in environments with shrinking civic freedoms. However, growing concerns over their ability to influence public opinion and political narratives has loomed over, increasingly through social media influencers operating within the burgeoning online media sphere. These influencers are often highly organized and well-compensated surrogates of political actors, serving as political organizers and interpreters of political messages, and reshaping communication, information dissemination and political engagement. This new paradigm enables immediate and deeply personal connections between politicians, influencers and their constituents, circumventing traditional media and campaign gatekeepers and the rules that regulate them.

In fact, this tripartite relationship

not only transformed the dynamics of traditional politicking and civic participation but has also created an environment of misinformation and polarization, particularly in the Global Majority. This is posing significant challenges to the integrity of informed political discourse and decision-making processes — facilitating an “information black market.”

Within the influence-for-hire networks in the political sphere, a key question remains as to who counts as an “influencer.” The term has historically included, for instance, journalists, opinion leaders, activists and politicians, who disseminate views on social or political matters online. In recent years, content creators have also been referred to as influencers, broadly defined as individuals who do not come from an institutional background and whose fame and following is entirely platform-built.

Broadly, there are five categories of

influencers based on the size of their following, as illustrated in *Figure 1*.

A content creator may be characterized as a *political* influencer in this networked ecosystem if they overtly or covertly endorse or promote a political position and/or candidate through social media channels.<sup>1</sup> In this report, we focus on *political* content creators, or *political* influencers, and their active role in creating and disseminating *political* content online during the election cycles.

Although defining what exactly should be considered as “political” content remains a challenge, the report differentiates between two types of *paid* political content, i.e., political advertisements (political ads) and sponsored political content, based on the medium of transaction. Political ads are promotional content created and disseminated by the

political party or candidate themselves and exclusively through *on-platform* payment channels. These contents are available through political ads libraries or similar transparency databases provided by platforms. On the other hand, sponsored political content, either by an influencer or a third-party entity, are promotional content disseminated following *off-platform* (or offline) transactions, and often blurs the line between ideological alignment and material transactions, such as payments or merchandise. Under some platform policies, sponsored political content can be treated as a sub-category under sponsored or branded content. We focus in this report broadly on sponsored political content, however, as discussed in this report, it is frequently conflated with political ads and result in policy ambiguities and enforcement inconsistencies.

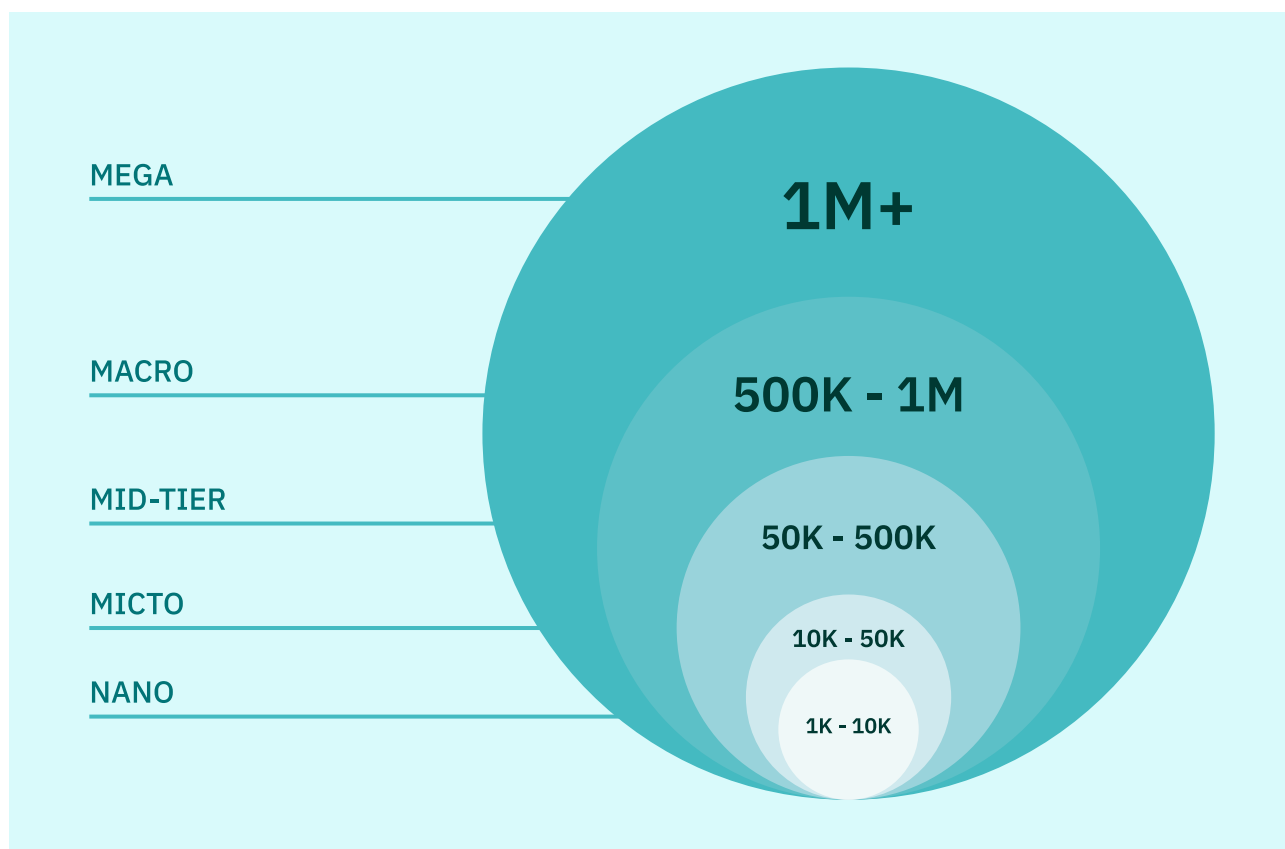


Figure 1: Five categories of influencers based on the size of their following. Source: Shopify

02

## MOTIVATIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND POLITICAL ACTORS TO COLLABORATE

### A. WHY ARE POLITICIANS AND ELECTORAL CANDIDATES COLLABORATING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN THE GLOBAL MAJORITY

There are several motivations underscoring collaborations between political actors and social media influencers in Global Majority countries, and results in drawing segments of the population that would have otherwise been difficult to reach towards partisan messages. In this section, we identify five key motivations for politicians and electoral candidates to collaborate with influencers.

#### *Relationship with Online Followers as an Authentic Voice*

Social media influencers hold significant digital influence, fostering audience engagement by leveraging authenticity and personalized relationships<sup>2</sup> with them, across various platforms. As public trust in formal institutions wanes and “peer-to-peer influence” gains momentum, many influencers have ascended to the status of *primus inter pares* — or “first among equals” — amongst their followers. Politicians and candidates that are endorsed by influencers are seen as an extension of their authenticity, underpinned by perception of a genuine ideological

Relationship with online followers as an authentic voice

Hyper-localization of political messages for hard-to-reach constituents

Distilling complex political messages to compelling and viral stories

Bypassing journalistic ethics to present a favorable narrative

Accessing a wider range of digital analytics to inform political campaigning



alignment, which can sway voter sentiment. While some collaborations stem from ideological alignment, many involve elements of monetary and non-monetary transactions. Current social media ecosystems enable influencers to leverage their online presence, and authentic voice and ability to communicate in vernacular to amplify political messages amongst engaged audiences while capitalizing on the exposure. This relatability grants influencers the authority to offer political analysis and opinions, a domain once reserved for subject matter experts and journalists. This relatability grants influencers the authority to offer political analysis and opinions, a domain once reserved for subject matter experts and journalists.

### ***Hyper-localization of Political Messages for Hard-to-Reach Constituents***

Micro- and nano-influencers, ranging between 1,000 to 50,000 follower accounts, have niche audiences within targeted audience segments and generate much higher engagement amongst these segments than mega- or macro-influencers and celebrities.<sup>3</sup> For instance, their followers may be concentrated in specific geographies and/or minority communities, or resonate strongly with communities with a specific ideology or political leaning, enabling influencers to distribute their messages at a hyper-localized level. As a result, micro- and nano-influencers offer politicians and candidates a unique window to communicate and persuade niche and hard-to-reach audiences, whilst avoiding scrutiny as these influencers often operate away from the public spotlight.

### ***Distilling Complex Political Messages to Compelling and Viral Stories***

Social media influencers craft captivating and shareable content that resonates with their audience, leveraging the adage “facts tell, stories sell.” Whether developing political messages or establishing an online persona, each piece of content is deliberately designed to simplify complex political messages and tell a compelling story. Moreover, they are well-versed in navigating platform algorithms to maximize the visibility of and engagement with their content. By capitalizing on the expertise and creativity of influencers, political actors can enhance their online visibility and effectively communicate their message to the relevant constituents. This is especially relevant in Global Majority countries where communities experience the internet dominantly — and often exclusively — through social media platforms. Crucially, the commercial models of the social media platforms are structured to incentivize influencer behavior and prioritize increasing engagement.

During this year’s presidential election in Indonesia, influencers strategically focused on creating lighthearted and engaging campaign content on TikTok, capitalizing on its burgeoning popularity among the youth demographic. President-elect Prabowo Subianto strategically collaborated influencers and content creators for his political campaign, portraying an image of a ‘chubby and cute, lovable yet assertive, brave general ready to lead the nation into a golden era.’<sup>4</sup> Similar strategies were used successfully in earlier elections, specifically during the 2019 national election.

***Political actors prefer to engage with social media influencers over traditional media and journalists to bypass media and journalism ethics that may subject them to tough questions on policy issues and electoral commitments.***

### ***Bypassing Journalistic Ethics to Present a Favorable Narrative***

Generally, influencer content does not broach contentious social or political topics; instead, they focus on non-political matters, aimed at reputation and image management. Some serve as contemporary but covert campaigners operating behind the veneer of civic participation only to undermine, obscure and manipulate it. Political actors prefer to engage with these social media influences over traditional media and journalists to bypass media and journalism ethics that may subject them to tough questions on policy issues and electoral commitments. Conversely, strategic storytelling, such as biographical anecdotes, genealogical discussions, or sharing relatable experiences (e.g., food preferences or childhood memories), constructs personally relatable narratives that humanize political actors. Much of the messaging and its veracity is based on talking points directly from the political actors, exacerbating risks of spreading mis- and dis-information. It enables political actors to exploit emotional or

identity fault lines that ultimately can steer voter perceptions in their favor with no measure of accountability.

An illustrative example is the national elections in the Philippines in 2022. Current President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. abstained from participating in presidential debates, declined media interviews and selectively distributed media advisories. Instead, he surrounded himself with influencers, or in political communications parlance, “key opinion leaders.” Shielded from censorship and fact-checking requirements, videos circulated on platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Facebook to gloss over the atrocities of his father’s martial law era, during which numerous activists and journalists suffered detention, disappearance or death.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Accessing Digital Analytics to Inform Political Campaigning***

Platforms typically restrict the extent of analytical tools that are available to political actors and government agencies. Social media influencers, on the other hand, often have access to analytics tools that can provide more disaggregated data about audience demographics, interests and online behavior. As a result, influencers enable candidates to bypass platform-specific guardrails and access demographic and preference data of their constituents, enabling them to develop more granular and targeted messaging strategies. Further, through sophisticated audience segmentation, affiliation with a political actor can prompt influencers’ followers to adopt similar viewpoints and attitudes, while also encouraging them to participate in online activism or political campaigns.

## B. HOW INFLUENCERS ARE CO-OPTED INTO POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Social media influencers are co-opted into political campaigns because of one or more of the following factors.

Ideological Alignment

Payments and Monetization

Social Clout

Coercion

### *Ideological Alignment*

Social media influencers often sign up for political campaigns due to ideological alignment. An influencer sharing similar beliefs, interests, values or political ideologies with a particular candidate or a party is more inclined to voluntarily espouse and endorse their campaigns. Content created may lack subtlety and have overt ideological composition, engendering a greater degree of authenticity and more resonant messages. This enables greater amplification of hyper-partisan content and engagement, often reinforcing groupthink and biases within their audience. Despite the risk of potential loss of sponsors, brand partnerships and followers, many influencers who openly supported their chosen candidate and vocally engaged in political messaging, for instance in the Philippines, found that their increased fame attracted both new and existing networks and brands.<sup>6</sup>

### *Payments and Monetization*

For many influencers, financial gains outweigh ideological considerations, prompting them to align with political candidates or campaigns primarily for profit. Financial incentives, whether in the form of gifts, sponsorships, non-monetary considerations or direct payments, are compelling motivators for influencers to engage in political endorsements and create content favoring specific candidates, parties or agendas. Especially in hybrid democracies in the Global Majority, the transactional motivation skews the playing field, as the ruling parties typically have greater financial resources and political capital that can disadvantage opposition parties.

For instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stands as the largest beneficiary of political funding via electoral bonds in India, accounting for nearly 50 percent of all bonds redeemed and surpassing the combined funding of its main opposition and a dozen other parties, enabling them to engage more influencers than any other parties.<sup>7</sup> One influencer, Dhruv Rathee, acknowledged that the sheer financial prowess of the ruling party steers influencers towards creating content in their favor.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to any transaction between the influencer and political actor, the content can also be monetized through on- or off-platform advertisements. Globally, over 50 million people earn revenue from their social media activities, with more than 2 million of them making a full-time living from it, redistributing over US\$ 20 billion to content creators and

***Our research found that there is an average 50-70 percent increase in engagement across platforms when an influencer features a politician or explicitly shares partisan content on their channel, thereby making such content fit for on-platform monetization.***

influencers.<sup>9</sup> Different revenue models exist, including ad revenue sharing and platform-facilitated audience support (e.g., subscriptions and digital tips) and transactions (e.g., selling branded products and services via platform marketplaces). Notably, the performance-based revenue sharing model incentivizes influencers to actively create and share content. Our research found that there is an average 50-70 percent increase in engagement across platforms when an influencer features a politician or explicitly shares partisan content on their channel, thereby making such content fit for on-platform monetization. Meta's now discontinued<sup>10</sup> Reels Play bonus program provided eligible influencers up to US\$ 35,000 per month for views on qualifying Facebook content.<sup>11</sup> In their quarterly earnings call last year, Mark Zuckerberg indicated time spent on Instagram has increased with people resharing reels more than 3.5 billion times every day.<sup>12</sup> YouTube allows monetization of the content on

its short and long-form videos as well as live videos.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Social and Political Clout***

In addition to financial compensation and other perks, alignment with political campaigns offers influencers the opportunity to increase their social clout. By gaining access to exclusive events and networking opportunities with political and business elites, influencers can enhance their visibility and expand their reach beyond their existing niches, audience demographics and communities. As a result, their status as trusted voices are elevated, creating deeper connections and increased credibility among a broader audience base. This, in turn, attracts more followers, brand partnerships, and other lucrative opportunities, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of growth and success for influencers.

For instance, in the Philippines, former President Rodrigo Duterte employed bloggers, granting them presidential press accreditations and affording them equivalent access to events and personalities as professional journalists and media during the 2016 election campaign.<sup>14</sup> Some of them were subsequently appointed in government positions under his administration. Similarly, during the 2022 presidential bid, the current President Marcos Jr. employed a similar strategy.<sup>15</sup> Allure of social and political clout could also dissuade influencers from affiliating themselves with opposition or weaker parties, as evident from the influencer engagements in India, addressed in this report.

***Our investigation found at least 30 percent of surveyed influencers in India and Bangladesh were coerced and intimidated into engaging with and featuring political candidates in their content.***

### **Coercion**

In some cases, influencers may be compelled to participate in political campaigns through coercion from external actors, including political parties, special interest groups, state apparatuses or individuals with vested interests in influencing public opinion

or electoral outcomes. Such coercion aims to enlist influencer support for specific candidates or political agendas. Coercive tactics can manifest in various forms, including intimidation, violence, reputational harm, financial coercion, social ostracization, peer pressure, cyberbullying and exploitation of vulnerabilities. Sometimes, influencers choose one party over the other due to concern about potential repercussions.<sup>16</sup> Our investigation found at least 30 percent of surveyed influencers in India and Bangladesh were coerced and intimidated into engaging with and featuring political candidates in their content. This is especially concerning in environments with declining press freedoms and weak rule of law, where influencers — amassing large following yet lacking institutional safeguards — can disseminate polarizing and partisan narratives in the mainstream and alt-media spheres, without independent media to offer balanced reporting or fact-checking the information.



03

## RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH INFLUENCER-GENERATED ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

### A. OVERVIEW

#### ***Absence of Explicit and Legally-Binding Disclosure and Transparency Mandates Creates a “black market for political information”***

The influencer-politician dynamic prompts several concerns about the inherent lack of transparency, accountability and authenticity. Generally, regulatory restrictions on political advertising that apply to offline campaigns do not explicitly extend to online channels, providing political actors free passes to exploit cost-effective and unregulated avenues to communicate their messages to large and hyper-localized audiences through influencers-generated content. In the absence of explicit and enforceable disclosure and transparency obligations under domestic laws and/or platform policies, politicians and influencers are able to systematically evade disclosure of payments or other benefits exchanged for sharing political content. This blurs

the line between regulated political campaigning and covert efforts by political figures to manipulate public opinion, creating a “black market for political information” — i.e., unregulated and unmonitored online ecosystem where political information flows unchecked, often guided by hidden agendas and undisclosed interests to vast and highly targeted audiences. Weak monitoring and regulations also make it difficult to differentiate between candidate- or party-sponsored mouthpiece disseminating partisan content and independent online content creators expressing personal political viewpoints. As Meta acknowledges in its influence operations threat report, “[s]uch tactics exemplify the gray areas where the boundary between advocacy and deception can be hard to define, and pose important questions for how public debate should function online.”<sup>17</sup>

## ***Content Ecosystem Operating with Limited Checks and Balances Risks Exacerbating Mis- and Dis-information***

Carefully crafted storytelling by influencers on social media risks manipulation and distortion of public opinion about important political and social issues. Due to lack of unified governmental regulation in the content ecosystem and limited institutional checks and balances, the risks of mis- and disinformation spreading online exacerbates significantly, especially in cases where influencers do not fact-check messages they promote, or mis- and disinformation production are professionalized. Countries in the Global Majority, each at varying stages of democracy and often without adequate digital literacy, are most vulnerable to these manipulative tactics.<sup>18</sup>

An illustrative example is the professionalized influencer operation in the Philippines, where disinformation production has been normalized and is part of existing workflows within local creative industries, with political consultants operating with limited oversight and strategically maneuvering around government regulations.<sup>19</sup> Content creators have transposed their tried-and-tested attention-hacking methods into the political sphere, orchestrating well-curated disinformation campaigns and generating engagement in social media to influence the mainstream media and broader public agenda. The Philippine Commission on Elections does not require candidates to disclose *paid* social media campaigns and content, enabling the “black market for political information” to thrive unregulated.<sup>20</sup>

Further, the risks associated with influencer-led online political campaigns are higher in regions with low digital literacy — such as Philippines, Indonesia

***Influencers, unencumbered by media codes and or journalistic ethics, and incentivized to sway their followers, often share catchy hyper-partisan content that performs well with audience engagement.***

and Myanmar — due to products like Free Basics, which offers free access to text-based content on Facebook up to specific data caps but restricts access to other content unless users pay for mobile data.<sup>21</sup> As a result, users without internet access are unable to access the full content or fact-checked information using credible news outlets, enabling mis- and dis-information to thrive in the content ecosystem.

### ***Traditional Media Competes for Audience Attention with Influencers Sharing Hyper-Partisan Content***

As a growing number of online populations turn to social media platforms for news and information, influencers and traditional media outlets find themselves competing with each other for audience attention. However, influencers, unencumbered

by media codes and or journalistic ethics, and incentivized to sway their followers, often share catchy hyper-partisan content that performs well with audience engagement. Overwhelmingly, the discourses are positive, or at least non-critical.<sup>22</sup> The influencer culture has dramatically transformed the information ecosystem, and the ‘nuanced take of a subject matter expert is no match for the tweet or TikTok of a clout-chasing pundit who seeks to affirm the identity and belief system of their political camp of choice.’<sup>23</sup> As a result, the opinions of citizens influenced by the influencers become more polarized, prompting media outlets to adopt increasingly extreme editorial stances. This domino effect compels political parties to moderate their policy positions to appeal to median voters — those characterized as moderate independent without strong party alignment or ideological affiliations — in order to win elections.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the integrity of the electoral outcomes can be influenced by the competing interests of traditional media outlets, bound by codes of conduct and journalistic ethics, and unregulated influencers, whose unchecked influence can impact public opinion in unpredictable ways.

***Ability and Expertise of Influencers to Reach Hyper-Local Demographics with Limited Digital Literacy Poses Significant Risks of Voter Manipulation***

Embedded within the influence-for-hire ecosystem are hierarchical networks and structures, enabling mega- or macro-influencers to enlist smaller-scale counterparts, who are often community-focused individuals with a modest following concentrated in their local area, noted for their hyper-specific and hyper-dedicated relationships with

their followers and significantly higher levels of engagement.<sup>25</sup> These micro- or nano-influencers then leverage algorithms and analytic tools to execute hyper-local campaigns targeting specific cohorts and constituencies, who are often less digitally savvy and are more susceptible to harm or misleading information. Moreover, coordinated influencer operations can flood content carrying the same message. This was evident in the Kenyan election last year, where micro influencers played a pivotal role in disseminating specific hashtags, photos and talking points in their content, while the political actors funding them maintained a cautious distance.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in India, a candidate for the incumbent government, Deepti Maheswari, engaged nearly 1,000 nano-influencers to dilute adverse narratives against her in her constituency.<sup>27</sup> These coordinated campaigns have the potential to create filter bubbles and echo chambers, where individuals, insulated from differing opinions and perspectives, are mostly exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs and biases. While this allows political actors to disseminate their message to a receptive audience, such feedback loops contribute to confirmation bias, polarization of political views, entrenchment of existing societal divisions, stifling of dissenting voices, and a shrinking space for constructive debates.



## Average Views for Influencer-Generated Content

■ Non-political content ■ Political content

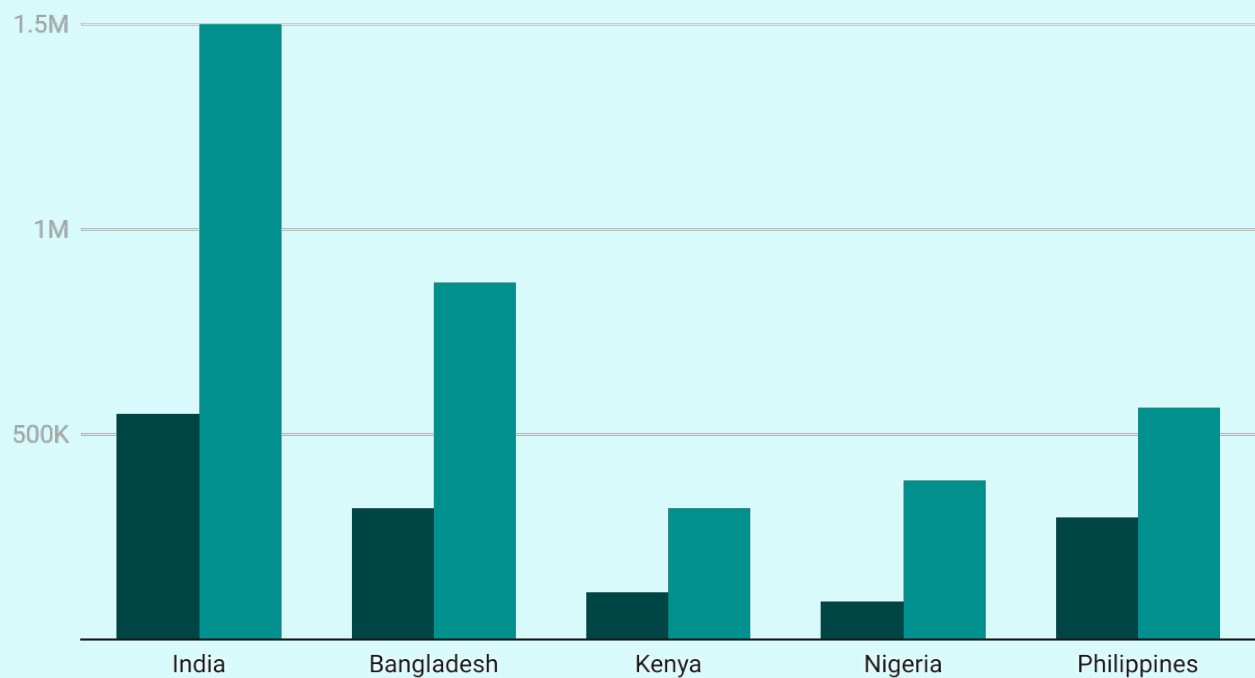


Figure 2: Average views for influencer-generated content based on political content and non-political content in India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria and the Philippines.

### B. INFLUENCERS IN ACTION

We sourced a list of social media influencers, prominent across YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and X, and used a combination of Crowdtangle UI (Facebook and Instagram) and platform APIs to pull data on their content, including timestamps and engagement. We monitored and analyzed 2,342 rows of data between February 1, 2023 and February 29, 2024 for a cumulative 46 macro-, micro- and nano-influencers in India, Bangladesh, Philippines, Kenya and Nigeria to discern their engagement with political content, particularly in the context of elections. In addition, we analyzed a cumulative 1,121 pieces

of content from the Philippines (May 2022), Kenya (August 2022) and Nigeria (February 2023) that were uploaded by influencers during a 7-month period in the lead-up to their respective elections. Although TikTok is increasingly an important platform for political influencers, we did not include it in this analysis because of its ban in India.

On average, we find 50 percent or more uptick in *engagement* in influencer content featuring politicians or candidates, relative to non-political content across platforms, as illustrated in *Figure 2*. We define engagement as a combination of likes, comments and shares.

## Disclosure on Influencer-Generated Political Content

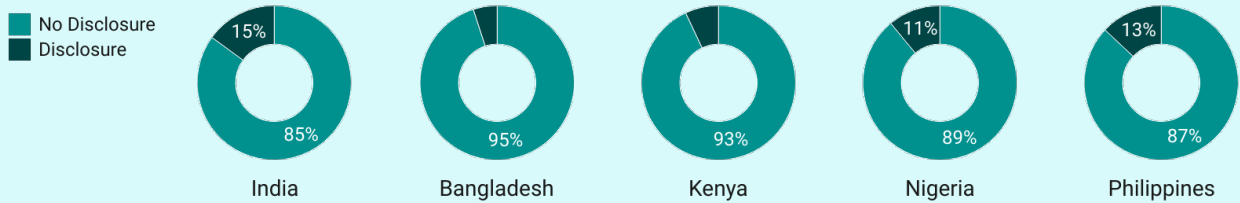


Figure 3: Disclosure on Influencer-Generated Political Content.

Although the majority of platforms require some degree of disclosure on sponsored content (see the next section for detailed analysis of platform policies), we find widespread lack of transparency, with more than 80 percent of reviewed political content across platforms bearing no disclosure notice, as illustrated in *Figure 3*.

We supplemented on-platform investigations with offline interviews with influencers across all listed

countries. Interviewed influencers indicated that they have all created political content in exchange for financial compensation from political parties or their intermediaries, and some even monetized the content through on-platform products. Some influencers confirm that their content was also “boosted” through ads, however, these ads were not subject to any additional disclosure or enforcement.

## **INFLUENCE-FOR-HIRE ECOSYSTEM IN THE GLOBAL MAJORITY**

### **A. HOW THE INFLUENCER-FOR-HIRE MODEL HAS BEEN REPLICATED IN GLOBAL MAJORITY COUNTRIES**

While influencer-led political messaging and campaigning have been prevalent in various jurisdictions across the globe, our investigation on elections across the Global Majority revealed that the influencer-for-hire-models, common in India, Indonesia and the Philippines, has been replicated in several other Global Majority countries, including Kenya, Nigeria and Bangladesh. We observed a regional cross-pollination of practices, such as the growing use of strategists and public relations agencies in Indonesia and the Philippines. Meanwhile, in India, tenders were issued for marketing agencies to hire influencers, coupled with large convenings or award ceremonies to bolster influencer credibility. Indonesia, Philippines and India have all leveraged the influencer hierarchy, incentivising mega influencers to recruit micro- and

nano-influencers, aimed at hyper-localized content dissemination for specific constituencies.

We identified several key characteristics and behaviors that define the influencer-for-hire model now prevalent in the Global Majority countries.

- Political parties or candidates often convene social media influencers in the buildup to elections. In several cases, marketing agencies have been commissioned through tenders to organize and manage these influencers' messaging strategies.
- There exists a distinct preference among politicians and candidates to engage with social media influencers over traditional media and journalists who may filter or interpret political messages, or ask critical questions. This shift reflects a strategic move towards more personalized and controlled forms of political communication, which,

while circumventing conventional gatekeepers, also has the benefit of directly targeting specific demographics.

- A significant aspect of this model is the personification of political content by influencers. Through interviews, comedy or social activities, like eating or cooking, influencers seek to “humanize” the politician or candidate. By delving into personal topics such as favorite foods or childhood memories, influencers aim to foster a sense of authenticity and relatability. However, this personalized approach often results in controlled messaging, heavily influenced by the politician or candidate. Since influencers lack journalistic training, the veracity of their content relies heavily on the information provided by the political figures themselves, raising concerns about the spread of mis- and dis-information.
- The model relies on using micro- or nano-influencers to create and disseminate hyper-localized

content, allowing for more targeted and personalized communication. Given that the electoral outcomes often depend on engagement at a grassroots level, these influencers craft content that resonates with the unique cultural, social, linguistic and political contexts of different regions or localities, ensuring authenticity and relevance as well as high level of engagement.

- There is a tendency towards mainstreaming and professionalizing the influence-for-hire network, largely through marketing and PR agencies, aimed at disseminating subtle messages and full-blown hyper-partisan campaigns. At times, political parties or hired marketing agencies pressure influencers into posting political content on their channels. With declining press freedoms, weakening rule of law and the absence of institutional safeguards for the influencers, they may find themselves compelled to disseminate specific, polarizing narratives without adequate checks and balances.

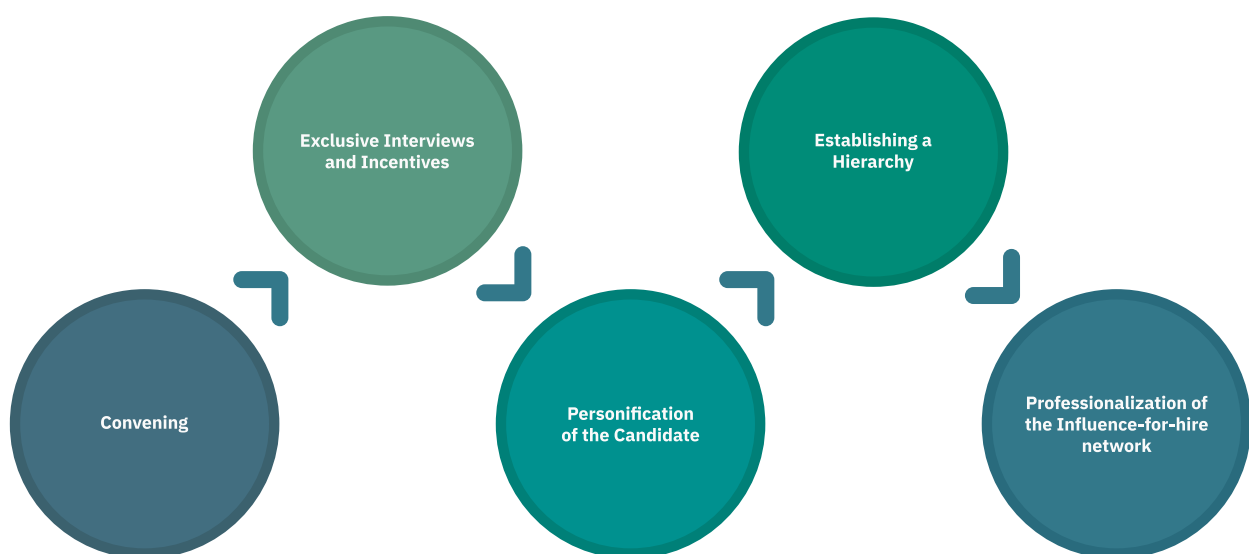


Figure 4: The influence-for-hire model for Global Majority political campaigns.

## B. CASE STUDIES

### INDIA

Many experts and commentators believe the 2024 general election in India is the “election of influencers.”<sup>28</sup> With over 800 million internet users in India, politicians and candidates have been wooing thousands of influencers, including gamers, to overtly and covertly share their political messages. In March 2024, ahead of the country’s Lok Sabha polls, the BJP-led government introduced the National Creators’ Award, where 60 percent of the awarded influencers were found to have explicitly promoted the ideology and/or politicians of the BJP.<sup>29</sup>

For instance, influencers running food vlogging channels, like Kamiya Jani, have shared several pieces of content featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi — ranging from messages of boycotting Maldives and snorkeling in Lakshadweep to the inauguration of sea bridge and coastal road in Mumbai.<sup>30</sup> She also produced documentaries on conservation of temples and cultural heritage, collaborating with the government on the latter, with each piece prominently featuring Modi.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Jani also interviewed Minister Nitin Gadkari at his residence, describing him as ‘a foodie first, and a politician second.’<sup>32</sup> Ankit Baiyanpuria, a social media influencer and the recipient of the best health and fitness creator award at the National Creators’ Award, had joined Modi in his *Swachhata Hi Seva* campaign,<sup>33</sup> with the prime minister later sharing a video of the meeting on X. He asked his eight million followers on Instagram to vote for the BJP.<sup>34</sup> Veer Sharma, a political influencer, spends

his time and resources exclusively for candidates endorsed by the BJP, helping one win in the 2023 assembly polls with the highest victory margin in the history of Madhya Pradesh.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, another influencer, Ganeshprasad Sridharan, who manages *Think School* accounts across multiple social media platforms, has created content rationalizing controversial decisions such as abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, construction of the Gujarat international financial tech city and one-district, one-product policy, which are considered significant milestones for the BJP.<sup>36</sup> Affiliated social media pages also posted pro-government content, like lessons on public speaking from Modi and assessment of market performance under the current administration.<sup>37</sup> Modi also interacted with gamers with substantial social media following, promising them government support for the gaming and esports sector.<sup>38</sup>

Each of these influencers commands a substantial following across multiple social media platforms, and India is the biggest market for user-generated content service providers like Meta and Google, with statistics indicating that the influencer market will grow substantially, at a compound annual growth rate of 25 percent over the next five years.<sup>39</sup> With over half of 1.4 billion citizens aged under 30, using social media is a sophisticated soft-power campaign policy of the ruling party to reach out to young voters. Even tenders have been issued to commission marketing agencies to convene social media influencers and manage their messaging.<sup>40</sup>

Other influencers are using more subtle forms of strategies. Rather than directly soliciting votes for the ruling party, their content demonstrates right-wing ideologies of the BJP. A culture and religion influencer, Janhvi Singh, was awarded the heritage fashion icon award at the National Creators' Award, and she expressed her admiration for the party's focus on Hinduism. Similarly, a folk singer, Maithili Thakur, with millions following her Hindu devotional tunes on social media amassed wider attention when Modi shared her song on X during the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, as well as naming her the cultural ambassador of the year and an election commission ambassador.<sup>41</sup>

Ahead of the 2019 national elections, Modi reportedly informed his cabinet colleagues that the election would be contested on smartphones.<sup>42</sup> A member of the official election team confirmed that the party had organized meetings with influencers and shared talking points for their content.<sup>43</sup> Opposition parties, especially the Indian National Congress Party led by Rahul Gandhi, have also strategically engaged in interviews with a select few influencers during his cross-country march aimed at creating political momentum for his party.<sup>44</sup> As election outcomes in India are increasingly determined at the grassroots, micro- and nano-influencers are critical to the party's success in wooing voters in each constituency.

## INDONESIA

Around 3,000 miles away, electoral candidates in Indonesia have extensively used influencers and social media during election seasons. Ahead of the February 2024 national elections, Prabowo Subianto, a former general dismissed from the military amidst allegations of war crimes, strategically cultivated a viral *gemoy* persona for himself — meaning cute and cuddly — through social media campaigns.<sup>45</sup> Central to this strategy was active engagement with social media influencers, content creators and celebrities.<sup>46</sup> While some influencers, like celebrity duo Raffi Ahmad and Nagita Slavina, with a combined following of over 90 million on Instagram and Facebook, were personally invited for lunch at his office and accompanied him during campaign events,<sup>47</sup> others like Uya Kuya created a rap song as a tribute.<sup>48</sup> With the increasing trend of personification of the candidate, citizens saw him as “one of us,” rather than holding Subianto accountable for his past actions. As a result, discourses around Subianto’s past admission of human rights violations in the 1990s<sup>49</sup> — an important electoral issue — have been overshadowed by the positive social media coverage, while dissenting voices have been drowned by clamors fueled by social media influencers.

Additionally, identity politics has been deployed to rally public support and smear rivals, using social media and influencers to amplify the message. For example, the country’s political elite have exploited long-held prejudices against the minority ethnic Chinese community to score political points, with claims that ‘more than 50 percent of the economy is in the hands of (Indonesian) Chinese’ although they constitute less than 5 percent of the

overall population.<sup>50</sup>

As early as 2012, Jakarta was considered as “the world’s most active Twitter city” and the use of social media was professionalized during this and subsequent elections; public relations and advertising agencies were hired to advise on and implement social media strategies that drove social media discourse in certain directions.<sup>51</sup> Employing social media “volunteers” to propagate smear campaigns and counter-slander opponents became an essential strategy in election campaigns in the latter half of the 2010s. This tactic evolved into a sophisticated influencer-for-hire network, reaching its zenith during Indonesia’s 2019 national election and the subsequent student protests that year.<sup>52</sup>

According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, globally, Indonesia ranked 46th in digital literacy and 83rd in trust in information on social media.<sup>53</sup> A market survey found that the country’s netizens consider influencers to be trustworthy figures and heavily rely on their recommendations to make decisions.<sup>54</sup> Of the 280 million citizens, around 185 million are internet users and over 139 million are social media users, with more than half of eligible voters aged between 17 and 40, and about a third are under 30, making the youth demographic key to influencer campaigns.<sup>55</sup> Civil society organizations in Indonesia contend that Subianto’s election win, among other factors, was aided by social media marketing, particularly on TikTok.<sup>56</sup>

## PHILIPPINES

During the 2022 national elections in the Philippines, thousands of social media influencers played covert roles in political campaigning, orchestrated by political intermediaries and consultants in a largely decentralized and unregulated manner. Research findings indicate that at least 1,425 influencer accounts were used for covert political campaigning, with a majority focusing on video-centric, creator-friendly platforms like YouTube and TikTok for disseminating hyper-partisan content and algorithmic manipulation.<sup>57</sup> Facebook served as a key platform for amplifying disinformation and X facilitated politicized interactions. Influencers transformed politicians into brands and election campaigns into contests for content popularity, rather than substantive policy discussions.<sup>58</sup>

With influencers high in demand ahead of elections, they were offered a premium to participate in political campaigns. Their compensation was determined by factors such as their social capital, past performance, political notoriety and willingness to use incendiary language and aggressive tactics. These influencers received payments from the political parties and candidates they endorsed, which is estimated to range from US\$ 11 to 27 million, in addition to monetizing engagement through platform creator programs and other incentives.<sup>59</sup>

Former President Rodrigo Duterte has institutionalized influencer operations within the government through in-house content creators in the Presidential Communications Operations Office and

the Philippine National Police. During his 2016 national election campaign, influencers such as Mocha Uson, RJ Nieto and Carlos Munda bolstered his online presence and later secured government positions under his administration.<sup>60</sup> His victory marked the Philippines' first social media election.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. orchestrated his own disinformation networks spanning various platforms, utilizing both long-form YouTube videos and trendy TikTok shorts to reach audiences with differing ages and attention spans. His network of pages collaborated with hyper-partisan channels, anonymous personalities and influencers across Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. While X suspended numerous pro-Marcos accounts in January 2022 for rule violations, influencers continued to rewrite his family history using Facebook and YouTube.<sup>62</sup> Similar to Subianto, the personification of Marcos Jr. steered the conversation away from important topics like the nearly US\$ 10 billion that went missing, and the detention, disappearance and death of thousands of activists, dissidents, oppositions and journalists, during his father's dictatorship.<sup>63</sup>



## RULES TO GOVERN ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

### A. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM POLICIES FOR POLITICAL CONTENT

Each platform has different policies to govern content creators or influencers in their ecosystem. While specifics of these policies vary, they broadly fall under a handful of categories that are consistent across platforms. Our review of the relevant policies of the five platforms — Meta (Facebook and Instagram), TikTok, YouTube and X — finds that there is no unified policy to govern political content. We then examined four different categories of policies that exist within the platforms' policies that could be applied to political content disseminated by political actors and influencers.

- **Community standards and/or guidelines:** The standard set of guidelines for both sponsored and non-sponsored unpaid content, determining what can or cannot be shared on a platform.
- **Creator policies:** A specific set of guidelines, complementing community guidelines, to determine what content creators can or cannot share, and how they can use the platform. A subsection of these policies would entail *branded content* or *paid partnerships*, i.e., rules that determine how content creators or influencers should treat commercial partnerships to promote a brand or product and the transparency obligations governing such endorsements.
- **Advertising policies:** A specific set of guidelines for paid content using on-platform payment products, with specific sections determining the criteria for uploading and disseminating political ads.
- **Monetization policies:** A specific set of guidelines outlining the criteria for monetizing qualifying content, either shared by a content creator or influencer, or a brand. These policies

We summarize the platform policies across the criteria by highlighting in green for relatively well-defined policies, yellow for vague, unclear or inadequate, and red for absence of clarity or specificity.

QUESTIONS	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	YouTube	X
Defines “political content” and/or comprehensively outlines information that guides on what can be categorized as “political content” (excluding political ads)?	Red	Red	Green	Green	Green
Explicitly classifies sponsored political content as a subcategory of broader sponsored or branded content policies?	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Red	Red
Disallows influencers from creating or sharing content that, directly or indirectly, endorses or promotes candidates or political parties?	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red
Partially restricts and/or limits influencers from creating or sharing content that, directly or indirectly, endorses or promotes candidates or political parties, based on clearly defined criteria?	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red
Requires mandatory disclosure of sponsored or branded content?	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Specifies disclosure obligations apply irrespective of the medium of transaction (e.g., offline payments, merchandise and gifts)?	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red
Disallows on-platform monetization of political content (e.g., through in-stream ads, paid products or incentives)?	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Red
Outlines the enforcement process and/or consequences for non-compliant sponsored or branded content?	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Clearly distinguishes between political content, sponsored political content and political ads?	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red

Figure 5: Categorization of platform policies across criteria based on clarity of the policies.

are often accompanied by products that enable creators to make revenue off their content.

We analyzed all of the above policies to understand definitional frameworks, explicit and implicit obligations on influencers, and expectations around sponsored and non-sponsored political content. Our objective was to evaluate if the policies offer sufficient specificity and clarity to ensure a reasonable standard of accountability and transparency regarding political content shared by influencers.

Our analysis concluded that platforms have broad policies on disclosure of sponsored or branded content; however, there is no clear definition of political content and the policies are silent on how sponsored political content should be treated. This results in a policy loophole that is exploited by political figures and influencers to share unmoderated campaign content. The table in *Figure 5* assesses how platform policies govern influencer-backed political content by asking a set of key questions.

### ***There is No Clarity on What Constitutes “Political” Content***

Questions around what constitutes *political* content is made more complicated when influencers are involved. Does merely featuring a political actor suffice to classify content as “political” — and by extension, partisan — or must the influencer *explicitly* endorse a candidate or political party? If one takes the former view, then the tour given by Bangladeshi Energy State Minister Nasrul Hamid to content

creator Iftekhar Rafsan<sup>64</sup> less than a month before the national election would qualify as political content. However, from the latter viewpoint, Samdish Bhatia’s declaration of the BJP as his “favorite party”<sup>65</sup> would qualify as a political content, but not that of Rafsan. Our review of the platform policies does not satisfactorily answer this question, and this is a crucial policy gap for how political content — sponsored and non-sponsored — should be treated and what are the user’s obligations.

### ***Ambiguity Around Political Content, Sponsored Political Content and Political Ads***

Although some platform policies specify content categories falling under “election” or “political” policies, they fail to clearly distinguish between, and often conflate, political content, sponsored political content and political ads. Political ads on social media platforms are typically content created by the candidates or political parties themselves to sway voter opinions or actions, mobilize voters, or shape narratives around political campaigns; it receives highly visible placement in front of users due to their status as advertisements. In contrast, sponsored political content is content that is posted on a platform by individuals who have received compensation or other benefits off the platform to promote and endorse partisan messages. Unlike political ads, which are subject to rigorous government regulations and platform policies requiring disclosure, transparency and funding sources, sponsored political content is treated by the platforms as “unpaid” content, and therefore considered protected political

speech under platform policies, enabling evasion of government regulations and scrutiny by platforms.

Under some platform policies, sponsored political content can only be treated as an advertisement that requires disclosures when it falls within the defined scope of political ads, setting a high threshold and enabling influencers to circumvent ad restrictions and enforcement actions. For instance, Facebook and Instagram disallow sponsored content that presents ‘controversial political or social issues or crises in an exploitative manner for

***An influencer from the central state of Chhattisgarh in India has acknowledged charging candidates around US\$ 180 each to feature them in short videos ahead of state elections, with no on-platform disclosure accompanying his content.***

commercial purposes.’ Other materials — including content made on behalf of or about a political party or candidate, or content related to election, referendum or ballot initiative — is regulated by political ads policy that warrant monitoring of on-platform transactions.<sup>66</sup> While it may be argued that broader

disclosure mandates under branded or sponsored content would naturally apply to paid political messages, the policies typically use terms more common within the commercial product marketing industry, which creates confusion. For example, the branded content policy of Meta defines the term “branded content” as a user-generated content that ‘features or is influenced by a *business* partner for an exchange of value, such as monetary payment or free gifts,’ and requires content featuring ‘third-party product, brand or business partner’ to be posted using platform tools, with their prior permission.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Offline Transactions are Much Harder to Detect and Enforce***

The association between influencers and political actors often occurs through offline transactions and may not exclusively involve financial exchange. An influencer from the central state of Chhattisgarh in India has acknowledged charging candidates around US\$ 180 each to feature them in short videos ahead of state elections, with no on-platform disclosure accompanying his content.<sup>68</sup> Platforms often rely on influencers to self-disclose, which results in inconsistencies and no tangible incentives for influencers to declare their association. In this context, robust and clearly articulated policies encompassing offline payment channels and clear enforcement mechanisms are crucial to ensuring transparency and accountability of sponsored political content.

***Our interviews with influencers across various countries revealed that most created content with covert political messages in exchange for financial remuneration, with some additionally monetizing the content through on-platform products without authorization or disclaimers.***

### ***Influencers are Wary of Losing their “Authenticity” if their Content Contains Disclosure***

Influencers often feel revealing that a political content sponsored by a party would make their followers less willing to engage and would label them as a “campaigner” as they build their brands on authenticity. One influencer in India explains that while he creates political campaign materials camouflaged in the lifestyle content genre, he does not actively endorse any party or candidate due to concerns about potential online backlash.<sup>69</sup> Our interview with influencers creating political content as a part of the election campaign similarly revealed a common apprehension about potential impact on their credibility and authenticity if they revealed that their content is sponsored by a political party or candidate.

## **B. PLATFORM SPECIFIC ANALYSIS**

### **I. META**

Both Facebook and Instagram disallow government entities, government officials and political candidates and parties from running partnership ads (with the exception of the United States, where different rules apply). However, this policy only applies to the accounts of political parties and their candidates, and not on influencer accounts, effectively allowing influencers to exploit this policy gap. Additionally, while there are prohibitions on paid promotion of ‘controversial political or social issues or crises in an exploitative manner for commercial purposes,’<sup>70</sup> what constitutes “controversial,” “crises” or “commercial purpose” remains open to subjective assessment. Particularly, there are no restrictions or disclosure obligations on organic political content, as well as on political content that was paid using offline channels. Our interviews with influencers across various countries revealed that most created content with covert political messages in exchange for financial remuneration, with some additionally monetizing the content through on-platform products without authorization or disclaimers. None of them have adhered to the requirement of using paid partnership labels, mandated by both Facebook and Instagram. Meta continues to allow sponsored and non-sponsored political content on its platforms, prioritizing on the basis of personalized signals like user surveys, reportedly after shifting away from engagement signals.<sup>71</sup>

## II. TIKTOK

TikTok maintains a clear policy that prohibits any form of political ads, including content created by influencers.<sup>72</sup> Organic content featuring personal political beliefs or genuine political conversation is allowed, provided it is not used with any paid ad products. Despite this stance, a study by Global Witness and the Cybersecurity for Democracy found that TikTok failed to catch 90% of ads featuring ‘outright false and misleading election misinformation,’ with the company reportedly acknowledging the unresolved issue of undisclosed sponsored political content and ads from influencers.<sup>73</sup> According to findings by the Mozilla Foundation, unlike other social media platforms, TikTok has no transparency into political advertising on its platform, which makes it impossible to assess how TikTok is enforcing its policies in practice.<sup>74</sup> It also notes that influencer-led political content does not ‘appear to be actively monitored or scrutinized by TikTok, raising concerns around how the platform is enforcing its trust and safety protocols.’<sup>75</sup>

## III. YOUTUBE

YouTube allows political content and its monetization by influencers, provided they comply with ‘local campaign and election laws for any areas they target’ as well as its community guidelines, ads policies and monetization policies.<sup>76</sup> Explicitly prohibited categories of political content include materials related to voter suppression, false candidate eligibility claims, impersonation, hate speech and harassment, and spam,

deceptive practices and scams, as well as content violating the community guidelines or other policies.<sup>77</sup> However, there is a policy exception that allows otherwise violating content to remain on the platform if it has educational, documentary, scientific or artistic context in the video, audio, title or description, which creates significant leeway for influencer-generated political content.<sup>78</sup> Despite YouTube having a policy to terminate channels that attempt to “conceal their association with government actors,” influencer content containing partisan endorsements often do not disclose the association.<sup>79</sup>

## IV. X (fka TWITTER)

X allows political content as long as it is not false or misleading, and the creator voluntarily complies with the

***As demonstrated during the 2022 Kenyan election, this voluntary compliance regime for sponsored political content is ineffective in curbing influencer-led hyperpartisanship. Accounts verified via blue badge were reportedly used to orchestrate coordinated smear campaigns against opposition candidates.***

relevant local laws. However, the policy allows content containing ‘inaccurate statements about an elected or appointed official, candidate, or political party; organic content that is polarizing, biased, hyperpartisan, or contains controversial viewpoints expressed about elections or politics; ... [or which uses] X pseudonymously or as a parody, commentary, or fan account to discuss elections or politics’ provided there are no other policy violations.<sup>80</sup> — creating significant leeway for influencer-generated hyper partisan and misleading content to be disseminated on the platform. Crucially, there is no explicit reference to restrictions on influencer-led political content, and limited and arbitrary enforcement on sponsored organic content. During the 2022 Kenyan election, the voluntary compliance regime for sponsored political content was ineffective in curbing influencer-led hyperpartisanship.<sup>81</sup> Accounts verified via blue badge were reportedly used to orchestrate coordinated smear campaigns against opposition candidates.<sup>82</sup>

### C. ELECTION REGULATIONS ON POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Vague platform policies are supplemented by weak legal guardrails, creating fertile ground for manipulative tactics to influence voter opinion using influencer-led sponsored political content. Absent robust mandates around disclosure, influencers are exploiting their voice and reach to disseminate hyper partisan messages and misleading narratives, distorting public discourse and undermining democratic processes. Countries in South and Southeast Asia, like the

Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan, lack specific policies regulating influencer endorsements. Other countries, like India and the United States, have formulated guidelines on influencer endorsements that fall short of regulating influencer-led sponsored political content.

For example, the Department of Consumer Affairs in India issued guidelines to ensure that individuals do not mislead their audiences when endorsing products or services and requiring paid endorsements by influencers to disclose their material connection with the advertisers. While specifying it applies to influencers having the power to ‘affect their audiences’ purchasing decisions about a product, service, brand or experience,<sup>83</sup> it does not explicitly reference political endorsements, resulting in a regulatory loophole that is being abused.

Similarly, the guidelines issued by the Federal Trade Commission in the United States specify the use of endorsements and testimonials in advertising and apply to influencers for product marketing. However, these rules do not explicitly mandate disclosure when disseminating political messages. Commissioners Ellen Weintraub and Shana Broussard issued a joint statement expressing disagreement with the exemption for paid influencers, emphasizing that ‘the public is entitled to know when those influencers are being paid to spread a political message.’<sup>83</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analyses in this report, we propose the following recommendations:

- **Robust policy on political content disclosure:** A comprehensive, unified policy on political content, including sponsored political materials, should be introduced by platforms to ensure transparency and accountability in influencer- and third-party generated political engagement. Influencers should be mandated to disclose any form of sponsorships and benefits — such as monetary payments, merchandise gifts and other incentives — received in exchange for political endorsements, along with clear identification of the sponsoring political party or candidate. Disclosure not only ensures transparency and accountability for the influencers and political sponsors, it also enhances the integrity of the electoral process by empowering voters with authentic information and fostering user trust in online information. It can also avoid undue influence and mitigate circulation of mis- and disinformation. Specifically, the policy should be decoupled from general branded content, political ads and monetization policies, as these policies may not cater to the distinct operational and functional features of sponsored political content.
- **Clear definition and differentiation of paid and unpaid political content:** Drawing a clear distinction between political content and political ads is essential for effective regulation and enforcement. A well-articulated definition of “political content,” clearly outlining the characteristics that differentiate political content from political ads and other types of content, should be incorporated in the policy, encompassing any material (including text, images, video or audio) intended to influence political opinion or behavior, regardless of sponsorship or monetary exchange, and irrespective of medium of transaction. It should



clearly distinguish political content — sponsored and non-sponsored — from political ads with illustrative examples. This differentiation ensures transparency in labeling and enables users to discern between unpaid and paid endorsements, and between organic content and political ads.

- **Community reporting and human moderation:** Empowering users with easy-to-use reporting mechanisms to flag potential covert political content masquerading as lifestyle, fitness, health, or education-related content, is crucial for maintaining transparency and integrity. Once the content is reported, human moderators should review it to assess its compliance with political content policy and take necessary actions to address any violations. This user-centric approach will help identify and mitigate the spread of deceptive political messaging disguised within non-political content genres.
- **Consequences for non-compliance:** Platforms can use existing means to address non-compliance of disclosure or other political content policies, including content removal, account suspension, temporary restrictions, engagement reduction and demonetization. Clearly outlining these consequences in the policy will serve as a deterrent and reinforce the importance of compliance.

- **Clear guidelines on interactions with other policies:** Establishing clearer guidelines on how political content policy interacts and intersects with other platform policies concerning misinformation, inauthentic behavior, manipulated content and other practices that affect democratic processes is crucial to its effective implementation. This includes clear requirements on compliance with applicable local laws to mitigate legal risks and adherence to the GNI and human rights principles.
- **Utilization of video illustrations for clarity:** Using video illustrations to clearly outline permissible and prohibited political content, as well as the responsibilities of influencers in adhering to disclosure requirements and community guidelines and standards, can enhance comprehension and adherence to policies. Currently, platforms like YouTube and TikTok use these visual aids to communicate complex policies to its users. By leveraging engaging multimedia formats, the platforms can effectively communicate policy expectations and empower users to make informed decisions about their content creation and consumption practices.

## CONCLUSION

One pervasive issue that persists across all social media platforms is the deficiency in enforcement mechanisms, enabling the creation of a “black market for information.” As most social media influencers are reluctant to voluntarily disclose their association with political actors, and there is no effective mechanism for platforms to uncover off-platform transactions, the enforcement of these policies remains challenging. Most countries — including major markets like the United States and India — do not have *specific* regulations governing influencer marketing in non-consumer contexts. This leaves influencers bound by little more than a “good faith” system, relying on voluntary disclosure of collaborations between influencers and political actors.

As influencers are increasingly becoming a large part of our information ecosystem, their engagement in political campaigning could, in many cases, be classified as “influence operations” or “coordinated inauthentic behavior” — vocabularies commonly used by technology companies to mean systematic efforts by foreign operations to manipulate domestic public opinion or

deceive users to achieve certain agenda. Many influencers are spreading content that is beneficial to society, such as those aimed at counterattacking against vaccine misinformation, whereas others are being organized to sow hate, vitriol and confusion.<sup>84</sup> While regulators are developing an appetite in addressing this issue, with elections in at least 64 countries and the European Union, representing a combined population of nearly 50 percent of the world,<sup>85</sup> candidates are allocating a significant chunk of campaign budgets to social media influencers. Of particular note is the fact that many Gen Z and millennial voters will be voting for the first time and are likely targets of well-curated influencer-led sponsored campaigns designed to sway and influence them. Given the high penetration of social media, growth in the use of online influence-for-hire networks in the Global Majority is inevitable, and it could soon be the decisive factor in how elections are fought, won and lost. Without timely intervention by platforms and governments, democratic processes will continue to be undermined behind surrogate and shadow campaigns.

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## Methodology

We used a combination of Crowdtangle UI, platform APIs, and manual search to build the data pipeline across platforms between February 1, 2023, and February 29, 2024. We filtered and de-duplicated the data based on the influencer's follower account count, offline research on their political engagement, account lifetime, and spread across different platforms. The cumulative dataset, spanning India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Kenya, and Nigeria, included 2,342 pieces of content from a total of 46 influencers. We used the aforementioned tools to source an additional 1,121 pieces of influencer content within specific timelines from the Philippines (December 1, 2021, to May 1, 2022), Kenya (Jan 1, 2022, to July 30, 2022), and Nigeria (July 1, 2022, to January 30, 2023) to analyze the role of influencers in the lead-up to each country's general election.

We manually reviewed the final dataset containing 3,463 pieces of content and labeled the content as *political* if it met one or more of the following criteria: (a) featured an electoral candidate, (b) overtly endorsed a political party and/or candidate, (c) used superlative keywords that overly or subtly endorses any one political party, candidate and/or discernible partisan ideology, (d) used explicit derogatory keywords to undermine any one political party, candidate and/or discernible partisan ideology to subtly promote another party or candidate, and (e) used explicit derogatory keywords to undermine the election process to promote one party or candidate (e.g., '*the voting count is rigged because it did not allow the XYZ candidate to win*'). We did not categorize content that provided a general description or opinions on election processes or voter participation as *political*. In doing this exercise, we acknowledged the significant difficulty in maintaining consistent criteria for labeling content as *political* given the myriad of ways in which influencers and political actors promote their partisan ideologies.

# Endnotes

- 1 Martin Riedl, Josephine Lukito and Samuel Woolley, 'Political Influencers on Social Media: An Introduction' (2023) 9(2) *Social Media + Society* 1.
- 2 In this report, references to "personalized relationship" means the individualized connections that social media influencers cultivate with their followers on various platforms, either through direct engagement such as responding to comments or direct messages, hosting live streams or initiating interactive discussions, or by customizing their content, responses or interactions to cater to the preferences and interests of their followers. We found that such connections imbue followers with a sense of being heard, valued and acknowledged by the influencers, fostering a sense of connection, loyalty and authenticity.
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