

Political polarization through political memes for new voters in the 2024 presidential election

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Abstract

New voters aged 17 to 24, categorized as Generation Z, are highly proficient in digital technology and actively use social media as a primary source of political information, particularly through political memes. Social media fosters an echo chamber effect by continuously presenting similar political content, reinforcing existing beliefs and contributing to political polarization. This study examines the phenomenon of political polarization among new voters in the 2024 presidential election through political memes, utilizing the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the echo chamber concept as theoretical frameworks. A qualitative approach was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews with new voters who rely on social media for political information, content analysis of political memes on social media platforms, and a literature review. The findings indicate that new voters predominantly engage with political information through the central route of processing, relying on news portals, social media, and interpersonal discussions. However, social media algorithms reinforce an echo chamber effect by curating content based on users' previous interactions, leading to the polarization of supporters of different candidates (01, 02, and 03). This polarization manifests in heated debates and conflicts, particularly in the comment sections of social media posts featuring political memes. The subjective interpretation of memes—often infused with humor, satire, or sarcasm—exacerbates tensions, as they are perceived as either excessively supportive of or hostile toward particular candidates, further intensifying political divisions.

Keywords: Echo Chamber; Political Memes; New Voters; Political Polarization

Introduction

On February 14, 2024, simultaneous elections were held to elect the president and vice president, members of the DPR, DPD, and DPRD at the provincial and regency or city levels (Wibawana, 2024). One of the key factors in the 2024 elections was first-time voters, whose significant numbers influenced voter turnout (Azirah, 2019). According to data from the General Elections Commission, of the 204.8 million voters in 2024, 25 million were first-time voters aged 17-24 years (KemenPPPA, 2024). The participation of first-time voters in the 2024 elections was crucial, making it essential for them to have received political education to become informed voters and understand political dynamics (Hasyim & Azkia, 2023).

First-time voters are aged 17-24 because elections in Indonesia are held every five years (Wibowo et al., 2020). This age group belongs to Generation Z, defined as Indonesians born between 1997 and 2012 (Kominform, 2021). Gen Z is a tech-savvy generation and often uses social media, particularly Instagram, to obtain political information (Muhamad, 2023). Instagram is widely used for political communication activities, especially in efforts to create and gauge public opinion on political issues (Indrawan et al., 2023). Furthermore, Instagram helps develop political literacy by enhancing knowledge about politics, understanding new political terms, and fostering confidence in political participation (Novian & Rusmono, 2021).

Gen Z's use of Instagram for political information falls into four types (El Qudsi & Syamtar, 2020). Unengaged users ignore political content and do not follow political developments. Excluded users engage with politics through other media but not on Instagram. Passive users seek political information but do not interact. Active users create, modify, comment on, and share political content. The use of Instagram in political activities exposes Gen Z or first-time voters to political content (Karim et al., 2020). Among the types of political content seen on social media, political

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memes stand out as a highly engaging and widely circulated form of political communication (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). A meme is an image or photo with text that generates a new meaning (Nugraha et al., 2015). Memes are essentially visual representations of social phenomena, including politics, packaged in the form of videos, images, or text and widely distributed on social media.

Political memes refer to memes that involve public interests or conflicts, political actors, representative actions, or political decisions (Johann & Bülow, 2019). Political engagement is a primary motivation for creating and sharing political memes on social media (Johann, 2022). As part of popular culture, political memes are an alternative option for political education. The exposure to political memes becomes a crucial factor influencing citizens' participation in political activities (Kasirye, 2019) Thus, political memes are part of political communication in the digital era.

Political memes influenced social media audiences to participate in the 2019 presidential election (Salikin & Sulaksono, 2022). Political memes have been used as a propaganda strategy to shape public opinion and garner political support (Aminulloh et al., 2022). Political memes have been employed to either build or damage the reputation of presidential candidates. Anonymous accounts on Twitter played a dominant role in constructing conversations using political memes about presidential candidates Jokowi and Prabowo, supported by influencers, buzzers, and bots, which amplified the quantity of these conversations (Soebakir et al., 2020).

The primary function of political memes is to depict opponents negatively and create stereotypical images of candidates (Pidkuimukha & Kiss, 2020) Political memes shared on social media can create societal polarization, dividing people into "us" versus "them" groups with deep distrust (Mansyur, 2023). This polarization threatens social harmony, exacerbates conflicts, and weakens democracy by reducing support for collective decisions and strengthening opposition attitudes (Rianadiwa et al., 2024). Based on this explanation, the researcher conducted a study titled that aiming to analyze the phenomenon of political polarization through political memes for first-time voters in the 2024 presidential election.

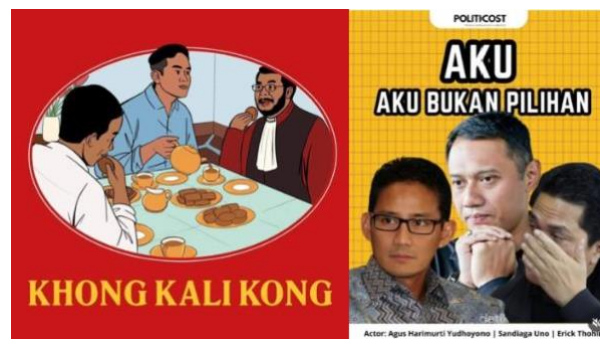


Figure 1. Example of political meme in presidential election 2024

Source: <https://indowork.id/2023/10/28/jelang-pemilu-calon-presiden-dan-wapres-jadi-lucu/>

This study employs the Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory and the concept of the echo chamber. The Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory explains how individuals process and respond to persuasive messages, including political content on social media. Memes are highly visual and easily shareable reinforce existing attitudes which aligns with the role of echo chambers, where individuals repeatedly encounter similar perspectives, leading to political polarization. Individuals process messages through two routes: the central route, which involves critical thinking and seeking information from various sources to verify data accuracy, and the peripheral route, which involves simpler thinking without consulting additional sources (Littlejohn et al., 2017). According to this theory, there are three types of arguments that can influence an individual's decision: strong arguments that contain calls to action supported by data and facts; neutral arguments that involve persuasion without influencing others; and weak arguments that convey weak persuasion indirectly (Prihantoro & Ohorella, 2020). In this study, the Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory is used to analyze the routes through which first-time voter access political memes, leading to political polarization during the 2024 presidential election.

An echo chamber is defined as an environment where individual opinions, political inclinations, or beliefs about a topic are reinforced through repeated interactions with peers or sources who share similar tendencies and attitudes (Cinelli et al., 2021). Through repeated interactions and constant exposure, individuals may begin to regard their beliefs as the ultimate truth. Echo chamber phenomena can be found both in real life and online, but are increasingly prevalent on social media due to its growing popularity. Echo chambers can lead to cognitive biases and narrow perspectives on a topic, as individuals are exposed to others with similar opinions and preferences (Wulandari et al., 2021). In this study, the echo chamber concept is used to analyze how polarization is created when first-time voters are exposed to and interact with individuals who share similar attitudes and opinions about political memes in the 2024 presidential election.

Previous research on political memes was conducted by Pidkuimukha & Kiss (2020) showed that political memes were used during the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election to construct negative images of political opponents. These images exaggerated negative traits, such as issues related to a candidate's political past. The memes used were popular Western memes incorporating humor, sarcasm, satire, and irony to reinforce negative messages.

Another study was conducted by Mahadian et al. (2019) indicated that political memes facilitate the imitation of ideas, political opinions, and attitudes, encouraging the replication and evolution of discourse, allowing it to "propagate." Political memes also contribute to stereotyping through satire or humor by using common assumptions as premises in one or more associative contexts. A subsequent study by Halversen & Weeks (2023) found that political memes were created to make jokes about candidates and influence others. The study also highlighted that political memes are a form of online expression and political participation, which can provoke anger from opposing candidate camps.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, aiming to explain a phenomenon in-depth through comprehensive data collection (Kriyantono, 2016). In qualitative research, the researcher acts as a "participant observer," directly recording detailed, complete, and in-depth descriptive sentences that accurately reflect the actual situation (Nugrahani & Hum, 2014). The qualitative approach is used to gather in-depth data on the phenomenon of political polarization through political memes among first-time voters in the 2024 presidential election. To obtain in-depth data, the researcher conducted interviews with five Generation Z individuals who will be voting for the first time in the presidential election. The interviewees are also active social media users, particularly on Instagram, where they are exposed to political meme content and participate in sharing these memes. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted observations and a literature review on political memes, political polarization, and first-time voters from books, journals, and reports. The data from the interviews, observations, and literature review were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's analysis technique, which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data collection: This was carried out by gathering research data through interviews, observations, and literature reviews related to political memes as a medium for political polarization among first-time voters in the 2024 presidential election; data reduction: the collected data were filtered based on theories and concepts relevant to political memes as a medium for political polarization among first-time voters, to be included in the research findings; data display: the findings were written in a report and analyzed using the Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory and the echo chamber concept; and conclusion drawing or verification: the research findings were summarized to address the research questions related to political memes as a medium for political polarization among first-time voters in the 2024 presidential election.

Results and Discussion

First-time voters aged between 17 and 24 years old can significantly impact political participation due to their substantial numbers. According to data from the General Election Commission (KPU), out of 204.8 million voters in 2024, 25 million are first-time voters. These voters have unique characteristics, as they exhibit high enthusiasm but their voting decisions are still uncertain, making

them swing voters (Astreawan, 2022). First-time voters belong to Generation Z, a tech-savvy generation that utilizes social media, particularly Instagram, to access political information (Muhamad, 2023). They access various information from Instagram and other social media platforms to help them decide on presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2024 presidential election.

One of the most frequently accessed types of content is political memes, which involve societal interests or conflicts, political actors, representative actions, or political decisions (Johann & Bülow, 2019). Political memes were a significant factor influencing voter participation during the 2019 presidential election (Salikin & Sulaksono, 2022). Political memes are used to influence public opinion to garner political support from the public (Aminulloh et al., 2022). Moreover, political memes on social media have a positive and significant effect on the political literacy of Generation Z (Nazhif, 2022).

Political memes are packaged in the form of images or videos containing text or political figures to create stereotypical depictions of candidates (Pidkuimukha & Kiss, 2020). These political memes eventually form support groups, leading to polarization among Generation Z in society. Polarization refers to divisions within society, resulting in the emergence of "us" versus "them" dynamics, where people become divided and distrustful of one another (Mansyur, 2023). This polarization threatens social harmony and can lead to conflicts due to differing political choices. The researcher conducted interviews with Generation Z individuals who are involved in sharing political memes to analyze the phenomenon of political polarization through political memes among first-time voters in the 2024 presidential election.

Central Route and Peripheral Route in Seeking Political Information

Generation Z exhibits high enthusiasm, is relatively rational, and is eager for change, but lacks political experience, making them more susceptible to changes in preferences based on the information they receive (Astreawan, 2022). With easy access to technology, first-time voters utilize various sources of information to learn about politics. They obtain political information from multiple sources, such as internet media, friends, or close acquaintances. The government, through Law No. 2 of 2011, also mandates political parties to provide political education to first-time voters, ensuring they become informed voters who understand the dynamics of politics (Hasyim & Azkia, 2023).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model Theory explains how individuals process and respond to persuasive messages, including political content on social media through two routes: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves more critical thinking, prompting individuals to seek information from multiple sources to verify the validity of the data, while the peripheral route involves simpler thinking without relying on other sources (Littlejohn et al., 2017). Based on interviews with respondents, they sought political information from multiple sources, including online news portals, social media, and trusted individuals. Therefore, first-time voters tend to use the central route in seeking political information, indicating that they are more critical and do not rely on just one source.

First-time voters engage with political information through the central route by evaluating the evidence, credibility, and argument quality of both the creators and disseminators of political memes. They exhibit critical thinking, intelligence, and a strong commitment to democracy, making them less susceptible to external influence or intimidation (Diskominfo, 2024). Their approach to political content involves careful, logical, and analytical processing, ensuring that the information they consume aligns with credible sources before engaging with or sharing it. A key factor in this process is the credibility of social media accounts that produce and distribute political memes. One of the most frequently accessed accounts for political memes is @politicaljokesid, which has a following of approximately 354,000 users. This Instagram account is known for its critical and satirical counter-narratives in the political sphere, using memes as a form of digital political participation (Qolbi et al., 2020). The engagement with such content reflects the tendency of first-time voters to seek and assess political messages beyond surface-level appeal.

A high level of access to information and education plays a crucial role in shaping the political integrity of the respondents in this study. As first-time voters, they dedicate more than

three hours per day to smartphone usage and are actively engaged in academic discourse on political communication through their university coursework. This exposure enhances their understanding of political dynamics, enabling them to critically assess electoral choices. Recognizing the significance of their vote in shaping national leadership and policy direction, these voters actively seek information to make informed decisions. Social media, with its accessibility and real-time updates, serves as a primary source for gathering information on candidates. Their engagement with digital platforms reflects a strategic adaptation to the modern political landscape, where information is rapidly disseminated and public discourse is shaped through online interactions.

"Initially, I didn't know who to vote for, but I started to look at the track records of the candidates."

Respondents used online news portals, social media, and trusted individuals to seek political information, which then influenced their decisions in choosing presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The news they accessed related to political figures or specific cases involving the candidates. They also followed several political accounts, particularly those that posted political memes, such as @politicaljokesid. Respondents discussed their findings with trusted individuals, even those who had voted in previous presidential elections. They actively share content, including political memes, to facilitate discussions on each presidential and vice-presidential candidate. This exchange of information serves as a medium for political deliberation, allowing them to evaluate different perspectives, reinforce their arguments, and engage in collective political discourse within their social circles.

"People around me are voting for a certain candidate, so I also started looking up information about them, even though I haven't decided yet."

Echo Chamber of First-Time Voters in the 2024 Presidential Election

An echo chamber is an environment where an individual's opinions, political tendencies, or beliefs on a topic are reinforced by repeated interactions with sources sharing similar attitudes and tendencies (Cinelli et al., 2021). Echo chambers can trigger cognitive biases and narrow perspectives on a topic by exposing individuals to others with similar opinions and preferences (Wulandari et al., 2021). Social media creates echo chambers through algorithms that recommend similar content based on an individual's previous likes or views, especially in the Instagram explorer feed. Respondents in this study frequently access political information on social media, resulting in their social media feeds being filled with political content.

Respondents reported liking political memes that "relate" to their personal views. In addition to political memes, they also view content on specific political figures, leading social media algorithms to recommend similar content, a phenomenon referred to as a filter bubble (Wulandari et al., 2021). Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok use filter bubbles that create echo chambers among supporters of different presidential candidates. This aligns with the tendency of Generation Z to engage only with content they find appealing.

"Gen Z just looks for like-minded people. We seek out people who like what we like."

Respondents actively shared political memes with peers who supported the same candidate to strengthen and reaffirm their political choices. However, they also shared information with those holding different opinions to engage in discussions and gain new insights. Respondents participated in watch parties for all presidential and vice-presidential debates via Zoom, during which they provided live reactions. Some respondents also engaged in comment wars on political accounts they followed, posting positive comments on those that aligned with their views and negative comments on those that contradicted their opinions. Frequent involvement with like-minded individuals led respondents to view information subjectively rather than objectively.

“Yes, we had a watch party, too. We watched it via Zoom. We shared screens and watched together, while reacting live.”

“I like being friends with people who are like me, so it’s no longer objective.”

Political Polarization through Political Memes for First-Time Voters in the 2024 Presidential Election

Political memes are a popular source of content used by first-time voters to understand political issues during the 2024 presidential election. As election season approaches, numerous social media accounts post political memes that are easily accessible, especially for first-time voters. Political memes on social media have a positive and significant impact on Generation Z's political literacy (Nazhif, 2022). They also positively influence first-time voters' participation in the 2024 presidential election. Political memes play a significant role due to their simple and engaging audio-visual format, making them easier for first-time voters to understand compared to other media.

“In Gen Z circles, memes are easier to understand compared to reading news or watching full-length videos; we understand more quickly.”

Respondents not only accessed political memes but also actively shared them with friends, engaging in direct discussions. They shared political memes about specific figures or topics with friends who supported the same candidates to gain backing. They also shared political memes with friends who had different political preferences to discuss or attempt to influence their opinions. In some cases, respondents shared political memes as jokes or to engage in playful banter, acknowledging that political memes often contain humor that shouldn't be taken too seriously.

“I repost because I find it fun. When I repost, it’s to let people see the post and I want to see their comments from different points of view.”

“We often share memes, just for fun. I share, my friends share, we have a group where we frequently share funny memes.”

Political memes are created to joke about candidates and to influence others (Halversen & Weeks, 2023). Respondents particularly favored political memes that were humorous or satirical, especially those that poked fun at one of the candidates. This aligns with findings from Mahadian et al. (2019) which showed that political memes serve as a foundation for stereotyping through satire or humor, using widely held assumptions as a premise involving one or all candidates. Satirical political memes were also used by respondents to engage in banter with supporters of other candidates.

Political memes packaged with humor, satire, and mockery often generate heated comments on social media. Comment sections fill with both positive and negative responses, leading to discussions and even online conflicts. Social media accounts posting political memes often accompany them with captions designed to spark debates, making disputes inevitable. This occurs because first-time voters interpret political memes subjectively, not objectively. They are already biased toward certain candidates and hostile toward others, which makes them easily provoked. They write opinions in the comments or respond to others who share or oppose their views.

Voters' lack of objectivity can be attributed to echo chambers, which are reinforced by social media algorithms. Echo chambers create cognitive biases and narrow perspectives by repeatedly exposing individuals to similar opinions and topics (Wulandari et al., 2021). Social media algorithms recommend similar content if individuals interact with or like particular posts. When first-time voters search for information on a particular candidate, their social media feeds continue to display similar content, resulting in greater exposure to information about that candidate. Consequently, they no longer view content objectively, but rather subjectively, according to the content they receive.

Social media algorithms that create echo chambers can influence policy-making, political communication, and the evolution of public debates, particularly on polarizing topics (Cinelli et al., 2021). This polarization threatens social harmony and can lead to conflict due to differing political choices. First-time voters are divided into groups supporting candidates 01, 02, and 03, often engaging in online conflicts, especially following the broadcast of presidential and vice-presidential debates. Through political memes, first-time voters become more entrenched in their support for a particular candidate. They write comments, post stories, or share specific political memes to express their support or opposition toward particular candidates.

“They’ll think, ‘Oh, someone agrees with me. I’m not the only one who thinks this way.’ So, they feel validated, and this creates groups that dislike candidate 1, 2, or 3, or groups that support candidates 1, 2, or 3, because they feel the meme represents their feelings.”

Political memes that are satirical, humorous, or critical of a particular candidate can provoke debates in the comment sections where these memes are posted. These debates often involve sharing data or simply expressing opinions. Such comments reflect the polarization caused by political memes, as people argue with those who post negative comments about the candidates they support. Comment sections also create echo chambers, where relevant comments appear at the top.

“I’ve noticed several times in meme posts, the comments are already divided into factions. Those who support a candidate will seek out others who also support them.”

First-time voters tend to seek out comments or content that aligns with their political support or understanding. They use social media to show their support by posting or sharing political memes with friends who back the same candidate, fostering communication with like-minded peers. When they find friends who share the same support, they solidify their choice of candidate. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) Theory explains how people process political content on social media through two routes: the central route and the peripheral route. The choice of route depends on how critically voters filter information about candidates. Voters using the central route think logically, rely on credible sources, and compare multiple perspectives before making a decision. In contrast, the peripheral route is based on emotional appeal, where voters rely on unverified sources, often influenced by humor and visuals. Political memes attract attention but can limit critical thinking, leading voters to trust a single, biased source. This reinforces confirmation bias, as they seek content that aligns with their views instead of evaluating all candidates objectively. As a result, their political knowledge becomes one-sided, deepening polarization.

Conclusion

First-time voters, aged 17 to 24, fall into the Generation Z category, a tech-savvy group that utilizes social media to access political information. Although Generation Z shows high enthusiasm, their voting preferences remain fluid, positioning them as potential swing voters in the 2024 presidential election. Political memes, which are light and entertaining in format, can be used to influence swing voters to support a particular candidate. First-time voters employ the central route of information processing by seeking political information from news portals, social media, and close contacts. Social media, in particular, actively disseminates political memes, exposing first-time voters to such content regularly. Through the algorithmic filter bubble, social media creates echo chambers by continually providing content relevant to what first-time voters have previously accessed. These echo chambers eventually lead to the polarization of supporters for candidates 01, 02, and 03 on social media platforms. Polarization may result in divisions, as it often triggers discussions or debates that escalate into online conflicts among supporters. First-time voters backing a particular candidate tend to engage in debates in the comment sections of political meme posts, especially when the memes heavily favor or criticize a specific candidate. Political memes containing humor, satire, and mockery are often interpreted subjectively, leading them to be seen as

overly supportive or critical of a candidate. This can cause divisions both online and offline, driven solely by differing political affiliations.

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