

TikTokking To Voters?

Policy Attention on TikTok During the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 U.S. presidential election was the first in which both major-party candidates incorporated TikTok into their digital campaign strategies, giving campaigns a new way to reach younger voters. This paper examines how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump used the platform to communicate about public policy and the relationship between policy discussion and engagement. We analyze 680 videos posted by the candidate and campaign accounts for both candidates between July 21 and November 5, 2024, coding each for explicit policy content and policy topic. Policy communication was relatively uncommon, and Trump was significantly more likely than Harris to discuss policy. The campaigns also emphasized different agendas. Trump focused heavily on macroeconomics, immigration, and law and crime, while Harris devoted more attention to abortion policy. We find little evidence that the emphasis on policy increased as Election Day approached. Policy-focused videos also received less engagement than non-policy content, while Trump videos consistently received greater engagement than Harris videos. These findings highlight the tension between traditional campaign policy communication and the incentives of a short-form, algorithmically curated platform.

Keywords: policy agendas, TikTok, issue ownership, presidential elections

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Introduction

The 2024 U.S. presidential election was the first election in which both candidates, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, adopted TikTok as part of their digital communication strategy. Over the last decade, TikTok has become one of the most popular platforms for young people, and adopting TikTok offered campaigns a way to talk to these voters directly. According to Pew Research Center, 63% of adults under 30 are on TikTok, with 43% saying they get news from TikTok (McClain and Eddy 2026). Harris recognized this opportunity soon after entering the race. “Although Joe had felt differently, I made the immediate decision to go on TikTok,” she wrote in her memoir. “The @KamalaHQ TikTok would be a five-person Gen Z team in their twenties. We would give them a few rules of the road and then let them trick it out. Insta would have a Millennial flavor, X would be directed at political junkies, and Facebook would target the Boomers” (Harris 2025).

TikTok is a new medium for campaigning, and many of the voters they were trying to reach were new to electoral politics. It is not clear what strategies campaigns would choose to use on this platform. Both mobilization and persuasion are viable strategies when trying to reach young people. Several issues were salient during the election, offering talking points and ways to engage voters. However, TikTok as a platform offers other affordances to users that might incentivize different types of messages. TikTok embraces short, vertical video that engages users with music, memes, or other content. The TikTok algorithm means that even those not following political content may still be exposed to it.

In this paper, we analyze 680 TikTok videos from the Harris and Trump campaigns, considering the messages used by each campaign as they try to reach young voters. Coding for policy, we find that only 27.5% of videos contained explicit discussion of policies. Trump, the 2024 challenger, was significantly more likely to discuss policy, often including videos discussing the economy, law and crime, and immigration. While Harris mentioned more issues throughout the campaign, she prioritized civil rights with discussions of abortion rights. The campaigns rarely talked about the same issues. Trump’s approach appeared to work, with Trump videos receiving significantly more engagement, though both campaigns suffered an engagement penalty when discussing policy.

The 2024 election was the first election where both major parties campaigned on the platform, and TikTok now seems here to stay. Whether it remains a site to reach young voters, a specific generation, or expands to other age groups, TikTok offers a unique way to reach voters.

Literature Review

Campaigns, Policy Communication, and Platforms

Political scientists have been interested in campaigns, how they influence decision-making (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944), whether they are persuasive or not (Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2013; Kalla and Broockman 2018), and whether they effectively mobilize (Gerber and Green 2000) for the better part of a century. Campaigns represent strategic political communication aimed at a specific audience and goal, giving us valuable insights into what politicians prioritize and what they think voters should be thinking about. The decision to communicate about certain issues is often conceived with the end goal of persuading or mobilizing voters in mind. This often takes place through selective attention to a set of issues that gives them a comparative advantage over their opponents, known as issue ownership (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003). By campaigning on an issue your party “owns”, candidates attempt to set the agenda for the election and convince voters they are best situated to lead in

this political moment. Broadly speaking, Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) identify Republicans as having issue ownership on policies such as taxes, spending, crime, and defense, while Democrats own issues such as healthcare, social welfare, and civil rights. Topics like national security and the economy fluctuate based on the performance of the current administration.

Politicians face constraints on what issues they can capitalize on, and their strategies are contingent on factors beyond their control. Vavreck (2009) highlights how the state of the economy, often seen as the most important policy topic in elections, influences the strategies incumbents and challengers choose. For example, when the economic conditions favor a candidate, they will run on economic issues, clarifying why they are the right choice in the moment. Candidates for whom the economy is an unfavorable topic will often run on different issues. Taken together, this means we expect campaigns to focus on issues they own, regardless of the medium they use to communicate, with some limitations, particularly around the economy.

There is a strand of literature that argues campaigns are often minimally effective at achieving their goals of persuasion and mobilization. While this seems contradictory as politicians pour money and resources into campaigning, the question has remained since the minimal-effects era of the 1940s (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Recent work by Kalla and Broockman (2018) indicates that the persuasive effect of campaigns in the general election is essentially zero, although there are some circumstances in which persuasion may be possible. If this is the case, what matters about campaigns? We argue that it is the content they strategically choose to highlight, which even if it does not persuade voters, sets the terms on which the campaign is fought. By strategically highlighting certain issues, campaigns can shift the perception of what is most important (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This can mobilize voters by informing them which issues are at stake, what a candidate's stance is on a key issue, and changing their evaluation of whether participating is worth their time.

Strategic issue selection can go beyond simply priming the electorate. Hillygus and Shields (2008) argue that selecting wedge issues – such as immigration or abortion – can cross-pressure voters who hold policy stances at odds with their partisan identification. Collectively, whether through priming the electorate, selecting wedge issues, or even attempting to set the political agenda (Feezell 2018; Gilardi et al. 2022), the strategic communication of policy issues is fundamental to understanding campaigns and is worth measuring to improve the interpretation of electoral outcomes.

In this study, we utilize the adoption of TikTok, a short-form video, social media platform, by both candidates in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, to examine whether traditional campaign dynamics remain at play. Given the incentives and affordances of the platform, there is reason to question whether TikTok is suited for traditional campaign communication strategies. This leads us to our central research question:

RQ1: How did Kamala Harris and Donald Trump approach policy communication on TikTok during the 2024 U.S. presidential election?

Decades of research tell us to expect policy communication from presidential candidates to be a key feature of campaign strategy, but, as we discuss below, TikTok's affordances and user culture may complicate this strategy for candidates. That said, we expect certain patterns of issue ownership to maintain, and for policy communication to focus in the weeks leading up to the election.

H1: In their policy communication, candidates will devote a disproportionate share of their attention to issues owned by their party.

H2: As election day approaches, both campaigns will increase the volume of their policy-related communication monotonically.

These two hypotheses allow us to gauge whether these expectations remain despite the adoption of a new medium of communication. In the next section, we discuss reasons why TikTok may encourage candidates to turn away from policy communication altogether, stemming from the platform's cultural norms and underlying algorithmic infrastructure.

Young People and the Challenges of TikTok for Campaigns

As a platform, TikTok's audience is disproportionately young, requiring campaigns to adapt their messages to this age group. Young people are also a distinctive electoral audience, voting at lower rates than older Americans, and many are still developing their political and partisan identities (CIRCLE 2025; Sears and Valentino 1997). This makes the age group a useful group to target, especially in swing states where the margin of victory is often a matter of tens of thousands of votes. Presidential campaigns can be important socializing events for younger citizens, helping crystallize partisan attitudes and political orientations (Sears and Valentino 1997). On the other hand, TikTok has become a platform for politically engaged users to talk and learn about issues, organize, and even take political action (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2023). Because partisan attitudes have not yet crystallized, this is an age group in which both the mobilization of supporters and the persuasion of potential voters are possible strategies. Whether one is explicitly looking for political content or not, the algorithm is still likely to expose users to political content (Tomkins, Ge, and Rothschild 2025).

Issues impact young people in distinct ways, and throughout the 2024 election there were several salient issues campaigns might have engaged them with. Young people may also evaluate parties partly through whether leaders appear responsive to the issues and priorities that matter to them (McSweeney 2024). Across all age groups, the economy was a top concern, with a study from CIRCLE finding that 67% of young people included it in their top three most important issues. The 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the resulting increase in abortion restrictions throughout the country was a highly salient issue for young Democrats. Abortion had proven to be an issue that helped Democrats build cross-cutting coalitions in several states that put access on the ballot, and it remained important in 2024 (Durkee 2024). Throughout 2024, protests related to the conflict in Gaza had flared on college campuses, and in general, support for Israel had a major age gap across both parties (Cavari 2013, Silver 2026). Youth activist organizations were also calling for action on issues like gun control, climate change, and student loans (Youth Agenda 2024). For Republicans, Turning Point USA and a series of influencers and podcasters helped make issues salient. Young people in both parties had issue priorities, and TikTok could serve as the platform for candidates to communicate their ideas, attacks, and successes.

A challenge for campaigns is that TikTok's short-form video and recommendation algorithm encourage videos that can quickly catch the attention of users. Therefore, candidates might experiment with options other than issues for gaining attention. Campaigns can use culturally recognizable content such as music or memes to communicate their personality, expressing warmth, competence, leadership, joy, or other traits voters may be looking for in a candidate (Halversen and Weeks 2023; Lausten and Bor

2017). Beyond issues, campaigns can also use TikTok to focus on identities (Tomkins, Ge, and Rothschild 2025). Identity has become increasingly important in American politics, shaping how people view both their in-group and out-group (Huddy 2001, Mason 2018). Identity-focused language may be able to mobilize through threat, without explicitly discussing issues. Candidates have options when determining how to reach these voters and may choose to experiment with a variety of options based on the affordances offered on TikTok.

Scholars have long observed that social media features a set of affordances that allow users to interact, deliberate, and participate in content creation; traditional media has no analogous mechanism. What this means is that campaigns must make decisions about campaign strategy that follow the logic of the platform they use, and platforms differ drastically in what they offer users (Bossetta 2018). Despite this promise, Stromer-Galley (2019) notes that campaigns very rarely take advantage of the interactive features, and often adopt a broadcast-style approach to new media. So while campaigns do not take advantage of every affordance a platform gives them, it does provide constraints.

There are reasons to believe the constraints of a platform like TikTok are greater than earlier generations of new media. Emails, websites, Facebook, and Twitter, for example, are all text-based, a medium politicians and campaigns are very comfortable with. A short-form video platform like TikTok places new technological burdens, as well as expectations for authenticity and familiarity with cultural norms (Burnley 2025). Cervi, Tejedor, and Blesa (2023) show that politicians attempt to blend political and entertainment content on TikTok in response to these cultural constraints. Additionally, whereas earlier generations of social media platforms relied on generating a following, TikTok is unique in that the recommendation algorithm is seen as central to determining the content users see, not who they follow (Guinaudeau, Munger, and Votta 2022). Virality then is crucial to success on the platform.

Studies of political communication on TikTok have found that the platform does have a robust culture of political content, even if that is not what the platform is known for. Medina Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich (2020) conducted one of the first studies looking at political content on TikTok and found high levels of interactivity between users and similar levels of posting from users identified with both major U.S. parties. While Republicans received more views, Democrats interacted more in cross-partisan discussion. Activists are also active on the platform, adapting to the same constraints faced by politicians in an attempt to raise the salience of their movement. Research from Cervi and Divon (2023) and from Jalli (2025) highlight how activists utilize viral trends in an attempt to reach the widest possible audience, while also having to trade the political depth and nuance that is hard to translate into a viral moment.

The underlying tension regarding TikTok and the 2024 presidential election is that, given how close presidential elections are in a polarized America, campaigns are highly incentivized to reach every single voter they can. This certainly includes young voters who vote at lower rates and likely use TikTok as their primary social media platform. However, the platform itself, not only in the viral culture that makes it entertaining, but in its design that relies heavily on algorithmic recommendations, disadvantages the traditional political content we associate with presidential campaigns. We are interested in the degree to which this first adoption of the platform for a presidential campaign featured candidates adapting their communication strategy to a new platform.

H3: TikTok videos featuring policy communication will receive less engagement across the board than videos that do not feature policy communication.

Data and Methods

For this paper, we collected all TikTok videos posted by the two major candidates in the 2024 United States presidential election: Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Each candidate operated two accounts, leaving us with four total accounts to consider. The differences in these four accounts are worth exploring because each candidate operated one account associated with them personally (@kamalaharris, @realdonaldtrump) and one associated with their campaign (@kamalahq, @teamtrump). Account types are typically run by different teams, with personal accounts often focusing on traditional campaign communication, whereas campaign accounts are more likely to engage with platform trends and memes (Russell 2021).

We chose TikTok as an object of study precisely because it is not seen as a place where traditional campaigning would transfer easily, particularly policy communication. The affordances of the platform, particularly its emphasis on viral video spread through the algorithmically curated For You Page, present challenges that earlier text-based social media platforms did not for political campaigning (B. Burnley 2025; Guinaudeau, Munger, and Votta 2022). For our purposes, we wanted to see how and to what extent policy communication thrives in an environment that is not necessarily suited for it. While there are examples of substantive communication and debate on TikTok, even around politics, these videos often come from users who are more accustomed to the platform and can natively communicate in a way that feels authentic (see work on activism: Cervi and Divon 2023; Jalli 2025).

Using the four handles identified above, we collected all videos posted by these accounts over the entire campaign cycle. We consider only the period where Kamala Harris was the candidate, between July 21, 2024 and election day, November 5, 2024, inclusive. To do this, we used the traktok package for R (Gruber 2026) and authenticated with credentials for the TikTok Research API. This ensures the data collection process both meets TikTok's research terms and is reproducible. For each video, we collected engagement metadata such as views, likes, comments, reposts, as well as post duration, and additional media information, such as whether the post used music or other audio. All metadata was collected in 2026, so all engagement metrics would have stabilized, and videos would almost certainly have fallen out of algorithmic recommendation. In total, the four accounts produced 680 TikTok videos that we analyzed and handcoded for policy content.

To assess the policy content of each TikTok video, we watched the full video and systematically coded three policy variables: whether the video contained policy at all, the major policy topic, and the policy subtopic. We used the Comparative Agendas Project codebook (Jones et al. 2025) to classify all policy into major topics and subtopics, using the major topic as the main variable. Videos can contain more than one major topic or subtopic. We independently coded a random sample of 100 TikTok videos to verify we were coding the policy content variable similarly. During this process, we also coded for several variables associated with the virality of a given video, such as whether the video contained a meme or music, and whether the video was a reposted political advertisement to use as control variables.

An intercoder reliability check on the policy communication variable yielded a Krippendorff's α of .92. The full major topic reliability table is presented in the appendix. We then separately coded the remaining 580 videos using the scheme above. This yielded 187 videos that explicitly mentioned a policy topic, 27.5% of all TikTok videos posted. Candidates discussed 18 of the 21 major topics, and mentioned 64 of the 220 subtopics.

Results

Differences in Policy Attention

How did the candidates differ in the frequency of their posting and their policy attention? Table 1 shows frequencies by candidate and account for the period of the campaign, with an additional breakdown by account for each candidate. While Harris was the much more active candidate, posting 437 TikTok videos over the course of the campaign, only 22.4% of her videos explicitly focused on a policy issue. In contrast, Trump posted fewer videos, only 243 over the campaign, but focused more on policy, with 36.6% of his videos explicitly mentioning a policy issue. This difference in policy attention of roughly 14% is substantively and statistically significant ($t = -3.85$, $p < 0.001$).

Broken down by account type, both candidates were more active from their campaign accounts (@kamalahq and @teamtrump) than their personal accounts (@kamalaharris and @realdonaldtrump). While Harris slightly favored her campaign account to post policy content, Trump primarily used his personal account to post policy content. This is largely because the Trump campaign posted far more traditional political advertisements to their feeds, especially on the @realdonaldtrump account. Due to this, we find no meaningful difference, at least in this data, in the policy focus based on the type of account.

In general, we view this level of policy attention as quite low as a share of total output. While these benchmarks are uncommon, Burnley and Russell (2026) analyze a decade's worth of tweets from sitting U.S. senators and estimate that roughly 68% of their total output was policy-related. While this comparison is not exact, in terms of both the politician and the platform, it provides supporting evidence that TikTok is less policy-focused than other social media platforms, at least as currently used.

Candidate	N	Policy	Policy %	Account	N	Policy	Policy %
Harris	437	98	22.4	@kamalaharris	171	35	20.5
				@kamalahq	266	63	23.7
Trump	243	89	36.6	@realdonaldtrump	47	20	42.6
				@teamtrump	196	69	35.2

Table 1: Differences Between Candidate Accounts in Total Videos and Policy Videos

When we turn to the policy content of the videos themselves, we find that the two campaigns differed in the policy they focused on in the lead-up to the election. Figure 1 shows the proportion of videos that explicitly mention each policy major topic by candidate, ordered by the difference in proportions between candidates. While Harris focused on a wider breadth of policy, mentioning policy that fell under 18 of the 21 Comparative Agendas Project major topics, she focused heaviest on a single policy topic – Civil Rights, which here is almost exclusively a discussion of abortion policy.³ Trump, on

³ The Comparative Agendas Project has abortion policy under the right to privacy, in regard to how abortion protection is often legally codified. Of the videos we coded for Civil Rights, 45 of the 52 mentioned abortion rights and no other subtopics.

the other hand, focused on fewer policy topics (14 of 21), but primarily focused on the topics of Macroeconomics, Immigration, and Law and Crime.

The policy distributions show that the campaigns were allocating their policy attention to substantively different areas, rather than campaigning on the same policy ground. While the economy was reported as the most important issue to voters in the run-up to election day, we see evidence that only Trump spent a good portion of his policy attention on the topic. Trump mentioned economic policy – whether interest rates, cost of living, or inflation – in 42 (17.3%) of his TikTok posts. In comparison, Harris only mentioned economic policy in 14 (3.2%) of her TikTok posts. As the incumbent party candidate, Harris may have been trying to distance herself from the economic conditions during the campaign

(Vavreck

2009).

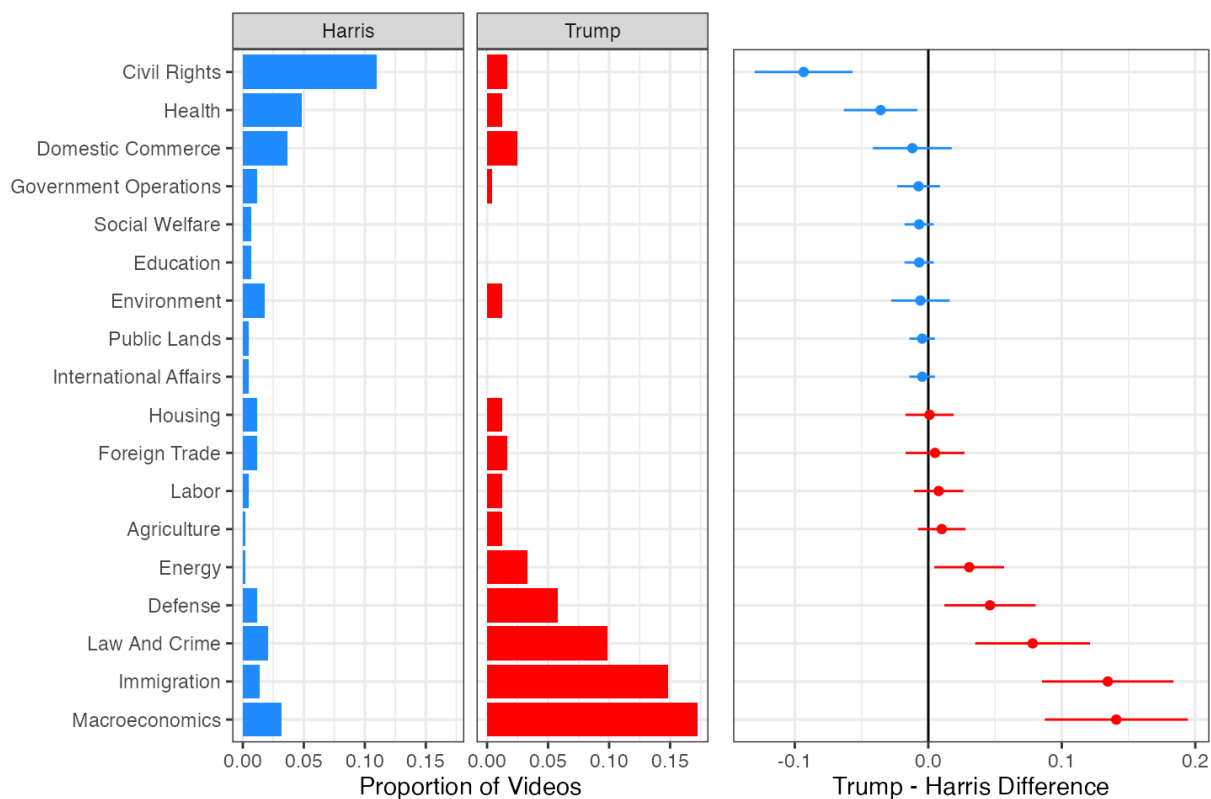


Figure 1: Difference in Policy Topic Mentions by Candidate

Note: The left-hand panel of the figure shows the percentage of videos that explicitly mention each policy topic by campaign. The right-hand side shows the results of a two-proportion test with 95% confidence intervals, comparing each campaign's policy attention by topic.

The right-side panel of Figure 1 shows the results of a two-proportion test for each policy topic across the two campaigns, with a multiple-comparisons correction. The difference in policy attention is plotted with 95% confidence intervals. We see that for many policy topics, the campaigns do not differ significantly in their policy focus. For Harris, the issues of Civil Rights and Health receive attention at a rate that is significantly higher than that of the Trump campaign. For Trump, the issues of Macroeconomics, Immigration, Law and Crime, Defense, and Energy (often energy cost) receive a level of attention that is significantly higher than that of the Harris campaign. These results provide evidence

that the campaigns differed in their policy communication, at least on TikTok, in a way that is not only substantially interesting but statistically significant. Moreover, the issues highlighted by each campaign map well onto the concept of Democratic and Republican issues, as defined in Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003).

Moving forward, we consider how the top six policy topics – Macroeconomics, Civil Rights, Immigration, Law and Crime, Health, and Defense – were discussed over time and how they impacted the engagement each candidate received on the platform. First, we assess the robustness of the two-way proportion test to show that differences in policy attention are not attributable to different digital communication strategies. Table 2 shows the results of a logistic regression model that controls for factors that would be associated with greater policy attention simply through posting longer videos: video length, and whether the video was a political ad reposted to TikTok. We also use week-level fixed effects to control for variations in policy focus by week. The Trump campaign posted more political advertisements directly to their TikTok accounts than the Harris campaign. These videos were often longer and focused on a number of policy issues over two to three minutes, rather than one topic over a matter of 20 to 30 seconds.

	Macroeconomics	Immigration	Law and Crime	Defense	Civil Rights	Health
Trump	1.745*** (0.278)	3.135*** (0.283)	2.294*** (0.607)	2.277*** (0.409)	-3.252*** (0.615)	-1.561 (0.835)
Ad	1.443*** (0.410)	0.979 (0.644)	1.889** (0.587)	0.949 (0.969)	2.475*** (0.537)	1.364 (0.922)
Video Length	0.005 (0.005)	0.020*** (0.004)	0.024*** (0.004)	0.016 (0.009)	0.008* (0.004)	0.011** (0.003)
Num.Obs.	654	591	654	590	642	433
R2	0.183	0.321	0.341	0.214	0.184	0.131
R2 Adj.	0.094	0.235	0.211	0.059	0.095	-0.009
RMSE	0.26	0.22	0.19	0.17	0.25	0.22
Week FE	X	X	X	X	X	X

p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 2: Logistic Regression Model Predicting Policy Attention

Note: Table shows the regression output of logistic regression models predicting a dummy indicator for each of the six policy topics listed above. Given we use week-level fixed effects, any week where there are no videos on a given policy topic gets dropped, leading to differences in the number of observations.

Across the six policy topics, all maintain their significant difference between campaigns, with the exception of Health. Knowing a video was an advertisement and the video's length are associated with greater policy attention in several of the models, indicating that, to some extent, policy attention is a function of how long a TikTok video is. Given the average video is quite short (~33 seconds), campaigns

may face the tradeoff between greater policy focus and fewer viewers. We return to this question when discussing engagement.

Differences over Time

We find limited evidence that policy attention increases over time. While the raw number of policy-focused videos does increase as election day nears, the proportion of videos that mention policy actually decreases for both candidates. Figure 2 shows both the number of policy videos posted by each campaign and the proportion of their total videos that focused on policy, both plotted with local regression trendlines. The left-hand panel shows that the total volume of policy-related TikToks posted by both campaigns follows a very similar pattern, increasing as election day approaches. However, the center panel shows that this is a function of the increase in overall output over time, indicating that we do not see an increase in the proportion of policy videos posted. If anything, the campaigns decrease their policy content in the final weeks leading up to the election.

In the right-hand panel, we identify an important caveat to this. The plot shows the total number of videos posted mentioning each topic for each week of the campaign. For example, when looking at the topic of immigration, the Trump campaign posted a total of 36 videos mentioning the policy issue. The facet showing when this policy communication occurred indicates that his campaign posted 10 immigration videos in the second-to-last week and 9 in the final week. A similar pattern is seen for each of the policy topics of interest. So while policy communication as a proportion of the total output did not increase over time, we do see both campaigns focusing on their top policy priorities in the final weeks of the campaign, when many undecided voters make their decision (Hayes and Benegal 2025) and when engagement on the platform was highest.

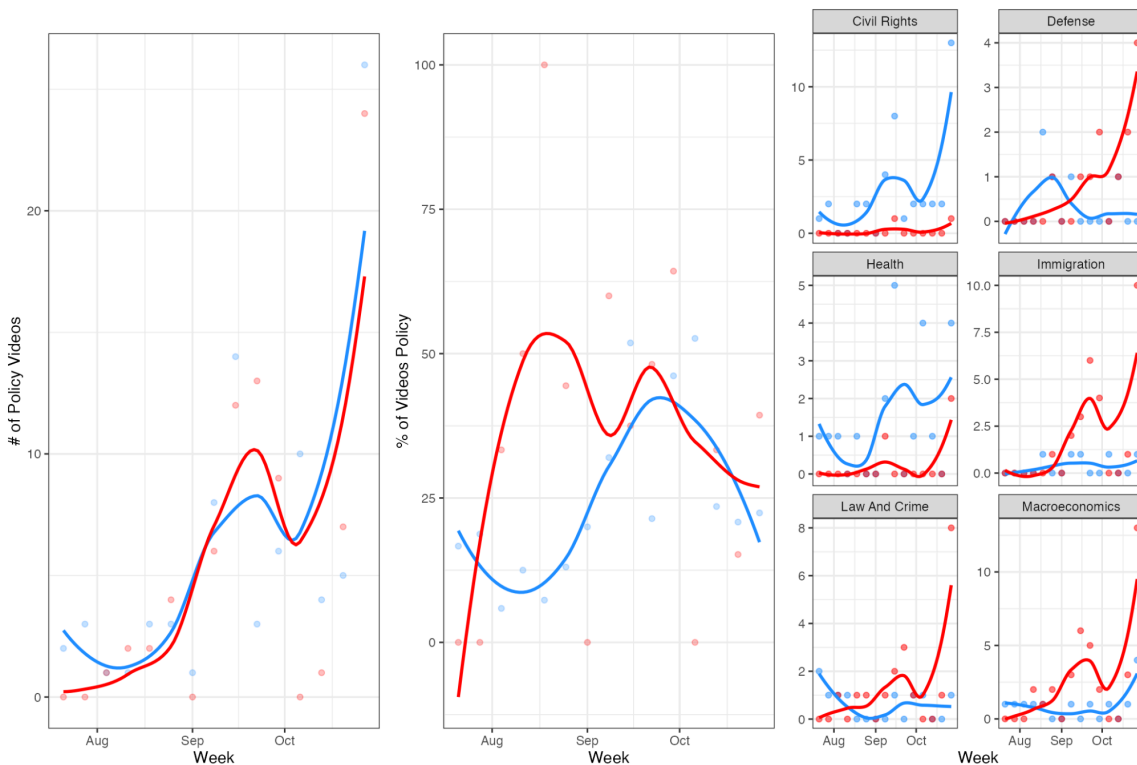


Figure 2: Time Trends in Policy Attention

Engagement with Policy Content

The final question we explored was whether policy content was related to the total level of engagement a candidate got on the platform. Table 3 shows the results of a linear regression model with one of the four engagement types we capture as the dependent variable: likes, views, shares, or comments. Here, we use the natural log of engagement, given the right-skewed distribution of engagement across the videos in our sample. We control for independent variables of interest, such as candidate, whether the video mentioned any policy topic, and, finally, for each policy topic individually. Additionally, we control for several variables that we believe could increase a video's virality, such as whether it contained a meme and whether it used music. Finally, we use week-level fixed effects to control for variation in engagement by campaign week.

	Likes	Likes	Likes	Views	Views	Views	Shares	Shares	Shares	Comments	Comments	Comments
Trump	0.400*	0.405*	0.486*	0.647***	0.631***	0.709***	1.111***	1.112***	1.202***	1.199***	1.195***	1.234***
	(0.150)	(0.154)	(0.187)	(0.140)	(0.150)	(0.168)	(0.177)	(0.180)	(0.231)	(0.129)	(0.130)	(0.160)
Policy Content	-0.400*	-0.374*		-0.406**	-0.364*	-0.401	-0.354	-0.436*		-0.335**	-0.387**	
	(0.140)	(0.153)		(0.117)	(0.137)	(0.302)	(0.176)	(0.183)		(0.108)	(0.122)	
Meme		-0.053	-0.042		-0.233	-0.241		0.056	0.065		-0.756***	-0.745***
		(0.170)	(0.161)		(0.148)	(0.142)		(0.217)	(0.218)		(0.139)	(0.133)
Music		0.129	0.178		-0.001	0.008		-0.184	-0.131		0.112	0.153
		(0.096)	(0.100)		(0.093)	(0.102)		(0.147)	(0.148)		(0.126)	(0.131)
Video Length (seconds)		-0.001	-0.001		-0.003*	-0.003*		0.003	0.003		-0.002	-0.002
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.003)		(0.001)	(0.001)
Macroeconomics			-0.324			-0.086			-0.289			-0.233
			(0.175)			(0.268)			(0.272)			(0.182)
Immigration			-0.297			-0.083			-0.381			-0.277
			(0.298)			(0.326)			(0.339)			(0.339)
Law and Crime			-0.204			-0.175			-0.390			-0.202
			(0.425)			(0.367)			(0.485)			(0.420)
Defense			-0.076			0.058			-0.098			-0.162
			(0.412)			(0.436)			(0.586)			(0.427)
Civil Rights			0.162			0.345			0.074			-0.093
			(0.172)			(0.247)			(0.212)			(0.137)
Health			-0.229			-0.074			-0.264			-0.281
			(0.200)			(0.193)			(0.259)			(0.208)
Num.Obs.	680	680	680	680	680	680	680	680	680	680	680	680
R2	0.146	0.148	0.147	0.193	0.201	0.206	0.143	0.146	0.147	0.202	0.233	0.231
R2 Adj.	0.124	0.122	0.115	0.173	0.177	0.175	0.121	0.120	0.114	0.181	0.210	0.202
FE: week	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 3: OLS Regression Output for Models Predicting Engagement

Note: The table above shows regression output for the four engagement metrics we consider. We use the natural log of each of the engagement metrics listed at the top of each column.

Across all models, the single greatest and most consistent predictor of engagement, regardless of metric, is whether the video came from the Trump campaign. All else equal, videos posted by the Trump campaign garnered a 49% increase in likes, an 88% increase in views, a 204% increase in shares, and a

203% increase in comments. These results are not only statistically significant but also notably substantial, particularly in the contexts of shares (where a user privately sends a video to another user) and comments. When a video contains policy content, it receives less engagement than videos with no policy content at all. The models above predict decreases of 31% in likes, 31% in views, 35% in shares, and 32% in comments, all else equal, for policy-related TikToks. This indicates that campaigns receive a substantial penalty, at least in observed engagement, for discussing policy on the platform.

In several of the models, we control for specific policy topics rather than the policy/not policy dummy variable. We do not see a relationship between any given policy topic and engagement, evidence that no policy area drives engagement on the platform. That said, whereas the policy dummy variables above have exclusively negative coefficients, several of the topic dummies do have positive coefficients, notably Civil Rights on likes, views, and shares. These coefficients are not statistically significant, potentially because we do not have sufficient data to detect an underlying relationship, or because the relationship is very weak. In general, the control variables we included that could explain virality do not add much explanatory value beyond the key independent variables. In general, longer videos receive less engagement, and memes in particular attract fewer comments.

Discussion

The results above present us with four major takeaways. First, policy content is quite sparse on TikTok. While this is not surprising given the audience, the culture of the platform, and the affordances it offers to users, it is surprising given that policy content is often central to presidential campaigns. Nearly three-quarters of videos contained no explicit policy content whatsoever. In our experience of coding these videos by hand, what we observed was a much greater focus on the campaign activities and the personal characteristics of the candidates rather than their explicit policy proposals.

Despite the low level of policy content throughout the cycle, we should note that the campaigns were not equally attentive to policy. The Trump campaign was twice as likely to share policy-related TikToks compared to the Harris campaign. Part of this can be explained by the Harris campaign being more active in general. During our coding, we noted that the Harris campaign was much more likely to post daily videos cataloging where the candidate was, whereas the Trump campaign was more likely to use videos to advance a campaign priority, such as an advertisement on a given policy topic.

Second, we find that the campaigns have different policy agendas. Rather than both candidates focusing primarily on a common set of issues, the evidence above shows that each candidate shared TikTok videos focused on policies that benefited them. For Trump, this meant focusing on the economy, energy costs, immigration, law and crime, and a strong military. For Harris, this meant focusing on the issue of abortion and calls for major health care reform. We find that Harris communicated about a broader range of policies than Trump, but Trump communicated about a specific set of policies with greater intensity. This discovery affirms existing research indicating that Democrats exhibit greater policy diversity than Republicans, likely as a strategic communication approach (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Burnley and Russell 2026).

The issues a campaign focuses on are critical, especially when considering the audience on TikTok – young adults who are more likely to report that neither party represents them (Pew Research Center 2023). The fact that the campaigns presented two vastly different policy agendas likely resonated with users who engaged with both campaigns. Two observations seem particularly important to us after watching these videos. First, Trump freely communicated about the most important issue in this election – the economy – whereas Harris rarely did. Prior research indicates that incumbents, or incumbent

copartisans, are constrained from campaigning on the economy when the fundamentals are not in their favor (Vavreck 2009), and this finding seems to reaffirm this. Second, Harris focused heavily on abortion rights, making it the single most frequent topic her campaign communicated about. While polling shows that this issue is incredibly important to young women, we wonder how this impacted the heavily covered struggles of the Harris campaign to reach young men (see CIRCLE 2024). The reasons why young men did not support the Harris campaign are multifaceted and warrant further investigation in future research. However, it is noteworthy that the emphasis on abortion communication, coupled with a lack of focus on economic issues, is particularly significant in relation to that discourse.

Third, we do not see meaningful temporal changes in policy communication over the course of the campaign. Although the number of policy videos rises as election day nears, this is mainly due to campaigns posting more videos. Policy content as a percentage of total output has not increased, and there is some evidence that it has actually decreased over the last month. We do not find evidence that the campaigns attempt to focus the audience on the specific policy agendas of their candidates, and instead increase non-policy-related content. While both campaigns did post the majority of their videos on their top policy issues in the last two weeks, this is likely overshadowed by the increase in other content.

Finally, we observe policy-related content garnering far less engagement on the platform than non-policy-related content. TikToks featuring explicit policy communication received roughly two-thirds as much engagement across all metrics as those without. This is particularly important in regard to the point raised above about policy content competing with non-policy-related content in the final weeks of the campaign. The single strongest predictor of engagement was whether the video was posted by the Trump campaign. This reaffirms existing research that demonstrates Trump's unique ability to dominate the attention environment (LADD/SINGH ET AL). We did not find a relationship between other factors that might lead to virality or between individual policy topics and engagement. Together, these findings paint a picture at odds with our expectations: Trump communicated about policy more, focused on issues seen as more important to voters, and received engagement orders of magnitude larger than Harris. While this is purely speculative, it is possible that Trump's policy agenda was much clearer and more salient to young voters who were highly engaged on TikTok in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election.

This study is not without limitations, and we encourage readers to interpret its results with caution. Importantly, we do not know whether any of these outcomes change political outcomes. We don't have measures of who saw what kind of content or whether it changed their political beliefs or behaviors, but we do have descriptive evidence demonstrating what kind of content circulated and the levels of engagement it received. Future research should examine the impact of TikTok on young people's voting intentions and candidate support. At the moment, it's unclear how much a single video or even a full campaign might impact a user of the platform. Given the sheer volume of content on the platform, and the decidedly unpolitical nature of the vast majority of that content, it's possible that presidential campaigns are not that consequential in the grand scheme of things. Future research could attempt to measure how salient campaigns are to the average user and assess the extent to which algorithmic recommendations, based on past engagement with political content, change what users see.

The scope of this paper is also quite limited. We study a single election, in a single country, between two candidates, making our conclusions highly contingent on the idiosyncratic features of that election cycle, the politics of the United States, and the personal characteristics of the two candidates. It's unclear whether these findings would hold under different circumstances. We encourage researchers to employ a similar approach in studying other elections, particularly as the platform evolves over time and

adoption grows. While we believe short-form video will likely always present challenges for political communication, it is important to understand how politicians utilize this medium to reach voters.

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