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The Paradox of Digital Activism on Social Media in the 2024 General Election Process

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Abstract

This study departs from the paradoxical phenomenon of the 2024 presidential election, when the dominance of conversation and engagement on social media is not in line with electoral results. That raises questions about how the dynamics of digital activism shape and the factors that frame the difference between online spaces and voter reality. This study aims to elucidate the dynamics of social media conversations before, during, and after elections, as well as identify the structural, cultural, strategic, and technological contexts that accompany them. The study used a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of the views of political expert and influencers from each Candidate Pair. The results show that digital conversations are intense and polarized, reinforced by algorithmic logic, the practice of buzzers and bots, and the formation of echo chambers. However, the decision to choose remains shaped by a combination of emotional closeness, the power of the political machine, as well as conventional practices such as money politics and social assistance. This study concludes that social media is an important arena for public opinion formation, but cannot be used as a single indicator of electoral legitimacy, so strengthening regulation, digital literacy, and campaign integrity are strategic agendas going forward.

Keywords: *Election 2024, Social Media, Digital Activism, Voting Behavior, Digital Democracy*

INTRODUCTION

Presidential and vice presidential elections are the main mechanisms in democratic systems that link citizen participation with the establishment of political legitimacy (Bagaskara & Ma'ruf, 2025). In the Indonesian context, campaigns become a space for delivering Vision, Mission, image, and political messages to influence voter preferences (Izzati et al., 2025; Setiawan & Djafar, 2024). The development of digital technology then expanded the arena of political contestation to social media and made digital space an important part of electoral political communication (Assaefi et al., 2024). Nonpartisan actors such as influencers also have an important position in shaping opinion and political participation through digital platforms (Lessy, 2025; Samanda, 2025; Saragih et al., 2024)

The high use of social media makes digital platforms relevant in the 2024 election campaign. In Indonesia, the number of active users of social media in January 2024 is estimated to reach 139 million, while Instagram is among the platforms with high usage rates (Rainer, 2024; Zelda, 2025). However, digital engagement needs to be distinguished from electoral support. Engagement shows the amount of activity recorded on the platform, not the number of unique users; voice share shows the proportion of mentions or conversations, not the percentage of voters; voting behavior, on the other hand, refers to the actual choice reflected in the official vote. Therefore, high engagement cannot be directly interpreted as a high number of supporters (Fahmi, 2024; Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia, 2024)

In this study, the term digital activism is used to refer to the practice of communication, production and dissemination of messages, as well as the mobilization of political issues through the internet (Dwityas et al., 2024). Digital activism can expand participation and shape perceptions, but it is not synonymous with engagement. Digital space also serves as an arena for participation and the formation of political discourse, while presenting challenges in the form of polarization, disinformation, and symbolic mobilization (Katili et al., 2025)

The phenomenon was seen in Emprit Drone data for the period January 21–February 3, 2024. In the monitoring period, Candidate Pair 01 recorded 19,951,478 interactions (45%), Candidate Pair 02 recorded 13,498,985 interactions (30%), and Candidate Pair 03 recorded 11,271,774 interactions (25%). On voice share, Candidate Pair 01 gained 36%, Candidate Pair 02 37%, and Candidate Pair 03 27% (Fahmi, 2024). These Data show differences between interaction intensity and conversation distribution, but cannot yet be used to infer voter proportions or population support.

The difference becomes relevant when compared with the official results of the commission. The vote was held on February 14, 2024, while the National recapitulation of election results was determined by the KPU on March 20, 2024 through KPU decision Number 360 of 2024. The results recorded 40,971,906 valid votes for Candidate Pair 01, 96,214,691 votes for Candidate Pair 02, and 27,040,878 votes for Candidate Pair 03 out of a total of 164,227,475 valid votes (Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia, 2024). Thus,

Candidate Pair 01 had the highest Instagram engagement in the monitoring period, but Candidate Pair 02 obtained the highest official votes.

To read the paradox, the study uses rational choice theory and the concept of choosing behavior. In rational choice theory, choice is understood as the result of consideration of the benefits, costs, experiences, and social conditions that are judged relevant by the individual. The concept of voting behavior emphasizes that electoral decisions are formed through the relationship between political knowledge, political events, and the act of voting (Syafhendry, 2016; Yahya et al., 2024). In the context of digital politics, utility is not necessarily limited to program evaluation, but can include symbolic immediacy, perceived stability, and practical considerations. This framework is used in research not to argue that voters are always entirely rational, but rather to explain that voting decisions cannot be reduced to a single indicator of digital engagement (Grecu et al., 2025).

Previous research has covered digital campaign regulation, cyberpolitics, influencers, and political communication strategies. Amalia & Cahyani (2022) show that the regulatory limits of campaigns through social media still face clarity issues. Meanwhile, Alamsyah & Ridwan (2023) place social media as a cyberpolitics space that allows the mobilization of public opinion and participation. In addition, Dewi & Pratiwi (2025) for example, has pointed out the gap between digital popularity and electoral reality in the 2024 presidential election. Therefore, the novelty of this research is not put on the claim that the gap has never been found, but rather on the way the gap is analyzed through more measurable units, periods, data, and theoretical mechanisms.

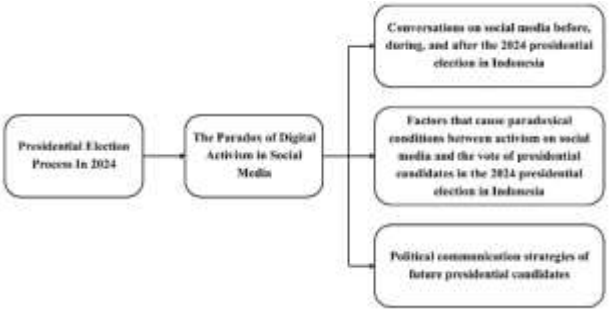
In this study, the novelty was put on four things. First, the unit of analysis was narrowed down to Instagram interaction and conversation patterns at the level of each prospective partner during the period January 21-February 3, 2024, rather than on digital communication strategies in general. Second, emprit's aggregated Drone data was read alongside four in-depth interviews, namely three influencers related to each Candidate Pair and one political observer. Third, digital indicators are compared explicitly with the results of the KPU's official valid votes, so the engagement, voice share, and electoral vote units are not treated as the same measure. Fourth, the study used rational choice theory to identify mechanisms that explain why digital attention and visibility do not always lead to electoral choices.

Based on this focus, the study aims to: (1) analyze the digital interaction patterns of three Candidate Pairs on Instagram during January 21–February 3, 2024; (2) compare digital interaction indicators with the official valid vote results of the 2024 presidential election; and (3) explain the mechanisms that form the gap between digital visibility and electoral results through thematic readings of interviews and rational choice theory. With this limitation, the study is not intended to measure the number of unique users, infer the magnitude of national public opinion, or establish a causal relationship between digital activities and voting choices.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explain the paradox between digital engagement and the electoral outcome of the 2024 presidential election (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study design focused on the digital monitoring period of 21 January–3 February 2024 and the official electoral results after the vote of 14 February 2024. Thus, the dynamics of social media were analyzed based on the available monitoring period, while the KPU results were used as an electoral comparison at the national level.

Figure 1. Research Framework



Source: Data Researchers

Primary Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four purposively selected informants, consisting of three influencers who produce or discuss political content related to Candidate Pairs 01, 02, and 03, and one political observer who has competence in national political analysis. Informant criteria include: (1) having involvement or knowledge relevant to digital political communication in the 2024 election; (2) Understanding the dynamics of digital campaigns; and (3) being willing to participate in interviews. The interview is recorded with the consent of the informant and transcribed for analysis. In the presentation of the results, informants are called I1, I2, I3, and I4 based on roles so that the comparison flow across informants is clearer.

Table 1. Profile Informant

Code	Category Informants	Relation to Objects	Functions in Analysis
I1	Influencer Candidate Pairs 01	Production and communication experience digital campaign Candidate Pairs 01	Describe organic movement patterns, influencer consolidation, and perceptions of digital support conversions
I2	Influencer Candidate Pairs 02	Production and communication experience digital campaign Candidate Pairs 02	Explain personalization, emotional appeal, content repetition, and engagement strategies
I3	Influencer Candidate Pairs 03	Production and communication experience digital campaign Candidate Pairs 03	Explaining meme culture, visual identity, FOMO, and the digital assault experience
I4	Political Observer	Observation of voter behavior and dynamics of the 2024 election	Contextualizing digital findings with voter character and electoral reality

Source: Data processed by researchers

The main secondary Data comes from Emprit Drone documents for the period January 21–February 3, 2024. The data analyzed include the number of interactions, voice share, conversation time patterns, as well as narratives and issues that arise in each Candidate Pair. Secondary Data is not used to estimate the number of unique users or the percentage of voters represented. As an electoral comparison, the official results of the KPU are used

in the form of the number of valid votes of each Candidate Pair. With this distinction, digital units of measurement and electoral units of measurement are treated as two different types of evidence.

Data analysis was done through thematic analysis and cross-source comparison. First, interview transcripts were read over and over to identify units of meaning related to engagement, personalization, campaign coordination, symbolic proximity, practical incentives, and algorithmic manipulation or amplification. Secondly, the initial codes are grouped into broader themes. Third, the theme of the interview was compared to the pattern on the drone Emprit document. Fourth, comparative results are read using rational choice theory to explain how perceived benefits, emotional closeness, campaign organization, and structural conditions can influence choice. The last stage is to limit inference so as not to turn aggregate Third-party data and four interviews into causal claims or representations of all Indonesian voters (Lune & Berg, 2017).

The validity of the data was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing three types of evidence: (1) aggregated data of Emprit drones; (2) interviews of four informants; and (3) official KPU results and relevant literature. Triangulation is not used to assert that all three sources measure the same thing, but rather to test whether interpretations of paradoxical mechanisms gain support across sources. The limitations of the study are in the limited number of informants and aggregated digital data, so the findings cannot be causally generalized to all Indonesian voters (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results were arranged in three stages of analysis: (1) comparing digital indicators recorded by Emprit drones with official KPU results; (2) identifying cross-interview themes that explain these differences; and (3) interpreting the relationship between themes through rational choice theory. This structure distinguishes between empirical findings, theoretical interpretations, and practical implications (Lune & Berg, 2017).

Table 2. Summary of cross-source findings

Themes	**Drone Emprit & KPU**	**Interview**
Difference in indicators	**Interaction on Instagram** Candidate Pairs 01: 45%; Candidate Pairs 02: 30%; Candidate Pairs 03: 25%. **KPU results** Candidate Pairs 01: 24,95%; Candidate Pairs 02: 58,59%; Candidate Pairs 03: 16,47%.	I1-I4 describe message character, coordination, digital engagement, and range limitations.
Representation	44.7 million is the number of interactions, not unique users.	I4 assesses that social media does not reach all voters.
Personalization	Candidate Pair 02 shows a relatively stable interaction pattern with certain spikes.	I2 emphasizes the effectiveness of personal and emotional content.
Coordination	Differences in time patterns between pairs of Candidate Pairs.	I1 highlights late influencer support; I3 highlights FOMO.

Technology & Polarization	Hashtag patterns, comments, and interactions during the monitoring period.	I3 reports mass reporting and digital attacks.

Source: Processed researchers based on drone Emprit, informant interviews, and the commission

Differences in Digital Indicators and Electoral Results

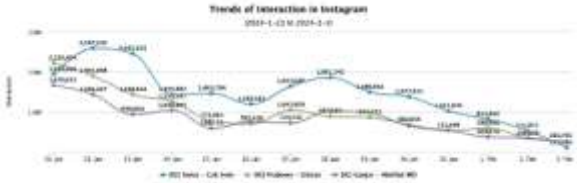
Tabel 3. Comparison of digital indicators with the official results of the 2024 presidential election

Paslon	Interaksi Instagram	Voice share	Suara sah KPU	Porsi suara
01 Anies–Muhaimin	19.953.478 (45%)	36%	40.971.906	24,95 %
02 Prabowo–Gibran	13.498.985 (30%)	37%	96.214.691	58,59 %
03 Ganjar–Mahfud	11.271.774 (25%)	27%	27.040.878	16,46 %
Total	**44.724.237 (100%)**	**100 %**	**164.227.475**	**100%**

Sumber: Drone Emprit (2024) & Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia (2024)

The results of the analysis of the drone Emprit document for the period 21 January–3 February 2024 show that political conversations on social media, especially Instagram, take place very intensely but are not linear with electoral results. Candidate Pair 01 (Anies–Muhaimin) dominated the total interaction with 19,951,478 interactions (45%), followed by Candidate Pair 02 (Prabowo–Gibran) with 13,498,985 interactions (30%), and Candidate Pair 03 (Ganjar–Mahfud) with 11,271,774 interactions (25%). However, in terms of voice share (total mentions), the distribution is relatively balanced between Candidate Pair 01 (36%) and Candidate Pair 02 (37%), while Candidate Pair 03 gained 27%. These data show that high engagement does not automatically reflect absolute discourse dominance, but rather indicates the intensity of participation of certain support groups in the digital space.

Figure 2. Total interactions of 2024 election Candidate Pairs on Instagram



Source: Drone Emprit

Temporarily, each of Candidate Pairs showed different digital campaign patterns. Candidate Pair 01 showed a high spike at the beginning of the period (January 22-23) with a massive organic pattern, but then experienced a gradual decline. The character of this campaign is based on a strong grassroots movement but less strategically structured. This is reflected in the statement ofI1, which mentions:

“Candidate Pair 01 is too good in the campaign. In the current era of stupidity, many people are fooled by social assistance. The campaign is too idealized and not populist.” (I1, 2024).

I1, an influencer associated with Candidate Pair 01, considered the campaign's approach too idealistic and less populist. This statement is read as an informant's perception of the character of the message, rather than as an objective assessment of the entire campaign of Candidate Pair 01

The intellectual-idealistic approach that emphasizes the narrative of change and anti-corruption is resonant among educated netizens, as seen from the dominance of the hashtag

#aniesbaswedan (1,078 mentions) and the #DesakAnies campaign. But the momentum of big influencer support coming in on D-1 shows a delay in the consolidation of digital opinion. These findings suggest that an intellectual-idealistic approach that emphasizes narratives of change and anti-corruption is resonant among educated netizens, but is less likely to convert to broad electoral support. Geise et al. (2025) showed that personalization and emotionalization strategies are more effective at influencing voter preferences than normative or idealistic messages alone. A similar study, Yasa (2024), found that personal imagery, authenticity, and symbolic repetition were stronger at building support, especially among young voters, than abstract programmatic narratives.

In the perspective of Rational Voter theory (Syafhendry, 2016), voters choose Candidate Pairs who maximize utility. However, in the context of social media, the utility is not only based on program evaluation, but also emotional closeness and personal perception. Thus, although hashtags such as #aniesbaswedan and the #DesalAnies campaign demonstrates the dominance of digital discourse, the delay in the consolidation of influencers and the lack of emotional orchestration limit the conversion of support into electoral votes.

In contrast, Candidate Pair 02 showed a more stable and planned pattern of activity with strategic spikes on January 24 and 29. This strategy emphasizes the Candidate Pair's personalization and emotional approach. This is in line with the findings of Decker (2025) which states that personalization of content in digital campaigns is able to influence public opinion and encourage audience mobilization, although it has the potential to cause problems related to trust and Privacy. Influencer of Candidate Pairs 02 statement confirms this orientation:

“The most effective Prabowo-Gibran because of how to sell the right person. Marketing should be no valuation, personal content is more effective than just IQ. The debate with Gibran's casual costume went viral and became a meme. Breaking ethics but entertaining, creating new standards to suit social shifts.” (Interview with Influencer of Candidate Pairs 02, 2024).

This strategy is reinforced by TikTok's engagement achievement of 24 billion views, showing the effectiveness of repeated content distribution that forms psychological closeness with voters. The viral phenomenon of Gibran's casual costume in the debate became a turning point that shifted public attention from the substance of the program to aspects of entertainment and personal closeness. These findings are also in line with Segerberg (2025) who showed that personalized political communication on social media increases emotional engagement and shapes perceptions of Candidate Pairs' character, ultimately influencing electoral decisions. Thus, the strategy of Candidate Pair 02 reflects the shift of digital campaigns from a programmatic orientation towards affective politics centered on the figure and emotional experience of voters.

Candidate Pair 03 showed a volatile pattern with a peak of activity on January 21 and a significant decline after January 29. The strategy based on meme culture and visual identity (Penguin) drove organic follower growth, from 1,000 to 80,000, but was relatively late and faced coordinated

digital attacks, including four mass reports. Influencer of Candidate Pair 03, stated:

“The most relaxing reward is using memes and embracing the Penguin's identity. Followers go from 1.000 to 80.000 organic.” (Interview with Influencer of Candidate Pairs 03, 2024).

The findings suggest that digital creativity without protection from organized attacks can hinder the consistency of online political conversations. However, this digital creativity is faced with coordinated attacks, including mass reporting and uniform comment patterns. This finding is in line with research by Njoroge (2025) which shows that meme politics can increase political engagement digitally because humor and visual symbols make it easier for public participation and discussion. In addition, research from Behera (2025) on the role of memes in political communication in India confirms that exposure to meme content can affect political perception and digital voter engagement.

However, this digital creativity is also faced with coordinated digital attacks such as mass reporting and uniform comment patterns that narrow the space for online political discourse. This is contrary to an optimistic view of the functioning of memes. Trolls and disinformation in Indonesia's 2024 Elections show that provocative content and aggressive accounts can reinforce polarization and systematically attack opponents, which actually harms the quality of digital political communication (Nurdin, 2024). In the international arena it is also warned that memes can develop into manipulative forms of disinformation or satire, which have the potential to reinforce extreme behavior if not balanced by effective content moderation (Lee & Hernández, 2024)

Social media conversations are marked by sharp polarization and the formation of echo chambers. Each camp builds its own bubble of support that reinforces internal beliefs while creating the illusion of a majority (Irawan, 2025). Influencer of Candidate Pair 01 cites the statement, ”unorganized good will be outdone by organized crime," to illustrate the inequality between organic digital movements and more systematic political machines. Cross-platform hate comment practices, the use of uniform comment templates, and mass reporting suggest a coordinated pattern of attacks that narrows the space for public deliberation. Research by Raza et al. (2023) found that algorithms not only reinforce the “internal solidarity” of a group, but also cause information segregation that reinforces digital political polarization structurally. Similarly, Amri & Yandri (2025) concluded that social media algorithms narrow the space for public dialogue and increase the spread of disinformation, which in turn decreases the quality of public deliberation in Indonesia's digital Democracy.

The Momentum of the presidential-vice presidential debate on January 24-25 was the peak of the interaction of all Candidate Pairs, but the post-debate Dynamics showed that personal virality was more enduring than programmatic substance. The massive, trending #DesalAnies campaign across multiple platforms did not correlate with actual election results, suggesting a gap between digital enthusiasm and voting behavior. As such, social media conversations before, during, and after the 2024 presidential election are intense, polarized, and driven by algorithmic logic that amplifies

personalization as well as virality. However, the dominance of digital interaction, especially by Candidate Pair 01, does not directly correlate with electoral results because the conversations take place in echo chambers, are influenced by emotional strategies and organized orchestration, and do not represent the entire configuration of Indonesian voters.

Cross-source comparisons showed an important pattern, Candidate Pair 01 obtained the highest engagement, but Candidate Pair 02 obtained the highest official votes. KPU data recorded 96,214,691 votes for Candidate Pair 02 (58.59%), 40,971,906 votes for Candidate Pair 01 (24.95%), and 27,040,878 votes for Candidate Pair 03 (16.47%). Thus, the results of the study do not conclude that engagement "fails" to change the sound, but rather show that engagement and sound measure different objects as well as being influenced by mechanisms that are not fully present in the digital space.

The Mechanism of Paradox Formation

The research findings suggest that the paradox between the dominance of digital activism and electoral outcomes cannot be explained by a single variable, but rather is formed through the interaction of structural, cultural, strategic, external, and technological factors. High levels of conversation on social media do not automatically turn into electoral support because digital spaces have limited representation, while voting decisions are also influenced by voter characteristics, campaign strategies, practical incentives, and power configurations outside the digital space. In a rational choice perspective, voters consider the practical benefits, emotional closeness, experience, and perceptions of the Candidate Pair when making a choice, not just the intensity of the digital campaign (Grecu et al., 2025; Syafhendry, 2016).

The first finding is the limitations of digital representation. Emprit's Drone Data showed about 44.7 million interactions during the observation period, but that number is the number of interactions and cannot be treated as the number of unique users. Therefore, the number of such interactions cannot be divided by the number of voters to conclude that voters are represented in digital conversations. Digital Data used in this study is aggregated at the level of activity and interaction, so it can not be used as a direct measure of the representation of individual voters (Fahmi, 2024). These limitations are reinforced by I4 which states:

"...social media is not based on facts. A crowded campaign doesn't guarantee victory because many voters aren't familiar with social media." (I4, 2024).

A similar statement was delivered by I3 who stated,

"The problem is that many people have not been active in social media... the survey must jump directly because the target of boomers and millennials is not all active." (I3, 2024).

Thus, the high level of digital activity needs to be distinguished from the representation of the voting population. The concentration of digital activities in urban areas also indicates the existence of access gaps, while the impact of social media on democratic participation is strongly influenced by the level of internet penetration and digital access (Acheampong & Taden, 2025). Wara (2026) also shows that opportunities and forms of political engagement are affected by digital access, so groups

with lower connectivity have limitations in online political mobilization.

The second finding relates to personalization and emotional closeness. The character of voters who tend to consider personal preferences and perceptions can strengthen the influence of emotion-based political communication. I4 States,

"Indonesian voters are generally traditional ones who vote based on preferences, easily influenced by gemoy's campaign. Popularity on social media is not necessarily the same as electability." (I4, 2024).

Preferences based on personal preferences and responses to emotional appeals have been shown to be more effective than rational argumentation based on policy programs. This finding is in line with research by Bosetta & Schmøkel (2023) which shows that emotional involvement in digital campaigns has an effect on voting behavior compared to messages that are solely program or policy oriented. I2 also emphasizes the importance of personalization through statements:

"Marketing must have a valuation based on IQ, EQ, and spiritual. Personal content is more effective than IQ. Repeated posts go into the subconscious." (I2, 2024).

This strategy shows how the repetition of personal content and emotional narratives can build symbolic closeness with voters, especially in the context of a political culture that does not like negative campaigns. Drăgan (2025) shows that emotional narratives delivered in a repetitive way are capable of forming affective attachments to political figures because they resonate with the social identity and experience of the individual.

In the perspective of rational choice, emotional closeness should not be understood as something contrary to rationality. Such closeness can be part of the utility perceived by voters when evaluating Candidate Pairs. Voters do not necessarily compare Candidate Pairs based solely on programs, but may also consider perceptions of character, comfort, identification, and symbolic proximity (Syafhendry, 2016). The pattern also relates to responses to negative campaigns. I4 States,

"In Indonesia Candidate Pairs who like to attack are disliked... those who get sympathy are attacked." (I4, 2024).

These findings suggest that overly offensive messages can elicit a negative response from voters. Makulilo's (2024), suggests that negative campaigning in a number of contexts can produce sympathetic responses to the attacked party, particularly in more moderate political communication environments. Thus, personalization, symbols of closeness and management of emotions become part of the process of forming a Candidate Pair's perception that can enter into the consideration of voters.

The third fnding is coordination and consistency of campaign organization. The difference between an organic digital movement and a more structured campaign is seen in the timing patterns of support emergence, message continuity, and content distribution coordination. Candidate Pair 02 was supported by a stronger party infrastructure, top-down coordination, and adequate resources, while Candidate Pair 01 relied more on spontaneous, voluntary movements. I1 describes the condition by stating,

"Unorganized good will be defeated by organized crime. The social assistance factor is incredible. Big

influencers declare D-1... people tend to be more FOMO than we see." (I1, 2024).

The irregularity of the support Time is also related to the bandwagon effect mechanism. I3 stated,

"If you support 03 just declare it let people FOMO because our culture is FOMO." (I3, 2024).

The statement shows that perceptions of overwhelming support can be part of a digital political communication strategy. The effectiveness of campaigns on social media is determined not only by the number of messages produced, but also by the consistency of content design, audience segmentation, narrative integration, and coordination with conventional political networks (Hidayat et al., 2025; Khamdan et al., 2025). A structured campaign allows the message to be present more consistently and shapes the accumulation of perceptions over a period of time. In contrast, sporadically emerging support has a harder time building communication momentum. Within the framework of rational choice, campaign coordination is not positioned as a direct cause of electoral victory, but as a mechanism that affects the consistency of information available to voters and the chances of a message entering their consideration process (Syafhendry, 2016)

The fourth finding is practical incentives and contexts outside of social media. The decision to choose does not only take place in the digital space. Informants identified money politics and social assistance as factors perceived to influence voter choice. I4 refer to money politics as a "disease that is difficult to eliminate" and can take the form of money or goods, while I1 states that "the silent majority" relates to social assistance and asserts that "the social assistance factor is remarkable." These findings are in line with Tsokwa & Tigye's (2025) which shows that financial and material incentives can influence voters ' decisions while decreasing the credibility of the democratic process. However, this factor is not placed as the sole cause of the 2024 election results because this study does not have quantitative data that can measure the prevalence or magnitude of the causal effect of money politics and social assistance. The factor is positioned as an external context emerging from the interview and supported by the literature.

In the same dimension, it was also found that the use of platform insights in the preparation of communication strategies. I2 States:

"Not stealing data but using platform insights for the right strategy at the right time" (I2, 2024).

The statement points to the use of data available on the platform to determine the timing and shape of messages. The pattern relates to the concept of data-driven campaigning, which is the use of data and segmentation techniques to understand audience behavior and adapt political communication to the characteristics of a particular group (Luke et al., 2024). Thus, digital strategy not only takes place through publicly visible conversations, but also through the process of segmentation and customization of messages that takes place behind the distribution of content.

The fifth finding is algorithmic amplification and polarization. Social media conversations do not take place in a completely neutral space because the distribution of information is influenced by algorithmic logic and user engagement patterns. The research paper found echo chambers, uniform comment templates, mass reporting, and reports on

buzzers and bots. I4 cautioned that "digital would be a double-edged knife “without a strong ethical framework, while I1 hoped for” no more buzzers" as the practice was judged to distort information. Raza et al. (2023) showed that social media algorithms can reinforce internal group solidarity while causing information segregation that deepens political polarization.

In these situations, the high visibility of a narrative is not always synonymous with broad public support. Echo chambers can reinforce the beliefs that users already have and shape the perception of majority support. I3's experience of mass reporting and account lockdown also suggests that digital actions are perceived as coordinated. The literature on coordinated inauthentic behavior suggests that coordinated groups of accounts can leverage platform structures to accelerate narrative dissemination and influence public perception through systematic patterns of action (Cinelli et al., 2022). In this study, inauthentic coordination is treated as an interpretation of patterns that emerge in informant experience and literature, rather than as a factual assignment to specific actors or networks of accounts that cannot be directly verified.

The five findings show that the digital-electoral paradox is formed through the difference between digital units of measurement and units of electoral behavior, the limited reach of digital space, the formation of emotional and symbolic utility, the degree of coordination of campaigns, the influence of practical incentives outside of social media, and algorithmic amplification mechanisms. Therefore, high engagement cannot be treated as a direct proxy of public opinion or voting behavior. Emprit's Drone Data showed that Candidate Pair 01 gained 45% of total Instagram interactions during the observation period, while the distribution of voice shares was relatively balanced between Candidate Pair 01 and Candidate Pair 02. These differences indicate that engagement, voice share, public opinion, digital activism, and voting behavior are different concepts and are not interchangeable.

In a rational choice perspective, voters combine information, perceived benefits, emotional closeness, experience, and socio-political conditions when evaluating a Candidate Pair's alternatives. Therefore, the dominance of a Candidate Pair in digital conversations may indicate strong mobilization and visibility among certain groups of users, but it does not in itself indicate dominance in electoral choices. The paradox lies in the distance between the intensity of digital participation and the electoral decision-making process, so that social media is more correctly understood as an arena for forming perceptions and symbolic mobilization than as a single indicator of electoral power.

Perspectives on Rational Choice and Governance of Digital Democracy

Research findings confirm that engagement, public opinion, digital activism, and voting behavior are different concepts. Engagement refers to activities recorded on the platform, public opinion in this study is understood through digital conversation patterns and does not represent a population survey, digital activism includes communication practices and issue mobilization, while voting behavior is reflected in electoral choices collected through official voting and recapitulation mechanisms (Dwityas et al., 2024; Fahmi, 2024; Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia, 2024)

In a rational choice perspective, social media provides information, symbols, and cues that can shape perceptions of utility, but voter decisions persist in the broader socio-political environment. Perceptions of benefits, emotional closeness, Candidate Pair reputation, organizational networks, economic conditions, and social experiences can be part of those considerations (Grecu et al., 2025; Syafhendry, 2016). Thus, digital engagement is more correctly understood as one of the sources of the formation of political considerations, rather than as a single predictor of electoral outcomes.

These conditions demand digital democratic governance that pays attention to transparency and quality of information. The transparency of digital platforms and campaigns needs to be strengthened, especially with regard to political advertising, paid promotions, as well as automated or coordinated account identification mechanisms. At the same time, digital and political literacy needs to be geared toward distinguishing engagement from electoral support, checking the credibility of information, and recognizing forms of digital manipulation. Campaign Integrity also needs to be strengthened through oversight of funding as well as the practice of providing material incentives that have the potential to influence voter choice.

The findings are not intended as causal evidence as the study used aggregated data and four informants. Therefore, further testing can be done through the use of unique user data, longer conversation coverage until after the vote, as well as comparative or mixed methods approaches to test the consistency of such mechanisms in different groups and regions.

CONCLUSION

The study shows a clear difference between digital engagement and electoral outcomes in the 2024 presidential election. During the period January 21-February 3, 2024, Candidate Pair 01 had the highest Instagram interaction, but the official KPU results showed Candidate Pair 02 obtained the highest valid votes. This finding does not prove that engagement does not affect politics, but rather shows that engagement is not an equivalent measure of unique users, public opinion, or voter votes.

Through thematic analysis of interviews and triangulation with Emprit drones as well as the official results of the KPU, the study identified five mechanisms that help explain the paradox: the limitations of digital representation, personalization and emotional closeness, coordination of campaign organizations, practical incentives outside the digital space, as well as algorithmic amplification and polarization. Read through the theory of rational choice, the mechanism suggests that electoral choices are formed from broader considerations of utility than the intensity of interaction on social media. The limitation of the study lies in the four informants and aggregated digital data, so the results cannot be generalized as a causal relationship for all Indonesian voters.

The implication of the study is the need to treat digital data proportionately in the analysis of political communication: engagement can indicate attention and activity, but should not be the sole proxy for electoral support. Subsequent studies are suggested to use unique user data, a time span that

includes the period before and after voting, as well as comparative or mixed methods designs to test the mechanisms found.

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