

Dances, Duets, and Debates: Analysing political communication and viewer engagement on TikTok*

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Abstract

TikTok has emerged as a powerful player, revolutionizing the way politicians interact with constituents. Launched in 2017, TikTok has rapidly gained global popularity, extending beyond entertainment to become a hub for ideological formation and political activism. Despite extensive research on politicians' use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, TikTok's distinct platform-specific languages and features have received limited attention. Its short video clips, algorithmic content recommendations, and mobile-only interface present new challenges and opportunities for politicians aiming to communicate effectively. This paper addresses this gap by examining how U.S. politicians have embraced and adapted to TikTok's communication styles. Drawing on Schellewald's (2021) framework, we analyze the content of U.S. Governors and Members of Congress on TikTok to understand how they use comedic, documentary, communal, explanatory, interactive, and meta communication forms to connect with their audience. Our study aims to explore the extent of politicians' adoption of TikTok, categorize their communication styles, evaluate the topics they address, and assess how these choices influence viewer engagement and popularity. Employing a multimodal approach that studies video, text, and audio, we analyse a comprehensive dataset of TikTok videos from U.S. politicians. Our findings provide valuable insights into digital political communication on emerging platforms like TikTok and the role of multiple message modalities in harnessing online attention and engagement.

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Introduction

The rise of social media has revolutionized political communication, providing politicians with unprecedented opportunities to engage with the public and influence the political agenda (Barberá and Zeitzoff, 2018; Gilardi et al., 2022; Klinger, 2013; Kreiss et al., 2018). Among these platforms, TikTok stands out as a powerful player. Serving as the international version of its Chinese sister app, Douyin, TikTok was launched in 2017. Despite its relatively recent release, TikTok has amassed a staggering two billion downloads to date, making it one of the most downloaded and fastest growing apps of the last decade (Crosses, 2). Known for its viral dance and singing trends, as well as amusing clips that typically last only a few seconds, TikTok, much like the early days of other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, has been perceived as mere “childish” or “simple” entertainment (Schellewald, 2021). However, TikTok offers users an unparalleled opportunity to showcase their creativity, connect with a global audience, and gain temporary fame by creating, sharing, and consuming short-form video content, which has rapidly turned the platform into a new venue for ideological formation and political activism (Guinaudeau et al., 2022).

While a considerable body of research has investigated the use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook by politicians for political purposes (for example, see Barberá and Zeitzoff (2018); Gilardi et al. (2022); Klinger (2013); Kreiss et al. (2018)), TikTok’s unique platform-specific languages and features have received limited attention. TikTok’s distinct characteristics, such as short video clips, algorithmic content recommendations, and a mobile-only interface, create new challenges and opportunities for politicians seeking to communicate with the public effectively (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). This paper seeks to address the gaps in the existing literature by examining how politicians in the United States have adopted and adapted to TikTok’s platform-specific communication styles. Specifically, we draw on Schellewald (2021)’s framework of communicative forms on TikTok, which identifies six communication styles prevalent on the platform: comedic, documentary, communal, explanatory, interactive, and meta. By analyzing the content produced by U.S. Governors and Members of Congress on TikTok, we aim to gain insights into how politicians leverage these communicative forms to engage with the public and drive viewer engagement on the platform.

The paper’s objectives are fourfold: First, we aim to explore the extent to which U.S. politicians have embraced TikTok as a new communication platform. Second, we seek to identify and categorize the communication styles adopted by politicians on TikTok, shedding light on how they use humor, personal anecdotes, knowledge-sharing, interactive challenges, and meta-commentary to connect with their audience. Third, we examine the topics politicians choose to address in their TikTok content and evaluate how these communication

styles may vary across different topics. Finally, we evaluate how the choice of communication style and topic affects viewer engagement, enhancing or suppressing politicians' popularity and agenda-setting capabilities. Our dataset includes all TikTok videos posted by U.S. governors, members of congress, and senators until April 2023, manually matched with their TikTok accounts. We identify and categorize textual, audio, and visual content in the videos, enabling us to explore the communicative forms adopted by politicians.

Overall, our findings show that only a small proportion of U.S. politicians are using TikTok actively. Importantly, no single Republican politician is using the platform (any longer) as of April 2023. In our content analysis of TikTok as a political communication platform, we found that U.S. politicians predominantly address political topics, with civil rights, law and crime, and government operations standing out in specific periods. When conveying these subjects, politicians mainly resort to using an explanatory or documentary approach. Interestingly, while comedic styles, especially when discussing government operations, are much less frequent, they correlate with increased user engagement across all metrics. These findings highlight a dilemma for politicians: while comedic styles on TikTok clearly increase user engagement, there's a simultaneous need for politicians to maintain an image of competence and seriousness. Thus, platform incentives might clash with a politician's need to appear reliable and trustworthy.

This study contributes to the understanding of digital political communication in the context of social media platforms focused on short-form video content and algorithmically curated delivery. By analyzing the content produced by politicians, we shed light on how they adapt their communication strategies to resonate with TikTok's audience and algorithm. Our findings provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of different communicative forms and topics in driving viewer engagement on the platform. Furthermore, our multimodal annotation approach presents a fitting framework for studying communication forms in complex TikTok data, serving as a valuable resource for future research initiatives interested in exploring political communication on the platform, both manually and at scale.

Background

Social Media and Politics

In the modern era of communication, social media platforms have emerged as crucial channels for global leaders and policymakers. Recognized for its powerful potential in digital diplomacy, these platforms enable immediate dissemination of messages, prompt crisis management, and influential manipulation of both media and political narratives ([Barberá and Zeitzoff, 2018](#)). Unlike traditional legislative forums that might be constrained by speaking

time limits, leadership controls, or speaker selection protocols, social media platforms provide politicians a freer space to voice opinions and emphasize their expertise in specific areas. Consequently, these platforms play a pivotal role not just in broad political communication but in the setting of the political agenda and public discourse (Gilardi et al., 2022).

Notably, much of what we currently understand about the interaction between politicians and their potential electorate on social media has been centered around platforms like Twitter (Enli, 2017; Hemsley et al., 2018; Jacobs et al., 2020; Jungherr, 2016) and, to a lesser extent, Facebook (Larsson, 2016; Ceccobelli, 2018; Nave et al., 2018; Nitschke et al., 2016; Sørensen, 2016; Stetka et al., 2019). However, a comprehensive understanding of political online engagement demands a wider lens, capturing activity on a variety of emerging platforms. Two considerations underscore the urgency of this broader focus. Firstly, each platform molds its unique culture of interaction, influencing users' behaviors, especially in areas like content production, comments, and reactions (Papacharissi, 2015; Bastos, 2015; Bene, 2020). Thus, to deepen our grasp on how politicians and their constituencies interact, it's imperative to examine these patterns across diverse platforms. Secondly, political entities and their teams frequently employ a range of platforms beyond Twitter and Facebook for their campaigns. In fact, platforms like Snapchat and Instagram have been spotlighted as crucial arenas, especially for targeting younger demographics (Kreiss and McGregor, 2018; Munoz and Towner, 2018). An overemphasis on the more traditional platforms like Twitter might stem from the relative ease of data extraction from them (Bruns, 2019; Freelon, 2018; Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014) but results in a narrow overview of the political communication dynamics that are at play on the broad social media spectrum.

Our study pivots attention to TikTok, a largely uncharted territory in academic research. With audiovisual content being a cornerstone of political communication, as evidenced since television's advent (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Strömbäck, 2007), the dearth of scholarly work on TikTok is puzzling. Our research aims to fill this gap, exploring content creation by politicians and public engagement on this platform. Initially, platforms akin to TikTok were designed for personal use, as epitomized by YouTube's former tagline, "Broadcast Yourself" (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). However, it didn't take long for politicians to identify their immense potential for connecting with wider audiences (Moe, 2008). While TikTok's primary emphasis on visual and audiovisual content echoes the "YouTube Elections" of the 2000s and highlights the importance of visual mediums in the political realm (Carlson and Strandberg, 2008; Dylko et al., 2012; Towner and Dulio, 2011), TikTok offers an array of new affordances that make it a distinct platform.

Although measuring the direct impact of politician's social media strategies on outcomes like elections is complex (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021), engagement metrics like likes and

comments are invaluable. Before the rise of platforms like TikTok, online user engagement could — and indeed still can — be gauged by the extent to which varying functionalities like comment fields or “e-mail a friend” links were used on web pages (Deuze, 2003, 214). While these and similar varieties of web traffic data sources remain important measures of activity today, the influx of social media has added another dimension of audience engagement possibilities as users can get involved by liking and commenting on the posts made by other social media users. While it is true that “lightweight signals” such as these can be used in a variety of different ways (Hayes et al., 2016, 171) - for instance, while a comment can readily express a certain sentiment, a “like” can take on a plethora of meanings based on the original intent of the engaging user, expressing support or critique alike - their sheer volume can significantly influence content visibility on algorithmically-curated platforms like TikTok, potentially shaping public discourse (Kreiss et al., 2018, 4). The challenge and research question then remains: how effectively are politicians leveraging this platform to resonate with potential voters, and is it the content or presentation that matters most?

TikTok

The advent of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of political communication, enabling politicians to interact directly with their constituents and amplify their messages beyond traditional media channels. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become instrumental in shaping public discourse and political agendas. However, the emergence of TikTok has introduced a new and unexplored dimension to political communication based on its unique platform-specific features and communication styles. TikTok, launched in 2017 as an international version of the Chinese app Douyin, has quickly gained popularity among users worldwide. With over two billion downloads, TikTok has become one of the most downloaded apps of the last decade. The platform’s short-form video content and algorithmic content recommendations have contributed to its rapid growth and appeal to younger audiences. Demographically TikTok users are young, with 28% global users under the age of 18 and over 60% of users under 30 (Iqbal, 2021). The videos are usually short in length, ranging from 15 seconds to 10 minutes, with shorter videos being most common. There is a strong focus on meme-making, especially audio memes where users re-create videos using the sounds from others videos (Abidin, 2021). TikTok is organised largely by hashtag and if the user selects a hashtag they can see a selection of videos with that hashtag (Kaye et al., 2021, 2022). However, users can also sort videos by sounds, and see other videos that use the same sound. A central feature of TikTok is the ‘For You’ page, which is the feed that users will see when they open the app. This feed of videos is algorithmically curated for the user, based on the user’s past browsing, viewing and interactions with videos, and

this proprietary algorithm’s success in offering relevant content to the viewer is considered to set TikTok apart from other platforms on the market, offering users a continuous stream of videos, even from accounts they have not followed (Kaye et al., 2021, 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2020).

Given the algorithm’s role in content dissemination, virality on TikTok is both unpredictable and consequential. Every tiktok, regardless of the user’s follower count, has a chance to go viral, making it a highly effective tool for distributing content and reaching a broad audience (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). Looking at climate activism specifically, Hautea et al. (2021) argue that the affordances of the platform – *visibility, editability and association* – facilitate the creation of unique activist content oriented around personal narratives and affective connection. As Davis (2020, 11) explains, these ‘affordances refer to how objects enable and constrain’, so a platform’s affordances can create the conditions in which particular actions are much more appealing (or much less appealing) because of the design of the interface. TikTok’s platform affordances all shape the platform cultures and the ways in which information circulate (Southerton and Clark, 2022).

Within this context, TikTok’s platform demands a more personal involvement from politicians in the content production process, prompting them to create authentic and relatable videos and showing themselves at the center stage. The realization of the enormous potential offered by TikTok depends not only on the adoption of the platform but also on how politicians choose to communicate on it (Kelm, 2020). The differences in the supply mechanism implies that political tiktoks can reach a much broader audience beyond politicians’ followers and sympathisers. This could give a strategic incentive to create content that resonates well with TikTok’s algorithm, but which also works across partisan divides. To understand how politicians adapt to this new platform, we adopt Schellewald (2021)’s framework of TikTok communicative forms, which encompass comedic, documentary, communal, explanatory, interactive, and meta styles.

Comedic TikToks embrace humor, ranging from lighthearted fun to pointed political commentary. Employing humor, visual effects, text labels, and a variety of comedic styles, this form is instrumental in addressing a wide spectrum of political topics, from generic subjects to more controversial themes. The comedic content may exploit the medium’s potential for absurdity or parody, providing both entertainment and insight. *Documentary* TikToks combine humor with personal storytelling. These videos often capture the personal experiences, peculiarities, and life situations of creators. By showcasing daily settings and events, or weaving together seemingly random clips into coherent narratives, this style emphasizes relatability, enabling viewers to identify with the shared experiences. *Communal* TikToks highlight collaborative efforts, underlining the significance of social relationships and shared

experiences. Created with partners, family, friends, or colleagues, these videos emphasize relatability, shared self-expression, and a collective sense of understanding, resonating with the audience by referencing common cultural events or social norms. *Explanatory* TikTokS are more instructive, functioning as tutorials or knowledge-sharing platforms. While there's a nod to personal experience, the emphasis is on imparting valuable information. These videos can be aesthetically pleasing, but often detach from the creator's identity, focusing primarily on the shared knowledge or skill. *Interactive* TikTokS harness the platform's features, fostering a dynamic space for challenges, reactions, and collaborations. By capitalizing on TikTok's unique features like 'Duet' or various filters, these videos champion a sense of community, competition, and engagement, making the most of the platform's interactivity. Finally, *meta* TikTokS offer introspection by commenting on the platform itself. Whether discussing the algorithm, popular trends, or user behaviors, these videos foster a sense of awareness. By explicitly or implicitly commenting on TikTok's mechanics, creators provide a more analytical perspective on the platform's dynamics.

In sum, the variety of communicative forms on TikTok presents politicians with a plethora of strategies to communicate effectively (Hautea et al., 2021). By tapping into these styles, politicians can achieve broader reach, deeper engagement, and foster a genuine connection with a diverse demographic on the platform (Kelm, 2020). This versatility is essential for politicians striving to create content that resonates with TikTok's unique and dynamic audience and content dissemination algorithm (Davis, 2020; Southerton and Clark, 2022). Importantly, however, while these forms provide a structural framework, they're versatile, allowing creators to weave them together as needed to address a broad spectrum of topics. The potential for politicians lies in navigating these communicative forms adeptly, striking a balance between TikTok's platform-specific features, such as its multimodal combination of visual, text, and audio elements, to effectively engage with a diverse and expansive audience.

By adopting Schellewald (2021)'s framework, we explore how politicians embraced these communication forms to engage with the public. Examining how multimodal communicative cues and issue attention in TikTok videos influence social media engagement helps advance our understanding of the features that make audiences respond more actively to online political content. Employing a novel dataset of TikTok videos posted by U.S. Members of Congress and Governors, our study provides insights into politicians' adaptation to the TikTok platform. By examining the extent of politicians' adoption of TikTok, the communication styles they employ, and the topics they address, we aim to unravel the intricate relationship between politicians, their audience, and the evolving landscape of political communication on this algorithmically curated platform. Through this analysis, we shed light on

how politicians effectively navigate TikTok’s unique affordances to harness its potential for impactful political engagement and agenda setting. In particular, we address the following four questions:

RQ1: Which issues do politicians address on TikTok?

RQ2: Which communication styles do politicians adopt when communicating with the public on TikTok?

RQ3: To what extent are communicative style and topics associated with viewer engagement?

Data & Methods

Original data

To answer our research questions, we use an original collection of all TikTok videos posted by US members of congress, senators, and governors. To collect these videos, we identified politicians’ TikTok accounts manually by going through the list of members of congress, senators, and governors. Overall, only 37 politicians had an active TikTok account at the time of data collection in April 2023. This amounts to just 6.3% of all top level US politicians.

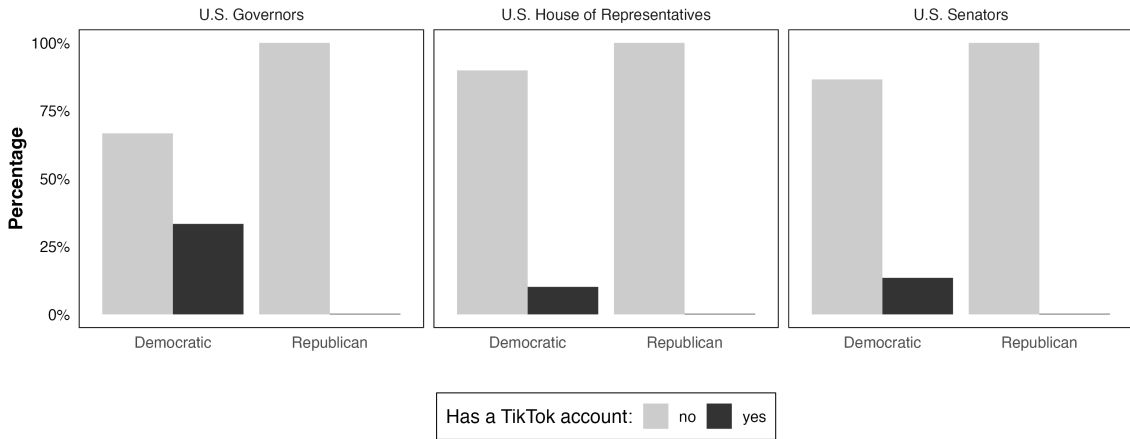


Figure 1: **Presence of TikTok accounts by party.**

As figure 1 displays, all politicians who use TikTok as of April 2023 are members of the Democratic party, with no publicly available TikTok accounts by Republican politicians at the time of data collection. We speculate that this has to do with the harder stance regarding China and a potential TikTok ban taken by the Republican party. In addition to the video content, we also collected video captions and recorded relevant meta data (e.g. timestamps, engagement metrics, etc.).

In total, our dataset consists of 2230 videos posted by 37 individual politicians. As table 1 shows, posting frequency varies considerably between the individual politicians in our dataset ($mean = 60.1$, $sd = 95.0$) and is right skewed. Some of them are recent adopters (e.g. Adam Schiff, Maxwell Frost) while others are using the platform already for longer (e.g. Gavin Newsom, Ed Markey). Most of them use it quite infrequently (e.g. Maura Haley, Mark Takano), while others are highly active (e.g. Gretch Whitmer, Cory Booker).

Name	Date range	n	Name	Date range	n
Cory Booker	2022/02/28 - 2023/04/21	460	Congresswoman Rashida	2022/07/20 - 2022/12/21	22
Gretch Whitmer	2021/07/27 - 2023/04/23	278	Katie Porter	2022/10/06 - 2023/03/31	22
JB	2022/02/16 - 2023/03/28	264	Greg Casar	2021/11/04 - 2023/02/22	20
Gavin Newsom	2020/12/11 - 2023/04/19	194	Rep. Frederica S. Wilson	2022/07/19 - 2022/09/19	20
Bernie Sanders	2020/03/11 - 2023/03/28	144	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	2023/03/25 - 2023/06/07	15
Jeff Jackson	2021/04/29 - 2023/03/27	93	StevenAHorsford	2022/08/06 - 2022/12/02	15
Tony Cárdenas	2022/04/15 - 2022/12/23	77	adamschiffca	2023/01/25 - 2023/04/06	15
Kirsten Gillibrand	2021/08/11 - 2022/12/31	76	Congressman Pocan (WI-02)	2022/07/21 - 2023/03/23	13
John Fetterman	2022/08/18 - 2022/11/13	59	Jared Polis	2022/02/22 - 2022/11/09	13
Josh Shapiro	2021/10/30 - 2022/11/09	59	RepCori	2022/11/18 - 2023/03/31	12
Senator Ed Markey	2020/04/30 - 2023/03/11	49	Jon Ossoff	2020/12/17 - 2021/11/07	11
Tony Evers	2022/01/14 - 2022/11/08	49	Morgan McGarvey	2022/01/18 - 2022/08/22	10
JahanaHayesCT	2022/07/09 - 2022/11/08	40	Congressman Maxwell Frost	2023/02/07 - 2023/03/01	9
Team JB	2022/07/18 - 2022/11/05	37	Maura Healey	2020/10/26 - 2022/08/24	9
Senator Bob Casey	2020/11/08 - 2023/02/12	33	Sen.warnock1	2023/01/16 - 2023/01/16	9
Ilhan Omar	2021/09/10 - 2023/01/31	29	Rep. Pressley	2023/01/11 - 2023/03/10	6
Gov. John Bel Edwards	2021/06/08 - 2022/09/13	25	Tim Walz	2021/01/04 - 2021/03/22	6
jilltokuda	2021/10/27 - 2022/04/17	23	congresswomanhoulahan	2021/10/14 - 2022/09/23	6
			Rep. Mark Takano	2019/12/13 - 2020/05/22	3

Table 1: **Overview of TikTok accounts included in our dataset.**

Manual coding and intercoder reliability

The two main variables we are interested in are the political issues politicians talk about on TikTok, and the communicative styles they are using when doing so. Regarding issues we follow the common approach of using the issues from the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al., 2019) and use their operationalization and items for our codebook. These include, among others, issues such as macroeconomics, environment, health, or law and crime. For communicative styles we use the framework from the previous section (comedic, documentary, communal, explanatory, interactive, meta), and created a category coding scheme to analyze the videos for said styles. The codebook was created by the two authors using the comprehensive description of communication styles outlined in (Schellewald, 2021) and the background section of this paper, and a small sample of videos. Together we created a comprehensive list of items and video features coders should look for when making a decision. Whenever uncertainties arose, solutions were discussed, agreed on, and recorded in the codebook. The final codebook (see appendix B) was then given to three research assistants who coded the final data. Following the coder training, we conducted an intercoder

reliability test using 298 videos which were coded by all three coders. Because each video could entail up to two topics and styles, we created a dummy variables for each topic/style, and recorded if each topic/style was present in the video. Using a weighted mean of pairwise chance corrected Cohen’s κ calculations to ensure that very rarely appearing topics/styles do not inflate the average error, this first test already achieved satisfactory (Landis and Koch, 1977) results (topic: $\kappa = 0.60$, communicative style: $\kappa = 0.65$). Following these ensuring outcome, the three coders proceeded with coding the remaining videos, which are single annotated.

Statistical models

We are interested in four dimensions of user engagement with politicians’ videos on TikTok, namely virality (the number of plays of a video), evaluation (liking a video), deliberation (commenting on a video), and dissemination (sharing of a video). We use these numbers as the outcome variable in an OLS regression model, and topics as well as communicative styles as independent variables. As it is common with social media engagement data, the distributions of the dependent variables are heavily skewed, with most videos earning very little engagement, and few videos going viral. We therefore follow a common approach in the literature on social media engagement (e.g. García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Pipal et al., 2022) and log transform the dependent variables. To handle the fact that each video can be attributed with up to two topics and styles, we stack our dataset and create a new observation for each topic-style combination. Thus, if a video has a second topic *or* style, we create a second observation for this video, using the second topic *or* style. Additionally, if a video has a second topic *and* style, we create four observations using each combination from the two topics and styles. Moreover, we include a number of control variables (year and month dummies, a linear time variable, and video duration in seconds), as well as politician-level fixed effects to account for the fact that unobserved politician characteristics like individual popularity are likely to be related to the success of their videos. We also cluster the standard errors on the level of the individual video to account for the fact that the stacked observations of each video with a second topic or style are not independent from each other.

Results

Our first research question was concerned with the issues politicians talk about on TikTok, tapping into the new affordances this platform provides regarding the substance of the content. Overall, the videos US politicians post on TikTok are predominantly political,

with 81.6% of videos addressing one of the political issues included in the CAP. But what political issues are politicians talking about specifically? Figure 2 gives an overview of the top issues politicians talk about on TikTok aggregated by month. Across the observed period, the intensity surrounding most topics remains relatively consistent. However, the subject of civil rights emerges as a notable exception in April 2022, as does the issue of law and crime between June 2022 and October 2022.. Moreover, discussions centered on government operations peak significantly between May 2022 and March 2023. During this peak, mentions of government operations surpassed the frequency of the next most discussed topic by over fivefold.

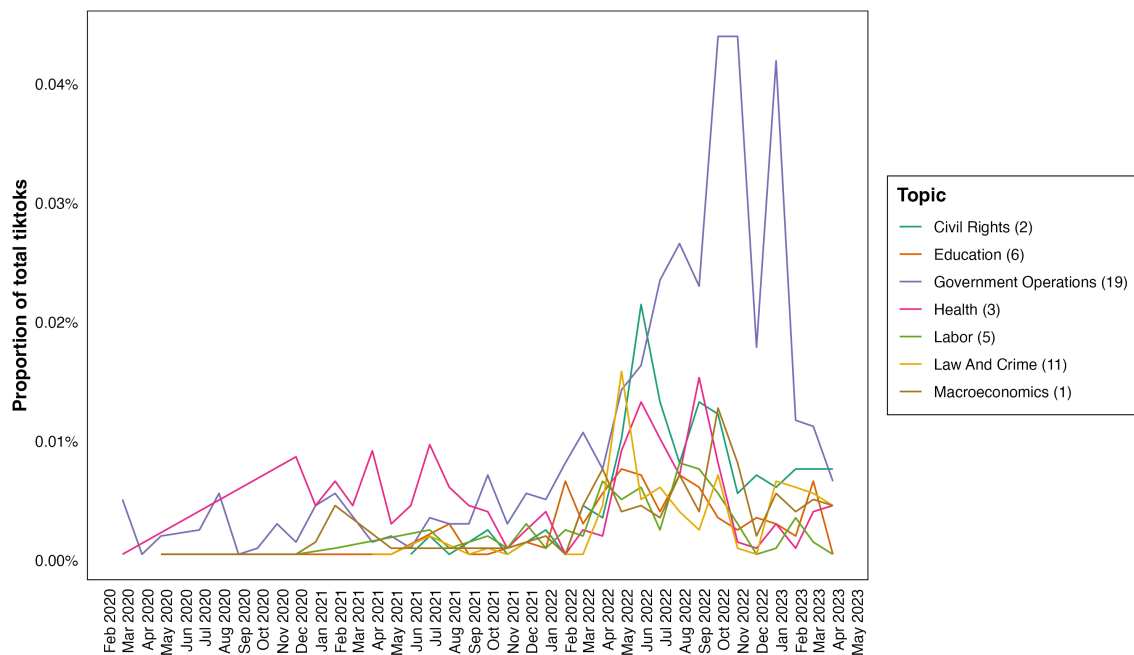


Figure 2: **Topic proportions and volume over time.** Topic proportions are calculated relative to the total number of videos to highlight changes in volume and proportions. Topic proportions are limited to the 7 most prominent topics to facilitate visual display.

Our second research question asked what communicative styles US politicians use when communicating on TikTok. Overall, the most commonly used style was the explanatory style (56%), followed by videos using a documentary style (22%). Comedic (9%) and communal (9%) videos were posted much less frequently, while the interactive (2.1%) and meta (0.1%) styles played only a very marginal role. Figure 3 displays the use of each style over time, with monthly proportions relative to the overall amount of videos. Similarly to the development of topic proportions over time, we see a large increase in overall video volume in 2022 and 2023. This is also the time where the difference between using explanatory versus any other communicative style diverges, with the explanatory style being used, at peak times, almost three times as much as the second most common style, namely documentary videos.

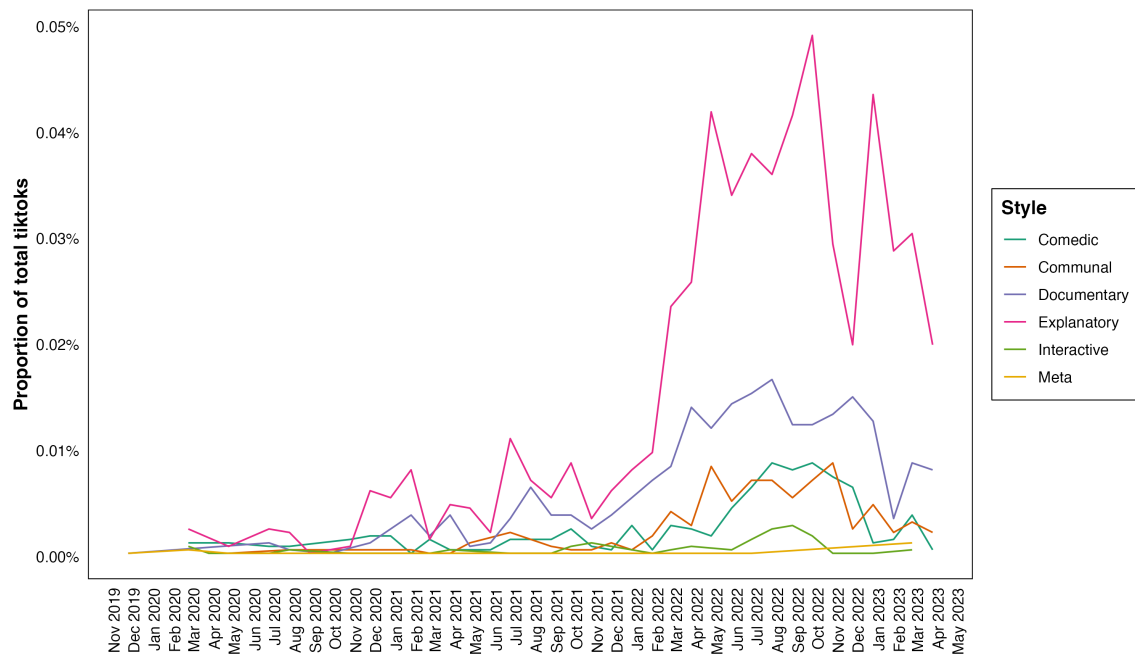


Figure 3: **Style proportions over time.** Style proportions are calculated relative to the total number of videos to highlight changes in volume and proportions.

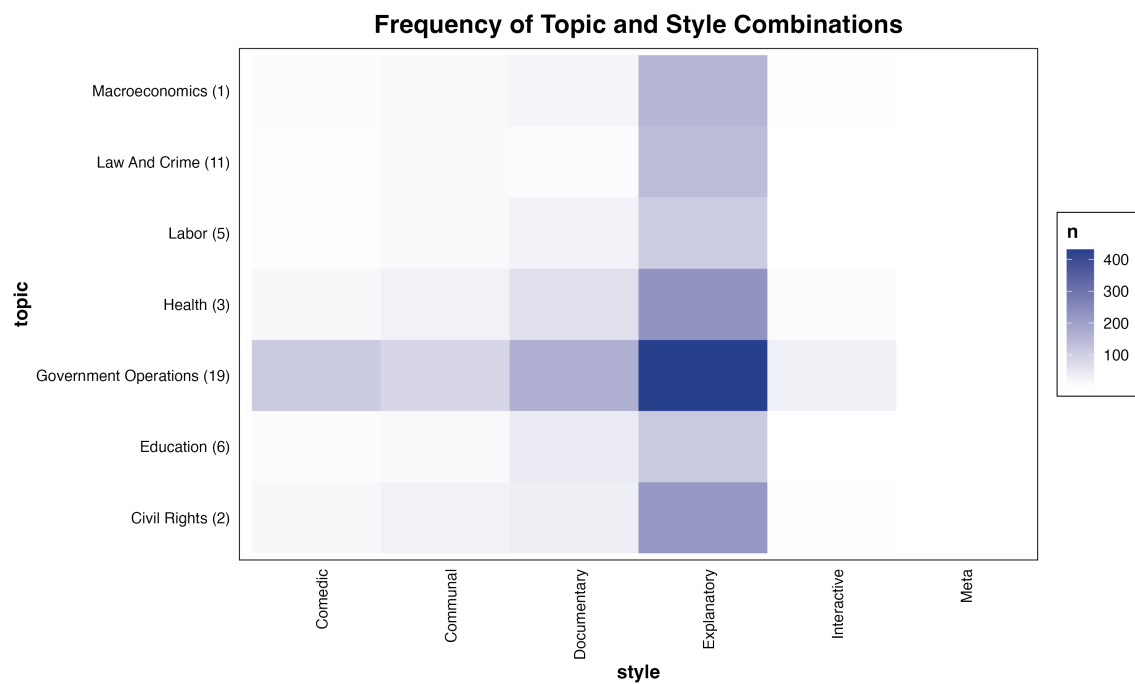


Figure 4

But which styles do politicians use when talking about different topics? Figure 4 displays the frequency of each communicative style per discussed topic. The list of topics in this figure is limited to the 7 most addressed issues (see Appendix A for the full frequency matrix). Across all topics, politicians mainly use the explanatory style when posting on TikTok. It is only for the issue of government operations, that is politicians talking about politics itself, that we see them making considerable use of other styles as well. Importantly, this is also the only topic where politicians create the "typical" fun TikTok videos, making use of the comedic style.

Our third and final research question was concerned with the association between topics, communicative styles, and success on TikTok. Overall, the results of the regression models underscore the importance of both topic and style in influencing engagement on political TikTok. While comedic videos consistently increase engagement (as seen from row 11 in Figure 5, documentary-style videos seem to deter it (as seen from row 9 in Figure 5). Furthermore, addressing issues like civil rights, government operations, the state of the economy, and public health consistently attract more comments, likes, and shares than videos addressing educational or labour issues.

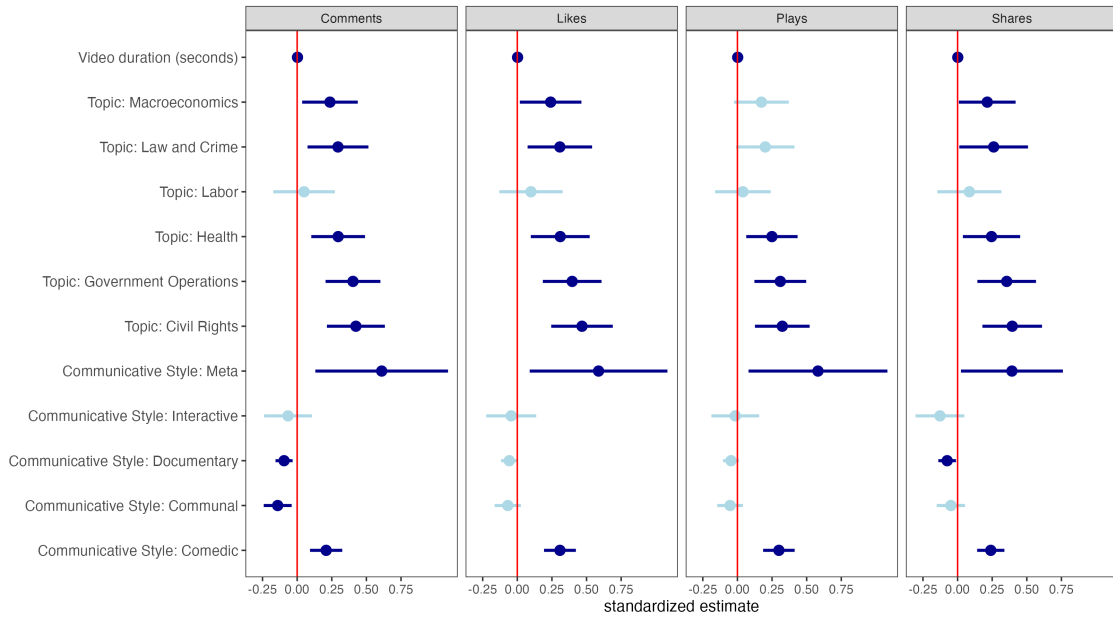


Figure 5: **OLS regressions explaining engagement metrics with topics and communicative styles.** Observations with 2 topics and/or communicative styles have been stacked, and all dependent variables have been standardized. The number of topics is limited to the seven most discussed topics for better visual display. The reference category for the topic variable is "Topic: Education, the reference category for the communicative style variable is "Communicative Style: Explanatory". Full regression tables are shown in appendix B.

Across the four forms of engagement, we see a consistent pattern regarding the association between communicative style and engagement. Videos with a comedic style were associated

with more engagement, significantly predicting higher plays ($b = 0.299, p < .001$), likes ($b = 0.308, p < .001$), shares ($b = 0.240, p < .001$), and comments ($b = 0.103, p = .024$) compared to videos using an explanatory style (reference category). Similarly, the meta style, that is politicians talking about the platform itself, was related to a higher number of plays ($b = 0.596, p < .023$), likes ($b = 0.587, p < .021$), shares ($b = 0.393, p < .037$), and comments ($b = 0.610, p = .013$). Conversely, the documentary style was associated with less engagement for two out of the four engagement metrics. It significantly predicted fewer shares ($b = -0.075, p = .021$) and comments ($b = -0.085, p = .003$) compared to the explanatory style. However, the negative association with the number of plays ($b = -0.047, p = .112$) and likes ($b = -0.058, p = .055$) was not statistically significant. The remaining communicative styles (communal, interactive) did not show a consistent statistically significant correlation across the four outcomes, with the exception of the communal style being negatively associated with fewer comments ($b = -0.141, p = .006$).

In terms of topics, we also observe noteworthy variation in engagement. Videos addressing civil rights demonstrated consistently higher engagement compared to those discussing education (reference category). They had significantly higher plays ($b = 0.324, p < 0.001$), likes ($b = 0.467, p < 0.001$), shares ($b = 0.395, p < 0.001$), and comments ($b = 0.424, p < 0.001$). Videos focusing on government operations also garnered more attention than education. It showed higher plays ($b = 0.310, p < 0.001$), likes ($b = 0.396, p < 0.001$), comments ($b = 0.403, p < 0.001$), and shares ($b = 0.355, p < 0.01$). The health topic also demonstrated a similar trend. Videos on health had higher plays ($b = 0.249, p < 0.01$), likes ($b = 0.310, p < 0.01$), comments ($b = 0.296, p < 0.01$), and shares ($b = 0.245, p < 0.020$) when compared to the reference category. Videos about macroeconomics exhibited a consistent effect across three of the dependent variables. They received more plays ($b = 0.173, p < 0.09$), likes ($b = 0.241, p < 0.05$), and comments ($b = 0.199, p < 0.05$) than videos discussing education. T

In sum, the use of TikTok by U.S. politicians shows some key trends. Predominantly, politicians are leaning towards explanatory styles to convey political topics, with civil rights, law and crime, and government operations being particularly notable subjects. However, there's a clear engagement advantage with comedic styles, even though they are less frequently employed. This juxtaposition highlights a potential tension for politicians on TikTok: balancing platform-specific engagement incentives with the traditional expectations of political discourse.

Discussion

The dynamism introduced by TikTok in the arena of political communication is emblematic of our age: quick, visually compelling, and shaped largely by algorithms. As one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, TikTok represents a new frontier for digital political communication. TikTok has significantly changed the social media sphere. Other platforms afford user-created videos or the act of “scrolling the feed”, but TikTok marries these trends and elevates information density and virality. Snapchat pioneered mobile-first video editing technology and low-friction video production, but it is a fundamentally closed system that relies on users to curate their networks for video distribution. YouTube’s recommendation algorithm allows it to show videos to people who have never opted into the creators of those videos, but the long-form nature of those videos and importance of community means that traditional networks are still very important. TikTok, on the other hand, combines the best of both worlds: a continuous stream of videos, even from accounts users do not follow, mobile-first interface that allows an easy scrolling, and a short-form video design that enables visibility, editability and association. The synthesis of these affordances makes TikTok a viral platform and offers new opportunities for politicians to communicate with the public. Through our research, we have illuminated key facets of this evolving landscape, shedding light on the ways politicians adapt and engage on the platform.

Our study underscores that TikTok is not merely another platform where politicians can recycle their online content, but a unique space that needs an alignment with specific communicative forms and issue areas to maximize engagement. The strong prevalence of explanatory videos suggests that politicians view TikTok as a re-branded, but same old social media channel where they can disseminate knowledge and set their agenda in a traditional manner by re-using content. However, the notably higher engagement associated with comedic videos indicates that humour remains a powerful tool for capturing attention and driving interaction on TikTok, even in political contexts. This suggests that while politicians predominantly opt for an informative style, incorporating humour can significantly boost interaction and reach, potentially bridging the divide between formal political discourse and the younger demographic prevalent on TikTok. Issue-wise, we observed that topics such as civil rights, government operations, the economy, and public health resonated more with viewers than subjects like education or labor. This suggests that certain political topics might be inherently more engaging for the TikTok demographic, or they may be better suited for the platform’s short-form video format.

Overall, these results inform our understanding of how the “supply side” of content on TikTok differs from other platforms. Social media platforms are created by their users and their interface design, which dictate the underlying information spreading mechanisms.

TikTok encourages politicians to create televisual content aimed at a larger public audience than any previous platform. Moreover, due to TikTok’s scrolling design, content creators, including the politicians studied here, are compelled to “hook” their audiences within the first few seconds of their short videos to avoid being scrolled away into the algorithmic void. The nuanced relationship between communicative style, topic, and engagement provides actionable insights for politicians aiming to optimize their TikTok communication strategy. While explanatory content might be the most common, diversifying styles—particularly by infusing humour or tapping into personal stories—can amplify reach and resonance. Yet, this poses a challenge: balancing the allure of humor with the seriousness expected of political figures.

It is important to note, however, that our study focuses on a small population of politicians who are active on TikTok. At the time of writing, TikTok sued to government to delay the effect of an executive order that would have prevented further downloads of the app. Although a deal appears to have been secured, the company’s Chinese origins still persist in political discourse, preventing members of the Republican Party and even some Democrats from joining the platform. Nonetheless, this does not hinder the relevance of our study. TikTok may be the first platform to upend the social media establishment by remixing and combining previously disparate affordances, but it will not be the last.

In conclusion, as digital platforms continue to evolve and reshape the contours of political communication, understanding the nuances of each platform is paramount. Our research on TikTok offers a glimpse into the complex interplay of communicative style, content, and engagement in the digital age, highlighting the transformative power of social media in modern political discourse. Future research should prioritize developing robust, scalable methodologies that can capture and analyze vast amounts of complex audiovisual data from TikTok to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its dynamics. Such methods would allow for granular, large-scale analyses into user engagement patterns, content preferences, and the interplay between algorithms and user behaviors. Additionally, it’s imperative that future studies extend the scope of analysis to different settings, to discern how regional, sociopolitical, and cultural nuances influence the way content is consumed and engaged with on TikTok. This would not only enrich the discourse on digital political communication but also provide insights into the global-local dynamics of social media platforms in varying contexts. As TikTok and similar platforms continue to grow, they will indubitably play an increasingly vital role in shaping political narratives, offering both challenges and opportunities for politicians and the public alike.

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A Appendix - Topic and communicative style frequencies

Topic	Comedic	Communal	Documentary	Explanatory	Interactive	Meta
Agriculture (4)	1.00	0.00	7.00	7.00	0.00	0.00
Civil Rights (2)	16.00	30.00	36.00	219.00	3.00	0.00
Culture (21)	2.00	7.00	19.00	43.00	0.00	0.00
Defense (15)	0.00	1.00	0.00	14.00	0.00	0.00
Domestic Commerce (14)	1.00	3.00	7.00	14.00	0.00	0.00
Education (6)	9.00	14.00	41.00	113.00	0.00	0.00
Energy (8)	1.00	2.00	2.00	27.00	0.00	0.00
Environment (7)	5.00	4.00	12.00	62.00	2.00	0.00
Government Operations (19)	111.00	86.00	169.00	431.00	32.00	1.00
Health (3)	16.00	29.00	67.00	230.00	8.00	0.00
Housing (13)	0.00	3.00	0.00	17.00	0.00	0.00
Immigration (9)	1.00	1.00	3.00	7.00	0.00	0.00
International Affairs (18)	1.00	3.00	5.00	22.00	0.00	1.00
Labor (5)	6.00	14.00	27.00	107.00	1.00	0.00
Law And Crime (11)	5.00	11.00	10.00	138.00	0.00	0.00
Macroeconomics (1)	9.00	14.00	24.00	155.00	3.00	0.00
Public Lands (20)	0.00	5.00	9.00	12.00	0.00	0.00
Social Welfare (12)	1.00	15.00	14.00	62.00	0.00	0.00
Technology (16)	2.00	0.00	5.00	15.00	0.00	3.00
Transportation (10)	5.00	1.00	7.00	25.00	0.00	0.00

Table A1: **Frequency matrix of topic and style combinations.**

B Appendix - Full regression output

	Plays	Likes	Shares	Comments
topicAgriculture (4)	0.170 (0.226)	0.232 (0.233)	0.297 (0.290)	0.254 (0.262)
topicCivil Rights (2)	0.324 (0.101)	0.467 (0.113)	0.395 (0.110)	0.424 (0.107)
topicCulture (21)	0.263 (0.131)	0.385 (0.147)	0.358 (0.145)	0.367 (0.138)
topicDefense (15)	0.500 (0.303)	0.452 (0.328)	0.486 (0.184)	0.538 (0.230)
topicDomestic Commerce (14)	0.134 (0.143)	0.131 (0.162)	0.162 (0.184)	0.029 (0.168)
topicEnergy (8)	0.146 (0.127)	0.210 (0.136)	0.188 (0.156)	0.264 (0.122)
topicEnvironment (7)	0.143 (0.114)	0.223 (0.123)	0.213 (0.131)	0.291 (0.112)
topicGovernment Operations (19)	0.310 (0.095)	0.396 (0.108)	0.355 (0.108)	0.403 (0.101)
topicHealth (3)	0.249 (0.095)	0.310 (0.108)	0.245 (0.105)	0.296 (0.099)
topicHousing (13)	0.342 (0.239)	0.350 (0.246)	0.442 (0.255)	0.434 (0.269)
topicImmigration (9)	0.635 (0.245)	0.806 (0.257)	0.629 (0.417)	1.000 (0.272)
topicInternational Affairs (18)	0.481 (0.215)	0.498 (0.224)	0.527 (0.153)	0.510 (0.231)
topicLabor (5)	0.040 (0.102)	0.099 (0.117)	0.085 (0.118)	0.050 (0.113)
topicLaw And Crime (11)	0.201 (0.107)	0.307 (0.119)	0.261 (0.127)	0.295 (0.112)
topicMacroeconomics (1)	0.173 (0.101)	0.241 (0.113)	0.214 (0.105)	0.237 (0.102)
topicOther	0.166 (0.096)	0.212 (0.108)	0.236 (0.107)	0.176 (0.102)
topicPublic Lands (20)	0.170 (0.145)	0.277 (0.152)	0.271 (0.138)	0.266 (0.165)
topicSocial Welfare (12)	0.092 (0.113)	0.126 (0.126)	0.081 (0.131)	0.048 (0.124)
topicTechnology (16)	0.490 (0.168)	0.539 (0.175)	0.551 (0.172)	0.564 (0.153)
topicTransportation (10)	0.286 (0.143)	0.311 (0.162)	0.365 (0.125)	0.363 (0.147)
styleComedic	0.299 (0.058)	0.308 (0.059)	0.240 (0.050)	0.209 (0.059)
styleCommunal	-0.053 (0.047)	-0.069 (0.048)	-0.048 (0.052)	-0.141 (0.051)
styleDocumentary	-0.047 (0.029)	-0.058 (0.030)	-0.075 (0.032)	-0.095 (0.031)
styleInteractive	-0.015 (0.088)	-0.044 (0.092)	-0.127 (0.090)	-0.066 (0.088)
styleMeta	0.582 (0.256)	0.587 (0.254)	0.393 (0.188)	0.610 (0.244)
styleNo second option	0.058 (0.021)	0.067 (0.022)	0.027 (0.022)	0.057 (0.021)
styleOther	-0.115 (0.062)	-0.127 (0.071)	-0.146 (0.104)	-0.165 (0.095)
year2020	-1.893 (2.930)	-2.265 (3.275)	-1.113 (1.766)	-2.375 (3.466)
year2021	-5.253 (6.391)	-5.991 (7.159)	-3.283 (3.857)	-5.593 (7.597)
year2022	-8.401 (9.895)	-9.582 (11.087)	-5.353 (5.980)	-8.747 (11.760)
year2023	-11.544 (13.398)	-13.016 (15.013)	-7.344 (8.096)	-11.689 (15.920)
monthFeb	-0.506 (0.306)	-0.499 (0.342)	-0.399 (0.194)	-0.538 (0.359)
monthMar	-0.614 (0.596)	-0.623 (0.667)	-0.504 (0.368)	-0.592 (0.704)
monthApr	-1.176 (0.880)	-1.171 (0.986)	-0.908 (0.534)	-1.099 (1.044)
monthMay	-1.345 (1.176)	-1.379 (1.315)	-0.981 (0.728)	-1.225 (1.391)
monthJun	-1.442 (1.462)	-1.538 (1.637)	-1.139 (0.884)	-1.492 (1.734)
monthJul	-1.877 (1.750)	-1.937 (1.961)	-1.319 (1.056)	-1.820 (2.077)
monthAug	-2.143 (2.041)	-2.299 (2.288)	-1.476 (1.230)	-2.105 (2.423)
monthSep	-2.558 (2.336)	-2.700 (2.618)	-1.765 (1.412)	-2.488 (2.773)
monthOct	-2.826 (2.628)	-3.043 (2.945)	-1.919 (1.588)	-2.787 (3.119)
monthNov	-2.953 (2.920)	-3.235 (3.273)	-2.031 (1.763)	-2.920 (3.466)
monthDec	-3.014 (3.206)	-3.302 (3.594)	-2.017 (1.933)	-2.941 (3.807)
linear_time	0.257 (0.293)	0.293 (0.328)	0.170 (0.178)	0.247 (0.347)
as.numeric(video_duration)	0.002 (0.000)	0.002 (0.001)	0.002 (0.000)	0.002 (0.001)
Num.Obs.	4317	4317	4317	4317
R2	0.599	0.579	0.541	0.558
R2 Adj.	0.591	0.571	0.532	0.550
AIC	128 933.8	113 638.0	128 933.8	80 291.5
BIC	129 456.2	114 160.4	129 456.2	80 813.9
RMSE	726 020.48	123 470.41	726 020.45	2595.48
Std.Errors	by: video_id	by: video_id	by: video_id	by: video_id

Table B1: **Full regression tables.** Standard error in parentheses.