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## Sociological aspects of political support: Influencers' impact on the social media users\*

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**Abstract.** Political endorsements on social media, involving the support from influential figures, have become commonplace. As a result, political communication, which was originally limited to face-to-face interactions, develops online through social media. The article aims at identifying how effective political support changes in the technological era from the perspective of political sociology. The study is based on the qualitative approach — a review of relevant works and interviews with expert informants. The study shows that influential figures, such as celebrities, influencers, political and religious leaders, with political support ensured mainly by social media, get the ability to shape the image of candidates, increase their visibility, legitimacy and electability, and broaden the spectrum of support for their campaigns. Certainly, the success of such political endorsement depends on several factors, such as the credibility of endorsers, how actively they are involved in the campaign, how the campaign is perceived by the public, and whether the compatibility of values between the endorser and the candidate is achieved. Political endorsement faces several challenges, such as the risk of backlash, potential for public opinion manipulations, black campaigns and misinformation due to changes in the dynamics of social media that can make endorsements easily manipulated. Therefore, political endorsements on social media are not a mere means of promotion — in the digital era, they became part of political communication.

**Key words:** influencers; sociology of communication; digital communication; digital era; social media; political endorsements; election campaigns

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In the digital era, political communication has undergone a significant transformation evidenced by social media as the main platform for interaction with voters. Political endorsements that involve influential figures, such as celebrities, influencers and senior politicians, are one of the most effective and widespread communication strategies, since digital influencers ensure a significant effect on voter preferences. For example, the viral video by influencer Rezo in the 2019 European Elections determined a significant drop in votes for the party he criticized [15]. This phenomenon is supported by the development of increasingly advanced digital communication technology so that political information is more accessible and widespread and social media grows rapidly and provides easy access to supporting information [29].

The phenomenon of political candidates seeking support from influential figures has become commonplace in Indonesian politics, especially in the run-up to general elections. Former President Joko Widodo, President Prabowo Subianto and former Governor of Jakarta Anies Baswedan — strong political magnets, whose popularity comes not only from their achievements but also from their symbolic attraction of masses and creating great electoral appeal [21]. The 2024 election in Indonesia is an important case for explaining how political endorsements affect campaign dynamics and voter decisions. In sociology of communication, political endorsement is a form of persuasive communication that aims at ensuring a positive image of candidates and increasing their electability. However, the efficiency of political endorsement depends not only on the popularity of supporting figures but also on how information is received and interpreted by the public. On the other hand, political endorsement also refers to the role of the media and its impact on society [12]. The media is of social-cultural nature and functions independently to regulate interactions in other social institutions or structures.

The dualistic relationship between the media and social institutions determines several conditions that influence the audience's perception and acceptance of the media content in a particular context. Social media allows influential figures to express their support directly to millions of followers in a short period of time, which allows candidates to increase their public visibility and legitimacy. Originally political communication was limited to face-to-face interaction, but the rapid development of social media made Internet-based media a channel to access various fields — education, culture, social, economic, legal and political.

Some recent examples show how endorsement from celebrities or social media influencers can change the dynamics of political campaigns and increase candidates' electability. For instance, a few celebrities and influencers endorsed certain candidates in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, which affected voters' perceptions and decisions. The number

one choice, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, received the support of public figures, while the number two choice, Prabowo Subianto and Gibran Rakabuming Raka, were supported by popular celebrities. Such support is believed to increase the popularity and electability of both among the younger generation, especially followers on social media. Ganjar Pranowo and Mahfud MD, the number three choice, also received support from social media influencers to spread their political messages. Celebrity endorsements had a significant impact on the voting behavior of new voters; the General Election Commission (KPU) of Padang City collaborated with nine community leaders as influencers at the 2020 elections to increase voter participation [10; 17].

Political communication shapes the image of candidates to ensure voters' positive perception, which can ultimately increase the candidate's electability. Political communication covers various aspects — from campaign ads, media interviews and public debates to the use of social media. Each element of political communication can make a significant contribution to the public perception of the candidate [23], combining verbal and nonverbal messages [5; 30]. Moreover, political communication can combine different strategies such as social activities, billboards and banners, radio advertisements and social media. [35] — all provide opportunities to optimize image and electability in general elections [27].

Political communication is based on several principles, the first of which is consistency [4] — what is said should be consistent with the party's platform, paradigm and response to public issues; the second is replication — information should be repeated so that the public can fully understand the party's platform; the third is that the information conveyed should be verifiable for truth.

The involvement of celebrities and artists in political campaigns is inseparable from the pros and cons of society. As citizens they have the same opportunities and rights as others in democracy to be elected and to vote; at the same time, they have popularity as a modality for competition [36]; therefore, political parties recruit celebrities as political endorsements. In addition to celebrities, political figures (like Anies Baswedan, the former presidential candidate and former governor of Jakarta) became strong candidates in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election. In his campaign, Anies received support from influential figures — politicians, celebrities and social media influencers, which played an important role in his positive image and increased his electability in the eyes of the public. Among his supporters was Jusuf Kalla with great influence, whose support increased Anies' legitimacy as a candidate [1] due to attracting the media and public attention and affecting their fans' political choice. The influence of celebrities in politics is known as “politainment” — a combination of politics and entertainment [3], which can increase political awareness and voter participation, especially among the younger generation. However, this

phenomenon also presents challenges such as a lack of transparency regarding sponsored content and commercialization that blurs the line between genuine advocacy and commercial interests.

From the perspective of sociology of communication, endorsement from influential figures affects public opinion through three mechanisms: (1) additional legitimacy and credibility to the candidate from respected and trusted figures; (2) the bandwagon effect — people tend to follow the choices of the respected majority, which increases voter participation and strengthens the candidate's position in the political competition; (3) social-psychological effect — endorsement from celebrities and social media influences voters' perceptions and decisions, since followers consider influencers as role models or trustworthy figures [16]. For instance, Oprah Winfrey played a role in increasing the electability of candidates in the US elections [24]; the same applies to celebrity supporters in the 2008 US Democratic Presidential Primary [8].

In Indonesia, most research of political endorsement focuses on the role of social media in political communication in the digital era [10; 17], although there are studies of the influence of celebrity endorsements on voter attitudes [3]. Thus, the article aims at explaining effective political support, including social media assistance and corresponding strategies and challenges, and is based on the qualitative approach [7; 9; 28] — to study the dynamics of digital communication and social-cultural factors of effective political endorsements — and a literature review — to identify how endorsement practices reflect broader social relations and power dynamics in contemporary political communication [31]. In-depth interviews were conducted with two key informants [26]: Anies Baswedan, an Indonesian academic, activist and politician, who served as the Governor of Jakarta from 2017 to 2022 and in 2024 was a presidential candidate (knowledge of digital political communication strategies and the role of endorsements in election campaigns), and Mohamad Hekal Bawazier, an Indonesian politician, who served as a member of the House of Representatives (strategic position in legislative politics, understanding of political communication and its influence on public policy).

According to the interviewed political experts, during elections endorsements have a significant influence on the visibility of candidates, providing them with additional legitimacy and strengthening their image, especially for voters who are still hesitant to make their choice. Political endorsements from influential figures can increase voter trust and support, changing the dynamics of campaigns by attracting media attention and making voters more likely to accept political information (from figures perceived as having moral or intellectual authority). Endorsements from religious leaders and academics have a different impact than from celebrities or influencers — provide stronger moral legitimacy than endorsements from celebrities who are more focused on popularity, but endorsements from celebrities can reach a wider group of voters, especially the younger generation more exposed to social media (table 1).

Table 1. **Political endorsement strategies and challenges**

| Strategy                  | Expected impact               | Risk/Challenge                     |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Live discussion           | Trust, real interaction       | Low turnout, unengaged audience    |
| Social media narrative    | Wide reach, virality          | Misinformation, backlash           |
| Targeting opinion leaders | High trust, persuasive effect | Hard to control the message        |
| Webinars and livestreams  | Direct voter engagement       | Low view rating, learning issues   |
| Audience segmentation     | Effective message targeting   | Misidentification of target groups |

Endorsement from figures with academic or moral background can be more influential for those who prioritize rationality when choosing candidates [24], while endorsements from celebrities are more effective in attracting voters less involved in politics and more influenced by emotional factors. This phenomenon can be explained with the concept of “opinion leader” [14]: individuals do not directly receive political information from the media — rather through intermediaries such as celebrities or public figures they trust. Thus, political endorsement can be considered a form of interpersonal communication that strengthens the effect of mass media.

In the digital era, social media has become the main means of spreading and strengthening political endorsements. Digital platforms allow candidates to reach a wider audience more quickly and directly; social media not only expands the reach of endorsement but also allows two-way interaction with voters, thus strengthening political involvement. Interactions through social media help candidates build more personal relationships with voters, which increases voters’ trust and participation level [6], which can be attributed to the “network society” theory [2] — social media becomes the main space for more interactive and community-based political communication. In addition, social media also allows for the virality of endorsement content, which is explained by “participatory culture” theory [13] which emphasizes that voters are not only passive consumers but can also producers of political information (participate in spreading campaign narratives to their own audiences). Social media functions as a virtual public space for political conversations. Such horizontal communication makes it easier for voters to discuss and evaluate the credibility of endorsement from celebrities and political figures. Therefore, effective support is determined by two factors — popularity of the endorsing figure and how political messages are received and discussed in online communities.

For endorsements to be more than just symbolic, candidates should implement specific strategies (table 2), such as holding events together by the endorsing person and ensuring his active direct involvement in the campaign (in dialogue with the public). *“In this way, the endorsement can have a real impact on the campaign and increase public participation”.*

Table 2. **Indicators to systematically measure the success of endorsement**

| Indicator               | Description                             | Example                                      |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Voter support increase  | Change in electability                  | Pre- and post-electability surveys           |
| Social media engagement | Likes, shares, comments, virality rate  | Social media analysis                        |
| Mass sentiments         | Public emotional tone                   | AI sentiment tools                           |
| Participation rate      | Event attendance, livestream viewership | Event metrics, streaming platform statistics |
| Media coverage          | Frequency of mentions                   | Media monitoring                             |

Active engagement of endorsers can increase the credibility of campaign messages and strengthen emotional bonds with voters. Furthermore, such strategies as live streaming, webinars and discussion forums can strengthen the impact of endorsements by providing a space for interaction. The concept of symbolic interaction [20] shows that the meaning of endorsement is determined not only by who provides support but also by the type of interaction between endorsers and voters. In other words, successful endorsement creates a reciprocal relationship between the endorser and the community through meaningful communication.

In addition to direct involvement, the use of social media is key in the endorsement strategy. Candidates with strong narrative on social media can increase the effect of endorsement. According to the “agenda-setting” theory [18], the media has an important role in shaping public perception; therefore, an effective communication strategy ensures that endorsement get enough media coverage to influence public opinion. Another approach is audience segmentation based on political and social preferences: by identifying groups of voters most likely to be affected by a particular endorsement candidates can adjust their communication strategies to increase their impact. The concept of “two-step flow of communication” [14] asserts that voters often receive political information through intermediaries or opinion leaders; therefore, candidates should ensure that their endorsement reaches opinion leaders who can reinforce their political message in a particular community.

While political endorsements can provide benefits for candidates, there are some challenges to consider. One of the main ones is the risk of controversy: in some cases, endorsements from certain figures can cause negative reactions from certain voter groups, especially figures with a negative track record can lower the candidate’s credibility [8]. Another challenge is the possibility that voters would consider endorsement as an inauthentic political tactic or a form of political transaction aimed solely at gaining votes. The theory of “manufacturing consent” [11] highlights how the media and political elites can shape public opinions through various communication strategies, but not

if endorsements are considered a manipulative attempt to gain votes in the absence of any real involvement with voters [22].

To overcome these challenges, transparency in communication and the selection of the right endorsers are critical. To avoid conflicts of interest or negative effects, candidates should ensure that endorsers’ principles and visions are in line with their campaigns. Communication crisis management strategies are also needed to deal with potential controversy of political endorsements. According to theory of symbolic interactionism [20], the meaning of endorsement is determined not only by the endorser but also by how voters interpret and respond to the message in their social environment. Thus, it is important to involve the public in the endorsement to reduce the risk of backlash. Voters will be more engaged in political campaigns if allowed to speak with candidates and their endorsers, which will ultimately increase support. In addition, campaigns can encourage voters to become passive consumers of endorsement (political messages from various digital platforms), according to the “participatory culture” model [13]. An equally important challenge is the changing dynamics of social media that allows for manipulation: black campaigns and misinformation can undermine the credibility of endorsement and raise voters’ skepticism. Therefore, candidates should build a strong digital reputation (based on the relevant management strategy) to ensure that their endorsement narrative is consistent and authentic across all communication platforms. Moreover, by applying a sociology-based approach to communication, candidates can ensure that endorsements are not only a political marketing means but also a means of building deeper relationships with voters and communities they represent.

A comparison of endorsements during the election period and after the election in Indonesia shows significant differences and impacts (table 3).

Table 3. **Political communication strategies**

| Aspect                  | 2024 Election Campaign                                   | Post-election period                               |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Main purpose            | Increasing electability                                  | Maintaining legitimacy and long-term relationships |
| Message characteristics | Explicit, massive, focused on encouraging people to vote | More subtle and focused on image enhancement       |
| Type of activity        | Promotion on social media                                | Digital engagement                                 |
| Impact on electability  | Significant increase                                     | Maintaining voter support                          |
| Impact on the public    | Shaping public opinion and mobilizing voters             | Maintaining trust                                  |
| Endorser                | Celebrities, influencers, religious leaders              | Celebrities, influencers, active public figures    |

During the 2024 election campaign, political endorsements tended to be massive and explicit to increase the electability of presidential candidates. After the election, political endorsements were more subtle, tactful and restrained to maintain legitimacy and relationships between elected candidates. Endorsers were usually celebrities, influencers and political figures. Thus, political endorsements have evolved from a political marketing tool to part of long-term political communication. For example, endorsements from celebrities and influencers supporting certain candidates during campaigns continue to affect public and social media activities to strengthen candidates' images and boost political engagement. On the contrary, endorsements that cease after the election tend to have less impact on long-term political relationships. Thus, post-election support is an important indicator of the sustainability of political communication strategies with active participation of various parties in today's digital age.

Not all political campaigns rely on celebrity or influence endorsements — legitimacy and visibility can be ensured by alternative forms of communication, shifting political influence from symbolic charisma to collective participation and structural credibility [32-34]. Without celebrities, campaigns depend more heavily on communication networks and grassroots mobilization [19]: public trust develops through horizontal dialogical communication that emphasizes openness and interaction, which is in line with Habermas' concept of the public sphere — political legitimacy comes from rational public discourse rather than elite mediation. As a result, campaigns without endorsements have the potential to strengthen deliberative democracy by encouraging citizen participation and issue-based dialogue.

To maintain influence, candidates can use several strategies: community-based communication networks allow for spreading messages through trusted interpersonal ties, according to the theory of diffusion of innovation [25]; authenticity and transparency also become crucial — credibility is ensured by political messages perceived as sincere and consistent with lived experience [20]; digital platforms allow participatory political culture to develop — citizens can become micro-endorsers [13], voluntarily sharing campaign narratives within their social networks, which reflects the two-step flow of communication model [14]; campaign narratives that emphasize collective identity, shared values and community solidarity also play an essential role in reinforcing emotional connection and social cohesion.

Legitimacy in mediated societies depends on institutional transparency and long-term engagement rather than celebrity popularity. Sustained interaction and ethical consistency help political figures accumulate symbolic capital — a form of social trust grounded in authenticity and participation rather than popularity [12]. By prioritizing openness and genuine communication, candidates can transform the absence of endorsement into an opportunity to strengthen public trust and civic involvement. Thus, politics without celebrity endorsement redefines the nature of political communication from spectacle to substance, placing greater

value on authenticity, transparency and participatory engagement as the basis for sustainable legitimacy. Long-term credibility strengthens sustainable political relationships based on shared meaning and collective trust, while celebrity endorsements can only provide temporary visibility.

The success of political endorsements can be measured by various indicators, such as an increase in voter support, participation rates and interactions on social media. Therefore, the success of political strategies is reflected in changes in the level of political participation and public trust in candidates. Evaluation of endorsement efficiency can also use mass sentiments analysis on social media to understand the public’s response to specific endorsements. Artificial intelligence algorithms can be used to measure whether user comments, reactions and interactions are positive, negative or neutral. In addition, electability surveys before and after endorsements can show the influence of endorsement on voter preferences. Moreover, the efficiency of endorsements can be attributed to the concept of agenda-setting [18], which explains how the media and influential figures shape public perceptions of certain political issues. Successful endorsements create broader public discourse (candidates as part of the main agenda of voters) (table 4). In addition, the evaluation of the success of endorsements should consider its influence on various voter groups: endorsements from celebrities tend to be more effective for young voters active on social media, while endorsements from religious figures or academics are more influential for conservative voters or those who prioritize moral and intellectual values in the political sphere.

Table 4

**Comparison of political endorsers: Key strengths and potential risks**

| Type of endorser  | Key strength                                       | Potential risk                                 |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Celebrities       | High public visibility, appeal to young voters     | Backlash from controversial figure             |
| Influencers       | Strong engagement, peer-level trust with followers | Credibility issues if perceived as inauthentic |
| Religious leaders | Moral authority, influence on conservative voters  | Limited appeal beyond religious circles        |
| Academics         | Intellectual credibility, rational influence       | Less emotional appeal for mass audiences       |
| Political figures | Political legitimacy, policy alignment             | Perceived as partisan or transactional         |

On social media, the efficiency of endorsements can be also measured by the number of impressions, shares, comments and discussions on various digital platforms. Voters who are more engaged in discussions around endorsements show higher levels of engagement, which can ultimately contribute to their political decisions. The analysis of endorsement success can also use the two-step flow of communication model [14], which explains that political information does

not influence voters directly but through the intermediary of opinion leaders. If an endorsement can be accepted by an opinion leader in the community, the effect is likely to be broader, because opinion leaders convey the message to their audience. However, endorsement from controversial figures generates unfavorable reactions from certain voter groups. Therefore, monitoring the media and public opinion is crucial to prevent possible negative impacts of political endorsements.

Ultimately, the success of a political endorsement is determined not only by the number of voters directly affected but also by how the endorsement shapes the candidate's image in the long run, i.e., consistent and strategically developed endorsements can strengthen the candidate's position. According to the theory of symbolic interaction of [20], the efficiency of endorsements depends on voters' efforts to interpret the support of certain figures in their social context. If candidates can direct endorsement effectively and make it part of an authentic campaign narrative, they tend to have greater appeal. In general, to evaluate the success of political endorsements, we need an explicit multifaceted approach combining an analysis of the credibility of the endorser, accuracy of the message, and dynamic interactions in digital media that shape voter perceptions and decisions. In addition, candidates should focus on the segmentation of their target audience for a more precise and effective campaign strategy. The evaluation of political endorsement should be accompanied by real-time monitoring of public responses on various digital platforms, so that the candidate would immediately change communication strategy according to the dynamics of public perception and emotional response.

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## Социологический аспект политической поддержки: влияние инфлюэнсеров на пользователей социальных сетей\*

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**Аннотация.** Политическая поддержка в социальных сетях, включая участие лидеров общественного мнения и инфлюэнсеров, в настоящее время стала привычным явлением. Политическая коммуникация, изначально ограничивавшаяся личным взаимодействием участников политического процесса, теперь развивается в онлайн режиме — через социальные сети. Цель представленного в статье исследования — оценить эффективность политической поддержки в цифровую эпоху с позиций социологии коммуникации. Исследование сочетает качественный подход в изучении предвыборных и других политических компаний, обзор литературы и интервью с двумя экспертными информантами. Согласно результатам исследования политическая поддержка со стороны таких влиятельных фигур, как знаменитости, инфлюэнсеры, политические и религиозные деятели, пользующиеся социальными сетями, способны сформировать имидж кандидатов, повышая их узнаваемость, легитимность и избираемость, расширяя медийный охват их потенциальных избирателей, что позволяет существенно масштабировать и дифференцировать политические кампании. Безусловно, эффективность политической поддержки кандидата зависит от авторитета продвигающих его лидеров общественного мнения, их активности в медийной кампании, ее коммуникационной стратегии во взаимодействии с аудиторией, соответствия декларируемых ценностей участвующих в кампании инфлюэнсеров и продвигаемых ими кандидатов. Однако политическая поддержка инфлюэнсеров сопряжена и с рядом проблем, таких как риск негативной реакции, возможности манипулирования общественным мнением, вероятность проведения теневого кампаний и распространения дезинформации в связи с изменениями в динамике социальных сетей (сама логика их функционирования может легко превратить политическое продвижение в инструмент манипулирования). Таким образом, политическая поддержка — это не просто инструмент медийного продвижения, а неотъемлемая часть политической коммуникации в современную цифровую эпоху.

**Ключевые слова:** инфлюэнсеры; социология коммуникации; цифровая коммуникация; социальные сети; политическая поддержка; избирательные кампании

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