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The Long-Distance Relationship Between Youth and Italian Politics on TikTok: Insights From the 2024 EU Election

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Abstract

TikTok's rapid rise in media and information consumption among young Italians has recently prompted Italian politicians to stake out this space during election campaigns to engage a younger electorate, traditionally sidelined by mainstream news and political communication. However, attempts to tailor Italian political communication to the TikTok ecosystem are still undergoing a process of adaptation and familiarization (Boccia Artieri & Donato, 2024). This may reflect the challenges of engaging with TikTok's peculiarities: it is driven by youth-centered usage and language focused on entertainment and escapism (Cervi et al., 2023), and its predominantly algorithmic architecture shifts content circulation from relational networks to personalized recommendations. This configuration transforms the political experience on social media for both politicians and users, moving from relational interactivity toward a more aesthetic, performative dimension. In this context, our study examines how these TikTok characteristics affect the production, circulation, exposure, and evaluation of political content during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. The analysis revolves around three main foci: How politicians used TikTok and leveraged the platform's features; how users encountered and assessed political content; and how the topics addressed by politicians on TikTok compare with those young Italians deem most important. The second-order election setting of the European elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), contrasted with youth voter appeal (Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani, 2024), adds complexity, making the alignment of political and user interests a key driver of TikTok content circulation less predictable.

Keywords

algorithmic media logic; clustered publics; European elections; network media logic; TikTok politics; youth

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1. Introduction

Just weeks before Italy's September 2022 elections, Italian politics discovered TikTok. Until then, only Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega party, had a platform account; by summer 2022, all major parties and leaders had opened profiles and updated them with varying consistency ahead of election deadlines (Martella, 2024). The aim was to reach a young audience, often disenchanted with traditional politics and hard to reach via mainstream media or other social channels. In 2022, TikTok had 16.2 million Italian users—over 60% aged 18–35—with an average monthly usage of 21 hours (Statista, 2023; we are social & Meltwater, 2023). Despite extensive media coverage, the 2022 campaign on TikTok was met with sarcasm (Capone & Marino, 2022) and a general sense of unease from users, fueling perceptions of a forced approach and lack of context awareness by politicians (Battista, 2024; Boccia Artieri & Donato, 2024). Entertainment-driven campaign videos depoliticized the debate, leaving little room for campaign issues or youth priorities (Ipsos, 2022). Martella's (2024) analysis confirms this gap: The most viewed TikToks on Italy's election were political debates (40%), not entertainment (6%). This challenges the idea of TikTok as apolitical and highlights the mismatch between youth interests and how Italian politicians use TikTok in their electoral strategies. Scholars highlighted the lack of "genuine interest and understanding of what was truly happening within the platform and its logics" (Boccia Artieri & Donato, 2024, p. 97). Across any media environment, the effectiveness of political messages depends on adapting to a medium's technical and cultural affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Kreiss et al., 2018). On TikTok, this is especially crucial. Unlike other social networks, TikTok relies on personalized algorithmic recommendations that prioritize a video's ability to match user interests over social ties (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Cervi, 2021). Content appears dynamically on the "For You" page based on viewing behavior and preferences, with an interface that downplays social interaction while maximizing algorithmic profiling (Zeng et al., 2021).

In political communication, this model promises visibility far beyond one's base—but only if content is crafted to engage the algorithm both technically and creatively, a challenge Italian politics has only partially met. By 2024, with over 21 million subscribers and more than 30 hours of monthly use, TikTok had become Italy's most-used social platform (we are social & Meltwater, 2024). On the eve of the 2024 European elections, its role in political messaging has become even more central. Given TikTok's reliance on algorithmic recommendations, this study explores how these features shaped the production, circulation, exposure, and evaluation of political content during Italy's 2024 European Parliament elections. The aim is to assess how Italian politicians used TikTok and harnessed its native functionalities. Additionally, it focuses on how TikTok users consume, interact with, and evaluate political content—an area rarely examined (Greenfield et al., 2025). Finally, since content circulation algorithms intersect with user interests, the analysis compares the topics debated in political TikToks during the campaign with those that young Italians deem priorities.

2. From Networks to Algorithms: How Recommendation Algorithms Shape Political Content Dissemination on TikTok

Over recent years, several studies have shown how TikTok's unique architecture is reshaping social platforms' logics and the practices underpinning content production, distribution, and consumption. These changes redefine the network media logic governing platforms (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). On TikTok, content circulation downplays explicit relational networks—following and interactions—in favor of personal interests profiled and organized by autonomous recommendation algorithms. Klinger and

Svensson (2024), revisiting the concept a decade later, argue that the algorithmic turn (Napoli, 2014) is replacing human intermediaries and fostering new communicative modes. In this configuration, message reach and visibility hinge on performing to the platform's algorithmic criteria rather than on offline popularity or traditional social ties (Klinger & Svensson, 2024; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

This shift gains further momentum under the banner of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), whereby digital media, especially platforms, do not merely mediate communication but actively shape reality. Accordingly, platform affordances—the action possibilities embedded in technical infrastructures (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Bucher & Helmond, 2018)—configure the bounds of communicative practices and determine visibility and engagement mechanisms.

Within the context of network media logic, this means that connectivity serves as the platform's enabling structure (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). On social networks like Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter), user social networks still drive content circulation. Thus, message effectiveness also depends on actors' ability to build and sustain supporter networks, mobilize them, and encourage interaction through strategic, personalized content (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

TikTok reshapes this architecture: Algorithmic programmability replaces user social networks as the primary distribution infrastructure, meaning content circulation depends solely on the user's ability to engage the algorithm and is oriented exclusively on individual interests (Baumann et al., 2025). Messages spread not because they are shared by known contacts but because the algorithm deems them relevant to users' preferences. While collective participation means remain, the weakening of relational features (followers/following, commenting, sharing) marks a shift from a relational, interactive logic to a performative, algorithmic logic (Hardt et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

These differences also structurally shape political communication, which adopts different forms, languages, and functions depending on the platform (Shearer et al., 2024; Stier et al., 2018). On Facebook, politics builds intimacy and relationships through personal narratives and pop-culture references to humanize candidates and spark emotional engagement (Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). On X, it embeds the politician's personal voice into public debate, joining conversations with other actors (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham et al., 2017). Instagram emphasizes aesthetics and storytelling aligned with the politician's public persona, drawing on celebrity and everyday politics languages (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Lilleker & Veneti, 2023). Studies show that on TikTok, these processes not only occur but accelerate because of its algorithmic logic (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020). TikTok incorporates traits enabling personalized, intimate, and performative political storytelling: The centrality and brevity of videos fuse key politainment elements such as embodied performance (Gerbaudo & Moreno, 2023), emotive personal narratives (Zamora-Medina, 2023), and lighthearted content. Features driving virality and memetic practices (music, stitch, duet) blend pop culture and encourage co-creation of significance (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Interactive tools likewise revolve around individual performance and staging (Abidin, 2020; Martella, 2024). This acceleration is primarily due to the different mechanisms of content circulation. On major social networks governed by network media logic, message visibility depends on the intersection of algorithmic logic and user intermediation.

On Facebook, for example, visibility is co-produced through user–politician interactions—likes, comments, and shares (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013)—in an environment that supports bidirectional,

mobilizing communication (Stier et al., 2018). X, despite its recent algorithmic evolution (Moore, 2023), retains a conversational structure, encouraging conversations among politicians, users, and other public-debate actors (Kreiss, 2014; Shearer et al., 2024). Instagram's relational dimension persists through collective creations—memes and collaborative posts—that foster message reach (Marquart et al., 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). As noted, the content circulation on TikTok depends exclusively on algorithmic profiling. Still, features such as music, filters, and effects facilitate the creation of standardized, recognizable content, fueling trends and virality (Cervi et al., 2023). Duet, stitch functions, trend, and challenges (Abidin, 2020) enable direct interactions with other videos, spawning collective narratives and boosting engagement. These practices require no preexisting relations, relying instead on individual performance that effectively turns the user into content (Martella, 2024). Consequently, politicians must adapt to these conventions to avoid appearing alien to platform culture (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023). Trend participation and strategic use of viral music now serve as key "contamination" strategies for political messaging on TikTok, generating return virality among users and media (Boccia Artieri et al., 2022; Zamora-Medina, 2023).

The shift from a connectivity logic to algorithmic centrality profoundly affects two core dimensions of digital political communication that are also relevant to the aims of this work: the strategic function attributed to each platform and the topics that are addressed on them. Contemporary online politics adopts a multiplatform approach to optimize content diffusion and reach differentiated audiences, especially during election campaigns (Lukito et al., 2025; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Each network serves distinct goals: Facebook for mobilization and building affective proximity through personalized policy and current-affairs narratives (Stier et al., 2018); X for real-time commentary and positioning within the public debate, driven by the public-opinion agenda (Kreiss, 2014; Lukito et al., 2025); Instagram for constructing visual leadership via aesthetic codes aligned with candidate values and everyday narratives on cultural and identity topics such as environment, inclusion, and immigration (Chang et al., 2024; Marquart et al., 2020).

Also in this case, TikTok's algorithmic centrality marks a discontinuity with relational platforms. Its primary role is to connect politicians with younger electorates (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025; Cervi et al., 2021). The platform works less as an information hub and more as a space for political socialization and cultural mobilization. Challenges, trends, and memetic practices foster identification, imitation, and participation, making TikTok a strategic channel to reach younger voters (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). TikTok thus operates as a political motivational arena: it spurs action and engagement but only when political messages conform to platform-specific codes (Vaterlaus & Chow, 2024) Symbolic and polarizing issues prevail (such as civil rights, woke culture, immigration) and are treated with emotional and sensationalist language, according to a logic of engagement rather than in-depth analysis. (Lukito et al., 2025; Pérez Rastrilla et al., 2023). In this environment, content effectiveness hinges on adherence to dominant communicative styles (Li et al., 2025) and the strategic deployment of platform formats and functions (Grantham et al., 2025).

Algorithmic recommendation centrality thus profoundly shapes how politics deploys TikTok and engages both users and the algorithm. Recent studies have analyzed politicians' strategies, revealing context-dependent approaches (Cervi et al., 2023) but a common struggle to fully leverage the platform's potential. In Europe, research in Germany, Italy, and Spain portrays political TikTok use as a "missed opportunity" (Bösch & Ricks, 2021; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Zurovac, 2022), dominated by performative, promotional politainment and scant user interaction. In Latin America, however, practices lean toward self-promotion (Acosta & Acosta, 2022; Figuereo Benítez et al., 2022; Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022) and

pop-culture crossovers such as Antonio Kast's Marvel and Star Wars nods in Chile or Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's sports-themed performances (Gerbaudo & Moreno, 2023). Personalization varies significantly: Spanish politicians rarely share private-life details (Zamora-Medina, 2023), whereas in Italy, Salvini frequently posts personal content with implicit political undertones (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023). A parallel is found in French President Emmanuel Macron's informal selfie videos (Salazar, 2023). Politicians also routinely repurpose content from other media (interview clips, press conferences, topical statements) to populate their TikTok feeds (Martella & Cepernich, 2024).

3. Shifting Audience on TikTok: From Networked Publics to Clustered Publics

A key aspect of TikTok's algorithmic logic is its transformation of online publics. Gerbaudo (2024) labels TikTok a second-generation social network due to its reliance on recommendation algorithms in contrast to first-generation relational platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram. Those platforms host networked publics (boyd, 2010) built around explicit, visible social ties (friends and followers): a people-centric environment (Gerbaudo, 2024) where algorithmic selection coexists with user agency in defining audiences (Vromen et al., 2016). The articulation of audiences is transparent, visible in the interface, and linked to the network of relationships. In these environments, forms of connective participation emerge (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), oriented toward specific issues and developed in fluid, horizontal networks based on a collaborative and co-productive logic. Socialization and political participation in these environments often take the form of a peer-to-peer process, activated by peer relationships within thematic and temporary communities (Loader et al., 2014). On second-generation platforms like TikTok, however, clustered publics emerge (Gerbaudo, 2024): Audiences formed by algorithmic grouping based on implicit behavioral affinities rather than social connections. This shift from a "people-centric" to an "item-centric" model centers on content performance (Kaye et al., 2022; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). As Gerbaudo (2024, p. 2) cautions: "In transforming the social form of online publics, social interest clustering raises important ethical and political questions and, in particular, risks of depersonalisation, opacity and fragmentation." TikTok's publics are thus less identifiable, more fragmented, and unaware of the selective logic guiding their exposure, which hinges on shared objects, not relationships.

Scholars have proposed alternative concepts to describe these audiences: imitation publics, built on memetic rituals (Zulli & Zulli, 2022); affective publics, driven by emotional engagement (Hautea et al., 2021; Papacharissi, 2014); refracted publics, confined to semantic niches (Abidin, 2021); and algorithmic audiencing, emphasizing opaque automated recipient selection (Riemer & Peter, 2021). The notion of clustered publics, however, which in a sense encompasses these approaches, focuses most directly on the changed social form of online publics (Simmel, 2011) and its implications for communicative experience, making it particularly suited to capture TikTok's distinctive user characteristics.

In light of these innovations, several scholars have examined how clustered publics engage with politics on TikTok, with most focusing on socialization and political participation among Generation Z (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Hyper-personalized algorithmic selection creates a space that frames politics within personal experiences and emotional involvement, intertwined with displays of identity politics. This yields an environment where young users actively discuss political and social issues often underestimated by mainstream media (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023). Such an environment not only encourages online political behaviors but also spurs offline action (Karimi & Fox, 2023), shapes political opinion formation (Tukiainen et al., 2024)

through its growing informational use (Lim & Guerra, 2023), and contributes to political identity construction. Other studies highlight TikTok's role in youth activism—particularly around civil rights, environmental concerns, and gender issues (Hautea et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021)—and in creative, participatory forms that can evade censorship or disrupt traditional political events, as seen in the fake Donald Trump rally registrations (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022).

Fewer studies address how algorithmic logic affects exposure to and evaluation of political content on TikTok. On first-generation social networks, exposure is mediated by visible connections, granting users agency in content selection and operating within environments that allow user awareness and control (Marquart et al., 2020; Vromen et al., 2016). In contrast, TikTok's item-centric logic optimizes content delivery based on user preferences and behaviors and its immersive interface diminishes awareness of selection processes, fostering passive information consumption (Shearer et al., 2024; Vaterlaus & Chow, 2024). The algorithm rapidly categorizes users into opaque "algorithmic niches," often without their knowledge (Gerbaudo, 2024). These niches limit exposure to alternative viewpoints and undermine critical judgment (Cervi & Tejedor, 2023; Li et al., 2025).

Political content is present but less visible on TikTok than on other platforms. A recent Pew Research Center study found that only 45% of TikTok users encounter political content, versus 74% on X and 52% on Facebook (Shearer et al., 2024). Nevertheless, TikTok has become a major news source for young people (Lim & Guerra, 2023). Several studies warn, however, of disinformation, polarization, fragmentation, and selective exposure risks on TikTok (Gerbaudo, 2024; Weimann & Masri, 2021). While relational networks and incidental exposure on platforms like Facebook mitigate filter-bubble effects (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), algorithmic feeds and engagement-driven design on TikTok fragment audiences and amplify selective exposure and opinion polarization risks (Gerbaudo, 2024). Recent work shows that highly engaged users with extreme ideological views express political opinions more frequently and visibly (Li et al., 2025). In some European contexts, TikTok even appears to favor right-wing populism: neutral German users see AfD content up to six times more often than centrist material (Tjaden et al., 2024); in Finland, platform use correlates with right-wing Finns Party support—even among otherwise apolitical users (Tukiainen et al., 2024)

With regard to how young users evaluate political content, the literature identifies several potential factors, some of which are linked to the algorithmic and stylistic nature of TikTok. When young users evaluate political content, authenticity is paramount: Videos perceived as "genuine" and context-appropriate (first-person perspective, informal settings) earn greater trust and approval (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025). As on relational platforms, performative coherence matters, but it hinges on visual style and aesthetics on TikTok—editing, popular music, shot quality, and on-screen presence boost positive judgments of content creators (Munger & Li, 2025). Affective engagement—identification with content, native interactions (duets, stitches, comments), and informative entertainment—also drives favorable evaluations (Casula & Wong, 2025). Packaging and sharing methods further shape user impressions (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025). Most studies agree that alignment with platform cultural and technical codes is critical (Cervi et al., 2021; Zamora-Medina, 2023). Content seen as "out of place" or stylistically inconsistent garners less engagement and invites ironic or negative reactions. Cervi and Tejedor's (2023) analysis of comments on Matteo Salvini's videos reveals widespread rejection of content perceived as inappropriate for TikTok, with responses hinging on tone and stylistic fit more than political substance.

In sum, the literature concurs that political actors must adapt to TikTok's technical and cultural affordances and usage norms to earn positive evaluations and avoid seeming alien on the platform.

4. Methodology and Research Objectives

Given the centrality of algorithmic exposure in circulating political content on TikTok and the need for political actors to reach young audiences with platform-appropriate languages, editing, and topics, this study aims to compare how Italy's main parties and leaders used TikTok during the 2024 European election campaign with how young Italians perceived and engaged with those posts. To assess content coherence—crucially for capturing audience interests via the algorithm—we compare the topics addressed by politicians on TikTok with those ranked as priorities by young users during the campaign.

The study is based on an analysis of content published by the main TikTok accounts of Italian politicians and political parties ($n = 12$) between May 8 and June 9, 2024 ($n = 275$ videos), analyzed using a multimodal content analysis sheet (Serafini & Reid, 2019); and on the results of a computer assisted web interviewing survey conducted on a representative sample of 553 young Italians (aged 18–35) with an active account on the platform.

The content analysis uses variables referring to some fundamental dimensions of the relationship between politics and TikTok: the production methods of the videos, understood as the use of at least two of the editing tools described in the previous paragraphs (music, captions, duets, stitches); the engagement and visibility generated; the function of the video (distinguished into informative, entertainment, promotional, critical, commentary, and personal); and, finally, the presence of references in the videos to European issues, derived from a study on issues important for the future of Europe according to young people, published by Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2024). All videos were viewed and independently coded by two trained coders using a content analysis sheet based on the variables presented above. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.79, indicating substantial agreement. The survey on young people investigates: the frequency and modes of exposure to political content on TikTok; evaluations of those videos; and the European topics young Italians deem most urgent, using the same Eurobarometer list.

By cross-tabulating these data, this study aims to explore: the politicians' ability to leverage TikTok's stylistic and technical affordances and its impact on content effectiveness; users' exposure patterns and judgments of political videos; and overlaps between the platform's political agenda and youth priorities. Finally, we compare these dimensions by political alignment—both for the TikTok accounts and for the survey respondents.

These objectives lead to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do young people consume and evaluate political content on TikTok during the election campaign and to what extent have Italian politicians leveraged the platform's potential and tools?

RQ2: Which European issues appear most frequently on the political agenda presented on TikTok and is there a correlation with the thematic priorities expressed by young voters?

The results of the analysis offer insights into how Italian politics uses TikTok and the role of affordances in the creation of effective content—an area that has yet to be structurally investigated in the Italian context—as well as into an aspect that scientific literature is looking at with growing interest, namely how users consume and evaluate content. The context of the 2024 European elections adds a further layer of complexity: this is a contest often considered second-order (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Roncarolo, 2010) and therefore one in which politicians invest little, but which is potentially significant for young voters (Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani, 2024). The analysis of European issues addressed by politicians and expected by users allows us to observe the convergence or divergence of interests—a key factor in the circulation of content on TikTok—between political actors and young platform users in an atypical electoral context.

5. Results

5.1. Content Production

Regarding the use of TikTok by Italian politicians, 275 pieces of content were analyzed during the election campaign period (Table 1). The account that posts the most content by far is Matteo Salvini's (66), which alone exceeds one quarter of all content published by all the monitored accounts. Next are Fratelli d'Italia (49), Carlo Calenda (27), and the Partito Democratico (26). Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni published 25 pieces of content. The accounts that publish the least are Forza Italia (2) and Movimento 5 Stelle (6). It should be noted that, although all content from the main Italian parties and leaders was analyzed, figures such as Elly Schlein, leader of the Partito Democratico, and major parties like Matteo Salvini's Lega, Carlo Calenda's Azione, and Matteo Renzi's Italia Viva are absent from the list because, at the time of monitoring, no active accounts attributable to them were found. Looking at how politicians used TikTok in their electoral communication

Table 1. Content analysis on TikTok politicians during the European Parliament election campaign*.

	Number of posts	Main video purpose	Use of editing tools (at least 2) (%)	Average engagement**	Average views**	Followers**
Antonio Tajani	12	Promotional	6 (50)	1,791.4	11,196.5	4,708
Forza Italia***	2	NA	NA	NA	NA	3,248
Giorgia Meloni	25	Informative	0 (0)	67,983	50,8124.8	1,563,894
Fratelli D'italia	49	Critical	30 (61.2)	11,562.8	22,765.2	131,996
Matteo Salvini	66	Critirial	40 (60.6)	30,771.7	83,832.1	1,011,976
Partito Democratico	26	Personal	19 (73.8)	838.7	4,898.8	51,575
Giuseppe Conte	19	Critical	15 (78.9)	39,551	47,238	780,061
Movimento 5 Stelle***	6	NA	NA	NA	NA	73,445
Europa Verde	10	Comment	8 (80)	4,591	26,737.4	2,658
Carlo Calenda	27	Entertainment	8 (29.6)	1,750.5	7,419.7	32,281
Matteo Renzi	11	Commentary	8 (72.7)	35,287.5	22,864.4	95,076
Più EUROPA	22	Informative	12 (54.5)	3,614.2	9,473.5	31,804

Notes: * Manual coding performed by two coders (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.79$); ** Follower, views, and engagement data was collected on June 9, 2024; *** The accounts of Forza Italia and Movimento 5 Stelle were excluded from this analysis due to the limited amount of content.

and at content performance, the analysis delves into several significant dimensions: the combined use of the platform's editing tools, the videos' dominant function, and performance metrics such as followers, views, and average engagement over the period.

Regarding video functions, nearly 30% of the sample were classified as critical content, followed by commentary and informative videos at around 20% each. Entertainment-oriented videos were the least common (6.18%), a finding that partly contradicts the politainment trend identified in the literature review. Account-level distributions confirm right-wing radical actors' preference for critical and conflictual content which dominates Matteo Salvini's and Fratelli d'Italia's output as well as that of Giuseppe Conte, leader of the populist Movimento 5 Stelle. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, likely owing to her institutional role, uses her account predominantly for informative purposes. Among other actors, the Partito Democratico stands out for its personal-style videos—driven in large part by a series of candidate-profile clips (e.g., Partito Democratico, 2024)—and Carlo Calenda for entertainment, notably through his BlaBlaCarl format, in which he drove around with a supporter discussing political and personal topics in an infotainment style (e.g., Carlo Calenda, 2024).

Moving on to TikTok's editing tools, each video was coded for the use of at least two of the following: music, captions, subtitles, filters, duet, and stitch. The table reveals considerable variation. Overall, most accounts employ these tools in at least 60% of their videos. Progressive-area accounts (Giuseppe Conte, Partito Democratico, and Europa Verde) show the most uniform and intensive use, averaging 75.8%, with similar figures also for Matteo Renzi. The most surprising finding is Prime Minister Meloni's virtually zero use of combined tools: although most of her TikToks include music or subtitles, not a single video uses more than one tool. This is intriguing given her account's top performance metrics. Salvini ranks second, followed by Conte and Renzi—both strong users of platform tools and focused on critical and commentary content. The weakest performances come from Antonio Tajani, +Europa, and especially the Partito Democratico, which averaged fewer than one thousand interactions.

This picture suggests that electoral content performance on TikTok is linked less to the use of editing affordances and more to an account's follower base and, to a lesser extent, to video function. To investigate this hypothesis, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted between average engagement and views and with combined affordance use, and follower count. The analysis reveals a non-significant correlation between engagement and views; a moderate correlation between views and affordance use ($p = 0.68$); and very strong correlations both between views and follower count ($p = 0.84$) and between engagement and follower count ($p = 0.89$).

5.2. Content Exposition

The survey sample is representative of the Italian population aged 18 to 35. It comprises 553 respondents active on TikTok. The geographic origin of respondents is distributed proportionally according to ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) data. The gender distribution is slightly skewed towards women, who represent 54.8%. Regarding the sample's political orientation, almost half of the respondents define themselves as progressives (49.2%), i.e., from the left to the center-left, while the second largest group is those who do not place themselves on the political spectrum (21%). Conservatives, placed on the right or center-right, represent 18.3%; while centrists, liberals, and moderates account for 11.6%.

Concerning exposure to political content on TikTok, the survey focuses on two main dimensions: frequency and mode. For the first, respondents were asked whether and how often they viewed content from political accounts during the election campaign weeks. Overall, more than 60% report having viewed TikToks from one of the analyzed accounts, though fewer do so frequently. Looking at differences by political orientation (Table 2), predictably the politically unaligned—who are generally less interested in the electoral campaigns— are the least exposed to political TikToks, while those who view them most frequently are progressives and, above all, liberals.

Table 2. Exposure frequency to political content on TikTok.

	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Never (%)
Conservative (right–center right)	23.8	39.6	36.6
Centrist	31.3	37.5	31.3
Progressive (left–center left)	21.7	42.3	36
Non-political/Prefer not to say	16.4	27.6	56
Total	22.1	38.2	39.8

Excluding those who answered "never," the remaining respondents were asked how they encountered this content, with four options: "spontaneous" (actively and independently sought), "mediated" (because I follow political/news accounts or political influencers), "casual" (randomly in the feed or via sponsored posts), and "network" (sent by contacts). Their responses were then cross-tabulated with viewing frequency (Figure 1).
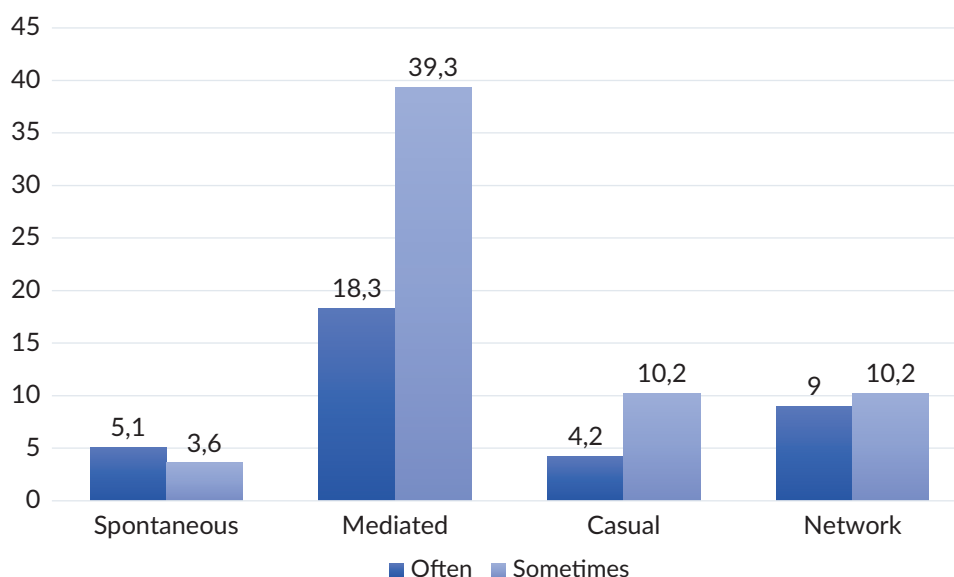

Figure 1. Frequency and nature of exposure to political content on TikTok (in percentages).

Overall, most respondents (57.6%) report encountering political content on TikTok because they follow a politically oriented account. Far fewer find it spontaneously (8.7%) or stumble upon it by chance (14.4%). Notably, "network" encounters (content sent by contacts) exceed "casual" feed exposures, though "mediated" views (from following political/news or influencer accounts) cannot distinguish whether content appeared because it was posted by those accounts or surfaced algorithmically in feed. The biggest differences between frequent and occasional viewers occur in the "mediated" and "casual" modes, suggesting that algorithmic

feed exposures, when they happen, remain infrequent. The only mode where frequent seekers outnumber occasional ones is "spontaneous" search, where more respondents actively sought election-related content regularly than sporadically.

We also examined content alignment by political orientation to explore ideological fragmentation and filter bubbles on TikTok. Users indicated whether the political videos they saw were mostly aligned, partially aligned, or distant from their own views. Overall, the political content that reached users during the period observed was, in most cases, distant from their positions: 43.8% of respondents said they had seen content that was not aligned with their political views. On the other hand, 27.3% of the content was fully aligned, while a further 28.9% was partially aligned. Although over half of the sample still encounters content within a broadly sympathetic value universe, the substantial share exposed to distant viewpoints prompts further reflection on ideological bubbles—and suggests that, for this cohort, these effects may be partially mitigated.

To further examine this aspect, the ideological coherence of political videos was related to users' political positioning and their modes of exposure to videos through a multiple correspondence analysis. This analysis allows exploration of associations among the individual categories of the three variables considered. The resulting two-dimensional plot (Figure 2) accounts for 87.5% of the total variance (Dim1 = 45.3%; Dim2 = 42.2%), providing a reliable representation of the relationships among the categories.
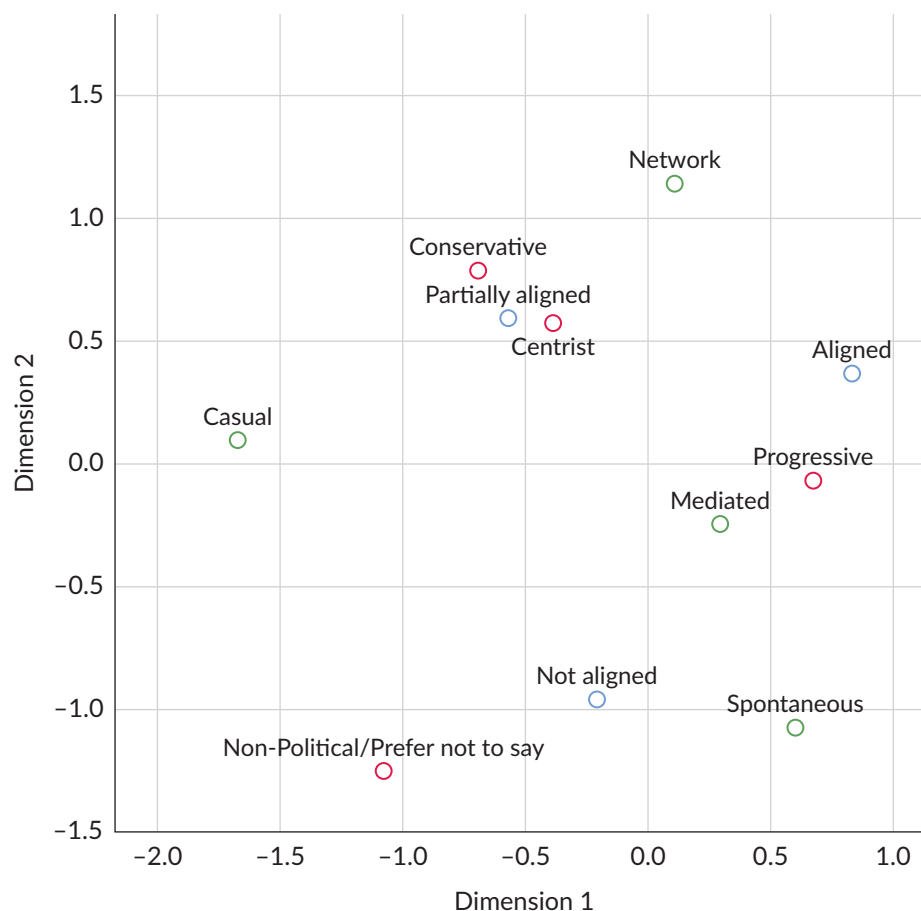

Figure 2. Multiple correspondence analysis between political affiliation, nature of exposure to political content, and ideological consistency of political content viewed.

Specifically, Figure 2 reveals a clear association between "mediated" exposure, reception of content "aligned" with one's own orientation, and membership in the "progressive" area. This suggests a consumption pattern akin to that of relational social networks, where informational experiences are heavily filtered by followed accounts, resulting in content consistent with users' preexisting interests and preferences.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are apolitical or undeclared users who, while associated with receiving ideologically distant content, also exhibit a tendency toward active exposure—as if, in uncertainty or political distance, they occasionally sought out informative content to orient themselves during the election.

"Conservatives" and "centrists" occupy an intermediate zone of the plot, associating primarily with "network" and "casual" exposure modes and with reception of "partially aligned" content. This cluster aligns—albeit partially, given its link to network exposure—with TikTok's prevailing exposure model, in which consumption is often driven by the recommendation algorithm and partially confined within an ideological bubble. In these cases, exposure is partly accidental but still oriented toward content at least partly compatible with users' value universe.

5.3. Topics Correlation

The thematic analysis aims to compare the European issues most addressed by political accounts during the election campaign with those deemed priorities by young survey respondents. The goal is to identify potential convergences and divergences of interests, particularly given the centrality of user interests in the content-circulation mechanisms governed by recommendation algorithms.

With regard to the topics most covered by politicians on TikTok, Table 3 summarizes the aggregated results by political area.

Table 3. European topics addressed in TikTok videos*.

	Centrist (%)**	Right/Center-Right (%)**	Left/Center-Left (%)**	Total (%)
Environment	4.65	8.33	13.95	8.96
Human and civil rights	16.28	6.25	16.28	12.69
Inequalities	25.58	14.58	23.26	20.90
Economy	18.6	12.50	4.65	11.94
Immigration	6.98	18.75	6.98	11.19
Employment	6.98	8.33	13.95	9.70
Personal data protection	2.33	0	0	0.75
Border protection	NA	8.33	0	2.99
EU security and war	16.28	20.83	20.93	19.40
Consumer protection	2.33	2.08	0	1.49
Terrorism	NA	NA	NA	NA

Notes: * = Manual coding performed by two coders (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.79$); ** = the aggregation was necessary for clarity of analysis and reflects formal and informal party alignments on the national scene and the composition is as follows—right/center-right (Fratelli d'Italia, Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Antonio Tajani), left/center-left (Partito Democratico, Giuseppe Conte, Movimento 5 Stelle, Europa Verde), and centrist (Carlo Calenda; Matteo Renzi; + Europa).

In general, the most prominent issues are combating "inequalities," "human and civil rights," and "common security policies." However, significant differences emerge across political alignments. For instance, the left/center-left focuses on typical themes such as "environment" and "employment," whereas the right/center-right pay less attention to civil rights and more to characteristic topics like "immigration" and "border protection." Liberals, predictably, focus more than other areas to economic issues. The least emphasized topics are "personal data protection" and "consumer protection." No content related to "terrorism" was identified.

As for the issues young users perceive as priorities, the results are summarized in Table 4 and aggregated by respondents' political orientation.

Table 4. Relevant European topics for TikTok users sample.

	Conservative (%)	Centrist (%)	Progressive (%)	Non Political (%)	Total (%)
Environment	12.90	7.8	21.7	9.6	16
Human and civil rights	4	3.1	13.2	13.2	10.3
Inequalities	2	9.4	13.6	5.3	9.3
Economy	18.8	18.8	15.8	14.9	16.5
Immigration	16.8	7.8	4	14	8.9
Employment	10.9	9.4	8.5	16.7	10.7
Personal data protection	4	4.7	2.9	4.4	3.6
Border protection	7.9	10.9	2.6	2.6	4.5
EU security and war	11.9	12.5	9.2	9.6	10.2
Consumer protection	1	6.3	4.4	5.3	4.2
Terrorism	9.9	9.4	4	4.4	5.8

Overall, the most valued issues are "environment" and "economy," followed at some distance by labor, rights, and common security policies. However, differences among political orientations are evident. Progressives pay most attention to the "environment," whereas it is markedly less frequent in other categories; they also prioritize rights and the fight against inequalities—topics that are residual for other respondents. Among conservatives, "immigration" is predictably a strong issue, and, less obviously, "environmental" and common security policies also feature prominently. Centrists differ most from the average: besides the economy, they show the greatest support for "border protection" and common security policies, while "environment," "immigration," and especially rights are much less felt. Finally, the apolitical respondents share common ground with both progressives and conservatives, but unlike all other categories, their top priority is labor.

Even from this initial overview, analogies, but above all differences, with the political agenda on TikTok become apparent. To examine convergences and divergences between political and user agendas, these were compared using the Pearson correlation index (Table 5).

The results of this analysis show few significant correlations between the agendas, and all are of weak intensity. However, it is worth noting that a correlation, albeit minimal, exists between the overall user agenda and that of politics on TikTok. This nonetheless highlights a partial convergence between the topics desired and those proposed. Looking at the comparison of agendas broken down by political area, the most

Table 5. Pearson correlation analysis between the political agenda and users' agenda on TikTok.

	Right/Center-right	Left/Center-left	Centrist	Politics
Conservative	0.570133*	−0.02385	0.028612	0.176947
Centrist	0.45813	0.006846	0.319374	0.286681
Progressive	0.268955	0.60326*	0.556423*	0.548718*
Non political	0.430937	0.36928	0.36199	0.437524
Users	0.467847	0.508811	0.520821	0.567206*

Note: * $p > 0.05$.

notable finding concerns progressives: not only do they show positive correlations with their reference area (the left/center-left), but also with the liberal politicians' agenda and with the general agenda, albeit all with very low intensity. The agenda of conservative users, by contrast, exhibits low correlation only with the agenda of its own political area. As for the final two user categories, no significant correlations emerge—a result that is understandable for the apolitical group and perhaps more intriguing for centrists.

5.4. Content Evaluation

Regarding users' evaluations of politicians' TikToks during the European campaign, respondents were asked their opinions on three dimensions: technical production quality, content usefulness, and contextual appropriateness. Their answers were then combined into a single index assessing the quality of political TikToks, and these data were cross-tabulated with respondents' political orientations (Table 6).

Table 6. Rating of political content seen on TikTok.

Quality Ratings	Conservative (%)	Centrist (%)	Progressive (%)	Non Political (%)	Total (%)
None	20.3	22.7	13.8	25.5	18
Low	10.9	20.5	22.4	19.6	19.5
Medium	50	36.4	38.5	39.2	40.5
High	18.8	20.5	25.3	15.7	21.9

Overall, most respondents rate the Italian political content they encountered on TikTok as "medium." The proportions of those who gave "none," "low," or "high" ratings are not markedly different. However, the distribution by political orientation reveals more interesting differences, particularly between progressives and conservatives. Among progressives, fewer respondents select "none," and the sample is more evenly split between those who rate the content very positively and those who rate it negatively. Among conservatives, negative ratings are far below the average, as are positive ones (though to a lesser extent), resulting in a higher concentration in the "medium" category. It is unsurprising that the non-political group offers the fewest ratings overall and the highest share of "medium" ratings, while centrists align more closely with the average pattern.

Cross-tabulating interest in UE election level, exposure frequency, ratings, and political orientation (disaggregated) via multiple correspondence analysis (Figure 3) reveals notable behavioral patterns that likely influence how this sample consumes and evaluates political content on TikTok.
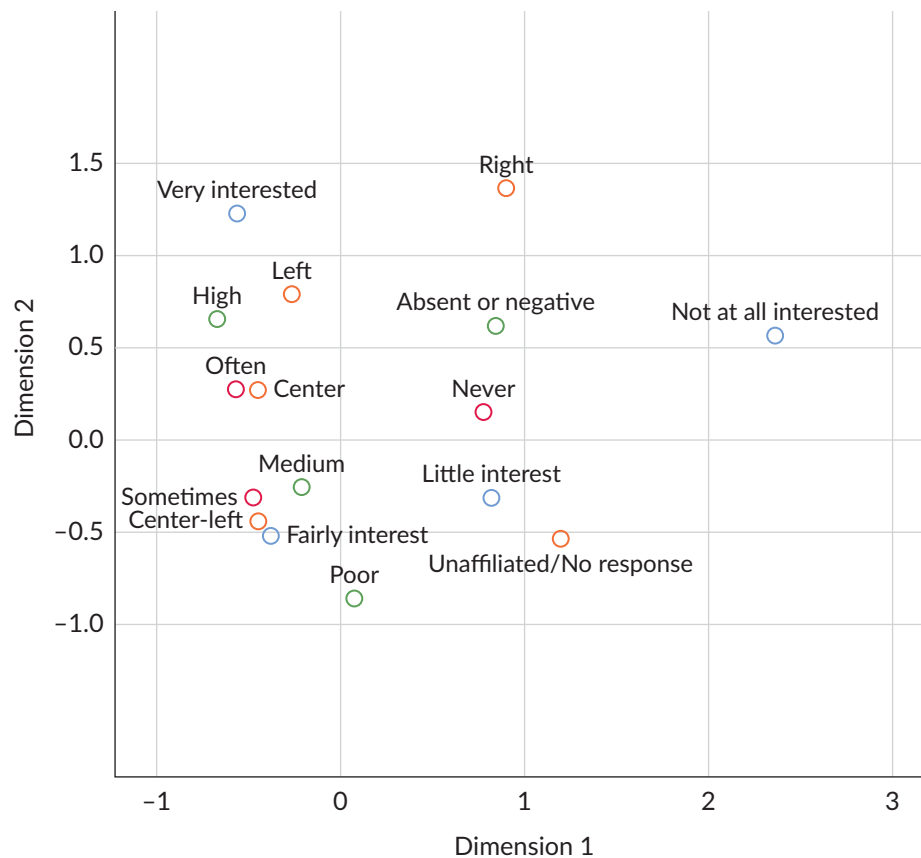
Figure 3. Multiple correspondence analysis between political affiliation, interest in EU elections, exposure to political content, and judgment of political content.

The analysis reveals a fairly clear structure along the axes, suggesting several potentially interesting relationships among the variables. These are distributed along two latent dimensions: one related to political engagement (horizontal axis—high vs. low interest and exposure) and the other to political positioning (vertical axis—"extreme" vs. "moderate" positions). In the top left appear more activist profiles: very interested in the elections and giving high ratings to political content on TikTok, generally left-leaning, suggesting that the most engaged and exposed audiences tend to evaluate platform content positively. On the opposite side, albeit with weaker associations, are low interest in the elections, rare exposure, and absence of ratings, associated with right-wing positioning, describing disengaged or critical, predominantly conservative users. In the bottom left quadrant lie the "fairly" (interest), "sometimes" (exposure), and "medium" (rating) modes, together with centrist orientations (center, center-right, center-left): a moderate group with intermediate attitudes and behaviors. Finally, in the bottom right, the proximity of "little" interest, "poor" ratings, and "unaffiliated/no response" defines a set of apathetic and non-politicized users.

Regarding ratings, the outlined picture suggests that greater election interest and more frequent consumption lead to more positive evaluations. This hypothesis is also supported by the chi-square tests crossing the variables. Political interest is strongly associated with both content ratings ($\chi^2(9) = 45.206$, $p < 0.001$) and exposure frequency ($\chi^2(6) = 64.823$, $p < 0.001$); likewise, the relationship between exposure and ratings is highly significant ($\chi^2(6) = 20.451$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that higher exposure to political content on TikTok and greater interest in the European elections translate into more favorable perceptions

of the content. The associations between ratings and orientation ($\chi^2(15) = 30.880$, $p = 0.009$) and between orientation and exposure ($\chi^2(10) = 18.323$, $p = 0.050$), however, are less pronounced, indicating a weaker link between ideological position, consumption mode, and content evaluations.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Two years after the initial, and minimally impactful, entry of Italian politics onto TikTok, this study aims to analyze how Italian political actors used the platform during the European election campaign and how users are exposed to and evaluate those pieces of content. This exploratory analysis also allowed reflection on the shift in political communication from platforms combining relational and algorithmic logics (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) to one built primarily on profiling and recommendation algorithms (Gerbaudo, 2024). All of this occurs in an Italian context where no studies have simultaneously examined production and consumption of political content on TikTok, and where, in particular, the dynamics of user exposure to and evaluation of political content remain unexplored.

The research questions designed to capture these behaviors and explore the impact of the platform's predominantly algorithmic architecture are further enriched by the setting of the European elections—typically considered a second-order election (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Roncarolo, 2010)—characterized by low political investment but strong engagement among young Italians (Consiglio Nazionale dei Giovani, 2024). In this context, the intersection of political and user interests is not guaranteed and communicative dynamics are less predictable.

RQ1 examines the dynamics of political content production and exposure on TikTok with a particular focus on the role of algorithmic logic in content circulation and how these videos capture users' attention. On the production side, results show uneven use of features that facilitate content replicability and virality (such as music, filters, stitch, and duet). The dominant function of the content produced by politicians is critical, consistent with TikTok's reputation as a space rewarding emotional and polarizing narratives (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025).

Cross-referencing this production data with engagement metrics reveals an interesting pattern. The top-performing content by far comes from Giorgia Meloni. The Italian Prime Minister is the only one to make no use whatsoever of combined editing features. These performance results suggest that, at least in this context, engagement is not directly tied to the use of platform tools—though further investigation into their specific deployment is needed—but rather to the recognizability of the political personality and the strength of her fan base. This finding confirms claims made by several studies that the mere technical presence of affordances does not guarantee results unless coupled with audience support for the content creator (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Cervi & Tejedor, 2023).

After Meloni, the most successful videos come from accounts that predominantly used the platform for critical content. Taken together, these observations underscore the importance of emotional and polarizing elements and the political figure's reputation (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025) in activating consensus mechanisms on TikTok. The algorithmic logic, as theorized (centered on content performance), appears tempered by relational signals (such as follower count), affective cues (the figure's reputation), and emotional tones (critical messaging).

Confirming that relational components remain relevant even on TikTok, the survey results show that exposure to political content on TikTok arises from differentiated pathways based on users' interests and behaviors, combining dynamics of both networked publics (boyd, 2010) and algorithmic recommendation logics. A majority of the sample (60%) viewed political content—a notable figure given TikTok's orientation toward entertainment and leisure—and these videos were encountered primarily through mediation by followed accounts linked to the political-informational sphere. This suggests that the follower/following logic, considered less influential on TikTok (Zeng et al., 2021), still serves as a significant signal for the recommendation algorithm, as on relational social networks (boyd, 2010), and represents a content–orientation strategy in the political context (Riemer & Peter, 2021).

At the same time, the fact that over 40% of the sample viewed content not aligned with their own political opinions indicates an openness in users' political experience and suggests a partial mitigation of concerns about ideological bubbles on TikTok (Zhao, 2021). Multiple correspondence analysis reveals widely diversified exposure patterns to political content that correspond to users' interests, ideological positions, and behaviors on the platform. In particular, progressive users are more exposed to content aligned with their political stance via mediated modes, replicating networked mechanisms that involve individual action; apolitical users often display active exposure modes (seeking content autonomously) and most frequently encounter messages not in line with their own views; the communication pattern most consistent with TikTok's connective logic (Gerbaudo, 2024) is that of conservative users who experience partially casual and partially network-based exposure and receive content fairly coherent with their political orientation.

This picture tempers the scenario described by clustered publics, which do not completely replace the logic of online audiences, but rather reformulate it around behavioural patterns. This is also evident in the way users evaluate political content. Political videos on TikTok receive more positive ratings from users with higher election interest and greater exposure frequency—often left-leaning users, thus via mediated, coherent exposure—while the most negative ratings come from apolitical and right-wing users who most often associate with low election interest and scant content exposure. The low content evaluations by right-wing users—despite very high engagement percentages for Meloni and Salvini—suggest that positive outcomes relate more to support for the figure than to qualitative evaluation of the content, attenuating the impact of the platform's affordances (Grantham et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2025).

At the same time, the fact that political TikToks are particularly appreciated by progressive users, who tend to be interested and frequently exposed to content aligned with their views, demonstrates that, despite recognized technical quality, engagement does not increase accordingly.

Regarding RQ2, both politicians' and users' thematic distributions follow identity-based and generational logics. Dominant issues align with platform literature: topics of youth interest that are emotional and polarizing (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025; Pérez Rastrilla et al., 2023). Correlations between the political agenda and users' priorities are very weak, becoming appreciable only among progressives who may simply be more engaged, consume more content, and rate it more favorably due to this overlap of interests. Thus, thematic alignment supports perceived quality but is not directly tied to engagement. This means that the highest-performing content is not always aligned with users' top priorities. The algorithm appears to favor emotionally intense or ideologically marked content over content coherent with users' interests (Cartes-Barroso et al., 2025). The presence of generational themes in right/center–right coalition content, such as environment, suggests a partial adaptation to platform codes rather than genuine convergence.

Overall, the study's results depict a hybrid landscape where algorithmic logics coexist with relational signals, personal motivations, and identity patterns. Algorithmic recommendation remains central to TikTok's communicative ecosystem, but focusing solely on this dimension risks overlooking individual users' characteristics, their capacity to interact with both the platform and political content, adapting it to their needs, and borrowing behaviors from other platforms and media contexts. Indeed, the data suggest that, when interest is present, users not only are exposed to political content but also actively navigate and evaluate their experience using mental schemas, values, and expectations that do not necessarily coincide with those of the platform. Far from contradicting the framework of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) or diminishing the role of algorithms in clustered publics (Gerbaudo, 2024), this perspective redefines these concepts by highlighting the algorithms' capacity to integrate and respond to individual actions and predispositions to which they adapt.

Rather than merely determining if and how politics can reach young people, this study highlights which combinations of factors—pertaining to the user, the content, and the creator—promote more performative political communication on a complex topic such as the European elections. By considering distances and points of overlap between political offerings and users' interests and expectations, the emerging picture is more nuanced than a simple efficacy/inefficacy dichotomy. It nevertheless shows signs of convergence in both platform understanding and user interests, even as dynamics familiar from other social networks persist.

In summary, TikTok does not discard the logics of previous social networks (boyd, 2010; van Dijck & Poell, 2013) but transforms and integrates them with its algorithm in a performative and emotional key, akin to a process of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Political content can circulate and perform beyond its core electorate, yet its effectiveness depends on the ability to build a credible relationship among form, actor, and audience.

Despite promising findings, particularly regarding the integration of algorithmic and networked logics and how politicians and young users employ TikTok in the context of Italian elections, this study has structural limitations: the lack of a direct comparison between content evaluation and actual exposure to specific political videos; the focus on the European elections context, which, while interesting, limits generalization to other electoral moments; and the absence of a more qualitative approach to how political actors use the platform's editing tools. It should also be noted that user evaluations may be influenced by respondents' pre-existing political orientations, levels of political interest, visibility bias in exposure to political content, and familiarity with the political figures featured in the videos, among other factors. However, to minimize such biases, differences in political orientation and levels of political interest were taken into account in the analyses and respondents were asked to focus primarily on the technical and content-related qualities of the videos. Future research could address these limitations by integrating varied methodological perspectives to more deeply emphasize correlations between the production and consumption of political content, including longitudinal and comparative analyses across different elections and national contexts.

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