



Report:

TIKTOK AND THE 2023 NORWEGIAN LOCAL ELECTION: HOW ARE FIRST-TIME VOTERS USING TIKTOK AS A SOURCE FOR POLITICAL INFORMATION?

Ragnhild Tvergrov Skare

UTSYN - Centre for Security and Resilience

Oslo, December 8th 2023

The report is written and published by UTSYN – Centre for Security and Resilience, by: Ragnhild Tvergrov Skare in collaboration with Hedda Langemyr, Ingrid Vik and Marte Aasen.

Published with support by Fritt Ord.

UTSYN - Senter for sikkerhet og totalforsvar

C.J. Hambros Plass 2C

0164 Oslo

Org.nr.: 919672226

post@prosjektutsyn.no

www.prosjektutsyn.no

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In September 2023, local elections were held in Norway. Tens of thousands of 18 and 19-year-old voters expressed their first political stances at Norwegian polling stations. In December 2022, the Security Minister of the United Kingdom, Tom Tugendhat, warned that TikTok has significant potential to influence British first-time voters in the next election (Martin, 2022). In Norway, 40 per cent of 16-19-year-olds claim to use TikTok to stay updated on the news (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2023).

How does TikTok function as a channel for information on political issues in Norway? How did first-time voters use the platform to gather information during the election? What did TikTok look like during the election campaign? What impact could this have had on young voters?

Main findings

UTSYN bases this report on observations made on the platform throughout the summer and fall of 2023, international research on how TikTok influences young users, and qualitative interviews with 21 Norwegian first-time voters after the election. The report provides an overview of some of the key features of young people's use of TikTok as an information source for political content. It is not conclusive but rather points to blind spots and areas that require further research.

The findings indicates that TikTok is not primarily used as a serious news source among young people. Unless the user has a specific interest in politics and news, the content that dominates is often related to the user's interests. This can be things like skincare, motorsports, or celebrity news. However, there is a significant exception. When major national or international events occur, like the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the conflict between Israel and Palestine, TikTok is flooded with content about the events. In these cases, TikTok can provide valuable information from “the ground” but is also filled with misinformation and misleading narratives.

During the election, most first-time voters encountered political content. The majority mentioned that they mainly came across content from the right side of the Norwegian political spectrum. This aligns with surveys conducted by the major Norwegian newspaper VG (Verdens gang), which showed that the political right had five times as many views as the left on TikTok during the election period (Vik & Hvitmyhr, 2023). Although some interviewees explicitly claim to be influenced by TikTok, much suggests that the app was not

the sole or most important source of information for young voters. Family, friends, traditional media, and online political party quizzes were often mentioned as more significant for young voters.

One last important observation is that the 2023 election was not particularly suitable for a TikTok election campaign. The content on the app is by nature more nationally and internationally oriented and thus more suited for national elections. The main election tag: #Valg2021 has twice as many views as #Valg2023, even though the app has more daily users in 2023 than in 2021. This suggests that the potential for TikTok to influence the 2025 Parliamentary election is greater than it was in 2023.

Recommendations for Addressing TikTok's Impact on Political Awareness and Information Dissemination

These recommendations aim to address TikTok's influence on political awareness, combat misinformation, and advocate for responsible use of the platform during critical periods like elections and crises.

Increased Media Presence on TikTok During Elections:

- Encourage established media houses like VG, Dagbladet, TV2, and NRK to increase the amount content presenting political party viewpoints on TikTok during elections.
- Enhance information diversity and counter content from unverified users.

Increase Funding for Relevant Organizations:

- Boost support for organizations working preventively to strengthen resilience against disinformation, especially those providing resources for schools.
- Recommended organizations: Tenk.faktisk.no, the educational arm of Faktisk.no, or Medietilsynet.

Raise Awareness and Develop Strategies for TikTok in Crises:

- Recognize TikTok's role in disseminating information for young users during crises and make strategies to handle misinformation.
- NRK, as a trusted source, should re-establish NRK Supernytt's TikTok account to reach

the younger audience effectively.

- Establish public-private collaborations with entities monitoring social media trends to alert the media houses when events are trending and counter misinformation.

Advocate for International Social Media Regulation:

- Advocate for international regulation of social media platforms, particularly focusing on preventing the creation of echo chambers and the massive spread of misinformation during crises.
- Norway could push for international action through international forums like the United Nations.

Recommendations for Further Research:

- Conduct long-term research on TikTok's impact on Norwegian society, especially focusing on its role in shaping youth perspectives leading towards the 2025 election.
- Explore TikTok's potential as a platform for radicalization, considering its ability to create content-specific echo chambers and potential religious radicalization.

Method

This report examines how first-time voters use TikTok as an information source for politics. It specifically looks at how young people use the app to find political information and how they used the app during the local elections.

Most studies on TikTok have focused on how users are utilizing the app in general and the content on the app (Montag, et al., 2021). For example, research has been conducted on how political parties use TikTok to communicate with voters in the USA (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) and Spain (Serrano, et al., 2020), how information about Covid-19 was communicated on the app (Basch, et al., 2020; Li, et al., 2021), and how the app can be used as a tool to reach young people with health care information (Comp, et al., 2020). Few studies have examined the effects political content has on users and how the app is used as a source of political information. Most of what we know about TikTok's ability to influence, and the various security challenges posed by the app has been uncovered through investigative journalism. To date, there has been no research on this topic in Norway.

So far, most studies on TikTok have employed quantitative methods (Kanthawala, et al., 2022). TikTok relies heavily on its powerful algorithm to provide users with personally curated content. This is what gives TikTok its competitive edge over other social media platforms. This difference also means that researchers should explore new methods beyond traditional ones to study TikTok. Amnesty International recently published two reports on how TikTok negatively affects the mental health of young people by promoting content about self-harm and depression to vulnerable users (Amnesty International, 2023a; Amnesty International, 2023b). They used a mixed method with quantitative data obtained using bots and qualitative interviews with users in different countries (Amnesty International, 2023a). This method proved effective in uncovering the influence content can have on TikTok users. UTSYN's report is based solely on qualitative investigations to understand how Norwegian first-time voters use the platform to find political information. Due to budget constraints, UTSYN has not been able to collect quantitative data.

UTSYN's report is based solely on qualitative investigations to understand how Norwegian first-time voters use the platform to find political information.

We made observations on the platform throughout the summer and fall of 2023 and conducted qualitative group interviews with a total of 21 Norwegian first-time voters after the election. Additionally, we used international research and investigative journalism to contextualize the findings. A weakness of the data is that the interviews with first-time voters are not entirely representative of everyone in the group. This is because it was challenging to find enough schools willing to facilitate interviews. Therefore, it is not possible to make generalizable conclusions. Instead, the report will highlight blind spots and areas that require action and more thorough research.

What is TikTok?

The Chinese-owned app TikTok has taken the Western market by storm since its launch in 2017. With its powerful algorithm, TikTok creates a personalized "feed" for each user based on their interests. In recent years, the app has gained a solid foothold in youth culture, both in Norway and abroad (Willingham, et al., 2023).

TikTok's robust algorithm generates a more personalized feed than any other social medium of similar size. Each user receives tailored "For You Page" (FYP) that captures the user's interests. This has led TikTok to revolutionize certain industries that appeal to young audiences almost overnight. Singer Olivia Rodrigo went from being an unknown name to a global star in record time after finding success on the app. Author Colleen Hoover sold more books than the Bible in 2022 after going viral on #BookTok (Palmer, 2022). This demonstrates TikTok's powerful ability to influence youth culture.

However, alongside its explosive growth, experts, politicians, and commentators have expressed scepticism regarding the app. The scepticism is primarily associated with two overarching challenges: fear of espionage and data sharing, and concerns about unwanted influence on users by foreign actors. These concerns have been brought to the forefront of the public debate due to several controversies.

Security experts cannot rule out that the Chinese government has access to Western user data from TikTok (Bakke, 2022). This is particularly problematic considering the amount of data the app collects from its users (Tallaksrud, 2023). TikTok collects information such as operating systems, keystroke patterns or rhythms, birthday, location, movement data, and contacts from its users (Tallaksrud, 2023). TikTok claims that employees in China do not

have access to Western personal data (Shepardson, 2023). However, it is well-documented that user data has formerly been misused by the company. For instance, the company used personal data to spy on journalists that were in contact with individuals working for TikTok (Criddle, 2023). It has also been revealed that employees at another app owned by TikTok's parent company, Bytedance, received instructions from the parent company to promote pro-Chinese content to American users (Baker-White, 2022).

In addition to issues related to ownership and data processing, it has been revealed that TikTok's algorithm can quickly create deep rabbit holes for users. In December 2022, the Norwegian state broadcaster, NRK conducted an experiment on TikTok where they created a user based on a 14-year-old boy named Samuel (Bjørke, et al., 2022). He is interested in fitness and desires a leaner and stronger body. As "Samuel" starts swiping, he initially sees regular videos: a goose, some food, and a Norwegian celebrity going for a run. On the second day, his FYP has changed; now, half of the videos are about muscles and fitness-related content. By the third day, 90% of the content he sees is about muscles and fitness. In just three days, 14-year-old "Samuel" found himself in a rabbit hole dominated by content about exercise, calories, and men with large muscles (Bjørke, et al., 2022). Such rabbit holes can have serious consequences for young individuals. In "Samuel's" case, the content can lead to an increased risk of gaining an eating disorder or body dysmorphia. The promotion of harmful content to children and young people on TikTok is well-documented. Two recent reports from Amnesty International have documented that TikTok regularly exposes young users to harmful content. Within a few hours, young individuals interested in mental health had their feeds filled with content about self-harm, depression, and suicide (Amnesty International, 2023a; Amnesty International, 2023b).

What do we know about TikTok's ability to influence elections?

In December 2022, the Security Minister of the United Kingdom, Tom Tugendhat, warned that TikTok has significant potential to influence British first-time voters in the next election (Martin, 2022). This has already occurred in various parts of the world. In several elections held in 2022 and 2023, TikTok played various roles in influencing election results or events that unfolded during the campaigns. Studies have also documented TikTok's poor handling of disinformation on the platform in the context of previous elections, such as the German election in 2021 (Bösch & Rincks, 2021).

In Latvia, TikTok is credited with the election of two new parties to the parliament (Jauns, 2022; Springe, et al., 2023). The two parties were "Stability," a vaccine-sceptical pro-Russian party, and the "Progressives," a social-democratic liberal party with a young voter base. During the Latvian election, a significant portion of the strategic voter base, consisting of young and Russian-speaking individuals, used the app to stay updated on Latvian politics. While the app had considerable popularity, it also hosted substantial amounts of pro-Russian content. Downloading the app with Russian and Latvian as the main languages quickly led to increasingly radical content supporting Russian narratives.

In Finland, a survey found that over half of young voters in the spring 2023 election were influenced by content they saw on TikTok. Among those who voted for the populist "Finns Party", 62 per cent claimed TikTok influenced their choice (Milton, 2023).

The question of whether TikTok can influence the upcoming U.S. election in 2024 is now being raised by journalists and experts (Fortson, 2022). A whopping 32 per cent of Americans aged 18 to 29 regularly receive news from TikTok (Matsa, 2023). There is already a substantial amount of information about U.S. politics and society on the app. While much of it is legitimate information, there is also a considerable amount of misinformation. A clear example of TikTok's ability to spread political disinformation came in the summer of 2022 when President Biden received approval to expand the American Internal Revenue Service (IRS) by \$80 billion. After the decision was made, several TikTok videos fuelled a conspiracy theory that the expansion was a cover to send government employees to confiscate Americans' weapons. Some users spread videos threatening IRS employees, with messages like "you are now targets" directed at IRS staff (Fortson, 2022). TikTok eventually removed this content, but it had the opportunity to spread widely before being taken down.

TikTok as an information source

Much suggests that Norwegian youth are changing their media habits. Young people are turning away from traditional media while increasingly using social media as a source of news (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2023). According to Christina Grahn, Director of Government Relations and Public Policy at TikTok in Northern Europe, one million Norwegians visit TikTok every day (Grahn, 2023). A substantial 40 per cent of those aged 16 to 19 state that they use TikTok as a news source (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2023).

In interviews with several Norwegian first-time voters, it is confirmed that TikTok is used as an information source among the youth. Information is mentioned alongside entertainment as the two main reasons why young people use the app. Primarily, the discussions revolve around "lighter" news and information about topics such as celebrity gossip, culture, or sports. This is supported by a British study conducted by Ofcom. The study shows that while 83 per cent of those aged 16 to 24 in the UK use social media to follow the news, celebrity news and "light" news dominate the usage (Ofcom, 2023). In the British study, 53 per cent of respondents stated that they use TikTok to find celebrity news, while only 25 per cent use the platform for political news (Ofcom, 2023). Nick Newman from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism mentioned in an interview with *The Guardian* that he has found similar patterns in his research (Milmo, 2022).

The interviews show that most users generally come across information about topics they are interested in and occasionally encounter some news. Most of them come across content from Norwegian media outlets from time to time. However, there is a significant exception. During crises such as wars or natural disasters, feeds are filled with content related to the unfolding events. The young interviewees specifically mentioned the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the situation in the Middle East as events that were extensively featured on their feeds.

TikTok has proven to be an ideal platform for sharing information during times of war or crisis. The format of short videos and simple tools has made it easy to disseminate information, both legitimate and illegitimate, on a large scale (Stokel-Walker, 2022). The fact that TikTok serves as an information platform during a crisis presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it makes information easily accessible for ordinary people and analysts trying to understand what is happening "on the ground". On the other hand, there is a risk that actors with malicious intent may use the app to create confusion and shape public perceptions of a conflict or event. Large-scale dissemination of misinformation or selective presentation of facts can be potential ways of achieving this. Previous research has shown that misinformation spreads much faster than legitimate information on social media (Vosoughi, et al., 2018).

In the interviews, the first-time voters discussed how the war between Israel and Hamas appeared on their TikTok feeds. They could tell that in the days immediately following October 7th, their feeds were filled with content from Israel and Gaza. The information came from traditional media outlets but also from profiles expressing that they were “on the ground” or others who had something to say about the conflict. This applied even to those who usually did not have much political content or news on their feeds. After October 7th, it is well-documented that substantial amounts of misinformation about the situation in the Middle East have been spreading on various platforms, including TikTok (AP, 2023).

Most interviewees had done some reflection about the amount of misinformation and the necessity of fact-checking on the app. At the same time, several expressed that the content on TikTok often seemed credible to them because it came “from the ground” or showed more graphic content than regular news sources were sharing. Some said they fact-check within the app by looking at the comment section, checking “stitches,” or watching videos on the same topic on TikTok. Some also felt that the content on TikTok often was more credible than the information found on regular media outlets. This can be problematic considering the amount of misinformation on TikTok. Regarding the conflict, the youth mainly encountered pro-Palestinian content or content from Norwegian media outlets². Only one respondent got more pro-Israel content than pro-Palestinian.

TikTok and the Norwegian election

On September 5th, the outcome of the 2023 school elections revealed a clear victory for the Norwegian right, notably highlighted by the Progress Party's (FrP) significant surge in support, doubling its vote share since the previous school elections. This secured their position as the second-largest party after the Conservative Party (Høyre) (Wichstad & Borgmo, 2023). Subsequently, Norwegian commentators started asking themselves if TikTok contributed to this outcome.

It appears that actively seeking political content on TikTok is not usual among its users. Instead, political content finds the users, with most observing political content curated by the platform's algorithms. Interviews indicate widespread exposure to political content during the election campaign, even among those that typically had little political content in their feeds. The platform featured content from political parties, local politicians, affiliated individuals, and ordinary users engaged in public discourse. The most utilized tag,

#Valg2023 (Election2023), amassed a total of 11.8 million views, while smaller tags like #Kommunevalg2023 (LocalElection2023) and #Valgkampen2023 (ElectionCampaign2023) accumulated 386,000 and 415,000 views, respectively.

The Norwegian TikTok landscape during the election campaign predominantly showcased content from the political right. A survey conducted by VG highlighted a substantial discrepancy in the number of views received by each party on TikTok between June 1st and September 7th, 2023. During this period, Høyre accumulated 4.7 million views, whereas FrP received 1.9 million. Høyre and FrP collectively received over five times more views than all other parties combined (Vik & Hvitmyhr, 2023). Notably, the survey only considered accounts of the main party, party leader, youth party, and youth party leader, excluding other accounts with significant reach, such as youth party local branches or other local and youth politicians. For instance, Innlandet FrP's TikTok account boasted several videos with 50,000 to 100,000 views, with the most-viewed video reaching over 500,000 views. Students from Ålesund municipality mentioned seeing videos from this account, situated far away from Innlandet's local elections.

One explanation for the success of the political right on TikTok partly lies in quantity. Following controversies surrounding the app, a joint parliamentary meeting was convened in the spring of 2023, addressing TikTok's role in the different parties' election campaigns. While Venstre (Liberal Party) and the Labour Party sought an agreement among parties not to use the app, no such consensus was reached. Venstre, the Labour Party, the Centre Party, the Christian Democratic Party, and the Red Party were not officially present on TikTok. Despite this, political content from these parties persisted on the app, created by users not directly affiliated with the main party. FrP and Høyre maintained a visible presence making the right surpass the left in overall presence on the platform.

Another key factor contributing to the right's success is the quality of the content. First-time voters emphasized that the content from Høyre and FrP was both better produced and presented the political stances of the parties in a better way. Charisma, factuality, and production quality emerged as crucial elements in the right's effectiveness on TikTok. First-time voters particularly commended the Progress Party Youth (FPU) for adeptly addressing issues, with FPU leader Simen Velle attaining celebrity-like status on the app.

Interviewees consistently referenced frequently seeing him on their feeds during the election campaign.

While TikTok may not have been the sole or primary source of information for young voters, it still could have had a crucial role. The design of the app ensures that voters are consistently exposed to political content, primarily from one side of the political spectrum in the Norwegian case. This exposure likely had an influence that young people may not have consciously recognized. TikTok also served as a platform where users didn't necessarily determine what to think but often what to think about, contributing to setting the agenda in peer groups and school environments after political issues or politicians appeared in their feeds.

The 2025 TikTok election?

Another crucial observation is that the 2023 election was not particularly well-suited for campaigning on TikTok. The app lacked local content during the campaign that was relevant to first-time voters' hometowns. Consequently, several young individuals interviewed by UTSYN expressed that the content had limited influence on their voting decisions.

Simultaneously, some referred to content they encountered during the 2021 parliamentary election as more impactful on their political opinions than what they saw in 2023. National elections are more "fitting" for a TikTok campaign because the platform inherently features more national and international content. This perception is affirmed by platform searches, where the tag #Valg2021 (Election2021) has a total of 22.7 million views, while #Valg2023 has 11.8 million views. Thus, content related to the parliamentary election had double the views at a time when daily platform usage in the 16-19 age group was ten per cent lower than in 2023 (IPSOS, 2023).

Hence, there is a strong reason to believe that TikTok will play a role in the next parliamentary election in 2025. Before that, it will be crucial for the political parties to establish common guidelines on how the app can be utilized during the election campaign. Given the substantial user numbers, it becomes problematic if some parties are highly visible while others are scarcely present, as this discrepancy is caused by differing security concerns among the parties. It is natural that some parties perform better than others on certain platforms; thus, the emphasis should be on formulating shared guidelines for how politicians

can use the app based on a collective understanding of what threats TikTok is actually posing.

TikTok is a platform where political content will exist regardless of the presence of Norwegian media and politicians. Ordinary users, with or without party affiliation, create content about both minor and major issues that stimulate debate. This could include clips from party debates, statements from politicians, or videos created by ordinary users. Consequently, it will not be possible to prevent TikTok from being a platform with information and political content, even if all politicians are absent from the platform.

Recommendations

Enhancing Media Presence on TikTok During Elections:

Norwegian mainstream media should be more present on TikTok during elections. TikTok is an established platform for diverse information sharing. First-time voters, who normally did not encounter political content on their feeds, were exposed to Norwegian political content during the election campaign period. Virtually all first-time voters mentioned one or more Norwegian media houses as crucial sources of credible information on the app. Even users who usually had limited exposure to political content encountered Norwegian media outlets occasionally. Particularly leading up to the election, media outlets already present on TikTok, such as VG, Dagbladet, TV2, and NRK, should publish more content presenting the political stances of parties. This would contribute to improving the information of young voters and counterbalancing content from unverified users. These actions are vital to ensuring that multiple political perspectives are represented objectively on the app.

Increase Funding for Organizations Working Preventively Against Disinformation:

Schools play a central role in strengthening resilience and promoting critical use of social media as an information source. Currently, teachers often have limited knowledge or capacity to address these issues effectively. UTSYN recommends increased support for organizations working preventively in schools to develop up-to-date resources for teachers nationwide. This is especially crucial during elections and significant international or national crises with widespread social media dissemination. Such organizations could include Tenk.faktisk.no, the educational branch of Faktisk.no, or Medietilsynet, which already have expertise in creating effective educational programs on topics such as disinformation, fact checking, and influence.

Raise Awareness and Develop Strategies for TikTok as an Information Channel in Crisis and War:

We need to take TikTok's role as an information source during crises seriously. The app failed to handle the significant quantities of misinformation during the early stages of the conflicts in Ukraine and between Israel and Palestine resulting in widespread dissemination of false narratives. In times of crisis, confusion and fear quickly arise, and TikTok can exacerbate these emotions, leading to increased polarization in society. While this issue is not unique to TikTok, other platforms like X and Instagram also contribute to spreading

misinformation and fear. What sets TikTok apart is its young user base and its ability to shape the perceptions of young users.

UTSYN recommends that trusted Norwegian media outlets actively monitor and publish corrective and informative content during crises. NRK, as a public broadcaster, should play a particularly vital role in this. Relevant measures could include reinstating NRK Supernytt's TikTok account, known for its wide reach and popularity among the target audience. Another measure could involve establishing a private-public collaboration with relevant entities monitoring trends and content on social media. These entities could provide information on trending events and when massive misinformation is spreading. Based on this information, NRK Supernytt or other trusted entities could release corrective information. Research has shown that "debunking" videos explaining why a video contains false content have a significant impact on whether users believe in misinformation or not (Bhargava, et al., 2023).

Norway Should Advocate for International Regulation of Social Media Algorithms:

TikTok has the potential to significantly influence its users. However, it faces significant challenges related to the spread of misinformation and the creation of harmful echo chambers. While Norway can contribute to strengthening resilience and robustness among our population, the most substantial changes must come from the company itself. Algorithm-driven social media platforms present new challenges that impact democracy in multiple countries. Norway should take an international lead in advocating for regulations governing these platforms, creating guidelines for algorithm-driven recommendation systems in social media, potentially through the United Nations or direct engagement with the companies.

Potential measures that platforms could implement during crises include significantly limiting the spread of content from unverified users. If platforms cannot control the dissemination of false content, considerations for societal safety should outweigh user metrics and revenue. Platforms should also limit the possibilities for the creation of echo chambers where users are served one-sided and reinforcing content. This is essential not only for political content but also for content promoting self-harm, depression, or radicalization.

Recommendations for Further Research:

The impact of TikTok on Norwegian society is an area with insufficient knowledge. This study has revealed a potential that is not yet fully understood regarding how TikTok can influence the perception of reality among Norwegian youth. Further research should delve deeper into this topic, examining how the platform is used in the lead-up to the 2025 elections and considering a longer-term perspective. Influence does not only occur in the days and weeks leading up to an election; it is a long-term process that gradually alters the worldview. Therefore, there is a need for long-term research examining political content on TikTok. Another area that warrants exploration is TikTok's potential to function as a platform for radicalization. During interviews, it was noted that TikTok hosts significant amounts of religious content accessible only to users with religious interests. According to first-time voters, much of this content is radical and clearly misinformation. TikTok has a considerable ability to create deep rabbit holes for its users, potentially even in religious contexts. This is an area that research should further investigate.

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