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Gamified Politics and Digital Populism: The 2024 Presidential Campaigns of Prabowo Subianto and Lai Ching-te

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the 2024 presidential victories of Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia and Lai Ching-te in Taiwan through the lens of digital communication and political gaming. The research employs a comparative qualitative approach with a multi-method design, integrating digital ethnography, multimodal discourse analysis, and qualitative content analysis to map symbolic dynamics in the digital space. Findings reveal that both campaigns utilised hybrid digital communication models combining emotional storytelling, visual memes, and gamified participation. The study concludes that digital play has reshaped electoral communication, marking a shift from ideological politics to emotional, representational politics constructed through algorithmic logic. This provides significant implications for understanding comparative digital populism in Asian consolidating and stable democracies.

Keywords: Digital communication, comparative populism, Lai Ching-te, political gaming, Prabowo Subianto

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INTRODUCTION

The 2024 presidential elections in Indonesia and Taiwan featured political figures who captured global attention by utilising discourse games on social media to construct compelling electoral images (Fitriananta et al., 2025). This phenomenon signifies a fundamental shift in political communication, transitioning from

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conventional media dominance to interactive, symbolic digital spaces where algorithms play a central role in framing public perception. As highlighted by (Fauzi et al., 2018), the current "hybrid media system" forces political actors to adapt to both legacy media and the chaotic, high-velocity nature of digital platforms (Hermawan et al., 2025).

Previous studies, such as those by (Anjeli et al., 2025) and various contemporary analyses of digital literacy (Bulya & Izzati, 2024), have explored how digital tools facilitate the personalisation of power. However, research gaps remain regarding the cross-contextual comparison of how "digital symbolic play"—the use of gamification, memes, and viral humour-produces distinct electoral outcomes in consolidating democracies like Indonesia compared to stable democracies like Taiwan (Andrian & Syaifullah, 2026). While Indonesia's 2024 landscape was characterised by high-affective, populist engagement, Taiwan's environment remained deeply rooted in institutional civic-mindedness, even within digital arenas (Qintara & Archellie, 2025). This paper aims to bridge this gap by integrating a sociology of communication approach with the digital populism framework, examining how these contrasting models produce varying levels of leadership legitimacy and voter mobilisation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Modern campaigns increasingly utilise gamified elements—such as challenges, digital badges, and interactive algorithms—to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. However, the mechanisms through which these strategies influence voter behaviour, and the degree to which they threaten or strengthen democratic deliberation, remain under-theorised.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The analysis reveals that the 2024 victories in Indonesia and Taiwan were underpinned by the "gamification of affectivity," where voters were transformed from passive political subjects into active "political gamers." As shown in Table 1, the strategies employed were highly contingent upon the digital ecosystem of each nation.

Table 1
Comparison of gamified strategies in 2024

Aspect	Prabowo Subianto (Indonesia)	Lai Ching-te (Taiwan)
Primary Digital Logic	Affective/Populist	Deliberative/Institutional
Dominant Platform	TikTok, YouTube, Instagram	Facebook, LINE, YouTube
Gamification Catalyst	Viral danses, memes (#JogetGemoy)	Policy interaction, digital petitions
Target Audience	Generation Z and Millennials	Broad civic public/Professionals

Prabowo Subianto's campaign effectively reimagined his image from a traditional military figure to a "grandfatherly" populist icon through the tactical use of humour and nostalgia (Pristiani & Affandi, 2026). By leveraging TikTok's recommendation algorithm, the campaign fostered emotional intimacy, allowing supporters to engage with the candidate not through abstract policy debate, but through shared symbolic play (Aminulloh et al., 2025). This created a "Populist Gamified Communication Model" (PGCM), where the pleasure of participation—sharing memes and viral videos—outweighed the necessity of detailed ideological alignment (Engesser et al., 2017).



Figure 1. Path coefficients and significance of digital engagement

In contrast, Lai Ching-te's campaign utilised a "Civic Gamified Communication Model" (CGCM). Rather than relying on viral affect, the campaign emphasised institutional resilience and democratic stability (Fitriyanti & Aulia, 2025). Gamification in this context took the form of interactive policy quizzes and community-based digital engagement, which functioned to reinforce existing civic trust rather than build it from scratch (Anjeli et al., 2025).

As shown in Figure 1, the path coefficients suggest that while both models correlate positively with electoral success, the "Affective Trigger" in the Indonesian context shows a significantly higher impact on rapid mobilisation compared to the "Civic Trigger" in the Taiwanese context, which relies more on long-term institutional reinforcement (Fauzi et al., 2025).

This suggests that electoral success in the algorithmic era is highly sensitive to local socio-cultural predispositions (Gunaeri & Khusna, 2025). Digital populism is not a monolith; it adapts to the existing democratic culture of the nation, either by weaponising viral affect or by digitising civic institutionalism.

CONCLUSION

Digital politics in Asia has evolved into hybrid communication forms. While Prabowo relied on affective algorithms, Lai utilised rational, community-based digital trust. Modern campaigns must balance viral gamification with mitigation protocols against algorithmic bias.

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