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TikTok Use and Young AfD Voters

Katjana Gattermann and Marina Tulin

Abstract

This chapter investigates the relationship between social media use and voting for the German far-right party, AfD. It poses three research questions tapping a) the type of platform, with a specific focus on TikTok in comparison to other social media, b) the moderating role of voters' age, with a particular focus on young voters, and c) gender differences among voters. Analysing novel panel survey data in the context of the 2024 EP elections in Germany, we find a positive relationship between TikTok use and voting for the AfD in cross-sectional analyses. However, these findings do not replicate in the panel analyses, which means that no causal relationship is established. Moreover, there are similar positive associations for Facebook and Telegram use, respectively, while other social media use is either negatively related or not at all. Age does not moderate these relations, but platform preferences intersect with age groups, such that young voters prefer TikTok and Instagram, while middle-aged voters prefer Facebook. Gender rarely moderates the relationship between social media use and voting for the AfD. We strongly recommend that future research explores underlying mechanisms and addresses potential confounders that may be driving associations between social media use and exposure to far-right content, particularly with respect to TikTok, and voting behaviour.

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1 Introduction

The surge of far-right parties in the 2024 EP elections led the European public debate to focus on possible reasons behind their electoral success. In Germany, political observers were quick to assume that TikTok would be responsible for the AfD's alleged electoral success among young voters (e.g. NDR, 2024). Such claims are based on a presumed relationship between three observations, namely, first, that AfD politicians would be more active on TikTok than other politicians; second, that younger voters more so than older voters would actively use social media, and particularly TikTok, to inform themselves about politics; and third, that young voters overwhelmingly voted for the AfD. While each of these assumptions can be verified on their own—as we will discuss below, it is a challenging task to draw a causal relationship between social media activity of parties and politicians, user engagement with their content, and vote choice (see Bene, 2018; Kelm et al., 2023; Kruikeimeier, 2014). Our contribution sheds light onto the presumed relationship between TikTok use and far-right vote choice in the 2024 EP elections by using novel panel survey data from Germany (Van den Hoogen et al., 2024).

2 Research Questions

Social media are an important campaign tool. There are indications that politicians tend to adapt their communication strategies across different platforms. For example, German politicians tend to use X (formerly Twitter) to take part in the public debate and Facebook for political campaigning (Stier et al., 2018). Bossetta's (2018) study of the 2016 US Presidential election suggests that the content of campaign messages was largely similar across Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. This would imply that social media activity varies more between political parties than across platforms (see also Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). Indeed, mainstream political parties were late to exploit social media for campaigning (e.g. Magin et al., 2017), but populist parties, such as the AfD, embraced social media early on to circumvent mainstream media (e.g. Ernst et al., 2019). This entails that populist parties are also more active (e.g. Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021) and more popular (e.g. Widholm et al., 2024) on TikTok. There is also early evidence for the German state elections of September 2024 that AfD politicians tend to be more active on TikTok, and due to the algorithm first-time voters are more often exposed to AfD than other party content (Potsdam Social Media Monitor, 2024). Yet, the AfD tends to also generate more user engagement on other platforms, such as Facebook and X (Serrano et al., 2019). So, in order to single out a potential TikTok effect on voting behaviour, we need to compare TikTok to other social media. High social media use likely increases the chances that users come across political content (e.g. Heiss et al., 2020). So, if there are any social media effects on voting behaviour, social media use should capture some of this irrespective of the content users come across. We thus ask (RQ1): To what extent is social media use related to voting for the AfD?

Next, we require a closer look at voters' age. Scholars are trying to understand the reasons for the far-right vote among younger voters (e.g. Foa & Mounk, 2019; van der Brug et al., 2024). A report by Schläger et al. (2024) suggests that the AfD received 16% of the vote among voters aged 16 to 24, while the overall AfD vote share was also 15.9% in the 2024 EP elections. It was 12% for voters aged 60+ and between 18 and 20% for the remaining age groups. At first glance, young voters thus do not appear to stand out.

There is a large literature on the relationship between new media use and political participation among young citizens, concluding that the relationship is not straightforward and often conditional on factors such as political interest, type of media use, and type of political participation (e.g. Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). This suggests that self-selection is at play: For example, Heiss et al. (2020) show that Austrian adolescents who actively seek information on social media are more likely to participate in politics offline, while incidental exposure to political information would lead to less offline engagement. While this makes it difficult to identify independent effects on voting behaviour, correlations between young voters' social media use and the AfD vote would tell us whether certain platforms allow the AfD to lure in young voters.

Marquart et al. (2020) argue that social media is replacing traditional media as an information source among young citizens. Age may indeed explain the decline in Facebook use and the rise of YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram in Western countries (Reuters Institute, 2024, p. 11), but all of these, including Facebook, are on the rise among the German population (p. 83). A so-called TikTok effect among young voters may thus be as likely as a Facebook effect among older voters. We thus ask (RQ2): To what extent does age moderate the relationship between social media use and voting for the AfD?

Lastly, far-right voters tend to be male (e.g. Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Givens, 2004), but the alleged ideological gender gap in young voters (Burn-Murdoch, 2024) has received little scholarly attention. First indications from the 2024 EP elections point to the role of socio-cultural attitudes, with young women tending to be more progressive than young men (Milosav et al., 2024). If social media had anything to do with this, it could be that certain social media messages from far-right parties and their supporters resonate more with men than with women. While we lack direct evidence, members of men-centred online communities are more likely to be drawn into alt-right circles on social media such as YouTube and Reddit than others (Mamié et al., 2021). The AfD's lead candidate not only promoted issues such as identity politics, the economy, and migration on TikTok during the EP election campaigns, but also provided dating tips to young men (Bartmann & Brückner, 2025). The latter aligns with the AfD's major characteristic of toxic masculinity in both its practice and public discourse (Daddow & Hertner, 2021) and its misogynous communication on Facebook and Twitter against women and LGBTQIA+ leaders (Reinhardt et al., 2024). Still, women tend to more often use social media such as Facebook and TikTok than men (European Parliament, 2023). We thus ask (RQ3): To what extent does the presumed relationship between social media use and the AfD vote differ for men and women voters?

3 Analysis

We use original data from a three-wave panel survey conducted in the Netherlands, Poland, and Germany as part of the MADEU24 project (Van den Hoogen et al., 2024). Data were collected in late April/early May (wave 1, w1), late May (w2), and right after election day on 9 June 2024 (w3). The initial German sample consisted of 2033 respondents and was comparable to the German population regarding age, gender, and region. After excluding non-participants in w2/w3, those with unlinked data (17) and missing values (5), the final sample comprises 999 respondents.

Turnout in the EP elections was 86% in our sample compared to 64.74% officially. Of those who voted, 17% stated that they voted for the AfD in w3 (official figure: 15.9%). AfD voters aged 16–24 years were underrepresented (6%) compared to Schläger et al. (2024), while other age groups were comparable.

Respondents reported social media use in a typical week (w1) or the past week (w2/w3) with little variation between waves (see Fig. 1) but substantial variation between age groups (Fig. 2). WhatsApp was most used (5 days), followed by Facebook (3 days), Instagram, and YouTube (2–3 days). TikTok, our primary focus, averaged 1 day per week. Reddit and Telegram as well as Snapchat and X (not shown here) were used least often (<1 day).

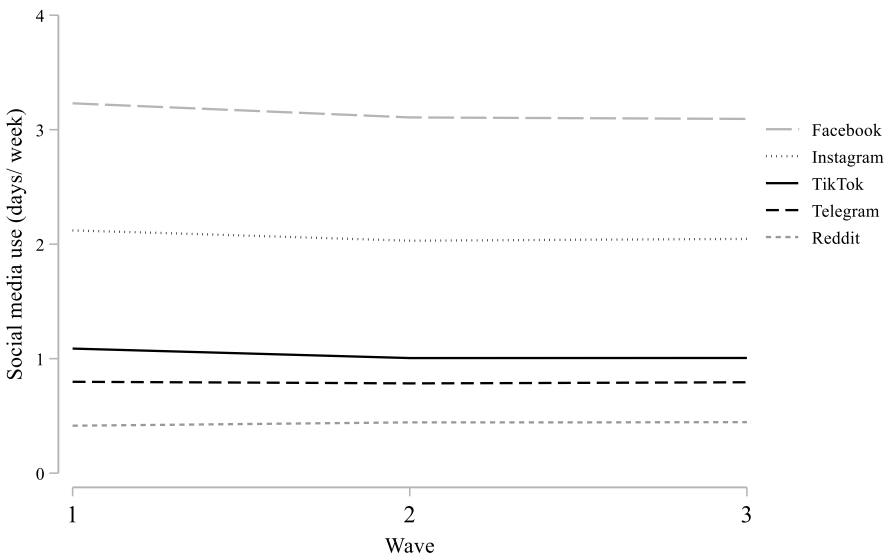


Fig. 1 Social media use trend across waves (*Note:* Selection of most relevant social media platforms)

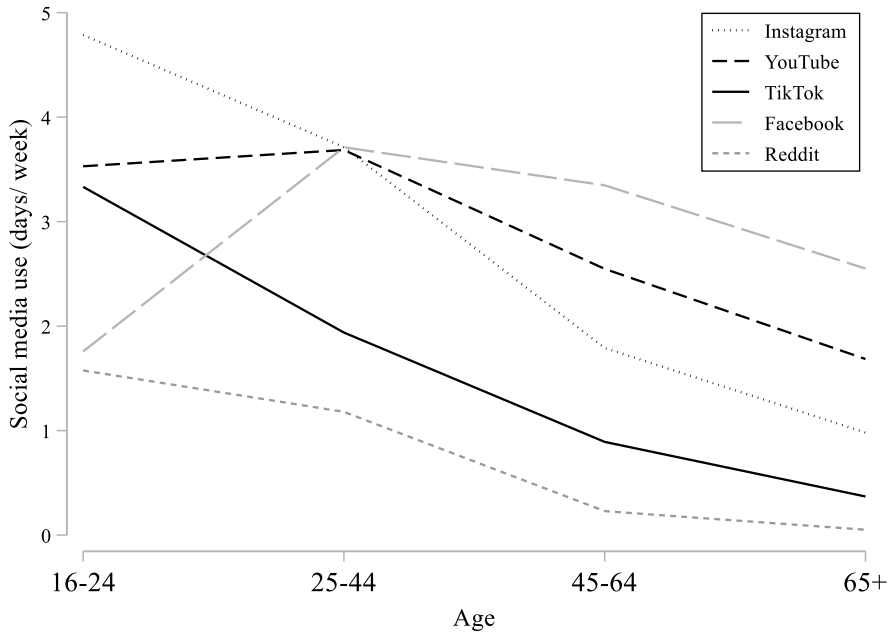


Fig. 2 Social media use (pooled across waves) across age groups (*Note*: Selection of most relevant social media platforms)

The youngest age group (16–24 years) were the heaviest social media users, except for YouTube and WhatsApp, which was comparable with other age groups, and Facebook, which they barely used ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.86$). They were overrepresented on TikTok and Instagram averaging 3.33 ($SD = 1.93$) and 4.79 days/week ($SD = 2.12$), respectively. The second youngest group (25–44 years) used Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp the most, although these platforms were also popular among those aged 45–64.

To answer our RQs, we conduct regression analyses on respondents who voted in the 2024 EP elections ($N = 855$), using a binary outcome variable to capture AfD voting ($M = 0.17$). We examine the link between social media use and AfD voting via linear probability models (for detailed results, see Table 1 in the Appendix) predicting AfD voting as a function of average social media use pooled across waves (RQ1, Model 1), age (RQ2, Model 2), and gender (RQ3, Models 3 and 4). Each additional day of using TikTok increased the likelihood of voting for the AfD by 3% ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.008$, $p < 0.001$). Daily TikTok users are 21% more likely to vote for the AfD than non-users. That said, only 3% of respondents use TikTok daily; 71% never use it. Other social media, such as Telegram ($B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.009$, $p < 0.001$) and Facebook ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.005$, $p = 0.006$) also positively predict AfD voting. In contrast, Instagram ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $p = 0.004$) or Reddit use ($B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.001$) was negatively related to AfD voting. X, YouTube, Snapchat, and WhatsApp use is not associated with AfD voting.

For RQ2, we modelled the interaction effects of social media use and age groups to test if age moderates the relationship between social media use and AfD voting. We find no significant interaction effect. Thus, the associations identified in Model 1 are consistent across age groups. Age likely strongly intersects with social media use, complicating the detection of differential effects.

For RQ3, we examine gender differences in the association between social media use and AfD voting. For both men ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.012$) and women ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.008$), TikTok use is positively associated with AfD voting. The effect sizes are identical, such that each additional day of TikTok use increases their likelihood to vote for the AfD by 3%. Thus, frequent man TikTok users are not more likely to vote for the AfD than women TikTok users. Moreover, Reddit use is negatively associated with AfD voting ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$) and Telegram is positively related ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.001$) among men, while there are no such relationships for women. Among women, Instagram use is negatively related to AfD voting ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.002$), while there is no such relationship for men. There are too few non-binary or trans individuals in our sample, which prevents us from reliably estimating other gender effects.

Panel Regression Analyses. After establishing a significant association between TikTok use and AfD voting (RQ1) among both men and women (RQ3), our final analyses move towards the question of causality. To this end, we exploit our longitudinal data to estimate fixed effects showing how within-individual changes in TikTok use across waves affect the likelihood to vote for the AfD (Table 2 in the Appendix). Such models control for the potential confounding effects of all observed and unobserved time-invariant individual-level characteristics, although these models do not guarantee definitive evidence of causality.

Providing further answers to RQ1, we find that TikTok use is not related to AfD voting ($B = 0.005$, $SE = 0.006$, $p = 0.462$). Each additional day of TikTok use increases the likelihood of voting for the AfD by only 0.5%, and it is not statistically significant. Yet, YouTube use is a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.013$, $SE = 0.005$, $p = 0.007$). Each additional day of YouTube use reduces AfD voting by 1.3%. Someone who increases their YouTube use from 0 to 7 days is thus 9.1% less likely to vote for the AfD. In our sample, however, only 10 citizens (1% of the sample) actually underwent such a rapid increase in their YouTube use between waves. The majority maintained a stable YouTube use between w1 and w2 (56%) as well as w2 and w3 (57.1%), or changed their YouTube use by only 1 day between w1 and w2 (22.8%) or between w2 and w3 (20.6%).

To better understand the null findings with regard to TikTok use, we checked whether citizens actually changed their TikTok use over time: It remained stable for most respondents (81.2% between w1 and w2, and 80.2% between w2 and w3). This stability may explain the lack of significant effects in the panel regressions (*note*: YouTube use has 57% stability).

Turning to RQ3 about possible gender differences, we split the results into men and women. As in the full sample, we do not observe a significant effect of TikTok use on voting for the AfD for either men ($B = 0.004$, $SE = 0.009$, $p = 0.658$) or

women ($B = 0.002$, $SE = 0.009$, $p = 0.843$). However, there is a significant negative effect of changes in YouTube use among men ($B = -0.015$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = 0.025$), but not among women ($B = -0.011$, $SE = 0.075$, $p = 0.100$).

Robustness Checks. To better understand the robustness of our findings, we examined the role of AfD vote intention prior to the elections (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Those who more often used TikTok in w1 also had a significantly higher intention to vote for the AfD in both w1 ($B = 0.014$, $SE = 0.006$, $p = 0.020$) and w2 ($B = 0.019$, $SE = 0.006$, $p = 0.002$). Voting for the AfD is significantly predicted by TikTok use even when controlling for intention to vote in w1 ($B = 0.013$, $SE = 0.005$, $p = 0.004$) and w2 ($B = 0.009$, $SE = 0.004$, $p = 0.033$).

We also checked whether TikTok effects are unique to the AfD or whether they can also be found for other successful parties, such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) or Alliance 90/The Greens (Green Party). We do not find any significant relationships between TikTok use and voting for the Green Party or CDU for any of our RQs (see Tables 4 and 5 in the Appendix).

4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to shed light on the alleged relationship between young voters' TikTok use and voting for the AfD. We cannot establish a causal link between TikTok use and AfD voting, but our cross-sectional analyses show that TikTok use is positively related to voting for the AfD. However, frequent users of other social media, including Facebook and Telegram, are also more likely to vote for the AfD, although these findings do not hold in the panel analyses. Age does not moderate the relationship between social media use and voting behaviour, which may be explained by different social media attracting different age groups. TikTok users tend to be younger, while Facebook is most popular among those aged 25 to 44 years old—a group which also overwhelmingly voted for the AfD (Schläger et al., 2024). At the same time, the AfD is also very active on Facebook (Davis et al., 2019; Serrano et al., 2019). Telegram was used to a similar degree among the two youngest age groups. This suggests that voters of all ages self-select into different social media. It is likely that populist radical-right voters find likeminded people on platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, which then reinforces their intention to vote for the AfD. Still, this may not fully explain why we see similar voting behaviour among TikTok users as young voters tend to not be fully politically socialized and thus less likely to self-select into certain political content. Moreover, Instagram use, which is also rather popular among the youngest cohort, has a negative association with voting for the AfD. One explanation may be that there was a lot of mobilization against the AfD by influencers on Instagram during the EP campaigns (Meiß & Ziegler, 2025), which may also explain why women Instagram users were less likely to vote for the rather misogynous AfD (see Reinhardt et al., 2024). The negative effect of YouTube use, which is also rather popular among the two youngest age groups, on voting for the AfD is particularly driven by men YouTube users and may be related to the varied exposure during the campaigns. Taken together, these different

findings suggest that the type of social media does play a role after all; and the promotion of certain political content on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram may indeed explain part of the AfD vote.

Our findings did not reveal any gender differences in the relationship between TikTok use and voting for the AfD. Although we do not find consistent patterns for other social media across the different analyses, this does not mean that gender differences are absent. Given the growing scholarly interest in gender differences among young far-right voters in European elections (e.g. Milosav et al., 2024; van der Brug et al., 2024), we recommend that future research further investigates the potential role of social media in attitude formation, especially since certain far-right content particularly appeals to young men (see Bartmann & Brückner, 2025). More generally, as we were unable to replicate our main findings in the panel analyses, we strongly recommend that future research explores underlying mechanisms and addresses potential confounders that may be driving associations between social media use and exposure on the one hand, and political attitudes and voting behaviour on the other.

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