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Banning TikTok could turn Gen Z into a political force

Paul Matzko

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One hundred fifty million Americans use TikTok, a fact both the app's critics and defenders repeated last Thursday at a congressional hearing with TikTok CEO Shou Chew. It's a number that includes two-thirds of Generation Z, making the hearing a rude introduction to the dysfunction of government for the next generation of voters.

In fact, older policymakers and journalists are deeply siloed — consuming news from legacy outlets and chattering with each other on Twitter — and many are missing the immense anger of TikTokers at the talk of a ban. (As both a media historian at a think tank and a middling TikTok creator, I have a unique position from which to translate the visceral reaction of many TikTokers to what they witnessed from Congress.)

TikTok has not traditionally been as political a space as other social media platforms like Twitter. And while it is not yet clear whether the post-hearings outrage felt on TikTok will be channeled into political action, it is possible that a TikTok ban could turn into a radicalizing event for Gen Z like how the free speech protests at Berkeley energized young people in the 1960s.

While congresspeople and pundits might write TikTok off as merely as a place for “cute dance videos” or a conduit for Chinese indoctrination, any actual user of TikTok could have told the House Energy & Commerce Committee — not that they bothered to ask — that the platform contains multitudes.

Yes, there are viral dance trends and silly memes making light of capibaras and borzois, but TikTok is the same platform that allows an ex-Amish creator with 1.4 million followers to draw attention to his rescue mission helping abused Amish teenagers, helps queer teenagers in conservative towns to find community, and opened the door for a local engineer to draw national attention to the Ohio train derailment.

So while Congress might think it is merely banning a fungible “Big Tech” platform, TikTok users know that doing so will tear apart their vibrant, ad hoc online communities. The comments sections of post-hearing videos are filled with pleas like, “Someone show this to congress as proof they shouldn’t ban TikTok.”

The hearing made it obvious to users that Congress does not understand what TikTok is, how the technology works, and how most people experience it. The most frequently ridiculed members have been Rep. Greg Pence (R-Ind.) for growling “pay me for my data,” Rep. Richard Hudson (R-N.C.) for wondering if TikTok connects to WiFi, and especially Rep. Buddy Carter (R-Ga.), who found 21 million viewers watching him ask about “pupil tracking” and “age-gating.”

Many TikTokers felt the hearing was deceptive. Instead of sharing a representative sample of TikTok videos during the hearing, the representatives showed only extreme, fringe content in the style of “Look at this poorly crafted mee-mee [meme] we found with ten likes,” designed to put TikTok in an unrealistically bad light. Congress offered up a paper-thin caricature of the platform that users know and love.

And while Congress might find the theoretical potential of data gathering and surveillance by the Communist Chinese Party reason enough to call for a TikTok ban, users are much less concerned. A common refrain is that TikTok doesn’t collect any information that any other major social media platform doesn’t also collect; at least TikTok never sold their data to brokers and wannabe authoritarian strongmen. And the (unproven) proposition that China is spying on users doesn’t faze those who, as one user put it, don’t feel “important enough as a college student with eight cents to my name” to provide any valuable intel.

It’s not China that worries TikTokers, who have settled on a particular shadowy villain to blame for the whole affair: Facebook. Given that the TikTok competitor stands to benefit from a ban, fingers have been pointed at recent purchases of Meta stock by members of the hearing committee, and which has appreciated significantly over the last six months.

Thus, what TikTokers saw at the hearing has convinced many that it could only have been the product of “every single one of those politicians [being] bought and paid for,” hashtag “#usgovernmentsucks.”

While this may be an overstatement, there is a kernel of truth to these complaints of undue influence from TikTok's competitors. In 2021, Meta hired a Republican consulting megafirm called Targeted Victory to both launder anti-TikTok talking points through sympathetic journalists and to plant fake grassroots stories in hundreds of local newspapers. The goal was to incite a nationwide moral panic among parents of teens using TikTok. As one operative put it, the "dream would be to get stories with headlines like 'From dances to danger: how TikTok has become the most harmful social media space for kids.'"

Future researchers will get the opportunity to trace any direct influence between TikTok's competitors and members of Congress; after all, you don't spend \$70 million a year on lobbyists for nothing. But when multiple congresspeople at the hearing highlighted dangerous TikTok trends for teenagers — for instance, Rep. Buddy Carter sat in front of a banner reading "Deadly TikTok Challenges" — they were repeating a line of criticism popularized by TikTok's biggest competitor. TikTok creators are not entirely wrong to be suspicious that the ban "has nothing to do with our safety, and everything to do with Meta can't beat 'em, so let's destroy 'em."

But perhaps the most serious sin of the hearings for users of a platform defined by authenticity — typically featuring a direct-to-camera conversational tone and low-fi production values — is that the congresspersons were performing an obviously inauthentic outrage for a completely different audience. Nearly half of Americans might use TikTok, but the half that doesn't both votes and donates to politicians at much higher rates than the half that does.

It rang hollow when committee members claimed to uphold basic American values like freedom of speech, only to, when Chew failed to provide them with the answers they were looking for, repeatedly threaten him with prosecution for lying to Congress. They demeaned themselves at regular five minute intervals with repetitive, pre-written questions, showed a complete disinterest in Chew's answers, barked "I reclaim the balance of my time," and then patted themselves on the back for their bipartisanship. And all for what?

As one creator put it, "There's my soundbite guys, put it on twitter," or, as the case may be, on a cable news pundit show or on the local nightly news reel.

The proceedings seemed neither fair nor democratic to TikTok users. "Congress worried China is using TikTok to make the US government look bad," goes one popular meme using a scene from a Nicolas Cage movie, but "the world [is] watching today's proceedings and seeing that the biggest threat to the US government is the US government."

That sentiment is bringing previously apolitical TikTokers off the sidelines, from NASCAR superfans to gym bros. A routine refrain in response videos is some variation on “I don’t normally do anything with political content” — to quote a septic and well contractor with 1.9 million followers — but who, after the hearings, wanted “to see a list of which representatives...are in favor of this tiktok ban because I tell ya it’s probably going to affect how I vote.”

There is certainly a hunger among TikTok users for politicians who both understand the technology and appreciate their values. There are several candidates who might fit the bill as TikTok’s tribune of the people. Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-N.Y., 183 thousand followers) was the only congressperson to stand with TikTok creators at a pre-hearing press conference. First term Rep. Jeff Jackson’s (D-N.C.) plainspoken explanations of politics and policy have earned him 1.4 million followers on TikTok and national media attention.

However, Jackson has publicly supported a TikTok ban, a stance likely to cap his appeal on the platform, leaving the door open for a new contender, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), already known for her facility with Instagram. AOC posted her first video to TikTok two days after the hearings, criticizing the ban and gaining over a third of a million followers in just 24 hours.

The fact that AOC could post a video and reach 3.3 million viewers in a day is a reminder of the latent political potential of the platform, as is the way it has raised the profile of two democratic socialists (Bowman and AOC) and a first-term moderate Democrat (Jackson).

The path to high office—for whichever politician is bold enough to embrace it—has historically run through novel mass media forms. Franklin Delano Roosevelt turned his “fireside chats” to immense political advantage in the 1930s, Ronald Reagan used his daily radio show in the 1970s to act as a kind of shadow president, and Donald Trump rode his belligerent Twitter thumbs into the Oval Office in 2016.

Our first TikTok president might already be on the platform, waiting for their moment to channel the anger of Gen Z voters who are alienated by the business-as-usual congressional antics displayed last week.

Paul Matzko is a research fellow and the host of the podcast Building Tomorrow.