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Political Ads on Social Media and the Recent Practice in Indonesia: Insights from Facebook Ad Library

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The 2020 United States Presidential elections set an unprecedented record in political advertisement expenses on Facebook. The difference in numbers is quite staggering. While Trump and Hillary in 2016 collectively spent \$ 81 million in advertising on Facebook, the 2020 presidential candidates have both individually surpassed this figure. As reported in the *Facebook Ad Library Report*, from January 1, 2020, to November 3, 2020, President-elect Joe Biden spent 103 million dollars on political advertising on Facebook, where Donald Trump spent 95.2 million dollars. This figure only accounts for the official page of each candidate and has not considered other pages.

This significant increase in political advertising spending came in part after Facebook had become the only social media platform that still allowed political advertising before the company eventually prohibited political ads after polls closed on November 3. Previously, in October 2019, Twitter carried

out a ban on political advertising on its platform. Therefore, politicians in the United States have no other alternative but to pile up money on Facebook. Through his personal Twitter account, Twitter CEO, Jack Dorsey, said that "political message reach should be earned, not bought." Not only Twitter, the application Tik Tok, which has more than 91 million monthly active users in the United States, has also banned political advertising on its platform.

The question then is, should political advertising be banned from social media for good? The spread of misinformation and hoaxes in recent years that are often said to be the culprit for the birth of populist leaders like Donald Trump is an inevitable fact. Social media has become a prevalent breeding ground for disinformation. However, the majority of the misinformation is unfortunately grown organically. Given this context, it seems that political advertising has a large reservation to fight against misinformation.

An exciting example is the story of Acronym, a political organization formed by former digital team member for Obama's re-election campaign, Tara McGowan. McGowan's organization have successfully fundraised and spent \$ 100 million on political ads on Facebook against Trump by spreading facts and credible news. Consisting of an experienced digital team, including ex-Facebook employee, McGowan bombarded voters in swing states with microtargeted ads. The intention was to counter the narrative crafted by the far-right partisan media controlled by Trump.

In an interview, McGowan, who has received some criticism related to her strategy, said that if political ads are prohibited, then the mainstream media would have a monopoly on information and can take advantage of organic posts to spread misinformation. Likewise, the incumbent candidate will always have more power with greater media access, such as TV. With the rise of populism, such control could severely harm democracy.

Unlike cable TV, advertising on social media is much more efficient and structured in terms of cost and strategy. With microtargeting, advertisers can directly select voter segments and limit the coverage of their ads. As a result, the costs incurred can be substantially cheaper because it is not wasted on TV commercials whose coverage is too broad. For instance, Joe Biden mostly targets his political ads at users aged 45 or below while Donald Trump focuses his political ads on users aged 45 and over.

Furthermore, programmatic advertising (or audience network on Facebook) also allows social media platforms to exchange user behaviour information with various websites on the internet to become more efficient in microtargeting by reading massive internet usage behaviour. Have you ever searched for shoes on a website, and when you open Facebook one minute later, been presented with an ad for the exact shoes you just looked for? This is how the internet works today.

How about Indonesia?

In Indonesia, political parties and politicians have started adopting social media advertising in recent years, although still not on a massive scale. Data from the Facebook Ad Library Report shows several pairs of candidates inside The 2020 local elections, for example, has taken advantage of political ads Facebook with varying outcomes.

The candidate pair for Mayor of Makassar, Appi-Rahman, spent nearly 3 billion rupiah for political advertising on Facebook four months prior to the election. However, the pair defeated by the incumbent. In comparison, PDI-P politician Andrei Angouw spent approximately 88 million rupiah on political ads through his page and was able to attain the position of mayor of Manado. Whereas the pair Dico M. Ganinduto and Windu Suko Basuki in Kendal spent 55 million rupiahs on Facebook ads also won the election. Meanwhile, the Facebook Page of the former presidential candidate pair Prabowo-Sandi was actively conducting political ads for regional head candidates from the Gerindra

Party. During the same period, the Gerindra official page spent at least 105 million rupiahs on political ads.

Apart from elections, Indonesian political parties have also used political ads to continue their engagement with voters. As of recently, PSI (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia) is the most active party. The past month's data showed that PSI had spent 22 million rupiahs for political advertising on Facebook. Meanwhile, Giring Ganesha, acting chairman of PSI, has spent nearly 100 million rupiah for six months period until January 2021 since declaring that he will run as a presidential candidate. Another example is the *Golkar Indonesia* Facebook page, which carries out political advertisements to promote some of their political views regarding government policies such as the COVID-19 vaccine, in addition to campaigning for their regional head candidates, has spent nearly 15 million rupiah on the same period.

For better or for worse, social media such as Facebook will play an increasingly active role in Indonesia's political dialogue in the future, along with the increasingly dominant generation of young voters who are no longer accessible by the TV. According to a report from *We Are Social* in 2020, 82% of internet users aged 16 to 64 actively used Facebook in Indonesia. This figure put Facebook only behind YouTube (88%) and WhatsApp (84%). Meanwhile, Twitter users were still far below, with the proportion of 56%. Facebook assumed that 130 million Indonesians could be reached out through ads on the platform. A very significant amount for close public engagement.

The campaign period perhaps only takes a few months, but the battle against disinformation occurs every day, both in and out of election cycle. Therefore, through social media, political advertising should encourage more extensive political communication between representatives and constituents. With limited media coverage at the local level, social media ads have the potential to be a powerful grassroots campaign tool. Moreover, just like in the US, political ads can help campaign fundraisers, especially for those with limited access. Ultimately, a campaign's success is not determined by how much money is spent on the but should also consider the message's quality and how it can resonate with the voters.

The efficacy of political advertisement in victories are still difficult to prove, regardless of whether it is digital, or TV ads given the many factors involved. However, it is also the case with advertising in general that its causality on product sales performance is still hard to justify. Regardless, political advertising is a tool to win the public debate and people's attention, which sometimes is much more important than a single election.

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