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TikTok Tactics

2024 US Candidates Dance Around Security Risks

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Despite TikTok's ongoing national security risks, 2024 candidates in US House, Senate, gubernatorial, and secretary of state races continue to use the platform to reach voters.

Since its emergence onto the social media scene in 2016, viral video app TikTok has exploded in popularity, dominating the screentime of a reported [one billion monthly](#) active users worldwide today. This year, the app's user base has made it an all-but-unavoidable tool for US [presidential](#) and vice-presidential candidates, who have used TikTok to make their bids to voters.

Yet researchers and lawmakers' [initial national security concerns](#) surrounding the potential for malign influence due to TikTok's ownership ties to the People's Republic of China (PRC) have only become louder as additional voices in Washington and beyond have joined the chorus. To address these concerns, in 2024 Congress passed and President Biden signed House Resolution (HR) 7521 to force TikTok to divest from its PRC-based parent company ByteDance or face a ban in the United States. This was mere months before the president's campaign [joined](#) the platform itself.

As election day fast approaches, a wide swath of federal and state candidates are seeking to leverage TikTok's popularity with GenZ users. In October 2022, the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) produced a [report](#) documenting how US midterm candidates employed TikTok to reach voters and boost campaign visibility. This year, ahead of the 2024 US general elections in November, ASD and the GMF Technology Program researched the question of whether TikTok use among US Senate, House, gubernatorial, and secretary of state candidates has increased, and how candidates have continued to harness TikTok in campaigns. After two years, Democrats still outweigh Republicans on TikTok use, TikTok's sluggishness in verifying candidate accounts has worsened, and political TikTok styles are beginning to mature.

The Facts: How Widespread is TikTok Usage Among House, Senate, Gubernatorial, and Secretary of State Candidates?

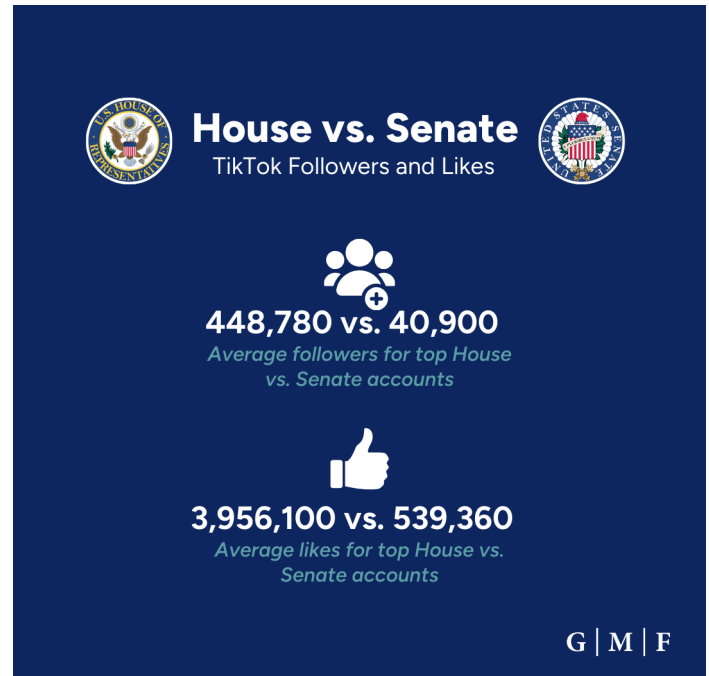
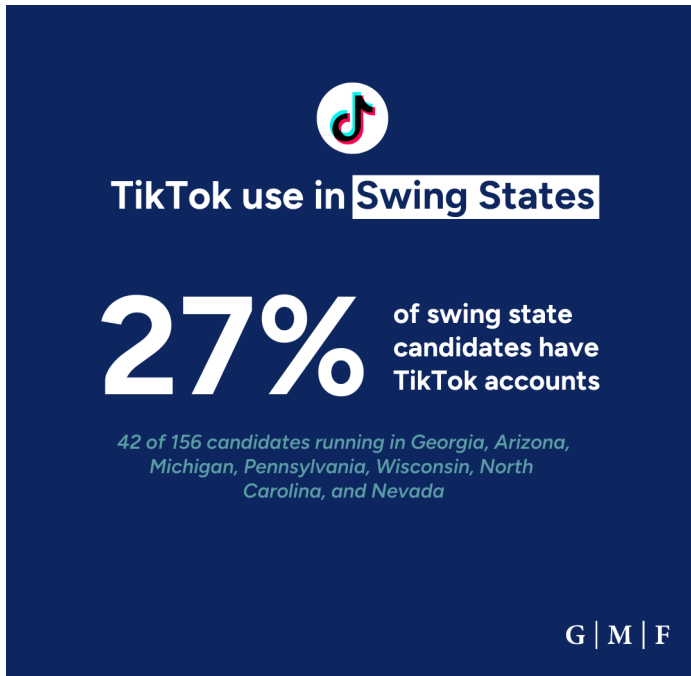
In the 2024 general elections, 27% of House, Senate, gubernatorial, and secretary of state candidates are using TikTok to interact with voters, increase their reach, and advocate for policy ideas—up from 23% of candidates who used the platform [in the 2022 midterm elections](#). At the same time, Americans' weekly TikTok usage [grew by 10%](#).

Of 964 total candidates, ASD and the GMF Technology Program identified 257 TikTok accounts held by federal and state candidates running in the November 2024 general elections. (Approximately 17 of the catalogued accounts have no posted content, have no followers, or otherwise cannot be credibly attributed to the candidate.) Of the 257 accounts tracked, TikTok has verified only 34. (View the list of candidates and their account status [here](#).)

Here's what we found:

- **Democrats are still more likely than Republicans to have accounts.** Of the total number of federal and state candidates, about 38% of Democrats and only about 16% of Republicans had TikTok accounts. This finding is consistent with GMF's 2022 report, which found that Democrats were almost three times as likely as Republicans to have TikTok accounts. Despite growing bipartisan concern about TikTok, this more uniform recognition has not translated into significant narrowing of the partisan split on candidate TikTok use.

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- **TikTok has verified just 13% of candidate accounts, an even lower percentage than in 2022.** This fraction is even lower than that of candidate accounts verified in the 2022 midterms (about 18%)—a poor showing even then. Although TikTok usage has increased in the past two years—including among political candidates—and the company [aims to stake](#) its claim as a trustworthy election actor, candidate verification has worsened. Even among the 68 candidates who explicitly link out to their TikTok profiles on official campaign websites, TikTok has verified only four.
- **TikTok use is less prevalent among incumbent candidates than non-incumbents.** Of the tracked accounts, about a fifth (21%) are linked to candidates running for reelection in their state; by contrast, incumbents make up 43% of candidates overall in these races.
- **Seventy percent of candidates posting on TikTok made their first post after the 2022 midterms.** Almost three-quarters of the 235 candidates with catalogued accounts and posted content logged their first post after the conclusion of the 2022 midterm elections—that is, as they entered the 2024 election cycle.
- **State races in particular saw a significant drop in verification from 2022, with far fewer secretary of state accounts overall this year.** While use of TikTok in gubernatorial races stayed consistent from 2022 (roughly 50% of major party candidates had an account in 2024, compared to 47% in 2022), GMF identified only one account linked to a candidate for secretary of state—Jesse James Mullen (MT)—in 2024 (7% of secretary of state candidates in 2024 compared with 25% in 2022). No accounts of candidates for state office this year are verified, unlike in 2022, when 31% of gubernatorial and secretary of state candidate accounts were verified.
- **Senate candidates are more likely to use TikTok than are candidates for the House of Representatives—but House candidates get more engagement.** About 43% of Senate candidates have accounts, compared to about 25% of House candidates. This finding is largely consistent with 2022, and the gap in usage between Senate and House candidates has even grown from 2022 by about five percentage points.

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- **Just over a quarter of candidates with accounts link out to their TikTok profile from their campaign websites.** Of 257 catalogued accounts, only 26% of candidates link to their TikTok profiles on their official campaign websites—a common practice for candidate social media presence on X and Facebook. Absent this clear indicator of a profile’s authenticity, the political information environment on TikTok is even murkier.

Top 5 Verified Senate Candidate Accounts by Followers:

1. Adam Schiff, CA, Democrat (94,200 followers; 871,700 likes)
2. Colin Allred, TX, Democrat (57,900 followers; 1,100,000 likes)
3. Bob Casey Jr, PA, Democrat (20,200 followers; 405,000 likes)
4. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, FL, Democrat (19,100 followers; 199,800 likes)
5. Kirsten Gillibrand, NY, Democrat (13,100 followers; 120,300 likes)

* Bernie Sanders (VT, Independent (1,500,000 followers; 12,400,000 likes)), though not a major party Republican or Democratic candidate, has a larger TikTok following than any top-five major party Senate profile. As such, GMF chose to include mention of Sanders’ account in this report.

Top 5 Verified Senate Candidate TikTok Accounts by Followers

Candidate	Followers	Likes
Bernie Sanders (I-VT)	1,500,000	12,400,000
Adam Schiff (D-CA)	94,200	871,700
Colin Allred (D-TX)	57,900	1,100,000
Bob Casey, Jr. (D-PA)	20,200	405,000
Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (D-FL)	19,100	199,800

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Top 5 Verified House Candidate TikTok Accounts by Followers

Candidate	Followers	Likes
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY)	1,000,000	7,500,000
Ilhan Omar (D-MN)	615,800	2,500,000
Ro Khanna (D-CA)	43,700	6,500,000
Ayanna Pressley (D-MA)	48,400	2,700,000
Jasmine Crockett (D-TX)	136,000	580,500

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Top 5 Verified House Candidate Accounts by Followers:

1. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, NY, Democrat (1,000,000 followers; 7,500,000 likes)
2. Ilhan Omar, MN, Democrat (615,800 followers; 2,500,000 likes)
3. Ro Khanna, CA, Democrat (343,700; 6,500,000 likes)
4. Ayanna Pressley, MA, Democrat (148,400 followers; 2,700,000 likes)
5. Jasmine Crockett, TX, Democrat (136,000 followers; 580,500 likes)

The top verified House candidate accounts have far more followers and likes on average than the top verified Senate candidate accounts (448,780 vs. 40,900 followers and 3,956,100 vs. 539,360 likes). Ilhan Omar is the only candidate to make the top 5 list in both 2022 and 2024. This year, Democratic candidates dominate the top 5 lists for both Senate and House candidates. By contrast, only two Republican accounts in the House are verified: Mayra Flores (R-TX) with 43,100 followers and Nancy Mace (R-SC) with 27,400 followers. No Republican Senate accounts are verified. Although running as an Independent, incumbent Vermont candidate for the Senate Bernie Sanders notably tops the charts with 1,500,000 followers on TikTok—more followers than the top listed House and Senate accounts combined. After Sanders, Senate candidate TikTok “leader” by number of followers Adam Schiff also served as ranking member and then chair of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence from 2015 to 2023. In October 2022, he and Rep. Lori Trahan (D-MA) [wrote a letter](#) to TikTok CEO Shou Chew expressing concerns about electoral mis- and disinformation on the platform and the need for greater transparency in content moderation decisions around political activity ahead of the 2022 and 2024 elections.

Analysis: How are House and Senate Candidates Using TikTok?

As TikTok’s role in US politics is maturing, a “culture” of posting and styles specific to the platform are taking shape. Academic studies on social media traction show that tactics such as [“code mixing”](#) and [informal content style](#) can help generate more favorable user engagement. On TikTok, state and federal candidates’ choice to stylize their content according to the app’s trends and humor can make or break their ability to reach voters.

Striking a Chord: The Power of Trending Sounds

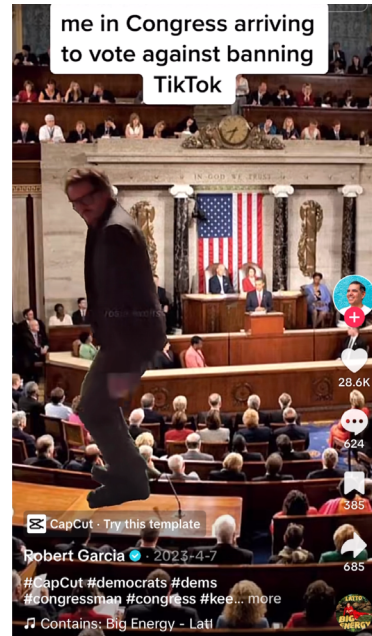
“Trending sounds” are short clips that can be selected by users from TikTok’s public sound library and dubbed over a video, categorizing it within a feed of other posts that have used the same audio. This TikTok feature has been especially visible as [presidential candidates](#) have capitalized on these soundbites to play to meme culture and appear on GenZ feeds in their 2024 TikTok debuts.

Candidates who use trending sounds often receive higher viewership on the relevant video. For example, in April of 2024, Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (D-FL), the Democratic candidate for Senate in Florida, dubbed a trending audio bite from the song “No Bars” with the lyrics, “Mwah, blocked” to complement a video about Floridian voters blocking her opponent Rick Scott from passing a national abortion ban. The video received 11,500 views—significantly higher than her average video viewership of 400 to 1500 views at that time.

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TikTok · Debbie Mucarsel-Powell



TikTok · Robert Garcia

Robert Garcia, an incumbent California House Democrat, has also used trending sounds to advertise his pro-TikTok stance – a view that may be especially popular with younger voter bases (62% of 18–29-year-olds in America report using the app). Garcia dubbed one of his videos with the trending song “Big Energy” and overlaid text that reads, “me in Congress arriving to vote against banning TikTok”. The post garnered over 139,000 views, a high count for his feed, which typically racks up views in the 10,000-50,000 range.

The KamalaHQ Effect

Forty-seven state and federal candidates—just over 18% of candidates with accounts—created their first post after the launch of presidential nominee Kamala Harris’ “KamalaHQ” account. Harris’ account has [grown popular](#) for its “meme” posts and internet humor aimed at landing with America’s GenZ voters. Some state and federal accounts that emerged following KamalaHQ’s launch seem to have taken cues from Harris’ success. These accounts mimic the same “[meme posts](#)”, TikTok trends, and popular sounds that Harris’ account has popularized.

The account of Josh Stein, a Democratic candidate in the North Carolina gubernatorial race, is one that has played heavily off the same viral sounds and pop culture references that KamalaHQ embraces. One post features a clip of Stein speaking to his constituents at a campaign event with the overlaid text “This & my bestie”—playing off a TikTok trend in which users use the same caption to capture ideal activities or settings to experience with friends or partners—and a sound bite from a Charli XCX and Lorde mashup.

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Swinging for the Fences

Of the 156 candidates running in this year's seven [swing states](#) (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin), just over a quarter (42, or 27%) have documented TikTok accounts. Just one of these accounts, that of sitting US Senator Bob Casey, Jr. (D-PA), made the top five follower list. Only nine are verified.

Many of these candidates use their TikTok accounts to comment on issues and speak to demographics that may influence whether their state swings red or blue. Mark Robinson (R-NC), who is running for election in North Carolina's gubernatorial race, has posted numerous times advocating for a "secure border" and criticizing Biden's June 2024 move to [offer citizenship](#) to immigrants without legal status. In a [recent poll](#) of registered North Carolina voters, immigration ranked as voters' top issue, especially among Republicans.

Senator Casey's account is riddled with posts advertising his platform of fighting "greedflation", and one post features Casey at a brewery in Erie, drinking beer and "cheersing" the county. In Pennsylvania, [52% of voters](#)—the highest proportion of voters in any swing state—cite the economy as their central concern, and Erie is one of two Pennsylvania counties that has [swung](#) back and forth between red and blue across the 2012 to 2020 elections.

In Georgia, which went blue in the 2020 presidential and Senate elections by [a narrow margin](#), Shawn Harris (D-GA) is using his TikTok to campaign actively against incumbent Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), hoping to flip District 14 to democratic control. Of Harris' ten most recent posts, seven feature him speaking directly to the camera about Greene's voting record and challenging her to the debate stage. These posts do not capitalize on meme culture or trending sounds but take a more serious tone, encouraging users via captioning and hashtags to "vot[e] for who is going to fight for you" and #voteblue.

Politics or Play: Scanning the Content Spectrum

Some candidates use their TikTok accounts to break political events and central platform positions down into more manageable soundbites for voters. This approach may square well with the [52% of TikTok users](#) who report getting their news from the app.

Members of the Squad, a progressive group of eight Democratic representatives, are among those candidates who post informal, sit-down "chats" in which they speak directly to their voters about policy issues. Ayanna Pressley's "Here's the Tea" series breaks down for her viewers political concepts such as the debt ceiling and the debate surrounding statehood for the District of Columbia. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has taken to TikTok throughout 2024 to share updates on the status of the DEFIANCE Act, a bipartisan bill creating legal redress for victims of non-consensual deepfake pornography.

These types of policy-focused videos, however, do not always achieve the same reach as posts with more playful tones. While Representative Greg Casar (D-TX) frequently reposts TV interviews and congressional appearances, his most popular video by far (with over 275,000 views, compared to an average of several thousand) features Casar lip syncing to the hit song "Espresso" by Sabrina Carpenter. Sticking to the platform's lighthearted roots may be key to achieving virality on TikTok, with implications for US politics as candidates adapt their messages to the app and its audiences.

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Two Years Older but None the Wiser?

Since the 2022 midterm elections—when US candidates [began using TikTok](#) in earnest to experiment with political outreach—much has changed around the politics of the app both in elections and in the national security conversation in the United States.

TikTok has [expanded](#) the “US Elections Center” it [launched](#) in January 2024 and its “How to Vote” resources, with a stated aim to “provide ... reliable voting information for all 50 states and Washington, DC”, including information about how elections work, what is on the ballot, and election results. Its election integrity plan also touts the role of “blue ‘verified’ checks” on notable accounts, and it requires government, politician, and political party accounts to be verified. Only 13% in our dataset are verified, and the overwhelming majority of accounts to which candidates’ official webpages link explicitly are unverified. TikTok maintains its ban on political advertising, though last month NBC News [uncovered](#) 52 videos spreading political messages with a “Paid Partnership” label or #ad or #sponsored tags. In our dataset, [candidates post](#) political ads created via other media on TikTok.

The national security concerns around using and trusting TikTok as a platform for election information have only heightened in the last two years, as new evidence of malfeasance and an appetite for influence has surfaced. In late 2022, the Justice Department opened an [investigation](#) into ByteDance around allegations and an admission from the company that it inappropriately surveilled American citizens—including two journalists and their associates—through TikTok. In 2023, TikTok mobilized its user base to protest legislation forcing a divestiture by prompting users with messages to call their Congressional representatives, providing location-based information on who those reps were and adding their telephone numbers. The high volume of subsequent calls [included](#) violent threats to congressional offices. And in 2024, a Justice Department filing [accused](#) TikTok of using an internal search tool, Lark, to gather information on users’ views and expressions on sensitive topics including abortion and religion.

At the same time, the PRC’s own boldness in engagement in online influence has grown. According to the February 2024 [Annual Threat Assessment](#) of the US Intelligence Community, “TikTok accounts run by a PRC propaganda arm reportedly targeted candidates from both political parties during the US midterm election cycle in 2022.” Research firm Graphika [reported](#) this fall that the long-running PRC-linked influence operation Spamouflage had taken to [impersonating](#) US voters on X and TikTok in an effort to drive social divisions around the 2024 elections. While this was largely unsuccessful and emblematic of the PRC’s present lack of sophistication with Russia-style influence operations, the only post of the small campaign that gained any traction was a video on TikTok.

For all these reasons, a tepid “Washington consensus” on the national security risks around TikTok has emerged, culminating in HR 7521. As the case against TikTok gets prosecuted in the courts, political candidates continue to use the app to reach voters.

Methodology

Data collection took place between September 9 and October 1, 2024. Thus, all follower and like metrics are approximate.

Some candidates had more than one TikTok account. In these cases, GMF looked at the account with the larger following. GMF only included candidates from major political parties (Democrat and Republican). GMF included all Democratic and Republican candidates running in the Louisiana primary, which will occur on the same date as the US general and presidential elections on November 5, 2024. GMF marked an account “unverifiable” with an asterisk(*) if the account contains no posted content and is not linked from a candidate’s official page or verified. We also note cases where bios or profile photos are also missing from these accounts.

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GMF's first report tracking TikTok use by political candidates was published ahead of the 2022 midterm elections. This year's report focuses on candidates running for election in the general rather than midterm elections. Not only are there differences in the number of seats up for grabs—and in which states—but [voter turnout and demographics](#) are also likely to vary from 2022 to 2024, with potential implications for how candidates use TikTok and whether they choose to create accounts.

Acknowledgements

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