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Why social media likes don't equal votes

The Sunday Post (Kuching), Malaysia



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FROM THE
Byline
Francis Chan

THIS year, the nation finds itself gripped by election fever.

Johor and Negeri Sembilan have already gone to the polls, Melaka is widely expected to follow, while speculation is rife that Sarawak could hold its state election later this year.

Aspiring candidates and their supporters are already laying the groundwork, raising issues and highlighting the shortcomings of their opponents.

Increasingly, much of this political battle is being fought not on the ground, but in the digital sphere.

For many politicians, the campaign trail now begins on social media.

With almost everyone carrying a smartphone, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and other platforms have become among the most efficient ways to reach voters, particularly the younger ones.

But political analysts have sounded an important warning: a huge following, thousands of likes and millions of views do not necessarily translate into votes.

Elections are ultimately won on the ground: through door-to-door visits, personal interactions, and the painstaking work of persuading voters one by one.

Social media may amplify a political message, but direct engagement remains the foundation of electoral success.

This is the paradox of modern politics.

A candidate can command millions of views online, and still lose to an opponent with

barely a digital presence.

The lesson was evident during the Sabah state election last November.

One Sabah politician observed that those who predicted the collapse of a government based largely on social media 'likes' had made a fundamental error in reading modern politics.

The algorithms may have created an impression of momentum, but that momentum did not necessarily materialise at the ballot box.

This disconnect is particularly striking among the young voters, who dominate social media engagement but whose actual participation in elections can be considerably less enthusiastic.

Studies of young first-time voters in Malaysia have highlighted this contradiction.

While many express a strong intention to vote, much of their political participation remains confined to consuming and sharing information online – a phenomenon commonly described as 'slacktivism'.

The digital world can create a satisfying sense of political participation without requiring the effort of actually turning up at a polling station.

That is where the old-fashioned business of campaigning still matters.

Get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, personal visits and face-to-face engagement provide the logistical and emotional nudge that social media cannot.

There is a world of difference between expressing support for an issue online and physically showing up to vote.

Social media's greatest strength, its ability to target

specific groups, can also become its greatest weakness.

Algorithms tend to feed users content that corresponds with their existing interests and beliefs.

As University of Tasmania analyst Prof James Chin has observed, people are repeatedly shown things they like, making them less willing to listen to alternative views.

The result can be an echo chamber.

Within that digital bubble, a candidate may appear overwhelmingly popular.

Supporters see thousands of positive comments, shares and likes and begin to believe that the wider electorate feels the same way.

But the electorate outside that bubble may tell a very different story.

Prof Dr Murnizam Halik of Universiti Malaysia Sabah puts it bluntly: influencers and celebrity performers may attract huge crowds and generate excitement, but there is no guarantee that someone who likes a particular singer will vote for the candidate who sponsors the performance.

His conclusion is telling: digital campaigns can generate attention, but attention is not the same as persuasion, and neither necessarily produces voter loyalty.

A 'like' is a low-cost expression of approval – it requires almost no sacrifice.

A handshake on a doorstep is different – it requires time, effort and a willingness to listen.

Voters remember candidates who visit their homes, sit with them, listen to their problems, and promise – however



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cautiously – to look into their grievances.

They may take some of those promises with a pinch of salt, but the personal encounter creates a connection that a Facebook post or TikTok video cannot easily replicate.

Ultimately, voters consider more than the number of likes that a candidate receives.

They look at community engagement, leadership qualities, credibility and vision.

They also vote according to concerns that affect their daily lives: the economy, jobs, cost of living, infrastructure, local development and in many places, identity and community interests.

In a political landscape shaped by strong community bonds, a personal visit is more than a campaign stop – it is a sign of respect.

As the 'old saying' goes: "Voters are more likely to trust a handshake than an online meme."

However, campaigning on the ground is not cheap.

Candidates with stronger financial and logistical backing inevitably have an advantage.

Ruling coalitions and established political parties generally possess networks, machinery and resources that smaller parties and independent candidates may struggle to match.

In rural constituencies, particularly in Sarawak,

campaigning can be a demanding and expensive exercise.

Candidates may have to travel considerable distances to reach villages and longhouses, often over poor roads or by boat.

They hold rallies, meet voters at longhouses and community halls, organise dialogues and, as is customary during campaigns, provide food and drinks for those attending.

All of this requires money, manpower and time, but that physical presence can make a crucial difference.

Does this mean social media is irrelevant?

Hardly.

Digital platforms are now an essential part of modern campaigning, particularly for reaching the urban and younger voters.

They allow candidates to communicate instantly, respond to issues, circulate videos and speeches, and maintain visibility between physical campaign events.

The most effective strategy, therefore, is not to choose between the digital world and the real world, but to combine the two.

The modern campaign is increasingly a hybrid campaign – social media creates visibility, while ground campaigning builds relationships.

Political parties can use voter data and digital platforms to identify particular groups

and locations, but ultimately, someone still has to knock on the door, shake a hand and make the case for the candidate.

The distinction is simple.

Social media tells the follower: "I agree with you."

Direct campaigning tells the voter: "I care about you."

And when 'Election Day' arrives, it is the second message that matters more.

Until voting becomes as easy as clicking a 'like' button, elections will continue to be won not in the comfort of a social media feed, but on the ground – sometimes under the scorching sun, sometimes in the rain, and often on a doorstep.

The likes may create the noise.

The shares may create the illusion of momentum.

But when the ballots are counted, it is the voters who turn up at the polling station who decide who wins.

In politics, clicks can create attention; only votes create victory.



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The most effective strategy, when it comes to modern election campaigning, should not be to choose between the digital world and the real world, but to combine the two. — Bernama file photo



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SUMMARIES

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