

# MAKING TIKTOK TICK: A GUIDE TO UK POLITICAL DISCOURSE

JANUARY 2024

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# Foreword

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As the digital era ushers in unprecedented changes in communication, TikTok has emerged as an increasingly significant force. From viral sea shanties to dangerous “challenges”, it’s reshaped how people sell goods, how memes are made and how news travels.

In today's world, the lines between content creators and consumers are increasingly blurred, transforming every smartphone user into a potential media producer. This democratisation of content creation is revolutionising political messaging and campaigning, compelling modern politics to adapt and understand this new paradigm.

What then are the lessons for campaigning? What is the shape of modern UK political content across the platform? What works and what doesn’t when it comes to political TikTok? These are the questions that Campaign Lab set out to answer when we commissioned this investigation and asked Rootcause to examine more than 60,000 videos.

This report delves into what political content works best, exploring not only hot topics but also the key active messengers and the impact of different styles of videos. Using innovative collection and classification methods enabled by new AI technology, we now have quantitative data about a famously opaque platform. We can see that common assumptions about the nature of content that resonates on TikTok can be misleading. While some insights in this report might seem to reflect common sense, others are surprising and counterintuitive.

Another critical lesson from TikTok's influence in UK politics is its transcendent nature. The average political TikTok is shared 7 times, including to platforms like Whatsapp and Facebook. This cross platform sharing amplifies their impact beyond TikTok's native audience, extends the content’s reach to wider audiences and further blurs the lines between different media channels.

While this report has focused on the mainstream of political UK content, TikTok, like any platform driven by strong recommendation algorithms, also has the potential to drive users to much darker corners. More research is needed to track, understand and explore the reach of conspiracy theories and more dangerous alt right content.

Overall, TikTok, like all new digital spaces, is not just a platform for political communication; it's a reflection of the evolving relationship between politics and the digital world. As campaigners seeking to understand how we can spread our message across these new platforms, we must also be willing to listen to what is being created, shared and understand how people might be organising or building power through this platform.



Hannah O'Rourke  
Director, Campaign Lab

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Just over five years after its launch in the UK, TikTok continues to be extremely popular. Its combination of video sharing and an innovative but opaque algorithm have been a recipe for success that has seen TikTok acquire more than 23 million British users.<sup>1</sup>

There is a huge amount of content created and shared on the platform every day. Around 20% of all users report using TikTok for news and current affairs<sup>2</sup>, making it likely that the platform has significant influence over how millions of potential voters across the UK form their views and opinions about politics.

Yet, with a general election looming, there is still little evidence about how best to leverage TikTok as a channel for political communication.

This research contributes to filling that gap.

Numerous tried and tested angles exist for political messaging.

Many people feel a temptation to attack politicians they disagree with, and to criticise parties or policies they oppose. Others lean in to a more positive approach, talking up ideas they like, commending parties and promoting politicians they want to see succeed.

Whatever angle is chosen, people also home in on a particular political issue.

To date, despite plenty of experimentation and some success with individual initiatives, little is known about what political issues and content consistently perform best and resonate most with TikTok users.

We sought to change this.

We built a sample of more than 13,000 TikTok videos using a hashtag-based methodology (see methodology note<sup>3</sup>). This sample focused on mainstream UK political hashtags, avoiding more politically extreme content. We gathered more than three quarters of a billion plays and 4 million shares to other social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook since Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister in October 2022.

Plays	761,633,007
Favourites	3,432,482
Comments	2,156,265
Likes	6,103,281
Shares	3,151,780
WhatsApp shares	712,321

We have carefully analysed the videos using artificial intelligence (AI) technology, categorising them based on different topics (issues) and different styles of content (narrative angles). Our methodology allows us to assess the performance of content relating to these categories, according to plays and likes. Uniquely for this type of analysis, we have developed a scientifically robust method to assess content

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With a general election looming, there is still little evidence about how best to leverage TikTok.”

**FIGURE 1**  
*Overall figures from our sample*

performance on a per-video basis, which is a better indicator of what ‘works’ than relying on cumulative metrics (which can be distorted by random factors such as existing user profile or one-off viral success). We have also examined the relative profile of individual politicians in our sample.

We find that:

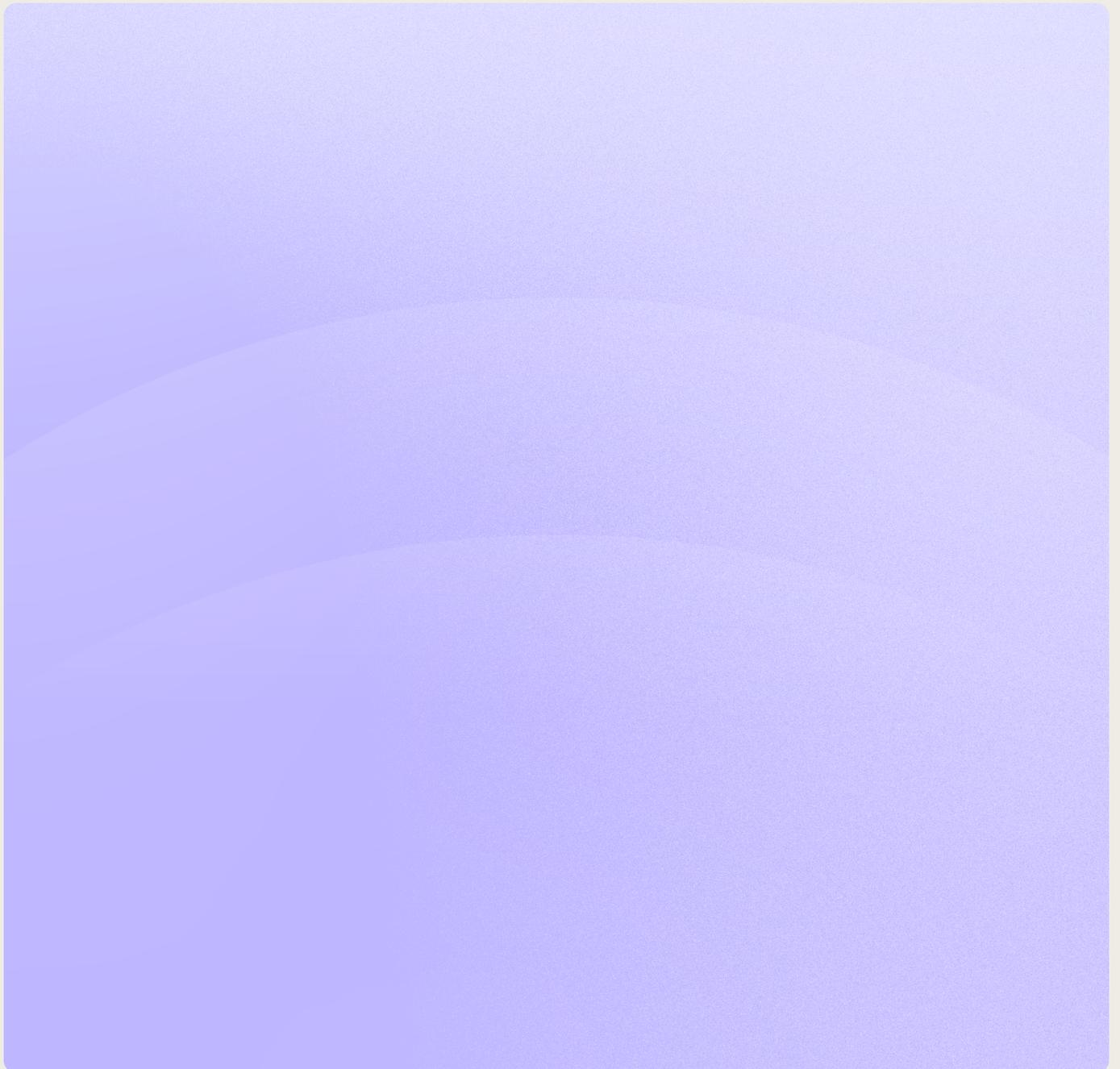
- Criticism of politics, policies and politicians has the largest share of content; 57% of the videos contain critical content and those videos account for 45% of plays in our sample.
- Content about political parties performs poorly compared to other content.
- The cost of living has been the biggest UK politics topic on TikTok this year with just over 20% of plays.
- There is a strong appetite for factual and informative content across TikTok. On a per-video basis, content that appears factual and informative outperforms all other content types. While only 5% of videos are tagged as ‘Factual: informative’, these videos account for 11.5% of all plays.
- Rishi Sunak, Boris Johnson and Suella Braverman are the three most frequently identified politicians in our sample.
- Rishi Sunak is consistently unpopular across many issues; Boris Johnson is associated with corruption.
- Keir Starmer has very little footprint on TikTok, coming in sixth place when looking at politicians by number of plays.
- Political content from TikTok is regularly shared on other platforms, with each video being shared an average of seven times.
- Traditional media organisations with content on TikTok are being outperformed by new media organisations and independent content creators.
- TikTok matters. There are more than 17 plays per voter in our sample and many more which are not captured.

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We gathered more than three quarters of a billion plays and 4 million shares to other social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook since Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister in October 2022.

## Examining UK politics content on TikTok

<b>07</b>	Overview
<b>09</b>	Narrative angle analysis
<b>11</b>	Narrative angle performance statistics
<b>13</b>	Issue analysis
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<b>16</b>	Which narrative angles go with which issue?



Our analysis explores both the *narrative angles* (styles of content) and the *issues* (topics covered) in our sample.

An issue such as healthcare, education or foreign policy can be discussed using a variety of narrative angles, for example through critical, promotional or factual messaging. A video might address an issue like healthcare in many ways: perhaps by criticising a policy, the performance of a government minister or a political party. Other videos might be more factual or informative and take a more neutral stance on issues.

To assess which *issues* and *angles* are present on TikTok in as neutral a way as possible, we asked a large language model (LLM) to create classification schemas for both aspects. The classification schemas were adjusted to make sure that categories were as independent as possible from each other and to remove redundant categories.

Criticism	Policy
	Politician conduct
	Political party
Promotional	Policy
	Politician conduct
	Political party
	Other
Factual	News report
	Informative
	Educational
Humor/satire	Parody
	Comedic critique
Discussion/debate	Current events
	Historical

**FIGURE 2**  
*Classification tree for types of narrative angle*

Economic issues	Public finances
	Inequality
	Cost of living
	Brexit
Social issues	Healthcare
	Education
	Housing
	Immigration
	LGBTQ+ rights
	Social justice
Governance	Corruption
	Elections
	Public services
	Law and justice

**FIGURE 3**  
*Classification tree for issues*



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Foreign policy	Ukraine
	China
	Other countries
Environmental issues	Climate change
	Sustainability
Indeterminate	Not enough information
	No direct link

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# 1.1 UK politics content on TikTok

## Narrative angle analysis

**AT A GLANCE:**

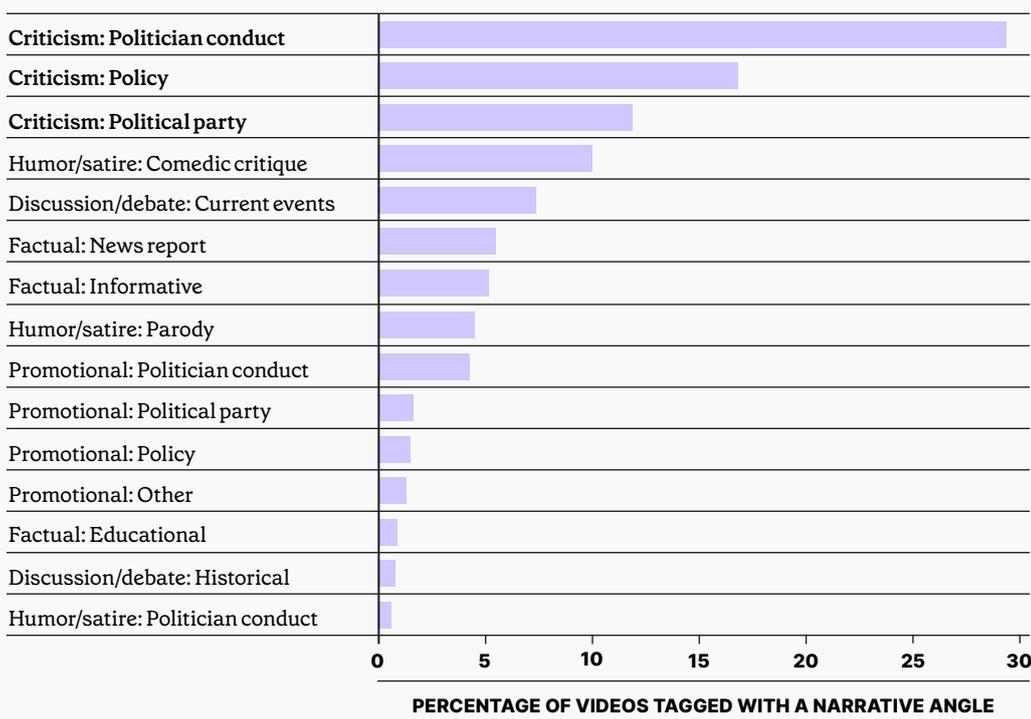
- 1 Over half of all videos in our sample contain criticism of politicians.
- 2 Critical videos receive fewer plays.
- 3 Videos promoting individual politicians or political parties perform poorly in terms of plays and likes.
- 4 Factually informative videos perform very well, ranking third across the narrative angles behind criticism of politician conduct and policy.

The most popular narrative angle used in the videos in our sample is the criticism of politician conduct. This is true in terms of the number of videos (30% of sample), the number of plays (25%) and the number of likes (20%). The second most popular narrative angle is criticism of policies. In total, critical videos account for around 57% of the content in our sample, 45% of plays and 42% of likes.

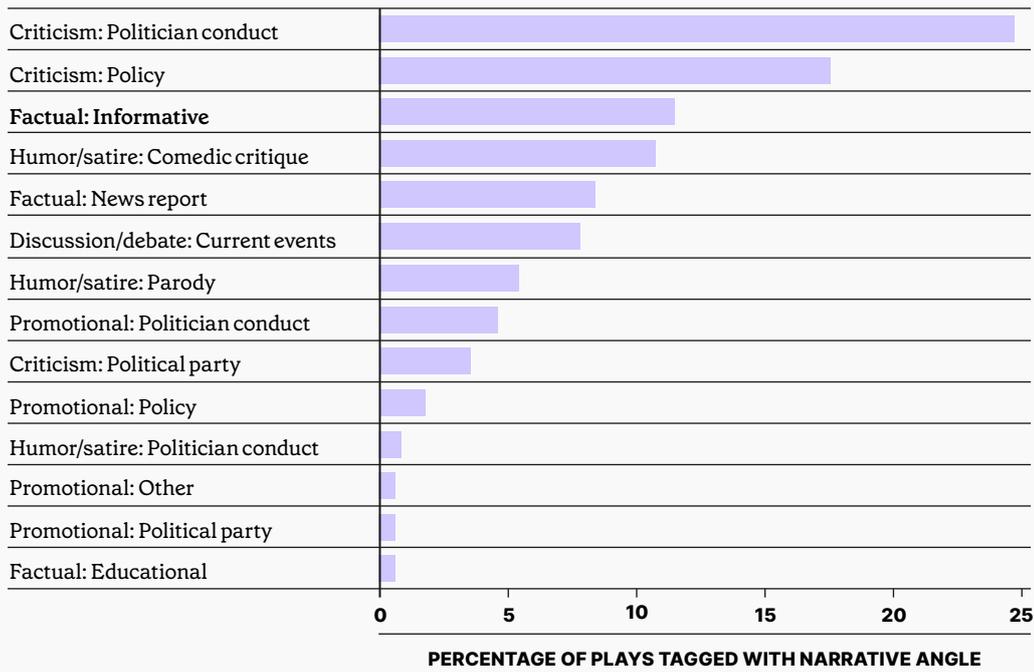
The TikTok algorithm decides what videos are presented to people. It is very effective at choosing content that people will find engaging and that will keep them on the platform. It is interesting to note that critical videos receive fewer plays and likes than one would expect based on the number of videos of that type, and therefore they underperform to some extent. Other poorly performing narrative angles include those that promote individual politicians or political parties.

Interestingly, we find that factually informative videos (generally not from news organisations) perform well considering the number of videos of this type. While this category only accounts for only 5% of videos, it has the third highest number of plays (at 11.5%) and 8% of likes. Similarly, Humour/satire videos also perform well relative to the number of videos.

[View the top-five TikToks in each narrative angle.](#)



**FIGURE 4**  
Narrative angles by percentage of videos



**FIGURE 5**  
*Narrative angles by percentage of plays*

## 1.2

# UK politics content on TikTok Narrative angle performance statistics

### AT A GLANCE:

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#### IN TERMS OF REACH:

- 1 Videos with factual and informative content perform best compared to other narrative angles.
- 2 Critical videos perform best towards policies, rather than towards individuals.
- 3 Party criticism performs particularly badly.

#### IN TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT:

- 4 Critical videos perform better than factual ones.

To dig deeper into the performance of narrative angles, we use a **per-video** approach. This focuses on typical videos and downplays the importance of videos that have 'gone viral'.

To summarise our method, we assess each narrative angle based on how it performs against the other angles. We take measurements using median numbers of each statistic, and use advanced statistics (Mann-Whitney U test) to confirm that the median measurements of each narrative angle are all distinguishable from each other (except where noted). For simplicity of language, we use the term *typical video* to describe the estimated performance of the median video of each narrative angle. All plots of typical videos show the distribution of bootstrapped medians (1000 medians are calculated from resamples of 1000 videos).

This approach demonstrates how different narrative angles perform consistently across TikTok.

### REACH STATISTICS

The number of plays of a video is the main indicator of the extent of its audience reach. Here, we focus on five narrative angles from the previous section, and present the number of plays received by typical videos for each angle.

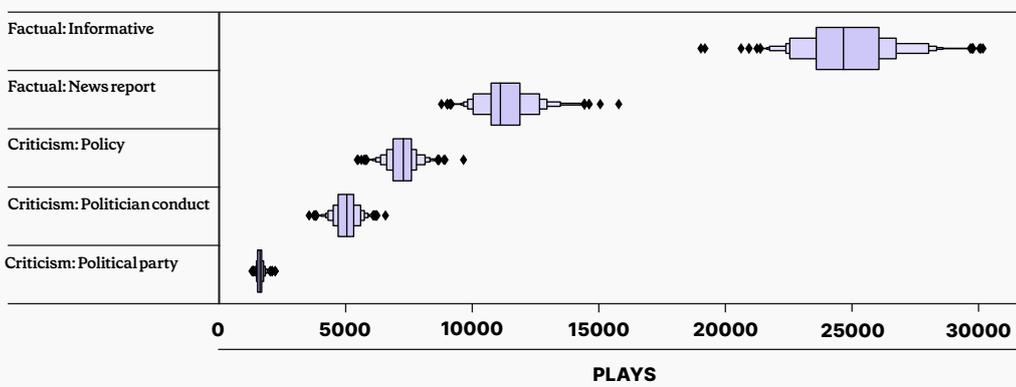


FIGURE 6

Plays of typical videos associated with each narrative angle

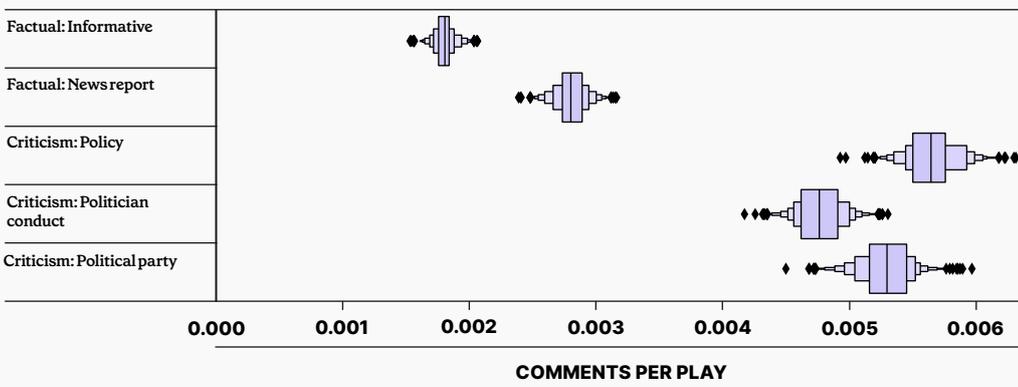
This analysis confirms that informative content performs particularly strongly. With typical informative-content videos in our sample having received around 25,000 plays, this is over double the performance of news report videos (with a median of around 11,000 plays).

In terms of critical videos, policy criticism performs the best in terms of our reach measurements (with our videos having received a median of around 7,400 plays). The typical videos that criticise politician conduct received around 5,100 plays, while criticism of political parties performs the worst, with only 1,700 plays.

**ENGAGEMENT STATISTICS**

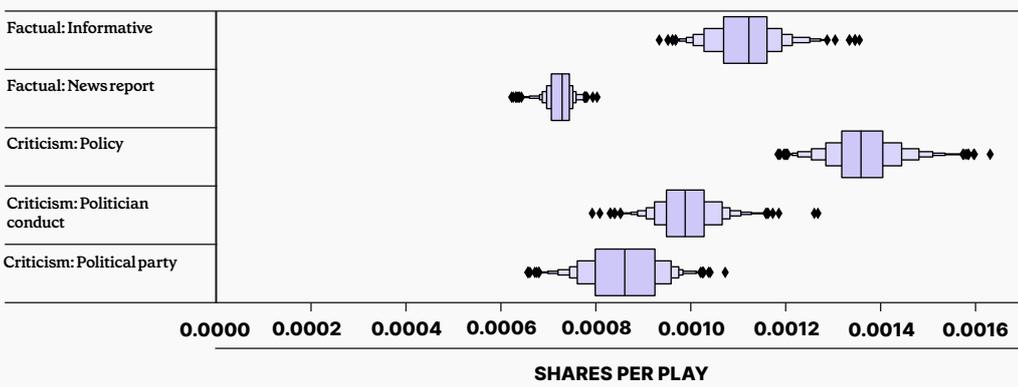
Users engage with TikTok videos by liking, sharing or commenting on them. We have found that likes and shares across our sample strongly correlate with the number of plays. This leads us to present engagement statistics on a **per-play** basis.

In comparison to the reach statistics, a different picture emerges for the engagement statistics. Critical videos in our sample received around twice as many comments per play than the more factual videos. We show comments per play in Fig. 7, and the data for likes per play follow a similar pattern.



**FIGURE 7**  
*Comments per play of typical videos associated with each narrative angle*

Shares gives us another picture, with policy criticism having been the most likely narrative angle to be shared to other platforms for each play of a video (with one share for every 730 plays). Videos containing policy criticism were twice as likely to be shared compared to news reports, which in our sample received the fewest shares per play (at one share for every 1,400 plays).



**FIGURE 8**  
*Shares per play of typical videos associated with each narrative angle*

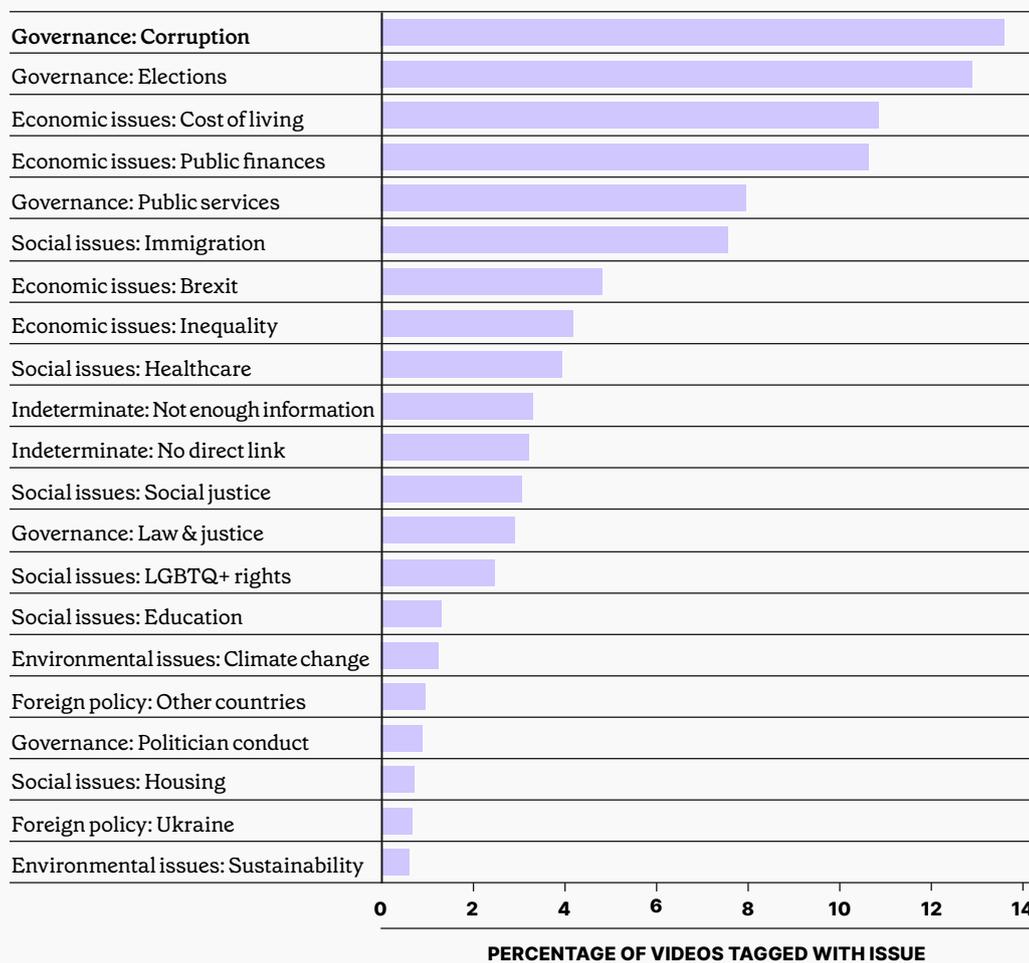
# 1.3 UK politics content on TikTok Issue analysis

## AT A GLANCE:

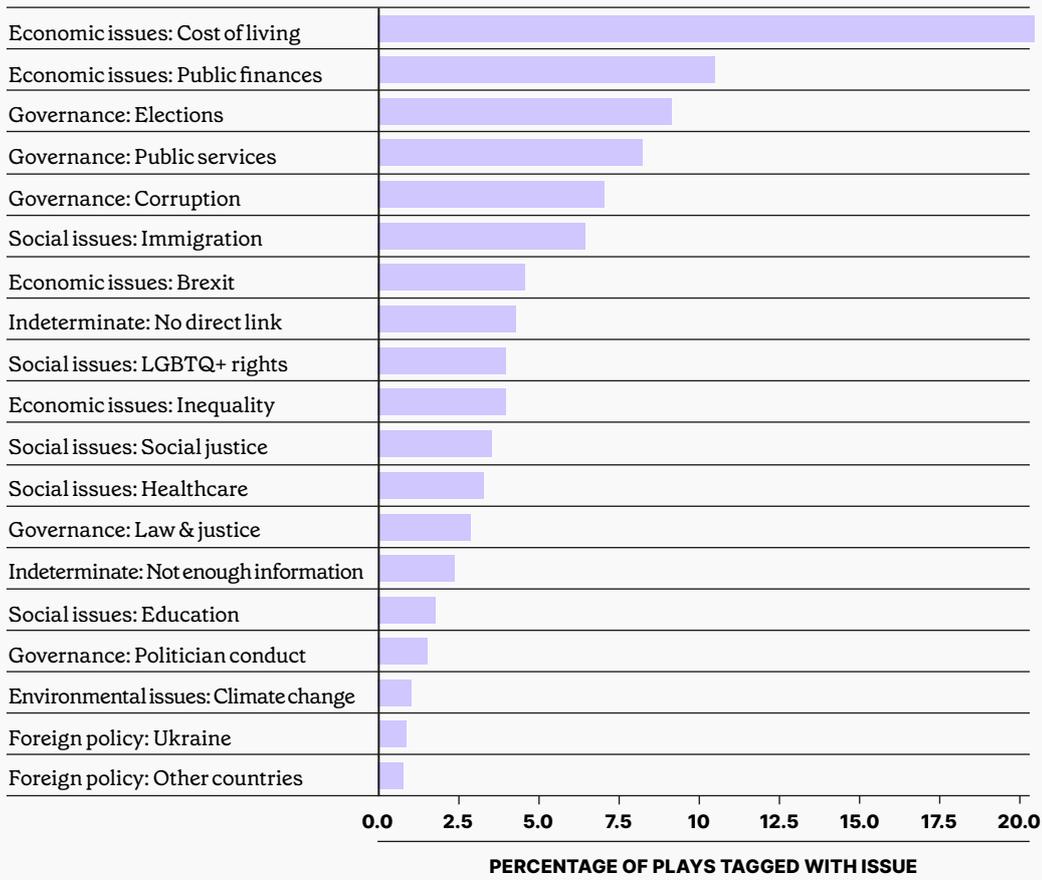
- 1 Videos relating to the cost of living account for more than 20% of all plays.
- 2 While many videos cite perceptions of corruption, these videos do not perform well in terms of plays and likes.

We have repeated the same analytical approach to look at the political issues covered in TikTok videos. We find that, although corruption is the most common issue by number of videos, it is videos related to the cost of living, and the state of public finances and public services that are most played and liked among our sample.

[View the top 5 TikToks by issue.](#)



**FIGURE 9**  
Issues by percentage of videos



**FIGURE 10**  
*Issues by percentage of video plays*

- 1 Videos relating to the cost of living receive high levels of reach and engagement.
- 2 Videos highlighting inequality have relatively low numbers of plays, but have higher levels of engagement.
- 3 Videos relating to immigration receive high numbers of comments per play.

REACH STATISTICS

We focus on four topical issues: cost of living, public finances, immigration and inequality. Cost of living stands out as performing particularly well in terms of reach, with typical videos having received around 16,000 plays. This is over double the number of plays for videos covering the issue of public finances at 6,900 plays, which itself is over double the reach of immigration videos at 3,600 plays. Inequality is the least popular topic, having received only 2,400 plays for typical videos. The data for the number of likes and shares for typical videos show similar patterns.

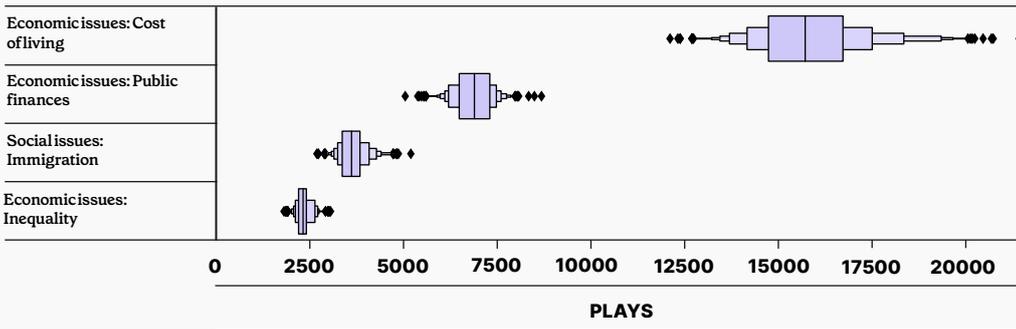


FIGURE 11  
Plays of typical videos associated with each issue

ENGAGEMENT STATISTICS

In terms of engagement (likes, shares, comments), our findings are reversed to some extent. Videos discussing immigration received the most comments per play (at one comment for every 270 plays).

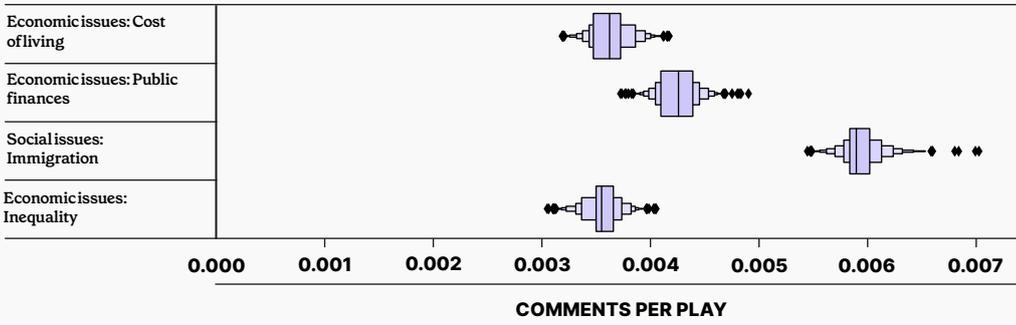


FIGURE 12  
Comments per play of typical videos associated with each issue

Note: In this case, cost of living and inequality videos were not scientifically distinguishable from one another.

# UK politics content on TikTok

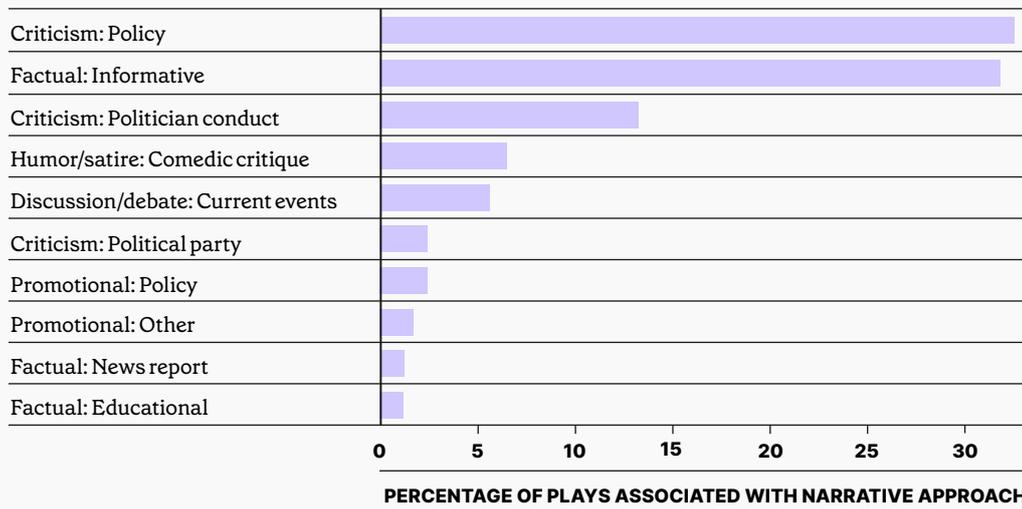
## Which narrative angles go with which issue?

AT A GLANCE:

- 1 Content containing factual approaches to the cost of living performs well.
- 2 Policy criticism performs well when applied to issues of public finances and immigration.

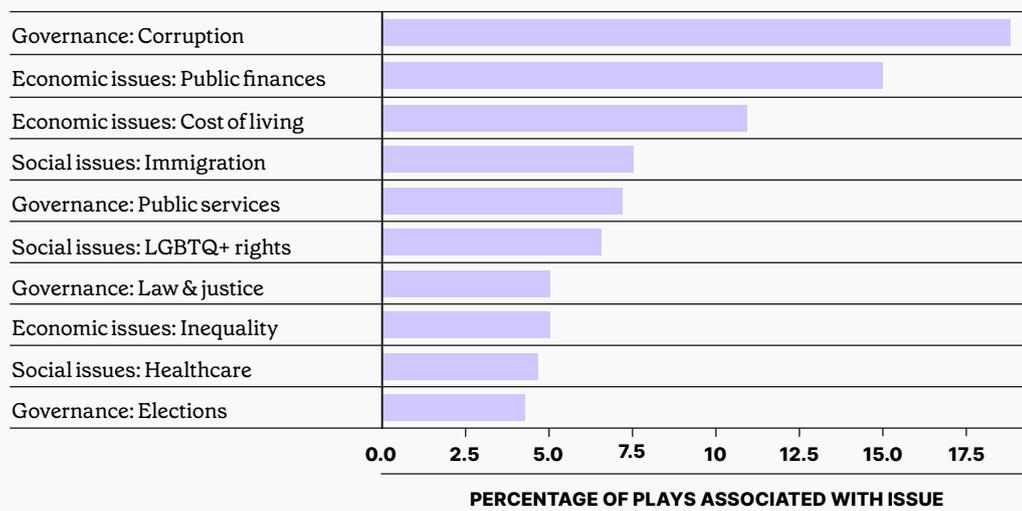
Looking closely at how different issues pair with different narrative angles enables analysis of which pairings are most effective in terms of the number of plays.

We find that videos categorised as covering the cost of living perform best when presented as policy criticism or factual pieces. Of the videos categorised as cost of living, only around 13% are tagged as criticising an individual (politician conduct).



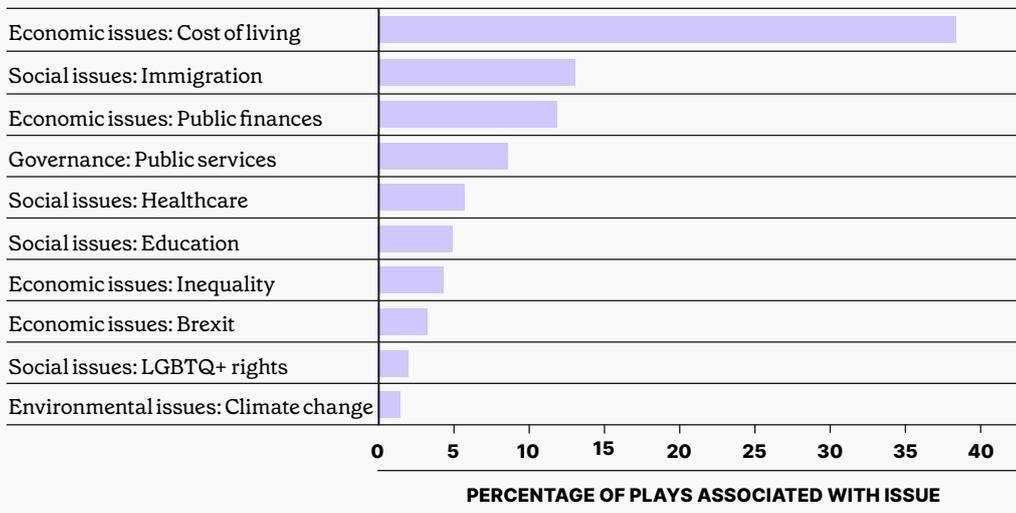
**FIGURE 13**  
Percentage plays for the top-10 narrative angles associated with the cost of living issue

Individual criticism performs best when covering the issues of corruption and public finances.



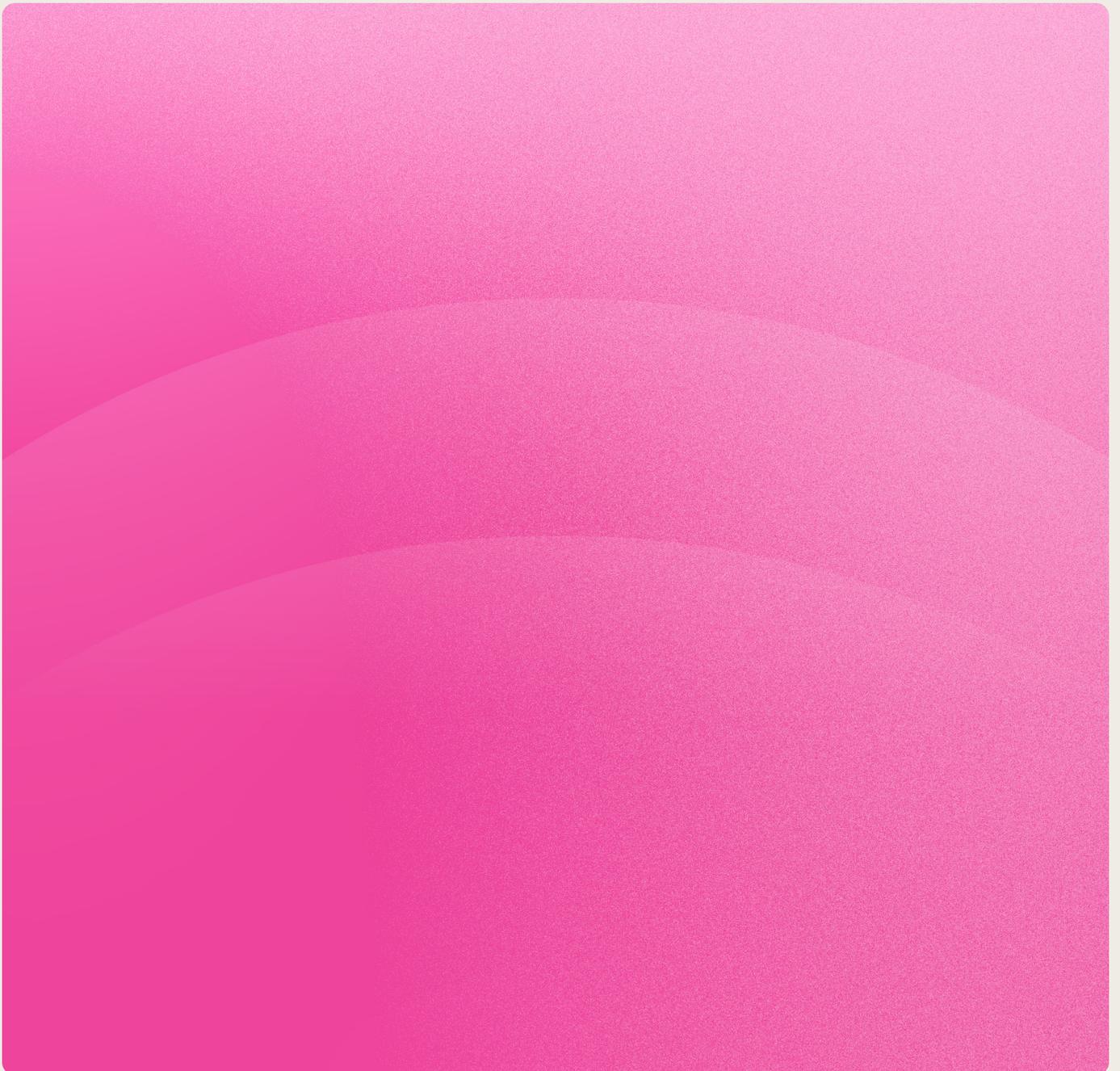
**FIGURE 14**  
Percentage plays for the top-10 issues associated with criticism of politician conduct

Finally, policy criticism also performs well when covering the issues of public finances and immigration (beyond cost of living).



**FIGURE 15**  
*Percentage plays for the top-10 issues associated with policy criticism*

## Perceptions on TikTok of UK politicians

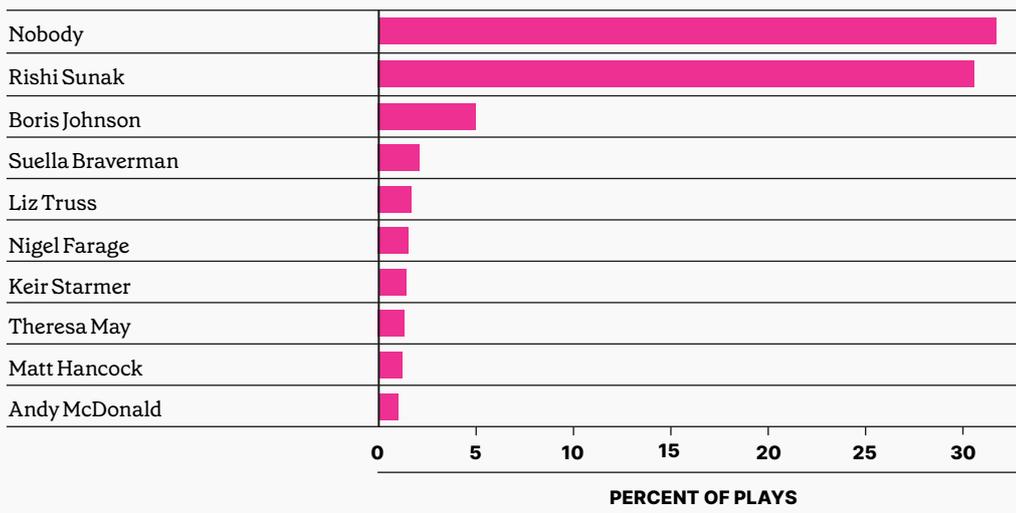


# Perceptions on TikTok of UK politicians

## AT A GLANCE:

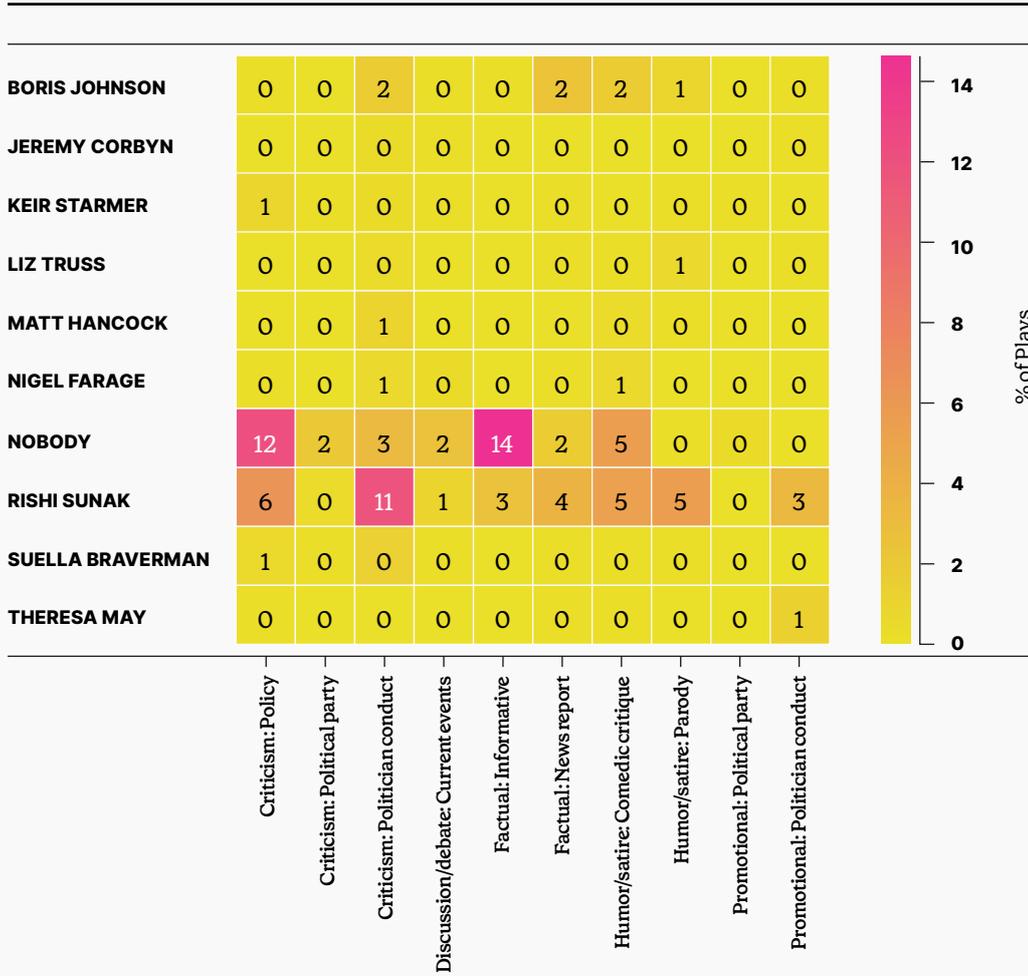
- 1 Rishi Sunak is the most tagged politician, in almost 20% of videos in our sample.
- 2 Rishi Sunak is criticised across numerous issues.
- 3 Boris Johnson is frequently associated with videos categorised as relating to the issue of corruption.
- 4 Keir Starmer is the fourth most commonly tagged politician in our sample.

Having looked at narrative angles and issues, we have also analysed how discourse across the TikTok platform relates to individual politicians. We tagged each video with the people (politicians) associated with the content. For simplicity, in our analysis we have avoided videos tagged with multiple people, and only focus on videos where either only one person or nobody was tagged. We find that the most tagged person in our sample is Rishi Sunak.

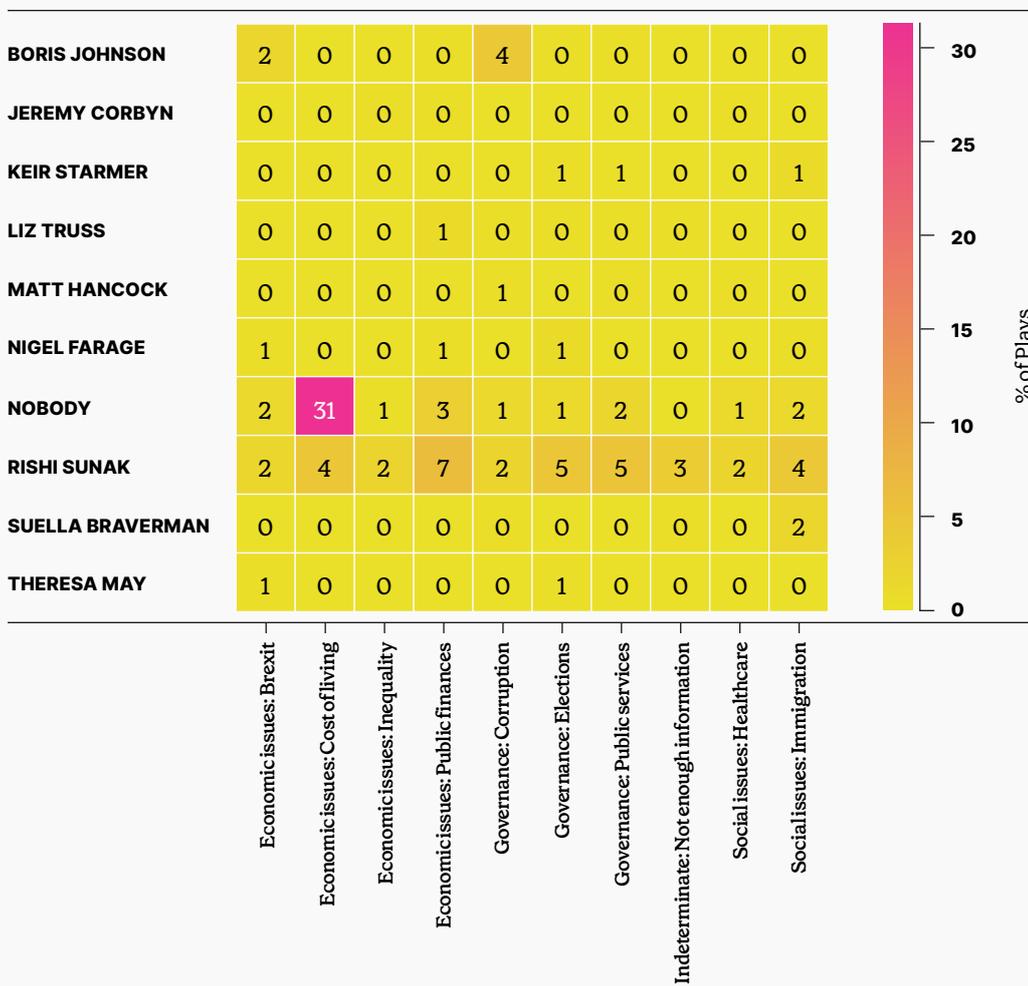


**FIGURE 16**  
Percentage of plays tagged with specific individuals

Looking at how different people are associated with narrative angles, we find that, across our sample, Rishi Sunak is commonly associated with some of the most critical categories of content (Fig. 17). This includes criticism of policy and conduct. Rishi Sunak is also most closely associated with content relating to public finances, the cost of living, public services and immigration. By contrast, Keir Starmer barely registers across our sample. Boris Johnson occurs with videos categorised as related to the issue of corruption (Fig. 18).



**FIGURE 17**  
Co-occurrence of politician and narrative angle. Shows the percentage of plays received by each politician and narrative angle.



**FIGURE 18**  
Co-occurrence of politician and issue category. Shows the percentage of plays received by each politician and issue.

## Top creators of TikTok videos on UK politics

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**22** Top-10 accounts by plays

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**22** Top-10 accounts by likes

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**23** Top-10 accounts by shares

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# Top creators of TikTok videos on UK politics

## AT A GLANCE:

- 1 Sky News and LBC are the only traditional broadcast media that feature in the top-10 TikTok accounts by plays.
- 2 Social-led media such as Politics Joe and Novara are influential in terms of likes and shares.
- 3 Independent creators are out-performing large media organisations.

Our analysis of the creators of the content in our sample shows that media organisations perform an important role in shaping the most popular political content on TikTok. The majority of the top-10 most viewed creator accounts in our sample are media organisations, but only Sky News and LBC have traditional broadcast channels. Instead, it is new, online-only news sources such as Politics Joe and Novara Media that rank highly, as well as independent creators such as Question Guy.

However, we acknowledge that many independent creator videos are built on footage originally produced by established broadcasters, often through political talk shows.

skynews	48,853,387
politicsjoe	32,463,787
pmqskeir	29,430,683
yahoouk	27,853,665
questionguy	26,674,690
lbc	24,201,938
gemma_99999	22,106,185
pinknews	19,877,109
novaramedia	19,254,277
footballiswar	18,947,468

**FIGURE 19**  
Top-10 accounts by plays

When looking at videos by the number of likes and shares, the picture shifts a little to place a small number of widely liked and/or shared left-leaning creators such as @Gemma\_99999, @pmqs\_keir and @gammons\_gone\_wild into the top 10. is also most closely associated with content relating to public finances, the cost of living, public services and immigration. By contrast, Keir Starmer barely registers across our sample. Boris Johnson occurs with videos categorised as related to the issue of corruption (Fig. 18).

pmqskeir	2,088,150
questionguy	2,049,220
pinknews	1,881,751
politicsjoe	1,814,698
skynews	1,807,457
yahoouk	1,480,939
novaramedia	1,229,785
footballiswar	1,206,009
gammons_gone_wild	1,059,332
lbc	1,019,020

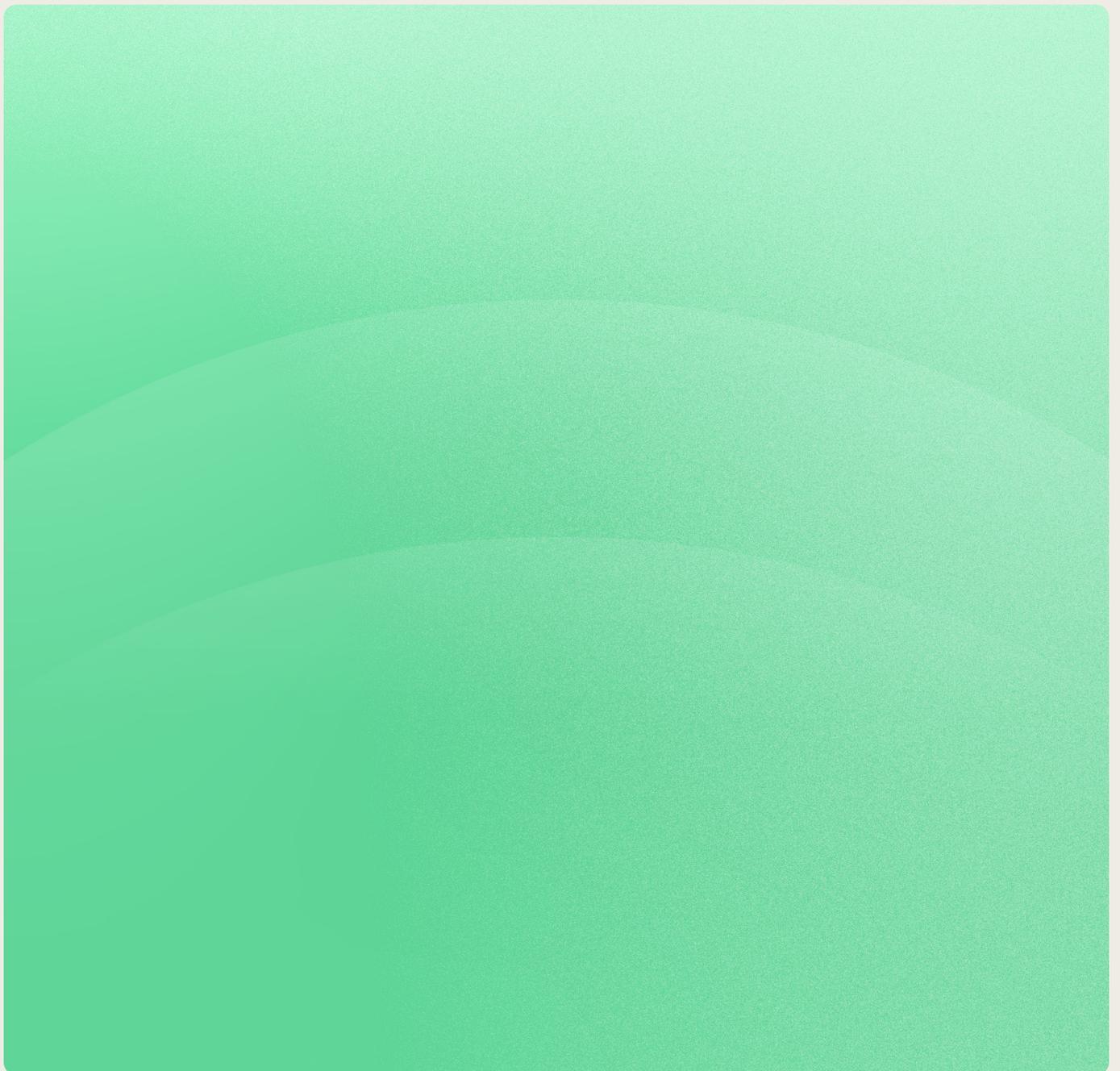
**FIGURE 20**  
Top-10 accounts by likes

<b>pmqskeir</b>	208,951
<b>questionguy</b>	158,321
<b>bullsnosenews</b>	155,485
<b>politicsjoe</b>	119,352
<b>gemma_99999</b>	117,199
<b>novaramedia</b>	115,731
<b>gammons_gone_wild</b>	98,855
<b>skynews</b>	97,305
<b>yahoouk</b>	95,189
<b>pinknews</b>	85,946

**FIGURE 21**  
*Top-10 accounts by shares*

As we acknowledge above, there are limitations to analysis of these cumulative figures, which can be distorted by existing reach or random viral successes. Nonetheless, the accounts highlighted here have all performed well consistently throughout the year represented by our sample. It is possible to analyse the top performers further by looking at median engagement metrics in a similar manner to the multivariate ranking charts in section 1, but this falls outside the scope of this report.

## Conclusion and recommendations for progressive organisations



There is a substantive amount of political content on TikTok and the sizable, left-leaning audience of politically engaged users have a clear appetite for factual and informative content. They prefer content that discusses issues rather than attacking individuals, and they prefer to hear from real people rather than brands and organisational accounts.

The issues that resonate most strongly with the TikTok audience are mainly economic and indicate concerns about the rising cost of living, and the poor state of public finances. Both of these factors could indicate that the TikTok viewers have a negative outlook on their future financial status.

There is scope to produce meaningful and impactful progressive content amongst audiences who are often at the start of a lifetime of political activity. Based on our analysis of the content, the featured politicians and the creators of UK politics videos on TikTok, we offer the following recommendations to progressive organisations who are considering whether and how to engage.

## **DON'T DUMB DOWN**

Our analysis reveals a strong appetite for factual and informative content. Although there is a fine art to making short-form video that contains considerable amounts of high-quality information, it is easier than ever before to accomplish this using dynamic video graphics. This sort of content has the potential to perform well in engagement terms and, furthermore, TikTok is reportedly nudging users towards longer videos.

## **DO POLITICS, BUT DON'T DO PARTY POLITICS**

We know there is a substantial audience for political content on TikTok but our analysis has revealed that this audience prefers a discussion of issues and policies over a discussion of particular individuals and party politics. Organisations developing their approach to TikTok should consider the footballing cliché of 'play the ball, not the player' when creating content designed to win over hearts and minds.

## **DON'T TALK PEOPLE DOWN**

In addition to a preference for issues and policies, we can see that whilst it is popular to create videos which actively attack or criticise individual politicians, these videos don't always perform well when it comes to engagement. This suggests that there are better returns to be had from investment in other, more positive narrative angles.

## **AIM FOR QUALITY OVER QUANTITY**

We have found many accounts that have generated sizable views and likes for their videos, despite having very low numbers of followers. This provides encouragement that it is possible to reach large audiences on TikTok without needing to invest a lot of time into building a follower base (which is often necessary on other social media platforms).

## **6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRESSIVE ORGANISATIONS:**

**1***Don't dumb down***2***Do politics, but don't do party politics***3***Don't talk people down***4***Aim for quality over quantity***5***Think beyond TikTok***6***Consider reach and engagement separately*

**THINK BEYOND TIKTOK**

With the average TikTok video being shared seven times across social media, it is clear that what happens on TikTok doesn't stay on TikTok. Create the kind of content that people find engaging and they will share it on other platforms including WhatsApp.

**CONSIDER REACH AND ENGAGEMENT SEPARATELY**

We find that videos with high rates of engagement (likes, comments, shares) do not always have wide reach (plays), and that videos with high reach do not always have high engagement. This peculiarity of the TikTok algorithm means it is important to consider whether you are looking to engage an existing community with your content or to reach as many people as possible. The answer to this question may shape the narrative angle you choose to deploy.



With the average TikTok video being shared seven times across social media, it is clear that what happens on TikTok doesn't stay on TikTok.

As our approach relies on hashtags, we acknowledge there may be other influential content that is not captured by this approach. This is especially true when the creators are trying to reach new, less politically engaged audiences and therefore they may be reluctant to identify or relate to a 'political establishment'.

Our sample was built using hashtags in a way that is designed to accommodate shortcomings in TikTok's own search platform. We are confident our sample is representative of mainstream political discourse, and we have established a bootstrapping method that gives us

statistical confidence in the relative performance of different types of content.

We know that there will be a number of videos with very low view counts that may not be included in our sample. We also know there will be videos that are relevant to political discourse in the UK that do not feature in our sample - not least many of those produced by Nigel Farage.

We hypothesise that where regressive actors are pushing regressive narratives on the Tiktok platform, they are likely to be targeting audiences who are not

already politically engaged. Therefore, they are likely to use a different range of hashtags or to actively refrain from using hashtags to avoid observation through the type of analysis that we conduct. Further research would be required to understand this issue more fully.

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1. Ofcom - Adult's Media use and Attitudes, March 2023 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0028/255844/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0028/255844/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf)

2. Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2023 [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2023.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf)

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Rootcause is a not-for-profit consultancy helping forward thinking organisations win in modern digital information ecosystems. We combine artificial intelligence, data and deep experience to help our clients gain an edge in highly-contested narrative environments.