DE-INFLUENCING POLITICS: MEASURES TO REDUCE INFLUENCER IMPACT ON REGIONAL POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT
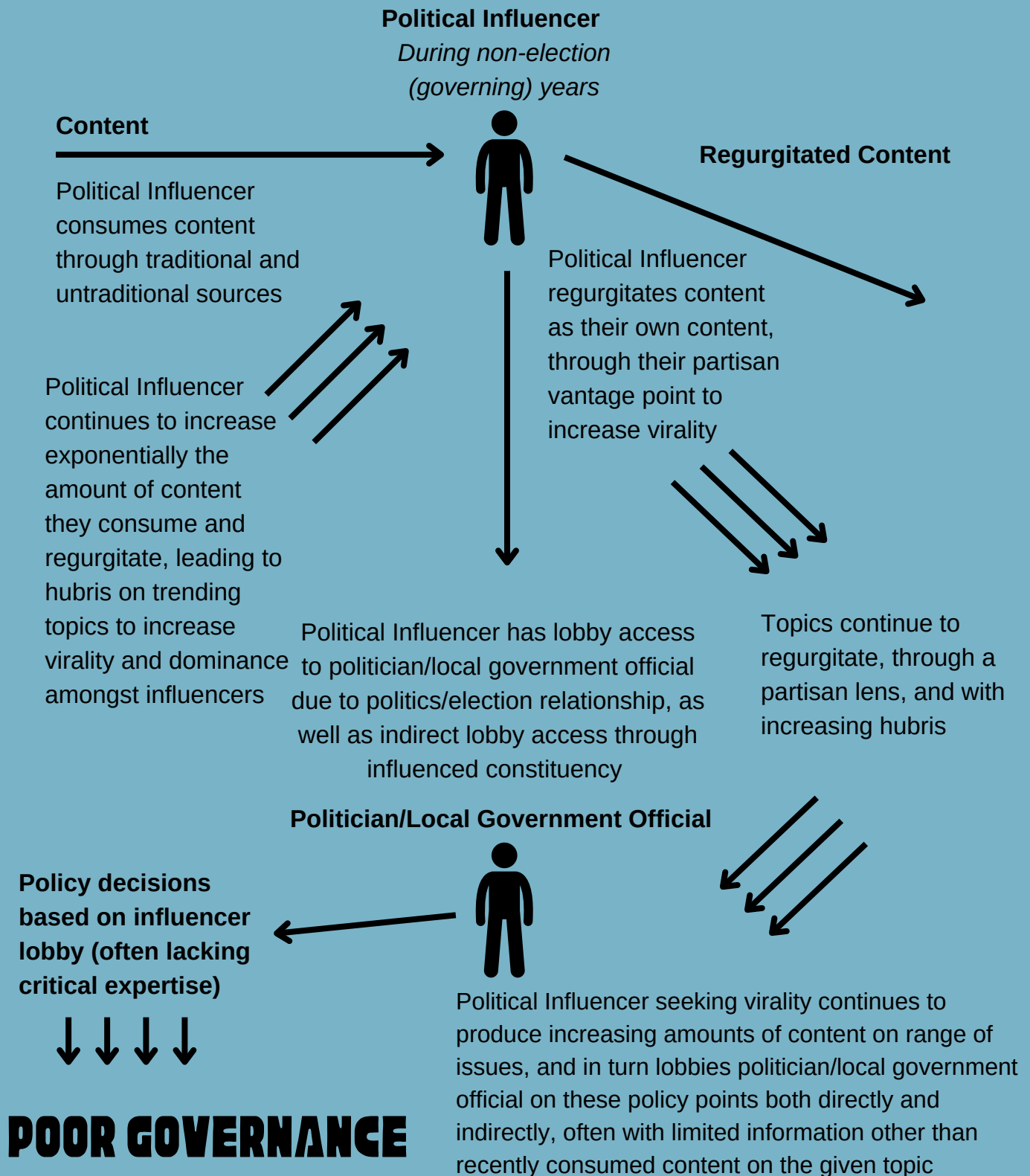
OVERVIEW

The impact of social media influencers on politics has been well established. Influencers have been found to not only impact the selections made by voters in any given election, but in more recent years to influence political parties to move internal policy objectives and sharpen polarization in social settings along partisan political lines. Polarization along partisan lines has been on the rise for at least three or four decades; however, the sharp division and partisan entrenchment seen between 2022 and 2025 has been tied to the impact of political influencers, including so-called news influencers who disseminate news through primarily social media or podcasts, and whose content consists exclusively of political news with interjected opinions.

In recognition of this stark impact social media has had on recent elections, political parties have embraced political influencers as a strategy. In the 2024 election, PACs supporting Joe Biden for re-election spent tens of thousands of dollars for political influencer content, while Kamala Harris's campaign funneled an astounding $4M to influencer-focused marketing firms, as well as additional expenditures directly sent to firms representing her many celebrity endorsements. Influencer payments directed in support of Donald Trump in 2024 are less available; however, during his 2020 election, $1.8M was spent on an influencer-focused marketing firm. Furthermore, in 2024, conservative PAC Turning Point USA publicized its partnership with hundreds of conservative content creators in support of Trump. And in the final days of his 2024 election, the impact of celebrity podcasters and influencers, including Joe Rogan, undoubtedly played a role in the outcome of Trump's eventual success.
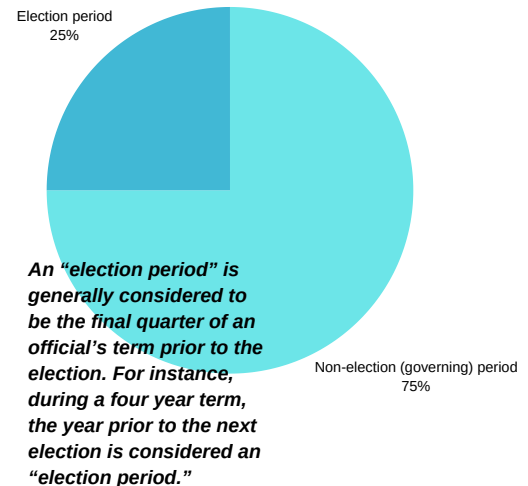
Since the 2024 election, politicians at every level of government are now seen harnessing this strategy rooted in social media and podcast content creation, as well as celebrity alignment to advance political goals. Though use of influencers as a political strategy may seem astute in this digital era, studies indicating influencers have additional impacts on policy choices raise concerns about potentially negative impacts on governance overall. This is particularly the case at the regional or local level, where governance most directly impacts the public and where errors made are felt the most by constituents. This policy brief will outline the problem of influencer impact on politics and government and offer policy recommendations to combat the problem at the regional level.

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SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACTS ON GOVERNANCE

Political Influencer
*During non-election
(governing) years*

Content

Political Influencer
consumes content
through traditional and
untraditional sources

Regurgitated Content

Political Influencer
regurgitates content
as their own content,
through their partisan
vantage point to
increase virality

Political Influencer
continues to increase
exponentially the
amount of content
they consume and
regurgitate, leading to
hubris on trending
topics to increase
virality and dominance
amongst influencers

Political Influencer has lobby access
to politician/local government official
due to politics/election relationship, as
well as indirect lobby access through
influenced constituency

Topics continue to
regurgitate, through a
partisan lens, and with
increasing hubris

Politician/Local Government Official

**Policy decisions
based on influencer
lobby (often lacking
critical expertise)**

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

POOR GOVERNANCE

Political Influencer seeking virality continues to
produce increasing amounts of content on range of
issues, and in turn lobbies politician/local government
official on these policy points both directly and
indirectly, often with limited information other than
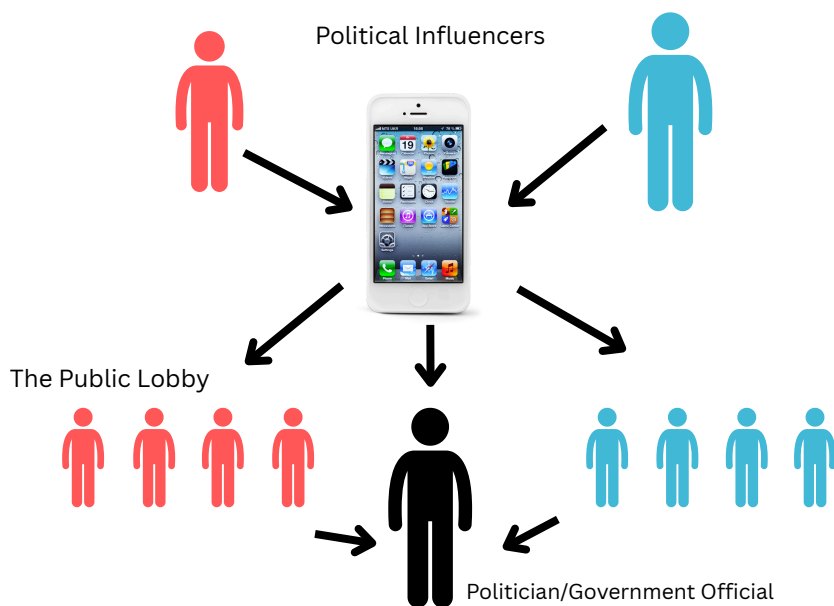recently consumed content on the given topic

DISCUSSION

Social media and content creation success is generally considered ephemeral and inconsistent as a source of income. Whereas influencers - including popular podcasters - have seen increasing success since 2020 in earning modest to sizable earnings, these trends have declined significantly over the last 12 months. Reasons for this are varied across different influencing genres, though some commonalities among them include: changes to social media algorithms and monetization prerequisites; ownership changes, for example when Twitter changed ownership in 2022; over-saturation in the market; and, increased un-relatability of content creators to content consumers. This presents an increased burden on political influencers to compete in the market of social media influencing not only during election periods, but in non-election (governing) periods as well.

Election period
25%

Non-election (governing) period
75%

An "election period" is generally considered to be the final quarter of an official's term prior to the election. For instance, during a four year term, the year prior to the next election is considered an "election period."

It would be inaccurate to suggest that all influencers are ill-equipped to offer policy advice on any given topic during non-election governance periods. Obviously influencers come from a variety of backgrounds, educations, and expertise; however, it would be equally inaccurate to suggest that political influencers have the necessary qualifications to influence policy on the breadth and scope of topics they have increasingly been known to create content and subsequent policy influence on. Because of the nature of content creation as an unsustainable revenue stream, creators have moved in recent years to expand their content, discarding the previous "niching down" strategy, and instead embracing a variety of topics that are popular, frequently changing, and have potential for virality. In other words: whereas creators previously stuck to individual topics, such as "science," or "economics," or "health," today creators push content based upon whatever is trending. A political influencer will therefore one day be posting content relative to the stock market, the next day on topics of public health and gun safety, the following will be a complete shift to climate change, and on the fourth they will be creating content on the issue of economic sanctions and tariffs. No one can be an expert at everything, and still yet, in the current moment, it is actually a requirement of influencers, including political ones.

Political Influencers

The Public Lobby

Politician/Government Official

The danger in this becomes evident when the data suggests political influencers do not just have an impact on votes, but on policy choices altogether. Furthermore, the public lobby is impacted by the distortion of views that political influencers tend to exaggerate for the sake of competition within the market for views and virality. The public lobby that then goes on to echo polarized demands of influencers to politicians/government officials only heightens the problem. And the impacts of this are most disastrous at the regional and local levels, where polarization and disinformation of topics result in the most direct impacts to the public.

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POLICY OPTIONS

Policy options to combat the rise and impact of political influencers on regional policy are limited due to the scope of the problem and limitations on local government to enact the types of meaningful reforms that would be necessary to combat the issue. Nevertheless, some regional policy options and activities have some evidence to offer potential remedies to prevent poor governance resulting from political influencers and their impact.

Prohibit use of social media on government-owned technologies

Offer "media literacy" trainings for elected officials and members of the public; support social media training programming for local schools

Require expert testimony when engaging in policy discussions and decision making

Engage in regional election reforms, including "clean campaigns' that afford candidates limited fund allowances and prohibit certain types of expenditures

Activate localized "social media detox" campaigns to encourage the public to unplug from social media and content consumption regularly

Enact internal policies focusing on an evidence-based policymaking paradigm

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