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TikTok Divest-or-Ban Law Rattles Pro-Biden Influencers (2)

Biden's campaign is making an unprecedented effort to court influencers, even though he signed a bill that could lead to TikTok vanishing in the US.

By Akayla Gardner

(Bloomberg) -- When President Joe Biden returned to the White House after delivering his State of the Union address, 23-year-old TikTok influencer Awa Sanneh joined roaring cheers alongside administration staffers gathered on the mansion's back porch.

Biden told the group "how important" social media content is to reach Gen-Z voters, recalled Sanneh, among dozens of creators invited for a watch party that night.

Just weeks later, Biden signed into law a bill that forces TikTok's parent company, Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd., to sell its stake or face a ban in US app stores. That has rattled the social media creators his campaign has taken unprecedented steps to court.

"I'm pretty critical of him at this moment in time," said Sanneh, who has attended multiple administration briefings and has more than 510,000 followers. "If you truly understood the impact, then you would want to keep TikTok."

Biden's embrace of the divest-or-ban bill exemplifies his efforts to contain what administration officials and lawmakers from both parties see as a growing national-security threat from China. Nonetheless, he continues to promote his political message on the platform.

None of the influencers who spoke to Bloomberg News said Biden had lost their vote. However, the new law is likely to turn off younger voters, who've propelled the app to mainstream relevance and are key to Democratic electoral wins. Many are already unenthusiastic about Biden's reelection.

"Election after election, young people continue to show us they understand the stakes of this moment, and will vote like their futures depend on it - because they do," said Seth Schuster, a spokesperson for Biden's campaign.

Kenny Walden, who has 167,000 TikTok followers and has attended White House events, posted a video on the platform expressing confusion over Biden's decision to back the bill over privacy and data security concerns.

TikTok: My thoughts havent changed on the tik...

"I'm against it, Joe," said Walden, whose content focuses on encouraging people to vote for Biden. The president is silencing his "frontline of defense," he added, referring to creators like him.

Opponents of the bill say it threatens freedom of speech and singles out the social-media platform over others collecting users' data.

White House officials maintain their intention isn't to prohibit TikTok from operating, but to force the app's Chinese

owner to divest. The 270-day deadline for ByteDance extends beyond November, allowing users to continue posting through the election.

“This is about our national security. This is not concerns about Americans using Tiktok,” said White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. “There’s certainly time on the books to see how this plays out.”

Earlier: [TikTok Ban in US Looms as Biden Kicks Off 270-Day Countdown](#)

ByteDance has made clear it has no intention of selling, and a protracted legal battle is likely. At the same time, Donald Trump is already using the prospect of a ban to court younger voters. In a social media post before the bill passed Congress, he blamed Biden for setting a ban in motion. That marked a reversal for Trump, who as president signed an order in 2020 banning the app that was later overturned in court.

Biden’s team says its presence on the app is a vital part of a strategy to reach voters in as many arenas as possible. The app’s reach is massive: More than 170 million Americans have accounts, the company says, and a third of adults under 30 get their news from it, according to the Pew Research Center.

Earlier: [Biden’s Campaign to Stay on TikTok Despite Divestment Law](#)

In a first-of-its-kind push for a presidential administration, Biden’s aides are in touch daily with social media influencers or their managers. Meanwhile, campaign officials are considering bringing creators into their headquarters, said a person familiar with the deliberations.

The campaign’s partnerships with popular creators are all the more important since TikTok prohibits political advertising. Organizing multiple people to push positive content beats Biden’s presence alone on the app, according to a person with knowledge of the strategy.



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The Biden campaign launched a [TikTok account](#) during the Super Bowl in February. It has more than 300,000 followers, which pales in comparison to those of the most popular influencers. The campaign is taking at least one known security precaution: Staffers post on the app from one separate device.

Biden officials were already facing a daunting landscape on TikTok, even before he signed the divest-or-ban bill. Negative posts about the 81-year-old president proliferate on the platform, driven by frustration over his handling of the war in Gaza, his age and climate policies.

"It's very anti-Biden," Kerry Robertson, a Minneapolis-based influencer who supports Biden, said of TikTok. "It always has been."

"Even though the algorithm isn't showing me any kind of pro-Biden content or anything like that, whenever I do those videos, I get a lot of 'Thank you for this,'" she added.

Earlier: [Primaries Show Candidates Can Win on TikTok But Lose at the Polls](#)

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There is no clear evidence TikTok's algorithm has a particular political bent, according to Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, a Hebrew University of Jerusalem associate communication professor. But since it's notoriously opaque, it presents a "problem" for those seeking to understand its growing political influence, said Columbia University associate communications professor Ioana Literat.

"Look what's happening on TikTok," Biden said recently at a fundraiser. "It's so easy to just flat-out lie and not know what's true, so we got a lot at stake here."

It's difficult to measure the volume of positive or negative sentiment about Biden on TikTok because the company restricts certain data. Users are often siloed in different content universes, where their feeds reflect topics they interact with the most, experts say.

Biden's team is making the calculus that they can persuade disenchanted voters to consider supporting him, in part through online content.

Before Biden's Radio City Music Hall fundraiser in March, which featured comedian Stephen Colbert and former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, some TikTok creators joined a roundtable with campaign staffers about digital strategy, where Biden stopped by to speak with them, one influencer recapped in a [video](#).

[TikTok: seeing biden, obama, clinton + queen ...](#)

Finnegan Biden, Biden's granddaughter, also hosted a happy hour for creators at nearby Pebble Bar before the fundraiser.

Similar to the Radio City event, behind-the-scenes visits to the White House are great fodder for social media. "Look at this – this napkin has the seal of the president on it," Sanneh said in a [video](#) inside a White House bathroom that drew 2.1 million views.

[TikTok: Dear Awa-Topia \(the name is a work in...](#)

If TikTok goes away, so does a source of influencers' revenue. Harry Sisson, a 21-year-old who has joined both official and campaign gatherings, is encouraging his 850,000 TikTok followers to watch videos on his YouTube channel, where he has been posting more because of the potential ban.

"There are a lot of creators on TikTok who support them and have done a lot of work for the campaign and the president," Sisson said in an interview. "I'm overall disappointed."

(Updates with details about opposition to bill in ninth paragraph)

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