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## Private firms turn to social media to predict Indonesian election winner

**Private companies are forecasting voting outcomes of the Indonesian presidential race based simply on positive mentions of a candidate on Facebook and Twitter.**

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BY JACK BOARD



A woman checks her ballot before casting her vote in the presidential election at a polling station in Solo, Central Java, Indonesia on July 9, 2014. (AP/Taufan Wijaya)

**SINGAPORE:** The use of social networks as a platform for political campaigning soared during Indonesia's presidential election.

Now, amid ongoing uncertainty about the reliability of some opinion polls -- which both candidates used to claim victory -- private companies are forecasting voting outcomes based simply on positive mentions of a candidate on Facebook and Twitter.

Cherishing their independence from traditional forms of polling, many have been criticised for perceived bias.

Groups like PoliticaWave in Jakarta rely on algorithms, live updates and instant sentiment results on anything from a speech to a smear campaign, to which candidates can respond in real time.

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Yose Rizal, PoliticaWave founder, said: "Social media is a two-way communication, before that they only use TV or print, it's a one-way (communication) just like when they speak to their constituents, but now the constituent can respond to their vision, to their mission and communicate directly to them."

There is no small number of voices to be heard.

Indonesian presidential candidate Joko Widodo, also known as Jokowi, has dominated the Twittersphere -- he has nearly 1.8 million followers -- and was the most talked about topic by Indonesian users during the election campaign.

Rival Prabowo Subianto's strength has been driving highly organised discussions on Facebook, where he boasts an army of 8 million users.

There have been around 100 million tweets and 200 million Facebook interactions about the election this year, which reflects an online conversation so pervasive that it extends into real world influence.

While experts agree social media can be an effective agent of change, they caution that it is still inhibited by the limits and reliability of technology.

Jennifer Yang Hui, Associate Research Fellow (Centre of Excellence for National Security) at Nanyang Technological University, said: "It's a very raw form of data that comes out in real time and lesser on real analysis...and the question of understanding what they convey is still difficult, it's mired in a lot of issues, such as, for example, sarcasm, which the algorithm might detect as something positive when you're actually saying something quite the opposite."

Kirpal Singh, Associate Professor of English Literature at Singapore Management University, said: "One can become a thousand on the internet. So if polling agencies say 800 people said this, it could actually just be two guys messing things up.

"I think for the future, 7 or 10 years from now, I think it will be much more sophisticated, much more streamlined and therefore easier and neater and cleaner in many, many ways. And also a little bit more difficult to subvert."

PoliticaWave predicted a Jokowi victory 53 points to 46.

Whether that proves right or wrong, as more and more voters mobilise social media around the world, it is clear the deafening chatter of online politics is here to stay.

- CNA/nd