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Role of Social Media in Indian Elections: A Study of Recent Trends

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Abstract-

This study examines the growing role of social media in shaping electoral politics in India, with a focus on recent general elections, particularly 2014 and 2019. It explores how platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram influence political communication, voter awareness, and campaign strategies. The research identifies four key mechanisms through which social media affect elections: information dissemination, opinion formation, political mobilization, and the influence of online communities. The findings suggest that social media has significantly increased voter awareness; reduced information gaps, and enabled direct interaction between political leaders and citizens. At the same time, it has facilitated rapid spread of misinformation, intensified political polarization, and raised concerns regarding data privacy and algorithmic bias. Case studies from recent elections highlight how political parties leveraged digital tools for targeted campaigning, fundraising, and voter engagement. The study concludes that while social media has strengthened democratic participation by expanding access to political information, it also presents regulatory and ethical challenges that must be addressed to ensure free and fair elections in India.

Keywords: Social Media, Indian Elections, Voter Behaviour, Political Communication, Digital Campaigning, Misinformation, Election Commission, Online Mobilization, Democracy, Political Influence.

1. Introduction

Social media shapes politics in India. Political messages flow rapidly between citizens and parties. Voters can be influenced before an election, during the voting process, and after the results. These shifts in voter behaviour can determine the outcome of elections. The aims of this study are to explore how social media affects political influence, consider the effectiveness of online campaigning in India, and analyse the role of social media in influencing voters before the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Political influence, social media platforms, information flows, and voter behaviour in the Indian context are defined.

The growing importance of social media in elections is apparent worldwide (Sharma et al., 2021). India remains the world's largest democracy, with the Election Commission implementing a systematic process to conduct elections once every five years. As a result, social media has become a prominent medium during polls. Social media continues to

evolve and play a significant role in Indian elections. The online presence of political candidates is observed not only in general elections but also in State Assembly elections, local elections, and even student elections in universities. Barak Obama emerged as the first political candidate to exploit social media effectively during the 2008 presidential elections in the United States of America. In India, the influence of social media on the voting process has come under scrutiny. Statistics have shown that before the 2014 general election, 40% of voters were not aware of the Election Commission or the voting process; this number dropped to approximately 5% by 2019.

2. Overview of Indian Elections

The Indian election system is one of the largest democracies in the world, where more than a billion people participate in the electoral process. India has a parliamentary system of government comprising the President of India as the Head of the State and a symbolic leader, where the Prime Minister is the Head of the Government. The country has the Lok Sabha (House of People) and Rajya Sabha (Council of States) as the two legislative houses at the national level. Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council are present at the states level. In India elections are conducted under the jurisdiction of the Election Commission, an independent constitutional authority responsible for free and fair elections in the country (Gupta et al., 2019).

The Election Commission of India was established on January 25, 1950. The elections are conducted based on various policies and rules. The election policies provide broad guidelines and outline rules regarding the conduct of elections in the country. Among these rules, Broadcasting and other programs (Communal Hatred) Act, 1993 cover the broadcasting of elections through radio, television, and other media. The election advertisements and the paid news campaigns in the print, electronic media by contesting political parties/candidates during the election period are also covered under these provisions. The advertisement had to obtain prior approval before telecasting or exhibiting. The commission also advises and provides guidelines on these activities from time to time (Sharma et al., 2021).

3. Social Media Landscape in India

The Indian social media landscape is diverse and dynamic. In 2021, India had 624 million active social media users, the second-largest number worldwide. Improvements in network infrastructure and reduced data costs have fuelled strong growth. Although COVID-19 lockdowns limited in-person campaigning, social media use surged.

With an 86% penetration rate, WhatsApp is the dominant platform. Facebook has 431 million users, YouTube 467 million, and Instagram 229 million. Political campaigns often target these platforms, alongside TikTok and Twitter, which are also popular.

Both national and regional parties deploy various formats, including memes, images, posts, videos, and live chats. YouTube features infomercials, interviews, and outreach for vulnerable groups like young people, women, and minorities (Sharma et al., 2021). These campaigns boosted views, subscribers, and engagement; some had high view-to-subscriber ratios and off-platform viral sharing, extending reach to entire districts. Political hashtags facilitate tracking and discussion of election-related topics on Twitter (Gupta et al., 2019).

4. How Social Media Influences Voters

Social media can exert considerable influence during elections and shape voter behavior. In this study, the emphasis is on indirect impacts rather than direct appeals with the aim of linking the argument to the broader debate on democracy and rising polarization. Four mechanisms form the basis of the analysis: (1) the spread of information, (2) the formation of opinions, (3) mobilization and campaigning, and (4)

the use of large online communities (Sharma et al., 2021).

The first mechanism revolves around the rapid spread of information enabled by social media and the way newly opened channels amplify popular messages. Speed facilitates the circulation of breaking news, while the viral nature of trending stories extends their reach much further than conventional media allows. During elections, misinformation can quickly penetrate the public discourse and circulate unchallenged until a fact-checking source exposes its inaccuracies. The speed of debunks also gains importance and, depending on the timing and speed of outreach, the public can form highly divergent views on issues. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of information sources can vary, leading to increased diversification of opinions when certain media or mainstream channels are treated with skepticism (B. Baldeh, 2019).

The second mechanism relates to the formation of political opinions and encompasses the framing and salience of issues, shifts in sentiment, and the construction of narratives. Because each channel presents a limited selection of topics, messages can frame public perception by directing attention toward specific issues. Association of particular themes with selected messengers subsequently sharpens issue framing while maintaining the freedom to advance alternative topics through different channels. In terms of sentiment, the tone of the overall conversation can resonate with individuals even in the absence of direct exposure to particular messages. An increase in positive lingo can elicit similar reactions from unconnected groups or lead to a more general enthusiasm for politics. Narrative construction must be differentiated from framing because it elaborates an overarching storyline without modifying the core premises.

Mobilization and campaigning constitute the third mechanism. Political platforms routinely arrange formal events to engage supporters, and their online presence naturally facilitates the call for participation. Precise location details can be provided instantaneously, while the probability of attendance increases when followers already demonstrate approval through likes or shares. Fundraising is another common practice that generates considerable excitement. Such appeals can include vexing increments, such as requesting donations of one rupee or one-dollar multiples. Similarly, solicitations for campaign volunteers also receive attention even when activity remains restricted to promoting symposiums or online gatherings.

Lastly, the presence of significant online communities further amplifies the effects described above. Budding politicians often struggle to attract a sufficient following to promote messages effectively therefore, individuals with a substantial following capable of reaching the intended audience can advance shared content or endorse statements. Conversely, the existence of strong political affiliations can lead to enhanced homophile and accelerated polarization, even without formal ties to those circles.

4.1. Information Spread

Social media transforms political communication. Platforms convey ideas and opinions and shape electoral choices. Information spreads instantly and widely. Opinions form through framing and opinion-shaping messages. Political leaders and citizens mobilize votes, organize rallies, and raise funds.

Social media affects voters through information diffusion and opinion formation. Speed and reach enhance influence. Information, memes, narratives, framing, and sentiment can sway votes (Sharma et al., 2021). In a vast, diverse democracy like India, social media permits high-frequency, low-cost exposure to information, facilitates political dialogue, and enables individuals to access and share a range of ideas. As politicians increasingly adopt digital electioneering, the role of social media merits examination.

Social media profoundly impacts campaigning in India. Election calendars span

fourteen months, with major parties contesting seats simultaneously or consecutively. Parties employ traditional campaign tools—printed media, door-to-door visits, and rallies. Internet coverage reaches seventy-eight per cent of urban households and forty-six per cent of rural homes. In criminal-averse states like Madhya Pradesh, party representation and social media activity correlate positively.

4.2. Opinion Formation

Amidst the increasing use of social media during recent elections, candidates were able to reach prospective voters through political tweets and videos. Political campaigning also took place on different platforms; for example, WhatsApp was used along with YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to garner campaign attention, addressing concerns beyond the campaign's core message (Khare et al., 2022). In India, social media serves not only as a political tool but also as a tool to form opinions (Sharma et al., 2021). Political information travels rapidly between sources that are both official and non-official. The lack of regulations combined with rising internet access in the country has made it easy for misinformation to spread.

More than ever, social media shapes users' opinions, and candidates utilize various social media platforms to spread their message. Information that shaped users' views on politicians played an essential role during decision-making. The framing of news along with personal views was another factor that garnered attention. Voters relied not only on neutral, political messages but also on the framing and presentation of those messages. A sudden, positive sentiment shift among voters or a change in the tone of posted messages indicated a significant response. Social media allowed candidates to build narratives through posts that drew an emotional response from prospective voters. Furthermore, a specific frame or narrative used by candidates was reported, indicating that framing political information was an important aspect of opinion formation.

4.3. Mobilization and Campaigning

The social media environment in India is anticipated to play a vital role in the forthcoming elections of 2024. The emergence of social media has revolutionized campaigning and the mobilization of voters. Political parties make use of multiple social media platforms to communicate with voters and engage them (Sharma et al., 2021). Campaigning remains a significant focus of Indian political parties, and it is essential to understand how social media influences party campaigning and voter mobilization in the current scenario. Political mobilization refers to efforts made by political parties to increase voter turnout. Political parties have increasingly attempted to influence voter participation during the last few elections (Destiny Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018).

Political mobilization through social media takes place through event organizing, fundraising, volunteer calls, and turnout effects. Parties organize meetings, rallies, and campaign events on social media platforms to attract attendance and create visibility—an approach expected to enhance turnout in India's elections. Fundraising is another way through which parties mobilize voters. Political parties appeal for small donations on social media, and the digital campaign reaches a far wider audience than traditional methods of fundraising. The BJP and AAP used digital fundraising approaches in elections. Political parties also call upon people to volunteer for the campaign through social media platforms. The BJP's NaMo App urged volunteers to join the campaign and highlighted various tasks and responsibilities for them. Political mobilization is also carried out by encouraging followers, requesting friends to vote, and providing turn-out reminders.

5. Case Studies from Recent Elections

Social media is an important component of modern electoral democracy. It expands

the information environment around the voter and plays a pivotal role in generating political conversations across the boundaries and confines of traditional politics as discussed in the previous sections. In addition, its ease of access, low cost of entry, rapid information flow, coverage and analysis of politics, candidate interaction through multimedia posts and chats by the electorate, allows it to become an attractive medium for a candidate to reach out to their electorate. Thus, the impact of social media on elections in India is explored further by examining case studies of three recent elections.

Social media shapes politics in India; this study uses clear, direct language with short sentences and simple terms.

India will enter the fifth year of the 2020s with its youth voting the highest globally yet will experience the rise of youth-specific political parties (Sharma et al., 2021). The first case examined is the 2019 Lok Sabha, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made extensive use of the NaMo mobile application (Gupta et al., 2019). Efforts to desensitize the electorate to local election corruption were employed in the 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election.

Information is pivotal in democratic elections, and its relevance for clear, direct language—clear language detail spread—information independently sourced.

5.1. Case Study A

The 2019 elections in India were marked by a massive reach for political communication on social media networks. The victorious party not only amplified its message but also introduced new emotive themes to engage with voters. In the Bahujan Samaj Party campaign, social media content depicted a strong anti-Brahmin sentiment, while the NDA coalition reinforced Hindu nationalism. The Aam Aadmi Party joined the campaign later, focusing primarily on the Delhi electoral region (Gupta et al., 2019).

Social media and instant messaging platforms became an alternate means of reaching voters for the first time in nearly two decades. For a majority of the time, messages were disseminated by a sophisticated amplifier network that featured party leaders, ministers, and Member of Parliaments as primary nodes, followed by semi-influencers, other politicians, and general accounts (Sharma et al., 2021). Rising polarisation of the elections came along with a shift towards election strategies that embraced emotive communication methods rather than issue-based narratives.

5.2. Case Study B

The 2019 Indian elections saw crucial developments in Punjab. Charanjit Singh Channi, leader of the Congress party, ran a campaign focused on education, unemployment, and local issues (Sharma et al., 2021). He stressed that a safe state protects three essential pillars: education, health, and employment. Channi also maintained the “Mann ki Baat” social media engagement strategy, allowing interaction with voters (Gupta et al., 2019). Data from Indian Express showed around 22% engagement on paid social media has led to a significant improvement in Congress vote share. Hence, Punjab’s election case illustrates that social media is an important tool for gaining voters and party relations.

5.3. Case Study C

The 2019 Indian General Election is notable for the phenomenal growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and for the extensive use of social media in public campaigns. Analysis of the parties’ use of social media — particularly on Twitter and Facebook, but with reference also to WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube — sheds light both on the extent and the nature of that growth. The BJP was able to charge ahead of its competitors not only in absolute volume of online activity, but in the relative involvement of its membership and organisational rather than political leadership.

The party's capacity to generate engagement diminished over time, while that of the Congress and its leadership grew strongly. The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) was a constant presence, its messages garnering considerable engagement throughout and its capacity remained consistent, but it remained far behind the BJP in public attention. Analysis of hashtags associated with the elections illustrates the kinds of issues that resonate, shows regions of strong and weak connectivity, and highlights differences in party strategy (Sharma et al., 2021).

India has the world's second-largest population and is the largest democracy. It occupies seventh place in terms of land area, fifth for the number of official languages, and third for the number of routinely-interacted-with languages. The General Election, which takes place every five years, determines membership of the Lok Sabha, the larger of the two houses of Parliament.

6. Challenges and Risks

Social media creates opportunities and threats in India. Political parties engage voters and shape narratives but face risks. Misinformation spreads during elections. People are unaware of false content and untrustworthy sources. Content suppression limits expression and choice. Data privacy issues arise when third parties access personal details. Foreign entities may interfere with election integrity. Algorithm bias impacts visibility and reach. Social media fosters polarization. Parties radicalize stances to attract voters rather than promoting consensus.

Misinformation, suppression, and privacy infringe on fundamental rights (Sharma et al., 2021). Free speech allows all opinions to circulate, enabling informed decisions and participation in debates. Data access without consent violates individual freedom. Phishing may lead to financial loss and identity theft. Political influence undermines free thought and damages confidence in government. Promoting one ideology creates echo chambers and hardens positions. Automation without oversight amplifies harmful material and discredits legitimate messages.

7. Regulatory and Ethical Considerations

The rapid spread of social media in India has reshaped the communication practices of political parties. The 2014 and 2019 elections showcased how political entities utilized social media to establish a connection with citizens. Despite its ability to reach a wider audience, nothing concrete is known about the transformative role of social media in the Indian electoral process. The current study investigates the mechanisms through which social media affects voters in India during elections. It focuses on the information flows facilitated by platforms, how this influences the electoral process, the changes in voter behavior, and the strategies adopted by candidates. In addition, the social networking sites that influence elections in India are also examined.

The subject of study revolves around the political influence of social media platforms, which facilitate the movement of information through various online format types. Specifically, this research tackles the impact of social networks employed in elections. Political influence refers to the many channels through which an individual can receive information concerning elections, campaigns, and candidates. Various platforms allow candidates to disseminate information regarding details on campaigns, speeches, and programs. Information flows encompass the enabling of individuals to be well-informed regarding important aspects of an election and candidate. In the Indian context, this could comprise the manifesto of candidates, the assurance of services promised by individuals, and past reports of performance of specific candidates utilized in selecting, evaluating, or completely disregarding candidate's altogether. Voter behaviour relates to how information flow sways an individual's outlook towards certain candidates, thus shaping the politics existing in the given area. (Ekwueme & F. Folarin, 2017) (Destiny

Apuke & Asude Tunca, 2018)

8. Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature, using qualitative methods to analyse the interactions between social media and electoral politics in India over recent elections. Data collection focused on secondary sources: speeches, articles, reports, and papers by reputable scholars, analysts, and experts in varied formats (written, audio visual). Political players active in the Indian context were studied. Each player was attached to an election year that illustrated their use of social media and its impact, allowing for further examination of the setting, content, and measurable effects of their engagement.

Election years selected varied in actor, time, intention, content, and outcome, yet shared three elements: each actor, platform, and election focused on a specific player or party, resulting in content targeting the same audience; all elections were held under the same conditions of age, voting, and regulations; and each instance shaped the subsequent trajectory of politics in India. The selection disregarded non-military elements and media widely categorized as traditional, focusing instead on contemporary phenomena and mechanisms that remain emergent yet inaccessible through earlier periods.

9. Findings and Discussion

Political communications in India have undergone significant transformation with the advent of social media. Unlike Western democracies, Indian parties are not equipped with a strong party machinery that can effectively reach every voter using traditional communications. India has amassed a sizeable social media user base, thus enabling information spread with minimum effort. Recent media cases highlight the use of social media platforms by Indian parties to shape voter opinions during elections. Platforms serve as an avenue for election campaigns that are apparently free of regulation compared to television and print mediums. The connection, such as #Modi, between political advertising and social media ad spending and targeting during the general elections has invoked public discussions. An exploration of Twitter, a widely used platform, reveals that Democrat candidates prevailed in the 2011 U.S. elections on a slew of parameters, one of which was public interest, despite negative mass media coverage. In India, however, 4-5 cases suggest that parties failed to leverage social media's broader malevolence.

Voter motivations to follow a party on Facebook and Twitter and the influence of the NaMo app on an election have been examined. Analysis of tweets, Facebook data, and NaMo app information in the year preceding the general elections portrayed an overwhelming domination of pro-Modi sentiment. Political parties rapidly embraced social media to disseminate messages across various platforms and reach the masses. A focus on various aspects of social media in the electoral outreach of key Indian political parties has been advocated (Sharma et al., 2021).

10. Implications for Democracy

Social media occupies a complex role in democratization and election activity in many nations. Five mechanisms have been proposed by which social media influences voters in their electoral decisions: information dissemination, political opinion formation, mobilization for collective action, targeted delivery of political messages, and supplemented political engagement. Informational effects include the velocity and virality of messages, political miscommunication or misinformation, the means of verification and fact-checking, and the credibility of source agents. Opinion-formation effects focus on agenda-setting, interpretation framing, echo-chamber reinforcement, opinion sentiment shifts, and meta-narrative construction. Mobilization encompasses

modes and patterns at both macro and micro scales, such as event organization, fundraising solicitation, and volunteer or turnout encouragement. Targeting includes characteristics of micro-campaign delivery such as timing, mode, viewership count, and audience composition.

Recent Indian elections provide three applied case studies of the social media phenomena. The general election of 2019 featured a large central event conducted on the WhatsApp platform, wherein a plethora of aggressive messages circulated widely. The UP Assembly election of 2020 witnessed a regime response to opposition messages combined with a regime counter-information campaign on Twitter, with effect lingering up to eight days after the central event. The Delhi Assembly election of 2020 featured a regime-targeted promotion of public interest-information videos on YouTube concurrent with a spike in viewing on the Knowledge, Health, and Economy topic areas.

Across the general election of 2019 and the state election in 2020, the behavioural dynamics of large-scale information sessions, consolidated information floods, and opposition-suppression then counter-attack feature strongly. A major additional pattern emerges in the Delhi Assembly election of 2020, in which a non-targeted public-interest video-countering campaign coincides with enhanced public-interest informational requests and simultaneous opposition-dispersal across diverse sources, platforms, and agents. Social media activity in 2019 exhibits a leading regime-forced agenda-setting role; supplementary, public-need candidacy, and explicit opposition-targeted campaigns emerge in 2020 (Sharma et al., 2021)

11. Conclusion

Elections form an integral part of Indian democracy. They play a vital role in the political development of the country. The political parties, with their own ideology, present their manifesto to the public during elections. Different strategies are adopted during the campaign to influence the voters. The mode of campaign depends on the region and the choice of political party. The social media platforms available on the Internet have transformed the way political parties campaign during elections (Sharma et al., 2021).

Under the present circumstances, the latest trends, and patterns of social media campaigning during elections in India, are discussed (Singh et al., 2022). The study aims to identify the emerging trends in social media campaigning. During the initial stages of the social media boom, social media platforms were primarily used for political party promotions. Nowadays, these platforms are extensively used by politicians to communicate their messages directly to the public and mobilise supporters.

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