

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GENERAL ELECTIONS IN INDIA

*** Dr. Kondapalli Ratna Raju**
Asst. Professor,
Dept. of Pol. Sci. & Pub. Admn.
Andhra University
Visakhapatnam -03

Ms. Mondru Sion Kumari
Asst. Professor
Dept of CSE
Engineering College for Women
Andhra University

**Corresponding Email: rrajukondapalli@gmail.com*

Abstract:

Social Media have an immense ability to impact conventional media. All daily papers and TV presently have columnists who persistently screen Face book and Twitter for getting breaking news. The manner in which conventional and social media associate and merge with each other profoundly affects present day political communication. Social media is more just since anybody with access to the Internet can bring an issue up in the public field. The role of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing voting behavior cannot be underestimated. In the digital age, social media has become a transformative force in many aspects of life, and its impact on the political landscape, particularly during elections, is profound.

Keywords: *Social Media, Political Communication, Political Parties, Digital Media, General Elections, Political Campaign*

Introduction

The beginning of the internet in the 1990s onwards gave rise to the digital and networked population around the world (Kahn 2021). The invention of ICT and Web 2.0 has provided people with many opportunities. The internet and social media revolution have affected various fields of life, and politics is not immune to it. Over the last decade, the digital population of India has been growing. India is the world's largest democracy and has the most significant proportion of young people. The Internet and Mobile Association of India states that India is the second country with the most internet users. In the recent decade, the significance of social media in politics has increased in India and across the globe. The first-time social media started gaining prominence in Indian politics was when Mumbai was attacked in 2008. At that crucial moment, it was through social media that people in India and abroad were getting updates regarding this incident.

Political parties are utilizing the power of social media in their campaigns. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become integral to political campaigns around the world, and India is no exception. With millions of users actively engaging in political discourse online, it is crucial for political parties to have a strong presence on social media platforms.

The role of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing voting behavior cannot be underestimated. It provides a platform for political parties to communicate directly with voters, share their policies and ideas, and mobilize support. Moreover, social media allows for targeted advertising and micro-targeting, enabling parties to reach specific demographics and tailor their messages accordingly.

However, with the growing influence of social media, there are also concerns about the spread of fake news, propaganda, and misinformation. It is essential for voters to critically analyze the information they come across online and verify its authenticity.

Importance of Social Media in Political Campaigning:

In the digital age, social media has become a transformative force in many aspects of life, and its impact on the political landscape, particularly during elections, is profound. From mobilizing grassroots movements to influencing public opinion, social media plays a crucial role in modern electoral processes. It has become an integral part of election campaigns, allowing political parties to connect with voters on a more personal and direct level. In the context of Lok Sabha elections in India, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube play a crucial role in reaching out to the masses, especially the younger generation who are more active on these platforms.

According to recent statistics, **India has the second-largest number of internet users in the world, with over 624 million people having access to the internet. Out of these, around 400 million are active social media users.** This presents a massive opportunity for political parties to engage with voters and shape public opinion. Social media platforms provide a level playing field, where even smaller parties with limited resources can reach a wide audience.

During the Lok Sabha elections in 2019, social media usage reached new heights. As per reports, there were over 220 million interactions related to the elections on Facebook alone. Twitter saw over 5.4 million tweets related to the elections. Instagram was not far behind, with millions of political posts and stories being shared. These numbers highlight the significant influence of social media on political discourse in India.

How Social Media Has Transformed Political Campaigns

Social media has brought about a paradigm shift in political campaigning. Unlike in the olden days, when the elders were glued to the TV screens to catch the latest updates on the winning party or their favored party, now we have the convenience of all-time updates at our fingertips. One of the key advantages of social media is its ability to provide real-time updates and instant feedback. Political parties can share their policies, speeches, and campaign events with voters in real-time, allowing for immediate reactions and engagement. This instant feedback loop helps parties gauge public sentiment and adjust their campaign strategies accordingly.

Moreover, social media platforms allow for targeted advertising and micro-targeting. With the vast amount of data available, political parties can tailor their messages to specific demographics. This personalized approach helps in creating a deeper connection with voters and mobilizing support more effectively.

Key role in influencing first-time voters

A survey which was conducted by a digital marketing company has found that nearly 1 / 3 of first-time voters were influenced by political messages on social media platforms during Lok Sabha elections. During general elections around 15-crore first-time voters received political messages through various social media platforms, said the survey report of around 25 lakh participants. Political movement on social media was higher in 2019 Lok Sabha elections than in 2014, the report by ADG Online said. "30 percent of 150 million first-time voters are engaged and influenced through social media platforms, political messages have reached out to 50 per cent of first-time voters through social media and the remaining 20 per cent are aware of the developments in the country," the report said. Social media messages have a greater influence on youths; the report said adding that more than 50 per cent of voters influenced by social media are less than 25 years of age.

As per the survey report, around 40 percent of youths (18-24 years) kept themselves updated about the political developments through at least one social media platforms -- Facebook, Twitter Instagram, Share Chat and WhatsApp. The very nature of social Electronic copy media helped in amplifying engagement through comments, online interactions, trolls, posts, pictures showing support, it said. Anuj Sayal, Group Chairman, ADG Online, said, "Political parties have used big data analytics techniques for increasing mass outreach and conveying their key messages for the general elections." An expert said social media has served as the most important source of information for political developments, surpassing other mediums.

Role of Social Media in 2024 Elections:

The political parties used the social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook and X to live stream road shows, rallies and media conferences in real-time. This also enabled the parties to reach the masses directly, without relying solely on traditional TV news channels. The world of memes and hashtags once a hub for entertainment, the social media platforms in recent times have quickly transformed into a platform for news, information, campaigns and more. Taking from global trends, the political parties in India are also using X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp, and other social media channels vie for attention and support from voters. As the number of smart phones rises, available with easily-accessible and cheap internet, the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections saw the army of social media teams of parties use their creativity to start trending hashtags, participate in meme fest and to also convey the message to voters.

Major political parties such as Congress and BJP, throughout the 44-day elections, used platforms to mock each other counter claims through the eye-catching memes. Just to reach a wider audience, the parties have also created accounts on the same platform for different states and languages, making it possible to hit the target voters at the micro level. With focus on content creation, these accounts have tapped into the trends using fast-paced trending music, snappy video edits and to-the-point crisp messages to garner support. In the run up to the elections, Congress extensively used Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra and Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra to change his image from a 'shehzada' (a prince, as BJP terms him) to a grassroots leader who has traveled the country's length and breadth to understand common people's problems.

On the other hand, the BJP which ran the Lok Sabha election campaign around PM Modi, tried to portray him as a 'karmath' (hardworking) leader by mentioning his daily number of rallies and roadshows throughout the day. Both the parties also often used social media to project an image of strength and superiority over the other.

The Social reach: BJP vs Congress

BJP

The BJP emerged as a frontrunner in terms of social media presence and effective campaigning. The party made its debut on X, formerly known as Twitter, in October 2010 and has amassed an impressive following of 22 million subscribers. The BJP's X account prominently features Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party president JP Nadda as its key figures and defines itself as "world's largest political party, representing aspirations of 1.4bn Indians." The party's bio on the platform includes the hashtag, 'Viksit Bharat by 2047', which has been a central theme of BJP's Lok Sabha campaign this year.


In the 2019 Lok Sabha, when Rahul Gandhi's 'Chowkidar chor hai' had become the Opposition's biggest poll campaign slogan against PM Modi over the alleged irregularities in

the Rafale deal, the BJP used 'Main bhi chowkidaar' campaign for PM Modi and senior party leaders to counter the jibe.


Building upon the same, in the 2024 general elections when RJD Chief Lalu Prasad said in a rally that Modi has no family, PM Modi responded by saying that the whole nation is his family. The BJP leaders were quick enough to add the prefix 'Modi ka parivar' in their social media accounts which quickly gained widespread popularity and support.

The BJP's innovative use of catchy slogans and their ability to engage with the public through social media platforms have proven to be highly effective in garnering support and solidifying their presence in the digital realm.

Numbers of followers and subscribers



BJP vs Congress



Social Media platforms	BJP	Congress
X	22 million	10.6 million
Facebook	16 million	6.8 million
Instagram	8.4 million	7 million
YouTube	6.06 million	5.26 million

TOI

Congress

The Congress made its debut on the social media platform X in February 2013, and the party currently boasts 10.6 million followers. The party's X profile prominently showcases its leader Rahul Gandhi alongside party president Mallikarjun Kharge, while also highlighting various issues raised by the party, such as "Yuva Nyay, Nari Nyay, Kissan Nyay, Shramik Nyay and Hissedari Nyay." These issues were central to Rahul's renowned Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, which has been regarded as crucial in reviving the party this election.

On its X profile, the party describes itself as "India's Most Vibrant Political Movement" and promotes hashtags such as #Bhartibharosa, #Pehlinaukaripakki, and #Kissan MSP Guarantee. These hashtags serve to communicate the Congress party's manifesto and promises for the Lok Sabha election 2024, emphasizing their commitment to address the concerns of the youth, women, farmers, and workers, while also ensuring their participation in the country's progress.

The party also extensively promoted Rahul's two yatras where he was seen walking with people from various walks of life across the country, resulting in a significant boost in the party's popularity. The party accounts tried to push the emotional side of the Congress leader by sharing the posts about when he worked as a coolie for a few hours, labored in the

paddy fields alongside farmers in Haryana, drove trucks, tractors and interacted with mechanics. This grassroots approach allowed him to connect with the masses on a personal level.

In addition to PM Modi's over 200 rallies and public outreach programmes, and Rahul Gandhi's around 180 during the campaign, both leaders leveraged their millions of followers across various social media channels to live stream the public events and give the jist to the audience. This strategic use of digital platforms allowed them to reach a wider audience and engage with potential voters in real-time.

The Role of Influencers and Celebrities in Social Media Campaigning

Influencers and celebrities play a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing voting behavior on social media. Many political parties collaborate with influencers and celebrities to expand their reach and connect with a wider audience. Influencers have a loyal following and can effectively communicate messages to their followers. By endorsing candidates, sharing campaign updates, and encouraging their followers to participate in the electoral process, influencers can help in mobilizing support and creating a positive perception of political parties.

Celebrities, too, have a strong influence on social media. Their endorsements and support for political candidates can sway public opinion and garner attention. Political parties often leverage the popularity of celebrities by collaborating with them for campaign events, social media posts, and public appearances.

However, it is essential to ensure that influencer and celebrity endorsements are authentic and aligned with the values and objectives of the political party. Parties should choose influencers and celebrities who genuinely support their cause and have a positive reputation.

Traditional Media and Social Media

Social Media have an immense ability to impact conventional media. All daily papers and TV presently have columnists who persistently screen Face book and Twitter for getting breaking news. The manner in which conventional and social media associate and merge with each other profoundly affects present day political communication. This availability and assembly among customary and social media winds up basic on account of India and other creating nations where the span of the internet is as yet constrained. Social media is more just since anybody with access to the Internet can bring an issue up in the public field. However,

it would not be feasible for social media alone to reach past their center crowd and impact more extensive areas of society except if they work together with conventional media.

Conclusion:

The impact of social media on general elections is significant and multifaceted. Social media platforms have transformed how political campaigns are conducted and how voters engage with politics. Social media has a profound impact on general elections by enhancing communication, enabling targeted campaigning, and facilitating rapid information dissemination. However, it also poses challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and the creation of echo chambers. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the electoral process.

The procedure of Indian Political System is influenced with numerous inconveniences that brought about the disintegration of white collar class from its overlay. Each election included lakhs of people who were not willing to vote. Political alienation was far and wide. Likely it additionally brought up key issues on Indian Democracy. Be that as it may, things changed and new bend in the electoral procedure is being rise of social media. That demonstrated the way that they will change the major builds of Electoral Process. Sixteenth Lok Sabha is a reasonable contextual investigation in Indian electoral framework which demonstrated that the social networking is giving another shape to electoral process.

References

<https://www.theimpulsedigital.com/blog/social-medias-influence-on-urging-voters-impact-of-online-engagement/>

<https://www.sriramsias.com/blog/how-social-media-has-transformed-political-campaigns-in-2024/>

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lok-sabha-elections-2024-how-social-media-emerged-as-key-battlefield-for-bjp-vs-congress/articleshow/111002045.cms&ved=2ahUKEwi24oP2veGGAxUon2MGHW03DWkQFnoECBoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1kmWkjuaNLa1Iik5Rh6J1U>

Aparaschievi, Paul Adrian. The Use of New Media in Electoral Campaigns: Analyses on the Use of Blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in the 2009 Romanian Presidential campaign. Journal of Media Research 2.10,2011

Behnke, Philip, Social Media and Politics Online Social Networking and Political Communication in Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung, Singapore, 2010.

Bagga, R K, Kenneth. Keniston & Mathur Rohit, "*The State, IT and Development*" Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2015.