

RISE AND ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONS STUDY OF GENERAL ELECTIONS IN INDIA

Author's Name: ¹Narinder K. Dogra, ²Sandeep kaur

Affiliation: Punjabi University Patiala, Punjab, India

E-Mail: mander2119@gmail.com

DOI No. – 08.2020-25662434

Abstract

Elections in India are alleged to be the biggest festival of democracy. Elections in India are not always fantastic, because due to vast size and population of the country, it becomes the most difficult task for the political parties to engage with voters. It is not easy for the political parties to reach each and every voter physically, but with the arrival of technology and rise of internet, the task of reaching out to masses has been alleviated. This study is set to know how 2019 general elections in India were different from 2014 elections with the climb of social media. The 2019 survey data collected by Lokniti during national election study has been compared with the data collected since 2014 general elections by diverse agencies to understand the usage patterns among the users of social media and its impact on their voting behavior. It has been found that the arrival of various new digital technologies and platforms for public campaigning since the 2014 elections has changed the character of such forms of communication. This paper found that compared to 2014 elections, the number of internet and social media users has grown various in 2019 elections, thus making it the first full-fledged internet elections in India, but its impact is not visible on the voters. An important aspect about the role that social media played in the 2019 elections is the phenomenon of fake news and misinformation.

Keywords: Social Media, General Elections, India, facebook, voting behavior.

INTRODUCTION

General elections in India have been the main festival of democracy since their inception. From the very first Lok Sabha elections, held between 1951 and 1952, around 80 million people voted to choose 489 Members of Parliament from 1,849 candidates.¹

After Independence of India in August 1947, there was a dire need to hold general elections to elect a truly representative Government on the basis of universal adult suffrage. Election Commission was formally constituted on January 25th, 1950. The First Chief Election Commissioner, Shri Sukumar Sen, was appointed on March 21st, 1950.²

Indian elections have evolved from ballot papers to electronic voting machines, from camels and horses to cars and choppers, from telegrams to real time mobile apps. Around 70 years ago, people used to gather around famous public landmarks, where the Election Commission would put up scorecard-like billboards to keep people updated on the counting results. Today, results, trends, analyses and reactions are on each voter's fingertips.¹

The Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) were used for the first time in part of Parur Assembly Constituency in Kerala in 1982, on experimental basis. The EVMs were used at all polling stations in the country in the 14th General Elections to the Lok Sabha in 2004 for the first time. Since then all elections to Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies have been held using EVMs.² In the latest Lok Sabha elections, the number of voters reached 900 million, who were eligible to

vote for 8,040 candidates.³

OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media refers to websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly, efficiently, and in real-time.⁴ Social media is a phrase that we throw around a lot these days, often to describe what we post on sites and apps like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and others. So you can infer that social media are web-based sites that allow people to interact with each other.⁵ However, Tufts University defined social media as a means of interactions between people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.⁶ Many people define social media as apps on their smartphone or tablet, but the truth is, this communication tool started with computers. This misconception stems from the fact that most social media users access their tools via apps.⁴

SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONS

In 2018, a popular social networking site came under heavy criticism from US regulators after it was found that a third-party vendor had collected data of users illegally. This personal data was then used to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential elections, indicating the vital role that social media plays in today's politics. As users increasingly refer to social media to voice their opinions about social issues and share news and other information with their peers, they generate immense amounts of information.⁷ However, reports from different countries have shown disinformation attempts to manipulate elections, be it via discrediting campaigns, external influence or trying to suppress voter turnout have been disseminated through social media.⁸

Earlier, the messages on these platforms were considered irrelevant and were more often ignored. In late 2006, when Twitter was launched, its creators stated that the purpose of tweets was to tell one's followers what they were doing.⁹

Social Media has the advantage of being instant, precise and target specific. Social media has gained worldwide fame in recent years, however, the concept is not new. During the mid 90's with widespread edition of personal computers users were also attracted to services like chat rooms, newsgroups and instant messages.¹⁰ What is new is the growth of social media (Facebook & Twitter) and its use for more than just means of socializing on Internet. The Internet has been long argued by scholars as a democratizing medium for its capacity in accessing various information and interaction, bringing individuals into the political process.¹¹

The survey reports by Smith & Rainie proposed that the Internet is an vital political information source for young adults. For that occasion, social network sites provide users a unique platform for sharing information.¹² Social media has strong associations with characteristics and communication relevant to protest activity such as documentation, motivating information, content relay, and perceived content reliability.¹³ It enables various forms of interaction between voters and political actors. User generated content can provide meaningful information that citizens might not be able to obtain elsewhere.¹⁴ Furthermore, the collaborative and open nature of social media can lower the barriers of access into politics, particularly for the group of less politically erudite.¹⁵ Thus, social media can significantly influence the political arena.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIA

In present context, social media is playing an essential role in Indian democracy. Usage of social media in Indian politics is completely a new idea. For instance, estimations suggest that in 2009, there were just 2 million users of Facebook in India and an irrelevant number on Twitter. Therefore, throughout the general election of 2009, social media usage in India was minuscule. Till 2014 there were around 93 million users of Facebook and 3.3 million Twitter accounts¹⁶, thus representative advent of social media in Indian politics. However, today Facebook has 313 million users, 7.65 million Twitter accounts. In addition to that WhatsApp has 400 million users and 41 million people watch YouTube on a monthly basis, this signify that the Indian people are considering social media as considerably important in the way they move forward as a broader community. In India, the number of users for most social media platforms is within the top ten in the world.¹⁶ The Social media has doubled its Indian audience base and continues its expansion in the world's second most densely inhabited nation. As a result of this rise in online communication, the key political parties have increased their online presence.¹⁷

Politicians in India believe that the Internet can, indeed, be an appropriate platform for informed, interactive politics, stimulating political participation and opening up possible avenues for expanding decision making beyond the closed doors of political institution.¹

In Indian politics, social media was first used as a tool for campaigning six years ago during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, where, by and large, the Narendra Modi led-Bharatiya Janata Party dominated the discussion and topped the social media game.¹⁹ A recent report has pegged the total expenditure on campaigns on digital platforms at a whopping Rs 400-500 crore, of a total of Rs 4000-5000 crore total advertisement and publicity spend of political parties. The target audience is predictably the youth, many of them first time voters.²⁰ In the past one year, we have seen most parties stepping up their game and using social media platforms effectively to woo voters, especially the millennial.²¹

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was way ahead of the Congress in advertising expenditure on social media of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, according to data from advertising transparency reports by Google and Facebook. The data shows that the BJP has spent more than Rs 25 crore in advertisements across Facebook, Instagram, Google and YouTube. It has spent Rs 11.6 crore and Rs 13.43 crore on Google and Facebook respectively. The Congress, the main opposition party has spent a total of Rs 1.42 crore for ads on Facebook (Rs 74 lakh) and Google (Rs 62 lakh).²² Use of Internet and social media for appealing individual voters in India provided politicians with the level of support that most candidates never see.²³

Neha Malik in her dissertation concluded that social networking websites are becoming more and more extensively used as a latest channel for posting, finding and sharing information and content in India. These innovative developments are embraced more by younger generations while older generations are still lagging behind in India.²⁴

OBJECTIVES

1. What is the impact of use of social media on voting behavior in India?
2. How successful Social Media is in engaging the first time voters in elections?

HYPOTHESES

1. Use of social media in a political campaign would positively influence voters.
2. Social media would successfully engage first time voters in elections.

METHODOLOGY

To understand how social media has played the role in two major elections of the country, a comparative study of 2014 and 2019 general elections in India was done.

RESEARCH TECHNIQUE

Content analysis was a technique which routine a group or collection of measures to sort effective interpretations from data. Various survey reports, media reports, articles and research papers were thoroughly analyzed to attain required data for this study.

DISCUSSION

In order to identify the role and influence of social media in 2014 and 2019 general elections of India, we need to understand the significance of social media in elections. India being a second populous nation requires certain special and advanced communication technologies for more effective political campaign, so that such a large number of voters across spatial and social divides may be addressed.

Over the years, electronic media has played an important role in elections, but the beginning of new digital technologies and platforms for public campaigning since the 2014 elections has changed the character of such forms of communication. Back in 2014, merely one of every ten voters (9%) was found to be using Facebook. This figure of usage has increased gradually since, doubling to 20 percent by 2017, and then increasing further to 32 percent during the recent 2019 Lok Sabha elections.¹⁹

Following 2014, victory of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who concertedly employed social media to campaign for its own programme, other political parties, including the Indian National Congress (INC) also created IT cells to coordinate and aggressively campaign for their programme for the 2019 elections. Narendra Modi has over 129.6 million followers on social media, including 33.1 mn on Instagram, 44 mn on facebook and 52.5 mn on Twitter, while as Rahul Gandhi is far behind with only 15.8 million followers, including one million on Instagram, 3 million on facebook and 11.8 million on twitter.

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to know how 2014 general elections in India were different from 2019 elections with the rise and involvement of social media in influencing the voting behavior of an individual. In simple terms this study was set to understand how social media has played the role in two major elections of the country to influence voters and to what level the social media usage and political campaigning increased with the dawn of social media. The secondary data in the shape of survey reports collected by Lokniti, newspaper articles and researches carried out in this circumstance from time to time were considered as a sample of study. The study was pegged on two objectives, viz Use of social media in a political campaign would positively influence voters and Social media would successfully engage first time voters in elections. Researcher was successful in fulfilling both the objectives.

The first objective, impact of use of social media on voting behavior in India can be underlined by the fact that programmes and policies of contesting parties are easily accessible to the voters without otherwise filtered by the editorial boards in case of mainstream media. Social media turned out to be an open platform for the politicians to speak up their mind openly without being heckled or curtailed (mainstream media). Although, it has been seen that in the past five years, the number of internet users has grown manifold, but the impact on voters is very limited, as BJP witnessed increase of 6% points vote share in 2019 elections as compared to 2014 elections, INC experienced an increase of just 0.02% points vote share in 2019 elections. The overall voter turnout increased by mere 1.16 % at 67.56% in 2019 as compared to 66.40% in 2014, thus making it evident that not much impact has been made with the increase in social media users. Moreover Lokniti survey report also supported that social media had little impact on the voting behavior.

Similarly, the researcher was successful in fulfilling the second objective about how social media engaged the first time voters in elections. A survey conducted by ADG online has asserted that nearly one-third of first-time voters were influenced by political messages on social media platforms in the ongoing general elections. Over half of around 15 crore first-time voters received political messages through various social media platforms. Political association on social media was higher in 2019 Lok Sabha elections than in 2014.²⁵

As per the survey report, around 40 per cent of youths (18-24 years) kept themselves updated about the political developments through at least one social media platform.²⁵ The very nature of social media helped in amplifying engagement of first time voters through comments, online interactions, trolls, posts, pictures showing support, thus it can be concluded that the findings support the hypothesis.

During the course of the study, an important aspect of the role that social media played in the 2019 elections was the phenomenon of fake news and misinformation. There was so much social media involvement in the politics that Facebook has to play down its connection to politicians around the world, including Mr. Modi, among a rise in political misinformation.²⁶

Sahana Udupa examined how hate speech and extreme speech have become new normal in online political communication and participation in India.²⁷ Sangeeta Mahapatra and Johannes Plagemann highlight how fear mongering and the politics of hate propagated by the BJP and the Congress have widened societal fault lines.²⁸

Although, as compared to 2014 elections, the number of internet and social media users in India has grown manifold in 2019 elections, thus making it the first full-fledged internet elections in India, but the impact of social media remained limited and more negative, as it opened up flood gates for personal attacks and fake news, besides disseminating disinformation. Thus, it can be concluded that although all the major political parties considered social media as the best platform to disseminate their manifestoes to influence voters on large scale, but the outcome remained below par, as very little change in the voting percentage was witnessed. 2019 general election was not much different from 2014 election in terms of voter percentage, but the negative impact was quite visible, wherein political parties and their created IT cells resort to personal attacks and mudslinging to demean opposition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. India Today. (May, 2019). Indian Elections: Biggest festival of democracy since 1951. <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/indian-elections-biggest-festival-of-democracy-since-1951-in-pics-1532293-2019-05-22>. [Retrieved on 18-01-2020].
2. S.K. Mendritta. (2014). Evolution of Electoral System of India, Press Information Bureau. New Delhi, India.
3. Robin Mason. (2018). Indian Elections: Unraveling the biggest festival of democracy. Birmingham University. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/indian-elections.aspx>. [Retrieved on 28-01-2020].
4. Matthew Hudson. (2019). What is Social Media? The balance small business. <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/what-is-social-media-2890301>. [Retrieved on 08-01-2020].
5. Daniel Nations. (December 2019). What Is Social Media? Lifewire <https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-social-media-explaining-the-big-trend-3486616>. [Retrieved on 02-01-2020].
6. Social Media Overview. Communication and Marketing. Tufts University. <https://communications.tufts.edu/marketing-and-branding/social-media-overview/>. [Retrieved on 25-01-2020].
7. Prashanth Ramesh, Ashwin Srinivas. (December 2018). Impact of social media data on political elections, Latent view. <https://www.latentview.com/blog/impact-of-social-media-data-on-political-elections/>. [Retrieved on 27-01-2020].
8. Ros Taylor. (2019). Social Media Monitoring During Elections. Open Society Foundations, European Policy Institute. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/b01958d0-7dce-41d3-94ec-622f992f5efc/social-media-monitoring-during-elections-20190614.pdf>. [Retrieved on 28-01-2020].
9. Nigel Jackson & Darren Lilleker (2011) Microblogging, Constituency Service and Impression Management: UK MPs and the Use of Twitter, The Journal of Legislative Studies, 17:1, 86-105.
10. Crispin Thurlow, Laura Lengel, Alice Tomic (2004). Computer Mediated Communication. SAGE Publications.
11. Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment. Political Communication, 17, 341–349.
12. Smith, A. W., & Rainie, H. (2008). The Internet and the 2008 election. Pew Internet & American Life Project.
13. Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, 13(1), 210-230.
14. Wilson, C., & Dunn, A. (2011). The Arab Spring| Digital Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Descriptive Analysis from the Tahrir Data Set. International Journal of Communication, 5, 25.
15. Kushin, M. J., & Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did social media really matter? College students' use of online media and political decision making in the 2008 election. Mass Communication and Society, 13(5), 608-630.
16. Socialmediatoday. <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/topic/social-media-updates/>. [Retrieved on 03-02-2020].

17. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/studies-and-reports/#panelSurveys>. [Retrieved on 26-01-2020].
18. Araba Sey & Manuel Castells. (2004). "From media politics to networked politics: the Internet and the political process," Chapters, in: Manuel Castells (ed.), The Network Society, Edward Elgar Publishing.
19. Lokniti (2019). Social Media and Political Behaviour. Centre for the study of developing societies.
20. Medha Dutta (April, 2014). Election 2014 is all about social media. Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/Election-2014-is-all-about-social-media/articleshow/33835014.cms>. [Retrieved on 03-02-2020].
21. Inam Ulla Khan. (March, 2019). Lok Sabha Elections and Social Media. The Companion. <https://thecompanion.in/2019-lok-sabha-elections-and-social-media/>. [Retrieved on 25-01-2020].
22. Vidhi Choudhary. (May, 2019). BJP outspends Congress, others in social media advertising. Hindustan Times. (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/bjp-outspends-congress-others-in-social-media-advertising/story-FHByCC5vUfs7xCvD9kDY5L.html>). [Retrieved on 30-01-2020].
23. Chilkoti, A. (2014). Narendra Modi to be India's first social media prime minister. The Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/e347de5c-e088-11e3953400144feabdc0>. [Retrieved on 02-02-2020.]
24. Malik, Neha. (2014). MBA Dissertation: The effect of Social Media on Individual voters in India. Dublin Business School. Ireland.
25. The Hindu. (May, 2019). Social media plays key role in influencing first-time voters: Report. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/social-media-plays-key-role-in-influencing-first-time-voters-report/article27109353.ece>. [Retrieved on 21-01-2020].
26. Vindu Goel, Sheera Frenkel (April, 2019). In India Election, False Posts and Hate Speech Flummox Facebook. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/technology/india-elections-facebook.html>. [Retrieved on 26-01-2020.]
27. Udupa, Sahana (2018): "Gaali Cultures: The Politics of Abusive Exchange on Social Media," New Media & Society, Vol 20, No 4, pp 1506–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817698776>. [Retrieved on 02-02-2020]
28. Mahapatra, Sangeeta and Johannes Plagemann (2019): "Polarisation and Politicisation: The Social Media Strategies of Indian Political Parties," GIGA Focus Asien, Vol 3, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-61811-8>. [Retrieved on 3-02-2020]