Examining the Role of Social Media in Shaping Voter Behaviour in Contemporary Electoral Politics

Mr. Neeraj A.V.[1], Sofiya Menachery[2], Bhumika Patil S, Abuzar Arif[4]

[1] *Lecturer, Department of Multimedia and Mass Communication, Pillai College of Arts, Commerce and Science, New Panvel, India*

[2] *T.Y. B.A. Multimedia and Mass Communication Student, Department of Multimedia and Mass Communication, Pillai College of Arts, Commerce and Science, New Panvel, India*

[3] *T.Y. B.A. Multimedia and Mass Communication Student, Department of Multimedia and Mass Communication, Pillai College of Arts, Commerce and Science, New Panvel, India*

[4] *T.Y. B.A. Multimedia and Mass Communication Student, Department of Multimedia and Mass Communication, Pillai College of Arts, Commerce and Science, New Panvel, India*

ABSTRACT: *This study examines the gradual shift from traditional media, i.e., newspapers, radio, and TV, to social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram, as well as WhatsApp, and their role in shaping voter behavior. It explores exactly how platforms enable direct communication and connection between political leaders and the public, provide real-time engagement, help with targeted political advertising, and personalized messaging strategies. The research highlights key factors which influence voter behavior, including economic conditions and media exposure, while emphasizing the increasing role of microtargeting, emotional persuasion, influencer participation and visual political branding, Thes modern campaigns. Through case studies, the study demonstrates how social media enhances voter mobilization, while also contributing to political polarization and misinformation. Furthermore, the study comes to the conclusion that social media functions as a double-edged sword in modern democracies. Understanding this evolving digital landscape is crucial to know whether social media serves as a tool of democratic empowerment or political manipulation in the future of electoral politics.*

Keywords: Politics, Social Media, Targeted Advertising, Democracy, Misinformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The way digital technology is growing fast has really changed the way elections work these days. In the past people who wanted to get elected would use newspapers, radio and television to talk to voters. They would also have meetings and put up posters to get their message across. These old ways of communicating were how people got their news and information. But now that more people have internet and smartphones social media is becoming quite a huge deal in elections. Perception formed through social media is very intricate, it can depend on various factors like income, education level and what they see on the internet. In all these years, what people see and hear on the internet has become a big part of how they think about politics and who they want to vote for. Digital media and platforms have a lot of power to shape what people think about politics and the people who want to be elected. People have conversations about politics on Facebook and Twitter. These are the places where leaders can talk to people directly, forming a strong link. In the past people just listened to someone talking on the radio or television. This is different now. People can actually talk back to each other on Facebook and Twitter. People can engage with each other online when it comes to elections on Facebook and Twitter. Lots of things can influence how people vote, like their family, friends and what they believe in when they vote. The internet and digital media are really good at getting information to people and during the time of the elections, ultimately

helping them make up their minds about who to vote for on Facebook and Twitter. Social media is really important in systems these days. It does a lot more than just share information. Social media also helps decide what issues are important, what people think about them and gets people involved in politics. Sometimes it even spreads information. Social media has an impact on young people who vote, people who are voting for the first time and people who live in cities. People should really look at how social media affects the way people vote. This is because we need to understand how elections work these days with the internet. Social media is really changing things. It is changing the way people vote. We should know how social media is changing the way people vote. Social media is having an impact; on democracy and the way people take part in it. Looking at how social media affects the way people vote is very useful. The internet and social media are changing things a lot. People vote differently now because of media. By looking at media and voter behavior we can see how social media is shaping the way people vote.

1.1 Shift from Traditional Media to Social Media in Elections

Earlier elections were about traditional media like newspapers, radio and television. Political parties would hold rallies, put up posters, have press conferences and run TV advertisements to get to voters. It was much a one-way thing. Parties would talk and people would listen. Now that we have technology elections are more about social media platforms. Parties can now talk to voters directly through videos, ads that are meant for specific people, funny pictures and videos and posts that people can interact with. Social media lets them do a thing, such as:
• *Talking and listening to people at the same time*
• *Getting feedback right away*
• *Campaigning in real time*
For example, leaders, in India use Facebook and Twitter which is now known as X to change what people think and to set the tone for politics.

Leaders use the media to influence public opinion and set political narratives and this is a big part of elections now.

1.2 Meaning of Voter Behaviour

It is really about how they make this choice: "Why do people choose to vote for a person or party?" Voter behavior is about figuring out what makes people decide on a candidate or party when they vote. It is understanding the reasons behind their choices. The things that influence people to make their decisions are important. Help us to recognized why people vote us

1.3 Key factors influencing voters:

1. Economic Factors: Voting decisions are influenced by things like employment; they consider the government welfare schemes that are in place. All these things, including employment and government welfare schemes, play a role in the decisions people make when they vote.

2. Media Factors: News coverage and political advertisements and social media campaigns really influence what the public thinks and how voters see things. The news coverage and the political advertisements and the social media campaigns all play a role in shaping the public opinion and the voter perception of the news coverage and the political advertisements and the social media campaigns.

1.4 Growth of Facebook and Twitter in Politics

Facebook and Twitter are very helpful for parties to talk to voters. Parties can use Facebook and Twitter to talk to people. They can do campaigns that're just for certain groups of people. This helps parties figure out what people think about things and tell them what Facebook and Twitter think is important. Facebook and Twitter make it easy for parties to get to voters and tell voters what parties want to say about things.

1.5 Importance of Studying Social Media in Modern Democracy

The internet influences opinions. It also affects youth participation in things. The internet has an impact on campaign strategies. Additionally, it plays a role in the spread of information and the spread of misinformation about things. The internet and social media are really important when it comes to the spread of information and the spread of misinformation.

2. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES VOTERS

2.1 Targeted political advertisement

With the emergence of data analytical methods, artificial intelligence, and behavioral profiling, the landscape of modern political campaigning has shifted dramatically. Political parties now utilize significant amounts of data from social media, browsing habits, online purch Political Branding and Leader Image Building and voter records to develop highly specific profiles of voters. Microtargeting is the term used to describe the process of dividing the electorate into very specific categories based on criteria such as age, sex, geographic location, interests, psychological traits and emotional tendencies. As an example, younger generations such as Generation Z may see advertisements promoting relief from student debt, climate change initiatives or job opportunities in growing industries, whereas older generations may receive information about pension reform, health care benefits or national security. Campaigns maximize their persuasive efforts and minimize the amount of wasted outreach by tailoring messages to address the most pressing issues relating to each demographic group. This microtargeting approach uses a communications strategy known as priming, creating new mental access to information for voters. When voters see repeated messages that focus on specific issues such as inflation, unemployment and education, they will begin to evaluate candidates for office based on those prime issues and not by using an overall view of a candidate's policy platform. In this way, voters will develop their opinion of a candidate based on key issues that have been heavily promoted, rather than as part of a complete understanding of a candidate's plan to resolve the major issues facing the country

2.2 Political Branding and Leader Image Building

This is a narrative literature review that explores how social media can be used to construct political images through visual communication, synthesizing 52 peer-reviewed materials (2008-2025). The political communication of modern times is dominated by visual content, which includes images, videos, memes, and triggers 3.2 times more interactions than text among 5.2 billion users. Such platforms as Instagram (1.8-3.2% engagement), X (memes), Tik Tok (youth mobilization), and Facebook (reach) facilitate algorithm-enhanced, personal image creation. Semiotics (polysemous signs) and visual framing/image-bite politics (emotional encoding) and political branding/personalization theories are all integrated as theoretical backgrounds. Examples of case studies include India 2024 (Modi: 6.61Cr visual adverts, 100M+ followers), US (Fetterman authenticity, Trump spectacle) elections, citing platform-specific strategies and traits of cross-cultural behaviors. There are positive impacts such as voter mobilization (43 per cent vote influence India youth) and parasocial bonding and heuristic decision-making. The challenges regarding the negative issues include visual misinformation (18% deepfakes), polarization (X: +34%), and algorithm echo chambers. India-Western differences emphasize the cultural symbol potency (85% vs 60%).

2.3 Emotional and Persuasive Messaging

The development of personalized methods to distribute content online creates an important element which determines how social media platforms shape voting patterns in contemporary elections. The growth of digital platforms which provide personalized content to users enables the emergence of problems concerning user privacy rights and algorithmic bias. According to Rhum et al. 2021 political microtargeting functions through its

combination of voter data collection and customized advertising which creates a danger that political groups will manipulate voters through their control of small groups. The concept of online platforms as information custodians which Professor Jack Balkin proposed provides a framework for developing stronger data privacy protection laws which will not violate First Amendment free speech rights. The research conducted by Sivek et al. 2018 shows that news distribution now uses emotional analysis methods which require people to understand how their emotions shape their news consumption while research shows how individualized content affects voter behavior. Political campaigns should develop strategies which enable them to interact with specific voter groups while maintaining protection of citizen rights and democratic principles.

2.4 Role of Influencers and Online Opinion Leaders

Political influences have become really important in politics over the few years. This is especially true with more people using media and online platforms. These influencers have a following online and use their platforms to shape what people think get people to vote and affect how people talk about politics. They also help people know more about politics, social movements and elections. Political influences play a role in making people aware of political topics. They help mobilize votes and shape opinions. Research has shown that when friends and influencers encourage people to vote it can really work, for younger people. Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is a group that's very good with technology and uses social media a lot to get information. This makes them a key target for creative political campaigns.

Most of the information they consume comes from platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. Political ads are crucial to engage with this age group. They are becoming more important in elections. For Generation Z political ads focus on emotions and being work best. These ads are usually spread through media platforms like Instagram and TikTok

. Younger people are more likely to get involved in politics if they are exposed to news. This is different from generations. The attitudes of citizens towards politics are still forming. In contrast older generations tend to stick to what they know and do. Exposure to news affects younger citizens more. They are more open to ideas and experiences. Young people are more flexible and open to change. This makes them more likely to engage in politics if they are exposed to the information.

2.5 Echo Chambers and Political Polarization

Despite the increased availability of information through social media, political polarization is also on the rise due to the curation of information through algorithms on these platforms. Algorithms tend to curate information that is similar to the information with which the user has previously interacted, leading to the creation of echo chambers in which the user is mostly exposed to information that is similar to their existing beliefs and ideologies. Research has revealed that almost 65% of the users on social media tend to interact more frequently with groups that have similar political ideologies to their own, leading to increased in-group identity and increased levels of distrust towards opposing ideologies and groups. Sensational and controversial information is often curated on these platforms due to the increased engagement that it is likely to attract, further increasing the levels of polarization on these platforms. The increased polarization on social media is likely to lead to affective polarization in which political differences are likely to turn into hatred and hostility towards opposing groups and ideologies. This may further translate into increased levels of violence and protests in the offline world.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1 Donald Trump's Use of social media in the US elections

A key component in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was the use of social media in carrying out campaigns. Social media sites and platforms like Twitter, Instagram, etc. serve at the forefront as a tool of political information source, rather than

acting as support elements for a campaign. In an environment like this, political candidates use social media to influence public opinion directly, without the aid of conventional news editors. This tactic was adopted strategically by Trump, which worked out in his favor, winning with 304 votes compared to 227 votes for Hillary Clinton.

Trump adopted a comparatively aggressive and personal approach in contrast to Hillary Clinton, who managed her profile in a more polished way. According to media experts, Trump's outlandish "authentic approach" gained the attention of the younger impressionable audiences on these platforms and improved his relationship with his followers, boosting online interaction and political support for his presidency. His tweets often made headlines or were publicized through memes, demonstrating how social media influences media agenda.

A research study report by PLOS ONE, after sifting through 250,000 Twitter accounts, states that the conventional Republican internet base transformed into a very active pro-trump network, also discovering the potential presence of AI powered bots, showcasing large non-organic engagement.

3.2 Digital Campaigns Held by Narendra Modi (BJP)

According to IAMAI data, 77% of Indian social media users have utilized their mobile phones to access social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and others, amassed and inhabited a large content consumer base of Indians. Identifying this key opportunity early on, Modi's 2014 campaign treated mobile connectivity and digital content dissemination as a political opportunity.

In 2014, his campaigns utilized innovative tools such as "Digital Rath" vans which were equipped with 55-inch LED screens that travelled across several villages, broadcasting Modi's speeches in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Simultaneously, Modi had about 10+ million YouTube views, 12+ million Facebook followers, 4+ million Twitter followers, i.e. being the most followed Indian politician at that time. His strong and active digital presence and consistency created a direct impact on the youth who frequented the same platforms and also formed a large part of electorate. Campaign models such as "Chai Pe Charcha" (2014) blended offline interaction with online streaming, allowing Modi to appear directly connected to citizens through radio. Government-linked digital initiatives, such as the India AI outreach campaigns, further show how digital platforms are used not only for elections but for continuous political communication and branding. "Mann Ki Baat" (started 2014) was another such program, a monthly radio program of PM Narendra Modi, where he interacts with citizens of India on themes and issues that matters to the Nation. These digital campaigns garnered support which helped Modi win the 2014 election.

3.3 Role of Cambridge Analytica Controversy

Cambridge Analytica was a British political consulting firm that specialized in Data analytics as well as profiling of voters based on psychography. Back in 2018, as per the investigations conducted by The Guardian and The New York Times, it was revealed that the data of approximately 87 million Facebook users was accessed by the company without any proper consent, indirectly, through a personality quiz app. This data, after being collected without the user's knowledge, was used to build psychological profiles for specified and targeted political advertising.

During the 2016 US presidential campaign, as well as other national elections i.e. it was claimed that the company had a direct influence on voter behavior by drafting tailored messages to target the audiences and their individualistic fears, personal preferences, and personality traits. The government preceded to question the role of big tech companies during elections leading to sector data protection protocols worldwide in India. Both, the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) accused each other of having links with Cambridge Analytica during the 2019 election period as well. This controversy spread awareness about data-driven campaigning, WhatsApp misinformation network

and the authenticity of the political landscape.

3.4 Comparative Impact on Voter Mobilization and Polarization

In the U.S., Donald Trump used Twitter for direct communication and targeted Facebook advertising to connect with his followers. However, trump's strong and aggressive approach led to repeated attacks on mainstream media and opponents as well as increased ideological division and mistrust. Contrary to this, in India, the BJP's coordinated IT cell operations and extensive WhatsApp networks showcase expanded outreach, particularly among those from rural population areas or are voting for the first time. However, rapid circulation of political content through various social media platforms and messaging apps has led to misinformation and communal tension.

Conclusively, in both democracies social media is the key factor that strengthens the mobilization by reducing communication barriers and personalizing outreach. This comparison suggests that digital campaigning is a double-edged sword: on one hand, it can enhance political participation but on the other, it can also increase social polarization

3.5 Social Media: Tool of Empowerment or Manipulation?

Social media has transformed the political arena, where over half the nation primarily uses it to get news. It allows the citizens to obtain information quickly and it allows the political leaders to address the citizens directly, mobilizing supporters quickly and influencing first-time voters at a large scale. At the same time, the same tools also enable data-harvesting, misinformation, target persuasion and algorithm-driven polarization. Through both cases of elections, we can observe the powerful impact social media has on campaign dynamics, which begs a crucial question:

"Is this a sign of democratic empowerment or a new kind of political manipulation?"

4. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE

4.1 Fake News and Misinformation

Fake news is a problem when it comes to voting. People who support politicians and even people we do not know often share false information to get people to vote for them This happens a lot on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. People see things on these sites. They do not know what to believe. The false information spreads quickly so it is really hard for people to know what is true and what is not true, about things they see on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. This can really confuse voters when they are trying to decide what to do. Change the way people think about the election. Fake news can have an impact on what people think and this is not good for elections. Fake news is still an issue in digital electoral politics.

4.2 Data Privacy Concerns

Data privacy is a deal when it comes to the internet and politics. Political campaigns usually get a lot of information from people who use social media and do things online. They use this information to make ads that're just for certain people and to send messages that are tailored to each person. The thing is, people do not always know that their information is being collected and used. That is a problem. Personal information is being used without people knowing about it. This is a concern for many. People want to know when their information is being used. They also want to say if it is okay or not. The fact remains that people need to be aware of how their information's being used. Data privacy is a concern because it can be used in ways that're not fair to voters and it is not always clear what is going on with our personal data. Political campaigns and data privacy are something that we need to think about.

4.3 Impact on Free and Fair Elections

The use of platforms can also affect how fair elections are. You see, online propaganda and fake accounts and automated bots can spread messages that're not really fair to all the candidates or parties. This can make it so that some candidates or parties have an

advantage over others. Digital platforms can spread messages to support certain candidates or parties. The digital platforms and the messages they spread can create a situation that's not fair to everyone and this can influence the decisions that voters make which can affect the idea of having free and fair elections, in a society that is democratic. Elections and digital platforms are related, and digital platforms can influence the fairness of elections.

4.4 Government Regulation and Platform Responsibility

We need to deal with these problems. The government has to make some rules and social media platforms have to be more responsible. The government and the people in charge of elections have to keep an eye on the ads that're about politics and make sure people do not get the wrong information. At the time social media companies should make some strict rules check the facts and be honest, about who is paying for the ads. This is how social media companies can be trusted by the public and be seen as credible. Social media platforms have to do this to keep the trust of the public and be social media platforms. 5. Future of Digital Electoral Politics The future of elections will depend more on digital communication and technology. Social media will keep playing a role in political campaigns getting voters involved and sharing information. We need to make sure that digital communication is honest and fair. User data must be protected. We should use tools in a responsible way so that they help democracy instead of hurting it. Technology should make elections better not worse. Digital communication is changing the way we do politics. Elections will be shaped by media and technology. We have to be careful with communication in politics. It's crucial that we use technology to help democracy.

4.5 Challenges and Future of Digital Electoral Politics:

Although India being one of the largest democracies in the world, its electoral system is regarded by many as contrary to many international standards of transparency, fairness and credibility. The most pressing is criminalization of politics, where people with criminal backgrounds run for and often win elections with the consequence that public policy is influenced by people upon who involved in the dirty work of the criminals they conduct depends. A 2019 report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) stated that as of 2019, around 43% of Indian lawmakers have criminal cases pending against them, which has raised alarm bells over the integrity of the political system. (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2019) One other challenge is the use of money and muscle power. Most often at the state level, the political parties resort to vote-buying and manipulation forms of other kinds which lead to uneven fields during elections. Here, too, fairness is undermined further by money spent on campaigns and more so in cash intensive states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. On the path forward, We should move ahead as one in this process, and we have To ensure that enough voices of reason prevailing on the Floor would lead the system inclusively, transparently and Take the country forward to the point that we have an Electoral system that is fair and everybody's vote counts and Nobody's vote is influenced in the wrong manner by undue Influence or even manipulation, that is the path forward.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Pew Research Center (2020–2023): Relationship between social media platforms and people's involvement in online discussion of public and politics.
2. Election Commission of India (2014): Showing how the national election was conducted and what the overall results were.
3. The Guardian (2018): The Cambridge Analytica controversy and the concerns it raised for the use of personal data in political advertising.
4. Facebook(n.d.): Information on the platform's guidelines regarding political advertisements.
5. X Corp (n.d.): Policies describing how political advertising and campaign related contents are handled on the platform.
6. IAFOR (2014): A study discussing how Narendra Modi used digital media during political campaigns and made active communication with the voters.
7. Statista (2023): Statistical data showing trends in social media which are related to politics and elections.
8. Wikipedia contributors (n.d.): Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal and its impact on public debate about data privacy.

REFERENCES

1. Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017): social media and fake news in the 2016 election. (Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), 211–236)
2. Brennan Center for Justice (2024): Discussion of deepfakes, elections, and the idea often referred to as the "liar's dividend".
3. Election Commission of India (n.d.): A resource explaining misleading news, presenting common myths alongside factual clarifications.
4. Xu, G. (2025): A source on how misinformation spreads across social media platforms (Humanities and Social Sciences Communications)