



The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Awareness among Youth

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Abstract

Social media is one of the most salient venues in which youth are increasingly accessing political information, engaging with public issues and voicing political opinions. Based on the secondary data collected from Data Reportal, ECI and scholarly research, this paper looks at how social media has influenced political awareness among youth in India. It first discusses the notions of political awareness and networked communication, then explores the development of the use of the internet and social media, the political uses of the large platforms and the role of the young in the electorate. The paper maintains that social media creates more opportunities to access political information, reduces the cost of expression and mobilisation, and provides young citizens with a voice that was frequently not provided by traditional media. Meanwhile, it exposes them to misinformation, echo chambers, polarisation and hostility online, and the advantages are not shared equally due to the digital divide. At the end of the paper, the authors contend that social media should be regarded as a facilitator and not a tool for political education, and that the development of media literacy, platform accountability, and inclusive digital access are key elements to enable social media engagement to be informed participation.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Awareness, youth, Political Participation, misinformation, echo chambers, Digital India.

Introduction

Political awareness is the level of knowledge that citizens have about political institutions, political leaders, political policies or public issues, and what they mean to the citizens. It is fundamental to democratic citizenship, since if the people are not informed they are not able to hold the representatives to account and to make informed choices in a meaningful way. Previously, newspapers, radio, television and intra-family, caste/community conversations were the primary sources of political information in India. For a long time, in Habermas' understanding, the public sphere remained the domain of a handful of media institutions and was constituted by the discussion of private individuals joining to form a public opinion (Habermas, 27).

This relationship is no longer as it is with the advent of the internet and, more significantly, on the advent of low cost smartphones and mobile data. Chadwick has termed modern politics as a "hybrid media system" where old and new media meet, and where both political actors and journalists and ordinary citizens participate in the production and reproduction of politics (Chadwick, 4). According to Castells, in the internet age, social movements spread via social networks that are independent of existing power centres (Castells, 10). For the young people who constitute a significant portion of Indian population, and are some of the most active users of digital platforms, social media is not an extra source of information but is the primary and most



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common source of information for many. India is one of the youngest nations in the world with a median age of approximately 28 years and more than 20% of the electorate is young. In fact, as evidenced by the amount of digital outreach used in recent general elections, political parties and politicians have realised this and now rely on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and X as key tools of campaigning. How social media influences the political awareness of the youth is thus directly relevant for the quality of democracy in India. They have the capacity to enhance democracy when they provide awareness and involve people, and to undermine it when they foster myth and division.

Review of Literature

There is a vast amount of research that has been done on the question of whether or not social media actually has the effect of expanding political participation. After reading and analyzing dozens of studies, Boulianne found that the use of social media has a positive association with participation, but this association is typically weak in strength (Boulianne, 524). In their study, Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela concluded that being more likely to use social media for news was correlated with a higher social capital, civic engagement, and political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 319). A well-documented experiment conducted in the 2010 U.S. presidential elections on Facebook demonstrated the impact social influence in online networks can have on mobilising citizens; it showed that messages conveying that friend had voted contributed to a small but measurable increase in the likelihood of the recipient voting as well as seeking out information on the topic (Bond et al., 295). Citizens can share information and coordinate action, and social media enhances their ability to do so, Shirky said (Shirky, 29). Other scholars have created theories of new engagement styles. Individuals are encouraged to personalise their involvement with digital media and organise without relying on traditional organisations, as proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (739), called connective action. Bennett et al. (835) explored the civic engagement of young citizens whose civic style is more personal and networked than that of older generations and examined how they engage in civic life through digital communication. The concepts of young citizens in the digital age, and the new modes of civic identity that online media enable, have also been explored (Dahlgren, 3; Loader, 1). Gerbaudo demonstrated how social media was being used to choreograph the actual physical meetings of protests, and Tufekci pointed out that fast-growing movements online might not be well-organised enough to maintain pressure (Tufekci, 3).

Risks are also a topic of interest in the literature. In online contexts, people can select information that reinforces their pre-existing attitudes, which can lead to group polarization (Sunstein, 44), and personalised algorithms could put users in a “filter bubble” (Pariser, 9). Mutz was also able to demonstrate that being exposed to cross-cutting orientations may raise awareness of rationales for opposing views, but may also decrease political participation, making it difficult to make straightforward claims about deliberation. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral found that false news on Twitter traveled further and faster than real news (Vosoughi et al., 1146), while Allcott and Gentzkow studied the spread and effect of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.



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In the Indian context, Jeffrey and Doron traced the path of the mobile phone becoming part of everyday life (Jeffrey and Doron, 1), Arora explored the digital habits of the next billion (Arora, 3) and Banaji and Bhat looked at the role of social media, and WhatsApp in particular, in spreading hate and disinformation (Banaji and Bhat, 1). This debate is set against the larger backdrop of Putnam's anxiety that new media could harm or reconfigure civic engagement. Most of the studies, however, have been carried out in a Western context or on small samples. There is a dearth of studies that use nationally available data on electoral participation and digital access and use for young Indians. This paper attempts to fill part of the void by using the secondary data available in conjunction with the theoretical literature.

Objectives

1. To explain the concept of political awareness and examine the role of social media in shaping it.
2. To examine the growth and expansion of internet and social media usage in India.
3. To analyse the political use of major social media platforms in India.
4. To study the role and significance of young voters in the Indian electoral system.
5. To identify the major opportunities and risks associated with the use of social media for promoting political awareness among youth and to suggest suitable measures for improving informed political participation.

Research Methodology

This research is descriptive and analytical with secondary data. The yearly Digital reports on India published by Data Reportal have been used for internet and social media data. Electorate and youth data have been extracted from the publications of the Election Commission of India while the result of post-poll surveys conducted by Lokniti-CSDS have been taken for context. Borrowings have been made from books and journal articles cited in the references both theoretical and empirical. The data is organized into three tables and can be compared over time by using values from tables and percentages of changes. The study has some limitations. Platform data is estimates and does not represent unique people, there is no primary survey of youth conducted and the data is rounded and should be compared to the most recent editions of the sources.

Social Media and Political Awareness: A Conceptual Framework

Social media can be defined as online services that enable users to write, post and react to content and interact with people. They are unique in that each one of their users can be not only a receiver of information but also a producer of information. This is unlike the traditional media one-to-many model. Bennett and Segerberg claims that these platforms allow for personalised and networked political action (Bennett and Segerberg, 739), while Castells underlines that they distribute messages in these networks through emotion and sharing, rather than institutional authority (Castells, 10). There are four channels through which social media has an impact on political awareness. The first is exposure: young people are exposed to political content outside of their main purpose for using a platform—such as for entertainment or social contact—and can



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be made aware of a topic they might otherwise not be interested in knowing about. The second is expression: posting, commenting and sharing enable youths to express opinions, and to try them in public. The third is mobilisation: platforms lower the expenses of organising protests, campaigns and volunteer activity, as in Bond et al. (Bond et al., 295). The fourth is influence from peers and opinion leaders, including influencers, because political information is frequently disseminated through peers and opinion leaders (and not through official news institutions), with the influence being greater the closer one is to them. Awareness can be increased in each channel, but each channel may also present with bias or falsehood, and so the quality of the information is as important as the quantity.

Youth represent a unique group in this process in several ways. Young people are in a developmental phase in which political identities and orientations to participation are being shaped, and in which the media environment in which they are growing up makes a lasting impact. While older Indians took their initial cues on the political from family, party affiliations and traditional media, for many young Indians, they formed their initial views from short videos, memes and posts from friends. However, low turnout or party membership is not necessarily seen as political apathy as young people are often disconnected from conventional political institutions; they are active in other civic expression (Loader, 1). Dahlgren also contended that the extent to which youth are civically engaged relies on whether they have the chance to learn and to speak and to be heard (Dahlgren, 3). Putnam's worry about new media and entertainment taking the place of traditional civic engagement is also important as it serves as a counterpoint, noting that the online activity could supplant instead of complement community engagement (Putnam, 216). These are some of the reasons that the impact of social media on youth should be studied separately.

Growth of Internet and Social Media Use in India

A social media's reach is contingent on the spread of Internet connectivity. The number of internet users and identities of user of social media in India and the percentage growth rates for each year from 2020 to 2025 are mentioned in table 1.

Table 1: Internet and Social Media Users in India, 2020-2025

Year (January)	Internet Users (million)	Annual Growth (%)	Social Media User Identities (million)	Annual Growth (%)
2020	560	-	400	-
2021	624	11.4	448	12
2022	658	5.4	467	4.2
2023	692	5.2	467	0
2024	751	8.5	462	-1.1
2025	806	7.3	491	6.3

Source: Data Reportal (Kepios), Digital 2020 to Digital 2025: India



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As per Table 1, the number of internet users in India has grown from around 560 million in 2020 to more than 800 million in 2025, almost 44 per cent in five years. The highest growth was in 2021 (+11.7 per cent) when work, education and entertainment went online as a result of the pandemic. The number of social media users increased from approximately 400 million to approximately 490 million during the same period, but has been more gradual and uneven and had not increased substantially between the years 2022 and 2024. This indicates that in India social media is hitting saturation level of accounts and hence going forward, the extent and nature of use will be more important than a large number of new users. In the book, Arora discusses the next billion users, demonstrating how a language, cost and social norms will influence the use of the smartphone for many first-time users an only device of access. It should be mentioned that the number of user identities may be more than people, as many people have multiple accounts.

Major Platforms and Their Political Uses

Some platforms are more influential than others on political awareness. Table 2 presents a summary of the approximate reach of each of the major platforms and the typical political usage of each.

Table 2: Major Social Media Platforms in India and Their Typical Political Uses

Platform	Approximate Reach in India (million, early 2024)	Typical Political Use
YouTube	460	Video news, explainers, long-form interviews and political commentary; live broadcast of rallies
Facebook	365	Community and constituency pages, local campaign groups, sharing of news links
Instagram	360	Short videos, visual messaging, influencer content and youth-oriented campaigns
WhatsApp	Over 500 (company reported)	Closed groups for party workers and communities; rapid forwarding of messages, including misinformation
X (formerly Twitter)	25	Announcements by leaders and parties, trending hashtags, journalists and policy debate

Source: Data Reportal, Digital 2024: India

The one glaring aspect of the Indian social media landscape that emerges out of Table 2 is that the platforms that have the highest reach aren't necessarily the ones that are more synonymous with elite political discussion. With a relatively limited user base of approximately 25 million, X plays an out of proportion role in setting the news agenda, by influencing the agenda of journalists, politicians and commentators. YouTube, Facebook and Instagram have several hundred million



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users and disseminate political messages to a larger audience than the English-speaking urban middle class, particularly in local languages. WhatsApp works differently as it's a private messaging app with groups that enable messages to move quickly in trusted groups. Banaji and Bhat believe that together, these factors of trust and speed create a formidable medium for the dissemination of both helpful and hurtful information, as well as misinformation (Banaji and Bhat, 1). Chadwick's concept of a hybrid media system is the reason for this, as a piece of content that's posted online can be picked up through broadcast, and broadcast media can be amplified through the internet (Chadwick, 4). Youth participation in the Indian Electoral System.

Young Voters in the Indian Electorate

The youth are important to the democratic politics of India not only as a percentage but also as first time voters. Table 3 shows the electorate size of the previous three general elections, as well as the number of registered voters in the age group of 18-19, for the first time or just about to vote for the first time.

Table 3: Electorate, Young Voters (18-19 Years) and Turnout in Recent General Elections

General Election	Total Electorate (crore, approx.)	Registered Voters aged 18-19 (crore, approx.)	Share of Electorate (%)	Overall Turnout (%)
2014	83.4	2.3	2.8	66.4
2019	91.2	1.5	1.6	67.4
2024	96.8	1.8	1.9	65.8

Source: Election Commission of India, press notes and statistical reports

The electorate has increased by around 13 crore people from 83 crore in 2014 to 97 crore in 2024 in the last 10 years, as summarised in Table 3. This was not mirrored by the number of voters in the 18-19 age group, however. Their vote share in both the 2014 and 2019 elections, and in 2024, was less than 3 per cent of the electorate, at 2.3 crore, 1.5 crore and 1.8 crore respectively. This means that while a large proportion of those eligible to enrol is the most digitally active cohort, very few have done so. In this regard the Election Commission has focused on social media and campus based programmes to motivate enrolment and the disparity between social media engagement and electoral registration is something that needs to be explored further.

Younger people, 30 and under, make up more than one-fifth of voters and have strong voices in the election. According to the survey, Indian youth are not using social media as their only source of political information; there are multiple sources of political information. Data from the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll study has suggested that while social media usage has increased significantly for obtaining information on politics, a significant portion of voters still use television and personal conversations to get political information, and that access to social media is highly uneven, both within and across urban and rural areas, and between men and women (Lokniti-CSDS). This means that mobile technology has been taken up into social relations, rather than supplanting



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them, Jeffrey and Doron remind us (1). This reinforces the notion that social media operates as a part of a wider system rather than in isolation; that family, community, education and the greater media context influence social media.

Illustrations of Youth Mobilisation through Social Media

There have been a number of instances in the past decade and a half which prove that social media can catalyze social awakening and action among the younger Indians for many different causes. Online networks, text messaging and live coverage were important tactics used in the anti-corruption campaign of 2011-12, which brought a large number of urban youth into public protest. The public reaction to the sexual assault case that took place in Delhi in December 2012 was no different, with online discussion and calls to assemble quickly spreading, which led to changes in the criminal law. In later protest and citizenship campaigns, as well as in campaigns on agriculture and Examination issues, hashtags, on-line petitions, video clips and encrypted messaging for organisation and publicity were also widely used, but opinions are polarised on the validity of these campaigns and the paper does not comment on them. What they demonstrate is the ability of platforms to bring together far-flung participants in a timely fashion. The episodes can be understood in terms of the concepts outlined above. In terms of choreography, Gerbaudo claimed that social media is the tool whereby activists can gather people in the real world, in public space, and to provide emotional guidance for the gathering (5).

Castells also highlighted the emotions that can fuel the diffusion of networked movements, such as anger and hope (Castells, 10). However, Tufekci noted the convenience of online mobilization can also lead to the emergence of movements on the public scene without the organization that previous movements have established, and that can significantly reduce their skills to negotiate and maintain pressure (Tufekci, 3). Both are supported by Indian experience: the online campaigns were successful in gaining instant visibility, and the ones that succeeded in institutional change have done so with mixed results. Electoral management bodies have also leveraged the social media for civic uses. The Election Commission conducts voter education programmes, using digital platforms, social media accounts and online voter registration tools, and collaborates with educational institutions to engage young people nearing voting age. These are examples of social media as a site of contestation, but also as a medium of institutional outreach, and as a means by which the state can promote political awareness of youth in a non-partisan way. They also suggest that social cues (as when friends are seen voting) are even more effective, which echoes the design of campaigns that increase visibility of peer participation (Bond et al., 295).

Language, Region and Gender Dimensions

There is a certain aspect that is language in this. An increasing proportion of users in India use the internet mainly in the Indian language, and new video platforms and short-video apps have helped streamline the experience for non-English speakers to watch and create political videos. The experiences of such users are not the same as that of the English-speaking urban middle class, however, as they are only able to access it at a price, shared devices and local social norms (Arora,



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3). Political communication in regional languages has, therefore, broadened the audience for political discourse, at the same time, however, making it harder to verify claims by people who don't belong to the language community, such as fact-checkers. It is also important to take into account region and gender. In general, urban youth have quicker connections and own more personal devices, while the rural population, and in particular young women, rely on a family phone, and have restricted access to it. As Jeffrey and Doron note, the mobile phone in India has become integrated into preexisting gender, age and caste-based hierarchies (1), some of which reduce the mobility of the phone and others that increase it. Although women with political opinions are less likely to be present online, those who are more likely to be targeted for abuse, as Banaji and Bhat observe in their study on online hate (Banaji and Bhat, 1). Both Loader (1) and Dahlgren (3) have suggested that youth should not be considered as a homogeneous group and that a variety of civic identities are developed in various social contexts. The unequal access, confidence, and safety conditions, which shape who gains access to the new 'digipublic sphere' and who feels safe to do so, should thus be taken into account in any evaluation of social media and political awareness.

Reading the Evidence Together

The three tables suggest some tentative conclusions. As shown in Table 1, connectivity has increased significantly, but growth in the number of social media accounts has started to slow down, thereby making the policy question of "access" transition to "quality of use." As seen in Table 2, political communication occurs on platforms of very different character, with open and public platforms (e.g., X and YouTube) giving a visible agenda; and closed comms groups on WhatsApp give a private opinion, where scrutiny is limited. Table 3 also indicates that the youngest age group are still a small proportion of the registered electorate, reflecting the fact that interest in politics online does not yet translate into formal registration. A pattern emerges from the three findings—digital exposure is ubiquitous, but a move from exposure to informed and sustained participation requires proactive support. This reading also assists with placing social media in the broader of the theories discussed above. The more optimistic perspective (held by Shirky and by Gil de Zuniga et al.) holds that platforms are instruments that expand participation (Shirky, 29).

The conservative perspective, identified with the contributions of Sunstein, Pariser and Tufekci, focuses on fragmentation and fragility (Tufekci, 3). The Indian figures are in line with an intermediate position. While social media certainly increases the visibility of politics to young people, the extent to which this visibility translates into understanding depends on how content is produced and developed, and on the skills of social media users and the institutions that bring social media into the realm of political life. The positive aspects of social media in terms of young peoples' political awareness are discussed.

Positive Contributions of Social Media to Youth Political Awareness

The first and most obvious contribution is one of information. Almost any parliamentary debate can be followed by young users; party manifestos are read; candidate interviews are watched and



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news from various sources is compared on near-free basis. Gil de Zuniga et al. also determined that the users of social media for news had a higher level of civic engagement (Gil de Zuniga et al., 319) and Boulianne's meta analysis confirmed that there was a positive but small relationship between the use of social media for news and participation (Boulianne, 524). Secondly, social media reduces the barriers to expression and organisation. Youth who feel disillusioned of the main political parties can organize issue-based groups, initiate a petition, and mobilize resources and publicize local issues. This personalised participation can be scaled up without formal organisations, as Bennett and Segerberg note, “connective action” (739). Hashtags and online petitions have been used to bring attention to media and officials on campaigns related to student issues, environment, examination irregularities, and public safety in India. Third, social media provides an platform to people underrepresented in mainstream media like Dalit, Adivasi youth; Small Town youth to share their experience directly. Fourth, social media enables political oversight, by enabling citizens to document and share cases of administrative shortcomings and pose direct questions to leaders. Last but not least, the electoral authorities, as well as other elections stakeholders, inform young people about voter registration and polling procedures and their rights through voter awareness drives.

Risks and Challenges

When social media is working well, it poses significant dangers. The foremost is misinformation. Vosoughi et al. (1146) discovered that fake information spread even further and faster than true information, while Allcott and Gentzkow (211) demonstrated that false information can spread widely during elections. Rumours in India's messaging groups have played a role in the communal tensions and violence that have occurred in the country (Banaji and Bhat, 1). Young people may be particularly vulnerable as they are likely to read news in short snippets and forwarded messages without verifying the source. The other danger is that of echo chambers and polarisation. When people curate information for themselves that aligns with their worldviews, groups grow more radical (Sunstein, 44), and Pariser said that algorithmic personalisation exacerbates this trend (Pariser, 9). While there is disagreement as to the extent of this effect, platform designs that incentivize engagement are known to highlight emotive and divisive content. Thirdly, online hostility and trolling and organised abuse may dissuade youth, particularly women and people from minority groups, from participating in political discussions. Fourth, shallow participation is an issue. There are threats that being digitally active is easy to create attention but not necessarily build the organisational capacity and strategic skill that movements require, as critics call it slacktivism because of online actions that don't manifest in offline action (Tufekci, 3). Fifth, the benefits of the digital divide are limited.

Arora's work reveals that access, language and device quality vary significantly across Indian users (Arora, 3) and that the political voice of social media could be greater among the youth, male, and more educated, than among the rest of the population. Sixth, questions concerning how the data was used, the nature of microtargeting and how it can be used for covert political advertising pose questions about the fairness of elections. Last but not least, state control over



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online content, such as takedown requests and internet shutdowns, sets up a conflict between the regulation of bad content and the free expression that is at the heart of democratic communication, as highlighted in Dahlgren's research on young citizens and new media (Dahlgren, 3).

Suggestions

There are multiple ways in which social media can be used to help people be more politically aware. First, media and information literacy must be incorporated in the school and college curricula, and youth should be able to identify what is true or not and how algorithms influence what they see. Second, platforms should be more accountable, with transparency on political advertising, labelling of paid and automated content, and timely intervention on coordinated disinformation, and by working with independent fact-checkers. Third, regulation should be proportionate, transparent and subject to judicial review, and not serve as an instrument to stifle legitimate dissent in the form of harmful content. Fourth, electoral authorities and educational institutions should leverage more regional language social media spaces to promote enrolment and voting among the youth, and also link online awareness with offline opportunities like campus democracy clubs and civic internships. Fifth, political parties should have codes of conduct for digital campaigning and dissuade abuse. Sixth, investment is required in digital infrastructure and affordable access in rural and disadvantaged communities in order to close the gap. Last, more primary research, focusing on gender, region and language, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on political knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

Conclusion

The paper through secondary data and literature has tried to look into the phenomenon of how social media is contributing to political awareness among the youth in India. The evidence demonstrates that digital connectivity has increased exponentially from an estimated 560 million to more than 800 million of users of the internet between 2020 and 2025, and its use of platforms for political communication, expression and mobilisation, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and X, is now commonplace. Social media provides low cost information for young citizens (who make up a significant part of the electorate) and provides opportunities for voice and new forms of organisation. The analysis also reveals these benefits come with a very high risk. The exposure to political content does not guarantee understanding, and this is due to the presence of misinformation, echo chambers, hostility, unequal access, etc.

The small proportion of young people at the bottom of the voter register – despite their high level of digital engagement – indicates that digital activity is not always correlated with formal political participation. The use of social media should be regarded as a catalyst to the social and political climate rather than a surrogate for civic education, institutions and community. The job of policy-makers, educators, platforms and young people is to make the volume of political information on the Internet reflect the quality of the political awareness of the young people themselves. So, if it is done, social media can reinforce the pillars of the Indian democracy; if not, it can contribute to the cacophony that undermines them.



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