

Forum on General Elections 2019: Issues & Challenges

Date and Venue: 10th October, 2019 at Lecture Room – 1 (Annexe), India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi

Session 2: Social Media, Election Expenditure and Voter Influence: Changing Face of Electoral Politics in India?

Background Notes

Subtheme 1: How candidates and political parties are using social media for electoral campaigning?

The idea of social media as a force-multiplier in politics has gained virality in our minds, especially in last four years. According to [Datareportal's Digital 2019: India report](#),¹ out of total population of 1.361 billion, around 41% i.e. 560 million Indians are active users of internet and total no. of active social media users are 310 million (23% of population). More recently, social media have become Fundamental “spaces” for political organizing and activity, and people get much of their information on public matters from social media sites.

Political parties and other political actors increasingly use data analytics, digital media, and micro-targeting, which make campaigns more “personalized”. Where as in the past, if political candidates wanted to reach voters during election campaigns, they had to hand out leaflets, knock on doors, hold public meetings (rallies) and drive around in cars/open jeeps shouting through loud-hailers.

Aided by affordable 4G internet connection and smartphones, social media has been a godsend for parties who can save on time, resources, and efforts of physical coverage of these areas by reaching out to more voters on a personal level, in an interactive format. Unmediated access between politicians and the people is rewriting the rules of political interactions and processes, creating a new software of democracy. Advancements in online technology, have given political parties and supporters new ways of getting their message across.

The prevalence of social media in politics has made elected officials and candidates more accountable and accessible to voters. The ability to publish content and broadcast it to millions of people instantaneously allows campaigns to carefully manage their candidates’ images based on rich sets of analytics in real time.

Thus, for candidates/political parties, social media platforms are the de-facto medium for influencing their voters and creating a wave of change. All political parties use social media to target voters. Often the message is direct and above board. Sometimes, parties use seedy advertising strategies and humor to get their point across, promote themselves or undermine the opposition.

While social media has been used positively to make voters more politically aware and part of political discussions, its negative use has increased in the last four years in terms of the spread of disinformation and propaganda that create false backstories of opposition leaders, negative stereo-types of religion and caste. In the cycle of propaganda and counter-propaganda, all parties have normalized negativity and abuse online. Social media strategies are the most potent weapons which have become a game changer of late. The party that creates the most innovative social media election strategies will be able to influence their voters and thus get more votes.

What is emerging, is the alarming possibility that outside interests are working to undermine the democratic process in a much more subtle and surreptitious way. Citizens sharing political views on social media is a good thing. The problem comes when we get a significantly resourced outside organisation spending a lot of money for advertising and propaganda to millions of people across social media platforms to influence or distort an election for reasons of their own. Newspaper headlines and social media feeds are full of stories of hacked documents, troll networks, and bot-driven misinformation campaigns.

From the [Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's WhatsApp campaigns to influence voters](#)² to the [Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte's use of Facebook and troll armies](#)³ to broadcast and amplify his support, social media has been used by political parties both as a tool of empowerment and oppression.

[Facebook admitted](#)⁴ its platform had been exploited by political parties and other interests during elections. A report from the company's security team outlined what it calls 'information operations' – coordinated efforts by malicious actors to spread misinformation and sow distrust, for political ends.

With this as the background, we hope this panel could dwell on the misinformation campaigns, micro-targeted manipulation, and trolling. These techniques are distinct, though they are often used in tandem. By what mechanisms can digital techniques of campaigns significantly affect electoral outcomes? Are political social media campaigns a threat to democratic elections? What are the impacts of these threats and can impact not just election outcomes, but the key democratic activities of participation, public deliberation, and institutional action? What are the key vulnerabilities to digital threats and what counter-measures can be taken? How are political parties, electoral commissions, and other democratic institutions affected by these digital techniques? How do they respond? Can cross-institutional comparisons reveal different vulnerabilities and effective counter-measures?

- By Divya Arora
Sr. Software Analyst, ADR

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Subtheme 2: Social Media and Changing Nature of Election Expenditure

Today's innovation becomes the norm for tomorrow. This can be rightly said about the social media's role in election campaigning in India. During the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, political parties were exploring this medium for their campaign to influence 'online' voters through the virtual mass media. However, by the time for Lok Sabha 2019 election campaign started, social media did not remain a new tool to influence the voters. Instead it became the one of the most dominant tools which could not be overlooked by the political parties and candidates. Gills Verniers, a professor at Ashoka University, said that social media has become "[a constant megaphone](#)" for political parties to amplify their messages. Around [40 percent](#) of the voters acknowledged receiving poll related messages on their mobile phones just before the polling day.

Extensive reach and greater impact of social media has been considered the primary reason for its popularity among the candidates and political parties for political campaigning. Another important factor is the monetary aspect of social media campaigning. Campaigning through Social media is relatively economical with respect to other conventional methods such as rallies, processions, usage of print and electronic media etc. According to the survey conducted by the Centre for Media Studies, even though social media was extensively used by political parties for campaigning during the Lok Sabha 2019 elections, yet [digital ads amounted to less than 1%](#) of their expenditure.

It is noteworthy that this is limited to the expenditure incurred through the official accounts for the campaigning. However, political parties and candidates are campaigning more than what could be tracked and accounted. This kind of political campaigning is executed through 'viral-posts' campaigning. In such cases, these posts/tweets are shared by party followers, social media influencers and pages which are not directly related to the party or the candidates. Thus, it becomes difficult to track these activities under election expenditure incurred by political parties and candidates on social media. Campaigning of this nature works to the benefit of the parties and candidates who cannot account for such indirect publicity under their election campaign expenditure. Further, such content is also seen as more influential for the voters than digital ads.

Addressing this additional mode of campaigning through social media, the Election Commission of India issued guideline to be taken to monitor activities and expenditure incurred by political parties and candidates on social media campaigning. Such measures include:

- Application of model code of conduct to social media campaigning
- Inclusion of online campaigning expenditure in election expenditure statements of political parties and candidates.
- One Social media expert to be a part of district and state level of Media Certification and Monitoring Committees

Elaborating on the current scenario, we would like the panellist to discuss the changing nature of campaigning and election expenditure through social media. To which extent social media will affect the overall cost of election campaigning. Further, it would be interesting to know the panellist's views on the future of social media and election expenditure in the times of constant technological advancement.

By Loveleena Sharma
Senior Program Associate, ADR

Subtheme 3: Regulation of political propaganda/campaigning on social media

General Elections 2014 marked social media platforms as a major tool to impact the dynamics of politics. It is no news that social media played a key role to spread fake news, hate speech, and paid news to mislead voters. Hence, prior to the Lok Sabha 2019, Election Commission of India (ECI), along with the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), and social media giants like Facebook, Google, Twitter and other platforms, adopted a “Voluntary Code of Ethics for the General Election 2019” to regulate the misuse of social media.

The code allows the social media platforms to implement policies and processes which assure access to information on electoral matters which are appropriate while keeping in mind the principle of freedom of expression.¹

With the increasing flow of fake news, paid news and hate speech to elevate the political propaganda, it becomes paramount to monitor political activities on social media. Following are a few measures taken by ECI and some social media giants:

- ECI made it mandatory for all the candidates contesting in 2019 elections to mention their social media handles in their affidavit. They also made it compulsory for all political social media advertisements to pre-certify from the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees (MCMCs) in place at the district and state levels.
- Facebook partnered with third-parties for fact-check and made their Ad Library public which displays all active and inactive ads around social issues, elections and politics to bring ad transparency. Similar ad library measure has been also opted by Twitter and Google.
- Google went one step ahead and hosted training sessions for Indian journalists on online verification and fact-checking, journalist digital safety and security, YouTube for elections coverage and data visualization for elections.
- Now, Twitter only allows political campaigning ads to run via promoted tweets and in-stream video ads. To run political ads, the political advertiser has to obtain Twitter Certification.²
- In a white paper called Stopping Abuse released by WhatsApp in early 2019, the company revealed that they deleted around 2 million accounts to tackle fake news.³ These accounts have bulk or automated behaviour which means they send high volumes of messages. WhatsApp also launched CheckPoint Tipline which allows its users to submit suspicious content to know its authenticity. In 2 months of CheckPoint’s launch, it received about 75,000 authentication requests from the users.⁴
- ECI together with social media platforms have developed a notification mechanism. The electoral body notifies about the violation under Section 126 of the Representation of the People Act, and on other matters. Post which, an action is taken on such violations within three hours.
- During General Elections 2019, Twitter deleted around 220 tweets by May, Facebook deleted about 702 pages, accounts and groups (as reported on 01 April 2019).⁵ About 60 Facebook political advertisement posts were found during the silent period.⁶ These contents were taken down on the grounds of violation of Code of Ethics, communal hate, junk news and bypassing anti-spam.⁷

With this as the background, we hope this panel would discuss some important questions like how far we have reached with the above-listed regulation strategies. Are the implemented strategies enough to tackle the spread of fake news, hate speech and paid news for a country like India? Are voters even aware about the above-listed

regulation strategies? How gravely have social media platforms affected General Elections 2019? Did the impact of social media decrease in this General Elections in comparison to General Elections 2014?

By Nandini Raj
Program Associate – Communications
Association for Democratic Reforms

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