

Shaping Votes: The Intersection of Social Media and Political Communication

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Received: 23 March 2026 / Accepted: 30 March 2026 / Published: 31 March 2026
Journal homepage: <https://anubodhan.org>

Abstract

Elections are fundamental expressions of democratic practice and are increasingly entwined with changing modes of information dissemination. Social media platforms have become crucial spaces for the creation, dissemination, and contestation of political narratives in recent years. This study considers the widespread belief that these platforms, particularly Instagram and Facebook, exert significant influence on electoral outcomes, with their impact manifesting in similar magnitude but through different mechanisms. The paper explores the interaction between different forms of online political communication vis-à-vis unofficial social media accounts' political news coverage and official political party campaigns, and their potential to shape narratives within the digital public sphere. Drawing on

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primary evidence, it was established that third party social media accounts gain more traction than political parties' official social media campaigns because of their more interactive, engaging and easy-to understand communication, proving the importance of memes, reels and other social media communication tools in political narrative setting online. The contribution of these dynamics to engagement and opinion formation amongst social media users and the electorate is also emphasised. The study concludes that the influence of social media on pivotal and overarching democratic processes like elections is significant, varied and multifaceted, necessitating attention from policymakers and politicians.

Introduction

Democracy is seen and described as an institutional arrangement where the means of filling a public office is by a competitive struggle for people's vote. This means to fill a public office is referred to as Elections. It is from the Old French 'elecion' meaning- choice, election, selection. Democratic Elections in the presented approach are a legitimised procedure of peaceful takeover of power, giving those exercising power the comfort of having a social mandate, contributing to the consolidation of the political system (Diamond, 1994 as cited in Wojtasik, 2013). Electoral outcomes are single-handedly the most important and impactful event in the overarching political landscape of a country, which can be corroborated by the increased media interest of the actions and decisions taken at the national arena.

A widely-held belief today is that electoral outcomes are most affected by social media, and that this impact is disproportionate in comparison to preceding forms of media. This paper intends to study the facticity of this belief, limiting itself to social media site Instagram and micro-blogging site X (erstwhile Twitter). It also aims to understand if this impact by social media is variegated or not in terms of adoption of different tools and mediums to present/deliver the same content to netizens. A contextualisation has been attempted with the case study of Delhi 2025 State Assembly Elections.

A field investigation was conducted in April, 2025, covering 400 respondents across Delhi. This group was dominated by the electorate of the 2024 General Elections of India and was selected based on random sampling. To better understand the kind of social media content and posts which gain traction, 250 netizens were also surveyed in April 2025.

Background

Media is the plural form of medium, described as "a means one can use to express or communicate something" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Anything that a Sender employs to communicate the message to the receiver is a medium,

as explained in the Sender Message Channel Receiver or Transmission Model by David Berlo (1960) (Hanson, 1973). The sender and receiver here can be equal in numbers as individuals or groups. Typically, when the sender is one person or a smaller group of individuals and the receiver is a bigger group or community, the medium employed is called mass media. In essence, any form of media that has the potential and intention to reach a mass audience constitutes mass media. (McQuail, 2010)

Political communication is anything that encompasses the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics. The message has to have a significant political effect on the thinking, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals, groups, institutions, and the whole societies and environment in which they exist. (Graber & Smith, 2005) At the core, Political communication is the role of communications in the political process (Chaffee, 1975 as cited in Kaid, 2004).

The interaction between political actors (parties, candidates, pressure groups, new social movements), the media, and the citizens (public, voters, social groups) forms the bedrock of political communication (Jensen, 2001 as cited in Goncalves, 2018). This is best elucidated by Harold Lasswell in his five-question model of communication: “Who says What to Whom via Which channel with What effects”, indicating the influence of media on political opinion (and voting behaviour) best. This influence can be as rudimentary as guiding and influencing the readers/viewers to what to think about than what to think (Bernard Cohen), as postulated in the agenda-setting theories to influencing the direction to think in about the issue at hand, best captured in the phrase from Lippman’s Public Opinion (1922), “The World Outside and the Pictures in our heads,” compelling one to believe about the influence of media at every step of opinion formation. One often finds the various channels of mass media deviating from their original and actual role of reporting straight facts to setting narratives, often restricting the perspectives a reader/viewer is exposed to. This cycle has been broken every time with the rise of newer forms of media, which posit increased accessibility and accountability.

Needless to say, political communication has evolved over centuries with newer forms of media yielding better influence and enjoying better penetration in society, affecting the electorate's awareness. Before the advent of any technological form of communication, political rallies, and campaign speeches’ knowledge was only restricted to the attendees of the campaign and individuals who lived in some geographical proximity, where information dissemination was possible. The Industrial Revolution made printing technology easier and cheaper after it was invented in 1440 by Johann Gottenberg and was only used to print religious books initially. Speech contents started getting documented and literate non-attendees outside a specific geography were able to access such information. The arrival of radio started including all people capable of hearing

in this group, and with television (and other forms of visual-electronic media) this group grew in size. Today, with digital media, every citizen has access to such information at one click.

The development and evolution of media have also transformed the information dissemination pattern from a downward direction to a vertical direction. Earlier, it was relatively difficult for the political sphere to keep a finger on the pulse of the electorate with limited media to get the latter's view on issues. Today, with digital technologies' pervasiveness, every citizen/ user gets an opportunity to voice their opinion or express their dissent on the very same platform as their leaders, making communication a two-way model, which, too, has affected how the political sphere interacts with the public.

A lot of studies and research have been done to understand this influence. The 2008 US Presidential Elections and the 2014 Indian General Elections are the most popular ones for being the harbinger of introducing social media into the electoral landscape of their respective countries, with Barack Obama and Narendra Modi often being referred to as "Social Media President/ Prime Minister". These studies, however, view social media's impact in light of the pre-social media era, depicting them as "newer" technologies co-existing (though with greater influence) with others (electronic and print). Today, however, electoral outcomes seem to be most affected by social media, so much so that it is difficult for a typical first-time-voter to imagine an election with no Twitter/ X trending hashtags, no news anchors comparing the likes received by two rival political leaders on their posts (indicative of their traction), not getting real-time updates about the electoral campaign happening in another state or country, and no fact-checking units (with questionable reliability themselves) sieving the truth from hate speech and mis/dis-information online.

This forces one to believe that social media and other digital technologies have the greatest and most direct impact on political opinions, electoral choices, and voting behaviour of the electorate. Today, many traditional news media journalists confess to having "Social-Media trackers" in their team whose job is to source information about "What's trending?" from social media platforms. The vertical distribution of information, too, has changed this interaction, with political leaders feeling more obliged to be accountable and transparent to their vote bank via these media. Furthermore, election commissions around the world have started taking the happenings on the internet far more seriously today with the issuing of guidelines and warning notices addressed to social media users and the public respectively about the responsible usage of the platforms and the responsible consumption of the information available, proving its influence.

Methodology

This study was conducted in three segments. The first segment presents an

historical analysis to understand how mass media and its interaction with politics and election has evolved over decades facilitating better communication, deeper information penetration in the society and more influence in terms of opinion formation. It examines how different forms of media have engaged with politics in distinct ways, shaped by their unique audiences and the evolution of technological advancements, historically. It also explores how the interplay between media and politics resulted in varying campaign strategies, with each influencing and adapting to the other over time.

The second segment attempts to address the shortcoming of little to no presence of empirical data to understand this relation, by doing an empirical analysis based on a field investigation conducted in May- April 2025 in the Delhi- National Capital Region with a total respondent count of 400. The electorate of the 2024 General Election dominated this respondent group, followed by the electorate of the 2025 Delhi Assembly Elections. The interviews were structured, subjected to on-spot modification for better engagement at the discretion of the field investigator. The analysis brought out by this investigation prompted the researchers to understand the political social media campaigns better by examining what content gains more traction online.

The third segment, in order to explore the earlier mentioned area and to ensure that the point of view of netizens doesn't get left at bay because of their important positioning at the receiving end of the online campaigns, involved an online survey constituting of (previously or currently live) social media posts and campaigns from the 2024 General Election of India and 2025 Delhi Assembly Election. The total respondent count was of 250 individuals from across various social media and chatting platforms- WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Quora, Reddit amongst others. The insights were of specific importance to understand the variegated engagement on social media posts.

Historical Analysis

This section argues that the impact of social media on the electorate hasn't been disproportionate as commonly understood. It has been rather the effect of progressive technological advancements over decades in the forms of mass media which increased their access and hence the impact they generated. A brief analysis of all forms of mass media from print to electronic to the most pervasive digital media, along with examples from Indian political and electoral history, are mentioned in this section to substantiate the arguments made.

A. *Print Media:*

This was the first stage in the development of a media form for information dissemination for political and social purposes. Its major tools included:

i. *Pamphlets*

Pamphlets were employed extensively, most notably by the Hindustan Socialist

ii. Republican Association (HSRA) to propagate *anti-colonial* sentiment (Singh, 1929). During the *Emergency* (1975–77), they were used by underground opposition networks to expose human rights violations and mobilise resistance against Indira Gandhi’s authoritarian rule.

iii. **Billboards**

Billboards became a prominent tool in post-independence electoral communication. Key examples include Indira Gandhi’s *Garibi Hatao* campaign (1971), the BJP’s *India Shining* (2004) and *Ab Ki Baar Modi Sarkar* (2014), and the Aam Aadmi Party’s (AAP) issue-based campaigns such as *Paani Bill Half, Bijli Bill Half* (2015).

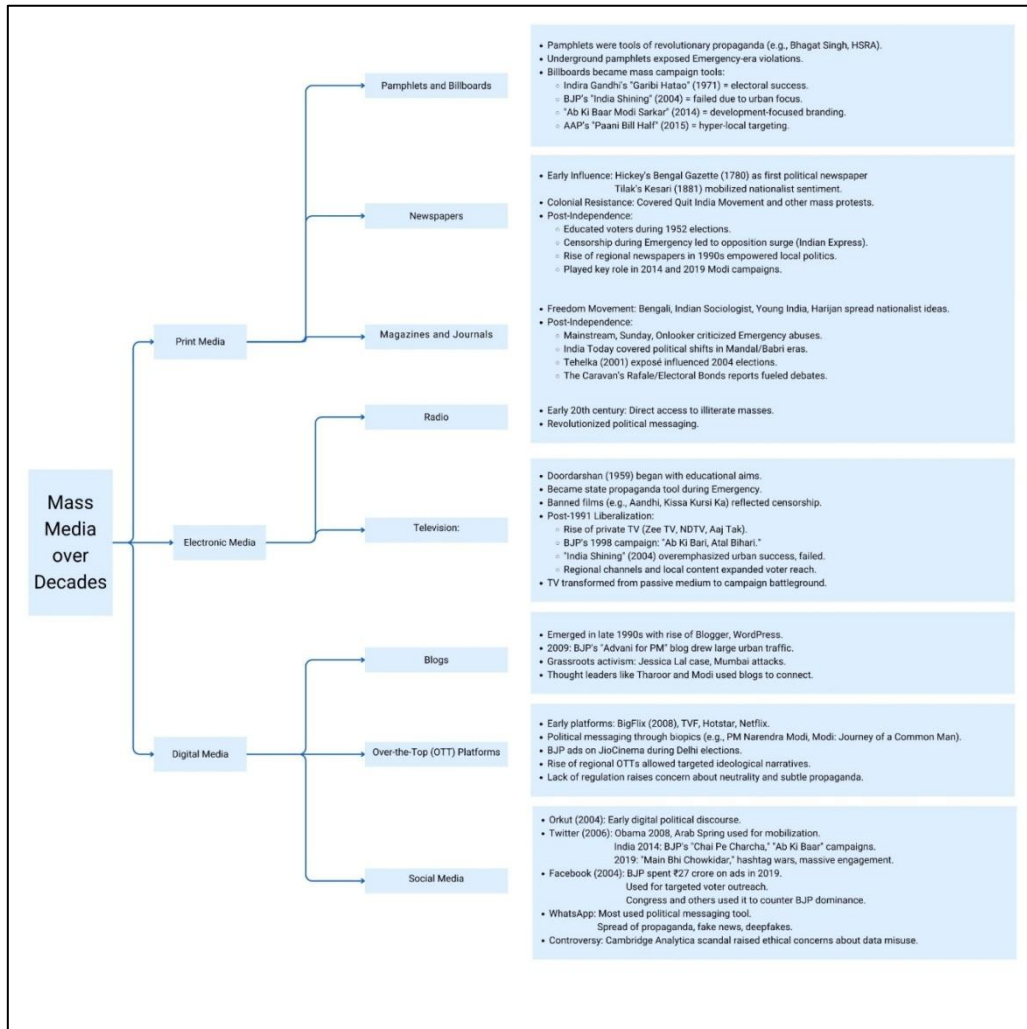
iv. **Newspapers**

Newspapers played a foundational role in political communication in India, beginning with *Hickey’s Bengal Gazette* (1780) and continuing with Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s *Kesari* (1881), both of which emerged as influential nationalist platforms. *The Indian Express* became significant during the *Emergency* for its critical reportage. The 1990s saw the rise of regional newspapers—such as *Dainik Bhaskar*, *Eenadu*, and *Malayala Manorama*—which strengthened regional political parties and decentralised the political public sphere.

iv. **Magazines**

Magazines such as *Bengalee*, edited by Surendranath Banerjee during the Swadeshi Movement, and *Sunday* and *Onlooker* during the *Emergency*, contributed substantially to political discourse. Later publications such as *India Today*, *Tehelka*, and *Caravan* played a key role in shaping post-coalition political analysis through investigative and long-form reporting.

This stage marked the beginning of a political communication environment in which campaigns and their rhetorical strategies were systematically documented and disseminated. It significantly expanded the scale of political outreach and created the foundational conditions for subsequent transformations in media forms, while also enabling the delivery of credible information and sustained coverage of political developments over the decades.



Brief description of evolution of forms of mass media and their consequent effects on the Indian electoral/ political scenario

B. Electronic Media

This constituted the second stage in the evolution of media forms that facilitated political communication on a much larger scale. Its tools comprised:

i. Radio and Television

Radio was used during the anti-colonial struggle to reach the public and became a key post-independence medium with the establishment of *All India Radio*, which disseminated news and educational content. Until the early 1990s, radio remained entirely state-controlled.

ii. Television

In its early decades, television was controlled by the state, which proved detrimental during the *Emergency* when politically sensitive films such as *Aandhi* (1975) and *Kissa Kursi Ka* (1977) were banned. The 1991 reforms fundamentally altered this environment, transforming television into a diverse and competitive media landscape. Global media corporations like *Star TV*, *Sony*, and *MTV* entered the Indian market with localisation strategies that ensured political content reached even remote parts of the country.

Simultaneously, private news channels such as *Zee TV* (1992), *NDTV* (1998), and *Aaj Tak* (2000) emerged, revolutionising political communication by offering continuous election coverage, live debates, and prime-time interviews. Political parties increasingly used these platforms to gain direct access to wider audiences. Radio and television were also used jointly for political campaign advertising—for example, “*Ab Ki Bari, Atal Bihari*” (1998) and the *BJP*’s “*India Shining*” (2004).

It is important to recognise that radio and television did not replace one another; rather, they *collectively* shaped political discourse. However, like radio, television remained a one-way medium in which voters consumed information without interactive engagement.

This stage enabled political messages and news content to reach remote corners of the country, democratising access even for non-literate strata. It enhanced voter engagement during elections and transformed campaign practices, with visuals acquiring equal importance—and sometimes precedence—over other campaign materials.

C. *Digital Age*

This stage was a direct manifestation of the globalisation reforms India had adopted, which made its digital boundaries more porous and opened the country to the dotcom boom and the Internet age. Its major tools included:

i. *Blogs:*

Blogs emerged as important early tools for political communication. The *BJP*’s “*Advani for PM*” *blog-driven campaign* (2008) featured over 200 posts and attracted more than 500,000 visitors, while the Indian National Congress countered with digital outreach focused on social justice and youth engagement (Advani, 2008). *Karnataka’s 2008 assembly elections* further demonstrated how political parties used blogs to connect with urban, tech-savvy voters (Praja Rajyam Monnet, 2009).

ii. *Social Media:*

By the 2009 General Elections, discussions on *Orkut* had evolved into digital town halls, indicating a shift in political mobilisation. Political parties began recognising the platform’s potential, using *Orkut* communities to gauge public

sentiment, rally support, and counter opposing narratives (Parida & Das, 2014).

India's 2014 General Election marked *Twitter's* rise as a central political tool. Narendra Modi's campaign mastered digital storytelling through initiatives like "*Chai Pe Charcha*" and "*Ab Ki Baar, Modi Sarkar*," which trended for weeks (Bajaj, 2017). The BJP's rapid rebuttal to Rahul Gandhi's "*suit-boot ki sarkar*" remark demonstrated Twitter's capacity for real-time narrative control.

By 2019, political contestation on Twitter intensified. Modi's "*Main Bhi Chowkidar*" countered Gandhi's "*Chowkidar Chor Hai*," trending globally with 1.5 million tweets in 24 hours. Hashtags such as *#BalakotAirstrike* and *#ModiHaiToMumkinHai* shaped public sentiment, while Modi's "India wins yet again!" tweet set record engagement levels.

The 2014 and 2019 General Elections also witnessed unprecedented reliance on *Facebook* and *WhatsApp*. The BJP employed targeted advertisements, coordinated engagement strategies, and thousands of WhatsApp groups to disseminate campaign messages. In 2019 alone, the BJP reportedly spent over ₹27 crore on Facebook advertisements between February and May (The Economic Times, 2019). The Congress and regional parties also adopted Facebook and WhatsApp extensively to counter this digital dominance.

WhatsApp, with over 400 million users in India, became a primary medium for spreading political messages, propaganda, and misinformation. *Fact-checking organisations* such as Alt News and Boom Live documented the rise of fake news, including deepfakes and doctored videos, aimed at shaping voter perception (Alt News, 2024).

This latest stage of media evolution warrants deeper inquiry into its nature of influence during elections and political campaigns. With the means of political communication now widely distributed and easily accessible, the impact of digital media on political choices, voting behaviour, and electoral beliefs appears evident. However, empirical research supporting the commonly held belief that social media affects election results, remain almost non-extant. The next section addresses this gap.

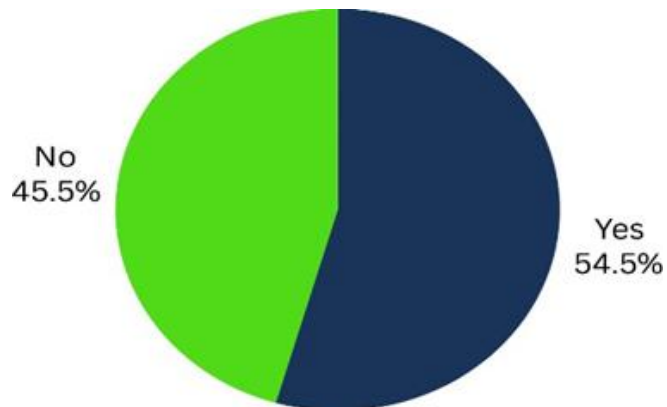
The Empirical analysis

The following analysis is inclusive of the insights from both the interviews and surveys. Henceforth, a structured analysis is presented to understand the electorate's perception of politics, election, and social media, along with the latter's influence on voting and the former two, the variegated response on social media campaigns and the Delhi Election of 2025. This is preceded by an analysis of the respondent demographic.

1. Understanding the Respondent Demographic

a. Interviews:

- i.** The sample size was of 400 individuals, out of which 80% of the respondents were students in the age bracket of 17 to 22.
 - ii.** 54% of the respondents identified themselves with an “upper middle class”² background, followed by lower middle-class background (35.5%), rich (5.8%) and poor (4.7%).
 - iii.** This was limited to the geographical region of Delhi- NCR, with a domination by 2024 General Election’s electorate, followed by the 2025 Delhi State Assembly Election’s electorate.
- b. Surveys:**
- i.** The sample size was of 250 individuals, of which 65% fell in the age bracket of 19-21 years.
 - 2.** The respondent’s interest in politics and elections:
 - a.** 76.3% of the respondents expressed their interest in understanding the political landscape of the country, with 87.5% of respondents showing an affirmative reception towards the importance of the election and its impact.
 - b.** 54.5% of the respondents exercise their right to vote because of the following commonly mentioned reasons:
 - i.** Because it is an active citizen’s duty
 - ii.** Because it is a citizen’s right
 - iii.** By exercising their right, they can hold the government accountable
 - iv.** It is what their parents had asked them to do
 - v.** Because elections are costly, and thus these resources shouldn't go to vain
 - vi.** To get concessions
 - c.** 45.5% of the respondents do not exercise their right to vote because of the following commonly mentioned reasons:
 - i.** Logistical/administrative challenges
 - ii.** Skeptical of the system
 - iii.** No real change or impact after elections



Respondents' Participation in Elections

An individual's perception of politics and election, heavily influences their decision to cast their vote. While a small proportion "exercise their right" out of a moral obligation, most people vote out of hope for a change or an impact on their lives directly- which has increased with the trend of Direct Cash Transfers since last year, which signals of a healthy democracy. It must be noted that since a significant chunk of the respondents' group was that of outstation students, the most commonly cited reason to not being able to vote was logistical

1. Social Media

a. 80% of the respondents perceive social media to be a newer form of media, as opposed to the rest 20% who think of it as a completely distinct form of media.

b. 53.3% of the respondents accept the influence of social media on their voting behaviour, however, 67.3% believe that social media influences the voting behaviour of others.

c. There is also a dissonance between a platform a voter perceives to be a source of more credible information and a platform which a voter uses to get information.

d. Different social media tools (memes, reels, long-text posts) used have different impact on the voting choices of a voter.

e. 61.3% of the respondents believe that Facebook and Instagram have different audiences.

i. Facebook has a less literate and more rural audience in comparison to Instagram, which has a more literate and urban audience.

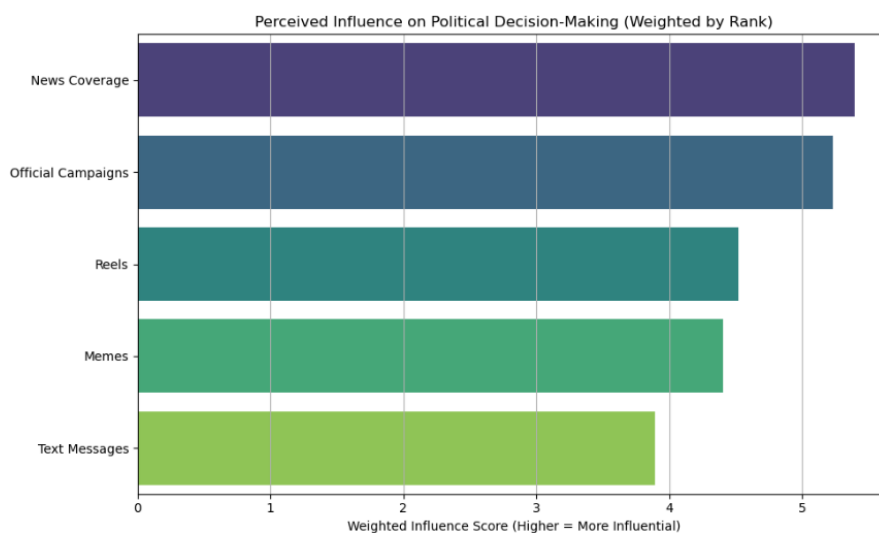
ii. Facebook has an older generation to cater to, in comparison to Instagram,

iii. which has a younger audience base, because:

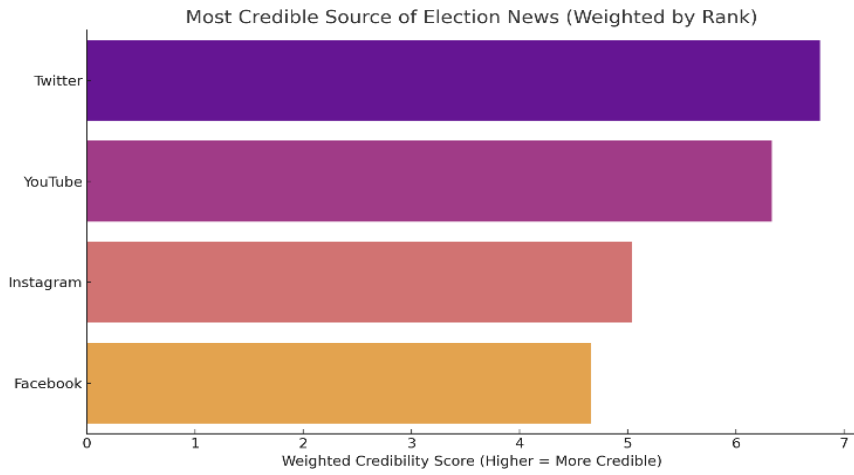
1. User Interface and Design
2. Instagram started with the usage of the audience who wanted an escape from their parents’ vigil on Facebook, and later, the content and algorithm got customised for their needs. Similarly, content on Facebook got customised for an older generation, which feels more seen and visible there.

It was found that most respondents think of social media as a distinct form of media because the word ‘media’ generates the imagery of news reporting- print or electronic- while social media generates the imagery of social media networking sites mostly Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The former is still accorded more credibility, though the latter’s chances to be “controlled by the state” are still less. Additionally, an app which might be perceived as the source of most credible political information might not be the app which a respondent uses to gain knowledge because of familiarity with the app and deployment of tools which convey information more easily (compare a meme-based explanation of a manifesto on Instagram versus a detailed analysis video on Twitter). The impact of these different ‘tools’ is also different as depicted below.

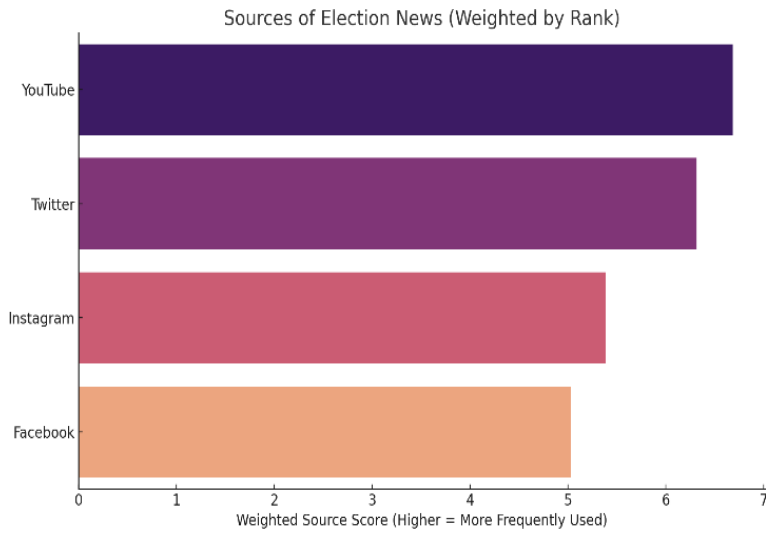
Empirical evidence to the widely-held belief of Facebook and Instagram having different audiences is also found, with the former having an older audience comparatively. The reasons are stated above and prove that this has been a generational shift, which might continue with emergence of different social networking sites in futures.



Perceived Influence of Information Platforms on Political Decision-Making



Ranking of the information sources information, as reported by respondents

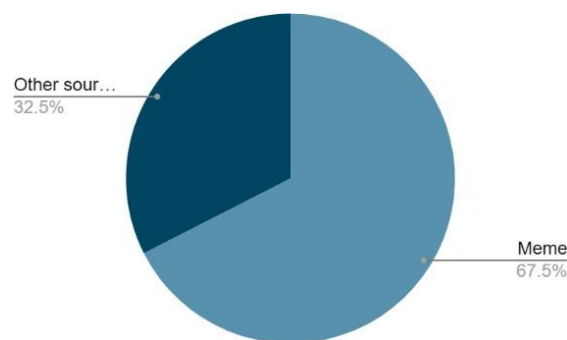


Preferred platforms for accessing information based on respondent choices

2. Third-party social media accounts

- a. 45.8% of the respondents accept that memes provide a more relatable understanding of political scenarios compared to traditional news. (Interviews)
- b. 66.5% of the respondents selected a meme-based coverage of a political campaign over its official handle's campaign counterpart.
- c. 73% of the respondents will more likely interact with the meme-based coverage of facts in opposition to an editorial published in a newspaper.
- d. 59.5% of the respondents will engage with reel-based coverage of educational-factual content in opposition to its original coverage on news platforms.
- e. 67% of the respondents will engage more with reel-based coverage of political parties' official advertisement campaigns in opposition to the actual advertisement.
- f. 73% regard the meme-based coverage of a snippet from a campaign speech as more engagement-worthy than the actual speech.
- g. 65% will interact with the summarised version of a political party's manifesto online more than the actual manifesto.

It is established that third party social media accounts gain more traction than political parties' official social media campaigns because of their more interactive, engaging and easy-to-understand communication medium. This, in turn, proves the importance of memes, reels and other social media communication tools in setting the narrative online.

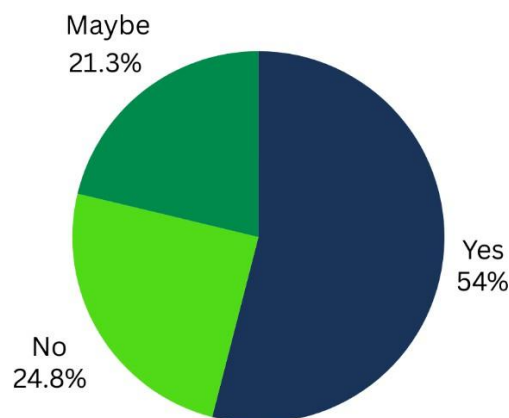


Comparison of social with traditional media platforms

3. Delhi

- a. 54% agreed that social media was leveraged differently by different political parties in the Delhi State Assembly election, with BJP having a better reach in comparison to AAP.
- b. Responses regarding what worked for the BJP in this election include, with specific regard to social media campaigning, include:
 - i. Extensive posts on its manifesto
 - ii. Striving for connection with the netizens through their social media outreach

The differing employment of social media strategies by different parties certainly had an impact in the coming to power of the ‘anti-incumbent’, generally referred to as “they were able to strike that chord better with the younger generation which lives on the internet” by most respondents. This substantiates the claim made in the starting that the intangible institution of social media heavily influences the electoral behaviour and outcomes.



Difference in the usage and employment of social media by different parties

Conclusion

While the historical analysis clearly proved the proportionate impact of social media on its users with respect to political and electoral content, the evidences from the empirical study clearly testified all the hypotheses and proved that social media- as the latest manifestation of media- impacts the voting behaviour of its users in the present time.

Different social media platforms indeed use different tools to convey information, shape narratives and gain traction to news items resulting in varied

audience demographics across platforms. This also leads to a variegated impact usually generated by third party social media accounts, which exert greater influence on social media users (and the potential electorate) in comparison to political party's official social media campaigns across varying categories, in essence satirical commentary on current affairs issues, manifestos, political campaign speeches, opinion columns, and political advertisements. This proves that meme-based content gains more traction than non-meme-based content overall, with 67%.

The Delhi Legislative Assembly Elections of 2025 was used as a case in point and social media's entrenched influence in the victory of the winning party was also conveyed by the respondents, in response to the question regarding leveraging of social media ("playing the social media game") by different political parties. While social media was not the sole factor cited, its strategic use by various political parties was widely acknowledged, though the precise extent of its impact on the election outcome remains debated and warrants further investigation.

The study concludes that social media wields a strong influence on the voting behaviour of the electorate and has the potential to affect election results notably today, which further ascertains that social media as an institution can't be ignored by political parties, analysts and academicians in the contemporary world of psephology.

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Appendix

Link to interview: <https://forms.gle/ZFmP2icFPEAVtZneA> Link to online survey: <https://forms.gle/FLc58EzfDGkLrS899>