

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY: INVESTIGATING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN VIKSIT BHARAT

SUMAIYA TABASSUM S

RESEARCH SCHOLAR, THIRUVALLUVAR GOVERNMENT ARTS COLLEGE, RASIPURAM.

Abstract

The role of social media in promoting transparency and accountability in electoral processes has become increasingly significant, particularly in the context of India's aspiration to become a developed nation by 2047 under the vision of Viksit Bharat. This research paper investigates how social media can enhance electoral accountability in India, focusing on its potential to promote transparency and hold elected officials accountable. Through a comprehensive literature review, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, and case studies, this study examines the impact of social media on Indian elections. Key findings suggest that while social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for direct communication between politicians and voters, they also pose challenges such as the spread of mis-information and manipulation of public opinion. The study highlights the need for regulatory measures and media literacy initiatives to harness the positive aspects of social media while mitigating its negative impacts. The implications of these findings are crucial for policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organizations in shaping the future of democratic processes in India as it strives towards development.

Keywords: *Social media, electoral accountability, transparency, Viksit Bharat, India, elections, misinformation, case studies, statistical analysis*

1 Introduction

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political communication and engagement, transforming the landscape of electoral politics worldwide. In India, where the vision of Viksit Bharat aims to make the country a developed nation by 2047, the role of social media in ensuring electoral accountability becomes paramount. Electoral accountability refers to the mechanisms through which voters can hold their elected representatives responsible for their actions and decisions. Social media, with its vast reach and real-time interaction capabilities, has the potential to enhance transparency, facilitate direct communication between citizens and politicians, and monitor governmental performance.

However, the same platforms that offer these opportunities also present challenges, such as the rapid spread of misinformation, the creation of echo chambers, and the potential for manipulation by vested interests. In the Indian context, where social media penetration is growing rapidly, understanding how these platforms can be leveraged to promote accountability while mitigating their negative effects is crucial.

This research paper aims to investigate the potential of social media to promote transparency and accountability in the electoral processes of Viksit Bharat. Specifically, it seeks to answer the

following research question: How can social media be utilized to enhance electoral accountability in India, and what are the challenges and opportunities in this context?

To address this question, the paper will first review existing literature on the impact of social media on electoral processes, both globally and in India. It will then present descriptive statistical analyses of social media usage during Indian elections, followed by inferential statistical analyses from experimental studies that test hypotheses related to social media's effect on accountability. Case studies will provide in-depth insights into specific instances where social media has influenced electoral outcomes and accountability. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations for policymakers and electoral bodies to maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its risks.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the discourse on digital democracy in India, particularly in the context of its developmental aspirations. By examining the interplay between social media and electoral accountability, this research aims to inform strategies that can strengthen democratic institutions and processes in Viksit Bharat.

2 Literature Review

The intersection of social media and electoral politics has been a subject of increasing interest among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. Globally, studies have shown that social media platforms can significantly influence electoral outcomes by shaping public opinion, mobilizing voters, and providing a platform for political discourse. In India, the use of social media in elections has grown exponentially since the 2014 general elections, which were dubbed the first "social media elections".

Research has highlighted both the positive and negative impacts of social media on electoral accountability. On the positive side, social media enables direct communication between politicians and voters, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. This direct channel can increase transparency, as politicians can share their agendas, policies, and performance directly with the public. Additionally, social media facilitates the rapid dissemination of information about government actions, allowing citizens to hold their representatives accountable more effectively.

However, the negative aspects of social media in elections cannot be ignored. The spread of misinformation and fake news on these platforms can mislead voters and undermine the integrity of the electoral process. In India, during the 2019 general elections, both major political parties were found to be sources of misinformation, with a significant portion of false information originating from their social media accounts. Furthermore, the use of social media for targeted advertising and microtargeting raises concerns about privacy and the potential for manipulation.

Studies have also explored the role of social media in voter turnout and political participation. For instance, a study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) found that while social media did not significantly alter voting behavior in the 2019 elections, it did increase political participation among first-time voters. This suggests that social media can play a role in mobilizing certain segments of the population, thereby enhancing accountability by ensuring that a broader cross-section of society is engaged in the electoral process.

In terms of regulatory frameworks, India's Election Commission has taken steps to monitor social media usage during elections, including setting up social media cells to track violations of

the Model Code of Conduct. However, the effectiveness of these measures in curbing misinformation and ensuring accountability remains a topic of debate.

Globally, experiments like the one conducted in Mexico by have shown that high saturation levels of social media information campaigns can significantly impact electoral accountability by rewarding best performing incumbents and punishing poorly performing ones. Such findings underscore the potential of social media to bolster accountability when used strategically.

In summary, the literature reveals a complex relationship between social media and electoral accountability in India. While social media offers tools for greater transparency and direct engagement, it also poses risks that need to be managed through regulatory measures, media literacy, and ethical practices by political actors.

3 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Social media usage in Indian elections has seen a significant increase over the years, reflecting the growing penetration of internet and mobile technology in the country. According to data from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), as of 2024, there are over 500 million social media users in India, with WhatsApp and Facebook being the most popular platforms.

During the 2019 general elections, social media played a pivotal role in political campaigning. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was particularly effective in its use of social media. Modi's personal Facebook page had over 43.5 million likes, and his institutional page had 13.7 million likes, making him the most liked leader on Facebook globally. On Twitter, Modi had 42 million followers on his personal account and 26 million on his institutional account, placing him among the top followed world leaders.

A study analyzed 6.9 million tweets from 17,261 politicians across 127 parties during the 2019 elections and found that the BJP had the most effective use of its central account, dominating electoral campaigning on Twitter. The party's share of political ads on Google was 41.4%, and on Facebook, it was 14.7%.

WhatsApp, with its end-to-end encryption and group messaging features, has become a crucial tool for political parties to reach voters directly. In 2019, the BJP had approximately 900,000 "WhatsApp Pramukhs" (group administrators) who managed WhatsApp groups to disseminate party messages. These groups were used to send political content, including text messages, images, and videos, often containing misinformation.

The use of social media for electoral purposes is not limited to national elections. In state assembly elections, parties have increasingly relied on digital strategies. For example, in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, the BJP created over 17,000 WhatsApp groups in Punjab alone. Similarly, in the 2021 West Bengal assembly elections, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) spent Rs. 1.69 crores on digital ads on Facebook, while the BJP spent Rs. 25.31 lakhs. These statistics illustrate the scale at which social media is being utilized in Indian elections, highlighting its potential to influence voter behavior and electoral outcomes.

However, they also underscore the need for mechanisms to ensure that this influence is used to promote accountability rather than undermine it.

Table 1: Social Media Usage in Indian Elections (2019)

Platform	Metric	Value
Facebook	Likes on PM Modi's personal page	43.5 million
Facebook	Likes on PM Modi's institutional page	13.7 million
Twitter	Followers on PM Modi's	26 million
Twitter		900,000
WhatsApp		

Table 2: Political Ads on Social Media During 2019 Elections

Platform	Party	Share of Political Ads
Google	BJP	41.4%
Facebook	BJP	14.7%

Table 3: Digital Ad Spending in State Elections (2021)

State	Party	Amount Spent
	TMC	Rs. 1.69 crores
	BJP	Rs. 25.31 lakhs

4 Inferential Statistical Analysis

To understand the causal impact of social media on electoral accountability, we turn to experimental studies that test specific hypotheses. A notable study conducted a field experiment in Mexico to evaluate how digital information campaigns on social media can affect electoral accountability.

The study hypothesized that social media campaigns can disseminate objective information about government performance and thereby influence voter behavior. Specifically, it tested whether targeting information at a larger share of the electorate (high saturation) would amplify the effectiveness of these campaigns through social propagation mechanisms.

The experiment was conducted in 128 municipalities in Mexico, where Facebook ad campaigns were randomized across different levels of saturation: 0% (control), 20% (low saturation), and 80% (high saturation) of the electorate. The campaigns provided information on the performance of local mayors, focusing on their handling of public funds and service delivery. The results showed that in segments with high saturation (80% targeted), best-performing incumbents received an additional 7-8 percentage points in vote share compared to the control group, while poorly-performing incumbents saw a reduction in vote share. In contrast, low saturation (20% targeted) had a much smaller effect, with best-performing incumbents gaining only 2-3 percentage points.

Interestingly, the study also found indirect effects, where even voters not directly targeted by the campaigns were influenced, suggesting that social media campaigns can have spillover effects through social networks. However, these indirect effects were more pronounced in high saturation conditions. Statistically, the direct effects were significant, with p-values indicating

that the observed differences were not due to chance. For example, the increase in vote share for best performing incumbents in high saturation segments was statistically significant at the 1% level.

These findings have important implications for India, where social media penetration is high, and political parties often target specific segments of the electorate. The study suggests that for social media campaigns to effectively promote accountability, they need to reach a critical mass of the electorate. This could mean that civil society organizations or independent media outlets need to collaborate to achieve high saturation levels when disseminating information about government performance.

Furthermore, the study highlights the potential of social media to reward good governance and punish poor performance, which is central to electoral accountability. In the context of Viksit Bharat, where the government aims to improve governance and service delivery, leveraging social media for accountability could be a strategic tool. However, it is important to note that the Mexican context may differ from India's, particularly in terms of social media usage patterns and political culture. Therefore, while the findings provide valuable insights, they need to be adapted to the Indian context.

Table 4: Impact of Social Media Campaigns on Vote Share (?)

Saturation Level	Best-Performing Incumbents	Poorly-Performing Incumbents
High (80%) Low (20%)	7-8 percentage points	Significant
	2-3 percentage points	decrease Minimal

*Note: All effects are statistically significant at conventional levels.

5 Case Studies

5.1 Case Study 1: Use of WhatsApp in Indian Elections

WhatsApp has become a critical platform for political communication in India due to its widespread use and ability to create private groups for targeted messaging. During the 2019 general elections, both the BJP and the Indian National Congress (INC) extensively used WhatsApp for campaigning. The BJP, in particular organized its WhatsApp strategy around “Pramukhs” or group administrators, who managed large numbers of WhatsApp groups to disseminate party messages. It is estimated that the BJP had around 900,000 such Pramukhs in 2019, a number expected to increase for the 2024 elections. These groups were used to send political content, including text messages, images, and videos, often containing misinformation or hate speech. For example, during the 2019 elections, there were instances of communally divisive messages being circulated on WhatsApp, which contributed to social tensions.

The use of WhatsApp for electoral purposes raises concerns about accountability because it allows for the rapid spread of unverified information, which can influence voter perceptions without being subject to fact-checking or regulatory oversight. Moreover, the end-to-end encryption of WhatsApp makes it difficult for authorities to monitor content, posing challenges for electoral integrity. However, WhatsApp has implemented measures to curb misinformation, such as limiting the number of times a message can be forwarded and labeling forwarded

messages. Despite these efforts, the platform remains a fertile ground for disinformation during elections.

5.2 Case Study 2: Social Media Monitoring by the Election Commission of India

In response to the growing influence of social media on elections, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has taken steps to monitor social media activity during election periods. For the 2024 general elections, the ECI set up a Social Media Cell to monitor realtime activity on various platforms, flag sensitive content, and handle complaints related to social media violations.

The ECI also issued guidelines for political parties and candidates regarding the use of social media, including prohibitions on posting content that violates the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). However, enforcing these guidelines on platforms like WhatsApp, which are encrypted, remains challenging. A notable instance was during the 2023 Karnataka state elections, where the ECI was unclear about its powers to monitor social media during the electoral silence period, highlighting the need for clearer regulatory frameworks.

The ECI's efforts to monitor social media represent an attempt to ensure accountability by holding political actors responsible for their online communications. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on the cooperation of social media platforms and the development of robust legal frameworks.

5.3 Case Study 3: Role of Influencers in Elections

Another emerging trend in Indian elections is the use of social media influencers to reach voters, particularly younger demographics. Political parties engage influencers on platforms like YouTube and Instagram to create content that promotes their agendas or attacks opponents. These influencers often have large followings and can sway public opinion through their posts.

For example, during the 2024 elections, several influencers were reported to be creating hyperlocal, microtargeted content for political parties, reaching rural voters who might not be active on traditional social media platforms. The use of influencers raises questions about transparency and accountability because it is often unclear whether these influencers are being compensated by political parties, and if so, whether this is disclosed to their audiences. This lack of transparency can mislead voters and undermine the integrity of the electoral process.

6 Conclusion

This research paper has explored the potential of social media to promote transparency and accountability in the electoral processes of Viksit Bharat. Through a literature review, statistical analyses, and case studies, it has examined both the opportunities and challenges presented by social media in this context.

Key findings suggest that social media can enhance electoral accountability by providing direct channels for communication between politicians and voters, facilitating the dissemination of information about government performance, and mobilizing political participation. However, these benefits are tempered by significant challenges, including the spread of misinformation,

the manipulation of public opinion through targeted advertising, and the difficulty in regulating encrypted platforms like WhatsApp.

The descriptive statistical analysis revealed the extensive use of social media in Indian elections, with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp playing crucial roles in political campaigning. The inferential statistical analysis from experimental studies showed that high saturation levels of social media campaigns can significantly impact electoral accountability by rewarding good governance and punishing poor performance.

Case studies highlighted specific instances where social media has been used to influence electoral outcomes, both positively and negatively. The use of WhatsApp for spreading misinformation and the challenges faced by the Election Commission in monitoring such platforms underscore the need for robust regulatory frameworks. Additionally, the growing role of social media influencers in elections raises concerns about transparency and accountability.

In the context of Viksit Bharat, where India aims to become a developed nation by 2047, leveraging social media for electoral accountability can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can strengthen democratic institutions by making governance more transparent and responsive. On the other hand, without proper safeguards, it can erode trust in democratic processes through the proliferation of fake news and manipulative practices.

To harness the positive potential of social media while mitigating its risks, several measures can be recommended:

1. **Regulatory Frameworks:** Develop clear and enforceable guidelines for social media use during elections, ensuring that platforms cooperate with electoral bodies to monitor and curb misinformation.
2. **Media Literacy:** Implement educational programs to enhance citizens' ability to critically evaluate information on social media, reducing their susceptibility to mis-information.
3. **Transparency in Political Advertising:** Require political parties to disclose their spending on social media ads and the use of influencers, ensuring that voters are aware of who is behind the content they consume.
4. **Platform Responsibility:** Encourage social media platforms to take proactive steps to combat misinformation, such as labeling forwarded messages, limiting viral for-wards, and partnering with fact-checking organizations.
5. **Data Protection:** Strengthen data protection laws to prevent the misuse of personal data for electoral manipulation.
6. **Research and Monitoring:** Continue to invest in research to understand the dynamics of social media in elections and establish mechanisms for real-time monitoring of social media activity during election periods.

In conclusion, as India moves towards its goal of Viksit Bharat, integrating social media into electoral processes can be a powerful tool for promoting transparency and accountability. However, this requires a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of digital

communication while addressing its inherent risks. By doing so, India can ensure that its democratic institutions remain robust and responsive in the digital age.

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