

“Impact of Social Media on Political Attitude, Participation and Voters’ in India after Globalisation”

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Abstract

Citizens learn about politics and government primarily from television and newspapers; these media outlets can influence voters not only through the slant of a particular report but also merely by choosing which stories to cover. This study measured the effect of receiving free subscriptions to either a liberal or conservative-leaning newspaper on voters’ political knowledge and opinions in the United States. Results demonstrated that neither subscription had an impact on voters’ political knowledge, but that both subscriptions caused voters to increase their support for the Democratic presidential candidate. This suggests that the informational effect of news exposure was stronger than the effect of the slant.

Key words: Informational effect, Decentralized approach, Political Knowledge.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed how people gather information. Individuals and organizations all over the globe can connect directly to share information. This decentralized approach can enhance social welfare by aggregating massive amounts of information. At the same time, conflicting interests and objectives may give rise to false or misleading information in these decentralized platforms. This misinformation can be harmful to individual and group decision-making if left unchecked.

Misinformation on political issues is especially concerning. Social media users with strong political beliefs may spread false information to benefit their interests. If this type of information is rampant, social media could do more harm than good in informing voters about political issues. Policymakers and social media companies alike are currently discussing how to address these concerns about misinformation.

In the experiment, a group decides between two policies. Each group member is assigned a partisan preference for one policy or the other, and receives an individual payment if their policy is chosen. This partisan payment varies across subjects, so voters may have strong or weak preferences for their preferred policy. Additionally, one of the policies is “correct” for every member of the group, in that it awards a payment to every group member if chosen. Each member knows which policy will ensure her partisan payment, but must pay to learn information about which policy is “correct” for the whole group.

Information held by voters is crucial in determining policy choices. Social media platforms play an increasingly pivotal role in determining the information available to voters.¹ Voters are exposed to information via social media, and can themselves provide information to others. By increasing the availability of information to voters, social media has the potential to increase informedness. However, partisan preferences among social media users may lead to perverse outcomes. First, users may strategically withhold information that does not support their preferences, thus potentially distorting beliefs. Second, users may post false information to affect voter beliefs and policy outcomes. Recently, there has been a lot of attention paid to the latter, particularly related to elections.

To effectively address the effect of misinformation, it is important that our laboratory environment reflect several important features of reality, while simultaneously allowing us to directly measure outcomes that more typically unobservable in naturally occurring data. These features include the ability of individual voters to acquire costly information themselves, to share and gather information on a social media platform with an endogenous network structure where the information on social media can be inaccurate. In order to measure the effect of partisan preferences on the part of voters, as opposed relying on unobserved variation in homegrown preferences, it is also important to induce voter bias.

In the absence of social media, our environment is similar to that of Martinelli (2006), which provides a theoretical benchmark of information acquisition without communication. When communication via a social media platform is introduced, theoretical analysis is intractable. As such, our experiment exploratory, as discussed in (Smith, 1982). In short, we have purposefully chosen an environment that reflect critical aspects of reality, so that the resulting data can inform policy debates surrounding misinformation, rather than focusing on a tractable model. This experiment is a first step towards using the lab as a test-bed for effectively combating misinformation.

With the introduction of a social media platform, group members across the partisan spectrum purchase more units of information. Therefore, the lower quality of decision making in the presence of misinformation is not driven by voters being less individually informed. Misinformation results in voter's expending more resources on information, but not improving the quality of decision making.

In the truthful information sharing protocol, group members share over 90% of the information purchased. In contrast, when misinformation is possible, only 50% of the information purchased is shared accurately on the social media platform. Further, we observe fewer connections on the social media platform when misinformation is permissible. In fact, the relatively low level of connections when misinformation is possible is the primary channel that explains the lower quality of decision making even after we account for the total information purchased by all group members. This result is of particular importance, as it demonstrates that social media platforms may have a vested interest in policing misinformation.

Specifically, user engagement, as measured by the number of people a user follows, is reduced by misinformation. While Mark Zuckerberg has stated, "I don't think that Facebook or internet platforms in general should be arbiters of truth," our results suggest that it may be in Facebook's interest to police misinformation.

1.2 Review of Literature

The paper studies three strands of the literature: *partisanship*, *communication*, and *endogenous information acquisition*, in a cohesive framework.

Battaglini et al. (2010), in their seminal paper, study the swing voter curse in a controlled laboratory setting. In the absence of partisan voters, uninformed voters strategically abstain from voting. In the presence of strict partisan preferences for one of the two options, in larger groups, a higher share of uninformed voters vote to counteract partisans' effect in the group, as predicted by theory.

Guarnaschelli et al. (2000) study voting behavior in the presence of communication via straw polls with groups with a common interest. Communication improves information aggregation across both the voting rules. Goeree and Yariv (2011) extends the framework in Guarnaschelli et al. (2000) to allow for unrestricted communication and heterogeneity in group composition: weak and strong partisans across three voting rules. They find that individuals accurately reveal private information in both the weak partisan and strong partisan treatment, which leads to better information aggregation and improved quality of group decision making. Le Qument and Marcin (2019) observes a similar pattern of truthful sharing of private signals with restricted communication in a three-person group even when the partisan bias is disclosed along with the straw vote results.

Pogorelskiy and Shum (2019) study the role of media bias on the quality of group decision making in the presence of weak partisans in a group. Group members have an option to share their signals truthfully on a social media platform. They vary two fixed social network structures and the degree of bias in the media signals. They find that communication through the social network improves the quality of decision making relative to no social media. However, biased media signals lower the quality of group decisions.

Elbittar et al. (2016) study heterogeneity in the cost of acquiring information across majority and unanimity decision rules. They find low levels of information purchase and frequent voting by uninformed voters even when they have a choice to abstain from voting, which lowers the quality of group decisions significantly. Grosser and Seebauer (2016) focus on the majority rule and compare voluntary and mandatory voting; similar to Elbittar et al. (2016) they report under-purchase of information and a penchant for uninformed voting. Bhattacharya et al. (2017) points out that the signal's precision is an essential determinant of information acquisition. When signals are perfect, i.e., revealing the state of the world with certainty, theory predicts the data well. However, groups tend to over-purchase signals compared to the equilibrium prediction.

Vageer et al. (2011), in his study, reveals that the presence of a political leader on twitter results in attracting large masses through electronic campaigning. Not only the appearance but how they present themselves is also vital. Woolleya et al. (2010) conducted a study, to explore how a politician portrayed himself on Facebook using content analysis of Facebook, deliberates that Barak Obama was portrayed more positively.

Similarly, Hsu and Park (2012) conducted a study in South Korea to know the usage pattern of National Assembly members and posited that users have a negative attitude toward these members. Therefore, the type of content reveals the emotions of the users towards the political candidate or party. The social media platforms help to build specific patterns that are used by the analyst for making strategies.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To study the influence of social media usage on their political party choice with moderating effect of voter demographics.
- 2) To study the use of social media by political parties in satisfying the communication needs of voters.

1.4 IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The marketing strategies have been explored largely and are growing in different perspectives and implementing marketing theories in political area has been started. Many researchers around the globe have made an attempt to study the management concepts in political scenario and found various factors that may influence the voter's behaviour to make voting decision. From marketing perspective, voters are considered as the market which is further divided into different segments on the basis of age, gender, interest, knowledge etc. that assists the political party candidates to understand the needs, attitude and behaviour of voters. However, voter's decision about choosing a political party or leader has resemblance with decision to choose a product. The concept of marketing management is used for making strategies to influence voters and concept of consumer behaviour is used to study voter's decision about party choice whereas concept of communication is used to exchange the information, news or facts with one another using different media to target voters in order to seek their support and political participation. Therefore, to influence citizens and to convey messages, ideas, and thoughts etc. political parties and their leaders have used different media from time to time and became successful. For instance, print media in the form of newspaper, posters, magazines, pamphlets were highly used in 19th Century, whereas broadcasting media specifically radio and Television was widely used in 20th century to reach large masses.

In 1932, radio was one of the popular media to convey the political message wherein Franklin D. Roosevelt, an American politician gave a series of 30 evening radio speeches between 1922-1944. Similarly, in 1961, John F. Kennedy became first American President to hold live televised news for conveying their message

to target audience. Prior to United States Presidential Elections 2008, only traditional media such as Television, Newspaper, direct contact with politicians etc. were used but this election transformed the way of communication with the general public by using social media to a great extent. The winning of Barak Obama was the result credited to the use of social media marketing. Later on, political leaders & parties around the globe have started using social media as a tool of empowerment and oppression. For instance, use of WhatsApp campaign by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and use of Facebook by Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte are known for bringing in the desired change. Thus, the new media became popular in 21st Century wherein utilization of social media and specially through mobile phones have shown tremendous growth.

In India, Radio came into existence in the year 1927 and in 1959 the first Television Centre was set up. The Satellite Television Experiment (SITE) was one of the biggest communication experiment of one-year duration carried out from 1975 to 1976. However, in the year 2011 and 2012, social media was initially used by Anna Hazare in his anti-corruption movement in India. The General Election 2014 was the first election where political parties have adopted social media to have contact with masses online. Initially, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has focused on social media to a large extent and became politician with highest search on social media after Barak Obama. This further created the buzz about social media, hence, more leaders are now taking help of social media in contacting the masses to convey their strategies. Later on Aam Aadmi Party also realized the importance of social media and laid emphasis on using it to influence citizens. Successful implementation of social media by both the parties has pushed the other parties like Indian National Congress to have its presence on social media and in 2015, Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader made his entry on Twitter. Hence, by and large, all parties have considered social media as powerful marketing tool. However, techno-savvy Bharatiya Janata Party has left Indian National Congress behind by introducing various campaigns on Facebook, creating buzz on twitter, and presenting PM Modi's holographic in remote villages. And from then, social media has become an imperative media and is getting stronger day by day for political campaigning. Modern means of communication, traditional media and inter-personal communication have blended together and complemented each other. Therefore, in order to use new media for online campaigning successfully rigorous marketing strategies are required to influence voters and win elections.

Following is the brief description of few social media platforms:

- **Facebook:** “An internet-based social media that allows people to connect with others in their circle for the purpose of social exchange” (Aladwani, 2014).
- **WhatsApp:** A Social Media application owned by Facebook, “It is a cross- platform mobile messaging Application for exchanging messages without payment for short service message (SMS)”.
- **YouTube:** An application which allows users to upload videos over the Internet and share them with others.
- **Instagram:** A social networking platform allows the sharing of pictures and videos.

Shared content on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. provides an opportunity to seek and exchange political information with others. It also allows the individuals to use that content to have an interpersonal discussion with their friends and family members, which may result into their decision to vote. Similarly, WhatsApp, a mobile messaging service by Facebook is also popular for sharing political content. Thus, social media has the potential to reach larger masses by creating interpersonal relationships. Researcher found that social media is a powerful medium to make the electoral decision where social media efforts are combined with traditional marketing campaigns and media avenues (Rutenberg, 2013). According to World Stat, India has left behind the United States and is able to secure second position after China in terms of internet users. According to IAMAI (Internet and Mobile Association of India) 2019, India had 451 Million monthly active internet users in the first quarter of the year 2019 where 65 per cent

of internet users are between the age of 12 to 29 years and 72 per cent of them use internet on daily basis. Overall 7 per cent growth i.e. from 24 per cent to 31 per cent is projected in terms of access to internet by Indian users from 2018 to 2023. These reports depict internet penetration in India is growing at fast pace and is expected to grow with much faster rate.

1.5 RECENT TRENDS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIA

Furthermore, India is among top ten in term of number of users for most used social media platform in the world with 200 Million users on WhatsApp, 7.65 Million users on Twitter, 300 Million users on Facebook, and on YouTube 41 Million users using on monthly basis. According to Reuters, 52 per cent of Indian social media users use Facebook and 18 per cent use Twitter as a source of news. However, Hootsuite's Digital 2019 report, reported unlike other social media platforms usage of Twitter is decreasing at the rate of 2.2 per cent per quarter. As per Socialbakers, official profile of Narendra Modi on Facebook and Twitter are most followed. Moreover, amongst all states of India, Manipur is among top 5 states having highest internet penetration and all political parties in India are trying to leverage this growth in the number of internet users.

Approximately 65 per cent population in India is youth which may be the reason for such popularity of social media. It is observed in previous elections that youth is less interested in politics but social media usage has made youth more interested in getting political knowledge online through social networking sites. According to IAMA Report 2016, 90 per cent of social media users were following state assembly elections on social media.

Adopting new phenomena of social media has changed the paradigms of politics as it has the ability to shape new messages and contact large masses which were not experienced in customary media. From multiple points of view, individuals moved from keeping up particular site to building up different accounts on different SNS. As individuals are moving to the Internet, resulting into establishment of new culture in politics. There is a saying regarding social media that 'Traditional media's like Television and Newspaper acts as a watchdog but social media is like a watchdog over watchdogs'.

1.6 RESULTS AND POLICY LESSONS

Receiving either paper produced no effect on knowledge of political events or stated opinions about those events, and there were no differences between the treatment and comparison groups in voter turnout for the 2005 gubernatorial election. In November 2006, however, there was a 2.8 percentage point increase in voter turnout. It is surprising to see a result in 2006 but not in 2005. This could be a result of the post-election exposure to the remainder of the ten-week newspaper subscriptions, or the fact that 17 per cent of the treatment group renewed their subscription after the free period ended.

Interestingly, receiving either newspaper led to an increase of support for the Democratic candidate. Despite the political slant of the newspapers, the effects were similar for the Post and the Times, resulting in an overall 7.2 percentage point increase in likelihood of voting for the Democratic candidate. This may be due to the fact that the Republican President's approval ratings were falling over that period of time, or perhaps the Democratic candidate was conservative-leaning. In either case, these results suggest that the informational effect of more exposure to news was stronger than the effect of its slant.

The study deliberately varies whether and how group members can share the information they learn about which policy is correct. In one treatment, subjects cannot share what they learn. In the second treatment, they can post truthful information to a shared social media platform. In the third, subjects can post any information, true or false. In the latter treatments, members can also choose to opt out of social media connections with other group members.

The experiment finds that social media increases the quality of group decision making, but only if false posts are prohibited. When subjects can share information through social media, they acquire more information about which policy is correct. This is true whether misinformation is permitted or not. However, when misinformation is allowed, group members with larger partisan payments make false posts when they stand to benefit if the incorrect outcome is chosen. These false posts lead more group members to reduce the number of other members they connect with. This, in turn, makes the group worse at selecting the correct policy, relative to if there were no social media platform.

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