Chapter 1

Social Media: An Emerging Tool for Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Internet usage has shown drastic growth in the initial half of the year 2015 in India. The user base has increased over 354 million and with this India has become the top second country after China in terms of internet usage. Facebook is the prime social networking site which is used by 96% of urban users, followed by Google Plus (61%), Twitter (43%) and LinkedIn (24%). This extensive use of social media by the public had attracted the attention of the politicians to use it for election campaigns and has given researchers a reason to find out how politicians are engaging the public through this platform. Influence of Social media on the electorate has been proved from its successful use in the US presidential election in 2008 and by political parties in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in India. This paper intends to explore the use of social media and its effectiveness in political elections through an extensive literature review. Social media has become an effective tool for political engagement and political participation as it is a low cost media as compared to traditional media. The low cost of this media has made it one of the main source to get information for advanced analysis and in-depth understanding of the electoral process. This paper will provide an insight to politicians, political analysts, journalists and electoral candidates regarding social media usage. The paper will also present a future research agenda to study how political parties can benefit from use of social media and change their strategies to engage workers and the voters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political campaigns in today’s era are not limited to rallies, speeches to deal with crowds and masses rather social media is an emerging tool to share information, influence and engage people for political participation. Political leaders and officials are realizing the importance of social media as it becomes a powerful tool to spread political information as well as contacting citizens. Influence of Social media has been proved from its successful implementation in the US presidential election in 2008.

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1.1. Background

In India, the initial significance of social media was recognized in Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement, 2011 and 2012. During general election 2014 in India, social media was being used by almost all political parties like BJP, Congress and AAP to engage with the public and seek votes. On the individual front, official Facebook page of Narendra Modi has second highest number of likes after Barak Obama. He is also the most searched politician on social media and the first political leader to use Google+ in India. Some of these references to the use of social media in a political landscape indicate the potential this media has for its application in enhancing the political participation.

1.2. Current Scenario

The Technology revolution in general and the Internet in particular has changed the world to a great extent by connecting the people from different corners. Internet usage has shown speedy growth in India. According to IAMAI report, it took almost a decade to increase user base from 10 million to 100 million, which has surprisingly increased over 200 million in the subsequent three years, and within initial six months of year 2015 internet user base in India has grown over 17% which is 354 million. With this, India has become the second top country after China in terms of internet usage.

Today the younger generation is gradually using more social media like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Blogs, YouTube, Google+, LinkedIn and many more to share information with each other. Facebook, Twitter and Google were three major social media platforms used in Lok Sabha general elections in India in the year 2014, apart from traditional media to convince the voters to vote in their favor. According to IAMAI-IMRB report, Facebook is the principal social media website which is used by 96% of urban users, followed by Google Plus (61%), Twitter (43%) and LinkedIn (24%). Reports showed that college-going students (34%) cover the major section of users, followed by young men (27%).

1.3. Social Media and Generation Y

Generation Y who also dubbed as ‘digital natives’ because of their high usage of digital technology in which use of social media has a substantial role to play. This segment of young people use social network sites basically to maintain contact with friends and associates, make new contacts with friends of friends or people with common interests, content sharing, engaging in self-expression, consume commercial and user-generated content, get information and casual learning and for informal and formal youth engagement opportunities.

India is among the youngest countries of the world, where approximately 65 percent of the population is below the age of 35. The most significant cause for the hit of social media is working youth of India in different sectors as they rarely find an opportunity to watch television, but are mostly available on the virtual world via laptops, smart phones, and workstations. This segment is substantial and generally no political party will take the risk of not reaching out to them. This further indicated that if this segment is more engaged with social media rather than traditional media, the political parties will have to use this medium to engage the electorate.