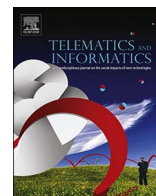


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Leveling the playing field: The use of Twitter by politicians during the 2014 Indian general election campaign

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ABSTRACT

In this study, it is theorized that the communicative affordances offered by social media platforms will enable politically under-resourced candidates to contest the marginalization they face in traditional media. Multivariate analyses were conducted of the tweets of 205 political candidates of the 2014 Indian general election. Findings reveal that fringe party candidates received the least media attention and tended to use Twitter more frequently than major party candidates, especially for interaction and mobilization. Minor party candidates also received less media attention, albeit their Twitter usage patterns were not significantly different than major party candidates. The results illustrate that social media platforms can help overcome resource inequality in politics. The larger implications of this study are discussed.

1. Introduction

The past decades have witnessed an explosive growth in online political activities and its profound impact on the political processes in many democracies worldwide (Howard and Parks, 2012; Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2014). Political parties and organizations, interest groups, and ordinary citizens have converged and interacted with each other on the online sphere to disperse and promote ideas and exert influence on politics (Bennett, 2012). The enhanced communication among citizens through online and mobile technologies has empowered grassroots networks and activism across the globe (Lee et al., 2017; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). Likewise, politicians and parties have strategically used the communicative affordances of online media in interacting with citizens (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Kruikemeier, 2014). These online politics culminates particularly during election campaign periods during which high-intensity information flows and communication occur. Political candidates produce and distribute their campaign messages, bypassing the gatekeepers in traditional media channels (Lassen and Brown, 2011). Further, using various social media platforms, candidates directly connect with and mobilize voters, and quickly respond to opponents' claims (Graham et al., 2013).

As online campaigning gains more prominence, scholars seek to understand the implications of the introduction of the new campaign practices for the long-standing patterns of inequalities among political parties (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016; Larsson and Moe, 2014; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). In politics, some parties have more resources and advantages than others. Incumbent parties and well-established parties tend to have a stable and strong constituent base and local organizations, which in turn makes it

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easier to attract media attention (Hopmann et al., 2011). In contrast, minor parties or parties that represent underprivileged populations or alternative perspectives of the society often lack resource and reputation in politics (Margolis et al., 2003). These disadvantages result in low media attention. In a democracy, especially one with a multi-party system, socioeconomic cleavages in the society likely translate into power and resource inequalities among political parties depending on the socioeconomic status of the constituents that each party represents (Bartels, 2009). If this is the case, the existing socioeconomic gap in the society is likely to become perpetuated due to the structural disadvantages imposed on the parties that represent minority groups and underprivileged populations/regions.

Within this context, a growing number of scholars have investigated whether the emerging trend of online campaigning levels the playing field for minor political parties and politically disadvantaged candidates. Yet, research to date has yielded mixed results. Some have found that candidates of well-established major parties and those with high campaign budgets use Internet technologies more actively than others (Gilmore, 2012; Peterson, 2012). This research is consistent with the normalization hypothesis (Margolis et al., 1999) which posits that online campaigning would only reinforce existing power relations of offline campaigns. The argument is that larger parties have strategic departments, are more experienced and better campaigners, and have more resources therefore they will replicate offline power in the online sphere (see Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). However, others have found that opposition and emerging parties tend to be more active in using digital technologies than governing parties (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; Hemphill et al., 2013; Plotkowiak and Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013). This work is camped into the innovation/equalization hypothesis which suggests that politically disadvantaged parties and candidates would be able to catch up with established parties, by campaigning through online media (Gibson and McAllister, 2011; Schweitzer, 2008). The explanations center around low cost of investment and less skills required for online platform use (see Jacobs and Spierings, 2016).

However, the current scholarship has mostly focused on Western democracies where the Internet and social media has become an integral part of political campaigns. Investigating a context where social media is starting to make inroads in politics can provide us with a better understanding of how it can help reduce political inequality. Further, most of the previous work has not considered both party characteristics and campaign essential personal motivations of candidates that could drive them to use new technologies (for exception see Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). An understanding of these set of factors can better explain why politicians turn to new technologies.

The present study aims to fill the existing gaps and extend the current literature by providing an insight into online campaigning by political candidates in India, a newer democracy of the global south. India is indeed a relevant context to study whether online and social media technologies would flatten traditional power structures in political parties because it has a multi-party system and its election in 2014 was the first-time social media tools were extensively used for political campaigning (PTI, 2013). Since Internet technologies and social media are just starting to make inroads in India, there exists a good amount of variations in online campaigning across parties and more so between candidates, which makes it feasible to study the relationship between party establishment, candidate characteristics, and online campaigning. In addition, it is fruitful to go beyond the frequently analyzed relatively settled liberal-democratic contexts and expand the research on transformative effects of new communication technologies in global politics.

While examining the usage of Twitter by Indian politicians, the present study also considers their traditional media coverage in terms of the newspaper attention they received in the period leading up to the general election. This will provide us with a better understanding of the interplay between the factors which drive the candidates to use Twitter. This approach is different from most studies of social media and political campaigning, which have paid little attention to the fact that social media is just a part of a more complex political media ecology, which comprises traditional media and politics-related interactions on various channels outside of social media. To better understand the online campaigning, it is imperative to look at traditional media sources that remain an important part of political campaigning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Study background: the 2014 Indian general election

The electoral process for 16th Indian general elections, the world's biggest democratic exercise, spanned over a month, from 7th April to 12th May 2014 and involved nearly 815 million voters (Taylor and Kaphle, 2014). Voting was held in ten stages and the country witnessed the highest ever electoral turnout at 66.4%. The results signaled a historic win for the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) being voted to power, marking one of the rare instances in the nation's political history when neither a non-coalition government nor Indian National Congress (INC), the other political powerhouse, were to govern the state. BJP's win also marked the first instance since 1984 when a party had won the elections with an absolute majority winning 272 parliamentary seats out of the total 545 seats.

Although the social media penetration in India was only 12% in 2014 (Digital India, 2014), a pre-election study suggested that social media campaigning could influence the electoral outcome for 160 seats making social media the newest vote bank with the power to shape Indian politics (Patel, 2014). Research suggested social media campaigning to be more persuasive than TV ads (Haq and Ray, 2013) and therefore social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, were extensively used during 2014 electoral campaigning. Twitter Inc. consolidated a firm partnership with BJP politicians and various Indian mobile service providers to distribute tweets online and offline (Kalra, 2014). An important aim behind extensive social media campaigning was to engage a high number of first-time voters. India's largest and youngest voter base ever included 150 million 18–23 years old who qualified to vote for the first time (Virmani, 2014). In 2014, India had nearly a billion telecom subscribers and 243 million internet users (PTI,

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