

Original article

Social Media and Election campaigning in India: Insights from the Assam Assembly Elections

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Abstract: Social media, a defining innovation of the 21st century, has become a vital medium for individuals to share, interact, and voice their perspectives on a global scale. Its rise has made cross-border communication more accessible than ever before. One significant development in recent years is the widespread adoption of social media for political campaigning, a trend now seen worldwide. Political parties and leaders across the globe increasingly rely on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to connect with voters more directly and efficiently. They frequently post updates, photos, and videos to engage with the public and boost visibility. In India, like other democratic nations, social media has become an essential part of political outreach and election campaigns. The country currently ranks third globally in terms of social media usage. Assam, a state in northeastern India, is witnessing a growing voter base with women now outnumbering men and record levels of youth participation. In response, political parties need to shift toward a digital-first approach in their campaigns. This paper thus aims to explore the role of social media in election campaigning in India, with a particular focus on its impact in the state of Assam.

Keywords: social media; election campaigning; assam; voters

1. Introduction

Social media has emerged as a modern and rapidly expanding platform that has become a crucial element of political communication, especially during election campaigns. Unlike traditional media, social media offers a more interactive and efficient way for people to engage with one another. Political parties now use these platforms to better understand the preferences, interests, and concerns of voters. Today's election campaigns go beyond conventional methods like posters, rallies, and public speeches, they now include digital strategies such as online advertisements, Facebook updates, blog entries, tweets, and Instagram posts. It is widely believed that social media has the potential to reshape democracy by enabling citizens to engage with political figures in more direct and dynamic ways.

In earlier times, traditional media has been playing an important role in election. But with the emergence of new technologies, traditional media have been replaced by social media platforms and now it is growing as an effective forum for performing political activities. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp etc. are new ways for political parties to encourage citizens engagement during elections. These platforms have reduced the gap between the politician and the voters. The new inventions and new technologies helping political parties to reached out to the voters more easily. The 2008 U.S. Presidential election was the first election to use social networking sites to impact voters. In India, the strategy of using social networking sites for political campaigning was inculcated from 2014 Lok Sabha Election which resulted the victory of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India.

Assam is situated in the north-eastern region of India and has 33 districts which are further divided into 126 constituencies (Goswami, 2021; Saikia & Bhattacharyya, 2022). Assam is a state where internet facilities are not available in all parts, yet social media has made a great impact in the last assembly elections of the state. This new way of political campaigning has changing the political atmosphere of the state. In 2016 and 2021 Assam Assembly elections the use of social media by political parties was Although comparatively high than earlier elections. Therefore, Assam is an interesting place where we can examine the role of newly emerged social media platforms to mobilize people during elections.

2. Literature review

In her article "Social Media: Definition, Effects, and List of Top Apps," Maya Dollarhide describes social media as a platform that enables the exchange of ideas and information through virtual networks. She highlights that social media encompasses a wide range of applications, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, which allow users to share content, engage with others online, and form communities. Dollarhide also notes that in 2022, the global number of social media users increased by 137 million. She emphasizes that social media is a constantly evolving landscape, with new apps emerging alongside established platforms as technology advances. Her article offers a clear and comprehensive explanation of what social media is.

Michael Dewing in his article social media: An Introduction, defines social media as wide range of internet based and mobile services that allows users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content or join online communities.

Ankit Lal in his book, 'India Social- How Social Media is Leading the Charge and Changing The Country' has asserts about how political leaders how political leaders fought with their tweets and how these fought sometimes lands them in trouble. In this book, he discuss how in the last ten years, platforms like facebook, twitter, youtube and whatsapp have changed the way Indians engage with politics, popular culture and social revolution. This book has clearly discuss about various issues like Nirbhaya's Legacy, NaMo 2014, India against corruption movement etc. This article also describes how whatsapp becoming the major tool used to spread the agenda of major political parties,

The article "Role of Social Media in Election Campaigning in India with Special Reference to Assam" by Rantu Sarmah and Dr. Niranjan Mohapatra emphasizes that although Assam remains a geographically remote state with limited internet access in some areas, social media played a significant role in the 2016 Assam Assembly elections. Political parties, particularly the BJP, utilized social media platforms to promote various narratives, which were strategically crafted to spark widespread public discourse across the state. The authors stress the importance of understanding the influence of social media in elections in today's globalized world. They also call for stronger monitoring efforts by election commissions to regulate how politicians use these platforms during campaigns. Furthermore, the study points to the need for in-depth research and proactive measures to address the growing impact of social media on Assam's political environment.

An article has been published by N Narasimhamurthy 'Use and Rise of Social media as Election Campaign medium in India', where he clearly discussing about how social media playing a central role in attracting voters and especially the new generation of young adults. He asserts that unlike traditional media social media allow political parties to share their beliefs, goals as well as actively engage with their potential voters. On the basis of Uses and Gratification theory he analyzing the rise and use of social media in election campaign medium during the election time. This article also discussing about political reasons and the motivating factors for which people engage in social media platforms during

election campaign period. This article provide data about 2014 Loksabha elections and asserts that this election was India's first election where large scale of technology and internet access platforms were used to connect and mobilize the citizens.

Another article has been published by Pratysh Paras Sharma and Tanaya Hazarika, 'Social media and Election Campaigns; An analysis of the usage of Twitter during the 2021 Assam Assembly Elections' where they discussing about the use of digital technologies like mobile phones and social media platforms including Twitter for broadcasting messages and for creating political communities. They discussing about use of twitter 2021 Assam Assembly election by two main political parties- Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian National Congress and exploring which party was able to use Twitter significantly and how far this strategy of online communication was effective.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the use of social media in election campaigning,
2. To examine the use of social media by different political parties for election campaigning with special reference to Assam.

4. Methodology

This study is primarily grounded in secondary sources. The author has collected data from books, journals, scholarly articles, government websites, and news reports. Using this secondary data, the paper constructs arguments to explore the use and impact of social media in Assam's assembly elections.

5. Discussion

Social media in India is becoming popular day by day and the people accepting it as an important tool to interact with political leaders. The use of social media for political activities in India has seen significant growth since 2012, with a sharp rise during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Political parties actively leveraged social media platforms, with the BJP leading the way. The Parliament election of India 2014 is considering as a social media election because most of the election campaign was took place online and it played a huge role in the victory of Narendra Modi. Early in 2014 itself, Modi realized the potential of social media and decided to make it a campaigning tool to mobilize voters. Recognizing the influence of social media in voter engagement, other political leaders also began establishing their presence online. Since then, many political parties have maintained active social media profiles and websites to stay connected with the electorate. Numerous Facebook and WhatsApp groups have been formed by these parties to influence public opinion and draw voter attention.

During assembly elections in India, social media serves as the best medium for communicating with voters. Though Assam is a backward state in terms of its technological advancement, yet in each and every election there were some new trends has been seen and use of social media platforms during election is one of them. In 2016 Assam Assembly Election political parties and the voters widely used social media platforms for election campaigning. IN 2021, Assam Assembly Election also same scenario was seen as political leaders were very active in social media. In The Indian Express it is stated that, social media played a major role in tremendous performance of Unite People's Party Liberal (UPPL) in the Assam Assembly Election 2021.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been skillful in utilizing social media for election campaigning since the 2014 general elections in India. Since then, the party has consistently leveraged online platforms during various state and regional elections, including in Assam, where it once again made extensive use of social media to convey its messages. In recent years, however, the Indian National Congress has also significantly strengthened its digital presence, an area that was previously considered to be dominated primarily by the B.S.For. the first time in Assam's Legislative Assembly election history, a non-Congress government returned to power in the 2021 elections. The BJP-led alliance secured 75 out of the 126 Assembly seats, while the Congress-led Grand Alliance managed to win only 50 seats, with one seat going to the Rajior Dal (Northeast Now, 2021). Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the current Chief Minister of Assam, maintained a strong presence on social media, regularly sharing updates on COVID-19 cases and visiting hospitals during the pandemic. These activities were widely publicized through his social media channels, leaving a

strong impression on the public. As a result, many voters supported the BJP, influenced by Sarma's leadership during the crisis.

During the election period in Assam, social media platforms also witnessed some clashes. In the 2021 Assam Assembly elections, the two main political parties — Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress — made extensive use of creative hashtags on Twitter to engage voters. The BJP employed tags like #BJPdelivers and #BJP4SecureAssam in their tweets. On the other hand, Congress introduced an animated character named Kokai, accompanied by the hashtag #KokaaiKiKoi on their social media channels. They also launched other hashtags such as #BaadDiaHe to criticize the BJP for allegedly making false promises to the people of Assam. Both the parties' Twitter accounts extensively used many unique hashtags to highlight different issues of the state and to reach out to the maximum number of voters online. In this election mainly highlighted their achievements in the state in online campaigning and introduced many welfare schemes for tea garden workers. The party was posting pictures and videos of their grassroots-level campaigning rallies, meetings with massive crowd gatherings to showcase the party's huge support base in the state. Congress party was heavily criticized in when they used tea garden pictures of Srilanka and Taiwan as Assam's tea gardens on their social media pages. Despite an innovative online campaign strategies of Congress party, these few lapses made opposition to took full advantage of it.

The use of social media platforms by political parties extends beyond just assembly elections. During the 2024 Lok Sabha election of India political parties in Assam made extensive use of social media platforms. Assam, contributing 14 members to the Lok Sabha, the highest among northeastern states saw an active digital campaign landscape. Political leaders and parties predominantly posted images highlighting developmental work, rallies, meetings, and public events. Most of the content shared on their official pages centered around showcasing achievements or drawing comparisons in developmental progress. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) effectively leveraged platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube to spread its message and engage with the public. They partnered with influencers and created targeted content for key voter segments like women and youth, strengthening their grassroots outreach. The Congress also focused on social media strategies, aiming to build anti-incumbency sentiment by spotlighting key issues in the state. Advanced technologies, including AI tools, substantial financial investment, and skilled digital teams allowed many opposition candidates to pose significant challenges to the ruling party during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Assam.

Thus, social media is a platform where political leaders interact with their voters easily. In the age of globalization, it is very necessary to understand and explore the role of social media in election campaigning. Along with the benefits of using social media by political parties, there are some negative impacts also. During elections, lot of misinformation and propaganda spread on social media which creates difficulty for users to know what information they should trust. Sometimes these platforms become a tool for spreading fake news about candidates which not only impact their reputation but also their online campaign. Therefore, election commission should give more attention to these social media sites which are used by politicians during elections.

6. Conclusion

Advancements in technology and the rise of new media have significantly transformed the global political landscape. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have become key spaces where political leaders and citizens engage directly on a range of issues. These platforms are now among the most powerful tools used by political parties during elections to connect with the public, promote their agendas, and clearly communicate their vision. New technologies are not only reshaping political discourse but also encouraging greater civic participation.

In Assam, a northeastern state where internet connectivity is still lacking in many areas, social media usage remains notably high. Citizens actively use these platforms to voice concerns and discuss pressing matters. During the last Assam Assembly election, political leaders maintained a strong presence on social media. The COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted physical gatherings, further pushed political parties to rely on digital platforms for organizing and campaigning.

With the next Assam assembly election just six months away, parties have already started strategizing and ramping up their social media engagement. It will certainly be intriguing to observe how political parties utilize social media in the

upcoming Assam assembly election, and which one succeeds in turning it into an effective tool for political communication.

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