



'Young India' Votes: Assessing The Impact Of Social Media On First Time Voters With Special Reference To Voters Of Assam, India

Mr. Sumit Kumar Sarma Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, H. P. B. Girls' College, Golaghat.

Dr. Tapan Saikia Dr. Tapan Saikia, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, H. P. B. Girls' College, Golaghat, Assam.

Abstract: India is not just the largest democracy of the world with largest population of young people. Along with a large base of young voters India is also one of the largest users of social media. The major objective is to understand by digital platforms play a key role when it comes to political socialization in the present era. A survey of 239 first time voters was conducted to understand the impact of social media campaign. The result shows that the social media and its increasing use by political stakeholders have opened new challenges and opportunities in political landscape.

Keywords: Internet, social media, Young Voters, Election, Assam.

Introduction:

A plethora of studies have analysed the relationship between the use of social media and its influence over the first-time voters by looking into their political participation (Kahne, Lee & Feezel, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Most of them focus on how social media impacts the young generation's political preferences in non-election times, while a few of them do try to understand the use of social media platforms in election campaigns. Fletcher and Young (2013) in their study of media and election have found that news media have a high degree of impact on voters especially when it comes to mobilization of voters. The study also noted that news media platforms are increasingly making use of social media platform to reach out to people. A number of studies have noted that social media platforms are becoming popular with politicians who find it convenient to communicate with the voters (Soerensen, 2016). Such platforms provide an opportunity to the politicians and leaders to establish a network of direct communication with voters who follow these leaders on their social networking sites (Bimber, 2014). Several studies like that of Gottfried & Shearer (2016) and Newman et al., (2017) suggest that young voters form a formidable number when it comes to consuming of news from social media platforms. In this particular study, we look into young voters who experience voters for the first time, with special focus on rural voters. The works builds on other studies that investigate the mobilizing effect of social media platforms during and after elections

based on the activity of voters like discussion, sharing and publishing (Holt et al., 2013; Kahne et al., 2013). Our works focus on the exposure and impact of social media platforms on political participation of young rural voters. We also look into the varieties of options available to the voters and the different types of political content that is available to first time voters. A lot of existing literature focus more on the use of electronic platforms by political actors and also look at possibility of engaging voters with the actors (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). However, we have very little available literature how social media platforms impact the preferences and choices of first-time young voters. We need to have a better understanding on how prominent this type of direct political communication influences young voters when it comes

mobilization. The objective of the present study is threefold: Firstly, to examine the availability of digital devices and internet network to the first-time voters. Secondly, to analyse the impact of social media campaign on young voters of rural background. Thirdly, to understand the growing importance of social medium platform in election campaign. The present study addresses this objective in three ways: first, it looks into the penetration and availability of internet network and related devices amongst the young voters. Second, it looks into the amount and frequency of news related to politics and politicians shared over social media platforms which is targeted towards voters. Third, it examines the impact of social media activity in choice-formation over political preferences by the young first-time voters. This will shed light on how voters who rely on digital platform form their political preferences and their susceptibility to political information during election campaign. The study, therefore, extends the existing knowledge about the changing forms of digital campaigns in modern times.

The First-time voters and social media in India:

A general decline in news consumption is observed among the young citizens (Mindich, 2005), however, most of what is consumed by the present generation comes from social media platforms (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). When it comes to India, with the largest population of young citizens with a median age of 27.9 years as of 2018, it is by far the youngest nation of the world. This also makes India one of the nations with the greatest number of young voters. Since 2014, a whopping 45 million new voters have been added to the voters list according to the election commission data. This new addition has expanded the voters list by almost 5% since the last election. Seeing the high rate of youth participation in the election, especially since 2014, which saw witnessed a high time high 66% voters' turnout. Interestingly, the voters turnout of young voters was 68% two percent more than the national turnout (Kumar, 2014). Hence, it was natural for all political parties to make an appeal to such voters to come vote in large numbers. The table below indicates the increasing trend of voting amongst the young voters in India.

Table 1 Percentage of Young Voters (18-25 years) in Lok Sabha Elections (1999-2014)

Turnout	1999	2004	2009	2014
Young Voters	57	52	54	68
National Average	60	58	58	66

Source: Kumar, 2014

The above table clearly indicates the increase in voting by young voters in recent years. Thus, they are sure to becoming a deciding power when it comes to winning elections. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections out of 900 million registered voters 15 million voters were first time voters. The top 5 states with maximum number of seats in Lok Sabha had the largest number of first-time voters.

Table 2: Top 5 States that Added Maximum Numbers of New Voters

State	2014	2019	New Voters	Lok Sabha Seats
Bihar	63,800,160	69,934,100	6133940	40
West Bengal	62,833,113	68,335,671	5502558	42
Rajasthan	42,994,657	47,339,902	4170941	25
Maharashtra	80,798,823	84,969,764	4170941	48
Uttar Pradesh	138,810,557	142,784,587	3974030	80

Source: Election Commission of India

It is clear from the above table that 43% of Lok Sabha members will come from these states making them a formidable pillar of support for party which hopes to gain majority in the Lok Sabha. Another important information that needs to be highlighted is the states that had the largest number of proportions of first-time voters. The table below presents the proportion of first-time voters of the total voters.

Both the tables indicate that the young voters that the young voters make up for a formidable force in election. Thus, any study on election and related topics cannot avoid to discuss the new young voters.

Social media usage:

After getting an idea on importance of the first-time voters, it is essential to understand where the first-time voters obtain information on range of issues. Studies show that young citizens use social media platform for a number of purposes (Lenhart, 2015). The table below highlights the status of digital penetration in India.

Table 3: Data on Digital Penetration

States	Proportion of New Voters	Lok Sabha Seats
Assam	13%	14

Rajasthan	10%	25
Bihar	10%	40
West Bengal	9%	42
NCT Delhi	9%	07
Gujarat	8%	26
Karnataka	08%	28
Jharkhand	7%	14
Uttarakhand	7%	5
Haryana	7%	10
Country's average	5%	211 (Total seats from these states)

Source: Digital India Report, 2021

A report by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IMAI) in 2020 and Nielsen showed there are 227 million internet users in rural India which is about 10% more than the internet users in urban India. India stands far behind USA and China where the internet penetration is 88% and 61% respectively as of 2019. When it comes to Voters in India, the use of social media platforms by have grown substantially between 2014 and 2019. The following table, based on the study conducted by Lokniti-CSDS, provides a lucid picture of the users of social media in the country.

Table 4: Social Media Users (2014-19)

	May 2014	May 2017	May 2018	May 2019
Facebook	9	20	32	32
WhatsApp	-	22	33	34
Twitter	2	5	14	12
Instagram			14	15
YouTube				31

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Survey

From the above table it is clear that WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform at 34 percent closely followed by Facebook at 32 percent and YouTube at 31 percent. An important observation is that the growth has been quite sluggish between 2018 and 2019. Whereas, the growth of micro-blogging site Twitter and Instagram has been quite limited. However, we need to mention here that the said study was conducted in only 19 states with a limited set of samples. In the context of the state of Assam, on which our study is based on, nearly 13% of voters were first time voters between the age group of 18-24 in the General election of 2019. Thus, it becomes quite necessary to understand the impact of social media in the voting preference of first-time voters. In the section below, we present the data from our survey.

Research Methodology:

4429 | Mr. Sumit Kumar Sarma 'Young India' Votes: Assessing The Impact Of Social Media On First Time Voters With Special Reference To Voters Of Assam, India

In order to find the impact of social media campaigns on first time voters the present work draws on a post poll online survey. One of the objectives of the study being to analyse the impact of social media on first time voters of rural India in general and Assam state in particular, the survey was conducted in the Golaghat district of Assam. Golaghat district lies in the south bank of Brahmaputra River in Upper Assam. As per the census of 2011, the total population of Golaghat is 10, 66,888 with 543, 161 males and 523,727 females. The Urban population of the district stands at 97,736 while the rural population is 969,152.

Sample of the Study:

For the study a sample of 150 respondents was selected. Purposive sampling method was used to identify these 150 respondents who were first time voters from rural areas. Online questionnaire with 20 structured questions was sent to them. Out of the 150 selected samples response was received from 129 respondents. The data in the table below illustrates the socio-demographic variables like age, gender and formal education.

Table 5: Demographic Variables (N=129)

Variables	Categories	Count	Column N %
Sex	Male	27	79.07
	Female	102	20.93
Age	Above 20 years	41	31.78
	20 years	35	27.13
	19 years	55	42.64
	18 years	17	13.18
Educational Qualification	HSLC	4	3.1
	HS	31	24.03
	UG	92	71.32
	PG	2	1.55

Table 5 briefly demonstrates the demographic profile of the respondents. We see that the respondents are all young, with only 31.8% above the age of 20 years. Educational wise, the survey finds 71.32% of respondents as under graduate. It is also important to note that a large number of respondents (79.07%) are female. This point to the growing importance of women participation in politics and elections. In the following section we bring out the major findings of the survey.

Data analysis and interpretation:

Smartphone ownership and its use, and increasing access to the internet are clearly the key drivers of the growth of social media in the country. In a recent survey conducted by Lokniti-CSDS during the Lok Sabha election one third of the respondents were found to have owning a Smartphone. This is much higher than the figure recorded in 2017 when Lokniti had found 24percent voters nationally to be having a Smartphone. Similarly, the proportion of those who have an internet connection on their mobile phones has gone up from 21 percent to 34 percent.

Table 6 indicates that in social media platforms, WhatsApp has the highest number of users (89.92%). Instagram is used by 3.88% of respondents and Facebook is popular with 3.10%. It can be seen from the table that a large number of respondents (55.81%) people spends 1-2 hours daily over social media platform, while 27.91% of respondents spend about 2-4 It is evident from the below table 6 that large number of respondents, around 58.14% of respondents use social media often, while 16.28% use it very often.

Table 6: Use of Social Media Platforms (N=129)

Factors	Parameters	No of responses	Percentage
Use of any social media platform	Whatsapp	116	89.92
	Facebook	4	3.10
	Instagram	5	3.88
	Twitter	2	1.55
	Both Whatsapp and Instagram	2	1.55
Time spends on social networking sites daily	1-2 hours	72	55.81
	2-4 hours	36	27.91
	More than 4 hours	21	16.28
Use of social networking sites as source of information	Always	75	58.14
	Occasionally	2	1.55
	Sometimes	31	24.03
	very Often	21	16.28

Medium for news and information	News Channels	11	8.53
	Newspaper	6	4.65
	Web Portals	6	4.65
	YouTube Channels	24	18.60
	Facebook	11	8.53
	WhatsApp Messages	14	10.85
Use of gadgets	Laptop	9	6.98
	Smartphone	119	92.25
	Desktop	1	0.78

Source: Survey Questionnaire

The table above shows that the highest number of respondents (18.60%) rely on YouTube for information, followed by reliance on WhatsApp Messages by 10.85% of respondents. Facebook as a source of information is used by 8.53% of respondents, while Web Portals is preferred by 4.65% of respondents. On the other- hand traditional medium like News Channels and News Papers as a means of gaining information is used by 8.53% and 4.65% of respondents respectively. In the section below we present the impact of first-time voters and use of social media.

Table 7 indicates that most respondents do not use this platform for political discussion quite often. The result showed that only 35.66% of respondents discuss political views over social media platforms while 27.71% never discuss any political issues.

Table 7: social media and Political Awareness (N=129)

Factors	Parameters	No of responses	Percentage
Expression of political views over social media	Never	28	21.71
	Often	9	6.98
	Sometimes	46	35.66

	Rarely	30	23.26
	Very often	16	12.40
Importance of Social Media activity for Political Parties	Very Important	92	71.31
	Important	26	20.16
	Fairly important	8	6.20
	Not important	3	2.33
Follow political campaigns on social media	Yes	64	49.61
	No	65	50.39
Inspiration to vote in 2021 assembly elections	Candidate	76	58.91
	Political campaigning on social media	12	9.30
	Political rallies	5	3.88
	Political Party	20	15.50
Discussion of political ideas with friends over social media.	Very Often	21	16.28
	Often	14	10.85
	Sometimes	61	47.29
	Rarely	17	13.18
	Never	16	12.40
Expression of political views over social media.	Very Often	16	12.40
	Often	9	6.98

	Sometimes	46	35.66
	Rarely	30	23.26
	Never	28	21.71
Trust in News shared over Social Media	A lot	8	6.20
	Some	61	47.29
	Not Much	41	31.78
	Not at All	19	14.73
Importance of social media to first time voters	Very Important	29	22.48
	Important	26	20.16
	Fairly Important	39	30.23
	Not Important	18	13.95
Political Party activeness during 2021 Assembly Elections	Congress	20	15.50
	BJP	91	70.54
	AJP	1	0.78
	AIUDF	1	0.78
	AGP	1	0.78

From the above table it is clear that most respondents do not use this platform for political discussion quite often. The result showed that only 35.66% of respondents discuss political views over social media platforms while 27.71% never discuss any political issues over social media. Only a small percentage of respondents (12.40%) use social media platforms very often and even less respondents (6.98%) use social media platform often. While 23.26% of respondents use social media platform as a platform for political discussion rarely. The table clearly points that most of the respondents agree that social media forms an important element for any political parties with 71.31% seeing it as very important, 20.16 as important and 6.20% see social media as a fairly important for political parties. Thus, it is clear that most respondents see social media as an

important component for the political party to attract new voters. Findings clearly indicates the respondents are almost equally divided when it comes to the questions of following political campaigns over social media with 49.61% of respondent (64 nos) as being following the leaders and their campaigns over social media while 50.39% respondents do not follow political campaigns over any social media platforms.

The survey clearly suggests that during the 2021 Assembly elections of Assam young first-time voters were influenced by the candidate (58.91%). Political party influenced (15.50%) of respondents. While a small number of respondents (9.30%) were actually influenced by social media campaigning when it comes to voting. It is interesting to note that even though the use of social media has increased as a source of information, it hasn't been very effective as an influencer amongst the youth of rural areas as suggested by our survey findings. It is quite clear from the above table that most of the respondents (47.29%) do sometimes talk about political issues with their friends over social media platforms. When it comes to active discussion, just 16.28% respondent were found be actively involved in political discussion. Whereas, a good number of respondents 13.18% replied that they rarely discuss any political issues with their peers and friends. This indicates that there is a lack of political socialization when it comes to the young voters of rural areas. The findings of the survey clearly point to the fact that the level of trust placed over news and information shared over social media platform is not very significant. A large majority of respondents (47.29%) trust such information over social media only sometimes. While 31.78% of respondents do not place much trust over information shared in such platforms. Only a handful of respondents (6.20%) place complete trust. Interestingly (14.73%) of respondents completely negate the information provided in social media platforms.

The table clearly points that most of the respondents agree that social media forms an important element first time voters with (22.48%) seeing it as very important, (20.16%) as important and (30.23%) see social media as a useful device. While (13.95%) of respondent find it to be of average importance and the same percentage of respondents feel that it is not very important for political parties to make active use of social media. From the above table it is clear that most respondent (70.54%) found the BJP to be most active when it comes to the use of social media. As for the major opposition party, the Indian National Congress, 15.50% of respondent found it to be more active in social media platforms. As far as other regional parties are concerned, the number of respondents who found them active was negligible with only 0.78%. The result is nor very surprising because the BJP has been quite active in social media even before the elections. This also indicates why the party has been able to attract more young voters in recent years. Lastly, our survey tried to find out the response about the rise in political participation due to increase in the use of social media. It is important to understand the impact of social media in political participation as we have witnessed a rise in the voting percentage in recent times. The above discussion also suggest that social media has to an extent made an impact on the young voters whose percentage of voting has increased in recent years. The table below shows the number of the respondents who find the role of social media

in the increase of political participation.

Discussion:

The study indicates that social media has a profound influence over the young first-time voters. Some of the major findings can be summarized as social media has witnessed a major growth since last decade. Our survey indicates a large percentage of respondents own a smart phone with internet connection. Another important finding is the variation in the number of social media users in different platforms. The chatting App WhatsApp has the largest number of users with 89.92% of respondents. Followed by popular social media platform Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The findings of the survey also indicate that the young generation of respondents spends a considerable amount of time over internet and social media. We found that a whopping 44.19% of respondents spend more than 2 hours daily over social media. The survey indicated that a good number of respondents use social media platforms very regularly. Social media hasn't been very popular as a platform for political discussion as indicated by the survey. Only 19.38% of respondents see it as a platform to discuss social issues or for political awareness. Social media has brought about radical changes in the way political campaigns are undertaken in present times. In our survey, we find that a large number of respondents (49.61%) do follow political campaigns over social media. Another important finding of the survey pertains to influence asserted by various mediums when it comes to the voting choice of first-time voters. We find that the image of the candidate has the greatest impact on the respondents (58.19%) when it comes to voting. However, when it comes to regularity of political discussion amongst the first-time voters, we find that a very few (4.65%) often indulge in such discussion while 44.19% of respondents never participate in any such discussion.

Lastly, the survey looked into the increasing role of social media platforms over patterns of political participation in recent election. It found that around 42.64% of respondents see social media as a major element in the hands of political parties. This is quite evident in the popularity of these platforms that they are being made use by political parties. Another finding under the same heading was the presence and activeness of political parties during the 2021 State Assembly elections. The findings indicate that the Bharat Janata Party (BJP) was much ahead than other parties in terms of social media campaign with 70.54% of respondents finding an active presence of the party in the social media platform.

Conclusion:

Social media has a tremendous impact on the life of the citizens of any nation. In the context of the increasing role of social media and communication technology by all sectors of society-leaders, politicians, professionals, students etc- it is natural to have an understand of the social media's role in not just elections but also in opinion making along with fuelling social tensions at times. In this survey we looked into 3 important aspects of social media in relation to first-time voters- first, the extent of use of social media

platforms by voters; second, impact of social media platforms when it comes to preference selection by first time voters and thirdly, the impact social media might have on the first-time voters with special reference to the assembly elections of Assam, India in 2021.

From the survey and the findings that we have presented in the above sections we can make three broad conclusions.

First, social media has gained popularity amongst the young first-time voters who are well equipped with the digital technology. Most of them own a digital gadget and spend considerable amount of time over these platforms. The first time-voters use these platforms and devices to perform a number of tasks which also includes political socialization. These sites are used by them as a source of news along with following political campaigns and the profile of candidates are closely followed by the voters. Most of the information on political events comes from sites like WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube. Thus, we also find the young voters spending considerable time over these platforms.

Second, the findings of the survey indicate that the first-time voters are influenced by a number of factors when it comes to their preference in voting. A large number of voters are influenced by the way a candidate presents himself or herself to the voters over social media platform. The profile of the politician accompanied by a positive or negative campaign affects his or her political fortunes. In recent times, we have seen that most political parties and candidates are giving attention to online campaign to reach out to the maximum number of people and voters. Many of them have special IT cells too.

Third, the survey also indicates that majority of the young voters do not take decision based on the online campaign of propaganda of the candidate. It also shows that the online platforms are not the only or even the most reliable source of information for the voters. What the survey highlights is that even though there is a rapid increase in the use of social media platforms it is yet to become very popular when it comes to political discussion. Survey found that it is not the most popular platform to discuss politics for the young generation.

Thus, we can see that importance of social media platform is growing. However, it is yet to become a decisive force when it comes to voting preferences by the young first-time voters of rural Assam.

Conflict of Interests:

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References:

- Baldwin-Philippi, J. (2017). The myths of data-driven campaigning. *Political Communication*, 1–7. doi:10.1080/10584609.2017.1372999
- Bimber, B. (2014). Digital media in the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the personalized political communication environment. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 11(2), 130–150. doi:10.1080/19331681.2014.895691.
- Feezell, J. T., Conroy, M., & Guerrero, M. (2016). Internet use and political participation: Engaging citizenship norms through online activities. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 13(2), 95–107. doi:10.1080/19331681.2016.1166994.
- Fletcher, F., & Young, M. L. (2012). Political communication in a changing media environment. In H. Semetko & M. Scammell (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of political communication* (pp. 36–48). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Holt, K., Shehata, A., & Strömbäck, J. (2013). Age and the Effects of News media Attention and Social media Use on Political Interest and Participation: Do Social Media Function as Levelers? *European Journal of Communication*, XXVIII (1), 19–34 DOI: 10.1177/0267323112465369.
- Gottfried, J., & Shearer, E. (2016). News use across social media platforms 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>
- Kahne, J., Lee, N.-J., & Feezell, J. T. (2013). The civic and political significance of online participatory cultures among youth transitioning to adulthood. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 10(1), 1–20. doi:10.1080/19331681.2012.701109
- Kumar, Sadhavi (2014). Indian Elections 2014: Political Discourse Reaches a New Low. *Diplomat*, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2014/05/indian-elections-2014-political-discourse-reaches-a-new-low/>.
- Lenhart, A. (2015). Teens, social media & technology overview 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>
- Mindich, D. T. Z. (2005). *Tuned out: Why Americans under 40 don't follow the news*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, F., Levy, D., & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). Reuters institute digital news report 2015. Retrieved from <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf>.
- Rao, A. (2019). How did Social Media Impact India's 2019 General Election? *Economic & Political Weekly*, XXXXIV (51).
- Soerensen, M. P. (2016). Political conversations on Facebook – The participation of politicians and citizens. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(5), 664–685. doi:10.1177/0163443715620924.