

Digital Democracy and Student Politics: Interpretation from Assam University Student's Council Elections

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Abstract

Digital democracy can be defined as the practice of democracy by using social media in online and off line political communications. Online and offline modes are important because both are extensively used for political mobilization, campaign and communication. Internet enabled platforms such as social networking sites and mobile communication have been emerged as one of the frequently used tools for political activities.

Digital democracy has a great role in the improvement of political information retrieval, and exchange between government bodies and individuals, initiating public debate, community formation, motivating people for participation and political decision-making. Student unions are considered as the nursery of the politics. Same political and election methods are used for campaigning and elections of student bodies and to make voters aware of the issues, candidates, and their promises by exploring all means of communications. Since youth are equipped and frequent users of digital media so analyzing their exposure to social media, use of social media for informing and influencing voters can be very useful to understand the increasing importance of such media in democratic practices.

Present paper is an attempt to explain the patterns of digital media uses in student politics and their role in influencing and mobilizing voters. With the help of interaction with student participants in Assam University Student's Council Election-2014 paper has tried to highlight the issues, efforts and effectiveness of digital media in student politics.

Key words: Social Media, Digital Democracy, Student Politics

1.Introduction

Internet enabled communication practices have replaced one sided mass media communication with interactive and creative communication in the social and political spheres. Internet has helped users to act as active viewers, listeners, and readers and created a common platform of collective creation of messages, participating discussions, and chance to influence social political practices with popular point of views. People believe that because of its nature and strength to connect people from all over the world 'Internet is democratic in itself' (Van Dijk, 2013).

Internet has removed the space barriers and its strength of storage and connectivity promoted direct democracy (without control of political parties and workers) among users. The traditional practice of political communication and democracy is changing with exploration and experiments of Internet. With spread of Internet terms like virtual democracy and digital democracy have become part of mainstream political practice and it is reflected in the exercise of e-governance, election administration and management. With optimistic point of

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view it is believed that virtual democracy will bring substantial change in the culture and exercise of democracy and use of democratic tools and means. With support and popularity of cyber media and digital communications use of oral and print media, electronic media, and face-to-face communication would be declined. Screens, terminals, blogs, profiles, pages, websites, discussion groups are emerging as new means of political communication all over the world.

Political communication in India is essentially election communication. Political parties always come out with their roadmaps only ahead of polls. To actively engage the voters these parties have been extensively using public meetings, election rallies, and door-to-door campaigns, local hoardings, print advertisements, and small exhibits in their election communication. This has been a dominant practice and role model for all other elections including union elections, regional council elections, and student body elections. Till 2004 more or less same poll campaign pattern was practiced in all elections in India. But, since 2004, after the emergence and availability of ICT in public sphere change in the political communications started taking place. ICT has provided opportunity to all stakeholders to practice Internet, mobile communications, and other digital media tools for their political communications. This digital era has transformed the way of political communication as political parties have adopted digital tools in last parliamentary elections in 2014 that have been never adopted before.

1.1 Digital Media and Digital Democracy

Digital media has ability to transmit digitized contents over Internet, computer, and with mobile networks. Multi-media data with the help of digital media can be sent to a large number of respondents speedily and effectively, and objectives of group forming and interactivity can be achieved with the help of it. Personal computers, e-book readers, laptops, tabs, smart phones, smart TV and many more devices work as platform to disseminate such data. Digital media is becoming more popular form of sharing contents/ information because of its interactivity, immediacy and entertainment value. Digital media, popularly known as the new media, is representing and imagining the world in a new way. Digital media has revolutionized the way of communication and helps in shaping political visions of the people. With increasing use of ICT in the public life and practice of various models of e-governance digital democracy has become part of our political discourse.

With e-governance and 'Digital India' initiatives government is attempting to create ICT based new highways for connecting new ideas and disseminating knowledge. With increasing use of digital media by people a generational change is posing challenge for established structure of information and communication, as nation is moving towards digital democracy.

1.2 Social Media Influence

'The advent of social media in transforming the way in which people connect with each other and the manner in which information is shared and distributed'. (deity.gov.in). Social media can be defined as online platform where users can create and share contents and participate in the discussions, debates and interactions. It provides unique opportunity to its users to express without any obstacle or barriers.

Connectedness, collaboration and community are three important C of social media. Social media provides 24x7 connectedness and like-minded people can connect and re-connect on domains and topics of their interest. Status updates, likes, comments, tweets, retweets are some of the examples of unending connectedness of social media. This achieved connectedness enable users to create and sustain communities. These communities have firm role in creating awareness, sensitization, mobilization and can be used for seeking inputs in policy making, building good relations, and seeking feedback on any issue.

With increasing use of various networking sites social media is emerged as a powerful platform to sway public opinion and to generate mass support. Social media includes different online palteforms of interaction. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have classified social media into six different types; Collaborative projects (Wikies), Blogs and Microblogs (Twitter), Content communities (Vlogs and video sharing sites- Youtube), Social networking sites (Facebook), Virtual game worlds, and Virtual social worlds.

Social media has been exponential in its growth. Radio took 38 years, TV 14 years, Internet reached in four years, ipod in three years to reach 50 million people, whereas Facebook added 100 million users in less than nine months. As on 31st March 2014 around 251.59 million people were using Internet through wired, wireless, and mobile wireless connections in our country (www.trai.gov.in). Out of total Internet users around 50% are using social media. An average Indian spends around five hours accessing Internet and out of total time around 40% is spent on social media. Though, only one out of five Indians is using Internet together it is a big and effective number because most of users belong to middle class and youth population; enthusiastic to participate in change and adoption of new things.

‘The role of social media in the creation of what is called ‘shared awareness’ is immense. This awareness can be used for political mobilization as witnessed in 2001 in the impeachment trial of Philippines President Joseph Estrada, One million signature campaign to secure women’s rights in Iran, Jasmine revolution of Tunisia or the Arab spring, movements in India and Bangladesh recently etc.’ (Yojana editorial, 2013, p.03)

The 2014 Parliamentary elections in India have proved the power of social media in political communication and to woo the voters. Politicians and political parties turned to social networking sites to engage Internet savvy, first time voters and youth voters. With having official YouTube channel, active Facebook page and Twitter account politicians convinced voters in a cost-effective manner and with massive speed in delivery of messages. These appearances considered as important as holding mass rallies and plastering candidates. One can say that with the digital divide, poverty, and illiteracy online campaigns for general elections may be constrained but in term of paving the way for further democratization of policiespower of social media cannot be ignored. Social media is an effective tool of political interaction for other forms of electoral democracy such as union body elections, student body elections, and other organizational elections.

2.Methodology

For the present study the data was collected through two approaches, one quasi-participant observation and second survey method. Researcher was part of the election process so election management related information was collected as a participant. Information of election campaign, use of social media, and related inputs were collected as a distant

observation. Opinion of the students was collected with the help of purposive sampling and total 40 samples were included in the survey. Purposive sampling was used to determine and include the Internet users from the existing and voter students.

DIGITAL MEDIA AND STUDENTS' POLITICS-

Election management is a difficult task at every level. For a country like India implementing digital democracy is still a distant dream because of demographic and digital divide factors. Election commissions in national and state elections have been facing difficulties to reduce paper work and encourage voters for high turnouts on election days. With inadequate infrastructure and small Internet user population making electoral process digitized and transparent is a time-taking target. But we can go ahead with digital democracy concept in smaller versions of democracy and students' election can be forerunner. In fact, number of candidates and organizations has already started using digital media for such electoral process.

Social media is a vital factor in students' politics now days. 'The techno-savvy youth are going in the transformation from digital migrants to digital natives. They are present with their true identities on the digital platform' (www.ukessays.com). In the age of ICT and smart phones where majority universities and institutions of higher learning are equipped with Internet facilities digital media based electoral process could be a new model of students' democracy. A digitized student's body can serve with more transparent, participatory and interactive body so a true and effective representation can be formed. A digital democracy model can be used to combat with political apathy with the help of technological support. It can encourage and secure cent-percent voting and involvement of all students in decision-making and setting objectives, priorities, and line of functionality for representative bodies.

Candidates have extensively used social media in recent past in various student body elections. In the year 2014 in Punjab University the prospective candidates have taken to social networking tools like Facebook and WhatsApp to reach out to a larger student population. In Delhi University 2014 union elections student organizations made conscious efforts to actively use social media to garner support to reach out to thousands of students spread across the university's 70-odd colleges.

Student activism is transforming and characterized by developing blurbs, coordinating and involving to online signature campaigns, liking or sharing pictures and news on issues, rallies or movements. Students' organizations believe that social media campaigning is extremely important to win any election. Such new media tools are rated as the best media to get in touch with the students who are not much interested in student politics. With the help of new media tools flaunting achievements, posting day-to-day activities, animated slogans, initiating debates on particular issues, asking for suggestions and feedback has become easier for candidates and electorates both.

2.1 Assam University Student Body Election

Assam University has a student's representative body called Assam University Students' Council (AUSC) working with elected office bearers from students. Dean of Students' Welfare is president of the body and election is held for the posts of general secretary, assistant general secretary (two- one open, one reserved for women), cultural secretary, sports secretary and magazine secretary. Election for 2014 body was conducted in two steps- first,

direct elections to elect department's students' representatives (DR) at departmental level, and second, two elect main body of the council by direct voting. In main body elections only elected DRs can contest.

2.2 Administration of the Elections-

Office of the Election Commissioner has taken care the business of the AUSC-2014 elections with the help of department heads as presiding officers. Including first notification of announcement of the elections the commission issued total 17 notices/circulars. Only first notification was issued for wide circulation through university website. Rest of communication was managed by conventional dispatch system. Election commission had very little time to complete the election process, but due to unhurried mechanism, even first notice took so much time to reach to the departments. First notice was issued on September 3, 2014, and it reached in some departments on 8 or 9th September, the date of filing nominations.

2.3 Campaigning for AUSC-2014

After the first phase of elections serious and eligible candidates started their campaign to woo the voters. Since only three days were given to candidates to go for campaigns they tried to explore all possible ways to touch and convince the voters. Almost all candidates extensively used both conventional and new media tools including banners, posters, leaflets and handbills, hoardings, mass rallies, door-to-door campaigns, mobile communication, and the social media.

2.4 Use of Social Media-

Candidates had so many difficulties including costly publicity materials, food and refreshment for campaigners and supporters, petrol and convene charges. They took help of others to meet out such expenses and on an average per candidate Rupees 15 to 20 thousand were spent. Besides, candidates wanted to touch scattered student population residing in distant places. Keeping in mind constraints of budget, time, and avenues offered by social media they tried to spread their messages through social media.

Among social media Facebook was used as the main podium of election campaign. Pages like 'News of Assam University' with 2,367 likes, AUS Hostellers Forum with 1,797 members, candidate and supporters' profile pages and other community pages turned into the field of the appealing and counter canvassing. With the help of such platforms message was effectively placed before more than 70% student population of the Assam University. With creative posters, appeals, promises and account of works done for students' candidates have placed their voting appeals and received good response from students with likes, comments, and shares.

With such observation it can be said that candidates and their supporters with expectation of massive acceptance and political applicability used these social media tools. Besides, these tools were also used to generate student's attention and to act as points of salience. It can be said that the social media is generally open systems and are accessible to almost every one. The social media today has no dependency on computers as it can be accessed through mobiles. Every tool present for social media was specifically used to target niche audiences.

This point has influenced the candidates to go for social media with conventional practices of election campaign.

2.5 Effectiveness of the Social Media:

The popularity of the social media is directly related to how many people know about these platforms and how this affects the election results. This is a practical measure to know the popularity of the social media campaigns, at least during elections days. In order to know if the candidates are using the social media as a tool for political campaigning, a sample survey was conducted among the students. This was important, as we would know the effectiveness and potential of social media in student body elections.

With the help of purposive sampling total 40 samples were included in the survey. Out of total samples 80% from PG and 40% from UG courses were interviewed. Gender wise 60% male and 40% female respondents were participated in the survey. All selected respondents were Internet users with having presence on the social media networks. Accessing Internet through mobile phone was also a common practice among respondents as 60% male and 50% female respondents were using it through this device too. A very slight difference was observed in accessing Internet through mobile among male and female respondents. Facebook found most popular social networking site as all respondents were using it. Around 20% respondents were having profile on other social networking sites along with Facebook.

Most of respondents were using social media in the same way, around one to two hours or more than 3 hours (when using Internet), so it can be assumed that for student community using social media is a dominant trend. A significant variation was observed on 'time spent on social media' among male and female respondents. Most of male respondents (66.6%) fallen in more than 3 hours per visit category whereas most of female respondents in the 1 to 2 hours per visit category.

All respondents have voted in the AUSC -14 steps 1 and 2 both. A mixed response was observed in term of candidate preference as equally 40% voted for either candidate from the same department or from other departments. Both male and female respondents voted other department's candidates in case of no candidate from the same department contesting in the election. Therefore, it can be said that student voters in the Assam University preferred candidates from the same department.

Among social networking sites Facebook was the most used social media for election campaigns. Candidates and their supporters have uploaded their appeals for voting, photographs, and achievements to persuade the voters. Message effectively landed into the court of voters as all the respondents have seen such posts through their Facebook profiles.

Such Facebook posts grabbed the attention of the voters as 80% out of total respondents have carefully seen the message. 20% respondents (only female) have taken it casually as they spent less than five seconds to see the post. Around 60% respondents liked the posts and 30% shared on their wall. Thus, it can be concluded that posts on social media drew attention of the voters and generated active response from the users. 40% users gave comments on some election related posts and around 30% got reply from the other side as well. Such posts by drawing attention of the voters stimulated them and received valuable comments, suggestion and reactions. Such reactions play important role in understanding the effectiveness of the message as well as provide a chance to correct the posts, policies, and strategies.

Like any other election in our country students also use number of ways for their political campaigns. Now day's social media, use of banners/posters, holding meetings, and face-to-face interaction are most practiced means of political campaigning inside the campus. On asking preferences, respondents equally preferred face-to-face- interaction and social media as most desired platforms to conduct election campaigns. Majority students have rated use of banners, posters and meetings as the third preference. Therefore, we can say that young generation prefers social media campaigns over conventional means of campaign and publicity.

3.Findings of the Study

The study on one the hand is an attempt to understand the popularity of Digital Democracy in the student body elections; nursery of political training for youth. This study also reveals that now students are using new media as an effective communication tool. On the other hand users approach analysis of the digital media campaigns can give us a deep insight into political trends during the election time .It can also be assumed that more online plateforms and social media could be used in students' politics in the near future. This may help both student voters and candidates to take course of actions. The study also reveals that at administrative level no efforts are taken to use digital media for election management, which is a divergence with objectives of e-governance, paperless administration and policy of government to promote use of social media by government departments, agencies, and units. The university system has yet not realized the importance of the use of the online plateforms for students' elections. They did not issue the information or update the sites on a day-to-day basis, although it is technologically possible to update the contents in real time today. It creates unnecessary delay in dissemination of information and as a result low-turnouts and less participation of students is observed in election process.

Conclusion

Use of social media is very important in aggregating and articulating needs and problems as identified by candidates, voters and supporters so digitization of the election process should be incorporated in the election management in the institutions of the higher studies.

Digital media is a cost effective, transparent and participatory means and its strength should be used for socializing and educating voters and citizens in the functioning of the political and electoral system and the generation of general political values.

Digital media platforms should be available for activating and mobilizing students' bodies through encouraging voters to participate in political decisions and forwarding their opinions for viable policy options.

The popularity of social media among students should be utilized to make electoral process dynamic and to increase the consciousness of the people.

To make elections more transparent, efficient, and more accountable and open we can follow the three-step model of digital democracy-

First Step- Administration and management of electoral process and elected body should be digitized. Notification of election, profile of candidates, nomination, withdrawal, publication of results and other relevant information should be accessible through online system.

Second Step- Creation of community so more participatory, active, and responsive body can

function.

Third Step- Online availability of functioning so every member of the community should be well informed and be able to contribute with their suggestions, ideas, and comments.

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Appendix

Tables of the Response

Table-1. Distribution of Respondents according to their studies and gender

S. No.	PG		UG		Male		Female		Total	
	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
2	32	80%	8	20%	24	60%	16	40%	40	100%

Table-2. Respondents using Internet

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
2	Yes	24	60%	16	40%	40	100%
3	No	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil

Table-3. Respondents having social media profile

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
2	Yes	24	60%	16	40%	40	100%
3	No	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil

Table-4. Having profile on different social media sites

S. No.	Social Media Platform	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
2	Only Facebook	17	42.5	14	35	31	77.5
3	Only Twitter	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
4	Facebook & others	7	17.5	02	5	09	22.5
5	Twitter & others	Nil	Nil	40	100	Nil	Nil

Table-5. Most used social media sites

S. No.	Social media site	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-	No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
2	Facebook	23	57.5	13	32.5	36	90
3	Twitter	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
4	Others	01	2.5	03	7.5	4	10
5	Grand total	-	-	-	-	40	100

Table-6. Frequency of using social media profile

S. No.	Social media site	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Daily	10	25	4	10	14	35
3	At least four times/week	9	22.5	7	17.5	16	40
4	1 to 2 times/week	5	12.5	5	12.5	10	25
5	Grand total	-	-	-	-	40	100

Table-7. Time spent on social media (when visits)

S. No.	Social media site	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	< 1 hour	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
3	1-2 hour	Nil	Nil	14	35	14	35
4	More than 3 hours	18	45	02	5	20	50
5	Not sure	6	15	Nil	Nil	6	15
6	Grand total	-	-	-	-	40	100

Table-8. Accessing social media through mobile phone

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Yes	24	60%	14	35	38	95
3	No	Nil	Nil	02	5	02	5
4.	Grand total					40	100

Table-9. Voting in AUSC-14

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Yes	22	55	13	32.5	35	87.5
3	No	02	5	03	7.5	5	12.5
4.	Grand total					40	100

Table-10. Voting Preference

S. No.	Social media site	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Candidates from the same department	22	55	16	40	38	95
3	Candidates from other department	2	5	Nil	Nil	2	5
4	Voted to other department's candidates due to no one contested from the department	24	Nil	16	16	40	100

Table-11. Information of AUSC-14 campaign on Facebook

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Yes	24	60	16	40	40	100
3	No	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
4.	Grand total					40	100

Table-12. Responding on FB campaigns

S. No.	Social media site	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Carefully read the message	24	60	14	35	38	95
3	Seen and switched to other message (within 5 seconds)			02		02	5
4	Ignored	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
5	Gave a like	15	37.5	08	20	23	57.5
6	Forwarded to others	07	17.5	06	15	13	32.5
7	Share	07	17.5	05	12.5	12	30

Table-13. Receiving AUSC-14 message on mobile

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Yes	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
3	No	24	60	16	40	40	100
4.	Grand total					40	100

Table-14. Comments by users on FB campaigns

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Yes	11	27.5	06	15	17	42.5
3	No	13	32.5	10	25	23	57.5
4.	Grand total					40	100

Table-15. Response of candidates on users questions/comments

S. No.	Response	Male		Female		Total	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
1	-						
2	Yes	05	12.5	06	15	11	27.5
3	No	19	47.5	10	25	29	72.5
4.	Grand total					40	100

Table-16. Preference as most suitable medium for students' elections by users

S. No.	Option	First Preference				Second Preference				Third preference			
		Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
1	-												
2	-	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
3	Through Social Media	11	27.5	07	17.5	15	37.5	13	32.5	06	-	-	-
4	Banners/posters, meetings	-	-	-	-	04	10	-	-	16	40	16	40
5	Face-to-face Communication	13	32.5	09	22.5	05	12.5	03	7.5	02	-	-	-
5	Grand total	24	60	16	40	24	60	16	40	24	60	16	40