

# Role of Social Media in Political Participation among Students

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**Ansu Joseph**

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Calicut, Kerala, India

**Lakshmi Pradeep \***

Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Calicut, Kerala, India

## Abstract

The present study is an attempt to analyse how social media empower political participation among college going students. The study explores the extent of political activity of students across social media platforms. It associates social media political participation and political efficacy with various demographic variables and evaluates the influence of social media in their real life political participation.

## Keywords

Social media, Online political participation, Political efficacy

## Introduction

Since ancient times, communication has always been one of the top priorities of people. As we pass the era not only our basic living style differs but our mode of communication and attitudes towards technology also changes. Now being in an information age we are overwhelmed with different kinds of media and information. Today, a world without new media, particularly social media is literally unimaginable. People quickly switch to new media including social networking sites because of its unique features. With the help of technological advancement and the invention of web 2.0, long distance communication is very much possible. Today's popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, YouTube, Instagram and so on. Basically they all are social networking sites which connect one to another and the world. According to the world digital population of April 2022, around the world there are five billion internet users, which is approximately 63 percent of the total world population and among them 4.7 billion people is social media users, that is about 93 percent of them. According to Indian social media statistics of January 2022, the number of social media users in India has been

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\* Correspondence: Email: lakshmiprdp@gmail.com

growing and reached a steady rate of 467 million in 2022 because of the deep penetration of the internet. Internet has made social media popular and it acts as a fuel for social media users.

Due to the increased engagement and activeness of social media, its function increases day by day. People can participate and engage in the country's politics and related affairs and here one can use social media as a tool for propaganda or to enhance democracy. According to the Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thoughts it is said that politics is "a process whereby a group of people, whose opinion or interest are initially divergent, reach collective decisions which are generally regarded as common policy" (Arackal, 2015). According to Mc Quail (1992), "political communication refers to all processes of information (including facts, opinions, beliefs, etc..), transmission, exchange engaged in by participants in the course of institutionalised political activities" (Arackal, 2015). Therefore, political communication can be referred to all types of communication in political context. Here the common public, political institutions, political parties, politicians or rulers can be participants in the communication process and in the communication process messages can be political information, beliefs, opinions, facts and so on. And this political communication engages the participants, which is a political activity.

Robert Dahl in 1973 declares that "political participation is an essential part of modern democracies because it enables the citizens to hold their government accountable" (Dahl, 1973).

When we look at the history of Indian elections we notice the rise of young voters and it has tremendous changes. According to the 'Youth in India' report, "the total youth population increased from 222.7 million in 1993 to 333.4 million in 2011 and it is projected to reach 371.4 million by 2021" so from these reports we will understand how important the youth is in the current Indian political scenario. Even though youth are so important, they don't have an opportunity to express their opinion in mainstream politics. So it's necessary to have political participation rather than just consuming political information and new media give a platform for political participation and engagement.

Social media is a platform where each individual can raise their voice. History of social media in political elections starts from the US presidential election in 2008. It was Barack Obama being the first African American US presidential candidate who used social media campaigns as an election strategy and it is the first known social media election which gave a new face for total politics

and election around the world. Social media became a milestone in the Indian political process and election campaign in 2014. It is considered as the “first social media election of the country”. It was Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his political party who widely used social media and received huge benefits from the social media platforms. His social media tactics targeted educated youth and especially middle class groups. So as we said after the 2014 election India's every election whether it be general election, state elections or panchayat elections, social media has become an important part in political communication, participation and decision making. According to the election reports there were around 150 million fresh voters in the 2014 Indian general election. According to the study of Rodrigues in 2019 as of October, during the Indian general election, Modi had around 44 million followers in March of that year, Modi had around 433 million viewers for his YouTube videos. (Rodrigues, 2019), Modi had 30 million followers on Instagram. The BJP government and Narendra Modi used WhatsApp as a social media connecting platform to reach a huge amount of people. They use the personalization feature of WhatsApp to engage with people which became their success mantra. From this it is clear that social media and social media political participation can play a key role in Indian political structure. We can use this online political participation in social media to monitor our elected candidates so they have the thought that people are watching them so they will be more accountable in their services. Also our online political participation makes us understand more about political affairs and current political affairs. This can make youth more political. The politicians and political parties will understand that we are not someone who responds only at the time of votes and our each word and action will have an effect on them. This will make them remember about their election promises and fulfil them. Also when we actively use the online media for political participation this can influence the government policy and processes in such a way it can favour in realizing the needs of the common public.

### **Study Objectives**

- To assess the strength and possibilities of social media as a vehicle to enhance political information in students.
- To explore the extent of student's political participation in social media.
- To find out whether social media political participation leads to political efficacy.
- To find the association between the demographic variables and the social media political participation and efficacy.

- To evaluate the extent to which social media political participation is reflected in real life.

### **Methodology and Theoretical analysis**

To achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher depends on a quantitative method for materialising the study. The objectives of the study demand such an approach to get needful data. In the present research, data collection is done through a survey method. The students of Calicut University campus become the population of the study. Purposive sampling technique is used to select the representatives of the population. The data is collected using well-constructed questionnaires administered among the selected participants. There are 154 participants in the study. The researcher conducts an online survey method using Google forms to send questionnaires and collect answers.

### **Goal System Theory**

“Goal system theory suggests that human goals are represented mentally as cognitive constructs which are linked to sub goals and means of achievement” (Kruglanski et al., 2002). The theory explains how goals are chosen and pursued in a behavioural situation. “Attitudes towards objects, even if strong or toward behaviour, even if highly positive, are insufficient in and of themselves to incite action, instead human behaviour is driven by goals”(Kruglanski et.al, 2015). So according to the theory an individual needs to expose themselves to political information which can be either intentionally or even incidentally. The political information must be something which they regarded as relevant. And then they must conclude that there is a gap between the present state and an undesired or desired future state. The individual will have an explicit participatory goal only when the individual regards the early mentioned future state as attainable. Finally the individual needs to activate these goals against other goals in a behavioural situation. But even if there is no explicit participatory goal in individuals, social media usage can still lead to fostering the low effort form of political participation (Knoll, Matthes, and Heiss, 2018).

### **Cognitive Engagement Theory**

The cognitive engagement theory explains that one's political participation is associated with their education, the information they receive, political knowledge and also based on their political satisfaction. So according to the theory an individual who is educated can access more information and hence they will be informed about the events and issues. So this can lead to political

participation among people. Also the political participation of an individual can further increase their satisfaction towards political and government policy. The theory was developed in the time of traditional media and traditional political participation. The media causes less cost for consumption of information and it leads to more political knowledge and increases in political interest among respondents and thereby can enhance political participation. (Salau, Hamid, and Ishak, 2017). In the current age of digital media we are more prone to social networking sites and we can access social media platforms if we have an internet facility and no other extra charge. So this attracts the attention of people and social media nowadays act as online political platform that gives as an opportunity to understand political information, events, controversies of political parties, politicians, government systems and so on. This can lead to increase in political interest and further can lead to online political participation and extend to political efficacy and real life political activities.

### **Data Collection**

A self-administered questionnaire was prepared and distributed among the selected samples for the purpose of collecting data. The questions have been written to fulfill the objective of the study. The data was collected from the respondents using a purposive sampling method, strictly to students who use social media. The tests used in SPSS include Frequency Distribution test, Chi-Square test, Normality Test, Kruskal Wallis test and Mann Whitney U test. Data analysed were given as tables.

### **Sample profile**

The sample profile of the study is based on the demographic variables gender, age and qualification. Among the 154 respondents, 78 were females and 76 were males. Also the pattern of social media usage for political information, most used social media, time spent on social media platform, political interest, political affiliation social media used for political information, time spent on social media to assess political information, social media as a vehicle to enhance of political information, extent of online political participation in social media, effect of online political participation on online political efficacy, to find the association between the demographic variables and the social media political participation and efficacy, to evaluate the extent to which online political participation is reflected in real life are assessed from the chosen samples.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

The findings of the first objective, political information through online social media shows that the majority of respondents agree that the usage of social media helps them widely understand various aspects of contemporary politics and political parties, actions, policies and also controversies. The findings of the second objective, political participation through social media platforms shows that the majority disagree with their social media online political participation. But the extent of social media political participation increases in each level. When correlated the levels of online political participation with demographic variable it is proven that age, gender, qualification, social media used for accessing political information do not have significant difference between political participation but the political interest, affiliation and time used in accessing social media for political information have a significant difference between social media online political participation. The findings of the third objective, political efficacy which include both internal and external political efficacy through social media political participation shows that as the respondents' online political engagement increases, their political efficacy also increases. That is as levels of online political participation have significant differences between internal, external and total political efficacy. When correlated political efficacy with demographic variables it is revealed that age, gender, qualification, social media used for accessing political information do not have significant difference between total political efficacy but the political interest, affiliation and time used in accessing social media for political information have a significant difference between total political efficacy. The findings of the fourth objective, real life political activities of respondents have a significant relationship with social media online political participation.

## **Summary of analysis**

Among the group of respondents, 43.01% agree and 15.58% strongly agree that social media act as a vehicle to enhance political information. 46.67% agree that their social media usage for accessing political information provides them an internal political efficacy and 9.95% strongly agree it. Also 43.72% gives a neutral agreement in case of external efficacy and 20.99% strongly agrees and 1.94% strongly agrees it. According to the findings of the study, there is a significant difference in levels of online political participation between internal political efficacy and external political efficacy and total political efficacy. Levels of political participation have significant differences between the respondents' political affiliation, political interest and time spent on social media for accessing political information. Total political efficacy has

significant differences between respondents’ political affiliation, political interest, time spent on social media for accessing political information. According to the findings, levels of online political participation have significant differences between real life political activities.

The findings of the study show that a vast majority (91.5%) agree that social media will become an important tool or strategy in the coming Indian elections. A majority (67%) of respondents believed that social media political participation is needed to sustain the democracy in India in the current political scenario.

	<b>Political participation level</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	
<b>Internal efficacy</b>	Level 1	39	52.58	Kruskal-Wallis H = 33.58, df = 3, p value = 0.000
	Level 2	66	73.84	
	Level 3	39	95.12	
	Level 4	10	130.15	
	Total	154		
<b>External efficacy</b>	Level 1	39	59.03	Kruskal-Wallis H = 23.885 , df = 3, p value = 0.000
	Level 2	66	71.35	
	Level 3	39	95.59	
	Level 4	10	119.6	
	Total	154		
<b>Total political efficacy</b>	Level 1	39	51.26	Kruskal-Wallis H = 40.481 , df = 3, p value = 0.000
	Level 2	66	71.37	
	Level 3	39	99.81	
	Level 4	10	133.3	
	Total	154		

Table 1: Political efficacy vs Political participation level

Level of political participation	Political Affiliation			Political Interest			Time spent on SM political information					
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	Less than 1 hour	1-2 hour	2-3 hour	More than 3 hours	Total	
Level 1	2(5.1)	37(94.9)	39(100)	16(41.0)	23(59.0)	39(100)	30(76.9)	7(17.9)	1(2.6)	1(2.6)	39(100)	
Level 2	9(13.6)	57(86.4)	66(100)	45(68.2)	21(31.8)	66(100)	47(71.2)	17(25.8)	2(3.0)	0(0.0)	66(100)	
Level 3	14(35.9)	25(64.1)	39(100)	35(89.7)	4(10.3)	39(100)	19(48.7)	11(28.2)	6(15.4)	3(7.7)	39(100)	
Level 4	6(60.0)	4(40.0)	10(100)	9(90.0)	1(10.0)	10(100)	2(20.0)	5(50.0)	3(7.7)	1(10.0)	10(100)	
Total	31(20.1)	123(79.9)	154(100)	105(68.2)	49(31.8)	154(100)	98(63.6)	26(39)	11(7.1)	5(3.2)	154(100)	
		Pearson Chi-square=23.108, df=3, P value=.000			Pearson Chi-square=23.809, df=3, P value=.00			Pearson Chi-square=24.007, df=9, P value=.004				

Table 2: Level of Political Participation vs political affiliation, political interest and time spent on social media political information.

	Political Interest	N	Mean Rank	Political Affiliation	N	Mean Rank
Total Political Efficacy	Yes	105	88.64	Yes	31	102.19
	No	49	53.62		123	71.28
Total	154			154		
Mann-Whitney U = 1402.500 p value=0.000				Mann-Whitney U = 1141.000 p value=0.001		

Table 3: Political efficacy vs political affiliation, political interest



	Time Spent on Social Media for Accessing Political Information	N	Mean Rank
Total Political Efficacy	Less than 1 hour	98	70.56
	1- 2 hour	40	84.01
	2- 3 hour	11	109.36
	More than 3 hour	5	91.3
	Total	154	

Table 4: Time spent on social media Political Information and total Political Efficacy

**KruskalWallis Test=9.393, df=3, p value=0.025**

Social media as an important strategy in coming Indian elections	Frequency (%)
Yes	97(91.5)
No	9(8.5)
Total	154(100)

Table 5: Social media as an important strategy in coming Indian elections

*Figures in parenthesis denote percentage*

<b>social media political participation is needed to sustain democracy</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Yes	71(67.0)
No	35(33.0)
Total	154(100)

Table 6: Social media political participation sustain democracy of India

*Figures in parenthesis denote percentage*

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Conclusively the findings of the study determine that students are active consumers of political information from social media platforms as the majority of the respondents agree that they enhance their political information from social media platforms. Even though students are not active social media political participants it is found out that as their levels of political participation increases as they have interest or affiliation in politics also more time they spent on accessing political information can make them active social media political participants and according to this, their political efficacy increases. Even though the respondents disagree about their social media political participation they believe that social media political participation can sustain the democracy in India and they believe that social media will be one of the significant strategies in future election and decision making. Since the majority believes so, social media political engagement and political participation should increase among both students and youth to be political and also for sustaining the country's democracy. The governing system also should remember that today's youth make tomorrow's future so they should encourage and engage students in politics and related affairs through most engaging social media platforms.

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