Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 466
MAY 2021
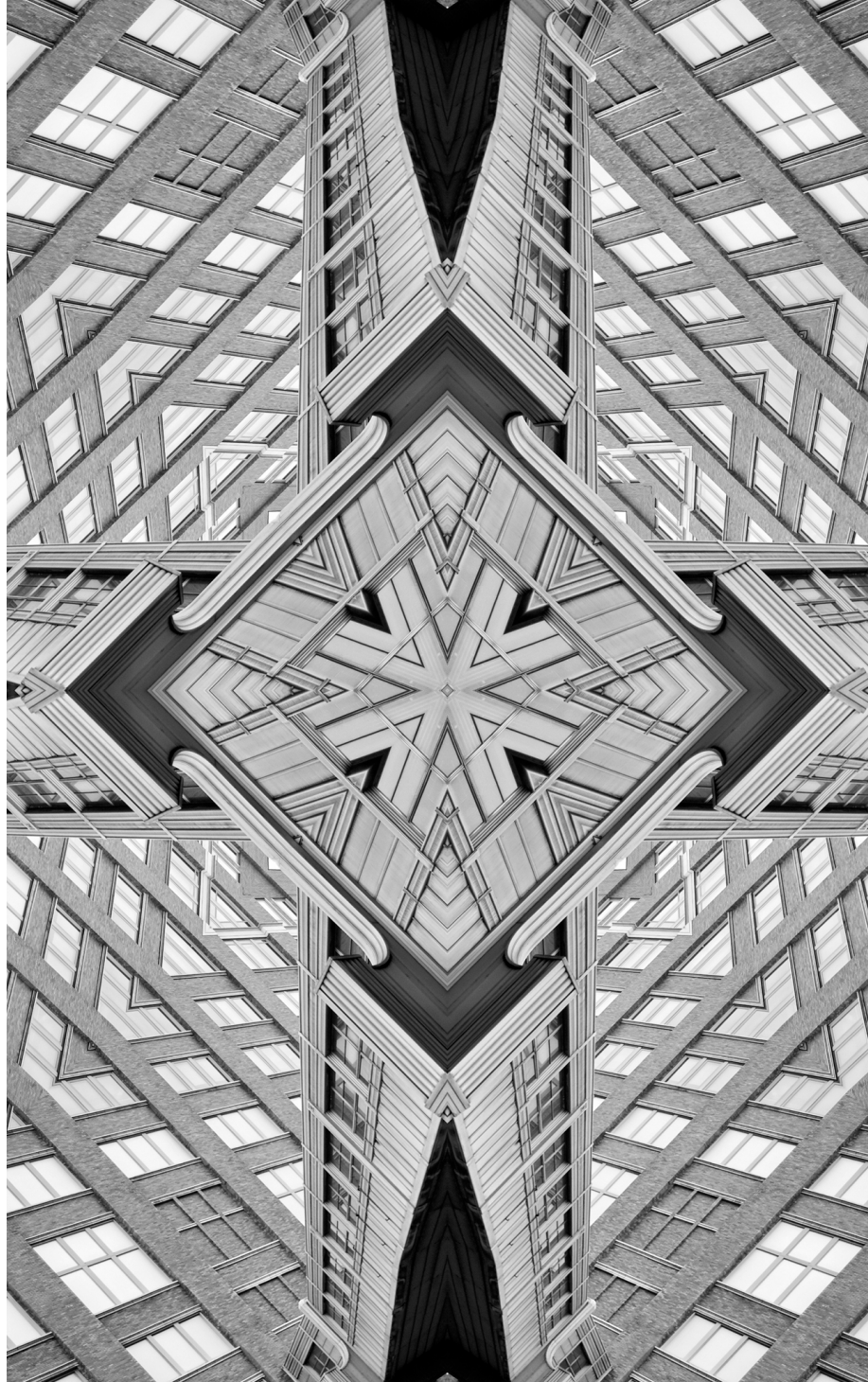
Towards Informed Discourse and Voter Education: A Critique of E-Campaigns

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Abstract

Digital spaces are becoming increasingly vital for public deliberation on issues of shared interest, including during electoral campaigns. This brief examines the types of discourse on social media platforms that electoral candidates engage in. It studies the content of the online campaigns and their potential impact on voter education, and recommends countermeasures against the threat of uninformed and unethical online narratives that only encourage polarisation, rather than genuine discourse.

Introduction

In the last few years, online platforms have started outstripping traditional print media as sources of news and other information[a] relevant during electoral campaigns.[1] These platforms enable direct interaction between the candidate and the target voters. Public perception is key in elections,[2] after all, and the optics of one's campaign can be directly linked to the information that is made available to voters. Social media, in particular, are a key tool for electoral candidates as they facilitate easy and effective online engagement.[3]

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has recognised the need to not only encourage higher voting turnouts but to also promote a truly participative, informed and ethical voting. In 2009, it launched the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation, its flagship programme for voter education. More than a decade since, however, the ECI has yet to create effective mechanisms to respond to the misuse of social media for election campaigns. There exists a legal framework for addressing traditional, "offline" abuses like booth capturing and vote-buying; but a similar mechanism is absent for newer forms of malpractice that have evolved on online platforms. These activities include information tampering by government agencies, political parties, private firms, media, and influencers;[4] dissemination of hate speech;[5] misinformation;[6] voter profiling; and black propaganda.[7]

The Supreme Court (SC) of India has laid down a fundamental principle: that a voter's right to free speech entails a right to receive information as well.[8] The SC argued that such information enables critical thinking, and thereby, informed decision-making. However, there is no legal standard against misleading, manipulative, or false information shared online by government authorities, candidates or even parties. The ECI, and other government agencies with jurisdiction over these issues, have not been swift enough to address the challenges posed by technological tools. The evolving forms of misuse of online platforms for political gains remain overlooked.

This brief analyses the predominant forms of online discourse during elections and whether or not they promote issue-based, informed voting. The brief focuses on two election campaigns—the Indian general elections of 2019 and the Delhi state elections in 2020—and combed the Twitter platform for the

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a   This brief uses the term 'information' to refer to facts, news, opinion, statistics, any content, or data that helps a voter to interpret the quality of a candidate/political party. This could include online reportage or discourse related to the candidate's past work, identity, education, awareness of the constituency/state/country, planned or implemented policies, party's manifesto, and criminal record.

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evaluation. The brief aims to outline the typology of information disseminated by various political parties, media practitioners, and party candidates to interact with voters who frequent digital spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Online spaces have been "democratised" in India with greater affordability of smartphones and some of the world's cheapest data plans, leading to an enormous increase in recent years in the platform user base.[9,10,11] Indeed, analysts have referred to the 2019 national polls as the 'WhatsApp Elections',[12] for the wide use of the messaging app by candidates in bringing their campaigns to massive numbers of target voters.[13] For a few years before that, certain candidates and political parties started expanding their digital outreach, operating their electoral campaigns with the convenience of tools like advertisements and sponsored content on social media platforms.

The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), in a 2019 report, highlighted the Indian public's increasing political participation on social media platforms. At the same time, the study said, there is still a lack of evidence of a tangible and substantial influence of these platforms on elections.[14] The report explores two key findings that hint of the growing impact of information sharing online: (a) social media users were more opinionated than non-users; and (b) "the awareness was found to be declining among users with decline in the usage."[b]

Other studies outside of India, meanwhile, have argued that the influence of platforms on citizen's perception of politicians and political issues is evident.[15,16] Both perspectives, while agreeing that there is increasing reliance on platforms for consuming political information, disagree on its true impact.[17]

Other studies have attempted to contextualise the use of social media in the larger question of political outreach. One such study, published by the ACM COMPASS,[18] questions the binary understanding of political discourse. It argues that although a politician may primarily communicate through a specific platform with a particular audience, the said information often reaches the mainstream population through traditional media. Still other studies have found

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b The 'awareness' in the study was limited to online trending issues and slogans like "#MeinbhiChokidar" and the Balakot strikes.

a long history of the misuse of social media platforms to influence democratic dialogue, especially during elections.[19] In India, a specific area of concern is WhatsApp, which has often been called a "black hole" of disinformation during elections.[20] A bigger context could be that, as Microsoft's digital civility index has found, Indians are most likely to encounter misinformation online.[21]

Indeed, social media platforms have evolved from providing public utility functions for its end-users to also being gatekeepers of news and information.[22] These platforms' ability to aggregate narratives for the voter make them a potential threat to the autonomy of elections.[23] Various studies, including those in urban India, have found that the building of narratives and perceptions in social media is assisted by curating favourable political dialogue through the employment of rhetoric,[24] propaganda, clientelistic promises,[c] and identity and vote bank politics.[25]

The potency in social media platforms lies in their speed: an MIT study, for instance, has underlined that misinformation, in particular, tends to spread "farther, faster, and deeper" on these platforms.[26] Moreover, platform algorithms prioritise certain types of content over another, as sensationalist speech garners more engagement online.

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> " There is a legal framework for addressing traditional, 'offline' abuses like vote-buying; a similar mechanism is absent for new forms of malpractice on online platforms. "

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c   "Clientelism" refers to an implicit or explicit promise of goods and services for political support.

This brief analyses the types of information promoted on Twitter right before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections,[d] and the 2020 state elections.[e] The sampled tweets were classified according to the following: campaign or propaganda; divisive or conspiratorial; policy-related discourse (support or criticism). The tweets examined for the sentiment analysis could fall under multiple categories: e.g., both campaign or propaganda; and divisive or conspiratorial.

Findings and Analysis

Figure 1:
# Campaign-related tweets, by category, Lok Sabha elections 2019
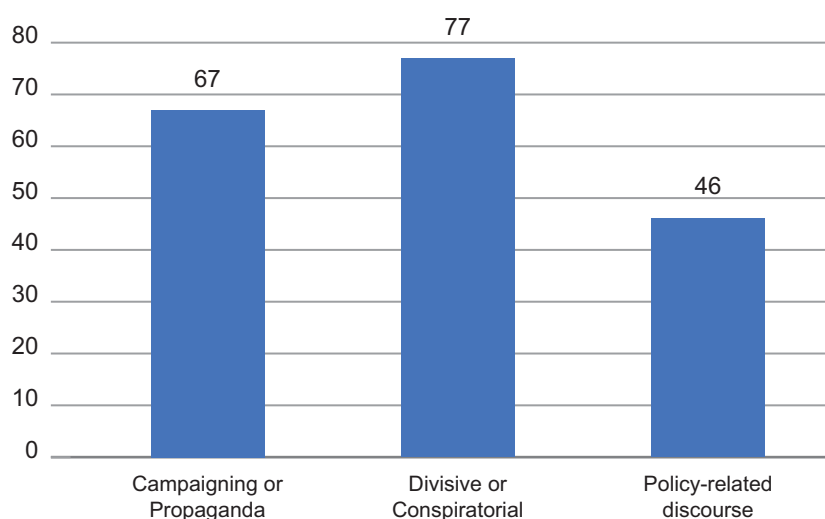
Total sample size of tweets = 150

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d   Lok Sabha Elections (2019) - tweets were collated from stakeholders before elections, from 11 March 2019 (the day of party nomination) to 11 April 2019 (the first day of polling). A total of 744 tweets across 73 trending hashtags were recorded. Thereafter, to prevent any political or ideological biases in the findings, 150 tweets were randomly shortlisted through the process of randomisation on the software R.

e   Delhi State Elections (2020) – focused on the three main political parties in the capital: Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and INC. From each, 10 standing candidates with the highest Twitter followers were shortlisted. Overall, 300 tweets were analysed from a randomised set of ten tweets per candidate. The timeline was from 24 January 2020 (last date for withdrawal of nomination) to 6 February 2020 (last day of campaigning allowed for politicians before polling).

A significant proportion of the narratives were non-policy criticism, conspiratorial speech, and divisive discourse; then followed by blind campaigning or propaganda. In terms of constructive discussion, less than one-third of the analysed tweets engaged in any form of policy-related discussion.

Figure 2:
Campaign-related tweets, by category, Delhi State elections 2020
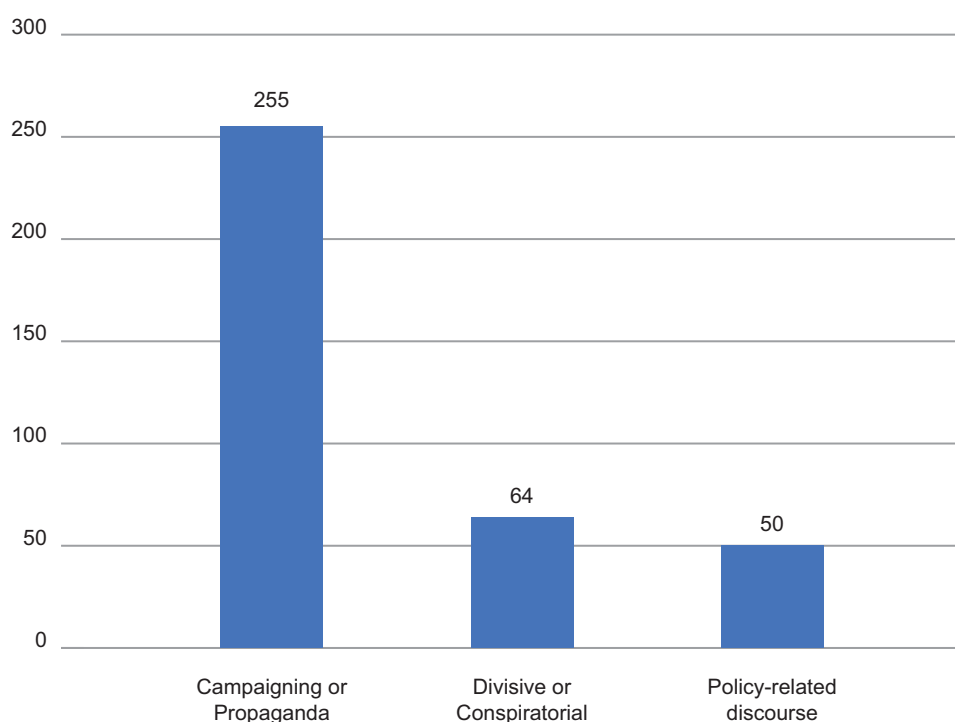
**Total sample size of tweets = 300*

A similar pattern was observed in the Delhi election. It was assumed in some media debates that Delhi elections were primarily performance-based and endorsed policy issues such as education, water, and electricity supply.[27] The data shows, however, that policy was an under-discussed topic when compared with other categories.

Spotlight on Indian Elections

During both the elections, political parties and candidates deployed social media techniques. For example, positive measures highlighting goodwill nature, hardworking attributes and exemplary statesmanship were undertaken through videos, interviews, and advertisements.[f] For their part, negative measures (within the scope of this analysis) identified as generic-blind campaigning, unethical or non-policy discussions, also contributed to information dumping on Twitter.

Both the 2019 Lok Sabha election and the Delhi election the following year exhibited similar patterns in the way social media was utilised by candidates and their parties. The following points summarise those trends.

- There was a high percentage of tweets in the category of 'campaigning and propaganda' during both elections, with rare mention and focus on manifestos, policy, or past performance. Most of the tweets followed the bandwagon of blind campaigning without providing any insights into the (future or past) policy plans and remained limited to self-praise.

- To diminish, belittle and tarnish an opponent's candidature, 'divisive and conspiratorial tweets' were also largely utilised, contributing to unconstructive rhetoric and exclusionary narratives. Even criticism remained limited to individuals or identities, rather than policies.

- Other negative measures such as misinformation, "junk news",[28] misinformation, and hate speech were also employed to weaken other candidatures.[29,30,31] They are outside the scope of this analysis.

To be sure, the use of rhetoric to vilify or create an exclusionary narrative is not a new phenomenon. Political discourse has long been weaponised and targeted to garner emotional responses with "them vs. us" narratives.[32] Charteris-Black, a scholar of 'politics and rhetoric', explains: "While metaphors – such as that of darkness and light and the personification 'stripped of our insistence' – provide the frame of the argument, the persuasive effect of Conviction Rhetoric is produced by their interaction with contrast, rhetorical questions, and patterns of repetition and reiteration."[33]

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f   For instance- Delhi BJP IT Cell partnered with political communications firm The Ideaz Factory to create "positive campaigns" using deepfakes to reach different linguistic voter bases. It marked the debut of deepfakes in election campaigns in India.

Spotlight on Indian Elections

From the case studies used in this brief, it is clear that a platform like Twitter—which in theory can offer space for genuine political discourse—was not used in such a manner during highly engaging timeframes. Similar insights were derived by the Oxford University-based Programme on Democracy and Technology in its examination of the 2019 elections: it found high penetration of junk news, and of divisive, conspiratorial, and polarising narratives on Whatsapp and Facebook.[34] Candidates were often observed to employ techniques that deter discussion on policies enshrined in their manifestos, as they focused on campaigning along the lines of identity politics and using conspiratorial or divisive speech. This disrupts the 'trickle-down' model of information, as key aspects of policies did not reach the voters, in turn encouraging uninformed decision-making. Potentially, the quality of vote deteriorates by attaching primacy to indicators like 'identity' above policies.

Similarly, overreliance on campaigning and propaganda is furthering biased, misleading, unethical, uninformed, or manipulative information. This can overwhelm voters with surplus information that is counterintuitive to one's critical thinking and is in direct contradiction to the objectives of the ECI's voter education programme. Even techniques like blind campaigning may be harmless but continue to disseminate non-constructive information among voters that engage or consume information online. They also contribute to 'noise' that only diminishes critical thinking.

> " In the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the Delhi state polls the year after, Twitter was used more for propaganda, and less for policy discussion. "

Voter Education in India: Beyond High Voter Turnouts

Voting is regarded as a fundamental right that allows citizens to be part of a political community. A 'right to vote', in turn, assumes the effective exercise of such a right with due diligence. As mentioned briefly earlier, the Supreme Court of India has opined that a voter is entitled to information about the antecedents of a candidate and the process of casting a vote is a facet of their freedom of speech and expression.[35] Even during the Constituent Assembly debates, B.R. Ambedkar had argued for the importance of "quality-voting". While introducing the principle of Universal Adult Franchise as a voting right, Ambedkar explained it as a tool for political education, equal membership in the polity, and political correctness.[g,36] Access to relevant information like manifestos, past performance, qualification, and party-policy awareness is necessary to educate voters. This access not only guarantees the upliftment of vote quality but also empowers voters with information that is necessary to express their political will.

Identity-based politics or clientelistic policies often reward by tipping voting preferences.[37] This allows voter perception to be manipulated and mischaracterised by giving primacy to a group identity over the candidate's performance or qualifications.[38,39,40] This is common as voters typically lack access to necessary information. A 2011 study titled, "Do Informed Voters Make Better Choices? Experimental Evidence from Urban India," argues that education about performance-based indicators can change election outcomes.[41] Information about performance-based indicators enables change in electoral behaviour to select better performers.[42] Additionally, with better access to quality information, voters are incentivised to vote, resulting in better turnout numbers.[43,44]

> " During the Constitutional Assembly debates, BR Ambedkar explained the 'right to vote' as a tool for political education, and equal membership in the polity. "

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g   At that time 'political correctness' referred to collective action against the wrongs committed by the British but with the foresight of empowering voters to assist in the socio-political decisions by electing ideal representatives in the future.

Voter Education in India: Beyond High Voter Turnouts

Other recognised benefits of a robust voter education model include: access to correct information; reduction in electoral malpractices; prioritisation of development over identity-based politics; move beyond preconceived notions; quality deliberation and critical thinking; and less incidence of preferential identity-based voting. Essentially, voter education necessitates access to information that facilitates critical thinking, paving the way to informed choice.

As every individual enjoys similar rights of voting, voter education has the capacity to break identity barriers in politics. It allows diverse participation and inclusivity for wider engagement between the citizens themselves, rather than through self-appointed gatekeepers. For example, research on performance-based indicators found that the number of drinking water projects in areas with women-led *panchayats* (local councils) was 62 percent higher than in those with men-led councils.[45] Therefore, realigning political interests with performance-based indicators can self-correct local governance models and promote better politicians from marginalised communities. An effective Voter Education model has the potential to institutionalise a meritocratic, policy-based electoral campaigning that installs performance-based incumbency.

At the same time, even as voter education is an imperative for an effective right to vote, it is by no means sufficient. It is an essential component to assist informed and ethical decision-making to address voter aspirations. 'Right to Vote' itself necessitates the imperative of ethical and informed voting through choice, awareness, and access to relevant information. Voter education has the capacity to realise, change the quality, scope, and the kind of government citizens' desire.

> " Voter education necessitates access to information that facilitates critical thinking, paving the way to informed choice. "

Regulatory Challenges

With increasing digitalisation, social media platforms have become hosts of public forums that are necessary for deliberation and direct political interaction. However, the very algorithmic design of these platforms—which curate personalised user-feeds and conduct user profiling—has non-democratic implications. Algorithms solidify homogeneous information ecosystems that enhance similar interests from past preferences, to curate "engaging" user feeds, resulting in the incubation of what are called echo-chambers.[46,47] This limits the scope of critical thinking and counter-speech, further making it difficult to perceive adverse information. Coupled with political bots, unregulated sponsored content, the absence of fact-checking political advertisements, user profiling, and susceptibility to foreign interference—these pose huge threats of platform misuse.

A 2020 study by Reuters Institute highlighted that although only 20 percent of misinformation was shared by politicians, celebrities, and other prominent public figures, it contributed to the largest chunk of reshared and engaged content (69 percent).[48] This top-down (mis)information model reflects a special persuasive power yielded by political figureheads. Meanwhile, a 2020 study by Washington-based Center for Democracy and Technology noted that this can result in voter suppression.[49]

At present, there is no legal standard against any type of ill-speech shared online. A 2021 study by Oxford Internet Institute found Indian government agencies and political institutions directly linked to sponsoring computational propaganda.[h,50] To ensure transparency and accountability, the nature of algorithms has also warranted a debate into the growing "public" role of "platform-ised" speech. The current approach avoids any concrete structural or content-based regulations for platforms or political institutions. It predominantly dictates self-regulation, without implicating any responsible duties or liability.

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h   Computational Propaganda is a form of political manipulation that takes place online using internet tools like social media platforms and algorithms.

Regulatory Challenges

To ensure free and fair elections, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) underlines rules for speeches, portfolios, manifestos, processions, and general conduct. Rules of campaign do apply to social media interactions but are limited to political parties and politicians but not their agents. The MCC is neither legally enforceable nor is it applicable throughout the year, except for a month before the elections or sometimes even less.[51] The MCC has evolved over the years to encompass various issues of electoral malpractice but due to its periodic and non-binding nature, it is regularly flouted and offenders are not held accountable. The Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, recommended making MCC a part of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RPA) to ensure its enforceability. The ECI also laid instructions for registration of accounts, pre-certification of political advertisements and expenditure disclosure.[52] However, due to the sheer volume of information shared, it renders any monitoring ineffective and discounts the role of hired agents or other affiliated machinery.[53]

A comprehensive approach to curb the misuse of social media platforms was overlooked until the recent "Voluntary Code of Ethics for the 2019 General Election".[54] This code, however, fails to place the user at the centre of the spectrum. It does not provide for any notice or action that can be initiated by the users, effectively ignoring the viral and direct effect on voters. The reporting mechanism has been centralised, with only the ECI empowered to raise concerns against online content.

Broad transparency measures are suggested while speedy removal or redressal is not guaranteed under both this code and the MCC. The scope of the ECI and judicial authorities is limited, as platforms are tasked with determining voluntary practices. Questions also loom over the authentication process of official accounts; reviewing is limited only to paid advertisements for e-news providers; it requires displaying election-related expenditure but imposes no limit; it fails to prioritise digital education; and it is unable to preview content posted by party members.

An equally important gap is that 'hate speech' and 'disinformation' remain undefined and lack any legal precedence for consistent application to online speech. There is a clear absence of any punitive liability against extremist, hate speech and disinformation content even under the RPA. Although Section 123 (3A) of RPA identifies promotion of hate as a corrupt practice, it is not defined under any legislation nor reflected under MCC. Subsequently, lack of

Regulatory Challenges

any regulatory or enforceability standard leaves platforms functioning under a regulatory vacuum. The reforms to MCC and RPA are imperative, they must include online political discourse and realign with the ECI voter education programme's principle of promoting "ethical and informed" voting.

As truthful and fact-based information is necessary to express political will, it is important to identify subtle campaigning techniques that aim to blur voter perception through unethical or uninformed information, flooding tactics, and vote-bank politics. As online information will continue to play a key role in shaping perceptions, it is necessary to move to explicit policy interventions. By understanding the dominant types of information shared online, it can contribute to raising standards of informed voting.

> " Algorithms solidify homogenous information ecosystems, limiting the scope for critical thinking and making it difficult to perceive adverse information. "

Policy Recommendations

It will be fallacious to blame politicians alone for lack of sustainable, effective standards for policy- or performance-based politics. As there is also a lack of incentive for voters to obtain and analyse information to make informed voting choices, it leads to lower accountability amongst political agents to deliver performance- or policy-based narratives to uplift the quality of political discourse. Instead, voters remain susceptible to vote-grabbing, wherein politicians appease voters through identity politics, populism, propaganda or vote-bank politics.

It is difficult to overhaul the tried and tested unethical incentive model to make way for a policy-friendly information ecosystem. However, with social media platforms being used as a political tool for campaigning and engagement, their misuse can endanger the democratic right to vote. It is necessary to formulate a holistic model that provides opportunity to self-correct through accountability, transparency, and better incentives. Otherwise, left unchecked, the current patterns can destroy the free and fair fabric of Indian elections.

1. Moving beyond "voter literacy" and "voter turnout"

This analysis has emphasised that the ECI's objectives of promoting voter education or "ethical and informed voting", takes a backseat in its own strategies. Rather than uplifting the quality of votes, ECI's programme for voter education, in effect, is more focused on its other enshrined principles of enlarging voter turnout numbers or promulgating literacy about the process, or the literal act of how to cast a vote. The importance of promoting critical thinking before ballots and informed voting is not yet realised across state policies, at least not uniformly. There is also a lack of cohesion in various state practices under SVEEP. For example, while the state of Kerala's model lays focus on "quality voting and hundred percent voter turnout",[55] many other states have struggled to even formulate SVEEP policies or remain silent on the principle of "informed voting".[56]

To strengthen the 'Right to Vote', SVEEP needs to create a collaborative approach with continuous engagement[57] between media, civil society organisations, and across state/district level executives (District Election Officer, SVEEP committees, and Booth Level Officers). Furthermore, the ECI must intensify and enable interactions between offices of State Chief Election Officers. Best practices can be adopted from states such as Kerala[58] and Arunachal Pradesh[59] to highlight a pathway for improvements. For example, Arunachal Pradesh's

election regulations already emphasise on key issues: they underline informed voter education, encourage policy-based criticism, condemn hate on linguistics or religious lines, ban use of religious structures for election propaganda, and set a higher standard for the party in power.[60]

In February 2020, a working group provided recommendations for SVEEP, MCC and other seven issues related to electoral reforms which are yet to be made public.[61] These amendments must aim to bring social media political interactions under ECI's purview as well. SVEEP models can minimise information tampering that is used as a political tool for electoral gains.

Liability must be extended to media houses as they are also in a position of power when it comes to information dissemination. In a letter titled, "Press Council of India Report on Paid News", the independent media body PCI suggested that the Press Council Act "be amended to make its recommendations binding and electronic media be brought under its purview."[62] Media houses should also be asked to fact-check information shared and appropriate punitive measures must be imposed on defaulters who peddle lies or communal disharmony.

2. Instituting a self-regulation model for politicians and platforms

Twitter as a platform gained prominence for enabling political discourse online due to the active use by various heads of states, eminent scholars, and influential journalists, among others. This resulted in an exponential boom in its base by around 330 million active users worldwide; in India, it has 27.3 million users. Twitter, like other platforms, enable easy maintenance of public relations and campaigning, and both the politicians and the platform gain. The sensationalist and click-bait nature of disinformation or hate speech results in online proliferation, in the process blurring the authenticity divide and magnifying the socio-political divide. To combat the threat of misinformation and maintain electoral integrity, it is imperative to bring on-board both the social media platforms, tech-companies, and politicians together in strengthening the charter of participation against online harms, for the duration of the election period. A consortium like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) can be devised, where politicians, government agencies, the ECI, tech companies and social media platforms should consult to curate an online code of conduct against unethical and misuse of platforms.

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Policy Recommendations

Effective enforcement standards and regulatory measures can be devised by this consortium to address the use of political bots and inorganic sharing techniques. For example, WhatsApp has been used in India to spread misinformation, especially during elections. Armies of volunteers are employed by political parties to engage with the local electorate through chat groups, for example. In this regard, WhatsApp employed some self-regulation measures to restrict inorganic sharing by imposing limitations for the forwarding options up to only five chats at a particular moment.

Strengthening the regulations against hate speech and fake news is also extremely imperative, and platforms should actively assist political parties and candidates in fact-checking. The exaggerated effect of ill-intentioned or even innocent sharing of such content by politicians should not be undermined as it can incite, create panic, confuse, and divide. Awareness against sharing such content should directly also engage in condemning and spreading awareness against the same. The platforms and other fact-checking initiatives can be mandated under the purview of ECI to assist political parties and candidates in fact checking and avoiding unintentional proliferation of unethical and uninformed speech. Finally, this brief calls for special punitive measures like suspension from parties against politicians that are repeat offenders.

3. Encouraging Civil Society Organisations-ECI cooperation

Civil society organisations can collaborate with ECI and play an important role in disseminating performance reports and curating candidate profiles, to form an effective 'Know Your Candidates' campaign. They can also help the election management bodies in reviewing and curating transparency reports to provide data on types of political discourse manipulation techniques and address challenges. Civil society organisations can help translate a direct or indirect effect of candidate/party policies on voters with the ease to access. They could also publish information relevant to elections like the candidate's criminal record, expenditure, and past performance across different regional languages. Fact-checking groups like ALT News and Boom Live already exist, but formalising partnerships with ECI will provide much needed credibility.

Policy Recommendations

They can help voters inculcate practices of fact-checking to minimise the negative impacts of fake news during elections. For example, ECI can adopt the pledge of the Transnational Commission on Election Integrity[i] to reject the use of 'deceptive digital campaign practices' like deep fakes and deep nudes, collaborating with foreign actors for electoral manipulation.[63] CSOs can assist the Election Commission to further strengthen the dispensing of important electoral duties towards "ethical and informed voting".

> " To combat misinformation and maintain the integrity of elections, it is imperative to bring on-board tech platforms and politicians in strengthening the charter of participation against online harm. "

i   The recommendation 3 of "The Report of the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age" promotes the principles laid by the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity that rejects employment any form of deception to win elections.

Conclusion

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An electoral candidate's social media campaign is no longer limited to a specific period; rather, they can be in constant engagement with voters by employing aggressive e-campaign models. This makes it important to ensure that the activities of electoral candidates across social media follow a certain legal framework along with ethical rules. To begin with, it is difficult to impose any liability for sharing "unethical and uninformed" information until they fall under the category of what is blatantly illegal.

The very principle of free and fair elections is threatened by such an absence of an effective accountability or industrial standard for the use of social media in electoral campaigns. A voter's exposure to uninformed, unethical, hate speech, and fake news is in direct contravention of the ECI's objective of promoting "ethical and informed voting" and uplifting voting standards.

There is also a substantial lack of policy-related discussions by political parties and candidates which directly contributes to diminishing the quality of an individual's vote, inability to elect ideal representatives, and disincentives political participation by the citizens. The centrestage is often occupied by alienating propaganda that is tailor-made for identity-based politics.[64]

This brief argues for stringent methods to ensure dissemination of correct, ethical, informed and policy-based information by political parties and candidates. This brief suggests a model that will help voters channel critical thinking to realise their aspirations, while prioritising performance and policy-based indicators to cast their vote. In this regard, ECI's short-handedness to counter unethical speech during online election campaigns must be uprooted and replaced with a consolidated legal mandate. The recommendations also include an interdependent model between political personalities, social media platforms, ECI and civil society organisations to raise transparency, accountability and incentivisation towards an improved Voter Education model. This requires strict penalties against unethical speech, hate speech and disinformation, especially those coming from a position of authority. ORF

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