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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON VOTING PATTERN

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I. Introduction

“In the Digital age, the ballot box extends beyond the confines of polling stations, reaching into the very pockets and screens of voters worldwide. Social media’s pervasive impact has woven itself intricately into the fabric of electoral processes, shaping the trajectory of democracy itself.” In today’s hyper-connected world, the power dynamics of democracy have taken on a digital hue, with social media platforms serving as the contemporary agora where political discourse unfolds, and electoral decisions are shaped. The symbiotic relationship between social media and voting patterns is a complex tapestry, woven with threads of information dissemination, targeted persuasion, polarization, echo chambers, and social influence. This essay embarks on a journey to dissect the multifaceted impact of social media on voting behavior, exploring its history, transformative potential and the nuanced challenges it presents to the integrity of democratic processes.

Social media is a 21st-century platform and a tool that helps nations and societies to create, exchange, and express their own thoughts and ideas widely and also listen, form opinions, and participate in a lot of fascinating things, out of which Voting and elections are the ones in trend throughout the world. People of all age groups are fascinated to use and make this tool as a medium to connect to the world with less time and energy.

It is not a single person of 18 plus years of age who is casting the vote now, it is a bunch of other factors that cast his/her vote. Elections, as we all know, are decided on many local, regional, national, as well as international level factors. Social media is now one of those key factors that impacts voter patterns and behavior. On these platforms, political engagement is usually in the form of making a quirky statement or raising a slogan, sharing an embarrassing photo or video of the opposite party, republishing a favorable post, and making a strong comment.

When we engage in political discourse on social media, a euphemism for uncompromising political positioning is we tend to amplify our own beliefs, doing so primarily before an audience already converted to our way of thinking. It serves as a mirror, reflecting the cheers of like-minded individuals and bringing us a fleeting sense of satisfaction, much like a mirage brings joy to a weary traveller in a desert.

This engagement has a notable impact on our voting behavior: it reinforces our convictions, potentially pushing one or more of our views to a tipping point. In platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram groups, members can directly influence each other, encouraging others to vote in a certain way.

However, assuming that venting our frustrations, anger, or happiness on social media directly improves our voting turnout is simplistic. More often, the opposite occurs. Like many intoxicants, heated political engagement on social media can lead to an initial rush followed by a period of inaction, lethargy, and sometimes guilt. While the truly committed may overcome this, there's a significant chance that the political 'high' experienced by fringe participants will be satiated by their online activity, leaving them with little urge to actually vote. Many who engage passionately or aggressively on social media may feel that their virtual activism has accomplished more than their single vote ever could.

Imagine this, you wake up, grab your phone, and before you've even had your morning coffee, you're bombarded with a barrage of political ads, news articles, and memes flooding your social media feeds. Sounds familiar, right? Welcome to the age of social media and its supposed influence on voting patterns. But, are we really just puppets dancing to the tune of algorithms and clickbait? Or do we still hold the power to think critically, make informed decisions, and shape the course of our democratic future? Hence, to understand and get an answer to this, there is a need to delve into the multifaceted impact of social media on voting patterns, exploring its dual role in both positive and negative dimensions. Before delving into these dimensions let's first understand its historical context.

II. Historical Context

The influence of social media on voting patterns is a relatively recent phenomenon, largely emerging in the 21st century with the widespread adoption of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others. This historical context of social media's influence on voting patterns

can be understood by a timeline of various key events: -

A. 2008 US Presidential elections

Candidates used social media for their campaigns and young voters were not much reliant on traditional news media sources. They were looking forward to various social media. According to Conroy, Feezel, and Guerrero (2012),¹ chat rooms, online news, and political email correspondence do predict higher voting rates; thus, it is clear why these platforms started to be used in marketing of political campaigns. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have gained significant traction and have begun to influence political discourse. Barack Obama's presidential campaign effectively utilizes social media for fundraising, mobilization, and voter engagement, setting a precedent for future political campaigns.

B. 2010 Arab Spring Uprisings

Social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. A spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground. Social media helped spread democratic ideas across international borders. The Arab Spring had many causes. One of these sources was social media and its power to put a human face on political oppression. Social media alone did not create the social movements observed in the Arab Spring, but access to interactive media affected the movements' narrative and framing, which dictated the success or failure of the various civil efforts to force political concessions.

C. 2012 US President Elections

In comparison to the 2008 election, social media's application became increasingly more diverse in choice of platform which made it more omnipresent. Although both candidates used social media, Obama implemented nine different social media platforms while Romney only used five (Enli, 2017).² Social media was an integral part of each of their campaign that aided in the expansion of political membership and allowed their supporters to express party affiliation and their ideologies (Dalton-Hoffman, 2012).³ Thus, 2012 marks the election where the marketing of campaigns needed to fully utilize the platforms of social media as it continued

¹ Conroy, M., Feezell, J.T., Guerrero, M, "Facebook and political engagement: A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement", 28(5) *Computers in Human Behavior* 1535–1546 (2012).

² Enli G, Naper, "Social media incumbent advantage: Barack Obama's and Mitt Romney's Tweets in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election Campaign", In: Bruns A, Enli G, Skogerbø E, et.al. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* 364–377 (Routledge 2012).

³ Dalton-Hoffman, Maggie, "The Effect of Social Media in the 2012 Presidential Election" *The First-Year Papers (2010 - present)*, Trinity College Digital Repository (2012).

to become a primary influence in an individual's life.

D. 2016 US Presidential Election

Increasingly in the 2016 election, candidates were required to have a “performative flexibility” to help connect with voters in an optimal manner. Simultaneously, social media became increasingly used to bypass normal streams of media and became a direct source of news. For example, instead of conducting a press conference and putting full reliance on social media to announce her campaign, Hillary Clinton tweeted her decision to run on April 12, 2015, in correlation with a YouTube video (Enli, 2017).⁴ The Cambridge Analytica scandal also reveals how personal data harvested from Facebook was used to target political ads, raising questions about data privacy and manipulation.

E. 2016 BREXIT Referendum

Social media platforms were pivotal in spreading both accurate and misleading information. The Leave campaign successfully used emotionally charged messages to drive engagement and support. Their simple and intuitive slogans, like “Take Back Control,” resonated deeply on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, creating a sense of urgency and widespread support for Brexit (Referendum Analysis UK) (LSE Research Online).⁵

F. 2019 Indian General Elections

During the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in India, The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a dominant social media presence, and nearly half of India's 900 million eligible voters had access to the Internet and social media platforms primarily including Facebook and WhatsApp. A lot of famous slogans like “Main bhi chowkidar” (I am also a watchman) were included in the campaigns online which was part of their highly coordinated social media strategy.

G. 2020 US Presidential Elections

The number of early voters under 30 was more than doubled compared to the 2016 election, reflecting increased youth engagement largely driven by social media campaigns. The Widespread use of “Get Out The Vote” (GOTV) campaigns on social media ensured that users

⁴ *Supra* note 2.

⁵ Andreouli, Eleni and Nicholson, Cathy, “*Brexit and everyday politics: an analysis of focus-group data on the EU referendum*”, 39(6) *Political Psychology* 1323-1338 (2018).

were constantly reminded and encouraged to vote (Division of Research) (UMD College of Information Studies).⁶ Both the candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump, leveraged social media to reach and mobilize their supporters. While Joe Biden used social media to engage younger audiences through TikTok and digital advertising, Donald Trump's campaign was associated with spreading disinformation and using targeted ads based on personal data.

Now delving into the multifaceted impact of social media on voting patterns, by exploring its dual role both in positive and negative dimensions.

III. Positive Dimensions of Social Media's Influence

Social media platforms have a massive global reach, connecting billions of users and providing an unprecedented audience for political messages. For instance, during the 2020 US presidential election, Twitter had over 330 million monthly active users, offering candidates a vast platform to share their messages. These platforms also facilitate direct engagement between candidates and voters, fostering a sense of connection and participation. A notable example is the 2019 Indian general elections, where Narendra Modi's social media campaign engaged millions of young voters on Facebook and Instagram, significantly contributing to his landslide victory.

Social media also serves as a primary information source for many voters, shaping their perceptions and decisions. During the 2016 Brexit referendum, social media played a crucial role in influencing public opinion through targeted ads and viral content. According to a survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 51% of respondents across 40 countries reported using social media as a news source.

Moreover, digital strategies have become increasingly vital in planning political rallies and drafting party manifestos. Pre-election sentiment analysis often relies on social media trends and "tweet surveys" rather than traditional surveys. Lastly, social media keeps the public informed about upcoming events, party schedules, and election agendas, making it easier for people to stay up-to-date on political developments.

⁶ Social Media's Impact on the 2020 Presidential Election: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, available at: <https://research.umd.edu/articles/social-medias-impact-2020-presidential-election-good-bad-and-ugly> (last visited on May 24, 2024).

IV. Negative Dimensions of Social Media's Influence

Social media's impact on political discourse has several negative dimensions, starting with polarization and the creation of echo chambers. Algorithms on these platforms often reinforce existing beliefs, leading to polarized political environments.

The next critical issue involves the "3 M's"—misrepresentation, misinformation, and manipulation. Social media is frequently used to misrepresent facts, criticize opposition parties, and spread misleading or incorrect information. This manipulation undermines the integrity of information available to the public.

Additionally, social media's influence on voter opinion is heavily skewed by financial power. Affluent parties with substantial resources can dominate social media advertising, thus disproportionately influencing the voter base. During elections, the proliferation of fake news on these platforms can significantly sway public preferences.

One of the most severe consequences is the undermining of democratic processes. Social media can be exploited to manipulate public opinion, interfere with election results, and spread propaganda. For example, during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in India, reports indicated that political parties used bots and fake accounts to amplify their messages and attack opponents, thereby distorting the electoral discourse. This exploitation poses a significant threat to the fairness and transparency of democratic elections.

V. Conclusion

“Social media is the new battleground of politics, where ideas compete for attention, and elections are won or lost in the digital arena.” We cannot ignore a fact that politics and media share a complex synergistic relationship; media, politics and elections are knotted together and social media platforms have become the essential ground for the discussion of political narratives.

In conclusion, the notion that social media's impact on voting patterns is a myth or not has clouded modern democracies. We must keep in mind that a tweet can trend, but it takes more than hashtags to win an election. As responsible citizens, it is imperative that we critically evaluate the narratives surrounding the role of social media in elections and recognize whether or not its impact is overstated. By doing so, we can foster a more nuanced understanding of electoral processes and uphold the integrity of democratic governance.