INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed



www.ijlra.com

ISSN: 2582-6433

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ISSN: 2582-6433

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ISSN: 2582-6433

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ISSN: 2582-6433

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

India has one of the youngest electorates in the world, and its political parties now compete for young voters as much on smartphones as on the ground. This article examines how social media has shaped youth participation in Indian electoral politics, using a doctrinal and secondary-data method. Drawing on Election Commission of India (ECI) records, Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study findings, internet-adoption reports and the relevant legal framework, it argues that expanded social media access has widened political exposure among young citizens but has not translated automatically into formal participation, such as enrolment and voting. The article further shows that the regulatory regime governing online campaigning remains fragmented, built largely on offline-era provisions and soft-law advisories. It concludes with recommendations for digital civic education, platform accountability, transparency in online political advertising and targeted enrolment drives for first-time voters.

Keywords: youth participation; social media; electoral politics; Lok Sabha elections; Model Code of Conduct; misinformation; digital democracy.

1. Introduction

Democracy depends on participation, and participation depends on who chooses to take part. In India, the largest democracy in the world, the age profile of the population makes the youth vote a decisive resource. Reports around the 2024 general election estimated that around 210 million voters were between 18 and 29 years of age, roughly a fifth of the electorate. Parties of every ideological colour have responded by moving their campaigns onto platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, X and WhatsApp, and by courting online creators who command large young audiences.

This shift raises a question that is as much legal and political as it is technological. Does greater

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social media exposure make young Indians more active citizens in the formal sense, or does it produce a form of engagement that stays largely online? And are the rules governing digital campaigning adequate for the ways in which young people now receive political information?

The article addresses three questions:

1. How has social media changed the manner in which young Indians encounter and discuss politics?
2. What do available electoral data suggest about the relationship between social media use and formal participation?
3. How well does the existing legal and regulatory framework protect the integrity of online political communication?

The discussion is limited to parliamentary and assembly elections in India and relies on published secondary material. It does not claim to establish causal links, which would require primary survey or experimental work.

2. Review of Literature

Research on youth and politics in established democracies has often reported declining turnout among younger cohorts, together with a shift towards issue-based and individualised forms of action such as online petitions, political consumerism and protest. Scholars studying Canada and Britain, for instance, have described rising disengagement from conventional electoral channels even where interest in political causes remains high.

The Indian picture has been more mixed. Analyses of the National Election Study by Lokniti-CSDS have documented that turnout among younger voters, which once trailed the overall figure, caught up with and in some elections matched or exceeded it from 2014 onwards. Kumar and Kumar (2024), writing on the 2024 general election, use NES data to examine youth voting choices and conclude that, despite sustained efforts by parties to build a distinct youth constituency, none of them could be said to have captured it fully.

On social media specifically, the 2019 Lokniti-CSDS and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung survey on social media and political behaviour remains a key reference. It suggested that, in the Indian context, exposure to political content online is widespread among users but that only a small share of respondents identify social media as their main source of political information. Cross-national scholarship generally finds that social media use is positively but modestly associated with political participation, and that the relationship depends on the type of use: people who use platforms for news and discussion behave differently from those who use them mainly for entertainment.

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A gap remains at the intersection of law and political behaviour. Much of the political science literature treats regulation as background, while legal scholarship tends to analyse provisions without reference to youth participation data. This article attempts to connect the two.

3. Research Methodology

The study is doctrinal and analytical, based entirely on secondary sources:

- **Official data:** ECI publications on electors, enrolment and turnout.
- **Survey-based research:** published findings from the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study and related surveys.
- **Technology and access reports:** industry and government publications on internet and smartphone penetration.
- **Legal materials:** the Constitution of India, the Representation of the People Act, 1951, ECI instructions and advisories, the Information Technology Act, 2000 and its rules, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and relevant judicial decisions.
- **Scholarly literature:** peer-reviewed articles and books on youth, media and elections.

Because secondary data come from studies with different sampling frames and definitions of "youth" (commonly 18 to 25, 18 to 29, or 15 to 29), comparisons across sources are made cautiously and figures are presented as indicative rather than exact.

4. The Youth in the Indian Electorate

4.1 Constitutional and demographic background

The Constitution (Sixty-first Amendment) Act, 1988 reduced the voting age from 21 to 18, and Article 326 guarantees adult suffrage for citizens who are not disqualified. This decision formally brought a large cohort of young citizens into the electoral system. Since then, successive election cycles have seen parties and the ECI treat the 18 to 29 group as a distinct constituency.

4.2 Participation trends

Historically, young voters turned out in lower proportions than the overall electorate. Post-poll surveys indicate that this gap narrowed sharply by 2014 and 2019, when estimated youth turnout was comparable to, and in some estimates slightly above, the national figure. Overall Lok Sabha turnout has remained in the mid-sixties as a percentage across 2014, 2019 and 2024.Enrolment tells a more cautious story. In the run-up to the 2024 election, the ECI reported

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that only about 38 per cent of eligible first-time voters had registered, roughly 18 million of an estimated 49 million. Internal migration for study and work, unfamiliarity with the registration process and the cost of updating residence details are frequently cited as reasons.

The pattern is therefore uneven. Young Indians who are registered tend to vote at rates close to the rest of the electorate, but a significant share of the youngest eligible citizens never enter the electoral roll.

5. Social Media and Electoral Campaigning

5.1 Changing channels of political communication

Social media has changed campaigning in several visible ways. Party and leader accounts now operate continuous communication cycles rather than seasonal ones. Short video, memes and live streams carry messages in formats suited to young audiences. Parties also run dedicated social media and information technology cells, and political leaders increasingly appear in conversations with online creators and influencers, whose reach among young users can exceed that of traditional media.

5.2 Possible positive effects

- **Information access:** Young citizens can follow candidates, manifestos and parliamentary debates without relying on gatekeepers.
- **Lower cost of expression:** Campaigns, petitions and public conversations can be organised without major resources.
- **Voter mobilisation:** Reminders, enrolment drives and polling-day information reach users quickly, as seen in ECI and civil society outreach.
- **Accountability:** Citizens can circulate evidence, question representatives and amplify local issues.

5.3 Limits of online engagement

Exposure is not the same as participation. A user who follows political content, shares a post or uses a hashtag has engaged in communication, but has not necessarily registered, verified details on the electoral roll or voted. The contrast between rapidly growing internet use and comparatively stable turnout figures across recent Lok Sabha elections suggests that access alone does not guarantee a rise in formal participation. Structural factors, including employment concerns, political trust, migration and administrative barriers, appear to matter at least as much.

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Survey evidence on youth priorities reinforces the point. Pre-poll studies in 2024 found that economic concerns, particularly unemployment and prices, were prominent among young respondents. Social media may amplify these concerns, but it is the response of institutions and parties to them that shapes political choices.

6. The Legal and Regulatory Framework

6.1 Statutory provisions

The Representation of the People Act, 1951 remains the core statute. Provisions on corrupt practices, such as undue influence, promotion of enmity on grounds of religion, race, caste, community or language, and false statements about a candidate's character, apply regardless of the medium used. Section 126, which restricts campaigning in the forty-eight hours before the close of polling, was drafted with traditional media in mind, and the ECI has sought to extend its spirit to online platforms through advisories. Campaign expenditure rules also raise the question of how paid online promotion should be accounted for.

6.2 The Model Code of Conduct and ECI measures

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC), though not a statute, is enforced in practice by the ECI and is applied to online conduct by parties and candidates. Over successive elections the Commission has introduced steps such as requiring candidates to disclose their social media accounts, seeking pre-certification of political advertisements on certain media, and persuading major platforms to follow a voluntary code of ethics during elections. Ahead of the 2024 elections, it also issued guidance on the use of artificial intelligence and synthetic media in campaigns. These measures show regulatory adaptation, but their dependence on advisories and voluntary compliance leaves enforcement uneven.

6.3 Information technology and data protection law

The Information Technology Act, 2000 and the rules made under it govern intermediary obligations, takedown processes and due diligence. The Supreme Court's decision in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015) struck down Section 66A as unconstitutional for violating free speech, a reminder that regulation of online political expression must meet constitutional standards. In *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020), the Court emphasised that restrictions on internet access must satisfy proportionality, which is relevant to any measure affecting digital political participation. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 introduces consent-based obligations that bear on micro-targeting and profiling of voters, although its

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detailed operation for political data continues to develop.

6.4 Assessment

The framework is a patchwork. It relies on provisions written for older media, advisories without clear sanctions and general-purpose technology law that does not address political advertising specifically. Three problems stand out: unclear liability for platforms and intermediaries, limited transparency about who pays for online political content, and the difficulty of enforcing silence periods and expenditure ceilings in fast-moving digital spaces.

7. Challenges

- **Misinformation and disinformation:** False or misleading content, including manipulated images and AI-generated media, spreads quickly in closed messaging groups where verification is difficult.
- **Echo chambers and polarisation:** Recommendation systems may expose users mainly to views they already hold, which can harden identities instead of encouraging deliberation.
- **Data-driven targeting:** Profiling for political messaging raises privacy and fairness concerns, particularly for first-time voters who may have limited experience in evaluating persuasive messages.
- **The digital divide:** Gaps in access by gender, income and region mean that online mobilisation does not reach all young citizens equally.
- **Slacktivism:** Low-effort online gestures may substitute for, rather than lead to, sustained participation.
- **Administrative barriers:** Enrolment and address-change procedures can be difficult for students and migrant workers regardless of how much political content they consume online.

8. Discussion

The evidence reviewed supports a qualified conclusion. Social media has plainly changed how young Indians meet politics: parties spend heavily on it, young voters see political content daily and public conversations form and dissolve within hours. Yet the formal indicators of participation, enrolment and turnout, have moved far less than internet adoption would suggest. The more likely explanation is that social media operates on awareness and opinion, whereas

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voting depends on additional conditions: being on the roll, believing that voting matters and being able to reach a polling station.

This has a legal implication. If digital platforms influence opinion without a matching accountability structure, the quality of participation, not just its quantity, becomes a constitutional concern. Free and fair elections require that voters can form choices without deception or covert manipulation, and the present regulatory design does not fully secure this.

9. Recommendations

1. **Statutory clarity:** Parliament should consider amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 that expressly address online campaigning, paid political content and synthetic media.
2. **Transparency in political advertising:** Platforms should be required to maintain public, searchable archives of political advertisements, with disclosure of sponsors and expenditure.
3. **Platform accountability:** Binding election-period obligations, with proportionate penalties, should replace reliance on voluntary codes alone.
4. **Digital and civic literacy:** Universities and schools should include media literacy and electoral procedure in curricula, building on existing electoral literacy clubs.
5. **Easier enrolment:** Simplified online enrolment and address change, and campus-based registration, would target the first-time voter gap directly.
6. **Responsible party conduct:** Parties should adopt and publish internal codes for social media campaigning, including commitments on deepfakes and abusive content.
7. **Further research:** Primary surveys of young voters, with attention to differences by gender, region and platform, would test the associations discussed here.

10. Conclusion

Social media has become a permanent feature of youth political life in India, and electoral actors cannot ignore it. Its value for democracy, however, depends on whether online attention turns into registered, informed and free voting. The data suggest that this conversion is incomplete, and the law has not yet kept pace with the digital environment in which young citizens form their political views. Closing both gaps, in participation and in regulation, is necessary if the country's demographic advantage is to strengthen rather than weaken democratic practice.

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