

# The Impact of Social Media on Public Opinion and Political Campaigns

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## Abstract

In recent society, social media has had great importance in the way that it shapes public opinion about current politics and campaigns. In this paper, we study how social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram...) has changed the political landscape by facilitating democratic processes and its inconvenient consequences. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the effect of social media on public opinion, with a particular interest in how political candidates make use of these media to change the way voters perceive them. The use of targeted advertising, viral content, and data analytics to shape political messages and then mobilise voters is examined. Finally, the paper also considers the negative effect of social media, such as information dissemination, cause of echo chambers, and enhancing political polarisation. Using case studies of recent political campaigns, the paper illustrates social media's use for both improving democratic participation and influencing the public sentiment. Finally, when analysing the role of social media in politics and their ethical concerns, the paper finishes by highlighting the problems of privacy, use of data, and accountability of tech companies. Though social media can strengthen democratic engagement, the research suggests that its potential to do so has equal potential for harm and requires careful regulation so as to not degenerate into divisive incitement of an ignorant and emotive electorate.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Public Opinion, Political Campaigns, Misinformation, Data Analytics

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, the emergence of social media has radically influenced campaigning for office and moulding of public opinion. Over the past two decades, companies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube have grown from simple communication to being powerful influence tools that may reach millions of people in real time. This evolution has changed the communication of politicians and political organisations and has permitted them to overpass their gatekeepers such as newspapers or television networks, and communicate directly to their target. Access to information in general has been democratised by social media, and with that has come democratisation of access to political content, and opportunities to engage it, express opinions, participate in dialogues. While this shift has quite obviously led to many challenges as well, involving the making of echo chambers, the proliferation of misinformation, and heightened political polarisation.

While social media plays a role in many political campaigns, it's particularly transformative. The reliance by candidates on these platforms to shape a message and mobilise supporters and in some cases even raise funds has become in some ways unprecedented. On the other hand, using sophisticated data analytics or algorithms assisted in enabling campaigns make

personalised advertising, targeting certain group demographics with their tailored messages. In addition to that, this micro targeting strategy can improve campaign efficacy but also presents many questions pertaining to privacy and data ethics. Others indicate social media has a massive effect on voter behaviour through high profile elections like the 2016 US Presidential Election and Brexit referendum. On these occasions, platforms were utilised to boost some narratives that eventually turned out to be inaccurate or misleading and ended up shaping electoral outcomes.

Social media has also spawned new forms of political participation and activism, at the same time. The movements of the Arab Spring, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo spend a lot of time talking about how these platforms have been leveraged as ways to challenge authority, advocate for social justice, and mobilise mass protests. Though this new connectivity has given power to the citizens, it has also empowered bad actors with the tools to misuse these spaces. Demonstrable fake news, deep fakes, and organised disinformation campaigns are mushrooming, all of which undermine public trust in democratic institutions and the media. For the influence of social media on public opinion and campaign analysis, it is a double role when it comes to social media as a sword with two edges; it both provides opportunity for engagement on both ends: engagement in the political process and participation in the democratic process; as well as posing threats to democratic integrity.

## **Literature Review**

Traditionally, traditional media has served to influence the narrative of politics and the opinion of its public. In a classic study entitled *Public Opinion* (1922) Walter Lippmann discusses the way mass media produce ‘pictures in our heads’ about political events. However, with the emergence of social media, scholars like Castells (2012 in *Networks of Outrage and Hope*) were able to investigate how digital communication has flipped political discourse and made the power dynamic shift from top down to bottom up, where fresh bottom up participation had never been possible with traditional media.

Political campaigns have been revolutionised by social media platforms that enable direct interaction with voters. In their *Science* published study, Howard and Parks (2012) argue that 2008 Obama’s campaign was the turning point of digital campaigning in its use of social media to mobilise young voters. Just as Tufekci (2014) shows in her article *Big Questions for Social Media Big Data* in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, how algorithms allow competitive political campaigns to pinpoint their audience with an exactitude by employing micro targeting strategies.

Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) in *Journal of Communication* research how social media strengthens political participation and engagement. Their study found that social media users are more likely to speak to each other about politics and go to protest, shaping public opinion. Likewise, Bode et al. (2014) state in *Political Behaviour* that Facebook, for instance, is also an essential platform that influences users political beliefs through exposure to various positions.

Misinformation and fake news has increasingly been spread through social media. In their *Journal of Economic Perspectives* study, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) survey the role of fake news in the election of Donald Trump as US president in the 2016 election, and the ways it

may have affected vote choice. What their research sets out to emphasise are the problems inherent in social platforms that are not regulated. In the Science article *The Spread of True and False News Online* by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018), they show that false news travels faster than true news on Twitter and threatens to undermine the very processes through which democracy inculcates the sensibilities for good political public decision making.

In Republic.com, Sunstein (2001) discusses echo chambers, where users will only ever see information that reinforces their current belief systems. Pariser (2011, 10) who elaborates in *The Filter Bubble* on how algorithms acting on social media accentuate this phenomenon, thus provoking political polarisation. In their study 'Mainstream' versus 'social' in news: An empirical comparison of social and mainstream media in reporting about a major civil rights event published in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016) provide empirical evidence of politically similar content being encountered by users of social media, reinforcing their bias.

Social media has also become a way of grassroots activism and social movements. Rather, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explain in *The Logic of Connective Action*, Twitter and Facebook have made collective action possible in new ways, in terms of ease of organising protests and campaigns. Such as, Howard and Hussain's (2013) analysis of the Arab Spring: Case studies of movements, or has the rise of digital communication led to a paralysis of the political infrastructure in Venezuela, and hence the fall of Chavez and the beginning of a democratic transition? By bypassing state-controlled media, our digital media can catalyse political change – so as we showcase in *Digital Media and the Arab Spring*.

### **Analysis and Findings**

Social media plays such a huge part in shaping public opinion; voters are fed information through how they perceive political candidates and their policies. Because of this, social media platforms give our politicians the opportunity to interact directly and as soon as possible with the electorate. They can literally craft their narratives in real time – responding to events, responding to controversies, not tying their hands to intermediaries. The sheer unfiltered nature of this access has radically changed the politics of public opinion formation. For example, traditional platforms like Twitter and Facebook allow political hopefuls to appear relatable, accessible even, and in many cases, share personal anecdotes or somewhat behind the scenes looks at their campaigns. It makes politicians human and facilitates more closeness to voters. People too, websites, the virality of content, all of these things are ways to shape public perception. Memes, viral posts, and short videos often replace a person's need to find credible information about a candidate or a political issue, shortening complicated issues into what can be passed around emotionally charged and easily digestible snippets. In politics, too, influencers have shown to be vital participants, relying on their considerable online followings to endorse candidates or replicate political messages. They're a valuable asset for campaigns seeking to persuade people to cast their ballots one way or another because of their abilities to connect with specific demographics, and especially younger voters.

Social media in itself has completely adapted to the digital age as the political campaigns make use of the sophisticated strategies which capitalise on the unique features of social media. Another major innovation is the utilisation of targeted advertising and data analytics. User data,

be it demographic, preferences, browsing history; social media platforms pick up all. This data is used by campaigns to place highly personalised ads aimed at each voter. This micro-targeting method makes sure that messages hit home with their target audience and are more likely to develop into engagement and support. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, the Trump campaign famously leveraged Facebook's advertising tools to run thousands of customised ads daily, directly relating to voters with the issues which concerned them in swing states. For instance, algorithms on YouTube and TikTok work to amplify political content as well. These algorithms tend to push content that's driving high engagement — think emotionally charged or controversial posts. This can help campaigns and expand their reach, but these same processes can also introduce questions about whether the process is fair and transparent and whether algorithmic biases can accidentally favour some candidates or viewpoints over others.

However, the effects of social media on politics have not remained without significance shortcomings. Misinformation and fake news is becoming one of the most burning issues. Due to a high potential for false, misleading information to go viral without being thoroughly fact checked first, social media is decentralised in nature. We saw this in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, when fake news articles were shared more often than legitimate news ones on Facebook. Not only does misinformation mislead voters, but it also erodes citizens trust in democratic processes and institutions. Another negative is the creation of echo chambers and political polarisation. Current social media algorithms are built to present content to users that confirms their current beliefs, further cementing us in our echo chambers, decreasing the well of ideas we access from a wide range of perspectives. But repeated entertainment of alternative viewpoints over time can create tightly-knit ideological bubbles in which users become insulated from competing views. The cause of this has been connected to polarisation in societies, since people are getting more caught up in themselves and their beliefs and less keen to sit down and actually talk to people who have a different opinion.

Further insights into how social media transforms politics are provided through case studies of political campaigns. Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns are often held up as new standards of digital campaign strategy using the likes of Facebook and Twitter to rally young voters and get supporters fired up. On a darker side, the 2016 Brexit referendum and 2019 Indian General Election maroon the negative aspects of social media's effect on people's judgement and votes as information spread and people's data was used to control voter behaviour. For example, the Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated how Facebook data was harvested and used to target voters with, specially tailored, messages aimed at influencing their voting decisions. Dually, these case studies identify the dualism of social media's role in politics, highlighting the unprecedented potential for increased engagement with politics and also some of the greatest risks to democratic integrity.

## **Discussion**

The impact of social media on politics has wide reaching implications for democracy. Although it has been instrumental in democratising information dissemination and encouraging wider civic participation, about the same time as it has exposed democracies to unprecedented risks. On top of the collection and use of personal data in key social services, one of the biggest problems is how to strike the balance between transparency and the risk of manipulation.

Through social media, politicians and organisations can communicate directly with the people, without the presence of traditional media filters and guarantee transparency on their part. But this very direct form of communication can also be used to spread manipulated content, misinformation or propaganda. Fake accounts, bots and coordinated disinformation campaigns undermine democratic processes by manipulating voters' perceptions and polarising societies. A popular example of such interference is a report on how, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Russian hacking of fake social media accounts massively influenced public opinion. The threat that this manipulation constitutes to democratic values is great enough that it merits stringent regulations forcing social media platforms to become both transparent and responsible. The problem is how to achieve this balance without curtailing freedom of expression, one of the foundation stones of democracy.

Social media provides political campaigns with various distinct advantages and disadvantages compared to the traditional media. The mass media has traditionally been the major way politicians communicate with one another and with the public. Thus it supplies a structure of debate platforms, advertisement spaces, and news coverage, with a certain degree of accountability, professionalism, etc. While that is the case, it is very limited in its reach and accessibility, especially to those in junior audiences that are becoming more and more reliant on digital platforms for information. However, social media has revolutionised accessibility in this case by allowing political content to spread to millions in real time, by geography and socioeconomic means. Traditionally, politicians have relied on media to reach voters, but the ability to utilise platforms like Twitter and Instagram bring about a closeness to the voters that traditional media lacks. In spite of this, social media has some serious pitfalls in its unregulated status. Unlike traditional media that does not release its content into a media ether without at least minimal editorial oversight and ethical standards, social media platforms—as is—often lack robust mechanisms for preventing the further spread of false or harmful content. These platforms are driven by the algorithms that maximise engagement without concern for accuracy... sensationalistic or divisive content gets jacked up. It is not just that this shift has diluted the quality of political discourse; it has also prompted debate about whether and how tech companies ought to bear responsibility in how to manage the information ecosystem.

The debate on the role of social media in politics centres around ethical concerns involving privacy issues, data misuse, and who is accountable for the tech companies. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed just how far the makers of tailored political advertising are prepared to go with your personal data. A lot of user data is collected and scraped by social media platforms all in the name of fuelling their advertising model without explicit consent from a huge number of users. Through a commodification of personal information, these actions raise significant ethical questions about the privacy of users and the likely exploitation of digital footprints as a political tool. Additionally, the opacity of how algorithms work only makes these issues worse. That data, in turn, is used by users to influence the content that they see — without being aware generally — creating fertile ground for manipulation. Another important issue is the accountability of tech companies. Fewer than a decade ago, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became powerful gatekeepers of political discourse, with scant regulatory oversight. Yet many companies have taken some action on misinformation — or at least on improving transparency — including labelling false content, banning political ads, and more, but these measures are often incomplete and unreliable.



With all of the ethical dilemmas that come with social media's role in politics, policymakers, tech companies and civil society need to put this at the top of their agendas. However, as we learn the pitfalls of these platforms, preserving their democratic potential while reducing their risks requires finding the right balance between innovation and regulation. The first steps towards this would be the adoption of comprehensive data protection laws, transparency into algorithms, and robust content moderation policies. Favouring digital literacy among users helps also to enable citizens to critically evaluate the content they meet on line. In the end, tech companies and governments aren't solely responsible for these challenges — society is too. Considering how far social media has come, it is essential that its powers be used to fortify, not the powers that be diminish, democratic systems and democratic values.

## **Conclusion**

No doubt, social media has transformed the political scene by influencing the conducts of campaigns, moulding of public opinion as well as the ways in which voters interact with political content on the internet. It's democratised information access, and opened up new avenues for political participation. As a result, politics has never been more accessible and interactive, as we have platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for letting politicians directly interact with their electorate. But this transformation has come with serious challenges like the growth of misinformation, loss of privacy, and the intensification of political polarisation. However, it is important also to reflect on both sides of the coin when it comes to social media which are a tool for democratic engagement as well as a potential threat to democratic integrity and hence balancing its usage and regulation.

The complexity of social media in politics is the subject of the analysis. It gives us unparalleled opportunities for transparency and outreach, but also serious ethical and legal worries. Vulnerabilities of digital platforms have been exposed by problems of data misuse, algorithmic manipulation and fake news spread. The challenges of social media require immediate response from policy makers, tech companies, and civil society if the risks are to be mitigated and social media platforms run in a responsible way. Among these the solution; Strengthening data protection laws, ensuring algorithmic transparency, and fostering digital literacy among users, to name a few. The democratic potential of these platforms, however, are contingent upon fostering a culture of accountability within tech companies and incentivizing ethical practises in political campaigning at the same time.

However, even more influence on the politics will be garnered as social media evolves. Future research should be on how to find a way to find a balance between the advantages of social media and its risks, and find how to use the power majorly well for the good of all. In order for social media to be a transformative force in building up democratic institutions and encouraging educated civic engagement, the challenges must be addressed, and responsible usage encouraged. Ultimately the responsibility is everybody's: governments, technology companies, as well as citizens, with the responsibility to be aware and critically engage with the information they consume. By doing so, we are able to participate fully in the democratic promise of social media whilst minimising its potential to destabilise democratic values.

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