
Social Media Exposure and Political Awareness in India: Evidence from Secondary Survey Data

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Abstract

Social media has become an important source of political information for citizens in India. The present article examines social media exposure and political awareness among Indian citizens using secondary survey evidence. The study draws on published survey findings from the Lokniti programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), with particular reference to studies on social media and political behaviour and the 2024 Social and Political Barometer survey. The analysis focuses on patterns of social media use, exposure to political messages, access to political information, and citizens' trust in political content received through social media. The available evidence indicates that social media has become an important channel for political communication and has increased citizens' opportunities to encounter political information. At the same time, differences in trust, social background, frequency of use, and the quality of information suggest that exposure to political content does not automatically result in greater political awareness. The findings indicate that social media can support political awareness by providing access to political information and opportunities for discussion, but its contribution depends on how citizens understand, assess, and use the information available to them. The article concludes that social media should be viewed as an important but not independent source of political awareness within India's wider political communication environment.

Keywords: Social media, political awareness, political communication, Indian citizens, secondary survey data, political information.

Introduction

Digital communication has changed the way people access, receive, and share political information. Newspapers, television, and radio continue to play an important role in political communication, but social media has created a more direct and interactive channel between citizens, political leaders, political parties, government institutions, and the wider public. Through social media, citizens can follow political leaders, access information about government policies and public issues, watch political discussions, share information, and express their own views. Political actors and public institutions can also use these platforms to communicate directly with citizens.

The growing importance of social media is particularly relevant in India, where the expansion of internet access, smartphones, and digital platforms has increased opportunities for citizens to engage with political information. Social media is now used not only for personal communication and entertainment but also for political discussion, election-related communication, and the exchange of information about public affairs. As a result, it has become an important part of the contemporary political communication environment in India.

However, the relationship between social media exposure and political awareness is not necessarily direct. Greater exposure to political information may provide citizens with more opportunities to learn about political issues, but social media also contains incomplete, misleading, partisan, and unverified information. The level of trust that citizens place in online information may therefore influence how

they understand and respond to political content. The Lokniti-CSDS *Social Media and Political Behaviour* study examined social-media use, the socio-economic profile of users, awareness of political issues and events, and the relationship of social-media use with political behaviour.

Against this background, the present article examines social media exposure and political awareness among Indian citizens using secondary survey evidence. The study focuses on social-media use and exposure to political information and considers whether such exposure can contribute to political awareness. It also recognises the limitations of social media as a source of political information and does not assume that social-media use automatically results in greater political awareness.

Literature Review

Previous research has examined social media from different perspectives, including political communication, political participation, political learning and public opinion. **Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)** explained social media as an interactive environment in which users can create and exchange content. Their study is useful for understanding the participatory nature of social media, although it was conceptual rather than an empirical study of political awareness. **Kietzmann et al. (2011)** further examined the main functions of social media and highlighted interaction, sharing, relationships and user participation as important features. These studies provide the basic understanding of social media as a communication environment in which users are not only receivers but also producers of information.

Boulianne (2015) reviewed existing empirical research on social media use and political and civic participation. The meta-analysis found a generally positive relationship between social media use and participation, although the strength of the relationship differed across studies. The study indicates that social media can provide opportunities for political engagement, but its effect is not necessarily the same for all users. The study was published in *Information, Communication & Society* and is relevant to the present article because it establishes the broader connection between social media use and political engagement.

Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) examined how social media exposure to news relates to political learning. Using panel survey data from the United States, the study found that people who believed that political news would reach them automatically through their social networks were less likely to actively seek news and showed lower levels of political knowledge over time. The study therefore suggests that simply encountering political information through social media does not necessarily result in political learning. Published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, this study is particularly relevant to the present article because it highlights the distinction between **social-media exposure and actual political awareness**.

In the Indian context, **Lokniti-CSDS (2019)** conducted the *Social Media and Political Behaviour* study to examine the extent of social-media use among voters, the socio-economic profile of users, political awareness, attitudes and the possible influence of social media on voting choices during the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The study considered platforms including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube. Its findings showed that social media had become an important part of political communication, but its influence on electoral outcomes should not be treated as decisive or uniform across citizens. The study is highly relevant to the present article because it provides national-level evidence directly connecting social-media use with political awareness and political behaviour in India.

A more recent source is the **Lokniti-CSDS Social and Political Barometer 2024**, which provides evidence on the continued role of social media in political communication in India. The survey included **10,019 respondents** and examined social-media use and exposure to political messages. The findings show that social media has become an important channel through which citizens encounter political information. However, differences in trust towards political messages indicate that exposure to online political content does not necessarily mean that citizens accept the information as reliable. This evidence is particularly relevant to the present study because it supports the need to examine political awareness together with the nature and reliability of social-media exposure. The Lokniti-CSDS programme is published by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), India.

Taken together, these studies show that social media has created new opportunities for citizens to encounter political information and participate in political communication. However, the literature also indicates that **exposure to political content should not automatically be equated with political awareness**. The existing evidence provides useful insights into social-media use, political participation and political behaviour, but there remains scope to examine more closely how exposure to political information through social media relates to political awareness among Indian citizens. This provides the basis for the present secondary-data study.

Methodology

3.1 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine the relationship between social media exposure and political awareness among Indian citizens using available secondary survey evidence. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the pattern of social media use among Indian citizens.
2. To examine the extent of citizens' exposure to political information through social media.
3. To examine the association between social media exposure and political awareness among Indian citizens.
4. To examine the role of trust and reliability of social-media information in shaping political awareness.

3.2 Type of Study

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It uses existing survey evidence to examine social media exposure and political awareness among Indian citizens.

3.3 Type of Data

The study is based entirely on secondary survey data. The main source is published survey evidence from the Lokniti programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). The CSDS Data Unit maintains national and state-level survey datasets relating to political attitudes, opinions and social and political behaviour. (CSDS)

Particular attention is given to the Lokniti-CSDS studies on social media and political behaviour and the 2024 Social and Political Barometer survey.

3.4 Nature of the Data

The data used in the article are survey-based quantitative data collected by Lokniti-CSDS. The 2024 survey considered here included 10,019 respondents and included questions on social-media use and exposure to political messages. (Lokniti)

Method of Analysis

The article uses descriptive analysis and comparative interpretation of published survey findings. Percentages and reported patterns are used to understand social-media exposure and political communication. The study does not claim causal relationships between social-media use and political awareness.

Discussion

The available secondary evidence shows that social media has become an important part of India's political communication environment. The use of WhatsApp and YouTube, in particular, is substantial in the 2024 survey. Facebook and Instagram also have a significant user base, although usage levels differ across platforms. (Lokniti)

An important finding is that political messages are reaching a considerable section of social-media users. In the 2024 survey, 11.0% reported receiving political messages frequently and 31.3% reported receiving them sometimes. Thus, more than two-fifths of respondents reported receiving political messages either frequently or sometimes. (Lokniti)

This indicates that social media has become a significant channel for political information. Citizens do not have to actively search for political information in every case; political messages can reach them through their existing social networks and platform activity. This may increase exposure to political issues and current events.

However, the evidence also shows an important limitation. Political information reaching citizens does not necessarily mean that citizens trust or accept that information. The 2024 survey shows considerable variation in trust in political messages received through social media. Only 11.0% reported trusting such messages "a lot", while 30.0% trusted them "somewhat". A substantial proportion expressed limited or no trust. (Lokniti)

This finding is important for understanding political awareness. Political awareness requires more than simply receiving political messages. Citizens need to understand the information, assess its reliability and, where possible, compare it with other sources. Therefore, social media may provide an opportunity for political learning, but the outcome depends partly on how citizens use and evaluate the information.

The earlier Lokniti-CSDS study also provides useful evidence on this issue. Its analysis of the 2019 election examined awareness of important political issues and events among social-media users and found that the relationship between social-media use and political behaviour was not uniform across different social groups. The report cautioned against treating social media as the single explanation for electoral outcomes. (Lokniti)

This suggests that social media should be understood as one part of a wider political information environment. Education, social background, access to media, political interest and existing political preferences may influence how citizens respond to information received through social media.

Another important issue is the quality of information. The Lokniti-CSDS research has noted concerns regarding misinformation and the possibility of misleading or manipulated political content being circulated through social-media platforms. (Lokniti) This creates a challenge for political awareness because frequent exposure to political information is useful only when citizens can distinguish reliable information from false or misleading content.

The findings therefore support a balanced understanding of social media and political awareness. Social media can increase access to political information and provide opportunities for political discussion. At the same time, it cannot be assumed that all users become more politically aware simply because they use social media. The nature of use, frequency of political exposure, trust in information and ability to evaluate content are important factors.

The evidence also suggests that the relationship between social media and political awareness deserves further study using individual-level survey data. The existing published reports provide valuable national-level evidence, but access to detailed survey datasets would allow researchers to examine differences across age, education, gender, rural and urban location and other social characteristics in greater detail.

Conclusion

Social media has become an important source of political information for Indian citizens. The secondary survey evidence reviewed in this article shows that a substantial proportion of citizens receive political messages through social-media platforms, while platforms such as WhatsApp and YouTube have become widely used communication channels. At the same time, citizens show different levels of trust in political information received through these platforms. The evidence therefore suggests that social media can create opportunities for greater political awareness, but its influence should not be understood as automatic or uniform.

Political awareness depends not only on exposure to information but also on the quality of information, users' interest in politics, their ability to understand political content and their capacity to identify unreliable information. The findings also indicate that social-media use and political behaviour can vary across different sections of society. Therefore, social media should be viewed as one important source of political information within a wider communication environment.

The study concludes that social media has the potential to support political awareness among Indian citizens, but its contribution to informed citizenship depends on responsible use and the ability to evaluate information critically. Future research using individual-level secondary datasets can further examine whether the frequency and nature of social-media exposure are statistically associated with different dimensions of political awareness.

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