Social Media - A New Digital Power To Influence Voters

Ankit Kashyap, Dr. Mehak Jonjua

Abstract: A significant role is played by media in any democratic setup by informing audiences about the agendas and ideologies of different political parties and outfits. Apart from being watchdog of the society and informing people about the use of political power by politicians, media also establishes the image of the political parties. The political campaigns in different forms of media like print, electronic and internet helped in shaping opinion of the people. The influence of social media is increasing leaps and bounds and the information reaches to the desired population. With every new general and legislative assembly elections, there will be more number of youth populations than before and social media will be the tool to reach out to the younger population. Social media apart from being the important tool in the field of communication technologies also helps in connecting to the audience on more frequent basis. The social media can actually help politicians to reinforce their ideologies and agendas by increasing their presence. Social media helps in maximum participation at reduced cost and hence more impact as compared to traditional media. This paper studies the use of social media by political parties and subsequent impact in the minds of the voters. The paper took into consideration how political parties promote their messages and their own image among their supporters and other peoples in social media. The paper also aims to find how people perceive political discussion and campaigns on social media. The paper aims to conduct survey questionnaire from a sample of 500 respondents in Delhi NCR region. The social media has helped in bridging gaps between individual and society. It acts as horizontal media of communication providing benefits of participatory democracy in the current scenario. This paper will help in knowing the impact of social media in the upcoming elections. The paper will also analyze the extent to which social media is used for political communication.

Index Terms: Social Media, Digital Power, Voters, Political Mobilization, Elections, Political Communication, Image Management

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media plays a pivotal role in dissemination of information to its audience. In the current scenario, the term media will be incomplete without taking into account the importance of social media. "Social media is the collection of tools and online spaces available to help individuals and businesses to accelerate their information and communication needs."- Axel Schultze. With the advancement of technology, social media seems to be more captivating and interesting in providing information to the society. The impact of social media cannot be undermined considering the significant role it played in 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections and legislative assembly elections held recently in Delhi, Maharashtra etc. Irrespective of the political parties, politician know the relevance of social media specially keeping in mind youth population. Social media became a relatively popular word in 2014 parliament elections. In the initial days of internet static pages of political parties and politicians were used for the promotion. But with the advent of social networking websites, political campaigns changed completely as social networking websites enables politicians to be interactive and update at regular intervals. The feedback of the audience could be easily analyzed through their likes and comments on networking pages. Meti, Khandoba and Guru, 2015 refers to U.S. Presidential elections of 2008 where social networking sites were used to the fullest for the first time for maximum political mobilization. In order to reach out to the young voters, Barack Obama used Facebook in exceptional ways which helped him in fetching 70 percent of total votes who were less than 25 years old.

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• *Ankit Kashyap is a Ph.D. scholar at Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, India. E-mail: akashyap@amity.edu*
• *Dr. Mehak Jonjua is currently working as an Associate Professor at Amity School of Communication, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, India. Email- mjonjua@amity.edu*

Political Mobilization may be defined as the development of social and hence political relationship between individuals and political parties. Political mobilization through social networking sites indicates subtle change in the minds of the audiences or voters to change their thought process or to think about any particular political parties as they have been exposed to that political party through different forms of social media. Since social media provides an interactive forum, it also gives an idea to the politicians about the expectations of the people from the government or whether people are happy with the incumbent government or not. As per Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2012, the status of social media has been particularly highlighted in politics, given the fact that the use of social networking sites like (Facebook) and microblogging sites (Twitter) are believed to have the potential of attracting youth population and positively influencing political involvement. They also laid emphasis on social media becoming a core part of public discourse and effective communication in the modern society. The fast development of social media has caused major changes pertaining the way people find groups of individuals with similar interests, the nature of information, the available news sources, or the possibility to require and share ideas. In the last Lok Sabha Elections in 2014, Narendra Modi was said to have extensively used social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to influence voters and specially reaching out to the youth. When Narendra Modi won the general elections in 2014, the UK's Financial Times called him "India's first social media prime minister". "Social media has emerged as an essential tool of communication and has created new ways of political mobilizing and encourage social media users in political activities ranging from joining their political groups by tweeting, status update, expressing supports through blogs and videos on YouTube."* Social media has facilitated political campaigning in many ways. The immediate reach of social media makes it preferred choice of politicians and political parties over mainstream media or traditional media. The paper aims at analyzing how social media is used by political parties by posting pictures,

videos, posts etc. on social networking sites and further manage to mobilize the voters.

2. Review of Literature

The study examines the importance of social media in mobilization of community votes in Lok Sabha Elections. The notion is based on common logic that if any kind of information is disseminated through social media, then the mobilization of the community will take place and hence it will bring in substantial political change. Several studies over the years have revealed that social media brought indicative changes in many countries such as USA, Iraq, Zimbabwe, India etc. Social media has helped in bringing in lot of social, political and economic changes across the globe. Mutanana, 2016 in his report concluded that social media is used as a communication tool for political change and hence mobilization. One of the important observations about social media movement was that it enabled interactivity and introduced speed which was lacking in traditional media and mobilization. The social media was regarded as the effective tool of communication in bringing out political mobilization. The limitation of social media, however is that it requires more penetration especially in the developing nations. Meti, Khandoba, Guru, 2015 analyzed how online social media has fruitful effect on offline population. The world of social media is not limited to discussions but it also creates massive impact in the minds of the audiences. The results in their research depicted that the use of social media for political activities increases people's political participation, political knowledge and political efficacy. It was also observed that Twitter had very significant effect in political mobilization as Twitter for political knowledge is used by only those individuals who are genuinely interested in politics and it attracts a very peculiar subset of citizens. Moreover, the use of social media for political information depends on the frequency with which a particular social media has been used. The more a social media has been used, higher are the chances of political involvement and participation and hence mobilization. Kaur & Kaur, 2013 in their report found out impact of social media in the politics. As per report, the political discussions were confined to newspapers, TV channels and Nukkad Nataks but with the advent of social media, it has ensured that the youth of the nation is also involved in political discussions. The youth analyses different political events of the government and also influence decisions of the government. The social media was also credited for bringing out Arab revolution as it played multiple and positive role in creating awareness and finally telling people about misinformation in Tunisia. However, apart from political mobilization, social media did not have much influence in getting the voters together for casting their vote. Zaezjev, 2014 while doing content analysis of social media in Ukranian Euromaidan revolution found out how social media was significant in carrying out political mobilization. The research detailed how social networks anticipated political events and helped in mass mobilization. The mobilization of the people happened without involving any political leaders itself conveyed the impact of social media like Facebook on masses. It was observed that social media was used not only as a tool for political mobilization but also as a tool for media coverage. Uji, Mngusuul, 2015 in their study about socio-political mobilization with the help of social media explains that social media helps people in opening up with their ideas and expressions especially amongst youth who are more active users of social networking websites. Different social and political campaigns are easier to carry out on social media forums as compared to mainstream media. The ability of social media to be interactive and posts getting communicated from one place to other makes it more popular and convenient. However, internet literacy needs to be stronger for both politician and public to ensure stronger political mobilization with the help of social media tools. Webb, 2014 in his reports on political mobilization mentions that social media platforms provided a much needed space to the users of internet for putting their ideas and expressing themselves without any fear. It helped in political mobilization as part of Arab Spring revolution in countries like Tunisia and Syria. The study also reveals that social media acts as aid to main stream media and the existing of one is dependent on other after advancement of technology. The role of technology was also highlighted as the chances of maximizing the effect are possible only through social media. Zaheer, 2016 in the report talks about the use of social media like Facebook amongst youth and how it influences them in political participation. The level of political participation depends on the amount of time spent on social media like Facebook. The youth who spends more time on Facebook are likely to spend more time on internet and their political participation naturally becomes higher as they are more active and gradually likes and comments on the issues rose by others. The normal perception is that online mode of communication has lesser credibility as compared to traditional media but the reports revealed that credibility on Facebook was higher than other forms of media. The use of online media for political mobilization is translated in offline activities as well. Hale, 2017 discusses impact of social media in a digital world. According to the study conducted at Oxford Internet Institute, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are platforms where we discuss politics and also make our decisions whether we want to be active member of that political campaign or not. These social networking websites also decides where we "do" politics. The social media draws attention of limited segment of the people but creates a larger impact in the long run.

3. Objective

To study the role of social media in political mobilization

4. Research Method

The research method used in this study is Survey. A survey has been conducted amongst active users of internet from different age groups. The instrument used for collecting the data is questionnaire both manually and through document filled online. The reason for using questionnaire method was to get the insights of social media usage by different types of audiences. The impact of social networking sites can be assessed only by knowing the opinion as to how they perceive the information received through social media. The social media tools like Facebook and Twitter had decisive impact in 2014 and recently concluded 2019 Lok Sabha Elections. The sample will be collected from students from different university who constitutes a large section of the youth population, faculties from different

universities who are opinion makers and other members of the society who enjoys voting rights. The sample size will be 500 respondents from Delhi- NCR who will be representative of the total population. One of the criteria that has been outlined to conduct this study is that survey questionnaire will be filled only by those people who uses internet as a medium of communication and information. Through literature reviews, the study clearly indicates that the amount of time that one spends on different social networking websites online is directly proportional to his active participation in political campaigns offline.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

The data was analyzed through responses received from survey-questionnaire. The respondents were active users of internet and social media. The data collection helped in better understanding of the study underwent. The major findings of the research are explained below.

Findings and Discussions

Age Group

As per Table 1, the respondents were divided in to three age groups. Almost 75% of total respondents were of the age group 18-25 which also indicates that youth are more participative in political discussion and they constitute a large segment of voters as well in the upcoming elections. 16.3% of total responses came from age group 25-35 and remaining little more than 7.5% responses came from people having age group 35-50.
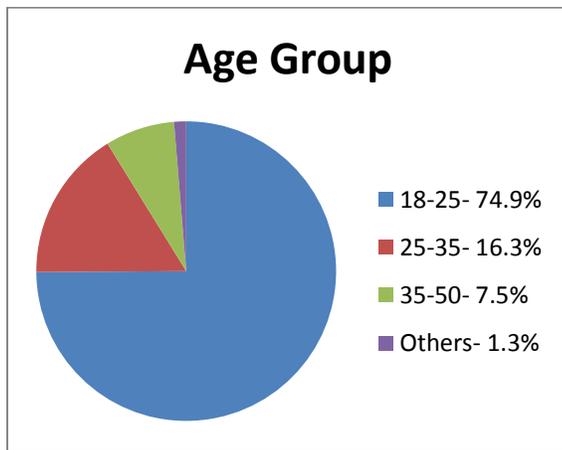
Table 1- Age group of respondents

Gender

Table 2 represents that the total responses from female was higher than male as per the chart below. As the survey was conducted through both online and offline medium, it was interesting to observe more participation of female in the survey and voicing their opinion about social media and political mobilization. The number of female respondents was 53.8% while male respondents contributed to remaining 45.8%.
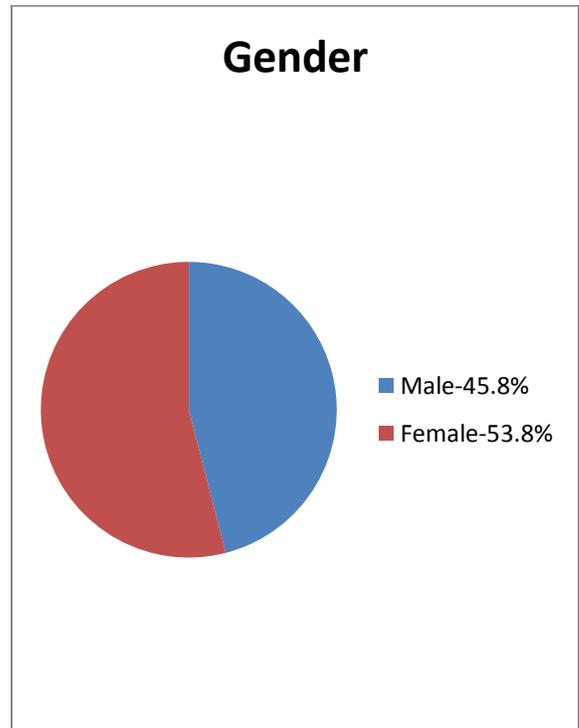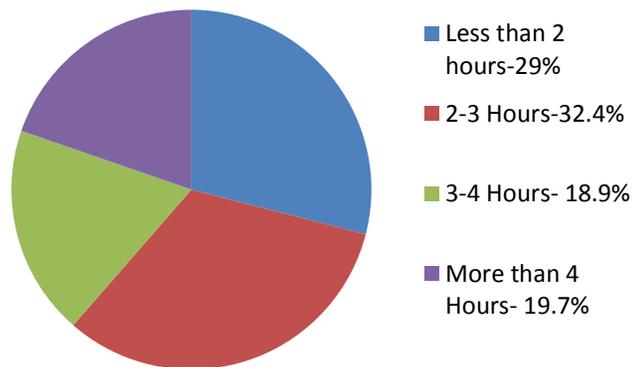

Table 2- Gender Representation

Number of hours spent on Social Media

It was important to see the total duration spent on social media by users of internet as it precisely decides the actual mobilization which might takes place. It has been observed in many studies that the amount of time spent on social media also decides the involvement of users in political mobilization. If someone is using social media for a longer duration, they are more likely to be active contributors in shaping opinion of the people and hence political mobilization. 32.4% of total population accepts that they use social media for 2-3 hours every day while 29% of the total population uses social media for less than 2 hours. It was interesting to observe that 19.7% of the total population uses social media for more than four hours every day while remaining 18.9% uses social media between 3-4 hours. (Tab- 3)
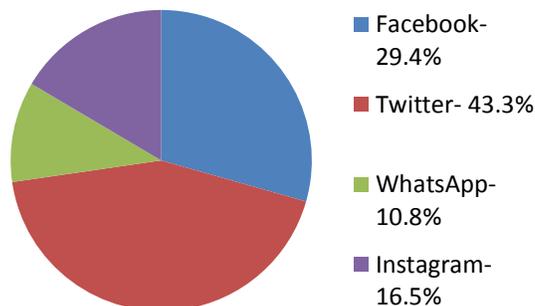
Number of hours spent on Social Media

- ■ Less than 2 hours-29%
- ■ 2-3 Hours-32.4%
- ■ 3-4 Hours- 18.9%
- ■ More than 4 Hours- 19.7%

Table-3- Number of Hours Spent on Social Media

Social Networking Sites used for General Information
Table 4 indicates the uses of social media to get general information and the statistics are worth observation. When asked about different sources to get information, 79.2% of the total population receives information from WhatsApp while 76.7% rely on Instagram. Facebook constitutes 69.1% in terms of providing information while Twitter remains source of general information for 42.8% of total population.

Use of Social Media for General Information

- ■ Facebook- 69.1%
- ■ Twitter- 42.8%
- ■ WhatsApp- 79.2%
- ■ Instagram- 76.7%

Table 4- Social Media usage for getting General Information

Social Networking Sites used for Political Information
As per Table 5, it clearly indicates that when it comes to getting political information, 43.3% of total population relies on Twitter. Facebook remains an important source of political information with 29.4% respondents relying on information provided. Even though Instagram and

WhatsApp had the maximum impact on people for getting general information, their role in defining political opinion or mobilization gets restricted at 16.5% and 10.8%.
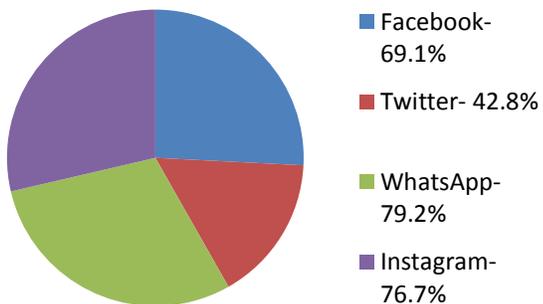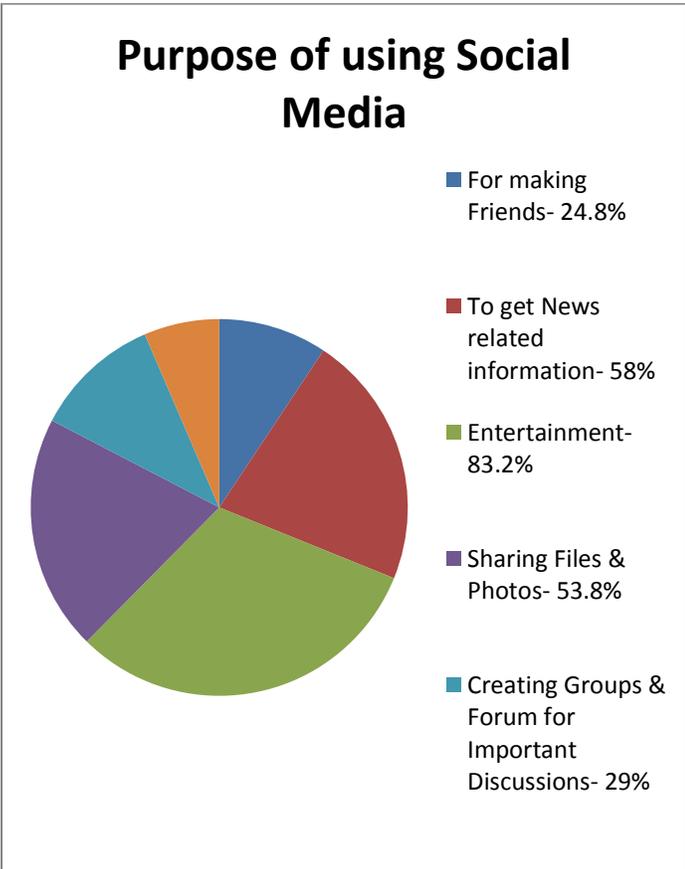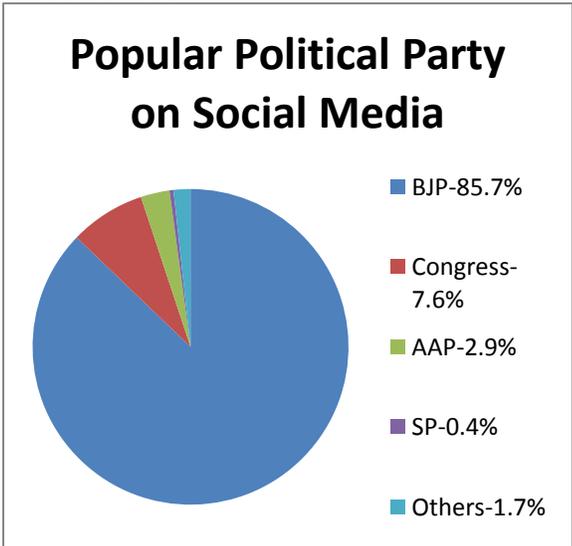
Use of Social Media for Political Information

- ■ Facebook- 29.4%
- ■ Twitter- 43.3%
- ■ WhatsApp- 10.8%
- ■ Instagram- 16.5%

Table 5- Social Media usage for getting General Information

Purpose of Using Social Media
To understand the impact of social media, it was important to analyze the purpose of the respondents behind using social media. Respondents were given choices to choose more than one reason for social media usage. As per Table 6, it can be found that 83.2% uses social media for entertainment purpose but there are good amount of 58% of total population who uses social media to get news related information. 53.8% of the sample population uses social media for sharing files and photographs with friends. Only 24.8% uses social media for making friends while there are 29% who uses social media for creating groups and forums for important discussions. The others constitute 17.2% of total population who uses social media actively

Table 6- *Purpose of using Social Media*

Most popular party on Social Media
As it can be clearly seen in Table 7, the popularity of Bhartiya Janata Party on social media is much ahead of any of the contemporary political party. BJP rules the chart with 85.7% popularity index on social media while Indian National Congress and Aam Aadmi Party remain at 7.6% and 2.9% respectively. The percentage of Samajwadi Party and others are negligible as far as their popularity on social media is concerned.

Table 7- *Most Popular Political party on Social Media*
Uses of social media for Political Communication

Political mobilization can happened only when political communication takes place on different forms of social media. Table 8 represents that 48% of the total population agree that social media is extensively used for political communication while 33.6% users strongly agree for the same which indicates a total agreement of almost 81.6%. While 10.5% chose to be neutral on their comment, 7.4% strongly disagree about the usage of social media for political communication.
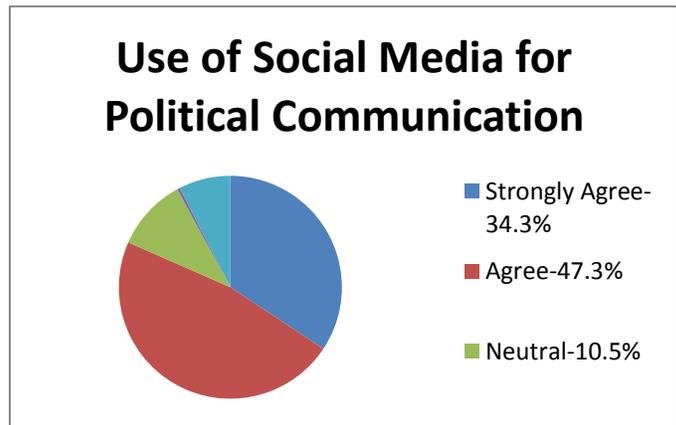
Table 8- *Use of Social Media for Political Communication*

**Social Media as Image Building forum**
The users of internet are increasing every day and hence the usage of social media for satisfying different needs. Table 9 clearly outlines that social media does help in building image of the politicians and allows them to form their opinions and ideologies amongst those who follow political developments. 74.4 of the total population supports social media as image building tool while 19.7% have negative opinion about the same. A less significant but 5.9% also thinks that it may or may not help in building image of the politicians.
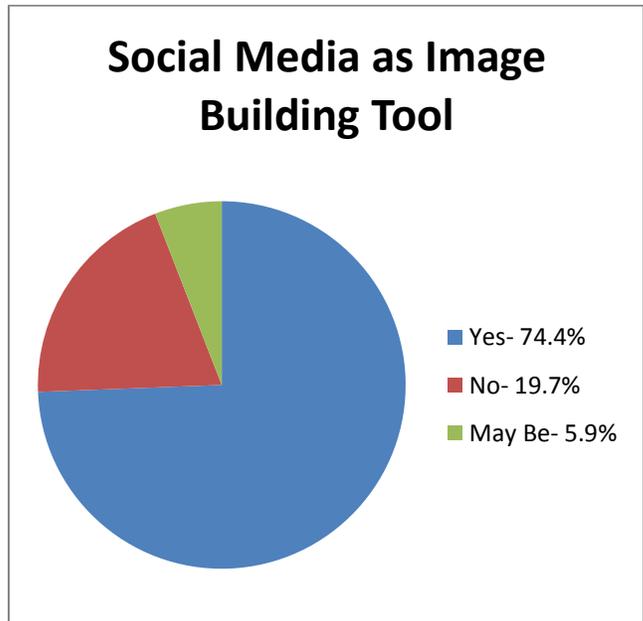
Table 9- *Social Media as Image Building Tool*

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ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN 2019 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

Social media played a significant role in all the elctions conducted after 2014 in India. It has been more significant in recently concluded legislative elections of Delhi and last Lok Sabha Elections. 94.9% (Table 10) respondents believe that social media will play the most crucial role in political mobilization. The impact of social media will be higher in India as compared to mainstream media as only 5.1% thinks that social media will not help in political mobilization.
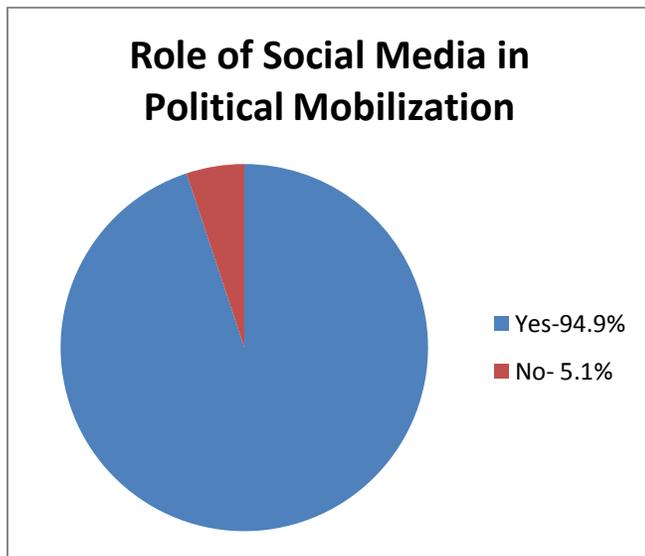
Table 10- *Role of Social media in Political Mobilization*

STUDY OF THE OBJECTIVE

The study of the objective to identify the role of social media in political mobilization revealed that elections in India will always be one of the biggest festival as it involves participation of individuals who are eligible to vote. The involvement of more than 60 percent of the total population which usually is the average voting percentage in India further ascertains the fact that people enjoys their voting rights in the democratic setup. The role of different forms of media have always been very crucial as it helps politicians in getting their opinions reach to larger section of the crowd. In this report, we analyzed the importance of social media in particular in contrast to traditional forms of media. Social media's participation is getting better and impactful with every passing election. It is important here to note that there is huge correlation between voting population and users of social media which mainly constitutes youth. The study finds out that social media is being used by politicians for varying purposes. Apart for fetching votes in elections which remains ultimate target, politicians use social media to generate informal and direct relations with desired set of audience. The social media followers not only help them in shaping their opinion to multiple stakeholders but also helps in positioning their positive image. It is easier to reach out to people with minimum expenditure and still be more personalized in their approach. It is only through social media immense popularity and presence that even an e-invite to prime minister by a poor person garners enough

attention because the message has been replied by the prime minister of the country. The study also reveals about the presence of different political parties in different forums of social networking sites and their subsequent usage by the politicians. It was also observed that people use particular social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook when they have to fetch political information and they rely on Instagram and Whatsapp for other entertainment based information. Politicians use these forums for political communication and it has been observed that they even announce several important policies on their social pages. The study finds out strong evidences in support social media being a prime influencer in deciding the fate of the politicians.

CONCLUSION

In the current digital age, the purpose of the study is to analyze the extent to which social media can influence political mobilization. The current study reflects positive outcome in terms of political participation and hence political mobilization through social media. Findings of the results outlines that fifty percent of the total population uses social media for more than 2 hours every day and hence their active participation in social media campaigns. The results show that politicians and political parties are using social media tools effectively for political communication. The results of the study unanimously confirm Bhartiya Janata Party as the most popular party on social media. The results show that Twitter is preferred over Facebook for getting political information but the dependency of larger section of the audience is on WhatsApp and Instagram when it comes to getting any other general information. The study suggests that if politicians start using Instagram and WhatsApp alongside Facebook and Twitter, the chances of political mobilization will be higher. The results clearly states that social media plays a major role in building images of the politicians and also putting their ideas to the end users. The results of the study ensure that social media will play significant and crucial role in political mobilization in the upcoming elections of India.

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