



Social media shaping first-time voters' political behavior: A combined analysis using framing theory, UGT, and the ELM

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of the role that social media plays in the politics of first-time voters in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, in the India parliamentary election in the year 2024. Using the Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), as well as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the study examines the influence of the organization of political information, personal reasons to use the media, and the patterns of cognitive processing on trust, political awareness, and their behavioural responses. The quantitative, cross-sectional design was adopted, where the purposive sampling was used to survey 246 first-time voters with the help of face-to-face surveys. The analysis showed that patterns of social media use were strongly linked to important changes in political outcomes such as trust in political information, the commonness of information (re)validation, and the alteration of voting preference. The results provide support to the argument that the framing of digital texts is critical in encouraging interpretations, that user motivation determines use of a platform, and that greater mental engagement mediates political actions. Despite some geographic limitations and coverage and dependences on self-reported information, the study can be used in gaining some insights into the role of social media as an agent of political socialization of new voters. Its implications on the practice are of use in political communicators, educators, and policymakers who aim to improve digital literacy and develop informed democratic engagement among young people.

Keywords: Social Media; First-Time Voters; Political Communication; Framing Theory; Uses and Gratifications Theory; Elaboration Likelihood Model; Political Trust; Digital Literacy

1. Introduction

Digital media have dominated in the sphere of political communication, especially among first-time voters. When it comes to the Indian context, where young people are a sizeable part of the electorate, it is important to know how they affect their politics through the social media. There is a prevalence of social media as the key source of political information that has influenced the perceptions, attitudes, and behavior of the young voters (Kumar, 2022). The 2024 Indian parliamentary elections have been attended by the unseen activity of first-time voters, a large proportion of whom were deeply dependent on social media to receive political information. Such a change explains why it is important to consider the processes that social media influence on political behavior. To examine this phenomenon, the current research incorporates three theoretical lines, Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Both theories provide different perspectives through which various aspects of media on political conduct may be comprehended.

Framing Theory assumes that how information is conveyed (framed) greatly affects how audience interprets and makes a decision (Entman, 1993). In political communications, the frames that the media applies on certain things also have the effect of accentuating some sides of an issue, whilst making less to some sides such that the mass audience may be influenced in a certain way by the media. As an example, the political events or candidates can be included in a positive

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or negative manner, as this will influence the voter attitudes and decisions (Chong & Druckman, 2007). To understand the nature of the political behavior of first-time voters, it is necessary to understand how they see the frames and are affected by those frames.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is concerned with the intentions of the persons in consuming media. Research by UGT shows that, there is active choice by individuals of media channels and information which meet personal needs and wants, like information need, personal identity, integration and social interaction (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). On the political side, a first-time voter might use social media to learn about the politics; join in the communication or even support their political ideologies (Ruggiero, 2000). We can perhaps gain more insight into media consumption patterns of these voters and its impact on their political interest by looking at the gratifications that they intend to acquire with media use.

Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) is a theory that elucidates the attitude change and persuasion processes. According to ELM, there are two paths to be followed to arrive to persuasion: the central route process, whose points are careful and pensive attitude to the message information, and the peripheral route which depends on some shallow indicators, the attractiveness of the source or the number of arguments offered (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The processing of political information by first-time voters in social media can either take one of the two routes based on the motivation and the processing capacity of first-time voters. The consideration of the direction in the majority is capable of throwing light on the clarity of political release on the internet social sites.

The combination of these theories offers an elaborate framework against which an analysis of the extent to which social media influences the political behaviour of first-time voters can be done. Framing Theory illuminates how political information is structured and presented so that it can affect the perception; UGT explains the reasons why the media are involved; and ELM provides knowledge about how the human mind perceives the information and then changes the attitudes with regard to political information. Such theories when tested empirically on social media and political behavior development proved to be relevant to the situation. As an example, a study shows that the effects of framing of political messages in social media may greatly influence opinion and attitudes of the users (Lee & Chyi, 2014). Evidence-based on UGT has also established that proper reasons by individuals to use the social media resources, including information seeking and social networking are strongly associated with their political involvement (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Besides, due to ELM-based studies, it was revealed that the path of information processing on social media has a certain impact on the persistence and intensity of the political attitudes developed (Winter, Brückner, & Krämer, 2015). Nevertheless, the increasing amount of literature still lacks an explanation of how the various theoretical frameworks apply in a collective way explaining influence of social media on first-time voters in Indian context. The socio-political landmark of India has a unique set-up and the growing scope of penetration of digital media in the country necessitates such an investment to explore this dynamic. The proposed study will address this gap as the potential interaction of social media usage, framed political content, motivation of users and cognitive processing conduits will be investigated in shaping political behavior of first-time voters in Coimbatore and the state of Tamil Nadu. This research aimed at finding a delicate picture of the processes in which the social media can shape the political behavior of new voters by the use of a cross-sectional research design that includes Framing Theory, UGT, and ELM.

1.1. Objective of the Study

This research paper is to explore the influence of social media in developing political actions among the first-time voters of the state of Tamil Nadu, with additional emphasis on which exposure to political information, the motives of users, and information processing behaviours impacts trust, awareness and the voting behaviour. Based on the Framing Theory, the study focuses on the manner in which the exercise of the information which is provided in the political world is framed and cognized in digital media. With the aid of Uses and Gratifications Theory, it evaluates the reasons why the first-time voters resort to social media when participating in politics. Elaboration Likelihood Model has been utilised to explain the manner in which voters encode and give reaction to persuasive political messages such as misinformation and advertisement messages. With the study of relationships between the variables consisting of the preference of the platform, trust to political content, and frequency in seeking verification of the information, and the outcome of voting the proposed study gives a theory-based analysis of the role of social media in the political process and decision-making of the newly enfranchised voters.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study combines Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) in a bid to understand the effects of social media on the political awareness, trust and political behavior of first-time voters. The Framing Theory (Entman 1993) holds that media frames marginate reality and select an aspect of it to

understanding by the audience. When used in reference to the social media, this framing of political information taken by the politicians may influence to a great extent how the first-time voters perceive such information and whether that information can be trusted. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) have created UGT which implies that people consciously use media to satisfy particular wants, including information, individual identity and social interaction. Social media platforms can be used by first-time voters in order to address their intrinsic desire of political information and social interaction thus affecting their political knowledge and political engagement. According to ELM proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) people tend to process persuasive messages of the central route that is dependent on careful and thoughtful processing or of the peripheral route that is based on superficial cues. The path to be followed is based on the motivation and the processing capacity of the person. In the proposed work, ELM will be used to determine the effects of political information processing by first-time voters on the social media and how it influences their vulnerability to misinformation and their voting patterns. By introducing these theories in combination, the study will allow reaching an in-depth perspective on the synergy of media content, user motivation, and mental processing in creation of political awareness and decision-making among new voters.

3. Research Methodology

This research integrates Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to examine how social media influences first-time voters' political awareness, trust, and behavior. Framing Theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), posits that media frames shape audience interpretations by highlighting certain aspects of reality. In the context of social media, the way political information is framed can significantly affect first-time voters' perceptions and trust in that information. UGT, developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), suggests that individuals actively seek out media to fulfill specific needs, such as information, personal identity, and social interaction. First-time voters may use social media platforms to satisfy their need for political information and to engage with others, thereby influencing their political understanding and participation. ELM, introduced by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), explains how individuals process persuasive messages through either a central route, involving careful and thoughtful consideration, or a peripheral route, relying on superficial cues. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed for this study. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through online survey and face to face surveys administered to 246 first-time voters. The collected data were analyzed to explore patterns in social media usage and their relationship with key political outcomes. The findings indicated significant associations between social media use and changes in political behavior, including trust in political information, the frequency of information validation, and shifts in voting preferences. The route taken depends on the individual's motivation and ability to process the message. In this study, ELM helps assess how first-time voters process political content on social media and how this processing affects their susceptibility to misinformation and their voting behavior. By combining these theories, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between media content, user motivations, and cognitive processing in shaping political awareness and decision-making among first-time voters.

3.1. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 Framing Theory with UGT (Media Use & Exposure)

Framing Variable	UGT Variable	p-value
Awareness of misinformation	Preferred media type	0.297
Social media used most	Trust in party info	0.002
Social media used most	Change in vote preference	0.154
Platform used	Better understanding of politics	0.003
Trust in social media info	News source preferred	0.000
Info gathering frequency	Understanding party agendas	0.000

3.2. Media Use and Exposure

The results indicate a significant relationship between the social media platform used and both trust in political information and a better understanding of politics. This supports the argument that different platforms frame political content in unique ways, influencing how first-time voters interpret and internalize political messages (Entman, 1993). Voters who engage with platforms like Instagram or YouTube may be more likely to trust political information depending on how it is framed visually or interactively, aligning with UGT's premise that individuals seek media that matches their information and cognitive preferences (Katz et al., 1973). Moreover, the frequency of using social media

to gather information was significantly associated with understanding party agendas, suggesting that information-seeking motivations are directly linked to cognitive political outcomes. However, some associations such as between preferred media type and misinformation awareness were not significant, indicating that the medium alone does not predict misinformation sensitivity. Similarly, while users' platform preference influenced political understanding, it did not significantly correlate with a change in vote preference, pointing to a possible gap between cognitive effects and behavioral change.

Table 2 Framing Theory vs ELM (Cognitive Processing & Influence)

Framing Variable	ELM Variable	p-value
Awareness of misinformation	Trust in political info	0.011
Awareness of misinformation	Frequency of checking news	0.000
Awareness of misinformation	Action on receiving misinformation	0.005
Awareness of misinformation	Influence on election outcome	0.000
Awareness of misinformation	Frequency of info gathering	0.000
Trust in party info	News verification frequency	0.017
Info gathering frequency	Info source used	0.000
Misinformation encounter freq	Info checking behavior	0.172

3.3. Cognitive Processing and Influence

A strong pattern of significance emerged across several variables linking Framing Theory with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Awareness of misinformation showed statistically significant relationships with trust in political content, news-checking behavior, user actions in response to misinformation, perceived election influence, and frequency of information gathering. This underscores that individuals who recognize the presence of misinformation are not only more cautious in their cognitive processing but also more likely to engage deeply with political content via central processing routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). For instance, those who frequently verify news before forwarding or report misinformation appear to be processing political messages with higher involvement and scrutiny. The association between information gathering and the type of source used further supports this notion, indicating that framing effects may determine which sources are seen as credible enough to influence behavior. Notably, the relationship between misinformation encounter frequency and information checking behavior was not statistically significant, suggesting that frequent exposure alone does not guarantee critical engagement reinforcing the ELM's emphasis on motivation and ability, not just exposure.

Table 3 UGT vs ELM (User Motivation & Persuasion Impact)

UGT Variable	ELM Variable	p-value
Info source preferred	Trust in party info	0.017
Info gathering frequency	Changed vote preference	0.000
Info verification frequency	Voting behavior	0.003
Info gathering frequency	Better political understanding	0.000
Action on receiving misinformation	Trust in info	0.161

3.4. User Motivation and Persuasion Impact

When examining user motivations through the lens of UGT and their outcomes via ELM, several critical associations were observed. A significant relationship was found between preferred information sources and trust in political information, suggesting that gratifications sought from media align with perceived credibility (Katz et al., 1973). More importantly, frequency of political information seeking showed strong significance with both voting behavior and increased political understanding. It means that motivated media users who actively search political content will be more centralized to process information and display informed behavior with characteristics such as change in voting

preference. This interpretation is further supported by the large correlation between the verifying frequency of the news and voting behavior which indicates the existence of cognitive effort in terms of persuasion as well as in political decision-making (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Nevertheless, because the action that could be exercised after misinformation was received was not strongly correlated with trust, it means that the behavioral tendencies to report the misinformation or ignore it might not always follow more complex cognitive motivation or levels of attitude.

4. Discussion

The results of the current investigation showed important association with media framing and confidence in the political information demonstrating the primary assumption of the Framing Theory which states that the structuring of information affects the interpretation made by the audience (Entman, 1993). Framing which highlights some narratives or sources may be useful during political communication contexts because they can greatly influence how people measure credibility and support specific political outcomes. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the information reveals that people who often consult information before sharing with others as a sign of high level of cognitive involvement are more prone to be persuaded on the central processing paths (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This lends credence to the theory that when people are motivated to attend deeply to political information and that they are willing to subject the information to critical evaluation, the attitudinal change of the individual upon exposure to the same lasts a long time and there is possible shift in the voting pattern of a person. At the Uses and Gratifications Theory perspective, the research highlights the fact that first-time voters are actively exploring the social media platforms not only to entertain or to communicate, but more precisely to satisfy their political information needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The observed relationship between social media platform preferences and increased political understanding supports previous research suggesting that audience motivations and media use habits are critical determinants of political knowledge acquisition. Such theoretical convergence points out that first-time voters are never inert consumers of the digital content. Instead, they are active participants in interpretation, evaluation, and utilization of political information through the framing of messages, personal cognitive involvement and enjoyments that they are gaining. The tri- theoretical framework gives more insight into how social media can influence political awareness and trust and behaviour, especially when it pertains to the issues of misinformation and paying elections.

4.1. Limitations of the Study

Although there is some significance in how this research shows the impact of the social media on the political activities of first-time voters based on theoretical perspectives of the Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), there are shortcomings. To start with, both a purposive method used in sampling and a focus on a specific geographic context (Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu) do not allow the generalization of the data to other populations in India. Second, cross-sectional design does not allow this; it is able to capture association and not changes between points in time. Third, there is possible bias of self-reported data represented by social desirability or lack of assessment accuracy. Fourth, despite the attempt of taking variables based on three theories, the study can be exposed to subjective analysis in terms of political content and motivations, according to cultural, educational, or linguistic background, which was not profoundly investigated. Lastly, more advanced models of analysis like regression or structural equation models may enable a greater causal explanation and interaction effects to future researches and dealing with these weaknesses will increase the strength of future studies on digital political engagement.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented the discussion of the influence of social media on political behavior of the first-time voters considering combined insights of the Framing Theory, Utilities and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The results indicated an important influence of the form and format of political information, user intentions of consuming political information and their mental fidelity tactics in relation to trust in political information, political awareness, and even voting behavior tweaks. The findings upheld the theoretical assertion that framing is involved in interpretation (Entman, 1993), that gratifications direct media uses (Katz et al., 1973), and that cognitive equipages are determinant of the effect of appealing messages (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The use of social media and trust, the seeking of knowledge and political awareness were noticed to be statistically significant in the relationship with each other. Such results reveal the strong influence of social media in the democratic process of the youthful electorate and especially those who have stepped into the democratic process of voting. With the current trend toward the digitalization of political activity, the study is a relevant input into the knowledge of youth political activity and possible meaningful participation as well as misinformation. Shifting the research to various regions, adding a longitudinal level, and examining the interventions to promote digital political literacy should be examined in the future.

Such observations can be applied to the design of digital literacy that might require an informed contribution to democracy in a youth.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Statement of Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. All procedures involving human participants were in compliance with the institutional and/or national research committee's ethical standards and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.

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