

# Political Polarization in the Digital Age: Social Media and the Transformation of Democratic Politics in Karnataka

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## Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed political communication, electoral campaigning and democratic participation in India. Karnataka, characterized by strong political competition, technological development and increasing digital connectivity, provides an important context for examining these changes. This paper analyses the relationship between social media and political polarization in Karnataka, focusing particularly on WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and YouTube. It examines how digital platforms have changed communication between political parties, candidates and citizens while simultaneously creating challenges associated with misinformation, selective exposure, echo chambers, partisan narratives and affective polarization. The study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, election-related studies and research concerning digital political communication. Particular attention is given to the 2019 Lok Sabha election and the 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election. The paper argues that social media has become an integral part of political campaigning and mobilization, creating opportunities for political participation and accountability but also contributing to increasingly fragmented political communication. The study concludes that social media does not independently cause political polarization; rather, its effects emerge from the interaction between political identities, party strategies, platform architecture, misinformation and user behavior. Strengthening digital literacy, multilingual fact-checking, transparency in political advertising and responsible platform governance is therefore essential for protecting democratic deliberation in Karnataka.

**Keywords:** Political polarization, social media, digital democracy, Karnataka, political communication, misinformation, elections, democratic governance.

## 1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital communication has significantly transformed contemporary political systems. Social-media platforms have changed how political parties communicate with citizens, how candidates campaign and how voters obtain political information. Unlike traditional mass media, social media allows political messages to be produced, shared and discussed by political organizations and ordinary citizens simultaneously.

India has experienced a particularly significant transformation in digital political communication. Political parties increasingly use WhatsApp, Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube for campaigning, political mobilization and image building. Social media has reduced the traditional distance between political representatives and citizens and has enabled political actors to communicate directly with specific audiences.

Karnataka provides an important case for studying this transformation. It combines high digital connectivity, rapid technological development, strong electoral competition and considerable social and political diversity. Research on the 2019 Karnataka election found that major political parties had already integrated social media into their electoral campaigns, using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp alongside conventional political communication. Research on the 2023 Karnataka Assembly election similarly demonstrates the importance of social media in constructing and circulating political narratives.

However, the expansion of digital politics has created a democratic paradox. Social media can increase political participation and access to information, but it can also reinforce political divisions. Misinformation, selective exposure, partisan communication and emotionally charged content can contribute to political polarization. Contemporary scholarship increasingly distinguishes between ideological polarization and affective polarization. The former refers to disagreement over political positions, whereas the latter involves emotional hostility towards political opponents.

The present study therefore examines the relationship between social media and political polarization in Karnataka and evaluates its implications for democratic politics.

## **Objectives**

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the changing nature of political communication through social media in Karnataka.
2. To analyse the relationship between social media and political polarization.
3. To examine the role of social media in electoral mobilization.
4. To assess the impact of misinformation and partisan communication on democratic discourse.
5. To identify measures for strengthening democratic communication in the digital age.

## **Research Questions**

1. How has social media transformed political communication in Karnataka?
2. How do digital platforms contribute to political polarization?
3. What role does misinformation play in digital political communication?
4. Does social media strengthen or weaken democratic participation?
5. What measures can reduce harmful polarization while protecting freedom of expression?

## Review of Literature

Research on digital politics has expanded rapidly over the last decade. Social media has been described as an important transformation in political communication because it allows political actors to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with citizens.

Studies of Indian politics show that social media has become increasingly important for political campaigning and voter mobilization. Research on Karnataka's 2019 election demonstrates that political parties used multiple platforms as part of organized campaign strategies. Social media was not simply an additional communication channel but increasingly became integrated with traditional campaign structures.

Research on the 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election also indicates that political actors used social media to construct and circulate political narratives. Twitter/X provided a public arena for political discussion, while WhatsApp and other platforms facilitated more decentralized communication.

International literature identifies several mechanisms through which social media may contribute to polarization. Selective exposure can lead users to consume information that confirms their existing political preferences. Echo chambers can limit exposure to opposing views. Algorithms may amplify highly engaging emotional content. Political misinformation can further reinforce partisan identities.

Tucker et al. (2018) identify social-media polarization and political disinformation as major areas of contemporary political research. Cinelli et al. (2021) demonstrate how echo-chamber effects can develop through patterns of social-media interaction. Weeks and Gil de Zúñiga (2019) further examine the relationship between social media and political polarization.

Indian research has increasingly focused on misinformation, political campaigns and digital mobilization. However, Karnataka-specific research has tended to focus more on digital campaigning and political narratives than on the broader consequences of social-media polarization for democratic tolerance and deliberation.

## Methodology

The study adopts a **qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design**.

It relies primarily on secondary sources, including:

- peer-reviewed journal articles;
- academic books and chapters;
- research papers;
- election-related studies;
- government and Election Commission materials;
- studies of social-media communication;
- publicly available research concerning Karnataka elections.

The study focuses primarily on the period **2019–2026**, with particular attention to the 2019 Lok Sabha election and the 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election.

The principal platforms examined are WhatsApp, Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube.

The study does not claim to establish a direct causal relationship between social-media use and individual voting behavior. Instead, it identifies mechanisms through which social media may influence political communication, participation and polarization.

## **Social Media and the Transformation of Political Communication in Karnataka**

Political communication in Karnataka has changed from a largely one-directional model to a networked and interactive model.

Traditionally, political parties relied on:

- public meetings;
- rallies;
- newspapers;
- television;
- posters;
- door-to-door campaigning.

Social media has added:

- WhatsApp groups;
- political videos;
- memes;
- hashtags;
- livestreams;
- influencer communication;
- targeted advertisements;
- online volunteer networks.

Research on the 2019 Karnataka election demonstrated that major political parties had incorporated social media into their campaign structures. This indicates that digital campaigning has become part of mainstream electoral organization rather than remaining a supplementary activity.

The 2023 Assembly election further demonstrated the importance of digital narratives. Political parties and candidates used social media to promote campaign messages, respond to opponents and mobilize supporters.

The transformation can therefore be represented as:

**Traditional Campaigning → Digital Campaigning → Integrated/Hybrid Campaigning**

Digital communication does not replace traditional political organization. Instead, online and offline political activities increasingly reinforce each other.

Social media can contribute to polarization through several interconnected mechanisms.

**Social Media, Misinformation and Electoral Politics**

Misinformation is one of the most important challenges associated with contemporary digital politics.

Political misinformation may involve:

- false statements;
- manipulated images;
- misleading videos;
- fabricated quotations;
- old material presented as current;
- misleading statistics;
- manipulated audio or video.

The rapid circulation of such material can create difficulties for citizens and election institutions because corrections often reach audiences more slowly than the original claims.

The problem is particularly important in multilingual political environments. Karnataka's political communication occurs extensively in Kannada as well as English and other languages. Consequently, effective fact-checking requires multilingual capacity.

Social media also facilitates rapid counter-communication. Political parties can respond to allegations almost immediately, meaning that digital campaigning increasingly operates as a continuous process rather than a campaign limited to election periods.

**Democratic Opportunities and Challenges**

Social media has both positive and negative consequences for democracy.

**Democratic Opportunities**

Social media can:

1. increase political awareness;
2. improve access to political information;
3. facilitate citizen participation;
4. provide direct communication with representatives;

5. strengthen political accountability;
6. increase youth engagement;
7. provide alternative platforms for civil society.

These characteristics can strengthen democratic participation.

## **Democratic Challenges**

At the same time, social media can:

1. spread misinformation;
2. reinforce echo chambers;
3. increase partisan hostility;
4. facilitate online harassment;
5. encourage identity-based political conflict;
6. weaken trust in institutions;
7. fragment the public sphere;
8. facilitate manipulation and coordinated campaigns.

The democratic impact is therefore fundamentally ambivalent.

Social media should not be described as either inherently democratic or inherently anti-democratic.

## **Findings**

The analysis produces several important findings.

### **First, social media has become an integral component of political communication in Karnataka.**

Political parties increasingly use digital platforms for campaign communication, mobilization and political branding.

### **Second, political communication has become more decentralized.**

Citizens, political volunteers, influencers and independent commentators can contribute directly to political narratives.

### **Third, social media has increased the speed of political communication.**

Political claims and counterclaims can circulate within minutes, creating both opportunities for accountability and risks of misinformation.

#### **Fourth, digital platforms can reinforce political polarization.**

Selective exposure, echo chambers, emotional communication and partisan narratives can increase political distance between groups.

#### **Fifth, misinformation is an important mechanism of polarization.**

False or misleading political information can reinforce pre-existing political identities and deepen distrust of opponents.

#### **Sixth, social media does not independently cause polarization.**

Political polarization is shaped by existing political identities, social divisions, party competition and institutional factors. Social media can amplify these processes.

#### **Seventh, Karnataka demonstrates the development of hybrid political communication.**

Online political communication increasingly operates together with rallies, local organizations, traditional media and grassroots campaigning.

#### **Eighth, AI-generated content is becoming a new challenge.**

The emergence of generative AI, synthetic media and deepfakes creates additional risks for electoral communication and political trust.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **Strengthen Digital Literacy**

Educational institutions and civil society organizations should promote critical evaluation of political information.

#### **Develop Multilingual Fact-Checking**

Fact-checking mechanisms should provide timely verification in Kannada as well as English.

#### **Improve Political Advertising Transparency**

Digital political advertisements should disclose their sponsors and relevant funding information.

#### **Strengthen Platform Accountability**

Platforms should improve transparency concerning political advertising, coordinated manipulation and content moderation.

## **Protect Freedom of Expression**

Measures against misinformation should not become instruments for suppressing legitimate political criticism. Regulation should therefore include transparency, independent oversight and due process.

## **Strengthen Election Institutions**

Election authorities require technological expertise and appropriate institutional mechanisms to monitor digital campaigning.

## **Encourage Democratic Digital Culture**

Political parties, educational institutions and civil society should encourage respectful disagreement and political tolerance.

## **Conclusion**

Social media has fundamentally transformed political communication in Karnataka. Political parties increasingly use digital platforms for campaigning, political mobilization, narrative construction and direct communication with citizens. At the same time, citizens have acquired greater opportunities to participate in political discussion and hold political actors accountable.

However, the expansion of digital politics has also produced important democratic challenges. Selective exposure, echo chambers, misinformation, emotional communication and partisan narratives can contribute to political polarization and weaken democratic deliberation.

The Karnataka experience demonstrates that social media should not be viewed as the sole cause of political polarization. Rather, its influence emerges through the interaction between digital technologies, political parties, existing social identities, political competition and individual behavior.

The key challenge is therefore not to eliminate political disagreement. Political disagreement is essential to democracy. The objective should be to ensure that disagreement remains compatible with political tolerance, pluralism and democratic norms.

For Karnataka, this requires stronger digital literacy, multilingual fact-checking, transparent political advertising, accountable platform governance and institutional capacity to address emerging digital threats. The future of democratic politics will depend not simply on how extensively citizens use social media, but on **how effectively democratic institutions and citizens adapt to the changing digital political environment.**



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