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GRT

ROLE OF TWITTER IN THE ONLINE CAMPAIGN OF 2014 LOK SABHA POLLS IN PUNJAB AND CHANDIGARH

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ABSTRACT

Twitter-based online campaigning was visible for the first time during the 2014 Lok Sabha election in Punjab and Chandigarh as politicians used the online channel to provide updates to voters. The trend caught up as the election neared even though the site is yet to catch up with the popularity of other social networks in the region. The study establishes six key reasons why microblogging clicked with the voters to get political information. The findings give insights into the voters' expectations from political use of Twitter and also reveal that young adults are the ones who opted for online consumption of political updates using Twitter. Apart from convenience of using Twitter, real time updates and informative

posts kept them hooked on to the microblogging site even though live tweeting using hashtags was still not used that often in the election. The findings are based on a survey of voters.

KEYWORDS : Twitter, online campaign, politics, social media .

1.INTRODUCTION:

The Lok Sabha election was marked by an aggressive online campaign with politicians across party affiliations taking to tweeting for providing campaign updates and statements. Despite its 140-character limitation, Twitter was an obvious choice for national leaders contesting the polls in the region as they wanted to continue reacting to developments at the national level while trying to reach maximum number of voters in their constituency. The bright side of the brevity of messages was that politician as well as the voter as they could post and retrieve the short messages on the go or even in areas with limited Internet access. Political microblogging witnessed participation from both sides but when compared with the use of other social networking sites like Facebook, the Twitter campaign was

certainly much smaller in scale and also its reach.

There were many party supporters who posted updates of political developments but what attracted the voters was the growing trend of real-time updates and informative posts from credible handles – that of the politician or party. Also, the microblogging format was seen as a convenient way of accessing updates, especially on the go. As revealed in the findings, unlike other social media platforms, voters did not consider Twitter as a public sphere for interactions with other voters or the politician and the experience was limited to one-way flow of information from the politician. But there was a section of voters using Twitter primarily for expressing their political views. Among the peripheral benefits of joining Twitter, politically inclined voters downloaded content so that it could be further shared on other social networks. The wide reach of Twitter beyond the user's limited friend circle as on other social network gave them a window on a wide variety of content and also wider audiences for their own posts.

Previous research has laid emphasis on how it is the younger generation that is mostly consuming informative content online. To confirm this, Twitter users were asked to specify their age and it was found that most of the microblog users were young adults in the 26-40 age group, followed by the youngest lot aged between 18-25 years.

The findings give insights into what voters expect from political updates on Twitter. It was found that real time and informative posts can help generate better responses on the microblogging site. As ease of usage is a priority area for voters, the trend to post links and other material that redirect the voter to other sites is not considered welcome.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Twitter as a campaign tool has been hailed for taking the message directly to the voter, bypassing the traditional media outlets (Lassen & Brown, 2011), and also bringing with it a set of benefits – it is low cost for the politician and also “enhanced recruitment of volunteers and contributions, and an opportunistic space for lesser known candidates” (Gueorguieva, 2008). Aharony (2012), in his study of Twitter use by three key world leaders - President Obama, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, found that it was informative posts on daily happenings and top issues that made most updates for all three politicians.

Social networks like Twitter have been hailed for its features of “participation, openness, conversation, community and connectivity”, much in contrast to the “one-way, asymmetric model of communication that characterized media in the 20th century” (Hermida, 2011:3). However, in terms of Twitter's use for election campaign, politician-voter interactivity leaves much desired. Candidates tag other politicians but voters are rarely mentioned, point out Conway, B. A., Kenski, K., & Wang, D. (2013) questioning if it led to “meaningful dialogue” in real terms. The focus of politicians is on using Twitter as a site to “disseminate the same information shared in other media” (Golbeck et al., 2010) and not “promoting interactions with retweets or user mentions.”

Politicians' focus is on targeting users wanting to get updates even when they are not actively composing posts or actively reacting to tweets. During campaign period, it is details of campaign events and political statements that carry newsworthiness. The rise of Twitter has led to changes in the news consumption patterns of its users, especially 16-24 year olds according to the 2012 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Thorsen, E. 2013). It has been found that among those opting for online channels to access news, 20% stumble upon news on a social network like Twitter or Facebook and this is more prevalent among 43% young users (Newman, 2012). Twitter itself boasted of its breaking news feature when it declared, “It's like being delivered a newspaper whose headlines you'll always find interesting –

you can discover news as it's happening, learn more about topics that are important to you, and get the inside scoop in real time" (Twitter, 2012).

In terms of the number of Tweets, past researchers have found that most candidates realise that Twitter following is not linked to frequency of tweeting. Conway et al (2013) point out that despite presidential primary candidates during the 2012 campaign Buddy Roemer tweeting more than his rivals, his increase in followers still did not match that of popular politicians. Some even believe "there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to use Twitter" (Golbeck et al., 2010).

3.METHODOLOGY

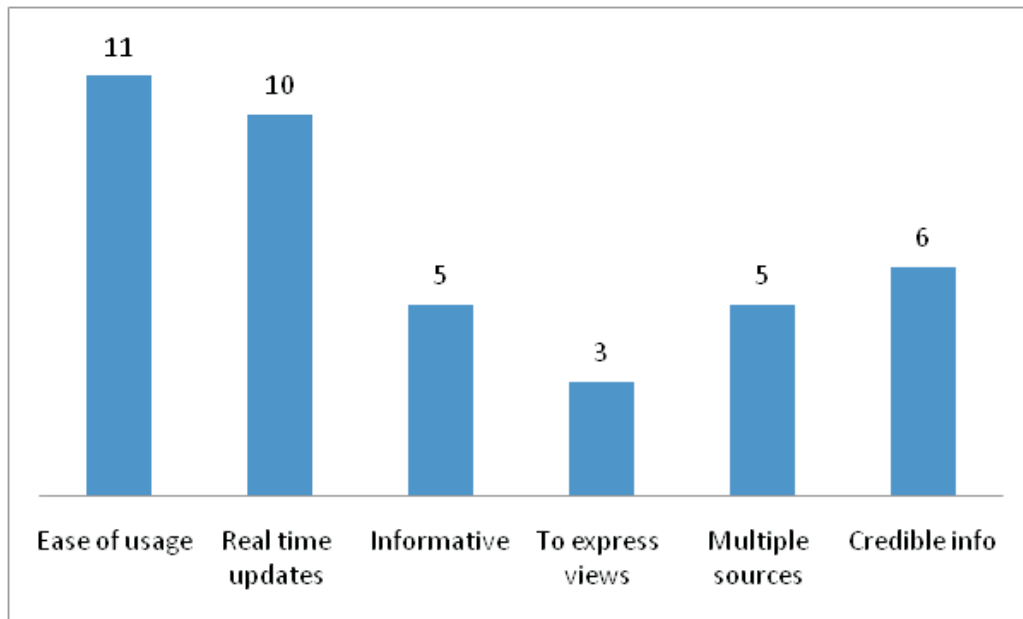
A survey of voters was conducted soon after the 2014 Lok Sabha election in Punjab and Chandigarh and Twitter users who got political updates were selected from different cities. They were asked to give their reason for opting for the microblogging site and also specify their age. In all, 40 voters were selected using non-probability sampling procedure due to the fact that those relying on Twitter for political information were not that common. With Two open-ended questions, the voters were asked to specify the reason for choosing Twitter for political communication and also their age. The results were divided into six key categories – (1) easy to use, (2) real time updates, (3) informative, (4) credible posts from official handles, (5) express myself and (6) multiple sources and wider reach. 'Easy to use' was used as an umbrella category for responses saying Twitter was used for being convenient, it saves time and it is an easy to connect and also share information. The Twitter users were divided into four age groups – (1) ≥ 25 years, (2) 26-40 years, (3) 40-50 years and (4) 50+ years.

4.RESULTS

Rq1: *What was the primary reason for voters to choose Twitter for getting political updates during the 2014 Lok Sabha election?*

Among the various reasons for choosing Twitter for political communication, the easy of using the microblogging site due to its features and format topped the list, followed by real time updates helping voters 'follow' the political leaders in the true sense. A section of user voters also found the benefit of hearing directly from the official handle of the politician or other known sources like media houses as a credible way of getting information. The informative nature of political posts and Twitter being used as a platform for expressing political views was also highlighted by the respondents. In terms of convenience or ease of usage, voters do not appreciate the trend of posting links and other forms of indirect sharing on Twitter, which may make it difficult to access information. A section of politicians take the shortcut of linking their Twitter account to other sites which results in links being shared on the microblogging site.

Fig1: Reasons for choosing Twitter for political updates



Rq2: Which age group had the most voters using Twitter for getting political updates?

The decision of voters to use Twitter as channel for getting updates from politicians also depended on their age. Most users were aged between 26-40 years and there was none in the sample in the 50+ category. While the very young voters (18-25 years) may be interested in posting or sharing other forms of content, it is the slightly older lot that is following the politicians on Twitter.

Table 1: Age of Twitter users getting online updates

	Age categories				Total
	<= 25	26 – 40	41 - 50	51+	
Number of Twitter users	10	22	8	0	40

5.CONCLUSION

Twitter’s network in Punjab and Chandigarh has grown since its launch in 2009 and by the time Lok Sabha elections were held in Punjab and Chandigarh region in 2014, the number of Internet users had grown substantially. As per the 2011 Census, 12.8% households in Punjab had computers and its availability was 33.2% in Chandigarh. Of these 5.4% were connected via Internet in Punjab and 18.8% in Chandigarh. The responses point to the fact that where politicians may shy away from using Twitter for not being too articulate with the language to be able to express in 140 characters, what voters expect are informative updates in real time. It could well be a picture or a video with caption about the political activity of the politician. Use of hashtags can come in handy in making research of series of posts from different sources easier. Even though a few hashtags like #ModiInPunjab or #NaMoInPunjab had several tweets in the Lok Sabha elections, it was not something used by all political parties for live tweeting of rallies or other public events. In terms of the sentiment of voters, most of them themselves do not seem to be expecting direct interactions with the politicians and the percentage of those using Twitter to express themselves was also much lesser.

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