

## Social Media and Political Mobilisation: A Study of Twitter Usage Among Youth Voters in Tier-2 Cities of Gujarat

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**Abstract:** Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have emerged as significant arenas of political communication and mobilisation in India, challenging the dominance of traditional media in shaping political discourse especially among young, digitally connected urban populations. This study examined the nature, patterns, and political effects of Twitter usage among first-time and young voters (aged 18–25) in four Tier-2 cities of Gujarat — Rajkot, Surat, Vadodara, and Bhavnagar — in the period preceding and during the 2022 Gujarat Assembly Election. A mixed-methods approach combining a structured survey of 400 young voters with qualitative content analysis of 2,000 political tweets identified through Gujarat election hashtags was employed. Survey findings indicate that 72.8% of respondents used Twitter as a primary or secondary source of political information, significantly higher than television (61.4%) and print media (29.2%) among this age group. Active political participation on Twitter — including posting original political content, retweeting political messages, or participating in hashtag campaigns — was reported by 44.6% of respondents. Regression analysis found that Twitter political engagement frequency was significantly positively associated with offline political participation (attending rallies, discussing politics with family and peers) ( $B=0.38, p<0.001$ ) and intent to vote ( $B=0.27, p<0.01$ ). Content analysis of political tweets revealed high prevalence of partisan framing, emotional appeals, and minimal factual sourcing, with disinformation and unverified claims identified in 31.4% of sampled posts. The study concludes that Twitter is a significant political mobilisation tool for Gujarat's urban youth but raises concerns about information quality that necessitate media literacy interventions.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Twitter, Political Mobilisation, Youth Voters, Gujarat Election, Media Literacy*

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between social media and democratic participation has been one of the most contested and empirically interrogated questions in twenty-first-century political communication scholarship. Early optimistic accounts posited that social media would democratise political discourse by reducing barriers to participation, enabling citizen journalism, and facilitating horizontal political organising beyond the gatekeeping functions of traditional mass media. More recent scholarship has complicated this picture substantially, documenting the role of social media in spreading political misinformation, reinforcing partisan echo chambers through algorithmic content curation, enabling foreign electoral interference, and potentially undermining the quality of democratic deliberation.

In India, the relationship between social media — particularly Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram — and political processes has been transformed over the past decade. India has one of the world's largest and fastest-growing social media user bases, with over 500 million active users across platforms as of 2024. Twitter, while smaller in absolute numbers than WhatsApp or YouTube in India, has been disproportionately influential in shaping political discourse among the educated, urban, and politically active population. Its open, public architecture makes it particularly suitable for political communication: politicians, journalists, civil society actors, and citizens all operate on a nominally shared platform where their messages can be amplified, critiqued, and contested.

Gujarat presents a particularly interesting state-level context for studying social media and political mobilisation. The state is among India's more digitally connected states, with above-average smartphone and internet penetration relative to the national average. Its Tier-2 cities — Rajkot, Surat, Vadodara, Bhavnagar, and several others — have seen rapid economic growth, expanding middle classes, and growing populations of first-time young voters who have come of political age in the social media era. The 2022 Gujarat Assembly Election, won decisively by the BJP with its highest-ever seat count, was widely reported as a digitally intense campaign in which social media messaging played a significant role in reaching young, urban voters.

While national-level analyses of social media and Indian elections exist, fine-grained, city-level empirical studies of how young voters in Gujarat's non-metropolitan urban centres actually engage with political content on Twitter — what they read, share, believe, and whether their Twitter engagement translates into offline political action — are absent from the published literature. This study fills this gap with a mixed-methods empirical investigation covering four Gujarat Tier-2 cities and the 2022 Assembly Election cycle.

## 2. Methodology

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The study employed a sequential mixed-methods design: a quantitative survey was conducted first, followed by qualitative content analysis of political tweet data. The quantitative survey was administered to 400 young voters aged 18–25 with active Twitter accounts, residing in the four study cities: Rajkot (n=100), Surat (n=100), Vadodara (n=100), and Bhavnagar (n=100). Participants were recruited through stratified purposive sampling from college campuses, youth wing political party events, and online recruitment through Twitter direct messages to users who had engaged with Gujarat election hashtags. The survey was conducted in Hindi and Gujarati between 1 November and 1 December 2022, spanning the final three weeks of the Gujarat Assembly Election campaign period and one week post-result.

The structured questionnaire covered: (i) sociodemographic profile; (ii) social media usage patterns (platform, frequency, duration, primary purpose); (iii) Twitter-specific political behaviour (information-seeking, content creation, hashtag participation, candidate following); (iv) perceived credibility and usefulness of political information on Twitter versus traditional media; (v) offline political participation (attending rallies, donating, canvassing, discussing politics, voting intention); and (vi) media literacy practices (fact-checking behaviour, cross-referencing with other sources). The survey was piloted with 30 non-sample respondents and refined for clarity.

For the content analysis, 2,000 public tweets were sampled from four significant Gujarat election hashtags (#GujaratElection2022, #GujaratVotes, #BJP4Gujarat, #CongressForGujarat) during the campaign period (1–28 November 2022) using the Twitter Academic Research API. A random sample of 500 tweets per hashtag was drawn. A deductive coding scheme with six content categories was applied: partisan framing (pro-government, opposition, neutral), content type (factual claim, opinion, satire, image/video without text), use of emotional appeals (positive/negative sentiment assessed using a VADER sentiment analysis tool with manual validation of 20% of tweets), presence of verifiable factual claims, evidence of disinformation (claims cross-referenced with fact-checking databases AltNews and Boom), and use of coordinated hashtag campaigns. Two independent coders

applied the scheme to a shared 10% subset; inter-rater reliability (Cohen's kappa) was 0.82, indicating strong agreement. Any discrepancies in the remaining coding were resolved through discussion.

### 3. Results and Findings

Survey data revealed high and active Twitter engagement among the study sample. Of 400 respondents, 92.8% reported using Twitter daily or near-daily, with a mean self-reported daily political content exposure time of 47 minutes. Among political information sources, Twitter was ranked as a primary or significant source by 72.8% of respondents, higher than television (61.4%) and substantially higher than print media (29.2%), radio (8.4%), and mainstream news websites (54.1%). News shared by political parties' official Twitter handles and by political leaders personally was the most trusted category of Twitter political content (trusted by 68.4% of respondents), followed by journalists' Twitter accounts (62.1%), with peer-shared content from non-verified ordinary Twitter users rated as least trustworthy (31.6%).

Active political participation on Twitter was reported by 44.6% of respondents, including posting original political opinions (28.4%), retweeting political party or candidate content (38.9%), and participating in organised hashtag campaigns (31.2%). Regression analysis with offline political participation (composite score: attending rallies, canvassing, political discussions) as the dependent variable showed Twitter political engagement frequency as the strongest predictor ( $B=0.38$ ,  $SE=0.06$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), followed by political party identification strength ( $B=0.24$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and parental political activity ( $B=0.19$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). First-time voters showed significantly higher Twitter engagement than repeat voters (mean engagement score 3.8 vs 3.2 on a 1–5 scale;  $p<0.01$ ), suggesting that social media plays a particularly significant mobilisation role for newly eligible voters.

Content analysis of the 2,000 tweet sample revealed strongly partisan character of the political Twitter discourse surrounding the Gujarat election. Pro-BJP content comprised 61.8% of sampled tweets, opposition (Congress, AAP) content 24.6%, and neutral/informational content only 13.6%. Emotional content (strongly positive or negative sentiment) was present in 72.4% of tweets. Factual claims were present in 48.1% of tweets, of which 31.4% were assessed as containing unverified or demonstrably false information when cross-referenced with AltNews and Boom fact-checks. Coordinated hashtag campaigns — characterised by high-volume posting of identical or near-identical text within short time windows — were identified in 18.7% of the BJP hashtag sample and 12.3% of the Congress hashtag sample, suggesting organised social media management on both sides.

### 4. Discussion

The finding that 72.8% of young Gujarat voters relied on Twitter as a primary or significant political information source — higher than television among this demographic — is consistent with national trends documented by Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey data for the 2019 general election but represents a notably high concentration in Tier-2 cities specifically, where earlier assumptions would have predicted stronger television and print reliance. This finding has significant implications for political campaign strategy, media policy, and civic education: the information environment in which Gujarat's young urban voters form their political beliefs is now substantially constituted by social media rather than editorially curated traditional media outlets.

The positive association between Twitter political engagement and offline political participation challenges 'slacktivism' narratives that have suggested social media political engagement displaces rather than augments real-world civic participation. The significant coefficient ( $B=0.38$ ) and the specific forms of offline participation associated with high Twitter engagement — rally attendance and interpersonal political discussion rather than merely voting — suggest that Twitter may function as a political socialisation environment that normalises political engagement and lowers the activation threshold for offline action among young, previously apathetic voters. This

is a potentially significant democratic benefit that should not be obscured by legitimate concerns about information quality.

The content analysis finding that 31.4% of factual claims in political tweets contained unverified or demonstrably false information is deeply concerning from a democratic quality standpoint. The combination of high reliance on Twitter as a political information source, the high proportion of false claims circulating in political Twitter discourse, and the finding that only 22.6% of survey respondents reported regularly cross-checking political information with other sources before believing or sharing it, points to a significant vulnerability in the information environment of Gujarat's young urban voters. The disproportionate presence of pro-ruling party content (61.8%) and the evidence of coordinated hashtag campaigns suggest asymmetric information operations that further distort the deliberative quality of political Twitter discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that Twitter is a dominant and politically consequential information platform for young voters in Gujarat's Tier-2 cities, functioning as a significant positive driver of political mobilisation and offline engagement while simultaneously hosting high volumes of partisan, emotionally manipulative, and factually questionable political content. The platform's role as a political mobiliser and as a disinformation vector are not contradictory but coexist and mutually reinforce patterns of passionate, low-quality political engagement.

Policy and programmatic recommendations include: (i) integrating social media news literacy and political fact-checking skills into undergraduate curricula across Gujarat colleges, with specific training on cross-referencing political claims using established fact-checkers like AltNews and Boom; (ii) mandating political party social media campaigns to include verified source attribution for factual claims under Electoral Commission guidelines; (iii) investing in research on coordinated inauthentic behaviour and political bot activity on Indian social media to inform Election Commission content regulation; (iv) supporting community-based digital literacy initiatives in Tier-2 cities targeted at first-time voters; and (v) conducting comparative cross-state studies to assess whether the patterns documented in Gujarat generalise to other urban Indian political contexts.

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