

India's social media election battle

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By Atish Patel Delhi



Image copyright AFP

Image caption Narendra Modi has his own website and is on Twitter, Facebook and Google+

Ahead of the general elections, political parties in India are attempting to woo voters on social media for the first time.

Politicians are taking part in Google+ Hangouts, televised interviews organised by Facebook and using the Facebook-owned smart phone messaging app WhatsApp to connect with millions of tech-savvy urban voters.

India's 16th general election - to be held in [nine phases](#) over April and May - will be closely fought, with some observers saying social media will play a vital role in deciding which party wins the most seats.

According to a report published in April 2013 by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and the Mumbai-based Iris Knowledge Foundation, Facebook users will "wield a tremendous influence" over the results of the polls in 160 of India's 543 constituencies.

Now no serious politician is seen as being able to avoid social media altogether

It's a finding political parties have taken note of, with major contenders like the ruling Congress party and main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) earmarking 2-5% of their election budgets for social media, according to an October 2013 study by

IAMAI and Mumbai-based market researcher IMRB International.

Big data

During the last general election in 2009, social media usage in India was minuscule.

Today, however, Facebook has 93 million users and Twitter has an estimated 33 million accounts in the country.

Many political parties have beefed up their online presence as a result.

The main opposition BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, was among the first Indian politicians to set up a website and today is on Twitter, Facebook and Google+.

His main rival, Rahul Gandhi, the Congress party's undeclared candidate for PM, however, doesn't have a website and doesn't use any of the three major social networks.

Anti-corruption campaigner-turned-politician Arvind Kejriwal has amassed 1.5 million followers on Twitter since joining in November 2011, a year before he launched his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and over two years after Mr Modi, who has 3.6 million followers, opened his account.

"Now no serious politician is seen as being able to avoid social media altogether," said Congress government minister Shashi Tharoor, who until he was overtaken by Mr Modi last July, was the most followed Indian politician on Twitter.

"It does have a significant reach in certain segments of the population and as far as we're concerned, that's important enough to pay attention to and clearly the opposition is paying attention to it too," he added.

Taking a leaf from US President Barack Obama's presidential campaigns, India's parties are using tools to crunch the insurmountable amounts of information social media generates - what's known as big data analytics.

Pinstorm, a digital marketing agency used by some of India's biggest companies to monitor what is being discussed online, now has political parties as clients.

From its Mumbai office, the agency has been collecting, storing and analysing tens of thousands of political statements from over 100 online platforms daily for the past six months to allow parties to find supporters and tweak their political message.

The agency is able to track conversations at national and local level, making it a useful tool for both national and regional parties.

The anti-corruption AAP, taking part in its first general election after an impressive debut in local polls in Delhi last year, uses Pinstorm to "compare how we are faring against others", said Ankit Lal, the party's social media strategist.

Professor Amit Sheth and a team of researchers at the Ohio Centre of Excellence in Knowledge-enabled Computing at Wright State University have also been [tracking political sentiment online](#) since July.

He says data collected from social media could in the future replace opinion polls, which many observers say are often rigged in India.

"With social media data, we can measure sentiments, for example, before a rally, during the rally, and post-analysis. It's much more frequent [than opinion polls]," Mr Sheth said.

'Dipstick of the elite'

There are some, however, who are doubtful about social media's expected effect.

Social media "is not a true dipstick. It really is only a dipstick of the elite," said Sunil Abraham, executive director of the Bangalore-based Centre for Internet and Society.

Sceptics believe with so many Indians illiterate and lacking internet access, particularly in rural swathes of the country, it is still essential for political leaders to hold rallies and spend on billboard and newspaper advertising to reach the majority of the 814 million-strong electorate.

Parties are also interacting with voters on their mobile devices and it makes sense.

There are more mobile phones in India today than toilets, according to the latest census data, and just over half of the country's 1.2 billion population owns one.

"Mobile is very integral to our strategy," said Arvind Gupta, who heads the BJP's IT and social media cell.

One of the BJP's most unique electioneering tools allows potential voters to listen in on Mr Modi's rally speeches in real time on their phones from anywhere in India. "It's our own innovation," said Mr Gupta.

The number of smartphone users is growing in India and it's how most of the country's web users go online.

That's why WhatsApp, recently purchased by Facebook, is being used by the likes of the BJP and Congress to send photos, videos and messages to potential voters.

"No other medium gives as much mass, simultaneous reach as mobile phones in India today," said Milind Pathak from One97 Communications, a Delhi-based mobile marketing firm.

Political parties like AAP have signed up tens of thousands of members by urging people to give them a missed call for free - party officers then get in touch and formally enrol them as supporters.

"Looking forward, I think the medium will continue to be a heavily-invested area for a political party," Mr Pathak said.

Atish Patel is a Delhi-based independent journalist