

Social Media & Political Behaviour

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Executive Summary

This collaborative report between the Lokniti programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung analyzes the growth of online social networking sites and apps in India and their role in shaping political preferences and attitudes in the recently concluded 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The report is divided into four sections and relies heavily on Lokniti's survey data.

Through an analysis of data related to social media usage, **Section 1** of the report shares some of the key trends and patterns noticed in the usage of social media platforms in the country during the last five years. The focus of this section is on five social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube – questions about whose usage have been asked in Lokniti's national surveys since the 2014 elections thus allowing for a longitudinal analysis of the usage of these platforms. The analysis presented in this section shows that Facebook and WhatsApp have seen tremendous growth in the last five years and are currently being used by one-third of the electorate making them the two most popular networking sites in the country at the moment. Twitter on the other hand continues to be the least popular of all social networking sites with a usage of 12 percent. While this is a six-fold increase since 2014 when Lokniti had found it to be used by just 2 percent of all voters, the growth of the platform seems to have stagnated since 2018 when 14 percent of all voters had reported using it in a Lokniti survey. In fact, stagnation is not limited to just Twitter alone. Facebook, WhatsApp and even Instagram too have not seen much growth over the last one year as per the Lokniti data. Nonetheless, it is also noticed that most users who have created an account on these social media platforms seem to be using them regularly (that is, either daily or weekly), except for Twitter which Lokniti's data suggests has seen a decline in regular usage by its users. In overall terms, after taking the usage of all platforms into consideration, it is found that currently only a little over one-third of the electorate in the country is exposed to social media with the rest two-thirds not using any of the social media platforms about which questions were asked. Moreover, high exposure to social media is found to be only among one-tenth of the country's electorate. A region wise analysis of the exposure index reveals that the eastern part of the country is way behind the rest of the country in terms of usage/access to social media whereas the southern and northern regions perform the best in this regard. A large part of the social media usage is found to be driven by smartphones, whose ownership has gone up from one-fourth to one-third in the last two years according

to Lokniti's data. Smartphone ownership is twice as high in big cities than villages. It is also found to be much higher among upper castes than Dalits and Adivasis, and among men than women.

Section 2 of the report takes the issue of smartphone ownership being unequal forward and looks at whether this has resulted in the social media space also being unequal given that smartphone ownership is found to be driving social media usage to a large extent. Using Lokniti's survey data it reports that the social media space continues to be upper caste dominated as it is found that upper castes are twice as likely to have high or moderate exposure to social media as Dalits and tribals. It however finds Muslims to be performing rather well on this count and finds the minority community's social media usage to be second only to that of the upper castes. An analysis of the shares of users belonging to various caste groups among the total users of a particular platform, finds that upper castes continue to occupy the greatest share of two of the most popular social media sites – Facebook and WhatsApp. Having looked at caste, the section then goes on to do a similar analysis of social media usage by some other key background variables such as education, age, locality and gender, and reports that even though the college-educated, young, urban and male voters continue to be dominant in the social media space, the representation of the less educated, elderly, rural and female voters in the social media sphere has gone up somewhat.

Section 3 of the report discusses the role of social media as an influencer by looking at the awareness levels of social media users about recent happenings, their attitudes and opinions regarding the minority communities and their trust levels in the information accessed on social media. As far as awareness is concerned, four in every five respondents who had a high exposure to social media claimed to have heard about the slogan popularized by the Congress, '*Chowkidar chor hai*' and the BJP's counter to it '*Main bhi chowkidar*'. On the other hand one in every two who were not exposed to social media was found to have no knowledge about these slogans. Moreover, the awareness was found to be declining among users with decline in the usage. Even with respect to the NYAY scheme promised by the Congress, one in every two who were not exposed to social media was found to have no knowledge about it, as against more than three-fourths with moderate or high exposure who knew about it. Awareness about the Balakot air-strikes was found to be very high across all types of users but there was still a 20 point gap between users and non-users of social media. The section also highlights the attitude of social media users towards religious minorities. Across all categories of usage, three-fourths were found to believe that India belongs to all religions equally against around one sixth who said that India belongs only of Hindus. Further, the voters with high exposure to social media were found to be more likely to believe that Muslims are highly nationalist compared to the ones with no social media exposure. They were, however, at the same time found to be more likely to hold the other extreme view as well – that Muslims are not nationalist at all. In fact this is one of the key findings of this section. Voters on social media seem to be more opinionated compared to voters not using it and hence are more likely to hold both extreme positions. Finally, the section ends by looking

at the trust levels social media users have on the information they see on social media. One in every four respondents, across platforms and irrespective of their usage – whether regular or rare, claimed to have no trust at all. The section ends by concluding that amidst all the discussions and debates over the burgeoning influence of social media on the general public, we may have exaggerated the actual impact of this medium.

Section 4 of the report looks at the issue of social media usage and vote choice in the context of the recently concluded Lok Sabha election. Analyzing Lokniti's 2019 election survey data, it reports that the BJP enjoyed a distinct advantage over its opponents in this regard as the party got greater support/vote share among users of social media than among non-users. However it cautions the reader into reading too much into this as it is found that the BJP did quite well among those not exposed to social media as well, a segment that comprises two-thirds of the country's electorate. The section further argues that the impact of social media exposure on BJP's vote share was not uniform across castes and communities and voters belonging to different educational backgrounds. In other words high usage of social media seems to have helped the BJP in some cases but not necessarily in others. It also reports that the overall trend of high support for the BJP among those more exposed to social media is not consistent across all social networking platforms and can only be seen among Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram users and not as much among Twitter and YouTube users. Another key finding that is shared is that the BJP's social media advantage over the Congress actually declined in this election compared to the 2014 election. The ruling party's lead over the Congress reduced among social media users and widened among those who do not use social media.

It further reports that for most voters, the main source of political news continues to be television followed by newspapers and that only three percent of the respondents in the survey reported that their main source of political news was social media. Even among social media users, the proportion of those who said that social media was their main source of political news was found to be just six percent. The section also suggests that the UPA's performance was not as bad among social media users as it was among newspaper readers thus hinting that the blame/reason for the UPA's defeat may lie elsewhere. The section ends by showcasing survey-based evidence that points towards a strong link between social media usage and political participation.

The Context

While television is believed to have played a major role in moulding public opinion during elections in India for the last two decades and perhaps continues to do so, the surge in internet penetration and the arrival and growth of different kinds of new digital technologies and online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram etc. has challenged its dominance somewhat. Moreover, the exponential rise in usage of social media (as these various platforms are collectively known) in the last decade has changed the way election campaigns are being run not just in India but across the democratic world, with leaders, parties and candidates going all out in using this rapidly growing medium to gain direct access to voters and influence their opinions. Social media today is no longer just an innocent space to connect with friends and family. Instead, it has metamorphosed into becoming an influential space for political activity and discourse often leading to heated and polarized conversations.

In Indian politics, social media was first used as a tool for campaigning five years ago during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, where, by and large, the Narendra Modi led-Bharatiya Janata Party dominated the conversation and aced the social media game. For the elections of 2019, however, the Indian National Congress, along with other parties, also upped their game with Congress President Rahul Gandhi, who was initially slow in joining the medium, building up a huge social media following post 2015. In an attempt to reach out to their potential voters, almost all the major political parties established their own social media teams, or 'cyber warriors' or 'cyber armies' as the media likes to call them, and massively used the social media and app space to spread their message among voters, especially first-time and young voters who are most likely to be on these spaces. The stakes were so high for both sides that a significant part of this political messaging was actually misinformation and socially divisive propaganda often spread through surreptitious means.

As internet penetration deepens, online social networks and messaging apps are becoming accessible to more and more Indians, especially to those on the margins. Although, on the one hand the democratization of the space (read more about it in Section 2 of the report), which could be credited to affordable smartphones and cheap internet data packs, must be appreciated and welcomed, but on the other, this massive growth of social media seems

to have also become a problem for democracy. With a much higher number of people online and on the hugely popular messaging platform WhatsApp (34% of voters use it at present as per our recent national study), the scope for these platforms to be abused by the deliberate misleading and manipulation of voters has never been greater. The users who are experiencing and engaging with these mediums for the first time and the ones who are comparatively less educated might be more vulnerable than others (although the educated don't fare too well either in this respect). Some recent studies have shown that many people are having a hard time differentiating real information and news from made-up and fake stories. There were also reports last year of vested interests using these mediums, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, to spread 'fake news' and tailored content to sway voters. Many of the mob lynchings that took place a year ago were also attributed to the spread of fake news on WhatsApp. The problem is so serious that just before the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the Election Commission met representatives of social media firms to try to find ways of how content on social networking sites and apps that violated the election code of conduct could be deleted. Although, the companies owning these spaces did step up their efforts to stop misuse and took steps in this direction, it was perhaps a case of doing too little too late with much of the damage to not just democracy but society at large being already done.

Cognizant of the context outlined above, this report is an attempt to analyze, through survey data, the supposedly dominating role being played by social media in the electoral process and the impact it may or may not have had in influencing the political behaviour of voters. While at a broader level, it tries to study the relationship between social media usage and voting behavior, at a narrow level it highlights some of the trends and patterns noticed in social media usage in India over the years. It also takes a look at the changing profile of social media users, the awareness of important political issues/events among voters using social media, their attitudes particularly with respect to minorities, and ultimately, the potential influence it might have on voting choice. Although, the report majorly emphasizes on the 2019 general elections, it also makes use of the relevant survey data collected by Lokniti over the last five years, especially while analyzing the usage patterns over the period and the users' profile.

In the first section of the report, we compare the 2019 survey data collected by Lokniti during the National Election Study (*see Methodology section at the end of the report*) with the data collected since the 2014 general election for understanding the usage patterns among the users of social media. In the next section, we try to delve deeper into the profile of users of five major social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube. In the third section we attempt to study the awareness levels among social media users, the potential impact it may have had in shaping public opinions with regard to minorities, and the trust levels it enjoys among its users. The last chapter tries to understand how the social media users voted in the recently concluded general elections that saw the Narendra Modi led government return to power with a comfortable majority.

The emergence of various social media platforms has certainly made it easier for politicians to connect with the people, but is talk of its impact on politics and elections exaggerated? How often do those on social media actually use it? To what extent do the users of social media use it as a medium to discuss politics? Does social media manage to mould people's attitude towards political parties, and is it sufficient enough to make them win elections? What role does it play in influencing their vote choice? How much trust does it enjoy among its users? This report is an attempt to answer these pivotal questions amidst the growing debate over the emerging role of social media in politics.

1. Social Media Usage: Trends and Patterns

Ever since the substantially mediatized national elections of 2014 which for the first time saw the deployment of social media by political parties as a tool for campaigning and reaching out to voters, Lokniti has begun consistently asking questions in its national and state surveys related to the usage of various social media platforms by voters. This data collected over the last five years has allowed us to not just understand the relationship between social media usage and voting choices (thus going beyond our earlier focus on traditional media such as TV news viewership and newspaper readership) but it has also enabled us to track the growth of social media in the country, particularly the intensity or regularity with which it is being used by the people. In this section, we share some of these findings related to social media usage in India and highlight some of the trends and patterns that have been noticed.

Growth and stagnation

The use of social media among voters in India has grown by leaps and bounds with several social media platforms witnessing tremendous growth between the 2014 and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Back in 2014, merely one of every ten voters (9%) was found by Lokniti's election-time survey to be using Facebook. This figure of usage has increased steadily since, doubling to 20 percent by 2017, and then increasing further to 32 percent during the recent 2019 Lok Sabha elections (**Table 1.1**). The usage of WhatsApp (bought over by Facebook in 2014) in the country has also followed the same trend. The messaging app that also allows for free audio-video calling was used by only 22 percent of the voters in 2017 and has now increased to 34 percent. The only other social media platform that currently matches the popularity of Facebook and WhatsApp in India is YouTube. Nearly one-third (31%) of the respondents in Lokniti's survey were found to be using the video sharing site/application. Instagram, which is a relatively new platform, is also quite popular. Acquired by Facebook in 2012, the photo and video sharing social networking service is at present being used by 15 percent or about one-seventh of the country's electorate.

Table 1.1: Social media users (daily, weekly, monthly and rarely, combined), 2014–2019 (%)

	May 2014	May 2017	May 2018	May 2019
Facebook	9	20	32	32
WhatsApp	-	22	33	34
Twitter	2	5	14	12
Instagram	-	-	14	15
YouTube	-	-	-	31

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Surveys (also for all figures and tables hereafter).

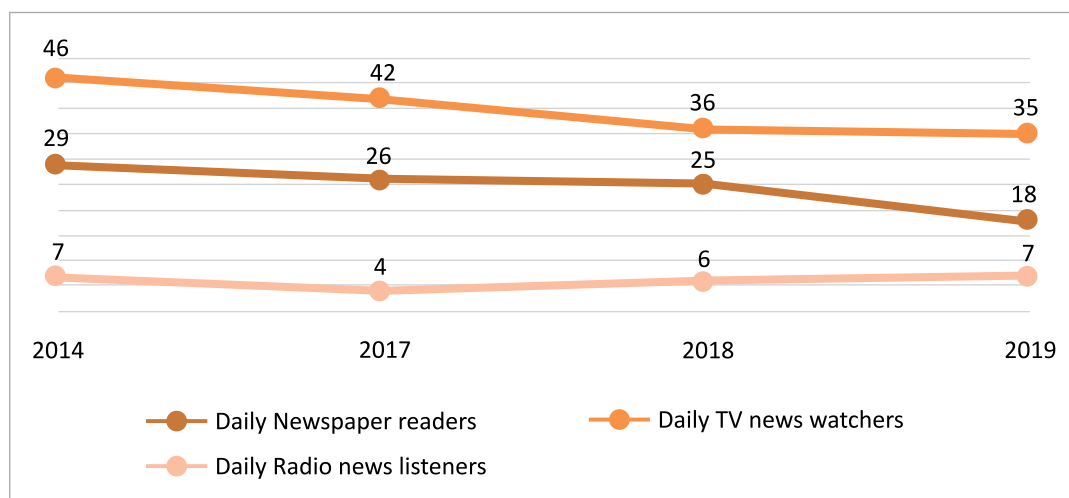
Question on WhatsApp was not asked in 2014; question on Instagram was not asked in 2014 and 2017; Question on YouTube was asked for the first time in 2019.

Out of all the social media platforms, Twitter continues to be the least popular social media platform in terms of usage. The social networking and micro-blogging service that was launched in 2006, was found to be used by 2 percent of the voters in 2014, and is currently being used by 12 percent or one in every eight voters. While this growth from 2 percent to 12 percent does point to a six-fold increase in the last five years, it is nowhere close to the usage figures of WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube or for that matter even Instagram which came on the social media scene much after Twitter. What's more, in May 2018 when Lokniti had conducted a national survey in 19 major states of the country, the overall usage of Twitter among voters was found to be slightly higher than what it is today at 14 percent indicating that the growth of the platform may have actually stagnated in the country. To just be absolutely sure about this decline in Twitter's usage figures we looked at the responses received from only those 19 states where the May 2018 survey had been conducted. On doing so we found no difference whatsoever. That is to say, that Twitter usage in these 19 states was also found to be 12 percent, the same as what we found in our analysis of 26 states.

This slowing down of growth, as it appears, is not just limited to Twitter only. The growth in Facebook and WhatsApp usage too seems to have become sluggish. Lokniti's data indicates that after registering rapid growth in usage between 2014 and 2018, both platforms have seen negligible increase in usership in the last one year. Facebook was being used by 33 percent of the voters last year and in the most recent survey it was found to be used by the exact same proportion of voters. In other words no increase in Facebook usage in India was noticed in our data in the last one year. The usage of WhatsApp in the same period went up marginally by one percentage point. Instagram usage has also increased only by about one percentage point in the last twelve months, from 14 percent to 15 percent. For YouTube we do not have any comparison point since we have only just started asking about it in our surveys.

The rise of social media platforms in the country has been accompanied by a steady decline of traditional media over the years. Our data suggests that as social media usage has grown; parallelly, newspaper readership and TV news viewership seem to have declined. In 2014, 29 percent of voters had said that they read newspapers daily. In 2019, this figure declined to 18 percent in our survey (**Figure 1.1**). Similarly, the proportion of those watching TV news daily has declined from 46 percent in 2014 to 35 percent now. It seems that as voters have moved to newer mediums of getting information including social media, this has clearly impacted their consumption of news through traditional media sources.

Figure 1.1: Percentage of voters consuming news via TV, newspaper and radio on a daily basis, 2014–2019 (%)



Question asked: How regularly do you do the following – daily, sometimes, rarely or never? a. Watch news on television? b. Read the newspaper/s? c. Listen to news on radio?

Regularity of usage

While it is important to look at usage of social media platforms in overall terms, the more important thing to see perhaps is the regularity with which these platforms are being used by those who have created their accounts on them. Our analysis of this aspect indicates that most social media users seem to be regular users. In other words those who have registered themselves or created an account on various social media platforms seem to be active/regular users by and large, and we find that this tendency has remained consistent over the years with regard to most platforms. For instance, out of the 32 percent who use Facebook currently, 27 percent are those who use it either daily or weekly (**Table 1.2**). This means that the total share of daily and weekly users among total Facebook users is about 85 percent. Back in 2014, this share had been about 77 percent – out of the 9 percent of total FB users, 7 percent were using it either daily or weekly. WhatsApp usage also shows a similar pattern with a high share of daily and weekly users in its total usership. However when it comes to

Twitter, we notice that only three-fifths of those who have set up an account on it, seem to be using it actively at the moment which is in stark contrast to 2014 and 2017 when the very few voters who were using Twitter were using it quite regularly. Instagram also fares better than Twitter in this regard as currently nearly three-fourths of its users are using the platform either daily or weekly.

Table 1.2: Regular social media users (those using daily and weekly), 2014–2019 (%)

	2014	2017	2018	2019
Facebook	7	18	27	27
WhatsApp	-	20	29	31
Twitter	2	4	9	7
Instagram	-	-	9	11
YouTube	-	-	-	28

Twitter also performs the worst when we look at just the share of daily users (excluding those who use it weekly) in the total users – out of the 12 percent who reported using the platform, only 5 percent were found to be using it only a daily basis (**Table 1.3**). This comes to around 42 percent of the total and indicates that a majority of those on Twitter currently don't use it everyday. Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube, on the other hand have high daily usage at 23 percent, 29 percent and 25 percent respectively and the share of daily users of the three platforms in their total user base is also very high. For Facebook it is 72 percent, for WhatsApp it is 85 percent and for YouTube it is around 81 percent.

Table 1.3: Daily social media users, 2014–2019 (%)

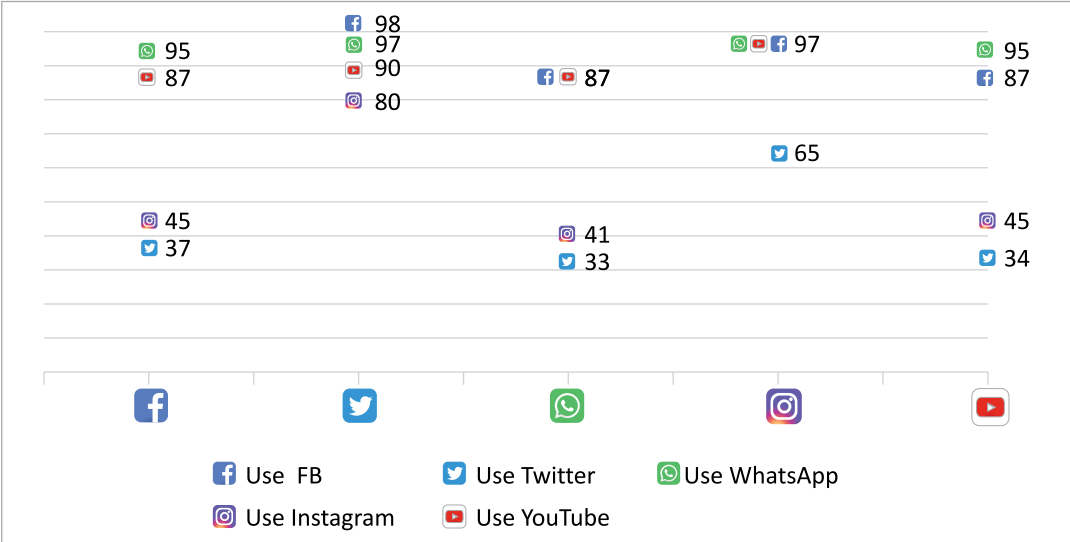
	2014	2017	2018	2019
Facebook	3	10	22	23
WhatsApp	-	14	26	29
Twitter	<1	1	6	5
Instagram	-	-	7	8
YouTube	-	-	-	25

Correspondence analysis

Through a correspondence analysis we notice that almost everyone who uses some social media platform or the other also uses WhatsApp (**Figure 1.2**). In other words what's common to most Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube users is that they all use WhatsApp as well. Facebook and YouTube also seem to have a very high usership among those who use other social media platforms. Interestingly, we find a puzzling relationship between Twitter and Instagram users. The usage of Instagram was found to be greatest among Twitter users at 80 percent. In fact this high usage of Instagram among Twitter users was far greater compared to the proportion of Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube users also using Instagram. Similarly, the usage of Twitter was found to be almost twice as high among Instagram users as among

users of other social media platforms. Simply put, if a person is using Twitter then her/his chances of using Instagram are far greater than someone who is using other social media platforms. Likewise, Instagram users show a far greater probability of using Twitter than users of other platforms.

Figure 1.2: Correspondence analysis of social media usage 2019 (%)



Composite social media index

In order to understand overall social media usage better, we created a composite index that took into account the questions that probed the regularity of voters' usage of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram. We did not include YouTube for reasons of comparability with the 2018 survey as back then a question on YouTube usage had not been asked. In each question, the response options offered to the respondent were many times a day, once or twice a day, some days a week, some days a month, very rarely and never. An answer that was 'many times a day' was assigned a score of 4. The answer 'once or twice a day' was assigned a score of 3. The answer 'some days a week' was given a score of 2. Answers 'some days a month' and 'very rarely' were assigned a score of 1 and a 'never' answer was assigned a score of 0. A no response to the question or an answer such as 'I don't have an account' was also assigned a score of 0. The scores of the answers to all the four questions were added. The resulting summated scores ranged from 0 to 16. The summated scores were distributed across four newly created categories that indicated different degrees of social media usage or exposure. Summated scores that ranged from 10 to 16 were categorized as 'High social media usage'. Summated scores that ranged from 7 to 9 were categorized as being 'Moderate usage'. Summated scores ranging from 1 to 6 were categorized as 'Low usage'. Summated score of 0 was categorized as 'Never used'.

The results of this composite index reveal that about 64 percent of the country's electorate is not exposed to social media at all (**Table 1.4**). That is, nearly two of every three people do not use any of the four social media platforms that we had asked them about during the survey. Only about 10 percent of the respondents in our survey were found to have high exposure to social media (that is, they used social media either a lot or quite regularly). About 11 percent were moderately exposed to it and 15 percent were found to have low exposure. When we created the same index in the data set of the 2018 survey when the same questions had been asked, we ended up with exactly the same figures. In 2018 too, only one in ten had high exposure to social media and two-thirds had no exposure to it whatsoever. In other words there has been no increase in social media usage over the last one year. This finding as revealed by the index only confirms what we had found when we had looked at the usage of all social media platforms individually – that the growth of social media in India seems to have plateaued.

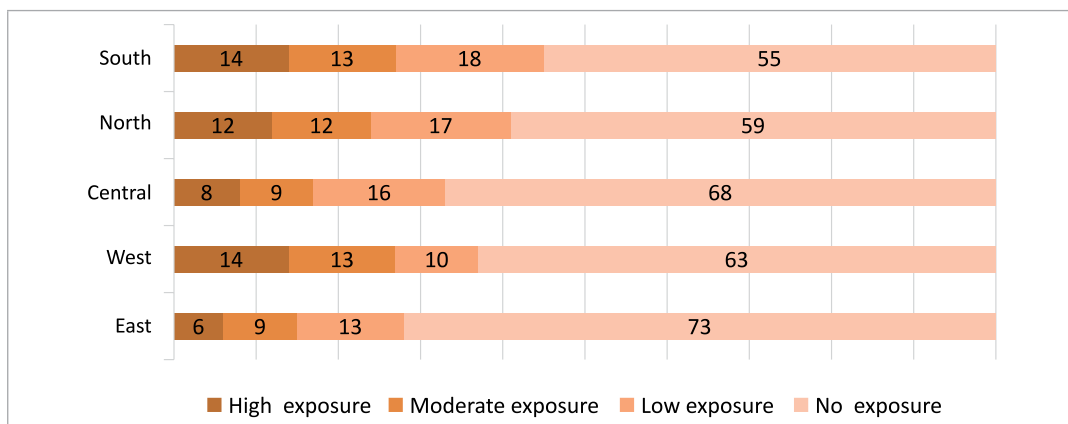
Table 1.4: Social media exposure index (%)

	2018	2019
High exposure to social media	10.1	10.1
Moderate exposure to social media	10.6	10.9
Low exposure to social media	15.7	15.3
No exposure to social media	63.6	63.7

Social media usage varies by region

The usage of social media does not seem to be evenly spread out across the country at the moment. An analysis of usage of various social media platforms by regions reveals that the eastern part of the country (which includes Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam and the rest of the states of the North East) seems to be lagging behind the rest of the country at present. Not only were three-fourths of voters in this region found to have no exposure to social media at all as per our social media exposure index (**Figure 1.3**), it also has the lowest proportion of users across all the five social media platforms discussed so far. Only about one-fourth of voters in this region were found to be using Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube as opposed to the overall national average of one-third (**Figure 1.4**). As far as Twitter and Instagram are concerned, usership of these social media platforms is currently at 6 percent and 8 percent respectively in eastern India. The states that seem to be performing particularly poorly are Odisha, Assam and West Bengal. It must be noted here that Lokniti did not conduct a survey in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Sikkim during the recent national elections hence we are unable to comment about social media usage in these states.

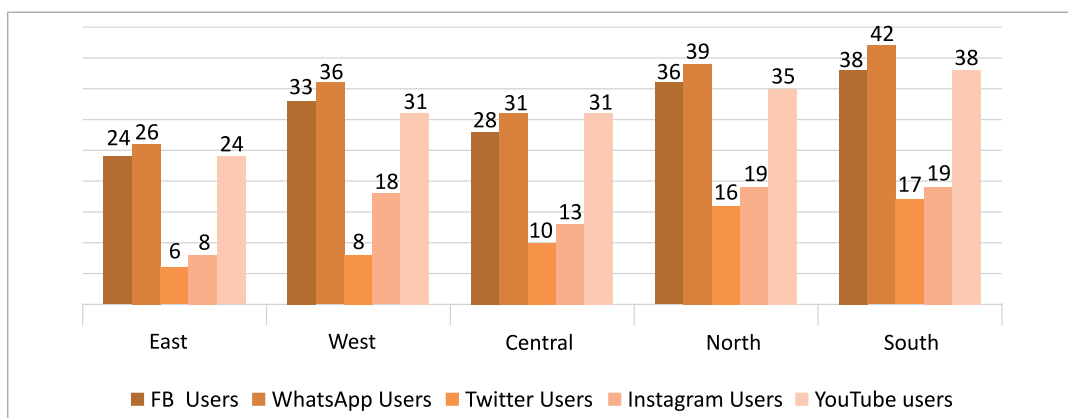
Figure 1.3: Level of overall exposure to social media in different regions, 2019 – by the composite social media index (%)



Note: East includes West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur; West includes Maharashtra, Gujarat and Goa; Central India includes Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh; North India includes Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and Delhi; South India includes Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Telangana.

The states in the southern, western and northern parts of the country show the highest levels of exposure/usage to social media platforms and are twice as likely to have high exposure to social media as the states in the eastern part of the country. South India as per our recent survey has the highest percentage of WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube users followed closely by north India (Figure 1.4). The Western region which comprises of the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa also reported reasonably high usage of social media platforms except Twitter.

Figure 1.4: Total usage of various social media platforms in different regions of the country, 2019 (%)



Figures above are a combination of daily, weekly, monthly and rare usage.

Social media growth driven by smartphone

Smartphone ownership and its use, and increasing access to the internet are clearly the key drivers of the growth of social media in the country. In our most recent survey conducted during the Lok Sabha election we found one third of the respondents to be owning a smartphone (**Table 1.5**). This is much higher than the figure recorded in 2017 when Lokniti had found 24 percent voters nationally to be having a smartphone. Similarly, the proportion of those who have an internet connection on their mobile phones has gone up from 21 percent to 34 percent. The greater ownership of smartphones is clearly determining social media usage. We find that among those who own just a feature phone (41% of the electorate), the usage of social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube is merely about 10 percent (**Table 1.6**). However among voters who own a smartphone, usage of these platforms shoots up to nearly 70 percent. In fact, smartphone ownership is seen to be determining social media usage far more than computer/laptop ownership or access to internet at home.

Table 1.5: Ownership of phones, computer/laptops and access to internet, 2017 & 2019 (%)

	2017	2019
Mobile phone ownership	74	74
Feature phone ownership	50	41
Smartphone ownership	24	33
Mobile phone with internet	21	34
Own a computer/laptop	18	16
Own a computer/laptop with internet	7	-
Internet connection at home	-	10

Note: Question on ownership of computer laptop was not asked in 2019 and question on internet connection at home was not asked in 2017.

Question asked: Q. What kind of mobile phone do you have – a simple phone or a smart phone with a touch screen? Qa. (If has a mobile phone) Does your phone have an internet connection?

Table 1.6: Frequent usage of social media by ownership of gadgets and access to internet, 2019 (%)

	Daily and weekly usage of FB	Daily and weekly usage of Twitter	Daily and weekly usage of WA	Daily and weekly usage of Insta	Daily and weekly usage of YouTube
No mobile ownership	3	1	4	1	3
Own a feature phone	9	3	11	3	9
Own a smart phone	68	16	80	28	71
Own a smart phone with internet	72	17	84	29	75
Own a computer/laptop	52	18	60	27	53
Internet connection at home	48	18	54	24	48

Table 1.7: Who is more likely to own a smartphone? (%)

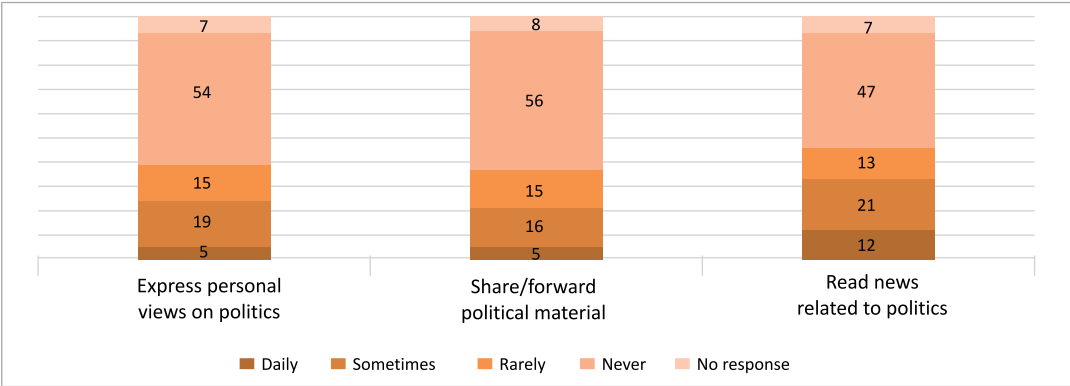
	Feature phone	Smartphone
Gender		
Men	42	41
Women	40	24
Age Group		
18–22	24	61
23–25	27	59
26–35	38	45
36–45	47	31
46–55	49	20
56+	40	12
Class		
Upper class	29	57
Middle class	37	44
Lower class	44	30
Poor	45	17
Level of Education		
College educated	24	70
Up to matric	49	35
Up to primary	55	13
Non-literate	41	5
Locality		
Big cities	28	58
Towns	36	42
Villages	44	27
Communities		
Upper caste	36	43
OBC	44	30
SC	46	25
ST	40	23
Muslim	39	32
Others	35	38
Regions		
East India	45	26
West India	31	38
Central India	33	29
North India	41	35
South India	39	39

The fact that we find the states in the eastern part of the country to be lagging behind the rest of the states in social media usage could well be due to low smartphone penetration in this region. Our survey found only 26 percent of voters in east India to be having a smartphone compared to 39 percent in southern India (Table 1.7). Ownership of smartphones was also found to be two times greater in big cities than villages, 58 percent to 27 percent. It was also found to be much higher among upper castes than Dalits. Interestingly while we notice parity between men and women when it comes to owning feature phones (42% men and 40% women own one), among women the usage/ownership of smartphones is 27 percentage points less than ownership among men.

Not a platform for political discussion?

It is generally believed that the social media and the internet have the capacity to strengthen democracy by providing a new arena for online deliberation on politics. It is argued that as people get online and gain access to communication technologies it gives them opportunities for discussion and thus increases conversations and discussions around political issues. However our survey does not seem to confirm this line of argument, at least with respect to India. Despite social media growing at a rapid pace, not many social media users in our survey reported using it for airing their political views and thoughts. Only one in every four users of social media said that they express their personal views on politics either daily or sometimes (Figure 1.5). Over half said they never do it.

Figure 1.5: Percentage of social media users (those who use any platform) who express, share and read political news (%)



Question asked: How frequently do you do the following on Twitter or Facebook or WhatsApp – daily, sometimes, rarely or never? a. Express your personal views on politics b. Share/forward any political material c. Read news related to politics

Moreover, only one in every five social media users said that they share or forward politics news/material regularly, either daily or sometimes. Once again a majority said that they never share any political material online. The survey in fact found that social media users seem to be relatively more comfortable in just being passive recipients of political news on social

media sites rather than actively sharing news that is political in nature. One in every three said that they read political news on social media daily or sometimes, which is a higher figure than those who said that they use social media for expressing their political views or sharing political news.

We looked at the responses given by the voters of different parties to the two questions related to expression of political views and sharing of political material, and did not find much variation between how voters of the two main national parties – the BJP and the Congress, responded to it. Majority of voters who voted for the two parties said that they never do the two things and only about one-fourth said that they do both regularly – that is, daily or sometimes (Figure 1.6 and Figure 1.7). In fact, interestingly, BSP voters who use social media were slightly more likely to say that they express their political views and share political material on social media regularly than voters of other parties. Of all the voters, Left voters who are on social media were least likely to share political news or express their political opinion on social media.

Figure 1.6: Frequency with which voters of political parties express their political views on social media, 2019 (%)

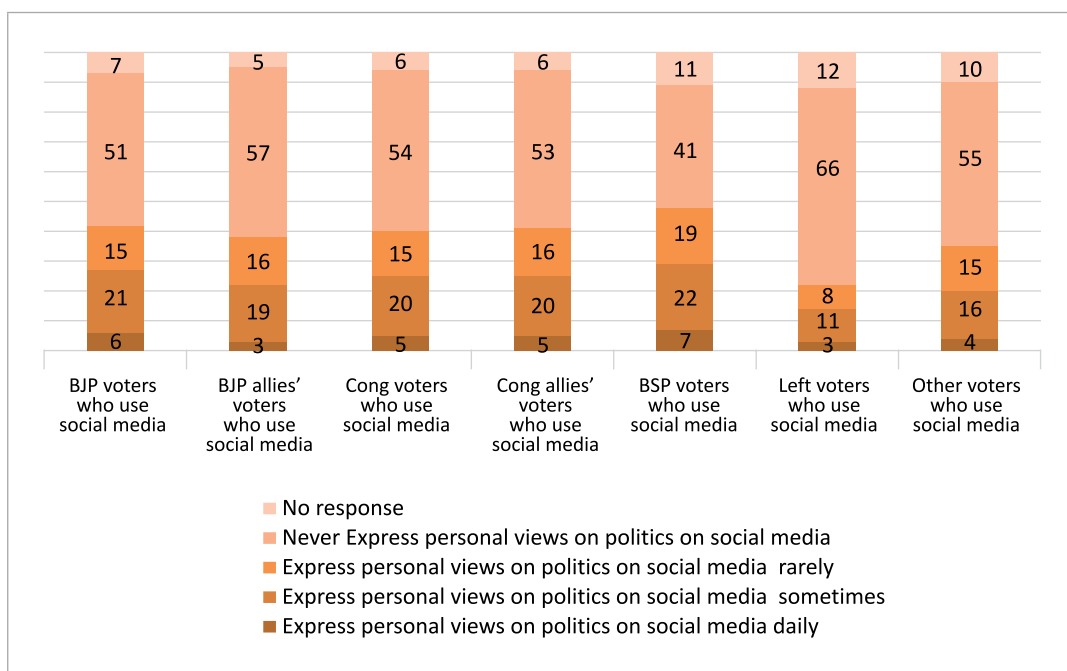
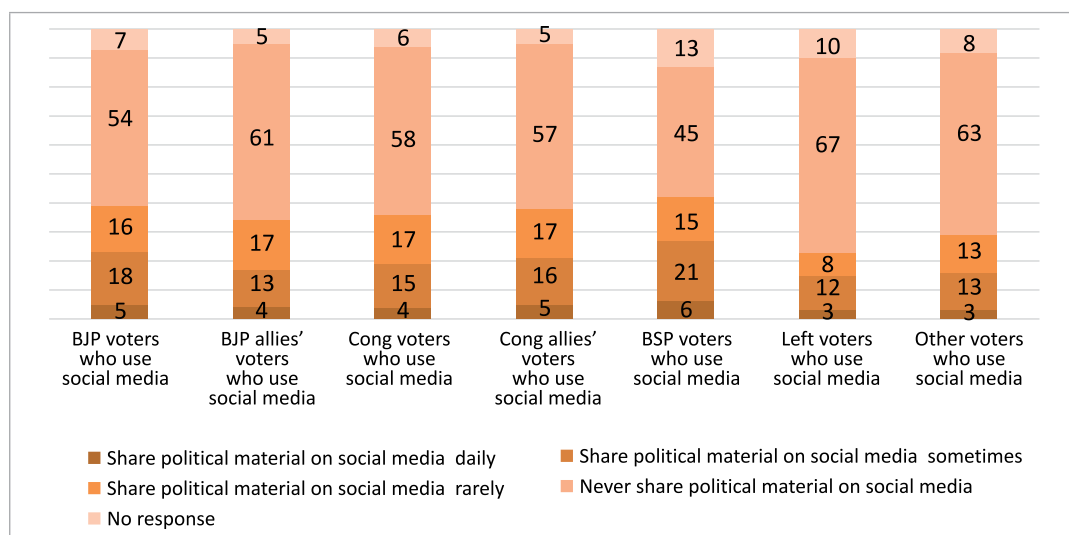


Figure 1.7: Frequency with which voters of political parties express share political material/news on social media, 2019 (%)



Key Takeaways

- Social media in India saw tremendous growth between the 2014 and 2019 elections
- Facebook usage went up by more than three times and Whatsapp usage by more than four times in the last five years
- YouTube is the third most popular social media platform after Facebook and WhatsApp currently in terms of usage
- Twitter usage saw a six-fold increase in the last five years, however it seems to have declined somewhat compared to 2018
- Facebook and Whatsapp usage too seems to have plateaued when compared with figures recorded in 2018
- Apart from Twitter, the usership of most social media platforms comprises mostly of regular users
- Almost everyone who uses some social media platform or the other also uses WhatsApp
- Overall after taking into account the usage of four social media platforms we find that two in every three voters do not use social media at all
- Eastern India has the lowest exposure to social media, southern the highest
- Social media usage is largely determined by smartphone ownership
- Social media is hardly being used by most users as a platform for airing political views or sharing political content

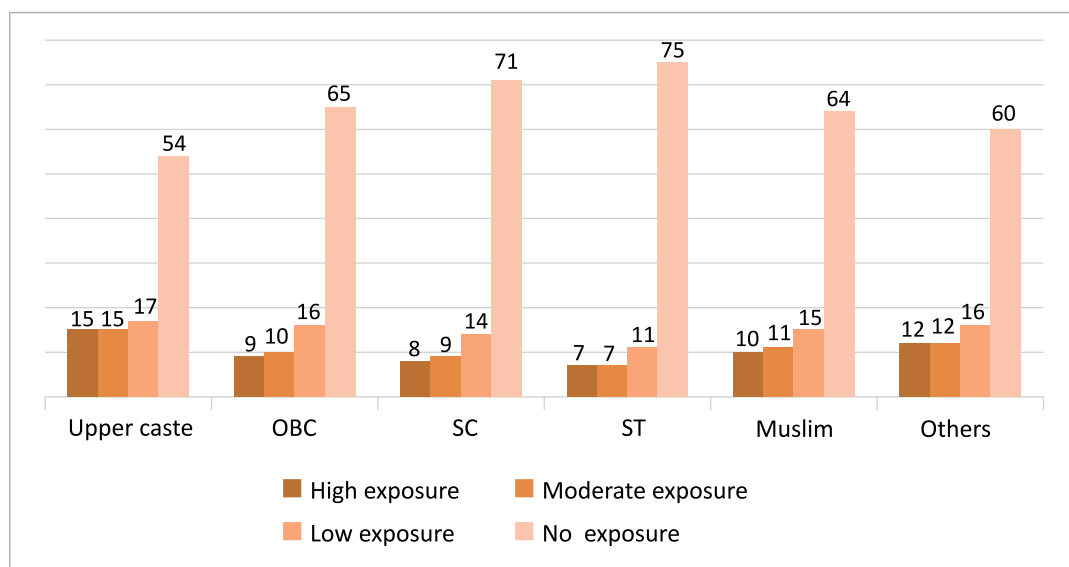
2. Social Media: Whose Space?

In the previous section we pointed out how smartphone ownership in India at the moment is highly unequal – that men are far more likely to own one than women, that people in big cities are twice as likely to own it as those in rural areas and that upper castes seem to have it with them much more than Dalits. We also presented data that showed that smartphone ownership was a key determinant of social media usage. The question from these two findings that thus arises is this – if access to smartphones is not the same across various demographics, then, is social media, whose usage is primarily dependent on smartphones, also an unequal space? Are there major differences between who is and who is not a social network site user in India, and if there are, then has the gap at least been bridged over the years? This section would try to shed some light on this crucial question that is linked to the democratization of online social networks.

Upper caste dominance continues

Let's start with caste first, something that rarely gets discussed when talking about social media in the country. Lokniti's social media usage data suggests that the social media space has always been upper caste dominated and continues to be so. Upper castes are nearly twice as likely to have high or moderate exposure to social media as Dalits and tribals. While 15 percent upper castes were found by Lokniti's 2019 survey to have high social media usage, among Dalits and tribal communities high usage was at 8 percent and 7 percent overall, respectively (**Figure 2.1**). Nine percent OBC communities reported high usage of social media which is greater than Dalits and tribals but lower than the upper castes. At the other extreme, those who don't have access to social media at all, the gap is even wider among communities. While 75 percent tribals and 71 percent Dalits were found to have no social media exposure whatsoever, the figure of no usage among Upper castes was found to be relatively much less at 54 percent.

Figure 2.1: Degree of exposure to social media by castes & communities as deduced from the composite social media exposure index, 2019 (%)



Source: Lokniti-CSDS Survey

Note: Figures have been rounded off hence may not add up to 100

Interestingly, the Muslim community, a large section of which is said to be educationally and economically as backward as the Dalit and tribal community, performs rather well when it comes to social media usage. The minority community's exposure to social media was found to be second only to that of the Hindu Upper castes. About one-fifth of them were found to be exposed to social media either strongly or moderately, which is even greater than the exposure recorded among Hindu OBCs.

This overall pattern of upper castes being most frequent in social media usage followed by Muslims can in fact be seen across all social media platforms when we look at each of them individually. As **Table 2.1** shows, upper castes are most likely to be highly active on Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram compared to other communities and this has remained consistent for the last five years. Muslims have fared second best in this regard and Dalits and tribals the worst. That being said, we also notice that the gap between upper castes and other communities when it comes to regular usage of certain social networking sites has reduced slightly over the years indicating that certain social media spaces may be getting democratized and more representative, albeit very slowly. For instance, while in 2014 Dalits and tribals were three times less likely to be frequent users of Facebook than upper castes, now they are less than two times less likely.

Table 2.1: Frequent social media usage by caste-community, 2014–19 (%)

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
Facebook				
Upper caste	11	24	36	35
OBC	7	16	25	25
SC	4	12	21	21
ST	3	15	14	19
Muslim	7	17	26	28
Others	9	20	35	30
Twitter				
Upper caste	3	6	13	10
OBC	2	3	9	6
SC	<1	2	7	5
ST	1	5	4	5
Muslim	2	3	7	7
Others	2	2	12	6
WhatsApp				
Upper caste	-	27	39	41
OBC	-	18	27	30
SC	-	13	23	25
ST	-	15	14	21
Muslim	-	22	32	32
Others	-	22	39	36
Instagram				
Upper caste	-	-	12	16
OBC	-	-	8	10
SC	-	-	7	7
ST	-	-	5	8
Muslim	-	-	9	10
Others	-	-	11	13
YouTube				
Upper caste	-	-	-	35
OBC	-	-	-	27
SC	-	-	-	22
ST	-	-	-	19
Muslim	-	-	-	29
Others	-	-	-	30

But overall, the entire process of democratization of social media and social networking sites seems to be rather slow. When we take each social network site individually and look at the share of users (by users here we mean not just regular users but even the rare users) belonging to each caste and community among the total users of that particular site, we find that upper castes continue to occupy the greatest share (higher than their overall share in the country's population which is about 20–22%) of two of the most popular social media sites. For example, in 2017, upper castes formed 30 percent of the total user base of WhatsApp and Facebook which in 2019 was found to be just one percentage point less at 29 percent (**Table 2.2**). The reader must note that the share of caste groups in the total sample in 2019 was weighted as per their share in the 2017 sample in order to do a strict comparison. Moreover, the comparison done here is only for those 19 states where the survey was conducted in 2017. Dalits on the other hand showed a two point increase. Twitter shows a slightly better result with regard to Dalits. The community's share among Twitter's total usership has risen by four points in the last two years from 8 percent to 12 percent. At the same time, the proportion of tribal users of Twitter among total Twitter users has gone down in the last two years from 10 percent to 6 percent.

Table 2.2: Share of caste-communities among total users of various social networking sites, 2017 & 2019 (%)

	Total Facebook users		Total Twitter users		Total WhatsApp users		Total Instagram users		Total YouTube users	
	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019
Upper caste	30	29	33	31	30	29	-	31	-	28
OBC	34	38	32	37	33	38	-	38	-	38
SC	11	13	8	12	11	13	-	11	-	13
ST	6	5	10	6	6	5	-	6	-	6
Muslim	13	12	12	12	14	13	-	12	-	13
Others	7	2	6	2	6	2	-	2	-	2

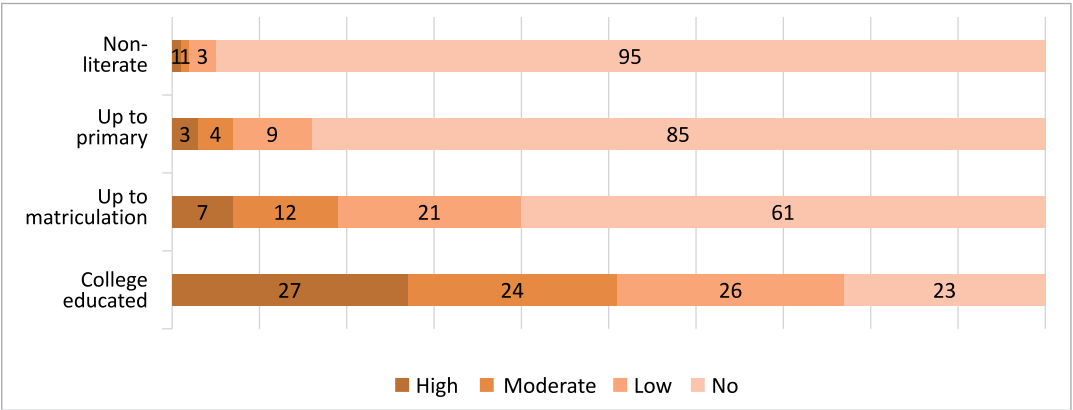
Note: Read column percentages. Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding off.

Highly educated dominate but their hold weakening

An analysis by education reveals that social media at present seems to be almost exclusively the domain of the educated, particularly those who are highly educated but this dominance is beginning to weaken somewhat. Overall, only 23 percent of voters who described themselves as having studied beyond Class X/gone to college were found to have no social media exposure (**Figure 2.2**) whatsoever. In other words, over three-fourths (77%) of voters who had studied either in college or beyond Class X have some degree of social media exposure. This percentage falls to 40 percent among those educated up only till matriculation and further to just 16 percent among those who have studied only up till primary. The gap between the

highly educated and the somewhat educated on social media is even wider when we just focus on those who use the social networking sites frequently. College educated voters, our survey found, are four times more likely to have high social media exposure than those educated till matriculation.

Figure 2.2: Degree of exposure to social media by education, 2019 (%)



A look at the various networking sites individually also throws up similar results on the whole, but it also reveals some interesting differences in terms of the degree to which the highly educated dominate various platforms. It turns out that Twitter and Instagram are two spaces where the gap between the highly educated and the moderately educated in terms of regular usage is the greatest. College educated voters are three times more likely to frequently use Twitter than voters who have studied only up till matriculation, 18 percent to 5 percent (**Table 2.3**). Instagram shows an even bigger gap with college educated voters being four times more likely to be highly active on the platform than voters who have studied only till Class X, 28 percent to 7 percent. An analysis of WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube usage on the other hand revealed relatively lower differences between the highly educated and the less educated and these differences have narrowed during the last few years.

This narrowing of the gap can also be noticed when we compare the share of the highly educated users in the total users of a particular platform with that of the share of the less educated users in the total users. Across all platforms, for which we have comparison points from the past, we notice that the share of college educated users in total usership has declined. Among Facebook users it has gone down from 71 percent to 63 percent, among Twitter users from 81 percent to 67 percent and among WhatsApp users from 71 percent to 62 percent (**Table 2.4**). Instagram at present seems to be more dominated by the highly educated (70%) than all other platforms. Twitter comes next; although it must be mentioned here that Twitter has also made the greatest gains towards inclusivity than other platforms over the last two years.

Table 2.3: Frequent social media usage by education, 2014–19 (%)

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
Facebook				
College educated	23	43	60	62
Up to matric	4	14	24	26
Up to primary	1	4	10	9
Non-literate	<1	2	5	3
Twitter				
College educated	5	10	20	18
Up to matric	1	2	8	5
Up to primary	<1	1	4	3
Non-literate	<1	<1	2	1
WhatsApp				
College educated	-	49	65	70
Up to matric	-	16	27	33
Up to primary	-	5	10	11
Non-literate	-	3	5	4
Instagram				
College educated	-	-	21	28
Up to matric	-	-	7	7
Up to primary	-	-	2	3
Non-literate	-	-	2	1
YouTube				
College educated	-	-	-	63
Up to matric	-	-	-	28
Up to primary	-	-	-	10
Non-literate	-	-	-	3

Table 2.4: Share of educated and less educated voters among total users of various social networking sites, 2017 & 2019 (%)

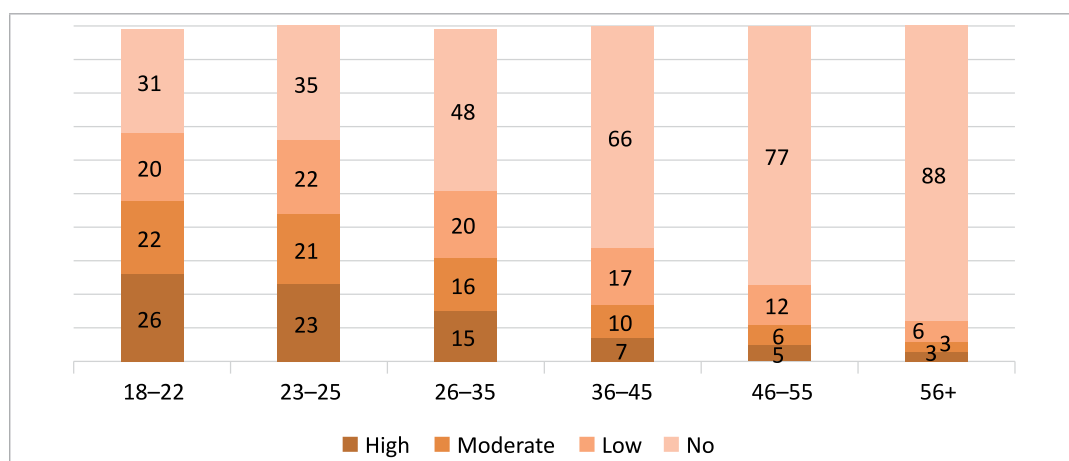
	Total Facebook Users		Total Twitter users		Total WhatsApp users		Total Instagram users		Total YouTube users	
	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019
College educated	71	63	81	67	71	62	-	70	-	63
Up to matric	21	27	14	22	21	28	-	20	-	27
Up to primary	5	7	3	7	5	7	-	6	-	7
Non-literate	4	4	2	5	4	4	-	4	-	4

Note: Read column percentages. Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding off.

Still a very young space

Social media continues to be a space dominated by the young with the youngest voters (18–22 years old), also known as “first-time voters” by election analysts, using it most regularly. From Lokniti’s survey data it appears that even 26 to 35 year olds don’t use social media platforms as frequently as 18 to 22 year olds or for that matter 23 to 25 year olds. While 26 percent and 23 percent of the 18–22 and 23–25 year olds were found to be highly exposed to social media, high usage among 26–35 year olds was around ten percentage points less at 15 percent (**Figure 2.3**). This sudden drop in regular usage of social media among voters aged between 26 and 35 years compared to those younger than them can be seen across nearly all social media platforms (**Table 2.5**).

Figure 2.3: Degree of exposure to social media by age, 2019 (%)



As opposed to well over half of 18–25 year olds voters using Facebook and YouTube either daily or weekly, only two-fifths of the 26–35 year olds were found to use the two sites as frequently. Similarly, while around 60 percent of 18–25 year olds reported using WhatsApp regularly, among 26–35 years olds the percentage was 46 percent. In fact, usage of social media platforms seems to be dependent on a person’s age. Youth are most likely to use it and the elderly least likely to do so. Lokniti’s survey found only about one-third of young respondents (18–25 year olds) to be not using social media at all. This figure of non-usage was on the other hand extremely high among those aged above 55 years at 88 percent (**Figure 2.3**). Survey data also shows that the greatest growth in WhatsApp usage seems to have taken place among 18–22 year olds. In 2018, 53 percent of the voters belonging to this age group were using the platform which has now jumped by eleven points to 64 percent (**Table 2.5**). Instagram usage among this youngest segment has also gone up considerably in the last one year from 20 percent to 28 percent.

Table 2.5: Frequent social media usage by age-group, 2014–19 (%)

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
Facebook				
18–22	20	42	55	58
23–25	17	36	54	55
26–35	10	25	38	40
36–45	4	15	21	22
46–55	3	8	14	14
56+	1	4	8	8
Twitter				
18–22	4	8	16	17
23–25	3	8	17	14
26–35	2	5	12	10
36–45	1	3	8	6
46–55	1	2	7	4
56+	<1	1	3	3
WhatsApp				
18–22	-	45	53	64
23–25	-	40	55	59
26–35	-	29	41	46

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
36–45	-	17	26	28
46–55	-	9	17	19
56+	-	6	10	9
Instagram				
18–22	-	-	20	28
23–25	-	-	19	25
26–35	-	-	13	16
36–45	-	-	6	8
46–55	-	-	4	5
56+	-	-	2	3
YouTube				
18–22	-	-	-	60
23–25	-	-	-	54
26–35	-	-	-	42
36–45	-	-	-	24
46–55	-	-	-	15
56+	-	-	-	7

Even though middle aged and elderly voters do not report much frequent usage of social media, and far less so compared to the youth, their share in the total usership of social networking sites has nonetheless seen a slight increase; although it is still nowhere close to their actual share in the country's electorate (**Table 2.6**).

Table 2.6: Share of age groups among total users of various social media platforms, 2017 & 2019 (%)

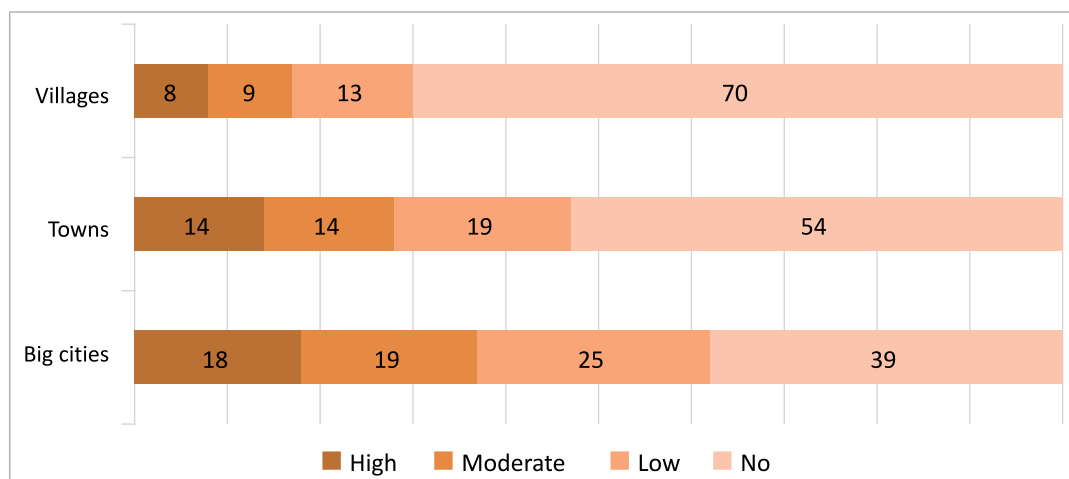
	Total Facebook Users		Total Twitter users		Total WhatsApp users		Total Instagram users		Total YouTube users	
	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019
18–22	32	28	31	28	30	27	-	32	-	28
23–25	14	14	14	14	14	14	-	16	-	14
26–35	31	32	31	30	32	31	-	29	-	31
36–45	14	15	14	15	14	16	-	13	-	16
46–55	5	7	6	7	6	7	-	6	-	7
56+	4	5	5	7	4	5	-	5	-	4

Note: Read column percentages. Share of age groups weighted by Census 2011 and then projected.

Cities lead, villages begin to catch up

An analysis of Lokniti's social media usage data in terms of the locality in which social media users are residing reveals that usage of social media is still a very urban phenomenon as those living in big cities and towns are far more likely to use it than those living in rural areas. About 18 percent respondents living in big cities reported a high degree of social media usage which was over two times greater than the high usage (8%) reported by respondents in villages (**Figure 2.4**). Respondents living in towns fell in between the two extremes with about 14 percent of them being highly exposed to social media. What is interesting to note here is that there are still about two-fifths of voters even in the big cities who do not use social media at all and about one-fourth do so only very rarely.

Figure 2.4: Degree of exposure to social media by urbanity, 2019 (%)



Even as villages are far less likely to use social media than towns and cities, an analysis of the growth in frequent usage of each of the social networking sites reveals that the greatest gains seem to have happened in rural areas since 2014. While regular Facebook usage has gone up two and a half times between 2014 and 2019 from 18 percent to 45 percent in big cities, in rural areas it has registered a nearly five-fold increase rising from 5 percent in 2014 to 23 percent now (**Table 2.7**). Similarly, frequent Twitter usage in rural areas has gone up from 1 percent to 6 percent compared to two times in big cities (6% to 13%). Moreover, in the last one year frequent Twitter usage seems to have declined at a far more rapid pace in big cities and towns than in villages.

Table 2.7: Frequent social media usage by urbanity, 2014–19 (%)

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
Facebook				
Big cities	18	28	46	45
Towns	11	25	34	33
Villages	5	15	22	23
Twitter				
Big cities	6	5	18	13
Towns	3	7	13	10
Villages	1	2	7	6
WhatsApp				
Big cities	-	35	55	55
Towns	-	28	38	41
Villages	-	15	23	26
Instagram				
Big cities	-	-	15	19
Towns	-	-	13	15
Villages	-	-	7	9
YouTube				
Big cities	-	-	-	47
Towns	-	-	-	36
Villages	-	-	-	23

In overall terms too (taking all users into account, not just the regular ones), rural social media users now comprise a greater share of total social media users than they did two years ago. Their share in Facebook's total user base has gone up from half to nearly three-fifths and among Twitter's user base from two-fifths to half (**Table 2.8**).

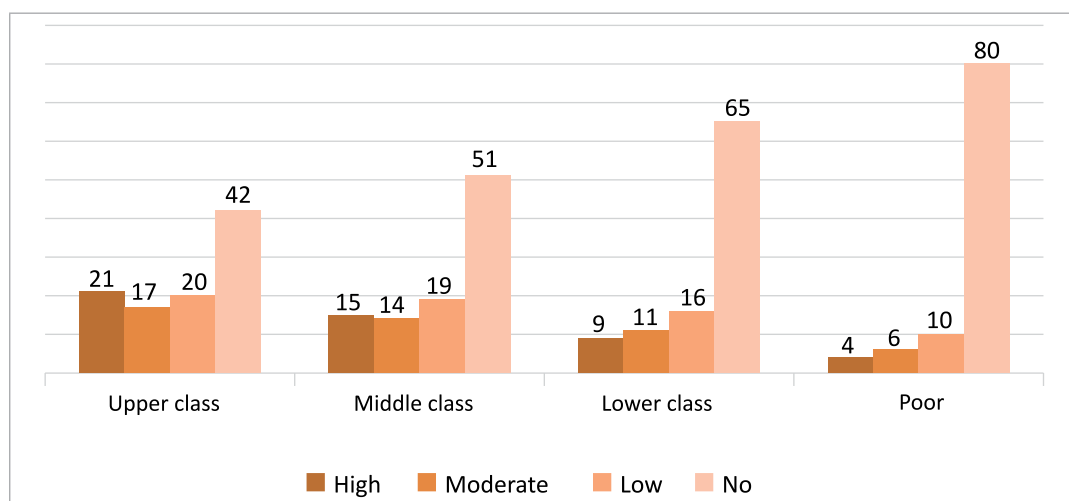
Table 2.8: Share of rural-urban users among total users of various social media platforms, 2017 & 2019 (%)

	Total Facebook Users		Total Twitter users		Total WhatsApp users		Total Instagram users		Total YouTube users	
	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019
Big cities	22	23	21	25	23	23	-	24	-	23
Towns	26	21	38	23	26	22	-	23	-	22
Villages	52	56	41	52	51	55	-	53	-	56

Note: Read column percentages

An analysis by economic background reveals that upper and middle classes are still more likely to use social media platforms frequently than the economically worse-off sections. Lokniti's 2019 survey found the richest voters to be twice as likely to use social media sites greatly/regularly as voters from the lower class (**Figure 2.5**). Over two-thirds of voters from the lower class and four-fifths from the poorest sections were found to have no exposure to social media at all.

Figure 2.5: Degree of exposure to social media by class, 2019 (%)



Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding off

Having said that, we also notice that compared to 2014, frequent usage of social media platforms has increased tremendously among lower class voters. Daily or weekly usage of Facebook for instance has risen by eight times from merely 3 percent to 25 percent in 2019 with the jump being particularly high between 2017 and 2018 (**Table 2.9**). Although upper and middle classes have also seen an increase in regular usage, this rise has not been as spectacular as the one witnessed among the lower class. Regular WhatsApp usage increased

by three times among lower class voters between 2017 and 2019 so much so that the gap of 29 percentage points between the upper class and lower class in terms of frequent usage of WhatsApp is now down to 23 percentage points.

Table 2.9: Frequent social media usage by economic class, 2014–19 (%)

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
Facebook				
Upper class	19	34	45	47
Middle class	10	19	36	37
Lower class	3	8	26	25
Poor	5	11	16	14
Twitter				
Upper class	5	8	15	14
Middle class	2	3	12	10
Lower class	1	1	9	6
Poor	1	2	6	3
WhatsApp				
Upper class	-	39	52	53
Middle class	-	21	40	43
Lower class	-	10	29	30
Poor	-	12	17	16
Instagram				
Upper class	-	-	16	22
Middle class	-	-	12	16
Lower class	-	-	8	9
Poor	-	-	5	4
YouTube				
Upper class	-	-	-	47
Middle class	-	-	-	38
Lower class	-	-	-	26
Poor	-	-	-	14

The Gender gap

The gender gap persists but has narrowed somewhat. The share of men in Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp's total user base has dropped by about 4–5 percentage points between 2017 and 2019 (**Table 2.10**). Men continue to dominate these spaces with their share in the total user base being close to two-thirds. Women users of social media across all platforms comprise only a third of the total user base.

Table 2.10: Share of men and women among total users of various social media platforms, 2017 & 2019 (%)

	Total Facebook Users		Total Twitter users		Total WhatsApp users		Total Instagram users		Total YouTube users	
	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019
Men	70	66	67	63	69	64	–	63	–	65
Women	30	34	33	37	31	36	–	37	–	35

Note: Read column percentages

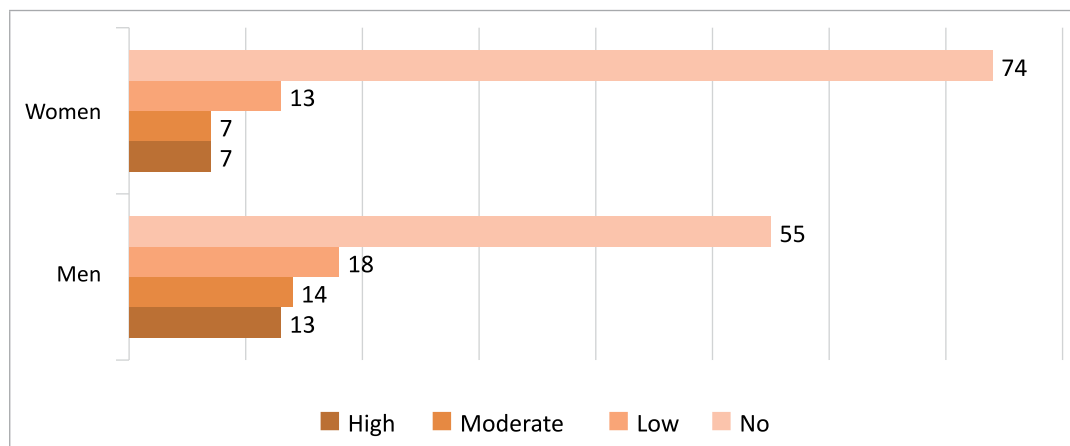
Even in terms of growth in regular usage of social networking sites, there has been no significant change in the difference between the two genders. Even as frequent Facebook usage has gone up among women from 5 percent to 18 percent between 2014 and 2019, among men too it has risen by three times from 10 percent to 35 percent in the same period (**Table 2.11**). As far as regular usage of WhatsApp is concerned, the gap between the two genders which was 14 percentage points in 2017 has steadily increased instead of declining and now stands at 18 percentage points.

Table 2.11: Frequent social media usage by gender, 2014–19 (%)

	Daily and weekly users 2014	Daily and weekly users 2017	Daily and weekly users 2018	Daily and weekly users 2019
Facebook				
Men	10	25	35	35
Women	5	10	18	18
Twitter				
Men	2	5	11	9
Women	1	2	7	5
WhatsApp				
Men	-	27	38	40
Women	-	13	21	22
Instagram				
Men	-	-	11	14
Women	-	-	6	8
YouTube				
Men	-	-	-	36
Women	-	-	-	19

An analysis of the composite of social media index by gender reveals that women are two times less likely to highly or moderately use social media than men (Figure 2.6). While 14 percent women were found to have high or moderate exposure to social media, among men the same figure was 27 percent. Three in every four women voters in India have no exposure to social media at all.

Figure 2.6: Degree of exposure to social media by gender, 2019 (%)



Key Takeaways

- Upper castes continue to dominate online social networks, Dalits and tribals lag behind
- Social media exposure among Muslims second only to that of Hindu upper castes; moreover Muslim share in total user base of social media platforms is in proportion to their actual population
- College educated voters four times more likely to have high social media exposure than those educated till matriculation; at the same time across all platforms share of college educated users (includes rare users) in total usership has declined
- Social media dominated by the young, but even among the young, 26–35 year olds don't use social media platforms as frequently as 18–25 years olds
- 88 percent of those aged above 55 years do not use a single social networking site; at the same time share of middle aged and elderly in total Twitter usership has almost doubled in the last two years
- While people in cities are far more likely to use social media than those in villages, there are still about two-fifths of voters even in the big cities who do not use social media at all and about one-fourth do so only very rarely
- In overall terms rural social media users now comprise a greater share of total social media users than they did two years ago
- Regular WhatsApp usage increased by three times among lower class voters between 2017 and 2019
- Women users of social media across all platforms comprise only a third of the total user base still, with only a marginal increase in last two years
- Three in every four women voters in India have no exposure to social media at all

3. Social Media: An Influencer?

The last decade has witnessed an exorbitant growth in ostentatious consumption of goods and services. With an increasing number of smartphones in the market and affordable internet packages, social media platforms are spreading their reach to the masses. User friendly interface of social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube has made these spaces accessible to different sections of the society, although as pointed out in the previous section, this access is still quite unequal. This conspicuous consumption of social media platforms, which has become a means of reputability to many, makes it necessary to study the potential impact it might have in making people aware, shaping public opinion, changing their attitudes towards the world around, and ultimately, influencing their vote choice.

The information which users gather through social media helps them form fresh opinions, apart from reinforcing the beliefs they already hold. Furthermore, social media reawakens latent opinions of the users. It triggers them to take actions on their latent or inactive opinions. The potential to influence the collective consciousness of the voters makes social media a key player at the time of elections and between them.

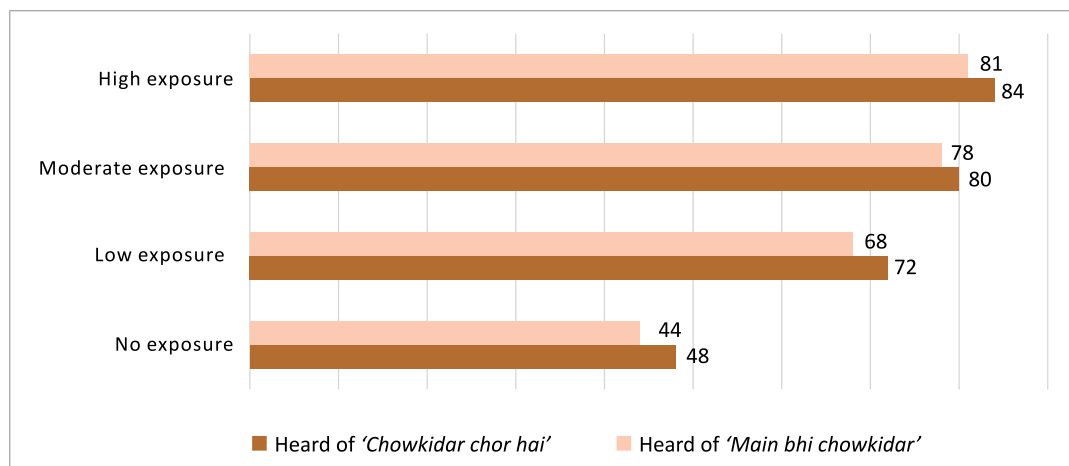
In this section we will focus on three things – first, how far social media helped political parties communicate with the voters in the run up to 2019 general elections, second, the kind of views social media users hold with regard to majoritarianism and identity related debates, and finally end by looking at how seriously the information that is shared on the medium is taken by the users.

Outreach of Political Slogans

In its campaign for the 2019 elections, the Rahul Gandhi-led Indian National Congress raised allegations of a potential fraud against Narendra Modi in the Dassault Rafale Jet deal and coined a slogan '*Chowkidar chor hai*' (translated as 'the watchman is a thief') to counter a narrative created by the Prime Minister of being a '*Chowkidar*' (watchman) of the nation. The slogan was raised by Mr. Gandhi continuously during his rallies and even on social media platforms like Twitter. On March 16th, just a month before elections, Mr. Modi came up with a counter via a 'tweet', claiming himself and everyone else who is fighting corruption to be a '*Chowkidar*', coining a counter slogan '*Main bhi chowkidar*' (translated as 'I am also a

watchman’), with all the Bharatiya Janata Party leaders adding the prefix ‘*Chowkidar*’ to their Twitter handles. We asked respondents if they had heard of the two slogans (Figure 3.1; Tables 3.1 & 3.2).

Figure 3.1: Social media users who had heard about ‘*Chowkidar chor hai*’ and ‘*Main bhi chowkidar*’ slogans – by the composite social media exposure index (%)



Question Asked: Have you heard of the following slogans: a. ‘*Chowkidar chor hai*’ b. ‘*Main bhi chowkidar*’

Table 3.1: Social media users who had heard about ‘*Chowkidar chor hai*’ slogan – by the frequency of their usage (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never Used
Facebook	82	74	69	50
Twitter	80	79	77	56
WhatsApp	81	64	66	49
Instagram	83	82	72	56
YouTube	82	75	71	49

Table 3.2: Social media users who had heard about ‘*Main bhi chowkidar*’ slogan - by the frequency of their usage (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never Used
Facebook	79	70	66	46
Twitter	77	78	73	52
WhatsApp	78	63	63	44
Instagram	81	77	71	51
YouTube	79	75	67	45

Almost half the respondents who were not exposed to social media, i.e. the ones who had never used these platforms, were found to have no knowledge about the two slogans, whereas, four in every five respondents who had a high exposure to these mediums claimed to have heard about them. Although the respondents with low and moderate exposure to social media were also found to be aware about the two slogans, their numbers were slightly less than those having high exposure to these mediums, the gap being negligible between respondents with high and moderate exposure but wider between those with low and moderate exposures. Here we must also point out that awareness levels about the two slogans were found to be lower among daily viewers of television news than among those highly and moderately exposed to social media.

On comparing the two slogans, the overall awareness of '*Main bhi chowkidar*' was found to be slightly less than that of '*Chowkidar chor hai*', with the difference being constant among all kinds of users- daily, weekly and rarely, all across the five social media platforms studied. Whereas the awareness about the slogans was found to be more or less equal among daily users of all the mediums, weekly and rare users of WhatsApp showed significant difference compared to the weekly and rare users of other platforms. Since WhatsApp is primarily a messaging or chatting app, the information doesn't stay for longer, unlike Facebook or Twitter where the users can visit and revisit the pages or profiles of parties and leaders to keep themselves updated. This could be the possible reason for lesser awareness among users who open their WhatsApp once or twice a week or only a few times in a month. The bottom line is, if you were on social media, there was a much higher chance of you being aware about the two slogans than those who were not on it.

Outreach of NYAY Scheme

The NYAY (*Nyunatam Aay Yojana*) scheme promising a minimum income to poor households was announced by the Congress just days before India went to polls in order to wrest the post-Balakot momentum back from the BJP. Through this announcement the Congress tried to create a counter narrative by bringing the focus of the elections back to economic issues. We asked the respondents in our survey if they had heard about the scheme or not (**Table 3.3 & Figure 3.2**).

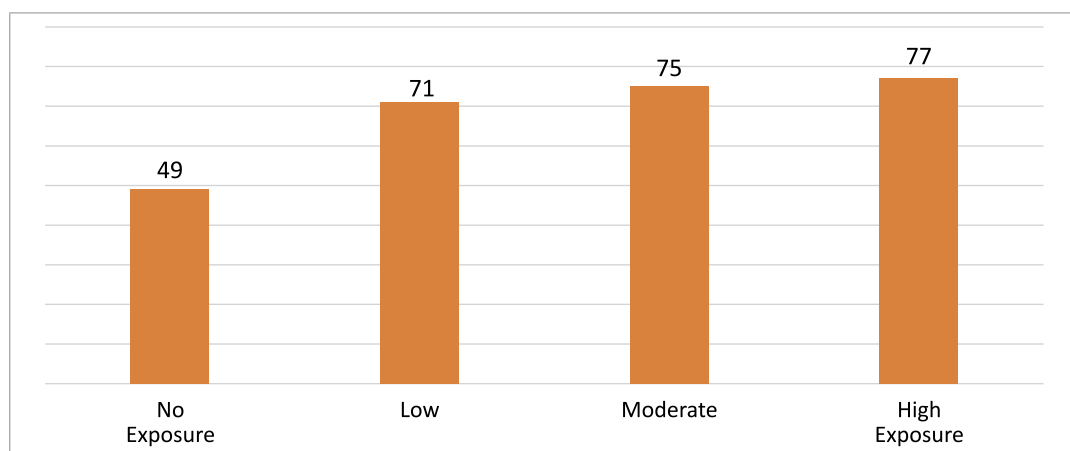
Here also, almost half of the respondents who were not exposed to any kind of social media were found to be completely unaware about any such scheme. When we compared the users on the basis of their usage - daily, weekly and rare, we found a similar pattern of decline in awareness among users. When we compared daily and weekly users, the decline was again found to be maximum among WhatsApp users (7 percentage points), with the awareness falling only by one or two percentage points among the users of other social media platforms.

Table 3.3: Social media users who had heard about the ‘NYAY Scheme’ - by the frequency of their usage (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never Used
Facebook	76	74	73	50
Twitter	76	76	76	55
WhatsApp	75	68	71	49
Instagram	77	76	73	55
YouTube	75	72	69	50

Question asked: Have you heard of the Congress’s promise of Minimum Income Guarantee (Nyunatam Aay Yojana/NYAY) for poor households if it gets elected to power?

Figure 3.2: Social media users who had heard about ‘NYAY Scheme’ – by the composite social media exposure index (%)



Thus, it can be said that Congress did manage to communicate about the scheme to about three-fourth of the users having high/moderate exposure to social media with the respondents having low exposure not far behind, but it failed to reach out to half of the non-users of social media platforms. Congress perhaps relied more on social media but could never actually communicate to the real beneficiaries of the scheme - the ones who lack resources to be on these social media platforms.

Awareness Regarding Balakot Air-Strikes

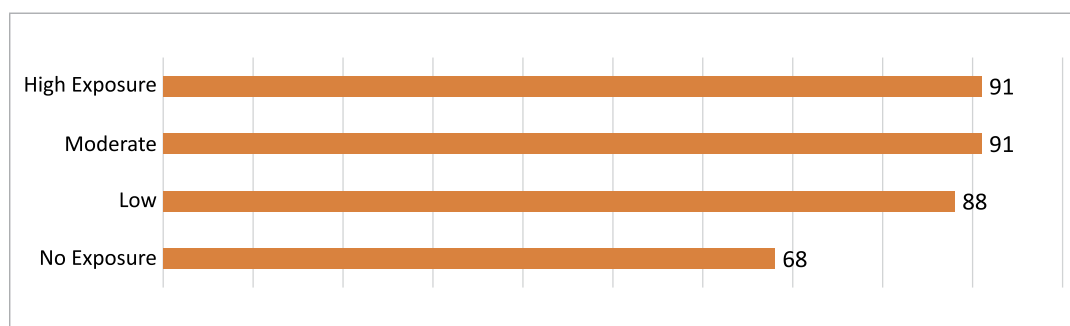
India’s air strikes on terrorist training camps in Pakistan in response to the Pulwama attack, popularly known as Balakot air-strikes, grabbed a lot of attention throughout the nation, and are believed by many to have given Modi a boost he needed just before the elections. We asked respondents if they had heard about India’s air-strikes (**Table 3.4 & Figure 3.3**).

Table 3.4: Social media users who had heard about Balakot air-strikes – by the frequency of their usage (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never Used
Facebook	91	90	85	70
Twitter	86	89	89	75
WhatsApp	92	83	84	69
Instagram	91	89	84	74
YouTube	92	90	81	70

Question asked: Have you heard about India's Air-Strikes on terrorist training camps in Pakistan in response to the Pulwama terrorist attack?

Figure 3.3: Social media users who had heard about Balakot air-strikes - by the composite social media index (%)



The knowledge about the air-strikes was very high across all the sections but the gap between users and non-users, i.e. the ones who had high/moderate/low exposure to social media and the ones with no exposure at all, was found to be more than 20 percentage points, as only 68 percent of the non-users were aware about them as against 88 percent of the ones with low exposure and 91 percent of the ones having high/moderate exposure to social media. As it appears, social media platforms were quite effective in communicating about the air-strikes, with 86 percent of daily users of Twitter and more than 90 percent of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram and YouTube users aware about the same. When we compare daily users with weekly users, the dip is again much higher among WhatsApp users (9 percentage points). Thus, WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube seem to have played a more dominant part in spreading the news about the strikes compared to Twitter and Instagram. While Instagram is relatively very new, the figures were surprising for Twitter, which, with its trending hashtags, is believed to play most important role in spreading news and information.

Majoritarianism: Attitude Towards Minorities

Does India belong to only Hindus, i.e. does it entitle the majority with certain kind of primacy, or does it belong to all religious communities equally? When it comes to issues like nationalism, what do the social media users think about Muslims? With these two questions we now move to analyze how sensitive the social media community is towards the rights of the minorities.

We asked the respondents which of the following two sentences they agree more with: 'India primarily belongs to only Hindus' and 'India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, not just Hindus' (Table 3.5 & Figure 3.4).

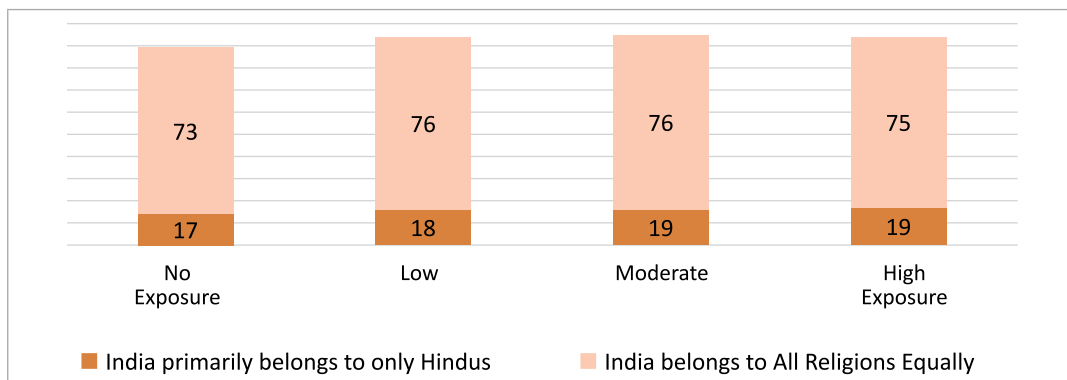
Table 3.5: Responses of Hindu social media users to the question whether India mainly belongs to Hindus or to all religions equally - by frequency of usage (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never Used
India primarily belongs to only Hindus				
Facebook	18	22	25	16
Twitter	20	19	30	16
WhatsApp	17	26	29	17
Instagram	19	15	29	17
YouTube	18	19	17	17
India belongs to all religions Equally				
Facebook	77	71	70	74
Twitter	74	78	62	75
WhatsApp	78	62	66	73
Instagram	74	85	62	74
YouTube	77	71	78	73

Question Asked: (1) India primarily belongs to only Hindus; (2) India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, not just Hindus. Please tell me which one do you agree with?

The result was almost similar across all the four categories of social media users – Hindu respondents with no exposure to social media, respondents with low exposure, moderate exposure and high exposure – with more than three-fourth choosing the latter, i.e. 'India belongs to all religions equally.' Those who believe India to be only of Hindus were between 17 to 19 percent across all the categories.

Figure 3.4: Responses of Hindu social media users to the question whether India mainly belongs to Hindus or to all religions equally – by the composite social media index (%)



Question Asked: (1) India primarily belongs to only Hindus; (2) India belongs to citizens of all religions equally, not just Hindus. Please tell me which one do you agree with?

Interestingly, numbers of both types of believers (believer of sentence 1 and 2 both), were slightly higher among Hindu social media users compared to non-users. Nineteen percent of voters with high exposure to social media believed that ‘India belongs to only Hindus’ as against 17 percent with no exposure; and 75 percent of voters with high exposure believed that ‘India belongs to all religions equally’ as against 73 percent of non-users. As it appears, the usage of social media does have an impact in making the beliefs you hold somewhat stronger, as it perhaps gives you a space where you can express and share your views and opinions, and allows you to create groups/pages of likeminded people. This intra-personal communication which takes place within these groups and pages could be the reason for strengthening both kinds of beliefs.

Furthermore, it is worth noticing that the numbers of Hindu respondents who believe that ‘India belongs to only Hindus’ is much higher in the middle two categories- weekly users of Facebook and Whatsapp; and rare users of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram - compared to the daily users and the respondents who have never used these mediums. A weekly/rare user of WhatsApp and a rare user of Twitter/WhatsApp/Instagram is also less likely to believe that India belongs to all religions equally. What differentiates the daily users of these platforms from weekly and rare users? Perhaps, when the usage is higher, you are exposed to all kinds of views and opinions. This increased participation may help in neutralizing the ultimate impact on the opinion formation of the voters. On the other hand, when your interaction with these mediums is low, you tend to believe on the limited information you are exposed to. Moreover, your friend circles on social media, the pages you follow and the groups you are a part of may be much less in numbers compared to the people who are highly active and interact on daily basis, further restricting your thought process to a closed group. Because of lesser exposure, you also tend to believe fake news. This might be one of the possible reasons for daily users, who are exposed to multiple opinions and the non-users,

who are not exposed to social media at all, sharing similar views, as opposed to weekly/rare users.

While it was important to look at the general notions and beliefs of the voters with respect to minorities, the more important thing to see perhaps is what the Hindu social media community thinks of Muslims, when it comes to the idea of nationalism. We asked the respondents how nationalist the Muslim community according to them is (Tables 3.6 & 3.7).

Table 3.6: Opinion of Hindu social media users on nationalism of Muslims – by frequency of social media usage (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Rarely	Never Used
Muslims are highly nationalist				
Facebook	25	28	23	21
Twitter	23	33	32	21
WhatsApp	26	17	25	20
Instagram	26	33	17	22
YouTube	24	29	21	21
Muslims are not at all nationalist				
Facebook	16	15	8	12
Twitter	21	15	10	12
WhatsApp	15	11	8	12
Instagram	17	9	17	12
YouTube	16	10	11	12

Question Asked: According to you how nationalist is the Muslim community - highly nationalist, somewhat nationalist, not much nationalist or not at all nationalist?

Note: Responses shown above are for the answers given on the two extreme ends.

Table 3.7: Opinion of Hindu social media users on nationalism of Muslims – by the composite social media index (%)

	Highly nationalist	Not at all nationalist
No Exposure	21	12
Low	24	12
Moderate	24	17
High Exposure	28	15

Question Asked: According to you how nationalist is the Muslim community - highly nationalist, somewhat nationalist, not much nationalist or not at all nationalist?

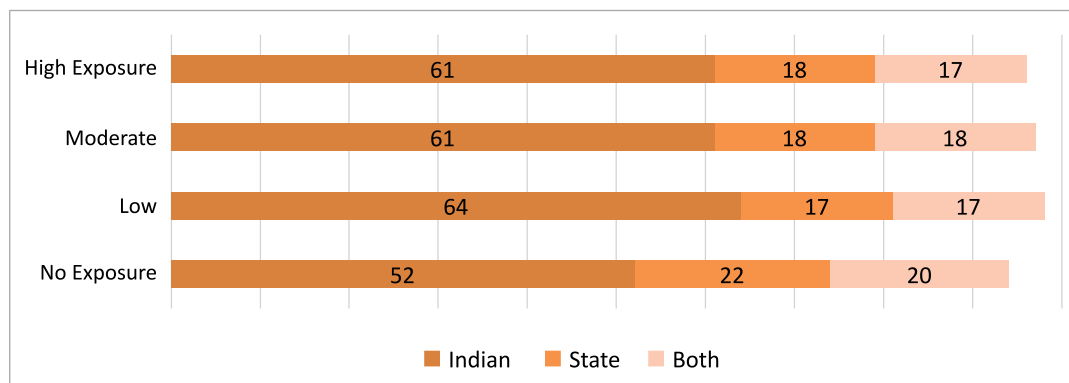
Note: Responses shown above are for the answers given on the two extreme ends.

The survey data indicates that the Hindu voters with high exposure to social media are more likely to believe that Muslims are highly nationalist compared to the ones with no social media exposure. While 21 percent of the respondents with no exposure believed so, the number of respondents with high exposure was at 28 percent (a gap of 7 percentage points). Furthermore, 12 percent of non-users believe that Muslims are not nationalists at all, as against 15 percent of the responds with high-exposure to social media. The picture is a little contradictory here, but one thing can be clearly observed that as the exposure to social media increases, the opinions of the users, whatever they might be, get strengthened.

Interestingly, among the Hindu respondents using Twitter, the numbers of those daily users who believe Muslims to be highly nationalist are lowest (23%) compared to the other four social media platforms; and highest among weekly and rare users' categories (33 percent and 32 percent respectively). It also shows a significant difference of about 5 percent compared to other applications, with more than one-fifth of daily Twitter users believing that Muslims are not nationalists at all.

The survey also found the respondents who were using any of these social media platforms identifying themselves more with their national identity (that of an Indian) as compared to the respondents who were not exposed to any of these mediums (**Figure 3.5**).

Figure 3.5: Responses of social media users when asked how they identified themselves, by their 'Indian' identity or their State identity – analysis by the composite social media index (%)



Question asked: When we ask the people as to who they are, we get different answers. Some call themselves Indian. While others identify themselves only as _____ (State identity)? How do you identify yourself - Indian or ____ (State identity)?

Note: The rest of the respondents did not respond

As the data suggests, 22 percent of the respondents with no exposure to social media identified themselves with their local identities (of belonging to a particular State). It falls by 4 percentage points in case of the respondents with high social media exposure. The rise

among the respondents who identified themselves as Indians is almost 10 percentage points with three-fourth of users with high social media exposure identifying themselves with the national identity.

Trust in Social Media

During the last few years, we have witnessed a significant increase in ‘fake news’, consisting of deliberate misinformation spread via online social media. This phenomenon is even more common at the time of elections, wherein, the political parties and leaders, in order to have an edge over their opponents, spread, or instigate their supporters to spread, a lot of misinformation to mislead the voters. As observed earlier, the easy targets could be the ones who don’t understand the social media platforms as much because of their lesser participation than others, i.e. the ones who use social media less frequently. In order to have a better picture, we asked the respondents how much trust do they have in the news that is shared on various social media platforms (Table 3.8 & Figure 3.6).

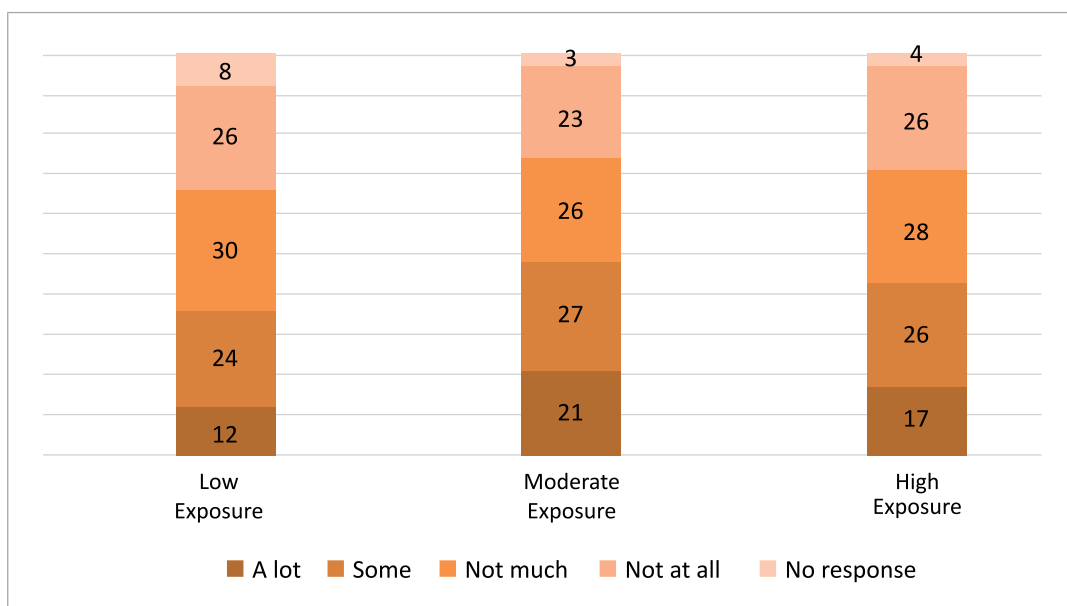
Table 3.8: Trust in news shared on social media among social media users – by the frequency of usage of a platform (%)

	A lot	Some	Not much	Not at all
Daily & Weekly Facebook users	17	26	28	25
Daily & Weekly Twitter users	18	29	28	22
Daily & Weekly WhatsApp users	16	26	28	26
Daily & Weekly Instagram users	18	26	27	25
Daily & Weekly YouTube users	16	26	28	25
Monthly & Rare Facebook users	14	24	29	27
Monthly & Rare Twitter users	18	21	26	28
Monthly & Rare WhatsApp users	10	29	31	20
Monthly & Rare Instagram users	18	30	23	20
Monthly & Rare YouTube users	12	27	28	26

Question asked: How much trust do you have in the News that is shared on WhatsApp/Facebook etc. - a lot of trust, some trust, not much or none at all?

Note: The rest of the respondents did not answer the question

Figure 3.6: Trust in news shared on social media among social media users – by the composite social media index (%)



Note: Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding off.

Question asked: How much trust do you have in the News that is shared on WhatsApp/Facebook etc. - a lot of trust, some trust, not much or none at all?

Almost one in every four respondents, irrespective of their usage patterns, claimed to have no trust at all on the news shared across these platforms. The respondents with high social media exposure reported having least trust in the authenticity of the information circulated (26%). Interestingly, the ones showing maximum trust were also the respondents who had moderate and high exposure to these mediums (21% and 17% respectively).

Among the daily and weekly users, the gap between the voters who responded as ‘a lot’ and the ones responding as ‘not at all’ was found to be highest among WhatsApp users (10 percentage points), followed by the users of YouTube (9 percentage points). With a difference of only 4 percentage points, the gap was the least in case of daily and weekly Twitter users. Overall, if we club the daily and weekly respondents who claimed to have shown ‘a lot’ and ‘some trust’ on the news that is shared on these social media platforms and the ones who responded as ‘not much’ and ‘not at all’, we found more than half of the respondents to not trusting social media as a source of information/news. Here also the gap was highest among WhatsApp users (12 percentage points), followed by YouTube (11 percentage points). The gap was again found to be least in case of Twitter users (only 3 percentage points). In other words, the voters using WhatsApp or YouTube have shown the least trust in the news shared on social media platforms and the voters using Twitter the most.

Concluding Remarks

As the survey data indicates, social media did play an important role in carrying forward the message regarding political slogans, proposed schemes of the parties and actions taken by the security forces, as those active on these mediums were found to have much more awareness about them compared to the non-users. However, amidst all the discussions and debates over the burgeoning influence of social media on general public, we seem to have exaggerated the actual impact of this medium.

Although, social media does seem to have made an impact as the people who were using it were found to be by and large far more opinionated than the ones who were not exposed to any of these platforms, and further, it did manage to spread its reach to a larger proportion of the voters compared to 2014, but in the last one year, the growth seems to have stagnated. A dominant reason for that could be the trust deficit among its users (as well as non-users) with regard to the information they receive on these platforms. It would also be interesting to note that there was a visible difference between the attitudes of the frequent users and the occasional users across all the mediums. As the usage increases, the awareness also increases along with strengthening of held beliefs. However, high exposure also seems to balance out the difference in opinions by making varied views about a particular issue accessible to the users, ultimately, neutralizing the impact. Thus, social media might be an influencer, but not as much as it is believed to be.

Key Takeaways

- The information which users gather through social media helps them form fresh opinions, apart from reinforcing the beliefs they already hold
- Four in every five respondents who had a high exposure to social media claimed to have heard about the slogans '*Chowkidar chor hai*' and '*Main bhi chowkidar*'
- One in every two who were not exposed to social media was found to have no knowledge about these slogans
- With respect to the NYAY scheme, comparing the users on the basis of their usage, the awareness declined with decline in usage
- One in every two voters who were not using any of the social media apps could never know about the NYAY scheme
- The knowledge about the Balakot air-strikes was very high across all the sections but the gap between users and non-users of social media was found to be more than 20 percentage points
- Across all the categories of usage, three-fourth believe 'India belongs to all religions equally'
- Those who believe India to be only of Hindus were between 14 to 17 percent across all the categories
- The voters with high exposure to social media are more likely to believe that Muslims are highly nationalist compared to the ones with no social media exposure
- As the exposure to social media increases, the opinions of the users, whatever they might be, get strengthened
- Those who are on at least one of the social media platforms are likely to identify themselves more with their national identity compared to the State identities
- One in every four respondents, irrespective of their usage patterns, claimed to have no trust at all on the news shared across social media platforms
- Voters using WhatsApp and YouTube showed the least net trust and the voters using Twitter the most

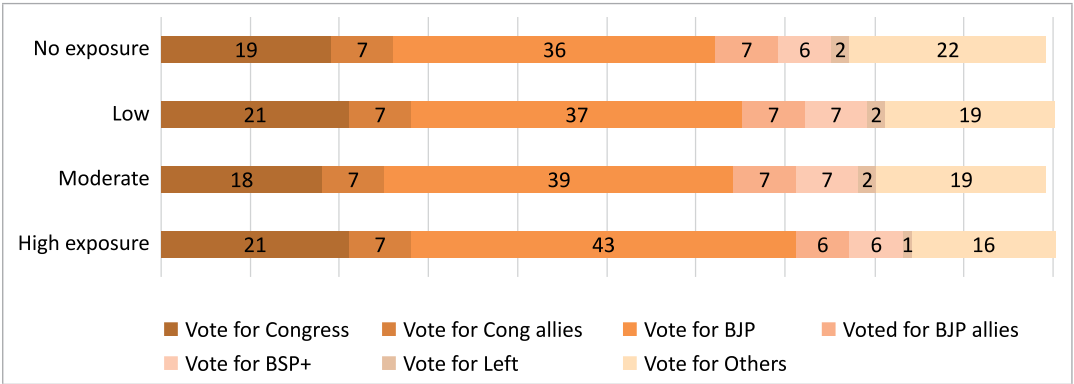
4. Social Media and Vote Choice

In the last section we looked at the extent to which social media impacts the awareness and attitudes of voters; and if it really is a key influencer. Taking the discourse forward, in this section we look at the relationship between social media usage and voting preferences in the recently concluded 2019 Lok Sabha election.

Although there is a general belief and a strong hunch among many that social media played a major role in the BJP's return to power, there hasn't been much evidence presented yet to substantiate or refute this line of thinking. We at Lokniti are in a position to say something about this since for the first time during our National Election Study we asked a series of questions to voters about their usage of social media platforms. This makes it possible for us to link voters' usage of social networking sites, or applications, with their voting choices. So how did social media users vote in the 2019 election? And was their voting preference any different from the voters who were not using it? Our analysis of the survey data throws up a mixed picture. While it does indicate that the BJP did far better among those who use social media a lot than among those who don't use it much, at the same time it does not allow us to conclusively state that social media played a major role in determining the outcome of the 2019 election. This is because even as we find the BJP to have done extremely well among those having high levels of exposure to social media, we also find it to have done quite well among those with low levels of exposure or for that matter among those with no exposure to social networking sites/apps at all. The survey found BJP's vote share among those with high social media exposure to be at 43 percent, among those with moderate social media exposure at 39 percent, among those with low exposure at 37 percent, and among those with no exposure at all at 36 percent (**Figure 4.1**).

This pattern no doubt shows that there existed a relationship between voters' social media usage and their propensity to vote for the BJP. However, considering that the party also got a very high proportion of votes (36%) among those who had absolutely no engagement with social media whatsoever perhaps indicates that it may have won the election even if we take social media out of the equation.

Figure 4.1: Degree of overall social media usage and vote preference for parties or alliances, 2019 (%)



Note: Overall social media usage based on a composite index of Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and Instagram usage.

Further, we must remember that the segment of voters who are highly exposed to social media and among whom the BJP did extremely well netting 43 percent of their vote constitute only 10 percent of the total electorate as per our survey (see Section 1). On the other hand, those who are not exposed to social media at all comprise 64 percent of the electorate and among them the BJP seems to have secured a vote share that is only a percentage point less than its overall vote share of 37 percent.

What’s more, it is not only the BJP that seems to have enjoyed a social media advantage; its main opponent, the Congress too seems to have had one. If we compare just the two extremes – those who have high exposure and those who have none, we notice that the Congress did slightly better among voters whose social media exposure was high than among voters who had no exposure at all (**Figure 4.1**).

One must also not forget the fact (as demonstrated in Section 2) that upper caste, upper class, college educated and urban voters continue to dominate the social media space and are far more likely to be highly exposed to it than Dalits, Adivasis, the economically worse-off, the less educated and rural voters. It is therefore quite possible that the reason why the BJP secured the highest vote share among those highly exposed to social media may have little to do with their high social media usage *per se* but may actually have something to do with the fact that many of those who comprise this segment that uses social media regularly have traditionally always voted for the BJP in large numbers.

Table 4.1: Vote preference of caste communities by their degree of social media usage, 2019 (%)

	Vote for UPA	Vote for NDA	Vote for BSP+	Vote for Left	Vote for Others
Upper caste					
High exposure	18	65	1	<1	16
Moderate	17	62	2	1	18
Low	18	61	4	<1	17
No exposure	18	57	1	2	22
OBC					
High exposure	28	55	4	1	12
Moderate	23	54	6	1	16
Low	22	52	6	1	19
No exposure	22	55	4	1	18
SC					
High exposure	38	42	4	1	15
Moderate	28	40	8	1	23
Low	31	39	9	1	20
No exposure	33	41	13	3	10
ST					
High usage	26	57	10	-	7
Moderate	27	58	6	-	9
Low	44	41	2	2	11
No exposure	38	44	1	2	15
Muslim					
High exposure	39	15	25	3	18
Moderate	45	8	20	3	24
Low	47	9	17	3	24
No exposure	45	9	16	3	27
Others					
High exposure	42	23	3	4	28
Moderate	46	27	5	5	17
Low	40	21	2	4	33
No exposure	42	24	3	3	28

That being said, we do also find that the BJP-led NDA did better among those upper caste voters who reported having greater exposure to social media than those who didn't (**Table 4.1**). Among Adivasis and Muslims too we notice a similar pattern. We do not however find any clear pattern among OBC and Dalit voters. Among Dalits, in fact we notice higher social media usage to be lessening the gap between the NDA and the UPA and no exposure to it to be widening it. A disaggregated analysis by caste thus reveals a complex picture and indicates that social media exposure seems to have worked differently among different castes and communities. Among some it helped the BJP and among others it didn't really give it any special advantage.

Similarly, when we analyze the relationship between social media usage and vote choice by adding the layer of education, we once again get an ambiguous picture. While we find that college-educated voters who used social media a lot voted for the NDA in a bigger proportion compared to college-educated voters who had low or no exposure to social media, we do not find a similar pattern among those who studied only till Class X. If anything, we notice a higher social media usage to have favoured the UPA more than the NDA among this segment (**Table 4.2**).

Table 4.2: Vote preference among voters with different educational qualifications by their degree of social media usage, 2019 (%)

	Vote for UPA	Vote for NDA	Vote for BSP+	Vote for Left	Vote for Others
College Educated					
High exposure	26	51	5	1	17
Moderate	24	49	7	2	18
Low	24	47	7	1	21
No exposure	23	47	7	4	19
Up to Matric					
High exposure	32	43	9	2	14
Moderate	30	40	7	1	22
Low	29	45	7	2	17
No exposure	26	46	5	3	20
Up to Primary					
High exposure	34	44	8	1	13
Moderate	24	49	8	1	18
Low	38	37	6	2	17
No exposure	27	42	5	3	23

Another reason why we need to be cautious before arriving at conclusions about the social media's role in effecting a BJP victory is that the general trend of high support for the BJP among those more exposed to social media is not consistent across all social networking platforms. While Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram show a clear trend - that is, highest support for the BJP among those who use these platforms daily; Twitter and YouTube do not. Twitter users who used the platform daily were as likely to vote for the BJP as those who said that they used it monthly or rarely (**Table 4.3**).

Table 4.3: Degree of overall social media usage and vote preference for individual parties, 2019 (%)

	Vote for Congress	Vote for Cong+	Vote for BJP	Voted for BJP+	Vote for BSP+	Vote for Left	Vote for Others
Facebook							
Daily users	20	7	41	7	6	1	19
Weekly	19	7	38	8	7	2	20
Monthly/rarely	19	8	35	9	11	1	18
Never used	20	7	36	7	6	2	22
Twitter							
Daily users	15	12	38	9	7	1	18
Weekly	19	8	52	5	3	<1	12
Monthly/rarely	19	7	38	6	12	1	18
Never used	20	7	37	7	6	2	21
WhatsApp							
Daily users	20	7	41	7	6	1	20
Weekly	21	8	39	8	4	2	18
Monthly/rarely	19	7	33	7	16	1	18
Never used	19	7	36	7	6	2	22
Instagram							
Daily users	20	7	42	7	6	1	17
Weekly	24	5	43	5	6	2	15
Monthly/rarely	16	8	42	8	8	1	19
Never used	20	7	37	7	6	2	21
YouTube							
Daily users	20	7	39	8	6	1	20
Weekly	19	6	44	7	5	2	16
Monthly/rarely	22	5	37	6	8	2	20
Never used	19	7	36	7	7	2	21

BJP's social media advantage over INC actually declined

When we compare the performance of the BJP and Congress among Twitter and Facebook users in 2019 with their performance among the users of these platforms in 2014, we notice that the greatest gains made by the BJP were among those who did not use these two platforms at all compared to those who did. In fact among the latter, that is Facebook and Twitter users, the BJP's vote share fell compared to 2014 and the Congress's increased. Among daily Facebook users, the vote share gap between the BJP and Congress reduced from 27 percentage points to 21 percentage points (**Table 4.4**). Among weekly Facebook users it came down from 23 percentage points to 19 points and among rare users it declined from 28 percentage points to 16 points. However among those who don't use Facebook at all, the gap increased from 7 percentage points to 16 percentage points. A similar pattern can be seen with respect to Twitter as well except in the category of weekly users (**Table 4.5**). This comparison shows that the BJP actually lost its social media advantage over the Congress compared to 2014.

Table 4.4: Degree of Facebook usage and vote preference, 2014 & 2019 (%)

	2014		2019	
	Vote for Cong	Vote for BJP	Vote for Cong	Vote for BJP
Daily	16	43	20	41
Weekly	18	41	19	38
Rarely	16	44	19	35
Never	23	30	20	36

Table 4.5: Degree of Twitter usage and vote preference, 2014 & 2019 (%)

	2014		2019	
	Vote for Cong	Vote for BJP	Vote for Cong	Vote for BJP
Daily	15	47	15	38
Weekly	15	41	19	52
Rarely	22	34	19	38
Never	20	31	20	37

Social media vis-à-vis traditional media

While usage of social media is definitely growing in the country, social networking platforms do not seem to be sites from where voters are accessing news on politics. In our survey, we asked voters an open ended question about the medium/source they most depended on to get news on politics. Nearly half (49%) said that they mostly got their news from television news channels, 10 percent said it was through newspapers, 11 percent said they got it from people around them and only three percent (6% *among social media users*) of the respondents spontaneously said that online social networks are the medium from where they got their news on politics (**Table 4.6**). What's more, the preference for the BJP among the few

who said that social media is from where they mostly get their political news was found to be exactly the same as the preference for the BJP among those who said that TV was their main source of information. Those who mostly got their news from newspapers were in fact most likely to vote for the BJP.

Table 4.6: Voters' main source of political news (%)

	Main source of political news	<i>Voted for BJP</i>
Television	49	37
Friends/neighbors/people	11	37
Newspaper	10	41
Social media	3	37
Internet	2	38
Mobile phone	2	37
Radio	1	33
No response	22	37

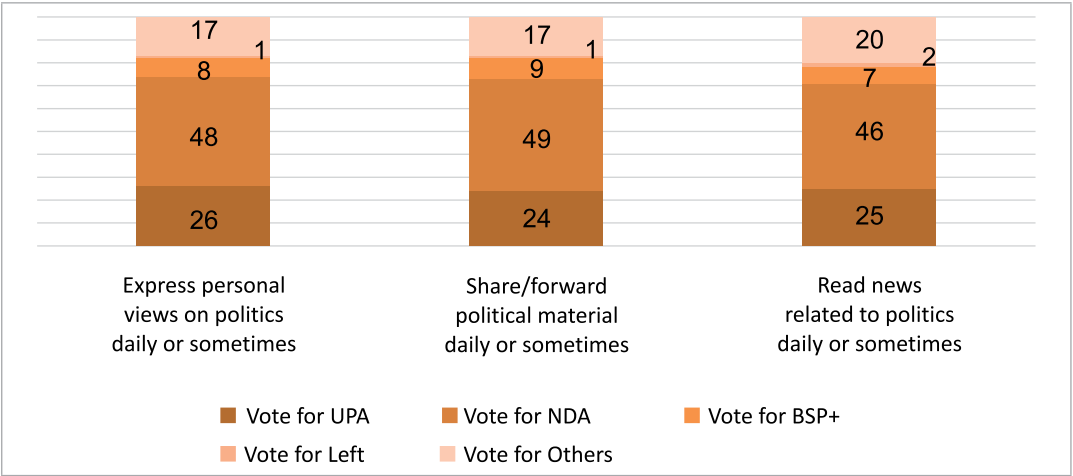
We also tested for the exclusive effect of social media usage on vote choice by looking at the voting preferences of only those respondents who reported high social media usage but at the same time never watched TV news or read newspapers. The voting preferences of these two categories were then compared with the voting preferences of those respondents who said that they watched TV news and read newspapers daily but had no exposure to social media whatsoever. The results of this exercise did not throw up any significant differences between the two extremes with the BJP-NDA only managing to get a slight advantage among the former. In fact, the more interesting result that we found is this – the UPA seems to have done much better among those who use social media a lot but never read newspapers, and done much worse among those who read newspapers daily but have no presence on social media (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7: Vote preference of regular users of social media users vis-à-vis regular users of traditional media, 2019 (%)

	Vote for UPA	Vote for NDA	Vote for BSP+	Vote for Left	Vote for Others
High social media exposure but never watch TV news (6%)	26	48	5	1	20
High social media exposure but never read newspapers (17%)	30	47	1	1	21
Read newspaper daily but is not exposed to social media at all (27%)	19	47	6	8	20
Watch TV news daily but is not exposed to social media at all (43%)	26	44	4	3	23

Where the BJP/NDA seems to have got a bigger advantage is among those social media users who frequently express their political views and share political news and articles on social media. Nearly half (49%) of those who said that they share political news either daily or sometimes on social networking sites were found to have voted for the NDA. Similarly, 48 percent of those who said they express their personal views on politics voted for the NDA (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Vote preference of social media users who express, share, read political news on social media, 2019 (%)



Question asked: How frequently do you do the following on Twitter or Facebook or WhatsApp - daily, sometimes, rarely or never? a. Express your personal views on politics b. Share/forward any political material c. Read news related to politics

Social media as a polarizer

Lokniti’s survey data also suggests that regular social media usage may have made people develop strong feelings of like and dislike towards a political party. When voters were asked whether there was any party that they particularly disliked, only 14 percent or one in every seven of those who were not exposed to social media at all said that they did. On the other hand, among those exposed to social media, the figure was higher at over 20 percent (Table 4.8). Similarly, when voters were asked whether they felt close to any party, those who had the highest exposure to social media were 11 percentage points more likely to say that they felt close to a party than those who had never used social media. Interestingly, daily Twitter users who said they disliked a party were least likely to dislike the Congress compared to daily users of other platforms. At the same time daily Twitter users who said they particularly felt close to a party were also least likely to feel close to the Congress compared to daily users of other sites. Instead they were most likely to feel close to the BJP. In overall terms, when we analyze the two questions by the composite social media index, we find that the Congress was disliked far more among respondents with high social media exposure than those who no exposure whatsoever. The BJP on the other hand was disliked far more by

those with no exposure than those with high exposure (**Table 4.9**). Similarly, those with high media exposure were far more likely to feel close to the BJP than those with no media exposure. For the Congress it was the opposite (**Figure 4.3**).

Table 4.8: Social media users who said they particularly disliked a party and felt particularly close to a party – by the composite social media exposure index (%)

	Particularly dislike a party	Feel close to a party
High exposure	21	37
Moderate	21	32
Low	24	34
No exposure	14	26

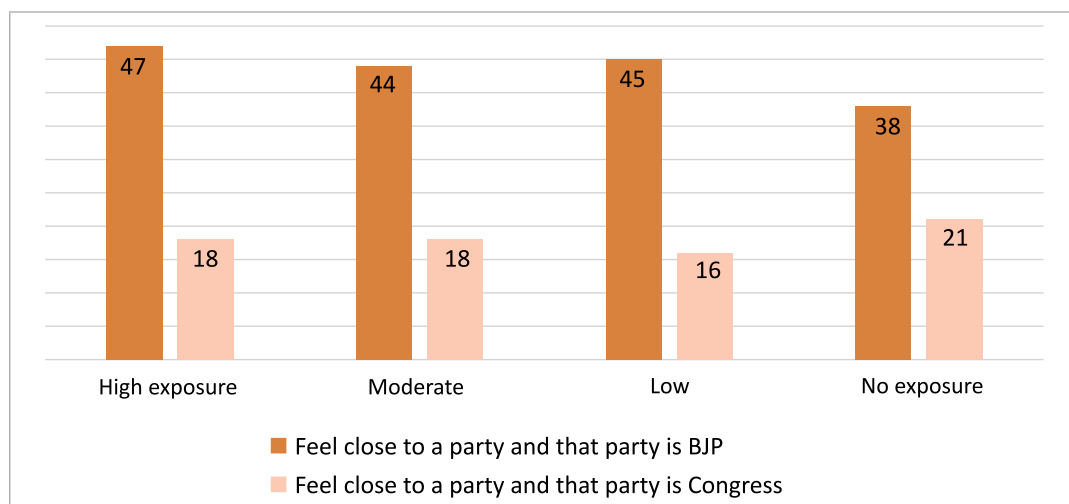
Questions asked: 1) Is there any political party you particularly dislike? 2) Is there any party you particularly feel close to?

Table 4.9: Party disliked most by those who said they particularly disliked a party – by the composite social media exposure index (%)

	Dislike BJP	Dislike Congress
High exposure	36	32
Moderate	35	29
Low	31	25
No exposure	41	20

Question asked: (If dislike a party) Which party do you dislike?

Figure 4.3: Party felt close to by those who felt particularly close to a party – by the composite social media exposure index (%)

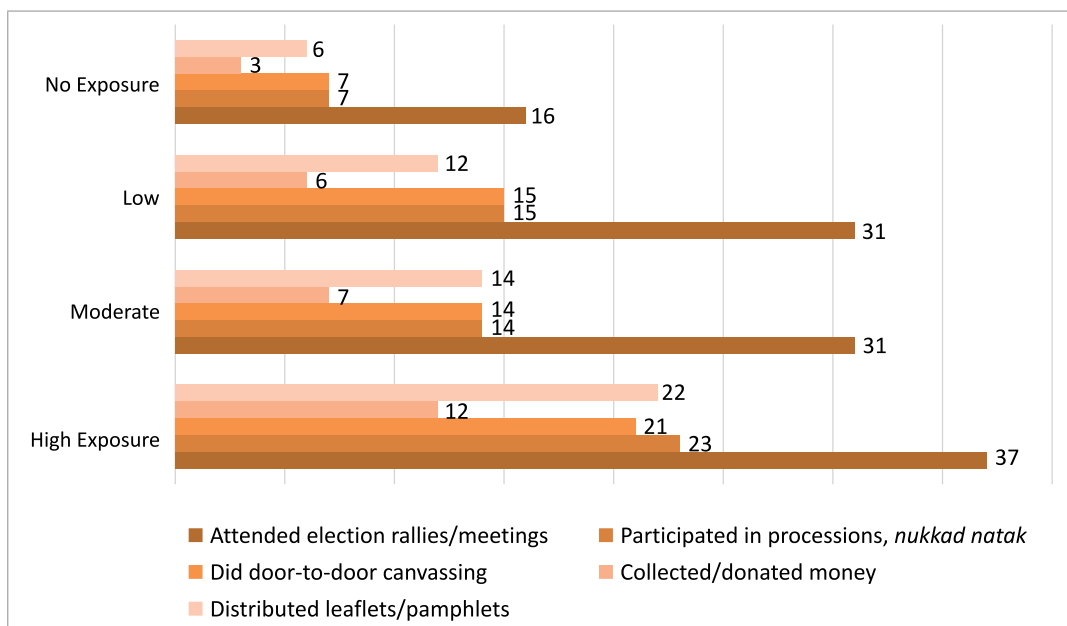


Question asked: (If feel close to a party) Which party do you feel close to?

Social media drives participation

Finally, while we do not have sufficient evidence from the survey to conclude that social media played a definitive role in shaping or determining voting preferences, we do find evidence that points towards a strong link between social media usage and political participation. The survey found social media users to be twice as likely to participate in election rallies and meetings, thrice as likely to take part in processions and door to door canvassing and four times as likely to collect or donate money and distribute pamphlets as those not using any of these platforms (**Figure 4.4**). The voters' propensity to take part in all these activities in fact was found to increase as their exposure levels increased. We do not, however, notice any link between exposure to social media and voter turnout. Those with no exposure were nearly as likely to have turned out to vote as those with low, moderate and high exposure levels.

Figure 4.4: Degree of overall social media usage and participation in election activities, 2019 (%)



Key Takeaways

- Analysis of survey data on social media usage and its link to voting preferences in the 2019 Lok Sabha election throws up a mixed picture
- Survey data shows a relationship between voters' social media usage and their propensity to vote for the BJP; higher was the exposure to social media, higher was the support for BJP
- **But** BJP also got a high proportion of votes (36%) among those not exposed to social media who form two-thirds of the electorate
- Congress too did better among those highly exposed to social media than those not exposed to it
- The impact of social media exposure on BJP's vote was not uniform across castes
- The overall trend of high support for the BJP among those more exposed to social media is not consistent across all social networking platforms
- The BJP's social media advantage over Congress declined compared to 2014. While its lead over Congress among those who use social media declined compared to 2014, its lead among those who do not use social media widened.
- For most voters, the main source of political news is television followed by newspapers. Only three percent said their main source was social media
- Nearly half of those who said that they share political news either daily or sometimes on social networking sites were found to have voted for the NDA
- Social media usage might be making people develop strong feelings of like and dislike towards a political party
- There is a strong link between social media usage and political participation

Conclusion

In the context of the increasing use of social media and new digital technologies by political leaders, parties and candidates at the time of elections; and the emerging debate about social media's role not just in shaping opinions and voting choices but also in fuelling social conflict through misinformation and communally divisive propaganda, this report has looked at four aspects related to social media in India – one, the actual extent of its usage among the voters; two, the socio-economic profile of those who use it; three, the impact it may be having on voters' awareness levels, and their attitudes regarding minorities and the growing identity related debates in the country; and, four, its possible impact on voting choices in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

We have three broad conclusions to make based on the sample survey-based evidence and analysis that has been presented in the report.

First, as far as the role played by social media in shaping voting choices in the 2019 Lok Sabha election (won by the BJP-led NDA) is concerned, an analysis of voting behaviour data from Lokniti's National Election Study throws up findings that do not allow us to confidently state that it was social media that turned the election in favour of the BJP. Even as the data shows that the BJP-led alliance did enjoy an advantage among social media users, and particularly among those who use it very often, at the same time the survey also finds the BJP to have done quite well among those who were not on social media at all. Considering that the latter, that is, those who have never used social media, continues to be a very large segment of the electorate (nearly two-thirds according to our survey) and those who use it are merely one-third of the electorate (with regular users just being one-tenth), it appears that the BJP may well have won the election even if we take social media out of the equation. Moreover, we also find that the BJP's social media advantage did not exist across the board – for instance, while we find a strong correlation between social media usage and vote for the BJP among upper castes and advasis, we do not find a similar relationship to have existed among Dalits and OBCs. Similarly, the correlation was strong among the college educated but not among those who have studied up till Class X. Furthermore, while the propensity of voters with higher social media usage to vote for the BJP was seen on most social media platforms, there were however some where it was not visible. And even on those platforms where it was visible, the relationship was not a perfectly linear one. What's more, the BJP's advantage

over the Congress among social media users actually declined in comparison to 2014. We find that its vote share lead over the Congress reduced among Facebook and Twitter users and widened among those who do not use the two platforms. We also find that for a majority of voters, including those on social media, traditional media such as TV and newspapers continue to be the most important sources for getting news on politics. Only three percent of voters said that social media is what they depended on most to get access to political news. Moreover, only one-fourth of social media users in our survey reported using the medium regularly for airing their political views and thoughts, and only one-third said they use the medium for reading political news daily or sometimes. These data should caution us from claiming that social media determined voting choices and had an impact on elections. It did play a role, no doubt, but its role was not pre-eminent.

Second, although hate speech and anti-minority bashing on online social networks and apps is growing, and is very much a reality, we do not find much evidence from our survey that indicates that this constant bombardment of communal propaganda may have impacted people's opinions towards minorities adversely. Voters with high social media usage were more likely to believe that Muslims are nationalist and also that India belongs to all its religions equally (and not to Hindus alone) than voters with no exposure to social media whatsoever. We must add a note of caution here though while arriving at this conclusion – there could have been an element of social desirability at work with respect to the questions that were asked and we cannot be sure about how the respondents who gave us these responses offline might actually be behaving or reacting to the majoritarian messages online either openly or in the cloak of anonymity. It is also interesting to note that those on social media were found to be more opinionated on questions of majoritarianism than those not on it and hence we also notice there to be a tendency among those exposed to social media to be more likely to carry both sets of beliefs/extreme opinions on these questions as compared to those who do not use social media. In other words those who were exposed to social media were not only more likely to not have majoritarian sentiments as compared to those who do not use it but they were at the same time also more likely to have them as well. That being said, it must be stressed that the former outweighed the latter by a wide margin, which is reassuring. What is also perhaps a positive finding is that half the regular, moderate and rare users of social media said that they do not have much trust (either no trust or very little trust) in the information they receive on the social media platforms with the highest levels of distrust being among those who use social media a lot. Given the abundance of fake news that is shared on these platforms, this is a welcome finding. At the same time, however, we must also stress that there is still a sizeable section of frequent social media users (one-fifth) who said they highly trust the information that they receive from these platforms.

Finally, there is no doubt that social media platforms in the country have grown at a rapid pace in the last five years and data collected during our various surveys does clearly indicate this, however, what it also finds is that this growth may have stagnated now. Even as we notice that the increase in usage of various social media platforms was exponential up until 2018, it

has stopped increasing in the last one year or so. While this is particularly true for Twitter, it can also be seen with respect to the usage of Facebook and WhatsApp which are currently the two most popular social media platforms in the country. It is also noticed that those who are using these social media platforms continue to be mostly from certain well to do and comfortably placed sections – mostly upper caste, urban, highly educated and young voters. This exclusivity also seems to be linked to the fact that these sections have a greater access to/ownership of smartphones. However, at the same time, the space is getting more and more representative with each passing year on account of growing access to the internet and the availability of inexpensive mobile data packs. A comparison between the survey data collected this year and data from two years ago indicates that the democratization of the social media space (that is, inclusion of other segments of society) has been taking place, particularly with respect to the inclusion of the less educated and those living in rural areas. The one gap that has however not been bridged much is the men-women gap. Women continue to lag far behind men when it comes to smartphone ownership and social media usage, and the gap between the two genders has only reduced marginally compared to two years ago, across platforms.

We believe that going forward, this gap between digital ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ needs greater attention from those doing research on social media, and that traditional methods such as sample survey research, despite their limitations in studying social media, may have much to offer (as demonstrated in this report) as far as the study of Internet society is concerned.

Methodology

The analysis that has been presented in this report is based on nationwide surveys conducted in April–May 2019, May 2018, May 2017 and April–May 2014 by the Lokniti programme of Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. While the surveys done in 2019 and 2014 were part of the National Election Study that Lokniti conducted during the Lok Sabha elections, the surveys conducted in 2018 and 2017 were part of Lokniti’s Mood of the Nation series.

The 2019 survey was a Post Poll conducted a few days after voters had voted in each phase of the Lok Sabha election and the 2014 survey was a Pre Poll conducted three weeks before the Lok Sabha election.

The fieldwork for the 2019 survey was conducted in 26 States – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal. A total of 24,236 voters were interviewed in 211 parliamentary constituencies.

The fieldwork for the 2018 survey was conducted in 19 States – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. A total of 15,859 respondents were interviewed in 175 parliamentary constituencies.

The fieldwork for the 2017 survey was conducted in 19 States – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. A total of 11,373 respondents were interviewed in 146 parliamentary constituencies.

The fieldwork for the 2014 survey was conducted in 21 States – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal. A total of 20,957 respondents were interviewed in 301 parliamentary constituencies.

The sampling process adopted across all surveys was multi-stage random sampling – first the parliamentary constituencies were sampled, then the assembly constituencies within them, then polling stations within them, and finally the voters who were to be interviewed from the electoral rolls of the sampled polling station. At each of these stages the systematic random sampling procedure was adopted.

Once we identified our sample of the electorate, trained investigators were sent to meet them. Our investigators sat down in the homes of people whose names were selected from the electoral roll, and asked them a detailed set of questions using a standardized semi-structured interview schedule. All the interview schedules were translated to local languages – in West Bengal it was in Bengali, in Tamil Nadu in Tamil, in Rajasthan in Hindi and so on.

While doing the all-India analysis we adjusted the figures using a statistical technique known as weighting, which means that each State was proportionately represented in the analysis. The achieved raw sample across all four surveys has also been weighted by gender, locality, religion, and caste group based on Census 2011.

Profile of the achieved raw national sample compared with Census 2011 (%)

	May 2014	May 2017	May 2018	May 2019	Actual share in India's population Census 2011
Women	46	48	46	48	49
Urban	26	28	22	27	31
SC	19	17	19	19	17
ST	8	10	9	9	9
Muslim	13	11	12	14	14
Christian	2	2	2	3	2
Sikh	3	2	2	2	2

Note: Figures have been rounded off.

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