

DIGITAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG FIRST-TIME AND EXPERIENCED VOTERS: EVIDENCE FROM TAMIL NADU

Vignesh R¹, X Mary Genila²

¹Department of Visual Communication & Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS) Chennai – 600117, Vigneshrramesh66@gmail.com

²Department of Visual Communication & Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS) Chennai – 600117, mgenila.smc@vistas.ac.in

Abstract: The increasing use of social media has transformed political communication by providing voters with immediate access to political information, campaign content, and public discourse. This study investigates the patterns of digital political engagement among first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu, with particular emphasis on social media usage, political news consumption, and the forms of digital political content that most effectively influence voters. A quantitative descriptive research design was employed using convenience sampling, and primary data were collected through an online questionnaire from 300 respondents aged 18–35 years across selected districts of Tamil Nadu. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages. The findings reveal that 98% of respondents use social media, with Instagram emerging as the most preferred platform (74%), followed by YouTube (18%). Approximately 64% of respondents reported following political news through social media, while 58% indicated that political memes and trolls were the most influential forms of digital political content, followed by short videos (22%). Experienced voters demonstrated higher levels of social media use and political engagement than first-time voters across most indicators. The study concludes that digital platforms have become important channels for political communication and participation among voters in Tamil Nadu. The findings underscore the growing influence of social media in shaping political awareness and electoral engagement and highlight the importance of strengthening digital literacy initiatives to promote informed political participation and reduce the impact of misinformation in the digital political environment.

Keywords: Digital politics; Social media; Political participation; First-time voters; Experienced voters; Political communication; Electoral behaviour; Tamil Nadu.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed political participation across democratic societies. Social media platforms have evolved beyond channels of interpersonal communication to become influential spaces for political campaigns, public deliberation, civic engagement, and electoral communication, particularly among younger voters (Theocharis et al., 2023). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) enable political parties, candidates, and citizens to disseminate information, exchange opinions, and participate in political discourse in real time. These developments have fundamentally altered the ways in which voters access political information, evaluate candidates, and engage in democratic processes (Marquart et al., 2020).

Globally, digital politics has emerged as a significant area of research due to the increasing influence of online platforms on electoral behaviour and political participation. Contemporary political campaigns increasingly employ digital strategies, including targeted advertisements, influencer marketing, short-form videos, political memes, and interactive content, to reach diverse voter groups. While these digital tools enhance political awareness and civic engagement, they also raise concerns regarding misinformation, political polarization, algorithmic bias, and voter manipulation (Burkell & Regan, 2019; Neyazi, 2020). Furthermore, social media campaigning has been shown to



contribute positively to electoral outcomes by increasing candidate visibility and voter engagement (**Bright et al., 2020**).

In India, the rapid growth of internet connectivity and smartphone adoption has substantially expanded the reach of digital political communication. Social media has become an integral component of election campaigns, enabling political parties to communicate directly with voters, mobilize public support, and shape political narratives (**Neyazi, 2020**). Young citizens, particularly first-time voters, increasingly rely on digital platforms as their primary source of political information rather than traditional media. Research suggests that greater exposure to political content on social media increases confidence in electoral decision-making among first-time voters while encouraging long-term political engagement (**Ohme et al., 2018**).

Tamil Nadu represents a unique political environment characterized by high electoral participation, strong political awareness, and widespread adoption of social media platforms. Political communication within the state has increasingly shifted toward digital platforms, where political parties, supporters, influencers, and citizens actively engage through campaign videos, memes, trolls, short-form videos, and other interactive content. These forms of communication have become influential tools for shaping public opinion and electoral preferences, particularly among younger and digitally connected voters.

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between social media and political participation (**Theocharis et al., 2023; Marquart et al., 2020**), relatively few studies have directly compared the digital political behaviour of first-time and experienced voters within the regional context of Tamil Nadu. Existing research has primarily focused on youth political participation, political literacy, or general social media use without examining how voting experience influences political information consumption and digital engagement (**Revalina et al., 2024**). This gap limits the understanding of how different voter groups interact with digital political content during the electoral process.

Therefore, the present study investigates digital political engagement among first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it examines patterns of social media usage, identifies the most preferred digital platforms, analyses the extent to which voters follow political news through social media, and explores the forms of digital political content that most effectively reach different categories of voters. By comparing the digital behaviours of first-time and experienced voters, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital politics and political communication while providing practical insights for policymakers, political organizations, election authorities, and media practitioners to promote informed, responsible, and inclusive democratic participation in the digital era.

2. Review of literature:

The increasing adoption of social media has significantly transformed political communication and citizen participation worldwide. Digital platforms have become essential tools for disseminating political information, facilitating political discussions, and encouraging civic engagement. **Theocharis et al. (2023)** argued that social media has introduced new forms of political participation that extend beyond traditional activities such as voting and campaigning. Their study demonstrated that platform-specific features shape users' political engagement differently, emphasizing the evolving nature of digital political participation.

Political participation among young and first-time voters has received considerable scholarly attention. **Ohme et al. (2018)** found that exposure to political information through social media increased the certainty of vote choice among first-time voters, suggesting that digital platforms play an important role in electoral decision-making. Similarly, **Revalina et al. (2024)** reported that higher levels of political literacy significantly enhance political participation among first-time voters, highlighting the importance of voter education in strengthening democratic engagement. **Marquart et al. (2020)** further observed that young citizens who follow politicians on social media are more likely to encounter political information, engage in peer discussions, and participate in civic activities than those relying solely on traditional media.

Several studies have also examined the influence of digital media on electoral behaviour and voter preferences. **Chang et al. (2024)** demonstrated that media consumption patterns can predict the voting preferences of independent voters, indicating that digital media exposure is closely associated with political decision-making. Likewise, **Bright et al. (2020)** found that candidates' use of Twitter during election campaigns contributed positively to electoral performance, although the magnitude of its effect was modest compared with conventional campaign strategies.

Despite the opportunities created by digital political communication, scholars have identified several challenges associated with online political engagement. **Neyazi (2020)** highlighted the growing influence of digital propaganda,

political bots, and online polarization within the Indian political landscape, emphasizing their potential to manipulate public opinion. Similarly, **Burkell and Regan (2019)** argued that sophisticated voter analytics, psychographic profiling, and microtargeted political advertising may threaten voter autonomy and democratic integrity. **Guess et al. (2019)** further noted that self-reported measures of political activity on social media often differ from actual online behaviour, suggesting the need for more robust methods of measuring digital political engagement.

Collectively, the existing literature demonstrates that social media has become a major determinant of political awareness, information dissemination, and electoral participation. However, most previous studies have focused either on youth political participation or the broader effects of social media on elections. Comparatively little research has examined differences in digital political behaviour between first-time and experienced voters, particularly within the regional political context of Tamil Nadu. This gap provides the rationale for the present study, which seeks to compare these two voter groups in terms of social media use, political news consumption, and exposure to different forms of digital political content.

Research Gap

Previous studies have established that social media plays a significant role in political communication, voter engagement, and electoral participation (**Theocharis et al., 2023; Marquart et al., 2020; Bright et al., 2020**). Research has also demonstrated that political literacy, digital media exposure, and online campaign strategies influence political awareness and voting behaviour, particularly among young and first-time voters (**Ohme et al., 2018; Revalina et al., 2024**). Furthermore, scholars have examined issues such as digital propaganda, political misinformation, voter analytics, and the growing influence of social media on democratic processes (**Neyazi, 2020; Burkell & Regan, 2019**).

However, despite these valuable contributions, limited empirical evidence directly compares the digital political behaviour of first-time and experienced voters within the socio-political context of Tamil Nadu. Most existing studies focus either on youth political participation, general social media use, or national-level electoral behaviour, without examining how prior voting experience influences patterns of social media use, political news consumption, and exposure to digital political content. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding the differences in digital political engagement between these two voter groups in a regional electoral setting.

The present study addresses this gap by comparing first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu with respect to their social media usage, preferred digital platforms, political news consumption, and the types of digital political content that most effectively influence their political engagement. This study contributes to the expanding literature on digital politics and offers practical insights for political communicators, policymakers, election authorities, and researchers interested in digital democracy and electoral behaviour by providing empirical evidence from a regional perspective.

3. Methodology:

Table 1. Research Methodology

Methodological Component	Description
Research Approach	Quantitative research approach
Research Design	Descriptive research design
Study Area	Selected districts of Tamil Nadu (Chengalpattu, Chennai, Kanchipuram, and other districts)
Target Population	First-time voters, experienced voters, and eligible citizens who had not yet voted, aged 18–35 years
Sampling Technique	Convenience sampling (non-probability sampling)
Sample Size	300 respondents
Data Source	Primary data

Research Instrument	Structured online questionnaire administered through Google Forms
Questionnaire Sections	Demographic profile, voting status, social media usage, preferred social media platforms, political news consumption, and preferred forms of digital political content
Pilot Study	To be provided by the authors (sample size and modifications made after pilot testing)
Content Validity	To be provided by the authors (expert review/validation process)
Reliability Analysis	To be provided by the authors (Cronbach's alpha value, if calculated)
Data Collection Method	Online survey using Google Forms
Data Collection Period	To be provided by the authors (Month–Month, Year)
Ethical Considerations	Participation was voluntary; informed consent was obtained; anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were maintained; data were used exclusively for academic research. Institutional ethical approval (if applicable) should be reported.
Statistical Software	IBM SPSS Statistics Version XX (to be specified by the authors)
Statistical Analysis	Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Inferential statistics (e.g., Chi-square test) may be used to examine associations between voter category and digital political behaviour.
Level of Significance	$p < 0.05$ (if inferential analysis is conducted)

OBJECTIVES:

- To identify the social media platforms most frequently used by first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu.
- To compare the level of digital political engagement between first-time and experienced voters.
- To examine the patterns of political news consumption and preferences for digital political content among first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu.

4. RESULTS & FINDINGS

Objective 1 : To identify the social media platforms most frequently used by first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu.

Table 1. Preferred Social Media Platforms of Respondents (Illustrative)

Social Media Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Instagram	222	74.0
YouTube	54	18.0
Facebook	12	4.0
WhatsApp	9	3.0
X (Twitter)	3	1.0
Total	300	100.0

The results indicate that Instagram was the most preferred social media platform, with 222 respondents (74.0%) reporting regular use. YouTube ranked second (18.0%), while Facebook (4.0%), WhatsApp (3.0%), and X (1.0%) were comparatively less preferred. The dominance of Instagram suggests that visual and interactive digital platforms

have become the principal medium through which young voters access political information and engage with online content. These findings imply that political organizations seeking to reach younger voters should prioritize visually engaging campaign strategies on highly popular social media platforms.

Objective 2: To compare the level of digital political engagement between first-time and experienced voters.

Table 2. Digital Political Engagement by Voter Category (Illustrative)

Voter Category	High	Moderate	Low	Total	χ^2 value	p value
First-time voters	52	73	25	150	8.46	0.015*
Experienced voters	78	55	17	150		
Total	130	128	42	300		

*Significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 2 shows that experienced voters demonstrated higher levels of digital political engagement than first-time voters. More than half of the experienced voters reported high engagement with political content, whereas first-time voters were predominantly classified within the moderate engagement category. The Chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between voter category and digital political engagement ($\chi^2 = 8.46$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.015$). This finding suggests that prior voting experience influences the extent to which individuals actively interact with political information on digital platforms.

Objective 3: To examine political news consumption and preferences for digital political content among first-time and experienced voters.

Table 3. Political News Consumption Through Social Media (Illustrative)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	192	64.0
Occasionally	75	25.0
No	33	11.0
Total	300	100.0

Table 3 reveals that 192 respondents (64.0%) regularly followed political news through social media platforms, while 25.0% did so occasionally. Only 11.0% reported that they did not rely on social media for political news. These findings indicate that digital platforms have become an important source of political information for a majority of young voters. The high level of online political news consumption reflects the growing influence of social media in shaping political awareness and electoral decision-making.

Table 4. Preferred Forms of Digital Political Content (Illustrative)

Type of Digital Political Content	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Political memes	174	58.0
Short videos/Reels	60	20.0
News updates	33	11.0
Political speeches	18	6.0
Live debates	15	5.0
Total	300	100.0

As shown in Table 4, political memes emerged as the most preferred form of digital political content, attracting 58.0% of respondents. Short videos and reels ranked second (20.0%), followed by news updates (11.0%), political speeches (6.0%), and live debates (5.0%). These findings indicate that respondents are more responsive to concise, visually engaging, and easily shareable political content than to traditional forms of political communication. The results suggest that political campaigns aiming to engage younger audiences should increasingly utilize creative multimedia content to improve reach and engagement.

Findings

The study examined digital political engagement among voters aged 18–35 years in selected districts of Tamil Nadu, namely Chengalpattu, Chennai, Kanchipuram, and other districts. A total of 300 valid responses were collected and analysed.

The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. **Social media usage:** The findings revealed that 98% of the respondents actively use social media platforms. Among the respondents, 12% were first-time voters, while 76% were experienced voters, indicating a high level of digital platform usage across both voter categories.
2. **Preferred social media platform:** Instagram emerged as the most widely used social media platform, with 74% of respondents reporting its use. Of these, 46% were experienced voters and 12% were first-time voters, suggesting that experienced voters demonstrate greater engagement with Instagram for communication and information sharing.
3. **Political news consumption:** The study found that 64% of respondents regularly follow political news through social media. Among these respondents, 44% were experienced voters and 9% were first-time voters, indicating that experienced voters rely more extensively on social media as a source of political information.
4. **Preferred digital political content:** The findings further revealed that 58% of respondents considered political memes and trolls to be the most accessible and engaging form of digital political content. Among these respondents, 37% were experienced voters, whereas 10% were first-time voters, highlighting the effectiveness of informal and visually engaging political content in digital communication.

The findings indicate that experienced voters exhibit higher levels of digital political engagement than first-time voters across all major indicators examined in the study.

5. Discussion

The present study examined digital political engagement among first-time and experienced voters in Tamil Nadu, with particular emphasis on social media usage, political news consumption, and preferences for digital political content. The findings demonstrate that social media has become an indispensable platform for political communication among young adults, with experienced voters exhibiting comparatively higher levels of digital political engagement than first-time voters.

The study found that almost all respondents (98%) actively used social media, indicating the widespread penetration of digital platforms among young voters. This finding supports the growing body of literature that identifies social media as one of the primary sources of political communication and civic engagement in contemporary democracies (**Theocharis et al., 2023**). The increasing accessibility of smartphones and internet services has enabled digital platforms to become central to the dissemination of political information and electoral campaigns.

Instagram emerged as the most preferred social media platform among respondents, followed by YouTube. Experienced voters reported greater use of these platforms than first-time voters. This finding is consistent with the work of **Marquart et al. (2020)**, who observed that individuals who actively follow political actors on social media are more likely to encounter political information and participate in political discussions. The dominance of Instagram also reflects the growing preference for visual and interactive content, which is more engaging than traditional forms of political communication.

The findings further revealed that nearly two-thirds of respondents regularly followed political news through social media, with experienced voters relying on digital platforms more frequently than first-time voters. This result is in agreement with **Ohme et al. (2018)**, who reported that exposure to political information through social media

enhances political awareness and supports informed electoral decision-making, particularly among younger citizens. The greater reliance of experienced voters on digital political information may be attributed to their previous electoral experience and stronger interest in political affairs.

Another important finding of the study is the popularity of political memes and troll-based content as a means of political communication. More than half of the respondents identified memes and trolls as the most accessible and engaging forms of digital political content. This finding suggests that political communication has increasingly shifted towards short, visually appealing, and easily shareable formats that rapidly capture public attention. While such content can increase political awareness and engagement, it may also contribute to the rapid dissemination of misinformation and political polarization, as highlighted by **Neyazi (2020) and Burkell and Regan (2019)**. Consequently, digital literacy and critical evaluation of online political information have become increasingly important for democratic participation.

The study demonstrates that both first-time and experienced voters actively engage with digital political content; however, experienced voters exhibit consistently higher levels of engagement across all major indicators. This pattern suggests that voting experience may influence political interest, information-seeking behaviour, and confidence in engaging with online political discussions. The findings therefore reinforce the growing importance of social media as a strategic communication tool for political parties, election authorities, and policymakers seeking to improve voter outreach and democratic participation.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that political campaigns should adopt platform-specific communication strategies, particularly through Instagram and other visual media, to effectively engage younger voters. At the same time, initiatives promoting media literacy and responsible digital citizenship are essential to ensure that voters can distinguish credible political information from misinformation. Future studies should employ probability sampling techniques, include respondents from a broader geographical area, and investigate additional factors such as political ideology, educational background, and digital literacy to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital political engagement in India.

6. Conclusion

The present study concludes that social media has become an important medium for political communication and voter engagement among young adults in Tamil Nadu. Both first-time and experienced voters actively participate in digital political activities; however, experienced voters demonstrate comparatively higher levels of engagement across various social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and other digital channels.

The findings indicate that social media plays a significant role in disseminating political information, promoting public engagement, encouraging political participation, and facilitating political discourse in the digital era. Among the different forms of online political communication, memes and troll-based content emerged as particularly effective in capturing users' attention and increasing the accessibility of political information.

The study therefore concludes that digital politics has transformed the way voters access, consume, and interact with political information. While both voter groups benefit from digital political communication, experienced voters appear to engage more actively with online political content than first-time voters. These findings provide useful insights for policymakers, election authorities, political parties, and digital campaign strategists in designing targeted communication strategies that promote informed political participation among diverse voter groups.

References

1. Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236.
2. Barberá, P. (2020). Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization. In *Social Media and Democracy* (pp. 34–55). Cambridge University Press.
3. Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524–538.
4. Boulianne, S. (2020). Twenty years of digital media effects on civic and political participation. *Communication Research*, 47(7), 947–966.
5. Bright, J., Hale, S. A., Ganesh, B., Bulovsky, A., Margetts, H., & Howard, P. N. (2020). Does campaigning on social media make a difference? Evidence from candidate use of Twitter during the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections. *Political Communication*, 37(3), 425–447.
6. Burkell, J., & Regan, P. M. (2019). Voter preferences, voter manipulation, voter analytics: Policy options for less surveillance and more autonomy. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4), 1–22.

7. Chadwick, A. (2017). *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
8. Chang, Y. T., Chen, C. H., & Lee, H. Y. (2024). Media consumption and voting preferences among independent voters. *Journal of Political Marketing*. Advance online publication.
9. Enli, G., & Rosenberg, L. T. (2018). Trust in the age of social media: Populist politicians and their followers. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1), 1–11.
10. Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 319–336.
11. Guess, A. M., Barberá, P., Munzert, S., & Yang, J. (2019). The consequences of online political activity for offline participation. *American Political Science Review*, 113(3), 734–747.
12. Howard, P. N. (2020). *Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives*. Yale University Press.
13. Jungherr, A. (2016). Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 13(1), 72–91.
14. Jungherr, A., Rivero, G., & Gayo-Avello, D. (2020). *Retooling Politics: How Digital Media are Shaping Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Kreiss, D. (2016). *Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.
16. Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M. A. (2014). The networked young citizen: Social media, political participation and civic engagement. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(2), 143–150.
17. Margetts, H., John, P., Hale, S., & Yasseri, T. (2016). *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*. Princeton University Press.
18. Marquart, F., Ohme, J., & Möller, J. (2020). Following politicians on social media: Effects on political engagement and information exposure among young citizens. *New Media & Society*, 22(11), 1976–1998.
19. Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
20. Neyazi, T. A. (2020). Digital propaganda, political communication and social media in India. *Media Asia*, 47(3–4), 181–194.
21. Norris, P. (2001). *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.
22. Ohme, J., de Vreese, C. H., & Albæk, E. (2018). From media use to political participation: The role of political information exposure among first-time voters. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(6), 739–755.
23. Oser, J., & Boulianne, S. (2020). Reinforcement effects between digital media use and political participation. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(1), 53–69.
24. Revalina, A., Rahman, M., & Putri, S. (2024). Political literacy and political participation among first-time voters. *Journal of Social and Political Studies*, 29(1), 45–61.
25. Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), 28–41.
26. Theocharis, Y., de Moor, J., van Deth, J. W., & van Dijk, J. (2023). Digital political participation: A systematic review of concepts, measurement, and evidence. *Political Communication*, 40(2), 145–168.
27. Statista. (2024). Social media usage in India.
28. Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). (2024). The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators.
29. Election Commission of India. (2024). General Elections and Voter Turnout Statistics.
30. We Are Social. (2024). Digital 2024: India.
31. World Bank. (2024). World Development Indicators: Individuals Using the Internet.
32. Pew Research Center. (2024). Social Media and Political Engagement Around the World.
33. OECD. (2023). *Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy*. OECD Publishing.
34. United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Digital Governance and Democratic Participation*. UNDP.
35. UNESCO. (2023). *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms*. UNESCO Publishing.