
UNIT 14 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL MEDIA

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14.0 INTRODUCTION

The term "political participation" encompasses a broad range of actions citizens take to express their political beliefs, influence public policy, and support the democratic process. The extensive availability of the Internet in the modern era has tremendously improved people's capacity to participate in political processes. Internet-based applications have shown that they can motivate millions of individuals to take part in political processes that have real-world consequences.

When individuals participate in their political system online or offline, they engage in individual and collective actions, occupying new levels of socio-political interaction. The proliferation of digital ecosystems has simplified political participation, catapulting the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) into the sphere of political culture. The ultimate goal of MIL in this setting is to strengthen ties between the state and the people.

The digital age information system makes available a plethora of data about political problems, candidates, parties, and government policies. Users can easily access a wide range of information, including news, analysis, and multiple points of view, allowing them to enlighten themselves better and make sound choices, thus being politically included in society. To achieve the objective of political inclusion, citizens must have easy access to information and political agencies that encourage them to participate in

policy making indirectly, influence the enforcement of laws, evaluate the performance of our government, and assist others in doing the same.

14.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this Unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the basics of political participation in both traditional and digital contexts;
- Explore how digital media tools are used for political engagement;
- Examine how digital platforms influence political debates;
- Investigate the relationship between democracy and digital media; and
- Enhance media and information literacy for effective political participation.

14.2 CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Van Deth (2014) defined political participation as "citizens' activities affecting politics". Citizens' participation is very important for democratic decision-making, and this has led to a significant increase in the study of political participation during the past few decades. Participation in politics involves a wide range of actions that allow people to have their voices heard, shape policy that affects their daily lives, and shape the world around them. Beginning with a heavy emphasis on voting and electoral engagement in the 1940s and 1950s, the repertoire of ways to acquire influence has expanded lately to include actions like signing petitions, blocking traffic, donating money, and even fighting with the police.

14.2.1 Dimensions of Political Participation

Traditional studies of citizen involvement in politics have centred on voting. However, contemporary conceptions of political participation have expanded to encompass a broader range of activities. Brady (1999) defined political engagement as ordinary citizens' actions intended to influence some political outcomes. Verba and Nie (1972) described participation in four typologies: voting, campaign activity for political parties, contact with public officials, and cooperative or communal activities related to local communities. A more comprehensive typology, including five dimensions, was proposed by Teorell et al. (2007). According to them, political participation is the act of voting, consumer participation (e.g. donating money, boycotting products, and buying political products), involvement with political parties (e.g. working for, volunteering with, or financially supporting a political party), participation in protest activities (e.g. demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of protest), and contact activity (e.g. reaching out to groups including organisations, politicians, and government officials). More recently, Ekman and Amnå's (2012) presentation distinguished between latent and manifest political participation.

Table 1. Latent and manifest forms of political participation (Ekman & Amna, 2012)

Latent political participation		Manifest political participation		
Involvement (attention)	Civic engagement (action)	Formal political participation	Activism (extra-parliamentary participation)	
Individual forms				
			Legal	Illegal
Interest in politics and social issues Keeping watch on current political events	Activities are based on a person's interest and focus on politics and societal concerns.	Election involvement and contact activities	To make one's voice known or to make a difference by personal methods (such as signing petitions or political consumption) through extra-parliamentary forms of participation.	Individually committed unlawful acts with a political motivation
Collective forms				
A feeling of membership in a group or collective with a distinct political profile or agenda. Lifestyle-related politics (for instance, identity, clothing, music, cuisine, and values)	Volunteer work is done outside of one's family and close circle of friends to enhance conditions in the local community, for charity, or to assist others.	Membership in conventional political parties, trade unions, and other organisations	Network-based political participation, e.g. new social movements, demonstrations, strikes, and protests	Protests and illegal and violent activities: Conflicts with the police or political opponents include protests, rioting, squatting, property destruction, and confrontations.

Only through latent forms of participation can new political behaviours and the chances for political involvement in various countries be comprehended, as Ekman and Amnå (2012) stated.

14.2.2 Online Political Participation

The Internet has enabled new types of mediated political engagement, thus broadening the scope of political participation. Such new online forms of participation raised hopes for a stronger engagement of politically underrepresented demographics like women, ethnic minorities, youth, the less educated, and low-income individuals.

Online political participation can be psychological (psychological engagement in politics using digital media) or behavioural (online political behaviours: attending civic events online, contacting officials online, volunteering online, or working in online campaigns). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) define political participation as psychological and behavioural involvement in civic and public affairs with the clear expectation of influencing government actions. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) identified types of online and offline participation: passive engagement consists of news attention, discussion, and the expressive mode, whereas active participation includes voting, party or campaign activities, protest activities, contacting, communal actions, and consumerism.

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have evolved into potent instruments for online political engagement. Users can get their voices heard, disseminate political content, discuss contemporary topics, and make meaningful connections with others who share their views. People can band together for a common cause or a political campaign using online communities and grassroots movements made possible by social media. People can organise and sign online petitions to lobby for policy changes or support certain causes on digital media platforms. It is possible to influence policymakers by circulating and collecting signatures for these petitions. Political dialogues and debates on digital media platforms can now be held across geographic boundaries. Sharing opinions, posing questions, and conversing with others are all possible through internet forums, comment sections, and live streaming. Discussions like these help people learn more about politics, develop critical thinking skills, and affect public opinion.

Two main categories describe how an individual participates in politics via digital media. The three categories are:

- i) **Passive engagement:** An individual is exposed to information related to political affairs but is not compelled to take any kind of action.
- ii) **Active participation** means doing something to make a difference in the political system.

To be more specific, three distinct types of political influence can be attained through political participation: influence over particular policies (primary influence), influence over the selection of public officials responsible for making these policies (secondary influence), and influence over the political preferences and behaviours of other citizens (tertiary influence).

14.3 DIGITAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR PARTICIPATION

Digital media tools encourage digital participation by providing platforms and resources facilitating engagement, collaboration, and information sharing. They enable people to contribute their voices, perspectives, and expertise to various political and civic discussions and activities, nurturing a more inclusive and participatory democratic landscape. Digital media tools for political participation include social media platforms, online forums and discussion boards, crowdsourcing platforms, petitions and campaigns, and mobile applications.

Social media platforms: Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable individuals to connect, share, and engage with a larger audience. These platforms permit users to voice their opinions, discuss political issues, and generate public debates.

Online forums and discussion boards provide virtual locations for individuals to engage in conversations, debates, and knowledge exchange. These platforms enable individuals to pose queries, share information, and discuss topics of particular interest. They facilitate the development of communities and the exchange of diverse viewpoints. For example, "Youth4work" is an online forum to discuss political issues.

Crowdsourcing platforms: Digital media tools facilitate crowdsourcing, in which individuals collectively contribute to a project or acquire information. Crowdsourcing platforms and initiatives enable individuals to report news, document events, and share local perspectives that conventional media outlets might not cover. This encourages citizen participation in shaping the narrative of the news. For example, we can mention "participial," a collaborative crowdsourcing project that tracks democratic innovation and public engagement across the globe.

Online petitions and campaigns: Platforms such as Change.org, Avaaz, and other similar websites permit individuals to create and sign online petitions, thereby raising awareness about particular issues and advocating for change. These platforms amplify individual voices, mobilise support, and allow citizens to communicate their concerns and advocate for policy change.

Mobile applications: Mobile applications are crucial in encouraging digital participation, especially in regions with high mobile penetration. Mobile applications can provide features such as digital government facilities, election information, and engagement platforms. These applications provide citizens with easy and accessible methods to participate in political processes via their smartphones. For example, the MyGov (India) mobile application is a citizen engagement platform.

Activity 1

Creating an online political campaign

Create a unique hashtag related to a political topic you are interested in and use that hashtag in your social media posts to create awareness and encourage participation.

14.4 DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND POLITICAL DEBATES

An effective democracy demands a deliberative public sphere, an informal space for citizens to acquire information and communicate with one another to detect problems and bring them to the public's attention. The digital public sphere is the virtual space where people engage in public discourse, exchange ideas, and discuss various topics, including politics. It blurs the distinctions between professional journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens. The digital public sphere significantly influences political debates by enhancing accessibility and amplifying voices. However, obstacles such as fragmentation, disinformation, and polarisation appear.

The features of digital public spheres are discussed as follows:

Inclusion: The digital public sphere has increased the accessibility and reach of political discussions. Online platforms and social media enable people from diverse backgrounds, locations, and social groups to engage in political discussions. It has democratised information access and facilitated interaction beyond traditional offline spaces.

Voice amplification: Digital media platforms enable individuals to amplify their voices and participate in political debates. Previously underrepresented or marginalised groups can now express their opinions, share their experiences, and challenge dominant narratives. This increased variety of perspectives contributes to a more inclusive and lively political discourse.

Fragmentation and echo chambers: While the digital public sphere enables a diversity of voices, it can also fragment political discourse. Online algorithms and personalised content delivery may generate echo chambers in which individuals are predominantly exposed to information and opinions supporting their beliefs. This can restrict exposure to diverse perspectives and impede productive political discourse.

Disinformation and propaganda: The digital public sphere has also witnessed the propagation of disinformation and the amplification of polarised perspectives. False information, propaganda, and misinformation can rapidly spread and influence political debates through social media. This threatens the quality and integrity of political discourse and necessitates critical media literacy skills for effectively navigating the online landscape.

Influencing public opinion: Digital platforms offer the opportunity to influence public opinion through political debates. Influencers, journalists, and opinion leaders can use digital media to share their perspectives, analyse

political events, and sway public opinion. Online conversations can influence public perception, affecting electoral outcomes and policy debates.

Accountability: The digital public sphere encourages citizen engagement and nurtures a sense of accountability among political actors. Citizens can express their concerns, hold politicians accountable, and demand transparency through online discussions. Public scrutiny in the digital space can increase political debates' transparency and responsiveness.

Check Your Progress: 1

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Explain the term "political participation" and discuss its significance in modern democratic societies. How has the availability of the Internet impacted political participation?

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2. What are the dimensions of political participation, and how do they manifest in both online and offline contexts?

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3. Discuss the role of digital media tools in facilitating political engagement. How do platforms like social media and online forums influence the dynamics of political participation?

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14.5 DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Individual political rights and liberties are at the heart of liberal democracy. According to cultural theory, democratic governance is supported by a culture in which all individuals can participate in social processes of meaning-making and access to diverse viewpoints (Balkin, 2015). The proliferation of online communication tools makes it easier for individuals to participate in politics. New kinds of political engagement and the role of digital media in making them possible are important lenses through which to view digital democracy. Young people are heavily represented and engaged online, especially on social media. Thus, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are just a few examples of the many online communication channels that enable citizens to participate in public and political debates in the modern era.

Digital media has been perceived both as a threat to democracy and as a potential boon to citizen participation in government. Participation, political awareness, trust, polarisation, populism, and echo chambers are six elements that shift significantly with digital media usage and significantly impact democracy (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). In many cases, the first two factors have a favourable impact, whereas the remaining factors hurt democracy. However, the political environment of a State is crucial to evaluating the components. In countries where democracy is still in its formative stages, such as South America, Africa, and Asia, the favourable effects of digital media on political involvement and information consumption were most obvious. There was more evidence of the negative impacts in the well-established democracies of Europe and the United States, such as rising populism polarisation and falling political trust.

14.6 CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Voice, agency, and participation are transformed into meaningful experiences with citizenship status. To make participation more flexible, citizenship education is crucial. In an educational context, educational practice contributes to developing civic competencies, knowledge, and beliefs. After that, civic competencies give rise to political competencies. From the school learning stage onward, civic development concepts expand. Socio-political development theory explains that the civic development of students occurs in five steps: gaining knowledge (cognitive stage—social and emotional development) where social problems are introduced; logical skills where social problems are recognised; emotional abilities (capacity to contribute to social change) in the youth phase; political capabilities where youth learn to address problems civically; and social competencies where youth establish relationships. Citizens can contribute to decision-making when they acquire the skills to evaluate a problem from a civic and political perspective.

The strategic approach could be promoted at the community level to establish citizenship education, raise public awareness, and encourage participation from individuals of all ages. In the community context, citizenship education addresses civic literacy, diversity and intercultural understanding, environmental sustainability, democratic values, and human rights. Citizenship education must be inclusive of marginalised groups like minorities, expatriates, etc. Change agents such as the media, government, educational institutions, community centres, and libraries must promote it at the community level.

14.7 MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY (MIL): A PREREQUISITE FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Media and information literacy empower citizens. Political participation enables citizens to actively engage with society's institutions and the public sphere, facilitating democratic participation in political activity.

The four prerequisite conditions for political participation are mutually reinforcing factors:

- i) **Relevant knowledge and skills:** Individuals must possess pertinent information. The knowledge source should be objective and exhaustive. If they wish to participate in the public sphere, they must have the disposition and the capacity to express their ideas and beliefs.
- ii) **Loyalty to democratic values and procedures:** The willingness to adhere to democratic principles supports the entire legal, political, and democratic governance system. Democracy will not function if the participants' worth and loyalty fail.
- iii) **Citizenship identities:** To participate, one must identify oneself as a citizen. The formal perspective of citizenship conceptually denotes political life in a democracy, whereas the social perspective of citizenship conceives citizenship in specific sets of practices and social agency.
- iv) **Respect for fundamental civil and political rights** There must be an appreciation for civil rights and the rights of minority groups, including the notion that fundamental rights can be freely exercised.

14.7.1 Discussion on Components

Renee Hobbs (2010) outlined five core skills for digital media literacy that promote active political engagement and participation through consuming and creating content. These five criteria are considered when Hobbs' elements are applied to the political arena. The skills are:

- i) **Access:** Locating and utilising appropriate media and technological resources to access political information and disseminating pertinent information to others.
- ii) **Analyse and evaluate:** Comprehending information and thinking critically about it to assess its quality, authenticity, reliability, and point of view, as well as the implications or consequences of such information.
- iii) **Create:** Creating or composing content with creativity and self-expression.
- iv) **Reflect:** Consider the application of social responsibility to one's self-identity and communication practices.
- v) **Act:** Participating individually or collectively in the political process at local, regional, national or international levels.

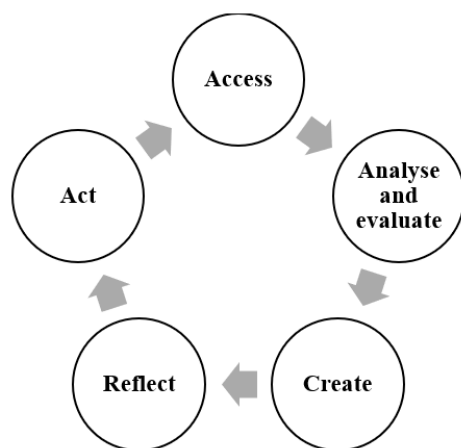


Figure 14.1: Essential competencies of Digital and Media Literacy (Hobbs, 2010)

Citizens with political differences can express themselves non-violently in a democracy through participation in political life and empowerment. It is necessary to evaluate the function of media and information literate citizens in information flow. A media and information literate citizen (i) understands the value of information in a democratic society; (ii) is aware of the role of information providers in a democracy; (iii) identifies the source of information; (iv) can evaluate information from any source; (v) knows when and where to share information; and (vii) can communicate effectively with the public.

14.7.2 Indian Context

The digital world of mobiles, the Internet, and big data either exacerbates or facilitates the political outcomes of information and communication technologies. Emerging information and communication norms foster nuanced and substantive conversations. Access to, consumption, and dissemination of information among communities has become spontaneous. In addition to the well-known media conglomerates, new organisations such as Google, Microsoft, and Meta assume control over the production of content and the engagement landscape. The new legacy organisations promote the global dissemination of information and communication. As a result, new connective platforms have evolved into a reservoir for sharing information, bringing together individuals who advocate for local, regional, and national causes.

In India, a citizen's ability to take part in the democratic process of their country depends on his or her familiarity with both state and civic issues. Participation in the administrative arena is essential to good governance from the top down. Civic and political knowledge, as well as the ability to shift relevant information from an ocean of information, are crucial for the citizens of India to participate in the political process effectively. National political participation is compromised due to the low MIL skills of its citizens. All citizens should be familiar with the paradox of information and media since it is through the media (print, radio, and online) that we learn about changes in government and society. Critical thinking about political messages and genuine engagement can be fostered by developing media and information

literacy (MIL).

Specifically, marginalised groups such as tribals, women, and religious minorities may benefit from online political participation. This improves prospects for fostering quality in all segments of society, as the Internet provides people from underrepresented groups a platform to share their stories and opinions, making political discourse inclusive. Nonetheless, MIL helps transform skills into valuable functioning, including public engagement in digital forms and using all available online communication channels.

Activity 2

Online political information access and analysis

Identify credible sources of online political information and differentiate between reliable news outlets, fact-checking websites, and opinion-based platforms.

Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Analyse the concept of the digital public sphere and its relevance in shaping political debates.

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2. Explore the relationship between democracy and digital media.

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3. Evaluate the importance of media and information literacy (MIL) for effective political participation.

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4. Reflect on the ways in which individuals can utilise digital media to influence policy making, evaluate government performance, and promote civic engagement.

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14.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the intricate relationship between political participation and digital media. Through this Unit, you have learnt a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of political participation, spanning traditional and digital realms. Also this Unit has explored the dimensions of political engagement, including individual and collective actions, within the context of the digital public sphere. Moreover, this Unit explained the various digital media tools that facilitate political participation, recognizing their role in shaping political debates and influencing democratic processes. It analysed the significance of media and information literacy (MIL) as a prerequisite for effective political engagement, particularly in the Indian context.

14.9 FURTHER READINGS

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14.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

1. "Political participation" refers to citizens' engagement in activities aimed at influencing public policy and supporting democratic processes. In modern democratic societies, it holds immense significance as it allows individuals to voice their opinions, contribute to decision-making, and hold elected officials accountable. The availability of the Internet has profoundly impacted political participation by expanding access to information, enabling grassroots organising, and fostering online activism. Citizens can now engage in political discourse, campaign for causes, and mobilise support more efficiently through online platforms, thus amplifying their voices and influencing political outcomes.
2. The dimensions of political participation encompass a wide range of activities, including voting, attending rallies, signing petitions, and engaging in political discussions. In both online and offline contexts, these dimensions manifest through various channels. For example, voting occurs offline at polling stations but can also take place online through electronic voting systems. Similarly, while attending political rallies and protests typically happens offline, individuals can also participate in virtual rallies and online campaigns through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.
3. Digital media tools play a crucial role in facilitating political engagement by providing platforms for communication, information dissemination, and mobilisation. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram enable individuals to connect with like-minded individuals, share political opinions, and organise collective action. Online forums and discussion boards allow for in-depth discussions on political issues, fostering a more informed citizenry. These platforms influence the

dynamics of political participation by amplifying voices, shaping public opinion, and providing a platform for marginalised groups to be heard.

Check Your Progress: 2

1. The concept of the digital public sphere refers to the online space where individuals engage in public discourse, exchange ideas, and participate in political debates. Digital platforms contribute to the democratisation of discourse by providing accessible and inclusive spaces for individuals to express their opinions, challenge dominant narratives, and hold public figures accountable. The accessibility of digital platforms allows for a diverse range of voices to participate in political discussions, thereby enriching democratic deliberation and fostering civic engagement.
2. The relationship between democracy and digital media is symbiotic, with the digital age information system playing a crucial role in promoting democratic values and principles. Digital media facilitate transparency, accountability, and civic participation by providing access to information, enabling citizens to scrutinise government actions, and fostering public deliberation. Online platforms also empower marginalised groups, amplify diverse voices, and facilitate political organising, thus strengthening democracy and promoting social change.
3. Media and information literacy (MIL) are essential for effective political participation in the digital age. MIL enables individuals to critically evaluate information, discern credible sources, and navigate the complex digital information landscape. Components of MIL include information literacy, which involves evaluating sources and verifying information, media literacy, which entails analysing media messages and understanding their impact, and digital literacy, which involves navigating digital platforms and tools effectively. MIL empowers citizens to make informed decisions, engage meaningfully in political discourse, and resist manipulation and misinformation.
4. Individuals can utilise digital media to influence policy-making, evaluate government performance, and promote civic engagement in various ways. For example, social media campaigns can raise awareness about pressing issues and mobilise support for policy changes. Online petitions and surveys can provide avenues for citizens to voice their concerns and preferences to policymakers. Moreover, digital platforms enable citizens to hold governments accountable by monitoring their actions, sharing information about governance issues, and participating in online discussions about public policies.