

## ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POPULIST POLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

Though populist movements are not a recent phenomenon, they have proliferated and gained traction after the late-1990s. This has corresponded with the rise of social media platforms across the world, making it imperative to examine the connection between social media and populist politics. Pursuant to this, the paper analyses the role that social media plays in the expansion of populist discourse. Section I of the paper explores the emphasis on social media in populist politics as a reaction to conventional media. Section II examines the role of social media in populist discourse, such as in the creation of a sense of oneness among the people and the new accessibility to political leaders. Section III then looks at the consequences of this role, such as the creation of a post-truth era and the shift from rational to affective or emotional persuasion in political discourse.

The author finds that *firstly*, the rise in populism is linked to the rise in social media due to a distrust of the elite-controlled conventional media. This is because social media allows for the circumvention of barriers and provides a voice to the people who previously felt unheard. It also allows for unmediated access to populist leaders who may have otherwise been censored. *Secondly*, the author finds that social media creates a stronger sense of oneness among the online community due to its amplification of negative emotions central to populist politics. Moreover, it has enabled the creation of stronger, more personal, and continuous bonds between leaders and supporters, and has allowed leaders to disguise themselves as part of the ordinary masses. In this way, social media has resulted in the facilitation of populist discourse. Though this role is important for democracy, the author *lastly* finds that the unchecked spread of populist discourse on social media leads to a post-truth era and a shift to affective politics.

Therefore, the author concludes that it becomes necessary to find solutions to mitigate such negative impacts, without which informed debate in a democracy may become inconceivable.

## INTRODUCTION

The term ‘populism’ is increasingly being employed to contextualise disruptions occurring in national political spheres across the world. In mainstream parlance, it has been used to explain the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of anti-establishment parties in Italy, Brazil, and the Philippines. It has also been used to explain the increased emphasis on nationalism, such as that seen in Narendra Modi’s nationalist project.<sup>i</sup> Due to its extensive use, it was even declared the ‘Word of the Year’ by Cambridge Dictionary in 2017.<sup>ii</sup> Though its meaning is still highly debated,<sup>iii</sup> it is generally agreed that populist movements engage in anti-establishment politics aimed at displacing governing elites.<sup>iv</sup> This is premised on the notion that society is divided into pure people and corrupt elites,<sup>v</sup> irrespective of which side of the political spectrum they may fall. Pursuant to this, a populist movement is one that undercuts the self-serving elite by channelling the unified will of the pure people,<sup>vi</sup> and their collective traditions.<sup>vii</sup>

Populism is not a recent phenomenon. However, there has been a surge in the number of populist movements and leaders since the late-1990s, corresponding with the rise of social media.<sup>viii</sup> Social media plays a fundamental role in political protest, as illustrated by the Arab Spring in 2010. Such platforms have also been hailed as harbingers of positive change. They emphasise political freedoms, such as free speech, and provide a platform through which governments can be held accountable. In this way, they are seen as facilitators of democracy.<sup>ix</sup> Such features may have also helped cement and expand populism in mainstream political discourse. To understand this relationship at a deeper level, this paper shall analyse the role of social media in populist politics and provide examples from the US and Indian contexts.

Section I of the paper shall explore the emphasis on social media in populist politics as a reaction to conventional media. Section II shall examine the role of social media in populist discourse. Specifically, it will look at the creation of a sense of oneness among the people and the new accessibility to political leaders. Section III shall then look at the consequences and future implications of this role, such as the creation of a post-truth era and the shift from rational to affective or emotional persuasion in political discourse.

## I. POPULISM: A REACTION TO CONVENTIONAL MEDIA

The rise of globalisation and liberalisation brought about many key advancements, such as the movement of people, economic liberalism, and the internet and other global communication systems. However, it has also denoted a shift in traditional values, and the growth of inequality in wealth distribution in the Global South, including India.<sup>x</sup> This resulted in the transfer of power to transnational elites. This shift in power allowed the elites to capture mainstream media,<sup>xi</sup> such as newspapers and TV, and retain monopoly powers over content creation and distribution.<sup>xii</sup> Traditional news entities have even taken over the blog format to maintain elite conversations within the network of trusted mainstream media.<sup>xiii</sup> In this way, elites could engage in agenda-setting and control the narrative to the disadvantage of ordinary citizens.

In contrast, social media platforms are ideal to host the “populist appeal” to ordinary citizens by those who have felt victimised and unheard by the mainstream media.<sup>xiv</sup> It provides a platform against elite institutions for both right-wing populists such as Marine Le Pen as well as left-wing populists such as Bernie Sanders.<sup>xv</sup> This is because social media removes barriers preventing ordinary citizens from engaging in dialogue, enables them to communicate directly with like-minded individuals, and allows them to form groups via the internet.<sup>xvi</sup> In this way, it facilitates the creation of new publics through enhanced connectivity. Moreover, in regimes where the mainstream media is controlled or considered untrustworthy, social media platforms force alternative forms of news dissemination.<sup>xvii</sup> Illustrations of this are the Arab Spring in 2010 and the US Capitol Hill riots in 2021 organised and encouraged through social media.<sup>xviii</sup> In India, ordinary farmers across the country largely organised their protests against three farm bills proposed by the government elites on social media. They further used these platforms to tell their truth amid a section of mainstream media spreading fake news.<sup>xix</sup>

Moreover, journalists in the mainstream media may modify, attenuate, or criticise populist statements during publication.<sup>xx</sup> To prevent this, many populist leaders prefer communication directly through social media, which is usually more personal, sensationalist, without criticism, and does not have to follow news values. It may be for this reason that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has preferred Twitter over mainstream media,<sup>xxi</sup> choosing to give only one official press conference (in which he took no questions) across two tenures instead. Thus, contemporary populist politics have used social media platforms to circumvent ‘elite-run’ mainstream media.

## II. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POPULIST DISCOURSE

### Creation of a Sense of Oneness

Emotions affect how individuals process information, form judgements, and react to objects, events, and situations.<sup>xxii</sup> Their importance is illustrated by Le Bon, who stated that a crowd's discourse is constituted on a terrain of sentiments, emotions, and beliefs, which possess immense power.<sup>xxiii</sup> Accordingly, emotions play a central role in populist politics. Particularly, populism has been characterised by two negative emotions: fear (of far-reaching social change) and anger (towards the establishment).<sup>xxiv</sup> For example, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom used social media to amplify popular fears about immigration and anti-nationalism.<sup>xxv</sup> Such implicit elicitation of emotions is also more typical of other populist leaders across the world.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Social media platforms result in the amplification and proliferation of these negative emotions. They allow for more intuitive and direct messaging with emotionally charged content. They also provide a place to channel anger and magnify irrational public moods,<sup>xxvii</sup> whether against the establishment or individuals with differing opinions. This is because social media platforms allow users to hide behind anonymity and not see the person towards whom their anger is directed, due to which the prefrontal cortex does not inhibit aggressive responses.<sup>xxviii</sup> Moreover, the asynchrony of communication removes the requirement of consensus-building. This results in people feeling like they are surrounded, understood, and protected by like-minded friends.<sup>xxix</sup>

Such emotional manipulation is seen in the campaign of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]. This populist campaign has attempted to instil a feeling of victimhood in the Hindu majority through the issues of love jihad and Ram Mandir's demolition. With the introduction of the National Registry of Citizens in 2019, the campaign used fearmongering against "illegal" immigrants to spread cultural mistrust and create an environment of "us versus them". This feeling was amplified through social media due to the ease of sharing and providing support. For instance, casual bigotry was shared innumerable times through WhatsApp forwards labelled "funny" and "informative".<sup>xxx</sup> Such forwards acted as highly effective propaganda for the BJP cause due to their quantity, seeming legitimacy, and ability to provide direct support

for its message. Moreover, Twitter and Facebook have allowed for the proliferation of “trolls” and the use of slang terms against the perceived elite, such as “pseudo-intellectuals”, to ignore and dismiss opinions against the BJP’s policies. In this way, the BJP has weaponised anger through social media,<sup>xxxix</sup> and has increased the sense of belonging to the populist cause.

Social media platforms also have specific features that aid in such emotional manipulation. Their algorithms determine the content to which users are exposed, generally resulting in the creation of “filter bubbles” and echo-chambers.<sup>xxxix</sup> Such algorithms dilute choice and autonomy while making truth and fact contingent upon an individual’s political leanings.<sup>xxxix</sup> Thus, with commonly shared truth being replaced by individual realities,<sup>xxxix</sup> users are exposed only to political content of which they approve. This leaves them with a feeling that they share the majority opinion and strengthens their sense of belonging and commitment to a populist cause.<sup>xxxv</sup> In this way, social media creates a sense of oneness by aiding emotional manipulation.

### **Re-imagination of Leadership Roles**

With the increase in the use of social media, there has been a change in the way populist leaders communicate with and relate to their supporters and undecided voters. Social media platforms create channels alternate to those formed by mainstream media, which allow for a greater amount of direct unmediated communication with the masses on a daily basis. This results in the formation of continuous deep personal ties between the leader and their supporters.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Since populism is centred around the idea of “the people”,<sup>xxxvii</sup> this also allows leaders to appear part of the homogeneous and virtuous community of ordinary citizens, as opposed to being part of the inaccessible government elite. This reimagined bond is evidenced by the fact that messages directly from populist leaders attain a greater number of likes and shares when compared with other posts of similar content.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Additionally, social media allows a populist leader’s message to reach undecided voters in neutral ways, such as through friends,<sup>xxxix</sup> removing the element of bias and strengthening the ties between the community itself. Therefore, there has been a change in the relationship between populist leaders, their supporters, and undecided voters.

An illustration of this reimagined role of leaders as part of the ordinary community is Donald Trump's twitter. Here, he consistently thanks supporters for their support and involvement while using collective phrases such as "together we will". After the Capitol Hill riots, he used phrases such as "we love you", "you're very special", and "I know how you feel" in tweets directed to the rioters.<sup>xi</sup> Similarly, Narendra Modi attempts to portray himself as a part of the pool of ordinary citizens while representing all of them. Pursuant to this, he has tweeted that he was happy to be the "Pradhan Sevak" (main servant) for every Indian.<sup>xii</sup> Instead of formal press conferences and briefings, Narendra Modi's active twitter account also posts messages in multiple languages and engages with the concerns of numerous citizens at a seemingly personal level. This also allows his content to be liked and shared instantaneously while providing a place for his supporters to be around like-minded individuals. As a result, both Trump and Modi have built a sense of personal and direct connections between themselves and their supporters. Such communication and digitisation of the public sphere also helps in leaders presenting themselves as allies to the people, leading a movement instead of a particular party.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **III. CONSEQUENCES OF POPULIST DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

#### **Post-truth Era**

"Post-truth" encompasses intentional lying, communication that nullifies concerns about the veracity of shared content, as well as colourful communication designed to attract public attention.<sup>xliii</sup> The post-truth era in the political sphere has seen these tactics used by multiple leaders across the world. However, this problem has been magnified by social media. Due to the influence that it has on populist politics, it becomes imperative to consider the extent to which the post-truth era affects populist politics on social media.

The ease of dissemination, anonymity, and a lack of editorial supervision over the content of posts on social media have resulted in the spread of fake news and manipulated content. This content has been used to form public opinion and shape public agenda through a 'politics of fear'; based on the misuse of statistics, appeals to emotion, and factual manipulation.<sup>xliiv</sup> In this way, post-truth in politics is driving populism, creating an impact upon political thinking, and

thereby threatening democracy. The extent of this problem can be seen in India, where almost 18,000 accounts on Twitter have been found to spread fake news and propaganda for the BJP party.<sup>xlv</sup> Moreover, such platforms provide a direct link to populist leaders, which allow them to peddle their own version of the truth. This is seen in the posts by Donald Trump, in which he has claimed a caravan filled with illegal immigrants was driving to the US border, that illegal border crossing had reduced by 73%, and that Russian interference in the 2016 elections was false, among other things.<sup>xlvi</sup> Thus, social media exacerbates the problems of the post-truth era.

### **Shift from Rational to Affective Persuasion**

Rational choice theory states that individuals make rational choices based on rational calculations to achieve outcomes aligned with their preferences and personal objectives.<sup>xlvii</sup> In the political sphere, this means that individuals rationally decide for whom to cast their vote based on rational calculations in an attempt to maximise their own self-interests. Till the recent past, the rational choice paradigm was given undue importance in political science research. However, this paradigm did not consider emotions, which were conceived as irrational elements, as affecting either actors or “rational” thinking.<sup>xlviii</sup> Due to this, it is necessary to reconsider the base on which citizens make choices, especially in light of the proliferation of social media platforms and their facilitation of emotional manipulation.

The traditional Habermasian public sphere is a space in which informed public dialogue is supposed to occur.<sup>xlix</sup> In sharp contrast, social media platforms are mainly occupied by individuals whose actions are motivated by shared negative emotions.<sup>1</sup> This is because social media provides a place for populist groups to channel fear and anger, and promotes this through affective clickbaits, fake news, and even heated exchanges. Such affective content is widely circulated and, resultantly, fuels political action.<sup>li</sup> Moreover, social media allows individuals to circulate personal views, accept or reject existing content, or even ignore differing opinions with ease.<sup>lii</sup> It allows for populist leaders to circulate seemingly simple solutions to complex problems,<sup>liii</sup> or resort to fearmongering to solidify their voter base. Due to this, it removes the need for intellectual engagement. Individuals would then be the recipients of deceptively simple messages rife with emotionally charged political terms and symbols.<sup>liv</sup> Consequently, rational persuasion is weakened, and affective or emotional persuasion becomes prevalent.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author has attempted to examine the role of social media in populist politics while providing examples from the US and Indian contexts. In Section I, the author found that the rise in populism is linked to the rise in social media. This is because of the populist reaction against conventional media, which had allowed elites to engage in agenda-setting and controlling the narrative to the disadvantage of ordinary citizens. Instead, social media allows for the circumvention of elite-control and provides a voice to the people who previously felt unheard. In Section II, the author found that social media created a stronger sense of oneness among the online community. This is because it amplified and proliferated negative emotions, such as fear and anger, which are central to populist politics. They further have specific features, such as algorithms, that aid in such proliferation. Social media has also reimagined the relationship between populist leaders and supporters. This is because it creates a stronger, more personal, and continuous bond between leader and supporter, and enables leaders to disguise themselves as part of the ordinary masses. This has resulted in the facilitation of populist discourse.

In conclusion, social media has an important role to play in populist politics, which are considered essential to maintaining democracy.<sup>iv</sup> However, in Section III, the author found two major consequences with the unchecked spread of populist discourse on social media: the increase in fake news and the resultant “post-truth” era; and the shift from rational to mainly affective politics. Thus, it becomes necessary to find solutions to mitigate such negative impacts, without which informed debate in a democracy may become inconceivable.

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