A Study of recent Incline on Modern Media use for Voter Awareness by ECI

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Abstract:

In a democracy, it isn't enough to inform voters about the date of elections. Sensitizing the electorate about the significance of voting is important for assisting them in making an informed decision. Additionally, voters need to be informed about the procedure, as well as about the political groups, their platforms, and the qualifications of the candidates. Armed with additional knowledge to aid in their "enlightened" voting, helping to create an informed populace. The ECI understands the value of connecting with younger, tech-savvy voters who access information via social media and other digital channels. In order to interact with voters and raise knowledge of the voting process, the ECI has adopted social media campaigns, mobile apps, and other digital tools. The study examines recent efforts by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to use contemporary media for voter awareness and also study the dramatic increase in voter turnout in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections following the 2009 launch of the ECI-SVEEP (Systematic Voter's Education and Electoral Participation) programme. This study will examine the changing methods of campaigning used by ECI across a range of media outlets, including radio, websites, participatory methods, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, which help to educate voters and increase their participation in forming national mandates post-2014 while also examining the current situation. The research covers recent initiatives that are disseminated digitally through social media platforms as well as the various factors that affect the behaviour of social media followers during election campaigning.

Keywords : Elections, voter turnouts, modern media, campaigns, awareness, ECI, ECI-SVEEP, voter's education, advertisements.

Introduction:

The ECI SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Election Participation) initiative was started by the Election Commission of India (ECI) with the goal of educating and inspiring voters to participate in the election process. Voting, which some democratic theories consider to be a civic duty, is by far the most common method to participate in politics. Therefore, the possible reasons for voter disengagement have drawn a lot of academic attention. The weight that communication is assigned in the

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different theoretical models of political engagement (for an overview, see Lister & Pia, 2008) varies significantly. According to the civic voluntarism or resource-based paradigm, people don't get involved in politics because they don't have the means or the desire to, or because no one requested them to. As a result, the paradigm emphasises the importance of mobilization, especially among political players and fellow citizens. The underlying premise is that increased political literacy among people will increase their voting power. However, empirical applications of the idea have found it difficult to make a clear distinction between the significance of citizens' news media habits, their political interests, and their political expertise. As a result, media communication has occasionally been disregarded as a deciding factor. On the other hand, models of political participation founded on rational decision-making speak more subtly about the need for communication. Any form of communication, but journalism in particular, has the power to reduce the expenses involved in gathering the information required to cast a vote. Conversely, by promoting the societal norm of voting, human interaction may increase the benefits of participation. In addition to placing a strong emphasis on interpersonal networks and, by extension, interpersonal communication, the social capital idea, which links all forms of social and volunteer activities with increasing political engagement, also emphasises interpersonal communication. However, it is thought that media communication, especially exposure to television, may have a negative impact by reducing the quantity of time available for social activities outside the home. The social capital paradigm thus emphasises how crucial media are as platforms or channels for political involvement. The media malaise or spiral of cynicism theory (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) contends that some (typically new) media platforms, such as video, cable or pay television, the Internet or social media, or specific media forms, decrease turnout. They may promote unfavourable political presentations, such as a focus on the personal lives of politicians or on scandal and conflict, which lowers the knowledge and interest of the public in politics, or they may make it simpler for the public to stay away from political information, which lowers the public's knowledge and interest in politics. As opposed to this, the new mobilisation or virtuous cycle hypothesis (Norris, 2000) attributes the promotion of political engagement to new media platforms, especially the Internet and social media. By encouraging public expression and the exchange of political viewpoints, they boost citizens' feelings of political self-efficacy and help them feel like a part of the political process and society. Here, it is thought that cognitive effects of communication, such as learning, prompting, and framing, may be necessary conditions for the occurrence of persuasive effects.

Citizens acquire information about different issues, policy positions, and candidates' character traits, and performance during the election campaign through communication by political actors, journalists, or their fellow citizens. The history of electoral participation in previous rounds functions forward to achieve the aim of building a stronger democracy through greater coordination with Civil Society Organisations, Media, and Corporate Houses. There has been a sharp rise in figures of

voter turnout in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, after the initiative of ECI-SVEEP. The awareness of voters is the first and foremost duty; for which there is a tour all over the states, interaction with voters, and assessment of their awareness about poll dates and location of the polling station in their constituency by the observer. There is also conduction of a study on whether the voters know about the registration in the electoral roll, voter's photo identity card, ethical voting, use of EVMs, and paid news syndrome. The observers also check whether there has been enough publicity about the upcoming polls or not and that can be further made robust to get higher participation.

Review of Literature

The use of media for voting awareness has evolved significantly in recent years, as technology and social media have changed the way that people access information and communicate with one another. Traditionally, media such as television, radio, and print newspapers were the primary means of spreading information about voting and encouraging people to participate in elections. These mediums are still important, but in the digital age, social media platforms and online news sources have become increasingly influential in shaping public opinion and driving voter turnout. Political campaigns and advocacy groups have also started to use targeted online advertising and social media marketing to reach specific voter demographics and to deliver personalized messages about the importance of voting. Overall, the use of media for voting awareness has become more diverse and multifaceted, with a range of traditional and digital channels being employed to engage and mobilize voters. The use of media by early childhood educators (ECIs) has changed significantly in recent years due to the advancement of technology and the increasing reliance on digital tools for communication and learning. One major change is the use of online platforms and virtual classrooms for remote learning and communication with students and parents. ECIs are now able to use video conferencing and online lesson planning tools to connect with their students and deliver instruction remotely. There has also been a shift towards the use of multimedia resources and interactive educational apps for lesson delivery and reinforcement of learning. ECIs are now able to use tablets, laptops, and other devices to access a wide range of educational resources, including videos, games, and interactive activities. Furthermore, social media has become a common tool for ECIs to connect with parents and share updates and resources. Many ECIs use platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to communicate with families and share updates on their students' progress and learning experiences. Overall, the use of media by ECIs has greatly expanded in recent years, providing new opportunities for communication, collaboration, and learning. When media platforms are studied separately, the realities of the modern media experience are ignored. As platforms proliferate, the media environment as a whole has complex due to a shift from traditional media ecology understandings to a greater appreciation of the hybrid media system.[1]

Through communication from political actors, journalists, or their fellow citizens, citizens learn about various issues, policy stances, and candidates' personality qualities and performance during the election campaign. While some of this information may be brand-new, communication frequently just reactivates previously existing information. In agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2004), for instance, which anticipates that citizens' ranking of concerns would be influenced by the salience of topics in communication, message salience is seen as a determining element. Also, candidates, issues, and candidate attributes may experience this transfer of attention. Communication may also alter the standards by which voters evaluate candidates by changing the perceived importance of particular topics and by stressing some features while neglecting others (priming; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Similar to this, framing effects can happen when certain features of a problem are persistently emphasised in discourse using a variety of symbolic and rationale techniques to support a certain definition, interpretation, assessment, or treatment suggestion for the problem. Hence, the impacts of learning, priming, and framing can all result in altered attitudes. According to dual-process models of attitude modification (see, for example, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the degree to which citizens put out effort in the cognitive processing of the information will determine how these changes manifest. People will either rely on their memories to make decisions or they will use the information that is most readily available to them. The frequency and freshness of information exposure will then affect the strength and direction of persuasive effects, which will, however, likely be fairly fleeting, or they will do online processing of the newly received information, that is, they will elaborate the message and compare it to their current system of knowledge and opinion, before taking a new position (or not). It is believed that this type of attitude shift is more persistent and more likely to result in a change in behaviour (such as voting).

The issue of poor voter turnout, under-participation of women and youth, and urban apathy has continued ever since the beginning of democracy in India.[2]

There is a need for an improved and updated system of collection of voter participation data by election authorities. The officially reported data on voter turnout as per gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, and other key characteristics of voters often show variations in the actual turnout among various groups of the population. the right strategies and actions can be taken to encourage voter participation with better focus and target the specific problem that gets highlighted and identified by the analysis of such data.[3]

Social media plays a significant role in the voting behavior of the youth. Political parties are successful in fetching the attention of the people of the metro and semi-urban cities. Social media is replacing traditional media but in rural areas, traditional media still has a significant impact in creating awareness among people. Social media provides a platform for people to get connected to parties they favor on various plans and programs they offer.[4]

With the progressive growth and popular use of social media, the political influences of social media during the 2014 Indian parliamentary election in India were seen. India is known as one of the most highly wired countries in the world, and people in India enjoy the highest level of Internet connection. Online information is perceived as more dependable and accountable than traditional media sources. India is ranked third in the use of social networks in the world. Therefore, India becomes an interesting place to examine the political influence of new-generation communication forums like social media.[5]

The adoption of social media in India for the last few years has been very strong and as per the eMarketer report "Worldwide Social Network Users: 2013 Forecast and Comparative Estimates" suggests that India will have more than 127 million social media users by the end of 2013. The report also points out that 75% of Indian social media users are active on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, etc and they each spend significant time daily on these social networking sites. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), one-third of social media users live in towns with a population of less than 5 million, and 2.5% of the total users stay in towns with less than 2 million inhabitants. The usage of social media is on the rise and is rising fast due to the usage of the internet on mobiles.[6]

The Indian initiative-A step of SVEEP was taken in 2009, out of managerial underlining of the gaps. In India, the turnout had historically stagnated around 55-60 percent, thus leaving out the choices of millions of eligible citizens. In the registration of citizens as voters and the more glaring gap in turnout from election to election is witnessed. Identification of such a trend was followed by the intellectual understanding that low participation would adversely sabotage the quality of democracy, hence making it a need for the intervention of management to address this problem.

Objectives
- To study the emerging use of social media and digital programmes by ECI for the promotion of voter awareness post-2014.
- To understand the change in the number of followers of social media accounts that ECI holds in relations to election related information that trends or is posted during events of state assembly elections and general elections.

Methodology
This study uses Descriptive design to study the changing and advancing use of new media for voter education by ECI. Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe a phenomenon and then organizing and interpreting it to conclude. The study uses secondary data and an inductive study of a specific initiative by ECI named SVEEP. The data is prominently from the website of IIDEA, ECI website, and social media platforms. Information about ECI social media profiles that were created with the

intention of raising voter awareness, as of the date the data was collected through the year of inception.

Analysis -

Overview-

Highest leap of voter turnout in Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and 2019 after the 2009 General elections , as illustrated by Fig 1. Below-

Voter Turnout by Election Type

India
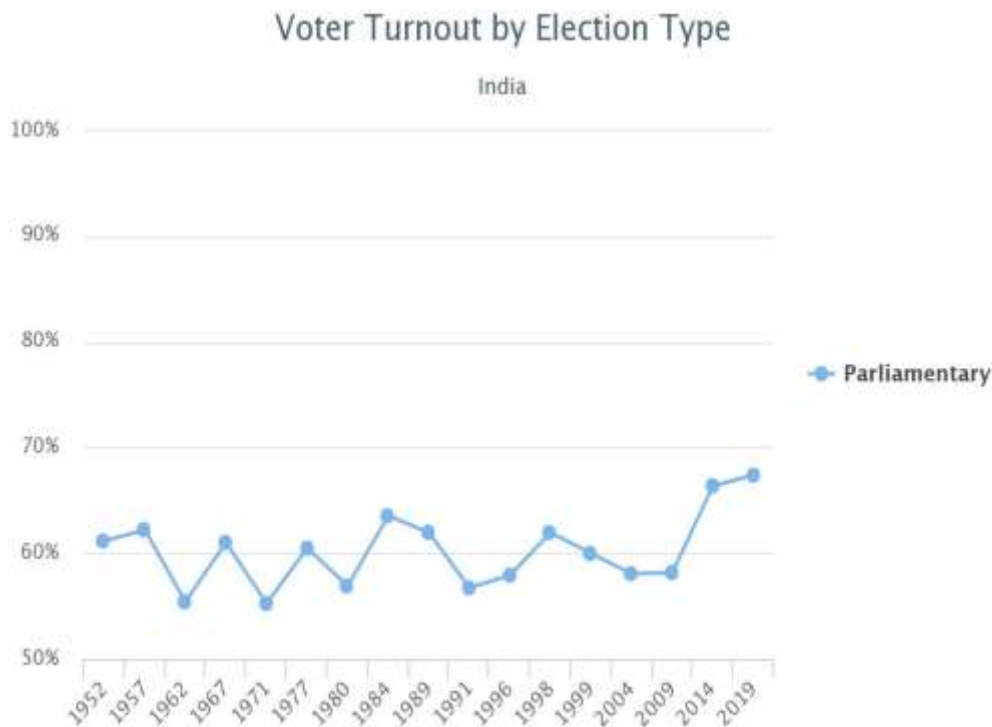
Parliamentary general elections.

Year	Voter Turnout	Total vote	Registration	VAP Turnout	Voting age population	Population
2019	67.40 %	613,656,298	910,512,091	68.80 %	891,934,297	1,311,559,204
2014	66.40 %	553,801,801	834,101,479	70.29 %	787,860,328	1,236,344,631
2009	58.17 %	417,037,606	716,985,101	56.45 %	738,773,666	1,156,897,766
2004	58.07 %	389,948,330	671,487,930	60.91 %	640,182,791	1,049,700,118
1999	59.99 %	371,669,104	619,536,847	65.69 %	565,780,483	986,856,301

Fig- 1. Source credit -as per the data of the International Institute for

Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)

The overall increase in voting percentage spans from 1999 to 2009 general elections have not been significant but after 2009 there have been two major landmark increases in participation in 2014, (The 2014 Lok Sabha Polls had the highest voter turnout in 57 years that records a 66.4 percent turnout [8], also with the highest jump in voter turnout till that point of time) and 2019 (the second highest landmark peak was seen once again right after 2014 general elections. The 2019 general elections have registered the highest-ever voter turnout in the history of Indian parliamentary elections. The final voter turnout stands at 67.11 percent [9]; that has been the record highest participation although the growth in the rate has not been of great significance).

Target Group and Strategies used –
Inclusion of the youth, rural and unawere section of society post-2014 and current mode of awareness

Creation pursued –To encourage more young voters to take part in the political process, the Government of India celebrates January 25 every year as "National Voters' Day"- as a basic method of general sensitization. To effectively deal with the low voter participation in elections: the Election Commission decides to take up a vigorous exercise to identify all eligible voters attaining the age of 18 years as of January 1 every year. To make it stand apart from the rest of other initiatives; the new voters would be provided with a badge with its logo "Proud to be a voter - Ready to vote".

Inclusion of all age groups and literate section of society-Election Commission of India rolls out its ambitious project 'Electoral Literacy Club' (ELC) for mainstreaming electoral literacy in Schools, Colleges, and Communities to promote electoral literacy in all age groups of Indian citizens. **Voter Awareness Forum (VAF)** is an informal forum for generating discussions and awareness around the electoral process, on the how what and where of registration & voting, through the medium of real-time activities.

The use of different forms of media-

Print media- The distribution of pamphlets, posters, magazines, articles, etc. to Gram Panchayats, Mahila Mandal, Yuwak Mandals, schools, and colleges. Electoral Rolls verification is done by the BLOs during door-to-door surveys and also creates awareness amongst the general public. Wide publicity of each stage related to elections is being done for creating awareness among the general public through press notes published in local newspapers and by inserting pamphlets and voting guides in local papers that reaches every household consuming it.

Participative means -organization of Nukkad natak, puppet shows, individual discussions, group meetings, contests, online quizzes, etc.

Television- the flash of the program of EPIC (Election Photo Id Card) campaign and electoral registration on the local cable network to inform the general public. Also broadcasting the interviews on Local cable operators giving whereabouts of various aspects of elections.

FM radio- used as a means to apprise the prospective voters about electoral registration, election program, the do's and don'ts to be followed in the duration of votes being cast, list of identification documents required during the time of polling, etc. Radio interviews are usually conducted to facilitate the people through the entire process of election.

Apps:
Several inaugurations of apps have been done like- Voter helpline app/ voterportal.eci.gov.in- this app has 2.16 Crore (21 Million) downloads and 1,53,604 (1.53 lakhs or 153K) user feedback. This national award-winning application has taken grassroots-level measures as a major tool for citizen empowerment and education.[14] cVIGIL app - which stands for Citizen Vigilance. A mobile application designed by the Election Commission of India, with an opportunity to report election code violations directly by citizens about any elections, polling booth as whistleblowers to wrong practices followed during those times.[15]

Awards: National Media Awards-
Under this, the Election Commission of India invites entries from Media Houses for the best campaign on Voter Education and Awareness during the year. There are four awards, one each for Print media, Television (Electronic), Radio (Electronic), and Online (Internet)/Social media. The awards are in the form of a citation, plaque, and cash prize and are presented on National Voter's Day (25th January).

Certain program launches were made to make the awareness process interactive and interesting –

The **'Matdata Junction'** is a 52-episode radio series produced by the Election Commission of India with All India Radio. It is a 15 minutes program broadcasted every Friday(during the 7- 9 PM slot) on the All India Radio network which covers 25 FM stations, 4 FM Gold stations, 42 Vividh Bharati stations, and 159 primary channels/local radio stations in 23 languages, i.e., Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Bodo, Santhali, Maithili, and Dogri. [10]

E Patrika-This is a bi-monthly e-magazine, a novel initiative of the Commission, that works on three-way communication - a platform for ECI to share instructions to ground level, for sharing feedback and success stories.[13]

Electronic media- Use of electronic posters(e-posters), voter awareness contests, slides in movie halls, and SMS to get the "Please Vote'' message.[12] The use of digital voter cards and the use of e-epic logos for higher participation and holding in the interest of the participants of the electoral system. There are invites by ECI for posters and brochures on the website for various initiatives bringing out the creativity and inclusivity of ideas from people directly as an added benefit.

Web Radio: Hello Voters Programme-

The Election Commission of India, under its flagship voter awareness program – SVEEP, undertakes innovative and exciting initiatives to promote ethical and informed voting behavior of the citizens across the country. The 24x7 online web radio service streams the voter awareness programs on the Election Commission of India website. The edutainment programming style of Radio Hello Voters envisages matching the popularity of the FM radio format and which further includes songs, drama, discussions, podcasts, spots, parodies, etc. from different states and all across the country.[11]

Social media-

      2014 onwards constitutional institutions and government or allied organizations have been on social media platforms to increase their reach to the people. Thereby enhancing participation in Indian democracy. The election commission of India holds- social media accounts of ECI dedicated to promote   awareness amongst the voters , from the year of its creation till the date of data collection.

      Instagram account with 2905 posts, 59.5k followers, and **ecisveep as user id**. It joined Instagram in march 2019 (the given data about the account dates to 2 December 2022). as illustrated by Fig 2. Below-
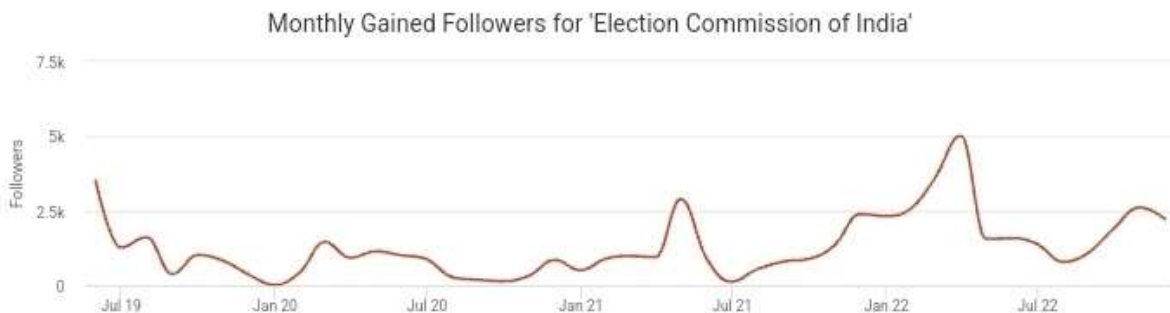

Fig 2. source credit – The data collected from the website named 'social blade', by the date of 2 December 2022.

      The Twitter handle has 239.6k followers and ECI media updates **@SpokespersonECI**; joined in march 2019(The given data was used by the date of 2 December 2022). as illustrated by Fig 3. Below-
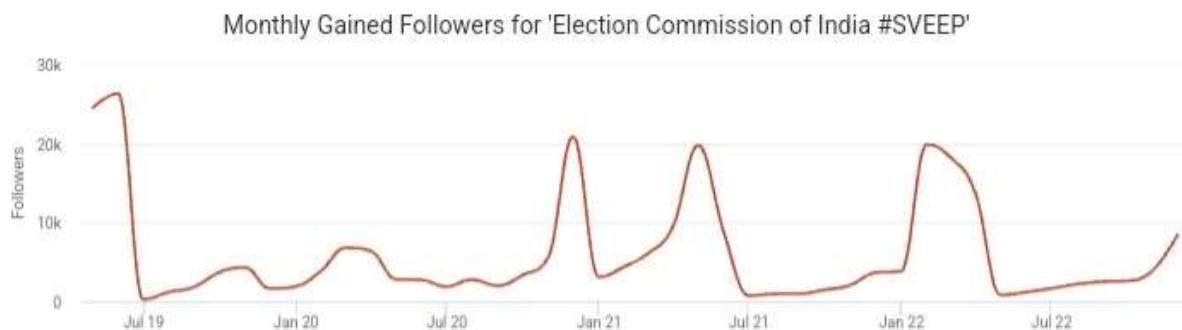

Fig 3. source credit- The data collected from the website named 'social blade', by the date of 2 December 2022.

      The peaks reached the followers of these account at the time of general elections or state assembly elections in various states and at different sets of time. The reach of these account touches its peak due to hashtag trending (**#sveep**) during the elections and after the declaration of the modal code of conduct general elections or state assembly

elections in various states and at different sets of time, Elections in India of 2020 , include by-elections to the Lok Sabha, elections to the Rajya Sabha for 73 Seats, elections to state legislative assemblies of 3 states and numerous other by-elections to state legislative assemblies, councils and local bodies and 2021 include by-elections to the Lok Sabha, elections to the Rajya Sabha, elections to legislative assemblies of 4 states and 1 union territory, and other by-elections to state legislative assemblies, councils and local bodies ,and 2022 include election to the office of the President of India, vice president of India, by-elections to the Lok Sabha, elections to the Rajya Sabha, elections to state legislative assemblies of 7 (seven) states, by-elections to state legislative assemblies and numerous other elections and by-elections to state legislative councils and local bodies.

Youtube channel was created as the earliest platform in the year 2013 with currently 135k subscribers. The given data used by the date of 2 December 2022. There has been a consistent rise in the viewership and subscribers to the channels from January 2020 as per the available data. The continuous video graphic content upload on the YouTube channel gave consistent rise in followers of this channel . As illustrated by Fig 4. Below-
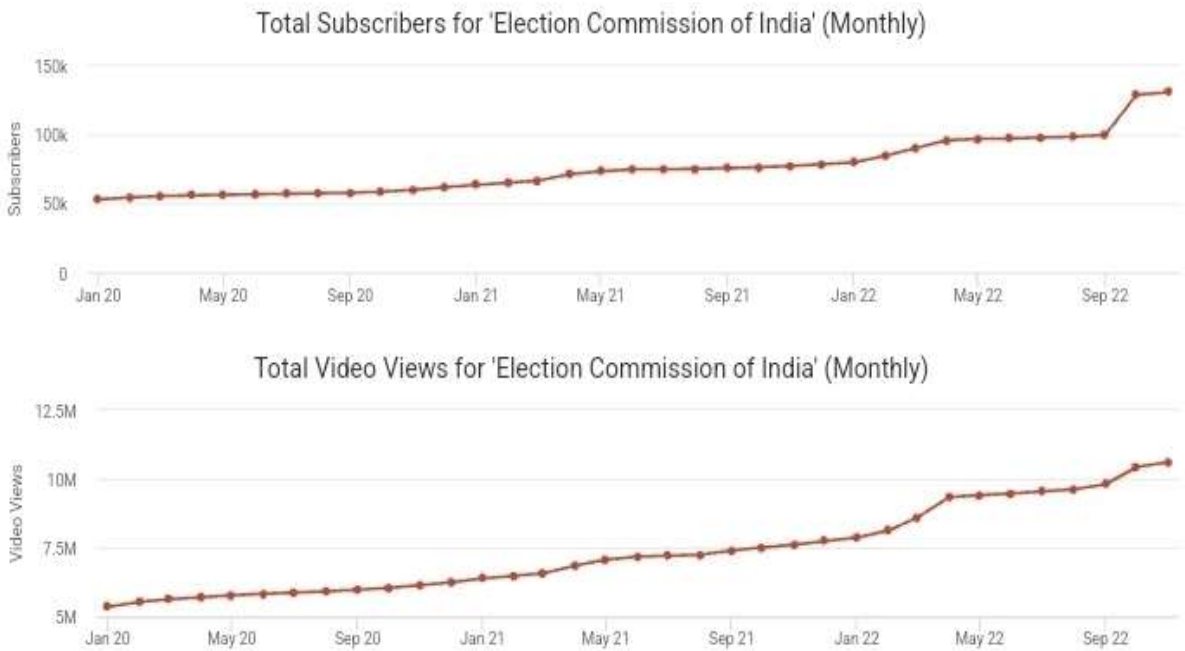
Fig .4 source credit- The data collected from the website named 'social blade', by the date of 2 December 2022.

Conclusions:

The sudden upsurge in social media accounts was a pioneer attempt in the 2014 general election by a prominent political party but there was not much significant contribution by a constitutional institution.

However, after 2014 plethora of attempts were made to be digitally inclusive by the constitutional body like the Election commission of India evident from the above study.

Constitutional bodies when initiating any hashtag, tweet or post hold higher credibility and accountability thereby curtailing rumors or fake news.

Social media accounts data have shown fluctuating peaks during the times of elections state and general. Whereby indicating the higher social media interaction during elections, (out of political rallies and political advertising) but for a short term. However, Youtube being specifically a video-oriented platform sees a consistent rise in views and subscribers due to its educative content that is available on the channel all the time. The inclusion of people's participation through quizzes and media awards, e-postures, and brochures create digital democracy catering voice to the grievances and creativity of individual example of designing logos for various initiatives as the above study adheres.

Post-2009, by ECI-SVEEP, there was a shift from on-field to online mode of voter education that includes television, radio, and technologies that enable electronic transmission of information. The impacts were certainly seen from the 2014 elections; after which 2019 saw the creation of social media accounts of every government institution and electronic media use like web radio, e-Patrika, digital voter cards, etc.

The cheaper and easier access to participation led to higher voter education furthermore voter turnout in the system was fuelled by initiatives of 'selfie after vote' to be posted or given a mention on television with the use of hashtags. Such higher transparency acts build trust and confidence among the citizens ensuring a feeling of inclusion into the system. However, the digital divide poses a challenge or limitation in the study that requires digital literacy. Posting regularly, and engaging with people educates the audience with valuable content leading to a new model of campaigning that has a low cost of expenditure with higher youth participation.

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