Digital Democracy: A Nexus between Social Media and Political Participation

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Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed political participation, enabling unprecedented interaction between citizens and government. This study examines the role of social media in political participation and how social media platforms have become channels for discussion, engagement, and building political relationships. By validating published analyses, interviews, issue assessments, and critically evaluating information, we analyze how social media has influenced political action, including voter behaviour in polls, civic engagement, and public perception. Our findings indicate that social media strengthens the political participation of different groups, facilitates citizen mobilization, and fosters simultaneous responses from elected officials and the public. At the same time, however, we observe challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and the rising issue of the digital divide. Ultimately, this study highlights both, the challenges and prospects of digital democracy, thus contributing to a better understanding of the complex relationship between social media and political participation.

Keywords

Social Media, Political Participation, Online Activism, Digital Society.

Introduction

The rise of digital tools and social media has changed communication. This has given rise to the concept of 'digital democracy,'

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which focuses on the role of digital tools in developing and supporting democratic principles and methods (Congge et al., 2024). An important factor in the influence of digital democracy on political participation is the use of social media. Social media platforms offer people new opportunities to express opinions, exchange data, and interact with other stakeholders. This has led to the emergence of new forms of political participation, such as online activism, digital petitions and social media campaigns (Boulianne, 2015). Social media has also allowed elected officials and political parties to reach a wider audience. Through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, etc. they can communicate directly with their voters and supporters, share opinions and agendas, and respond to comments and analyses in real time. This leads to a more direct and personal form of political interaction that was previously impossible (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020).

However, the impact of social media on political participation also brought new challenges. The spread of propaganda and disinformation on these platforms is a cause for concern, as it can influence public opinion and undermine democratic processes. Social media can also foster the formation of echo chambers, where individuals only see information that confirms their beliefs, thus exacerbating divisions. Despite these challenges, it is undeniable that social media has fundamentally changed political participation, offering citizens new ways to interact with their governments and hold their leaders to account (Gorenc, 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2019). In the evolving digital age, it is important to find ways to harness the potential of social media while mitigating its consequences and rising challenges. This study examines the impact of social media on political participation, analyzing how these platforms have both promoted and hindered democratic progress in Pakistan, particularly in the last decade. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach (Tucker et al., 2018).

The paper has been structured into the following five sections. First section highlights the background, motivation and purpose of current research. The next part provides the conceptualization of digital democracy and how this very concept has evolved over time. The third and fourth sections provide details on the historical evaluation and

emergence of social media in the world. The fifth section provides a short overview of related theories explaining the nexus between social media and political participation. The key social media trends about the most popular media and number of social media users in the world and Pakistan are provided in the sixth section. The seventh section elaborates the conceptualization of political participation in literature. The seventh section offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between social media use and political participation. The final section presents the findings and policy recommendations for key stakeholders.

Conceptualization of Digital Democracy

Digital democracy uses internet, social media, and online governance bodies to improve democratic processes, people's participation, and government accountability. It involves integrating digital technologies and governance bodies into democratic process to increase citizen responsiveness, inclusion, and effective participation in public policy development(Asimakopoulos et al., 2025).

From the perspective of digital democracy, online platforms and tools enable citizens to participate actively in the political process. These platforms facilitate participation in various activities, such as online surveys, digital discussions, electronic petitions, and crowdfunding for projects, thus enabling everyone to express their opinions, participate in processes, and influence decisions. Such participation allows people to fully participate in democratic life, beyond geographical borders (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). Hague and Loader (2005) examined the concept of digital democracy by considering the transformative development of digital tools in shaping democratic practices. They highlighted the role of online forums in promoting participation, increasing transparency, and developing innovative methods of political discussions. A theoretical study was conducted by Hacker and Dijk (2000), who explored the academic practices and practical implications of digital democracy, as well as the issues and perspectives associated with civic participation, debate, and the use of technology in democratic processes.

Christina and Garipidis (2013) study the impact of digital tools on democracy, politics, and government structures. They highlight the potential of digital democracy to strengthen civic engagement, responsibility, and accountability, while discussing the challenges and limitations of digital governance in relation to understanding democratic values. By bridging theory, law, and policy, they offer an interesting perspective on digital democracy.

Historical Evolution of Media Leading to the Era of Social Media

Pre-Social Media Era (before the 2000s)

Traditional media, including print media, audiovisual media, and cinema, dominate public opinion. Their unilateral dissemination of information has allowed them to control public opinion and limit their ability to react.

Early Social Media Era (2000s-2010)

Social media platforms such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) emerged, providing platforms for two-way interaction and enabling people to create and share data, interact with others, and contribute to online discussions.

Social Media Boom (2010-2015)

The popularity and use of social media are growing rapidly. The participation of renowned influencers, bloggers, and journalists is growing. The importance of user-generated content and online interactions is constantly increasing.

Current Social Media Era (2015-present)

Social media platforms have become an indispensable part of our daily lives which use procedural content curation to categorize content and influence what users see. Concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment are widespread. The historical development of media before the advent of social media can be analyzed through several key phases (Briggs & Burke, 2009).

Print Media: Chen (2022) argues that the advent of printing in the 15th century revolutionized communication, enabling the mass production and distribution of printed material. Newspapers, books, and pamphlets became influential media, helping ensure information reached a wider audience.

Broadcast Media: The 20th century saw the rise of broadcast media with the advent of radio and television. Radio news enabled the quick dissemination of information, while television brought illustrated stories to people. These media platforms amplified mass communication but remained largely one-way and did not offer much interaction.

Internet and Web 1.0: The advent of the Internet in the late 20th century laid the foundation for the digital age. The World Wide Web (WWW), which emerged in the early 1990s, enabled the development of websites with coherent content. Web 1.0 allowed individuals and businesses to publish data online but lacked the sharing and networking features typical of social networks.

Web 2.0: The early 2000s saw the emergence of the concept of Web 2.0, which ushered in a shift toward user-generated content and interaction. This period marked the shift from passive consumption to active online participation. Websites like Blogger and Wikipedia allow users to create and share content, while platforms like YouTube facilitate the distribution of videos.

Social Networking Sites: The rise of social networks such as Friendster (2002), Myspace (2003), and Facebook (2004) marked a turning point in media development. These platforms allowed users to create profiles, connect with others, and share content within their circle of friends.

Microblogging and Multimedia Sharing: Platforms such as Twitter (2006) and Tumblr (2007) offered microblogging spaces where users could share short pieces of information or multimedia content. Additionally, image and video platforms such as Instagram and YouTube gained popularity by allowing users to upload videos and share them with a wide audience.

Expansion and Diversification: Social media has constantly evolved and expanded with the rise of platforms like Snapchat (2011), LinkedIn (2003), and TikTok (2016) for short-form videos. Each platform offered unique features and events to the different preferences of its users.

As a result of this development, social media has increasingly focused on user-generated content, interaction, and networking. It has transformed media from passive consumption to active participation, enabling individuals to create, share, and interact with content globally.

Emergence of Social Media in the Contemporary Era

In today's world, the rise of social media has radically changed the way people interact and exchange information in the world. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn have reached vast audiences across the globe. They influence communication, interaction, and institutional and political relations (Lipschultz, 2023). The invention of smartphones, combined with internet access, has enabled people to participate in social media platforms. These platforms offer attractive features that allow users to create profiles, interact with others, and share content and views (Donner, 2015). Social media has enabled quick communication and the ability to network with friends, family, and colleagues, regardless of distance. Furthermore, social media has expanded the reach of communication by allowing users to share opinions, forecasts, images, and videos with a global audience, thus fostering the growth of virtual communities and online systems (Vuori, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on several theoretical considerations to understand the relationship between social media and political participation:

1. According to Habermas's (1991) “the public sphere is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed”. Likewise, in public sphere theory; Social media are considered a modern form of the public sphere in which individuals can participate in meaningful and rational discussions and debates.

2. Putnam's (2000) social capital theory: Social media can be used to build and maintain social capital, which in turn strengthens political standing and collective action.

3. Meyer and Minkoff's (2004) political opportunity structure theory: Social media offer marginalized people new opportunities to participate in political life.

4. The civic participation model (Verba et al., 1995) primarily focused on traditional forms of participation (e.g., voting, campaign work, etc.) and identified key resources that drive engagement. Similarly, Social media offer opportunities for political participation, tools, and a framework for reflection, all of which influence civic action.

5. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's (1976) proposed media dependence theory, the use of media to gather political information influences political participation. The original theory, proposed in 1976, focused on traditional mass media. But, in modern research, the same principles can be applied to social media, finding that dependency on social networking sites (SNS) for political information is related to political engagement and participation.

6. Based on deliberative democracy theory (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004), social media promotes citizen participation in broad, respectful, and informed discussions.

These theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive overview of the complex interrelationships between social media, political participation, and digital democracy.

Social Media Users in the World

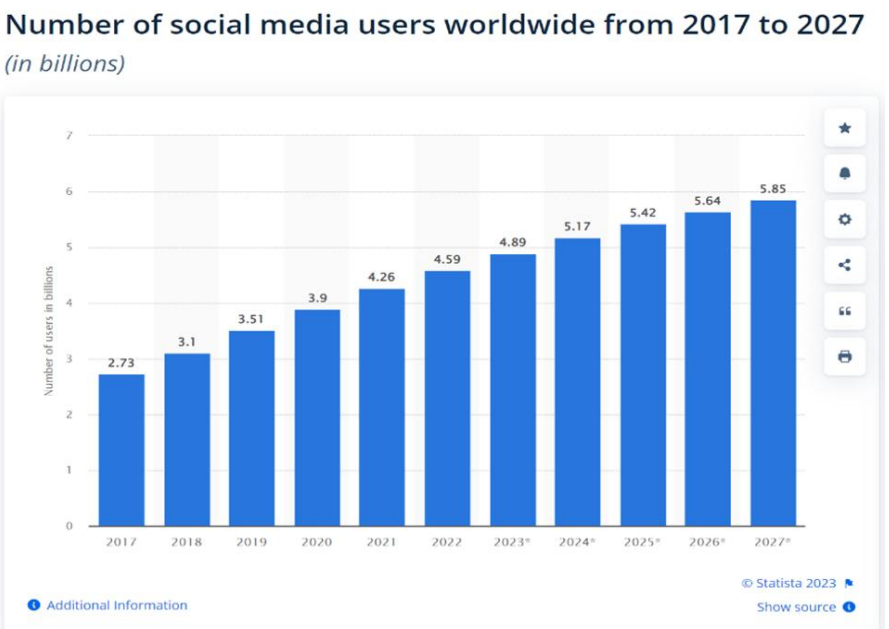
Social media usage worldwide has increased significantly in the last decade or so. As of 2023, approximately 4.9 billion individuals out of the global population of around 8 billion are using social media actively (Thakur et al., 2023). According to forecasts, the number of social media users worldwide is expected to reach 5.85 billion by the year 2027. As of January 2023, the worldwide penetration rate of social networks stands at 59.4%. On average, the typical social media user engages with 6.6 different social media platforms. Approximately 85% of the world's 5.27

billion mobile phone users use social media. Table 1 reports the most popular social networks worldwide (Number of Social Media Users Worldwide from 2017 to 2027, 2023).

Table 1: Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of January 2023

No.	App. Name	Users Worldwide	Male (%)	Male (%)
1	Facebook	2.95 billion	56.6	43.4
2	YouTube	2.56 billion	53.9	46.1
3	WhatsApp	2 billion	56.3	43.7
4	Instagram	2.5 billion	50.7	49.3
5	TikTok	1.2 billion	43	57
6	Twitter	436 million	58	42

Figure 1 shows the number of social media users from 2017 to 2027. As it can be seen, the number of social media users have increased over the said period, which implies the rising popularity of these social media



platforms for interaction regarding various social, economic and political issues among the masses.

Social Media Users in Pakistan

In 2022, the average monthly active social media users in Pakistan amounted to approximately 72.9 million, with an annual growth rate of 4.3% during 2021-22. This accounts for approximately 31.5% of the total population. On average, these social media users spend a certain number of hours on social media and maintain accounts on multiple platforms. People between 18-40 years of age are more active on social media in Pakistan. Facebook is the most popular platform in Pakistan around 23 percent of the total population uses Facebook. As of January 2023, the latest data indicates that there are approximately 46.44 million Facebook users in Pakistan, with a growth rate of 0.9%. Among these users, around 77.2% are male, while approximately 22.8% are female (CR Team, 2023).

Political Participation

Digital democracy refers to the utilization of the internet, social media, and online platforms, to enhance democratic processes. It involves the integration of digital tools and platforms into the democratic framework to foster transparency, inclusivity, and active citizen engagement in political decision-making. Asimakopoulos et al., (2025) mention that, the most egregious of these is the digital divide that disproportionately denies marginalized groups access to digital democracy due to economic and infrastructural disparities. Despite these strengths, digital inclusion is a key challenge. Marginalized groups have little access to the technologies needed to participate in digital democracy (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). ().

In the context of digital democracy, online platforms can facilitate various activities like online voting, digital consultations, e-petitions, and crowdsourcing of ideas etc., enabling people to express their opinions, provide input on policies, and also influence decision-makers. Such engagement empowers individuals and communities, breaking down geographical barriers and enabling broader participation in democratic processes (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025).

Hague and Loader (2005) study the concept of digital democracy by analysing the transformative potential of digital platforms in influencing democratic practices, emphasizing the role of online platforms in facilitating citizen engagement, increasing transparency, and enabling new forms of political discourse. Hacker and Dijk (2000) explore the theoretical foundations and practical implications of digital democracy, examining the challenges and opportunities. Christina and Garipidis (2013) investigate the impact of digital platforms on democracy, politics, and governance mechanisms. The authors analyse the potential of digital democracy to enhance civic engagement, accountability, and transparency.

Digital democracy also uses social media and online platforms to help people get involved in politics. These platforms give citizens spaces to share opinions, discuss issues, and organize grassroots movements. Information can spread quickly, making it easier to plan protests, rallies, and campaigns. As a result, social media helps amplify people's voices and encourages collective action.

Link Between Social Media and Political Participation

Several scholars have focused on the rise of social media, highlighting its importance for ordinary citizens and its connection to political participation. The growth of social media has created new opportunities for people to engage in political discussions and take part in democratic processes (Chadwick, 2013). Social media platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube have enabled individuals to exchange information, and discuss political developments (Strandberg, 2013). Social media has had an essential impact on political participation, both offline and online. Vitak et al. (2011) emphasized that social media users are more likely to participate in political discussions, share political content, and participate in online campaigns compared to non-users. Social media has also been found to enable new forms of political participation, such as online petition signing, digital activism, and crowdfunding for political causes (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). The emergence of social media has given rise to the use of digital technologies to enhance political participation and engagement (Effing, et al., 2011). Digital democracy has enabled citizens to bypass traditional checks and

participate directly in political processes. For example, in 2009, Twitter was effectively used in Moldova. Similarly, Facebook and Twitter played an important role in the political changes in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain in the past few years (Larama, 2014).As per the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2025), over 70% of households in Pakistan now use internet services, and individual internet usage jumped from 17% in 2019 to 57% by 2025. Its impact is intensifying gradually. In Pakistan, various political parties and ideological groups are working through online platforms to interconnect and encourage individuals to take part in the political procedure (Kugelman, 2012). Social media has also provided a platform to voice their opinions, a ground for marginalized groups and mobilizing for social and political change (Eijaz, 2013).

Despite the potential benefits of digital democracy, there are also critiques of the effect of social media on political participation. One reservation is that social media may reinforce existing social and political divides, as individuals tend to follow and engage with like-minded people (Boulianne, 2020). Social media may also contribute to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which would undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The UN views mis/disinformation as a critical global threat, with figures showing widespread impact: the 2024 Global Risk Report found over 80% of experts see it happening, impacting elections, health, and inciting violence (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Social media has a great impact on political participation. Nevertheless, there are also reservations about the impact of social media on political debates and the potential for reinforcing social and political divides. More research is needed to better understand the relationship between social media and political participation, and to develop approaches to enhance the benefits of digital democracy and address its weaknesses (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020)

As Jost et al., (2018) mention, “social media could exert meaningful effects on political participation”. Social media use allows candidates and political parties to connect with voters directly and share their messages or political opinions. It has authorized the political movements by simplifying organization, coordination, and amplification of voices.

Though challenges such as the spread of disinformation and the creation of filter bubbles emphasized the need for critical engagement and digital literacy in leveraging the potential of social media for expressive political participation.

Nowadays, social media serves as a primary source of news for many people across the globe. Instant access to information encourages individuals to stay connected in political discussions. For example, during elections, social media platforms provide informed coverage of events, enabling citizens to make informed decisions and actively participate in the democratic process (Saka, 2017).

Firmstone and Coleman (2015) argue that citizens can share their opinions, thoughts, ask questions, and express reservations directly to politicians through social media platforms. It provides a platform for social activists to connect, share resources, and coordinate actions. The Arab Spring in 2011 spread primarily from social media platforms. In the 2022 political changes in Pakistan, people used X and other social media platforms to share their opinions.

Social media binds individuals globally, allowing them to share and access information on global politics as well. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement gained significant recognition and support globally through social media, with individuals sharing information, resources, and expressing solidarity to discourse racial injustices and advocate for change. According to the Pew Research Center, (2024), 55% of adults in the United States of America say they get their news from social media platforms. This specifies that social media has become a peculiar source of information for a significant share of the population (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). A study determined that social media provides a platform for individuals to engage with a diversity of perspectives and access information from various sources they may not have encountered through conventional media (Jungherr et al., 2012).As per the Digital News Report, (2024), that social media platforms have become increasingly important in news distribution. It also emphasized the role of social media in breaking news stories and providing real-time developments (Newman et al., 2021). Hutchinson (2022) found that social media users are more likely to encounter news articles and information

that they would not receive through conventional news sources. Social media algorithms and the sharing of content by friends and connections expose users to a diverse range of information and perspectives. Users are more likely to engage in political discussions, participate in political events, and share political information with others (Jost et al., 2018). Social media has enabled citizen journalism, empowering individuals to report and share news in real-time politics. User-generated content improves the news quality by providing different angles and accounts of events (DeIuliis, 2015). This, afterwards, plays a beneficial role in promoting political participation and democratization of societies (Chadwick, 2013). The individuals who engage with political content on social media are more likely to chance meeting diverse viewpoints, leading to increased exposure to different political narratives and a multicultural information environment (Mitchell et al., 2014).

The United Nations Development Programme, (2025) emphasized the transformative role of social media in democratizing information and promoting citizen involvement. Moreover social media platforms provide citizens with the tools to actively participate in public discourse, access information on public facilities, and participate in political debates, therefore contributing to more inclusive and hands-on governance (UNDP, 2025). .A report by Freedom House, (2019) stressed the impact of social media in endorsing free expression and challenging censorship in oppressive regimes. It has allowed dissidents and protestors to share information and organize protests, thus contributing to the democratization of information in surroundings where outdated media may face hurdles.

In China, platforms like Weibo and WeChat have been used to spread information and raise political awareness (Fuchs, 2013). In Sudan, social media played a pivotal role during the 2018–2019 uprising (BBC News, 2019). In 2013, social media organized the Gezi Park protests in Turkey. Social media became an essential tool for citizen journalism (Tufekci, 2017). These examples elaborate on how social media platforms have enabled individuals to share information, and organize protests about political changes.Social media platforms have been used to crowdsource election monitoring efforts and share their observations (Norris, 2006).

During the 2012 Mexican presidential election, the #YoSoy132 movement used social media to document and report on electoral chaos, ensuring greater transparency in the electoral process (Baek & Lee, 2012). Jenkins et al. (2009) argue that direct broadcasting allows people to watch political events without intermediaries, promoting transparency and reducing the potential for manipulation or prejudice.

Besides, social media provides a platform for politicians and political parties to publicly reveal their campaign finances. They can share financial audits, expenditure details, and donor information to for transparency in political funding. Social media has also authorized people and journalists to investigate reports on political affairs. Through platforms like X, Facebook, and blogging sites, individuals can expose corruption, misconduct, and political disgraces (Morelock & Ziotti Narita, 2021). For example, number of Pakistani influencers used YouTube to reach millions, to share their ideas about societal subjects (Zaheer, 2016).

Social media also has negative implications for political participation, including the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. Algorithms used by social media platforms show users content aligned with their existing preferences, limiting exposure to various viewpoints and hampering meaningful political discourses (Shah, 2025). The 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum established how social media algorithms simplified the formation of echo chambers, contributing to the divergence of public opinion (Papadatos-Kalos, 2025).During the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms were diffused with misinformation, causing public confusion and obstructing effective policy responses (Caceres, 2022). Online harassment and toxicity discourage political meetings, with minorities, women, and marginalized groups often facing targeted harassment movements (Roiha, 2024)). Dominant examples include female politicians and journalists who are subjected to personal attacks, and doxing threats (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2011). Such environments tend to silence voices in active participation in political debates.Additionally, the phenomenon of slacktivism is prevalent on social media, where artificial forms of political engagement like sharing posts do not interpret into physical action (Jenkins et al., 2009). Social media platforms have also been operated to influence political results, as

seen in the Cambridge Analytica scandal during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Freedom House, 2019). In the same way, the European Union DisinfoLab report on 'Indian Chronicles' exposed a network of misinformation campaigns targeting Pakistan to operate public opinion and strain ambassadorial relations (EU DisinfoLab, 2019). Such incidents elucidate the darker side of social media's influence on democratization.

Conclusion

The advent of social media has unquestionably transformed the political participation, enabling individuals to connect, share information, and participate in political discussion like never before. Through an analysis of literature review and empirical studies, several key findings have arisen. Firstly, social media platforms have enabled a more inclusive and accessible form of political enrolment. They have broken down conventional barriers of entry, allowing people from different backgrounds and demographics to voice their thoughts, mobilize support, and engage in political engagements. This recent accessibility has the potential to enhance democratization and foster a more representative political system. Secondly, social media has become a powerful tool for political movements. It has enabled the rapid dissemination of information, facilitated the organization of politics, and amplified the voices of marginalized individuals. Activists, along with protestant and grassroots movements, have utilized social media platforms to raise awareness, demand accountability, and challenge conventional power structures. This enhanced mobilization has the potential to bring about significant social and political change.

Though social media has undoubtedly expanded the scope of political engagements, it also presents its fair share of hurdles. The rise of misinformation and disinformation, echo chambers, and filter bubbles has raised concerns about the quality of information and the separation of public discourse. The algorithmic design of social media platforms, driven by engagement metrics and personalized content, can inadvertently strengthen biases and limit exposure to different perspectives. In addition, concerns about privacy, data manipulation, and the influence of foreign actors on political processes demonstrate the need for regulatory

frameworks and responsible platform authority. It is crucial to address these challenges and harness the full potential of digital democracy.

While social media platforms have brought about significant changes in the realm of political participation, the full implications of digital democracy are still unfolding. It is an evolving landscape that needs ongoing research, critical analysis, and proactive interventions. By joining the power of social media while addressing its limitations, one can strive towards an informed, more inclusive, and participatory democratic society.

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