



Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss the advantages and challenges of electioneering on social media.(250 words)

22 Apr, 2019 GS Paper 2 Polity & Governance

Approach

- Write briefly about electioneering on social media.
- Give several key advantages of electioneering on social media.
- Give several key challenges of electioneering on social media with suitable examples.
- Provide an optimistic conclusion.

Introduction

- Electioneering on social media is the use of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp etc for election campaigning. There is a heavy impact of social media platforms, owing to the drastic increase in internet users, internet-enabled mobile phones and, the number of new voters in the 18-25 years bracket.

Body

Advantages of electioneering on social media

- It allows political parties to reach out to masses easily, on a personal level, in an interactive format. For example, social media makes it easy to spread the information about events, schedules, current events and important talking points.
- It is a cheaper and democratic way of campaigning as any candidate can find an internet savvy volunteer to take on the task of managing the social media posting for the campaign.
- Platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable candidates to directly reach out to voters, mobilize supporters, and influence the public agenda.
- It provides a wide range of choices to political parties to tailor their advertisements to suit the particular section of electorates.

Challenges of electioneering on social media

- **Political ads can influence voters** even in the most inaccessible electorates and can run continuously with no disclosure of who is paying for them.
- **False news** can be easily circulated at a lightning speed on social media to spread political propaganda to win the election by hook or by crook. For instance, the problem came to widespread attention during the 2016 US Presidential election, when Donald Trump's campaign invested heavily in digital advertising, and the term "fake news" emerged to describe pro-Trump propaganda masquerading as online news.
- **It can dent the process of free and fair election** and can even compromise the sovereignty of a country. For example, alleged Russian interference in the US presidential election included

covert ads on social media and Facebook groups pumping out falsehoods.

- **Political parties can unethically leverage data for campaigning on social media** with the help of organisations like Cambridge Analytica which stands accused of misusing the data of 50 million users stored on Facebook and rigging multiple elections worldwide, of political involvement in India.
- Electioneering on social media makes it **easier to spread polarising messages and disinformation faster.**
 - It can create misinformation about the popular political opponent and can malign his reputation. Owing to the lack of awareness and education in developing countries like India, this misinformation can manipulate the voters to vote against the political opponent.
 - It can polarise the voters on caste and religious lines through covert campaigning on social media platform like Whatsapp which can further create social tension and violence.
- Section 126 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, bans advertising and campaigning on TV and other electronic media during the 48-hour period but **it is difficult to track social media platforms for the violation of model codes of conduct, owing to their decentralised nature.**
 - Recently Umesh Sinha Committee has suggested that print, electronic media, WhatsApp, and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter be brought within the ambit of Section 126 to ensure voters are not unduly influenced and are afforded a period of reflection to examine their political choice.

Conclusion

- Since electioneering on social media can drastically harm the process of free and fair election which is the basic structure of the Constitution, all the key stakeholders -the Election Commission, Government, Political Parties and Social Media platforms should devise a way out to shield the election process from the ill effects of electioneering through social media.

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