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THE DIGITAL MOBILISATION OF A GENERATION: GENERATION Z AND THE RESHAPING OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY IN THE 2020s

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ABSTRACT
India's Generation Z (born 1997–2012) constitutes the largest youth cohort of any democracy worldwide, with recent estimates placing the cohort at approximately 377 million people. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, voters aged 18–29 comprised 22.8% of the national electorate, confirming Gen Z and young Millennials as the most keenly contested vote bloc in contemporary Indian politics. This article examines how digital nativity, issue-based political reasoning, and networked activism have enabled Gen Z to reshape electoral discourse, governance agendas, and democratic accountability mechanisms in India. Drawing on verified secondary data from the Election Commission of India, CSDS–Lokniti post-poll surveys, the Internet and Mobile Association of India, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the study argues that Gen Z is neither apolitical nor uniformly partisan; rather, it is a strategically selective, digitally mediated electorate that rewards perceived responsiveness on employment, education, climate action, and social justice. The findings indicate that while traditional party loyalties have weakened, the intensity of youth-led digital mobilisation has introduced new forms of horizontal political communication that bypass conventional gatekeepers. The article concludes by assessing the structural challenges, including youth unemployment, digital misinformation, and unequal internet access, that condition the long-term democratic impact of this generational shift.

KEYWORDS: *Generation Z, Indian democracy, 2024 Lok Sabha elections, digital activism, youth voter turnout, political participation, social media, issue-based politics*

1. INTRODUCTION

India stands at a demographic and political inflection point. With nearly two-thirds of its population below the age of 35, and Generation Z (Gen Z) alone numbering approximately 377 million, the country hosts the largest youth cohort of any nation on earth (Statista, 2024). In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, voters aged 18–29 constituted 22.8% of the national electorate, making them the single most sought-after vote bloc by all major political formations (Election Commission of India, 2024; Times of India, 2025). This demographic reality has triggered a structural transformation in how political power is contested, communicated, and legitimised in the world's most populous democracy.

Unlike preceding generations, Gen Z in India is characterised by three analytically distinct attributes. First, digital nativity: this is the first generation to have grown up with affordable smartphones, ubiquitous mobile data, and algorithmically curated social media as default features of their political environment (Internet and Mobile Association of India [IAMAI], 2024). Second, issue-oriented political reasoning: Gen Z voters evaluate parties and candidates less through the prism of inherited partisan loyalty or communal identity, and more through perceived performance on employment, education quality, climate action, and social justice (CSDS–Lokniti, 2024). Third, conditional trust in institutions: while Gen Z broadly endorses democratic norms, its trust in political parties, legislatures, and regulatory bodies is contingent on demonstrated transparency and responsiveness (Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2022).

The 2024 general election offers an ideal empirical window through which to assess these generational shifts. Contrary to predictions of uniform youth consolidation behind the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the election results revealed a more complex picture. CSDS–Lokniti post-poll data show that while the BJP retained a relative advantage among young voters, the opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) secured a disproportionate share of the youngest voter segment, contributing to the ruling party's failure to secure a supermajority (The Hindu, 2024; The Print, 2024). This outcome underscores a central argument of the present study: Gen Z in India is not a passive demographic dividend awaiting mobilisation by elite actors, but an active, discerning electorate whose preferences are increasingly shaped by horizontal, digitally mediated networks rather than vertical, hierarchical party structures (Castells, 2012).

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on youth political engagement in India has expanded significantly over the past decade, converging on four interrelated themes: the determinants of youth participation, the restructuring of the public sphere through digital media, generational value change, and the specific modalities of Indian youth activism.

2.1 Youth Political Participation: Resources, Interest, and Mobilisation

The foundational civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba et al. (1995) posits that political participation is a function of resources (time, money, skills), psychological engagement (political interest and efficacy), and recruitment networks. Applied to India, this framework helps explain historical oscillations in youth turnout between moments of high-intensity street protest and periods of relative electoral quiescence (CSDS–Lokniti, 2019). However, the 2024 election suggests a partial decoupling of turnout from traditional mobilisation networks: young voters were reached not only through party workers and family networks, but through Instagram influencers, YouTube commentators, and peer-to-peer WhatsApp dissemination (India Today, 2024).

2.2 Digital Media and the Networked Public Sphere

Castells (2012) theorised the emergence of a 'network society' in which political power is increasingly contested through digitally mediated networks rather than vertically integrated institutions. In India, this transformation has been accelerated by the world's largest affordable-data experiment, which saw active internet users surpass 886 million in 2024 and cross 950 million by 2025 (IAMAI, 2024; The Hindu, 2026). Rural India now accounts for 57% of active internet users, growing at nearly four times the pace of urban India, suggesting that the digital public sphere is no longer an elite urban enclave (The Hindu, 2026). For Gen Z, platforms such as Instagram, X, YouTube, and regional-language applications like ShareChat constitute primary arenas of political discovery and deliberation.

2.3 Generational Value Change and Post-Materialist Politics

Inglehart's (1997) post-materialist thesis holds that generations socialised during periods of relative economic security prioritise self-expression, quality-of-life, and participatory values over pure economic accumulation. While Indian Gen Z cannot be described as uniformly post-materialist, given the persistence of acute unemployment and precarious livelihoods, survey evidence indicates a discernible shift toward issue-based evaluation of political actors. CSDS–Lokniti's pre-election youth survey found that employment, education, and inflation ranked highest among first-time voter concerns, yet these were increasingly articulated through the language of rights, dignity, and governmental accountability rather than mere patronage (CSDS–Lokniti, 2024).

2.4 Indian Youth Activism: From Street to Screen

Empirical studies by CSDS–Lokniti, ORF, and UNESCO have documented a paradoxical combination of rising political awareness and persistent institutional distrust among Indian youth. Between 45% and 55% of young Indians actively discuss politics, with social media now rivalling television as the primary source of political information (CSDS–Lokniti, 2019; ORF, 2022). Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the 'meme-ification' of political commentary, wherein satirical visual content serves as a low-cost, high-reach mechanism for youth-led critique (Tandon, 2025). The 2024 election and subsequent protest waves, including the 2026 CJP (Common Jobs Platform) agitations and the Ladakh climate protests led by Sonam Wangchuk, have further demonstrated the capacity of Gen Z to translate online visibility into offline collective action (The Print, 2026; Decode Internet, 2025).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study pursues four primary objectives: (1) to analyse the demographic weight and electoral significance of Gen Z in India, with specific reference to the 2024 general election; (2) to examine the digital political behaviour, online activism, and networked mobilisation strategies employed by Gen Z voters; (3) to evaluate the impact of youth-led digital engagement on party competition, governance agendas, and democratic accountability; and (4) to assess the structural constraints, including unemployment, digital inequality, and misinformation, that mediate the long-term political influence of this cohort.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article employs a descriptive-analytical research design based on verified secondary data. The reliance on secondary sources is methodologically appropriate for a macro-level study aimed at synthesising existing evidence and identifying systemic patterns rather than generating primary micro-data. Data sources include official reports from the Election Commission of India (2024) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; survey data from CSDS–Lokniti (2019, 2024); digital adoption statistics from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (2024, 2025); international demographic projections from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs; and peer-reviewed scholarship in political science, sociology, and media studies. The analytical approach integrates documentary analysis, comparative trend analysis, and thematic interpretation of election data and digital-media practices.

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5. Demographic Profile and Electoral Weight of Gen Z

India's demographic structure confers extraordinary electoral weight upon its youth population. According to UN population data and domestic estimates, India's total population stands at approximately 1.46 billion, with a median age of 28.4 years, making it one of the youngest large economies in the world (UNFPA, 2025; Demographer.org, 2026). Gen Z, defined here as those born between 1997 and 2012, numbers roughly 377 million, or nearly 40% of the country's population in some estimates (Statista, 2024; India Today, 2026).

The electoral arithmetic is equally striking. The Election Commission of India's Atlas on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections records that voters aged 18–29 comprised 22.8% of the national electorate as of May 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2024; Times of India, 2025). State-level variation is substantial: Assam recorded the highest youth electorate share at nearly 30%, while Kerala, despite its advanced human development indicators, registered the lowest at just over 18%, reflecting divergent demographic transitions and migration patterns across states (Times of India, 2025). This geographic heterogeneity implies that Gen Z political influence is not uniformly distributed but is concentrated in specific regional arenas where youth cohorts are largest relative to the overall electorate.

Digital connectivity has amplified this demographic advantage into political voice. The IAMAI-Kantar Internet in India Report 2024 documents 886 million active internet users nationwide, a figure that crossed 950 million in 2025 (IAMAI, 2024; The Hindu, 2026). Crucially, rural India now accounts for 57% of active internet users, and rural connectivity is growing at nearly four times the pace of urban growth, indicating that the digital divide, while persistent, is narrowing in terms of absolute numbers (The Hindu, 2026). Government telecom surveys further reveal that approximately 96.8% of rural youth aged 15–29 used mobile phones for calls and/or internet access in early 2025, suggesting near-universal mobile penetration among the youth demographic (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2025).

6. POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR AND ELECTORAL CHOICES IN 2024

6.1 Turnout Trends and the Youth Vote Bloc

The 2024 Lok Sabha election was historic not merely for its scale, but for the intensity with which political parties competed for youth support. India Today (2024) described young voters aged 18–25 as 'the most sought-after vote bloc' of the election. Despite this mobilisation, overall voter turnout dipped by approximately 1.3 percentage points compared with 2019, even as the absolute number of voters increased due to population growth and enrolment expansion (Hindustan Times, 2024). Youth turnout followed this broader pattern of marginal decline, though the salience of youth issues in campaign discourse was unmistakably higher than in previous cycles.

Post-poll analysis by CSDS–Lokniti, published in The Hindu (2024), confirms that the BJP retained a relative advantage among young voters, but this advantage was insufficient to deliver the supermajority the party had projected. Simultaneously, Axis My India exit-poll data, reported in The Print (2024), indicate that the INDIA bloc secured a higher vote share among the youngest cohort than among older age groups, suggesting a generational gradient in opposition support. Sanjay Kumar and Devesh Kumar's (2024) analysis in Studies in Indian Politics further documents that the BJP lost significant seats precisely where youth dissatisfaction over unemployment and exam-related irregularities was most acute, underlining the electoral costs of perceived governance failures on issues central to Gen Z aspirations.

6.2 Issue-Based Orientation and Erosion of Partisan Loyalty

A defining characteristic of Gen Z electoral behaviour is the weakening of fixed party identification in favour of issue-based evaluation. CSDS–Lokniti's pre-election survey of first-time voters found that employment, inflation, education quality, and corruption were the most frequently cited determinants of vote choice (CSDS–Lokniti, 2024). This cohort is less likely to vote along traditional caste or community lines as a default position, and more likely to cross-pressure identity and performance considerations. The implication is that Gen Z is not a captured vote bank for any single party; rather, it behaves as a swing constituency whose allegiance must be continually re-earned through policy delivery and communicative accessibility.

6.3 Trust, Scepticism, and Democratic Commitment

Survey evidence from ORF (2022) and CSDS–Lokniti (2024) reveals a pattern of conditional institutional trust: Gen Z respondents endorse democratic principles at high rates, yet express significant scepticism toward political parties, elected representatives, and regulatory bodies. Sources of distrust include perceived corruption, the influence of money in politics, partisan media bias, and inadequate responsiveness to youth-specific grievances. This conditional trust is politically consequential: it creates an electorate that is simultaneously committed to democratic norms and willing to punish incumbents who fail to meet performance standards, thereby intensifying electoral competition.

7. DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND NETWORKED MOBILISATION

Gen Z political consciousness is constituted through digitally mediated environments to a degree unprecedented in Indian political history. Where earlier generations experienced political socialisation primarily through family transmission, school civics, and

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mass media, Gen Z encounters politics through algorithmically curated feeds, influencer endorsements, and peer-generated memes (Castells, 2012; IAMAI, 2024).

7.1 Platforms, Practices, and Political Discovery

Instagram, YouTube, X, WhatsApp, and regional-language platforms such as ShareChat and Moj have become the dominant infrastructure of youth political engagement. Political content on these platforms is characterised by short-form video, satirical memes, hashtag campaigns, and live-streamed rallies that collapse the distinction between entertainment and civic commentary (Tandon, 2025). The 2024 election witnessed sophisticated meme warfare, with parties and supporter networks deploying visual satire to delegitimise opponents and consolidate in-group identity. Scholarship on the 'memescape' of election results day confirms that memes function not merely as humorous distractions but as compressed political arguments that travel faster and farther than traditional editorials (Tandon, 2025).

7.2 From Digital Visibility to Offline Collective Action

The relationship between online activism and offline mobilisation has strengthened markedly. The 2024 campaign saw digital outrage over exam-paper leaks and perceived unfairness in public recruitment translate into visible youth protest. More recently, the 2026 CJP protests, documented by The Print (2026) and NDTV (2026), demonstrated how Gen Z activists used Instagram to broadcast protest locations, explain legal rights to detainees, and coordinate decentralised demonstrations against government hiring policies. Similarly, the Ladakh protests led by climate activist Sonam Wangchuk revealed a narrative war on social media in which Ladakhi Gen Z confronted slickly produced counter-narratives from partisan digital operations, illustrating both the emancipatory and contested nature of networked politics (Decode Internet, 2025).

7.3 Risks: Misinformation, Polarisation, and Algorithmic Capture

The democratisation of political voice through digital platforms is accompanied by significant risks. The rapid circulation of misinformation, orchestrated trolling, algorithmic amplification of polarising content, and the use of targeted digital campaigns to manipulate preferences all threaten the quality of democratic deliberation (IAMAI, 2024; Outlook India, 2025). Furthermore, internet shutdowns and platform restrictions, deployed by state authorities as instruments of public-order management, disproportionately constrain youth-led mobilisation and risk delegitimising democratic institutions in the eyes of a digitally native generation (Outlook India, 2025). Addressing these challenges requires not merely content moderation by platforms, but systemic investments in digital literacy, independent fact-checking, and regulatory frameworks that balance security concerns with expressive freedoms.

8. CASE STUDIES IN GEN Z POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

8.1 The 2024 Election: Youth as Swing Constituency

The 2024 Lok Sabha election provides the most comprehensive recent evidence of Gen Z electoral influence. Contrary to the ruling party's expectation of a sweeping youth mandate, the results revealed a fragmented youth vote sensitive to local economic conditions and governance grievances. In constituencies with high youth populations and acute unemployment, the BJP experienced significant seat losses, while the INDIA bloc made gains among first-time voters disillusioned by perceived economic mismanagement (Kumar & Kumar, 2024; The Print, 2024). The election thus confirmed that Gen Z behaves as a swing demographic whose support cannot be assumed from historical voting patterns or nationalist appeals alone.

8.2 Climate and Environmental Justice Movements

Indian Gen Z climate activists have successfully linked global environmental discourse to locally salient issues such as agrarian distress, urban air pollution, and Himalayan ecological fragility. The Fridays for Future India campaign, though attenuated by the pandemic, established a template for student-led climate strikes that has been adapted in subsequent mobilisations, including the Ladakh protests of 2024–2025 (UNFPA India, 2023; Decode Internet, 2025). These movements illustrate how Gen Z leverages digital tools to localise transnational issues and render them immediate to everyday experience.

8.3 Student Politics and Campus-Based Mobilisation

University campuses remain critical sites of Gen Z political formation. Institutions such as Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, the University of Hyderabad, and Jadavpur University have witnessed sustained mobilisation around fee hikes, reservation policies, campus autonomy, gender-based violence, and academic freedom (CSDS–Lokniti, 2019). These campus movements frequently intersect with national political debates, functioning as incubators of leadership and ideological formation. The digital documentation of campus protests via Instagram stories, YouTube livestreams, and X threads ensures that local grievances acquire national visibility, amplifying their political impact.

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9. IMPACT ON INDIAN DEMOCRACY

Gen Z's entry into electoral and civic politics is reshaping Indian democracy along four principal dimensions. First, participatory depth: youth engagement extends beyond periodic voting to encompass sustained scrutiny of governmental performance, digital petitioning, crowdfunding for social causes, and volunteerism in community initiatives (ORF, 2022). Second, agenda setting: online opinion-building by Gen Z influences election narratives, candidate selection, and policy focus, compelling parties to address issues that might otherwise be marginalised (Castells, 2012). Third, programmatic competition: in response to youth priorities, parties have introduced startup policies, skill-development schemes, education reforms, and digital governance initiatives, potentially improving policy responsiveness (NITI Aayog, as cited in ORF, 2022). Fourth, accountability pressure: real-time fact-checking, viral exposés of governance failures, and coordinated digital campaigns create new mechanisms of horizontal accountability that complement, and sometimes circumvent, traditional vertical accountability through elections alone.

10. STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite its transformative potential, Gen Z political agency is constrained by structural factors that cannot be resolved through digital mobilisation alone. Youth unemployment remains the most pressing concern. World Bank data cited through Statista (2026) place India's youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24) at approximately 16% for 2024, while the government's Periodic Labour Force Survey reports a decline in youth unemployment to 9.9% in 2025 from 10.9% in 2022, though definitional differences across sources complicate direct comparison (Statista, 2026; Economic Times, 2026). Regardless of the precise figure, the gap between educational attainment and decent employment opportunities generates frustration that can either energise political engagement or deepen cynicism, depending on perceived institutional responsiveness.

Additional challenges include inadequate political education in formal schooling, which limits the capacity of young citizens to evaluate complex policy trade-offs; persistent gender disparities in political participation, which mean that the visible face of Gen Z activism is often male-dominated; the digital divide, which, despite narrowing, still excludes marginalised rural and low-income youth from full participation in networked politics; and the prevalence of misinformation, which can distort electoral choices and inflame communal tensions (CSDS–Lokniti, 2019; ORF, 2022; IAMAI, 2024). Finally, the absence of dedicated youth representation mechanisms within political parties and legislative bodies restricts the translation of enthusiasm into institutional influence.

11. FUTURE PROSPECTS

By 2030, Gen Z and Millennial voters combined are projected to constitute nearly 60% of India's electorate, giving these cohorts decisive influence over electoral outcomes and policy directions (UNFPA India, 2023; India Today, 2026). The continued expansion of digital infrastructure, the rising political literacy associated with higher educational enrolment, and the consolidation of issue-centric activism suggest that Gen Z's political weight will increase rather than diminish. The critical question is whether this generational energy will be channelled into sustained institutional engagement, including party membership, local governance participation, and civil society leadership, or will remain confined to episodic digital mobilisation and protest politics. The democratic health of India in the coming decades depends substantially on the answer to this question.

12. CONCLUSION

Generation Z represents a distinctive and increasingly decisive force in Indian democracy. Its political behaviour is characterised by digital nativity, issue-based evaluation, conditional institutional trust, and networked mobilisation practices that differ qualitatively from those of preceding cohorts. The 2024 Lok Sabha election demonstrated that Gen Z is not a passive demographic dividend to be harvested by elite mobilisation, but an active, discerning electorate capable of swinging outcomes when its core concerns, employment, education, climate action, and social justice, are inadequately addressed. Digital platforms have amplified youth voice, enabled new forms of horizontal accountability, and transformed the tempo and texture of political communication. Yet these same platforms harbour risks of misinformation, polarisation, and algorithmic manipulation that can undermine democratic quality if left unaddressed.

The policy and institutional challenge for the coming decade is to create the conditions under which Gen Z's participatory energy can be translated into durable democratic deepening: through meaningful youth representation, responsive governance, investments in education and employment, and a regulatory environment that safeguards digital rights while curbing informational pathologies. India's demographic advantage will realise its full democratic potential only if the largest youth generation in its history is empowered not merely as voters, but as architects of a more accountable, inclusive, and deliberative democracy.

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