

Looking beyond elections: Political communications for a thriving democracy

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*Last year's Lok Sabha elections saw the highest ever turnout of **66.38%**, which served as a reminder of how vibrant India's democracy is today. However, there remains a communications vacuum between elections writes **Payal Kamat**. She argues citizen participation in urban areas in particular needs to be made more systematic through an effective political communications model.*



India is often hailed – and rightfully so – for being a democratically vibrant country. The principle of federalism has been deeply engraved in the constitution, and division of powers between the centre and state governments have been defined. However, there remains a communications vacuum that connects the voter and the voted.

Federalism is mainly achieved via decentralisation and decentralisation is possible with two key factors: citizen participation, and autonomy to local authorities to take decisions and execute plans.

A powerful state government, but a powerless local government disables contextual decision making and implementation, as it is beyond the scope of state government to take into account the problems and issues faced by every ward, area or locality. At present, the local corporator in urban India will have very few resources available at his disposal, and often more than 30,000 people under their jurisdiction. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi alone has **272** for a population of more than 9 lakh (900,000). Moreover, local authorities have no financial decision making powers, and for any sanction to be arrived from state government would take time and also exclude citizen input and feedback in a more substantive manner, as citizens' first mode of interaction is with their local government – thus further curtailing citizen participation to voting alone.

In India, when it comes to rural population there are **gram panchayats** that facilitate citizen participation. In the urban context, such an institution is lacking. If we desire a more deliberative democratic model, then citizen engagement lies at the heart of it. While the urban voter has been written off as disenchanted with politics, in reality there are no systems in place that allow urban voters to participate in decision making process which can provide him/her a formal voice. Providing a formal voice to a citizen, where there can be a dialogue between stakeholders, enables real issues and problems to be discussed, objectively assessed, and strategically implemented with the help of the citizen community.

Citizen participation in urban areas should be more systematic. Asking citizens to provide opinions on issues is good, but not enough. As opinion based feedback may not be considered as 'data' for influencing policy changes. There need to be reforms that enable citizens to interact with their local representative in a more consistent and strategic manner. Feedback should be integrated and fed into a larger system that reaches out to the policy makers. Providing such a platform will also ensure that the local government is accountable, that the financial and resource planning is optimal, and moreover transparency is sustained. Most importantly, it will lead to more active citizens which will in turn lead to politicians being more aware of the 'pulse of the people' in their areas.

This is where an effective political communication model comes handy. India has largely witnessed the use of political communication during elections (see, for example, my previous post on the '**Obamafication**' of Indian political campaigns), and of late as a consistent 'PR' channel used by elected representatives. Indeed, political communication and political PR are used interchangeably to mean the same. But the fact of the matter is that, it is not! Political communication is about creating a consistent channel of communication between the voter and the voted to establish empowered citizens, accountable representatives and a thriving democracy. Political PR can be a

by-product of a well-designed political communications framework that elected representatives can use to their advantage.

According to [Pippa Norris \(2004\)](#) political communications is an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media and the public. The process operates downwards from governing institutions towards citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and also upwards from public opinion towards authorities. Currently, in India, politicians and elected representatives are concerned about transmission of information to the news media and public, largely using the political PR services that will build goodwill for themselves. Other aspects of political communications, i.e. those operating 'upwards from public opinion towards authorities', are mainly chaotic and unstructured. Take for instance, the use of twitter; while most of the elected representatives are on Twitter in India, very few use it as an interactive medium. It is used as a broadcast medium to 'reach out' to constituents, with little focus on reciprocation and building feedback systems

An effective political communication model will help us bridge this gap by building new channels, devising tools and developing campaigns that will achieve in true sense a working democracy. This effective model may vary as per the needs and demographics of a constituency or a ward. With the growth of internet, political communication driven by cyber platforms in urban India will facilitate channels of civic engagement, such as political chat-rooms, mobilization of virtual communities, revitalising levels of mass participation in public affairs, and objective assessment of civic issues and feedback systems. [Janaagraha](#) in Bangalore is involved in creating community engagement program for communications between the voter and the voted. Delhi Government's [Janata ka budget](#) or participatory budgeting initiative was another fine example of citizen involvement in governance. However, such political communication initiatives are process intensive and require adequate professional assistance in managing the dialogue and ensuring its continuity. Professional and technical intervention could create this space for elected representatives for sustained community engagement activities.

The use of the internet by groups and social movements is often believed to exemplify digital politics (Pippa Norris, 2004). It could also serve as a catalyst for political communication in urban India. Winston Churchill once said "The best argument against *democracy* is a five-minute conversation with the *average voter*." An effective political communication strategy could be the key to empower this average voter and keep the democracy alive and kicking.

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About the Author

Payal Kamat is a political communications professional based in New Delhi. She completed an MSc in Political Communication at LSE in 2012.

See previous posts by Payal [here](#).

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