



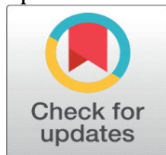
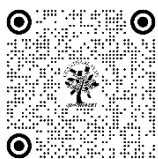


SERIOUSLY FRIVOLOUS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF THE GLOBAL EFFECTS OF POLITICAL HUMOUR ON POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION

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Received 18 November 2022

Accepted 28 December 2022

Published 04 January 2023

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.262](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.262)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

A politically conversant and sophisticated public is a major requisite for the development and functioning of a sound democracy. However, politics being an intricate subject doesn't usually catch a fancy of an average man. This poses the demanding challenge of simplifying political discourse and making it more appealing to the larger population. Studies show that political comedy can qualify as one of its competent solutions due to the inherent power of humour to not just amuse but also facilitate attention-grabbing, information retention, and recall [Fitzpatrick \(2010\)](#). Also, the application of humour in serious matters like politics makes it less subject to scrutiny [Feldman & Young \(2008\)](#) further motivating people to express themselves freely without being intimidated by the fear of criticism. The realization of these advantages of political comedy led to an influx in research and discussions around the implications of the same. Hence, in light of the rising popularity of various formats of political humour in contemporary times, the present paper employs the technique of narrative literature review to identify various approaches through which the effects of political humour have been studied so far and explores whether or not it impacts the current political landscape. The investigation of the secondary sources yields that the recent scholarship on political humour effects is mostly centered around television satirical shows and myriad of its formats on the internet. The paper is arranged according to five central themes found by the careful examination of the available literature, which are; a) political humour as a mediator of political knowledge, b) implications on political efficacy and cynicism, c) political humour and political participation/ engagement, d) persuasive impacts of political humour, and e) factors influencing the effects of political humour.

Keywords: Political Humour, Political Satire, Narrative Literature Review, Effects of Political Humour, Political Efficacy, Political Participation, Digital Political Comedy



1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have long been interested in the possible functions and effects of humour both at the levels of an individual and society at large. It was eventually explained through multiple theories that humour leads to the feeling of sudden glory that made one feel superior to the other [Hobbes \(1974\)](#) as well as it acts as a safety valve useful in releasing stress or "extra energy and passion" [Freud \(1905\)](#). The experiments were further conducted to observe the benefits of humour if applied to serious tasks like learning and the results were found more on the positive side [Pollio \(2002\)](#), [Garner \(2006\)](#), [Sambrani et al.](#)

(2014). In their study “The effect of humour on learning in an educational setting” conducted an experiment on 56 participants by bifurcating them into two groups with one group treated with humorous slideshows and the other with non-humorous ones. The results of the study conducted by Sambrani et al. (2014) showed that humorous content was more remembered than others. Besides, the results were deemed positive as the engagement shown for humorous materials was better than the non-humorous ones. Sambrani et al. (2014). Probably, this is the reason why humour has not been confined to mere entertainment but rather used to initiate dialogues on significant issues including science, mathematics, feminism, unemployment, and politics. Lewin (1983). Politics, when blended with humour or comic technique for its propagation is termed as political humour. Political humour can be understood as “an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes and institutions” McLeod et al. (2009). Political humour is not a novel phenomenon and has been existing for a long time. Scholars trace the origin of political humour in the plays of Greek playwright, Aristophanes. Schutz (1977). Even in Asian countries like India, the power of humour is illustrated in its oldest surviving manuscripts of dramaturgy, Bharat Muni’s *Natyashashtra*, wherein the word “humour” is used as “*hasya*”, referring to one of the eight *rasa* (essence or aesthetically transformed emotional state experienced by the spectator) evoked by *sthayi bhava* (permanent, durable and constant emotional condition) of *Hasa* (joy).

Since then, it underwent evolution through its multiple formats like political caricatures in newspapers and journals, political satires on television, and more recently in the forms of political memes, parody, and podcasts. With the rise in popularity of political satirical shows or late-night shows, political memes, and viral videos, especially in western countries, researchers develop an interest to study political comedy and focused their attention on the possible consequences of the same. The major reason behind this increased attention was an inquisitiveness to find its potency to affect the contemporary political landscape. However, there has been a serious lack of consensus between the researchers regarding the functions political humour essentially perform as well as its exact effects on the political engagement or participation of the audience. Over the years, research seems to contest its conflicting functions and effects, with some calling it a source of sheer entertainment incompetent to cause any significant effects on political participation Prior (2003), Baek & Wojcieszak (2009), while others argue it to be more informative Baum (2002) and persuading capable to bring political change by ensuring more political engagement/participation of its regular audience Lee (2014). The current study identifies and encapsulates the contemporary trends in the discussions and debates around the effects of political humour through the method of narrative literature review and provides pieces of evidence to argue its serious implication on the present political landscape.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH

The current study aimed to conceptualize the effects of political humour in the contemporary world. Hence, it employed the method of narrative literature review to examine the diversity in the approaches through which the implications of political humour have been studied so far. The available literature has been searched using various keywords like political humour, political satire, effects/implications of political humour on Google Scholar, online research database, and major constructs and variables (both predetermined and emergent) associated with the same like that of effects on political knowledge, effects on

political expression, implications on political participation, etc. were identified. Further, the studies concerning the relationship of each variable with the consumption of political humour were identified and examined. Out of more than a hundred results, studies were filtered after going through their title and abstract on the basis of their relevance to the current theme and finally, 30 studies were shortlisted for the review. The selected thirty (30) contemporary available pieces of literature encompass both empirical and theoretical works, most of which appeared after the year 2000.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

As per the reviewed literature, the effects of political satire have been found to be mostly centred around the following five key themes based on which the discussion of the paper has been arranged, i.e., a) political humour as a mediator of political knowledge, b) implications on political efficacy and cynicism, c) political humour and political participation/ engagement, d) persuasive impacts of political humour, and e) factors influencing the effects of political humour. Furthermore, the contemporary discussions and debates pertaining to the effects of political humour tend to have taken into consideration majorly two platforms, i.e., television and the new media.

3.1. POLITICAL HUMOUR AS A MEDIATOR OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

According to the first major finding of the study, there seems to have enough discussions regarding the ways in which the consumption of political humour can be related to political awareness or the mediation of political knowledge. The emergence of political humour as an integral form of political communication developed an interest of the researchers as to how much can be learned about the political happenings or politics in general from such content. Many studies in this line of concern, claimed either no correlation between political humour shows and political knowledge [Hollander \(1995\)](#), [McLeod et al. \(1996\)](#), [Prior \(2003\)](#) or negative implications on the same [Parkin et al. \(2003\)](#). However, other studies demonstrate positive relation between the two and highlight the potential of the content of political humour to aware and impart political knowledge to its audience. In the series of researches led by [Baum \(2002\)](#), [Baum \(2003\)](#), [Baum \(2005\)](#), he presented pieces of evidence to prove that soft news programming can increase political engagement by contributing to the political learning of the citizen. [Baum \(2002\)](#) suggested that political humour is conducive to the political engagement of citizens, stressing that they are most effective in “influencing the attitudes of politically inattentive individual” [Baum \(2002\)](#). Through a series of statistical investigations, [Baum \(2002\)](#) tried to establish a correlation between media consumption habits and attention paid to sophisticated issues of foreign policies and found that the political coverage by soft news programmes bridge the knowledge gap about high-profile issues of foreign policies across different segments of people. Furthermore, the passively political attentive population are more likely to form perceptions about presidential candidates by watching them on such shows [Baum \(2005\)](#). Nevertheless, more recent studies show similar findings as Baum. For instance, somewhat consistent results were found by [Gregorowic \(2013\)](#) that reaffirmed the positive influence of political comedy on the knowledge and attitudes of the audience. By employing the methods of experiment and secondary survey, the study concluded that exposure to political comedy: i) increases political learning

and influences attitude beyond exposure to the same information in hard news; ii) its influence is strongest on people with moderate prior knowledge; and iii) the learning and attitude effects are mediated due to the cognitive processing and engagement associated with humour comprehension and the experience of amusement. A different perspective, however, concerning how political comedy facilitates political learning was provided by [Xenos & Becker \(2009\)](#), who proposed that exposure to the contents of political comedy doesn't increase people's political sophistication by directly delivering the news, but by provoking them to seek political information from hard news sources. The data of [Xenos & Becker \(2009\)](#) was drawn from the experiment conducted on undergraduates, which eventually signalled that political comedy increases political engagement by serving as a "gateway to political attention" [Xenos & Becker \(2009\)](#). However, the quality of learning and knowledge imparted by such platforms remained in question. [Hollander \(1995\)](#) in his endeavour to find whether the sources of political humour are actually capable to spread awareness about political campaigns found that the audience of such content is more likely to recognize the political campaigns than to recall them. Although this indicates the positive implication of political humour in grabbing the attention of the audience toward important political issues, it also reveals the shallowness of political learning through such platforms.

In a nutshell, the answer to whether the consumption of political comedy holds the potential to impart political knowledge seems not to be that black and white and is likely to rather vary from one study to another. While the current dominant view agrees with the fact that it does affect the political awareness and knowledge of the consumers, the nature of political learning through such platforms still seems to be largely passive.

3.2. IMPLICATIONS ON POLITICAL EFFICACY AND POLITICAL CYNICISM

Apart from affecting the political knowledge of its consumers, the review of the available literature also reveals that the consumption of the contents of political humour can also implicate the perspective (positive or negative) with which an individual sees the government or politics in general, technically termed as political efficacy and political cynicism. The concept of political efficacy and political cynicism has been instrumental in studying political behavior and predicting the political participation of an individual [Abramson and Aldrich \(1982\)](#). Hence, the investigation regarding the effects of political humour would have been incomplete without studying its relationship with these two concepts. Political efficacy can be defined as "the feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual can play a part in bringing about the change" [Campbell et al. \(1954\) p.187](#)). While internal efficacy reflects the confidence of an individual in himself/herself in his/her potential/ability to understand politics and participate in it; external efficacy is the trust of an individual in a political system to respond to people's demand [Balch \(1974\)](#). On the other hand, political cynicism refers to the negative/ skeptical attitude towards politics and a belief that politicians and political systems are not qualified enough [Dekker et al. \(2006\)](#), which often leads to alienation and distrust. [Baumgartner \(2007\)](#) relates the exposure to "The Daily Show" to political efficacy. The results concluded that while it positively influences the internal efficacy of the viewers by providing the confidence that the world of politics is comprehensible; it also tends to negatively impact their external efficacy as the show sarcastically exposes the absurdities and vices of the electoral process. Likewise, [Hoffman & Young \(2011\)](#) found that in addition to traditional TV news,

satire, or parody, but not late-night comedy, indirectly affects political participation through the mediator of efficacy. They [Hoffman & Young \(2011\)](#) imply that the consumption of satire or parody increases one's political efficacy which further promotes him/her to take part in various political activities. Moreover, in an attempt of finding the correlation between the consumption of political satire and political cynicism, some researchers discovered that in comparison to non-consumers of political satirical shows, those who watch them are more likely to develop political cynicism [Guggenheim et al. \(2011\)](#). It includes a negative attitude toward politicians and a decrease in trust on the government [Tsfati et al. \(2009\)](#). Besides [Hong and Chang \(2019\)](#) discuss that the viewing frequency of "Mr. Brown Show" (a Singapore-based political satirical podcast) is directly proportional to both the internal efficacy and political cynicism of its audience. This implies that the audience of political satires does obtain political knowledge from satirical shows that give them a sense of awareness about the political happenings but more they are exposed to such content, more they lose trust in the political system. [Hong and Chang \(2019\)](#) also reveal that the viewers of the show tend to display higher political cynicism than political efficacy. The reason could be that unlike the dissemination of conventional hard form of political news on mainstream media that aims to provide unopinionated information, political satire is rather focused to offer stark criticism of the political schemes, policies, leaders, and parties that leads to the feeling of aversion among its audience about the same.

Ultimately, as per the discussion, it can be concluded, that political comedy does have a considerable amount of influence on both political efficacy and political cynicism. The fact that both of these concepts are known to influence the political behavior of people, however, becomes a matter of concern and further investigation.

3.3. POLITICAL HUMOUR AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: POLITICAL EXPRESSION, CRITICISM, AND DISSENT

[Vissers & Stolle \(2014\)](#) define political participation as "all forms of involvement in which citizens express their political opinion and/ or convey that opinion to political decision-makers". Hence, it takes under its purview all kinds of political expressions like writing and sharing political posts (reflecting their political opinions) with others, both online and offline, taking part in political discussions, political meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and protests. The review of the literature shows ample studies on the effects of political humour on political participation that broadly includes discussions at two levels, i.e., regarding the relationship of political comedy with a) political expression (discussion and criticism), and b) political activism.

There has also been an apparent association between the concept of the public sphere and media disposition. [Shifman \(2014\)](#) contends that online memes while taking place alongside offline political activities contribute to political movements by acting as an important discursive form of online political participation that further consolidates the cause. The scholarship examining the formal relationship between online political humour and political expression usually includes youths as beneficiaries. [Penney \(2020\)](#) observed that the Facebook meme page "Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash" emerged as a popular form of political expression as well as a means of discursive political participation for the youth supporters of Democratic candidates in the 2016 elections. He argued that this political meme page provided them with a platform to form their communal identity, connect with like-minded people, collectively promote the campaigns regarding their political interests and influence the voting decisions of their peers. Realizing the ability of

political comedy to serve as a free space for democratic discussions, some researchers conceptualize these platforms as a modern public sphere. Paul (2017) in his study "A New Public Sphere? English-Language Stand-Up Comedy in India" discusses the contribution of English-language stand-up comedy as a modern public sphere where opinions about social, political, and cultural aspects of local, national, and international issues are shared and further given feedback in the form of applause, silence (in case of live performance), likes and subscriptions and further discussed and debated in the comment section. In another study, in the context of India, Kumar (2015) discusses the significance of three digital forms of political comedy namely memes, parodies and viral videos, as an effective tool for political commentary. The analysis of the videos produced by the three newly formed groups in India namely *All India Bakchod (AIB)*, *The Viral Fever (TVF)*, and *The East India Comedy Club (EICC)* reveals that such videos cover a wide range of social and political issues and serve as an excellent platform to expose political hypocrisies and other political vices like corruption. Moreover, Kumar (2015) associated the political memes with the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and states that these memes were used to generate various hashtags on Twitter including "Acche_Din_, Bijli_Bin" (Good days, without electricity), "Abki_Baar, Antim_Sanskar" (this time, it's the funeral/ the end), that initiated healthy discussions and debate on the political front while providing the common man to criticize those holding political powers. In the article "Satire, Elections, and Democratic Politics in Digital India", Punathambekar (2015) links satirical videos taking a dig at political leaders like Narendra Modi, Arvind Kejriwal, and Rahul Gandhi during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Punathambekar (2015) contends that the videos emerged as a "popular mode of engagement with politics" during the elections. He argued that the political engagement of the audience of such videos is enabled by bringing the major and long-standing political issues around caste, religion, and nationalism into contemporary public culture (i.e., social media) in a non-conservative and engaging fashion. Researches demonstrating the positive effects of online political humour on the political engagement of its audience include Lee (2014), who suggested that those who are exposed to such content online are usually more actively associated with politics as they are more likely to take part in protests, rallies, and demonstrations as well as to vote in elections. Hence, they ensure the direct participation of the audience in politics Lee (2014).

Based on the majority of the literature available on the association between the consumption of political humour and political participation, it can be assumed that the popular sources of political humour not just inform the public about topical political happenings but also stimulate them to express themselves. The audience expresses themselves either by posting on social media, discussing with peers or sometimes by conducting or taking part in political activities like rallies, demonstrations, public meetings, etc.

3.4. PERSUASIVE IMPACTS OF POLITICAL HUMOUR ON PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL CANDIDATES AND PUBLIC OPINION

Another line of investigation in the context of political comedy effects is its implications on the **political opinion** or **perception** of political candidates Young (2004), Baum (2005), Becker (2012), Kucera (2015), which explicitly reflects the lack of consensus and varied observations. Baum (2005) presented evidence to demonstrate that the consumption of late-night political satires can influence the perception of political candidates among the politically passive audience. In another

study, focused to examine the differential impact of the types of political comedy (other-directed hostile humour & self-directed humour) [Becker \(2012\)](#) concluded that the consumption of political humour indeed has a significant impact on the political attitude of the audience and highlights the negative association between the other-directed hostile humour and evaluation of the political candidate being targeted. Furthermore, the influence of political humour on the perception of political candidates is illustrated by [Kucera \(2015\)](#) who brings to light the relationship between late-night comedy and the political public opinion to determine whether or not late-night humour is capable of creating political impact. [Kucera \(2015\)](#) also attempted to answer if political satires are ethical. Through an experiment on 40 female participants (who watched videos and filled out questionnaires to evaluate if watching humorous videos of presidential candidates (Barack Obama and John McCain) changes their opinion about them; it was concluded that the perception of the participants about the candidates changed after watching videos of the candidates. Also, the political information presented in a humorous way affected participants' political ideas/awareness. [Kucera \(2015\)](#). However, the ethical aspect of such programming was not that black and white, as on one hand, it seems ethical as showing presidential candidates on late-night shows makes it more transparent for the audience to know the candidates better, while on the other hand, it can be counter-argued by the fact that the show doesn't disseminate any information about the candidates but just make them more likable. Besides, political comedy also seems to persuade public opinion by setting a public agenda. [Boukes \(2019\)](#) shows that political satire indirectly affects the public agenda by prioritizing certain political issues over the other. The study found that the topics discussed became more important among citizens, media as well as Parliament, after the broadcast of the show.

On a contrary, [Young \(2004\)](#) put forth pieces of evidence to prove that such jokes didn't have a significant effect on the perceived notion of the political candidates during the 2000 US general elections. Rather, [Young \(2004\)](#) argued the role of the level of political knowledge and partisanship in moderating the influence of satirical shows on the perception of political candidates. Discussing the same, [Baumgartner \(2007\)](#) stated that the findings of the relationship between political humour and candidate evaluation are somewhat mixed and are rather dependent on the type of humour used to present their content. If a political candidate, who appears on such platforms, pokes jokes and fun at himself, he is more likely to get a positive evaluation from the audience. However, if a third person or a comedian does the same for that candidate, it mostly leads to a negative evaluation. Moreover, other researches tend to refute its implications on public opinion and political decisions. In a survey, conducted by [Kulkarni \(2017\)](#) on the persuasive impacts of political memes, 64% of the respondents disagreed with any association between the viewing of political memes and their political decisions. Hence, there are conflicting views on the estimation of the effect of political humour on the political opinion of people. While some outrightly reject the possibility of any connection between the two, others argue that the effects on public opinion are not direct and rather depend on external factors, including the nature of humour. Also, factors like the level of political knowledge and political bias are instrumental in pacifying the effects of political satire.

3.5. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EFFECTS OF POLITICAL HUMOUR

A myriad of studies substantiates that the effects of political comedy are not consistent and same on every individual consuming them, but rather depend on certain factors or mediators like political affinity or political partisanship, perception of the comedian and the programme, political knowledge as well as political efficacy Wolff et al. (1934), Zillmann & Cantor (1976), Priest (1966), Gregorowicz (2013). The findings of the research conducted by Wolff et al. (1934) identify the orientation of the audience toward the comic target as one of such mediators claiming that the degree of humour experienced affects the level of association/ affinity towards the object/individual being disparaged. The argument is further extended by Zillmann & Cantor (1976) who contend that humour appreciation by an individual is inversely proportional to the degree of affiliation or the positive association s/he has with the person/group being disparaged. This implies that if a person is naturally inclined toward a certain person/group (that may include a politician or a political party when seen in the context of the subject made fun of through political comedy) he is less likely to appreciate the jokes that target them or make them inferior in any way. The evidence about the same is also provided by Priest (1966) wherein, the respondents found the jokes about political candidates from another political party funnier than on the candidates of their party. Likewise, the level of prior political knowledge and interest also serves as an important mediating factor in deciding the intensity of the effect of political humour. Emphasizing the role of political attentiveness in determining the implications of television political satires on the evaluation of political candidates, Baum (2002), in one of his earliest articles on the effects of political comedy, argues that in comparison to politically active people, the perception about the election candidates of those who are politically passive or inattentive are more likely to get influenced by the television political satire. Besides, Gregorowicz (2013) maintains that among all its viewers, the influence of political satire tends to be the strongest on people with moderate prior knowledge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The careful investigation into the contemporary literature on the effects of political satire majorly reflects research on three (3) cogent lines: a) on the audience's political sophistication encompassing effects on political knowledge, and political efficacy; b) on political participation that includes political expression, criticism, and activism; and c) the persuasive effects of political humour. Besides, it also reveals that the discussion on the effects of the same has been largely centered around satirical television shows, which is followed by research on the other formats of political comedy on digital platforms like political memes, parodical videos, and stand-up comedy of political issues.

Although political satire is quite an outmoded format of communication existed since the beginning of mass communication or perhaps before. However, the prediction of McLuhan about "the medium is the message" McLuhan (2012) seems to hold true as the effects of political satire tend to multiply and become more complex to comprehend with the advent of each advanced media, especially the Internet. It also makes sense in a view of a "network society" where the boundaries between the creator and consumer are constantly blurring Castells (2004). However, an observation of the available literature suggests that the implications are not direct and consistent for one and all. In fact, it can be comprehended from the lens of indirect media effects theories like selective perception, selective

retention as well as individual difference theory as there are factors or mediators like political partisanship, perception of the comedian and the program, political knowledge as well as prior political efficacy responsible for moderating the influence of these above-mentioned effects. Pieces of evidence from various research suggest that despite being frivolous, political humour in the contemporary era is not merely characterized by its ability to entertain but also seems to cause mixed (both positive and negative) implications. Firstly, the consumption of political humour does affect the political awareness of their viewers, but the quality of such knowledge is rather superficial. The very fact seems to pose threat to democracy as half knowledge is worse than ignorance. Furthermore, political humour also seems to be directly proportional to both internal efficacy and political cynicism which implies that although the various means of political humour increase people's confidence in their ability to understand politics, they also are somewhere responsible for an increase in the negative outlook towards the government and its potency. This raises a concern about the clandestine capabilities of such platforms to develop reluctance among citizens to participate and contribute to political practices. The concern however tends to be contradicted to some extent, by the dominant observation regarding its effects on the overall political participation of the audience that suggests the consumption of political comedy paves way for passive activism as it stimulates an urge to express one's political opinion, either on social media by discussing it among peers and sometimes by taking part in the political activities [Bromberg \(2013\)](#). However, as far as public opinion is concerned, despite a lack of consensus on the direct implications, the contents of political humour are argued to influence the way political candidates are perceived. Besides, this also clears the stance of political comedians as "opinion leaders" [Katz \(2015\)](#) who seem to be influencing the political notions of their consumers and are equally capable to serve their hidden agendas by highlighting certain issues while hiding or avoiding others [McCombs & Shaw \(1972\)](#), [Boukes \(2019\)](#). Also, studies around political humour is more common and present in abundance in the context of western countries. While Asian countries are beginning to catch up with the trend, the scholarship pertaining to the power of political humour, especially the ones disseminated by the new media can still be considered to be in a nascent phase. In India, in the last two decades, the studies about political satire are usually conceptual in nature like the works of [Punathambekar \(2015\)](#), [Kumar \(2015\)](#), and [Paul \(2017\)](#) in which [Kulkarni \(2017\)](#) adds to the occasional empirical studies on the subject. The effects discussed in these researches are predominantly at the cognitive level that is only useful in the development of a working hypothesis. This exposes a major research gap concerning the studies of political humour in Asian countries, especially in India. Therefore, the accumulated conceptual works of knowledge of political humour along with the present study can be utilized for further investigation of the feasibility of the proposed hypothesis. Finally, based on the review of the present scholarship concerning political humour, the phenomenon of political humour can be deemed as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it positively contributes to the sound functioning of the nation, especially democratic ones by increasing political awareness and enhancing political activeness, while on the other, it also posits serious concerns, provided the persuading effects that hold the potential to hinder fair political practices.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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