

# Digital Campaigning and Grassroots Mobilization in Local Elections: A Systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

Local elections are key components of democratic representation. They frequently receive less attention by candidates and lower voter turnout than elections at the national level. This systematic literature review collected studies on the impact of social media-based digital campaign activities by candidates in local or subnational elections on voter turnout and other measures of electoral participation. Studies published between 2012 and 2024 were selected for inclusion in this review. An auditable corpus of 857 article rows was created from an article-numbering frame of 860 records. Of these, 42 potentially eligible studies were re-screened using a set of protocol-based eligibility criteria, and 24 studies in the end were included in the synthesis. The Population, Intervention/Exposure, Comparison/Context, and Outcome (PICECO) framework was extended by the study design to guide the screening process for eligibility. Quality appraisal of the included studies employed a set of CASP-based tools as well as the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool 2018. The evidence base for this review comprised studies from Europe, North America, Australia, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America. Of the 24 included studies, eight were rated as high quality, 15 as of moderate quality, and one as of low quality. Findings from the studies suggested that social media supported local electoral participation but not automatically. Rather, the influence of social media-based campaign activities on voter turnout was conditional. The strongest evidence for increased voter turnout was found for studies that employed peer-to-peer outreach and/or social-pressure strategies via social ties. Validated turnout records and/or studies that employed structured mobilization designs constituted additional elements of strong evidence. In contrast, findings from studies on candidate pages, paid online advertising by candidates, official voter information provided by governments, and general online information exposed to voters via digital campaign activities were more mixed. Social media is most effective as enabling infrastructure for grassroots mobilization when it provides locally relevant information, activates social networks, and makes a connection between online campaign activities and offline voter participation.

**Keywords:** voter turnout; peer-to-peer outreach; social pressure; civic engagement; online-to-offline participation.

## INTRODUCTION

Local elections determine who runs things at the municipal, city, district, provincial, barangay, mayoral, council, and regional level — the offices that, in practice, shape public services, community development, infrastructure, public safety, local regulation, and taxation. This is where representation is felt most directly. And yet local races routinely draw less media coverage, thinner campaign visibility, and lower turnout than national ones (Neihouser et al., 2022; Raynauld & Greenberg, 2014; Russo & Huddleston, 2021). Which is, frankly, a strange arrangement: the institutions closest to people get the least electoral scrutiny.

Social media has reshaped the environment local campaigns operate in. Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram — these platforms now function simultaneously as

campaign spaces, information channels, mobilization tools, and places where political identity gets built and argued over. Candidates can reach voters fast. Election commissions can push out voter information on the cheap. Ordinary citizens circulate campaign content within their own networks, and grassroots organizers coordinate get-out-the-vote efforts without needing traditional media as a gatekeeper (Adnan et al., 2020; Cormack, 2019; Haenschen, 2016; Sitto-Kaunda, 2024). None of this is trivial for local elections specifically, where campaign budgets tend to be thin and interpersonal networks carry outsized weight.

Still, social media use and voter turnout are not the same thing, and treating them as automatically linked is a mistake. A candidate page can rack up followers without moving a single non-voter. An election commission can post reminders that never reach the low-information citizens who actually need them. Paid ads often end up reaching people who were going to vote anyway. Online discussion can deepen polarization just as easily as it increases turnout (Bond et al., 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2021; Widodo et al., 2024). So the more useful question isn't whether social media shows up in local campaigns — it obviously does — but how it's used, by whom, through what mechanism, and with what actual consequence for participation, measurable or otherwise.

Three gaps in the digital campaigning literature stand out here. First: most of the scholarship is built around presidential, parliamentary, or other national campaigns, where salience, media coverage, campaign finance, party machinery, and voter motivation all look different than they do locally. National findings don't just transfer downward. Second: a lot of studies stop at online sentiment, candidate communication, or platform engagement, without ever connecting those variables to voting, registration, voting intention, civic awareness, or the qualitative accounts that actually describe mobilization as it happens. Third: the mechanisms that might make social media matter — information effects, relational effects, social pressure, peer-to-peer contact, youth civic education, minority-language communication, candidate image-building, official voter education — usually get studied as separate topics, rarely as parts of one picture (Marquart et al., 2020; Ohme et al., 2019; Zha, 2022).

This review tries to put that picture together. Social media is treated here not as a stand-alone technological intervention but as one piece of a wider mobilization ecology — candidates, peers, parties, civil society organizations, election administrators, influencers, local communities, platforms, all interacting.

The objectives: determine how far digital campaigning through social media shapes voter turnout and electoral participation locally; identify which strategies actually seem to work; assess how methodologically sound the existing evidence is; synthesize how digital grassroots mobilization affects political awareness, civic engagement, voting intention, voting decisions, and turnout; and flag where the gaps remain — developing countries, Global South contexts, emerging platforms, messaging apps, and studies that use validated turnout records instead of self-report, in particular.

Five research questions guided the work. (1) To what extent does digital campaigning through social media influence voter turnout in local elections? (2) What social media strategies show up in local elections, and which seem most effective at increasing participation? (3) What methodological approaches have been used to study this, and how reliable is the resulting evidence base? (4) How do digital grassroots mobilization practices — mediated through social media — shape political awareness, engagement, and turnout? (5) What gaps remain, particularly around developing countries and emerging platforms?

Three contributions come out of this. First, a broad systematic-review corpus gets narrowed down into a protocol-confirmed evidence base focused specifically on local and subnational participation. Second, direct turnout evidence is separated from the more indirect evidence on engagement, awareness, and voting decisions — a distinction that tends to get blurred elsewhere in the literature.

Third, a mechanism-centered synthesis shows that social media's influence has less to do with mere presence on a platform and more to do with whether digital communication actually activates informational, relational, community, or hybrid mobilization pathways.

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research design

This study used a systematic literature review design with narrative synthesis. Systematic, because it relied on pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria, screened a clearly defined corpus, documented why each exclusion happened, extracted data through a structured framework, and appraised the methodological quality of whatever made it into the final set. Narrative rather than meta-analytic, because the included studies varied too much — design, setting, platforms, interventions, populations, outcome measures — to be pooled into one statistical estimate without losing most of what makes them useful (Page et al., 2021; Popay et al., 2006).

The logic here was configurative, not aggregative. Rather than calculating a single pooled effect of social media on turnout, the review looked at how different digital strategies actually played out across different local electoral contexts — which made more sense given that platform effects are probably mediated by campaign design, social relationships, voter characteristics, election salience, digital literacy, and local political conditions. A single pooled number would have flattened all of that out.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The synthesis was organized around an information-relational-hybrid mobilization framework — social media treated not as one intervention but as an enabling infrastructure that could shape local electoral participation through four connected pathways. Informational exposure: voter education, candidate visibility, procedural reminders, campaign information. Relational mobilization: peer contact, social pressure, reminders coming from people voters already know or trust. Community-specific mobilization: messaging platforms, diaspora networks, minority-language digital publics. Hybrid conversion: whether online engagement actually turns into offline voting action, field organizing, civic education, or trusted community work, or just stays online. This four-part structure is what guided how mechanisms were coded and how evidentiary strength got interpreted across the studies that made it into the final set.

### Review context and evidence corpus

This is a review article, so there's no physical field site — the evidence base itself is the "site." Coverage ran from empirical studies published January 1, 2012 through December 31, 2024 that looked at social media or social-network platform use in local, municipal, subnational, regional, provincial, district, barangay, council, mayoral, or similar electoral settings. Any geographic region was eligible, as long as the study reported an electoral participation outcome or at least a participation-related qualitative narrative.

The original extraction corpus was numbered Articles 1 through 860. A structural audit turned up only 857 rows in the compiled table — article IDs 390, 393, and 399 were missing. That gap is kept visible here rather than smoothed over, in the interest of keeping the PRISMA reconstruction transparent.

### Literature search, databases, and study identification

Multiple databases were needed because the relevant research doesn't sit in one discipline — it's scattered across political science, communication, public administration, information technology, youth studies, regional studies, and electoral studies. JSTOR covered multidisciplinary social science and humanities ground, including political communication and local democracy work. ProQuest Political Science handled political science, public administration, electoral behavior, and dissertation records. SAGE Journals Online was useful for its indexing of communication, social science, and political participation journals. Taylor and Francis Online contributed political communication, public policy, regional studies, and governance literature. SpringerLink added political behavior and methods-focused social science research. Google Scholar was used only as a supplementary tool — for chasing citation trails and catching items that a single subscription database might miss.

The search strategy ran on three conceptual blocks. Block one, social media and digital campaigning: terms like social media, digital campaigning, online campaigning, Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, WeChat, digital mobilization, social networking sites, e-campaigning, peer-to-peer outreach, get-out-the-vote (GOTV), digital grassroots, community mobilization, influencer politics, political messaging. Block two, electoral participation and turnout outcomes: voter turnout, electoral participation, voting behavior, civic engagement, political participation, voter registration, political engagement, voting intention, mobilization, political awareness, civic mobilization. Block three, local or subnational electoral context: local election, municipal election, subnational election, community election, mayoral election, city council election, barangay election, ward election, district election, regional election, provincial election, local government election, local democracy, and related local-campaign terms.

The three blocks were combined with AND logic — Block A AND Block B AND Block C — filtered to the 2012-2024 window, English-language availability, and peer-reviewed or otherwise academically recognized sources. On top of that, backward citation chaining, forward citation searching, mining reference lists of existing systematic reviews, hand-searching key journals, and checking dissertation/thesis databases where relevant all fed into the search. These extra steps mattered because research on local elections and social media just isn't concentrated in any single database — you have to go looking for it in several places at once.

### PICO framework and eligibility criteria

Eligibility screening ran on the Population, Intervention/Exposure, Comparison/Context, and Outcome (PICO) framework, extended with study design into a PICOS structure. PICO was chosen because it gives a transparent way to turn research questions into criteria that can actually be searched and checked against. Here, Population meant eligible voters, citizens, youth, diaspora communities, candidate audiences, and local electoral participants generally. Intervention/Exposure covered social media, social-network sites, digital campaigning, online political communication, peer-to-peer outreach, messaging applications, campaign pages, or platform-based mobilization more broadly.

Comparison/Context was read as the local or subnational electoral setting itself, plus — where the data allowed it — contrasts against traditional media, non-social-media communication, or weaker digital exposure. Outcome covered voter turnout, registration, voting intention, voting decision, electoral participation, political engagement, civic awareness, or online-to-offline mobilization narratives. Study design got added as a fifth element because the review needed some way to separate actual empirical studies from conceptual essays, commentary pieces, and claims with no real support behind them.

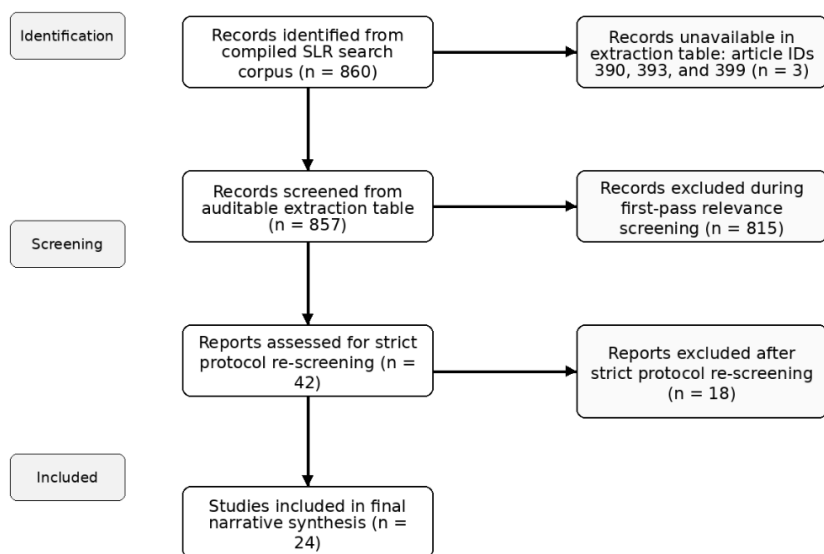
**Table 1 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion rules applied during screening.**

| Screening element        | Included                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Excluded                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Publication requirements | Peer-reviewed or academically recognized sources published from 2012 to 2024 and available in English.                                                                                                       | Studies outside the publication window, non-English texts without translation, inaccessible full texts, duplicates, or non-academic sources.                       |
| Population and context   | Eligible voters, citizens, youth, diaspora communities, candidate audiences, and local electoral participants in local, municipal, barangay, district, provincial, regional, or other subnational elections. | Studies with no voter or electoral-participation population, or national/supranational elections with no local or subnational data.                                |
| Intervention or exposure | Social media, social-network sites, digital campaigning, online political communication, peer-to-peer outreach, messaging applications, campaign pages, or platform-based mobilization.                      | Traditional media only, email-only or SMS-only interventions, websites without social media integration, or general internet use without a social-media component. |
| Comparison or            | Local or subnational electoral settings and, where                                                                                                                                                           | Contexts where the electoral level, campaign                                                                                                                       |

|              |                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| context      | available, contrasts with traditional campaign approaches, non-social-media communication, or weaker digital exposure.                                                        | setting, or comparison/context was not identifiable.                                                                              |
| Outcome      | Voter turnout, registration, voting intention, voting decision, electoral participation, political engagement, civic awareness, or online-to-offline mobilization narratives. | Candidate sentiment, campaign content, misinformation, polarization, or election results without a participation-related outcome. |
| Study design | Original empirical quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, experimental, quasi-experimental, observational, or case-study evidence.                                         | Conceptual essays, commentaries, narrative reviews as primary evidence, and studies without original empirical data.              |

**Figure 1. Flow diagram of the literature search using PRISMA 2020 protocol.**

#### PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram - Social Media and Local Elections (2012-2024)



Note. Supplementary citation chaining and hand-searching identified no additional studies for final inclusion.

**Table 2. Search and screening results for the systematic literature review.**

| PRISMA stage                                                | Number / description              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Records/articles identified from compiled SLR search corpus | 860                               |
| Records unavailable in compiled extraction table            | 3 (article IDs 390, 393, and 399) |
| Records screened from auditable extraction table            | 857                               |
| Records excluded during first-pass relevance screening      | 815                               |
| Reports assessed for strict protocol re-screening           | 42                                |
| Reports excluded after strict protocol re-screening         | 18                                |
| Studies included in final narrative synthesis               | 24                                |

#### Data extraction and quality appraisal

Data extraction followed the standard systematic-review structure. Fields pulled from each study included the article number, full citation, title, authors and year, country or jurisdiction, election type and population,

the social media or digital mobilization logic at work, theoretical framework, study design, key findings, the turnout or participation metric used, whether the mechanism was relational or informational, how the study mapped onto the review's objectives, its relevance to the review variables, and the final inclusion decision.

All 24 included studies went through quality appraisal. Qualitative studies and qualitative content analyses were checked against CASP-based qualitative criteria. Survey and panel designs used the CASP cohort/observational adaptations.

Mixed-methods work, quasi-experimental designs, non-randomized interventions, and randomized field experiments were appraised with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool 2018 (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018a, 2018b; Hong et al., 2018). Ratings came out as high, moderate, or low — the point being to support interpretation at the synthesis level, not to knock studies out purely on quality grounds.

### **Narrative synthesis procedure**

Four steps, roughly. First, included studies got tabulated by context, design, platform, strategy, outcome, evidence direction, quality rating, and which review objective they spoke to. Second, studies were grouped into themes based on the mechanism through which social media was expected to affect electoral participation. Third, each theme's robustness got checked against study design, quality rating, and how directly the outcome was actually measured. Fourth, conclusions were drawn by keeping direct turnout evidence separate from the more indirect kind — engagement, awareness, voting decisions, qualitative mobilization narratives.

Not all forms of social media evidence were treated as equal here, on purpose. A social-pressure field experiment backed by validated turnout data simply isn't the same tier of evidence as a qualitative study of youth perceptions, a content analysis of candidate pages, or an institutional communication case study — and pretending otherwise would have flattened the synthesis. So evidence was weighed by direction of findings, quality of design, how directly the outcome was measured, and how plausible the proposed mechanism actually was.

## **RESULTS**

### **Characteristics of included studies**

Twenty-four protocol-confirmed studies made the final cut. Geographically, that meant a fairly wide spread — Denmark, South Africa, the Philippines, Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Nigeria, the United States, Brazil, Belgium, France, Turkey, and Jerusalem all appear somewhere in the evidence base. Both Global North and Global South contexts are represented, though it's worth being honest that the number of studies per country stayed small and pretty uneven — this isn't a case of even coverage across regions.

Platform coverage varied a lot too. Facebook showed up most often, whether as a campaign page, a voter-contact tool, a source of political information, or a paid-advertising venue. Twitter/X featured heavily in studies looking at candidate communication, municipal-level discussion, and mobilization (or demobilization) discourse. WeChat turned up specifically in diaspora and minority-language participation research. Beyond that, other studies looked at digital marketing, online political information consumption, general internet tools, official election-commission outreach, and dedicated peer-to-peer mobilization platforms.

Outcome measures were all over the place, methodologically speaking. Some studies relied on validated turnout records, which gave them stronger footing as participation evidence; others leaned on self-reported turnout, voting decisions, political engagement, campaign awareness, political knowledge, efficacy, online-to-offline participation, or qualitative accounts of how mobilization actually unfolded. That mix is exactly why narrative synthesis made more sense here than trying to force a meta-analysis.

**Table 3. Distributional profile of the 24 included studies.**

| Dimension          | Category                                                                      | n  | %    |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------|
| Quality rating     | High                                                                          | 8  | 33.3 |
| Quality rating     | Moderate                                                                      | 15 | 62.5 |
| Quality rating     | Low                                                                           | 1  | 4.2  |
| Geographic context | Europe and United Kingdom                                                     | 5  | 20.8 |
| Geographic context | Asia and Middle East                                                          | 10 | 41.7 |
| Geographic context | Africa                                                                        | 4  | 16.7 |
| Geographic context | North America                                                                 | 3  | 12.5 |
| Geographic context | Australia/Oceania                                                             | 1  | 4.2  |
| Geographic context | South America                                                                 | 1  | 4.2  |
| Platform focus     | Facebook or Facebook Ads prominent                                            | 12 | 50.0 |
| Platform focus     | Twitter/X prominent                                                           | 5  | 20.8 |
| Platform focus     | Messaging or community-specific platform                                      | 3  | 12.5 |
| Platform focus     | Multi-platform or general social media                                        | 10 | 41.7 |
| Outcome evidence   | Direct turnout, registration, or official participation evidence              | 6  | 25.0 |
| Outcome evidence   | Engagement, awareness, voting decision, or qualitative participation evidence | 18 | 75.0 |
| Evidence direction | Positive or supportive                                                        | 8  | 33.3 |
| Evidence direction | Positive-mixed or conditional                                                 | 9  | 37.5 |
| Evidence direction | Mixed, limited, weak, or null                                                 | 7  | 29.2 |

Note. Platform counts are non-exclusive because several studies examined more than one social media platform or combined social media with broader digital mobilization tools.

**Table 4. Main evidence clusters in the final included studies.**

| Cluster                                  | Common platforms/channels                                                               | Evidence focus                                                                                                   | Direction of evidence                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Information infrastructure               | Facebook, Twitter/X, official websites and social pages, online news                    | Studies of voter education, local political information, candidate visibility, and election commission outreach. | Awareness improves, but turnout effects are usually indirect and depend on actionable, trusted content.     |
| Relational and peer-to-peer mobilization | Facebook tagging, peer-to-peer digital outreach platforms, social-network contact tools | Studies using known contacts, social pressure, social visibility, and personalized reminders.                    | Strongest evidence, especially when turnout is validated through voter records or comparable administrative |

|                                        |                                                                                                          |                                                                                              |                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        |                                                                                                          |                                                                                              | data.                                                                                                                  |
| Youth and novice-voter engagement      | Facebook groups, social media pages, youth get-out-the-vote channels, election commission platforms      | Studies focused on first-time voters, students, youth, and millennial voters.                | Positive for awareness and discussion, but turnout effects depend on civic education, digital literacy, and relevance. |
| Candidate-centered digital campaigning | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, YouTube, paid ads, digital marketing channels                    | Studies of candidate image, visibility, credibility, persuasion, and campaign communication. | Mixed evidence; more useful for voter perception and visibility than for verified turnout claims.                      |
| Community-specific platforms           | WeChat, Twitter/X language communities, local group chats, and community publics                         | Studies of diaspora, minority-language, and marginalized electoral communities.              | Can support participation where mainstream communication is limited, but measurement and misinformation issues remain. |
| Hybrid and limited online mobilization | Social media combined with fieldwork, face-to-face meetings, volunteer networks, and offline campaigning | Studies showing weak results for one-way broadcast, paid ads, or online-only campaigning.    | Digital tools are most plausible when embedded in offline grassroots organizing and trusted local networks.            |

## Quality appraisal results

Eight studies came out as high quality, 15 as moderate, one as low. The high-quality studies tended to share certain features — validated turnout data, randomized or field-experimental designs, administrative records, clean survey procedures, or well-specified mixed-methods evidence.

Moderate-quality studies still mattered for understanding mechanisms, but they get read more cautiously here, mostly because they leaned on localized samples, self-reported participation, qualitative narratives, or limited ability to make causal claims. The single low-quality study stayed in the review, but only as weak contextual evidence — it addressed the topic directly enough to be relevant, but its methodological limitations were serious enough that it couldn't carry much weight on its own.

This quality hierarchy shaped how everything else got interpreted. The strongest, most direct evidence came from studies that tied digital mobilization to actual voter records, verified participation, or structured interventions. Studies built around awareness, engagement, political discussion, campaign-actor perceptions, or qualitative mobilization narratives were useful for understanding mechanism — but they don't count as direct causal proof of turnout, and weren't treated that way.

**Table 5. Quality appraisal summary of final included studies.**

| Quality rating | Number of studies | Interpretive use                                                                                    |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| High           | 8                 | Validated turnout, field-experimental, administrative, or strong mixed-methods evidence.            |
| Moderate       | 15                | Relevant empirical evidence with limitations in sampling, causality, or direct outcome measurement. |
| Low            | 1                 | Relevant but weak contextual evidence with serious methodological limitations.                      |
| Total          | 24                | Final protocol-confirmed included studies.                                                          |

## Thematic synthesis of findings

### Six themes came out of the synthesis.

First: social media works as a kind of local electoral information infrastructure, widening access to candidate, campaign, election-administration, and issue information. This showed up most clearly in studies of municipal online communication, official election-commission outreach, and general online information consumption. But information on its own rarely did the job. To actually support participation, it needed to be timely, credible, locally relevant, and actionable — generic information didn't move the needle much.

Second: relational and peer-to-peer mobilization was, by a fair margin, the strongest mechanism for turning digital contact into actual participation. The most convincing evidence came from strategies that worked through voters' own personal networks — peer contact, social visibility, a sense of civic obligation, personalized reminders. In other words, social media does more when it reinforces trusted interpersonal cues than when it's just broadcasting general campaign messages into the void.

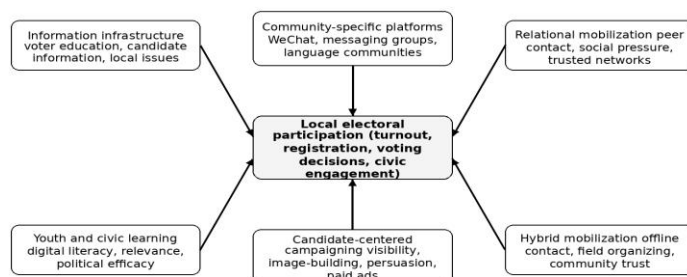
Third: youth and first-time voters kept showing up as a primary target for digital electoral mobilization. Studies from multiple regions found young people using digital platforms heavily for political information and discussion. But the actual turnout effects were mediated — by civic education, perceived relevance, digital literacy, political efficacy. Exposure to social media mattered more once young voters actually understood why the local election was relevant and how what they saw online connected to something they could do offline.

Fourth: candidate-centered digital campaigning clearly shaped visibility, image, and voting decisions, but the turnout evidence around it was mixed at best. Candidates and political actors used Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other platforms to spread messages, build name recognition, signal responsiveness, and target specific voters. A lot of this evidence, though, rests on self-reported perceptions, claims made by campaign actors themselves, or descriptive survey results — which puts a real ceiling on what causal claims about turnout can actually be made.

Fifth: messaging platforms and community-specific digital spaces helped participation among groups that mainstream campaign communication tends to miss. These platforms functioned less like a megaphone and more like a space where diaspora, minority-language, or community-based publics could form. Still, the evidence here stays limited, since many of these studies never directly measured verified turnout or bothered to separate platform engagement from actual voting behavior.

Sixth: several studies pushed back against overestimating what online mobilization can do. Weak or null findings clustered around one-way broadcast communication, paid ads with no relational reinforcement behind them, or campaign activity that stayed entirely online. Taken together, this points to digital tools being most credible as mobilization devices when they're embedded in offline grassroots organizing, civic education, and trusted local networks — not when they're expected to carry the work alone.

**Mechanisms Linking Social Media to Local Electoral Participation**



Strongest evidence: relational, peer-to-peer, and social-pressure mechanisms. Weaker evidence: one-way broadcast and unvalidated engagement metrics.

**Figure 2. Mechanisms linking social media to local electoral participation.**

## Research gaps and whether they were addressed

The review also identified research gaps in the evidence base. Table 6 shows whether each gap was addressed by this review and whether the primary studies sufficiently resolved it.

**Table 6. Research gaps identified in the synthesis and status of response.**

| Research gap                                                          | Evidence found in the review                                                                                                                                                                       | Addressed in this review?       | Remaining need                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National-level bias in digital campaigning research                   | The protocol narrowed the evidence base to local, municipal, subnational, district, provincial, regional, barangay, council, and mayoral contexts.                                                 | Addressed by the review design. | Future reviews should continue separating local elections from national elections because campaign salience and voter motivation differ by level.   |
| Limited direct turnout evidence                                       | Only a minority of included studies used validated turnout, registration, or official participation evidence. Most measured engagement, awareness, voting decisions, or qualitative participation. | Partially addressed.            | More field experiments, administrative records, validated turnout data, and longitudinal studies are needed.                                        |
| Underrepresentation of developing countries and Global South settings | The final evidence base included several Global South and developing-country contexts, but studies were unevenly distributed and country coverage remained thin.                                   | Partially addressed.            | More local-election studies are needed in Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other underrepresented contexts.                               |
| Emerging and messaging platforms remain understudied                  | Evidence was strongest for Facebook and Twitter/X. Messaging applications and newer platforms appeared less frequently.                                                                            | Not fully addressed.            | Future research should examine WhatsApp, Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Viber, and local messaging ecosystems more directly.                 |
| Online engagement is often confused with voting                       | The review separated direct turnout evidence from indirect engagement, awareness, and voting-decision evidence. However, many primary studies still relied on platform metrics or self-reports.    | Partially addressed.            | Primary studies should distinguish exposure, engagement, persuasion, intention, registration, and actual voting.                                    |
| Weak evidence on online-to-offline conversion                         | Some evidence linked digital outreach with offline mobilization, but many studies did not trace how online contact became actual voting behavior.                                                  | Partially addressed.            | Future studies should follow the full pathway from platform exposure to offline discussion, registration, turnout, and post-election participation. |
| Measurement of misinformation and trust in local digital spaces       | Some studies raised issues of misinformation, incivility, echo chambers, and trust, but these were not consistently tied to participation outcomes.                                                | Not fully addressed.            | Future research should study how trust, misinformation, and community credibility affect local electoral participation.                             |

Overall, this review closes the gap around the lack of a synthesis focused specifically on local elections — but it can only go so far in closing gaps that depend on primary studies that simply don't exist yet in sufficient number. The limitations that remain most pressing: too little validated turnout evidence, uneven coverage of the Global South, thin research on messaging apps and newer platforms, and weak measurement of how online engagement actually converts into offline action.

## **Research gaps and whether they were addressed**

The review also flagged a set of research gaps in the underlying evidence base. Table 6 lays out whether each gap was addressed within this review, and whether the primary studies themselves resolved it satisfactorily.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Social media influence is conditional, not automatic**

The core interpretation here is that social media shapes local electoral participation through specific mechanisms — not simply by being present. The most convincing of these mechanisms are relational: a voter hears from someone they actually know, picks up on the sense that voting is socially expected of them, gets a reminder that feels personal rather than generic, or comes across political information inside a community they already trust. All of this lines up with broader theories of social pressure, civic norms, and peer-based mobilization (Bond et al., 2012; Cormack, 2019; Haenschen, 2016).

That helps explain why social media's relationship with turnout isn't uniform. A candidate page, an election-commission announcement, a paid ad, a Facebook group, a Twitter/X thread, a WeChat group chat, a peer-to-peer platform, an online volunteer tool — these are all technically "digital political communication," but lumping them together hides real differences in who's sending the message, who's receiving it, what strategy is behind it, and what actually results. Social media clearly lowers the cost of accessing information and increases exposure. But turnout effects show up mainly when digital contact is personal, socially reinforced, and tied to something local and concrete.

### **Relational mobilization beats one-way broadcast**

The strongest evidence in this review, by a clear margin, backs relational mobilization. Peer-to-peer outreach and social-pressure messaging stand out because these are the studies that actually connect digital outreach to voter records or verified participation. What seems to matter isn't the tool itself but what it activates — existing social relationships and a sense of public accountability, rather than just another impersonal reminder landing in someone's feed (Cormack, 2019; Haenschen, 2016). That tracks with the wider electoral mobilization literature, which has long shown personal contact and social pressure outperforming generic appeals.

For local elections specifically, relational mechanisms probably matter even more, given how these races tend to have lower salience, thinner media coverage, and smaller campaign operations to begin with. In an information-poor environment, the people voters already know and trust can carry more persuasive weight than a candidate's general publicity or a mass digital ad buy. Social media can scale up these relational cues — it just can't manufacture the trust behind them.

### **Youth, candidates, and community publics each need a different playbook**

The youth-focused studies show digital platforms doing real work — creating exposure, sparking discussion, building interest — but mobilizing young voters clearly depends on more than exposure alone. It needs civic learning and a sense of relevance. Youth get-out-the-vote drives, classroom interventions, political events, digital discussion spaces — all of them point the same direction: platform exposure by itself isn't enough (Makola, 2022; Ohme et al., 2019). What seems to actually move things is accessible language, issue relevance, some groundwork of trust, civic education, and a real bridge between online engagement and the act of voting.

Candidate-centered campaigning calls for similar caution. Digital marketing and an active social media presence can absolutely shape how a candidate is perceived — credibility, visibility, even voting decisions — but none of that is the same as verified turnout (Ikan et al., 2024; Moekahar et al., 2022; Nicolas &

Donguiz, 2024). Candidate communication seems to do more when it's responsive, grounded in local issues, and tied into offline mobilization efforts. Posting on its own — especially once it drifts into self-promotion or pure broadcast — isn't strong evidence of anyone actually getting mobilized.

Community-specific platforms need their own approach too. WeChat, various messaging apps, diaspora networks, language-based online publics — these can reach voters that mainstream election communication tends to overlook (Russo & Huddleston, 2021; Zha, 2022). They're genuinely useful for political information, group discussion, and mobilization, but they also come with real risks: misinformation, echo chambers, emotionally driven mobilization, and just harder measurement overall. These platforms deserve more direct study going forward, especially in Global South and minority-language settings.

### **Online engagement isn't voting, and shouldn't be treated like it is**

One of the bigger methodological takeaways here: online engagement is not electoral participation, full stop. Likes, shares, comments, impressions, follower counts — these can signal visibility or attention, but they don't necessarily signal anyone actually casting a ballot. This review deliberately left out studies that measured campaign content or online activity without also tracking turnout, voting intention, registration, political engagement, civic awareness, or some participation-related narrative. That distinction matters, because it's easy to mistake campaign visibility for actual mobilization when the two aren't the same thing at all.

Which is part of why the evidence base here is uneven in its reliability. The high-quality studies make stronger claims because they're working with voter records, administrative participation data, randomized designs, or solid quasi-experimental evidence. The moderate-quality qualitative and survey studies still matter — for understanding mechanisms, meaning, and the barriers to implementation — but they need to be read with the appropriate caution attached. A stronger evidence base going forward will need designs that actually trace the chain from platform exposure through message reception, offline discussion, intention formation, and finally to the vote itself.

### **What this means for electoral practice and policy**

For election commissions, the takeaway is that social media shouldn't be limited to deadline reminders or activity-report posts. Official digital voter education should explain why the local election matters, how to actually vote, where to find reliable candidate information, and how participation connects to outcomes people will feel in their own community. Posts need to be accessible, multilingual where the population calls for it, interactive, and actually evaluated for reach and effect — not just published and forgotten.

For candidates and local parties, one-way posting isn't enough on its own. Campaigns do better prioritizing relational strategies — supporter-to-peer contact, public voting commitments, localized issue content, communication that actually responds to people rather than broadcasting at them. Digital campaigning should support door-to-door outreach, community events, volunteer mobilization, and trusted local networks, not stand in for them.

For civil society groups and civic educators, social media opens real opportunities to reach youth, migrants, linguistic minorities, and low-information voters — but only if the effort also grapples with digital inequality, platform trust, misinformation, and basic accessibility. Skipping that part undermines the rest.

### **Limitations and where future research should go**

This review has its share of limitations. First, the compiled table held 857 article rows even though the numbering sequence ran to 860 — the missing three IDs are reported openly rather than glossed over. Second, this was a solo, course-based review, which means there was no independent second screener to cross-check decisions. Third, restricting the search to English-language sources likely excluded relevant work published in Spanish, Portuguese, Filipino, French, Bahasa Indonesia, Turkish, and other languages.

Fourth, the studies were too methodologically varied to support a meta-analysis. Fifth, a number of the included studies measured engagement, awareness, or voting decisions rather than validated turnout — useful for understanding mechanism, but not a substitute for administrative turnout data.

Going forward, future research would benefit from leaning more on validated turnout records, field experiments, quasi-experiments, administrative participation data, and longitudinal surveys. More work is also needed on WhatsApp, Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and local messaging ecosystems more broadly — particularly in developing-country and Global South contexts, which remain thin in the current literature. Researchers should be careful to keep exposure, engagement, persuasion, intention, registration, and actual voting analytically separate rather than treating them as interchangeable. Comparative work across municipalities and countries would also help pin down which local conditions make digital mobilization more or less effective.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review looked at how social media-based digital campaigning shapes voter turnout and electoral participation in local elections. Following a PRISMA 2020-informed process and a pre-specified protocol, it screened an auditable corpus of 857 article rows drawn from an original numbering frame of 860 records. Forty-two potentially eligible studies were then re-screened strictly against the protocol, and 24 survived into the final narrative synthesis.

The review's finding, in short: social media can influence local electoral participation, but it doesn't do so automatically — the effect is conditional. The strongest evidence comes from relational and peer-to-peer mechanisms, particularly ones built on social pressure, personal networks, or targeted reminders. Informational and candidate-centered strategies can raise awareness and visibility, sure, but their connection to actual turnout is weaker and depends heavily on message quality, trust, digital literacy, local relevance, and whether there's any offline reinforcement behind it.

The broader implication is that social media is best understood as enabling infrastructure for grassroots mobilization — not as a cause of turnout in its own right. Digital campaigning matters most when it activates real social relationships, delivers information people can actually act on, reaches voters through networks they trust, and connects what happens online to what happens at the ballot box. For local democratic practice, that means social media should complement civic education, community organizing, volunteer mobilization, and field outreach — not replace them. For research, it means moving past platform metrics and digging into the actual causal and interpretive pathways through which online communication turns into electoral participation.

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The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) as an AI-assisted writing tool for grammar checking, clarity improvement, wording refinement, organizing ideas, and manuscript editing. Every AI-generated suggestion was reviewed, verified, and revised by the author, who remains fully responsible for the scholarly content, citation accuracy, interpretation of findings, originality, and final version of the manuscript.

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## Credit Roles

Remolona, A. A. R.: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Validation; Formal analysis; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; Project administration.

Olandria, A. G.: Supervision; Conceptualization; Methodology; Validation.

Lubiano, A.: Validation; Formal analysis; Visualization.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

## Ethical Statement

This systematic literature review synthesized previously published, academically recognized sources and did not involve direct data collection from human participants, animals, or biological materials — so formal ethics review approval was not required. Even so, the review held to standard research integrity practices: pre-specified eligibility criteria, study selection documented through a PRISMA 2020-informed process, methodological quality appraised with CASP-based and MMAT-based tools, and every included study cited honestly and accurately.

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