

From Reels to Voting Polls: Instagram as a Catalyst for the Evolution of GEN Z Geopolitics in A Transnational Context

Nitisha Tawra

Dept. of Political Science

Raghunath Girls' P.G. College

Meerut

Email: tawranitisha01@gmail.com

Dr Babita Maji

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Political Science

Raghunath Girls' P.G. College

Meerut

Email: majibabita225@gmail.com

Abstract

This research article examines how the Instagram is changing the way Generation Z (born 1997–2012) thinks about geopolitics in a global context. It focuses on South Asian democracies like India, Nepal, and Bangladesh and youth movements in Europe, particularly in Bulgaria. The study uses a mix of methods, including a survey with 40 respondents aged 18 to 30 and comparative case studies. The research shows that Indian Gen Z experiences a clear “passivity paradox.” They show high political awareness but face barriers to meaningful participation in the political system. The events of the July 2024 Uprising in Bangladesh, recognized as the first successful Gen Z revolution, Nepal’s social media ban resulted in a revolt in September 2025, and Bulgaria’s Budget Revolution in December 2025 highlight Instagram’s influential role. Survey data reveals that 57.5% of Indian Gen Z primarily get their political news from Instagram Reels and Stories, 60% engage with political content daily, and 70% support a secure Aadhaar-linked digital voting app called ‘Bharat Votify.’ This proposal is due to increasing distrust in government functioning in many countries, so in India, the Voting APP experiment can increase the trust of new generation voters in government functioning and would establish more transparency in the election processes. The study concludes that Instagram acts as a critical part of the infrastructure, not just a communication tool but shaping and transforming the political identities, protest movements, and democratic visions of Gen Z.

Keywords: *Instagram, Generation Z, Geopolitics, Digital Activism, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Bharat Votify, Platform Politics, Transnational Movements.*

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Nitisha Tawra

Dr Babita Maji

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Introduction

The change in political communication in the 21st century is closely tied to the rise of social media, mainly Instagram. Over the last ten years, these platforms have become central spaces for political discussion. They have changed how people get information, shape their views, and engage in democracy. This change is particularly important for Generation Z, a group that has been surrounded by digital technology and instant communication since birth. Unlike earlier generations, who learned about politics through family, schools, and television, Gen Z depends a lot on algorithm-driven digital platforms for political insight. In India, the growth of affordable internet services after the 2016 telecommunications revolution has connected millions of young people online. India now has one of the largest digital populations globally, with Instagram's user base expected to surpass 500 million by 2026.

Research Problem: Instagram's dual role as a surveillance tool and a freeing tool is the core paradox driving our investigation. It amplifies dissident voices for global audiences, but it is also vulnerable to algorithmic censorship, inconsistent content regulation, and official coercion. The main focus of this study is how Gen Z resolves this contradiction and what the geopolitical ramifications are.

The study is organized around five research questions:

- (1) How does Instagram's architectural grammar reshape Gen Z political protests?
- (2) What are the transnational commonalities and contextual divergences across Nepal, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, and India?
- (3) What are the structural consequences of Instagram-mediated protest movements?
- (4) To what extent does digital engagement on Instagram translate into real-world political action in India?
- (5) How can 'Bharat Votify' translate performative digital citizenship into verified democratic participation?

Literature Review

1 Social Media and Political Participation

Norris (2001) suggests a 'virtuous circle' of political communication in which those citizens already inclined toward political engagement is more likely to utilise new media and thus reinforce rather than create new participation. A 2023 Lokniti-CSDS study revealed that the use of Instagram was positively associated with political interest among Indian youth, but the association was higher among those who were already socialised into political attentiveness through family or

education (Palshikar et al., 2023). Treem and Leonardi (2012) describe four significant social media affordances - visibility, persistence, editability, and association. Scholars also highlight the political affordances of visual primacy, algorithmic curation, the influencer economy and Reels/Stories features for Instagram specifically (Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019)

2 Gen Z and Protest Politics

Gen Z protest politics marks a radical shift away from traditional hierarchical forms of mobilisation, towards a decentralised, 'leaderless' participatory culture. This generation is 'glocal' in its identity, tapping into the visual storytelling of Instagram to link local grievances (like corruption and austerity) to global patterns of injustice. Reels and memes "aestheticize dissent," facilitating entry and converting personal expression into collective action through emotional solidarity (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The 2024 Bangladesh July Uprising is popularly known as the world's first successful Gen Z revolution where student-led digital networks defeated state repression to overthrow a 16-year regime. This momentum later sparked Nepal's 2025 movement and Bulgaria's Gen Z Revolution (2025-2026), giving birth to a new era of the 'South Asian-European Gen Z Wave.'

3 Theoretical Framework

i. Networked Society Theory: Manuel Castells' framework argues that power today is centered on digital communication networks. "Mass self-communication" refers to individuals' ability to communicate with global audiences at the same time, representing a significant change. Instagram, which combines personal stories (Stories), broadcasting (Reels), and community interaction (Hashtags), is a clear example of this idea.

ii. Networked Public Sphere: This study focuses on Habermas's (1989) idea of the public sphere as it applies to digital spaces. It looks at how Instagram both supports and limits political discussion, and how conversations online lead to actions in the real world.

iii. Filter Bubble and Algorithms: Pariser's (2011) 'filter bubble' concept explains how algorithmic curation systems show users mostly content that matches their current beliefs. In India, 'echo chambers' formed by caste, community, and political identities play a key role in how Instagram influences political discussions.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods design integrating: For Primary data include quantitative survey-based data collection via Google Forms (40 respondents, aged 17–27 years, gender: 60% male, 40% female). All responses were critically analysed.

Secondary data sources include academic peer-reviewed literature, policy reports from Freedom House, Access Now, IDEA, and the Global Network Initiative, and journalistic documentation from Al Jazeera, The Wire, The Daily Star (Bangladesh), and Balkan Insight. The theoretical framework is highlighting on political communication theory, social movement studies, and digital sociology which is reflecting the complexity of transnational Gen Z digital politics.

Case Studies: Transnational Gen Z Uprisings

1 Bangladesh: The July Uprising (2024)

The July 2024 “Gen Z Revolution” in Bangladesh (sometimes referred to as the “Monsoon Revolution”) ended Sheikh Hasina’s 15-year rule and was a historic moment in South Asian history. It was the world’s first successful mass rebellion headed only by Gen Z. Opposition to a colonial-era public service quota system that set aside 30% of jobs for descendants of 1971 Liberation War soldiers served as the impetus for the Students Against Discrimination (SAD) campaign. Instagram served as the movement’s “prestige layer,” featuring visually arresting protest banners in Bengali and English, cinematic documentary-like Stories from Dhaka University, and English-subtitled Reels for global audiences, including the diaspora and international media. Between July 18 and 23, during a nationwide internet shutdown, Gen Z activists relied on decentralised mesh networks and VPNs, which were downloaded over 200,000 times in 48 hours to stay in touch and coordinate. As soon as they had internet access, Instagram Reels quickly spread uncensored and unfiltered footage of police brutality to international viewers that state-controlled media had purposely hidden. In the end, the movement led to a regime change and Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus became the Chief Adviser, while prominent student leaders Nahid Islam and Asif Mahmud were inducted into the national cabinet.

2 Nepal: Digital-Censorship Spark

The government of Nepal banned 26 social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, on September 4, 2025. This caused an outrage among Gen Z youth already frustrated by a 20% unemployment rate and political corruption revealed through the “#NepoKid” trend.

Decentralised student-led protests broke out in Kathmandu on September 8, 2025. The heavy-handed police response led to widespread rioting, burning of government buildings and curfews. More than 70 people died. The government fell apart. Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned on Sept. 9 and the social media ban was lifted. Sushila Karki, the former Chief Justice, has been appointed as the caretaker Prime Minister to steer the country towards fresh elections. Former rapper and

Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah, then 35, won a landslide victory in democratic elections in March 2026 and became Nepal's Prime Minister on March, 2026.

This outrage happened because of distrust of citizens of Nepal in government and deeply frustrated by extreme corruption. New generation voters (Gen Z) decided to remove this regime and elect a new trusted transparent government.

3 Bulgaria: European First Gen Z Revolt

The 'Winter of 2025' in Bulgaria is recognised as the first significant example of a European government collapsing mainly as a result of an insurrection headed by Generation Z. By December 10, more than 150,000 people had descended into Sofia as a result of the November 26, 2025, announcement of a draft 2026 budget that proposed significant hikes in social security levies, which were perceived as a "generational tax." The 'Executive Branch' of the protest was Instagram, where influencers transformed into 'Political Translators,' using Reels to explain how the budget will impact students' daily lives. One minute before a vote of no-confidence on December 11, 2025, Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov tendered his resignation, acknowledging that he could no longer disregard "the voice of the people."

It was another instance where citizens were losing all faith in their government, calling for it to be thrown out altogether and replaced by a new government.

4 India: The Systemic Pressure Model (2024–2026)

In contrast to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bulgaria, Gen Z activism in India has concentrated on pushing certain legislative and institutional changes rather than overthrowing the central government, this approach is known as "Institutional Audit." Some of the examples of Gen Z protest in India are, NEET-UG Exam Cancellation Protests (2024) where millions of students and youth organizations (such as the NSUI and AISA) led massive nationwide demonstrations following question paper leaks and mass irregularities in the crucial medical entrance exams. In Ladakh youth (Gen Z) demanded Statehood and Autonomy Agitations (2025). They did civic marches and hunger strikes in Leh demanding constitutional recognition under the Sixth Schedule.

The Gen Z Aravalli protest was a youth-led environmental demonstration that erupted in late December 2025 in Jaipur, Rajasthan, marking a historic moment where India's younger generation collectively took to the streets for climate justice.

Very recently, Gen Z planned "digital boycott" serves as a powerful political message for this generation, as demonstrated by the April 2026 "Digital Unfollow" movement, in which Raghav Chadha lost over 2.3 million Instagram followers within 48 hours after switching from the AAP to the BJP.

Primary Research: Survey Findings

A Google Form survey was administered to 40 respondents aged 18–27 (peak age: 20–22 years; gender: 60% male, 40% female). All questions were multiple-choice, anonymized, and designed to measure opinions, behaviours, and perceptions around political awareness, social media use, protest engagement, and civic technology attitudes.

Question	Leading Response	Percentage
Q1: Primary platform for political news?	Instagram Reels/Stories	57.5%
Q2: Frequency of engagement with political content?	Daily — multiple times	60%
Q3: Can social media campaign alone bring change?	Yes, but combined with protest	50%
Q4: Do you trust the Indian electoral process?	Partially trust	42.5%
Q5: Primary source for geopolitical events abroad?	Instagram Reels/Stories	67.5%
Q6: Is Indian Gen Z more politically aware?	Significantly more aware	50%
Q7: Personally participated in protest/demonstration?	No, but supported online	37.5%
Q8: Political identity?	Centrist/Issue-based	57.5%
Q9: Role of Instagram algorithm in shaping opinions?	Somewhat, verify independently	35%
Q10: Primary motive for sharing political content?	To spread political awareness	67.5%
Q11: Can Indian Gen Z protest like Nepal in future?	Yes, definitely / Yes, maybe	65%
Q12: Support secured Aadhaar-linked Voting App?	Yes (transparency + turnout)	70%

Table 1: Survey Results Summary — 40 Respondents (Google Forms, 2026)

1 Analysis of Survey Findings

The survey data study highlights a generation that is deeply entwined with a political ecology that prioritises digital technology. The degree of digital immersion is a crucial finding: 60% of respondents interact with political information many times a day, indicating that politics is a continuous background aspect of digital life for Generation Z rather than an infrequent interest.

Instagram’s algorithm turns out to be a complicated “double-edged” factor: 35% of respondents retain “digital scepticism,” stating they independently check information, while 30% admit the algorithm has a “very significant” impact in moulding political attitudes. According to Gen Z, the main reason people share political information is “to spread political awareness” (67.5%), which presents the Instagram feed as a cutting-edge instrument for public service.

The Indian Gen Z’s perspective on global movements is largely digital and peer-driven, with 67.5% of respondents attributing Instagram Reels and Stories as their main source of information on geopolitical events such as protests in Nepal, Bangladesh or Europe, versus 10% for international news outlets. Politically, 57.5% identify as “Centrist/Issue-based,” which suggests a move away from the traditional Left vs. Right paradigms and toward specific, relatable issues. The most significant takeaway is the widespread 70% support for a safe “Voting App” tied to Aadhaar, reflecting a strong generational need to harness technology to revolutionise the election process.

Transnational Comparative Analysis

Feature	Bangladesh 2024	Nepal 2025	Bulgaria 2025	India (2024–26)
Primary Trigger	Quota system & Autocracy	Social media ban & Nepotism	Budget & Corruption	Exam leaks & Institutional failure
Political Result	Regime collapse; PM fled	Regime collapse; PM resigned	Government resignation	Policy reform; Judicial intervention
Youth Representation	High (student ministers)	Moderate (interim council)	Emerging (new parties)	Indirect (pressure groups)
Instagram Role	Narrative building via Reels/TikTok	Bypassing censorship via VPN/Discord	Influencer-led political education	Micro-journalism via Reels/X
Stance on State	Illegitimate	Illegitimate	Captured	Negligent but Redeemable

Table 2: Comparative Political Impact of Gen Z Movements (2024–2026)

What ties all three countries together is ‘Radical Accountability’. Traditional party beliefs are being replaced by issue-based, digital-first mobilisation among Gen Z activists. A recurring finding is the “Diaspora Amplification Effect”, diaspora communities in Australia, the Gulf States, the UK, Germany, the US, and France serving as transnational relay stations that systematically benefits movements with bigger, wealthier, and more technologically advanced emigrant groups.

The main conclusion is that the digital fluency has overtaken conventional state apparatus in power and we have entered a period of asymmetric political responsibility. Institutional rigidity caused total government collapse in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bulgaria. Another route is India's "Institutional Audit" approach, which uses the same digital capabilities to enforce extreme transparency on the bureaucracy and the courts rather than to overthrow the government.

Policy Proposal: Bharat Votify

Bharat Votify is a proposed national digital civic platform that combines institutional accountability, civic education and participatory discussion with electronic voting. This proposal is to improve the trust of citizens in fair voting system and increase transparency. It is a hybrid platform that combines Aadhaar-based biometric verification with a cryptographic layer that preserves privacy, allowing users to participate in democracy in a verified manner without compromising their anonymity.

Core Architecture

- Secure Voting Module: Aadhaar-linked biometric authentication + blockchain-recorded, publicly auditable ballot casting.
- Civic Deliberation Forum: Modelled on James Fishkin's 'deliberative polling' methodology; AI-moderated 48-hour citizen panels on policy questions.
- Youth Policy Dashboard: Real-time transparency interface displaying constituency-level MP voting records, budget allocations, and developmental outcomes.
- Grievance & Accountability Portal: Encrypted direct channel for citizens to file grievances with elected representatives and track government responses.

This plan is supported by survey data of 40 respondents: 70% of respondents support a secure voting app connected to Aadhaar, with 22.5% noting the establishment of transparency and a significant amount claiming improved voter engagement. Concerns about data privacy and the digital gap, rather than general hostility to the idea, were the focus of student activists' cautious optimism. Although this initiative should need engagement of more citizens in survey to support or to criticize this proposal.

Conclusion

This research suggests that Instagram is not simply a platform for communicating Gen Z politics, but rather a fundamental infrastructure for the formation, contestation, and transformation of Gen Z political identities, movements,

and democratic imaginaries. It functioned as a transnational connective tissue, uniting fragmented protest energies into moments of global political prominence.

The Gen Z-led mobilisation in Nepal, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, and India signifies a paradigm shift in political engagement, characterized by digital fluency and a rejection of traditional hierarchies. In Bangladesh (2024) and Nepal (2025), youth uprisings successfully toppled entrenched administrations, leading to historic electoral transitions and the rise of new, youth-centric parties. Bulgaria similarly saw government resignations driven by anti-corruption sentiment.

In India from 2024-2026, protests regarding NEET-UG, Ladakh's statehood, and the Aravalli conservation reflect a diversified agenda spanning educational merit, constitutional identity, and ecological survival. Collectively, these movements demonstrate that Gen Z is transitioning from digital activism to tangible political disruption, forcing global governments to confront systemic issues of corruption, unemployment, and climate justice.

The transition from "Reels to Voting Polls" represents a generation prepared to run a democracy that prioritises digital technology. Although algorithmic manipulation is still a worry, poll participants' "digital scepticism" and selfless desire to raise awareness point to a resilient and knowledgeable public. Future Indian geopolitics will probably be defined by Indian Gen Z's need for a more open, accessible, and technologically sophisticated political system as they continue to see global changes via a digital lens.

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