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Politicisation in Tamil Nadu among Young Voters: A Framing Theory Approach

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Abstract:

Political framing shapes how young voters interpret and respond to political messages, yet qualitative understanding of this process remains limited in the Indian context. This study explores how youth in Tamil Nadu negotiate political frames across media and social interactions, drawing on Framing Theory to examine exposure, trust, and mobilisation. Using qualitative exploratory design with semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 100 purposively sampled young voters (aged 18–29), the research identifies how identity, development, corruption, and welfare frames resonate differentially across urban and rural contexts. Findings reveal that while identity-based appeals (caste, language, Tamil pride) evoke strong emotional responses, youth simultaneously engage in critical evaluation of political authenticity and implementation track records. Digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Instagram, function as primary sites of political exposure, with memes and visual content serving as accessible entry points for political discussion. Peer networks and family conversations emerge as crucial filters mediating frame interpretation. The study concludes that youth politicisation in Tamil Nadu is characterised by a dynamic negotiation between affective identity-driven appeals and rational expectations of developmental governance. Rather than passive consumers of political messaging, young voters demonstrate sophisticated capacity for critical reflection and selective engagement. These findings challenge assumptions of youth political apathy and suggest that trust-building, credibility, and substantive policy engagement beyond symbolic appeals are essential for sustained political mobilisation among this demographic.

Keywords: youth politicisation, political framing, Tamil Nadu, digital media, social mobilisation, qualitative research

Introduction:

Democratic vitality depends fundamentally on the active engagement of successive generations in civic and electoral processes. Understanding how young citizens develop political consciousness, interpret political messages, and make electoral decisions remains a significant challenge for both democratic

theory and practice. Tamil Nadu, a state with a storied history of regional political movements, distinctive linguistic and cultural identities, and a strong tradition of electoral participation, provides an especially rich setting for such investigation. The politicisation of youth is central to democratic vitality. In Tamil Nadu a state with a storied political culture and strong regional identities understanding how young voters interpret and respond to political messages has both local and theoretical importance. This paper uses Framing Theory to explore how exposure to politically framed messages influences political interest and mobilisation. Unlike quantitative approaches, this study employs qualitative methods to capture depth, context, and lived experiences of young voters. Yet we know little about how the state's young voters embedded in contexts shaped by Dravidian ideology, caste politics, and regional pride interpret, negotiate, and respond to political frames presented through digital platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube, which have become primary channels through which youth encounter political information. Understanding youth framing and mobilisation has both theoretical and practical significance theoretically deepening our comprehension of how Framing Theory operates in regionally distinctive, non-Western contexts where identity, caste, and language intersect with contemporary media dynamics, and practically providing insights for policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organisations concerned with fostering informed, sustained youth engagement in democratic processes.

Review of Literature:

Evolution of Dravidian Ideology, Regional Politics, and Tamil Nadu's Socio-Political Landscape

The evolution of Dravidian ideology in Tamil Nadu has been extensively documented as one of the most influential socio-political transformations in South Asia. Amsa and Madhu sudharsanan (2025) trace the trajectory of Dravidian thought from its emergence in the late nineteenth century to its consolidation as a dominant political force. Their work highlights how the ideology transitioned from an elite-driven intellectual movement with loosely defined ambitions into a comprehensive social, political, and economic programme. This transformation was shaped by key figures such as Periyar, Anna, and Karunanidhi, whose rationalist and populist strategies were further consolidated under the charismatic leadership of M.G. Ramachandran, embedding the movement deeply into policy and electoral institutions. Srinivasan (2024) situates this ascendancy within a broader analysis of regional party dominance in Tamil Nadu. His research shows how linguistic identity, cultural pride, and socio-economic considerations led to the decline of national parties and the rise of Dravidian parties such as the DMK and AIADMK. The resulting political landscape strengthened sub-nationalism and redefined the state's engagement with India's federal structure. However, recent scholarship notes an erosion in the ideological cohesion once central to Dravidian politics. Feringa (2023) argues that the gradual decline of Dravidianist subcultures previously sustained by DMK and AIADMK mobilisation—has contributed to weakened civic participation and increased mobilisation along caste and religious lines. This trend suggests a fragmentation within the once-unified cultural politics of Tamil Nadu. The cultural

roots of Dravidian political mobilisation are emphasised by Murugesapandian (2023), who underscores the critical role of political dramas in promoting rationalist ideas and challenging caste hierarchy, gender inequality, and Brahmanical dominance. These performances functioned as mass political education before their decline in prominence with the rise of cinema. Broader comparative perspectives on regionalism are provided by Tirkey (2023), who argues that regional parties across India play diverse yet influential roles in shaping federal democracy. Their strategies, identity mobilisation, and policy orientations significantly affect governance outcomes and national politics. Further, Fukaya (2023) examines the shifting ideological landscape of Tamil Nadu, noting that the radical Dravidian ethos of the mid-twentieth century has waned, giving way to electoral alliances shaped by contemporary caste and religious concerns. Engseth (2022) adds depth by analysing Tamil Nadu's dualistic language policy, characterised by strong Tamil promotion alongside pragmatic accommodation for minority languages in social welfare sectors. Historical analyses, such as those by Hardgrave (2022), reveal the early dynamics of electoral politics in Madras, marked by Congress dominance, DMK's indirect involvement, and the rise of caste-based parties representing the Vanniyar community. The revival of Dravida Nadu and associated anti-centre sentiments, as discussed by Debnath (2019a; 2019b), indicates how political elites strategically reframe sub-nationalist narratives to consolidate power and mobilise cultural nationalism. Complementing these studies, Gerritsen (2014) demonstrates that political images and iconography in Tamil Nadu are not mere reflections of leadership status but are actively constructed by party workers, who function as key agents in shaping political power and public perception. Collectively, these studies establish Tamil Nadu's political landscape as a complex interplay of ideology, culture, identity, and strategic mobilisation, evolving constantly in response to internal and external pressures.

Political Communication, Social Media Influence, and Youth Political Engagement

The emergence of digital platforms has reshaped political communication, particularly among younger generations. Shahzad et al. (2025) demonstrate that Gen Z increasingly relies on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter for political information. This shift boosts political interest and participation but also poses challenges due to misinformation and the limited practice of verification, potentially undermining informed citizenship. Lianda and Ananda (2025) extend this discussion to electoral campaigning, showing how Gen Z and Millennial candidates in Indonesia's 2024 elections utilised personalised content, visual storytelling, and issue-based messaging to engage voters more effectively. They also highlight structural barriers such as digital inequality and the persistence of disinformation. The effectiveness of digital political communication is further explored by Alifatunnisa et al. (2024), who note that humour, creativity, and direct online interaction attract young users. However, they emphasize the need for digital literacy and critical evaluation skills, given the proliferation of fake news. Additionally, Jireh (2024) demonstrates how Dravidian and Dalit populist cinema, though traditionally not classified alongside social media, functions as a parallel communicative sphere. Through

“convictional aestheticism,” cinema becomes a medium of ideological articulation and identity formation, particularly among marginalized communities. Together, these studies underscore the expanding role of digital and cultural mediums in shaping political consciousness among youth.

Cultural Representations, Political Imagery, and Media’s Role in Shaping Political Identity

Media, cultural narratives, and political imagery have historically played a central role in Tamil Nadu’s political sphere. As noted earlier, Murugesapandian (2023) shows how political dramas were instrumental in disseminating Dravidian ideology, democratizing knowledge, and challenging social hierarchies. Their impact laid the foundation for later forms of cultural mobilisation through cinema. Jiresh (2024) situates populist cinema within this trajectory, arguing that Dalit and Dravidian filmmakers use film as a space of resistance, representation, and empowerment. Such representations not only challenge dominant social norms but also contribute to political socialisation and identity formation. Further, Gerritsen (2014) provides insight into political imagery by demonstrating that images of leaders in Tamil Nadu are actively produced by party cadres. Rather than passive reflections of power, these images function as political tools that shape public perception, assert loyalty, and create competitive dynamics within parties. Pentland (2013) contributes a broader perspective by examining how media impacts youth engagement in the UK, arguing that disengagement stems from communication barriers rather than inherent apathy. Together, these works illustrate how visual culture and mediated communication continue to shape political identities and collective consciousness

Youth Voting Behaviour, Political Attitudes, and the Impact of Political Education

A significant body of research highlights the factors shaping youth voting behaviour and political attitudes. Hassan et al. (2024) find that interactiveness and political satire strongly influence youth voting decisions in Malaysia, while political credibility and informativeness, although less impactful, play essential roles in trust-building and decision-making. Amante et al. (2024) identify several determinants of young voters’ political choices, including social media exposure, peer pressure, political ideology, education, and socioeconomic background. They emphasise the need for further research into how these preferences translate into long-term political engagement. The importance of political education is demonstrated by Al-Hamdi and Sofyan (2023), whose study shows that intensive political instruction significantly enhances young voters’ understanding of democracy and political institutions, increasing positive perceptions. Benedicto and Ramos (2018) reveal that despite widespread dissatisfaction with political institutions among Spanish youth, this discontent often leads to political expression and activism rather than disengagement, suggesting that dissatisfaction can be a catalyst for participation. Pentland (2013) reinforces this point by arguing that youth disengagement is not the result of apathy but rather of structural and communicative barriers. Through improved political education, communication strategies, and trust-building measures, youth participation can be substantially increased. Collectively, these studies highlight that youth political engagement is dynamic and shaped

by a combination of media exposure, social environments, structural barriers, and educational interventions.

Theoretical framework: Framing Theory

Framing Theory posits that the presentation of information shapes interpretation. In qualitative research, framing is examined by analysing how participants describe and evaluate issues, what frames they recognise, and how they accept or resist them. This study explores how Tamil Nadu youth perceive and negotiate these frames.

Objectives:

- To explore how young voters in Tamil Nadu are exposed to political frames through media and social interactions.
- To understand the role of perceived bias and credibility in shaping youth trust and political interest.
- To identify which types of frames (identity, development, corruption, welfare) resonate most strongly with young voters.
- To analyse how framed political messages influence political talk and mobilisation among Tamil Nadu youth.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How do young voters in Tamil Nadu describe their exposure to political frames across media and social interactions?

RQ2: How does perceived framing/bias affect their trust and political interest?

RQ3: Which types of frames (identity, development, corruption, welfare) resonate most strongly in their narratives?

RQ4: In what ways do young voters critically negotiate or resist dominant political frames in their daily conversations?

RQ5: How do peer networks and family discussions influence the interpretation of framed political content?

RQ6: What role do digital platforms (social media, messaging apps) play in amplifying or filtering political frames among youth?

RQ7: How do young voters perceive the long-term impact of political framing on their civic participation and voting behaviour?

Methodology:

Research design

Qualitative exploratory design using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Sample and recruitment

Sample size: 100 young voters (18–29) in Tamil Nadu. Given the qualitative design, participants were selected purposively to ensure diversity (gender, caste, education, urban/rural).

Sampling method: Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants represented varied backgrounds (urban/rural, gender, caste, and education). Within purposive sampling, a stratified approach was used to balance demographic sub-groups. Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment, especially in rural areas, where participants referred peers of similar age.

Focus group discussion:

In one urban focus group, participants began by noting how WhatsApp forwards were the first political messages they encountered each morning. A male college student laughed and said, **“Sometimes my day starts with five different forwards from five different groups, all saying opposite things.”** Others nodded, adding that this constant exposure made them skeptical but also curious. Rural participants joined in, emphasising that identity-based appeals, especially those connected to caste and local pride, felt more persuasive than development slogans. One participant remarked, **“When they talk about our community, it feels personal. Development promises are nice, but they sound the same every election.”** Another female respondent countered that development issues like jobs and education were more important for youth, even if they doubted the promises. This led to a lively back-and-forth: an engineering student argued that job creation was the most urgent concern, while a rural youth insisted that recognition of community pride carried more weight in villages. Urban college students then debated memes: one argued that political memes trivialise serious issues, while another felt they actually spread awareness in a language young people understand. Another participant added that memes were **“easy to share”** and sometimes reached people who would not read newspapers. A female participant concluded by pointing out that development promises often sounded good but were rarely implemented in practice, leaving her disillusioned.

Highlight: The discussion revealed contrasts between emotional resonance of identity frames and rational expectations of development frames, with humour and memes serving as entry points for political talk. It also showed how youth negotiate between community pride and practical aspirations, often blending both in their political thinking.

Interview highlights:

Interviewees also provided rich insights. One young man shared, **“Instagram la party reels paathutu oru doubt varudhu – idhu nambalama illa party propaganda va? But at least it makes me think**

about politics.” He reflected that social media reels spark interest but also suspicion, showing how framing creates both engagement and doubt. Another respondent described, **“Naanga caste ah base panna speech kekkumbodhu immediate connect aagudhu, but later feel pannuvom – idhu namma genuine development ku help aagama?”** This highlighted the tension between emotional identity-based connections and rational concerns about actual governance outcomes. A third participant explained, **“Na friend WhatsApp group la corruption related news 3 share pannuvanga, adhu pathi pesumbodhu romba anger varudhu, but sometimes feel helpless too.”** This statement illustrated how corruption frames evoke strong anger but also cynicism and helplessness. In another interview, a postgraduate student mentioned, **“Naanga social media la policy debate paathaa romba interesting ah irukkum, but in real life it never gets implemented, so naanga oru distance maintain pannuvom.”**

Highlight: This shows how even when youth engage intellectually with development or policy frames, repeated disappointment reduces their trust. One more participant said, **“Election time la mattum politicians enga ooruku vandhu pesuvanga, appuram avanga maranjiduvaanga.”** Demonstrates the cyclical nature of attention youth perceive, leading to temporary mobilisation but long-term disengagement.

Theme 1: Exposure as everyday background

Participants reported encountering political messages frequently on WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram. Many described exposures as “unavoidable” but not always deliberate. Frames often entered daily conversations casually. - Interview Excerpt: **“Instagram la party reels paathutu oru doubt varudhu idhu nambalama illa party propaganda va?** But at least it makes me think about politics.”

Highlight: Social media content triggers critical reflection.

Theme 2: Trust and perceived bias

Respondents expressed scepticism about overtly one-sided content. Some described ignoring messages perceived as propaganda. Others said bias reduced their trust but not necessarily their awareness. Perceived neutrality enhanced credibility and engagement.

Theme 3: Identity as a mobilising frame

Caste and language-based appeals strongly resonated, particularly in rural areas. Several participants reported feeling emotionally connected when political content emphasised Tamil pride or community recognition. - Interview Excerpt: **“Naanga caste ah base panna speech kekkumbodhu immediate connect aagudhu, but later feel pannuvom – idhu namma genuine development ku help aagama?”**

Highlight: Identity frames resonate emotionally but raise doubts on developmental value.

Theme 4: Development and corruption frames

Urban and educated respondents valued development-oriented messages but expressed cynicism, noting promises rarely matched delivery. Corruption frames sparked frustration but also feelings of helplessness. Focus Group Point: A female participant noted that development promises often sound good but are rarely implemented. - Interview Excerpt: **“Na friend WhatsApp group la corruption related news share pannuvanga, adhu pathi pesumbodhu romba anger varudhu, but sometimes feel helpless too.”**

Highlight: Corruption frames evoke anger but also cynicism.

Theme 5: Political talk and mobilisation

Exposure to frames encouraged discussions among peers, especially during elections. Some participants described being motivated to vote or share content when frames aligned with personal identity or perceived fairness. –Focus Group Point: Urban college students debated whether political memes trivialise politics or actually spread awareness

Result:

The qualitative study, involving 100 young voters from diverse backgrounds across Tamil Nadu, reveals several key patterns in how political frames affect youth political engagement:

Ubiquitous Exposure and Media Influence: Youth encounter political content almost daily through WhatsApp forwards, Instagram reels, and YouTube videos. For most, exposure to these messages is inevitable and often unintentional, becoming an “everyday background” that triggers both curiosity and skepticism.

Critical Engagement with Framing and Bias: Young voters do not passively accept political messages. Instead, they actively critique information, questioning bias, credibility, and intent behind political content. Neutral or balanced messages tend to foster engagement and trust, whereas overtly partisan or propagandist frames are met with skepticism and often ignored.

Identity Frames as Emotional Catalysts: Appeals based on caste, language, and regional pride strongly resonate especially in rural areas evoking personal connection and motivating discussion or mobilisation. However, youth are aware of the limitations of identity politics and express concern about whether such appeals translate into genuine development.

Development and Corruption Frames: Urban and educated youth respond more to development-focused messages about jobs, education, and economic progress, yet remain cynical due to repeated unmet promises. Anti-corruption narratives provoke anger and frustration but also a sense of helplessness, particularly when circulated among peer groups.

The Role of Memes and Digital Content: Political memes and humorous digital content serve as accessible entry points for political discussion, particularly in urban settings. While some view memes as trivialising politics, others see them as powerful tools for raising awareness among disengaged youth.

Peer and Family Networks as Filters: Family discussions and peer groups strongly influence how youths interpret and internalise political frames. Youth blend emotional identification with their community and rational evaluation of political promises, indicating nuanced processing rather than uniform allegiance.

Impact on Mobilisation and Participation: Political discussion, especially when driven by personal relevance or perceived fairness, motivates youth to vote or share content during elections. However, disappointment with politicians—whose attention seems cyclical and campaign-driven leads to short-term mobilisation but long-term disengagement.

Conclusion:

The research finds that youth political engagement in Tamil Nadu is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between affective identity-based appeals and rational expectations about development and governance. Young voters are not passive recipients of political messaging; they demonstrate critical reflection, questioning perceived bias and credibility, and blending emotional resonance with practical concerns in their political judgments. Digital platforms act as amplifiers, making political information more accessible but also more contested, with memes and humorous content lowering barriers to engagement while sometimes trivialising serious issues. Despite cynicism triggered by repeated unfulfilled promises and exposure to corruption, youth in Tamil Nadu remain engaged and selectively responsive, demonstrating that dissatisfaction leads not to apathy but to critical evaluation and new forms of activism and expression. Family and peer networks, alongside digital interactions, create complex filters for processing political content, fostering both collective mobilisation and individual skepticism. Ultimately, the study concludes that effective youth mobilisation in Tamil Nadu requires moving beyond symbolic identity politics to address substantive developmental needs, provide credible information, and foster sustained trust. Policymakers, parties, and civil society must prioritise transparent, participatory approaches and cultivate digital literacy to enhance informed political participation. These insights challenge stereotypes of youth political apathy and highlight their sophisticated, context-sensitive engagement with framed political messages

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