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Now politicians use data analytics to improve decision-making

Among the techniques and tools being used are social media analysis, predictive algorithms, data analytics and forecasting based on primary data.

MUMBAI: Some 800 volunteers of Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, a non-profit voluntary outfit, are currently going from door to door in two blocks of Balasore in Odisha.

The villagelevel data they're collecting in lawmaker RK Jena's constituency is being entered into an app on tablets, which is then collated centrally.

Information is being gathered by the volunteers on a wide range of subjects schools, aanganwadi centres, health facilities, Panchayati Raj institutions, roads, transport, electrification and agriculture.

The data is being analysed by a not-for-profit development organisation, Swaniti Initiative, which will use tools that it has created to draft a development plan for the member of Parliament.

Jena is among the increasing number of political leaders employing big data and analytics to strengthen the decision-making process and improve governance at national, state and constituency levels. They include Minister of State for Finance Jayant Sinha, lawmaker Jay Panda, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu among others.

Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Odisha are among the states at the forefront of this data revolution.

This new orientation stems from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push to use the latest tools to improve governance, said Rwitwika Bhattacharya, founder of Swaniti Initiative.

He "is one of the most datacentric people in the country", said Bhattacharya. "With the recent focus of the government, a large shift has been towards digital governance, which is data-driven... a movement away from the pen and paper model."

Swaniti's team includes graduates from Harvard and Stanford besides the Indian Institutes of Technology and Management.

"Increasingly, Indian politicians are catching up with the data analytics that is being done in other countries, especially the US," said Sudipta Ghosh, partner at PwC India. "Politicians globally have started using predictive algorithms, data analytics tools and techniques for analysing and forecasting based on primary data."

DISTILLING DATA

The idea is to distil the flood of data into meaningful information and help bridge the gap between real needs and action. "Just three years ago I had colleagues scoffing at the use of data and technology," Panda said. "Today, there has been a dramatic shift and use of big data is becoming crucial in identifying trends and policies."

Panda conducts an annual poll in his constituency on specific issues, to get a sense of where he stands and the areas he needs to work on. From being largely anecdotal, these exercises have become more scientific and data-driven over time, he said.

Startups Using Big Data

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"Data is playing a definite role in shaping the future of the country," said Jena. He's depending on the new tools to monitor the state of agriculture, livelihoods, gender empowerment and economic benefits of government schemes on the people of his constituency. Having real-time information is a boon for politicians, said Milind Deora, former IT and telecom minister.

"Data, technology, social media are a big force multiplier," he said. "Even the most oldschool, cynical politicians understand that today."

Deora said friends from startups and digital communication companies have been involved in his previous campaigns, giving him access to big data and technology.
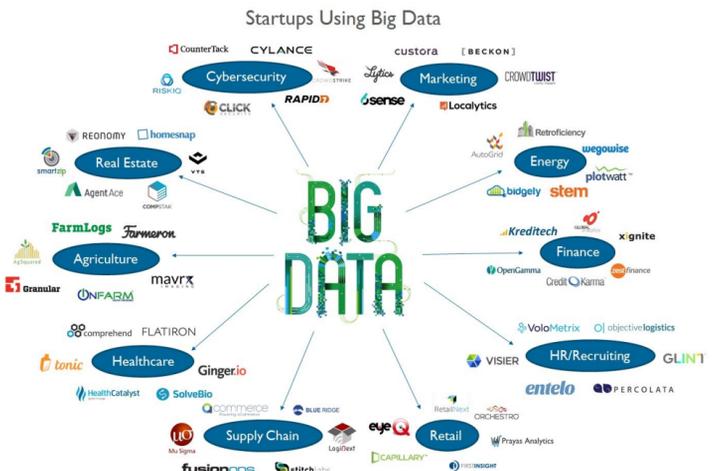
REDUCING GAPS

"In the old days, candidates would hire pollsters to measure responses from electorates. Today, it can happen easily with big data," he said. "It is an effective way of reducing gaps between politicians and people."

In Uttar Pradesh, Swaniti is helping to analyse the effects of a social security scheme and creating a dashboard to monitor programmes at district level. Swaniti prepared a dashboard for Andhra Pradesh on education, health and agriculture.

The Big 4 consultancies EY, PwC, KPMG and Deloitte have all been working with politicians, especially since the 2014 elections, when Modi's campaign made intensive use of technology. Management consultants such as McKinsey and BCG have also been working with political leaders.

Many clients are looking at patterns through text analytics based on data from social networking sites like Twitter as well. They are using the new tools to determine demographic profiles and socioeconomic aims.

"If the politician knows what is the educational background of his voters, then he can target funds from the government or encourage specific industries to invest in a particular sector that would have a targeted impact on employment," said Guru Malladi, advisory markets leader at EY.