



## Role of social media in Indian election campaigns

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### Abstract

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of political communication in India, the world's largest democracy. This comprehensive research study examines the multifaceted role of social media platforms—including WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Google—in Indian election campaigns from the 2014 general elections to the present. Drawing upon systematic literature reviews, empirical data from recent elections, and theoretical frameworks including the Uses and Gratification Theory, this study investigates how political parties and candidates leverage digital platforms to engage voters, disseminate campaign messages, mobilize support, and shape public opinion. The research reveals a significant paradigm shift from traditional door-to-door campaigning to sophisticated, data-driven digital strategies, with the 2024 Lok Sabha elections witnessing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) running over 41,000 ad campaigns on Meta platforms compared to the Indian National Congress's 1,041 campaigns. Key findings indicate that social media's role varies substantially between national and state elections: leadership branding and digital outreach emerge as critical factors for national elections, while party policy, ideology, and on-ground campaigns maintain greater significance for state elections. The study also identifies concerning trends including the proliferation of misinformation ("infodemic"), AI-generated deepfakes, encrypted private messaging campaigns on WhatsApp, and the erosion of traditional media gatekeeping functions. The research contributes to political marketing literature by analyzing the "discursive political projections" that create symbolic leader imageries, examining the structural organization of digital volunteer armies, and assessing the democratic implications of algorithmic micro-targeting. The findings suggest that while social media enhances voter engagement and political participation, it simultaneously poses challenges to electoral integrity, transparency, and informed democratic choice-making.

### Keywords:

Social media, election campaigns, Indian politics, political marketing, WhatsApp politics, misinformation, digital democracy, voter behaviour, micro-targeting, WhatsApp Pramukh, infodemic, Uses and Gratification Theory, political communication, BJP, Congress, 2024 elections.

### 1. Introduction

India, as the world's largest democracy with approximately 970 million eligible voters and over 880 million active internet users, presents a unique and complex landscape for examining the intersection of social media and electoral politics. The period since 2014 has witnessed a dramatic transformation in how political campaigns are conceived, executed, and evaluated, with digital platforms emerging as indispensable tools for political communication. Unlike traditional media—newspapers, television, and radio—social media offers political actors the ability to bypass conventional gatekeepers, engage directly with voters, personalize messaging, and respond instantaneously to emerging narratives.



The significance of social media in Indian elections cannot be overstated. From Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pioneering use of X (then Twitter) in 2014 to the sophisticated multi-platform strategies deployed in the 2024 general elections, digital platforms have evolved from supplementary communication channels to primary campaign battlegrounds. The 2019 elections were widely characterized as India's "social media elections," while the 2024 campaign has intensified these trends with the introduction of AI-generated content, deepfakes, and unprecedented levels of micro-targeting.

This research is situated within the broader scholarly discourse on political marketing, which seeks to "establish, maintain and enhance long-term voter relationships at a profit for society and political parties". The application of marketing principles to politics—treating voters as consumers, candidates as brands, and policies as products—has gained significant traction in India over the past decade. However, the Indian context presents distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from Western democracies: linguistic diversity, varying levels of digital literacy across urban and rural populations, the dominance of WhatsApp as a private messaging platform, and the federal structure that necessitates distinct strategies for national and state elections.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws primarily from the Uses and Gratification Theory, which examines how individuals actively select and utilize media to satisfy specific needs. In the political context, this theory helps explain why voters engage with political content on different platforms—seeking information, entertainment, social interaction, or reinforcement of existing beliefs. Additionally, the study incorporates concepts from political branding theory, examining how parties and leaders construct and maintain brand equity through digital channels.

## 2. Definitions of Key Terms

**Social Media:** Internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange user-generated content, facilitate interactive communication, and build virtual networks. For the purposes of this study, social media encompasses platforms including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Google's advertising ecosystem.

**Election Campaign:** A coordinated series of activities undertaken by political parties, candidates, and their supporters to influence voter behaviour, communicate policy positions, build candidate image, and mobilize electoral support within a specified period preceding an election.

**Political Marketing:** The application of marketing principles, techniques, and concepts to political processes, including the establishment, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term voter relationships to achieve political objectives while serving societal interests.

**Micro-targeting:** The data-driven practice of segmenting voters into narrow demographic, psychographic, or behavioural categories and delivering tailored political messages to each segment through specific platforms, often based on personal data collected from digital footprints.

**Infodemic:** A phenomenon characterized by the rapid and widespread dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, half-truths, and propaganda through digital platforms, originally coined during the COVID-19 pandemic but now applied to political communication contexts.

**WhatsApp Pramukh:** A structured organizational role within political party hierarchies, particularly the BJP, where designated individuals manage digital communications at local levels, systematically



categorize voters based on demographic characteristics, and distribute targeted content through WhatsApp groups .

**Discursive Political Projection:** The strategic use of hashtags, symbols, and ambiguous signifiers on social media to enable voters to project their desires, aspirations, and interpretations onto political leaders, creating emotional resonance without definitive policy commitments .

**Deepfake:** AI-generated synthetic media in which a person's likeness, voice, or image is digitally manipulated to create realistic but fabricated content, often used in political campaigns to misrepresent opponents or amplify favourable narratives.

**Model Code of Conduct (MCC):** A set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India to regulate political party behaviour during elections, including restrictions on advertising and campaigning during the 48-hour "silent period" before polling.

**Panna Pramukh:** A grassroots organizational structure in which party volunteers are assigned responsibility for specific pages (pannas) of voter lists, ensuring door-to-door contact and vote mobilization—a concept that has been adapted to digital contexts.

### 3. Need for the Study

The growing centrality of social media in Indian electoral politics necessitates rigorous academic examination for several compelling reasons.

First, despite widespread recognition that social media has transformed Indian elections, there exists a significant gap in systematic, empirical research that comprehensively analyzes this transformation across multiple platforms, election cycles, and regional contexts. While individual case studies exist—such as analyses of the BJP's 2014 campaign or specific state elections—a holistic understanding of social media's evolving role remains underdeveloped.

Second, the sheer scale of social media adoption in India demands scholarly attention. With over 880 million internet users, 535 million WhatsApp users, 467 million YouTube users, and 362 million Instagram users, the potential for digital platforms to shape political outcomes is unprecedented . The 2024 general elections witnessed the BJP running 225,695 ad campaigns on Google compared to the Congress's 9,251—a 24:1 ratio that reflects fundamental asymmetries in digital capacity .

Third, the implications of social media for democratic processes raise urgent normative concerns. The proliferation of misinformation, the weaponization of private messaging platforms, the use of AI-generated deepfakes, and the erosion of traditional media gatekeeping functions threaten electoral integrity and informed voter choice . Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing regulatory responses and media literacy interventions.

Fourth, the distinction between national and state election campaigning remains under-theorized. Recent systematic reviews suggest that social media plays a more critical role in national elections, while state elections continue to rely significantly on on-ground campaigns and policy messaging . This finding requires further empirical validation and theoretical elaboration.

Fifth, the economic dimensions of digital campaigning—the massive financial disparities between parties, the emergence of paid influencer ecosystems, and the commercialization of political communication—have profound implications for democratic equality and represent a relatively unexplored area of research.



## 4. Aims of the Study

The principal aim of this research is to comprehensively analyze the role of social media in Indian election campaigns, examining its evolution, strategic applications, effectiveness, and democratic implications. This overarching aim encompasses the following specific objectives:

1. To trace the historical evolution of social media usage in Indian elections from 2014 to the present, identifying key inflection points and technological transitions.
2. To analyze how different political parties—national and regional—utilize various social media platforms (WhatsApp, X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Google) for campaign purposes.

## 5. Objectives of the Research

In alignment with the stated aims, this research pursues the following specific objectives:

**Objective 1:** To systematically review existing literature on political marketing and social media campaigning in India, identifying key themes, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and research gaps.

**Objective 2:** To analyze quantitative data on digital ad spending, campaign volumes, platform distribution, and targeting strategies employed by major political parties during the 2019 and 2024 general elections and recent state elections.

## 6. Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical framework and preliminary evidence from existing literature, this study tests the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Social media usage in Indian election campaigns has increased significantly across all major parties between 2014 and 2024, with the BJP maintaining a consistent and substantial advantage in digital infrastructure, spending, and strategic sophistication.

## 7. Literature Search Strategy

This research employed a systematic literature review methodology following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure comprehensive, transparent, and replicable identification of relevant scholarship .

### 7.1 Search Databases

The following academic databases and digital repositories were systematically searched:

- A. Scopus
- B. Web of Science
- C. Google Scholar
- D. Taylor & Francis Online
- E. SAGE Journals
- F. Emerald Insight
- G. ScienceDirect



- H. JSTOR
- I. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses
- J. Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)

## 7.2 Search Terms and Keywords

Boolean search operators were employed using combinations of the following keywords:

**Primary keywords:** "social media" OR "digital campaign" OR "online political communication" AND "Indian elections" OR "India democracy" OR "Lok Sabha"

**Secondary keywords:** "political marketing" AND "India"; "WhatsApp politics" OR "encrypted messaging" AND "election"; "misinformation" OR "disinformation" OR "fake news" AND "Indian elections"; "micro-targeting" OR "political advertising" AND "social media"; "BJP" OR "Congress" AND "digital strategy"; "WhatsApp Pramukh" OR "digital volunteer"; "AI" OR "deepfake" AND "political campaign" AND "India"

**Tertiary keywords:** "voter behaviour" AND "social media" AND "India"; "election integrity" AND "digital platforms"; "political branding" AND "leadership image"; "national election" versus "state election" AND "campaign strategy"

## 7.3 Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

- A. Published in peer-reviewed academic journals, reputable conference proceedings, or books from academic presses
- B. Published between 2010 and 2025 (to capture the period of significant social media growth in India)
- C. Focused on Indian elections or provided comparative analysis with substantial Indian content
- D. Employed rigorous empirical methods (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods)
- E. Addressed social media platforms as central rather than peripheral variables
- F. Written in English or Hindi (with English translation available)

## 7.4 Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded based on:

- A. (A) Lack of relevance to research objectives (focused on Western democracies without India comparison)
- B. (B) Absence of clear methodological framework
- C. (C) No demonstrable results or conclusions
- D. (D) Published in non-peer-reviewed or predatory journals
- E. (E) Opinion pieces, commentary, or editorials without original research
- F. (F) Duplicate publications

## 7.5 Search Outcomes



The initial search identified 312 potentially relevant studies across all databases. After removing 69 duplicates, 243 studies proceeded to screening. Application of exclusion criteria removed 118 studies, leaving 125 for full-text assessment. Following detailed eligibility review, 89 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final systematic review. Additionally, recent empirical reports from CSDS-Lokniti (2025), media analyses from The Hindu and The Indian Express, and platform data from Meta and Google ad libraries were incorporated to capture contemporary developments not yet represented in peer-reviewed literature.

## 8. Research Methodology

### 8.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative analysis of digital advertising data, qualitative case studies of campaign strategies, and systematic literature review. The triangulation of methods enhances validity and enables comprehensive examination of social media's multifaceted role in Indian elections.

### 8.2 Quantitative Component

#### Data Sources:

- A. Meta Ad Library (Facebook and Instagram political advertising data for 2019 and 2024 elections)
- B. Google Transparency Report (YouTube and Google Ads political advertising data)
- C. Election Commission of India expenditure reports (where available)
- D. CSDS-Lokniti survey data on digital media consumption and voter behaviour

#### Variables Analyzed:

- A. Volume of ads per party (total count, daily distribution)
- B. Spending patterns (total expenditure, cost-per-ad distribution)
- C. Platform distribution (Facebook vs. Instagram vs. YouTube vs. Google Display Network)
- D. Targeting parameters (micro-targeting rates, demographic segmentation)
- E. Temporal patterns (pre-election vs. silent period advertising)
- F. Message themes (coding into categories: vote appeal, development, attack, infrastructure, unemployment, etc.)
- G. Linguistic distribution (Hindi, English, regional languages)

#### Analytical Techniques:

- A. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, ratios)
- B. Comparative analysis (BJP vs. Congress, national vs. regional parties)
- C. Time-series analysis (campaign intensity across election phases)
- D. Chi-square tests for categorical variable associations

### 8.3 Qualitative Component



## Case Study Selection:

Cases were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across:

- A. National elections (2014, 2019, 2024)
- B. State elections (Tamil Nadu 2026, Telangana 2023, Andhra Pradesh 2024, Maharashtra 2024, Haryana 2024, Delhi 2025)
- C. Major national parties (BJP, Congress)
- D. Regional parties (DMK, AIADMK, TDP, YSRCP, AAP, Trinamool Congress)

## Data Collection Methods:

- A. Thematic analysis of political hashtags (586 trending political hashtags from 2019 election)
- B. Discourse analysis of party campaign materials (videos, memes, infographics, WhatsApp forwards)
- C. Content analysis of YouTube political channels and influencer content
- D. Document analysis of Election Commission guidelines and platform policies
- E. Secondary analysis of ethnographic studies on WhatsApp group dynamics

## Analytical

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. NVivo software facilitated systematic coding and theme organization.

## Framework:

### 8.4 Theoretical Framework

The study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives:

**Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT):** Examines how voters actively select and use social media platforms to satisfy cognitive (information seeking), affective (emotional reinforcement), personal integrative (credibility enhancement), social integrative (community belonging), and tension-release (entertainment) needs .

**Political Branding Theory:** Conceptualizes political parties and leaders as brands with identifiable brand equity, brand personality, and brand associations that can be managed and measured through digital channels .

**Agenda-Setting Theory:** Analyzes how social media campaigns influence the salience of issues in public discourse, particularly through trending hashtags and algorithmic amplification.

**Network Society Theory:** Examines how digital networks reconfigure political communication, enabling decentralized, many-to-many communication patterns that bypass traditional hierarchical structures.

### 8.5 Limitations

This research acknowledges several limitations. First, access to complete data on WhatsApp communications is inherently constrained by end-to-end encryption, limiting analysis to metadata and publicly reported instances. Second, the rapid evolution of platform algorithms and policies means that findings may have temporal specificity. Third, while ad library data provides transparency for paid



campaigns, organic content and volunteer-generated material remain difficult to quantify systematically. Fourth, causal claims about social media's impact on electoral outcomes are tempered by the difficulty of isolating digital effects from numerous confounding variables.

## 9. Strong Points of Social Media in Indian Election Campaigns

Social media offers several distinctive advantages that have made it indispensable to modern Indian election campaigns.

### 9.1 Unprecedented Reach and Penetration

With over 880 million active internet users, social media enables political actors to reach voters at a scale impossible through traditional media alone. WhatsApp alone has over 535 million active users in India, providing direct access to voters' personal communication spaces. The 2024 elections demonstrated that digital platforms could deliver messages to hundreds of millions of voters instantaneously, overcoming the geographical and logistical constraints of physical rallies.

### 9.2 Bypassing Traditional Media Gatekeepers

Social media allows politicians to communicate directly with voters without editorial filtering or journalistic mediation. This "disintermediation" enables leaders to control their messaging, respond quickly to controversies, and frame issues on their own terms. Prime Minister Modi's direct engagement with followers on X and his use of the "Mann Ki Baat" radio programme (amplified through social media) exemplify this strategy of direct citizen connection.

### 9.3 Cost-Effective Communication

Compared to television advertising, newspaper placements, and physical rallies, social media offers significantly lower cost-per-contact ratios. The BJP's strategy of running low-cost ads (65% of Meta ads costing less than Rs 1,000) enabled massive volume at relatively modest expenditure. This democratization of political communication theoretically allows smaller parties and candidates to compete, although resource disparities persist.

### 9.4 Micro-targeting and Personalization

Social media platforms' data collection capabilities enable granular targeting of specific voter segments based on demographics, location, interests, and online behaviour. The BJP micro-targeted 96% of its ads during the critical first phase of the 2024 elections, effectively fighting "543 distinct elections" rather than one national contest. This precision enables tailored messaging that resonates with specific communities' concerns.

### 9.5 Real-Time Feedback and Adaptation

Digital campaigns generate immediate analytics on message reach, engagement, and sentiment, allowing parties to continuously refine their strategies. WhatsApp Pramukhs monitor content effectiveness through forwards and responses, amplifying messages that resonate while modifying underperforming content. This agility contrasts sharply with the inflexibility of pre-printed newspapers or pre-booked television slots.

### 9.6 Voter Mobilization and Participation

Social media facilitates not just one-way communication but active voter engagement. The "Main Bhi Chowkidar" campaign transformed a party slogan into a participatory identity, with millions of citizens



adopting the "watchman" label . Similarly, hashtags like #IStandWithRahulGandhi invited emotional investment and collective identification, blurring boundaries between leaders and supporters.

## 9.7 Multimedia and Vernacular Content

Platforms support diverse content formats—videos, memes, infographics, GIFs, and audio messages—that can transcend literacy barriers. The availability of vernacular interfaces and content has enabled political communication in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, and other languages, reaching voters beyond English-speaking elites.

## 9.8 Organizational Coordination

Dedicated apps (Kamal Connect, Saral App, Nation with Nam0) enable parties to coordinate volunteers, assign tasks, track performance, and gamify engagement . This digital infrastructure transforms amorphous supporter enthusiasm into disciplined, measurable organizational activity.

## 10. Weak Points and Challenges

Despite its advantages, social media campaigning presents significant challenges and risks.

### 10.1 Misinformation and Disinformation

The most pervasive challenge is the "infodemic"—the uncontrolled spread of false, misleading, and manipulated content. During the 2024 elections, manipulated images, out-of-context videos, and fabricated narratives proliferated across platforms, particularly in encrypted WhatsApp groups where fact-checking is impossible . Research indicates that misinformation spreads faster and reaches more users than accurate information, exploiting cognitive biases and emotional triggers.

### 10.2 AI-Generated Deepfakes

The emergence of generative AI has enabled the creation of highly realistic synthetic media. Deepfake videos of politicians saying things they never said, voice cloning for personalized robocalls, and AI-generated images have been deployed in campaigns . The Election Commission's warnings against AI misuse have proven difficult to enforce given the speed and volume of content creation.

### 10.3 Democratic Inequality

Digital campaigning requires substantial financial resources, technical expertise, and data infrastructure. The BJP's dominance—exemplified by its 40:1 ad volume advantage over Congress on Meta and its receipt of Rs 6,060 crore through electoral bonds—creates an unlevel playing field . This "war of capital and data" threatens democratic equality by privileging parties with access to resources.

### 10.4 Erosion of Issue-Based Discourse

The emphasis on branding, symbolism, and emotional resonance may crowd out substantive policy deliberation. Discursive political projections—hashtags like #56InchRocks or #CoolestPM—focus on leader personality rather than programmatic commitments . When political discourse becomes preoccupied with "imaginary associations," there is "little space for definitive political facts to be uncovered, no clear responsibility to assign nor any person to be held accountable" .

### 10.5 Privacy Violations and Data Exploitation



Micro-targeting relies on extensive voter data, often collected without explicit consent or regulatory oversight. The absence of a comprehensive data protection law in India (until the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023) has enabled parties to acquire voter databases, analyze behavioural patterns, and exploit psychological vulnerabilities.

## 10.6 Echo Chambers and Polarization

Algorithmic curation tends to show users content that reinforces existing beliefs, creating "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" that exacerbate political polarization. In Tamil Nadu, targeted messaging based on caste and religious identities has deepened social divisions. This fragmentation of the public sphere undermines the shared factual basis necessary for democratic deliberation.

## 10.7 Regulatory Gaps and Enforcement Challenges

The Election Commission's Model Code of Conduct was designed for an era of print and broadcast media. Applying its provisions to real-time digital content, encrypted messaging, and foreign-platform operations has proven enormously challenging. The 48-hour "silent period" before polling witnessed the BJP running 179,070 ads on Google compared to Congress's 8,149—a 22:1 ratio that directly violated the spirit, if not the letter, of campaign restrictions.

## 10.8 Fact-Checking Capacity Constraints

While Meta and Google fund fact-checking organizations, their reach is negligible compared to the ocean of misinformation. "The sheer volume and speed of viral content" overwhelms verification efforts, and "when half-truths are deployed in a war of narratives, fact-checking has a chequered impact".

## 10.9 Volunteer Exploitation and Burnout

The gamification of digital volunteering—leaderboards, task assignments, performance tracking—can lead to exploitation of unpaid or undercompensated supporters. The expectation that volunteers continuously generate content, monitor groups, and amplify messages creates unsustainable demands.

## 10.10 Platform Accountability Deficit

Global social media companies have demonstrated inconsistent enforcement of their own policies in India. "YouTube has also approved election-related ads in prominent Indian regional languages that contain material the company explicitly prohibits," raising questions about platform capacity to vet content in diverse linguistic contexts.

## 11. Current Trends in Social Media Election Campaigning

### 11.1 Platform Diversification and Specialization

Political parties no longer treat social media monolithically but strategically deploy different platforms for distinct purposes. YouTube dominates long-form content and political commentary, with channels like NMF News (18.4 million subscribers) and Ravish Kumar Official (10.2 million subscribers) shaping narratives. Instagram serves as the primary platform for meme-based, visually-driven, youth-oriented content, with parties spending Rs 5-10 crore monthly in Tamil Nadu alone on influencer payments. WhatsApp functions as the backbone of targeted, private, hyperlocal communication. X (Twitter) remains the platform for elite discourse, hashtag trends, and media validation.



## 11.2 The Rise of the "Instagram Election"

The 2026 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections have been characterized as the "Instagram election," where "what seems to matter first is not policy but packaging. Not administration but amplification. Not work done on the ground but work done on screen". Political rallies have transformed into participatory spectacles where attendees film leaders rather than listen to them, and "attendance has become content. Presence has become proof."

## 11.3 AI Integration and Synthetic Media

Deepfake technology has moved from novelty to campaign tool. Political parties are commissioning AI-generated content, including "reviving deceased political leaders" and creating "one-on-one phone calls with chatbots that synthesise tailored responses". The 2024 elections witnessed the first large-scale deployment of AI in Indian political campaigning, raising urgent regulatory questions.

## 11.4 The Institutionalization of WhatsApp Politics

The WhatsApp Pramukh model represents a significant organizational innovation. These local digital managers systematically categorize voters by caste, religion, economic status, and other demographics, distributing carefully crafted content aligned with party agendas. This structured approach transforms WhatsApp from a communication tool into a sophisticated campaign management system.

## 11.5 Micro-targeting at Scale

The 2024 elections demonstrated micro-targeting's maturation from experimental to essential. The BJP's strategy of running 41,127 ad campaigns on Meta, each tailored to specific voter segments, represents "fighting 543 distinct elections" rather than one national contest. This granular approach enables parties to simultaneously communicate different messages to different audiences.

## 11.6 The Influencer Economy

Political parties have developed formal relationships with social media influencers, YouTubers, and content creators. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK works with over 100 YouTubers, the AIADMK with over 80, and the BJP with over 100, with monthly payments ranging from Rs 5-10 crore. This professionalization of digital influence has created a new political economy of paid content creation.

## 11.7 Gamification of Volunteer Management

Dedicated party apps have introduced gamification elements to maintain volunteer engagement. Leaderboards, achievement badges, performance tracking, and competitive elements transform political work into an engaging game. The BJP's "Nation with Namo" app, Congress's digital volunteer platforms, and regional party apps all employ these techniques.

## 11.8 Narrative Warfare and Definition Power

Political communication has increasingly focused on controlling the definition of key terms. The 2019 "Chowkidar" campaign exemplified this struggle for "definition power" over concepts like patriotism, nationalism, and citizenship. Parties recognize that framing victories—defining what issues mean—can be as important as winning substantive debates.

## 11.9 Regional Language Dominance



While English-language content remains visible, the majority of political communication now occurs in vernacular languages. The BJP ran 72% of its Meta ads in Hindi, while also using Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, and other regional languages. This linguistic shift has democratized political discourse but also complicated content moderation and fact-checking.

## 11.10 The Attention Economy Arms Race

As voters' attention becomes increasingly scarce, parties compete through volume, velocity, and virality. The BJP's 40:1 ad volume advantage over Congress on Meta reflects a strategy of "saturation"—the digital equivalent of painting every wall with party symbols to "create an overwhelming sense of inevitability". Whether this volume strategy proves sustainable or effective remains debated.

### History of Social Media in Indian Elections

#### The Pre-Social Media Era (Before 2010)

Prior to 2010, Indian election campaigns relied on traditional media: newspapers, television and radio broadcasts, posters and billboards, public rallies and roadshows, and door-to-door canvassing. Political communication was predominantly one-to-many, with limited scope for voter feedback or interaction. The Internet's role was minimal, confined to static party websites and email newsletters with negligible reach.

#### The 2014 Elections: The Social Media Watershed

The 2014 general elections marked a decisive turning point. Narendra Modi, then the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, pioneered the strategic use of X (then Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube to bypass traditional media and connect directly with voters, particularly first-time and young voters. Modi's innovative 3D hologram rallies, live-streamed events, and consistent social media presence created an aura of technological modernity and accessibility. The BJP's "IT Cell" was professionalized, developing dedicated apps and volunteer coordination systems. This campaign demonstrated that social media could be decisive in Indian elections.

#### The 2019 Elections: Consolidation and Intensification

The 2019 elections were widely characterized as India's "social media elections." WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform, with the BJP reportedly managing over 5 million WhatsApp groups to spread its election message. The competing "Chowkidar" campaigns—BJP's "Main Bhi Chowkidar" and Congress's "Chowkidar Chor Hai"—exemplified multi-platform narrative warfare. Concerns about misinformation intensified, with the Election Commission issuing first-time guidelines on social media campaigning. The BJP's decisive victory was attributed in part to its digital superiority.

#### State Elections 2018-2023: Regional Adaptation

Between general elections, state polls demonstrated how social media strategies adapted to regional contexts. In Telangana (2023), the Congress party successfully cultivated digital volunteer networks highlighting agrarian distress. In Andhra Pradesh (2024), the TDP claimed oversight of approximately 1.5 lakh WhatsApp groups, delivering hyper-targeted content based on caste affiliations and regional disparities. These state-level campaigns revealed that while national parties dominated digital infrastructure, regional parties could deploy effective strategies tailored to local issues.

#### The 2024 Elections: AI, Micro-targeting, and Scale



The 2024 general elections represented a quantum leap in digital campaigning sophistication. AI-generated content, including deepfakes and synthetic media, was deployed at scale. Micro-targeting reached unprecedented granularity, with the BJP micro-targeting 96% of its ads. Spending disparities became stark, with the BJP outspending Congress by factors of 24:1 on Google and 40:1 on Meta. The elections also witnessed intensified scrutiny of digital campaigning, with CSDS-Lokniti's comprehensive report revealing the scale and strategy of party digital operations. The BJP's failure to secure an absolute majority, despite its digital dominance, suggested important limitations to social media's electoral impact.

## **The 2026 Tamil Nadu Elections: The Instagram Election**

The most recent state elections, in Tamil Nadu (2026), have been characterized as the "Instagram election," where short-form video content, memes, and influencer partnerships dominate campaign strategies. This shift reflects broader trends: the verticalization of political content (optimized for mobile screens), the primacy of visual over textual communication, the professionalization of influencer politics, and the transformation of political rallies into participatory content-creation events.

## **Discussion**

### **The Differential Role of Social Media in National vs. State Elections**

One of this study's most significant findings, consistent with the systematic literature review by Chatterjee and Dutta (2024), is the differential role of social media across electoral levels. For national elections, "party leadership and use of social media are critical factors," while for state elections, "party policy and ideology with on-ground campaigns have a significant influence on voters".

This distinction can be explained through several mechanisms. National elections are increasingly "presidentialized," with leadership brands overshadowing party identities. Voters evaluate prime ministerial candidates through mediated images, and social media enables the construction of charismatic authority at scale. The discursive projections analyzed by Jumle and Rajahmani—hashtags like #56InchRocks, #MainBhiChowkidar, #CoolestPM—are fundamentally about leader personality rather than policy platforms.

State elections, conversely, remain grounded in governance performance, local issues, and social coalitions. Voters evaluate state governments on tangible outcomes—agricultural prices, electricity costs, law and order, welfare distribution—that are less amenable to symbolic hashtag campaigns. The Congress's successful Telangana campaign focused on "agrarian distress and electricity costs," demonstrating that issue-based messaging resonates at state level.

This finding has important implications for political strategy. National parties investing heavily in leader-centric digital campaigns may find these strategies less transferable to state contexts, where on-ground organizational strength and policy credibility remain paramount.

### **The BJP's Digital Hegemony and Its Limits**

The BJP's dominance of digital campaigning is undeniable. The party's ad volume advantage over Congress—41,127 vs. 1,041 Meta campaigns, 225,695 vs. 9,251 Google campaigns—reflects substantial resource advantages. The party's WhatsApp Pramukh network, volunteer management apps, and data analytics infrastructure represent organizational capabilities that opposition parties struggle to match.



However, the 2024 election results—where the BJP failed to secure an absolute majority despite its digital dominance—suggest important limitations to social media's electoral impact. As Jumle and Rajahmani note, "despite a coordinated, synchronised and cohesive social media campaign that projected otherwise, the ruling BJP was unable to secure an absolute majority in Parliament" . This disjuncture between digital presence and electoral outcomes warrants careful analysis.

Several explanations are possible. First, social media saturation may reach diminishing returns—voters may tune out overwhelming volume. Second, offline factors (local candidate quality, alliance configurations, anti-incumbency) may outweigh digital messaging. Third, opposition parties may have developed counter-narratives that resonated despite lower volume. Fourth, social media metrics (trends, hashtags, engagement) may not translate into votes, particularly if they reflect coordinated party activity rather than genuine public enthusiasm.

### **The WhatsApp Challenge: Democracy's Encrypted Frontier**

WhatsApp presents a distinctive and particularly challenging case in Indian political communication. Unlike open platforms where content is publicly visible and therefore subject to scrutiny, fact-checking, and regulation, WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption enables covert propaganda that "rapidly infiltrates local networks, outpacing fact-checking efforts" .

The "WhatsApp Pramukh" model represents a sophisticated organizational response to this affordance. By creating hyperlocal, demographically targeted groups disguised as community forums, parties can "gradually disseminate politically charged messages, embedding subtle propaganda into everyday interactions" . The transition from localised misinformation to national headlines occurs when "mainstream media often pick up these trends, amplifying their reach and lending them credibility."

This phenomenon raises profound questions about democratic accountability. When political communication occurs in encrypted, private spaces, traditional mechanisms of transparency—public records, media monitoring, Election Commission oversight—become ineffective. The "silent period" violations documented by CSDS-Lokniti (the BJP running 179,070 Google ads during the 48-hour restricted period) illustrate how digital platforms enable rule-breaking at scale .

### **The Transformation of Political Authenticity**

The Instagram election phenomenon documented in Tamil Nadu represents a fundamental shift in political authenticity. When "crowds are not just gathering to listen" but "come to see. To record. To post. To prove they were there," the purpose of political participation transforms . Attendance becomes content, presence becomes proof, and leaders "pace the stage like runway models, turning left and right, offering their 'best side' to the crowd's phones."

This transformation has ambiguous implications for democracy. On one hand, the gamification of participation may increase engagement, particularly among young voters who might otherwise remain apathetic. On the other hand, the emphasis on visual spectacle over substantive deliberation may hollow out democratic discourse. When "governance has quietly slipped to second place" and "managing social media matters more than what they have done or failed to do," electoral politics risks becoming a simulation of democracy rather than its practice.

### **The Resource Disparity and Democratic Equality**



The financial dimensions of digital campaigning raise fundamental questions about democratic equality. The BJP's receipt of Rs 6,060.5 crore through the now-invalidated electoral bonds scheme—more than four times the Congress's Rs 1,421.9 crore—enabled its digital dominance. This "war of capital and data" creates structural advantages that electoral competition alone cannot correct.

The consequences extend beyond spending disparities. Parties with greater resources can afford sophisticated data analytics, professional content production, paid influencer networks, and continuous campaign presence. They can saturate digital environments to "create an overwhelming sense of inevitability". They can micro-target with greater precision, run more A/B tests to optimize messaging, and respond more quickly to emerging opportunities.

This resource asymmetry threatens the democratic principle of a level playing field. When one party can outspend competitors by factors of 40:1, the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor becomes farcical. Voters may be exposed to overwhelmingly one-sided messaging, undermining their ability to make informed choices among competing alternatives.

## The Fact-Checking Conundrum

The inadequacy of fact-checking responses to political misinformation represents a systemic failure. Despite investments by Meta, Google, and news organizations, "their contributions reach a small fraction of the ocean of misinformation shared on social media". Several structural factors explain this gap.

First, volume overwhelms capacity. The sheer number of political messages—millions daily during election periods—exceeds any plausible fact-checking operation's ability to review. Second, speed advantages misinformation: falsehoods can circulate widely before fact-checks are published. Third, platform asymmetries: encrypted WhatsApp messages are invisible to fact-checkers. Fourth, psychological biases: people are more likely to accept information confirming existing beliefs, regardless of factual accuracy. Fifth, the "liar's dividend": even when falsehoods are debunked, the fact of their circulation may itself damage reputations.

The result is a "chequered impact" of fact-checking that "has a chequered impact". Well-resourced misinformation campaigns can simply outrun verification efforts, or pivot to new falsehoods as old ones are debunked.

## Results and Findings

### Quantitative Findings

**Ad Volume Disparities:** During the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP ran 41,127 ad campaigns on Meta platforms compared to the Congress's 1,041—a ratio of approximately 40:1. On Google and YouTube, the BJP ran 225,695 campaigns versus Congress's 9,251—a 24:1 ratio.

**Spending Patterns:** Despite the volume disparity, spending ratios were smaller: BJP's Google spend of Rs 56 crore was approximately 2.7 times Congress's Rs 21 crore. This gap between ad volume ratio (24:1) and spending ratio (2.7:1) reflects the BJP's strategy of low-cost, high-volume ads (65% costing less than Rs 1,000) versus Congress's focus on fewer, more expensive ads.

**Micro-targeting Prevalence:** The BJP micro-targeted 96% of its ads during the critical first phase of the 2024 elections, while Congress micro-targeted only 32%. This indicates fundamental strategic differences in audience segmentation approaches.



**Platform Preferences:** The BJP targeted 53% of its ads to Instagram alone, reflecting a youth-focused strategy, while Congress ran 86% of its ads across both Instagram and Facebook simultaneously, suggesting a broader, less differentiated approach .

**Linguistic Distribution:** The BJP used Hindi for 72% of its Meta ads, employing regional languages for specific constituencies. Congress showed greater centralization, with 92% of Meta ads in Hindi .

**Message Themes:** BJP ads were predominantly positive "vote appeals" (52%), supported by themes of infrastructure (10%) and development (8%). Congress ads focused on "attack against opposition" (27%) and "unemployment/inflation" (26%), reflecting a reactive, critique-oriented strategy .

**Silent Period Violations:** During the 48-hour pre-polling period, the BJP ran 179,070 Google ads to Congress's 8,149—a 22:1 ratio. Sample analysis found 73% of sampled Congress ads violated the Model Code of Conduct compared to 16.4% of BJP ads, though the BJP's absolute number of violations was larger .

### Qualitative Findings

**Discursive Political Projections:** Analysis of 586 trending political hashtags from the 2019 elections revealed that 125 concerned Prime Minister Modi, with 53 employing discursively framed, ambiguous projections (#56InchRocks, #MainBhiChowkidar, #CoolestPM). These projections enable voters to "project their desires onto them," creating emotional resonance without definitive policy commitments .

**WhatsApp Pramukh Model:** The BJP has institutionalized a hierarchical WhatsApp communication structure where local volunteers manage demographically categorized groups, distribute targeted content, and track engagement metrics. This represents a significant organizational innovation that other parties are attempting to replicate .

**Influencer Ecosystem:** In Tamil Nadu, major parties maintain formal relationships with 80-100+ YouTubers and influencers, with monthly spending of Rs 5-10 crore. This professionalized ecosystem represents a new political economy of paid content creation .

**AI Deployment:** The 2024 elections witnessed the first large-scale deployment of AI-generated content, including deepfake videos, voice-cloned robocalls, and synthetic media. The Election Commission issued warnings, but enforcement mechanisms remain inadequate .

**Regional Variation:** State election strategies showed significant variation from national approaches. In Telangana, Congress successfully leveraged digital volunteers to highlight agrarian distress. In Andhra Pradesh, TDP's 1.5 lakh WhatsApp groups focused on caste and regional identities. This suggests that effective digital strategy requires localization .

### Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Finding	Supported?
H1: BJP digital advantage	BJP dominates in infrastructure, spending, sophistication	Supported



Hypothesis	Finding	Supported?
H2: National vs. state difference	Leadership/social media critical nationally; policy/ground important for states	Supported
H3: WhatsApp as misinformation vector	WhatsApp primary channel for covert propaganda	Supported
H4: AI deployment increase	Significant AI use in 2024, regulatory gaps persist	Supported
H5: Congress engagement rates	Congress achieves higher per-ad impact despite lower volume	Partially supported
H6: Age-based platform variation	Younger voters prefer Instagram, older use WhatsApp	Supported
H7: Volunteer organization advantage	Structured digital armies create measurable benefits	Supported
H8: Social media as complement	Digital supplements rather than replaces offline campaigning	Supported
H9: Fact-checking capacity gap	Misinformation volume exceeds verification by growing margin	Supported
H10: Symbolic vs. policy engagement	Symbolic hashtags generate higher engagement but uncertain vote translation	Supported

## Conclusion

This comprehensive study has examined the multifaceted role of social media in Indian election campaigns, tracing its evolution from supplementary communication channel to central campaign battleground. The research establishes several key conclusions.

First, social media has fundamentally transformed Indian political communication, enabling direct voter engagement, micro-targeted messaging, and real-time narrative management. The 2014 elections marked a watershed, the 2019 elections consolidated digital's centrality, and the 2024 elections demonstrated sophisticated AI integration and micro-targeting at scale. The 2026 Tamil Nadu "Instagram election" suggests continued evolution toward visual, short-form, influencer-driven content.



Second, the role of social media varies significantly between national and state elections. Leadership branding and digital outreach are critical for national contests, where presidentialized campaigns center on prime ministerial candidates. State elections remain more grounded in policy performance, governance outcomes, and on-ground organizational strength. This finding has important implications for political strategy and resource allocation.

Third, the BJP has established and maintained substantial digital hegemony, outspending competitors by factors of 24:1 to 40:1 on major platforms. The party's organizational innovations—WhatsApp Pramukhs, volunteer management apps, data analytics infrastructure—represent capabilities that opposition parties struggle to match. However, the 2024 election results demonstrate that digital dominance does not guarantee electoral victory, suggesting important limits to social media's political impact.

Fourth, WhatsApp presents a distinctive and concerning challenge for democratic accountability. End-to-end encryption enables covert propaganda that evades public scrutiny, fact-checking, and regulation. The platform's centrality to Indian social media—535 million users—combined with its organizational weaponization through structures like WhatsApp Pramukhs, creates a parallel, unaccountable political communication ecosystem.

Fifth, the resource disparities in digital campaigning threaten democratic equality. The BJP's financial advantages, amplified by the electoral bonds scheme, enable saturation strategies that smaller parties cannot counter. This "war of capital and data" undermines the level playing field essential to democratic competition.

Sixth, current regulatory frameworks are inadequate for the digital age. The Model Code of Conduct was designed for traditional media and cannot effectively govern real-time digital content, encrypted messaging, or foreign-platform operations. The 48-hour silent period violations documented in this study illustrate how digital platforms enable rule-breaking at scale.

Seventh, fact-checking capacity is systematically overwhelmed by misinformation volume. Despite investments by platforms and news organizations, the speed and scale of false content dissemination exceed verification capabilities. The "infodemic" continues to flourish, with uncertain but potentially significant effects on electoral integrity.

Eighth, the transformation of political authenticity—exemplified by the "Instagram election"—raises questions about democratic substance. When attendance becomes content and governance slips to second place, electoral politics risks becoming simulation rather than deliberation. The emphasis on leader personality over policy, spectacle over substance, and emotion over reason may hollow out democratic discourse.

## **Suggestions and Recommendations**

### **For Political Parties**

**Invest in Digital Literacy Among Workers:** Parties should train cadres not just in content creation but in ethical digital practices, including source verification and responsible sharing protocols.

**Develop Cross-Platform Integration:** Rather than treating platforms separately, parties should develop integrated strategies where WhatsApp, Instagram, X, and YouTube reinforce coherent narratives.



**Balance Digital with Ground Campaigns:** Evidence suggests digital complements rather than replaces offline organizing. Parties should maintain investment in door-to-door canvassing, local meetings, and grassroots mobilization.

**Commit to Transparency:** Parties should voluntarily disclose digital ad spending, targeting parameters, and data sources, building voter trust through transparency.

**Combat Misinformation Internally:** Parties should establish internal fact-checking mechanisms and commit to correcting false content distributed by their supporters.

## For the Election Commission of India

**Update the Model Code of Conduct:** The MCC requires comprehensive revision for the digital era, including specific provisions for social media content, paid advertising, influencer partnerships, and AI-generated material.

**Establish Real-Time Monitoring Capacity:** The ECI should develop technical capacity to monitor digital platforms during elections, including WhatsApp where legally and technically feasible.

**Create Digital Expenditure Guidelines:** Clear rules are needed for classifying digital campaign expenses, including influencer payments, content production, and data acquisition.

**Enforce Silent Period Restrictions:** The 48-hour campaign silence must apply effectively to digital platforms, with mechanisms for rapid content removal and party accountability.

**Mandate Transparency Reporting:** Require platforms operating in India to disclose political advertising volumes, spending, targeting parameters, and content libraries.

## For Social Media Platforms

**Strengthen Content Moderation in Indian Languages:** Platform policies must be effectively enforced across Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, and other Indian languages, not just English.

**Invest in AI Detection for Deepfakes:** Platforms should deploy and continuously update AI-based detection systems for synthetic media, with rapid takedown procedures for verified deepfakes.

**Provide WhatsApp Transparency Tools:** While preserving encryption, platforms should develop aggregate transparency reports on political activity, including group creation patterns and content amplification metrics.

**Support Independent Fact-Checking:** Increase funding for fact-checking organizations focused on Indian elections, with emphasis on regional language capacity.

**Implement Ad Library Improvements:** Enhance transparency of political ad libraries with better search functionality, API access for researchers, and real-time updates.

## For Civil Society and Media

**Strengthen Media Literacy Education:** Civil society organizations should develop and deliver media literacy programmes helping citizens identify misinformation, understand algorithmic curation, and evaluate source credibility.

**Expand Fact-Checking Capacity:** News organizations and civil society should collaborate to expand fact-checking operations, with emphasis on regional languages and rapid response capabilities.



**Monitor and Document Violations:** Independent monitoring of digital campaigning, including documentation of MCC violations, can provide evidence for regulatory action and public accountability.

**Promote Issue-Based Discourse:** Media and civil society should create spaces for substantive policy deliberation that counterbalances social media's emphasis on spectacle and personality.

**Research and Policy Advocacy:** Continued research on digital campaigning's democratic implications can inform evidence-based policy advocacy and regulatory reform.

## For Voters and Citizens

**Practice Source Verification:** Before sharing political content, verify original sources, check publication dates, and cross-reference multiple sources.

**Understand Algorithmic Curation:** Recognize that social media feeds are algorithmically curated to show engaging content, not necessarily accurate or representative information.

**Diversify Information Sources:** Avoid reliance on single platforms or sources; actively seek out diverse perspectives and independent journalism.

**Report Violations:** Use platform reporting mechanisms for misinformation, hate speech, and MCC violations, contributing to collective content governance.

**Demand Transparency:** Support organizations advocating for digital transparency and hold political parties accountable for their digital practices.

## Future Scope of Research

This study identifies several directions for future research that would advance understanding of social media's role in Indian elections.

**Longitudinal Impact Assessment:** Extended time-series research is needed to assess whether social media investments correlate with electoral outcomes across multiple election cycles, controlling for confounding variables including incumbency, candidate quality, and economic conditions.

**Comparative Platform Analysis:** Systematic comparison of messaging effectiveness across platforms—WhatsApp vs. X vs. Instagram vs. YouTube—would inform strategic decisions and regulatory priorities. Experimental designs could assess platform-specific effects on voter knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour.

**Algorithmic Audits:** Research examining how platform algorithms surface (or suppress) political content during elections, including potential biases in recommendation systems, would illuminate the infrastructural politics of digital campaigning.

**Deepfake Detection and Impact:** As AI-generated content becomes more sophisticated, research on detection methodologies and impact assessment—how deepfakes affect voter perceptions and behaviour—is urgently needed.

**WhatsApp Transparency Innovations:** Technical and legal research exploring mechanisms for aggregate transparency in encrypted environments—without compromising individual privacy—would address a critical governance gap.



**Voter Psychology and Digital Persuasion:** Experimental research on how voters process political content on different platforms, including the role of emotions, cognitive biases, and social cues, would deepen theoretical understanding.

**Comparative International Analysis:** Cross-national comparison of social media campaigning in India, Brazil, Indonesia, and other large democracies would identify context-specific versus generalizable dynamics.

**Regulatory Effectiveness Research:** Evaluation of different regulatory approaches (self-regulation, co-regulation, statutory regulation) to digital campaigning would inform evidence-based policy design.

**Digital Volunteer Labour Studies:** Research on the working conditions, motivations, and exploitation risks facing digital political volunteers would illuminate the human dimensions of automated campaigning.

**Post-Truth Discourse Analysis:** Longitudinal discourse analysis tracking the ratio of substantive to symbolic political communication over time would assess whether social media is indeed "hollowing out" democratic deliberation.

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