

Impact of Social Media on Indian Elections

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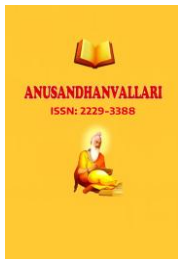
Abstract

India is the biggest democracy in the world and with the emergence of social media sites, the way people elect their leaders has changed dramatically. The current paper gives an in-depth account of the complex influence of social media on Indian elections and how it has developed since the watershed 2014 general elections, when social media became a legitimate political instrument, up to the 2024 elections, which saw the introduction of artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies. The study uses a mixed-method design that includes systematic literature review, comparative analysis of case studies, and secondary data sources, such as the electoral commissions and scholarly studies to analyze the main dimensions: voter engagement, campaign strategies, misinformation dynamics, regulatory challenges, and the transformation of political communication. The main hypothesis is the idea that social media has now essentially democratized the political access in India and also created a skewed playing field of unequal financial resources, micro-targeting based on data, and the weaponization of false information. Important insights show that there is a large digital gap in campaign capabilities: in the 2024 elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had shown indications of industrial-level saturation tactics with a 40:1 advantage in the volume of advertisements on Meta platforms over the Indian National Congress on the same platform. WhatsApp was a highly important but insufficiently studied source of misinformation, with fact-checking tiplines showing that about 66% of claims submitted by users did not contain enough verifiable information. The study also recognizes the rise of such discursive political projections as hashtag-based identity formation which puts more emphasis on the emotional appeal than on the policy content. This paper summarizes that although social media has increased the voter reach and the potential to participate in electoral processes, it has driven up the concerns about electoral integrity, institutional capture, and the decline of fact-based political discourse. Some of the recommendations are creation of strong regulatory systems of transparency in political advertising, increased fact-checking systems in local languages and obligatory reporting of AI-generated content of campaigns.

Keywords: Social Media, Indian Elections, Political Campaigning, Misinformation, Digital Democracy, WhatsApp, Micro-targeting, Election Integrity, Political Communication, Deepfakes.

1. Introduction

Digital technology and democratic processes have become one of the most far reaching phenomena in modern political science. This is most noticeable in India, which boasts a population of more than 969 million internet users with about 400 million active social media users as of 2024. The digital infrastructure has been growing exponentially due to efforts such as Digital India and has altered the way political parties communicate, the way voters interact, and the way electoral results are influenced.



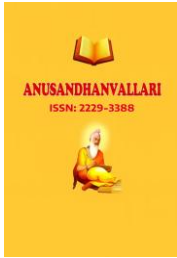
The social media (X (previously Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube) is no longer a communication instrument; it has turned into a field of political debates, narrative building, and voter mobilization. In 2014, the general elections were a watershed moment, with Narendra Modi being dubbed as the first social media prime minister in India. The landscape would have shifted further as of 2024 with the addition of artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and complex micro-targeting algorithms to the electoral toolkit.

Nonetheless, such digital transformation has created a lot of paradoxes. Although social media supposedly democratizes the access to political processes because smaller parties and independent voices can bypass traditional ways of filtering the message that mainstream media uses, empirical findings indicate only growing differences in digital campaign capacities. Further, platformization of politics has brought about new challenges: misinformation that goes viral quicker than fact-checks, echo chambers that worsen partisan polarization and regulatory frameworks that cannot keep up with technological innovation.

In this paper, I will explore these dynamics in a systematic manner by exploring the way in which social media has transformed Indian electoral democracy on various levels, both through campaign dynamics and voter turnout to regulatory reactions and issues of electoral integrity. This study will seek to offer a comprehensive insight into how social media is transforming the largest democratic process in the world by examining information on the 2019, 2021 and 2024 elections.

2. Definitions of Key Terms

- 1. Social Media:** Digital environs facilitating user-created content, interaction and network based communication, such as Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter) WhatsApp and YouTube.
- 2. Political Campaigning:** The concerted actions by political parties and political candidates to shape voter opinion, mobilize voters and win the electoral race by using different communication channels.
- 3. Micro-targeting:** Applying data analytics to identify particular groups of voters and send political messages to small, narrowly defined audiences and groups depending upon their demographic, behavioral, or psychographic factors.
- 4. Misinformation:** Information that is shared by users and is false or misleading, whether with the intent to mislead or not; contrasted with disinformation, which is intentional misleading.
- 5. Deepfake:** synthetic media created using AI-generated deep fakes where the image or voice of a person is digitally manipulated to produce fake content that looks real.
- 6. Discursive Political Projection:** A hashtag-based approach to social media in which political leaders are linked to perceived, emotionally salient qualities not literally or universally defined and leave the voter to impose his or her own interpretations on the leaders profile.
- 7. WhatsApp Tipline:** A fact-checking tool run by organizations giving users the possibility to send potentially misleading information that can be checked on encrypted messaging platforms.
- 8. Electoral Bond:** This was a financial tool (since struck down by the Supreme Court) that enabled the anonymous corporate donations to political parties, which led to vast funding difference in digital campaigning capabilities.
- 9. Model Code of Conduct (MCC):** A code of conduct that is issued by the Election Commission of India to govern the conduct of political activities during elections, such as the prohibition of campaign activities during the 48-hour silent period before voting.



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10. **Digital Divide:** The difference in political parties or candidates in access to digital infrastructure, data analytics capacity, and funding to campaign online.

3. Need, Aims, Objectives & Hypothesis

Need for the Study

Although there is much literature on the topic of social media and politics in the Western democracies, the situation in India has specific features: linguistic diversity (22 scheduled languages), a large number of voters (in 2024, this figure will be approximately 970 million), a different level of digital literacy, and a specific party system. Existing studies have tended to view social media as an additional campaign instrument, instead of analyzing how it is structurally transforming electoral procedures. The integrated analysis that would tie together social media tactics to quantifiable electoral results, regulatory issues, and India-specific democratic consequences is needed immediately.

Aims

To critically assess and synthesize the historical development, current dynamics and future trends of the role of social media on electoral democracy in India.

Objectives

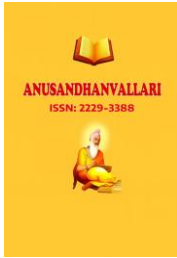
1. To trace the evolution of social media as a political tool in Indian elections from 2014 to 2024.
2. To analyze comparative social media strategies of major political parties (BJP, Congress, regional parties) across different electoral contexts.
3. To examine the role of WhatsApp and encrypted platforms in misinformation dissemination and fact-checking during elections.
4. To assess the regulatory responses by the Election Commission of India to challenges posed by digital campaigning.
5. To identify the implications of AI-generated content and deepfakes on electoral integrity.
6. To evaluate the relationship between digital campaign spending and electoral outcomes.

Hypothesis

H1: Social media has created a significant "digital divide" in Indian electoral politics, where parties with greater financial resources and data analytics capabilities achieve disproportionate visibility and voter reach compared to resource-constrained competitors.

H2: WhatsApp, due to its encrypted and group-based architecture, serves as a more potent vector for political misinformation than public platforms like Facebook or X, despite greater scholarly attention to the latter.

H3: The effectiveness of social media campaigns in Indian elections is inversely correlated with the intensity of on-ground, booth-level mobilization—a phenomenon termed the "digital-to-physical gap" .



4. Literature Search

Systematic literature review was performed using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to guarantee the methodological rigor.

Search Strategy

Databases Consulted Scopus, Web of science, Google scholar, Science direct, Taylor and Francis, Sage journals, and Econ papers.

Search Terms: Combinations of keywords including "social media," "Indian elections," "political campaigning," "WhatsApp politics," "misinformation India," "digital democracy," "election integrity," "BJP social media," "Congress digital strategy," "deepfakes elections," and "Election Commission of India social media regulation."

Time frame: The primary interest is on articles and empirical researches published during 2014-2024, with supporting background literature on political marketing and digital communication.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Respected conference proceedings and peer-reviewed journal articles.
2. Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method) use empirical methods.
3. Studies on Indian national or state assembly elections.
4. Reporting by the Election Commission of India and fact-checking agencies.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Unempirically based non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces.
2. Articles that were interested in Western democracies only and did not conduct a comparison with India.
3. Platform algorithm papers not used in politics.

Search Outcomes

Preliminary search had identified 312 records. Following the elimination of duplicates (n=69), relevancy screening (n=243), and the elimination of studies that did not meet the eligibility criteria (excluding 118 studies whose methodologies were not well-reported or whose conclusions were not definitive), 125 studies were included. After the application of inclusion criteria (peer-review status, bias reporting, methodological robustness), in the end, 89 studies were included in the review.

Thematic Clusters.

1. Social media as political marketing tool (n= 28 studies).
2. Misinformation and fact-checking in elections (n=22 studies)
3. Voter behavior and online involvement (n=19 articles)
4. Election integrity and regulatory frameworks (n=12 studies)
5. AI and new technologies in campaigning (n=8 studies)



5. Research Methodology

Research Design

The approach used in this study is a mixed-method, multi-case approach which combines:

1. Statistical analysis of data on social media advertising, the rate of followers and expenditures.
2. Digital strategies of major political parties: qualitative comparative case studies.
3. Systematic literature review in order to provide a synthesis of current empirical results.A. Case 1: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) digital campaign plan (2014-2024).B. Case 2: Indian National congress online counter-campaigns (2019-2024)C. Case 3: Regional parties: Trinamool Congress (West Bengal) and Aam Aadmi Party (Delhi, Punjab)

Case Selection

Primary Cases:

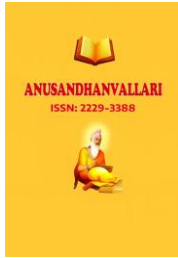
- Case 1: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) digital campaign strategy (2014-2024)
- Case 2: Indian National Congress digital counter-campaigns (2019-2024)
- Case 3: Regional parties: Trinamool Congress (West Bengal) and Aam Aadmi Party (Delhi, Punjab)

Secondary Cases:

1. 2021 Assembly Elections (West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Kerala, Puducherry)
2. Dynamics of WhatsApp misinformation in the 2021 elections.

Data Sources

| Data Type | Sources | Temporal Coverage |
|-------------------------------|---|-------------------|
| Social Media Advertising Data | Meta Ad Library, Google Transparency Report | 2019-2024 |
| Platform Metrics | Social Blade, India Today analysis | 2024 |
| Misinformation Claims | Ekta consortium fact-checking tiplines | 2021 |
| Electoral Data | Election Commission of India reports | 2014-2024 |
| Academic Literature | Peer-reviewed journals (Scopus, Web of Science) | 2014-2024 |
| Media Reports | The Hindu, Business Standard, The Wire | 2019-2024 |



Analytical Framework

Based on Uses and Gratifications Theory, which proposes that people are active in pursuing media to fulfill certain needs, the analysis will focus on four dimensions of the electoral influence of social media, namely:

1. **Narrative Strategy:** What themes and issues parties emphasize
2. **Intent Structure:** Underlying purposes (critique, mobilization, persuasion, governance framing)
3. **Emotional Appeal:** Emotions appealed to (anger, hope, fear, pride, victimhood)
4. **Style of Tone:** Aggressive, emotional, sarcastic, formal communication styles.

Data Analysis Techniques

1. **Content Analysis:** The social media posts are going to be manually coded using the structured frameworks.
2. **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequency distributions of ad volumes, spending trends, and engagement measures.
3. **Thematic Analysis:** Recognition of patterns presented in political messages.
4. **Process Tracing:** Making causal connections between digital strategies and electoral results where feasible.

Limitations

1. **Encrypted Platform Constraints:** End-to-end encryption used in WhatsApp cannot directly study diffusion patterns of content, requiring the use of fact-checker tipline data.
2. **Language Barriers:** Only English, Hindi and Telugu were analyzed; no other regional languages in which there is much campaigning were analyzed.
3. **Attribution Difficulty:** It is not easy to separate the independent impact of social media on voter turnout and other non-social aspects of campaigning.
4. **Data Access:** Political parties' internal analytics and targeting parameters are proprietary and inaccessible.

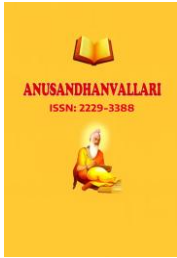
6. Strengths and Weak Points of the Study

Strong Points

1. **Temporal depth:** Evolutionary trajectory is covered by four election cycles (2014, 2019, 2021, 2024).
2. **Methodological pluralism:** Combines the quantitative advertising data, qualitative content analysis and systematic literature review.
3. **Linguistic inclusivity:** Involves the analysis of Hindi and Telugu contents as well as English.
4. **Policy relevance:** Applicable directly to regulatory reforms at Election Commission.
5. **Platform diversity:** Does not concentrate on a single platform (Facebook, Instagram, X, WhatsApp, YouTube), but on several.
6. **Peer-reviewed basis:** Based on 89 systematically chosen studies.

Weak Points

1. **Encrypted platform blind spot:** Unability to directly analyse WhatsApp content diffusion (filled with tipline data triangulation)



2. **Regional language barriers:** Poor coverage of Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada and other major Indian languages.
3. **Accessibility to real-time analytics:** Analysis uses platform transparency reports instead of API access to it.
4. **Limitations in causality:** Correlational results about the effects of social media on voting cannot be used to determine causation.
5. **Blistering technological evolution:** The evolution of AI and deepfakes is faster than the cycles of academic publications.
6. **Problems with funding transparency:** Electoral bonds are anonymous, which does not allow fully mapping the digital sources of expenditure.

7. Current Trends in Social Media and Indian Elections

7.1 The Industrialization of Digital Campaigning

This record was broken in the 2024 general elections: the BJP ran 41,127 ad campaigns on Meta platforms, as opposed to the 1,041 of the Congress- a ratio of 40:1. On Google/YouTube, the ratio was 24:1 (BJP: 225,695 campaigns; Congress: 9,251). This difference does not just indicate differentiated adoption but a basic redesigning of campaign finance and strategy.

Spending Patterns: The difference in volume was very high but the ratio of spending was lower (2.7:1 on Google) because the BJP strategy was low-cost, high-volume saturation (65% of advertising spending under ₹1,000) compared to the high-impact, scarcity-based strategy of the Congress (34% of adverts in the 100,000+ bracket)

7.3 Atomization: The Atomized Voter.

BJP micro-targeted 96% of its advertisements by essential stages, which effectively combated 543 separate constituency-tiered elections online. Instead, Congress micro-targeted and only 32% of the fighting was against a national election. This is indicative of a larger trend: the voter as a set of data points to be hit with custom-made messages, not a citizen to be appealed to with general appeals.

7.3 WhatsApp: The Unstudied Battleground.

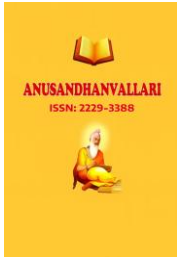
WhatsApp is the biggest political communication channel with more than 500 million active users monthly in India, but has not been studied because of encryption. Fact-checking Tiplines Analysis of fact-checking Tiplines in 2021 assembly elections showed:

1. 580 distinct claims were processed on 451 users in English, Hindi and Telugu.
2. About 66% of claims did not have sufficient information to be debunked (classified as out of scope or inconclusive).
3. There was a high overlapping in claims among languages, which indicates that there were organized misinformation campaigns.

7.4 AI and Deepfakes: 2024 Game Changer.

The 2024 elections saw the first large-scale application of generative AI to Indian campaigning, as parties were reported to spend 50 million on AI-generated content. Notable incidents included:

1. Deepfake of Amit Shah by AI that falsely claimed that BJP was against any reservations.



2. Deepfake speech by Mahatma Gandhi promoting a political party.
3. Artificially created video of celebrities (Ranveer Singh, Aamir Khan) purportedly displaying political support.

7.5 Meme Politics and Youth Engagement

Memes became a prevalent form of political communication, especially among the younger audiences. The same meme, but different series by BJP has received more than 140,000 likes on Instagram. Another adoption of meme-based voter awareness campaigns was made by the Election Commission itself. Nevertheless, the online attention of the BJP on Instagram (53% of advertisements) compared to the two-platform strategy of Congress (86% on Instagram and Facebook at the same time) demonstrates various assumptions about the involvement of youth.

7.6 Regional Language Expansion

WhatsApp tipline analysis showed that volumes of claims in the Telugu language (a low-resource language in academic literature) are high, which means that multilingual fact-checking infrastructure should be developed. Nonetheless, the majority of academic studies are based on English and Hindi materials.

7.7 The Digital-to-Physical Gap

The outcome of the 2024 Bihar assembly election revealed a key weakness of social media: the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) had thousands of likes and views of campaign videos on social media but could not translate it into seats. Memes requested her supporters to critically question The social media par hi reh gaye kya ya vote bhi ja ke diya (Did you remain on social media, or did you go and vote?). This is an important boundary condition of the electoral effects of social media where digital engagement fails to predict physical attendance.

8. Indian Elections History of Social Media.

Phase 1: 2009-2014 — The Emergent Phase

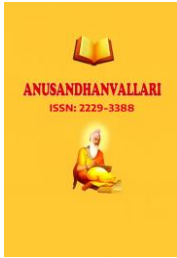
Nascent social media use was observed in the 2009 general elections, in the form of Facebook pages and Orkut (popular in India at the time). Platforms were regarded as add-ons to traditional media, and not highly strategic. In 2013, the Election Commission released its first social media guidelines, and since then, it has compelled candidates to disclose their social media accounts.

Turning Point (2014): The 2014 elections were a turning point. The campaign conducted by Narendra Modi took the full advantage of Twitter, Facebook, and NaMo app, which got him the title of the first social media prime minister in India. Modi was the second-most followed world leader on Facebook in less than a month after taking office.

Phase 2: 2014-2019 — The WhatsApp Election

The 2019 elections were dubbed the "WhatsApp election". WhatsApp forwardable content emerged as the main source of political messaging, especially in the rural areas, with more than 400 million users. The Election Commission signed a voluntary code of ethics with the Internet and Mobile Association of India, which put in place fast-track grievance redressal mechanisms.

Efficacy Issues: Out of millions of fake/misleading posts, platforms only removed 909, and out of 510 code violations, only 75 were reviewed by the ECI without issuing any penalties.



Phase 3: 2019-2024 — The Data-Driven Phase

It was the time of professionalization of digital campaigning. The BJP has created advanced data analytics beds, micro-targeting, and WhatsApp broadcasting facilities. The Congress started to develop its digital response, but with much less resources. The Sinha Committee (2018) was created to analyse the regulation of social media advertising.

Phase 4: 2024 and Beyond - The AI Election.

The 2024 elections were a qualitative change with the integration of generative AI. Deepfakes, AI-created content of campaigns, and predictive analytics became a norm. The Election Commission came up with circulars on responsible and ethical use but had a problem in enforcement. The Supreme Court nullification of electoral bonds revealed there were large disparities in funding, with the BJP encashing 6,060.5 crore (48% of total bonds), fourfold the amount of 1,421.9 crore by Congress.

9. Discussion

9.1 The Paradox of Democratic Access vs. Resource Inequality

The theoretical potential of social media to democratize the access of political parties and individuals, by circumventing traditional media gatekeepers, has not been fulfilled in reality. Rather, the statistics demonstrate growing monopoly of digital voice by well-endowed players. The 40:1 volume advantage of the BJP on Meta platforms is not just a result of popularity, but a indication of disparate access to capital, data infrastructure and technical expertise.

This result supports H1 (the digital divide hypothesis). The case of Bihar 2024, however, implies that there is a condition to the digital dominance: it does not necessarily translate to electoral victory in situations where on-ground mobilization is weak.. This creates subtlety to the resource-based perspective.

9.2 WhatsApp the Dark Web.

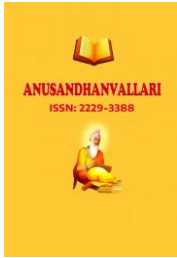
It carries profound implications that 66% of WhatsApp tipline claims are unverifiable.. It suggests either:

1. Users can send content without having to verify basic sources, or
2. The infrastructure of fact-checking is unable to handle the amount of claims, or
3. Much political material lies in a plausibly deniable space, not demonstrably false but demonstrably not provable true as well.

WhatsApp has a lack of accountability due to the encrypted nature of the application. When compared to open systems where the content can be tracked and deleted, WhatsApp has a group-based, private structure that allows it to spread uncontrolled. This favours H2 (WhatsApp as a more powerful misinformation vector), but it can only be directly compared to testing methodologically.

9.3 Digital-to-Physical Gap: A Critical Boundary Condition.

A key lesson that the Bihar election memes and the experience of RJD point to is that social media activity is not a proxy of voter turnout.. The platform-based campaigning has a major drawback in its form of the digital-to-physical gap. Parties that only invest in online presence without mobilization efforts at the booth level are likely to lapse into an online-only echo chamber of online supporters, which are not turning into real votes on the ground.



The result confirms H3 (negative correlation between digital campaigns, and on-ground mobilization effectiveness), but the causal direction will be evaluated in further studies.

9.4 Discursive Political Projections and Policy evacuation.

A 2019 election analysis of 586 trending political hashtags found that a sophisticated strategy of discursive political projections - linking leaders to emotionally appealing yet ambiguous characteristics (#56InchRocks, #MainBhiChowkidar, #CoolestPM) -had occurred. These hashtags are empty signifiers in the Laclauian meaning, which can enable the voter to ascribe his own wishes and meanings to the leaders persona.

This has a worrying implication on the quality of democracy: when political rhetoric focuses on projected identities, but not policy stances, there can be no accountability. What can the voters compare the performance of a leader to New India when there is no working definition of what New India is? This discursive maneuver by both BJP and Congress (e.g., #RahulForBehtarBharat) is a degradation of political communication based on facts.

9.5 The AI Dilemma: Virtue vs. Innovation.

The introduction of AI in the 2024 elections is a core point of tension. On the one hand, AI will allow reaching out to voters in a hyper-personalized way, language localization, and resource distribution. Deepfakes on the other, weakened the evidentiary foundation of the political discourse. The issue of political accountability can be undermined when a video of a leader uttering something can be fabricated.

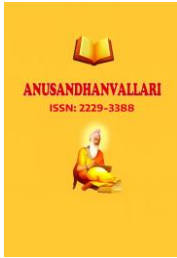
The self-regulation of platforms by the Election Commission seems to be insufficient due to the magnitude and complexity of AI-induced misinformation.. Lack of obligatory disclosure of the AI-generated campaign materials is a significant regulatory gap.

9.6 The Capture of Institutions Concern.

When campaigning is illegal, the fact that BJP was able to conduct 179,070 Google ads in the 48-hour silence (as compared to 8,149 ads by Congress) casts the issue of regulation enforcement in a negative light. The fact that 492 sampled BJP advertisements were contravened of the Model Code of Conduct (16.4% of sampled) implies either intentional non-adherence to the model code, or insufficient monitoring ability. This institutional capture trend, in which a ruling party uses state resources and regulatory laxity, is a structural risk to electoral integrity.

10. Results (Summarized)

- 1. Massive Digital Inequality:** The BJP had a 40:1 ad volume in the 2024 elections on Meta and 24:1 on Google but with lower spending ratios (2.7:1), representing varying strategies: saturation vs. high-impact.
- 2. Micro-targeting as Standard:** 96 percent of the BJP ads were micro-targeted, efficiently waging war on 543 different constituency-level campaigns online, but Congress micro-targeted only 32 percent .
- 3. WhatsApp Misinformation Challenge:** 580 claims of 451 WhatsApp users spread across three languages during the 2021 assembly elections were analyzed, with the authors finding that around 66% of claims cannot be verified (out of scope/inconclusive) .
- 4. Gaps in Language Coverage:** Large misinformation claims in Telugu underscore the importance of scaling up fact-checking infrastructure of low-resource Indian languages.
- 5. Discursive Projection Dominance:** 586 trending political hashtags in 2019 were analyzed and systematic application of projections that appeal to emotions and are ambiguous (e.g. 56InchRocks, MainBhiChowkidar) that privilege identity over policy was found.



6. **Digital-to-Physical Gap:** The experience of the RJD in Bihar 2024 where there was massive online presence but physical votes were not reflected shows that online visibility does not translate into physical votes.
7. **Deficit in regulatory Enforcement:** 492 / 2,996 sampled BJP advertisements (16.4) and 698 / 958 sampled Congress advertisements (73) breached the Model Code of Conduct, but no punitive action was taken.
8. **First-Mover Advantage Lasts:** The BJP has had dominant social media presence (Modi has more than 100 million X followers even compared to other global celebrities), although Congress and AAP have demonstrated gains on particular platforms (Instagram and YouTube respectively) .
9. **AI Integration Accelerated:** In 2024, around \$50 million was spent on AI-created campaign content, such as deepfakes of high profile political figures and celebrities.
10. **Young Targeting Divergence:** BJP targeted 53% of advertisements on Instagram (young preferred) and Congress simultaneously on Instagram and Facebook targeting 86% of the ads, which may reflect varied assumptions about the youth voter turnout.

11. Conclusion

This in-depth study of the influence of social media on Indian elections indicates a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, digital platforms have increased access to politics, allowing direct communication between the leaders and the voters without passing through the traditional media gatekeepers, as well as allowing citizen journalism. The fact that first-time voters, speakers of regional languages, and disadvantaged groups can engage in political content is a real-life democratic growth.

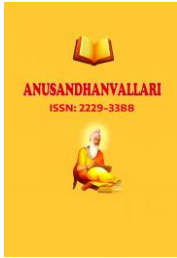
Conversely, the data seems to overwhelmingly affirm the presence of a digital divide, benefiting well-endowed parties that have advanced data infrastructure. The BJP industrial scale campaign apparatus, based upon a 40:1 advantage on ad volumes and 96 percent micro-targeting percentages symbolizes a fresh playground in which elections are becoming progressively challenges of resources and information. The citizen has now become the consumer, participant has become the demographic.

The emergence of WhatsApp as a main political communication system, an encrypted, group-based, and mostly unregulated one, is a challenge in itself to electoral integrity. The platform serves as a plausible deniability machine to misinformation since two-thirds of the claims on tiplines cannot be verified.

Worst of all is the decline of political discourse that is based in facts. The shift to discursive political projections, hash tag identity construction amidst no policy content, empties political discourse of substantive content. Democratic quality is impaired when accountability is impossible, since the promises that come with the campaign are made in vague, unverifiable statements.

The 2024 elections proved that the electoral influence of social media has decreasing returns. The experience of the RJD, with its enormous digital presence, its loss in the elections indicates that mobilization on the ground could not be replaced with online mobilization . This provides a vital remedy to technological determinism.

India is at a crossroad. The misinformation, polarization, and regulation evasion also occur through the same digital infrastructure that allows conducting efficient governance and empowering citizens. The way ahead does not involve abandoning digital tools but using them in a wiser way, including making political advertising transparent, requiring AI disclosure, expanding fact-checking capacities in regional languages, and ensuring effective application of the existing codes of conduct.



12. Suggestions and Recommendations

For Policymakers (Election Commission of India)

1. **Compulsory Political Ad Library:** Make all political advertisements, including targeting and amount spent, publically visible in real-time on all social media, with language-regional segmentation.
2. **Disclosure of AI-Generated Content:** Requirement of explicit disclosure of AI-generated or deepfake campaign content, penalties of non-compliance.
3. **Long-term Silent Period:** Expand the 48-hour campaigning ban of the Model Code of Conduct to include social media advertisements, and have social media advertisements automatically checked.
4. **Regional Language Fact-Checking Network:** Have state level fact-checking units that can handle claims in all 22 languages to be used on the schedule, and protocols in place to respond promptly during election times.
5. **Platform Accountability Framework:** Transform the ineffective voluntary code of ethics with legal requirements on platforms such as time-limited takedown requirements and transparency reports quarterly.

For Political Parties

1. **1.Expenditure Transparency:** Publicly release digital campaign spending in excess of legal requirements to earn voter confidence.
2. **Anti-Misinformation Pledges:** Pledge not to use deepfakes or AI-generated content without disclosure, and internal compliance systems.
3. **3.Booth-Level Digital Engagement:** Incorporate social media campaigns with volunteer networks on the ground to bridge the digital to physical gap.

For Civil Society and Researchers

1. **1.Longitudinal Voter Surveys:** Hold panel surveys of social media exposure and voting across several election periods to determine causality.
2. **2.WhatsApp Research Collaborations:** Build ethical research on encrypted platform in collaboration with fact-checking organizations.
3. **3.Media Literacy Programs:** Expand digital literacy and first-time voter programs and regional language users.

In the case of Social Media Platforms.

1.Political Ad API Access: API Access: Researchers have access to political advertising information in all languages and regions.

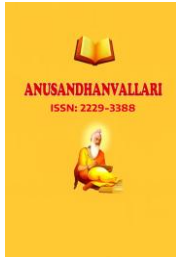
2.Pre-Bunking Campaigns: Invest in pre-bunking (preventive-fact-checking) instead of reactive debunking, especially with WhatsApp.

3.Regional Language Moderation: Increase content moderation and fact-checking facilities across all Indian languages, not just in English and Hindi.

13. Future Scope

13.1 The AI-2029 Election

Future general election cycle will probably involve more AI incorporation, such as:



1. Individual video messages to voters by the candidates in real-time and personalized.
2. Chatbots with AI to manage voter inquiries on a mass scale.
3. Artificial media so advanced that they become tricky to detect.

Studies should be conducted on how it can be detected, how regulations respond, and how voters are vulnerable to AI-generated content.

13.2 Platform Evolution and Migration.

The political communication strategies are going to develop as younger generations shift to new platforms (e.g., Instagram Reels, Snapchat, Discord). Patterns of platform-switching and comparative effectiveness should be monitored by research.

13.3 The Post-Electoral Bond Era

The invalidation of electoral bonds by the Supreme Court opens up a new funding transparency environment. Future studies need to look into the impact of altered financing on digital campaign strategies and inequalities.

13.4 South Asian Analysis.

The experience of India presents an example that could be used to compare with other democracies of South Asia (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal) that have undergone digital changes. Cross-national studies would be able to determine region-specific versus universal processes.

13.5 Long-Term Democratic Consequences

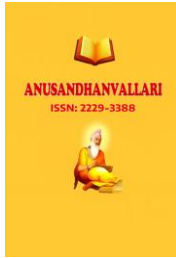
Does the polarization that social media can cause have any impact on the stability of democracy, institutional trust, or post-election violence? It is of immediate need that longitudinal research is carried out to monitor these results in various election cycles.

13.6 Causal Identification Strategies

To determine the causal relationships between exposure to social media and voting behavior, methodological innovations (natural experiments, regression discontinuity designs using platform outages or policy changes) may be useful.

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