

Social Media and Electoral Politics in India: A Comparative Analysis of the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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Abstract: *This article examines the growing role of social media in India's electoral politics by comparing the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha General Elections. Social media has evolved from a supplementary tool to a crucial factor in shaping political campaigns, voter engagement, and public discourse. With platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube, political parties especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) have leveraged digital strategies for voter outreach, targeted messaging, and mobilization. The study highlights the shift from mass communication in 2019 to data-driven, personalized voter engagement in 2024, driven by analytics, artificial intelligence, and influencer-led campaigns. It also explores the growing challenges posed by misinformation, fake news, and deep fake content, which have become increasingly sophisticated within the context of theoretical frameworks. The role of the Election Commission of India (ECI) and social media platforms in regulating digital campaigns and combating disinformation is also assessed. By comparing these elections, the study identifies trends in digital political engagement and their impact on electoral outcomes. It concludes with recommendations for policymakers and digital platforms to ensure transparency, accountability, and ethical use of social media in elections, safeguarding democratic integrity in India's digital era.*

Keywords: Social Media, India, Electoral Politics, General Elections and Public Opinion

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has revolutionized political communication, significantly influencing electoral processes worldwide (Chadwick, 2017, p. 89). In India, the world's largest democracy, digital technology has reshaped how political campaigns are designed and executed. With over 624 million internet users and approximately 400 million active social media users, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube have become integral to political outreach and mobilization (Kaur & Singh, 2021, p. 45). The increased penetration of smartphones and affordable internet has made social media an indispensable tool for political parties and candidates to engage with voters in real time (Statista, 2023). During the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, social media played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and influencing voter behaviour. Political parties extensively used digital campaigns to propagate their ideologies, disseminate political messages, and mobilize supporters (Rao, 2020, p. 112). However, the 2019 election also witnessed an unprecedented surge in misinformation, deepening concerns about the credibility of information available online (University of Oxford, 2019, p. 67). By 2024, social media's role had expanded beyond traditional campaign strategies. The integration of artificial intelligence, data-driven targeting, and influencer-based campaigns reflected a more sophisticated approach to voter engagement (Mohan, 2024, p. 78). Additionally, new platforms like Telegram and regional-language social media apps gained prominence, allowing parties to connect with diverse voter demographics. At the same time, the challenge of misinformation evolved, with deep fake videos and AI-generated content becoming more prevalent, prompting regulatory measures from the Election Commission of India (ECI) and social media platforms (BBC News, 2024). This study aims to compare the role of social media in the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha General Elections, analysing its impact on political strategies, voter behaviour, and information dissemination, while addressing the challenges posed by digital manipulation and misinformation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections

The 2019 Lok Sabha elections marked a pivotal moment in India's digital political landscape. Social media was extensively used by political parties, particularly the BJP, which ran one of the most sophisticated digital campaigns in Indian electoral history (GIGA Hamburg, 2019, p. 1). The INC also increased its digital presence but was comparatively less organized in its online strategies (Rao, 2020, p. 123). Facebook and Twitter were primary platforms for political messaging, with campaign hashtags and viral videos playing a significant role in shaping public discourse (Kaur & Singh, 2021, p. 49). WhatsApp, with its vast user base, became a

crucial tool for direct voter engagement but also a major vector for misinformation (University of Oxford, 2019, p. 71). Political parties strategically leveraged WhatsApp groups to communicate directly with voters, spreading campaign messages and mobilizing supporters. However, this also led to the unchecked proliferation of fake news, with misinformation often spreading faster than fact-checking efforts (Reddy, 2020, p. 33).

Despite the increasing influence of social media, the 2019 elections saw challenges such as online polarization, fake news, and targeted disinformation campaigns. The Election Commission of India attempted to regulate online content, partnering with major social media companies to introduce fact-checking mechanisms. However, the rapid spread of misleading information remained a major concern, affecting voter perceptions and trust in the electoral process (Mir, 2020, p. 84). Additionally, micro-targeted political advertisements, enabled by data analytics, allowed parties to reach specific voter demographics, raising ethical concerns regarding voter manipulation and privacy (Ghosh, 2019, p. 98). Furthermore, social media created a digital battleground where parties not only promoted their agendas but also engaged in smear campaigns against opponents. The use of 'IT cells'-digital teams responsible for managing a party's online presence-intensified, shaping narratives through coordinated trends and viral content. The effectiveness of these strategies was evident in the BJP's ability to dominate online spaces and influence electoral discourse more effectively than its counterparts (Jain & Kumar, 2021, p. 72). As a result, while social media democratized access to political discourse and provided voters with new avenues to engage with candidates, it also brought forth significant challenges regarding misinformation, polarization, and ethical concerns related to data privacy and targeted advertising. These factors set the stage for even more sophisticated digital strategies in the 2024 elections, further transforming India's electoral politics.

Social Media in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

The 2024 elections witnessed the growing influence of social media in political campaigns, with AI-driven analytics, deep fake technology, and micro-targeted advertising playing crucial roles in digital strategy. Political parties enhanced their use of social media influencers to directly engage with young voters, leveraging Instagram and YouTube to reach a broader audience (Mohan, 2024, p. 105). AI-powered chatbots and automated response systems allowed political parties to maintain a constant online presence, answering voter queries and tailoring content to individual preferences based on browsing patterns (Verma, 2024, p. 87). Live-streaming platforms, such as Facebook Live and YouTube, became key tools for political leaders to interact with the electorate in real time, bypassing traditional media gatekeeping. The direct interaction between candidates and voters through social media fostered a sense of connectivity and transparency, though concerns were raised about the authenticity of these engagements (Kumar, 2024, p. 92). However, challenges related to misinformation intensified, with deep fake videos and AI-generated content being used to spread misleading narratives. The Election Commission of India (ECI) took proactive steps by imposing stricter regulations on online political advertising and enhancing fact-checking mechanisms (ECI, 2024).

Collaboration with tech companies led to the

development of AI-powered misinformation detection systems, significantly improving the ability to flag and remove deceptive content (Sharma, 2024, p.104). Additionally, regional language social media platforms gained traction, allowing political parties to reach rural and non-English-speaking voters more effectively. The increased localization of digital campaigns expanded outreach efforts but also contributed to the dissemination of unverified information among smaller, less-regulated networks (Patel & Gupta, 2024, p.89). These developments underscored the growing complexity of social media's role in India's electoral politics, necessitating ongoing regulatory adaptations and voter digital literacy programs. AI-driven analytics, deep fake technologies, and micro-targeted advertising became key elements of digital strategies. Political parties enhanced their use of social media influencers to directly engage with young voters, leveraging Instagram and YouTube to reach a broader audience (Mohan, 2024, p. 105). However, challenges related to misinformation intensified, prompting the Election Commission of India to impose stricter regulations on online political advertising and fake news monitoring (ECI, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on the social media strategies of major political parties during the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Data was collected from official party profiles on platforms such as Face-book, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as from news articles, research papers, and reports on digital campaigning. The analysis involved coding and categorizing content to identify themes related to campaign strategies, voter engagement, misinforma-tion, and regulatory challenges.

Conceptual Foundations

The study of social media in electoral politics is grounded in various theoretical frameworks that provide insights into how digital communication shapes political behaviour and voter engagement. These theories help explain the evolving relationship between political actors, media technologies, and the electorate. The following conceptual foundations are critical in understanding the role of social media in the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections:

The Agenda-Setting Theory: Proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), this theory posits that the media significantly influences public perception by highlighting certain issues while downplaying others. Social media platforms serve as agenda-setters in Indian elections, shaping voter priorities by amplifying political discourses and trending hashtags. Political parties utilize social media algorithms to push favourable narratives and suppress unfavourable ones, thereby influencing public perception and media discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 180).

The Uses and Gratifications Theory: This theory, developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), explains how individuals actively seek media to satisfy their informational and social needs. Social media provides voters with an interactive platform for direct engagement with political leaders, policy discussions, and real-time campaign updates. By offering personalized content, political parties cater to different voter segments, increasing their influence over public discourse (Katz et al., 1974, p. 12).

The Spiral of Silence Theory: Proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), this theory suggests that individuals refrain from expressing opinions that deviate from the dominant

discourse due to fear of social isolation. In the Indian electoral context, social media echo chambers reinforce political ideologies, often discouraging dissenting voices. Users tend to align with dominant narratives, reducing the diversity of political discussions and increasing polarization (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 52).

The Two-Step Flow Theory: Developed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), this theory highlights the role of opinion leaders in shaping public perceptions. Social media influencers, digital campaign strategists, and prominent political figures serve as intermediaries who interpret and disseminate political messages to the masses. The rise of social media influencers and micro-targeting campaigns in the 2024 elections demonstrates the increasing reliance on digital opinion leaders to mobilize voters (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944, p.56).

The Network Society Theory: Castells (1996) introduced this theory to explain the shift towards a digitally interconnected society where power structures are mediated by technology. In contemporary Indian elections, political parties leverage social media networks to spread their narratives, mobilize grassroots support, and counter opposition claims. The decentralized nature of digital platforms allows rapid dissemination of political content, increasing voter engagement and participation (Castells, 1996, p. 87).

The Echo Chamber Effect and Confirmation Bias: Social media often fosters ideological echo chambers where users are exposed to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. This phenomenon reinforces confirmation bias, leading to a more polarized electorate. In both the 2019 and 2024 elections, parties strategically used social media algorithms to reinforce their support base, creating filter bubbles that limited exposure to opposing viewpoints (Sunstein, 2001, p. 34).

The Post-Truth Politics and Disinformation Theory: The era of post-truth politics is characterized by the prevalence of emotions over facts, where misinformation and fake news shape voter perceptions more than objective reality. Social media platforms in Indian elections have been instrumental in spreading manipulated content, deep fake videos, and misleading narratives, challenging democratic integrity (Keyes, 2004, p. 91). These conceptual and theoretical foundations provide a robust framework for analysing how social media influences voter behaviour, electoral outcomes, and political discourse. As digital technologies continue to evolve, their impact on democracy and election integrity will require continuous scrutiny and adaptive regulatory measures.

Comparative Analysis of 2019 And 2024 Elections

Campaign Strategies

In 2019, social media campaigns were primarily focused on broad messaging and mass outreach. Parties used these platforms to broadcast their manifestos, achievements, and rally information. By 2024, there was a noticeable shift towards targeted campaigning. Data analytics played a crucial role in identifying specific voter demographics, allowing for personalized content delivery. For example, the BJP's secret election war room in New Delhi focused on mobilizing female voters by analysing data and tailoring messages to resonate with women's issues (Sharma, 2024, p. 142). The 2024 elections also saw a rise in AI-driven campaign strategies. Political parties used machine learning algorithms to analyse voter sentiments and adjust their messaging accordingly.

AI chatbots and automated responses allowed parties to engage with voters at an unprecedented scale, providing instant replies to queries and gathering feedback in real time (Verma, 2024, p.110). Additionally, micro-targeted advertising enabled political parties to reach different voter segments more effectively than in 2019, enhancing the efficiency of their digital campaigns.

Voter Engagement

The 2019 elections saw voters engaging with political content primarily through likes, shares, and comments. In contrast, the 2024 elections witnessed a more active form of engagement, with voters participating in live sessions, polls, and discussions facilitated by political parties on social media platforms. This interactive approach not only increased voter participation but also provided parties with real-time feedback on public sentiment (Mohan, 2024, p.93). Moreover, influencer marketing played a crucial role in shaping public opinion in 2024. Political parties collaborated with social media influencers to reach younger demographics, leveraging platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube to disseminate their messages (Kumar, 2024, p.101). The shift from traditional media endorsements to digital influencers highlights the growing power of decentralized political communication.

Misinformation and Regulatory Challenges

Misinformation was a significant concern in both election cycles. In 2019, the spread of fake news was rampant, with platforms like WhatsApp being used to disseminate false information rapidly. By 2024, the challenge had evolved with the introduction of deep fake videos and AI-generated content, making it harder to distinguish between genuine and fabricated information. This necessitated the Election Commission of India to establish a Social Media Cell dedicated to monitoring and addressing misinformation during the election period (ECI, 2024). Additionally, new legislation was introduced in 2024 to combat misinformation, including stricter regulations for political advertisements on social media. Tech companies collaborated with government agencies to implement AI-driven fact-checking mechanisms, improving the detection and removal of misleading content (Patel & Gupta, 2024, p. 134). However, despite these efforts, deep fake content remained a significant challenge, with AI-generated videos influencing voter perceptions and political discourse.

Impact on Electoral Outcomes

While it is challenging to quantify the exact impact of social media on electoral outcomes, its influence on shaping public opinion is undeniable. In both 2019 and 2024, parties that effectively harnessed social media platforms were able to set narratives, mobilize supporters, and counteract opposition strategies more efficiently. However, the perils of misinformation also meant that public opinion could be swayed based on false premises, underscoring the need for media literacy among the electorate (Singh, 2024, p. 98). Moreover, the shift towards AI-driven political engagement in 2024 allowed political parties to personalize voter outreach to an unprecedented extent. While this improved efficiency, concerns over data privacy and electoral transparency grew, with calls for stricter regulations on digital political campaigns (Verma, 2024, p. 112).

Regulatory Challenges

The growing impact of social media on India's electoral politics has presented a range of regulatory

challenges for the Election Commission of India (ECI), government agencies, and social media platforms. Recognizing the increasing digitalization of political campaigns, the ECI has implemented several guidelines to monitor and regulate online electioneering. These measures include the formation of a Social Media Cell to oversee digital political activities, requiring political parties and candidates to disclose their social media spending, and mandating pre-certification of political advertisements on digital platforms (Mir, 2024).

Despite these efforts, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections highlighted several regulatory loopholes. The rapid evolution of digital technologies, the rise of deep fake content, and the widespread use of micro-targeted political advertisements posed new challenges for enforcement. The volume of misinformation significantly increased, with AI-generated content making it harder for fact-checkers and regulatory bodies to control deceptive narratives. Moreover, platform accountability remained a major issue, as tech companies faced criticism for inconsistent enforcement of content moderation policies. Calls for stronger digital election laws and improved coordination between election authorities, social media companies, and cybersecurity experts have intensified. Future elections will likely require AI-driven content moderation, stricter transparency requirements, and enhanced fact-checking mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of India's democratic process (Lakshané, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections through the lens of conceptual and theoretical foundations highlights the evolving role of social media in shaping India's electoral politics. The Agenda-Setting Theory demonstrates how political parties and media platforms have prioritized and framed specific issues to influence voter perceptions. In 2024, the increased use of AI-driven tools allowed parties to refine their agenda-setting techniques more effectively than in 2019, personalizing political messaging based on voter data. The Uses and Gratifications Theory explains the shift in voter engagement from passive consumption in 2019 to active participation in 2024. With interactive elements such as live sessions, influencer engagement, and AI-driven chatbots, voters became more involved in digital political discourse, seeking content that met their informational and participatory needs. The Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that social media echo chambers have intensified, particularly in 2024, limiting exposure to diverse political viewpoints. Algorithm-driven content curation has further reinforced partisan perspectives, making political debates more polarized than in previous elections. The Two-Step Flow Theory has gained relevance with the rise of political influencers and digital opinion leaders. In 2024, the use of social media influencers to mobilize voters proved more effective than traditional media endorsements, demonstrating a shift in voter trust towards decentralized sources of political information. Additionally, the Network Society Theory underscores how political campaigns have

leveraged digital platforms to decentralize political communication. In 2024, AI-powered data analytics and micro-targeted advertising enabled parties to reach specific voter demographics more efficiently than in 2019, marking a fundamental transformation in electoral strategies. While these advancements have made elections more digitally accessible, they have also introduced challenges such as misinformation, privacy concerns, and ethical dilemmas regarding voter manipulation. The Post-Truth Politics and Disinformation Theory remains relevant, as AI-generated deep fake content and misinformation campaigns have posed significant threats to democratic integrity in 2024.

As India navigates this digital electoral landscape, it is imperative to establish comprehensive regulatory frameworks that balance innovation with ethical safeguards. Strengthening digital literacy, promoting media pluralism, and ensuring transparency in political advertising will be key to maintaining the credibility of India's electoral democracy in the future. While it is challenging to quantify the exact impact of social media on electoral outcomes, its influence on shaping public opinion is undeniable. In both 2019 and 2024, parties that effectively harnessed social media platforms were able to set narratives, mobilize supporters, and counteract opposition strategies more efficiently. However, the perils of misinformation also meant that public opinion could be swayed based on false premises, underscoring the need for media literacy among the electorate (Singh, 2024, p. 98). Moreover, the shift towards AI-driven political engagement in 2024 allowed political parties to personalize voter outreach to an unprecedented extent. While this improved efficiency, concerns over data privacy and electoral transparency grew, with calls for stricter regulations on digital political campaigns (Verma, 2024, p. 112).

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