

Social Media and Election Campaigns: A Study on Indian Lok Sabha Election, 2024

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Abstract

Use of social media platforms for election campaigning has now emerged as a global trend. Social media is a 21st century platform which facilitates people to express and exchange their views globally. Unlike traditional media, social media enables politicians to interact directly with potential voters. These platforms have revolutionized the way political campaigns are run and how the public participates in political discourse. These platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram etc. are new ways for political parties to encourage citizen's engagement during elections. The 2024 Indian general election was the largest in history and, as a result, also the most expensive election ever where political parties invested huge amount of money in the campaigning process. All the parties adopted different social media strategies to connect with voters more easily and directly. This paper thus examines the role of social media platforms in election campaigning in the context of 2024 Indian Lok Sabha election. This paper particularly focuses on social media strategies employed by two dominant parties of India -Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress(INC) during the election campaigning in 2024 Lok Sabha election and thus explore which party was able to use these platforms significantly.

Keywords:

Social media, election campaigns, Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress

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Introduction

The 2014 Parliament election in India is regarded as a “social media election” because it was the largest democratic election in the world. In this election, around four to five hundred

crores were spent only on internet promotion and public relations. By the end of the 2014 election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had more than 16 million Facebook likes, making him the second most popular politician in the world on that platform, and he was the sixth most followed leader on Twitter (NDTV, 2014). NDTV (2014) reported that from the announcement of the 2014 elections until its conclusion, 29 million people in India engaged in 227 million posts, comments, and discussions. Social media also played a prominent role during the 2019 Indian general election, as political parties, politicians, and supporters used it extensively for political campaigning and communication (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). The way the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) competently exploited social media during these two elections forced other political parties to adopt online platforms as a central part of their campaigning strategies. Since then, various political parties have maintained their social media accounts and websites to remain connected with voters (Christian, 2014; Mehta, 2019).

The Lok Sabha elections in India were held between April 19 and June 1, 2024, in seven phases to elect 543 members of the Lok Sabha. A total of 960 million citizens out of a population of 1.4 billion were eligible to vote in the election (Mogul et al., 2024). During this election, the use of social media platforms increased significantly. Major political parties such as the BJP and the Indian National Congress (INC) used social media platforms to communicate with voters (Balakrishna & Sanyal, 2024; Gohain, 2023). The BJP intensified its outreach efforts for the 2024 Lok Sabha election, primarily through its social media advocates. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP organized a series of meetups with social media influencers ahead of the election. Union Ministers S. Jaishankar, Nitin Gadkari, Piyush Goyal, and several other politicians gave interviews to prominent YouTubers such as Ranveer Allahabadi and Raj Shamani (Mogul et al., 2024). This marked the first time senior Indian politicians had such interactions with YouTubers. Political leaders employed various tactics to sway voters through social media, engaging in intense online battles against their opponents. The INC also strategically used social media as a vital tool for political communication and engagement. Led by Rahul Gandhi, the party focused on fostering connections with supporters and disseminating its message across platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram (Sen, 2019). Both parties sought to maximize their social media presence to effectively engage voters during the campaign.

Literature review

Dollarhide (2023) explained that social media is a platform facilitating the sharing of ideas and information through virtual networks. She highlighted that social media encompasses a broad universe of applications and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, which allow users to share content, interact online, and build communities. In her article, she reported that in 2022, the number of social media users worldwide grew by 137 million, demonstrating the dynamic and ever-changing nature of social media as new technologies and platforms continuously emerge. This work clearly defines the meaning of social media.

Dewing (2012) similarly defined social media as a wide range of internet-based and mobile services enabling users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, and join online communities. According to him, services such as blogs, social bookmarking, and status-update platforms are integral to the social media landscape. Factors like increased broadband availability, the development of software tools, and the widespread use of social media, particularly among younger generations, have contributed to its rapid growth. Dewing emphasized that attributes such as replicability, accessibility, and searchability provide users with new ways to collaborate and engage in discussions on social media platforms.

Biswas et al. (2014), in their study on the Influence of social media on voting behaviour, found that political parties engaging most actively in digital interactions on social media are likely to secure greater electoral support. The study also showed that individuals highly active on social media are influenced in their voting decisions by the political content they encounter. The authors argued that while social media alone may not be sufficient to mobilize voters, when combined with news and print media, it plays a vital role in motivating individuals to vote.

Sam and Thakurta (2019), in their book *The Real Face of Facebook in India*, examined the role of Facebook and WhatsApp in shaping political communication. They argued that these platforms have become powerful propaganda tools and vehicles for disseminating disinformation. The authors highlighted Facebook's dominant position in India, achieved with the support of individuals close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and pointed to the marginalization and censorship of media organizations critical of the BJP leadership. They further noted that India has emerged as the largest source of disinformation globally, facilitated by widespread internet penetration, smartphone availability, and affordable data.

Sharma and Hazarika (2021), in their article Social Media and Election Campaigns: An analysis of the usage of Twitter during the 2021 Assam Assembly Elections, analyzed the role of Twitter in the campaigns of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC). They found that BJP used Twitter more professionally, leveraging analytical data to refine political messaging, while INC had a comparatively limited and less established presence in the digital sphere. Their study revealed that Twitter hashtags were widely employed by both parties to highlight issues and reach voters, but BJP's approach demonstrated greater sophistication and effectiveness.

Objectives

1. To examine the role of social media in election campaigning in 2024 Lok Sabha election of India,
2. To examine the use of social media during the election campaigning by two major political party BJP an INC,
3. To explore which party was able to use social media effectively

Database and Methodology

Content analysis of the official social media accounts of the two major political parties are conducted which are the BJP and the INC. The period of this study is from the day schedule for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was announced (March 16) to the day the first phase of voting commenced (April 19),2024. For secondary sources books, journals, magazines, papers published in different journals are used to write the paper.

A total of 150 posts analysed, where 90 posts were from BJP and 60 posts were from Congress. All the content mainly from the three major platforms -Facebook, X and Instagram related to election campaigning are categorized into following sections. They are as follows-

Allegations posts against the opposition party,

- Election related Tweets that includes viral hashtags,
- Regular updates of any developmental issues or projects,
- Participation of candidates in podcasts with social media influencers (interviews, face to face interaction etc.)

BJP'S Social media strategy in 2024 election

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), founded in 1980, is the largest political party in the world. It is currently the ruling party of India. After notable success in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, because of its active social media use, the party employed strong social media strategies again for the 2024 election. It aimed to reach diverse audiences in smaller cities and towns. The party recognized the need to keep up with the changing digital landscape, where influencers have a big influence, and emphasized the importance of careful planning and effective execution. To address the growing role of social media, the BJP launched the "Shankhnaad" campaign to improve its state-level social media setup for the 2024 elections. Additionally, it held workshops at both the state and district levels.

The general election of 2024 is very important for India, as it has the highest adoption rates of Instagram and YouTube in the world. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had skilfully used the large youth followings of popular social media figures in areas like music, comedy, culture, fashion, and fitness to spread their political messages. These influencers include comedian and writer Amit Bhadana, who has millions of subscribers on YouTube, and folk singer Maithili Thakur, whose popularity increased significantly after receiving recognition from Modi. They often promote Hindu-majority culture and share the BJP's right-wing views. Thakur was one of 24 influencers honoured at the National Creators Awards organized by the government.

BJP on Facebook, X and Instagram

Facebook, a popular social media platform for politicians, serves as a way to share regular updates about their activities. The BJP used Facebook to livestream public rallies held by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah during the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The party focused on its achievements and the projects it started. Instagram, known for having a younger audience compared to other platforms, also saw significant engagement from the party during the campaign. On X, the BJP used the hashtags #BJP4Development, #Modi Hai To Mumkin Hai, #Phir Ek Baar Modi Saarkar, and #ApkiBaar400Paar, which were trending during the campaign. During the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP rolled out the #Modi ka parivaar campaign to respond to criticisms about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal family background. The initiative, heavily promoted on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram,

aimed to frame Modi as a leader who treats the entire nation as his family. Party leaders and digital influencers helped spread this message through compelling videos, posts, and hashtags. The campaign attracted millions of interactions, significantly increasing Modi's visibility on social media. It reinforced his image as a committed and selfless leader while contributing to the BJP's broader digital outreach strategy. Through its emotional resonance and proper use of online platforms, the campaign played a key role in boosting voter interest and support.

Congress's social media strategy in 2024 election

Overcoming the consecutive defeats that INC faced against the BJP, the party had put in considerable effort to create a stronger narrative during 2024 election. To reposition itself more effectively, the INC had made significant strategies in its social media communication. The messaging was designed to resonate with Gen Z and millennials, by incorporating many trending elements. The party also aimed to present itself as a more trustworthy and relatable entity. The marketing strategy focused on building a humanized personality for the party, similar to how brands create personalities to strengthen their communication on social media. The Congress team actively used WhatsApp groups and Instagram to share its content. The party released a video featuring Rahul Gandhi, who connects well with the public and embodies the qualities that inspire trust.

Congress on Facebook, X, and Instagram

The party's social media strategy appears effective, gaining a following of 3.9 million on Instagram, 10.4 million on X (Twitter), 4.31 million on YouTube, and 6.7 million on Facebook. Additionally, Rahul Gandhi's YouTube channel has attracted 4.07 million followers during the election time. The INC's social media pages consistently offer content designed for each platform's with unique style and conventions.

The Congress Party initiated the #Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra with the aim of redefining Rahul Gandhi's public image through direct interaction with people at the grassroots level. As part of the campaign, he walked alongside individuals from varied backgrounds, shared personal experiences, and addressed important social and political issues using live streams and social media content. This approach led to a noticeable rise in his online following and engagement, presenting him as a more approachable and empathetic leader. The campaign played a key role in boosting the party's popularity and support ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. By

leveraging emotional narratives and face-to-face outreach, the yatra succeeded in strengthening public perception and energizing the voter base.

Findings and Discussion

India stands as the second-largest country in the world after China when it comes to internet users, boasting over 692 million people online. Out of this massive number, about 400 million are actively engaging on social media. It's no surprise that platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, have become vital tools for candidates and political parties to reach out to voters ahead of the general election. During the recent election, both the INC and BJP utilized these platforms over the 44-day campaign period to exchange memes, posts, songs, and more, effectively countering each other's messages.

Table 1.1: Comparison of followers of BJP and Congress on different social media platforms-

Social Media platforms	No. of followers in different social media platform	
	Bharatiya Janata Party	Indian National Congress
Facebook	16 million	6.8 Million
Instagram	7.7 million	4.6 Million
X (Twitter)	21.8 million	10. Million

Source: Official social media handle of BJP and INC, dated April, 2024

Some posts shared by BJP and Congress in their official accounts during the mentioned time period-





These posts, shared by both parties, can be regarded as posts related to developmental activities. They mostly use Facebook and X to give updates about their regular activities. Throughout the mentioned timeframe, both the party and their leaders predominantly shared photographs showcasing their developmental initiatives, rallies, meetings, and public gatherings. The majority of these posts on the official pages of both the parties focused on comparing their developmental efforts or highlighting their achievements in recent years.

A notable trend observed in this election cycle is the active engagement of candidates in podcasts and interviews with social media influencers, which marked a novel aspect of the electoral process. While full-length videos of podcasts and interviews featuring political leaders were predominantly available on YouTube, short videos have gained immense views on platforms like Instagram through features such as reels. Instagram had taken the lead as the go-to platform for online ad spending by both the BJP and Congress during the mentioned time period. During this period, Congress saw a surge of over 1.32 million followers, while the BJP gained 850,000 followers. A closer look at Instagram accounts reveals that both the parties were quite active, sharing snippets of their daily lives on the platform. Interestingly, posts that make allegations mostly come from the official party accounts rather than individual candidates. On the podcast front, many candidates have been engaging in interviews before one month or two months of the election to share their thoughts and ideas.

Twitter (X), one of the most used platform among the politicians and during the election campaigning also its use was quite high. A closer look at the Twitter accounts and tweets from

various candidates reveals that leaders from the Congress Party often used their tweets to shine a light on issues that the ruling party seems to overlook. Meanwhile, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had been quite proactive, pouring substantial funds into Google and Meta ads to boost their visibility and engagement on these platforms. The Congress Party used hashtags like #Bhartibharosa, #Pehlinaukaripakki, and #Kissan MSP Guarantee to share their manifesto and connect with voters on specific concerns.

While analyzing Modi's online posts it was found that his posts were mostly about religion and blessings, showing him as someone who respects spiritual leaders and traditions. In contrast, Rahul Gandhi focuses on people's anger and disappointment with the current government. He shared post about problems like high prices and lack of jobs, and thus called for change. Modi's social media was grand and symbolic, while Rahul's style were more natural and down-to-earth. Both leaders were using these platforms to connect with diverse voters. Both leaders were skillfully engaged themselves with regional factors and ideological debates to strengthen their standing.

The INC continuously exposes the inconsistencies of the ruling party on Instagram through a mix of reels and static posts. Adopting a new look, the party used popular meme templates to make fun of the opposition. The younger generation had responded favourably to the INC's approachable and genuine style, which had made it seem more real and relatable. Additionally, the INC released a number of video ads that challenged the current administration by bringing up relevant topics like inflation and unemployment.

One of the tweet shared by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi where he taunts opposition-



Through this tweet Rahul taunts opposition, “*Dara hua tanashah ek mara hua loktantra banana chahta hai,*” or “A scared dictator wants to create a dead democracy”, where 92,000 people gave it a thumbs up.

In the 2019 election, Rahul Gandhi’s slogan “*Chowkidar chor hai*” became a major slogan for his party against PM Modi. In response, the BJP launched the “*Mai Bhi Chowkidar*” campaign featuring PM Modi and other party leaders to counter this narrative. In 2024 election also, when Lalu Prasad Yadav claimed that Modi has no family, PM Modi cleverly replied that the entire nation is his family. Following this, BJP leaders began promoting the slogan “*Modi ka Parivar*” across social media, which quickly gained traction and support.



This advertisement, centered around the theme “*Modi Ka Parivar*” (Modi’s family), aimed to showcase how Modi has positively impacted the lives of ordinary citizens. Featuring a cheerful middle-class family riding in an autorickshaw, the ad resonated strongly with audiences and became one of Modi's most popular posts, garnering 2.3 million likes across various social media platforms.

Upon examining the three applications, namely- Facebook, X and Instagram, it was discovered that both the parties often posted same content simultaneously across these three distinct platforms. Several factors may contribute to this phenomenon. One significant reason identified through analysis is the demographic variation among users of these platforms. Facebook and Twitter primarily attract individuals aged 30 to 60, while Instagram is popular

among the younger demographic, typically aged 18 to 30. Recognizing these audience differences, political parties strategically upload the same content across all three platforms to effectively reach their diverse target audiences. Along with it they created accounts on the same platforms for different states and languages, to meet diverse voters at micro level.

In the 2024 elections, political campaigns really leaned into AI technology. Reports suggest that parties shelled out around \$50 million to create AI-driven content, including deepfake videos aimed at swaying public opinion. For example, the BJP rolled out an AI-generated video that humorously portrayed one of Prime Minister Modi's main opponents, while the Congress party (INC) produced some funny clips poking fun at Modi's policies. One particularly concerning instance involved a deep fake video of Amit Shah that falsely claimed that BJP opposed all forms of reservations, which was completely untrue. The surge of generative AI raised alarms about the potential for spreading misinformation and undermining the integrity of elections. The Indian government acknowledged these risks and cautioned that fake AI content could pose a threat to democracy. However, the Election Commission struggled to regulate the use of such technology and largely had to rely on tech companies to self-monitor, which raised concerns about the unchecked spread of misleading content.

Conclusion

The two notable leaders of the country PM Narendra Modi and opposition leader Rahul Gandhi differ not only in the content they share in social media platforms but also in their communication styles, tone, and overall approach. Their distinct methods of engaging supporters reveal notable patterns, emphasizing the contrast in their leadership styles. In the 2024 election, Modi's campaign had a more polished and professional tone, whereas Rahul presented himself as a more relatable, grassroots leader. The Indian National Congress focused largely on exposing the ruling party's unfulfilled promises over the past decade. Both parties employed fresh strategies to connect with voters. Drawing from previous experience, the BJP showcased more refined and strategic use of social media, while the Congress demonstrated significant progress in its digital campaigning efforts during the 2024 election compared to earlier years.

Thus, digital campaigning strategies played a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the 2024 Indian parliamentary elections. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) managed to secure a majority with 293 seats, they actually saw a drop from the 303 seats they held in 2019. With only 240 seats, the BJP fell short of the 272

needed for a clear majority. Meanwhile, the opposition INDIA alliance, spearheaded by Rahul Gandhi's Indian National Congress (INC), made impressive strides, with the INC alone winning 99 seats, an encouraging leap from their previous tally of 52 in 2019. While the BJP-NDA retained power, this election clearly highlighted a decline in their seat count compared to previous years, indicating a growing strength for the opposition. While various factors may have influenced the electoral dynamics of the 2024 election, the impact of social media platforms on the outcome of the 2024 Lok Sabha election cannot be overlooked.

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