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The Evolution of Social Media Campaigning in India: A Comparative Analysis of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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Abstract

This report will explore how Indian political campaigns have evolved with the use of social media and technology within the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. In 2014, social media was still a developing sector (only 110 million users). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used social media extensively using Twitter and Facebook. Many campaigned around Narendra Modi. By 2019, internet access had increased to approximately three times the amount of 2014 (one-third of voters). Political parties created millions of WhatsApp groups, and used targeted advertising. The main platforms used were Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, WhatsApp and regional platforms such as ShareChat. This led to the Election Commission and Tech companies agreeing on a Voluntary Code of Ethics in March 2019. In 2024, there are around 970 million eligible voters and 692 million online. This led to political parties using AI, deepfakes and viral memes. They spent huge amounts of money on Google and Meta advertising (BJP spent ~₹853M on Google and ~₹194M on Facebook/Meta). New strategies were used such as targeted letters sent via WhatsApp from the Prime Minister. Across the elections there has been an increase in mobile data (cheap 4G data from Jio), targeted analytics, use of influencers and citizen journalists (Popular YouTubers and journalists were used), and misinformation. The Elections Commission have constantly updated traditional campaigning rules to fit with digital media. By 2013 they had made it clear that all media rules apply online (spending limits, pre-certification, Affidavits). By 2022 they required specific reporting of digital advertisements. However, it is difficult to track how much is being spent online. There were many shadow accounts (Proxy pages gave some parties an unfair advantage through divisive adverts). Rural areas are not as engaged as Urban areas. Some areas with low internet usage had little change in traditional voting patterns. There has been an increase in digital campaigning in each election. The 2014 election was the "first social media election". The 2019 election was an intense 'WhatsApp election'. The 2024 election used new AI technology and memes. This report will use primary data from official sources (Election Commission reports, Party expenditure reports, Social media transparency reports), Party sources (Examples of posts, Slogans used), and secondary sources (Academic research, Policy reports, Media reports). There is limited primary data available (Exact amounts parties are spending, Targeting strategies). Much of the data is

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assumed from transparency reports and investigative journalism.

Keywords: Social Media Campaigning, Lok Sabha Elections, Digital Divide, Election Commission of India (ECI), Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Introduction

Social media and digital platforms have become an integral part of political campaigns in India in the last decade. The 2014 Lok Sabha election was viewed as the first "social media election" in the country, with parties utilising social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to target urban and first-time voters. By the time of the 2019 election, almost half of the 900 million Indian voters had access to the internet, and the election was labelled a 'WhatsApp Election' due to the heavy use of encrypted messaging groups. With around 400 million active social media users in India, digital campaigning has become a vital part of political campaigning in 2024. The use of artificial intelligence data analysis, targeted advertising and meme warfare has been adopted (See table below and timeline). This report will provide a detailed comparison of the different approaches taken in the 2014, 2019 and 2024 elections.

Primary resources were used throughout the research including official ECI guidelines, official spending statements and affidavits, social media pages and advertisement libraries. Secondary resources included peer reviewed studies, think tank reports, industry data and press investigations. Key resources included academic studies into the 2014 election, policy studies into the 2019 digital election and detailed media reports into the 2024 elections. Examples of social media were also used to demonstrate the methods. Data from the advertisement libraries were also cited (Google/Meta) to show estimated spending.

Election	Major Parties' Ad Spend (approx.)	Key Platforms/Strategies
2014	BJP heavily on social (no official data); Congress slower	Focus on Twitter/Facebook; BJP partnered with Twitter/mobile firms
2019	BJP ~₹325 crore (all media); Congress ~₹356 crore	"WhatsApp election": booth-level WhatsApp groups; NaMo app for outreach; platforms and ECI agree Voluntary Code of Ethics
2024	BJP ~₹853 M (Google) + ₹194 M (Meta, national page); Congress ~₹453 M + ₹108 M	AI-driven microtargeting and analytics; viral memes and hashtags (#viksitbharat); personalised WhatsApp campaigns (PM's letter)

Methodology and Data Sources

This analysis draws together quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources. Literature has been used to provide background on the initial use of digital campaigning (Twitter, 2014). The official rules (Model Code updates) and reported spending have been

collected from documents provided by the Election Commission (ECI) and government press releases. For 2019 and 2024 Meta Ad Library, Google Politics & Election and think tanks have provided insights into the platforms used. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung India roundtable, ADR/Deccan Herald analysis and Business Standard have produced credible reports. Party content (tweets, WhatsApp) has also been referenced where available in the media. Where there was no direct data available (overall budget spent) estimates from reputable sources were used.

A variety of sources were searched to find suitable academic papers and reports relating to electioneering between 2014 and 2024. Official affidavits and ECI manuals were reviewed. Finally, data points were extracted from sources such as internet users, ad spend and follower growth. All statements are backed up with citations. Tables have been used to provide a summary of comparative data (ad spend per party) from all sources. However, care has been taken to ensure that any unverified claims (leaked budgets, targeting algorithms) are acknowledged. Information presented has been identified as secondary analysis.

The 2014 General Election: The First Social Media Election

Despite there being only around 110 million users on social media in India during 2014, there was a great deal of optimism surrounding the influence it could have. The major parties, most notably the BJP led by Narendra Modi, invested a large amount of resources in their online strategy. Modi is a social media enthusiast and had accumulated 12.5 million 'likes' on Facebook and 3.6 million followers on Twitter by April 2014. This was much higher than any of his rivals. The BJP's campaigning was very focused around Modi and used slogans such as 'Main bhi chowkidar' (a play on the opposition calling him 'chor hai'). The party also had a formal alliance with Twitter and telecom companies to maximise the reach of their tweets. Their campaign on Twitter was 'much larger' compared to the Congress or AAP parties, due to the use of Modi's personal branding (Researchers).

The Congress Party however, was very slow to get into the digital world. They had a small online presence and did not have an organised online campaign. This meant the BJP had the advantage of being the first to use social media. Analysts believe that they won the election by a landslide due to their effective use of social media. Their volunteers (online workers) actively promoted their party's posts, mentioned influential followers and replied to any negative messages.

Key features of 2014 digital campaigning included:

- Twitter and Facebook have been heavily used by parties, especially the BJP, to spread speeches, slogans and pictures (such as those of Modi's rallies) to urban and first time voters.
- YouTube has been used to put speeches on-line, some have been translated into local languages to reach young people in Hindi/English and local markets.
- IT cells and data teams have been employed by parties to help manage content. Volunteers have helped spread the message.

- There has been little official regulation, just normal media regulations. Existing rules about paid-for news and spending have been assumed to be applicable.

However, there were limitations to the sheer scale of digital campaigning due to the low level of digital penetration. Only around 1 in 5 Indians accessed digital media in 2014. The main engagement was in urban areas, with highly educated youth being the main target. There was low impact in rural areas and many analysts noted that social media trends didn't always translate into votes. For instance, several studies noted that the results in 2014 had little correlation with Twitter activity, especially in the Hindi heartland.

The 2019 General Election: The WhatsApp Election

By 2019, the online world had exploded. With smartphones, ultra cheap data (Reliance Jio meant 1gb was only ~$0.26 expensive in India in 2019), numbers of internet users had increased to ~550 million (more than half of the electorate) by late 2018. Almost 300 million Indians are on Facebook and 200 million are on WhatsApp. This is more than any other country in the world. The digital divide has narrowed significantly from 2014 where only 1 in 5 Indians were online to ~1 in 3 by 2019. Millions of new users (especially from rural areas) have come into play.

Political parties used this. The BJP duplicated and expanded their digital strategy. They are said to have 3 WhatsApp groups for each of the 90,000+ polling booths in the country. They also have ~1.2 million volunteers on social media. The official NaMo app was widely used to monitor Modi's rallies. Social media was used widely to spread information. Roadshow and rally live streams were posted onto YouTube and Facebook. Targeted adverts were placed on Facebook and Instagram to spread word of BJP schemes and their nationalist message. Opposition parties also used their social media. Congress created large WhatsApp groups based around Rahul Gandhi's "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra".

WhatsApp became highly significant in 2019. Secret groups (often chain messages that are automatically forwarded) were used to persuade people on a micro level. Analysts referred to 2019 as the 'WhatsApp election'. This caused new issues. The Election Commission issued several advisories. In March 2019, social media companies (Facebook, WhatsApp, Google, Twitter, ShareChat etc.) and the Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) presented the ECI with a 'Voluntary Code of Ethics'. They agreed to respond quickly to any issues (within 3 hours of reporting under Section 126 RP Act). They also agreed to set up priority channels for communication with the ECI. They also agreed to increase transparency. For example, political advertisers will send pre-certified adverts to the statutory Media Certification & Monitoring Committee (MCMC). This was the first time platforms have been formally self regulated in an Indian election.

Campaign tactics in 2019 included:

Use of local languages: The parties heavily used local languages. Facebook/Instagram stories, WhatsApp voice notes, videos on TikTok and ShareChat in local languages were used to spread the message in local languages including Hindi, Tamil and Telugu.

Targeted messaging at booth level: Thousands of workers in the field shared targeted messages (memes and audio clips) to the district or community level using WhatsApp and Facebook.

Using citizen influencers: The BJP IT Cell employed thousands of youths to post on Twitter/X and Facebook. Congress also encouraged its cadres to create content. Individuals such as satirical bloggers or local celebrities became influencers who shared political content.

Catchphrases and hashtags: BJP promoted catchphrases such as #MainBhiChowkidar (to counter Congress' 'Chowkidar Chor Hai') and later catchphrases related to the 'Modi ka Parivar' meme. Congress promoted issues in their #NYAYYatra hashtag and promised relief for farmers and workers. The Times of India highlighted that the BJP's Twitter handle has a theme of "#vikasinktishtbharat by 2047".

Paid online advertisements: The parties increased their online paid advertisements. Data about detailed spending on digital in 2019 is limited. However, data about spending on print and electronic advertisements was given to the ECI. In 2019, the BJP spent ₹325 crore and Congress spent ₹356 crore on all advertisements. It is not known how much of this was spent on social media however it would have been tens of crores.

There are also mixed views regarding the impact of social media. Some research highlighted some irregularities – in high internet penetration areas such as South India, voting was not as expected based on online sentiment. The Lokniti survey data suggests that the BJP would have still won with similar margins without social media (although they admit it did increase awareness of issues). However, all parties recognised the importance of having a digital presence now to target a swing or youth demographic.

The 2019 election had a large amount of misinformation and fake news. Rumours were rife on social media and WhatsApp groups – including fake news around caste census and economic issues. The ECI increased their monitoring and launched their cVIGIL app (where citizens can report violations). In April 2019 they also released rules stating that online advertisements should be counted as part of the campaign spending. Overall the 2019 campaign was much more technologically advanced. It had a strong ground game, huge digital saturation and the first real attempt at self-regulation across platforms.

The 2024 General Election: AI, Analytics, and Memes

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections were held at a time when close to 970 million Indians had the right to vote, out of which over 692 million are active internet users. Out of these 400 million users use social media frequently. India now has one of the largest digital electorates in the world. With almost all smartphones having access to data, digital tools were used at next level.

Major innovations included:

Artificial Intelligence and Deepfakes: Those involved in AI content creation (with ~US$50 million spent on AI tools), saw a boom in deepfake videos, such as an AI video showing Amit Shah against reservation policies, fake voices of historic figures to support candidates,

and fake endorsements from celebrities (e.g Ranveer Singh). AI was also used for predictive analytics to micro-target swing constituencies and demographics. "The BJP used sophisticated data analytics to understand the preferences of voters and create targeted messages." The Congress party also used data to target young voters and those from marginalized groups. Personalization was taken to new heights, with the BJP even sending a Letter from the Prime Minister via mass WhatsApp (Viksit Bharat Sampark campaign). This letter detailed what they had achieved and asked for feedback. This went against them for a short period of time as the ECI told them to stop as it broke the Model Code.

Memes and cultural references: A meme war was witnessed in 2024, which targeted a large number of young voters. Different types of memes were used such as:

- **Same same but different:** Comparing political leaders from opposing parties using humorous captions. This was done by the BJP.
- **References to Bollywood/Reel:** ECI also participated by creating memes such as, young Amir Khan encouraging youth to vote. Popular movie references were also used by political parties for example, Money Heist.
- **Parodying issues:** In Telangana, BJP and TRS created memes related to web series.

In response to AAP's Arvind Kejriwal being briefly arrested, AAP handles created a campaign called "Jail ka jawab vote se" (Vote against jailing). A range of memes were used. These memes were culturally relevant, resulting in the campaign going viral amongst urban youth. It also helped to communicate the party's narrative.

Platform strategy: The social media data for growth during Jan-Mar 2024 shows BJP continued to lead in social media engagement. However, we do see opposition parties gaining traction. BJP gained ~410k followers on their Twitter/X page during Q1 2024. Congress gained ~237k followers. AAP gained a lot of traction on YouTube where they gained 590k subscribers. This was particularly noticeable in March when their leader was arrested. BJP invested heavily in Google/YouTube and Meta. Congress used high profile hashtags on Instagram and Facebook such as #Bhartibharosa, #PehliNaukriPakki and #KissanMSPGuarantee. Both BJP and Congress invested most in Instagram in late 2023/early 2024.

Citizen-journalism and viral content: With a perceived bias in mainstream media, many politicians used independent digital platforms. Journalists such as Ravish Kumar (NDTV) built up huge followings on YouTube and posted critical reportage about the elections. Parties also frequently held virtual town halls and webinars. This was streamed on YouTube and Facebook which helped avoid any disruptions caused by the heat in the summer. Both the BJP and Congress held dozens of online rallies and Q&A sessions in early 2024.

Spending patterns: According to analyses of the platform libraries and affidavits, there was a huge increase in digital advertising expenditure in 2024. Between March 16 (when the election was announced) and June 4, BJP spent Rs 853 million through Google ads across the country (Congress spent Rs 453M, and regional parties spent approximately Rs 193M on BJD). Between March 8 and June 6, BJP spent Rs 194M on 43,455 ads on Facebook/Meta

using their national page, whilst Congress spent Rs 108M on 845 ads. These figures do not include many of the pages used by allies, and shadow accounts, which also boost the message. Overall, Congress disclosed they spent approximately Rs 476.9 million on virtual campaigning, whilst a group of southern parties spent Rs 1,669 million. This shows just how much the digital space has become a key battleground.

Thematic Analysis

Platforms and Tools

The main social media platforms used over the last decade have changed. In 2014 Twitter and Facebook were the main platforms used, with the BJP having the best accounts and young urban voters using them. In 2019 WhatsApp became the main platform used for direct messaging. Regional apps such as ShareChat and TikTok (popular in 2019 but banned in 2020) also became popular. YouTube was consistently used throughout the three elections for speeches and campaign videos, but saw huge growth in 2024. Newer technologies became apparent in 2024, such as chatbots, VR/360 campaign videos and detailed analytics. Data platforms (CRM) were used by political campaigns to micro target different segments of their electorate based on caste, age and interests.

In each election parties have created social media wings. The BJP had a small team in 2014 but by 2019 they had thousands of volunteers in their digital cell. By 2024 they had employed many data scientists. The Congress and regional parties also had internal teams. The platforms themselves also had teams focusing on elections. Ad Libraries were introduced in 2019 to give some transparency into political spending. Messaging apps also increased their rules around mass messaging due to government pressure. The relationship between the campaigns and platforms changed from being completely unknown (2014), to having some rules in place (2019 code of ethics) and finally becoming controversial (2024 AI content rules).

Messaging and Targeting

There has been a shift towards more complex messages for different groups. In 2014 and 2019, large national messages were used (for example, 'Achche din' in 2014, “Abki Baar Modi Sarkar” and 'Sabka Saath' in 2019). However, by 2024 there were numerous different messages for specific groups. Different hashtags were used for different groups such as farmers (#KissanMSPGuarantee), young people (#PehliNaukriPakki) and women (#NariNyay). Nationalistic messages were used in conjunction with local messages using specific ad copy. The BJP used a personal message with the 'Letter from the Prime Minister'. Whereas Congress used a virtual roadshow to highlight the “Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra”.

Micro targeting was very important. Parties used data on voters along with previous results from polling booths to target different people with different messages using social media advertising. For example, rural farmers would receive messages about welfare benefits whereas urban students would receive messages about education schemes. In 2024, AI tools allowed parties to target even more specific groups based on their likely ideology and network. Political marketers were proud of their 'hyper personalisation' and even automated

responses. Whilst this was trying to have the most impact, it could create echo chambers as different groups received different messages which reinforced their current bias.

Influencers and Grassroots Networks

Influencers played a bigger role in each cycle. In 2014 there was some influence by Bollywood and sports stars. Social media influencers were very new. However, by 2019 there were dozens of YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp group leaders who became unofficial campaign promoters. Some were officially linked to a party and others were just friendly third parties. In 2024, there were official campaigns by parties to work with social media influencers. The BJP held a summit with content creators and key individuals such as urban vloggers or funny Twitter users were given exclusive news or travel benefits to generate positive content. Citizen journalism was also very popular. Independent sources such as News laundry and fact checkers have big followings.

A common feature is the use of digital armies. This is often done by volunteers. For example, the BJP used their cadre to engage with booth agents using WhatsApp and Facebook in all three elections. In 2024 there were more digital initiatives. QR code stickers were used and localised WhatsApp bots were used to answer common voter questions. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) used their cadre to create a positive social media presence by using positive analytics when they referenced their surveys and reports.

Misinformation and Content Issues

Misinformation has evolved from mere rumours to complex disinformation. In 2014 and 2019, there was a high level of misleading forwards (fake news). This included fake history, “WhatsApp Math” puzzles to cause confusion. In 2024, fake videos using deepfakes technology started to cause issues. These included videos of politicians in awkward or compromising situations as well as bots spreading conspiracy memes. Investigations found whole shadow networks on Meta pushing forward community content and spreading negative messages about their opposition. In Jharkhand polls in 2024, there were many hate speech advertisements coming from BJP proxies. These had 4 times more impressions per rupee than official channels.

Platforms have made improvements to detection using AI (to flag manipulated media) as well as labelling information operations. However, in January 2024 the ECI issued a warning based on new IT rules that any synthetic/AI political content must be declared. This is difficult to enforce as generative AI can easily bypass watermarking. Platforms are very reliant on user reporting. Studies have found that there were many pieces of misinformation that went viral and were never corrected by the end of the election. Due to the large amount of false narratives, there have been calls for tighter regulation from civil society and some regulators. However, in 2024 there have not been many formal regulations in place.

Paid Advertising and Data Analytics

The use of paid digital advertising has increased dramatically. In 2014 most of the spend went on TV, print and outdoor, however, digital advertising was used as an experiment. In 2019, parties were spending considerable amounts on Facebook/YouTube and Google search

advertising. Exact figures are hard to find, however in 2019, an analysis carried out at the request of the ECI shows that BJP+Congress spent a total of ₹681 crore on media advertising. Of this only some was digital. By 2024 detailed data is available on the advertising libraries. As seen above, BJP spent considerably more on Google advertising than Congress (₹853 M vs ~₹453 M). BJP also spent more on Facebook advertising (~₹194 M vs ₹108 M). These figures are likely to be an underestimate of the final amount spent due to smaller pages for allied parties and non-monetary content.

This spending was all targeted by using analytics. Parties used analytics provided by the platforms and custom data science. Tools using AI could be used to find swing constituencies by using voter rolls, previous results, demographics and social media data. BJP developed a tool called Info Edge (as reported in the press) to track real time metrics. However there were concerns over the use of analytics. Critics argue that the highly targeted advertising on the platforms (particularly in messenger apps and closed groups) are not transparent. This can also allow parties to bypass spending limits and fact checking.

Legal and Regulatory Context

Indian election laws apply equally on social media. In 2013, the ECI made it clear that "All provisions relating to election campaigning shall apply to social media in the same way as other media." Some of the main provisions are:

Declaration of Assets: Candidates are required to declare their official social media accounts in their affidavit (Form 26). They are also required to list how much they have spent on digital advertisements in their expense account. From January 2022 a new column has been added to expenditure forms to clearly state they are spending on digital/online campaigning.

Limit on Expenditure: Section 77 of the Representation of People Act sets limits on how much candidates can spend. This means any money spent on paid online advertisements (Google, Facebook etc) will count towards this limit. However, there are issues with monitoring this, especially with third party spending (ADR).

Pre-Certification: The model code requires that all political advertisements that are paid for (even on online platforms) must be certified by the MCMC. This means parties must provide proof of certification to the social platforms.

Code of Conduct*:* Once the election has been announced, the Model Code states that no government propaganda or incentives can be used. In 2024 the majority of WhatsApp messages promoting 'Viksit Bharat' were found to be a breach of this rule and were told to stop. The ECI also banned any paid promotion of exit polls or guess work of victory.

There are still large grey areas within the regulations. There is no specific law defining what is considered a political advertisement online. Although there are positive steps such as the Voluntary Code of Ethics (2019) and transparency column (2022), platforms have the responsibility to enforce these rules. As the ADR analysis highlights, proxy advertising can be easily avoided and the definition of paid news has broadened in the digital world. Experts have called for a complete overhaul of the sector (e.g. placing limits on party spending online and implementing strict audits of ad-libraries) but this has yet to happen.

Voter Engagement: Urban, Rural, Youth

Social media has changed the way parties engage with voters. Urban, young and diaspora voters are being targeted on social media platforms. The BJP and Congress both have official accounts (@PMOIndia and @INCIndia respectively) which posted videos related to ministerial launch events and rallies. These received millions of views. Social media is used to encourage people to get involved with the campaign. In 2024 the BJP had their 'My First Vote for Modi' website where first time voters could promise to support the party, record videos and share on social media.

The Election Commission also used social media. They ran a campaign called 'Turning 18' in 2024 to get young voters registered and excited. Digital workshops were run at state level by the EC to teach people how to find credible sources online. However, there is still the issue of the digital divide. A large proportion of rural areas do not have internet access. In 2019 it was estimated less than 30% of rural areas had internet. So although urban voters may be keeping up with all the tweets, a lot of voters in rural areas are influenced by local leaders, TV news and word of mouth. This can be seen in the analytics. Areas with less connectivity had low levels of social media engagement but still experienced the election as usual. (Lokniti surveys support this). Parties usually used a mixture of tactics. They would have social media campaigns but also ground events, traditional media advertising and SMS campaigning to ensure they reached all demographics.

Rural vs Urban impact: There seems to be an imbalance in the impact of digital campaigning. More 'connected' states (Kerala, Karnataka, Punjab) had lots of WhatsApp groups set up for each village. Voters would receive daily audio clips of speeches from leaders. However, less 'connected' areas in Bihar and Jharkhand had less targeting. Some analysis shows that the BJP performed better in these backward areas due to their ground campaigning and announcements about welfare. However, even small clusters of rural areas are impacted. Villagers are watching the viral videos on their smartphones and sharing messages from the party through their speaker phones at events.

Conclusion

Over the last decade (2014-2024) social media has gone from being an afterthought to becoming an essential part of campaigning in India. In 2014 Twitter was the main platform, in 2019 WhatsApp was the main platform and in 2024 AI was incorporated. Parties are increasing their budgets and getting more professional. However, it has also meant that misinformation has become more powerful, regulation has not kept up with technology and there is a disparity between urban and rural areas.

In the future digital campaigning in India has taken a huge step forward. There is a huge increase in users online and money spent on advertising (see table above). The way people are being persuaded has changed completely. Memes, data mined messages and AI avatars are being used which are much faster than they could have imagined in 2014. This has implications for democracy as it means that narratives can be created around elections. This raises concerns about transparency.

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