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DIGITAL PROMOTION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: RECENT ELECTIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract: Regulating political expenses throughout elections in India is a daunting task for the Election Commission of India (ECI), and is one of the biggest challenges to outlining annual election expenditures incurred by political parties and contestants. The Compendium of Instructions on Election Expenditure Monitoring is available on the website of the Election Commission (Election Commission of India, 2021). The expenses are incurred in an expressed and implied manner by political parties for luring their voters. The political parties frequently organize various promotional events and programs for marking their noticeable presence on the frontline. Globally the use of mass media by national and regional parties is quite common for electoral promotion in recent politics. It reflects that now a day's magnificent electoral events are using various possible paid and unpaid advertising platforms, where powerful parties and their opponents influence their ultimate consumers (voters) and their decisions for gaining success in polls (UNICEF, 2020). Undoubtedly, digital media played a powerful role in the recent elections in India as fifty percent of the voters were frequent mobile and internet users (Mehta, 2019). Heavy ad spending by most of the parties was recorded by Google, Facebook, and other popular social networks, especially in the 2019 elections. It is estimated that more than 6,500 crore rupees were spent by 18 political parties from 2015 to 2020 (Nidhi Jacob, 2021). Association for Democratic Reforms frequently collects data related to transparency and accountability of political parties (ADR Handbook, 2019). Moreover, the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IMAI) also submitted a voluntary code of conduct to the Election Commission of India (Election Commission of India, 2019) for maintaining transparency and fairness in conducting general and assembly elections. There is an increasing demand for digital civic engagement so that countrymen can contribute to their best possible in improving governance and decision making. Hence, it is important that they will get authentic and reliable information about political parties and contestants. This article is presenting an overview of digital promotion, digital civic engagement, political ad spending share, and social media usage by the supporters and contestants of various political parties in the recent elections in India.

Keywords: Digital Promotion, Ad Spend, Social Media Marketing, Content, Political Advertising, Digital Civic Engagement.

I Introduction: Most parties use various available digital promotion tools for developing a powerful image of the party, leaders, and contestants among voters. Digital media covers a wide range of audiences from distant areas and from various states. The number of Indian users registered on various social media platforms was among the top ten in the world, especially on WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Google, and TikTok (Prakash, 2019). The growth in digital advertising was 37.6% in 2018-19 (KPMG, 2019). In digital ad spending between February and May 2019 two giants, Google and Facebook declared cumulative online political advertising of 58.76 crores in India (Mehta, 2019). BJP dominated on both platforms as a leading party in ad spending (Joy, 2020). Political parties are recommended to declare their assets and liabilities regularly as per the recommendations of the Election Commission (ADR Handbook, 2019). Moreover, political parties often collect funds through political donations which are utilized for various activities including well-planned promotional campaigns developed by strategic planners effectively and efficiently. Therefore, the income and expenditure details are usually maintained and declared by the prominent national parties. Nevertheless, leading parties use an organized team of IT support, content developers, marketing staff etc., for designing their advertising budget, promotional campaigns, and electoral events. Sometimes, top advertising agencies and experts are hired for special campaigns and grand promotional events. Although, voluntary codes, guidelines, and laws are framed for political donations and expenditures. But, there is no single case when a fully transparent ad spending declaration is voluntarily provided by any political group. Nevertheless, there is a dark side to digital media, it is observed that hate speeches, fake news content, unparliamentary language, and derogatory words are also reported on various leading social media platforms against a party or leader. In the 2019 elections, social media platforms were used extensively by most parties and Lok Sabha Election was considered as most expensive election in the world (Archana Chaudhary, 2019). Social media and data analytics were key drivers in political promotion in the past elections. Most importantly social media is establishing two-way communication and there are various interactive platforms where a large number of voters can see the publicly available content in a few seconds. Users can also generate content on various digital media platforms in favour of a political party, and sometimes it is very difficult to identify original source of information. Most parties maintain their official pages, tweeter handler, Insta profiles, official WhatsApp accounts etc. Facebook and Google both played a crucial role in political verdicts in the past (Jeff Chester, 2017). The political leaders also used personal profiles for establishing direct communication with voters (Hasin, 2019). The top five social media tools quite often used by Indians were WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Reuters Institute, 2021). On one side, digital promotion tools were frequently used by Government and political parties for encouraging voters



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to cast their votes and for explaining the voting process and registration modes. On the other side weaponizing social media against a party or contestant for polarization of elections reported in many states in the past few years (Kalbag, 2019). Fake news, misleading information, biased content, and narratives were used in many states on social media (Kamra, 2019). Voter's today is changing their minds and preferences frequently on the basis of information received and perceived from various digital sources. Since the voter is new to handling social media platforms, therefore, the probability is very high to influence the insane voters easily. Unidentified users also post content, troll supporters of a contestant, use unparliamentarily language, spread word of mouth against a few contestants, report a specific ID, and change the decisions of other voters too at the eleventh hour. Digital campaigning is considered a cornerstone of recent Indian politics and demands caution at every stage. The contestants and parties must also inspect the contents posted for their party by their team or unknown person very carefully before spreading it on social networking sites. Because once it goes viral it would be quite difficult to control the impact of the message. Various online tricks, techniques, and tactics are used by Social Networks on various digital platforms such as; reducing or increasing the reach and frequency of the campaigns and messages, digital war rooms, troll armies, cyber cells, etc. Nevertheless, PR management through social networks is the top priority of leading political parties in India and those who are out of this race are losing their voters and battel (Hasin, 2019). Various popular digital promotion tools are used by leading political parties in recent times such as official websites, official and fan/followers' pages, speeches and stories, stories, animated ads, video campaigns through YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp groups, expert opinions, live debates and talks, electoral polls and surveys, e-WOM, etc. Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) is setting the benchmark in mass media including social media, followership, hashtag campaigns, tweets, fan pages, viral videos, microblogging, infographics, content development, online interactions etc. Of course, social media is a young space and early entry will give an added advantage to the users and political parties therefore, leading parties are exploring the new dimensions of the social media platforms, infographics, and content development so that they may interact more effectively with their potential and existing users. But overspending on promotional activities needs to be inspected by the authorities so that the essence of democracy can be maintained. It is necessary that fair and authentic information must be supplied to the voters, all voters must have equal chances to get access to use all the platforms, and voters should have equal opportunities in receiving timely and pertinent information from various political groups. In the future, it is expected that the trends will be positive and most parties will expand their social media strategies but early entrant like BJP receive maximum benefit from social networks.

II Literature Review: The 2014 general elections in India are known as the 'First Social Media Elections' in our country (Jose, 2021) in which BJP and Congress used social media extensively. Political advertising is slightly different from traditional advertising as selling ideas is not selling goods (Jaurisch, 2020). Moreover, ideas in politics can change the entire structure of the largest democracy or the direction of future leadership in different countries. Political advertising through social media is used to inject and spread ideas like the anti-corruption strategy used by Arvind Kejriwal before contesting for Delhi elections. Digital media is covering a wide range of diversified audiences and can be more interactive for establishing both sound digital civic management and digital governance. Nevertheless, increasing global political ad spending is an unnecessary burden on the economy and compatriots. Election spending is increasing globally (Power, 2019) and in early 2019, Google estimated 400 million active internet users in India and approximately one-third of Indians had access to various Apps i.e., Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube (Mehta, 2019). Visualize in a country with 90 corers voters and approximately 50 crores have internet access it would be better to approach the voters through mass media, especially social media. Government ad spending on publicity is also increasing vastly (Anmol Somanchi, n.d.). Although a slight downfall was noticed in the number of mobile users in India during the pandemic. In a study on social media and Political Behaviour it was concluded that social media has a strong influence on the political decisions of the voters (CSDS, 2019). It was observed that the fast-changing media environment is influencing the Indian political scenario (German Institute for Global and Area Studies, 2019). Further, it is blamed that social media in India is politicalized (Jose, 2021). In a study conducted in Punjab, it was observed that political success depends on the effective use of modern media tools and platforms for communicating with voters (Gopal, 2020). It was estimated that Ten national and regional parties spent Rs 1,406.25 crore only in Uttar Pradesh 2019 elections BJP incurred the highest expenditure of Rs 763.31 crore or 54.27 percent of total spending (Joy, 2020). Moreover, dirty tricks are also reported from various known and unknown sources like creating narratives, digital disinformation, reducing reach and frequency, planned internet shutdown, etc. Further, both the leading national parties BJP and Congress are exploring new platforms for energizing their promotional strategies and counter-promotion (Ganjapure, 2022). Koo spent approximately 6 crore rupees on political ads between 2020 to 2022, Moneycontrol looked at the facts and observed that top campaigns are either from BJP or Congress (Moorthi, 2022). The elections in Uttar Pradesh were a bit costlier and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) media spend was budget between Rs725 crore and Rs800 crore, followed by Samajwadi Party (SP) with a budget of Rs250 crore. Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) at Rs 200 crore, and Indian National Congress (INC) at Rs150 crore (Roy, 2022).

III Methodology: This article is based on secondary information collected from various reports, websites, articles, and documents. The summarized information from 2014 to 2021 is tabulated and presented in the next section for explaining the crux of the study. On



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one side an overview of popular digital promotion tools used for elections is presented which are commonly used by parties, contestants, and supporters. On the other side, an overview of profiles of the leaders, digital civic involvement, and recent political ad spending share on digital media in elections is presented. The information gathered from various sources is used for interpreting the results of this study in the next section.

IV Observations and Statistical Interpretations: For this study, secondary data is collected from various sources. Authentic and relevant information is summarized and presented in this section. For explaining the digital demography secondary data from various sources is extracted, tabulated, and summarized by the researcher for defining the real nature of the digital demography of users and their internet usage pattern in India. A diversified population and first-time voters are also actively using the internet, technical devices, and social networks in different states. The details of the digital demography of Indian voters between 2014-21 is presented in this section. The diversified population of India is quite active on various social networks and certainly, Facebook is a leading social network that is very popular among Indians. Easy to use, writing lengthy text, and sharing videos and other files are making it different from other social networks. The details of active registered users on various platforms is presented below:

Table 1: social media Active Users in India (2021)

There were 330 million users on social media in 2019 and the digital advertising market is set to become the largest among all media (Acumen). Currently, more than 480 million users are registered on various social media platforms. The details are provided below:

Platform	WhatsApp-Meta	Facebook-Meta	Instagram-Meta	YouTube	Snapchat	Linkdin	Twitter
Active users in millions	390.2	239.6	230.25	467	144.35	85	24

Users register as per their choice and preferences on social media but data mining and analytics tools can segregate them according to the demand of the market, analysts, and corporate world. Users' data especially demography is essential for planning digital promotion strategies and developing political advertisements. Meta is a leading platform and maximum users are registered on various meta platforms. Social media demography is presented below:

Table:2 Social Media Demography in India (2021)

Feature	WhatsApp-Meta	Twitter	Facebook - Meta	Instagram - Meta	YouTube	LinkdIn	Snapchat
Largest age group	25-34	18-29	25-34	25-34	25-34	25-34	15-25
Average time spent per day	2 Hours	31 minutes	33 minutes	29 minutes	33 minutes	5 minutes	25 minutes
What do they do	Read and share	Read	Read and Share	Watch	Watch	Read	Read and Share

Private and public players both are providing internet services in India but MTNL is limited to Delhi and Mumbai whereas BSNL is covering remote areas. Private networks are covering a wide range of territory for providing their services. As per the data released by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) private internet service providers i.e., Jio and Airtel are holding major shares and have maximum subscribers in India (TRAI , 2020).

The expansion of mobile users is giving a boost to internet users and social media usage among Indians because of two major reasons first is mobility second is low cost. Mobile device users (dongle+phone) hold 97.07 % of total broadband subscribers. Teledensity is 86.22% and internet teledensity is 57.29% in India (TRAI, 2020). The details of the top 5 internet subscribers providing their services in India are provided below:



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Table:3 Top Five Internet Service Provider’s Subscriber Base and Market Share (2020)

S. No.	Service Provide	Subscribers In millions	Market Share in %
1	Reliance Jio	398.31	53.17
2	Bharti Airtel	176.42	23.55
3	Vodafone idea	135.67	18.11
4	BSNL	29.31	3.91
5	Atria Convergence	1.68	0.22

More than 50% of the population is using fixed or wireless internet in our country. Interestingly 190 million youth in the country is interested in some kind of civic engagement through social media. During the pandemic, online education and digital platforms received grabbed the attention of users, especially youth and working professionals.

Moreover, India has one of the cheapest tariff plans in the world and reasonable mobile tariff plans are one of the reasons for increasing online users on various digital platforms. Hence, data for increasing trends for internet subscriptions (TRAI , 2020) is provided below in the table:

Table:4 Internet Subscription in India (2015-20)

Feature	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Growth 2019-20)
Total internet subscribers (mn)	302.36	342.65	422.20	493.96	636.73	743.19	29%
Internet subscribers per 100 population	24.09	26.98	32.86	38.02	48.48	55.12	
Broadband internet subscribers	99.20	149.75	276.52	412.60	563.31	687.44	37%
Wired	19.07	20.44	21.58	21.24	21.68	22.42	
Mobile wireless subscribers (mn)	283.29	322.21	400.62	472.72	615.05	720.77	30%
Urban internet subscribers per 100 population	49.07	58.28	70.83	84.74	97.54	99.12	
Rural internet subscribers per 100 population	12.89	12.80	15.49	16.41	25.36	32.24	

The parties contesting in different states are national, as well as regional political parties, therefore, the data for only the top-five national parties and the followership of their leaders are used for this study. Their followership and information on popular digital campaigns are provided in this section. Uttar Pradesh is one of the crucial constituencies known as the ‘heartland of politics’ in the country upon which the direction of national politics is dependent. Therefore, parties give special attention to this state and more emphasis is given to the voters from Uttar Pradesh. Digital promotion in this state is a bit trickier as compared to other states because a large number of migrants from Uttar Pradesh are living in different states. Similarly, Delhi is showing entirely different trends in electoral results. Therefore, special promotional campaigns are very carefully designed for Delhi and NCR. The followership of the leaders of the national parties is summarized below.

Table:5 Profile of Leaders of Top 5 National Parties and their Followership (2021)

Parties	No. of states Ruled out of 31	Seats in Lok Sabha out of 543	Seats in Rajyasha out of 245	Seats in State Assembly 4036	Leaders	Tweeter Followers of leaders	Facebook followers of leaders	Instagram follower of leaders
BJP	19	301	99	1411	Narendra Modi	80.3 million	43 million	20 million
INC	2	53	31	678	Rahul Gandhi	20.5 millions	4.5 million	1.9 million
ATC	1	24	13	235	Mamta Banerjee	6.5 million	4.95 million	200 K
CPI	1	3	5	88	Sitaram	1	272 k	19.8 k



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(M)					Yechuri	million		
BSP	0	10	1	8	Km. Mayawati	2.7 million	NA	NA

In politics, **campaign advertising** is the use of paid media (newspapers, radio, television, etc.) to influence the decisions made for and by various groups. These ads are designed by political consultants, advertising companies, and the expert campaign's staff. Therefore, parties use customized ads and campaigns to spread specific information and stuff to the voters and online potential voters. Moreover, various social media platforms are free and users can also generate content in social media. Therefore, a proper promotion mix is used by political parties throughout the year for making their vibrant presence among their voters. Similar contents of the promotion mix are shared below:

Table 6: Promotional Mix Commonly Used by Political Parties In India

Name of The Party	Research	Strategy	Campaigns
BJP	Social Media Team, Intelligence, Analytics, Apps, Sentiment Analysis, Audit of Contents,	Social Media Content Strategy, Content development and Sharing, Official Pages, YouTube Channel, Google Handouts, WhatsApp groups, Boost Fan pages, Party Symbol Awareness Campaign, Streaming videos, War room, Troll Army, Yuva iTV, Content Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Push Polling, Opposition Research, Hashtag campaigns, Radio Programs, Digital warriors (free membership)	Abki bar modi Sarkar, Mai bhi Chokidar, Chalo Chale Modi ke sath, Ayega to modi hi, Digital India, My First Vote For Modi, Modi Hai Toh Mumkin Hai, Bharat ke Man ki Bat, Fir Ek Bar Modi Sarkar, NaMo, Nation First, Mere Sapno Ka Bharat, Join Mission 272+ etc.
INC	Social Media Team, Intelligence, Analytics	Regular Tweets, Content Development and Contents Sharing, Streaming videos, War room, Troll Army, Web cast, YouTube Channel, Influencer Marketing, Hashtag campaigns, social media Warriors	Ladki hun Lad Sakti Hun, Chokidar chor hai, RAGA, Main Nahi Ham, Har Hath Shakti Har Hath Tarraki, RG4Education, RG4Piece etc.
ATC	NA	Regular Tweets, War rooms, Digital cadre, Youth Army,	Shoja Banglay Bolchi, Jumla Meter, Didi Ke Bolo, Bengal's Pride Mamta, One Man One Post etc.
CPI (M)	NA	Regular Tweets, Digital Manifesto, Video contents, Online and live debates and panel discussions.	Yoth Against Modi, we can Bring the Change etc.
BSP	NA	Regular Tweets	Behanji Ko Aane do, only vote for BSP, Jalpan se Phle Matdan, Bahanji hein to Bharosa hai,



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The recent ad spending on digital platforms by different political parties in five states is mentioned below and Uttar Pradesh alone is responsible for major ad spending on digital platforms.

Table 7: Political Ad Spend in 5 States on Digital Platforms (in December 2021)

Platform	Uttar Pradesh	Punjab	Goa	Uttrakhand	Maharashtra	Total
Ad Spend	2.75 crores	1.21crores	41 Lakhs	30.37 Lakhs	30.15 Lakhs	4.97 crores

Parties are maintaining their social media accounts effectively and hiring experts for responding to their followers in a prompt manner. The details of their official social media accounts and leading fan pages is provided below:

Table 8: Social Media Followership of Various National Parties (2021)

Party	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram		Pages
	Official Facebook Pages Name	Followers	Twitter handler Name	Followers	Instagram	Followers	
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	16 million	BJP4India	18.6 million	BJP4India	4.8 million	Narender Modi, I Support Narender Modi, Bhartiya Janta Party, Narender Modi PM
INC	Indian National Congress	6 million	INCIndia	8.6 million	incindia	1 million	Indian National Congress, With INC, Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, I support Rahul Gandhi
ATC	All India Trinmool Congress	1.3 million	ATCOfficial	601.9 k	atcofficial	92.7 k	All India Trinmool Congress,Banglar, Gorbo Mamta, Mamta Banerjee Supporter
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)	1 Million	Cpimspeak	435.3 K	cpimcc	114 k	Communist Party of India, CPIM-Speak, Sitaram Yechuri
BSP	NA	NA	BSP4India	13.4 k	BSP4bharat	98 k	Mayawati, Mayawati Fan group,

It is observed from the above data that political success in elections in recent times is related to digital media strategy and digital ad spending. The traditional methods are not very effective to influence the modern voter. Therefore, regulating ad spending as well as maintaining fairness in spreading digital information to the voters is essential.

Conclusion: It is concluded from this secondary study that voters today want various points of communication and counter communication from various representatives of the political parties. Active digital armies and sound social media strategies are mandatory for the parties as well as for the leaders representing national and regional parties in the elections. Processing real-time information, conducting analysis with the latest analytic tools, use of Apps for membership, and selection of candidates are mere basic things. Currently, the parties which are not equipped with active social media must train digital cadres through WhatsApp groups who can immediately boost Fan pages, handle campaigns, and spread visionary and symbol awareness like front-line warriors. Further, tools like streaming videos, digital war room, content marketing, influencer marketing, push polling, opposition research, hashtag



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campaigns, and live radio programs need to be explored by the social media cell of the parties. Digital warriors (through free membership) should be appointed and trained for developing effective social media plans under the media experts (paid basis). Few volunteers must also be appointed to observe the contents and campaign of oppositions so that counter-strategies can be prepared on time. Most importantly, effective social media research can prepare a sound base for the entire social media plan hence, few flawless researchers are required to face tuff competition at the ground level.

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