

Political Campaigns In India: Developing An Ethical Framework

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Abstract: Political campaigns are events where voters receive information about the political parties, their candidates and their political platform. Voters use this information to make a choice among the competing candidate and parties on polling day. In India, different political campaign methods and tools are being used. Having high ethical standards and moral values, in campaigns, is important make the elections free and fair. In other words, the ethical campaigning is very important in the interest of fair and free elections. However, the political campaign in India often takes unethical shape. The political parties and contesting candidates are increasingly adhering to unethical means during election campaign. Several studies expose the severe abuse of communication which leads to unethical campaign. As the campaigns greatly ensure free and fair election with informed participation of voters, it must comply with ethical frame work in the interest of democracy as well as voters.

Index Terms: Electoral campaign, ethics, code of conduct, clean election campaign.

1. Introduction

In electoral democracy, the political parties and contesting candidates join the election process by undertaking campaigns for mobilizing the voters to cast their votes in their favour. Political campaigns have been part of politics for a long time. Their main job is to support or oppose political candidates and their beliefs. Campaigns are events where voters receive information about the political parties, their candidates and their political platform. Voters use this information to make a choice among the competing candidate and parties on polling day.

For voters to be able to make a rational and informed choice, they need clear and accurate information on the candidates, platforms and issues. They need to be able to make a decision on whom to vote for in a secure environment, free from fear or intimidation. Some of the issues involved with having an environment conducive to a free and fair campaign, include the freedom to campaign. Campaign ethics and the behaviour of the parties, candidates and their supporters directly affect the integrity of the electoral process. Unethical campaign behaviour or treatment that artificially adversely affect the election outcome . In this context, the present paper is a modest attempt to analyze the ethical aspects during political campaigns in India.

1.1 Methodology:

The study utilizes a qualitative, evaluative and historical approach. It is based on secondary data sourced from online platforms, including government websites, academic journals, publications, and other resources. The data has been analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject and draw meaningful conclusions.

1.2 Theoretical Background

The political campaigns give candidates and political parties a chance to share their messages with people, helping voters make more informed choices on election day (Norris, 2004). To ensure the election is fair and reflects the people's wishes, public resources allocated to contestants should be equal. Election campaigns are how candidates and parties prepare to share their ideas and positions with voters before the election. Contestants use many ways to reach voters and spread their messages, such as traditional and new media, public events, written materials, or other methods (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006). Political rallies, door-to-door campaigning, roadshows, banners, posters, and variety of printed materials have always been a big part of campaign activities.

An election campaign is a planned effort to influence the decisions of a group of people (Trent et al., 2011). Its main purpose is to support or oppose political candidates and the ideas they represent. In other words, an election campaign is how political parties share their plans, past achievements, and future goals to gain the most votes in the upcoming election. Through these campaigns, political parties and their candidates seek to persuade voters to choose them, usually by outlining their policies. A good political campaign needs a clear message. An ideal campaign always informs but also inspires voters. It should explain where the candidate stands and why they should be trusted with the vote.

In democracies, these campaigns are used to select representatives or decide on referendums (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002). During elections, politicians and parties use various forms of communication to get people to support their candidates and the party. This communication includes both paid and unpaid methods. In modern politics, the most famous campaigns are usually for general elections and for positions like president or prime minister or legislator. The message of a campaign includes the ideas which the candidate wants to share with voters. It is meant to influence those who agree with these ideas to support the candidate when they run for a political position. The message often covers several key topics about policies. Most campaigns try to keep the message general to appeal to as many voters as possible. New and diverse advertising tools are often used in election campaigns, ranging from public meetings and rallies to posters, graffiti, and campaign marches. Political leaders, often called star campaigners, lead the campaigns for their parties, and they are the main tools for election communication and publicity in the country (Sardesai, 2020).

1.3 Methods of Campaign:

In India, different political campaign methods and tools are being used. During the period 1952 to 1984, conventional print media and some audio-visual ads were developed and used in election campaigns in early polls. After 1984 political parties started using electronic media extensively. Subsequently, the invention of new methods, technology, and the strategic environment of the election campaign has also changed in our country. In recent years, telephonic communication, digital media communication, and social media communication emerged as the popular platform of political campaign. In view of the variety of campaigning methods, the same can be divided into Traditional and modern types:

1.3.1 Traditional methods of political Campaign :

A traditional election campaign is run by a candidate himself, his staff and party workers rather than an outside agency. It's a campaign which uses traditional media to communicate a candidate's profile, background, and issues. These campaigns include the mass production and distribution of candidate's information to voters through print media, television advertising, direct mailings, billboards, speeches at rallies. Generally, the traditional election campaigns are associated with competitive elections in the context of stable democratic societies.

Posters and Pamphlets:

Posters and pamphlets are important traditional tools of campaign for providing information to the voters. They have been used in elections from the colonial period as the main tool of outdoor campaign during elections. Broadly, these tools can be used-

- 'to mobilise voters to support party's/candidate's cause
- to advertise a meeting or specific event
- to popularise your slogans and messages'.

Posters and pamphlets are very much useful in the areas where there is no easy access to newspapers and radio. These are direct tools of communicating with the constituency, but it can also be very expensive. In India, posters and pamphlets have always been an essential tool of election communication. In every election, political parties use posters and pamphlets for highlighting their main issues, policies, face, and slogans.

1.3.2 Modern techniques and methods of campaign:

In modern times, new techniques and methods are used, which are as follows :

i. Creating a Logo/Symbol and Slogan :

The symbol/ logo has become political party's identity and appear on all election materials for the campaign. People develop emotional attachments to logos/ symbols. Hence, it's important to create a logo that not only represents the party or candidate, but also depicts the message towards the burning issues. Similarly, a slogan can also work just like a logo attracts the people. The slogan, depicting local and national issues, also acts as the basis for the speeches of the candidates and party leaders. Both logo and slogan become brand identity of a candidate and party.

ii. Setting Narratives :

It is best to create a story or set narratives around the campaign. By creating a story or narratives, the candidates and political parties make emotional connects with the people. Ultimately, the people feel a bonding that the candidate / party is reliable which can bring solutions to their problems. In 2014 election, BJP used attacking and extensive advertisement to attract the voters with striking slogans, i.e., "AB KI BAAR MODI SARKAR" and "ACHHE DIN AANE WALE HAIN" etc. In 2019 election, the party started "MAIN BHI CHOWKIDAR" campaign. These slogans set the narratives to motivate supporters and impress undecided and first-time voters.

iii. Creating a Dedicated Election Campaign Website :

While a party may already have a website, building a dedicated website for the upcoming election is essential. This will allow the voters to visit the website to get the most recent and relevant information. The party and candidates must be consistent in the design aspect and use the same logo, design, image, font, colors, and slogans on the website as it would on t-shirts, flyers, brochures, and social media pages. Connecting this website with the social media platforms will help increase visitors to the official campaign website and win supporters.

iv. Use of Social Media :

Social media networks are the most widespread source of election campaign today. Social media has been extensively used by political parties, such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, to set narratives. The party and candidates can use social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to interact with the followers and engage them in meaningful debates during the process of elections. Social media adoption among Internet users in India is around 84% which is roughly 110 million social network users in India. The four major social media giants like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google have played major role

in 2014 parliamentary general election in India, in facilitating the political parties and candidates in breaking the news and spreading their message .

Further, 2019 election has witnessed intensified use of digital media platforms to reach maximum voters interactively. Social media played a crucial and central role in the image building and setting of the narrative through out the election process. In fact, political parties spent huge money on social media campaigns. 'Political parties have also spent over Rs. 53 crores on digital platforms like Google and Facebook between February and May 2019' . Expenditure on digital advertising was increased as 'from February 19 to May 19, political parties posted 124,094 ads on Facebook to reach out to their audiences'. This election is considered as the most expensive election ever conducted in the country as 'election expenditure in India has gone up by nearly six times in 20 years (1998-2019)- from Rs 9.000 crore to over Rs 55,000 crore'.

v. Using of Email :

Although digital media has taken the world by storm, emails remain the most effective tool for election campaign. As email campaigning is free-of-cost, the parties/candidates send frequent updates to all supporters from their desk. Starting from targeting new potential voters to engaging existing supporters, email campaign help to reach the masses with minimal effort.

vi. Sending SMS :

With the increase of mobile users , SMS has become an efficient medium for political candidates and parties to send their message to the voters . They seek the support of the voters and make voting appeal through sms.

vii. Flyers and Hording :

Flyers are the most effective and quick medium to convey the election campaign's message to the voters. For an effective campaign , it is important to select the right flyer size and publish the core message of the election campaign with party's logo, slogan, images etc. Similarly hording of the candidate and top leaders of the party, with catchy message, are put on the public places to influence the voters.

viii. T-Shirts for Campaign:

One of the best election campaign ideas is to design campaign t-shirts depicting the candidate's / top leaders picture, party's logo, symbol, or slogan. Motivating people to wear the campaign t-shirts will turn them into walking advertisements for the party's and candidates campaign. This type of campaign creates a visible image in people's minds.

ix. Surrogate Advertisements :

Surrogate refers to substitute or proxy. During elections, surrogate advertisements are used to indirectly influence the voter by propagating schemes and contributions of the party in power, defaming opponents by giving objectionable ads with fake names. Generally, political parties and candidates use surrogate advertisements for getting benefit during elections. However, election commission has banned such practices .

x. Virtual Campaign:

COVID-19 has a substantial effect on the conventional style of election campaign. During the period of social and physical distancing, digital virtual modes have emerged as the main platform of election campaign. The 'new normal' of election campaign during COVID-19 and afterward is likely to discourage physical gatherings, rallies, massive and extensive field publicity as election campaign. Political parties have extensively used digital technologies to overcome lockdown restrictions. Through social media

platforms, such as , Twitter, meeting apps, and YouTube, virtual rallies have emerged as new tools of political campaigning and communication.

2. Ethics in Electoral Campaign

Having high ethical standards and moral values, in campaigns, is important to ensure that elections are free and fair. In this context, how political parties, candidates, and their supporters behave during the campaign determines the fairness and honesty of the election process. Ethics in electoral campaigns are a set of principles based on moral values that guide all the people involved—like voters, political parties, and election officials—in acting properly during the campaign (Denton, 2000). Unethical actions or unfair treatment can affect the fairness of the election and its results. Candidates and political parties need the support of voters to win. They are expected to spread their message in a respectful way, without using violence or spreading false information. To ensure fair and free elections, ethical campaigning is very important.

2.1 Pre-Conditions for Ethics in Electoral Campaign

To make sure that the electoral campaign is honest and ethical, most election systems require that campaigns be conducted:

- According to the rules and laws set out in the legal framework;
- Without forcing people to vote or offering money for votes;
- Respecting the schedule of the election;
- Respecting the right of other parties to organise and campaign, and to share their messages with voters;
- Respecting the right of voters to get information from different sources and to attend rallies of other parties;
- Focusing on political issues and the platforms of candidates, not on spreading false information about others;
- Using peaceful and respectful methods, without threatening or intimidating other candidates, their supporters, or the media, and without using language that encourages violence among their own supporters;
- Respecting the freedom of the press to report on the campaign and express opinions about it;
- Respecting the electoral managers and not interfering with their work;
- Using the official process for complaints and the legal system for appeals;
- Accepting and following the official election results and the decision made by the election dispute resolution body’.

2.2 Aspects of Ethics in Electoral Campaigns

a. Running a Clean Election Campaign

Political parties and candidates participate in elections by running campaigns to win the support of voters on election day. It is important to have the freedom to campaign and access to the media to ensure a fair and honest campaign. A clean campaign helps maintain the integrity of the parties and the overall election process. In other words, a clean campaign means that candidates and parties should act fairly, focus on the issues, and follow the rules of the campaign. Since it is not clear which way voters will vote, candidates sometimes use negative tactics and unfair strategies (Lau & Rovner, 2009). They often focus on the weaknesses or personal lives of other candidates instead of their political ideas. This harms the idea of a clean campaign and affects the ethics of the campaign.

b. Code of Conduct for Ensuring Ethics

Codes of conduct apply to political parties, their candidates, and their supporters. These codes require parties to monitor the actions of their supporters and remain responsible for any violations by them.

i) **Voluntary Code of Conduct:** IDEA (the Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance) has created a model code of conduct (International IDEA, 1999). This code is based on discussions between the political parties. These codes set the basic rules for ethical campaigning and help build trust in how elections are conducted and their outcomes. IDEA believes that parties are more likely to behave honestly if they agree to follow a code of conduct voluntarily.

ii) **Mandatory Code of Conduct:** Some electoral systems require parties and candidates to follow a mandatory code of conduct when running in elections (Quraishi, 2014). These rules are part of the legal or regulatory structure and are enforced using administrative and legal punishments. If a candidate breaks the code, they might be removed from the election and could face legal consequences.

To ensure ethical campaigning, these codes must be clearly written, with the responsibilities of parties explained clearly. The penalties for breaking the code should be fair and clearly stated in the code itself. In the 2019 election, the Election Commission introduced a Voluntary Code of Ethics, agreed upon by major social media platforms (Election Commission of India, 2019).

According to this code, the platforms would try to, "where appropriate and taking into account the principle of freedom of expression," implement suitable policies and processes to help people access information related to elections.

2.3 Challenges to ethical campaign :

However, the political campaign in India often takes unethical shape . The political parties and contesting candidates are increasingly adhering to unethical means during election campaign. The following studies expose the severe abuse of communication which leads to unethical campaign:

Research done by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) found several following issues with communication during the election.

- **Increase in Online Rumors and Fake News:** During the 2019 election, there was a noticeable rise in online rumors and false news. A scholar named Rao (2019) said that 'political parties and their supporters spread a lot of incorrect information'. This made it very hard for fact-checking groups and concerned citizens to find the truth.
- **Low Quality of Public Discourse:** The 2019 election saw a lot of insults, leading many to comment on how poor the public debate had become. Even though name-calling, insults, and sarcasm have always been part of political communication, scholars like Mishra and Kumar (2019) noted that the level of negativity in political discussions has reached new lows. Even top leaders now use misinformation, insults, and personal attacks as standard practices. Over time, this low-quality communication has become common, almost like the new normal.
- **WhatsApp Activism:** In his research, Harris (2019) pointed out that during the 2019 elections in India, WhatsApp was widely used for activism. Immediately before the elections, a BBC news story was shared in WhatsApp groups, claiming that the ruling BJP party would lose to the INC alliance. The story incorrectly said it was from the CIA, KGB, and Mossad. In the end, it was found to be fake and not actually published by BBC News.
- **Low Trust in Social Media:** Because of the spread of fake information, people are losing trust with social media. According to a Reuters Institute study, only 34% of Indian people trust the news they see on social media, which is a little lower than the 36% who trust news in general (Aneez et al., 2019). Lokniti's study also showed similar levels of distrust, with one in four people saying they don't trust the news shared on social media at all (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019).
- **Unethical Political Communication:** Denton's (2019) research found that ethics in political communication have always been a difficult issue. The rise of digital technologies is making things even more complicated. These technologies are lowering traditional ethical standards for politicians, journalists, the media, and the public.

- **Populism and Hate Speech:** Social media has allowed for a more aggressive and personal style of political communication, which has led to more hate speech and extreme views spreading in unregulated online spaces, especially in regional languages and private WhatsApp groups. In a study, Sahana Udupa (2019) looked at how hate and extreme speech have become common in online political discussions in India. Sangeeta Mahapatra and Johannes Plagemann (2019) also noted that fear-mongering and hate-based politics by the BJP and Congress parties deepened social divisions during the 2019 elections.

To counter the spread of fake news, the 2019 elections used artificial intelligence (AI) tools to detect and stop false information. A fact-checking group called BOOM had access to a dashboard that marked false information as dangerous. Currently, BOOM is working with YouTube and Google to improve the reliability of news articles. WhatsApp also set up a “checkpoint research tip line,” allowing users to report possible misinformation. Based on the data collected, the tip line created a database of misleading content during elections and flagged around 70,000 to 75,000 messages in one month. These efforts aimed to stop the misuse of communication in the interest of ethical campaign.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

India is a democratic country with vast territory divided into 550 constituencies which elect their representatives through open election process. In 2019 Parliamentary elections, 8026 persons contested with average 14.81 candidates each constituency. It implies that, on average, one candidate was required to reach more than 15 lakh voters in a very short 40 to 60 days’ of election process. Indeed, sizeable number of Indian voters are subjected to apathy, ignorance, no-information, and isolation. In view of this, more than 40% of voters do not understand how to vote and also they have no idea about the contesting parties and candidates in the constituency. Ultimately, it becomes complicated and challenging to reach each household and inform voters of symbols, candidates, and the voting procedure effectively. As such, political campaign increases the participation of voters in the electoral process. Further, campaigning help candidates and political parties to woo the voters.

Thus, political campaign is an important medium of communication in the democratic system. It greatly ensures the fairness of election with informed participation of voters. Moreover, the political campaign must comply with ethical frame work in the interest of democracy as well as voters. In view of severe misuse of communication, the Election Commission is required to play proactive role for preventing unethical campaign and ensuring free and fair election in India.

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