Evolution of Political Campaign in India

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Abstract - The paper is a longitudinal qualitative analysis that has tracked the evolution of election campaigning in India since 1991 to 2014. Also, it has conducted a sentiment analysis on the 2014 general elections considering the two key political parties, the BharatiyaJanta Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC).

The study is aimed at documenting the developments in electoral campaigning and innovations in social media, mass media, outdoor and volunteer support. It finds out how election campaigning and political marketing has evolved over the years from 1991 to 2014. The evolution is narrated in the literature review, wherein the journey of political campaigns in India is traced based on the research conducted on the subject till date. The research gap is in context to the ambiguity in trends in the 2014 general elections that have laid foundations for modern day campaigning.

It also finds out if the modern day campaigning has become more leader centric. Through qualitative research by expert interviews and focus group discussions, it maps the keywords associated with the two contending parties namely the BJP and the INC in the 2014 elections. The result is presented by using a mind map so that it can be analysed that who is top of the mind in eyes of the common man, the party leader or the party itself.

During the course of the research, it has also been found that the sources from where political news is consumed. This research is significant as the mediums that emerge as most used, can be used for campaigning for targeting the educated voters during elections.

Key Words: Indian Election, Political Campaign, Political Marketing and Political Party

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Election campaign 2014 was the second most expensive campaign in the history of world, after the US presidential Campaign. There was a significant evolution in the campaigning methodology as the parties tried to move to innovative campaigning methods like social media, crowd fundraising, digital rallies and effective storytelling rather than sticking to the conventional print and television.

The study proves the hypothesis that modern day electioneering finds the political leader as the face of all campaigns, party’s engagements and philosophy. Hence, the leader should possess a character and demeanour that is synonymous to the party’s ideology.

The literature review identifies the evolution of political campaigning in India. Then, in context to the latest 2014 general elections, it identifies key changes in the campaigning style. The study then, has tried to map a trend in the modern day campaigning and tries to answer the following research questions.

i. Whether the Campaigns are increasingly getting leader centric?

ii. Who is top of the mind, the leader or the political party?

iii. What are the keywords associated with the key players in the 2014 elections and how do such associations take birth? What is derived by these keywords?

iv. Which is the major medium for consumption of political news and how can this medium be exploited as a targeted campaigning channel?

The research followed qualitative analysis based on expert interviews and focus group discussions. The expert interviews enable us to recognize the key trends and keywords used in media, industry and public affairs profession in context to a given party. The focus group discussions on the other end enable us to find the opinions and map the sentiments of the common man.

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study aims at finding qualitative evidence to prove or nullify the hypothesis “The modern day elections are leader centric” and observing the evolution Campaigns from 1991 to 2014, the shift from conventional methods to new age technology to reach the internet savvy, young voters and a diverse vote bank. Objectives are...

i) To analyse the electoral campaigning trends in 2014 and track the distinct features of the campaign.

ii) To find out popular mediums of news consumption so that the impact of future campaigns could be enhanced.

iii) To conduct a sentiment analysis for both, the BJP1 and the INC2 to gauge the sentiments of the voters and the experts.

1 The BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP) is one of the two major parties in the Indian political system, along with the Indian National Congress

2 The Indian National Congress (INC), also commonly called the Congress is one of the two major political parties in India, the other being the BharatiyaJanata Party.
iv) To understand whether the leader is ‘top of mind’ of the voters or the political party in context to the 2014 elections.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Political Marketing and Electoral Campaigning

It had been widely expected since the mid-1990s, that the Internet would have a decisive influence on election campaigning (Anstead and Chadwick, 2008). However, as political parties try to engage the audience and break clutter, 2014 emerged as the year where innovative campaigning won. Prabhu(2014) mentioned in his book that “He (Shri Narendramodi) won a historic election but Public relations won as well”.

The year 2013, in the same vein can be termed as the year when the entire concept of election campaigning and political marketing went through a complete overhaul, an unprecedented revolution. Political parties micro targeted various vote banks via using new age technology by sending personalised messages using mobiles, social media and digital rallies. The significant advantage of the Internet is its capability to mobilize resources: specifically, fund raising and recruiting volunteers too. Internet electioneering gives advantage for improving the communication between politicians and electors.

B. Lok Sabha Elections in India4 from 1991 to 2014

This paper is analysing the trends in Political campaigning since 1991 when INC returned to power in midterm elections under Prime Minister PV Narshimarao5 after the infamous Rajiv Gandhi6 assassination.

In 1991 Lok Sabha elections, being midterm elections obviously could not gain much campaigning momentum. In 1996 Lok Sabha elections, where the INC suffered one of the worst defeats, the government was finally formed by BJP’s leader Shri AtalBihari Vajpayee only to be aborted in twelve days. Successful governments were formed under HD Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral.7 The Election Commission had strictly directed that the expenditure be no more than Rs 4.15 Lakh focussing the parties to quit ideas of high tech campaigning and stick to door to door canvassing which are termed as the first “Mohalla Elections” by Roy (1996). BJP’s strategy of mobilizing sadhu saints, is natural as political parties recruit such individuals into their ranks as populist appeals become more important in Indian Politics and the democratic process percolates down to include formerly excluded groups since the “religiosity of people” predisposes particularly villagers and women to respond readily to such tactics(Dyke, 1997). Dyke also mentioned how letter writing was also adopted as a method for influencing the literate voters. Star endorsements became a rage as Kapil Dev campaigned for Manoj Prabhakar8. Sunil Dutt for Kapil Sibal9 and Raj Babbar.10 BJP started tele link services to deliver prerecorded messages and used toys and trinkets like caps, hooters, lotus shaped ‘bindis (a small coloured mark or jewel)’ to build the connection. Street plays, magic shows, talking dolls and video films too played an important role.

1998 again was a fragmented midterm elections, but fortunately for BJP, it emerged stronger and formed government with regional groups only to collapse after thirteen months. The 14th Lok Sabha elections were held in 2004, which led to the formation of Manmohan Singh Cabinet.12 The election results were surprising as not only did it spell defeat of NDA but also the resurgence of INC led by “Foreign Bahu (Foreign Daughter-in-law)” Sonia Gandhi who surprised everyone by declining the position of prime minister. 13 Analysts concurred that NDA’s India shining campaign did not appeal to the rural poor.14 Zora and Worweck (2004) was of the opinion that the India Shining campaign was just a pitch to big businesses. Masses found the party campaign calls on landline and mobile phones a nuisance. It may be that voters found the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)15 insufficiently attentive to the core issues of “bijli, sadak, pani (power, roads, water)” and voiced a rejection of neo-liberal economic reforms that were seen to benefit India’s middle and upper-classes only. Zora and Worweck (2004) describe the flavour of the promotions as very pro-urban, posters and television (TV) commercials in all major channels featuring women wearing sarees and playing cricket with the tagline, “you have never had a better time to shine brighter”. The campaign explicitly seemed to widen the gulf between the

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1 The Lok Sabha, House of the people, is the lower house of Parliament which is constituted of 530 elected representatives from states, 20 from Union Territories and not more than 2 to represent Anglo Indian community.
2 The Indian Elections are based on multiparty system and are conducted by the Election Commission of India. The Lok Sabha Elections are conducted after four years and based on adult suffrage.
3 PV Narshimarao was the tenth Prime Minister of India. He was a noted intellectual who represented the state of Andhra Pradesh in Lok Sabha. Prior to his Prime Ministership, he had served on various ministries including Foreign Ministry.
4 Rajiv Gandhi was the seventh Prime minister of India who served from 1884 to 1989. He was affiliated to Indian National Congress and was a popular figure in the Nehru Gandhi family.
6 Manoj Prabhakar is former Indian Cricketer who joined the Indian National Congress post his cricket career.
7 Kapil Sibal is a lawyer who belongs to Indian National Congress. He has led various ministries in United Progressive Alliance.
8 Raj Babbar is a Hindi and Punjabi film actor who entered politics by joining Janta Dal in 1989. Later he went on to join Samajwadi Party from where he was suspended. He finally joined Indian National Congress.
9 Meni Roy, India Votes, election 1996: A critical Analysis
13 The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is a centre-right coalition of political parties in India.
haves and the have-nots. Initially, INC opposed and made a
cue of the campaign by calling it “India cheated”. INC took
professional help from advertising agency Leo Burnett to
make a comeback with the question, “AamAadmiokoyamilega
(What will the common man get?)” L Balakrishnan, the
creative head of Lowe, another advertising company, said “If
anything, the campaign set a lot of people thinking that India
was not shining for them” (quoted in Times of India) [16, 17].

Political scientist Philip Oldenburg (2004) argues that
the failure of India shining was not due to a revolt by the rural
poor as both alliance parties got 35% electoral votes. He
concluded that the failure of NDA should be attributed to the
fact that the campaign was not geographically penetrative,
neither state level driven other than being economically
exclusive.

Again in 2009, the common man toppled, as INC “Jai
Ho (Victory Hymn)” defeated BJP’s “Bhay Ho (Fear Hymn)”.
The same positioning was across all platforms-TV, radio,
print, online and outdoor. IMRB [18] used spotlight techniques,
the same that is used for studying effect of advertising on
consumer behaviour to find effect of political advertising on
youngsters living in metros by studying the four campaigns:
“Jai ho”, “Dishayein”, “ Bhay Ho” and “Kadami”. 44% of
audience liked INC ads better, based on Oscar winning
Slumdog Millionaire song. [19].

According to the report the INC ad shows elements
around women while BJP lacked gender focus. Also it is
optimistic in nature as compared to the BJP advertisements
that focussed on “Bhay (fear)” and terming LK Advani as
“NidarNeta (fearless leader)”. As per the estimates of
CMS(Centre for Media Studies), about Rs 10,000
crores were spent during the Lok Sabha elections. [20].

Then the 2014 Grand elections, the largest in human
history with over 815 million voters, larger than the
electorates of the US and the European Union combined will
elect 543 representatives. [21] The NDA wanted to position itself
as a pro development party and hence unveiled the Vision
2020 document, that diluted its image as the “mandirwali
party (Advocating for temples)” (Deshpande and Iyer, 2004),

based on the issue of abrogation of article 370, building of the
Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and enforcing a Uniform Civil Code
(UCC) (Kumar, 2014). Apart from innumerable road rallies
and holographic presence, campaigns used micro targeting
approach via social media, mass media, rob calls and
marketing through number of volunteers and fans who were
willing to cooperate. [22] Twitter emerged as a key tool for
campaigning in the elections. Modi had 4.3 million twitter
followers in thirty-eight different languages. Holograms, voice
messages, personalized mails and even experiential marketing
by groups like CAG (Citizens for Accountable Governance) [23]
were used for volunteer enrolments. The elections also
witnessed a revamped new age interactive website , offline and
online campaigns by way of Google Hangouts, Whatsapp,
Youtub and even quirky mobile applications. [24].

The clutter on social media and the saturation of
mass media has posed the complexities of Big data which
emerged as a big challenge in the 2014 Elections. “The era of
big data in Indian politics has arrived,” said J Ramachandra,
CEO of Gramener that is a data analytics company. [25] The
2014 elections were data driven and very similar to the US
Obama elections. Modi’s unique digital events like ‘Chai
cSachara (Talk over tea)’ are unprecedented election events
that put the political leader directly in touch with people at tea
stalls in villages at publicized localities through a combination
of satellite, DTH, internet and mobile (Quoted in TechEdge,
CNBC 2014). [26]. Hence parties are increasingly seeking
professional help from corporates and Public Affairs agencies.
The “Unsui Campaign”, MTS election tracker and Google’s
Pledge to vote campaign are perfect case studies for how
corporates have leveraged the elections. [27].

IV. RESEARCH GAP

Notable commonalities between key findings among
all researchers is the consensus that online platform has the
power to shape election results. Communication scholars have
studied this political communication tool from other facets too

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[18] IMRB International (formerly “Indian Market Research Bureau”) is a multi-
country market research, survey and business consultancy firm that offers a
range of syndicated data and customized research services. 
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such as its job in growth of the national communications and information infrastructure (Kapor and Weitzner, 2010) and as a two way interactive portal in the age of conversations.

However so far, the study has focussed on the party campaigns, electoral messages of NDA versus the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) 29. In the 2014 LokSabha elections however, it was the party leader (NarendraModi versus Rahul Gandhi 30). The persona of the leader was synonymous to the party and hence the campaigns too had their key words defined by the personality of the leader. What is ‘Top of Mind’, the party name or the leader? Does political marketing online focus on the party or the leader and how does that affect voter’s recall and awareness?

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper follow a qualitative study to find out if the political leader is synonymous to the party in the modern day electioneering. The research aims at finding out how many respondents, who are experts in this field, agree to the fact that increasingly the leader’s persona is the face of the party and the backbone of the political campaigns. The second part of the research targets the common man by means of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), by means of convenience sampling to find out the keywords associated with each party and the association and recall therein. Understanding the perspectives of various professionals, experts and the common masses will help to understand the trend and ensue a healthy debate.

It has used qualitative study to conduct a sentiment analysis wherein a party is ranked based on two parameters; Favorability and Recall of the political parties in question versus the leader.

Methodological triangulation helped to bridge the gap between the two methods used for research and by overlapping methods for the same research, the findings are compared to establish the conclusion. The triangulation studies are conducted by recognising the common themes that emerge after the expert interviews and the Focus Group Discussions. The conclusions and the trends are based on the common themes.

A. Sampling Techniques

1) In Depth Interview: The Method of Sampling adopted for the In-depth Interview is Stratified sampling to compare difference in perceptions, opinions and attitudes. This part of the paper has considered ten participants who are experts in the field of Politics and Public Affairs such as Political Journalists, Public Affairs Professionals, Industry experts and Academicians. Participants consist of both male and female from age group 25-50.

2) Focus Group Discussions: The Method of Sampling adopted for the FGDs Convenience Sampling. FGDs are group discussions conducted in groups of five people to gauge the popular opinion, recall values and awareness about various campaigns, parties and leaders. Two groups of five participants each has been selected for the purpose. It has been recorded live to depict accuracy. Participants consist of both male and female from age group 20-30.

VI. FINDING AND ANALYSIS

The analysis is based on triangulation studies after considering observing the respondent’s opinions during FGD’s and Expert Interviews. 2014 general elections were the best example of presidential style campaigning with outstanding Public Relations campaigns to engage with voters beyond the limitations of geography, age, caste, gender and economic status. The leader has gained precedence over the political party in an electoral campaign. The study proves that the political leader leverages more recall as it proved that respondents feel that “Modi” (ShriNarendraModi, the Prime Minister of India) is synonymous to “BJP”, the political party he represents.

The interesting finding is the common man relates the most to the political leaders in a campaign followed by the past performance of the contending parties. INC’s failure according to the study can be attributed to the fact that the party was unable to address the various allegations of corruption levied against it, when the part was in Government. The leader is therefore, the face of the campaign and his personal beliefs; background and character traits paint the overall campaign strategy and determine the keywords that are associated with the party over variety of mediums.

The research has proved that the political leader leverages maximum recall. Hence a political party needs a strong leader who is the face of the campaign and of the party’s ideology. By use of social media political parties can reach to the grassroots. But Public Relations have emerged as the most important campaigning tool. Strategic communications and community engagement are the backbone of any electoral propaganda.

The research also finds that the keywords associated with any political party determine its recall value. Popular catchphrases like “Acche Din (Good Days)” outlive even the life of the campaign. They must be in sync with leader’s personality. According to the study past performance of the contending parties played a major deterrent in their chances of success. As VikasPathak, a political expert explains “The

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29 The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is a coalition of centre-left political parties in India formed after the 2004 general election

30 Rahul Gandhi (born 19 June 1970) is the Vice-President of the Indian National Congress (INC) party and the Chairperson of the Indian Youth Congress and the National Students Union of India.
The study proves the hypothesis that modern day electioneering finds the political leader as the face of all campaigns, party’s engagements and philosophy. Hence, the leader should possess a character and demeanor that is synonymous to party’s ideology. The study is based upon a small sample size and may not be considered enough to project national views. This research is a pilot project and leaves scope for further investigation at an extensive level. It is solely based on trends that emerged in 2014 general elections, is an longitudinal historical study and it may not be applicable in subsequent elections.

REFERENCES


Hun here refers to the Election Tagline used by Indian National Congress: “Main na hi Hum” which means “Not I but we”. “Hum” is the hindi word for “We”.

Referring to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi