



E-ISSN: 2789-1615
P-ISSN: 2789-1607
www.educationjournal.info
Impact Factor: RJIF 5.93
IJLE 2025; 5(2): 130-141
Received: 20-05-2025
Accepted: 24-06-2025

Amit Kumar Singh
Faculty Member, Department
of Law, M.J.P.R.U., Bareilly,
Uttar Pradesh, India

Political accountability in the digital age: assessing the impact of social media, online campaigning, and legal regulations on India's electoral democracy

Amit Kumar Singh

Abstract

The digital age has profoundly transformed electoral politics in India, redefining the ways political parties engage with voters, disseminate information, and influence public opinion. This research paper, Political Accountability in the Digital Age: Assessing the Impact of Social Media, Online Campaigning, and Legal Regulations on India's Electoral Democracy, critically examines the intersection of technology, law, and democratic governance. By analyzing the 2014, 2019, and 2024 general elections, the study explores the strategies employed by political parties, the evolving role of social media platforms, and the regulatory mechanisms designed to ensure transparency and accountability in digital campaigns. The paper identifies key challenges associated with digital electoral processes, including misinformation, polarization, privacy violations, algorithmic manipulation, and the digital divide. It further investigates India's legal and institutional frameworks, such as the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), the IT Act, and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, highlighting gaps in enforcement and emerging regulatory needs. Comparative analysis with international practices in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada provides insights into best practices for transparency, monitoring, ethical campaigning, and voter protection. Based on these analyses, the study offers a comprehensive set of recommendations, including updating legal frameworks to address AI-driven content and micro-targeting, implementing real-time monitoring systems, promoting digital literacy among voters, fostering ethical campaigning practices, and leveraging technological solutions such as AI and blockchain for transparency. The findings underscore that while digital technologies have enhanced voter engagement and political outreach, safeguarding electoral integrity requires a multi-dimensional approach combining law, ethics, technology, and civic education. The research contributes to the discourse on digital democracy in India, emphasizing the importance of political accountability, informed citizen participation, and the responsible use of emerging technologies in electoral processes. By integrating lessons from global experiences with the Indian context, the paper provides actionable strategies to ensure that digital campaigns strengthen, rather than undermine, the foundations of India's democratic governance.

Keywords: Digital democracy, political accountability, social media campaigning, electoral integrity, misinformation, privacy, AI in politics, india, voter engagement, legal regulations, digital literacy, comparative electoral analysis

1. Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy, has undergone a profound transformation in its electoral processes due to the rapid rise of digital technologies. Traditionally, political engagement in India relied heavily on face-to-face interactions, rallies, posters, newspapers, and broadcast media. However, the digital revolution has reshaped these dynamics, enabling political parties to communicate directly with millions of voters at an unprecedented scale and speed. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and messaging services like WhatsApp have emerged as powerful tools for political mobilization, campaign management, and public discourse.

The transformation of political campaigns into highly digitalized operations has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, digital platforms facilitate wider engagement, allow for real-time interaction between political leaders and citizens, and enable the rapid dissemination of policy information. On the other hand, they pose significant risks, including the propagation of fake news, digital misinformation campaigns, targeted political advertisements based on personal data, and the creation of echo chambers that reinforce ideological polarization. These developments have made it increasingly complex to hold political actors accountable and ensure a level playing field during elections.

Correspondence Author;
Amit Kumar Singh
Faculty Member, Department
of Law, M.J.P.R.U., Bareilly,
Uttar Pradesh, India

The introduction of digital campaigns in India began in the early 2000s, but it gained momentum during the 2009 general elections, where parties began experimenting with email newsletters, websites, and online forums. By 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leveraged social media extensively, employing data analytics, targeted messaging, and multimedia campaigns to engage with diverse voter segments. This marked a pivotal moment in Indian electoral history, demonstrating the power of digital tools in influencing electoral outcomes. The 2019 general elections further solidified this trend, with extensive use of WhatsApp groups, social media influencers, and AI-driven analytics to micro-target voters. By 2024, the landscape had become even more technologically sophisticated, incorporating deepfake videos, AI-generated content, and real-time digital monitoring, raising critical questions about transparency, regulation, and ethical conduct in electoral campaigns.

India's legal framework has attempted to keep pace with these developments, with the Election Commission of India (ECI) issuing guidelines for the use of social media in campaigns and the Indian government enacting regulations like the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. These regulations mandate social media platforms to establish grievance redressal mechanisms, remove harmful content, and provide transparency in political advertising. Nevertheless, the enforcement of these rules remains challenging due to the cross-border nature of digital platforms, the rapid evolution of technology, and the difficulty in monitoring online content comprehensively.

This research paper seeks to explore the intricate relationship between digital technology, social media, online campaigning, and political accountability in India. It examines the influence of digital campaigns on voter behavior, the challenges posed to democratic institutions, and the effectiveness of legal and regulatory frameworks in mitigating potential risks. By analyzing the digital strategies of political parties across multiple general elections, the study highlights the transformative impact of technology on electoral processes while also addressing critical ethical, legal, and societal concerns.

The key objectives of this study include:

- 1) To analyze the evolution of digital campaigning and social media use in Indian elections.
- 2) To examine the impact of digital platforms on voter behavior, political discourse, and public opinion.
- 3) To evaluate the effectiveness of legal regulations and guidelines governing online political campaigns.
- 4) To assess the ethical, societal, and technological challenges posed by digital campaigning.
- 5) To propose recommendations for enhancing political accountability and preserving electoral integrity in the digital age.

By exploring these aspects, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital technologies are reshaping democracy in India and how policymakers, regulators, and civil society can navigate these changes responsibly. The introduction of AI, big data analytics, and sophisticated targeting mechanisms has fundamentally changed the dynamics of electoral engagement, making it imperative to study these developments holistically to ensure that democratic principles are upheld in the digital era.

2. Evolution of digital campaigning in India

The trajectory of digital campaigning in India reflects the country's broader journey toward digitalization and the increasing penetration of the internet and mobile technologies. While traditional election campaigns in India relied heavily on physical rallies, print media, television, and radio, the past two decades have witnessed a significant shift toward digital platforms, changing the nature of political outreach, engagement, and voter mobilization.

Early experiments (2004-2009)

The initial phase of digital campaigning in India was exploratory. During the 2004 general elections, internet-based strategies were limited to party websites and email newsletters. These platforms were primarily used to provide information about party manifestos, candidate profiles, and press releases. The electorate in India at the time was largely offline, with only a small segment of urban voters connected to the internet. Consequently, the impact of these early digital campaigns was minimal in terms of influencing electoral outcomes.

By 2009, political parties began experimenting with social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which were gaining popularity among urban youth. The Indian National Congress (INC) utilized its websites and email campaigns to engage supporters and recruit volunteers for election activities. Similarly, the BJP started creating content for online platforms, laying the foundation for the sophisticated digital strategies that would emerge later. These campaigns focused mainly on awareness-building and outreach to tech-savvy voters rather than direct voter persuasion.

The digital breakthrough: 2014 general elections

The 2014 general elections marked a watershed moment in India's political history, as digital campaigning became a central strategy for political mobilization. The BJP, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, demonstrated unprecedented mastery over digital platforms, combining data analytics, targeted messaging, and multimedia content to reach a diverse electorate. The party's campaign included the following key elements:

- 1) **Social media integration:** Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were extensively used to disseminate party messaging, promotional videos, and real-time updates on campaign events. Hashtags such as #NaMo and #ModiForPM became viral, creating widespread online engagement.
- 2) **WhatsApp campaigning:** Recognizing the widespread use of WhatsApp across India, the BJP leveraged the platform to circulate multimedia messages, images, and short videos directly to voters, bypassing traditional media channels.
- 3) **Data-driven targeting:** The BJP used digital tools to segment voters based on demographics, location, and political inclinations. Personalized messages and campaign material were tailored to specific groups, enhancing voter engagement and resonance.
- 4) **Interactive online engagement:** The party's social media accounts facilitated two-way communication, allowing supporters to interact with leaders, ask questions, and share content. This created a sense of participatory politics that energized the electorate.

The success of the BJP's digital strategy in 2014 highlighted the immense potential of online campaigning in shaping

voter perceptions and influencing electoral outcomes. Political analysts widely acknowledged that the effective use of social media contributed significantly to the party's historic victory.

Consolidation and expansion: 2019 general elections

By the 2019 general elections, digital campaigning in India had evolved into a highly sophisticated ecosystem. Both major political parties the BJP and the INC invested heavily in online strategies, with an emphasis on data analytics, artificial intelligence, and targeted micro-campaigns. Key developments included:

- 1) **Micro-targeting of voters:** Political parties leveraged big data to identify individual voter preferences and design personalized messaging strategies. This approach allowed for highly specific communication, including WhatsApp messages, emails, and social media ads targeted at micro-segments of the electorate.
- 2) **Influencer marketing:** Recognizing the influence of social media personalities and content creators, parties collaborated with digital influencers to amplify campaign messages and reach younger audiences.
- 3) **Viral multimedia content:** Campaigns increasingly relied on short videos, memes, and infographics designed to go viral, creating widespread attention and online discussions.
- 4) **Countering opposition messaging:** Digital campaigns were also used strategically to respond to the opposition, counter misinformation, and shape public narratives in real-time.

The 2019 elections also raised critical concerns about misinformation and the ethical use of voter data. Fake news, doctored images, and politically motivated content circulated widely on WhatsApp and other platforms, challenging regulatory mechanisms and highlighting the need for robust digital governance.

The 2024 general elections: The era of AI and deepfakes

The 2024 elections in India marked a new era in digital campaigning, characterized by the integration of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and deepfake content. Key features included:

- 1) **AI-generated content:** Political parties experimented with AI-generated videos and images to create persuasive campaign material. While innovative, this also raised ethical and legal concerns about authenticity and manipulation.
- 2) **Real-time monitoring:** Social media monitoring tools allowed parties to track voter sentiment, engagement levels, and trending topics in real-time, enabling rapid responses to emerging issues.
- 3) **Sophisticated micro-targeting:** Advanced analytics enabled hyper-localized targeting, where messages were tailored not only to demographic segments but also to specific constituencies, neighborhoods, and voter clusters.
- 4) **Increased regulation and scrutiny:** The Election Commission of India, in collaboration with social media platforms, strengthened monitoring of online content, requiring disclosure of political advertising and rapid removal of harmful content.

Key trends in India's digital campaigning

- 1) **Shift from mass communication to personalization:** Early campaigns focused on broad messaging, but

contemporary strategies emphasize personalized content and direct voter engagement.

- 2) **Integration of multiple platforms:** Successful campaigns utilize a mix of social media, messaging apps, online news portals, and even AI-driven chatbots to reach diverse segments of the electorate.
- 3) **Blurring of political and entertainment content:** Digital campaigns increasingly blend political messaging with entertainment, using memes, music, and influencer collaborations to engage voters emotionally.
- 4) **Challenges of regulation and ethical conduct:** The global and decentralized nature of digital platforms creates difficulties in enforcing electoral laws, ensuring transparency, and preventing manipulation.

3. Impact of social media on electoral processes

Social media has emerged as a transformative force in political campaigns worldwide, and India is no exception. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have reshaped how political parties communicate with voters, influence public opinion, and mobilize support. The widespread adoption of social media has introduced new dynamics into electoral processes, creating opportunities for enhanced political engagement but also presenting significant challenges for maintaining democratic integrity.

Direct communication with voters

One of the most profound impacts of social media on electoral processes is the ability of political parties and candidates to communicate directly with voters. Unlike traditional media, which often acts as an intermediary between politicians and the electorate, social media allows unfiltered messaging. This direct communication serves multiple purposes:

- 1) **Amplification of political messaging:** Political parties can broadcast campaign promises, policy proposals, and achievements directly to millions of users, bypassing traditional media filters.
- 2) **Real-time engagement:** Candidates and parties can interact with voters in real-time through comments, polls, live streams, and Q&A sessions, creating a sense of participatory democracy.
- 3) **Mobilization of supporters:** Social media enables the rapid organization of volunteer networks, rallies, and campaign events, facilitating grassroots mobilization at unprecedented scales.

The 2014 general elections demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach, with the BJP leveraging social media to reach urban and rural voters alike. Campaign videos, interactive posts, and real-time updates created a strong online presence that enhanced voter engagement and contributed to electoral success.

Influence on voter behavior

Social media platforms play a critical role in shaping voter behavior, including political attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making. Research has shown that exposure to targeted political content on social media can significantly influence voting patterns. Several mechanisms contribute to this influence:

- 1) **Echo chambers and filter bubbles:** Social media algorithms tend to present users with content that aligns

with their existing beliefs and preferences. This creates echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to a particular political viewpoint, reinforcing their opinions and potentially polarizing the electorate.

- 2) **Viral political content:** Short videos, memes, and infographics designed for virality can simplify complex political issues, evoke emotional responses, and spread rapidly across networks. Such content often shapes public discourse and voter perceptions more effectively than traditional news reporting.
- 3) **Peer influence and social proof:** Seeing friends, family, or influencers endorse a political party or candidate on social media can influence individual voting behavior through social proof and peer pressure.
- 4) **Agenda setting:** By trending topics, hashtags, and viral campaigns, social media platforms can highlight specific issues, influencing what voters perceive as important during an election.

In India, the impact of social media on voter behavior was evident in the 2019 and 2024 elections. Targeted WhatsApp campaigns, personalized Facebook ads, and Instagram stories were used to influence specific demographic segments, including youth, women, and first-time voters. Political parties increasingly relied on analytics to identify voter preferences and craft content designed to resonate emotionally and ideologically.

Challenges to electoral integrity

While social media has democratized political communication, it has also introduced challenges that threaten the fairness and transparency of electoral processes:

- 1) **Misinformation and fake news:** The rapid spread of false or misleading information on platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook has been a persistent challenge in Indian elections. Fake news stories, doctored images, and misleading videos can distort public perception, manipulate voter sentiment, and undermine trust in the democratic process.
- 2) **Manipulation through micro-targeting:** Advanced analytics enable political parties to deliver highly personalized content to specific voter groups. While effective for engagement, micro-targeting raises ethical concerns about manipulation, privacy violations, and unequal access to information.
- 3) **Polarization and social division:** Social media can exacerbate existing social, religious, and political divisions. Polarizing content, sensationalist messaging, and hate speech contribute to social fragmentation, potentially undermining the democratic ideal of inclusive political debate.
- 4) **Anonymity and lack of accountability:** The anonymity provided by social media platforms enables the dissemination of harmful or illegal content without accountability. Fake accounts, bots, and troll networks can amplify propaganda, manipulate narratives, and intimidate voters.
- 5) **Digital divide:** Despite the proliferation of smartphones and internet access, significant disparities remain in digital literacy and access, particularly in rural areas. Unequal access to online information can exacerbate political inequality and limit meaningful participation in the electoral process.

Regulatory responses to social media challenges

Recognizing these challenges, the Indian government and

the Election Commission of India (ECI) have implemented legal and regulatory measures to govern social media use during elections:

- 1) **Information technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021:** These rules require social media platforms to establish grievance redressal mechanisms, remove harmful content promptly, and maintain transparency regarding political advertisements.
- 2) **Election commission guidelines:** The ECI has issued specific rules regarding online campaigning, including the prohibition of spreading false information, regulation of political ads, and monitoring social media platforms to prevent malpractice.
- 3) **Collaboration with technology companies:** Social media platforms are increasingly collaborating with regulatory authorities to identify fake accounts, remove harmful content, and provide transparency in political advertising.

Despite these measures, challenges remain in enforcement due to the global and decentralized nature of digital platforms, rapid technological changes, and the sheer volume of online content during elections.

Case examples of social media impact

- 1) **2014 general elections:** The BJP's social media strategy enabled rapid dissemination of campaign messages, creation of online communities, and mobilization of volunteers, contributing significantly to its electoral success.
- 2) **2019 general elections:** Targeted campaigns on WhatsApp and Facebook influenced voter behavior at a granular level. AI-powered analytics enabled parties to micro-target messages to specific voter segments, raising ethical concerns about manipulation and privacy.
- 3) **2024 general elections:** The emergence of deepfakes and AI-generated content created new challenges in ensuring content authenticity. Viral misinformation campaigns demonstrated the potential risks of advanced technology in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes.

Opportunities for enhancing electoral democracy

While challenges exist, social media also offers opportunities to strengthen democracy in India:

- 1) **Enhanced voter engagement:** Digital platforms facilitate greater participation, especially among youth and first-time voters, increasing political awareness and civic involvement.
- 2) **Transparency and accountability:** Social media enables real-time monitoring of political campaigns, making it easier to hold parties accountable for promises, misstatements, and unethical conduct.
- 3) **Policy advocacy and issue mobilization:** Citizens can use social media to raise awareness about policy issues, mobilize campaigns for social causes, and participate in public debates, enhancing democratic deliberation.
- 4) **Innovative campaign strategies:** Parties can leverage social media for creative, issue-focused campaigns that educate voters, highlight development agendas, and encourage informed voting.

4. Legal and regulatory frameworks governing digital political campaigning in India

The rapid digitalization of political campaigns in India has necessitated the development of legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure fair elections, transparency, and political accountability. The intersection of technology, law, and politics presents unique challenges, as traditional election laws were primarily designed for offline campaigning and mass media, not for online and social media platforms. This section examines the existing legal frameworks, regulatory bodies, their effectiveness, and the challenges posed by the evolving digital electoral landscape.

4.1 Role of the Election Commission of India (ECI)

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is the apex constitutional body responsible for administering free and fair elections under Article 324 of the Indian Constitution. Over the years, the ECI has actively updated guidelines to regulate political activities in the digital domain. Its responsibilities include:

- 1) **Monitoring online campaigns:** The ECI actively monitors social media content during elections to ensure compliance with the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), which governs ethical political behavior. The MCC restricts the use of hate speech, misinformation, and defamatory content against opponents.
- 2) **Regulating political advertisements:** Political parties are required to disclose the sources, costs, and targeting parameters of digital ads. The ECI mandates transparency in online campaigns to ensure voters are not misled or manipulated.
- 3) **Grievance redressal mechanisms:** During elections, the ECI sets up digital and physical grievance redressal systems to report violations of campaign rules, including online abuse, fake news, or illegal content.
- 4) **Guidelines for social media platforms:** The ECI collaborates with major social media companies to remove or flag content that violates election laws. It also educates platforms about compliance with Indian electoral laws and ethical norms.

4.2 Key legal provisions governing digital campaigning

a) The Representation of the People Act, 1951

The Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, provides the legal foundation for electoral processes in India. While primarily designed for traditional elections, several sections are applicable to digital campaigning:

- **Section 123:** Defines corrupt practices, including the dissemination of false statements about candidates. Social media platforms have become channels where violations of this section often occur.
- **Section 126:** Prohibits public meetings and campaigning close to polling time. Online messaging platforms are included in the ECI's interpretation to prevent last-minute manipulation.

b) Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act)

The IT Act provides the framework for addressing digital content and intermediary responsibility:

- **Section 79:** Provides conditional immunity to intermediaries (like social media platforms) but requires the removal of unlawful content upon receiving a notice.
- **Rules under the IT Act (Intermediary Guidelines, 2021):** Mandate platforms to remove harmful content,

provide transparency regarding digital political advertisements, and establish grievance redressal mechanisms.

c) Model Code of Conduct (MCC)

The MCC, although not legally binding, acts as a regulatory guideline for ethical campaigning:

- Prohibits inflammatory or defamatory posts.
- Requires that all political parties adhere to transparency norms in social media communication.
- Encourages responsible dissemination of information to prevent fake news and hate speech.

4.3 Regulatory measures by social media platforms

Social media companies have taken proactive steps to comply with Indian electoral regulations:

- 1) **Verification of political advertisers:** Platforms like Facebook and Twitter require parties and political advertisers to disclose identities, budgets, and targeting criteria.
- 2) **Content monitoring:** AI-driven tools and human moderators flag misinformation, hate speech, and manipulated content.
- 3) **Transparency reports:** Platforms periodically publish reports on political ad spending, content removals, and account suspensions.

Despite these measures, challenges persist due to the global nature of platforms, limited enforcement powers, and rapidly evolving technologies such as AI-generated content and deepfakes.

5. Case studies: digital campaigning and electoral dynamics in India

Case studies provide valuable insights into how digital technologies have transformed electoral campaigns in India. This section examines three pivotal general elections 2014, 2019, and 2024 to understand the strategies employed by political parties, the role of social media, and the regulatory responses to challenges arising from digital campaigning.

5.1 2014 general elections: The digital breakthrough

The 2014 general elections marked a significant turning point in India's electoral history, primarily due to the strategic use of digital platforms by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party leveraged social media to create a highly personalized and interactive campaign that reached voters across urban and rural India.

Key strategies

- 1) **Social media integration:** BJP effectively utilized Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to disseminate campaign messages. Interactive posts, videos, and live streams facilitated direct communication with millions of users. Hashtags such as #NaMo and #ModiForPM gained widespread traction, creating a digital echo that amplified the party's messaging.
- 2) **WhatsApp campaigning:** Recognizing WhatsApp's massive reach, especially in rural areas, BJP created groups and broadcast lists to circulate multimedia messages. This strategy allowed the party to bypass traditional media filters and reach voters directly with targeted content.
- 3) **Data-driven voter targeting:** BJP employed sophisticated data analytics to segment voters based on

demographics, interests, and political inclinations. This allowed the party to tailor campaign messages and outreach strategies, creating a sense of personalized engagement for each voter.

- 4) **Grassroots digital mobilization:** Social media was used to recruit volunteers, organize rallies, and coordinate door-to-door campaigns, creating a bridge between online and offline political activity.

Impact

The BJP's digital strategy contributed significantly to its electoral success, demonstrating the potential of social media to influence voter behavior, shape public opinion, and mobilize support. This campaign set a precedent for digital political campaigning in India, showing that technology could be a decisive factor in election outcomes.

5.2 2019 general elections: Micro-targeting and digital intensification

By 2019, digital campaigning had evolved into a sophisticated ecosystem characterized by micro-targeting, influencer collaborations, and AI-driven analytics. Both the BJP and the Indian National Congress (INC) leveraged digital platforms extensively, although the BJP maintained a dominant online presence.

Key strategies

- 1) **Micro-targeting:** Parties used big data analytics to identify individual voter preferences and behavioral patterns. Personalized messages were delivered to specific voter segments via social media ads and WhatsApp broadcasts.
- 2) **Influencer marketing:** Recognizing the persuasive power of social media personalities, political parties engaged influencers to amplify campaign messages, particularly targeting youth voters on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok (at the time).
- 3) **Viral multimedia content:** Memes, short videos, infographics, and GIFs were widely used to simplify complex political messages and increase virality. These forms of content were designed to be easily shareable, creating organic amplification through social networks.
- 4) **Rapid response to opposition:** Digital teams monitored opposition campaigns in real-time, crafting counter-narratives and clarifications to mitigate negative publicity or misinformation.

Challenges

Despite the effectiveness of these strategies, the 2019 elections also revealed significant challenges:

- **Misinformation and fake news:** WhatsApp and other platforms were used to circulate fake news and misleading information, influencing voter sentiment and raising concerns about electoral integrity.
- **Privacy concerns:** The extensive use of voter data for targeted campaigns highlighted ethical and legal issues regarding data collection and usage.
- **Regulatory oversight:** Although the ECI issued guidelines for online campaigning, enforcing compliance proved challenging due to the scale of

digital content and rapid dissemination.

Impact

The 2019 elections underscored the power of digital tools to influence elections while revealing vulnerabilities in regulation, ethics, and voter protection. Political parties increasingly recognized that online campaigning could sway outcomes as much as traditional methods if deployed strategically.

5.3 2024 general elections: AI, deepfakes, and digital complexity

The 2024 general elections marked the most technologically advanced campaigns in India's history. Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, and deepfake technologies became integral to digital campaigning, creating new opportunities and challenges for political parties, regulators, and voters alike.

Key strategies

- 1) **AI-generated content:** Political campaigns employed AI to generate persuasive videos, images, and text-based content. AI tools helped parties tailor content for micro-segments, optimize messaging strategies, and predict voter behavior patterns.
- 2) **Real-time monitoring:** Advanced social media analytics tools allowed parties to monitor voter engagement, trending topics, and sentiment in real-time. This enabled rapid content adjustments and strategic messaging during the campaign.
- 3) **Hyper-targeting:** Machine learning algorithms analyzed large datasets to deliver highly personalized campaign messages, down to the constituency or even neighborhood level.
- 4) **Digital advocacy and citizen engagement:** Parties utilized online platforms for policy discussions, virtual town halls, and interactive Q&A sessions, engaging citizens in participatory political discourse.

Challenges

- **Deepfakes and manipulation:** The circulation of AI-generated videos and doctored images raised significant concerns about authenticity, misinformation, and manipulation. Voters faced difficulty discerning real content from digitally fabricated material.
- **Regulatory gaps:** Existing laws struggled to address AI-driven content and algorithmic micro-targeting, highlighting the need for updated legal frameworks.
- **Ethical concerns:** Hyper-targeting and AI-driven persuasion raised ethical questions about voter autonomy and informed decision-making.

Impact

The 2024 elections highlighted both the transformative potential and the ethical, legal, and social risks of emerging technologies in political campaigns. While digital tools enhanced engagement and participation, they also underscored the necessity for stronger regulations, digital literacy initiatives, and technological solutions to maintain electoral integrity.

5.4 Comparative analysis across the three elections

Aspect	2014	2019	2024
Digital penetration	Moderate; focus on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp	High; broader use of Instagram, YouTube, micro-targeting	Very High; AI, deepfakes, advanced analytics, hyper-targeting
Voter engagement	Interactive posts, volunteer mobilization	Micro-targeting, influencer campaigns, viral content	Hyper-personalized messaging, AI-driven engagement, virtual town halls
Key challenges	Limited regulation, initial misinformation	Privacy concerns, fake news proliferation	Deepfakes, AI content manipulation, regulatory gaps
Regulatory response	Basic MCC guidance, ad-hoc monitoring	ECI monitoring, some disclosure norms	Strengthened IT rules, transparency mandates, need for AI-specific laws
Impact on electoral integrity	Positive influence, minimal manipulation	Mixed; increased voter influence but higher misinformation	Complex; enhanced engagement but significant ethical/legal concerns

5.5 Lessons learned

- 1) **Digital campaigning has become central to electoral success:** Political parties increasingly rely on social media to shape narratives, engage voters, and mobilize support.
- 2) **Regulation must evolve with technology:** Traditional election laws are insufficient to address AI-driven campaigns, deepfakes, and algorithmic targeting.
- 3) **Ethics and accountability are crucial:** Transparency in data usage, campaign funding, and content creation is necessary to maintain public trust.
- 4) **Digital literacy is essential:** Educating voters about misinformation, fake news, and online manipulation strengthens democratic resilience.
- 5) **Integration of online and offline strategies is key:** Successful campaigns combine digital tools with grassroots mobilization, rallies, and direct engagement.

6. Challenges to electoral integrity in the digital age (~1,300 Words)

The digitalization of electoral campaigns has fundamentally transformed the political landscape in India. While social media and online platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for engagement, they also introduce significant risks that can compromise electoral integrity. These challenges span misinformation, polarization, privacy concerns, the digital divide, and enforcement limitations, all of which require careful scrutiny to maintain fair and transparent elections.

6.1 Misinformation and fake news

One of the most pressing challenges in digital campaigning is the rapid spread of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms facilitate the instant sharing of content, which can reach millions within minutes. While this enables swift communication, it also allows false information to influence voter perceptions.

Key issues

- 1) **WhatsApp chains and viral messages:** The popularity of WhatsApp in India has made it a primary channel for spreading unverified information. Forwarded messages, images, and videos often contain manipulated facts, creating confusion and influencing voter sentiment.
- 2) **Political propaganda and deepfakes:** With AI-generated videos and deepfake technology, false representations of politicians, events, or policies can be created, making it difficult for voters to discern truth from fiction.

- 3) **Impact on marginalized communities:** Misinformation disproportionately affects voters with limited digital literacy, rural populations, and first-time voters, making them more susceptible to manipulation.

Example: During the 2019 general elections, numerous fake news campaigns circulated on WhatsApp, including misleading messages about candidates’ criminal records and government schemes, which prompted legal scrutiny and calls for stronger regulation.

6.2 Polarization and social division

Digital campaigns can exacerbate existing social, religious, and political divisions. Social media algorithms often prioritize content that generates high engagement, inadvertently amplifying sensationalist or polarizing messages.

Key issues

- 1) **Echo chambers and filter bubbles:** Users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing biases and creating political polarization.
- 2) **Hate speech and communal tensions:** Online platforms have been used to spread divisive content, fueling communal tensions and social unrest during elections.
- 3) **Fragmentation of public discourse:** Polarized content undermines inclusive political dialogue and can distort public understanding of policies and issues.

Example: In the 2024 elections, political campaigns increasingly targeted micro-segments of the population with highly tailored, ideologically charged messages, contributing to heightened polarization in certain constituencies.

6.3 Privacy and data protection concerns

Digital campaigns rely heavily on the collection, storage, and analysis of personal voter data. While these practices enable targeted messaging, they raise significant ethical and legal concerns regarding privacy.

Key Issues

- 1) **Unauthorized data collection:** Political campaigns often collect voter data through social media interactions, online surveys, and third-party analytics, sometimes without explicit consent.
- 2) **Targeted micro-campaigning:** Micro-targeted political ads, while effective, exploit personal information to manipulate voter behavior, raising questions about autonomy and informed consent.

- 3) **Regulatory gaps:** Although the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, establishes rules for handling personal data, enforcement in the political sphere remains limited, especially regarding cross-border data flows and algorithmic targeting.

Example: The Cambridge Analytica scandal in the global context highlighted how voter data can be exploited to influence elections. Similar concerns have been raised in India regarding the use of analytics firms for micro-targeting voters in national elections.

6.4 The digital divide

Despite increasing internet penetration, significant disparities remain in access to digital technologies, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized communities. The digital divide poses challenges to fair political participation.

Key issues

- 1) **Unequal access to information:** Voters with limited internet access may not receive timely campaign information, placing them at a disadvantage compared to digitally connected citizens.
- 2) **Digital literacy gaps:** Lack of digital literacy makes some voters more vulnerable to misinformation, propaganda, and manipulative campaigns.
- 3) **Urban-rural disparities:** Urban voters often have better access to online political content, while rural voters may rely on forwarded messages, which are more susceptible to misinformation.

Impact: The digital divide undermines the democratic principle of equal participation, as voters' ability to make informed choices is unevenly distributed across social and geographical lines.

6.5 Regulatory and enforcement limitations

While India has established a framework for regulating digital campaigns, including the IT Act, ECI guidelines, and intermediary rules, enforcement remains a major challenge.

Key issues

- 1) **Volume and speed of content:** The sheer volume of social media content generated during elections makes real-time monitoring and enforcement difficult.
- 2) **Cross-border platforms:** Many social media platforms are headquartered abroad, complicating jurisdictional authority and enforcement of Indian laws.
- 3) **Reactive rather than proactive measures:** Most regulatory actions occur post-violation, which limits preventive control over misinformation, hate speech, or data misuse.
- 4) **Resource constraints:** Election authorities face challenges in deploying sufficient human and technological resources to monitor digital campaigns effectively.

Example: Despite guidelines for political ads on Facebook and Twitter, compliance monitoring has been inconsistent, and illegal or misleading ads often remain active during critical periods.

7. Comparative analysis and findings: India and global practices in digital electoral campaigning

Understanding India's digital electoral dynamics benefits significantly from a comparative perspective. By examining

international practices, regulatory frameworks, and technological interventions in other democracies, we can identify lessons, successes, and gaps relevant to India. This section compares India's approach to digital campaigning with countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada, highlighting insights for strengthening electoral integrity and accountability.

7.1 India's digital electoral landscape

India has witnessed an unprecedented shift toward digital campaigning, particularly in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 general elections. Key features include:

- 1) **Extensive use of social media:** Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become primary channels for political communication.
- 2) **Data-driven micro-targeting:** Political parties employ analytics to deliver personalized messages to specific demographic segments.
- 3) **Integration of AI and emerging technologies:** In 2024, AI-driven content creation, predictive analytics, and deepfakes were utilized in campaigns.
- 4) **Regulatory frameworks:** India relies on the IT Act, Model Code of Conduct (MCC), ECI guidelines, and intermediary rules to regulate digital campaigns.

While India's digital campaigns have increased political engagement and voter participation, challenges such as misinformation, algorithmic bias, privacy violations, and the digital divide remain significant.

7.2 Comparative insights from global democracies

a) United States

The U.S. has one of the most advanced digital campaign ecosystems, characterized by extensive use of social media, big data, and targeted advertising.

Key features

- 1) **Regulation of political advertising:** The Federal Election Commission (FEC) mandates that all political ads disclose funding sources and targeting parameters.
- 2) **Role of big data and analytics:** Campaigns, such as the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, heavily utilized voter data analytics for personalized outreach.
- 3) **Challenges:** The U.S. has faced controversies regarding foreign interference, data misuse (e.g., Cambridge Analytica), and misinformation campaigns.

Lessons for India

- Transparency in digital political advertising is essential to maintain public trust.
- Regulatory oversight must adapt to emerging technologies and data-driven campaign strategies.
- Collaboration between authorities and technology platforms is critical to prevent misinformation.

b) United Kingdom

The UK emphasizes both legal regulation and voluntary codes for social media during elections.

Key features

- 1) **Electoral commission oversight:** The UK's Electoral Commission monitors political advertising, social media activity, and campaign financing.
- 2) **Social media code of practice:** Requires verification of

political accounts, disclosure of ad spending, and removal of misleading content.

- 3) **Misinformation mitigation:** Fact-checking initiatives and public education campaigns aim to counter fake news and algorithmic bias.

Lessons for India

- Voluntary codes and industry cooperation can supplement legal frameworks effectively.
- Fact-checking and civic education are critical for mitigating misinformation.
- Verification of political accounts enhances accountability and prevents anonymity-based manipulation.

c) Germany

Germany has implemented stringent rules to combat misinformation, hate speech, and foreign interference.

Key features

- 1) **Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG):** Requires social media platforms to remove illegal content, hate speech, and disinformation within 24 hours.
- 2) **Transparency in political ads:** Campaign advertisements must be clearly labeled, and spending must be reported to authorities.
- 3) **Digital literacy initiatives:** Public campaigns educate voters on identifying fake news and critically evaluating online content.

Lessons for India

- Strict timelines for content removal can reduce the spread of harmful misinformation.
- Enforcement mechanisms need to be robust and technology-driven.
- Public education enhances resilience against digital manipulation.

d) Canada

Canada focuses on ethical standards and transparency for digital campaigns.

Key features

- 1) **Election act amendments:** Require disclosure of online political ad spending and target audience information.
- 2) **Campaign ethics guidelines:** Emphasize honesty, integrity, and non-manipulative communication.
- 3) **Collaboration with platforms:** Social media companies are required to monitor political content and report violations.

Lessons for India

- Ethical guidelines can complement legal frameworks to maintain trust in electoral processes.
- Collaboration with platforms ensures real-time monitoring and enforcement.
- Transparency in digital campaigns prevents undue influence and manipulation.

7.3 Key findings from comparative analysis

- 1) **Transparency is central to accountability:** Countries like the U.S., UK, and Germany prioritize disclosure of

political ad funding, targeting, and content origin, which enhances trust and prevents manipulation. India's regulations are evolving, but greater emphasis on transparency in digital ads and targeting is needed.

- 2) **Proactive monitoring reduces misinformation:** Germany's rapid takedown of illegal content under NetzDG and the UK's collaboration with social media platforms demonstrate the effectiveness of proactive enforcement. India's current model is largely reactive, requiring enhancements in monitoring and rapid response.
- 3) **Digital literacy strengthens democratic participation:** Across all countries, voter education campaigns reduce the impact of misinformation and enhance informed decision-making. India faces a significant digital literacy gap, particularly in rural areas, which must be addressed.
- 4) **Ethical campaigning complements legal frameworks:** Codes of conduct, ethical guidelines, and voluntary industry cooperation have proven effective in multiple countries. India can incorporate similar initiatives to promote responsible online campaigning.
- 5) **Integration of technology and regulation is critical:** The U.S. and UK show that combining advanced analytics with regulatory oversight can balance campaign effectiveness with ethical standards. India must develop frameworks to regulate AI-driven content, micro-targeting, and deepfakes.
- 6) **Addressing the digital divide ensures equitable participation:** Comparative analysis highlights the need to reduce digital disparities. Inclusive access to information and platforms ensures that all voters, regardless of socioeconomic status, can participate meaningfully in democratic processes.

8. Recommendations: Strengthening digital electoral accountability in India

The digitalization of electoral campaigns in India has transformed how political parties engage with voters, communicate policy, and mobilize support. While these developments offer immense potential for democratic participation, they also present challenges to electoral integrity, voter privacy, and public trust. Building on the analyses of previous sections including legal frameworks, case studies, challenges, and comparative insights this section outlines actionable recommendations for strengthening political accountability and concludes with a synthesis of key findings.

8.1 Recommendations for strengthening digital electoral accountability

1. Legal and regulatory reforms

- 1) **Updating the Model Code of Conduct (MCC):** The MCC should explicitly address digital campaigning, including the use of AI-generated content, social media micro-targeting, and algorithm-driven messaging. Clear definitions of unlawful practices, misinformation, and online hate speech will enhance enforceability.
- 2) **Enhancing intermediary liability rules:** Under the IT Act, intermediaries (social media platforms) currently enjoy conditional immunity. These provisions should be strengthened to hold platforms accountable for the spread of political misinformation, deepfakes, and unethical campaign content. Timely removal

- mechanisms and stricter compliance requirements are essential.
- 3) **Transparency in political advertising:** Mandate that all digital political advertisements disclose funding sources, target demographics, ad spending, and content origin. Transparency reports should be submitted to the Election Commission of India (ECI) for audit and public scrutiny.
 - 4) **Data protection and privacy regulations:** Political campaigns should strictly comply with the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. Specific guidelines must be developed for responsible use of voter data, prohibiting unauthorized collection, micro-targeting without consent, and algorithmic manipulation.

2. Strengthening monitoring and enforcement

- 1) **Real-time monitoring systems:** The ECI, in collaboration with technology platforms, should develop AI-powered monitoring tools to identify and flag misinformation, hate speech, and unlawful campaign content in real-time.
- 2) **Rapid response teams:** Deploy dedicated teams at both central and state levels to address digital campaign violations swiftly. These teams can coordinate with law enforcement and social media companies to ensure timely action.
- 3) **Independent oversight bodies:** Consider establishing independent digital election observatories, similar to initiatives in the UK and Germany, to audit social media activity, monitor political ad transparency, and evaluate compliance with regulations.

3. Promoting digital literacy and public awareness

- 1) **Nationwide voter education programs:** Implement comprehensive programs to educate voters on recognizing misinformation, understanding algorithmic influence, and critically evaluating online political content.
- 2) **Focus on marginalized communities:** Special campaigns should target rural areas, first-time voters, and digitally underprivileged populations to bridge the information gap and promote equitable electoral participation.
- 3) **Collaboration with educational institutions and civil society:** Schools, colleges, and NGOs can play a pivotal role in fostering digital literacy, ethical online behavior, and awareness of rights and responsibilities in the electoral process.

4. Ethical campaigning practices

- 1) **Code of conduct for digital campaigning:** Political parties and candidates should adopt ethical guidelines that prioritize honesty, fairness, and transparency in digital campaigns.
- 2) **Voluntary industry cooperation:** Social media platforms should be encouraged to participate in voluntary codes of practice, including content verification, fact-checking, and responsible ad targeting.
- 3) **Promotion of civic responsibility:** Campaigns should focus on policy discussions, issue-based communication, and citizen engagement rather than sensationalism, polarization, or divisive content.

5. Technological solutions

- 1) **AI and blockchain for transparency:** Leveraging AI tools for real-time monitoring and blockchain for campaign finance transparency can enhance trust in electoral processes. Blockchain can provide immutable records of political ad spending, donations, and content origin.
- 2) **Fact-checking and verification mechanisms:** Integrate automated fact-checking tools within social media platforms and encourage partnerships with independent fact-checking organizations to mitigate the spread of misinformation.
- 3) **Countering deepfakes and synthetic media:** Develop AI-driven detection systems capable of identifying deepfakes and manipulated media to protect the authenticity of political content.

8.2 Key policy recommendations

Policy area	Recommendation	Expected impact
Legal framework	Update MCC, IT Act, and intermediary rules	Clarify legal obligations, enhance enforcement, prevent misuse
Data privacy	Strict compliance with Digital Personal Data Protection Act	Protect voter autonomy, prevent misuse of personal data
Transparency	Mandatory disclosure of political ads	Increase accountability, reduce hidden influence
Monitoring	AI-powered surveillance and rapid response teams	Quick detection and removal of misinformation
Digital literacy	Nationwide education programs	Empower voters, reduce susceptibility to fake news
Ethics	Voluntary codes and party accountability	Promote responsible campaigning, reduce polarization
Technology	Blockchain and AI solutions	Ensure transparency, authenticity, and trust in elections

9. Conclusion

The digital age has fundamentally transformed political campaigning in India, ushering in a new era where technology, data analytics, and social media platforms play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes. The integration of these digital tools has provided political parties with unprecedented opportunities for direct engagement with voters, enabling them to disseminate their messages widely, tailor campaigns to specific demographics, and mobilize support more effectively than ever before. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have become central to election strategies, while artificial intelligence and big data analytics have allowed parties to predict voter behavior, micro-target communications, and optimize outreach efforts.

However, alongside these opportunities, digital campaigning presents a series of complex challenges that threaten the integrity, transparency, and fairness of the electoral process. The 2014, 2019, and 2024 general elections in India demonstrate both the transformative potential and the risks inherent in this digital shift. Misinformation, fake news, algorithm-driven polarization, and the emergence of deepfakes have highlighted vulnerabilities in the democratic system. These phenomena can distort voter perceptions,

amplify communal and political divides, and undermine trust in electoral institutions. Moreover, the use of personal voter data for micro-targeting without adequate consent raises serious concerns regarding privacy and the ethical use of digital information. To safeguard the foundations of democracy in this rapidly evolving landscape, India must adopt a multi-dimensional strategy that combines legal reforms, regulatory oversight, technological solutions, voter education, and ethical campaigning practices. Strengthening the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) to explicitly address digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and micro-targeting is crucial. Simultaneously, ensuring transparency in digital advertising, including mandatory disclosure of funding sources, targeted demographics, and ad content origin, can enhance political accountability. Data privacy regulations, such as compliance with the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, must be rigorously enforced to protect citizens' information from misuse and manipulation.

Technological interventions, including AI-driven monitoring systems, blockchain-based transparency tools, and automated fact-checking mechanisms, can play a critical role in identifying and mitigating misinformation in real-time. Collaboration between the Election Commission of India (ECI), technology platforms, civil society organizations, and independent oversight bodies can establish a robust framework for monitoring, reporting, and addressing violations in digital campaigns. These efforts must be complemented by comprehensive voter education programs designed to enhance digital literacy, foster critical evaluation of online content, and empower citizens to make informed electoral decisions. Ethical norms in political campaigning also hold significant importance. Political parties and candidates must prioritize honesty, fairness, and responsibility in their digital strategies, avoiding manipulative tactics, divisive rhetoric, and the dissemination of misleading content. Voluntary codes of conduct, industry partnerships with social media platforms, and public accountability mechanisms can reinforce ethical campaigning practices and foster a culture of transparency and trust.

Comparative insights from countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada underscore the importance of proactive regulation, collaboration with technology platforms, and civic empowerment. Lessons from these democracies reveal that digital electoral integrity is best maintained through a combination of stringent legal frameworks, rapid enforcement mechanisms, transparency initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and active engagement with emerging technologies. By tailoring these global best practices to the Indian context, the nation can effectively address challenges posed by misinformation, privacy violations, and algorithmic biases while preserving the benefits of digital engagement. Ultimately, political accountability in the digital age is not solely the responsibility of regulators or political parties; it also depends on an informed, vigilant, and digitally literate citizenry capable of critically engaging with information and holding elected representatives accountable. India stands at a crossroads, where the choices made today regarding the regulation, ethics, and technological deployment of digital campaigns will determine the trajectory of its democratic processes for decades to come. By embracing a multi-faceted strategy that combines law, technology, ethics, and civic education, India can ensure that its democracy remains

resilient, inclusive, and responsive in the age of digital politics.

References

1. Ahluwalia P, Suri K. Digital campaigns and electoral behavior in India: an analysis of social media influence. *J Polit Stud*. 2020;27(2):45-68.
2. Banerjee A, Mehta R. Social media and political communication: opportunities and challenges for Indian democracy. *Indian J Public Adm*. 2021;67(3):245-267.
3. Bansal S. Electoral reforms in India: transparency and accountability in the digital age. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2019.
4. Bhattacharya D. The role of WhatsApp in shaping political narratives: evidence from India. *Media Cult Soc*. 2022;44(5):899-916.
5. Bhatnagar R. Political micro-targeting and privacy concerns: lessons for India. *Int J Digit Polit*. 2020;3(1):15-32.
6. Cadwalladr C, Graham-Harrison E. The Cambridge Analytica files. *The Guardian*; 2018. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files>
7. Chadha R, Kaur P. Artificial intelligence and digital electoral strategies: implications for Indian democracy. *J Elect Stud*. 2021;12(2):77-101.
8. Chaturvedi S. Social media regulation and electoral integrity in India. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 2020;55(18):35-42.
9. Crisp BF, McGregor SC. Social media, campaigns, and democracy: comparative perspectives. *Polit Commun*. 2019;36(3):317-335.
10. Dutta S. Electoral governance and digital democracy in India: a legal perspective. *Indian J Const Law*. 2021;15(2):112-136.
11. Election Commission of India. Model code of conduct for general elections, 2019. New Delhi: ECI; 2019.
12. Election Commission of India. Guidelines for social media and digital campaigning. New Delhi: ECI; 2024.
13. Faris R, Roberts H. Democracy in the digital era: misinformation and online political behavior. *J Democr*. 2020;31(4):45-59.
14. Ghosh S, Mukherjee A. Algorithmic bias in social media campaigns: implications for Indian elections. *AI Soc*. 2022;37(1):57-72.
15. Gupta N. Digital literacy and political participation: bridging the gap in India. New Delhi: Routledge; 2020.
16. Harish V. Privacy and data protection in electoral campaigns: Indian challenges. *J Law Technol*. 2019;11(2):89-112.
17. Hoffman LH, Lutz C. Political communication in the age of social media: lessons from global elections. *Int Polit Sci Rev*. 2021;42(6):789-807.
18. IT Ministry, Government of India. Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. New Delhi: Government of India; 2023.
19. Jha R, Singh P. Social media influence on voter behavior: evidence from India. *Asian J Polit Sci*. 2020;28(1):25-49.
20. Kaushik R. The ethics of AI-driven campaigns in India: policy implications. *J Ethics Digit Polit*. 2021;2(3):41-63.
21. Kaur M, Sharma P. Digital divide and political participation: an Indian perspective. *Indian J Soc Res*. 2022;63(4):501-520.

22. Kreiss D. Prototype politics: technology-intensive campaigning and the data of democracy. New York: Oxford University Press; 2016.
23. Kumar S. Regulating online political content: challenges and opportunities for India. *J Law Soc.* 2019;46(2):233-256.
24. Lazer D, *et al.* The science of fake news. *Science.* 2018;359(6380):1094-6. DOI:10.1126/science.aao2998
25. Muralidharan S, Rasmussen L, Patterson R, Shin J. The effects of digital campaigns on rural voters in India. *World Dev.* 2019;122:44-57.
26. Nair A, Menon V. Political accountability and transparency in Indian elections: the digital dimension. *J Gov Public Policy.* 2021;11(1):67-92.
27. Norris P. Digital divide: civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2001.
28. OECD. Digital government and democracy: electoral integrity in the digital age. Paris: OECD Publishing; 2020.
29. Pal S. Social media misinformation and election outcomes in India. *Media Stud J.* 2022;34(3):112-136.
30. Parthasarathy R, Singh D. Electoral integrity and the role of the Election Commission in the digital era. *Indian Polit Sci Rev.* 2020;54(1):35-58.
31. Rainie L, Wellman B. Networked: the new social operating system. Cambridge: MIT Press; 2012.
32. Singh A. Deepfakes and synthetic media in Indian elections: legal and ethical implications. *J Law Technol Soc.* 2021;7(2):59-84.
33. Tufekci Z. Algorithmic harms beyond Facebook and Google: emergent challenges of computational politics. *Colo Technol Law J.* 2015;13(1):203-218.
34. Varshney A. Electoral reforms and social media regulation in India: comparative perspectives. *Int J Const Law.* 2019;17(3):981-1005.
35. West DM. Air wars: television advertising and social media in the digital age. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; 2020.