

The Ballot and the Brand: A Comparative Analysis of BJP and Congress Campaigns and the Marketing Imperative in Indian Elections

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, marketing has transcended its traditional domain of commerce to become an essential tool in political communication and campaign strategy. This paper explores the increasingly blurred lines between commercial marketing and political campaigning, presenting a detailed analysis of how political parties in India, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), use marketing principles to engage with the electorate. Drawing from the theoretical framework of political marketing, which includes elements such as branding, segmentation, positioning, communication, and crisis management (Ormrod, Henneberg, & O'Shaughnessy, 2013; O'Cass, 2001), the paper argues that electoral success is deeply intertwined with the effectiveness of a party's marketing strategy. The BJP's rise to prominence and electoral dominance has been significantly aided by strong brand positioning, consistent communication, and strategic use of digital platforms. In contrast, the INC has suffered repeated electoral setbacks due to disjointed messaging, weak leadership portrayal, and failure to adapt to the evolving media and political environment. Case studies, such as the BJP's outreach to Pasmanda Muslims and the Congress's miscommunication around its NYAY scheme, highlight how misaligned or ineffective marketing strategies can alienate voters and damage party credibility. This paper concludes that in contemporary politics, marketing is not merely a supplementary activity but a central determinant of political success or failure.

Keywords: *commerce, marketing, political communication, campaigning, digital platforms, electoral*

INTRODUCTION

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Over the years, we have seen a major growth in the digital platforms; social media has become one of the most popular ways of communicating, engaging or interacting with society. It is no longer just a platform for informal social interactions but has turned into a major marketplace where a large chunk of the population is its daily user. For businesses, these users are not merely just users of a social media platform, but they see them as their potential customers. Arguably when we talk about politics, In election we discuss about how various parties try to project their ideas and plans for the people in the form of a manifesto, which is similar to making an offer or invitation to buy a particular product as the fundamental aim of marketing in business is to satisfy the needs of the people while earning profit, similarly the political parties aim to satisfy or fulfil the demands of the people in best possible way, projecting themselves as the solution to their problem.

So, we must acknowledge that marketing is not just limited to the goods or services; it can be based around an individual who is himself a brand or a representation of an organisation (Saxena, 2011; Chakrabarti, 2014). The major question that arises here is whether, when there is a failure of a political party in its attempt to perform well in an election, it is also the failure of its political marketing campaign. To gain valuable insight regarding this question, we need to understand the current political environment and how the fundamentals of marketing are related to politics. To further understand the relation between politics and marketing, we would like to discuss the comparative case study between the way the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) project themselves to the public and how the voters react to their promotional strategies.

MARKETING FRAMEWORK IN RELATION TO POLITICS

When we talk about marketing, the first thing that comes to our mind is related to the sale or purchase of goods. Since we learned about marketing, our focus has been on the commerce side of this term, whereas marketing has quite a universal application.

Political marketing has evolved into a sophisticated field combining traditional marketing techniques with political communication (Norris, 2000; Plasser & Plasser, 2002). In democratic systems, elections are competitive marketplaces where political parties function as brands, and voters act as consumers, making informed choices. This paper examines how a political party's inability to secure victory can be attributed to marketing failures such as weak branding, ineffective communication, and poor segmentation strategies.

As per the Theoretical Framework of Political Marketing, it applies the principles of marketing to the political domain, including Branding, Segmentation, Positioning, Communication strategies, Crisis management, etc. The Fundamentals of marketing and politics to some degree go hand in hand, talking of brand, it is basically a symbol that the people resonate with, providing a particular quality of experience to its customers, so are the Political parties in today's date. Each political party has an ideology that they carry forward as their positioning in the eyes of the people, and people who align with those beliefs tend to vote for that particular leader or political party.

Another important aspect of marketing is the concept of segmentation; Segmentation basically focuses on dividing the population into different categories based on some common attributes or factors, thereby making it easier for the brands to target the customers accordingly (Ahmed & Jaidka, 2016; Kaul & Chaudhuri, 2018). India, being a home to a vast population coming from numerous ethnicities, makes it very difficult for any brand or political party to attract customers or voters with a single marketing strategy. It is almost impossible for one single strategy to work on the whole of India, as we go down from Kashmir to Kanniyakumari, everything starts to change, whether it is the language, beliefs, food, culture, education or the source of entertainment etc. So, to tackle this dynamic population effectively, marketers segment the market accordingly, and this is something that the political parties also must focus on. Talking of national parties such as the BJP and the Congress they try to align with local parties or leaders for the elections at places where they do not have strong control as it is important to connect with the locals so what these political parties do is they segment the market accordingly and then try pick a representative whose is close to the locals of that particular area or is of the same community, who form the most influential vote share in that region. It is very essential for the political parties to segment the population effectively so they can target the potential voters accordingly and devise a strategy that suits and attracts the majority of the voters of that particular area, thereby giving them a competitive edge over their competitors.

Communication is a major aspect of marketing, as the success of a marketing campaign depends on the fact that the message that a brand wants to convey has been understood by the potential customers in the same way the brand wanted it to be perceived by them (Chaturvedi, 2016; Kumar, 2021). If we focus on the 2020 advertising campaign of Tanishq, infamously known as “Ekatvam”, in which there was a Hindu woman who got married in a

Muslim family. In the advertisement, her in-laws organised a traditional baby shower showcasing harmony between Hindus and Muslims. For the brand, the thought behind this campaign was to promote communal harmony and acceptance of a culture of the female partner, though it wasn't perceived by the public as planned. Many accused this advertisement campaign of being a promotion of "Love Jihad", a term used to describe those Muslims who purposefully marry a non-Muslim partner for the sole reason of converting them to Islam. This controversy had a negative impact on Tanishq's sales, and they eventually had to withdraw their advertisement.

Similarly, in politics, communication plays a significant part; if the political parties are unable to put forward their thoughts and vision appropriately, then their potential vote bank won't respond to their appeals in the same way they expect them to. In 2024, Rahul Gandhi, a senior Congress leader, on his visit to the United States of America, participated in an interaction where he spoke about the reservation system in India, suggesting towards a more data-driven approach to ensure the system is able to provide true social justice. These comments of Rahul Gandhi were interpreted to be against the reservation system, making a majority of his supporters opposed his stand. For the Congress, it was a major issue as they had been dwelling over the cast politics for quite a long time, and any damage to their image as a pro-reservation party could have been fatal for their upcoming elections. BJP also pushed this issue by accusing Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party of undermining constitutional guarantees and misusing the feelings of the Scheduled Cast (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backwards Class (OBC) communities. On facing a severe uproar from the people, Rahul Gandhi had to clarify his statements. In response to this controversy, Rahul Gandhi issued a formal clarification stating, "My remarks on reservation were completely misinterpreted and taken out of context. Let me make it clear that I, and the Congress party, fully support reservations. In fact, we advocate for a caste census to better implement these policies." To double down on the agenda, he further emphasised that if they came to power, they would explore increasing the reservations beyond the 50% limit.

All these corrective actions after you have identified yourself to be in crisis in politics and marketing are common, thereby making crisis management a crucial part of a successful campaign. For a successful endeavour it is important to identify and understand what the mistakes the party or a brand have made and how they can be rectified, and when the solution for the problem has been identified the party has to make sure that they implement it with at most urgency as in case of any delay there are high chances of the

emotions of the public is turning against the brand or a political party, which in future becomes very difficult to turn around in quick time and during this duration the competitor could make use of this situation to gain a competitive edge over you. So, both in politics and the business aspect, it is crucial to focus on the crisis management mechanism.

CURRENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Over the years, digital media has evolved significantly, so has the marketing landscape because of it, making room for new creative ways for brands as well as political parties to reach or engage with their audience. One such platform is social media, where both the brands and the political parties have to be active to take advantage of the wide range of audience present on those platforms.

Politics in India has evolved from door-to-door persuasion to high-decibel multimedia marketing (Verma & Sardesai, 2014; Joshi, 2017). As elections become increasingly media-centric, marketing strategies—akin to those in consumer goods industries—determine how effectively parties connect with voters. In this context, the BJP and Congress present contrasting case studies. The BJP's rise over the last decade is as much a triumph of marketing as of ideology (Jaffrelot, 2015; Chibber & Verma, 2018). Conversely, Congress's electoral setbacks highlight critical lapses in strategic communication and brand positioning.

A major role in today's competitive political environment is played by the active forces of every party who have dedicated forces to work in a single direction of portraying a clean and positive image of their party in the eyes of the of public. To do so, these parties employ social media experts who are basically responsible for the safekeeping of the image of the party that they have created over the years and make sure the message or the belief for which the political party stands is clearly and effectively communicated. This is something that we also find in the field of business, where marketers have a team, PR agencies, which are responsible for the positioning of their brand, as it is crucial for any brand or political party that the customers or their potential voters have a positive image of them.

Talking of the BJP, we can see over the years they have represented themselves as a strong pro-Hindu party, raising various issues such as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, which was something that was much opposed by a majority of the Muslim community of India. Another one of the most opposed acts by the Muslim community was the Citizen Amendment Act

(CAA), which provided a pathway to citizenship for a non-Muslim from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Despite its Hindu nationalist image, the BJP has undertaken several initiatives aimed at the upliftment of Muslim communities, such as the Pasmada Muslim Engagement, in which the BJP focused on Pasmada Muslims who are known to be economically and socially disadvantaged. Danish Azad Ansari, a Pasmada Muslim, was even nominated to the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council and was also nominated as the Minister of State for Minority Welfare. The party also nominated Tariq Mansoor, former Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, as the national vice president. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP government targeted economically disadvantaged groups, including Pasmada Muslims. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), many Pasmada Muslims were allocated housing units. Despite these efforts BJP did not yield substantial support from the Muslim community (Pillai, 2020; Kumar, 2021). On conducting the post-election analysis, it was revealed that the BJP secured only around 10% of the Pasmada Muslim vote in some constituencies, with even lower percentages in others. This drastic difference in welfare-to-vote relation may be subject to how the BJP has promoted itself as a party, even after they have made various efforts in favour of the Muslim community, due to their pro-Hindu image, the Muslim community hasn't given them their support.

Understanding the political structure of India might be complicated due to its diverse nature, but when we take business perspective to understand the above situation we can identify that the focus in this case may lie with positioning of the BJP, as they may be doing their part in the upliftment of the Muslim community and still are unable to receive satisfactory support from the community in the electoral polls clearly points towards the discussion of their positioning as a pro-Hindu party which throws off the Muslim community to vote in favour of the BJP as even though the BJP did good work in favour of them, the Muslim community see them be a party who are against the beliefs the Muslim community due to its pro-Hindu roots. Though India is a majority Hindu country, the Muslim population is growing at a fairly increasing rate, making the Muslim population hard to ignore, as in some states, they are a game changer from the electoral aspect. So, if the BJP wants to pursue some part of that vote share, they may have to change the way they portray themselves to the community.

Congress party, the party which has had experienced successful political journey over the years are finding it difficult to compete against the BJP in the current electoral contest, Questions has been raised about the leadership

of the Party, Rahul Gandhi who is currently the face of the party has often been criticised over his leadership or inheritance of power from the family on the contrary Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often been praised for his bold leadership and strong stance in the country as well as in the International community. India, being a country of diversity in every aspect, may it be based on culture, caste, income, etc., but this country also runs on emotions, which in today's Indian political scenario is clear that the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi is able to connect more with the general people.

On analysing the campaign of the Indian National Congress (INC), we can identify the irregularities of the party over the years, which have hindered their chances of a successful political campaign. If we focus on the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Congress had come from a successful campaign claiming victories in three key states, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, making their supporters optimistic for a more competitive Lok Sabha election.

The approach of the Indian National Congress (INC) was not satisfactory and seemed to be more of a hoax. The Manifesto that the Congress party has released having their flagship promise of the NYAY scheme which proposed an annual support of ₹72,000 for the poorest families was introduced only four days before the first polling phase which seemed more like a desperate measure taken by the Congress and this approach of urgency lacked credibility in the eyes of the public. The NYAY scheme in itself led to confusion among the people who mistook the scheme to be more of a judicial justice thing and not an economic support scheme (Farooqi & Bhushan, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020). The failure of the Congress party to clearly communicate its plans raises a major question about the professionals employed by the party for this job.

Indian National Congress has often been criticised for having a neutral stand or sometimes an ignorant approach to the issues of the Indian Hindu community. The Muslim community of India prefer the Indian National Congress over the Bharatiya Janata Party, so it becomes evident that they do not want to hamper their Muslim vote bank. Due to this lack of acknowledgement by the Congress party towards the Hindu community's issues, a sentiment of dissonance amongst the Hindu voters often leads to voters opting for the BJP, which, on the contrary, has a clear stand. Due to the complicated dynamics of the Indian political landscape, it is not possible for a particular party to keep everyone satisfied, but what can be controlled is the way they can portray themselves in the eyes of their target audience.

Politics or Politicians are often termed to be something which cannot be trusted, as more often than not, they tend to break their promises. The elections are fought on different fronts may it be on the grassroots or the online platforms due to the digital age and maybe in future something new becomes the new normal we cannot tell right now but thing which will remain constant is the message, The message which holds the true representation of a political party, it is the representation of the mission and the vision for which a party stand and aspires to achieve. This holds the essence of the party, which needs to be clearly communicated. Similarly, in the case of a brand, the identity of the brand must be clear in the eyes of its customer, making their brand a representation of their beliefs. This can be done through marketing, a successful marketing campaign can help achieve the set goals when planned and implemented correctly. On the contrary, if the marketing plans are not up to the mark or there is a failure in execution, they can very rapidly go against you and can also be the reason for the failure. Hence, whether it is a brand or a political party, marketing campaigns may work as a make or break, so it is something that has to be more focused upon, even in the political landscape, where we do not recognise its role that often.

CONCLUSION

The evolving landscape of Indian politics showcases a compelling convergence between traditional marketing and political strategy. As seen through the comparative lens of the BJP and the INC, the ability to market a political vision, build a resonant brand, and communicate effectively with segmented voter bases has become essential in securing electoral victories (Kaul & Chaudhuri, 2018; Saxena, 2011). The BJP's strategic use of media, cohesive brand identity, and proactive crisis management mechanisms have allowed it to dominate national discourse, despite controversial decisions or policies. Conversely, the Congress party's inconsistent messaging, leadership ambiguity, and lack of timely engagement with key voter segments have exposed it to electoral vulnerabilities—many of which can be directly attributed to marketing failures.

The cases of the NYAY scheme rollout and Rahul Gandhi's controversial comments on reservation underscore how critical clear and timely communication is in maintaining voter trust and alignment. Furthermore, BJP's inability to convert welfare outreach into Muslim votes despite targeted campaigns also reveals how deeply entrenched perceptions and brand positioning can influence voter behavior—sometimes outweighing policy actions.

In essence, politics in the modern era is not solely about ideology or governance but about perception management, emotional engagement, and strategic communication—core tenets of marketing (Srivastava, 2015; Lal, 2016). Political parties, like brands, are judged by how they project their identity, how consistently they deliver on their promises, and how well they respond to crises. A political defeat, therefore, should not only be seen as a rejection of ideology but also as a failure of the marketing mechanisms designed to connect that ideology to the masses.

In this context, political marketing emerges as both an art and science, shaping not only electoral outcomes but also public sentiment and democratic discourse. Future campaigns must recognize this paradigm and invest accordingly in professional, data-driven, and emotionally intelligent marketing strategies to stay relevant in an increasingly competitive political environment.

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