

From Marketplaces to Ballot Boxes: The Evolution and Strategic Role of Marketing in Modern Politics

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ABSTRACT

Political marketing has evolved significantly from its early reliance on physical interaction and traditional campaigning to a complex, technology-integrated strategic process. This paper examines how the classical marketing mix—Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—translates into the political sphere and shapes contemporary electoral behaviour. The study outlines the foundational definitions of marketing proposed by the American Marketing Association (2017) and Kotler & Keller (2016), demonstrating their applicability beyond commercial markets and into politics. The paper analyses how political actors function as products, how voter trust operates as a psychological “price,” and how the dissemination of political messaging (“place” and “promotion”) has transformed due to digital technologies. A key focus is the expanding role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the role of social media influencers in reconfiguring political communication spaces, enabling unprecedented reach, micro-targeting, and personalised influence—but also introducing deepfake threats and ethical challenges. The paper concludes that political marketing has entered a transformative phase, where digital ecosystems and AI-driven tools amplify both democratic engagement and manipulation risks. Effective political communication now requires balancing innovation with transparency, safeguarding democratic trust in an increasingly digitised political environment.

Keywords: Political Marketing; Marketing Mix (4Ps); Digital Political Communication; Artificial Intelligence in Elections; Social Media Influencers; Electoral Behaviour in India

INTRODUCTION

India, the largest democracy, has seen a major evolution of the electoral process, starting with initial limited representations during the British era, to eventually transforming into a vibrant electoral system after independence. As the electoral processes evolved, so have the techniques used by the political

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representatives to lure voters to vote in their favour. The approach used by leaders to influence the majority opinion and win their votes has been one of the most remarkable changes in the electoral politics. Political Marketing has experienced massive growth in keeping with a socio-politically dynamic environment (Lilleker, 2011; Scammell, 2007). In the past, political parties and politicians used to campaign through grassroots, door to door, and other campaign to lure voters to vote in their favour. Although the mentioned way might appear outdated or even insufficient, it was one of the effective methods of interacting with the potential voters during the period when only a few avenues of direct communication were available (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Newman, 1999). Today, the landscape of political persuasion encompasses a broader array of techniques and mediums, reflecting the complexities of modern electoral dynamics (Norris, 2000; Strömbäck, 2007).

If we look at the most relevant and widely accepted definitions of marketing, i.e.—“the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (American Marketing Association, 2017) and “a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging value with others.” (Kotler & Keller, 2016) we can see that the focus is given upon how a brand or company can earn profit by actually providing the customers something that the customers may feel is value for their money. The two-way relationship between customers and a brand is not limited to the business field, but also extends beyond it. Applying the marketing frameworks to politics, we can see how relevant marketing is in determining the course of how one party is perceived (Lees-Marshment, 2009; Newman, 1999).

Marketing Mix

The 4 P's of Marketing, also known as the marketing mix, refer to the four key elements that a firm controls to influence consumer decisions and achieve marketing objectives. These four elements are Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. Together, they provide a strategic framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating marketing strategies (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Kotler & Keller, 2016). The product is the first element in the mix, referring to the actual tangible item that aims to solve a problem or satisfy a need of an individual, for which they are willing to pay a surplus amount,

which eventually counts as a profit for the company. Regarding value, it is attained by the customer when they are satisfied with the product, and along with that, they should have the feeling that the product was value for money, i.e., it must be reasonable in accordance with the value provided by the product (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Third P stands for “Place,” which refers to the distribution channels and processes used to make the product accessible to consumers. Lastly, we have a promotion which includes all communication activities aimed at informing, persuading, or reminding consumers about the product. It covers advertising, public relations, sales promotion, digital marketing, and personal selling (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Newman, 1999). The marketing mix can be implemented in the field of politics. If we go through the electoral process, it can be compared to how different companies compete against each other to gain the majority market share. In politics, leaders and parties compete with each other to win the majority share, which will enable them to win elections and come into power (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Pich, 2019). If we look at this situation without focusing on the nature of the two disciplines, we can see a degree of resemblance, i.e., in both cases, the competition amongst the groups is on how much better they are than their competitor, and eventually, who amongst them is relatively able to solve or satisfy the needs of society (Lilleker, 2015). Whether it is a business or a political party, they cannot provide an absolute solution for all the needs and problems of society, as one particular product or idea cannot realistically satisfy everyone due to the dynamic nature of individuals and their diverse needs. So the competition is about how your product or idea is relatively better than your counterpart, keeping you at the top of the pecking order. To stay ahead of their competition, these institutions must also evolve and adapt to the changing dynamic environment (Lees-Marshment, 2009; Strömbäck, 2007).

Application of Marketing Mix Into Politics

The marketing mix, also referred to as the 4Ps of marketing, when applied to politics, can provide a deeper insight into the transition phase of a political party from being merely a political party to a well-established brand (Pich, 2019; Scammell, 2015). Starting with the first P of the marketing mix, that is “Product,” when applied to politics, refers to the Leader of a particular political party, along with the party and its ideology, which will then be perceived by voters or the public

as the solution to their needs and wants (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Newman, 1999). The rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is a relevant example illustrating how people seek solutions to their problems through these political parties or leaders who often act as products promising to address specific issues (Siddarth et al., 2021; Singh, 2019). The rise of Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) can be understood through the lens of political marketing, where political actors are treated as “products” designed to address public grievances. In the early 2010s, widespread frustration over everyday corruption ranging from bureaucratic bribery to large-scale scams created a clear gap in the political marketplace, generating public demand for an honest and credible alternative (Pal, 2015; Siddarth et al., 2021). AAP positioned itself precisely within this gap by constructing a political product centered on anti-corruption identity. The party’s offering combined Kejriwal’s personal image of simplicity and integrity, the party’s symbolism (such as the broom), and policy promises like the Jan Lokpal Bill, all of which framed AAP as a solution to the dominant societal problem of corruption (Chopra, 2019; Singh, 2019). In political marketing terms, the leader and party became a packaged product—where Kejriwal served as the embodied brand representing transparency, accountability, and resistance to elite privilege (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Pich, 2019; Scammell, 2015). This alignment between public need and political offering created what political marketing theorists call a strong “issue–solution fit,” enabling AAP to differentiate itself from mainstream parties and position itself as the sole credible alternative in Delhi (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Siddarth et al., 2021; Singh, 2019). As a result, voters perceived AAP not merely as a political option but as a targeted solution to their lived experiences of corruption, leading to unprecedented electoral support, including its landslide victory in 2015 (Election Commission of India, 2021; Siddarth et al., 2021). Thus, AAP’s rise illustrates how political leaders and parties function as products that promise relief from pressing societal problems, and how effective marketing of such products can translate into electoral success.

In a political marketing context, “Price” is not monetary; it is the cost the voter perceives when supporting a party or leader. The price paid by the voter in this case is a psychological cost, which is the trust a voter is putting into the vision of the political party. Choosing a political party or leader over another comes with an opportunity cost, i.e., if the selected leader comes into power and does not live up to the expectations, the psychological cost

will be of not selecting the right leader or party, and also now the voter will have to wait for the next 5 years until they get another opportunity to vote (Newman, 1999; Norris, 2000). Incumbency directly reinforces the idea that the “Price” a voter pays in political marketing is fundamentally psychological and tied to opportunity cost. When voters place their trust in a party and elect it to govern, they effectively commit themselves to a five-year political contract. If the incumbent government underperforms, breaks promises, or fails to meet expectations, the psychological cost for the voter becomes sharper: not only did they make the “wrong choice,” but they also cannot immediately correct it. This frustration amplifies voter dissonance because the price of misplaced trust must now be carried until the next election cycle (Kavanagh, 1995; Strömbäck, 2007). In this sense, incumbency magnifies the emotional and temporal burden on voters—supporting the argument that political “price” is not monetary but rooted in the long-term consequences of electing a party that does not deliver. It also explains why anti-incumbency emerges so strongly: dissatisfied voters seek to avoid repeating the earlier psychological cost, so they shift their vote to prevent another five-year period of regret. Thus, incumbency makes the voter’s opportunity cost more visible and more consequential, strengthening the political-marketing understanding that choosing a leader is a high-stakes emotional investment with long-term consequences (Lilleker, 2011; Norris, 2000). In Indian politics, there are many moments where voters who once trusted a government later felt disappointed and chose not to repeat the same mistake—showing how incumbency carries a real psychological cost for citizens. Delhi’s 2013 election is a striking example: after supporting the Congress for 15 years, many voters felt let down by rising prices, corruption scandals, and governance failures. This sense of “we trusted you and you didn’t deliver” pushed people toward the Aam Aadmi Party, leaving the Congress with just eight seats (Singh, 2019; Siddarth et al., 2021). A similar story unfolds across states like Rajasthan, where voters have almost never re-elected the same government since the 1990s. People often express a feeling of regret or frustration about the previous five years and choose a new party simply to avoid repeating that emotional and opportunity cost (Kavanagh, 1995; Norris, 2000). In Uttar Pradesh in 2017, many citizens who voted for the Samajwadi Party in 2012 shifted to the BJP because of deeper dissatisfaction with law and order and unmet development expectations—again showing how earlier trust turned into dissonance (Singh, 2019). Punjab’s 2022 election also reflected this

pattern: voters who had placed their hopes in the Congress in 2017 felt betrayed by internal conflicts and perceived non-performance, leading them to give AAP an overwhelming mandate (KAS, 2019; Singh, 2019). These incidents show a common emotional thread: when people feel that their trust has been wasted, they would rather switch parties than endure another five years of the same disappointment. This is exactly how incumbency magnifies the “price” a voter pays—not in money, but in regret, frustration, and the long wait until they can correct their choice.

“Place” in marketing refers to how a product reaches the customer and where it will be available for purchase. “Place” in earlier times were limited to the shops where people themselves had to go and by a particular product but in today’s time the availability of products are no more limited to the actual store but goes beyond the it i.e. the online channels which are the most popular channels where a product is made available and also the information regarding the product whether it is an advertisement, promotion or offer have all shifted from other areas to the online platforms (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Kotler & Keller, 2016). In the same way, “Place” in political marketing has also undergone a major transformation. Earlier, political communication and outreach were limited to physical spaces, such as rallies, nakkad sabhas, party offices, and local campaigning, as well as the distribution of pamphlets and posters. Voters had to be physically present in these locations to access political messages or interact with leaders (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Newman, 1999). Nevertheless, political messages today are not only limited to the offline space just like commercial products. The location where the voters receive political messages has grown exponentially with the rise of social media, online sources of news, direct mail to the target audience, WhatsApp discussions, YouTube speeches, and live-streaming rallies (CJR, 2019; India’s Center of Journalism, 2019; Mozilla Foundation, 2024; Time Magazine, 2019).

This change has transformed the way political marketing is conducted, as political parties can now reach anywhere in the world at any time without the need for physical presence. Online communities, the engagement zones on Instagram and X (previously with Twitter), personalized messages sent using the data acquired through the micro-targeting model, and digital platforms on which voters can consume the political content, fact-check information, and (fully) engage in the political discussions are included in the domain of political place (Lilleker, 2015; Pal, 2015; Singh, 2019). Consequently,

politics no longer remains confined to places, but has instead become digitally ubiquitous and gives the parties an opportunity to exist within the daily lives of the voters. This development shows that political marketing has had to accommodate the new technological forces just like commercial marketing by simply expanding the space in which voters can get in touch with political products that is, leaders, parties, ideologies and promises (Norris, 2000, Strombeck, 2007).

Since political marketing has evolved to include digital platforms, the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has brought a new understanding of the concept of Place in that it dictates where, when, and how the voter will receive political content. The AI-based algorithms on apps such as Meta, Google, and X control the types of political messages that a voter will see on his or her screen, generating customized places where a voter can be politically influenced (Islam et al., 2024; Pal, 2015). Parties now use AI tools for micro-targeting, sending customised messages to different voter groups based on age, caste, religion, location, and browsing behaviour. Chatbots, automated WhatsApp campaigns, AI-generated speeches, and digital avatars of leaders make political communication available 24/7, across millions of individual digital spaces simultaneously (Dhanuraj & Nair, 2024; Islam et al., 2024; Kar Singh et al., 2024). However, the same AI that expands access has also created serious challenges. During the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, for example, an AI-generated deepfake video of Home Minister Amit Shah circulated widely on social media, showing him “supporting” a caste-based reservation policy that he never actually proposed. The Delhi Police later confirmed it was manipulated content designed to influence voters (Livemint, 2024; New Indian Express, 2024). In Mumbai, Police registered cases against some operatives making use of AI-generated voice cloning to create false messages (The Indian Express, 2024; The Print, 2024). Though AI seems to be a promising tool for marketing but these incidents highlights the double-edged nature of AI in political “Place”: (Islam et al., 2024; Kar Singh et al., 2024). while it assist in spreading out the message and ideas of a political party, at the same time it open doors for easy spread of miss information which often deceive the general public. AI can place political content in highly personalized digital spaces—but when misused, it can distort reality, unfairly influence voter perception, and undermine democratic trust. As politics becomes more digital, AI has

effectively turned every voter's phone into a political battleground, making "Place" more influential—and more vulnerable—than ever before (Barik, 2024; Dhanuraj & Nair, 2024; Mozilla Foundation, 2024).

In political marketing, Promotion represents all the tools, messages, and strategies through which a political party communicates its ideas and persuades voters—and it naturally grows out of "Place" because once parties decide where their message will reach voters (offline spaces, media, or digital platforms), they must decide how to present it there (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Lilleker, 2015). Earlier, promotion was almost entirely offline: political parties relied on street-corner meetings, nukkad sabhas, wall posters, handbills, loudspeaker announcements, film-song-based jingles, and large gatherings like the rallies of Indira Gandhi or N.T. Rama Rao. As television entered the Indian household in the 1980s–90s, promotion shifted to mass media, giving rise to televised speeches and symbolic ads like the BJP's 1991 "Ram Rath" visuals or Congress's emotional 2004 "Aam Aadmi" campaign (Norris, 2000; Singh, 2019). However, once the "Place" of political messaging shifted to digital spaces—Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and X—the nature of promotion dramatically changed (India's Center for Journalism, 2019; KAS, 2019; Mozilla Foundation, 2024; Time Magazine, 2019). The 2014 and 2019 BJP campaign with Modi as the main face is landmark example. In these campaigns BJP used data-driven promotion techniques along with WhatsApp groups and targeted ads. "Chai Pe Charcha" live sessions helped in targeting different voter groups (Pal, 2015; Pal, 2017; Singh, 2019). In 2020, AAP's Delhi campaign used micro-videos on TikTok and hyperlocal WhatsApp messages tailored to specific colonies, showing how "Promotion" now adapts to digital "Places" (Siddarth et al., 2021). With the rise of AI, political promotion has taken yet another leap. Parties can now generate thousands of customised posters, slogans, and videos using AI tools; analyse voter emotions in real time; and deliver micro-targeted promotions to specific castes, age groups, or even neighbourhoods (Dhanuraj & Nair, 2024; Islam et al., 2024; Kar Singh et al., 2024). AI-generated avatars of political leaders are being used to deliver speeches in multiple languages simultaneously—BJP's 2024 campaign experimented with Modi's AI-generated multi-language messages, while DMK used AI to recreate the voice and style of former leader Karunanidhi to address younger voters (Barik, 2024; Islam et al., 2024). But this powerful new promotional tool has also brought serious risks. During the 2024 Lok Sabha election, deepfake

videos of Home Minister Amit Shah were circulated on social media, manipulating his speech to make it appear as if he supported unpopular caste-based changes; Delhi Police confirmed it was a deepfake created using AI (Livemint, 2024; Republic TV, 2024). Similarly, fake AI-cloned voices of Bollywood actor Aamir Khan and political leaders like Manoj Tiwari were used during the campaign to spread misleading messages (New Indian Express, 2024; Reuters, 2024). In another incident, an AI-generated video falsely showing Congress leader Rahul Gandhi urging people not to vote caused confusion until fact-checkers intervened (Alt News, 2025; Islam et al., 2024).

The following incidents underscore how AI has made political promotion more targeted and efficient, but on the other hand, paved the way for easy manipulation and misinformation, such as deepfakes, and AI-generated posters or information that are inaccurate and misguide the public. This is how promotion, which is one of the most important marketing tool, has evolved from a simple one-way broadcast to technologically driven techniques, which, once misused, can work against a particular leader, party, or institution

DISCUSSION

The relevance of marketing strategies, often considered limited to the field of business, extends to the political marketing landscape. Politics and marketing, when discussed, may not sound idealistic, but both disciplines complement each other well. The majority of rational voters are aware of the fact that any political party may come into power, the basic problems, such as scams and corruption, will still exist, so the competition between political parties to lure such voters is dependent on how well they market themselves to be better than their counterparts. The sad reality of politics for the public is that “Justice becomes the byproduct of this electoral competition,” whereas it should be the aim of both the ruling party and the opposition to work together and work for the nation, not merely just to win this electoral battle.

Comparing the marketing mix with the political elements helps us better understand the relevance of marketing in politics. The 4 P’s of Marketing have their relevance in the political context, as Product in the political context will be the Leader or a party that promises to be the solution for a particular problem, for which the “Price” they have to pay, which is in the form of vote, which the individuals cast in favour of those leaders or parties whom they see as their potential solution to the problem. For any business, it is important

to find the best possible distribution system through which the product reaches the consumers, similarly in politics not all individuals are same and it is important for the political parties to segment the population and target them accordingly with the best possible method whether it is door to door campaigns, cold calling, using social media platforms, or running ads. This illustrates the significance of “Place” of the marketing mix in the context of politics. Lastly, one of the most popular forms of circulating information and attracting people is through “Promotions.” In politics, promotions have evolved from door-to-door campaigns to the use of sophisticated technology and analytics to gain an edge over their competitors. The relevance of Political marketing poses a promising scope for further research, as not much has been published on this theme.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND AI IN MODERN POLITICS

Social media, home to millions of users worldwide, provides a promising scope for businesses as well as political parties to make use of this user base to spread their message, ideas, or even promote themselves. Social media influencers are not shy of Indian politics, as we see a lot of famous YouTubers or influencers transitioning their careers towards a more politically centric content. Indian democracy stands for free speech, which is one of the most important pillars of any *democracy* (Constitution of India, Article 19). But there have been incidents where the same provision of free speech is used to selectively manipulate the voters and the public. It is normal for individuals to pick a side in politics as per their views or ideologies, but some of the social media influencers make use of their large audience to run a particular propaganda (Rathi, 2024; Observer Research Foundation, 2023). *The whole image of fake neutrality carried by such influencers is a threat to society, as they invoke anger based on their selective criticism backed by their image of being neutral.* Social media has become one of the strongest tools for promotion in modern politics, and if misused, it can lead to severe communal disturbance (Bose & Scroll.in, 2023). Hence, it raises concerns about regulating such content that lacks credibility.

As discussed above, AI technology, when misused, has adversely affected the electoral campaigns of many leaders and political parties (ECI Advisory, 2023). AI can be easily used to create false propaganda, whether targeting the government or any other leader. It is the responsibility of the

election commission to make sure that fake AI-generated videos or baseless propaganda, which are purposefully launched to mislead the voters, do not hamper the fair electoral coemption. The Election Commission of India even issued an advisory to all political parties and their representatives, not to indulge in such malpractices of creating deep fakes or other false content (Election Commission of India, 2023). Provisions of the Indian Penal Code (now replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita), such as Sections 336, 354–357, and those dealing with forgery, identity manipulation, and defamation, apply when a deepfake harms a person’s reputation or deliberately spreads misinformation (BNS, 2023). The Information Technology Act, 2000, is currently the main digital-era legislation — Sections 66D and 66E deal with impersonation and privacy violation (IT Act, 2000). Though there are rules and regulations governing this issue, a more robust implementation system is required to ensure a free and fair competition.

CONCLUSION

Political marketing has undergone a significant transformation since the shift from traditional and physically locative approaches to more digitized and AI-based approaches. The classical marketing mix can be applied to the political world and this presents a good means of understanding how parties can build political brands, attract voters and do so in a manner that determines their success or failure with regard to elections. Their leaders and ideologies become the products, the trust of the voter is the price, the redefining of the place by the digital ecosystems, and the transformation of the political promotion by AI. Meanwhile, political agendas have been delivered to voters through the digital platform with ease and have been able to make their messaging personal and also function within the high-velocity information spaces. Nevertheless, the new development has proven hazardous, such as artificial intelligence-born misinformation, deepfake videos, and algorithmically-generated content, which is a significant threat to democratic procedures that are reasonably fair.

Political marketing, indeed, is an inevitable part of any political campaign due to the increased competition amongst political parties, followed by easy access to advanced technology, but along with these advancements, responsibility and accountability will also increase as proper standards and regulations must be placed to monitor the proceedings, ensuring that there is no misuse of the technology or creation of false agendas. Ultimately, both

business institutions as well as political institutions have their responsibility towards society by resolving the issues and providing the customers or the voters the value for the price they pay, whether it is through money or in the form of votes. “Political Marketing” still remains very much an uncharted territory on which there is a requirement for more research to be done in the near future, highlighting the integration of both disciplines, i.e., marketing and politics, underscoring the relevance of marketing frameworks in politics, and how the political parties and leaders are transitioning from being merely just a political institution or individual to a proper brand which requires to be managed accordingly, thereby protecting and improving its brand equity.

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