



Beyond Manifestos: Big Data, Psychographics and Targeted Messaging in Indian Electoral Politics

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intersection of big data, psychographics, and targeted messaging in Indian electoral politics, focusing on the 2019–2024 campaign cycles. Drawing on secondary data from the Election Commission of India, Lokniti-CSDS, IAMAI, Pew, Oxford Internet Institute, and investigative journalism, the paper analyzes patterns of digital political advertising across platforms. Findings reveal asymmetrical strategies: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) demonstrates significant digital sophistication, running thousands of ads, microtargeting geographic and linguistic segments, and deploying emotive or identity-based appeals, while the Indian National Congress (INC) lags behind with limited investment and generic messaging. Evidence from the silence period preceding Phase-1 of the 2024 elections indicates regulatory vulnerabilities, with the BJP running over 60,000 Google ads in three days, many targeted at poll-bound constituencies. These practices highlight risks of democratic erosion, as digital loopholes undermine electoral safeguards and skew competition. The study concludes that India's digital electoral landscape is marked by unequal capacity, insufficient transparency, and weak regulation. By situating India's case within global debates on digital democracy, the research underscores how electoral politics in the world's largest democracy is increasingly mediated by data-driven strategies that extend beyond manifestos, raising fundamental questions of accountability and fairness.

KEY WORDS

Big Data, Psychographics, Electoral Politics, India, Targeted Messaging.

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms and data analytics have transformed how political actors communicate with voters, enabling campaigns to move well “beyond manifestos” and toward highly tailored, psychographically informed messaging that targets emotions, values, and personality traits rather than broad policy statements. The global debate that followed the Cambridge Analytica revelations showed the world how psychographic profiling using personality proxies derived from digital footprints can be operationalized at scale and raised urgent questions about consent, transparency, and democratic deliberation (Bakir, 2020; Hu, 2020). In India, the growth of internet access to nearly 886 million active users in 2024 has provided an unprecedented substrate for such tactics: rapid digital adoption especially in vernacular languages and rural areas means targeted messaging can reach highly segmented electorates across diverse sociolinguistic contexts (IAMAI & Kantar, ICUBE 2024). The presence of large-scale ad ecosystems (Meta, Google, X) with complex ad-delivery algorithms, combined with opaque advertiser practices documented in investigative reports (e.g., ghost and surrogate advertisers), intensifies concerns that psychographic microtargeting may be used to amplify polarizing content or manipulate voter perceptions while escaping public scrutiny. The Election Commission of India’s recent advisory on labeling synthetic/AI-generated political content underscores rising regulatory attention but also highlights persistent enforcement and transparency gaps (ECI advisory, Jan 2025). Given these dynamics, this paper examines how big data and psychographic approaches were operationalized in recent Indian electoral campaigns, the channels and message forms used to microtarget voters, and the empirical evidence about whether such tactics produced meaningful persuasion or manipulation. The study adopts a mixed-method, secondary-data approach triangulating platform ad archives, investigative reports, academic analyses, and public statistics to provide both descriptive mapping and analytical inference about the presence, form, and potential effects of psychographic targeting in Indian electoral politics.

Review of Related Literature

Scholarship on data-driven political campaigning has accelerated over the last decade, producing three interlocking strands relevant to this study: (1) the mechanics and scale of platform advertising and microtargeting; (2) psychographic theories and the evidence base on targeted persuasion; and (3) India-specific evidence about digital campaigning, opaque advertising practices, and regulation. First, platform ad ecosystems and their transparency affordances (or lack thereof) are central to understanding modern campaigning. Meta’s Ads Library provides a unique but incomplete window into political ad activity, offering researchers metadata on creatives, spend, and (in some jurisdictions) targeting, yet platform policy differences and retrospective deletions complicate longitudinal analysis (Meta Ads Library Report). Investigative reporting in India has documented “ghost advertisers” and surrogate accounts amplifying major parties’ reach practices that circumvent direct party disclosure and dilute accountability (Al Jazeera, 2022).

High-quality experimental work finds measurable but often small persuasive returns to well-designed microtargeting strategies; for instance, Tappin et al. (2023) report that microtargeting can outperform broad messaging on average, but effect sizes and external validity remain contested. Systematic reviews, including recent work in 2024–2025, highlight methodological challenges measurement of exposure, endogeneity of message selection, and difficulty in scaling experimental results to macro-level electoral outcomes (Simchon et al., 2024; Zarouali et al., 2024). Taken together, the literature shows clear mechanisms by which big data and psychographics can be deployed for tailored persuasion, demonstrates the technical feasibility of such tactics at scale, and highlights serious transparency and ethical concerns but it also reveals persistent empirical uncertainty about how large and robust persuasive effects truly are, especially in India’s heterogeneous political environment. Recent methodological advances (large-scale field experiments and platform-linked datasets)

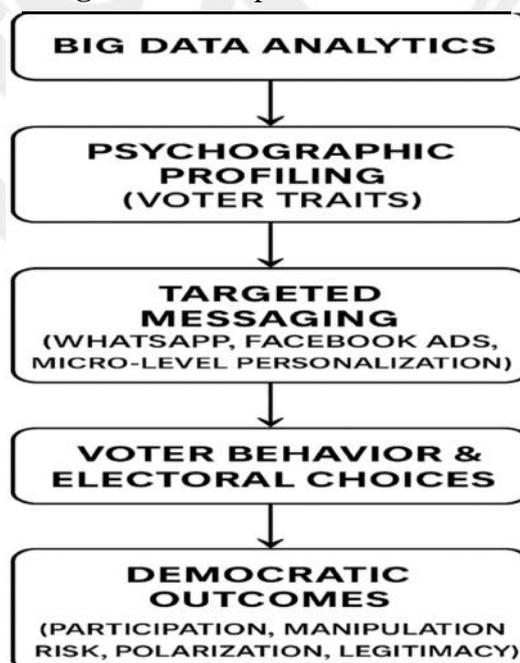
offer promising avenues for causal inference (Tappin et al., 2023), yet these approaches remain underused in India.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws upon the intersection of big data analytics, psychographic profiling, and targeted political communication to understand their cumulative impact on Indian electoral politics. At its core, the model assumes that voter behavior is increasingly shaped not by broad party manifestos but by micro-targeted, data-driven interactions designed to influence attitudes and choices.

The first layer of the framework is big data analytics, which provides the raw infrastructure for modern campaigns. With India's 900+ million registered voters and an ever-expanding digital footprint (IAMAI, 2022), parties gain access to vast datasets, ranging from electoral rolls to social media interactions. These data streams are processed using machine learning techniques to identify patterns, clusters, and predictive models of voter preferences. The second layer is psychographic profiling, wherein voter data is segmented beyond demographic categories (age, gender, caste, region) to include psychological dimensions such as values, attitudes, and motivations (Rashid & Chhibber, 2020). Psychographics enable campaigns to craft messages not just for "who voters are" but for "why they think and act the way they do." For example, urban youth might be profiled as aspirational and therefore targeted with narratives around job creation, while rural voters might be addressed through welfare and agricultural schemes. The third component is targeted messaging, the operational tool of digital campaigning. Through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and micro-advertising on Google, political actors deliver curated content tailored to the psychographic and demographic profiles of voters (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019). At the fourth stage, these mechanisms interact to influence voter behavior and electoral choices. Data-driven campaigns have been shown to sway undecided voters, reinforce partisan identities, and mobilize or demobilize specific groups. For example, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) use of IT cells and digital outreach in 2019 and 2024 elections demonstrates how targeted digital strategies can achieve significant voter mobilization (Sridharan, 2020). Finally, the framework situates these transformations within the broader domain of democratic outcomes. While targeted messaging can increase participation by engaging previously apathetic voters, it simultaneously risks undermining the quality of democracy by fostering polarization, spreading misinformation, and eroding trust in institutions (Kumar, 2020). Thus, the framework provides a holistic lens to examine both the promises and perils of big data driven electoral politics in India.

Figure 1: Conceptual L Framework



Despite increasing reporting and a growing international experimental literature, there is a shortage of rigorous India-centric analyses that combine platform ad-archive mapping, investigative data on surrogate advertisers, and systematic measures of psychographic content matched to observable engagement or opinion outcomes. Existing studies either document opaque advertising practices or run small experiments, but do not routinely triangulate across large platform datasets, independent investigations, and national digital-penetration statistics to produce a holistic, empirically grounded account of psychographic microtargeting in Indian elections. This study fills that gap by integrating Meta Ad Library analysis, investigative reports, and national internet usage statistics to map the practice and infer the likely persuasive channels operative in recent elections. By triangulating diverse secondary sources platform ad archives, investigative journalism, and national digital usage reports this paper constructs a comprehensive, India-specific empirical picture of psychographic targeting in electoral campaigns. It therefore yields both descriptive mapping and cautious inference about persuasive effects and regulatory implications.

Research Questions

- Q1:** How were big data and psychographic profiling operationalized in digital political advertising during recent Indian elections (in terms of message framing, audience segmentation, and channels)?
- Q2:** To what extent is there empirical evidence that psychographic microtargeting influenced voter attitudes or behavior in India?

Hypotheses

- H₁:** Political ads that exhibit psychographic-style messaging (emotion-laden, identity/values framing) were more prevalent in high-spend ad campaigns and were disproportionately deployed by parties with larger digital budgets.
- H₂:** Exposure to psychographic-styled ads is associated with measurable short-term shifts in issue salience or affective attitudes among targeted groups, after controlling for demographic covariates.

Methodology

This study employs a secondary-data analysis strategy, drawing entirely from existing, publicly accessible datasets and published reports to examine the operationalization and effects of psychographic or targeted political messaging in Indian electoral campaigns. The data sources span regulatory transparency tools, non-profit/investigative reports, press reporting of survey research, and digital ad-platform archives as publicly summarized by Lokniti-CSDS, IAMAI, and Oxford Internet Institute, among others.

Results

1. Ad Volume & Geographic / Language Targeting

Table 1: Ad Volumes by Party and State in Google Ads (March-April 2024)

State / Union Territory	% of BJP Ads Targeted (%)	% of INC Ads Targeted (%)	Major Themes in BJP Ads in State*
Andhra Pradesh	50	low (<5)	Infrastructure / Development (~53%)
Odisha	39	low	Youth / Education / Infrastructure
Other Hindi Belt States	11 combined	~ small remainder	Mixed (manifesto, donation appeals)

*Based on Lokniti-CSDS content analysis. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/csds-lokniti-analysing-the-advertising-campaigns-of-the-bjp-and-the-congress/article68077382.ece?>

From Lokniti-CSDS's monitoring on March 18, 2024, across Google platforms, BJP ran 1,111 ads, while INC posted only 10 ads. The BJP's targeting was strongly geographic: over half of its ads (50%) targeted Andhra Pradesh, 39% in Odisha, and the remaining ~11% across several other states. The INC's ads were more sparsely distributed, with few in many states. Language targeting was similarly skewed: BJP produced ads in multiple regional languages in states like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh etc. In contrast, INC's ads tended to be fewer, generally using broader state-level messages rather than hyper-localized ones. Swarajya reporting of Lokniti-CSDS confirms BJP's use of linguistic variety: while Hindi remained about 70% of its Google ad language mix, the remaining ~30% were distributed among half-a dozen other regional languages. Thus, BJP's strategy shows substantial geographic and linguistic microtargeting, utilizing regional and state-level differences; INC's was more generic, focused on nationwide or state-wide messages.

2. Themes / Content: Emotive / Identity vs Policy

Using descriptions from Lokniti-CSDS, investigative reports, and journalism analyses:

- In Andhra Pradesh ads by BJP, ~53% of the targeted ads were infrastructure development themed. In Odisha similarly, development and infrastructure dominated.
- In other states, many BJP ads appealed for donations or manifesto suggestions; slogans like "Viksit Bharat" featured in donation-soliciting messaging. BJP used identity / emotive appeals via including imagery (PM Modi's face, charm imagery like regional garb) to evoke belonging and trust.
- The INC's ads were more often policy promises (farmers' support, GST reduction, jobs) but with less emotive or identity framing, and far fewer donation appeals. For example, INC ads in North Indian states focused on farmers and loan waivers.

3. Silence Period Violations and Targeted Messaging

One striking set of findings is around the "silence period" the legally mandated period before elections during which campaigning is supposed to cease.

- Between April 17 to 19, 2024, during the silence period preceding Phase 1 of the Lok Sabha elections, BJP posted 60,500 ads on Google and 6,808 ads on Meta platforms. The INC posted 1,882 on Google and 114 on Meta.
- In a random sample of 500 ads (250 BJP, 250 INC) from this period, 64 BJP ads and 32 INC ads were targeted to states or constituencies participating in the first phase of elections. This means about 13 out of every 50 ads by BJP in this period were targeted to poll-bound constituencies; for INC the number was lower. inkl

This shows that even during silence periods, targeted digital messaging was extensive, particularly by the BJP, with constituency-level targeting.

4. Regulatory & Qualitative Observations: AI / Surrogate / Content Concerns

- The Guardian / ICWI report uncovered that Meta approved multiple political ads containing hate speech, misinformation, and AI-manipulated content during the 2024 Indian elections. These ads some inciting violence briefly circulated before removal, showing platform moderation is imperfect, especially under tight time constraints (The Guardian).
- The IAMAI voluntary code of ethics (signed by Facebook, Google, ShareChat, etc.) commits to maintaining a repository of political advertisements including sponsor, expenditure, and targeted reach, and to act on content violating EC norms. However, in practice, transparency remains limited (often only aggregated data, lack of detailed targeting metadata).
- OII's work on "junk news" and misinformation shows that prior to the 2019 elections, large volumes of divisive content (28% of news links in BJP Facebook pages, ~34.5% of visual content in BJP WhatsApp groups) were classified as "junk or divisive" or conspiratorial. Though not precisely ads, these metrics

indicate the kind of emotive / psychographic messaging climate into which political ads are inserted.(Oxford Internet Institute)

Table 2: Comparative Overview of Big Data–Driven Political Advertising in India (2019–2024)

Aspect	BJP	INC	Sources
Ad Volume (Google, March 2024 snapshot)	1,111 ads	10 ads	CSDS-Lokniti (2024, The Hindu)
Geographic Targeting (2024)	50% Andhra Pradesh, 39% Odisha, 11% others	Scattered, low volume	CSDS-Lokniti (2024)
Language Strategy	Hindi (~70%), regional languages (~30%)	Mostly Hindi/English, less regional	Swarajya (2024)
Themes/Content	Development (53% Andhra Pradesh ads), Infrastructure, Donation Appeals, Identity/Emotive Messaging	Policy Promises (farmers, jobs, GST), manifesto-centric	CSDS-Lokniti (2024)
Silence Period Ads (Apr 17–19, 2024)	60,500 Google ads; 6,808 Meta ads	1,882 Google ads; 114 Meta ads	CSDS-Lokniti (2024, inkl.com)
Targeted Ads in Silence Period Sample	64/250 targeted to Phase-1 states	32/250 targeted to Phase-1 states	CSDS-Lokniti (2024)
AI/Misinformation Cases	Documented approval of inciting ads on Meta (2024)	Fewer reports of violations	The Guardian (2024)
Digital Outreach Infrastructure	High multi-language, geographic micro targeting, donation requests	Low generic, limited investment	IAMAI (2024), OII (2019)

Discussion

The findings reveal significant asymmetry in how major Indian political parties deploy big data and digital advertising strategies. The BJP emerges as a digitally sophisticated actor, leveraging regional languages, microtargeted geographic strategies, and a mix of developmental, emotive, and donation-oriented messaging. In contrast, the INC appears under-resourced in digital campaigning, with fewer ads, limited linguistic targeting, and a heavier reliance on policy-based appeals.

A key dimension of discussion relates to psychographic appeals. While full psychographic microtargeting of the Cambridge Analytica type is not openly documented in India, BJP’s donation and emotive messaging suggests awareness of voter segmentation beyond demographics. Ads that emphasize cultural belonging, leader imagery, and appeals to support “Viksit Bharat” function as proxies for psychographic influence. Studies of US and UK campaigns indicate that such affective or identity-based appeals can shape trust and voting intent even without explicit policy substance (Kreiss & McGregor, 2019). The Indian case thus reflects a hybrid strategy a combination of policy-oriented development narratives and emotionally resonant appeals. Another critical finding is the silence period violation. Posting over 60,000 Google ads during April 17–19,

2024, indicates not only scale but also potential erosion of electoral safeguards. The Election Commission of India's restrictions are designed to allow voters a reflection window free of campaign bombardment. By exploiting digital loopholes, parties primarily the BJP extended persuasive reach precisely when voters were most vulnerable to influence. This confirms fears of regulatory lag vis-à-vis digital campaigning, aligning with Oxford Internet Institute's earlier warning about India's susceptibility to "junk news" ecosystems (OII, 2019).

The INC's digital weakness is equally revealing. Despite contesting nationally, it ran only 10 Google ads in the period Lokniti-CSDS observed. This lack of investment reflects both resource asymmetries and possibly a traditional campaign orientation rooted in rallies and print. While offline campaigning remains vital in rural India, IAMAI's 2024 ICUBE report indicates that over 800 million Indians are now online, with rural areas comprising 52% of users. Thus, underutilization of digital platforms risks strategic irrelevance for INC, especially with younger voters. From a democratic perspective, the findings raise concerns about information inequality. A digitally advanced party can saturate discourse with its narrative, while weaker parties remain marginal online. The result is not a level playing field but a digitally skewed battleground. Combined with the opacity of ad targeting platforms disclose ad counts and spend bands but not psychographic criteria this creates risks of manipulation without accountability. Moreover, the role of platform governance is deeply contested. The Guardian (2024) found Meta approved ads inciting violence. This reflects systemic moderation weaknesses in high-volume political contexts. While IAMAI's self-regulatory code commits to transparency, actual enforcement remains thin, highlighting a gap between normative regulation and operational outcomes. Without stronger third-party audits, Indian elections risk becoming laboratories for unchecked digital influence.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

The study highlights urgent policy imperatives for ensuring electoral integrity in India's digital age. The first and most pressing is strengthening regulatory oversight of digital advertising. The Election Commission of India (ECI) currently enforces silence periods and expenditure rules, but enforcement falters in digital spaces where ads proliferate by the tens of thousands. A mandatory pre-clearance mechanism for all political ads similar to traditional media should be extended to digital platforms, with real-time disclosure of sponsors, targeting parameters, and expenditure.

Second, transparency of ad archives must deepen. Current Google and Meta repositories provide ad counts and broad spend bands but lack granular data on targeting criteria, psychographic variables, or user impressions. A standardized open database managed by an independent regulator could ensure researchers and civil society can monitor manipulation attempts. Platforms should be legally obliged to disclose ad microtargeting variables while protecting individual privacy.

Third, closing loopholes in the silence period is critical. The BJP's 60,000+ ads in April 2024 show that current voluntary codes are ineffective. Statutory penalties for violations, including financial fines and disqualification of non-compliant ads, are necessary. This should be supplemented with automated AI-based monitoring of ad repositories during silence windows.

Fourth, capacity-building for opposition and smaller parties is essential. Digital campaigning asymmetries risk undermining electoral competition. Publicly funded training programs could equip parties with basic digital literacy and ethical campaigning techniques, creating a more balanced digital field.

Lastly, voter literacy initiatives should be prioritized. With 800+ million internet users, many first-time digital voters are exposed to targeted ads without understanding how data informs them. Embedding media literacy in curricula, public campaigns, and ECI outreach would empower citizens to critically evaluate persuasive content.

Together, these steps can help India transition from a laissez-faire digital campaign environment to a regulated, transparent, and voter-centric framework. Without such reforms, the risk remains that India's democracy will be "datafied" in ways that privilege dominant actors and erode public trust.

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