Media Impact and Elections: A Study of Political Campaign in Contemporary India

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Abstract

In democracy media act as a facilitator. It plays an extremely significant role in the political sphere as it influence public opinion through its agenda setting function. Media define and take up the issues that have immense appeal and emerge as dominant and decisive factors in the political realm. It can keep a check on the political system through the transparency in their actions hence independent media are effective instruments that keep on track and on guard the spirit of democracy and exert positive influence over its citizens. Its power has further strengthened by the emergence and proliferation of the new media.

Media politicking guarantee a democracy to flourish, furbish, survives and succeeds. In an age of hi-tech communication and information revolution the smooth functioning of democracy is not possible in the absence of free and independent institution of media. A free and fair election is not merely about the freedom to vote and the knowledge of voting process rather it is a process of shared knowledge where voters engage directly in debate and discussions to assimilate adequate information about issues, parties, policies, candidates and the election development itself that they could make best possible choices in selecting their representatives to govern.

Media provide a larger platform for making consensus and formulating public opinion among the voters, it acts as a crucial player to ensure democratic elections and safeguard the transparency of the process. In democracy elections without media freedom is considered a contradiction to standardised norms. The paper primarily aims to examine the issues related to the responsibilities of the Media in a democratic
system of governance with specific reference to the coverage of general elections of the 2014 in India. The paper also attempts to study the comparative reporting attributes in mainstream Indian media during general election 2014.

Key words: Media, Politics, Elections, Democracy, Free and Fair, Coverage, Voters

Introduction
The basic media responsibility include inform and educate people about politico-religious, socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-economical, socio-ethical scenario whereby an informed citizenry can build a independent, egalitarian, stable, civilized, developed, peaceful, progressive, prosperous state. Media is an important pillar for protecting and promoting moral values in a democratic nation and that of its citizens. In this era of information and communication technology age media provide sophisticated means of expression to facilitate swift communication connecting people globally. The communication platforms have acquired an unparalleled skills and capabilities to deliver messages with breath taking speed. The technology driven media have transformed the world into a global village. Whatever the circumstances or the nature of the society in which the media operate, certain factors are basic in the way they influence modern living. The mediated massages are constantly aiming at target audience influencing attitudes, perceptions and decision-making (Upadhyay, 2006) and hence contributes meaningfully to the desired change.

In modern political arena people largely depend upon media for choice and preferences. Media help them select the most suitable political option out of multiple alternatives. Since media have immense potential to set a political agenda it attempts to trigger a line of political discourse influencing the electoral trends in the society. Media dissemination of various meaningful and useful massages through its surveillance, interpretation, linkage, correlation, transmission of values and entertainment functions (Anand, 2012) leads to mass awareness and help update people with current issues and happenings of consequence. People have varied information needs, among them information regarding elections is one of the most sought after one. Media provide not only necessary information but also meaningful and useful knowledge during the election period and it plays crucial role in evolving and shaping
the popular opinion. Media mobilizes the masses and set the political agenda. It helps building consensus through news, debates, studio discussions, opinion polls and surveys. With the increased participation of the people through effective feedback system, media create an environment of politically informed decision making by highlighting the issues and problems prevailing in the society. The participative media facilitates effective communication and understanding of the subject (Aggarwal, 2002).

**Democracy and Media**

Knowlton Nash observed that there are different kinds of power centre in any democracy: the judiciary, the government mandarins, the elected representatives, the establishment, the business community, and the unions. But...what binds it all together is the media. Only through the media can the governing communicate with the governed in any mass sense. The mass media is the backbone of democracy it provide the essential political information that voters need for taking rational stand to support a political dispensation and to cast their votes in favour of a person or party and to decide the base to vote. They help identify the problems in the society and highlight these issues so that the stakeholders could be focused. It is media that put to thorough scrutiny between promises and poll plank of the parties and candidates and how they view problems and issues that the society is grappling with. The crucial political functions of media includes surveillance of socio-political environment, identifying the most relevant issues, providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views, holding officials to account for the way they exercise power, provide incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the political process, and resist efforts of forces outside the media to subvert its own independence (Dayal, 2011).

In democracy people are supreme and sovereign and representatives are elected directly through voting mandates. Right to vote and choose the candidate of choice is the fundamental attribution of a democratically elected Government. People are free to elect a government of their own choice. Freedom of choice is at the core of democracy where the representatives are nominee of the people in the Parliament to legislate for them and hence multi-party political system, right to contest, campaign and vote, right to discuss, dissent and equal participation, universal adult suffrage and
periodic elections assumes an indispensable part of the constitutional doctrines that foster the democratic functioning (Howard, 2004).

Multi-party system exists and operates because the media educate the voters about the parties in contest. It educates the people to the pros and cons of various political outfits including their agenda, ideology, priorities, prominence and other salience. The media also drive home how voting is important for people and those they have right to caste vote, contest and campaign if he intends to. The media watchdog role ensures that people are not discriminated on the basis of their race, religion, ethnic group, or gender. Media also provide the necessary inputs outlining the importance of the two another important requisites of democracy, universal adult suffrage and timely election. Hence Lichtenberg established how mass media are potentially significant in upholding the basic norms of democracy in a society.

Need for the study

Media as a common platform for the public, political parties and politicians has specific roles and direct relevance when it comes to elections. Further the emergence of innovative Information Technology (IT) has turned the world into a global knowledge society where everything is known and familiar. Beyond the ordinary importance of information, a democracy cannot survive in the absence of an independent media system. It is the media that provide checks and balances to the three arms of government ensuring smooth functioning of a democracy. Similarly media cannot be effective in national progress without being responsible and free from sensationalism, propaganda and bias. Media should always withstand pressures and report objectively pointing the gap between performance and the promises of the ruling powers. The study is an attempt to examine the role played by media during the 2014 general elections. In addition it may contribute to the understanding of the media dynamics and stimulate further work in the field of politics and media. So its aim is to trace media influence in operation during the whole course of election and electioneering in the backdrop of the recently held general elections in India.

Methodology

The methodology consists of both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Hence a mixed method of research has been applied by the researcher. The general objective of the present study is to analyze
the patterns of influence and to determine the role and impact of mass media during the election campaigns. The Present Study was conducted to analyze the role of Indian Media in Covering General Elections 2014. The researcher aimed at analysing the content to make valid inferences through qualitative as well as quantitative approach.

**Literature Review**

Media impact on elections, political participation and voting behavior has been studied in the in many countries including United States, UK, Germany and other European and African countries but in India research attention has been focused of late. There have been a few studies on the nature and functions of the media (Fernandez, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Kluver et al., 2007; Prasad, 2006; & Sonawalkar, 2001). The available literature on political knowledge focuses on a wide variety of issues like the correlation between reliance on different forms of communication resources and the corresponding level of political knowledge (Berkowitz & Pritchard, 1989).

In his study Tedesco (2001) found a positive relation between the public issues agendas set by the media and the poll plank of candidates with particularly strong correlations for Republican candidates. With the advancement of the internet revolution, more and more scholars have studied the media as a platform for voicing public opinion (Hook, 2011; Krueger, 2002 & 2005). Golan and Wanta (2001) in their study in New Hampshire for the year 2000 found that second level agenda setting was primarily important in the initial stages of the campaign when the mass public was beginning to learn about the candidates.

Media Plan Institute in its report published on coverage of Election campaign established that pre-election reporting is rather superficial and sensational reporting which lack depth insight of various issues concerning the voter. The report concluded that some media outlets were openly inclined towards a particular political party or candidate. The report also maintained that media should have investigative approach during pre-election reporting which help voter in better assessment of the potential electoral contestant. The media should adopt planned and articulated quantification techniques to judge suitable candidate seeking elected office (Plan, 2014).

By and large study of the literature suggests that in India there has been little research on the impact of the media on politics in general and voting behavior in
particular. Therefore in this study the researcher has tried to find the media impact on political participation in India.

**Media Role and Elections:**

Elections are an important part of any democracy without which it cannot work. In a democratic government generally confusion prevail among the voter regarding casting their votes following all party or candidate claiming themselves as best option hence it is very difficult to study how any voter arrive at a decision in casting his or her vote for a party or a candidate, in a democracy as large as India it becomes more difficult in comparison to western democracies. There are various factors having influence on the voting pattern in a vibrant democracy as large as India, where diversities like caste, color, creed, religion, region, background and personality of candidates, parties, and mass media affect the decision of voters (Benoit, 2009) With the media surge and proliferation of new means of mass media, they have become very critically instrumental for politicians and political parties in reaching out to a widespread masses, which was not possible till few years ago. Mass media over the years have changed the political process of societies in which citizen enjoy freedom of choice out of multiple alternatives through its extensive, aggressive and analytical campaign during elections.

It is stated well that politics would progress to diversity and Multi-faceted communication channels and content (Dahl, 1982) from this perspective, it is opined that use of media could widen the scope of democracy and bring in pluralism to effect norms of normal and actual equalitarian life. In the election period political parties tends to propagate their agenda through media to garner popular public support. They advertise their manifestos and try to project them best option among others. It helps in establishing the facts and bringing the truth to the people (Marko, 2010). Thus at election time, when constituents must elect their representatives, it becomes doubly imperative that the media afford them all information necessary for them to make informed choices about whom to elect and whom not to elect into positions of authority. It has been observed in previous elections that how slogan of “feel good” and “India shining” dominated the media hob-nobs. Image management or drawing parallels in comprehensive, constant and continuous reporting result into developing personality cult owing to wider and strong media appeal.
among the masses. The BJP leader L.K. Advani, A B Vajpayee or Congress leaders Pt. Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Soniya, Priyanka or Rahul Gandhi are among the prominent example from the political India (Gandhi & Sandhu, 2012). Media exposure and wide coverage with mass appeal leads to formulate and mould the public opinion with reference to choice of the candidate hence putting pressure on the party concerned to project one as party face or leader on the front (Hopmann, 2015)

**Media Impact and General Elections of 2014**

The Indian general election 2014 was a historic event in the second most populous country of the world. India celebrated its democratic fest to elect representatives for the 16th Lok Sabha. It was unique in many senses with many parties being in fray roping in a huge no. of contestants to test their luck in this ballot battle. The General Election of 2014 considered as the largest election in the world had whopping 814.5 million voters with 23.1 million or 2% of first time voters in the age group of 18-19 years. Interestingly, in a surprising trendy the record breaking total voter turnout bordered on 66.38% where around 8251 candidates contested for the 543 seats in the elections held in 9 phases covering 29 States and 7 Union Territories. Among many parties two national parties dominated the political clout of the country namely BJP and Congress. While the incumbent Congress was struggling to retain the power, BJP appeared to be at an advantage owing inescapable anti-incumbency against the ruling Congress following its rule of consecutive last ten years. Thus as anticipated right wing political party BJP and its allies NDA came to power with an impressive victory winning 336 seats. The ruling party Indian National Congress that dominated national political scene for over six decades was routed in the 2014 elections winning a meager 8.1% (44) seats in a house of 543 seats. The congress poll drubbing reduced the party to lowest ever tally as it failed to win least required seats (10% seats) to have leader of opposition in the parliament. The political consequences of huge media network sites in India however were evident in the 2014 elections had a paradigm shift in the national election campaigns. Different Media vehicles including conventional media (Newspapers, Radio, News channels or others print or electronic media outlets) as well as social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) were
quite instrumental during the elections to let people judge the most potential party and candidate to govern the country. Media by reporting extensively about each and every aspect from the political viewpoint based on various issues including corruption, development, safety and security, health and hygiene, gender equality put forward the agenda and national mood in the election vehement (Hasan, 2014).

The 2014 general elections were about the fierce fight of the ideologies, poll planks, poll strategies, rhetoric, views and opinions with their counter views and the opinions. The war of words of two major players Congress and BJP of the election became news mix for the major English dailies to vernacular to local tabloids. On the one hand Congress charged the opposite party for divisive agenda to polarise the voters on the religious lines, on the other side BJP charged the ruling congress for minority appeasement. The role the media played have been very significant amidst leaving ample scope for analysis, debate and research. At the same time, never had it been so effective to set the political agenda as seen during the 2014 general elections. Media makes and creates images of the political leaders or political parties. Media through its extensive description of governance of any party in any state or at center, can establish the image of that political party (CRAIG, 2004). Amid Pre-election reporting of media the debate and discussion sauntered around the governance comparison of various BJP ruled states be it Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, MP and Goa with the non-BJP ruled states including Kerala, Bihar, Tamilnadu, Bengal ruled by regional political parties and states ruled by congress like Uttarakhand, Karnataka etc. The news pertaining to social development and core election issues were not as frequent as that of news related to inter-party comments or allegations or leaders trading personal and political charges. In pre-election reporting mostly news pertaining to crime, corruption, rapes and murders following failure of the central government appeared. In the elections of 2014 amid reports of the Polarisation the principal opposition party BJP had a clean sweep in many states including Gujarat, Rajasthan, Delhi, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh. The party won most of the seats of Hindi heartland of the north and central India including UP, Bihar, MP, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand (Sinha, 2014). The 2014 election will be remembered for high voltage media
reporting and its almost complete focus on individuals including Soniya Gandhi, Rahul, and Modi etc. The critical issues at the ground level like unemployment, poverty, education or health were discussed rarely. So the political discourse in the run upto the 2014 general election took shape of presidential elections where media presentation depicted it was a contest between Modi and rest. Modi as champion of headlines following his powerful oratory, fiery speeches and strong mass appeal assumed a larger than life dimension, dwarfing all other elements of the political discourse and public agenda. One indispensable effect of this hype, hysteria or rhetoric repeatedly suggested a Modi wave. The tide of Modi wave was on the basis of opinion polls, and not ground level reports, that was mainly concerned to predict him most probable PM of the country. The media focus was entirely on personalities, ignoring the larger issues involving the elections. Which ultimately suggested that other electoral factors such as the choice of candidates, local level alliances, and the performance of State government were not given that importance accordingly (Hasan, 2014).

Renowned writer and critic Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, in their 1988 book Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, discussed about the influence of ‘propaganda’ and ‘systemic biases’ in the mass media and explained how consent is developed in the minds of people on economic, social and political policies. Poll strategist believes that it’s impossible in a country as large as India to win a thumping majority as BJP got without media. Media is one of the most powerful tools for one to achieve a target with larger and wider dissemination of the massages. It is such that before assuming office, Mr. Modi, during his first ever press conference after the poll victory, admitted that media has played a great role in his journey from Gujarat to Delhi (Narita, 2014). Thus it was the powerful rhetoric which dominated media reporting to create a wave that made Modi most popular and capable person to occupy the chair of Prime Minister of India (Upadhyay, 2013).

The coverage of general election 2014 by a major Hindi daily Amar Ujala and another major English daily The Hindu can help understand the media trends of election reporting and its attitude towards political
parties and national agenda. For this purpose the sample from The Hindu and Amar Ujala, for the month of April was studied which include the coverage of the campaign one week before the date, voting started and reporting during the elections till April 30 2014. The data of thirty days reporting in the newspapers has been analysed for the purpose to study media reporting devoted to general election 2014. The political news stories on Front page and editorial page were the units of analysis for the purpose of inferences the researcher set to draw to study the media campaign during the elections.

**Amar Ujala**

The paper was selected because of being among the highly circulated vernacular dailies. Since majority of Indian population stay in the Hindi belt where Hindi dailies have far flung reach to rural and remote areas compared with others language newspapers. The Hindi media has mass appeal among the majority of the Indians owing to their demographical situation. Hence general elections were a major event for the vernacular Hindi press following its vast exposure to major chunk of the Indian voters.

Source: *Amar Ujala, Month of April, 2014.*

Amar Ujala devoted sizable portion of the space to the political news on its front page and editorial page. The coverage study indicate news about the major national parties occupied the space prominently while at the same time space of the paper allotted to regional political parties was comparatively lesser, the paper reported excessively about the two major players, their leaders and their interparty comments, statements and announcements, policies and strategies. The stories counted include news about the BJP, Congress and regional parties and their political equations with other regional and national parties. The category broadly defined as regional mix (REG/MIX). The blow diagram clearly depict as principal opposition party BJP occupied larger media space in the coverage. Out of total stories counted fifty percent were about the BJP rest thirty one percent to
ruling Congress and nineteen percent were allotted to regional parties and other political news. Among the news stories appeared about BJP were largely about the development and good governance which was main poll plank of the party.

Source: Amar Ujala, Month of April, 2014.

The party PM candidate Mr. Narendra Modi was in the focus following his potential development work in Gujrat and presenting a development and good governance model before others, News space was also dominated by news pertaining to his strong and stable leadership, investment friendly policies, statement from the party leaders, party manifesto or various poll predictions in which party was much ahead against its main opponent INC (Indian National Congress).

The paper also reported about opposition charge on Mr. Modi for 2002 post Godhra riots when he was the chief minister of Gujrat that he could not control rioting mobs, apart from this news also appeared about party allegedly being involved or provoking sectarian division, communal hate, and polarisation. Thus in news framing fifty six percent positive tone of the paper was observed while thirty nine percent negative news appeared with just five percent neutral news make it to the reporting about BJP. Whereas news stories about INC were that of the lack of leadership, corruption ridden governance following scams including 2G, Coalgate or Adarsh Society and opposition’s charges of policy paralysis, dynasty politics or family legacy or diarchy (two power centre), weak Prime Minister or bringing low to the office of the PM. However news was also reported when party leaders took on BJP for its divisive politics and for the secular credentials of the party accommodating all sections of the society. Of the total news stories appeared about the Congress sixty seven percent negative in tone while twenty one percent was positive and twelve percent was neutral.
Thus the overall study of the political news framing of the Amar Ujala with reference to Congress and BJP indicate that BJP was leading in media campaign following more positive news appeared about the party poll prospects, policies and strong leadership under Narendra Modi while at the same time incumbent INC was struggling because of several charges and allegations of corruption, women security, unemployment, inadequate social security and poor socio-economic policies.

**The Hindu**

The Hindu is one of the most reputed news daily with a glorious past and large circulation from southern to northern India. The paper is renowned for its balanced and objective reporting. It also reported about the 2014 general elections with a great enthusiasm and accountability. The coverage about the BJP was news pertaining to party’s stand on economy, development, governance, party manifesto beside news about its PM Candidate Mr. Narendra Modi for his decisive leadership, development oriented politics, intra-party relationships etc. at the same time the papers also reported about the opposition charges of his alleged role in 2002 Post Godhra riots, pro corporate policies, promoting crony capitalism, disputed speeches and statements by the party leaders provoking religious sentiments to cause polarization etc. The news coverage about the INC (Indian National Congress) include inclusive approach of the party which may win more post-election allies given to its secular credentials, lack of decision making and slow or poor governance, the government of the party in question for multiple opposition allegations, grappling with the scams after scams etc. the paper also reported about the opposition charge of weakening economy, defense, scandals and scams, policy delay etc.
Since the paper has southern origin so political news from the southern region of the country also appeared prominently. The paper allotted as visible in the figure maximum coverage share to BJP 45% along-with Congress and Regional parties 35% and 20% respectively. As apparent the paper allocated sizable portion to regional parties particularly based in southern part of the country. The political news space allotted by The Hindu includes INC, BJP, and REG/MIX. The category for regional parties and their party affairs has been coded as REG/MIX. It's a broad category formulated to cover the regional parties and their leaders, their political activities and discourses. BJP and INC were the major parties in the election so both parties occupied the maximum space of the newspaper.

The main opposition party BJP not only dominated against its opponent INC in media coverage but also in paper tone framing to depict the positive, negative, neutral framing put the BJP much ahead of the INC. Fifty two percent positive news appeared for BJP, it was forty three percent of the total news to BJP that was measured as negative while merely five percent was neutral for the party.

In the case of ruling congress which gives the impression contending with the multiple questions for being in power for the last consecutive ten years under UPA I and UPA II was under huge pressure from opposition seeking accountability of the Govt on various national and international issues. Although party was at an advantage in paper reports for its secular character enabling it win more allies in post-election scenario yet
it was under severe anti-incumbency for two consecutive tenure.

![Congress](image)

Source: *The Hindu*, *Month of April, 2014.*

The paper coverage tone about the INC indicates how the party was outnumbered statistically by its opponent BJP. Its negative news share blow in the graph stand at fifty four percent with thirty two and fourteen percent for positive and neutral news respectively. The overall paper tone analysis and framing suggests BJP was at an advantage from the reporting perspective which was to appeal the voters while most of news appeared about the congress were negative owing to accountability of the party for its rule of the last ten years. The news pertaining to the congress appeared were mainly about the opposition charging the party for its failure on various fronts including unemployment, price hikes, corruption, health and poverty etc.

**Conclusion**

The media plays a vital role in keeping the citizenry updated of the current events and raising awareness of various issues in any society. It also has an extremely significant impact on the public’s views and way of thinking. The media is one of the strongest pressure group, having direct influence on the political process. It acts like a mediator between peoples and institutions through which public opinion is shaped and at times manipulated. Thus media’s role becomes even more vital in exceptional periods, one of which is electoral junctures, when the media becomes a crucial player with its reach and approach to the public. The Electoral politics constitute a formidable challenge to the media, putting its impartiality and objectivity to the test. The media reporting of 2014 general elections was unique in many ways including its extensive coverage and sensationalizing the masses through scintillating political temperature. The two national parties – the Indian National Congress (INC) commonly referred as the Congress party, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – were way ahead of other national parties and poll
issues when it comes to devoting the space and stories in reporting during the elections. As media indicated between the two, the BJP was more aggressive than its nearest rival the Congress in media plank. Unlike earlier in many parts of urban India, first time media coverage spread to rural India proportionately to connect the voters with this massive exercise of electing suitable representative to govern the country. Parties seem to have been well influenced by the presidential form of campaigning in the US where in addition to media impact, thousands of volunteers were engaged in large numbers to mobilise the voters. Apart from the political parties, key contestants in urban constituencies were specifically focus point for the media to demonstrate to their voters. Media reporting was in question owing to its image projection of party leaders including Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Narendra Modi etc. The task of the mainstream media, especially local or vernacular media outlets, should not be inclined towards the power center or it should not function as a mouthpiece for any government body or particular candidate. Media should act like a mechanism for free and balanced information to the masses. Its utmost duty is to report unbiased and objectively. It should function without any favor or fear. Its role should not be that of a fierce critic or staunch supporter of any political party but it should be that of a constructive critic. Its basic role is to enlighten and educate the public and act as a neutral, objective platform for the free debate of all points of view the relationship between politics and media thus considered to be custodian of democracy. This relationship needs constant rebalancing. Highest parameters of transparency and a regular critical evaluation are of utmost importance. Despite their inter-dependence, the demarcation line between them must be maintained. The society needs a sensible balance between media and politics for the survival and existence of democratic process.

References:


