



Review Article

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The Dynamics of Political Advertising: A Comprehensive Theoretical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Political advertising has long been integral to election campaigns, government policies and regimes in India and worldwide. They play a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing voter behavior. We remember Eisenhower's "I Like Ike" campaign from America to Indira Gandhi's "Gareebi Hatao" to Narendra Modi's "Ab Ki Baar Modi Sarkar" Campaign, and many more. This paper provides a theoretical overview of political advertising with examples of the American and Indian contexts. It explores the contrast and similarity between conventional and political advertising based on the arenas of commercial marketing and political marketing. It examines the political market's segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) model. It further discusses the dynamism of a political marketing mix while sketching the new additions to the 4Ps, different promotional strategies, and the impact of social media on political advertising. Furthermore, it highlights relevant research studies in the field, mainly focusing on Indian studies from recent elections. Finally, it discusses the methods employed to study political advertising, identifies research gaps and suggests potential areas for future study.

INTRODUCTION

According to the "Handbook of Political Communication" in 1981, Kaid defines "Political Ads as a process of communication in which the source (usually a political party or candidate) buys an occasion or a spot to build up the audiences through mass media channels with political messages with the intended effect and influence their political attitude, belief, and behavior (Kaid, 2004, p. 156). Even though this definition stands old, it is applied in a broader context of global promotion and marketing in politics in the 21st century.

According to "Ad Standards", a part of the Australian Association of National Advertisers, "Political Ads are attempted to either influence or comment on matters of national importance or government policies that are currently a subject of immense political debate"(Nott, 2020, p. 1). Indian Politics shapes layman's thoughts through what we show through our media, a part of every household viewing television, reading newspapers or scrolling through

our social media news feeds. The small regional parties are the tiny fishes in the ocean ruled by big fishes like the famous national parties (Sehgal, 2019). It is either the BJP and Congress rivalry, coalition parties joining and leaving, or the blame game debates between party spokespersons, and these have always been hungry for limelight reaching from different channels and sources (Rakshit, 2023). The cruciality arises in how these parties, their ideologies, their agreements and their conflicts reach the country's public through various communication channels like the traditional media or new media (Rakshit, 2023).

With the rise of Internet accessibility in India, political marketing comes into play to publicize and promote a party or a candidate; its dynamic tools and tactics have a similar foundation to commercial marketing. Political advertising is not a new concept in the political arena; it plays a pivotal role in "the unconcealed art of breaking news", painting a new picture of the candidate or attacking the competition, questioning the policies of the government or giving voice to the citizens' opinions either satirically or ironically.

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In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th US President, used advertising while campaigning for the first time. “I Like Ike” Ad, sometimes referred to as “We Like Ike” and “Ike for President”, was the first Television Political advertisement campaign sent out in mass media channels to introduce “IKE” and his support team to the country’s population. This Ad was an effort to introduce him better to the general and broaden the electorate for more acceptability. Furthermore, “Eisenhower Answers America” was the first spot ad that ran all over America on Radio and Television in 1952 and reached 40 million American households (*The Evolution of Political Advertising* | JFK Library, 2004). With time, Political ads have become a vital element of an umbrella campaign and consist of a critical narrative arch that supports the messaging or standpoint of a political party. By the mid-1990s, the campaigns started running massive campaigns all over TV and Cable around the US to capture more and more American Citizens. As advertisements are visual art, they have a greater reach over all the channels, currently peaking on social media than television.

In the 21st Century’s digital world, political strategists have to find unique, more creative and engaging ways to get a hold of the public eye, and campaign managers help design the roadmap for creating the entire election process and post-elections to take the feedback. Political marketing helps the party segment its target audience and set the correct tone and content format to reach the same, with the help of marketing tactics formulated in an integrated marketing communication (IMC) plan. A message delivered at the correct time, through an appropriate channel in an acceptable language, will be more effective in setting the tone for a party and its candidate than messing up with either of these components. Commercial IMC includes advertising, public relations (PR), direct marketing, sales promotion and personal selling. Today, digital advertisements with the use of social media tools and the Internet are designed in such a way that they act as a catalyst and empower voters. However, political advertisements online are not regulated, which results in a great chance of privacy breach incidents like the “Cambridge Analytica” in 2017, which took the personal information of almost 90 million Facebook Users through their mobile application. During the 2016 US Presidential Election, the trump campaign was one of the primary clients of the agency. It used the collected data hugely to micro-target the American Electorate through its messages, which later dragged the agency and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to court.

Conventional Marketing and Political Marketing

Political marketing and commercial marketing work in the same fashion. It involves ideas and notions used by political ‘for-profit’ organizations to get a desired public opinion or to direct the public opinion in a definite direction. Political marketplaces are like commercial marketplaces. Like Marketers, politicians are also constantly trying to

anticipate what will add value to their constituent citizens’ lives and what cost-effectively benefits it to cater to society’s strata. As a corporate leader uses strategies and plans to maneuver and market his products, it is vital for the country’s modern-day leaders running for important positions to use them to win elections and incorporate them to run for office successfully. However, voters’ behavior is essential to the marketing plan; it varies according to their belief systems, which develop through their past voting patterns, word-of-mouth, and communication through mass media channels. Socioeconomic groups and their inclination towards a specific party influence voters’ behavior. Their behavior gets affected and influenced either by the political issues, social imagery of the candidates or the situational contingency created by one candidate and epistemic values. Researchers conduct a thorough polling analysis to help the politicians and the parties further shape policies for the electorate, and they consume policies as products (Kotler & Kotler, 1999).

Essential Elements for Political Marketing: STP and Extended 4Ps’

Effective political marketing involves segmentation, targeting, positioning, and a comprehensive marketing mix. Segmentation, crucial in traditional and political marketing, forms small homogenous clusters within heterogeneous groups, allowing tailored messages to persuade the voters. Grassroots-level micro-segments are often data-driven to enhance campaign strategies. For example, the credit for the BJP’s success in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections goes to data-driven micro-targeting through control rooms (Dutta, 2019). Positioning builds a candidate or party’s image, employing principles like clarity, consistency, credibility, competitive value, and communication (P. Bannon, 2004). The political marketing mix, adapting McCarthy’s 4P model, includes product (candidate’s ideology), price (campaign cost), place (campaign distribution), and promotion (communication channels). It employs diverse channels, from traditional media to digital platforms, adapting to various voter segments. An extended marketing mix in developing countries like India involves factors like party, overall persona, candidate traits, and polling strategies. The product’s success pivots on alignment with voter preferences, emphasizing research and effective communication. Pricing scrutiny includes media costs, influencing voter perceptions. Place involves strategic campaign dispersal, considering geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. Promotion assimilates various communication tools to create awareness, build trust, and persuade voters. Personality traits, party symbols, and past achievements contribute to the overall political mix, adapting to diverse cultural contexts. This multidimensional approach recognizes the dynamic nature of political marketing, requiring constant adaptation to reach and influence voters across different segments and regions effectively.



Chowdhury and Naheed (2019) contribute valuable insights based on empirical research, expanding the 4Ps to incorporate additional elements. They introduce physical/people evidence, enveloping a party's use of famous personalities, volunteer strength, local relationships, celebrity connections, and the installation of statues representing party figures. The party is considered an individual "P," involving signs, symbols, global status, past achievements, candidate numbers, and ideological alignment. Another critical aspect is the "Personality Traits" of the candidate, including dedication, modesty, resilience, and values. "Polling" emerges as a robust component, involving pre- and post-election surveys, understanding voter needs, and presenting promising policies in the manifesto. On polling day, voters choose candidates based on the effectiveness of "Persuasion" strategies, which include family associations and promises of financial security through methods like distributing "freebies" and regular outreach via social media, pamphlets, or direct mail (Chowdhury & Naheed, 2019, p. 14). This extended framework endorses the distinct dynamics of political marketing, encompassing multiple factors to craft compelling and adaptive strategies in diverse political landscapes.

Political Advertising: American Context vs. Indian Context

"Political advertising in the United States and India is complexly influenced by their unique political structures, cultural contexts, and media landscapes. The US ingrains a rich history of political advertising rooted in a two-party system, with traditional channels like television, radio, and direct mail traditionally steering campaigns. However, the 2008 Presidential Elections marked a transformative moment as Barack Obama harnessed the power of social media. In contrast, India's political advertising has adapted to the impact of satellite television, social media, and many regional languages (Kumar, 2017). The vast electoral landscape in India, characterized by regional parties and linguistic diversity, presents distinct challenges and opportunities that demand tailored advertising strategies. Political marketing deploys commercial strategies for political entities to shape public opinion and navigate the political marketplace, drawing parallels with the tactics employed by corporate leaders. This intersection of marketing principles and politics underscores the increasing influence of the marketing world on the political stage (B. Newman & Perloff, 2004)."

Political Advertisement: India

Political advertising in India has a rich history dating back to the 1950s, with printed material and posters being the primary of communication. The 1980s saw the introduction of advertisements, but only parties with enough resources could afford this mode of communication. With the rise of digitalization through social media and digital marketing,

political advertising has revolutionized in the past decade. Today, political parties in India use various channels to communicate with their potential voters, including social media, print media, SMS, and radio. While political advertising has become more diversified and accessible, concerns about the ethics and legality of political ads in India came parallel. They include facts or communication related to a political party, its representatives or candidates in the ads about issues of the country, its citizens, specific topics important to the public interest and government policies. They are either published or broadcast by the government, lobbyists, parties and other interest groups that fall into the political categories without any limitation of timeframes and occasions like elections. The use of political advertisements has grown rampantly in terms of downright frequency of exposure or extensive and lengthy political campaigning; political ads, as compared to commercial ads, still need to be undersized.

Tracing down advertising trends, on 23 May 2019, the Lok Sabha Election result announcement revealed that the Bharatiya Janata Party secured 303 seats, while the coalition they led claimed victory with 353 seats in 2019. Before polling, Facebook and Google devised their respective systems to analyze the exact ad Spending by political parties and the correct statistics on the number of ads they received from different political parties. According to the Google Ads Transparency Center insights on Political Advertising in India, from 1 June 2019 till 1 June 2023, posted 11769 ads all over India, with Ads spending Rs.270,820,750, with Karnataka sitting at the top with 73.3 million advertising spend. 2022 received the most significant chunk of 125 million going into Ads done by BJP over four years. From the approximate amount of 271 million spent on Political ads by the BJP, Video format ads took 59.7%, which is ₹162 Million, whereas Image Ads had a 40.3% share, equating to ₹109 Million (Google *et al.* Center, 2023).

In 2019, from February to May, political parties collectively allocated Rs. 58.67 Crore to Facebook and Google for political ads. In contrast, Facebook Ad Library received more ads from advertisements sent by individual advertisers (Mehta, 2019). Political researchers and polling mavericks studying the bucketing of political ads were worried at that time. Online ads kept on increasing at high speed. Supporters of each party kept on posting ads, trolling groups and support forums, attacking each other through ads, debate zones, and online groups battling to support their chosen party was also becoming a part of advertising, as the amount of content similar in appearance and similar sounding hashtags increased, it got difficult to understand if the actual publisher of the ad was an individual supporter or official party campaigners (Mehta, 2019).

Evaluating Political Advertisements

Political Advertising came to light from different cultures, backgrounds and contexts. The content amalgamation in political campaigns and advertisements gets divided

between paid and free content—for example, paid content has political parties OOH (Out-Of-Home), including billboards, posters and hoardings, TV spots, print ads, and organized events such as rallies. Free content incorporates free spaces over the Internet, such as YouTube and Twitter. Researchers first give foundational information about political marketing as an expansive concept and further explain the growth of political advertising branching ahead.

Qualitative and Descriptive Methods

Initial research or literature on political advertising adopted the historical and rhetorical method. Some were descriptive and explained layers of the environment, such as social, economic, legal, technological, and political, which became the basis for political advertisements in a particular country. Historical methods used by researchers solved the basic and primitive questions regarding political advertising and helped the followers understand the frameworks, styles, types and functionality. Likewise, exploratory and descriptive methods aid researchers with context, concepts, and theories to understand the useability and impact on viewers to study how a political party wants to communicate its sociocultural standpoint by giving technical details of ad production and in-depth descriptions. Rhetorical analysis helps to understand the content of an ad, the elements in a political speech, and parliamentary arguments to articulate the vocalization of words.

Similarly, narrative analysis supports understanding the language, tone, and different constructs in the story-building process of an ad. In contrast, the semiotic analysis focuses on the signs and symbols in the ad and scrutinizes the images, pictures, photographs, slogans, significant themes and sometimes hidden subliminal meanings of an ad. Qualitatively, to understand the overall structure of an ad, a researcher can mix these methods to interpret various aspects; for instance, a mix of linguistic, semantic and narrative methods will probe into the story, symbols, and sentence structure and identify its direction (Johnston, 2006).

Quantitative Content Analysis

Researchers widely adopt quantitative content analysis to study political ads. Standardized Content Analysis would describe the issue in the ad, explain the images and their innate personality, and tell us if the message is supposed to be an attack, claim, or harm to the opposition party's image. Several aspects are probed quantitatively, for instance, how it represents genders and, if stylized according to gender, the types like appeal, acclaim and defense ads. Moreover, we recognize the use of theories and concepts by analyzing the production components of the ad.

Selecting Samples

Sampling in quantitative content analysis adopts a purposive sample (collecting political ads from a particular

period) or a convenience sample. A purposive sample is based on a specific level of electioneering, on the gender of the candidates or voters, for instance, picking only women candidate contesting the election and their issues; it can also be a sample in longitudinal research covering a trend, a change, or a policy over the years. Sohal and Kaur (2018) conducted their content analysis study on "YouTube Political Advertisements: Evidence from 2014's Indian Parliamentary Elections." they defined their sample by picking 92 advertisements of the Indian National Congress and 55 Advertisements of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) posted on YouTube. They investigated these ads, discovering the preeminent features of the YouTube ads, the type of appeal, message content, and which part dominates or is strongly addressed in the video, whether it is logical or emotional, and whether issues addressed are national or progressive for the country's future. The researchers must give valid reasons for including and excluding an ad from their sample size; the recurrence of issues and images in a particular ad gives them a direction to code.

Coding Divisions and Categories

The distinction between an issue ad and an image ad is a matter of content analysis and empirical/experimental research. In different countries, while comparing ads, how to analyze them is one issue, but how to sample them is another issue. Researchers have tried to make the samples comparable or similar, not automatically equal (Tak *et al.*, 1997). A maximum number of political advertising content analysis studies employ at least two coders. Intercoder reliability is paramount; if there is a disagreement between two coders, a third coder is taken on board to resolve the response to an ad.

Lastly, content analysis studies are conducted using the framework of theories and models of voting, advertising, and communication; sometimes, theories of political science and film studies are used to understand the approach of making a political ad and its elements.

Methods: Surveys

Survey research methods help determine how voters worldwide use, remind and construe information and imagery in political ads. Scholars understand the effects of the ad on a general impact level, tonality and magnitude of the message in the ad over a period, attitude and behavior change by the information in the ad whether it was a legitimate or misleading claim by the advertisers. The survey methods mainly address the degree of recognition and recall of the ads by the voters, its impact on their decision-making for voting, and whether hostile or offensive messages in ads can cause a backlash (Ansolabehere *et al.*, 1999). Survey Methods in Market Research and tracking previous polling trends are not considered new practices in strategizing a political campaign. It helps politicians to segment their target audiences. There are various kinds of polls: "Typically



performed after a candidate has decided to run for office, benchmark surveys establish a foundational data set. Trial heat surveys gauge potential candidate performance in hypothetical matchups early in the campaign. Close to election day, tracking polls actively conducts daily surveys to monitor any last-minute shifts in support. Major polling firms conduct cross-sectional and panel surveys to view the electorate's preferences at various campaign stages comprehensively. They conduct exit polls immediately after voters cast their ballots." (Newman & Perloff, 2004).

Furthermore, Surveys mechanize "participatory action research" with the audiences of the political ad to test premises formed with the framework of theories, like the Users and Gratification Theory, agenda-setting theory and more, and to break down theoretical aspects of the ad, which eventually defines its type. When mixed with content analysis, it also supports addressing the broader influence of political ads and their future effect on changes in public policy.

CONCLUSION: RESEARCH GAP & FUTURE AGENDAS

The future of political advertising research and political marketing needs exploration as far as Indian politics is concerned. US and European politics developed with trends and technologies. The impact of the Internet and emerging social media usage in political campaigns warrants the future uprise related to artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), programmatic advertising, micro-targeting, influencer marketing, user-generated content (UGC), and E-word-of-mouth (eWOM) and many other impending themes.

Abid *et al.* (2023) discuss that even though political marketing allows exploring different political environments, contrasting cultures, the world's biggest democracies and different locations and voters within them to study the effect of political marketing offline or online, the results depend on the voters' participation. The voters are bifurcated into distinct segments, requiring a different communication approach, from the ward to the national level. Facebook and Twitter are social media networking apps thoroughly probed; the field needs more information regarding booming apps like Instagram and TikTok to tap into a new and vast set of audiences joining them, especially the new voters. In-depth content analysis of different transmission formats, such as Instagram reels, YouTube shorts and short-span series, can be studied to understand the changes and impact. Qualitative research methods are more than conducting verbal/language-based focus-group discussions and interviews; researchers can also seek visual methods such as 'Photo Elicitation Interview' where either researcher or participant or both generate photographs to indulge in a deep, layered and insightful conversation theorizing the picture (Glaw *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, the conceptual building blocks of political marketing could be more substantial; researchers need to drive their focus out of the surface level and fleeting political campaigns, voter behavior and election results. There is not even a handful of research that theorizes any concept for further academic benefits in political marketing; most of the studies conducted are on momentary issues mentioned previously (Abid *et al.*, 2023). A sizeable number of themes emerged with the marketable Gen Z (Born after 1996) as the new voters, using contemporary and state-of-the-art technologies. The new interfaces and parameters on social media apps can be indicators, such as engagement rates and recent sentiment strategies, to study the new characteristics of voters. Political advertising has taken a considerable chunk of the campaign budget for a long time.

Nevertheless, no substantial research occurred except for television, newspaper and magazine ads, Twitter and Facebook ads, sentiment cues and more. Additionally, how do the digital marketing campaigns run by national political parties affect voters? Moreover, do the new keywords and content format impact the voters and help get the desired results? The media mix keeps changing with the product, as the candidate and party become the products we market; the dynamic nature of all the components of the overall political marketing strategy can be analyzed together and in isolation. Political branding and brand value creation by the candidate and party's image and characteristics, whether they translate or convert into votes, and support from different stakeholders are also potential aspects. There are multiple areas for researchers to contribute and build constructs, concepts and foundational theories in the oversized political marketing and advertising bracket that will increase the scope for research and give a base to newer developing countries to use marketing tactics in their political ecosystems mindfully.

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