

Political Marketing and the Quality of Democracy in India: Democratic Participation, Deliberation, Equality and Accountability with Special Reference to Rajasthan

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Abstract:

Political marketing has moved from being a relatively specialized technique of electioneering to a central component of contemporary democratic competition. The increasing use of branding, voter segmentation, opinion polling, social media, data analytics, influencer communication and targeted advertising has altered not only how parties seek votes but also how citizens encounter political information. This paper examines the democratic consequences of this transformation in India, asking whether political marketing strengthens democracy by expanding participation and responsiveness or weakens it by encouraging manipulation, misinformation, unequal competition and the displacement of policy deliberation by image management. Drawing on the political-marketing literature, institutional reports and the Rajasthan case material contained in the original study, the paper develops a democracy-centred analytical framework around five dimensions: political participation, informed choice, equality of electoral competition, deliberative quality, and accountability. Rajasthan is used as a subnational case through which these tensions can be observed in a highly competitive electoral environment. The paper argues that political marketing is neither intrinsically democratic nor inherently anti-democratic. Its democratic effects are conditional upon transparency, institutional regulation, media pluralism, political-finance controls, data governance and citizens' media literacy. The Rajasthan experience is particularly instructive because it demonstrates how the same communication technologies can broaden political outreach while simultaneously intensifying micro-targeting, polarization and resource-based asymmetries. The central democratic question, therefore, is not whether political marketing should exist, but under what conditions it can operate without compromising the informational, egalitarian and deliberative foundations of democracy.

Keywords: Political marketing; democracy; democratic quality; political communication; misinformation; micro-targeting; electoral equality; deliberation; India; Rajasthan

1. Introduction: From Electoral Campaigning to Democratic Transformation

Democracy is not exhausted by the act of voting. Competitive elections are meaningful only when citizens can access political information, compare alternatives, participate without undue manipulation, and hold elected representatives accountable. The contemporary expansion of political marketing therefore raises a question that is fundamentally democratic rather than merely electoral: what happens to the quality of democratic citizenship when political communication increasingly adopts the techniques of the commercial market?

Political marketing is commonly understood as the application of marketing principles to political competition, including campaign strategy, voter research, segmentation, branding and communication (Newman, 1999; Lees-Marshment, 2001). Kotler and Kotler (1999) conceptualize political marketing through the idea of an exchange between political organizations and citizens, while Newman (1999) emphasizes candidate-centred campaigning, polling, branding and voter segmentation. Lees-Marshment (2001) further distinguishes product-oriented, sales-oriented and market-oriented political organizations. The significance of these approaches for democracy lies in their underlying conception of the citizen: the citizen can be treated as an active participant in public reasoning, but can also increasingly be approached as a "political consumer" whose preferences are measured, segmented and strategically influenced.

The transformation is particularly consequential in India. A vast and heterogeneous electorate now encounters political communication through a hybrid media environment in which rallies, interpersonal networks and community mobilization coexist with WhatsApp groups, Facebook, YouTube, influencer content, data analytics and targeted digital communication (Chopra, 2019; Pal, 2022). The original study describes this transition as a movement beyond the traditional "nukkad sabha" toward "algorithm-driven visibility and 24/7 image management" (Chopra, 2019; Pal, 2022). This is not simply a technological change. It potentially alters the conditions under which democratic opinion is formed.

The democratic stakes are therefore considerable. Political marketing can make politics more accessible, translate complex issues into communicable messages, reach first-time voters and create channels through which parties receive rapid feedback from citizens (Newman, 2016; Scammell, 2014). Yet the same instruments can facilitate selective exposure, misinformation, emotional manipulation, polarization and unequal access to political visibility (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2019). The problem is especially acute where differences in financial and organizational resources enable some political actors to dominate the informational environment.

This paper consequently reframes the original question—whether political marketing strengthens or weakens democracy—into a broader inquiry into the quality of democracy. It asks: Does political marketing improve citizens' capacity to participate meaningfully? Does it support informed electoral choice? Does it preserve equality among political competitors? Does it strengthen or weaken deliberation? And does it improve the accountability relationship between elected representatives and citizens? The case of Rajasthan is used to examine these questions at the subnational level.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

The study has four principal objectives:

- To examine political marketing as a transformation of democratic political communication rather than merely a campaign technique.

- To assess its consequences for participation, informed choice, equality, deliberation, trust and accountability.
- To examine how these democratic consequences become visible in the Indian context.
- To use Rajasthan, particularly the 2023 Assembly election context described in the source material, as an illustrative case of the democratic opportunities and risks associated with contemporary political marketing.

The central research question is: How does political marketing affect the quality of democracy in India, and what does the Rajasthan experience reveal about the relationship between digital campaigning, electoral competition and democratic citizenship?

3. Methodological Approach

The paper adopts a qualitative and descriptive-analytical approach. It synthesizes the political-marketing literature, institutional and civil-society material, and the Rajasthan case evidence contained in the original manuscript. The source study identifies the Election Commission of India, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), academic scholarship and contemporary media reporting as its principal evidence bases. The Rajasthan discussion incorporates reported campaign practices associated with the 2023 Assembly elections. The objective is interpretive rather than causal: the paper does not claim that any single marketing practice mechanically determines an electoral outcome.

This distinction is important. Political communication is embedded in wider institutional and social conditions, including party organization, caste and community networks, media structures, economic resources and voter preferences. Accordingly, the Rajasthan case is treated as an illustrative case rather than a statistically representative test of all Indian elections.

4. Conceptualising Democracy Beyond Elections

A democracy-centred analysis requires moving beyond turnout and electoral victory. The original manuscript identifies transparency, equality of access, informed debate and accountability as central democratic requirements. Building on that framework, this paper evaluates political marketing across five dimensions.

4.1 Participation

Democratic participation concerns whether citizens are able and willing to engage with political processes. Targeted communication can lower informational barriers and bring younger, rural and marginalized groups into political conversations (Newman, 2016).

4.2 Informed Choice

Elections require citizens to possess sufficient reliable information to distinguish among political alternatives. Marketing becomes democratically problematic when persuasive communication systematically displaces factual information or encourages citizens to encounter only selectively curated narratives (Norris, 2000; Stromer-Galley, 2019).

4.3 Political Equality

Democratic equality is challenged when differences in financial resources, data infrastructure and professional expertise translate into disproportionate control over political visibility. The original study identifies resource inequality as a major risk because wealthier parties can invest more heavily in consultants, advertising and data systems.

4.4 Deliberation and the Public Sphere

Deliberative democracy depends upon citizens encountering competing arguments and having opportunities to evaluate public claims. The commercialization and personalization of political communication can narrow this space when politics becomes predominantly a contest over images, slogans and emotional identification (Lees-Marshment, 2020; Scammell, 2014).

4.5 Accountability and Trust

Political marketing may improve responsiveness by enabling parties to monitor voter concerns. However, if communication is optimized for short-term popularity rather than policy performance, the relationship between promises, governance and accountability may weaken (Scammell, 2014).

5. Political Marketing: From Representation to Marketisation

The concept of marketisation is central to understanding the democratic implications of political marketing. Lees-Marshment (2020) argues that contemporary politics increasingly incorporates market-oriented practices. The political party becomes attentive to voter preferences in ways that may improve responsiveness, but the logic also risks encouraging politics to be evaluated through the techniques of product positioning and brand management. Scammell (2014), through the idea of "consumer democracy," highlights the tension between the communicative efficiency of marketing and the democratic ideal of citizens as participants in collective self-government.

Newman's (1999) work on the "manufactured" political image is particularly relevant to this transformation. When political identity is heavily mediated by branding, the distinction between a political leader's substantive record and the image constructed around that record can become increasingly difficult for voters to assess. The democratic concern is not that political actors communicate strategically—strategic communication is intrinsic to politics—but that the informational environment may become structured primarily around persuasion rather than public reasoning.

6. Democratic Benefits of Political Marketing

6.1 Expanded Political Reach

Marketing techniques can enable parties to communicate with constituencies that conventional campaigning may not reach efficiently. Regional languages, localized messaging and issue-specific communication can make political information more accessible (Newman, 2016). In this respect, political marketing can have an inclusionary democratic function.

6.2 Mobilisation and Participation

Digital communication can reduce the organizational costs of mobilization. Social-media platforms and messaging applications permit rapid circulation of campaign information, volunteer coordination and event mobilization. In principle, this can strengthen electoral participation and civic engagement.

6.3 Responsiveness

Polling, surveys, focus groups and digital feedback allow political actors to observe changing citizen preferences. The market-oriented party may therefore become more responsive to public concerns (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Yet responsiveness is democratically valuable only when it translates into substantive policy attention rather than merely optimized messaging.

7. Democratic Risks: When Persuasion Becomes Manipulation

7.1 Misinformation and the Crisis of Informed Choice

One of the most serious democratic risks is the speed and scale with which misleading content can circulate. Howard and Kollanyi (2016) use the term "computational propaganda" to describe the interaction of automated systems, social-media infrastructures and political communication. Stromer-Galley (2019) similarly examines the relationship between social-media participation, mobilization and misinformation. In the Indian context, research on WhatsApp during the 2019 general election demonstrates the difficulty of identifying and correcting misinformation on encrypted or closed platforms (Kazemi et al., 2021).

7.2 Micro-targeting and Fragmentation of the Public Sphere

Micro-targeting changes the structure of political communication because different groups may receive different political messages. Segmentation can make communication more relevant, but it can also reduce the possibility of a shared public conversation. If voters are exposed primarily to messages constructed for their demographic, caste, locality or perceived preference, citizens may participate in increasingly fragmented informational worlds (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2019).

7.3 Inequality of Electoral Competition

The principle of political equality is threatened when campaign resources are distributed radically unevenly. Professional consultants, data infrastructure, advertising budgets and sophisticated digital teams are costly. Resource-rich parties can therefore purchase greater political visibility and more precise forms of persuasion. The resulting problem is not simply that some campaigns are better organized; it is that unequal resources can translate into unequal opportunities to shape the information available to citizens (Sahoo, 2024a; 2024b).

7.4 Personalisation, Branding and the Decline of Policy Deliberation

The branding of leaders can simplify political communication, but it may also encourage a politics of personality. When political competition is organized around slogans, emotional identification and leader images, substantive discussion of institutional performance and policy alternatives may receive less attention (Newman, 1999; Lees-Marshment, 2020). The democratic cost is a potential reduction in the quality of deliberation.

8. India: The Digitalisation of Political Competition

India provides an especially significant setting for studying these transformations because electoral competition operates across an exceptionally diverse linguistic, social and regional landscape. Traditional campaigning through rallies, interpersonal networks and community mobilization has not disappeared; rather, it has been combined with digital communication. Pal (2022) characterizes this as a hybrid form of political mobilization, while Jaffrelot and Verniers (2019) draw attention to the increasing integration of digital strategy and party organization.

WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube have become important channels for political communication, while mobile applications and data analytics enable parties to monitor engagement and tailor campaign material. Kazemi et al. (2021) show why encrypted platforms are particularly important to the misinformation problem, while Udupa (2024) draws attention to "data-driven" campaigns and commercial digital influencers as part of a broader transformation of Indian democracy.

The democratic significance of these developments is therefore ambivalent. Digital campaigning can reduce distance between politicians and citizens, but it can also reduce transparency regarding who is

communicating with whom, on what basis, and using which data. The resulting challenge is to preserve the participatory benefits of digital communication while ensuring that persuasion remains compatible with informed consent, fair competition and democratic accountability.

9. Rajasthan as a Democratic Case Study

Rajasthan provides a particularly useful subnational setting for examining these questions. The source study characterizes the state as a highly competitive bipolar political environment dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), with electoral alternation and closely contested constituencies. Such an environment makes communication strategy particularly significant because relatively small changes in voter preferences can have substantial consequences for electoral representation.

9.1 The 2023 Assembly Election Context

The 2023 Rajasthan Assembly election illustrates the coexistence of conventional mobilization and contemporary political marketing. Mass rallies, door-to-door canvassing and community meetings continued to be important, while WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, influencer communication and localized digital messaging were incorporated into campaign strategies. The source material reports the use of caste- and locality-oriented WhatsApp groups, welfare-oriented messaging and emotionally resonant narratives (BBC News, 2023).

The democratic importance of this development lies in the changing architecture of political persuasion. A public speech or rally is generally visible to a broad audience, whereas targeted digital messages can be directed toward specific groups. This may improve relevance, but it also makes political communication less visible to citizens outside the targeted group and potentially more difficult for journalists, opponents and regulators to scrutinize.

9.2 Political Marketing and Participation in Rajasthan

The Rajasthan case demonstrates the participatory potential of political marketing. Localized communication can connect electoral campaigns to immediate concerns, while digital networks can involve younger voters and citizens who consume political information primarily through mobile platforms. Influencers and community figures may also act as intermediaries between parties and groups of voters.

From a democratic perspective, however, increased participation should not automatically be equated with improved democratic quality. A citizen can be highly exposed to political communication while receiving a narrow or misleading range of information. Participation is therefore democratically meaningful only when it is accompanied by informed choice and the ability to encounter competing perspectives.

9.3 Political Marketing and Equality in Rajasthan

The source study identifies differences in digital infrastructure and marketing capacity between the major parties as an important feature of the Rajasthan campaign environment. The reported use of voter databases, digital teams, analytics, volunteer applications and influencer networks illustrates how organizational capacity can be converted into communicative reach. This raises a fundamental democratic question: when electoral visibility depends partly on the ability to invest in sophisticated communication infrastructures, does formal equality of the vote coexist with substantive inequality of political voice?

ADR's analysis of vote shares, margins of victory and representativeness in the 2023 Rajasthan Assembly election is relevant to this issue because narrow margins make the informational and organizational dimensions of campaigning especially important (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2023). The evidence does not establish that political marketing alone determined individual constituencies, but it supports treating campaign communication as an important component of competitive electoral politics.

9.4 Misinformation, Polarisation and Deliberation

The Rajasthan case also illustrates the darker side of targeted communication. The source material reports the circulation of rumors, emotionally charged narratives and community-specific appeals through tightly connected digital networks (BBC News, 2023). Where such content is difficult to verify or challenge rapidly, citizens may make political judgments in an informational environment that is asymmetrical.

This has implications for deliberative democracy. The democratic ideal is not simply that citizens communicate more; it is that they can assess claims, encounter disagreement and revise opinions in light of reasons and evidence. When campaign communication privileges emotional resonance and identity-based targeting, the volume of communication can increase while the quality of public reasoning declines.

10. Political Marketing and Democratic Accountability

Accountability is a particularly important dimension of the political-marketing problem. In a conventional representative relationship, citizens evaluate governments on the basis of promises, performance and public debate. Marketing can complicate this relationship when political success depends heavily on maintaining a favourable image. Scammell (2014) cautions that consumer-oriented political communication can alter the relationship between political organizations and citizens, while Lees-Marshment (2020) highlights the broader marketisation of politics.

The concern is not that political parties should avoid communicating achievements. Rather, democratic accountability requires citizens to be able to distinguish between policy performance and symbolic presentation. If digital campaigning creates highly personalized narratives that obscure institutional responsibility, accountability can become weaker even when communication becomes more sophisticated.

11. Towards a Democracy-Centred Regulatory Framework

The appropriate democratic response is not to eliminate political marketing. Modern democratic politics necessarily requires communication, and citizens benefit when political actors can explain policies and mobilize participation. The regulatory objective should instead be to prevent marketing practices from undermining the conditions required for meaningful democratic choice.

11.1 Transparency in Political Advertising

Citizens should be able to identify who is sponsoring political advertisements and, where appropriate, why particular audiences are being targeted. Greater transparency can make digital political persuasion more publicly accountable.

11.2 Stronger Political-Finance Oversight

Because sophisticated marketing requires substantial resources, campaign-finance transparency is central to maintaining electoral fairness. Political-finance scholarship on India increasingly emphasizes the significance of the digital environment (Sahoo, 2024a; 2024b).

11.3 Data Governance and Privacy

The use of voter and behavioural data requires safeguards against unauthorized or opaque profiling. Data-driven campaigning should not become a mechanism through which citizens lose meaningful control over how political actors classify and target them.

11.4 Media and Digital Literacy

Citizens need the capacity to evaluate sources, recognize manipulative framing and verify political claims. Media literacy is therefore not an optional educational supplement but part of the institutional infrastructure of contemporary democracy.

11.5 Platform Accountability

Digital platforms have become important intermediaries in political communication. Their policies concerning political advertising, automated amplification and misleading content therefore have implications for the integrity of democratic discourse.

11.6 Strengthening Deliberative Spaces

Political communication should not be allowed to become exclusively individualized. Public debates, accessible manifestos, transparent policy comparisons and independent fact-checking can help restore a shared informational environment.

12. Discussion: Is Political Marketing Democratic?

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that the question cannot be answered through a simple positive or negative judgment. Political marketing is better understood as a democratic technology whose consequences depend on the institutional and informational environment in which it operates. Its participatory potential is real: it can lower communication barriers, reach previously disengaged citizens, and make political organizations more responsive. Yet its capacity for manipulation is equally real.

The central democratic tension is between persuasion and deliberation. Persuasion is unavoidable in electoral politics; political parties must persuade citizens. The democratic problem arises when persuasive capacity becomes so asymmetrical, opaque or data-intensive that citizens cannot reasonably evaluate the messages directed at them. In that situation, the voter risks becoming less a participant in collective reasoning and more a target of optimized political persuasion.

Rajasthan demonstrates this tension particularly clearly. The state's competitive electoral environment encourages parties to invest in communication, mobilization and voter segmentation. These practices can broaden participation, but they can also intensify resource inequalities, community-specific messaging, misinformation and the substitution of visibility for deliberation. The case therefore supports the broader argument that political marketing should be evaluated according to its effects on democratic quality, not merely according to its effectiveness in winning votes.

13. Conclusion

Political marketing has become an important structural feature of contemporary democracy. Its significance extends well beyond campaign management because it influences how political information

is produced, distributed and consumed. In India, the combination of mass electoral competition, digital penetration and highly professionalized campaigning has made these effects increasingly visible.

The central finding of this study is that political marketing produces a democratic paradox. It can democratize political communication by expanding reach and participation, while simultaneously undermining democratic quality through misinformation, unequal campaign resources, fragmented publics, emotional manipulation and reduced deliberation. As the original study concludes, political marketing is therefore a "double-edged" phenomenon: its democratic consequences depend upon the conditions under which it is used.

The Rajasthan case makes this paradox concrete. The 2023 Assembly election environment demonstrates how traditional forms of mobilization can coexist with highly targeted digital communication. WhatsApp networks, influencer-based messaging, localized appeals and data-enabled campaign organization can bring politics closer to citizens, but they can also make political persuasion less transparent and more unequal. Rajasthan should therefore not be read merely as an example of successful digital campaigning; it is better understood as a case through which the democratic trade-offs of political marketing become visible.

The policy challenge is consequently not to remove marketing from democratic politics but to embed it within stronger democratic safeguards. Transparency in political advertising, effective political-finance regulation, responsible data governance, media literacy, platform accountability and spaces for substantive public debate are essential. The ultimate test of political marketing should be whether it expands citizens' capacity to make autonomous and informed political choices. Where marketing increases participation while preserving equality, transparency and deliberation, it can contribute to democratic vitality. Where it converts unequal resources and opaque data practices into disproportionate political influence, it risks weakening the very democratic principles that elections are intended to realize.

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