

## **Was the 2019 Indian election won by digital media?**

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## Abstract

Research on the reasons for the unexpected outcome of the 2019 national election in India can be divided into two strands: one strand examines the election without recourse to media, arguing that the appeals by parties to different segments of the population swayed voters. The other strand has made the case that media campaigns, and digital media in particular, were decisive in shaping the electoral outcome. Among the explanations that focus on media, these can be further subdivided into those that make the case for traditional media still playing a more important role than online media, and others that argue that digital media, and perhaps even online disinformation, played a key role. In this paper, we review the evidence for these competing accounts, drawing on the available evidence. We argue that an explanation based on combining elements from both strands, plus the interaction between digital media and traditional media and offline mobilization, together explain Modi's unanticipated election victory.

Keywords: Campaigns, election, digital media, disinformation, populism, India

## Introduction

The role of digital media in elections has been subject of extensive academic debates. But the growing body of literature that analyzes the relationship between digital media and election outcomes has offered mixed evidence. While some studies show that social media can help the party and the candidate to win elections (Gainous and Wagner, 2013; Kruikemeier, 2014), others disagree and argue that the effect of social media on actual election outcomes is at best is minimal (Strandberg, 2013; see also Sides, Vavreck and Tesler, 2018, for the US 2016 election). Yet other studies argue that despite the rise of digital media, traditional media continue to play an important role in influencing election results (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016). These sharply contrasting views about how digital media relate to election outcomes may be due to the fact that election campaigns often deploy an array of strategies that include grassroots campaigns in addition to using both traditional and digital media to reach out to voters. Research has no doubt advanced our understanding of how digital media affect elections in Western democracies. Outside Western democracies, and for India in particular, however, there is limited analysis of digital media and elections.

This paper examines the role of media during the 2019 national election in India, focusing on the success of prime minister Narendra Modi's campaign. It takes a holistic view of media rather than looking at individual media and compares digital media with traditional media and how they interact with grassroots campaigns. The paper not only contributes to the theoretical debates about the role of digital media in election campaigns, but also provides evidence from a non-Western context. The paper is based primarily on the analysis of secondary data but also synthesizes a wide range of perspectives on media and campaign dynamics in the

world's most complex democracy. The argument in the conclusion of the paper will be that a combination of factors, and especially how digital media translated into traditional media, plus strengthened offline mobilization **backed by populist support**, provides the most convincing explanation of Modi's electoral success.

The paper is organized as follows: first we provide the background by giving an overview of India's media and political systems. Next, we discuss digital media and how they are used for election campaigns, including the populist style whereby populists use digital media to challenge the elite establishment (including the party establishment) and its entrenched media position. Then we provide further background with Modi's election victory in 2014. Once we have done this, we can turn to the digital media campaign itself with a focus on the 2019 elections, which we subdivide by the different platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc). One peculiarity is how Modi used celebrities in his digital media campaign, and we discuss this briefly before we discuss the role played by disinformation. This allows us to turn finally to the role of voters, how they were mobilized on the ground, and how they were swayed. Our conclusion compares our argument with other explanations of his electoral success and draws out lessons for the future.

## The Indian Media and Political systems

The Indian media system is highly complex and diverse and does not fit neatly into the framework developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004; 2012). Placing India within Hallin and Mancini's schema, it can be noted that there has been a strong tradition of public service broadcasting and high newspaper readership until the 1980s, but since then there has been a proliferation of private channels and the public service has shrunk to a small audience share. In addition to the national media in English and Hindi there is also a growing number of vernacular language news outlets (Neyazi, 2014, 2018). This diversity of newspapers and news channels in 14 major Indian languages reflects not only linguistic diversity but also regional and cultural diversity. When scholars analyze the Indian media system as a whole, they tend to focus on specific media such as television news (Roy and Chakraborty, 2013). But at this national level, it is also the case that although there are media that **purport autonomy from the state and so neutrality**, the elite English-language press is alleged to have a bias towards a left-liberal ideology that overlooks the interests of the larger audience of the vernacular masses.

Recent decades have also seen the emergence of English-language news channels such as *Republic TV* and Hindi news channels such as *Sudarshan TV* that are overtly partisan and that have a large audience reach (*Republic TV* is the largest single channel). Moreover, some Indian states have had partisan media systems for some time (Roy and Chakraborty, 2013), **and there are important differences between the North and South of the country in this regard**. Still, the growth of this partisan media system at the national level has accelerated since the 2014 election, and the emergence of the right-wing BJP as a dominant political party at the national and state levels has thus been bolstered by the emergence of a system in which media **neither support nor oppose the ruling party**. It is against this background that we need to understand both the 2014 and 2019 national election campaigns and their relationship with news media.

## Digital media, campaigns and voting in India

When considering the impact of media on elections, we can begin with the idea that elections have become increasingly mediatized (Hjarvard, 2008). But while mediatization theory correctly highlights that the media themselves play an increasing and autonomous role, as with the prominent role of journalists or the mounting ritualization of certain election-related formats, digital media have also had the opposite effect, expanding the role of media outside of established channels and enabling more direct contact between voters and parties or candidates. An example of the latter is engagement in India of armies (or “cells”) of paid and voluntary workers via social media campaigns, often to increase the reach of negative campaign messages. And while there is still a dominant agenda in the national news cycle, the parties’ media campaigns have become more adept at “spin” and promoted voter turnout but also targeted specific voter groups via social media. These changes are nowhere more visible than in India which has witnessed rapid growth of digital media even as the role of traditional media has, as we shall see, remained resilient.

Before the internet, mobile phones had already played an important role in political mobilization. The successful election campaign in 2007 of Mayawati to become chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP), India’s most populous state, marked a point of departure in this regard. In the campaign, as Doron and Jeffrey (2013, 143–64) have documented, Mayawati’s Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) made use of mobile phones to coordinate getting out the vote. It can be added that the BSP emerged as a party supported by Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) and Mayawati herself had risen from a humble Dalit background. One more noteworthy feature of this campaign was that the major newspapers and television channels during this campaign were dominated by Hindu upper caste elites that were disdainful towards Dalit claims to political representation. This theme, whereby digital media are used to circumvent traditional media, will be prominent in what follows.

A complete review of the literature on (digital) media and electoral politics in India is beyond the scope here, but we can focus on work that bears closely on the 2019 election and Modi’s success. In relation to social media and politics in India, one of the first incidents to gain widespread attention via Twitter, mainly on smartphones, was the Delhi gang rape that took place in December 2012. In response to this event, many activists and journalists went online, and succeeded in drawing far more attention to the event than traditional media would have done. However, this attention was confined to a small and urban internet-savvy part of the population (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014).

Digital media received greater attention for the first time with Modi’s campaign in 2014 to become prime minister. The 2014 Indian election was dubbed the first “internet election.” As mentioned, Modi, like Donald Trump, used Twitter in particular to circumvent opposition to his candidacy from within his own party and from the media, in Modi’s case especially the elite English-language media. Modi also relied more heavily on vernacular languages, and especially Hindi, as Neyazi (2018) has demonstrated. Further, like Trump, Modi used Twitter in 2014, as in 2019, to attack and disparage his opponents, and especially Rahul Gandhi, the former president of the Congress party. And attacks online are, of course, not just restricted to Modi’s campaign: Punathambekar (2015), for example, has given an account of the humorous and satirical videos that went viral during the 2014 election. He also notes, as do Ahmed, Jaidka and Cho (2016), discussed in a moment, that during election times, video, and also television, takes on a political role that is unlike during non-election times.

## The 2014 Election and Modi's Online Challenger Advantage

The elite-bias perception of Indian news media led Modi to extensively use digital media during the 2014 national election. Several studies have shown that the BJP and Modi's campaign was able to dominate the media agenda and receive more coverage than the Congress party (Neyazi, 2018). As mentioned already, Modi used Twitter in particular to circumvent not only what he perceived as an elite media establishment but also to circumvent his own party, which initially opposed his nomination as its prime ministerial candidate. In this way, Modi was able to get his message out to his supporters and to have these, often aggressively anti-establishment, messages conveyed to a wider public when his tweets and speeches were covered in traditional channels (Schroeder, 2018a, 2018b). Modi was not the only one to benefit from Twitter, as shown in the study by Ahmed et al. (2016). The study by the Centre for Media Studies (2014), which was based on a content analysis of five major news channels, showed that both Narendra Modi and the BJP received much more airtime/coverage as compared to other leaders such as Rahul Gandhi and his Congress party and Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). It can be noted, however, that for the state legislative election in Delhi in 2015, Kejriwal's success is also thought to have benefitted from a strong digital media campaign: we discuss this further below.

In the Lok Sabha election campaign in the spring of 2014, the BJP leader, who also had many more media appearances, held rallies across the country, and in general ran a far more active campaign than the Congress Party and its leader. Narendra Modi did an average of five campaign events per day, flying by helicopter from one to the next while crowdsourcing topics for his speeches on Twitter (Price, 2015). According to India Today, Modi, through his multi-faceted campaigns that included rallies, road shows, 3D hologram appearances at simultaneous rallies in 53 cities on 10 April and making direct phone calls to citizens on their mobiles, contacted about 18 times more voters than Mr Gandhi (nearly 234 million voters compared with Gandhi's 13.3 million) (Pradhan and Mahurkar, 2014). We can already see here the importance of the "ground campaign", which it will be important not to overlook later when we come to the 2019 election.

The use of digital media in the 2014 election campaigns has been reported in several studies. Using a large random sample of Tweets from major political parties during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Ahmed, Jaidka and Cho (2016) found that the internet played an important part in the BJP's success, particularly among the first-time voters. The Aam Aadmi (or common man) Party (AAP), a new party, had the next greatest Twitter presence, though it failed to get an electoral dividend (but did so during the 2015 state legislative elections, as mentioned). Still, party contact face-to-face and by phone were the two most important predictors of political engagement during the 2014 election, more so than online media attention, as Neyazi, Kumar, and Semetko's (2016) study found, based on a survey of three urban areas. Pal, Mistree, and Madhani (2018) examined Modi's media strategy in the 2014 national election and noted that his fervent Hindu nationalist appeal via digital media was stronger before he began campaigning. Once the campaign had begun and even more so after he had become prime minister, he had to become more inclusive of all faiths. And since being office, Modi has regularly tweeted greetings during the religious holidays and festivals of other religions.

The strategic and creative use of public relations and Twitter by Modi has also been noted in various studies. Pal, Chandra & Vydiswaran (2016) have shown how Modi enhanced his standing by posing with Indian spiritual leaders and Bollywood and cricket stars. To run a successful campaign, the party depends on dedicated followers who need to be motivated. On this front, Modi's campaign was far ahead of his rivals. In their study, Pal et al. (2016) offer an account of the use of Twitter by Modi to motivate ground troops, the RSS (the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), a Hindu extreme right-wing nationalist volunteer organization (see Andersen and Damle, 2018). When Modi mentioned his RSS followers in tweets, they were pleased and energized. This selective use of tagging followers on Twitter galvanized supporters to work harder in the hope of getting noticed by their leader.

Bajaj's (2017) analysis of the coded "frames" of Modi's tweets during the 2014 election campaign shows, however, that there were few tweets containing the Hindu nationalist message of the BJP; instead, they mostly promoted the agenda of economic development. This finding was also supported by Jaffrelot (2015), who has labelled Modi's campaign "high- tech populism", referring to the focus of the campaign on "digital India" and economic development and aimed at a younger urban elite. He has been compared to other populist leaders in the study by Gonawela et al. (2018), who examined the tweets of Modi, Trump, Geert Wilders (Holland) and Nigel Farage (UK) over a period of several months during the respective elections of these right-wing populists. They found that Trump's tweets are far more negative than Modi's and that Trump tweeted more personal insults and personal criticisms. **Modi also used** more wordplay in his tweets and more group insults, for example, by bundling criticisms about several Congress politicians or the Gandhi family into one tweet. Once he had been elected, however, Pal (2015) argues that "most of Modi's tweets, have become banal, feel-good messages, shout-outs to major events and popular figures, and nods to partnerships and affiliations" (p. 386). This finding was further supported through a content analysis of Modi's Tweets from when he began his account in 2009 until 2015 (Pal et al., 2017). The most important finding is the disappearance of Modi's sarcastic attacks from his Tweets and the presence of more positive and aspirational messages once he became prime minister.

Several other studies have also focused on the interaction between traditional and new media in setting the news agenda. In their study, Chakraborty et al. (2018) showed the extent to which Modi's tweets were able to enter traditional media from 2009 until 2015. They found that his tweets became more newsworthy over time, especially in the last phase of the 2014 election campaigns and even more so once he became prime minister. And tweets with certain themes like political and celebrity callouts are also more newsworthy than other themes like "development" or "foreign visits." **The authors argue** that social media are not used as a tool to disseminate news; instead, news now originate in social media and therefore get attention in traditional media. Similarly, Neyazi (2018) showed that despite the fact that only a small fraction of Indians were online in 2014, public sentiment scores derived from Twitter and Facebook were regularly published on the front pages of many English and vernacular newspapers and websites of TV news channels. Thus people who were not online were getting the information about the social media campaigns activities through the traditional media, **which reflects the emergence of a media system combining the logic of both new and traditional media via a translation of the former into the latter (see also Schroeder 2018b).**



Importantly, we cannot ignore the integration of populist style of Modi with his digital media campaigns. Like Trump, towards the end of the 2014 campaign Modi attacked not just his political opponents but also established elites and presented himself as an outside challenger, both features typical of a populist political communication style (Moffitt, 2017). The main thrust of his campaign, of course, and again emblematic of his populism, was his appeal to his Hindu nationalist base, as documented by Udupa (2015). Udupa also describes offline meetings of Hindu nationalist supporters, such as the “Global Patriotic Tweeples Meet” in Mumbai, which gave rise to hashtags that trended for several days. Udupa (2016) also describes online efforts to rewrite history along Hindu nationalist lines. Along similar lines, Sinha (2017) notes that Modi’s attacks on the media partly stem from the criticisms he received early on over his involvement in the Gujarat riot incident in 2002, leading to BJP attacks on “presstitutes”, a derogatory term that combines two words – press and prostitutes. Govil and Baishya (2018) also note this aggressive tone outside of traditional media. They point out that the RSS never communicates via traditional media, but these Modi supporters are highly active using digital media, including disseminating videos that feature Modi and Hindu nationalist themes. The Hindu right is thus active on social media and on the ground, and this hybrid orchestrations between campaigns and non-election mobilizations deserves to be investigated further.

## 2019 Election Background

In 2019, there continued to be an urban-rural digital divide in internet access in India (Tenhunen, 2018). Yet political parties have increasingly turned to digital tools to promote their messages. Whereas Indian elections used to be based on client-patron relationships (but see Chhibber and Verma, 2018), in recent elections and with the growth of the middle class, there has been a shift to the promise of upward economic mobility and India’s global rise, though as we shall see, caste, region, and religion are still central. And although the BJP had an advantage in its early start in using digital tools, by 2019 the Indian National Congress (popularly known as the Congress party) could have equally made use of smartphones which had become widely available by then. The Congress party made limited use of social media in the 2014 Lok Sabha (national parliament) election, but by 2019 it had created a Data Analytics Department, headed by Praveen Chakravarty, a former investment banker. It is true that the BJP vastly outspent Congress party on social media, but aside from money, this advantage is mainly an organizational one, with the BJP’s small central team in Delhi able to engage millions of “social media volunteers” around the country (Sardesai, 2020: 226-7, 232-3).

Just before the 2019 Lok Sabha election took place, the Reuters Institute released the digital news report for India in March 2019. One limitation of the report was that it was based on an urban sample. Still, an important finding was that the majority of respondents identified with the BJP. Out of 1013 respondents, nearly 501 respondents identified with the BJP while 232 respondents identified with the UPA (the United Progressive Alliance, led by the Congress party) and only 282 respondents were still non-committal about their choice or indicated that they were not going to vote in the general election. The survey reveals that the BJP already had a decisive lead compared to other political parties in terms of support among the online population, but it would also need to sway the rural population that was reachable only via vernacular languages and grassroots mobilization.

In any event, the Modi-led BJP adopted a comprehensive media strategy which sought to reach not only an online audience but simultaneously set the agenda for traditional media and mobilized grassroots campaigns. Studies of voting behavior, which we will discuss below, often ignore the role of media, however. Apart from very few studies such as Verma and Sardesai (2014), media have not featured in the empirical research on Indian elections (we will discuss the exceptions shortly).

### The digital campaign in the 2019 election

Modi's image after the 2014 election was of an accessible and publicly engaged prime minister. At the same time, he has insulated himself from probing questions by journalists by hardly having any press conferences, unlike all previous prime ministers. His message could be summarized as "make India great again", or more precisely to suggest that *he* is making India great again. His campaign was highly centered on his person and his leadership as opposed to his party, which was in the background. When the 2019 election campaign began, the traditional news media coverage concentrated on the horse race between the main leadership candidates. Research from the US suggests that voters are attracted to horse race news rather than substantial issues (Iyengar, et al., 2004). We also know that the BJP spent the bulk of its advertising resources on television: in the run-up to elections in five Indian states in December 2018, the BJP had the single largest spend from among all advertisers in November, ahead of Netflix and Trivago (Anand, 2018, see also the documentation of election spending at <https://adrindia.org>). Meanwhile, digital media, apart from playing the role of advertising tools, spread satirical messages and provided means for supporters to rally each other and denigrate the opposition.

As during the 2014 election campaign, Modi's strategy was to deliver a series of interviews to news channels just before each phase of the polling, videos of which were then shared on social media platforms. Hence the digital campaign of BJP and Modi needs to be understood within the larger context of an online campaign that was played out on multiple social media to reach wider audiences more effectively. Whether Modi posted himself or not, his form of address on Facebook and Twitter is and was personal: he spoke with his own accessible voice, and the posts were a mixture of Hindi and English and other languages to suit visits to particular states.

#### Facebook

On Facebook, Modi had 43 million followers in December 2018. He regularly posted videos, but his posts also used more informal speech, closer to spoken language, without the constraint of being confined to the 280 characters of Twitter (though in practice, the text is often shorter, used for labelling or commenting on images and video or to pose questions). The comments and replies both praise and criticize him. Interestingly all text in Hindi has a translation button next to it. The posts in this case, unlike for Instagram and YouTube but similar to Twitter, follow a temporal order. But the posts, including photos and videos, are again mainly of the public relations type. Hindu nationalist themes are subtle rather than overt. His Facebook posts also included information about his campaigns, rallies, meetings and interviews.



## Twitter

Modi had 44+ million followers on Twitter in December 2018, and this has also been his most political channel. There are more speeches here than on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, though ceremonies and official visits are also featured. But on Twitter, Modi emphasizes his own achievements more and he also chides his political opponents. The more inclusive and less antagonistic tone since he became prime minister was discussed above. But it is not only Modi on Twitter: The BJP and their politicians also dominated Twitter with the largest number of most followed politicians; 228 out of 500 (Pal & Panda, 2019). Yet the BJP and Modi also know the limitations of Twitter as an elite medium and spent a very limited amount on advertising on this platform. This was in contrast to the Congress party, which spent a large amount of money on advertising on Twitter as compared to Facebook. In fact, Congress spent nine times more money than the BJP on Twitter advertising (Mehrotra, 2019). This also highlights how different political parties prioritized different digital social media to reach out to different groups of voters.

## WhatsApp

The 2019 Indian election was dubbed the first “WhatsApp” election. Yet the study of WhatsApp is difficult because this is a private means of communication. According to one report, the BJP had at least three WhatsApp groups for each polling booth (Uttam, 2018). This was a replication of the strategies that the BJP deployed during the 2017 Uttar Pradesh state elections. The study by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, which followed 1400 public groups and analyzed 1.09 million messages during the campaign period throws some interesting light on this (Bengani, 2019): The study revealed that text messages constituted 45 percent of the overall content, while images, links and videos together accounted for 52 percent of the total content shared among those groups. The most widely shared messages were largely inflammatory with the intention of mobilizing support for the BJP. Among the top ten shared messages, there was **only** one message that aimed at mobilizing support for the Congress party. These findings are complementary to a qualitative study by Sinha (2017) based on observation of five groups and dominated by Modi supporters. Sinha observed that many exchanges revolve around jokes and cartoons, personalized attacks on Modi’s opponents disparaging their looks and intelligence, and praise for Modi’s achievements. Substantive exchanges about politics are short-circuited by saying that these are too serious or too political for this forum.

## Instagram

On Instagram, Modi had almost 16 million followers in December 2018. Many of the Instagram photography and videos he posted received around a million likes and thousands of comments. Unlike other digital media, the emphasis on Instagram is on pleasing images: ceremonies, meetings with leaders, visits to important sites, yoga and the daily routines of the prime minister’s life – all presented with colorful and appealing and tasteful pictures. The themes here, even more so than on YouTube, rise above politics. Since there is no text (apart from speeches, but they are more ceremonial, and there are fewer political rallies than on his Facebook account), the emphasis is on presenting a thoughtful and caring leader.

## **Celebrity politics**

In order to expand his social support base, Modi has used celebrities more strategically than seen before in Indian politics. Even **when** he was a chief minister, Modi engaged with celebrities and public figures for campaigning. For example, in the wake of 2012 Gujarat Assembly election, Modi organized a Google hangout session with netizens, which was hosted by famous film actor Ajay Devgn. While this was the first time that an Indian politician used live video-chat to engage with the online audience, what was most important was the use of a film actor to host the session (see PTI, 2012). Such engagement and outreach often made the headlines in traditional media, leading to much wider reach. While in the past, politicians kept the engagement with celebrities to formal events such as award ceremonies and fund raising (Pal, 2019), Modi created new political capital by not only engaging with celebrities but making such engagement part of his public persona. For example, soon after meeting celebrities, Modi often tweets a picture with celebrities and posts it on Facebook and Instagram. Since celebrities have many more followers, this helps in creating a positive image of the politician in the eyes of ordinary citizens and dominates the news agenda. Moreover, the companionship of celebrities is often perceived by the celebrity's fans as an endorsement, which may ultimately sway voting decisions.

### **The role of disinformation**

Like other democracies, India has witnessed the growing circulation of online disinformation. The Reuters Institute India Digital News report, published just before the Lok Sabha election, showed that 57% of respondents were worried about whether online news they come across is real or fake (Zeenab et al., 2019). **Das and Schroeder (2020) have documented, using interviews, how people from various walks of life were both worried about disinformation in early 2019 but also highly aware of how this was affecting them and the country at large.** The growing circulation of disinformation particularly on social media like WhatsApp became a central concern for the Indian government, which formally asked the company in late 2018 to take measures to check the spread of disinformation. WhatsApp adopted several such steps, including limiting the number of forwards to ensure that disinformation should not spread at a large scale. The Oxford Internet Institute's (OII) study also found that WhatsApp was used widely by all political parties to spread disinformation (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw, 2019).

Along similar lines, Facebook removed pages linked to the BJP and the opposition party, INC, which were responsible for spreading junk news (Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw, 2019). According to Facebook, there were a total of 687 pages and accounts linked to the IT cell of the INC, while 15 pages and accounts were linked to the BJP. The amount of advertising on Facebook for the BJP was \$70,000 (INR 48.5 lakh) while the INC spent \$39,000 (INR 26.9 lakh) (Thaker, 2019). The BJP thus spent almost double. They were also many fact-checking organizations both independently and in collaboration with social media organizations that were regularly exposing fake online news. The OII study noted, for example, that because of the lack of content moderation, the NaMo app was used by propagandists or campaign consultancies. These include The India Eye, one of the most active accounts on this app, which was responsible for 40 percent of 744 posts on NaMo's default feed. The study also found a link between the The India Eye and Silver Touch, another campaign consultancy, both of which were responsible for running several fake accounts on Facebook and Instagram.

### **Voters and the role of social media in the 2019 election**

There is one analysis which has sought an account of the role of social media based on a representative sample of the population, the Centre for the Study of Developing Society's report (2019). This report points out that 2/3 of Indians did not use social media at all and most said that television, followed by newspapers, was their main source of news about the election. Only a small proportion (3%) said that social media were the main source. The findings also show, however, that social media have grown, with Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube reaching approximately a third of Indians and Instagram and Twitter approximately a sixth, while in 2014, Twitter reached only 2% and Facebook 9% (p.12, table 1.1). What the CSDS also reports is that social media users were highly engaged: for example, about a quarter used social media in 2019 to share or forward political views, read news or express political views daily or sometimes, and another 13-15% rarely did so (p.20, figure 1.5). Of course, social media is still dominated by upper caste, highly educated urbanites and men, with the gap only narrowing slowly. Yet Indians were also wary of social media: One in four, regardless of whether they used social media, did not trust the medium (p.49), a finding also supported by another study (Zeenab et al., 2019). Still, the BJP did not do better among social media users than among non-social media users (p.54-57) and these BJP social media users were also not likely to vote more, though they were more likely participate in campaigning and in election rallies (p.61). However, apart from this last point about participation, the report does not say anything about how social media influenced the success or otherwise of digital campaigns or their influence on the news agenda.

## **Ground wars**

The grassroots campaign of the Modi-led BJP, aspects of which have already been discussed in passing, was more powerful compared to other parties. The BJP not only had more rallies and extensive door-to-door campaigns but also mobilized a large number of booth-level workers and groups who were in direct touch with the voters. These ground level workers are by now part of the campaign strategies of most of the political parties, but the BJP has a very well-developed structure for coordinating booth-level workers. In 2019, India operated at more than 1 million booths where over 900 million eligible voters cast their votes. In order to mobilize party workers at the grassroots, PM Modi launched "Mera Booth Sabse Mazboot" (my polling booth, the strongest) campaign in September 2018 while addressing the party workers through the NamoApp (PTI, 2018). In order to galvanize booth level workers, PM Modi interacted with 10 million booth-level workers through a video-conference on 28 February, 2019.

The BJP's focus on booth-level workers not only demonstrates the importance of grassroots campaigns but also shows how technology is embedded effectively to mobilize foot soldiers who are the main conduits of the party's campaigns strategies. While booth-level workers have always been the bulwark of party campaigns, the BJP deployed and coordinated these workers more systematically in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. During the 2014 campaign, booth level workers were mobilized and coordinated by means of mobile phones. In 2019, the BJP and other parties used the mobile app WhatsApp for such coordination which had already been effectively used in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) state assembly election in 2017, where the BJP won with a three-fourth majority. According to one report, there were almost 9000 WhatsApp groups that the BJP IT cell in UP had access to, while each of those groups had an average of 150 members. According to this strategy, the BJP was able to reach an average of 1.35 million people every day through WhatsApp group (Bhardwaj, 2017). These workers were then encouraged to pass the message to those who did not have access to the internet. This micro-

targeting of voters and the combination of online and offline strategies has placed the BJP's campaign strategies far ahead of its rival. Research from the US has shown that grassroots campaigns still play crucial role in mobilizing voters (Nielsen, 2012).

### **Why people voted for Modi**

There have been a number of studies of why people voted for Modi – quite apart from the role of media in the election. Jaffrelot (2019) says that while the BJP was a middle or upper class party in 2014, by 2019, its appeal had widened such that class no longer plays a role. Yet the BJP has also consolidated its role as a Hindu party and it had less support among minority faiths (Sardesai, 2019). Suri (2019) goes further and argues that whereas the Congress party relied on caste during elections, the BJP appealed to nationalism and development across class and caste divisions and also extended its appeal to lower strata. Mairano (2019) similarly shows increased support for the BJP among the rural population, and Deshpande, Tillin and Kailash (2019), like Maiorano, point out that increased benefits from welfare schemes (such as pensions, sanitation, cooking gas) may have widened the BJP's appeal downwards. They also argue that the BJP pointed to how welfare had in fact already been provided to the “undeserving” under previous Congress governments, but that the BJP instead claimed that it wanted to achieve more universal welfare benefits. Jaffrelot (2019) argues that “Modi is perceived by the poor, not only as one of them who is defending them against the rich...but as a man they can trust and who cares for them...and protect their country against the external threats” (p.158).

Both Jaffrelot (2019) and Suri (2019) also point out, however, that the election was highly dependent on Modi the person rather than the party, and that his future support will depend on his ability to continue to deliver benefits. This personalization of politics whereby leadership appeal is more influential than parties that was an earlier a feature of Presidential system has been found in various parliamentary democracies and is thought to have been facilitated by media (Bennett, 2012; Mughan, 2000). The same trend applies to Indian democracy, and what we can see is that, whatever role played by the media, Modi's appeal among Indians of all stripes, except among non-Hindus, has grown. [Similarly, the demand for a strong leader grows during the time of a crisis. Since the time Modi came to power, he has been projecting the nation in crisis – 60 years of misgovernance and underdevelopment bestowed by the previous governments \(particularly the Congress party\). These criticisms have been emphasized throughout his campaigns. These criticisms were heightened to an extreme with the killing of 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel in an attack after a militant drove an explosive-laden vehicle into a bus in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir. This event was dramatized in the media as a major crisis and an assault on Indian democracy \(Vijayan and Drennan, 2020\). The resultant airstrike to revenge the killing of Indian officers, which took place on 26 February, was portrayed as a triumph made possible because of a strong leader. Many reputable media houses went on to attribute the successful airstrike to PM Modi in addition to circulating misinformation about it \(Vijayan and Drennan, 2020\). The media has thus played a vital role in the personalization of politics, helping Modi to gain traction among the voters.](#)

### **Conclusion**

It is worth bearing in mind in what follows that pollsters and the media and the wider public all expected Modi and the BJP to do worse in the 2019 election than in 2014, especially

following a series of wins by Congress party in state elections in late 2018. Thus pundits and others thought that the BJP would lose power in the sense that the party would be forced to form a coalition government. The opposite happened. With hindsight, it can be seen that Modi's campaign gave him overwhelming advantages: His agenda dominated the media, including having a far greater share of television airtime than Rahul Gandhi and his opponents (Sardesai, 2020: 206), but also due to his negative campaign attacks on the opposition plus the whipping up of nationalist sentiment after the Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrikes against Pakistan.

We have argued that the media environment was conducive to lively contestation, split especially along the lines of opposition to Modi in elite English-language media versus a juggernaut Modi campaign on all levels, but especially on the ground and in vernacular languages and in aggressive negative social media campaigns. **Sharma (2020) has documented that the BJP used professional campaign organizations and has had much stronger such organizations in place ever since the election in 2014.** Moreover, as just noted, Modi was able to convince a wider portion of the public that he was championing their interests against a party that still represents a corrupt and self-serving establishment. Modi therefore did not simply win the media campaign: his political program, a populism **which has moved away** from a caste-based clientelism and towards an anti-secular exclusionary Hindutva politics, also resonated with a broader electorate.

Still, media no doubt gave him an overwhelming advantage: not only did he enjoy a far wider reach among all the types of media, especially in vernacular language media, but he was also able to mobilize his troops on social media to spread aggressively negative messages and to get out the vote locally. Such a comprehensive advantage should have been predicted; the fact that it was not highlights how both political and especially digital media strategies have moved elections into new directions. Among the lessons are that new political thinking, but also new thinking about how to effectively utilize new digital media during elections, is required.

Another implication is that it is time to revisit some classical political communication theory to understand media uses and their effects on elections. Since the time of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) seminal "two step Flow" model of personal influence, the myth of direct effect of media on voting behavior has been questioned. And several empirical studies in the context of the US and Europe that have shown limited effects of the media on voting behavior (Finkel, 1993; Hillygus and Jackman, 2003; McGuire, 1986). Media at best can have a reinforcing effect on voter's decisions since the most trusted information citizens received about politics is through friends, relatives and community members. In the current context, the main advances in campaigning can be found in digital communication technologies, which reshape these close-by influences. The "two-step flow" model is thus getting re-channeled whereby groups interact online in WhatsApp groups and the like on the one hand, but top-down leaders and parties also have the possibility to push down messages into these groups, targeting them and tailoring their messages. Apart from this direct influence, agenda setting has also been reshaped, with digital media being used to circumvent the role of traditional media and also shaping the content of traditional media directly. In India, a country in which different media – print, television and the internet – all continue to grow, more empirical research is needed to understand how elections are influenced by different media uses and how the reach of all these media – together - is affecting election campaigns on the ground.

Finally, in answer to the question we pose in the title: all that can be said at this stage, in view of the complex workings of media that have just been described, is to give a complex but also clear answer: that digital media, translated into visibility in traditional media, plus as a tool for on-the-ground mobilization both among active supporters and in terms of getting out the vote, were certainly necessary conditions for Modi's overwhelming electoral success (see also Schroeder 2018a, 2018b). **In other words, his populist message via Twitter had served him well as a challenger in 2014, but in 2019, this message also needed to resonate among and reach a mass voting public, and this happened via translation into various channels including traditional media plus on the ground mobilization, and thus propelled him to victory.** Media therefore had both an (indirect) top-down and a bottom-up effect. But since the second main precondition for keeping him in power has been a longer-term groundswell of support for his populist agenda, as detailed in the previous section, it remains to be seen whether either or both of these forces will maintain his dominance in Indian politics.

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