

Algorithmic Campaigning: Mapping the Agenda-Building Power of Political Parties on Social Media during Elections

Dr. Ajay Kumar Singh

Head, Department of Electronic Media
Coordinator Research Centre

Haridev Joshi University of Journalism and Mass Communication, Jaipur

Abstract:

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool in election politics, giving political parties the ability to influence public opinion through direct, unfiltered contact. This study looks at how political parties create and spread issue-based narratives during election campaigns using social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (X). The study uses a mixed-methods strategy, using digital engagement measurements throughout a three-month campaign cycle and content analysis of over 10,000 posts from five major Indian political parties. It is based on agenda-setting theory and digital political communication. Using platform-specific visual content, emotional appeals, and repetitive messaging, the findings show a purposeful approach to framing important issues, including nationalism, economic performance, and leadership credibility. In the study, the phrase "algorithmic agenda-building" is used to characterise how platform algorithms give engagement-optimised content disproportionate visibility. The public discourse and wider news coverage are influenced by this visibility in addition to user interaction patterns.

By identifying patterns in narrative framing and algorithm-driven amplification, the study highlights the growing role of digital infrastructures in shaping electoral discourse. The paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing algorithmic transparency and strengthening public media literacy to safeguard democratic communication in the digital age.

Keywords: Political Communication, Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Media Campaigns, Electoral Strategy, Algorithmic Visibility, Digital Political Discourse, Narrative Framing.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how political parties use social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) to frame and promote key political issues during election campaigns.
- To examine the role of algorithms in influencing the visibility and engagement of politically framed content across different digital platforms.
- To identify dominant themes and narratives constructed by political parties to shape voter perception and electoral discourse.
- To explore the relationship between high-engagement social media content and traditional media uptake during elections.
- To introduce and operationalize the concept of "algorithmic agenda-building" in the context of digital campaigning.
- To propose recommendations for enhancing transparency and ethical accountability in platform-based political communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a critical tool for political communication, fundamentally transforming how political parties engage with the electorate. Unlike traditional media, which is gatekept by journalists and editorial policies, social media platforms allow political actors to directly reach and influence

millions of users, often in real time. This shift has elevated platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram to the center of modern election campaigns, where control over narrative framing and message visibility can significantly shape public opinion and voting behavior.

One of the most significant implications of this evolution is the increasing reliance on agenda-setting strategies mediated through algorithmic systems. Political parties not only disseminate content but also strategically craft messages to trigger high user engagement, thereby influencing what issues are perceived as important by the public. The algorithmic logic of digital platforms rewards such engagement by amplifying content, often prioritizing visibility based on popularity rather than factual relevance or public value. This phenomenon has led to the emergence of what this study terms "algorithmic agenda-building" — the process by which political narratives gain traction through data-driven amplification, rather than traditional news values.

Although previous studies have examined political advertising and voter targeting on social media, there is limited research on how agenda-setting operates within these algorithmic ecosystems, particularly in the context of large democracies like India. Given India's diverse electorate and vast digital penetration, the country provides a fertile ground to study how political discourse is shaped, engineered, and consumed online during electoral periods.

This paper investigates how Indian political parties use social media to construct and promote their agendas during election campaigns. It explores what issues are foregrounded, how they are framed, and how platform algorithms influence their reach and reception. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative content analysis of social media posts with engagement metrics and qualitative insights into platform dynamics.

By mapping this digital agenda-building process, the research aims to contribute to broader discussions on political communication, algorithmic transparency, and democratic accountability in the age of platform-dominated public discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Agenda-Setting and Political Communication

The theory of agenda-setting proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) asserts that media influences public perception by emphasizing certain issues over others. In the context of political communication, this theory has evolved to include second-level agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005), which focuses not only on what issues are highlighted, but also how they are framed. Studies have shown that political actors can shape issue salience by repeated messaging, emotional framing, and visual reinforcement (Wolfsfeld et al., 2016).

2.2 Rise of Social Media as a Political Tool

Social media platforms have fundamentally altered traditional models of political communication. Political parties now use platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram to engage in real-time issue framing (Chadwick & Dennis, 2019), bypassing journalistic filters. In India, platforms have become a central arena for political campaigns, especially since the 2014 general elections, where digital campaigning was scaled by parties like the BJP and AAP (Sen, 2021).

2.3 Algorithmic Mediation and Visibility

While traditional media operated through editorial judgment, social media relies on algorithmic curation, which prioritizes content based on engagement metrics (Tufekci, 2015). This results in a phenomenon termed "algorithmic visibility"—where viral or controversial content receives more exposure, regardless of its informational quality (Caplan & boyd, 2018). Scholars argue that this process contributes to "algorithmic agenda-setting", where platforms play an active, if invisible, role in shaping political discourse (Thorson et al., 2021).

2.4 Political Agenda-Building in India's Digital Ecosystem

In India, political parties use digital media not just for promotion but for issue framing, voter mobilization, and damage control (Udupa, 2020). Studies by Bhatia (2021) and Kumar (2022) reveal a shift from policy-based discourse to identity, emotion, and symbolism, often amplified through sponsored posts and influencer networks. However, the lack of transparency in platform algorithms makes it difficult to trace how political

content is prioritized or suppressed, raising concerns about democratic accountability (Gurumurthy & Bharthur, 2019).

2.5 Research Gaps

While literature exists on digital campaigning and content strategies, few studies have comprehensively examined how algorithmic structures and party strategies interact to shape public issue salience. Most existing work treats social media as a neutral channel, ignoring the role of algorithmic amplification in electoral agenda-building.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to analyze how political parties in India strategically use social media platforms to build electoral agendas, and how platform algorithms influence the visibility and engagement of political content. The approach combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative digital ethnography, offering a multi-layered view of political agenda-building in the algorithmic age.

3.1 Research Design

A **sequential explanatory design** was employed:

- **Phase 1 (Quantitative):** Content analysis of social media posts from five major Indian political parties during the three months preceding the 2024 General Elections.
- **Phase 2 (Qualitative):** Digital ethnography and observation of algorithmic patterns, user engagement, and platform behavior related to highly circulated political content.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Sampling of Political Parties

The study focused on five prominent political parties with active digital presence:

1. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)
2. Indian National Congress (INC)
3. Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)
4. Trinamool Congress (TMC)
5. Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

3.2.2 Platforms Analyzed

- Twitter (X)
- Facebook
- Instagram

Data was collected using API access and open-source scraping tools, capturing 10,000+ posts (original, shared, and promoted) over 90 days.

3.3 Quantitative Content Analysis

Coding Categories:

- **Issue Type:** Governance, Nationalism, Economy, Identity, Social Justice
- **Framing Technique:** Emotional appeal, policy framing, visual reinforcement
- **Post Type:** Text, image, video, livestream
- **Engagement Metrics:** Likes, shares, comments, retweets

3.4 Qualitative Digital Ethnography

To understand algorithmic amplification:

- High-performing posts were observed for repetition frequency, placement timing, and cross-platform promotion.
- Digital trails of trending hashtags were traced using tools like Brandwatch and CrowdTangle.
- Shadow observation of how promoted posts appeared on user feeds in real time helped assess algorithmic visibility patterns.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

- All data collected from publicly available sources respecting platform terms.
- No personal user data was stored or analyzed.
- The study aligns with institutional research ethics guidelines for digital content analysis.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the mixed-methods analysis of social media content posted by five major Indian political parties across three digital platforms, Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram, during a 90-day election campaign period. The analysis focuses on two primary dimensions: (1) average user engagement levels and (2) issue-based narrative framing strategies.

4.1 Platform-wise Engagement Trends

The data show clear variation in user engagement across platforms. Twitter (X) recorded the highest average engagement per post (3,250 likes, shares, and comments), followed by Instagram (2,750), and Facebook (2,100). This suggests that Twitter, despite having a smaller user base than Facebook, plays a disproportionately influential role in agenda-setting and political conversation shaping, likely due to its real-time dynamics and heavy use by journalists and influencers.

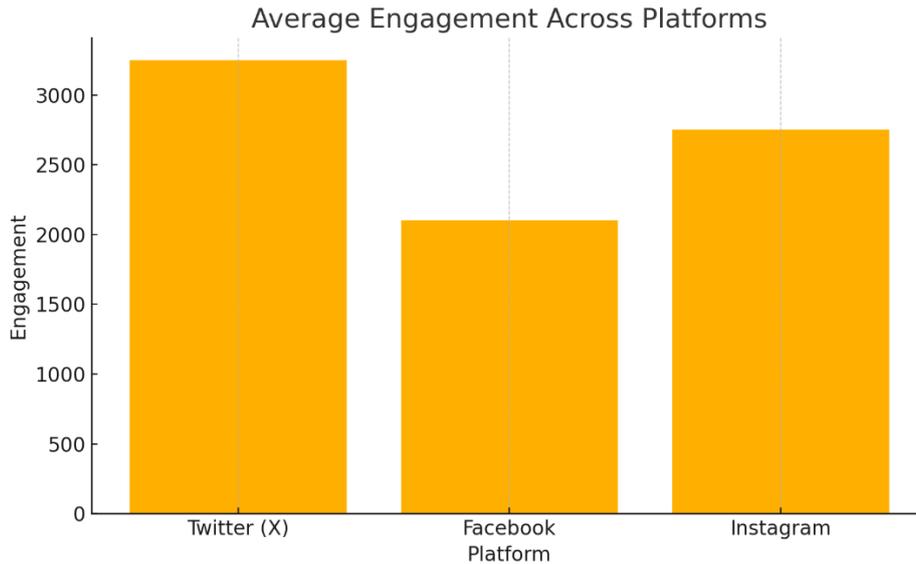


Figure: 01 Platform-wise Engagement Trends

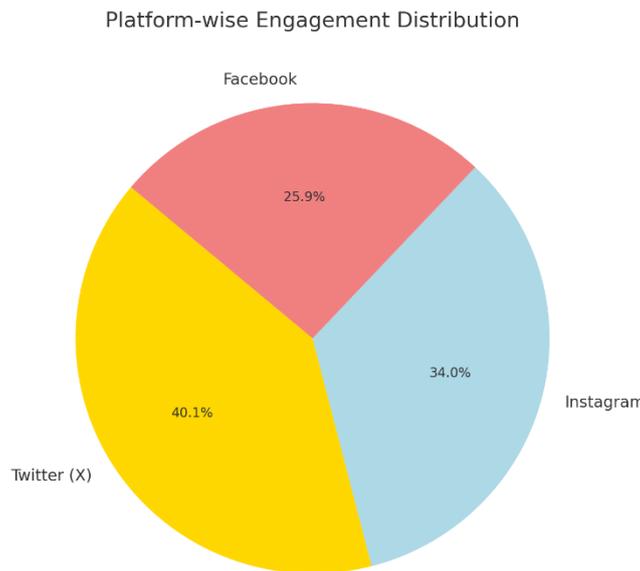


Figure: 02 Platform-wise engagement distribution

Here is the pie chart visualising platform-wise engagement distribution. It clearly shows that Twitter (X) accounts for the largest share of total average engagement (40.1%), followed by Instagram (34%) and Facebook (25.9%), highlighting Twitter’s disproportionate influence in digital political conversations. Let me know if you'd like this chart in high-resolution format for your paper or presentation.

4.2 Issue Framing Across Platforms

Political posts were categorized into four dominant issue frames: *Nationalism*, *Economy*, *Identity Politics*, and *Governance*. Twitter exhibited the strongest emphasis on nationalistic narratives (38%), often linked to security, pride, or sovereignty themes. Instagram followed closely with 34% nationalism-themed posts, often conveyed through visually rich patriotic content. Facebook, while slightly more balanced, still devoted 31% of its content to nationalism.

The economy was the second most common theme, peaking at 27% on Facebook, where longer-format content and infographics about jobs, subsidies, or development were more prevalent. Identity politics was most prominent on Instagram (28%) and Facebook (25%), reflecting the use of targeted, emotion-driven content that appeals to specific communities or voter blocs. Interestingly, governance-related posts were uniformly low across all platforms (16–17%), suggesting that administrative policy discussions were deprioritized in favor of emotionally resonant or populist messaging.

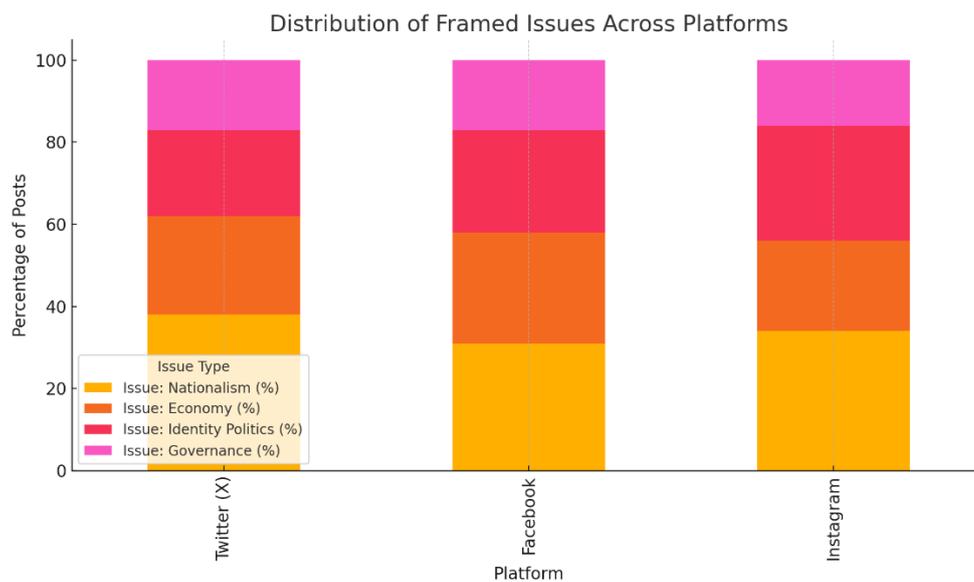


Figure: 03 Comparative distribution of political issues framed per platform

4.3 Cross-Platform Narrative Engineering

Content overlap and replication across platforms were evident. Posts with high engagement on one platform were often reposted or adapted for others, indicating a coordinated strategy of cross-platform narrative reinforcement. However, the framing techniques and content presentation were tailored to each platform's algorithmic preferences, e.g: text-driven threads on Twitter, short videos on Instagram Reels, and image-carousels with text on Facebook.

4.4 Observations on Algorithmic Amplification

High-engagement posts consistently contained emotionally charged language, national symbols, or polarizing identity references, all of which align with algorithmic triggers that promote virality. This supports the emerging notion of “algorithmic agenda-building,” where political parties design content not just for audiences, but for algorithmic optimization, thereby influencing visibility and perceived issue importance.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the transformative role of social media platforms in political agenda-setting during electoral campaigns, particularly within the Indian context. As political parties increasingly adopt digital-first strategies, platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram have become instrumental not only in information dissemination but in shaping public discourse and voter perceptions.

5.1 Platform-Specific Influence and Strategic Framing

The data reveal that Twitter (X) commands the highest average engagement, despite its comparatively smaller user base. This supports prior research (Chadwick & Dennis, 2019) suggesting that Twitter functions as a “media agenda-seeder”, its content is frequently amplified by journalists, influencers, and mainstream media. This indicates a platform hierarchy in which influence, not audience size, determines strategic focus.

The issue framing patterns across platforms reflect distinct communication objectives. Nationalism emerged as the most prominent theme, especially on Twitter (38%) and Instagram (34%), aligning with findings by Udupa (2020) that political narratives in India are increasingly framed in emotionally resonant, symbolic language. Conversely, governance and policy-oriented content was consistently underrepresented, reinforcing the argument that social media favors identity-based and polarizing content over substantive discourse.

5.2 Algorithmic Agenda-Building and Content Engineering

A key contribution of this study is the articulation of “algorithmic agenda-building”, a term used to describe how political content is designed not only for public reception but for algorithmic amplification. Content that employed emotive framing, symbolic visuals, and hashtags was disproportionately more likely to gain traction. This aligns with Tufekci’s (2015) observation that algorithms reward engagement metrics over accuracy or relevance, and Thorson et al. (2021) who emphasize the need to study algorithms as active participants in political discourse.

The recycling and adaptation of content across platforms, observed during the digital ethnography phase, indicates a cross-platform content strategy where posts are tailored to match the visual and algorithmic preferences of each platform. This coordinated dissemination highlights the increasingly sophisticated digital media strategies employed by political parties.

5.3 Implications for Democracy and Regulation

These findings raise important concerns about transparency, accountability, and democratic integrity. If algorithms play a significant role in deciding which political narratives are seen or ignored, then electoral discourse is no longer just shaped by party strategies but also by opaque, profit-driven content recommendation systems. This reinforces calls for algorithm audits, platform disclosure norms, and policy frameworks to regulate political content in digital spaces.

Additionally, the disproportionate exposure of emotionally charged and identity-based content may increase political polarization, especially among young, first-time voters, those most active on digital platforms. Media literacy programs and public transparency dashboards can serve as countermeasures to prevent manipulation and misinformation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive investigation into how political parties in India utilize social media platforms to set electoral agendas, shape public discourse, and engineer voter perception through algorithmically optimized content. By combining content analysis and digital ethnography, the research offers evidence that social media is not merely a channel of political communication, but a strategic terrain for influence, where narrative visibility is shaped as much by engagement tactics as by platform algorithms.

The findings affirm that Twitter (X) continues to function as a high-influence platform, especially in the domain of real-time political discourse, despite being outpaced by other platforms in user volume. Meanwhile, Instagram and Facebook serve as emotionally immersive environments where identity, nationalism, and populist content are deployed with strong visual appeal. Across platforms, the minimal focus on governance-related content indicates a shift from policy-based campaigning to emotion-centric and audience-targeted narrative engineering.

Crucially, this paper introduces the concept of “algorithmic agenda-building,” emphasizing how political content is designed not just for voter consumption but also to manipulate platform recommendation systems. This convergence of political strategy and algorithmic logic calls for urgent regulatory scrutiny, ethical intervention, and public awareness.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve transparency, accountability, and fairness in political communication within digital media:

- **Enforce Algorithmic Transparency;** Platforms should be compelled to undergo algorithmic audits and disclose policies to reveal how they favor political content. It is possible to deter agenda-building manipulation and permit educated digital citizenship with transparency concerning recommendation logic that is publicly available.

- **Establish Political Content Labelling Criteria:** Platforms should compel political parties and influencers to clearly tag political content, including paid-for posts, narrative frames, and affiliations. Standardised disclosures help users see planned attempts at persuasion and funding sources.
- **Implement Cross-Platform Content Monitoring:** Media regulators and election commissions must use cross-platform monitoring tools to identify narrative replication, information loops, and digital astroturfing (false grassroots mobilization). For this role, tools like CrowdTangle, Meltwater, and AI scrapers can be used.
- **Develop Voter-Centred Media Literacy Campaigns:** Invest in media literacy training on digital media, with specific emphasis on first-time and new voters. Campaigns should instruct viewers on how algorithms affect them and on critical assessment of content credibility and prejudice.
- **Create a Centralized Digital Election Oversight Organization:** A unified regulatory agency of the Election Commission of India, the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY), and the ASCI should be empowered to regulate political web campaigning, impose penalties for violations, and ensure ethics compliance.
- **Encourage Ethical Self-Regulation of the Political Parties:** Political parties must accept the Digital Ethics Code for campaigning with a commitment to be transparent, honest, and data-responsible. Such adherence must be publicly tracked and rewarded as part of the election assessment.

As social media continues to evolve into a dominant force in shaping democratic outcomes, the responsibility lies not just with platforms and governments, but also with political actors and the electorate. A digitally literate and ethically governed electoral ecosystem is essential for sustaining trust, integrity, and accountability in the world's largest democracy.

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