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POLICY PAPER

GENERATIVE AI AND ITS INFLUENCE ON INDIA'S 2024 ELECTIONS

Prospects and challenges in the democratic process

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ANALYSIS

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

The paper explores how *Artificial Intelligence* (AI) was utilized in the 2024 general elections in India, a year marked by a significant increase in the use of technology in political campaigns. The widespread use of AI tools globally during the „super election year," a term coined by the UNDP, raised questions about their impact on democratic processes. In the Indian elections, key applications included deepfake technology, targeted voter outreach, and AI-generated campaign materials. AI was employed both positively – enhancing the effectiveness of campaign outreach and enabling customized messaging – and negatively, allowing campaigners to amplify propaganda and spread deceptive content and misinformation to the masses, which was not possible in previous election campaigns.

The paper highlights AI's dual role in enhancing voter engagement while also posing ethical risks. It raises concerns about voter privacy, the spread of false information, and the decline of informed voting. The paper emphasizes the need for regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible AI use, protect democratic integrity, and prevent misuse. It suggests that current AI technology will likely be used in similar ways in future elections. The study underscores the importance of a collaborative approach involving political parties, regulatory bodies, technology platforms, and voters to establish ethical standards for AI use in elections, ensuring that technological advancements support rather than undermine democratic principles.

1. Introduction

"When people around the world cannot discern fact from fiction because of a flood of AI-enabled mis- and disinformation, I ask, is that not existential for democracy?"

Kamala Harris, AI Safety Summit 2023, London

Elections are important for a thriving democracy. A robust democracy is underpinned by trustworthy and trusted election processes in a rule-based order and the active participation of voters in a free and fair manner. In recent years, however, the impact of *Artificial Intelligence* (AI) and machine learning on modern society has also produced spillover effects in the conduct of elections. With 2024 being the "super election year" worldwide, experts are concerned about the potential impact of AI on democratic institutions and processes (*UNDP, 2024*).

Indian political parties have never shied away from experimenting with novel technologies in their election campaigning strategies. For instance, in 2014, Prime Minister Modi appeared in several of the party's political rallies via a 3-D hologram version of himself. Similarly, during the Delhi Assembly elections in 2020, an AI-generated lip-syncing video of a *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) politician was generated by a political consultant in two regional languages, appealing to different sections of voters.

The 2024 Indian general election was no different. The largest democratic exercise in the world concluded in the first week of June, after a long six-week period during which 642 million people exercised their right to vote. It perfected the stage for experimenting with GenAI in devising election campaign strategies. In 2024, Indian political parties spent a whopping $16 billion in election expenses; an estimated $50 million (*Shukla & Schneier, 2024*) was devoted to AI-generated materials including AI resurrection of deceased party stalwarts, devising personalised campaigning, and the creation of deepfakes[1] of Bollywood[2] celebrities to convey politically charged sentiments. While the infusion of AI into electioneering did not necessarily produce any serious repercussions, as feared by some, there was very little transparency. Additionally, given the massive social media user base and internet penetration in India, political actors were greatly successful in harnessing these digital tools to amplify the current trends in traditional campaigning, expand their outreach, craft narratives, and at times manipulate perceptions.

In this context, the paper aims to explore how AI has been employed in the 2024 Indian general election. Has it deteriorated the democratic fabric of the country or facilitated empowering the citizenry and strengthening the democratic process? Although definitive conclusions are still emerging, the 2024 election highlights critical trends and vulnerabilities in AI's use in political campaigns, revealing an intensifying trajectory that builds on developments since 2014 and suggests the profound future impacts AI may have on democratic processes. It therefore lays the groundwork for much-needed further exploration and research. The paper will also explore

1 Deep Fakes are images, videos, or audio which are edited or generated using artificial intelligence tools, and which may depict real or non-existent people.
2 The Hindi Film Industry

the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating AI in election campaigns and identify any gaps in the current approach that deter ethical and effective use of AI while preserving democratic principles.

1.1 Methodology

The research study employs a qualitative research design, conducted in two phases. In the first phase, preliminary desk research was conducted using secondary data sources and potential stakeholders were identified. Subsequently, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders such as political analysts, AI startups, media personnel and legal experts. All the collected data were carefully recorded and were diligently assorted, edited and analysed to validate the arguments presented in the paper. Thus, this study is important for its lessons and insights it holds for other democracies given the heightened expansion and accessibility of AI technologies.

2. The Electoral Landscape

The Indian political discourse presents an intricate web of complexities with diverse demographics, cultural variations, caste dynamics and a myriad of socio-economic issues. According to Chhibber et al. (*2019*) on average, an Indian MP represents constituencies with the number of eligible voters ranging from 1.5 million to 2.5 million. This figure is larger than the population of over 50 countries and almost four-fold the number that a *Member of Parliament* (MP) represented in India's maiden election of 1952 (*ibid*). An extreme example would be the stark difference in the electorate between the smallest parliamentary constituency of Lakshadweep (57,784) and the largest constituency of Malkajgiri (3,779,596) (*ECI, 2024*). Against this backdrop, a typical candidate running for the post of MP is faced with the tremendous challenge of reaching out to voters of this scale. The failure of the candidates to effectively communicate their agenda to the electorate impairs both candidates' winning probability as well as the voters' ability to make informed decisions.

Reaching voters on this scale makes elections a costly affair. *The Election Commission of India* (ECI) assumes the responsibility of capping and monitoring the election spending of candidates as well as of the political parties. Whilst the election expenditure of an MP contesting from a Lok Sabha constituency in larger states is pegged at USD 113,154 and USD 89,332 in smaller states, there is no cap on expenditure by political parties. Additionally, the ECI mandates all political parties to refrain from organising any public meetings during the 48 hrs ending with an hour fixed for the conclusion of polls, commonly known as the 'silence period' (*ECI, 2013*).

However, with the advent of technology, the very idea of public meetings which traditionally took the form of rallies, has undergone substantial changes over the past two decades. Though door-to-door campaigning and political rallies still hold relevance, speeches and campaign cries are no longer constrained by geographical limitations. With nearly 751.5 million internet users (*Kemp, 2024*) and the prevalence of national and regional television news channels broadcasting in various local languages, the potential reach of political rallies and campaigns is unfathomable. Thus, the amount of time taken for the messages of a political rally to reach constituencies under the 'silence period' is minuscule, ultimately nullifying its logic.

3. A Shift to a More Digital Democracy: From Big Data to AI

The commercialization of the internet that started about two decades ago led many to believe that it would hasten the spread of democracy (*Dahlberg, 2007*). As Rosenbach and Mansted observe, "the design of the internet itself - as a decentralised network that empowers individuals to freely associate and share ideas and information – reflected liberal principles." However, with big data analytics and machine learning taking centre stage, the political campaigning ecosystem has been heavily revolutionised. This has been particularly visible in the 2014 general election, where the BJP prioritised a digital-first approach to leverage the large data embedded within social media platforms. According to Thakur (*2014*), this move gave primary importance to data-driven decision-making, live interactions and tailored messaging, thus establishing online campaigning as a formidable force in the Indian political spectrum. The prevalence of social media powered by sophisticated AI algorithms became indispensable in terms of understanding and mobilising the demographics in the Indian elections (*Pang, Chen, & Jin, 2019*).

Equipped with huge datasets, political parties are increasingly utilising big data analytics to generate 'granular, behavioural and psychometric voter profiles[3]' to classify voters into specific interest groups and bombard them with personalised political content (*Aneja, Chamuah, & Reddy, 2020*). Tufecki (*2014*) describes this as *'Computational politics'* wherein computational methods are applied to large datasets derived from online and offline data sources for conducting outreach, persuasion and mobilisation in the service of electing, furthering or opposing a candidate, a policy or legislation. The degree of granularity attained through both online and offline strategies prompted author and political strategist Shivam Shankar Singh to comment "Cambridge Analytica probably won't even dream of this level of targeted advertising" (*Singh, 2019, p. 74*).

The 2014 general election, where the BJP emerged with a thumping victory, was popularly known as the 'social media election' due to its significant online presence and hitherto unparalleled employment of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now known as 'X') to woo the voters (*Khullar & Haridasini, 2014*). The campaigning process was highly data-driven since political parties realised big data's power in micro-targeting voters with tailored and personalised messages, curating campaign strategies, recruiting volunteers and enabling voter engagement. Over time, young techies started dominating the communication war rooms of political parties often overshadowing the role of political pundits who otherwise devised strategies based on hands-on experience gained through grassroots involvement with voters, calculations of vote banks based on the understanding of caste and religious dynamics and coalition arithmetic. While there is an inherent social desirability bias[4] in personal interactions with the voters, tech-driven strategies provide closer monitoring of voter behaviour and preferences. Thus, young techies are better equipped to understand and analyse complex voter demography and devise personalised political messaging contents that resonate with specific voter segments. By 2019, all major political parties had resorted to online platforms in political marketing, and the presence was felt tremendously.

AI algorithms on social media drive content recommendations, detect images and speech, create user profiles, target the users with tailored advertisements, map sentiments or offer novel content. This prompts crucial questions about the nature and quality of information and how the consumption of knowledge in democracies has changed. In a deliberative and participatory democracy, citizens are expected to be aware of relevant issues and exercise communicative rationality[5] (*Habermas, 1990*) or to immerse themselves in agonistic political struggle (*Nemitz, 2018*), questioning one another's perspectives (*Coeckelbergh, 2022*).

The last ten years have already shown that digital transformation impacts elections though means such as micro targeting and a change in engagement via social media. As AI advances more complex techniques will be employed to shape election outcomes. The debate around misinformation[6] and disinformation[7] will only put the role of AI in influencing public perception under greater scrutiny. While these challenges are real and unresolved, there is a gap when it comes to charting solutions that ensure a balance between the ethical use of AI and preserving democratic principles.

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3 Psychometric profiling is the process of understanding an individual's personality, belief systems, behavioral style, and reasoning skills using a data-directed, objective, and structured approach (mettl, no date)

4 Social desirability refers to the tendency of individuals to respond in a way that is socially acceptable or favorable, rather than providing honest or accurate answers (ScienceDirect, no date)

5 Communicative rationality refers to the capacity to engage in argumentation under conditions approximating to this ideal situation ('discourse', in Habermas' terminology), with the aim of achieving consensus (*Dews, 1998*).

6 Misinformation refers to "false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead" (*Diaz, 2018*).

7 Disinformation focuses on "information that is deliberately false or misleading" (*Jack, 2017*).

4. Case Studies and Observation of AI in 2024 Elections

The following section enlists some of the known cases where AI-generated content was employed to influence public perception of political candidates across political parties.

Tab. 1 | Cases of AI used during India´s 2024 election

DATE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF MEDIA	TYPE OF THREAT	LIKELY INTENT	PRIMARY TARGET
February 24, 2024	AI Resurrection of dead All-India Anna Dravidian Progressive Federation (AIADMK) party veteran J Jayalalitha (popularly known as 'Amma' or Mother). A minute-long video was posted on the party's official handle by the party's digital media wing.		Targeting Information Consumption	Evoke Emotions, Mobilisation	AIADMK supporters, General Electorate of Tamil Nadu
April 18, 2024	The viral video of celebrated Bollywood star, Ranveer Singh criticising PM Modi is a deepfake AI Clone *(No AI disclaimer)*		Candidates and Political Parties	• Disinformation • Hate Propaganda • Manipulation of Public Sentiments	• Swing Voters • Fans of Ranveer Singh
April 30, 2024	Shakti Singh Rathore, a BJP member from Ajmer, Rajasthan invested $24,000 in AI generated personalised video messaging and phone calls to reach 1.2 million people during the 2024 Indian General Election. *(No AI disclaimer)*		Information Consumption	• Voter outreach and engagement • Microtargeting and voter persuasion	• Potential voters in Ajmer, Rajasthan
May 28, 2024	An AI-generated voice clone video of news anchor Sudhir Chaudhary predicting a win for Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) candidate from West Delhi, Mahabal Mishra was spread widely during the 2024 General Election. The video also includes fake graphics of an exit poll in the background. *(No AI disclaimer)*		Trust in Democracy	• Disinformation • Manipulating Perceptions • Polarisation	• Voters • Media and Journalists

DATE	CONTEXT	TYPE OF MEDIA	TYPE OF THREAT	LIKELY INTENT	PRIMARY TARGET
March 27, 2024	AI Anchor 'Samanta' launched by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) generated amusement among the voters of West Bengal, when it offered 'Holi wishes' in local language		Targeting information consumption	• Voter Engagement • Entertainment • Publicity and enhance party's outreach	• Regional Bengali-speaking voters • Youngsters
July 20, 2024	Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) AI Anchor 'Vaibhavi' delivers news and updates about the campaign activities of the party in the local language (Telugu) on its official YouTube channel garnering widespread attention.		Targeting information consumption	• Enhance voter engagement, accessibility and transparency • centralised messaging • Modernisation, publicity	• Telugu-speaking voters • Undecided voters • First-time voters
March 23, 2024	Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) workers released two AI-generated voice clones featuring the messages of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal while he was in jail. *(AI Disclaimer)*		Targeting information consumption	• Evoke emotional support • Maintain political presence and boost party workers morale	• Undecided Voters • Swing voters • AAP supporters and party workers

The 2024 Indian general election showcased the convergence of traditional campaigning methods like political rallies, door-to-door campaigning and new-age technologies, with AI redefining the digital campaigning space and increased internet penetration playing a crucial role in defining the electoral dynamics. Social Media platforms wired with highly sophisticated AI algorithms offer unprecedented opportunities for political parties to micro-target the voters and deliver personalised messages while ensuring last-mile connectivity. In the 2024 election, Instagram reels and YouTube shorts with energetic background scores emerged as the popular means of political appeal among parties. For instance, while the 1,222 full-length videos uploaded to Narendra Modi's (BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate) official YouTube channel between April 1 and May 30 garnered only 44,000 views per video, the 258 YouTube shorts and 37 Instagram reels amassed an average viewership of 0.85 million and 27 million, respectively (*Bhattacharya & Mitra, 2024*).

The use of AI in election campaigns, as shown in the case list, shows potential as well as significant risks. Many innovative ways were used to engage voters and reach a larger audience by tailoring messages and content. The key application includes voter profiling and personalised campaign targeting.

5. Emerging Vulnerabilities

As the impact of AI technology on the Indian election has grown in recent times, AI continues to influence political campaigning. It also introduces a new layer of vulnerabilities by increasing the potential for manipulation through precise voter profiling, targeted messaging, and the spread of misinformation. This section explores how AI-driven tools exposed Indian elections to ethical and practical challenges this year. This gives an indication of potential vulnerabilities suggesting that AI tools can be further exploited in future elections.

5.1 Data Analytics and Voter Profiling

India's diversity and vast demographics pose the challenge of effectively capturing the sentiments of its citizenry. In this often complex scenario, AI is utilised to navigate through the complexities and offer a nuanced understanding of voter preferences and behaviours. Historically, the extent of democratic engagements backed by profound voter data and the ability to effectively traverse through various identities, caste and religious equations determined the winning probability of political parties in India. Thus, because of the need to maximise voter engagement and to effectively strategise political resources, political parties in India have resorted to psychometric profiling of voter data.

One notable instance in the 2024 election is the extensive use of the Sangathan Reporting and Analysis, or Saral App, by the digitally adept BJP to extend and strengthen its public outreach. The Saral App[8], with more than 2.9 million Google Play store downloads (*Jaswal, 2024*) was described as an "election-winning machine" by the party's head of information technology and social media division. The app was launched with the primary objective of complete digitization of all data and ensuring last-mile communication with party *karyakartas*[9] by disseminating policies, expansion activities and programmes of the party. However, the scope of the app expanded gradually to include extensive data collection of voters at the booth level - the lowest subdivision of an electoral district which usually has only 700 to 800 people. To boost registration, grassroots workers organised door-to-door campaigns and camps in the neighbourhood with posters carrying BJP's logo. They further assisted people in signing up on the app alongside other activities like voter registration and promotion of government welfare schemes. The app also incentivises the BJP Karyakartas, by offering a chance to interact with Modi himself upon achieving the target registrations, while failure affects his positional standing in the party. For individual voters, the app allows them to personalise their profile with images and quotes of PM Modi, who for many holds deep emotional significance. Additionally, it also sends alerts about party engagement and outreach activities for them to participate.

Upon successful registration, the app collects "user's mobile number, address, age, gender, religion, caste, social categories such as scheduled tribes and castes, parliamentary constituency, voter identity number, and professional and educational details" (*Jaswal, 2024*). With caste still playing a crucial role in Indian society, according to party leadership, this granular data collection has enabled them to identify their weaknesses and devise tailored strategies to appeal to specific caste groups (*Dixit, 2024*). As Shivam Sankar Singh affirms in his book, political parties are employing both manual data collection techniques as well as data analytics to collect and segregate the voter base along the lines of caste and religion and categorisation of information; for instance, electricity bills are used to determine socioeconomic status.

The availability of vast swathes of data in the hands of any political party provides an electoral advantage. By leveraging the data it is better equipped to channel their resources strategically, shape strategies and appeal to crucial vote banks like tribal communities by effectively targeting the populace with tailor-made campaign materials. For instance, by utilising the data collected through the Saral app alongside other data like previous election results, the BJP segregates respective booths in a constituency as "safe," "favourable," "battleground," or "difficult," (*Jaswal, 2024*) and devise campaigning strategies to turn "favourable" to "safe" and "difficult" to "favourable".

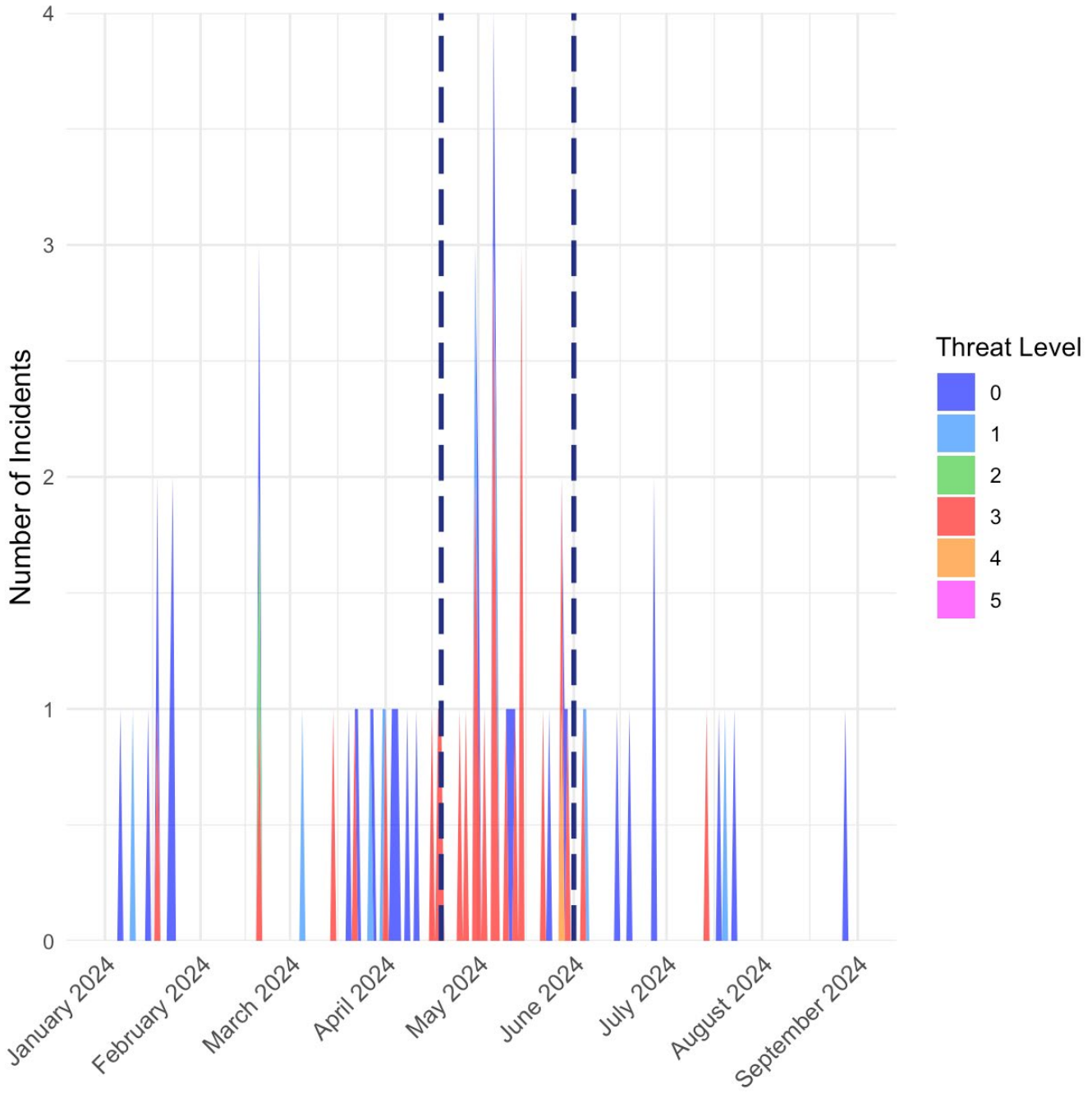
Besides micro-targeting voters, AI holds the capacity to create what is popularly known in the literature as epistemic bubbles (earlier called the filter bubble) and echo chambers (*Coeckelbergh, 2022*). Epistemic bubbles is the social media phenomenon where information silos are created where an individual's exposure to information and arguments are restricted to one's own social media bubble, thus preventing the individual's exposure to opposing points of view (*Nguyen, 2020*). Similar to misinformation, epistemic bubbles have existed long before the advent of AI, for instance, people living in close-knit communities or close organisations of kindred spirits. However, such epistemic bubbles are reinforced by technology. These are often visible at the fringes of opinion, where pluralism is limited. The integration of AI algorithms with social media analytics hastens this phenomenon by creating more nuanced and arguably more effective echo chambers and information silos by analysing patterns and digital footprints of users. This leaves the information generation process in the hands of Big Techs and advertisers.

8 SARAL App was developed by the BJP primarily for enhanced connectivity with the party followers.
9 Party workers

5.2 Spread of Misinformation and Erosion of Informed Voting

Throughout the 2024 Indian general elections, technology was largely used constructively for outreach activities and to mobilise voters. However, a recurring theme entailed AI's use in spreading misinformation and/or manipulating public perception against opponents. This is done particularly through the creation of deepfake videos and altered audio to create false narratives. Typically, the surge in both forms of false information peaks around important political events and the political parties and their sympathisers actively circulate such disinformation (*Poonam & Bansal, 2019*). An analysis of misinformation and disinformation during the general election reveals an interesting pattern. In the two months leading up to the election, there was a significant surge in the number of misinformation and disinformation spread across various platforms[10] (*Mallick, 2024*). As elections progressed, such information and news were centralised in regions going to polls (*Goel, 2024*). However, there was no hard evidence of the impact this news had on the voters.

Figure 1 | Frequency of AI Incidents in India during the 2024 Indian General Election.



10 As indicated in *Figure 1*.

Many of the AI-generated campaign materials were aimed at tarnishing the images or discrediting political opponents, targeting religious and ethnic minorities, and suppressing dissenters. Some striking examples of misinformation and disinformation campaigns during the last election season included the deepfake videos of popular Bollywood celebrities like Aamir Khan, Ranveer Singh and Amitabh Bachan. In these deceptive viral videos, which gained a viewership of more than 0.5 million, Aamir Khan and Ranveer Singh condemn PM Modi for not fulfilling election promises and his failure to address the socio-economic perils of the people. Both actors vouched for INC and ended their speech with "Vote for Justice, Vote for Congress".

According to Divyendra Singn Jadoun, Founder of the India Deepfaker, "the unchecked use of AI raises questions about ethics and privacy". During the elections, Jadoun mentioned that out of the 200 requests received, a significant proportion of them came from various politicians with the request to tarnish the images of their political rivals by superimposing their images on sexually explicit content. Another request was to create a fake low-quality video of the party's candidate to counter any detrimental real videos that might arise during the election which he refused.

In the investigative report of Civil Watch International and Ekō, a corporate accountability organisation, it was found that Meta, the parent organisation of Facebook, approved AI manipulated political advertisements that overly contained Hindu supremacist language, Islamophobic remarks and disinformation about political leaders. These adverts were created and submitted by the organisation to check Meta's ability to detect and prevent content that could be decisive for India's general election. Meta responded to this flaw by highlighting that "we do not fact-check politicians due to our commitment to free expression and the belief that political speech is heavily scrutinised in mature democracies with a free press" (*Rajvanshi, 2024, n.p.*). At the same time, India is ranked 159 out of the 180 countries in the press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders. Furthermore, only 41% of the Indian population trusts the news, according to a survey conducted by the *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* (RISJ).

The 23 Watts, a communication consulting firm, in its report titled ‚Truth be told', found that 91% of the respondents in the age group of 25 and below (commonly called Generation Z (Gen Z)) in the Delhi-NCR region believed that misinformation or disinformation could influence voting decisions. It also highlighted the behavioural pattern of the surveyed community, with 80% of the respondents admitting to altering their perceptions based on the influence of disinformation . More-over, 59% fall prey to sensational content and a striking 45% share unverified news among their social circles, which was later found to be false. This is in consensus with the literature on the lack of proprietary and media literacy prevalent among most Indians (*Singh, 2019*).

Similarly, the survey by digital rights organisation, Social & Media Matters, found that almost 80% of first-time voters were bombarded with misinformation or disinformation in India. Among various social media platforms, WhatsApp emerged as the primary conduit for the dissemination of fake news at 29.8% followed by Instagram and Facebook at 17.8 and 15.8 percent respectively. Moreover, the survey also revealed that 37.1% of the surveyors were directly impacted by misinformation. The 2024 Global Risk Report by the World Economic Forum found India highly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. According to Joyojeet Pal, the spread of online inflammatory speeches and propaganda is presented with three challenges, namely sophistication, believability and virality (*Mishra, 2024*). With increasing polarisation and media distrust, the willingness of certain sections of society to believe things about communities that are antagonistic to their belief system and worldview is high.

Historically, countries have been targeted with misinformation and disinformation campaigns. However, the uniqueness of AI comes in its potential to amplify the scale of production and diffusion of misleading information by countless times adding additional layers of sophistication, including hyper-realistic deepfakes, audio clones to micro-target and influence the perceptions of voters. This is substantiated by the research findings of Johnson et al. (*2024*), which used "prior studies of cyber and automated algorithm attacks" to predict the proliferation of bad-actor AI activities online. The authors predict that by mid-2024 - ahead of the US and other global elections - AI will hasten the spread of contentious information across social media platforms nearly every day. To prevent the creation of false information, big companies which employ GenAI visual tools prohibit users from generating "misleading" images. Nevertheless, researchers at the *Centre for Countering Digital Hate* (CCDH) invalidated the claim while being able to generate deceitful election images with a success rate of more than 40% in four popular GenAI platforms, namely, Midjourney, OpenAI's ChatGPT Plus, Stability.ai's Dream Studio, and Microsoft's Image Creator.

6. Personalised Campaign Strategies

Given the immense precedence that AI holds in redefining the political campaigning spectrum, BJP, which has always been the tech-savvy political party, employed AI for the first time in the 2020 Delhi Assembly Election to create two deepfake videos of a party leader (*Christopher, 2020*). The original video, which was delivered in Hindi, was realistically mimicked in Haryanvi (a language spoken by a considerable number of electorate in Delhi) using an AI algorithm which was fed hours of speeches to generate the deepfake. This incident showcases the constructive use of AI in political campaigning, where personalised connections are established with the voters without maligning healthy competition.

The 2024 election saw the dissemination of highly personalised political messaging including deepfake impersonations of candidates and Bollywood celebrities and resurrection of dead leaders. In January 2024, Muthuvel Karunanidhi, former CM of the south Indian state of *Tamil Nadu* (TN) and the veteran party leader of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, appealed to the party's youth wing via an AI-generated video. Similarly, in the following month, the *All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam* (AIADMK) posted an AI voice-cloned audio clip of the party stalwart Ms Jayalalitha, popularly known as "Amma" or Mother among the people of TN on its official X website. Strikingly, these AI-generated contents of the political leaders who died a few years ago successfully generated veneration and adulation among the masses. Thus, to create recall value, emotions take a central stage in all political parties' campaign strategies.

AI manifestations in political campaigning were not restricted to deepfakes and audio clones alone. While addressing the Kashi Tamil Sangamam rally in 2023, Narendra Modi used the innovative real-time AI-based translation tool, Bhashini to translate his speech from Hindi for the benefit of the Tamil audience present in the rally. In Modi's words "Today, the use of new technology has occurred here through Artificial Intelligence. This is a new beginning, and hopefully, it will make it easier for me to reach you" (*INDIAai, 2023, n.p.*). Since 2022, the tool embedded in the NaMo mobile app has been utilised heavily by the BJP to translate Modi's speeches with voiceovers in Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Odia, Bengali, Marathi and Punjabi regional languages (*Christopher & Bansal, 2024*). Such pioneering technology inevitably assisted the BJP in making Modi's personality accessible beyond the Hindi heartlands to the south.

In the months leading up to the general elections, one of the main contenders of BJP led NDA government, Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi state and the leader of the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP) was arrested and jailed by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with the Delhi liquor scam. Though this untimely arrest barred him from attending in-person election rallies, the AAP creatively utilised AI to effectively communicate Kejriwal's emotions, messages and hope to the general public via audio cloning of the former's voice while ensuring transparency via an AI disclaimer. This is a primary example of AI's power in promoting deliberative democracy and availing the opportunity for informed decision-making. Another video showcased an AI model delivering the *Telugu Desam Party's* (TDP) manifesto in Telugu, the regional language of Telangana. Likewise, the *Communist Party of India* (Marxist) employed AI anchor "Samata" to reach out to the voters in West Bengal. The maiden video garnered 3,500 views within the first 12 hours (*Saha, 2024*) and "evoked amusement" among the voters.

7. AI as an Equalizer in Elections

While concerns exist regarding misinformation and digital platforms, any reactionary measures from regulatory authorities may inadvertently undermine freedom of expression. There needs to be a fine balance in safeguarding freedom of expression as well as preserving democratic processes. This argument gains credence when we consider the importance and the application of technology in levelling the field, especially for smaller political parties.

An important application of AI unique to the Indian context is its ability to create a fair playing field for all political parties. As per the data released by ECI, the total political spending between 2014 and 2023 was an astounding sum of USD 1.89 billion, of which 55% accounted to the BJP followed by INC (30%) and CPI (M) (6%). After 2014, while BJP's expenditure considerably mounted, peaking at 66% in FY 2022-23, INC, on the other hand, saw a steady decline over the years with 22% during the corresponding period. However, AI bridges this divide by enabling politicians to cover parliamentary constituencies that typically boast an average of 1.5 million voters at a very minimal cost. The cost of organising huge political rallies and public meetings is exceptionally high in India. For instance, while the two-day political event that hosted Rahul Gandhi in 2018, cost INC workers around USD 1.2 million; today for less than USD 60,000 approximately 0.5 million personalised calls and messages in the voice of the intended politicians can be made as opposed to generalised messages delivered during rallies, says Divyendra Singh Jadoun. Thus, AI has emerged as a cost-effective and time-saving tool in the big fat Indian election. This argument was se-

conded by another political consultant, Sagar Vishnoi, who opined that the deployment of AI in political campaigning has reduced the cost by almost half and 80% of campaigns will be driven by AI in the next five years in India. However, Naveen Kumar, an experienced political analyst presented a contradicting view that AI is no substitute for door-to-door campaigning of political candidates seeking votes from the individual electorate 'with folded hands'. Additionally, while these AI calls allow for personalised messaging, the voters are often unaware that they are speaking to an AI voice thereby raising concerns about potential deception.

Nevertheless, there is a compelling case for AI to foster better connections between politicians and voters. If used positively, AI tools could make campaigns more equitable and level-playing for all participants. Therefore, it is also important to explore how these technologies can democratise access and make electoral contests more balanced and inclusive. By understanding its applications, the right use of AI can connect beyond the political spectrum, especially in instances where the government can take real-time feedback from citizens through two-way communication on various welfare schemes. As noted by Sagar Vishnoi, if rightly implemented, AI and technology can improve the productivity and efficiency of the system by replacing the need for large-scale surveys with simpler call surveys instead. Such use of technology holds promise for media, political parties, and government bodies alike, offering a streamlined and cost-effective approach to engagement with voters and data collection.

8. Conclusion – The Growing Threat of AI in Future Elections

The 2024 Indian general election served as a testing ground for the use of GenAI in electioneering practices. Whilst the integration of AI in political campaigning did not lead to grave consequences some had feared, it highlighted both AI's innovative potential as well as the significant vulnerabilities specific to the country's socio-economic context. GenAI offered significant avenues for innovation in campaign outreach, including the creation of customised political messaging to improve representation and the opportunity to digitally connect with remote communities. Moreover, it helped ensure a level playing field by benefiting under-resourced candidates to effectively deliver their messages to the constituents in a cost-effective manner.

Nonetheless, the swift expansion of AI-generated misinformation and disinformation in the form of deepfakes, voice cloning, and lip-sync deepfakes posed a significant threat to electoral integrity. The creation of deepfake videos featuring popular political figures, news anchors and celebrated actors to "empower deception" by disseminating false and divisive narratives heightens the chances of manipulating public opinion, given the stature they hold among the people. The misuse of technology by actors with malign intentions in some cases extended beyond mere smear campaigns of political rivals to include exploitation of existing religious or social divisions.

Thus, the vulnerabilities revealed by AI in this election have far-reaching implications for the future of India's electoral landscape. The employment of deepfake to impersonate prominent figures or disseminate divisive materials holds immense potential to further existing sectarian tensions or exacerbate communal fault lines. In a country where political rhetoric often assumes communal and caste tones, AI holds the potential to amplify the spread of divisive messaging, deepen polarization and risk public order and safety. Furthermore, the potential for micro-targeting voters with false information could erode voter confidence in digital content ultimately undermining informed democratic participation and the electoral process. Moreover, political parties proactively taking initiatives to collect detailed information about their constituents raises critical questions about the privacy of individuals. This unauthorised use of personal data could facilitate targeted manipulation, voter profiling or even identity theft. Additionally, the prospects of big-tech companies emerging as gatekeepers of political discourse create added complexity by creating epistemic bubbles. This leaves the information generation process in the hands of Big Techs and advertisers which could threaten free speech and expression.

For most of the election process, the disinformation and misinformation relied on less advanced technologies to create cheap fakes, which use simple editing tools and on news and videos taken out of context. Google's Project Shakti initiative which ran a fact-checking during the Indian election observed that only 2% of the content was generated using AI. Instead of creating novel engagement channels, AI was predominantly utilised to augment the outreach and efficiency of existing engagement strategies. Thus, the available evidence suggests that the impact of AI-generated misinformation is relatively low in the current scenario, and the near-term implications for democracy indicate the exacerbation of enduring threats.

9. Responsible Use of AI during Elections

In the wake of rising concerns over the spread of misinformation during election times, the ECI issued a warning to all political parties to adhere to "responsible and ethical use of social media platforms and strict avoidance of any wrongful use by political parties and their representatives during *Model Code of Conduct* (MCC) period in General Elections and by- elections-regarding" (*ECI, 2024, p.1*). However, the extensive user base coupled with the gamut of information shared across social media platforms makes fact-checking online content a daunting task. This warrants a concerted effort from various actors, including political party representatives, Big tech giants, ECI, CSOs and citizens. However, former Chief Election Commissioner of India, S. Y. Qureshi pointed out, that India lacks efforts to regulate AI with accusations of big techs like Meta and YouTube profiteering from the dissemination of hateful content.

The current efforts undertaken by the government to address misinformation suffer from jurisdictional tensions and pose a threat to freedom of expression. The recently published draft Broadcast Bill, 2023, which was later withdrawn after facing severe criticism, stands as a prime example of vague, top-down rules enacted to police content or jeopardise the users' constitutionally sanctioned right to freedom of expression. This in turn severely undermines the very essence of deliberative democracy. Equally worrying is the lack of detection and enforcement on Facebook's part to identify contentious ads posted by shadow accounts on its platform, giving candidates and political parties the leeway to evade responsibility for content violating MCC enforced by the ECI.

9.1 Creating a Collaborative Framework

Disinformation can prevent informed decisions essential for a deliberative democracy. However, counteractive regulatory measures such as holding platforms liable also present a risk to freedom of expression. The way to tackle the challenge is for the ECI to work constructively with political parties, law enforcement, and platform providers. The ECI needs to facilitate coordination and information sharing between election officials, law enforcement, and social media platforms to identify and respond to deliberate misinformation and disinformation. The Election Commission could establish a committee that comprises representatives from political parties, digital platform providers and law enforcement agencies to monitor online content. A grievance mechanism to address the concerns of the committee members should also be included. The system will have to remain adaptable to the evolving challenges while also building the necessary capacity to uphold free and fair elections.

Additionally, significant efforts to create awareness among the political parties and the voters on the usage of AI and the deliberate attempts to spread fake videos, misinformation and disinformation must be undertaken. The political parties could be educated about the Dos and Don'ts on social media campaigns and the ECI could enforce mandatory disclosure of AI-generated materials and make them accountable for their acts. It is a discovery process and a learning phase for every stakeholder and the ECI must not let the guard down at any point in time. Even if the platform providers are made accountable, the rapid technological advancements and the enormity of the size and volume as a result of increased internet penetration and the sheer size of the Indian electorate make it impossible for platform providers to take absolute control of the use of AI tools in election campaigns. Instead, the onus should be on a collaborative approach of all stakeholders to ensure a responsible and mature action and response.

9.2 Strengthening Fact-Checking Methods and Networks

When a deepfake video is out and has attained virality, early detection is important to limit the spread and control the damage done, especially in time-sensitive events like elections. There are two approaches to detect and undertake damage control.

I. First is the manual detection method, which includes examining the content to look for unnatural signs of facial expression, lip movements, and lighting inconsistencies. Once manually detected, a formal complaint can be filed.

II. Forensic Analysis using AI tools: If, despite the initial detection efforts, the video goes viral, it is critical to escalate the contested contents promptly to AI-based fact-checking units for forensic analysis. These units use deep learning algorithms that check for sophisticated inconsistencies such as pixel-level alterations. Once the evidence is gathered, the legal case can be strengthened by employing a strong media strategy to damage control.

This can help in mitigating the impact of deepfakes, thereby, protecting public trust and preventing misinformation from influencing election outcomes.

9.3 Legislation and Institutional Responses

Any legislative approach to curb the misuse of AI tools by the government should be approached with a sense of caution. While misinformation could be damaging and subject the larger population to vulnerable spots, AI tools are also an enabler for many to improve their socio-economic conditions and income levels. India is one of the prime examples of using digital technology to scale efficiency in governance deliveries and efficient use to optimise resources. In all these efforts, AI tools and digital empowerment played an important role. While the scenario also presents space for

manipulation using misinformation campaigns, any legislation in AI and digital space should be balanced without killing the space for innovation and entrepreneurial activities. Most informants who participated in this study, including academic researchers, political consultants, and AI experts, have opinionated that the use of AI and the understanding about its use is in its early days and any strict legislation may be counterproductive at this moment. Instead, there needs to be a collaborative approach to tackle the negative fallouts of AI usage during the election campaigns. One way is to strengthen the rules and mandate of ECI concerning AI collaboratively. This would be an extension or widening of the scope of some of the rules or evolved frameworks entrusted with ECI, such as "the Model Code of Conduct", "Voluntary Code of Ethics for social media platforms" etc. The discussion around misinformation and disinformation shall be a round-the-clock exercise with various stakeholders to understand the challenges and the threats. The ECI shall not come to decisions on the "Code of Conduct" related to AI and social media use without understanding the scope and canvas of the platforms used. This can be achieved through a consultative and decentralised process only.

The level barrier for the smaller parties and independent candidates is very high, particularly given the high-voltage style campaigns in Indian elections. Though equity is ensured for participation in Indian elections for individuals or parties and contests, it has become an expensive outing, as shown by the figures in the studies conducted by various agencies over the years. AI could offer a level playing field for those candidates and the parties in this context as it reduces the cost of electioneering and helps scale up the reach of a massive number of voters. Any proposed legislation or rule demanding compliance should not be skewed towards bigger parties or individuals with deep pockets as an unintended consequence. This would defeat the very essence of the democratic principles and representative characteristics underlined.

Lastly, India's FPTP system and diversity leave a very important research question to ponder: Do AI tools face aggressive contestation in a multiparty and multilingual electoral scene? Does diversity present a self-regulating space in an assured "freedom of expression" setting? This is a subject for another research paper.

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Annexure

List of Abbreviations

ECI	Election Commission of India
EVM	Electronic Voting Machines
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
IMAI	Internet and Mobile Association of India
AI	Artificial Intelligence
MP	Member of Parliament
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal
TDP	Telugu Desam Party
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
TN	Tamil Nadu
AAP	Aam Aadmi Party
RISJ	Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
Gen Z	Generation Z
CCDH	Centre for Countering Digital Hate
INC	Indian National Congress
MCC	Model Code of Conduct
CSO	Civil Society Organization

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Praveen Rai	Political Analyst	The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
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