



A Thematic Exploration of Influence of Political Advertisements on Voter Behaviour in India

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ABSTRACT

In a rapidly evolving democratic landscape, political advertisements have emerged as powerful tools for influencing voter behaviour. With India being the world's largest democracy, the intersection of advertising strategies and voter psychology offers a fertile ground for exploration. As political parties adopt increasingly sophisticated communication tactics, the impact of these advertisements on voter perceptions, decision-making, and electoral outcomes becomes a topic of significant interest. Reflecting on past elections, it is evident that the narratives, imagery, and messaging in political advertisements play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. The research aims to examine the extent of this influence, understanding its dynamics, and evaluating its implications on Indian democracy. Political advertisements have become a cornerstone of electoral strategies, significantly shaping voter behaviour and decision-making processes. In India, a country marked by its diversity in culture, language, and political ideologies, the role of political advertisements is particularly profound. This research paper examines the influence of political advertisements on voter behaviour in India, focusing on their psychological, cultural, and social impact. By analysing election campaigns, the study seeks to uncover the methods through which advertisements mold public opinion and the factors contributing to their effectiveness. Through a qualitative method, the research highlights the nuances of voter-advertisement interaction and the ethical considerations it entails. The findings aim to provide insights into the evolving nature of political communication and its implications for the democratic process in India.



INTRODUCTION

Political advertising is an important part of the political situation in India, especially during the election period, as it has a significant role in influencing voter's decision-making processes. Political advertisements have been transformed significantly throughout the history of politics due to the emergence of mass media and digitization. There was a doubling of the budget on political advertising in 2019 Lok Sabha elections as there was a 73% increase in advertising expenses in the 2019 election compared to 2014 election making it the most expensive election in terms of expenditure on political advertising (IndiaSpend, 2019). Political advertisements affect voters in varying ways depending on region or group of people. For instance, charismatic leadership influences voters as seen in the 1971 election with the use of the slogan "Garibi Hatao" by Indira Gandhi that influenced voters strongly. Also, the images of Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 and Narendra Modi in 2014 influenced the voters (Raha College, 2019). In certain states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, caste influences the voting behavior of the people where advertisements aim at particular social groups to gain votes. Television is a very effective medium of advertising politically and continues to remain as such as it can reach a large number of people. Political advertisement exposure has proven to change voter preferences. For example, in the Texas gubernatorial race in 2006, it was discovered that an increase in the number of TV ads by a candidate by 40% resulted in a 5% increase in votes for the incumbent candidate (IndiaSpend, 2019). It is similar in India where political parties use television as a medium to improve visibility and public opinion. Social media has added new dimensions to political campaigning. Sites like Facebook and Twitter can be used to advertise with precision, and hence, political parties are able to address specific demographics. Misinformation and ethical implications of such targeted advertising are the other concerns. (Tech Policy Press, 2019) Nevertheless, there have been attempts made by the Election Commission of India to counter these problems with some policies designed to increase transparency and accountability. Nevertheless, despite all these advancements, the ads made by political parties have also raised a number of questions concerning their effectiveness. For instance, some researchers believe that excessive emphasis on images rather than on substance makes voters distrustful towards political parties and politicians. Indeed, despite the extensive campaign conducted by the Indian

National Congress during the 2019 general elections, this party experienced one of its worst losses. (Agency Reporter, 2019) Therefore, although political ads help to get the voters' attention, it does not guarantee that the voters are able to identify with those candidates whose campaign ads they see. Thus, political advertisements in India are of great importance for shaping voter perceptions and engaging different social groups, thus having a huge influence on the voters' behavior. Concerning the future of media industry, the role played by the media in election results remain very significant for both political parties and voters.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are to analyze the strategies and techniques used in political advertisements in India, focusing on the visual, verbal, and emotional tactics employed by political parties to influence voters; to assess the psychological impact of these advertisements on voter decision-making by examining how they shape perceptions, beliefs, and preferences across different demographic groups; to evaluate the role of cultural and regional factors in shaping the effectiveness of political advertisements, considering India's diverse cultural and linguistic landscape; and to examine the ethical considerations and challenges in political advertising, including issues related to misinformation, sensationalism, and regulatory frameworks.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Due to the growing importance of political advertisements in the life of the citizens, many ethical, psychological and social concerns have arisen in India with respect to their nature. Politicians are increasingly employing more advanced approaches to marketing and media to affect the voters through their emotional appeals and targeted message delivery, which is enhanced by the use of big data analytics. Although these advertisements can help the voters become better acquainted with the candidates and policies offered, there is a danger of spreading misinformation, causing polarization and distracting from the discussion of governance issues. Moreover, the social media is employed to amplify this impact, creating "echo chambers" and having a particularly powerful effect on the undecided voters. There are inadequate systems of regulation, which are necessary to regulate the substance and financing of



these advertisements, which may cause the balance of power disparity during the elections. This raises significant ethical concerns for the political parties and for the responsibilities of the electoral bodies in organizing free and fair elections. In order to provide for an educated and clean electorate, it is necessary to study the impact of these advertisements on the voting behavior of the voters.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive and analytical method with a qualitative approach to examine the impact of political advertisements on the voter behavior and the implications thereof in India. To get an overview of the issue, secondary sources were used such as election reports, political campaign analysis and academic literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and messages within the content, methods and outcomes of political advertising on voters' perceptions and voting behaviour. Case studies of key election campaigns were examined to gain insight into the influence of media platforms, targeting and messaging on voter behaviour. The multi-method approach enabled an in-depth analysis of the problems of political advertising, as well as ethical issues and gaps in regulation, and provided pathways for a responsible political communication and for protecting electoral integrity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Strategies and techniques used in political advertisements in India

The political advertisements in India have become very sophisticated and have adopted numerous tactics to sway the voters. It shows the change of the landscape from media to digital platform as a result of a change in technology and the voters (Arulchelvan, 2014). Today, political parties can mix the visual, verbal and emotional approach and create extremely interesting stories that get a great response from voters. One of the prominent ways is through the visual aspect. Most political ads feature large banners and posters of the candidate, and show the candidate in the most positive light, complete with all his accomplishments and promises. In the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, Bharatiya Janata Party developed

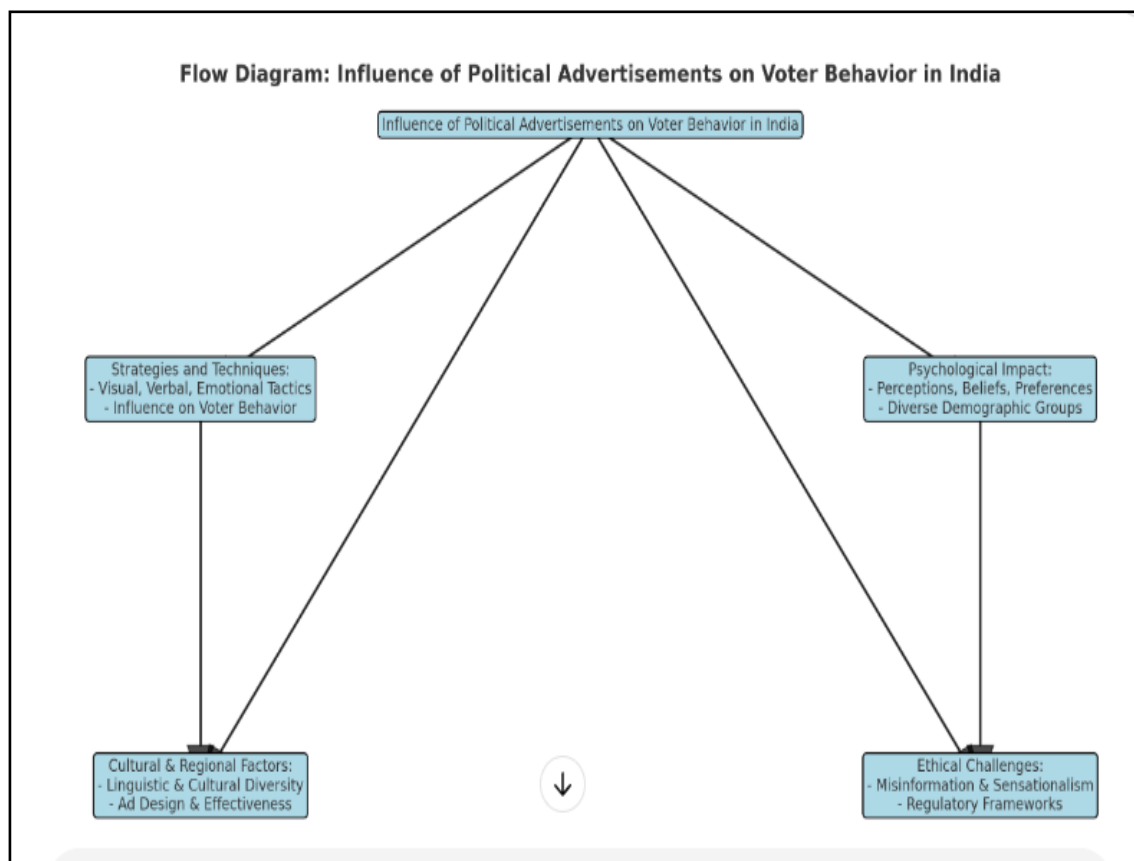
a brand image around Prime Minister Narendra Modi's public image and adopted a slogan of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas", to appeal to the emotions of the elector (Kaur & Sohal, 2019). This brand strategy creates a personality of candidates and creates an image that voters can relate to. Indian National Congress—like the other two major parties—has traditionally been able to leverage the mainstream communication that focuses on social justice and overall wellbeing issues. The legacy appeal in commitment to the common man is mostly utilized during their election and advertisement, and the INC is still utilizing the slogan "Congress Ka Haath, Aam Aadmi Ke Saath" (Congress hands are with the average man). This work to reach emotionally with voters who may feel economically disadvantaged or alienated. INC has now also begun to work on its digital footprints, but at a relatively low pace in comparison with the BJP.

The communistic campaign of AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) that came out of the anti-corruption campaign has effectively employed the most modern methods of communication. The party has taken advantage of social media, not just for outreach, but for fundraising as well and making it possible for supporters to send money electronically. Campaigns tend to concentrate on transparency and accountability as a way of attracting voters disillusioned with the old-fashioned ways of politics. For example, AAP has used memes and viral content to share messages with young voters during elections, ensuring that its messages are more relatable and accessible to them. In other states such as West Bengal (TMC) and Tamil Nadu (DMK), other regional parties have also made their strategies local. The TMC emphasizes local concerns on development and grassroots campaigning contributes in establishing one-to-one links with the electorates. The same applies to the DMK, which does some of the same traditional media and outreach tactics in the digital world, but would focus on schemes of social welfare that it thinks resonate with its supporters. For all parties, social media has transformed political ads. As India is a very young nation with growing online population, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have

now become a part and parcel of the campaign strategies (Rao, 2020). Digital ads were spent by parties in the 2019 elections to the tune of ₹23 crores approximately by the BJP (Mehta, 2019). This

wider movement is reflected in the use of digital platforms to create targeted messaging to voters based on their demographics, which leads to targeted voter engagement (Sohal & Kaur, 2018).

Figure 1. Key Factors Influencing Political Advertisements and Voter Behavior in India.



Source: Author

Figure above 1 indicates the connection between political ads and voter behavior in India from four important dimensions which include advertisement approach, psychological effect, cultural/regional aspects and ethical issues. Visual, verbal and emotional approaches affect the way people perceive, believe and prefer things. Cultural diversity also impacts on the effectiveness of political communication in various regions. On the other hand, ethical issues are created because of misinformation and sensationalism. In all these ways, voter behavior is influenced by the interaction of persuasion, psychology, socio-cultural and ethical perspectives.

Psychological impact of political advertisements on voter decision-making in India

The interaction between politics and the voters' decision-making process is an intriguing topic that, in fact, captures the complexities of a modern democracy. Political advertisement has great power as it conveys message, evokes sentiment, moulds perception and inculcates belief in the voters (Kaid, 2004). This is especially true in a country with such a varied population as India, in which the reactions of various groups to advertising tactics vary (Akhter & Sheikh, 2014). With political parties increasingly using emotional appeals in their election campaigns, the psychological influence of these advertisements is increasingly significant in determining the effectiveness of their campaign in influencing voter preference (Coleman & Wu, 2015). The discovery reveals that political advertisements have a significant impact on young people's voting behavior, particularly in Bangalore.



The study conducted among the graduate and post-graduate students of Jain University revealed that a large percentage of the respondents talked about political advertisements with their family and friends, indicating that the social context affects perception and preference to advertisements. The study also found that young voters are not only aware of political advertisements but also are actively engaging in them, suggesting that these political advertisements have a significant influence on the electoral decision-making process among young people (Sharma, 2012). Some of these ads have a strong emotional appeal, which can help garner voters' votes; ads that anger or move people can have a powerful effect on voter support for candidates (Banerjee & Ray Chaudhuri, 2016).

Political ads can provoke emotion, and there are two kinds of emotional appeals: emotional and logical appeals. Emotional rhetoric generally seeks to elicit emotions like love, fear, or nostalgia and to pull on their emotions in an effort to attract voters (Basil et al., 2013). In 2014, for example, the Bharatiya Janata Party fares well in exploiting emotions to address poverty and hardship. By contrast, logical appeals are grounded in a rational discussion of policies and governance. Such appeals must be used strategically; however, as research shows that emotional appeals are more effective in altering voters' opinions than fact-based ads. Moreover, the widespread use of digital media has revolutionized the way political ads get to voters. Targeted advertising is possible on social media, meaning that the targeting of messages can be more fine-grained and based on the interests and behaviour of the respective target groups (Dash, 2024). This selective targeting would be more effective in terms of the psychological effect of advertising since it would be more relevant for individual voters. The power of storytelling to generate emotional reactions has resulted in greater attention from younger voters who are more likely to share these ads on their social networks (Sohal & Kaur, 2018). But the implications of the findings are not limited to the question of voter engagement; it may be that political parties need to be mindful of the psychological impact of their advertising. Candidates can boost their support and turnout by successfully evoking emotions in ads. At the same time, however, negative advertising may negatively affect some segments of voters if they perceive that the advertising is too aggressive or misinformation (Princeton et al., 2002). It is therefore important to grasp the emotional profile of political commercials

in developing messages that positively appeal to voters. Political advertisements have an immense impact on the mind of the Indian voter and are complex in nature. As they affect perceptions and beliefs through emotional appeals, such advertisements have a very influential role in determining electoral outcomes. Political campaigns do change in response to changing media environment and changing electorates, but further studies of the effectiveness and ethical implications of these methods help to foster a healthy process for Indians to elect their representatives (Bethapudi & Thomas, 2011).

Cultural and regional factors in shaping the effectiveness of political advertisements in India

The multi-layered fabric of India made up of different cultures, languages, and traditions has a significant influence on the political arena, particularly when it comes to political advertisements. This is a context that influences the messages of ads and the voter's perception of them across various regions of the country (Karan, 2009). The political advertisements in India are not just related to the messaging part but are a complex amalgamation of cultural sensitivities and regional identity. Considering there is an electorate population of more than 1.4 billion, it becomes important to know the importance of the cultural and regional aspects when it comes to political parties in India trying to address their huge target audience. The political advertisement in India has evolved to a large extent and in the last two decades, the evolution has been even greater. It has been from obsolete media to digital media communications in terms of the communication of political messages (Varughese & Semetko, 2019). In the year 2004, the 'India Shining campaign' of the Bharatiya Janata Party was a major landmark in the history of political advertising in India. Although it failed in winning hearts of people but it set an example for other campaigns to come that had stories which revolved around urban expansion as against rural issues.

However, with the rise in social media, political campaigning has also changed in India. Parties can shape their messages with Facebook and Instagram as the focal point, taking into account cultural backgrounds and regional preferences (Rodrigues, 2014). In the 2023 state legislative assembly elections, both the BJP and the INC have leveraged influencer marketing to connect with the online-savvy youth voter. This is a sign of



awareness of cultural transformation among the youth generation; where authenticity and relatability in political messages are common. Also, regional languages are the focal point in the evaluation of political advertisements. India is a linguistically diverse country; a message that can be effectively communicated in Hindi may not be as effective in the regions of Tamil Nadu or West Bengal, where regional languages dominate. This need for localization has been recognized by the political parties, for example local dialect is used in the advertisements to reach the voters (Arulchelvan, 2014). This approach makes people feel understood, and is an expression of respect for local cultures that can play a significant role in election results. Political Ads that are based on cultural values that vary across different states are also effective. This can be very impactful for an ad in a community where there are strong ties and sentiments, such as in Punjab or Gujarat. In a more cosmopolitan area, such as Delhi or Mumbai, the issue of economic development and social justice may be more important than cultural appeals. This disparity assists the political parties to make their advertisements more focused and effective. The result of this exercise is that recent elections make it clear that the money matters for political advertising. The BJP is estimated to have spent ₹23.04 crores on online advertisements alone in 2019 whereas the INC came next with ₹16.07 crores (Mehta, 2019). These expenses are not just an indicator of conflicts between different parties, but also acknowledge the significance of the role of advertisements in shaping the views of the electorate of India's multicultural society. The significance of the role of cultural and regional aspects in shaping the effect of political advertisements cannot be underestimated in the case of India. Here political parties have to maneuver through such a complex field with an understanding of different identities existing within the Indian society.

Ethical considerations and challenges in political advertising in the Indian

Ethical concerns have emerged in the context of political advertising in the dynamic and multifaceted political scenario in India. Political parties seem to be exploring all avenues of persuasiveness; in this way, they walk on a tight rope between persuasion and manipulation (Adekoya & Olomjobi, 2017). It is made more difficult by the emergence of digital media which enables the rapid spreading of information and

misinformation. Therefore, these issues of integrity in the political arena and the ethical responsibilities of advertisers are most pertinent (Dashottar, 2019).

Misinformation is one of the great ethical questions of political advertising. In the last few years, particularly in 2019 and 2024, political parties in India, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress, have been spending a significant amount of money on advertising online, with reported spending of ₹23.04 crores and ₹16.07 crores respectively. But there are no strict regulations regarding these ads and some are given falsehoods without accountability. Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India has raised concerns about the need for targeted political advertising regulation, yet there are numerous gaps in the judgement of the Supreme Court of India (Bethapudi & Thomas, 2011).

The sensational nature of the political ads also adds to the ethical mix. Exaggerated claims and emotional appeals are sometimes used to grab the attention of advertisers, which can create a false impression of the facts and lead to poor decision-making. For instance, in the 2024 elections, social media was flooded with ads that not only advocated for candidates but also disseminated divisive stories designed to discredit their opponents. This phenomenon is worrying because of the danger of polarization of voters caused by sensationalism and the effect on substantive policy debate (De Run et al., 2013).

Regulatory provisions on political advertisements in India are still under the process of development. In this backdrop, there are also in India specific political advertising laws around elections that foster transparent and accountable politics. Notably, several regulations govern this activity wherein the pre-certification norms on political advertisements through the Indian Election Commission is mandatory as all political parties and aspiring politicians need to undergo approval beforehand with regard to publishing electronic advertisements. MCC regulates other aspects of advertising, such as the use of official resources for political purposes and, overall, the use of state owned enterprises to distribute electoral advertising during the campaign period. Moreover, under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, Section 127A it is an obligation to print and publish all electoral literature to include with its publication, the name and address of the person by whom it was



printed. The ECI has also published guidelines against paid news, where the media house has to declare all paid contents that are associated with political advertisement to uphold journalistic credibility. The ECI has, therefore, recognized the fact that digital platforms have become so important in political campaigns and therefore needs stringent monitoring of online ads to avoid misinformation and comply with the existing laws including directives for the platforms to maintain records of political advertisements and their funding sources. Together they are striving for ethical practices in the electoral process, but there always be new challenges to address when campaigning in digital environments (Neyazi & Schroeder, 2021).

Beyond issues of misinformation and sensationalism, it is also about issues related to privacy and consent. With the rising trend of political campaigns utilizing a person's personal information to receive more targeted ads, there's a lot of privacy concerns. Political advertising should be ethical, meaning that all parties involved in the use of their information must give informed consent to have their information used and a guarantee of data protection. If their right to privacy is violated, people could lose trust in the political apparatus in general and even turn on an apparatus that seems exploitative of privacy (O'Cass, 2002). The task of solving the moral conundrum of political advertising in India, and of implementing measures of stricter regulation, more openness and commitment to telling the truth, is not so easy, and is equally complicated. The duty of the political parties is not only to establish an atmosphere where the ethical standards are promoted but also for the media and the regulatory bodies. India would strengthen its democratic system further if it focuses on ethical campaigning in politics and it would enable the voters to be equipped with proper information for their voting. Now the country has to take a step forward by involving its stakeholders to regain integrity in political debate and regaining the public's trust in the electoral process (Lipsitz et al., 2005).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- 1) Advertise in Indian politics, political ads tend to use combinations of visual, verbal, and emotional elements to add narration to ads through colors and images that can be used to emotionally touch upon voters.
- 2) There are techniques like micro-targeting and programmatic ad buying that allow political

campaigns to create ads that reach demographically relevant audiences and thus make the ads more powerful.

- 3) Voters are being influenced using emotions like fear, hope, and patriotism to shape their perceptions and beliefs about the candidates and policy options.
- 4) The effectiveness of political advertisements depends greatly on cultural and regional factors like linguistic diversity in India, which requires localized messages.
- 5) Political parties tend to hire social media influencers that would target younger voters in their campaign strategy.
- 6) Psychological effects of political advertisements include reinforcing beliefs and biases, which might result in polarized behaviors and decisions made by voters.
- 7) Narratives of culture and local problems are included in the advertisements in order to make them more effective among certain voter groups in India.
- 8) Some of the ethical issues of political advertising include misinformation, sensationalism, and manipulating emotions of voters through misleading content.
- 9) The framework for regulation of political advertisements in India still needs to be developed as recently the Supreme Court required further discussion about targeting ads.
- 10) As digitalization took place, political advertising was transformed and there are responses to current events and dynamics of the campaign
- 11) There is an increase in online interactions that drive voter engagement in the current times.
- 12) The competitive environment in the field of political advertisement in India is characterized by big differences in expenditures made by the competing parties.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research on the effects of political advertisements on voter behavior in India has revealed immense implications regarding the relationship between the media, politics, and public decision making in the world's biggest democracy. Political advertisements are a very influential tool used in shaping people's perceptions and influencing their opinions, thus playing a very vital part in forming narratives that influence voters decisions. The study emphasizes the use of effective messaging, emotional appeals, and technology on the internet to have a tremendous effect on electoral outcomes. It encourages politicians to practice



ethical advertising practices. In addition, the results are useful for the election commissions and other stakeholders in creating frameworks aimed at promoting a campaign process that is to be fair on all aspects. For voters, the study reminds them the importance of being literate in separating propaganda from facts to enable them to make wise decisions. Moreover, the research proves that political consultants when formulating communication campaigns. It narrows down the existing gaps between the understanding of voter psychology and media influences. This contributes to the ongoing discourse of democratic participation, therefore, political advertising becoming a means of constructive engagement instead of a manipulative one. India's continuing efforts in embracing innovations in digital elections ensure more accountable and enlightened electoral process due to an educated and informed electorate.

CONCLUSION

Political advertisements in India have proven to be a very important tool in influencing voter behavior through the application of various strategies incorporating visual, verbal, and emotional components to attract voters. The advertisements utilize powerful imagery and convincing narratives to develop emotional

relationships with voters by framing themselves as hopeful and progressive. Psychological impact of these ads is very strong because of their ability to influence voter's perceptions and beliefs especially the less informed who depend on emotional cues rather than engaging in debates. India's multicultural and multilingual characteristics require political advertisements to be designed in such a way that they connect voters from different regions and cultures based on issues of particular relevance to them. Ethical issues like misinformation, sensationalism, and need for regulatory oversight are some of the problems associated with political advertising. Modern digital political advertising is another aspect of political advertising whose effectiveness has been influenced by adoption of new strategies. The research paper contributes to SDG 16 - Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by studying how the political advertisements have an impact on the awareness, perceptions, preferences, and decision-making of voters in India. This includes issues such as misinformation in political discourse, ethical communication, transparency, targeted communication and public trust which emphasize the need for ethical political communication for meaningful democracy.

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