

# Social Media and Party Organization in India

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## ABSTRACT

How have India's political parties adopted Internet-based communication technologies, including social media, to reach out to their constituencies? What consequences does this have for intra-party and party-voter linkages? Drawing on evidence from recent party campaigns, including those during the 2024 national election, especially in north India, this paper highlights how new forms of media, which are accessible on smartphones, influence party organization. The paper emphasizes the coexistence of multiple modes of campaigning and party organizing activities and, more importantly, synergy between a party's in-person and online activities that shape each other, which makes them fundamentally different from those observed earlier. To build and sustain online partisan attachments, a party establishes organizational units that are fully dedicated to information technology (IT) and social media work, develops vigorous networks on Internet-based platforms within the party and with voters, and creates and disseminates a steady stream of online content. Consequently, a party engages in continuous messaging with its functionaries, workers, and loyal voters, who then remain in a state of constant mobilization, which is a shift away from episodic mobilization that was observed in the pre-social media era.

**Keywords:** electoral campaigns, mobilization, political parties, political behavior, party-voter linkages, social media

# Redes sociales y organización de partidos en la India

## RESUMEN

¿Cómo han adoptado los partidos políticos de la India las tecnologías de comunicación basadas en internet, incluidas las redes sociales, para llegar a sus electores? ¿Qué consecuencias tiene esto para los vínculos internos del partido y entre el partido y los votan-

tes? Basándose en la evidencia de campañas recientes de partidos, incluidas las de las elecciones nacionales de 2024, especialmente en el norte de la India, este documento destaca cómo los nuevos medios de comunicación, accesibles a través de teléfonos inteligentes, influyen en la organización partidaria. El documento enfatiza la coexistencia de múltiples modalidades de campaña y actividades de organización partidaria y, aún más importante, la sinergia entre las actividades presenciales y en línea de un partido, que se influyen mutuamente, lo que las hace fundamentalmente diferentes de las observadas anteriormente. Para construir y mantener vínculos partidistas en línea, un partido establece unidades organizativas dedicadas por completo a las tecnologías de la información (TI) y al trabajo en redes sociales, desarrolla redes sólidas en plataformas basadas en internet dentro del partido y con los votantes, y crea y difunde un flujo constante de contenido en línea. En consecuencia, un partido mantiene un intercambio de mensajes continuo con sus funcionarios, trabajadores y votantes leales, quienes luego permanecen en un estado de movilización constante, lo que representa un cambio respecto de la movilización episódica que se observaba en la era anterior a las redes sociales.

**Palabras clave:** campañas electorales, movilización, partidos políticos, comportamiento político, vínculos entre partidos y votantes, redes sociales

## 印度的社交媒体和政党组织

### 摘要

印度各政党如何利用包括社交媒体在内的互联网传播技术来接触选民？这对党内联系以及党与选民之间的联系有何影响？本文基于近期政党竞选活动（包括2024年议会选举期间的活动，尤其是在印度北部地区）的证据，重点探讨了那些可通过智能手机访问的新型媒体如何影响政党组织。本文强调了多种竞选活动和政党组织活动模式的共存，更重要的是，政党的线下活动和线上活动之间存在协同作用，这些活动相互影响，与以往的观察截然不同。为了建立和维持线上党派归属感，政党建立了专门从事信息技术(IT)和社交媒体工作的组织单位，在党内和选民之间建立基于互联网平台的强大网络，并创建和传播稳定的线上内容。因此，政党会与其官员、工作人员和忠实选民进行持续的信息传递，从而使他们保持持续的动员状态，这与社交媒体时代之前观察到的间歇性动员截然不同。

关键词：竞选活动，动员，政党，政治行为，政党与选民的联系，社交媒体

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## **Introduction**

India exemplifies the ongoing digital revolution, having experienced a rapid rise in the access and use of Internet-based communication technologies (ICTs) in recent years. In 2010, only 7.5 percent of India's population used the Internet; by 2020, this had increased over fivefold to 43.4 percent and by 2023, it had reached 57.5 percent (Waghmare 2024). Availability of low-cost smartphones, primary devices that Indians use to access social media, and mobile Internet data, amongst the cheapest in the world, has made this possible. From 2014 to 2024, India added almost 900 million mobile broadband connections (Waghmare 2024), reflecting a transformative shift in the way Indians are connected to each other via ICTs.

How have the changes in India's media and communication landscape shaped political parties and their relationships with voters in the country? I highlight the ways in which new forms of media, accessible on smartphones, are influencing party campaigns, and emphasize how modern campaigns conducted by India's parties are fundamentally different from those observed earlier. Party organizing and campaigning activities have evolved from when India's parties primarily relied on face-to-face outreach, to now when they deploy multiple modes of outreach to build and sustain partisan attachments with

in parties as well as those with voters. In the context of recent elections in India, I consider the role of online platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube during parties' campaigns and the interaction between a party's campaign on social media and its on-ground campaign. Beyond typical election times, I explore how intra-party linkages and party-voter linkages have altered in today's multi-faceted media landscape.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I outline the modes of outreach that India's political parties typically use. I emphasize that today competitive parties deploy multiple campaign modes that vary based on which media technologies they use and the scale at which they operate. Second, drawing on my intensive fieldwork in north India, I outline the typical steps that a party takes to build and sustain online partisan attachments, both internal to the party and external to the party. Third, I discuss the consequences for party messaging, mobilization, and party organization.

## **Modes of Outreach by Parties in India**

Scholarship on political communication, largely based on evidence from advanced democracies, identifies three types of election campaigning: pre-modern, modern and post-modern (Norris 2000; Gib-

son and Römmele 2001). These map onto the eras of political communication marked by widespread use of the newspaper, radio and television, and now, the Internet, respectively (Farrell, Le Duc, Niemi, and Norris 1996; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Plasser and Plasser 2002). Use of print media, rallies and meetings, which are labor-intensive, characterize pre-modern campaigns. Modern campaigns are marked by broadcast television news and news advertisements, which are capital-intensive and post-modern campaigns by use of the Internet and direct mail. Except for Epstein (2018), who proposes a “multi-stage political communication cycle,” extant scholarship assumes a generally linear evolution of campaigns, where changes in communication technology determine the dominant mode parties use to engage with functionaries, workers, and voters.

Until the early 1990s, in India, party organizing and campaigning activities were primarily conducted face-to-face. In this “pre-modern” era, parties’ long-term goals—such as the goal of achieving social justice in case of the Indian National Congress (INC) party, which dominated national-level politics until the 1980s—shaped the political content that parties and their leaders communicated during these activities which ranged from door-to-door household visits to mass rallies. However, in the past three decades, parties conduct a range of outreach activities, including face-to-face, through the phone, newspaper, radio or television, and increasingly, through ICT platforms. During this ongoing

fast-modernizing era, parties’ short-term goal of winning elections and the professionalization of parties (Sharma 2024), has influenced the content of party outreach conducted through these modes.

Alongside the medium through which the outreach is conducted, the scale of outreach varies too. For instance, in case of in-person campaign activities, a party carries out individual or household-level door-to-door canvassing, neighborhood-level walkabouts (or *padyatras* in Hindi) and street-corner meetings (or *nukkad sabhas* in Hindi), and district-level large public meetings (or *jan sabhas* in Hindi), bike rallies, and roadshows. In case of outreach conducted through the phone (which does not use the Internet), newspaper, radio or television, outreach might be targeted to individuals via phone calls or text messages; to one or more neighborhoods when conducted through pamphlets in the newspaper or advertisements on local cable channels; and to a district, and often beyond, when a party’s political advertisements appear in state or national dailies or on state-wide radio or TV channels. Outreach conducted on Internet-based platforms also varies in scale. For example, one-to-one party messages sent on WhatsApp are at the individual-level, while party messages sent to groups on online platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook reach a neighborhood if the group only includes people from a limited geographic area. Moreover, party messages on its website or on social media groups or pages on platforms (such as Facebook

and Twitter) or on channels on YouTube, that are formed by the district or state level of a party organization, have a wider geographic reach.

Although parties pursue outreach activities with the ultimate goal of winning elections, parties hope to achieve specific intermediate goals through outreach activities that they conduct at different scales. For instance, consider the case of in-person outreach activities of a party. During door-to-door canvassing, based on the interaction that a party worker has with a voter, they assess whether the voter is likely to vote for their party or for the party who they perceive as the other main competing party in that electoral constituency. Party workers routinely mention that in the printed version of the electoral roll that they carry with them while conducting door-to-door canvassing; after interacting with a voter, they make a note about which party they think the voter will vote for. Later, this contributes to a party's internal estimates of its vote share in that constituency. Whereas during walkabouts, a party's candidate, party functionaries, and grassroots party workers briefly meet and greet voters on the campaign trail while handing out electioneering materials, and during street-corner meetings, the candidate and local party functionaries meet with a group of voters to highlight—and sometimes to discuss—local, constituency-specific issues. At district-level large public meetings, party leaders speak about the party's past achievements and promises for the future, while emphasizing ways in which the party is different from other

parties. Moreover, such meetings, bike rallies, and roadshows are an opportunity for the party to “show its strength” (often referred to as *shakti pradarshan* in Hindi) in the lead-up to an election.

In contrast to the prediction that as a shift in communication technology occurs a party's dominant mode of campaign will change, in developing democracies such as India—where contemporary party campaigns have until recently remained empirically under-examined (Semetko 2022)—we observe a coexistence of “pre-modern,” “modern” and “post-modern” campaigning. For instance, an in-person mass campaign rally of party's high-level leader is routinely announced in newspapers, often with a half-page or full-page party advertisements. Upon the conclusion of such a rally, speech excerpts of a party's highest-level leaders such as the incumbent party's chief minister and national-level and state-level presidents, and other competing parties' projected chief ministerial candidates and national-level and state-level presidents, are frequently reported in print media and broadcast media. Anecdotally, during recent party campaigns for national elections, it has been observed that the partisan inclination of a news television channel tends to influence how much airtime it gives to reporting about rallies of parties, especially those featuring the highest-level leaders such as Narendra Modi in case of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rahul Gandhi in case of the INC.

Moreover, during national elections and state elections in large states

that are conducted across multiple phases, on a day when voting occurs in one set of constituencies, parties often conduct in-person party events and mass rallies in other constituencies where voting is scheduled for a later date. Coverage of those in-person campaign events is broadcast on news channels across the country, including in constituencies where voters are going to the polls that day. This, in turn, can potentially influence vote choice decisions in the constituencies voting on that day, especially in a context where nationally representative surveys reveal that around 15 percent of the voters say that they decide who to vote for on the day of voting (CSDS 2014, 2019, 2024). In this context, recent research has found media exposure to be a determinant of vote choice; specifically, voters with higher frequency of accessing news are more likely to vote for the BJP in India's national elections, including those held prior to social media (Verma 2024).

Beyond their coexistence, in today's social media era when India is characterized by a multi-faceted media landscape, party organizing and campaigning activities that are conducted through different modes shape each other (Sheikh 2024). This, I emphasize, is epitomized by the interaction between a party's organizing and campaigning activities that occur online and in-person. I term the synergy between two modes of campaigning—and specifically, the two-way relationship between a party's online campaigning and in-person campaigning—as *content-complementarity* (Sheikh 2024).

Photographs and videos of in-person campaigning and party events are valuable content for parties and their leaders for their engagement on Internet-based platforms, including social media. As many expressed to me during interviews, a party's functionaries and workers share photographs and videos from party events that they organize on WhatsApp groups and on Facebook to show their party loyalty and to signal to their party's higher-ups that they are “actively doing party work,” with the overall goal of increasing their visibility within their party. Moreover, by sharing photographs that feature themselves with a party's leaders who were also at a party event, a party functionary also strives to signal their “upward connectedness” (Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Chauchard and Garimella 2022). In the lead-up to an election, a party's candidates typically share videos of walkabouts in which they can be seen interacting with voters on their social media pages to project that they are locally embedded in their constituency. A party's leaders also frequently share carefully selected content from mass rallies that they addressed to signal that they are “among the people” (often summarized as *janta ke beech* in Hindi). Moreover, the anticipation that certain kinds of content will gain greater traction online and possibly have persuasive and mobilizing effects on a party's functionaries and workers as well as on voters, also determines how party leaders conduct themselves at a party's in-person events, including rallies, and the content of their speeches at these events.

## **How do India's Parties Build and Sustain Online Partisan Attachments?**

**I**n the social media era when exposure to content on Internet-based platforms shapes political attitudes and behavior and, in turn, parties' campaign and electoral prospects, parties are compelled to establish an active online presence. Observations from intensive fieldwork that I have conducted in recent years during multiple party campaigns in lead-up to elections in north India, reveal that to build and sustain online partisan attachments—within their organizations and with voters—India's political parties follow three broad steps.

First, a party establishes its information technology (IT) and social media unit (also known as a department or cell or wing), which operates as an organizational vertical from the party's highest levels (e.g., the national-level or state-level) to its lowest levels (e.g., the polling station-level or polling booth-level). This party unit is staffed with "social media volunteers" who are fully dedicated to the party's social media work. Importantly, a party's IT and social media unit is distinct from other existing media-related party units that are centralized and only operate at a party's state and/or national-level headquarters. This organizational unit is also different from other units of a party such as the women's unit, youth unit, or farmers' unit, each of which aim to represent the interests of a particular socio-economic group of the electorate.

Second, after being established, a party's dedicated organizational vertical creates an online presence of the party. At a minimum, this involves setting up social media accounts for the party; however, more importantly, it involves bringing party functionaries and workers into the social media fold and getting them to use Internet-based platforms for party communication—both internal and external to the party.

Through a face-to-face survey of approximately 400 party functionaries of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Samajwadi Party (SP) that I conducted in 2022 in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state, I found that among the surveyed party functionaries, WhatsApp was used almost universally and more than 90 percent of the functionaries of each party used Facebook for party purposes. The rampant use of WhatsApp for party purposes is not surprising especially given that by 2019, anywhere between one-fourth and one-third of India's electorate was on WhatsApp (Reuters 2018; CSDS 2019b). More recently, it has been suggested that "India runs on WhatsApp" (Ghaffary and Heath 2022) and in early 2025, it was reported that there are more 500 million WhatsApp users in India (Chaturvedi 2025). A post-election nationally representative survey in 2024 found that 48.6 percent of voters used WhatsApp at least once a day, and 36.8 percent of voters used Facebook at least once a day (CSDS 2024). Moreover, 17.5 percent of the respondents of this survey reported that they had sent campaign messages for a candidate or party on WhatsApp and/or Facebook during the campaign period in the lead-up to

the 2024 national election (CSDS 2024). My survey in UP in 2022 revealed that although Twitter (now, X), Instagram, and YouTube were also used by party functionaries for party purposes, these social media platforms were used to a much lower extent with less than 40 percent of the functionaries of either party reporting their use. Comparing the use of social media platforms among party functionaries at different levels in the BJP, I found that although more than 60 percent of the BJP functionaries who operated at the assembly constituency-level or at a party level above used Twitter for party purposes, less than 40 percent of party functionaries operating at lower levels of the party used Twitter. More generally, Twitter is used to a greater extent by a party's elites, such as high-level party leaders and party functionaries at the national and state levels, compared to lower-level party functionaries. During my interviews, high-level functionaries emphasized that through Twitter a party and its leaders hoped to shape content about the party in mass media, while acknowledging that this platform was much less useful for them to establish direct connect with lower-level functionaries and voters. This aligns with the fact that only a small share of India's electorate is active on Twitter; for instance, a post-election nationally representative survey in 2024 revealed that only 12.3 percent of voters used Twitter at least once a day (CSDS 2024).

Major parties competing in an election use multiple social media platforms during their campaigns, but the intensity with which they use these plat-

forms during election campaigns varies. For instance, in the lead-up to India's 2014 national election, which was the first time that social media had been used by party campaigns during a country-level election, parties focused largely on Facebook (Barclay et al. 2015). The widespread use of WhatsApp by parties in the subsequent national election held in 2019 led observers to consider it as "the WhatsApp election" (Murgia et al. 2019; Arun 2019).

Recently, the 2024 national election has been called "the YouTube election" because national-level parties spent huge sums of money to advertise on YouTube, state-level politicians' used of the platform extensively, and a significant share of voters were consuming content on YouTube (Bhatt 2024; Rashid 2024). In a face-to-face survey that I conducted of approximately 2,000 voters, who were smartphone users in Uttar Pradesh in 2022, I found that the share of respondents who used YouTube at least once a day was considerably high at more than 80 percent and very similar to the share of respondents who used WhatsApp at least once a day. At the time, my party functionaries' survey revealed that only around a quarter of them used YouTube for party purposes. However, by the time of the campaigns for the 2024 national election, parties had understood the potential of YouTube and other video-sharing apps to reach voters, and they began using these apps more extensively, while also collaborating with social media "influencers" (Khan, Mukherjee, and Pal 2024). Moreover, a post-election nationally representative survey in 2024 revealed

that 47.8 percent of India's voters were using YouTube at least once a day (CSDS 2024), and a national telephonic survey conducted in 2024 found that around one-third of respondents reported YouTube to be their primary source of news (Sircar 2024).

Beyond establishing a digital presence on social media, a related task that a party must carry out is to form networks of party functionaries and workers on Internet-based platforms. In case of WhatsApp, this involves the formation of a party's WhatsApp groups. These WhatsApp groups might be internal to a party thereby replicating a party's organization in the online space, or external to the party, when they include voters. During my interviews with party functionaries who worked in IT and social media units of parties, they emphasized that the advantages of WhatsApp groups included: establishing a local connection, engaging in interactivity and obtaining feedback on party messages, and quick dissemination of a party's messages, especially for coordinating campaign efforts and mobilizing people for an in-person party event.

In my survey of party functionaries in UP, I found that, on average, a typical BJP or SP functionary was a part of 30 to 35 party WhatsApp groups during the campaigns in the lead-up to the 2022 state election there. Unsurprisingly, this number declined in the post-election period; however, even when an election was not imminent, a typical BJP functionary was still part of roughly 23 party WhatsApp groups, whereas this number was lower for the SP, whose typical functionary was only a part of 15 par-

ty WhatsApp groups. In contrast to the widely held view that parties collate voters' phone numbers from datasets that they purchase or from "missed call campaigns" (Singh 2019; Saini 2020), during interviews party functionaries often told me that to create WhatsApp groups with voters they obtained phone numbers from their local networks (Sheikh 2025). Moreover, among the surveyed party functionaries who had formed WhatsApp groups with voters, around 65 percent said that they collected voters' phone numbers during door-to-door visits, revealing another synergy between a party's in-person and online outreach (Sheikh 2024).

Third, once a party has set up its presence and networks on Internet-based platforms, its focus shifts to online content. The two main content-related tasks that a party's functionaries must engage in while building an online presence are: content creation and content dissemination.

The online content of a party can be classified based on where within the party's organizational structure it is created, the format of that content, and its substance. Content creation can occur either in a centralized way, when content is created at a party's national-level or state-level headquarters and simply shared with all levels below that, or in a decentralized way, when content is created at lower levels of a party and then it moves through party networks, including to its upper levels. Moreover, this content might be generated in-house within a party or by an agency to which the task is outsourced. A party's online content can also be classified in terms

of its format: whether it is text or visual content.

My analysis of parties' official content on Twitter during recent election campaigns in north Indian states revealed that an overwhelming share—typically 80 percent or more—of a party's official tweets contained visuals. Visual content takes the form of a digitally generated graphic, photograph, or video. Much of a party's digitally generated graphics—such as those highlighting a campaign promise or a party's past achievement or an informational graphic on government performance—is created by a party's IT and social media unit, often with professional inputs. In contrast, photographs and videos are online content that are often created and posted by a party's functionaries and workers, and this visual content typically comes from a party's real-world events, including campaign events. For instance, a recent analysis of content that circulated on BJP's WhatsApp groups in Uttar Pradesh, revealed that around a quarter of the content showed participation in a political event, meeting, or rally (Chauchard and Garimella 2022).

To understand the volume of online posts that party functionaries created during their party's campaign, in my survey of party functionaries in UP, I asked them for an estimate of the number of online posts with photographs and videos that they created and posted online during the one month prior to voting for the 2022 state election. On average, each BJP functionary estimated that they had created and posted around 180 online posts with photographs,

whereas this was closer to 150 for a typical SP functionary. This suggests that each of the surveyed functionaries posted on average 5 or 6 posts with photographs during their party's month-long campaign prior to voting. The average number of posts with videos that they created and posted was about the same at a little over 60 each for both BJP and SP functionaries, implying that these functionaries made and posted roughly two online posts with videos each day during the campaign's peak.

When a state election is imminent, the substance of content posted by a party on social media can be classified based on whether it is about a party's past performance or the future (i.e., campaign promises), and whether the content is related to the state-level, district-level, assembly constituency-level or local-level. We might expect a greater share of an incumbent party's online content to be focused on past performance, whereas for a challenger party we might expect a greater share of its online content to be about its campaign promises and plans if it is elected to government. However, in my survey, functionaries of both BJP and SP estimated that in the lead-up to the 2022 state election in UP, between 55 and 65 percent of their party's online campaign content was about past performance. Strikingly, the functionaries of both parties provided similar estimates of the level to which the campaign content belonged. They estimated that around 30 percent of their party's content was state-level content, roughly between 25 and 30 percent content was about the district-level, and a sim-

ilar share of content pertained to the assembly constituency-level, with the remaining content being about the local-level.

For content dissemination, parties use online networks including a network of WhatsApp groups and the party's social media pages and groups. A party's internal network of WhatsApp groups replicates the party's organizational structure so there are WhatsApp groups at the state-level, district-level, assembly constituency-level, ward-level and so on. These WhatsApp groups might be connected to each other in a larger WhatsApp tree. While being part of a WhatsApp tree, upon receiving a message from a level above them, party functionaries and workers would forward that message to all the WhatsApp groups that they are a part of, including those which included party members below them. In this way, a party message that originated from a party's high or middle levels would cascade to those located at a party's lower levels as well as to voters who are supporters of the party. During my interviews, functionaries from major parties who contested state elections in north Indian states underscored that a strong network of WhatsApp groups enabled the party to transmit a party message from its highest to lowest levels and to its loyal voters within just five or six hours.

When a party is attempting to create its social media presence and expand its reach through online platforms, it primarily focuses on maximizing the quantity of its online content. However, once its online presence and

networks have been built and a party has established a steady stream of content, then its focus shifts to quality of online content. This shift in focus implies that the party is more discerning about the type of content it posts online, and it manifests itself in several ways. For example, rather than posting the same content on all Internet-based platforms where the party has an online presence, party functionaries carefully select the content to post on each platform while being conscious of who is likely to view and consume the party's content on that platform. A sophisticated approach might also involve a party targeting tailored content to specific groups of voters on WhatsApp or on social media.

More significantly, when centering quality of online content, functionaries in a party's IT and social media unit devote time and effort to monitoring content on social media. Typically, they conduct two tasks: monitoring their own party's online content and monitoring the online content of other parties. When monitoring their own party's content—work that a few party functionaries referred to as “content feedback work”—party functionaries seek to assess what kind of content of their party is gaining resonance online and what kind of content is not getting much attention. While monitoring the online content of other parties, a party attempts to comprehend the content of other parties that's going viral and if that content attacks their party, then in response the party composes and circulates new content.

## Consequences for Party Messaging, Mobilization, and Party Organization

Equipped with an organizational vertical that is wholly devoted to IT and social media work, together with robust online networks, and a steady stream of online content, a party engages in *continuous messaging* (Sheikh 2025). A party communicates with its functionaries and workers, as well as voters at regular intervals throughout the day. Crucially, this messaging is continuous—not sporadic—because it is frequent in not only the lead-up to an election but also when an election is not imminent.

In my survey of party functionaries in UP in 2022, I asked them about their daily WhatsApp use during the state election campaigns and in the post-election period. On average, during the campaigns, BJP functionaries said that they used WhatsApp to communicate with other party functionaries and workers around 55 times per day, for SP functionaries this was somewhat lower at 48 times per day. The average daily number of times that functionaries of both parties said that they used WhatsApp to communicate with voters during their campaigns was between 40 to 50. During the months after the election, the average number of times that these functionaries said that they used WhatsApp daily for party communication—both internal to the party (i.e., with others in the party) and external to the party (i.e., with voters)—reduced to around 15. This implies that even without an upcoming election and

associated campaigns, on average, party functionaries used WhatsApp about once every waking hour for communication within the party and for communication with voters (Sheikh 2024).

I also asked party functionaries how frequently they used Facebook daily for party-related communication. Because this is a social media platform, the distinction between intra-party communication and communication with voters is difficult to make. During their party's campaign for the 2022 state election in UP, on average, party functionaries of both the BJP and the SP reported having used Facebook around 45 times per day. Even during the months after the election when there was no ongoing campaign, party functionaries said that they used Facebook 20 to 25 times per day, which was approximately half of the number of times they had used Facebook during the campaign time.

To understand the regularity with which parties communicate through Twitter (now, X), I observed the content on major parties' official Twitter handles. I found that in the lead-up to state elections held in 2022 and 2023, these parties posted content on their Twitter account every 15-20 minutes, through the waking hours of the day, typically from 7 am to 10 pm. Even when an election was not on the immediate horizon, a party's official Twitter handles posted content approximately hourly through the waking hours of the day.

Such *continuous messaging* enables a party to keep its functionaries, grassroots workers, and loyal support-

ers in a state of *constant mobilization* and strengthens partisanship among those who are already inclined towards it (Sheikh 2025). This is distinct from episodic mobilization that occurred earlier because, prior to Internet use becoming widespread, party organizing and campaigning efforts typically occurred in a more intermittent manner in the lead-up to elections. However, in the digital era, online partisan content which party functionaries, party workers, and supporters are regularly asked to like, comment on, and share on Internet-based communication platforms mobilizes them and repeatedly reinforces their partisan leaning. India's parties lay emphasis on this because partisan attachments have historically been weak in the country.

Parties' rapidly expanding online networks—which often cut across a party's hierarchical levels and enable them to engage in continuous messaging—also have an implication for the conceptualization of party organization and, more broadly, parties. The three faces of party organization: party in public office, party on the ground, and party central office (Katz and Mair 1993) are now increasingly connected with each other through social media. Although a party might have control over what it shares on the online account of each party organization face, the interactivity characteristic of social media means that online content can easily move from party's one face to another (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016).

Due to the social media-enabled interactivity within the party as well

as possibilities of interactivity with actors external to the party, instead of the earlier paradigm that theorized parties-as-organizations due to the underlying hierarchical structure of parties, in today's digital age, we can shift towards conceptualizing parties-as-networks (Auerbach et al. 2022). Parties are no longer merely organizations which are monolithic with fixed boundaries (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016), but nor are they entities with flattened hierarchies in which all individuals have equal agency to act. Instead, contemporary parties increasingly resemble networks (Rahat 2022). Within a party, party leaders and party functionaries are nodes in the network and each of them are connected to several other individuals, who may or may not be formally affiliated with the party. Further, parties and their leaders search for and engage with “influencers” on social media—such as celebrities, media persons, and media houses—who are external to the party i.e., they are not formal members of the party, to expand their online reach and network (Lalani, Mothilal, and Pal 2019; Sharma and Jain 2022).

## **Conclusion**

**D**rawing on evidence from recent campaigns, I have presented insights on how India's political parties have adopted Internet-based communication technologies, including social media, and its consequences. I have emphasized that in today's digital age, a party's multiple modes of campaigning, organizing activities interact with each other. We observe a

synergy between a party's online and in-person activities. I have described the three-step process that a party typically follows to build and sustain online partisan attachments within the party as well as with voters. I have argued that this three-step process—which includes establishing an organizational vertical that is fully focused on IT and social media work, vigorous networks on Internet-based platforms, along with regular content creation and dissemination—enables a party to engage in continuous messaging. A key consequence of this is that a party can keep its party functionaries, workers, and voters, in a state of constant mobilization. Another key implication is that parties, which have previously been theorized as organizations, can increasingly be conceptualized as networks.

To further deepen our understanding of how new communication technologies are shaping party organization in India, there remain several avenues for future research. First, to understand the relative importance of a party's IT and social media unit compared to a party's other units and the extent to which these units work in tandem, organizational dynamics within a party need to be examined in greater detail. Second, how exactly a party functionary's social media activity determines their career progression within a party merits further study. Third, party adoption of emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI)—in the context of a developing democracy such as India and its impact on the quantity and quality of online partisan content demand closer investigation.

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