POLITICAL CONSULTANTS AND ELECTION CAMPAIGNING IN INDIA: EMERGENCE, ACTIVITIES, AND DEMOCRATIC CONCERNS

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Abstract

This paper examines the rise of political consultancy in India and analyzes its activities, organizational models, and implications for democratic processes. Political consultants have become major players in shaping campaign strategies and communication. However, their growing influence has sparked debates regarding the impact on inner-party democracy and grassroots political engagement. The paper reviews the evolution of political consulting internationally and in India. It then presents findings from surveys of consultants and party workers in Bihar to provide empirical insights. Results reveal consultants' rising prominence in data analytics, digital media, and shaping electoral narratives. However, they continue relying on workers for voter mobilization. Findings also highlight perceptions of declining worker participation in decision-making and excessive focus on leadership appeal. The analysis evaluates the consultancy's multifaceted democratic impacts and stresses optimizing positive contributions while addressing areas of concern. Recommendations center on enhancing transparency, grassroots collaboration, and nurturing consultancy guided by democratic principles, not just practicality.

Keywords:

political consulting, election campaigns, party workers, leadership, democracy

Introduction

Election campaigns have been transformed by the advent of political consultancy, with external experts playing a growing role in strategy formulation, voter outreach, and crafting campaign narratives (Farrell et al., 2001). Political consultancies wield expanding influence across parties by providing specialized services using data analytics, digital media, public relations, and opinion research (Plasser, 2000). However, as relatively new players in the electoral arena, concerns persist regarding their implications for inner-party democracy, policy coherence, and grassroots political engagement (Karlsen, 2010).

This paper aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the evolving landscape of political consultancy in India. The first section will chronologically trace the origins and proliferation of political consulting as an organized industry, first in the US context and then globally. The drivers catalyzing the internationalization of American-style expert-driven electioneering approaches will be explored (Farrell, 1998).

The narrative then delves into political consultancy's relatively recent entry into Indian election campaigns. It will highlight the incremental opening-up of electoral processes to professional agencies for technical tasks and the eventual rise of specialized consultancy firms orchestrating wider strategy and voter outreach (Plasser, 2009).

Thereafter, the paper will present key empirical insights gleaned from surveys of political consultants[1] and party workers[2] in the Indian state of Bihar. The data provides revealing perspectives into consultants' activities, organizational models, campaign responsibilities, and their complex relationship with party functionaries (Tenscher et al. 2016). Findings underscoring friction as well as complementarity illuminate the multifaceted association between consultants and ground-level party workers.

Based on the survey evidence, the analysis evaluates the implications of expanding political consultancy on crucial facets of India's local and national democratic processes. It examines perceived impacts on inner-party democracy, leadership preferences, campaign messaging, policy coherence, and grassroots engagement (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002).

The concluding section stresses optimizing consultancy's constructive potential as technical enablers while addressing areas of concern surrounding the erosion of participatory processes. Recommendations center on enhancing transparency, grassroots collaboration, and nurturing consultancy guided by democratic principles, beyond just expediency. With ethics as the compass, political consultancy can strengthen, not weaken, Indian democracy.

The Rise of Political Consultancy

The origins of political consulting as an organized industry are traced back to the United States in the early 20th century. Seminal figures like Clem Whitaker, Leone Baxter, Joseph Napolitan and David Garth developed professionalized approaches leveraging mass media and public relations for election campaigns (Medvic, 2001).

Firms dedicated exclusively to providing political services emerged, distinguished from earlier publicity agents by their full-time role across multiple elections. Expert-driven marketing and advertising techniques gained primacy with television's advent and data analytics revolutionizing microtargeting (Johnson, 2016). From the 1980s, the industry globalized with leading US consultants like Arthur Finkelstein exporting their expertise to campaigns abroad. Factors like rising costs increased demand for their specialized skills in communication strategy. Their pioneering methods took root internationally, and adapted to local contexts (Plasser & Plasser, 2002).

Scholarship examining this worldwide proliferation of American-style expertise stresses that it did not represent the outright displacement of Indigenous styles. Rather, a synthesis emerged blending external techniques with entrenched domestic traditions shaped by factors like party systems, media environments, and regulations (Swanson & Mancini, 1996). This selective integration gave rise to distinct "globalizations of campaigning" as each nation crafted its unique professionalization pathway aligning US approaches with traditional practices (Norris, 2000).

However, a common thread was the incremental opening up of elections formerly managed exclusively by party loyalists to external consultancy groups providing technical expertise, especially in spheres like media management. Their specialized skills gained precedence but without wholly substituting ground mobilization capacities. This complex balance underpinned the rise of political consultancy reshaping electoral landscapes worldwide (Farrell & Webb, 2000).

The Advent of Political Consultancy in India

India remained insulated from professionalized electioneering for longer compared to other democracies. Campaigns continued being managed by party workers and volunteers leveraging conventional outreach methods. While some specific tasks like advertising were outsourced to external agencies over time, extensive involvement of professional consultants in core electoral strategy and management was limited until recently (Plasser, 2009).

It was only in the 2014 national elections that political consultancy emerged as a major force reshaping Indian electioneering. The Narendra Modi campaign marked the first high-profile case where professional consultants, especially the organization Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG)[3], orchestrated pivotal aspects of campaign strategy and voter outreach (Price, 2015).

CAG's data analytics know-how, innovative use of technology like holographic rallies, and shaping of campaign narratives signaled the ascent of American-style expert-driven electioneering in India. Their involvement in helping propel the BJP to power sparked wider adoption of professional consultancy across parties (Palshikar et al., 2014).

Thereafter, the space has rapidly evolved with the entry of diverse consultancy firms and strategic advisors leveraging specialized expertise to steer campaigns. Some prominent examples include the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), Political Edge, LeadTech, Varahe Analytics, IFSSS, etcetera.

These players provide services spanning technology integration, data mining, public relations, branding, and crafting campaign communication. While larger parties have also developed in-house consultancy capabilities, niche external consultants remain in high demand given their track record in electoral contests. Their rising national and regional clout signals the firm entrenchment of political consultancy as a mainstay of Indian electioneering (Pant, 2021).

However, as relatively new players in the electoral arena, debates continue on their implications for inner-party structures and democratic functioning. Do they strengthen grassroots political engagement? Or does excessive professionalization undermine participatory ideologies? The following sections will interrogate such multifaceted impacts based on empirical data.

Mapping the Landscape: Political Consultancy and Democracy

The advent of political consultancy as an organized industry reshaping electoral processes has sparked scholarly debates on its democratic implications. Literature reflects polarized perspectives, either as optimistic appraisals of consultancy modernizing campaign practices or critiques of excessive professionalization undermining participatory ideals.

Early research on consultancy's emergence in Western democracies viewed it as a positive shift from partisan to professional, technocratic campaign management leveraging cutting-edge expertise in spheres like public relations, opinion polling, and data analytics (Newman, 1994). By bringing specialized knowledge, this scholarship argued consultants enhanced electoral integrity and vibrancy.

However, later studies adopted a more skeptical orientation, questioning whether consultancy advances meaningful political participation or diminishes it through excessive tactical manipulation. Norris (2000) cautions that consultant-driven electioneering risks reducing parties to marketing vehicles pandering to short-term electoral market moods rather than long-term vision.

Other scholars foreground tensions between consultants' power, owing to proximity with party leadership, and inner-party democracy. Karlsen (2009) finds Norwegian candidates highly dependent on consultants for electoral viability amidst weakening party loyalty, raising accountability concerns.

Indian scholarship is still emerging in political consultancy's relativistic new presence. Early studies like Palshikar et al. (2014) have examined consultancy adoption by Hindu nationalist groups to sharpen ideological appeals and narrative construction, signaling professionalization aligned with party agendas.

While scholarship reflects polarized perspectives on political consultancy's democratic implications, empirical evidence remains crucial for a balanced understanding. This study aims to illuminate India's complex ground realities through a systematic analysis of consultants and party workers' experiences. The surveys of professionals and functionaries provide fascinating insights into the activities, relationships, and perceived impacts shaping the country's political landscape.

Study Approach and Data Sources

To develop in-depth, empirical insights into the activities and influence of political consultants on Indian election campaigns, surveys were undertaken with two key groups - professional consultants operating in Bihar, and party workers affiliated with the state's four major parties, namely Janata Dal-United (JDU), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and Indian National Congress (INC).

The consultant sample comprised 40 experienced consultants drawn from major consultancy firms and individual strategists active in Bihar's electoral landscape, including both recent state assembly polls and national elections. They were identified using purposive sampling[4] techniques to recruit professionals with extensive consulting expertise relevant to the research objectives (Robinson, 2014).

The party worker sample comprised 250 respondents affiliated with the JDU, BJP, RJD, and INC, and hailing from diverse organizational wings including Youth, Women, Social Media, etc (Figure 1). They were recruited using snowball sampling to effectively tap into embedded party networks through referrals (Noy, 2008). Care was taken to ensure proportional representation based on each party's relative strength in Bihar. Worker surveys aimed to incorporate grassroots perspectives.

Questionnaires for the two groups were designed based on the review of political consulting literature and qualitative inputs from focus group discussions with party workers (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Measures encompassed campaign experiences, tools used, collaboration formats, and perceptions of evolving roles and relationships. Surveys combined closed and open-ended items across these themes (Dillman et al., 2014).

Field data collection involved in-person and telephonic survey administration by the researcher from Patna, Bihar[5]. Responses were recorded manually and digitized for analysis. Appropriate statistical techniques including tests of association and comparison of means were applied for descriptive and inferential analysis using R software (Kabacoff, 2015).

	Wing								
	Yuva Morcha	**Social Media**	**Mahila Morcha**	**Minority**	**Intellectual**	**Jila**	**Pradesh**	**Others**	**Total**
Party									
BJP	16	31	4	4	8	8	8	9	88
RJD	15	15	9	8	1	4	6	4	70
JDU	10	17	9	7	0	3	2	2	50
INC	11	14	6	5	0	3	8	3	50
Total	52	77	28	24	9	18	24	18	250

Figure 1:Distribution of Sample Across Different Wings of the Parties

The analysis has certain limitations in terms of geographic scope confined to Bihar and the small, non-probabilistic consultant sample. Findings provide exploratory empirical insights but cannot be statistically generalized. Further studies across diverse geographies can enrich representativeness. However, within its defined parameters, the survey data offers crucial perspectives into political consultancy activities and impacts in India's complex electoral landscape[6].

Key Survey Findings

The surveys of political consultants and party workers in Bihar generate fascinating insights into the activities, relationships, and perceived impacts shaping India's electoral landscape. By incorporating both expert and grassroots perspectives, the findings spotlight the complex realignments and multifaceted consultant-worker dynamics emerging across the political ecosystem.

The analysis reveals several notable trends regarding campaign practices, power equations, and inner-party processes in the consultancy age. While revealing

significant consultant influence in spheres like data analytics, communications, and digital engagement, the evidence also underscores continued interdependencies and areas of friction with ground-level party functionaries. The results add empirical depth to ongoing debates surrounding professionalized electioneering's implications for democratic participation.

The Political Consultant Perspective

The consultant survey data reveals key trends in campaign practices and relationships in India's political landscape. Consultants report their involvement across diverse electoral activities – from shaping communication strategy to digital media management, data analysis, and branding. Many major firms offer end-to-end campaign solutions spanning research, messaging, and voter mobilization (Dulio, 2004).

Findings show that consultants have penetrated innermost leadership circles, with 72.5% having managed campaigns for party chiefs and senior leaders (Figure 2). Their access and proximity to top decision-makers point to a significant influence in shaping electoral strategies. However, 97.55% also reveal direct coordination with party workers during campaigns, underlining interdependencies.
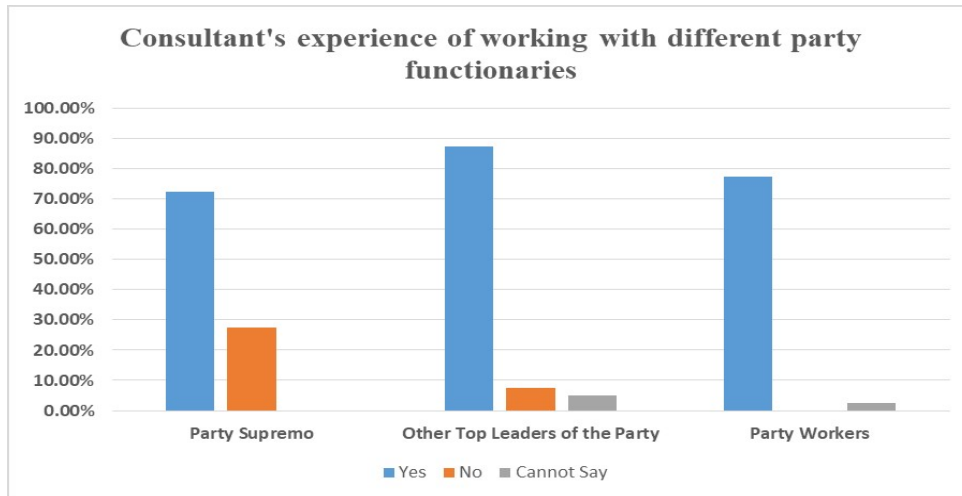

Figure 2: Consultants Collaboration with Party Functionaries. Primary Data.

In terms of campaign focus, approximately 45% of consultants prioritize accelerating immediate electoral wins rather than long-term party-building (Figure 3). The results-driven approach reflects competitive pressures. However, 25% strongly or somewhat deny this singular focus, indicating a continued commitment to broader organizational goals.
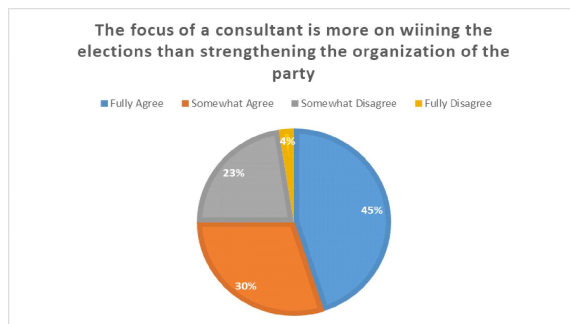
Figure 3: Focus of Consultants. Primary Data.

When analyzing client selection, ideology, money, and the prospect of victory emerge as key determinants for a significant 40% of consultants (Figure 4). However, 50% admit to being guided by purely by financial packages and winnability. These divergent motivations reveal complex field realities.

You/ your agency take a political party as a client based primarily on what criteria?	Response Percent
Ideology/ Alliance Partners	40
Money Offered	25
Probability of Winning	25
Cannot Say	10

Figure 4: Criteria to Take Clients. Primary Data.

Intriguingly, while 80% prefer engaging high-profile CM or PM candidates due to advantages like visibility and resources, 20% caution against the risks of personality cults (Figure 5). This underscores both the desirability of prominent faces as well as misgivings.
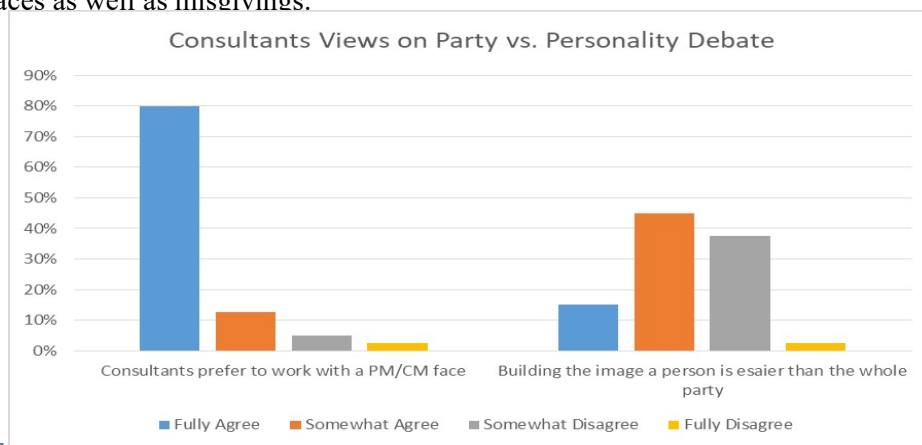

Figure 5: Party vs. Personality. Primary Data.

The findings reveal consultants' dominance in communication strategy but continued reliance on ground networks of party workers for voter mobilization. While revealing assumed hierarchies, data also signals some democratizing tendencies. There are promising signs but areas of disconnect persist.

The Party Worker Perspective

The worker survey data provides fascinating grassroots insights into changing campaign processes and power equations in the consultancy age. Their views reveal a mixed picture of the consultant-worker dynamic.

A sizeable 27.6% of workers believe the influx of consultants has increased centralization and opacity in decision-making rather than intra-party democracy and thus the organization has weakened (Figure 6). However, 22% feel it has enhanced professionalism and transparency and thus strengthened it. The polarity reveals complex realities.
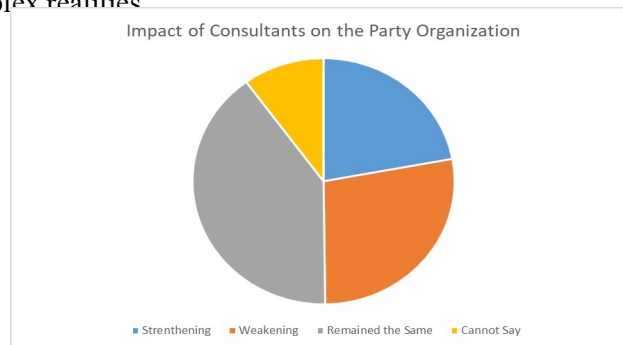
Impact of Consultants on the Party Organization

■ Strenthening   ■ Weakening   ■ Remained the Same   ■ Cannot Say

Figure 6: Impact on Organization. Primary Data.

In terms of importance, 40% of workers report feeling reduced relevance in the data-driven era where consultants dominate activities like analytics and social media. However, 25% believe consultants have built their capacities by imparting digital skills. Divergent experiences co-exist.
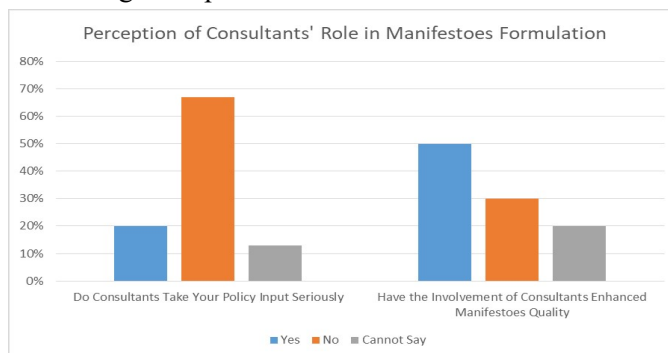
Perception of Consultants' Role in Manifestoes Formulation

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Cannot Say

Figure 7: Consultants' Role in Manifestoes Formulation. Primary Data.

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Just 20% of workers feel consultants seriously incorporate their policy feedback. However, 50% believe consultants' data models have strengthened manifestos' evidence base (Figure 7). A dichotomy between perceived exclusion in practices and value-addition in principles persists.

While 55% are anxious about consultants promoting personality cults focused on the party chief, 20% feel leaders' governance record deserves spotlighting. Divergent worker perceptions reveal multi-dimensional consultant impacts on inner-party functioning.

Overall, the empirical insights highlight gaps but also synergies between workers and consultants. The complex interplay reveals reconfigurations underway, illuminating areas requiring redressal through institutional measures for optimizing positive, democratic change.

Partnership, Divergence, and Nuance

The survey findings offer fascinating glimpses into political consultancy's activities and impacts, revealing significant influence but also continued reliance on party workers' traditional strengths like voter mobilization. This underscores interdependencies alongside realigning power dynamics.

The data highlights consultants' growing expertise in spheres like social media, data analytics, and communications strategy. Their professionalization of these campaign facets responds to wider technology-driven shifts in political outreach mediums. Workers acknowledge consultants' niche technical skills on these fronts. However, they continue retaining their core strength in on-ground voter engagement leveraging loyal party networks built assiduously over time. Complementarity underlies the worker-consultant equation alongside misgivings.

However, the findings also reveal certain domains of disconnect. The perception that consultants undervalue workers' inputs into policy formulation and grassroots knowledge merits redressal through structured bottom-up collaboration. Misgivings surrounding arrogance point to the need for building greater trust and camaraderie. Responsible integration of professional expertise aligned with inner-party democracy remains a work in progress.

Interestingly, while consultants prefer high-profile CM or PM faces for branding advantage and resources, some also caution against personality cults eclipsing party character. Workers' data underscores a similar dichotomy - while anxious about the excessive glorification of the party chief, some recognize leaders' track records deserve a highlight. The interplay between personality and ideology merits judicious balancing.

Furthermore, the evidence also reveals consultants' motivations span ideology, money, resources, and prospects for electoral victory. Client environments play a key role too in shaping conduct - with programmatic parties providing fertile ground for value-driven communication. Overall, the data illustrates that professionalization pathways are shaped by structural factors and leadership priorities, not consultants alone.

Undeniably, political consultancy has etched itself into the electoral landscape. However, healthy adoption entails integrating external inputs while strengthening inner-party vibrancy. With ethics, not just expediency as the compass, India's consultancy firms can optimize positive, ethical change. The recommendations hereafter further outline potential steps in this direction.

Recommendations

• Spotlighting Grassroots Change-Makers: Consultancy messaging must shine the spotlight beyond leaders to highlight selfless grassroots change-makers who are the heart and soul of energizing people's movements. Their stories inspire and build issue-based discourse.

• Democratizing Decision-Making: Consultants must advocate decentralization of power and internal democracy within parties through initiatives like leadership mentoring across tiers, not just the top brass. Bottom-up engagement creates participatory, inclusive campaigns.

• Code of Ethics: Industry associations of consultancy firms should collectively draft a voluntary code of ethics centered on transparency, non-partisanship, and grassroots responsibility. Adoption can be incentivized through certifications and public advocacy.

• Political Ethics Education: Integrating political ethics as part of management and policy curriculums can shape a principled future consultant workforce guided by fair practices, not just expediency.

• Public Participation: Citizen-led transparency initiatives like social audits of campaign financing and ethical practices can enhance consultancy accountability and catalyze self-regulation.

• Capacity Building of Workers: Upskilling party workers on digital media and data analytics through targeted training can empower them with technical expertise to meaningfully collaborate with consultants as equals.

• Balanced Regulation: Nuanced state regulation combined with voluntary industry self-regulation can enhance transparency through norms like targeted financial disclosures tailored to India's electoral landscape.

Conclusion

The advent of political consultancies has profoundly transformed India's electoral landscape. As experts steering data-driven campaign strategies, consultants have secured a prominent place in the country's political ecosystem.

This paper has presented an empirical analysis of consultants' emergence and activities in India, evaluating their multifaceted impact on democratic processes. While no facile judgments can be rendered, some key cross-cutting themes have emerged from the study. Fundamentally, India boasts a vibrant participatory democracy powered by diverse grassroots energies. Any solutions for responsible political consultancy must align with this cooperative ethos.

The findings reveal that while consultants' specialized expertise holds merit, excessive centralization of powers in the hands of a few elites risks undermining inclusive policymaking - the heartbeat of decentralized governance. However, the tide may be turning, with growing instances of consultants adopting a collaborative approach by engaging with diverse regional and local leaders. Sustaining these promising beginnings remains vital.

The analysis has also highlighted the imperative need for judicious transparency frameworks to address issues like opacity in campaign financing. However, lasting positive change requires evolving individual mindsets and organizational values, beyond just top-down policies. The solutions must emerge from within the consultancy community itself, with a focus on nurturing two-way collaborative synergy with party workers. Only such self-regulation guided by democracy's moral compass can fully harness the positive contributions of consultancies.

Furthermore, the study indicates that personality-driven campaigns by consultants are amplifying partisan rhetoric at the cost of nourishing meaningful issue-based public debates. However, with growing instances of ideology-infused consultancy, the potential for brighter democratic participation remains achievable. The recommendations stress volunteering transparency, embracing principled advocacy, and empowering diverse party voices. Optimizing positive contributions while addressing areas of concern will enable consultancy to advance Indian democracy and cooperative federalism to greater heights. Therein lies the opportunity ahead.

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(Footnotes)

1. Political consultants offer technocratic expertise in spheres like public relations, opinion research, data analytics, campaign management, etc. leveraging the latest tools and methodologies to shape strategy and messaging.

2. Party workers refer to ground-level functionaries who are formal members of a political party, contributing through grassroots engagement, mobilization, spreading ideology, etc. either voluntarily or full-time.

3. CAG applied techniques like data analytics, social media, Centralized Tech Control Room for voter outreach during the 2014 elections.

4. Purposive sampling involves an intentional selection of participants meeting the study criteria.

5. Surveys were administered after obtaining informed consent from all participants. Privacy and anonymity norms were strictly followed.

6. The limited sample size precluded more advanced statistical analysis and warrants caution against over-generalization of results beyond the underlying study assumptions and conditions.