



Beyond the Headlines: Media, Voter Power and the Unexpected Outcome of Haryana's 2024 Elections

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Abstract

This paper investigates the complex relationship between media, public opinion and political power, centring on the 2024 Haryana Assembly elections in India. Despite pre-election media coverage predicting a clear victory for the Indian National Congress (INC), with exit polls forecasting 50–58 seats for Congress, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) defied these projections and won 48 seats, securing its third consecutive term. This stark contrast between media predictions and actual results highlights critical issues regarding the role of media in shaping public opinion, its influence on voter behaviour and the extent to which media narratives can accurately reflect or distort political realities.

Through an in-depth analysis of media reports, exit polls, social media trends and voter behaviour, this study explores how media can construct an echo chamber that magnifies certain political narratives, while failing to account for ground-level dynamics. The research also addresses the influence of digital platforms in disseminating political discourse and it limits the voters opinion.

Moreover, the researcher examines the pivotal role of voter behaviour in challenging media-driven expectations. It argues that despite the extensive influence of opinion polls and social media, the power ultimately rests with the electorate. In Haryana, voters responded to localized issues that were underestimated by media projections.

The study concludes that while media plays an essential role in political discourse, it is voters who hold the decisive power in a democracy, as evidenced by the Haryana elections. This research provides a broader understanding of the limitations of media influence in political contests and the resilience of democratic choice.

Keywords: media influence, public opinion, political power, Haryana elections, exit polls, social media, voter behaviour, democracy

Introduction

The role of media in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes has long been a subject of scholarly interest, particularly in democratic societies where media narratives can impact voter perceptions and expectations (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The 2024 Haryana Assembly elections in India provide a

compelling case study in this regard. In the lead-up to the election, extensive coverage from television media and digital platforms, including opinion polls and social media trends, consistently forecasted a victory for one political party. These media outlets not only published exit polls suggesting that this party would secure a significant majority but also amplified discussions through televised debates, panel analyses, and viral social media content, effectively creating a widespread public perception of the election's likely outcome (Iyengar, 1991; Chadwick, 2017). Yet, the eventual victory of an opposing party defied these projections, challenging assumptions about the predictability of media influence on voter behaviour.

This discrepancy between media-driven expectations and the actual electoral results raises critical questions about the function and limitations of media in shaping political narratives. By analysing both television media and social media content through a content analysis approach, this study seeks to understand how these platforms may contribute to an echo chamber effect, reinforcing certain political narratives while neglecting other influencing factors, particularly localized issues and voter priorities that are often underrepresented in national discourse (Sunstein, 2001). The power of media to shape political discourse is undeniable; however, as seen in Haryana, it may not fully account for ground-level dynamics that ultimately drive voter behaviour (Entman, 1993).

In addition to examining the echo chamber effect, this study will also explore the amplification role of social media and the increasing fragmentation of public discourse. Recent scholarship on the impact of social media on political behaviour suggests that while digital platforms offer greater access to information, they can also lead to polarized spaces that influence public opinion in nuanced ways (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). By conducting a content analysis of television broadcasts, social media posts, and public commentary around the 2024 Haryana elections, this study aims to clarify the relationship between media narratives and voter agency, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on the role of media in democratic elections.

In addition to media's influential role, recent analyses suggest that exit polls may fail to capture the "silent voter"—individuals who either avoid public political discourse or prefer less vocalized, issue-specific engagement, often leading to unexpected election outcomes (Swarajya, 2024). Such voters, unaffected by prevailing media narratives, represent a substantial demographic that media coverage and polls might overlook. This tendency to be "carried away by the noise" illustrates the media's limitations in accurately gauging nuanced voter preferences in elections like Haryana's.

Objectives of the study

1. To analyse the role of television media and social media in shaping public opinion prior to the 2024 Haryana Assembly elections through exit polls and political discourse.
2. To identify the presence and impact of echo chambers within television broadcasts and social media platforms, with a focus on narratives predicting a Congress victory.
3. To assess the concept of the "silent voter" and examine how this demographic influenced the electoral outcome in contrast to media-driven predictions.
4. To investigate the reasons behind discrepancies between media predictions and actual election results, emphasizing limitations in media's ability to predict voter behaviour accurately.
5. To propose recommendations for enhancing media practices in election reporting and exit polling, aimed at improving predictive accuracy and reflecting diverse voter perspectives.

Review of Literature

1. Media influence on public opinion and political power

Early studies by McCombs and Shaw (1972) on agenda-setting reveal that media prioritizes certain issues, significantly influencing public focus. This foundational concept emphasizes that media doesn't tell people what to think but what to think about. In the context of elections, this effect can be amplified, as Iyengar (1991) found, with visual framing in television broadcasts affecting viewers' political perceptions. As this study

examines the Haryana elections, it acknowledges how repeated media coverage of predicted wins may have shaped voter expectations and public discourse around Congress's anticipated success.

2. The echo chamber effect in media

Digital media's role in echo chambers, as explored by Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015), shows how social networks often reinforce existing beliefs by amplifying similar perspectives. This leads to homogeneous content exposure, potentially creating a bias in favour of specific narratives. Similarly, Chadwick's (2017) work on hybrid media systems suggests that television and social media can converge, reinforcing echo chambers. This is particularly relevant to the Haryana elections, where echo chambers may have led to an overemphasis on pro-Congress narratives, ignoring alternative voter sentiments.

3. Exit polls, predictive limitations and the silent voter

The effectiveness and accuracy of exit polls remain a contentious topic. Studies by Crespi (1989) and Lavrakas (2008) indicate that exit polls, while valuable, are often influenced by methodology flaws, timing, and sample limitations. These flaws were seen in the Haryana elections, where exit polls failed to capture the "silent voter"—a demographic often underrepresented in surveys. Articles from Swarajya (2024) argue that the "silent voter" segment is increasingly overlooked, as media tends to focus on more visible or vocal political groups, causing a significant gap between media predictions and actual outcomes.

4. Social media's role in shaping political narratives

Social media has further complicated traditional media dynamics. Theories on social media's impact, as proposed by researchers such as Pariser (2011) with his concept of the "filter bubble," indicate that social media algorithms favour content that resonates with users' established views, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. In electoral contexts, this phenomenon creates polarized political discourses, influencing public opinion and the way people perceive electoral outcomes. The Haryana election case exemplifies these effects, as social media amplified pro-Congress narratives that contradicted the eventual BJP victory, underscoring social media's limitations in representing voter diversity.

5. Case studies of media impact on elections

Comparative studies of media influence on elections, such as Jamieson and Cappella's (2008) work on U.S. elections, illustrate that media impact varies across contexts, often determined by political and cultural factors. Regional elections in India, like Haryana's, may showcase similar dynamics, where media projections based on urban or vocal sentiments diverge from rural voter behaviour, resulting in inaccurate forecasts. Indian researchers, including Thakur (2018), explore similar discrepancies in Indian state elections, showing that media's influence is often limited by local issues that resonate more deeply with voters than overarching national narratives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the media narratives surrounding the 2024 Haryana Assembly elections. The primary focus is on analysing the role of television media and social media in shaping public opinion, particularly in relation to the exit polls and their influence on voter expectations. By treating this as a case study, the research dissects media coverage to understand the discrepancy between media-driven narratives and actual election results.

1. Data collection

The research collects media content from a range of sources, including:

- **Television media:** Key television broadcasts and political debates that aired leading up to and during the election period are analysed. These include coverage by national and regional news channels.

- **Social media:** Social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, are examined to identify key discussions, political campaigns, and the spread of exit poll predictions. Hashtags, viral posts, and user-generated content are particularly useful in understanding the public discourse.
- **Exit polls and opinion polls:** The analysis incorporates multiple exit polls published by media organizations in the days leading up to the election, as well as post-election analyses. These data points are critical in understanding the forecasting of election results by media outlets.

2. Content analysis

Content analysis is conducted by identifying recurring themes, key phrases, and narratives related to political predictions and voter sentiment. The focus is on categorising:

- **Predictions of political outcomes:** Media reports that highlighted Congress as the frontrunner are compared with narratives suggesting uncertainty or advantage for the BJP. The tone, language, and framing of such reports are critically examined.
- **Social media discourse:** Hashtags, retweets, posts, and comments around exit poll predictions are analysed to understand the amplification or contradiction of televised narratives. Trends and sentiment analysis on social media platforms help assess public opinion at different points during the election period.
- **Voter sentiment:** Both in media coverage and on social media, the study investigates how media reporting either acknowledged or overlooked localised issues that contributed to the election's outcome. This is particularly important for understanding the role of the "silent voter."

3. Sampling

Given the temporal nature of the election and media coverage, the study focuses on content published within **the month (September 5 to October 8, 2024)** leading up to the election and immediately following the results. Specific dates range from the **first exit poll predictions to post-election analysis i.e., from October 5 to October 8, 2024**. The sample size consists of 10-15 articles and reports per day, as well as prominent social media posts and discussions related to the elections.

4. Coding and Analysis

The data collected is analysed using thematic coding, where recurring patterns and themes are identified within the content. Key themes to be coded include:

- **Media framing:** How were the political parties, particularly Congress and BJP, framed in the media narratives leading up to the elections? Was there a bias in how the media portrayed the parties?
- **Prediction accuracy:** Analysing discrepancies between exit poll predictions and actual results, with a focus on how media organizations handled these discrepancies.
- **Public discourse:** Themes around public discourse and voter sentiment, especially focusing on whether the media captured the true mood of voters, including the silent voter.

Limitations of the study

The study is limited to the media content surrounding the Haryana 2024 elections and the exit poll data associated with them. It does not account for deeper demographic analysis or surveys, and the study's findings may not be applicable to elections outside this context. Also, due to the evolving nature of social media, some data may be missing or incomplete.

Data analysis

In the 2024 Haryana Assembly elections, media predictions based on exit polls significantly diverged from the actual results. The exit polls projected a clear victory for Congress, with predictions such as 44-54 seats (Dainik Bhaskar) or even 55-62 seats (Republic-Matrise), while BJP was estimated to secure significantly

fewer seats. However, when the results were announced, BJP emerged victorious, securing 48 seats, disproving the exit poll forecasts.

This stark contrast between media projections and real outcomes highlights the complexities of exit polling, where factors like voter unpredictability and the silent voter were not adequately accounted for in media reports. While exit polls can provide insights into trends, the actual voting outcome often reflects a more nuanced and diverse electorate.

The data analysis focuses on the discrepancies between media predictions and actual election results in the Haryana 2024 Assembly elections. The analysis is as follows:

1. Assessing the accuracy of exit polls

Exit polls predicted a clear Congress victory, with estimates of Congress winning anywhere from 44 to 62 seats (ABP Live). However, BJP emerged victorious with 48 seats, defying these projections. This discrepancy will be explored by analysing the methodology behind these exit polls, including sample size, geographic focus, and possible biases in the questions asked.

2. Analysing media framing of political narratives

Media outlets, especially those reporting on television and digital platforms, predominantly forecasted a Congress win. By analysing these narratives, the study will identify whether the media was overly focused on national-level issues (e.g., BJP's governance failures) while underestimating local dynamics. For instance, key issues such as regional development, caste dynamics, and the performance of local leaders may not have been adequately represented in the media's portrayal of the election.

3. Evaluating the role of social media in shaping public opinion

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook played a significant role in amplifying the exit polls' projections. These platforms often saw Congress supporters confidently predicting a win, while BJP supporters expressed scepticism. The analysis will track hashtags, posts, and user sentiments to gauge how online discourse influenced or reflected public opinion. The comparison of social media trends with actual voter behaviour will highlight the potential disconnect between online narratives and ground realities.

4. Investigating the role of voter behaviour in challenging media expectations

Despite media-driven narratives, the results in Haryana demonstrated that voter behaviour was not entirely in line with the media's predictions. This objective will explore the factors that led to BJP's unexpected victory. Analysis will look at exit poll data, election day voting behaviour, and demographic trends to determine why the "silent voter" played a critical role in defying predictions. Understanding why voters went against media narratives will shed light on the limitations of media influence in shaping electoral outcomes.

Findings of the study

1. Inaccuracy in the exit poll: The exit polls heavily favoured Congress, predicting a clear victory, with estimates ranging from 44 to 62 seats. However, the BJP won 48 seats, contrary to predictions. This indicates flaws in the exit poll methodologies, such as non-representative sampling, over-reliance on national issues, and failure to capture localized factors like caste dynamics and regional grievances, which had a more significant impact on voter behaviour than expected.

2. Media framing of the narrative: Television news and digital media outlets consistently presented Congress as the dominant party. The media narrative was shaped by national-level concerns—such as BJP's governance record—and general dissatisfaction with the ruling party. However, this narrative failed to account for local issues and the evolving political landscape in Haryana. For example, the role of prominent local leaders, regional development, and caste-based voting patterns were underestimated, which contributed to the misinterpretation of the electorate's mood.

3. Social media and public opinion: Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were filled with posts and hashtags indicating a strong momentum for Congress, driven largely by exit poll predictions. However, a closer look at these discussions reveals significant scepticism about these predictions, especially among BJP supporters. Despite this online narrative, social media did not capture the complexity of the electorate, and its influence on voter behaviour was less substantial than anticipated. Social media amplified partisan sentiments, yet it failed to influence the silent voter or those undecided until the last moment.

4. Voter behaviour and the silent voter: A critical finding is the role of the "silent voter"—voters who were either undecided or kept their political preferences private. These voters, who were largely missed by the exit polls, ultimately played a significant role in the BJP's victory. The result demonstrated a shift in voter preferences, suggesting that factors like local development issues, personal connections to political figures, and regional concerns were far more influential in shaping voter behaviour than the media's portrayal of the election.

5. Impact of localized issues: The election result highlighted how issues on the ground, such as infrastructure development, employment, and caste dynamics, played a critical role in shaping the outcome. The media's focus on broader political narratives obscured the importance of these localized issues, which ultimately turned out to be decisive. Voters in Haryana responded more to these tangible concerns, rather than media-driven predictions or national-level discourse.

Suggestions and recommendations

1. Improving exit poll methodologies: Exit polls in India, especially in states like Haryana, need to adopt more robust sampling methods that account for local demographic and regional variations. Pollsters should consider using more granular regional data and ensure that they capture silent voters who may not be reflected in broader national trends. The use of mobile-based surveys and increased sample sizes could provide a more accurate representation of voter behaviour.

2. Balanced media coverage: Media outlets must avoid creating overly simplistic or biased narratives, particularly when reporting on elections. A more balanced approach, which incorporates localized issues and regional sentiments, would better reflect the diverse political landscape. Media organizations should ensure they avoid overemphasizing national-level narratives that may not resonate with voters on the ground.

3. Social media literacy: Social media is an essential platform for political discourse, but its influence can be divisive. Voter education programs focusing on social media literacy should be promoted, emphasising the importance of critical thinking and verifying information before acting on it. Media organisations should also be cautious about amplifying misleading narratives that can mislead the electorate.

4. Focus on local issues: Election campaigns and media coverage should pay closer attention to local issues that directly affect voters. In the case of Haryana, factors like regional development, caste politics, and local leadership played a more significant role in shaping voter behaviour than expected. Campaign strategies should thus be more tailored to regional realities.

5. Consideration of silent voters: Polling agencies and media houses should invest in research methods to better understand the "silent voter." These voters, often unaccounted for in surveys, have the potential to influence election outcomes significantly. Implementing more diverse polling techniques, including offline and in-person interviews, can help capture these voices.

6. Incorporating ground-level feedback: Media, pollsters, and political parties should engage more with on-the-ground political dynamics, such as door-to-door surveys and direct voter interactions. Listening to these voices can provide insights into the true mood of the electorate and ensure that exit polls and media predictions align more closely with real voter sentiment.

Conclusion

The 2024 Haryana Assembly elections revealed a fascinating dynamic between media predictions, voter behaviour, and the ultimate outcome. Despite media narratives and exit polls overwhelmingly favouring Congress, the actual result—BJP securing 48 seats—illustrated a significant disconnect between media-driven expectations and the ground reality. This study emphasizes that, while media and polling data play crucial roles in shaping public discourse, they can also mislead by overlooking local issues and the influence of the "silent voter." The research underscores the importance of refining exit poll methodologies, considering local dynamics, and understanding voter behaviour beyond media hype. The Haryana elections reaffirm that, in a democracy, it is the electorate who ultimately shapes the political landscape, challenging the assumptions of both media and political analysts.

As we look ahead, these findings suggest the need for more nuanced approaches in polling, media coverage, and political campaigns—ones that prioritize the diversity of voter experiences and the complexity of local issues. Only then can we hope to bridge the gap between media narratives and the true pulse of the electorate.

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