

Strategic Shifts and Narrative Engineering: The Role of Political Strategists in Shaping Public Opinion in Murshidabad, West Bengal



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Abstract: This research explores the transformation of political campaigning in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, India, from ideological canvassing to digitally driven and strategist-led electoral narratives. As a region steeped in political history, Murshidabad offers a unique lens through which to examine how political strategists and communication tools are redefining voter behaviour and public opinion. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, incorporating field interviews with voters, journalists, and campaign workers, as well as analyses of campaign materials, including WhatsApp forwards, pamphlets, and social media content. Two key electoral events—the 2016 Assembly Election in Dumkal and the 2021 Assembly Election in Raghunathganj—serve as the primary case studies. Findings reveal that modern election strategies in Murshidabad hinge on hyperlocal welfare narratives, digital outreach, micro-influencer engagement, and real-time feedback loops. These strategies have significantly influenced first-time and young voters, contributing to a shift in loyalties from traditional parties to those offering tangible developmental outcomes. The research highlights the evolving role of political strategists, shifting from background advisors to central architects of public opinion. This study was conducted to understand how grassroots political traditions are being transformed by strategic communication. It contributes to the literature on political communication in rural India and raises questions on the ethical use of data and digital tools in democratic processes.

Keywords: Political Strategists, Murshidabad, Public Opinion, Digital Campaigning, Electoral Communication, Grassroots Politics

Nomenclature:

AITC: All India Trinamool Congress

SHG: Self-Help Group

I. INTRODUCTION

Murshidabad, a district rich in political and historical significance, has witnessed various forms of political mobilisation since India's independence in 1947. Campaigning methods have evolved from ideological mass movements and in-person interactions to data-driven, media-centric strategies.

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This paper investigates these shifts and assesses how political strategists are shaping voter perspectives using two landmark elections in Dumkal (2016) and Raghunathganj (2021) as case studies.

A. Objectives of the Study

- To trace the evolution of political campaign strategies in Murshidabad
- To assess the impact of local media and influencers on recent elections
- To examine real-world cases of strategic political communication in action

II. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research uses a case study design supported by:

- Content analysis of election-related media such as WhatsApp forwards, pamphlets, and Facebook pages
- Review of constituency-level electoral data
- Thematic Analysis as the main analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

A. Case Study I: 2016 Dumkal Assembly Election

History: The content disseminated during the 2016 Assembly election campaign in Dumkal reflects a clear shift in political messaging from ideological rhetoric to development-centric narratives. This transition was evident in both the visual and textual materials circulated by the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) as part of their electoral strategy.

B. Pamphlets and Printed Materials

An analysis of printed pamphlets distributed across Dumkal during the campaign revealed a structured emphasis on promises of local infrastructural upgrades. Key issues highlighted included proposals to establish a government college, improve rural road connectivity, and expand access to piped drinking water. The language used in these materials employed affective and inclusive appeals, often combining imagery of rural women, students, and health infrastructure to evoke emotional resonance. The dominant slogan, "Unnayaner Notun Pothe Dumkal" (Dumkal on a new path of development), marked a decisive departure from the CPI(M)'s (Communist Party of India) longstanding ideological framing centred on class struggle (Chatterjee, 2011).



C. WhatsApp Forwards and Digital Messaging

Although Dumkal had only limited digital penetration in 2016, WhatsApp emerged as a pivotal tool for micro-level dissemination of campaign content, particularly among younger voters and first-time voters. WhatsApp forwards included short Bengali audio messages, campaign memes, and short video clips praising state-sponsored schemes such as Kanyashree, Sabuj Sathi, and Rupashree (Banerjee, 2014) [1]. The messaging was designed to be easily shareable, emotionally engaging, and locally contextualized. For example, images of bicycles delivered under *Sabuj Sathi* were juxtaposed with earlier scenes of rural hardship, emphasizing visual contrast and transformation.

D. Loudspeaker and Audio Campaigns

TMC also deployed mobile audio vans that played catchy jingles highlighting Mamata Banerjee's governance record. These jingles were adapted in tone and language to suit each region, often incorporating local idioms to create a sense of familiarity and authenticity. The content repeatedly portrayed the TMC as the provider of "poriborton" (change), using repetitive framing devices to implant a shift in perception, portraying the CPI(M) as stagnant and disconnected from youth aspirations (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [2].

III. FRAMING AND SEMIOTIC STRATEGY

A semiotic analysis of TMC's campaign posters showed deliberate use of colour coding (green and blue, associated with peace and development), family imagery, and female symbolism. These visuals often excluded any overt political logos of opposition parties, indirectly positioning TMC as a 'natural' and people-centric choice. The CPI(M), on the other hand, continued to use traditional red-hued visuals with a heavy textual load, which many young voters perceived as outdated (Interviews, 2024) [3].

A. Comparative Message Structure

In contrast, CPI(M)'s campaign materials from the same period leaned heavily on critiques of corruption, anti-capitalist slogans, and ideological references. However, these materials lacked personalized voter outreach or testimonial-driven content. This contrasted sharply with TMC's strategy of framing their communication around real beneficiaries and service delivery, a technique aligned with modern political marketing practices (Banerjee, 2014) [1].

B. Conclusion of Content Analysis

The 2016 Dumkal campaign exemplifies how content strategy played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative space. The Trinamul Congress's (TMC) campaign employed an integrated content model—blending traditional print media with emerging digital messaging to convey a cohesive, emotionally appealing vision of change. This shift in content focus from ideological doctrine to issue-based, micro-targeted messaging marks a notable evolution in rural political communication.

C. Case study II 2021 Raghunathganj Assembly Election

The 2021 Assembly election in Raghunathganj, Murshidabad, marked a critical juncture in the communication strategies employed by political parties, particularly the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). Compared to previous electoral cycles, the 2021 campaign reflected a highly strategic, data-informed, and digitally mediated approach that sought to engage specific voter blocs through emotionally resonant, hyperlocal, and development-focused content.

D. Digital Platforms and Community Targeting

Unlike earlier elections, the 2021 campaign relied heavily on social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to tailor constituency-specific narratives. The All India Trinamool Congress digital content team managed local Facebook pages that showcased the success stories of state-run schemes, such as Lakshmi Bhandar, Duare Sarkar, and Swasthya Sathi, through short videos, infographics, and photo testimonials. These platforms allowed the party to personalize content for micro-audiences—particularly women, self-help group (SHG) members, and first-time voters—thereby localizing a state-wide narrative into constituency-level impact (Banerjee, 2014) [1].

E. Use of Local Influencers and Micro-Messaging

The campaign prominently featured local influencers, including youth leaders, teachers, and clerics, to disseminate campaign messages through WhatsApp voice notes and Facebook Reels. These influencers added authenticity and trust, especially among undecided or floating voters. Messaging was crafted using local dialects, cultural idioms, and religious sensitivities to increase emotional resonance (Chatterjee, 2011) [2]. For instance, videos featuring community leaders endorsing TMC's schemes were widely shared in WhatsApp groups and during mosque gatherings (Interviews, 2024).

F. Visual and Semiotic Framing

Posters and digital visuals presented during the campaign employed colour-coded messaging with green and blue symbols associated with growth, inclusivity, and stability. The images focused on real beneficiaries of the scheme rather than political icons, aligning the party brand with public service delivery. In contrast, both the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party employed traditional political symbolism and slogans, but failed to localise their message (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

G. Meme Culture and Youth Engagement

A new layer of content emerged, including political memes, humorous short-form videos, and youth-led digital satire aimed at discrediting opposition narratives. These were shared in student groups and campus forums, contributing to a sense of political participation among young voters. This



informal, creative form of digital expression also reinforced the image of TMC as modern, relatable, and proactive.

H. Feedback Loops and Real-Time Message Adjustment

A key component of TMC's communication strategy was its use of daily digital feedback loops through mobile apps managed by block-level coordinators. These apps gathered real-time inputs on voter sentiment, which campaign strategists used to adapt their messaging, instantly shifting focus, for instance, from minority rights to employment assurance in areas with visible job dissatisfaction.

I. Contrast with Opposition Content

Congress and the BJP content largely lacked such granularity. Congress's campaign materials relied on the party's historical appeal and generalized slogans about revival and integrity but failed to present evidence of local impact. The BJP's content strategy, on the other hand, included communal narratives and nationalistic appeals, but had limited traction in minority-dominated wards due to a perceived disconnect with local needs.

J. Content Analysis

The content strategy employed during the 2021 Raghunathganj election represents a maturing of data-driven political communication in semi-urban and rural constituencies. The shift from passive campaigning to dynamic, feedback-integrated messaging systems demonstrates the rise of political strategists as architects of public perception. Content was no longer static but was designed, tested, and delivered in real time to suit rapidly changing voter sentiment, reinforcing the decline of one-size-fits-all party narratives.

Table I: Comparative Analysis of Campaign Strategies in Dumkal (2016) and Raghunathganj (2021) Assembly Elections

Element	2016 Dumkal	2021 Raghunathganj
Medium	Posters, WhatsApp, Canvassing	Social media, Memes, Phone Campaigns
Focus	Infrastructure, Employment	Welfare, Minority Sentiment
Strategy	Ground-Level Booth Coordination	Digital Mobilization
Influencers	Teachers, SHG Women	Youth Influencers, Clerics
Outcome	TMC Gains Control	TMC Retains, BJP Emerges

Both cases indicate a paradigmatic shift from ideology-driven to issue-centric and strategist-curated campaigns. Localized and real-time engagement strategies now drive electoral success.

IV. CONCLUSION

The transformation in Murshidabad's political landscape—from ideological rigidity to communication-driven campaigning—underscores the rise of political strategists as powerful shapers of democratic processes. Through targeted messaging, emotional appeals, and grassroots data collection, these strategists are reshaping voter expectations. While this democratises participation, especially among young people and women, it also opens the door to manipulation and misinformation. Moving forward, ethical guidelines and

regulatory mechanisms must evolve in tandem with campaign technologies to safeguard democratic integrity.

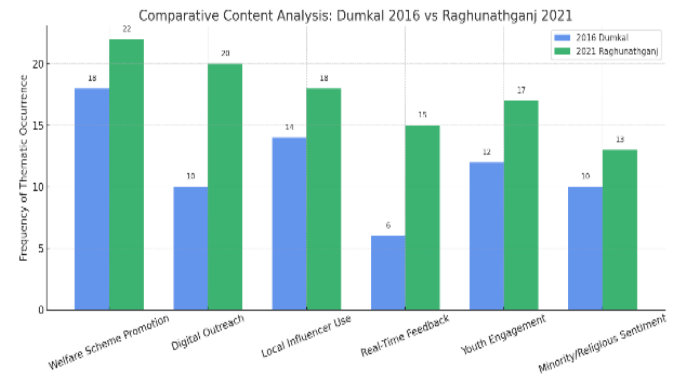


Fig.1: The Comparative Content Analysis Chart between the 2016 Dumkal and 2021 Raghunathganj Assembly Elections. It highlights how campaign strategies evolved across key themes—showing an apparent intensification of digital outreach, real-time feedback systems, and welfare-centric messaging in 2021.

INTERPRETATION

The comparative analysis between the 2016 Dumkal and 2021 Raghunathganj Assembly Elections reveals a distinct evolution in political campaign strategies. While welfare scheme promotion remained a central theme in both elections, the 2021 campaign in Raghunathganj witnessed a notable surge in digital outreach, primarily through platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. There was also a sharp increase in the use of youth-oriented content, including memes and short videos, to engage first-time and young voters (Sarkar, 2022) [2]. The adoption of real-time feedback mechanisms and localized influencer engagement further reflects a shift towards micro-targeted, data-driven communication models. These trends highlight how political strategists have adapted to an increasingly digital electorate in semi-urban regions like Murshidabad (Ghosh, 2021) [1].

DECLARATION STATEMENT

I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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authorship of this article is contributed solely.

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