

## **Framing the Votes: The Influence of Pre-Poll Narratives on Voter Behaviour and Electoral Outcomes**

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### **Abstract**

Elections are a critical component of the democratic governance of a country; for the last few decades, they have been increasingly influenced by misinformation, political polarisation, and media narratives. This study examines the role of misinformation and fake narratives in shaping voter behaviour. This is done by analysing and comparing the pre-election polls and actual election results of the Delhi elections. In addition, the research investigates how media organisations frame electoral narratives, the extent of misinformation dissemination, and its influence on voter perception and polarisation. Through a textual analysis of ten news samples from prominent media sources, the study identifies patterns of political messaging, biased reporting, and misleading electoral predictions. By comparing pre-election polls with actual voting outcomes, the research evaluates the influence of media-driven misinformation on electoral decision-making. As misinformation continues to erode trust in media and institutions, understanding its influence on voter behaviour becomes crucial for safeguarding democratic processes.

**Keywords:** Election; Misinformation; Voter; Behaviour; Political; Polarization; Media; Framing

### **Introduction**

The rise of misinformation in electoral processes has transformed the political landscape of contemporary India, significantly influencing voter perceptions and democratic participation. With the production of digital media, pre-election polls have become a key instrument in shaping public opinion. However, the accuracy and integrity of these polls are often compromised by politically motivated misinformation. In Delhi elections, pre-poll surveys frequently set narratives that may not align with actual electoral outcomes, raising concerns about media credibility and political polarisation.

Misinformation during elections operates through multiple channels and mediums, including the use of biased reporting, selective framing, and manipulation. Political parties and media houses often use pre-election polls to build a narrative that can influence voter sentiment. When actual election outcomes do not align with these narratives, it leads to disappointment and erodes public trust in the democratic process. This study examines the differences between pre-election polling and actual election results, assessing their role in influencing voter behaviour and political polarisation.

By conducting a comparative analysis of pre-election polls and final voting outcomes, this research aims to find out the extent to which misinformation influences electoral decision-making. Despite extensive research on misinformation and electoral behaviour, limited studies have focused on the Indian electoral landscape, where caste, religion, and regional dynamics uniquely intersect with political narratives. This study aims to address this gap by analysing pre-election polling data, media representations, and their influence on voter perception and polarisation in Delhi elections through textual analysis of narratives.

### **Review of Literature**

The intersection of misinformation, political polarisation, and electoral behaviour has been widely studied across global republics. Scholars have noted that misinformation exploits cognitive biases, reinforcing pre-existing political beliefs and expanding ideological divisions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Media framing studies suggest that news organisations significantly shape voter perceptions through selective information associated with political narratives (Entman, 1993). Framing theory highlights how media outlets emphasise particular aspects of an event, thereby influencing audience interpretation (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

In the Indian context, the fast spread of misinformation during elections has raised concerns about the credibility of news sources. Banaji and Bhat (2020) explore how digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, have become primary channels for political propaganda, enabling the widespread dissemination of misleading information. Research on pre-election polls highlights the role of biased sampling and media influence in misrepresenting public expectations (Sinha, 2021). These studies suggest that pre-election misinformation narratives not only influence individual voting decisions but also fuel broader political polarisation.

Some studies indicate that the repetition of misleading narratives, particularly in high-stakes elections, contributes to the dissemination of false beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Social media algorithms further strengthen these biases by curating content based on users' pre-

existing political preferences (Tufekci, 2018). This creates echo chambers, where misinformation spreads unchecked and leads to intensified polarisation. Pre-election polls in India are often used as a strategic tool by political parties and media to influence voter sentiment. Prominent scholars like McCombs (2004) argue that polls provide a brief of voter intentions; others caution that they can be manipulated to project an artificial momentum for certain political parties. The over-reliance on such polls without scrutinising their methodology can mislead voters, influencing democratic decision-making processes.

Despite extensive research on misinformation and media bias on international platforms, there remains a gap in Indian scenarios in understanding how misinformation in pre-election polling influences voter behaviour in both urban and rural settings. Existing literature predominantly suggests Western democracies, while Indian elections present unique challenges, including caste, regional, and religious dynamics that interact with misinformation, specifically in the case of Delhi, where people from migrated states are located. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing media coverage, misinformation patterns, and their impact on political polarisation in the context of Delhi elections.

### **Objectives**

1. To analyse how misinformation in pre-election polls influences voter behaviour in Delhi elections.
2. To examine the role of media framing in shaping political polarisation during election campaigns.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does misinformation in pre-election polls affect voter perceptions and choices?
2. What are the dominant media frames used to shape political narratives during Delhi elections?
3. How do discrepancies between pre-poll surveys and actual election outcomes reflect the impact of misinformation?

### **Methodology**

This study employed qualitative methodology, specifically textual analysis, to examine the representation of pre-election polls and actual voting outcomes in Delhi elections. As textual analysis allows for the systematic examination of media narratives, identifying patterns of misinformation, bias, and political framing. Also, pre-election and actual election secondary

data are compared and then analysed to find out the changes in perceptions and voting behaviour patterns, if any. A comparative approach will be employed to evaluate the accuracy of pre-election predictions in relation to final electoral outcomes.

The research will analyse ten news headline samples from leading media organisations, focusing on their coverage of pre-election polls and actual voting results. The selection of these samples will be based on their reach, political leanings, and impact on public discourse. Through thematic coding, key patterns in the framing of election-related misinformation will be identified. By systematically coding misinformation patterns, the research will assess the extent to which pre-election discourse influences voter expectations and political polarisation.

**Sample Table 1 for Content Analysis of Pre-Election Poll News Coverage**

| Media House | Article Title & Date | Tone (Positive/Negative/Neutral) | Framing (Issue-Based/Strategic/Emotional) | Polarizing Language (Yes/No & Example) | Mentions of Caste, Religion, Region (Yes/No & How?) | Misinformation/Fake News Indicators (Yes/No & Example) |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
|             |                      |                                  |                                           |                                        |                                                     |                                                        |

**Sample Table 2 for Comparison of Pre-Election Polls by Media Houses and Actual Election Results**

| Party | Media House 1 | Media House 2 | Actual Election Results | Republic World Vote Share | Hindustan Times Vote Share | Actual Vote Share (%) | Seat Projection Error (Republic) | Seat Projection Error (Hindustan) |
|-------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|       |               |               |                         |                           |                            |                       |                                  |                                   |

|                            | (Seats<br>) |    | (Seats) | (%) | (%) |     | c World) | n Times) |
|----------------------------|-------------|----|---------|-----|-----|-----|----------|----------|
| <b>BJP</b>                 | XX          | XX | XX      | X%  | X%  | XX% | ±X       | ±X       |
| <b>Congres<br/>s (INC)</b> | XX          | XX | XX      | X%  | X%  | XX% | ±X       | ±X       |
| <b>JJP+</b>                | XX          | XX | XX      | X%  | X%  | XX% | ±X       | ±X       |
| <b>INLD+</b>               | XX          | XX | XX      | X%  | X%  | XX% | ±X       | ±X       |
| <b>IND</b>                 | XX          | XX | XX      | X%  | X%  | XX% | ±X       | ±X       |

The table will be analysed by comparing seat projections and vote share predictions from Republic World and Hindustan Times against actual election results. The seat projection error ( $\pm X$ ) will show how accurate each media house was in predicting outcomes. Differences in vote share will highlight any overestimation or underestimation of a party's support. If one media outlet consistently favours or downplays a party, it may indicate bias in reporting. This analysis will help assess whether media polls mislead voter expectations or align with actual results.

### Tabulation and Discussion

**Table 3: Media Framing and Narrative Analysis of Delhi 2025 Exit Poll Coverage**

| <b>Media House</b> | <b>Article Title &amp; Date</b>                                       | <b>Tone (Positive/Negative/Neutral)</b> | <b>Framing (Issue-Based/Strategic/Emotional)</b> | <b>Polarizing Language (Yes/No &amp; Example)</b> | <b>Mentions of Caste, Religion, Region (Yes/No &amp; How?)</b> | <b>Misinformation/Fake News Indicators (Yes/No &amp; Example)</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>India Today</b> | BJP comeback in Delhi after 27 years, predict exit polls, big setback | Positive for BJP, Negative for AAP      | Strategic                                        | Yes ("big setback for                             | No                                                             | Unclear                                                           |

|                       |                                                                                                                           |                  |                      |                                         |    |         |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------|----|---------|
|                       | for AAP (Feb 5, 2025)                                                                                                     |                  |                      | AAP")                                   |    |         |
| <b>The Hindu</b>      | Delhi Assembly election 2025 highlights: 60.39% voter turnout recorded in Delhi; exit polls predict BJP win (Feb 5, 2025) | Neutral          | Issue-Based          | No                                      | No | No      |
| <b>Economic Times</b> | Delhi election exit polls 2025: Just one poll sees AAP winning. Check its prediction (Feb 5, 2025)                        | Neutral          | Strategic            | No                                      | No | No      |
| <b>NDTV</b>           | BJP Set For Delhi 'Wapsi', 3 More Exit Polls Predict Big Election Win (Feb 5, 2025)                                       | Positive for BJP | Strategic/E motional | Yes ("Delhi Wapsi", "Big Election Win") | No | Unclear |
| <b>CNBCTV18</b>       | Delhi Election Exit Poll 2025 Highlights: BJP expected to win (Feb 5, 2025)                                               | Neutral          | Strategic            | No                                      | No | No      |

### Data analyses and Discussions Table-3

According to the data shown in Table 3 Delhi's 2025 election exit poll coverage reveals the role of media narratives in shaping political discourse that leads to the situation of the public sphere and division of the public. The coverage largely presents a dominant narrative of the BJP's resurgence, placing it as a major political shift after 27 years. Drawing from Habermas'

(1991) concept of the public sphere, where rational-critical debate should ideally lead to informed decision-making, the representation of election results in these media reports validates how strategic and emotional framing often takes priority over issue-based discussions. This style of framing is particularly visible in the headlines from NDTV (“BJP Set for Delhi ‘Wapsi’”) and India Today (“BJP Comeback in Delhi after 27 Years, Big Setback for AAP”), both of which frame the results as a dramatic political shift rather than focusing on policy discussions or governance issues.

The media narrative's role in shaping public perception is also evident in some headlines that lead to the condition of the split public phenomenon, where different segments of society consume and interpret information differently based on their media preferences (Fraser, 1992). The Economic Times headline to some extent presents an oppositional narrative by highlighting that only one poll predicts an AAP victory, presenting a counterpoint to the vast pro-BJP coverage. This suggests a fragmented reception of political news, supporting Chantal Mouffe's (2005) argument that the public sphere is inherently agonistic, shaped by oppositional ideological forces rather than an unusual rational consensus. Additionally, the presence of polarising language in some narratives, such as NDTV's use of ‘Delhi Wapsi’ and India Today's framing of AAP's loss as a “big setback,” reflects the strategic use of emotional engagement to shape public sentiment. While The Hindu and CNBC TV18 maintain a neutral and issue-based tone, focusing on voter turnout and statistical data, the more dramatic language in NDTV and India Today relates to Laclau's (2005) theory of populist discourse, where political competition is framed in a way that increases emotional and ideological divisions.

There were no explicit mentions of caste, religion, or regional narratives in the exit poll coverage, which is an exit from past election reporting trends in India, where such factors often play a decisive role. However, the potential for misinformation or misleading interpretations remains, particularly if the actual election results significantly vary from the exit poll projections. The strategic framing of BJP's expected win without critical engagement with governance, voter concerns, or policy implications focuses on “horse-race journalism” as suggested by Patterson (1993), where elections are treated as competitive watching practices rather than functional democratic processes. Thus, the media's role in constructing political realities within a split public sphere becomes evident in these narratives, representing how different media narratives contribute to shaping electoral narratives. While some outlets focus on strategic and emotional framing, others attempt to provide a neutral, data-driven perspective, reflecting broader debates on the role of the public

sphere in democratic engagement.

**Table 4: Comparison of Exit Poll Seat Projections and Actual Election Results for Delhi 2025**

| Part<br>y                 | Mat<br>rize<br>(Sea<br>ts) | Peop<br>le's<br>Puls<br>e<br>(Sea<br>ts) | Peop<br>le's<br>Insig<br>ht<br>(Sea<br>ts) | P-<br>Ma<br>rq<br>(Se<br>ats) | JV<br>C<br>(Se<br>ats) | Actu<br>al<br>Elec<br>tion<br>Resu<br>lts<br>(Sea<br>ts) | Seat<br>Proje<br>ction<br>Error<br>(Matr<br>ize) | Seat<br>Proje<br>ction<br>Error<br>(Peop<br>le's<br>Pulse) | Seat<br>Proje<br>ction<br>Error<br>(Peop<br>le's<br>Insigh<br>t) | Seat<br>Proje<br>ction<br>Error<br>(P-<br>Marq<br>) | Seat<br>Proje<br>ction<br>Error<br>(JVC) |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| BJP                       | 35-<br>40                  | 51-<br>60                                | 40-<br>44                                  | 39-<br>49                     | 39-<br>45              | 48                                                       | +8 to<br>+13                                     | -12 to<br>+12                                              | -8 to -<br>4                                                     | -9 to<br>+1                                         | -9 to<br>+3                              |
| AAP                       | 32-<br>37                  | 10-<br>19                                | 25-<br>29                                  | 21-<br>31                     | 22-<br>31              | 22                                                       | -10 to<br>-15                                    | +3 to -<br>12                                              | -7 to -<br>3                                                     | -1 to -<br>9                                        | 0 to -9                                  |
| Cong<br>ress<br>(INC<br>) | 0-1                        | 0                                        | 0-1                                        | 0-1                           | 0-2                    | 0                                                        | 0 to -1                                          | 0                                                          | 0 to -1                                                          | 0 to -1                                             | 0 to -2                                  |

(source pre-poll [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/delhi/delhi-election-exit-polls-2025-only-one-poll-predicts-victory-for-aapcheck-how-many-seats-kejriwals-party-may-get/articleshow/117953520.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/delhi/delhi-election-exit-polls-2025-only-one-poll-predicts-victory-for-aapcheck-how-many-seats-kejriwals-party-may-get/articleshow/117953520.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst))

Sources Actual election: <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/delhi-assembly/delhi-election-result-2025-live-updates-bjp-aap-congress/article69193873.ece>)

#### **Data analyses and Discussions Table-4**

According to Table 4, the 2025 Delhi election results mark a significant political shift, with the BJP securing 48 seats, enabling it to form the government after 26 years. The AAP, which had dominated the last two elections, faced a considerable decline, securing only 22 seats. The Congress (INC) continued its downward trajectory and failed to win any seats. The pre-

election poll projections varied significantly, with some underestimating BJP's final tally and others overestimating AAP's performance. For instance, People's Pulse predicted a BJP sweep with 51-60 seats, slightly overestimating the party's final count. Meanwhile, Matriz, JVC, and P-Marq failed to anticipate BJP's success, projecting between 35-45 seats. The discrepancy between pre-election predictions and actual results raises important questions about voter behaviour, political communication, and the limitations of polling in divisive media narratives (Silver, 2012).

Habermas's public sphere theory (1989) provides an understanding for these electoral patterns. In an ideal democracy, voters always engage in rational-critical debate, forming opinions based on public interest rather than media-induced biases. However, the 2025 Delhi election exemplifies a fractured or split public sphere, where different political groups engaged with diverse, ideology-focused narratives. Instead of a single space for democratic deliberation, the election campaign was shaped by multiple, oppositional public spheres (Dahlgren, 2005). BJP's campaign dominated mainstream media, particularly television and digital platforms, successfully constructing a nationalist and governance-centric discourse. AAP, on the other hand, focused on welfare-driven messages, emphasising education, healthcare, and local governance. This led to a split in voter perception, where different sections of society engaged with diverse political realities (Schäfer, 2010).

In this context, Fraser's split public theory (1990) helps explain how different voter groups interpreted political messages through the diverse ideology. The middle-class voters, who previously supported AAP due to its emphasis on governance and transparency, appeared to have shifted toward BJP. They are likely influenced by concerns over national security, economic development, and political stability (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013). This shift was not fully estimated by pre-election polls, leading to an overestimation of AAP's strength. Additionally, BJP's control over digital narratives through coordinated social media campaigns helped them to mobilise undecided voters. Further broadening the gap between polling predictions and actual results (Tufekci, 2017).

Another crucial factor in this electoral outcome is the role of media narratives in shaping political realities and public perceptions. BJP's structured approaches and media strategy, integrated and mediated messages through different platforms, allowed it to control and increase its political messaging effectively (Chadwick, 2013). AAP's campaign, though strong at the masses level, failed to respond to BJP's large-scale digital dominance, which was necessary in shaping voter perceptions (KhosraviNik, 2022). Congress's complete decline emphasises the significance of engaging with contemporary media dynamics, as the

party's failure to establish a diverse media presence reduced its political relevancy in an era of hyper-mediated political discourse (McChesney, 2015).

The discrepancies in pre-election polls also insist on the challenges of measuring voter behaviour in a stratified society. Polling agencies that relied on static voter models probably failed to account for last-minute political shifts. The unexpected surge in BJP's support suggests that undecided voters seem to have made a late decision in favour of the ruling party, influenced by narrative dominance in media (Iyengar & Massey, 2019). In contrast, AAP's inability to expand beyond its core voter base seems to result in a greater seat loss than most pre-election polls had predicted (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

Finally, the 2025 Delhi elections coverage represents how political communication, media narratives, and ideological divisions shape electoral outcomes in a split public sphere. As voters increasingly engage with partisan information ecosystems, traditional polling methodologies must adapt to the complexities of contemporary political behaviour. Future election studies will need to incorporate real-time media analysis, sentiment tracking, and behavioural response record management to produce more accurate projections (Neuman et al., 2011). The results of this election claimed that the growing influence of media-driven divisive narratives leads to political polarisation and its ability to reshape electoral expectations and realities in a deeply divided public discourse.

### Findings

- It was found that strategic and emotional framing dominates over issue-based reporting, as most media narratives, particularly by NDTV and India Today, frame the election results in a way that emphasises BJP's political comeback rather than engaging with governance issues, voter concerns, or policy discussions. These findings resonate with the trend of horse-race journalism; thus, Delhi elections are presented as competitive spectacles rather than substantive democratic processes.
- The Economic Times article introduces a counter-narrative by mentioning that only one poll predicts an AAP victory, indicating that different media narratives cater to different audience expectations. Therefore, the split public and fragmentation were evident, where different people were engaged with different political realities based on their ideological leanings.
- The use of polarising language was also evident in selected narratives, suggesting an attempt to influence reader sentiment rather than maintaining neutrality. These narratives were

prominently found in NDTV's use of "Delhi Wapsi" and India Today's framing of AAP's loss as a "big setback." Consequently, these outcomes were seen as a populist discourse, where media narratives play a role in constructing political victories and defeats in emotionally charged ways.

- There was limited focus found on caste, religion, and regional narratives. Unlike past election coverage, these narratives are not explicitly framed to be through caste, religion, or regional divisions, a notable shift given India's history of identity-based electoral politics. However, this does not necessarily mean that these factors were absent from voter behaviour, just that they were not emphasised in media narratives.
- It was also established that the heavy reliance on exit polls, which are often inaccurate or misleading, raises concerns about how media narratives shape public expectations before the actual results. There is observed potential for misinformation or misinterpretation. As a result, if election outcomes significantly differ from exit polls, it could lead to public distrust in media institutions and democratic processes.
- The overall positive tone for BJP in most narratives comes to an outcome that a growing pattern where certain media narratives favour dominant political narratives leads to the reinforcement of partisan media trends. Hence, in the modern public sphere, mass media, instead of encouraging rational debate, often go with political interests to shape public opinion.
- Polling limitations were clearly evident in a polarised public sphere. For instance, polls like Matrize, JVC, and People's Insight underestimated BJP's support, reflecting the difficulty in capturing last-minute voter shifts in fragmented media narratives.
- People's Pulse overestimated BJP's win, showing that overreliance on certain voter demographics can distort projections. Most polls assumed AAP's urban governance model would ensure a stable vote share, but middle-class defections to BJP led to overestimations of AAP's seats.
- BJP's victory was aided by effective media management, where it controlled the dominant political narrative across multiple platforms. AAP's inability to counteract this narrative shift resulted in a greater seat loss than expected.

## Conclusion

The 2025 Delhi Assembly elections validate how media narratives, strategic framing, and ideological divisions shape electoral outcomes in a fragmented public sphere. The dominance

of strategic and emotional framing over issue-based reporting reflects the prevalence of horse-race journalism. The elections are presented as political spectacles rather than substantive democratic events, particularly visible in the exit poll coverage. The dramatic framing by media leads to a resurgence that prioritises political momentum over governance analysis in favour of particular party imaging. The presence of polarising language, as seen in headlines, emphasises how media discourse can shape public sentiment and contribute to political polarisation.

The findings further highlight the fragmented nature of political communication, with different media narratives serving to diverse ideological segments. The counter-narrative, promoted by media, acknowledges the possibility of an agenda party victory and exemplifies the existence of oppositional discourse within a split public sphere, where audiences engage with election narratives based on their pre-existing biases. Thus, the public deliberation is not uniform but shaped by competing political and ideological forces. Additionally, the limited focus on caste, religion, and regional narratives marks an exit from traditional election coverage, where identity politics has historically played a significant role. However, the absence of explicit mentions in media coverage does not necessarily imply their irrelevance in voter behaviour.

The discrepancies between exit poll projections and actual results also reveal the limitations of contemporary polling methodologies in capturing late voter shifts. While some agencies, like People's Pulse, overestimated BJP's victory, others, like Matrize and JVC, underestimated its support, indicating the challenges of measuring voter behaviour in an increasingly polarised and digitally mediated public sphere. Ultimately, the 2025 Delhi elections reaffirm that modern electoral politics is deeply intertwined with media discourse, where strategic narratives influence voter perceptions and expectations. The reliance on exit polls, which are often inaccurate, raises concerns about their influence on public trust in democratic processes.

As partisan media trends continue to shape political realities, the role of the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate becomes increasingly challenged. Future election studies must integrate real-time media analysis, sentiment tracking, and behavioural response assessment to develop more accurate projections and counteract the growing influence of media-driven polarisation in democratic societies.

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