

Street Corner to Smartphone: The Transformation of Political Campaigning in Tamil Nadu's Digital Sphere

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Abstract: *Tamil Nadu's political campaigning has changed throughout time, mirroring a larger trend in Indian electoral politics that has moved away from conventional, in-person mobilisation and toward digitally based communication tactics. In order to improve participation, customise storylines, and vie for voters' attention, political actors in Tamil Nadu have embraced digital platforms and technology, which are examined in this study. In this article, the hybrid interaction of offline mobilisation and online outreach is highlighted through an analysis of primary campaign practices during the 2021 Assembly election and the developing dynamics of the 2026 electoral cycle. The study shows how cell phones, social media, and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies impact political discourse, voter behaviour, and strategic messaging, placing Tamil Nadu's historical campaign culture within the broader framework of digital political communication. This study makes the case that internet campaigning has emerged as a key factor influencing the state's current electoral politics, with ramifications for political ethics and democratic participation.*

Keywords: Digital Campaigning, Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections, Social Media Politics, AI-Generated Political Content, Hybrid Electoral Strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

The political history of Tamil Nadu is based on performative public involvement and popular mobilisation. The foundation of political outreach in the state during the 20th century was made up of wall posters, film culture, street corner talks, and sizable demonstrations. Through direct community involvement, charismatic leadership, and personal visibility, traditional Dravidian parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) developed sizable voter bases. However, the last ten years have seen the widespread availability of inexpensive cell phones and widespread internet connectivity in India, which has drastically changed the way political campaigns function. These days, campaign messages spread quickly via digital channels like YouTube, X (previously Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp, frequently avoiding conventional communication middlemen. Due to intense rivalry in the 2021 Assembly elections and ongoing preparations for the 2026 elections, these trends have increased in Tamil Nadu. In order to reach a wider range of voter segments, parties are progressively integrating digital tactics into their larger campaign designs, going beyond offline approaches.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: STREET-BASED POLITICAL CULTURE

In the past, Tamil Nadu's active public sphere has been used for campaigning. Using performance venues that allowed for instant communication and emotional resonance, party leaders spoke to voters at open rallies, roadside gatherings, and college campuses. Given that cinema had long served as a medium for political communication in the state, cultural symbols, movie stars, and linguistic pride all contributed significantly to the reinforcement of political narratives. Even while digital techniques were already being used, the fundamental framework of campaigning during the 2021



Assembly election was still based on these face-to-face encounters. To spread their messages, leaders such as Edappadi K. Palaniswami (AIADMK) and M.K. Stalin (DMK) travelled across constituencies, personally talked with people, and depended on party cadre networks. Public opinion was still influenced by traditional media, including print and radio.

III. DIGITAL MEDIA'S RISE IN TAMIL NADU POLITICS

Tamil Nadu had a slow but noticeable transition to digital political communication starting in the late 2010s. Platforms like WhatsApp proved indispensable for managing election logistics, sharing memes, organising volunteers, and communicating campaign information. The efficiency of digital techniques has already been shown by national political campaigns; for example, during the 2019 Indian general election, political organisations used trend manipulation on Twitter and WhatsApp to magnify storylines. Regional content producers and YouTube influencers like Maridhas Malaichamy became well-known political voices in Tamil Nadu. These individuals frequently supported party ideologies and were subject to legal action because of false information and defamation allegations. This development demonstrated how non-party actors may use digital platforms to impact the political discourse of the state.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGING AND DIGITAL OUTREACH (2021 ELECTION)

An important turning point in Tamil Nadu's digital campaign landscape was the 2021 Assembly election. Social media was utilized by parties to increase participation outside of regular rallies:

To mobilize grassroots supporters and disseminate party messages, targeted WhatsApp groups were extensively used. These organizations turned regular channels of communication into political forums where party slogans, local concerns, and candidate advertisements spread quickly.

The 2021 cycle's reports brought to light issues about deceptive advertising in conventional media that influenced digital narratives. Accusations were made that print and online content were used to circulate misleading information about rival parties, demonstrating that digital and offline propaganda tactics often occurred in tandem.

Young voters, active on social platforms like Instagram, participated in polls and online political discussions, underscoring the demographic shift toward digital consumption of political content. While not wholly exclusive to Tamil Nadu, this trend mirrored broader national patterns of social media's rising influence.

V. THE DIGITAL STRATEGY OF THE 2026 ELECTION CYCLE

As Tamil Nadu gears up for the **2026 Assembly election**, digital campaigning has evolved into a sophisticated field with strategic innovations:

1. Multi-Platform Campaigning

By establishing specialized public outreach platforms and AI-enabled websites to collect public input for its manifesto drafting ahead of the 2026 elections, the ruling DMK has significantly increased its digital reach. An attempt to engage voters through interactive internet platforms, as opposed to just traditional venues, is seen in this incorporation of technology. In a similar vein, the AIADMK has increased its online presence by teaching party members how to set up and run WhatsApp groups to efficiently reach voters at the local level. This method, which combines social media with conventional booth-level management, is similar to previous tactics but larger in scope and technical cooperation.

2. Satirical Content and Youth Targeting

To engage younger voters on social media, political competitors, especially the DMK and AIADMK, have used short animations and satirical films. By using animation and cultural allusions to critique opposition parties, these innovative ads raise their profile among first-time voters. These strategies represent a change from communications that is solely informative to persuasion that is entertainment-driven and geared toward digital audiences.

3. AI and Deep Fake Technologies

The employment of artificial intelligence in political messaging is one notable breakthrough in the 2026 cycle. AI has been utilized by parties and newcomers such as TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) to create movies of past political luminaries in order to symbolically promote current campaigns. An AI-generated video, for instance, showed former



DMK leader C.N. Annadurai supporting actor Vijay's TVK party's ascent—an unprecedented tactic in Tamil Nadu's electoral history. Legal and ethical discussions around political communication manipulation and authenticity have been sparked by this usage of AI.

VI. HYBRIDIZATION OF OFFLINE AND ONLINE STRATEGIES

Digital campaigning in Tamil Nadu is not a replacement for traditional methods but a **hybrid model** where offline and online tools reinforce each other:

- Parties continue to conduct home data drives and door-to-door surveys, such as the DMK's Oraniyil Tamil Nadu effort, which combines personal outreach with online data collection to create voter profiles and customize campaign messaging. Opponents contend that by using false information, such tactics run the risk of combining voter participation with engineered consent.
- By being livestreamed and extensively disseminated on digital channels, offline rallies and community gatherings expand the reach of live events beyond regional limitations. Parties are able to simultaneously maintain visibility in both public and private digital domains because of this connectivity.

VII. INFORMATION WARFARE AND NARRATIVE COMPETITION

The 2026 election cycle highlights the competition for narrative dominance on digital platforms. As parties deploy targeted content, the battle for attention intensifies:

- Opinion surveys on Facebook, Instagram, and X show that voter preferences vary across platforms, illustrating how digital media affects online political representation. For example, Facebook data favours old parties like DMK, but Instagram measures indicate substantial youth support for TVK.
- With the use of brief, powerful videos, digital campaigns are increasingly using emotional and symbolic language to frame political concerns, such as accusing opponents of having "anti-people policies" or unmet promises.
- Hyperlocal targeting and digital war rooms highlight how serious narrative competition is. Parties are now moving away from one-size-fits-all slogans and using digital analytics to create messaging tailored to individual constituencies. A granular approach to digital advocacy is shown in region-specific videos and hyperlocal WhatsApp groups.

VIII. DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The shift to digital campaigning raises significant questions for democratic engagement in Tamil Nadu:

1. Voter Cognition and Misinformation

When digital content spreads quickly without sufficient vetting, voter perception becomes vulnerable to false information. Deep fake films and AI-generated content challenge established standards of political transparency by obfuscating the distinction between manipulation and authentic political speech.

2. Inclusivity and Digital Divide

While smartphones connect many voters to digital campaigns, gaps in internet access and digital literacy persist, particularly in rural areas. This divide can skew political engagement toward digitally savvy demographics, leaving behind those reliant on traditional campaigning.

3. Personalization vs Public Discourse

Digital platforms prioritise personalised and short-form content, potentially reducing space for substantive policy discussion. The focus on satire, emotionally charged slogans, and quick visual clips may overshadow detailed deliberation on governance issues.

IX. CONCLUSION

The transformation of Tamil Nadu's political campaigning from street corner to smartphone signifies a paradigm change. Digital tactics are now essential to how parties communicate, rally support, and construct political narratives, even though old approaches are still significant. Social media, artificial intelligence, and grassroots organizations



interact to form a complex hybrid system that is specifically influenced by Tamil Nadu's political culture. Political actors successfully employ digital platforms to increase their reach and influence, as evidenced by the 2021 election and the current 2026 campaign cycle. These changes bring up important issues about ethical communication, democratic involvement, and the state's future of political engagement. Therefore, digital campaigning is a revolutionary force that is reshaping political practice in modern Tamil Nadu rather than just a technological advancement.

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