

Campaign Discourses in Cyberspace: Thematic Patterns in Online News Coverage of 2025 Bihar Assembly Elections

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Abstract

The current era is witnessing a transformation in elections and election campaigns due to online media. The role of the online media in election campaigning has increased significantly. The use and influence of the internet have grown over time. This research conducts a thematic analysis of news related to the Bihar elections on two online news platforms: The Indian Express and The Print. This research is entirely based on secondary data. For this purpose, news articles related to the Bihar elections published on both platforms between October 1 and November 31, 2025, were collected as data. The research found that both platforms gave prominence to news related to electoral reforms. The difference between the two was that while The Indian Express presented it in terms of credibility and reforms, The Print highlighted allegations of vote rigging and the challenges of judicial inquiry. Following this, news related to development, schemes, and youth received significant coverage.

Keywords: Elections, Election Campaign, Online Media, The Indian Express, The Print

Introduction

The landscape of election campaigning in today's digital age is rapidly changing. The internet, social media, and online news platforms are increasingly essential tools for political communication, whereas in the past, election campaigns were primarily restricted to rallies, posters, radio, and television (McNair, 2017). Online news and digital media are used by political parties, leaders, and followers to communicate their plans, ideas, and allegations.

Online news portals rapidly gaining popularity and not only provide information about events But they also determine which issues will be given more or less importance and in what framework the news will be presented. Voters' ideas, opinions, and choices are subsequently influenced by this (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Therefore, it becomes important to understand the types of campaign discourses presented by online media during elections and the major themes that repeatedly appear in them.

In a politically aware state like Bihar, where political discussions take place on every street corner, issues such as caste, development, law and order, employment, leadership, and political alliances regularly appear in election-related discussions. Therefore, it becomes important to examine how online media presents these issues, which topics receive greater attention, and what type of language is used to report them in order to better understand the democratic process.

The political landscape of Bihar is largely shaped by coalition politics, such as the National Democratic Alliance and the Mahagathbandhan, the presence of many political parties, and shifting support from various social groups. Issues like electoral reforms, law and order, caste dynamics, development, migration, and employment have gradually become increasingly important. In recent times, online media has emerged as a crucial platform for raising these issues. Through its coverage, digital news media influences public opinion and plays a significant role in shaping both the direction and intensity of election-related discourse.

In this background, the present study undertakes a thematic analysis of campaign-related discourses in online news coverage of the Bihar elections. The study aims to examine the key themes highlighted in digital news, the political narratives formed through these themes, and their possible impact on public political understanding. Through this analysis, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discussions on digital media, political communication, and election studies.

Literature Review

With seven out of ten people in India currently online (Kemp, 2025), the advent of digital platforms has transformed the way election campaigns are conducted. Election campaigning is no longer limited to traditional media such as newspapers, television, radio, and rallies; it has expanded to digital platforms as well. Social media, web-based news portals, vlogs, and blogs have become essential and influential tools in today's election campaigns. This shift is having a profound impact on election communication, campaign strategies, and voter behavior. (Njoku & Wilcox, 2025).

Research clearly shows that political parties are using social media and digital platforms to disseminate election messages, connect with voters, and understand their reactions. This new tool has become an essential instrument for them. For example, a study titled "The Impact of Social Media on Political Campaigns and Election Outcomes in India" states that Indian political parties are extensively using social media to communicate their policies and election agendas to the public, making it a crucial part of their electoral strategies. (Singh & Shrivastav, 2023).

Similarly, a study titled "The Role of Social Media in the Campaigns of Indian Political Parties" shows that Social media is an inexpensive and easy-to-use, effective communication tool, and this new medium is widely used during elections to reach targeted groups. (Rizvi & Mujtaba, 2024).

Available research on the role of media in democratic processes also shows that the media helps in guiding elections smoothly and plays a crucial role in raising voter awareness, providing unbiased information, and increasing voter turnout. An article titled "The Special Role of Media in Fair Elections and Increasing Voter Turnout" highlights the positive role of the media. (Dainik Bhaskar, 2023).

Research on election activities in digital media has pointed out that political parties actively use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to circulate their campaign messages. This online outreach helps parties reach a wider audience and also plays a role in shaping the social and political behaviour of voters. (Chauhan, 2024).

In the last few years, digital media has started playing a role that goes beyond traditional modes of election campaigning. For a large section of young and internet-savvy voters, online platforms now work alongside, and in many cases replace, rallies, posters, and door-to-door campaigns (Chaturvedi, 2025). Tools such as online news portals, digital war rooms, live streaming, and video-based content have significantly changed the way election-related discussions take place (Davis & Taras, 2022). Experiences from states like Bihar show that political parties are increasingly relying on digital campaigning to reach voters. Even at the local level, online strategies are being used to circulate campaign messages quickly and widely (Maharashtra Times, 2025).

These studies make it clear that narratives of election campaigns in online news coverage reflect not only news reporting but also political parties' strategies, audience emotional engagement, and the interactive nature of digital platforms. Therefore, understanding the thematic patterns prevalent in online media in the context of the Bihar elections is essential for a comprehensive understanding of democratic processes, voter behavior, and political discourse.

Objective of the Research

1. To identify the major campaign themes present in online news coverage during the Bihar elections.
2. To understand how online news portals present electoral issues.
3. To analyze which issues received more prominence and which received less coverage.
4. To understand and categorize the political narratives constructed in online media.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting Theory

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) agenda-setting theory suggests that the media sets the public's priorities regarding issues. The media doesn't tell people what to think, but rather what to think about.

This theory becomes even more relevant in the context of digital media, which is readily available to everyone at the touch of a button, as certain issues are continuously given prominence on online platforms through frequency, headline language, breaking news, and trending stories. This study analyzes which issues online news portals give more importance to and how they shape the electoral agenda.

Framing Theory

Framing theory explains how the media presents an issue from a particular perspective. Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1974) and later Entman (Entman, 1993) explained that the media constructs a particular meaning of reality through selection and presentation. This study attempts to identify the types of frames used in online news to portray electoral issues—whether as Electoral governance reforms, conflict, development, corruption, identity politics, or leadership struggles.

Research Methodology

This research follows a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research mainly focuses on understanding meanings, themes, and patterns present in the data rather than dealing with numbers or statistics. The data for this study was collected from two well-known online news portals, namely The Indian Express (<https://indianexpress.com/about/bihar/>) and The Print (<https://theprint.in/?s=bihar>). These portals were chosen because they have national credibility and are known for their extensive and consistent coverage of political events, especially during elections.

News related to the Bihar elections was collected for research purposes from The Indian Express and The Print news platforms from October 1 to November 30, 2025. The assembly elections in Bihar were held on November 6 and 11, 2025, and the votes were counted on November 14. The main reason for choosing these dates was that it would allow for the analysis of news coverage before and after the election. This will help in understanding the complete election environment.

For this study, purposive sampling was used to select only those news articles that were related to the Bihar elections. News articles that were not related to the Bihar elections were not included in the study.

For data analysis, the thematic analysis method was used. All selected news articles were read carefully to generate initial codes. These codes were then examined and grouped on the basis of similarity to form broader themes and sub-themes. This process helped in identifying recurring topics and understanding which issues received greater emphasis in online news coverage.

To ensure a more organised and systematic analysis, generative AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grok AI were used whenever required. These tools assisted in coding support, theme organisation, and identifying patterns in the data. However, the final interpretation of the findings and conclusions was carried out entirely by the researcher.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to only two online news portals; therefore, its findings cannot be fully generalized to all digital media. Additionally, thematic analysis involves the researcher's interpretation, which introduces a degree of subjectivity.

News related to Bihar that appeared on both news portals during the selected dates (1 October to 30 November 2025).

	The Indian Express	The Print
News	45	393
Opinion	104	150
Not Related to Bihar Election	19	26
Total	168	569

Thematic Coding of The Indian Express

Theme 1: Electoral Governance and Institutional Reforms

Initial Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Theme
Reduction of voters per booth	Polling efficiency	Electoral governance reforms
Mobile phone deposit facility	Voter convenience	
Webcasting of polling stations	Surveillance & transparency	
ECINET digital dashboard	Administrative digitisation	
Training of BLOs & BLAs	Professionalisation of election staff	
Redesigned voter slips	Procedural accessibility	
Postal ballot counting changes	Electoral credibility	

Theme 2: Voter Demographics and Participation Management

Initial Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Theme
First-time voters data	Youth participation	Voter mobilisation context
Senior citizen voters	Inclusive electoral design	
SIR voter roll revision	Electoral roll restructuring	
Reduced polling station load	Crowd management	
Outreach through BLOs	Grassroots engagement	

Theme 3: Welfare Politics and Youth-Centric Development Narrative

Initial Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Theme
Student credit card scheme	Education finance support	Welfare and development politics
Scholarship amount doubled	Incentivising education	
Youth initiatives worth ₹62,000 crore	Skill & employment focus	
NIT Patna campus expansion	Educational infrastructure	
Patna Metro launch	Urban development projects	
Cultural symbols in metro	Regional identity branding	

Theme 4: Political Contestation and Blame Narratives

Initial Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Theme
RJD blamed for brain drain	Historical governance failure	Political blame framing

Criticism of past regimes	Regime comparison	
Allegations on CM's health	Personalised political attack	
BJP vs RJD narratives	Polarised political discourse	
Counter-allegations by JD(U)	Defensive political rhetoric	
Corruption and lawlessness claims	Delegitimisation strategies	

Theme 5: Alliance Politics and Electoral Strategy

Initial Codes	Sub-Themes	Main Theme
NDA seat-sharing formula	Coalition negotiations	Alliance management
Opposition alliance talks	Strategic coordination	
Smaller party dissatisfaction	Power asymmetry in alliances	
Jan Suraj entry	Political fragmentation	
Candidate distribution conflicts	Electoral bargaining	

Thematic Coding of The Print

Theme 1: Electoral Governance, Administration, and Democratic Legitimacy

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
SIR voter revision	Electoral roll restructuring	Electoral governance & legitimacy
Alleged vote theft	Trust deficit in institutions	
EC procedures	Administrative authority	
Supreme Court references	Judicial oversight	
BLO verification	Grassroots election management	

Theme 2: Welfare Politics and Developmental Communication

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Women cash transfer schemes	Gender-targeted welfare	Welfare-driven electoral politics
Scholarship expansion	Youth welfare	
Urbanisation plans	Infrastructure-led development	
Industrial corridors	Economic modernisation narrative	

Theme 3: Youth Aspirations, Employment, and Migration

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Unemployment	Job scarcity	Youth discontent & aspiration
Migration outside Bihar	Economic displacement	
Skill deficit	Structural labour issues	
Tech hub vision	Aspirational future framing	

Theme 4: Political Leadership and Personality-Centric Narratives

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Nitish Kumar governance	Incumbent leadership framing	Leadership-centric politics
Modi victory claims	Centralised power narrative	
Mamata Banerjee comparison	Regional leadership contrast	
Rahul Gandhi criticism	Opposition credibility	

Theme 5: Alliance Politics and Electoral Strategy

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Seat-sharing disputes	Coalition tensions	Alliance management & strategy
Friendly fights	Opposition fragmentation	
NDA coordination	Alliance consolidation	
Congress internal review	Organisational crisis	

Theme 6: Identity, Religion, and Cultural Mobilisation

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Sanatan Dharma convenors	State–religion interface	Religious & cultural politics
Temple governance	Institutionalisation of religion	
Criticism by intellectuals	Secularism debate	
Hindu identity discourse	Ideological mobilisation	

Theme 7: Media Framing and Political Discourse Construction

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
“Jungle Raj” narrative	Historical delegitimisation	Media framing of politics
“Unsafe state” claims	Fear-based framing	
Polarisation rhetoric	Conflict narratives	
Opinion-led critique	Interpretative journalism	

Theme 8: Regional Spillover and National Political Implications

Codes	Sub-Themes	Theme
Bihar impact on Kerala	Interstate political influence	Electoral spillover effects
Bengal comparison	Regional political exceptionalism	
Tamil Nadu alliance shifts	National opposition recalibration	

Interpretation of Themes

The thematic reading of news reports and opinion pieces published in The Indian Express and The Print brings out both common and contrasting ways in which the Bihar Assembly Election 2025 has been presented. While both platforms actively cover election-related issues such as governance, welfare policies, and political competition, their focus, depth, and narrative style differ. These differences reflect the distinct editorial positions and writing approaches adopted by the two news portals.

1. Electoral Governance as an Administrative Focus

In the Indian Express, election coverage has largely focused on electoral governance and administrative reforms. Issues such as reducing the number of voters per polling booth, webcasting of polling stations, the ECINET dashboard, training of booth-level officers, and newly designed voter slips have been frequently discussed. In this way, the Election Commission is portrayed as an efficient and reform-oriented institution working towards transparency, smooth management, and credibility in the electoral system.

On the other hand, The Print goes beyond administrative details and connects electoral governance to questions of democratic trust and legitimacy. Its coverage includes concerns about alleged vote manipulation, the role of the judiciary, and the Supreme Court's intervention. This gives The Print a questioning and critical tone. While The Indian Express views elections from a procedural and reform-oriented perspective, The Print places electoral administration within the broader debates about accountability and institutional credibility.

2. Voter Participation and Demographic Management

The Indian Express's coverage of first-time voters, senior citizens, voter turnout management, and outreach by booth-level officers portrays voting as a logistical exercise. The focus is on planning, data management, and efficient mobilization, rather than on ideological or emotional engagement with voters.

The Print connects voter participation in elections to deeper social and economic realities. Issues affecting ordinary people, such as migration, unemployment, and discrimination, are central to its coverage. Young voters are portrayed not merely as a demographic group, but as a segment of the population facing uncertainty due to job scarcity and systemic shortcomings. This contrast highlights that while The Indian Express emphasizes administrative aspects of the elections, The Print focuses on the broader social issues and underlying causes that influence voter behavior.

3. Welfare Politics and Development Narratives

Both news platforms have given considerable coverage to welfare schemes and development, but their interpretations appear to differ. The Indian Express has discussed initiatives such as student credit cards, scholarships, metro projects, and educational infrastructure as part of the government-led development agenda. These schemes have been presented as indicators of governance performance and long-term planning, particularly aimed at fulfilling the aspirations of the youth.

However, The Print largely views welfare measures as tools of political communication. Schemes such as cash transfers for women, urban development projects, and industrial corridors have been analyzed in terms of their electoral utility. Here, welfare is seen not merely as policy delivery, but also as a means of influencing voters and building political support.

4. Youth as a Space of Hope and Anxiety

The Print has given special attention to issues concerning young people. Topics such as unemployment, migration, skill gaps, and the promises of technological change portray young voters as a group caught between disillusionment and hope. This portrayal suggests that youth discontent could influence election results and political alliances.

In contrast, The Indian Express appears to adopt a more positive and policy-oriented perspective on young people. Its coverage emphasizes education loans, skill development programs, and infrastructure growth. This difference highlights a policy-based optimism in The Indian Express compared to a more critical socio-political viewpoint in The Print.

5. Political Contestation, Leadership, and Blame Narratives

The Indian Express often presents political contests through narratives that emphasize blame, particularly on issues such as "jungle raj," corruption, brain drain, and law and order. These narratives frequently reference past government models and reinforce party-based polarization.

The Print takes this discussion further and appears to focus primarily on individual leaders and personalities. Comparisons between leaders like Nitish Kumar, Tejashwi Yadav, Narendra Modi, and Rahul Gandhi transform the election into a competition of leadership credibility, political image, and governance style. This reflects a shift from party-centric politics to leader-driven communication.

6. Alliance Politics and Electoral Strategy

Both platforms have focused extensively on alliance politics, covering issues such as seat-sharing negotiations, coalition pressures, and internal party tensions. The Indian Express largely views alliances as necessary practical arrangements for managing electoral calculations. However, The Print emphasizes internal conflicts, fragmentation, and organizational weaknesses, particularly within traditional parties like the Congress.

This suggests that alliances are being perceived not merely as political and strategic maneuvers, but also as indicators of deeper instability within party politics.

7. Identity, Religion, and Ideological Mobilisation

One key difference is that The Print appears to focus on religious and cultural issues, which are far less prominent in The Indian Express's coverage. Discussions about Sanatana Dharma, temple administration, secularism, and Hindu identity add an ideological layer to their election reporting.

8. National-Level Implications

The Print connects the electoral developments in Bihar to political trends in states like Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. This approach frames the Bihar election not merely as a state-level event, but as one of broader national significance.

Conclusion

This study examines the online coverage of the 2025 Bihar Assembly elections. For this purpose, online news articles related to the Bihar elections 2025 from The Indian Express and The Print were analyzed. Both platforms prominently featured news related to electoral reforms. The difference lay in the approach: The Indian Express presented these reforms in terms of credibility and improvements, while The Print highlighted allegations of vote rigging and the challenges of judicial scrutiny. Following this, news related to development, schemes, and youth issues received significant coverage. The analysis also revealed youth aspirations, migration, and employment concerns as important thematic undercurrents. The Print's coverage, in particular, linked unemployment and outward migration to structural economic challenges, while simultaneously presenting technology hubs and industrial corridors as potential solutions.

The election results announced on November 14, 2025, showed a victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance, which successfully retained power. While this paper finds that both portals dedicated significant coverage to election-related news, a closer examination reveals that law and order emerged as a major issue in the context of the election results. The Print also covered this aspect, while The Indian Express gave it less prominence. Women's cash transfer schemes also played a significant role in the BJP alliance's victory, and both platforms covered related news.

Although this paper found that both portals gave more space to election-related news, the Indian media landscape has expanded significantly, and media consumption patterns have become much more diverse. Language, region, and regional news platforms play a crucial role in this. Since both of these news portals are in English, and Hindi is the dominant language for news consumption in Bihar, it is likely that their impact on the people of Bihar was limited. This opens up several avenues for future research, including incorporating regional media and language into such studies.

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