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Data, Dependence, and Democracy: The Paradox of Political Consultancy in India

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Political consultancy has become an important force in India's electoral landscape. It is influencing how parties organise campaigns, interpret voter behaviour, and exercise internal authority. This paper examines how data driven consultancy practices alter the relationship between political parties and external strategists and analyses the implications for democratic accountability. The paper argues that data-driven political consultancy in India has created a new principal–agent relationship in which parties become structurally dependent on consultants who control data, digital infrastructure, and interpretive analytics. Drawing on fifty semi-structured interviews and a principal–agent framework, the study shows that data-driven consultancy creates structural dependence by controlling voter data, digital infrastructure, and analytics. This generates agency costs such as algorithmic opacity and data lock-in, weakening internal party deliberation, oversight, and democratic accountability. By foregrounding these mechanisms, the paper shows how data-centric consultancy enhances campaign efficiency while simultaneously introducing new democratic vulnerabilities that existing scholarship has largely overlooked. The paper concludes that the rise of political consultancy in India represents a paradox of democratic modernisation.

Keywords: Political Consultancy, Indian Politics, Democracy, Political Parties, Digital Campaigning, Principal-Agent Framework

Introduction

Political consultancy in India has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades, evolving from informal advisory roles to sophisticated, data driven electoral operations. Early experiments emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s with firms such as Viplav Communications, which pioneered structured campaign management, message orchestration and survey-based strategy for regional parties. These early consultancies operated primarily as communication specialists, offering media planning, printed materials and limited voter research. By the 2010s, however, consultancy work expanded to include large scale opinion polling, constituency mapping and professional event management, marking a shift toward the systematic use of data in electoral campaigns (Sharma, 2022). The post 2014 period witnessed the consolidation of political consultancy as an institutionalised field (Keshav Patel, 2015). Firms

such as the Indian Political Action Committee (IPAC), Inclusive Minds, Showtime Consultancy and Amplify Insights became central actors in both national and state elections. Their work drew on global models of professionalised campaigning, but adapted them to India's large, diverse and highly mediated electoral environment. As scholarship notes, Indian campaigns increasingly rely on integrated teams of data scientists, communication strategists and digital coordinators who translate complex voter information into targeted electoral interventions (Singh 2019, Udupa, 2024). Their significant involvement in recent elections, including the 2024 general elections, illustrates how consultants have become intermediaries linking parties, voters and technology. This digital turn has created a structural paradox in the organisation of Indian electoral politics. On one hand, political consultancies improve campaign efficiency, expand outreach and enable a form of evidence-based strategy previously unavailable to many parties. On the other hand, their growing control over the infrastructures of data collection, digital communication and narrative construction creates new frictions within party organisations (Kolodny and Dulio 2003). Consultants now manage voter databases, communication pipelines and analytics platforms, which shifts interpretive authority from party cadres to external strategic teams. Their claims of political neutrality, often presented as part of their professional expertise, further position electoral campaigns as markets in which data brokerage and visibility engineering become central to political competition.

This paper argues that these developments create a distinct principal–agent problem in Indian politics. As parties outsource key campaign functions, they become structurally dependent on consultants who control data, possess superior information, and manage the digital systems that parties rely on. Existing scholarship highlights professionalisation, message design, and strategic coordination, but the new Indian model is defined by deep digital mediation rather than strategy alone. Consultants now operate at the centre of campaigns by controlling the infrastructures through which communication, voter analytics, and strategic decisions are generated. Through machine-learning tools, real-time dashboards, and micro-targeted advertising, they shape narratives, set priorities, and influence candidate decisions. This infrastructural power shifts accountability within parties and compromises democratic values.

To examine these conditions, the study draws insights from fifty semi-structured interviews (2023-24). The field survey includes respondents from major consultancy firms, including IPAC, Inclusive Minds Consultancy, Showtime Consultancy, and Amplify Insights, as well as from political parties such as the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and the Indian National Congress (INC). Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling to access otherwise opaque consultancy-party networks. With the analysis, the paper addresses a key gap in

the political consultancy literature. Existing work, based on the U.S. and Europe, studies consultants as short-term campaign actors (Thurber, 1998). It does not consider how long-term embedded consultants accumulate informational authority. The literature has little to say about how consultants can shape organisational routines, compress internal debate, and influence strategic decisions by controlling access to voter data and analytical systems (Medvic & Lenart, 1997). This study addresses that gap.

By exploring the Indian case, the paper adds comparative value in three ways. First, India's consultant-party model operates in a context of high digital penetration and weak regulatory oversight. This allows consultancy firms to build extensive data infrastructures and exercise forms of informational control that are rarely documented in large democracies. Second, consultants in India are not temporary campaign actors. They are embedded inside parties for long periods. This embeddedness gives them routine access to organisational decisions, voter datasets, digital platforms, and internal communication systems. It also creates new risks around transparency, surveillance, and the internal balance of power. Third, the Indian case sheds light on wider global shifts in digital campaigning, especially in the Global South, where similar structural conditions prevail. It shows that political competition is increasingly shaped by data intermediaries who control not only how parties communicate with voters but also how leaders interpret political reality and exercise authority. This makes India a critical site for understanding the future of consultancy-led electoral politics.

Principal-Agent Theory and the Delegation of Political Expertise

Principal-agent theory has long been used to analyse delegation in political organisations, focusing on how principals outsource tasks to agents who possess specialised expertise, while facing risks of information asymmetry, moral hazard, and goal divergence (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Miller 2005). In electoral contexts, parties hire consultants to enhance efficiency and compete more effectively in complex electoral environments. Within this set up, few functions are delegated to consultants. However, this paper argues that data-driven political consultancy represents a qualitatively different form of delegation. Consultants no longer simply execute tasks defined by party leadership. They design and manage the informational infrastructures through which political judgement itself is exercised. As a result, the asymmetry between principal and agent is not limited to information but extends to control over the systems that generate, classify, and interpret political information. Scholars have shown that expertise confers authority not only because it solves problems but because it shapes how problems are defined, measured, and prioritised (Sajjanhar, 2021). In data-intensive environments, this authority is amplified by the opacity and complexity of technical systems, which limit meaningful oversight by non-experts. In electoral politics, consultants function as expert intermediaries who translate political objectives into technical operations and convert data outputs into strategic advice (Kolodny & Logan, 1998). Their

control over data allows them to frame what counts "winnability," or "campaign success". This framing power aligns with broader political economy arguments that technical expertise can depoliticise decision-making by presenting contingent choices as neutral or evidence-based (Newman, 2009). As a result, organisational authority shifts away from deliberative political processes towards technocratic evaluation.

The framework also engages with digital governance literature, which emphasises how digital systems shape behaviour, authority, and accountability by structuring information flows and decision-making processes. Scholars of digital governance argue that power increasingly operates through infrastructures that determine visibility and interpretation rather than through direct command (Plasser & Plasser, 2002). Applying this insight to electoral politics, the paper conceptualises consultancy-led campaign systems as governing infrastructures that regulate political communication, voter targeting, and organisational coordination. Control over databases and strategic content enables consultants to influence strategic priorities while remaining formally outside party hierarchies. Bringing these strands together, the paper introduces the concept of infrastructural agency dependence. This refers to a condition in which principals become dependent on agents not merely for expertise, but for access to and control over the infrastructures through which organisational decisions are made. In such settings, agency costs arise not only from hidden actions or divergent incentives, but from the principal's inability to disentangle political judgement from the technical systems that produce it.

Importantly, this concept is not unique to India. Similar dynamics have been observed wherever political organisations rely on external actors to manage complex digital systems, including in advanced democracies with professionalised campaign industries (Johnson, 2012). The Indian case, however, offers a particularly clear illustration because high digital penetration coexists with weak regulatory oversight and deep consultant embeddedness. The Indian case thus functions not as an exception but as an early and intensified instance of a wider transformation in democratic politics. By theorising political consultancy as a form of infrastructural power, the framework contributes to broader debates on how data-driven governance reconfigures accountability, autonomy, and democratic control in the digital age.

Context: How Consultants Became Indispensable to Parties

The ascendancy of political consultants in India is inextricably linked to the broader digital transformation of the electoral arena (Phadnis & Khandelwal, 2022). As political campaigns evolve into sophisticated, data-intensive enterprises, parties increasingly depend on consultants to translate complex digital footprints and voter information into precise, actionable electoral strategies. The contemporary significance of these actors thus extends far beyond traditional communication roles; it is rooted in their capacity to integrate technology, advanced analytics, and strategic narrative framing into a unified and

potent campaign apparatus. In a political environment characterised by volatile voter loyalties, accelerated media cycles, and fragmented digital public spheres, consultants provide the essential technical and cognitive infrastructure that allows parties to navigate complexity and remain competitive.

This reliance marks a definitive shift from historical patterns of political mobilisation. Where parties once depended on ideological commitment and extensive cadre networks to engage the electorate, the erosion of traditional loyalties and the rise of the floating voter, understood in India as an increasingly nonaligned and issue responsive segment that is not tied to stable partisan identities, have compelled a turn toward professional expertise that can offer data-backed insights into electoral behaviour (O′Shaughnessy, 1990; Kolodny & Logan, 1998). Consultants fulfil this demand by engineering campaigns that systematically blend survey research, social media analytics, and behavioural profiling to not only respond to but also anticipate voter preferences. This represents a rationalisation of electoral politics, where decisions about messaging and resources increasingly follow data driven logics rather than ideological deliberation, making the political arena more managerial and efficiency oriented (Grossmann 2009). The digital revolution has profoundly amplified this trajectory. The advent of advanced analytics, micro-targeting, and pervasive digital communication tools has cultivated an ecosystem in which consultants function as central amplifiers of political attention and visibility. By harvesting and interpreting vast datasets from social media interactions to granular voter lists they construct detailed psychographic profiles that directly inform targeted messaging and resource allocation (Aswini Varna, 2019). This data-driven paradigm facilitates a continuous feedback loop, delivering real-time strategic intelligence to party leadership and enabling the calibration of narratives for specific constituencies. Consequently, political decision-making is increasingly grounded in data inferences and predictive modelling, displacing the intuition-driven practices of the past (Varughese et al., 2022).

For political parties, the appeal of consultants is multifaceted, extending beyond mere technological adoption. Consultants serve as crucial translators, interpreting political objectives through the lens of technical possibility and enabling leaders to steer through an environment saturated with digital media and complex information flows. The significant reputational capital of figures like Prashant Kishor and organisations such as IPAC or Inclusive Minds further reinforces their strategic centrality. Their involvement itself becomes a powerful signal of organisational modernity and professional competence attributes that enhance a party's legitimacy within a competitive electoral marketplace (Phadnis & Khandelwal, 2022). Employing a prominent consultancy is thus both a symbolic declaration and a practical strategy, demonstrating a party's commitment to evidence-based, technologically sophisticated campaigning.

However, this growing dependence introduces significant structural challenges. As consultants accumulate proprietary expertise and unilateral

control over critical data infrastructures, they emerge as autonomous centres of power within the political system. Their unique position to interpret data and influence high-stakes decisions grants them substantial sway over candidate selection, campaign themes, and even ideological positioning. The party-consultant relationship is, therefore, characterised by a tension a collaboration that enhances tactical efficiency while simultaneously redistributing internal authority and creating new principal-agent dilemmas. In summary, political consultancy has become an indispensable feature of contemporary Indian democracy precisely because it fuses technological capability, strategic expertise, and influential power (Keshav Patel, 2015). Consultants supply the metrics that define electoral success, the platforms that engineer public visibility, and the methodologies that convert raw information into political persuasion. Their emergence marks a systemic transition from a model of mass politics to one of strategically mediated politics, where the contest for power is increasingly waged not on the streets alone, but within the realm of data dashboards, curated digital feeds, and opaque algorithmic models.

The Operational Architecture of Political Consultancy: From Data to Delivery

The influence of political consultants in India is operationalised through an integrated system that embeds them within the core functions of political parties. Their methodology represents a fundamental re-engineering of electoral campaigning, where data analytics becomes the central nervous system of political operations. This transformation manifests clearly in three interconnected domains: data infrastructure, digital campaigning, and strategic formulation, each reflecting and reinforcing the principal-agent dynamics and digital intermediation outlined in our theoretical framework.

Data aggregation is not merely a technical foundation of consultancy work; it is the primary site where agency power is produced and exercised in India's electoral system. What appears as a technical exercise of assembling voter lists is, in practice, a multilayered political process through which consultants generate and control the informational architecture that parties depend on. Consultant constructs elaborate electoral intelligence systems that extend far beyond demographic profiles to incorporate detailed mapping of community influencers, local elites, institutional power brokers, organisational strengths, candidate winnability scores, pre-poll survey results, comparative leader-image analytics, and opposition vulnerability assessments. This constitutes the datafication of political judgement, where categories, weightages, and predictive models built by consultants increasingly substitute for cadre-based knowledge and internal deliberation.

Figure: Operational Architecture of Modern Political Campaigns

Source: Reports of various consultancies and interviews of consultants, 2023-24

Comprehensive Data Aggregation and Voter Profiling:

The data ecosystem is produced through a structured methodology operating simultaneously at village, mandal, and assembly constituency levels. Consultant-led teams, comprising field coordinators, embedded party workers, digital data operators, and subject-matter specialists collect ground-level information through surveys, door-to-door interactions, ethnographic mapping, and observational assessments of local political dynamics. While party cadres provide community access and contextual insights, the analytic structuring of this information occurs entirely within consultant-managed platforms. As data moves upward through various administrative layers, it is progressively cleaned, coded, categorised, and synthesised using proprietary tools, resulting in dashboards and reports that shape leadership decisions.

This movement from raw intelligence to curated insight is where the principal–agent logic becomes most visible. The agent not only holds more information than the principal but also controls the conceptual lenses through which the principal interprets political reality. In doing so, consultants become epistemic intermediaries actors who mediate what counts as "public opinion," whose concerns are prioritised, and how political problems are defined. Party leaders thus come to depend on consultant-generated interpretations rather than grassroots deliberation or organisational feedback. Such dependence introduces new agency costs that go beyond classical principal–agent concerns.

Because consultants control the technical systems, the raw data, and the analytic infrastructure, parties experience data lock-in, where campaign intelligence is inseparable from consultant-managed platforms. Leaders often cannot verify how winnability scores were computed, why certain issues were weighted more heavily than others, or how community influence networks were mapped. These costs raise important questions of democratic accountability. The criteria used to allocate tickets, prioritise issues, or target communities are

influenced by outside party oversight mechanisms. As a result, critical decisions that once reflected internal debate or organisational experience are increasingly mediated by proprietary models and algorithmic tools. The principal, nominally in charge of political judgement, thus becomes dependent on the agent's technical systems and analytic authority, an asymmetry that marks a significant extension of principal–agent theory into the domain of digital political organisation.

Digital Campaign Infrastructure and Micro-Targeting:

The architecture of digital political campaigning in India represents a complex integration of technological systems, organisational hierarchies, and communicative practices. This emerging infrastructure operates as a multi-layered ecosystem that fuses digital platforms with localised political networks, creating what one senior consultant described as "a broader system for political communication" (Senior Consultant, March 2024). At its core, this system relies on an intricate network of WhatsApp groups, social media channels, and analytics dashboards, each structured along geographic, demographic, and thematic parameters. Consultants design and manage these interlinked platforms, thereby controlling the conditions under which political messages circulate, the speed of organisational response, and the visibility of competing narratives.

The platform ecology described by consultants further illustrates how operational practices produce principal–agent asymmetries. Separate strategies for WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, outlined by a digital head who noted that "we maintain separate content calendars for each platform" (Personal Communication, Senior Consultant, 2024) do not merely reflect media literacy; they institutionalise the consultant's role as the architect of differentiated voter publics. In principal-agent terms, this segmentation gives the agent disproportionate agenda-setting power: consultants determine which audiences receive which issues, how emotional registers are deployed, and how political identity is curated across demographic groups.

From a normative perspective, this raises critical concerns about consent and political autonomy. Scholars of digital campaigning and algorithmic governance have argued that micro-targeting transforms political communication from a shared deliberative process into a series of personalised persuasion environments that voters neither fully perceive nor meaningfully contest (Dulong De Rosnay & Stalder, 2020; Udupa 2024). Unlike traditional mass campaigning, where messages are publicly visible and subject to counter-argument, algorithmically mediated messaging operates through asymmetrical information flows. Empirical studies demonstrate that, voters are often unaware of why they are targeted, how their data are used, or how alternative narratives are withheld (Isaak and Hanna 2018). This opacity weakens informed consent and complicates democratic accountability, as political influence becomes embedded within technical systems rather than explicit political argument.

The production of digital content unfolds through a multi-tiered process that combines ground intelligence with strategic authorisation. Local party cadres

gather issue-based information and constituency feedback, which is then processed by the consultant's creative and data teams to design communicable digital content. For example, when TDP cadres in several mandals reported grievances about irregular pensions, consultants converted this into a short video highlighting beneficiary story, added data on the number of pending applications and framed it as a governance issue for targeted circulation. However, the political leadership retains final authorisation to ensure ideological coherence and message discipline. As a district party president observed, "Our local workers provide raw intelligence about constituency concerns, which the consultants translate into communicable formats. The leadership, however, validates every piece to ensure strategic alignment" (District party president, 2023). The scale, duration, and quality of digital campaigns are also shaped by financial arrangements between party leaders and consultancies, further embedding market logics into political communication.

Oversight and accountability within this digital infrastructure are maintained through customised dashboards that provide senior party leaders with real-time analytics on content performance. These dashboards measure not only reach and impressions but also engagement depth, sentiment polarity, and conversion metrics. As a national party leader explained, "We monitor the emotional resonance of our messages, not just the numbers. Data allow us to re-target with precision and adjust tone or imagery when sentiment shifts" (National Party leader, 2024). This practice illustrates the institutionalisation of data-driven reflexivity, where strategy continuously adapts to analytics feedback rather than post-event assessment.

Coordination between digital and field operations is achieved through structured synchronisation protocols. Daily review meetings link digital analysts with constituency-level coordinators to maintain message coherence between online content and offline mobilisation. The digital teams share performance data, while field units report local responses, creating a closed feedback loop that sustains narrative consistency across media environments. This system transforms traditional campaign management into a form of data governance, where political communication is continually recalibrated through real-time data integration.

Finally, the content distribution model embodies a hybrid logic of professional production and organic propagation. Consultants generate roughly 70–80 percent of structured digital content, but its dissemination relies on party networks and community influencers for amplification. As one strategist observed, "Our professionally produced videos and infographics form the narrative core, but authenticity and reach depend on organic sharing through WhatsApp groups, party groups, unions, and local influencer circles" (Consultant Manager, 2024). This method produces what may be described as structured virality, a controlled form of digital diffusion that blends top-down orchestration with bottom-up circulation.

Through this process, the consultant not only manages campaign narratives but also engineers the very conditions under which political communication achieves credibility and scale. Taken together, these new principal–agent relations illustrate the emergence of a new campaign infrastructure in India one characterised by the synchronisation of data, finance, and narrative. Consultants thus function as both technologists and mediators, operating within a hybrid system that merges market rationality with political emotion. The result is a form of digitally mediated politics in which the boundaries between persuasion, participation, and surveillance are increasingly blurred.

Integrated Campaign Management and Strategic Functions*:* Political consultants in India now manage campaigns in ways that reshape organisational authority within parties. Their work moves beyond traditional advisory tasks and brings together digital communication, message design, field coordination, and organisational training into one integrated system. This shift needs to be understood not only as operational efficiency but as a structural change in the principal–agent relationship. Consultants become central organisers of political strategy, while parties depend on them for information, interpretation, and execution. This dependence is a form of infrastructural agency, where control over tools, knowledge systems, and workflows gives consultants influence that exceeds their formal mandate.

Strategic content development*:* Strategic content development is a clear example of this shift. The systematic preparation of issue briefs, talking points, and thematic narratives for political leaders. These are calibrated to specific constituencies and evolving public discourses. As a Coordinator of a leading consultancy explained, "We maintain what we call 'content calendars,' synchronised with political developments, ensuring that leaders receive evidence-based talking points that resonate with current voter concerns while remaining consistent with the party's ideological line" (Senior Consultant, 2024). Consultants thus function as knowledge intermediaries, translating complex public sentiment into communicable political narratives. This process involves close coordination with local leaders to contextualise issues within regional realities.

Event Management*:* The orchestration of physical campaign events including public rallies, padayatras, and regional level meetings represents another crucial dimension of consultant expertise. These events are no longer treated as isolated spectacles but as multi-platform communication opportunities embedded within a larger media ecology. Consultants employ advanced event management systems integrating crowd logistics, security design, and message amplification. A senior strategist explained, "We treat each rally as a synchronised communication node, combining physical presence with digital visibility. Stage design, camera angles, speaker order, all are planned in conjunction with live-streaming strategies and social media content rollout" (Senior Consultant, 2024).

This level of integration ensures that traditional campaign formats are seamlessly connected to digital publicity pipelines, multiplying their reach and symbolic impact.

***Cadre Training and Organisational Building**:* Consultants also play a pivotal role in cadre training and organisational professionalisation. Through structured workshops and digital modules, they equip party workers with practical skills in communication, data collection, and voter engagement. Their methods are now embedded within party systems, as seen in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) 2025 digital membership and training drive (The New Indian Express, 2025), which aims to enrol two crore members through app-based modules on communication, voter outreach, and governance messaging. Although presented as an internal party programme, its digital architecture, structured workflows and metric driven approach reflect the diffusion of consultancy methods into routine party functioning. This demonstrates how consultants shape internal capacity building and embed data-oriented practices within party structures, further reinforcing the dependencies and power asymmetries outlined in this study.

***Opposition monitoring**:* Another important domain of consultant activity involves opposition monitoring and intelligence gathering (Raavi 2023). Dedicated research teams use digital surveillance tools and data analytics to track rival parties' announcements, social media campaigns and regional movements (Lasania 2023). A political analyst noted that consultants maintain an opposition dashboard that compiles past performance records, expenditure data and real time speech transcripts, allowing parties to anticipate rather than merely respond to rival strategies. These practices draw from corporate intelligence and crisis management models and have become central to maintaining electoral advantage. This intelligence work also reinforces the principal agent dynamic identified in this study, because parties become dependent on consultant-controlled knowledge systems to interpret competitor behaviour and to make timely strategic decisions.

***War room management**:* The culmination of consultancy involvement occurs during poll day management, when they establish centralised war rooms functioning as real-time command centers. Equipped with dashboards displaying turnout data and demographic trends, these war rooms coordinate logistics, mobilise volunteers, and deploy interventions in constituencies showing low participation. As one consultant explained, "On voting day, our job is to maintain electoral equilibrium, identifying weak pockets and ensuring turnout through micro level coordination. The dashboard tells us where to act within minutes" (Consultant associate 2023). Electoral equilibrium refers to keeping expected support intact by preventing sudden drops in turnout. For example, if portal data shows unusually low morning voting in a booth considered favourable to the party, the war room alerts local coordinators, who immediately mobilise volunteers to contact known supporters in that area. This reflects a shift from

reactive campaigning to predictive management, enabled by the fusion of analytics, communication networks and coordinated field operations.

Post-electoral Engagement*:* Increasingly, the role of consultants extends beyond the electoral cycle into phases of governance and public communication. For ruling parties, consultants assist in shaping policy narratives, designing governance communication strategies, and managing digital engagement with citizens. This enduring partnership blurs the distinction between campaign strategy and political administration, signalling the long-term institutionalisation of consultancy within the machinery of party politics.

In sum, the expanding repertoire of consultant functions from data gathering and campaign management to intelligence operations and post-election advisory illustrates the consolidation of a new form of political intermediation. Consultants no longer operate at the margins of electoral politics; they now anchor its operational, communicative, and organisational infrastructure.

Beyond Strategy: The Structural Implications of Political Consultancy in India

The rapid expansion of political consultancy in India has produced not only professional sophistication but also structural vulnerabilities within party systems. Political consultants now control campaign infrastructure voter databases, digital narratives, and analytics; so, parties are increasingly dependent on external expertise for decisions that were once driven by ideological conviction or cadre deliberation. The resulting arrangement fits a principal–agent model, but with intensified tensions because parties delegate essential campaign functions to agents whose goals, information access, and incentives differ from their own.

Principal–agent dynamics surface most clearly in three interrelated ways. First, goal misalignment emerges because parties value long-term cohesion and ideological credibility, while consultancies emphasise measurable campaign performance and client retention. This difference encourages strategies that favour visibility and tactical gains, even at the cost of weakening internal organisation. Second, information asymmetry arises because consultants possess access to the informational core of campaigns, internal party assessments, voter databases, and digital performance analytics. This concentration of data-driven expertise allows them to act as epistemic intermediaries who not only interpret but actively construct what is perceived as "public opinion," thereby influencing agenda setting and strategic priorities within the party. Third, moral hazard arises when consultants operate with limited oversight and pursue strategies that advance their commercial visibility, including aggressive data extraction or sensational messaging. These risks are difficult for parties to detect or correct.

One practical manifestation of goal incongruence appears in candidate selection. In West Bengal, sitting MP Arjun Singh's denial of renomination in 2024 and his subsequent defection was attributed to consultancy-based winnability assessments rather than party-level consultation (Indian Express,

2023). Similar frictions appeared in Andhra Pradesh, where legislators criticised survey-based exclusions and questioned the transparency of consultancy ratings. Puthalapattu MLA M. S. Babu argued that "survey mechanisms could be manipulated" after losing renomination (The New Indian Express, 2024). A senior party member observed, "We depend on consultants to tell us what the people want but increasingly, they influence our decisions indirectly" (Senior party member, 2024). These examples show how external evaluations can override local experience, weaken trust, and trigger factional conflict.

Information asymmetry, the consultant's epistemic advantage is equally consequential. Consultants possess data, microtargeted voter lists, and fine-grained ad-performance metrics. This effectively converts consultants into knowledge brokers who define what counts as "public opinion" for their parties. The misuse or selective deployment of such data can amplify existing social divisions, reinforcing polarisation and deepening identity-based cleavages within the electorate. The Andhra volunteer data controversy is illustrative (The News Minute 2023). Allegations that beneficiary data passed through consultancy channels raised concerns about the circulation of sensitive welfare information. Unlike earlier forms of asymmetry, where consultants interpreted party-collected data, the new system gives agents access to information produced inside state or party institutions. This creates a deeper structural risk by expanding the agent's control over institutional information. Commercialisation further heightens these concerns. Reports of large and opaque financial flows to consultancy firms in Andhra Pradesh have intensified fears that consultancy incentives may diverge from public accountability (Times News Network 2023).

A further tension in the party-consultant relationship arises from moral hazard; the risk that consultants, operating under limited supervision, may pursue strategies that advance their own commercial or reputational goals rather than the party's long-term interests. The expanding consultancy market in India, characterised by overlapping contracts and fluid political loyalties, creates fertile ground for such opportunistic behaviour. Several consultants interviewed for this study acknowledged that "political credibility now depends on visibility and delivery," which often incentivises risk-taking strategies aimed at producing immediate, high-impact results. As one senior digital campaign manager noted, "If a campaign goes viral, the consultant wins visibility (leader image building) even if the message is manipulative" (Consultancy Social Media coordinator, 2024). This incentive structure can lead to aggressive data-harvesting, sensationalist messaging, and overpromising electoral outcomes, all of which expose parties to reputational and ethical risks. Such incentives drive aggressive data harvesting, psychographic profiling, and behavioural targeting, practices that blur the line between persuasion and surveillance and weaken citizen autonomy by exposing voters to opaque, micro-engineered messaging they cannot contest. These techniques also erode internal party democracy. Behavioural analytics and sentiment dashboards shape candidate selection and

resource allocation, leaving cadres unable to challenge the metrics that define their value. Party officials privately expressed concern about consultants' cross-party engagements, describing them as a "conflict of interest that risks party's internal politics" (The News Minute, 2019). In this environment, parties remain accountable to the public, but consultants control the data systems and interpretive tools that steer both voter behaviour and internal decision-making, creating a structural vulnerability at the heart of contemporary Indian electoral politics.

The consequences of this moral hazard extend deep into party organisation. As consultants prioritise metrics such as digital traction and survey ratings, cadre contributions rooted in long-term community work become less visible. A mid-level leader explained, "Earlier, loyalty and local connect mattered. Now, if you don't show up on a survey report, you don't count" (Party leader, 2024). In his constituency, a long-serving leader with strong community ties was dropped from consideration because his name did not appear in performance rankings. Across several states in 2024, such survey-based exclusions led to defections, factional splits, and declining morale. Workers felt displaced by evaluations they could not contest. These developments weaken internal cohesion because relational politics is replaced by data-driven assessments controlled by external agents. Viewed through the principal agent lens, moral hazard in political consultancy represents more than a managerial problem. It reflects a shift in political accountability itself. In digital campaign settings, agents control the data systems, survey instruments and interpretive dashboards that guide leadership decisions, creating new risks because their actions are harder for principals to observe or verify. As a result, the logic of professionalism can easily shade into opportunism, producing short term gains but long-term organisational fragility.

Conclusion

Overall, the rise of political consultancy in India marks a major shift in how democratic competition is organised and understood. Consultants have moved from peripheral advisors to influential strategists who run data-driven and digitally mediated campaigns. Their use of data analytics has altered the relationship between parties, voters and political information. These methods do more than improve efficiency; they shape how voters are classified and targeted, often without their knowledge or consent. This creates a democratic paradox. Consultants enhance strategic coordination, yet their control over voter data narrative production and feedback systems generates new dependencies that weaken ideological autonomy and partisan representation. Behavioural targeting and sentiment engineering further threaten citizen autonomy by embedding persuasion in opaque digital environments. Consultants function as digital power brokers who shape political visibility without being subject to democratic accountability. Surveillance-oriented campaign infrastructures, volunteer systems, booth-level mapping, sentiment tracking and real-time dashboards

deepen these risks. They create data flows invisible to voters and sometimes even to party workers, raising concerns about data rights, informed consent and the boundary between legitimate persuasion and manipulation.

Looking ahead, the challenge for Indian democracy is not to reject digital modernisation but to regulate it with transparency norms, ethical safeguards and stronger data governance. The model code of conduct could be the tool to increase the transparency by including detailed guidelines on consultancy involvement regarding elections. Disclosure of agreements and data usage regulations could be a step towards accountability. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 provides a starting point, although political consultancy occupies a grey zone between politics and commerce that requires more specific oversight. Measures such as mandatory disclosure of consultancy contracts, clear boundaries on data use and the creation of internal party ethics codes can help rebalance professional expertise and political responsibility. Parties must also reflect on how technological dependence reshapes their internal democratic life and their long-term ideological coherence. Ultimately, the rise of political consultancy signals both the technocratisation and the datafication of Indian politics. The central democratic challenge is to ensure that this expertise supports rather than substitutes the foundations of participation, deliberation and accountability. Without appropriate safeguards, data-driven mobilisation risks narrowing citizen autonomy, deepening informational inequalities and undermining the internal democratic structures that sustain representative politics.

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