

The power of positive campaign in the Delhi elections

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*The Aam Aadmi Party's success in the Delhi elections last week has been attributed to a number of factors. Here, **Payal Kamat** explores their positive campaign tactics, which contrasted with the negative messaging deployed by the BJP.*



Just a few months ago political pundits and commentators were writing off the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as a protest movement that accidentally ventured into politics and a “[dying brand](#)”. Yet last week, the political start up won a massive mandate in the recently held Delhi assembly elections (67 seats out of 70). Their success has been attributed to many factors, including the negative campaigning by the mighty and old timer BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party); their only credible competition in this election.

Political consultants and researchers alike have conventionally opted against attack campaigns or what we call “negative advertising” towards the close of the campaign period. Since undecided voters predominantly decide in the last 72 hours before polling, focusing on a positive message that establishes one’s credibility over opponent’s weakness, acquires larger traction.

Elections in India signify the politics of hope. In the centralised democratic set up, much unlike the deliberative democratic model, one of the only credible ways citizens can assert their voice is through elections (Khilnani S, 2010). Thus political beneficiaries influence voters by selling them hope for better future

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections were a case in point. A content analysis conducted by the author that analysed key messages of the then Prime Minister candidate Modi’s rally speeches across India showed that over 65% of messages were positive and around 35% were attack campaigns. The data does not include advertisements, interviews and other mediated campaign materials. In case of Delhi polls 2015, the BJP’s messaging in the last week of campaigning predominantly targeted the AAP Chief Ministerial candidate Arvind Kejriwal instead of promoting its ‘action plan’ for the state. This was indeed a poor reflection on the party that only last year won a thumping mandate in the general elections riding high on a positive campaign that promised *AccheDin*, or ‘better days’ for the nation.

According to Iyengar, Shanto (1993) negative advertising has an effect on voter attitudes not just towards the candidate but also towards the campaigns themselves, therefore de-motivating the voter. That apart, negative campaigning also cheapens the whole campaigning process making it a battleground for mudslinging.

Does that mean attack campaigns have no benefits for the parties that use them? Not entirely.

The conventional wisdom is that negative adverts do work, albeit with two important qualifications. Voters do not perceive all negative information equally. If the information or allegations presented in the advert are not perceived as relevant, then it will have very little impact (Sides, John, Lipsitz, Keena, Grossman, Matthew, 2010). Also, while the ads have the capacity to weaken the support for the opponent, there is a possibility of diminishing the stature of the attacking candidate among voters by a potential backlash effect, when a candidate persistently publishes or airs negative information about their opponents.

In Delhi polls, the BJP’s negative campaigns had two sides. On the one hand, it spread irrelevant information by making personal attacks on Kejriwal, accusing him of being Naxal, anarchist and more importantly mocking him through caricatures of his children and family in campaign ads. On the other, there were cases where the negative campaign did reflect relevant debates, primarily the issue-based attacks which questioned Kejriwal on his previous 49-day rule (*Paanch sawaal Kejriwal*). However the timing for this latter campaign to ‘click’ was too short and it was difficult for the BJP to build a strong narrative for people to even perceive these questions as important. Moreover,

BJPs refusal to attend a live debate where Kejriwal promised to answer these questions made the party appear unwilling to stand by its claims.

While there is no clear data to prove the 'causal effect' of attack ads on the voters in this case, it is indeed strange that a party that has positioned itself to be development-focused spoke so little about development in the last few days of campaigning. In contrast, Kejriwal refused to give in to the negative narrative that BJP was trying to set for him. Instead of getting bogged down trying to address the allegations, or even reverse attacking the BJP, he focused on selling hope to the people of Delhi.

While the BJP's central rule was attacked on issues, deliverables and performance, the AAP stayed clear of making personal attacks on any individual. Winning voter support was accomplished by building strong support for the AAP itself rather than by seeking to undercut public support for the opponent. When candidates struggle in their efforts to build positive images of themselves, many choose to close the gap by attempting to tarnish the image of their opponent – as the BJP's strategy demonstrated.

Even the Prime Minister, who is a master communicator when it comes to selling dreams and hopes, fell short of doing so in his campaign speeches. He accused pollsters of 'baazaru' (Hindi conversational lingo for 'sold out') and name-called Kejriwal as a Naxalite. As a result, his campaign speech largely lacked the erstwhile earnestness to work for the state of Delhi.

Arvind Kejriwal not only focused on laying out his agenda for Delhi, but also uttered the simple yet most difficult word for a politician to convey in India today – 'Sorry'! Having apologised for his mistake of resigning last year he could then move on, focusing upon winning the perception war for his party.

In their research, Lau, Sigelman, Rovner (2007) state that three variables — relevance of message, degree of civility and the tolerance level of the voter — interact in complex ways and determine whether or not negative campaigns succeed. "In other words, there is no simple, universal answer: In some cases negative campaigns can have substantial effects on voter impressions; in others, the effect is negligible"

Clearly, in Delhi 2015- the effect was indeed negligible. The power of positive campaign prevailed.

Cover image: Aam Admi poster on back of auto rickshaw. Credit: flickr/ [Ramesh Lawani](#)

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See previous posts by Payal [here](#).



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