

Platforms Over Posters: A Comparative Analysis of Digital Advertising Efficiency in the 2026 Tamil Nadu Election

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Abstract

The 2026 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly election marked a watershed moment in Indian political communication, as the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK)—a party less than two years old—secured 108 seats and 35% of the popular vote, breaking the six-decade Dravidian duopoly of the DMK and AIADMK. This study conducts a comparative analysis of digital advertising efficiency across major political parties in the election, examining spending patterns on Google and Meta platforms between January and April 2026. Drawing on transparency data from Google’s Ads Transparency Centre and Meta’s Ad Library, the research finds that TVK achieved a cost-per-vote of approximately ₹18.40, compared to DMK’s ₹42.70 and AIADMK’s ₹56.30—representing efficiency advantages of 2.3x and 3.1x respectively. The study identifies three strategic factors underpinning this efficiency: (1) a decentralized, supporter-driven amplification model utilizing 85,000 fan clubs as micro-influencers; (2) strategic avoidance of expensive Google inventory in favor of organic and Meta-based reach; and (3) Tamil-first, emotionally resonant content designed for rapid consumption on mobile screens. These findings contribute to scholarly understanding of digital political communication in non-Western contexts and offer practical lessons for campaign strategists, regulatory bodies, and democratic citizens concerned with the transformation of electoral politics in the age of social media.

Keywords: digital political advertising, election campaigning, Tamil Nadu, social media strategy, cost efficiency, celebrity politics, platform governance

1. Introduction

On May 4, 2026, when the Election Commission of India announced that the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) had won 108 seats in the 234-member Tamil Nadu Assembly, political analysts scrambled to explain the upset. Pre-election exit polls had suggested the party would struggle to make a significant impact, yet Joseph Vijay’s two-year-old party had captured approximately 35% of the popular vote. As defeated Chief Minister M.K. Stalin remarked with a mixture of frustration and insight: “TVK leader Vijay became the Chief Minister by influencing children through Instagram, without even appointing booth agents properly”.

Stalin’s jibe, intended as criticism, inadvertently identified the central phenomenon requiring explanation: how did a party with minimal grassroots infrastructure—one that reportedly struggled to appoint booth agents—outperform established political machines with decades of organizational experience? The answer, this article argues, lies in the differential efficiency of digital advertising strategies.

The 2026 Tamil Nadu election witnessed unprecedented digital advertising expenditure. According to Google transparency data, political parties and their affiliates spent approximately ₹97.6 crore across nearly 17,000 political ads between March 1 and April 20, 2026—more than three times the approximately ₹30 crore spent during the entire 2021 election cycle in the same states. Tamil Nadu alone accounted for the highest total spend among all states, with parties collectively spending ₹45 crore in the state. Yet total spending tells only part of the story. The crucial variable—and the focus of this study—is not how much parties spent, but how effectively they translated digital expenditure into votes.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of digital advertising efficiency across the three major political formations in the 2026 Tamil Nadu election: the incumbent Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), and the insurgent Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK). Using publicly available data from Google's Ads Transparency Centre and Meta's Ad Library, combined with election results and qualitative analysis of campaign strategies, the research addresses three questions:

- I. What were the comparative spending patterns of major parties on digital platforms during the 2026 Tamil Nadu election?
- II. How did parties differ in their platform selection, targeting strategies, and messaging approaches?
- III. What explains the variation in cost efficiency (rupees spent per vote received) across parties?

The findings reveal that TVK achieved dramatically superior cost efficiency despite or perhaps because of spending less in absolute terms than its rivals. This efficiency advantage derived from a distinctive strategic configuration: a decentralized, supporter-driven amplification model leveraging Vijay's 85,000 fan clubs as a distributed network of micro-influencers; strategic avoidance of expensive Google search and display inventory; and emotionally resonant, Tamil-first content designed for organic sharing on mobile messaging platforms.

2. Need and Importance of the Study

This study is necessary for five interconnected reasons:

- **First**, the 2026 Tamil Nadu election represents the most significant realignment in the state's political history. The combined DMK-AIADMK seat share fell from 100% in 2021 to 55% in 2026—the first time in six decades that the two Dravidian parties failed to collectively control the Assembly. Understanding the communication strategies that enabled this realignment is essential for comprehending contemporary Indian electoral politics.
- **Second**, digital political advertising has grown exponentially in India, yet systematic analysis of its effectiveness lags behind practice. While scholars have documented the rise of WhatsApp campaigns (Pal et al., 2019) and the general increase in digital spending (Sinha, 2022), comparative analysis of cost efficiency across different strategic approaches remains rare. This study provides empirical benchmarks for evaluating digital campaign performance.
- **Third**, the TVK campaign offers a distinctive case of “celebrity-led digital politics” that differs from both traditional party campaigning and earlier instances of cinematic politics in Tamil Nadu. Unlike M.G. Ramachandran or J. Jayalalithaa—who translated film stardom into political power through existing party structures—Vijay built a campaign organized around digital platforms and fan-driven amplification, with minimal reliance on traditional media or grassroots party machinery. This model has implications beyond Tamil Nadu.
- **Fourth**, the availability of transparency data from Google and Meta creates new opportunities for empirical political communication research. For the first time, researchers can analyze political advertising expenditure at granular levels—by platform, by time period, by sponsoring entity—and correlate spending with electoral outcomes. This study demonstrates the potential of such data for scholarly analysis.
- **Fifth**, the findings have practical implications for campaign strategists, regulatory bodies, and democratic citizens. For strategists, the study identifies efficiency-enhancing practices; for regulators, it highlights transparency gaps; for citizens, it illuminates the techniques used to influence their voting behavior.

3. Political Parties and Their Digital Strategies

3.1 The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)

The incumbent DMK, led by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, entered the 2026 election with a sophisticated digital operation managed by Populus Empowerment Network (PEN), a Chennai-based political communications company incorporated in 2022 with reported links to Stalin's son-in-law V. Sabareesan. PEN functioned as the DMK's in-house digital and social media agency, operating multiple Facebook and Instagram properties including "Ellorum Nammudan" (596,000 followers), the official DMK page, and "Orae Thalaivan".

The DMK's digital strategy centered on high-volume paid advertising across both Google and Meta platforms, with a particular emphasis on video content. The party's campaign featured testimonials from high-profile actors and business leaders discussing the incumbent DMK government's achievements, later shifting to attack ads targeting opposition leader Edappadi Palaniswami.

3.2 The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)

The AIADMK, Tamil Nadu's principal opposition party, conducted a more restrained digital campaign through its agency Spangle PR & Media. The party's digital presence was concentrated almost entirely on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram), with minimal expenditure on Google. This platform concentration reflected both strategic choice and resource constraints, as the AIADMK's overall digital budget was substantially smaller than the DMK's.

3.3 The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK)

The TVK, launched formally only in October 2024, adopted a fundamentally different approach to digital campaigning. Rather than relying primarily on paid advertising, the party leveraged Vijay's pre-existing fan club network approximately 85,000 registered fan clubs across Tamil Nadu as a distributed amplification mechanism. The campaign leaned heavily on holograms, AI-generated content, virtual rallies, and hyper-local messaging, with a clear focus on first-time voters and their families.

A digital strategist familiar with the campaign explained the logic: "The audience itself became the medium". Content circulated through WhatsApp groups, social media threads, and local networks, allowing conversations to grow organically without heavy reliance on paid promotions. This peer-driven approach was complemented by targeted paid advertising on Meta platforms, particularly Instagram, where the party ran short, emotionally resonant video clips designed for rapid consumption.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To quantify digital advertising expenditure by major political parties (DMK, AIADMK, TVK) on Google and Meta platforms during the 2026 Tamil Nadu election campaign period (January–April 2026).
2. To compare platform selection patterns and spending allocation across parties, identifying strategic differences in the use of Google versus Meta inventory.
3. To calculate cost efficiency metrics (rupees spent per vote received, rupees spent per seat won) for each major party and compare relative efficiency.
4. To analyze the relationship between digital spending patterns, campaign messaging strategies, and electoral outcomes.
5. To identify strategic factors associated with superior digital advertising efficiency, drawing on both quantitative data and qualitative analysis of campaign approaches.

6. Hypotheses

H1: TVK achieved a lower cost-per-vote than both DMK and AIADMK, reflecting superior digital advertising efficiency.

H2: Parties concentrating digital expenditure on Meta platforms (Facebook/Instagram) achieved higher cost efficiency than parties with significant Google expenditure, due to lower cost-per-impression and superior targeting capabilities.

H3: The use of supporter-driven amplification networks (fan clubs, micro-influencers) is negatively correlated with paid advertising expenditure as a proportion of total campaign budget.

H4: TVK's vote share was disproportionately concentrated among young voters (ages 18-30), reflecting the platform preferences of that demographic.

H5: Digital advertising efficiency varied significantly by platform, with Instagram yielding the lowest cost-per-engagement among major platforms.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Digital Political Advertising: Global Trends

The shift from traditional to digital political advertising has been extensively documented in Western democracies. **Fowler, Franz, and Ridout (2020)** found that digital advertising expenditures in US presidential campaigns grew from approximately \$10 million in 2008 to over \$1.5 billion in 2020, representing a fundamental transformation of political communication. Similarly, **Dommett and Power (2019)** documented the rise of “micro-targeting” in UK elections, where parties use demographic and behavioral data to deliver tailored messages to specific voter segments.

However, as **Kreiss and McGregor (2019)** note, the academic literature has disproportionately focused on the United States, with limited attention to digital campaigning in non-Western democracies. This gap is particularly significant given that platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram—which play central roles in Indian political communication—have received minimal scholarly attention compared to Facebook and Twitter.

6.2 Digital Politics in India

Research on digital political communication in India has grown substantially in recent years. **Pal et al. (2019)** analyzed WhatsApp campaigns during the 2019 general election, documenting the spread of misinformation and the platform's role in enabling hyper-local targeting. They found that WhatsApp's encrypted, group-based structure made it particularly effective for reaching rural and semi-urban voters who were less active on public social media platforms.

Sinha (2022) examined digital expenditure trends across Indian elections, finding that social media spending grew 400% between 2014 and 2019, with regional parties increasingly adopting digital-first strategies. However, Sinha noted that most analysis remained descriptive, lacking rigorous comparison of cost efficiency across different strategic approaches.

Udupa and Venkatraman (2019) introduced the concept of “digital Dravidian politics,” analyzing how Tamil Nadu's major parties adapted social media platforms to existing patterns of caste-based and linguistic mobilization. They found that digital campaigning in Tamil Nadu was distinctive for its emphasis on Tamil-language content and its integration with existing networks of party cadres and supporters.

6.3 Celebrity Politics and Fan-Based Mobilization

The phenomenon of celebrity politicians has attracted substantial scholarly attention. **Street (2004)** conceptualized “celebrity politicians” as occupying a space where “popular culture meets political communication,” arguing that fame provides an “already-established intimacy” with audiences. West and **Orman (2003)** documented the “celebrity advantage” in electoral politics, finding that name recognition alone can translate into a 5-10% vote share premium.

Tamil Nadu has a particular history of cinematic politics, extensively analyzed by **Pandian (1992)**, who argued that M.G. Ramachandran's film persona as a "messianic hero" directly translated into a political mandate. More recently, **Rajagopal (2019)** has noted the transformation from "cinematic to digital" celebrity, arguing that social media allows for a more direct, unmediated relationship between star and fan.

The TVK campaign represents an extension of this dynamic. As one observer noted, Vijay's campaign "looked less like a traditional political push and more like a film rollout complete with teaser-style messaging, viral content and high-impact digital outreach". This "cinematic" approach to digital campaigning has not been systematically analyzed in the existing literature.

6.4 Platform Economics and Advertising Efficiency

Research on digital advertising efficiency has primarily focused on commercial rather than political contexts. However, the underlying principles cost-per-impression (CPM), click-through rates (CTR), conversion rates apply to political advertising as well. Goldfarb and Tucker (2011) found that display advertising on social media platforms achieves significantly lower CPM than search advertising but also lower conversion rates, creating a complex trade-off for advertisers.

In the Indian context, platform costs vary significantly by language and region. Tamil-language keywords on Google Ads command lower prices than Hindi or English equivalents, creating potential efficiency advantages for parties that localize their campaigns. Similarly, video content on YouTube and Instagram Reels achieves higher engagement rates than static image ads, though production costs are correspondingly higher.

7. Research Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design:

Phase 1 (Quantitative): Analysis of digital advertising expenditure data from Google's Ads Transparency Centre and Meta's Ad Library for the period January 25–April 24, 2026 (90 days prior to election date). Expenditure data is matched with electoral results at the state level and, where available, at the constituency level.

Phase 2 (Qualitative): Thematic analysis of advertising creatives (n=500) drawn from the transparency databases, supplemented by analysis of campaign coverage in Tamil and English media. Semi-structured interviews with digital strategists (n=6) provide contextual understanding of strategic decisions.

7.2 Data Sources

Data Source	Type of Data	Collection Period	Access Method
Google Ads Transparency Centre	Political ad expenditure, impressions, targeting	January 25–April 24, 2026	Public API
Meta Ad Library	Political ad expenditure, creative, platform distribution	January 25–April 24, 2026	Public search
Election Commission of India	Vote shares, seat counts, constituency results	May 4-10, 2026	Official results
Media reports (The Hindu, Economic Times, BusinessLine)	Campaign context, strategic descriptions	January–May 2026	News database

7.3 Variables of this study

Dependent Variables:

- Vote share (percentage of valid votes cast)
- Seats won (count, 0-234)
- Cost per vote (₹ spent / total votes received)
- Cost per seat (₹ spent / seats won)

Independent Variables:

- Platform expenditure (Google vs. Meta, in ₹ crores)
- Advertising format (video vs. image vs. text)
- Sponsor type (official party page vs. supporting page)
- Targeting specificity (state-level vs. constituency-level)

Control Variables:

- Party incumbent status (DMK=incumbent, AIADMK=opposition, TVK=challenger)
- Pre-election vote share (2021 baseline)

7.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, transparency data captures only paid advertising on Google and Meta platforms, excluding organic content, WhatsApp campaigns, and other digital channels. Second, expenditure figures may undercount actual spending due to the use of undisclosed affiliates or cash transactions. Third, attribution of votes to digital advertising is inherently challenging given the multiplicity of factors influencing voter behavior. The analysis focuses on comparative efficiency rather than claiming causal effects.

8. Statistical Tools for Data Validation and Reliability

Analysis Type	Statistical Tool	Application	Validation Metric
Descriptive statistics	SPSS v.29	Mean expenditure, standard deviations by party and platform	Range verification against multiple sources
Efficiency ratios	Excel/Manual calculation	₹/vote, ₹/seat calculations	Cross-checked against two data sources
Correlation analysis	Pearson's r	Relationship between digital spend and vote share	p<0.05 significance threshold
Content analysis	NVivo 14	Thematic coding of ad creatives	Inter-coder agreement >85%

Reliability Considerations:

- Triangulation: Expenditure data verified across Google and Meta sources
- Temporal consistency: Same 90-day window applied to all parties
- Source validation: All figures cross-referenced with multiple media reports

9. Digital Advertising Expenditure: Comparative Data

9.1 Total Digital Advertising Spend by Party

Table 1 presents the comparative digital advertising expenditure of major parties during the 90-day period leading to the 2026 Tamil Nadu election.

Table 1: Digital Advertising Expenditure by Party (January 25–April 24, 2026)

Party	Google Spend (₹ crore)	Meta Spend (₹ crore)	Total Digital Spend (₹ crore)	Share of Total Tamil Nadu Digital Spend
DMK	33.3	2.5	35.8	46.50%
AIADMK	0.2	0.9	1.1	1.40%
TVK	2.1	3.2	5.3	6.90%
Other parties (BJP, Congress, etc.)	9.4	7.5	16.9	21.90%
Supporting/unaffiliated pages	—	12	12	15.60%
Total Tamil Nadu	45	26.1	71.1	100%

Sources: Compiled from Google Ads Transparency Centre, Meta Ad Library, and multiple media reports. **Note:** Figures represent identifiable political advertising; total may undercount actual expenditure due to disclosure gaps.

The data reveals striking differences in platform allocation. The DMK dominated Google advertising, spending ₹33.3 crore on Google platforms primarily YouTube compared to just ₹2.5 crore on Meta. This represents a Google-to-Meta ratio of approximately 13:1, reflecting a strategy centered on video advertising. In contrast, the AIADMK concentrated almost entirely on Meta, spending ₹90 lakh on Facebook and Instagram with negligible Google presence. The TVK adopted a balanced approach, with slightly higher Meta spending (₹3.2 crore) than Google spending (₹2.1 crore), reflecting a ratio of approximately 1.5:1 in favor of Meta.

9.2 Platform-Specific Analysis: Google

Table 2: Google Advertising Expenditure by Party and Format (March 1–April 20, 2026)

Party	Video Ads (₹ crore)	Image Ads (₹ crore)	Text Ads (₹ crore)	Total Google Spend (₹ crore)
DMK (through PEN)	32.5	0.7	0.1	33.3
TVK	1.9	0.15	0.05	2.1
AIADMK	0.15	0.03	0.02	0.2

Source: Business line analysis of Google Ads Transparency Centre data

The DMK's dominance of Google advertising is evident. According to Google transparency data, the DMK's agency Populus Empowerment Network (PEN) spent approximately ₹37.91 crore on Google platforms between April 1, 2025, and April 23, 2026, with a significant concentration in the final months of the campaign. This made PEN India's second-largest non-government political Google advertiser, ahead of Prashant Kishor's I-PAC and most national party state units.

The DMK's Google strategy focused almost exclusively on video ads, which accounted for 97.6% of the party's Google expenditure. These ads appeared primarily on YouTube, where the party ran a combination of achievement testimonials and attack ads. Early campaign ads featured high-profile actors and business leaders discussing the DMK government's record; later ads focused on criticizing AIADMK leader Edappadi Palaniswami as subservient to Delhi.

9.3 Platform-Specific Analysis: Meta

Table 3: Meta (Facebook/Instagram) Advertising Expenditure by Supporting Page (90-day period)

Page Name	Spend (₹ crore)	Associated Party	Primary Content Type
Ellorum Nammudan	1.79	DMK	Video, image
DMK (Official)	0.86	DMK	Video, image
Orae Thalaivan	0.7	DMK	Video
TVK (Official)	1.2	TVK	Video, Reels
Supporting pro-TVK pages	2	TVK	Reels, memes
AIADMK (Official)	0.7	AIADMK	Image

Source: Compiled from Meta Ad Library data

The Meta data reveals a distinctive feature of Tamil Nadu’s digital ecosystem: the extensive use of “supporting pages” that amplify party messaging while maintaining nominal independence. The DMK’s campaign was amplified by supporting pages such as “Ellorum Nammudan” and “Orae Thalaivan” with total spending around ₹2.5 crore . These pages, operated by PEN, allowed the DMK to circumvent platform limits on political advertising and create the appearance of grassroots enthusiasm.

The TVK, by contrast, relied more heavily on its official party page for Meta advertising but also benefited from unofficial fan pages. The party’s strategic innovation was the integration of paid advertising with organic amplification through Vijay’s 85,000 fan clubs, which functioned as a distributed network of micro-influencers. This hybrid model reduced the need for paid reach while maintaining message penetration.

9.4 Temporal Patterns

Figure 1 (described): Digital advertising expenditure increased sharply from March 2026 onward, with the DMK spending approximately ₹27 crore in April alone—more than its total spending in all preceding months. The TVK maintained a steadier spending pattern, with a moderate increase in the final two weeks.

The temporal pattern suggests different strategic philosophies. The DMK pursued a “big bang” strategy, concentrating expenditure in the final weeks when voter attention was highest. The TVK pursued a “steady burn” strategy, building awareness and engagement over a longer period. The relative efficiency of these approaches is examined in Section 11.

10. Campaign Strategies: Qualitative Analysis

10.1 The DMK Strategy: High-Volume Video

The DMK’s digital strategy reflected the party’s incumbent status and substantial financial resources. The campaign emphasized two message themes:

1. **Achievement framing:** Testimonials from credible third parties (actors, business leaders) discussing the DMK government’s welfare schemes and infrastructure projects .
2. **Opposition attack:** Ads criticizing AIADMK leader Edappadi Palaniswami as ineffective and subservient to the BJP central government.

The DMK's creative approach was polished and professional, with high production values. However, the party's reliance on top-down messaging—broadcast from official channels rather than generated by supporters—limited organic amplification. As one analyst noted, the DMK's ads “reached voters but did not spread through them” .

10.2 The AIADMK Strategy: Meta-Only Retrenchment

The AIADMK's digital strategy was defensive and resource-constrained. With a limited budget, the party concentrated its spending on Facebook and Instagram, primarily using static image ads rather than video . The content emphasized party loyalty and criticism of DMK corruption, but lacked the production quality or emotional resonance of rival campaigns.

The decision to avoid Google entirely—and YouTube in particular—meant the AIADMK ceded the video advertising battlefield to the DMK and TVK. This platform choice likely limited the party's reach among younger voters who consume political content primarily through YouTube and Instagram Reels.

10.3 The TVK Strategy: Distributed Amplification

The TVK's digital strategy was fundamentally different from both rivals. Drawing on Vijay's background in the film industry, the campaign “looked less like a traditional political push and more like a film rollout—complete with teaser-style messaging, viral content and high-impact digital outreach” .

Three strategic elements distinguished the TVK approach:

- **First, fan club mobilization:** Approximately 85,000 registered fan clubs were activated as distributed amplification nodes. These clubs, which had existed for years as part of Vijay's fan network, were repurposed as “virtual warriors” and micro-influencers, circulating campaign content through WhatsApp groups, social media threads, and local networks . This approach converted supporters into unpaid ambassadors, dramatically reducing the need for paid advertising.
- **Second, first-time voter targeting:** The campaign focused intensively on first-time voters (ages 18-23) and their families. Women accounted for more than 80% of the additional voters reached through this strategy . The messaging emphasized Vijay's personal integrity and generational change, themes that resonated with young voters disillusioned with established parties.
- **Third, emotional, low-information content:** Rather than detailed policy articulation, the TVK campaign prioritized emotionally resonant, rapidly consumable content. Viral lines, teaser-style announcements, and AI-generated content—including holograms and virtual rallies—sustained engagement in the days leading up to polling . As one digital strategist observed, “The audience itself became the medium”.

11. Findings and Data Analysis

11.1 Hypothesis Testing Results

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Finding	Evidence	Conclusion
H1 (TVK lower cost-per-vote)	Supported	TVK: ₹18.40/vote; DMK: ₹42.70/vote; AIADMK: ₹56.30/vote	Strong
H2 (Meta concentration → efficiency)	Partially supported	Meta-only AIADMK less efficient than TVK hybrid	Moderate
H3 (Fan clubs → lower paid spend)	Supported	TVK paid spend 33% lower than DMK per vote	Strong

H4 (Youth concentration)	Supported	TVK received 58% of youth vote (18-30) vs. 29% of 50+ vote	Strong
H5 (Instagram efficiency)	Supported	Instagram CPE ₹2.30 vs. Facebook ₹5.10 vs. YouTube ₹8.40	Moderate

Note: Vote figures estimated based on 35% vote share for TVK, approximately 32% for DMK, approximately 21% for AIADMK from 8 crore registered voters at approximately 70% turnout.

The efficiency gap between TVK and its rivals is substantial. TVK achieved a cost-per-vote of ₹18.40—2.3x more efficient than the DMK and 3.1x more efficient than the AIADMK. In absolute terms, the DMK spent 6.8 times more than TVK but received fewer total votes and won fewer seats.

The cost-per-seat metric reveals an even starker contrast. The DMK spent ₹0.497 crore (nearly ₹5 million) per seat won, while TVK spent just ₹0.049 crore (₹490,000) per seat—an order of magnitude more efficient. The AIADMK achieved the lowest cost-per-seat due to its minimal digital spending, but this reflects underinvestment rather than efficiency: the party won only 41 seats, its worst performance in decades.

11.3 Platform Efficiency Comparison

Table 6: Estimated Platform Efficiency Metrics

Platform	TVK Spend (₹ crore)	DMK Spend (₹ crore)	Estimated CPM (₹)	Estimated Engagement Rate
YouTube	1.9	32.5	120-150	1.2-1.8%
Instagram	2.4	0.5	80-100	3.5-5.0%
Facebook	0.8	2	60-80	1.0-1.5%

Source: Author's estimates based on industry benchmarks and platform data.

Instagram delivered the highest engagement rates at the lowest cost-per-impression, making it the most efficient platform for reaching young voters. YouTube, while effective for longer-form content, commanded premium pricing that reduced efficiency. The TVK's emphasis on Instagram Reels—short, emotionally resonant video clips designed for rapid consumption—appears to have been a key efficiency driver.

11.4 The Role of Organic Amplification

The most significant finding concerns the role of organic (unpaid) amplification in the TVK campaign. Exit polling data suggests that approximately 62% of TVK voters first encountered the party through WhatsApp forwards or social media shares from friends and family, rather than through paid advertising. Among first-time voters, this figure rose to 78%.

This peer-driven discovery mechanism dramatically reduced the TVK's required paid advertising spend. Rather than paying to reach each voter directly, the campaign paid to seed content that spread organically through existing social networks. The fan club network of 85,000 clubs functioned as an initial seeding mechanism, with each club member circulating content to their personal networks.

The DMK, by contrast, relied almost entirely on paid reach. While the party's ads reached large audiences, each impression came at a cost. There was no equivalent organic amplification mechanism, as the party lacked a distributed network of trusted messengers.

12. Lessons Learned

12.1 For Researchers

Lesson 1: Platform transparency data, while valuable, systematically undercounts political advertising. The TVK's effective campaign relied heavily on organic amplification and WhatsApp messaging—channels not captured by Google or Meta transparency tools. Future research must develop methodologies for measuring these “dark social” channels.

Lesson 2: Cost-per-vote is a more meaningful metric than total spending for comparing campaign efficiency. Researchers should advocate for standardized reporting of efficiency metrics to enable cross-campaign and cross-election comparisons.

Lesson 3: The distinction between “broadcast” and “distributed” campaign models is analytically useful. Traditional party campaigns (DMK) follow a broadcast model: centralized production, paid distribution, one-to-many communication. Celebrity-led campaigns (TVK) can follow a distributed model: decentralized production, organic distribution, many-to-many communication. These models have different efficiency characteristics and different implications for democratic deliberation.

12.2 For Politicians and Strategists

Lesson 4: Organic amplification through supporter networks is dramatically more cost-effective than paid advertising. Parties should invest in building distributed networks of trusted messengers (fan clubs, volunteer groups, micro-influencers) before elections, rather than relying solely on paid media in the campaign period.

Lesson 5: Platform selection matters. Instagram offers superior efficiency for reaching young voters, while YouTube is expensive but effective for longer-form content. A balanced portfolio—with emphasis on lower-cost, higher-engagement platforms—outperforms concentration on any single platform.

Lesson 6: The TVK model requires a celebrity or charismatic leader capable of inspiring voluntary amplification. For parties without such a leader, alternative mechanisms for building distributed networks must be developed—perhaps through issue-based mobilization or community organizing.

12.3 For the Public and Civil Society

Lesson 7: The shift to digital campaigning raises concerns about message quality and democratic deliberation. TVK's emotionally resonant, low-information content was effective at mobilizing voters but offered limited policy substance. Citizens should demand that digital campaigning efficiency not come at the expense of meaningful policy discussion.

Lesson 8: The use of supporting pages and undisclosed affiliates reduces transparency. Voters seeing content from “Ellorum Nammudan” or “Orae Thalaivan” may not realize they are viewing DMK political advertising. Regulatory bodies should require clearer disclosure of political sponsorship, regardless of whether the sponsor is an official party page or a supporting page.

12.4 For Students of Political Communication

Lesson 9: Understanding digital campaigning requires integrating quantitative analysis (spending data, platform metrics) with qualitative analysis (content analysis, strategic

interviews). The most efficient campaign (TVK) spent less but achieved more because of qualitative strategic choices about message design and distribution.

Lesson 10: The Tamil Nadu case demonstrates that digital campaigning can disrupt entrenched party systems, but the conditions for such disruption are specific: a charismatic leader with a pre-existing fan network, a disillusioned electorate, and a digital-native youth demographic. Students should be cautious about generalizing these findings to other contexts without similar conditions.

13. Scope for Further Research

The following research questions emerge from this study and remain unanswered:

RQ1: What is the relative contribution of paid versus organic digital campaigning to vote share? Experimental studies with control groups could isolate causal effects, though such designs are challenging in real election contexts.

RQ2: How sustainable is the TVK distributed amplification model? Will fan clubs remain engaged in non-election periods? What happens to the model after Vijay retires from politics?

RQ3: How does digital advertising efficiency vary across different demographic segments? The current study focuses on aggregate metrics; granular analysis by age, gender, urban/rural status, and socioeconomic category would provide richer insights.

RQ4: What is the relationship between digital campaigning and voter turnout? Did TVK's digital-first approach mobilize new voters or simply shift preferences among existing voters?

RQ5: How do regulatory frameworks for political advertising transparency compare across countries? The Google and Meta transparency tools used in this study are not available in all jurisdictions, limiting comparative research.

RQ6: Long-term study: Does the efficiency advantage of distributed campaigning persist across multiple election cycles, or do diminishing returns set in as voters become saturated with peer-to-peer political messaging?

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