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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Political Communication, Media and Elections: A Case Study of Kerala Chief Minister's Press Meetings in the 2021 Assembly Elections

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of political communication, particularly through media channels, in influencing electoral outcomes in the 2021 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections. The Left Democratic Front (LDF), under the leadership of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, retained power for a consecutive second term during the Covid-19 pandemic. A key focus of this research is the impact of the regular press briefings conducted by Pinarayi Vijayan, which are argued to have played a significant role in shaping public perception and securing electoral support for the LDF. This paper explores the ways in which political communication, primarily mediated through television and press briefings, influenced the decision-making process of the electorate, especially in a time of crisis. By employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this study assesses how the Chief Minister's communication strategies, including transparency and crisis management, resonated with the electorate and contributed to the LDF's electoral success. The research also examines how media, as a tool of political communication, shaped the voters' choices and their understanding of the government's handling of the pandemic. The findings of this research suggest that Pinarayi Vijayan's media interactions not only bolstered his public image but also fostered a sense of trust and accountability, which played a pivotal role in securing the electoral mandate for LDF. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on political communication and media influence in democratic elections, particularly in crisis situations.

**Keywords:** Political communication; LDF; Covid-19; Pinarayi Vijayan; Media

### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary democracies, political communication plays a pivotal role in shaping electoral outcomes. Defined broadly, political communication refers to the strategic transmission of political messages through various mediums—ranging from spoken and written words to visual symbols and imagery—aimed at influencing public perception and behavior. As Denton and Woodward (1990)<sup>1</sup> suggest, political communication encompasses the methods employed by message senders to impact the political environment, while Brian McNair (2011)<sup>2</sup> emphasizes its purposive nature in shaping public discourse about politics. For McNair (2011), political communication transcends mere verbal exchanges, incorporating visual elements such as personal appearance, symbolic representations, and media framing. Across different historical contexts, from the

propaganda machinery of Nazi Germany to modern democratic campaigns, political actors have consistently relied on communication strategies to further their ideological objectives and mobilize voter support.

This paper seeks to explore the role of political communication, specifically through media channels, in influencing political choices, with a focus on the 2021 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections. It examines how Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's daily press briefings during the COVID-19 pandemic became a key tool in shaping public opinion and securing a decisive electoral victory for the Left Democratic Front (LDF). In a context where the electorate was grappling with the existential threat of a global health crisis, the LDF's communication strategy, particularly the transparent and regular updates provided by the Chief Minister, contributed significantly to the party's landslide



win—securing 99 of the 140 seats in the Assembly. This victory was particularly remarkable given the challenging backdrop of the pandemic, which had raised widespread uncertainties about governance and crisis management.

The paper examines the effectiveness of these press conferences as a form of political communication, offering insights into how the LDF leveraged media to bolster public trust in its governance. Through this case study, we aim to understand how strategic political communication can influence electoral decision-making, particularly in times of crisis. By focusing on Kerala's unique political context, where an elected communist government is in power, this study sheds light on the broader dynamics of political communication in modern electoral politics and its potential to shape electoral outcomes.

## POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

Political communication can be defined as the strategic use of communication to influence public knowledge, beliefs, and actions on political matters (Ray, 2022)<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, James W. Chesebro's seminal work, "Theoretical Approaches to Political Communication" (1974)<sup>4</sup>, offers critical insights into the various frameworks through which political communication can be analysed. Chesebro identifies five distinct approaches—Machiavellian, iconic, ritualistic, conformational, and dramatistic—that provide diverse lenses for understanding the complex interplay between power, symbols, and political behaviour. These approaches illuminate the ways in which power structures are communicated and maintained through symbolic representations, either directly or indirectly shaping dominant and subordinate political narratives.

The **Machiavellian approach** to political communication emphasizes the self-contained nature of power, arguing that power is intrinsic and not inherently linked to symbolic representations. According to this perspective, symbols serve as mere decorative tools with aesthetic functions, rather than integral components of political power itself. In this view, political power is more substantial and impactful than the symbols used to communicate it, and the role of communication is secondary to the exercise of power itself<sup>4</sup>. This approach underscores a more instrumental, often cynical, understanding of political communication, where power is seen as the driving force in political outcomes, with communication serving merely as a conduit for its reinforcement.

In contrast, the **Iconic approach** foregrounds the centrality of symbols in political communication. Here, symbols are not mere embellishments; rather, they are seen as powerful political icons that shape public attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. According to Chesebro (1974)<sup>4</sup>, political rhetorical icons—often visual depictions of power or force—are critical in altering or reinforcing dominant-subordinate

relationships. In this view, symbols are not passive representations but active agents that influence political dynamics by shaping how political authority is perceived and legitimized.

The **Ritualistic approach** takes yet another direction by framing politics as an ongoing symbolic ritual. According to this view, political communication is less about the transmission of explicit political messages and more about the manipulation of symbols to alter public attitudes and behaviours. These symbolic actions, while seemingly neutral or ceremonial, are potent in shaping political ideologies, often obscuring deeper social issues. The ritualistic approach critiques the role of symbols in perpetuating political structures without addressing the underlying issues that they mask, positioning political communication as both a tool of manipulation and a means of social control.

The **Conformational approach** views political communication as a mechanism to confirm or challenge political figures, ideologies, or programs. Here, the focus is on how communication serves as a tool for either reinforcing or destabilizing the prevailing political order. Political communication, in this framework, is less about persuasion and more about affirmation, with political agents using media to assert their legitimacy or discredit opposing viewpoints. This approach suggests a more reactive and defensive use of communication, wherein the aim is to uphold or counter existing political narratives.

Finally, the **Dramatistic approach** offers a more nuanced understanding of political communication by framing politics entirely as a symbolic construct. Here, political reality is seen as shaped and maintained through the use of symbols, which individuals or political agents employ to construct, communicate, and perpetuate political identities and ideologies. Chesebro (1974)<sup>4</sup> argues that political communication is not simply a means of disseminating information but a performative act where symbols become integral to the formation and maintenance of political power.

Taken together, these five approaches provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing political communication, each highlighting different dimensions of how power, symbols, and public perception intersect in the political sphere. By applying these theoretical perspectives, scholars can better understand the strategic use of communication in shaping electoral outcomes, influencing political behaviour, and constructing the very fabric of political life. Whether through reinforcing existing power structures, altering public attitudes, or creating new political realities, political communication remains a fundamental tool in the contest for power and influence in democratic societies.

## MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The media, often referred to as the fourth pillar of democracy, plays a critical role in the functioning of political systems, particularly through its informational function, which is inherently an act of political communication. Media



not only disseminates information but also sparks debates, shapes public identities, and fosters civic engagement. In modern democracies, citizens primarily interact with politics through media, which in turn channels political discourse. As Krotz (2007)<sup>5</sup> argues, media has the power to alter, transform, and even distort communication, thus creating new forms of public engagement. The rise of mass media has exponentially accelerated the transmission of news and political messages, allowing politicians to effectively utilize these channels to communicate their policies and ideas to the electorate.

Pippa Norris (2001)<sup>6</sup> underscores that political communication is an interactive process involving the transmission of information among politicians, media, and the public. Effective political communication through media serves two key purposes: image-making and agenda-setting. Image-making, as a fundamental component of political communication, involves shaping public perceptions of individuals or institutions to create a favourable image, essential for electoral success. This process is crucial in building political capital, as voters are often swayed by generalized perceptions of candidates and parties, rather than a rational evaluation of their policies (Wallas, 1908). Thus, the political image constructed through media channels plays a significant role in determining voting preferences and shaping electoral outcomes.

Agenda-setting, another crucial aspect of political communication, refers to the media's ability to influence public policy by prioritizing certain issues over others<sup>7</sup>. Through the process of 'framing,' media determines how information is packaged and presented to the public<sup>8</sup>. The framing of news events influences how the public perceives issues, directly impacting their decision-making processes. McCombs and Shaw's (1972)<sup>9</sup> seminal agenda-setting study highlights that the media's emphasis on specific topics elevates their public salience, guiding citizens' political attention. Conversely, the media's omission of issues leads to their perception as less important<sup>10</sup>.

The Marxist instrumentalist theory of media offers a critical lens through which to examine the media's role in political communication. According to this theory, media owners—often part of the ruling elite—control the content disseminated, ensuring that it aligns with their interests and preserves the status quo. Browne (2016)<sup>11</sup> and Chandler and Munday (2020)<sup>12</sup> argue that the media serves the interests of the capitalist class by curating content that reinforces conservative worldviews, preventing the general populace from questioning the socio-economic structures that sustain elite power. Thus, the media's role in political communication is not neutral but is shaped by the ideological and material interests of its owners, who shape public perception in ways that maintain their privileged position in society.

TELEVISION NEWS CHANNELS AND PRESS MEETINGS OF THE CHIEF MINISTER

The continuous engagement of Kerala's Chief Minister with the media for nearly a year during the COVID-19 pandemic marked a rare and significant moment in the state's political history. Historically, the relationship between the Chief Minister and news channels had been characterized by conflict; however, the exigencies of the crisis facilitated an unusual collaboration. While social media has grown increasingly influential, particularly among Kerala's younger voters, a large portion of the population continues to rely on television for both news and entertainment. According to the Broadcast India Survey (2018), 93% of households in Kerala have access to television<sup>13</sup>, underscoring its critical role as a primary medium for political communication.

The impact of television as a political communication tool is further evidenced by the post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), which reveals the significant role of television in shaping voters' political perceptions during the 2021 Assembly elections. According to the survey, 69.8% of respondents indicated they watched news daily, while 11.1% engaged with it at least once a week (CSDS, 2021). These findings resonate with Coleman and Blumler's (2008)<sup>14</sup> assertion that television channels play a pivotal role in transferring political discourse into the private sphere of viewers' living rooms. This data suggests that, despite the rising prominence of social media, television remains an indispensable medium for political communication in Kerala, directly influencing voter opinions and electoral behaviour.

Table 1:

Q1: How would you rate the steps taken by the state government to deal with the situation arising out of COVID-19 over the last year?		
Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	1579	46.1
Good	890	26.0
Average	731	21.3
Bad	151	4.4
Very Bad	24	.7
No Opinion	49	1.4
Total	3424	100.0

Source: CSDS 2021 Survey

In a post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), 46% of respondents rated the Kerala government's management of COVID-19 as "very good," while 26% considered it "good." In contrast, 21.3% viewed the government's response as "average," and only 5.1% described it as "bad" or "very bad," with 1.4% offering no opinion. These figures indicate that a substantial majority—72.1%—appreciated the government's efforts. This positive assessment supports the cultivation theory, which posits that prolonged media exposure, particularly



to television, shapes individuals' attitudes and behaviours by internalizing the narratives presented to them. In this case, the frequent media coverage of the Kerala government's COVID-19 response likely influenced public perceptions, reinforcing a favourable view of the government's actions.

Further insights from the survey reveal the timing of electoral decision-making. When asked when they finalized their vote choice, 51.4% of respondents indicated they had decided before the campaign even began, while 23.6% made their choice after candidate announcements. Only 5.4% waited until the day of voting. Notably, 36.2% of respondents expressed support for Pinarayi Vijayan continuing as Chief Minister for a second consecutive term (CSDS, 2021). Despite the press briefings occurring months before the elections, they proved instrumental for the Left Democratic Front (LDF), with their strategic timing amplifying their reach. The daily press conferences, scheduled between 6 and 7 pm—prime viewing hours—captured significant viewership. According to Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) data, the Chief Minister's press conferences on March 23, 2020, achieved a rating of 7.25 across eight Malayalam networks, which increased to 9.05 by March 27. Furthermore, these briefings were livestreamed on official social media platforms, with an average of 4 lakh viewers per session, peaking at 5 lakhs on some days (The Quint, 2021)<sup>15</sup>. This wide viewership underscores the media's pivotal role in shaping public opinion and political outcomes, especially during critical periods of crisis management.

## AN ANALYSIS OF CHIEF MINISTER'S PRESS MEETINGS

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's press briefings during the COVID-19 pandemic can be divided into two distinct segments: the first forty minutes, which focused on detailed updates about the pandemic, and the final twenty minutes, reserved for media questions. These daily briefings, marked by meticulous preparation with written notes, significantly reshaped the public's perception of the Chief Minister. While Pinarayi Vijayan had long held a prominent political position, he lacked the "mass leader" image enjoyed by his predecessor, Oommen Chandy (The News Minute, 2020)<sup>13</sup>. However, through a combination of leadership during the pandemic and strategic political communication, he successfully cultivated a new image as a capable statesman leading the state through a crisis.

Initially, Health Minister K.K. Shailaja conducted the daily press briefings, but as her popularity grew, Pinarayi Vijayan himself took over, recognizing the communicative and electoral potential of the platform. The shift to the Chief Minister handling the briefings allowed for more direct political messaging, enabling Vijayan to engage in purposeful communication. Importantly, the briefings also helped to repair his strained relationship with the media, which had been marked by conflict, notably after an

infamous outburst at journalists (The Hindu, 2020).

The Marxist instrumentalist theory posits that media serves the ruling class by shaping public opinion, manipulating the masses through agenda-setting. However, in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) was strategically leveraging the same media to further its electoral agenda, integrating seamlessly into the liberal democratic framework. This was not a novel approach: the CPI(M) had launched Kairali TV in 2000 and People TV in 2005, illustrating the party's long-standing recognition of television as a potent tool for mass communication.

The key functions of political communication—information, command, influence, and integration (Gupta, 2014)—were evident in Vijayan's press briefings. The government effectively communicated vital information about COVID-19, issued commands regarding lockdowns and safety measures, influenced public compliance, and ensured cohesion by addressing potential discontent. In the words of Machiavelli (1532), "Never let a serious crisis go to waste." Vijayan turned the pandemic into an opportunity to bolster his political legitimacy, projecting an image of strength and leadership, akin to Machiavelli's ideal ruler: a lion to terrify the opposition and a fox to navigate challenges<sup>16</sup>.

The media framing of the pandemic, through the Chief Minister's press conferences, played a central role in shaping public perception. The government's policies were not just communicated; they were implemented on the ground, ensuring that the message resonated with people's lived realities. The integration of party cadres in local communities blurred the lines between government functionaries and party workers, allowing the LDF to claim credit for effective governance while maintaining popular support.

The press briefings became the primary source of 'credible' information for the public, providing updates on COVID-19 cases, government measures, and public health guidelines. This reliance on official sources mirrored the pattern observed during crises such as the September 11th attacks, where fear and uncertainty drove massive media consumption. In Kerala, the CM's briefings provided a sense of security, reinforced by campaigns like 'Break the Chain' and 'Oppamundu Sarkkar' (The Government is with You), which strengthened the government's credibility and engendered public trust.

The CPI(M) also capitalized on Kerala's high internet penetration and its robust cyber team, collecting feedback from the public and incorporating suggestions into the Chief Minister's briefings. This participatory model enhanced the government's image and further legitimized its actions. In the context of electoral politics, image-making plays a crucial role, and the LDF's ability to project Vijayan as a strong and competent leader—embodied in the media's framing of him as "The Captain"—was central to its success. The





"Captain" narrative, which emerged during crises like Ockhi, Nipah, and COVID-19, was reinforced by media outlets, contributing to Vijayan's transformation from an aloof figure to a revered leader<sup>15</sup>.

Despite the Marxist instrumentalist critique of media as a tool of capitalist manipulation, the Kerala case reveals a more complex dynamic. Media, in exchange for government advertisements, was complicit in amplifying the achievements of the Pinarayi government, sometimes sidelining ethical concerns for financial gain. However, by the time post-election scrutiny exposed certain COVID-related scandals (Onmanorama, 2023), the Pinarayi government had already secured a second consecutive term, demonstrating the electoral power of media-driven image-making. Thus, while media often serves the interests of the powerful, it also remains a potent instrument in shaping political outcomes, as evidenced by the LDF's strategic use of communication to retain political power.

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## CONCLUSION

From the study carried out it was evident that government machinery and the CPI(M) leadership were strategically prepared for a comprehensive public relations exercise during the COVID-19 crisis, with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan positioned as the 'captain' of the state. This deliberate media framing was aimed at strengthening his image as a decisive and capable leader, especially in the lead-up to the Kerala Legislative Assembly elections. The Chief Minister's daily press briefings garnered TRP ratings that surpassed those of popular television serials and entertainment programs, signifying the public's heightened attention to his leadership. His portrayal as a resilient leader navigating multiple crises—ranging from the pandemic to floods and the Nipah virus—was reinforced through the media, which effectively amplified the Left government's agenda, ensuring its widespread acceptance in the public domain.

In times of crisis, such as the pandemic, a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety typically takes hold of the population. However, through his daily briefings, Vijayan provided

the public with authoritative, real-time updates about the situation on the ground, thus becoming the primary source of information. This direct communication from the Chief Minister minimized the reliance on alternative sources and helped to mitigate public uncertainty. The government's welfare measures, including community kitchens and food kits distributed through ration shops, were also communicated effectively through these briefings, which were broadcast live across various media platforms. These initiatives demonstrated the government's proactive approach to addressing the immediate needs of the population, particularly those who had lost their livelihoods due to the lockdown.

Effective political communication requires a messenger who is both credible and legitimate, capable of delivering messages with clarity and empathy. In the context of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan fulfilled this role adeptly. While multiple factors undoubtedly contributed to the LDF's resounding victory in the 2021 Assembly elections, it is undeniable that the Chief Minister's press briefings, coupled with the immense media support they received, played a pivotal role in securing public trust and galvanizing electoral support. The media not only acted as a channel for information but also as a vehicle for political image-building, solidifying Vijayan's stature as a strong and competent leader. Thus, the intersection of political communication, media strategy, and leadership during the pandemic was instrumental in shaping the electoral outcome, underscoring the power of effective media engagement in modern democratic politics.

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