

Fake News and Its Influence on Political Polarization

Shivangi Asthana

School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Correspondence: Shivangi Asthana (22481877@life.hkbu.edu.hk)

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Abstract

Digital spaces have become critical arenas for the spread of fake news and hate speech, which exacerbate societal polarization. This polarization intensifies divides, often along partisan lines, and can escalate into violence, thereby undermining social cohesion and democratic stability. During elections, fake news campaigns contribute significantly to polarization by influencing voter behavior, spreading misinformation rapidly, and raising concerns about the credibility of information sources and free speech. As most democracies depend on informed voters and fair electoral processes, the role of independent media watchdogs becomes vital. This paper examines how media watchdogs operated during world's biggest democratic elections, in India and the United States in 2024. The chapter focuses on two key questions: (1) What role do media watchdogs play in political polarization and disinformation during elections? And (2) How do they promote accurate information and democratic resilience in highly polarized electoral contexts? Through a comparative analysis of content published by Newslaundry in India and American Oversight in the U.S., this study identifies how these organizations addressed misinformation and exposed fake news tactics. The 2024 elections illustrate how polarization shaped electoral outcomes, public discourse, media narratives, and democratic participation in both countries. Despite challenges like rapid digital disinformation spread, social media amplification, and enforcement gaps, watchdogs employed collaborative and investigative methods to uphold media accountability. The findings reveal convergences and divergences in their approaches, emphasizing their critical role in enhancing transparency, combating disinformation, and strengthening democratic resilience amidst polarized electoral environments.

Keywords: India; United States; 2024 elections; media watchdogs; fake news

INTRODUCTION

Digital spaces have become fertile ground for fake news campaigns and hate speech, which further deepen societal divides. A 2023 World Economic Forum study on global risks highlights societal polarization as one of the top 10 current concerns and a long-term threat for the next decade. This polarization can escalate into violence and divide individuals along partisan lines. As fake news spreads rapidly, disseminating hate speech and threatening societal cohesion, it not only questions the credibility of sources but also raises concerns about free speech. This paper analyzes the role of independent media watchdogs during the 2024 elections in India and the U.S.A., and discusses the effects of fake news echo chambers in both nations. The two focus areas of this paper are (1) What role do media watchdogs play in political polarization and disinformation during elections? And (2) How do they promote accurate information and democratic resilience in highly polarized electoral contexts?

The 2024 elections in the U.S. and India provide current examples of how political polarization not only influenced electoral results but also affected public discourse, media narratives, and democratic participation, underscoring the importance of studying polarization for understanding modern electoral politics. Considerable academic research has examined the relationship between polarization and disinformation in the context of elections (Hossain, 2025; Pallav et al., 2026; Prakash & Bansal, 2025). However, there is comparatively limited scholarship focusing specifically on the role of media watchdogs during the most recent elections in the United States and India.

Polarisation

Political polarization describes the increasing ideological division between political parties, where their views become more extreme and they are less willing to compromise for the common good. This growing gap weakens the political center and creates a more fragmented and conflict-filled environment. For example, in the United States, the clear divisions between the Republican and Democratic parties were visible in the 2024 presidential election, when supporters of incumbent President Donald Trump and Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris saw each other not just as political rivals but as existential threats, fuelling partisan hostility. Likewise, in India's 2024 general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a third term but with reduced parliamentary strength, highlighting deep political divisions and a competitive multiparty system in which supporters of opposing parties often view each other as enemies or threats.

This polarization often extends into social identity, where people strongly identify with their party and see the opposition as a threat to their way of life, reinforcing negative stereotypes and mutual distrust. Furthermore, social media platforms amplify this divide through uncivil political exchanges and hate speech, turning political discussions into battlegrounds of hostility (George, 2023). From a sociological perspective, the roots of polarization lie in diverging beliefs influenced by religion, ethnicity, and gender norms, which shape conflicting worldviews and confrontational behaviors. Economically, polarization is driven by income inequality and the widening gap between societal extremes and the middle class, which intensifies feelings of marginalization (Waldman, 2017). European political theorists Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, whose work on media system polarization informs this discussion, emphasize how ideological divides mirror broader societal splits and media fragmentation, contributing to the mediascape that both shapes and reflects partisan divisions (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2005).

Relationship between polarisation and disinformation

News deliberately elaborated based on falsehood and with the intent to confuse the consumers is seen as disinformation (Gelfert, 2018). The European Commission defines it as, "Verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm." (Network, 2023).

Studies on the relationship between political polarization and disinformation show multiple ways polarization encourages the spread and reinforcement of information disorders. First, polarization makes society more likely to accept information that matches pre-existing beliefs, even if it's factually wrong (Chagas, 2025). This selective exposure is often driven by perceived connection to certain media outlets or online profiles, strengthening confirmation bias, which is a mental tendency to prefer information that supports one's existing views (Iyengar et al., 2008) (Humanes & Valera-Ordaz, 2023); (Vicario et al., 2019). This phenomenon links to the decline of post-truth norms, where objective facts matter less than appeals to emotion and belief (Capilla, 2021). For instance, during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, disinformation efforts exploiting deep partisan divides used fabricated videos and false stories that mostly circulated within politically similar online groups, intensifying confirmation bias and misleading voter perceptions (West, 2024; Brookings, 2024).

Second, polarization cultivates echo chambers - closed digital spaces where individuals exchange information with like-minded peers, isolating themselves from contrary viewpoints (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2023). In these environments, the penetration of opposing ideas is minimal, enabling the rapid circulation and reinforcement of partisan misinformation. Evidence from social media monitoring during the 2024 Indian general election shows that distinct political groups clustered in separate online communities with minimal cross-communication, intensifying opinion silos. The

difficulty of breaking these echo chambers contributes to wider societal divides and entrenched misperceptions.

Third, polarization erodes trust across social groups, making it challenging to correct misinformation or reach consensus on factual matters. As intergroup dialogue breaks down, individuals become more prone to sharing fake news that disparages political opponents, further aggravating hostility (Osmundsen et al., 2021). Recent analyses of disinformation spread amongst U.S. conservatives reveal that high polarization correlates with increased misinformation sharing motivated by ingroup dominance, demonstrating how ideological divides fuel the misinformation dynamics (Zhu & Pechmann, 2025). The adversarial climate exacerbated by polarization undermines democratic discourse by impeding efforts to establish shared truths.

Finally, polarization is actively exploited by various actors who produce and spread disinformation for political advantage. This includes coordinated networks of trolls and bots, as well as state-sponsored campaigns aimed at influencing election results (Keller et al., 2020);(Robles et al., 2022). The desire to inflame divisions and weaponize information disorders remains a deliberate tactic, as shown in documented cases involving foreign interference in elections, such as Russian-origin disinformation videos during the 2024 U.S. campaigns (Kamarck & West, 2024), and misinformation fuelling ethnic tensions in South Asia (Majumdar, 2024). Polarization not only makes societies more likely to believe and share disinformation but also structurally creates segregated information bubbles and erodes the trust needed for democratic consensus (Osmundsen et al., 2021). These dynamics have been vividly demonstrated during recent elections around the world, highlighting the need for ongoing research and strong efforts to fight polarization-driven information disorders and safeguard democratic processes (Ribeiro et al., 2017).

Fake news through AI in election

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have significantly transformed the landscape of modern elections, especially in democratic countries. These technologies power social media algorithms, targeted advertising, automated content creation (including deepfakes), and campaign strategy optimization—making campaign outreach more data-driven and responsive. The rise of AI-generated synthetic media makes detection and mitigation more difficult, posing increasing challenges to electoral integrity worldwide. AI-curated social media feeds expose users to content aligned with their interests and views, increasing the risk of echo chambers and limiting exposure to diverse political perspectives. AI-produced fake news, manipulated videos, and coordinated bot activity can amplify propaganda, facilitating the spread of disinformation at scale. This can distort voter perceptions and heighten political polarization. Malicious actors also exploit machine learning tools to identify and target vulnerable groups or interfere with electoral processes, raising national security concerns. Given these growing influences, it is urgent to systematically assess and regulate AI interference in elections. This includes reviewing how recommendation algorithms affect political content visibility; tracking the spread of AI-generated fake news and its impact on voter behavior; and developing policies and technological solutions to prevent manipulation and promote fair, informed voting. AI's role in shaping electoral dynamics calls for re-evaluating traditional political communication models and the ethical frameworks that govern them.

U.S elections and fake news

Political polarization and misinformation are not new topics in the media, but have become especially prominent during elections, particularly during President Donald Trump's campaign. Through 2024, the U.S. has held 60 presidential elections, occurring every four years without fail since 1789. From the beginning, the Electoral College has been responsible for electing the president. Initially (1789-1820), the president was chosen solely by electors, with no popular vote involved.

Starting in 1824, participation in the popular vote began affecting how electors voted, although the Electoral College's majority still determines the outcome. Early on, restrictions based on property, race, and gender limited voter eligibility, but over time, suffrage was broadly expanded. Modern elections show a sharp rise in registered voters, with over 231 million registered in 2020 and more than 238 million in 2024, driven by population growth and increased registration efforts. Voter turnout as a percentage of eligible voters has fluctuated over time. Elections in the early 1800s had a limited franchise and lower turnout due to restrictions.

In contrast, in the 20th and 21st centuries, turnout has typically ranged from 50% to 63%, influenced by political cycles and mobilization efforts. The 2020 election saw a record-high turnout of about 66.8%, the highest in over a century. While 2024 turnout data are still being gathered, early signs suggest participation will stay high given the intense electoral engagement. The voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 with the 26th Amendment in 1971, boosting youth voter participation. Recent elections have focused on efforts to increase youth turnout, who now comprise about 18% of the electorate (Arakaza, 2025).

Donald Trump's 2016 election increased activity in communication sciences as the era of polarization and disinformation began. Although the presence and impact of polarization had been recognized for a long time, they reached unprecedented levels in 2016. The link between disinformation and polarization was examined in newspapers from three countries: the U.S., France, and Spain. It is observed that political polarization is often portrayed as a long-standing issue, mainly driven by political actors rather than information disorders. These political figures—such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Jair Bolsonaro—exploit social media's lack of regulation (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2023). Another study investigates the obstacles to credible global elections by focusing on three countries: the U.S. (the world's oldest democracy), India (the world's largest democracy), and Estonia (a country that heavily depends on digital technologies during elections). The most significant challenges identified were managing misinformation and disinformation during the election period (Srivastava et al., 2023).

Indian elections and fake news

Celebrating 75 years of independence, India is riding the wave of being the world's largest democracy. Contested elections at the national, state, and local levels provide a foundation for fair governance. However, lately, every day feels like an election day with new narratives emerging daily, reflecting opposing political views and the competition for public perception. Elections in India represent a unique and complex interplay of democracy and governance that often go beyond traditional academic models mainly developed in the West. In the 21st century, the blending of democratic processes with governance challenges in Indian electoral politics has created a distinct discussion that needs deeper analysis. A persistent puzzle in Indian electoral politics is the cyclical phenomenon where political parties campaign on promises of good governance but frequently fail to deliver thoroughly once in power, yet still enjoy significant electoral support. For example, in the 2024 general elections, Prime Minister Modi's BJP secured a third term despite widespread criticism over governance issues such as service delivery inequities, allegations of political suppression, and concerns about the impartiality of law enforcement agencies (Duggal et al., 2024). This phenomenon underlines the importance of reorienting election analysis to consider democracy and governance as intertwined forces shaping electoral outcomes.

Modern factors such as the widespread impact of social media, the significant role of money in campaigns, and the trend of defections among elected officials greatly influence the electoral environment, bringing new messages and meanings for governance and democracy. For example, the 2024 elections saw extensive use of social media for political mobilization and misinformation,

along with accusations of electoral manipulation through the misuse of investigative agencies targeting opposition leaders. While psephology traditionally relies on empirical electoral data and public opinion surveys to analyze voter behavior, political science offers a broader framework that considers democracy and governance as essential perspectives for comprehensively explaining election results.

Political parties and free elections are essential pillars of a well-functioning democracy. However, political parties and party systems have evolved and changed significantly, even within established democracies. While parties ideally serve as conduits for public opinion and vital instruments of popular participation, they often acquire a negative connotation as they increasingly act as power brokers rather than effective platforms for addressing public concerns. This tension is especially evident in developing societies where party politics intersect with complex social dynamics such as caste, identity politics, ethnic conflict, federalism, pressure groups, affirmative action, public policy, and political economy (Varshney, 2001).

Historically, the Indian party system illustrates this evolution. In the early post-independence years (1952-1964), the Indian National Congress (INC) dominated as a broad-based party uniting various social groups and ideologies, serving as a genuine vehicle for popular participation. However, with the decline of the Congress system in the late 1960s and the rise of regional parties and coalition politics, parties increasingly became tools for elite negotiation and identity-based political mobilization rather than broad ideological representation (LaPalombara & Weiner, 1966). For example, the fragmentation of the Congress in 1969 and the subsequent Emergency period (1975-77) under Indira Gandhi showed how party power could be used to suppress opposition and centralize authority, undermining democratic participation. The emergence of regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab, and the Janata Dal coalition at the national level in the 1980s and 1990s further complicated party politics, as these groups often focused on regional identity, caste coalitions, and ethnic interests, sometimes intensifying social divisions.

Meanwhile, the BJP's rise since the 1990s and its consolidation of power by 2014 reflect the reassertion of a national party with a strong ideological base but also one engaged in identity politics and centralization of power (Voets et al., 2025). These developments show how parties have evolved from merely expressing public opinion to becoming key mediators in negotiating power across social and political divides. The role of parties as power brokers influences broader governance, policy implementation, and democratic discussions, making traditional views of party politics as solely representative or participatory more complex. This nuanced role of parties, as noted by Varshney (Varshney, 2001), remains crucial in understanding the changing nature of democracy in developing societies like India, where party politics operate within complex intersections of caste, religion, ethnicity, and economic inequality.

It is interesting to observe that the mass appeal of political parties is rooted in religiosity and freebies, rather than governance. The paradox is that democracy requires political parties, yet these parties are shifting away from functional democracy to serve their interests (Sisodia & Chattopadhyay, 2025). Since the late 1990s, the concepts of deepening democracy and good governance have become key themes in Indian politics (DeSouza et al., 2008) (Chandra, 2008). Building on the idea of a "third electoral era" (Sisodia & Chattopadhyay, 2025), scholars argue that state-based political parties are playing an ever greater role in shaping electoral outcomes and promoting democratic deepening across India's diverse regions.

The Election Commission of India remains one of the country's most trusted institutions, credited with conducting credible and large-scale elections. However, in recent years, opposition parties and some members of the public have expressed concerns about transparency and neutrality, especially

regarding electronic voting machines and the management of the electoral roll. Despite these concerns, the system's resilience and the high voter turnout show ongoing public engagement (Bhat, 2021). After nearly 70 years and over 400 primary elections—including 17 Lok Sabha and 391 State Assembly elections—India's Election Commission continues to maintain its reputation as a credible body and significant public trust. The scale of India's democratic process is remarkable: for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, nearly 969 million citizens were registered to vote, a fivefold increase since 1952. The demographic makeup has also shifted, with the number of first-time voters aged 18–19 reaching 1.85 crore in 2024—a 23% increase from 2019—though this still accounts for less than 40% of those eligible to vote for the first time. Overall, more than 210 million people aged 18–25 are eligible, bringing youth perspectives into the democratic process. While the Election Commission's credibility remains strong, challenges remain, including encouraging greater participation among young voters and fostering broader trust in electoral procedures.

Using religion as a tool for vote bank

The chapter titled "*The New BJP: Expanding Social Base and Ideological Moorings*" examines the evolving ideological foundations and expanding social constituencies of the BJP in the post-2014 period (Verma & Mathur, 2024). It argues that the BJP leadership presents Hindutva not primarily as a religious ideology but as a demographic and cultural identity, embodying a 'continuity and change' relationship with its ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The BJP's rise involves repositioning the Hindu community at the center of Indian political discourse, counteracting the earlier dominance of lower-caste politics that accompanied the deepening of democracy—what the authors describe as a 'counter-revolution of the dominant caste' (Vaishnav, 2025). This transformation marks a shift from a conservative stance toward constructing a broad, inclusive Hindutva identity among Indians, framed as 'common sense' in political narratives. Conceptualizing Indian democracy as a socio-political 'structure,' the chapter highlights how the BJP as the 'agency' simultaneously cultivates practical hegemony through governance and social counter-hegemony by reshaping democratic narratives to realign public perceptions and political discourse around its ideology. Supporting research shows that since 2014, the BJP has significantly broadened its social base, attracting not only traditional upper-caste supporters but also increasing appeal among Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits, Adivasis, and younger voters, thereby creating an unprecedented electoral coalition in India's Hindi heartland and beyond (Vaishnav & Mallory, 2024); (Ruparelia, 2024). This social and ideological consolidation has helped the BJP establish itself as a hegemonic force in Indian politics, redefining democratic engagement around a dominant Hindu identity while extending its influence into previously marginalized regions and communities.

Political disinformation fuelling societal polarization

Ramachandra Guha critiques Prime Minister Narendra Modi's consolidation of power after 2014, arguing that this dominance has weakened India's pluralism and essential democratic institutions. Modi's government has pursued the centralization and personalization of power, undermining institutional checks and promoting religious and cultural uniformity. The article warns that these trends could ultimately threaten both the strength of Indian democracy and its global ambitions, as India's pluralistic traditions are a vital source of resilience now at risk (Guha, 2024). This study explores how political disinformation and hate speech, especially on social media, fuel societal polarization. Using configurational and complexity theory approaches, it finds that disinformation, combined with monitoring and state censorship, can both provoke and manage polarization. Surveillance mechanisms may help reduce fake news but can also lead to a spiral of silence, where people self-censor, resulting in dominance by a single viewpoint and increased polarization. The findings emphasize the fragile balance for policymakers and platforms between fighting fake news

and maintaining open public discourse, especially as hate speech and hostile narratives deepen societal divisions (Kreiss & Neill, 2025).

Role of media watchdogs during elections

Electoral observation and media watchdogs play critical roles in ensuring electoral integrity. They enhance accountability by gathering and disseminating credible information on the electoral process - including campaigning, vote counting, and institutional transparency. In fragile democracies and electoral autocracies, where formal channels of accountability may be weak, international and domestic observer groups can provide both upward (to international organizations) and downward (to civil society) accountability. These groups help validate or challenge election credibility, bolster opposition confidence when fraud is exposed, and act as a check on electoral authorities. However, the impact is mediated by the transparency, accountability, and compliance mechanisms present in a given country (Norris & Nai, 2017). In the words of the Open Society Institute, “Silence and secrecy are two of the most powerful tools that government can employ to mute critics and cloak their actions from the public scrutiny” (Open Society Foundations, 2016). The mass media plays a crucial role in upholding ethical standards in public life through its watchdog function—monitoring and scrutinizing the actions of government officials, which is essential for a healthy democracy. However, how effectively the media fulfills this role is not fully clear. Insights into this come from the changing history of the press, including factors like media ownership, journalistic ethics, legal frameworks, technological advancements, organizational structures, and the nature of news coverage. While reporters rarely frame their ethical considerations around formal moral theories, the press generally measures its success by widely recognized examples of watchdog journalism, from investigative muckraking to the Watergate scandal. As media partisanship, news priorities, and reporting methods evolve, the watchdog role’s impact and effectiveness also fluctuate. Despite the rise of digital media and the availability of highly partisan news, most people still rely on centrist media for political news. However, a small but politically engaged subgroup consumes a large volume of strongly partisan content. This group tends to have a disproportionate influence on politicians, who often align their actions with these individuals’ views.

Research objective and research question

The theoretical development of the relationship between political polarization during elections and the spread of disinformation leads to the objective of this study: to analyze the role of media watchdogs during elections in mitigating the effects of polarization and fake news. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how watchdog organizations function in polarized media environments, their effectiveness in curbing misinformation, and their impact on the electoral information ecosystem and public trust.

RQ1: How do media watchdogs influence the dynamics of political polarization and disinformation during elections?

RQ2: What role do they play in promoting accurate information and democratic resilience in highly polarized electoral contexts in India and the United States?

This framing aligns with current theoretical insights that polarization exacerbates media bias and misinformation, which can distort electoral outcomes, and highlights the watchdogs' critical role in addressing these issues.

METHODS

This research employs content analysis to examine the influence of media watchdog organizations and the impact of fake news echo chambers on public discourse. A comparative analysis is conducted of online news articles and reports published by Newslaundry in India and by

American Oversight in the U.S. during the 2024 elections. The study identifies the key issues these watchdogs addressed regarding misinformation, the tactics they employed to expose fake news narratives, and how their interventions may have affected electoral information ecosystems and voter awareness. This analysis also explores the limitations and challenges faced by these watchdogs amid the rapid spread of digital disinformation, including platform enforcement gaps and the role of social media amplification in each country's distinct political and media environments.

For studying Indian general elections comprehensively, the ideal time frame includes the full cycle of the election process, including the announcement, campaigning, polling phases, and results. Based on the official schedule:

- The election notification and the model code of conduct came into effect on 16 March 2024.
- Polling was conducted in seven phases from 19 April to 1 June 2024 across different states.
- Vote counting and result declaration occurred on 4 June 2024.
- The tenure of the previous Lok Sabha ended on 16 June 2024.

Therefore, the selected time frame for analysis is mid-March to mid-June 2024 (15 March to 15 June 2024).

For covering the U.S elections

To cover the 2024 United States presidential election comprehensively, the ideal time frame should encompass the whole election cycle, including candidate announcements, primaries and caucuses, party conventions, general election campaigning, polling day, and the final vote counting and certification phases. Based on the official and typical schedule:

- Primary and caucus events began on January 15, 2024, with the Iowa caucus, and continued through the summer, concluding by June 2024.
- Major party conventions were held in mid-July and August 2024 to officially nominate presidential candidates.
- The general election campaign period followed the conventions, with key presidential debates held on July 27, September 10, and October 1, 2024.
- Election Day was on November 5, 2024, when voters cast ballots nationwide.
- Post-election processes include vote counting, certification of results, and the Electoral College casting votes on December 17, 2024.
- The new president took office on January 20, 2025.

Therefore, the selected time frame for analysis is from mid-January 2024 to mid-December 2024 (January 15 to December 17, 2024).

Newslaundry

Newslaundry was founded in 2012 in New Delhi by Abhinandan Sekhri, Madhu Trehan, and Prashant Sareen, all of whom brought extensive experience as former print and television journalists. It is widely recognized as India's first subscription-based news platform, operating solely on public subscription revenue rather than donations or advertising. As an independent media company, Newslaundry covers current affairs through a diverse range of formats, including media critiques, investigative reporting, podcasts, and documentaries. Newslaundry and its founders have significantly contributed to fostering a more accountable and transparent media landscape in India, embodying the watchdog role by scrutinizing political power, media practices, and social issues with integrity and innovation. Their role as a media watchdog is central to their mission. The organization has gained acclaim for in-depth investigative work that highlights critical issues such as gender sensitivity, government agents' environmental exploitation, and biases in electoral funding

mechanisms. This positioning underscores their commitment to promoting ethical journalism and holding power to account without commercial or political influence.

Since 2017, Newslaundry has hosted its annual event, The Media Rumble, South Asia's largest media forum, which convenes activists, lawyers, policymakers, tech innovators, scholars, and senior media professionals to critically examine the state of news media in India and explore ways to improve it. The event fosters dialogues about media diversity, inclusivity, technology's role in journalism, and the evolving challenges of sustaining independent media in a polarized environment. Eminent editors, managing directors, and journalists from India's leading independent outlets such as The News Minute, The Scroll, The Wire, and The Caravan actively participate, reflecting Newslaundry's collaborative approach to strengthening media freedom.

Previous research analyzes Newslaundry's role during the farmers' protests (Dangarwala, 2023), examines the motive of ethical digital journalism (Rao, 2024), and explores sustainable journalism practices (Rahaman). In addition to their investigative work, Newslaundry places a strong emphasis on amplifying marginalized voices and addressing national issues through rigorous, ethically grounded journalism. Their independence from advertising pressure enables them to pursue stories that might otherwise be overlooked or underreported. The platform has a strong track record of withstanding legal and political pressure, exemplified by their defense against defamation and copyright lawsuits from major media groups, affirming their commitment to free and fearless journalism. Their role as watchdogs is justified by their critical media analysis, influential annual forum, collaborations, resilience in the face of pressure, and commitment to ethical, inclusive journalism. Researching and following Newslaundry offers insight into one of the most credible, innovative, and effective defenders of media freedom and democratic accountability in the country.

The Reuters Institute case study describes how five independent Indian news outlets—Newslaundry, The News Minute, The Wire, The Caravan, and Scroll—collaborated during the 2024 Indian general elections to provide comprehensive election result coverage funded by their audiences. This coalition emerged in response to India's vast and complex election process, in which over 640 million people voted across multiple phases spanning 6 weeks. The collaboration enabled these organizations to pool resources and expertise to analyze and broadcast live election results, offering independent and diverse perspectives distinct from mainstream media. Audience funding played a critical role, enabling independent outlets to maintain editorial freedom without relying on advertising or government support, which is often linked to media bias or commercial pressures. By joining forces, the outlets maximized reach and impact, ensuring high-quality, non-partisan coverage accessible to a broad demographic. The initiative highlighted the strength of audience-supported independent journalism in India's highly competitive and polarized media environment. It demonstrated that collective action among independent outlets could strengthen democratic accountability by delivering credible and thorough election information to millions.

American Oversight

American Oversight is a nonpartisan watchdog committed to promoting truth, accountability, and democracy by ensuring the public's right to access government records. Since their establishment in 2017, they have obtained and released thousands of documents from federal, state, and local agencies. Their team works to prevent abuses of power, protect civil rights, and preserve government transparency. Especially, combat illegal attempts to weaken federal transparency laws—including the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)—and resist efforts by the current administration to sidestep transparency and restrict access to public records. They worked closely with more than 120 partners at the national, state, and local levels to uncover documents that could inform the American public and support the advocacy of progressive organizations fighting election subversion. Before the

2024 election, American Oversight released the Anti-Democracy Playbook, a detailed report analyzing eight strategies used by anti-democracy groups to suppress votes and erode trust in the electoral process. These tactics include mass voter-registration challenges, politically motivated lawsuits, spreading anti-immigrant conspiracy theories, voter intimidation, partisan control of election administration, delays in certification, demands for hand counts, and state-level voter fraud investigations. The Playbook revealed the networks behind these efforts and offered vital insights to protect democracy ahead of the election.

Table 1. Newslaundry articles on the 2024 Indian elections

Article Name	Published Date	Link	Common Themes Identified
Decoding the 2024 Lok Sabha mandate with independent media	April–June 2024 (Video series across election period)	Decoding the 2024 Lok Sabha mandate with independent media	Independent collaborative election coverage; analysis of election results; voter issues such as unemployment, inflation; opposition strategies; regional dynamics
Lok Sabha 2024 results, exit polls debacle	8 June 2024	Hafta 488: Lok Sabha 2024 results, exit polls debacle	Election results analysis; caste and regional politics; rise of Hindutva; exit polls versus actual outcomes; civil society role
Let's Talk About: Inside India's 2024 Lok Sabha elections	24 May 2024	Let's Talk About: Inside India's 2024 Lok Sabha elections	Interview with former CEC Syed Quraishi; election administration; voter turnout; electoral integrity
Exclusive: In 3 Lok Sabha seats swung by BJP, many wrong voter deletions, violations of EC norms	Post-June but detailing Elect 2024 (Dec 2024 for archived reference)	Exclusive: In 3 Lok Sabha seats swung by BJP, many wrong voter deletions, violations of EC norms	Voter list inaccuracies; electoral roll scrutiny; election commission's vulnerabilities; impact on close outcomes
Political analyst Sanjay Kumar on why Ram Mandir didn't deliver in 2024	11 June 2024	Political Analyst Sanjay Kumar	Voter priorities shift from symbolic issues (Ram Mandir) to unemployment and inflation; BJP's electoral challenges
Investigation coverage on electoral bond disclosures, political funding (Project Electoral Bond)	Throughout election period, reported in December 2024 retrospective	Electoral Bonds Data Released	Political funding transparency; electoral bonds scam; government-business nexus; investigative consortium journalism

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes notable Newslaundry articles on the 2024 Indian elections published between 15 March and 15 June 2024. Political funding coverage, especially regarding electoral bond disclosures, has become a significant focus in newsrooms ahead of India's crucial 2024 parliamentary elections. Hundreds of millions of voters re-elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP for the third consecutive term. These articles and coverage demonstrate Newslaundry's comprehensive role as an independent election watchdog during the 2024 Indian general elections. Common thematic threads across these articles include the independent and collaborative election coverage that provided real-time analysis and insights beyond mainstream narratives. Investigative journalism focusing on electoral integrity, including scrutiny of voter lists and political financing. Analysis of voter behavior and issue salience, such as economic concerns versus cultural symbolism. India has nearly 21,000 registered newspaper titles and around 400 news channels across numerous languages. However, due to widespread media capture by traditional outlets, the most revealing

investigative work recently has been done by smaller digital newsrooms like The Reporters' Collective, Newslandry, Scroll, The Quint, and The News Minute. These outlets are pioneering impactful and challenging reporting. A distinct watchdog orientation underscoring media independence amidst regulatory and commercial pressures. Use of multi-format content, including interviews, podcasts, and live discussion panels for deeper engagement.

Then, Table 2 summarize American Oversight's articles and videos on the 2024 U.S. elections, covering January 15 to December 20, 2024, with publication dates, links, and common themes identified based on publicly available information.

Table 2. American Oversight's articles and videos on the 2024 U.S. elections

Article Name	Published Date	Link	Common Themes Identified
2024 Anti-Democracy Playbook	January 2024	Anti-Democracy Playbook	Tactics of voter suppression and election denial; legal challenges; partisan election administration; voting rights threats
Tracking Threats to Democracy - 2024 Review	December 2024	2024 Review	Overview of anti-democracy influences; government transparency; attacks on democratic institutions
The Anti-Democratic Tactics Threatening Voter Access and Fair Elections	Throughout 2024	Anti-Democratic Tactics	Election integrity investigations; transparency in voting processes; FOIA requests exposing misinformation
The Election Denial Movement's Misguided Push to Hand-Count Ballots	September 2024	Investigative reports from American Oversight	Electoral bonds and political funding transparency; influence of money in elections
Virtual Panel on Election-Related Disclosures and Misconduct	March 2024	Virtual Panel for Campaign to Dismantle ERIC	Voter intimidation; election misinformation; partisan interference in election administration
Post-Election Certification and Legal Battles	November - December 2024	Newsletters and public data releases	Legal challenges to vote certification; delayed results; efforts to undermine election results

Discussion and Conclusion

Media watchdogs play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of political polarization and disinformation during elections, particularly in highly polarized contexts like India and the United States. Regarding RQ1: How do media watchdogs influence the dynamics of political polarization and disinformation during elections? These organizations actively monitor, expose, and counter misinformation and disinformation that often fuel political divides. By uncovering tactics such as voter suppression, politically motivated litigation, and the spread of conspiracy theories—as seen in American Oversight's 2024 Anti-Democracy Playbook—they reveal the networks and strategies behind attempts to manipulate public perception and election outcomes. Their work interrupts misinformation flows that can deepen polarization, helping to clarify facts amidst competing narratives. In India, similar watchdog efforts highlight vulnerabilities in voter lists, regional political influences, and misinformation around exit polls, which inform the public debate with grounded, evidence-based reporting. For the second question RQ2: What role do they play in promoting accurate information and democratic resilience in highly polarized electoral contexts in India and the United States? Media watchdogs enhance transparency by making government records and

investigative findings openly accessible, empowering the public and advocacy groups to hold power accountable. Through detailed research, collaborative independent coverage, and public dissemination of findings, watchdogs like American Oversight and Newslaundry foster informed citizen engagement and trust in democratic processes. Their persistent efforts to update reports and expose ongoing attempts to undermine elections strengthen democratic institutions by promoting electoral integrity, countering election denialism, and highlighting socio-political complexities beyond partisan headlines. In both the U.S. and India, the presence of vigilant media watchdogs is vital to counteracting attempts to erode democracy through disinformation and divisive tactics. They help anchor electoral discourse in facts and transparency, thereby supporting democratic resilience even amid heightened polarization. Ultimately, their work underscores the importance of accessible information, rigorous oversight, and independent journalism as pillars sustaining trust and fairness in elections.

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Data Availability Statement

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