

Chor or Chowkidar: who won the ‘chowkidar’ battle on Twitter during the 2019 Indian elections

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1 Background

The effective use of social media by Narendra Modi in the 2014 Indian elections opened a new frontier for India’s diverse and burgeoning political parties. During the campaign, then-PM candidate Modi promised to act as the nation’s ‘chowkidar’ (Hindi word for gatekeeper / watchman) against corruption and money laundering [2]. In 2018, Rahul Gandhi, then-president of the main opposition INC party, first used the slogan ‘Chowkidar Chor Hai’ (Hindi for ‘the gatekeeper is a thief’) in a campaign rally. Modi hit back on 16th March 2019 with the ‘MainBhiChowkidar’ campaign [1] (Hindi for ‘even I am a chowkidar’), appending ‘Chowkidar’ to his Twitter screen name and accusing the opposition of insulting the nation’s security guards. Following his lead, his cabinet colleagues, at least 1900 BJP politicians and tens of thousands of supporters added ‘Chowkidar’ to their names and #MainBhiChowkidar amassed more than 400,000 tweets within the day. This setup a direct confrontation between the two ‘Chowkidar’ narratives on Twitter. In this work, we intend to study which party dominated this battle during the 2019 General election period.

2 Data

Using a combination of machine learning classification and human verification, we have built a database of tweets of Indian politicians. Our ML model leverages the Twitter profile description, tweet content and Twitter **friend** and **list** network to identify if a given handle belongs to an Indian politician. We built a two-stage classification pipeline including a high-recall primary classifier that filters out spurious accounts using only the Twitter description text and a high-precision secondary classifier that uses tweet data to identify new politicians. We snowballed on the set of politicians in our labelled training set using their friend-network, list-network and common hashtag users to feed new accounts to the pipeline. We also used lists of candidates from state and national elections from the ECI ¹ website. Our approach can identify politicians with a precision of over

¹ ECI - Election Commission of India

91 percent. At the time of writing, our database contains tweets of over 18500 Indian politicians and over 8000 US politicians. Figure 1 shows our classification pipeline.

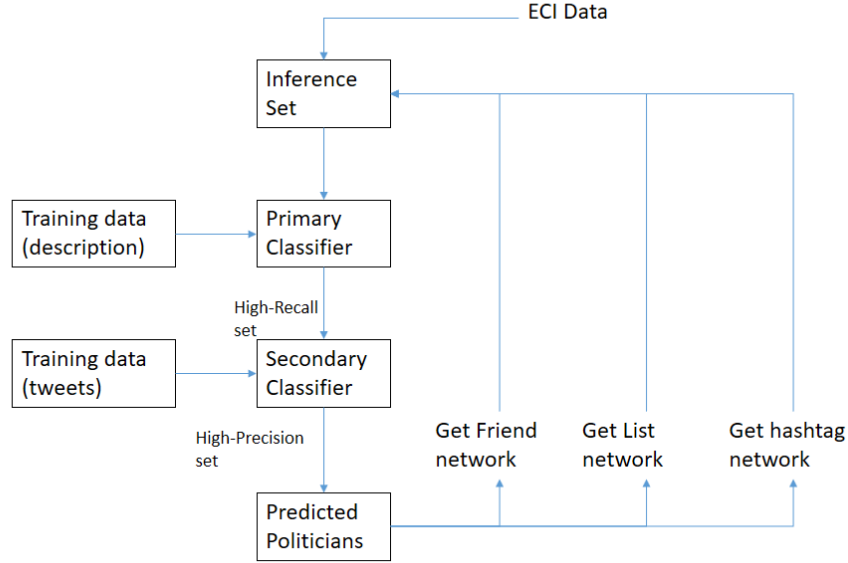


Fig. 1. Classification pipeline to find politicians on Twitter

For this study, we analysed the tweets of 2826 BJP politicians and 1644 INC politicians that posted original tweets (non-retweets) between January to May 2019. We selected tweets from both parties that included hashtags related to ‘Chowkidar’. A sample is shown in table 1.

Sr No	BJP hashtags	INC hashtags
1	#MainBhiChowkidar	#ChowkidarChorHai
2	#ChowkidarPhirSe	#EkHiChowkidarChorHai
3	#Chowkidar (devnagri script)	#FileChorChowkidar
4	#iTrustChowkidar	#FileChorChowkidar

Table 1. Top ‘Chowkidar’ hashtags tweeted by BJP and INC politicians

We collected a total of 44042 tweets (BJP-25716, INC-18326).

3 Analysis

To determine which party was more successful in getting traction on Twitter, we used two different metrics - total daily retweets and number of trending hashtags. For retweets, we added all the retweets earned by a party on any given day. For trending hashtags, we took all hashtags used by the party that trended for at least an hour on that day. Our database of trending hashtags consists of hourly trends on Twitter in India for all days in the study period. We controlled for the date, the party, the number of tweets posted, number of party politicians tweeting, the percentage of all party politicians tweeting and the sum of followers of these users. In adding up all followers of a given pair of politicians, we observe that there exist common users that are counted twice. But given that such followers are exposed to tweets of both politicians and have equal opportunity to retweet them, we aver that it is an accurate estimate of the reach of a party on a given day.

We fed these formulae to a linear mixed-effects model using log-transformation to scale all numerical variables:

$$daily_retweets \sim (1||date) + party + num_users + percentage_users + total_followers + total_daily_tweets$$

$$daily_trending_hashtags \sim (1||date) + party + num_users + percentage_users + total_followers + total_daily_tweets$$

As shown in table 2, we observed that relative to the BJP, the INC received higher aggregate retweets when it used its ‘Chowkidar’ hashtags. However, the BJP manages to get its hashtags to trend much more than the INC.

Response variable	Explanatory variable	Mean difference	Significance level
log_retweet_count	BJP - INC	-0.552	< 0.0001
log_trend_value	BJP - INC	0.199	0.0391

Table 2. Effect of party on daily retweets and trending hashtags

To understand the contradiction between the retweets and trending hashtags, we analysed the number of daily hashtag-linkages between users of both parties. We defined a hashtag-link as the use of the same hashtag on a given day two politicians of the party. We find that on days when at least 40 users use ‘Chowkidar’ hashtags from both parties, the BJP had at least twice as many hashtag-linkages than the INC for a pair of users, making for a much more cohesive campaign. This enabled the BJP to get more traction for its hashtags, thereby making them trend more.

4 Discussion

Our results show that INC was more successful in securing retweets than the BJP on the ‘Chowkidar’ issue, indicating that its politicians were more successful in propagating the party’s narrative at an individual level. However, the BJP’s cohesive team effort in promoting its hashtags allows it to reach audiences beyond its followers through Twitter’s trending topics. Prior work has shown that in terms of trending hashtags, the BJP dominated substantially after the ‘#MainBhiChowkidar’ movement [3].

Moving ahead, We intend to study this contradiction in greater detail, with specific focus on the interaction between different politicians using the same hashtag, organised hashtag promotion efforts and competing tit-for-tat hashtags used by the two parties. Our goal is to build a comprehensive framework to understand the dissemination of propaganda and extreme speech at scale by politicians in India.

References

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