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Is Tweeting in Indian Languages Helping Politicians Widen Their Reach?

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Indian politicians are increasingly tweeting in Hindi and other regional languages. The article finds that Hindi language tweets are more likely to be retweeted and favourited than tweets in English. Politicians in power use multilingual tweeting to offer positive messages such as greetings, whereas politicians in opposition use language strategically to use campaign-style wordplay to attack their opponents.

Lalu Prasad Yadav's tweet on 12 December 2017 did not only go viral online, but also found mention in print news. The tweet did not have an outwardly political message. It quite simply asked people to retweet. But it was a quintessential Lalu performance. The codemixed tweet stood on its sardonic lyricism—it worked best when one imagined Lalu quip it out. It also cannot be translated without losing its essential character.

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Figure 1: Tweet by Lalu Prasad Yadav (@laluprasadrjd) on 12 December 2017

Four years ago, during the 2014 general elections, the immediate recipients of Narendra Modi's social media outreach efforts were largely urban, English-speaking elites. The landscape on social media has evolved much since then. During the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) first Parliamentary meeting in March 2018, party leaders chose social media outreach as a central point of discussion. Parliamentarians who were not on social media as well as those who were but had not invested in expanding their presence, were enumerated. The prime minister set a threshold of social media followers for the first time—each parliamentarian would need to have at least 3,00,000 followers on social media, irrespective of what constituency they were from (*Zee News* 2018).

Modi's call to arms has been accompanied by a significant investment in social media by parties across the political spectrum. While the BJP still leads significantly in terms of social media following^[1] largely driven by a strong top-down push from the centre, the recognised role of social media in political outreach has now spread across parties at both the national and regional levels.

Parties as well as individual politicians now have dedicated teams working on social media, appealing to a range of electoral constituents and forming mixed scope clusters of followings online (Anand and Agnihotri 2018).

The Study

To better understand the importance of these clusters, we first aggregated a total of 274 politicians and political accounts.

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The list was generated based on two attributes:

- (i) The individual politicians' status as party leaders, such as being an elected representative or having an official post in the party machinery, and
- (ii) Significant following online, typically 50,000 followers or more. We then used the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) to mine tweets of each handle, and generated the corresponding median retweet count for each account.^[2]

As seen in Figure 2, at least 66 verified political accounts have over 1 million followers on Twitter. Unsurprisingly, these accounts also get significant online throughput as measured by the retweet rate for their tweets. Although Modi leads significantly in online following, and the majority of the most followed politicians on Twitter are from the BJP, leaders from a number of other political parties (significant of those being Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh

Yadav) have attracted followers and have received high throughput for their messaging. [3] In fact, between January and April 2018, the median retweet count of Rahul Gandhi's tweets consistently outscored the median retweet count of other Indian politicians', including the

Prime Minister, who has over five times as many followers.^[4]

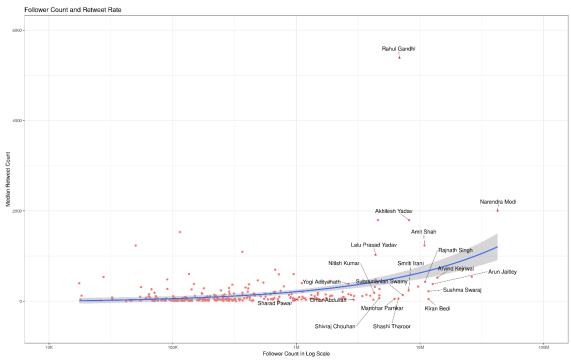


Figure 2: Indian Politicians' Median Monthly Retweet Rate by Number of Twitter followers: January - April 2018

Source: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1MPVmq-n9v34Y833D-4adMKYj2f mZDfK T5tPVM1k2SY/edit?usp=sharing

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Tweeting in Regional Languages

A key to the growing popularity of a number of politicians' messaging online has been the use of regional languages. Of the fifteen most retweeted messages by Indian politicians in the last year, eleven have used Hindi. All fifteen of these messages are from the prime minister. Eight of the fifteen tweets happen to be congratulations on an event (recently, it has been common for tweets with greetings to be written in two languages). Modi's own gradual move to using more of regional languages in his tweets has coincided with the increasing presence of such practices on social media.

Individual politicians' use of language is also spread across a range. Table 1 shows the percentage of English-language tweeting by various Indian politicians. Two trends emerge from this. While language use on social media does not map onto the language of preference of a politician's electoral constituents, it can serve as an indicator of who a politician speaks to online. The social media accounts of a few politicians are largely aimed at populations other than their voting constituents. For instance, unelected politicians like P Chidambaram, Subramanian Swamy, and Kiran Bedi have a higher proportion of English language tweets, whereas Sushil Modi, Raghubar Das, or Yogi Adityanath^[5] actively use social media as means

Table 1: Key Indian Politicians and the Percentage of their Tweets in English (Roman Script) between 10/2013 to 04/2018

Politician	Percent Tweets in English
P Chidambaram	99.9%
Kiran Bedi	99.8%
Manohar Parrikar	99.0%
Subramanian Swamy	99.0%
Shashi Tharoor	97.8%
Smriti Irani	86.8%
Akhilesh Yadav	82.7%
Narendra Modi	73.7%
Arvind Kejriwal	72.9%
Sharad Pawar	68.7%
Rahul Gandhi	68.0%
Piyush Goyal	65.6%
Vasundhara Raje	57.9%
Oommen Chandy	53.0%
Jyotiraditya Scindia	51.6%

of outreach to the press and citizenry by using more regional languages.

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Amit Shah	48.7%
Shivraj Chouhan	43.4%
Lalu Prasad Yadav	40.8%
Kumar Vishvas	37.6%
Raj Babbar	36.6%
Sushil Modi	30.8%
Raghubar Das	24.2%
Yogi Adityanath	8.0%

Although the net impact of language is still difficult to definitively quantify, we see a few initial trends. For both the Congress and the BJP, tweeting in English tends to get fewer responses from followers, as measured through "favourite count" (equivalent to the number of times users clicked the "Like" button). The median monthly favourites for tweets in all the Congress and BJP accounts from our sample show a gradual increase in favourite count for non-English tweets; particularly from mid-2015 and onward, the upward trend has been fairly consistent., For the BJP, however, we do not find a significant difference when measuring follower response using retweet count (equivalent to the number of times users clicked the "share" button on Facebook).

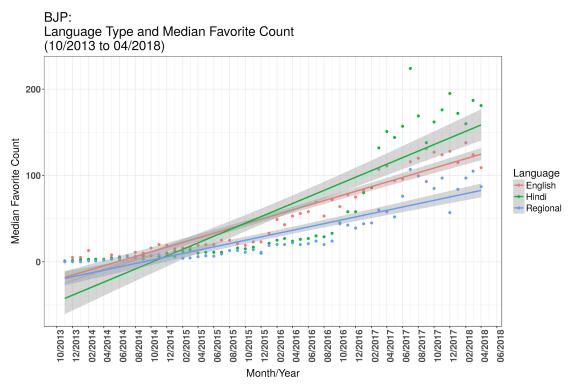


Figure 3(a): Median Monthly Favouriting of Tweets by Sample Politicians in the BJP.

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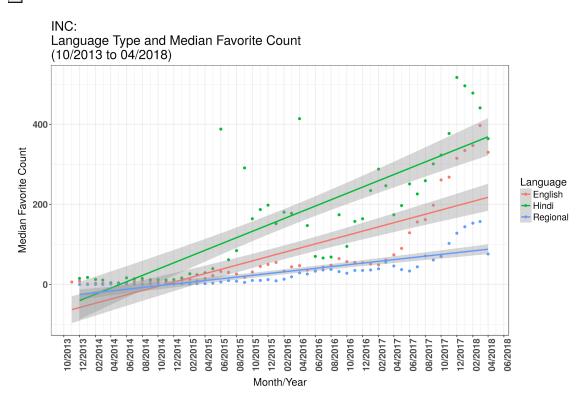


Figure 3(b): Median Monthly Favouriting of Tweets by Sample Politicians in the Indian National Congress (INC).

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Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi: Language Type and Median Retweet Count (05/2015 to 04/2018)

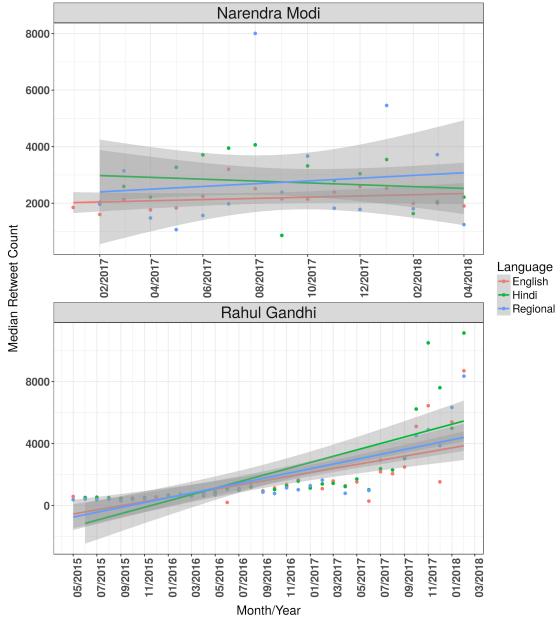


Figure 3(c): Median Monthly Favouriting of Tweets by Sample Politicians in Regional Parties

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Language and Political Style

Two trends pertaining to language and political party tweets emerge from Figure 3. First, Hindi language tweets perform better for the BJP, Congress, as well as regional parties post 2016. Second, non-Hindi regional language tweets do not perform as well as either Hindi or English.

While Figure 3 would suggest a much more significant engagement of the public with tweets from Congress politicians as compared to BJP politicians, particularly in the last six months, this is partly due to the impact of Rahul Gandhi's Hindi-language tweets, which have been widely retweeted. A look at Rahul Gandhi's tweets in Hindi offers unique perspective on the discourse of Hindi language political tweeting.

A latecomer to Twitter, starting only in mid-2015, Rahul Gandhi's following and the reach of his tweets increased dramatically in late 2017, as seen in Figure 4. While Modi still remains, by far, the most dominant political figure in terms of aggregated monthly engagement through retweeting or favouriting, Rahul Gandhi's messaging has taken on an aggressive style of confrontation that has aided the popularity of his messaging.

Part of this has been the adaptation of campaign-style sloganeering by using one-liners, wordplay, and rhymes, and often doing so in regional languages. A look at some of his most favourited Hindi-language tweets shows the use of wordplay and campaign style rhetoric.

Table 2: Most Favourited Messages from October and November 2017, a Period of Key Growth of Rahul Gandhi's Online Appeal, Arranged by Number of 'Favourites'

Date	Favourites	Tweet Text
11/2017	36907	0000 00 0000, 0000 00 00000 000-000 00 00000 0000 000 000-
10/2017	33740	Congress GST= Genuine Simple Tax Modi ji's GST= Gabbar
		Singh Tax ="00 0000 0000 00 00"
11/2017	33526	مم ممم رموموم مممموم ممموم ممم ممم ممم م
10/2017	25193	محموم محموم من محمومه من محموم من محموم من محموم معموم محمومه محمومه محمومه محمومه محمومه معمومه م
10/2017	24743	مم ومموده (محموده من ممودهم ممارهم مماره معاد) · عمد ممودهم من محموده
11/2017	23289	a aaaaa, a aaaa aaaaa aa aaaaa aaa-aaaa, aaaaa aa aa aaaa

Unlike politicians like Yogi Adityanath or Raghubar Das who conduct the vast majority of their communications in regional languages, the use of Hindi by leaders who use multiple languages or code-switch (use two or more languages in a single message) is made further

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interesting by its selective nature. While Modi uses Hindi primarily for greetings, relying on English for the vast majority of his regular tweeting, politicians like Rahul Gandhi or Lalu Prasad Yadav use Hindi with emphasis. As we see in Table 2, all of Rahul Gandhi's most favourited tweets from Late 2017 are either forms of rhyme, turn of phrase, or sarcasm. One interesting example is the repeated use of the multivocal "Shah Zade" to refer to Jay Shah, Amit Shah's son. Shahzade, ironically, was a term used by Modi in his 2013 tweets to derisively refer to Rahul Gandhi.

A look at how Modi and Rahul Gandhi perform in terms of message favouriting underlines the apparent success of the attack strategy in Figure 5. While the retweeting of Modi's messages is relatively flat, and consistently higher pre-2017, the phase of more attacking messaging and particularly the use of Hindi, appears to have much better throughput for Rahul Gandhi.

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Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi: Language Type and Median Retweet Count (05/2015 to 04/2018)

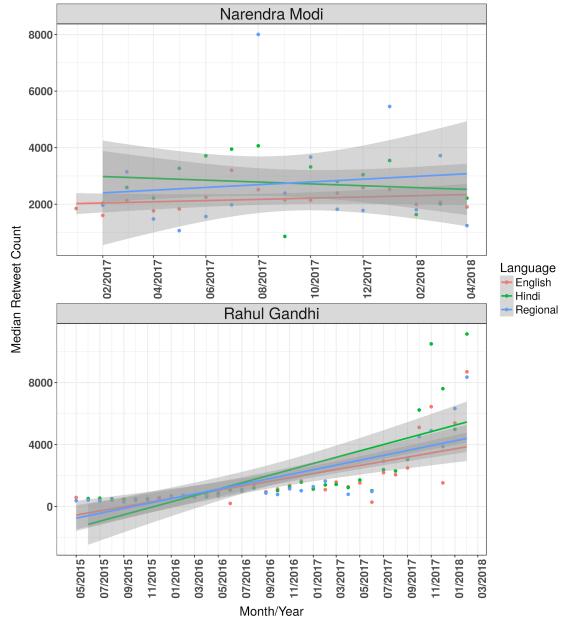


Figure 4: Median Monthly Retweets of Hindi-language tweets by Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi

Conclusions

The use of Hindi and regional languages on social media, in the native script of the

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languages, is growing. This trend is likely to expand the centrality of online spaces in political discussions in the coming elections by broadening the social media consumption base beyond tech savvy elites. Additionally, the migration of certain politicians to communicating solely using regional languages is an important sign of how political communication is evolving. This has consequences for information veracity, opinion diversity, and the role of professional news media. We are moving even closer to an era in which politicians across the political spectrum can actively switch to communicating with their constituents directly through social media, bypassing traditional print news altogether. This has important implications for the watchdogs' ability to force politicians to respond to important issues. It also has consequences for the development and enablement of an informed citizenry, particularly as more people move to getting their news solely or primarily online.

Finally, the increasing use of Hindi and regional languages online has moved towards breaking notions of social media as a form of elite outreach. In addition to the dominant use of regional languages by some politicians, the selective use of language for affective purposes such as insults, sarcasm, or humour, brings to fore the role of street-style sloganeering and rough and tumble politics as it plays out on social media. If the evidence is to be believed, politicians are actively embracing this style, and finding its resonance among followers.

End Notes:

- [1] In our sample, the median follower count for BJP accounts is 28.6K, which is 31.2% higher than the median follower count for INC.
- [2] Our sample includes 1.15 millions tweets contributed by 274 Indian political agents (individual politicians as well as official party accounts) between October 2013 and April 2018. Additionally, we observe 18 distinct languages used in our dataset, with English and Hindi being the most used languages.
- [3] Past research (Semetko and Tworzecki 2017, Ford et al 2016, Forelle et al 2015) has suggested the use of bots by various politicians across the political spectrum, however the extent of bot use in the following or retweeting of politicians cannot be exactly determined.
- [4] While Rahul Gandhi's median retweet rate (a better measure than arithmetic mean for the typical reach of a tweet) is higher, Modi, who tweets with greater frequency, is much more likely to have tweets go viral.
- [5] The majority of recent public speeches by all three politicians have also been in Hindi.

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Image-Credit/Misc:

Image Courtesy: Compiled from Twitter.

