Leader or Party? Personalization in Twitter Political Campaigns during the 2019 Indian Elections

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ABSTRACT

Personality-centric politics has been a significant part of discussions on social media's impact on electoral politics. In this study, we quantified personalization in mainstream politics by studying the extent to which parliamentary candidates referred to the key leader of their party as opposed to the party itself in their Twitter political campaigns. We found that the candidates of the incumbent right-wing Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, led by a popular and widely approved leader, Narendra Modi, were significantly more likely to run a leader-centric campaign than the candidates of the main opposition party, the INC. Smaller, state and regionalist parties showed mixed results - while candidates of some parties centralized their discourse significantly in their key leaders, in other parties' campaigns, the party was more prominent than its leader in candidate campaigns. We also found that BJP candidates, rather than uniformly running campaigns coat tailing on their hugely popular leader, were strategic in the extent to which they ran Modi centric campaigns. For BJP candidates, their followers count, the type of constituency and Modi's own approval rating in the region were closely associated with running Modi-centric campaigns. We found no discernible patterns in how INC candidates personalized their social media campaigns.

1 INTRODUCTION

Politicians throughout the world now engage with citizens on social media, often eschewing the mediation of their interactions through professional journalists and instead, speaking directly to their constituents [45]. In India, an increasingly large number of politicians have made Twitter their primary means of public outreach, which in turn has meant that journalists and citizens alike must turn to Twitter as a listening post for politicians' positions on various issues [19]. This has impacted how electoral campaigns are

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structured and managed, since social media becomes a site where the politician's image is constructed, and the channel which then propagates out to traditional media such as print and television [11].

The election of populist leaders with a heavy social media footprint such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, and Narendra Modi have brought to fore the role of personalized campaigns, where the central focus of political outreach is on the individual rather than the parties to which they belong [40]. Although personalization through social media is a relatively recent development, personalization itself is neither novel nor unique; Over the past few decades, researchers have observed increasing personalization in democracies with a variety of party and electoral configurations including Israel [40], Slovenia [9] and Egypt [26], across system (presidential and parliamentary), stage (early and mature democracies) and regional distinctions [39]. The contemporaneous rise of personalized politics and social media political campaigns is no mere coincidence; personalization research suggests that new media technologies such as social media propel politicians towards a more personalized style of campaigning by providing newer, multi-modal avenues of individual self-presentation [17].

Personalized politics has important and varied implications. One specific cause for concern, stemming from *classic democratic theory*, is that this emphasis on individuals will distract voters from accessing relevant information necessary to make rational choices in the ballot box [1]. In addition, leaders enjoying increased political importance as a result of personalization are likely to have more autonomy in taking issue positions and are thought to be unconstrained by party norms in such a system [48]. Thus, traditionally, personalized politics is viewed in unfavorable terms to party politics [4]. On the other hand, with declining party memberships, a charismatic leader may actually invigorate and boost the fortunes of the party. Thus, personalization may also be a calculated strategy adopted by political parties [38]. In addition, much like partisanship, personalization is also an informational shortcut employed by voters seeking to distill and simplify complex issues when making important political decisions [1]. Therefore, while we do not take a normative stance on whether personalized politics is beneficial or detrimental to democracy, we argue that personalized politics has important political ramifications and its prevalence must be examined and contextualized.

The rise of Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India presents an interesting case in personalized politics since India has a parliamentary system of governance which is generally more conducive to party politics [39]. Moreover, Modi belongs to the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is both cadre-based and ideologically driven, rather than parties that rely on one or a few charismatic or powerful figures as a source of their public

appeal. Unlike a presidential system in which presidents are either elected through direct elections or an electoral college, in India's parliamentary system, the party or coalition holding the majority of seats gets to appoint the prime minister. Therefore, a test of the prevalence of personalized politics in this scenario is to examine the extent to which candidates campaign in the name of their leader or their party. In this work, we conduct a large-scale analysis of the Twitter political campaigns of 539 candidates belonging to 16 major parties in India's 2019 parliamentary elections to accurately quantify the level of personalized politics by measuring the leader/party centric nature of their social media campaigns.

With political leaders eclipsing the popularity of parties, downstream parliamentary candidates who run on the party ticket must also adapt their electoral campaigns to match this changing fulcrum. Anecdotally, in 2014 and 2019 elections, BJP candidates were seen coat tailing on the party leader's popularity and riding the "Modi Wave" [1]. However, we still do not know if these candidates uniformly campaigned using the leader's name or if factors such as incumbency or leader approval ratings tempered the centrality of leaders to their campaigns. In this work, we examine how candidate-level and constituency-level variables are associated with how much a candidate centers their leader in social media campaigns.

Previous works predominantly examine the personalized politics of Narendra Modi and other populist leaders during their respective election campaigns. These works are specifically concerned either with the leaders' self-presentation [31] and messaging style [34] or with their parties' topical content focus [2, 8]. Significantly, while we have a clearer understanding how these leaders' personalized campaigns are run, we do not know to what extent downstream candidates center their leaders in their campaigns and what factors are associated with candidates choosing to run a leader-centered campaign. Unlike previous work, we focus squarely on the campaigns of individual candidates and their relationship to leaders during campaigning to answer these important questions.

Through our analysis we find that:

- Candidates belonging to different parties employ different levels of personalization in their campaigns. While the BJP parliamentary candidates centered attention on their main leader Narendra Modi in their campaigns as opposed the party itself, it was by no means the norm. We find that candidates of certain regional parties which were traditionally leader-centric, such as the TRS campaigned more on the party rather than the leader.

- We also find that the BJP candidates were especially strategic when referring to Modi during their campaigns. Candidates contesting in states with higher approval ratings for Modi referred to him more in their tweets than candidates in states where Modi had lower approval ratings. Interestingly, we find that candidates in reserved constituencies and those with lower social media presence (fewer followers) were more likely to refer to Modi in their tweets.

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[1]https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/modi-wave-failed-assembly-poll-candidate-makes-it-to-lok-sabha/articleshow/69486391.cms

2 INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

India's parliamentary system is based on the Westminster model. There are two houses of the parliament: Rajya Sabha (Upper house) and Lok Sabha (Lower house). In this work, we focus on political campaigns to the Lok Sabha, the primary legislative body of the country. In the Lok Sabha, 543 members are elected representing constituencies across the country based on a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system where voters may only vote for one candidate in a constituency and the candidate with the most votes, irrespective of whether they obtained the majority of votes, is declared the winner. Some seats of the Lok Sabha are reserved for members of groups historically marginalized by the Hindu caste system, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, to ensure proportional representation in lawmaking. The party or coalition that holds a majority of the seats in the Lok Sabha chooses the Prime Minister of India. Thus, voting in Lok Sabha parliamentary elections (or general elections) is central to choosing the Prime Minister, albeit indirectly, through electing Members of Parliament (MPs). Elections to the Lok Sabha are held every five years unless it is dissolved earlier by the President.

The Prime Minister and their government may be removed if the MPs pass a motion of no confidence in the Lok Sabha. Thus, unlike the presidential system, the Prime Minister is inextricably linked to the their party/coalition in parliament and must have the confidence of the majority of its members. Further, since voters do not directly vote for the Prime Minister, parties have traditionally played a central role in canvassing votes. In fact, most recently, the INC contested in the 2004 general elections and won without projecting a clear candidate for the Prime Minister's post. Therefore, institutionally, the parliamentary system in India is not particularly conducive to personalized politics. However, this does not mean that personalized politics does not exist in India. In the early 1970s, Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister enjoyed strong personal support among the masses with cries of "Indira is India and India is Indira" echoing during campaign rallies. Many regional parties such as the Shiv Sena and the AIADMK in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu respectively have also enjoyed leader-based support.

In the 2019 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi won an unprecedented 303 seats out of 543, while their primary opposition, the Indian National Congress (INC) won 52 seats. Much like the 2014 elections, the success of the BJP has largely been attributed to Modi's charismatic image and the party's social media strategy. Recent research suggests that about 30% of BJP aligned voters would have voted differently if Modi was not the BJP Prime ministerial candidate [42].

The other key parties that our work covered included two parties that operated primarily in the largest electoral Indian state of Uttar Pradesh - the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), two parties that operated in the second-largest state, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Shiv Sena (SHS), and one party in the newest state of India - Telangana, the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS). These parties were selected based on the number of verified candidate accounts on Twitter from each party, which we capped at a minimum of 10 accounts. Since most of these regional parties were primarily active in a single state, there is a significant gap between the number of accounts of the BJP and INC,

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the two parties that went head to head throughout the country, and these smaller parties, as shown in Table 1.

3 RELATED WORK

3.1 Personalized campaigns and social media

Social media is uniquely well suited to personalized politics. Much work has explored the ways in which lines between personal and public are blurred [18]. The personalization of politics was arguably intensified by the overlaying of social media on an audience-driven environment in which various aspects of a politician's personal life could be under examination by ubiquitous media [44]. Many studies have noted Barack Obama's use of social media as being an integral part of his political persona both in campaign phases and in subsequent continuing political outreach [7].

Nielsen's work in the early Obama era showed that political outreach on social media is highly controlled and integrated - both at the grassroots and on multi-modal broadcast media, and that these are managed by a highly trained set of professionals [29]. Social media is uniquely well placed to play a role as a central message-management medium, and as Elni and Skogerbø have noted, they fit into a 'long-term ongoing processes where political communication has become increasingly focused on personalities and personal traits of politicians'. [17].

3.2 Personalized politics in party-centred political systems

While personalized politics are purported to be more common in presidential systems, many party-centered political systems also play host to personalized politics. Personalization may occur because of institutional changes such as holding open primaries to select candidates or may be media-based where media reports have more emphasis on the individual candidates than parties, or be a result of behavioral changes where politicians engage in personalized behavior such as introducing private bills [40]. In addition, Allister suggests that decline in party membership in Westminster party-centered systems has resulted in parties turning to national party leaders to widen their reach and appeal, hastening the process of personalization [28]. Not all personalization is directed towards the central leader, instead, candidates may run highly personalized campaigns focusing on themselves rather than the leader or party resulting in *decentralized personalization* [4]. Winter and Baudewyns [16] identified that constituency-level candidates in party-centric Belgium run offline personalized campaigns based on factors such as seniority, size of district and how "safe" the constituency is for running a personalized campaign. Studying Norwegian politicians' social media usage, Elni and Skogerbø [17] found that personal visibility and marketing opportunities ranked highest in the list of motivations for politicians to engage on social media even in political systems that are party based. In our work, we study *centralized personalization*, which 'implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g. political party, cabinet) to a single leader (e.g. party leader, prime minister, president)' [4], specifically examining how candidates structure their campaigns emphasizing their leader or party.

3.3 Personalized campaigns in India

After the 2014 Indian general elections, much has been written about how the BJP ran a Modi-centric personalized campaign [3, 23, 31]. Jaffrelot [23] noted that the BJP's 2014 campaign actively reduced the emphasis on party apparatus by marginalizing senior party leaders and giving party tickets instead to close associates of Modi, while campaigning with explicitly personalized slogans such as 'Abki bar, Modi Sarkar!' (This time, Modi government!) and 'Your vote for the BJP candidate is a vote for me.' Chhibber and Ostermann [14] also observed that 31% of BJP's 'vote mobilisers', individuals who actively donate to the party and canvas for votes, said that they would have voted for another party if Modi was not BJP's prime ministerial candidate. In comparing Twitter political campaigns of major parties, researchers also noted that the BJP used Twitter to build a "modern identity" by connecting with the younger audience, engaging with users by replying to questions and acknowledging individual users through template tweets [2].

Broadly, research on personalization on social media has focused on either the importance of personalities and traits of politicians or how individual candidates run personalized social media campaigns aiming to make themselves known to voters. However, there is little work examining centralization on social media, studying if and how much candidates at the constituency level align themselves closer to the leader or party to harness their popularity. Specific to the Indian context, most previous work on personalization on social media focus almost exclusively on BJP's Modi-centric style of campaigning. While it is readily apparent that political campaigns have indeed been personalized, we currently lack approaches to accurately estimate the extent of personalized politics prevalent in these campaigns. Also lost in the focus on Modi is how individual candidates of BJP and other parties aligned themselves with their leaders in their social media campaigns. In this work, we aim to quantify the level of personalization in candidates' social media campaigns to compare personalization across parties as well as critically examine the factors associated with candidates employing personalized campaigning.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political personalization refers to a 'process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines' [40]. Thus, personalization is a process over time where political individuals become more relevant compared to political parties or institutions. Personalized politics refers to 'a specific point in time, a situation where political individuals are more important relative to political groups' [36]. As Pedersen and Rahat [36] note, research on political personalization and personalized politics complement each other and may provide interesting insights on their own. For example, they note that while Israel has a longer history of political personalization than Germany, the magnitude of personalized politics is higher in Germany than in Israel. In this work, we focus on studying personalized politics aiming to quantify its prevalence across parties and identifying factors that influence its employment by downstream party candidates.

Pedersen and Rahat offer two guidelines for porting the concept of personalized politics to our specific context. First, any measurement of personalized politics should include measures of specific behaviors to estimate the relative importance of individuals and collectives (party). Thus, in our scenario, we measure the extent of personalized politics by directly comparing the frequency with which individual politicians refer to their leader compared to their respective party in their Twitter political messaging. The logic of measuring the frequency of mentions during the election campaign is that the frequency is indicative of the importance of the leader or party. Thus, by comparing the frequency of mentions of leader and party, we can compare their relative importance. This type of measurement has been used in previous studies of media personalization in newspapers/magazines [15, 47] and television advertisements [37] during election campaigns. This measurement also allows us to compare the level of personalized politics across parties and identifying the factors associated with their prominence.

Pedersen and Rahat's second guideline is linked to identifying the specific area, level and character of personalized politics being studied. Since different dimensions of personalized politics may have entirely different implications, this guideline helps to consolidate and synthesize comparable research without unwarranted generalizations on personalized politics. In this work, by examining the behavior of candidates through their social media campaigns which also contributes to the construction of their media self-image, we study both the behavioral and media dimensions of personalized politics. Further, we examine the importance of leaders rather than non-leading politicians, analyzing personalized politics at the centralized level. Finally, in this work, since we don't characterize how the leader is being referred to, we cannot identify if the personalization we observe is privatized, where more emphasis is placed on the private life of individuals highlighting non-political factors such as families, hobbies etc [46]. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that privatization is indeed prevalent in the Indian context evidenced by Modi's tweets featuring photos seeking blessings from his mother and visiting sacred temples [31].

5 DATA COLLECTION

Elections in India was held in seven phases from April 11th to May 19th, 2019 for 543 Lok Sabha seats. Most parties released the list of candidates in batches only a few weeks before the elections. Therefore, we initially had a running script collecting tweets of most politicians who were likely to contest in the elections. Once candidates were announced, we relied on TCPD - Indian Elections Dataset [6], which lists details of all 8000+ candidates contesting in the elections, to source our candidate list. Although, the Election Commission mandated that all candidates declare their social media accounts in their candidate affidavit filed to the Commission, many did not actually specify account details [2]. Further, unlike other countries, most candidates in India did not have verified Twitter accounts (at least, at the time of the elections). Therefore, we employed machine learning approaches [35] as well as manually identified Twitter accounts of candidates contesting in the elections by looking up party websites, news articles and performing

Party	Twitter accounts	Median tweet count
BJP	266	272.0
INC	148	149.5
SHS	16	219.0
SP	13	99.0
NCP	12	141.0
BSP	10	113.5
TRS	10	42.0
Other Parties	64	95.0
Total	**539**	**182.0**

Table 1: Summary of twitter accounts collected showing the number of accounts identified per party and the median number of tweets posted by candidates belonging to that party.

searches on Twitter and Google. As we are concerned primarily with the questions related to how party candidates campaigned, we identified accounts of candidates of major state and national parties, omitting independent candidates and candidates of small regional (sub state level) parties. To make the data collection task tractable, we also removed candidates who *lost their deposit* from the TCPD list [3]. Since elections are held in phases, candidates' campaigns in different constituencies may have different end dates. Therefore, we collected and analyzed tweets posted by candidate accounts from February 1, 2019 to the polling dates of their respective constituencies. In total, we collected 197663 tweets from twitter handles of 539 candidates contesting in 397 constituencies belonging to 16 major parties using Twitter's REST API [4]. Table 1 shows the number of accounts identified per party and the median number of tweets posted by candidates belonging to that party. For this work, since we are interested in estimating how central leaders/parties are to political campaigns of candidates, we restrict our analysis to the 7 parties for whom we have identified accounts of at least 10 candidates on Twitter. Apart from Twitter data, we obtain individual and constituency level data for each candidate in the elections from TCPD - Individual Incumbency Dataset [21]. We obtain approval ratings for Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, the leaders of the BJP and INC respectively, in 21 major states from India Today-Axis My India post poll study [5].

6 PARTY OR LEADER? WHO IS CENTRAL TO TWITTER POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS?

As mentioned in Section 4, to characterize the level of personalized politics, we compare the frequency at which candidates in different political parties refer to their leader or to their party in political campaigns. Then, we compare the levels of personalization across parties.

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[2]https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections/ls-polls-politicians-still-have-a-long-way-to-become-online-personalities-119051100990_1.html

[3]To deter fringe candidates who do not have a realistic chance of winning the election from contesting, the Election Commission requires a monetary deposit from candidates while filing their nominations. The deposit is returned if the candidate secures at least 1/6th of the total votes cast in the constituency.

[4]Contact the first author for the dataset

[5]https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/congress-performance-elections-2014-2019-bjp-rahul-gandhi-modi-1534753-2019-05-25

Party	Region	Leader	Leader twitter accounts	Main party accounts
BJP	National	Narendra Modi	@narendramodi, @narendramodi_in, @PMOIndia	@BJP4India
INC	National	Rahul Gandhi	@RahulGandhi	@INCIndia
SP	Uttar Pradesh	Akhilesh Yadav	@yadavakhilesh	@samajwadiparty
BSP	Uttar Pradesh	Mayawati	@Mayawati	@BSP4Bharat
SHS	Maharashtra	Uddhav Thackeray	-	@ShivSena
NCP	Maharashtra	Sharad Pawar	@PawarSpeaks	@NCPSpeaks
TRS	Telangana	K. Chandrashekar Rao	@TelanganaCMO	@trspartyonline

Table 2: Details of each party, including the party leader and their primary twitter account handles. Uddhav Thackeray has since had a twitter presence but was not active online at the time of data collection

Twitter provides multiple ways by which candidates may refer to leader or party. They may retweet, quote or mention (@mention) or may simply use the leader or party's name in their tweets. We identify a tweet by a candidate as leader (party) referring if the leader (party) was referred to in that tweet by any of the aforementioned ways. There are indeed other ways to refer to party leaders on Twitter, most notably, through sharing photos and videos of the leader which this measure does not consider, a limitation we return to in Section 8.

6.1 Identifying leader and party referring tweets

First, we manually identify the twitter accounts of leaders and their parties. Most leaders and parties have one official twitter handle. Some leaders have multiple twitter handles, usually one personal twitter handle and other handles corresponding to their role as prime/chief minister. National parties such as the BJP and INC also have state-specific twitter handles which we also include in our analysis. We use these twitter handles to identify if candidates retweet, mention or quote tweet their leader/party. Since, BJP and INC candidates contesting in different states may refer to their leaders and parties in the local language, we obtain party and leader references in major 12 Indian languages apart from English [6]. For other parties, we obtain references in English, Hindi and the regional language of the state in which they are contesting. We then use regular expressions to identify tweets containing leader or party text. We mark tweets as leader (party) referring if the leader (party) was retweeted, @mentioned, quoted or if their name was mentioned in that tweet. Table 2 includes the party and leader names in English and their corresponding twitter handles [7]. For each candidate C, we calculate the total number of tweets ($T_{C,n}$), the number of leader-referring tweets ($T_{C,l}$) and the number of party-referring tweets ($T_{C,p}$) posted during the election campaign.

6.2 Modeling

In order to estimate and compare the party-wise averages of leader-referring and party-referring tweets, we build a mixed effects logistic regression, modeling the probability of an average candidate of a party posting tweets referring to party or leader. The number of leader or party-referring tweets is the number of *successes* and the total posts by a candidate is the number of *trials* of a binomial distribution, as follows:

$$T_{C,refer} = Binomial(P(refer), T_{C,n})$$
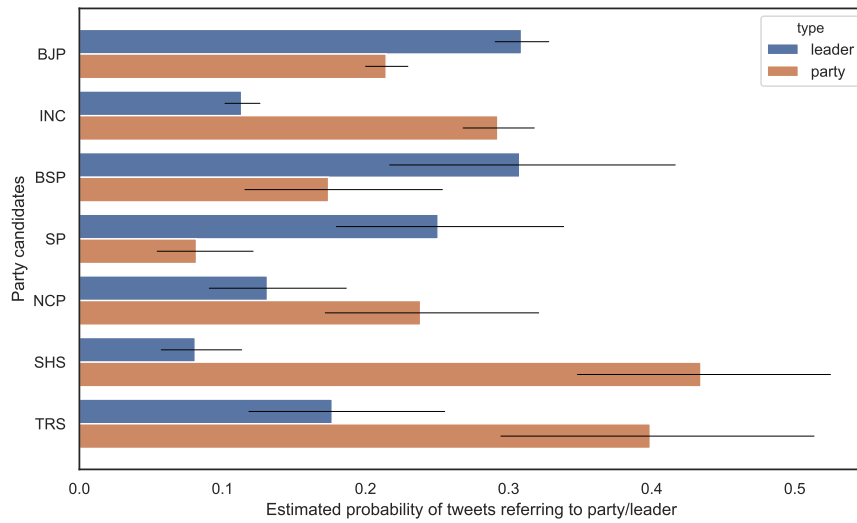$$P(refer) = logit(\alpha_C + \beta_l is\_leader + \Sigma\beta_p party_p$$
$$+ \Sigma\beta_{p,l} party_p * is\_leader)$$

where: *is_leader* is an indicator variable indicating whether the tweets posted by candidate C are leader-referring (*is_leader* = 1) or party-referring (*is_leader* = 0). $T_{refer,C} = T_{C,l}$ when *is_leader* = 1 and $T_{refer,C} = T_{C,p}$ when *is_leader* = 0. We include a dummy variable $party_p$ for each party p. Since we are primarily interested in how candidates belonging to different parties vary in their references to party and leader, we include an interaction effect $party_p * is\_leader$. Finally, we include a random effect for candidate α_c to account for individual variances in the tweeting activity.

Through this model, we estimate $p(refer)$, the probability of referring a leader (when *is_leader* = 1, *party* = *p*) or party (when *is_leader* = 0, *party* = *p*) by an average candidate of political party p. Since, candidates may vary quite widely in their levels of activity on Twitter, this estimate is not the same as simply averaging over the references in tweets posted by the members of a party. This approach ensures that a few outlier candidates who prolifically refer to the party or leader in their tweets don't distort the estimation of $p(refer)$.

6.3 Results and Discussion

We use the *lme*4 package [5] for modeling and the *emmeans* package [27] to perform post-hoc comparisons between party and leader referring probabilities for different parties. Since, the referring probabilities are in the same scale, they can be compared within and across parties. Figure 1 shows the probabilities of an average candidate belonging a party posting a tweet referring to their party (orange bar) and their leader (blue bar). All party-vs-leader comparisons within parties yield statistically significant(at $p = 0.05$) differences.

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[6]We obtained the party and leader references in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Punjabi, Odia, Bhojpuri, Urdu and Gujarati.
[7]Uddhav Thackeray, the chief of Shiv Sena (SHS) did not have a Twitter account during the Lok Sabha elections. We provide more details on this and examine the robustness of our findings in Section 6.4

Figure 1: The frequency of leader (blue) and party (orange) referring tweets that an average member of each party has posted. All differences within parties are significant at $p = 0.05$. BJP, BSP and SP candidates, on average, post a higher frequency of leader-referring tweets while INC, NCP, SHS and TRS candidates post a higher frequency of party-referring tweets.

We observe that the BJP candidates on average refer to Modi (30.90%) with higher frequency compared to their party (21.44%). Interestingly, the BJP candidates refer to Modi in rates comparable to BSP candidates referring to their leader, Mayawati (30.77%), a party known for its leader-centric style of functioning. On the other hand, the INC candidates referred to their party more than their leader (29.24% vs 11.33%), suggesting that the candidates, acting rationally, were on average less reliant on their party leader Rahul Gandhi for their electoral campaigns, which may either refer to the relative de-personalization of campaign strategy in the party, or that the local candidates, acting independently, found the Gandhi to be less valuable as a vote-puller.

The NCP, SHS and TRS, regional parties which traditionally have been leader centric, project their party (NCP: 23.84%, SHS: 43.44%, TRS: 39.90%) more than their leader in campaigning (NCP: 13.14%, SHS: 8.10%, TRS: 17.67%). However, for all of these parties, the child of the main leader - Supriya Sule, daughter of NCP leader Sharad Pawar, Aditya Thackeray, son of Shiv Sena leader Uddhav Thackeray, and KT Rama Rao, son of TRS leader K Chandrashekhar Rao are all top figures on Twitter for their respective parties. In other words, in each of these, the grooming process to take over the party leadership eventually is arguably part of what reduces the dominance of the head of the party, a hypothesis we test in the following section.

Three parties (BJP, BSP and SP) out of seven parties analyzed clearly project their leader more than their respective parties. Given the large literature on the personalizing effects of social media on political campaigning, our results show a need to rethink how personalizing has its nuances - either related to the relative draw of

a specific leader, or to the unique motivations of a party at a given time.

6.4 Checking the robustness of our findings

6.4.1 Can the presence of family members of party leaders explain the lower levels of leader personalization observed?

The family factor in party personalization is an important point of study for the future of regional parties in India. Family control of regional parties in India has long been a well-known facet of their political development [12]. An overwhelming majority of the key regional parties to have won seats in the 2019 election are currently or historically run by members of a single family. The family member who is groomed to be a future leader is often deployed in a high ranking public facing position. For example, with the SHS, Uddhav Thackeray, its leader, did not have a Twitter account during the elections while his son and SHS youth wing president, Aaditya Thackeray has over 2 million followers and is active on Twitter. Thus, while Uddhav is clearly the main leader in offline interactions, online, the younger leader is allowed to be the mainstay of the party.

Similarly, the INC, NCP and TRS have multiple members of their respective founding families among top positions. Thus, it is perceivable that, because of the multiple power centers within the party, candidates may be splitting their leader referring tweets between the party leaders. Therefore, we performed a robustness check, performing the same analysis by expanding the set of leaders to include Aaditya Thackeray for SHS, Priyanka and Sonia Gandhi for INC, Ajit Pawar and Supriya Sule for NCP and KT Rama Rao for TRS. Predictably, the probability of leader-referring tweets by party candidates increased with the addition of more leaders, however, a

Variable type	Variable	Description
Constituency level	Electors	z-score of number of registered voters in constituency
	Reserved constituency	Yes, **No**
	Approval ratings	Leader's approval ratings in the state in which constituency is present
Candidate level	Gender	Male, **Female**
	Incumbent MP	Yes, **No**
	Experience	Number of terms previously served as MP
	Followers	log(number of followers)
	Verified Twitter account	Yes, **No**

Table 3: Independent variables used in modeling frequency of Modi (Gandhi) referring tweets by BJP (INC) candidates. The reference category for all categorical variables is in bold.

statistically significant difference between the probability of posting leader and party referring tweets remained for all four parties. This implies that while candidates do refer to the family members of the leaders in their tweets, it still does not make up the difference between the frequencies of leader-referring and party-referring tweets

6.4.2   Does the number of followers of the party account exceed that of the leader accounts?

Another possible reason for the lower frequencies of leader referring tweets for these parties could be that, at least on Twitter, the popularity of the party exceeds that of the leader. Candidates may be trying to reach as many users as possible in their tweets and choose to mention accounts having the highest reach, that is, the highest number of followers. Thus, by this logic, if the party accounts had more followers than the leader accounts, this might explain the candidates choosing to @mention, quote and retweet party account more. However, we find that for all parties, leader accounts have more followers (sometimes 10x) than official party accounts. Therefore, more party followers does not explain the reason for candidates of these parties choosing to refer to parties more than their leaders.

7   WHAT FACTORS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH CANDIDATES CENTERING THEIR PARTY LEADER IN TWITTER POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS?

Results from the previous section suggest that the extent to which candidates run personalized campaigns vary from party to party. What about intra-party differences in campaigning? Consider for example the BJP candidates who, on average, aligned closely with their leader, Narendra Modi in election campaigns. It is unclear if these candidates instinctively campaigned centering a leader who was a social media giant, whether this decision was driven by central diktat, or if candidates individually calculated in choosing to align with Modi. Indeed, an important underlying question in this work is about who in charge of the messaging by the Twitter accounts of party candidates? the individual candidates or centralized party high command? Based on news, exposes of party IT cell activities, as well as a booming industry in political social media management, it is well known that brand managers and a large number of party

workers work behind the scenes to both craft what a politician says and engineer message virality [13]. Arguably the most significant social media campaigns of the 2019 - the INC's #ChowkidarChorHai (The Watchman is a Thief) and the subsequent tongue-in-cheek rejoinder in the BJP's #MainBhiChowkidar (I am a Watchman) offer important examples of how hashtag battles are both rooted in clever brand wordplay and are driven by party workers' aggressive online engagement [33]. News reports have suggested that the BJP party high command exerts influence messaging [8], and the prime minister himself asked incumbent MPs to show a following of at least 300,000 on Twitter or risk losing their party ticket in the elections. [9]. However, given the secrecy with which all parties conduct activities on social media, we know surprisingly little about the inner workings of these campaigns and how centrally controlled the everyday activities of the individual candidates on Twitter are.

Driven either by central command or individual calculation, if the decision were indeed strategic, what factors are associated with this alignment? We analyze the constituency level and candidate level factors that may be associated with leader alignment by building mixed-effects binomial regressions to model the frequency of candidates' references to their leader in their tweets. For this analysis, we use only the candidates' leader-referring tweet counts ($T_{C,l}$) and total tweet counts ($T_{C,n}$) mentioned in Section 6.1 and limit the analysis to only the BJP and INC candidates as the other parties have too few accounts to make meaningful inferences in this case. We build two identical regression models for BJP and INC candidates to compare factors that affect them. The full list of independent variables and how they are operationalized is available in Table 3. Below, we explain the rationale behind analyzing these variables.

Constituency level variables: The features of the constituency that a candidate contests from is expected to inform their campaign strategy. For example, the size of the electorate generally affects campaign strategy. Candidates in larger constituencies are more likely to run centralized campaigns as fewer percentage of the electorate are likely to know the candidate individually in a large constituency [49]. Therefore, we include the size of the electorate as a variable in the model. In India, certain seats are reserved for candidates belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, in

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[8]https://techcrunch.com/2019/02/13/india-politician-tweets/
[9]https://theprint.in/politics/modi-tells-mps-increase-social-media-following-to-3-lakh-or-ticket-may-be-in-jeopardy/44330/

	BJP		INC	
	Dependent variable			
	Percent of leader-referring tweets			
	β	SE	β	SE
Followers	-0.051^{**}	0.025	0.021	0.051
Verified Twitter account	0.057	0.133	-0.082	0.252
Gender(Male)	0.048	0.139	0.209	0.278
Incumbent	0.144	0.136	-0.316	0.291
Experience	0.071	0.045	-0.0001	0.084
Electors	0.047	0.048	-0.155	0.104
Leader approval ratings	0.019^{***}	0.007	-0.003	0.009
Reserved Constituency	0.229^{*}	0.137	0.357	0.256
Constant	-1.673^{***}	0.458	-2.249^{***}	0.521
Total observations	252		138	
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

Table 4: Coefficients from binomial regression models predicting the likelihood of BJP (left column) and INC (right column) candidates referring to their respective leaders in their tweets.

order to increase their representation in law making. Researchers have observed major differences in door-to-door campaign styles between reserved and general constituencies [25]. We examine if these differences translate online and include type of constituency (reserved for SC/ST candidates or unreserved) as a variable in the model. Specific to leader-centric campaigning, intuitively, we expect the leader's approval ratings in the region to factor in how prominent the leader is featured in the candidate's campaign. Since, we only have data on approval ratings at the state level for Modi and Gandhi, we include the approval ratings for the state in which the constituency is present as an independent variable[10]. We also include a state-level random effect to account for regional differences (beyond leader approval ratings) in how campaigns are conducted.

Candidate level variables: Many candidate level variables also play a prominent role in devising campaign strategy. Incumbency accords many advantages to a candidate during campaigning, especially in terms of access to more campaign funding and familiarity with voters [20]. Incumbent candidates likely already have name recognition and are less likely to depend on the leader for canvassing votes. On the contrary, newer candidates may need to coattail on the leader; This lack of visibility also likely reflects in their social media profile. To gain a larger social media audience, newer candidates may need to refer to their leader more often in their tweets. Therefore, we include in the model, traditional candidate-level factors associated with visibility such as incumbency and experience (the number of times the candidate has previously been a Member of Parliament (MP)) as well as social media popularity metrics such as followers count and Twitter verification status as a proxy for familiarity with voters. It is well documented that female politicians are historically at a disadvantage in Indian electoral politics and only make up 14% of current MPs. On Twitter, Indian female politicians are especially targeted for abuse, with over 13% of all tweets

mentioning them during the elections reported to be abusive in a recent study[11]. Therefore, we include the gender of the candidate as an independent variable in the model to examine if they conduct online campaigns differently compared to their male counterparts. Finally, we include a candidate level random effects to account for individual differences in the levels of Twitter activity recorded.

7.1 Results and discussion

We report the model coefficients for both BJP and INC candidate models in Table 4. For BJP candidates, based on the coefficient for approval ratings ($logodds = 0.019$, $odds = 1.019$), we observe a 1.9% increase in the odds of tweets referring Modi for every 1 percent increase in approval rate. This suggests that candidates do adjust their references to Modi in their tweets according to his approval ratings in the state, albeit in a small way. We also find that candidates referred to Modi in much higher proportions in constituencies reserved for candidates from the Scheduled Castes or Tribes (SC/ST), referring to communities historically discriminated against by the Hindu caste system. Based on the coefficient for *reserved constituency* ($logodds = 0.229$, $odds = 1.25$), we observe a 25% increase in the odds of tweets referring to Modi in reserved constituencies. There is a plausible explanation for this, since the literature has shown that under Modi, there has been a dramatic shift in SC/ST voting patterns. While this population traditionally did not vote for the Hindu right wing parties (which were typically seen as upper caste oriented), there has been a significant movement towards the BJP since Modi's ascent, which makes him, rather than the party and what it has traditionally represented, the major driver of votes [24]. This case also highlights how parties can use personality over ideology in targeting specific interest groups when it is more relevant to electoral goals.

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[10]Since we have approval ratings for only 21 states, we restrict our analysis to these states only. However, these states together make up 523 out of the 543 MP seats

[11]https://amnesty.org.in/news-update/shocking-scale-of-abuse-on-twitter-against-women-politicians-in-india/

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We also find that the frequency of Modi references is inversely related to the number of followers the candidate has on Twitter. This suggests that less popular candidates (as measured by their Twitter following) refer to Modi more in their tweets, presumably to tap into the leader's high popularity on Twitter (with over 50 million followers), or to signal closeness to Modi. There may be multiple interpretations of this. The obvious connection would be to tap into the positive brand value of the highly followed leader online, but it is also plausible that retweeting is a form of tribute, and it is not uncommon in Indian political culture for lower-level leaders publicly express obeisance for a leader in a cult of personality style politics [22, 41]. We do not observe any statistically significant associations with other variables such as gender, experience and incumbency for BJP candidates.

For INC candidates, we find no significant associations between any candidate or constituency level variables and their propensity to refer to Gandhi. Interestingly, we find no evidence of correlation between between Gandhi's approval ratings and the frequency with which INC candidates refer to him. This means that candidates either referred to Gandhi at rates irrespective of his popularity in the state they were contesting in. Since we have evidence from the previous analysis suggests that candidates, on average, referred to him in only 11% their tweets, it appears that candidates referred to him in lower rates even in areas that he was purported to be popular. This may be because Rahul Gandhi has traditionally had a significant social media disadvantage, due to a successful campaign of insult and disparagement [43]. Despite his gains on social media since mid-2017, in which he started aggressively trolling the prime minister online [32], the ghost of the dominant narrative of him as naive and infantile, put forth by the opposition, continued to haunt him [30]. Thus, INC candidates may be less inclined to be associated with him on social media, even when his offline popularity in the region is higher.

Another possible interpretation is that centralized outreach, such as instruction to candidates to tweet about the leader, may be limited with INC. This is plausible in explaining the institutional gap between the two parties. Much recent work has examined how the BJP has had an extremely well-oiled machinery that has centralized the discourse and talking points for its members online [10, 13] and in particular, been effective with building a strong brand identity for its leader, Modi [23]. However, there appears to be no similar narrative for the INC and Rahul Gandhi. Thus from the perspective of candidates from both parties, we see on one hand, the BJP that is both known to be centrally organized in its social media output and helmed by a hugely popular leader, whereas the INC is not known to have a well-coordinated social media strategy, and the key leader himself does not have the draw of his key rival. This could be useful in understanding the relatively low push for Rahul Gandhi by his own party's candidates.

8 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This work examines only the social media campaigns of candidates and thus, it is unclear if the insights from these studies apply in the offline context as well. That is, we do not know if candidates' leader-referring behavior in the online context is indicative of their behavior offline in rallies, speeches and door-to-door canvassing.

Future work comparing behavior of candidates in offline and online contexts will help answer this question. However, research suggests that online campaigning strategies adopted by parties are consequential by themselves, for raising the profile of candidates and circumventing the traditional media [45].

In this work, we measure the most direct form of personalization, a candidate referring to their leader through text in their tweet. This measurement does not identify personalization through other media such as sharing posters or photos of their leaders and does not take into account the relative weight of such different forms of personalization – Sharing a photo of the candidate greeting the leader may have a higher significance than merely retweeting the leader. Further, this work does not study the effects of personalization on followers and voters. Do personalized social media campaigns increase visibility, improve voter perception and garner votes in the election for individual candidates? Both identifying and understanding the effects of the different forms of personalization are avenues for future work.

9 CONCLUSION

We present the first quantitative analysis of centralized personalization in social media electoral campaigns in any parliamentary system, improving our understanding of personalization in party-centered systems. First, we find that the extent of personalization varies across parties. While the BJP, SP and BSP candidates emphasized their leaders more than their parties in their tweets, other parties such as the INC, NCP, SHS and TRS candidates employed more party-centric social media campaigns. This suggests that, despite social media being conducive to personalized campaigns, candidates do not necessarily default to such campaigns. Instead, we observe that candidates may just as easily run party-centric campaigns by amplifying party accounts and referring to their parties in their tweets. Thus, we demonstrate the need for a more nuanced understanding of personalization in social media campaigns that is attuned to not just the affordances for personalization that social media sites offer but also to how parties, depending on their own unique local circumstances, may choose to highlight the party's image using the same affordances.

Specific to the India context, contrary to the popular narrative which projects a near universal embrace of Modi by BJP candidates during the election campaigns, we observe that these candidates were particularly strategic in aligning themselves closely with Modi, in spite of his outsized popularity, both offline and on social media. Finally, we find that factors such as the number of followers and Modi's approval ratings were strongly associated with the frequency with which BJP candidates referred to Modi in their tweets.

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