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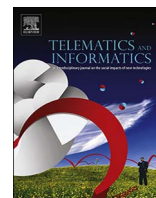
# Leveling the playing field: The use of Twitter by politicians during the 2014 Indian general election campaign

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

In this study, it is theorized that the communicative affordances offered by social media platforms will enable politically under-resourced candidates to contest the marginalization they face in traditional media. Multivariate analyses were conducted of the tweets of 205 political candidates of the 2014 Indian general election. Findings reveal that fringe party candidates received the least media attention and tended to use Twitter more frequently than major party candidates, especially for interaction and mobilization. Minor party candidates also received less media attention, albeit their Twitter usage patterns were not significantly different than major party candidates. The results illustrate that social media platforms can help overcome resource inequality in politics. The larger implications of this study are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

The past decades have witnessed an explosive growth in online political activities and its profound impact on the political processes in many democracies worldwide (Howard and Parks, 2012; Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2014). Political parties and organizations, interest groups, and ordinary citizens have converged and interacted with each other on the online sphere to disperse and promote ideas and exert influence on politics (Bennett, 2012). The enhanced communication among citizens through online and mobile technologies has empowered grassroots networks and activism across the globe (Lee et al., 2017; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). Likewise, politicians and parties have strategically used the communicative affordances of online media in interacting with citizens (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Kruikemeier, 2014). These online politics culminates particularly during election campaign periods during which high-intensity information flows and communication occur. Political candidates produce and distribute their campaign messages, bypassing the gatekeepers in traditional media channels (Lassen and Brown, 2011). Further, using various social media platforms, candidates directly connect with and mobilize voters, and quickly respond to opponents' claims (Graham et al., 2013).

As online campaigning gains more prominence, scholars seek to understand the implications of the introduction of the new campaign practices for the long-standing patterns of inequalities among political parties (Jacobs and Spierings, 2016; Larsson and Moe, 2014; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). In politics, some parties have more resources and advantages than others. Incumbent parties and well-established parties tend to have a stable and strong constituent base and local organizations, which in turn makes it

easier to attract media attention (Hopmann et al., 2011). In contrast, minor parties or parties that represent underprivileged populations or alternative perspectives of the society often lack resource and reputation in politics (Margolis et al., 2003). These disadvantages result in low media attention. In a democracy, especially one with a multi-party system, socioeconomic cleavages in the society likely translate into power and resource inequalities among political parties depending on the socioeconomic status of the constituents that each party represents (Bartels, 2009). If this is the case, the existing socioeconomic gap in the society is likely to become perpetuated due to the structural disadvantages imposed on the parties that represent minority groups and underprivileged populations/regions.

Within this context, a growing number of scholars have investigated whether the emerging trend of online campaigning levels the playing field for minor political parties and politically disadvantaged candidates. Yet, research to date has yielded mixed results. Some have found that candidates of well-established major parties and those with high campaign budgets use Internet technologies more actively than others (Gilmore, 2012; Peterson, 2012). This research is consistent with the normalization hypothesis (Margolis et al., 1999) which posits that online campaigning would only reinforce existing power relations of offline campaigns. The argument is that larger parties have strategic departments, are more experienced and better campaigners, and have more resources therefore they will replicate offline power in the online sphere (see Jacobs and Spierings, 2016). However, others have found that opposition and emerging parties tend to be more active in using digital technologies than governing parties (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; Hemphill et al., 2013; Plotkowiak and Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013). This work is camped into the innovation/equalization hypothesis which suggests that politically disadvantaged parties and candidates would be able to catch up with established parties, by campaigning through online media (Gibson and McAllister, 2011; Schweitzer, 2008). The explanations center around low cost of investment and less skills required for online platform use (see Jacobs and Spierings, 2016).

However, the current scholarship has mostly focused on Western democracies where the Internet and social media has become an integral part of political campaigns. Investigating a context where social media is starting to make inroads in politics can provide us with a better understanding of how it can help reduce political inequality. Further, most of the previous work has not considered both party characteristics and campaign essential personal motivations of candidates that could drive them to use new technologies (for exception see Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). An understanding of these set of factors can better explain why politicians turn to new technologies.

The present study aims to fill the existing gaps and extend the current literature by providing an insight into online campaigning by political candidates in India, a newer democracy of the global south. India is indeed a relevant context to study whether online and social media technologies would flatten traditional power structures in political parties because it has a multi-party system and its election in 2014 was the first-time social media tools were extensively used for political campaigning (PTI, 2013). Since Internet technologies and social media are just starting to make inroads in India, there exists a good amount of variations in online campaigning across parties and more so between candidates, which makes it feasible to study the relationship between party establishment, candidate characteristics, and online campaigning. In addition, it is fruitful to go beyond the frequently analyzed relatively settled liberal-democratic contexts and expand the research on transformative effects of new communication technologies in global politics.

While examining the usage of Twitter by Indian politicians, the present study also considers their traditional media coverage in terms of the newspaper attention they received in the period leading up to the general election. This will provide us with a better understanding of the interplay between the factors which drive the candidates to use Twitter. This approach is different from most studies of social media and political campaigning, which have paid little attention to the fact that social media is just a part of a more complex political media ecology, which comprises traditional media and politics-related interactions on various channels outside of social media. To better understand the online campaigning, it is imperative to look at traditional media sources that remain an important part of political campaigning.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Study background: the 2014 Indian general election

The electoral process for 16th Indian general elections, the world's biggest democratic exercise, spanned over a month, from 7th April to 12th May 2014 and involved nearly 815 million voters (Taylor and Kaphle, 2014). Voting was held in ten stages and the country witnessed the highest ever electoral turnout at 66.4%. The results signaled a historic win for the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) being voted to power, marking one of the rare instances in the nation's political history when neither a non-coalition government nor Indian National Congress (INC), the other political powerhouse, were to govern the state. BJP's win also marked the first instance since 1984 when a party had won the elections with an absolute majority winning 272 parliamentary seats out of the total 545 seats.

Although the social media penetration in India was only 12% in 2014 (Digital India, 2014), a pre-election study suggested that social media campaigning could influence the electoral outcome for 160 seats making social media the newest vote bank with the power to shape Indian politics (Patel, 2014). Research suggested social media campaigning to be more persuasive than TV ads (Haq and Ray, 2013) and therefore social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, were extensively used during 2014 electoral campaigning. Twitter Inc. consolidated a firm partnership with BJP politicians and various Indian mobile service providers to distribute tweets online and offline (Kalra, 2014). An important aim behind extensive social media campaigning was to engage a high number of first-time voters. India's largest and youngest voter base ever included 150 million 18–23 years old who qualified to vote for the first time (Virmani, 2014). In 2014, India had nearly a billion telecom subscribers and 243 million internet users (PTI,

2014a,b). The latter is a small, but important community since pre-election analyses predicted that social media could influence the electoral outcomes in urban constituencies where the Internet is widely used. Accordingly, most parties used the Internet and social media technologies to complement and scale their campaign in the run up to the 2014 general elections. Online campaigns made imaginative use of social media to connect with the masses. Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which literally translates to 'Common Man's Party', used two-way SMSs as an important canvassing tool in the Delhi elections. BJP used a wide scale mass distribution of SMSs with an aim to register new voters. The party used social media to strengthen internal workflows, such as to mobilize booth level workers through specialized WhatsApp groups. Baishya (2015) notes BJP ran a slick viral marketing utilizing selfies of Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, which played an important role in the run-up to the election. The party also set up a separate IT cell to monitor social media opinion, create models of voter engagement, generate targeted advertisements and recommended actions to the party management (Roy and Das, 2013). Regional parties such as the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the YSR Congress party, and the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) also forayed into social media campaigning to promote their agenda in the national arena.

Some studies investigating the 2014 Indian general elections found that BJP, a major party and the eventual election winner, was highly successful in digital campaigning (Arulchelvan, 2014; Baishya, 2015). Others suggest that the new political parties were also successful in online campaigns (Chopra, 2014). This study aims to go beyond previous investigations and conducts an analysis of individual candidates' Twitter activity (and not party's central accounts).

## 2.2. Political campaigning on social media

In the US and globally, the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial campaign by Jesse Ventura was considered one of the first Internet-based election campaigns. As a third-party (Reform Party) candidate, Ventura launched a campaign website to announce his campaign schedules and organize supporters. Although he was a visible candidate due to his charismatic persona and pro-wrestler career, his campaign suffered from weak local party organizations and was substantially outspent by his opponents from two major parties. The use of the Internet was a way for Ventura campaign to make up the resource deficit, and this move was considered one of the reasons why he won the election (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Contemporary Internet technologies allow candidates to do much more than what political websites provided about two decades ago. Online campaigning via social media, for example, enables on-the-fly multimedia content creation and circulation. Indeed, online campaigns are now versatile in the forms they take up – be it 7-second to hour-long videos, pdf documents, the web, and mobile applications or re-shareable gif images. These messages are available to the public instantly, without the reporting, production and editing lag incurred when communicating over traditional news sources (Hermida, 2012). Although traditional media are still the main distributors of campaign messages, social media enable political candidates to circumvent the filters of journalism and directly release their messages through and collect feedback from networks of citizens at low cost. The affordances and capacities that social media provide have brought changes to how candidates and parties wage their campaigns and interact with citizens (Hong and Nadler, 2012; Soon and Soh, 2014).

In the last few years, Twitter, among various social media platforms, has established itself as one of the most popular communication tools for campaigns (Hopkins, 2014; Larsson and Moe, 2012). It is common now for political leaders to hold special Twitter town hall meetings to answer questions posted by Twitter users and ask for public support via Twitter (Cilliza, 2011). Twitter has even been incorporated into presidential debates. When the presidential debates are on, political commentators live-tweet the debates on Twitter and campaign aides jump in, not waiting for the traditional post-debate "spin." These instances highlight how Twitter is redefining how politicians construct and distribute their messages. The integration of the medium in political campaigns is underlined by the fact that the social media giant recently offered a manual, titled "The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook" ahead of the 2016 US presidential election to help candidates use the platform effectively for political campaigns (Twitter, 2015). Likewise, in India, Twitter closely worked with Indian politicians during the 2014 electoral campaigns and partnered with mobile and media firms to distribute tweets (Kalra, 2014). The outreach attempts by social media platforms to facilitate online political campaigning appears to be beneficial especially for non-established parties and candidates with resource and media attention constraints.

Although the experiments with Twitter as a new campaign tool is continuously evolving and gaining prominence, a limited number of political parties and candidates are actually using it for their campaigns across the world (Nulty et al., 2016). Available research suggests that even when adopted, Twitter is used differently. Some use it as a tool for mobilization or interaction with the citizens, while others only consider it a form of broadcasting (Graham et al., 2013). Drawing on this research, the present study aims to explain different uses of Twitter by political candidates. Beyond the frequency of Twitter use, we specify the communication patterns by looking at their *interaction* practices and *mobilization* efforts via Twitter. While the broadcasting features of Twitter to send messages from one to many is helpful for political campaigns, it is the conversational features that can add to a more refined approach to online campaigning. These conversational affordances offered by Twitter is what bridges the gap between politicians and candidates (Coleman and Blumer, 2009). Political tweets are also a way to mobilize voters (Parmelee and Bichard, 2011). The tweets that contain "mobilizing information" (e.g., a call of vote, to donate, be part of offline rallies, etc.) from political candidates are re-tweeted by followers and followers of their followers creating a chain reaction. These messages spread across the online audience creating support for candidates.

*2.3. Party establishment, traditional media coverage, and online campaigning*

Established parties are often with a long history and have been central to the governing of the country. Vergeer and Hermans (2013), for example, define establishment as the history of the party as indicated by party age in years. This is well suited to analyzing most Western democracies, where fewer parties compete for the electorate and have a democratic history of over a hundred years. For a young and developing democracy, such as India, however, defining establishment as the party's history may be limiting. This is because some political parties like Indian National Congress (INC) and All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen (AIMIM), which were formed in 1885 and 1926 respectively, did not actually stand for election until India's first election after independence, held in 1951–1952. In the 2014 election, a total of 8251 candidates from 464 political parties competed for the electorate. Typically, after India's general elections, several political parties come together to form a coalition government at the center. These alliances are dynamic and may last only until the next week or the next state election. Thus, it is not clear how only the history of political parties could help to identify establishment. Another relevant explanation of establishment is Sartori's (1976) perspective of political relevance, comprising all those parties that participate in the government, or those parties that are regarded as suitable coalition partners by the governing party. In this manner, Sartori (1976) focuses on the "governing potential" of a party and its "governmental relevance." In a similar vein, Norris (2003) defines party establishment based on the party's electoral performance in the most recent election. Given the political context and party dynamics in India, party establishment is better understood by considering political and governing relevance. We then follow Norris' classification to conceptually distinguish parties into three categories (i.e., major, minor, and fringe), based on their recent electoral performance.

Party establishment matters in terms of drawing media attention. Indeed, media bias in coverage of established and non-established parties is well documented. Established parties form a significant proportion of the electorate, which results in continued media and public attention. Research has shown that incumbent parties receive greater media attention than other political parties (Hopmann et al., 2011; Van Praag and Van der Eijk, 1998). Political parties that do not belong to the establishment receive minimal attention as they are considered less newsworthy (Schönbach and Semetko, 1996). Given that the trend of media-centered campaigning in contemporary elections, the attention bias in news coverage skewed in favor of established parties creates a serious structural inequality problem for minor or fringe political parties.

Under this circumstance, social media offers a visibility platform for political candidates who are not frequently covered by the media. Campaigning through social media can be a more hospitable environment for the non-established parties and candidates who may not be able to afford extensive advertising nor attract airtime on traditional media outlets. On social media, there are typically no supervisory authorities who constantly monitor and make gatekeeping decisions of who to cover and who to disregard. It can be also argued that established parties and candidates have more resources to offer sophisticated online campaigns, as shown by Gibson and Ward (2000). Although possible, this possibility appears less likely. Given that the cost of online campaigns is near negligible, perhaps what matters more is motivation to use it. Established major-party candidates already enjoy strong visibility and receive media attention, which reduces further demand for online campaigning. In contrast, for candidates from small, under-resourced parties, social media applications are of great value for their campaigning; by using social media, they can fill their offline resource deficiency and make up the lack of media attention at least to some degree. In sum, drawing on the above discussion, we propose a mediation model that will explore the relationship between the party establishment and Twitter usage and the mediating role of media coverage in the relationship, as follows:

Candidates from less established parties will be less frequently covered in the media than candidates of established major parties (H1). Candidates with less media coverage will post more tweets (H2a), interact more with Twitter users (H2b), and raise more calls for mobilization (H2c) than candidates with more media coverage. Finally, the relationship between the party establishment and Twitter use in total posting, interaction, and mobilization will be mediated by media coverage, as indicated by significant indirect effects of candidates' party establishment on Twitter use – total tweets posted (H3a), interaction (H3b), and mobilization (H3c).

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Sample

To test the hypotheses, we first had to identify political candidates who used Twitter for their campaigns in the 2014 Indian general election. Per the Election Commission of India (www.eic.nic.in), a total of 8251 candidates from 464 political parties waged their election campaigns in that year. From the list of candidates, we randomly drew a sample of 1650 candidates, which is 20% of the total. We then identified whether each candidate had a Twitter account created prior to the election. This resulted in 205 candidates with a Twitter account, which formed the final sample for our analyses. In terms of Twitter adoption, about 12.5% (N = 205) of the initially sampled candidates (N = 1650) had an account for the online communication platform. After identifying the candidates qualified for our study, we collected two sets of data: Tweets posted by the selected candidates and the candidates' individual and party characteristics.

### 3.2. Tweet data

Tweets posted by the 205 candidates from midnight March 7th, 2014, when the voting schedule for the 2014 general elections was announced, until midnight May 12th, 2014, the last day of general election, were collected, using Twitter's API (total *N* of Tweets = 22,496 with retweets excluded). Then, the collected tweets were counted for each candidate (*M* = 109.74, *SD* = 98.67),

and two coders analyzed all tweets to identify a) *interaction* and b) *mobilization* tweets. *Interaction* ($M = 23.87$, $SD = 9.54$) tweets included replies to other users, operationalized by @ mentions. *Mobilization* ($M = 24.71$, $SD = 10.20$) tweets contained messages which urged the users to either make a campaign contribution, subscribe to a political party's website/social media accounts, sign up to volunteer for the party, donate money for the campaign, vote for the party, or attend campaign events. A coding session was conducted before the final coding process. The pilot sample involved 3050 tweets and once an acceptable inter-coder reliability was reached, the two coders split the remaining sample and proceeded with coding (n = 9723 each). If the coders felt a tweet belonged to multiple categories, it was included in all such categories. For each tweet, the mean of the coding results from the two coders was calculated for final analyses. Reliability was assessed by using Krippendorff's alpha, and alpha scores were above the often-suggested level of 0.70, indicating satisfactory levels of reliability (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). The count of total number of tweets posted, interaction, and mobilization tweets form the three dependent variables in our study.

### 3.3. Party establishment

The party establishment, the main independent variable, was measured by adopting Norris' (2003) classification of parties. Each candidate's party was categorized into one of the three groups (i.e., major, minor, and fringe), based on the party's electoral performance in the 2009 general election. Specifically, parties with more than 20% of the seats in the parliament were classified as "major," those with 3%–20% seats as "minor," and finally those with less than 3% of the seats as "fringe." Yet, Sartori's (1976) perspective of political relevance highlights the need to pay attention to all those parties that participate in the government or those parties that are regarded as suitable coalition partners by the governing party. Therefore, any party which joined the coalition with the leading major party, Indian National Congress (INC) to form the government in 2009, was also classified as a "major" party because they were an integral part of the ruling establishment. Two dummy variables (i.e., minority and fringe parties) were created with the major party being the reference category.

### 3.4. Media coverage

A candidate's media coverage, specified as the mediator, was measured as word counts (in hundreds) by examining his/her mention in news stories published in three leading dailies, *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Telegraph*, during the study period. The choice of the newspapers was based on the circulation and regional coverage across India . Stories were searched through LexisNexis news archive. If a news article mentioned two or more candidates, then the word count was divided between each candidate ($M = 53.11$, $SD = 41.61$).

### 3.5. Controls

Based on previous literature, this study considered a number of control variables that could potentially influence a candidate's Twitter usage: candidate age ($M = 49.73$, $SD = 11.29$), gender (85.9% males), Twitter experience ($M = 10.13$, $SD = 6.41$; in month), the number of Twitter followers ($M = 112.58$, $SD = 57.5$; in thousand), party ideology (65.9% left-wing), and party age as measured by subtracting the year the party started using the current name from the year 2014 ($M = 32.82$, $SD = 21.34$). In addition to these basic variables, we considered various shocks (i.e., external, internal, and personal) as additional controls (Gibson and Rommele, 2001; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). The external shock, often defined as an electoral defeat/success, was measured by the relative change in the number of seats a party obtained in the 2009 election, as compared to the 2004 election ($M = 10.52$, $SD = 40.48$). The internal shock was measured as a major intra-party event such as the change of leadership within a candidate's party (0 = no, 1 = yes; 21.46% shocked). The personal shock was indicated if a candidate had been involved in a political or personal scandal (e.g., bribery, criminal case involvement, etc.) during the six-month period before the election nomination (0 = no, 1 = yes; 12.2% shocked).

## 4. Results

Hypothesis 1 states that candidates from less established parties will be less frequently covered in the media than candidates of established major parties. Media coverage was regressed on two dummy variables (i.e., fringe and minor parties with the major party as the reference category) and a set of control variables. As seen in Table 1, both fringe party ($b = -45.34$, $SE = 10.76$, $p < 0.001$) and minor party ($b = -22.09$, $SE = 10.81$, $p < 0.05$) were negatively associated with media coverage, suggesting that candidates from fringe and minor parties received significantly less attention from news media, as compared to candidates of major parties.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that candidates with less media coverage will post more tweets (H2a), interact more with Twitter users (H2b), and raise more calls for mobilization (H2c) than candidates of major parties. Each of the three types of Twitter use was regressed on the two dummy variables of party establishment and control variables. When predicting specific Twitter use such as interaction and mobilization, we controlled for total tweets posted as overall use of the medium. As reported in Table 1, media coverage was not significantly associated with total number of tweets ($b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.18$, *ns*) while it was negatively associated with interaction ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.05$) and mobilization ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < 0.05$) tweets. As hypothesized, the results indicate that candidates who had less media coverage used Twitter more actively for interaction and mobilization than those with more media coverage. However, the overall number of tweets was not influenced by media attention.

Finally, building on the above hypotheses, Hypothesis 3 proposes a mediation possibility: party establishment as indicated by two

**Table 1**
Party establishment, media coverage, and Twitter campaign.

| | Media coverage | | Twitter use | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Total Tweets | | Interaction | | Mobilization | | |
| Age | 0.12 | (0.31) | 0.98 | (0.78) | −0.10 | (0.07) | 0.03 | (0.08) | |
| Gender (male = 1) | 5.37 | (8.19) | 51.95 | (20.72) | 0.70 | (1.85) | 1.25 | (2.07) | |
| Personal Shock | 2.37 | (5.73) | 2.17 | (14.49) | 2.17 | (1.28) | 2.11 | (1.42) | |
| Party Age | 0.26 | (0.13)* | −0.32 | (0.33) | 0.01 | (0.03) | −0.02 | (0.03) | |
| Ideology (left = 1) | 1.54 | (9.77) | 9.67 | (24.68) | 1.83 | (2.17) | 4.25 | (2.42)# | |
| External Shock | 0.10 | (0.09) | 0.06 | (0.24) | −0.03 | (0.02) | −0.05 | (0.02)* | |
| Internal Shock | −4.56 | (8.02) | −8.18 | (20.27) | 3.68 | (1.78)* | 2.15 | (1.99) | |
| User Experience | −0.07 | (0.23) | 0.16 | (0.58) | 0.00 | (0.05) | 0.06 | (0.06) | |
| Followers | 0.02 | (0.04) | −0.06 | (0.12) | −0.02 | (0.01)* | −0.01 | (0.01) | |
| Media Coverage | – | | −0.18 | (0.18) | −0.03 | (0.02)* | −0.03 | (0.01)* | |
| Total Tweets | – | | – | | −0.03 | (0.01)** | −0.02 | (0.01)** | |
| Fringe Party[1] | −45.34 | (10.76)*** | 5.10 | (28.38) | 7.44 | (2.50)** | 8.52 | (2.79)** | |
| Minor Party[1] | −22.09 | (10.81)* | 31.43 | (27.58) | 2.24 | (2.44) | 3.80 | (2.72) | |
| R-square | 16.72 | | 6.00 | | 22.60 | | 15.60 | | |

*Note*: [1]Fringe and Minor parties are dummy variables with major party being the reference category. Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. N = 205. #$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.5$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

dummy variables of fringe and minority parties → media coverage → Twitter use. To test the mediation hypothesis, we estimated indirect effects of candidates' party establishment on Twitter use – total tweets posted (H3a), interaction (H3b), and mobilization (H3c), using the PROCESS macro (model #4) available for SPSS. Given that there are two independent variables, one mediator, and three dependent variables, we estimated six indirect effects from six equations. This is because each equation in PROCESS only takes one independent variable and one dependent variable. The indirect effects were calculated through point estimates and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals based on bootstrapping method with 5000 iterations. When the 95% confidence interval excludes a value of zero, it suggests the effect be statistically significant (Hayes, 2013). The results are summarized in Table 2 and illustrated in Fig. 1. As hypothesized, the indirect effects of fringe party affiliation on interaction and mobilization tweets via media coverage were statistically significant (interaction: $b = 1.51$, $SE = 0.76$, 95% CI = 0.28–3.37; mobilization: $b = 1.29$, $SE = 0.74$, 95% CI = 0.10–3.15). However, the mediation pattern was not observed when total tweets posted was considered as the dependent variable. When the same test was conducted for minor party candidates (as opposed to major party candidates) in the place of fringe party candidates, the indirect effects were significant for none of three types of Twitter use.

All in all, these results suggest that fringe party candidates, as compared to major party candidates, received less media attention, which in turn led them to use Twitter more actively especially for interaction and mobilization purposes. Thus, the lack of media coverage is a mediating mechanism explaining why fringe party candidates made more use of Twitter.

## 5. Discussion

Some scholars have been skeptical of the prospect that the Internet would improve the openness in the relationship between politicians and citizens (Hargittai, 2008). They claim that the structural causes of inequality still remain, which influences the way the Internet is adopted and used; thereby the online realm is just a reflection of the offline political power hierarchies. Normalization hypothesis (Margolis et al., 1999) adapts this argument to political campaigning, suggesting that online campaigning only reinforces existing power relations of offline campaigns. On the contrary, the other school of thought claims that due to their communicative affordances and capacities, online technologies have helped to narrow the offline political inequalities. Equalization hypothesis (Gibson and McAllister, 2011; Schweitzer, 2008) puts forward this argument and posits that politically disadvantaged parties and

**Table 2**
Indirect effects.

| | b | SE | 95% Bootstrap CI | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Lower Limit | Upper Limit |
| Fringe Parties → Media coverage → Total Tweets | 7.96 | 7.98 | −6.84 | 25.00 |
| Fringe Parties → Media coverage → Interaction Tweets | 1.51 | 0.76 | 0.28 | 3.37 |
| Fringe Parties → Media coverage → Mobilization Tweets | 1.29 | 0.75 | 0.10 | 3.16 |
| Minor Parties → Media coverage → Total Tweets | 3.88 | 4.39 | −2.31 | 15.59 |
| Minor Parties → Media coverage → Interaction Tweets | 0.71 | 0.48 | −0.02 | 1.96 |
| Minor Parties → Media coverage → Mobilization Tweets | 0.60 | 0.43 | −0.01 | 1.71 |

*Note*: N = 205. Estimates were calculated using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). Confidence intervals (CI) are based on the bootstrapping of 5000 samples.
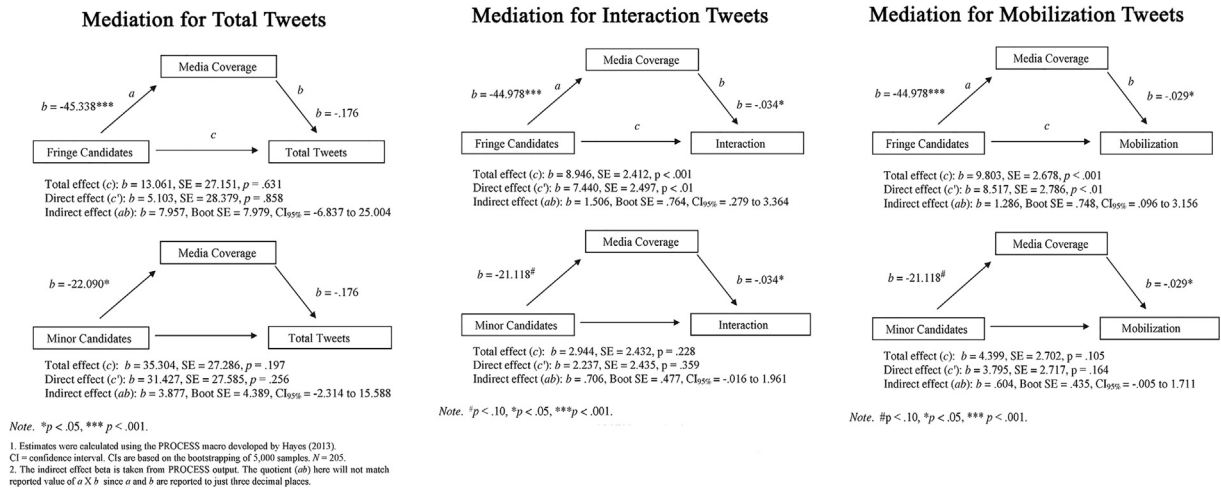
**Mediation for Total Tweets**

Media Coverage

$b = -45.338***$  $a$     $b$  $b = -.176$

Fringe Candidates   $c$   Total Tweets

Total effect ($c$): $b = 13.061$, SE = 27.151, $p = .631$
Direct effect ($c'$): $b = 5.103$, SE = 28.379, $p = .858$
Indirect effect ($ab$): $b = 7.957$, Boot SE = 7.979, $CI_{95\%}$ = -6.837 to 25.004

Media Coverage

$b = -22.090*$      $b = -.176$

Minor Candidates      Total Tweets

Total effect ($c$): $b = 35.304$, SE = 27.286, $p = .197$
Direct effect ($c'$): $b = 31.427$, SE = 27.585, $p = .256$
Indirect effect ($ab$): $b = 3.877$, Boot SE = 4.389, $CI_{95\%}$ = -2.314 to 15.588

*Note.* $*p < .05$, $*** p < .001$.

1. Estimates were calculated using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013).
CI = confidence interval. CIs are based on the bootstrapping of 5,000 samples. N = 205.
2. The indirect effect beta is taken from PROCESS output. The quotient ($ab$) here will not match
reported value of $a$ X $b$  since $a$ and $b$ are reported to just three decimal places.

**Mediation for Interaction Tweets**

Media Coverage

$b = -44.978***$  $a$     $b$  $b = -.034*$

Fringe Candidates   $c$   Interaction

Total effect ($c$): $b = 8.946$, SE = 2.412, $p < .001$
Direct effect ($c'$): $b = 7.440$, SE = 2.497, $p < .01$
Indirect effect ($ab$): $b = 1.506$, Boot SE = .764, $CI_{95\%}$ = .279 to 3.364

Media Coverage

$b = -21.118^{\#}$      $b = -.034*$

Minor Candidates      Interaction

Total effect ($c$): $b = 2.944$, SE = 2.432, $p = .228$
Direct effect ($c'$): $b = 2.237$, SE = 2.435, $p = .359$
Indirect effect ($ab$): $b = .706$, Boot SE = .477, $CI_{95\%}$ = -.016 to 1.961

*Note.* $^{\#}p < .10$, $*p < .05$, $***p < .001$.

**Mediation for Mobilization Tweets**

Media Coverage

$b = -44.978***$  $a$     $b$  $b = -.029*$

Fringe Candidates   $c$   Mobilization

Total effect ($c$): $b = 9.803$, SE = 2.678, $p < .001$
Direct effect ($c'$): $b = 8.517$, SE = 2.786, $p < .01$
Indirect effect ($ab$): $b = 1.286$, Boot SE = .748, $CI_{95\%}$ = .096 to 3.156

Media Coverage

$b = -21.118^{\#}$      $b = -.029*$

Minor Candidates      Mobilization

Total effect ($c$): $b = 4.399$, SE = 2.702, $p = .105$
Direct effect ($c'$): $b = 3.795$, SE = 2.717, $p = .164$
Indirect effect ($ab$): $b = .604$, Boot SE = .435, $CI_{95\%}$ = -.005 to 1.711

*Note.* $\#p < .10$, $*p < .05$, $*** p < .001$.

**Fig. 1.** Mediation analysis.

candidates would catch up with traditional, established parties by campaigning through online media. At this junction, this study aimed to investigate whether online technologies and social media platforms reduce or reproduce the existing offline political power structures in electoral campaigning during India's 2014 elections. While just one empirical attempt cannot answer the above question, our results speak to the democratic potential of Web 2.0 technologies in unequal, fragmented political environments.

During the 2014 Indian election campaign, BJP, the eventual electoral winner, ran a large-scale online campaign yet did not engage in dialogic interaction with the public in fear of losing control over centralized party goals (Chadha and Guha, 2016). The party has had a long history of strict party discipline due to its filial link with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing paramilitary organization (Jaffrelot, 2010) which might have restricted open communication with the public on Twitter. On the other hand, the incumbent party INC failed to acknowledge the potential of social media campaigning and even their prime ministerial candidate, Rahul Gandhi, did not open any social media account (Goyal, 2014). The behavioral literature explains how a leader behavior can affect the attitude and actions of team members (Schaubroeck et al., 2007). Thus, it is likely that the non-acceptance of Twitter by core party leadership of INC, one of the major parties in the country, would have deterred some of its members from the medium. Their oversight was leveraged by political debutants like AAP, who also recognized Twitter's potential as a political tool which could drive news agenda in the mainstream media (Ahmed et al., 2016). This trend is evidenced in our findings as candidates from fringe parties, who received less media attention, were more active in using Twitter for interaction and mobilization than majority party candidates. Minor and fringe party candidates are also financially disadvantaged as compared to established parties, which encumbers their ability to gather resources that are essential for mobilization. Online channels like Twitter are viable alternatives to reach out to potential voters due to their wide outreach and low cost of investment. While this practice by candidates does not necessarily infringe upon the role of traditional media in electoral campaigning, it does augment the campaign information expanse especially for candidates ignored in traditional media coverage.

Our findings support the equalization hypothesis – however, there are several other factors, beyond a lack of media coverage, which could have contributed to the results. The major party candidates underestimated the capabilities of social media campaigns (e.g., INC) or were cautionary in their social media use due to strict party regulations (e.g., BJP). This could have allowed fringe party candidates to exploit the medium in an absence or limited activity of many major players. Furthermore, this was the first-time social media was extensively used in an Indian general election and while some parties had social media teams to handle their central accounts, individual candidates' accounts were rarely managed by professional teams. Politicians from major party are more vulnerable to online and offline ridicule due to miscommunication or social media faux pas (see Chopra, 2014) and could have been warier of Twitter interactions. This could also explain the negative association between the number of followers and interaction tweets.

The implications of these findings are that Web 2.0 technologies do offer innovative avenues for political campaigns and are advantageous to the fringe party candidates to challenge the offline political power hierarchies. However, we should be cautious in this techno-optimistic view. While the power of Twitter to strengthen the political public sphere has been witnessed through recent uprisings (e.g., Arab Spring, India's Nirbhaya protest), the current findings does not confirm the capabilities of Web 2.0 technologies in positively influencing every aspect of the electoral environment. Recent findings suggest that BJP were highly successful in their digital media campaigning (Ahmed et al., 2016; Arulchelvan, 2014; Baishya, 2015). Therefore our findings should not be evaluated in isolation but in conjunction with other related findings. Furthermore, the political implications of Web 2.0 technologies would also be shaped by historical, sociological and societal contexts. Future scholars should test the questions examined here in varying contexts for a comprehensive understanding. Also, Twitter is dominated by the young and educated middle class; other groups, including blue-collar workers and the elderly, are under-represented. Thus, it will be still simplistic to claim that Web 2.0 technologies can bring equality to the entire political sphere. Nevertheless, recent findings in India suggesting that online political campaigns are becoming instrumental (Arulchelvan, 2014) adds weight to the idea that Web 2.0 technologies will be crucial in future campaigns.

The findings of this study also give rise to the question of whether the Internet and Twitter would continue to remain influential in leveling the political playing field in the longer run. As the Indian society attains further technological progress, it is probable that some of the major political players who resisted campaigning on social media would invest more into it for forthcoming elections and the online power structures might begin to reflect offline trends. On the other hand, since Web 2.0 requires a low cost of investment, it is also possible that candidates from fringe parties would find novel, creative ways to use the medium and strengthen their relationships with the voter base. We also anticipate that the nature of the Internet and the characteristics of online communication may further change in the coming years, which may make it challenging to apply the current findings in the future.

## 6. Limitations and conclusion

In this section, we acknowledge some caveats and make suggestions for future research. First, a noteworthy limitation is not being able to include newspapers from other languages in the framework. A part of the challenge lies in operationalizing the linguistic diversity of India. The Constitution of India designates Hindi and English as the official languages of the Government of India but it does not recognize a single national language (Department of Official Language, 2015). Hindi remains the most spoken mother tongue in the country, but only for the under 40% of Indians who speak it. Hindi is the majority language in only a dozen out of the 29 Indian states and an effort to incorporate it as the dominant national language has met resistance. Instead, English has become the unofficial lingua franca of the country (Masani, 2012) and is now the second largest language in the country ahead of Bengali, Telugu, Gujarati, Kannada and others (TNN, 2010). While generally considered as a language of the elite, the most vocal demands for English teaching are now coming from most disadvantaged communities (Masani, 2012). Thus, our choice to focus on English newspapers and tweets was practical, because it was the only language that afforded a nationally comparative study. We recommend that future scholars should attempt to conduct a multi-language analysis incorporating most, if not all, the 22 major languages of the country.

Secondly, it is also possible that fringe parties, due to their regional associations, receive frequent coverage in non-English local media. For example, politicians from AAP could have received greater attention in Punjabi and Hindi newspapers in the Northern region as compared to English newspapers. If that is the case, then fringe party candidates could potentially reach their local voters through the vernacular press, and one might assume that the politician-media-citizen electoral mechanism is fulfilled and there are no necessities for new communication technologies like Twitter. Although plausible, however, even when fringe party candidates receive media attention in the vernacular press, they would still suffer from the lack of media attention in English-based newspapers because it makes them limited in reaching out to the population which prefers English. Thus, in order to communicate with that segment of the society and overcome the bias toward major party candidates in the English language press, politicians from minor and fringe parties would still need to use social media tools which are dominantly used by citizens who prefer English language (see Wong, 2012). To simply sum, as observed in our findings, the fact that fringe party candidates face a substantial news deficit in English newspapers would likely motivate them to turn to alternative channels such as social media through which they can connect to the possible audience of English newspapers they miss. Nevertheless, as emphasized before, future scholars should include vernacular media in their framework for a more conclusive understanding of the normalization-equalization thesis.

Thirdly, while this multi-modal analysis focused on newspaper coverage of political candidates and online campaigning via Twitter; it is plausible that both campaigning and attention to politicians in other traditional media mediums such as the television and radio could be different. Future research should consider television content because it is the most preferred medium of information in the country (Dasgupta, 2016).

Fourthly, our operationalization of interaction tweets utilized @ signs but not all tweets using the @ sign are equally interactive in nature. Future scholars could categorize the different intended audiences (e.g., media, citizens, other politicians) and levels of interactivity, which would provide a more refined understanding of interaction on Twitter.

Limitations notwithstanding, the current study makes several contributions to existing literature. First, we go beyond the frequently analyzed Western democracies and add diversity to literature by analyzing an important yet ignored political context. Secondly, by including traditional media coverage and social media activity within the same framework, this study was successful in showing a robust relationship between media coverage and Twitter use. However, it is difficult to establish causality given the nature of the data. In the future, a longitudinal research frame could better determine the impact of Web 2.0 technologies in normalization or equalization and would complement the current findings. Finally, recent work investigating the 2014 Indian general elections found that BJP, a major party, was most effective in wide scale digital campaigning. However, our evidence suggesting equalization at the candidate level demands future research to incorporate social media activity of both party and individual candidates when analyzing online political campaigning and normalization-equalization theses.

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