DÉFI DE RECHERCHE SUR L'ÉCOSYSTÈME NUMÉRIQUE

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM RESEARCH CHALLENGE

VOTE

VOTE

Understanding the Digital Ecosystem

Findings from the 2019 Federal Election

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A Study of Indigenous Voices Online in the 2019 Canadian Federal Election

Kelsey Leonard,
(Shinnecock Nation), McMaster University, Department of Health, Aging & Society, Post Doctoral Fellow
leonardk@mcmaster.ca

Chelsea Gabel,
(Red River Métis from Rivers, Manitoba), McMaster University, Department of Health, Aging & Society, Associate Professor

Marrissa Mathews,
(Omushkegowuk Cree, Weenusk First Nation), McMaster University, Department of Political Science, PhD Student

What we wanted to know

We examined online activity centered on Indigenous issues during the 2019 Canadian Federal Election. We aimed to understand the experiences of Indigenous voices online during the election and how digital democracy threats to Indigenous Data Sovereignty attempted to diminish Indigenous rights and self-determination. We also sought to identify the key issue trends of Indigenous online users in digital spaces. The study analyzed digital content posted to Twitter and identified topics of salience for Indigenous Twitter users and Indigenous candidates during the election. **Our study addresses the following research questions:**

- What were the most frequently used Indigenous hashtags among the general population of Twitter users during the 2019 Federal Election campaign season (August 1 to December 1, 2019)?

- What political issues were most frequently discussed by Indigenous candidates active on Twitter in the 2019 federal election?

- How were Indigenous candidates talked about on Twitter?

How we did it

- Indigenous Digital Research Methodology: drawing from principles of **Indigenous Data Sovereignty** (*Kukutai and Taylor 2016*), **Digital Bundles** (*Wemigwans 2018*), **Decolonizing Methodologies** (*Smith 1999*), and **Storywork** (*Archibald 2008*).

- Tweet collection: Collected **Twitter data** on two sets of accounts, Indigenous candidates and the general population, from August 1 to December 1, 2019. We identified **62 Indigenous candidates** in the election, but **only 45 had Twitter accounts**.

- Tweet Selection: We recorded a tweet if it contained the following hashtags: #Attawapiskat #FirstWater #WaterCrisis #GreenNewDeal #StopTMX #reconciliation #MuskratFalls #indigenous #MMIW #MMIWG #UNDRIP #TMX #Transmountain #GrassyNarrows #SNCLavalin #FlintNorth #waterislife #fnpoli #indigenousvotes #IndigVote #NativeVote #indigpoli #Unistoten #tinyhousewarriors #notransmountain #nomancamps #MétisNation #FirstNations #Metis #Inuit #IdleNoMore #FNMI #abpoli.

- We also, in a separate collection, identified Twitter posts (August–December 2019) from Indigenous candidates. For candidates, we included all original tweets, as well as retweets and replies that were made by these accounts: Total of **8961 tweets**.

- Content Analysis: Tweets were coded using **thematic analysis for salient electoral issues** identified by Indigenous candidates as determined by frequency of political issues in post collection.

Key terms and what they mean

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

"The right of an Indigenous nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data. From this perspective, Indigenous governance of data assets is about stewardship for both present and future generations" (*Kukutai & Taylor 2016, pp.132*).

First Nations Water Crisis

In Canada, many First Nations communities across the country do not have access to safe drinking water and live under boil-water advisories.

Indigenous Electoral Politics

Indigenous electoral politics in the Canadian context considers disparities in voter turnout and Indigenous Peoples' decision-making processes for advancing Indigenous policy agenda items often further complicated by limited electoral infrastructure on reserve, party Indigenous platforms, and colonial power dynamics.

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now occupying those territories or parts of them. "Indigenous Peoples" as used in this project includes Aboriginal, Inuit, and Métis communities throughout what is currently known as Canada; individual members of First Nations; and status and non-status Indians, including those living on or off reserve.

UNDRIP

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is an international instrument adopted by the United Nations on September 13, 2007. Canada has yet to fully implement UNDRIP nationally.

What we found

Figure 1. Examples of Frequency of Hashtag Use Among Twitter Users During 2019 Canadian Federal Election From August to December 2019
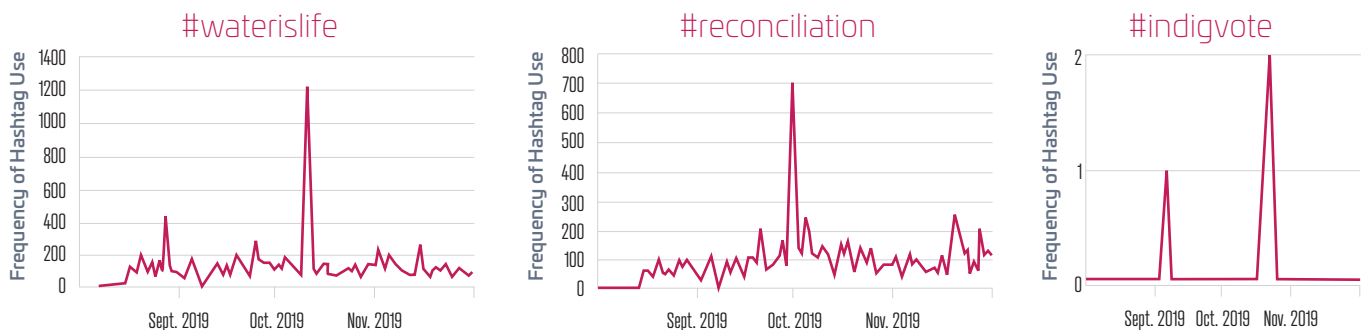
The study found that the general Twitter population used the following hashtags most frequently: #mmiwg, #mmiw, #fnmi, #fnpoli, #tinyhousewarriors, #notransmountain, and #grassynarrows. We hypothesized that key political discourse points from the 2015 election and campaign promises of the incumbent administration, such as eliminating drinking water advisories in Indigenous communities and implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, would have a high posting frequency in the social media activity of online users and Indigenous candidates. As **Figure 1** shows with the examples of water and reconciliation, hashtags related to these issues (such as #mmiwg, #reconciliation, #waterislife, and #indigpoli) did spike in October and leading up to the election. Other highly used hashtags were unexpected including #abpoli and #greennewdeal. We did find that some hashtags were used for two different purposes. For example, #abpoli was used

to refer to Aboriginal politics as well as Alberta politics, and #greennewdeal was frequently used in discussions relating to American elections, as well as by Indigenous candidates for environmental issue advocacy.

Indigenous electoral politics discourse in the 2015 federal election was dominated by questions of Indigenous Peoples' voter turnout and participation (*Gabel et al. 2016*). Hashtag campaigns such as #nativevote, #indigvote, and #indigenousvotes were created to raise awareness and increase Indigenous voter participation. The use of these hashtags continued in the 2019 election, peaking before election day for each hashtag. **Figure 1** provides the example of #indigvote hashtag. But we found the 2019 election saw more diversity of Indigenous issue framing, indicating the discourse of Indigenous electoral politics is evolving beyond simply participating in Canadian electoral politics and positions of "to vote or not to vote."

What we found

Next we investigated the political issues most frequently discussed by Indigenous candidates. Of 62 Indigenous candidates in this election, 18 did not have Twitter accounts. None of the Indigenous candidates without Twitter accounts were elected.

Of the hashtags we sampled, the top five (5) most frequently used by Indigenous candidates are (See **Figure 2**): #reconciliation, #indigenous, #firstnations, #undrip, and #greennewdeal. Use of hashtags evolved over time, for example, Indigenous candidates' use of #greennewdeal, #reconciliation, and #undrip peaked near election week (See **Figure 3**).

Figure 2. Frequency of Identified Hashtag Use Among Indigenous Candidates During 2019 Canadian Federal Election
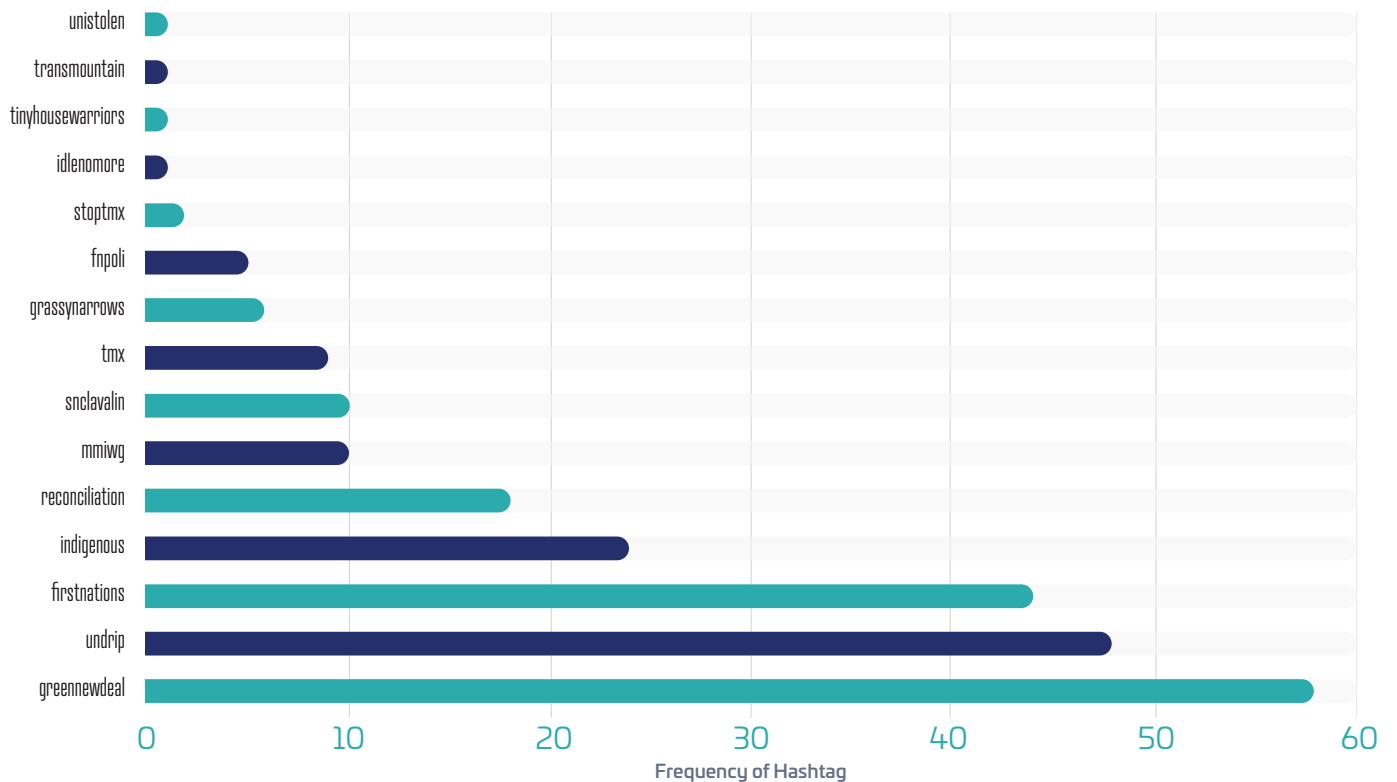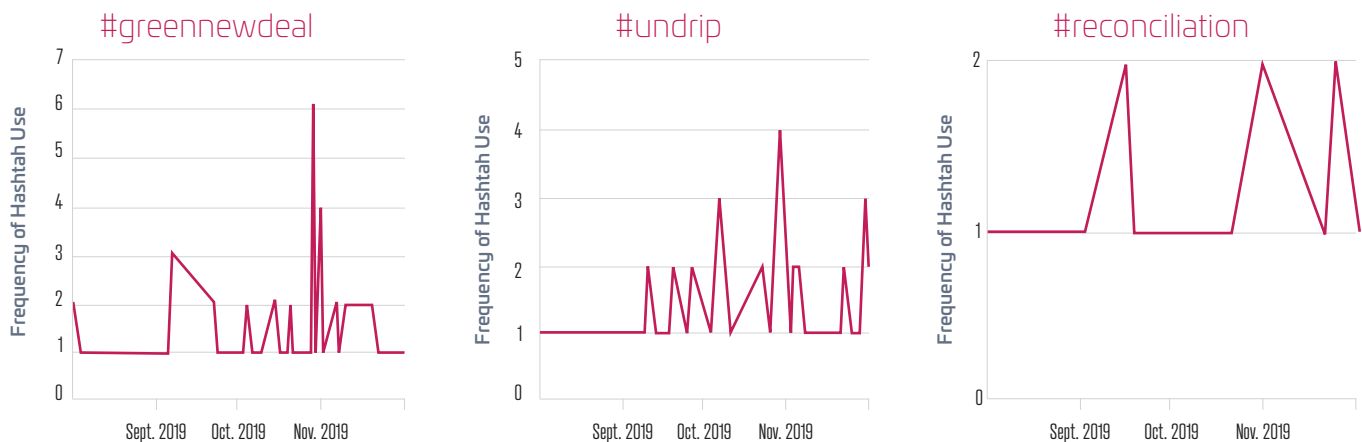

Figure 3. Frequency of Hashtag Use Among Indigenous Candidates During 2019 Canadian Federal Election from August to December 2019

What we found

It is also helpful to look beyond simple hashtag counts. Although water crisis hashtags were not frequently used by Indigenous candidates, content analysis found that Indigenous candidates referenced Indigenous water issues in 62 posts on Twitter from August 1 to December 1, 2019. The NDP used the First Nations water crisis as a political action point during its campaign, which was frequently referenced by Twitter users with hashtags such as #GrassyNarrows and #watercrisis (*Canadian Press, 2019*). This is particularly relevant given that an APTN and Environics poll during the election found that drinking water and climate change were ranked by Indigenous Peoples as their top issues, which may have linkages to the 44% of Indigenous candidates who tweeted or retweeted content on protecting the environment. This was also the first ever federal election opinion poll of Indigenous Peoples by an Indigenous news organization in Canada (*Environics Research, 2019; Martens, 2019*).

We also considered how Indigenous candidates were talked about by others on Twitter. Our search query for #Indigenous #elxn43 and #Metis found a newly trending Indigenous issue topic in the 2019 Federal Election. This emerging discourse included accusations of ethnic fraud perpetrated by certain candidates, who claimed Indigenous identity without any evidence to support their claims (*Bascaramurty, 2019; Barrera and Deer, 2019*). The tweets shown here illustrate two examples. Candidates who had their Indigenous identity claims challenged in news media and on Twitter included Celine Laquerre, Marc Serré, George Canyon, Amanda Kistindey, Jocelyn Rioux, and Kathy Laframboise.

Lastly, an important issue raised by Indigenous voices active on Twitter during the election using the #elxn43 hashtag and referencing Indigenous Peoples pertained to the common reference by non-Indigenous candidates of ownership of Indigenous Peoples. As seen in the tweet by Sarah Harney, many Indigenous People find it extremely offensive when candidates or elected officials say "Our Indigenous People" or "Canada's Indigenous People" implying that Indigenous Nations are not sovereign but rather under the colonial patronage of the Canadian state. The saliency of this tweet for Indigenous voices online is representative given it was one of the most retweeted and liked Indigenous Twitter posts during the election.

Darryl Leroux @DarrylLeroux · Oct 20, 2019
A great article by @DakGlobe about federal election candidates falsely claiming to be "Indigenous" that includes the voices of 3 actual Métis people, including @willgoodon #raceshifting

Candidates find themselves at centre of debate on Métis identity
Surge in Canadians self-identifying as Métis poses threat to rights of Indigenous groups, critics say
🔗 theglobeandmail.com

Niigaan Sinclair @Niigaanwewidam · Oct 22, 2019
1) Also, of the ten Indigenous MPs elected last night (matching the record from the 2015 election) one - Marc Serré - has questionable identity claims as researched by my colleague @DarrylLeroux see:

4 federal candidates accused of Indigenous identity appropriation by...
The author of a new book, Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity, says several federal election candidates ...
🔗 cbc.ca

Sarah Harney
@s_harney

Omg petition for everyone in this debate to stop saying "Our Indigenous people" or "Canada's Indigenous people" promptly. We 👏 are 👏 distinct 👏 Nations #elxn43

8:06 PM · Oct 7, 2019 from Ottawa, Ontario · Twitter for iPhone

What this means for the election

During this election 29% of Indigenous candidates did not use Twitter to engage in electoral politics. Indigenous candidates had a high frequency of posts regarding the environment (although not always water specifically) and the UNDRIP compared to other Indigenous issue topics. Notably, among the hashtags we identified, #greennewdeal was one of those used most frequently by Indigenous candidates. This speaks to the importance of environmental issues for Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous candidates but also the way in which Indigenous candidates and their parties are influenced by American environmental politics.

Additional content shared by Indigenous candidates on Twitter during the 2019 Canadian Federal Election included Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Reconciliation using affiliated hashtags.

In the next phase of this research, we are conducting interviews to determine the level of incivility and online abuse Indigenous Twitter users may have experienced during the election, as well as identifying particular actors.

An important concern raised by the study is whether ethnic fraud by political candidates jeopardizes elections' integrity. Some Indigenous People already perceive elections' integrity to be compromised. This is shown by the significant debate over whether or not Indigenous People should even vote at all, a debate which can be exacerbated by allegations of fraudulent claims of Indigenous identity. High-level party remedies for these concerns may provide meaningful acts of reconciliation and help increase Indigenous voter participation.

The largest limitation to this study is that some data collection and analysis is still ongoing and so new findings will likely emerge to add more context and support to these initial findings.

What's next

Policy Recommendations:

1 Indigenous candidates may benefit from enhanced digital activity including updated social media accounts throughout elections.

2 All candidates and elected officials can improve Indigenous public relations by stopping all reference to Canadian ownership/dominion over Indigenous Peoples.

3 All parties should consider implementing policies to prevent ethnic fraud and false claims of Indigenous identity by their candidates.

Future research:

4 Indigenous Online Visions of the Future (what do Indigenous People see their use of the internet during elections leading towards?)

5 Assessment of digital media support and resources available to Indigenous candidates to build their digital personas during elections. Also examining Indigenous candidate digital literacy and use of digital tools for effective online engagement and outreach (e.g. hashtags, ads, etc.)