

RESEARCH NOTE

# Representations of Inuit and Inuit issues on Twitter during the 2019 Canadian electoral campaign

OBSERVATOIRE DE LA POLITIQUE ET LA SÉCURITÉ DE L'ARCTIQUE (OPSA)



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ET LA SÉCURITÉ DE L'ARCTIQUE

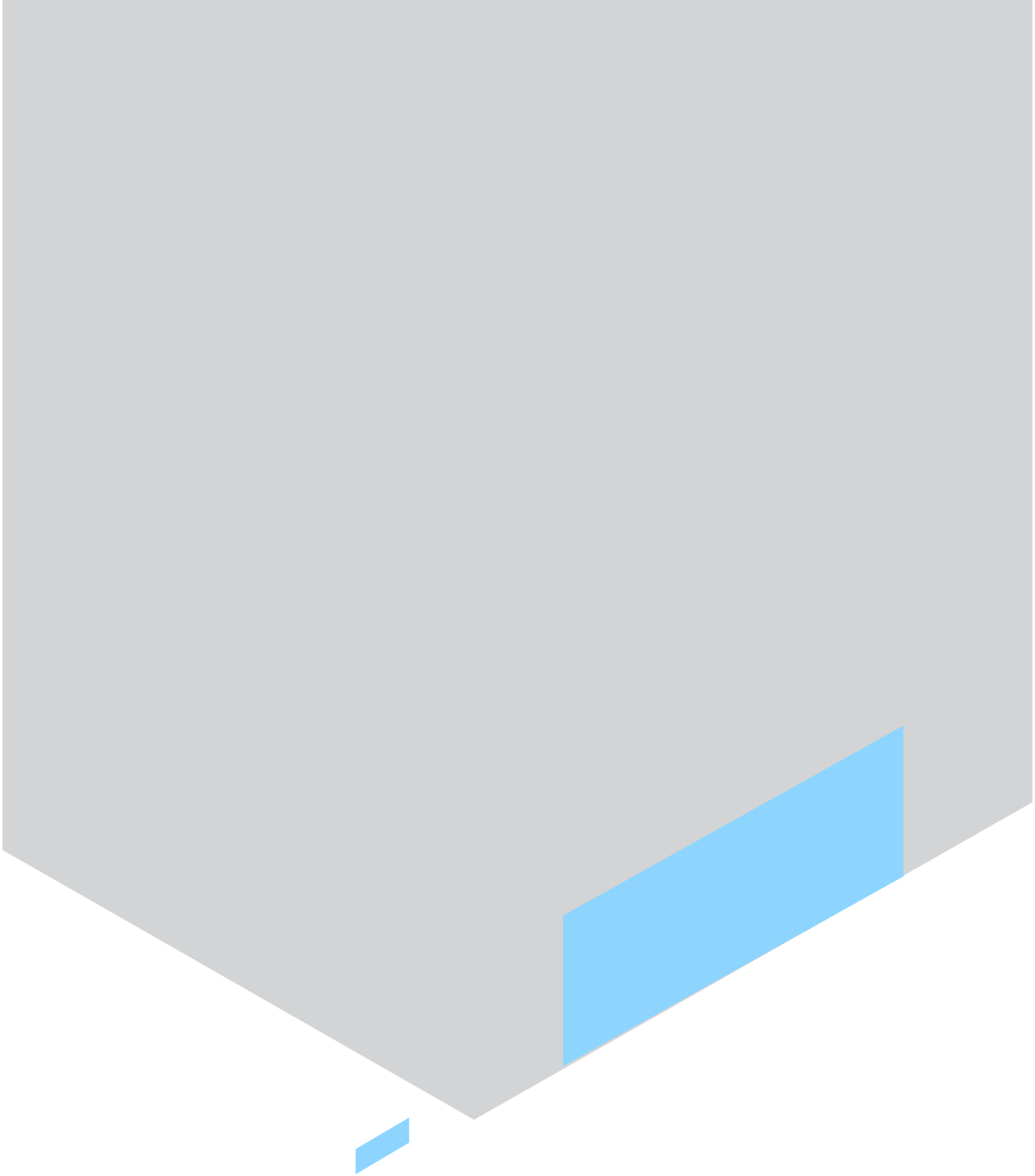
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# **RESEARCH NOTE**

# Representations of Inuit and Inuit issues on Twitter during the 2019 Canadian electoral campaign



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Inuit groups and issues have garnered significant attention from Canadian policy-makers and media. As these elites have focused on specific Inuit issues while paying little attention to others, they have also presented Inuit people and issues in specific ways, framing them as either active or passive players of their socio-economic development. The study of elected representatives' discourse through the traditional media has always constituted a challenge, mostly due to the media's filtering action brought on by significant content and format limitations as well as selection biases.

Recently, with the emergence of social media, elected representatives do not need to go through an intermediary (traditional media and reporters) in order to efficiently spread their political communication. This, in turn, offers scholars opportunities to study and analyze the nature of their political communication and their interactions with society at large.

Using the Eureka database, this research note intends on analyzing tweets published by Canadian elected representatives on Inuit issues from October 2014 to October 2019, paying particular attention to the 2014-2016 time

period. Indeed, this timeline allows for interesting insights since it encompasses the last year of the Conservative government led by Stephen Harper and the first year of the Liberal government, led by Justin Trudeau. Then, this project will analyze how Inuit groups have used social media during the 2019 federal electoral campaign to advocate for their priorities.

## **Inuit issues and the Trudeau government**

Indigenous issues, including Inuit ones, were a priority for the newly elected Trudeau government in 2015. The liberal government emphasized the need to establish a new relationship with Indigenous People based on "respect, partnership and recognition of rights" (Trudeau, 2017). This new relationship translated into different programs and measures in relations to Inuit groups. Agreements between the Government of Canada and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) were signed so that the Government could deliver health and social programs to Inuit communities. Similar collaboration delivered funding for the National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy (ITK, 2016).

The renewed relationship did not only bring additional funds and programs: a different

approach was also put in place to co-manage and co-develop policies and initiatives. For example, the 2019 Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework was co-developed with Northern stakeholders, including Inuit organizations, involving them in every step of the policy-making process. Close cooperation was also at play with the creation of the Tuvaijuittuq Marine Protected Area in the High Arctic in 2019. The Qikiqtani Inuit Association is meant to play a critical role in the management and conservation efforts in that area (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2020).

Social media can also allow government officials and elected representatives to engage with constituents and stakeholders. In addition to informing the public, these platforms have the potential to facilitate exchanges and acknowledge the positions, arguments or achievements of constituents. In other words, they could constitute a dynamic tool to establish relationships between governments and segments of the population.

A timid attempt at evaluating how Inuit issues and identity have been portrayed by Canadian society and institutions was made. For example, Pupchek (2001) has illustrated how Inuit art had been inserted as discursive resources symbolizing the Canadian national community in order to construct the Canadian identity and play a role in nation-building. A similar inquiry was led by Fletcher (2009) on the use of Inuksuit in the Canadian nation-building project. This mode of political expression was questioned by these authors because it could be construed as either occurrences of cultural borrowing, cultural appropriation or co-elaboration of identity.

Shadian (2007) also investigated this question and how the Inuit has come to signify and embody Canada's Arctic identity, having been inserted in governmental Arctic discourse and policies. Other studies have explained how Inuit occupancy of the Canadian North is part of Canadian Arctic sovereignty claims (see among others Vanderzwaag and Pharand, 1984;

Loukacheva, 2009).

Media representations of Inuit people and issues have started to garner attention, although it remains to this day a nascent area of interest. Studies have observed that southern media portrayals, in Canada and abroad, of Inuit people, issues and practices have been inaccurate, stereotypical and grossly simplistic (Yunes, 2016; Glennie, 2018; Lackenbauer, 2018).

The next section of this article will focus on documenting how Inuit issues and identity are represented in Southerner's social media communications. It will more specifically analyze if and how Canadian elected representatives at the federal level used Twitter to address Inuit issues.

### **Social media and elected representatives**

Based on empirical observations we already know that the traditional media in Canada have devoted more time and attention to Indigenous issues, including Inuit ones, after the election of Justin Trudeau (Landriault, 2018). The political messaging and communications of elected representatives experienced similar changes. The number of tweets posted by elected representatives including the term "Inuit" was higher during the year following the election of Justin Trudeau than during the last year of the Harper government. This number remained relatively high, at around 600 tweets per year from 2016 to 2019 (see table 1).

	Number of tweets	Percentages of tweets published in June
October 19 2014 – October 19 2015	233	17%
October 20 2015 – October 19 2016	469	20%
October 20 2016 – October 19 2017	691	16%
October 20 2017 – October 19 2018	599	14%
October 20 2018 – October 19 2019	673	16%

Table 1: number of tweets including the term “Inuit” posted by elected representatives from 2014 to 2019.

This change can be mostly attributed to the change of government. From October 2014 to October 2015, tweets from members of the governing party represented only 15% of all tweets for this period. On the other hand, 73% of tweets for the October 2015 to October 2016 time period originated from Liberal elected representatives. Liberal ministers Carolyn Bennett and Jane Philpott were particularly active on social media, publishing and relaying messages on Inuit issues.

This quantitative shift did not mean a fundamental change in the timing of these messages. There were salient moments during any given year at which tweets were more frequent: the months of June and November stand out as they contained national days or commemorations (National Indigenous Peoples Day and National Aboriginal Veterans Day, respectively). This observation is noteworthy for

two reasons. Firstly, the attention elevated these commemorations by celebrating Indigenous contributions to Canadian society. Secondly, the focus was on Indigenous issues as a whole rather than Inuit ones. Moreover, a majority of posts published were of a general nature, pointing to these days, but not tackling specific issues or raising awareness about specific grievances. The fact that noting peaks around these commemorations and subsequent decreases afterwards point to a superficial and punctual level of attention, far from being a sustained priority throughout the calendar year. Other instances of increased activity occurred whenever the governing party made an announcement or investment related to Inuit communities. For example, the March 2018 peak can be explained by the announcement of a strategy to eradicate tuberculosis in Inuit communities.

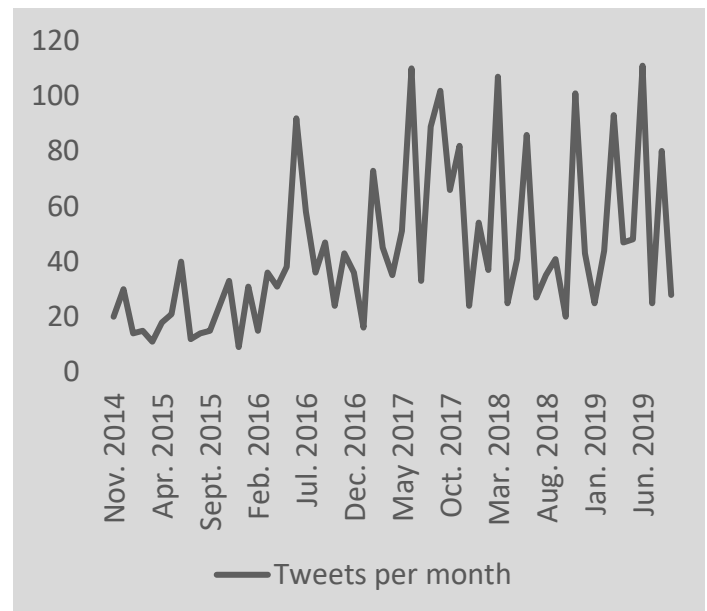


Figure 1: tweets per month from November 2014 to September 2019.

The content of the messages evolved between the Harper and Trudeau governments. An analysis of the tweets published between October 2014 to October 2016 allow to capture the nature of this change. Liberal elected representatives tended to communicate on a broader set of dimensions than Conservative representatives did: day-to-day political and

social issues were addressed more frequently. Conservative tweets tended to focus on cultural celebrations and events rather than tackling socio-economic realities or acknowledging Inuit political organizations (see table 2).

	<b>Cultural issues/events</b>	<b>Political issues/events</b>	<b>Social issues/events</b>
<b>Tweets by Liberal representatives</b>	37%	23%	30%
<b>Tweets by Conservative representatives</b>	53%	8%	23%
<b>Tweets by NDP representatives</b>	27%	27%	39%

Table 2: nature of tweets by different party representatives from October 2014 to October 2016.

Liberal representatives also tended to use Twitter in a more dialogic fashion, engaging with stakeholders and constituents on the platform rather than just relaying messages in a unidirectional fashion. Two ways to adopt a more dialogic approach is to mention other users (such as the accounts of influential Inuit organizations or leaders) in your tweets or to retweet posts published by other accounts. However, it is worth noting that Liberal accounts mentioned or retweeted more frequently in general, whether these mentioned or retweeted accounts were civil society organizations or their Liberal colleagues (see table 3).

	<b>Percentage of tweets mentioning or retweeting Inuit individual or groups</b>	<b>Percentage of tweets mentioning or retweeting fellow politicians</b>
<b>October 2014 – October 2015: Tweets by Conservative representatives</b>	15%	15%
<b>October 2015 – October 2016: Tweets by Conservative representatives</b>	27%	37%

Table 3: percentages of mentions and retweets in elected representatives accounts from October 2014 to October 2016.

It is clear that the attention given by elected representatives to Inuit issues on Twitter increased both quantitatively and qualitatively with the election of the Trudeau government. The next step of this inquiry consists in assessing if this saliency translated into more attention to these issues at the crucial time of an electoral campaign, a time at which important debates should take place about the future of public policies.

### **Inuit issues during electoral campaigns**

Given the increase in exposure of Inuit issues, it would be tempting to assume that these issues would necessarily receive more attention during an electoral campaign. However, ridings with a majority of Inuit voters are not numerous, and so purely electoral incentives to address these issues are limited. The nature of wedge issues and partisan divide can also explain why limited attention can be devoted to these issues. The 2019 federal electoral campaign only registered 37 tweets addressing Inuit issues, which represents a lower count than during the 2015 electoral campaign (50 tweets). A majority of posts came from Liberal, Green and NDP

candidates, with Green leader Elizabeth May and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh posting messages. Conservative candidates were almost invisible on these issues. Attention was punctual and general again, with 1 tweet out of 5 posted during the electoral campaign directly referring to the Orange Shirt Day (September 30), a day to commemorate residential school survivors. In general, messages were either about Indigenous issues in general or presented accomplishments/achievements made by their party on Inuit issues (especially of course the ruling Liberal party).

Overall, Inuit issues did not register on the national social media radar during the electoral campaign. The low number of ridings with a significant Inuit majority did not help to convince parties, especially national leaders, to invest time addressing these issues. It is worth noting that only one party leader travelled to Nunavut to meet with voters (Justin Trudeau). Hence, although Inuit issues were talked about and often mentioned from October 2015 to October 2019, this heightened interest did not transfer to the electoral campaign, sparking debates about measures, investments and policies.

This article will now analyze how Inuit groups and leaders attempted during the 2019 electoral campaign to raise awareness and pushed advocacy for pivotal issues confronting their communities.

Inuit people in Canada have practiced active political representation for decades. Their modern political mobilization became significant in the 1970s and 1980s when different land claim agreements were signed with the Government of Canada. Legal representatives such as Nunavut Tunngavik or the Makivik Corporation were established to negotiate these agreements and then to ensure that the federal government fulfill their obligations. This activism was also observed in terms of political advocacy, with the creation of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (initially Inuit Tapirisat, 1971,

representing Canadian Inuit), the Inuit Circumpolar Council (initially Conference, 1977, representing Inuit living in four countries), and Pauktuutit (1984, representing Inuit women).

These groups, among others, have given a voice to Inuit people to deal with Southern governments and influence popular culture, media and decision-makers. On this note, studies were done to assess the nature of the political ideas promoted by Inuit organizations. Inuit organizations created as a result of land claims agreements (for example, Nunavut Tunngavik or Makivik Corporation) and political advocacy groups (ITK, ICC) were deemed as part of innovative Inuit governance solutions. Wilson (2007) argued that the ICC was able to provide collective influence, share best practices, enhance political autonomy and strengthen connections of Inuit people. A similar account was drawn by Abele and Rodon (2007) focusing on Inuit internal and external diplomatic achievements. On this regard, scholars have focused on the nature and utility of these political movements and their stance in relations to traditional conceptions of state sovereignty (Shadian, 2010; Gerhardt, 2011).

Likewise, other studies looked at organizations dealing with land claim agreements as innovative illustrations of multilevel governance at play (Wilson, 2017) and as playing “a positive role in the dynamic process of Aboriginal self-government in Canada” (Wilson and Alcantara, 2012; p.782). Doubts were expressed by Rodon (2018) who observed that land claims agreements created fragmented governance, with disagreements and a multiplicity of agencies in charge of different areas of responsibilities. Economic benefits as a result of resource development were also uneven and were not a defining factor in generating economic development (Rodon, 2018).

In order to assess the social media presence of Inuit organizations during the electoral campaign, the Twitter accounts of five Inuit

organizations were analyzed: the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (@ITK\_CanadaInuit), Qikiqtani Inuit Association (@Qikiqtani\_Inuit), Pauktuutit (@Pauktuutit), Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada (@ICC\_Canada) and Nunavut Tunngavik (@NTunngavik). In total, 120 tweets were published by these five organisations during the 2019 electoral campaign. Out of these posts, only 20 tweets addressed the election or vocalized grievances, with the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Inuit Circumpolar Council being the most active organizations. The overall lack of attention paid by candidates to Inuit issues was noted by Inuit leaders. For example, Monica Ell-Kanayuk, the president of ICC-Canada, noted that Arctic-specific conversations were absent from the electoral campaign and that Arctic and Inuit issues had failed to register as issues of national importance (cited in Quinn, October 18 2019).

As a result, the political messaging of these organizations on social media did not attempt to frame these issues as such. Out of the studied 20 electoral tweets, 45% of posts were about the climate strike and protest that occurred in late September 2019, and the Orange Shirt Day (commemorating residential school survivors and victims, September 30). Hence, the approach used consisted in rallying around broader causes that were connected to Inuit priorities. The former was particularly salient as many Inuit organizations were present at the different climate rallies from September 20 to 27. The latter allowed Indigenous issues as a whole to occupy a central place during the campaign, an effect that was not present during the rest of the electoral campaign (Savard and Landriault, October 3 2019).

The other messages were aimed at asking questions to the different parties on key issues (shipping, health, sovereignty, etc.), although these posts were not relayed in a significant fashion. This strategy did not confront parties and was rooted in a non-antagonistic approach. The close cooperation of these organizations with the federal government can explain this

reluctance to adopt a more hard-nosed public stance: future funding and programs depend on a positive working relationship with the next government. This strategy was contrasted with criticisms expressed by Inuit artists and activists Tanya Tagaq and Alethea Arnaquq-Baril who called out the Green party leader Elizabeth May for supporting Indigenous rights while at the same time opposing the Inuit seal hunt (Barrera, October 18 2019).

The traditional media also proved an alternative solution to social media for Inuit organizations in order to share Inuit takes and priorities with the rest of the country.

For example, ITK President Natan Obed was interviewed on CBC News program *Power and Politics* (September 20) and penned an opinion text in the Toronto Star (September 30). Inuk leader Sheila Watt-Cloutier also wrote an opinion text in the Globe and Mail on October 5. Both guest editorials urged more ambitious climate actions and connected the dots between Inuit issues and national/global issues (here, climate change). For example, Watt-Cloutier suggested that Inuit communities could suggest solutions to Southern communities on how to sustainably manage the environment, reaffirming that changes to the Arctic environment will result in changes everywhere (Watt-Cloutier, October 5 2019, O11).

A similar focus was present in Obed's *Power and Politics* interview, with the interviewer and Obed both framing Inuit issues as part and parcel of broader questions, be it Indigenous truth and reconciliation, the implementation of the recommendations of the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, climate change or racism (as a result of Trudeau's blackface controversy). However, Obed also presented Inuit-specific priorities and expectations, focusing on suicide prevention, social services and infrastructures, Inuit-led research and the creation of a new Inuit-Crown partnership. Furthermore, he analyzed different party platforms, implicitly taking position, with

criticisms for both the Conservative Party and the NDP while suggesting the Liberal party should focus and present their achievements further (Obed on CBC, September 20 2019). Of course, this type of political messaging does not apply very well to the 280-character format, potentially sparking it to backfire.

## Conclusion

The election of the Trudeau government clearly impacted the frequency and nature of Inuit issues mentions on social media. More attention was devoted to these issues from 2015 to 2019 and Liberal representatives mentioned or retweeted messages from Inuit users in a more frequent fashion. Even though Inuit issues were more frequently mentioned, this higher saliency did not translate into more attention during the 2019 electoral campaign: Indigenous and Inuit issues remained marginal and were not often addressed by party leaders and candidates alike. In turn, Inuit organizations were not very active on social media, regrouping around popular national causes. The lack of visibility for Inuit issues as topics of national concern brought these groups to flock to national issues (Indigenous rights, climate change) and establish the connection between these and specific challenges encountered by Inuit communities. A similar strategy was used by national Inuit leaders in traditional media. On this regard, the Orange Shirt day and the climate strikes and protests allowed Inuit voices to be heard.

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