Activity and Deliberative Enclaves of Fragmented Turkish Youth Groups of Political Parties on Twitter

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Abstract

Twitter has become the major platform for studying political fragmentation, echo chambers and polarization, and Turkey is one of the countries in which social media, in particular Twitter is used for political discussions the most, especially among young people. However, political fragmentation studies focusing on Turkey is limited. In this study, in order to shed light onto the influence of ideologically fragmented political youth groups on Twitter, the attributes and activities of the followers of the official youth groups of ruling party (AKP) and the main opposition party (CHP) are studied. Their followers which is around 400 thousand and 60 thousand, respectively, are subjected to a comparative analysis. In particular, the number of followers, friends, favorites and Tweets (including retweets and retweets with comment) of the followers of each group, as well as the number of verified accounts in each group are studied. In addition, in order to reveal the level of deliberative enclaves, the protected profiles in each group are analyzed. The findings are discussed together with the ideological lines of the groups and the results of the recent national elections.

Keywords: Deliberative enclaves, fragmentation, Turkish politics, youth participation in politics, social media, Twitter

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Introduction

One of the biggest issues political communications is the forming and reinforcing of echo chambers among fragmented groups. With the Internet and interactions on the social networks, this has even become a more important issue. Because, when compared to traditional media, it is now much more efficient to access to widespread ideas and interact with others. Here, the basic question is, whether on each platform such as Twitter or Facebook, do people tend to interact with like-minded people and narrow down their perspectives or on the contrary, with different-minded people and widen their perspectives (Bakshy et al. 2015; Bright 2018; Dahlberg 2007). The former results in forming and reinforcing echo chambers, while the latter weakens echo chambers. Because reinforcing echo-chambers among fragmented groups would potentially lead to polarization and even extremism, this issue becomes central in political communication science. Furthermore, research on echo chambers exceeds political science. To concrete examples are the dynamics of echo chamber and polarization about a debate on Twitter between people who are for and against abortion (Yardi and Boyd 2010), and echo chambers of conspiracy and scientific information pages on Facebook (Quattrociocchi et al. 2016). Focusing on politics, several countries and even multiple countries were in the focus of research (Gruzd and Roy 2014; Rauchfleisch and Metag 2015; Casteltrione 2019).

However, there is not much research on the echo chambers in Turkish politics. What is more, because young people in Turkey are closely involved in politics and most of the recent political issues are concerning youth, research on echo chambers focusing on Turkish youth becomes even more interesting.

In this work, focusing on the political youth groups in Turkey, we study their Twitter activities, and deliberative enclaves. In particular, we focus on the official youth groups of the two largest political parties in Turkey: The ruling party AKP (Justice and Development Party), and the main opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party). AKP was founded in 2001, and has been the ruling party since 2002 elections, and the percentages of votes for these two parties are shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1: Percentage of votes in the general elections for the ruling party AKP and the main opposition party CHP, since 2002, the first elections of AKP right after it was founded in 2001.

In this work, we consider two groups of Twitter accounts, where the members of each group are the followers of the official Twitter account of the official youth group of one of the parties, with the screen names @AKGenclikGM (of AKP), and @chpgenclikgm (of CHP). The numbers of followers of each account are 391.663 and 60.606, respectively, as of May 2019, when the data retrieval of this study was done. (As of writing this proceeding, these numbers are 394 thousand and 67 thousand, respectively.)
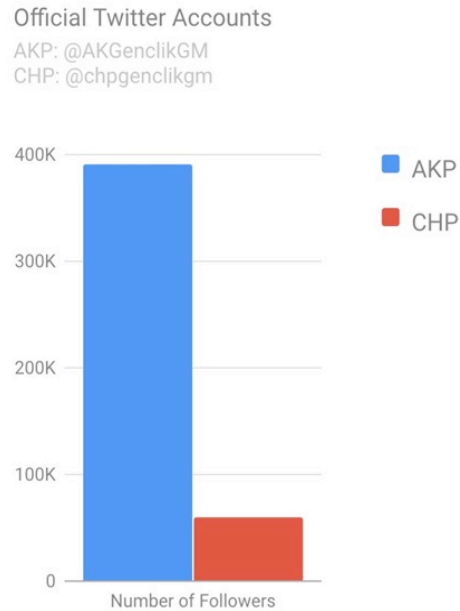

Figure 2: Number of followers of the official Twitter accounts @AKGenclikGM and @chpgenclikgm, the official youth organizations of the ruling party AKP and main opposition party CHP, respectively, by May 2019.

Method

In order to analyze the Twitter activities first, and then the level of deliberative enclaves of each official youth group on Twitter, we focused on each single follower of each group. For each follower account, we counted the number of followers and how many accounts followed, by May 2019. Using Tweepy library (Tweepy 2018), we counted the number of tweets and favorites in a 3-year span between the beginning of 2016 and the end of 2018. We checked whether the account of the follower is a protected one. Because we interpret that more protected accounts suggest a stronger deliberative enclave, and more likely to have a stronger echo chamber. We checked whether the account is a verified one. Because, more verified accounts suggest that more journalists, politicians and celebrities are following that group. This means, that group would have a weaker echo chamber. Our method is illustrated in Figure 3. For each group, we calculate the total numbers, and normalize the numbers with respect to the size of the group.
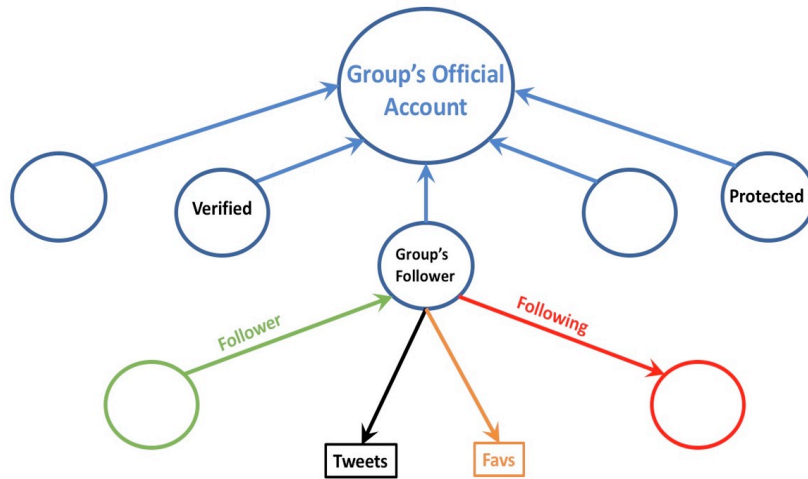
Figure 3: Illustration of our method. Among the followers of each official account of official youth organization of the political party, we count the number of verified accounts and protected accounts to shed light onto the level of deliberative enclaves and echo chambers. In order to analyze the Twitter activities, we focus on each single follower of the account, and for each follower, we focus on the number of followers and friends following, as well as tweets and favorites.

Results

Followers: We first found the total number of followers of the followers of the official youth group of each party, as shown in Figure 4 (left). The numbers are 144.812.114 for AKP and 62.518.629 for CHP. When we normalize these numbers with respect to the total numbers of the followers of each group, we find 378 for AKP and 1.031 for CHP. In other words, on the average, as shown in Figure 4 (right), a follower of the CHP group is followed others almost 3 times of a follower of the AKP group. That is, tweets of CHP group are more likely to propagate faster and more in Twitter.
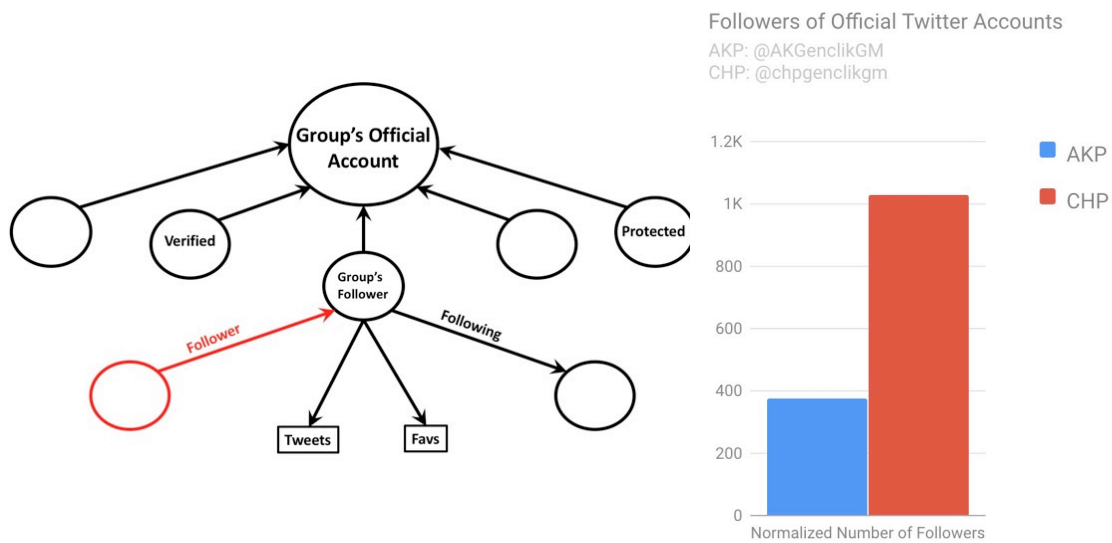

Figure 4: Left, we calculate the total number of followers of the followers of the official account. Right, normalized results for each group show that the followers of the official youth organization's account of CHP are followed by three times more than that of AKP.

Accounts being followed: We found the total number of accounts followed by the followers of the official youth group of each party, as shown in Figure 5 (left). The numbers are 173.944.466 for AKP and 50.032.657 for CHP. Normalizing these numbers with respect to the total numbers of the followers of each group, we find 444 for AKP and 825 for CHP. This shows that, on the average, as shown in Figure 5 (right), a follower of CHP group is following 2 times more accounts than a follower of AKP group.
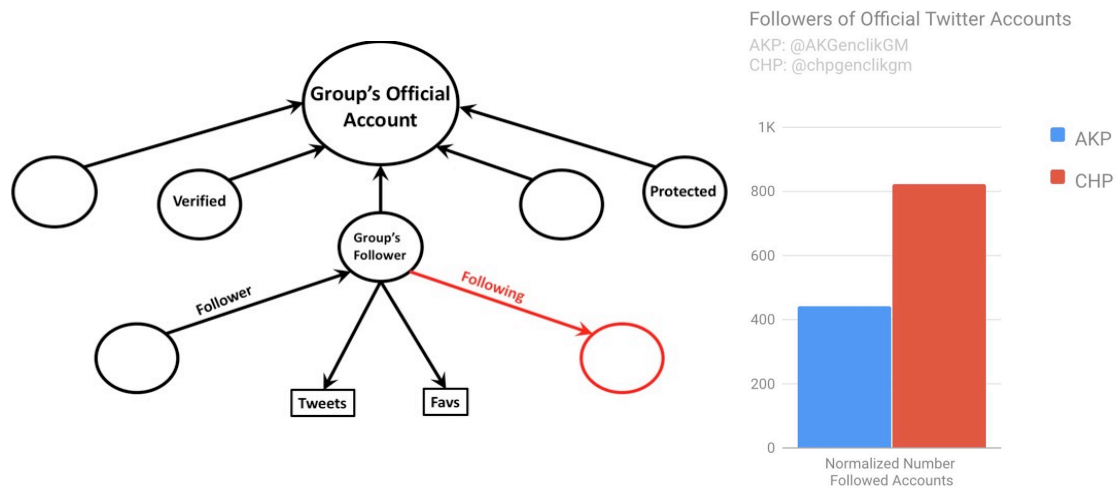

Figure 5: Left, we calculate the total number of accounts followed by the followers of the official account. Right, normalized results for each group show that the followers of the official youth organization's account of CHP are following other accounts around two times more than that of AKP.

Number of Tweets: We found the total number of tweets by the followers of the official youth group of each party, as shown in Figure 6 (left). Here, tweets account for tweets, retweets and retweet with comments. The numbers are 340.418.948 for AKP and 158.627.894 for CHP. When we normalize these numbers with respect to the total numbers of the followers of each group, we find 869 for AKP and 2.617 for CHP. That is, on the average, as shown in Figure 6 (right), a follower of CHP group tweets 3 times of a follower of a follower of AKP group.
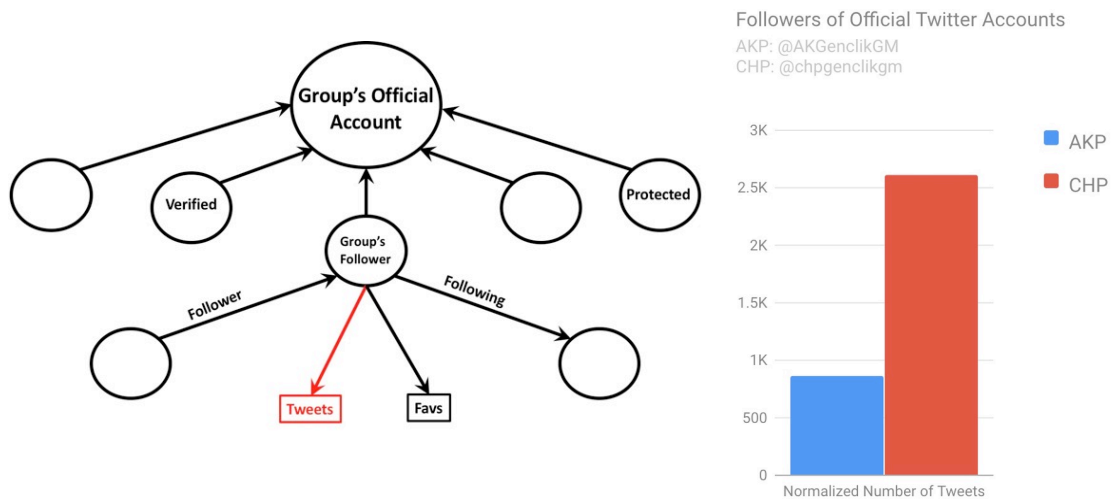
Figure 6: Left, we calculate the total number of tweets by the followers of the official account. Right, normalized results for each group show that the followers of the official youth organization's account of CHP are tweeting around three times more than that of AKP.

Number of Favorites: We found the total number of favorites by the followers of the official youth group of each party, as shown in Figure 7 (left). The numbers are 400.283.104 for AKP and 132.196.076 for CHP. When we normalize these numbers with respect to the total numbers of the followers of each group, we find 1.022 for AKP and 2.181 for CHP. Similar to the above previous results, on the average, as shown in Figure 7 (right), a follower of CHP group favorites tweets 2 times of a follower of AKP group.

These four results show that followers of the official youth group of CHP are significantly more active than those of AKP group on Twitter.

Percentage of Verified Accounts: When it comes to analyzing deliberative enclaves and forming echo chambers, we focus on the verified accounts and protected accounts, as shown in Figure 8 (left). More verified accounts following a group suggests that any favoriting, retweeting or commenting to a tweet of the group by a verified account makes that tweet visible to much more people. With this motivation, we checked how many verified accounts are following each of these two official youth group accounts. The results are, 340 for AKP and 169 for CHP, with percentages 0.09 and 0.28, respectively, as shown in Figure 8 (right). This shows that, the tweets of the official youth group of CHP are much more reachable to people. Therefore, this group is less likely to form an echo chamber, than the group of AKP.
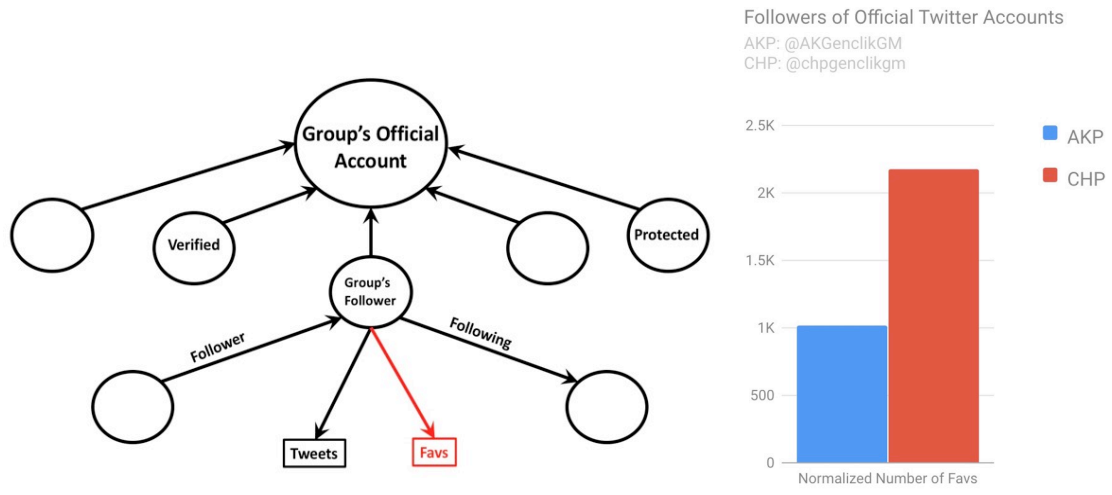
Figure 7: Left, we calculate the total number of tweets favorited by the followers of the official account. Right, normalized results for each group show that the followers of the official youth organization's account of CHP are favoriting others' tweets around two times more than that of AKP.
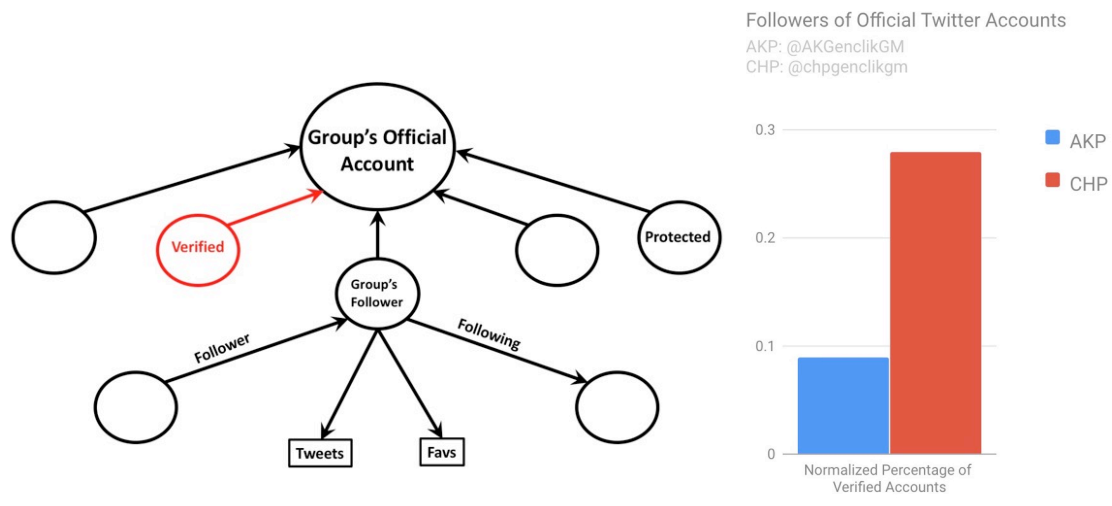

Figure 8: Left, we calculate the total number of verified accounts among the followers of the official account. Right, normalized results for each group show that the number of verified accounts among the followers of the official youth organization's account of CHP are around three times more than that of AKP.

Percentage of Protected Accounts: The tweets of protected accounts cannot reach to people other than the followers of that protected account, and this reflects a deliberative enclave. And as more of the accounts of a group are protected accounts in a group, the more likely that group forms an echo chamber. We found that the percentages of protected accounts of official youth groups of AKP and CHP are almost the same, CHP being slightly greater, as shown in Figure 8. However, this result does not show any significant difference for the two groups.
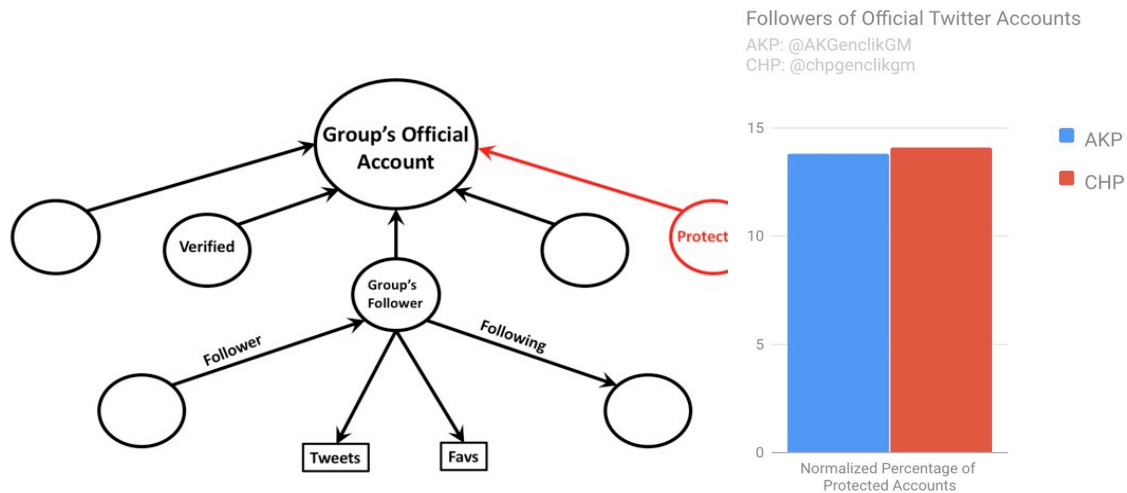

Figure 9: Left, we calculate the total number of protected accounts among the followers of the official account. Right, normalized results for each group show that the number of verified accounts among the followers of the official youth organization's account of CHP is almost the same with that of AKP.

Conclusion

Because the total number of followers as well as total numbers of followers, accounts followed, tweets and favorites of ruling party AKP group is significantly greater than the main opposition party CHP group, it is obvious that the former has a higher influence on Twitter in terms of the total volume. But when we normalize the total numbers of these interactions with respect to the total number of followers of each group, we find that on the average, a follower of CHP group is much more active on Twitter, than a follower of AKP group.

However, this result alone cannot prove which group is more likely to form an echo chamber, or even reinforce or weaken it. For such a proof, it is necessary to reveal whether these interactions take place between like-minded or different minded people. On the other hand, because verified accounts have a significantly higher potential to propagate on the social network, they help weakening the echo chambers among the fragmented groups, by enabling people to access various ideas. In this vein, because we found that more verified accounts are following CHP group, it is more likely that tweets of CHP group will be retweeted or discussed through comments considerably more than that of AKP group. When it comes to protected accounts, which create deliberative enclaves among fragmented groups, we found similar results for both groups.

Acknowledgements

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