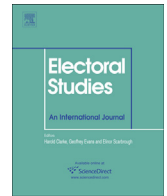




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Constituency candidates in comparative perspective – How personalized are constituency campaigns, why, and does it matter?

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ABSTRACT

The personalization of politics is a widely debated phenomenon in the electoral studies literature. However, most of the available research focuses on the national level and thus on party leaders and main party candidates. This article emphasizes the use of extending this debate to the constituency level and to constituency candidates. It furthermore sketches a framework for related research and introduces a new set of data collected in the context of the Comparative Candidate Studies Network (CCS).

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1. The personalization of politics

This special symposium focuses on a widely debated concept in electoral studies, namely the personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). The concept of personalization suggests that candidates increasingly take center stage vis-à-vis political parties and issues. It furthermore expects this development to concern the levels of voters and political elites. Proponents of personalization on the one hand assume an increasing effect of candidates on the perceptions and choices of voters. On the other, they hypothesize an increasing prominence of candidates and candidate characteristics in campaign and constituency communication.

In this special symposium we aim to address three puzzling and hitherto uncharted questions in the debate on the personalization of politics summarized in Fig. 1. First,

we know little about the *quantity and quality of personalized election campaigns*. Most of the available research focuses on the national level and thus on few main party candidates (Anderson and Brettschneider, 2003; Brettschneider et al., 2008; Kriesi, 2012; Vetter and Gabriel, 1998). As a result, the role of candidates at other electoral levels and thus the frequency of personalized campaign behavior with regard to a particular election remain to be an open question. Specifically, it is open whether personalized politics solely is related to national politics and main party candidates or whether it needs to be perceived as a comprehensive vote getting strategy that can be observed at all levels of campaign politics. Furthermore, we have little knowledge on the range and meaning of personalized campaign styles and thus on the quality of personalization. This concerns the concrete campaign strategies that define personalized politics vis-à-vis party oriented forms of campaigning. However, this also concerns the relationships between parties and constituency candidates in the context of personalized campaign communication. Personalization

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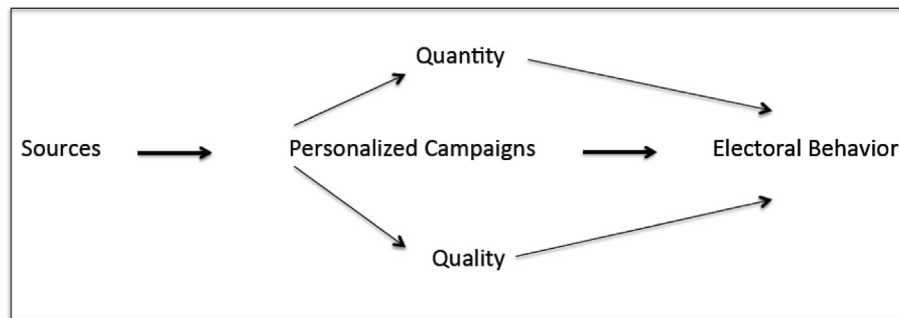


Fig. 1. The personalization of politics.

might indicate individualistic forms of campaign politics with constituency candidates running their campaigns as independent non-partisan political entrepreneurs. In contrast, personalization might turn out to be a vote getting strategy adopted and actively pursued by political parties.

A second question this special symposium focuses on concerns the *sources of personalized campaign politics*. Since previous research has been constrained to few cases at the national level of politics, we have little solid empirical evidence on what might cause personalized campaign styles. Particularly, we know little about the question whether personalization can be considered a strategic reaction on the part of individual candidates structured by contextual factors or whether it rather must be viewed as an erratic occurrence that is candidate specific and therefore hard to model.

The third question this symposium is interested in touches upon the *electoral consequences of personalization*. Personalization is widely considered a complex phenomenon enclosing both levels of electoral politics, the voter and the candidate level. However, this observation does not clarify whether these two levels are interrelated to each other, and how. Particularly, we have to ask whether personalized vote choices can be perceived as a result of personalized campaign strategies or whether these two phenomena represent two distinct faces of personalization that by and large remain unrelated to each other.

These are the main questions this special symposium is concerned with. It addresses these questions from a comparative cross-national perspective on the basis of a common conceptual frame and a new and common set of candidate survey data. The remainder of this introduction is devoted to sketching the conceptual frame integrating the contributions to this special symposium (2), to introduce the data their authors draw from (3), and to summarize their key findings (4). Before I turn to these tasks one reservation needs to be made. Clearly, the personalization concept implies the evolution of a process advancing across time. This suggests the need for a longitudinal research perspective. This perspective cannot be adopted in the context of this special symposium and in light of available data that are cross-sectional. However, our cross-sectional perspective enables us to better understand the range of choices in candidates' campaign styles and to understand its sources as well as its electoral effects. These

insights are crucial prerequisites for future systematic longitudinal research on the issue.

2. Personalization at the constituency level: a frame for comparative research

This special symposium focuses on the constituency level of electoral politics and on the campaign behavior of candidates running at this level. This stands in contrast to the national level of campaigning that stresses the main candidates of political parties and that so far with few exceptions (Bowler and Farrell, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008) has been in the center of the debate on the personalization of politics.

This special symposium, for three main reasons, considers the constituency level of electoral politics of crucial importance to address the questions outlined above. First, focusing on constituency campaigns allows us to significantly increase the number of cases while studying the personalization of politics. Take the German example, where about six main candidates battle for votes at a given election compared to more than 2,000 constituency candidates. With such an increase in the number of cases constituency campaigns are able to serve as *critical laboratories for descriptive and explanatory research* on personalization. Such an increase in cases allows us to better understand what candidates do in their campaigns, to what extent and in what ways campaign styles can be characterized as being personalized, why candidates do the things they do, and what kind of electoral effects it has.

Second, constituency campaigns provide a *critical context for gauging early signs and styles of personalization*. They allow for 'low cost personalization' on the part of vote seekers; less is at stake for constituency level candidates compared to party leaders at the (more visible) national level. Third, past research suggests that *constituency campaigns matter for vote choices*. This research traditionally focuses on Westminster democracies and on the strategic efforts of political parties to effectively utilize scarce campaign resources in plurality systems (Denver et al., 2003; Pattie and Johnston, 2003; Pattie et al., 1995; Whiteley and Seyd, 2003). This special symposium, on the one hand, aims to broaden the geographic scope of this debate and to increase variance with regard to electoral context. On the other, it aims to go beyond the issue of

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