

Chapter 8

Personalization Online: Effects of Online Campaigns by Party Leaders on Images of Party Leaders Held by Voters

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ABSTRACT

Research on the increasing importance of party leaders in elections has observed that party leaders maintain personal websites, blogs, and social networking sites in order to personalize the image of themselves by mixing personal and professional matters. This chapter examines whether these efforts affect the party leader character impressions by voters in a positive way. The chapter presents two experiments that examine the impact of exposure to authentic personal websites and, as a form of social media, blogs of party leaders on voters' perceptions regarding various traits of party leaders during a Finnish election campaign. The findings are mixed. The perception of one leader was significantly enhanced by exposure to his website as well as his blog. Moreover, exposure to the blog by this politician resulted in an enhanced assessment of his personality traits whereas exposure to his website had positive effect on the evaluation of his professional traits. In making sense of the findings, web and social media approaches, and participant expectancies are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about the effect that personalized politics online has on voters. According to Pruyzers, Cross and Katz (2018, p. 3), personalized politics means that individual political actors are “centrally important, prominent and highly visible” in politics. Among these actors, the international literature on political personalization has paid much attention to the increasing importance of party leaders in elections (e.g. Cross, Katz, & Pruyzers, 2018; Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Mughan, 2000; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). The concept of presidentialization of parliamentary systems stresses increasingly leadership-centred electoral processes and personalized party campaigns (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Correspondingly, Bittner (2011, 2018) has empirically demonstrated that voters’ perceptions of party leaders, in particular the leaders’ traits and personality, affect voter decisions and the distribution of votes in elections (see also Garzia, 2011).

In empirically testing the personalization thesis, claiming that party leaders have become more important to voters *over time*, Bittner (2018) concludes that party leaders and their personality have always been important in the minds of the electorate; voters have constantly evaluated party leaders and considered them in their vote calculus. However, what is new, Bittner notes, is that the amount of and access to information about the personality of party leaders is increasing, particularly on the web and in social networking sites and apps (Bittner, 2018, p. 53). This evolution, from personalization offline to a growing personalization online, might increase the role of party leaders’ personality with time.

For some time already, party organizations have created separate web and social networking sites for their party leaders, giving them an emphasized personal presence online during election campaigns. Firstly, parties maintain special party leader websites, which are different from the main party campaign site (e.g. Rahat & Zamir, 2018; Van Os, Hagemann, Voerman, & Jankowski, 2007; Voerman & Boogers, 2008). Secondly, advancing from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, party organizations are personalizing their party leaders during campaigns by using various social media tools, too. Hence, party leaders maintain personal blogs, create profiles on Facebook and post messages on personal Twitter and Instagram accounts (Jackson, 2006; Larsson, 2015; Larsson & Ihlen, 2015; Small, 2016; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). In a recent study on political personalization online, Rahat and Zamir (2018) survey the online presence of 127 party leaders in 25 countries. In the year 2015, 57% of the party leaders had own websites, 90% had personal Facebook accounts and 80% used Twitter accounts.

In “selling” party leaders online, by means of personal websites and various social networking sites and apps, an overriding aim is, arguably, to build a bond between the party leader and the voters by allowing for personal interactions and stressing such personal traits and characteristics of the leader that are believed to be perceived as positive by the voters. Scholars have noted that politicians, including political leaders, use various online platforms to stress their competence, qualifications and achievements as well as to emphasize their ordinariness, in order to appear as ordinary human beings by sharing personal information and stories, glimpses of family life etc. (e.g. Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2018; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). However, this emergent trend by parties to maintain special party leader websites, blogs, social networking sites and apps in order to personalize the leaders by mixing personal matters and traits with professional and political activities and issues begs the obvious question if it matters: Do these efforts affect the party leader character impressions of voters in a significant and positive way?

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