Facing the Voters - Individual and Institutional Determinants of Personalization in Social Media Images

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Extended Abstract

Current developments in political campaigning show a shift away from parties and a distinguished number of party officials, mostly party leaders, towards a broader, more personalized, and fractured political landscape, in which individual candidates play a more pronounced role (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Social media is a key component in this trend, and by now one of the most important tools for politicians to communicate directly to voters, journalists, and other political elites. It allows politicians to build their own individual brands without dependence on and interference from journalists and media outlets. On social media platforms the border between the offline and online space is blurred, leading to the emergence of a semi-public, semi-private space (Enli & Thumim, 2012).

Simultaneously images gain more and more influence on election campaigns, especially on these platforms. They enable political elites to bridge the gap between politicians and their voters by creating an intimate relationship with them (Grabe, 2009). Overall, politicians not only have the opportunity to share professional campaign pictures, but also more personalized, private images (Metz et al., 2020). In this context, Boussalis et al. (2021) show that images evoke an emotional response, followed by a cognitive response. Voters quickly evaluate images, intuitively leaving less room for actual cognitive and rational considerations. Therefore, politicians are constantly aware of how they present themselves in front of cameras, as backstage behavior can become public controversy (Mutz, 2015).

When running for office, candidates face a strategic dilemma: To what degree do they want to put themselves at the center of campaign communication? This calculus depends on personal preferences and institutional incentives. The amount of personalization is a strategic decision by candidates interacting with electoral institutions. The more incentive to *cultivate a personal vote* (Shugart et al., 2005), the more benefits they will reap from focusing on their own image. In the German multilevel system, these incentives differ between list-candidates who are mainly selected by their party, and nominate candidates who have to win a majority in a local district electorate. We argue that candidates who face the voters individually will also focus on their own image in their communication. One central ability of political candidates is to differentiate themselves from their political party, not relying on its label for campaigning. These candidates are likely more distant politically or see their party as distant from themselves. We argue that "mavericks", who see themselves as ideological deviants, will be more likely to focus on themselves.

Beyond these rational institutional factors, candidates are professional users who utilize their social media platforms consistent with their own self-image and preferences. Accordingly, we assume that personality traits affect to what degree politicians focus on their own image. We investigate whether certain personality traits have an impact on self-presentation strategies during election campaigns. In order to assess the effect of personality traits on self-presentations, we use candidates' self-reported Big Five personality traits. Hereby we expect

that higher extraversion leads to higher personalization in visual communication, and a higher degree of emotional messages. Higher neuroticisms as well as higher conscientiousness could lead to overall fewer posts containing self-images and more compliance with party messages and images. (Mondak & Halperin, 2008).

We test these hypotheses on a novel dataset of linked surveys and social media accounts. Based on reference images for more than 1,150 individual candidates and almost 35,000 posted images on Twitter during nine German state elections conducted in 2021 and 2022, we identify how often political candidates post images containing their own faces during campaign periods. Using state-of-the-art face recognition software, we measure the self-focus of visual social media communication (see figure 1). Building on these results, we will additionally examine candidates' expressed facial emotions by using a perceived emotion recognition algorithm. We further link this data to candidate surveys conducted during the 2021-2022 elections. The combination of survey questionnaires, social media, and official election records has been approved by survey participants, i.e., candidates, and enables us to answer our research question. Figure 2 shows the daily posted images on Twitter of the candidates running for the respective state election. We included all nine state elections since 2021 and selected all images two months before and two weeks after election day for our analysis.

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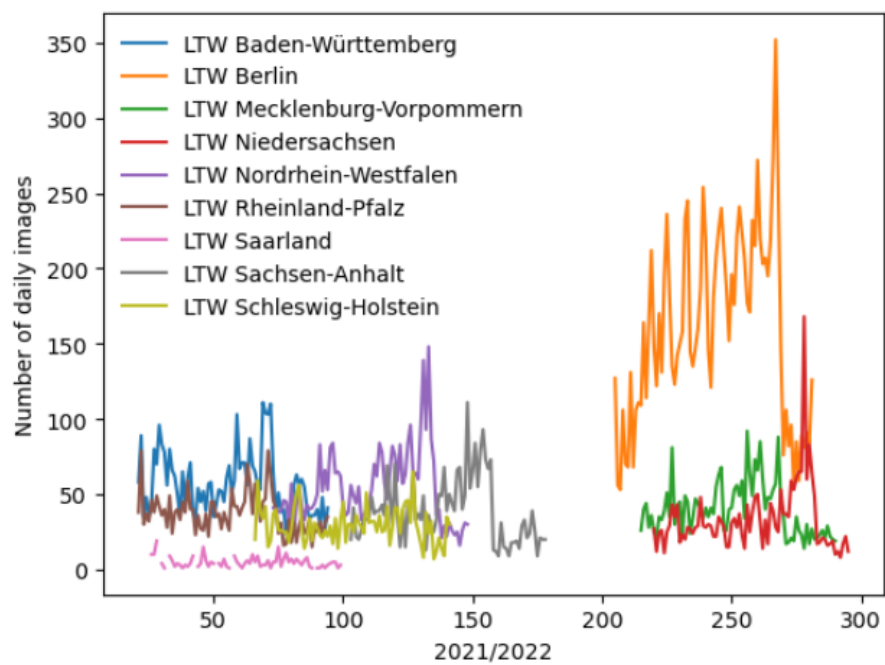
Figure 1: Example of Face Recognition: Lindner (FDP)

Figure 2: Images in State Election Campaigns