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Personal, private, emotional? How political parties use personalization strategies on Facebook in the 2014 and 2019 EP election campaigns¹

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Personal, Private, Emotional? How Political Parties Use Personalization Strategies on Facebook in the 2014 and 2019 EP Election Campaigns

Abstract

In 2014, the EU introduced the lead candidate procedure to raise citizens' awareness and interest in the European Parliament (EP) elections and, thereby, voter turnout. We study the use of personalization, centralized personalization (focusing on lead candidates), emotional personalization, and private personalization on Facebook by political parties across 12 countries during the 2014 and 2019 EP campaigns and the effects of personalization on user engagement. A standardized quantitative content analysis of 14,293 posts by 227 political parties shows that about half of the Facebook posts were personalized, but there is no general trend of rising personalization. While emotional personalization increased, parties hardly ever posted about their lead candidates and their private lives. Variations are not due to structural (e.g., party and media systems) or geographical/cultural factors. Positive effects are found for the use of emotional personalization attracting a higher volume of user reactions (likes, reactions, shares, and comments) in both elections.

Keywords: Facebook, personalization, emotions, lead candidate, user engagement, political parties, European elections, content analysis

Introduction

After seven elections or 35 years, the European Parliament (EP) introduced the system of lead candidates for the 2014 EP election (EU Parliament, 2018). The lead candidate procedure allows European political parties to nominate a candidate for the post of European Commission President and run the election campaign with this lead candidate, or "*Spitzenkandidat*." European citizens are thus informed about the candidates for President of the European Commission before the elections. While still voting indirectly, they can choose who becomes head of the European Commission. The EU hoped the lead candidate initiative would raise citizens' awareness and interest in the European Union and voter turnout (EU Parliament, 2018). Personalizing the EP elections was seen as a step towards a more democratic and more transparent EU (EU Parliament, 2018).

Indeed, personalized politics has long existed, for instance, in the form of emotional bonds with charismatic politicians (e.g., Balmas et al., 2014; Bennett, 2012), because "political parties often find that personalized appeals to growing ranks of independent voters can help to engage them" (Bennett, 2012, p. 22; see also Kruikemeier et al., 2013). Most studies show a trend towards more personalization over the past years (e.g., Balmas et al., 2014; Bennett, 2012; Garzia et al., 2020; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007), but there are some exceptions, for example for mass media (see Kaase, 1994; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). However, studies on personalization and EU politics are scarce (Gattermann, 2022).

Specifically, with the introduction of the lead candidate procedure and the decline in voter turnout to a record low in 2014, the question is, how significant is the personalization of campaign communication in EP elections? Moreover, political personalization is complex, and different research approaches mean that results are not comparable or lead to inconsistent conclusions (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Some studies that examine personalization trends in Western Europe in national elections based on (expert) surveys (e.g., Garzia et al., 2020 or Marino et al., 2022) demonstrate country- and party-related differences. European Parliament elections provide an opportunity for comparative studies across political parties, countries, and time periods because they have a similar context, occur on a few consecutive days, and are regularly repeated.

The 2014 EP election was the first in which most parties used Facebook (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). Facebook is an ideal campaign instrument for parties to reach out to voters. Accordingly, research has shown that Facebook has become the dominant social media platform in election campaigns (Bossetta, 2018). Facebook is a campaign instrument

with a much more direct and personal mode of communication (e.g., Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015) because the social media platform “was built to bring people closer together and build relationships” and it “prioritize(s) posts that spark conversations and meaningful interactions between people” (Mosseri, 2018). Research also shows that personalized online communication increases political engagement (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Metz et al., 2020).

Our comparative longitudinal study empirically explores the personalization of campaign communication through a quantitative content analysis of 14,293 Facebook posts by 111 (2014) and 116 (2019) political parties across twelve countries and two consecutive election campaigns. We focus on party communication, not on individual candidates, because candidate communication is per se more “personal(ized)” and recent studies show that (still) not all members of the European Parliament are on social media (e.g., Gattermann, 2022). Moreover, in EP elections, voters elect parties and not candidates. The context of the new lead candidate system promises fresh insights into the old(er) question of whether institutional change brings longitudinal outcomes in more personalized campaigns and allows comparisons across countries over time.

Personalization

Political personalization is a "process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007, p. 65). In a nutshell, it describes a shift of attention and focus from issues and policies to political figures and "from parties to politicians" (Adam & Maier, 2010, p. 213). This relatively straightforward definition of personalization is helpful for the purpose of this paper. There are, of course, also more complex conceptualizations. For instance, Pedersen and Rahat (2021) differentiate three analytical dimensions of personalization, i.e., arena (where it takes place), level (whose power is changing), and character (how it is manifested). However, we take a strictly empirical approach to personalization here; although previous studies have discussed normative aspects and understandings, debates about whether personalization is beneficial or detrimental to liberal democracies (e.g., Adam & Maier 2010; Frantz et al. 2021) – we do not contribute to this here.

With rising levels of partisan dealignment (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), personalized campaign communication has become increasingly important over the last decades (e.g., Balmas et al., 2014; Bennett, 2012). Garzia and colleagues (2020) analyzed the relationship

between partisan dealignment, leader effects, and party choice through 109 national election surveys collected in 14 Western European parliamentary democracies between 1961 and 2018. They showed that "an increasingly dealigned electorate progressively moved away from party-centered voting patterns into a more individualized style of decision making" (p. 18). Nevertheless, Rahat and Kenig (2018) note that sometimes there might be a shift in attention from the individual actor to the political group and that such trends of depersonalization have to be considered as well. Based on the overall trending pattern in previous research, we hypothesize that *Personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019 (H1a)*.

The process of political personalization is multifaceted and multilayered (Metz et al. 2020), leading to different approaches in research and, in the end, different results and discussions on political personalization. Rahat and Sheafer (2007, p. 207) differentiate between institutional, media, and behavioral personalization. Institutional personalization at the state and party level, which is of interest for the current study on parties' communication in EP campaigns, implies "the adoption of rules, mechanisms, and institutions that put more emphasis on the individual politician and less on political groups and parties." Through their longitudinal analysis of Israel (1949–2003), Rahat and Sheafer (2007, p. 65) show that "[i]nstitutional personalization leads to personalization in the media, which in turn leads to personalization in the behavior of politicians"; thereby proving the relevance of institutional personalization in the process of personalization in politics.

Following Rahat and Sheafer's (2007) typology, Balmas and colleagues (2014) introduced two types of political personalization. The authors differentiate between centralized and decentralized personalization. Both refer to the flow of power among elite groups. In their concept, centralized personalization "implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g., political party, cabinet) to a single leader (e.g., party leader, prime minister, president)," whereas "decentralized personalization means that power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g., candidates, members of parliament, ministers)" (Balmas et al., 2014, p. 37). Adapting this to political communication, centralized personalization means that party leaders or top candidates feature more prominently in party communication and receive more visibility at the expense of other party elite members. The introduction of the lead candidate procedure shows that centralized personalization has become essential to the parties' campaign strategies, even though personalization had already been part of previous campaign strategies. Following Balmas et al. (2014), Gattermann (2022) focuses on the European Commission (EC) president and

centralized personalization. Her study on news coverage of European affairs in the *Financial Times* between 1982 and 2019 shows that reports on the EC president slightly increased over time at the expense of the European Commission in general. We thus hypothesize that the personalization strategies of parties in the EU campaigns center on the lead candidates; thus, *Centralized personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019 (H1b)*.

Professional Personalization, Emotions, and Private Information

Some authors note that the process of personalization implies more than just putting more emphasis on the individual politician, as emphasized by institutional personalization. Following Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010), Metz and colleagues (2020) use a personalization typology that distinguishes between three dimensions: professional, emotional, and private self-personalization on politicians' Facebook posts. (From here, we refer to private professionalization instead of private self-privatization because we focus on party communication, not on how candidates self-personalize). Professional personalization presents a politician's political activities and tasks as a member of parliament and professional qualities (e.g., integrity, honesty, experience). Emotional personalization displays positive and negative emotions – Metz et al. (2020) do not distinguish between them. Private personalization refers to personal and intimate information and is all about the person behind the office (e.g., family, hobbies). In their analysis of German parliament members' Facebook posts (in 2016), the authors found that professional and emotional personalization are most used, but private personalization, which is rarely used, has the most significant effect on audience engagement. Users are interested in a politician's private life! Similarly, Hermans and Vergeer (2013), who compared candidates' websites in 17 countries during the 2009 EP elections – before the EU established the lead candidate system and before Facebook had become a significant campaign platform – show that posts with professional personalization were most common. Just like in the study by Metz et al. (2020), posts with information about the candidates' homes and families or information about personal preferences in the candidate's private lives were rarely present. Another study on Instagram in the German 2017 national election showed that candidates "overwhelmingly" (p. 15) remain in professional rather than private contexts in their Instagram posts (Haßler et al., 2023). Considering that parties learn over election cycles and that personal information yields more engagement, we would still expect a low but increasing level of private personalization. Thus we propose that *Private personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019 (H1c)* and

that *Private personalization drives user engagement more than other forms of personalization (H2c)*.

Personalized communication is strongly connected with emotions. According to Ekman (1993), emotions are a process, an automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal past, and a set of psychological changes and emotional behaviors that allow us to deal with a given situation. Gattermann (2022) argues that a human dimension in EU politics is important because it provides a face to the generally perceived distant EU – making it more accessible to the people. Studies show that emotions are essential in campaigns, as they play an important role in processing political information and thereby affect voters' attitude formation and voting decisions (Brader & Marcus, 2013; Crabtree et al., 2020; Nai & Maier, 2021; Weeks, 2015).

Emotions are evoked through how parties say something: How they frame their message – positive or negative. On the one hand, campaigns aim to foster positive emotions, such as, for instance, Barack Obama on Facebook in his successful 2012 campaign, opting for messages of hope and enthusiasm (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). Following Brader (2005), enthusiasm is a reaction to signals that positively affect a person's goals (i.e., things are going well). It reinforces commitment to those goals and strengthens the motivation to act or stay involved. On the other hand, negative appeals such as fear "are very common in modern electoral campaigns" (Nai, 2018, p. 225). Mainly, extremist parties use negative emotions like anger, fear, or anxiety in their messages (Crabtree et al., 2020; Widmann, 2021), preferring fear to enthusiasm in campaign communications (Nai & Maier, 2021). Nai (2018, p. 241) sees negative and fear-fueled campaigns as "detrimental forces in modern democracies, fostering depressed turnout, cynicism, apathy, and a gloomier public mood." Here, we study emotions in the context of personalization, i.e., in personalized party posts, and hypothesize *Emotional personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019 (H1d)*.

Personalization and User Engagement

Campaigning in hybrid media systems and democratic elections is strategic communication (Klinger & Russmann, 2017; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2014). Political parties invest in professional communication units, employ external PR strategists, and work directly with social media platforms to optimize their messages (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018; Russmann, 2022) to maximize followers and interactions and to target, reach, and mobilize voters. On Facebook, the number of reactions (in 2014: likes), shares, and user comments are

user engagement measures or popularity cues. Parties reap double benefits from posts that generate substantial user engagement because audiences emerge through user interactions on social media. To reach beyond targeted groups and followers, parties rely on their users to spread content with their networks (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). User engagement enables messages to spread beyond the circle of immediate followers to more peripheral networks. As a consequence, more potential voters can see and engage with them. Moreover, social media are algorithmically curated environments where algorithms attribute relevance to messages that generate engagement and amplify these messages. Thus, parties seek to get as many reactions, shares, and comments as possible because this helps spread the message with double amplification by users and algorithms.

A study on EP election campaigns (Klinger et al., 2023) showed that the correlation between likes/reactions and shares, as well as between shares and comments, increased substantially in 2019 compared to 2014 and that the level of user engagement is connected to the content of a post: negative emotions, negative campaigning, and dramatization attracted more reactions, shares, and comments. Based on this, we hypothesize that *Personalization drives user engagement (H2a)* and, more specifically, *Emotional personalization drives user engagement (H2d)*. Bene (2017) similarly showed in Hungary that candidates' Facebook posts providing private information yield significantly more likes and comments, and posts with negative emotions induced more sharing. Studying personalization and emotional appeals in candidates' posts on Facebook in Germany, Metz et al. (2020) found that both professional and emotional personalization were the most prevalent, but only emotional and private personalization yielded more user engagement. This means that while candidates rarely use private information, it holds tremendous potential to engage more users. Specifically, studies in candidate-centered electoral systems have shown that personalized Facebook posts have a statistically significant positive effect on the number of likes, comments, and shares (e.g., Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). From this, we can derive that lead candidates will also impact interaction, i.e., *Centralized personalization drives user engagement (H2b)*.

In the context of the 2014 and 2019 EP elections and based on the literature review, we focus on personalization in general, emphasizing centralized personalization, emotional personalization, and private personalization. Here, we briefly summarize our hypotheses:

H1a: Personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019.

H1b: Centralized personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019.

H1c: Private personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019.

H1d: Emotional personalization has increased between 2014 and 2019.

H2a: Personalization drives user engagement.

H2b: Centralized personalization drives user engagement.

H2c: Private personalization drives user engagement more than other forms of personalization.

H2d: Emotional personalization drives user engagement.

Country and Party Differences

Context matters. For instance, Bennett (2012, p. 24) points out that more focus has to be given to "the palpably different communication styles of personalized politics on the Left and the Right." In the 2019 EP election, conservative and social-democratic parties lost seats to increased voter support for Eurosceptic and far-right parties (EU Parliament, 2019). Empirical evidence on institutional, professional personalization is sometimes contradictory, often due to country- and party-related differences. However, research usually does not pay enough attention to these aspects (e.g., Bennett, 2012). Based on an expert survey, Marino et al. (2022) analyzed the personalization of politics for around 110 parties in 17 Western European countries from 1985 until 2016. While the study did not identify a clear trend in the personalization of politics in national elections among Western European countries over time, country- and party-related personalization trends were detected. In a recent study on the 2019 EP election, Wurst et al. (2022) analyzed Europarties' communication on Facebook. They found that some Europarties, particularly the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES), more than others, frequently made references to their lead candidates on Facebook. Again, we argue that EP elections provide a research setting in which country- and party-related influences can be better compared than in national elections because of the same institutional setting of the EU elections in all member states. Consequently, we ask:

RQ1: How does the share of personalization, centralized personalization, emotional personalization, and private personalization in political parties' Facebook posts vary across countries, party families, and over time?

Data and Methods

European Parliament elections present an excellent case study offering researchers unique possibilities for comparative studies across political parties, countries, and time, as they provide a similar context, take place over a few consecutive days, and do so recurrently. We included the United Kingdom and 11 of the 27 remaining EU countries: Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden. These countries present diversity across several critical differentiating dimensions within the EU, e.g., geographic positioning, political system, media system, monetary contributors, and benefactors from the EU. In some countries, local elections took place at the same time as the EP elections, but no national elections took place in any of our selected countries. This is important, as we code party posts on Facebook and must ensure that no first-order election is prioritized in them. Facebook is the most important social media platform in all countries under investigation, particularly in terms of news and political information gained from social media (AU 30%, ESP 44%, CRO 55%, FR 43%, GER 22%, HU 61%, IRE 39%, IT 56%, NL 28%, PL 65%, SWE 32%, UK 24%, Digital News Report, 2021).

The data drawn from the Facebook pages of 111 (in 2014) and 116 (in 2019) political parties were collected during the two weeks before the elections. Our study includes parties with a Facebook page that were categorized into party families by the Party Manifesto Project² or the European Electoral Project³ (data sources for party characteristics), with the addition of very few exceptions. Thus, we included more than just the major parties but not all fringe parties. Our overall data set includes 14,293 party posts (6,100 for 2014 and 8,193 for 2019, see Table S1 in the Supplementary file). Data was collected by the academic-led company Sotrender.com, which continuously collected posts and their metadata during the study period. The data were downloaded just after the campaigns ended, so any additional user reactions produced after the elections were not included. Sotrender does not control for the possibility of bots or "like farms" but makes a scan of official party profiles as they are visible to the users.

² manifesto-project.wzb.eu

³ [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352340920308623](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352340920308623)

Thirteen coders (11 being native speakers) conducted the manual coding using a standardized quantitative content analysis. Our coders were fluent in their languages and deeply accustomed to the cultural and political contexts in the countries they coded (most of them citizens, some living there at the time of coding). The coders were recruited and trained in two sessions. After each, we ran a reliability test on 150 randomly chosen posts in English, with an outcome of Percent Agreement (.956), Brennan and Prediger (.941), and GWET's AC (.951) (for details, please see Table S2 in the Supplementary file).

Measurements

Our main content variables – personalization, centralized personalization, emotional personalization, and private personalization – are each considered independently, such that all of them could be coded in a single Facebook post. All variables are binary-coded and moderately correlated (see Table S3 in the Supplementary file). We only coded the text of Facebook posts, not photos, videos, or URLs in the posts.

Variables Used in the Study

Personalization was coded if the post focused on or mentioned one or two identifiable person(s) with their function(s) and/or name(s). We identified a total of 6917 personalized posts.

User engagement: Kalsnes et al. (2017) have categorized three kinds of connective affordances on social media: acknowledging (reaction/likes); redistributing (shares); and interacting (comments). Following this logic, we can measure engagement by the number of likes (reactions in 2019⁴), shares, and user comments on each post published by a political party. The frequency of all three forms of engagement rose from 2014 to 2019. We collected 2,973,374 likes in 2014 (so an average of 487 likes per post) and 11,081,964 reactions in 2019 (1361 per post on average); 765,487 shares in 2014 (125 per post, on average) and 2,475,824 for 2019 (304 per post, on average); and 378,956 and 2,416,165 comments respectively in 2014 and 2019 (62 and 296 per post, on average).

Centralized personalization occurs when at least one of the *lead candidates* is mentioned in the post (2014: Jean Claude Juncker/Luxembourg, Martin Schulz/Germany, Guy Verhofstadt/Belgium, Ska Keller/Germany, José Bové/France, Alexis Tsipras/Greece,

⁴ In 2016, Facebook diversified "likes" into six categories of reactions (like, love, haha, wow, sad, angry). For 2014, we collect likes; for 2019, we add all reactions.

Peter Sunde/Sweden, Amelia Andersdotter/Sweden; 2019 Manfred Weber/Germany, Frans Timmermans/the Netherlands, Margarethe Vestager/Denmark, Jan Zahradil/Czech Republic, Ska Keller/Germany, Bas Eickhout/The Netherlands, Violeta Tomič/Slowia, Nico Cué/Spain, Oriol Junqueras/Spain) but no more than another two people are mentioned. Centralized personalization was identified in 276 posts. In the regressions, we also employ *decentralized personalization*, indicating personalized posts but not centralized (N=6641) (posts without a personalization element are the reference group).

Emotional personalization was operationalized as personalized posts containing emotions (as in Metz et al. (2020), see also Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015; Crabtree et al., 2020; Widmann, 2021). We identified a total of 1439 personalized posts including emotional appeal.

Private personalization was operationalized as a personalized post that displayed a person in a private context, focusing on private or intimate information and life aspects (family, hobbies, personal matters, children, spouse, vacation, etc.) rather than the professional context. In total, 79 posts contained some form of privatization.

Control Variables

Party family belonging is based on the typology and data provided by the Party Manifesto Project; parties were grouped into party families according to their ideological standpoint. Twenty-five parties not included in the Party Manifesto Project data were classified using a comparable proxy of ideological and economic standpoints from the European Electoral Project (see Table S4 in the Supplementary file). *National parties* are a reference for party comparison because we expect them to put emphasis on strong personalities (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2017).

Countries are added as dummy variables, with Ireland as a reference. Among the 12 countries, Ireland is the country that is closest to the average in the use of personalization. It shows almost the same use of personalization between the two elections (47.8%).

We also include other variables controlling for party characteristics and Facebook affordances (for details please see Table S5 in the Supplementary file).

Results

Personalization Strategies on Facebook

The aim of this study is twofold. First, to examine from a longitudinal perspective the use of personalized communication by political parties on Facebook during European elections. Second, to analyze how personalization affects the level of user engagement received by party posts on Facebook.

Comparisons across Countries

Our results for the use of personalization show that about half of the Facebook posts in each election were personalized (2014: 49.4%, N=3019; 2019: 47.5%, N=3,898 (F 5.13, $p < .023$)). On average, the share of personalization overall has not increased between 2014 and 2019, however it may differ substantially per country (Figure 1, Map 1). For some countries such as Poland (+18%) and Spain (+10%) the share of personalized posts had increased, but in other countries such as Sweden (-19%) and Italy (-19%) the data reveals the opposite development. Thus, H1a, indicating an increase in personalization between 2014 and 2019, is rejected.

Regarding *centralized personalization* (Figure 1, Map 2), we found that despite about half of the Facebook posts in each election being personalized, parties did not focus on their lead candidates. Centralized personalization was only displayed in very few Facebook posts in both campaigns (2014: 2.85%, $M = .025$ N=174; 2019: 1.97%, $M = .015$ N= 161 (F 17.69 $p < .000$)), with a decrease in 2019. Thus, H1b is rejected as we do not find generally increased interest in leading candidates.⁵ The rare posts with centralized personalization generally focused on a professional context. We find slightly more interest devoted to lead candidates depending on their country of origin, however, the pattern is not consistent. In Germany and the Netherlands, centralized personalization was the highest among all countries studied (respectively 7.7% and 4.4% of posts were dedicated to lead candidates in both elections); on the contrary, in Spain (1.73%) the interest in the lead candidate was at the same average as in other countries (1.93%) and in Sweden it was even below (.49%). In countries where the lead candidate was present in both years, a growth in interest was observed (by .9 percentage points in Germany and 2.3 percentage points in Spain), as well as in the country that introduced the lead candidate only in 2019 (plus 9.3 percentage points in the Netherlands).

⁵ Within the studied countries, four of them had lead candidates: In Germany and Spain during both elections, in Sweden in 2014, and in the Netherlands in 2019.

In the 2014 EP campaign, none of the posts with a lead candidate featured private information, and in the 2019 campaign only one of the 161 posts with a lead candidate gave a glimpse of their private life.

Like other studies, we have found almost no *private personalization* (Figure 1, Map 4). Taking all personalized posts into account, political parties seldom offer private information about their politicians, which was only found in 0.25% of the posts in 2014 and in 0.77% of the posts in 2019. Thus, we do see an increase, confirming H1c, as private personalization exhibited a quadrupling in magnitude (from 15 to 69 posts) in 2019, but persisting on an extremely low scale.

Looking at *emotional personalization* (Figure 1, Map 3), we find that the share of emotional personalization increased almost four times between 2014 (3.2%, $M=.031$, $N=195$) and 2019 (12.44%, $M=.059$, $N=482$) ($F 56.13$ $p<.000$). Both positive and negative emotional personalization have increased (positive from 1.99% ($N=60$) to 4.5% ($N=175$); negative from 4.5% ($N=136$) to 7.95% ($N=310$)). Thus we can confirm H1d hypothesizing an increase in posts containing emotional personalization.

< Insert Figure 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d here >

Figure 1. Personalization, centralized personalization, emotions and privatization change per country and per year

Comparisons across Parties

Figure 2 (for details please see Table S6 in the Supplementary file) shows the use of *personalization* by parties according to their political ideological families. Comparing with the Nationalist parties whose communication generally has a strong focus on the leader (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2017), in 2014 three parties were using more personalization: Social Democrats, Liberals, and Conservatives (respectively $OR=2.011$, $OR=2.126$, $OR=1.535$ with $p<.000$ for all). This tendency changed in 2019, when Nationalist parties dominated in the employment of personalized messages, with the exception of Left Socialists and Special Issue-oriented parties ($OR=1.214$ $p<.05$ and $OR=1.749$ $p<.000$), which employ more

personalization. A particularly substantial negative breach in this respect is for Ecologist, Liberal, and Ethnic Regional parties (OR=.474, OR=.579, OR=.678 respectively, $p < .000$). When comparing party size (Table S6) in 2019 the minor parties in the national parliaments used more personalization during the EP campaign. Divergences among countries (with the reference to Ireland, being closest to a general average among countries in the study) are more substantial in 2019 than in 2014. Parties in Poland (OR=3.443), Spain (OR=2.852), France (OR=2.696) and Austria (OR=2.643) use more personalization than the average of other countries.

< Insert FIGURE 2 >

Figure 2. Personalization by party ideological family

Note: Partial outcomes of the logistic regression, Nationalist parties is a reference group.

As such, regarding country and party differences in our research question, we did find some interesting variations (e.g., stronger effect of centralized privatization in some of the countries of origin of the lead candidates), but no clear pattern of this variation. For all personalized Facebook posts there are differences between countries, and even within countries over time, as well as between party groups and within party groups over time. But our data display no clear pattern for a higher or lower use of personalization. Neither do geographic position, nor the political and media system play a role. It does not matter whether countries are monetary contributors to or benefactors of the EU or what role Facebook plays in the country in terms of news and political information consumption.

Personalization and User Engagement

Now, let us turn to the effects of personalizing party posts on user engagement on Facebook. Figure 3 (for details please see Table S7 in the Supplementary file) indicates that *decentralized personalization* yields less user engagement in both elections, i.e., likes (2014: $\beta = -.191$; 2019: $\beta = -.175$ ($p < .000$)), shares (2014: $\beta = -.445$; 2019: $\beta = -.318$ ($p < .000$)) and comments (2014: $\beta = -.141$; 2019: $\beta = -.187$ ($p < .000$)). *Centralized personalization* exhibits less stable effects, negative on gaining comments in 2014 ($\beta = -.307$ ($p < .000$)) and positive on gaining likes in 2019 ($\beta = .382$ ($p < .000$)). But no other effects are statistically significant.⁶

⁶ In additional models including *personalization* (merging centralized and decentralized personalization) the effects are negative and statistically significant for any form of engagement in both electoral campaigns.

Private personalization revealed only a positive effect on likes for the 2019 EP campaign ($\beta=.449$ ($p<.000$)).

Our analysis consistently reveals positive effects of *emotional personalization* across all forms of engagement and for both years (likes 2014 $\beta=.503$, 2019 $\beta=.203$; shares 2014 $\beta=.687$, 2019 $\beta=.558$; comments 2014 $\beta=.305$, 2019 $\beta=.198$ ($p<.000$)). Posts that infuse a personalized message with emotional resonance tend to elicit a more substantial response from the community.

In sum, we cannot confirm hypotheses 2a–c, and we identified a counterintuitive outcome from the *decentralized personalization* where a consistently negative effect on engagement was observed. Our findings support hypothesis 2d, affirming that emotional personalization attracts more user reactions. We also have to reject the notion that private personalization drives user engagement more than any other type of personalization – instead, emotional personalization is a key driver.

< Insert **FIGURE 3** >

Figure 3. De-/centralized-, private and emotional personalization on user engagement

Discussion and Conclusions

Our results show that across 12 European countries and comparing two consecutive elections after the introduction of lead candidates in EP elections, about half of the Facebook posts are personalized, but there is no general trend of rising personalization. Party communication clearly is about decentralized personalization focusing on members of the European Parliament and single politicians, but not giving more visibility to the lead candidate as postulated by centralized personalization strategies (Balmas et al., 2014). The EU lead candidate initiative did not change this between 2014 and 2019. The sole effect of lead candidates is observed in some countries where they stand as candidates (most evidently in Germany and the Netherlands). Moreover, just like in the 2009 EP election on party websites (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013), if campaign communication is personalized, it focuses on professional information about lead candidates as well as all other politicians (i.e., professional personalization). Private personalization is not a trend in EP campaigns.

Accordingly, personalized campaign communication on party Facebook pages in EP elections can be described as decentralized professional personalization.

Personalization varies across countries, but with no discernible geographical or structural pattern relating to party or media systems. However, what we found were interesting insights that merit deeper reflection and discussion. In most countries, personalization increased (especially in Spain, Germany, and Poland), but in some, it decreased (especially in Italy and Sweden). One possible explanation that came to mind was that personalization might be higher in the countries of the lead candidate's origin and that parties might emphasize a lead candidate if they are citizens of "their" country. We do not have all countries with lead candidates in our sample and cannot fully assess this. However, this connection holds only partially in the countries we cover. For instance, personalization in Sweden decreased from 64.8%, the highest general personalization among all countries in our study in 2014 with two Swedish lead candidates (Peter Sunde and Amelia Andersdotter) to 45.6 % in 2019 (minus 19.2) when no Swede was among the lead candidates. However, only 0.9% of party posts contained a lead candidate in 2014, and in 2019, none of the posts. Similar but different, in the Netherlands, centralized personalization increased dramatically in 2019 when Frans Timmermans was the lead candidate (from 0.6% to 9.9%), but personalization overall remained stable with a slight decrease (46.6% to 45.3%). Although we observe more lead candidates featured in party posts in their home countries, the numbers are often low and do not explain the level of personalization in general.

We did not find a pattern that could explain these variations, which – in our view – suggests that variations occur from situational factors and strategic decisions. Situational factors can arise from parties with visually prominent or famous candidates or from a crisis situation that gives more visibility to an incumbent candidate. Strategic decisions to center the candidates rather than campaign messages may have an impact on the varying levels of personalization and emotional contents – the picture we get from the data reveals that European parties do not make homogeneous decisions about centering candidates or politicians in their campaigns – they are by no means following a trend towards personalization or more emotional messages.

We can confirm previous results from Metz et al. (2020) that emotional personalization yields more user engagement. In fact, this is the only stable variable across the years and forms of engagement that have had a positive effect on users.

At this point, the limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Although we analyzed the most essential social media platform for disseminating news to citizens and gathering political information (Digital News Report, 2021), our analysis is nevertheless restricted to a single social media platform. Future studies should consider platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, in recognition that Facebook's dominance in election campaigns might decrease over time with the rise of newer platforms. Our comparison included only a selection of EU countries. Ideally, future research will take all EU countries into account. Using our manually coded data as training data for automated analyses could enable us (and other scholars) to include all countries in the next electoral cycle. In upcoming election cycles, one could also include the posts of lead candidates – if the lead candidate systems are applied again in 2024. Longitudinal studies are always confronted with changes, and this is especially true for social media, an emergent technology, where changes happen constantly and often quickly. For instance, Facebook's algorithms changed between 2014 and 2019, affecting user reactions, and the like button was updated in 2015. While in 2014, users could only generically "like" something, in 2019, they had more response options through six different reactions (like, love, haha, wow, angry, sad). In our study, we compared the 2014 "like" to 2019 "reactions" (all six reactions), but of course, they do not necessarily mean the same thing. Further examinations are needed to understand that change in the affordances. Data from the 2024 EU election will contain one more reaction, the “care” emoji, added during the pandemic in 2020. After the 2024 campaigns, we will have two election cycles with the six reactions established in 2015. This will enable scholars to better assess this change in affordances, e.g., whether users interact more over time or because of more options to react. We could also study if posts with “angry” reactions have more reach in two different election cycles with this option.

Regarding categorizing parties into party families, the Party Manifesto Project counts Hungarian Fidesz as a Conservative party and Irish Sinn Fein as a Special Issue party, when both are borderline cases that could also have been classified as Nationalist parties. From here, it could be insightful to incorporate our results with qualitative interviews with the political parties to address the why-question, i.e., understanding parties' strategic decisions regarding personalized content.

By focusing on personalization strategies in this study, we picked up on the lead candidate initiative the EU introduced in 2014, hoping to raise awareness of and interest in the EU among citizens. In the last EP election in 2019, the Conservatives won the most seats, but in the end, it was not their lead candidate, Manfred Weber, who became president of the

EU Commission. Instead, members of the European Parliament elected the surprise candidate Ursula von der Leyen from Germany, who had not even run as a lead candidate. Hence, in the end, the decision of the Commission President was not determined by the people's vote, as promised with the introduction of lead candidates in 2014. In an unexpected plot twist, the EC decided to abandon or betray the lead candidate system *after* votes had been cast. So, it is now an open question whether the lead candidate procedure will come into play again in the next EP election in 2024 and, if so, how the public will react. Time will tell if the lead candidate approach was just a short-lived experiment. Our data show that lead candidates play only a minor role in personalizing party communication and did not set a trend towards more personalization in motion.

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Appendix
Figure 1A Personalization

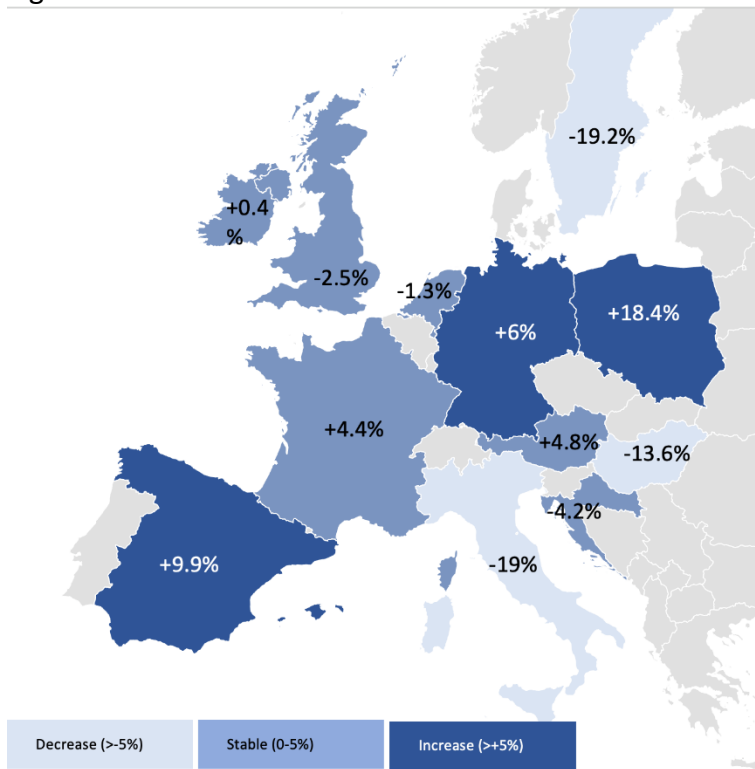


Figure 1B Centralized personalization

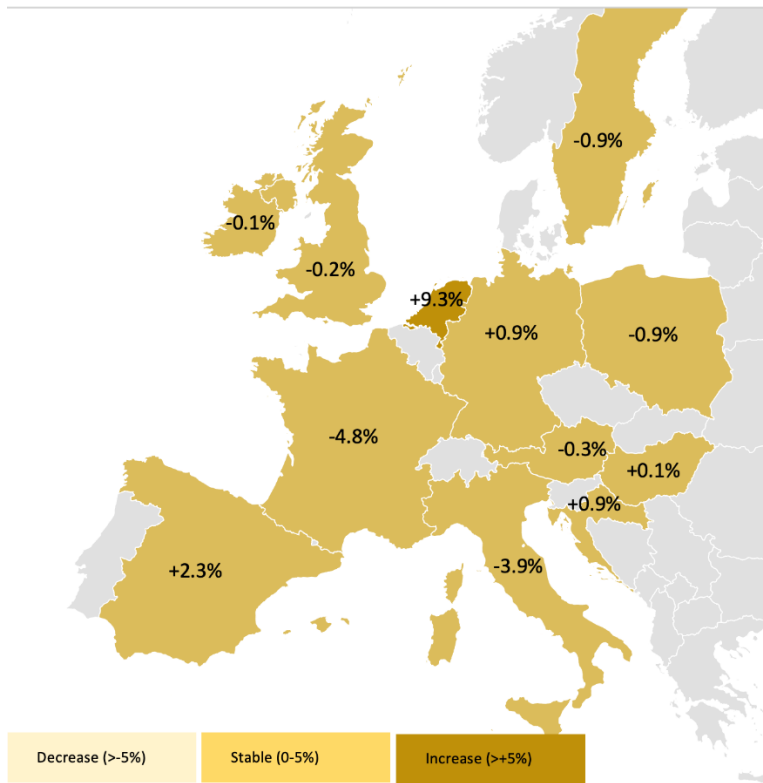


Figure 1C Emotional personalization

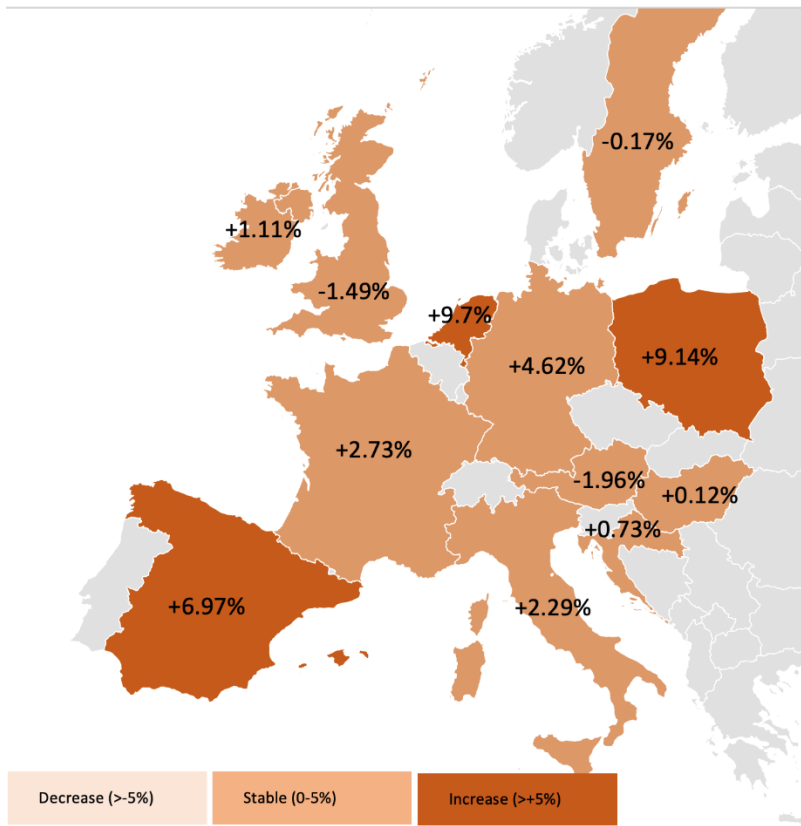


Figure 1D Private personalization

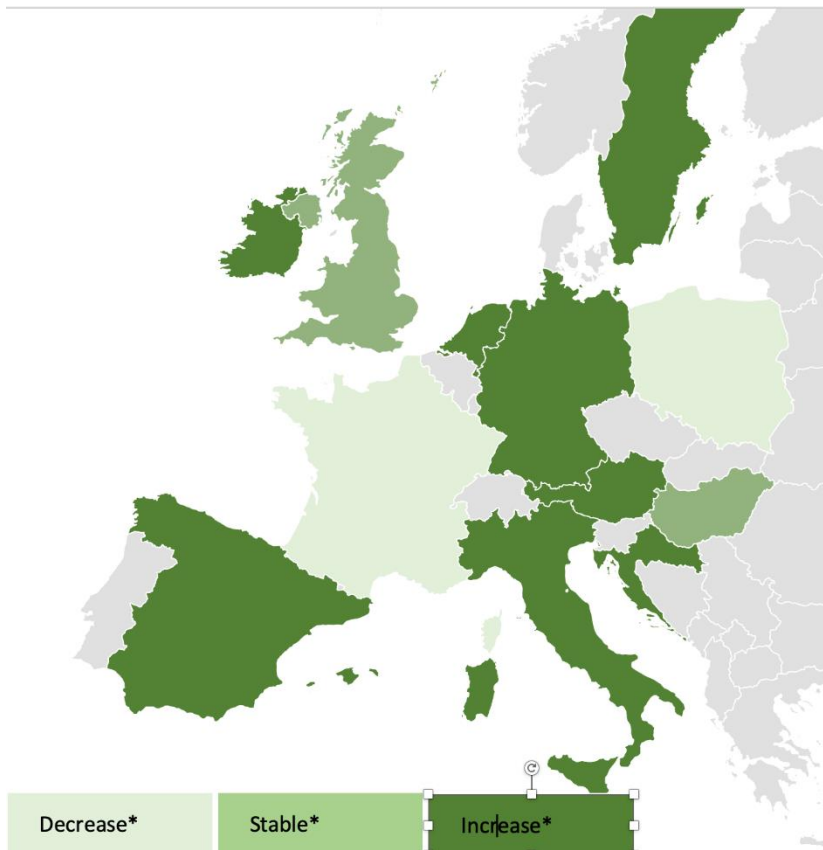


Figure 2. Personalization by party ideological family

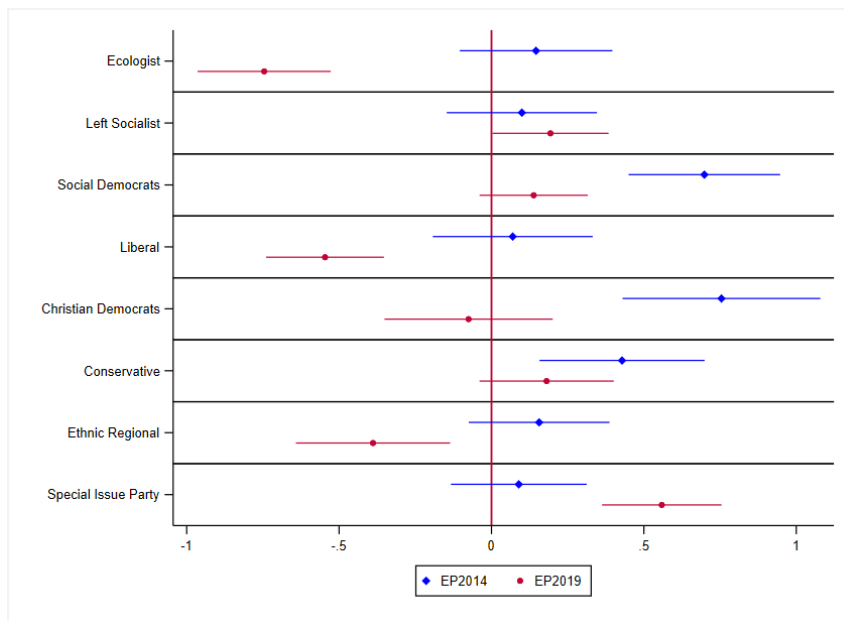


Figure 3. De Centralized, private and emotional personalization & Reactions

