

The Popularization of Political Communication: A New Definition, Its Drivers on Facebook, Its Properties Under the Current Hybrid Media System

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ABSTRACT

This article presents and adopts a new definition of the popularization of political communication, which is defined as a strategic communicative action through which political actors try to create new connections with those citizens who do not still know, follow and support them and to emotionally strengthen the political bond with their current sympathizers. Second, a comparative analysis of the Facebook pages of the main political leaders of 31 countries shows that the popularization of political communication is a relevant phenomenon on Facebook, while a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) indicates that the presence of a presidential system, a high digitalization of the media system, and a high level of trust in political institutions are three sufficient conditions for a “pop” communication on Facebook. Finally, the article identifies and discusses its main properties and development under the current hybrid media system.

KEYWORDS

Facebook, Political Leaders, Popularization Of Political Communication, QCA, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Scrolling on the Facebook pages of political actors exposes audiences to a wide array of communicative stances. Politicians communicate what and how they want on their own digital profiles, including textual content about a specific policy issue, harsh attacks on their opponents in videos, the use of a populist style of communication with stylish info-graphs, and so forth. Sometimes, they also publish pictures while campaigning with a film star, live videos buying fresh food in a supermarket or a birthday wish to a parent in a concise but passionate text status. Respectively, the literature denotes these three latter communicative choices as empirical examples of celebrity politics, lifestyle politics and intimate politics. While analyses on how and why political leaders employ policy issues (Cotta and Ceccobelli, 2017; Larsson, 2015), negative campaigning (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Auter & Fine, 2016) and populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017; De Vreese et al., 2018) on social media abound in the literature, less attention has been devoted to the latter phenomena, particularly from a comparative perspective. The aim of this article is threefold: first, it provides a causal, ontological, and realistic reasoning for analysing celebrity, lifestyle and intimate content under the popularization of political communication’s theoretical lenses; second, through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), it reveals the sufficiency conditions for the main political leaders of 31 countries’ strategic choice of popularizing their political communication on Facebook; finally, it identifies and discusses the main properties and implications of this strategic communicative action under the current hybrid media system.

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THE POPULARIZATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In a time characterized by the so-called “populist zeitgeist” (Mudde, 2004), the most recent literature on leaders’ communication style has devoted less attention to other concepts that have animated the scientific debate on this topic for many years. Before the populist zeitgeist hypothesis reached enormous popularity within academic research, concepts such as the personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007), celebrity politics (Street, 2004; West & Orman, 2003; Wheeler, 2013), lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998; Mancini, 2011) and intimate politics (Langer, 2010; Stanyer, 2013) were among the main concepts adopted by media scholars to describe and explain the changes occurring in the political communication of contemporary political actors. All these concepts have been and are still employed as theoretical lenses denoting the different strategies used by political actors to communicate proficiently with voters due to a continuously transforming media and a political environment characterized by individualization (Inglehart, 1997), party-de-alignment (Dalton et al., 2000), commercialization (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) media abundance and audience fragmentation (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jomini Stroud, 2011; Mancini, 2013; Prior, 2007). The transformations denoted by these concepts are straightforward: political leaders currently sell more than parties (the personalization of politics); they must appear like ordinary citizens and in touch with the daily lives of their voters (lifestyle politics); they have to be perceived as extraordinary individuals, deserving of the office they aspire to hold (celebrity politics); and finally, political leaders must make their private lives public because voters need to trust them, and disclosing aspects of their private lives make them appear authentic (intimate politics).

These different concepts trace different phenomena, but they all share a crucial element: the causal reasoning determining why political leaders need to communicate their proximity with voters, their extraordinariness and their authenticity. There are two main drivers pushing political leaders towards these strategic moves: the need to keep their current supporters on their electoral side and to enlarge the pool of their sympathizers to transform them into future loyal voters. This causal red line connecting these three concepts can be identified by the notion of popularization (Street, 2015), and in this article, it is empirically used according to the following new definition:

The popularization of political communication is a strategic communicative action through which political actors try to create new connections with those citizens who still do not know, follow or support them – particularly with the ones who are less interested in the news, in the actors and in the dynamics related to the sphere of politics – and to emotionally strengthen the bond with their current sympathizers.

So defined, the popularization of political communication does not need to be considered a new phenomenon (during previous centuries, political actors needed to create new connections with those citizens who still do not know, follow or support them and to emotionally strengthen the bond with their current sympathizers). Politicians always needed and tried to create connections with new potential voters and keep a strong bond with their more loyal ones. However, the current hybrid media system, which is so deeply affected by digital media and their own logics (Chadwick, 2013), might make popularization both more required and employed by political actors. Citizens consume political news in a high-choice media environment (Prior, 2007) that is ever more dominated by private digital companies (Kreiss & McGregor, 2017) that, through their secret algorithms, seem to push them within echo chambers (Hannak et al., 2013; Pariser, 2011)¹. Here, through selective exposure media practices, they are exposed to the information they like the most, being a specific political side, or no political sides at all, if they use these new digital platforms as entertaining media outlets only (Iyengar, 1987; Wheeler, 2009). It is within this current media environment that political actors must manage how to make up different communicative strategies, such as what the literature has discussed using the ideas of intimate, celebrity and lifestyle politics, considered here as three

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