Chapter 30
The Social Media Politicians:
Personalisation, Authenticity, and Memes

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ABSTRACT

Social media brings to the forefront two very important factors to today's politics: the prominent role of the internet and the importance of personalisation which is closely tied to a tendency of political candidates to overexpose their private lives. This does not mean that the candidate becomes more relevant than the political party or the ideological platforms thereof, but the interest tends to fall on the candidate's lifestyle; on their personal characteristics and their most intimate surroundings, which blurs the line between the public and private spheres. Online profiles are used as a showcase for the public agenda of the politician at the same time as they gather, on a daily basis, the thoughts, tastes and leisure time activities of the candidates. This chapter offers a reflection of the ways in which political leaders develop their digital narratives, and how they use the social media environment to approach citizens.

INTRODUCTION

The personalisation of politics refers to the process by which individuals as political actors become more relevant to collective entities, such as political parties or parliaments (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Ferreira da Silva, Garzia, & De Angelis, 2019; Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018; McGregor, 2018; Pedersen & Rahat, 2019; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007), but also to topics or issues (Adam & Maier, 2010). Although it is not new (Holtz-Bacha, Langer & Merkle, 2014; Newman, 1999; see also Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960), this trend is becoming more relevant today, especially in relation to the exposure of the more personal side of politicians (McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017); a trend that is framed in the context of an increasingly personalised society (McGregor, 2018): the society of the "me generation" (Bennett, 2012).

In this vein, this chapter will further explore the notion of political personalisation, deepening the understanding of concepts such as individualisation, privatisation or celebrification and, from a more general perspective, how political discourse has been simplified in the social network environment.

PERSONALISATION AS A FEATURE OF "NEW" POLITICS

Political personalisation has been perceived as one of the fundamental characteristics of the so-called contemporary politics (Agranoff, 1974; Castells, 2009; Maarek, 2011), in line with other aspects such as the growing relevance of media—especially related to television—the simplification of political discourse, social fragmentation (Bennett, 2012) or partisan dealignment (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Regarding the latter, there is no lack of examples in which the evolution of certain political organisations has been linked to the trajectory of their leaders, such as Forza Italia and Silvio Berlusconi or En Marche and Emmanuel Macron (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019), to the point of finding parties that bear the name of their leader in their names, such as the Italian Noi con Salvini or the GIL, acronym of Independent Liberal Group (Grupo Independiente Liberal in Spanish), founded by Jesús Gil y Gil. In the face of this, Daoust, Blais and Péloquin-Skulski (2019) found, however, that despite declining membership or laxity in party loyalty, parties remain more important than leaders. After all, parties become more stable than their members, which invites easier and more lasting identification with the electorate. In this way, it would be expected that loyal voters would cast their votes according to the political party, while those more fickle voters would pay more attention to the candidate or the programme; although it is true that in such decision making, each country's election system plays a role (Canel, 2006), as well as the personal preference of each voter (Rospir, 1999). In this way and facing the impossibility of drawing a reliable conclusion based on the variables involved, the most suitable strategy to follow seems to be for the candidate, the political party and the programme to integrate coherently and consistently with the electoral message.

As indicated by Pedersen and Rahat (2019), while most of the works addresses the possible negative consequences of political personalisation, a few researchers focus on the benefits that it can have for democracy. Regarding to the first point of view, the criticisms revolve around the possibility that it "will inject irrational elements into democratic politics and enhance populist trends", or "it will increase emphasis on personal charisma rather then [sic] the impersonal rule of law and institutions" (p. 1). As for the positive consequences, it is proposed that political personalization could improve the confidence lost in institutions and the political class—especially in the young sector (Manning, Penfold-Mounce, Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2017)—resulting, thanks to the possibilities of the internet and new communication technologies, in "a more individualized society, in which technology allows direct communication between decision makers and citizens" (Pedersen y Rahat, 2019, p. 2); a "direct communication between politicians, not parties, and citizens" (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart and de Vreese, 2013, p. 54), that "can contribute to citizens' political involvement" (p. 60).

Personalisation can help to define and simplify certain political slogans and ideas, since it is easier to tell a personal story than to communicate abstract political issues (Martín Salgado, 2002; Salmon, 2008). This allows to connect such political personalisation with infotainment, and more specifically with politainment. Following Castells (2009), the simplification of political discourse involves identifying it with human faces, and it is much better if these faces can be recognised as celebrities. This makes possible to establish a connection between the wider concept of political personalisation and the "politician

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