The personalization of politics in comparative perspective: Campaign coverage in Germany and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In the last few decades personalization has been identified as a defining trend of contemporary political communication. The empirical evidence, however, is mixed and there are very few studies that explore more than a single-case study. This article investigates media personalization in comparative perspective by analysing the press coverage of recent general elections in Germany (2009) and the United Kingdom (2010). Was the reporting in both campaigns (equally) personalized? How and to what extent does the phenomenon vary across the two countries? What does this mean for our understanding of personalization? The analysis shows that there are at least as many differences between the countries as there are similarities; although both campaigns can be considered personalized in some respects, the form it takes is substantially different due to structural variations in the media and political systems, as well as the more transient, but key, impact of the distinctive characteristics of the campaigns and each of the candidates.

Keywords

Comparative analysis, content analysis, Germany, personalization, United Kingdom

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In the last few decades, and across the western world, personalization has been identified as a defining trend of contemporary political communication. The empirical evidence, however, is mixed, even within individual countries, and there are very few studies that explore more than a single case. This article investigates media personalization in comparative perspective by analysing the press coverage of recent general elections in Germany (2009) and the United Kingdom (2010). Was the reporting in both campaigns (equally) personalized? To what extent and how does the phenomenon vary across the two countries? What does this mean for our understanding of personalization? The analysis shows that there are at least as many differences as there are similarities; although both campaigns can be considered personalized to some extent, personalization takes substantially different forms due to structural variations in the media and political systems, as well as the distinctive characteristics of the campaigns and candidates. It is hence clear, although often overlooked, that when discussing personalization we should be careful in drawing generalizations about the phenomenon.

In fact, in many ways, the personalization of politics is as old and ubiquitous as politics itself. Throughout history and in different countries individuals have played an important role. Nevertheless, the frequent diagnosis of an increase in personalization during recent decades seems to suggest a new development. Several factors have been identified as key drivers of personalization. Some of them are media-related: the proliferation of television, the pervasiveness of the media in the political process and the intensified economic orientation and competitiveness of the media industries. But it is clearly not just about the media: the modernization of society and changes in the political system have further contributed to the personalization process. Modernization, in its sociological sense, has led to a weakening of the traditional social ties (class, social strata) that used to determine an individual's path through life. This process of individualization has brought new uncertainties. Parties that could long rely on loyal partisan votes have had to deal with the de-ideologization inherent in the modernization process and the growth of the 'unreliable' voter. In addition, since many political problems can no longer be solved at the national level, particularly in the EU, parties tend to refrain from promises they cannot keep because of decisions being made beyond their reach. Retreating to general and uncontroversial issues, emphasizing emotional appeals and focusing on individual politicians seems therefore to be a rational strategy for political actors.

Given the magnitude of these changes it is expected that politics, and specifically political communication, would have become more personalized across western democracies. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume either that personalization has developed linearly, or that all countries would experience the phenomenon identically. Only empirical evidence could confirm or reject these assumptions but, although longitudinal studies have recently become more common (see below), systematic comparative studies are still rare.

Our study tackles this gap, focusing on key questions of cross-system generalizability and the role of structural and contextual factors. First, to what extent is personalization present to the same degree in different countries? Second, does it exhibit the same characteristics? Finally, what do the similarities and differences tell us about the factors that influence the degree and nature of personalization in different settings? The article attempts to answer these questions by comparing 'media personalization' in election

coverage in two West European nations: Germany and the UK. These two countries share some structural characteristics that are crucial to how personalization develops, but also differ importantly in regard to their media and political systems. This makes them ideal for comparative purposes. Moreover, evidence from previous single-case studies that have dealt with different aspects of personalization in Germany (e.g. Holtz-Bacha et al., 1998; Kaase, 1994; Schulz and Zeh, 2005; Wilke and Reinemann, 2001) and the UK (e.g. Foley, 2000; Langer, 2007, 2011; Mughan, 2000) suggests interesting differences between the cases. For instance, whereas Foley (2000) and Mughan (2000) found an increase over time in the relative visibility of leaders during campaigns in the UK, most studies in Germany could not confirm a positive trend (but see Schulz and Zeh, 2005); in both countries, however, the prominence of leaders/top candidates has been consistently high. Regarding the emphasis on personal characteristics, whereas Langer found a positive trend from the 1990s, Reinemann and Wilke (2007) did so for Germany only for some dimensions of personality, and only after TV debates were introduced in the 2000s. But personalization in the two countries has not been compared in depth, and hence these differences, and their underlying causes, have not been much explored.

This article analyses the press reporting of the campaigns. It focuses on exploring similarities and differences in the degree as well as the style of personalization. Moreover, unlike previous comparative studies, which focused mostly on politicians' visibility vis-a-vis parties, we also explore the degree of attention paid to the personal characteristics and private lives of candidates.

The first part of the article sets up the bases of the empirical analysis: it discusses the conceptualization of personalization and previous research on the subject, provides a brief comparison of key dimensions of the British and German political and media systems and how these might affect personalization, and discusses our methodology. The second part presents the empirical analysis focusing first on candidates vs parties, second on the focus on personality (or lack thereof), and finally on the very British emphasis on the personal sphere of leaders.

Personalization: Conceptualization and previous research

Conventional wisdom, anecdotal evidence and normative arguments long dominated the personalization debate. Moreover, there has been a lack of clarity and agreement about the definition of the term, which has led to inconclusive and often contradictory research findings. In the last few years, however, a burgeoning literature on the subject has developed, with an increasing accent on defining the concept in a clearer, and empirically measurable, fashion (Adam and Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2009; Langer, 2007, 2011; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012). From this research, it has become apparent that personalization is too complex to be treated as a single concept, even when focusing only on its political communication dimensions. First, we need to be specific about the timeframe, i.e. are we referring to election and/or routine periods? Second, there is an issue of locus, i.e. where is personalization manifested: in media coverage, party/candidate or government communication and/or voters' judgements? This article, for instance, will only focus on the analysis of news coverage, and specifically of the press, in what can be labelled 'media personalization'.

Finally, and crucially, we need to distinguish between different types of personalization. There is now widespread agreement that personalization is, and must be studied as, a multidimensional phenomenon (Karvonen, 2009; Kriesi, 2012; Langer, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2012). In the first level of analysis, personalization refers to 'the notion that individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen, 2009: 4). In media coverage, this is manifested in an increased visibility of candidates (in general) and/or leaders (in particular), in both cases relative to their parties. This heightened visibility has been conceptualized as 'individualization' (Van Aelst et al., 2012) and, if the attention is specifically on leaders, as a dimension of 'presidentialization' (Adam and Maier, 2010; Langer, 2011; Vliegenthart et al., 2011), because in this process leaders become not only more prominent relative to parties but also vis-a-vis other party representatives and, outside electoral periods, other government actors (Foley, 2000; Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

But personalization is used to refer not only to a change in on whom the coverage focuses, but also in what it emphasizes: in this sense, it goes beyond the visibility of individuals, instead referring to an increasing focus on their 'character' or 'personalities'. This rather broad concept comprises their 'hard' professional (or performance-related) characteristics, 'soft' personal traits and the details of their private lives. So, within the focus on personality, it is necessary, if not always clear-cut (see Adam and Maier, 2010) to try to establish whether there has been a shift in emphasis from the political to the personal sphere, in what has been defined as 'privatization' (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007) or 'politicization of private persona' (Langer, 2007, 2011).

These distinctions are crucial for several reasons. Studies have argued that there can be significant variations in how different aspects of personalization develop, both over time and across countries (e.g. Karvonen, 2009; Langer, 2011; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). As a result, failing to make this distinction risks overlooking important evidence or misinterpretation of findings. For instance, whereas Wattenberg (1991) found an increased personalization in press coverage in US campaigns, Sigelman and Bullock (1991) did not: they were looking, however, at different types of personalization (in Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). Moreover, it seems apparent that these distinct dimensions are likely to be affected by different causal factors. Finally, different types of personalization raise distinctive normative concerns: individualization about the role of parties and the balance of power between different actors in parliamentary democracies; personality-focus, especially if concentrating on 'soft' character traits and the personal, about the quality of political information, the rationality of voters' choices and the type of leaders that are elected. The shift to the personal also raises some hopes about its potential for reinvigorating representative democracy (for an overview of these debates see Adam and Maier, 2010; Langer, 2011).

So, conceptually, a lot of progress has been made in the last few years, and there is a growing body of research on single-country cases, including longitudinal studies (e.g. Langer, 2007; Mughan, 2000; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Schulz and Zeh, 2005; Wilke and Reinemann, 2001). In contrast, although 'comparative efforts are simply indispensable' for developing a better understanding of personalization (Karvonen, 2009: 21), there are still only a handful of systematic empirical studies, which is the only way of tackling

questions of generalizability of degree and style. These studies (Dalton et al., 2000; Kriesi, 2012; Vliegthart et al., 2011) have explored quantitative changes over time and focused on one dimension of media personalization: individualization, i.e. the visibility of candidates vis-a-vis parties. The countries and periods covered, and the conclusions they reached, are not identical, due to methodological and conceptual differences. Nonetheless, these studies agree on a few crucial points. First, as with most single-case studies (see Adam and Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2009, for detailed overviews), they found that for parliamentary systems personalization trends over time are, if present at all, weaker than generally assumed; second, there are significant differences across countries; and finally, these 'largely depend on the institutional arrangements of the respective political systems, with the overall regime type and the electoral system accounting for most of the differences' (Kriesi, 2012: 841).

Our study expands on this rather limited literature: it concentrates on exploring the cross-system validity of the alleged 'global' phenomenon of personalization. It explores personalization in two dimensions: like the studies above, as relative visibility of individuals, but also regarding the degree and nature of the attention paid to their personal characteristics and private life, which 'although central to the wider process of personalization' (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 205) so far has been neglected in the few available comparative studies (Kriesi, 2012). Moreover, the research design allows us to explore not only quantitative but also qualitative differences, and to do so on the basis of an analysis that uses a common codebook, which permits a systematic comparison.

Germany and the UK: Similarities and differences

The studies discussed above, as well as the broader comparative politics literature, suggest that the nature of the political, electoral and media systems might be key factors for explaining the level and nature of personalization in different countries (Kriesi, 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2012; Vliegthart et al., 2011). Moreover, it is important to take into account the specific circumstances of each campaign, as it is clear from previous research (e.g. Holtz-Bacha, 2000; Langer, 2010; Vliegthart et al., 2011; Wilke and Reinemann, 2001) that situational and individual factors can matter greatly. Hence, we first examine the characteristics of the political system in both countries, followed by the media, and then a brief discussion of the characteristics of the campaigns.

Both Germany and the UK have parliamentary regimes and strong party systems which, relatively speaking, should temper personalization trends. On the other hand, both countries have a strong concentration of power in the hands of the head of government, although German Chancellors are arguably less powerful than British Prime Ministers (O'Malley, 2007). At the same time, there are significant differences that are expected to affect how the phenomenon is manifested in each country. In recent history the UK has been, at the national level, a majoritarian democracy with a 'two-and-a-half party system' (Siaroff, 2003), which is to a large extent the result of the first-past-the-post system. Although support for smaller parties has risen at the sub-national and supra-national levels, where other electoral systems are used, they barely register in most Westminster constituencies (Lynch, 2007). The party with the largest number of MPs tries to form a government and its leader automatically becomes the Prime Minister.

One-party government has been the norm; there has been, however, a coalition government (Conservative–Liberal Democrat) since the 2010 General Election, the first in peace time since 1931.

By contrast, Germany has a multi-party system with five parties represented in the national parliament (Bundestag). The electoral system is a mixed-member proportional system, which gives each citizen two votes: one for a party candidate in the constituency and the second for a closed-party list. The seats a party gets depend essentially on the number of second votes. Therefore they are more important, and campaigning predominantly targets the party votes. Elections in Germany generally lead to coalition governments. So far, the Chancellor has always belonged to one of Germany's big parties, the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats, which is why only these parties call their top candidates 'chancellor candidates'. It is hence likely that in the UK there will be concentrated attention on the leaders of the main parties who are not only individual candidates in their constituencies but, in practice, are also 'running for' Prime Minister; in Germany, due to the role and number of relevant parties, the attention will be more dispersed across individuals and parties, but still with substantial emphasis on the 'chancellor candidates'.

The media systems are also significantly different, although with some relevant similarities, such as strong public service broadcasters and high newspaper readership (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004 for an overview). With regard to newspapers – the focus of this study – the UK market is distinctively national, intensely competitive and has a much more developed tabloid press: there are several popular daily titles which have the highest circulations of the entire market. Newspapers are highly – and often aggressively – partisan, even if more de-aligned than in the past (Deacon and Wing, 2002), and are subject only to self-regulation, at least for the time being. In contrast, there is only one national tabloid in Germany, *Bild*. It enjoys the highest circulation but does not define the market in the way British tabloids do. In general, the German newspaper market is characterized by its regional – and hence often monopolistic – structure, although the national broadsheets play an important role as the key political media. Moreover, unlike in the UK, although their political leaning is identifiable, German newspapers are not openly partisan. Hence, given the higher degree of competition and the tabloids' influence, in the UK more attention to the personality of candidates might be expected, especially in relation to 'soft' character traits and private lives. The impact of the press's open partisanship is less clear-cut, but it might push coverage in the same direction if the personal is an easy target for partisan praise or attack.

The grounds for this assumption are reinforced by the legal and cultural differences between the two countries in relation to privacy. The UK has never had specific privacy legislation. Moreover, although the right to privacy is now covered by the European Convention on Human Rights, and 'pro-privacy' rulings have become more common, the historical legacy means that the print media have enjoyed a great deal of freedom to write about the private, and this has been an accepted – albeit grudgingly – dimension of journalistic and political culture; at least for now.¹ In contrast, in Germany there has been a long-standing tacit understanding that the private life of politicians was not to be discussed in the media. However, with politicians nowadays more often using the personal for image management (most notably Gerhard Schröder), media are also more prone to

digging into the private lives of elected representatives (see Holtz-Bacha, 2004). Moreover, the courts, and the German Constitutional Court in particular, have regularly argued that public figures have a role-model function and therefore that the public can, in certain circumstances, have a legitimate interest in the personal (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). Nonetheless, on a continuum between right to privacy and freedom of the media, Germany can be placed more centrally than the UK.

Finally, and specifically relating to the campaigns, it is worth noting that both countries now have televised leaders' debates. This is important because it has been identified as a significant factor in increasing levels of media personalization, both in terms of visibility of leaders and a greater personality-focus (Schulz and Zeh, 2005, 2010; Wilke and Leidecker, 2010). Germany already had debates among (the four or five) main party leaders during the 1970s and 1980s, and introduced televised encounters of the two chancellor candidates in 2002. In contrast, in the UK TV debates appeared for the first time in 2010. So, because of this novelty, the debates might have a stronger impact on the nature of the coverage in the UK than in Germany, including on the degree of personalization in both its dimensions.

In fact, there is no doubt that the debates became the focal point of the campaign in the UK. They catapulted Nick Clegg, the leader of the third party, to campaign stardom and, as a result, lead to much stronger scrutiny of him by the media, and to vicious personal attacks by the Tory press. In contrast, David Cameron was given an easy ride by a largely supportive – even if lukewarm – press. He was generally liked by the public and was hence at the centre of the Tory campaign. Moreover, since his election as leader, he had skilfully used selected elements of his personal life in the construction of his public persona, even if his 'posh' background did attract some uncomfortable attention. Labour's campaign was less leader-centred, due both to Gordon Brown's unpopularity and uneasiness with the demands of personalized campaigns (Langer, 2010); nonetheless, critical questioning of his ability, both as a leader and campaigner, was highly salient, especially after what became known as 'Duffy-gate' (see Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010).

In Germany there were also clear differences between the parties. Merkel ran as incumbent and the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) campaign heavily focused on her as, according to surveys, she was far more popular than her party, the Christian Democrats (Infratest Dimap, 2009). Moreover, Merkel was presented as much more approachable and open to the public than in 2005, when she was criticized for her 'distant' and 'cold' style; this time she even showed glimpses of her 'private' self. On the other hand, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Social Democratic Party, SPD) could not run as a 'classic' chancellor challenger, as he had been Vice-Chancellor and Foreign Minister in the coalition government during the preceding legislative period. Moreover, he had a hard time succeeding charismatic former Chancellor and media-pro, Gerhard Schröder.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to compare 'media personalization' in the campaign coverage in Germany and the UK. As discussed above, this comprises two main dimensions: first the increasing importance – and hence mediated visibility – of individual over collective

actors, and in particular of candidates over political parties. Within this dimension, it is also commonly assumed that, as a result of 'presidentialization', the increased emphasis on individuals is concentrated on top candidates/leaders. This is the sub-dimension of visibility we focus on. Second, personalization refers to heightened attention devoted to the personal characteristics and private lives of candidates.

These dimensions were operationalized as follows. For prominence of the individuals, we counted the number of mentions of leaders/top candidates in the headlines and the main body of the articles, and the number of direct quotes attributed to them. In addition, and in order to explore relative visibility, we coded for references to their parties in the headlines. Finally, given that mediated visibility is as much textual as visual, we also quantified the presence of different actors (i.e. leaders/top candidates, other party representatives and relatives) in photographs.

In order to identify the second dimension (focus on personality), we coded the number of statements discussing the personal characteristics of the top candidates/leaders. The analysis distinguished between two types: political qualities (i.e. competence, integrity, strength, campaigning skills, charisma and psychological attributes) and personal qualities (i.e. those not directly related to the job such as likeable, personable and humble).² In addition, we also coded each article for the presence/absence of references to any dimension of their personal lives: family and love life, socioeconomic background, childhood/youth, education, lifestyle, personal appearance, age and religious affiliation. Mentions of their relatives were coded separately.

Four coders participated in the data analysis, two in each country. The second coders analysed a sub-sample of 50 articles each: the intercoder reliability scores (calculated according to Holsti, 1969) were .92 and .89 for the German and the UK samples respectively.

The samples covered the three weeks prior to the election. Every article in any section (bar letters to the editor) which referred to the election, the campaign and/or any of the candidates was included. However, articles that mentioned the incumbent but made no explicit reference to the election/campaign were excluded. The newspapers included were as follows; for Germany: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (broadsheets) and *Bild-Zeitung* (tabloid); for the UK: *The Guardian* and *The Times* (broadsheets) the *Daily Mail* (mid-market), the *Mirror* and *The Sun* (both tabloids). For Germany, every article was analysed, resulting in a sample of 264 articles. For the UK, due to the size of the population, systematic sampling was applied: every fourth article was selected, resulting in a sample of 421 articles. The main difference in the composition of the samples (see Table 1) is in the ratio of broadsheet and tabloid articles, which is due to differences in the press market discussed above. The impact of this disparity will be addressed in the analysis.

The exclusive focus on press coverage inevitably raises issues of generalizability. But the main aim is to compare personalization in different countries, and how best to investigate it. Hence, generalizability across media is less of an issue. Moreover, it is worth noting that Kriesi (2012: 831) found that 'the results for the television news programmes (where available) are quite similar to the ones of the newspapers'. Analysing only one election per country is also limiting in some ways, especially evidently in terms of evolution over time; but it does enable greater depth in the comparative analysis. Moreover,

Table 1. Number of coded articles by country and newspaper type.

Newspaper type	UK		Germany		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Broadsheet	232	55	206	78	438	64
Tabloid	189	45	58	22	247	36
Total	421	100	264	100	685	100

our results are consistent with overall trends from longitudinal studies for these countries (see references above).

Findings

As shown in Figure 1, the data on visibility clearly indicate that there are some striking similarities between the countries. The presence of the top candidates (category ‘combined’) is massively predominant: in both countries at least one of the leaders was mentioned in 90% of the articles and in over 40% of the headlines. Moreover, they were quoted in around a quarter of the articles. However, although as expected the main party representatives are clearly highly prominent in both the UK and Germany, important differences due to party and electoral system are also evident.

First, in the UK coverage the focus is on the leaders of the three main parties; in fact, it is striking how very few references there are to leaders of other, smaller, parties. In contrast, the interest of the German coverage concentrates on the candidates of the two big parties, Chancellor Angela Merkel and challenger Frank-Walter Steinmeier. But there is also a much stronger emphasis on the top candidates of the other parties in this multi-party system: 58% of the articles and 20% of the headlines refer to them, while for the UK this is only 3% and 0.5%. The data also indicate an incumbent effect for Chancellor Angela Merkel, which is not evident in the UK.

Second, the analysis of the headlines (see Table 2) confirms that the reporting in the UK is more candidate-centred, and specifically leader-centred. While 33% of articles in the UK featured at least one of the leaders in the headline, their parties were only mentioned in 24%, giving a ratio of 1.37. In comparison, parties were mentioned more frequently than the top candidates in Germany, with a 0.92 ratio (see Table 3). The difference can be partly explained, again, by the German electoral system, specifically the importance of the second vote, which is given to the party list and not to a single candidate. It is worth noting, though, for all the talk about the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies (Poguntke and Webb, 2005), clearly in both cases parties are still much more central than in US elections, where the ratio was 5.6 (Dalton et al., 2000).

Interestingly, the data at the national level also reveal different degrees of personalization (see Tables 2 and 3). This indicates that the position, popularity and style of each candidate are among the crucial factors that influence personalization. For instance, the German data show that there is a clear chancellor bonus for the incumbent. The chancellor bonus is a visibility bonus for the incumbent that has been found in many campaigns

Figure 1. Mentions of candidates in the article, headline and quotes in comparison.

Table 2. Presence of British leaders vs parties in the headlines.

Candidate (party)	Candidate mentioned		Party mentioned		Ratio
	N	%	N	%	
David Cameron (Cons.)	70	16.6	53	12.6	1.32
Gordon Brown (Labour)	66	15.7	66	15.7	1
Nick Clegg (Lib-Dems)	73	17.3	39	9.3	1.87
Other party leaders (various)	2	0.5	4	1.0	0.50
Total mentioning at least one leader/party	138	32.8	101	24.0	1.37

N = 421.
Note: The total is smaller than the sum of the categories because more than one leader and/or party could be mentioned in the same headline.

(e.g. Semetko and Schoenbach, 1994: 27). Angela Merkel is mentioned almost twice as much as her party in the headlines. None of the other candidates is mentioned nearly as much, not even her main challenger, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Moreover, Steinmeier’s candidate–party ratio is almost reversed (0.88). In fact, with the exception of Oskar Lafontaine, all other candidates were mentioned far less than their parties. This reinforces the conclusion that, with the exception of the Chancellor, there continues to be more focus on parties than candidates, even top candidates, in the German coverage.

Table 3. Presence of German top candidates vs parties in the headlines.

Candidate (party)	Candidate mentioned in headline		Party mentioned in headline		Ratio Top cand./party
	N	%	N	%	
Angela Merkel (CDU)	72	27.3	37	14.0	1.95
Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD)	44	16.7	50	18.9	0.88
Other candidates (combined), thereof:	52	19.7	96	36.4	0.54
Guido Westerwelle (FDP)	23	8.7	38	14.4	0.60
Oskar Lafontaine (Die Linke)	10	3.8	7	2.7	1.43
Gregor Gysi (Die Linke)	4	1.5	7	2.7	0.57
Renate Künast (Die Grünen)	7	2.7	15	5.7	0.47
Jürgen Trittin (Die Grünen)	5	1.9	15	5.7	0.33
Peter Ramsauer (CSU)	3	1.1	36	13.6	0.08
Total mentioning at least one leader/party	168	63.6	183	69.3	0.92

N = 264.

Note: The total is smaller than the sum of the categories because more than one top candidate and/or party could be mentioned in the same headline.

For the UK, the findings also indicate interesting differences between the three main party leaders (see Table 2), highlighting how the degree of personalization varies not only over time, as shown by longitudinal studies, but also within the same election. While the British press featured Gordon Brown and the Labour Party equally in the headlines, David Cameron was mentioned more often than his party (ratio 1.32), which is consistent with his more personalized campaign. Nick Clegg appeared almost twice as much as his party, and was in fact mentioned more often than the other two leaders, which is highly atypical (see Kriesi, 2012). Undoubtedly, this was a result of the impact of the TV leaders' debates which placed him at the centre of the campaign and triggered heavy scrutiny of a leader who, up to that point, was relatively unknown to the general public. This is not to say that this benefited Clegg, as a lot of the personalized coverage was highly negative; but it certainly increased the leader's absolute and relative visibility.

Visibility, however, is not only manifested in the text; photographs are also an indicator of the importance attributed to different actors, and hence of personalization. Thus, we coded for the presence of the top candidates/leaders, their families and other party representatives. Overall, the analysis confirms the previous findings. Figure 2 shows,

Figure 2. Presence of leaders/top candidates (TC) and others in photographs.

once again, the high prominence of the top candidates in both countries. Surprisingly, though, it also suggests a greater visibility in Germany when the presence of the top candidates is considered in a combined figure (85% of all pictures vs 74%).

However, when unpacking this combined value into each of its categories, the proportion of pictures that show the German top candidates *alone* is 48%, and therefore is lower than in the UK sample (53%). At the same time, 34% of all pictures show them with other party representatives, which is highly uncommon in the UK coverage (only 6%). Thus, the visual dimension of the German coverage appears more leader-centred because of the greater proportion of pictures of the party ‘team’.

At first glance, this practice might seem to suggest a lower degree of personalization. But what it actually indicates is that there are different types of personalization. In the UK the focus is clearly on the leaders and there is substantial evidence of a ‘leadership stretch’, which is associated with ‘presidentialization’ (Foley, 2000), i.e. focus on the leader in detriment to other party figures, including top officials such as (shadow) cabinet members. Interestingly, though, in this election in the UK, pictures of other party representatives alone were more common than those of them with the leaders. This is in part because there were a few articles focused on constituency campaigning; but mostly this figure was enlarged due to a handful of minor ‘scandals’ affecting individual candidates, and especially due to the emphasis on campaign strategists and ‘spin-doctors’, such as Peter Mandelson. (Shadow) Cabinet members who did not have a main role in campaign strategy appeared much less frequently, and ‘team’ pictures with the leader were largely absent.

In contrast, in Germany there is more emphasis on the ‘teams’, a strategy that counts on the recognition value of not just one person, but of a group of highly ranked party representatives who promote the main candidates. This does not necessarily mean that

there is less personalization in Germany; it is rather a different kind, not focusing on top candidates only but on a group of 'faces' or a 'leading group' of the party. This is true across the board, as the data show no substantial differences between larger and smaller parties.

The other key difference between photographs in the German and the British coverage is on the role of partners. Whereas hardly present in Germany at all (1%), they appeared in 19% of the pictures for the UK sample, both with leaders and on their own. This suggests that there are substantial differences regarding the second of our dimensions of personalization, and in particular in the emphasis on the personal life of candidates. We expand on this below.

Political qualities, personal qualities and personal life

In order to compare the coverage regarding the second dimension of personalization, we coded all evaluative statements of the leaders/top candidates, distinguishing between political (or professional) and personal qualities. In addition, we coded in each article for presence/absence of references to their personal lives and to their relatives.

Overall, the presence of evaluative statements is slightly higher in the UK than in Germany. On average, there were 1.56 and 1.49 statements per article respectively. In both countries the most frequent category was, by far, references to political or professional qualities (Table 4). Moreover, the distribution within this category is also pretty similar. Campaigning skills appear at the top for both countries, and are even higher in the UK, probably as a result of the impact of the first-ever TV debates. This emphasis on campaigning skills is related to personalization but it is also part of a broader characteristic of the coverage. In both countries the press heavily focused on the campaign itself (e.g. strategy, photo opportunities, polls): 65% ($n = 275$) of all articles in the UK and 71% ($n = 187$) in Germany. Conversely, policy issues played a comparably minor role: they were the main subject in 29% ($n = 77$) of the articles in Germany and 27% ($n = 114$) in the British coverage (data not shown here). This is in line with other studies which have shown that in contemporary journalism the campaign and the 'horse race' often dominate the coverage (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Strömbäck, 2008).

Core political qualities were also frequently discussed in the German and UK coverage. Among these, 'competence' was the most prominent in both countries, followed by integrity. Strength/reliability and charisma appeared to be less important, although the former was more frequent in the UK. Interestingly, in the German coverage psychological attributes (like being a control freak or omnipotent) figured prominently, and more so than in the UK.

It is in the other categories, however, where we found the clearest difference between countries. In particular, the evidence in Table 4 indicates that the discussion of the candidates' personal qualities and especially their personal lives plays a greater role in the British coverage. Moreover, whereas their relatives were mentioned in a single piece in Germany, they appeared in 89 articles in the UK sample. This suggests that the main difference between the cases, as already hinted at in the photograph data, is to be found in relation to the 'privatization' dimension.

Table 4. Ranking of qualities mentioned (unit of analysis: statement).

Type of statement	Germany		UK	
	N	%	N	%
Political qualities	261	66.4	344	52.3
Personal qualities	35	8.9	87	13.2
Personal life	97	24.7	227	34.5
Total	393	100	658	100
Average per article		1.49		1.56
Political qualities (disaggregated)	N	%	N	%
Campaigning skills	81	31.0	135	39.2
Competence	61	23.4	69	20.1
Integrity	30	11.5	52	15.1
Strength/reliability	23	8.8	43	12.5
Psychological attributes	49	18.8	33	9.6
Charisma	17	6.5	12	3.5
Total political qualities	261	100	344	100

How can we explain these remarkable differences? In the first instance, it makes sense to hypothesize that they might be a result of the distinctive characteristics of the press markets, which were also reflected in the much higher proportion of tabloid articles in the UK sample. In order to test this assumption, the UK data were broken down by newspaper type. In order to minimize the impact of the differences in length of the articles between tabloids and broadsheets, the unit of analysis used here was the article.

As Figure 3 shows, there is indeed some variation between tabloids and broadsheets in the UK but this, in itself, does not explain the differences with Germany. In fact, the difference across newspaper types is greater in relation to 'political qualities' and not, as would be assumed, in the personal categories. Broadsheets also pay a good deal of attention to the personal and do so much more than in Germany. This indicates that the differences are not merely a result of the coverage in tabloids. Instead, they must be regarded as resulting from more structural variables discussed above, that make the UK distinct: electoral and party systems (majoritarian and hence closer to presidential contexts), journalistic practices and legislation (affecting both tabloids and broadsheets), and political communication norms (a degree of emphasis on the personal has become routinized and is now expected).

But it is not all structure. It is clear that the specificities of each election and candidate also have a strong impact, making the degree of personalization, to an extent, contingent. In 2010 in particular, the stress on the personal might have been partly a result of the emphasis on class and education prompted by Cameron's background and the comparison with Clegg's, especially after the TV debates prompted the Tory press to attack the Lib-Dem leader. Moreover, like Blair, Cameron heavily used his personal life in the construction of his public persona. Brown and Clegg were more reluctant, but, due to media demands and the reactive nature of leader competition, also publicized some

Figure 3. Proportion of articles referring to different qualities and themes by newspaper type (UK sample only).

aspects of their personal lives (see Langer, 2011). By contrast, in Germany none of the candidates much used the personal for strategic publicity. This might not be surprising in the campaigns that had very heavy emphasis on the party, and little on the leaders. But it was also the case for Merkel; even though she was at the very centre of the coverage (as reflected in her high visibility) and added a more personal touch to her campaign in 2009, she did not really ‘go personal’.

Conclusion

This study assessed the degree and nature of personalization in the press coverage of recent general election campaigns in the UK and Germany. The analysis was done across two dimensions: relative visibility of individual actors, and in particular leaders/top candidates, and emphasis on their personal characteristics and private lives. The analysis shows that although the coverage in both countries shows features of personalization, the form that this takes varies substantially. The cross-country comparison makes it possible to start to ascribe these differences to the influence of two types of variables: structural, and hence potentially more enduring, and those specific to each election.

The first type of influence is particularly clear in relation to visibility. As expected, there is no doubt that the electoral system and the associated party system are crucial factors in the degree and form that personalization takes. In the UK, the analysis showed

that there is a strong concentration in the coverage on the leaders of the three main parties at the expense of their parties and other representatives, and especially in detriment to smaller parties and their leaders. In Germany, reporting focused on the chancellor candidates of the two big parties but also, although to a lesser extent, on the top candidates of the other smaller parties. There is also more emphasis in Germany on both the party and the 'team' than in the UK. In both countries, however, the emphasis on parties vis-a-vis candidates is higher than has been found in presidential systems, highlighting also the importance of regime type.

The impact of structural differences was also noticeable on the other main dimension of media personalization. In both countries similar attention was paid to political qualities, showing a degree of homogenization consistent with cross-national trends in western journalism. But the attention to the personal qualities, and especially personal life, of politicians is clearly higher in the UK than in Germany. This has partly to do with its majoritarian system, which makes the UK closer to (but far from the same as) the campaign dynamics of a presidential system. But mostly it is to do with other kinds of structural differences. In particular, we identified the characteristics of the press market, which in the UK is more highly competitive, with a strong tabloid culture and openly partisan; and the more fluid boundaries of privacy, both in terms of legislation and journalistic norms. This also reflects, and is reflected in, differences in how parties and candidates use the personal for strategic publicity in each country.

There are also more idiosyncratic issues at play, in terms of both the characteristics of the election and the different candidates. For instance, the party/leader ratio varied substantially within each country, in part because of the different emphases in the campaigns, which were in turn related to the main candidates' style and degree of popularity. Equally, some of the UK emphasis on the personal is specifically associated with the particularities of this election and the emphasis given to it by the leaders, especially by Blair's 'heir', Cameron. Given the structural differences between the two countries and the routinization effect (Langer, 2011), the stronger emphasis on the personal in the UK is likely to continue. However, because of the importance of individual factors, it might decrease from this higher threshold with a different set of leaders, as was the case in Germany – at lower levels – after Schröder.

In short, it is clear there are a range of factors that influence personalization, making it distinctive in each country, and to some extent in each election. The comparative analysis has proved to be an essential research strategy for uncovering these similarities and differences, and identifying some of the conditions that can explain variation across countries. It is also useful in helping us uncover the limitations of concepts developed in national contexts and for creating better ways of measuring them, which are replicable and useful across systems.

This study has, however, limitations. It would be useful for future research to include a larger number of case studies, so enabling us to better isolate and test the different variables at play. Moreover, a longitudinal research design over several election campaigns would provide valuable insight, especially for exploring further the role of systemic and contingent factors that influence personalization. But this analysis is undoubtedly a step in the right direction.

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Notes

1. There might be some relevant changes in this regard in the near future, as a result of the Leveson Inquiry Report, both in terms of journalistic self-restraint and new regulation. But, because of issues of public interest, changes are less likely to apply to political figures.
2. The list of qualities was adapted from Miller et al. (1986) and Wattenberg (1991).

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