

PERSONALIZATION OF REPRESENTATION

A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

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The *personalization of politics* has been a major theme in political science, at least since the publication of Wattenberg's book *Candidate-Centred Politics* in 1991 (Wattenberg, 1991). The phenomenon has been studied in more research areas; most extensively in the area of media and communication research (see for instance McAllister, 2007; Kriesi, 2012; Langer, 2007) and studies of voters' preferences and behaviour (see for instance Bittner, 2011; Lobo, 2015; Schmitt et al., 2015). Other aspects, and especially the implications for political representation, has been devoted less attention (Balmas et al., 2014: 40; Rahat & Shaefer, 2007: 69). The notion of personalization of politics is thus very broad, describing a general process in which individual political actors become more prominent at the expense of parties and other political groups (Karvonen, 2010: 4; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007: 65). This may be reflected in various aspects of political life from media coverage to institutional designs and the behaviour of voters and politicians. Personalization of politics is thus a concept or an idea that unifies various aspects of a political development. This means that it is important to clarify which aspects of personalization is under investigation and how these aspects relate to the overall idea.

In this short research memo, I will focus on what I call personalization of representation, building primarily on the work of Balmas et al. (2014), Rahat and Sheaffer (2007), and Van Aelst et al. (2011). The personalization of representation – or as it has been called elsewhere, the personalization of politicians' behaviour – is the area of personalization that has gained least attention even though it is potentially crucial for the way democratic representation is carried out. If parties lose control over the behaviour of their politicians, it may become more difficult to build lasting majorities and reach decisions in legislatures. It may also devalue the cue parties provide to voters when making decisions about how to vote and thus complicate elections. First, voters will have to make more efforts in terms of knowing the positions of individual candidates. Second, after the election, the party mandate is less clear, inflated

by multiple personal positions, and it becomes more difficult to decide whether the party delivers what it promised or not, which is important according to the responsible party model of democracy. However, personalization may also help overcome decreasing trust in politicians and build new linkages between citizens and their representatives. Due to these potential consequences, it is highly important to define and study the personalization of representation.

Personalization of Politics or Personalized Politics?

Before we move into the conceptual discussions, it is important to settle the distinction between personalization of politics and personalized politics because it has implications for the research designs used to study this phenomenon in all branches of political science.

Personalization of politics refers to a process where the role of the political representative changes. This process is said to start as the heydays of the mass party end (Karvonen, 2010: 3). It is an approach to representative democracy that builds on the view that ideology has ended (Bell, 1960), making parties change their strategies and role in democracy by developing into catch-all-parties (Kirchheimer, 1966) and by increasingly competing on post-materialistic issues to attract voters (Inglehart, 1971). The consequences of these changes are increased focus on 1) issues, and 2) persons in the political process. These potential consequences of societal changes have been fuelled by the development in communication technology from the usage of television to various social network sites, changing the channels as well as the format and speed of communication between voters and political parties (Hermanns & Vergeer, 2013).

Personalization of politics thus intrinsically refers to a *change* that can only be studied using longitudinal data to be able to trace the process of personalization. Preferably, such studies include data from the times of mass politics where social classes and fundamental societal cleavages structured political conflict to show how representation has or has not changed. For the study of personalization, it does not make sense to compare today with periods prior to mass politics where persons may have been just as crucial, nor does it make sense to trace the process of personalization in political systems where mass politics never developed (Karvonen, 2010). The idea of personalization is developed to describe a process starting with the decay of the mass party. The implication is that we need data over time – preferably time series or at least observations at different relevant points in time – to study personalization of politics.

Whereas personalization of politics describes a development or a process, *personalized politics* describes a situation where individuals are central to the political process. This is not a time-specific situation; it may exist at the very early stages of democracy as well as the most advanced stages. In addition, it may exist in some political systems or parties at a given point in time, but not in others. It follows that the study of personalized politics is not limited by the need for longitudinal data. Comparing levels of personalized politics across different types of media, electoral systems, or types of parties will provide us with valuable insights for understanding under which conditions individuals are prominent in the political process (Van Aelst et al., 2011: 210; Zittel, 2012). In the study of personalized politics, we can integrate more types of data, which will advance the theoretical developments in terms of understanding the causes behind personalization. Furthermore, for empirical reasons, it is important to keep the two concepts apart. For instance, in Israel, a process of media personalization has been documented (Rahat & Shaefer, 2007), while this is not the case for Germany (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). However, the *level* of personalized media focus was higher in Germany than in Israel (Van Aelst et al., 2011: 210).

Studies of personalization of politics as well as personalized politics thus require different research designs, but they are conceptually connected and will thus inform each other in terms of developing explanations and understandings. In the following, I mainly stick with the term personalization of politics, which is most commonly used in the literature. However, the discussion of the aspects as well as the areas of personalization is relevant for personalized politics as well.

Aspects of Personalization: Individualization and Privatization

Personalization of politics refers to a process where individuals become more prominent, but this may manifest itself in different ways. Van Aelst et al. (2011) differentiate between two aspects of personalization: *individualization* and *privatization*. Individualization concerns a focus on individual politicians, including their ideas, capacities, and policies. This type of personalization may challenge the dominance of the party in regulating representation, but it does not necessarily cause a devaluation of the political debate shifting to less substantial themes (Ibid: 204–206). Privatization concerns a focus on the private life of politicians, including their hobbies, family life, and personal history (Ibid: 201-204). This potentially threatens the substantive content of political debates, but it may also reduce the distance between voters and their representatives portraying these not only as political actors but also as “ordinary people”.

Both of these aspects of personalization are important and potentially consequential for democracy but in different ways. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge this two-dimensional character of personalization and keep them separate in empirical analyses.

Areas of Personalization: Institutions, Media, and Behaviour

As mentioned above, personalization of politics is taken as a fundamental change of politics that is relevant for various aspects of the political system. Rahat and Sheafer (2007) suggest a typology distinguishing between institutional, media, and behavioural types of personalization, which have been taken indirectly into use by Karvonen (2010). Institutional personalization relates to institutional changes that put more emphasis on the individuals, for instance by changing from a closed-list to an open-list electoral system (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007: 66). Media personalization refers to increased media coverage of individuals rather than collective actors such as political parties (Ibid: 67). Finally, behavioural personalization is not given an overall definition; it is split into two subcategories, i.e. behaviour of the public and behaviour of politicians. Personalization of the behaviour of politicians is defined as an increase in individual political behaviour and a decline in party activity. Contrastingly, personalization of the behaviour of the public should be expressed in changed perceptions of politics from seeing politics as a competition between groups to a struggle between individuals and in increased importance ascribed to candidates for vote choice (Ibid: 68).

Rahat and Sheafer further develop their typology in collaboration with Meital Balmas and Shauk R. Shenhav (Balmas et. al. 2014) by identifying two *routes* to personalization, which they call centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization implies that power flows upwards from groups to a single leader, whereas decentralized personalization means that power flows downwards from the group to the individual politician (Ibid: 37). This is relevant to all areas of personalization, and the two processes do not necessarily come at the expense of each other. We may thus witness a dual process of personalization. Focusing on the personalization of politicians, the centralized process of personalization has been studied most extensively. Especially the edited volume of Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (2005) on presidentialization of politics provides a systematic and comprehensive study of the increasing power of prime ministers. In relation to the decentralized personalization among politicians, we still lack empirical evidence besides the study on Israel supplied by Balmas et al. (2014).

While I sympathize with the overall aim of developing a typology to systemize the different areas of personalization, I find that especially the personalization among politicians suffers from a lack of overall definition and clarity. Rahat and Shaefer (2007) provide a very helpful starting point to develop the typology further by raising a set of questions. First, why are perceptions part of the behavioural personalization of voters and not the behavioural personalization of politicians? Second, what does it mean that political behaviour becomes more individual? Third, does increased individual political behaviour of politicians necessarily come at the expense of party activities?

Personalized Perceptions

I find it most expedient to either include or exclude perceptions in both subcategories of the behavioural personalization. Calling the type of personalization “*behavioural* personalization” in itself may reduce the relevance of perceptions. However, I find it highly relevant to include perceptions into the study of personalization and personalized politics for two reasons. First, changes in perceptions of politics will inform us most directly about how long-term changes in societal structures are absorbed by the political actors, who are the forces of change after all. Second, especially when studying politicians, a major literature on representative roles has been concerned with how politicians define and perform their task of representatives (Eulau et al., 1959; Wahlke et al., 1962; Searing, 1994; Saalfeld & Müller, 1997). This literature has recently regained energy because of the notion of personalization and thus the potential increased importance of individual politicians (Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Andeweg, 2014). The most direct relevance of perceptions is that they influence behaviour and thus impact on the political process of representation (Andeweg, 2012). A less obvious point, which is however interesting for the study of personalization, is that perceptions may change without behavioural consequences in terms of party activity because the behavioural consequences of the perceptions will be moderated by strong institutional norms and rules. We may thus find similar personalized perceptions of politics in two settings but with different behavioural consequences. Therefore, I suggest that perceptions of politics are included in the definition of personalization among voters as well as politicians.

Personalized Versus Partisan Political behaviour

What constitutes individual political behaviour as in contrast to party activity? Rahat and Sheaffer exemplify the increased individual behaviour by increased numbers of submissions and adoptions of

private member bills (Rahat & Shaefer, 2007: 68). This clarifies the idea but still only defines the concept by exemplification. Another way to put it is that this constitutes a clever operationalization but not really a conceptual definition.

I suggest defining personalized political behaviour of politicians as *parliamentarian and extra-parliamentarian activities that are sponsored primarily by the politician rather than the party*. Activities are broadly understood to cover all aspects of representation from voting in the legislature to providing service to the constituency and to posting news on twitter. The sponsor of the activity is crucial since politicians perform many activities as party agents, for instance commenting on an issue in the media or in parliament by voting as a party delegate or giving speeches on behalf of the party. However, other activities are performed on the politicians' own accounts, for instance promoting their own views or capacities in election campaigns, asking questions in parliament on issues not related to the spokesperson's jurisdiction, or posting news about their private life or personal qualities. The distinction between party and individual activities can be difficult to operationalize since a politician in most parliamentary party systems is an individual as well as a party agent. However, it is this distinction we need to make to be able to distinguish personalized politics from partisan politics.

Personalization at the Expense of the Party?

Personalization has been defined as a process where individual political actors become more prominent at *the expense* of parties and other political groups (Karvonen, 2010: 4; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007: 65). To detect personalization, the observations we need to make is therefore individuals becoming more prominent at *the expense* of political parties. Thus, for instance in the study of personalization in media coverage, we need to discover an increase in individual/party ratio coverage rather than just an increase in the coverage of individuals to conclude that personalization has taken place. However, this may be too demanding and counterproductive when studying personalization of representation since there is theoretically no reason for partisan and personalized politics not to co-exist.

Esaiasson (2000:58) argues and shows that politicians integrate several interests in their task definition. Politicians do not see themselves solely as party agents, delegates of the constituency, or trustees using their own judgement and views to make decisions as representatives. Rather, politicians combine these different tasks. In addition, in the case of increased constituency focus in the UK, Norton (2002) argues that this does not necessarily come with a cost to the party. Actually, he argues that constituency

occupation is more often useful than harmful to the party leader. Increased focus on constituency potentially brings costs to the party in the form of intensified intra-party competition, which drains resources away from promoting the national party platform and results in “constituency-owners” who can challenge or even ignore party discipline when the interests of the constituency and of the party conflict (McLeay & Vowles, 2007: 80). However, constituency work may also strengthen the party by mobilizing the local party organizations, securing a party seat, and enhance the party profile (ibid.).

Similarly, other kinds of personalization can challenge but also support party representation. On the one hand, personalization can result in increased intra-party competition and lack of party discipline due to individual promotion and independent behaviour. As with constituency loyalty, personalization can result in rebellion and party switches, which is indeed harmful to the party. On the other hand, personalization can also mobilize activists and voters connecting not only to the party but also to the candidate due to his/her personal qualifications. Strong personal attachments may even bring parties support that they would not otherwise have gotten. Increased personal behaviour in parliament in the form of asking more questions or engaging in interpellation may not harm the party as long as the positions taken do not directly contradict the party position. Thus, it is not evident that personalization challenges the central role of the party. It will not provide a comprehensive picture of the changes in the representative behaviour of modern MPs if we only study those aspects where personalization conflicts with party politics. Personalization can also be seen as an *additional* link between the representatives and the represented. This link is based on personal identification and private likes and dislikes rather than party identification and ideology. Such personal links have possibly always existed but they may have become more important, due to demands from the electorate and mass media.

To include this aspect of personalization, I suggest defining the broader concept of personalization of politics as *a process where the prominence of political individuals increases*.

In some situations, MPs face a dilemma between acting as party agents or individual representatives. MPs cannot vote both in accordance with *and* against their party. However, in many other situations, activities can be combined. The social media offers a platform for personalization (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013) that does not necessarily influence activities as a party agent. Some might argue that time is limited so that time spent on Facebook is time lost in party activity. However, the increased resources of the parties and parliaments and the developments of communication technology have made it possible to be more effective and perform more activities over all. Therefore, I find that limiting behavioural personalization to the situation where individual behaviour has become relatively

more important than party behaviour is not helpful for grasping how politics and political representation develops.

Personalization of Representation

Bringing the pieces together, I suggest a conceptualization of personalization, which is illustrated in Figure 1. The figure is organized in three layers that take the area, route, and aspect of personalization into account. The focus is on the *personalization of representation*, for which the relevant conceptual boxes are bold. The dotted horizontal lines indicate where I break off the conceptual development related to other areas and routes of personalization.

As mentioned above, I define personalization of politics as the increased importance of political individuals in all aspects of the political process. According to this definition, personalization is not necessarily associated with decreased importance of political parties.

In the first conceptual layer concerning the *areas* of personalization, I build on the innovative work of Rahat & Shaefer (2007) and include the personalization of institutions and media. It should be noted, though, that politicians' media behaviour is taken to be part of the representation area. Thus, the use of social network sites and websites will be studied as part of the personalization of representation rather than personalization of the media, since it is activities controlled and carried out by a politician.

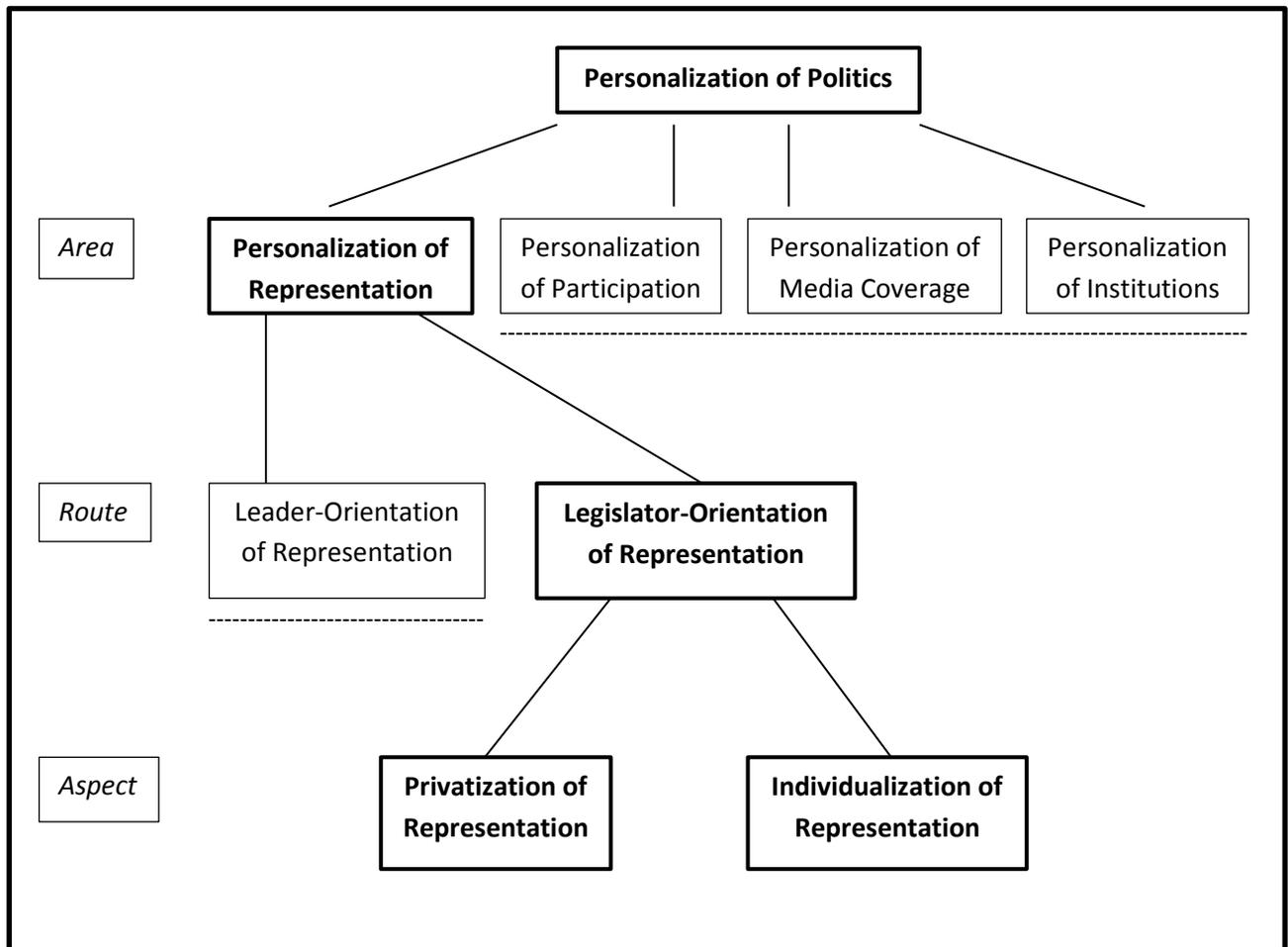
Therefore, I suggest calling this area *the personalization of media coverage*, indicating that this does not cover all aspects of modern media behaviour but primarily the media controlled by some journalistic editor. I suggest splitting the behavioural personalization into 1) *personalization of participation*, which relates to political perceptions and behaviour of voters, and 2) *personalization of representation*, which concerns the perceptions and behaviour of politicians. I find this division helpful as it differentiates between two lines of research that are indeed linked to each other but that also originate from different traditions and constitute research agendas of their own. I use the words participation and representation rather than behaviour to indicate that within these areas we may also study changes in attitudes and perceptions related to personalization; for instance, the voters' preferences regarding representatives (Campbell & Lovenduski, 2014) or politicians' attitudinal distance to party policy.

I define *personalized representation* as the situation where the individual politician is the centre of representation. The focus of representation is the personal views of the politician or representation of his or her personal voters. The party is a vehicle for political power rather than a political principal. The

style of representation is personal, and the politician communicates directly to voters as an individual and engages in parliamentary activities not circumscribed by the party. The *personalization of representation* is thus a process where individuals increasingly become the centre of representation.

In the second layer concerning the *routes* of personalization, I use the division suggested by Balmas et al. (2014) and call the centralized personalization in this area *leader-orientation of representation* and the decentralized personalization *legislator-orientation of representation*. In the first route of research, empirical and theoretical focus should be directed at political leaders such as increased power and independency of party leaders, prime ministers, or maybe ministers in general. In the second route of research, focus is on the increased power and independency of rank-and-file legislators and politicians, who do not hold leadership positions in the party or in government.

Figure 1: Conceptual layers of personalization of representation



Finally, in the third layer, I include the different aspects of personalization building on the work of Van Aelst et al. (2011). Privatization refers to an increase in the use of private appeals in the representation telling about hobbies, family life, and personal upbringing, whereas individualization refers to an increase in individually-sponsored statements such as calling attention to personal political views or capacities.

How conceptual clarification brings the research agenda forward

The main purpose of this research note is to instigate a clarification of the concept *personalized politics*. The concept is still more commonly used in various literatures, but the definition of what is meant by personalization differs and is sometimes not even explicitly stated. A broadly accepted idea of personalization is that it refers to a process where persons become more important to politics in some way. Even though this is a vague and very broad understanding, it points to a potentially very important change in modern politics and representation, which requires a thorough and systematic investigation. A conceptual clarification of the phenomenon is crucial for bringing the research agenda forward. We simply need to know what we are talking about in order to speak to and inform each other and the public about this possible political development.

In this research note, I have suggested a very general overall definition of personalization of politics as a process where the prominence of political individuals increases. Furthermore, by bringing existing conceptualizations together, I suggest a conceptual framework consisting of multiple conceptual layers that help specify the areas, routes, and aspects of personalization. I find this conceptualization strong as it balances the need for conceptual broadness to include multiple dimensions of personalization on the one hand and the need for conceptual precision to specify given dimensions of personalization and start developing and evaluating empirical measures of personalization on the other hand.

To increase collective knowledge and cumulative research, we need a common conceptual framework that provides a standard for evaluating the validity and comparability of our empirical measures.

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