Personalization, social media, and voting: Effects of candidate self-personalization on vote intention

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Abstract
Scholars have documented growth in media coverage and popular discourse focusing on politicians’ personal lives—personalization. Candidates use social media and personalization to circumvent mainstream news media, disrupting conventional processes. This personalization arguably increases voters’ reliance on personal characteristics as voting heuristics. An online experiment exposed more than a thousand US adults to personalized or policy/campaigning tweets from a male or female US Senator running for re-election. Candidates who personalized elicited higher evaluations of social presence and parasocial interaction. For female candidates who shared a supported party with a respondent, personalization leads to feelings of perceived presence and parasocial interaction. Ultimately, the feelings of intimacy created by personalized tweets led respondents to express support for personalizing candidates, but this effect is contingent upon the gender and in-party status of the candidate.

Keywords
Candidate communication, electoral studies, experimental methods, parasocial interaction, personalization, social media, social presence

Scholars in the United States and abroad have documented growing trends toward media coverage and popular discourse focusing on the personal identities and private lives of politicians. This personalization of politics is typified by an increase in individualized...
interactions, often at the expense of traditional political institutions (e.g. Van Aelst et al., 2011). The growth of social media is clearly abetting this transformation, offering a highly personalized point of entry into politics. To the extent that candidates use social media like most of the general public does, personalized politics will be exacerbated, as social media create an arena for ongoing personal identity construction (Bennett, 2012).

Initial studies suggest that candidate’s use of social media for personalizing communication varies widely and is conditioned by the electoral contexts candidates face (Evans et al., 2014; McGregor et al., 2015; Meeks, 2012). Additionally, findings suggest that while traditional campaigning messages may incite more engagement in the form of retweets, personalizing messages were more likely to invite replies (Lawrence et al., 2015). These findings, as well as others on candidate behavior on social media, suggest a range of styles of presentation on social media—from the highly impersonal and formal to the gregarious and intimately personal (see also Kreiss, 2014).

Candidates’ emphasis on personalization arguably increases voters’ reliance on personal characteristics as voting heuristics. Traditionally, political communication scholars have argued that focus on personal characteristics crowds out policy and other “serious” considerations (e.g. Bennett, 2012). But some scholars have begun to theorize that personalization in politics may enhance people’s engagement (Papacharissi, 2014).

What remains to be examined is how this personalizing communication, which campaign consultants reveal is particularly crafted to “go around” mainstream news media (Kreiss, 2014), affects the electorate. In short, I ask, Under which circumstances, and how, does self-personalization on social media “work” for candidates? Findings from an online survey experiment support my hypothesis that personalized communication causes voters to manifest positive feelings of intimacy towards candidates. To the extent that candidates present highly personalized versions of themselves on social media, these personalized communications prompt constituents to create impressions of closeness to and imagined relationships with the candidate, which increases the likelihood of electoral support. However, these effects are contingent upon the gender and partisan identity of the candidate.

**Personalized politics**

Scholars have theorized a growing personalization of politics, marked by the declining centrality of traditional political institutions and processes in society supplanted by the rise of more individualized modes of political interactions. In one of the more expansive treatments of the concept, Bennett (2012) sees the rise of personalized politics as part of a broader societal shift that emphasizes personal lifestyle affordances in constructing our lives. This personality-focused electorate emerges as more formal group identifications fade (Bennett, 2012), and as a result, civic engagement today often involves construction of personal politics through lifestyle values.

Some have lamented the shift towards personalized politics, believing the personality-centered system cultivated through mass media, particularly television, has watered down substantive political discourse, negatively affecting rational modes of citizenship (Hart, 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). However, some scholars argue that the more personalized and popularized nature of contemporary politics may be engaging for a
broader range of citizens (Van Zoonen, 1998). Whether today’s blurrier boundaries between the formerly separate spheres of “information” versus “entertainment” are ultimately good or bad for democracy, a more encompassing analytical approach to the many kinds of messages and activities that might now be democratically relevant is needed (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001).

Voter evaluations of politicians increasingly focus on personal traits—citizens “vote for people and their ideas rather than for political parties and programs” (Corner and Pels, 2003: 7). However, candidate’s presentations of self to constituents have long been a prominent feature of US politics (Fenno, 1978). Voters’ impressions and media representations of politicians’ personal traits has oft been studied (see, for example, Bishin et al., 2006; McGraw, 2003). But today’s media environment, dominated by social media, has arguably increased the degree to which politicians’ personal identities, families, and lifestyles are emphasized over policy stances and leadership abilities (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; McGregor et al., 2016).

Many theorists treat personalization as something “done to” politics or politicians; my focus here is on the personalization politicians “do to” themselves—self-personalization. The shifting political environment (Bennett, 2012) combined with a communication environment that is increasingly focused online (Chadwick, 2013; Meeks, 2012) may explain why many politicians see personalized politics as a successful strategy to appeal to voters. Candidate’s presentation of their personal lives and traits to constituents illustrates a significant individuating influence on the formation of political evaluations, as it invites voters to rely on candidate-specific information to form appraisals (McGraw, 2003).

The affordances of social media in particular allow politicians to humanize themselves, conveying those traits that Fenno (1978) observed are so important: a sense of identification with their constituents and perceptions of empathy. At the same time, the public are primed to experience personal characteristics through social media, so as politicians engage in this expected behavior on social media, voters may be more influenced by it.

**Personalization on social media**

The ubiquity of social media may be intrinsically linked to the rise of personalized politics. Social media expand the political arena to allow for increased personalizing in campaigning by placing “the focus on the individual politician rather than on the political party” (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013: 758). Indeed, social media ally well with the personalizing trend in electoral politics, affording politicians the ability to intimate personal relationships with constituents, sharing images of themselves (literally and figuratively) in a manner that can seem genuinely personal and spontaneous.

Social media are now widely, though not universally, employed by politicians and candidates in the United States. Conway et al. (2013) find broad though uneven use of Twitter by candidates in the 2012 presidential election. Gulati and Williams (2012) find that over three-fourths of major party US congressional candidates in the 2010 elections had both a Facebook page and Twitter account. Gainous and Wagner (2014), studying that same election, also find wide adoption of these social media. To the extent that
candidates self-personalize on social media, adoption ranged from near zero to up a third of posts in the 2014 election (McGregor et al., 2015).

Personalization, especially on social media, can lend a sense of authenticity to campaigns by blurring the line between a candidate’s private and public selves, which appeals to voters (Louden and McCauliff, 2004). A candidate’s personal revelations may allow the public to more easily identify with them. Furthermore, as Meeks (2012) points out, when candidates tie issues to their personal lives, it can make policy seem personal, which may allow the public to more easily identify with issues and candidates.

Personalization for candidates may “work” for voters, especially in a digital campaign context, by creating particular psychological effects. Self-personalizing communication may evoke higher levels of social presence and parasocial interaction for individuals (Lee and Oh, 2012). Social presence describes the extent to which mediated communication replicates face-to-face interactions, which can illicit the “feeling that one has some level of access or insight into the other’s intentional, cognitive, or affective states” (Biocca and Nowak, 2001: 482; see also Short et al., 1976). Even though the communication is occurring virtually, social presence creates feelings of connection with and physical presence of another (Baym, 2010; Nowak and Biocca, 2003). Parasocial interaction is a unidirectional, nonreciprocal, pseudo-relationship an audience forms with a mediated personality, sometimes termed as “intimacy at a distance” (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 215). People can form an interpersonal relationship with a figure, and these relationships, though mediated, create a sense of closeness, a sense of truly knowing the figure, and that the figure speaks directly to them. Self-personalizing communication, especially on social media, seems particularly primed to elicit these imagined, intimate relationships between candidates and their constituents.

Most people are unlikely to encounter a candidate for national office in person, but a great many more are likely to come across their social media messages. Through self-personalization, candidates can use social media to present a more informal and humanized version of themselves to constituents. Social media give candidates the opportunity to allow homestyle to “transcend geography” (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015: 118). Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media means that individuals are not relegated to passively viewing these self-personalizing posts—they can comment, tweet, or share their way to an engaged relationship with candidates. Personalized tweets have been found to engender more engagement from the public (Lawrence et al., 2015) and to lead to heightened perceptions of social presence, increased parasocial interaction, and increased vote intention for candidates (Lee and Oh, 2012). Left unexplored in these studies is the role of other candidate characteristics, like gender, play in these relationships.

The role of gender in social media personalization

In considering the role a candidate’s gender may play in personalized politics, many questions arise. Personalization has been theorized and studied rather extensively, but gender is rarely explicitly tackled in the literature. Literature on politics and gender indicate the media more often subject women to personalized treatment, which can cause women candidates to struggle in establishing policy competence. While the
personalizing trend in politics overall may not be overtly gendered, there is evidence to suggest that gender may explain different personalizing communication styles (Lawrence et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2014; Meeks, 2012).

Despite the relative number of US women in office and leadership positions, gender stereotypes associating women with communal traits rather than with agentic leadership traits endure. These stereotypes create particular challenges for women politicians: playing to expected gender roles inhibits the ability to embody leadership, while conforming to leadership expectations inhibits femininity (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Jamieson, 1995). Female candidates must strike a delicate balance in their self-presentation (Lawrence and Rose, 2009).

Strategic stereotype theory proposes that politicians can craft successful campaigns by capitalizing on gender stereotypes that benefit them (or are expected of them) while counteracting potentially damaging gender stereotypes (Fridkin and Kenney, 2014). They argue that women candidates must delicately exploit stereotypes that associate women with caring while minimizing stereotypes that associate men with agentic leadership traits. Analysis of social media efforts of 2014 gubernatorial candidates suggests that female candidates remain more cautious about exploiting opportunities to personalize themselves, whereas male candidates sense an opportunity to balance stereotypes by including more humanized, even nurturing images (Lawrence et al., 2015; McGregor et al., 2016). But the combined effects of a candidate’s gender and self-personalizing social media communication on constituents have not yet been examined. Since gender is perhaps the dominant personal characteristic, its interplay with self-personalizing communication warrants examination.

**Partisan identity and personalization on social media**

Gender, race and ethnicity are all strong and persistent social identifications, but partisanship is strengthening as a social identity. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) demonstrate that affective partisanship drives partisan bias and discrimination—partisans discriminate against opposing partisans to a greater degree than race-based discrimination. Likewise, Green et al. (2002) draw from socio-psychological perspectives on partisanship, arguing that partisan identity is a social identity, akin to religious identity. These identities are formed early in life (Loader et al., 2014) and are quite stable (Cowden and McDermott, 2000). Green et al. (2002) theorize partisanship as a social identity that reflects a blend of cognition and affect, which in consort strongly influence vote-choice. Given the role of affect in partisanship, especially via an affective platform like social media (Papacharissi, 2014), candidates who personalize may elicit higher levels of perceived presence and imagined intimacy from individuals with whom they share partisan identity.

Candidate personalization via social media broadly increases feelings of closeness (Lee and Oh, 2012), but as Lee and Oh note in their study, the personalized tweets they tested were still issue focused. In this study, I present tweets adapted from actual candidates where personalization is focused more on the candidate’s private persona to further probe the role of partisan and gender identity on reception of personalized tweets from candidates.
Hypotheses
First, taking into account previously documented advantages of candidate’s online personalization (e.g. Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Lee and Oh, 2012; Meeks, 2012), I expect personalization to be generally positive for all candidates. Participants exposed to personalized tweets will report higher levels of social presence (H1a), parasocial interaction (H1b) and vote intention for the candidate (H1c) than those exposed to tweets devoid of personalization. Delving deeper, a candidate’s gender and/or political party also serve as notable heuristics for voters to rely on when fomenting psychological associations, like social presence and parasocial interaction, as well as when casting their vote. Because partisanship is affective and serves as a strong social identity, individuals’ favorable response to personalization may be contingent upon a shared partisan identity with the candidate. When a candidate tweets, those exposed to personalized posts from a respondent’s supported party will report higher levels of social presence (H2a), parasocial interaction (H2b), and vote intention (H2c) for the candidate. Enduring gender stereotypes relating women to communal traits suggests voters may respond more positively to female candidates who self-personalize than to personalizing male candidates. However, given the strength of partisan identity, this relationship is likely to be dependent upon partisan congruence. Specifically, when a candidate personalizes, those exposed to a female candidate from a respondent’s supported party will report feeling higher levels of social presence (H3a), parasocial interaction (H3b), and vote intention (H3c) for the candidate.

Methods
I used an online, between-participants survey experiment to test the hypotheses. US residents over the age of 18 years participated in the study (N=1181). The data were collected between 17 and 27 April 2015, and I used Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to recruit the sample. The sample was diverse in terms of age (M=36.9, standard deviation [SD]=12.97), gender (49.7% male), race (78.9% White, 7.1% Black, and 4.6% Hispanic American), education (12.7% high school or less, 36.5% 2-year degree or some college, 36.8% 4-year degree, and 14% post-graduate), and political party affiliation (54.6% Democrat or leaning, 27.1% Republican or leaning, and 18.4% no party affiliation).

Procedure
Participants were solicited using MTurk. On the MTurk website, participants choose which studies they would like to participate in, and in return, they receive payment through Amazon. Anyone can register to become an MTurk worker after preapproval by Amazon. However, researchers who post tasks on MTurk can set up qualifications for the type of worker they would like to complete the task. After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to view a screen shot of a candidate’s Twitter feed. The study uses 2×2×2 between-participants design. The candidate was either male or female (gender manipulation), Democrat or Republican (party manipulation), and displayed self-personalizing tweets or not (personalizing manipulation). The
gender of the candidate was indicated by their name,4 and the candidate’s party was indicated in the bio area of their Twitter profile. Candidates whose tweets did not contain personalization focused on policy and campaigning, the two most common uses of candidate’s social media efforts (Evans et al., 2014; Meeks, 2012). Policy tweets included, “Homelessness is an important issue that we can’t allow to be swept under the rug in this campaign. #2014” and campaigning tweets included, “The only place to get an official #TeamParker yard sign is at our online store. Order yours today!” Candidate feeds that featured personalization included policy and campaigning tweets, but also self-personalizing tweets like, “I was 1st in my family to graduate college, like so many hard-working Americans. It wasn’t easy, but it changed my life. #MyStory” and “Our daughter passed her driver’s license test yesterday & took the car to the store this morning to buy family groceries. This could turn out to be a great thing!” All tweets used in this study were drawn from 2014 gubernatorial candidates, with identifying information removed. These posts were coded as personalized in previous studies (Lawrence et al., 2015; McGregor et al., 2016), where personalized posts revealed the aspect of a candidate’s personal life (Langer, 2007), presented family or personal preferences (Hermans and Vergeer, 2012), or contained some form of self-disclosure (Meeks, 2012). For all conditions, the screen shot of the candidate’s Twitter feed featured six tweets in total. In the control condition, all tweets were policy or campaigning focused. In the personalized condition, four of the tweets were personalized, one was policy focused, and one was campaigning focused. For example stimuli, see Appendix 1.

After viewing the stimuli, participants answered a series of questions. The first sections of questions evaluated the participants’ opinion on the candidate’s social presence, parasocial interaction, and vote intention. Between these sections, participants were also asked two attention check questions.5 Participants then answered three more sets of questions: a manipulation check, social media use, and demographics.

**Measures**

Candidate attributes were used as independent variables, and thus were dummy coded: gender (Female = 1) and political party (Democrat = 1).

**Personalization.** The presence of personalized tweets (coded high) was manipulated such that a candidate’s Twitter feed was presented either with or without self-personalizing tweets.

**Supported party.** The candidate’s Twitter feed, the source of personalization, was manipulated such that tweets were attributed to either a Democrat or Republican US Senator. A dichotomous variable was created to represent whether the candidate’s political party aligned with the participant’s political party (Weeks, 2015). For example, if a self-reported Democrat (or leaning) viewed tweets from a Democratic candidate, that combination was coded as “in-party” (coded high). If a self-identified Republican (or leaning) saw tweets from the same candidate, that combination would be coded as “out-party.”

**Social presence.** Four items were adapted from Lee and Oh (2012) to measure participants feeling of a candidate’s social presence via tweets. Social presence was measured
by assessing the extent to which participants agreed with four statements on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). The statements were as follows: “I felt like I was engaging in an actual conversation with [candidate’s name],” “I felt like I was in the same room as [candidate’s name],” “I felt as if [candidate’s name] was speaking directly to me,” and “I felt like I could get to know [candidate’s name] through Twitter.” A composite variable was created from their four measures ($M=3.21$, $SD=1.61$, $\alpha=.929$).

**Parasocial interaction.** To measure a respondent’s sense of a parasocial relationship with the candidate, I adapted six items from Lee and Oh (2012). Agreement was evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). The statements were as follows: “The tweets did not show me what [candidate name] is like” (reverse coded), “[candidate name] made me feel comfortable, as if I were with a friend,” “[candidate name] seemed to understand the kinds of things I want to know,” “I would not tell my friends about [candidate name]” (reverse coded), “I can trust the information I get from [candidate name],” and “I found myself comparing my ideas with that [candidate name] said.” I created a scale to measure *parasocial interaction* with the six items ($M=3.95$, $SD=1.16$, $\alpha=.842$).

**Vote intention.** Two items were used to measure a respondent’s vote intention toward a candidate. Agreement on both measures was evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). The two statements are as follows: “I would like [candidate name] to run in the next election” and “I would vote for [candidate name] if they ran in the next election.” The two items were added together to create a composite variable *vote intention* ($M=3.98$, $SD=1.49$, $\alpha=.925$).

**Statistical analysis**

Before testing the hypotheses, I conducted independent sample $t$-tests to confirm the manipulation of self-personalizing tweets worked as desired. To test $H1a–c$, and to test the conditional effects of a candidate’s gender, in-party relationship, and personalization, I estimated ordinary least squared regression models for each dependent variable: social presence, parasocial interaction, and vote intention. First, the models examine the direct effects of a candidate’s gender, personalization, and in-party relationship on the dependent variable. The second model tests the hypothesized combined effect of personalization and in-party status ($H2a–c$). Next, “moderated moderation” models tested the three-way interaction I hypothesize ($H3a–c$) and were further probed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Finally, and based on analysis of descriptives and correlations, I conducted post hoc analysis. First, I estimated a multiple ordinary least squared regression model to examine the effects of feelings of social presence and parasocial interaction on vote intention. Next, I used the Hayes PROCESS macro to test for mediation suggested by the multiple regressions—the ability of social presence and parasocial interaction to conduit the effects of personalizing communication on vote intention.
Results

Personalization manipulation check

As candidate personalization is the independent variable of interest, I examined respondent’s assessments of the tweets to ensure they were perceived as intended. The first item assessed perceived intimacy on a 7-point scale ranging from “very non-intimate” (1) to “very intimate” (7). The second item assessed how personal the respondents evaluated the candidate’s tweets on a 7-point scale ranging from “very impersonal” (1) to “very personal” (7). As expected, participants who viewed self-personalizing candidates (M=4.72, SD=1.26) evaluated the tweets as significantly more intimate than those in the control conditions (M=3.36, SD=1.49), t(1060)=16.085, p<.001. Likewise, participants who viewed tweets from self-personalizing candidates (M=5.28, SD=3.62) rated the tweets as significantly more personal than those in the control conditions (M=3.62, SD=1.47), t(1060)=20.68, p<.001. The t-tests confirm that the manipulation of self-personalizing tweets functioned as expected.

Hypotheses tests

The first set of hypotheses focuses on the singular effects of personalization and predicted that respondents viewing personalized tweets from a candidate would report higher levels of feeling social presence (H1a), parasocial interaction (H1b), and vote intention (H1c) compared to those not exposed to personalized tweets. The first hypothesis is supported—participants exposed to personalized tweets (M=3.498, SD=1.558) were more likely than those not exposed (M=2.904, SD=1.454) to report feeling the social presence of the candidates, t(1060)=−.6.428, p<.001. Therefore, H1a is supported. Similarly, participants who viewed personalized tweets (M=4.039, SD=1.154) were more likely than those in the control condition (M=3.907, SD=1.147) to report a sense of parasocial interaction, t(1060)=−1.862, p<.05—H1b is partially supported by this small mean difference. The difference between respondents’ intentions to vote for personalizing versus non-personalizing candidate tweets is marginal and non-significant, so H1c is rejected (t(1060)=.407, n.s.). All of these results rely on one-tailed t-tests.

Without the influence of contextual variables, these findings suggest that candidate’s can use personalizing tweets to simulate perceived presence, whereby citizens can form a virtual and intimate relationship with the mediated candidate. These tests do not take into the gender of the candidate or in-party status, which is the focus of the second set of hypotheses.

Social presence. The coefficients reported in Table 1 (Model 1) indicate two main effects: candidate personalization (b=.575 (.102), p<.001) and supported party (b=.269 (.102), p<.01) both positively predict feelings of social presence. The main effect of personalization on social presence provides more robust support for H1a. Next, the hypothesized interactions are entered into the model (Table 1, Model 2 and Model 3). H2a predicted that when a candidate personalizes, respondents exposed to a candidate with whom they share partisan identity would report stronger feelings of social presence than those in the
control condition. The interaction coefficient is not significant, $b = .205 \ (0.203), n.s.$—H2a is not supported. H3a predicted that when a candidate personalizes, respondents exposed to a female candidate from a supported party would express higher feelings of social presence than those in the control condition. The coefficient was significant, $b = .870 \ (0.406), p < .05,$ indicating that effect of personalization on feelings of social presence is contingent upon a candidate’s gender and in-party status. Exploring this significant interaction further illustrates that respondents who saw female candidates with in-party status were more likely to report feelings of social presence in the personalized condition ($M = 3.91, SE = 1.52$) than in the control condition ($M = 2.97, SE = 1.54$), $b = .94 \ (0.20), p < .001$—H3a is confirmed. Furthermore, respondents exposed to male candidates from the out-party in the personalized condition were more likely to report perceived presence ($M = 3.35, SE = 1.62$) than in the control condition ($M = 2.69, SE = 1.29$), $b = .66 \ (0.21), p = .0017.$ Additionally, respondents exposed to male candidates from the same party as the respondent in the personalized condition expressed higher levels of social presence ($M = 3.53, SE = 1.54$) than those in the control condition ($M = 3.12, SE = 1.52$), $b = .41 \ (0.20), p = .0430.$ The only condition under which personalization did not increase feelings of social presence is for those exposed to female candidates who did not share partisan identity with the respondent, $b = .31 \ (0.20), p = .1207.$

**Parasocial interaction.** Three models were estimated to examine the hypothesized effects of the independent variables on parasocial interaction. The only significant main effect is supported party ($b = .412 \ (0.076), p < .001$), indicating that sharing party identification with a candidate positively relates to feelings of parasocial interaction (Table 2, Model 1). The

### Table 1. Effects of gender, party, and personalization on social presence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate gender (female = 1)</td>
<td>.137 (.102)</td>
<td>.138 (.102)</td>
<td>.355 (.205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization (coded high)</td>
<td>.575 (.102)**</td>
<td>.473 (.143)***</td>
<td>.651 (.207)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported party (coded high)</td>
<td>.269 (.102)**</td>
<td>.169 (.142)</td>
<td>.423 (.202)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization × supported party</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.205 (.203)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization × candidate gender</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>– .343 (.286)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported party × candidate gender</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>– .503 (.284)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization × supported party × candidate gender</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.870 (.406)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.756 (.103)**</td>
<td>2.808 (.115)**</td>
<td>2.698 (.146)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1062</td>
<td>1062</td>
<td>1062</td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.050</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

df: degrees of freedom.  
Unstandardized regression coefficients reported. Standard error is listed in parentheses.  
*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01; ****p < .001. All p-values are two-tailed.
direct effects model indicates that candidate personalization was not associated with increased feelings of parasocial interactions ($b = .125 \ (.076)$, n.s.), indicating that support for H1b is limited—when controlling for the other factors, respondents do not report a stronger sense of parasocial interaction with personalizing candidates as compared to candidates who do not personalize. The interaction term of candidate personalization × supported party is not significant, $b = -.179 \ (.152)$ n.s.—therefore, H2b is not supported. In the personalized condition, the interaction between candidate gender and supported party is positive and significant, $b = .757 \ (.304)$, $p < .05$ (Table 2, Model 3), providing support for H3b. Further examination of this interaction demonstrates that respondents who were exposed female candidates with in-party status were more likely to foster a sense of parasocial interaction in the personalized condition ($M = 4.50$, $SE = 1.01$) than in the control condition ($M = 4.13$, $SE = 1.23$), $b = .33 \ (.14)$, $p = .0223$. The conditional effects at other levels of the moderators were not significant.

**Vote intention.** A third set of models was estimated to examine the effects of the independent variables on voting intention. As with parasocial interaction, the only significant main effect on voting intention is a respondent’s in-party status, $b = .759 \ (.097)$, $p < .001$, indicating that shared partisan identity is a strong and positive predictor for vote intention (Table 3, Model 1). H2c predicted that when a candidate personalized, respondents exposed to a candidate from the same party as the respondents would be move likely to express vote intention for that candidate compared to those in the control condition. The coefficient for the interaction term personalization × supported party is not significant ($b = - .281 \ (.277)$, n.s.), and H2c is rejected. Finally, coefficient testing H3c was not
significant, \( b = .507 (.387), \text{n.s.} \), suggesting that a candidate’s gender and supported party status do not interact to affect vote intention in the personalized condition (Table 3, Model 3). Thus, H3c is not confirmed.

After examining the analysis based on my initial hypotheses, I estimated a final exploratory multiple linear regression model (Table 4) to examine both social presence and parasocial interaction as predictors of vote intention, following a block containing the same independent variables (candidate gender, candidate personalization, and supported party) used in the previous models. The first block accounted for little variance in vote intention (6.6%) (see Table 4). The second block examined the effects of feelings of social presence on vote intention. Higher feelings of social presence were positively related to vote intention, \( b = .163 (.029), p < .001 \). Social presence greatly increased the fit of the model, increasing the variance explained to 41.8%. A final block examined the effect of parasocial interaction on vote intention. For participants who felt a greater sense of parasocial interaction with the candidate, they were increasingly likely to express intention to vote for that candidate, \( b = .806 (.039), p < .001 \). Parasocial interaction accounts for another 19.2% of the variance in vote intention, bringing the final model to a good fit—accounting for 61.0% of the variance \( F(5, 875) = 273.647, p < .001 \).

In light of these regression results that suggested a possible mediation, as well as a desire to further probe the democratic implications of personalization on voting behavior, I then tested the possibility that feelings of social presence and parasocial interaction may mediate the effects of personalization on voting intention. To do this, I estimated two moderated mediation models. The first tests the indirect effects of personalization on vote intention through social presence, which is contingent upon a candidate’s gender

### Table 3. Effects of gender, party, and personalization on voting intention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate gender (female = 1)</td>
<td>.000 (.097)</td>
<td>.000 (.097)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization (coded high)</td>
<td>−.012 (.097)</td>
<td>−.003 (.136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported party (coded high)</td>
<td>.759 (.097)**</td>
<td>.768 (.136)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization × supported party</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.018 (.193)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization × candidate gender</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported party × candidate gender</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate personalization × supported party × candidate gender</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.672 (.098)**</td>
<td>3.667 (.109)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1062</td>
<td>1062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F( df) )</td>
<td>20.655 (3, 877)**</td>
<td>15.476 (4, 876)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.066</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**df**: degrees of freedom.

Unstandardized regression coefficients reported. Standard error is listed in parentheses.

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01; ****p < .001. All p-values are two-tailed.
and their in-party status. Figure 1 depicts the mediation model showing direct effects, while Table 5 shows the conditional indirect effects at various levels of the moderators. Results indicate that the direct effect of personalization on vote intention is negative ($b = -0.39 (0.08), p = 0.000$), but that for respondents in the personalized condition exposed to male candidates from the out-party, increased feelings of social presence create a path to vote intention, $b = 0.39 (0.12)$. Additionally, for those in the personalized condition, respondents exposed to female candidates with in-party status reported an increased sense of perceived presence, leading to increased vote intention, $b = 0.57 (0.13)$. See Table 6 for the full conditional indirect effects (Figures 4 and 5).

**Discussion**

In this study, I present the results of an online survey experiment among a group of US adults examining the impact of candidate self-personalization on three criteria: social presence, parasocial interaction, and vote intention. Overall, findings suggest that personalization itself
Table 5. Conditional indirect effects of personalization on vote intention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Bootstrapped LLCI</th>
<th>Bootstrapped ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male × out-party × personalized</td>
<td>.3908</td>
<td>.1530</td>
<td>.6318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male × in-party × personalized</td>
<td>.2483</td>
<td>−.0111</td>
<td>.4974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female × out-party × personalized</td>
<td>.1848</td>
<td>−.0308</td>
<td>.4336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female × in-party × personalized</td>
<td>.1319</td>
<td>.2962</td>
<td>.8388</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LLCI. Lower Limit Confidence Interval; ULCI. Upper Limit Confidence Interval

does not lead directly to increased support for the candidate. The effect of personalization is contingent upon a candidate’s gender and shared partisan identity, which work in consort to increase respondents’ evaluations of social presence and parasocial interaction with the candidate. These two psychological mechanisms strongly predict vote intention, and they conduit a positive effect of self-personalizing communication on vote intention.

Respondents rated candidates with personalized Twitter feeds marginally higher in feelings of social presence and parasocial interaction, and these findings track with previous work that generally show positive effects of personalizing for candidates (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Lee and Oh, 2012; Meeks, 2012). When candidates personalize, some subjects felt as if they were physically present with the candidate while also experiencing a seemingly real interpersonal relationship. And yet, these relationships are conditional—the effect is not the same for male and female candidates. Self-personalization appears to “work” better for male candidates, for whom respondents conjured perceived presence whether or not they shared a partisan identity with the
candidate. However, only women candidates with an in-party status were able to harness personalization to arouse the same feelings from respondents, who also experienced an imagined familiarity with the candidate. Controlling for contextual variables, the results suggest both social presence and parasocial interaction predict vote intention. Conditional upon gender and partisan identity, feelings of social presence and the imagined intimacies of a parasocial relationship positively mediate the relationship between candidate personalization and vote intention. Under some conditions, self-personalization on social media activates these psychological mechanisms so that the public feels they have insight into or access to the candidate’s affective states.

While it is clear that gender plays a role in how candidate self-personalization is perceived, the particular function of gender is vague. Self-personalization on social media “works” differentially for male and female candidates—but why? Analysis of candidates’ social media posts indicate that women engage in more personalization (Meeks, 2012), and qualitative assessments reveal differences in how female candidates employ their personal characteristics to build mediated relationships with the public, strategically deploying self-personalizing communication to balance gendered

Figure 2. Predicted parasocial interaction by experimental condition.
Bars represent estimated marginal means by condition. Social presence is measured on a 1–7 scale with higher scores corresponding to higher feelings of social presence. Error bars denote standard error.

Table 6. Conditional indirect effects of personalization on vote intention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Bootstrapped LLCl</th>
<th>bootstrapped ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male × out-party × personalized</td>
<td>.2631</td>
<td>−.0142</td>
<td>.5700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male × in-party × personalized</td>
<td>.0553</td>
<td>−.2298</td>
<td>.3489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female × out-party × personalized</td>
<td>−.1713</td>
<td>−.4724</td>
<td>.0938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female × in-party × personalized</td>
<td>.3660</td>
<td>.0903</td>
<td>.6644</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
stereotypes (Lawrence et al., 2015; McGregor et al., 2016). Perhaps these more complex negotiations in personalizing for women candidates prevent conclusive evidence in experimental design. Future research should examine why gender functions differently along partisan identity when candidates engage in self-personalizing behavior vis-à-vis social media.

Those worried about the negative effects of personalization should note that the direct effect of personalization on vote intention is negative—only when candidates are

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**Figure 3.** Predicted vote intention by experimental condition. Bars represent estimated marginal means by condition. Social presence is measured on a 1–7 scale with higher scores corresponding to higher feelings of social presence. Error bars denote standard error.

**Figure 4.** Moderated mediation model: Conditional effects of personalization on vote intention through social presence. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. The regression coefficient for the full three-way interaction term is reported.
able to establish feelings of closeness does the effect turn positive. This may mean voters aren’t relying on the information in personalizing posts to make voting decisions so much as the personalizing posts allows them to feel more connected to the candidate—manufactured intimacy precedes vote support. Scholars like Papacharissi (2014) have argued that we are in an era of affective politics, in which the public “feels” their way into politics. In the absence of more policy-driven communication, feelings of intimacy with a mediated version of the candidate positively influence voting support for that candidate. These same connective feelings may work to increase voter’s faith candidates and elected officials, and future research should examine this possibility.

Scholars with less than favorable views of the use of social media in politics lament its focus on personalization and softer, infotainment at the expense of more policy or issue-based communication. This appears to be an explicit choice—campaign staffers noted their use of social media to foster constituent relationships with the express purpose of cultivating long-term engagement rather than providing information (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015). While this does not preclude social media from also being persuasive, long the goal of campaign communication especially in the deliberative democracy tradition (Hart, 1998; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999), campaigns did not voice this as a clear goal. Perhaps because of its focus on personalization, campaigns use of social media may favor a more engaged model of citizenry, in tune with “everyday politics,” as opposed to an informed citizenry (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015). And yet, my results suggest that personalization on social media “works” differently for candidates along gendered and partisan lines. On one hand, partisan identity may not play a large role in engagement politics wherein campaigns craft social media messages to mobilize supporters rather than convert detractors (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2014). On the other hand, a candidate’s gender affects vote intention differentially along in-party/out-party lines. Considering the low information/high engagement environment of modern political communication (Chadwick, 2013; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001), research should examine further these gendered and partisan differences; in particular, a focus on

**Figure 5.** Moderated mediation model: Conditional effects of personalization on vote intention through parasocial interaction. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. The regression coefficient for the full 3-way interaction term is reported.
out-party personalizing communication may speak to the increasingly gendered attacks women politicians encounter online. To the extent that campaigns do wish to share information on social media, future research should explore whether the feelings of closeness and intimacy evoked by self-personalization may prime individuals to be more (or less) open to policy or issue information from candidates. There may yet be a course to chart in which engaged, participatory, and personalized politics works to increase receptiveness to normative politically relevant information.

This study is, of course, not without limitations. As with any experiments, a certain amount of artificiality is present, although necessary. The results here are based on a single snapshot of a candidate’s Twitter feed. In the real world, of course, the public could view either many more posts from a candidate or perhaps none at all. While I am unable to evaluate the cumulative effect of personalizing communication across an election season, the fact that I do find significant effects indicates the power of self-personalizing. Also, this study is limited in representativeness, hence generalizability, as respondents opted in to take an online survey. While the demographics of the sample are diverse, further replication of the study is needed to confirm the generalizability of the findings.

Personalized communication, especially on social media, fosters within the public a sense of intimacy with the public figure, whom does not reciprocate. Stromer-Galley (2014) conceptualizes “controlled interactivity”—where campaigns carefully manage a candidate’s social media account particularly to create these feelings with the electorate. An electorate who feels connected, particularly if they feel the candidate is speaking to them (via social media), may be more likely to act on behalf of the candidate. My findings suggest these feelings strongly affect support for a candidate. We all experience the world in a personalized manner—ads are targeted to us based on search histories, news recommended to us by friends, preferences predicted by algorithms. The rise of personalized politics is just one aspect of an increasingly personalized society (Bennett, 2012). The results of this study must be interpreted within this larger societal context. Self-personalizing social media strategies can evoke feelings of mediated yet intimate relationships with the public, which in turn lead to increased support for the candidate. To the extent that more campaigns take up this strategy, we may be moving further towards a model of affective and engaging politics.

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**Notes**

1. They are careful to point out they do not draw from social identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995) which emphasize group identity in order to bolster self-esteem.
2. In order to recruit participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), I posted a job listing that broadly described the study and the compensation (US$.35 for the 5- to 7-minute study).
3. Participants in this study were recruited from those users who have a high approval rating (90% or better) for tasks completed that were considered acceptable by other researchers.
These requirements are included to recruit only participants who have taken previous tasks seriously to limit the risk of including fraudulent participants in the sample.

4. Dave Renniger, male; Emily Parker, female.

5. Only participants who answered both attention-check questions correctly were used in the analysis (N=1062).

6. The p-values for the t-tests are one-tailed. Because the hypotheses were directional, I calculated p-values for one-tailed tests.

7. This is the three-way interaction hypothesized and supported earlier in the study.

References


**Author biography**

Shannon C McGregor (MA, University of Florida) is a PhD candidate in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests are political communication, social media, gender, and public opinion.
Appendix 1

Example of personalized stimuli