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## **Campaign individualization in comparative perspective: does the context matter?<sup>i</sup>**

### **Individualização de uma campanha eleitoral numa perspectiva comparativa: o contexto importa?**

### **Individualisation d'une campagne électorale dans une perspective comparative: le contexte est-il important?**

### **Individualización de una campaña electoral desde una perspectiva comparativa: ¿es importante el contexto?**

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**Abstract:** Despite a great flourishing of studies on election campaigns, the issue of individualized campaigns has been widely neglected, especially from a comparative perspective. Yet, campaigns differ not only in terms of strategy or style, but also with regard to the role played by individual candidates. This article examines the variation of both the communicative focus and the resources used by candidates across different Western democracies. Using data from the Comparative Candidate Surveys (CCS), it tests the impact of several institutional and political features on campaign individualization. Our results show that both electoral systems and the legal framework regulating electoral contests display a significant impact on campaign individualization.

**Keywords:** electoral campaigns; candidates; political parties; multilevel analysis

**Resumo:** Apesar do surgimento de numerosos estudos sobre campanhas eleitorais, o tema das campanhas individualizadas tem sido particularmente negligenciado, sobretudo numa perspectiva comparada. Não obstante, as campanhas diferenciam-se não apenas em termos de estilo ou estratégia, mas também quanto ao papel desempenhado por candidatos individuais. Este artigo analisa a variação na abordagem comunicacional e nos recursos utilizados por candidatos em várias democracias ocidentais. A partir dos dados recolhidos nos Comparative Candidate Surveys (CCS), é testado o impacto de vários aspetos político-institucionais sobre a individualização de campanhas eleitorais. Os resultados mostram que os sistemas eleitorais e os enquadramentos legais que regulam as disputas eleitorais têm um impacto significativo sobre a individualização das campanhas.

**Keywords:** campanhas eleitorais; candidatos; partidos políticos; análise multinível

#### **Résumé**

Malgré le grand nombre d'études sur les campagnes électorales, la question des campagnes individualisées a été largement négligée, notamment dans une perspective comparative. Toutefois, les campagnes diffèrent non seulement en termes de stratégie ou de style, mais également en ce qui concerne le rôle joué par les candidats individuels. Cet article examine la variation de l'orientation de la communication et des ressources utilisées par les candidats dans les différentes démocraties occidentales. En utilisant les données du Comparative Candidate Surveys (CCS), il teste l'impact de plusieurs caractéristiques institutionnelles et politiques sur l'individualisation de la campagne. Nos résultats montrent que les systèmes électoraux et le cadre juridique régissant les scrutins ont un impact significatif sur l'individualisation de la campagne.

**Mots-clés:** campagnes électorales; candidats; partis politiques; analyse à plusieurs niveaux.

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**Resumen:** A pesar del gran florecimiento de los estudios sobre campañas electorales, el tema de las campañas individualizadas ha sido ampliamente descuidado, especialmente desde una perspectiva comparativa. Sin embargo, las campañas difieren no solo en términos de estrategia o estilo, sino también con respecto al papel desempeñado por los candidatos individuales. Este artículo examina la variación tanto del enfoque comunicativo como de los recursos utilizados por los candidatos en las diferentes democracias occidentales. Usando datos de los Comparative Candidate Surveys (CCS), prueba el impacto de varias características institucionales y políticas en la individualización de la campaña. Nuestros resultados muestran que tanto los sistemas electorales como el marco legal que regula los concursos electorales muestran un impacto significativo en la individualización de la campaña.

**Palabras clave:** campañas electorales; candidatos partidos políticos; análisis multinivel.

## Introduction

The personalization of politics is a multi-faceted phenomenon which encompasses several dimensions related to distinct arenas: some scholars focus on institutional actors (Poguntke and Webb, 2005), others concentrate on the role of the media and the increasing importance of leaders' image in media contents (Adam and Maier, 2010; Kriesi, 2012), while another strand of research deals with the shifts in the internal distribution of power within party organizations (Blondel, 2010; Pilet and Cross, 2014; Scarrow, 2014; Passarelli, 2017). Finally, a number of studies focus on the personalization of electoral behavior, that is, the impact that leaders have on voter choice (Aarts *et al.*, 2002; Karvonen, 2010; Garzia, 2014; Lobo and Curtice, 2015).

There has been a growing attention on candidate personalization, which examines the constituency level of electoral politics and the behavior of candidates during the campaign (McAllister, 2007; De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015; Eder *et al.*, 2015; Gschwend and Zittel, 2015; Zittel, 2015). The concept of 'individualized campaigning' – which is used in this paper as a synonymous of 'candidate personalization' – refers to a situation where candidates campaign independently of the party (see Zittel and Gschwend, 2008: 980). A number of works have shown that individualized campaigning matters for both vote choice and election outcomes (Gschwend and Zittel, 2015; van Erkel *et al.*, 2017). From this viewpoint, individualized campaigns at the constituency level seems more effective than party-centered campaigns.

This strand of research suggests that candidate personalization is contingent on politicians' motivations, their political experience or party characteristics (e.g. ideology, resources, etc.). Little has been done, however, to link institutional characteristics to the style of electoral campaigns. This is quite surprising considering there is a consensus on

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the importance of the electoral system for campaign personalization (Cross and Young, 2015; Zittel, 2015).

This paper aims to systematically explore to what extent and in what kind of context candidates may play a more autonomous and independent role in electoral campaigns. To achieve this goal, we focus on candidate personalization at the constituency level, which allows us to assess the relative importance of structural factors compared with individual determinants of campaign styles. How do candidates perceive their role vis-à-vis party organizations? What are the tools used by candidates during election campaigns? More importantly, how these dimensions vary across distinct institutional and political settings? These are the main research questions that guide our study. These topics are extremely relevant not only because they can elucidate the relationship between parties and voters, but also because they contribute to our understanding on the personalization of politics. In addition, the analysis of candidate campaigns is an important piece for a more systematic and comprehensive examination of electoral campaign features and the way candidates adopt distinct tools and strategy. By focusing on the variation of candidate campaigns across different institutional and political settings, we are able to shed more light on the conditionality of personalization, thus emphasizing how macro-level characteristics affect the tools and the strategy adopted by candidates.

Drawing on the concept of ‘individualized campaigns’ (Zittel and Gschwend, 2008), we examine how institutional factors influence the degree and type of candidate personalization. The basic premise under this study is that variations in behavior and attitudes of candidates may be understood by reference to variations in electoral institutions (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Farrell and Scully, 2007). However, there are other potential political and institutional factors that may affect the degree of campaign individualization and deserve to be explored in a comparative and systematic way. Moreover, this phenomenon may shed more light on the dynamics of party change and the transformation of the links between parties and their electoral bases.

Relative to previous studies on the personalization of politics, the contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to examine cross-national differences in terms of individualized campaigns, exploring both macro and micro determinants of candidate-centered electioneering. As several authors have noted (Cross and Young, 2015; De

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Winter and Baudewyns, 2015; Zittel, 2015), existing research has failed to systematically examine differences across countries and the impact of macro variables. Second, it sheds more light on how the type and style of electoral campaigns differ cross country, adding to the literature related to the personalization of politics. In doing this, our contribution speaks not only to the comparative study of election campaigns but also to the debate about political representation, in particular the relationship between citizens and their representatives. From this viewpoint, we believe that this study is a valuable contribution to understand some of the challenges that democratic representation is experiencing in contemporary societies.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section briefly reviews the literature and elaborates the theoretical arguments in order to examine individualized campaigns across countries. The subsequent section deals with data and methods. The fourth section analyzes cross-national variations in terms of the communication focus and the organization (resources) employed by candidates, and then elaborates on the multivariate model used to test the main determinants at the macro and individual levels. The final section summarizes the findings and discusses its implications for election campaigns and party-voter linkages.

### **Individualized campaigns: Does the context matter?**

The personalization of politics is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is supposed to affect both old and new democracies (Bittner, 2011; Lobo and Curtice, 2015; Gunther *et al.*, 2015). It is widely agreed that the electoral process in contemporary democracies has evolved towards personalized party campaigns and leadership-centred characteristics (e.g. Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006; Rahat and Kenig, 2018). In such campaigns, an overriding aim is to build a direct bond between the party leader and the electorate by stressing such personal traits of the leader that are believed to be perceived as positive by the voters.

Recently, research on personalized campaigning has moved from the study of party leaders at the national level to the analysis of the campaign behavior of individual candidates. According to Zittel and Gschwend's (2008: 980), the concept of 'individualized campaigning' means that candidates seek a personal vote 'on the basis of a candidate-centered organization, a candidate-centered campaign agenda and candidate-

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centered means of campaigning'. They distinguish three dimensions that are related to candidates' attitudes, the degree of personalization of the issues raised by candidates and, finally, the degree of personalization of the campaign resources.

Empirical research indicates that the degree of individualized campaigns varies within countries and across parties (e.g. De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015; Eder *et al.*, 2015; Gschwend and Zittel, 2015). Individual level variables and party features are key factors for explaining variations of individualized campaigns. However, it is unclear what are the effects of institutional factors on the quantity and quality of constituency campaign (Zittel, 2015). While conventional wisdom suggests that personalized campaigns are more likely to emerge in single-member districts or with a very small magnitude, we know very little about the systematic effects of structural variables, such as the electoral system or party funding regulation. Karlsen and Skobergo (2013), for example, found that individualized campaigns may also emerge in proportional systems and with a multi-party competition. Zittel (2015: 293) has argued that electoral institutions matter for campaign styles, but this effect is not systematic and depends on the institutional context. As a consequence, two questions must be raised. In what contexts are individualized campaigns more likely to emerge? What are the macro-level factors that contribute to fostering campaign individualization?

Previous studies have shown that institutional features have bearing on campaign and vote personalization (Farrell and Scully, 2010; Curtice and Lisi, 2015; Formichelli, 2015). Therefore, we contend that the degree of individualized campaigns may differ according to distinct institutional and political contexts. In practice, this means that this phenomenon varies cross-nationally and from one election to another. It is our aim to unveil to what extent there are systematic differences among countries, and to investigate the factors that account for this variation. In the following, we present and discuss the main factors that are associated with the variation in campaign individualization.

The crucial dimension that affects candidates' incentives to organize and execute their own campaign strategy and mobilize more personalized resources is related to the characteristics of the electoral system (Farrell and Scully, 2007). One consolidated strand of research maintains that proportional systems tend to foster more party-centred campaigns, increasing national coordination and the vertical structure of campaign organization (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Farrell, 2002).

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Traditionally, candidates seem to play an important role in single-member districts, as the British and German experiences seem to confirm (Pattie *et al.*, 1995; Denver *et al.*, 2003; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008). These findings have a very narrow geographic scope and it focuses mostly on campaign efforts rather than on campaign styles. Even the symposium published in *Electoral Studies* in 2015 does not provide a systematic test of the effects of institutional factors. To the best of our knowledge there is no empirical evidence with regard to the relative importance of the electoral system on candidate-centered elections vis-à-vis party or individual-level variables. As a consequence, by considering a high number of countries this study aims to examine the relationship between electoral systems and individualized campaigns in a systematic way and to achieve more robust results.

Recent studies have started to give attention not only to the impact of distinct electoral formulae, but also to other important elements of the electoral system such as district magnitude and ballot structure. This is of the outmost importance in the European context given the fact that most electoral systems are based on proportional formulae, although their effects on party systems and strategies may vary considerably. Carey and Shugart (1995) pioneered this strand of research by examining how different characteristics of the electoral system affect the incentives to cultivate a personal vote. A study on MEPs found that electoral systems based on closed lists tend to emphasize the role of parties to the detriment of individual candidates (Bowler and Farrell, 2011). Yet the effect of district magnitude may interact with the ballot structure. As the magnitude increases, candidates are more likely to run personalized campaigns when voters may express their preference. By contrast, in closed list systems the relationship is exactly the opposite: only candidates at the top of the list are supposed to emphasize their personality, because in this context the use of personal resources is an instrument for securing selection by party leaders. Empirical findings seem to confirm this interaction, showing that the capacity of candidates to mobilize (illegal) resources depends not only on district magnitude but also on the type of ballots (Chang and Golden, 2007).

Studies on candidate personalization provide robust evidence that district magnitude matters. In Belgium, for instance, empirical research found a curvilinear relationship between district magnitude and personalized campaigns (De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015). In particular, the authors found that in small districts (less than 12 seats) an increase in their size is likely to strengthen candidate personalization, while the

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relationship works in the opposite direction in large districts. However, Selb and Lutz's findings (2015) contradict the argument elaborated by Shugart and Carey that candidate personalization (i.e. the effort to cultivate a personal vote) rises with increasing district magnitude in open ballot PR elections.

Beyond the impact of the electoral system, there are other neglected institutional aspects that may be germane for candidate personalization. We argue that three dimensions may contribute to influencing the style of electoral campaigns. The first is the legal framework regulating the campaign; the second is centered on state administrative structure, whereas the third focuses on the use of digital technologies. As explained below, these factors affect party organizational contexts and strategies, thus they may indirectly influence candidate personalization. For example, it has been found that the use of digital media may activate the rise of 'citizen-activated' campaigns, which increases the interaction between citizens and candidates (Gibson, 2015), particularly for young voters (see Magalhães *et al.* 2018).

One important dimension that may influence the degree of individualized campaigns is based on the legal framework regulating political campaigns. This dimension includes two distinct but intertwined elements: the mobilization of financial resources, on the one hand, and the access to the mass media, on the other. It has been noted that public funding for running campaigns is a widespread phenomenon in contemporary Western European countries (van Biezen, 2008). Yet there is a significant variation in terms of the restrictions to receive private subsidies and the capacity of candidates to raise their own funding and to use their resources during the campaign. It has been noted that when personal campaign finance is allowed, the costs of electoral campaigns are higher and parties' central leadership have more difficulties to control candidates' expenditures (Katz, 1980). Therefore, it is plausible to expect that in countries where private donations are allowed and there are no bans to candidate expenditures, prospective MPs are likely to focus more on their personalities than on their respective party. The second important dimension related to the regulation of electoral campaigns is access to the mass media. Also in this case, it is useful to distinguish the variation of European countries along a continuum from a completely state-dominated environment to a context where parties and candidates have more freedom to buy airtime and use their

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own instruments. Due to methodological reasons, we aggregate these two dimensions in an index of openness of campaign regulations.<sup>ii</sup>

The degree of personalized campaigns may also depend on state (de)centralization. It is plausible to expect that the higher the level of decentralization, the more likely candidates will run individualized campaigns. State centralization may have both a direct and an indirect impact on the style of election campaigning. On the one hand, in a decentralized environment, candidates are more likely to foster contacts at the grassroots level, as their political future lies primarily in the hands of the voters in their constituents. On the other, the administrative structure affects the type of party organization and the dynamics of political recruitment (Lundell, 2004; Bolleyer, 2012), which in turn is likely to influence campaign styles and the relationship between prospective representatives and citizens (Karlsen and Narud, 2013). Therefore, we expect to find more individualized candidate campaigns in more decentralized states.

Finally, the last element that may affect cross-national variation in campaign individualization is related to the diffusion of information technologies. As several authors have already highlighted (Norris, 2000; Vaccari, 2013), the evolution of political campaigns is strictly related to the development of new communication tools that parties and candidates use to mobilize and persuade voters. With the emergence of web 2.0 individual candidates may benefit from a direct control on these new digital media instruments. The greater the proportion of the population with a regular use of these instruments, the more likely candidates will run post-modern campaigns through the use of individual resources. Indeed, even in a party-centered environment like the Norwegian one, social media are one of the most important communication tools and those candidates who focus more on their own candidacy are also more inclined to have an individualized style on social media (see Karlsen and Enjolras, 2016).

Beyond institutional features, the type and style of political campaigns may depend on individual characteristics. One important dimension traditionally associated to electoral campaigns is the type of recruitment. According to the literature, decentralized modes of candidate selection are more likely to lead to more independent prospective MPs using a wider diversity of resources (Giebler and Wüst, 2011; Giebler and Wessels, 2013). Due to the lack of data on this issue for several countries in our dataset, this variable is measured through a proxy, namely the fact that the candidate held functions



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in the local party office (see Cross and Young, 2015). The candidates party membership record is also considered, since unaffiliated candidates or recent party members may display different patterns of campaigning vis-à-vis older members. We also control for the left-right orientation of candidates, considering the hypothesis that right-wing candidates are more likely to emphasize their own personalities than left-wing candidates (Giebler and Wüst, 2011). Gender is also an important factor, since men are more prone to personalized campaigns than women (Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2013).

Drawing on the previous discussion, we are able to formulate our hypotheses, based on the general expectation that different political and institutional settings affect campaign individualization. We summarize here our main research hypotheses:

- H1: the lower is the district magnitude, the higher is the degree of campaign individualization;
- H2: the higher the incentives for a personal vote, the higher is the propensity to emphasize candidate personality;
- H3: in countries where it is possible to receive unrestricted donations, use non-limited financial resources and pay for airtime, candidates are more likely to have a higher visibility;
- H4: the higher the degree of state decentralization, the higher is the level of campaign individualization;
- H5: the higher the dissemination of Internet, the higher is the presence and role of candidates in the campaign.

## **Data and methods**

This study aims to assess the degree of individualized campaigns across different countries, by examining the impact of macro factors on the extent of individualized campaigns. In order to address this question, we use an original dataset based on the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) project. This multi-national project has collected data on candidates running for national parliamentary elections by using a common questionnaire. The field research was conducted between 2005 and 2012. The countries included in the dataset present a wide variation in terms of institutional and political characteristics, allowing us to test the importance of macro variables on the degree of

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individualized campaigns. The CCS dataset (module I) includes 24 elections and 19 countries: Australia (2007 and 2010), Austria (2008), Belgium (2007), Canada (2008), Czech Republic (2006), Denmark (2011), Estonia (2011), Finland (2007 and 2011), Germany (2005 and 2009), Greece (2007), Hungary (2010), Iceland (2009), Ireland (2007), Netherlands (2006), Norway (2009), Portugal (2009 and 2011), Romania (2012), Sweden (2010) and Switzerland (2007 and 2011). In the descriptive part of the study, we will use the whole dataset in order to map the variation of the dependent variables. In the inferential part of the analysis, the geographical scope is reduced due to lack of data about relevant independent and dependent variables in some countries. In particular, we exclude the two Australian elections (2007 and 2010), Austria (2008), Estonia (2011), Finland (2007), Netherlands (2006), and Iceland (2007). In the case of the communicative focus index analysis, we also exclude Canada (2008), while in the case of the campaign resources index we had to exclude Germany (2005) and Czech Republic (2006) due to lack of data on the dependent variable. Therefore, the number of countries included in the multivariate analysis ranges from 15 (dependent variable campaign resources) to 16 (dependent variable communicative focus).

Table 1 displays the dependent and independent variables, as well as the scales used and the sources consulted for its creation. The dependent variables tackle two different dimensions of campaign individualization: the communicative focus (parties vs. candidates) and the campaign resources, namely personal websites, flyers, posters and press ads<sup>iii</sup>. The independent variables are as follows. First, two factors related with the electoral system: the average district magnitude and an index of incentives to personal votes (see Carey and Shugart, 1995). This index expresses the extent by which party leaders control candidate access to the ballots and the order of the party list of candidates on the ballot, whether the votes are pooled at the party level or not pooled at all, and whether voters cast a single vote for one party, multiple votes or one vote below the party level. We also test the impact of the regulatory framework on campaign resources (donations, limits on expenses, paid media adverts), the dissemination of the new media and the degree of decentralization of the country. Several other individual-level variables drawn from the literature are also included in the analysis as controls.

In the following section, we proceed with the description of the differences and communalities between the selected countries in terms of the two dimensions of campaign

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individualization. Then, the relative contribution of each one of these variables is addressed by means of multilevel regression analysis.

**Table 1: Dependent, Independent and Control Variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Description/Scale</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b><i>Dependent</i></b>		
Communicative Focus	0=Campaign is aimed to attract as much attention as possible to the party 11=Campaign is aimed to attract as much attention as possible to the candidate	CCS (2014)
Personal Resources	0=no personal resources or strategies used 4=several personal resources or strategies used	CCS (2014)
<b><i>Independent Country-Level</i></b>		
Average District Magnitude	Continuous, starting from 1 (single-member districts)	Johnson and Wallack (2012)
Carey and Shugart's (1995) Index of Electoral System Incentives	1 to 13; higher numbers mean stronger incentives	Johnson and Wallack (2012)
Access to paid resources	0=restricted (donations and paid ads not possible, limits on expenses); 3=unrestricted (donations and paid ads possible, no limits on expenses)	IDEA; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (2006); Rafter (2009)
Decentralization Index	5 point-scale; higher numbers mean higher levels of decentralization	Lijphart (2012)
Internet Dissemination	Internet Users per 100 Inhabitants; Continuous, varying from 0 to 100	ITU (International Telecommunications Union)
<b><i>Individual-Level Controls</i></b>		
Gender (dummy)	1= female 0=male	CCS (2014)
Membership	Number of years as party member (from 0 - unaffiliated - to X years)	CCS (2014)
R served in his local party headquarters? (dummy)	1=yes 0=no	CCS (2014)
Ideology	11-point left-right scale	CCS (2014)

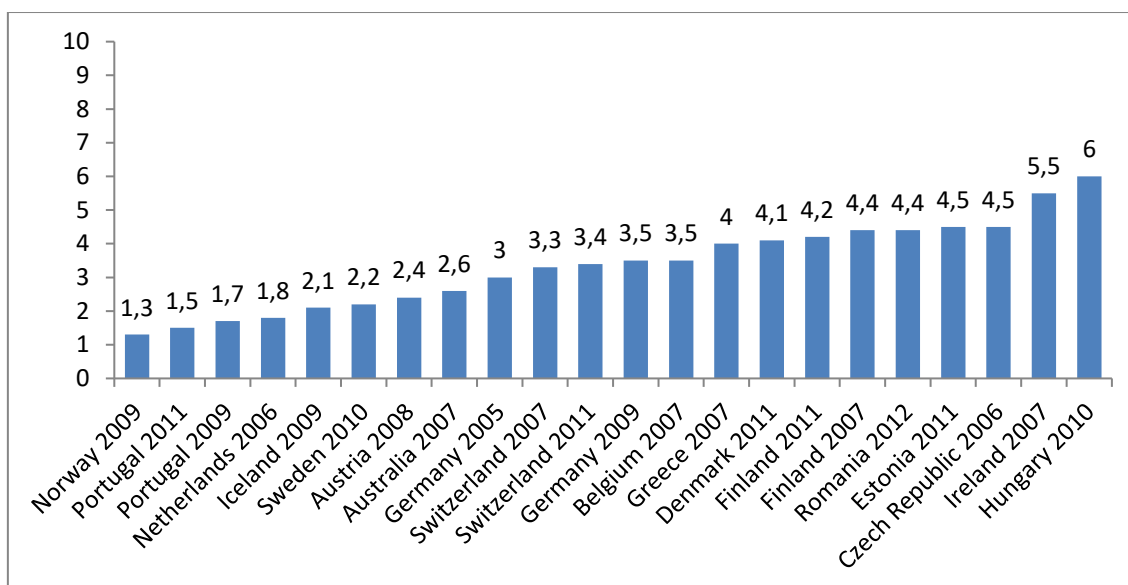
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## Campaign individualization in comparative perspective

What should be the primary aim of campaigns? Should campaigns foster attention to the party, its leader, its programmatic stances, or to the candidate, his/her qualities, competence and charisma? Across our set of countries, there is no consensus in terms of the normative goal of the election campaigns: in countries such as Norway, Portugal or the Netherlands, candidates tend to believe that the campaigns are meant to raise attention to their parties, whereas the Irish and the Hungarian candidates tend to favor a focus on themselves as political actors. In the countries where two elections are available (Finland, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland), a stable pattern emerges over time – perhaps a little less so in the German case (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Communicative Focus of Campaigns**

(scale: 0= Focus on Party; 11= Focus on Candidate)



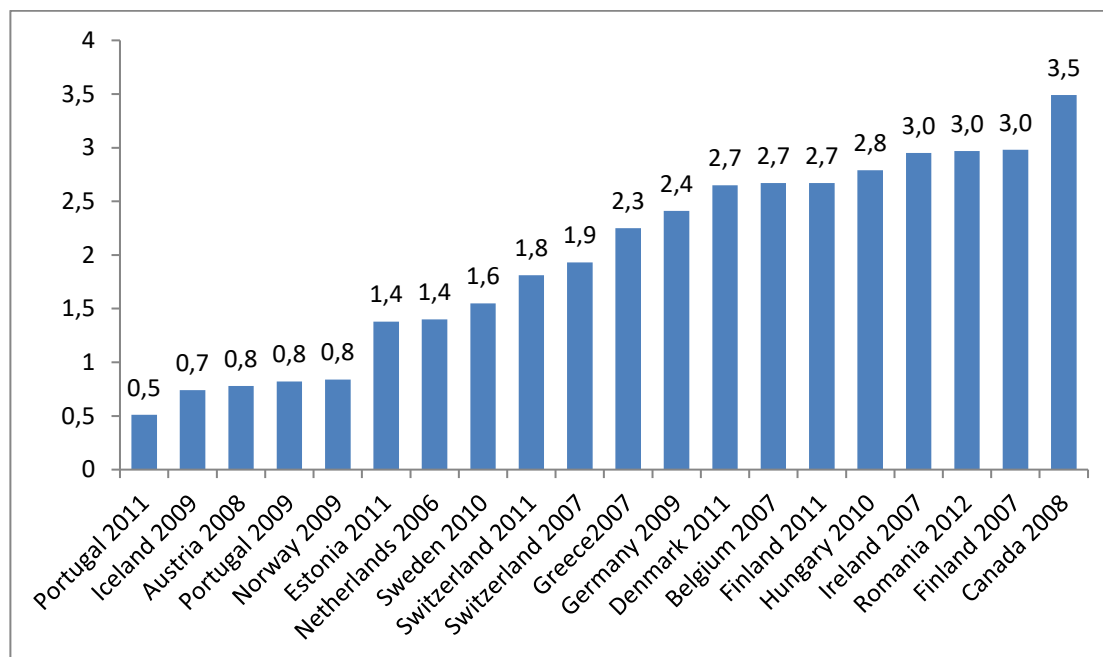
Source: CCS (2014, Module 1). No data for Canada (2008) and Australia (2010).

Let us now focus on the second dimension of individualization: the preparation and use of individualized resources and strategies by candidates during the campaign, namely the development of personal websites, flyers, posters, and the use of press ads. The index of individualized resources varies between 0 (when none of these strategies was used) and 4 (when all the strategies were implemented). Once again, there are considerable differences between the countries under study, with Portuguese, Austrian, Icelandic and

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Norwegian candidates making poor use of personal resources, while Canadian candidates develop a truly personalized campaign strategy (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Index of individualized campaign resources**



Source: see Figure 1. No data for Australia (2007 and 2010), Germany (2005) and Czech Republic (2006).

These two dimensions of campaign individualization are positively and highly correlated at the country level: in fact, countries where the average levels of individualization of the communicative focus are high usually display higher figures in terms of use of personalized resources in campaigns (Pearson's  $r = .89$ ,  $p = .000$ ). At the individual level, though, the panorama varies considerably: there are countries where this relationship is positive but moderate (Pearson's  $r > .40$  and  $< .60$ ; Denmark in 2011, Germany in 2009, Austria in 2008, Netherlands in 2006), others in which it is not significant (Switzerland and Greece in 2007, Sweden in 2010), and still others in which the relationship is weak and negative (Hungary 2010). In sum, in some contexts attitudes towards what a campaign should focus on tend to shape behaviors and decisions on personalizing campaign resources more than in others, and there are contexts where this does not happen at all. This may be so because the path between individual beliefs and behaviors is often bound by rules, resources, motivation and opportunity.

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What are the factors that explain this huge variation between countries? In the following paragraphs, we explore the specific contribution of macro factors for explaining variation in the degree of campaign individualization. The contextual variables are related to the electoral system (district magnitude and incentives to personal voting, as well as an interaction term between the two variables), state decentralization, Internet dissemination and regulatory framework for access to funds and paid airtime. We also control for individual level factors by including in the multivariate analysis gender (there is evidence that women are less prone to personalization than men; e.g. Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2013), left-right self-positioning (left-wing politicians are usually less keen on personalized strategies, Giebler and Wüst, 2011), connection to the party (years as member) and connection to the constituency (whether the candidate has served in the local party headquarters).

Before proceeding with the multivariate analysis, we test the assumption that there is a significant variation in candidates' attitudes and behavior according to their belonging to a specific group (in this case country/year). This is performed through estimation of multilevel empty regression models, without independent variables, compared then to simple linear regression models, which do not consider the hierarchical nature of the data and the existence of candidate clusters at the country level. The aim is to test the null hypothesis that the dependent variable does not vary due to cluster characteristics.

As far as the communicative focus of campaigns is concerned, the results indicate that a certain amount of the variance is due to the context (likelihood ratio test = 1475.2;  $p=0.000$ ). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), i.e. the proportion of the variance attributable to country-level factors, is of 0.19, which means that almost 81 per cent of the variance of candidates' opinion on campaign communicative focus is not cluster (country/election) dependent and therefore might depend on individual-level variables. Similar results are obtained for the variable related to individualized campaign resources (likelihood ratio test = 2348.5,  $p = 0.000$ ; ICC = 0.288). This means that only one-fifth to one-third of differences across candidates are stemming from group (in this case, country/election context) differences.

Let us start with the analysis of the communicative focus of the campaign (party vs. candidate). First, the four individual-level control variables achieve statistical significance, and their impact on this dependent variable works in the expected direction

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(see Table 2): the more right-wing is the candidate, the less s/he believes that the campaign should be focused on the political party s/he represents. Male candidates are more likely to support the idea that the campaign should focus more on their personal characteristics rather than the party; finally, candidates holding a local office or with a longer party affiliation show more positive stances towards campaign individualization.

Only two context-related variables have a significant impact on candidates' opinion about the communicative focus of the campaign. On the one hand, access to paid resources has a statistically significant effect and suggests that more unrestricted regulatory frameworks lead candidates to emphasize their personalities during the campaign. On the other, the findings show that the electoral system is also a relevant factor; in particular, where incentives to a personal vote are stronger, candidates are more prone to support the idea that election campaigns should focus on candidates rather than parties.

In terms of campaign resources, three macro variables contribute to fostering individualization: electoral system incentives to cultivate a personal vote, the lack of strong restrictions to paid resources and a low degree of Internet dissemination. The latter finding, which contradicts our expectations, may be explained by the fact that, in countries where Internet dissemination is high, individualization may mean almost exclusively the use of online individualized tools and low or no individualization of other campaign materials; while in countries with a low degree of Internet dissemination, candidates may feel the need to make a more personalized use of several traditional instruments and resources. In other words, more than a negative impact of Internet dissemination on individualized campaigns, there may be a reduction of the diversity of tools and outputs used to reinforce personalization. Another potential explanation is that Internet penetration rates may be not related to the use of online tools for political purposes (see Magalhães *et al.* 2018). Unfortunately, we do not have good measures for the level of 'digital' mobilization of voters in the countries included in the analysis. Finally, our four control variables achieve statistical significance and the signs of the coefficient are in the expected direction: male and right-wing candidates, as well as those with a longer partisan background and local office holders tend to use more often individualized resources.

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All in all, the model significantly contributes to explaining differences between countries with respect to the communicative focus of the campaign and individualized resources. In this latter case, the model explains only 11 per cent of the variance, but, interestingly enough, almost 9 per cent is attributable to the contextual factors included in our multilevel model. This means that our model fails to explain only about 20 per cent of country-level variation (and 70 per cent of individual-level variation). When we look at the communicative focus, our macro-variable model seems to be more powerful: the proportion of the variance explained by macro factors is a bit smaller (7 per cent), but since the variation due to cluster is also lower (19 per cent), there is only 12 per cent of between-cluster variation to be explained by other contextual factors. These conclusions are drawn from the comparison between the models shown in table 2 and the models with only the control variables, which only contributed to explaining less than 2 per cent of the overall variance for each dependent variable.

**Table 2: Contextual and Individual-Level Factors of Campaign Individualization (multilevel regression)**

	<b>Campaign focus</b> (0=party; 10=candidate)	<b>Campaign resources</b> (0= none; 4= several personal tools)
Gender (female)	<b>-0.22***</b> (0.06)	<b>-0.06*</b> (0.03)
Ideology	<b>0.11***</b> (0.01)	<b>0.07***</b> (0.01)
Party affiliation (years)	<b>0.01***</b> (0.001)	<b>0.01***</b> (0.001)
Local office (yes)	<b>0.24**</b> (0.07)	<b>0.30***</b> (0.04)
Incentives to personal vote	<b>1.11***</b> (0.52)	<b>0.31*</b> (0.16)
District magnitude	0.34 (0.22)	0.16 (0.12)



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Interaction	-0.12	-0.03
Incentives*Magnitude	(0.09)	(0.02)
Decentralization	-0.09	0.06
	(0.23)	(0.15)
Access to paid resources	<b>1.44**</b>	<b>1.12**</b>
	(.62)	(0.51)
Internet dissemination	-0.03	<b>-0.04*</b>
	(0.01)	(0.02)
Constant	-0.36	0.83
	(2.33)	(1.07)
Variance explained	8.8%	10.5%
N (individual)	8691	8418
N (groups)	16	15

Notes:

1. Standard errors in parantheses.
2. Sig.:  $p < .001=***$ ;  $p < .01=**$ ;  $p < .05=*$
3. Average VIF are below 2 in both regression models.

## Conclusions

As individuals have assumed an increasingly large role in election and party politics, political scientists have sought to understand the factors that lead candidates to campaign on the basis of their own resources and characteristics. Previous scholarship has suggested a host of different factors that could plausibly explain why some election campaigns are more candidate-centered and others do not. We build on this research by systematically testing the impact of institutional factors on campaign individualization.

The comparative analysis presented in this article is a first effort towards a truly comparative analysis of the phenomenon of campaign individualization, observable when candidates other than the party leader decide to adopt a personalized focus and strategy in their campaigns (Balmas *et al.*, 2014). The empirical analysis allows us to conclude that the institutional arrangements and the regulatory framework, namely in terms of campaign funding, access to media and electoral systems, seem to play an important role

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with regard to both candidate behavior (individualization of campaign resources) and their attitudes towards the objectives of the campaign. Yet the degree of individualization of campaign tools seems to be more dependent on the context than the communicative focus, as not only the electoral system (incentives to a personal vote) and access to funds and paid airtime are important, but also the degree of Internet dissemination.

We also found evidence of the importance of candidates' individual characteristics. Individual with longer careers in local politics were consistently more likely to emphasize their own personalities. Candidates' experience proved to be extremely relevant to the type of campaign, while right-wing politicians seem to favor their personalities to the detriment of partisan appeal. Overall, these results are in line with the existing research on campaign intensity (Giebler and Wüst, 2011). Candidates' gender also appears to influence individualized campaigns, with female candidates more prone to focus on party organizations.

The results of our study have two important implications. On the one hand, adopting a micro perspective unveils that candidates have strategic motivations and may conduct distinct campaigns according to the incentives set forth by the contextual setting. On the other, the fact that between-cluster variation is only partly explained by institutional variables suggests that cultural differences may play an important role. In other words, the legacy and tradition of each country in terms of the characteristics of the electoral process and modes of communication may explain why campaigns differ even in similar institutional settings.

Overall, the findings of the present study confirm the relatively weak impact of the institutional context on campaign features (Bowler and Farrell, 2011), and the relatively weak impact of the context at large. Nonetheless, the empirical analysis suggests that election campaigns present distinct properties and dimensions – in terms of intensity, objectives, tools, etc. – and that the effects of the institutional context may vary according to the different components under analysis. This means that scholars need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach in order to fully investigate the characteristics of election campaigns. From this viewpoint, it is worth emphasizing the exploratory nature of this study and its ambition to contribute to fostering comparative research in this field.

Lastly, the fact that the variation in the levels of campaign individualization (in terms of communicative focus and resources) due to country characteristics is less

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pronounced than that associated to features of the individual candidates seems to suggest not only a growing campaign professionalization, but also a significant variation and heterogeneity of the campaigns adopted by political parties and their members. Yet, contextual factors deserve to be taken into account because they have a fairly significant impact on individualization, but also because they may affect other campaign characteristics or exert indirect effects. These are topics that further comparative research needs to address in the future.

Future studies should also seek to disentangle the impact of meso variables – such as, for instance, party strategy, models of party organizations, type of recruitment, etc. – on campaign individualization. Previous studies suggest that these are important dimensions that influence campaign characteristics for elections to the European Parliament (Giebler and Wüst, 2011; Giebler and Wessels, 2013). Extending the analysis to other world regions would, moreover, show whether the results are generalizable to all democracies since the theoretical argument itself is not restricted to the European context.

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**Appendix 1**  
**Country-Level Independent Variables**

	<i>Average District Magnitude</i>	<i>Carey and Shugart (1995) Index</i>	<i>Access to paid airtime (1= yes)</i>	<i>Index of State Decentralization</i>	<i>Internet Users per 100 Inhabitants in Election Year</i>
Belgium 2007	7.5	3	0	3.5	64.4
Canada 2008	1	10	1	5	76.7
Czech Republic	14.29	2	0	2	35.27
Denmark 2011	19.57	3	0	2	90
Finland 2011	13.33	3	1	2	86.9
Germany 2005	10.07	10	1	5	68.7
Germany 2009	10.07	10	1	5	64.7
Greece 2007	5.42	3	1	1	35.9
Hungary 2010	6.17	10	1	1	65
Ireland 2007	4.05	4	0	1	61.2
Norway 2009	8.68	2	0	2	90.6
Portugal 2009	10.46	1	0	1	48.3
Portugal 2011	10.46	1	0	1	53.3
Romania 2012	8.17	1	1	1	40
Sweden 2010	10.69	3	0	2	90
Switzerland 2011	7.69	3	0	5	85.2
Switzerland 2007	7.69	3	0	5	75.7

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<sup>i</sup> This is an original study, which has not been previously published in a peer-reviewed journal or book.

<sup>ii</sup> In our subset of countries, the index of restrictions to campaign funding is almost perfectly correlated with our measures of state decentralization and internet dissemination, with Pearson's r's exceeding 0.9. This caused difficulties in fitting the model, and therefore we took the decision of creating an index aggregating information of rules concerning both campaign funding and access to paid TV airtime.

<sup>iii</sup> The CCS questionnaire includes three more items: office hours, social gatherings and personal TV ads. Yet these items have not been considered in all surveys carried out in the different countries under analysis, thus we opted to exclude them from the index of individualized campaign resources.