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Not so Intimate Instagram: Images of Swedish Political Party Leaders in the 2018 National Election Campaign

Marie Grusell^a and Lars Nord^b

^aPolitical Communication, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; ^bPolitical Communication, Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The visual components of political communication are closely related to the ongoing personalization of politics. Not only do the media focus their stories on candidates and leaders, but also the parties' own work with the electoral campaigns and political propaganda have an increasing focus on the individual candidates and leaders. This study focuses on how political party leaders chose to use visual images in their self-presentation on Instagram during the 2018 general election in Sweden. This is done through a quantitative content analysis of party leaders' posts during the last three weeks before Election Day.

The results do not confirm an increasing level of personalization of politics. Party leaders were visually exposed in an innovative way, but still mainly within rather predictable campaign contexts. General social media standards have been developed by political parties also on this platform. When applying to these standards branding and long-term party strategy considerations seem to be more important than possible short-term effects of exposing surprising personal and emotional characteristics of the party leader.

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Introduction

Contemporary political communication is in a constant flow of change. The last decades have in many ways transformed its dynamics with the introduction of the web, social network sites (SNSs), and the new use of digital politicking (Panagopoulos 2009; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Davis 2019). Today, political communication is closely intertwined in a mix of mobilizing, organizing, communicating with constituents, and governing (Bruns et al. 2015). With the introduction of SNSs, new strategies for political information dissemination, mobilizing, organizing, and fundraising have been initiated and quickly integrated as campaign working tools. Not only does the form for political communication change, but also the possibilities of influencing the content of the communication have increased from a party and party leader perspective (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016). Today, politicians are attracted to SNSs for many reasons such as the ability to build more personal relationships with the voters and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to control how their image is perceived by others (Balmas et al. 2014; Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016). There also seems to be a norm that heads of governments use social media to capture attention through impactful images or videos on an almost daily basis (Veneti et al. 2019; Poulakidakos and Veneti 2019).

CONTACT Marie Grusell  marie.grusell@jmg.gu.se  Political Communication, University of Gothenburg, Box 710, Gothenburg 40530, Sweden.

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The visual components of political communication are closely related to the ongoing personalization of politics (Steffan and Venema 2019; Poulakidakos and Giannouli 2019). A prevailing idea is that the focus of news coverage to a large extent has shifted from parties and organizations to candidates and party leaders (Stanyer 2013). This phenomenon of personalization has become a central topic in political discussions. Nevertheless, the evidence is not yet conclusive due to a lack of conceptual clarity and an absence of common operationalization (Adam and Maier 2010; Bjerling 2013; van Aelst and Walgrave 2011; Stanyer 2013). Nonetheless, the key concept of personalizing politics is the role of individual politicians and the fact that more emphasis is placed on individuals instead of political parties. Personalization of politics not only indicates a stronger focus on candidates/politicians instead of parties, but also puts focus on their personal, nonpolitical characteristics (Adam and Maier 2010). Not only do the media focus their stories on candidates and leaders, but also the parties' own work with the electoral campaigns and political propaganda have an increasing focus on the individual candidates and leaders instead of the parties, their platforms, and the collective interests that they claim to represent. In this study, personalization is viewed from a party communication perspective and related to media technology developments.

With the increasing use of SNSs it is reasonable to assume that personalization of politics has progressed even more (Highfield 2016). In many ways, SNSs have changed not only the conditions for how to communicate, but also the rules for our way of communicating with each other. Currently, a new dynamic exists even at the institutional level – a media logic and a social media logic as well as a combination of both (Klinger and Svensson 2015a; Klinger and Svensson 2015b; Olsson and Eriksson 2016).

How do the new standards and strategies affect party leaders' ways of communicating? In this case study, we focus on how political party leaders chose to use visual images in their self-presentation on Instagram during the 2018 general election in Sweden. This is done through a quantitative content analysis of party leaders' posts during the most intense campaign period – the last three weeks before Election Day. The case of Sweden is interesting for several reasons, primarily because of the high penetration of SNSs, having a daily reach of 79 percent of the overall population in 2019. The same year, Instagram reached 52 percent of the Swedes every day and 82 percent of the population aged between 15 and 24 years. In this group, traditional news media reach was about 15 percent (Mediebarometern 2019 2019, 2020). Thus, Instagram has a huge potential as possible party communication channel targeting the youngest and more volatile segments of the electorate.

Since the use of Instagram in a political context recently had a breakthrough, we still have limited knowledge about how political actors utilize images in “self-presentation” in the context of SNSs. Previous studies underline the potential of social media characteristics; their ability to connect easily to the public and get attention and followers, and their capacity to analyze worthy information about users that can prove to be very useful in political campaigning (Bosseta 2018; Larsson 2019). This study investigates whether Swedish party leaders preferred to portray themselves in professional, personal or private contexts when they try to reach and connect to voters on Instagram during the National Election campaign in 2018.

The management of images

As mentioned, SNSs have quickly been integrated and an increasingly important part of political communication. Gálvez (2019) has addressed the evolution of research on SNSs. During the initial period from 2008–2012, the main areas of interest were Web 2.0 and the internet in terms of SNSs. During the more established period from 2013–2017, there was a strong upward trend in the impact of social networks and platforms (especially Twitter and Facebook) in many areas such as social movements, public relations and publicity, distribution of content, crisis communication, participatory journalism, political communication, or the configuration of public identities

through social platforms with special emphasis on youth. This is particularly noticeable in the research literature, where there is a wide range of not only Anglo-American research but also research from other countries such as Taiwan, Romania, Australia, and Brazil (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Gilmore 2012; Luc Chia-Shin Lin 2015; Momoc 2014). The perspectives examined are mainly the content of social media such as Twitter and Facebook (Aharony 2012; Jungherr 2014; Sweetser and Lariscy 2008; Tumasjan et al. 2010) and recipient studies of how the content is perceived (Ceron et al. 2014; Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2012).

Studies addressing Instagram's role in politics are starting to progress. There is still much work to be done, but interesting results have been obtained by examining how voters (Eldin 2016; Jung et al. 2017; Mahoney et al. 2016), political candidates, and parties communicate on the platform as well as how candidates present themselves on Instagram (Munoz and Towner 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld 2017; Russmann and Svensson 2017; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019).

Regarding how voters use Instagram, Mahoney et al. (2016) conducted research on the Scottish electorate and examined voters' "everyday social-political talk" through a qualitative analysis of Instagram images using the hashtags #IndyRef and #GE2015. In their study, they uncovered visual themes such as propaganda and persuasion, the voting process, portrayal of self, portrayal of others, and established symbolism. The effects of Instagram have also been studied in students in the election in Bahrain (Eldin 2016). Using a descriptive study portraying the effects of exposure to Instagram campaigns, the result showed effectiveness of Instagram among students. Jung et al. (2017) investigated the effects of two self-presentation styles of personalization and interactivity on voters' perceptions of politicians and their voting intentions in the context of Instagram in Singapore. The results of their experiments showed that presenting the public life of a politician had a more positive effect on the perception of character compared to their private life. Also, the use of a highly interactive style on Instagram had a more positive effect on the perception of character compared to a lack of interactivity. They also concluded that character perception was a mediator for the effects of personalization and interactivity on voting intention.

How political parties communicate on Instagram was studied by Turnbull-Dugarte (2019). He found that the four main parties' daily use of Instagram in the 2015 and 2016 Spanish General Elections showed that political parties are actively innovating their communication strategies to keep up-to-date with an ever-evolving political communication market. In line with previous studies, he showed that the new challenger parties are the most active on the photo-sharing social media platform (Larsson and Kalsnes 2014; Williams and Gulati 2013). He also noted a reduction in the use of the platform between the two analyzed election cycles, with a significantly lower number of publications being made during the second round of the election campaign. He argued that this can be a result of electoral fatigue with two general elections taking place in the country within six months.

Recent work concludes that images can play a critical role when members of the public are evaluating politicians (Lilleker, Veneti, and Jackson 2019). It is therefore realistic to expect that specific qualities in political leaders such as sincerity, honesty, intelligence, friendliness, and trustworthiness play a vital role when making electoral decisions. Scholars have begun to explore how parties and politicians manage their images on Instagram. For example, the use of Instagram in the 2014 Swedish election has been explored (Ekman and Widholm 2017; Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016; Russmann and Svensson 2017; Russmann, Svensson, and Larsson 2019). In a content analysis of party postings on Instagram (N = 220) collected during the last weeks of the campaign, one result showed that Instagram was used as a "virtual billboard" for Swedish political parties, often providing personalized yet professional postings of the parties' top candidates. The personal lives of candidates, such as images depicting their families and hobbies, were rarely provided (Filimonov, Russmann, and Svensson 2016). Swedish parties employed Instagram primarily to broadcast information, not to mobilize voters. Approximately half of the Instagram posts

depicted other campaign instruments (e.g., depictions of other new media sources and traditional media) in what the authors called a “hybridity” strategy.

Russmann and Svensson (2017) found that political parties rarely used Instagram to directly communicate with their followers, and the quality of these interactions when they occurred was not substantial. Ekman and Widholm (2017) showed in their content analysis study ($N = 800$) that journalism still holds strong symbolic value, even when politicians are in charge of the political discourse. Also interesting to note is that most politicians avoid public interaction (Poulakidakos & Anastasia, 2016; Russmann and Svensson 2017). Instead, they seem to be preoccupied with the branding of their public personas (Olsson 2017). The platform logic of Instagram contributes to the formation of digital lifestyle politics, where symbolic connections between politicians and a variety of actors are staged through new mediated relations. An Instagram study that compared Swedish elections in 2014 and Norwegian elections in 2017 found that the platform was fully integrated in the broader campaign strategy used to personalize political messages (Russmann, Svensson, and Larsson 2019). In conclusion for the Swedish studies, it is important to note that in the 2014 general election, the use of Instagram was not fully developed (Poulakidakos & Anastasia, 2016). At that time, Instagram was only for the “early adopters” (cf. Rogers 1995). It is therefore interesting to compare earlier usage with the election 2018 to see what kind of development has taken place.

Research has also examined how the Syrian presidency communicated to both English and Arabic audiences (Holiday, Lewis, and LaBaugh 2015). In this study, it was discovered that some themes (e.g., youth, societal support, and religion) were shown equally between these two groups, whereas nationalism and patriotism were communicated more readily to the English audiences. Liebhart and Bernhardt (2017) examined the strategic use of Instagram in election campaigns for the office of the Austrian Federal President in 2016. With a visual analysis of Instagram posts ($N = 504$), their study showed how a politician makes use of a digital platform to project and manage desired images. The article sheds light on visual aspects of digital storytelling as a relevant factor in political communication.

Research on online image management and its impact on leadership in the context of digital permanent campaigning have been done on Justin Trudeau’s use of Instagram during the first year immediately following his election victory on October 19, 2015 (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019). Through a hybrid quantitative and qualitative approach, the result showed that Instagram’s visual and textual aspects were fully embraced to create, maintain, and in some cases sharpen a positive image that is coherent with Trudeau’s desire to reintroduce “sunny ways” in Canadian politics. On the other hand, much less importance was given to his private life in his Instagram feed, which is in line with practices of other politicians internationally (e.g., Obama, Harper, Sarkozy, and Merkel).

Professional, personal or private

For a long time, a central component of political communication has been different types of visual symbols (Lilleker, Veneti, and Jackson 2019). When it comes to “the image of the politician”, the first examples are statues and paintings, followed by portrait photography, press photography, and various uses of photos such as posters, leaflets, and advertisements. With the introduction of “electronic” communication, film, television, web, and finally social media were introduced. With every technological advancement the importance of visual communications has increased (Krogstad 2017; Vigsø 2017). For example, in the last 60 years, television as a visual medium has become the dominant source of political information in most countries (Kaid et al. 2008). Over time, politicians have embraced the significance of visuals and worked hard to construct both effective image bites as well as powerful sound bites. With the introduction of SNSs, images are taking on an increasing role in the constructing of political images. The saying “a picture is worth

a thousand words” is, of course, relevant, but the new function images have obtained is even more impressing.

The fact that pictures are generally better remembered than words has been known for a long time; in psychology research, this phenomenon has been called “the picture superiority effect” (Stenberg 2006). Images help to create attention and closeness and can also be used to inform, document, argue, and convince. Images can also be more memorable, gain more attention, and evoke more emotive responses than text. We also know that images applied to political campaigning have the ability to affect a voter’s judgments on a variety of candidate character traits. Rosenberg et al. (1986) showed in their experimental study that an image can include both general impressions of the candidate’s fitness for office and specific impressions of several character traits (e.g., competence and integrity). The conclusion was that the impact of an image is so sufficiently strong that a single photograph can have a clear impact on voters’ judgments regarding a candidate’s congressional demeanor, competence, leadership ability, attractiveness, likability, and integrity (Rosenberg et al. 1986). More recent studies have confirmed the importance of physical attractiveness for candidate evaluation and voting behavior (Lenz and Lawson 2011; Lev-On and Waismel-Manor 2016).

Today, it is of great importance for politicians to have a presence in different public arenas. With the growing number of channels, the work on politicians’ public image has become a full-time job. At present, there is a trend for politicians to present themselves differently in different media, usually on a scale from formal to informal, depending on the context. Three overall dimensions can be described: professional, personal, and private. The lines between these dimensions are not always easy to define but technical features of an image can go toward the formal aspects (social context, clothing style, professionalism), while others can point to the informal aspects (background, angle, focus). The personal and the private can also be difficult to separate, but the context of an image can be helpful – for example, if the politician is photographed in their family home or with close family members in “cherished situations.” The operationalization of personalization dimensions is presented in the methodology section.

All the images have something in common, namely that they are conscious attempts to influence what impression the audience should have of the politician (Vigsø 2017). The perception of a politician can change under different cognitive “frames.” A frame defines the packaging of an element in such a way as to encourage certain interpretations and to discourage others (Goffman 1974; cf. Entman 1993). Traditionally, framing studies have been used to examine text. Nevertheless, visual framing has been utilized to explore several wide-ranging topics – for example, the portrayal of political actors in traditional television coverage. Grabe and Bucy (2009) studied frames in news coverage between 1992–2004 and found three frames: the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser. Other scholars have replicated their visual framing framework on candidates’ visual self-presentation strategies in online media (Cmeciu 2014; Goodnow 2013; Lee 2016). Research reveals that candidates strategically employ visual frames in traditional and online media to fulfill certain campaign functions.

Engaging ‘hearts’ and ‘minds’

SNSs attract billions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their everyday lives – ordinary people as well as politicians. Nonetheless, there are structural variations around visibility and access, which in many ways are how SNSs differentiate themselves from each other. Important to note is that the visibility of a profile on different social media sites varies according to user discretion. For example, Facebook by default allows users who are part of the same “network” to view each other’s profiles unless a profile owner has decided to deny permission to those in their network. As Instagram is owned by Facebook, the same default is in place for Instagram users.

Table 1. Swedish Party leaders on Instagram (post, followers and following of others; August 2018).

Party	Social Democrats	Green Party	Green Party	Center Party	Christian Democrats	Conservative Party
Party leader	Stefan Löfven*	Gustav Fridolin	Isabella Lövin	Annie Lööf	Ebba Busch	Ulf Kristersson
Updates	416	855	72	1 656	893	347
Followers	35,1t	18,6t	5 666	65,8t	51,1t	42,9t
Follow	0	574	32	597	500	51

Note:

*Run by members of staff. Green Party has two party leaders, one male and one female spokesperson.

SNSs have a wide variety of technical features, but their backbone consists of visible profiles that display an articulated list of friends. Profiles are unique pages for each user. The profile is generated by using the answers for descriptors such as age, location, interests, and an “about me” section. Most sites also encourage users to upload a profile photo. In general, sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities. Some sites cater to various audiences while others attract people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality-based identities. Studies have also shown that social media platforms are perceived differently at a fundamental level with Instagram engaging more of the users’ ‘hearts’. Twitter, by contrast, is capturing more of their ‘minds’. These differences, in turn, are reflected in the linguistic, topical, and visual aspects of the user posts (Poulakidakos & Anastasia, 2016; Manikonda, Meduri, and Kambhampati 2016). When it comes to variation in photo posts, Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) identified eight popular categories in their Instagram study. Interesting to note is that the most common photo category belongs to selfies and friends. This is in line with the conventional wisdom that Instagram is mostly used for self-promoting and social networking with friends. On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily “networking” or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. The strength of social network sites is that they enable users to articulate and make their social networks visible. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made, but that is often not the goal, and these meetings are frequently between “latent ties” who share some offline connection (Boyd and Ellison 2007). The least popular category in their study was for pets and fashion. In between, you find categories like food, gadgets, and captioned photos. They also found types of users clustered with the “selfies-lovers” as the most common group. Furthermore, they discovered that a user’s audience (number of followers) is independent of his/her shared photos on Instagram.

The study, material and method

The objective of the study is to explore how political party leaders in Sweden chose to use visual images in their self-presentation on Instagram during the 2018 general election campaign, and to discuss whether their use of images on this social media platform can be described as professional, personal or private. The following research questions are addressed:

RQ1: To what extent did Swedish party leaders post images on Instagram during the election campaign 2018?

RQ2: How were Swedish party leaders portrayed on Instagram during the election campaign 2018?

RQ3: To what extent can the images posted by Swedish party leaders on Instagram during the election campaign 2018 be characterized as professional, personal or private?

Methodologically, a quantitative content analysis was conducted. The data consisted of posts from six of nine party leaders (3 female and 3 male) active on Instagram (August/September

2018) see [Table 1](#). The party leaders who did not have their own accounts participated on the parties' official Instagram accounts instead and are for that reason not included in the study.

Through repeated interviews with Party Secretaries and campaign managers (Author 2016), what stood out with the Swedish party leaders is that, of the six represented on Instagram, all except for one (Social Democrats' party chairman, Sweden's Prime Minister, which is managed by Stefan Löfven's employees) manage their own accounts, which gives extra value for the study's findings.

The Prime Minister's account stands out by not following anyone. But in general, the party leaders follow few (32–597 persons) compared with the number of followers which varies between 5666 – 65.8t. The activity on updates also differs. Most active are the party leaders of the Center Party and the Christian Democrats (1656 and 893 posts). Least active is the female party leader for the Green party (72 posts).

The data was published during the period of three last weeks before the election (15 Aug – 9 Sep 2018). In Sweden the Election Day is always the second Sunday in September, so the intense campaign phase does not start until mid-August when summer vacation is over. In all, 328 updates were published during the hot phase on the party leaders Instagram accounts. Election campaign studies in Sweden normally cover the last four or three weeks before Election Day. In this case, the Instagram study was part of a project where overall party communications were studied during three weeks.

In this study so-called "Instagram stories" were excluded from the assessment because they are available only for 24 hours. Stories also fulfill another communicative function, which does not contribute with an equivalent and comparable basis for the posts. The same goes for videos ($N = 66$) with associated captions, which were not investigated. In cases where there were several images in the same post, only the first image has been included in the coding. This is because only one analysis unit can be connected to a corresponding variable at a time. The number of posts that have been analyzed in this study is ($N = 262$). With the ease of changing in digital media, it is possible that posts can be deleted, captions and tags can be adjusted afterwards, and the number of approvals and comments can increase or decrease. The follower's participation in the form of likes (approvals) and comments was not coded and was therefore not analyzed. The study material was downloaded every night during the time period examined. Changes that took place in the status updates after this period were therefore not represented in this study.

The codebook was comprised of 31 variables with associated variable values. Most of the variables consisted of so-called content variables. They dealt primarily with how the party leaders are presented – among other things by how the images are composed, how they look, where they are, and with which people.

Instagram posts were analyzed as professional, personal and private. Post were categorized as professional when they showed the party leader in a political context; talking at political rallies, meeting voters during the campaign, expressing political messages, meeting the media, discussing with other politicians or appearing in the Parliament or Government offices. Posts were coded as personal when they portrayed the party leader in an explicitly nonprofessional context, for example portrayed walking in the streets alone, traveling or reading a newspaper in a restaurant. Finally, posts categorized as private showed the party leader in explicit off-work situations such as being together with family members at home, playing with his/her grandchildren, playing tennis or going hunting.

However, it is important to emphasize that although our ambition is to be impartial, it is impossible to guarantee complete objectivity. Coding of factors that treat appearance or emotional expressions, for example, is to some extent dependent on the evaluation the researcher weighs into the assessment. To strengthen the degree of objectivity in the study, reliability tests were carried out. Initially, and in order to receive good results, there has been code training (discussions around variables) as well as revising the coding manual throughout the study.

Our goal was to make the variables as unambiguous as possible. A pilot coding was conducted to eliminate discrepancies and, thus, ensure a reliable and viable coding scheme. The final coding was done individually to avoid discussion or consensus building. Reliability concerns the repeatability of the results and focuses on intercoder reliability or “level of agreement among two or more coders” (cf. Neuendorf 2017). To ensure that our coding results had high intercoder reliability, we employed a third external individual to test the intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliability test showed an overall reliability of (Holsti) .87.

Finally, ethical aspects were considered. These aspects concerned primarily how to collect and archive the data. We can assume that there is an understanding of how the new media landscape works among the party leaders, since they use public accounts, on Instagram to communicate with followers. Based on this, we have concluded that it is reasonable to republish visual and textual publications in our study.

Results: focus on campaign activities

This section starts by presenting some overall data, and then the contents of the status updates will be described. Thereafter, there is a discussion about what impressions the updates can be assumed to give regarding formal or informal images and the aspects of professional, personal, and private images.

At first glance, when examining the updates, they all seemed to be “snapshots” of the everyday life of a working party leader in an election campaign. The photos provided a dynamic and interesting feel and suggested an “informal” set up; in many ways, they could be taken by anyone. Nevertheless, looking closer, it becomes clear that the photos probably have been carefully selected to illustrate specific images of the party leader.

Most of the images reflect party leaders undertaking representative acts as party leader (67 per cent) or participated in representative actions involving voters (25 per cent). The election campaign as a phenomenon is the most frequent frame used for the pictures chosen to be posted (85 per cent). Hardly any pictures show the party leader doing everyday activities (5 per cent). Most of the photos intended to reflect the party leader in a work environment. As a whole, 96 per cent of the pictures showed the party leader in the everyday professional mode compared to only four per cent from everyday private life. Furthermore, there was almost an even distribution between photos taken indoors (49 per cent) and outdoors (51 per cent).

When looking at the results we can furthermore note that the status updates increase closer to Election Day. Also, interesting to note is the symbiotic relationship with traditional media that has been observed in previous research of social media in Sweden (Poulakidakos & Anastasia, 2016). The different peaks that appear are closely linked to events that take place in traditional media (party leaders’ debates and hearings in television) (Figure 1).

It is also interesting to observe how they were portrayed on this social media platform during the election campaign, and what was included in the portraits of them. Did they appear on their own or together with other persons, and in what kind of settings; typical campaign context or in a more informal setting?

When it comes to the content of the status updates, 62 per cent of the pictures showed the party leader in different social situations (Table 2). The most common content was photos of the party leader alone (16 per cent), followed by party leaders with voters (15 per cent), then followed by party leaders with colleagues (10 per cent). Overall, the least occurring pictures were party leaders with other people (social actors, family members, influencers, etc.). The pictures posted reflects party leaders doing party leader related work and participating in actions involving voters. This is to show how the *day to day work* takes place in different situations and setting. But additionally, to show the party leader in their everyday professional mode to create an image of seriousness and credibility. The election campaign as the most frequent frame, may not be so

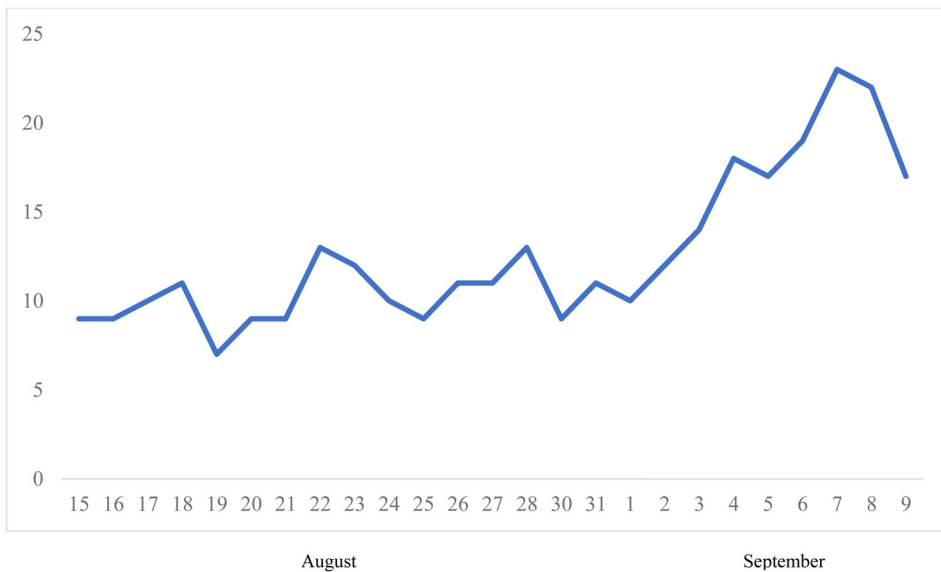


Figure 1. Number of party leader Instagram posts per day (Aug–Sep 2018).

Table 2. Swedish party leaders' content on Instagram during the election campaign 2018.

	%
<i>What is included in the image?</i>	
Only party leader	16
Party leader with party colleagues	10
Party leader with social actor	5
Party leader with another public profile	2
Party leader with family member	4
Party leader with influencers	3
Party leader with other party leader	5
Repost of other media content	35
Party leader and voter	15
Journalist	3
Other	2
Total	100
<i>Are campaign activities reflected?</i>	
Yes	93
No	7
Total	100
<i>Where is the picture taken?</i>	
Indoor	49
Outside	51
Total	100

(N = 262).

Source: Instagram study (General election 2018).

surprising as the most intense phase of the campaign is analyzed. The results show that an overwhelming majority of the photos on Instagram (93 per cent) seemed to have the purpose to reflect different types of campaign activities.

When not posting pictures of themselves, the most-posted content was reposting other media content (35 per cent), which was often news about themselves from traditional media. Worth noting is that the general tendency of the distributing of content was quite similar between

the party leaders. There seemed to be an established "genre" of what type of images to post. However, some individual differences could be noted; the Social Democratic Prime Minister displayed most images together with voters and with a family member but also the least amount of reposts. The female party leader for the Green Party showed most photos together with other party leaders, colleagues, social actors, and journalists.

Most of the status updates consisted of pictures of the party leaders, which can be naturally explained by the platform itself and the genres of Instagram. But how can you describe their appearances? The first observation was that all pictures are appropriate/correct, and the party leaders seemed to be naturally good looking. Their body language was open (93 percent) and they all had a natural posing position (92 percent). The most common facial expression was different degrees of smiling (68 percent), and when not smiling party leaders were neutral or very serious (32 percent). To use only good/proper photos seemed to be a strategy to show the party leader at his/her best.

More than half of the images had either a perspective (67 percent) or a half body (20 percent) frame. Almost all photos were taken straight or slightly from the front (99 percent). This could be explained by the possibility that a coworker from the communication department was taking the pictures. Naturally, the aim was to take as good a photo as possible to capture a moment of the party leader's workday to share with followers.

One of the most used picture frames used on Instagram is "selfies," but among the party leaders, there were only two percent selfie pictures. In general, close-ups (6 percent) or detail pictures (1 percent) were rare (Table 3). This can probably be explained by the fact that the communication department is in charge of taking the pictures with the aim to capture the workday of the party leader.

Also, most of the images reflect party leaders did representative acts as party leader (67 percent) or participated in representative actions involving voters (25 percent). The election campaign as a phenomenon was also the most frequent frame used for the pictures chosen to be posted (85 percent). Hardly any pictures showed the party leader doing everyday activities (5 percent). As a whole, 96 percent of the pictures showed the party leader in the everyday professional mode compared to only four percent from everyday private life.

More professional than personal

The distance and context used in photos help to classify different types of signals. A full photo is mainly used to provide space for the environment and atmosphere. Depending on the type of environment in which a person is portrayed – for example, an urban environment or a public place – the viewer will see and experience both the image and the motive in different ways. By using distance, the proximity to a subject can be altered. A close-up, in many cases, creates a sense of intimacy with the viewer, especially if a person's face is centered in the image. A half-picture, on the other hand, is most suitable for clarifying personal and social relationships. Eye contact and a directed look tend to signal a type of emotional contact that seems to create a relationship with the viewer. Nevertheless, in most of the images in the study party leaders did not have eye contact with the camera (68 percent). Using pictures in action, without eye contact, can be interpreted in different ways. One way is to show a glimpse and a snapshot of the workday or to be seen as a way of keeping the distance and keep your privacies.

The perspective from which the image is taken also has importance. The image angle broadly serves as a design for the relationship that arises between a viewer and the depicted person where each party is assigned a certain power depending on the angle from which the image is portrayed. An image taken from below gives the depicted power by putting the viewer in an inferior position. An image taken from a bird's eye view, on the other hand, gives the viewer power by placing it in a superior position. An image taken from an eye-to-eye perspective assigns both the

Table 3. Swedish party leaders' visual images on Instagram during the election campaign 2018.

	%
<i>Perspective in the picture</i>	
Selfie	2
Long-shot	5
Medium-shot	18
Close-up	6
Detail picture	1
Establishing shot	68
Total	100
<i>Camera angle used</i>	
Straight from the front	98
From above	2
Total	100
<i>Body language</i>	
Open	93
Active	7
Total	100
<i>Body Position</i>	
Posturing	8
Relaxed	2
Natural posing	90
Total	100
<i>Facial expression</i>	
Neutral	17
Smiles	44
Laughs	24
Serious	15
Total	100
<i>Eye contact with the camera</i>	
Yes	32
No	68
Total	100
<i>Is the Party Leader active</i>	
No action	3
Representative acts as party leader	67
Representative acts together with voters	25
Everyday activities	5
Total	100
<i>Professional vs. Private</i>	
Everyday life private	4
Everyday professional	96
Total	100

Comment: (N = 262).

Source: Instagram study (General election 2018).

viewer and the depicted person equal power, as both parties are positioned at the same level. However, the perception is in the eye of the beholder. A picture can in some situations signal intimacy and understanding, but in other cases, it can be perceived as revealing or offensive. If there is a greater distance between the subject and the viewer, this can result in the image creating clarity, giving a hint of where the image is located, and giving the viewer valuable insights as well as the image is perceived as conventional and non-touching.

If we examine the status updates in the study based on this, the overall conclusion is that all photos examined in many ways can be described as "formal" since the photos have the purpose to reflect different types of campaign activities, and personal or nonpolitical characteristics are rare. Furthermore, over half of the photos have either a perspective or a half body frame. Interesting to note is that in most of the images, the party leaders do not have eye contact with the camera, which could be a sign of not wanting to have emotional contact with the followers or that the picture is chosen to show the party leader at "work." Additionally, the results from the

study indicate that the party leader wishes to have a professional relationship with the followers. It is clear that the party leaders chose professional settings for their photos. Technical features in the form of distance, context type, and clothing style of the party leaders lead us to the conclusion that the images can be described as professional. In most pictures, we meet a hard-working professional politician in their role as party leader in everyday working situations. The pictures that are used accentuate the image of well-groomed and positive party leaders who enjoy their work. Most likely, the images are chosen for their “shareability” with the aim to help boost popularity. Also, the fact that personal pictures are rare and chosen with great care gives the strong impression that the use of Instagram is a professional tool, even if it is a private account. What is very likely is that what we see is a constructed image of “the everyday life” of a party leader. We get to follow specifically selected parts of a working day when the party leader is both professional and formal.

Discussion: toward political social media standards

SNSs have changed not only the conditions for how to communicate but also the rules for our way of communicating with each other. This study aimed to explore how political party leaders in Sweden chose to use visual images in their self-presentation on Instagram during the 2018 general elections and to discuss if the use of images can be described as a process of personalization of politics. If personalization is simply defined as a focus on photos of the party leader, then Instagram can surely be described as a personalized arena. A majority of the photos posted by the party leaders are of them “selves” in different situations. But, if personalization of politics is defined as a stronger focus on politicians and their personal, nonpolitical characteristics, the answer is no. This case study of Swedish party leaders’ posts on Instagram indicates that a majority of the pictures can be described as “formal” since the photos have the purpose to reflect different types of campaign activities, and personal or nonpolitical characteristics are rare. In addition to this, the party leaders rarely have eye contact with the camera, which could be a sign of not wanting to have emotional contact with the followers. Furthermore, the results from the study indicate that the party leader wishes to have a professional relationship with the followers. It is clear that the party leaders chose professional settings for their photos. Technical features in the form of distance, context type, and clothing style of the party leaders lead us to the conclusion that the images can be described as professional. In most pictures, we meet a hard-working professional politician in their role as party leader in everyday working situations. In many ways, we meet a constructed image of “the everyday life” of a party leader.

The study also showed that it seems that there has been an established “genre” for party leaders’ appearances on Instagram: they all publish similar types of images. The main purpose of the photos seems to accentuate the image of well-groomed and positive party leaders who enjoy their work. Personal photos are rare, and when used chosen with great care. The use of Instagram is used as a professional tool, even if it is a private account.

This study did not focus on the text parts, but a brief overview shows that the interactions between the party leaders and their followers appear to be very limited. It is very likely that the party leaders’ interactions on Instagram is developing in the same direction as previous studies of interactions on Twitter, and that is; more monologue than dialogue (Poulakidakos & Anastasia, 2016). In many ways, Instagram resembles the use of elections posters, *videlicet* well-chosen pictures, and messages. But, with Instagram, the possibility to interact with followers has increased. However, the possibility of interacting with followers is something that is not yet used frequently.

To conclude, the overall use of Instagram of party leaders in the latest Swedish election campaign does not confirm an increasing level of personalization of politics. Party leaders are visually exposed in an innovative way, but still mainly within rather predictable campaign contexts. As party approaches to Instagram display basic similarities with regard to photo selections

and visual storytelling ideas it is relevant to argue that general social media standards have been developed by political parties also on this platform. When applying to these standards branding and long-term party strategy considerations seem to be more important than possible short-term effects of exposing surprising personal and emotional characteristics of the party leader.

The results of the study can have implications for future digital election campaign communications in Sweden. The results indicate that political party campaign officials use social media platforms as Instagram to a large extent and do so in a structured and strategic way, where the possible impact of visual communications is highly recognized. However, the interactive potential in this platform is not yet fully developed, and it is plausible to believe that relationship with voters can be further strengthened if this dimension is added to the tool in future election campaigns. Given the impressive reach of Instagram in Sweden, especially among younger generations, it is surprising to note that full potential of this platform not has been utilized.

The conclusions drawn from this case study of party use of Instagram during one election campaign in Sweden may be partly explained by a national political culture where parties and collective loyalties traditionally have been more important for voters than single politicians and their personalities. In further investigations of the role of Instagram as a strategic campaign communication tool comparative studies, examining countries with different political culture, could contribute to a more general understanding of how and why Instagram is used by political parties during election campaigns in varying national contexts. The limitation of this study is its focus on Instagram posts during one single election campaign in one country. Further studies, including national variations of campaign contexts, political systems and media systems are needed in order to offer extended knowledge in this field.

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