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## Personalization, gender, and social media: gubernatorial candidates' social media strategies

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the 'self-personalization' of campaign politics, marked by candidates highlighting their personal lives over their policy positions. The rise of social media may be accelerating this shift. Applying Strategic Stereotype Theory [Fridkin, K. L., & Kenney, P. J. (2014). *The changing face of representation: The gender of U.S. senators and constituent communications*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.], which holds that women politicians try to deactivate stereotypes that associate men with agentic leadership traits while capitalizing on stereotypes that associate them with warmth, we assess what role gender plays in candidate self-personalization on social media. A large-scale computerized content analysis of social media posts by gubernatorial candidates in 2014 suggests that male candidates may see more and female candidates see less strategic benefits in personalizing, but this effect does not persist in the face of electoral contextual variables like competitiveness. We also find qualitative differences in the ways male versus female candidates personalize through social media.

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In the closing weeks of their battle for one of Arkansas' senate seats in 2014, Democrat Mark Pryor and Republican challenger Tom Cotton faced off in two debates that became notable for how Cotton repeatedly described himself to voters as a future father. As noted by the *New York Times*,

It took Mr. Cotton less than three sentences in the first debate to bring it up. 'Anna and I were so excited last week to announce that we were expecting our first child, a baby boy,' he said after reciting a long list of problems he blamed on President Obama and Mr. Pryor. 'We want to make sure our baby has the same sort of future that we all had.' (Kenny, 2014)

Cotton's approach to connecting with voters may have been dismissed by commentators as ham-handed, but it is noteworthy in two respects: A male politician bringing attention to his impending parenthood foregrounds what we call the 'self-personalization' of

contemporary politics, and invites examination of the strategies of personalized politics available to male versus female politicians.

In this study, we assess the role that candidate self-personalization plays in digital campaigning and to what extent gender influences this style of campaign communication. A large-scale computerized content analysis of 2014 gubernatorial candidates reveals that some candidates engage in no personalizing while others practice it often. Quantitative results suggest that male candidates may perceive more strategic benefits in personalizing, though contextual campaign variables such as electoral competitiveness negate this effect. In particular, we find that women candidates tend to ‘self-personalize’ more when faced with competitive races. Qualitative analysis suggests that women candidates may engage in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting themselves through social media in caregiving roles.

### Personalization in contemporary politics

A number of scholars have theorized a growing personalization of political life in modern societies. Personalization is marked by dynamics that strengthen the power of individual politicians vis-à-vis parties and institutions, along with more individualized, intimate, and lifestyle-based modes of interaction with politics (Bennett, 2012). Along with these personalization trends comes the ‘individualization’ of politics (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011), in which voter evaluations of politicians are increasingly focused on personal traits, identity, and lifestyle, with more citizens seeking to ‘vote for people and their ideas rather than for political parties and their programs’ (Corner & Pels, 2003, p. 7). This ‘privatization’ of politics (Holtz-Bacha, 2004) and the ‘politicization of private persona’ (Langer, 2007, 2011) create a ‘blurring of the border between the political and the private, the public and the personal’ (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013, p. 758).

Of course, the novelty of personalized politics should not be exaggerated. The ‘presentation of self’ to constituents has been a key feature of US politics for some time, and ‘in many ways, the personalization of politics is as old and ubiquitous as politics itself’ (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, p. 154). Fenno’s classic work *Home Style*, for example, emphasized the importance of representatives’ self-presentation to audiences: ‘Politicians believe that a great deal of their support is won by the kind of individual self they present ... More than most other people, they consciously try to manipulate it’ to project impressions of themselves as competent, empathetic, and in touch with their constituents (Fenno, 1978). Indeed, voters’ inferences about the personal traits of politicians are a predominant feature of modern democratic politics (Bishin, Stevens, & Wilson, 2006; McGraw, 2003). Moreover, TV created an illusory sense of intimacy with politicians long before there was Facebook (Hart, 1998). What differs today is arguably the *degree* of emphasis on politicians’ identity and character – and their families and lifestyles – over their policy stances and leadership abilities.

From this perspective, personalization is one adaptation political actors make to an increasingly mediatized political realm (Corner & Pels, 2003; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Schulz, 2004; Strömbäck, 2008) that favors personal narratives over abstract policy discussions and thus heightens the politician’s need to cultivate and project his or her favored individual ‘self’ to the voting public (Stanyer, 2008). While many theorists have treated

personalization as something that is ‘done to’ politics, especially by the rising influence of an increasingly fragmented and unfettered media, it is important to note that personalization is something politicians may ‘do to’ themselves as well (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014). For both citizens and political actors, as Stanyer observes, today ‘the political self is ... constructed [in part] through the selective disclosure from private life’ (2008, p. 420).

Personalized politics seem especially prevalent and established in the USA, where ‘individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities’ (Karvonen, 2009, p. 4). Particularly in the context of US politics, how candidates present their personal lives to their constituents represents an important individuating influence on political impression formation, allowing voters to rely on candidate-specific information rather than on stereotypic information to form their evaluations of candidates (see McGraw, 2003).

### **Social media and personalization affordances**

The rise of social media is arguably tied to – indeed, may be accelerating and exacerbating – the rise of personalized politics. When politicians employ a communications platform that was essentially built for the sharing of personal information, it should be little surprise that the personalization of politics might increase. Social media have enabled for everyone a new culture of personal identity construction that is at once both private and public. The ability to share photos in particular provides new opportunities for politicians to share glimpses of their daily lives in the same way that many social media users now routinely do (Morrison, 2014; Pew Center, 2014). Indeed, participating in social media virtually *requires* constructing a representation of oneself (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Enli & Thumin, 2012). As Enli and Thumin argue: ‘In order to participate in online social networking ... individuals *have no choice but to represent themselves*’ (p. 88, emphasis added), and to do so virtually requires a highly individualized and personalized approach.

Enli and Skogerbø (2013) observe that, ‘Social media such as Facebook and Twitter place the focus on the individual politician rather than on the political party, thereby expanding the political arena for increased personalized campaigning’ (p. 758). Jackson and Lilleker (2011) theorize that some politicians are using social media to present themselves ‘as likeable human beings, so representing a second strand of impression management’ (p. 90) in addition to traditional concerns about party, policy, and competence.

In terms of the specifically personalizing uses of social media examined here, Gainous and Wagner (2014) find that politicians who use Twitter more heavily are more likely to tweet about their own personal characteristics. More anecdotally, digital campaigning consultants for Barack Obama and Mitt Romney recently told a C-SPAN audience that candidates showing their personal side on social media can present a strategic advantage because it ‘humanizes’ the candidate (C-SPAN, 2014).

Despite the obvious connections between personalization and social media, however, candidate self-personalization on social media may not be rampant. While social media are now widely employed by politicians in the USA and abroad (Conway, Kenski, & Wang, 2013; Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Gulati & Williams, 2012; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013), evidence so far suggests that politicians are adapting social media to traditional campaigning tactics more than they are taking advantage of its unique affordances. Gainous and Wagner (2014), for example, find that members of Congress who use

Twitter more often are more likely to engage in self-personalizing tweeting, but they find less of that than other more traditional campaign tactics such as pushing out news and campaign information to their constituents and attacking opponents (see also Evans, Cordova, & Sipole, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Thus, we might expect less 'self-personalization' in candidates' social media streams than predicted by the personalization literature.

### ***Gender and social media personalization***

A number of unexplored questions arise when we consider the role of gender in personalized politics on social media. While the personalizing trend in politics overall may not be gendered, there are some reasons to suspect that politicians will engage differently in personalizing communications<sup>2</sup> depending upon their gender considerations. Previous research suggests that female candidates may take to social media more readily than male candidates and may more readily use it to attack their opponents (Evans et al., 2014). Moreover, another recent study suggests that 'If social media allow individuals to build large personalized and unmediated networks, this might actually be most useful to politically marginalized and underrepresented groups such as women and ethnic minorities' (Spierings & Jacobs, 2016, p. 11). The question here is whether female and male candidates engage in different personalization strategies when pitted against one another in contests for executive office.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that in other political systems, particularly those that present voters with party slates rather than choices between individual candidates, the gendered implications of social media self-presentation may differ (Spierings & Jacobs, 2016). Candidates in party list systems may perhaps have more freedom to craft appeals to identity groups, while candidates for statewide executive office in the USA must craft appeals in order to attract broad coalitions of voters.

Within the context of US politics, enduring gender stereotypes associating women with caring and other 'communal' traits rather than with dominance, decisiveness and other 'agentic' leadership traits create unique challenges for women entering the political field: conforming to expected gender roles makes it difficult to seem leader-like, while conforming to expectations of leadership makes it difficult to seem appropriately feminine (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Jamieson, 1995). Despite accumulating studies suggesting a declining inhibiting role for gender stereotypes in electoral politics (Brooks, 2013; Dolan, 2014), these binds may still be evident when women seek executive offices because those are associated in the public's mind with unitary leadership traits more readily attributed to men (Dunaway, Lawrence, Rose, & Weber, 2013; Fowler & Lawless, 2009; Kahn & Gordon, 1997; Paul & Smith, 2008).

Consequently, the self-presentational balancing act for female candidates, particularly those who seek the governor's mansion or the White House, is complex (Lawrence & Rose, 2009; Rose, 2012). Yet recent research on candidate campaign strategies finds that in many ways, women and men do not campaign significantly differently (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, & Robertson, 2004; Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009), and that what appear at first blush to be gender-based differences in candidate communications can be better explained by the candidate's party and other factors (Dolan, 2005, 2014). Fridkin and Kenney's (2014) recent study of senators' communications with their constituents finds, however, that female senators emphasize their agentic traits significantly more than their male counterparts do, particularly in their political ads. These gender effects hold while

controlling for party and other factors, suggesting that female senators are still quite mindful of navigating double binds.<sup>4</sup>

Fridkin and Kenney (2014) propose Strategic Stereotype Theory to explain these complex findings: Politicians seek to capitalize on gender stereotypes that benefit their political aims while attempting to counteract potentially damaging gender stereotypes. For female senators, they argue, the challenge is to deactivate stereotypes that associate men with agentic leadership traits, while carefully capitalizing on stereotypes that associate women with caring. By the same token, male candidates may seek to offset stereotypic male weaknesses by showcasing their families and other personal information.

The continuing effects of gendered double binds, and politicians' strategies in response, lead us to two contradictory expectations regarding personalized politics on social media. We might expect that female politicians engage in *less* personalizing communication on social media than their male counterparts because personalizing messaging risks evoking damaging gender stereotypes that associate women with the private sphere rather than the public; with emotionalism rather than decisive intellect; and with nurturing rather than leadership. This expectation is supported by findings that women candidates are more circumspect in their ads and websites about showing themselves in their familial roles and have long been counseled by their consultants to avoid priming gender stereotypes (Bystrom et al., 2004; Dittmar, 2012; Niven & Zilber, 2001). We might also expect male candidates to see advantages in the personalizing affordances of social media, since sharing imagery from their personal lives allows them to round out their image profiles, conforming to (and helping to create) an emerging 'new man' subtype: agentic male politicians who are also nurturing and empathic (Meeks, 2014).

Yet we might simultaneously expect *more* personalizing messaging from female candidates because they may sense a strategic advantage over their male competitors when it comes to conveying notions of caring and connectedness. This prediction is supported in findings by Druckman et al. (2009) that female candidates in House and Senate races are *more* likely than men to feature material about their families on their websites. This strategy may make good sense, given recent research suggesting that gendered expectations of women as nurturers persist: Stalsburg's (2010) sample of college students gave less favorable ratings to hypothetical childless female candidates than to female candidates portrayed as mothers. To the extent that candidates use social media to signal their support for 'compassion' issues (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014) or simply to conform to traditional gender role expectations, female candidates may seize social media opportunities to evoke assumptions about their superiority in caring. Moreover, Meeks' (2014) findings indicate that personalization becomes a valuable strategy when candidates face more competitive environments. By extension, the default strategies often counseled to and followed by female candidates (Dittmar, 2012; Dolan, 2014) may be discarded when facing environments that invite risk-taking.

Finally, it is also possible that gender plays little role in candidate social media strategies compared to electoral contextual factors that have been shown to shape campaign strategies overall (Bystrom et al., 2004; Dolan, 2005, 2014; Druckman et al., 2009; Fowler & Lawless, 2009; Fridkin & Kenney, 2014). Once contextual factors such as party, incumbency, competitiveness, and timing in the electoral cycle are controlled for, candidate gender may prove to play little role in candidate personalization on social media. Extending the findings of Evans et al. (2014) that candidates in more competitive races use

Twitter more than candidates in safer seats, and Meeks' (2014) suggestion that personalization offers candidates advantages in close races, we might expect that candidate self-personalization is tied less to gender than to other strategic considerations.

## Hypotheses

Combining these literatures on the personalization of politics, the personalizing affordances of social media, and candidates' gendered communication strategies, we test several hypotheses in the context of a highly individualized and entrepreneurial setting: US gubernatorial elections. The first two hypotheses address the prevalence of personalization in campaign social media streams:

H1a: Gubernatorial candidates will use social media less for personalization than for other, more traditional campaign uses.

H1b: Social media streams will exhibit variation across gubernatorial candidates, with some candidates engaging in more personalization than others.

Second, we test the two hypotheses proposed by Strategic Stereotype Theory (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014) as applied to personalization on social media:

H2a: Male gubernatorial candidates will engage in more personalizing communication on social media, presumably because they perceive a strategic advantage to humanizing their image profiles - or at least, perceive no electoral penalty for doing so.

H2b: Female gubernatorial candidates will engage in more personalizing communication on social media, presumably because they perceive a strategic advantage to humanizing their image profiles - or because they perceive an electoral penalty for not doing so.

Finally, we test two hypotheses suggested by prior research on how gender interacts with other electoral context factors and the particular role of competitive races in driving politicians' communications strategies, including the decision to personalize (Dolan, 2005, 2014; Fowler & Lawless, 2009; Meeks, 2014).

H3a: Once political party, incumbency, and timing in the election cycle are controlled for, gender alone will not significantly influence gubernatorial candidate personalization.

H3b: Gubernatorial candidates in more competitive contests will exhibit more personalization on social media.

## Methods

### *Candidate selection*

Eighteen major-party candidates were studied here, representing all 2014 gubernatorial races from around the country that featured a female candidate. The candidates vary as much as reality allows by party, geographical region, and competitiveness. A full description of the candidates, including their party affiliation, competitiveness, and overall social media output, can be found in [Table 1](#). We identified the social media accounts associated with each candidate by following the social media links from their websites, which yielded at least one Twitter account and Facebook page for each candidate.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1.** Candidate communication by social media platform, 1 January–5 November 2014.

	Status	Comp.	Twitter	Facebook	Total
Martha Coakley (D-MA)	Open	Toss-up	3644 89.4%	430 10.6%	4074
Charlie Baker* (R-MA)	Open	Toss-up	1092 69.1%	488 30.9%	1580
Gary King (D-NM)	Challenger	Likely R	949 73.7%	339 26.3%	1288
Susana Martinez* (R-NM)	Incumbent	Likely R	220 43.4%	287 56.6%	507
Maggie Hassan* (D-NH)	Incumbent	Leans D	186 38.4%	299 61.6%	485
Walt Havenstein (R-NH)	Challenger	Leans D	660 58.5%	469 41.5%	1129
Joe Dorman (D-OK)	Challenger	Solid R	1247 58.7%	877 41.3%	2124
Mary Fallin* (R-OK)	Incumbent	Solid R	1267 72.8%	473 27.2%	1740
Gina Raimondo* (D-RI)	Open	Toss-up	1862 84.7%	337 15.3%	2199
Allan Fung (R-RI)	Open	Toss-up	2080 76.8%	629 23.3%	2709
Vincent Sheheen (D-SC)	Challenger	Likely R	459 69.0%	206 31.0%	665
Nikki Haley* (R-SC)	Incumbent	Likely R	305 31.2%	674 68.8%	979
Susan Wismer (D-SD)	Challenger	Solid R	493 62.2%	299 37.8%	792
Dennis Daugaard* (R-SD)	Incumbent	Solid R	978 89.6%	113 10.4%	1091
Wendy Davis (D-TX)	Open	Likely R	3700 81.9%	815 18.1%	4515
Greg Abbott* (R-TX)	Open	Likely R	1719 66.5%	866 33.5%	2585
Mary Burke (D-WI)	Challenger	Toss-up	1429 75.6%	461 24.4%	1890
Scott Walker* (R-WI)	Incumbent	Toss-up	2157 54.3%	1819 45.7%	3976

\*Indicates electoral victory.

## Data

This study uses data collected from Twitter and Facebook via Crimson Hexagon (CH), a suite of social media analysis tools that have access to the full Twitter firehose and to all accounts on Facebook (Hitlin, 2013; Hopkins & King, 2010; Pew, 2012). Academic researchers have begun to use CH to examine frames and other message components in various media, from tweets to blog posts to news stories (McGregor, 2014; Reis Mourao, 2014).

Using CH to gather social media data involves creating a query for each candidate, called an ‘opinion monitor.’ Each of our 18 opinion monitors gathered all tweets and Facebook posts originating from that candidate from 1 January to 5 November 2014, yielding 34,328 social media posts, including 24,447 tweets and 9881 Facebook posts. All of these posts from the candidates were coded, following the process outlined below.

## Algorithm training

CH’s ForSight software, which operates on the principles of machine learning and algorithmic coding, requires human training in order to categorize candidates’ posts.



Methods similar to traditional human coding are used: Researchers hand-code a sample of exemplar posts for each of the categories of interest, and the algorithm ‘learns’ from this human coding how to recognize relevant material. In order to successfully train the algorithm, 20–35 posts exemplifying each category as perfectly as possible must be identified. As described by researchers at the Pew Research Center:

Once the training is complete, the algorithm analyzes content at the assertion level, to ensure that the meaning is similarly unambiguous. This makes it possible to analyze and proportion content that contains assertions of differing tone. This classification is done by applying statistical word patterns derived from posts categorized by human coders during the training process. (Pew, 2012)

Following this procedure, two researchers classified 1706 posts, or about 100 per candidate. These posts were used to train CH’s algorithm to analyze the full corpus of tweets from each candidate. For example, to classify Wendy Davis’ social media posts, we trained ~25 posts for each of the four categories: *personal*, *campaign*, *policy*, or *off-topic*.<sup>6</sup> After the training was completed, CH classified the rest of Davis’ posts based on the training data.

### **Reliability**

Computer-assisted content analysis of large data sets is still an emerging method in communication research, and scholars have yet to agree on a standard measure of reliability. A supervised classification system like the one used here assumes that there is no error in the original exemplars used to train the algorithm (Hand, 2006). However, demonstrating inter-coder reliability has long been a threshold of meaningful content analysis (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005).

We used a two-pronged approach to assess reliability when using CH’s machine learning methods. Two of the authors coded the training posts together and only selected exemplar posts on which they completely agreed – a total of 1706 posts. A third coder then hand-coded a 10% sample (171) of the posts used to train the algorithm in each category; Krippendorff’s alpha on this subsample was 0.936.<sup>7</sup>

### **Categorization of social media material**

CH was trained to categorize candidate social media posts in reference to four categories: *personal*, *campaign*, *policy*, or *off-topic*. Our main category of interest is the first, which represents ‘self-personalizing’ social media posts. We operationalized this category by blending Langer’s (2007, p. 381) study on the ‘personalization of the private persona’, which presents an index of references to politicians’ personal lives, including their family, personal appearance, lifestyle (hobbies, likes/dislikes, recreational activities, etc.), upbringing, and religion; Hermans and Vergeer’s (2013) emphasis on candidates’ presentation of their family and home lives and personal preferences; and Meeks’ (2014) operationalization of personalized tweets as those that include ‘some form of self-disclosure’ or those ‘connecting some aspect of the candidate’s personal life to the content of the tweet’ (p. 11).

The ‘personal’ category thus includes social media posts in which candidates described their personal characteristics – for example, this tweet by Texas gubernatorial candidate

Greg Abbott: ‘30 years ago today an accident put me in a wheelchair. Our lives aren’t defined by how we’re challenged but by how we respond.’ Meeks’s (2014) self-disclosure construct allowed us to better capture candidates’ ‘self-personalization.’ For example, general mentions of religion (e.g., an Easter Day post ‘He is risen!’) were not counted as ‘personal’; only those that included some degree of *self-disclosure* (e.g., another Easter post: ‘I hope that you spend this day in the midst of loved ones, and that you experience the gratitude of new life that springs eternal through faith in Christ’) were categorized as personal. This stricter measure yields a conservative and more precise measure of personal content in social media than that found in some other studies (e.g. Gainous & Wagner, 2014).

The other categories of social media posts represent more traditional candidate uses of media: *campaigning* and *policy* messaging. Previous research shows that innovative uses of social media generally take a back seat among candidates to traditional efforts to mobilize voters and push out candidate information (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van ‘t Haar, 2013; Klinger, 2013; Kreiss, 2014; Pew Research, 2012). Campaigning posts include attempts at voter mobilization, operationalized to include mentions of endorsements (see Benoit & Benoit, 2005, p. 243), volunteers, and favorable fundraising and polling figures. A prototypical campaign post is one like this tweet from Wisconsin governor Scott Walker: ‘Pumped up crowd at our campaign offices in La Crosse last night. Glad to join you!’ The *policy* category deals with substantive policy issues on which a candidate takes a position (see Bartels, 1986), following the typical battery employed in other studies, including foreign relations, health care, taxes, etc. (e.g., Druckman, Hennessy, Kifer, & Parkin, 2010). A prototypical policy post is this one from New Mexico challenger Gary King: ‘About \$300 a week. That’s what people making the federal minimum wage make. A typical CEO makes 774 times that. The need to raise the minimum wage is obvious’.

Lastly, we identified an *off-topic* category to ensure that our categories were exhaustive, a requirement of both content analysis and proper use of CH’s coding algorithm. Off-topic posts included statewide news from an incumbent (‘Roads closed today due to the snow storm. Will update further as SCHP assesses the situation’) or other innocuous announcements (‘Happy St. Patrick’s Day!’) – fairly frequent uses of social media among incumbent politicians (Golbeck et al., 2010).

### **Quantitative data analysis**

CH runs two algorithms. The first expresses results as a proportion of all text in the data sample that falls into each of the trained categories, rather than as a percentage of individual posts. CH’s second algorithm mimics traditional approaches to content analysis by classifying individual posts into the best-fit category, making the data suitable for secondary analysis.

In order to test our hypotheses, we added several variables to results from CH’s second algorithm. Each post was coded for the *candidate* who posted it, the *gender* of that candidate, his or her *political party*, the candidate’s incumbent status (*incumbent*, *challenger*, or *open seat*), election period (*primary* or *general*), and the competitiveness of the candidate’s race (*solid Republican/Democrat*, *likely R/D*, *leaning R/D*, or *toss up*). To create this

competitiveness index, we combined Larry J. Sabato's *Crystal Ball* and the *Cook Political Report's* competitiveness indexes to create a scale from the least to the most competitive.

*Statistical analysis.* In order to test H1a, a chi-square test was run to ascertain the relationship between social media posts and communication categories. H1b was assessed by examining the distribution of personalizing post across candidates. To test our second set of hypotheses, regarding gender, we calculated a chi-square test between gender and personalizing communication. Our last set of hypotheses (H3a,b) were assessed via hierarchical logistic regression, with personalization as the outcome variable. Gender, along with contextual variables (election period, incumbent status, competitiveness, and party), were entered as a predictors, with the candidate serving as a constant. The results of this regression led us to run a chi-square test to examine the relationship between competitiveness and self-personalizing communication.

We include inferential statistics, with the reminder that the underlying data have not been sampled randomly and represent a census of all relevant social media posts.

### Qualitative analysis

In addition, we conducted a qualitative textual analysis of those posts categorized as 'personal' by CH. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2009), we looked for patterns of 'personal' information in each candidate's communication. In particular, capitalizing on the pairing of female and male candidates in our sample, we compared the ways in which female and male candidates brought their families and family lives into their social media streams.

## Results

Our first hypothesis (H1a) posits that candidates will use social media, specifically Twitter and Facebook, less for personalizing communication than for other traditional campaign- or policy-oriented messages. As shown in Table 2, personalizing communication made up 7.9% of Twitter and Facebook material from candidates overall, with more of that activity occurring on Twitter - the more often used platform - than Facebook. Accordingly, H1a is supported. Campaigning comprised about half of all social media communications (50.8%). These candidates talked about policy roughly twice as much (14.9%) as they shared personalizing information. In fact, seven candidates (Gary King, Maggie Hassan, Walt Havenstein, Mary Fallin, Allan Fung, Susan Wismer, and Dennis Daugaard) engaged in too little personalizing to train the algorithm to detect it in the rest of their posts.<sup>8</sup>

Our second hypothesis (H1b) proposes an unequal distribution of personalizing posts by candidates, with some personalizing far more than others. The range of personalizing

**Table 2.** Social media communication by category and platform.

	Campaigning	Policy	Personal	Off-topic
Twitter 71.2%	49.6%	13.3%	7.3%	29.8%
Facebook 28.8%	54.2%	18.7%	9%	18.1%

posts by candidates is large, from zero detectable personalization by some candidates to 510 such posts (32.3% of his communications) by Charlie Baker, the Republican candidate for Massachusetts' open governor's seat; 427 (12.5%) by Texas's Republican open seat candidate Greg Abbott; and 500 (12.5%) by Wisconsin's Republican governor Scott Walker. As such, H1b is supported. Table 3 shows the varying proportions of personalizing messaging across the candidates, as well as which platform each favored for this type of communication.

Our second set of hypotheses assesses the role gender plays in the extent to which candidates engage in personalizing on social media. The results in Table 4 suggest that male candidates engaged in personalizing communication more than their female counterparts: 10.6% of male candidates' social media posts were personalizing in nature, compared with 5.1% for women candidates.<sup>9</sup> These results suggest support for H2a – the 'male advantage' hypothesis, over H2b – the 'female hypothesis' – which is not supported.

Our final set of hypotheses test the relationship between candidate personalization and other pertinent variables. H3 posits that once political party, incumbency, and timing in the election cycle are controlled for, gender alone will not exert a strong influence on candidate personalization. As seen in Table 5, logistic regression indicates that posts from

**Table 3.** Percent of personalizing communication by candidate.

	Twitter	Facebook	Total
Martha Coakley (D-MA)	99 2.4%	28 .68%	127 3.12%
Charlie Baker (R-MA)	251 15.9%	259 16.4%	510 32.3%
Gary King (D-NM)	0 0.0%	0 0%	0
Susana Martinez (R-NM)	21 4.1%	16 3.2%	37 7.3%
Maggie Hassan (D-NH)	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0
Walt Havenstein (R-NH)	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0
Joe Dorman (D-OK)	151 7.1%	117 5.5%	268 12.6%
Mary Fallin (R-OK)	0 0.0%	0 0%	0
Gina Raimondo (D-RI)	232 10.6%	37 1.7%	269 12.3%
Allan Fung (R-RI)	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0
Vincent Sheheen (D-SC)	49 7.4%	71 10.7%	120 18.1%
Nikki Haley (R-SC)	10 1.0%	94 9.6%	104 10.6%
Susan Wismer (D-SD)	0 0.0%	0 0%	0
Dennis Daugaard (R-SD)	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0
Wendy Davis (D-TX)	199 4.4%	31 .69%	230 5.1%
Greg Abbott (R-TX)	298 11.5%	129 5.0%	427 12.5%
Mary Burke (D-WI)	71 3.8%	41 2.2%	112 6.0%
Scott Walker (R-WI)	419 10.5%	81 2.0%	500 12.5%

**Table 4.** Personalizing candidate communication by gender.

	Not Personalizing	Personalizing	Total
Male	15,322 89.4%	1825 10.6%	17,147
Female	16,302 94.9%	879 5.1%	17,181

Note:  $\chi^2(1) = 361.296, p < .001$ .

female candidates are less likely to be personalizing. As compared to male candidates, posts from female candidates have 74.5% lower odds of being personalizing (OR = .255,  $p < .001$ ). Thus H3 is not supported: even when controlling for these contextual variables, posts from male candidates are more likely to be personalizing. The regression model also indicates that being a Democrat is associated with 32.8% lower odds of posting personalizing communication, while being in open seat races is associated with 63% higher odds of personalizing posts. We also find that candidate posts in the primary election period have 42.6% higher odds of being personalizing compared to those posted in the general election period.

Finally, H4 posits that candidates in more competitive races will exhibit more self-personalization. Results indicate that competitiveness is positively associated with personalizing communication (OR = 1.044,  $p < .05$ ). That is, for each increase on the four-point scale of competitiveness, the odds of communication from a candidate being personalizing increases by 4.4%, as shown in Table 6.<sup>10</sup> Almost 10% of posts from candidates in races deemed a toss-up were personalizing, more than double those in safe races. Less than 5% of posts in the least competitive contests (solid R/D) were personalizing (4.7%).

As both gender and competitiveness are indicated as positive predictors of personalizing communication, we also test their combined effects. A second model was run testing the effect of the interaction of competitiveness and gender (female = 1) on personalizing. Results suggest that posts from female candidates in competitive races are more likely to be self-personalizing (OR = 1.409,  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 6).

Thus, the quantitative findings suggest qualified support for the Male Advantage hypothesis. The heaviest personalizers in our sample were three male candidates who used Twitter and Facebook extensively. These male candidates engaged in a great deal of personalized

**Table 5.** Hierarchical logistic regression: political contextual variables and personalization.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
<i>Candidate</i> (constant)	1.031***	1.022–1.041	1.048***	1.037–1.059
<i>Party</i> (Repub = 1)	.672***	.572–.791	.853	.716–1.017
<i>Gender</i> (Female = 1)	.255***	.217–.301	.138**	.108–.177
<i>Primary</i> (1)	1.426***	1.302–1.562	1.422 ***	1.298–1.557
<i>Office</i>				
Challenger (1)	.655***	.554–.798	.651***	.546–.777
Open seat (1)	1.630***	1.442–1.843	1.703***	1.507–1.924
<i>Competitiveness</i>	1.044*	1.001–1.089	.925***	.877–.976
<i>Compt. * Gender</i>	–	–	1.409***	1.276–1.556
Chi-square	630.517		814.313	
<i>Df</i>	8		8	
<i>N</i>	34,328		34,328	

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 6.** Personalizing candidate communication by competitiveness.

	Not personalizing	Personalizing	Total
Solid R/D	5480 95.3%	268 4.7%	5748
Likely R/D	9622 91.3%	918 8.7%	9961
Leans R/D	1613 100%	0	1613
Toss-up	14,909 90.8%	1518 9.2%	16,427

Notes: Bonferroni corrected  $p$ -values do not reveal significant differences between z-test proportions by column.  $\chi^2(3)=271.592, p < .001$ .

communication even while they each faced different competitive contexts (Abbott's race was categorized as 'safe', Walker's as 'likely' to go to him, and Baker's 'leaned' toward the other party's candidate). This finding suggests these male candidates did not perceive a potential penalty for personalizing their candidacies. Overall, our interaction models show that competitive races can encourage women candidates to self-personalize.

### Qualitative findings

Qualitative analysis suggests subtle differences in *how* candidates personalized. Virtually none of the posts from male candidates featured them in explicitly caregiving roles. While candidates of both genders sought to portray themselves as loving family members, and most male candidates pictured themselves at least occasionally with their children, grandchildren, parents, and extended families, only female candidates shared images of themselves cooking, cleaning, doing homework with their kids, etc.

This was not a pattern across the board, since some female candidates used social media sparingly or rarely personalized. But three female candidates in our sample present two different models of the modern female personalizing candidate. One model was exhibited by both Governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina and Gina Raimondo of New Hampshire, who won her open seat race. Both routinely used social media to show themselves as competent and engaged political leaders *and* as caregivers to their families.

Haley's Twitter and Facebook stream exhibited a knack for the informal, humor-tinged style of popular social media communication and she used it extensively to, in equal parts, mobilize her supporters, promote her policy agenda, and relate to her followers in a personal way. Her social media communication included a steady stream of gendered self-presentations, such as a Facebook post featuring a close-up photo of Haley's two children headlined 'Help Us Wish Our Mom a Happy Mother's Day'. The text read in part:

... Please leave her a message to help us show her how many people agree that she is doing an awesome job!

She may have an extremely busy job, but she always finds time to spend with us. She knows that *to be a good Governor, she has to be a good mom*. From helping us get ready for school, to attending sporting events, and of course Haley family fun nights, *she never forgets that she's our mom first*. [emphasis added]

Similarly, Raimondo exploited social media to convey an image of hominess and identity with Rhode Islanders, weaving a 'family, food and faith' theme through many of her

posts. Family was a consistent feature of her posts, and her posts, like Haley's, show an intimate concern with her children that was largely absent from the social media streams of the male candidates in our sample:

I'm sitting here correcting my daughter's homework – don't remember 4th grade being this hard :)

Watched kids march thru slush on way into school. Now I'm worrying they will have wet feet all day.

Another very different model of personalizing communication was presented by Texas Democrat Wendy Davis, who lost to Republican Greg Abbott in a race that centered heavily on Davis' compelling narrative about being a teen mother who worked her way from a trailer park to Harvard (a story which came under fire on both factual and symbolic terms during the campaign). In stark contrast to Haley and Raimondo, Davis shared very few daily glimpses of her family life on social media, but she persistently featured her motherhood as a central facet of her campaign in posts like these:

Wendy appeared on the Today Show this morning and told her inspiring story – from single mom to Texas Senator. 'I'm not an overnight sensation,' Wendy said. 'I'm a Texas success story. I'm the epitome of hard work and optimism.'

I pursued education not instead of being a good mother, but because being a good mother required that I build a better life for my family.

While Haley and Raimondo used social media to create an intimate window into their daily lives as mothers, Davis presented her motherhood story in broad, almost mythical terms, with few of the intimate flourishes that take advantage of the unique affordance of social media. While this difference surely results in part from the fact that Davis' children are now grown, both models provide some evidence to support the Female Advantage hypothesis – that women candidates can perceive advantage in featuring themselves as caregivers on social media.

## Discussion

Our study is motivated by curiosity about under-explored potential relationships between the personalizing communications enabled by social media and candidates' gender strategies. Strategic Stereotype Theory, though it does not specifically address the phenomenon of personalization, suggests that in political contests that pit individual candidates against one another, as in the USA, male and female politicians may see advantages in communicating with voters in a personal, intimate way about their private lives. That theory yields two possible expectations: That female candidates will avoid the risk of evoking damaging gender stereotypes with personalizing social media posts, or that female candidates will see strategic opportunities to exploit stereotypical feminine strengths by sharing about their private lives – particularly, any caregiving roles they play. This theory also suggests that male candidates may see strategic opportunities in social media personalization, which can allow them to round out their public personae with tidbits from their private lives. We also posited that gender could have less demonstrable impact on candidate self-personalization than other factors arising from the electoral context each candidate faces.

Our findings, though preliminary and limited by the availability of real-world numbers of and variation in cases, suggest (limited) support for all three expectations. Male candidate gender appears to be positively associated with self-personalization on social media. Anecdotally, in five of our nine candidate dyads, the male candidate engaged in more personalization than his female opponent. Electoral competitiveness appears to also be associated with personalizing communication. In particular, competitiveness drives woman candidates to personalize: posts from females in competitive races are more likely to be self-personalizing.

Our qualitative exploration suggests that in US gubernatorial contests, at least, some women candidates see an advantage in showing themselves explicitly as caregivers to their children. Strategic Stereotype Theory argues that female candidates must decide whether to highlight their family caregiving role – and thus conform to expectations about ‘appropriate’ feminine behavior – or avoid it, in order to avoid evoking stereotypes that hold caregiving as incompatible with competent political leadership. The female candidates in our sample did not uniformly show themselves as caregivers – indeed, some of them do not have children at home, so this strategic choice was less pertinent for them. But two who did face that choice seem to have struck a strategically useful balance between caregiving and competence in their social media self-revelations. Qualitatively, therefore, we find some evidence to support the Female Advantage hypothesis as well.

Gender aside, our findings suggest that candidates engage in more personalizing communication when they are locked in tighter races. Again, this may be confirmation of Meeks’ theory (2014) that candidates see strategic advantage in personalization when they most need to distinguish themselves from competitors. If this finding is replicated in further research, it would be consistent with recent studies suggesting that apparent gender-based differences in candidate communications can be better explained by other political factors (e.g., Dolan, 2005, 2014).

Our findings echo Dolan’s research (2014) showing that gender generally matters less than other contextual factors, particularly party, in explaining electoral outcomes. Compared to the powerful heuristic of party ID, ‘expecting abstract gender stereotypes to be as useful in shaping voter behaviors is probably not realistic’ (p. 33). Given the strong evidence for the importance of party (and incumbency) in shaping voter choice, it stands to reason that candidate strategies may not be as strongly shaped by concerns about gender stereotypes as by other factors.

On the other hand, our findings are consistent with Fridkin and Kenney’s (2014) findings that male senators expend more communications effort than female senators conveying non-political information, especially their family lives. ‘Men want to stress their familial connections as a way of demonstrating their communal characteristics,’ they argue, whereas for female senators, ‘emphasizing family is perceived as more of a liability’ (48). Fridkin and Kenney’s study looks at the constituent messaging of sitting senators, and so by definition their study encompasses one group within our study: incumbents. Our study suggests that incumbent and challenger women are more likely to engage the relatively risky strategy of self-personalization when they find themselves in competitive races. Female candidates have long been counseled to avoid evoking traditional gender stereotypes (Dittmar, 2012), and our data suggest many still follow that advice – until the competitive environment makes them willing to employ riskier strategies. A hypothesis for future research is whether this apparent finding holds across more electoral contexts.



## Conclusion

This study focuses on the USA, an electorally unique context in terms of its first-past-the-post, winner-take-all structure; its relatively weak parties and entrepreneurial candidates; and its particular style of gendered politics. We therefore do not attempt to generalize from these 2014 US gubernatorial elections to campaign politics overall. In fact, we might hypothesize that candidates' gender strategies on social media will differ in elections that do not pit individual candidates directly against one another, such as legislative races in party list systems in which candidates may appear on the ballot precisely to round out a party's appeal to specific identity groups. Our findings pertain to the context of highly individualized and entrepreneurial US gubernatorial elections, in which candidate characteristics (conditioned by factors such as party identity and incumbency) play a key role in voter choice (Bartels, 2002; Druckman, Jacobs, & Ostermeier, 2004).

Nevertheless, candidate efforts at self-personalization studied here may represent a budding trend, at least in the USA, whose progress may be shaped by a tension between the open and personalized nature of social media and adherence to campaign communication norms of 'controlled interactivity' (Stromer-Galley, 2014). More cross-national research is clearly needed in this area. Finally, given the real-world lack of racial and ethnic diversity among gubernatorial candidates in 2014 and the lack of female-against-female contests, this study was not able to address the important questions of how race considerations and opponent gender may shape individual candidates' social media strategies.

The political uses of social media are still evolving, and so any findings regarding candidates' social media use are likely to be partially contingent on individual candidates' comfort with these new media forms and with emerging norms of use among political consultants and campaign managers. Beyond a candidate's gender and electoral context, there is of course a personal aspect to how intimate or personalizing one chooses to be on social media. As Zac Moffatt, digital media campaign strategist and former digital director for Mitt Romney for President, recently told a C-SPAN audience when asked about social media personalizing, 'It's about the candidate's comfort level as well, because if they're faking it, you can tell. And that's worse than not doing it at all' (C-SPAN, 2014). Moffatt's observation may foreshadow a future - perhaps imminent - in which self-personalizing social media strategies are the norm rather than the exception.

## Notes

1. Neither study analyzed 'personalization' per se, and each operationalized 'personal' content on social media differently than we do: Gainous and Wagner (2014) did not analyze the extent to which candidate self-promotion takes the personalizing forms explored in this study, and Evans et al. (2014) categorized as 'personal' all tweets that were not directly pertinent to the candidate's campaign, including those that we categorized as 'not relevant' to our study.
2. Note that we use the term 'personalizing' here to distinguish phenomena associated with personalization of politics from the common use of 'personalized' to mean messages that are targeted and tailored for specific audiences - for example, see Gainous and Wagner (2014, p. 109).
3. Evans et al. (2014) find no statistically significant difference in the proportion of male and female candidates' Twitter posts that were 'personal' in nature; but given their less restrictive

operationalization of ‘personal’ posts, gender differences in personalization still pose an open question.

4. Interestingly, both Fridkin and Kenney (2014) and Dolan (2014) find that gender does not seem to serve as a main cue in voter choice. This may either be because voters have moved on while candidates and consultants continue to operate by outmoded concerns about gender stereotypes (see Dittmar, 2012), or because campaigns are effectively doing what Strategic Stereotype Theory, discussed below, suggests: neutralizing the effects of damaging gender stereotypes.
5. Eight candidates in our sample (Mary Fallin, Scott Walker, Dennis Daugaard, Allan Fung, Gary King, Gina Raimondo, Martha Coakley, and Susan Wismer) had one account for their campaign and another account for their current office. Both are included here, as posts from both accounts appeared to come from a first-person perspective and contained campaign-related communication.
6. CH recommends training with 20–30 posts per category as a best practice.
7. Intercoder reliability was assessed using ReCal (Freelon, 2010, 2013).
8. As discussed above, in order for the CH tool to learn how to recognize and categorize relevant information, researchers must hand-code a subset ( $n < 20$ ) of social media posts for each category, for each candidate. While it is likely that these candidates may have posted a few personalizing items, there were too few to register and too few to significantly affect the results.
9.  $\chi^2(1) = 361.296$ ,  $p < .001$ . This chi-square was also run without the personalizing outlier, Charlie Baker; in that analysis, the percentages change as does the chi-square value, but the relationship remains significant.
10.  $\chi^2(3) = 271.592$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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