Greek political leaders on Instagram

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Greek political leaders on Instagram:
Pre-electoral and non-pre-electoral "visual flows"

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Abstract

Through social media communities, politicians communicate professional, personal or even private information and try to "connect" with influential figures or ordinary people. More specifically, the use of Instagram by politicians can be approached as a way of producing "visual flows" of professional, personal and private moments. The present research is a comparative study of the ways in which the leaders of the three largest - based on their electoral percentage - political parties in Greece (New Democracy, SY.RIZ.A., KIN.AL.) shape their "image" through their posts on Instagram during the "multiple" pre-electoral period of 2019 (European elections, Local Regional elections, Parliamentary elections) and a non-pre- electoral period (first half of 2018), in order to identify similarities and differences in the communication strategies of the aforementioned political figures per period.

Keywords: political leaders, Instagram, personalization, elections, communication strategy.

The personalization of politics and Instagram

Political communication evolves based on the changes that take place in the communication field. Just as television created new forms of televised political communication, so have social media created the conditions for the emergence of new forms of political communication (Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016: 336). Studies focusing on Facebook and Twitter have shown that they are the platforms through which politicians project the "best possible aspects of their personalities" to the electorate (Jung et al., 2017:2195; Avedissian, 2016) by applying primarily text-based communication strategies (Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016; Ekman & Widholm, 2017:16). Social media focus the public attention on the personal aspects of the politician and reinforce the personalization and privatization of her/his communication features. Therefore, the communication practices of politicians in the social media must be approached in the light of the articulation of their communication strategy under the popular culture of a celebrity (Ekman & Widholm, 2017: 18).

Political personalization describes a process in which "individual political figures have become more important than political parties and any other political collectives" (Karvonen, 2010: 4).

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As a result, candidates try to promote a self-image that meets the voters' expectations. Even political parties "strategically" choose to promote their political program through candidates who are popular figures among their constituencies (McAllister, 2007: 580).

According to Rahat and Sheafer's (2007) typology, we can distinguish between three general types (or areas) of political personalization -institutional, media and behavioral- even though Adam and Maier (2010: 231) conclude that there is only one area of politics with plenty of evidence for the personalization thesis, media coverage.

Van Aelst et al. (2011: 206) suggest that personalization in the media landscape comprises two dimensions: "individualization", a term that describes a process where "individual politicians have become more central in media coverage, while parties and government institutions have become less relevant", and "privatization", which implies "a shift in media focus from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, as a person distinct from their public role" (2011: 214).

Privatization can be further analyzed to two distinct sub-dimensions based on whether the media focus is on the "personal characteristics" or the "personal life" of the politician (Van Aelst et al., 2011: 207). According to Jebril, Albaek and de Vreese (2013: 107), privatization denotes a "shift in journalism towards covering the private rather than the public side of politicians" and can be associated to strategic game coverage in the news, in the sense that media focus on the personal traits of the political candidates rather than the party's political platform. In the same vein, Langer speaks of the "politicization of private persona" referring to an increased importance "not just of leaders or of their leadership qualities, but of leaders as persons, as "human beings" (2010: 61).

From the above overview it should have become apparent that most researchers identify two quite distinct aspects of personalization; on the one hand, the "hard side" of personalization, which refers to a stronger focus on politicians at the expense of parties, and on the other hand, there is a "soft side" of personalization, which goes beyond the visibility of the individual and stresses on the increased importance of personal traits and qualities that become more relevant and salient to the voters' evaluations of politicians' performance (Adam & Maier, 2010: 216; Bjerling, 2012: 45; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014: 156).

In the new media environment, personalization of politics has found a new fruitful space to grow further since social media "are designed to facilitate a direct link between sender (politician) and receiver (citizen) and vice versa" (van Santen & van Zoonen, 2010: 65), by bypassing the journalists' intervention (Olsson, 2017: 100). More specifically, politicians' Instagram use can be understood as a way of producing visual flows of professional, personal and private practices in which the authenticity of everyday political life takes center stage (Ekman & Widholm, 2017: 29).

Instagram posts might include different types of performances and practices related to the private moments with friends and family (Jung et al., 2017: 2197), personal, semi-professional

and professional aspects of political life, like everyday professional footage (e.g., imagery of day-to-day duties/tasks), political performances (superseding the everyday duties of politicians), media appearances, attendance at celebrity events and public demonstrations (Ekman & Widholm, 2017: 21). In that way, politicians are able to construct strategically self-managed galleries, in which work practices and glimpses of their private life become visible (Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016, p. 321). This is a typical feature of celebrity culture, where actors "must constantly shift between performing their stage persona, concealing or revealing personal information, and creating intimacy and authentic self-presentation" with their followers (Ekman & Widholm, 2017: 29).

As far as Greece is concerned, previous research (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019) has shown that politicians use Instagram as a strategic communication tool (especially during the years 2017 and 2018). This first study on the use of Instagram by Greek politicians revealed both similarities and differences in the ways of its use (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019: 202)[*].

Main Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on our theoretical background, as well as previous findings on the use of Instagram by Greek politicians (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019), the main research question of the current research is about the similarities and/or differences that can be traced in the "image" of the leaders of the three major political parties[†] (Kyriakos Mitsotakis of New Democracy, Alexis Tsipras of SY.RIZ.A/Coalition of Radical Left, and Fofi Gennimata of KIN.AL./Movement for Change), formed through their Instagram posts to their personal accounts, during a non-electoral period (2018) and a pre- electoral period (2019).

Our coding unit is the Instagram post, hence the picture (or video) along with its caption (if it exists). More specifically, we examine the posts of the aforementioned politicians during the year 2018 (from the beginning of the year until the end of June), and during the consecutive pre- electoral periods of 2019 (from April 28 to July 6), accumulating 388 posts (122 for Fofi Gennimata, 130 for Kyriakos Mitsotakis and 136 for Alexis Tsipras), that were published during the first half of 2018 (220 posts) and during the pre-electoral periods of 2019 (168 posts). Each post is coded according to the variables outlined in the following research hypotheses and research questions, which stem from our theoretical background.

Since personalization is a fundamental feature of Instagram (Jung et al., 2017), (1) we expect frequent presentations of the politicians' personal and/or private lives (e.g., family moments,

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[*] The politicians monitored for the scopes of this research are Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Alexis Tsipras and Fofi Gennimata.

[†] According to their parliamentary strength after the last parliamentary elections in July 2019. For a detailed presentation of the results see the relevant website of the Ministry of the Interior (Hellenic Ministry of the Interior, 2019).

person-centered everyday moments -political and non-political) in both campaign and non-campaign posts.

(2) We expect that during the pre- electoral period, politicians will "attack" their opponents more often compared to non- electoral periods, due to the intensity of political discourse and the polarization of public political discourse (Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016).

(3) We expect that in both periods the majority of the posts will include a depiction of the politician her/himself (Van Aelst et al. 2011: 206).

In addition, we will seek to answer the additional research questions:

(1) Are there any differences in the proportion of the depiction of different personal performances during the two distinguished periods of study? For example, everyday professional footage (e.g., imagery of meetings and other day-to-day duties/tasks), political performances (superseding the everyday duties of politicians), media appearances and attendances at celebrity events and public demonstrations?

(2) Does the demonstrated "connectedness" of politicians – the strategy that creates symbolic links between politicians and different "spheres" of society (Ekman and Widholm, 2017) – differ significantly in the two periods of our research?

Methodology

The method used for the current research is quantitative content analysis, which can be briefly defined as the systematic, based on scientific criteria, analysis of the characteristics of various messages (Kyriazi, 2001; Neuendorf, 2002). It constitutes a systematic, reproducible technique for transforming the content of various forms of messages (text, still and moving image, sound, etc.) into fewer categories of meaning, based on specific codification rules (Stemler, 2001; Miller & Brewer, 2003), allowing the researchers to examine large amounts of data through a systematic methodology. The ability to implement content analysis to a variety of "texts" makes it useful as a research method. The primary target of content analysis is the systematic research of the content of the unit of analysis (text, image, news item, advertisement, etc.) (Berelson, 1971). In our case, the unit of analysis is the Instagram post, including both the image (either still or video) and its caption. The quantitative analysis of the posts was conducted with SPSS 25. The statistical test implemented to assess the similarities and differences in the Instagram communication strategy of the politicians under research is the chi-square and Fisher's exact test (Field, 2017).

Results

Our first hypothesis focuses on the personal/private aspects of the politicians' posts since we expect a rather frequent presentation of the personal and/or private life (van Aelst et al., 2011). On the one hand, as Figure 1 shows, posts with personal aspects of politicians decrease

significantly during the pre- electoral period (from a percentage of 16.4% during the non-electoral period of our survey, they decrease to 5.4% during the pre- electoral period).
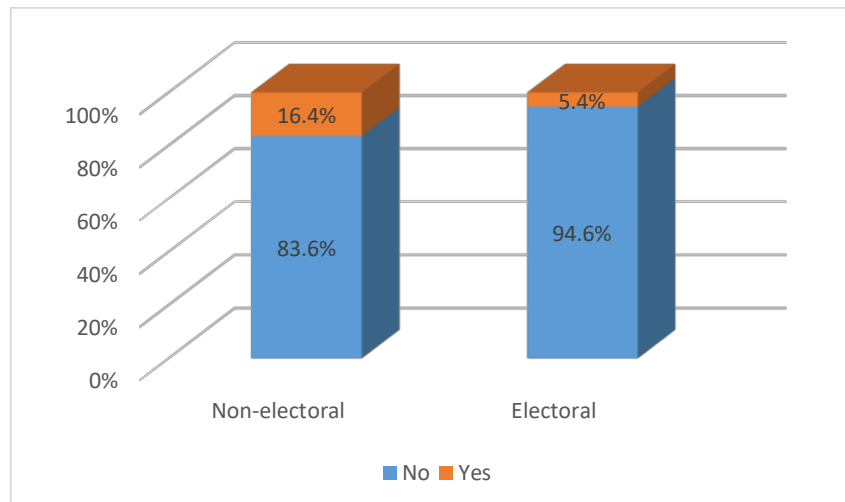

Figure 1: Posts with personal aspects of politics (by period) (fisher's exact p value= .001).

On the other hand, the private moments of politicians appear to have a constant presence in both periods of our research. According to Figure 2, the viewing rates of private moments on Instagram are almost identical for both non- electoral and electoral periods (7.7% and 7.1% respectively). This fact probably indicates the application of a certain communication strategy based on content that accords to the promotion of the private moments of politicians, who consistently choose to show instances from their private lives, since this reinforces the "quasi-social" "face to face" relationship with their followers (Avedissian, 2016: 6). According to these results, we partially accept our first working hypothesis about the constant existence of personal and private posts by politicians in both pre- electoral and non- electoral periods.
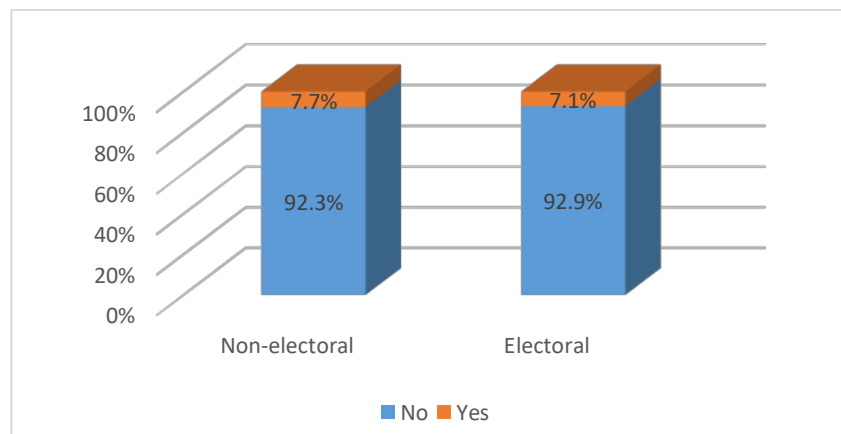

Figure 2: Posts with private aspects of politics (per period) (fisher's exact p value= 1,000).

In addition, we expect that politicians through their posts will primarily attempt to build their own profile, rather than to attack their political opponents. According to Figure 3 politicians use Instagram almost exclusively as a means of "positive" self-promotion during both periods of our survey (85% during the non- electoral period and 87.5% during the consecutive electoral

periods of 2019). This is an interesting finding, especially in the polarized political sphere of Greece, in which the rationale of cross-blaming is a widespread practice, especially during the "crisis" (Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016). Based on this finding we reject our second working hypothesis.
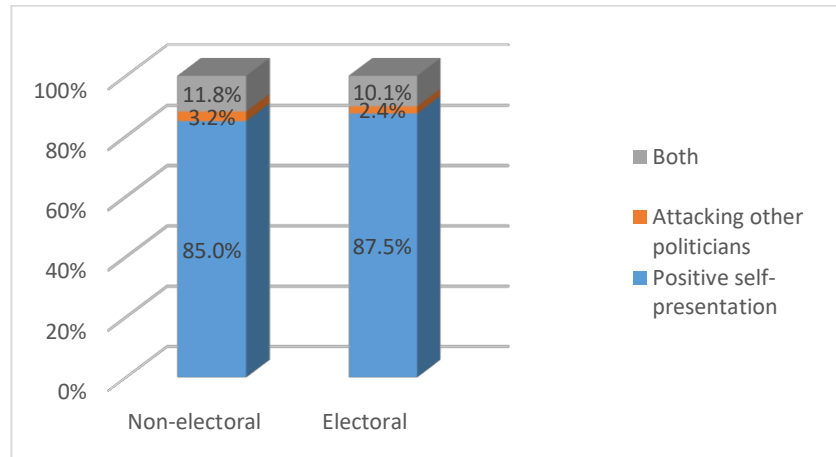

Figure 3: Positive self-presentation or "attack" on political opponents by period (chi-square p value= .766).

In a similar vein to the focus on the positive self-promotion, the portrayal of politicians itself can be spotted in most of the posts. As Figure 4 shows, the already high rate of depiction of politicians in the non- electoral period of our survey (79.5%) increases even more during the electoral period (88.1%), which reveals the strongly individual-centric rationale of the politicians' communication strategy through Instagram, especially during the pre- electoral period.
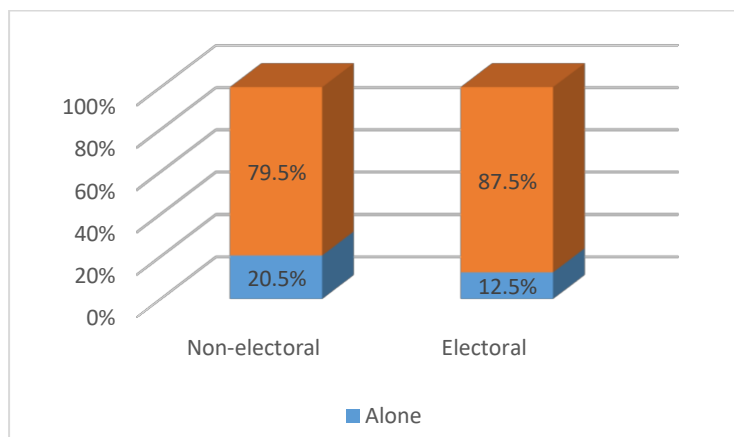

Figure 4: Depiction of politicians in their posts by period (fisher's exact p value= .028).

In addition to publishing personal and private moments, the politicians' posts on Instagram also include professional aspects of their lives. Primarily, politicians displayed their participation in political events such as speeches and visits-tours in various places, either in Greece or abroad. These visits-tours show a clear upward trend during the pre- electoral period of our survey (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of professional content of posts (per period).

	Non-electoral period (2018)		Pre-electoral period (2018)		Fisher's exact p value
	No	Yes	No	Yes	
Everyday professional routine	198 (90%)	22 (10%)	166 (98,8%)	2 (1,2%)	**0.000**
Political events	100 (45,5%)	120 (54,5%)	52 (31%)	116 (69%)	**0.005**
Political Party Material	189 (85,9%)	31 (14,1%)	152 (90,5%)	16 (9,5%)	0.209
Media exposure	208 (94,5%)	12 (5,5%)	158 (94%)	10 (6%)	0.829

An additional element that strengthens the creation of a positive profile, is the highlighting of the "connection" - through meetings, discussions, collaborations - with important political actors/bodies (politicians, citizens, celebrities, media professionals, NGO representatives and entrepreneurs). According to Table 2, politicians primarily focus on connecting with citizens, non-political actors, and politicians (especially during the pre- electoral period), while they do not highlight their contacts with media professionals and celebrities.

Table 2: Depicted "connectedness" of politicians, per period.

	Non-electoral period (2018)		Pre-electoral period (2018)		Fisher's exact p value
Connection with:	No	Yes	No	Yes	
Politicians	156 (70,9%	64 (29,1%)	133 (79,2%)	35 (20,8%)	0.078
Media professionals	210 (95,5%)	10 (4,5%)	155 (92,3%)	13 (7,7%)	0.200
Celebrities	220 (100%)	0 (0%)	166 (98,8%)	2 (1,2%)	0.18
Non-political actors	200 (90,9%)	20 (9,1%)	134 (79,8%)	34 (20,2%)	**0.002**
Citizens	164 (74,5%)	56 (25,5%)	79 (47%)	89 (53%)	**0.000**

Discussion

In this research, we compared the visual communication strategies of three Greek politicians on Instagram during two different periods, a non- electoral period and a pre- electoral period, in order to identify similarities and differences between these two periods.

As far as similarities are concerned, they can be traced to the consistent depiction of politicians' private lives, which highlights the links between political communication and celebrity culture in social media (Ekman and Widholm, 2017: 18). Moreover, according to Langer's approach (2010: 61), this projection of the private sphere remains at the core of "politics", as the aspects of politicians' private lives are used in order to craft their leadership profile.

The similarities between the two periods include the politicians' effort to project a positive image of themselves, rather than attacking political opponents. Although previous research has highlighted the polarization of public political discourse, especially within "crisis"

(Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016), image-centric posts on Instagram seem to be predominantly aimed at creating a positive image of the respective politician.

As for the differences between the two periods, they can be traced to the increased depiction of politicians during the pre- electoral period, which highlights the person-centered communication strategy followed on Instagram. At the same time, this increased visibility of politicians during the pre- electoral period takes a more exact political dimension, as personal moments (van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011) are reduced, possibly in favor of posts that promoting political events and "connect" with citizens and non-political actors (e.g., members of pressure groups).

It should be taken into account, that the research of a dynamically growing social network, such as Instagram, requires constant renewal of empirical data. A future extension of the present research is to examine comparatively the ways in which different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are involved in the process of political communication, and in particular if they convey the same message, or they act in complementary ways (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2017: 31).

The present research could also be extended to the analysis of structural features of Instagram posts (Ekman & Widholm, 2017) or focus on the ways in which users interact with the political messages disseminated through this platform. In any case, the development of Instagram as a social networking site and its subsequent political use, indicate that it constitutes an extremely conducive research field for political communication.

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