

Chapter 8

Who is in the news? Personalized political news in comparative perspective

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Introduction

Is political news about individual politicians or rather about political institutions? This question is guiding the growing literature on the personalization of media coverage, a hot topic in both political science and communication science. Several studies indicate that the degree of personalization in the news affects both ordinary people and politicians. First, personalized news coverage might influence the perceptions of the general public about who are the central players in politics. From a normative perspective, personalization might be seen as a threat to parliamentary systems where traditionally the party, not the candidate, stood at the centre of the political process (Shenhav & Sheafer, 2008). More generally literature on personalization suggest that the political system is presented as the domain or battlefield of individual actors and as a consequence the public gets little insight into more fundamental power structures (Bennett, 1996, p. 51). Furthermore, for some authors studying presidential systems (US and France) more visibility is given to actors, at the expense of issue coverage (Gerstlé, Davis, & Duhamel, 1991). Other scholars, however, have argued that this trend does not necessarily imply a shift away from substantive news coverage in parliamentary regimes. They argue that it is not because the news features individual politicians that it would be less about issues (Oegema & Kleinnijenhuis, 2000), but rather that individual politicians are the spokespersons of the parties' ideas. Second, as been shown in the Israeli case, a more personalized news coverage can affect the behaviour of politician. As journalists focus more on individual politicians, these politicians

in turn showed more personalized behaviour in parliament (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). In short, the degree of personalization in the news is not merely a question of presentation.

Besides the debate about the consequences of personalized news coverage, there is also an ongoing empirical debate on the degree of personalization in the news (Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). There is, however, a lack of conceptual clarity and an absence of common operationalization, so that no definitive conclusions can be stressed on this issue. In general, there is a consensus that the concept of personalization refers to a trend of increased importance for (a select number of) individual politicians at the expense of institutions such as political parties or governments. However, as we argued earlier (Van Aelst et al., 2012), in order to improve our understanding of personalization and its antecedents, it can be useful to study the degree of personalization cross-sectional, at a certain moment in time. Scholars have mainly studied the visibility of (leading) politicians (versus institutions) during election campaigns (e.g. Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). The findings of these country studies are hard to generalize as they are strongly determined by the national context and even the specific characteristics of the campaign under study. As far as we know comparative studies on personalized media coverage have been exceptional (but see Gerstlé, et al., 1991; Schönbach, De Ridder, & Lauf, 2001), and only recently scholars have gone beyond country borders (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013; Boumans, Boomgaarden, & Vliegenthart, 2013; Kriesi, 2012; Zeh & Hopmann, 2013). These studies have given us more insight to the factors that might explain country differences in the degree of personalization of news coverage. Most of these studies, however, involve only a limited number of countries (between 2 and 6), making it difficult to generalize the effects of systemic factors.

In this chapter we address this shortcoming by a comparative study of routine political news in 16 Western countries. We focus on the visibility of individual politicians (versus institutions) in general and on the ‘concentrated’ visibility of political leaders in particular. Both types of personalization are conceptually different and should be analysed separately (Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer, & Shenhav, 2014; Van Aelst, et al., 2012). After presenting and discussing these indicators of personalized news coverage we also try to explain the differences between outlets and countries using

meso-level variables (type of media organization) and different (political and media) system level characteristics. First, we elaborate on the concept of personalized news coverage and the findings of previous comparative studies on media personalization.

2. Personalized political news in comparative perspective

In recent discussions about the changing features of politics in advanced industrial democracies personalization is considered one of the key developments (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; McAllister, 2007). The central idea is that individual politicians have taken a more central position in politics at the expense of other political institutions, in particular traditional political parties. The concept of personalization is used in relation to the behaviour of voters, political actors, the media, and institutions (Karvonen, 2010; Adam & Maier, 2010). First, voters may increasingly make their electoral choices based on the individual attributes of candidates and leaders in particular (e.g., Aarts, Blais, & Schmitt, 2011; Bittner, 2011; Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012). Second, personalization can be linked to the changing behaviour of candidates and parties. Parties have become electoral-professional organizations: office holders are displaced by professionals with both technical and political skills, emphasizing their personal role in the party governance and strategy (e.g., Negrine, Holtz-Bacha, Mancini, & Papathanassopolous, 2007; Panebianco, 1988). Politicians may act and campaign more as individual actors and less as members of a party (Zittel & Gschwend, 2008). Third, the media may represent politics more as a confrontation of individuals rather than of collectivities. This chapter focuses solely on how the media present individual politicians and political institutions. We will not focus on the behaviour of voters or political actors, but acknowledge that they influence media coverage.

Since the concept of personalization has a clear temporal aspect most of the discussion has concentrated on how political news and election coverage has changed over time. The general impression is that the focus of news coverage has shifted from parties and organizations to candidates and leaders is sometimes—but certainly not always—supported by empirical studies (for an overview

see Van Aelst, et al., 2012). These studies, however, give us some insights in the factors that explain changes in the degree of personalization. For instance, Rahat and Sheafer (2007) show that in Israel a growing degree of media personalization is mainly driven by institutional changes in the political system. These changes led to a more personalized coverage, which in turn influenced the behaviour of politicians. Since political system characteristics are crucial to understand personalization we need comparative studies to better understand the determinants of personalized news coverage.

Kriesi (2012) compared the election coverage in six European countries over time. The study did not find a general trend towards personalization, but rather observed large country difference in the degree of personalized coverage. The most outspoken difference in media coverage was between France, characterized by its (semi) presidential system, and the five other countries (UK, Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Switzerland). The importance of the presidential system is also pointed out by Gerstlé et al. (1991). Kriesi (2012, p. 841) attributed those differences to the “institutional arrangements of the respective political systems, with the overall regime type and the electoral system accounting for most of the differences.” In most countries he found the same levels of personalized coverage across media outlets.

The study also distinguished between general visibility of politicians and the concentration of media coverage on a few top leaders. Both types of personalization are related, but far from identical (see also Balmas, et al., 2014). For instance, the general share for individual politicians (compared to institutions) was only slightly higher in the UK compared to the Netherlands. The focus on a limited number of political leaders, however, differed substantially with the degree of concentration being much higher in the UK. This finding is confirmed by the two-country comparison by Boumans et al. (2013). In particular when it comes to the role of the prime minister both countries differ. Their study shows that in the UK attention has been increasingly focused on the political leader, while in the Netherlands the prime minister even loses visibility in comparison with other ministers. In the Dutch case the prime minister is only highly visible in campaign periods, but far less during routine periods. Also Schönbach and colleagues (2001) found a clear difference in attention for the political leader in election coverage between Germany and the Netherlands, with the Dutch Prime Minister being

relative less visible in comparison to the German Chancellor. According to the authors of both two-country studies it is likely that the media system (higher degree of commercialization, journalistic culture) in interaction with a political system where power is more or less concentrated can account for these differences.

Based on the literature on personalization and insights from previous comparative studies we formulate eight hypotheses that can be used to explain differences in the extent of personalized coverage. The first three hypotheses deal with country variation and focus on the main distinctions between the type of media organizations. The next five hypotheses relate to systemic characteristics that can account for differences between countries.

In general television is seen as a driving force behind the personalization of politics (Hart, 1992; Meyrowitz, 1985). In particular because persons are better suited to be visualized than institutions we expect television news coverage to be more personalized compared to newspapers. In addition, we expect that the greater the commercial pressure, the more personalized the media coverage of politics will be. This expectation follows from the general idea of news values (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). News about persons is expected to be more easy to comprehend and more attractive for the audience (Luhmann, 2000). In particular, commercial television channels are supposed to be more oriented towards audience and, then, towards celebrity politicians (Bourdieu, 1998; Darras, 2005). Along the same vein we can expect that popular or mass-market newspaper are focused on persons, looking at their gesture more than at their policies, and by doing this explaining political institutions to their reader by focusing on the central role of leading politicians (Karvonen, 2010).

H1: Television coverage is more personalized than newspaper coverage.

H2: Commercial television covers politics in a more personalized way than public television.

H3: Mass-market newspapers cover politics in a more personalized way than up-market newspapers.

In line with the idea of commercial pressure we can expect that on a media system level more competition can lead to more personalized coverage. This expectation can be measured by the number of television channels with a media market, or by the number of national dailies. It seems plausible that in media-saturated democracies journalists as well as political actors are trying to gain readers or visibility by personalizing (and even more by intimating) politics (Stanyer, 2013).

H4: The higher the number of national television channels, the higher the degree of personalized coverage.

H5: The higher the number of paid national dailies, the higher the degree of personalized coverage.

Previous studies have referred to the political system to explain country differences but are not able to identify the precise characteristics that drive personalized coverage. We can expect that news coverage of politics to a large extent reflect the political power structures of a country (Wolfsfeld, 2011), meaning that in countries with more political institutions (multi-level of governance, multi-party system, etc.) the chance is higher that coverage is less personalized. In their comparative study of international news coverage in six countries Balmas & Sheafer (2013) found that the coverage of countries with a two-party system is more personalized than those of multi-party-systems. In the same line we argue that in federal countries, that are characterized by forms of multi-level government attention for institutions is higher. In these countries power is shared among multiple actors and less centralized in the hands of a few individuals. The degree of federalism relates to one of the two central dimensions of *Patterns of Democracy*, the seminal work of Lijphart (1999/2012), to distinguish between countries where power is centralized and countries where power is shared. Also the electoral system is an important feature in the study of Lijphart and may also play a role in terms of news coverage. The main distinction in the literature is made between majoritarian systems where usually the candidate that is supported by the highest number of voters ‘takes it all’, and systems that are characterized by proportional representation (Lijphart, 2012, p. 130). More personalized coverage may be expected in countries with a majority electoral system, where there is a greater focus on single

candidates, compares with countries with proportional representation, in which the electoral system may emphasize parties to a greater extent. Also countries that have a mixed-member electoral system, such as Germany, have a higher degree of personalization (Zittel & Gswend, 2008) that might lead to more personalized coverage. The electoral system has also a clear impact on the number of parties, with proportional representation leading to overall more parties in parliament (Farrell, 2001). Again this would strengthen the division of power over more actors and might lead to less personalized coverage.

H6: The more centralized (or the less “federal”) the political system, the higher the degree of personalized coverage.

H7: The level of personalized coverage is higher in majoritarian or mixed electoral systems compared with systems that have list proportional representation

3. Data & Methodology

The analyses are based on comparative content analyses of the political news in 16 countries. Our data set contains a selection of news items from newspapers, television news, and online news sites in routine periods. For more information on the data see Chapter 2.

For each news item the first five actors were coded. We used an elaborate code scheme for all types of actors, including all domestic and international political actors, but also non-political actors. Furthermore, each actor had to be mentioned at least twice in the news item. In this way we assured that the political actors that were included in our analyses have a prominent position in the news item and were not mentioned on the side. In total almost 29,000 actors were coded. Our analyses will almost exclusively focus on the 60% national political actors.

In an attempt to explain the extent of personalized coverage in each country we have constructed two main dependent variables. The first measures individualized coverage of politics with a focus on the general visibility of politicians versus all institutions. This variable is the sum of the

number of individual politicians mentioned in the news item (between 0-5) minus the number of institutions mentioned in the news item (0-5). The second deals with concentrated visibility: the relative focus on the prime minister or the head of state. Because the number of leaders is limited to one or two, it is impossible to construct this variable as above. Hence it represents a simple ratio of the number of items in which the leader is mentioned out of the total items analyzed.

In line with the previous chapters we test for three independent media variables: television type (commercial vs. public), newspaper type (mass-market vs. up-market) and online news. As main indicators of concentration and concurrence orientation in media system we use the number of paid national dailies and the number of national television channels.

Three independent political variables were used. A first one is the effective number of parties in parliament as indicator of *pluralism* in political system. A second one explores the level of *federalism* in countries. This variable is based on the index developed by Lijphart (2012) and it distinguishes between political systems where the national government is sovereign relative to its territorial units (1) and full federalism which are systems characterized by sharing of responsibilities between a national authority and semi-autonomous regional units (5). The third is a nominal variable that represents the electoral system and distinguishes between list proportional representation systems (0) and majority or mixed systems (1).

The unit of analysis is the media outlet within a country. As there are 10 outlets within each of the 16 countries analyzed here, the N is 160. Since media outlets are nested within countries we conduct linear regressions with robust standard errors (see chapter 2). Before we turn to the explanatory analyses of personalized news coverage we discuss the descriptives showing the attention for politicians and the main institutions across countries.

4. Descriptive results

Actors in the news

In general, we see that about 8% of actors are non-domestic. This low number is mainly a consequence of our focus on national political news: we only selected those stories that included a domestic political actor (see chapter 2 for details). As a consequence these results tell us little about the share of international actors in the news as most of ‘real’ international news stories are not included. In some cases the high number of international actors is related to the economic situation of the country such as Greece, where international institutions such as the EU and the IMF (together 6%), are often present. In other larger countries such as the UK and Germany it rather seems that their own politicians play a more prominent role on the international scene and therefore more foreign news is domesticated. In France, the low presence of international actors can be rather related to the process of a new government formation and the focus on a few domestic issues that dominated the news (e.g. gay marriage).

Table 1: Type of actors in domestic political news

	International (%)	National (%)		Total Number of Actors
		non-political	political	
Austria	10.8	27.5	61.8	1850
Belgium	4.2	40.6	55.3	1630
Denmark	6.3	31.4	62.3	1792
France	2.9	28.2	68.9	2098
Germany	13.7	30.0	56.3	1933
Greece	11.3	9.3	79.5	1822
Israel	4.8	50.8	44.4	2009
Italy	7.2	18.7	74.1	1659
Netherlands	8.9	26.6	64.5	1776
Norway	3.2	34.6	62.2	1591

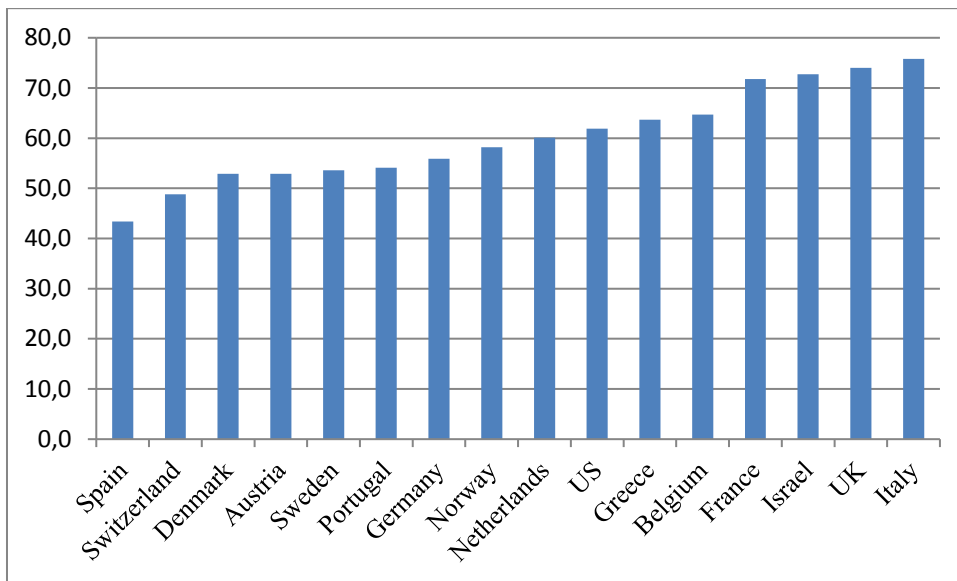
Portugal	7.7	39.4	52.9	2011
Spain	8.9	39.2	51.8	2090
Sweden	4.4	29.6	66.0	1062
Switzerland	8.5	35.0	56.4	1370
UK	12.8	34.4	52.8	2012
US	7.1	43.6	49.3	2137
Total	7.8%	32.8%	59.4%	28842

Since we coded the first five actors in the news, not all domestic actors are political. Almost one third of actors are non-political actors, including e.g., ordinary citizens, companies, civil servants, and police officers. Again, we see large country variation in the presence of these non-political actors. For instance Israel ordinary (non-organized) citizens (13%) and police and military forces (8%) are much more prominent compared to other countries. In Greece on the contrary the percentage of non-political actors is quite low, which might be related to the fiscal crisis that created a crisis of the political world. In the remainder of this chapter we will mainly focus on the largest category of domestic political actors including both individual politicians and political institutions (government, parliament, parties, and ministries).

B. General visibility: Individuals versus institutions

Table 2 shows the percentage of individual actors of the total amount of actors. In general a small majority of actors in most countries are individuals (54%), and this share grows as we include political actors only (61%). These figures mean that the news coverage of political actors is more personalized than the news coverage of all actors that are featured in political news stories (e.g. interest groups, companies). With six out of 10 political actors being persons, political news is indeed personalized, but institutions and groups¹ still play a visible role. The most important institutions are political parties (43% of all references to national political institutions) and government institutions (35%).

Figure 1: Percentage of individual actors versus institutions or groups



As is shown in Figure 1 the variation in degree of personalization between countries is extensive. In countries such as Italy and the UK the news is clearly most personalized with three out of four political actors being an individual. The news is mostly about politicians and not so much about parties and governments. The opposite is true in Switzerland and Spain where political institutions are more present than individual politicians. In the case of Switzerland this has partly to do with the absence of a real prime minister and the government working as a collective unity. Also the longitudinal study of Kriesi (2012) showed that campaign coverage is generally less personalized in Switzerland compared to other countries. In Spain it is remarkable that the news often refers to specific ministries, but less to the responsible minister. For instance, the Ministry of Social affairs is twice as often an actor in the news compared to the Minister (90 versus 46). Although, the US with its presidential system is often considered as a highly personalized country this is not shown in our data. The general visibility of persons versus institutions in US media is very average compared to other European countries.

Most attention in domestic political news is devoted to the executive power. In general, government actors receive about 40% of all attention for national political actors (see Table 2). In

countries such as the UK, Israel, and Portugal government actors represent even more than half of the actors in the news, in Spain the attention for the government is even three-quarters of all actors.

Table 2: Attention for government actors and ratio persons versus institutions in government

	Attention for all government actors	Ratio government Person/institutions
UK	58.4%	4.85
Italy	28.1%	3.86
France	37.0%	3.50
Belgium	42.4%	2.78
Israel	53.4%	2.64
Greece	36.1%	2.42
Germany	32.2%	2.41
Netherlands	31.2%	2.28
Austria	26.9%	1.98
US	42.3%	1.69
Denmark	38.2%	1.47
Norway	44.8%	1.45
Portugal	56.1%	1.14
Sweden	23.3%	1.01
Switzerland	25.5%	1.01
Spain	74.1%	0.88
	40.7%	1.91
	(N=16,000)	

The degree of personalized coverage for government actors is calculated by dividing the attention for persons active in government versus government institutions. Again, the variation of countries is large and mainly in line with the general level of personalized coverage. In countries as Italy, France, and the UK the media focus more than three times as much on persons in government rather than on the government in general or government ministries. In Spain, Switzerland, and also Sweden government is as much or more about institutions than about the people leading the government.

Besides governments also political parties are central players in Western democracies. Although political parties have been challenged by growing voter dealignment and decreasing membership, they have maintained a strong position, in particular in multi-party systems (Dalton, McAllister, & Wattenberg, 2000; Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012). This established position is reflected in the news coverage of most countries, in particular in the Nordic countries and central European countries such as the Netherlands and Austria. In the US, UK and Israel parties have a remarkable low share of media attention. In general, politicians are about ten times more visible than parties. In the UK and Israel references to politicians happen four times as much as references to the party as a whole (not in table). In the UK and the US this overrepresentation can be related to the low number of parties (two and a half and two, respectively).

Table 3: Attention for political parties and ratio politicians versus parties

	Attention for parties	Ratio politicians/parties
Israel	6.0%	12.12
UK	7.3%	10.14
US	7.3%	9.32
France	11.5%	6.24
Italy	14.2%	5.34
Portugal	14.0%	3.86
Germany	14.9%	3.75

Spain	12.7%	3.42
Belgium	19.1%	3.39
Norway	17.8%	3.27
Sweden	29.7%	3.25
Greece	22.4%	2.84
Netherlands	22.2%	2.71
Denmark	24.6%	2.15
Austria	26.1%	2.03
Switzerland	15.0%	1.80
	16.5%	3.72

C. Concentrated visibility: Focus on Leaders

To what extent is the news focused on a few leading politicians? In most countries under study the prime minister is the most powerful political actor and therefore also the most visible person in the news. The degree to which this person² dominates the news varies again strongly across countries. The visibility of the PM is compared to the attention for all domestic political actors clearly most outspoken in the US, UK, and Israel. Barak Obama (19%), David Cameron (17%), and Benjamin Netanyahu (17%) are even more visible than the French President François Hollande (12%). This lower visibility has probably to do with the fact that governmental power in France is shared between the president and the prime minister. When both are taken into account the concentrated visibility of France rises to 18%. Still this is much lower than Kriesi found in his comparative campaign study, where the semi-presidential system of France was far more personalized than that of other countries. This difference might be related to the extreme focus on the main candidates in French presidential elections. Additionally, the intention of Hollande in the beginning of his presidency to be a less ‘omnipresent’ president (compared to Sarkozy) might have influenced news coverage. And at the time of the analysis, the major opposition party (UMP) was in a leadership crisis after internal elections. Italy, that showed the highest degree of personalization in general, scores slightly lower in terms of

concentrated visibility. This lower focus on the leader might be partly due to the specific Prime Minister at the time under study: Mario Monti was not elected but leading an expert cabinet.

Table 4: Attention for Prime Minister and Head of State

	% of PM (or Head of State ³) on all political actors	PM and Head of State	% of articles with PM as actor
US	18.7%	18.7%	43.9%
UK	17.0%	17.8%	37.1%
Israel	16.8%	20.2%	37.9%
France	12.0%	18.0%	34.1%
Italy	10.7%	14.4%	26.6%
Germany	9.1%	11.7%	22.1
Netherlands	9.1%	9.4%	24.1
Greece	8.6%	9.7%	23.0
Spain	7.8%	8.4%	16.8
Norway	7.7%	8.8%	18.2
Portugal	6.9%	11.2%	14.4
Denmark	6.4%	6.6%	16.1
Sweden	4.9%	4.9%	12.6

Belgium	3.9%	4.6%	8.6
Austria	2.6%	3.9%	6.7
Switzerland	1.3%	1.3%	2.9
Total	8.6%	10.4%	22.2%
	(N= 17138 actors)		(N= 7106 articles)

As shown in Table 4, the concentrated visibility is lowest in traditional consensus democracies such as Switzerland, Austria and Belgium⁴. These countries have fragmented multi-party systems and high level of federalism which makes that power is more divided over multiple actors. The extreme low score in Switzerland is due to the very specific government coalition with rotating leadership which makes that there is actually no real prime minister. At the same time, looking at the number of articles dealing with the prime minister or the head of state gives a more contrasted picture where traditional majoritarian countries such as US, UK, and France count more than one third of the articles covering this actor, whereas as this is less than one out of ten in some of the typical consensus democracies.

5. Explanations of Personalized Coverage

To *explain* the extent of personalized coverage we use two main dependent variables: (1) general visibility: the relative focus on individual politicians out of the total coverage of individual politicians and political institutions; and (2) concentrated visibility: the relative focus on top leaders. Above we have introduced several possible explanations for the extent of personalized coverage. We use media organizational variables to clarify intra-country differences (H1-H3) and next introduce characteristics of the media system (H4-H5) and political system (H6-H7) to explain differences between the 16 countries. Before we turn to our multivariate analyses we have a brief look at the

bivariate correlations between the relevant variables. In general, Table 5 shows that outlet variables are hardly correlated with either type of personalized coverage, while the country variables seem much more relevant. Both media and political system variables are strongly correlated to general visibility and concentrated visibility in the news. The correlations for both types of personalization show a similar, but not identical pattern. They have a bivariate correlation of .60. Next, we turn to our regression analyses for a more rigid test of their importance.

Table 5: Correlations between general and concentrated visibility, type of media organization and national factors related to media and political system.

	General visibility	Concentrated visibility
Public Service TV	.009	-.083
Commercial TV	.033	.058
Up-market Newspaper	-.165*	.009
Mass-market Newspaper	.160*	.014
Online website	-.007	-.023
Number of National TV Stations	.306**	.635**
Number of Paid National Dailies	.096	.173*
Level of Federalism	-.237**	-.159*
Electoral System	.310**	.536**
N	160	160

Entries are pearsons R. ** significant at $p < .01$, * significant at $p < .05$

A. General visibility: Individual Politicians vs. Institutions

The focus on individual politicians (versus political institutions) is the most basic measure of personalized media coverage of politics. First, we expected that television news would be more personalized than the coverage of newspapers and websites. Indeed, individual actors are slightly more present in television news (64%) than in newspapers (60%). However, the difference is not significant

(not in table). Newspapers also favour individuals before institutions and television news in turn devotes substantial attention to the main political institutions. When we further distinguish between media organizations we see that the difference in degree of general visibility between commercial (65%) and public television (62%) is also modest and not significant. The difference between mass-market newspapers (66%) and up-market newspapers (58%) is more outspoken. Our regression model 1 confirms that broadsheet newspapers differ significantly from the other media types (H3). We do not find support for hypothesis 2 about the type of television-ownership. Model 2 points out that online media are not less or more personalized than traditional media. This finding is in line with recent studies showing that websites do not change much the form of news, neither in the direction of more commercialization nor in the opposite one (Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig, & Zambrano, 2012).

Table 6: Explanations of General Visibility (Individual Politicians vs. Institutions)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Robust		Robust		Robust	
	B	Std.Err	B	Std.Err	B	Std.Err
Commercial TV	.028	.060	.028	.060	.028	.061
Mass-market Newspaper	.174	.090	.174	.090	.174	.090
Up-market Newspaper	-.126*	.054	-.126*	.054	-.126*	.055
Online website			-.008	.083	-.008	.085
Number of National TV Stations					.000	.000
Number of Paid National Dailies					-.038	.053
Level of Federalism					-.158*	.065
Electoral System					.380	.307
Constant	.542***	.114	.546***	.104	.716	.493
R ²	.038		.038		.269	
N	160		160		160	

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001 *Note:* the statistical analysis is OLS regression with robust standard errors. Public television is the reference category for the media type.

When entering the country variables in Model 3, we see that only one variable is significant: the level of federalism. The number of national television stations and the number of newspaper in a country, important indicators for the degree of commercialization of the media system, turn out not to be significant. The effects of the impact of the number of national television stations (H4) and of the electoral system (H7) goes in the expected direction but are not significant⁵. Figure 2 presents a partial plot (N= 16 countries) that demonstrate the impact of the level of federalism on the dependent variable while holding the other independent variable constant. As can be seen in the regression line in Figure 2 below, the more federalist a country is, the lower is the personalized coverage. This finding might be

mainly related to the higher number of institution that is involved in multi-level governance structures. Yet it is clear that countries are not aligned well around the regression lines, as there seem to be other central effects on personalized coverage which are not accounted for in our analysis.

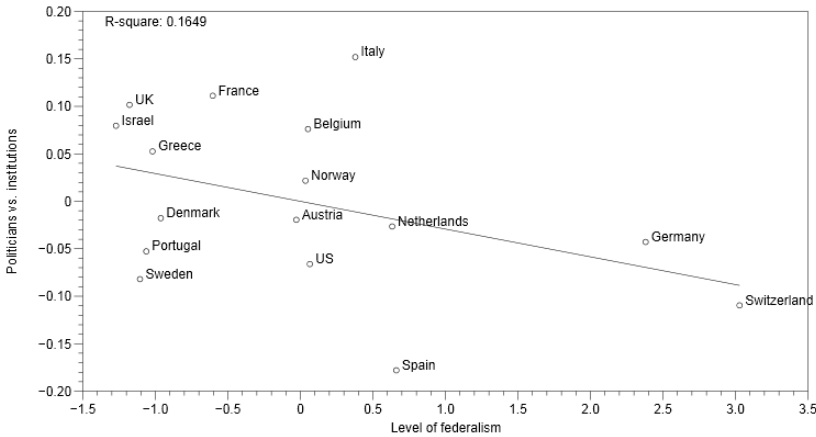


Figure 2. Relative attention to individual politicians (general visibility)

Notes: N=16; R² for the level of federalism= .16

B. Concentrated Visibility: The Focus on Top Leader

As in the case of the focus on individual politicians vs. institutions, the media outlet variables prove to be relatively unimportant to explain the relative attention to the top leader, which is a common operationalization of concentrated media personalization. Only commercial television presents more personalized coverage compares with public television (H2). Turning to the country variables we see that a combination of political-related and media-related variables is at work. As can be seen in Table 7, at the national level the variable found to account best for variations within the dependent variable is, again, the level of federalism (H6). The number of national television stations (H4) has also a significant impact on the dependent variable. Again, the hypotheses on the number of newspapers and the electoral system are not supported (although above the hypothesis on the effect of the electoral system is supported when excluding outliers). We will elaborate on this in the conclusion.

Table 7: Explanations of the Relative Focus on Individual Politicians vs. Institutions

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Robust		Robust		Robust	
	B	Std.Err	B	Std.Err	B	Std.Err
Commercial TV	.037*	.016	.037*	.015	.037*	.016
Mass-market Newspaper	.025	.016	.025	.015	.025	.016
Up-market Newspaper	.023	.017	.023	.017	-.023	.017
Online website			-.006	.013	-.006	.013
Number of National TV Stations					.000***	.000
Number of Paid National Dailies					-.002	.013
Level of Federalism					-.033**	.010
Electoral System					.057	.042
Constant	.193***	.026	.196***	.024	.179	.104
R ²	.008		.009		.538	
N	160		160		160	

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001 *Note:* the statistical analysis is OLS regression with robust standard errors. Public television is the reference category for the media type.

Similarly to the first figure, Figure 3 presents partial plots (N= 16 countries) that demonstrate the impact of each of the two significant national-level independent variables (the level of federalism and the number of national television channels) on the dependent variable while holding the other independent variable constant. As can be seen in the regression lines in Figure 2, the more federalist a country is, the lower is the personalized coverage, and the larger the number of television channels in a country, the greater the focus on national leaders. These figures show us the effect of centralized countries (Israel, France, UK, and Greece for the first graph) and of strong competition to access to large nation-wide audiences (mainly UK and US) in explaining the mediatisation of top leaders. As

above, the graphs clearly show that the impact of the dependent variables on the relative focus on the top leader still leaves much to desire.

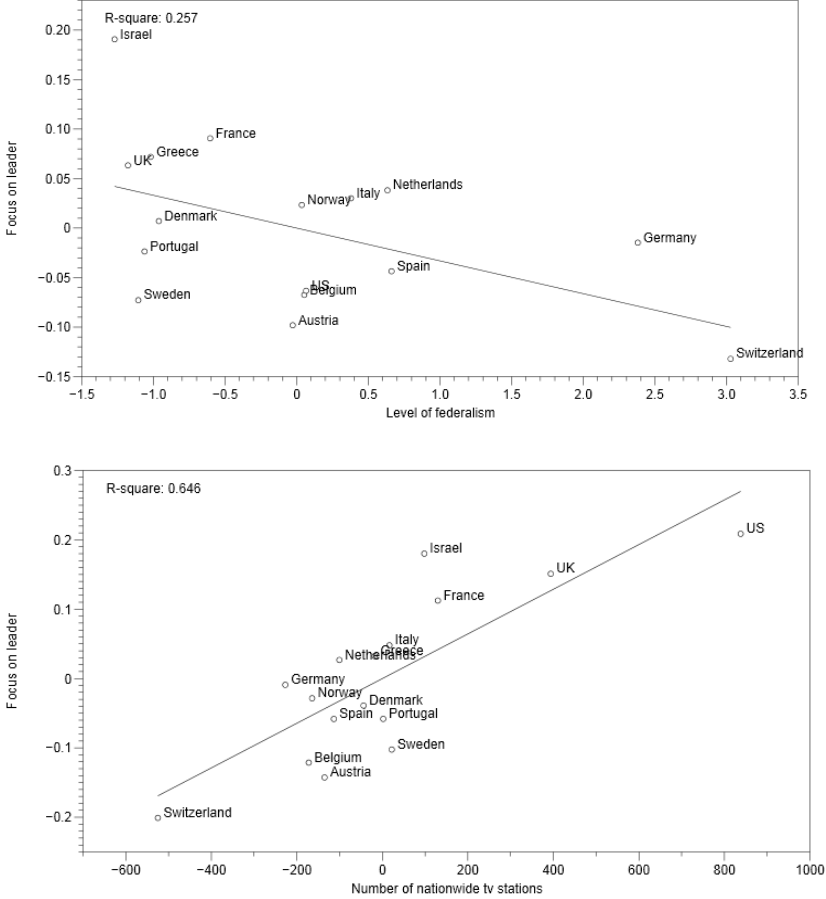


Figure 3. Relative attention to top leaders

Notes: N=16; R² for the level of federalism= .30 and for the number of national television stations = .66.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Our comparative news study shows that in general individual politicians are more prominent in the news compared to political institutions. The degree of personalized political coverage, however, varies strongly across countries. For instance, in Italy and the UK in three out of four cases the central actor in the news is an individual politician. Conversely, in Spain and Switzerland this is less than half. Also when we focus only on top political leaders similar, but not identical, variation among countries

emerges. The difference between both types of personalized coverage is for instance shown in the US that is characterized by an average degree of general visibility, but has the highest degree of concentrated visibility. This result shows that it is important to distinguish between general and concentrated visibility when studying personalization in the news.

It appears that both political and media system variables account for such differences, but it remains difficult to identify the central variables that explain variation in a systematic way. Our study shows that at least two country characteristics matter: the number of television channels and the degree of federalism. First, it is clear that also political features influence the degree of personalized coverage. Our analyses showed that the degree of federalism helps to explain country differences. This is one of the two central dimensions in the work of Lijphart (2012), to distinguish between countries where power is centralized and countries where power is shared among multiple actors. Our study suggests that in typical federal systems (Switzerland and Belgium) there is less personalization of news than in centralized and/or presidential systems (UK and France for example). The electoral system correlated positively with both types of personalized coverage. Although the impact of this variable did not prove to be significant in the general regression models, its impact became significant whenever outlier cases were excluded from the analysis. Probably the explanatory impact of the electoral system might be more outspoken when studying election campaigns. This might explain why, for instance, the visibility of the French president was high, but not in exceptional way as was shown in the campaign study of Kriesi (2012).

Second, it is apparent from our analyses that the number of television channels within a country plays a central role in explaining the centralized form of personalized political coverage. (As noted, the impact of this variable was found to be significant on general visibility after excluding outliers from the analysis). Does this mean that television as a medium is more prone to coverage on a few 'political celebrities'? While this sounds logical (television is expected to prefer individuals over abstract organizations), data does not necessarily support this expectation. The focus on the main political leader (prime minister or the head of state) in television is higher than in 10 out of the 16 countries, but only in Norway the difference is significant. In the six other countries concentrated

visibility is higher in newspapers compared to television, but again the effects are non-significant. Therefore, it might be that rather than the medium, it is the competition among television channels that is the force that drives personalized coverage. Or put differently, in more competitive media environments, news organizations might be more inclined to use personalized coverage to attract a larger audience.

We can also note that in the case of UK, Israel and France, as well as for Switzerland, these effects seem to be cumulative. Media-systems as well as political system had definitely to be thought together (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). Neither the media system, nor the political system is able to explain solely the variation of actors' personalization in political mediatization. The precise interplay of these characteristics, however, remains unclear. For example, there is little evidence that Hallin and Mancini's media system classification (2004) explains this. The most personalized and concurrence affected news-coverage are coming from different type of countries. But as we previously argued (Van Aelst et al., 2012) after this first explanatory study, we still need additional studies to explore the determinants of personalization. We believe at least two paths for further research are worthwhile developing. First, better indicators are necessary to explain country variation. Probably not only the number of institutions play a role, but also their magnitude or political impact. For instance, we lack a measure of the actual strength of institutions like political parties in the political process. Second, our study focused on 'normal' political news in routine periods. This is in contrast with most previous work that mostly deals with campaign periods. It would be good to combine both periods in a longitudinal perspective to improve our understanding of their different dynamics.

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¹ Also reference to a collection of individual politicians such as 'Members of parliament' or 'several politicians of the opposition' were considered as a group.

² Also mentions of the prime minister in his/her function as party leader are included. In some countries (e.g. The Netherlands) this happens frequently.

³ For France and Switzerland we have taken the president as the main political actor.

⁴ In Belgium the visibility of the French-speaking PM Elio Di Rupo is also low as we only included the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) media in our study.

⁵ When outlier cases are excluded from the analysis (using Cook's D statistics; seven outliers were found and excluded), the impact of the number of national television stations and of the electoral system become significant and in the expected direction in line with H4 (the higher the number of national television stations, the greater the personalized coverage) and H7 (the level of personalized coverage is higher in majoritarian or mixed electoral systems compared with systems that have list proportional representation). The impact of the level of federalism continues to be significant in that analysis.