Out of Office

A Quantitative Content Analysis of Swedish Party Leaders' Use of Personalization on Instagram

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Foreword

A big thank you to..

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Abstract

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This study explores the use of personalization on social media by Swedish politicians and its correlation with engagement levels. A quantitative content analysis was conducted using data from the Instagram accounts of three prominent Swedish party leaders—Ulf Kristersson, Magdalena Andersson, and Jimmie Åkesson—collected over a two-year period (2021-2023), with a sample size of 1,287 posts. The study aimed to determine if personalized content is more frequently posted than non-personalized content, if the proportion of personalized content increases closer to elections, and if personalized content generates higher engagement from online audiences. The results revealed that Swedish politicians prioritize party-related content over personal content on Instagram, contradicting previous expectations. Although personalized content received higher engagement, the politicians predominantly shared non-personalized content. These findings enhance the understanding of how politicians use social media to engage with their audiences and provide insights into the types of content that their audiences on social media prefer. Furthermore, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how politicians navigate social media to communicate with their audience and shape public opinion online.

Keywords: Personalization, privatization, political communication, visual communication, Swedish politicians, social media, Instagram, online engagement, likes, quantitative content analysis

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Sammanfattning

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Denna studie utforskar användningen av personalisering på sociala medier av svenska politiker och vilken påverkan det har mätt på engagemang. En kvantitativ innehållsanalys genomfördes med hjälp av data från Instagram-kontona av tre framstående svenska partiledare—Ulf Kristersson, Magdalena Andersson och Jimmie Åkesson—samlad över en tvåårsperiod (2021-2023), med ett urval på 1 287 inlägg. Studien syftade till att avgöra om personaliserat innehåll publiceras oftare än icke-personaliserat innehåll, om andelen personaliserat innehåll ökar närmare val och om personaliserat innehåll genererar mer engagemang från deras publik på sociala medier. Resultaten av denna studie visade att svenska politiker prioriterar parti-relaterat innehåll över personligt innehåll på Instagram, vilket motsäger tidigare förväntningar. Även om personaliserat innehåll fick högre engagemang delade politikerna övervägande icke-personaliserat innehåll. Dessa fynd bidrar till en ökad förståelse av hur politiker använder sociala medier för att engagera sig med sin publik och fördjupade insikter i vilka typer av innehåll politiska målgrupper föredrar på sociala medier. Dessutom bidrar studien till en djupare förståelse av hur politiker navigerar sociala medier för att kommunicera med sin publik och forma den allmänna opinionen digitalt.

Nyckelord: Personalisering, privatisering, politisk kommunikation, visuell kommunikation, svenska politiker, sociala medier, Instagram, digitalt engagemang, gillamarkeringar kvantitativ innehållsanalys

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The rise of social media within the political sphere has reshaped the landscape of contemporary political communication. Through these platforms, politicians now have the ability to create and disseminate their own content to constituents (Dogaru-Tulică, 2019). This shift has not only fostered a more interactive and personalized form of communication, but has also liberated politicians from previous dependence on traditional media to reach their audience. Resulting in many politicians emerging as influential content creators in their own right (Thorlacius, 2023). This shift underscores the increasing significance of personalization in contemporary political communication.

Personalization can be understood as a "process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat & Shaefer, 2007; Rahat & Kenig, 2018, p. 118). This process is multifaceted, evident through transformations in political institutions, shifts in media portrayal and coverage of politics, and alterations in the conduct of both politicians and voters (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). These changes can be attributed into three primary factors: Firstly, the increasing influence of media on politics; secondly, a shift from party-centric to politician-centric focus; lastly, a cultural shift towards valuing individuality over collectivism, known as individualization (Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

In political communication research, social media is frequently viewed as a catalyst for personalized politics (Pedersen, 2024). It can be argued that social media contribute to processes of personalization, due to their digital designs, interactions with other media, and the ability to establish intimate connections with voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Furthermore, while images have always played a role in political communication, the study of visual elements has recently gained increased traction, largely driven by the widespread use of social media platforms within political communication (Farkas & Bene, 2021). By extent, social media such as Instagram offer a platform where visual expression allows

individuals to brand themselves and showcase their everyday lives. The platform's characteristics enable instant actions and intimacy, providing insights to users' personal and professional lives (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Unlike other social media platforms, such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram stands out for its emphasis on visual content. Particularly in its ability to provide intimate portrayals of everyday political activities (Haßler et al., 2023) This visual-centric approach fosters a sense of individualism and encourages performative self-display, where users showcase their personalities for the public to instantly see, in pursuit of likes and comments (Ekholm & Widholm, 2017). This unique focus, largely shaped by the platform's digital architecture and visual focus, positions Instagram as the primary platform of interest for this study.

On instagram, politicians tend to attract more 'likes' and comments on posts showcasing personal aspects of their lives rather than those depicting their public duties (Pamelee et. al,. 2023). In communication research, user engagement on social media has mainly been evaluated using popularity and engagement metrics such as likes, comments and shares, but also through user interactions like friend requests and follows (Blowers, 2012). Increased engagement from the public on social media typically means that politicians are effectively connecting with their constituents, building a stronger online presence, and potentially influencing a wider audience with their messages (Peeters et al., 2023). Thus, it can be argued that engagement metrics provide insight into the success of politicians' social media communication strategies (Bene, 2017).

1.2. Problematization

Scholars hold varied opinions regarding the implications of politics becoming more personalized. Some view it as a threat to democracy, others as an opportunity for its enhancement, and some remain undecided on its consequences (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Simultaneously, the emergence of personalization within the traditionally party-centric Swedish political landscape presents a paradox. While Sweden's political system has traditionally been characterized by strong party influence and collective decision-making processes, where parties with differing ideological beliefs have to cooperate to form coalition governments, the focus tends to be on the party rather than individual candidates (Russman et

al., 2019). Therefore, the growing emphasis on portraying politicians as private individuals challenges established norms and dynamics of political representation (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Hence, this paradox raises fundamental questions regarding the consequences of politics becoming more personalized. Some concerns revolve around the notion that heightened personalization in politics might introduce irrational elements into democratic processes, potentially serving as a driving force behind populist tendencies (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). Other concerns arise from the fear that personalization may result in a shift of focus, prioritizing personal characteristics over policy substance. Additionally, there is a concern that fostering personal connections between leaders and citizens might weaken systems of accountability (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

Considering that social media is frequently regarded as a catalyst for the rise of personalization within political communication research (Pedersen, 2024), and that there is a suggested correlation between increased engagement on social media and politicians ability to reach and connect with a wider audience (Peeters et al., 2023), we argue that there is a need to examine the prevalence of personalized content and its relation to increased popularity and engagement metrics. Furthermore, several studies have examined personalization in relation to political communication on social media platforms (Ekholm & Widholm, 2017; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020; Pedersen, 2024). And in the Scandinavian context, (Filimonov et al., 2016; Larsson, 2017; Russmann et al., 2019). However, there are few studies exploring this area within the Swedish context. Especially, to what extent Swedish political actors employ personalization on Instagram, and their effectiveness in influencing audience engagement. Thus, highlights the need for further investigation into these dynamics within the Swedish political landscape.

1.3. Aim and research questions

This quantitative study aims to examine the Instagram activity of three prominent Swedish party leaders and how it relates to the concept of personalization. More specifically, the study will focus on two main aspects: firstly, the prevalence and distribution of personalized content in comparison to non personalized content on their Instagram accounts; and secondly, the correlation between personalized content and increased levels of popularity, measured

through the number of likes received on their posts. This approach aims to uncover the extent to which Swedish politicians utilize personalized content on their Instagram accounts and assess its effectiveness in driving increased popularity. By extent, it hopes to reveal whether the three prominent Swedish politicians employ personalization strategies when engaging with their audience on social media platforms. Thus, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the role of social media in contemporary political communication, particularly within the Swedish political context. To achieve this aim, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: *Do Swedish politicians prioritize personal content over party-related content on their Instagram accounts?*

RQ2: *Do personalized content in Instagram posts lead to higher engagement?*

1.4. Delimitations

For this study, several delimitations have been established to ensure a focused and comprehensive analysis. Firstly, the study will exclusively examine data sourced from the Instagram platform, encompassing likes on the respective posts as the primary outcome variable. Secondly, this study focuses on the party leaders of the three largest political parties in Sweden; Ulf Kristersson, Magdalena Andersson, and Jimmie Åkesson. Thirdly, the sampled data material is limited to a specific time frame, spanning from September 11, 2021, to September 11, 2023, encompassing one year before and after the election period. Lastly, the variations of personalized content has been confided to four categories of variations within the study area: Personal Content with Connection to Private Sphere, Personal Content with Political Message, Party-Related Content with Connection to Private Sphere and Party-Related Content without Connection to Private Sphere.

1.5. Study setting

Instagram is a popular social media platform where users can share images and create short video clips. Since its launch in 2010, it has become a significant tool for social interaction

and visual communication (Internetstiftelsen, 2023). The study *The Swedes and the Internet* by The Swedish Internet Foundation (2023), found that in Sweden, Instagram is widespread, with 46 percent of internet users using it daily. When asked to select a favored social media platform, one in five Swedes (21%) chose Instagram. The platform's popularity varies across demographics, with individuals born in the 2000s and 1990s exhibiting the highest usage rates. Notably, 46 percent of all internet users aged 8 and above are active on Instagram in Sweden, suggesting a strong presence on the platform. Regarding political engagement, Larsson (2023) observes a growing use of Instagram among Swedish political parties from 2012 to 2018. Although initially being deprioritized due to more established platforms like Facebook and X, Instagram has now gained more interest and focus amongst Swedish parties, underscoring its growing importance within the political landscape (Larsson, 2023).

Furthermore, The Swedish Internet Foundation (2023) found differences in user experiences within their study. Furthermore, users were drawn to the platform for various reasons, including maintaining relationships, receiving brand updates and promotions, sharing personal images, expressing opinions and their identity, and passing time (Internetstiftelsen, 2023).

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

In this chapter, our objective is to review the previous research in the field and contribute insights to the theoretical framework of personalization. This not only guides our study but enhances the overall understanding of the phenomenon. The sections within this chapter are structured in alignment with the existing research questions formulated for our study. Section 2.1 is structured as the theoretical framework utilized by this study and the phenomenon of personalization, followed by a body of previous research within the field of study for this thesis. Ultimately, section 2.3 and 2.4 will culminate in the presentation of three hypotheses formulated based on the insights from the reviewed literature.

2.1 Personalization

Despite the increasing attention on personalization in research, there remains a lack of consensus among scholars regarding its precise definition (Shahaf, 2024). In its broadest sense, personalization refers to a development wherein politicians become the main focal point for people's interpretations and evaluations of political processes, whether due to their political beliefs or other traits (Adam & Maier, 2010). This shift redirects attention from issues or parties to individual politicians, shaping how politics is perceived and engaged with by the public (Adam & Maier, 2010). Put simply, the concept of personalization suggests that individual politicians are not only important in the political process but are also believed to become increasingly significant over time (Garzia, 2014). Recognizing personalization as a long-term process is crucial because it has implications for the possibility to assess the level of personalization at a specific moment in time or in particular contexts (Gatterman, 2022). Therefore, this study will build on a definition that understands personalization as a "process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat & Shaefer, 2007: p.65).

Furthermore, Rahat and Kenig (2018) and Gatterman (2022) suggest that Political personalization should be divided into three types: institutional, media, and behavioral. Each of these can be subdivided into two subtypes: personalization within government and other institutions, controlled and uncontrolled media personalization, and behavioral personalization among politicians and voters. Since this study seeks to explore personalization in relation to social media, the focus is primarily on media-related aspects rather than behavioral or institutional. While behavioral and institutional personalization are important factors for explaining the concept of political personalization, they may not directly align with the scope and objectives of this particular study, which aims to explore the nuances of social media-driven personalization in the political sphere.

However, institutional personalization takes place when institutions such as the parliament, congress or party are reformed in a manner to increase the political weight of an individual actor, like the prime minister or party leader, at the expense of the institution itself and its political groups (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). According to Gatterman (2022), if personalization is considered as a longitudinal process, institutional personalization serves as the initial stage in this process. This is because institutions both influence and shape the level of personalization in media coverage and political behavior over time (Gatterman, 2022). If institutions remain unchanged and allow personalized politics, there may be consistent levels of personalization in media coverage and behavior.

Conversely, institutional changes can impact personalization processes across various dimensions over time (Gatterman, 2022). In turn, the personalization of politicians' behavior is frequently associated with changes in electoral systems that promote personalized campaigning. This connection is seen as stemming from media personalization, where media logic impacts not just media entities and journalists but also political parties and politicians (Gatterman, 2022). Media personalization refers to a process in which the media focus shifts from collective entities, such as political parties or institutions, to individual politicians (Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

There are as previously mentioned two subtypes of media personalization, controlled and uncontrolled. Firstly, controlled media personalization occurs when political actors increasingly use individual-focused messaging, often at the expense of collective groupings

like political parties (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). This phenomenon is evident during election campaigns, where the personal traits of individual politicians, including party leaders at the national level or local candidates, take precedence over party platforms (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). This shift towards individual and personalized communication is also observable on online platforms, where politicians' personal social media accounts tend to be more active and receive more attention than official party channels (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Secondly, uncontrolled media personalization refers to a situation where media coverage disproportionately focuses on individual politicians rather than on broader political groupings or issues (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). This can lead to a narrative where the actions and characteristics of individual politicians overshadow the collective identities of political parties (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). For instance, instead of associating a government with its political party or coalition, the media may start to identify it primarily with its leader (Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

Furthermore, Van Aelst et al. (2012) present a framework that divides personalization into two dimensions: *individualization* and *privatization.* In the first dimension of personalization; individualization, individual politicians are ascribed a more central role in media coverage, while the importance of parties and government institutions declines (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Thus, aligns well with the concept of media personalization. This shift in focus from parties to individual politicians challenges traditional parliamentary systems. Some even regard it as a threat when the candidate takes center stage in the political process instead of the party (Van Aelst et al., 2012). The second dimension of personalization, known as privatization, involves a growing emphasis in the media on depicting politicians as private individuals (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Privatization can be defined as a "media focus on the personal characteristics and personal life of individual candidates" (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007, p.68). For example, these characteristics can be divided into categories such as portrayal of family, personal history, childhood, recreational activities (such as hobbies and vacations), and romantic relationships (Van Aelst et al., 2012). In this study we will primarily focus on the second dimension; privatization as it holds greater relevance in the context of politicians' communication on social media. This differentiation is made because it is reasonable to expect that individual politicians naturally take center stage in the coverage on their personal

Instagram accounts. Consequently, the prevalence of individualization will be more or less self-evident.

2.2 Engagement on social media

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in people using social media for political discourse. This increase can be attributed to the growing perception of social media as crucial for keeping up with political issues (Wang & Liu, 2019). One of the reasons for this could be that social media has brought about new ways of engaging and interacting with political communication, such as participating in online petitions, consuming information or commenting on politicians' posts (Matthes, 2022). Higher levels of engagement from the public on social media generally indicate that politicians are successful in capturing the attention and interest of their audience, effectively conveying their message, and potentially building stronger connections with constituents (Peeters et al., 2023). Put differently, it suggests that politicians maintain an effective online communication strategy.

Additionally, by monitoring and evaluating user engagement on social media platforms, politicians and parties can adjust their electoral strategies to better resonate with voters (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2021). Consequently, scholars are increasingly interested in comprehending the motivations behind individuals' engagement in the online political sphere, particularly in how social media platforms facilitate the dissemination and interaction with political information and how this usage influences political engagement (Wang & Liu, 2019; Young, 2014).

The conceptualization of social media engagement and the factors that influence it present a rather complex entity (Voorveld et al., 2018). In communication research, user engagement on social media has mainly been evaluated using popularity and engagement metrics such as likes, comments and shares, but also through user interactions like friend requests and follows (Blowers, 2012). Moreover, Lipschultz (2022) underscores the power held by social media, noting the shift from conveying public opinion via political surveys to direct engagement on social media platforms. The author suggests that emerging technologies blur the distinction between private and public discourse online (Lipschultz, 2022).

However, critics have raised concerns about using these metrics to measure engagement, since engagement could also be seen as a psychological state (Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). And measuring these simple user interactions does not necessarily mean the user has reached that state of mind (Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). In addition, Peeters et al (2023) states that while engagement with politicians' posts on social media can be a reliable indicator of voter support, it is not without limitations (Peeters et al., 2023). Furthermore, Gustafsson et al. (2021) argues that previous studies on engagement and user interaction with social media posts are ambiguous and often produce results that are inconsistent or contradict each other. This may be a result of many studies focusing solely on specific platforms or organizations and may therefore lack generalizability across contexts (Gustafsson et al., 2021). Additionally, the evolving nature of social media platforms and their intricate algorithms adds complexity to the study of user engagement, as factors influencing engagement may vary over time (Gustafsson et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, some previous research such as that of Bilson et al. (2021) shed light on the significance of social media engagement. Suggesting that there is a positive correlation between Facebook likes and election outcomes. Bilson et al. (2021) uncovered that Facebook likes performed more accurately as an indicator for predicting the total votes in the election than attractiveness- and competency- ratings. These findings suggest an increased level of voter engagement, as evidenced by the activity on social media platforms (Bilson et al., 2021). Similarly, Kristensen et al. (2017) argue that likes are reliable indicators of voter support, serving as a versatile tool for users to express their attitudes. The study found that likes reflect various reasons and preferences, showing how users engage with political content (Kristensen et al., 2017). This is supported by Swani and Labrecque (2020) who emphasize that a single like can signify an attitude and recognition towards the content, page, and/or the sender of content. In summary, the previous research outlined in this section underscores the multifaceted nature of user engagement with political content on social media platforms.

2.3 Personalization on social media

The first research question addresses to what extent Swedish politicians prioritize personal content over party-related content on their Instagram accounts.

RQ1: *Do Swedish politicians prioritize personal content over party-related content on their Instagram accounts?*

This research question is based on the assumption that the rise of personalized politics is closely tied to the increased use of social media within political communication. Enli & Skogerbø (2013) argue that social media contribute to processes of personalization due to their design, features, interaction with other media, and the opportunities they offer for establishing intimate connections with voters.

Previous studies have shown that voters prefer politicians who demonstrate independence from their party and are more open to information that portrays them as individuals rather than just political figures (Metz et al., 2020). Linking political issues to personal experiences can make politicians seem more accessible, potentially fostering greater public connection with both the issues themselves and the candidates advocating for them (McGregor, 2018). Additionally, tailoring communication to the individual can lead to increased feelings of social presence and parasocial interactions (Lee and Oh, 2012).

The latter, parasocial interactions is a term founded by Horton and Wohl in 1956, and refers to a feeling of intimacy that individuals form with public figures. The phenomenon can be understood as a one-sided relationship facilitated by media appearances, leading to the development of perceived relationships between viewers and media personalities (Peng, 2021). Cohen and Holbort (2018) found in their study on support for political leaders in the U.S on social media that "intensity of parasocial relationships voters have with candidates is an important predictor of support for political candidates and actors" (p517). Furthermore, the authors found parasocial interactions to be an even stronger predictor of support than "demographics, policy and ideology, personal political attributes, and media exposure and use" (p. 517). Consequently, given the recognition of increased political support associated with the portrayal and emphasis of politicians' personalities in the media, this study is

anchored within this problem area. However, as this study is limited to examine the sender perspective of personalized communication by politicians, it will not examine the concept of parasocial relations as a whole.

Furthermore, there are good reasons to assume that politicians' social media activity will automatically translate into increased personalized representation (Campbell et al., 2019; Metz et al. 2020; McGregor, 2018). Personalized representation characterized here as politicians prioritizing the promotion of themselves and issues personally significant to them, over their party and its program (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). However, it should be noted that Politicians' ability to achieve their political goals does not only depend on voter support but also on the collective efforts within political parties to advance agendas and maintain reputations over time (Pedersen, 2024). Politicians stand to gain from these collective efforts, providing them with incentives to actively contribute to party promotion (Pedersen, 2024).

Contrary to the perspective of Campbell et al. (2019), Pedersen (2024) argues that due to the diverse incentives social media activity should not be directly equated with personalized representative communication. Instead, politicians' social media activity is likely to involve a mix of managing personal images and promoting their parties (Pedersen, 2024). Additionally, Enli and Skogerbø (2013) underscore that while social media contributes to the personalization of politics, it is not only a result of politicians' social media activity. Instead, they suggest that social media aligns with a broader ongoing shift in political communication, which have increasingly emphasized politicians' personalities and individual characteristics over time (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013).

To assess levels of personalized representation, Pedersen (2024) set out to examine the facebook accounts of 146 Danish members of Parliament over the course of a year. The study uncovered two significant findings; first, while it is clear that politicians utilize Facebook to shape their personal image, they also fulfill their party obligations, and attend to their assigned tasks as spokespersons. Secondly, Pedersen (2024) suggests that contrary to expectations, it is primarily politically secure politicians who engage in personalized communication on social media, suggesting that successful politicians may have greater flexibility in balancing personal and party-related content. This is supported by Shahaf (2024) who observed that political leaders with longer tenures tend to exhibit heightened

personalization and experience a growth in followership on Facebook and X. According to Shahaf (2024), over time veteran party leaders attract more attention on social media than their respective parties and thus assume the role of primary spokespersons for the parties.

Moreover, Guðmundsson and Sverrisson (2019) investigated whether the usage of social media by politicians, however not limited to leaders, contributes to the personalization of the Icelandic political system. They mainly examined whether social media tends to center more around political parties or individual candidates. The key findings suggest that while personalized posts are prevalent across all parties on social media, there is a notable distinction between the more established parties and newer ones (Guðmundsson & Sverrisson 2019). The newer parties prioritized party-political communication on social media, utilizing it as a means to present different policies to voters. In contrast, more established parties utilized social media to engage with voters on a personal level, highlighting the private aspect of their candidates (Guðmundsson & Sverrisson 2019).

Furthermore, Russman et al. (2019) studied how Swedish and Norwegian parties used instagram to present and promote themselves during the election campaigns of the Swedish election in 2014 and the Norwegian election in 2017. The study found that in the Swedish 2014 election, only 5 percent of Instagram posts featured the politicians in a private context, contrary to 20 percent in the 2017 Norwegian election. The authors propose that by positioning the politician as a private individual, political parties convey a more personal and emotionally resonant image of their politicians, foster authenticity and create a sense of closeness between the politician and the public (Russman et al., 2019).

Moreover, Geise et al. (2024) studied personalization as a political campaign tactic on social media during the 2021 German federal election period. The study found that politicians utilize Facebook and Instagram to portray themselves as viable candidates, predominantly employing professional personalization, with more private personalization being rare exceptions. These findings are supported by Metz et al. (2020) who suggests that while personalization within a professional context emerges as one of the most prevalent strategies online, personalization in a private context is rarely employed, despite having great possibility in creating increased audience engagement.

Building upon the previous research outlined in this section, two hypotheses have been formulated. The first hypothesis refers to an increase of personalized content relative to party-related content. This hypothesis is based on the notion that there is an increased use of social media within political communication, and the idea that social media such as Instagram serves as a catalyst for personalized politics. Additionally, given the findings from previous studies as outlined in sections 2.2 and 2.3 indicating that personalized content on social media platforms typically generates higher levels of engagement, it is anticipated that politicians will prioritize the creation and dissemination of such personalized content.

H1: *Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of personal content relative to party-related content in their posts, characterized by an increased focus on aspects of their personal lives, such as family activities, hobbies, and personal achievements, compared to content related to their political party, policy positions, or campaign activities.*

The second hypothesis refers to an expected increase of personalization in closeness to the election. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that if personalized content proves to be effective in creating audience engagement, as outlined in sections 2.2 and 2.3, there should likely be an increase in its use as the election approaches. This reasoning is based on the idea that personalized posts can create stronger connections with voters, making campaign efforts more impactful and relatable. Consequently, as the need to solidify voter support becomes more urgent closer to the election, politicians and parties are likely to intensify their focus on creating and disseminating personalized content.

H2: *Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of personal content in close proximity to the* election.

2.4 Visual political communication on Instagram

The second research question explores the correlation between personalized content and heightened engagement.

RQ2: Do personalized content in Instagram posts lead to higher engagement?

Farkas and Bene (2021) argues that there is a prevalence of personalized content in visual social media communication, and that Instagram tends to favor informal, spontaneous, and non-political visuals, while Facebook leans towards more formal, settled, and politically oriented content. These observations underscore the differing dimensions of personalization between the two platforms, and motivates the choice of Instagram posts as the empirical data this study is based upon. In alignment with the objective held by Farkas and Bene (2021) in relation to visual communication, Russman et al. (2019) factor visual communication as a contributing factor and support to the increased personalization and privatization within political communication. Additionally, the authors observe that through the utilization of Instagram to personalize their messaging, political parties can engage voters through a visualized sense of intimacy (Russman et al., 2019).

In the Swedish context, Ekman and Widholm (2017) studied how Swedish politicians utilize Instagram as a platform for visual political communication, analyzing content from sixteen Swedish politicians' accounts. The study found a significant difference between how individual politicians use instagram, where some use it mainly for dissemination of political messages while others use it to share more private or intimate content as a way of positioning their digital identities (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). However, politicians who adapted a more personal centered communication strategy, sharing intimate and private glimpses into their lives exhibited a higher network centrality and following compared to politicians who predominantly focused on disseminating political messages (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). In addition, Filimonov et al. (2016) observed that Instagram accounts of Swedish parties exhibited heightened levels of personalization in their visual content.

Moreover, Larsson (2017) conducted an in-depth analysis of the engagement patterns of Norwegian political parties and politicians on Instagram. Notably, individual politicians

consistently received higher levels of engagement compared to traditional political parties on the platform. Furthermore, whilst examining what type of content drives engagement for parties as well as individual politicians, the study found that political parties tend to amplify their engagement when focusing on election-related and policy-centric issues. Conversely, individual politicians achieved notable success by leveraging more personalized content strategies. Larsson (2017) proposes that this trend might be due to the significantly more personalized content shared on individual politicians' accounts.

Thorlacius (2023) explores how Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen strategically presents herself on Instagram following the 2019 election. She combines artistry and humor, offering behind-the-scenes moments to connect authentically with her audience. By sharing relatable instances like morning runs and makeup-free selfies, Frederiksen deepens intimacy with followers, aligning with celebrity culture dynamics (Thorlacius, 2023). Thorlacius (2023) further suggests that the findings are a result of Instagram followers prioritizing glimpses into politicians' private lives and softer political content rather than gaining insights into politicians' primary political agendas. Additionally, Larsson (2023) discovered that populist parties in Sweden, despite initially adopting Instagram later, eventually exhibited higher levels of engagement compared to non-populist parties. This suggests their effectiveness in leveraging the platform's visually-oriented communication approach. Hence, Larsson (2023) noted a potential shift towards prioritizing audiovisual content in political communication strategies among Swedish parties.

Metz et al. (2020) discovered that self-personalization was a common feature in politicians' Facebook posts, particularly within visual content. The author suggests that adopting a private and emotional communication style is most effective for managing the impression of politicians. This implies that audiences prefer a more intimate and emotionally engaging portrayal of public figures online (Metz et al., 2020). Similarly, Peng (2021) studied U.S. politicians' Instagram feeds and how various content categories influence audience engagement, with a particular emphasis on the role of personalization. While the study found that a substantial amount of politicians' Instagram posts centered around traditional political activities, these tended to get less engagement. Conversely, nonpolitical and private content attracted more likes (Peng, 2021), aligning with prior research suggesting that personalized

content receives more audience engagement on social media platforms. Furthermore, Peng (2021) argues that this trend may be attributed to users' desire for more relatable communication on social media.

Based on the previous research provided by this section, it is evident that politicians utilize Instagram as a platform for political communication in two distinct manners; posting more traditional party-related content, as well as self-presentation to better connect to their audiences. From this, scholars have pointed out the latter as an effective way of gaining engagement on social media, as the earlier studies collectively demonstrate the significance of personalized content in driving engagement and popularity on Instagram among politicians (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Larsson, 2017; Metz et al., 2020; Peng, 2021; Thorlacius, 2023. Thus, we have formulated the following hypothesis:

H3: *Personalized content on Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts correlates positively with higher levels of popularity in comparison to party related content, measured through the popularity indicator likes.*

Conclusively, throughout this literature review, the following 3 hypotheses (Ha) have been presented, as well as formulated null hypotheses (H0):

Descriptive:
H1: *Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of personal content relative to party-related content in their posts, characterized by an increased focus on aspects of their personal lives, such as family activities, hobbies, and personal achievements, compared to content related to their political party, policy positions, or campaign activities.*

> **H0:** *Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of party-related content without relation to the private sphere.*

Comparative:

H2: *Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of personal content in close proximity to the election.*

> ***H0:*** *There is no significant difference in the proportion of personal content on Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts in close proximity to the election compared to other periods.*

Associative:

H3: *Personalized content on Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts correlates positively with higher levels of popularity in comparison to party related content, measured through the popularity indicator likes.*

> ***H0:*** *There is no significant positive correlation between personalized content on Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts and a higher level of popularity, as measured by the engagement indicator likes, compared to party-related content.*

3. Method

The following section outlines the methodological framework utilized in this study, including the scientific approach, content analysis methodology, sampling technique, coding scheme, incorporation of validity and reliability measures and data analysis. Each component will be discussed and reflected upon for their selection and implementation throughout the research and data analysis phases.

3.1 Scientific approach

The scientific approach of this study stems from a positivistic paradigm and adopts a post-positivist perspective. This is due to deductive reasoning made in order to test the hypothesis, however still acknowledging the complexities in conducting quantitative research on a social phenomena. Alas, the purely positivist conception of an entirely objective reality is challenged by the presence of subjectivity and diverse perspectives, thereby necessitating a nuanced consideration of these factors (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021).

In this study, adopting a post-positivist perspective acknowledges the limitations inherent in a purely positivist approach. While deductive reasoning is employed to test hypotheses, we recognize the complexities of studying social phenomena, as many natural science researchers reject the notion of employing principles for quantitative research within social science (Bryman, 2011). Hence, we do not rely solely on objective observations but also consider subjective experiences and interpretations within political communication on Instagram. However, despite acknowledging subjectivity and its potential influence, the post-positivist paradigm rather suggests striving to minimize this subjectivity (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021). This approach allows us to explore the nuances of how personalized political communication interacts on social media, understanding that there may be multiple interpretations of the phenomena.

3.2 Content analysis

Weber (1990) defines content analysis as a method for simplifying textual material into more manageable data. Given the extensive volume of data available on Instagram, content analysis provides a structured framework for organizing and analyzing the material. Wrench et al. (2019) expands on the importance of justifying the use of content analysis for specific reasons. Additionally, Weber (1990) suggests that by using content analysis as a research method, researchers are able to identify characteristics and objectives of communicators, identify trends in content, detail reactions and seek the central focuses of individuals, groups, institutions, or society.

As the objective of this study is to investigate the usage of personalization within political communication online, the study focuses on the leaders of prominent political parties within the Swedish parliament. Moreover, the unit of analysis will consist of Instagram posts by respective party leaders. As advised by Wrench et al. (2019) guidance, researchers employ quantitative content analysis to collect qualitative data from textual sources and systematically categorize it into distinct themes or dimensions. These categories, as explained by the authors, will assist the research in distinguishing our set of variables. Hence, the content analysis will involve a detailed examination of the sampled Instagram posts shared by these political leaders, with a strong focus on the levels of personalization evident in their communication.

Hence, this study will employ an operationalization of the variable personalization, which will be further expanded upon in section *4.4 Operationalization and Coding scheme*. Furthermore, the data collected through this analysis will be organized and examined to identify recurring patterns associated with personalized content. Through this, we will explore the relationship between personalized communication and audience engagement metric measuring popularity: likes. Likes will serve as the outcome variable in our examination of how the use of personalized communication strategies influences audience engagement on Instagram.

3.3 Sampling

For the purposes of this study, we have opted to analyze Instagram posts by the leaders of the three largest political parties in Sweden during the time period 2021.09.11 - 2023.09.11. This selection was based on the results of the Party Sympathy Survey conducted in May 2023 by the Swedish Statistics Bureau (SCB), which identified The Social Democratic Party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Moderate Party as the top three parties in terms of public support. Consequently, the leaders of these parties, Magdalena Andersson (The Social Democratic Party), Jimmie Åkesson (Sweden Democrats), and Ulf Kristersson (The Moderate Party), were chosen as subjects for this study. The three politicians were selected through a purposive sampling, as their specific characteristics of leaders of prominent political parties were of interest in this study. By employing a purposive sampling method, we can gather and analyze data from the intended sample more effectively (Wrench et al., 2019). This selection is predicated on the notion that these leaders represent their respective political parties and serve as the public faces of their parties. By examining their Instagram posts, we can gain insights into how and to what extent they utilize personalization to increase engagement among their followers.

As leaders of prominent political parties, they attract significant public attention, and their Instagram posts are therefore of particular interest to the public and may have a considerable impact on public opinion. However, it is of importance to note that more secure and veteran politicians tend to exhibit more personalized content on social media, as highlighted by Pedersen (2024) and Shahaf (2024). Alas, including a larger variety of politicians for this study could potentially lead to variations in results. However, selecting three out of the eight party leaders in the Swedish parliament was considered to align with the objective held by this study to investigate prominent Swedish politicians.

The selected sampling period for the posts, ranging from September 11, 2021 to September 11, 2023, is strategically aligned with the Swedish election held on September 11, 2022. This timeframe spans one year before the election and extends one year after, providing a comprehensive view of Instagram activity surrounding the election period. This period allows for the investigation of research questions and hypotheses presented in this study. Firstly, it enables the examination of the extent to which Swedish politicians prioritize

personal content over party-related content on their Instagram accounts, and whether this prioritization varies over time and in relation to the election. Additionally, it facilitates the exploration of Hypothesis 2, which seeks to understand whether personalized content is uploaded more frequently in connection with the election. Contrary, previous research within the field of political communication tends to focus solely on the time frame of election campaigns. However, given that this study's objective extends beyond election-centric communication, the need for a more expansive temporal framework was deemed necessary. Furthermore, by including two different terms of office, this timeframe may reveal differences in Instagram usage and content strategies across different political periods. Thus, the chosen timeframe effectively captures key political events and transitions, providing further insights into political communication on social media.

Consequently, the purpose of the sampling method used in this study enables us to make generalizations of leading Swedish politicians' usage of personalized content online. Moreover, in terms of collecting our specific data from the party leaders, the study stems from an exhaustive sampling method, including all data found from the party leaders' during the set time frame (Djurfeldt et al., 2018). Hence, due to the extensive data material on the three Instagram accounts during this time period, the data material was retrieved using the data analysis tool CrowdTangle. The meta-tool allowed us to retrieve all posts from the party leaders during this time period, as well as gaining access to the date of posting, likes and URL links to post, which was used for the study (CrowdTangle, 2024). Through the link to each post, we were able to examine all posts during this time period from the three party leaders (N= 1287), and manually code each post by accessing the links.

Initially, 1287 posts were retrieved. However, some posts were excluded from the analysis for various reasons: collaborative posting with other accounts and due to being posted from livestream. Ultimately, 1281 posts were used for the analysis.
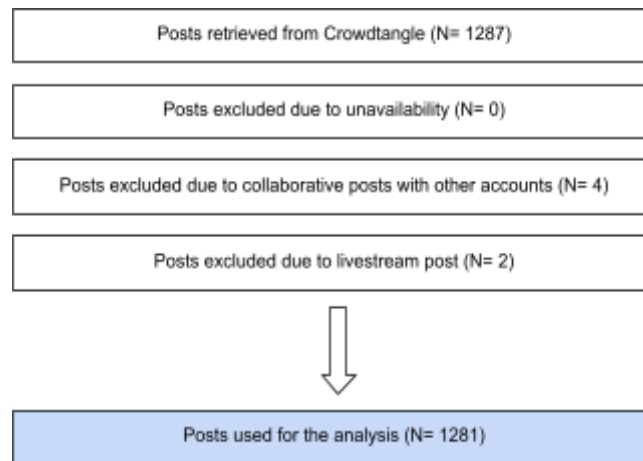
Figure 2. Posts selected for analysis from CrowdTangle.

3.4 Operationalization and Coding Scheme

As this study focuses on a social phenomenon with qualitative attributes, we collected information and translated it into quantifiable data using coding techniques. This approach supports our quantitative research by converting qualitative elements into numerical values. (Bryman, 2011). Ultimately, the data material was ascribed to different categorizations of personalization, provided by our coding scheme. The coding was deductively mapped out by reference to the distinctions made within the realm of personalization and differentiation to the category of privatization, as suggested by Rahat and Kenig (2018), Van Aelst et al. (2012) and Enli and Skogerbø, (2013). To ensure a clear and precise explanation of the operationalization process, a codebook was developed, in line with the recommendations by Wrench et al. (2019). The authors suggest that the codebook should be sufficiently detailed and straightforward, allowing others to use it to code the material independently. Thus, the codebook was created, which allowed us to categorize the material into distinctive categories. The categories have been vital in coding the material, marked as 1,2,3 and 4; which makes up for the distinction of the degree of personalization and content (see Appendix 1 for codebook).

3.5 Reliability and Validity

In order to guarantee that the data gathered appropriately reflects the phenomenon being examined, reliability is crucial in research. Reliability is concerned about the accuracy of what is being measured, rather than its relevance and instead questions how we measure it (Djurfeldt et al., 2018). Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2021) suggests that in order to seek reliable quantitative data, the outcome of the results should be rather consistent if we were to repeat the study. To enhance the study's reliability, both authors collaborated in coding and categorizing the collected data. We established a coding scheme based on the theoretical framework provided in this study and the categorization was created through consensus between the authors. Wrench et al. (2019) suggests that researchers code an initial set of data separately in order to compare and ensure the intercoder reliability.

Thus, in order to minimize subjectivity and ensure reliability, we independently coded 5 percent (N= 65) of the total sample (N= 1287). Then, Cohen's kappa was calculated in order to ensure that the intercoder reliability was sufficient, where the results $\kappa \approx 0.8149$ (see appendix 3 for calculation). This indicated a positive outcome, as a Kappa result exceeding 0.70 indicates satisfactory intercoder reliability (Wrench et al., 2019). Once confirmed consensus in our coding approach, the remaining material was coded independently. Moreover, the data collected from Crowdtangle, including the measured engagement (likes), was verified manually by accessing the links to the post and ensuring that the information provided by CrowdTangle was correct.

Furthermore, quantitative research aims to achieve both validity and reliability in its findings. Validity deals with whether the measurement accurately assesses what it intends to measure. It ensures that the research target aligns with the intended subject matter, reflecting theoretical principles and assumptions, and that the questions asked are meaningfully quantifiable, reflecting the desired outcomes of the study (Djurfelt et al., 2018). Additionally, Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2021) discusses the importance of external validity, which refers to whether the study and its result holds the ability to extend findings beyond the specific study. By employing an exhaustive sampling method that includes all posts from the leaders of Sweden's three biggest parties over a two-year period (2021-09-11 to 2023-09-11), this study aims to enhance its external validity. The extensive data from these influential

political figures provide a foundation for understanding how prominent Swedish politicians use personalization online.

3.6 Ethical considerations

When sampling data from online and social media sources, there are a number of ethical considerations to be made. Researchers are accountable for upholding transparency, securing informed consent, and safeguarding data privacy throughout the research process (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021). However, given that the subjects under study are public figures, and their posts are intended for public consumption, the collection of data can be viewed as ethically permissible. Furthermore, Wrench et al. (2019) expands their thoughts on subjective ethics on the topic of good means, bad end; suggesting that even though the purpose and ethical criterias were applied throughout the research process, the outcome and use of the research could still potentially hold the risk of experiencing challenging ethics. For instance, the authors propose that when studying political communication and how to effectively deliver political messages, politicians may use this research as a way of manipulating audiences to get elected. As this topic is of high relevance to this study, it makes for an ethical standpoint to which we as researchers have to reflect on the outcome of studying political communication and its effects on the political landscape. Therefore, as researchers, it is important for us to critically reflect on the ethical dimensions of our investigation into political communication and its influence on the political landscape.

Furthermore, ethical considerations are relevant to discuss in relation to the data collection method itself. Using CrowdTangle, a meta-tool owned by Facebook, journalists and researchers are able to gather extensive data and monitor the social media landscape on Facebook and Instagram (Crowdtangle, 2024). However, employing a data analysis tool owned by the same company, Meta, for this study might not be considered ethically problematic, as the tool facilitates post retrieval while the interpretation and significance of the results are determined independently.

3.7 Data Analysis

In order to evaluate hypothesis 1, the initial step involved calculating the frequency of each content category.   This provided an initial overview of the frequency distribution of content categories. Additionally, the number of posts in each content category was converted into percentages relative to the total number of posts. This allowed for a comparison of the prevalence between each content category. A Chi-square test was also conducted to evaluate the potential correlation between content categories and politicians' Instagram accounts. This test aimed to determine whether the observed distribution of content categories significantly deviated from what would be anticipated under the null hypothesis of no association (Djurfeldt, 2018).

To test Hypothesis 2, which concerned the distribution of content categories before and after the election, the frequencies of each category were examined. The number of posts falling into each content category was counted for both periods; five weeks before and five weeks after the election. This data was then converted into percentages relative to the total number of analyzed posts. This approach made it possible to compare the frequency of each content category between the two time periods. Additionally, a similar analysis was conducted for the six months leading up to the election. This was done to investigate whether there were any changes in the distribution patterns of content categories leading up to the official election campaign period.

To test hypothesis 3, four different approaches were employed. First, the 25 most popular posts from each party leader were selected based on the highest number of likes, resulting in a total of 75 posts in the dataset. Subsequently, we calculated the mean number of likes for each content category among these top 75 most popular posts. The data was then visualized using a bar and a pie chart to illustrate the average likes for each content category, and the frequency distribution in percent. Through this analysis, we aimed to identify any variations in average likes across different content categories among the most popular Instagram posts, and to compare the most popular posts and the entire dataset. The second approach to testing hypothesis 3 involved calculating the mean number of likes for all posts made by the three party leaders (N=1281) posts. The data was then visualized again using a bar chart to illustrate the average likes for each content category, allowing for a comparison

of popularity across the different content categories throughout the entire dataset. This approach also made it possible to gain a brief insight into whether personalized content of Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts in fact exhibits higher levels of popularity in relation to non-personalized content measured in likes.

The third way of testing hypothesis 3 involved examining whether there were significant differences in the mean number of likes across the four content categories of all posts (N=1281). However, first it had to be assessed whether the distribution of likes were normally-distributed as it determines the suitability of certain statistical tests (Wrench et al., 2019). To test the normal-distribution a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted. Based on the Shapiro-Wilk test results, the p-value associated with the likes variable was less than 0.001 ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that the likes variable is not normally distributed (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2010). Therefore, rendered parametric statistical tests that assume normality for analyzing the like variable are non applicable. Thus a non-parametric test was required (Gleason, 2013).

The Kruskal-Wallis test was chosen because it does not assume a normal distribution, making it a suitable alternative to one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Gleason, 2013). The Kruskal-Wallis test was employed to determine if there were significant differences in the mean number of likes across the different content categories. If the Kruskal-Wallis test produces a significant result with a p-value of at least 0.001, it suggests that there are notable differences among the groups (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2010).

However, the Kruskal-Wallis test does not identify which specific groups differ from each other (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2010). To identify these differences a post-hoc pairwise comparisons were performed using the Mann-Whitney U test. This allowed for a pairwise comparison of means between two groups, making it suitable for identifying significant differences between individual content categories (Karadimitriou & Marshall, 2018). However, as these groups are assessed , it brings forth the statistical challenge of conducting multiple comparisons tests, which heightens the likelihood of obtaining false positive statistical outcomes, consequently elevating the risk of type I errors (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2009). To address the increased risk of type I errors resulting from multiple pairwise comparisons, we employed the Bonferroni correction test. This method alters the

significance level for individual comparisons, thereby reducing the risk of type 1 errors (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2009).

The fourth and final way to test hypothesis 3 involved conducting a correlation analysis. This was done to investigate the relationship between different content categories and popularity measured by likes on Instagram posts. By calculating correlation coefficients, it could be determined whether there was a significant association between specific types of content and the level of engagement, as indicated by likes. However, since the correlation analysis demands two continuous variables, dummy variables had to be created for the categorical content types to facilitate this analysis (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021).

4. Results and Analysis

In the forthcoming section, the results found within the study as well as the analysis of these findings will be presented. The results will be aligned with the formulated hypotheses to comprehensively and methodically address them. First, a concise descriptive overview of the results will be provided, followed by the presentation of visualized data sourced from SPSS, the software utilized for data analysis in this study. In the analysis, the following categories were used to classify the content on politicians' Instagram accounts; (1) Pc+Ps - Personal content with connection to private sphere, (2) Pc+Pm - Personal content with political message, (3) Prc+Ps - Party related content with connection to the private sphere, (4) Prc-PS - Party related content without implications to the private sphere.

4.1 Results

4.1.1 H1

H1: Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of personal content relative to party-related content in their posts, characterized by an increased focus on aspects of their personal lives, such as family activities, hobbies, and personal achievements, compared to content related to their political party, policy positions, or campaign activities.

To test hypothesis 1, an initial quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the frequency of each content category within the dataset. The number of posts in each content category was also converted into percentages relative to the total number of posts. This calculation allowed for a comparison of the relative prevalence of each content category This process provided an initial overview of the distribution of content categories (see figure 1).

Content categorization

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Pc+Ps	197	15.4	15.4	15.4
	Pc+Pm	104	8.1	8.1	23.5
	Prc+Ps	123	9.6	9.6	33.1
	Prc–PS	857	66.9	66.9	100.0
	Total	1281	100.0	100.0	

Figure 1. Frequency of each content category
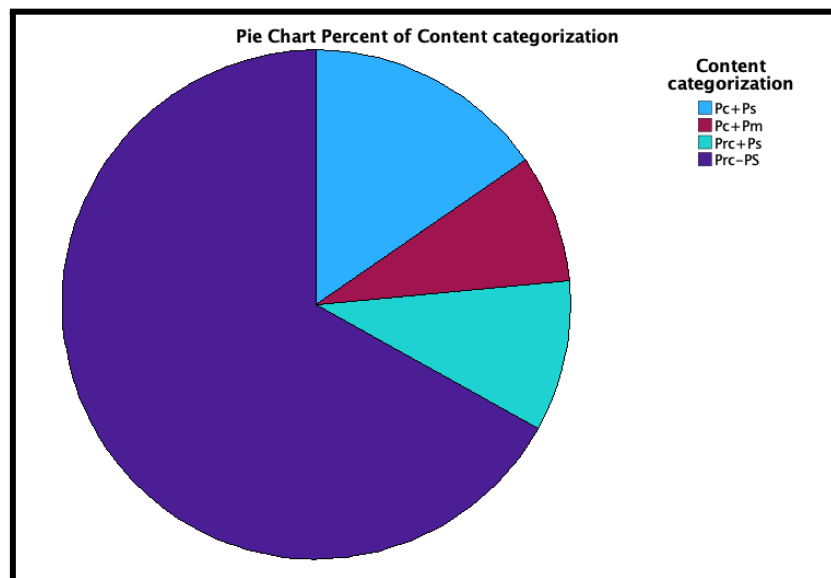
Figure 2. Chart percent of each content category

Among the Instagram posts of Swedish politicians, personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) was observed in 197 posts, representing 15.4% of the total number of posts. Conversely, personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) was the least frequent category, appearing in only 104 posts, accounting for 8.1% of all posts. Party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) was featured 123 times, constituting 9.6% of the total. The most prevalent category was party-related content without implications

to the private sphere (Prc-Ps), which appeared 857 times, comprising a significant majority of 66.9% of all posts. These results reveal a notable trend, the prevalence of party-related content without implications of the private sphere across the entire spectrum of Instagram posts. This category encompasses a 66.9% (Prc-Ps) share of the 1281 posts created by Magdalena Andersson, Ulf Kristersson, and Jimmie Åkesson between September 11, 2021, and September 11, 2023. Based on these findings, it appears that the predominant category among the Instagram posts is party-related content without implications of the private sphere (category 4). This finding contradicts the hypothesis that Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts would exhibit a higher proportion of personal content relative to party-related content in their posts. Furthermore, an additional analysis was conducted to determine the frequency of each content category attributed to individual party leaders within the dataset, (see figure 3).

Category	Jimmie Åkesson (%)	Magdalena Andersson (%)	Ulf Kristersson (%)
(1) Pc+Ps	7.8	11.5	20.8
(2) Pc+Pm	9.2	7.5	8.9
(3) Prc+Ps	17.0	8.8	8.4
(4) Prc-PS	66.0	72.2	62.0

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of content categories

Upon comparison of the content distribution among the Instagram posts of Jimmie Åkesson, Magdalena Andersson, and Ulf Kristersson, distinct patterns become apparent. Jimmie Åkesson's posts primarily revolve around party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS), making up for a significant majority at 66.0%. Additionally, Magdalena Andersson's Instagram feed is also dominated by party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS), accounting for 72.2% of her posts. However, Ulf Kristersson's content distribution exhibits a slightly more diversified profile. While a substantial portion (62.0%) with party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS), there is a notable presence of personal content with a connection to the

private sphere (Pc+Ps) at 20.8%. Especially in relation to Jimmie Åkesson and Magdalena Andersson.

Moreover, when delving into personal content categories, such as personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) and personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm), Jimmie Åkesson's and Magdalena Andersson's posts showcase similar trends, with smaller proportions relative to party-related content without implications to the private sphere. However, Ulf Kristersson's posts demonstrate a more balanced distribution, with a relatively higher percentage of personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) compared to his counterparts. Overall, these findings highlight the diversity in the frequency of each content category associated with individual party leaders. While all party leaders predominantly feature party-related content, Ulf Kristersson's profile stands out by exhibiting the highest proportion of personal content among them.

The second way to measure H1 entailed conducting a Chi-square test to evaluate the potential correlation between content categories and politicians' Instagram accounts. This test aimed to determine if the observed distribution of content categories significantly deviated from what would be anticipated under the null hypothesis of no association. The results indicate that there is a significant association between the type of content and politicians' Instagram accounts. The p-value being less than 0.001 suggests that the observed differences in content distribution are unlikely to have occurred by chance alone. Furthermore, upon analyzing the content distribution across the four categories, it became evident that party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS) was the most prevalent category, with 857 posts. This finding contrasts with the initial hypothesis, which suggested a higher proportion of personal content relative to party-related content. Conversely, personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) had 197 posts, personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) had 104 posts, and party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) had 123 posts.

The results revealed that the initial hypothesis H1, which anticipated a higher proportion of personal content relative to party-related content in Swedish politicians' Instagram posts, was not supported. Instead, the opposite was observed. Party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS) emerged as the predominant category,

comprising a substantial 66.9% of all posts. This trend persisted when analyzing the content distribution among the Instagram posts of the party leaders separately. Although it should be noted that Ulf Kristersson's posts demonstrate a higher percentage of personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) compared to Jimmie Åkesson and Magdalena Andersson.

4.1.2 H2

H2: Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts will exhibit a higher proportion of personal content in close proximity to the election.

To test hypothesis 2, an analysis of the distribution frequencies for each content category was conducted. Furthermore, the number of posts in each content category was converted into percentages relative to the total number of analyzed posts. This dual approach facilitated a comprehensive comparison of the prevalence of each content category both five weeks before and five weeks after the election. Analyzing the distribution of content categories during these two periods reveals several significant trends:

Content Categorization					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Pc+Ps	24	10.9	10.9	10.9
	Pc+Pm	18	8.2	8.2	19.1
	Prc+Ps	30	13.6	13.6	32.7
	Prc−Ps	148	67.3	67.3	100.0
	Total	220	100.0	100.0	

Figure 4. Frequency of each content category five weeks before the election

Content Categorization					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Pc+Ps	5	11.1	11.1	11.1
	Pc+Pm	2	4.4	4.4	15.6
	Prc+Ps	2	4.4	4.4	20.0
	Prc–Ps	36	80.0	80.0	100.0
	Total	45	100.0	100.0	

Figure 5. Frequency of each content category five weeks after the election

In the five weeks leading up to the election, the majority of posts fell under the category of personal content with connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps), constituting 67.3% of the total posts analyzed. This category was followed by personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) and party related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps), each contributing 10.9% and 13.6%, respectively, while party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-Ps) comprised 8.2%. This trend mirrors what was observed when analyzing all the posts in the dataset (N=1281).

However, the content distribution shifted significantly in the five weeks following the election. While the percentage of posts within the (Pc+Ps) category remained relatively similar at 11.1%, there was a noticeable decrease in the number of posts, dropping from 24 to 5. Similarly, (Pc+Pm) and (Prc+Ps) categories experienced a decline both in terms of the number of posts and their relative prevalence. (Prc+Ps) particularly saw a substantial decrease in percentage, from 13.6% to 4.4%, mirroring the overall trend of decreased engagement with this content category. In contrast, the category of (Prc-Ps) increased in prominence after the election, representing 80.0% of instances analyzed. However, it is important to note that the significance of these changes is limited due to the small number of posts (N=45) analyzed five weeks after the election.

Thus, the results revealed that the hypothesis H2, which anticipated that Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts would exhibit a higher proportion of personalized content in close proximity to the election, was not supported. However, while the hypothesis was not explicitly formulated to compare the total number of posts before and after the election, only

the content distribution, the results clearly indicate that the total number of posts was significantly higher five weeks before the election compared to five weeks after.

Content Categorization

|		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Pc+Ps	78	13.7	13.7	13.7
	Pc+Pm	55	9.6	9.6	23.3
	Prc+Ps	67	11.8	11.8	35.1
	Prc–Ps	370	64.9	64.9	100.0
	Total	570	100.0	100.0	

Figure 6. Frequency of each content category six months before the election

Notably, similar results were found when looking at the cumulative six months leading up to the election. Although there is still a prevalence of party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS), there is a measured increase in personalized content during this period when compared to the five weeks leading up to the election as well as after the election. Personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) accounted for 13.7% of the total content. Personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) constituted 9.6% of the content. Additionally, party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Pm) comprised 11.8% of the content. However, the dominant category remained party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS), making up 64.9% of the total content.

4.1.3 H3

H3: Personalized content on Swedish politicians' Instagram accounts correlates positively with higher levels of popularity in comparison to party related content, measured through the popularity indicator likes.

To test hypothesis 3, we initially measured the mean number of likes for the top 25 most popular posts from each of the three party leaders, (N=75) posts. The data reveal significant variations in average likes across different content categories.
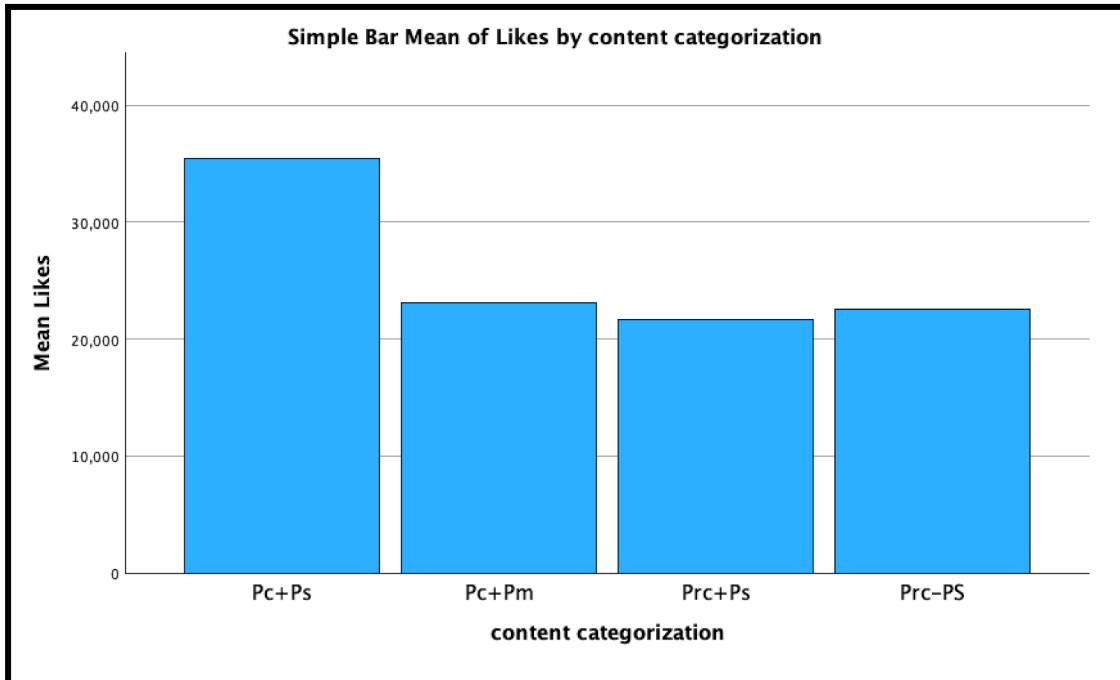
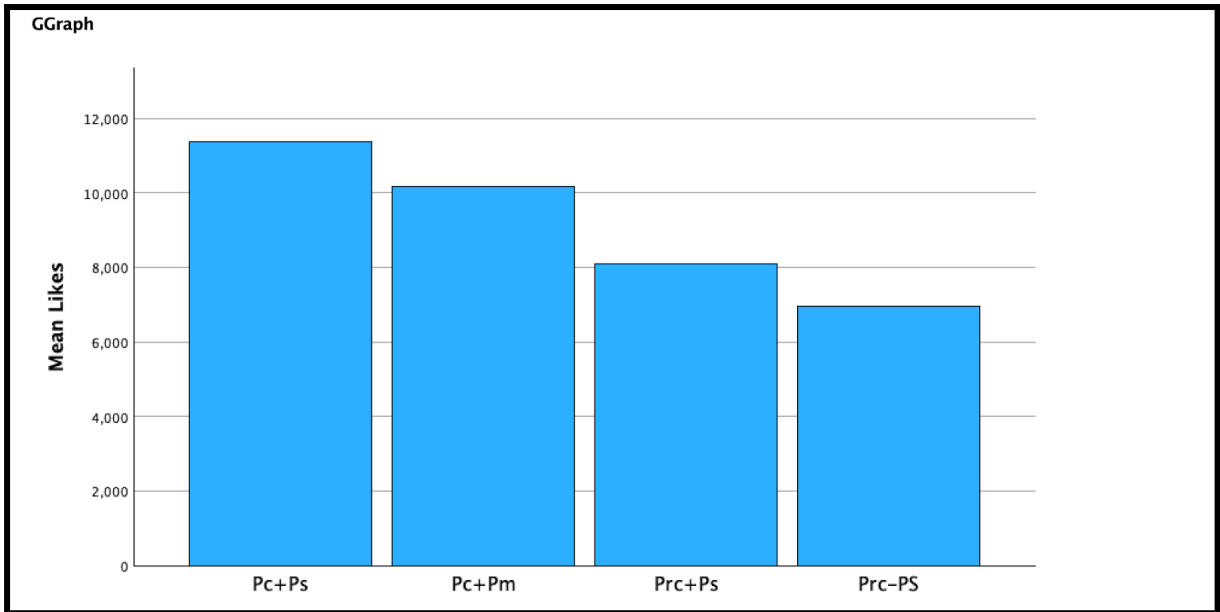*Figure 7.* Means of likes top 75 most popular posts

Posts categorized as personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) receive the highest average likes, followed by personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) and party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-Ps). Conversely, posts related to party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) received comparatively lower average likes.
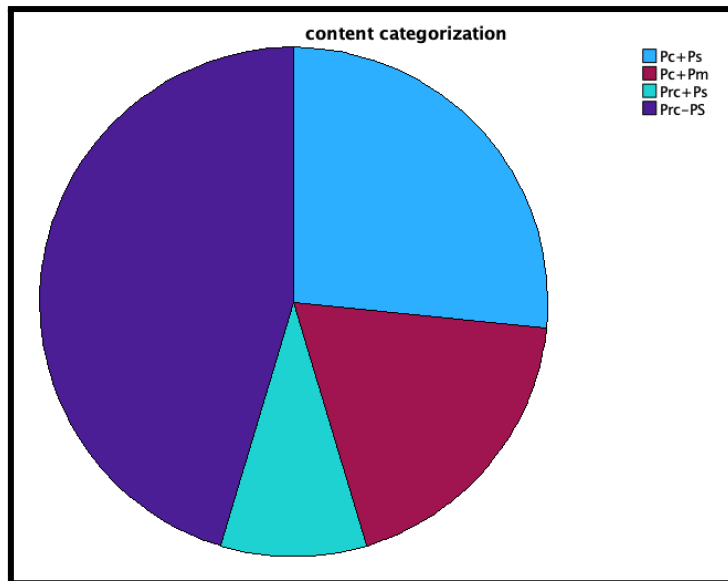
Figure 8. Distribution of likes top 75 most popular posts

Of the 75 most popular posts (9662 - 107825 likes), the frequency distribution indicates that the majority of the posts fall into the Party related content without implications to private sphere (Prc-PS) category, comprising 45.3% of the total. Meanwhile, Personal content with connection to private sphere (Pc+Ps) and Personal content with political message (Pc+Pm) categories account for 26.7% and 18.7%, respectively, collectively representing a significant portion of engagement. Posts categorized as Party related with connection to private sphere (Prc+Ps) constitute a smaller proportion at 9.3%.

The second approach to testing hypothesis 3 involved calculating the mean number of likes for all posts made by the three party leaders (N=1281) posts.

Figure 9. Means of likes all posts (N=1281) posts

The results indicate that Personal content with connection to private sphere (Pc+Ps) received the highest average likes, followed by Personal content with political message (Pc+Pm), Party related content with connection to private sphere (Prc+Ps), and Party related content without implications of private sphere (Prc-PS). In comparison to the data from the top 75 most popular posts, the results indicate a somewhat parallel trend. Posts categorized as Personal content with connection to private sphere (Pc+Ps) continue to receive the highest average likes, Similarly, Personal content with political message (Pc+Pm) follows second in terms of average likes, although with a closer gap. However, the divergence emerges with Party related content with connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps). When considering all posts (N=1281), it retains the second lowest average likes count, which is a slight increase from its standing in the analysis of the top 75 most popular posts, where it held the lowest position in terms of average likes. Instead, Party related content without implications of private sphere (Prc-PS) emerges with the lowest average likes count. It is evident that all average likes counts for each category are lower when considering all posts compared to when focusing on the top 75 most popular posts.

The third way of measuring hypothesis 3 involved conducting a Kruskal-Wallis test to examine whether there were significant differences in the mean number of likes across the four content categories of all posts (N=1281).

Pairwise Comparisons of Content categorization					
Sample 1–Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig.[a]
Prc–PS–Prc+Ps	88.295	35.670	2.475	.013	.080
Prc–PS–Pc+Ps	153.038	29.230	5.236	<.001	.000
Prc–PS–Pc+Pm	174.063	38.413	4.531	<.001	.000
Prc+Ps–Pc+Ps	64.743	42.513	1.523	.128	.767
Prc+Ps–Pc+Pm	85.768	49.280	1.740	.082	.491
Pc+Ps–Pc+Pm	–21.025	44.840	–.469	.639	1.000

Figure 10. Pairwise comparison and significance (N=1281) posts

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a notable difference in the mean number of likes among the four content categories (χ^2 = 43.814, df = 3, p < .001). This suggests that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean number of likes across the four content categories, indicating that at least one of the content categories significantly differs from the others in terms of the number of likes received. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons using the Mann-Whitney U test were then conducted to determine which specific pairs of content categories exhibited significant differences in mean likes. The Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust for multiple comparisons. The comparison between party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS) and party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) revealed a significant difference (p =.013). However, after adjusting for multiple tests, the significance level slightly increased to .080. When comparing party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS) with personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps), a highly significant difference was observed (p < .001). Similarly, a highly significant difference was found when comparing party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS) with personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) (p < .001). No significant difference was

observed between personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) and personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) (p = .639). Additionally, there was no significant difference between personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) and party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) (p = .128). Finally, no significant difference was found between personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) and party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) (p = .082).

The fourth approach to evaluate hypothesis 3 involved conducting a correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the different content categories and a popularity indicator such as likes. Notably, significant positive correlations were observed between likes and personal content with a connection to the private sphere (Pc+Ps) (r = 0.176, p < 0.001), as well as personal content with a political message (Pc+Pm) (r = 0.093, p < 0.001). These findings suggest that posts falling under these categories tend to receive more likes on average, indicating a higher level of engagement from followers. Conversely, a significant negative correlation was found between likes and party-related content without implications to the private sphere (Prc-PS) (r = -0.191, p < 0.001). This indicates that posts under this category tend to receive fewer likes on average. Moreover, party-related content with a connection to the private sphere (Prc+Ps) showed a weak correlation with likes, which was not statistically significant (r = 0.003, p = 0.453). This suggests that while there may be some association between this type of content and popularity indicators such as likes, the relationship is not strong enough to reach significance.

4.2 Analysis related to the research questions

4.2.1 RQ1

RQ1: *Do Swedish politicians prioritize personal content over party-related content on their Instagram accounts?*

Hypothesis 1 was not supported by the data, as it revealed that Swedish politicians prioritize party-related content over personal content on their Instagram accounts. This result is surprising given that previous studies have highlighted the strong incentives for politicians to engage in social media activities, particularly by adopting personalization strategies (Lee & Oh, 2012; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020; Pedersen, 2024). While these findings diverge from our initial hypothesis, they support Pedersen's (2024) argument that there are numerous incentives for politicians' to engage in social media activities that extend beyond personal representation, and thus politicians' social media activity should likely involve a mix of managing personal images and promoting their parties.

By extent, this suggests that there should likely be variations in the social media activity and content among individual politicians. This suggestion is supported by Ekman & Widholm (2017) who found significant differences between how individual politicians use instagram, where some use it mainly for the dissemination of political messages while others use it to share more private content. However, our results did not reveal such significant differences among individual politicians. Instead, they exhibited similar content distribution, primarily focusing on party-related content.

Furthermore, since all of the three observed politicians are highly-established figures within the Swedish political system, and are party leaders of their respective political parties, the results present a interesting contradiction to the notion that politically secure or veteran political leaders exhibit increased levels of personalization (Pedersen, 2024; Shahaf, 2024; Guðmundsson & Sverrisson, 2019). It should be noted that the results presented in our study do not provide insights into the levels of personalization over longer periods of time. However, we observed a clear trend of party-related content outweighing personal content

during the studied two-year period. Thus, presents an interesting argument for further longitudinal studies to explore the levels of personalization over more extended periods.

Furthermore, hypothesis 2 was not supported since the data indicates that the levels of personalized content did not increase in relation to party related content in close proximity to the election. This result was surprising given that it contradicts some of the previous studies on the use of social media in election campaigns such as Metz et al. (2020), Russmann et al. (2019) and Geise et al. (2024). While these earlier studies did not specifically examine changes in personalization levels, they highlighted the motivations and benefits of adopting personalized strategies. For instance, Russmann et al. (2019) noted that featuring politicians in a private context could foster authenticity and create a sense of closeness with the public. Similarly, Geise et al. (2024) found that politicians can utilize Facebook and Instagram to portray themselves as viable candidates. Interestingly, both Geise et al. (2024) and Metz et al. (2020) observed that politicians predominantly employ professional personalization, with more private personalization being rare exceptions, despite private personalization having significant potential for audience engagement.

However, since we examined the personal accounts of the three politicians and not the party accounts, it was expected that the politicians would feature in nearly all posts. Therefore, the distinction between private and professional personalization was not made. Instead, we made the distinction between personal (i.e. private) and party related content. We found that a majority of posts, in close proximity to the election, were party-related rather than personal. Notably, due to the fact that the total number of posts increased in close proximity to the election, all content categories increased, whereas the distribution amongst the four categories remained similar to the total sample size.

In summary, given the extensive literature on the concept of personalization outlined in section 2.1 and the numerous scholars suggesting a shift of focus on politicians at the expense of the party, portraying them as private persons rather than mere party representatives, in both uncontrolled media and controlled media such as Instagram. A higher prevalence of personal content, especially with private aspects, was expected. This expectation was also partially based on the suggestion that personal content can be beneficial in terms of engagement and public connection. However, while it is clear that personalization

strategies are at play, although to a lesser extent than expected, these results provide limited insights into the underlying motivations driving the content choices of each party leader. This underscores the need for further research to investigate the factors influencing politicians' content choices and the motivations behind them.

4.2.2 RQ2

RQ2: *Do personalized content in Instagram posts lead to higher engagement?*

Hypothesis 3 was supported by the data, as it revealed that posts categorized as personal content with a connection to the private sphere received the highest average likes. Conversely, posts categorized as party-related without connection to the private sphere received comparatively lower average likes. These findings were not surprising, considering they align with previous research such as Peng (2021) who identified that personalized content attracts more engagement in terms of likes compared to content focusing on traditional political activities. Similarly, Larsson (2017) found that politicians using personalized content strategies achieved higher levels of engagement. Russmann et al. (2019) further observed that a personalized approach to visual communication on Instagram significantly enhances engagement. It should however be noted that while posts categorized as personal content with a connection to the private sphere had the highest engagement levels, they were not the only category associated with increased engagement. The second-highest average likes were posts categorized as personal content with a political message. This suggests that the audience also engages with posts where political issues are associated with personal experiences. This aligns with McGregor (2018) who suggested that politicians can enhance their accessibility and deepen connections with voters by integrating political issues with personal narratives.

While posts in this category primarily focus on personal and private aspects, with non private party-related elements playing a secondary role, often observed in captions attached to the visual contents, it further underscores the method used to categorize posts into four categories. Unlike other studies that only differentiate between personalized and non-personalized content, this study offers a more nuanced perspective on the relationship

between social media content and audience engagement. Thus, it can be argued that this study makes a valuable contribution to the field of research in political communication.

Furthermore, when disclosing the top 10 most liked posts from each party leader, it was found that posts with presence of and connection to the private sphere in terms of family relations generated a great number of likes. Evidently so regarding the posts from Magdalena Andersson, who's husband was found present in 4 out of her 10 most liked posts, found in place number 1,2,7 and 9th place out of all the posts from the three party leaders. Furthermore, 2 out of the 10 most liked posts from the party leaders' consisted of Magdalena Andersson in a personal setting in the forest. Similarly, for Ulf Kristersson, 5 out of his 5 most liked posts were posted within the month before and after the election, and here, 3 out of these 5 posts had clear connection to personal content within private sphere, consisting of him drinking beer, being with his family, and expressing running as his hobby. Thus, this can be understood as a distinct privatization of the political leader, due to depictions of personal life including romantic relationships, hobbies and family activities (Van Aelst et al. 2012); (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). The content can be seen to act as a visual illustration of blending an entertaining tonality, which Thorlacius (2023) suggests fosters an intimate and authentic connection to audience and voters, aligning with celebrity culture dynamics. This strategic use of personal-centered communication, as noted by Ekman and Widholm (2017), facilitates a sense of intimacy and authenticity, ultimately driving higher levels of engagement from followers.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This quantitative study has examined the Instagram activity of three prominent Swedish party leaders and how it relates to the concept of personalization. More specifically, the study has focused on two main aspects: firstly, the prevalence and distribution of personalized content in comparison to non personalized content on their Instagram accounts; and secondly, the correlation between personalized content and increased levels of popularity, measured through the number of likes received on their posts. From the findings within this study, the following conclusions have been made.

The first hypothesis was not supported, as the analyzed data revealed that Swedish politicians prioritize party-related content over personal content on their Instagram accounts. This result was unexpected considering previous research emphasized the significant incentives for politicians to participate in social media activities, particularly by implementing personalization strategies.

Neither the second hypothesis was supported, as the frequency of personalized content did not increase in relation to party-related content in close proximity to the election. Contradicting our expectations derived from previous research, which suggested that personalization strategies could be beneficial in campaigning to enhance voter engagement and connection.

The third hypothesis found support in our data, indicating that posts categorized as personal content with a connection to the private sphere received the highest average likes followed by personal content with political message. These results were anticipated, given they align with previous research indicating that personalized content tends to generate higher engagement, particularly in terms of likes, compared to content centered around more traditional political topics or activities.

5.2 Discussion

The conclusions made from this study presents an interesting paradox. Despite the analyzed data showing that personalized content receives higher popularity levels, Swedish politicians predominantly share non-personalized content. This discrepancy raises intriguing questions about the underlying motivations and strategic decisions guiding their social media activity. A key objective of this study was, as outlined in the introduction, to explore personalization in the Swedish context. Therefore, it is also reasonable to assume that this context will have implications on the type of content seen on the politicians social media accounts.

Thus, one possible explanation for the observed predominance of part-related content could be that the Swedish political system traditionally has centered around the party rather than individual politicians (Russman et al., 2019). Swedish politicians might prioritize maintaining a strong, unified party image, believing it to be more important for their political success and credibility.

However, given the informal and visual-centric nature of Instagram (Farkas and Bene, 2021), emphasizing photos, stories, and videos designed to capture immediate and personal experiences, it is reasonable to assume that Instagram would be less conducive to the dissemination of traditional political messaging. Therefore, the predominance of party-related content is rather surprising. One explanation could be that politicians primarily use Instagram not because of its design but because of its widespread user base. They leverage the opportunity to connect with their audience, meeting them where they are, even in spaces traditionally associated with informal content consumption.

Additionally, considering that the three politicians are leaders of larger political parties, they might feel a greater responsibility to promote their party's agenda rather than focusing on personal narratives. It is also important to acknowledge that the followers of these accounts extend beyond potential voters. Many of them likely consist of party members and individuals who follow the leaders due to shared ideological beliefs. Thus, politicians might be wary of blurring the lines between their personal and professional lives, choosing instead to maintain a more formal and policy-focused communication strategy. Politicians might fear that too much personal exposure could lead to controversies or distract from their policy messages, thus undermining their political objectives.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the results from this study do not reveal to what extent the politicians are actually interested in the number of likes on their posts. While personalized content received more likes, it is unclear if this is a result of a deliberate strategy employed by the politicians to increase engagement or if it is a consequence of Instagram's visual and informal nature favoring this type of content. We argue that it might be a result of the latter. Personalized content, especially when highlighting the private aspects of politicians' lives, aligns with the platform's design and meets audience expectations for more informal and personally relatable communication on social media. If it were solely due to politicians intentionally employing personalized strategies to enhance engagement, we would likely have observed a higher frequency of such content.

It is also worth considering that politicians' social media activity might not be primarily driven by the pursuit of likes and engagement. Their objectives likely extend beyond immediate online popularity, which are not always reflected in social media metrics. It should also be addressed once again that conceptualization of social media engagement and the factors that influence it is a rather complex activity (Voorveld et al., 2018). Given the algorithmic nature of social media platforms, it is crucial to acknowledge their potential influence on the visibility and engagement of politicians' posts. This factor adds complexity to the analysis of user engagement, as the variables affecting engagement can fluctuate over time (Gustafsson et al., 2021). Therefore, it is also reasonable to assume that Politicians might receive likes based on other factors that extend beyond the implications of adopting certain communication strategies. However, even if the number of likes can be influenced by other factors they do provide insight into the overall popularity and reach of politicians' social media posts. Thus, we argue that likes still serve as a valuable metric for engagement and popularity on social media.

5.3 Contributions and Further research

5.3.1 Contributions

This study has provided some valuable insights within the field of political communication research. Firstly, while several previous studies have explored personalization in political communication on social media platforms, including some in the Scandinavian context, few have studied the Swedish context, particularly on the social media platform Instagram. By examining the prevalence of personalized content and its correlation to increased popularity levels, measured by likes received on their posts. Our study has revealed that Swedish politicians prioritize non personalized content over personalized content on Instagram, challenging existing notions about the role of personalization in political communication. This further contributes to a deeper understanding of how they utilize social media platforms such as Instagram for disseminating political communication. Additionally, unlike other studies that only differentiate between personalized and non-personalized content, our study categorized posts into four different categories. This method provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media content and audience engagement in political communication. Thus, could also be seen as a methodological contribution.

5.3.2 Further research

Firstly, while the conclusions made in our study do not provide insights into the levels of personalization over longer periods of time, we observed a clear trend of party-related content outweighing personal content during the studied two-year period. Thus, presents an interesting argument for further longitudinal studies to explore the levels of personalization over more extended periods.

Secondly, another interesting approach would be to conduct a thematic analysis to reveal if there are common themes in the pictures that generate higher levels of popularity. This could involve categorizing posts based on recurring topics, events, or other aspects, and subsequently analyzing the engagement metrics linked to each category. Moreover, this study solely relied on the popularity engagement metric of likes; therefore, exploring other

measures of engagement, such as comments, shares, or views, would be valuable. Comparing these diverse metrics could offer a more holistic comprehension of audience interaction and engagement on Instagram.

Lastly, while as previously mentioned several studies have explored personalization in political communication on social media platforms, few have studied the Swedish context, particularly on the social media platform Instagram. Thus, there is still a need for further research focusing on Swedish political actors' use of Instagram and the consequences of adopting personalization strategies. One approach to gaining a deeper understanding could involve conducting qualitative interviews or surveys with politicians or their stabs. Through these methods, politicians can directly articulate their motivations, strategies, goals, and decision-making processes regarding their social media activity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Codebook

Units of Data Collection: Instagram posts by Ulf Kristersson, Magdalena Andersson and Jimmie Åkesson during the time period of September 11 2022 - September 11 2023.

Variable 1 - Name of politician

Variable 2 - Date of post

Variable 3 - Number of likes

Variable 4 - Political leader present in picture
      4.1 Yes (1)
      4.2 No (2)

Variable 5 - Setting
      Variable 5.1 Personal (1)
      i.e personal setting at home, sporting activity, vacation setting etc.

      Variable 5.2 Professional (2)
      i.e office setting, legislative chamber, on site-visits in duty

      Variable 5.3 Text/Illustration/Collected image (3)

Variable 6 - Content categorization
Variable 6.1 (Pc+Ps): Personal Content with Connection to Private Sphere (1)
- Content focused on personal aspects of the politician's private life.

Variable 6.2 (Pc+Pm): Personal Content with Political Message (2)
- Personal content that includes a political message.

Variable 6.3 (Prc+Ps): Party-Related Content with Connection to Private Sphere (3)
- Party-related content that includes elements of the politician's private life.

Variable 6.4 (Prc-PS): Party-Related Content without Connection to Private Sphere (4)
- Party-related content without any connection to the politician's private life.

Appendix 2 - Illustration of coding

The following examples illustrate how content was coded and categorized into four distinct categories. The chosen examples for visualizing the coding were gathered from the party leaders's top 10 most liked posts and selected from there.

Category 1: Pc+Ps - Personal content with connection to private sphere

The first category, *Personal content with connection to private sphere*, relates to personal and private content shared by the party leaders without apparent political motives shown in the post. The first image, being the second most liked image during the time period for all three party leaders, is a picture of Magdalena Andersson with her husband, as the caption reads that they are celebrating their silver wedding day, "25 years of love ❤️❤️❤️".

Magdalena Andersson. (2022). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CjTJ2WEDikK/]

The second image features Magdalena Andersson in the forest, holding a cup of coffee, accompanied by the caption: "Enjoying the Swedish autumn. Open fire, hot coffee, and a substantial harvest of hedgehog mushrooms soon to be cleaned." Similarly, the third image depicts Magdalena Andersson and her husband in a comparable forest setting, captioned "Höst ❤️," translating to "Autumn ❤️."

Magdalena Andersson. (2022). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CjxKm-nDmIN/]

Magdalena Andersson. (2022). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CkVXxJeDJts/]

The fourth image visualized here, is Ulf Kristersson's fifth most liked post, featuring him alongside Swedish YouTuber Jonas Fagerström, with the caption 'Many seem to think we're alike, Jonas and I 😉'. The setting appears casual and personal, reinforcing the intimate nature of the content and implying a sense of friendship or similarity between Kristersson and Fagerström. Consequently, the posts were categorized as *Personal content with connection to private sphere.*

Ulf Kristersson. (2022). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/ChsVfXvDmwk/]

Category 2: Pc+Pm - Personal content with political message

The fifth image is Ulf Kristersson's fourth most liked post during the time period and features him, his wife and his daughter at Göta Logistic Regiment, with the following caption:

> Today, I was a proud father on the regiment's day when the Göta Logistic Regiment in Skövde opened its doors to all the soldiers' relatives. Magnificent and informative, with many parents reflecting on the seriousness that ultimately underlies the reason for strengthening the Swedish defense significantly.

The content was categorized as personal content due to the clear connection to Ulf Kristersson's family and role as a proud father, however suggesting a political message as he describes the need to strengthen the Swedish defense. Thus, the post was categorized as *Personal content with political message.*

Ulf Kristersson. (2022). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CkTCC_bji9y/]

Category 3: **PePrc+Ps - Party related content with connection to private sphere**

The sisxth image in this section, falling under the third category of content, features a post by Jimmie Åkesson. This post is identified as his most liked content over the examined two-year period and depicts him standing at a gas station. The caption reads "ENOUGH IS ENOUGH," followed by a reflection on the high cost of fuel and its impact on individuals, concluding with criticism of the government's increased taxation on gasoline. While the subject matter is politically driven, the visual elements of the post suggest Åkesson himself refueling his car, as well as textually describing this experience in the caption, and thereby connecting the issue to his personal experiences. Consequently, the post was categorized as *Party related content with connection to private sphere.*

Jimmie Åkesson. (2021). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CVNqSi3o9Hr/]

Category 4: Prc-PS - Party related content without implications to private sphere

The 7th image portrays a post by Jimmie Åkesson showcasing the party leaders of the right-wing side of the bloc boundary: Ulf Kristersson, Jimmie Åkesson, Johan Pehrson, and Ebba Busch. Shared three days after the 2022 election, the post includes the caption #maktskifte, translating to "change of power." Given its focus on a professional setting and addressing the election results without evident personal connections, the post was categorized as *Party related content without implications for the private sphere.*

Jimmie Åkesson. (2022). Instagram post. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CjsLsNvooxd/]

Appendix 3 - Intercoder Reliability: Cohen's kappa (κ)

To calculate Cohen's kappa (κ), we determined the observed agreement (Po) and the expected agreement by chance (Pe), and then used these in the following formula, due to that 53 out of 65 posts were coded the same:

Po = 53/65
Po ≈ 0,8154

Then, we needed to calculate the probability of chance agreement (Pe). Pe = (Number of categories / Total number of observations) * (Number of categories / Total number of observations). Since there are 4 categories and 65 observations:

Pe = (4 / 65) * (4 / 65)
Pe = (16 / 4225)
Pe ≈ 0.00378

These values were then included in the formula for Cohen's kappa.

κ = (Po - Pe) / (1 - Pe)
κ = (0.8154 - 0.00378) / (1 - 0.00378)
κ ≈ (0.81162) / (0.99622)
κ ≈ 0.8149

Resulting in a Cohen's kappa of approximately 0,8149.