

The age of celebrity politics

Sharon Coen considers psychology's role in a modern phenomenon

From celebrity candidates and aspiring singing Prime Ministers to candidates becoming the focus of gossip magazines, the boundaries between celebrity and politics are becoming increasingly blurred. With the National Elections approaching, this article reflects on the phenomenon of personalisation of politics and its possible effects on the democratic process. In particular, we focus on how social, political and media psychology can contribute to explaining the phenomenon and its impact on voters' attitudes and behaviours.

For some time now, scholars and the public alike have bemoaned a sharp change in the way politics is lived by citizens (especially in the Western democracies). With politicians of all hues generally sharing a liberal market consensus, it can be hard to distinguish between the various manifestos. As the author Keith Sutherland put it in 2004, 'The party's over'. With the prominence of political ideology receding, individual personalities come to the fore.

This phenomenon is well captured by the concept of audience democracy, proposed by Manin (1995, English edition 1997). De Beus (2011) describes a shift, over the last 20 or so years, away from traditional parties' democracy. The political party was the dominant actor in the field of politics, the party programme the leading principle, and competence the virtue for which politicians strived and with which they legitimised their politics. Instead, we now have audience democracy, in which personalities are favoured over the party, performance over the programme and authenticity over competence.

Of course, some would argue there has been superficiality on the political stage going back much more than 20 years. Indeed, De Beus notes that audience democracy resonates with Edelman's notion of symbolic politics from 1967. He claimed that the instrumental dimension of politics was gradually being replaced by a

dramaturgical one and by spectacle, while political actors employed symbols and rituals for public consumption via the media.

New or old, there is little doubt therefore that this process has been facilitated by the ever-increasing role played by the media in political debate. For decades, communications scholars have argued that the media (in particular, TV and, later, the internet) constitute the new 'public sphere', the place where issues relevant to citizenship and society at large are debated and elaborated. Political reporting in the news media is increasingly 'personalised', presenting issues as personal opinions of a single politician rather than ideological or party-driven. Similarly, the acceptance or rejection of a political argument is increasingly attributed to the person making the argument rather than the ideological standpoint the argument is built upon. Thus, in the UK, we are no longer talking about what 'Labour', 'Liberal Democrats' or 'Conservatives' propose, we are debating what

"Political reporting in the news media is increasingly 'personalised'"

Miliband, Clegg or Cameron say (although not all agree on this trend, e.g. Vliegthart et al., 2011).

This shift towards the personalisation of politics is accompanied by an increasing scrutiny of the private lives and affairs of politicians, rather than their institutional successes and failures. Van Aelst et al. (2012) highlighted this tendency towards 'privatisation' (i.e. a focus on the politician as a private individual as opposed to a politician as a public official) and 'personalisation' (a progressive shift towards focusing on non-politically relevant traits). They distinguish this from the shift towards 'individualisation' (coverage of individuals as opposed to institutions). Individualisation itself can be considered in terms of a general increase in the visibility of individual political representatives in the media, and in terms

questions

What are the psychological processes involved in the formation of political judgements concerning candidates?

What are the psychological underpinnings of political engagement?

What role do the media play in promoting and/or hindering political engagement??

resources

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Dibble, J.L. & Rosaen, S.F. (2011). Parasocial interaction as more than friendship: Evidence for parasocial

of the concentration of media attention on political personalities who occupy leadership roles, such as party leaders or presidents.

Virtually all of this reporting and communication is mediated, and delivered in a 'one-to-many' direction. As citizens, we rarely have a chance to interact directly with our aspiring – or actual – political representatives. New technologies and the internet have introduced an element of interactivity, which some argue can significantly alter the relationship between politics, politicians and the public, but even in this case it is safe to say that the relationship citizens establish with politicians is mostly parasocial.

Parasocial interaction

Parasocial interactions (PSI: see Giles, 2002) are relationships that the public establishes with characters in the media. These can be real or fictional characters: for example, the public can establish PSIs with characters in a movie or in soap operas, or with actors, musicians, famous sportsmen and sportswomen. Horton and Wohl (1956) first illustrated this phenomenon in detail, arguing that the

modern media (at the time, radio, TV and press) encourage the establishment of PSIs by 'coaching the audience' into believing they are somehow part of the events portrayed. (For a recent replication and extension, see Hartmann and Goldhoorn, 2011.)

Nowadays, the internet and social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook offer new opportunities for parasocial interaction between politicians and voters. This creates anomalies for parasocial interaction itself, for example when politicians respond directly to tweets from the public. These changes need to be further explored by psychologists interested in both media and political communication in order to understand their impact.

While a significant proportion of scholars conceptualise PSIs as inherently positive (such as forms of mediated 'friendship'), others suggest that PSIs are a much wider phenomenon, and that people also establish them with media characters they dislike (e.g. Dibble & Rosaen, 2011). Importantly, research in this area seems to suggest that there are substantial parallels between social and parasocial interaction: perceived similarity and attraction are examples of factors that are important in the establishment of both real-life friendships and PSIs.

Similarly, political psychologists have tried to identify the role played by individual traits and characteristics in the success of political candidates. Appearance, gender and demographic characteristics are all relevant to voting choices (e.g. for an overview, see Catellani, 2011), and evaluations of politicians' morality and leadership appear particularly important (e.g. Cislak & Wojciszke, 2008). Voters tend to favour political candidates

who match their own personality characteristics and sets of values (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), and extraversion and sociability also play a role (see Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009). By providing further information on such traits and characteristics across a variety of media – Twitter, radio interviews, live televised debates and more – politicians are supplying a rich vein of evaluative information. Of course, this information may or may not be relevant to the task in hand.

Heroes and villains

With the growing focus on individuals rather than ideas or institutions, and with the rising interest in the private aspects of politicians' lives, the boundaries between 'hard' and 'soft' news are becoming increasingly blurred, and so are those between institutional figures and celebrities within the public realm. Thus, we see politicians portrayed as heroes or villains, in line with the classical melodramatic narrative (see Mancini & Swanson, 1996), and the emergence of a 'celebrity' politician.

According to Street (2004) there are two types of 'celebrity' politicians: the first, a person who achieved a celebrity status prior to entering the political scene (examples could be the US actor Arnold Schwarzenegger or the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo), the second, a 'professional' politician who, either by association or adopting the appropriate communication styles and avenues (e.g. Tony Blair posing with the England football team) assumes celebrity status. A third possible type could be a 'professional' politician who, by no will of their own, achieves 'celebrity' status by being a target of gossip and tabloid attention (often the case with women in politics: see Mazzoni & Ciaglia, 2013). How can research in psychology help us to understand each type of celebrity politician?

The history of politics is populated by illustrious examples of celebrity figures achieving success: consider the actors



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interactions with disliked media figures. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 23(3), 122.

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Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ronald Reagan, the last of whom of course reached the highest office. More recently, a young political activist won the BBC talent show *The Voice UK*: throughout the show, he was claiming he aspires to become 'the first singing black Prime Minister' in the UK. Achieving celebrity status in other domains seems therefore to be a viable pathway for aspiring politicians. Why is this?

Above all, celebrity status guarantees visibility, and therefore familiarity. Parasocial interactions (PSIs) offer an explanation here, how they arise from an illusion of familiarity with mediated characters. Getting to know a candidate through their presence in the media – regardless of the context – can foster a sense of acquaintance with the candidate. This can lead to the establishment of PSIs, which, when positive, can promote a sense of intimacy and trust.

Also, celebrities are often deemed attractive, and actors are trained on how to best deliver a message through both verbal and non-verbal cues in front of a camera. It is therefore not surprising they can deliver a more convincing performance: indeed, research has shown that Reagan's physical attractiveness and expressiveness were important factors in explaining his success in a televised debate (Patterson et al., 1992).

What about politicians who become 'celebrities'? Political scandals and details of candidates' private lives are covered not only in mainstream news, but also gossip magazines and shows (for an example in the Italian context, see Mazzoni and Ciaglia, 2014). Can psychology predict the likely consequences of exposure to news coverage of scandals?

Studies (e.g. Bless & Schwarz, 1998; Schwarz & Bless, 1992) have shown how exposure to scandals can lead to both assimilation and contrast effects: on the one hand, when reminded of politicians involved in scandal, participants tended to report decreased levels of trust in the general social category of politicians, but they also reported heightened levels of trust in individual politicians (not associated with scandals). These studies suggest that coverage of scandals led to a 'vicious cycle' by shaking the public's trust in politics and 'forcing' individual politicians to stand out from the crowd and seek individual (non-scandal-related) coverage to counteract its negative effects.

Another phenomenon worthy of our consideration is political endorsement by celebrities. This is a growing phenomenon, not only in the US, where there is a long history of endorsements by VIPs of political candidates, but also in Europe. Celebrities are often invited to

'sponsor' a candidate, or attend political rallies and events. At the same time, politicians often endorse and/or attend non-political events, such as sports, entertainment and arts. In the UK it is not uncommon to see politicians partake in comedy, reality TV or talent shows (for an example in the Italian context, see Mazzoleni and Sfondini, 2009).

Once again, psychological research can help us to understand this phenomenon. Advertisers have long understood how associating a product with a liked celebrity boosts sales of the product via a series of psychological processes. For example, according to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic/systematic model of persuasion (Chaiken et al., 1989), 'liking' the person who delivers the persuasive message induces heuristic rather than systematic processing of its content. The qualities attributed to the celebrity – such as likeability, attractiveness, trustworthiness, success – can transfer to the product (see Erdogan, 1999, for a review). We might argue that political candidates in the mediated world are similar to 'brands' or 'products', 'sold' to the audience via techniques borrowed from persuasion, advertisement and marketing.

A double-edged sword

As in advertising, exposure is everything. Presence in the media becomes paramount in the race to election: a candidate who is absent from the spotlight does not stand a chance. Borrowing the expression of the famous book by Anne Philips (which deals with representation of women in minority in the political world), mediated political communication could be seen as moving from a politics of ideas to a politics of presence. To give a concrete example, Mazzoni and Ciaglia (2013) suggest that part of the reason



Exposure is everything

incomplete transition? How Italian politicians manage the celebratisation of politics. *Celebrity Studies*, 5(1-2), 93-106.

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behind the failure of the centre-left political party in Italy to attract votes lies in its refusal to engage more extensively with the media.

Whether by choice or by force, politicians find themselves under this spotlight. Once there, an increasing focus on private lives as well as professional conduct, combined with the growing scepticism concerning parties and political systems, might lead to a shift in the way citizens make decisions concerning their support of political candidates – away from the issues, values and ideas brought forward by candidates and parties, and towards evaluations based on personal characteristics of the single politician.

On the one hand, this personalisation and celebritisation of politics can be seen as a positive move towards restoring citizens' engagement with politics: politicians are seen as individuals, some admired, some disliked, but they have become part of people's everyday lives and entered their homes in one way or the other. Their 'celebrity' status gives them prominence but also brings them 'back to the people': it is easier to relate to people than to abstract ideas or institutions. The opportunities offered by social networking sites and the internet in general to interact directly with politician and with news providers and the wider public (e.g. by posting comments on the articles or blogging) can be also seen as important ways in which the citizen can engage in the public debate.

On the other hand, though, it is unclear how judgements grounded on the personality or private conduct of a single individual can be predictive of political ability and efficacy. Firstly, the dimensions of leadership and competence (identified as crucial in the evaluation of political



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Presentation vs. political principles

The increasing focus on single individuals in mediated political communication and the extended TV coverage given to individual politicians renders non-verbal aspects of political communication particularly relevant in people's voting preferences and evaluations of candidates (see e.g. Coen, in press). For example, Todorov et al. (2005) have shown that voters's estimations of competence based on snap-judgements of candidates' faces are predictive of voting preferences, while Koppersteiner and Grammer (2010) showed how motion patterns displayed by politicians during speeches are predictive of viewers' evaluations of their personality (and thus of voters' preferences). In a very interesting study, Antonakis and Dalgas (2009) were able to identify election outcomes based on children's preferences concerning candidates' appearance. It comes therefore as no surprise that Ed Miliband felt it necessary to defend himself from attacks concerning his appearance in photos by shifting the focus on principles rather than looks (The Guardian, 25 July 2014).

leaders by political psychologists: see Catellani, 2011) might be orthogonal to – for example – conjugal loyalty or driving habits. Secondly, focusing on the individual politician might lose sight of the fact that political decisions are made at collegial level: a prominent example could be US President Barack Obama, who was hailed as a hero and a promoter of change when he was first elected in 2009 and took a significant hit in support when he struggled in passing his healthcare bill in Congress. In democratic systems, there is little that single individuals can do on their own. Therefore, representing politics as a horserace among good/bad individuals rather than a collective process is misrepresenting the reality of the political process.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that

celebrity status might have a significant impact on work-related stress and work-life balance of politicians. Being a celebrity, while having advantages, has also significant negative consequences (see Schaller, 1997): inflated expectations concerning performance at work, constantly being the object of discussion and evaluation, having to protect one's privacy and that of loved ones... all can negatively impact the politicians' well-being and their ability to perform (see Weinberg, 2011, for an analysis of work-related stress factors in politicians).

To conclude, psychological research and evidence can contribute to understanding the antecedents and consequences of the progressive shift towards a celebritisation of politics, and the role old and new media play in fostering this process. On this basis, psychology can provide important suggestions and consideration on how this phenomenon impacts the democratic process and how best to safeguard the public interest.

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