



Do constituency candidates matter in German Federal Elections? The personal vote as an interactive process



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ABSTRACT

What are the electoral consequences of constituency candidates' campaign strategies? This paper focuses on the German case to theoretically and empirically explore this question. Theoretically, it perceives personalization at the voter level as the result of an interactive process involving both candidates and voters. It argues that voters need to be asked and mobilized to personalize their votes in order of doing so. Empirically it draws from a novel set of data for the 2009 German Federal Elections including voters and candidate data. On the basis of this data set we are able to show that the campaign behavior of constituency candidates matters for the perceptions and behaviors of voters.

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1. The personal vote in Germany's party democracy

What are the electoral consequences of constituency candidates' campaign strategies in German Federal Elections? Predominantly, students of electoral politics are skeptical in this regard, emphasizing the partisan basis of vote choices in German electorates. These are said to be facilitated by the long-term subjective identification of particular national coalitions of voters with particular national parties (Falter et al., 2000). For example, traditionally, unionized blue-collar workers are more likely to cast their votes for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) while Catholics attending church on a regular basis are more likely to support Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) (Müller, 1999; Pappi, 1973; Wessels, 2000).

In contrast to these skeptics, this analysis emphasizes the electoral significance of constituency candidates in Germany's party democracy. Particularly, it considers vote

choices to be affected by the campaign behavior of constituency candidates. This basic argument flows from three theoretical assumptions concerning the increasingly complex electoral context German voters operate in. First and foremost, voting behavior is being perceived as an interactive process involving candidates and voters. In this paper, we argue that voters personalize their vote choices if they are asked to do so. Thus, personalized voting is considered a result of personal vote seeking behavior at the candidate level in the course of election campaigns rather than an independent behavioral strategy at the voter level. Second, we consider both candidates and voters to be affected by incentives to personalize in campaign contexts flowing from Germany's mixed electoral system allowing voters to simultaneously cast a nominal and a party vote. Our third assumption emphasizes the significance of declining partisanship in German electoral politics. Past evidence suggests that German parties so far functioned as powerful mental images governing voters' selective acquisition of political information and political elites' campaign strategies as well. However, with decreasing partisanship voters and elites alike might be increasingly

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willing to explore alternative means and strategies to structure the interactions of candidates and voters in campaign contexts.

It is important to note, that in this paper we do not assume a direct causal relationship between macro-level factors such as weakening partisanship and ballot structure on the one hand and micro-level processes such as voting on the other (Anderson, 2009). We rather assume indirect effects contingent upon voters and constituency candidates interacting in the course of constituency campaigns. From this perspective, decreasing partisanship and the opportunity to cast a nominal vote facilitate the personalization of vote choices at the constituency level. However, voters won't subscribe to this behavioral strategy if candidates fail to supply personalized types of campaign communication, thus, if voters are not actively encouraged to personalize their vote. This paper considers personalization to be an interactive process involving candidates and voters at the grassroots, lacking any traceable beginning and any linear and clear-cut dynamic as well.

The following sections aim to theoretically develop the argument just made and to test it on the basis of voter and candidate data for the German Federal Elections in 2009. The paper is structured in four main parts: We will first elaborate on why and how constituency candidates might matter for the choices of German voters; we will secondly present our data, our empirical model, and our hypothesis that we aim to test; in a third part, we will present our empirical findings; the paper fourthly closes with a short summary and a discussion regarding the implications of our findings for comparative research on personalized voting.

2. Why and how do candidates matter in German Federal Elections?

According to students of personalization candidates matter vis-à-vis parties and issues. Their research demonstrates positive effects on vote choices that however vary between elections, contexts, and candidates (Brettschneider, 2002; Brettschneider et al., 2008; Kaase, 1994; Ohr, 2000; Vetter and Gabriel, 1998). Despite its many merits, this literature provides only limited insights in the electoral effects of candidates. This is for two main reasons. First, it predominantly focuses on a constrained set of candidates at the federal level such as party leaders and candidates for chancellorship. Second, it hardly unveils those mechanisms explaining personalized vote choices. As a result, it is only able to explore the tip of the iceberg at best when it comes to the levels and sources of personalized voting behavior.

To gauge candidate effects in more comprehensive and less constrained ways, this paper focuses on a *subordinate (second) level of candidacy*, namely the constituency level. It considers constituency candidates of particular electoral relevance for three main reasons: First, constituency candidates are in close proximity to voters and thus enjoy privileged access to their electoral considerations via a multiple number of venues; second, in contrast to party leaders running for chancellorship, in Germany's mixed system, constituency candidates actually appear on the

ballot and thus formally stand for election on the basis of a nominal vote; third and most important, by focusing on the constituency level we are able to increase the number of observations and thus tap into a rich empirical source in exploring the role of the personal factor in electoral politics.

To further explore the mechanisms explaining personalized vote choices this paper particularly focuses on the campaign behavior of constituency candidates and related efforts to seek personal votes. Voters might vote for candidates for different reasons that need to be traced to eventually explain personalized vote choices. Most of the literature on personalization downplayed those causal linkages by simply paying attention to the relationship between survey-based candidate evaluations and reported vote intentions. This paper aims to unveil the sources of personalized voting by focusing on the campaign behavior of candidates and related efforts to seek personal votes. It aims to explore whether personalized voting is contingent upon candidates asking voters to personalize their vote choices.

2.1. Research on the electoral implications of constituency candidates in Germany

So far, constituency candidates and their campaign behavior received only passing attention among students of German electoral politics. Partly, this is due to early empirical observations emphasizing the centralized nature of German election campaigns and thus the irrelevance of the constituency level campaign operations. For example, Kitzinger (1960) in his study on the 1957 campaign emphasized the top-down approach adopted even in the most decentralized German party, the CDU. According to Kitzinger, in this party, local party elites were ready to accept intrusions in their domains "from above" for campaign purposes and to go along with centralized campaign strategies addressing national electoral coalitions. In light of these findings emphasizing the collectivist nature of German election campaigns, succeeding research did not see any point in further investigating the constituency level.

Past disinterest in constituency campaigns is also due to a particular reading of the German electoral system deemphasizing the behavioral implications of its candidate-centered features. Most students of electoral politics dismiss the behavioral effects of the input dimension of the German electoral system combining two different types of ballots, a nominal and a partisan one (Gschwend, 2007; Hennl and Kaiser, 2008; Kaiser, 2002). From this perspective, German voters are assumed to not make a distinction between the two tiers of the German electoral systems and to vote for parties rather than persons at both tiers (Nohlen, 2000, 318). The literature on this issue suggests two particular voter-level explanations for this commonly held assumption. The first explanation emphasizes the complexity of the German mixed system and resulting cognitive effects at the voter level. From this perspective, voters are not able to personalize their vote since they cannot tell the difference between the two tiers of election and thus understand the electoral opportunities available to them (Jesse, 1988; Kaase, 1984; Schmitt-Beck, 1993). The second

explanation argues that voters do not wish to take advantage of the available electoral opportunities in light of distinct partisan loyalties. From this perspective, the assumed electoral irrelevance of the nominal vote flows from the partisan ties of German voters and that they traditionally cast their votes on a partisan basis (Falter et al., 2000; Müller, 1999; Pappi, 1973; Wessels, 2000).

Contamination theory by and large revitalizes these traditional theories on the functioning of Germany's mixed system and takes it to another more general and comparative level (Ferrara et al., 2005; Ferrara and Herron, 2005; Gschwend et al., 2003; Herron and Nishikawa, 2001). Contamination theory argues that in mixed systems the party vote overrides and structures the personal vote. On the one hand, it are rooted in assumptions on campaign behavior that we alluded to above arguing that parties "run" candidates and orchestrate campaigns in a top-down way, thus that voters primarily receive partisan cues at all levels of campaign communication. To some extent, contamination arguments refer to assumptions on voting behavior emphasizing the crucial role of partisan identities and party loyalties for individual vote choices.

This paper aims to take a fresh and closer look at the electoral implications of constituency contests for two reasons that by and large remained understudied in previous research on German electoral politics. The first reason results from personal vote seeking literature and concerns empirical evidence on the actual behavior of German legislators and candidates. This evidence contradicts the assumption of German parties as monolithic actors in electoral politics. It is able to unveil traces of personal vote seeking behavior aimed to supplement partisan strategies for strategic reasons. For example, Lancaster and Patterson (1990) demonstrate that nominally elected members of the German Bundestag are more likely to engage in pork barrel politics; Klingemann and Wessels (2001) and Zittel (2003, 2010) found systematic differences in constituency communication between legislators elected via party lists on the one hand and legislators elected on the basis of a nominal vote on the other. Nominally elected legislators put more efforts into the task of communicating with constituents. In light of the papers' research question, most importantly, Zittel and Gschwend (2008) and Zittel (2009) contradict the assumption of uniform centralized campaigns demonstrating striking differences in campaign behavior at the constituency level for the 2005 elections driven by the prospects to win nominal votes. The question that remains to be answered in this type of research concerns the electoral pay-offs and whether personal vote seeking matters in this regard.

Some of the available research on electoral politics did ask about the electoral implications of constituency candidates. Its findings suggest that constituency candidates do matter for the behaviors of voters. However, this research predominantly focused on non-political vote getting mechanisms such as the physical attractiveness of candidates, their local origin, or their status (Rosar et al., 2008; Shugart et al., 2005; Schneider and Tepe, 2011; Tavits 2010). Most importantly, it exclusively relies on indirect measures of personal vote seeking rather than on direct ones. It thus fails to explore how the elite and voter

level are linked to each other and to what extent campaign communication might matter for the personal vote. Advancing from these observations on the literature, this paper aims to focus on direct measures for personal vote seeking activities by exploring whether personalized voting is contingent upon candidates asking voters to personalize their vote choices in campaign contexts. It thus aims to bridge the gap between the available findings on personal vote seeking behavior on the one hand and the analysis of vote choices on the other.

This paper is driven by a second consideration for paying closer attention to the electoral implications of constituency campaigns. This consideration however is of little impact on the following analysis for a particular reason. In this consideration we emphasize the weakening of persistent and stable partisan loyalties in German electoral politics. Nowadays, German electorates are less partisan than they used to be which is demonstrated by a wealth of empirical evidence based upon different kinds of indicators. For example, Wessels (2000) emphasizes the shrinking sizes of electorally relevant coalitions of voters in proportion to the whole population. Arzheimer (2006) furthermore demonstrates a slow and constant decline of party identification among German voters between 1977 and 2002. By way of explaining this trend, he points to weakening effects of group membership (Zelle, 1998) suggesting that party loyalties are fading even within electorally relevant national coalitions of voters.

Weakening partisanship in German electorates should have crucial implications for the likelihood of personalized voting in constituency contests and suggests paying closer attention to this matter. It is plausible to assume that non-partisan voters should be more willing to follow constituency campaigns, to distinguish between individual candidates and parties, and to vote contingent upon candidate behavior (Brettschneider et al., 2008; Kaase, 1994). However, in this analysis, we do not test for this effect since we assume that social and electoral change is only facilitating personalized voting rather than providing a direct explanation for it. Our assumption is that even non-partisan voters need to be asked to personalize their vote in order to do so.

2.2. *Personal vote seeking in German constituency campaigns: a framework for analysis*

In this paper we consider the behavior of German voters and their likelihood of personalizing their votes contingent upon the behaviors of legislators and candidates. Personalized voting must be considered an interactive process involving *two levels of personalization*: the voter level and the elite level (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). We argue that German voters are ready to personalize their votes, if they are asked to do so, if constituency candidates actively engage in personal vote seeking behavior in their campaigns. Thus, incentives to personalize vote choices flowing from Germany's mixed electoral system should matter contingent upon the campaign strategies of constituency candidates.

It is important to note, that with the above made argument we do not dispute the crucial role of partisanship for nominal vote choices in Germany's mixed system. This

is the natural baseline expectation flowing from contamination theory, which assumes that in mixed electoral systems partisanship patterns the perceptions and the behaviors of voters at both tiers of elections. However, our general hypothesis that we aim to test is that exposure to personalized campaigning should influence voters above and beyond the expected effects of partisanship; thus that campaign behavior of constituency candidates should matter in addition to partisanship.

How can constituency candidates successfully campaign for nominal votes in Germany's mixed system? Personal vote seeking in campaign contexts is a multifaceted phenomenon that needs to be delineated in the remainder of this section. Traditionally, students of constituency campaigning in plurality systems emphasize campaign expenses to empirically gauge the *intensity of campaign efforts* in local contexts. It is not too implausible to assume that greater campaign efforts under plurality rules also do indicate a higher degree of personalization and thus we will test for this factor in the succeeding analysis. However, this is a risky assumption since on the one hand as the literature on the British case suggests high effort constituency campaigns also can be facilitated and even driven by local party chapters rather than local candidates (Pattie and Johnston, 2003). On the other hand, candidates campaigning at high intensity levels might perceive themselves as standard bearers of their parties and accordingly might deemphasize their own candidacy. Thus, in light of the personalization concept, aggregate campaign expenses are hard to read in their exact meanings and electoral effects as well.

Conceptually, in light of our preceding considerations, we emphasize the need to focus on campaign style rather than effort and thus distinguish between *three dimensions defining personalization at the constituency level*: 1) Personalization can manifest itself in the attitudes and goals of candidates, and thus in a general propensity to talk about ones own candidacy and personality whenever possible; 2) Personalized campaigning can take the form of particular organizational structures that are candidate centered, meaning to a certain degree independent from party organizational structures; 3) Last but not least personalized constituency campaigns could concern the content of campaign communication emphasizing candidate rather than party.

We do not assume a deterministic relationship between these three dimensions of personalized campaigning but rather a loose association depending on a number of intervening variables (Zittel and Gschwend, 2008) Furthermore, it is important to note that personal vote seeking in campaign contexts does not necessarily assume an adversarial relationship between local candidates and their party organizational contexts. The concept of personalized campaigning rather emphasizes the visibility of constituency candidates in the context of constituency campaigns as well as their campaign styles. The particular modes of the relationships between candidates and their parties, on whether they are adversarial or cooperative, are not subject to this analysis.

The preceding considerations highlighted personal vote seeking behavior in campaign contexts as a plausible and distinct phenomenon in German electoral politics. In a final step at the conceptual level we need to ask about the

possible electoral effects of this type of campaign behavior. With regard to this question, the paper distinguishes between *two modes of personalization at the voter level*: cognitive personalization and behavioral personalization. Naturally, students of voting behavior are interested in manifest vote choices and in whether and to what degree candidates are able to affect these choices. Behavioral personalization envisions German voters to cast their nominal votes because of the campaign behavior of candidates independent of their party affiliations. However, focusing on behavioral personalization constraints us in our analysis to superficial snapshots hiding underlying mechanisms such as candidate awareness that might structure future vote choices rather than immediate ones. The concept of cognitive personalization meaning awareness of candidates and their campaigns among voters takes these undercurrents into account. It is of particular concern in the context of this paper, since it sheds further light on the core causal mechanism it emphasizes, namely personalization as an interactive process involving candidates and voters. We do not consider the relationship between these two modes of personalization as being deterministic. But we do assume that cognitive personalization increases the likelihood of behavioral personalization.

3. Data and research design

In order to test our argument on personalized voting as an interactive process involving candidates and voters we need to combine at least two different data sources. First, we need data at the voter level primarily to obtain measures of cognitive and behavioral personalization, voters' exposure to constituency campaigns, and on further voter characteristics to control for alternative explanations. The 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) provides standard pre-election survey data that can be used for these purposes.¹

As second data source we need to obtain concerns candidate-level data providing information on the actual campaign behavior of constituency candidates. Such data allow to gauge the style and intensity of constituency campaigns and to explore those interactive processes involving candidates and voters this paper is concerned with. The candidate study module of the 2009 GLES is ideally suited for this purpose since it includes a number of instruments aimed to measure candidates' campaign behavior. In the context of this module, all constituency and party-list candidates of the five parties represented in the *German Bundestag* – the Social Democrats (SPD), Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), Free Democrats (FDP), Greens and the Left Party (DIE LINKE) – were surveyed in written form. With 790 completed questionnaires (38%) the response rate of the survey is satisfactory compared to similar surveys (Bowler et al., 2006; Gibson and McAllister, 2006); Since we are interested in the impact of constituency campaigns on nominal vote choices, our empirical analysis drops the party-

¹ Specifically we employ the GLES1103 (Pre-Release 1.3) study component that can be downloaded from the GLES homepage (ZA 5300). Replication material can be found on the authors' webpages.

list only candidates and focuses on the campaign behavior of constituency candidates ($N = 581$); 401 (37%) of these candidates were dual candidates, out of 1082 in the entire population, and 180 (44%) were only constituency candidates, out of 408 in the entire population.

To trace the interactions between voters and candidates, we need to match the two data sets described above. This can be done on the basis of the particular electoral districts in which respondents are voting and candidates are running. In order to organize the data in ways to allow matching the record of each voter to the available information on candidates running in his or her district we need to expand the pre-election data on voters accordingly. For example, in cases where the candidate study provides information for three candidates in a given electoral district, the individual records of all respondents' in this particular district need to be stacked onto one another such that they end up being three times in the matched data set. These three records are identical with one exception, namely they differ across candidate characteristics.

The matched sample we will finally work with includes those respondents at the voter level that need to fulfill the following two conditions. First, they need to report a vote intention for a candidate responding to our candidate study, and, second, they need to be eligible to vote in an electoral district from which at least two candidates participated in the candidate study module of the 2009 GLES.²

Obviously, matching our different sets of data results in information losses for the following reasons. We lose respondents at the voter and candidate level since we only included those electoral districts in which at least two candidates participated in the candidate study module of the GLES. Furthermore, we lose respondents at the candidate level since not all electoral districts were covered by the pre-election voter survey. However, this loss of information proves to be acceptable, particularly in light of the benefits when combining those two data sources. Matching voter and candidate data allows for a new and innovative way of studying the personalization of vote choices. It allows to truly studying the interactions between candidates and voters underlying personalized vote choices on the basis of independent information about the candidates and their campaign behavior in addition to voters' perception about those candidates' constituency campaigns. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been done before.³

² The second criterion is necessary to exclude a decision scenario that cannot be modeled, in the context of the conditional logit model. Decision scenarios in which voters possess merely information about one candidate cannot be modeled because there is no variance necessary to identify and estimate effects of candidate characteristics on vote-choice.

³ The final estimation sample we are working with leaves us with 285 respondents facing 166 candidates running in 64 electoral districts. At the candidate side, the sample shows a slight underrepresentation of CDU/CSU candidates. They comprise 16 percent of all candidates in the final estimation sample. The numbers of Left Party candidates (19 percent), FDP candidates (23 percent), Green candidates (22 percent) and SPD candidates (21 percent) in the final sample are close to the 20 percent for each party in the population actually running in an electoral district. In our final estimation sample 118 respondents are facing two candidates, 105 are facing three candidates and for 62 respondents we have information about four candidates of their electoral district.

The dependent variables in our analysis are straightforward and correspond to our distinction between two *modes of personalization at the voter level*: cognitive personalization and behavioral personalization. Cognitive personalization refers to voters' awareness of the candidates running in their districts. Behavioral personalization refers to nominal vote choices driven by the candidates' campaigns rather than their party labels. The pre-election module of the GLES measures voters' awareness of those candidates running in their districts by asking whether voters are able to recall (= 1) names and party affiliations of participating candidates.⁴ Our matched sample signals significant differences between voters in this regard; 203 (71%) respondents were able to correctly recall at least one of the candidates while 63 (9%) respondents were able to recall three and more candidates.⁵

In order to measure the second mode of personalization at the voter level, namely behavioral personalization, we focus on our respondent's nominal vote choices. Since our final estimation sample is a fairly small one compared to the entire sample of voters in the pre-election study, potential selection biases seem to loom large. However, a comparison of the distribution of nominal votes in the final estimation sample in contrast to the official nominal vote return totals documented in column two and three of [Table 1](#) demonstrates a close match with regard to party votes and, thus, provides reassurance in this regard.

Our independent variables, that aim to measure campaign intensity and the dimensions of personalized campaigning summarized above, flow from the candidate study module of the GLES. In the following analysis, the overall campaign budget serves as a summary measure for the *intensity of constituency campaigns (effort)*. To generate this type of information, the candidate study asked candidates in an open-ended question to report their total campaign budget. While the lowest 12 percent of the candidates in the estimation sample do spend no more than 1,000 Euros, the median budget of a constituency candidate is about 10,000 Euros. In the largest percentile, we find candidates that spend more than ten-times the budget of the median candidate.

In the following analysis, the level of personalization of constituency campaigns (campaign style) is measured via three indicators related to the three dimensions sketched above: 1) candidates' campaign norms; 2) the content of their campaigns; 3) the size of candidates' budgets derived from party-independent sources. To get at the prevailing campaign norm the candidate study asked for the candidates' assessment on a 10-point scale whether the main goal of their campaign was to maximize attention to

⁴ This variable has a distribution of 34 percent of all voter-candidate dyads in the final estimation sample that correctly recall the name and 66 percent otherwise. The original question wording of this item (v170) is as "Kennen Sie den Namen von einem oder vielleicht sogar mehreren der hiesigen Wahlkreiskandidaten oder -kandidatinnen und können Sie mir sagen, für welche Partei diese bei der Bundestagswahl am 27. September 2009 antreten? Bitte nennen Sie mir den Namen und die Partei der Kandidatinnen bzw. Kandidaten."

⁵ Note that respondents who not recall any candidate were dropped from the analysis predicting cognitive personalization.

Table 1

Distribution of nominal votes in the estimation sample as compared to the official results.

	Estimation sample [N]	Estimation sample [in %]	Official nominal vote totals [in %]
CDU/CSU	100	35.1	39.4
SPD	79	27.7	27.9
GREENS	40	14.0	9.2
FDP	35	12.3	9.4
LEFT	31	10.9	11.1

Note: Final estimation sample: $N = 285$. The official nominal vote totals are taken from the Federal Returning Office homepage.

themselves as candidates (=1) as opposed to their party (=10). We assume that the lower candidates rank on this scale the more likely they are to provide voters with personalized cues that should eventually encourage voters to personalize their vote.⁶ At the descriptive level, our analysis is able to uncover significant differences between candidates regarding their campaign norms. While the median rating is at 6 we find that 42 percent of our respondents rate their campaign norm at most at five, indicating a higher proclivity for a candidate-centered rather than a party-centered campaign. If personalization is in fact an interactive process involving candidates and voters then in our explanatory analysis we should find that voters are more likely to recall and to vote for those candidates ranking low on our 10-point scale.

To measure the degree to which candidates' personalized the content of their campaigns based on their own estimates we construct an additive scale ranging from 0 to 3 indicating whether candidates' put a particular emphasis on their role as a good constituency member in their campaign communication. The candidate study asked about three particular issues in this regard: 1) offer help to support citizens when facing concrete problems; 2) emphasizing the economic prospects of the constituency; 3) emphasizing availability for citizens to exchange ideas. At the descriptive level, we are able to find significant variance across candidates with regard to the content of their campaigns. Clearly, in 2009, in light of our indicator, some of them were more willing to personalize their campaign agenda compared to others. While about 23 percent of our candidates score at most 1 on this scale, we find that 36 percent get the maximum score on this scale. The median value of this scale is at two. In our following analysis, we expect to find that campaigns based upon personalized campaign agendas should increase the likelihood of personalized vote choices.

To get at the organizational mode of constituency campaigns, we focus on the non-partisan share of candidates' overall budget. The candidate study asks candidates about the share of their reported total campaign budget flowing from private funds and third party donations. Our assumption is that greater shares of party-independent funds indicate greater organizational autonomy and thus more personalized campaign styles. According to the self-

reports of the candidates in our estimation sample, we observe a large amount of variance in this regard. While the twenty candidates with the lowest values in the estimation sample can rely on at most 100 Euros, the median non-partisan budget of a constituency candidate is about 3.750 Euros. In the largest percentile, we find candidates that spend more than 95.000 Euros in non-partisan funds. If our argument on personalization as an interactive process holds then we should find increasingly personalized vote choices with increasing non-partisan budget shares.

The core argument of this paper assumes voters paying attention to constituency campaigns. Our analysis aims to control for this assumption. The 2009 GLES contains measures for voters' self-reported exposure to particular candidates' campaign communication including Websites,⁷ E-Mails or SMS,⁸ personalized information materials,⁹ campaign posters,¹⁰ and finally direct contacts.¹¹ Campaign communication must be considered a composite of many different activities. To quantify voters' exposure to this composite, for every respondent, we computed a summary measure. We sum-up the number of reported exposures to five predetermined campaign activities first. Broken down by candidates, we get five exposure measures – one per party candidate – ranging between 0 and 5: the value 0 indicates that respondents were not exposed at all to any of the activities of a particular party's candidates; the value 5 indicates that respondents were exposed to all five activities of a particular party's candidates.¹² The distribution with regard to this variable is rather skewed. About 61 percent of all respondents report not being exposed at all to any of those activities by any candidate while 27 percent apparently were exposed to at least one activity of one constituency candidate. 12 percent report being exposed at least two activities. This provides descriptive evidence that

⁷ Question wording: "Did you visit the websites of the district candidate representing party xxx?" (Original: "Und haben Sie dabei auch die Internetseiten der Direktkandidatin bzw. des Direktkandidaten der Partei XXX genutzt?").

⁸ Question wording: "Did the E-mail or SMS originated from the candidate representing party xxx him- or herself?" (Original: "Kam die E-mail oder SMS von dem Wahlkreiskandidaten oder der Wahlkreiskandidatin der <Partei einsetzen> persönlich?").

⁹ Question wording: "Did campaign material such as flyers or brochures originate from the constituency candidate representing party xxx?" (Original: "War das Informationsmaterial, wie z.B. Flugblätter oder Broschüren, von dem Wahlkreiskandidaten oder der Wahlkreiskandidatin der Partei XXX persönlich?").

¹⁰ Question wording: "Did campaign posters advertise the constituency candidate representing party xxx?" (Original: "Waren das Plakate, die Werbung für die Person des Wahlkreiskandidaten oder der Wahlkreiskandidatin der Partei <Partei einsetzen> machen?").

¹¹ Question wording: "Did you had direct contact with a constituency candidate while visiting campaign booths or rallies, or were you visited at home?" (Original: "Hatten Sie direkten persönlichen Kontakt zu einer Wahlkreiskandidatin oder einem Wahlkreiskandidaten, z.B. an einem Wahlkampfstand, im Rahmen einer Wahlveranstaltung oder durch Hausbesuche gehabt?").

¹² Note, however, that the estimation sample does neither contain respondents of all electoral districts nor do they come from a representative sample of electoral districts. We have to work with the electoral districts we have. While the sample of respondents is representative for Germany at large, we cannot infer from the data to what degree the situation we observe in the realized set of electoral districts does actually reflect every local district in the same way.

⁶ In previous research Zittel und Gschwend (2008, 1000) showed that this measure summarizes several conceivable indicators of personal campaigns.

voters do pay some attention to campaign matters. Thus, any relationship between personalized campaigns and personalized vote choices that we might find should not be spurious.

This paper does not argue for a one-dimensional explanation of nominal vote choices. Therefore, the following analysis incorporates three further measures at the voter-level to control for additional factors in this regard. First, we include a variable for *partisanship* in our models to establish a baseline for the partisan sources of nominal vote choices. This variable indicates whether and how strong the respondent identifies with each candidate's party. The strength is measured on a scale from 0 (no identification) to 5 (strong identification) with a mean of 1.1 and a variance of 1.8. Second, we control for an individual's level of political awareness following Zaller (1992) through including *political knowledge* into the model because respondents with a higher level of political knowledge might be better equipped to more readily recall particular local candidates and to become aware of campaign communication independent of campaign effects. We construct this measure as an additive scale of two factual knowledge questions on the role of nominal and PR votes for the distribution of seats in the Bundestag¹³ and on the 5%-threshold.¹⁴ The average respondent has a political knowledge score of 1.3 with a standard deviation of 0.75. Third, we control for regional differences in the nature of party competition between the Eastern and Western parts of Germany by including a dummy variable. This variable indicates, whether a respondent is eligible to vote in the *Eastern* part of the country. This holds true for 26 percent of the respondents in the final estimation sample.

4. Empirical models

To test our argument on the interactive underpinnings of personalized voting, we employ a conditional logit set-up to model both dependent variables. Conditional logit models are ideally suited to include both, chooser characteristics as well as choice attributes when modeling discrete-choice behavior. In our application, voters are the

choosers; the campaign behaviors of candidates are their choices. Thus, we will explain vote choices in light of voter characteristics *and* the candidate choices they face as well. This will be formalized as the systematic component of the utility function, V_{ij} , of voter i , which varies across the candidates j in her constituency. The model set-up resembles a logit model because both dependent variables are dichotomous. Respondents are coded to either recall (=1) or vote (=1) for a particular candidate or to not (=0) do this. However, the model is a *conditional* logit model because it considers for each voter the probability of each outcome y_{ij} (recalling, voting or not) conditional on the number of observed "1" per voter i in the data. Formally,

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(y_{ij} = 1 | \text{No. of observed 1's per respondent}) \\ = \exp(V_{ij}) / \sum_k \exp(V_{ik}), \end{aligned}$$

Thus, for instance, given that voters will cast their votes for only one among several candidates represented in our estimation sample (and we consequently observe only one '1' in the voters data), what will be the probability of choosing one particular candidate? Based on voters utility that is derived from casting a vote for each candidate they are facing (flowing from characteristics at the individual level and personalized campaign behavior as well), we estimate how likely each voter is to cast a vote for each particular candidate. The model's vote prediction, then, is that voters will cast their vote for those candidates with the highest estimated utility relative to the immediate competitors we have information for. Given that our estimation sample includes different choice-sets for different electoral districts, a further advantage of the conditional logit model lies in its flexibility allowing that each respondent might face a different number of candidates.

We are going to model our first dependent variable, cognitive personalization, as a function of characteristics (γ) that vary only across voters and, particularly as a function of attributes that vary also across candidates (β). Consequently, we specify the systematic component of the utility function, V_{ij} , of voter i and candidate j as follows¹⁵:

$$\begin{aligned} V_{ij} = & \gamma_{0j} + \gamma_{1j}(\text{Political Knowledge})_i + \gamma_{2j}(\text{East})_i + \beta_1(\text{Campaign Intensity})_{ij} + \beta_2(\text{Campaign Norm})_{ij} + \beta_3(\text{Campaign Content})_{ij} \\ & + \beta_4(\text{Campaign Organization})_{ij} + \beta_5(\text{Exposure})_{ij} + \beta_6(\text{Partisanship})_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

¹³ Question wording: "The German electoral system allows you to cast two votes, a nominal and a list vote. Which one of these two votes matters for the allocation of seats in the German Bundestag?" (Original: "Bei der Bundestagswahl haben Sie ja zwei Stimmen, eine Erststimme und eine Zweitstimme. Wie ist das eigentlich, welche der beiden Stimmen ist ausschlaggebend für die Sitzverteilung im Bundestag?").

¹⁴ Question wording: "How many percentages of the vote does a party need to win in order to receive representation in the German Bundestag?" (Original: "Jetzt möchte ich gerne von Ihnen wissen, ab wie viel Prozent der Stimmen eine Partei auf jeden Fall Abgeordnete in den Bundestag entsenden kann?").

In terms of candidate characteristics we include the reported total budget as a measure of *campaign intensity* as well as three indicators aimed to measure personalized campaign behavior: *campaign norm*, *campaign content*, and

¹⁵ As it is typically done in the context of discrete-choice models, our model can only be estimated when defining one party as a reference category (i.e., all γ are set to zero for this party) and interpret the estimated coefficients relative to this baseline. We will take the CDU/CSU as our reference category.

the reported party-independent budget as an indicator of the candidate centeredness of the candidates' *campaign organization*. Furthermore, we control for the strength and the direction¹⁶ of a voters' *partisanship*. Finally, we control for voter characteristics such as *political knowledge* and whether the respondent is eligible to vote in *East Germany* that are constant across candidates.

Furthermore, we argued that personalized campaign behavior and cognitive personalization should also have an effect on nominal vote choices. Consequently, we model our second dependent variable, *behavioral personalization*, using the same systematic component as before but now also add cognitive personalization as explanatory factor to it. Thus, the systematic component by which we model voters' nominal-vote behavior is the same as before, with the addition of the new term β_7 (*Cognitive Personalization*)_{ij}.

In the following, we will empirically trace the hypothesized electoral effects of personalized campaign activities in the context of the 2009 German Federal Elections. What is the role of candidates' campaign behavior in explaining these differences?

5. Personalization as an interactive process in the 2009 German Federal Elections

In the previous, we distinguished between two modes of personalization at the voter level: cognitive personalization and behavioral personalization. Consequently, in this section, we discuss our results in two steps. First, we will discuss and interpret our estimation results regarding *cognitive personalization* and, second, regarding *behavioral personalization*. Table 2 provides an overview over the estimation results of a conditional logit model predicting voters' awareness of the candidates running in their districts (cognitive personalization).

Consistent with prior research on political behavior, we find a greater propensity to correctly recall a particular candidates' name the stronger respondents identify with the party of this particular candidate. Certainly, the fact that partisanship apparently functions as a heuristic for voters facilitating name recall does not come as a surprise. Instead, it serves as a useful benchmark against which we can assess the relative importance of personalized campaigns in explaining the phenomenon of cognitive personalization. Table 2 demonstrates a positive effect in this regard. The greater the degree of exposure to personalized campaign activities the more likely it is that respondents will correctly recall the names and party affiliations of these very candidates. This supports our general argument on the interactive nature of personalized vote choices.

In light of Table 2, the effect of exposure to personalized campaign activities is independent of whether voters are politically well informed or not. While we generally find that well-informed respondents are not more likely to correctly recall a candidate's name, we find an effect of political knowledge for voters when recalling the names from CDU/CSU as opposed to FDP candidates. Political knowledgeable voters are, independent from the effect of

Table 2

Conditional logit model predicting cognitive personalization.

	Cognitive personalization			
Campaign intensity	-0.01 (0.02)			
Campaign norm	-0.04 (0.06)			
Campaign content	0.02 (0.22)			
Campaign organization	0.03 (0.02)			
Exposure	1.00*** (0.30)			
Partisanship	1.00*** (0.15)			
	SPD	Greens	FDP	Left
	Reference party: CDU/CSU			
East	1.69 (1.29)	0.92 (0.90)	0.37 (0.94)	1.19 (1.24)
Political knowledge	-0.56 (0.61)	-0.38 (0.54)	-1.18** (0.56)	-0.35 (0.70)
Intercept	1.02 (1.19)	-0.18 (1.20)	0.52 (1.14)	-0.99 (1.45)
Log-likelihood	-98			
No. of voter-candidate dyads	769			
No. of voters	279			

Note: Entries are estimated conditional logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

partisan heuristics more likely to correctly recall CDU/CSU candidates rather than FDP candidates. In addition to the level of exposure to personalized campaign messages and controlling for the effect of partisanship heuristics, neither personalized campaign behavior nor campaign intensity seem to facilitate recall any further.

Skeptics might second-guess the findings documented in Table 2. Since they are based upon cross-sectional data they necessarily provoke second thoughts about our causal assumptions. Obviously, in contrast to our theoretical considerations, voter's already existing awareness of particular candidates could influence their ability to recall candidates' names and, hence, their self-reported level of exposure to personalized campaign messages rather than the other way round. However, we respond to these skeptics by asking about the plausibility of their concerns in light of our findings documented in Table 2. Obviously, partisanship and political knowledge could be factors plausibly explaining voter's ability to recall particular candidate's names and as a result to expose himself or herself to those particular candidate's campaign communications. But since we find a systematic effect for exposure independent of partisanship and political knowledge, we do not see any plausible explanation for the assumption of reverse causality. As long as we lack such an explanation, we stick with the plausible argument that increasing exposure to candidate's campaign communication increases the likelihood of voters recalling their names, thus of cognitive personalization.

In order to address the issue of causality and to provide further substantive interpretations of our estimation results, we compute predicted probabilities to correctly recall the name of a typical CDU/CSU candidate distinguishing non-partisans from strong CDU/CSU partisan voters for

¹⁶ Therefore, this indicator varies across candidates and voters.

varying levels of exposure to personalized messages of such a CDU/CSU candidate.

Fig. 1 displays the effects of voters' level of exposure to a CDU/CSU candidate's campaign (x-axis) on the probability to correctly recall the name of this candidate (y-axis). While the black circles represent the model's prediction for strong CDU/CSU partisans at varying degree of exposure, from 0 to 5, of personalized messages of this candidate, the white circles represent the comparable predictions for non-CDU/CSU partisans of an otherwise typical voter.¹⁷ The corresponding vertical lines indicate the length of the respective 95%-confidence intervals.

Fig. 1 demonstrates an increasing likelihood to recall the name of a CDU/CSU candidate running in a district with voters' increasing exposure to his or her personalized campaign communication. The level of exposure does not seem to matter much for strong CDU/CSU partisans – our model predictions show that those voters will recall a given candidates' name anyway. However, the level of exposure to personalized campaign communication significantly matters for those voters that are not partisans of the candidate's party. According to Fig. 1, for typical non-partisan voters, the respective predicted probability increases from 31 percent without exposure to any personalized message to already 53 percent with at least one personalized message. If respondents report an exposure level to the candidate's campaign communication that reaches at least '3' on our scale, they are almost certain to correctly recall the candidate's name. The associated confidence interval ranges from 60 percent to about 98 percent. As we argued above, if exposure to candidates campaign communication would be endogenous rather than exogenous, we would plausibly expect to find no effects in our model among non-partisans. This is because these voters should lack any heuristic that would systematically focus their attention on particular candidates. However, since non-partisans are more likely to correctly recall a candidate's name if they report exposure to his or her campaign communication, exposure to campaign communication most plausibly predicts cognitive personalization.

Cognitive personalization, as we have argued before, is at best a prerequisite for behavioral personalization. But of course, eventually, we are interested in whether constituency campaigns pay-off at Election Day. Thus, we now turn to our second dependent variable, namely *behavioral personalization*.

The estimation results documented in Table 3 provide evidence that constituency campaigns do matter for citizens' nominal vote choices. Two of our three indicators measuring the level of personalization in constituency campaigns show positive effects on respondents' vote choices. These effects point into the expected direction and are statistically significant. Candidates running campaigns on the basis of candidate-centered organizations are more likely to receive personal votes. The more non-partisan funds they spent in their campaigns, the higher the

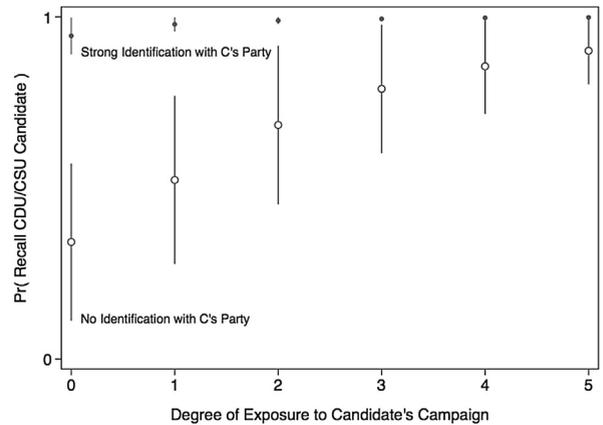


Fig. 1. Comparing the effects of partisanship and exposure on cognitive personalization.

likelihood of personalized vote choices. Furthermore, candidates' that subjectively aim to run their campaigns in personalized ways are more likely to receive personalized votes at the nominal tier. Clearly, voters are willing to personalize their vote choices if they are being asked to do so. Only our indicator for personalized campaign content fails to show a systematic relationship to nominal vote choices.

What is the relationship between cognitive and behavioral personalization? Table 3 provides a positive answer pointing into the expected direction. Respondents recalling a candidates' name are more likely to vote for this very candidate. However, and this is crucial in the context of our

Table 3
Conditional logit model results predicting behavioral personalization.

	Behavioral personalization			
Campaign intensity	-0.03* (0.02)			
Campaign norm	-0.11* (0.06)			
Campaign content	0.31 (0.20)			
Campaign organization	0.05*** (0.02)			
Exposure	-0.02 (0.27)			
Partisanship	0.68*** (0.08)			
Cognitive personalization	1.71*** (0.39)			
	SPD	Greens	FDP	Left
	Reference party: CDU/CSU			
East	-1.30 (0.89)	-1.32 (0.83)	-1.17 (0.91)	-1.07 (0.95)
Political knowledge	0.02 (0.46)	0.27 (0.47)	0.11 (0.51)	-0.89* (0.52)
Intercept	0.52 (0.73)	0.55 (0.86)	0.47 (0.81)	1.61 (0.99)
Log-likelihood	-114			
No. of voter-candidate dyads	799			
No. of voters	285			

Note: Entries are estimated coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01. CDU/CSU is reference category.

¹⁷ Our typical voter lives in the Western part of the country and has values on all independent variables that represent the sample average, except for *Partisanship* and *Exposure*.

argument, cognitive personalization does not determine behavioral personalization. Not everyone who correctly recalls a candidate's name subsequently intends to cast his or her vote accordingly. The estimation results rather indicate the influence of other systematic factors on nominal vote choices as well. Clearly, cognitive personalization is a more moderate form of personalization.

Similar to our previous analysis, the findings documented in Table 3 also support our baseline expectation emphasizing the role of partisanship for vote choices, even at the nominal tier. Theoretically, in the German mixed system, nominal votes should be driven by candidate characteristics while party list votes should be explained by partisanship. Empirically, Table 3 demonstrates contamination effects since partisan consideration do affect nominal vote choices. However, most crucial in the context of our argument, candidate's campaign communications do matter independent from partisanship at the nominal tier. This demonstrates that contamination theorists are only able to tell us parts of the story while this analysis is able to provide some of the missing pieces in this regard.

In contrast to our previous analysis on cognitive personalization, Table 3 indicates no direct influence of voters' exposure to personalized campaign communication on nominal vote-choice. However, this finding does not contradict the existence of indirect behavioral effects flowing from voters' exposure to campaign communication. In this case, the crucial linkage mechanism should be cognitive personalization, which according to Table 3 shows the expected positive effect on nominal vote choices. Voters that are able to recall a particular candidate are more likely to vote for this candidate independent of their partisanship and their political knowledge.

Again, in addition to looking at the estimated coefficients we would like to focus our further interpretation of the model's implications on the two factors that systematically influence a typical respondent's nominal vote choice: partisanship and personalization in organizational terms. Fig. 2 graphically represents predicted probabilities as solid lines together with their 95%-confidence intervals as shaded areas around these lines. We focus on the nominal vote choice of an otherwise typical respondent¹⁸ depending on whether or not he or she strongly identifies with the CDU/CSU. Similar to our previous analysis predicted probabilities are represented on the vertical axis indicating the likelihood that this respondent finally casts a nominal vote for a CDU/CSU candidate. The horizontal axis represents the size of a candidate's party-independent campaign budget as an indicator of personalization in organizational terms. Finally, at the bottom of Fig. 2, we also provide a rug illustrating the reported level non-partisan budgets of all candidates in the sample.

The increasing lines in Fig. 2 demonstrate for strong CDU/CSU partisan and non-partisan voters alike, that higher spending in party independent funds on the part of

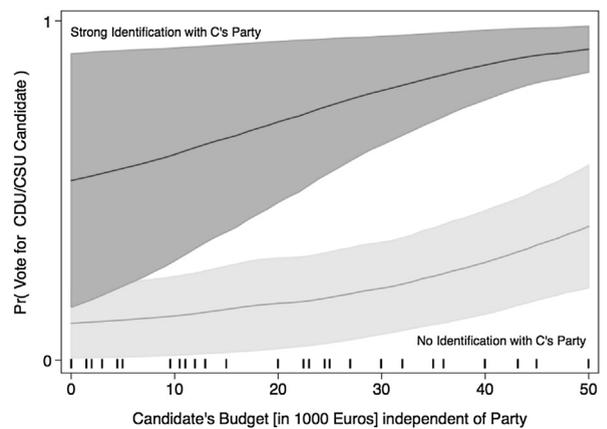


Fig. 2. Predicting behavioral personalization.

a particular CDU/CSU candidate results in a greater likelihood of voters casting a nominal vote for this very candidate. The estimated effect is strong across both scenarios. This can be seen by comparing the predicted probabilities for respondents casting their vote for a CDU/CSU candidate spending nothing in party-independent funds with the predicted probability to cast a vote for a CDU/CSU candidate spending 50,000 Euros in party-independent funds. For strong CDU/CSU partisans this probability increases from 54 percent to 94 percent, while for non-CDU/CSU partisans our model predicts an increase from 6 percent to 38 percent. Substantively, though, given our scenario, the estimated effect of personalization measured on the basis of non-partisan budgets does not matter much for strong CDU/CSU partisans. They are anyway predicted to cast their vote for the CDU/CSU candidate independently from the size of the party-independent funds.

Nevertheless, personalization measured in terms of party-independent funds does prove to be decisive for non-CDU/CSU partisans. Given our scenario to generate those model predictions, otherwise typical non-CDU/CSU voters are predicted to cast their vote for the candidate of another party as long as the CDU/CSU candidate does not spend much in terms of party-independent funds. However, if this CDU/CSU candidate spends 36,000 Euros and more, the predicted vote-choice changes. Typical non-CDU/CSU partisan voters facing a CDU/CSU candidate spending this amount of party-independent funds are predicted to cast a nominal vote for this particular CDU/CSU candidate. This amount can be interpreted as the price tag for a CDU/CSU candidate in his or her efforts to secure a personal vote from voters that do not already identify with the candidate's party.

6. Summary and discussion

This analysis presents a very first attempt to model nominal vote choices as interactive processes involving constituency candidates and voters. We are not aware of any analysis of similar scope. It demonstrates that constituency campaigns do matter for the cognitions of voters and for nominal vote choices as well. According to the previous

¹⁸ Our typical respondent lives in the Western part of the country, does recall the name of all candidates running in the local district, and has values on all remaining independent variables that represent the sample average, except for *Partisanship* and *Campaign Organization*.

analysis, constituency campaigns are able to sway non-partisans in contrasts to simply mobilize the vote of partisans. With regard to the cognitive level of analysis, by running personalized constituency campaigns, candidates are able to make themselves known among non-partisans. With regard to the behavioral level of analysis, by running personalized constituency campaigns, candidates are able to solicit votes among those voters in their district that are not partisans of their own party. We were able to witness behavioral effects for partisans and non-partisans alike, also suggesting mobilization effects resulting from personalized campaign efforts. However, the effects on partisans were decisive in direction and size.

Clearly, this analysis is tentative and needs to be substantiated by further research on this issue. First and foremost, the concept of personalization touches upon a process that we are not able to trace in light of the cross-sectional data used in this analysis. However, our findings, that are snapshots, provide good reasons to further focus on the issue and to expect even more striking results in future analyses. At future points in time, in light of our findings, we expect constituency candidates to become even more inquisitive and to increase their efforts in asking voters to personalize their vote. This is because, obviously voters react to personalized campaigns in positive ways, which should ricochet at the candidate level, providing additional incentives to personalize constituency campaigns. If we conceive personalization as an interactive process involving voters and candidates, it should be dynamic by nature and should be studied on the basis of a longer time frame and in light of two behavioral levels constantly interacting with each other involving each other in a spiral of personalization.

Our analysis clearly is not able to solve causality issues in conclusive ways. Candidates might personalize because of an already existing personal vote in their district rather than the other way round. To address these issues, future analyses need to adopt longitudinal approaches tracing the interactions between candidates and voters at different points in time. Furthermore, qualitative research strategies such as interview research allows for process tracing and for addressing causality issues as well. Last but not least, we need better data at the district level to better match candidates and voters and to allow modeling electoral choices on the basis of sufficient case numbers and perfect sets of information. Oversampling districts and investing special efforts to recruit candidates in oversampled districts to participate in related surveys would be a strategy to collect such data.

Do candidates in constituency campaigns matter in countries other than Germany, should this type of analysis go comparative? The answer to this question is a clear 'yes' for two main reasons. First, the personalization of politics is a common and much discussed phenomenon in most western democracies. Taking research on personalization to the constituency level and to countries other than Germany, and thus increasing the breath and the scope of the analysis, allows to better gauge the role of candidates vis-à-vis local and national party chapters and third party participants in the campaign as well. This allows to better

understand the phenomenon itself and to ask about observable variance in the quantity and quality of constituency campaigns. This will enrich the literature on personalization in conceptual terms and might generate new empirical insights as well.

Second, comparative research on personalized electoral politics at the grassroots allows testing traditional theories on personal vote seeking behavior in light of a new empirical phenomenon across different electoral contexts. This raises questions on plausible expectations and hypotheses in this regard and whether we would expect greater or smaller electoral effects for other candidate-centered systems such as plurality systems. This question obviously reaches beyond the confines of this analysis. However, in light of our previous considerations we see no plausible reason to not expect personalized vote choices contingent upon candidates asking for personal votes. Furthermore, in light of contamination theory discussed above, compared to "pure" plurality systems, mixed systems certainly represent "hard" or most unlikely cases rather than typical ones. Thus, finding electoral effects flowing from personalized campaigning in mixed systems should provide sufficient reason to further investigate this issue for other electoral contexts.

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