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Campaign Personalisation at the 2023 Estonian Parliamentary Election

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ABSTRACT

Parliamentary candidates face choices about the nature of their electoral campaign. Among else, they must strike a balance between promoting their party's image and their own personal appeal, and how much effort to invest in developing personalised campaign tools. These decisions shape the nature of candidates' campaigns, and the kind of election communications voters are exposed to. Using original data from the 2023 Estonian Candidate Study, this paper explores the extent to which candidates who stood for office at the 2023 Estonian parliamentary election personalised their campaign messages and used personalised campaign activities. It finds that candidates' campaigns remained broadly balanced between emphasising themselves and their party. In addition, it is the experience of being a local councillor and positivity about one's electoral chances that stand out as strong predictors for running more personalised campaigns. These results reveal that running in a relatively candidate-centred electoral system where voters have to cast their ballot for an individual candidate is not necessarily a guarantee for widespread campaign personalisation.

Introduction

Personalisation of politics is an increasingly prominent feature of our political landscape and discourse. Electoral campaigns are no exceptions. The commonly held perception here is that the personal attributes of parliamentary candidates feature now heavily in campaign materials that voters receive in the run up to the polling day. Candidates may emphasise their ties to the local community, occupation, educational background, political experience, etc. As traditional ties to political parties are weakening and party membership rates are generally in decline (e.g., van Biezen et al., 2012; Dalton, 2019; Kölln, 2016), these personal traits are often seen to offer voters useful information when deciding whom to cast their ballot for.

There is unsurprisingly a growing body of literature that focuses on campaign personalisation. Scholars have focused on the different dimensions of personalisation

(Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Kreiss, 2016), the effects of campaign personalisation on electoral success (McGregor, 2018), its impact on citizen engagement (Papacharissi, 2014), the determinants for campaign personalisation (e.g., Crisp et al., 2021; Cross et al., 2020; Townsley et al., 2022), etc. Existing insights into which candidates tend to be more likely to personalise their campaigns, however, derive mainly from studies focusing on advanced democracies. The evidence from newer post-communist democracies in Central and Eastern Europe is much scarcer.[1] There are, however, reasons to suspect that the picture may look slightly different there when it comes to campaign personalisation. Given that the development of party systems in these democracies was a more top-down affair (van Biezen, 2003; Kopecký, 1995; Mair, 1997), it is possible that the patterns of campaign personalisation there do not mirror well those in more established democracies, with parties potentially being more central to candidates' strategic calculations around the kind of campaigns they run. The electoral context at Estonian parliamentary elections also adds a further layer of intrigue. Using open list proportional representation where voters have to cast their ballot for an individual candidate, the electoral system incentivises candidates to cultivate a personal vote, suggesting that candidates may have contrasting incentives to consider when choosing their campaign strategy. There is an opportunity to extend our understanding of how far and how well campaign personalisation has travelled.

This study uses original data from the 2023 Estonian Candidate Study to explore the extent to which candidates personalise their individual-level campaigns.[2] It does so by looking at both their campaign focus and use of personalised campaign activities, engaging with the notion of campaign personalisation through the prism of cultivating a personal vote. The findings reveal some intriguing insights. It appears that an electoral system, where voters cast their ballot for an individual candidate and candidates compete against fellow partisans and candidates from other parties, is not a guarantee for candidate-centred campaigns. Individual-level campaigns in Estonia are characterised by rather modest campaign personalisation, in terms of candidates' framing of their campaign messages as well as their use of personalised campaign tools. That said, some factors do stand out as associated with stronger campaign personalisation. I find that campaign personalisation tends to be more prominent among candidates who run as serving local councillors and who are more positive about their electoral chances, but even there the underlying story is one of rather modest campaign personalisation. The increasingly prominent narrative around the perceived increase in the personalisation of electoral campaigns, and politics more broadly, does not always hold.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, a brief account of the saliency of personal traits in the context of electoral campaigns is given and theoretical expectations outlined. I then describe the data and the operationalisation of variables. This is followed by the discussion of the empirical findings and the broader implications that emerge from these.

Background and Expectations

Partisan dealignment, alongside recent societal and technological changes, is having a significant impact on electoral campaigns. These contests are increasingly taking place in the context of weakening party loyalties, rising number of floating voters and late deciders, and an increase in issue voting (e.g., Dalton, 2012, 2019; Erlingsson & Persson, 2011;

Lupo, 2015; Reny et al., 2019). The electoral volatility that is created by these trends high-lights the continuing importance of campaigns in influencing candidates' electoral fortunes.

An increasingly salient feature of electoral campaigns is the perceived emphasis on candidates' personal traits and policy positions. Candidates often highlight these in cam-paign materials (e.g., Garzia, 2011; McAllister, 2007; Trumm et al., 2023) and have good reasons for doing so. Candidates can, and do, differ from their party and fellow partisans on important policy positions, even in party-centred systems (De Winter & Baudewyns, 2015; Lloren & Rosset, 2017). Moreover, we know that candidates' personal traits can influence whom voters choose to cast their ballot for, with some non-policy attributes being particularly useful in cultivating personal votes. For example, voters tend to prefer candidates with personal ties to their local constituency (e.g., Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Horiuchi et al., 2020; Tavits, 2010; Velimisky et al., 2024) and candidates who they perceive to be more attractive (e.g., Berggren et al., 2010; Lawson et al., 2010; Milazzo & Mattes, 2016), while candidates' occupational background can influence voters' evaluations of them (e.g., Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Coffé & Theiss-Morse, 2016; Mechtel, 2014), as is the case with their gender (e.g., Anzia & Bernhard, 2022; Hassell & Visalvanich, 2024; Schwarz & Coppock, 2022) and race (e.g., Visalvanich, 2017a, 2017b). The idea that candidates' personal traits can be useful vote winning attri-butes is very much part of the contemporary discourse around electoral campaigns.

The existing empirical literature on campaign personalisation is extensive, but has so far predominantly focused on Western democracies (e.g., De Winter & Baudewyns, 2015; Milazzo & Townsley, 2020; Steffan & Venema, 2019; Townsley et al., 2022; Trumm et al., 2023). While there is emerging attention on campaign personalisation in Central and Eastern Europe, this has largely remained confined to comparative studies of campaign-ing during European Parliament elections (Bøggild & Pedersen, 2018; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013) and those that focus on candidates' individual-level campaigns in Hungary (e.g., Chiru, 2015; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Papp & Zorigt, 2016). It is important to build on this literature and examine the scale of campaign personalisation in a broader range of Central and Eastern European countries. This will not only help develop a more complete picture of campaign personalisation in the region, but also shed more light on how it compares to the patterns witnessed elsewhere.

Personalisation of Campaign Messages

It is in the interest of all candidates to try to get out the vote and win votes, but the extent to which they have incentives to do so by focusing their campaign messages on them-selves (versus their party) can, and does, vary. The electoral institutions shape the relative importance of personal votes in determining electoral outcomes and, in doing so, are likely to influence the behaviour of candidates. They have stronger incentives to cultivate personal votes in candidate-centred systems than in party-centred ones.

Candidates play an important role at parliamentary elections in Estonia. These elec-tions use open list proportional representation, requiring voters to cast their ballot for an individual candidate. Voting for a party list or multiple candidates is not an option. If a ballot is not cast for an individual candidate, it is treated as spoiled. This effectively means that candidates must compete for votes not only with candidates from other parties, but also with candidates from their own party who stand in their constituency,

creating a strong incentive for candidates to promote their own personal candidacy and cultivate personal votes.[3]

At the same time, it is important to highlight that there are some limitations to the candidate-centredness of the electoral system used at Estonian parliamentary elections. First, while voters can disturb candidate order on parties' constituency-level candidate lists, it is still parties that dominate ballot access. Parties remain important gatekeepers for becoming a candidate in the first place. The development of party systems in post-communist democracies was a top-down affair and, therefore, political power is usually centralised within party organisations (e.g., van Biezen, 2003; Kopecký, 1995; Mair, 1997). The gatekeeping power of central party organisations was also evident at the 2023 election. The 2023 Estonian Candidate Study data shows that more than two-thirds of candidates (67.7%) needed the support of their party's national executive to stand as the party candidate, and 15.2% required the support of their party's regional executive to do so. This gatekeeping power will likely reduce the likelihood of candidates carrying out entirely personalised, candidate-centred campaigns. Second, while the allocation of mandates highlights the importance of personal votes, parties still have a role to play there. The allocation of mandates takes place in three stages: (i) all candidates who gain more votes than the simple quota in their constituency get elected, (ii) parties that win at least five per cent of the nationwide vote receive an allocation of constituency seats based on their candidates' cumulative electoral performance in the constituency, which are awarded to candidates based on their intra-party ranking of vote share in the given constituency, and (iii) the remaining seats are allocated to parties nationally, using the D'Hondt method, and awarded to candidates based on their position on the national party list. At the 2023 parliamentary election, 74 per cent of seats were allocated to candidates in the first two rounds, where personal vote share determines whether one gets elected or not, with the remaining 26 per cent of seats allocated to candidates based on their placement on the national party list. In other words, if a party is allocated X number of national party list seats, it is the top X candidates on the national party list who get elected, irrespective of how many personal votes candidates received. While the electoral rules in place in Estonia create strong incentives for candidates to promote their own candidacy and cultivate personal votes, there are constraints to it. Parties still have a notable role to play when it comes to shaping candidates' electoral fortunes and that is something that candidates are likely to take note of when deciding their campaign strategy.

Personal and Political Profile

Existing evidence regarding potential gendered differences in campaign personalisation is mixed. While some empirical studies find no differences between the campaign personalisation of male and female candidates (Cross et al., 2020; Townsley et al., 2022), others find male candidates to be more inclined to emphasise their personal traits and reference their family as part of their campaign (Meeks, 2016; Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015). The latter proposition is also supported by research in political psychology that generally finds men to be more comfortable advocating for their positions and defending their own views (Albarracín et al., 2012; Kalaian & Freeman, 1994; Lausberg, 2016). Therefore, I expect to find support for this also in the context of Estonia.

H$_1$: Male candidates run more personalised campaigns than female candidates.

It is also likely that candidates' political profile influences their campaign choices. It is well established that political experience is one of the key personal vote winning attributes that candidates can possess, signalling voters their previous electoral success as well as knowledge of how political institutions operate, and assumed ability to successfully navigate the policy-making process (e.g., Horiuchi et al., 2020; von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2021; Trumm, 2016, 2022). Moreover, candidates who run as councillors in the local community or incumbents at national level are likely to have greater name-recognition through media prominence. It would make sense for candidates who can draw upon name-recognition and previous (local and/or national) electoral success to highlight these important personal vote winning attributes in their campaign.

H$_2$: Candidates with more prominent political profile run more personalised campaigns.

In addition, some candidates hold positions within their party organisation prior, or in addition, to being a candidate. The experience of working within party office is likely to socialise those candidates within their party organisation and influence their mind-set. They are likely to value loyalty to one's party higher and be more likely to act as a 'good partisan' during the electoral campaign, running a more party-centred campaign as a result.

H$_3$: Candidates who hold a party office run less personalised campaigns.

Relationship with Principals

Existing evidence has generally shown that voters prefer candidates who can claim localness and have personal ties to the constituency they stand for election in. This has been found in experimental studies (e.g., Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Horiuchi et al., 2020) as well as those focusing on electoral outcomes (e.g., von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2021; Schulte-Cloos & Bauer, 2023).[4] Candidates with local ties should find it easier to claim knowledge of the local community and the main issues it grapples with, and portray themselves as personally invested in its success. It is reasonable to expect candidates to highlight these ties in their efforts to win personal votes.

H$_4$: Candidates who live in their constituency run more personalised campaigns.

Candidates' relationship with their party can also differ. Political parties are not homogenous. While it is reasonable to expect candidates to be aligned with their party's broad ideological leaning and key manifesto pledges, there is nonetheless considerable ideological heterogeneity within parties, whether tied to issue positions and/or priority areas (De Winter & Baudewyns, 2015; Trumm et al., 2020). Candidates who feel ideologically more distant from their party and disagree with more of its policy positions have incentives to highlight their own personal policy priorities and positions more so than those whose views are better represented by their party's central messages. In a similar vein, candidates who differ from their party in the assessment of what the key campaign issues should be are more likely to diverge from their party's campaign messaging.

H$_5$: Candidates who are ideologically distant from their party run more personalised campaigns.

Electoral Context

Candidates differ in their electoral prospects, and this is also likely to influence their campaign strategy. Given the growing importance of personal traits in shaping who voters cast their ballot for (e.g., Arzheimer & Evans, 2012; Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Renwick & Pilet, 2016), and the fact that voters in Estonia must cast their ballot for an individual candidate, there are strong incentives for candidates who see themselves as electorally competitive to promote their personal traits and policy positions over their party label. At the same time, candidates who do not expect to get elected are more likely to take a long-term perspective and prioritise the image of their party in a bid to build a profile within their party and potentially be rewarded with a more favourable candidate listing for a future election.

H$_6$: Candidates with better perceived chance of winning run more personalised campaigns.

Next, candidates can differ in whether they were encouraged to put themselves forward as a candidate or not. While many candidates are encouraged to stand by their party leaders, other politicians, etc., there is still a substantial minority who receive no external push to stand and do so without any encouragement from others. It is likely that people who are confident and independent-minded enough to put themselves forward as a candidate, without encouragement from others, tend to run more self-centred and personalised campaigns.

H$_7$: Candidates who are not encouraged to stand by anyone run more personalised campaigns.

Finally, parliamentary constituencies in Estonia vary in district magnitude, which may impact how candidates campaign. While the comparative study by Sudulich and Trumm (2019) does not find a significant link between district magnitude and campaign focus, existing evidence is still limited. It is possible that, in an open list proportional representation system where voters have to cast their ballot for an individual candidate, the electoral value of candidate's personal reputation is greater in a constituency where she faces more co-partisan competitors whom she needs to differentiate herself from to attract personal votes.

H$_8$: District magnitude has a positive effect on campaign personalisation.

Data and Methods

The theoretical expectations are evaluated using original data from the 2023 Estonian Candidate Study. It is a comprehensive post-election survey of candidates who stood

for office at the 2023 parliamentary election. It covers candidates of all major political parties and includes a broad range of questions about their candidacy as well as their political profile and personal background. The survey was implemented immediately after the election in March-April 2023 to ensure that candidates have a fresh recollection of the campaign choices they made. The final sample includes 316 candidates (32.6 per cent response rate). It is broadly representative of the full population of candidates with regards to their partisanship, constituency, electoral performance, and list leadership.[5]

There are key advantages in using 2023 Estonian Candidate Study. First, it is one of the most comprehensive surveys of parliamentary candidates in the region. It includes questions on candidates' campaign behaviour and profile, covers all major political parties, and has a response rate of approximately one-in-three. This allows for a complex evaluation of the extent to which candidates opt to run personalised election campaigns and what factors help explain variation in how personalised different candidates' campaign efforts are. Second, the reliance on survey data allows me to capture candidates' unbiased accounts of their campaign activity, given the anonymity of their survey responses, but also subjective attitudes such as one's perceived electoral prospect. While information on candidates' campaign activity could in theory be derived from observing their actual campaign effort, this is practically challenging considering the number of candidates and campaign tools involved, and obtaining an understanding of candidates' subjective perceptions requires asking them about these. The reliance on survey data allows for an analysis that captures a broad range of candidates and explanatory indicators. Finally, the 2023 Estonian Candidate Study includes successful and unsuccessful candidates. The former are of course more important to understanding parliamentary dynamics and policy outcomes in the post-election parliament, but both sets of candidates contribute to what happens in the run up to the polling day and how voters experience election campaigns.

Survey data from the 2023 Estonian Candidate Study, featuring candidates across the political spectrum and covering all constituencies, offer valuable insight into campaign behaviour and the determinants of it. That said, a degree of caution is necessary. These data are self-reported. While candidates were assured of the anonymity of their responses, it is impossible to eliminate the possibility of socially desirable answers. The potential risk of such responses should be low though since, in addition to the promise of treating responses in an anonymous manner, the survey was conducted online. The lack of an interviewer ought to further reduce any incentives to misrepresent one's opinions and behaviours. It is also important to note that these data focus exclusively on candidates and their individual-level campaigns. They do not capture campaign efforts put in place by parties, including those that promote individual politicians of said parties. As such, while these data shed valuable light to an important element of the electoral campaign, they do not capture the entirety of the electoral campaign, as experienced by voters.

Dependent Variables

Campaign personalisation is measured through two separate variables. First, *campaign focus* captures the extent to which candidates focus their campaign messages around

their party versus themselves. It ranges from 0 'to attract as much attention as possible to my party' to 10 'to attract as much attention as possible to myself as the candidate'. This is a common way of capturing how candidate-centred versus party-centred candidates' campaign messages are (e.g., Sudulich & Trumm, 2019; Townsley et al., 2022), providing a useful comparative indicator of the kind of campaign messages voters are exposed to in the run up to polling day.

The second dependent variable – *campaign activities* – focuses on the kind of campaign tools candidates use in their campaign. It describes how many personalised campaign activities, from the following options, each candidate used: (i) personal website, (ii) canvassing, (iii) personal posters, and (iv) personal media adverts. The measure ranges from 0 'none' to 4 'all', with higher values corresponding to greater use of personalised campaign activities. It covers a broad range of campaign tools, ranging from highly localised door-to-door direct contact with potential voters to traditional and new media forms of campaign advertisements. It is important to note that this dependent variable is of a different nature to campaign focus. In contrast to campaign focus, which evaluates candidate-centredness in relation to party-centredness, campaign activities looks solely at the use of personalised campaign tools. It does not tap into candidates' use of campaign tools provided by their party nor their party's campaign tools that might feature the candidate. Campaign activities provides additional information that complements campaign focus, rather than acts as a robustness check for it. Taken together, the two dependent variables capture the extent to which candidates personalise the content of their campaign messages and use personalised campaign activities.

Explanatory Variables

In line with the theoretical expectations, I incorporate three types of factors in the empirical analysis of variation in candidates' campaign behaviour.[6] First, I capture candidates' personal and political profile. *Gender* is a dichotomous measure distinguishing between male (coded 0) and female candidates (coded 1). This is an exploratory inclusion as existing evidence is mixed. While some studies find men to more likely emphasise personal traits in their campaigns (Meeks, 2016; Stalsburg & Kleinberg, 2015), others find no significant gender differences in campaign personalisation (Townsley et al., 2022). With regards to candidates' political profile, *councillor* is a dichotomous measure distinguishing between candidates who are local councillors at the time of the election (coded 1) and those who are not (coded 0), while *incumbency* is a dichotomous variable that separates candidates who run as incumbents (coded 1) from those who do so as challengers (coded 0). These two variables tap into candidates' political experience and public visibility, with both being electoral assets and useful personal vote earning attributes. Next, *party office* captures whether a candidate holds a regional or national party office at the time of the election (coded 1) or not (coded 0). The socialisation effect coming from being embedded in the organisational structure of one's party may incentivise a more party-centred approach to campaigning.

Second, candidates' relationships with their key principals – voters and party – are captured through two indicators. *Locality* is a dichotomous measure that distinguishes between candidates who reside in the constituency they seek election in (coded 1) and those who do not (coded 0). Next, *ideological distance* describes how close, or far, a

candidate's ideological views are from those of her party. It is measured as the difference between the left-right position of the candidate and that of her party, as perceived by the candidate. The measure ranges from 0 'no difference' to 10 'completely apart'. A subjective measure is appropriate because it is candidates' perception of how ideologically close, or far, they are from their party that shapes their thinking around the need to run personalised campaigns, instead of objective distance which candidates may or may not agree with.

Third, I use indicators to tap into the electoral context that candidates face. *Chance of winning* describes the impact of the electoral context by capturing whether candidates believe their electoral prospects to be good (coded 1) or not (coded 0) at the beginning of the campaign, with the expectation being that it is the former who run more personalised campaigns. Moving on, *encouragement* describes whether the candidate was encouraged by someone to stand for election (coded 0) or whether this was entirely her own decision (coded 1). Putting oneself forward with no encouragement from others suggests a degree of confidence in oneself that lends itself to a personalised approach to campaigning. As the final, yet potentially important, element of the electoral context, the analysis accounts for *district magnitude*. The measure is operationalised as the maximum number of seats allocated in the constituency. The electoral value of personal reputation should increase as district magnitude increases in a candidate-centred electoral system, such as open list proportional representation, with candidates facing more co-partisan competitors they need to differentiate themselves from.

Finally, *party* is included in the analysis as a control variable. Distinct codes are given to all parties that won seats at the 2023 election, with candidates of other parties grouped together under a single 'other' label. This variable will help tease out any variation along party lines.

Empirical Strategy

This study uses ordinary least squares regression to explain variation in candidates' campaign focus and ordered probit to explain variation in how many personalised campaign activities they use. Both models are run with robust standard errors.

How Personalised are Estonian Electoral Campaigns?

I start by looking at the overall picture of campaign personalisation. Table 1 presents mean scores for campaign focus and campaign activities across all candidates, as well as by party.

Note first that the level of campaign personalisation, at least at the aggregate level, is relatively modest. The mean score for campaign focus across all candidates in the analysis is as low as 3.7. Given that the variable ranges from 0 'attention to party' to 10 'attention to candidate', this mean score indicates that candidates' campaign messages tend to be slightly more party-centred than candidate-centred. There is of course still room for the latter, since the mean score is closer to the mid-point of the scale (5) than complete party-centredness (0), but the evidence here tells the story of slight party dominance even in candidates' individual-level campaign messaging. This follows the narrative around the formation of party systems in post-communist countries having been a top-down

Table 1. Campaign personalisation in Estonia.

	Campaign focus	Campaign activities
Conservative People's Party of Estonia	4.3 (2.9)	1.4 (1.0)
Estonia 200	3.8 (2.8)	0.6 (0.7)
Estonian Centre Party	4.3 (3.2)	1.6 (1.2)
Estonian Reform Party	4.1 (2.7)	1.2 (0.9)
Fatherland	4.5 (3.4)	1.1 (1.1)
Social Democratic Party	4.3 (2.7)	1.0 (1.0)
Others	2.4 (2.4)	0.6 (0.8)
All candidates	3.7 (2.8)	1.0 (1.0)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

affair and power remaining quite centralised within many parties (e.g., van Biezen, 2003; Kopecký, 1995; Mair, 1997). Despite voters in Estonia casting their ballot for an individual candidate, incentivising the latter to cultivate a personal vote, parties still remain a prominent feature in candidates' campaign messaging. It is possible that this will change over time if party organisations de-centralise and the trend towards personalisation of politics grows, but these transitions need to go further than they have so far to turn individual-level campaigns in Estonia predominantly candidate-centred in their focus.

The relative lack of campaign personalisation is also evident when looking at how widespread the use of personalised campaign activities is. The mean score for the campaign activities variable is only 1. In other words, candidates use, on average, just one of the following four personalised campaign activities: (i) personal website, (ii) canvassing, (iii) personal posters, and (iv) personal media adverts. Individual-level campaigns are characterised by modest levels of campaign personalisation in Estonia. This appears to hold both in terms of candidates' framing of campaign messages and their use of personalised campaign tools.

Breaking the aggregate patterns down by party reveals a degree of consistency in candidates' campaign practices. There is some variation along party lines, as one would expect, but this remains limited. With regards to campaign focus, leaving aside candidates grouped together under the 'other' umbrella, it is the Estonia 200 candidates who tend to run most party-centred campaigns (3.8) and the Fatherland candidates who tend to run most candidate-centred ones (4.5). The mean scores are very similar for candidates of all major parties. Given that all party-level mean scores remain below 5 – i.e., the mid-point of the scale –, this evidence suggests that candidates of all main parties tend to, on average, conduct more party-centred, as opposed to candidate-centred, campaigns.

The limited variation on party level is also evident when focusing on variation in campaign activities. Estonia 200 candidates are once again the ones who tend to run least personalised campaigns, with their mean score being 0.6. The mean number of personalised campaign tools employed is highest for candidates of the Estonian Centre Party (1.6) and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (1.4). That said, the mean scores for all parties are relatively similar, highlighting a story of consistency rather than widely different campaign practices. The fact that all these mean scores are relatively low also shows that the narrative of limited campaign personalisation tends to hold across the party system.

Who Runs More Personalised Campaigns?

I now turn to testing what factors influence the extent to which candidates choose to personalise their individual-level election campaigns. Table 2 presents findings from the models explaining variation in campaign focus (Model 1) and campaign activities (Model 2).

Starting with campaign focus, four explanatory factors stand out as having systematic influence on the extent to which candidates focus on their own image versus that of their party as part of their campaign effort. With regards to candidates' political profile, the positive and statistically significant coefficient of 0.81 for councillor shows that candidates who run for election as serving councillors tend to put more emphasis on themselves, as opposed to their party, in their campaign messages. This pattern is in line with the theoretical expectation, as these candidates are likely to have greater name-recognition locally through their role and an existing track record of promoting local projects, both of which are useful vote earning attributes to highlight. I also find some evidence that the relationship between candidates and their party matters. Candidates who feel ideologically more distant from their party tend to run more personalised campaigns, as shown by the positive and statistically significant coefficient of 0.30. This also follows the theoretical expectation, given that candidates who believe that their party's policy positions are less accurate reflections of their own are likely to have greater incentives to communicate their distinct viewpoints to voters. Finally, two factors related to the electoral context stand out. The positive and statistically significant coefficients of 1.20 and 0.93 for chance of winning and encouragement suggest that, in line with theoretical expectations, candidates who were more confident in their electoral prospects before the start of the campaign and those who decided to run for office without any encouragement

Table 2. Explaining variation in campaign personalisation.

	Campaign focus Model 1	Campaign activities Model 2
Gender	0.20 (0.33)	−0.10 (0.14)
Councillor	0.81* (0.37)	0.33* (0.15)
Incumbency	0.35 (0.77)	0.10 (0.33)
Party office	−0.48 (0.33)	0.14 (0.15)
Locality	−0.57 (0.38)	−0.10 (0.18)
Ideological distance	0.30* (0.15)	−0.05 (0.06)
Chance of winning	1.20* (0.46)	0.71** (0.21)
Encouragement	0.93* (0.37)	0.07 (0.02)
District magnitude	0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.02)
Party		
Conservative People's Party of Estonia	1.44** (0.52)	0.59* (0.24)
Estonia 200	1.00* (0.47)	−0.04 (0.21)
Estonian Centre Party	1.42* (0.63)	0.93** (0.28)
Estonian Reform Party	0.93 (0.60)	0.25 (0.25)
Fatherland	1.95** (0.65)	0.42 (0.26)
Social Democratic Party	1.50** (0.549)	0.34 (0.24)
Constant	1.95** (0.73)	
/ cut 1		0.08 (0.32)
/ cut 2		1.07 (0.32)
/ cut 3		2.01 (0.31)
/ cut 4		2.94 (0.36)
R-squared / Log likelihood	0.16	−357
Number of observations	316	303

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

from their party, friends, family, etc. tend to conduct more personalised individual-level campaigns. Candidates who are more optimistic about their electoral chances have an incentive to seek personal votes, given that electoral success is to a very large extent determined by the share of constituency-level personal votes received, while those who do not expect to get elected should be more tempted to be good citizens to their party in hope of furthering their standing within their party. With regards to putting oneself forward as a candidate with no encouragement from others, this suggests a notable degree of confidence and self-centredness that lends to a personalised approach to campaigning.

Moving on to campaign activities, the range of explanatory factors that appear to influence it is smaller. The two significant effects that stand out here pertain to councillor and chance of winning. The positive coefficient of 0.33 for the former suggests that candidates who run as local serving councillors tend to use a broader range of personalised campaign tools, while the positive coefficient effect of 0.71 for the latter shows that candidates who are more optimistic about their electoral prospects tend to use more personalised campaign activities. Both effects are in line with those observed in Model 1, as well as H_2 and H_6, respectively. Councillor and chance of winning consistently influence the level of campaign personalisation. The effects of other explanatory variables covered here are limited to campaign focus only or are not present for either aspect of campaign personalisation.

To illustrate the real world meaning of the effects and provide a more intuitive comparison of the effect sizes, I present predicted values for campaign focus and predicted probabilities of using personalised campaign activities in Table 3. For each effect, the characteristic in question is allowed to vary, while others are held constant.

Starting with campaign focus, ideological distance stands out as having the largest effect on the extent to which candidates focus their campaign messages around themselves, as opposed to their party. Those who feel ideologically most distant from their party tend to conduct a lot more personalised campaigns than those who consider themselves to be perfectly aligned with their party on ideological grounds (5.5 versus 3.4). In fact, the former are the only group whose predicted score in Table 3 for campaign focus is above 5; i.e., they tend to run more candidate-centred than party-centred campaigns. The remaining effects are similar in size. There is a 1.2-point increase in the predicted score for campaign focus when comparing candidates who were positive about their electoral

Table 3. Predicted scores for campaign personalisation.

	Minimum	Maximum	Δ
	Campaign focus		
Councillor	3.4	4.2	0.8
Ideological distance	3.4	5.5	2.1
Encouragement	3.5	4.4	0.9
Chance of winning	3.5	4.7	1.2
	Campaign activities = 0		
Councillor	44.1	32.4	11.7
Chance of winning	42.6	19.9	22.7
	Campaign activities = 2		
Councillor	16.9	22.7	5.8
Chance of winning	17.7	29.5	11.8
	Campaign activities = 4		
Councillor	0.8	1.8	1.0
Chance of winning	0.7	3.7	3.0

prospects before the start of the campaign and those who were not (4.7 versus 3.5), a 0.9-point increase when comparing candidates who were not encouraged by anyone else to run to those who were (4.4 versus 3.5), and a 0.8-point increase when comparing candidates who run as local councillors to those who do not (4.2 versus 3.4).

Turning to campaign activities, it is the effect associated with chance of winning that stands out. There is a significant decline in candidates' probability of using none of the personalised campaign activities when comparing candidates with contrasting self-perceived electoral prospects. While more than four-in-ten candidates who thought their electoral chances were poor did not use any personalised campaign tools (42.6%), less than two-in-ten of those who were positive about their electoral prospects failed to utilise any personalised campaign tools (19.9%). There is also a notable, albeit smaller, difference in using two personalised campaign activities. The likelihood of doing so increases by 11.8% when comparing those who considered their electoral prospects to be good with those who did not (29.5% versus 17.7%). The difference in using all four personalised campaign tools is minimal at 3% (3.7% versus 0.7%). While making extensive use of personalised campaign activities is uncommon among candidates in general, irrespective of how good they think their chance of getting elected is, those who are positive about their electoral prospects are considerably more likely to use at least some personalised campaign activities than those are not. The effect sizes associated with running as a councillor or not are smaller in size. Candidates who run as serving councillors are 11.7% less likely to not use any personalised campaign activities than their counterparts (32.4% versus 44.1%), 5.8% more likely to use two personalised campaign activities (22.7% versus 16.9%), and 1% more likely to use all four personalised campaign activities (1.8% versus 0.8%). This evidence lends further support to the narrative that candidates' individual-level campaigns in Estonia do not tend to be overly personalised. Even when focusing on those candidates who tend to run more personalised campaigns, very few of them use the full range of personalised campaign activities available to them.

The use of all four personalised campaign activities covered in this study is rare. However, it is possible that there are some of these that are used by many, while others that only very few candidates make use of. Table 4 provides a descriptive overview of how many candidates – on aggregate, and by councillor and chance of winning – used each of the four personalised campaign activities.

There is some, albeit limited, variation in candidates' likelihood of using the different campaign activities when looking at the aggregate picture. They are most likely to use personal campaign posters (37.6%), while least likely to engage in canvassing (13.9%), with approximately one-in four using personal ads (24.8%) and just over one-in-five managing a personal campaign website (20.5%). This suggests that, as one would expect, more time-consuming campaign activities tend to be less popular. However, it also suggests that none of these campaign activities are commonplace among candidates. The picture of limited campaign personalisation does not appear to be driven by one or two personalised campaign activities that are particularly unpopular. The limited use of personalised campaign activities is the case across all four that are focused on here.

Looking at the disaggregated information next, variation in the use of personal campaign posters stands out. There is a 22.9% difference in the use of personal campaign posters by candidates who were serving councillors at the time of the election and those who were not (51.2% versus 28.3%). The difference is even bigger at 39.3% when

Table 4. The use of individual campaign activities.

	Website %	Canvassing %	Posters %	Ads %
Councillor				
No	15.0	13.3	28.3	19.4
Yes	28.5	14.6	51.2	32.5
Δ	13.5	1.3	22.9	13.1
p-value	0.00	0.75	0.00	0.01
Chance of winning				
Bad	18.2	13.1	31.8	20.9
Good	33.3	17.8	71.1	46.7
Δ	15.1	4.7	39.3	25.8
p-value	0.02	0.41	0.00	0.00
All candidates	20.5	13.9	37.6	24.8

comparing candidates who believed their electoral prospects to be good and those who did not (71.1% versus 31.8%). Moreover, local councillors and those with good electoral prospects are the only two sub-groups who are more likely to use personal campaign posters than to not use them. It is also worth highlighting that 25.8% more of those candidates who are positive about their electoral prospects use personal campaign ads than candidates who are not (46.7% versus 20.9%). All other differences depicted in Table 4 remain below 20%. That said, apart from canvassing, they are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

Conclusion

Voters are often perceived to rely on candidates' personal attributes during election campaigns when deciding whom to cast their ballot for. We know that a range of personal characteristics can provide cues for voters about the candidates they need to pick from, including candidates' localness (e.g., Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Collignon & Sajuria, 2018; von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2021), previous political experience (e.g., Horiuchi et al., 2020; von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2021; Tavits, 2010), occupational background (e.g., Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Coffé & Theiss-Morse, 2016), gender (e.g., Dolan & Lynch, 2014; Johns & Shephard, 2007), and even perceived attractiveness (e.g., Berggren et al., 2010; Milazzo & Mattes, 2016). These attributes can serve as informational shortcuts for what voters might expect from the candidate – e.g., knowledge of local matters, issue priorities, competence – if she was to get elected. Therefore, candidates have an incentive to talk about themselves, as well as their party, when putting their case forward. With existing insights deriving predominantly from advanced democracies, there is an opportunity to add to our understanding of how widespread campaign personalisation is by extending the focus to newer post-communist democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.

This study uses original survey data from the 2023 Estonian Candidate Study to reveal how personalised contemporary individual-level electoral campaigns are in Estonia. It does so by looking at candidates' campaign focus as well as the range of personalised campaign tools used. The findings reveal some interesting patterns. It appears that, despite an electoral system where voters have to cast their ballot for an individual candidate, incentivising candidates to cultivate personal votes, individual-level campaigns in

Estonia are characterised by rather modest levels of campaign personalisation, both in terms of candidates' framing of their campaign messages and their use of personalised campaign tools. It does appear that the top-down development of party systems in post-communist democracies, and the accompanying centralisation of power within many party organisations, still constrains the extent to which candidates choose to personalise their individual-level campaigns. While it is more extensive among some candidates – namely, those who run as serving councillors and who are more positive about their electoral prospects –, the narrative is one of relatively modest campaign personalisation even there.

There are three broader points arising from this study and its findings. First, there has been a lot of talk about the personalisation of politics in recent times. It has been shown that self-personalisation in political communications is commonplace (e.g., Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Metz et al., 2020), as is the use of visual personalisation in campaign ads (e.g., Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Steffan & Venema, 2019; Trumm et al., 2023), with candidates often drawing attention to their personal characteristics in search for votes (e.g., Dittmar, 2019; Milazzo & Hammond, 2017; Trumm et al., 2023). The evidence presented here tells a slightly different story. It suggests that, despite the perception that elections are becoming highly personalised, candidates tend to run only modestly personalised campaigns in Estonia. Their individual-level campaigns tend to focus more on their party than themselves, and the use of personalised campaign tools remains low. The extent to which individual-level campaigns are personalised does appear to vary across countries and one should be cautious in assuming high levels of personalisation at any given election.

Second, the findings of this paper add nuance to our understanding of the role that electoral institutions play in shaping electoral campaigns. It is well established that electoral institutions vary in their extent of incentivising candidates to cultivate a personal vote (e.g., Carey & Shugart, 1995; Farrell & Scully, 2007; Shugart, 2001), and there is also empirical evidence both from voter and candidate side to suggest that proportional representation systems – especially those that provide greater incentives for candidates to cultivate a personal vote like open list proportional representation – do lead to greater individual-level campaign effort (Karp et al., 2008; Sudulich & Trumm, 2019) and more personalised campaign focus (Sudulich & Trumm, 2019). The findings presented here highlight the need to go beyond the generalised patterns when explaining the campaign stimuli that voters in a particular country receive and account also for the potential influence of other factors such as party organisational structures. Electoral systems that incentivise cultivating personal votes may generally lead to more personalised individual-level campaigns, but are not a sufficient condition on their own for candidates to run highly personalised electoral campaigns. As shown, even in a country where electoral institutions offer quite strong incentives for candidates to personalise their individual-level campaigns, these can remain only modestly personalised. There are limits to the effects associated with electoral institutions on individual-level electoral campaigns.

Finally, this paper contributes to the ongoing debates around how gender shapes candidates' campaign choices. There is a large body of evidence to show that differences exist in male and female candidates' campaign styles and strategies. For example, female candidates are more expressive in their campaign interactions (Tsichla et al., 2023), more likely to use and emphasise feminine visuals (Carpinella & Bauer, 2021) and

'attack-style' messages (Evans & Clark, 2016). At the same time, however, we also have an emerging body of evidence that – at least at some elections – the extent to which male and female candidates choose to personalise their campaign messages is in fact quite similar (Meeks, 2016; Townsley et al., 2022). The findings of this paper contribute to this debate and lend support to the latter. While gender is likely to influence many aspects of campaigning, when it comes to the personalisation of one's campaign messaging and use of personalised campaign tools in Estonia, there do not appear to be significant differences between the campaign choices of female and male candidates.

In sum, these findings extend our understanding of how personalised election campaigns are in different countries, particularly those using quite candidate-centred electoral systems. At the same time, it is important to highlight also the limitations of this study. It focuses on a single country, meaning that one should be cautious when generalising to other electoral contexts, while the reliance on survey data means that the analysis is limited by what indicators it can include. It also focuses on a single election, which took place against the backdrop of post-Covid recovery, the war in Ukraine, and high inflation, among else. It is possible that the electoral context in 2023 may have had some influence on the opinions and behaviours of candidates. It is important, therefore, to be cautious when generalising the findings to other elections and countries. Future research should extend this line of enquiry to further electoral contexts, across time and space. It could also account for a broader range of explanatory factors and campaign tools, particularly online campaign tools such as various social media channels.

Notes

1. Notable exceptions include Cutts and Haughton (2021) that looks at campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe between 2011 and 2016, Brunnerová (2019) that looks at campaigns in Prague districts during the 2018 Czech Senate election, Hermans and Vergeer (2013) that focuses on the 2009 European Parliament election, and the edited book by Eibl and Gregor (2019) that describes political campaigns in several Central and Eastern European countries.
2. It is important to highlight here that the focus of this study is exclusively on the individual-level campaigns that candidates put on. These campaigns are an important part of the overall campaigning that voters are exposed to, but at the same time one does need to bear in mind that they are distinct from those carried out by political parties.
3. Using the seminal study of Farrell and Scully (2007) to classify electoral systems in terms of the incentives they create for cultivating personal votes – taking into account ballot access, vote choice, and district magnitude –, the parliamentary elections in Estonia score 8 on a scale from 3 to 9 where higher values indicate a more candidate-centred system.
4. Existing evidence from Estonia is mixed. Tavits (2010) did not find local birthplace to influence candidates' vote share at the 2003 parliamentary election, while Trumm (2022) found locality to influence candidates' vote share at the 2011 parliamentary election, but not at the 2015 and 2019 elections.
5. Further information about the sample is provided in Supplementary Appendix.
6. Further information about the explanatory variables is provided in Supplementary Appendix.

Disclosure Statement

Notes on contributor

Siim Trumm is an Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Nottingham. His current research agenda focuses on electoral campaigns and political representation. His research has been recently published in the European Journal of Political Research, the British Journal of Political Science, and Political Studies. He runs the OpenElections project and conducts the Estonian Candidate Study.

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