
Miscellaneous

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PoliTikToking – Online Personalism on TikTok: The Case Study of the 24th Knesset General Election Campaign

Abstract

Based on the theory of personalized politics, this study examines the inaugural electoral campaign seen on TikTok during the March 2021 elections for the 24th Knesset, providing a detailed analysis of online personalism. It offers a multimodal perspective focusing on parties and individual politicians in three political echelons (Parties-Leaders-Candidates); political output data and users' engagement metrics; and personalism types (individualization/privatization) on individual politicians' videos.

The findings reveal a nuanced political platform. When discussing political content (output), TikTok stands out from other social media platforms by creating a depersonalized environment where political parties excel over individuals. This is achieved through a clever strategy that involves youth groups managing the accounts to actively engage with users, and to maximize the platform's potential. Centralized personalism is evident within the party's internal dynamics.

Regarding engagement, TikTok replicates the patterns of personalized politics observed on other social media platforms with a clear mode of centralized personalism

patterns of engagement. When discussing personalism types, we have distinguished a hybrid third category of personalized videos that integrate elements of both individualization and privatization and are linked to the distinctive affordances of TikTok.

This study highlights how TikTok serves a dual purpose in political campaigns by engaging with younger demographics and strengthening established party frameworks. The implications suggest a complex interaction between traditional political dynamics and new media platforms, emphasizing the complex adaptation of political communication in the digital age.

Keywords

TikTok, Personalism, Israel, Electoral Campaigns, Online Personalism, Political Parties.

1. Introduction

Within the last three decades, online campaigns have gone through tremendous shifts, from websites to social media; from desktops to smartphones, from online banners to microtargeting; from mass to personal; from the digital to the algorithmic (e.g., Haleva-Amir, 2022; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Stromer-Galley, 2014).

A significant alteration in top political platforms marked the 2020s, highlighted by TikTok's landslide. Its special attributes deliver a novel user experience and different engagement options (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020).

Focusing on political communication, this research explores online political campaigns, applying personalized politics theory and online personalism. It analyzes the first electoral campaign on *TikTok* for the 24th Knesset in March 2021 while addressing both political actors and users.

Although TikTok was initially intended to be a politics-free app for Generation Z, it has gradually become a space for political discourse, protest, and activism (Mohamad, 2020; Omar & Dequan, 2020). As the 2020 US presidential election approached, TikTok became a hub on which political activists could share their views through videos from both political parties (Buzzel, 2020; Hernandez, 2022). In March 2021, the Knesset entered its fourth electoral cycle within two years due to the continuous political instability in Israeli politics. (Haleva-Amir, 2022). As citizens were already weary of the electoral fever, campaigns had to be innovative and engageable, and Israeli politicians and parties strategically leveraged the app to target younger audiences (Goichman, 2020; Patimer, 2021), who may not have been eligible to vote at the time but who will have a substantial impact on future elections (Zimmermann et al., 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

Prior to the general elections for the 24th Knesset in March 2021, there were sporadic instances of political figures and parties utilizing TikTok, particularly in Spain (Cervi & Marin-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021). However, this campaign stands out as the first time it has been used as a platform for electoral campaigning.

Personalized politics has recently garnered attention in political studies (Marino et al., 2022). This concept illustrates an ongoing shift in power dynamics in which individual political actors gain prominence while collective actors and institutions, e.g., political parties, diminish (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021: 211; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007: 65). Personalized politics can be observed in different spheres of political life, from media coverage and political campaigns to political institutions and the behavior of voters and politicians (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). The emergence of online platforms, notably social media, has introduced a new realm in which personalized politics can flourish or be curtailed (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Zamir, 2024). Hence, online personalism is the dominance of individual politicians over their parties in terms of online activity and consumption (Zamir, 2024).

Most studies referring to online personalism focus on Twitter (Kruijkemeier, 2014), Facebook (Haleva-Amir, 2021; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009b; Nave et al., 2018) and Instagram (Haßler et al., 2023). Additionally, most of the studies refer only to the supply/production side, i.e., the contents political actors post on social media (Zamir, 2024), while usually focusing only on the individual layer. Literature referring to the political actors and the users' side of the equation through engagement parameters representing consumption is relatively scarce (Zamir, 2024).

We outline the theoretical framework of personalized politics, online personalism and TikTok, both generally and regarding the Israeli case study. Next, we introduce the research

questions, database and methods. The findings section shows tables and graphs detailing results, followed by discussion and conclusions.

The study's novelty is multilayered. The case study is unique as the first electoral campaign on TikTok. Second, it is the first study to comprehensively analyze online personalism on TikTok while referring to three political levels (Parties, Leaders, Candidates – PLCs), both Supply and Consumption sides, and personalism types of privatization and individualization. By doing so, it aims to study whether TikTok, as a distinctive new app, duplicates personalized politics patterns of mass social media platforms, from both politicians' and users' perspectives.

2. Personalized Politics

The rise of personalized politics is characterized by the growing emphasis on individual political figures, while political parties are losing their significance (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). Personalized politics differentiates between *Centralized Personalization* (in which party leaders outperform their parties) and *decentralized personalization* (politicians outperform party leaders) (Balmas et al., 2014.; Zamir & Rahat, 2017). Traditionally, it was the party at the center of the campaign, which was perceived to be the ideological home, while its leader was perceived to be temporary and ephemeral. Over time, a clear shift has occurred, according to which, from an ideological point of view, the party serves the needs of the leader, its members represent the views of that leader, and the dominant personality drives processes, while the power of the political group is declining (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018; Balmas et al., 2014).

Over time, this transition has reshaped politics, fostering a more intimate and collaborative atmosphere. Candidates are using online platforms to amplify their ethos and to build relationships with constituents, thus creating a sense of companionship (Bar-Ilan et al., 2015).

Several factors have played a role in this change, including a loss of public trust in politics and the influence of technological and economic developments. All of these have led to the weakening of social solidarity, which was an essential anchor in the existence of the parties (Zamir & Rahat, 2019).

Nevertheless, the party's role endures, functioning as a foundation for cohesive behavior and ideology among its members and as a conduit through which the leader can connect with their constituents and promote personal political aims (Balmas et al., 2014; Rahat, 2022; Shamir & Rahat, 2022; Zamir & Rahat, 2017).

The personalization process can be attributed to several factors. People prefer a relatable human figure to represent their interests rather than an abstract party made up of various individuals. Hence, it is preferable to focus on candidates with whom voters are acquainted and can connect. Additionally, social media enables politicians to create and maintain accessible political images to emphasize campaign messages since visual images are gaining importance (Veneti et al., 2019). Moreover, social media facilitates a 'distant intimacy' condition through which politicians display personal elements and encourage close relations (McAllister, 2015; McGregor, 2018; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023).

Personalized politics has three dimensions: institutional, behavioral and media (Rahat & Shefer, 2007). The idea of institutional personalization pertains to institutional transformations that elevate the importance of individuals, such as the conversion from a closed-list to an open-list electoral system (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007).

Media personalization is the term used to describe the tendency to prioritize individuals over collective entities, such as political parties. It comprises 'controlled media', which denotes messages generated by the political actors themselves, and 'uncontrolled media', which denotes media coverage (Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

Behavioral personalization involves shifts in attitudes and actions among both voters and politicians. Personalized political behavior is characterized by political actors who both view and engage with politics through the lens of independent individuals, rather than group institutions (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

Sometimes, these dimensions overlap. One might look at the social media presence of politicians as a form of controlled media. It exists within the media and behavioral realms, showcasing their representative actions (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

While political personalization is measured over time, political personalism is measured at a specific point (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021), such is the case study of a specific electoral campaign.

Probing deeper into political personalism, we find two main theoretical models. One introduces a double-fold: privatized personalism and individualized personalism (Van Aelst et al., 2012). *Privatization* involves an increased focus on the private life and personal traits of politicians (McGregor, 2018) through informal elements (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Häbler et al., 2023), whilst *Individualization* highlights the political characteristics and professional qualities of individual politicians (Van Aelst et al., 2012; Metz et al., 2020). The second includes typology, initially implemented on televised portraits (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). 1. *Professional Personalization* addresses characteristics and individual tasks relevant to the official position. 2. *Emotional Personalization* emphasizes the politician's personal feelings, and 3. *Private Personalization* relates to personal information about the private self.

One should mention, though only briefly due to this study's limitations, that extreme personalization processes may jeopardize democracies by facilitating the emergence of authoritarian rulers through personalist parties, in which the leader's authority overshadows that of political allies, making the leader the ultimate power. (Frantz et al., 2022; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017).

3. Online Personalism

Political personalism can appear in various contexts and platforms, including the online sphere. Online personalism covers the controlled media personalism aspect, where politicians are accountable for their social media engagement, as well as the behavioral personalism aspect, which leads to changes in attitudes and actions online among voters and politicians (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

Studies do not provide a clear answer on the extent of political personalization on the internet since the level of personalized politics differs significantly across studies due to variations in platforms, countries, specific contexts, and political actors (e.g., Bösch & Ricks, 2021; Hermans & Vergeer, 2013; Jackson & Lilleker, 2009a; Larsson, 2016; McGregor, 2018; Pedersen, 2024; Vaccari, 2013).

To conceptualize this up-to-date topic, Zamir illustrates, in his recent article (2024), the wide variety of platforms, contexts and methodologies used by scholars who study this area. Despite inconsistencies in how political personalization is defined, most studies, including this one, adopt Rahat & Sheaffer's (2007) definition, according to which the power and influence of individual politicians rise while their political party's influence diminishes. However, in the online arena, most of these studies fail to implement this definition—which requires a direct comparison of the personal and the partisan—and they only focus on politicians. References to the political parties' component of online personalism are scarce (Larsson, 2019; Rahat & Zamir, 2018). This study uses the dual assessment approach by comparing individual politicians and parties, as Pedersen & Rahat (2021) and Zamir (2024) recommended.

Zamir defines *online personalism* as a situation in which a comparison of individual politicians shows they are more salient online than their parties; whereas, in *online depersonalism*, parties are more prominent online if compared with their members (2024).

Nowadays, social media platforms are frequently used for interactions between representatives and citizens. Pedersen and Rahat (2021) maintain that politicians' practices, *inter alia* on social media, denote the sub-dimension of the *Personalization of Representation*, whereas the public's online political behavior represents the sub-dimension of the *Personalization of Participation*.

Though early studies have referred only to the political actors' side of production/supply/output (e.g., tweets, posts, reels) on social media platforms (e.g., Jackson & Lilleker, 2009b; Larsson, 2019; Nave et al., 2018); in adopting the dual perspective of partisan-personal in the online sphere, we practically address both the political actors and their audience. As social media engagement metrics, like followers, *likes*, comments and shares, indicate users' preferences for specific political figures or groups, this enables comparisons between politicians and parties, which can be used to assess personalism (Kenig & Rahat, 2023; Zamir, 2024).

Hence, this study will address personalism dually by referring to the level of output (personalized representation) and consumption (personalized participation). There is no preconditioned correlation between these two aspects so that one might expect varied results in different contexts, political cultures, and platforms. For example, a party might excel over its leader on Twitter when referring to its output, measured by its number of tweets, while the leader's tweets might stand out more regarding engagement measures.

Operationalizing online personalism on social media has multiple variations, which depend on the context, platform, database, and overall research design. These range from the simple counting of outputs among the political actors to the average figure per group of actors within a specific period (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018), the ratio between output and consumption (Zamir & Rahat, 2017), and methods that are based on multiple variables' formulae (Zamir, 2024).

When referring to the online sphere, some scholars favor the multidimensional personalization typology of Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010) over the twofold concept of privatization and individualization (Van Aelst et al., 2012), as politicians' communication practices on social media will always be defined as personalized (Metz et al., 2020). Others, as well as this study, have adopted the dual categorization (Haßler et al., 2023).

Social media contributed significantly to the shift in political communication from implicit texts to visuals. Visual representations are more impactful than text in shaping the political agenda, evoking emotions, and conveying political messages more efficiently (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Schill, 2012; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). This principle has been well implemented on Instagram, focusing on capturing momentary experiences. Instagram offers politicians the chance to share a mix of photos that highlight various facets of their characters, allowing them to be seen as both dedicated public servants (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019) and as private people who enjoy spending time with family and friends (Mohamad, 2020; Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

4. Personalism – The Israeli Case Study

Since 2006, the internet has become crucial to Israeli political campaigns (Haleva-Amir, 2021). Over time, focus has shifted from party-centered themes to individual-centered Themes, specifically highlighting party leaders.

The preliminary equalization hypothesis that online space would bridge gaps between established political figures and new challengers has proven unrealistic. Instead, online space

not only maintains and strengthens existing power positions but also widens political disparities (the normalization hypothesis) (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018).

By the end of the 2010s, online political presence increased with rising social media platforms. Facebook's presence became the benchmark for every candidate, starting at the primary election stage (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018). This universal occurrence signified a transition where leaders and politicians took center stage from parties.

Israeli politicians enthusiastically reached out to voters through different online platforms, from Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram (Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Peng, 2020) to Snapchat and Telegram. Nonetheless, Facebook remained the primary platform, serving as a key communication channel and online showcase for self-presentation (Haleva-Amir, 2021; Shamir & Rahat, 2022).

These developments created opportunities alongside new constraints and challenges. Politicians must avoid vague messages that may attract criticism and invest in online infrastructure rather than established distribution channels. Neither has deterred politicians from using new online spaces (Lev-On, 2020). Israeli politicians stand out among international counterparts by fearlessly addressing divisive issues within Israeli society to further their political agendas and to distinguish themselves, intensifying personalization culture (Bar-Ilan et al., 2015).

Politicians began addressing personal lives and sharing private family moments. They realized that exposing personal details and expressing emotions triggered more emotional responses and generated higher engagement in "likes" and "shares" compared to neutral content (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Peng, 2020).

Politicians' increased Facebook utilization led to notable shifts in both output and consumption levels of political content (Zamir & Rahat, 2017).

While personalism on Twitter was sometimes higher than on Facebook, leaders demonstrate higher Facebook output compared to parties, whereas Twitter usage is more evenly distributed (Rahat, 2022; Shamir & Rahat, 2022).

Israeli politicians stand out for extensive social media use compared to politicians globally, making Israel an interesting case study for worldwide personalism and personalization trends (Rahat, 2022; Zamir & Rahat, 2019).

The March 2021 general elections for the 24th Knesset constituted the fourth electoral round within two years. This period was marked by political instability caused by coalition formation challenges. This situation compelled politicians to innovate by incorporating trending TikTok into online campaigning strategies. This initial campaign offers a special opportunity to reassess power dynamics in a new arena among parties and candidates regarding personalism (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021).

5. TikTok

In 2016, the Chinese company ByteDance established TikTok after recognizing the untapped potential in the short-form video market (Buzzel, 2020; Guinaudeau et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to social distancing and lockdown policies, the app reached a download peak with more than two billion downloads in 2020 and 400 million by the end of the 2nd quarter of 2021 (Statista, 2023).

TikTok stands out for its focus on the soundtrack, putting the user's musical preferences front and center (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). The app encouraged users to interact and to share new content by providing filters, editing tools and unique affordances: *Duet* – sharing a video reaction to an existing user's video; *Lip-Sync* – videos mimicking lip movements to soundtracks;

and engaging in *Web Challenges* prompting active participation and online sharing (like cooking or dancing).

Four consecutive communication levels were identified on TikTok, compared to three on all other social media platforms. Starting from simple views (1st level), through ‘likes’ or ‘shares’ (2nd level), basic written comments (3rd level), and up to video comments (the Duet feature, unique to TikTok and constituting the 4th level) (Medina Serrano et al., 2020).

One of TikTok’s key innovations is its main page, the ‘For You’ screen, where content is tailored and organized based on user preferences through an algorithmic recommendation system. It allows users to select and view topics and videos aligning with their interests. Algorithms process user data, like views, watch time, likes, and hashtags, to provide a personalized experience by selecting distinctive, suitable videos that effectively captivate each user. (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Hernandez, 2022; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Vijay & Gekker, 2021).

6. Political Communication on TikTok

Politicians’ adoption of TikTok as a political platform stems from three key factors. First, the imperative to reconnect with younger generations (Collin, 2015; Kligler-Villenchik & Literat, 2024) has drawn politicians to TikTok, as the platform demonstrates exceptional influence on young citizens’ political attitudes and engagement (Karimi & Fox, 2023). These political messages may prove particularly effective on TikTok, as the platform’s unique features, like Challenges and Duets, inherently encourage imitation and replication of content (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Second, the transformation of politics into pop-politics and “Politainment” (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014, 2022) requires politicians to adapt their messaging to each platform’s specific affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). TikTok, with its emphasis on entertainment, provides an ideal venue for this lighter, less serious political communication (Cervi et al., 2023).

Third, the rise of visual political communication (Veneti et al., 2019) enables politicians to cultivate more personalized and relatable profiles alongside popular public figures, moving away from traditional detached political personas (Skogerboe & Larsson, 2021), which aligns with young adults’ demonstrated preference for visual content-based apps (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

This indicates the importance of studying political practices on this platform and the interrelations between users, parties, and politicians.

2020 marked TikTok’s global ascendance as Gen Z’s preferred social platform (Abidin et al., 2023), becoming the year’s most downloaded app globally (Freer, 2020) partly due to COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures (Johnson, 2020). Politicians recognized the platform’s unique opportunity to reach audiences through short, entertaining content with novel affordances (Cervi, 2021). Gen-Z users’ interviews reveal that effective political engagement requires interactive dialogue and authentic “backstage pass” glimpses into politicians’ work and emotions, indicating young voters’ preference for politicians’ personalities over purely political content (Parmelee et al., 2022).

Research on political communication and electoral campaigning on TikTok is sparse, mainly addressing visual storytelling (Zamora-Medina, 2023) and Politainment across Europe (Bösch & Ricks, 2021; Battista, 2023; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021; Cervi et al., 2021; Cervi, 2023; Zurovac, 2022), Latin America (Calderón et al., 2022; Montúfar-Calle et al., 2022) and the USA (Umansky & Pipal, 2023). alongside topics like populism (Castro Martínez & Días Morilla, 2021), hate speech (Weimann & Masri, 2021) and digital persuasion techniques (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023).

Analyses of electoral campaigns have demonstrated that Peruvian politicians have tailored their TikTok strategies to entertain youth (Cervi et al., 2023), while European counterparts use it for self-promotion (Cervi et al., 2021; Cervi & Marin-Llado, 2021). Political efforts to adapt often appear inauthentic and *cringy* in TikTok's slang (Cervi, 2023). In the US, just 6.3% of top-level politicians engaged with TikTok by April 2023, using it as a conventional platform for agenda promotion, albeit with humor to attract younger viewers, indicating humor's role in bridging political discourse and TikTok's audience (Umansky & Pipal, 2023).

However, no research has been done on online personalism on TikTok, either in Israel or globally.

Prior to the 24th Knesset General Elections in March 2021, Israeli politicians seized the opportunity to utilize TikTok to engage a broader audience, motivate youth to impact their families and cultivate a potential voter bloc with the substantial political power (Patimer, 2021).

This study is significant and distinctive as the initial exploration of online political personalism theory within TikTok's context. Furthermore, it stands out as the first to investigate the inaugural Israeli campaign, which was also among the earliest globally. Additionally, it is based on a holistic perspective of all political actors active on the platform rather than on a mere sample.

7. Method

7.1. Research Objectives and Questions:

This research aims to investigate the degree of online personalism exhibited on TikTok throughout the electoral campaign for the 24th Knesset. This objective is pursued while referring to three different aspects of the theory: (1) Institutional and individual political actors across echelons (Parties, Leaders, and Candidates) and (2) both political content production and audience engagement patterns. Moreover, (3) we analyze the videos uploaded by leaders and candidates (individual political levels) to identify the political content's personalism type (Rahat, 2019).

RQ1: Is TikTok a personalized platform, both in terms of content creation and audience engagement? If so, what type of personalism is evident?

RQ2: How can we characterize individual politicians' videos on TikTok? Are they concentrating on their agendas and political activity to reflect individualized personalism, or are they more inclined to highlight their personal traits to reflect privatized personalism?

7.2. Time period

The study period includes the three months preceding the elections; from the day the 23rd Knesset was dissolved, on December 28, 2020, until Election Day on March 23, 2021.

7.3. Research Corpus

Rather than being based on a statistical sample, the research corpus includes all 576 videos uploaded by twenty-two political actors who were active on the platform during the election across all three levels, according to the following internal division: 8 Parties (*Likud*, *Yamina*, *Shas*, *HaAvoda*, *Tikva Hadasha*, *Meretz*, *Yesh Atid* and *Yisrael Beiteinu*), 6 Leaders (Naftali Bennett, Benjamin Netanyahu, Yair Lapid, Benny Gantz, Merav Michaeli and Ayman Odeh) and 8 candidates (Meirav Cohen, Orna Barbibai, Idan Roll, Ketty Shitrit, Yoav Kisch, Tzachi HaNegbi, Amichai Shikli and Alex Kushnir).

7.4. Research Design and methods

Political activity on TikTok was monitored daily during the study period. All videos uploaded by parties, party leaders, and candidates running for the Knesset were downloaded and databased. Using a mixed methods design of web content analysis and descriptive statistics; we systematically analyzed the data as follows:

7.4.1. RQ1

The data collected was analyzed quantitatively, using descriptive statistics to examine both the political output and the audience reach while comparing the various levels.

Output: We divided the total number of videos uploaded by all political actors in each group (parties, leaders, candidates) by the number of accounts in the group, to calculate the average number of videos per political account in each group.

Engagement metrics: To evaluate the depth of personalism, we established a novel measurement approach based on techniques from previous studies on personalization and TikTok. These include the total number of likes, video views, and followers for each political group throughout the entire campaign. To assess personalization metrics, examining the likes and followers provides a straightforward and quick method to evaluate social media users' interest in a political party or candidate. These metrics allow for a coherent, transparent, and thorough comparison of users' intentional engagement with the accounts of political figures (Zamir & Rahat, 2019, p.29). Yet, one must acknowledge that likes and followers may not represent real support for a candidate, leader, or party. In addition, the unique algorithmic recommendation system of TikTok highlights the importance of user views, which act as the critical components that can propel a video from being unnoticed to achieving viral status (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Hernandez, 2022; Medina-Serrano et al., 2020).

7.4.2. RQ2

We used qualitative web content analysis to study and categorize leaders' and candidates' videos according to Rahat's Typology (2019) of personalism (privatized/individualized). Both authors coded the videos. The Intercoder Reliability Kappa Value of 0.906 indicates a substantial agreement among the coders (Coleman et al., 2024).

8. Findings

8.1. RQ1: Online Personalism Output and Consumption Aspects across Political Levels

Table 1. Parties and Politicians Output and Consumption on TikTok

Output						Consumption		
			Accounts No.	Videos No.	Average	Likes	Views	Followers
Political Level	Parties	P	8	283	35.3	63,549	25,987,588	7,109
	Individual Politicians	L - Leaders	6	199	33.1	2,029,421	34,178,719	341,282
		C -Candidates	8	94	11.7	170,804	1,962,372	7,933
		L+C	14	293	20.9	2,200,225	36,141,091	349,215
Total			22	576	26.1	2,263,774	62,128,679	356,324

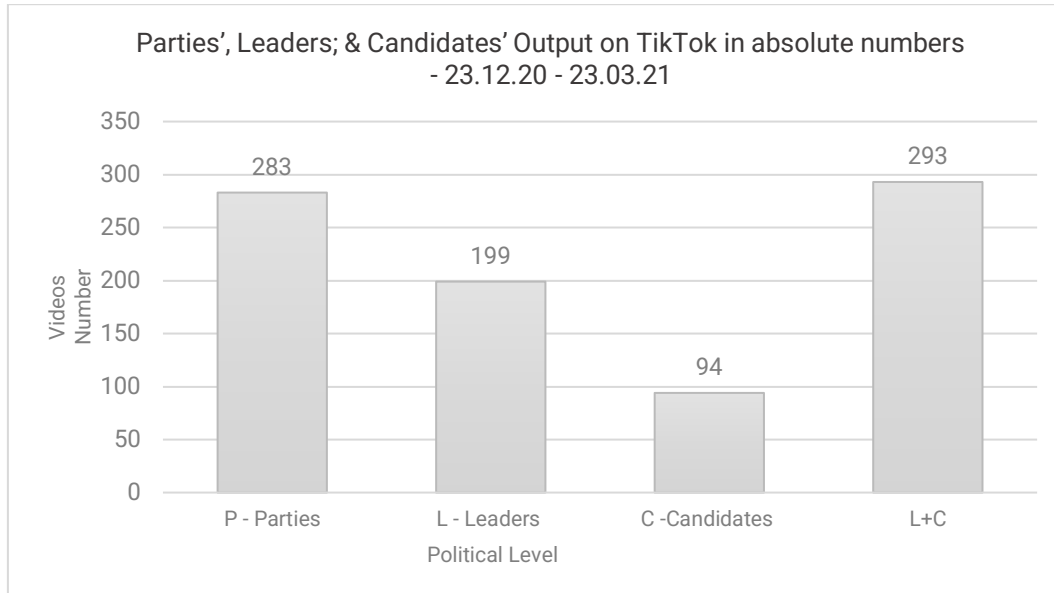
Source: author's own elaboration.

Table One summarizes the data related to all political levels, covering both the output and consumption aspects, during the campaign. It should be emphasized that PM Netanyahu managed two separate accounts. One in Hebrew and one in Arabic. To eliminate bias and

unnecessary repetition in the account tally, we consolidated the information from any two accounts that pertain to the same individual.

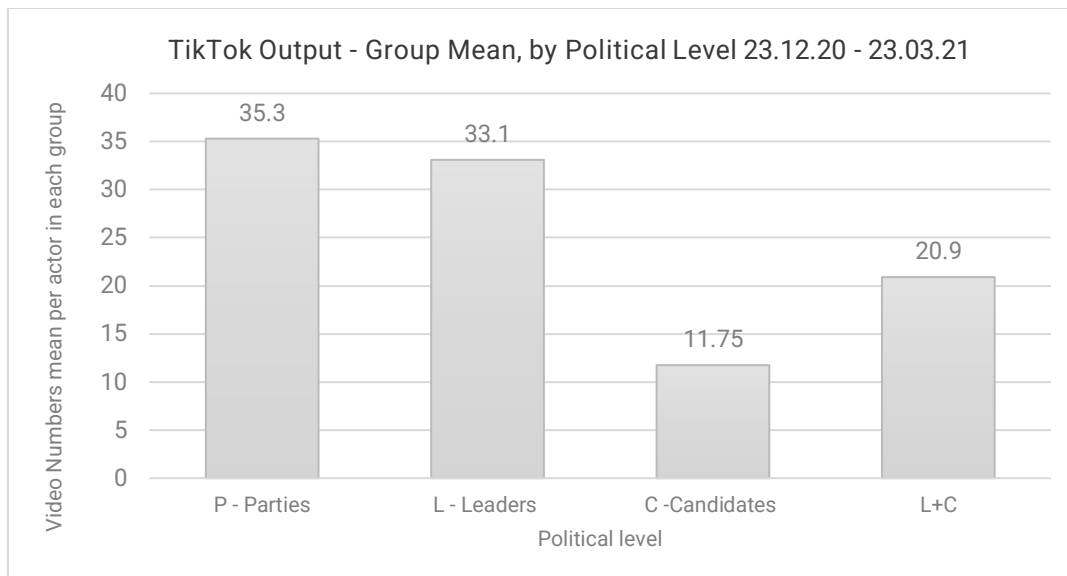
8.1.1 Output Aspect

Figure 1. Political Levels' Output on TikTok by Videos Numbers



Source: author's own elaboration.

Figure 2. Political Levels' Average Video Output on TikTok



Source: author's own elaboration.

Parties – Individual Politicians

We devised a category that merges the counts of leaders' and candidates' videos to facilitate a comparison between individual politicians and parties. We compared the combined category (L+C) figures with the party category (P) ones. A simple comparison of the video numbers shows a small margin of just ten videos in favor of the individual politicians. They had 293 videos, while the parties uploaded 283 videos.

When calculating the average number of videos uploaded per political player in each group, we found that the parties, through their young activists, heavily utilized the platform during this period. On average, each party uploaded 35.3 videos, whereas each politician uploaded only 20.9 videos.

Leaders – Candidates

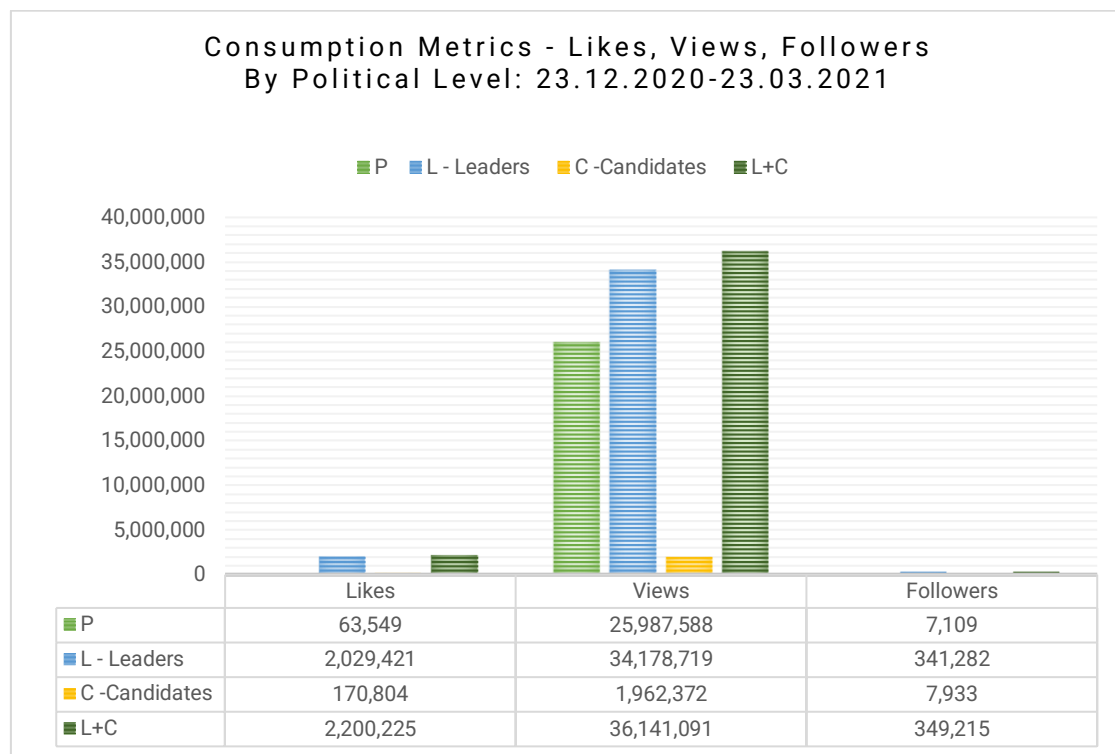
Six leaders and eight candidates operated TikTok accounts. We found that the output of the leaders' content exceeds that of the contestants by twice the margin. While the leaders uploaded 199 videos, the Knesset candidates uploaded 94 videos, resulting in a difference of 105 videos in favor of the leaders, which is more than twice the number uploaded by the candidates (199/94).

When calculating the average number of videos per political player in each category, a more significant gap of three times in favor of the leaders emerges. The average is 11.7 videos per Knesset candidate, compared to 33.1 videos for each leader.

The party leaders demonstrate notably higher output levels than the Knesset candidates, highlighting the centralized personalism within the party.

8.1.2 Consumption Aspect

Figure 3. Consumption Metrics by Political Level



Source: author's own elaboration.

Every engagement metric operates on its unique proportional scale, resulting in notable variations among the political actors, both within and between different groups, as illustrated in Figure no. 3. To ensure clarity, we have reattached the raw figures to the diagram.

Parties – Individual Politicians

We formulated a category that combines the engagement metrics of both leaders and candidates, thus enabling a direct comparison between individual politicians and parties. Consumption data show a notable advantage for individual players (L+C) over parties (P) regarding the level of public interest in their activity on TikTok.

Views: Large discrepancies are evident in this parameter, which TikTok values highly. The total views credited to the group of political candidates (36,141,091) exceed those credited to the group of parties (25,987,588) by over ten million views, representing a ratio of 1.4:1.

Likes: The number of 'likes' for individual politicians exceeds two million (2,200,225), whereas the parties have only 63,549 'likes', resulting in a ratio of 35:1.

Followers: This parameter highlights the most notable discrepancies. Politicians had 349,215 followers and the parties had 7,109 followers (a ratio of 49:1).

The data presents a clear and irrefutable representation of Personalism on TikTok and other platforms, demonstrating a noticeable preference for politicians over parties.

Leaders – Candidates

When comparing the consumption data among leaders and candidates, the audience clearly aligns with the leaders. The engagement figures of candidates are redundant compared to those of the leaders.

Likes: The ratio of 'likes' between candidates (170,804) and leaders (2,029,421) is 1:12.

Views: There is a striking 17-fold difference between candidates, who garnered 1,962,372 views, and leaders, who achieved 34,178,719 views.

Followers: The number of candidates' followers (7,933) surpasses the number of the parties' followers (7,109), but this pales in comparison to the massive following of the leaders (341,282), with a ratio of 49: 1.

The data all support the idea of centralized personalism. App users exhibit a strong interest in the leaders' content, surpassing the interest in the content of both the candidates' and parties' leaders. When collecting the data, it was observed that the views attributed to PM Netanyahu, who managed two active accounts, as previously mentioned, are substantial, accounting for nearly 65% of all views. With a total of 22,090,386 views on both accounts, the Hebrew version attracted approximately 21,740,200 views, while the account designed for the Arab audience saw just 350,186 views.

8.2. RQ2: Political Video Personalism Type

The terms individualization and privatization can be confusing. The first category pertains to political content presented through a personal lens, rather than a partisan viewpoint¹; while the latter refers to content in which the candidate/leader shares aspects of their private life², such as hobbies, family, pets, etc. Table 2 details our findings:

Table 2. Individual Politicians videos' by personalism type

Content Type	Leaders	Candidates	Total
Individualization	160 (80%)	39 (41%)	199
Privatization	29 (15%)	44 (47%)	73
Hybrid Contents	10 (5%)	11 (12%)	21
Total	199	94	293

Source: author's own elaboration.

Analysis shows that 80% (160 out of 199) of the leaders' TikTok videos are characterized by individualization content, featuring concrete political references to their work, criticism of their rivals, and action plans. A mere 15% of the videos (29/199) feature leaders discussing their private lives and families and displaying informal aspects of their personalities. Personalized content

1. MK Merav Michaeli 13.03.21.

2. MK Merav Cohen 07.03.21.

discussing the political positions and critiques of the outgoing government's performance was present in 41% (39/94) of the videos in the candidates' group. Privatization content was observed in 47% of the videos analyzed (44 of 94). Most leaders' videos center on political issues, with only a handful touching on personal subjects. However, among the candidates, the gaps between the two categories stand at only 6%, with a contrasting trend towards privatization.

During the analysis, we identified a new category of videos that could not be assigned to either of the two categories and that have a hybrid nature. These videos conveyed dual meanings by blending the different worlds. Let us give two examples:

A video in which PM Benjamin Netanyahu sits in a tent with Arab people wearing traditional clothing.³ He pours black coffee and passes it to his tent mates, saying, "Coffee break with friends." This video showcases Netanyahu's friendly and humorous personality. However, it is impossible to ignore the political efforts to connect with and reach out to potential voters in the Arab community in Israel.

Another example is a video by *Yesh Atid* MK Idan Roll, in response to one of his followers' videos.⁴ In the original video, the user notes that Roll, locally known as a web influencer, is an MK. In Roll's reaction video, he mentions his political views and personal life, saying, "I'm an MK, but I don't sleep in a suit."

Nevertheless, the proportion of hybrid videos is marginal. Politicians kept their humorous/personal content separate from their political content. In the Leaders' group, 5% of the videos were hybrid, whereas among the candidates, hybrid videos were prevalent at 12%.

Individual political actors, as a group, tended towards individualization. Individualization features were observed in most videos (68%, 199/293). Seventy-three videos were classified as including privatization content (25%) and 21 hybrid videos (7%).

An analysis of the disparities between the two political levels reveals that the individualization aspect in leaders' messages holds double the weight compared to candidates' messages (80% vs. 41%, respectively). When analyzing privatization videos, we observed a contrasting trend with a significant difference of over threefold (15% for leaders, compared to 48% for candidates). Although the candidates attempted to spark a new and light-hearted conversation with young users, the leaders' videos were predominantly political in nature, whether directly or indirectly, even though they tried to share entertaining, amusing and sometimes personal content.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

The electoral campaign for the 24th Knesset on TikTok was the first political campaign of its kind in Israel and among the first globally. Hence, only 22 political actors campaigned on TikTok to reach new, younger target audiences.

Based on political personalism theory, this study explored activity levels (output) of all political figures using the platform at three levels (Parties, Leaders, and Candidates), user interaction' extent with different accounts (Consumption) and how personalized messages are crafted (Individualization –Privatization).

9.1. Output

When referring to TikTok's output, findings indicate a depersonalism trend. Parties upload an average of 35 videos each, compared to 21 videos uploaded by individual politicians. This finding aligns with a recent study on Israeli political personalism on social media in which Parties'

3. PM Benjamin Netanyahu 07.03.21.

4. MK Idan Roll 11.03.21.

presence overshadowed their Politicians' presence when referring to fringe parties (Haleva-Amir, 2021)

The findings emphasize the essential role and contribution of political parties. For social media-informed voters, political parties prove pivotal in leading online conversations, demonstrating depersonalism amid surging personalization. Parties have actively enhanced their digital standing. Online, it was once thought everyone had equal chances, uniting existing and new contenders. Currently, literature refers to the online sphere as politically normalized (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018; Haleva-Amir, 2021).

Despite this, recent studies have also highlighted divergent results and a trend towards equal opportunities (Bene, 2023; Fisher & Gilardi, 2023). Initially used for political purposes and later normalized, TikTok established parties as hubs for discourse. Entrusting youth groups with TikTok management offers a dual advantage: engaging young members in politics and maximizing the platform's reach through its primary user base (Zimmermann et al., 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

When examining intra-party dynamics and comparing leaders to Knesset candidates, we found a clear preference for the leaders. Of all the content uploaded by individual players, 68% was attributed to the leadership tier, thus illustrating a distinct pattern of centralized personalism.

This finding supports the observations made by Zamir and Rahat (2019), and Rahat (2022), that online platforms promote centralized personalism. Leaders, with more resources, significantly outperform candidates' content output and quality even on new platforms.

9.2. Engagement

When comparing individual players and parties' number of views—which is the most significant engagement metric on TikTok (Medina-Serrano et al., 2020)—a major gap of over ten million views was found in favor of politicians. A comparison between the candidates and the leaders revealed a clear preference for leaders. Combining the findings in both dimensions establishes a clear picture of centralized personalism. It should be noted that this trend is prevalent in all the engagement indices and not only in the views index. Leaders have the highest engagement indices, followed by parties and candidates, the latter ones demonstrating the lowest engagement figures.

These data contrast the study by Balmas et al. (2014), which addressed both ends of the personalism spectrum. According to the study, the balance of relationships between centralized and decentralized personalism shifts along two axes: one focusing on centralized personalism concerning the leader versus the party and the other on decentralized personalism within the party.

The data may be biased because Benjamin Netanyahu has significantly higher engagement numbers than other political figures at both the state and international levels (Kenig & Rahat, 2023). Yet, even without Netanyahu, there is a distinct presence of centralized personalism, albeit with minor differences.

9.3. Personalism Type

In Rahat's (2019) research, dichotomous personalism content categories are explored: individualization (politicians' actions and plans) and privatization (insight into politicians' personal lives). Leaders prioritized Individualization, with 80% of their content reflecting their political commitment, whereas candidates placed less emphasis on individualization, with only 41% of their content centered on critical and political dialogues.

This study introduces an extension to the binary classification of two types of personalism while also identifying a third hybrid category that combines political and personal elements within a single video. TikTok's features and design, such as prioritizing user experience to empower individuals, the *ForYou* homepage algorithm, which puts anonymous users in the spotlight, and the short video format, which allows for more expressive communication than text or images, enable the blending of political and personal content in videos (Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Medina Serrano, et al., 2020). Although only 7% of the videos were categorized as such, this category is important to note since hybrid content reflects how politicians juggle between using up-to-date communication styles and maintaining a serious political image. Previous studies have described similar attempts, though scarcely (Umanski & Pipal, 2023; Zamora-Medina, 2023).

Individualized political content clashes with TikTok's original aim of informal, creative, and light-hearted communication. Although trying to attract younger audiences, politicians still share their core beliefs. (Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). This conclusion corresponds with the literature indicating European parties and politicians primarily use the platform for self-promotion and outreach (Cervi et al., 2021; Cervi & Marin-Llado, 2021).

Instead of indulging in the sheer escapism that TikTok offered to its original target audience, politicians mostly shared content about their political activities. They used the platform's unique features to communicate their actions and to invite feedback. Illustrating the politicization of TikTok, rather than the '*TikToking* of politics.'

This study contributes significantly to the literature on Israeli political campaigns, political personalism and the unique impact of TikTok on political communication. Our findings demonstrate TikTok's unique role in political campaigns. In some ways, it duplicates personalized politics patterns seen on mass social media platforms; in other ways, it offers a fresh and innovative approach. Engagement metrics showcase a fully centralized-personalized platform, while output metrics depict a trend towards depersonalized platform. Furthermore, when exploring political-content-personalism, it offers a new category that combines the binary categories of individualization and privatization into a hybrid category.

This study has several limitations. As a novel case study without comparable research, it relies solely on the theoretical framework of online political personalization. Examining a single election campaign allows us to assess only the current state of personalism rather than its evolutionary process. The study's scope, focused on three components of online personalism theory, excludes broader aspects of political discourse and qualitative video analysis while considering only the three primary engagement metrics. Future research should expand to comparative analyses across multiple electoral campaigns and countries, incorporating broader statistical analyses and qualitative evaluations of political content. Additionally, examining power dynamics within political structures, youth group influence, and audience responses would help evaluate dialogue authenticity between politicians, parties, and TikTok users.

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