# Institutions, Candidates, and the Rhetoric of Personalism: Evidence from Latin America

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**Abstract**

Personalistic leadership has long shaped democratic competition, yet we know little about how institutional contexts condition candidates' reliance on personal appeals. We argue that institutionalized party competition reduces candidates' incentives to rely on personalist rhetoric. Where parties provide stronger collective anchors, self-centered appeals become less attractive; where those anchors are weak, candidates can more easily mobilize through personal visibility. To test this argument, we analyze over 40,000 X posts from 131 presidential candidates across 17 Latin American countries from 2010 to 2022, linking text-based measures of personalist rhetoric to V-Dem and V-Party indicators of institutionalization and party organization. Candidates in more institutionalized systems use significantly less personalist rhetoric, while party-level results vary across organizational mechanisms. Such appeals enhance voter attention only where institutional constraints are weak. The study reconceptualizes personalism as an electoral strategy and provides new comparative evidence on how institutions shape leader-centered politics.

## Introduction

Personal politics has long been a defining feature of electoral competition. Across regions, candidates increasingly emphasize their personal attributes rather than collective identities such as parties or programs (Wattenberg, 1990 and 1991; Musella, 2018; Garzia et al., 2021; Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Rahat, 2024a; Luján & Acosta y Lara, 2024). This trend—often described as the rise of personalism—carries important implications for democratic accountability by shifting representation from organizations to individual leaders (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Malamud & Marsteintredet, 2024; Luján & Puig-Lombardi, 2025), affecting the linkages between politics and citizens and thus the way politicians are accountable and responsive to citizens (Kitschelt, 2000). Where party organizations are loose, party systems are inchoate, and partisan cues are unstable, candidates often have stronger incentives to rely on personalistic discourse to connect with voters (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

While prior research has shown that weakly institutionalized systems enable personalistic leadership (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Kitschelt et al., 2010), we still know little about how institutional contexts affect candidates' strategic use of campaign resources, particularly communicative ones. Existing studies tend to treat personalism as an outcome of institutional weakness—manifested in charismatic leadership or party collapse—rather than as a strategic rhetorical choice observable in campaign discourse. Understanding how institutional constraints shape the use of personalist rhetoric is key to explaining how personalism takes root and persists within democratic competition.

This article aims to fill these gaps by arguing that institutionalized party competition reduces candidates' incentives to rely on personalist rhetoric. Where parties provide stronger collective anchors, self-centered appeals become less attractive; where those anchors are weak, candidates can more easily claim credit and mobilize through personal visibility. At the party level, organizational features may shape these incentives in different ways: nomination procedures can embed candidates within collective rules, while local organizational structures may also provide resources for campaign mobilization (Tuttnauer & Rahat, 2025). At the same time, the relationship can be mutually reinforcing, since candidates who build campaigns around a personal brand have weaker incentives to invest in party structures that could constrain their autonomy (Resmini & Abbott, 2024). These considerations motivate the first association we examine in this article: party institutionalization and party-level organizational features are associated with candidates' reliance on personalist rhetoric.

We also argue that system-level institutionalization plays a key role in shaping the scope of personalist rhetoric used by individual politicians. In institutionalized party systems, social rootedness, stability in party competition, and parties' legitimacy as vehicles of representation constrain personalization by anchoring political competition in enduring partisan identities. This perspective shifts the study of personalism from inferring leader-centered politics through institutional decay to observing it directly in leaders' own words. Looking into rhetorical personalism gives us an initial glimpse of the mechanisms through which institutional contexts shape the personalization of politics.

To evaluate this argument, we analyze presidential campaign discourse across Latin America using an original dataset of over 40,000 X posts by 127 candidates in 40 elections across 17 countries between 2010 and 2022. Each post

was classified through a standardized GPT-based procedure as personalistic or not, depending on whether it emphasized the candidate's personal qualities rather than collective actors such as parties, teams, or programs. We then match these data to party-level indicators from V-Party and system-level measures from V-Dem, which capture party organizational attributes and party system institutionalization, respectively. This design allows us to assess how institutional environments condition candidates' rhetorical choices in the electoral arena and to identify the circumstances under which personalistic appeals become electorally advantageous.

Latin America offers an especially suitable context for examining these dynamics. The region combines a long tradition of leader-centered politics (Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020; Hamill, 1992) with pronounced variation in party organizational attributes and party system institutionalization (Mainwaring, 2018; Piñeiro-Rodríguez & Rosenblatt, 2020). In countries such as Uruguay, institutionalized parties anchor collective identities and constrain individual ambition (Rosenblatt, 2018). In contrast, in others, such as Peru, repeated party collapse has produced a succession of outsider candidacies built on highly personalistic appeals (Levitsky & Cameron, 2003). This diversity in organizational characteristics and historical trajectories provides the variation needed to examine how institutional constraints shape the rhetorical strategies leaders employ.

The empirical analysis supports our central argument that system-level party institutionalization constrains personalist rhetoric in campaigns, while party-level results vary across organizational dimensions. Candidates operating in weakly institutionalized party systems are more likely to rely on self-centered appeals. At the party level, more inclusive and decentralized nomination

procedures are associated with lower levels of rhetorical personalism, whereas local organizational strength is associated with higher use of personalistic appeals; party continuity and local party offices show no consistent association. Linking campaign rhetoric to measures of voter attention based on Google Trends (Luján & Acosta y Lara, 2024) further reveals that the returns to personalist rhetoric are context-dependent: candidate-centered rhetoric is more strongly associated with candidate-centered attention where institutional constraints are weak.

This paper contributes to the study of personalism and democratic institutions in three ways. First, it further expands previous studies addressing personalism as a strategic communicative behavior, highlighting how institutions shape leaders' rhetorical choices. Second, it connects institutional and behavioral approaches through a novel empirical design that combines large-scale text analysis of campaign discourse with comparative indicators of organizational and systemic institutionalization. Third, it shows that the electoral returns of personalist rhetoric depend on institutional constraints, clarifying the conditions under which leader-centered politics thrive. Together, these contributions move the study of personalism beyond descriptive analyses of charismatic leadership toward a systematic account of how institutions structure the personalization of democratic competition.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, we develop the theoretical argument linking personalist rhetoric, party organizational attributes, and party system institutionalization. We then present our research design, the strategy we followed to measure personalist rhetoric from social media discourse, and our empirical estimations to test our hypotheses. Then, we discuss the main results and further test our argument linking the supply and demand sides of

personalist politics. We conclude by presenting some implications of our study and a few considerations for future research.

## Personal politics and institutionalized parties

Political competition in democracies has long revolved around a tension between the appeal of individual leaders and the organizational capacities of political parties. Viewed through the lens of the seminal work by Kitschelt (2000), this tension reveals the way political linkages help to hold politicians accountable to citizens. Early democratic politics was dominated by notables whose charisma, prestige, and personal resources provided the main basis of political influence (Duverger, 1959). The expansion of suffrage and the rise of mass participation, however, created incentives for collective organization, giving rise to the modern party as an institutional solution to the instability of personality-driven politics. Mass parties anchored representation in social cleavages and sought to discipline individual ambition through routinized procedures and programmatic appeals (Gunther & Diamond, 2003; Panebianco, 1988; Sartori, 1976). Nevertheless, personalism has never disappeared. It has resurfaced repeatedly under institutional and communicative conditions that weaken organizational mediation and favor the direct projection of individual leadership (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Nietsche, 2021; Garzia, 2014; Garzia et al., 2021; Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

Political personalism implies the centrality of individual leaders at the expense of collective identities and organizations, such as political parties (Frantz et al., 2021; Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Garzia et al., 2021). As a particular mode of political linkage, it can take place across arenas (Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Pedersen & Rahat, 2024). In the governmental arena, personalist

rulers employ personalist rhetoric to legitimate their power, putting themselves at the center of their claims and public appeals (Brunkert & von Soest, 2023; Frantz et al., 2022). At the same time, in the electoral arena, personalist rhetoric can be seen as a strategic choice made by politicians to mobilize and persuade voters, by deliberately emphasizing their individual attributes as the organizing principle of political competition, subordinating programmatic and organizational identities to the projection of a leader's personal brand (Luján & Acosta y Lara, 2024).

Across arenas, personalist rhetoric shares a common core: the extent to which political leaders emphasize their individual attributes, leadership, or personal merits as the principal basis for seeking political support and legitimizing their will. Variation in the prevalence of personalistic appeals thus reflects not merely the survival of charismatic politics (Andrews-Lee, 2021) but a strategic adaptation to institutional, organizational, and communicative contexts that shape how leaders seek to mobilize support.

Relatedly, the personalization of politics is a process that refers to the growing centrality of leaders relative to parties across electoral, parliamentary, and governmental arenas—a pattern driven by partisan dealignment (Dalton, McAllister & Wattenberg, 2002; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, & De Angelis, 2021) and transformations in media systems (Chadwick, 2017) that privilege individual visibility over collective representation, and is observed even in well-stablished democracies (Karvonen, 2010; Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

The tension between party organization and individual leadership lies at the center of political competition. Classic accounts of party institutionalization emphasize that strong organizations discipline ambition, socialize leaders, and embed electoral competition in programmatic and collective structures

(Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Panebianco, 1988). When such organizational mechanisms are robust, candidates cannot campaign solely as individuals; they must operate within partisan boundaries that constrain the personalization of politics. Where institutionalization is weak, by contrast, parties lack the reputational and organizational resources to coordinate elites or to project coherent identities, enabling ambitious politicians to substitute their personal brand for the party label (Randall & Svåsand, 2002; Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020). The balance between the organizational and personal poles of competition thus depends on the degree to which parties can channel leadership within collective boundaries rather than allowing it to dominate them.

Parties differ in the extent of leader dominance—ranging from collegial or decentralized organizations to those effectively owned by a single figure (Frantz et al., 2021; Rahat, 2024a). At one end of this spectrum, institutionalized parties provide cues for voters and mechanisms of internal accountability that discourage plebiscitary campaigns (Lupu, 2016; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995), and they are often rooted in social movements or ideologies and accumulate resources that endure (Panebianco, 1988). At the other end, weakly institutionalized organizations are prone to volatility and the erosion of partisan identities, allowing leaders to rely on personalistic appeals as the principal linkage to voters. Some parties are created as vehicles for charismatic founders and remain tied to their leadership (Andrews-Lee, 2020, 2021), while others emerge as successors of mass and cartel parties (Calise, 2015; Musella, 2018). As Rahat argues, in personal parties, "the organizational glue is loyalty to the leader," thus "its institutions cannot counterweigh the leader" (2024b:218).

Some parties' organizational resources, such as extended networks of local offices, institutionalized mechanisms for candidate selection, and formal

procedures for policy formation, could constrain the leader's will more effectively. For example, local leaders and grassroots could be in a better position to hold the leader accountable and limit their discretion if the party's electoral fate is not dependent on the leader's image. However, in some circumstances even resourceful parties may be vulnerable to capture when legitimacy declines or authority becomes overly centralized (Husted, Moufahim, & Fredriksson, 2021; Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). These vulnerabilities become particularly visible in presidential systems, where candidates enjoy broad autonomy and where the institutional incentives of personal vote-seeking magnify the appeal of leader-centered strategies (Passarelli, 2020; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Samuels & Shugart, 2010).

We expect that some organizational attributes can constrain personalist rhetoric, whereas others may have no effect or even foster it, depending on whether they function as behavioral constraints or merely as organizational resources (Levitsky, 1998). Specifically, nomination procedures that embed candidates within collective rules should reduce reliance on personalist rhetoric. In contrast, organizational resources suited to electoral mobilization, such as local party structures, may benefit both personalist and non-personalist candidates alike (Tuttnauer & Rahat, 2025). Thus, more inclusive and decentralized nomination procedures should be associated with lower levels of personalist rhetoric. At the same time, organizational resources that facilitate electoral mobilization may be associated with greater reliance on personalist appeals.

Contemporary media environments further amplify this dynamic. The shift from party-centered communication to direct leader–voter interaction, first through television (Wattenberg, 1990) and increasingly through social media (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, & De Angelis, 2022), has reduced the costs of bypassing party structures and increased the rewards of

personal visibility. Candidates now operate in platforms that privilege emotional, short-form, and self-referential content (Pedersen, 2024; Zamir, 2023). These communicative transformations have strengthened leaders' capacity to dominate the public agenda independently of their organizations, accelerating the emergence of personal parties (Lioy, 2023; Rahat, 2024b). Despite being loosely defined (Lioy, 2023; Resmini & Abbott, 2024), the concept of personal parties departs from the idea that leaders are empowered at the expense of the party as a group and its members (Rahat, 2024b). They are weakly institutionalized by design, organized and structured around the authority of a single leader (Kostadinova & Levitt, 2014; Rahat, 2024b; Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020).

As a result, the balance of power between collective organizations and individual leaders has tilted decisively toward the latter, with implications not only for electoral competition (Ferreira da Silva, Garzia, & De Angelis, 2021; Ferreira da Silva & Costa, 2019; Passarelli, 2020) but also for the quality of democratic accountability (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, & Wright, 2020; Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020), the extent to which personalistic leaders rely on technocrats and the military to advance their policies (Weyland, 2024), undermine state capacity (Li and Wright, 2023), corruption regulation (Kostadinova & Neshkova, 2025), and polarization dynamics (Crespo-Martínez, Mora-Rodríguez, & Rojo-Martínez, 2025).

Given this broader trend toward personalist candidates, we argue that organizational attributes of individual parties and the degree of institutionalization of the party system jointly shape the extent to which candidates rely on personalist rhetoric. These two dimensions operate at different levels. Party organizational attributes capture different dimensions regarding a party's internal capacity to discipline elites, coordinate behavior, and sustain

programmatic identities (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Panebianco, 1988). Party system institutionalization refers to the stability, rootedness, and legitimacy of parties as collective actors within a polity (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006). While analytically distinct, the two dimensions are interrelated: institutionalized systems encourage the development of organizationally strong parties, whereas weakly institutionalized systems tend to generate fragile, leader-centered vehicles.

Within this framework, we expect party organization to shape candidates' rhetorical strategies through the balance between collective constraint and mobilizational capacity. Following Levitsky's (1998) distinction between institutionalization as value infusion—members' attachment to the party as an end in itself—and institutionalization as behavioral routinization—the entrenchment of rules of the game that narrow actors' behavioral options—we focus on the latter as the mechanism through which parties discipline ambitious individuals. When authority is dispersed across party actors, political careers are embedded in collective and routinized procedures, and established party labels and programmatic cues provide autonomous sources of reputation and support, candidates face greater organizational and electoral costs for centering their campaigns on their own persona (Lupu, 2016; Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). This is the sense in which Panebianco (1988: 58, as quoted in Levitsky, 1998: 84) argues that institutionalized rules channel actors' strategies into "specific and obligatory paths."

Yet organizational strength does not necessarily translate into this kind of behavioral constraint (Levitsky, 1998). Dense networks and local structures may expand candidates' mobilizational capacity without embedding them in rules that discipline their conduct and can therefore also be deployed to amplify a personal brand, particularly in systems where candidates enjoy substantial

independence from their parties (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020; Tuttnauer & Rahat, 2025).

*H1. Party organization attributes:* Organizational attributes that embed candidates within collective rules and procedures (behavioral routinization) will constrain personalist rhetoric, whereas attributes that primarily expand mobilizational capacity should not systematically do so.

The same logic extends to the systemic level. In institutionalized party systems, parties are socially rooted, enjoy stable interparty competition, and are perceived as legitimate vehicles of representation (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006). These features collectively constrain personalization by anchoring political competition in enduring partisan identities. By contrast, inchoate systems—characterized by volatility, weak legitimacy, and shallow societal linkages—create fertile ground for leader-centered appeals, as voters and elites lack stable partisan references. When a party is socially rooted, it is expected that party labels will be the main source of voters' and leaders' political identifications, thus leaving little room for personalist politicians to campaign on their own figures.

*H2. Party system institutionalization:* Higher levels of party system institutionalization will be associated with lower overall levels of personalist rhetoric across candidates and elections.

These two hypotheses capture the central claim of the argument regarding the supply-side of personalism: organizational attributes and systemic institutionalization jointly condition leaders' incentives to rely on their personal image rather than on collective party identities. The most permissive environment

for personalistic appeals is therefore one in which candidates face weak collective organizational constraints within a weakly institutionalized party system, while the greatest resistance arises when effective party constraints are reinforced by system-level institutionalization. These expectations can be most clearly evaluated in Latin America, where variation in party organization and system institutionalization provides empirical leverage to test how institutional constraints shape personalistic communication.

To link the supply and demand sides of personalism, we further expect that the strategic choices made by politicians when campaigning are associated with voters' behavior. The attention voters dispense to candidates' communications varies according to how much politicians use personalist rhetoric. Ultimately, if candidates opt for using personalist rhetoric in their campaign messages, it is because they expect voters to react accordingly, thus giving them an electoral advantage over their opponents. While in weakly institutionalized party systems, personalist rhetoric is expected to carry greater electoral returns, in strongly institutionalized systems, party identities are likely to wane the effect of personalist rhetoric among voters.

*H3. Linking supply and demand sides of personalism:* As collective party constraints and party system institutionalization increase, voters become less responsive to personalist rhetoric.

## Data and empirical approach

Latin America offers an especially compelling context for evaluating these expectations. As we stated above, the region combines a long tradition of

personalistic politics with cross-national and temporal variation in party institutionalization. Some countries, notably Uruguay, maintain more or less institutionalized party systems with socially rooted organizations that constrain personalism and reinforce collective identities. Others, including Peru and Ecuador, have experienced repeated collapses of party structures, enabling outsiders to dominate through highly personalized appeals. Intermediate cases—such as Argentina's Peronism or Mexico's PRI—illustrate how leader-centrism can coexist with organizational durability, giving rise to "institutionalized personalism" (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Malamud & Marsteintredet, 2024). More recent experiences with Hugo Chávez and Nayib Bukele reveal how presidential incentives and social media dynamics further strengthen leader-centered linkages (Andrews-Lee, 2020; Luján & Puig-Lombardi, 2025). This diversity in organizational strength and system-level institutionalization makes Latin America a natural laboratory for examining how institutional and organizational conditions shape the use of personalist rhetoric.

## Measuring personalist rhetoric on X

To systematically test our hypotheses, we examine presidential campaign discourse across Latin America based on original social media data. We collected publicly available posts shared by presidential candidates on the platform X (formerly Twitter) during the 90 days preceding each election day. This window was selected to capture the period when candidates actively mobilize support and define their electoral appeals. The extraction relied on the X API (v2), retrieving up to 3,000 posts per account as of December 2022—the maximum permitted under the platform's access constraints. The resulting dataset includes 43,965 posts authored by 135 presidential candidates across 40 elections in 17 Latin

American countries between 2010 and 2022. We focus exclusively on presidential contenders in the general elections. After excluding less active candidates with fewer than 10 posts, the final analytic sample comprises 131 candidates, with a median of 271 posts per candidate.

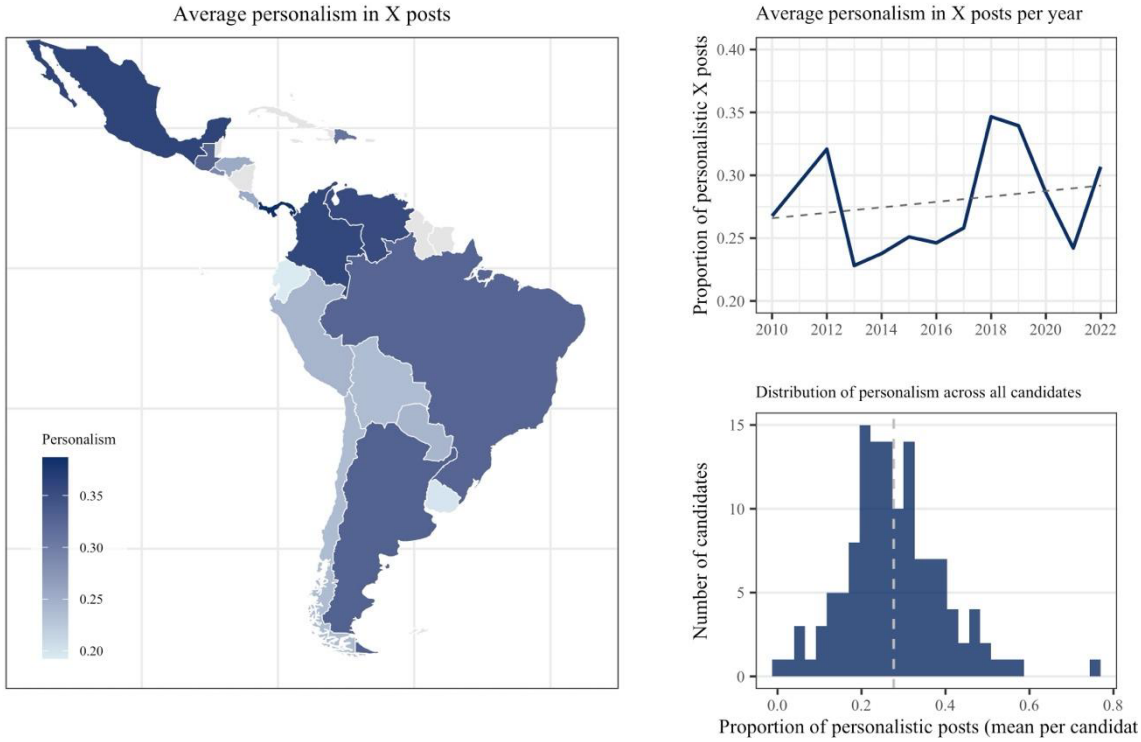
Each post was automatically classified according to whether it employed personalist electoral rhetoric, defined as the extent to which candidates emphasize their individual attributes, leadership, or personal merits as the principal basis for political support or legitimacy (Brunkert & von Soest, 2023; Luján & Acosta y Lara, 2024). The classification was conducted through an automated loop using the OpenAI API (GPT-5 mini model). The model received batches of posts per candidate, election, and country, and was prompted with explicit examples and coding rules distinguishing personalist (1) from non-personalist (0) posts. The prompt instructed the model to assign a binary label based on whether the post centered the individual as the source of legitimacy or efficacy, or instead emphasized collective actors, party platforms, or policy proposals.[1]

On average, 29.2% of posts in the dataset employed personalist rhetoric, with substantial variation across candidates (SD = 0.11, range = [0.00, 0.75]). Figure 1 illustrates this heterogeneity. The left panel maps the average share of personalistic posts across countries, revealing higher levels in Mexico, Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela, and lower levels in Uruguay and Ecuador. The top-right graph shows the time variation of average personalism. As can be seen, we found evidence supporting most of the literature's claims, emphasizing the trend towards increased personalization. Based on our social media data, the presence of personalist rhetoric among Latin American presidential candidates rose by

[1] The complete prompt and procedures for the classification are described in Supplementary Appendix A1.1. Examples of the classified posts are shown in Appendix A1.2.

about 5% from 2010 to 2022. The bottom-right panel shows the distribution of personalism across all candidates in the region. The histogram reveals substantial variation: while most candidates' campaigns include between 10% and 40% of personalistic posts, a few rely on markedly higher or lower levels. This pattern suggests that personalism is a widespread but uneven feature of Latin American campaign communication.

**Figure 1:** Average Personalism in Presidential Campaign X posts across Latin America




*Note:* GPT 5-mini based classification of personalistic rhetoric on X posts (2010-2022). Country ranking (left panel), temporal trend (upper right), and histogram of average personalist rhetoric by candidate (lower right).

The data reveal important variation in the use of personalist rhetoric across candidates and contexts. At one end of the spectrum, figures such as Federico

Malavassi (Unión Liberal, Costa Rica 2022) and Mauro Iasi (Partido Comunista Brasileiro, Brazil 2014) made almost no personal references in their campaign communication, with fewer than 5 percent of posts classified as personalistic. Both ran under programmatic or ideologically defined party labels that foreground collective identity over individual leadership. At the opposite extreme, candidates such as Keiko Fujimori (Fuerza Popular, Peru 2021) and Rómulo Roux (Cambio Democrático, Panamá 2019) relied heavily on self-referential appeals—around 45 percent of their posts were personalistic—framing competence, experience, and moral authority as individual attributes. A notable example is Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's 2022 campaign, which, despite the organizational strength of Brazil's PT, featured a high share of self-centered messaging.

We validate this classification through two procedures. First, we manually classified a random subset of 2,000 posts; GPT shows high agreement with human labels (accuracy = 0.837; $\kappa$ = 0.664) and flags a similar share of posts as personalistic (0.290 vs. 0.277). Second, we applied a conservative dictionary-based classifier to the full corpus; relative to this benchmark, agreement is lower, yet remains high (accuracy = 0.751; $\kappa$ = 0.381) given that GPT identifies a larger share of posts as personalistic (0.292 vs. 0.164), consistent with the dictionary capturing only explicit lexical cues. We present the complete results of these validation exercises in Appendix A1.3.

Despite these validation results, automated classification may still be sensitive to cross-national differences in language use, political culture, and styles of social media communication. Candidates may express personalism through country-specific idioms, irony, colloquial language, or implicit references that are harder to classify consistently across contexts. Our validation exercises reduce this concern by showing that the classifier performs well against human-coded

labels and remains broadly consistent with a conservative dictionary benchmark, while the use of a standardized prompt applies the same coding criteria to all posts. The results should therefore be interpreted as evidence about patterns of personalistic rhetoric in candidates' X posts, rather than as a complete measure of all forms of personalized campaign communication.

## Research design

To examine how institutional characteristics shape the use of personalist rhetoric in Latin American presidential campaigns, we integrate our original dataset of social media communication, which comprises posts by presidential candidates across Latin America between 2012 and 2022, with institutional indicators from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) projects. As described before, the dependent variable measures the share of posts classified by a large language model as personalistic—that is, emphasizing the candidate's personal traits rather than collective, partisan, or programmatic appeals.

Because V-Dem and V-Party differ in what they cover, not all candidates and parties in our X posts dataset can be matched to institutional indicators. The match with V-Dem—which provides country-year measures of institutional quality—covers almost all elections in the region and yields about 33,000 posts. In contrast, the match with V-Party yields roughly 15,200 posts because many candidates run under small or short-lived parties that are not coded in V-Party. The final analytic sample, therefore, includes only cases for which institutional

characteristics can be reliably matched, ensuring cross-national comparability and internal validity[2].

Our key explanatory variables capture the institutionalization of party politics at two levels. At the party level, we use four indicators from V-Party that capture distinct organizational attributes: local organizational strength (*v2paactcom*), party continuity (*v2paelcont*), candidate nomination procedures (*v2panom*), and local party offices (*v2palocoff)*[3]. These party-level measures allow us to examine whether different features of party organization are associated with candidates' use of personalist rhetoric: durable parties can provide collective reputations and partisan career structures, while organizational networks can structure how campaign appeals are produced and disseminated (Cross, Katz, & Pruysers, 2018; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). We use the V-Party indicators separately because they capture analytically distinct features of party organization rather than a single underlying dimension. Appendix A2.4 compares these results with alternative specifications based on PIPS, which distinguishes party institutionalization, understood as the routinization and value infusion of party organizations, from party strength, understood as organizational and mobilizational capacity, and provides aggregate measures for each concept (Self, Franke, and Mitchell, 2025). The results are substantively consistent with the main analysis.

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[2] It is worth noting that this limitation likely works against our hypotheses. V-Party tends to omit new, short-lived, or highly candidate-centered electoral vehicles, precisely the types of parties where personalistic appeals are most prevalent. As a result, the matched sample is biased toward more established and organizationally structured parties, making our tests conservative.

3All four V-Party indicators are standardized before estimation. We recode party continuity (v2paelcont) so that higher values indicate greater continuity across elections: no prior participation, prior participation under a different name, and prior participation under the same name. The candidate nomination variable (v2panom) is used in its original direction, where higher values indicate more inclusive and decentralized nomination procedures. In Appendix A2.5 we re-estimate the models using the PIPS operationalization of these indicators, including its alternative coding of candidate nomination, and the results are substantively consistent.

At the system level, we use V-Dem's party institutionalization index (*v2xps_party*), which measures the extent to which parties in a country are organizationally developed, territorially rooted, socially linked, programmatically differentiated, and cohesive in the legislature. This index captures whether parties, taken collectively and with emphasis on the larger organizations that structure competition, provide stable collective anchors for electoral politics. This system-level measure is theoretically relevant because personalistic strategies are expected to flourish where partisan cues are weak, collective identities are less stable, and electoral competition is less structured by durable party organizations (Lupu, 2016; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

In line with the literature on the systemic determinants of electoral personalism, we include some extra-institutional variables (Luján & Acosta y Lara, 2024). Incumbency is expected to reduce personalist rhetoric, as incumbents already enjoy high visibility and can rely on their governing record (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2020). Primaries increase intra-party competition, encouraging candidates to emphasize personal traits to differentiate themselves (Dalton, McAllister, & Wattenberg, 2002; Musella, 2018). The allowance of independent candidacies weakens partisan mediation, providing incentives for purely individual campaigns (Carey & Shugart, 1995), while federalism tends to promote local and leader-centered politics by fragmenting authority and coordination (Kitschelt et al., 2010). We also control for open-list systems, which generate strong incentives to cultivate a personal vote by forcing co-partisans to compete against one another (Carey & Shugart, 1995), and for two-round electoral systems that facilitate the entry of newcomer and outsider candidates who often lack established party machines (Golder, 2006; McClintock, 2018). These controls capture the institutional incentives that shape the balance between collective and personalistic appeals.

To test our first two hypotheses about how party-level organizational attributes and system-level party institutionalization shape the use of personalist rhetoric, we estimate post-level logistic regression models in which the dependent variable equals 1 if a post is classified as personalistic and 0 otherwise. All models include election-year fixed effects to absorb temporal common to candidates contesting elections in the same year. Standard errors are clustered by candidate within country to account for intra-candidate correlation. We do not include country fixed effects because some of our independent variables are defined at the country level and vary little or not at all within a country over the period studied. Including country dummies would therefore absorb the cross-national institutional variation that our design seeks to explain. Instead, we rely on clustered standard errors to adjust for within-country dependence while retaining the between-country signal of institutional differences.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{logit}(\Pr(Y_{ict} = 1)) &= \alpha + \gamma_1 \text{PI}_{ct} + \beta_1 \text{OrgStrength}_{p(i)t} + \beta_2 \text{Continuity}_{p(i)t} \\ &+ \beta_3 \text{Nomination}_{p(i)t} + \beta_4 \text{LocalOffices}_{p(i)t} + \delta' \text{X}_{ict} + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ict}\end{aligned}$$

$Y_{ict} = 1$ if post $i$, posted by candidate $c$ in election year $t$, was classified as personalistic. $\text{PI}_{ct}$ is V-Dem's party institutionalization index for the candidate's country-year. $\text{OrgStrength}_{p(i)t}$, $\text{Continuity}_{p(i)t}$, $\text{Nomination}_{p(i)t}$, and $\text{LocalOffices}_{p(i)t}$ are party-level indicators from V-Party for the party $p$ associated with post $i$. $\text{X}_{ict}$ includes institutional and candidate-level controls: primaries, independent candidacy, incumbency, federalism, two-round elections, and open-list electoral systems. $\lambda_t$ denotes election-year fixed effects.

In addition to the pooled post-level logit models, we also estimate a multilevel logistic model that explicitly accounts for the nested structure of the data (posts within candidates). This specification allows baseline propensities for personalist rhetoric to vary across candidates and relaxes the assumption that the effect of system-level institutionalization is constant across individuals. Concretely, we include a candidate-level random intercept to capture unobserved candidate traits that systematically affect rhetorical style and a candidate-level random slope for PSI the party institutionalization index (PI), to allow candidates to differ in how strongly party system institutionalization constrains their use of personalistic appeals. The multilevel model, therefore, separates within-candidate variation in posting behavior from between-candidate heterogeneity, providing a stricter test of our institutional argument under minimal assumptions about candidate-specific baselines and sensitivities:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{logit}\big(\Pr(Y_{ijt}=1)\big) &= \alpha + \gamma_1 \text{PI}_{kt} + \beta_1 \text{OrgStrength}_{p(j)t} + \beta_2 \text{Continuity}_{p(j)t} \\ &+ \beta_3 \text{Nomination}_{p(j)t} + \beta_4 \text{LocalOffices}_{p(j)t} + \boldsymbol{\delta}'\mathbf{X}_{ijt} + \lambda_t + u_{0j} \\ &+ u_{1j}\text{PI}_{kt} + \varepsilon_{ijt}\end{aligned}$$

$Y_{ijt} = 1$ if post $i$, posted by candidate $j$ in election year $t$, was classified as personalistic. $\text{PI}_{kt}$ is V-Dem's party institutionalization index for country $k$ in year $t$. $\text{OrgStrength}_{p(j)t}$, $\text{Continuity}_{p(j)t}$, $\text{Nomination}_{p(j)t}$, and $\text{LocalOffices}_{p(j)t}$ are V-Party indicators for the party $p$ associated with candidate $j$. $X_{ijt}$ includes the same controls as above, and $\lambda_t$ denotes election-year fixed effects. The term $u_{0j} \sim N(0, \sigma_0^2)$ is a candidate-specific random intercept, and

$u_{1j} \sim N(0, \sigma_1^2)$ is a candidate-specific random slope on $\text{PI}_{kt}$. This model allows candidates to differ both in their overall tendency to communicate in personalistic terms and in how the association between system-level party institutionalization and personalist rhetoric varies across candidates.

To test H3, we link candidates' campaign rhetoric to voters' attention by combining our tweet-based measure of personalist rhetoric with Google Trends indicators of candidate-centered search interest (Luján & Acosta y Lara, 2024). Because attention is conceptually defined at the candidate level—and because tweet-level engagement is noisy within candidate-campaigns—we aggregate the data to the candidate–election level and compute each candidate's share of personalistic posts during the campaign window. We then estimate OLS models in which the dependent variable is the candidate's Google Trends score and the key explanatory term is the interaction between candidate personalism and party system institutionalization:

$$GT\ Score_{ce} = \alpha + \beta_1 Personalism_{ce} + \beta_2 PSI_c + \beta_3 (Personalism_{ce} \times M_{ce}) + \delta' Z_{\{ce\}} + \tau(t) + \varepsilon_{\{ce\}}$$

where $GT\ Score_{ce}$ is Google search interest for candidate c in election e, $Personalism_{ce}$ is the candidate-level share of personalistic posts, and $M_{ce}$ is the institutional moderator. We estimate separate models for V-Dem's party institutionalization index and for each of the four V-Party party-level indicators: local organizational strength, party continuity, candidate nomination procedures, and local party offices. $Z_{ce}$ includes the same institutional controls used above (primaries, independent candidacies, incumbency, federalism, two-round

elections, and open-list systems), and standard errors are clustered by country. In this specification, we control for time with a continuous election-year trend rather than election-year fixed effects. Year fixed effects are not ideal here because the candidate–election sample is small and unbalanced across years, so absorbing all cross-year variation can substantially reduce leverage and make the interaction estimate depend on a narrower subset of within-year comparisons. A parametric trend retains the ability to account for secular changes in platform use and information environments while preserving the cross-temporal identifying variation central to the hypothesis.[4]

## Results

In this section, we begin by testing Hypothesis 1—that party organizational attributes will constrain personalist rhetoric when they embed candidates within routinized collective rules and procedures, but not when they primarily expand mobilizational capacity—and Hypothesis 2—that higher levels of party system institutionalization will be associated with lower overall levels of personalist rhetoric across candidates and elections—using post-level data. We then test Hypothesis 3 by linking the supply and demand sides of personalism, estimating whether the association between candidates' personalist rhetoric and voter attention is conditional on party system institutionalization.

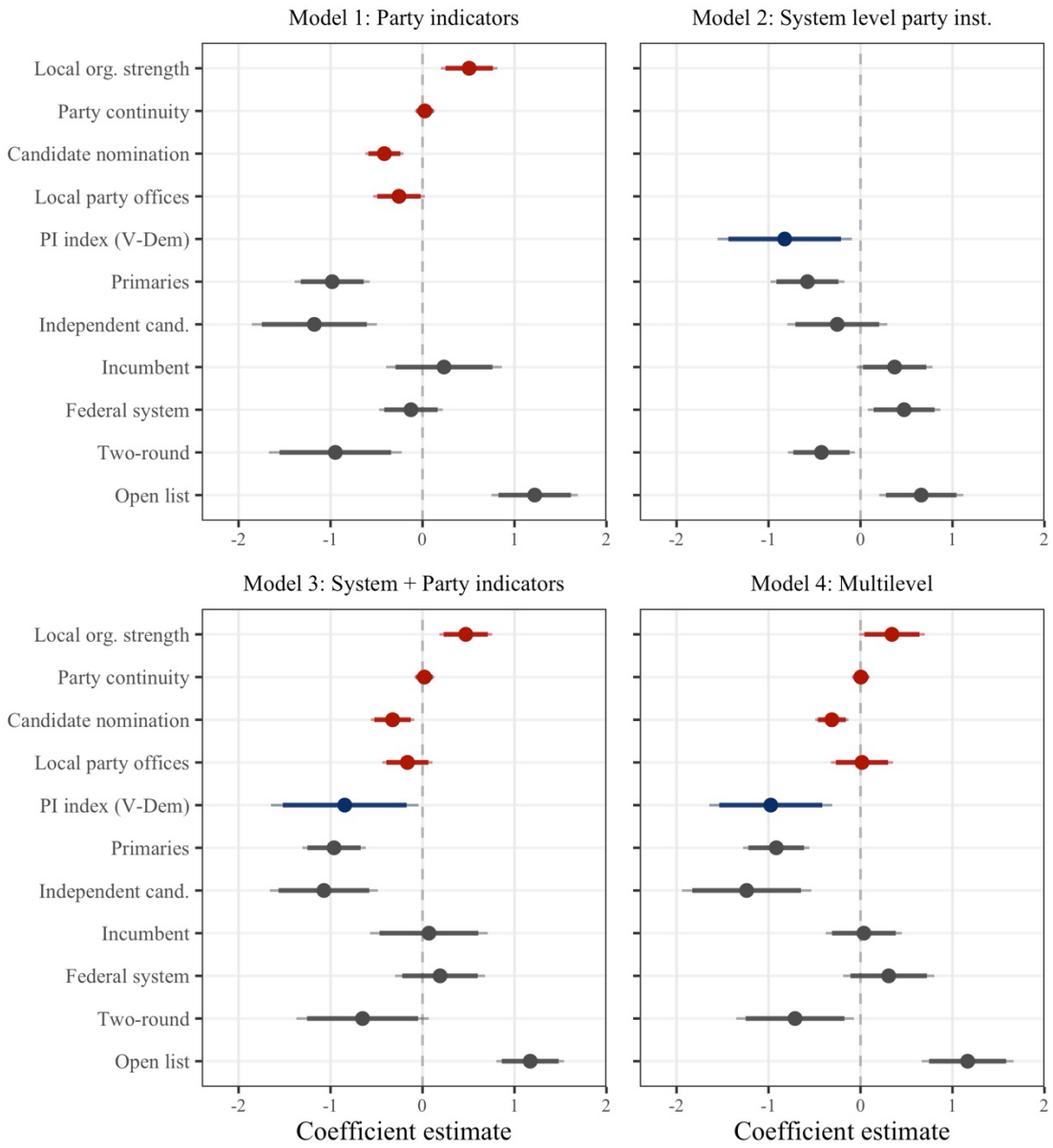
[4] As robustness checks, we present the results of models that allow for nonlinearity via a quadratic time trend in Appendix A3.1; the substantive inference on the interaction is unchanged.

## Organizational and institutional constraints and personalist rhetoric

Each model estimates the probability that an X post by a presidential candidate contains personalist rhetoric, controlling for institutional and contextual factors. Models 1–3 are tweet-level logistic regressions with election-year fixed effects and standard errors clustered by candidate within country. Model 1 tests the association between the four party-level organizational attributes and personalist rhetoric in the largest matched sample. Model 2 focuses on party system institutionalization (PSI). Model 3 jointly estimates both levels in the common matched sample. Model 4 re-estimates the joint specification as a multilevel logit with posts nested within candidates. Overall, the results support the expectation that system-level institutionalization constrains personalist rhetoric and indicate that party-level organizational attributes operate differently according to their function.[5]

[5] In Appendix A2.3, we aggregate the data to the candidate–election level and model the share of personalistic posts per candidate using weighted OLS, with weights equal to the number of posts and standard errors clustered by country. The candidate-level models recover the main party-level patterns: local organizational strength is positively associated with personalistic rhetoric, while more inclusive and decentralized candidate nomination procedures are negatively associated with it. Party continuity and local party offices remain statistically indistinguishable from zero. The party institutionalization index is negatively signed but does not reach conventional levels of significance in the joint specification. These results indicate that the main party-level findings are not driven by idiosyncratic post-level variation and broadly hold when the unit of analysis is aligned with the candidate-level nature of campaign strategy.

**Figure 2:** X post-level logistic regressions of personalistic rhetoric




*Note:* Coefficients from post-level logit models (Models 1–3) and a multilevel logit model (Model 4). Models 1–3 include election-year fixed effects; standard errors are clustered by candidate within country. Bars indicate 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Model 1 includes the four party-level indicators: local organizational strength, party continuity, candidate nomination procedures, and local party offices (N = 15,264). Model 2 includes V-Dem's party institutionalization index only (N = 33,152). Model 3 includes the V-Dem index plus the four party-level indicators (N = 15,264). Model 4 is a post–candidate multilevel model with candidate-level random intercepts and a candidate-level random slope for V-Dem's party institutionalization index (N = 15,264; 42 candidates). Full results in Supplementary Appendix A2.

Model 1 shows that the party-level indicators are not associated with personalist rhetoric in a uniform way. Local organizational strength—the permanent presence of party activists and personnel in local communities—is positively associated with personalistic rhetoric ($\beta \approx 0.51, p = .001$). By contrast, more inclusive and decentralized nomination procedures are associated with less personalistic rhetoric ($\beta \approx -0.42, p < .001$); a one-standard-deviation increase in this measure reduces the odds of a personalistic post by about 35%. Party continuity is close to zero and statistically insignificant ($\beta \approx 0.02, p = 0.65$), while local party offices are negative and only marginally significant ($\beta \approx -0.26, p = .075$).

Turning to the party system level, Model 2, Party Institutionalization index coefficient is negative and statistically significant ($\beta \approx -0.83, p < 0.05$), indicating that candidates campaigning in more institutionalized party systems are less likely to use self-centered appeals. Substantively, moving from the 10th percentile (0.63) to the 90th percentile (0.86) is associated with about a 17% reduction in the odds that an X post contains personalist rhetoric, holding other factors constant.

Model 3, which includes the system-level V-Dem index and the four party-level indicators in the same specification, shows that the main associations remain stable. The V-Dem party institutionalization index remains negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.85, p = .039$), indicating that personalist rhetoric is less common where party politics is more institutionalized at the system level. At the party level, local organizational strength remains positive and significant ($\beta = 0.47, p = .001$), while more inclusive and decentralized candidate nomination procedures remain negative and significant ($\beta = -0.33, p = .007$). Party continuity and local party office are not statistically distinguishable from

zero. Model 4, the multilevel specification with candidate-level random intercepts and a random slope for the V-Dem index, yields similar conclusions. The system-level index remains negative $(\beta = -0.98, p = .004)$, candidate nomination remains negative $(\beta = -0.31, p < .001)$, and local organizational strength remains positive, although estimated with less precision (\beta=0.34, p=.061). Party continuity and local offices again show no meaningful association. The random-effects estimates indicate some between-candidate variation in baseline personalism and in the association between system-level party institutionalization and personalistic rhetoric, but the average directional patterns remain consistent with the pooled models[6].

Across specifications, several controls behave consistently. Holding other variables constant, primaries are associated with lower levels of personalist rhetoric, whereas open-list systems are associated with higher levels of personalist rhetoric. Unlike candidate nomination procedures, which regulate access to candidacy itself, open-list rules structure competition among already-nominated co-partisans for preference votes in the general election—a distinct, ballot-stage mechanism that need not operate in the same direction as organizational constraints at the preselection stage. Two-round systems are also generally associated with a lower probability that candidates use personalist rhetoric, although this association is weaker in the joint post-level specification. Other controls are less stable across specifications. Federal systems are positively associated with personalistic rhetoric in the V-Dem-only model, but this

6 In Appendix A2.1, we re-estimate the joint specification using a Bayesian multilevel logit with weakly informative priors. The posterior estimates recover the same directional pattern as the frequentist multilevel model: the V-Dem party institutionalization index is negative, local organizational strength is positive, candidate nomination is negative, and party continuity and local party offices remain close to zero. The 95% credible intervals are wider and include zero for the main institutional variables, but the 90% intervals exclude zero for the V-Dem index [-1.64, -0.07] and candidate nomination [-0.43, -0.02], providing more conservative but substantively consistent evidence.

association does not persist once party-level indicators are included. Independent candidacies are imprecisely estimated in the V-Dem-only model, but become clearly negative in the V-Party-matched sample. Incumbency does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance in any model. Overall, these institutional and candidate-level controls capture contextual incentives that may shape rhetorical style.

Substantively, these results support H2 and are consistent with H1's expectation that party organizational attributes operate differently according to their function. Consistent with H2, personalistic rhetoric is less common where party politics is more institutionalized at the system level: candidates rely less on self-centered appeals in contexts where parties are organizationally developed, socially rooted, programmatically differentiated, and cohesive in the legislature. This is consistent with the expectation that institutionalized party systems provide collective anchors for political competition and reduce candidates' incentives to organize campaigns around their own personal brand.

At the party level, the evidence is consistent with the expectation that organizational attributes do not constrain personalism uniformly. The constraining pattern is clearest for candidate nomination: where nomination procedures are more inclusive and decentralized, personalist rhetoric is lower. Consistent with H1, this suggests that parties are more likely to limit candidate-centered appeals when nominations follow routinized procedures with fixed rules and requirements that candidates must meet, rather than depending on discretionary elite or personal approval (Levitsky, 1998; Panebianco, 1988: 58). This finding is consistent with, but narrower than, a general claim about decentralization: when decentralization takes a plebiscitary form without a procedural filter, it need not constrain personalism and may instead enable it

(Kernell, 2025). By contrast, neither party continuity—whether the party competed in the previous election under the same name—nor the presence of local party offices—whether the party maintains permanent offices at the local or municipal level—shows a consistent association with personalist rhetoric.

In summary, the results suggest that party organization matters through distinct mechanisms. Nomination procedures appear to constrain personalistic rhetoric when authority over candidacies is more inclusive and decentralized, while local organizational strength appears to provide a mobilizational infrastructure that can also be used to amplify candidate-centered appeals. By contrast, the results provide no consistent evidence that electoral persistence of party labels or formal territorial presence alone constrain personalization.[7]

The Brazilian case helps illustrate this point. Lula and the PT are difficult to place in a simple strong-party/low-personalism framework because they combine a highly recognizable personal leader with one of the region's most durable party organizations. Lula's appeal has long been rooted in the PT's collective identity, but it has also extended beyond the party label itself: *lulismo* has coexisted with *petismo* as a distinct form of leader-centered attachment, and Lula's personal appeal remained central to his later electoral coalition (Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Hunter & Power, 2023). This suggests that party organization does not necessarily suppress personal leadership. Under some conditions, dense activist networks and territorial reach may also help circulate and mobilize around an already prominent leader's personal brand.

[7] As a robustness check, Appendix A2.2 re-estimates the main models after excluding elections that could be considered outside regular democratic contestation, specifically El Salvador and Venezuela. Nicaragua does not appear in the analyzed sample. The results remain substantively unchanged.

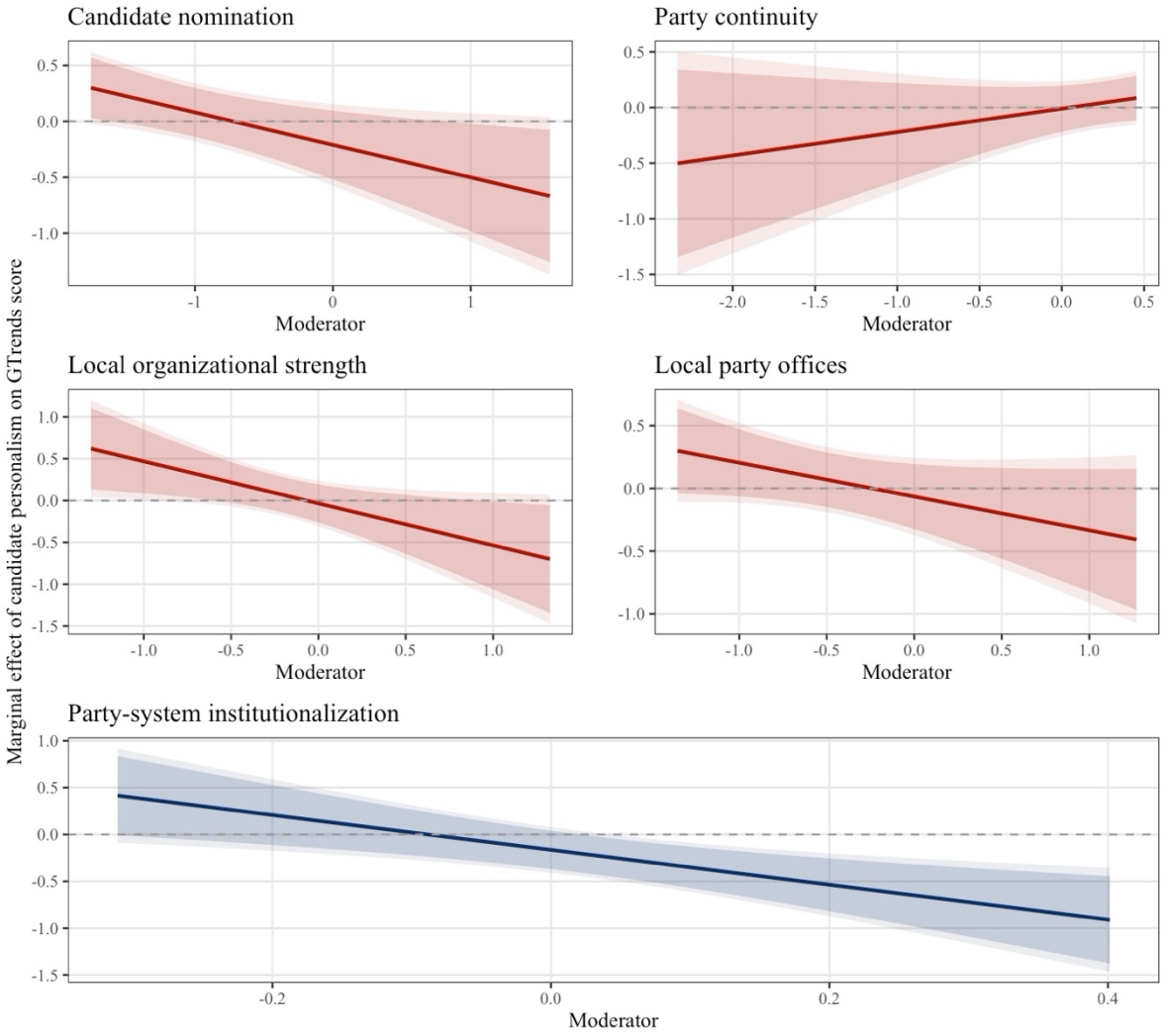
## Linking the supply and demand sides

So far, our analysis has focused on the supply side of personalism—how institutional and organizational structures shape the use of self-referential appeals in candidates' campaign communication. We now examine whether these same institutional conditions also shape the attention returns to personalist rhetoric. To capture demand-side personalism, we use the candidate-centered Google Trends indicator from Luján and Acosta y Lara (2024). We aggregate our tweet-level measure to the candidate–election and estimate OLS models with standard errors clustered by country and a linear time trend. In each model, we interact candidates' average personalism with a different institutional moderator: V-Dem's party institutionalization index and the four party-level V-Party indicators – local organizational strength, party continuity, candidate nomination procedures, and local party offices.

Figure 3 reports the implied marginal effect of candidate personalism on Google Trends salience across values of each institutional moderator. The results suggest that the attention returns to personalistic rhetoric are conditional on the institutional context. The interaction is negative and statistically significant for V-Dem's party institutionalization index ($\beta = -1.86, p = .017$), indicating that personalistic rhetoric is less strongly associated with candidate-centered search attention where party politics is more institutionalized at the system level. A similar pattern appears for candidate nomination procedures: the interaction is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.29, p = .045$), suggesting weaker attention returns to personalistic rhetoric where nomination procedures are more inclusive and decentralized. The interaction with local organizational strength is also negative, though significant only at the 90% level ($\beta = -0.50, p = .060$). By contrast, party continuity does not condition the relationship in the expected

direction, and local party offices do not show a statistically clear moderating effect.

**Figure 3:** Conditional effect of rhetorical personalism on candidate-centered




*Note:* Unit of analysis is candidate–election (V-Party matched sample; N = 42). Each panel plots the marginal effect of candidate personalism (share of personalistic X posts) on candidate-centered Google Trends salience across values of the indicated moderator (centered). Models are estimated by OLS with standard errors clustered by country and include the same institutional controls and a linear election-year trend. Shaded areas report 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

These results provide preliminary evidence that the demand-side relevance of personalistic rhetoric is context-dependent. Even when further research is needed to allow for a more conclusive statement, our results suggest some initial avenues for future work. The attention returns to personalistic appeals seem to be weaker where party systems are more institutionalized and where parties structure candidacies through more inclusive nomination procedures. This suggests the conditional nature of the supply–demand link: candidates' self-centered rhetoric not only varies with the structure of political institutions, but also appears to have asymmetric consequences across contexts. Where party systems are weakly institutionalized, personalistic campaigns are more likely to translate into candidate-centered voter attention, reinforcing the individualization of electoral politics.

## Concluding remarks

This article provides systematic evidence that both party-level organizational attributes and system-level institutionalization shape the extent to which individual leaders rely on personalist rhetoric in the electoral arena. At the party level, more inclusive and decentralized nomination procedures are associated with lower salience of personalist appeals, while local organizational strength is associated with greater use of personalistic rhetoric. At the same time, institutionalized party systems further limit the prevalence and effectiveness of personalist rhetoric, indicating that organizational and systemic constraints operate jointly rather than in isolation. Moreover, linking rhetorical strategies to voters' online search behavior demonstrates that the supply and demand sides of personalism interact differently depending on the institutional context. Beyond

these empirical findings, the study contributes to the literature by reconceptualizing personalism as a strategic communicative behavior rather than a mere symptom of institutional weakness. Methodologically, it introduces a scalable approach to measuring rhetorical personalism in campaign communication by combining a standardized GPT-based classifier with validation against manual coding and a dictionary benchmark. Substantively, by linking large-scale campaign discourse with indicators of party attributes and system institutionalization, the paper shows that personalist rhetoric responds to organizational incentives and institutional environments.

In this respect, although the results are broadly consistent with our hypotheses, the observational nature of our analyses does not allow us to establish the direction of causality. It may be that institutionalized party systems and inclusive nomination procedures reduce candidates' incentives to rely on personalist rhetoric, but it is also possible that leaders who build campaigns around a personal brand have weaker incentives to invest in party structures that could constrain their autonomy. Future research should build on these findings and move beyond statistically controlled associations to identify causal relationships more directly. Additionally, one result that merits further investigation is the positive association between local organizational strength and personalist rhetoric. This pattern is compatible with Levitsky's (1998) account of Peronism, in which informally routinized local base units reinforced clientelistic and personalistic linkages to the leader rather than disciplining party elites. Dense local activist networks may thus amplify a leader's personal brand even where nomination rules and party-system institutionalization constrain personalization at the top.

Finally, these results speak to broader debates about democratic accountability. When collective party constraints weaken and party system institutionalization erodes, personalistic appeals become more prevalent and more effective, shifting the locus of representation from parties to individual leaders. Understanding these dynamics is essential in an era of increasing personalization, particularly in presidential systems where candidates enjoy significant autonomy. The evidence presented here thus underscores the importance of institutional strength in preserving party-centered democratic competition.

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