Do We Know Politicians’ True Selves From the Media? Exploring the Relationship Between Political Media Exposure and Perceived Political Authenticity

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Abstract

Authenticity is an increasingly important factor in citizens’ evaluations of political candidates and their voting decisions. As citizens value political authenticity, politicians attempt to appear true to themselves in the public eye. However, little research has examined how these perceptions of politicians as more or less authentic are constructed. This study examines how citizens form perceptions of politicians’ authenticity and particularly sheds light on the relationship between political media exposure and perceived political authenticity. Drawing on the literature on performed authenticity in social media, personalized media coverage, and information processing, we examine the effects of exposure to political information in different media on perceptions of political authenticity and its subdimensions. Results from an online quota survey in Germany (N=1,210) show that differences in perceived political authenticity are not simply determined by citizens’ political attitudes but can also be explained by their frequency of exposure to political information in different media types. When citizens use private TV news, political accounts on social media, and follow candidate profiles, they perceive politicians as more authentic. Our analyses also suggest that some effects of media exposure on perceived political authenticity are conditioned by citizens’ party identification and their tendency to select ideologically congruent political information.

Keywords

authentic, politician, priming, political personalization, social media

Citizens’ perceptions of politicians have a decisive influence on their voting decisions. Research shows that the outcomes of elections across countries increasingly depend on the images of political candidates among voters (Garzia, 2017). This increased centrality of individual politicians in political campaigns and political discourse at the expense of political groups is generally referred to as political personalization (Gattermann & de Vreese, 2017). The personalization of politics no longer applies only to presidential election systems, in which candidates have traditionally been a deciding factor for voters, but also to parliamentary systems (Ferreira da Silva & Costa, 2019). Communication scholars consider the use of social media in political campaigns and the everyday communication of politicians and political parties to be important drivers of personalized politics (McLaughlin & Macafee, 2019; Metz et al., 2020). More personalized political communication adapts to the media logic and, together with the news media’s focus on individual politicians and their personalities, contributes to the growing role of candidates and their traits in public discourse and as relevant criteria for political decisions (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010).

A specific candidate trait that has recently received considerable attention is the authenticity of politicians (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015; Jones, 2016; Stiers et al., 2021). Political commentaries depict political elections as “authenticity elections” (Shane, 2018, p. 2) or reduce election campaigns to “battle[s] for authenticity” (Moore, 2017), whereas scholars consider authenticity as “an increasingly important criterion by which citizens judge politicians” (Valgårdsson et al., 2021, p. 859) and as “the best way of winning votes” (Gaden &
Dumitrica, 2015, p. 6). Political communication literature defines perceived political authenticity as the degree to which politicians appear as being and remaining true to themselves (Luebke, 2021) and considers authenticity as an important factor in the public evaluation of political candidates and citizens’ voting decisions (Brants et al., 2010; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Fordahl, 2018). Survey findings by Stiers et al. (2021) support these propositions and provide empirical evidence for a positive relationship between perceived authenticity and citizens’ intention to vote for specific candidates or their parties. Consequently, politicians across the political spectrum try to perform the role of authentic candidates who appear true to themselves in the public eye. This seems to be especially successful among politicians from populist parties, who are said to have an aura of authenticity due to their roles as political outsiders (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Whether citizens perceive politicians as authentic probably also depends on the impression they have formed from the media, such as the candidates’ self-presentation and their portrayal by the news media. Especially social media is recognized as a digital environment where authenticity plays a prominent role (Shane, 2018).

So far, however, the effects of media exposure on perceived political authenticity have not received much attention in the literature. Studies on determinants of perceived political authenticity mainly focused on political attitudes as antecedents of authenticity and identified partisanship as the main predictor for authenticity perceptions across national contexts. Scholars found evidence that people judge authenticity through a party lens and perceive politicians as more authentic when they identify with the candidate’s party (Brewer et al., 2014; Pillow et al., 2018; Stiers et al., 2021).

We assume that perceiving politicians to be more or less authentic is not only the outcome of political attitudes but also depends on specific impressions citizens derive from the media. This article conducts an exploratory study to investigate the effects of media exposure on perceived political authenticity, building upon first evidence for a positive relationship between exposure to specific media types and perceptions of politicians’ authenticity across national contexts. Scholars found evidence that people judge authenticity through a party lens and perceive politicians as more authentic when they identify with the candidate’s party (Brewer et al., 2014). As previous research provided descriptive insights on the question, we apply a more theory-driven approach, drawing on the literature on media priming theory, performed authenticity in social media, political personalization, and dual processing theory. This study conceptualizes political authenticity as a multidimensional social construct and uses data from an online quota survey of the German adult population (N=1,210) to explore the relationship between political media exposure and perceived political authenticity.

**Perceived Political Authenticity**

Authenticity in politics is conceptualized as a social construct that deals with the degree to which politicians are and remain true to themselves and results from interactions among politicians, the media, and the audience (Luebke, 2021; Parry-Giles, 2001, 2014). Following this notion, perceived political authenticity is a subjective assessment by citizens in which they judge whether they believe politicians are true to themselves (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Citizens base their evaluations of politicians’ authenticity on impressions formed from available information about a politician (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). They are assumed to judge political authenticity based on predispositions, such as knowledge about a politician and political attitudes (Pillow et al., 2018). Moreover, they are expected to evaluate authenticity relying on information from the media, such as politicians’ performed political authenticity (e.g., their self-presentation on social media) and on the news media’s construction of authenticity (e.g., candidate portrayal by journalists; Luebke, 2021; Parry-Giles, 2001).

Luebke (2021) proposed four theoretical dimensions of political authenticity. Three out of these four dimensions, namely ordinariness, consistency, and immediacy, have been identified in survey research as valid empirical facets of perceived political authenticity (Luebke & Engelmann, 2021). According to the immediacy dimension, politicians are authentic when they perform similar actions over time and space and stand by their opinions and narratives (Luebke, 2021). Politicians appear more authentic when they seem to stick to their true convictions regardless of the situation and consequences for their actions. Second, politicians are perceived as authentic when they appear as ordinary and down-to-earth (Enli, 2015). This ordinariness dimension of authenticity comprises impressions that contradict the notion of calculated politicians who do not act based on true convictions but rather on strategic motives (Luebke, 2021). When politicians have minor flaws and show moments of imperfection and weakness, they are expected to appear more authentic. Third, politicians are considered authentic when they appear to reveal their true selves directly to the public. According to the consistency dimension, politicians are authentic when their actions are driven by emotions and personal convictions. Perceived immediacy is stronger when politicians appear spontaneous and seem to say what they think (Luebke, 2021).

**Effects of Political Media Exposure on Perceived Political Authenticity**

As citizens rarely know politicians in person, they are likely to form impressions of authenticity from information in the media (Y. Lee & Min, 2020; Otto & Maier, 2016). This relationship between media exposure and candidate perceptions has often been explained with priming theory (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010; Bittner, 2011; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Y. Lee & Min, 2020). Media priming is the outcome of attribute agenda setting, that is, processes in which the salience of different personality traits of politicians is transferred from the media to the public (Kim et al., 2002). Since citizens evaluate
candidates based on the most salient attributes in their minds (Y. Lee & Min, 2020), they rely more on specific attributes, the more these attributes are emphasized by the media content they were exposed to (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010).

Priming is also understood as a combined effect of message strength and valence. Exposure to news media and social media not only primes specific candidate attributes as relevant factors for candidate evaluation (attribute priming) but also how citizens evaluate relevant traits (affective priming; Sheafer, 2007). The tonality of biased media content, such as candidate posts in social media, campaign news, and partisan media coverage, therefore primes both the relevance and the evaluation of the most salient candidate attributes (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2017; Y. Lee & Min, 2020; Sheafer, 2007). These effects are stronger the more people are exposed to biased information (Eberl et al., 2017). Thus, perceptions of politicians among citizens are shaped by media information on these politicians and their attributes (Bittner, 2011; Bos et al., 2011; Eberl et al., 2017; Y. Lee & Min, 2020; Ottati et al., 2002).

Only a few studies deal with the relationship between media exposure and perceived political authenticity in particular. Preliminary research suggests a positive relationship between perceived political authenticity and exposure to different media types, such as TV news and social media (Brewer et al., 2014; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Manning et al., 2017). Even though these studies generated valuable first evidence in this research field, they hardly provide profound theoretical explanations for the observed relationships. Therefore, we propose and test three theoretical explanations for the relationship between exposure to specific media and perceived political authenticity, drawing on literature on performed political authenticity in social media, personalized news media coverage, and information processing for different modes of communication.

### Social Media and Performed Political Authenticity

Social media platforms are an increasingly relevant way for citizens to read and share political information (Kreiss et al., 2018). Due to the focus on users’ personalities and intrinsic features allowing for direct and spontaneous communication, social media platforms are described as venues where people reveal their true selves (Dumitrica, 2014; E.-J. Lee et al., 2020). Thus, social media platforms can promote “a sense of authenticity” (E.-J. Lee et al., 2020, p. 2) among users and create “an environment where authenticity is simultaneously promised, demanded, and disputed” (Shane, 2018, p. 3). For these reasons, we assume that the more frequent use of social media to get information about politics positively primes authenticity as a relevant trait to judge politicians. Therefore, we pose the following hypothesis:

**H1a.** Higher use of social media for political information is positively related to perceived political authenticity.

However, mere exposure to social media does not simply mean that one is also more frequently exposed to the self-presentation of politicians. Scholars argue that authenticity needs to be performed by politicians to be perceived by the public (Enli, 2016; Fordahl, 2018). Performed political authenticity is another possible source for impressions on politicians’ authenticity. Perceived political authenticity is thus seen as the result of “a successful performance in which politicians play the role of someone real and truthful” (Luebke, 2021, p. 638). Social media is an important means for this purpose because it allows candidates to craft their own narratives and influence how others perceive them (Kreiss et al., 2018; McGregor, 2018). Politicians can use social media to bypass institutional media and to “speak directly to followers in a more personalized way” (Weeks et al., 2019, p. 375). Even if politicians’ accounts are likely to be updated by campaign staff, social media content is expected to enhance authenticity as long as it aligns with candidates’ characters and biographies (Enli, 2017; Kreiss et al., 2018; Macafee et al., 2019). We expect perceived political authenticity to increase when citizens visit candidate and party profiles more frequently.

**H1b.** Higher exposure to political accounts on social media is positively related to perceived political authenticity.

The former hypotheses assume affective priming of perceived political authenticity for different candidates due to social media exposure. The general use of social media for political information also comprises exposure to possible negative information about politicians’ authenticity, such as campaign posts by other politicians, who seek to deconstruct the performed authenticity of their opponents (Parry-Giles, 2001). Assuming that people are then more likely to be exposed to a specific politicians’ positive performances, we assume that perceived political authenticity for a specific politician increases when people follow him or her on social media. We pose the following hypothesis:

**H1c.** Following a specific candidate on social media is positively related to perceived political authenticity for this candidate.

### Personalization in Political Media Reporting

Conceptions of political authenticity as public communication processes ascribe the news media the role of “authenticating agents” (Parry-Giles, 2001, p. 214). The news media contextualizes and evaluates the performed authenticity of politicians for the public (Luebke, 2021). Their political reporting is thus likely to prime candidates and their authenticity as relevant factors for citizens’ evaluations of politicians (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). The increased focus in
media reporting on individual politicians and their political and non-political characteristics is generally referred to as political personalization (Otto & Maier, 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Since perceived political authenticity reflects impressions of consistency, ordinariness, and immediacy of politicians, we assume that a more personalized media coverage provides more relevant information to form these impressions. Thus, we expect that individuals make inferences about politicians’ authenticity from more personalized media coverage, even when these media may not explicitly address authenticity or individual dimensions.

Studies show that the degree of personalization in political media coverage varies between media and their business models. The political news coverage of tabloid media and private media tends to be more personalized than coverage by quality newspapers and public service broadcasters (Hopmann, 2014; Karidi, 2018; Skovsgaard, 2014). Therefore, we expect higher exposure to private TV news and tabloid press to correlate with perceived authenticity. Since there is scarce information about the coverage of political authenticity in the news media, we can only speculate about the direction of the effects. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

**H2.** Exposure to tabloid press and private TV news is related to perceived political authenticity.

### Modes of Communication

Citizens can rely on a variety of political information to form impressions of politicians’ authenticity. This includes rather text-based information in the news media, such as newspaper articles, or visual political information like TV news (Garzia et al., 2020). Even though social media is considered to provide an environment of greater visuality, the different platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, also vary in their degree of visuality (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Instagram is considered to focus more on visual communication, whereas Twitter and Facebook offer a mixture of texts and images (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

Boomgaarden et al. (2016) suggest that people process visual and verbal political information through different cognitive routes, as described in dual processing theory (Chaiken, 1980). The authors assume that text is more likely to be processed systematically and analytically, whereas visual information is more likely to be processed holistically and rapidly (Boomgaarden et al., 2016). They argue, “that the effectiveness of visual versus verbal information differs for different dimensions of candidate assessments” (Boomgaarden et al., 2016, p. 2533). In line with this reasoning, candidate traits are often classified as either political (e.g., competence) or non-political (e.g., integrity; Bittner, 2011). Evaluations of political traits are more likely based on rational information from text-based media (e.g., candidate statements), whereas perceptions of non-political traits are rather formed from affective information in visual media (e.g., candidate appearance; Boomgaarden et al., 2016; Eberl et al., 2017).

Since the notion of political authenticity in this article combines political and non-political impressions of politicians, we argue that it cannot simply be assigned to one of the two trait categories. Instead, we assume that the three dimensions of political authenticity either describe political or non-political candidate perceptions. The consistency dimension defines politicians as being true to themselves when they present coherent opinions and positions across time and situations. We argue that this dimension is rather political and that citizens need more factual and rational information about politicians’ current and past performance to evaluate consistency. Following the considerations made earlier, we expect this information to be more prevalent in text media and thus more likely to be primed among citizens who have a higher proportion of text-based information in their media diets:

**H3.** A higher proportion of text-based information in news exposure (**H3a**) and social media exposure (**H3b**) is related to perceptions of politicians’ consistency.

Compared to the consistency dimension, we consider ordinariness and immediacy to describe rather non-political impressions linked to affective candidate perceptions. Perceiving politicians as ordinary and thus more authentic implies that politicians appear like normal and down-to-earth people. Similarly, perceptions of politicians as immediate refer to impressions about politicians being open to others and acting emotionally. Although impressions for both dimensions may be derived from observations of candidates’ daily work as professional politicians, they represent inferences about politicians’ characters rather than their professional work. As these perceptions are more likely to be formed from visual information, we expect these dimensions to be primed among citizens who have a higher proportion of visual information in their media diets:

**H4.** A higher proportion of visual information in news exposure (**H4a**) and social media exposure (**H4b**) is related to perceptions of politicians’ ordinariness and immediacy.

### The Mediating Roles of Party Identification and Selective Media Exposure

Citizens evaluate authenticity through a party lens and perceive candidates as more authentic when they have a higher identification with the candidates’ parties (Brewer et al., 2014; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Pillow et al., 2018; Stiers et al., 2021). This can be explained by cognitive consistency.
theory (Feldman & Conover, 1983), which argues that citizens perceive politicians in ways that support their own political beliefs to avoid cognitive dissonance. Consequently, they process information in biased ways by ignoring or devaluing contrary information (Taber et al., 2011). This motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) suggests that “voters will use a variety of mechanisms to weight or distort new information to maintain their preexisting evaluations of candidates” (Pillow et al., 2018, p. 850). We derive from this that citizens’ party identification should influence their processing of information about politicians’ authenticity and moderate the assumed relationships between political media exposure and perceived political authenticity:

**H5.** The assumed relationships between media exposure and perceived political authenticity are moderated by party identification.

Political attitudes not only shape the perception of candidates through the processing of information but also through the selection of media for political information (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). People are neither able nor motivated to attend and process all available media information (Ottati et al., 2002), so they tend to select political information consistent with their political beliefs (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). This selective exposure in media use (Stroud, 2017) aims to reduce cognitive dissonance and leads people to expose themselves to political information that confirms their existing attitudes and evaluations of candidates (Bachl, 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). People are thus expected to select media information that reinforces their existing authenticity perceptions. Moreover, it has been shown that people differ in their tendency to select ideologically consistent information (Tsafiti, 2016). Accordingly, we assume that the relationship between media exposure and perceived political authenticity is likely to be influenced by citizens’ tendency to select ideologically congruent information:

**H6.** The assumed relationships between media exposure and perceived political authenticity are moderated by the tendency to select ideologically congruent political information.

### Method

#### Sample and Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online quota survey in Germany. Survey participants were recruited through an online access panel by the professional survey company respondi AG and received a financial incentive. We applied a quota procedure for age, gender, and education, reflecting the German population above 18 years (Online Appendix 2).

An a priori power analysis for linear multiple regression with G*Power 3 (Faul et al., 2007) was conducted to determine the target sample size. Based on pilot test results, we assumed small effects ($f = 0.01$). The analysis suggested that we needed about 1,160 respondents to detect the smallest main effect of interest with 80% statistical power and an alpha error probability of .05. Thus, we aimed for a sample size of 1,500 respondents. After data preparation (Online Appendix 1), we attained a final sample of 1,210 respondents (age: $M = 47.1$, $SD = 15.8$, range $= 18–74$; 51.0% female).

We randomized whether respondents rated the authenticity of Olaf Scholz, a center-left politician from the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, or Armin Laschet, a center-right politician from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany. Both candidates were nominated to run for the office of chancellor in the German federal election in autumn 2021 and were among the three most promising candidates for the election. As we were interested in possible media effects, we decided to focus on the two male candidates in the survey to avoid possible gender influences. Both politicians were known by a majority of our respondents (Online Appendix 3), had profiles on the same social media platforms, and posted regularly on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Online Appendix 4).

### Measures

The wording of all items used in the survey is reported in the Supplemental material (Online Appendix 5). The perceived political authenticity of the candidates was assessed using a three-dimensional 12-item scale based on previous work by Luebke and Engelmann (2021), which included four items for each of the three dimensions. For the analyses, we calculated mean indices for the full 12-item scale and each of the three dimensions (Online Appendix 6).

The list-frequency technique was applied to measure political media exposure (Andersen et al., 2016). We asked respondents how often they used different media for political information during the past week (0–7 days). Specifically, they reported the frequency of exposure to social media sites, tabloid press, quality newspapers, private TV news, and public service TV news. We also asked respondents whether they visited social media profiles of candidates and political parties (political accounts) and profiles of TV channels, newspapers, and news sites. Finally, all respondents were asked whether they actively followed the evaluated politicians on any social media platform.

To examine the proportion of textual and visual information in political media exposure, we applied a strategy by Garzia et al. (2020) to compute the composition of journalistic media and social media diets separately. Assuming that visual media effects are compensated by equally frequent use of text-based information (and vice versa), we calculated the difference between the average amount of TV news exposure minus the amount of newspaper and news website exposure...
for each participant (Garzia et al., 2020; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2011). Similarly, a difference score for social media diet was computed based on the difference between visual social media use (Instagram) and textual social media exposure (Twitter and Facebook). Parameters for both difference scores are reported in Online Appendix 6.

Party identification was operationalized by asking respondents how strongly they identify with Germany’s different political parties (Halmburger et al., 2019). We provided one item for each of the six German parties which were in the German parliament at the time of the study and used identification with SPD (Scholz) and CDU (Laschet) in the models.

We relied on a scale developed by Tsfati (2016) to examine respondents’ tendency to select ideologically congruent information. Instead of providing respondents with a list of different media outlets, we investigated selective exposure with the tendency toward congruent selective exposure (TECSE) scale, which allowed us to measure respondents’ motivation to select ideologically congruent information and to avoid incongruent information. We choose this approach because the German media shows comparatively low levels of media-party parallelism (Bachl, 2017), which complicates the assignments of political leanings to individual outlets. However, the scale has only low reliability in our sample (Online Appendix 6), indicating that the items, which we translated from English, were not highly correlated in the German sample.

Results

We calculated a set of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions in which we regressed mean indices for perceived authenticity (Online Appendix 8) and its subdimensions (Online Appendices 9–11) on the media exposure variables. Moderating effects of party identification and the TECSE on the effects of media exposure were tested by entering interaction terms into the models. Age, sex, party identification, TECSE of respondents, and a dummy variable for the candidate were included as control variables in each model.

The first hypothesis proposed a positive correlation between the use of social media for political information and perceived political authenticity. Model 2 shows no significant effect of higher social media exposure on perceived authenticity ($\beta = -0.04, p = .155$). This result does not lend support to H1a. However, Model 2 identified exposure to political accounts on social media ($\beta = 0.08, p = .008$) and following a specific candidate on social network sites ($\beta = 0.07, p = .012$) as significant predictors of perceived political authenticity. Respondents who read posts from social media accounts of individual politicians and political parties more frequently perceived politicians to be more authentic. Perceived authenticity for a specific candidate also increases when respondents follow this politician on social media. H1b and H1c can be confirmed.

The second hypothesis assumes that exposure to more personalized media coverage primes authenticity as a relevant trait to judge politicians. Higher exposure to private TV news positively influences perceived political authenticity (Model 2, $\beta = 0.05, p = .042$), whereas the frequency of tabloid press use does not have a significant impact on authenticity perceptions (Model 2, $\beta = -0.04, p = .143$). H2 is therefore partially supported.

The third and fourth hypotheses assumed influences of different modes of communication on subdimensions of authenticity. Specifically, we assumed that a higher proportion of text-based information in journalistic and social media exposure primes consistency, whereas a higher proportion of visual political information was expected to correlate with ordinariness and immediacy. Model 6 shows no significant effects for more textual media diets on perceived consistency, neither for journalistic media ($\beta = 0.04, p = .143$) nor for social media ($\beta = 0.04, p = .146$). Thus H3a and H3b are rejected. For the influence of higher relative exposure to visual journalistic information, the analyses show a close to significant influence on ordinariness (Model 10, $\beta = 0.05, p = .051$) and no effect on immediacy (Model 14, $\beta = 0.04, p = .138$). Citizens with a higher proportion of visual journalistic media exposure seem to perceive candidates to be more down-to-earth than those with a balanced or rather text-based media diet. No significant effects on either of the subdimensions were found for the social media diet predictor. Thus, we find some support for H4a, whereas H4b is rejected.

The fifth hypothesis postulated that party identification moderates the relationship between media exposure and perceived political authenticity. Specifically, we assumed a positive affective media priming of authenticity when citizens identify with the party of the politician being judged. Party identification was indeed identified as the strongest predictor for perceived authenticity (Model 1, $\beta = 0.46, p < .001$), confirming that citizens perceive candidates to be more authentic the more they identify with the candidates’ parties. Overall, two significant interaction effects for party identification were found. Model 3 shows that the effect of exposure to political social media accounts on authenticity increases when respondents have a higher party identification ($\beta = 0.06, p = .038$). Party identification also moderates the effect of newspaper exposure on authenticity ($\beta = 0.06, p = .019$). While higher newspaper exposure does not have a significant main effect on authenticity, the significant interaction effect shows that the influence of newspaper exposure is conditioned by higher party identification. H5 is partially supported.

In H6, we assumed the effects of media exposure on perceived political authenticity to be stronger when citizens have a higher tendency to select ideologically congruent political information (TECSE). This was based on the assumption that selecting attitude consistent information would reinforce existing authenticity perceptions. As shown in Model 1, the TECSE predictor has a significant positive influence on perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.12, p < .001$). The
more citizens tend to select ideologically congruent political information, the more they perceive candidates to be authentic. However, only the interaction between tabloid press and TECSE was significant (Model 4, $\beta = .07, p = .015$). Higher exposure to political information in tabloid media increases perceived political authenticity when people have a higher tendency to selective exposure. Thus, we only find weak support for H6.

**Discussion**

Perceived political authenticity was identified as an important factor in candidate evaluations and voting decisions. However, this article took a step back and shed light on how these perceptions of politicians as authentic are formed in the first place. Specifically, we applied a multidimensional scale to measure perceived political authenticity and explored its relationship with political media exposure. As citizens usually do not know politicians personally, we expected perceptions of politicians as true to themselves to be shaped by the media. In line with the notion that political authenticity is a construct from interactions among politicians, the media, and the audience, we considered performed authenticity in social media and mediated authenticity in the news media as possible sources for media effects on perceived political authenticity. Our study finds support for this assumption and suggests a positive relationship between higher exposure to specific journalistic media and the perception of politicians as authentic. We also provide evidence for the common claim that exposure to politicians’ social media performances leads citizens to perceive them as more authentic. All observed media effects are small effects, suggesting that political media exposure is only one among several factors explaining authenticity perceptions.

An important finding of this study is that exposure to performed political authenticity on social media is positively related to perceived authenticity. While mere social media exposure does not have a significant impact, higher exposure to political accounts on social media increases perceived political authenticity. Although exposure to these accounts implies seeing conflicting information from political opponents or competing parties (Luebke, 2021), our analysis suggests positive affective priming of political authenticity in the sample. This may be because citizens are more likely to seek information on social media that they agree with (Newman et al., 2017). Algorithmic curation, which aims for personalized information that fits users’ preferences (Berman & Katona, 2020), may further explain the positive effect. Moreover, following specific politicians on social media and thus being exposed to these candidates’ performed authenticity has the expected positive influence on perceived authenticity for these politicians. Similar to previous findings from qualitative research (Manning et al., 2017), our results emphasize the potential of social media as means for politicians to present themselves as authentic candidates.

Along with the impact of more frequent use of political accounts on social media, we found higher exposure to more personalized journalistic media to influence authenticity perceptions. Citizens perceive politicians to be more authentic the more they use private TV news for political information. Even without knowing how different private TV news portrays the authenticity of the two candidates, the assumed stronger focus on individual candidates and their personal qualities positively affects perceived authenticity. This effect is found for private TV news but not for exposure to tabloid media, whose reporting also tends to be more personalized (Skovsgaard, 2014). A possible explanation is that TV reporting is generally more personalized than newspaper coverage (Garzia et al., 2020) and thus provides more relevant information to prime authenticity. Audiovisual content may have a stronger influence on candidate perceptions than written content because it shows actual actions, statements, and facial expressions of politicians and therefore provides more relevant cues to judge their authenticity (Enhl & Rosenberg, 2018; Starke et al., 2020). Seeing that the influence of exposure to public TV news was close to significant (Model 2, $\beta = .05, p = .072$) provides support for this assumption and underlines the decisive role television plays in the construction of political authenticity (Brewer et al., 2014).

The mode of communication was also expected to explain the relationship between political media exposure and authenticity perceptions. Specifically, we assumed more text-based media diets to influence consistency perceptions and more visual media diets to correlate with perceived ordinariness and immediacy. With one exception, this reasoning does not hold true in our sample because the mode of communication, as we measured it, had no significant influence on the individual authenticity dimensions in most cases. We consider different reasons for this. One explanation could be the broad classification of different media as either text-based or visual media. This dichotomy of media types and platforms may neither fully reflect the information provided by the different media nor the way citizens use that information. We classified newspapers and the platforms Twitter and Facebook as more text-based. Since this media provides not only rational text-based but also visual and affective information on candidate appearances and non-political traits of politicians, citizens may have relied more on this type of information to form impressions on candidates from these media. The same may apply vice versa for TV news and Instagram content, which we classified as rather visual media, but may still provide relevant information on the more political dimension of consistency. Consequently, the underlying cognitive mechanisms, which we assumed to cause different influences from media exposure on authenticity dimensions, may not have been in place. Another similar explanation may be the classification of single authenticity dimensions as either political or non-political. We considered perceived consistency to constitute more political perceptions and ordinariness and immediacy to be rather
non-political trait impressions. While we derived this classification from theoretical considerations on the concept, it is unclear whether it applies to citizens’ actual perceptions.

Finally, we expected the effects of media exposure on perceived authenticity to be conditioned by party identification and the tendency to select ideologically congruent information. We found highly significant main effects on perceived authenticity for both constructs, whereas their expected moderating effects were supported only in some cases. We hypothesized that higher party identification would lead to stronger motivated processing of information in favor of the perceived authenticity for the politicians. This assumption is confirmed for exposure to newspapers as well as political accounts in social media. Similarly, we expected a higher TECSE to induce a stronger motivated selection of information, resulting in stronger media effects. This moderation was shown for tabloid press exposure. The fact that we find moderation effects for some but not all media exposure variables may be related to characteristics of the media reporting about which we can only speculate. First, it may depend on whether the different media provide sufficient relevant information for citizens to assess the authenticity of the candidates. Thus, only some media may provide enough information on the candidates that could be motivationally selected or processed by citizens to influence perceived authenticity. Second, even if the media provided sufficient information on candidates and their authenticity, it is very likely that different outlets of the same media type differ in their tonality of reporting. Consequently, citizens may be exposed to positive and negative information about candidates depending on the specific outlets they use.

**Limitations and Conclusion**

This study comes with some limitations that need to be mentioned and should be addressed in future research. First, we postulated media effects based on considerations on general media features (visual or text-based) and the general style of political reporting (degree of personalization). Both classifications were applied due to the lack of research on the relationships of interest. We derived general assumptions about the amount and type of information provided by different media types to test their relationship with perceived political authenticity. However, due to this exploratory and broad approach, we lack considerations on the tonality of reporting at the level of individual media outlets. As a result, it is and remains unclear how different outlets portray and evaluate the authenticity of different politicians. As priming is considered a combined effect of message strength and valence, future analyses should integrate results on the tonality of reporting. Systematic content analyses examining the mediated political authenticity by different news media and the performed political authenticity on candidates’ social media profiles would provide valuable insights for this purpose. Still, the positive correlations between exposure to different media and perceived authenticity in our study indicate that respondents are more likely to derive positive impressions of politicians’ authenticity from social media and news media. Experimental studies which vary the media type and valence of messages to test their impact on perceived authenticity could also complement our research.

Second, our findings are based on an online quota survey of the German adult population and are thus limited to this population. Still, our results point in a similar direction as findings from previous research on authenticity perceptions from different national contexts (Brewer et al., 2014), suggesting that these effects may apply across national samples. Future research should test the specific relationships between political media exposure and authenticity in other national samples to examine whether these findings are robust across samples and media or political systems.

Third, due to the national scope of this study, we measured perceived authenticity for two German candidates who both ran for the office of chancellor in the 2021 German federal election. Thus, the relationships were only examined for two specific and well-known male candidates from center-left and center-right parties in Germany. Given prior observations on gender differences and party differences in perceived political authenticity (Hahl et al., 2018), research should test whether these associations change for perceptions of candidates from other parties (e.g., from populist parties) and candidates of different gender.

Finally, we relied on cross-sectional data, which does not allow us to make causal claims for the observed relationships. Some of the observed effects in the study may thus not be fully exogenous. The relationship between perceived authenticity and following a candidate, for example, can also be considered reciprocal. Perceiving a politician to be more authentic may not only be the outcome of following this politician on social media but can also be a reason to follow him or her in the first place. Longitudinal and experimental research would allow scholars to examine directions for these relationships in more depth.

Despite these limitations, our study contributes to the academic and public discourse on authenticity in politics and advances our understanding of perceived political authenticity and its antecedents. This study shows that perceiving politicians as true to themselves is not only the outcome of existing political attitudes but also depends on impressions that citizens have formed from available information about the politicians in different media. We proposed and tested theoretical explanations for the specific relationships between authenticity and media exposure, showing that exposure to performed political authenticity in social media and the degree of personalization of political reporting can explain differences in authenticity perceptions. These findings also have implications for the practice of political communication, particularly of election campaigns. When politicians seek to appear more authentic, they should be more likely to succeed if they are present on TV news and
social media. Since following a politician on social media is associated with higher perceived authenticity, candidates should seek to capitalize on the potential of social media to construct authentic candidate images. However, to address individual dimensions of the construct, candidates need to engage with different media. Being visible on television can therefore contribute to ordinary and down-to-earth images, making candidates appear more authentic and may give them an edge in election campaigns. Hence, especially populist candidates could benefit from increased TV coverage, as the conveyed down-to-earth image fits well with their aspired role as political outsiders.

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