

# When the private becomes political: How lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations of political candidates

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## Abstract

Politicians often display what they like to do in their spare time. What type of books they like to read, what type of food they like to eat, and appraisals when their favorite sports team wins. These types of lifestyle-based messages are often argued to be a part of a broader personalization and privatization of politics, where voters follow and identify with political leaders rather than traditional ideological or social affiliations. However, in my PhD project, I argue that privatized lifestyle-based messages can trigger voters' social affiliations and judgments.

Introducing the concept of lifestyle cues I develop a theoretical framework arguing how lifestyle-based communication affects voters' support for candidates in two ways. First lifestyle cues might activate perceptions of warmth and competence. Second, following the sociology of Bourdieu, lifestyle cues might also signal social class affiliation to voters. Finally, I present 3 different models for how the causal relationship between lifestyle cues, voting behavior, and potential mediators, plays out. Methodologically I aim at a crowd-sourced measurement of lifestyle cues, based on actual social media posts by Danish MPs, to get a representative distribution of cues later to be applied for survey experiments. For the presentation I describe the procedures for the first crowd-sourced survey of lifestyle cues, and the next step in the process.

## 1. Introduction

In January 2021, the Social Democratic Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen posted a picture on Facebook that showed her eating a piece of bread with mackerel and mayonnaise. The post sparked some debate in Danish Media since it followed a pattern of presenting herself in everyday settings. Often, she would present herself as cooking for her family, going to football games, or watching popular television programs. However, after the Social Democrats lost large vote shares in the bigger cities in the 2021 local election, political commentators started to notice a shift in the popular image of Frederiksen. Suddenly she would start to show herself going to the theatre, showing off books in the background, and abstract paintings instead of traditional social realism. This was perceived as a clear

attempt to realign the group of higher-educated voters in the bigger cities and create a more appealing image for this group.

The example illustrates how politicians, use displays of their everyday practices and lifestyle choices in their communication. Furthermore, it indicates that leaders *think* these everyday practices, such as what they eat or leisure activities, affect voters' perception of them. The case is far from unique in the modern day, where politicians across countries, display their private side to voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Pedersen & Rahat, 2019). The rise of social media is often argued to be a catalyst of this development, given that it provides increased opportunities to directly address voters (Chadwick et al., 2016; Enli, 2013).

Even though these private messages displaying politicians' lifestyles, are assumed by political commentators to be an effective way of displaying authenticity, few have studied how voters perceive these lifestyle messages. One central aspect of privatized communication is for politicians to present what kind of person politicians are, by displaying their lifestyle to voters. What kind of music they like, what type of food they eat, and what kind of spare time activities they like to do, are often displayed to voters. Nevertheless, we don't know how lifestyle appeals affect what voters think of political candidates and how they evaluate them. Previous studies from the literature on privatization, have shown that politicians who display privatized information or a persona to voters, might be evaluated more positively and convey feelings of closeness and intimacy (Lee & Oh, 2012; Lee et al., 2018; McGregor, 2017). However, these studies do not tell us what exact features in privatized communication explain the effects, what type of inferences voters might draw, and which type of voters we should expect to be mobilized by privatized communication. To understand the impact of lifestyle appeals on voters' evaluations, we therefore need to bring in the literature on social class and lifestyle. Studies, mainly inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, have shown how individuals' lifestyles and categorization of lifestyles, are heavily influenced by their social class positions and perceptions of status hierarchies (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Jaeger et al., 2023; Jarness & Friedman, 2017; Kraus et al., 2011; Kraus et al., 2017). While we know that people use the lifestyle of others to infer their class position, we don't know whether citizens also would infer which social groups politicians will fight for, based on the lifestyle they present.

Second, there is a gap in the literature, relating to *which voters* are swayed by these types of private cues. Previous studies have mainly looked at the general effect across voters, assuming that voters receive privatized cues similarly. However, lifestyle cues might be interpreted very differently across groups of voters. Furthermore, this also highlights a lack of knowledge of the central mechanism driving the effects of privatized communication. Following Bourdieu and others, lifestyle is both a result of, but also perceived as a strong signal of social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Flemmen et al., 2018; Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Thus, it might be a good case to test how privatized cues by politicians also can trigger group-based identities and biases. The project will therefore also have a strong focus on the mechanisms

driving the impact of lifestyle cues, and which voters are moved by them.

Summing up, this project will therefore investigate whether and (if so) how lifestyle cues influence support for and evaluations of political candidates.

This project and research agenda are relevant for multiple reasons. It will provide insights into the effects of politicians' use of private messages - a widespread phenomenon in modern political communication. This is highly relevant in modern politics where social media offer politicians personalized platforms, to speak directly to voters. By answering questions about which voters are mobilized by lifestyle cues, the project will provide valuable insights into the interplay between political elites and voters. Can politicians use lifestyle-based messages to align with specific social groups in the electorate, and does it turn off other groups? Can displays of a particular lifestyle, increase how warm and competent voters perceive politicians? Or might the display of lifestyle cues also have adverse effects in terms of loss of credibility for politicians? All these are questions I will seek to address in my project. The project contributes to our understanding of the role of politicians' everyday communication with voters, and whether lifestyle-based communication can help foster a stronger feeling of attachment among voters. Or whether voters perceive it as intended manipulation, which might leads to increased feelings of political dissatisfaction.

## 2.1 Definition of lifestyle cue?

Even though it has been the subject of much analysis in academic research, the concept of lifestyle often is loosely defined across disciplines. In marketing and economics, lifestyle is often defined in terms of consumption patterns (Belk, 1988; Deaton, 1999). In sociology and anthropology, lifestyle is often defined as a pattern of behavior that reflects an individual's values, attitudes, and social position (Bourdieu, 1984; Faber, 2012). However, others also include measures of social and political values, opinions, and attitudes (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2010). Lifestyle therefore often is conflated with similar concepts such as habits, tastes, and cultural preferences.

In the project I follow the sociological tradition, of viewing lifestyle as patterns of behavior, and likewise as reflections and expressions of people's social position (Bourdieu, 1984). This definition highlights that a lifestyle is an observable pattern that expresses some underlying meaning for individuals (Cavazza & Corbetta, 2016). Lifestyle in this sense is how we *perform and express* our underlying tastes, habits, and social position – via our material possessions, leisure activities, and consumption. By focusing on lifestyle as observable behavior, I try to clearly distinguish it from concepts such as cultural preferences and values. A key goal of my project is to study the effects of communicating private lifestyles. Consequently, it is conceptually imperative to distinguish it from personalized appraisals of values, interests, and actions.

How does lifestyle then relate to political communication? One can object that the main part of a politician's life is expressing their underlying preferences. However, expressing preferences often happens in a setting where politicians are performing their public role. Contrary to that, public displays of a politician's lifestyle are inherently different, given that they show information about the politician as a *private person*.

Following this I define lifestyle cues as *messages by politicians (to voters) displaying manifestations of their consumption patterns, material possessions, and leisure activities*. Lifestyle cues are often posts on social media about politicians' leisure activities, hobbies, and cultural tastes. This definition states that lifestyle is not explicitly political in their wording, but instead focuses on the politician as a private person. Any mention of policy or ideological positioning is therefore not compatible with this definition. Likewise, it states that it is not any kind of privatized message, but messages which specifically inform about the lifestyle of politicians. In this sense, posts about the weather, displays of private emotions, or descriptions of their day, are not to be regarded as lifestyle cues in themselves, even though they are private.

The next section how the concept of lifestyle cues relates to the broader literature on the personalization of politics and political communication. Then I unfold the theoretical framework of the project.

## 2.2 Privatization of Politics

A well-established literature has focused on the growing personalization of politics. (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019; Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2011; Van Santen, 2010). Personalization can be defined as a process in which the political weight of individual actors in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (typically parties) declines (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). However, personalization also entails several different subdimensions (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019; Van Aelst et al., 2011). A main distinction in the literature is between *individualization*, meaning the shift of focus from parties to individual politicians and party leaders, and *privatization*, meaning a shift in focus from politicians as public figures to politicians as private persons (Van Aelst et al., 2011). Whereas the former relates to an increased shift in politics from parties and collective entities to individual politicians, the latter relates to a shift in political communication from merely professional and public communication to more private and personal content. Given the abovementioned definition of lifestyle cues, the project mainly refers to the concept of private self-personalization or privatization in general, given that it focuses on communication priming politicians' private character.

Previous research indicates that a substantial part of politicians' online political communication on social media such as Facebook is privatized (Bayer, 2022; Helboe Pedersen, 2022; Lee et al., 2018; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013; Metz et al., 2019; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Hermans & Vergeer (2013) found in a cross-national study that politicians display private information about their family or private preferences in around 40 percent of social media posts, whereas Metz et al. (2019), found German politicians displayed private self-personalization in around 17 % of their Facebook posts. However the prevalence varies across countries, social media platforms, and how privatization is measured (Helboe Pedersen, 2022; Metz et al., 2019). Even though communicating policy agendas and positions is still dominating, displaying a private persona is an important and prevalent part of modern political communication (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019).

My project contributes to the privatization literature, by looking at whether and how privatized communication affects voting behavior. One question is the prevalence of privatized messages in politicians' communication; however, another crucial question is how voters are affected by this type of information. Previous studies have looked at whether displaying personal information increases perceived levels of authenticity, warmth, likeability, and feelings of parasocial relations of candidates (Bene, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016; Metz et al., 2019; Tsfati et al., 2021). However other studies do not find consistent effects on voter evaluations, and generally the evidence is mixed (Lee & Oh, 2012; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016).

My project differs from and contributes to the privatization literature in multiple ways. First, compared to previous studies, I study a more clearly defined concept and subcomponent of privatization that has

relied on diverse forms of manipulating and operationalizing privatized messages. Different approaches have been emphasizing personal opinions vis-à-vis the party (Metz et al., 2019), priming private emotions and experiences (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012) displays of personal hobbies or family members (Bene, 2016), but more often via bundled treatments with different elements of self-personalization (Lee et al., 2018; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016). These different approaches might explain the variation in findings and create noise in the underlying concept being studied.

I aim to do this by studying the effects using a different experimental approach. I want to contribute to the literature by providing an empirically comprehensive measurement of lifestyle cues, also adding to sociological studies of the link between lifestyle and social status. I aim to develop survey experiments more properly getting at the causal effect of lifestyle cues in the real world, by taking account of the actual variation in how it is communicated by politicians. Second, I investigate the potential heterogeneous effects and mediators of privatized cues, a question largely unexplored in the literature. This is puzzling given the question of which types of voters politicians impact via their communication is very important in real-world politics. I contribute by looking at both which *type of lifestyle cues* are most effective on candidate evaluations, and likewise which *type of voters* are most affected by lifestyle cues. In doing so I also bring social class and the literature on class appeals into the study of the effects of privatized cues and evaluation of political candidates, by studying whether some lifestyle cues are better at targeting certain classes. This contrasts previous studies of self-personalization, that have viewed privatized messages as priming personality-focused evaluations of candidates (McGregor, 2017). Instead, I argue, privatized messages, like lifestyle cues, also prime evaluations based on group identification and social status.

### **2.3 Outcomes of Interest**

In the project, I am primarily interested in estimating the effect of lifestyle cues on voters' evaluation and probability of voting for a political candidate. Do displays of lifestyles make voters more or less likely to vote for a candidate? Therefore, the primary outcome variable in the project will be vote intention, measured as an individual's probability of voting for a candidate. Even in For a Danish context, where parties are often deemed as very strong, 50 % of the votes are still cast for individual candidates at Parliament Elections<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, there are strong reasons to study how individualized communication by candidates can foster changes among voters.

Further, the project will also study the impact of other aspects of candidate evaluations other than intended vote-choice. Following the theoretical framework outlined below, I look at the perceived warmth, competence, and social class affiliation of the candidate. Given that I argue an important

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/bagtal/2019/2019-06-04-Personlige-stemmer-til-folketingsvalg>

contribution of the project is to unpack the mechanisms driving the impact of lifestyle cues, studying these broader aspects of candidate evaluation is not only important to understand the effect on vote intention, but also in itself.

## Theory

In this section, I outline the theoretical framework and expectations for the project. First, I frame lifestyle cues in the broader literature of voter heuristics, and how I see lifestyle cues as a heuristic voters can rely on when they form evaluations of politicians. Then I describe three theoretical models of how I expect this can play out, based on three different theoretical mechanisms.

### 3.1 Lifestyle as a heuristic in candidate evaluations

Given that politics is complex, and keeping up with what is going on is a cognitively demanding task, people often rely on cognitive shortcuts – heuristics – to form opinions on political issues (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Mondak, 1993; Popkin, 1991). One of the heuristics highlighted in the literature is the likeability heuristic – that is voters base their evaluations of a policy on its consequences towards other groups (Brady & Sniderman, 1985). However, citizens also use other heuristics, such as what they think of the characteristics of party leaders (Bittner, 2011), and the background characteristics of candidates (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Carnes & Sadin, 2015; Heath, 2015). This points to the fact that political elites have a major impact on what information is salient to voters, and what heuristics they rely on by providing specific cues in their communication.

I argue messages about politicians' lifestyle, works exactly in this manner, by providing voters with a specific cue from which they infer additional information. I argue voters' evaluations of candidates will be based on these inferences. In the following, I first lay out the two main components of a lifestyle heuristic: 1) the personal traits of the politician; and 2) social class affiliation. Next, I present three different theoretical models, on how lifestyle cues affect how voters evaluate candidates. Likewise, they also have differing implications for what type of lifestyle cues can be expected to influence candidate evaluations, and which voters are expected to be mobilized.

### 3.2 Stereotype content and class signals

As outlined, I expect lifestyle cues to trigger two types of considerations in voters' minds. First, I suspect that lifestyle cues will activate perceptions of the personal character of the candidate. Building on the stereotype content model (SCM) I theorize they trigger evaluations of *warmth* and *competence* (Cuddy et al., 2009; Cuddy et al., 2008). Warmth relates to perceptions about whether others have good and other-regarding intentions towards us (ibid.). That is whether we think others are caring, kind, approachable, etc. (Ibid.). Competence relates to perceptions of how capable others are to carry out their intentions (Durante et al., 2017). That is perceptions of others' abilities, smartness, intelligence, success,

and work ethic (Cuddy et al., 2009). According to SCM citizens form quick, stereotypical evaluations of others on these two dimensions when interacting. Findings from consumer- and social psychology point to how these stereotypical evaluations of others are triggered by information about others' lifestyle choices, like material possessions (Andrew, 2000; Burroughs et al., 1991; Cherulnik & Bayless, 1986; Dittmar & Pepper, 1994).

Second, I argue lifestyle signals social status, to understand how it might influence voters' evaluation of candidates. Building on the tradition of Bourdieu, lifestyle signals are closely tied to social class, why class affiliation is central to take account of, in my project (Bourdieu, 1984; Flemmen et al., 2018; Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Jaeger et al., 2023; Lamont, 2000). According to Bourdieu, people's position in the social hierarchy is determined by their possession of mainly economic and cultural capital, which determines their everyday habits (Bourdieu, 1984; Faber, 2012; Flemmen et al., 2018). A consequence of this is the establishment of a lifestyle hierarchy, along class lines (Bourdieu, 1984). According to Bourdieu, this manifests itself, broadly speaking, in the higher classes consuming fine arts and chasing unique, sophisticated lifestyles, and the lower classes prefer popular culture, ordinary, and less-refined lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984).

However, for lifestyle cues to be a signal of social class, a status hierarchy of cultural lifestyles also needs to exist on the subjective level. Several studies show how lifestyle is a strong marker of social class, and that people perceive a hierarchy of different lifestyles based on social class: Kraus et al. find people accurately infer the social status of others from their cultural practices (Becker et al., 2017; Kraus et al., 2011; Kraus et al., 2017); In a study of class consciousness among Danes, Stubager (2017) finds that a substantial share perceives class differences in the way people talk, dress and their manners; Faber et al. shows how people perceive linkages between lifestyle choice and social classes (2012). Finally, a recent study in Denmark, shows that people perceive a clear hierarchy of cultural activities and that these perceptions are similar across high, middle, and lower-class citizens (Jaeger et al., 2023). This suggests a hierarchy of lifestyle relating to social class positions is highly prevalent among citizens.

The next section proposes three different ways of theorizing how lifestyle cues trigger perceptions of stereotype content and social class, how it impacts the evaluation of candidates and vote intention, and which voters are affected by which cues. First, the *general appeal model* suggests any lifestyle cue positively impacts voters' evaluations of candidates. Second, the *median appeal model* suggests lifestyle cues associated with the median lifestyle have a positive effect on evaluations. Finally, the *targeted appeal model* proposes that the effect of lifestyle cues is conditioned on the class position of voters themselves.



### 3.3 General appeal model

According to the *general appeal model*, all types of lifestyle cues can be expected to have a positive effect on candidate evaluations, and they can also be expected to be effective across all voters. Central to this argument is an expectation that lifestyle cues in the eyes of voters, primarily is a signal of candidates' warmth.

Studies suggest how displaying personal and private content on social media can influence feelings of authenticity, closeness, and warmth. (Bene, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016; Metz et al., 2019; Tsfati et al., 2021). Metz (2019) for instance finds that private content, including displays of the private lifestyle of politicians, yields positive effects on audience engagement on Facebook. When politicians step out of their public role, and show us their private sides we might perceive them as more authentic (Metz et al., 2019). Appearing authentic and down-to-earth is also shown to be an important trait for politicians to have, in the eyes of the voters (Clarke et al., 2018; Valgarðsson et al., 2020). Others find that disclosing private information increases feelings of closeness and warmth among voters (Lee & Oh, 2012; Tsfati et al., 2021).

Providing lifestyle cues might also yield a stronger parasocial relationship between politicians and voters (Horton, 1956). The concept has also been applied to studies of voters and found that applying information about private life increases emotional identification with politicians (Meyrowitz, 1986; Tsfati et al., 2021).

This suggests how displays of private lifestyle have a positive impact on candidate evaluations, primarily via increasing feelings of warmth. Likewise, one should expect a more general effect across voters, indicating a general tendency to prefer politicians who display their private lifestyle, whatever it might be. Therefore, the following hypothesis:

H1a: Lifestyle cues have a positive effect on voters' perceived warmth of political candidates.

H1b: Lifestyle cues have a positive effect on voters' probability of voting for political candidates.

### 3.4 Median appeal model

Whereas the first model predicts lifestyle cues generally have positive effects, the *median appeal model* predicts the effects of lifestyle cues, depend on the content of the cue. More specifically which *class affiliation* the lifestyle being displayed cues.

Particularly, the median appeal model suggests voters will prefer politicians displaying a lifestyle representative of median citizens. Likewise, it suggests voters will punish candidates displaying either an elitist or low-status lifestyle. However, exactly what constitutes a median lifestyle is an empirical

question, and hard to define in purely theoretical terms. Whereas upper or lower-status lifestyles are more clearly theoretically and empirically defined, what exactly is the median lifestyle is not clear, and might be highly context-specific.

Why should voters across the board prefer displaying lifestyles aimed at the median? According to the SCM people generally hold ambivalent attitudes towards high- and lower-status individuals (Durante et al., 2017; Fiske, 2019). Whereas high-status people are categorized as cold, but competent, lower-status people are categorized as being warm, but incompetent (Durante et al., 2017). However, the middle class is usually perceived as both relatively high in competence and warmth, as an idealized group (Durante et al., 2017). This also fits well with studies indicating voters, in general, hold relatively positive attitudes toward candidates and members of neutral reference groups in the middle of the social hierarchy; Wüest & Pontusson (2018) find voters, in general, prefer candidates with a skilled working class and middle-class background, over candidates from the upper middle class. Carnes & Lupu (2016) find that voters tend to favor working-class candidates over higher-class candidates; Finally, studies suggest voters hold unfavorable attitudes toward high-status candidates (Campbell & Cowley, 2013a, 2013b; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018).

Furthermore, there might also be reasons to expect that lifestyle cues can be *too* low-status and that candidates can “snob downward” too much. Following the SCM associations with the working-class and underprivileged groups might benefit a politician in terms of warmth, one should expect it will lead to a backlash in terms of lower perceived competence (Andrew, 2000; Cuddy et al., 2009; Cuddy et al., 2008). Findings from social psychology also show that people draw clear inferences about the personal characters of others based on their material possessions and lifestyles, which seems to closely fit this pattern (Dittmar & Pepper, 1994). These studies highlight a potential trade-off in lifestyle signaling between appearing elitist and thereby running the risk of being perceived as cold and on the other hand appearing too low-status, with the risk of being perceived as incompetent.

Likewise, sociological research suggests citizens, who generally might hold negative stereotypes of higher classes, might be positively minded when higher-class individuals appear more authentic, and down-to-earth (Hahl et al., 2017; Hahl, 2014; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Lamont, 2000). However, while these studies have been in everyday interactions among citizens, it is yet to be applied to a study of how it affects citizens' political attitudes and perceptions of politicians.

Summing up, I, therefore, expect a display of a lifestyle appealing to the median will be evaluated more positively by all voters, and displays of elitist and low-status lifestyles will be punished across the board. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Median lifestyle cues have a positive effect on voters' perceived warmth of political candidates.

H2b: Median lifestyle cues have a positive effect on voters' perceived competence of political candidates.

H2c: Median lifestyle cues have a positive effect on voters' probability of voting for political candidates.

### **3.5 Targeted appeal model**

In contrast to the median appeal, according to the *targeted appeal model*, we should expect voters to respond differently to specific lifestyle cues, depending on what class position they belong to themselves. We should expect voters to show the highest support for candidates, who specifically target voters' lifestyles.

Drawing on social psychological theory, there might be good reasons to think lifestyle cues only lead to more positive evaluations among targeted groups. Social identity theory suggests citizens' memberships in social groups are important in how people perceive themselves and others (Tajfel, 1982). Because people are motivated to hold on to positive self-evaluations, they are biased to perceive the groups they belong to more favorably than others (Turner et al., 1979). Likewise, a long strand of literature from social psychology shows that people, in general, tend to feel a closer relation to more similar others, and likewise evaluate information from people with higher interpersonal similarity in a more positive light (Berscheid, 1994; Liviatan et al., 2008; Mackie & Wright, 2003; Rim et al., 2009). According to the SCM, people also tend to hold positive attitudes of both warmth and competence toward members of groups they associate themselves with (Cuddy et al., 2008; Durante et al., 2017).

The literature on group-based appeals in politics generally suggests that appeals are most effective toward the targeted groups. Robison et al. (2021) find that class-based appeals to the working class are most effective among working-class members, and others find group appeals, in general, are most effective among members of the group being targeted (Dassoneville, 2022; Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2022).

This also ties nicely with Bourdieu, viewing lifestyle as a way social classes try to differentiate from each other (Bourdieu, 1984). Studies using the same approach as Bourdieu have found empirical support for the persistence of a link between social class and lifestyle, with higher classes preferring sophisticated lifestyles and lower classes preferring ordinary lifestyles (Faber, 2012; Flemmen et al., 2018). For instance, Jaeger et al. (2023) find citizens across all classes associate going to a flea market or techno concert with low social status, and opera and ballet with high status. Likewise, these studies not only find certain classes preferring lifestyles and symbols, but they also find a link between social class and distaste towards lifestyle markers associated with other classes (Faber, 2012; Lamont, 2000). This points to the fact that lifestyle is a way of positioning oneself relative to others, not only by highlighting what we like but particularly what we do not like (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019). Thus,

lifestyle cues can inform voters about what type of person the politician is, and which social group they belong to, thereby creating a basis for evaluating and judging them.

In all, the targeted appeal model adds to the former models by suggesting the effect is conditioned on voters' own social position. Increased feelings of warmth and competence will be much more likely to appear when the lifestyle cues target the social class of voters themselves. In this sense, voters need to feel a sense of similarity with the lifestyle of candidates, for it to positively impact how they perceive politicians. Summing up, I present the following hypothesis.

H3a: Voters will evaluate candidates displaying a lifestyle associated with their own class as more competent.

H3b: Voters will evaluate candidates displaying a lifestyle associated with their own class as warmer.

H3c: Voters will be more likely to vote for candidates displaying a lifestyle like the one associated with their own class.

## **4. Research Design and Data**

### **Study 1 – Measuring voters' inferences from lifestyle cues.**

To study the effects of lifestyle cues the project will primarily rely on survey-experimental designs, where I randomly assign different types of lifestyle cues to voters. However, lifestyle cues are a multidimensional concept, that might be problematic to grasp via traditional survey vignette experiments. Such an approach might suffer from either confounding unmeasured latent treatments or only estimating a treatment effect under very particular conditions (Fong & Grimmer, 2021). Likewise, such an approach might also not take account of the actually occurring variation that exists in the real world, and thereby either show treats that are either unrealistic or too extreme.

My approach to this challenge is to thoroughly base my project in how politicians display lifestyle in their everyday political communication. I do this by initially hand-coding Facebook posts from Danish MPs from the last electoral cycle (June 2019 – October 2022). Looking at Facebook posts in the Danish context has two main advantages. First, a large majority of Danish voters (84 %) are on Facebook, so and it is by far the most representative social media platform in Denmark<sup>2</sup>. Second, almost all Danish MP's use Facebook, and previous studies has shown that there is a substantial variation in what MP's post about there (Bøggild et al., 2019; Helboe Pedersen, 2022; Pedersen & Rahat, 2019).

In the first study I proceed in three steps. First, I rely on the large language processing model BERT, to classify the Facebook posts from the period into 3 broad categories: 1) Posts with a policy focus, 2) Posts on personal activities of the MP, and 3) Posts about the MP's private matters. The validation

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/nyt/NytHtml?cid=46771>

shows sufficiently high accuracy for all 3 categories, most crucially for my purposes, it shows high precision and recall for the privatized posts (F1-score at 0,91). In the second step I then look at the private posts, and hand-code these to identify posts that contain lifestyle cues. The purpose is to identify the full population of lifestyle cues in the period. Finally, I want to then take a representative subset of these posts, and survey what inferences voters make from them. The overall idea is to present a representative sample of Danish voters, a small number of Facebook posts containing lifestyle cues, and then capture how these impacts voters' perceptions of candidates. Motivated by my theoretical perspective I want to capture how the posts alters voters' perceptions of class affiliation, warmth, and competence of the candidate. Furthermore, I also want to include measures of the candidates' perceived ideological position and party, to see if voters also make policy-substantial inferences from lifestyle cues. Likewise, I also present respondents with pure political posts, to get at the impact of lifestyle cues relative to pure political messages by the same politicians.

### **Next steps**

In the second paper, I aim to build on the coding procedure and study the effects of lifestyle cues on voters' evaluations and vote intentions of candidates, via a survey experiment in Denmark. The purpose will be to test whether lifestyle cues impact voters' evaluations and support of political candidates, and likewise assess which of the different models best explains the relationship.

For the next papers, I would like to discuss the broader consequences of lifestyle cues. One path I would want to go is to look at under which conditions voters find lifestyle cues credible or manipulative, and whether this impacts general perceptions and trust of politicians. This would be a way of getting at the broader democratic implications of lifestyle-based communication.

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