

Performing the self: how women politicians leverage social media in political communication – An extended abstract

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Social media platforms have become a major vector of political communication, enabling public figures to circumvent traditional media gatekeeping and engage directly with citizens . In France, these platforms played a significant informational role during the 2022 presidential campaign, with 45.3% of voters utilizing them to access political content (Neihouser et al., 2022). For women in politics, this digital environment represents both a opportunity structure and a site of constraint: it requires them to position themselves within a political field historically dominated by men while simultaneously navigating the normative expectations embedded in digital cultures. These online practices thus reflect a continual negotiation of identity, situated at the intersection of gendered norms and the participatory dynamics of this platform publics (Cardon, 2010).

This study analyzes the online presence of nine French women politicians across three distinct platforms characterized by distinct forms of visibility: Instagram (visual proximity), TikTok (short-form, entertaining formats), and LinkedIn (professional legitimacy). The research identifies three primary strategies employed by these figures to construct their image, enhance visibility, and assert legitimacy.

The first strategy involves the politicization of the intimate sphere, where politicians leverage social media to stage aspects of their private lives. This "presentation of self" (Goffman, 1959), showcasing family, home, or pets, serves to humanize their image and forge an affective proximity with the audience, thereby transforming the private into a political argument.

The second strategy focuses on claiming legitimacy in a masculinized field. In a political landscape where authority continues to be gendered (Sineau, 1997), these women adopt a posture of competence demonstration and seriousness. However, unlike their male counterparts, they tend to avoid authoritarian stances and rarely emphasize a "pioneer" status, opting instead for a more modest approach and sometimes self-effacing.

The third strategy entails the valorization of activist commitments, whereby platforms are used to publicly align with causes such as feminism, ecology, and LGBTQIA+ rights. This signaling serves both anchor political identity and mobilizing specific activist or affinity-based communities, thereby extending the repertoire of political legitimacy beyond institutional credentials.

Across these strategies, the research reveals a persistent tension: women politicians must simultaneously claim political authority and conform, at least partially, to enduring gender expectations. Their digital self-presentation oscillates between the codes of political communication and those of influencer cultures, leading to hybridized forms of visibility. While this "appropriation of social platforms" (Stenger & Coutant, 2013) enables multifaceted, audience-specific identities, it also entails risks. Over-investing in influencer aesthetics may undermine political credibility, while the deregulated dynamics of platforms expose them to disinformation, narrative destabilization, and heightened hostility.

Keywords: women in politics - social media - representation - appropriation – platforms.