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# Mediatization and Personalization of Politics in Italy and France: The Cases of Berlusconi and Sarkozy

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## Abstract

In contemporary democracies, the construction of political leadership is driven by communication strategies with greater emphasis on image over substance and personality over ideology. This article analyzes two countries, Italy and France, that have been recently characterized by a remarkable increase in the personalization and mediatization of politics. First, the article intends to identify some key features of the leadership that emerge and prove to be successful in mediatized democracies. Second, the article makes a comparison of Italian and French electoral campaigns, paying special attention to the role of the media in the construction of leadership. Finally, the article examines the cases of two leaders who have left their mark on recent electoral campaigns and are credited with remarkable expertise in political marketing and news management: Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy.

## Keywords

mediatization of politics, electoral campaign, leadership, Italian politics, French politics

In contemporary democracies the ascent of political leaders cannot be explained without making reference to their communication style and media strategies. In their seminal article, Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999: 251) argued that one of the key aspects of the mediatization of politics is that political actors have become “able to adapt their behavior to media requirements,” that is, “they stage an event in order to get media attention, or if they fashion an event in order to fit the media’s needs as regards timing, location, and the framing of the message and the performers in the

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limelight.” Moreover, Mazzoleni and Schulz observed that the process of adaptation of politics to the media’s rules also involves the communication outlook of political actors and the content of their political discourse.

This article holds that such elements have now become characteristics peculiar to the nature and style of leadership that emerges and has proven to be successful in contemporary democracies independently of political cultures and institutional settings. The personalization of politics, which originally flourished in presidential systems such as the United States where leaders are understandably more exposed to public attention, has actually increased in semipresidential and parliamentary systems as well (King 2002; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Wattenberg 1991). This article focuses on Italy and France, two countries that in recent years have experienced a remarkable increase in the personalization and mediatization of politics. The analysis shows that, notwithstanding notable differences, there are remarkable similarities in both countries in regard to the role played by media in the construction of leadership. In particular, a number of strategies of image management that can be regarded as regular features in modern political communication have been identified in both Italy and France. These are (1) building an appealing image, (2) establishing an emotional connection with voters, (3) creating media events, and (4) going personal. Though all this does not amount to a well-developed theory but rather to insights and suggestions arising from a number of studies on how candidates employ marketing techniques to package their electoral images, both the existence and the influence of these features deserve to be tested. This article argues that such processes of adaptation of political actors to media patterns in Italy and France are necessarily linked to the ascent of two leaders, Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy, both of whom are credited with remarkable expertise in political marketing and news management.

Berlusconi and Sarkozy are clearly taken here as two convenient illustrations of the same phenomenon—the emergence of a mediatized leadership. However, the scope of the comparison, and possibly its contribution to the scientific discussion, is to highlight how the institutional and cultural settings in the two countries have acted as intervening variables in determining the emergence of a style of leadership that has common traits but also substantial differences, as I try to illustrate in the final section. The article’s arguments are based on a thorough and extended review of the existing literature on political communication in Italy and in France and on detailed descriptions of the cases of Berlusconi and Sarkozy.

## **Leadership, Media, and Image Management**

Conventional wisdom says that the mass media, in particular television, have played a key role in emphasizing leadership and personal characteristics (Butler and Ranney 1992; Hart 1999; Manin 1996; Newman 1999; Swanson and Mancini 1996). There is no doubt that television encourages the personalization of politics by bringing candidates’ faces and voices into citizens’ homes on a regular basis. According to the seminal book by Altheide and Snow (1979), among the dominant schemas through which the mass media frame the political reality in contemporary democracies, that

of personalization emerges as one of the most recurrent. The easiest explanation is that the media have a limited capability to transmit a full and complete picture of the political world, so they give priority to those aspects that can be transformed into good media products: that is, products that are spectacular enough to attract large audiences. This attitude has led mass media to report politics as a game or, as it is often represented, as a horse race. "In journalists' game paradigm, the focus is on a few individuals, the politicians, rather than on the broader interests they represent and the broader political forces that shape their politics" (Patterson 2000: 254). As a consequence, to use Edelman's words, the "political spectacle" consists, to a large extent, of "the construction and the use of leadership" (Edelman 1988, chap. 3).

Theories on political leadership have shown that leadership "depends on the combination of three aspects: the personal characteristics of the leaders, the instruments they have at their disposal, and the situation they face" (Blondel 1987: 25). Among the instruments that may favor the rise and success of a political leader, surely the mass media will appear as a key factor and one that can be compared in importance to parties and political movements. Indeed, it is common opinion that as parties have increasingly lost their power to gather and maintain public support, television has come to dominate the process of mobilization of voters by giving leaders the opportunity to establish a direct link with their followers. Therefore, contemporary leaders have adapted to changes in the political environment and have started to subordinate their message and style to fit the television formats. With television, the time has come for a "mediatized" kind of leadership.

The first goal of an aspirant political leader is to craft and sell his or her image through television. As Newman (1999: 88) observes, "One of the most important marketing tools a politician can use to drive public opinion is his or her image." Moreover, "in politics, an image is created through the use of visual impressions that are communicated by the candidate's physical presence, media appearances, and experiences and record as that information is integrated into the minds of citizens" (Newman 1999: 93). In particular, television is the best ally of potential leaders since it allows a political actor to be seen and heard by large numbers of citizens even though they are not actually physically present (Stanyer 2007: 73). Therefore, it offers a unique podium from which candidates can project their image and become "recognizable" (Stanyer 2007: 72 and ff.). Of course, it should always be remembered that the "media can either highlight, underplay, or diminish particular features of a candidate or a candidate's position on issues, casting them in a negative or positive light. These media-shaped images conveyed to voters . . . become powerful symbols that identify and/or define a candidate" (Kotler and Kotler 1999: 5). So the real question is how the leaders may succeed in developing powerful and efficient strategies to capture high-level visibility and positive media coverage. The literature on political marketing and communication has highlighted and described several strategies of image management as those most recurrently employed in a wide range of national contexts (Franklin 1994; Kotler and Kotler 1999; Louw 2005; Newman 1999). Of the strategies identified for the shaping and reinforcement of the leadership image through the media, the following are among the most effective.

### *Building an Appealing Image*

The first goal is the identification of what kind of image should be transmitted, a sort of “script” that may appeal to the voters (Louw 2005: 179). This implies personality traits but also clothes, manners, body language. In general, voters develop preferences with reference to certain types of leadership. Therefore, it is supposed that the construction of the leadership is at least partially influenced by the expectations of the followers. Precampaign market research—that is, polls and focus groups—helps to understand what type of leadership is most in demand by those segments of the electorate that are also potential constituencies. For instance, evidence collected by political psychologists has clearly shown that leftist and rightist voters possess different personality traits (Caprara et al. 2006), which are likely to orientate their assessment of candidates according to a principle of likeness. The ideal leadership profile should result from the compromise between the true personal characteristics of the candidate and the image that targeted voters seem to like and require. “The candidate should avoid choosing (an image) that is unnatural and unbelievable, no matter how much it might match the voter’s needs. The candidate will be placed in too many situations that test sincerity” (Kotler and Kotler 1999: 14). Therefore, a leader should be able to emphasize the characteristics that may attract consensus and downplay all possible liabilities. Once the image has been defined, it has to be projected consistently in all public occasions and especially on television, which remains the most important vehicle in influencing voters’ political attitudes.

### *Establishing a Direct and Emotional Link with the Voters*

Leaders are supposed to establish a direct relationship with the voters. Television allows them to reach audiences without any apparent intermediary. However, audiences have to be turned into followers (Louw 2005: 179). This goal can be achieved by establishing an emotional connection. “Effective leaders keep people’s attention because of their ability to grab hold of people’s emotions” (Newman 1999: 90). A leader should also be able to provide emotional and symbolic reassurance. An important part of this strategy consists of the so-called *storytelling* (Salmon 2007), in particular of those narratives based on political myths that have developed over time and are rooted in a substratum of specific traditions and cultures.

### *Creating Media Events*

Since getting into the press and attracting media coverage are the primary means of shaping and reinforcing the correct image, leaders need to find their way into our homes on television. To do so, they create media events, intended as political events that are spectacularized and adjusted to the demands of the media system (Dayan and Katz 1992). Media events must be designed to attract maximum news coverage. Therefore, they imply a great deal of news management to design timing, location,

and presentation of the event to meet the criteria and the formats of the mass media. To emphasize the leadership, media events have to be leader centered, that is, that the leader must be placed at the center stage. In other words, news managers try to combine image management and media events in such a way that political leaders use public appearances, usually symbolically loaded, to project their own image (Pfetsch 1998: 75).

Since it is not always possible to set the media agenda and to manufacture the news, candidates also need to “ride the wave,” that is, “they seek to coordinate their campaigns with external events of consequence so that the campaign will benefit from the additional media coverage elicited by the newsworthy events” (Iyengar and McGrady 2007: 133). By synchronizing their activities with press coverage, candidates are able to have their comments and statements included as sound bites in the TV news and, therefore, can project their image into the viewers’ minds.

### *Going Personal*

In recent years politicians have become “recognizable performers, but also intimate strangers” (Stanyer 2007: 72) in the sense that citizens never meet and get acquainted with them but come to know an abundance of details on their personal lives. In some ways, it can be argued that political leaders have gained the status of celebrities, like rock stars or movie stars.

A great deal of personal information on leaders is partially disclosed to the public by the media, although sometimes the politicians would prefer to keep it hidden. However, private lives have been increasingly perceived by the leaders themselves as a resource to be fruitfully exploited to construct a political identity. Thus, the leader’s families often become national icons: spouses and children attract a great deal of news coverage and always (Stanyer 2007: 74) perform a role in the electoral campaign. Political leaders allow TV cameras to enter into their homes and daily lives. The familiarity of leaders is strictly interconnected with the rise of infotainment (Delli Carpini and Williams 1996). The more a leader participates in nonpolitical talk shows, the more he or she has the opportunity to show his or her “true self” and tell fascinating personal stories. Talking about family and friends, passions and hobbies are supposed to “humanize” the image of leaders and elicit the public’s sympathy.

All these strategies have become regular features of Italian and French electoral campaigns. This phenomenon is because of the interplay of a number of factors, but, as we argue, has to be especially connected to the ascent of two leaders, Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy, who can both be chosen as good illustrations of mediatized leadership.

## **Personalization and Mediatization of Politics in Italy and France**

As mentioned before, politics in most Western democracies has evolved toward a process of personalization and presidentialization (Poguntke and Webb 2005). What

has been peculiar in Italy is the magnitude and, in particular, the rapid growth of the personalization of politics. As a matter of fact, starting from the deep and exceptional crisis of the political system that occurred in the early 1990s, Italian politics has changed its outlook completely and now appears dominated by highly personalized campaigns. Most campaign events are organized around the leaders, with the clear aim of directing the media's attention to their personal characteristics.

The collapse of the old parties following the corruption scandals of the early 1990s opened the door to new modes of political competition. While competition in the so-called First Republic (1946–92) was highly ideological, the end of the cold war and the process of secularization (especially important in a catholic country such as Italy) marked the demise of the old rhetorical contraposition between the communist utopia and Western democratic ideals. On the other hand, the scandals that led to the dissolution of several major parties contributed to a general party dealignment. For all this, although tough and inflamed, Italian electoral campaigns ceased to be predominantly fought on the basis of party ideologies and began to place emphasis on short-term factors such as platforms and leaders.

Why have leaders especially acquired so much importance? First, it should be kept in mind that when most of the old parties disappeared or had to change their name and outlook to survive, voters lost the reference points with which they used to orient themselves in the complex political world. At that point, party and coalition leaders appeared as an anchor, a shortcut to making voting decisions without being obliged to fully understand the ongoing and somehow obscure process of the transformation of the party system. This may partially explain why that particular process of personalization of politics, which is actually common to all modern democracies, has been so rapid and overemphasized in Italy.

The second factor concerns the process of the modernization of political communication. If the mass media are commonly viewed as promoters of personalization, in Italy their impact was certainly reinforced by the crisis of the political system. During the transition from the First to the Second Republic, the mass media turned elections into spectacles (Mazzoleni 1996), drawing inspiration from other national contexts, especially the United States. At the same time, political parties and coalitions addressed themselves to the same sources to organize their campaigns and shape their propaganda strategies. The management of political advertising, press releases, and televised debates and more generally the necessity to create events capable of attracting news coverage required experts to be employed in all fields of political communication. While Berlusconi, thanks to his great experience as a media tycoon, could rely on a powerful and well-oiled organization, the marketing operations of other political actors required a gradual learning process. However, fifteen years later, the professionalization of politics can be regarded now as an established feature of Italian electoral campaigns.

In sum, the media certainly played an essential role in the transition from a model of political communication based on parties to one based on leaders. In fact, in the First Republic parties were the main creators of political symbols, and the mass media



coverage of electoral campaigns focused almost exclusively on these. After the crisis of the 1990s, by contrast, the construction of political discourse seems to be the primary responsibility of leaders and candidates. Supporting evidence can be found in a comparison of pre- and post-1990s crisis posters and television spots (Cheles 2001, 2006; Pezzini 2001). The electoral television, including spots, infomercials, political talk shows, and televised debates, certainly contributed to creating a virtual dialogue between candidates and citizens that could supplement and, partly, replace the old party affiliations. To adjust to such new conditions and to take advantage of such new opportunities, all parties, including the most traditional ones, faced the problem of selecting leaders able to establish a direct link with the voters. In particular, this requirement has proven to be crucial in the case of the leaders of the two main coalitions who are also prospective prime ministers in case of victory.

Thus, after taking for granted that the personal factor matters, one should ask which leadership traits really make the difference and contribute to attracting and maintaining electoral consensus over time. For instance, why has Silvio Berlusconi been more successful than many others? Is this simply because of his greater access to television, as some people claim? Or is his long permanence as a key actor on the Italian political scene because of the fact that he has a superior knowledge of the rules of image management in the era of media politics? Will the analysis of the Italian context and, in particular, a detailed analysis of Berlusconi's case help us to highlight the nature of contemporary leadership? To answer these questions, it may be useful to carry out a direct comparison with another country, France, which has experienced a remarkable increase in the personalization of politics in recent years and, above all, is now led by a president who has been accused of "Berlusconizing" French politics.<sup>1</sup>

It should be stressed that the institutional context of French Fifth Republic politics is very different from that of Italy. The 1958 constitution shaped "the nature of party competition into a bipolarized pluralism involving electoral blocs on Left and Right. Political and electoral presidentialisation also changed the nature of parties themselves" (Clift 2005: 221). Since 1965 the direct election of the president of the Republic has actually encouraged the emergence of a personalized leadership (Gaffney 2003; Vedel 2007). Therefore, the personalization of politics, at least in the sense of leadership-oriented presidential campaigns, has been in place ever since. However, the recent evolution of the media environment has reinforced the typical personal focus in media coverage and introduced new techniques of political marketing (Maarek 2001, 2007), thus raising questions about the degree of the Americanization of French politics (Gerstlé 2004).

With respect to the Italian case, it has to be observed that the process of mediatization of politics in France started earlier and followed a more gradual development. In the late 1980s Kaid, Gerstlé, and Sanders (1991) had already found several similarities between the French and American campaigns—huge television coverage, intensive use of polls, employment of professional campaign consultants—but also concluded that, in France, the "political logic" still dominated the "media logic," that is, that politics did not play the media's game by bending to the criteria of media dictates. Accordingly,



Gerstlé (2004: 166) has observed that while it is undeniable that candidates and their consultants develop some “strategic identities,” such strategies are constrained by the characteristics of French political culture and institutional arrangement

It should also be observed that “the modus operandi of campaigning for presidential election in France has long been candidate-based teams with party support. Both elements are crucial” (Clift 2005: 236). While parties do not take center stage in presidential elections, they do remain an invaluable source of funds and logistical support. Therefore, “fighting a presidential electoral campaign without the support of a party is a mission almost impossible” (Vedel 2007: 107). At the same time, however, two elements of change in recent campaigns should be stressed: (1) the intensification of public relation consultancies and opinion polling, both resources that leaders tend to control directly with the help of their campaign team, independently from party influence, and (2) the ascent of leaders such as Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy, who have heavily embraced the ways and means of modern political communication. In the case of Royal, an outsider who relied on the Internet to aggregate the necessary support to obtain the Socialist Party nomination, the divergence between her campaign organization and that of her party was striking. In the case of Sarkozy, by contrast, his firm grip over the Gaullist Party depended partly on the fact that the professionalization of political communication had strengthened him in relation to his fellow party members and gave him the opportunity of transforming his party into a very efficient electoral machine quite easily (Maarek 2007: 158).

Most scholars argue that even if candidates devote great time and energy to communication activities, “a campaign cannot to be reduced just to a communication strategy” (Vedel 2007: 265) but implies also several other tasks, such as mobilizing party support and negotiating alliances between the first and the second ballots. However, it is also true that the 2007 election raised interesting questions about the growing importance of mass media and political marketing as primary tools for the construction of leadership images. Therefore, a direct comparison of the campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy to that of Silvio Berlusconi may be of help in clarifying to what extent Sarkozy can be considered a “mediatized leader” and how far he has influenced the French process of mediatization as a whole.

## **Two Cases of Mediatized Leadership: Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy**

### *Silvio Berlusconi*

Nobody could deny that Berlusconi’s leadership is inextricably linked with the process of mediatization of politics. In fact, in 1994, Berlusconi entered the political arena by inundating the television screens of Italian citizens with an infomercial in which he announced the foundation of his own party, Forza Italia. It is commonly assumed that Berlusconi transformed the scenario of Italian politics by applying the techniques of political marketing to an electoral campaign in a systematic way for the first time

(Mazzoleni 1995). In particular, he used benchmarking polls to segment and target the electorate, orchestrated a massive advertising campaign, and articulated his message in a clear and understandable way, very different from the “political jargon” (*politichese*) used by Italian political élites (Croci 2001).

Being the owner of the Italian commercial television network was a key determining factor of Berlusconi's electoral success. His television channels were, of course, an invaluable resource in giving the new party and its leader all the visibility and the publicity they needed. However, attributing the 1994 victory of Berlusconi to the ownership of Mediaset alone would be an exaggeration. What really made the difference was the deep knowledge of Berlusconi and his collaborators of the marketing rules that his business firms had hitherto applied intensively for commercial aims. As Mancini (2007: 118) has observed, “Berlusconi won because he was able, through professionalized skills, to make use of the opportunities offered by the new mass media system.” While it is true that Berlusconi's television channels gave a disproportionate coverage to his message, it should be also said that the overall media system (public television included) devoted a great deal of attention to him. Indeed, even the RAI-3 channel, which was traditionally close to the former Communist Party, gave Forza Italia a larger coverage than it did to the leftist PDS (Marletti and Roncarolo 2000: 226). Indisputably, such huge media coverage depended also on the fact that Forza Italia was the true novelty of the 1994 contest, not only because of Berlusconi's exceptional profile—the richest man in Italy, a media tycoon, the president of one of the most successful football teams, AC Milan—but especially because the leader-centered nature of his new party qualified it as something never seen before in Italian politics.

The important point to be stressed is that in 1994 Berlusconi's decision “to take the field” was a sort of super media event. He was already a celebrity. Therefore, the fact itself that such a famous man could run for prime minister was destined to attract maximum media coverage. In contrast to most political leaders at the beginning of their career, Berlusconi did not need to become “recognizable.” Nevertheless, he was an outsider with no previous political experience, and therefore he had to establish his credentials as a political leader. To do so, he followed the golden rules of mediatized leadership. He used the media, in particular television, to develop a virtual personal relationship with the citizenry. In other words, he gathered television audiences and turned them into followers. This objective was mainly achieved by transforming issues into slogans and symbols that could be directly related to his personality. To a middle class tired of high taxes and big government and still shocked by the corruption scandals, Berlusconi proposed a mix of free-market ideology and the American dream. Introducing himself as the man who had reached the greatest personal success through his own abilities and hard work, Berlusconi incarnated a message of hope and asked the Italian people to entrust him with the realization of their dreams (Campus 2002).

A salient characteristic of the leadership in the era of mediatization of politics is to encourage the establishment of a trust relationship between the leader and the voters that bypasses the traditional intermediary role of parties. This aspect is particularly emphasized in Berlusconi's case: the leader is placed at center stage while the party has

always appeared only as the leader's personal instrument. In fact, throughout its existence, Forza Italia depended on the symbolic appeal of its leader (and nothing seems to have really changed even now that Forza Italia has merged with AN [National Alliance] to form the new party of the Popolo della Libertà [the People of Freedom]). In the past fifteen years, Berlusconi has remained the protagonist in all the electoral campaigns. In particular, his peculiar strategy has been to set the media agenda through the construction of a sequel of spectacular events in which he always plays the role of the leading actor. To mention just a sample of them, we could include the cruise ship *Azzurra* in 2000, the signing of the "Contract with the Italian People" during a popular television show in 2001, and the dramatic speech at the convention of the Confindustria (the association representing Italia entrepreneurs) in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, the 2006 campaign was a good example of this strategy: Berlusconi was trailing in the polls at the start of the campaign and appeared vulnerable and exhausted by the increasing tensions with his own allies. However, through the staging of a number of media events, he succeeded in taking the limelight away from his adversary, Romano Prodi, and in dominating the campaign narratives. By shaking up the race in such a way, he came close to winning the election through the force of his own personality. In addition, the announcement of the formation of the new party, Popolo della Libertà, during an improvised and unexpected speech in November 2007 in a Milan square, can be regarded as a sort of *coup de théâtre*, aimed at preventing the newly formed Center-Left "Partito Democratico" from monopolizing the card of the "new politics." Mention should also be made of the innumerable gaffes and the unconventional behavior that have marked Berlusconi's political career: from addressing the European Parliament representative Martin Schulz as a concentration camp "Kapò" to accompanying Tony and Cherie Blair through a Sardinian village with a bandanna wrapped around his head. As convincingly argued by Mancini (2008), not only do such Berlusconi japes demonstrate that the traditional distinction between the private and the public spheres is gradually fading, but they also illustrate the extent to which Berlusconi represents the colonization of politics by the mass media culture of which he has always been a champion.

### Nicolas Sarkozy

Since the earliest stages of his career Nicolas Sarkozy has been well aware of the importance of the mass media in constructing contemporary leadership. He has always employed news management to increase his popularity: first when he was the young and ambitious mayor of the rich suburban town of Neuilly-sur-Seine, later on when he became an emerging Gaullist leader and an energetic and hyperactive minister (Artufel and Duroux 2006). Such an intensive and long-term investment in setting the news agenda and becoming a political celebrity served him well and paved the way to his ultimate achievement: the conquest of the French presidency (Campus and Ventura 2009).

As part of this general strategy aimed at attracting good coverage and securing access to the mass media, Sarkozy's communication staff has relentlessly courted journalists and supplied them with endless material for day-to-day headlines. Moreover, Sarkozy has also developed friendly relationships with several famous journalists and media tycoons (Winock 2007: 182). This circumstance attracted much criticism from his opponents who accused him of being the clear favorite of the mass media. During the presidential campaign, Ségolène Royal's spokesman, Arnaud Montebourg, openly expressed his concern about the "Berlusconization" of the French media system.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, Sarkozy has never had direct or indirect control of any media channel, but it is certainly true that his strategy of courting the media has paved the way for making him a sort of media celebrity, as he has been referred to as "le téléprésident" (Jost and Muzet 2008).

Sarkozy's strategy has always consisted of seeking to shape the news by employing all viable media opportunities. By strictly following the rules of political marketing, he has cultivated public support in a twofold manner. On one hand, he has managed to offer "interesting stories" to the mass media by intervening on a large number of issues and has taken part in a huge number of events where he played the leading actor (Maarek and Wahnich 2009). With the collaboration of a team of experts, some of whom have assisted him since he was mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine, Sarkozy's daily schedule was designed with a series of initiatives intended to grab media attention: speeches, photo opportunities, TV interviews, public statements, and so on. By so doing, he became a favorite of the news media and could count on regular and sustained coverage (Vedel 2007: 149). He has also proven to be very good at manufacturing media events, such as the American-style party convention especially designed to emphasize his public image (Artufel and Duroux 2006: 33, 47–48).

On the other hand, Sarkozy has been successful in "riding the wave": he has always coordinated his public statements and political decisions with external events to benefit from the coverage attracted by the newsworthy events. A typical example of this tactical behavior was his decision to become Minister of Internal Affairs in 2002, when French citizens, faced with huge problems of criminality, were especially vocal in asking for law and order. As Minister of Internal Affairs, Sarkozy proved to be very active in fighting crime. By so doing, he found himself in the limelight and became more popular than any other minister (Artufel and Duroux 2006; Campus and Ventura 2009; Ivaldi 2007). Even though he was not always portrayed in flattering terms because of his display of authoritarian character and hyperactivity, regular television appearances did help him to convey an image of assertiveness that greatly assisted him in building up his credentials for the presidency. In general, the history of Sarkozy's ascent to the leadership of the Gaullist Party and to the presidency is a successful tale of how an ambitious and capable candidate may exploit the mass media's potential, especially the visual media of photojournalism and television.

His general strategy of becoming a "recognizable politician," that is, achieving mediated visibility and becoming familiar to the voters, led Sarkozy to adopt the American habit of providing the mass public with detailed information about the

persona of political actors. This implies the self-disclosure of personal aspects of one's private life as well. Sarkozy has been both master and victim of such a form of strategic self-presentation. As a matter of fact, he publicized his marriage to Cécilia to help construct a favorable impression. To do so, he inundated the press with interviews and photographs of the happy family. At that time, the disclosure of his private life was probably meant also to counterbalance and mellow his overaggressive image. However, such overexposure of the private sphere, quite unusual in French culture, had a boomerang effect, first when Cécilia's extramarital affair was leaked by the press and later when she deserted him for good and the presidential couple divorced. Sarkozy's reaction to the violation of his privacy has often been one of defense and annoyance. He accused the media of having splashed his marriage crisis over magazines and tabloids. However, when the couple seemed to be reconciled, he did not avoid talking warmly and openly about his feelings for Cécilia in the book *Témoignage* (2006). In the same way, he appeared more than keen to publicize his new relationship and his subsequent marriage to Carla Bruni. In other words, although on some occasions he complained of excessive media attention, Sarkozy is well aware that politicians' private lives are now considered an acceptable and coveted subject of journalistic revelations. And so, if this is the price to be paid to become a political celebrity, why not provide the public with explicit personal information to ensure it forms an appropriate impression? This may shed new light on Sarkozy's increasing attitude of "going personal" in the effort of shaping public perceptions of him.

In sum, Sarkozy has been a master at crafting the image of a leader in command and "in action" by thoroughly exploiting media potential and political marketing tools (Jost and Muzet 2008). He has been very effective at getting French citizens to buy into his vision for the country. His slogan of the "rupture" was a successful image to simplify complex issues into a "personality." With the help of the communication technique of storytelling, he succeeded in presenting himself as an agent of change for the people (Salmon 2007). French political observers and pundits have marveled at his ability to use modern communication techniques and to shape public opinion in his favor. His novelty and discontinuity with French political practices have earned him the nickname of "Sarkozy l'américain." However, this should not lead to overemphasize the role of communication techniques in explaining his rise. In fact, despite appearances and from several aspects, it may be argued that Sarkozy is a more traditional leader than one would expect. For instance, his ascent within the Gaullist Party shows that Sarkozy has always been well aware of the importance of controlling the party to conquer the presidency. Therefore, while engaged in an effort to build the image of the leader in charge and to develop a fruitful relationship with the press, Sarkozy also worked very hard on enlarging his consensus within the party (Ivaldi 2007). Over the space of a few years, Sarkozy succeeded in notably increasing the number of party members and, especially, in changing their ideological profiles. Through a process of modernization of the party, he opened the door to a conspicuous new group of activists who, despite the opposition of President Chirac and his entourage, crowned Sarkozy as the presidential candidate at the party convention of Porte de Versailles on January 14, 2007 (Campus and Ventura 2009).

## Concluding Remarks

As far as the basic strategies of image management in the era of television are concerned, both Berlusconi and Sarkozy can certainly be regarded as examples of “mediatized leadership.” Both politicians utilized strategic marketing to develop their leadership image and exploited television as the primary channel to project it into the voters’ minds. Both have promoted themselves as visionary leaders who not only want to fix problems but also propose a new approach to politics based on a personal relationship with citizens. Both Berlusconi and Sarkozy have relied on political myths. The former played the card of the American dream; the latter built on the French tradition of heroic, decisive, and strong leaders. Both Berlusconi and Sarkozy have proven to be good at creating media events and attracting coverage. They also share a common taste for spectacular events, as shown by the setting for Forza Italia’s and UMP’s party conventions. And last but not least, neither refrained from going personal. Berlusconi celebrated his life’s achievements by sending a booklet (*Una storia italiana*) to millions of Italian families. Sarkozy publicly celebrated his falling in love with Carla Bruni.

From many points of view the two leaders are so similar that it sounds reasonable to argue that Sarkozy has followed the path paved by Berlusconi. They do, however, differ in at least one aspect of the process through which they built their own leadership. Silvio Berlusconi is a populist leader (Mastropaolo 2005; Pasquino 2007; Surel 2003; Tarchi 2003). According to Taguieff’s (2002) definition, Berlusconi can be seen as a typical case of the “telepopulist leader,” who emerges from outside, criticizes the political elites, and proclaims to be the defender of the people. For this reason, the most salient aspect of Berlusconi’s mediatized leadership is the imperative to establish a personal and direct relationship with the public, one that can be guaranteed only through the indispensable channel of television. By contrast, although Sarkozy has deeply exploited the rules of media communication, he is essentially a political insider, a true party man who took control of the UMP to acquire a strong partisan base and a direct link with financial and organizational resources (Campus and Ventura 2009).

In sum, Berlusconi has created the personalization and the presidentialization of politics in Italy from scratch (Calise 2005), while Sarkozy has only continued the trends toward the already existing presidentialization of French politics and made them more visible. From this point of view, it could be argued that the impact of Berlusconi in Italy has been more revolutionary than that of Sarkozy in France since he operated in a constitutional setting that was properly designed to constrain the personalization of politics and prevent the ascent of a new dictator such as Mussolini (Bull and Newell 2005: 6). As a consequence, Berlusconi has not relied on a preexisting Italian tradition of strong and nationalist leaders but has actually introduced a new, or at least an unknown, typology into Italian political culture: the telepopulist leader, one who has weak ideological and partisan roots but whose appeal is predominantly based on the personal factor. In this regard, the difference with the French case is striking. In France, Charles de Gaulle shaped the image of the presidential institution on the legacy of Bonapartism and of strong nationalist feelings. All subsequent presidents adapted themselves to



interpret the presidential role in line with the Gaullian imprinting. From that point of view, Sarkozy is no exception.

Notwithstanding such key differences, Berlusconi's and Sarkozy's new approach to communication, which has reached a level of sophistication never before attained by previous candidates, has certainly produced consequences for the Italian and French political systems and may well pave the way to a new generation of mediatized leaders. It is on the basis of the understanding of this ongoing process that contemporary leadership in both countries should be analyzed and discussed.

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### Notes

1. A recent book by Pierre Musso (2008) claims that the two leaders have so much in common as to give birth to a new phenomenon, *Le Sarkoberlusconisme*.
2. Berlusconi's speech was an attack against the leadership of Confindustria, accused of representing the interests only of big business. The speech was carefully planned as a "media event": Berlusconi appeared unexpectedly after it had been announced that he was ill and could not participate, he spoke in an aggressive way, and there was a large and vocal group of his supporters in the audience.
3. Declaration given to Canal+, February 17, 2007.

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