Lifestyle Cues in Politicians' Communication: Class Signals, Representation, and Voter Response

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Preface

This report presents an overview and summary of my PhD dissertation, *Lifestyle Cues in Politicians' Communication: Class Signals, Representation, and Voter Response,* written at the Department of Political Science from February 2023 to January 2026. The report outlines the theoretical and methodological framework of the dissertation, its key contribution, and the key empirical findings, while also discussing the limitations and broader implications of the dissertation. Besides this, the dissertation consists of three solo-authored papers, which form the basis of this report:

Paper A: Gustafsson, Rasmus. 2025. "Do Lifestyle Cues from Politicians Boost Voter Support?" *Invited to revise and resubmit to Political Communication.*

Paper B: Gustafsson, Rasmus. 2025. "Punishment of Being Posh? Lifestyle Cues, Class Signals, and Voter Evaluations?" *Under review.*

Paper C: Gustafsson, Rasmus. 2026. "What do Voters Infer from the Lifestyles of Politicians?" *Working Paper.*

The dissertation summary can be read as a standalone report, but readers are referred to the three papers for further details on specific theoretical arguments, design choices, and findings.

Acknowledgements

When I first started the PhD more than three years ago, I was so immensely motivated and excited to just get started with my research that it was very hard for me to grasp that one day this PhD would come to an end, and I would have to produce a dissertation. Sure, I knew there was a deadline, and I saw other great people defending their dissertations, so I knew it was going to happen. But it was very hard for me to truly comprehend that one day, the person standing in front of the crowd of friends, families, and colleagues, in Auditorium A1 would be *me*. However, now three years later, here we are. Now, it is my turn to be the one talking in front of you guys and be the one who hopefully will not make it too boring before you can get to what you really came for, the free drinks and snacks. I am greatly excited to have finally come this far! Yet, I am also greatly aware that if it were not for you guys, who I am speaking in front of on the day of the defense, I would never have made it this far.

There is this idea among many people that writing a PhD entails being locked in an office for three years, rarely seeing other people, being constantly stressed and overworked, and that it is, for the most part, a very lonesome endeavor. While some of these things are partly true (at least in some periods), the department and the people I have been around during the PhD have made not only this process much less lonely, stressful, and tiresome, but also more joyful, inspiring, and energetic. There is a long list of people whom I would like to thank for supporting me through the PhD.

First and foremost, there are two people I need to say a very special thank you to. *Mom,* I am not really sure I can fully describe how important you have been to me in getting where I am, but I can for sure say that I would not have been able to write this dissertation and get to where I am if it were not for you. Although things have not always been so easy for us, and for you, you have always offered me unconditional warmth, support, and love. You have always supported me and celebrated all the things I have achieved (something I am generally quite bad at). Even when you had to go through a very difficult period of sickness and treatment, at the time when I was abroad for my research stay, you still showed me unconditional love and support. I am forever grateful for you and the bond we share.

Theresa, you are the loveliest person I have ever met, and the best partner I could wish for. When we met four years ago, here in Aarhus, we were in very different places in our lives compared to now. I was working in the public administration, and you were doing an exchange semester. I would never have dreamed the relationship we started there would have grown so strong as it is

today. Despite being separated for a long time by a 10-11-hour train ride (at least) and only being able to spend limited time together and having to rely on WhatsApp calls, I always felt you were with me. I always feel fully supported by you. I always feel fully valued and respected by you. And I always feel I can fully be myself around you. In the meantime, you have shown the commitment to move to the dark and sometimes miserable country of Denmark and to learn the even more miserable language of Danish. I say deep and heartfelt "tak for dig" and for the bond we share and look forward to sharing our lives together.

Obviously, I would like to thank my supervisors, Rune Stubager and Troels Bøggild, for supporting me throughout the journey. I would not have been able to get through this PhD without you. When I started the project three years ago, I had a pretty good idea of what I found interesting and what I wanted to focus on. However, I was also aware that these ideas probably were not enough for a full dissertation. Thank you very much for always engaging with my work and for always coming up with constructive feedback. Thank you wholeheartedly for supporting my ideas and helping me to motivate the project to a wider audience. Thank you all for always pushing me to show more confidence in my research and to believe more in myself. *Rune,* thank you for always giving clear and calming supervision, and for always being good at making clear which tasks I should focus on. At a time when not all researchers of political behavior and opinion formation (for some weird reason) hold the view that social class relations determine everything, I have greatly appreciated studying and exploring a topic related to this overall theme, with you as a supervisor. *Troels,* even though you come with a different academic viewpoint, I have greatly appreciated your supervision. I have appreciated your willingness and persistence in pushing me to think about how the project has broader democratic and societal implications, and how to move the project forward theoretically and methodologically.

One of the finest things about working at the department as a PhD student is the privilege to be a part of a fantastic group and community of other PhD students. What makes the PhD community special here is not only how brilliant, skillful, and ambitious people are, but it is, in particular, the care, thoughtfulness, and warmth you are shown as part of the group. In academia, one can often be in a position surrounded by wonderfully smart and ambitious people. However, without any broader focus on work-life balance and social work environment, one can often be left feeling overwhelmed, lonely, and inadequate. While I also have struggled with these emotions along the way, being part of the PhD group has made this process much less lonely and stressful. Thanks to the whole institutional setup of the PhD process here, the organization of the PhD group, and foremost, the people who have constituted the PhD group during my time here, I will think back to these three years as one of the

most fun, inspirational, and joyful times in my life. Now, there are many people I have to thank who feature who has been part of the PhD community.

Ida (Vind), thanks for being a great and valued office mate during (most of) the three years of my PhD. Although our research projects were on rather different matters, and I quite often struggled to fully comprehend and explain what your PhD was about (purely due to my own inadequacies), I believe we found a great common ground as office mates. We shared some academic and cultural interests in the class dynamics of taste. We shared a surprisingly similar musical taste, and we even got to enjoy concerts together. We shared a liking for discussing ongoing political and cultural events, and I especially appreciated your updated knowledge on the dramas of celebrity gossip. *Daniel,* I would like to thank you for all the wonderful moments in our offices discussing ongoing events on everything from football, politics, questionable music, AI, and, not least, personal life. Thank you for your openness, warm spirit, sense of humor, and for always being supportive of my research ideas. *Tim,* thank you for always being extremely supportive of me and everyone around you, for countless political discussions, for your very strong (and sometimes maybe a bit too strong) competitive nature, and for always laughing at my silly jokes. *Hannah,* thank you for your energetic and fun spirit, for questioning and pushing the boundaries of beige Danish cultural norms, for sticking through the PhD despite a traumatizing Jenga game, and for countless amazing dance moves on the floor. *Mathies,* thank you dearly for many enriching discussions about status and anti-systemic beliefs, for your many hot takes and sometimes questionable beliefs, for having enlightened me about the world of chocolate, and for a great trip to Vancouver. *Leon,* thanks for the great moments we shared in both Aarhus and during my trip to Florence. I will forever remember our talks about German culture, gossip of academia, and not least a certain iconic Mojito in Florence. *Ida (Nørregaard),* thank you for having shared so many fun discussions and chats, for always questioning everything, but still being immensely supportive, for your silly humor, and not least for having settled our "ancestral beef" (no question). *Mads,* thanks for having our shared passion for social class, and for sharing experiences about a certain main supervisor, and not least for a great trip to the Summer School in Essex. *Mario,* thank you for your positive and energetic nature, for sharing many great talks about German culture, for many great moments playing Spikeball, and for your incredible talent of saying something that puts in a bad light, and then somehow making it worse when you try to save it. There are so many more people I could say many nice things about. Furthermore, I would like to give a big thanks to Mathias F, Louise, Paula, Ashraf, Karl, Amalie, Sara, Mikkel, Mathias B, Nadine, Mathias E (KSDH), Laurits, Ane, Felix, Ida A, Lucas, Pernille, Harald, Emilie F, Emilie D, MJ, Mariam, Anders, Victor, Kristian,

Samuel, Ali, Julia, William, Claire, Costin, Lasse, Morgan, Signe, Esther, Jannik, Jake, Aske, Laura, Signe, Winnie, Muzhou, Melek, and Nic (and many more that I have probably forgot). Thank you all, and to everybody who was part of the PhD and postdoc/AP group during my time here.

A big part of what makes doing a PhD at this department an inspiring and nicer work experience is the great institutional structure you are a part of as a PhD student here. This institutional setup would not be possible without many great people. First of all, a special thanks to *Lasse and Helene* for being very competent and dedicated PhD coordinators throughout my time here. I always felt taken very seriously whenever I raised my concerns to you, and I felt you were always standing up for the PhD group in leadership. Second, a big thanks to the Section of Behavior and Institutions, which I had the pleasure of being a part of. Although it can sometimes be a daunting and frustrating experience to present research papers in the section, this is only because the feedback one receives here is always of very high quality and always helps to elevate the work. It has been very inspiring and a great pleasure to be a part of the section and to talk to you about research and how to make sense of the chaotic political world. Finally, a huge thanks to all the amazing administrative staff of this department. You are the true heroes of the department. Without you, this department would completely crumble. There would be no functioning coffee machines, there would be no department days, there would no teaching schedules, no adherence to deadlines, and zero organized budgets. Thank you, Pernille, Ruth, Natasha, Njall, Annette, Olivia, Nicoline, Susanne, Felix, Anders, Helle, Ida, and Kamma. Without you guys, doing a PhD would have been significantly less fun and much more challenging.

But this PhD was not only done here in Aarhus. I also had the pleasure of spending a wonderful semester at the Department of Government at the University of Vienna. I had a really good time in Vienna, not only because it is an amazing city to live in, but also because of the great people I met at the department. First, a great thanks to *Markus* for being a great host for me during my visit. I appreciate the time you took to engage with my work, for having given me great tips about great neighborhoods in Vienna, and for constructive feedback. My time in Vienna was also made particularly wonderful because of the amazing group of PhD students I met during my time. A special thanks to *Marta* for the friendship we formed during my time in Vienna and have kept ever since. When I went to Vienna, I would never have thought that I would have formed such a strong friendship as we have now. Your humor, drive, energy, and warmth are things that I greatly appreciate to have part of my life. *Jule,* thank you for being a great office mate during my stay. *Manuel,* thanks for many great chats about the politics of class, German politics, and football. *Elena and Franzi,* thank you for your great and fun energy, and for inviting

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Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for always supporting me throughout my academic journey. I can always count on your support, and it always warms me how proud you are of me. A special thanks to my *Sven-Åge and Kirsten Marie*. We have spent many summers and vacations together, especially on questionable camping places in Sweden, and I have always appreciated the time we have spent together and the bond we have. I have always seen you as clear role models for me, as a kind of extra set of parents, whom I greatly appreciate. *Dad,* thank you for always being supportive and proud of me, even though I know it is not always the easiest to understand the lingo of academia. Finally, a huge praise and thanks to my dear friends *Esther, Freja, and Emilie,* for maintaining a strong friendship and bond even though we live in different places and are in different phases of our lives now. You are some of the people who know me the best and deeply appreciate the bond and friendship we have.

Alone, we can do so little, but together we can do so much, and although it is my name on this dissertation, I would not have been able to do this without all of you.

Rasmus Kappelgaard Gustafsson,
April 2026.

Chapter 1: Introduction

When politicians appeal with their lifestyle

In January 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Social Democratic Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and her government faced immense pressure to contain the spread of the virus in Denmark. Yet, for a brief period, a specific post on Mette Frederiksen's Facebook account would divert attention from the pandemic. In that month, Mette Frederiksen made a post showing her eating a traditional Danish open sandwich with mackerel and mayonnaise. This post was not the only one of its kind, as she had previously made posts that presented herself as cooking for her family, attending football games, or watching popular television programs. These posts did not go unnoticed by the Danish public and Media. The posts received a lot of social media attention and reach, and contributed to propel Frederiksen's Instagram to one of the most popular profiles in the country (Kulager, 2021). However, among the Media, the reception was more critical. Many criticized it for being part of a highly strategic and inauthentic media campaign that tried to present Frederiksen as "one of the people", and distance her from the elite she is undeniably a part of (Bager Ganderup, 2021; Kjøgx Bohr, 2021; Lykkeberg, 2021) Fast forward one year, to the Danish local election in 2021, and the Social Democrats lost large vote shares in the urban areas. Media pundits now noticed a shift in Frederiksen's communicative style. She launched her own podcast, where she would have long reflective discussions about art, culture, and societal problems with public intellectuals. She also started making social media posts about going to the theatre and what kind of books she had read recently. This was interpreted as a way to appeal to the more culturally left-leaning, cosmopolitan intellectual voters living in the urban areas, whom the Social Democrats lost in the recent campaign (Ingrisch, 2022).

The case regarding Mette Frederiksen's communicative style and the subsequent reactions and discussions in the media and the public, outlined here, are in many ways very illustrative of what this dissertation is about. First, it showcases an example of a type of communication that we have all probably seen if we follow politicians on social media. Posts that showcase politicians in everyday scenarios, and show their lifestyle preferences and activities to their followers. This is far from unique to the Danish case. In Germany, Conservative Prime Minister of Bavaria Markus Söder has claimed his own

hashtag on Instagram called #Söderisst (meaning "Söder eats"), where he shares different types of food he likes to eat. In England, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has talked openly about his support for the London-based football team Arsenal, and in the US, Joe Biden has shared his passion for vintage cars. These examples show how politicians nowadays use their social media profiles not only to communicate about their policy stances, but also to show their personal lifestyle practices.

Second, the Frederiksen case shows that these types of posts are viewed as highly strategic in the eyes of the media and public. There are two elements to this claim. First, they are strategic in the sense that these posts are perceived to communicate to specific social segments in the electorate. When Frederiksen presents herself eating traditional bread, watching football games, or cooking for her family, it is seen as a way to distance herself from the upper class or the elite, and when she makes podcasts and talks about her favorite books, it is the opposite. These shifts in signaling by Frederiksen might also illustrate that politicians might be aware of these dynamics. Furthermore, they are seen as a strategic manipulation of the electorate. It is a way to present a version of Mette Frederiksen that is closer to the people, but it is an image only; it is not an authentic view, but a highly constructed persona. It expresses an underlying fear that these posts are a way politicians present a misleading or ordinary image of themselves, which might manipulate voters and lead them to form a distorted perception of politicians.

These concerns about the impact of politicians' displays of private lifestyles have been raised by the media and the scientific literature. First, scholars have argued that information and messages that focus on politicians' private lives lead to more superficial assessments of political candidates (Balmas & Sheafer, 2016; Caprara & Vecchione, 2017; Meeks, 2016). One argument is that when politicians talk more about their lifestyle instead of their policy stances, it makes voters more likely to base their evaluation of candidates on superficial personality assessments, rather than their policy platforms (Balmas & Sheafer, 2016; McAllister, 2007; Meeks, 2016). A similar argument is given by Caprara & Vecchione (2017), who argue that these types of privatized communicative styles by politicians crowd out the substantive policy stances of politicians. Other scholars argue that these privatized lifestyle messages not only crowd out more rational policy-based evaluations of politicians, but that they might even manipulate voters. It is a way for politicians to create illusions that they are "down-to-earth", by potentially being highly strategic in how they present themselves (Enli, 2013; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). In a similar vein, others have argued it can be a way politicians can inconspicuously present themselves as representatives of the working or middle classes symbolically, even

though they might not do so in terms of the policies they pursue (Hahl et al., 2017; Pitkin, 1967; Wu et al., 2017).

These critical views by media commentators and academics can be boiled down to two core claims concerning how lifestyle-based messaging from politicians impacts democracy and the relationship between elites and voters: Lifestyle-based messaging from politicians hampers voters' ability to judge politicians in terms of policy, because it does not provide political information; and lifestyle-based messaging from politicians is inherently manipulative, strategic, and might lead voters astray. Underlying these claims is an assumption that lifestyle signaling is an effective and easy way to attract voters, without having to talk about one's policy platform. As we will see, this assumption might not be so grounded in the empirical reality as one might think.

In this dissertation, I study how these types of deliberate displays of private lifestyle preferences and activities by politicians influence voters. I term these deliberate displays of lifestyle preferences and activities *lifestyle cues*. Lifestyle cues is a broad and multifaceted concept that contains very different meanings across disciplines. In the dissertation, I define *lifestyle cues* as deliberate displays of material possessions, consumption patterns, and leisure activities to followers. Two aspects of this definition are worth highlighting. First, this definition highlights that it is *deliberate displays* of lifestyle, meaning it has to be politicians intentionally showcasing their lifestyle patterns to an audience. This mirrors what happens when politicians showcase their favorite music, which books they are reading, or what food they are eating, to their followers on social media. This is crucial, as there is an important distinction between listening to a particular kind of music and then deliberately *showing* others what one is listening to. What I am interested in is the latter, which lifestyle patterns politicians portray to voters. Second, the definition denotes what I mean by lifestyle, namely material possessions, consumption patterns, and leisure activities. This captures the material aspects of consumption, such as furniture and interior design, the type of clothes they are wearing, what type of food they like to eat, cultural consumption in the form of music or books, and activities they do in their spare time.

This dissertation examines how these lifestyle cues from politicians affect voters. The primary research question I seek to answer is the following: *How do politicians' lifestyle cues influence voter evaluations and perception?* This overall question contains three sub-questions, which I have investigated in the dissertation's three articles. First, are lifestyle cues an effective communicative tool to increase voter support? This relates to whether voters evaluate politicians more (or less) positively when politicians display lifestyle cues, and whether lifestyle cues increase voters' probability of voting for political candidates. Second, I ask whether lifestyle cues are a way to appeal to certain social

groups. That is, whether voters associate certain displays of lifestyle with certain social classes, and whether these cues are more likely to increase voting probability among those classes. Third, I ask whether lifestyle cues signal representation of specific political views? That is, whether displaying a particular lifestyle makes voters more likely to ascribe certain political views to politicians. This question looks beyond the impact on vote intention and asks whether lifestyle cues from politicians can potentially function as a heuristic for voters. In the next section, I will briefly outline my overall theoretical and empirical approach to answering these questions and present the structure of the summary.

My approach

Above, I presented a slightly pessimistic view of the role of lifestyle-based communication, expressed by both the media and scholars. In this dissertation, I offer a more optimistic outline of the role of lifestyle cues in representative democracy. A key claim of my dissertation is that lifestyle cues from politicians are clear signals of social class, and voters use these signals to form assessments of (a) what they think of the politician displaying that lifestyle; and (b) which groups and political views that politician likely represents. Based on sociological and social psychological literature, which has shown how strongly lifestyle and social class positions are tied together, there is good reason to believe voters will respond to lifestyle signals as cues and appeals to different social classes. Importantly, if this is true, lifestyle cues from politicians are not apolitical or void of political information for voters. In that case, lifestyle cues are just an alternative way to signal political allegiances to voters. As I will show later, voters actually do seem to infer political signals from politicians' lifestyles, showing that lifestyle signals might not be as apolitical as thought. Indeed, the claim that it is essentially better for democracy or that voters are more rational if politicians talk more about substantive policy also seems flawed. Yes, politicians might be strategic and manipulative when presenting their lifestyle, but that seems just as true when they talk about their policy preferences, as the literature of party competition highlights (Fenno, 1978; Green-Pedersen et al., 2020). And as lifestyle cues are arguably political, or at least provide political signals, I argue that they have to be taken seriously as political communication in political science.

I study these overall questions and claims in the context of Denmark, a multi-party system, with historically low but now rising inequality, and a setting in which lifestyle and class are closely tied, according to previous studies (Faber, 2012; Jaeger et al., 2023). As noted by the introductory example of Mette Frederiksen's Instagram, Denmark is also a case in which the displays of lifestyle in politicians' communication on social media have been discussed

by the public in recent years. Methodologically, I applied a combination of three novel survey-experimental designs to study the effects of lifestyle cues on voters. I took multiple steps to maximize the internal and external validity of the experimental designs. To maximize internal validity and ensure that I can disentangle the effect of politicians' lifestyle cues from other factors, I chose designs where I randomly assigned participants to different types of lifestyle cues. This ensures I can disentangle the effect of politicians' lifestyle cues from other factors. However, the main strength lies in the steps I have taken to maximize external validity. First, I used actual posts from Danish MPs as the stimuli in one of the experiments. Starting with a large-scale coding of all Facebook posts from Danish MPs from 2019 to 2022, to identify the relevant universe of lifestyle cues. I identified five lifestyle posts from 100 unique Danish MPs (500 in total), which I used as stimuli in the survey. In the two other experiments, I constructed posts with different lifestyle signals, based on the actual posts. I also employed this approach to identify the lifestyle signals that voters associated with different social classes and then used these observations to construct externally valid stimuli with distinct class signals. Second, I applied a stimulus sampling approach in all the survey experiments by creating multiple stimuli for each treatment category that I sampled from, so the experimental effects were not just down to one specific lifestyle signal. This was done to estimate more robust effects that take account of the variation and multidimensionality of politicians' lifestyle signals. Third, I varied the information richness across the experiments. In some cases, participants only receive very little information about the messengers, other than the lifestyle posts and their names. In other cases, where I applied actual MPs as messengers, voters receive more information, such as which party they come from. By doing so, I was able to test whether the effects are robust across different scenarios and whether the effects could be generalized to scenarios where more information about the messengers is available to voters.

Table 1.1: Overview of the articles in the dissertation

Short title	Title	Status
Paper A	Do Lifestyle Cues from Politicians Boost Voter Support?	R & R at *Political Communication*
Paper B	Punishment of Being Posh? Lifestyle Cues, Class Signals, and Voter Evaluations.	Under Review
Paper C	What do Voters Infer from the Lifestyle of Politicians?	Working Paper

I display the findings and arguments from the three solo-authored papers in the dissertation. In Paper A, I analyze whether lifestyle cues affect how voters evaluate politicians and whether they increase voters' probability of voting for

them. In the paper, I propose a dual model of how lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations. Based on previous studies of personalized and privatized content from politicians, I argue that, on the one hand, lifestyle cues might generally work as signals of closeness and warmth. This might especially be the case, given that citizens nowadays want politicians to display more "down-to-earthness" and authenticity (Clarke et al., 2018; Valgarðsson et al., 2020), and providing a glimpse of their private lifestyle activities might do exactly that. They might show voters who the politician is as a person, which creates a sort of closeness or parasocial interaction that they might not create through normal policy posts (McGregor, 2017).

On the other hand, displaying lifestyle cues might create a negative effect on the perceived competence of politicians as well. Although voters want their representatives to act down-to-earth, they also want them to act competently and solve societal problems (Clarke et al., 2018; Giger et al., 2021). When politicians talk about their lifestyle, they might signal a lack of care about the problems voters want them to solve, which might negatively impact their perceived competence. I therefore argue that displaying lifestyle cues in general is a double-edged sword for politicians and that they affect voter evaluations in these two contradictory ways. Empirically, I mainly find support for the latter effect. Across two survey experiments, I consistently find a negative effect of lifestyle cues on perceived competence, compared to when politicians talk about explicit policy issues. Furthermore, I do not find consistent evidence suggesting that lifestyle cues boost the perceived warmth and voting probability of politicians; if anything, I find the opposite pattern.

In Paper B, I focus on whether the patterns explored in Paper A are conditioned on the type of class signals that lifestyle cues provide. Some lifestyle cues, such as going to the soccer stadium, listening to traditional folk music, or eating traditional food, are particularly associated with the working class, whereas fancier and more distinctive lifestyle signals, such as fine dining, going to the royal theatre, or listening to avant-garde music, are associated with the upper classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Faber, 2012; Flemmen et al., 2018; Jaeger et al., 2023). This way of connecting lifestyle and class is a universal mechanism, and it is something citizens do rather accurately (Kraus et al., 2011; Kraus et al., 2017). As such, I argue that providing a lifestyle cue associated with a particular class might be a way to appeal to this class. I show that voters also seem to make systematic connections between MPs' lifestyle signals and their social class. Moreover, I find that voters consistently punish politicians who display upper-class lifestyle signals. Importantly, this effect even holds among voters who identify as members of the higher classes themselves.

In Paper C, I investigate whether voters use lifestyle signals as a political heuristic to form perceptions about who and what politicians represent.

Building on the argument from Paper B, I argue that voters might associate certain lifestyle signals with different political views. The argument here is that when politicians display a certain lifestyle signal to voters, it triggers considerations about the people and social groups that typically display those lifestyle preferences. I find that voters do make those inferences from politicians' lifestyle signals. Lifestyle cues associated with the working class are linked to populist parties and views, whereas high economic capital lifestyle cues are associated with mainstream right parties and economically right-wing views. Finally, high cultural capital lifestyle cues are associated with left-leaning parties and views, indicating how different types of upper-class signals can hold very different political meanings to voters.

Contributions of the dissertation

The combination of theoretical development and empirical studies provides important contributions to the literature. By studying how the lifestyle signals of politicians in their communication affect voters' evaluations and perceptions of political elites, I provide several important contributions to the literature. First, I advance the literature on the personalization of politics by focusing on lifestyle as a particularly potent type of communicative signal from politicians. Previous studies have investigated how privatized posts from politicians, such as posts about family life, leisure activities, or disclosing private information to their followers, affect citizens' evaluations of politicians (Lee & Oh, 2012; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016; Metz et al., 2019). Others focus more on the impact of personalized communication styles, such as how being more interactive or talking about individual activities rather than the party, affects voters (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012; Lee & Shin, 2012). There are clear overlaps with this literature and this dissertation, in the sense that lifestyle cues are clearly a subtype of personalized communication. However, the very different ways privatization and personalized communication have been operationalized offer little clarity in terms of what we actually study when investigating personalized communication. This is also reflected in the empirical findings, where some find that personalized or privatized communication can boost voter evaluations (Lee & Shin, 2012; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016), while others find the opposite (Giger et al., 2021). Focusing on the effects of lifestyle cues adds important nuances to previous studies of privatized communication.

A key claim of the dissertation is that to understand the consequences of lifestyle cues, we must think about lifestyle cues as social and political signals. Previous studies have largely treated posts about private life as something that is the opposite of substantial political communication and as something that has rather uniform effects across all voters (Giger et al., 2021; Lee & Oh, 2012;

McGregor, 2017; Metz et al., 2019). I argue that this view is misguided when we focus on lifestyle signals[1]. Lifestyle preferences and activities are something that to is grounded socially to a large extent, and tells us a lot about the social position and general worldviews of a person (Bourdieu, 1984; Kraus et al., 2011). Therefore, we should expect displays of lifestyle to activate considerations about social group representation and political views among voters. This might in particular be the case when the messengers are politicians, who are competing with other politicians, and can strategically choose what to advertise to their voters. Furthermore, this implies that not all lifestyle cues should be preferred equally by voters, that lifestyle cues are divisive along political and social lines. Lifestyle cues associated with the working class might be evaluated very differently depending on the social position one holds oneself in, and vice versa for upper-class lifestyle signals.

As already argued, I propose a less negative perspective on privatized communication. Lifestyle cues do contain politically relevant information to voters, which they can use to form impressions of (a) what politicians and parties represent, and (b) what they think of the representative. I show empirically that voters are not easily persuaded to evaluate politicians more positively just from posts about their lifestyle rather than their policy stances. If anything, voters like them less. This shows that voters are not necessarily so easily manipulated by politicians' lifestyle signals, and that they are able to critically evaluate those.

Second, I contribute to the literature on group appeals. A rapidly growing recent literature has examined how political parties can gain and attract voter support from particular social groups by making targeted appeals to those groups (Alamillo & Collingwood, 2017; Huber, 2021; Huber et al., 2024; Stuckelberger & Tresch, 2022; Thau, 2018). Many studies within this literature have focused on social classes, especially the working class, as the target of these appeals, either in the form of symbolic class appeals – abstract statements that you want to fight for the interests of this class (Robison et al., 2021; Thau, 2020) – or substantive class appeals – specific policy proposals that benefits a specific class (Evans et al., 2022). I contribute to this literature by theorizing how lifestyle signals can work as an alternative way for parties and politicians to appeal to social classes. In this sense, lifestyle cues can be seen as a form of symbolic class appeal. When politicians display lifestyle cues that align with a particular class, they also associate themselves with people who share those lifestyle traits, e.g., people who tend to come from this group. It is a way to present oneself as a representative of that group, even though one is

[1] I use lifestyle cues and lifestyle signals interchangeably throughout the summary.

not necessarily promoting policies that benefit the group (Robison et al., 2021).

Third, I contribute to the sociological literature of class and lifestyle by bringing those perspectives into the realm of politics. A longstanding body of research and theorization in sociology has shown how lifestyle and social position or class are closely tied (Bourdieu, 1984). This shows that our lifestyle preferences are shaped by our class position, and that we use the lifestyle of others to make inferences about their position in the social hierarchy (Flemmen et al., 2018; Jarness, 2015; Kraus et al., 2017). Others have looked at how lifestyle preferences correspond with political views and beliefs (Cavazza & Corbetta, 2016; DellaPosta, 2015; Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2021; Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024). However, none of these studies have assessed the consequences when politicians display their lifestyle to voters. This is an important addition, as these symbolic signals of lifestyle cues relate to what Bourdieu calls classification struggles, which is highly politically relevant (Bennett, 2009; Bourdieu, 1984). Although citizens from the lower class might assign higher status to particular forms of lifestyle, they still try to find ways to demarcate and distinguish themselves from the higher classes in positive ways (Westheuser & Zollinger, 2025). That might be by portraying their own lifestyle as modest, practical, or humble, in opposition to the bragging, wasteful, and snobbish lifestyles of the higher classes (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Jarness & Friedman, 2017). These classification struggles are highly relevant in politics, especially in recent years, where a growing number of voters from the lower classes appear to be feeling increasingly disenfranchised and marginalized from mainstream politics (Noordzij et al., 2021).

As argued by Noordzij and others, a part of this frustration also stems from an experience that politicians are too elitist in their lifestyle and that they lack understanding for the way of life of the working or lower class (Lamont, 2000; Noordzij et al., 2021, 2024; Westheuser et al., 2024). By signalling lifestyle cues that relate to different classes, politicians can signal a symbolic association and representation of these classes. Bringing in this perspective to the study of politicians' communication advances our understanding of both political behavior and opinion formation, and it also expands the sociological perspective of lifestyle and class by showing its broader political consequences.

Fourth, the dissertation offers methodological contributions to the field by using survey experimental designs where I maximize the external validity. Previous studies of the effects of privatized communication from politicians have tended to rely only on hypothetical stimuli from fictitious politicians (Lee & Oh, 2012; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016). One example is McGregor (2017), who studied the effects of self-personalized content on vote intention by

creating a series of posts that were either self-personalized or not from hypothetical candidates. However, these types of designs using hypothetical candidates might not necessarily mirror actual voting behavior (Hensher, 2010; McDonald, 2019). Other studies have examined the effect of different types of self-personalization, but only look at social media reactions and engagement as outcomes (Bene, 2016; Metz et al., 2019). To accommodate this challenge to the external validity of only using hypothetical politicians, I conducted one experiment where I used actual posts from Danish MPs as the stimuli. I used posts from a wide range of different MPs – 10 posts (five explicitly policy-related, five lifestyle-related) – to have a broad representation of the universe of these posts. The use of posts from actual MPs has the clear advantage of creating a more realistic scenario and boosts the external validity by using real-world politicians as the messengers. The experimental designs contribute to the literature by employing a more externally valid way of testing the effects of lifestyle cues and self-personalization in general.

I increase the conceptual validity of the experimental treatments by informing the treatment on citizens' own associations between lifestyle and class. Previous studies have used researchers' own generations of politicians' privatized or lifestyle-based messages (Giger et al., 2021; Weisstanner & Engler, 2025). However, that runs the risk of not necessarily manipulating what is desired or of being skewed representations of the concept (Skytte, 2022). To create a representative test of lifestyle cues with different class signals, I therefore first exposed citizens to actual lifestyle posts by MPs, and asked people to classify them in terms of which class they signaled. Following this, I constructed treatment stimuli based on the patterns in which posts people have classified as, e.g., working- or upper class.

Finally, I add to the literature by employing stimulus sampling designs, by creating pools of stimuli for each treatment, and then sampling the exact stimuli for each participant (Monin & Oppenheimer, 2014). Previous studies of the impact of lifestyle cues in political behavior have relied on rather simple designs, where the authors picked out a few treatment stimuli to test the effect of lifestyle (Ollroge & Sawert, 2022; Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024; Weisstanner & Engler, 2025). For instance, Weisstanner & Engler (2025), who assessed the impact of cultural class signals from politicians on vote intention, use either going to the pub to have a beer or drinking a glass of wine at home as their way of capturing class signaling in lifestyle. However, this type of design runs the risk of limiting the external validity, as the effects might not be generalizable to other types of lifestyle cues. Given that lifestyle is a multidimensional concept, and that many different lifestyle signals relate to certain class signals, this simpler design might not necessarily manipulate lifestyle signals per se, but rather specific signals. Therefore, I followed a stimulus

sampling approach where I constructed multiple stimuli for my treatment categories. This allowed me to test the effects of my treatment categories (for instance, working-class lifestyle cues) by using multiple different ways of manipulating them. It also allowed me to test whether the effects were robust across the different stimuli, and it allows me to measure more precisely which lifestyle stimuli have stronger or smaller effects. The stimulus sampling approach I followed not only increases the external validity of the average treatment effects but also adds analytical nuances, as it enabled me to more precisely estimate which specific lifestyle cues provide the strongest effects.

Outline of the summary

After having discussed the overall contributions of the dissertation, I will now move on to give a brief outline of the structure of the summary. Chapter 2 will describe the overall theoretical perspectives of the dissertation and present a theory of how lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations and perceptions. First, I will discuss the concept and definition of lifestyle cues and how they relate to concepts such as privatization, before moving on to describe the three theoretical mechanisms of how lifestyle cues affect voters. Chapter 3 will describe and discuss my methodological approach by first outlining my overall survey experimental approach and the individual studies I conducted, and then discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the overall validity and reliability of the empirical studies. Chapter 4 will outline some more descriptive findings concerning the universe of lifestyle-based posts I have classified from MPs. How prevalent are they? What types of lifestyle feature most prominently? What is the variation in terms of class signals? Which political parties are more likely to post about lifestyle cues, and which lifestyle cues do they send? Or are there some periods during the year when politicians are more likely to post about their lifestyle? This is to give an overview of the characteristics of lifestyle cues in politicians' communication.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I focus on the key findings of the dissertation, structured after the three sub-questions presented in the introduction. In Chapter 5, I examine whether lifestyle cues as a whole benefit the evaluation of and support for politicians. The results suggest that this does not seem to be the case. In Chapter 6, I examine whether the effects of lifestyle cues differ across classes and the class signals they provide. Here, I show that this does seem to be the case, but unlike what I expected, the tendency is that voters seem to punish politicians who display a higher-class lifestyle. Chapter 7 unfolds the question of whether voters use lifestyle cues as a political heuristic to form perceptions of what politicians represent. In the chapter, I show that this is the case and that different class signals in lifestyle cues are associated with representing different parties and views. Finally, I round off the summary in

Chapter 8, where I return to the overall research question by summing up all the findings and discussing the broader implications of the results. I discuss the general strengths and limitations of the dissertations, as well as pointing to directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I will outline the theoretical framework that this project builds upon. The theoretical background of the dissertation draws upon many different literatures and traditions from political science, sociology, and social psychology. I integrate these to construct the overall theoretical model of the dissertation, explaining the various ways lifestyle cues might affect voter perceptions and evaluations. The section continues as follows: First, I will elaborate on how I define lifestyle cues and how the concept relates but also differs from related concepts such as self-personalization and privatization. Second, I will briefly discuss why politicians, in the first place, might have incentives to communicate about their private lifestyles to voters, e.g., on their social media accounts. Finally, I will outline the theoretical mechanisms that explain how I expect lifestyle cues to influence voter evaluations and perceptions of politicians. I suggest three mechanisms in total:

1) *General Effect* – suggesting that politicians, generally, regardless of which lifestyle they display, are perceived as warmer but also less competent when they communicate lifestyle cues.

2) *Class Appeal Effect* – suggesting that the effect of lifestyle cues on vote intention depends on whether there is alignment between the class signals in lifestyle cues and voters' own class.

3) *Heuristic Effect* – suggesting that lifestyle cues also function as a way to infer the political opinions of politicians.

What is a lifestyle cue?

To initiate this chapter, in which I lay out the theoretical expectations of the model, it is essential first to discuss what I mean by the key concept of the dissertation: *Lifestyle cues*. In this section, I will first outline the relation to concepts such as personalization and privatization, before I describe what I mean by lifestyle cues and discuss how it differs from these related concepts.

Personalization and privatization

For quite some years now, scholars have argued that politics is becoming increasingly personalized (Garzia, 2011; McAllister, 2007). At a general level, the term personalization refers to a general shift in politics where individual actors, such as party leaders, presidents, and ministers, have gained more political power and attention at the expense of collective entities such as parties

(Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2011). However, this general term refers to a lot of different developments in politics that relate to different arenas and actors, whether it is the personalization of media attention, political communication, parties, or political processes in general (Pedersen & Rahat, 2019). While these are all interesting trends on their own to uncover, I will, for this dissertation, focus on the personalization of political communication – i.e., a development where what is communicated by and about politics is more individual politicians, and less about collective entities, mainly political parties (Van Aelst et al., 2011; Van Santen, 2010). In particular, it is the personalization of what politicians themselves choose to talk about that is relevant here, that is, a trend where politicians seemingly communicate more about themselves and their individual actions than about their party.

To describe this phenomenon, Van Santen & Van Zoonen (2010) use the term *self-personalization* to describe how the personalization of politicians' communication is a question of a strategically chosen way to create an image of oneself. The point of using the term self-personalization is also to highlight how the political elites are part of the process, and it is seen as a deliberate choice rather than just something that is imposed on them by the media (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Van Santen & Van Zoonen (2010) distinguish between three subtypes of self-personalization. Professional self-personalization relates to a focus on individual competencies and activities tied to the politician's professional endeavours (Metz et al., 2019). This could be a politician posting about the meetings they have attended during the day, or which bills they have initiated themselves, instead of focusing on the party's initiatives. This is similar to what others call individualization (Van Aelst et al., 2011). Importantly, professional self-personalization is personalized communication that relates to the representative's role as a politician.

This contrasts with what they term *private self-personalization,* which instead refers to communication about the politician's private life, or their life outside their political tasks and work (Metz et al., 2019; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). This could, for instance, be posting about doing something with their family, or holiday activities, rather than their political opinions or activities (Pedersen, 2024). The central point is that private self-personalization relates to a movement or pattern where politicians communicate about what is going on outside of their work and professional role as politicians. Instead, they present themselves as private personas and communicate about what is going on in their private lives (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Langer, 2009). This concept is similar to what others usually term *privatization* (Van Aelst et al., 2011). This also entails that private self-personalization removes focus from explicitly political matters or the explicitly political views of the politician, as that would otherwise be classified as professional self-personalization.

However, this does not mean that privatized communication cannot be implicitly political and provide political signals. It just means that posts or communication that can be labelled as private self-personalization move the object of attention from the work and professional tasks of the politician to the private life that is outside of the politician's official role.

As might already be clear, the focus of this dissertation relates closely to private self-personalization or privatization. When I am interested in looking at the effects of when politicians talk about their lifestyle, this is also a focus of what politicians do outside of their work setting, and how it impacts voters. The focus of the dissertation is not to assess whether politics is, in fact, becoming increasingly personalized or privatized, but to assess how an element of privatized communication is evaluated and perceived by citizens. In this sense, lifestyle cues are a type of or a big subcomponent of private self-personalization. But as I will demonstrate below, I also see lifestyle cues as something different and not entirely similar to private self-personalization. Before I do that, I will next elaborate on precisely what I mean when I use the term lifestyle cue in this dissertation.

A definition of lifestyle cues

Lifestyle is a term that is used differently across a wide array of literatures, ranging from referring to general personality types or worldviews to health or consumption. I do not aim to settle this discussion or the different meanings here. When I refer to lifestyle, I follow how it is often used in the social sciences, namely as explicit actions or observable behaviors that reflect underlying goals, societal positions, and values (Petev, 2013). The important point here is that lifestyle is behavior: It is the implicit, behavioral manifestations of our underlying views or values. In this dissertation, I do not define lifestyle as the same as our underlying values or social position, as that would conflate the terms. I instead see lifestyle as something that is shaped by our worldviews and as something that expresses them, but in an implicit way (Cavazza & Corbetta, 2016).

When referring to lifestyle, scholars usually talk about three different categories or dimensions: 1) leisure activities and hobbies in general, e.g., recurring ways to spend leisure time such as knitting, fitness, or reading (Petev, 2013); 2) cultural consumption, e.g., relating to what kind of cultural products and activities a person knows about and likes to enjoy, such as music, art, or sports (Bronner & de Hoog, 2018; Devine, 2005); 3) material possessions, e.g., what material goods a person spends their money on, such as furniture, vehicles, food, etc. The latter two relate closely to the distinction between material and experiential consumption in consumer psychology (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). In this sense, I see lifestyle as the way we perform and express

underlying tastes, habits, and social position via our material possessions, leisure activities, and cultural consumption.

However, in the dissertation, I am not only interested in lifestyle, but lifestyle *cues by politicians*. The phenomenon I am studying is not necessarily which lifestyle activities and preferences politicians might have, but the lifestyle they *show* to their audience. By lifestyle cues, I refer to *messages by politicians (to voters) displaying manifestations of their consumption patterns, material possessions, and leisure activities*. These might be posts or messages about representatives showing them at a concert, sports game, running, presenting their home décor, etc. This definition also highlights that lifestyle cues are not explicitly political, but focus on the politician as a private person(a). Therefore, any direct mention of policy or ideological positioning is incompatible with this definition.

Lifestyle cues vs. privatization

As I already mentioned, lifestyle cues can be seen as a subcomponent of private self-personalized communication. Posts or messages from politicians that focus on aspects of their private lives will often relate to their leisure hobbies or cultural consumption, and/or material possessions. However, as I will argue in this section, lifestyle cues differ from private self-personalization for two primary reasons.

First, not all privatized posts necessarily contain lifestyle cues. Lifestyle cues specifically mention the politician's leisure hobbies, cultural or material consumption, but we can easily imagine politicians sharing something from their private life that does not relate to that. Pedersen (2024), for instance, defines a social media post as private if it: (a) relates to events in personal life; (b) relates to non-political news or issues; (c) mentions persons who stand in personal relations to the politician, and (d) describes non-political activities. All these categories might likely contain lifestyle cues, but that is not necessarily the case. A politician merely mentioning their wife, a friend, or their children in a post is not saying or signaling anything about their lifestyle. A politician who mentions they went to a party or another event is not saying much about their lifestyle preferences. We can also think of a politician posting that they wish their followers a good day, praising the weather, and so on. These types of messages state something about the politician's private life, yet they do not give anything away about the politician's preferred leisure activities, cultural consumptions, or material possessions. In this sense, we can arguably conceive of privatized posts that are not lifestyle cues.

Second, I would argue that lifestyle signals are a particularly potent and politically salient type of privatization. Previous studies on the effects of self-personalization and privatization have focused on these types of communi-

cation as a means of priming the politician's private persona (Giger et al., 2021; McGregor, 2017; Meeks, 2016). In this sense, privatized posts have been viewed as a means to promote the perceived "humanness" of the political messenger (Lee & Oh, 2012; Lee et al., 2018). According to this line of thought, privatization works by increasing the perceived closeness and intimacy between the receiver and the politician, because we get to know them better as private individuals (McGregor, 2017). More generally, we can say that privatized communication affects voters by saying something about the *personal* character of the messenger. While this might certainly also be the case when focusing on lifestyle cues, I argue that lifestyle cues provide more information than the personal character of the politician. Previous studies have overlooked that messages about politicians' lifestyles not only provide this personalized component but also contain important *social and thereby political* signals. Because lifestyle cues are also implicit expressions of underlying habits, tastes, and social position, they convey social cues to citizens, indicating which social groups they cater to and are associated with. Therefore, lifestyle cues might not only reveal the type of person the politician is but also signal their association with specific social groups and, downstream, the type of people they represent. This matters because it highlights how lifestyle signals also might be socially and politically divisive, depending on the *kind of* lifestyle cues politicians communicate. Not all types of lifestyle cues might increase the perceived closeness or intimacy, but might do the opposite, if it is a lifestyle cue that is associated with the upper class being received by a working-class voter.

For these two reasons, namely that not all privatized posts are lifestyle cues, and that the lifestyle cues are more than "just" privatization, I argue that lifestyle cues are a distinct concept that adds an important contribution to the literature. In the next section, I will describe the overall theoretical model of how I expect lifestyle to influence how voters evaluate politicians.

The theoretical mechanisms: How lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations and perceptions

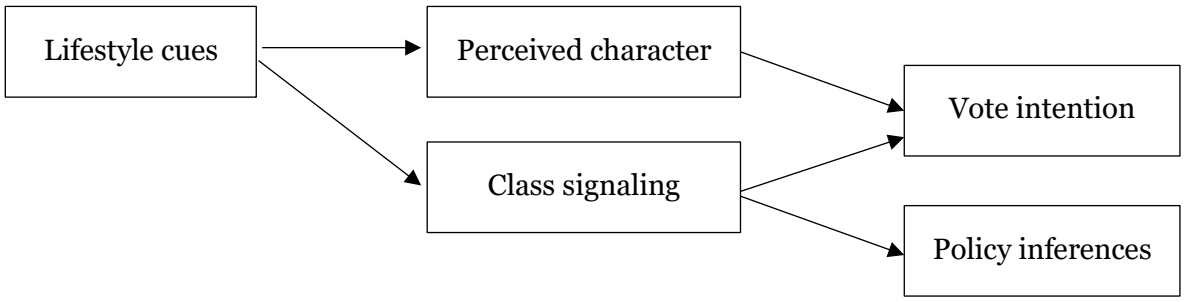
In this section, I outline the overall theoretical expectations of the effects of lifestyle cues on voters. As mentioned in the introduction of the chapter, the theoretical expectations outline three separate effects of how lifestyle signals affect voters. First, I argue that lifestyle cues might work through a *general effect* on voters' assessment of their personal character. Building on previous studies of privatization, I suggest that communicating lifestyle cues, regardless of the kind of lifestyle signal shown, increases the perceived warmth and sympathy for politicians, because they are perceived as more down-to-earth, and voters might feel they know them more intimately when they share their

lifestyle. On the other hand, I argue that lifestyle cues might negatively impact the perceived competence of politicians, because they signal less attentiveness to solving societal problems.

Second, I propose that lifestyle cues have a *class appeal effect,* suggesting that the effects of lifestyle cues on voters' likelihood of voting for politicians depend on the class signals being displayed in their lifestyle cues. The point here is that we should not expect lifestyle cues to have the same effect on all voters, as the effect will likely differ depending on whether the class signals displayed in politicians' lifestyles align with voters' personal class positions.

Finally, I suggest that lifestyle cues also have a *heuristic effect* on voters, where they not only affect voters' probability of voting for political figures but also can be used to infer which political views they represent. Because lifestyle signals also align with political attitudes in the electorate, we should expect lifestyle cues to be used as a heuristic by voters to infer politicians' political views and partisanship. Figure 2.1 displays an overview of the theoretical expectations in the dissertation.

Figure 2.1. Overview of the dissertation's theoretical expectations



General effect: Lifestyle cues as signals of personal character

I expect lifestyle cues to affect voters directly by affecting how warm and competent politicians are perceived. However, I expect lifestyle cues to affect these two components in opposing ways. Politicians can be thought of as facing an inherent marketing problem (Busby, 2009). On the one hand, they live relatively privileged lives. They earn a rather high salary, and through their jobs, they gain access to and build powerful social networks, where they mingle with influential people. Furthermore, they must display that they are capable individuals with strong competencies to gain political recognition from their colleagues and from voters. On the other hand, politicians cannot afford to be perceived as very elitist and out of touch with ordinary people (Clarke et al., 2018). If politicians are seen as belonging to a detached class or the elite, that may very well lead to political dissatisfaction (Allen, 2018; Devine et al., 2025).

Consequently, politicians also have an incentive to signal a distance from elitism and to signal that they are ordinary and down-to-earth. Citizens seem to hold contradictory beliefs about the personal character of a good politician, which puts politicians in a tricky situation (Clarke et al., 2018). Citizens expect politicians to be knowledgeable, intelligent, and competent, and simultaneously authentic, ordinary, down-to-earth, and someone you can have a good chat with at the supermarket (Clarke et al., 2018; Valgarðsson et al., 2020). Most studies suggest that citizens see politicians as generally out of touch with ordinary people and lacking authenticity (Noordzij et al., 2021; Valgarðsson et al., 2020). Valgardsson et al. (2021) argue that politicians today are facing an "authenticity gap". Studies of which stereotypes citizens have of politicians indicate that they tend to see them as competent, but also as lacking warmth and sympathy (Fiske & Durante, 2014).

So why might politicians have incentives to showcase their lifestyle to voters? One reason for this is that it might be a way to remedy the inherent marketing problem that they face (Busby, 2009). By presenting themselves in everyday scenarios, such as going to concerts, going on holiday with their family, or going for a run, they step outside of their formal role as politicians and into a private role that appears more relatable to the average citizen (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Metz et al., 2019; Page & Duffy, 2016). Politicians who display their lifestyle interests, preferences, and activities on their social media profiles can present themselves in more ordinary and relatable situations to voters. Many citizens might not know a lot about what is going on in politics, and understand how many of the activities politicians do relate to them (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), but they can most certainly relate to a politician going to a concert or eating their favorite meal. Lifestyle cues might not only make politicians more relatable but also make voters feel like they know the political messenger on a more intimate level (Lee et al., 2018). Providing lifestyle cues might increase what is called parasocial relationships, meaning that voters might perceive a stronger and more intimate identification and relation to the politician (Gabriel et al., 2018; Horton, 1956; Meyrowitz, 1986; Paravati et al., 2020; Stehr et al., 2015; Tsfati et al., 2021).

In other words, displays of lifestyle have a positive impact on candidate evaluations compared to political cues, primarily via increasing feelings of sympathy. There are good reasons to expect that increased sympathy will have downstream effects and lead to an increased probability of voting for an MP, as shown in Figure 1. For example, previous studies have found perceived warmth towards a candidate as a very strong predictor of vote intention (Laustsen & Bor, 2017).

However, lifestyle cues could also cause a backlash effect. If politicians post about their lifestyle, that could distract from what voters see as the real

purpose of politicians, and it will challenge what voters expect from them (Giger et al., 2021). Citizens generally care a lot about the professional competence of politicians and whether they are intelligent and hard-working (Bittner, 2011). It might be that politicians need to appear warm and ordinary, but studies suggest value politicians' competence over their warmth (Cowley, 2013; McCurley & Mondak, 1995). Furthermore, voters might value substantive representation – i.e., representation of policy preferences – very highly (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010; Schwindt-Bayer, 2005). Citizens may generally expect politicians to focus on the most central political issues of the day, and posting about what they do in their private lives could therefore come across as unserious. Therefore, there are good reasons to believe that lifestyle cues will negatively impact the perceived competence of politicians.

Another reason providing lifestyle cues might damage perceived competence is that the lifestyle-based messages might be seen as inauthentic or strategic. Citizens might already have an idea that politicians display their lifestyle preferences to appear more ordinary or that they do so in a staged and strategic way (Enli, 2013; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). This might especially be the case if the posts seem too out of character for the politician. In this sense, lifestyle-based posts might hurt the competence, not because they signal a lack of attentiveness to the political problems they should face, but because they are perceived as inauthentic. Following this mechanism, one might even argue that lifestyle cues could potentially hurt the perceived warmth of politicians, as voters might perceive politicians as strategic and negative intentions when making the lifestyle cues to begin with.

Overall, I suggest that lifestyle cues have a *general effect* on voter evaluations, which I expect will be observed regardless of the type of lifestyle cues politicians display. The theoretical mechanism presented in this section is a generalized effect. Both theoretical arguments suggested in this section argue that lifestyle cues affect the perceived personal character of politicians, which in turn affects voters' probability of voting for politicians. On the one hand, I expect lifestyle cues to positively impact the perceived warmth of political figures, which might positively impact voters' likelihood of voting. On the other hand, lifestyle cues might negatively affect the level of competence perceived by voters, which might lower the likelihood of voting.

Class appeal effect: Lifestyle cues as class signals

In this section, I present a second theoretical mechanism that clearly differs from previous studies of privatization, suggesting that the effects of politicians' lifestyle signals on vote intention depend on the kind of lifestyle they communicate. Lifestyle relates to social class signals, and how voters react to politicians' lifestyle signals should depend heavily on which class cues they

showcase, and whether that aligns with voters' own class. In the following, I outline why lifestyle cues from politicians should be associated with class signals. Then I explain which type of lifestyle signals voters might react most positively (or negatively) to. Voters might either display *a baseline class-preference*, where they, regardless of their own class, evaluate politicians who provide lifestyle cues with certain class signals more positively (or negatively), or follow a *class-affinity preference,* where they prefer politicians who display lifestyle cues associated with their own class.

Lifestyle and social stratification

An old tradition in sociological research, and later in social psychology, has argued and shown that lifestyle is inherently social class and status differences in society (Kraus et al., 2017). Originally, Veblen argued that the higher classes used their conspicuous consumption to show off their high social ranking to others (Veblen, 2005). Max Weber argued that groups with different social positions tended to share similar lifestyles (Weber, 2018). However, the theoretical connection was fully provided and adapted to a more modern connection with Bourdieu's theory of class and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). According to this theory, lifestyle is a product of the economic and cultural capital that individuals have acquired throughout their lives (Bourdieu, 1984, 2004). The accumulation and composition of these two forms of capital tend to produce a particular outlook and habitual way of processing the world, a *habitus,* which is reflected behaviorally in our lifestyles (Harrits, 2013). In this sense, lifestyles are a reflection of an individual's class position, but it also becomes a symbolic way for individuals to demonstrate their belonging to certain social groups (Bennett, 2009; Faber, 2012). Importantly, it is a way that people can differentiate and demarcate themselves from other classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Lamont, 2000).

This leads to a general stratification of lifestyle preferences across the social space, based on citizens' class position. Higher-class individuals tend to prefer and consume goods that are exclusive, sophisticated, unique, and distinct, as a way to signal a higher position than others (Faber, 2012; Jarness, 2015). As outlined above, we can generally classify lifestyle activities and patterns into different class categories. Within the higher classes, we can distinguish between lifestyles associated with high *economic* and *cultural capital*. The former is usually associated with lifestyle patterns that signal material wealth, expressed in exclusive, extravagant, and unique tastes in material possessions (Bronner & de Hoog, 2018; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). This can include the possession of expensive brands of furniture, exclusive cars, or home décor. In contrast, high cultural capital is usually associated with preferences for exclusive, unique, and sophisticated cultural tastes and activities (Jarness,

2015; Prieur & Savage, 2015). This can be going to fancy art exhibitions, operas, or reading sophisticated books. At the other end of the spectrum, working-class or low-capital cues are associated with displays of lifestyle patterns emphasizing simplicity, traditionalism, and practicality, as well as a distaste for everything that is considered "fancy" and "posh" (Faber, 2012; Jarness, 2015). Given that lifestyle preferences and activities among the working class are typically not differentiated by cultural or economic resources, I do not make a distinction here (Flemmen et al., 2018).

Later empirical studies inspired by Bourdieu have largely shown that this pattern and relationship between lifestyle preferences hold across different countries, although with some nuances[2] (Jaeger et al., 2023; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Petev, 2013). Citizens use the lifestyle signals of others, such as their way of dressing, Facebook profile pictures, and interior design, as a relatively accurate heuristic to assess the social status or class of others (Becker et al., 2017; Dittmar & Pepper, 1994; Kraus et al., 2017). Jæger et al (2023) also find that citizens, irrespective of their social ranking, tend to order different lifestyle practices, such as types of music and art, in a similar way in terms of their status. These findings indicate how the lifestyle of others tends to be *classed* in the minds of voters, and that citizens tend to associate class and lifestyle in a similar way.

Thus, there are good reason to expect voters to associate different lifestyle signals from polititicians to different classes. When politicians, for example, present lifestyle cues commonly associated with the working class, voters are more likely to perceive them as belonging to that class. From this perspective, lifestyle cues can be understood as a form of class-based group appeal that activates a cognitive association between the politician and a specific social class (Dassoneville, 2022; Huber, 2021; Huber et al., 2024; Robison et al., 2021; Thau, 2020). However, existing research that examines explicit appeals to groups such as the working class – typically through policy-based or symbolic messaging – has not assessed whether lifestyle cues themselves operate as class appeals (Evans et al., 2022; Robison et al., 2021). Lifestyle cues may instead function as more implicit class appeals, insofar as they convey class affiliation without explicitly naming it. Moreover, lifestyle cues may be as effective as explicit policy or symbolic appeals because they involve demonstrating class belonging rather than explicitly asserting it. Within this framework,

[2] Another general tendency is that higher-class individuals tend to consume and take part in a larger variety of cultural products and activities compared to lower-class individuals. This has led to a general discussion of the concept of "omnivorousness" in which some claim that lifestyle and consumption are not based so much on class anymore (Peterson & Kern 1995), and some claim that omnivorousness is just a new dimension of class-based lifestyle and consumption (Jarness 2015).

lifestyle cues can be conceptualized as specific, implicit representative claims that link politicians to particular social groups.

A baseline or affinity preference?

I have argued why lifestyle cues by politicians are likely to be perceived by citizens as class signals. The next question is in what way these class signals influence voters' assessments of politicians, and whether some types of lifestyle cues are more or less popular in the eyes of voters. I suggest that we could imagine two effects that guide how class signals from lifestyle cues affect voters. On the one hand, it could be a *baseline class preference,* where all voters will generally tend to prefer politicians showing a more relatable lifestyle, or show a distaste for politicians displaying an upper-class lifestyle. On the other hand, it could be a *class-affinity preference,* which is more of a heterogeneous effect where voters will be expected to prefer politicians showing lifestyle cues that align more closely with voters' own class. In the next section, I will outline these two mechanisms.

Assuming that lifestyle cues can be sorted by their class signals, and citizens have a rather similar understanding of what social class ordering particular lifestyle activities or preferences signal (Jaeger et al., 2023), we can expect lifestyle cues from politicians to provide important social signals that impact what voters think of them. The crucial point here is that, unlike what I argued drives the *general effect, the type of lifestyle cue* politicians show matters for what voters think of them. Lifestyle cues provide social cues to voters about which group politicians represent and come from, and these cues trigger voters' own group-based identities and attitudes (Conover, 1988; Kinder & Dale-Riddle, 2012). When a politician shows themselves going to the opera or eating at an expensive restaurant, they give a very different social class representation of themselves, compared to if they went to a football game or a country concert. And these differences might likely impact how voters assess and evaluate politicians.

We can imagine voters might show a *baseline class preference* (Vivyan et al., 2020). That is, voters will show a preference or distaste towards politicians' sending particular lifestyle cues. This preference is shown to the same extent across all voters. In general, I expect voters to evaluate politicians displaying relatable, middle-class lifestyle cues most positively, compared to lower- or upper-class cues. Based on the stereotype content model, we know individuals' perceptions and evaluations of others are colored by (the others) class positioning (Durante et al., 2017). People in upper-class positions are more likely to be characterized as cold, but also perceived as competent (Cuddy et al., 2009; Cuddy et al., 2008). Conversely, people in lower-class positions are stereotyped as being warm but incompetent (Durante et al., 2017;

Fiske & Markus, 2012). Thus, individuals tend to hold ambivalent stereotypes towards people from different ends of the class spectrum. The middle class, though, is usually perceived as relatively competent and warm at the same time, seen as an idealized and neutral reference group (Durante et al., 2017). This fits with studies indicating that voters hold relatively positive attitudes toward political candidates from neutral reference groups in the middle of the social hierarchy, compared to higher-class individuals (Campbell & Cowley, 2013a, 2013b; Carnes & Sadin, 2015; Wüest, 2018). In this sense, the baseline class preference mirrors the general effect model I argued in favor of earlier. But the key addition is that not all lifestyle cues will have similar effects on warmth and competence but will vary depending on the class signal they provide.

Based on this argument, lifestyle cues associated with the middle class may be evaluated more positively than other lifestyle signals. One reason for this is that voters might be more likely to perceive politicians as members of the middle class, and thereby as descriptive representatives of a broad social group that most people identify with. This might be especially relevant in a Danish context, where around 40-50 percent of the population usually identifies as middle class members (Stubager & Harrits, 2022). Another reason is that politicians are perceived as more down-to-earth and relatable when they provide middle-class lifestyle cues, even though voters are aware that MPs are from rather privileged classes (Devine et al., 2025). Working-class lifestyle appeals might simply come across as too strategic and inauthentic because voters are aware that MPs are not from the working class (Fiske & Durante, 2014). Furthermore, studies have shown that people evaluate higher-class members more positively when they signal a more down-to-earth lifestyle (Flemmen et al., 2019; Hahl et al., 2017; Hahl, 2014; Lamont, 2000).

Another version of this mechanism is that voters might show a clear preference for politicians displaying a middle class lifestyle, but distaste towards politicians' showcasing an upper-class lifestyle. In this sense, it is more of a baseline class dislike. Voters tend to show a dislike for political candidates that comes from upper-class conditions, such as being rich and highly educated (Campbell & Cowley, 2013a; Noordzij et al., 2021; Vivyan et al., 2020). This can be because voters tend to view politicians from the higher classes as out of touch and not very relatable to most people (Allen, 2018; Heath, 2015, 2018). Citizens tend to associate politicians with resourceful and well-off social groups (Devine et al., 2025; Fiske, 2019; Fiske & Durante, 2014), and if politicians display lifestyle signals that also associate them with these groups, these negative stereotypes might be further strengthened.

Conversely, citizens might be expected to prefer politicians who display lifestyle cues associated with their *own class*. This I call a *class affinity*

preference. This adds a layer of complexity to the theoretical expectations. Where the baseline class preference model suggests that all voters will evaluate different types of lifestyle cues differently, the class affinity mechanism suggests that the effects of different types of lifestyle cues also vary based on voters' social class positioning. Put more simply, the claim is that we should not expect a working-class voter and an upper-class voter to evaluate a politician displaying a working-class lifestyle cue similarly. This claim builds on the general logic that people usually like others who are comparable to themselves and tend to evaluate information more positively if messengers are perceived to be similar (Berscheid, 1994; Liviatan et al., 2008; Mackie & Wright, 2003). Lifestyle signals might be seen as cues that politicians are representatives of individuals' in-groups, which might make them more likely to perceive the politician favorably (Tajfel, 1982; Turner et al., 1979). People may see politicians displaying lifestyle cues associated with their own class as good representatives of their group, and as someone who understands them(Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Carnes & Sadin, 2015; Heath, 2015). In a recent study, down-to-earth cultural appeals about going to a pub were shown to be most positively evaluated by working-class voters, suggesting an example of how this pattern plays out empirically (Weisstanner & Engler, 2025).

From a more Bourdieusian perspective, one might argue that citizens use lifestyle signals as symbolic boundary markers to clearly create demarcation between classes (Faber, 2012; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Lamont, 2000). Lifestyle symbols become a way to highlight people's own class, moral, and symbolic position, and to frame their own class in a more positive light (Flemmen et al., 2022; Jarness & Friedman, 2017). Lower class and working class people may perceive the upper class as wasteful, elitist, and out of touch because of their extravagant and conspicuous lifestyles (Faber, 2012), whereas higher class individuals might perceive lower- or working-class people as unsophisticated and traditional due to their lifestyle (Jarness & Friedman, 2017). When voters are exposed to politicians displaying lifestyle cues associated with their class, we should expect these positive interpretations and stereotypes of their in-group to be activated, and the opposite to occur when they see lifestyle cues associated with an out-group.

This section has outlined two additional mechanisms for how lifestyle cues impact voters' evaluations and support for politicians. Both mechanisms differ from the *general effect* model by suggesting that we need to take the class signals of lifestyle cues into account to understand how they are received by voters. The baseline class preference mechanism suggests that voters evaluate politicians displaying a more mainstream, middle-class lifestyle class most positively. An alternative version of this suggests that voters specifically show a dislike for upper-class lifestyle politicians. Secondly, the class affinity

mechanism suggests that voters will prefer politicians who display lifestyle cues associated with their own class.

In the next section, I will outline the last block of the theoretical expectations and argue how these lifestyle class cues not only affect voters' direct evaluations of politicians but also can function as political heuristics for voters.

Heuristic effect: Lifestyle cues as political heuristics

In the following, I will argue why lifestyle cues from politicians can serve as a political heuristic for voters, helping them make inferences about which political views politicians represent. These arguments build largely on the previous section. Because lifestyle cues can be expected to be associated with different social classes and groups, I expect this to have implications for not only how politicians are evaluated, but also which political views they are perceived to represent.

As outlined above, we can generally classify lifestyle activities and patterns into different class categories. Within the higher classes, we can distinguish between lifestyles associated with high *economic* and *cultural capital*. The former is associated with lifestyle cues signaling material wealth and unique and exclusive material possessions. These can be labelled high economic lifestyle cues. The latter is associated with unique, sophisticated, exclusive cultural tastes and activities, and can be labelled as high cultural lifestyle cues. Even though both signal higher class and status, it is an important distinction as the two types of lifestyle cues relate to very different groups in society (high-income groups vs. university-educated people living in urban areas), which also hold rather opposing values (cosmopolitanism vs. libertarianism) (Flemmen et al., 2022; Harrits, 2013). It is therefore likely that voters might make different inferences about politicians when exposed to these two cues.

I theorize that voters will make clear inferences about the views of politicians based on the classed signals in their lifestyle cues. Lifestyle will likely trigger group-based inferences among voters, which then inform their perceptions of the politician's views. When exposed to lifestyle cues from politicians, e.g., signaling high cultural capital, voters will likely associate the politician with the political stances of the social groups normally displaying such lifestyles. Given that the lifestyle cues map on differently across social and political divides, I theorize that voters will make very different inferences about the issue stances and ideological leanings of politicians depending on which lifestyle cue they signal.

First, lifestyle cues linked to high levels of cultural capital – such as reading philosophically oriented literature, appreciating modern art, or consuming non-traditional cuisine – are strongly associated with highly educated voters and, more broadly, with residents of urban areas (Faber, 2012; Flemmen

et al., 2018). These forms of cultural consumption are likely to carry political connotations that mirror the political orientations of these groups. Indeed, Flemmen et al. (2022) demonstrate that individuals high in cultural capital disproportionately endorse culturally progressive positions, including support for refugee assistance, deeper European integration, and stronger climate action. Urban, highly educated citizens have also been shown to emphasize cultural openness and cosmopolitanism as a means of constructing symbolic distinctions between political in-groups and out-groups (Ollroge & Sawert, 2022; Prieur & Savage, 2013; Zollinger, 2022). Moreover, lifestyle-related symbols are frequently employed by observers to characterize left-leaning, cosmopolitan voters (Westheuser & Zollinger, 2025; Zollinger, 2022). Taken together, this suggests that voters may be inclined to interpret politicians who display high cultural capital lifestyle cues as culturally left-leaning, particularly on issues such as immigration and law and order (Bornschier et al., 2024). These inferences may further extend to partisan perceptions, as voters are likely to associate such cues with parties commonly perceived as representing these cultural positions (Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2021; Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024).

Second, lifestyle cues reflecting high economic capital – such as purchasing luxury home décor, driving expensive cars, or owning property in affluent neighborhoods – are commonly associated with upper-class or wealthy social positions (Jarness, 2015). Empirical research shows that individuals high in economic capital not only engage in these consumption patterns but also tend to share distinctive political preferences. Specifically, they are more likely to hold economically right-leaning views, favoring lower taxation and limited redistribution, and to support mainstream right-wing parties (Flemmen et al., 2022; Nicholson & Segura, 2012). Exposure to lifestyle cues signaling high economic capital may therefore prompt voters to infer that politicians endorsing such cues align with economically conservative positions (Ahler & Sood, 2018).

Third, lifestyle cues associated with the working class are likely to convey more ambiguous political signals. Groups characterized by low levels of both cultural and economic capital have long been understood as politically cross-pressured. Since Lipset, scholarship has documented how working- and lower-class citizens are often situated between economic egalitarianism and cultural authoritarianism (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). More recent evidence similarly indicates that individuals with low overall capital accumulation frequently combine economically left-leaning preferences with culturally right-leaning attitudes (Flemmen et al., 2022) As a result, lifestyle cues linked to lower-class positions may generate divergent political inferences across the two ideological dimensions. Low-capital lifestyle signals may first and

foremost activate perceptions of affiliation with working-class or economically marginalized groups, which could translate into expectations of economically progressive policy stances. At the same time, these cues may also be interpreted through the lens of the cultural cleavage, functioning as symbolic opposition to a culturally liberal, cosmopolitan elite, thus being associated with more culturally conservative positions (Zollinger, 2022).

Finally, I do not expect voters to make strong inferences based on middle class lifestyle cues. As the middle class lifestyle is generally a rather vague and neutral category, usually associated with things such as mundane holiday activities, museum visits, and mainstream home décor, I do not expect this to be associated with specific political views.

This section has laid out the main theoretical expectations and foundations of the dissertation. I theorize that lifestyle cues affect voters' evaluations and perceptions of politicians in three different ways. First, they might have a *general effect* on the perceived personal character traits of politicians. I expect lifestyle cues, in general, to make politicians appear more relatable and warmer, but at the same time, that might come at the cost of their perceived competence. Second, I theorize that lifestyle cues might have a *class appeal effect*, whereby voter reactions are contingent on the class signals that are sent. Finally, I theorize that lifestyle cues not only affect voter evaluations and the probability of voting for candidates but also the perceived policy positions of politicians. In this sense, lifestyle cues might have a heuristic effect, where voters are able to infer politicians' policy positions based on their lifestyle signals. In the next chapter, I will describe how I have analyzed these expectations empirically.

Chapter 3: Methodological approach

How do I approach studying these theoretical expectations empirically? Specifically, how do I approach studying the *causal* effect of politicians' lifestyle cues? Overall, my approach relies on survey experiments and quantitative methods to assess how exposure to lifestyle signals from politicians affects voters. In total, I collected three separate survey experiments as well as a collection of Facebook posts from Danish MPs that I use to uncover the questions I have put forward in the previous sections. In this section, I describe why I chose survey experiments to study the impact of lifestyle cues on voters, the challenges that arise from that, and what I did to remedy these challenges. I also discuss the choice of Denmark as a case, and why I focus on social media posts as the relevant type of lifestyle cues.

From a general point of view, there are many ways one could choose to study how lifestyle cues from politicians affect voters' evaluations and perceptions. One approach would be to present a smaller group of people with different examples of lifestyle cues from politicians on social media, and then interview them in-depth about their thoughts when they see such posts. Such an approach would be helpful to understand what people might think about when they are exposed to politicians' lifestyle cues, and how they make sense of them. Yet, it would not necessarily help us answer whether lifestyle cues change voters' perceptions and evaluations of politicians across the general population. Another straightforward approach would be to go out and interview different people and show them examples of posts from several prominent politicians' social media platforms, where they display their lifestyle, and then afterward ask people what they think of them. However, that approach would have three immediate problems. First, we would not know whether people's responses are because of the posts they have seen, or because they just generally like or dislike the specific politician. Maybe they are strong Social Democrats, and, therefore, really like posts from the Danish prime minister, while disliking posts from a right-wing party leader, regardless of what they post about. Second, just showing people lifestyle posts from a politician and asking what they think of the politician afterwards does not tell us whether the lifestyle posts *affected* people's evaluation. This is because we do not have any baseline to compare people's responses to, in order to determine whether the lifestyle posts changed their evaluation. Either we would need to ask them what they think of the politician *before* and *after* they see the post to measure whether their assessment changed, or we would have to show them a different

type of post from the same politician and then see if they evaluate them differently. Third, asking random people we meet on the street does not necessarily tell us how voters in general might react to lifestyle cues. People who live close to you, especially if you work in a university, are quite likely to be a skewed representation of the general population. Luckily, survey experimental approaches can help us overcome some of these problems. In the next section, I will describe why I opted for a survey-experimental approach, as well as which challenges might arise from that.

Why survey experiments?

To study whether lifestyle cues directly *affect* what voters think of and how they evaluate politicians, we would ideally have a scenario where a politician was displaying a lifestyle cue on their social media platform, and at the same time, the same politician, in the exact same circumstances, displaying a non-lifestyle cue on their social media platform to the exact same people (Angrist & Pischke, 2014). Of course, in reality, this is not entirely possible. However, with the use of survey experiments, we can approximate the scenario just described. First, survey experiments help researchers control which participants see what. I can, therefore, control that some participants are exposed to lifestyle-based posts, while others are exposed to other types of content. This gives me a level of control over what people are exposed to that I would not have if I studied what people saw on their actual social media profiles, where algorithms exert great influence over what people see. This control also allows me to create a scenario that mimics the ideal scenario above. By creating experimental conditions where I keep as many factors as possible *constant*, except for whether participants are exposed to lifestyle cues or not, I can create a scenario where the context and circumstances under which people are exposed to the posts are kept the same. I can create posts where the messenger, the party they come from, the post length, and other factors are kept the same, except that some of the posts contain lifestyle cues and others do not.

Second, by *randomly* dividing participants into those who receive the posts with lifestyle cues and those who do not, I can create a scenario where *the people* who are exposed to lifestyle cues (treatment group) are, *on average,* like the ones who are not exposed to the lifestyle cues (control group). This randomization is crucial because it allows me to directly compare the evaluations of the people who receive the lifestyle cues to those who do not. I can use this difference to estimate the effect of lifestyle cues from politicians. Finally, online survey experiments enable me to reach a larger and more representative share of the population than I would be able to in a lab setting. This allows me to be able to generalize the findings to the broader Danish population (Mutz, 2011).

Online survey experiments typically face several limitations, especially related to external validity, our trust in whether the findings from the survey experiments can be generalized outside of the experiment. These limitations arise as a direct consequence of the advantages of survey experiments. They create a controlled scenario, where things are kept constant, except for the treatment. However, this also means that survey experiments often create slightly artificial situations detached from how people experience political messages in real life (Egami & Hartman, 2022; Hensher, 2010). In the next sections, I will discuss three relevant limitations and what I did in the dissertation to take account of the challenges. I will discuss: The use of unrealistic and extreme treatments; The use of single treatments; The challenge of keeping all else equal. In Table 3.1, I show an overview of the experiments I conducted.

Table 3.1. Overview of studies in the dissertation

Paper	Study	Type of stimuli	Treatment categories	Main outcomes	Number of stimuli	Randomization procedure	N	Dates
A	1	Facebook posts from Danish MPs	• Lifestyle • Political	• Warmth • Competence • Vote intention	1000 unique posts – 500 posts for each treatment category	Participants randomly exposed to 5 different posts in 5 different rounds	N (obs) = 7530 N (participants) = 1506	March 20–April 4, 2024
A	2	Posts from hypothetical Danish MPs	• Lifestyle • Political • Control	• Warmth • Competence • Vote intention	20 unique policy posts. 30 unique lifestyle posts	Participants were randomly exposed to 5 different posts in 5 different rounds	N (obs) = 9265 N (participants) = 1853	December 17–27, 2024
B + C	2	Posts from hypothetical Danish MPs	• Working class • Middle class • Higher class	• Vote intention (Paper B) • Perceived ideological position (Paper C)	10 unique stimuli for each treatment category	Participants were randomly exposed to 5 different posts in 5 different rounds	N (obs) = 3091 (the subset exposed to lifestyle cues) N (participants) = 1853	December 17–27, 2024
C	3	Series of posts from hypothetical candidates for the local election	• Control • Working class • High cultural capital • High economic capital	• Perceived issue stances • Perceived partisanship	10 unique stimuli for each treatment category	Participants were randomly assigned to 3 unique “feeds” of different candidates	N (obs) = 4590 N (participants) = 1530	July 8–17, 2025
C	1	Facebook posts from Danish MPs, only the ones categorized as lifestyle posts	• Working class • Middle class • High cultural capital • High economic capital	• Perceived ideological position	500 lifestyle posts	Participants randomly exposed to 5 different posts in 5 different rounds.	N (obs.) = 3772 (the subset exposed to lifestyle posts) N (participants) = 1455	March 20–April 4, 2024

Increasing realism – Incorporating real-world posts

The first challenge relates to the fact that survey experiments often rely on stimuli or treatments created by researchers themselves. These are therefore based on the researcher's best estimation of how their treatment of interest looks. However, this approach typically entails two limitations. Either researchers create experimental treatments that are unrealistic, or they create experimental treatments that are rather extreme representations of the phenomena they want to study (Barabas & Jerit, 2008; Skytte, 2022; Slater et al., 2016). If researchers rely on treatments that are not necessarily representative of the phenomenon they are supposed to capture, it creates a problem with the external validity of the experiment.

To remedy this challenge and create survey experiments with more representative stimuli, I base my experiments on a thorough incorporation of real-world Facebook posts from Danish Members of Parliament (MPs). To do so, I relied on a dataset of all Facebook posts from Danish MPs in the period of June 2019 to October 2022, made publicly available by Danish consultant Valdemar Osted[3]. The use of this data allows me to investigate and categorize what Danish politicians actually posted, identify how they display lifestyle posts in real life, and use this knowledge to create stimuli that closely mirror how politicians display lifestyle cues.

More specifically, I made use of this dataset in three ways. First, I used the dataset to identify and classify the universe of lifestyle cues on the elite level. In total, the dataset consisted of around 92000 posts. WIth use of the supervised machine learning model BERT, I classified all the posts into three categories: 1) Explicit political opinion – either expressed by the MP or by the MP's party; 2) Explicit political activity by the MP; 3) Private – expressing nonpolitical opinions or personal activity of the MP. This initial procedure was primarily used to identify posts containing privatized content. In Appendix C of Paper A, I provide a detailed description of this classification procedure. However, a few points are important to highlight here. First, I hand-coded the initial categorization of the posts by BERT, which showed rather high levels of recall (0.97) and precision (0.85) for the privatized category. This means that the model missed relevant posts (few false negatives) to a rather low degree, and that the degree of false positives is sufficiently low (high precision). The model identified around 9000 posts as private, which were then manually coded in order to identify and categorize all the posts with lifestyle cues. Posts were coded based on whether they contained information about the MPs (1) hobbies or leisure activities (yes/no); (2) cultural activities or tastes (yes/no);

[3] https://github.com/ValdemarOsted/dkpolsome?tab=readme-ov-file

(3) material possessions or consumption (yes/no), and (4) finally, whether they contained explicit information about the political activities or opinions of the MP or any general explicit political opinions (yes/no). Posts coded "yes" in one or more of the first three categories, and did not contain explicit political information, were included in the sample of lifestyle cues. This process left me with around 5300 posts coded as lifestyle posts. In Chapter 4, I will unfold some of the variation within this group of posts.

Next, I used these posts directly as treatment material in the first of my experiments (I will refer to this as Study 1, see Table 3.1). Within the pool of all lifestyle posts (5300 posts), I wanted to trim it down to a pool of posts I could use as treatments. I designed the experiment so that participants were randomly assigned to screenshots of the actual posts. To increase the representativeness and external validity of the effects, I selected a pool of 100 MPs, representing a large part of the 183 Danish MPs. I then randomly picked five posts classified as lifestyle cues from each of these 100 MPs, that I then used as the one group of treatment material in the experiment. Because I wanted to compare the effects of lifestyle cues to a different type of content from MPs, I also randomly selected five explicitly political posts from the same MPs.[4] This gives a total of 1,000 posts (500 lifestyle posts, 500 policy posts), which I then used as the stimulus material in the survey. This design enables me to randomly assign participants to lifestyle or political cues, giving me the chance to estimate the causal effect of lifestyle cues. However, the design also increases the external validity by using actual posts from Danish MPs.

Finally, I also used these posts to inform the treatment material in the other survey experiments I conducted. One way I did this was by using the results from the first experiment, with the real posts, to construct treatments that realistically reflected the variation observed and based on participants' own classification. I used participants' classification of the lifestyle posts in terms of their class association to identify which lifestyle patterns and specific words people were more likely to associate with different classes. This way of using the content from the actual posts to inform the construction of stimuli for the two other experiments is an example of what I did to increase the validity of the treatments.

Increasing representation with stimulus sampling

The next challenge, typically seen in survey experiments, is that they usually rely on single vignettes or single versions of the treatment. This has also been done in previous studies of lifestyle signaling on political attitudes (see (Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024; Weisstanner & Engler, 2025). However,

[4] In Chapter 5 I will describe why I compare these.

because lifestyle is a multifaceted and multidimensional concept that can be expressed in many ways, single treatment designs limit the generalizability of the findings. Single treatment designs risk being biased by picking "extreme" treatment, or they might limit the construct validity by restricting the generalizability to other versions of the treatment (Fong & Grimmer, 2021; Monin & Oppenheimer, 2014).

To accommodate this, I designed the experiments to sample stimuli within each category, instead of having one version of each treatment (Monin & Oppenheimer, 2014; Wells & Windschitl, 1999). I did this in different ways across the experiments. As mentioned, in Study 1, I created 500 unique lifestyle and political stimuli because I had variation in the messengers (100 MPs). Therefore, I had five stimuli for each MP in each group. In Study 2 and 3, I created 10 different stimuli for each of the class signal categories. The stimuli were designed to capture different aspects of, for instance, working or upper class lifestyle signals, so the results were not only based on one specific treatment.

These designs offer several advantages. Besides increasing the overall generalizability of the effects, they also directly allow me to apply the effects across each stimulus. Therefore, I can estimate the effects across stimuli and identify potential moderating factors or dimensions within the lifestyle cues (Fong & Grimmer, 2021). It also allows for a detailed analysis of which specific type of lifestyle signals produces the strongest effects. By doing so, this type of design arguably provides a more realistic estimate of effect sizes (Cummings & Reeves, 2022; Monin & Oppenheimer, 2014; Simonsohn et al., 2025). Finally, this takes account of both the variation and "messiness" that exist between potential treatments in the real world leading to potentially more ecologically valid and robust conclusions.

A limitation to this type of design is that allowing for this variation and the use of stimulus sampling potentially lowers the internal validity. By allowing for variation across treatments within the same category, I open up for potential confounders. Compared to a simpler design with a treatment and control group where everything is kept constant except for a single sentence or word, the introduction of more variation makes these designs messier. As a result, one must acknowledge the trade-off between control and variability between the designs. Yet, an advantage with stimulus sampling is that it allows for direct testing of whether the effects all run in the same direction.

Factorial vignette designs

A third common challenge for the external validity of survey experiments with a simple treatment and control group is the lack of variation on other factors that are likely to influence the choices or attitudes shown by participants.

These designs typically keep everything else constant except for the treatment of interest, e.g., by varying just one word or a phrase in a text. This provides strong internal validity, as the researcher can be confident that any difference between the treatment and control group must be due to the exact word that varies. But by doing so, the researcher strips away the variation and dimensionality that characterizes people's decision-making and attitude formation in the social world (Hainmueller et al., 2017). Furthermore, the common experimental designs can only manipulate one or two components of an otherwise multidimensional concept, making it difficult to assess which aspect of the treatment actually drives the effect (Hainmueller et al., 2017). To overcome this with simpler designs, it would require running multiple survey experiments, changing one treatment at a time. However, that would be both very resourceful and inefficient. Luckily, other survey-experimental designs can help overcome this challenge.

To create experimental designs that allow for more dimensions to vary, I opted for *factorial vignette designs* for Study 2 and 3. In these designs, the researcher varies not only one or two levels, but also multiple *dimensions* that can have multiple *levels* (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Just like in a common, simpler design, participants are asked their opinions based on brief texts, but within those texts, multiple dimensions can differ. This allows researchers to vary multiple dimensions at the same time. The randomization of the levels within those dimensions also enables investigation of the causal effects of each dimension (Bansak et al., 2021).

For Study 2 and 3, I opted for a design where participants would read short posts from hypothetical politicians presented as social media posts. However, instead of showing posts that were entirely similar except for some posts containing lifestyle cues and others not, I varied multiple dimensions simultaneously. In Study 2, I varied the politician's gender via their name, which party they came from, their description of their workday, and then whether they displayed a political message or a lifestyle cue. The latter determined which overall treatment condition participants would be assigned to. In Study 2, participants were only presented with a single post from a politician. Within the political posts, I varied the policy issue they would be talking about. Within the category of the lifestyle cues, I varied the class signals for the purpose of the analysis of Papers B and C. This design meant that participants could be assigned to three overall treatment conditions or a control condition, where participants would only be exposed to a post with information about the politicians' gender, party, and description of their workday. Additionally, in the lifestyle condition, they would be exposed to a lifestyle signal, and in the political condition the posts would also contain a policy message.

In Study 3, I varied the gender of the politician, generic messages about their campaign, and whether the posts mentioned lifestyle signals or not. I also presented participants with a series of posts instead of just a singular post. Within the lifestyle condition, I varied the class signals. This meant that participants could be randomly assigned to one of four conditions: a control condition in which they would read three posts from the politician, all rather vague and generic posts about their campaign; or they could be assigned to one of three treatment conditions where they would be exposed to five posts from the politicians. These five posts were comprised of the same three vague posts about the politicians' campaign plus two lifestyle-related posts that had different class signals based on which treatment condition it was. The three posts in the control group were deliberately kept rather abstract and vague to not give clear signals of which political party they would belong to.

The variation of these multiple dimensions, coupled with the stimulus sampling approach described above, meant that I would vary a lot of different features and levels of the vignettes simultaneously. Because these features are all randomly assigned, I can still estimate the average treatment effect of receiving a lifestyle cue by averaging across the levels of the other dimensions as well as each of the treatment stimuli used to manipulate the lifestyle cues (Bansak et al., 2023; Hainmueller et al., 2017).

Another advantage of the factorial vignette designs is that they allow for multiple observations from the same participants (Bansak et al., 2018; Sniderman, 2018). Because the randomization of multiple dimensions and levels allows for an almost infinite combination to create unique profiles, these designs allow for participants to be presented with multiple rounds of profiles, in my case posts, and asked about their choices and evaluations after each, to assess the effects of each level (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). This means that the unit of analysis is each "choice" that was made, and not each participant. In a time with dropping response rates of surveys, getting multiple responses from the same individual optimizes the use of resources (Clifford et al., 2021). Across all my experiments, I presented participants with multiple posts, or a series of posts for Study 3, where all the dimensions and levels would be randomized for each round. The fact that I have multiple observations per participant also increases the statistical power of the analysis, allowing me to be able to estimate smaller effect sizes.

Taken together, the experimental designs I conducted in the dissertation incorporate elements that address some of the normal challenges with survey experiments. To address the challenge of using unrealistic treatments, I incorporated and made use of real-world posts from actual MPs to make sure the stimuli were based on how politicians communicate their lifestyles in real life. To address the challenge of using single treatments, I incorporated a stimulus

sampling strategy, creating multiple stimuli within each treatment level that were randomly sampled. This allows me to both estimate treatment effects across a range of individual stimuli and to analyze which aspects of the lifestyle treatments drive the effects. Finally, I use factorial vignette designs to allow for the variation of multiple dimensions and levels within the experiments, allowing me to collect multiple observations from the same respondents.

Generalizability of the survey participants

To acquire participants to fill out and complete the surveys, I recruited participants from Norstat for all of the three survey experiments I conducted. In Table 3.1, I show the number of respondents I recruited for each of the studies. The Norstat panel consists of individuals who have signed up for the panel and receive rewards and points each time they complete a questionnaire. As mentioned, I only rely on participants from Denmark. The primary advantage of recruiting participants via a population-based panel like Norstat is that it enables me to field the surveys among a large and generally representative group of people. To increase the representativeness of the responses I collected, all surveys included quota-sampling in terms of age, region of residence, and gender, meaning that the samples in the surveys all reflect the general population in terms of these characteristics. Alternatively, I could have collected the surveys via convenience samples, either among students or via my social media profile. However, these samples would be rather skewed towards a more educated and resourceful part of the population. Using Norstat allows me to conduct my studies with a sample that is much more likely to reflect the general Danish population, meaning I can be much more confident in generalizing the findings outside of my experiments.

Nevertheless, even population-based panels are not perfect. We know that people who sign up to survey panels generally tend to have longer educations and are more politically attentive than the general population (Egami & Hartman, 2022; Scherpenzeel, 2018). This might especially be the case in terms of surveys about political matters. Therefore, these panels might still not be perfectly representative of the general population. A practical solution would have required quota-sampling on measures other than gender, age, and region, which, unfortunately, was out sideof the financial scope of this dissertation project. Furthermore, other studies find that survey experiments focusing on increasing the representation of hard-to-reach population groups tend to find similar effects compared to population-based survey panels (Coppock & McClellan, 2019; Mullinix et al., 2015). This is a general point worth remembering when dealing with data from online survey panels.

Why focus on social media?

Politicians can express their lifestyle on various platforms and arenas, so why do I focus primarily on how they present themselves on social media? Politicians often appear on talk shows or give interviews to magazines, where they outline their personal lives or lifestyle preferences. These are certainly also examples of lifestyle cues, so why not focus on them? There are multiple reasons why social media posts, from platforms such as Facebook, are an especially relevant arena to study how lifestyle cues are expressed by politicians. First, social media gives each politician and MP a platform where they can decide for themselves how they want to communicate. In traditional media, moderators and editors decide how to present politicians' viewpoints in interviews and the like, but on social media they can directly communicate with their audience. This means that social media posts more clearly represent how politicians intentionally and directly want to communicate, and which lifestyle cues they want to show to voters. Although MPs are constrained by their party allegiances and loyalties in terms of what they can post about on social media (Pedersen, 2024), MPs report that they have more freedom to personalize their communication (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Social media posts also enable me to look at how a much wider variety of politicians and MPs communicate and display their lifestyles. If I focused on talk shows and magazines, I would most likely only have representation from party leaders and other prominent politicians. Because I am interested in how politicians, as a whole, communicate with their lifestyle and how the voters respond to it, using a data source that captures lifestyle cues from a bigger set of politicians is preferable.

Second, social media posts are useful as they reach a large number of people directly. Social media platforms allow politicians to communicate directly with potential voters and a bigger audience, in a way that is much easier compared to traditional media (Jungherr, 2016; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2022). Almost all adult citizens, especially in Denmark, use social media (Statistics Denmark, 2023). Third, social media is an applicable arena to study not only politicians' communication, but in particular their communication of lifestyle cues. Although many people use social media to get information about the news, a larger share of people report that they primarily use social media to catch up on what friends are doing and for entertainment (Al-Menayes, 2015). From that perspective, most citizens' main motivation for logging on to their social media profiles is not necessarily to receive information about politics. Therefore, social media platforms provide a new logic for how politicians have to communicate, to align with the expectations of their audience (Chadwick, 2017; Enli, 2013). The communicational code on social media pushes politicians to be more personalized, disclose personal information, and showcase

their personal lifestyle preferences. Hence, social media is also an ideal arena to focus on when studying politicians' lifestyle cues.

Finally, I focus on Facebook posts from Danish MPs primarily because Facebook is the by far the most used platform by both citizens and politicians. Around 90 percent of the adult population in Denmark has a Facebook profile (Statistics Denmark, 2023), and all active MPs have a Facebook profile (Severin-Nielsen, 2024), resulting in Facebook being the platform where most Danes are likely to encounter posts from politicians. Based on previous studies, MPs are also more likely to personalize and privatize their communication on Facebook, compared to Twitter/X, making Facebook a more relevant platform to focus on (Eriksen, 2025; Pedersen, 2024). In the next section, I will outline why I focus on Denmark as a case for the dissertation.

Using Denmark as a case

As pointed out already, I study the effect of lifestyle cues from politicians in a Danish context. I argue that there is good reason to focus on Denmark as a case to study this phenomenon. First, social media usage is very widespread in the Danish context, both among citizens and politicians. The Danish population has the highest shares of social media usage in the EU (Eurostat, 2024; Statistics-Denmark, 2023). Almost all MPs in Denmark have active profiles on Facebook and X, with the majority of those who are active on social media posting regularly (Pedersen, 2024; Severin-Nielsen, 2024). Furthermore, around 50 percent of the population in Denmark reports that they use social media to get updated on political news[5]. This high usage of social media in the Danish population also means that Danish politicians are greatly incentivized to campaign and post regularly on social media platforms because of the high outreach to the general population they can achieve from doing so. Furthermore, Danish MPs themselves report that they use social media to communicate a more personalized image of themselves, including posting about their private life (Severin-Nielsen, 2024). This high level of social media usage and the high degree of outreach politicians can achieve through social media communication make Denmark a particularly useful and relevant case to study the impact of lifestyle cues. In particular, the fact that social media usage is rather decentralized and widespread, and not just tied to the party leaders in the Danish context, makes it relevant to study how the posts and communication from a wide range of MPs affect voters (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Severin-Nielsen, 2024).

[5] Based on an analysis from the Danish Ministry of Culture: https://kum.dk/fileadmin/_mediernesudvikling/2021/Internetbrug_og_sociale_medier_2021.pdf

Second, Denmark is a relevant case to study the impact of lifestyle cues on citizens, from a class perspective. Although Denmark still has one of the lowest levels of post-tax income inequality among OECD countries,[6] substantial class differences persist in the Danish population. Among citizens, perceptions that class differences exist are still fairly widespread (Stubager, 2017). Compared to other countries with substantially higher levels of inequality, Danes are just as likely to draw on class categories to classify themselves and other citizens (Stubager & Harrits, 2022; Stubager et al., 2018). Crucially, Danes rely on lifestyle practices and symbols when classifying the status of others (Jaeger et al., 2023). Faber et al. (2012) argue that because of the presence of strong egalitarian norms in Denmark, citizens are likely to draw on symbolic boundary markers such as lifestyle preferences and taste as a means to define social classes. On the contrary, Danes are more hesitant to identify with distinct social classes themselves, and a big share often identify as part of a broad and neutral middle class (Stubager & Harrits, 2022). This might speak against the idea that we should expect citizens to make clear associations between the lifestyle appeals of politicians and social class representation.

Third, I argue that Denmark is a relevant case to study the effects of lifestyle cues because of the relatively high attention and awareness that politicians' strategic communication has received over the last few years. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the example of Mette Frederiksen's privatized and personalized communication on social media received widespread media attention and sparked a broader discussion of how politicians use their social media accounts (Jonassen, 2021; Kulager, 2021). This generally sparked extensive criticism of the Prime Minister's use of her social media communication. Moreover, a framing that politicians' social media communication was becoming increasingly personalized and strategic and less focused on substantial policy became widespread (Ekstra-Bladet, 2020; Jonassen, 2021). The existence and prevalence of these discussions of politicians' lifestyle cues in Denmark make it a highly relevant and important context in which to study this phenomenon, as it has been relatively widely contested, and voters have a prior awareness of it.

This might reveal one of the potential limitations of focusing on the Danish case. Because of this previously frequent media attention, one could speculate that Danish voters are primed to think somewhat negatively of lifestyle cues from politicians. When I expose Danish voters to examples of lifestyle cues from Danish politicians in survey experiments, it might be that they will think back to the discussions and the media coverage of Mette Frederiksen and draw

[6] https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/income-inequality.html

negative associations. This potential *pre-treatment* bias might therefore constitute a potential limitation to the generalizability of the findings.

Relying on data from one country offers general limitations to whether the findings can be generalized across the context. While the high usage of social media among Danish politicians and citizens makes it a relevant country in which to study the impact of politicians' lifestyle cues, one could also argue that it makes Denmark a more special or extreme case. Additionally, Denmark is one of the countries with the highest levels of trust in the political system and towards politicians (Eurobarometer, 2024). Thus, citizens might react differently towards communication and posts from politicians in Denmark compared to other countries. Based on this, Denmark might be considered as a most likely case for finding effects of lifestyle cues on voter evaluation and voter perceptions. This, of course, questions the potential generalizability of the findings to other countries. In Chapter 8, I will return to this point and discuss to what extent the findings can be expected to travel to other countries.

Representativity of the time period

Finally, it is worth discussing the use of Facebook posts from the period June 2019 to October 2022 as data in this dissertation. Several aspects are relevant when assessing the generalizability of using Facebook posts from Danish MPs during this time frame. One key issue concerns whether lifestyle posts from Danish MPs in this period can be considered representative of how politicians display their lifestyles on social media today. As mentioned above, there are limitations associated with focusing on Denmark, but it is also important to consider potential characteristics of the specific period from 2019 to 2022 that may distinguish it from the present.

A defining feature of this period was the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. During this time, parliamentary processes functioned differently than usual, and the political agenda shifted toward issues of public health and crisis management. It was also during this period that media attention and criticism directed at Danish politicians' use of lifestyle appeals increased. One might speculate whether there is a link between how the media framed lifestyle appeals—particularly those of Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen—and the COVID lockdowns. Given that opposition criticism of the government diminished and a substantial "rally-round-the-flag" effect emerged in many countries, Denmark in particular, during the early stages of the pandemic (Hansen, 2026; Jacobsen, 2025; Kritzinger et al., 2021), it is possible that criticism of the Prime Minister's use of lifestyle appeals on social media reflected a broader unease with the government's centralization of power during COVID-19. However, as shown in Chapter 4, there is little evidence that

MPs became more likely to post about their lifestyles after the onset of the pandemic and lockdowns.

Another aspect concerns how social media use has evolved since 2022. While Facebook remains a large platform in terms of overall users, daily usage and engagement have declined in recent years, particularly among younger demographics (Arceneaux et al., 2024; Warren, 2024). Instead, both citizens and politicians increasingly use platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Cervi et al., 2023; Gottfried, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Recent studies of politicians' use of TikTok suggest that the platform is primarily used to humanize political figures through personalized and entertaining content, reach younger audiences, and project a more informal persona (Cervi et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Similar patterns have been documented for Instagram use (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). These trends indicate that politicians are increasingly shifting their attention to other platforms for displaying their lifestyles, suggesting a potential change in how lifestyle content is showcased today compared to four or five years ago. Additionally, Meta has recently shut down political advertising on its platforms, which may further incentivize politicians to seek alternative platforms to reach their intended audiences (Meta, 2025).

A final concern relates to the use of posts from this period as treatment material in Study 1. Although the survey was fielded in spring 2024, the stimulus posts were drawn from 2019 to 2022. This temporal mismatch could create confusion among participants who are exposed to posts focusing on issues that are now dated, such as COVID-19 measures or events specific to that period. The use of such dated content may therefore pose a threat to ecological validity. On the other hand, an important advantage of using older posts from a wide range of MPs is that participants are highly unlikely to recall having previously encountered these specific posts, which may reduce the risk of pretreatment bias.

Taken together, these considerations suggest limitations to the extent to which Facebook posts from 2019 to 2022 provide a fully representative picture of how politicians display their lifestyles today. Many of these limitations stem from shifts toward platforms such as TikTok and Instagram that have occurred since then. Further research is needed to examine how lifestyle and personalized content varies across platforms. Nevertheless, there is little indication that the fundamental ways in which politicians communicate lifestyle cues have changed simply due to shifts in platform use. Consequently, the Facebook post corpus used in this dissertation provides a relevant and meaningful starting point for studying politicians' communication of lifestyle cues in a contemporary context.

Overview of studies

This section has outlined the motivation behind the overall methodological choices in the dissertation in terms of why I use survey experiments as the general approach and what I do to address the external validity of the findings. In Table 3.1, I show an overview of the different studies I conducted. In the following chapters, I will explain the designs of each of the studies in more depth. To give a brief overview, I will just briefly outline each of the studies and how they were used to answer the main questions of the dissertation.

In Study 1, the purpose was to compare the effects of lifestyle cues to those of explicitly political posts by randomly assigning participants to posts from Danish MPs. I created a sample of 1,000 posts – five lifestyle-based and five policy-based posts, from 100 different MPs – that I randomly drew from. Participants were exposed to five different posts in total, and thereafter, I asked them to evaluate the MP who made the post. This part of the study was used to answer whether lifestyle cues make voters more likely to support politicians. These findings were used in Paper A and will be discussed in Chapter 5. Furthermore, I used the subset of the observations in Study 1 who were exposed to the lifestyle-based posts to answer the question of what voters infer from the lifestyle cues of politicians. These findings were used in Paper C and will be outlined in Chapter 7.

In Study 2, I also used the data in two different papers and analyses. The overall sample was randomly divided into three different treatment conditions: control, political, and lifestyle. In each condition, they were exposed to a post from a hypothetical Danish MP that varied in its content depending on the treatment condition. Again, participants did five experimental "rounds," so they were exposed to five separate posts in total. In each round, it was randomized which condition participants would be exposed to. The purpose of this setup was again to compare the effects of lifestyle cues to other types of posts from MPs. This part of the experiment was used in Paper A and is described in Chapter 5. I used the subset of the observations in the lifestyle condition to examine the effects of different class signals in lifestyle cues. Within the lifestyle condition, I randomized the class signals of the lifestyle cues. The purpose of this was to examine the effects of different types of class signals on voter support to answer whether lifestyle cues can be used to appeal to different social classes. These findings are used in Papers B and C and will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

In Study 3, the purpose was to examine what political views citizens infer from politicians' lifestyle cues. Therefore, I compare the effects of different hypothetical political candidates' lifestyle cues with distinct class signals on their perceived political party and the perceived policy views. I randomly

exposed participants to a “feed” from different candidates that varied in their content, depending on which treatment condition participants ended up in. This analysis and the findings are used in Paper C and will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 4: Descriptive characteristics of politicians' lifestyle signals

Before going into the results from the individual papers of the dissertation, it is important to unfold some of the characteristics of the lifestyle cues that I identified. Through my classification of the Facebook posts from Danish MPs, which constitutes an important backbone of the dissertation, I was able to identify a large pool of lifestyle-based posts from the MPs. This classification enables descriptive analysis of what characterizes the way politicians signal lifestyle. This is to provide a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the empirical patterns in the central independent variable of the dissertation, and to get an understanding of the concept I am studying. The chapter will proceed in three steps: First, I will describe results about the *prevalence* of lifestyle cues. How big a share of all MPs' posts do they make up? Which political parties and types of MPs are more or less likely to display lifestyle-based communication? And how does the prevalence vary over an electoral cycle? Second, I look at the impact on *engagement*. Here, I will look at how lifestyle signals perform on Facebook in terms of likes, comments, and other measures of engagement, compared to other types of posts. Finally, I show an overview of how politicians' signals vary in terms of the type of lifestyle being shown. How do the lifestyle posts vary by their class signals, and do the signals vary by political party?

How prevalent are lifestyle cues?

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I use a comprehensive dataset of Facebook posts from Danish MPs, from the period June 5, 2019, to November 1, 2022, which was the period of that electoral cycle. The dataset contained 92,824 posts from 185 different MPs. Posts initially coded as "privatized" by the BERT-classifier were manually coded for whether they contained lifestyle cues. The classifier identified 7883 posts in total as "privatized" (8.8 percent of all posts). For a post to be classified to provide lifestyle cues, it must contain one of three types of information:

1) *Hobbies or leisure activities* – whether the post mentions active hobbies or leisure activities of the MP.

2) *Cultural activities and taste* – whether the post mentions cultural activities the MP has attended, such as sports games or concerts, or if it

expresses an opinion towards a cultural event or performer, such as praising a sports performance or artist.

3) *Material possession and appearance* – whether the post mentions or displays material possessions of the MP – e.g., which car they drive or furniture they have (or other items in the house) – and the material appearance of the politician such as clothing style.

If the post contains at least one of these categories, it will be coded as containing a lifestyle cue. Posts were also coded as containing multiple categories within the same post, given that they are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, I also coded for whether posts have explicit mentions of the MP's policy attitudes, specific political actions, or party, to filter them out.

Table 4.1. Categorization of lifestyle cues

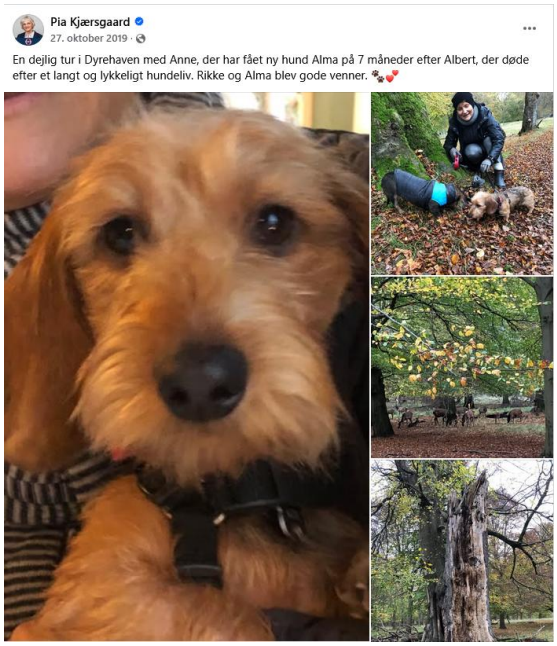
Category	Description	Coding scheme
Hobbies or leisure activities	Whether the post mentions the favored hobbies or leisure activities of the MP, e.g., doing sports, running, going for walks, liking nature, or reading books. Can also be holiday activities.	0 = No 1 = Yes
Cultural activities and tastes	Whether the post mentions cultural activities the MP has taken part in, such as going to a sports game or to the theatre, or an expression of a non-political opinion related to a cultural event or entity, such as praising a sports performance or an artist.	0 = No 1 = Yes
Material possession and appearance	Whether the post shows or mentions something about the material possessions and the material appearance of the MP. This can be the type of furniture and decoration in the house, the type of car, or clothing style, etc.	0 = No 1 = Yes
Political message or position	Whether the post includes an explicit political message about the MP's political position, an agenda, or a party	0 = No 1 = Yes

Figure 4A and 4B show examples of posts either coded as lifestyle cues or as private posts without lifestyle cues, to illustrate the differences. The posts in Figure 4A are both coded as privatized posts, but without lifestyle cues. The left post describes how the MP Anne Honoré Østergaard has injured herself, while the post to the left describes the death of a friend and colleague of MP Lars Christian Lilleholt. These posts are private in the sense that they concern matters in the MP's personal life, and do not show anything about their political stances or actions. Yet, they do not explicitly provide information about the leisure activities, cultural consumption, or material consumption preferences or activities, why they were not coded as lifestyle. On the other hand, the

two posts in Figure 4B contain explicit lifestyle cues. The left post is about a trip to the forest with the MP's dog, and the right post describes the MP going to an Elton John concert. These are examples of posts describing the leisure activities or cultural consumption of the MPs.

Figure 4A. Examples of posts coded as private but without lifestyle cues

Figure 4B. Examples of posts coded as lifestyle cues



In total, 5330 posts were identified as pure lifestyle posts equaling 5.7 percent of all the posts that were made in the period. This share aligns well with recent findings from the Danish context, showing that MPs predominantly focus

their social media attention on explicit policy issues and campaigning (Eriksen, 2025; Pedersen, 2024). However, while around 6 percent may sound like a small and unimportant share, it is not an irrelevant magnitude. It is a similar share to that of all posts that concern important policy issues like health care (6.2 percent) and environmental policy (6 percent), and over twice as high as the share of posts about housing policy in the period (2.6 percent). So, while the Danish MPs still primarily focus their Facebook attention on explicit policy issues, they post just as much, or more, about their lifestyle patterns as they do about several important policy issues.

This overall share covers important variation in terms of which parties and types of MPs are more likely to display their lifestyle online. To start with, I looked at the share of lifestyle posts within each of the Danish political parties. The numbers are shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Number and share of lifestyle posts by political party

Party	Number of lifestyle posts	All posts in total	Share of lifestyle posts for each party (percentage)
	Left-wing parties		
Red-Green Alliance	120	7908	1.5
Green Left (SF)	314	8261	3.8
Social Democrats	2191	24784	8.8
The Alternative	15	815	1.8
Independent Greens	31	1828	1.7
Social Liberals	239	7731	3.1
Left bloc	**2910**	**51327**	**5.7**
	Right-wing parties		
Liberals	1138	17456	6.5
Conservatives	425	6629	6.4
Liberal Alliance	7	1629	0.4
Christian Democrats	41	633	6.5
Danish Democrats	131	5512	2.4
Danish Peoples Party	218	3191	6.8
New Right	136	3127	4.4
Moderates	86	650	13.2
Right bloc	**2182**	**38827**	**5.6**
Independents	238	2670	8.9
Total	**5330**	**92824**	**5.7**

Note: Data is all Danish MPs' Facebook posts from June 2019 to October 2022.

As shown, the share of posts that are lifestyle-based varies quite a lot across parties, ranging from 0.5 to 13.2 percent. Even though lifestyle posts constitute a smaller share of their total posts for all parties, there is a lot of variation across the parties. Another important point is that lifestyle posts do not appear to be particularly tied to left or right parties. The share of lifestyle posts among right and left parties is almost the same. The higher share for parties in the left bloc is driven by Social Democrats, who are the party with both the highest number of posts in total and have one of the highest shares of lifestyle posts in total (9 percent). This suggests that lifestyle cues are not necessarily tied to one end of the political spectrum or among populist parties. Quite the contrary, the tendency is that lifestyle posts are more prevalent among more ideologically moderate parties such as the Social Democrats, the Liberals, and the Conservatives, whereas the shares are lower for more ideologically distinct parties such as the Red-Green Alliance and the Liberal Alliance. This shows that established, mainstream parties are the ones who are the most likely to turn to lifestyle cues to appeal to voters.

As a further step, I examined how the share of lifestyle cues varies across different characteristics of the MPs to investigate what characterizes the MPs who post the most about their lifestyle. First, I looked at whether party leaders were more likely to post about their lifestyle compared to regular MPs. Following the literature on personalization and "presidentialization," one would expect party leaders to be more personalized in their way of communicating on Facebook, which would also entail them to display their lifestyle more often (McAllister, 2007). However, comparing the share of lifestyle posts between party leaders and regular MPs, the numbers are rather similar, suggesting that party leaders do not necessarily drive lifestyle-based communication. It should be mentioned, though, that if the leader of the Liberal Alliance, Alex Vanopslagh, is dropped from the analysis, the average share for the party leaders is significantly bigger. Yet, among the top 10 of the MPs with the highest relative share of lifestyle posts, none are party leaders. Moreover, female MPs seem slightly more likely to display lifestyle cues compared to men, as shown in Table 4.3.

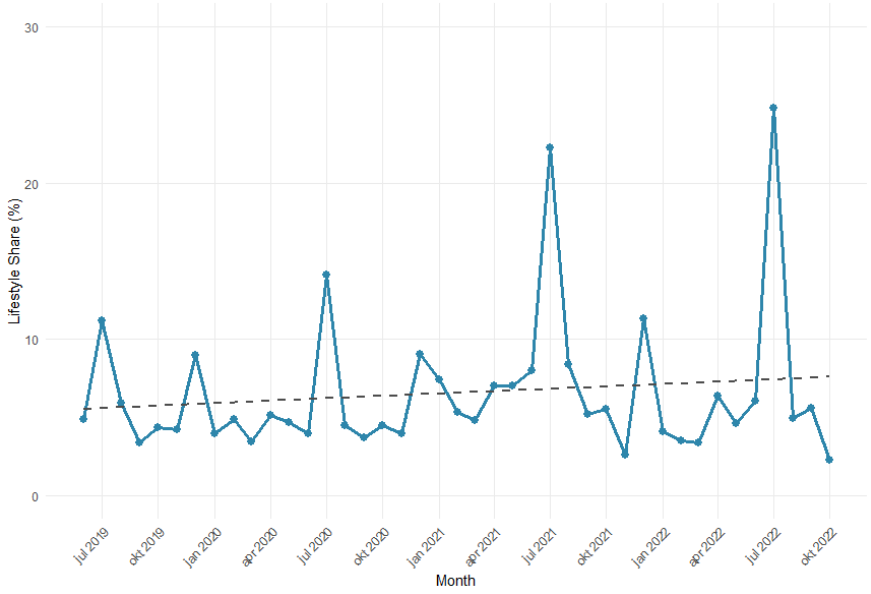
Table 4.3. Number and share of lifestyle posts by type of MP and gender of MP

	Lifestyle posts	Total posts	Share (%)
Party Leader			
Party Leader	583	9,519	6.1
MP	4,747	83,305	5.7
Gender			
Male	2,896	53,459	5.4
Female	2,434	39,365	6.2
Followers			
Above Median	3,217	51,414	6.3
Below Median	1,884	38,388	5.0

Note: Data is all Danish MPs Facebook posts from June 2019 – October 2022. Some posts are excluded from the analysis because data on the number of followers did not exist.

Finally, it does seem like MPs with a higher number of followers are slightly more likely to display their lifestyle on their Facebook profiles. MPs with an above median number of followers have a slightly higher share (6.3 percent) compared to the lower half (5 percent). This indicates that MPs with a higher reach on Facebook also tend to be a bit more likely to display lifestyle cues.

Figure 4.1. Share of lifestyle posts by Danish MPs over time



Note: Data is all Danish MPs' Facebook posts from June 2019 to October 2022.

Next, I looked at whether the share of lifestyle posts has changed over the electoral cycle based on the data. Given that the data was collected over a three

year period, it is limited what one can say about over-time *trends*, in terms of answering whether lifestyle-based posts are getting more widespread. However, Figure 4.1 can help identify whether there are times of the year when MPs are more likely to provide lifestyle-based communication. Looking at the spikes in Figure 4.1, the answer appears to be that MPs are far more likely to post about their lifestyle during times when they are on vacation. Alternatively, one can say that politicians seem to adapt to the political agenda in terms of what they post. The three months with the highest shares are all in July, which is the typical month for summer holidays in Denmark. For July 2021 and 2022, the relative share of lifestyle posts is as high as over 20 percent. These high relative shares of lifestyle cues in July are driven by both a general drop in Facebook activity of the MPs and a slight increase in the absolute number of posts with lifestyle-based content. There are also spikes in the share of lifestyle posts in December, which is most likely due to the Christmas period. This shows that MPs primarily display their lifestyle when they are on vacation and have time off from the Parliament. Finally, as shown by the dashed line, there is a slight upward trend in the share of lifestyle posts over time. This is primarily driven by the very high spikes in July 2021 and 2022.

How do lifestyle-based posts perform?

In the next step, I looked at how well lifestyle-based posts seem to perform on Facebook compared to other types of posts by politicians. In the dataset, I have several metrics of the performance of each post such as the number of likes, interactions, comments, and shares. This can help to enlighten some of the consequences lifestyle cues can have for politicians' communication. Although these metrics cannot tell us anything about whether they move voters' evaluations or attitudes, they can inform us about aspects of the real-world impact of lifestyle signals. I therefore compared the average number of overall interactions, likes, comments, and shares of lifestyle posts to the same shares for political posts from MPs. Here, I compare it to both *individualized political* posts, which are posts that describe the MP's own policy actions, activities, or opinions, and to *general political posts*, which are political posts that focus on the parties' actions or otherwise do not have a focus on the MP. The averages are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Different metrics of performance on Facebook by the type of post. All numbers are averages

Type of posts	Number of posts	Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares
Lifestyle	5330	1105.7	881.1	131.5	10.9
Individualized political	19021	665.8	509.2	101.7	22.8
General political	62814	927.3	640.6	168.1	70.2

Note: Data is all Danish MPs' Facebook posts from June 2019–October 2022. Interactions measure the average total number of likes and other types of reactions to the post. Comments show the average number of comments per post. Shares display the average number of profiles that shared the posts.

The numbers generally reveal two patterns, highlighting the positives and negatives of lifestyle-based communication from the politicians' point of view. On the one hand, lifestyle cues generate more positive interactions and reactions. They receive substantially more interactions and likes compared to the two forms of directly political posts. This suggests that lifestyle-based posts generally elicit more positive reactions from the audience on Facebook compared to explicitly political types of content, which in turn leads to higher reach on the platform. On the other hand, while they create more positive reactions, lifestyle cues seem to create less *engagement*. General political posts receive a higher number of comments compared to lifestyle posts, and the general political posts are seven times more likely to be shared compared to the lifestyle-based posts.

These numbers highlight that lifestyle-based communication can help politicians receive more positive reactions and likes on their platforms and potentially reach a higher number of people. However, lifestyle posts do not engage the audience to the same extent as the explicitly political posts, which highlights a trade-off for what type of engagement the politicians can go for.

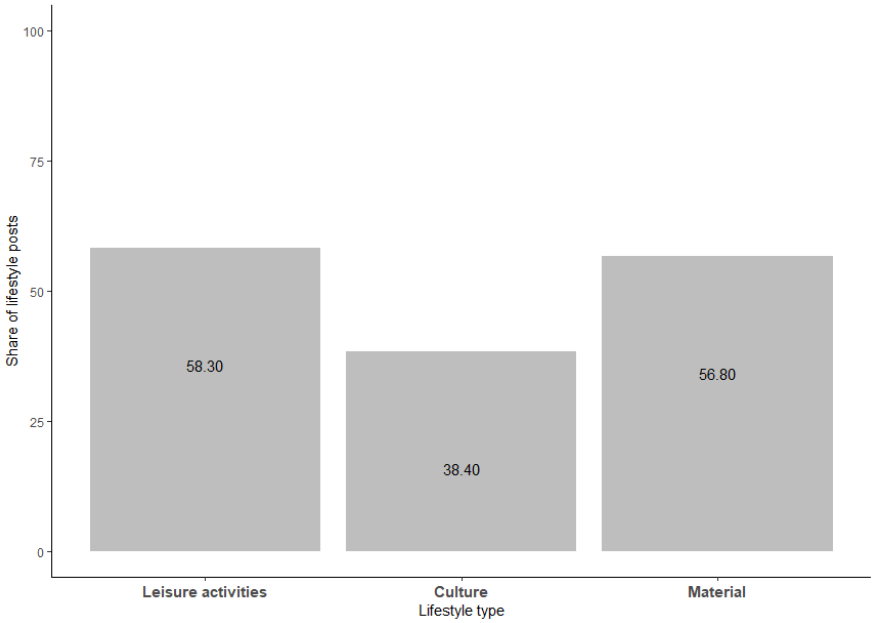
Which type of lifestyle do politicians present?

Finally, I display the variation in terms of the type of lifestyle signals displayed in the pool of lifestyle posts that were coded. In the following, I present the results in terms of the aspect of lifestyle that was more likely to be displayed (Figure 4.2). Next, I look at the variation in terms of class signals and how that varies across the political parties in the Danish Parliament (Figure 4.3).

First, I show which aspects of lifestyle MPs were more likely to show. As mentioned above, I coded the posts for whether the posts mentioned something related to either: 1) hobbies or leisure activities of the MP, 2) cultural activities and tastes of the MP, or 3) material possessions or consumption of the MP. The categories were not mutually exclusive, so one post could contain multiple categories. Figure 4.2. displays the share of all lifestyle posts that

represent each of these dimensions. Overall, most of the posts seem to mention either leisure activities or material consumption. The posts related to leisure activities often mentioned going for runs or walks, or other holiday activities with the family. The posts that mentioned material possessions or consumption, often related to showing the MP's favorite food, type of home décor, or possessions such as their car. These material possessions were more often shown "in the background" of the image, while the MP was doing something else. Finally, a smaller share of the lifestyle posts was about the cultural activities or taste preferences of the MP. This was often going to a sports game, an expression of appreciation for music or sports they like, or trips to the cinema or theatre.

Figure 4.2. Distribution of lifestyle posts by subcategory



Note: Based on classification of 5330 lifestyle posts from Danish MPs.

Second, I examined the variation in terms of the class signals in the lifestyle posts. To study this, I hand-coded the 500 lifestyle posts that featured in Study 1 into four overall class categories:

1) *Working-/Lower class*, which displayed everyday, modest, and often collective lifestyle patterns, associated with physical labor, popular culture, and sports.

2) *Middle class*, which were posts displaying respectable, aspirational, family- and career-oriented lifestyles, dominated by mainstream consumption and cultural activities.

3) *High cultural class*, which were posts displaying a cosmopolitan, taste-based distinction, knowledge-intensive, aesthetic orientation.

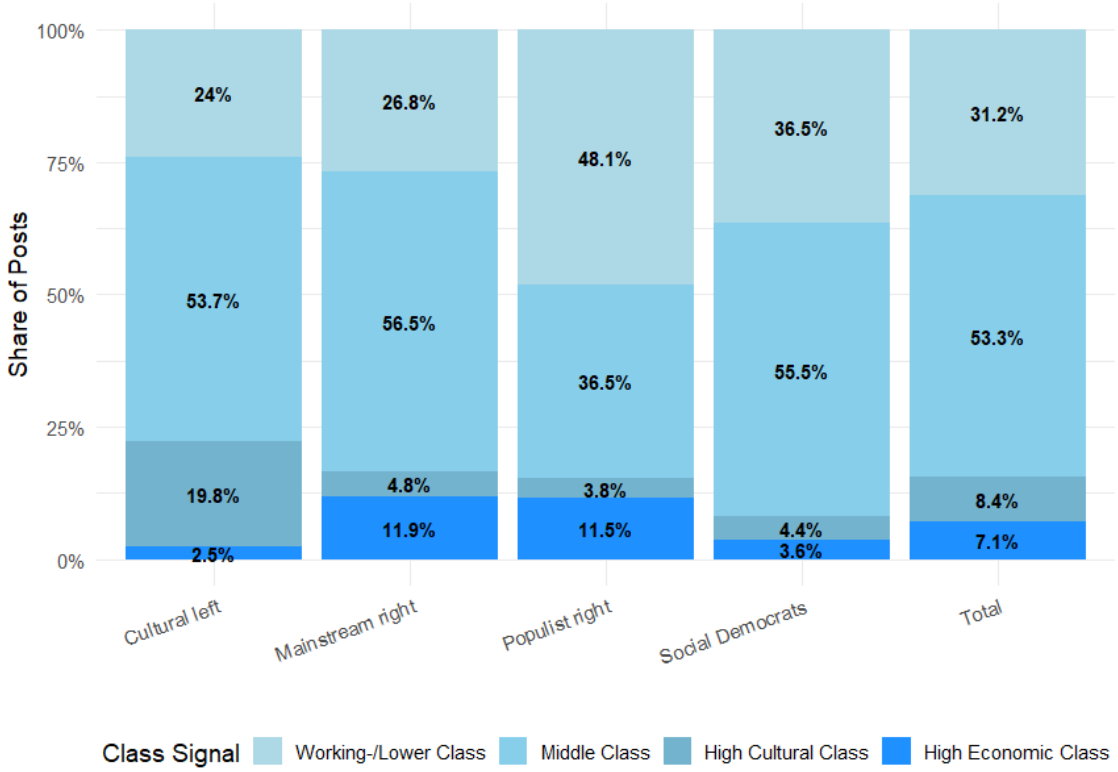
4) *High economic capital class*, which were posts displaying wealth, luxury consumption, exclusivity, and ownership of expensive assets.

Finally, posts could also contain no clear class signal. Because this analysis is only based on the categorization of these 500 posts, the analysis should be interpreted cautiously.

To examine whether the class signals vary by the political parties, Figure 4.3 displays the distributions of the class signals within four groups of party groups in the Danish Parliament, based on their orientation on cultural and economic issues. In Chapter 7, I will elaborate on these four categories. From Figure 4.3, it is evident that across all parties, most of the lifestyle signals showcase appeal to a more down-to-earth lifestyle. In general, 53 percent of all lifestyle posts display middle class signals, and 31 percent of the posts display a working-/lower class signal. Only a smaller proportion of all lifestyle posts contain high cultural or economic class signals. Yet, when looking across the party blocs, there are important differences in terms of the distribution. First, both mainstream and populist right parties are significantly more likely to display high economic class signals, which might align better with their typical electorate. However, the populist right parties differ from the mainstream right in being much more likely to display working class signals. Interestingly, MPs from the populist right are the ones who most often display working class signals in their lifestyle.

Finally, it is also worth noting that cultural left parties by far are the ones who are most likely to display high cultural class signals, compared to the other groups. All of these variations suggest that there is a general pattern where MPs signal middle class and average lifestyles online, but that there are also interesting variations in the class cues, which might be aligned with the different parties' voter groups. In Chapter 7, I will return to how these different class signals impact voters' perceptions of what political candidates represent.

Figure 4.3. Distribution of class signals across party blocs



Note: N = 500. Based on the categorization of posts featured in Study 1. Cultural left parties are: Red-Green Alliance, Green Left, The Alternative, and the Social Liberals. Mainstream right are the Liberals, the Conservatives, the Liberal Alliance, and the Moderates. Populist right parties are the Danish People's Party, the Denmark Democrats, and the Citizens' Party.

This chapter has provided a descriptive overview of what characterizes the universe of lifestyle cues that I study in this dissertation. First, lifestyle cues are not necessarily tied to politicians in specific roles or from the left or right. Instead, it seems like MPs from traditional mainstream parties and with generally a higher number of followers are more likely to display their lifestyle online. Furthermore, politicians are clearly more likely to display lifestyle cues when they are on holiday and less busy with parliamentary work. Second, lifestyle cues do seem to generate more positive interactions and reactions on Facebook, compared to explicitly political posts. However, at the same time, they also generate less engagement in terms of comments and shares. Finally, MPs most often display their lifestyle in terms of their leisure activities and material consumption. In terms of class signals, MPs clearly seem to showcase modest, middle- or working class lifestyle signals in terms of what they post on Facebook, with some important variations across parties. This highlights a clear tendency in the social signals MPs provide in their lifestyle cues, and it alludes to the importance of focusing on the lifestyle signals MPs choose to *show* online. Yet, the question remains whether and to what extent lifestyle

cues actually make a difference for what voters support and evaluations of politicians. I will examine these core questions in the next three chapters.

Chapter 5:
Do lifestyle cues boost voter support?

In this chapter, I will address the first sub-question I posed in the introduction. To what extent are lifestyle cues an effective tool to attract voter support? Do voters think better of politicians when they post about their lifestyle? Going back to the first part of Chapter 2, I presented what I call the general effect of lifestyle cues, arguing that lifestyle cues in general might influence voters' intention to vote for politicians in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, I theorized that lifestyle cues might make politicians more approachable, down-to-earth, and warm, positively impacting voters' willingness to vote for them. On the other hand, I argued that lifestyle cues might make politicians appear less willing to handle important political issues, which might make them seem less competent. This mechanism could therefore decrease voters' intention to vote for politicians.

As the chapter will show, I provide three general findings. First, lifestyle signals do not consistently boost, and might in some cases harm, the perceived warmth of and likelihood of voting for politicians. Secondly, lifestyle cues negatively impact the perceived competence of politicians. Third, lifestyle cues repel in-party voters, in particular, without attracting voters from other parties. Instead, I found that voters prefer politicians to focus on explicit policy matters. These findings challenge the more pessimistic views of personalization, suggesting that voters are more discerning than assumed and prefer politicians who focus on substantive political matters. The chapter continues by providing a brief overview of the experimental studies and the measures that were used, before I go on to discuss the results. For a more elaborate analysis and robustness checks, the reader should consult Paper A and its appendices.

Overview of studies

To test whether lifestyle cues, in general, affect voter support, I relied on data from two of the survey experiments I conducted. The data stems from what I referred to as Study 1 and Study 2 in Chapter 3, where I also described the overall approach of the experiments. What is central, to studying whether lifestyle cues from politicians affect voter support is that we need a baseline to compare it to. To determine whether voters perceive politicians as more or less warm, or are more likely to vote for them when they provide lifestyle cues, we need a *counterfactual*. In the two studies, I compared the effects of lifestyle cues relative to two different types of communication. In Study 1, I compared

participants' evaluations of politicians when exposed to posts about politicians' lifestyles to their evaluations when exposed to explicit policy posts. This is because, as also shown in Chapter 4, politicians primarily talk about explicit policy matters in most of their social media activity. It is also what one would expect a politician to talk about, why an explicit policy can be considered as the default type of information one would expect from a politician. This design captured the trade-off between substantial and explicit political communication on the one hand, and lifestyle-based posts on the other, and what voters prefer. In Study 2, I did the same, but I added a third category, which is vague descriptions of the politician's workday. These were meant not to include any information about the policy views or activities of the candidate, but just vague and generic descriptions, such as: "A long day ahead with group meetings and discussions in Parliament". The idea was to include a more neutral condition, so I could compare the effects of lifestyle cues to either a scenario where participants not only see an explicit policy cue, or a situation where participants do not receive a cue at all. This is because policy cues might create strong reactions, and therefore, it is beneficial to compare lifestyle cues to a type of communication that is not as strong to provide a fairer test.

As outlined in Chapter 3, the studies also vary in terms of the messengers and the treatment stimuli. Treatment stimuli in Study 1 were the pool of actual Facebook posts that I categorized. These posts were presented in their full length to participants in the way the MPs posted them originally, which is why they vary in terms of length and richness. The pool of stimuli consisted of 500 lifestyle posts and 500 explicit policy posts, with five posts from 100 different MPs in each category. Participants were randomly assigned to either a lifestyle or a political post. The randomization ensured that respondents could not see the same post more than once.

In Study 2, the stimuli vignettes were presented as social media posts from hypothetical MPs. These posts were standardized in terms of length and tone, which reduces the variation across the different posts compared to Study 1 and adjusts for potential pre-treatment effects that can occur from using posts from actual MPs. I randomly assigned participants to one of three different conditions. In the control condition, respondents were just shown a post that contained the name of the MP, their party, and a generic workday statement. The gender was randomized via the name of the MP, and MPs were randomly assigned to one of four major Danish political parties.[7] In the policy condition, participants were shown vignettes containing the same baseline but now adding a statement describing a political action or attitude of the MP. The

[7] I chose the Social Democrats, the Green Left (SF), the Liberal Party (Venstre), and the Conservatives, since they are 4 old and well-established parties in the Danish context.

randomization was constructed in a way that the policy statements would align with the party the MPs came from. The statements varied on different policy issues to make sure the results would not be driven by picking a specific issue.

In both studies, participants were exposed to five different posts and asked questions afterwards about the MP that made the post and the post in general. After each round, they would be randomly assigned to a new post.

Table 5.1. Randomized dimensions in Study 2

Dimension	Levels
Baseline information	
Gender	Female/Male
Party	Green Left/Social Democrats/Liberal Party / the Conservatives
Generic workday statement	1 out of 5
Experimental condition	
Lifestyle cue	1 of 30 different lifestyle statements
Political statement	1 of 5 posts constructed for each party

The key outcomes I was interested in across the studies were perceived competence, warmth, and the likelihood of voting for the MP. *Warmth* was measured with the following question (translated from Danish): "Based on the post, how sympathetic do you think the politician is?" *Competence* was measured with the following question: "Based on the post, how competent do you think the politician is?" Both are measured from 0 to 10, where 10 indicates a high degree of sympathy or competence. *Vote intention* is measured with the following question: "On a scale from 0 to 10, how likely is it that you would vote for this politician?" Again, 10 indicates a high likelihood. These outcomes were measured similarly across both studies.

Main findings

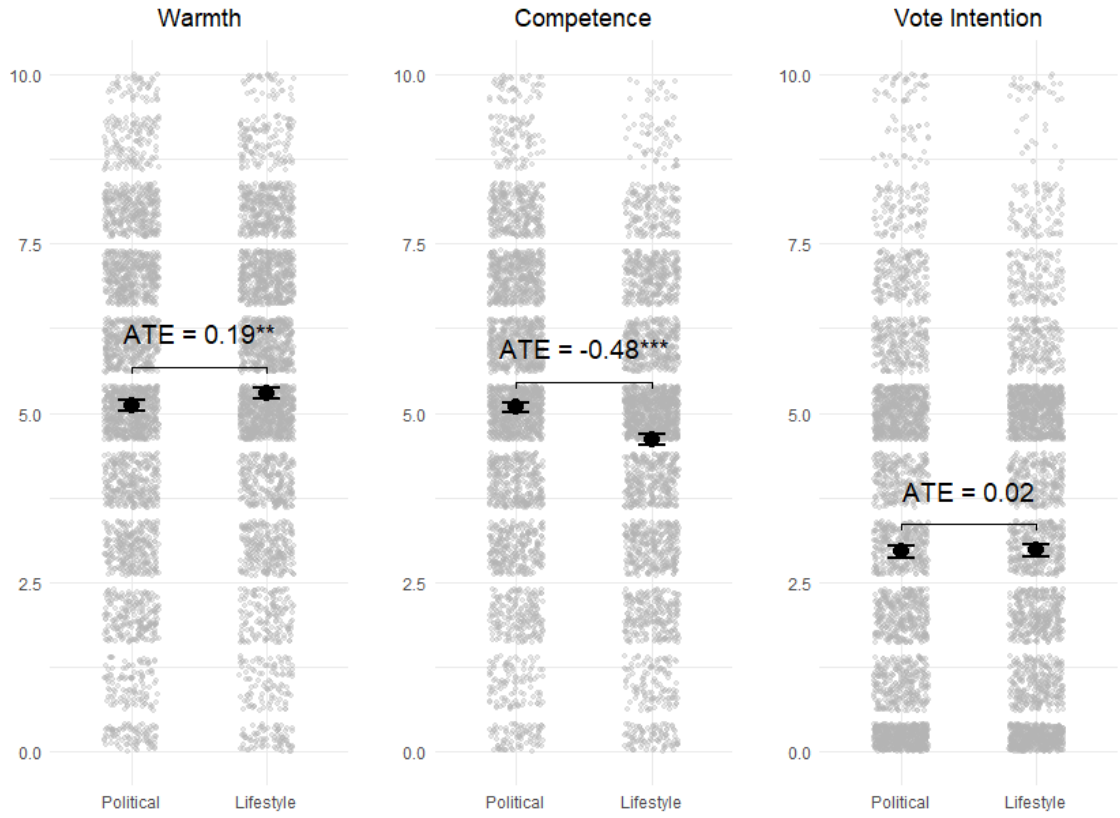
Study 1

First, I will outline the main results from Study 1, where I assessed the impact of the real-world lifestyle posts from MPs compared to the political posts. Figure 5.1 illustrates the results, showing the average levels of warmth, competence, and vote intention across the two experimental conditions, with 95 percent confidence intervals. The left panel of Figure 5.1 displays a small positive effect of lifestyle cues on perceived warmth of around 0.2 scale points (2 percentage points, $p < 0.01$) compared to the political cues. This finding supports

the argument that lifestyle cues boost the perceived relatability and warmth of politicians.

The center panel displays the other side of the coin. Compared to the political posts, lifestyle cues also negatively impact the perceived competence of MPs by approximately 0.5 scale points (5 percentage points, $p < 0.01$). These results appear to support the two mechanisms proposed in the General Effect. Nevertheless, it seems like these two effects potentially cancel each other out when looking at the impact on vote intention. I find no significant difference in the estimated probability of voting for the MPs between the two conditions ($p = 0.74$). It is also worth noting that participants generally seem more likely to provide neutral responses (= 5) when exposed to the lifestyle posts. This could indicate that citizens might find lifestyle cues slightly less informative, compared to political posts, in terms of forming a clear opinion about political figures.

Figure 5.1. Average levels of Warmth, Competence, and Vote Intention by Experimental Condition



Note: N = 7530. For the lifestyle posts, n = 3,772. For the policy posts, n = 3,758. The figure shows the average levels of vote intention, sympathy, and competence split by whether participants evaluated a politician posting a political or a lifestyle post. The dots represent the distribution of observations within each condition. $p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$.

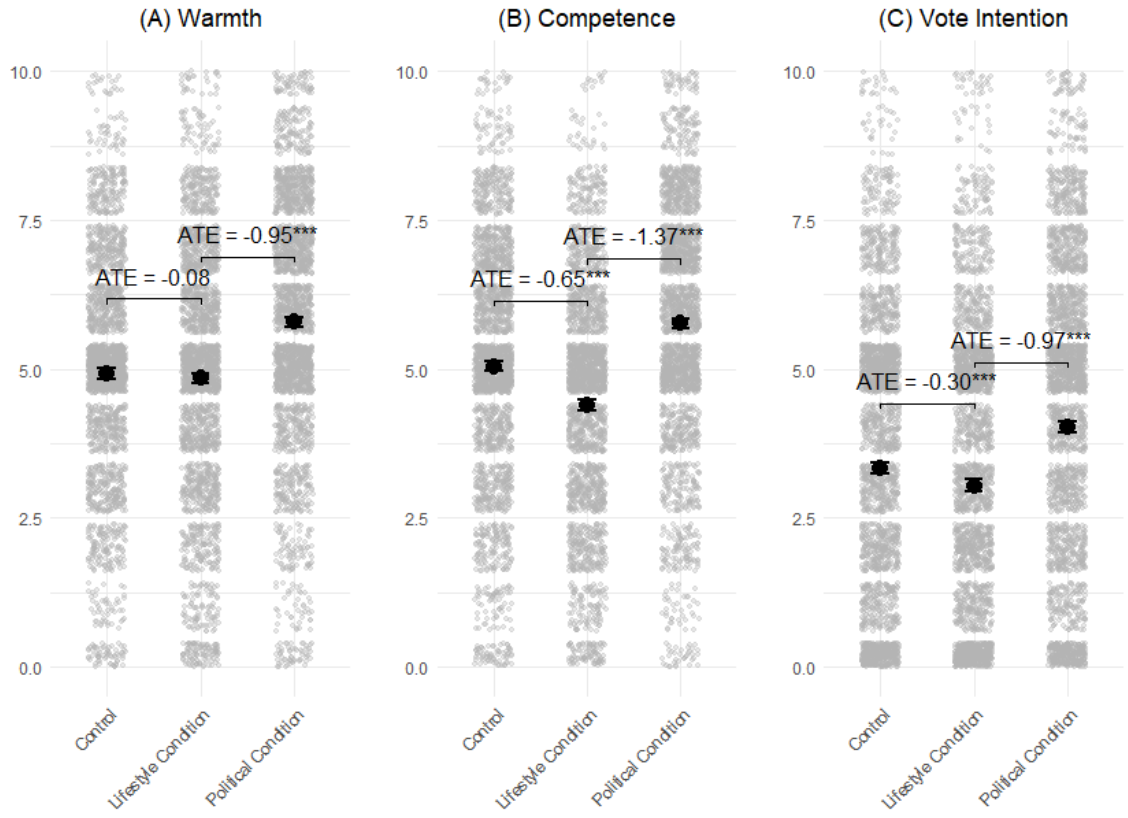
Overall, the findings from Study 1 seem to support the dual-component mechanism in the General Effect. On the one hand, lifestyle cues increase the perceived warmth of MPs, but on the other hand, they also negatively impact how competent MPs are perceived to be. However, I do not find an effect on the probability of voting for the MP, which suggests that lifestyle posts might move how voters evaluate MPs, but not their likelihood of voting for them.

Study 2

To test whether these effects hold, when posts are provided in a more experimentally controlled setting, I turn to look at the results from Study 2. This study also included a control condition. The results are presented in Figure 5.2. Clearly, the results show rather consistent patterns across all outcomes, as well as patterns that diverge from Study 1. Turning to the results presented in Figure 5.2, lifestyle cues generate systematically more negative evaluations of politicians than political cues, with effects that are substantively meaningful in size. Focusing first on Panel B, exposure to a lifestyle cue reduces perceptions of an MP's competence by approximately 1.37 scale points relative to exposure to a political cue. This finding is consistent with the results from Study 1, just with even stronger effect sizes. In addition, lifestyle cues produce a statistically significant negative effect when compared to the control condition, amounting to a reduction of about 0.65 scale points. By contrast, Panel C reveals a pattern that diverges from Study 1. Here, receiving a lifestyle cue is associated with a decrease in reported voting probability of roughly 1 scale point compared to the political cue condition, and approximately 0.3 scale points relative to the control group. This stands in contrast to the null effect observed in Study 1. Somewhat unexpectedly, as shown in Panel A, lifestyle cues also reduce perceived warmth by nearly 1 scale point relative to the political condition, reversing the pattern documented in Study 1. However, no statistically significant difference in perceived sympathy emerges when lifestyle cues are compared to the control condition.

Despite differences in effect sizes and directions relative to Study 1, two broader conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, lifestyle cues consistently undermine perceptions of politicians' competence. Second, there is little evidence that lifestyle cues enhance sympathy and, by extension, vote intention; instead, under certain conditions, such cues may even depress both perceived sympathy and the likelihood of voting for a politician. Across Study 1 and 2, I ran several analyses to check the robustness of the findings (see Appendix B, Paper A), and across these, the overall findings hold.

Figure 5.2. Average levels of warmth, competence, and vote intention by treatment conditions



Note: The figure displays the average levels and distribution of perceived vote intention, sympathy, and competence across the three experimental groups. All three outcomes were measured on a scale from 0 to 10. The dots plot the distribution of the same three outcome variables across the experimental groups. N: Control = 3086, Lifestyle Condition = 3091, Political Condition = 3088. $p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$.

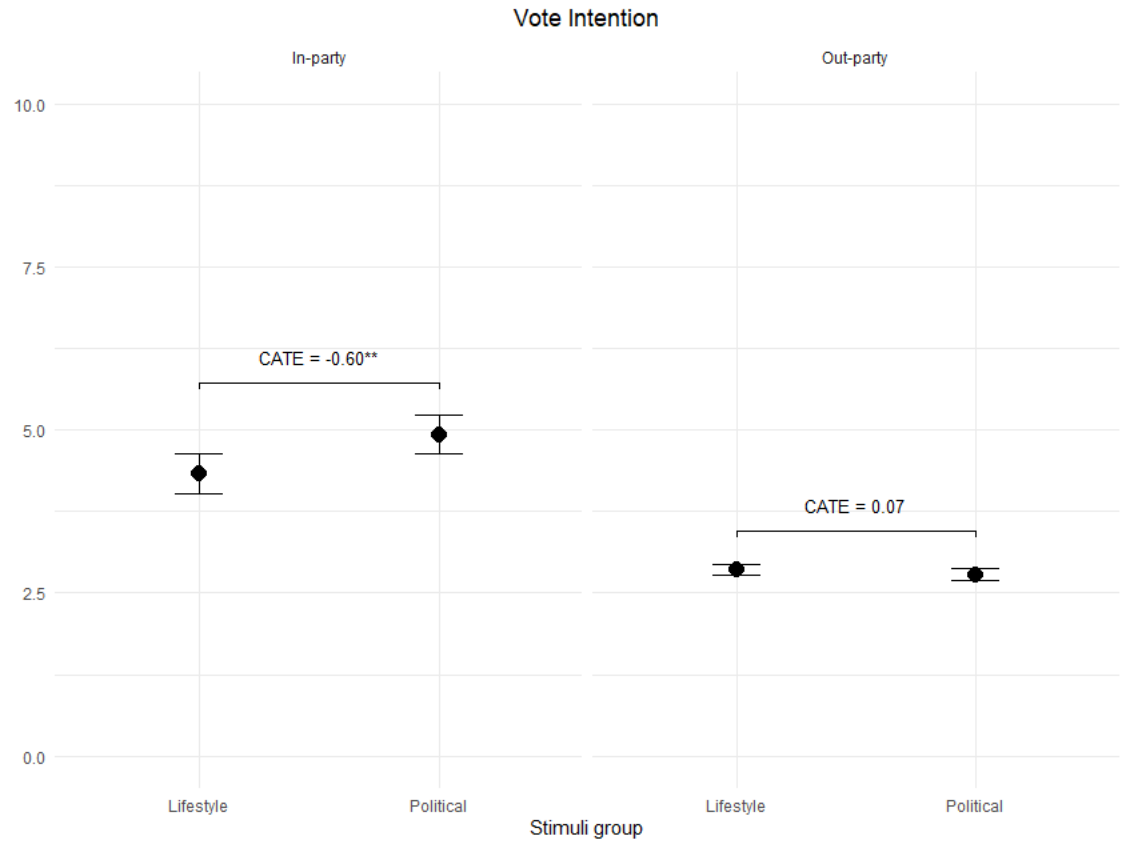
Do lifestyle cues attract voters from other parties?

To assess the broader implications of the results, I also analyzed whether the effects differ across voters' party loyalties. This is important, as it can say something more about which voters are mobilized, or demobilized, by lifestyle cues. Are lifestyle cues mainly effective among the electoral base, or do they help politicians to appear more likable among voters from other parties? I analyzed this by including a variable in the analysis capturing whether respondents support the party the given MP represents. This was done by asking respondents which party they would vote for if there was an election today. This was paired with the party of the MP on each post, coded as "in-party" if there was a match and "out-party" if not. The measure, therefore, only provides a proxy of partisanship in the sense of partisan identification. This variable was included as a moderator in both studies. Importantly, the functioning of the

experimental designs ensured that this shared partisanship was partly randomized, because it was randomized for each round, which party the MP would be from.

Figure 5.3 presents the results of this test in Study 1, and Figure 5.4 presents the results from Study 2. Here, I focus on the effects on vote intention. Unsurprisingly, there are strong positive effects of being exposed to posts by MPs from one's preferred party. However, the most important thing here is the interaction with the effect of lifestyle cues. Examining the results, it does appear that the effects vary based on voters' partisan loyalties. Among "in-partisans", i.e., when the MPs are from the party that voters would vote for, there is a negative effect of being exposed to lifestyle on vote intention, compared to the political cues. This suggests that lifestyle cues potentially scare off the electoral base. Does it then attract voters from other parties? Not really. Among "out-partisans," I do not find a significant difference in vote intention across the two conditions. This indicates a key limitation in the electoral effectiveness of lifestyle cues. They generally seem to push away in-party voters, while failing to make voters from other parties more likely to support MPs.

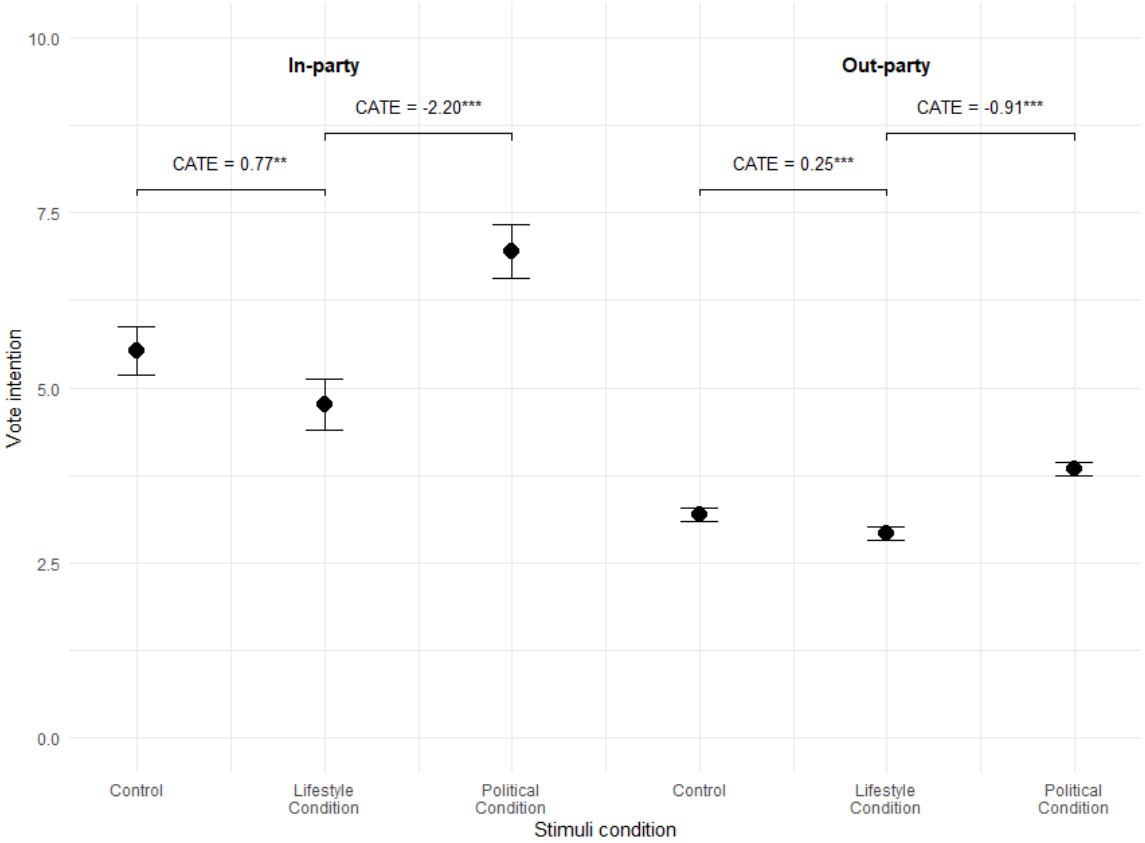
Figure 5.3. Average levels of vote intention across experimental conditions and partisanship



Note: The figure shows the estimated average levels of vote intention split by whether participants evaluated a politician for posting or political or a lifestyle post and whether the MP is from their preferred party (in-party) or not (out-party). $p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$.

Are the results similar in Study 2? Yes and no. Examining the results in Figure 5.4 shows that lifestyle cues exert a negative effect on voting probability for both in-party and out-party MPs. This pattern stands in contrast to the findings from Study 1 and suggests that voters are, if anything, more inclined to support politicians with whom they otherwise disagree when they are presented with policy information rather than lifestyle-related content. In this sense, the analysis constitutes an even more demanding test of the patterns documented in Figure 5.2 as it demonstrates that the adverse effects of lifestyle cues persist even when voters evaluate politicians who are not aligned with their own political preferences. Although the magnitude of these effects is larger for in-party politicians, the results point toward a broader and more general voter aversion to lifestyle-based messaging.

Figure 5.4. Average levels of vote intention across experimental conditions and partisanship (Study 2)



Note: Points display the average levels of perceived vote intention across the three experimental groups, with 95 percent confidence intervals. All three outcomes were measured on a scale from 0 to 10. N: Control = 3,086, Lifestyle Condition = 3,091, Political Condition = 3,088. $p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$.

Taken together, the findings from the two studies indicate that politicians' attempts to boost their appeal by sharing lifestyle-related content are unlikely

to pay off. Drawing on two survey experiments conducted in Denmark – using both real Facebook posts and carefully designed experimental material – I consistently show that lifestyle posts trigger a negative reaction, particularly by lowering perceptions of politicians' competence. At the same time, such posts do not reliably increase warmth or voting support and, in some cases, even reduce it. Overall, the evidence suggests that when voters are presented with a choice between lifestyle content and political substance, they tend to favor politicians who focus on concrete policy issues. Notably, lifestyle cues appear to be especially costly among voters who are already ideologically aligned or support the politician's party, as these voters seem to expect their preferred representatives to prioritize policy over personal displays. Meanwhile, lifestyle cues do not generate clear positive reactions among voters from other parties. In sum, the results point to a broadly negative impact of lifestyle-focused communication on how voters evaluate politicians.

Chapter 6: Are lifestyle cues a way to appeal to social classes?

In the previous chapter, I looked at whether posting about lifestyle affects how voters evaluate politicians. I found very little that suggested that voters prefer politicians who focus on lifestyle. Nevertheless, it might very well be that those overall effects hide important nuances. The previous chapter tells us something about whether posting about lifestyle, *as a whole,* compared to other types of posts, impacts how voters evaluate politicians. However, we do not know what the effects of different *types* of lifestyle cues are, and whether they provide heterogeneous effects. As argued, lifestyle cues can be expected to be closely tied to social class and status, and lifestyle cues with different class signals might be evaluated very differently by voters. This ties back to the second main question I posed in Chapter 1: Are lifestyle cues a way to appeal to certain classes? As mentioned in Chapter 2, I proposed two separate mechanisms that could be expected: a *baseline class effect*, which suggests that voters in general will evaluate middle class lifestyle signals most positively, and be more likely to vote for candidates proposing middle class signals, compared to other lifestyle cues; and a *class affinity effect,* which suggests that voters will prefer and be more likely to vote for politicians who showcase lifestyle cues that are associated with voters' own social class.

These questions and theoretical mechanisms will be addressed in this chapter. First, I investigate the extent to which voters associate MPs' lifestyle appeals with different class signals, based on their categorizations of the actual Facebook posts. Here, I find that voters seem to infer and associate different lifestyle cues with different classes. Second, I look at how different class signals in lifestyle affect voters' likelihood of voting for politicians. The findings suggest a clear dislike of politicians who provide higher-class lifestyle cues. Interestingly, this effect holds irrespective of which class voters identify with. Voters who identify as higher class themselves also tend to dislike politicians who present themselves as higher class in their lifestyle. Finally, the probability of voting does not seem to differ between politicians who provide middle class or working class lifestyle cues, highlighting that it is more a dislike of higher class signals than a clear preference for a specific lifestyle signaling.

Do voters make class associations from politicians' lifestyle posts?

The first part of the chapter investigates whether citizens associate a relation between lifestyle cues from MPs and social class. This is to assess whether the overall argument that lifestyle cues signal social class has empirical backing. If this is the case, I should find that participants can identify class associations based on lifestyle-related posts, that these associations make sense from what one would expect, and whether these associations are systematic.

To analyze this, I used data from Study 1. More specifically, I used half of the observations that were exposed to lifestyle-related posts from Danish MPs, meaning I had 3,772 observations for this analysis. After each post, participants were asked to categorize the MP into a social class. Following previous studies of class in a Danish context (Harrits & Pedersen, 2018; Stubager et al., 2018), I measure class associations with the question: "Based on the post, which class would you associate the politician with?" Respondents could answer one of the following: 1) Lower class, 2) Working class, 3) Lower middle class, 4) Middle class, 5) Upper middle class, 6) Upper class, 7) No class association, or 8) Don't know. I formulated the question to prime people to base their classification solely on the post. However, given that some of the MPs featured in the sample are rather well-known, and voters might know their political party, participants' prior opinions and perceptions of these MPs likely play a role in how they answered the question.

To analyze patterns in how participants infer class associations based on the lifestyle posts, I conducted a keyness analysis, a quantitative text analytical tool. The point of the keyness analysis is to identify the words or phrases that are most strongly related to a target corpus, compared to a reference corpus. This works by splitting a text corpus (Chen, 2025; Zollinger, 2022) into two categories: the target corpus and the reference corpus. The frequencies of words in the target corpus are compared to the frequency in the reference corpus, and through that, one can identify words most strongly associated with the target category. In this context, the overall text corpus is the Facebook posts used as the stimuli in the survey, and the target categories are the different class groups into which participants classified MPs relative to all the other categories. To identify words most clearly related to classifying MPs as working class, for instance, I took all the posts where participants categorized MPs as working class as the target corpus, and all other posts as the reference corpus. This analysis enables me to identify textual patterns and specific lifestyle words that were associated with specific class groups.

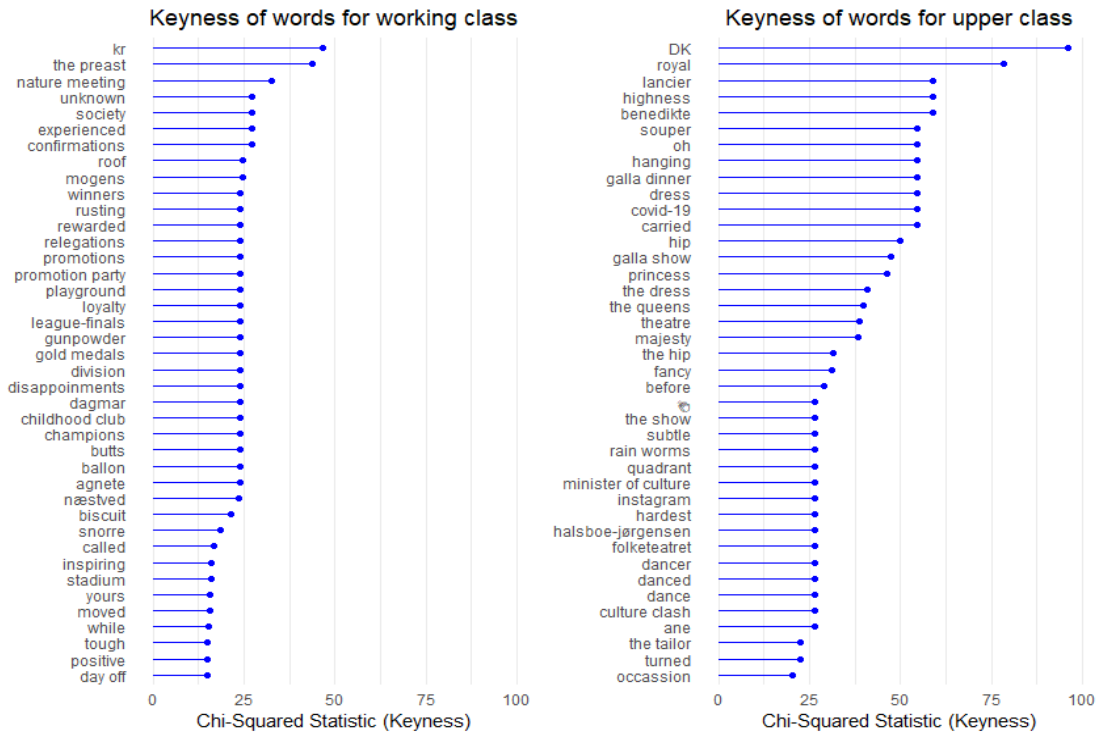
Generally, most participants associate MPs with rather resourceful classes. In 30.6 percent of the cases, MPs were associated with the middle class,

and in around 40 percent of the cases, they were associated with the upper middle or the upper class. Only 5.8 percent of the observations associate an MP with the working class. This suggests that voters generally associate MPs with higher social classes based on their appearances and lifestyles in their Facebook posts. However, recent studies suggest that voters generally tend to associate politicians with the privileged classes, so the numbers might likely reflect that general tendency (Allen, 2018; Devine et al., 2025)

Next, I explored the textual patterns in how participants classified MPs based on their lifestyle posts. I present the overall results of the analysis below in Figure 6.1. For simplicity, I only plot the 40 words with the highest relative frequency for the working and upper classes in the figure. Overall, the findings reveal some interesting patterns that give face validity to the idea that voters infer class from lifestyle posts. As it appears in the figure, the clearest pattern for the words related to the working class is words related to football (soccer) or local sports. Words such as *promotion, relegation, Champions League finale, division (referring to a sports division as in 1st division), gold medals, the childhood club,* and *stadium*, all appear as most strongly related to the working class. For the upper class, two general patterns can be identified. First, words related to participating in events with the royal family are associated with the upper class, i.e., words like *royal, highness, Lanciers*[8]*, princess, the queen, majesty*. Second, words related to participating in finer cultural events, such as *galla show, theatre, dancer, fancy, and show* were associated with upper class categorization. These tendencies seem to fit overall with what patterns one would expect people to think fit with the working and upper class respectively.

[8] A traditional dance at banquets and gallas where the Danish Royal family is present. It can also be danced at Gallas at Danish High Schools, but in this context, it refers to gallas with the royal family.

Figure 6.1. Words with the highest relative frequencies in posts from MPs classified as working or upper-class. Words are translated from Danish



Note: Results are based on the pool evaluations of lifestyle posts, n = 3772 observations. It shows the words that occur with the highest relative frequency in all the posts where respondents have associated the MP with the working class or the upper class, respectively, *in comparison to all the other lifestyle posts*. In other words, these are the words most uniquely associated with the working class or upper class. Words can also be emojis.

Another interesting pattern from Figure 6.1 is that the most distinctive words for the upper class have significantly higher keyness values, compared to words most strongly associated with the working class. This could indicate that it is generally easier for citizens to associate politicians with the higher classes. This pattern is supported by supplementary analysis[9], which showed that participants were more consistent and displayed less disagreement in classifying posts as upper class or upper-middle class, compared to the working class.

The findings indicate that citizens consistently draw inferences about politicians' social class based on lifestyle-related signals and link particular patterns of consumption and leisure to specific class positions. Posts describing attendance at football matches tend to be associated with a working-class background, whereas references to royal ceremonies or forms of highbrow culture are more commonly linked to upper-class status. More generally, respondents were substantially more likely to place MPs in upper-middle or

[9] Shown in Appendix A, for Paper B.

upper-class categories (approximately 40 percent) than to identify them as working class (5.8 percent). In addition, classifications into higher-status groups were more internally consistent, suggesting that, from the perspective of voters, politicians' lifestyles predominantly communicate associations with social privilege.

Which lifestyle cues do voters prefer?

Overview of the experiment

To study the causal effect of lifestyle cues with different class signals, I relied on data from Study 2. In the survey experiment, I randomly assigned lifestyle cues with either *working, middle or higher class* signals. Participants were randomly exposed to hypothetical Facebook posts from fictional MPs with different lifestyle cues. Participants were told to imagine the posts were Facebook posts from members of the Danish Parliament. For this analysis, I only look at the third of the observations for Study 2, that were assigned to the lifestyle condition (3,091 observations).

As described, the experiment was a factorial vignette experiment, where I randomly varied the class signals, the party, and the gender of the MP. In the randomization of the lifestyle cues, I also followed a stimulus sampling approach, using various stimuli within the same levels. I created a pool of 10 stimuli for each of the three class categories. The stimuli were constructed partly based on the relevant seed words from the keyness analysis, to maximize the external validity, and created so they would capture the variation of different class signals in lifestyle. The working-class lifestyle cues relate to buying rather practical, non-exclusive material goods and doing relatively mundane activities, such as going to the circus, buying a new stove, or listening to traditional "schlager" music. The middle-class stimuli contain descriptions of harmonious holiday activities, investment in home decor, exploration of cultural activities, and museum visits, to name a few. The final category, which I termed the higher class, is a combination of upper-middle- and upper-class cues. The higher-class stimuli describe rather exclusive consumption patterns holiday trips and activities, such as private wine tasting, signaling refined and exclusive taste. Table 6.1 gives an overview of the dimensions that were randomized, and Table 6.2 gives two examples of what a vignette could look like.

Table 6.1. Dimensions and levels in Study 2

Dimension	Levels
Baseline information	
Gender	Female/Male
Party	Green Left/ Social Democrats /the Liberal Party / the Conservatives
Experimental condition	
Lifestyle cue	Working class/ Middle class / Higher class

Table 6.2. Examples of vignettes (translated from Danish)

(Working-class condition) **Lars Nielsen (Liberal Party)** *My day started with meetings in the party group, where we discussed the bills we are voting on today.* *There are other things, though: Another nice evening at a soccer match with the kids – we are loyal supporters of our local club. (Working-class cue)*	(Higher-class condition) **Louise Pedersen (Social Democrats)** *A long day ahead with group meetings and then a debate in Parliament.* *After a long workday, I'm looking forward to a private wine tasting with a sommelier – always exciting to learn more about the world of wine. (Higher-class cue)*

As the main outcome, I focus again on the probability of voting, measured via the question: "How likely is it on a scale from 0 to 10 that you would vote for this politician?", where 10 indicates a high likelihood of voting for the politician. I also included measures of perceived warmth and competence, but they are not included here. To analyze whether the effects of the different lifestyle cues vary across voters' class – the class affinity effect – I included a measure of *class identification*. Given that the theoretical argument underpinning the class affinity effect relies on subjective psychological processes, i.e., work via people's perceived associations between politicians' class and their own class via lifestyle, I opted for a *subjective* measure of voters' class. I only expect the presence of a class affinity effect if voters subjectively identify with the class being targeted. Participants were asked about their class identity before the experimental procedure. I first asked participants whether they identify with a class, and if so, which one that is. They could choose the same one as in the class association measure shown above. If they did not pick a class, they were asked a follow-up question about which class they would say they most likely belong to. For the analysis, I pooled these two measures. Consistent with previous findings in Denmark, I find that a large share of participants identify as middle class (43 percent), whereas only 14 percent identify as working class (Stubager & Harrits, 2022; Stubager et al., 2018). For the analysis, I create a

dummy variable capturing whether the lifestyle cues match respondents' class identification.

Results

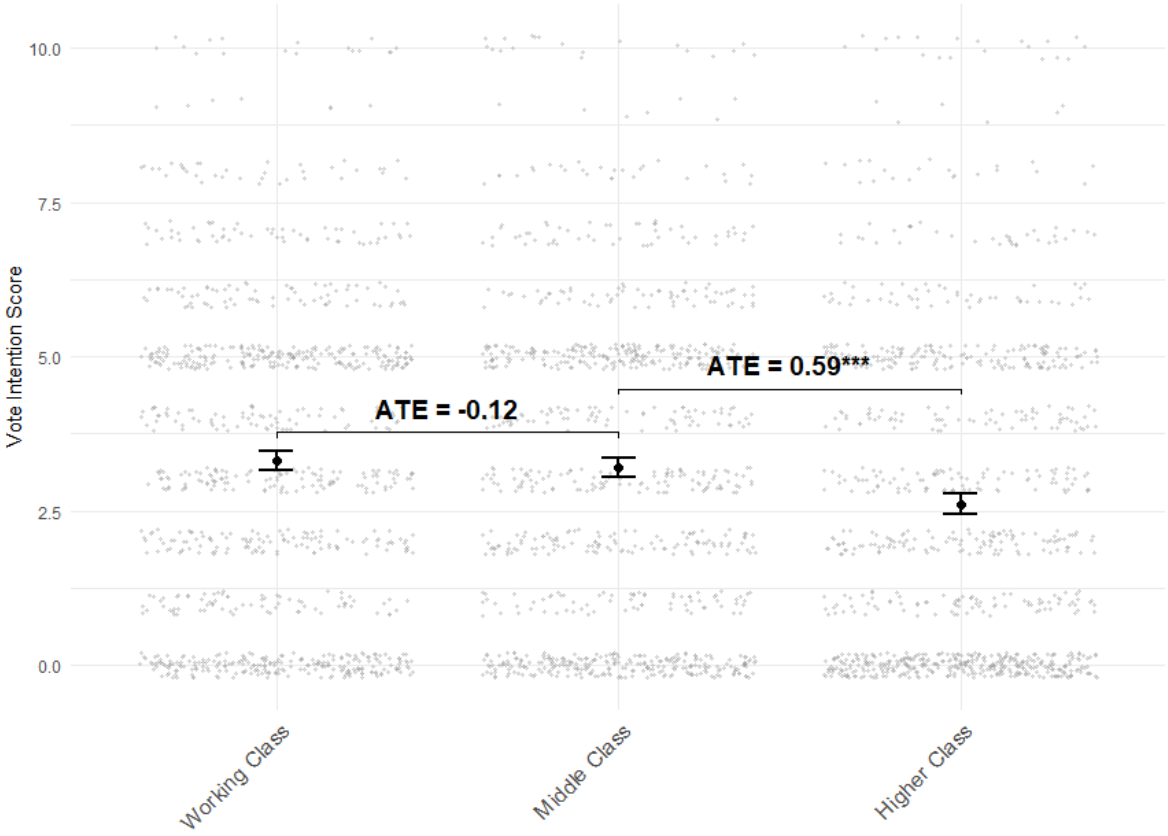
Moving on to look at the results, I first investigate the main effects on the voting probability across the three treatment conditions. This is done to test whether participants show a baseline class preference. I compare the differences in average probability of voting across the groups, with clustered standard errors for each participant. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 6.2.

The results generally show a negative effect of higher class lifestyle signals. When comparing the average voting probability of MPs displaying a higher class lifestyle compared to either working- or middle-class lifestyle cues, the levels are significantly lower. Compared to the middle class, the effect is around 0.6 scale points (6 percentage points). This is in line with previous findings suggesting that voters evaluate politicians from privileged backgrounds more negatively (Campbell & Cowley, 2013a; Vivyan et al., 2020). However, the results also indicate that voters do not have a preference between working- or middle class lifestyle cues. As can be seen from the figure, there is no significant difference in the voting probability between MPs displaying a working class or middle class lifestyle in their posts. Therefore, these initial results indicate that voters do not necessarily show a clear positive preference for middle class lifestyle signaling. Instead, it is a dislike of politicians showing higher class lifestyle cues.

Two supplementary analyses, which are shown in Appendix A of Paper B, highlight this trend. First, when looking at perceived warmth as the outcome, instead of voting probability, I find the same pattern, with even stronger effects. Showing a higher class lifestyle has a negative effect of around 12 and 10 percentage points on perceived warmth compared to working- or middle class cues. Again, there is no significant difference between the middle and working class categories. Second, the design allows me to investigate whether effects are consistent across the individual stimuli. This showed relative consistency, although the effect sizes for each stimulus vary. For nine out of 10 stimuli within the higher class category, there was a lower voting probability compared to the baseline category, and the seven stimuli that showed the lowest voting probabilities were all in this category. This shows that the treatment effects are not just down to a specific type of stimuli, and it increases the external validity of the findings. The lifestyle cues that led to the strongest negative effects were posts about buying a designer lamp, installing a new outdoor swimming pool, and dining at the high-end Copenhagen restaurant Gera-

nium. All this suggests that displaying a higher-class lifestyle affects voters' evaluations of politicians negatively.

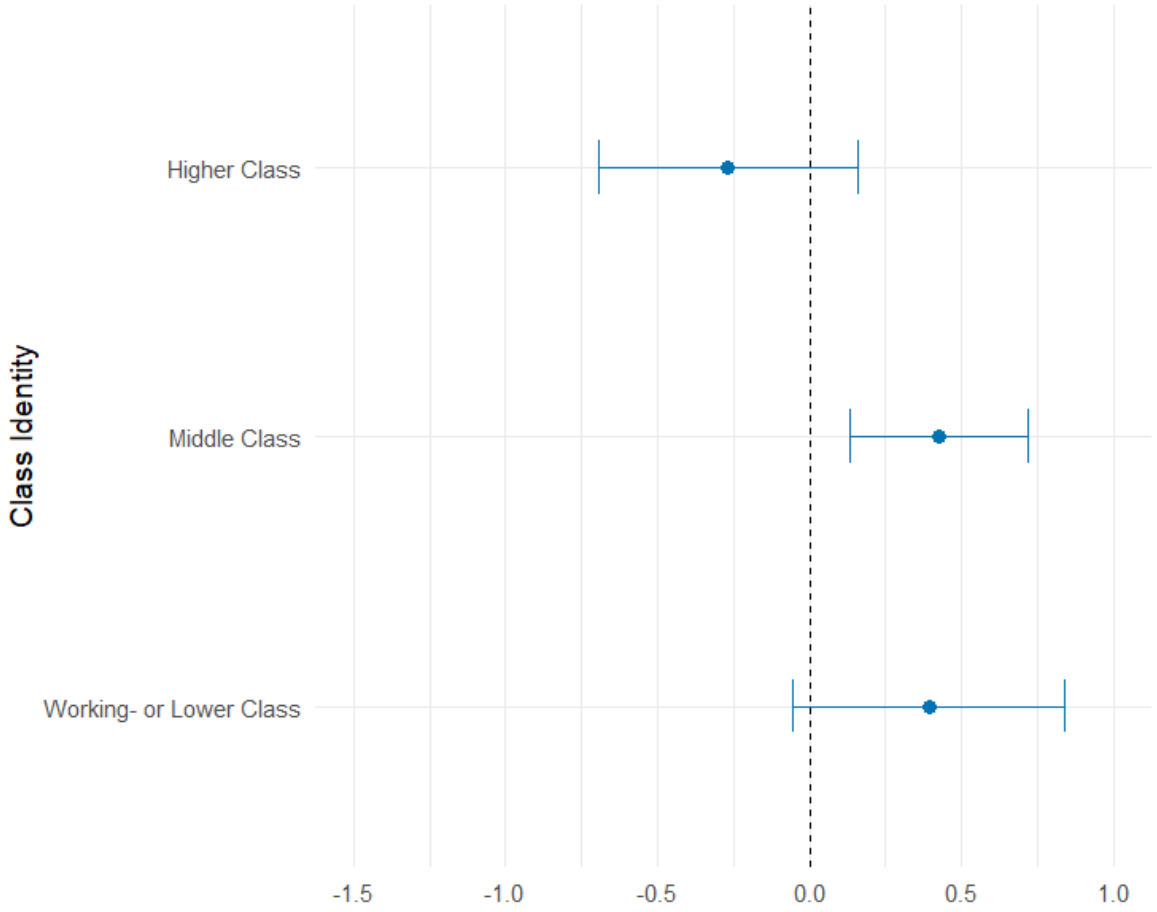
Figure 6.2. Average vote intention across lifestyle cues treatment groups



Note: N = 3091. The figure shows the average vote intention across experimental conditions. Vote intention is measured on a 0-10 scale, where 10 indicates a high likelihood of voting for the MP. $p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$.

Next, I examine whether these effects differ when we look across participants' class identification. In Figure 6.3, I show the results of an analysis that includes the dummy variable capturing whether there is a match between the class of the MP and the participant, as a moderator variable. The figure shows the marginal effect of receiving a lifestyle cue that matches one's own class identity compared to receiving a lifestyle cue that does not match, split by participants' class identification. For respondents identifying as middle class, for instance, it displays the effect of receiving a middle class cue, compared to receiving a different lifestyle cue. To increase statistical power and for parsimonious reasons, participants identifying as upper middle class and upper class were pooled together, and participants identifying as working and lower-class were pooled together for the analysis.

Figure 6.3. Treatment effects of receiving a matching lifestyle cue in terms of class



Note: N = 3091. The figure shows the marginal effect of receiving a lifestyle cue matching participants' class identification, compared to receiving one that does not match. The results are split by groupings of class identity. Participants identifying as upper middle class and upper class are pooled together, and vote intention is measured on a 0-10 scale, where 10 indicates a high likelihood of voting for the MP. Positive values mean a higher probability of voting for MPs.

To find support for the class affinity mechanism, we should expect to see positive effects across the groups. Yet, that is not entirely what can be seen. Among participants identifying as middle class (which is the biggest group), there is a significant positive effect (around 4.5 percentage points) on being exposed to middle class lifestyle cues on vote intention, compared to other cues. Working class identifiers also display a higher probability of voting for MPs who display working class lifestyle signals (compared to other lifestyle cues), but the effect is not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.08$). However, for participants identifying as higher class (upper middle- or upper-class), the effect is not significant, and even runs in the opposite direction. As such, these findings only provide limited support for the class affinity mechanism. Among participants identifying as middle class and working class, there is a tendency to prefer politicians when they display lifestyle cues

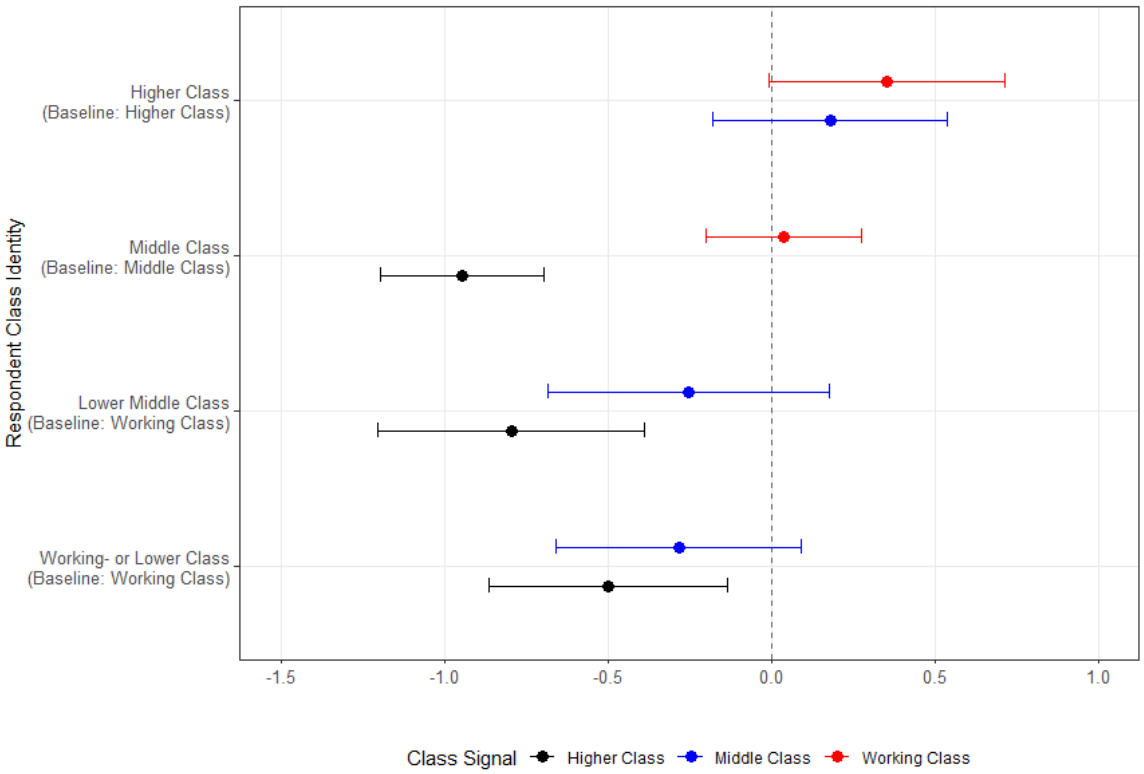
aligning with their identity, but for higher class identifiers, that does not seem to be the case.

To investigate these results in more detail, I conducted a second analysis, where I disaggregated the effect of the class matching into each of the treatments within each of the class identity groups. To increase statistical power, I decided to bundle the lower class with the working class, and the upper class with the upper middle class for the analysis. The class identity measure thus contained four groups for the analysis: 1) working and lower class, 2) lower middle class, 3) middle class, and 4) upper middle or upper class. The results are shown in Figure 6.4. Because the reference groups in Figure 6.4 are the "in-group" lifestyle cues, we should expect to find negative coefficients relative to the baseline to support the class affinity preference.

The results in Figure 6.4 seem to suggest that the differences are not driven by a class affinity effect, but provide more support to the interpretation that it is about disliking higher class lifestyle signals. Looking within the effects among participants identifying as working or lower class, lower middle class, and middle class, the results show clear negative effects of the higher class cues compared to the baseline categories. However, within all these groups there is not a significant difference in vote intention between the working- and middle class cues, which otherwise would be expected from the class affinity effect. This indicates that within these groups, voters are not showing a clear preference for politicians who display a lifestyle that aligns with their own class, but they clearly do not prefer politicians who provide higher class signaling. The negative effects of higher class cues vary between 5 to 9 percentage points (relative to baseline) within these groups. Furthermore, when looking at participants identifying as higher class, there is also a negative impact of higher class cues. However, the differences among higher-class respondents are not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.08$. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that voters who identify with the higher class also prefer politicians who display higher-class lifestyle patterns, which contradicts the class affinity explanation.

Overall, the results indicate that voters tend to react negatively to politicians who signal an affluent or "posh" lifestyle. Across voter groups, there is a clear preference for politicians who display working- or middle-class cues, rather than upper-class ones. This runs counter to the middle-class baseline effect and suggests that politicians who emphasize higher-status lifestyles are actively penalized. Notably, this pattern also emerges among respondents who identify with higher social classes themselves, challenging the class affinity effect as well. Instead, it appears voters display anti-elite disliking in terms of lifestyle signaling.

Figure 6.4. Treatment effects on vote intention relative to baseline by class identity



Note: N = 3091. The figure shows the marginal effect of receiving a lifestyle cue matching participants' class identification, compared to receiving one that does not match. The results are split by groupings of class identity. Participants identifying as upper middle class and upper class are pooled together, and vote intention is measured on a 0-10 scale, where 10 indicates a high likelihood of voting for the MP. Positive values mean a higher probability of voting for MPs. For the group of participants identifying as lower middle class, I used the working-class lifestyle cue as the reference category, because lower middle-class citizens usually feel closer to that group compared to the middle class.

Chapter 7: Are lifestyle cues signals of political views?

In Chapter 6, I investigated how the effects of lifestyle on voters' evaluation of politicians differ based on the class signals they provide. In this chapter, I investigate a different way lifestyle cues might affect voters. As the third part of my theoretical expectations, I argued that we should expect lifestyle cues to also function as a political heuristic for voters. This chapter relates to and answers the third question I posed in Chapter 1: To what extent does lifestyle cues signal representation of specific political views? Going back to the last part of Chapter 2, I argued that we should expect voters to use the social class signals in lifestyle cues to infer what politicians represent. This is because voters likely will associate different class signals with particular social groups that represent rather different political views and groupings, in a way that follows modern sociopolitical cleavages. First, I expect they might associate high economic class cues with economically right-leaning values and parties. Second, I expect that high cultural class cues, on the other hand, will be associated with culturally left-leaning positions and parties representing these views. Third, working class lifestyle cues might be associated with either economically left-leaning views or culturally right-leaning positions and parties.

I use data from all three experiments I conducted to examine this question and find that voters' lifestyle cues from politicians clearly influence the political views voters ascribe to them, and largely do so in the expected ways. These effects, importantly, hold even when voters are exposed to real-world posts from actual MPs, and when they know their actual party labels.

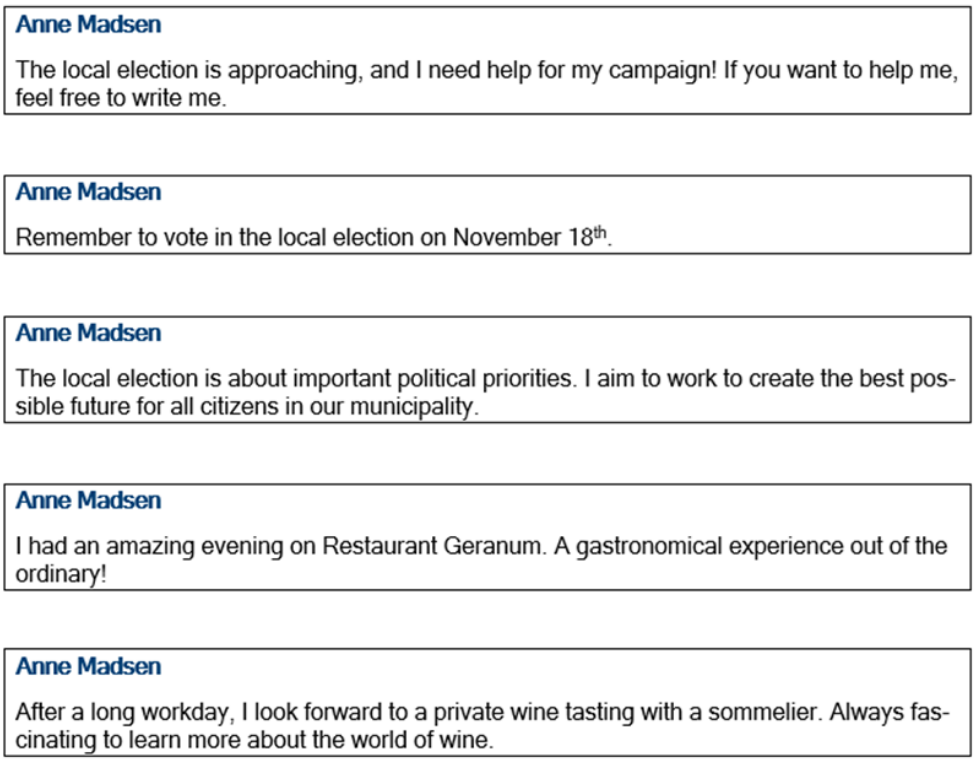
Do voters infer political views purely from lifestyle cues?

To examine these questions, I rely on data across all three experiments. In the first part, I describe the results from what I termed Study 3 back in Chapter 3. In this study, I exposed participants to sets of hypothetical Facebook posts from fictitious local candidates. The posts were presented to participants to mirror a “feed” or a candidate's Facebook page. Because the data was collected four months prior a local election in Denmark, the candidates were all presented to participants as potential candidates for the upcoming local election in their municipality. Participants were presented with three candidates and

social media "feeds", meaning three observations per respondent (n = 4,560). After reading posts from each of the candidates, participants were asked a set of questions about the candidates. In each round, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. The conditions varied in terms of the content and number of posts in the feeds participants were exposed to from each candidate. An illustration of how such a feed could look is shown in Figure 7.1.

In the *control condition*, participants were presented with three relatively neutral posts from the candidate related to the upcoming local election. These posts, for example, informed voters about the importance of participating in the election, encouraged campaign donations, or communicated general and abstract messages about improving conditions in the municipality. In the example in Figure 7.1, the first three posts represent these neutral campaign messages. In the three treatment conditions, participants were exposed to the same type of neutral election-related posts, as well as two further posts describing the candidate's lifestyle preferences or activities. As a result, respondents in the treatment conditions evaluated a total of five posts from each candidate. I also randomly drew the neutral campaign posts from a pool of nine posts. The randomization made sure the posts would not be repeated throughout the rounds.

Figure 7.1. Example of a candidate "feed" (translated from Danish)



In the *Working-Class Lifestyle* condition, candidates highlighted relatively traditional and practical lifestyle choices and expressed a mild aversion to extravagant or overly sophisticated symbols. In the *High Cultural Capital Lifestyle* condition, candidates emphasized preferences for intellectually demanding books and films, an openness to experimentation, and a subtle rejection of cultural symbols perceived as overly traditional. In the *High Economic Capital Lifestyle* condition, candidates signaled ownership of expensive and luxurious material goods, along with lifestyle practices associated with affluence and an interest in personal growth and self-improvement literature. Just like in Study 2, I followed a stimulus sampling approach within each experimental condition. I developed ten distinct stimulus texts for each class signal category, which were randomly assigned to participants within that condition.

To measure perceived political views of the candidates, I used two different sets of measures. First, I measured perceived *issue stances* with six different items. Three of them concern *cultural* issues: whether Denmark should take in more refugees, prioritizing preventative action rather than longer prison sentencing, and the protection of Danish culture. The other three relate to *economic* issues: lowering taxes, lowering social benefits, and whether the candidate supports decreasing economic inequality. Participants were asked to assess the extent to which the candidates would support these policies. All items were measured on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = "Strongly disagree", 10 = "Strongly agree"). I rescaled all items, so that higher values indicate a more right-leaning stance.[10]

Second, I asked participants to answer which political party they believed candidates would be a part of. Participants could choose from a list of all 12 parties currently represented in the Danish Parliament, as well as a "don't know" option. For the analyses, I categorized the parties into four broader party groups based on the theoretical expectations.

1) *Cultural left* – consists of the Red-Green Alliance, the Green Left, The Alternative, and the Social Liberals[11]. These are parties characterized by generally left-leaning positions, especially on cultural issues.

2) *Social Democrats* – who, in a Danish context, have a mainstream center-left platform but are more right-leaning on cultural issues.

3) *Mainstream right* – parties primarily defined as right-leaning on economic issues and are culturally more right-leaning. I included the Liberal

[10] That means I reversed the scaling of the items about preventive action and immigration, as well as the item about inequality.

[11] I included the Social Liberals in this group, even though they are more right-leaning on economic issues. However, they have a very clear cosmopolitan platform, with clear pro-EU and pro-environmental protection stances, and support for helping refugees.

Party, the Conservatives, the Liberal Alliance, and the Moderates in this group.

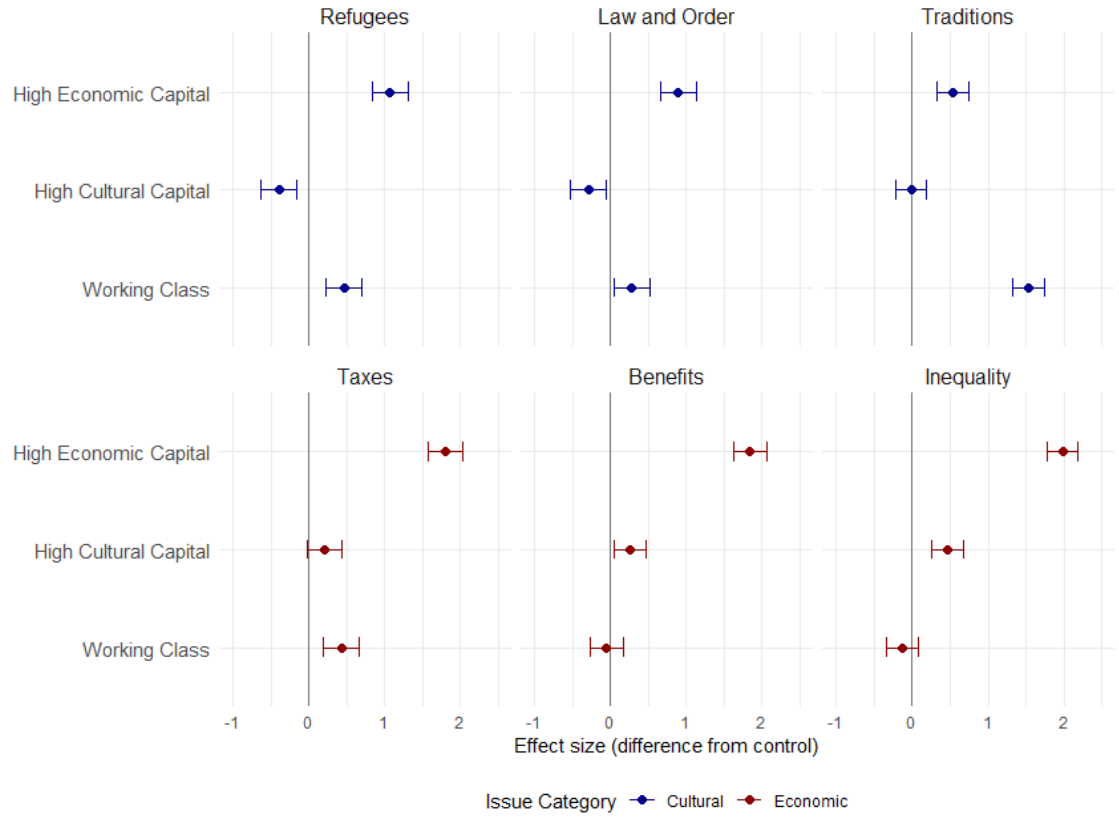
4) *Populist right* – consists of parties with clearly defined right-leaning positions on cultural issues such as immigration and law and order. These include the Danish People's Party, the Denmark Democrats, and the Citizens' Party.

Results

Figure 7.2 displays the results for the perceived issue stances of the candidates. Notice that point estimates on the right side of the line mean that the candidates were perceived to have more right-leaning views on the issue, compared to the control condition. The results generally indicate that voters do infer clear political signals from lifestyle cues, in the expected way. First, high economic capital cues are clearly associated with right-leaning opinions on economic issues, as shown in the lower panel of Figure 7.2. Candidates who display high economic capital cues are perceived as around 2 scale points (20 percent) more right-leaning across the three items. This is in line with the expected pattern. However, I also find that high economic capital cues are consistently associated with more right-leaning positions on cultural issues (effect around 0.5 to 1 scale points). This highlights that displaying lifestyle signals that highlight material wealth and exclusive material possessions generally signal more right-leaning views. However, the effects are clearer on the economic dimension.

Turning to the high cultural capital cues, I find the expected pattern for two out of three cultural items. Exposure to a high cultural capital cue shifts the perceived position of the candidate in a significantly more left-leaning direction on the issues of refugee support and law and order, with estimated effects of approximately 0.4 and 0.3 scale points, respectively. By contrast, no statistically significant effect emerges for the third item, traditions, when compared to the control condition. That said, the perceived position on this dimension is still significantly more left-leaning than in the other treatment conditions. Although the magnitude of these effects is modest and the pattern is not entirely uniform across all three indicators, the results indicate that high cultural capital cues are primarily associated with culturally left-leaning policy positions.

Figure 7.2. Effects on perceived policy stances by treatment condition.

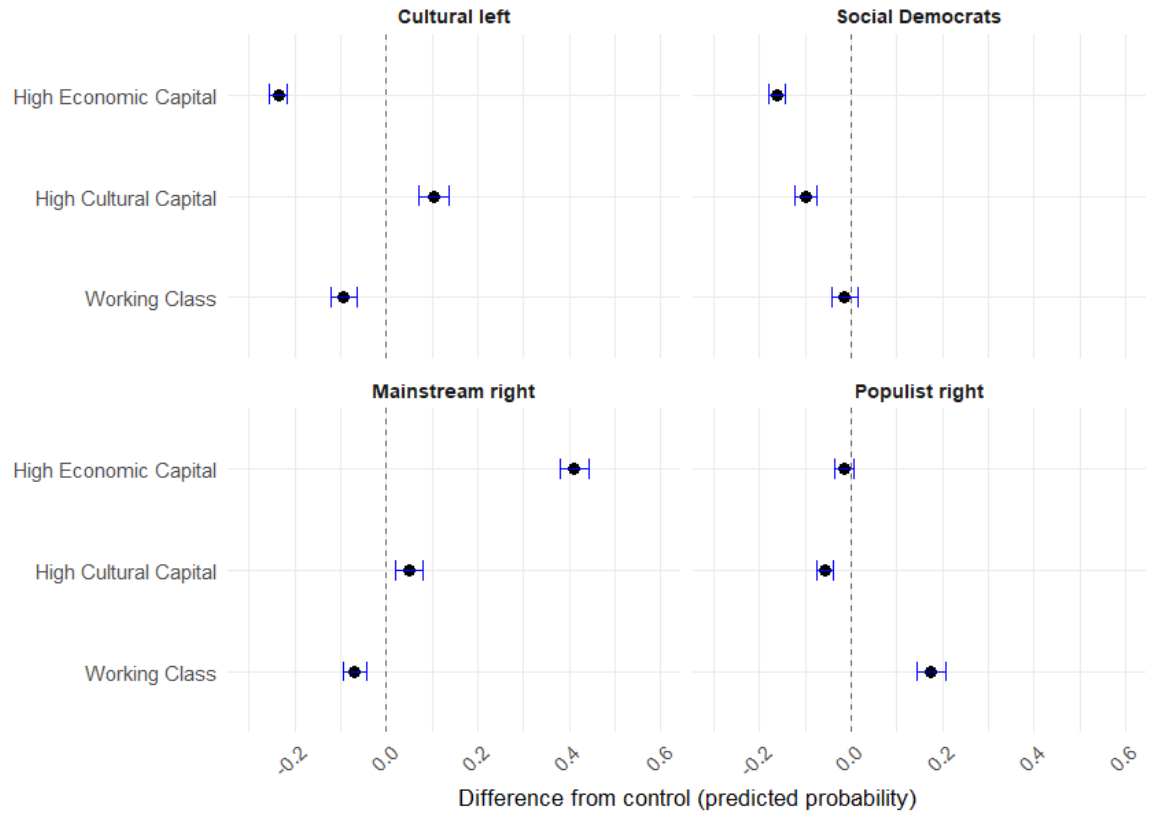


Note: N = 4590. All issue items are scaled 0-10, where 0 indicates left-leaning positions and 10 indicates more right-leaning positions. If the estimates are to the right of the line, it means that the perceived issue stance of candidates is more right-leaning compared to the control group.

Finally, the results for the working class condition generally indicate that they are associated with culturally right-leaning views, rather than economic leftism. As shown in the upper panel, when candidates display working class cues, they are perceived as more culturally right-leaning across all three items. The effect is particularly strong when looking at the support for preserving Danish traditions, where the effect is 1.5 scale points relative to the control group. There seems to be no consistent effect on the economic items.

I now turn to the effects on the perceived partisanship of candidates. As I grouped the parties into four different categories, I ran a multinomial regression model and estimated predicted probabilities for being categorized into the four party categories across treatment conditions. In Figure 7.3, I display the differences in these predicted probabilities relative to the control condition for all three treatment conditions.

Figure 7.3. Differences in predicted probabilities that participants assigned a candidate to a party in one of the four party blocs, across treatment conditions.



Note: N = 4590. The plot shows the differences in predicted probabilities of being assigned to the different party blocs for each treatment condition, relative to the control condition.

Overall, the results follow the expected pattern. First, candidates who display high economic capital cues are very clearly associated with mainstream right parties. Two-thirds of the participants classified candidates as members of mainstream right parties when they displayed high economic capital cues, which is a 40 percentage points difference relative to the control group. This is a very substantial difference. Similarly, high economic capital cues also significantly and substantially reduce the probability of being perceived as a member of the Cultural Left parties or the Social Democrats. Yet, it does not seem to affect the probability of being perceived as a populist right party member, even though these cues were associated with culturally right-leaning views above. This suggests that candidates showing off material wealth and high-end material possessions are predominantly linked to representing economically right-leaning parties. Focusing on high cultural capital cues, I also find the expected pattern. Candidates who display high cultural capital cues are significantly more likely to be associated with cultural left parties, relative to the control group. It also significantly decreases the likelihood of being classified as a member of the Social Democrats or the populist right bloc. Finally,

I find that working-class cues are mainly associated with populist right parties. Relative to the control condition, the working class cues increase the probability of being associated with populist right parties by 18 percentage points. Given that the baseline probability of being perceived as a populist right member is only 13.6 percent in the control condition, providing working class cues more than doubles the probability of being perceived as a populist right member. In line with these results, working class cues also reduce the probability of being perceived as belonging to the cultural left and mainstream right party blocs. Furthermore, it does not affect perceived Social Democrat membership.

These results suggest that voters use the lifestyle cues of politicians to infer what political views they represent. When candidates display high economic capital cues, they are very strongly associated with economically right-leaning views and parties. When candidates display high cultural capital cues, they are inferred to represent culturally left-leaning views and parties, whereas working-class cues are associated with representing culturally right-leaning views and populist right parties.

Do voters still make lifestyle-based inferences in the presence of more information?

The results in the previous section provide clear support for the theoretical expectations concerning whether voters use the lifestyle signals of politicians as a political heuristic. However, one shortcoming of the results in the previous experiment is that participants were only given very limited information about the candidates. Apart from the lifestyle signals and the generic posts about their electoral campaign, participants only knew the name of the candidate. To increase the external validity, I therefore used data from the two other survey experiments I conducted, which fortunately enabled me to test whether I could find the same patterns in scenarios with higher external validity. First, I used the experimental setup from Study 2 to test whether the lifestyle cues affected the perceived ideological positions of MPs when holding the party label of MPs constant. Given that many studies suggest that citizens use party labels as strong heuristics to infer positions, this is a stronger test of the heuristic effects of lifestyle cues (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021a, 2021b). Second, I used data from Study 1 to test the effect of different lifestyle signals based on actual Facebook posts. I used the classification of the lifestyle posts from Study 1 into different class signals as the independent variable and tested how these were associated with the ideological positioning of MPs.

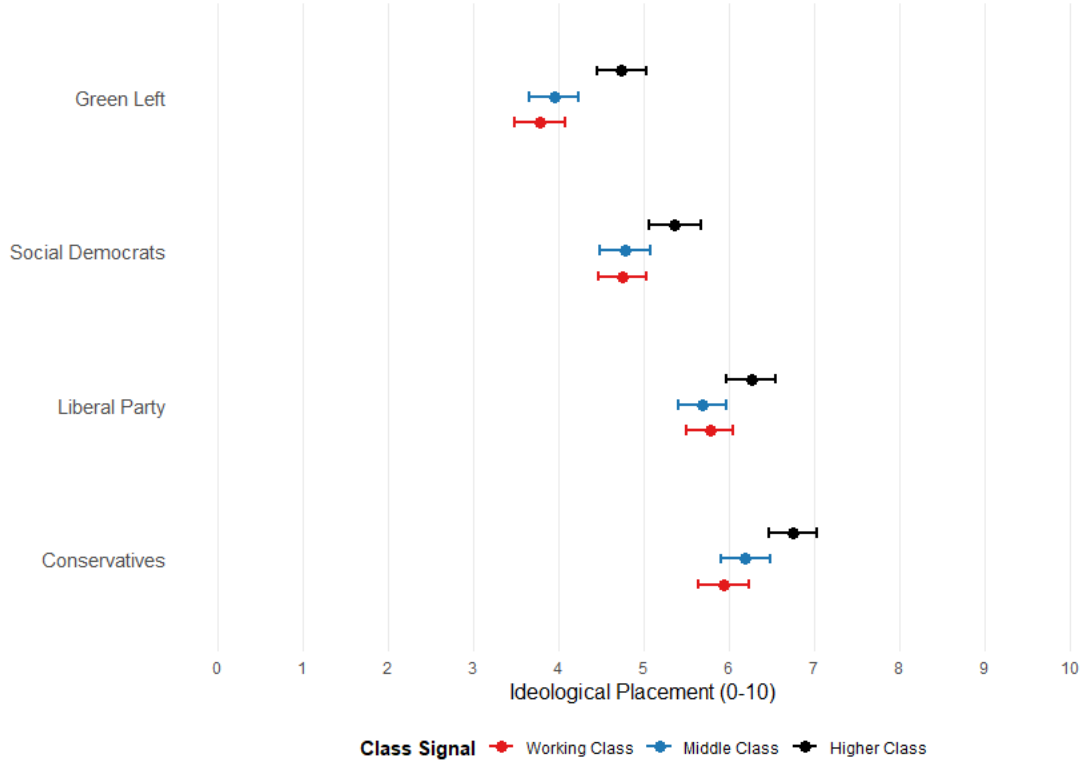
Results – Do voters infer intra-party differences based on lifestyle cues?

Using data from Study 2, I tested whether lifestyle cues affected the perceived positions of politicians when voters also knew the party label. I used the same experimental setup for Study 2, as described in the previous chapter, looking at the random assignment of class signals within the lifestyle condition, with three different experimental conditions (working class, middle class, and higher class). Importantly, I also randomized the party label of the MPs. The MPs were randomly drawn to be members of either the Green Left, the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party, or the Conservatives. As the primary outcome in Study 2, I asked participants to place the MPs on a 0-10 left-right scale, where 0 indicates a very left-leaning position, and 10 indicates a very right-leaning position. To test the effect of lifestyle cues in the presence of party cues, I include the party label of the MPs as an interaction term. I then compare the differences in average ideological position between the treatment conditions, when holding the party label of the MP constant. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 7.4 below.

As can be seen from Figure 7.4, lifestyle cues still move the perceived ideological positions of politicians when looking at the within-party differences. Unsurprisingly, the party labels clearly seem to guide the perceived ideological positions in the way one would expect, with MPs from left-leaning parties being perceived as more to the left. However, when looking at the perceived ideological positions within the parties, there are significant differences. Within all four parties, politicians who display higher class cues are perceived as significantly more right-leaning compared to MPs providing working class cues. The differences vary between 5 and 10 percentage points. These effects have substantial implications. For instance, MPs from the Liberal Party who provide working- or middle-class lifestyle cues are perceived as ideologically similar to MPs from the Social Democrats who display higher class cues. This is a substantially significant effect as it shows that lifestyle cues hold the potential to close perceived ideological differences across what is traditionally considered the center or middle of Danish politics.

These results indicate that lifestyle cues shape voters' perceptions of what politicians stand for even when party affiliation is known. Displaying higher-class lifestyle cues consistently shifts perceived positions in a more right-leaning direction, despite the presence of a party label. This suggests that lifestyle cues can both accentuate and blur perceived ideological differences across parties, while also offering politicians a means to differentiate themselves through the lifestyles they signal.

Figure 7.4. Effects of class on ideological placement by party

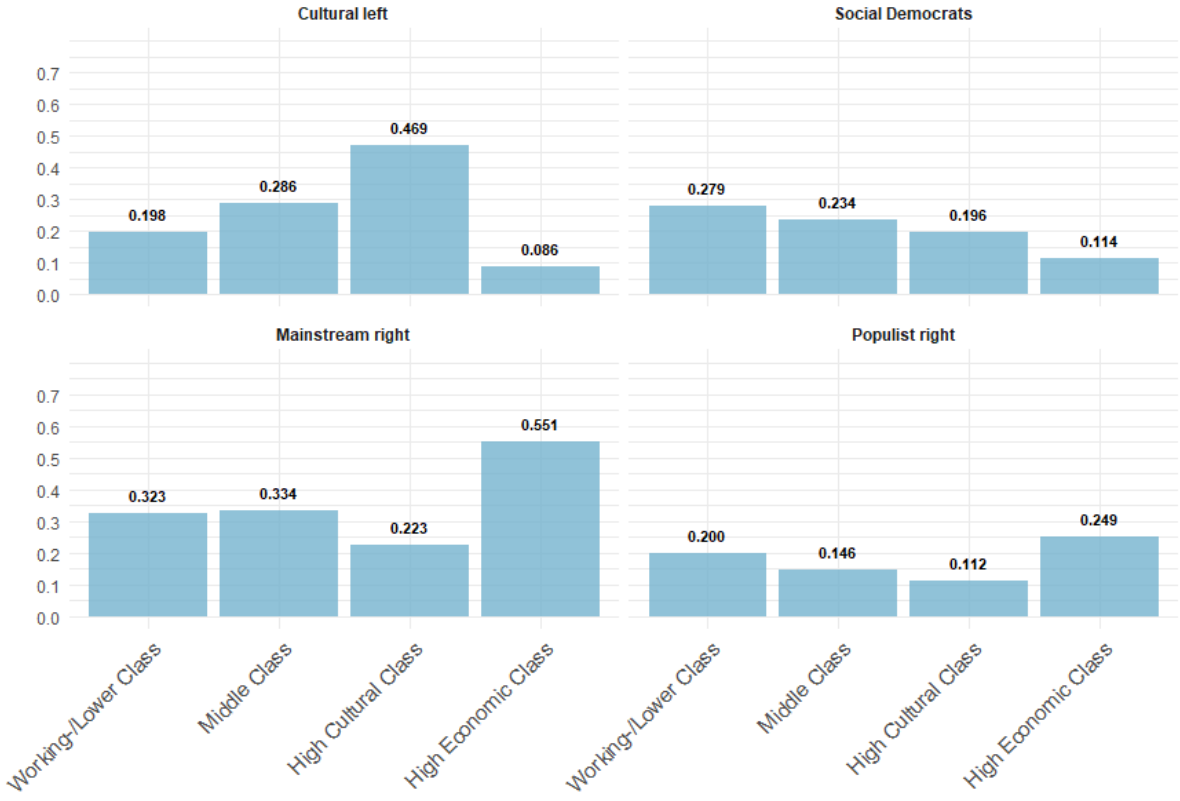


Note: N = 3091. Ideological placement is measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the most left-leaning, and 10 means the most right-leaning.

Results – do voters infer political signals from real-world lifestyle cues?

In the next step, I used data from Study 1. As described earlier, I coded the 500 lifestyle posts in terms of their dominant class signal into four categories (Working/Lower Class, Middle Class, High Cultural, High Economic). As outcomes, I measured both perceived ideological position and perceived partisanship. Here, I will focus on the results for perceived partisanship. I used the same measure of perceived partisanship as mentioned above, and coded the parties into the same four groups. Just as with the data from the experiment in Study 3, I estimated the predicted probabilities of being categorized as a member of each of the party groups, based on a multinomial regression model. I include MP-fixed effects in the analysis. These results are shown in Figure 7.5.

Figure 7.5. Predicted probabilities of being perceived as a member of a party bloc, by lifestyle class signal



Note: N = 3,772. The bars display the predicted probabilities of being categorized as a member of each of the party blocs.

The findings again seem to follow the expected pattern, at least for the high cultural and economic cues. Again, I find that high economic class cues were associated with mainstream right parties, in the eyes of voters. In 55 percent of the cases, MPs were classified as members of mainstream right parties when they displayed high economic class cues, which is significantly higher compared to the other class signals. Likewise, high cultural class cues were also clearly associated with cultural left parties, as expected. In 47 percent of the cases, MPs were perceived as cultural left party members when they displayed high cultural cues, which is also significantly and substantially higher compared to the other class signals. The main outlier here is the results for the working class cues. Contrary to the experiment in Study 3, I did not find working class cues to be associated with populist right parties. One explanation for this pattern could be that because the working-class cues are so widespread across different parties, they provide less clear political signals when looking at real posts, compared to a more artificial setting in Study 3.

Overall, though, the results across these three experiments point to a general pattern. Looking across data from three different survey experiments, all

of which rely on novel ways of measuring the effect of lifestyle cues in ways that increase the external validity, I generally do find that voters use the lifestyle signals of politicians as heuristics to infer what they stand for politically. Across all studies, I find that voters consistently associate higher class cues with more right-leaning stances. However, the effects depend on the type of high class signaling. High economic capital cues are associated primarily with economically right-leaning views and mainstream right parties. On the other hand, high cultural capital cues are associated with more left-leaning cultural issue stances and political parties. Finally, working-class lifestyle cues seem to be more associated with populist right parties and views. These views suggest that lifestyle cues have political implications for how voters perceive candidates and politicians. They guide what politicians are perceived to represent by linking their lifestyle signaling to modern socio-political cleavages. These general implications of the results, I return to these in the next concluding chapter.

Chapter 8: Concluding discussion

In this final chapter, I will go back to answer the overarching research question of the dissertation: *How do politicians' lifestyle cues influence voter evaluations and perceptions?* I will proceed by first summarizing the empirical findings and how they relate to this overall, and how they do so by answering the three sub-questions I posed in the introduction. Then I will discuss the broader implications and consequences of the findings in the dissertation. To do so, I will revisit the two perspectives and claims about lifestyle cues I outlined in Chapter 1: that lifestyle cues are apolitical, and that lifestyle cues manipulate voters and lead them astray. Based on the findings, I argue against these two claims. Next, I will discuss some limitations and caveats of the dissertation and discuss other possible theoretical explanations. Finally, I will discuss some directions for future research.

Summary of findings

How do lifestyle cues – defined as deliberate displays of material possessions, consumption patterns, and leisure activities to followers – by politicians influence voter evaluations and perceptions? Relying on different data sources and through three separate papers, I have examined this question. In these papers, I answer three sub-questions that all help address the general research question of the dissertation.

First, I examine whether lifestyle cues are an effective communicative tool to win over voter support. In Paper A, I study this by comparing how voters evaluate MPs in terms of their perceived warmth, competence, and willingness to vote for them, based on whether MPs communicate about their lifestyle or political matters. I expected lifestyle cues to have ambivalent effects on voter evaluations, suggesting a dual-component mechanism, where lifestyle cues positively impact the perceived warmth and sympathy of politicians, while also hurting their perceived competence. Based on Chapter 5 and Paper A, I provide three overall findings:

1) Lifestyle cues consistently lower the perceived competence of MP, while they do not consistently increase the perceived warmth.

2) Lifestyle cues do not increase the willingness to vote for politicians, and in some cases, displaying lifestyle cues might even lower the willingness to vote for a politician.

3) Lifestyle cues consistently hurt the evaluations among voters who normally would vote for the politicians' party, whereas it does not seem to positively affect the evaluations of voters normally supporting other parties.

Based on these findings, there is nothing that supports that politicians can win over voter support via lifestyle cues. When voters are exposed to posts from politicians who are otherwise similar, they tend to evaluate politicians more positively when they focus on their policy issues rather than their lifestyle.

Second, I examine whether lifestyle cues are a way for politicians to appeal to certain social classes. One way is that lifestyle cues, in general, do not appear to increase voter support for candidates, but it could be that this average effect hides important nuances. It might be that voters show very different evaluations of MPs based on the *type of lifestyle cue* they show. One such nuance is that lifestyle cues should be related to different social classes, and these class associations should be expected to matter for how voters evaluate politicians. In Paper B and Chapter 6, I examine whether the effects of lifestyle cues on vote intention differ depending on which class signal politicians display via their lifestyle. I argue that we should expect voters to either show a *baseline class-preference*, where all voters are expected to reward or punish politicians who display particular lifestyle class signals, or a *class-affinity preference,* where voters prefer candidates displaying lifestyle cues that align with voters' own class.

Empirically, I find that voters systematically associate politicians' lifestyle cues with social classes in ways we generally would expect them to, suggesting that politicians' lifestyle cues are related to social classes by voters. I additionally find that voters consistently punish politicians who display higher class lifestyle cues. Importantly, this tendency is even found among higher class voters. Simultaneously, voters do not show a clear preference for politicians showing working-class or middle class lifestyle cues. The findings suggest that voters make associations between the lifestyle cues and the class of politicians, and that displaying a higher class and elitist lifestyle certainly is not appealing to voters. Conversely, showing a more down-to-earth lifestyle generally appeals more to the electorate.

Third, I examine whether lifestyle cues have other effects on voters than just their general evaluations and willingness to vote for politicians. In Paper C and Chapter 7, I therefore examine whether voters infer representation of specific political views based on the lifestyle cues of politicians. I study this through different experimental designs, in which I expose voters to politicians showing different lifestyle cues, and then ask them to place the politicians in terms of policy stances and party affiliation. I expect voters to make inferences that follow a cleavage-based logic, where they infer views related to the class

and group signals of their lifestyle cues. The findings suggest that this is generally the case. I find that politicians who display high economic class cues are clearly associated with economically right-leaning views and mainstream right-wing parties that normally represent these positions. When politicians display high cultural class cues, emphasizing exclusive cultural taste and cultural sophistication, they are more likely to be perceived as representing culturally left-leaning positions and views. Finally, I find that working-class lifestyle cues are associated with culturally more right-leaning parties and positions in an experimentally clear setting. However, the finding does not seem to be replicated when looking at the perceived position of actual MPs who make working class lifestyle posts. Yet, the general findings show that lifestyle cues clearly are a way to signal representation of political views. Voters infer different political views based on the lifestyle cues politicians show to them.

How do lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations and perceptions of politicians?

How do these results help answer the overall research question: *How do lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations and perceptions of politicians?* Based on the findings of the dissertation, I can conclude that lifestyle cues affect how voters evaluate and perceive politicians in *three different ways*.

First of all, lifestyle cues have a *competence punishment* effect on how voters evaluate politicians. Based on the findings from Paper A, lifestyle cues do negatively affect the perceived competence of politicians. This suggests that politicians are seen as less willing to act on solving societal issues when they post about their lifestyle rather than explicit policy issues. Instead, politicians are clearly rewarded in terms of competence when they focus on substantial policy matters. While voters punish politicians with regard to competence, the results do not indicate that lifestyle cues consistently impact the perceived warmth of politicians. Interestingly, this tendency is particularly pronounced among voters from the normal electoral base. In-party voters are significantly more likely to punish MPs when they display lifestyle cues compared to political cues. The results therefore mainly suggest that lifestyle cues generally impact the evaluations of politicians in a negative way.

Second, lifestyle cues have a *class signaling effect* on voter evaluations. Based on the findings from Paper B, this class signaling effect entails two elements. For one thing, voters do make systematic and meaningful associations between politicians' lifestyle cues and social classes. Thus, voters infer class signals from politicians' lifestyle cues. These class signals are evaluated differently by voters. Across all voters, regardless of class belonging and identification, there is a general punishment of politicians displaying higher class

lifestyle cues. This punishment is especially pronounced when politicians show off exclusive material consumption. On the other hand, voters are much more rewarding towards politicians who display working- or middle class lifestyle cues, which indicates a clear distaste for politicians who signal elitism and higher class lifestyles.

Third, lifestyle cues have a *heuristic effect* on how voters perceive politicians. Based on the findings from Paper C, there is a distinct tendency that voters can infer clear policy stances based on politicians' lifestyles, and that different class signals have an impact on which political views politicians are perceived to represent. When displaying higher class lifestyle cues, politicians are generally seen as more right-leaning, but different higher class signals lead to very distinct perceptions of what politicians represent among voters. Whereas high economic class cues are clearly associated with economically right-leaning views and parties, high cultural class cues are associated with culturally left-leaning views and political parties. On the other hand, voters are more likely to associate working class cues with populist right parties. Lifestyle cues, thus, have the potential to alter voters' perceptions of what individual politicians stand for. Importantly, this effect also holds when voters are informed about the party labels of MPs. Even among politicians within the same party, different lifestyle cues (working vs. higher class) still lead to significantly different perceived ideological positions.

Reassessing views on lifestyle cues

What are the wider consequences and implications of these findings? To assess this, it is useful to return to how politicians' privatization and lifestyle cues are currently judged by academics and media critics. As I outlined in Chapter 1, the current views of lifestyle cues in the literature and among media commentators can boil down to two stylized claims. The first is that lifestyle cues hamper voters' ability to judge politicians in terms of policy, because lifestyle cues are essentially void of political information. The view is that lifestyle cues are apolitical and crowd out substantial, policy-based information and reasoning. The second claim is that lifestyle cues are inherently manipulative and strategic and might lead voters astray. They are manipulative and strategic in the sense that they might give a distorted and inauthentic image of politicians being down-to-earth, and this might sway voters to see politicians as representatives of the broader population, on purely symbolic grounds (Pitkin, 1967; Wu et al., 2017). Based on the results, I can now revisit these claims and assess whether they hold up to empirical scrutiny.

First, to what extent do the findings suggest that lifestyle cues are apolitical and crowd out policy-based reasoning among voters? To begin with, the findings, especially from Papers C and B, suggest that lifestyle cues from politi-

cians are *not* as apolitical as assessed by the current literature. In Paper C, I outline how voters openly infer political information and views based on politicians' lifestyle cues. Higher-class lifestyle signaling, especially when tied to high economic capital, is associated with right-leaning political views and mainstream right political parties among voters. In contrast, high cultural capital cues were more tied to cultural left views. The findings even showed that voters infer different views for politicians within the same political party if they display different lifestyle cues. In Paper B, I additionally found that voters also associated politicians' lifestyle with specific social classes. Supplementary analyses on the data from Study 3 show that voters also draw associations between different lifestyle cues and other social groups, such as rural voters or the highly educated (see Appendix for Paper C). These findings clearly do imply that lifestyle signals are not apolitical. They provide social signals to voters, in the sense that voters infer associations between specific lifestyle signals and which social groups politicians represent. They provide political signals, because voters distinctly infer general political and ideological stances based on lifestyle cues, both in terms of which views and which parties politicians represent.

Should we then worry that lifestyle cues crowd out citizens' ability to judge politicians based on policy? Based on the findings, I would argue that this worry is overstated. For one thing, if voters also make political and social inferences based on politicians' lifestyle cues, it seems hard to argue that lifestyle cues merely crowd out political considerations. If anything, one could say that lifestyle cues, especially the ones with clear class signals, constitute an alternative source of political information for voters. If voters are faced with a politician or a candidate, they do not know on their social media platform, and they just see a post with the politician going to a football game or going to the royal theatre, they might make very different initial judgments about the political views of the candidate. One could argue that such an inference based on lifestyle cues is rather superficial and less informed compared to if citizens are exposed to and engage with a post about a candidate's views on school or health-care policy. After all, explicit political cues that clearly specify a politician's or a party's stance on an issue should be more accurate sources of political information for citizens than a post about where a politician went on vacation. Well, that might not necessarily be the case. Politicians and parties are also highly strategic in terms of which policy positions and agendas they communicate on social media (Eriksen, 2025), and sometimes, they even change their positions on issues (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021a). One could, therefore, argue that explicit policy posts might not necessarily be better sources of information to infer what representatives stand for. Instead, we can see lifestyle cues as an alternative and supplementary source of politically relevant cues

for voters, and as a heuristic, voters can use them to navigate what politicians stand for.

Furthermore, as shown in Chapter 4, the clear majority of what MPs post about on their Facebook accounts is still explicitly about policy issues. The worry that politicians' communication channels are getting increasingly dominated by privatized posts and lifestyle cues might be overstated if we look at what politicians actually post about. Therefore, the claim that lifestyle cues are apolitical and crowd out political reasoning does not seem to hold up. Instead, I would reassert that lifestyle cues do provide political signals to voters and act as a heuristic that voters can use to navigate what politicians and parties represent.

Second, to what extent are lifestyle cues manipulative and something that leads voters astray? There are multiple elements in this claim and thereby different responses. One element is whether voters are easily persuaded to support politicians when they are exposed to lifestyle cues. Can politicians increase their voter support simply by showing their lifestyle cues? Based on the findings, there is nothing suggesting that this is the case. As shown in Paper A, voters find politicians less competent when they display their lifestyle cues compared to explicit political cues. Furthermore, no findings suggest that displaying lifestyle cues increases voter support. If anything, it seems to scare off the electoral base while failing to attract voters from other parties. So, when given the choice to pick politicians who focus on either substantial policy issues or lifestyle cues, voters seem more likely to pick the former. This clearly suggests that voters are *not* so easily manipulated by politicians' lifestyle cues.

Another element concerns whether politicians' lifestyle cues paint an inauthentic and distorted image of themselves to voters. The worry is whether politicians mainly provide lifestyle cues that present them as rather down-to-earth and mainstream, while hiding the lifestyle cues that present them in more elitist or high-end settings. As suggested by the findings in Paper B, this might be a smart strategy by politicians, given that voters across the board evaluate politicians displaying higher class lifestyle cues more negatively. If we look at the class signals of the lifestyle cues politicians do show, there might be something to this concern. As shown in Chapter 4, we can see that across all parties, the clear majority of politicians' lifestyle cues contain either working or middle class signals. Although there are differences across the different types of parties, the tendency is that most politicians display mainstream, down-to-earth lifestyle cues. While I, based on this dissertation, cannot know what the strategic considerations in what lifestyle signals Danish parties and politicians display are, this pattern does indicate at least an awareness, on the elite level, that politicians should be careful in displaying higher class lifestyle cues.

This could also indicate that politicians in the Danish context already anticipate the higher class lifestyle punishment that I find in Paper B, and are therefore reluctant to showcase those types of lifestyle signals on their social media profiles. Of course, based on the categorization of the posts, I cannot know what lifestyle the Danish MPs *actually* have. Therefore, it is hard to say whether they provide an outright distorted and manipulated picture to voters. But given that politicians usually tend to come from more privileged backgrounds than the general population, and that they also have significantly higher earnings compared to the general population, one could argue whether the lifestyle cues they signal provide a truthful picture (Allen, 2018; Carnes & Lupu, 2023; Devine et al., 2025; Statistics-Denmark, 2022).

The last element concerning this claim is on the voters' side and relates to whether voters are led astray by politicians' lifestyle cues. Are the inferences voters make from lifestyle cues somewhat accurate? Do parties send mixed signals with their policy- and lifestyle-based messaging? Based on the data I have collected, there are arguments both for and against this claim. On the one hand, one could argue that the inferences voters gather from politicians' lifestyle cues are likely to be somewhat accurate, given that they match how lifestyle preferences and political views are correlated among citizens. For instance, individuals with high economic capital are generally likely to hold economically right-leaning views and vote for mainstream right parties (Flemmen et al., 2022). Given that the inferences people seem to make about the political stances of politicians align rather well with how lifestyle preferences and political attitudes are correlated in the general population, one could argue that this is likely an accurate inference. Furthermore, supplementary tests suggest that voters across different levels of political interest generally make similar inferences about the policy views of politicians (see Appendix A, Paper C). For most of the outcomes used in Paper C, I find that voters with either high or low levels of political interest generally make similar inferences about the political stances of politicians based on their lifestyle cues. This also suggests that lifestyle cues are a cue that most voters can follow, without following politics that closely.

On the other hand, some of the supplementary analyses I have conducted suggest that voters make slightly different inferences based on lifestyle and policy cues (see Appendix A, Paper C). Generally, the supplementary analyses suggest that the ideological differences between politicians from different parties are smaller when they display lifestyle cues compared to policy cues. When MPs from left-leaning parties display explicit policy cues, they are perceived as more ideologically left, compared to when they display any lifestyle cue. This tendency holds when looking at both hypothetical MPs (from Study 2) and actual MPs (from Study 1). When MPs from right-leaning parties display

explicit policy cues, they are perceived as more ideologically to the right, compared to when they showcase lifestyle cues, but with one exception. When displaying higher class lifestyle cues, MPs from right-wing parties are perceived as ideologically similar compared to when they display policy cues, and in some cases they are perceived as even more to the right. This indicates that voters can likely be led to infer somewhat different things about what MPs represent, based on their lifestyle or their policy signals. It indicates that politicians can use their lifestyle cues to moderate their perceived political position in the public, which calls into question the potential of lifestyle cues as an accurate heuristic to infer the politicians' stances.

So, are lifestyle cues manipulative and lead voters astray? Based on this discussion and the dissertation, I would argue that lifestyle cues do *not* manipulate voters, but they *might* sometimes lead them astray. They do not easily persuade voters to support politicians. However, lifestyle cues seem to send different signals than explicit policy signals, which is something parties might be able to use strategically.

Broader implications

Moving on, the findings from the dissertation have multiple broader implications for our understanding of democracy and how political elites communicate. First, the dissertation generally shows that communicating lifestyle cues is not a winning strategy on its own for politicians to win over voters' support. Politicians cannot just focus on their lifestyle in their social media communication. They must offer substantial policy information to convince voters to support them. When voters are faced with choosing between politicians who communicate about their lifestyles or their policy views and actions, voters tend to prefer the latter. This matches what Giger et al. (2021) found in a similar study in Switzerland and Germany. However, this finding does not imply that displaying lifestyle cues always hurts how voters perceive and evaluate politicians. For one thing, as shown in Chapter 4, lifestyle cues can help increase the reach of posts on platforms like Facebook, as they usually receive more likes and positive reactions than typical policy posts. Furthermore, posts about private life and lifestyle can potentially also help increase the recall of candidates, and make the audience more likely to remember them (Lee et al., 2018). Therefore, there might be other relevant outcomes than just vote intention and direct evaluations, on which lifestyle cues can have a positive impact from the viewpoint of politicians.

Another important point is that the experimental designs I use only test the effect of one-time exposure to lifestyle cues. However, when citizens encounter posts from political figures online, they are likely to receive them from politicians they already know or from whom they have seen other posts. They

have the further option of clicking on the politicians' profiles and investigating other posts made by them. My designs do not fully capture this aspect of how citizens possibly encounter lifestyle cues from politicians outside of the experiments. Given that the posting of lifestyle cues is part of a general image-making process of politicians, and these images take time to construct, there might also be a longer-term effect of lifestyle cues that is not captured in my designs (Enli, 2013). However, supplementary tests presented in the appendices to Paper A show that the effects of lifestyle cues on voter evaluations were not more positive for more well-known politicians (party leaders or MPs with many followers). This suggests that lifestyle posts are not necessarily more efficient for more prominent politicians.

Thus, it might be premature to conclude that lifestyle cues are always harmful to how voters perceive politicians. A more correct assessment would be that politicians need to balance the explicitly policy-focused content and the privatized and lifestyle-based content.

Second, voters particularly punish politicians for displaying upper class lifestyle signals. It is a very clear tendency that voters across the board appear to evaluate politicians showcasing higher class lifestyle symbols significantly more negatively. One could argue that this finding might be more specific to the Danish context. Given that Denmark is a country with strong egalitarian norms where people typically like describing themselves as part of a broad middle class, it may be unsurprising that voters appear to dislike politicians who display higher class lifestyle cues (Faber, 2012; Stubager et al., 2018). One could argue that because of this, there is a social desirability bias for participants to evaluate the politicians who display higher class lifestyles more negatively. However, studies from other countries, that are different from Denmark, have found similar patterns. Studies from countries like the US, Austria, Germany, and the UK all suggest that voters generally dislike politicians and candidates who come from well-off and privileged social backgrounds (Campbell & Cowley, 2013a, 2013b; Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018; Vivyan et al., 2020). Other studies have also found that higher class lifestyle traits increase hostility and political dissatisfaction (Noordzij et al., 2021, 2024; Weisstanner & Engler, 2025). Hence, this finding seems to be in line with a general tendency among voters in other countries.

Third and finally, an important implication of the dissertation is how lifestyle cues can play a role in party competition. Given that different lifestyle cues are associated with different political stances, even when voters are made aware of the politicians, lifestyle cues have important implications for how political candidates are perceived at elections. The findings imply that candidates within the same party can differentiate themselves from other candidates by displaying different lifestyle appeals. Candidates within, for instance,

the Social Democrats can distinguish themselves from each other and potentially appeal to different voter groups by displaying either working class or high cultural class lifestyle signals. Additionally, the findings imply that lifestyle signaling can be seen as another avenue for cross-party competition. Politicians from different parties can alter their perceived ideological position by displaying different lifestyle cues in a way that might appeal to voters from other parties. Thus, candidates can use lifestyle cues as a tool to both differentiate themselves politically from other candidates within their own party and appear more appealing to voters from other parties. This is a relevant implication not only in Denmark, but in all countries with electoral systems where voters can choose between multiple candidates within the same parties.

Limitations and future research

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there are several important limitations to this dissertation that are worth highlighting. These limitations are a result of the decisions I have made in this dissertation. Although there are well-thought-out reasons for these decisions, as I outlined in Chapter 3, no research approach is complete and comes without limitations.

The first set of limitations stems from the dissertation's reliance on survey experiments to study the effects of lifestyle cues. While the experimental designs increase the internal validity of the results, and I take many steps to maximize the external validity of the concept I am studying, the designs might not fully capture how citizens are exposed to politicians' lifestyle cues in the "real world." The survey experiments provide a highly controlled setting where participants are more attentive and where there is less noise, compared to if they were exposed to posts on Instagram or Facebook. As mentioned, when citizens see a post from a politician on a regular social media platform, they can engage directly with the post, and they can click on the politician and see what else they have posted. The posts appear as part of a general feed where they are presented with a bunch of other posts, which can make the exposure "noisier." Future research should try to consider the features that characterize how citizens are exposed to posts from parties and politicians on social media platforms, while still maintaining the aim of studying the effects of lifestyle-based communication.

One solution is to launch experiments directly "in the field" by launching posts from either self-controlled profiles or cooperating with actual MPs. Here, the researcher can still control the construction of treatment stimuli by specifically manipulating how posts differ, but instead, test it directly on social media platforms. However, with Meta's recent limitation on political advertising, this option might prove more difficult. Another option could be conducting experiments on mock social media platforms (Mahajan et al., 2021). This

provides more of a controlled setting but still allows researchers to test the effects of different stimuli on a platform that mirrors actual social media.

Another limitation concerns the potential long-term effects. As mentioned, I only capture short-term effects of lifestyle cues just after exposure. Yet, it might be that these effects wear off after a very short period, which means that the implications on voters' evaluations and attitudes are less impactful outside of the experiments. Moreover, it could be that the lifestyle cues might have more "positive" effects on voter perceptions that are not captured in the surveys I conducted. It might, for instance, be that voters are more likely to remember politicians who provide lifestyle cues, especially if they align with their own. Future research should address this by incorporating panel-based designs where participants are asked to evaluate MPs weeks or months after the first exposure.

A second set of limitations concerns the fact that I focus on Denmark as the scope of the dissertation. As discussed already, Denmark is a highly relevant case to study the impact of lifestyle cues from politicians. However, it is only one country, and we cannot know whether the results ultimately travel to other countries. Particularly, one worry could be the distinct pre-treatment exposure Danish citizens might have faced, with the heavy media coverage of politicians' lifestyle signaling 4-5 years ago. For the reasons discussed above, Denmark can also be considered a most likely case for finding (a) negative effects of lifestyle cues on voter evaluations, and (b) negative effects of higher class lifestyle signaling. Yet, as also argued, other studies suggest that the findings might apply to other countries. Other studies have found that voters prefer politicians who focus more on policy than privatization (Giger et al., 2021); in different contexts, higher-class politicians tend to be evaluated more negatively (Campbell & Cowley, 2013a, 2013b; Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018; Vivyan et al., 2020; Weisstanner & Engler, 2025); and that voters do make systematic inferences on the political views of others based on their lifestyle in different countries (Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2021; Ollroge & Sawert, 2022; Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024). With that being said, future research should broaden the scope to study the effects of lifestyle signaling in other countries, with different electoral and party systems, different class composition, and different ways of associating class and lifestyle.

While the dissertation has taken important steps to examine how lifestyle cues affect voter evaluations and perceptions, it also opens up other important questions and theoretical perspectives. In this dissertation, I have looked at lifestyle from a social class perspective, drawing on sociological and social psychological literature. I have argued that lifestyle cues are closely associated with different classes and that this is a key mechanism in understanding how they affect voter opinions. This does not, of course, exclude other alternative

theoretical explanations. One perspective could be that the effects are not so much driven by class signals, but what matters is more simply psychological similarity. In this sense, what matters more is not whether lifestyle cues align with our social class, but the specific lifestyle cues politicians show align with individuals' lifestyles. If I like football, and I see a politician displaying that they like football too, I might be more inclined to like that politician. Not because the politician is more aligned with my social class or represents my class but just because the politician likes the same things as I do (Liviatan et al., 2008). Furthermore, lifestyle cues might signal other group attachments than just class. It might be related to a masculinity-femininity dimension, where some lifestyles are seen as more masculine or feminine. It could relate to ethnicity or geographical locations, where some ways of speaking, dressing, or eating are all part of a specific ethnic or geographical identity that politicians can tap into. Future research should address these alternative perspectives and mechanisms in greater detail.

Finally, the dissertation opens up a series of other unanswered research questions that future research should look into. One open question is how lifestyle cues might impact voters when presented together with political messages. In the dissertation, I have studied the effects of lifestyle in comparison to explicitly political messages. However, sometimes these two occur within the same post. That might be calculated from the perspective of politicians to underline a political message. One could, for instance, imagine an MP trying to promote a green policy message, and then show that they drive an EV or do not eat meat. Future research should look into whether lifestyle cues potentially can strengthen or change the persuasiveness of policy-based messages, and how they work together with explicit political posts, or whether they can turn off voters if lifestyle cues are perceived as “off-brand”.

Another broad unanswered question relates to how politicians in general can signal authenticity and down-to-earthness credibly and successfully. This dissertation has examined whether lifestyle cues in general, and some lifestyle cues in particular, make politicians appear warmer, more competent, and generally make voters more likely to support them. In general, it seems like middle-class and particularly working-class signals make politicians appear more down-to-earth and sympathetic, compared to the higher class. However, looking at how political figures in the real world can communicate, there are a number of factors that need to be considered. They need to factor in what party they represent, which voter groups they are speaking to, and their own natural appearance. Clearly, some politicians do appear more authentic and likable, and lifestyle cues and self-disclosure are important elements in that. However, we still don’t know too much about why some politicians just seem to be more “in touch” with people than others. Why is it that some politicians just appear

more down-to-earth and manage to appeal to the "people"? And how can their lifestyle cues, way of speaking, dressing, and general appearance contribute to cultivating such an image? These, I believe, are important questions for political science to investigate going forward.

Concluding remarks

This dissertation has investigated the role of lifestyle cues in political communication and how they affect how voters evaluate and perceive politicians. I have done so by examining three related questions. First, I ask whether lifestyle cues are an effective communicative tool to win over voter support. The findings from Paper A suggest that this is not the case. MPs are consistently perceived as less competent when they display lifestyle cues, and there is no evidence suggesting that they gain voter support. Furthermore, displaying lifestyle cues is particularly negatively received among voters from MPs' own political party. Instead, the findings point to voters preferring politicians to focus on explicit political matters, and that they at least should balance the focus on policy and lifestyle on their social media platforms. Second, I ask whether lifestyle cues are a way to appeal to certain social classes. The findings from Paper B suggest that voters do infer social class from politicians' lifestyles. Additionally, voters across the board clearly punish politicians who display higher class lifestyle cues, while they do not prefer middle- or working class signals over each other. Finally, I ask whether voters can use lifestyle cues as a political heuristic to infer the political views of politicians. The results from Paper C clearly show that this is the case. Voters systematically associate higher class lifestyles with more right-leaning opinions, but they also differentiate based on the type of higher class cues. High economic class cues are associated with economically right-leaning views, while high cultural capital cues are associated with more left-leaning opinions. Finally, the working class is generally associated with populist, right-leaning stances.

The dissertation makes several important contributions. I advance the literature on the personalization of politics by introducing and systematically theorizing *lifestyle cues* as a distinct and politically meaningful form of personalized communication. While prior research has examined privatized content -such as references to family life, leisure, or personal activities – or individualized communication styles, existing approaches have treated these phenomena inconsistently and often as uniformly non-political. As a result, the literature provides limited clarity regarding what personalization captures conceptually and why its effects vary empirically. I argue that lifestyle cues should be understood not merely as "private" or non-substantive communication, but as socially embedded signals that convey information about politicians' social position, values, and worldviews. Drawing on sociological and

psychological research, I conceptualize lifestyle displays as signals that can activate voters' considerations about social group representation and political alignment. Furthermore, I propose a dual-component model arguing why voters might react ambivalently to lifestyle cues from politicians. This perspective challenges the assumption that privatized communication has uniform effects across voters and instead highlights its potentially divisive nature along social and political lines. Empirically, the dissertation demonstrates that lifestyle cues do not increase voter sympathy or support; if anything, they tend to reduce perceived competence. These findings nuance existing debates by showing that voters are not easily persuaded by lifestyle-based personalization and are capable of critically interpreting such signals.

The dissertation contributes to the literature on group appeals by theorizing lifestyle cues as a form of *symbolic class appeal*. Whereas previous studies have focused on abstract symbolic appeals or class-targeted policy proposals, I show how politicians can signal affiliation with social classes through lifestyle displays alone. By aligning their lifestyle with class-specific tastes and practices, politicians can symbolically present themselves as representatives of particular social groups without making explicit policy commitments. At the same time, the dissertation extends sociological theories of class and lifestyle into the political domain. While sociology has long demonstrated that lifestyle is closely tied to social class and used in everyday classification struggles, little work has examined the political consequences of politicians' lifestyle displays. I show how lifestyle cues intersect with class-based symbolic boundaries and contemporary feelings of political marginalization, linking lifestyle communication to broader processes of political representation and conflict.

Methodologically, the dissertation advances the field through externally and conceptually robust survey experiments. I employ real social media posts from sitting MPs to enhance realism and external validity, rather than relying exclusively on hypothetical candidates. Treatment stimuli are informed by citizens' own class-based interpretations of lifestyle cues, increasing conceptual validity. Finally, by using stimulus sampling designs with multiple lifestyle cues per condition, the dissertation improves generalizability and allows for more precise estimation of which specific lifestyle signals drive observed effects.

This dissertation has examined how lifestyle cues from politicians affect voters. Going back to the example from Chapter 1 with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and the infamous mackerel open sandwich, it is hard to say whether that post increased Frederiksen's popularity. However, based on this dissertation, we have gained a deeper understanding of how lifestyle cues like that influence how voters evaluate and perceive politicians. Based on this, my best guess would be that the Mackerel posts likely might have harmed

Frederiksen's perceived competence, but not necessarily increased her perceived warmth, compared to if she just focused on her professional activities or political platform. However, it might have made voters more likely to perceive her as working- or middle-class, which in contrast can boost how voters perceive her. Finally, voters might have been more likely to ascribe her culturally more right-leaning views, based on the traditional working class lifestyle signaling.

More broadly, this dissertation speaks to a fundamental tension in contemporary democratic politics between representation as resemblance and representation as competence. In an era in which politicians are increasingly expected to appear ordinary, relatable, and socially embedded, lifestyle cues have become a visible currency of political communication. Yet the findings presented here suggest that such cues are not neutral expressions of authenticity, nor are they an unambiguous resource for political persuasion. Instead, they are interpreted through deeply rooted social classifications and evaluative standards, activating judgments about class, values, and political alignment that can both connect and divide. Lifestyle displays thus reveal not only who politicians are perceived to be, but also what voters expect politics itself to be about. In this sense, the study of lifestyle cues offers a window into broader struggles for authenticity, representation, and legitimacy in modern democracy.

English Summary

With the spread of social media in the last 20 years, politicians today have great access to communicate directly with citizens in a more personalized way. Politicians use this access to communicate not only about their policy actions but also their personal lifestyles. I term these intentional displays of leisure activities, cultural and material consumptions by politicians, as *lifestyle cues*. These types of privatized messages by politicians have generally been viewed rather negatively by media critics, political commentators, and scholars. First, scholars and commentators have argued that lifestyle cues from politicians are problematic for democracy since they crowd out focus on substantial politics. Second, there is a deeper worry that these lifestyle cues might be ways politicians can manipulate and lead voters astray.

In this dissertation, I examine whether these assumptions about lifestyle cues actually hold by studying whether and how lifestyle cues from politicians affect voter evaluations and perceptions of politicians. In doing so, I provide a less pessimistic view. First, I argue that voters might not be so easily manipulated and persuaded by politicians' lifestyle cues. Instead, I expect lifestyle cues to have ambivalent effects on how voters evaluate politicians, by positively impacting warmth but negatively impacting perceived competence. Furthermore, I argue that lifestyle cues might provide relevant social and political signals to voters, meaning that lifestyle cues from politicians should not be discarded as void of political meaning. Drawing on sociological and social psychological theory, I argue that lifestyle cues from politicians should be associated with distinct social classes and groups. I argue this has two theoretical implications. One, that the effects of lifestyle cues on voter evaluations are likely dependent on the class signal of lifestyle cues. Two, that voters can use lifestyle cues as a heuristic to infer what groups and political views politicians represent.

I study these questions in the context of Denmark, by combining an extensive dataset on Danish MPs' Facebook posts with novelly designed survey experiments. These experiments are designed in a way to maximize both the internal and external validity by incorporating real-world posts from politicians as well as a stimulus sampling approach.

In Paper A ("Do lifestyle cues from politicians boost voter support?"), I examine how lifestyle cues affect how voters evaluate politicians. I test this by relying on two survey experiments that use posts from actual and hypothetical MPs to test the effects of lifestyle cues in different scenarios. The findings from Paper A support three conclusions. First, displaying lifestyle cues relative to

political cues consistently lowers the perceived competence of MPs. Second, no evidence suggests that lifestyle cues positively impact perceived warmth and vote intention. Finally, the findings show lifestyle cues particularly have a negative effect on voter evaluations among in-party voters, while it fails to increase vote intention among out-partisans. Overall, the paper shows that displaying lifestyle cues, on its own, hurts how voters evaluate politicians. Instead, it suggests voters prefer politicians to focus on explicit policy matters.

In Paper B ("Punishment of Being Posh? Lifestyle cues, class signals, and voter evaluations"), I examine whether the effects of lifestyle cues vary depending on the class signals they provide. Using citizens' own classifications of Danish MPs lifestyle-based posts, I show that citizens do make systematic associations between lifestyle cues from politicians and social class. In the next step, I examine whether voters' intention to vote for MPs depends on which class association politicians signal via lifestyle cues. I find that voters generally dislike MPs displaying higher class lifestyle cues, while they are indifferent between middle- and working-class signals. Importantly, this tendency holds regardless of voters' own class. The paper suggests voters have a general distaste and dislike for politicians who display upper class lifestyle tendencies.

In Paper C ("What do voters infer from the lifestyle of politicians?"), I examine whether voters are able to infer the political views of politicians consistently, and whether lifestyle cues function as a heuristic for voters. I test this by relying on data across three different survey experiments, testing whether the effects hold in different settings. The results suggest that voters clearly do infer political views of politicians in a generally consistent way. Politicians providing high economic class cues are perceived as representing mainstream right parties and economically right-leaning views, high cultural class cues are more associated with culturally left-leaning positions, and working class cues tend to be associated with culturally right-leaning views.

Overall, this dissertation shows that lifestyle cues impact voter evaluations and perceptions of politicians in nuanced ways. While lifestyle cues do not seem to boost voter evaluations, especially not if they signal upper class affiliations, voters are still able to infer political information based on lifestyle cues. This shows that voters are not easily persuaded and manipulated by lifestyle cues. Politicians cannot just show lifestyle cues to boost their voter support; they also have to focus on substantial political content. However, that does not mean lifestyle cues are void of political meaning in the eyes of voters. Voters do infer political and social signals from politicians' lifestyle cues that are politically relevant. Based on this dissertation, I therefore suggest a more nuanced and less pessimistic view of the role of lifestyle cues in political communication.

Dansk resumé

Med de sidste 20 års spredning af sociale medier, har politikere i dag stor adgang til at kommunikere direkte til borgerne på en mere personaliseret måde. Politikere bruger denne adgang til, ikke kun at kommunikere om deres politiske standpunkter, men også deres personlige livsstil. Jeg kalder disse intentionelle fremvisninger af fritidsaktiviteter, samt kulturelt og materielt forbrug, kalder jeg for *livsstilscues*. Denne form for privatiserede budskaber, af politikere, er generelt blevet anset ganske negativt af medierne, politiske kommentatorer og andre forskere. For det første, har kommentatorer og forskere argumenteret for at livsstilscues fra politikere er problematiske for demokratiet, fordi de fjerner fokus på den substantielle politik. For det andet, hersker der en dybere frygt at livsstilscues er en måde hvorpå politikere kan manipulere vælgere og lede dem på afveje.

I denne afhandling, undersøger jeg hvorvidt disse antagelser om livsstilscues faktisk holder, ved at studere hvorvidt og hvordan politikeres livsstilscues påvirker vælgernes evalueringer og opfattelser af politikerne. I den sammenhæng fremhæver jeg et mindre pessimistisk syn på livsstilscues. For det første, argumenterer jeg for at vælgerne ikke så åbenlyst bliver manipuleret og overtalt af politikernes livsstilscues. I stedet forventer jeg at livsstilscues har modsatrettede effekter på hvordan vælgerne evaluerer politikerne, ved positivt at påvirke politikeres opfattede sympati, men negativt påvirke deres opfattede kompetence. Ydermere, argumenterer jeg for at livsstilscues sender både sociale og politiske signaler som vælgerne forventes at tage ned, hvorfor livsstilscues må forventes at indeholde politisk information fra vælgernes synspunkt. Ved at trække på sociologisk og socialpsykologisk teori, argumenterer jeg for at politikernes livsstilscues associeres med bestemte sociale klasser og grupper. Det har to teoretiske implikationer. For det første, at effekterne af livsstilscues på vælgernes evalueringer formentligt afhænger af hvilke klassesignaler livsstilscues indeholder. For det andet, at vælgerne bruger livsstilscues som en heuristik til at inferere hvilke grupper og politiske synspunkter politikerne repræsenterer.

Jeg studerer disse spørgsmål i en dansk kontekst, ved at kombinere at omfangsrigt datasæt af danske folketingspolitikeres Facebookopslag med nyskabende survey-eksperimentelle designs. Disse eksperimentelle er designet på en måde til at maksimere både den interne og eksterne validitet, ved at inkorporere faktiske opslag fra danske politikere og en ”stimulus sampling” tilgang.

I Artikel A ("Do lifestyle cues from politicians boost voter support?"), undersøger jeg hvordan livsstilscues påvirker vælgerne evaluerer politikere. Jeg tester dette ved at benytte to survey eksperimenter der bruger opslag fra både faktiske og hypotetiske MF'ere til at undersøge effekterne i forskellige scenarier. Resultaterne fra Artikel understøtter tre konklusioner. For det første finder jeg at fremvisning af livsstilscues sammenlignet med politiske opslag konsekvent mindsker politikeres opfattede kompetence. For det andet, er der ingen resultater der tilsiger at livsstilscues politikeres opfattede varme og stemmetilbøjelighed. Endeligt, finder jeg at livsstilscues særligt har en negativ effekt på vælgerevalueringerne blandt "in-party" vælgere, mens det ikke øger stemmetilbøjeligheden blandt vælgere fra andre partier. Alt i alt, viser artiklen at livsstilscues, i sig selv, skader hvordan vælgerne evaluerer politikere. I stedet indikerer artiklen at vælgerne foretrækker politikere der fokuserer eksplicit på politiske forhold.

I Artikel B ("Punishment of Being Posh? Lifestyle cues, class signals, and voter evaluations") undersøger jeg, om effekterne af livsstilscues varierer afhængigt af de klassesignaler, de formidler. Ved at anvende borgernes egne klassifikationer af danske folketingsmedlemmer livsstilsrelaterede opslag viser jeg, at borgerne faktisk foretager systematiske koblinger mellem politikernes livsstilssignaler og sociale klasser. I det næste trin undersøger jeg, om vælgernes stemmetilbøjelighed afhænger af, hvilken klasse politikerne signalerer gennem livsstilscues. Jeg finder, at vælgere generelt er negativt indstillede over for folketingsmedlemmer, der udviser livsstilscues forbundet med højere sociale klasse, mens de er indifferente mellem middelklasse- og arbejderklassesignaler. Jeg finder ydermere at denne tendens gør sig gældende uanset vælgernes egen sociale klasse. Artiklen påpeger, at vælgerne har en generel modvilje og afsmag overfor politikere, der udviser livsstilstendenser forbundet med overklassen.

I Artikel C ("What do voters infer from the lifestyle of politicians?") undersøger jeg, om vælgerne er i stand til konsistent at udlede politikeres holdninger, og om livsstilssignaler fungerer som en heuristik for vælgerne. Dette tester jeg ved at anvende data fra tre forskellige surveyeksperimenter og undersøge, om effekterne gør sig gældende på tværs af forskellige kontekster. Resultaterne viser, at vælgerne tydeligt udleder politikeres holdninger ud fra deres livsstil. Politikere, der udtrykker højere økonomiske klassesignaler, opfattes som repræsentanter for traditionelle borgerlige partier og økonomisk højreorienterede holdninger, mens højere kulturelle klassesignaler i højere grad associeres med kulturelt venstreorienterede positioner. Arbejderklassesignaler tenderer derimod til at blive forbundet med kulturelt højreorienterede holdninger.

Samlet set viser afhandlingen, at livsstilscues påvirker vælgernes evalueringer og opfattelser af politikerne på en forskelligartet måde. Selvom livsstilscues, i sig selv, ikke synes at forbedre vælgernes vurdering af politikerne – særligt ikke når de signalerer tilknytning til overklassen – er vælgerne stadig i stand til at udlede politisk information ud fra livsstilscues. Politikere kan ikke blot kommunikere livsstilscues for at øge deres vælgeropbakning; de skal også fokusere på substantielt politisk indhold. Det betyder dog ikke, at livsstilscues er uden politisk betydning i vælgernes øjne. Vælgere udleder både politiske og sociale signaler fra politikeres livsstilscues. På baggrund af denne afhandling foreslår jeg derfor et mere nuanceret og mindre pessimistisk syn på livsstilssignalers rolle i politisk kommunikation.

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