

## Original Research Reports

# “You’re Important, Jeremy, but Not That Important”: Personalised Responses and Equivocation in Political Interviews

Maurice Waddle<sup>\*a</sup>, Peter Bull<sup>ab</sup>

[a] Department of Psychology, University of York, York, United Kingdom. [b] Department of Psychology, University of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom.

## Abstract

This study was an assessment of personalised equivocation in political interviews, namely, politicians’ responses to questions which, in lieu of an explicit reply, are directed personally at the interviewer. Twenty-six interviews with recent UK party leaders were analysed in terms of questions, replies, and personalisation. The majority of personalised responses contained elements of criticism, although over a quarter were more amicable. For the eight featured politicians, the use of such responses was adjudged to be more about individual communicative style than their position on the political spectrum. Only one politician did not respond in this manner, indicating a more widespread use of personalisation than was previously suggested. Furthermore, an evaluation of interviewer follow-ups showed its effectiveness as a diversionary tactic in the face of troublesome questions. In terms of the proportion of questions which receive a full reply, a general reply rate analysis highlighted how recent political leaders have changed little from their predecessors.

**Keywords:** personalization, political discourse, evasion, reply rate, personal attacks, flattery, banter

## Non-Technical Summary

### Background

Commentators and researchers have highlighted an occasional tendency for some politicians, when faced with a challenging question, to direct their response personally at the interviewer. Such behaviour is often referred to, metaphorically, as “playing the man, not the ball”.

### Why was this study done?

This study followed up on our earlier research, where we identified seven types of personalised comments used by politicians in their responses to questions. Here, we used that typology to conduct a systematic analysis of recent interviews with UK party leaders. The purpose was to assess the prevalence of personalised responses in this area of mainstream political discourse, and to gauge its potential effectiveness in dealing with difficult questions. This analysis would also facilitate an up-to-date evaluation of “reply rate” – the extent to which politicians answer interviewers’ questions.

### What did the researchers do and find?

We analysed a set of 26 interviews which took place during the general election campaigns of 2015 and 2017. The exchanges between interviewers and politicians were coded for question type and, for the politicians’ responses, whether a reply was forthcoming. Each response was assessed for personalisation, and our specific focus was those deemed equivocal – namely, those in which a full reply to the question was not provided.

Seven percent of equivocal responses contained personalisation – although not all were critical in nature; over a quarter were more genial. Overall, most of the personal responses appeared to divert the interviewer from following up with a similar question. As for our reply rate analysis, altogether the politicians gave full replies to 38% of questions.

### What do these findings mean?

The extent to which recent politicians reply to questions appears to have changed little from those of a generation ago. In terms of responding in a personal manner, the potential effectiveness of “playing the man, not the ball” may explain why most of the politicians here were identified making such a response.

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2020, Vol. 8(2), 560–581, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jssp.v8i2.1095>

Received: 2018-11-14. Accepted: 2019-12-20. Published (VoR): 2020-09-15.

Handling Editor: Clifford Stevenson, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, United Kingdom

\*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, UK. E-mail: [maurice.waddle@york.ac.uk](mailto:maurice.waddle@york.ac.uk)



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

A study by Waddle and Bull (2016) was conducted to assess the range of personalised language used by politicians in interviews. Specifically, the study focused on comments directed at the interviewer, often used in lieu of a direct answer to their questions. They likened this form of rhetoric, metaphorically, to the footballing expression *playing the man, not the ball*. In terms of a political interview, such behaviour – labelled *personalisation* – was defined as “any attempt by the politician to play the interviewer into the interview proceedings, as opposed to the expected practice of adhering to the topical agenda” (p. 415).

The practice of a politician directing a personal response at the interviewer in the face of a difficult question has not gone unnoticed in communication research. Over twenty years earlier, Bull and Mayer (1993) showed that former Prime Minister (PM) Margaret Thatcher occasionally responded in this manner. A primary purpose of that study was to identify the different ways in which politicians avoided giving direct answers to interviewers’ questions. Consequently, a typology of equivocation was devised, which was further expanded by Bull (2003). From those two studies, 12 superordinate categories of equivocation (subdivided into 35 subordinate categories) were identified. The fifth of those categories, labelled by Bull and Mayer (1993) *attacks the interviewer*, was the response type occasionally employed by Thatcher, and subsequently renamed *personalisation* by Waddle and Bull (2016).

The need for the revised label arose when it became apparent that not all equivocal responses directed personally at political interviewers were of a critical nature. For example, towards the end of an interview during the 2010 General Election campaign, BBC broadcaster Jeremy Paxman asked the then PM Gordon Brown a particularly difficult question: “Why do you think people don’t seem to like you?”. After a brief initial equivocal response, Brown followed that with “You’re such a nice guy Jeremy. You’re such a nice guy”. This seemingly genuine flattery prompted genial laughter in the interviewer and appeared to take the sting out of the difficult situation with which Brown was faced. He used the apparent change in the tone of the interview to defend his prime-ministerial record and to promote his party. Waddle and Bull (2016), in their analysis of online video-recordings of 44 British political interviews, identified seven categories of personalisation used by the politicians. One category – *blandishments* – encompasses flattery akin to the foregoing instance, and other such pleasantries. Another refers to instances where the politician’s comments relate to the interviewer’s frame of mind, typically including advice to calm down;

the following was from an interview, again by Jeremy Paxman, with the then Labour cabinet minister Peter Mandelson.

---

<b>Paxman:</b>	Is there anything that's the responsibility–
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Hold on Jeremy–</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	Is there anything that's the responsibility–
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Just calm down.</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	Look, you said–
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Just calm–</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	No–
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Just calm down a minute and listen to the answer.</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	All right. Well you've just told us. The answer is "No, that's not your responsibility".
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Just–</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	What about the–
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Jeremy–</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	question of you saying now you want–
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Jeremy, calm–</i>
<b>Paxman:</b>	right regulation, not light regulation? Is that not your responsibility?
<b>Mandelson:</b>	<i>Calm down a minute and– If you'll just calm down for one moment, perhaps I can get a word in. My view of regulation is [...]</i>

---

*Note.* The relevant sections of the dialogue are shown in italics.

The above form of personalised response, whilst not a particularly good-natured one, does not need to include personal criticism, and can be used as a means of equivocation. Waddle and Bull's (2016) remaining five categories relate to comments of a distinctly critical nature. All seven categories of personalisation used by politicians in interviews are detailed in the subsequent section (listed in Table 2). The purpose of the current study was to use this categorisation system devised by Waddle and Bull (2016) to evaluate the extent of personalisation in recent interviews. Previous research on political interviews broadcast between 1987 and 1991 (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer, 1993) showed that, of the three politicians who featured, only Thatcher used personalisation as a means of equivocation. Here, a corpus of 26 interviews from the general election campaigns of 2015 and 2017 was analysed, each with the leader of a UK political party and broadcast on TV. Prior to a detailed introduction to the current study, there now follows a review of relevant research literature on questions, replies, evasion, and personalisation in broadcast political interviews.

## Previous Research – Questions

In democratic nations, interviews are typically conducted to obtain information from politicians on their policies or the actions of their party, be it in government or in opposition. One purpose of research on political interviews has been to assess the extent to which politicians provide direct answers to the questions they are asked (e.g., Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991). However, identifying what constitutes a reply goes hand in hand with what is identifiable as a question. That process, however, is somewhat less straightforward than it seems. Consequently, to better facil-

itate the quantitative analysis of interviews, Bull (1994) proposed a method to clarify identification of both questions and replies. Questions typically take an interrogative form (e.g., “Did you authorise that?”), but not always. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) refer to questions that are *declarative* in form, which are often voiced with rising intonation at the end of the statement (e.g., “You authorised that?”). Indeed, a request for information may not only be, syntactically, of non-interrogative form but even contain no verb. For example, in a 2017 interview of PM Theresa May, Jeremy Paxman was asking about net migration to the UK:

---

<b>Paxman:</b>	Can you tell us what it is now?
<b>May:</b>	Yes it was 248,000 in the last set of figures.
<b>Paxman:</b>	<i>Non-EU migrants?</i>
<b>May:</b>	Was about 170, 175,000.

---

Note. Source: Sky UK, 2017.

Clearly, the second turn of Paxman here is a request for information, but contains no verb; these are referred to as *moodless* questions (Jucker, 1986). Harris (1991) suggested that political interviews include substantial numbers of questions that are non-interrogative in form, and that these are put forward by the interviewer for the politician to express agreement or disagreement.

Questions in interrogative syntax fit one of three distinguishable forms based on the type of expected reply (Quirk et al., 1985). Those seeking affirmation or negation are defined as *yes-no* (or *polar*) questions (e.g., “Will there be tax increases?”). Those seeking a reply from an open range are identified as *wh*-questions; these feature an interrogative word, namely, *how* (the only one not to begin with *wh*), *who*, *why*, *when*, *which*, or *what* (e.g., “What does that mean?”) [Bull (1994) added *where* to this list]. Those which present two or more alternatives are referred to as *alternative* (or *disjunctive*) questions (e.g., “Was that the fault of the Chancellor, or are you to blame?”).

In addition to the three interrogative types (yes-no, alternative, and wh-questions) and the two non-interrogative (declarative and moodless), Bull (1994) added a third non-interrogative type: *indirect*. Bull (2009, p. 217) defines indirect questions as “a means of asking questions through reporting that of another”. He provided the following example (in which the question’s force is not expressed directly, but is expressed via a subordinate clause): “Many people have asked the question why did you go to war in Iraq”. Bull’s (1994) analysis identified over 1,000 questions from 33 political interviews, and all were identifiable as one of these six question types.

## Previous Research – Replies and Evasion

As questions are identifiable as a request for information, a reply is a response which provides the requested information. In terms of political interviews, assessment of replies is interesting in that it addresses the unflattering view which prevails in the public perception: that politicians, in general, are evasive (Harris, 1991). Harris’s study was conducted to evaluate the extent to which politicians do give straight answers to questions. From 17 political interviews conducted between 1984 and 1987, mostly with leading UK politicians, Harris found that *direct answers* were provided to just over 39% of the questions asked. Bull’s (1994) clarification of questions and replies in political interviews proposed three types of response to interviewers’ questions: *Replies* provide, explicitly, the information requested; *Non-replies* are a failure to provide the information; *Intermediate replies* sit midway on a continuum between replies and non-replies. Intermediate replies include instances where the politician’s answer is

not stated explicitly but is implied, instances where the politician gives only a partial answer, and instances where an assessment of whether a reply was forthcoming cannot be made because the politician was interrupted. Bull's analysis of 33 interviews with leading UK politicians conducted between 1987 and 1992 found that 45.6% of questions received an explicit reply. Noticeably, this figure, termed *reply rate*, is comparable to the figure of 39.3% which Harris (1991) reported for direct answers from an entirely different set of interviews. More up-to-date studies, although of only a small set of interviews (Bull, 2016, 2017), are indicative of even lower reply rates by recent party leaders. All of the above studies are consistent in showing that leading UK politicians tend not to give full replies to the majority of interviewers' questions.

Of course, studies of equivocation in interviews and press conferences extend beyond UK politics. Researchers have examined the practices of politicians worldwide, including, the United States (e.g., Clayman, 2001; Clementson & Eveland, 2016), Malaysia (Nur Zahraa & Siti Rohana, 2016), Montenegro (Vuković, 2013), Taiwan (Huang, 2009), and Turkey (Çakir, Kökpınar Kaya, & Kara, 2016). Such studies, however, either did not set out to evaluate reply rates or, where statistics are reported, they are not always suitable for comparison with the foregoing UK studies. A clearer comparison can be made with a study of Japanese politicians (Feldman, Kinoshita, & Bull, 2015), where, from a series of interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013, national politicians gave direct replies to 41.4% of questions. This figure is noticeably similar to the reply rates reported for UK politicians in the 1980s and 1990s (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991).

## Previous Research – Personalisation

The study of personalisation in politics has meant different things to different researchers. For example, Thornborrow and Montgomery (2010) utilise the term to relate to subjective experiences of interviewees. Leone (2013, p. 133) defines it as “the phenomenon of leaders' profiles eclipsing those of their respective parties”. Here, the term is used for discourse directed at a person present, with the intention of having personal relevance to that individual. This form of personalisation in political communication has been investigated in areas beyond the broadcast interview. For example, in Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) – the UK Parliament's highest profile event – Waddle, Bull, and Böhnke (2019) investigated personalisation in the question-response exchanges between the leaders. Their evaluation of what are, effectively, personal attacks showed that, of the five PMs between 1979 and 2016, David Cameron was the most personally aggressive. In one period of Cameron's premiership (the ten PMQs sessions before the 2015 General Election), over 60% of his responses to Leader of the Opposition (LO) Ed Miliband contained a personal attack. Whilst acknowledging the differences between the two modes of political communication, particularly the rivalrous situation which exists between the leaders, Waddle et al. proposed that, similar to political interviews, a potential function of personalisation in PMQs is equivocation.

An extensive literature search shows that evaluations of this form of personalisation have not been the primary focus of political interview research. However, close scrutiny of research into evasion does yield some findings. These tend to be from studies utilising the aforementioned typology of equivocation (Bull, 2003; Bull & Mayer 1993). The fifth category from that typology (*attacks the interviewer*) is an equivocal response to a question in the form of critical personalisation directed at the interviewer. In Bull and Mayer's analysis of 15 interviews with three leading politicians, only Margaret Thatcher resorted to personal criticism; 13% of her equivocal responses contained a personal attack on the interviewer.

Simon-Vandenberghe (2008) examined responses of extremist politicians – from the Belgian right wing party *Vlaams Belang*<sup>i</sup> – as a comparison to mainstream political discourse. It was reported that the far right politicians

resorted to responses which were highly personal. Simon-Vandenberg suggested that, beyond challenging an interviewer's neutrality, responding with such personalisation was characteristic of extremist discourse.

Subsequent research, conducted by [Mehdipour and Nabifar \(2011\)](#), included an analysis of evasive techniques over a series of 20 interviews held between 2001 and 2010. They used the typology of equivocation discussed above ([Bull, 2003](#); [Bull & Mayer, 1993](#)) to evaluate the responses of two high profile figures in US politics: Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton. They reported a total of 362 questions asked, 146 of which received an equivocal response. Only one of these equivocal responses – given by Rice – was identified as an attack on the interviewer.

[Çakir et al.'s \(2016\)](#) analysis covered eight interviews of Turkish politicians in 2011. They reported that two of the eight politicians used a personal attack on the interviewer as an equivocal strategy. Overall, just over 4% of the equivocal responses were identified as that form of personalisation. However, it is difficult to contrast those findings with the foregoing UK studies because, for the Turkish study, only 68 evasive responses are reported across 1,182 minutes of interview time. Interestingly, Çakir et al. identified three additional evasive strategies, one of which – using humour – matches the personalisation category *blandishments* proposed by [Waddle and Bull \(2016\)](#). Çakir et al. show PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to be a frequent user of humour in lieu of a direct answer. Waddle and Bull noted such practices by senior Conservative politician Boris Johnson. For example, when questioned in 2011 by Jeremy Paxman about aspiring to be party leader, he bantered with the interviewer that he (Paxman) might want the job:

---

**Johnson:** (laughs) But I – What I always wonder, I mean, always baffles me – *I'm going to be your campaign manager, that's what I'm going to do, 'cause as I've said, you have a better chance than I do, Jeremy, you're, you know, I think you might well, you've got the gravitas, you've got the name recognition, you know, you're kind of, everybody knows that you're probably quite Conservative, even though you sort of levitate over party policy, I think you'd be an ideal candidate. Listen, you know, what about it? Down the line Dave's eventually going to, going to pack it in, and, and –*

---

It is apparent that such personalised rhetoric can be a feature of responses to interviewers' questions. To date, however, personalisation has not been the specific focus of research into evasiveness by politicians. This study aims to address that shortfall.

## The Current Study

The focus herein was an analysis of interviews with UK party leaders from two recent general election campaigns. It is apparent from the foregoing reviews, that personalised equivocation is more diverse than the critical comments used by Thatcher, as reported by [Bull and Mayer \(1993\)](#). A detailed analysis of the responses of recent politicians would provide data to address a number of key areas: the range of personalisation in mainstream political discourse, the extent to which it forms an equivocal response (including measuring its effectiveness as an evasive tactic), and the recent party leaders who are inclined to use it. This study is not only an investigation into this specific form of dialogue, but also an overdue up-to-date assessment of how leading politicians respond to interviewers' questions.<sup>ii</sup>

Analysis included an assessment of interviewers' questions and politicians' responses in accordance with the methods of [Bull \(1994\)](#).<sup>iii</sup> The politicians' responses were further assessed for personalised language using the



categories of personalisation proposed by [Waddle and Bull \(2016\)](#). The use of that categorisation system – with its seven types of personalised replies – means that the scope of personalisation analysis is now broader than the single *attacks the interviewer* category characterised in responses by Thatcher in the 1980s. Therefore, it was predicted that personalised equivocation levels would be higher in these recent interviews. For the same reason, there was an expectation that more politicians would be observed using personalisation as an equivocal response than had previously. It was also predicted, as suggested by recent studies of single interviews ([Bull, 2016, 2017](#)), that the overall reply rate of current politicians would be lower than those of their predecessors.

## Method

### Interview Participants

The politicians who featured in the analysed interviews were all leaders of UK political parties at that time. In 2015 they were: David Cameron (Conservative PM), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats), Nigel Farage (United Kingdom Independence Party [UKIP]), and Ed Miliband (Labour). In 2017 they were: Jeremy Corbyn (Labour), Tim Farron (Liberal Democrats), Theresa May (Conservative PM), and Paul Nuttall (UKIP). The interviewers were Evan Davis (BBC), Andrew Marr (BBC), Andrew Neil (BBC), Jeremy Paxman (Channel 4/Sky News), and Robert Peston (ITV). Details of each interview are displayed in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

*Details of the 26 Interviews Analysed*

Politician	Interviewer	Date	Broadcaster	Duration
Cameron	Davis	15 April 2015	BBC	27:55
Cameron	Marr	19 April 2015	BBC	17:11
Cameron	Paxman	26 March 2015	C4 & Sky	18:26
Clegg	Davis	13 April 2015	BBC	27:52
Clegg	Marr	3 May 2015	BBC	13:32
Farage	Davis	22 April 2015	BBC	27:49
Farage	Marr	22 March 2015	BBC	9:08
Farage	Marr	3 May 2015	BBC	9:59
Miliband	Davis	20 April 2015	BBC	28:37
Miliband	Marr	26 April 2015	BBC	15:10
Miliband	Paxman	26 March 2015	C4 & Sky	16:10
Corbyn	Marr	23 April 2017	BBC	23:16
Corbyn	Neil	26 May 2017	BBC	27:35
Corbyn	Paxman	29 May 2017	C4 & Sky	16:39
Corbyn	Peston	28 May 2017	ITV	16:57
Farron	Marr	30 April 2017	BBC	9:20
Farron	Neil	1 June 2017	BBC	27:42
Farron	Peston	23 April 2017	ITV	10:46
May	Marr	30 April 2017	BBC	23:40
May	Neil	22 May 2017	BBC	27:46
May	Paxman	29 May 2017	C4 & Sky	16:32
May	Peston	30 April 2017	ITV	19:40

Politician	Interviewer	Date	Broadcaster	Duration
Nuttall	Marr	23 April 2017	BBC	6:09
Nuttall	Marr	21 May 2017	BBC	6:23
Nuttall	Neil	29 May 2017	BBC	27:35
Nuttall	Peston	28 May 2017	ITV	5:11
<b>Total</b>				<b>477:00</b>

*Note.* Interviews by the BBC's Andrew Marr with the leaders of UKIP were shorter in duration than the others, but, during both campaigns, they were interviewed twice. Interviews by Jeremy Paxman – broadcast as *The Battle for Number 10* on Sky News and Channel 4 (C4) – were conducted on both occasions with only the two leaders who might be elected PM. Duration = minutes:seconds.

## Apparatus

Videos of the interviews were accessible from either [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) or [youtube.com](http://youtube.com). Online searches (detailed below) led to the following websites for interview transcripts: [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), [facebook.com](http://facebook.com), [news-watch.co.uk](http://news-watch.co.uk), [politicshome.com](http://politicshome.com), [skygroup.sky](http://skygroup.sky), and [spectator.co.uk](http://spectator.co.uk). Online transcripts could not be located for three interviews; these were transcribed by the first author. [See [Appendix](#) for transcript web page details.]

## Procedure

General election campaigns were selected as the basis of the analysed interviews because, at such times, broadcasters typically include all major party leaders. Also, particularly for leaders of the largest parties, airtime tends to be similar. General elections in the UK can be as much as five years apart, but the two most recent elections<sup>iv</sup> were separated by just over two years: 7 May 2015 and 8 June 2017. Accordingly, it was decided to include interviews from both the 2017 and the 2015 election campaigns to provide a larger sample of relatively recent material. The date of the 2015 General Election was set by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which schedules general elections every five years ([House of Commons Library, 2017](#)). Official campaigning began on 30 March 2015. On 18 April 2017, the PM announced her intention to call an early election. In accordance with the Act, agreement was required by two-thirds of the House of Commons; the motion was passed the following day. Internet searches were conducted for videos of complete interviews between the above dates (30 March - 7 May 2015 and 18 April - 8 June 2017). Searches were also conducted for online interview transcripts; where these were not available, they were transcribed by the first author. Using the videos and the transcripts, the interviews were analysed for personalisation and reply rate separately. Both analyses (detailed below) were conducted in full by the first author. In each case, initial analysis was based on the transcripts. To facilitate accuracy, anything even vaguely ambiguous from the transcript alone was checked using the videos.

## Personalisation

Personalisation analysis involved assessing each of the politicians' responses for comments directed personally at the interviewer. [Similar analyses have also been conducted by the first author on exchanges in PMQs, which an interrater reliability test ([Cohen, 1960](#)) showed to be highly reliable ( $k = .88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) ([Waddle et al., 2019](#))]. Instances of personalisation were then coded in accordance with the categories identified by [Waddle and Bull \(2016\)](#), as listed in [Table 2](#). Seven categories of personalisation were identified in that study; each one is defined below.



Table 2

*Categories of Personalisation. Equivocal Responses Directed Personally at the Interviewer by the Politician May Allude to One or More of the Following*

1. Interviewer bias
2. Broadcast organisation bias
3. The interviewer's competence
4. The interviewer's conduct
5. The interviewer's history
6. The interviewer's frame of mind
7. Blandishments

*Note.* Category 7 covers genial and complimentary personal comments (e.g., flattery and banter). Table adapted from Waddle and Bull (2016).

Five of the categories are distinctly critical: effectively, personal attacks. The first of these – *interviewer bias* – relates to suggestions that the interviewer has, or is displaying, biased personal or political views. An example of this can be seen in a response to a question by Labour politician Dennis Skinner. Skinner was being questioned by the BBC's David Dimbleby in 1992 about Labour Party policy on the voting system *proportional representation* (PR). Skinner's reply included an accusation of bias towards PR: "Well you ought to have explained it much more clearly than Mr Dimbleby. *I know you're one of the chattering classes that believes in proportional representation*".

The category *broadcast organisation bias* relates to instances where personally directed comments are critical of the organisation represented by the interviewer, particularly in relation to programme content and coverage. Dennis Skinner followed up the above with a response identified as such:

<b>Skinner:</b>	<i>and we had it rammed down our throats. We had it rammed down our throats for about three week [sic]. Every time Paddy Backdown<sup>v</sup> opened his mouth about it, you went on about it and turned it into an agenda item. The truth is that Ashdown and his party got eighteen percent. Proportional representation has not been supported in this election. And I'm fed up of hearing on your programme today, all these people trotting out that, that the Labour party's got to get in bed with the Liberals. The whole thing is a nonsense. [...]</i>
-----------------	--

*Interviewer competence* is the category which includes personal comments which are disparaging about the interviewer's intellect, knowledge, or their level of skill. The opening sentence voiced by Skinner in the first example above – "Well you ought to have explained it much more clearly than Mr Dimbleby" – is classed as an attack on Dimbleby's competence in the interview. A further example can be seen in a response by the then Member of Parliament (MP) George Galloway. Responding to a question from Channel 4 News presenter Cathy Newman in 2012, he began by disputing her knowledge of electoral history: "I don't know why you're being so churlish about this. *I know more about left-wing history than you do, I assure you.*"

The fourth category – *interviewer conduct* – relates to personal criticism of the interviewer's interpersonal behaviour in the ongoing interview. Examples can include suggestions that they are being discourteous, dishonest, confrontational, or that their line of questioning is motivated to be damaging for the politician. In the following example, George Galloway was being questioned in a BBC interview shortly after his successful election to Parliament as

a Respect Party candidate in the 2005 General Election. Jeremy Paxman's question referred to Labour MP Oona King, who had just lost her seat to Galloway:

---

<b>Paxman:</b>	Well we're joined now from his count in Bethnal Green and Bow by George Galloway. Mr Galloway, are you proud of having got rid of one of the very few black women in Parliament?
<b>Galloway:</b>	<i>What a preposterous question. I know it's very late in the night, but wouldn't you be better by, starting by congratulating me for one of the most sensational election results in modern history?</i>

---

Another example of personalisation identifiable as interviewer conduct is taken from a 1971 BBC interview of Labour politician, later PM, James Callaghan. Here, Callaghan takes exception to Robin Day's questioning about his views on Labour's Deputy Leader Roy Jenkins:

---

<b>Callaghan:</b>	Well in that case you'd better discuss it with Mr Jenkins <i>but you're not going to get me to make statements that you'll then throw at Mr Jenkins and try to set us at each other's ears. I'm not going to take part in that game to satisfy a television panel.</i> Now let's turn to something else.
-------------------	--

---

The fifth category – *interviewer history* – incorporates criticisms related to an interviewer's reputation and professional or personal history. For example, in a 2011 BBC interview, George Galloway was being quizzed by Andrew Neil about his level of support for the Iranian President. Galloway's response included "*You used to work for Rupert Murdoch of Fox News. We could, I think, quote some choice things from Fox News*".

Whilst the above five personalisation categories relate to comments critical in nature, this is not necessarily true of the sixth – *interviewer frame of mind*. This covers instances when the politician suggests that the interviewer is in a state of anger or agitation, and typically takes the form of advice to calm down. An example of such rhetoric, by Peter Mandelson, is shown in the Introduction section above.

The final category, *blandishments*, relates to personalised comments by the politician which are distinctly positive in nature. Included are instances of flattery, banter (examples of these, by Gordon Brown and Boris Johnson, are also shown in the Introduction above), indeed any personalised utterance with an apparent intention to generate conviviality or familiarity.

## Reply Rate

For this analysis, it was first necessary to identify the interviewers' questions in accordance with the procedures for political interview research by Bull (1994), as described above. Thereby, each question was coded as either a *yes/no*, *wh-*, *alternative*, *indirect*, *declarative*, or *moodless* question. [In accordance with previous research (Feldman, 2016), small talk questions<sup>vi</sup> were not included.] Repeated or rephrased questions were counted as fresh instances. Some questions, though relatively rare, could be coded as more than one type (e.g., when the interviewer posed a double-barrelled question). Coding the questions in this manner facilitates an assessment of whether the requested information has been provided in the politician's responses. Thus, an evaluation was made as to whether the politician had made a reply, an intermediate reply, or a non-reply (Bull, 1994), also described above. This analysis was conducted in full by the first author. To confirm reliability, an interrater evaluation was conducted on over 15% of the corpus, which was also analysed independently by the second author. In terms of identification of questions, an interrater reliability test (Cohen, 1960) was applied and resulted in  $k = .83$ ,  $p < .001$ .

As for the identification of replies, a further test resulted in  $k = .77$ ,  $p < .001$ . According to statisticians Landis and Koch (1977), the first of these represents “almost perfect” agreement, and the latter is very high on their range of “substantial” agreement (p. 165), confirming the high reliability of this analysis overall.

## Results

The results of the reply rate analysis are shown in Table 3. The overall reply rate for the entire 26 interviews was 37.69%. The reply rate for the 2015 interviews combined was 42.82%; for 2017 it was 33.80%. Overall reply rates for individual politicians were: Cameron 33.93%; Clegg 40.00%; Farage 49.45%; Miliband 47.46%; Corbyn 29.63%; Farron 28.75%; May 31.71%; and Nuttall 49.45%.

Table 3

*Politicians' Full Replies to Questions*

Politician	Interviewer	No. of questions	Replies	Reply rate %
Cameron	Davis	49	18	36.73
Cameron	Marr	33	12	36.36
Cameron	Paxman	30	8	26.67
Clegg	Davis	35	17	48.57
Clegg	Marr	20	5	25.00
Farage	Davis	48	21	43.75
Farage	Marr	23	16	69.57
Farage	Marr	20	8	40.00
Miliband	Davis	37	13	35.14
Miliband	Marr	39	18	46.15
Miliband	Paxman	42	25	59.52
Corbyn	Marr	43	15	34.88
Corbyn	Neil	48	12	25.00
Corbyn	Paxman	46	12	26.09
Corbyn	Peston	25	9	36.00
Farron	Marr	10	1	10.00
Farron	Neil	49	12	24.49
Farron	Peston	21	10	47.62
May	Marr	37	11	29.73
May	Neil	52	19	36.54
May	Paxman	46	14	30.43
May	Peston	29	8	27.59
Nuttall	Marr	16	8	50.00
Nuttall	Marr	9	5	55.56
Nuttall	Neil	55	28	50.91
Nuttall	Peston	11	4	36.36
<b>Totals</b>		<b>873</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>37.69</b>

The personalisation analysis was cross-referenced with the reply-rate analysis to evaluate the use of personalised comments in equivocal responses (instances where the politician failed to provide a full reply). On this basis, only non-replies and intermediate (implied, partial, and interrupted) replies were assessed. Personalisation by the

politician directed at the interviewer within an explicit reply was thereby disregarded. For example, in the following extract, Jeremy Paxman was pressing Ed Miliband on whether he would make deals with the Scottish National Party. Miliband bantered with Paxman, but as he also made a direct reply here (answering “No” to a yes-no question), this personalisation was not accounted for.

<b>Paxman:</b>	You are, if you have any chance of forming a government you will won't you?
<b>Miliband:</b>	No, <i>don't be so presumptuous</i> . We've got six weeks to go, six weeks to go, <i>you don't get to decide the election results six weeks before the general election</i> . You're important Jeremy but not that important. It's the British people who decide.

Note. Source: Sky News & C4, 2015.

Table 4 shows the results of the personalisation analysis. Overall, 7% of the 544 responses which were not full replies contained personal comments directed at the interviewer. The politician with the highest level of personalisation on this basis was Nigel Farage, with 17.39%. Percentage rates for other politicians were: Nick Clegg – 12.12%; Tim Farron – 10.53%; Ed Miliband – 9.68%; David Cameron – 5.41%; Theresa May – 5.36%; Jeremy Corbyn – 3.51%. None of Paul Nuttall's equivocal responses contained personalisation.

Table 4

*Equivocal Responses Containing Personalisation*

Politician	IR	1. IR bias	2. BO bias	3. IR comp.	4. IR conduct	5. IR history	6. IR FoM	7. Bland.	Total
Cameron	Davis				1			1	2 (6.45)
Cameron	Marr								0
Cameron	Paxman				1			1	2 (9.09)
Clegg	Davis			1				1	2 (11.11)
Clegg	Marr			2					2 (13.33)
Farage	Davis	1		3	2			1	7 (25.93)
Farage	Marr								0
Farage	Marr				1				1 (8.33)
Miliband	Davis							2	2 (8.33)
Miliband	Marr				2			1	3 (14.29)
Miliband	Paxman							1	1 (5.88)
Corbyn	Marr				1				1 (3.57)
Corbyn	Neil								0
Corbyn	Paxman			1				1	2 (5.88)
Corbyn	Peston				1				1 (6.25)
Farron	Marr								0
Farron	Neil			2	3				5 (13.51)
Farron	Peston				1				1 (9.09)
May	Marr				3				3 (11.54)
May	Neil							1	1 (3.03)
May	Paxman					1			1 (3.13)
May	Peston				1				1 (4.76)

Politician	IR	1. IR bias	2. BO bias	3. IR comp.	4. IR conduct	5. IR history	6. IR FoM	7. Bland.	Total
Nuttall	Marr								0
Nuttall	Marr								0
Nuttall	Neil								0
Nuttall	Peston								0
<b>Totals</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>38 (6.99)</b>

*Note.* Shows numbers of politicians' responses to questions which were not full replies and which contained personalisation. Percentages in parentheses. IR = Interviewer; BO = Broadcast organisation; comp. = competence; FoM = frame of mind; Bland. = Blandishments (e.g., flattery, banter).

All instances of personalisation from these 26 interviews were identifiable in accordance with the categories identified by Waddle and Bull (2016). The most common type was befitting the category *interviewer conduct*, with 44.74% identified thus. One such example occurred as interviewer Robert Peston pressed Tim Farron on his views about gay sex. Farron's personalised response related to the line of questioning Peston was pursuing: "*Robert, Robert, I think if I'm honest with you it's possible that I'm not the only person who's getting tired of this line of questioning*".

*Blandishments*, which includes flattery and banter, accounted for 26.32%. An example from this category was apparent in the following exchange. Jeremy Paxman, citing the words of a member of the public, was querying whether Ed Miliband had the strength of character for the role of PM. Miliband's response was both jocular and equivocal:

<b>Paxman:</b>	Right. In that event you would be leader of our country. You know what people say about you because it's hurtful but you can't be immune to it. A bloke on the Tube said to me last week "Ed Miliband goes into a room with Vladimir Putin, the door is closed, two minutes later the door is opened again and Vladimir Putin is standing there smiling and Ed Miliband is all over the floor in pieces."
<b>Miliband:</b>	<i>Was that David Cameron that you met on the Tube?</i>

*Note.* Source: Sky News & C4, 2015.

Comments identified as being critical of an interviewer's competence accounted for 23.68%. One such example followed a question by Evan Davis about UKIP income tax policy; Farage responded with: "*Well you ought to do your research a bit better because you are wrong about the top rate of tax.*"

The following exchange includes the only response identified as befitting the category *interviewer bias*. Here, Farage's response appears to question the neutrality of interviewer Davis [IR indicates where speech by the interviewer is omitted]:

<b>Farage:</b>	<i>I tell you what's interesting— [IR] let me now attack the liberal Metropolitan elite, in the shape of you talking to me, alright? When you interviewed David Cameron, when you interviewed Miliband and Clegg, you know, did you go through a list of their, not just council candidates— [IR] No, no, let me finish, let me finish. [IR] But it's very interesting— [IR] It's interesting that you do what everybody in the liberal Metropolitan elite does, you pick up a comment from somebody in UKIP made on Facebook, probably late at night. What you never do is challenge the other leaders about why their elected councillors— [IR] and officials are serving prison sentences— [IR] are serving prison sentences— [IR] for paedophilia, are serving prison</i>
----------------	---

---

*sentences for racial assault and yet just one person in UKIP says this and you attempt to portray that as being the party– [IR] and it's not.*

---

PM Theresa May made the only personalised response focused on the interviewer's history, namely, making reference to Paxman's reputation. Paxman's persistence in asking May about her view on UK membership of the European Union led her, eventually, to make a personal comment about the interviewing style for which he has become renowned:

---

<b>Paxman:</b>	OK. So you've changed your mind?
<b>May:</b>	What I am now doing–
<b>Paxman:</b>	Have you changed your mind?
<b>May:</b>	I think there are huge opportunities–
<b>Paxman:</b>	Have you changed your mind?
<b>May:</b>	<i>Jeremy, I know that you have– use this tactic and you want me to answer–</i>

---

*Note.* Source: Sky UK, 2017.

There was one response by Farage which was critical of the broadcast organisation (the BBC). However, this followed a question by the BBC's Andrew Marr asking Farage about the future of the corporation and, importantly, contained no element of personal criticism, so was not coded as this form of personalisation. There were no personalised comments making reference to the interviewer's frame of mind.

The final assessment for personalisation was to gauge its potential for effectiveness. This was achieved by analysis of the interviewers' follow-up: whether or not, following the personalisation, there was a clear repeat or reformulation of the question. Of the 38 instances of personalised equivocation, only 14 were followed by the same question or a reformulation of it.

## Discussion

This study was focused on recent televised political interviews in the UK. Included were interviews with leaders of UK parties: all held and first broadcast during the 2015 or 2017 general election campaigns. The primary focus, and the novel contribution of this research, was an assessment of personalisation by the politicians, namely, personal comments directed at the interviewer in lieu of a direct reply to their question. To facilitate the evaluation of personalisation used in this way, an analysis of questions and replies was also necessary. The second of these analyses would highlight whether or not a question had received a full reply, and where this was not the case, these responses featured in the personalisation assessment. A consequence of the second analysis was an up-to-date and long overdue evaluation of reply rate – the extent to which politicians answer interviewers' questions – from a series of interviews with leading politicians. The results of both the personalisation and reply rate analyses are discussed below.

## Personalisation

Across all 26 interviews (11 in 2015 and 15 in 2017), there were 544 equivocal responses by the politicians. 7% of these responses included personalised comments aimed at the interviewer. [Waddle and Bull \(2016\)](#) identified seven types of personalisation used by politicians in interviews. Five of these were evident from the current corpus. These findings show highly personalised responses to be, not only characteristic of extremist discourse ([Simon-Vandenberg, 2008](#)), but an occasional tactic of mainstream politicians. The most common – almost 45% – were comments about the interviewers' conduct. Over a quarter were of the more genial variety – labelled *blandishments*. Just short of a quarter were comments making reference to the interviewers' competence. There was only one example of a politician levelling an accusation of personal bias at the interviewer. There was also only a single example of a personalised response fitting the category *interviewer history*.

Findings support [Waddle and Bull's \(2016\)](#) personalisation typology in that all personalised equivocal responses were identifiable as one of the seven types therein. Notably absent from these interviews were responses befitting the category *interviewer frame of mind*. This specific form of personalisation was a reported feature of responses by Labour politician Peter Mandelson. One such case is highlighted in the Introduction above. Another occurred during an interview with the BBC's Tim Willcox in 2010, when Mandelson repeated the phrase "calm down" four times. A further instance of this highly personal response was evident during a 2010 press conference, where Mandelson and other leading Labour politicians were being questioned by journalists, including Sky's Adam Boulton. On that occasion, Mandelson repeatedly told Boulton to calm down. The obvious conclusion from these observations is that this form of response is not widely used, but is an occasional tactic of Mandelson's, and one which he uses somewhat successfully to achieve greater control of the conversation.

For the individual politicians in this study, UKIP leader Nigel Farage directed the largest proportion of personal comments at the interviewers. Over 17% of his equivocal responses contained personalisation. Interestingly, Farage's successor as UKIP leader, Paul Nuttall, directed no personal comments at the interviewers during his equivocal responses. Comparing these figures to previous findings ([Bull, 2003](#); [Bull & Mayer, 1993](#)), only Farage was a more frequent user of personalisation than former PM Margaret Thatcher, whose reported rate of personalised equivocation was 13%. It is important to note that previous research did not encompass as broad a range of personalisation as this study, chiefly, the inclusion of more genial tactics (labelled *blandishments*). However, only one of Farage's personalisations was identified thus, so, even without *blandishments*, the former UKIP leader's personalisation was still slightly higher than Thatcher's.

As only one of the political leaders in this study used personalised equivocation at a level above that of former PM Thatcher, this does not represent support for the prediction of higher levels by the recent politicians. However, all but one of the eight politicians here occasionally resorted to personal comments in lieu of a direct reply; previous research ([Bull, 2003](#); [Bull & Mayer, 1993](#)) reported personalisation tactics by only one of three leaders analysed. So, as expected, more politicians were observed using personalised equivocal responses. This may be indicative of an increased likelihood for politicians to be personal in their responses. However, as the current method is broader in scope and the videos and transcripts of the interviews from the 1980s and 1990s were not at our disposal, this could not be confirmed.

A closer look at one of the politicians here highlights a notable distinction. At just over 5% of his equivocal responses containing personal comments, former PM David Cameron was one of the lowest users of personalisation across these interviews. In contrast, an entirely different picture emerged from an analysis in a parliamentary setting



(Waddle et al., 2019). When responding to questions from his political opponent, his personal aggression then was highest of the five PMs analysed. In one period of ten consecutive sessions of PMQs, almost 62% of his responses contained a personal attack on the LO. The salience of this sharp difference in one politician's behaviour across two distinct modes of political communication is perhaps more noteworthy with consideration of the timings. The PMQs sessions assessed by Waddle et al., and Cameron's interviews analysed here, both took place between January and April 2015. Clearly, the then PM had a tendency to respond with personal antagonism towards a political opponent; the same tendency was not a feature of his behaviour towards political interviewers.

### Functionality

In terms of the effectiveness of personalised equivocation; namely, whether it has the potential to divert the interviewer from what the politician may deem a troublesome question, analysis showed that on 63% of occasions, the question was not repeated or reformulated. This falls somewhat short of the 83% reported for Thatcher's interviews following her personal attacks on the interviewer (Bull & Mayer, 1993). However, Bull and Mayer contrasted the effectiveness of that technique with some of the more defensive means of equivocation used by Thatcher's political opponent, Labour leader Neil Kinnock. Those varied from only 25% effective, to entirely ineffective (i.e., the interviewer always followed with a repeat or reformulation of the question). Taking account of those previous findings, the 63% result from this study suggests that personalised equivocation – *playing the man, not the ball* – has the potential to be an effective strategy in diverting the interviewer from a troublesome line of questioning.

Cameron's clear disparity in personalisation across the two modes of political discourse suggests that personalisation in PMQs serves a different purpose than in interviews. Some of the potential functions cited in Waddle et al.'s (2019) PMQs research are not transferable. For example, personal criticism may serve to magnify cognitive differences between political opponents (Ilie, 2004). Indeed, particularly in the run up to a general election, party leaders may be motivated to make personal attacks in an attempt to reveal shortcomings in their opponents and to promote themselves. Attacks on an interviewer suggest a somewhat different motivation.

Waddle et al. (2019) also discuss how personalisation in PMQs might function as a means of equivocation. Ilie (2004) proposes that the emotional force of a personal attack outweighs its rational force. Conceivably, if personalisation has an emotional effect on an opposition politician, an interviewer might be similarly affected. Arguably, an interviewer does not expect to become the focus of a politician's response. The interviewer's role is to set the agenda (Greatbatch, 1986). Occasions when they become the topic of conversation might serve to distract them from their line of questioning. Indeed, even personalisation which is amicable may engender a similar reaction. Atkinson (1984) expressed such a view from his observation of former PM Harold Wilson. Wilson's reported personalisation was merely to address the interviewer by his first name – a tactic which could “neutralize, albeit temporarily, the forceful interviewing style of Robin Day” (p. 174).

Our finding highlighting the potential effectiveness of personalisation as an interview tactic is a strong justification, in the interests of transparency, for research of this nature and the importance of having a reliable coding system to assess its use by those who represent or seek to represent us.

### Reply Rate

Reply rate – defined as the percentage of responses which explicitly provide the information as requested in the interviewers' questions – was also assessed. For the 2015 interviews this was 43%, for 2017 it was 34%, giving an overall reply rate across all 26 interviews of almost 38%. Research on interviews from the 1980s and 1990s

found rates of just over 39% (Harris, 1991) and close to 46% (Bull, 1994). Although recent analyses of individual interviews have hinted at lower reply rates by current leading politicians (Bull, 2016, 2017), the more comprehensive analysis here suggests an overall similarity with their predecessors.

Individually, a broader range of reply rates was apparent across the eight political leaders. Amongst the lowest, and supportive of recent findings by Bull (2016, 2017), were the leaders of the two main political parties in 2017: LO Corbyn at just below 30%, and PM May just short of 32%. Lowest of all across these interviews was Farron, at below 29%. Highest in their reply rates were the UKIP pair, Farage and Nuttall. Their identical reply rate figures (49.45%) showed they gave direct replies to almost half of the questions. Their apparent similarity in this aspect of interview conduct stands in stark contrast to their levels of personalisation, where, in that analysis, they were polar opposites.

## Limitations

The findings herein are from two distinct periods – the general election campaigns of 2015 and 2017. Hence, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of contemporary political context, which was not accounted for here. Contextual influences may feature in the levels of personalisation or reply rate and, though only two years apart, the effects of these influences on the nature of the discourse are likely to vary. Indeed, the same will be true when comparing with interviews from the past. A further connected limitation relates to action orientation. Utterances, including questions and responses, should not be treated in isolation; rather, according to the conversation analysis (CA) approach, they may be understood as forms of action relevant to their specific context and oriented towards certain goals (Drew & Heritage, 1992). However, we believe the findings from this study could be used in future research to address these limitations by investigating action-orientation and the role of context in broadcast political interviews.

Future research may also consider whether there are features of questions (e.g., the presence of personalisation directed at the politician) which are more likely to be met with a response which targets the interviewer. A future study might also investigate the role of question topic in relation to personalisation. A similar analysis was conducted by Waddle and Bull (2019) on the question-response sequences in PMQs, showing that domestic policy exchanges, compared to foreign policy, were significantly higher in personal antagonism between the leaders. Such a study would show if question topic plays a similar role in exchanges between interviewer and politician.

## Conclusions

The basis of this study was an investigation into personalised rhetoric in equivocal responses by politicians. Featured interviews were with leaders of four UK political parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservative, and UKIP). This allowed an assessment across the mainstream political spectrum. Interviews were held during two general election campaigns (2015 and 2017) – the recency of these would facilitate an up-to-date analysis, and allow a comparison with findings from the study of interviews from around a generation ago. The method of analysis also provided an opportunity to make comparisons in reply rate – the extent to which politicians give explicit answers to interviewers' questions. Overall, the reply rate was 38%, not dissimilar to the overall rates reported for politicians from the 1980s and 1990s (Bull, 1994; Harris, 1991).

In terms of personalisation, results here were supportive of the typology devised by Waddle and Bull (2016). All equivocal responses directed personally at the interviewer were identifiable in accordance with the typology. Five of their seven categories were identified in this corpus. Most were of the critical variety; though over a quarter

were good-natured. The type of personalisation seemingly a tactic of former cabinet minister Peter Mandelson – repeatedly telling the interviewer to calm down – did not feature here. Overall, 7% of equivocal responses (occasions when a full reply was not forthcoming) contained personalisation. The politician highest in personalised rhetoric here was Nigel Farage, with over 17% of his equivocal replies identified thus. However, his successor as UKIP leader, Paul Nuttall, made no such responses. The interpretation from these findings is that their position on the political spectrum is not a factor, suggesting it is more a matter of personal style. Also on an individual level, another finding of interest related to former PM David Cameron. A relative frequent user of personal attacks on opponents at PMQs (Waddle et al., 2019), he did not exhibit a similar tendency in these interviews.

The reported effectiveness of personalisation (Bull & Mayer, 1993) – the strong likelihood of it diverting the interviewer from repeating a question that has gone unanswered – was supported by the results of this study. Bull and Mayer also reported that PM Margaret Thatcher was the politician inclined to direct personal responses at the interviewer. Results for the eight party leaders here showed only Farage to have a greater inclination for personalised equivocation than Thatcher. This finding, coupled with the now broader scope of identifying personalisation, is not evidence of increased levels by recent politicians. However, all but one of the eight leaders directed responses personally at the interviewer in lieu of a straight answer. It seems for most politicians, *playing the man*, in one form or another, is not beyond the pale.

## Notes

i) *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) is a Belgian nationalist party that was formed to replace *Vlaams Blok* (Flemish Bloc), which was dissolved in 2004 following condemnation for racism by a Belgian court (Simon-Vandenberghe, 2008).

ii) This study formed part of the Ph.D research of the first author, and an earlier version is printed in his doctoral thesis: Waddle, M. (2018). *Playing the man, not the ball: Personalisation in political discourse* (Doctoral thesis, University of York, York, United Kingdom). <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/22456>

iii) Our study uses a content-analytic approach to address the research questions. The authors fully acknowledge the validity of alternative approaches, e.g., discursive/CA analyses (see, e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 2012), and recognise the relative shortcomings of the current approach in terms of action orientation.

iv) The 2015 and 2017 elections were the most recent at the time of our analysis.

v) “Paddy Backdown” was a nickname Skinner used for the then Liberal Democrats leader Paddy Ashdown.

vi) Occasionally, the interviewer and politician briefly exchange small talk, typically before the start of the interview. Small talk questions like “Shall we get our mutual celebrations for the Arsenal victory out of the way first?” are not included in the analysis. This example occurred in the Peston-Corbyn interview. Both men are supporters of Arsenal Football Club.

## Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgments

The authors have no support to report.

## Author Contributions

This article is based on a study which is also reported in the doctoral dissertation of the first author, of whom the second author was the Ph.D supervisor.

Waddle, M. (2018). *Playing the man, not the ball: Personalisation in political discourse* (Doctoral thesis, University of York, York, United Kingdom). <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/22456>

## References

- Atkinson, M. (1984). *Our masters' voices: The language and body language of politics*. London, United Kingdom: Methuen.
- Bull, P. (1994). On identifying questions, replies, and non-replies in political interviews. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13, 115-131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X94132002>
- Bull, P. (2003). *The microanalysis of political communication: Claptrap and ambiguity*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Bull, P. (2009). How to analyse political interviews. In G. Álvarez-Benito, G. Fernández-Díaz, & I. M<sup>a</sup> Íñigo-Mora (Eds.), *Discourse and politics* (pp. 215-229). Newcastle-upon-Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bull, P. (2016, October 24). Theresa May has a very special technique for avoiding questions. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/theresa-may-has-a-very-special-technique-for-avoiding-questions-67424>
- Bull, P. (2017, June 6). Who dodges more questions, Theresa May or Jeremy Corbyn? The verdict is in. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/who-dodges-more-questions-theresa-may-or-jeremy-corbyn-the-verdict-is-in-78955>
- Bull, P., & Mayer, K. (1993). How not to answer questions in political interviews. *Political Psychology*, 14, 651-666. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791379>
- Çakır, S., Kökpınar Kaya, E., & Kara, A. (2016). Evasion strategies used in Turkish political discourse. *The Journal of International Social Research*, 9(46), 58-64. <https://doi.org/10.17719/jisr.20164622574>
- Clayman, S. E. (2001). Answers and evasions. *Language in Society*, 30, 403-442. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404501003037>
- Clementson, D. E., & Eveland, W. P., Jr. (2016). When politicians dodge questions: An analysis of presidential press conferences and debates. *Mass Communication & Society*, 19, 411-429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1120876>
- Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20, 37-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316446002000104>
- Drew, P., & Heritage, D. (1992). *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Feldman, O. (2016). Televised political interviews: A paradigm for analysis. *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research*, 3, 63-82. <https://doi.org/10.15206/ajpor.2016.3.2.63>
- Feldman, O., Kinoshita, K., & Bull, P. (2015). Culture or communicative conflict? The analysis of equivocation in broadcast Japanese political interviews. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 34, 65-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X14557567>
- Greatbatch, D. (1986). Aspects of topical organization in news interviews: The use of agenda-shifting procedures by interviewees. *Media Culture & Society*, 8, 441-455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443786008004005>

- Harris, S. (1991). Evasive action: How politicians respond to questions in political interviews. In P. Scannell (Ed.), *Broadcast talk* (pp. 76-99). London, United Kingdom: SAGE.
- House of Commons Library. (2017, April 27). *Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011*. Retrieved from <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06111>
- Huang, Y. (2009). A study of hedge strategies in Taiwan political discourse. In E. Weigand (Ed.), *Dialogue analysis XI: Proceedings of the 11th IADA conference on 'Dialogue Analysis and Rhetoric'*. University of Münster, March 26-30, 2007 (pp. 155-179). Münster, Germany: Edda Weigand.
- Hutchby, I., & Wooffitt, R. (1998). *Conversation analysis: Principles, practices and applications*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Ilie, C. (2004). Insulting as (un)parliamentary practice in the British and Swedish parliaments: A rhetorical approach. In P. Bayley (Ed.), *Cross-cultural perspectives on parliamentary discourse* (pp. 45-86). Philadelphia, PA, USA: John Benjamins.
- Jucker, A. H. (1986). *News interviews: A pragmatolinguistic analysis*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Landis, J. R., & Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics*, 33, 159-174. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2529310>
- Leone, G. (2013). Sometimes I, sometimes me: A study on the use of autobiographical memories in two political speeches by Barack Obama. In I. Poggi, F. D'Errico, L. Vincze, & A. Vinciarelli (Eds.), *Multimodal communication in political speech: Shaping minds and social action* (pp. 133-148). Berlin, Germany: Springer.
- Mehdipour, F., & Nabifar, N. (2011). Critical analysis of evasion techniques in American political news interviews. *Journal of Academic and Applied Studies*, 1(5), 56-70.
- Nur Zahraa, H., & Siti Rohana, M. T. (2016). Evasion strategies by politicians in news interviews. *Malaysian Journal of Languages and Linguistics*, 5(1), 10-30. <https://doi.org/10.24200/mjll.vol5iss1pp10-30>
- Potter, J. (2012). Discourse analysis and discursive psychology. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 111-130). Washington, DC, USA: American Psychological Association.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. Harlow, United Kingdom: Longman.
- Simon-Vandenberg, A.-M. (2008). "Those are only slogans": A linguistic analysis of argumentation in debates with extremist political speakers. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 27, 345-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X08322476>
- Thornborrow, J., & Montgomery, M. (2010). Special issue on personalization in the broadcast news interview. *Discourse & Communication*, 4, 99-104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481310364332>
- Vuković, M. (2013). Adversarialness and evasion in broadcast political interviews. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 7(4), 1-24.
- Waddle, M., & Bull, P. (2016). Playing the man, not the ball: Personalisation in political interviews. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 35, 412-434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X15592443>
- Waddle, M., & Bull, P. (2019). Curbing their antagonism: Topics associated with a reduction in personal attacks at Prime Minister's Questions. *Parliamentary Affairs*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/PA/GSZ010/5423856>
- Waddle, M., Bull, P., & Böhnke, J. R. (2019). "He is just the nowhere man of British politics": Personal attacks in Prime Minister's Questions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38, 61-84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X18767472>

## Appendix: Interview Transcript Sources

**Cameron/Davis 2015:** Gage, C. (2015, April 15). David Cameron's leaders' interview with Evan Davis. *PoliticsHome*. Retrieved from <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/economy/news/63488/david-camersons-leaders-interview-evan-davis>

**Cameron/Marr 2015:** BBC. (2015, April 19). Transcript of David Cameron interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/19041503.pdf>

**Cameron/Paxman 2015:** Sky News [& Channel 4]. (2015). *Cameron and Miliband: The Battle for Number 10 - interview with David Cameron*. Retrieved from <https://www.skygroup.sky/corporate/media-centre/articles/en-gb/cameron-and-miliband-the-battle-for-number-10-interview-with-david-cameron>

**Clegg/Davis 2015:** Transcribed by the first author.

**Clegg/Marr 2015:** BBC. (2015, May 3). Transcript of Nick Clegg interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03051503.pdf>

**Farage/Davis 2015:** News-watch. (n.d.). *Transcript of BBC1, Leader Interviews, 22nd April 2015, 7.30pm*. Retrieved from <http://news-watch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BBC1-Leader-Interview-Nigel-Farage-22nd-April-2015-7.30pm.pdf>

**Farage/Marr 2015:** BBC. (2015, March 22). Transcript of Nigel Farage interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/22\\_03\\_15\\_nigel\\_farage.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/22_03_15_nigel_farage.pdf)

**Farage/Marr 2015:** BBC. (2015, May 3). Transcript of Nigel Farage interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03051502.pdf>

**Miliband/Davis 2015:** Transcribed by the first author.

**Miliband/Marr 2015:** BBC. (2015, April 26). Transcript of Ed Miliband interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/26041504.pdf>

**Miliband/Paxman 2015:** Sky News [& Channel 4]. (2015). *Cameron and Miliband: The Battle for Number 10 - interview with Ed Miliband*. Retrieved from <https://www.skygroup.sky/corporate/media-centre/articles/en-gb/cameron-and-miliband-the-battle-for-number-10-interview-with-ed-miliband>

**Corbyn/Marr 2017:** BBC. (2017, April 23). Transcript of Jeremy Corbyn interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/23041703.pdf>

**Corbyn/Neil 2017:** The Spectator. (2017, May 26). *Andrew Neil interviews Jeremy Corbyn: Full transcript*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/05/andrew-neil-interviews-jeremy-corbyn-full-transcript/>

**Corbyn/Paxman 2017:** Sky UK. (2017). *The Battle for Number Ten 29.05.17 Interview with Jeremy Corbyn*. Retrieved from <https://www.skygroup.sky/corporate/media-centre/articles/en-gb/the-battle-for-number-ten-290517-interview-with-jeremy-corbyn>

**Corbyn/Peston 2017:** ITV Press Office. (2017). *Jeremy Corbyn on Peston on Sunday*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/MrJohnRentoul/posts/1853697944953352:0>

**Farron/Marr 2017:** BBC. (2017, April 30). Transcript of Tim Farron interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30041702.pdf>



**Farron/Neil 2017:** The Spectator. (2017, June 1). *Andrew Neil interviews Tim Farron: Full transcript*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/06/andrew-neil-interviews-tim-farron-full-transcript/>

**Farron/Peston 2017:** ITV Press Office. (2017). *Tim Farron on Peston on Sunday*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/Mr-JohnRentoul/photos/a.1458582951131522.1073741828.1401938353462649/1834616533528160/?type=3>

**May/Marr 2017:** BBC. (2017, April 30). Transcript of Theresa May interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30041701.pdf>

**May/Neil 2017:** The Spectator. (2017, May 22). *Andrew Neil interviews Theresa May: Full transcript*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/05/andrew-neil-interviews-theresa-may-full-transcript/>

**May/Paxman 2017:** Sky UK. (2017). *The Battle for Number Ten, 29.05.17, Interview with Theresa May*. Retrieved from <https://www.skygroup.sky/corporate/media-centre/articles/en-gb/the-battle-for-number-ten-290517-interview-with-theresa-may>

**May/Peston 2017:** ITV Press Office. (2017). *Theresa May on Peston on Sunday*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/Mr-JohnRentoul/posts/1838571489799331:0>

**Nuttall/Marr 2017:** BBC. (2017, April 23). Transcript of Paul Nuttall interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/23041702.pdf>

**Nuttall/Marr 2017:** BBC. (2017, May 21). Transcript of Paul Nuttall interview. *The Andrew Marr Show*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/21051701.pdf>

**Nuttall/Neil 2017:** The Spectator. (2017, May 29). *Andrew Neil interviews Paul Nuttall: Full transcript*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/05/andrew-neil-interviews-paul-nuttall-full-transcript/>

**Nuttall/Peston 2017:** Transcribed by the first author.