Evaluating political candidates' image. An experimental approach

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Presa Universitară Clujeană

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for those who are gone, for those who remained
it is not the length of life, but depth of life

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EVALUATING POLITICAL CANDIDATES' IMAGE. AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

The quality of a democracy is closely linked to people's ability to make reasonable and rational choices, as history has shown us. The democratic choice also means the ability of the electorate to make informed and rational decisions, the emphasis being on the quality of political decisions. In other words, using a rational judgment, voters should elect candidates based on relevant attributes such as their experience, intelligence, leadership abilities and positions on policy issues, while the superficial information that does speak about the leaders' competence should be ignored.
Nonetheless, even this predisposition of the voters to rely on shallow and unconscious decisions represents the point of interest of recent studies in political sciences and psychology. There is also the case when people cannot explain their voting behavior and preferences about politicians that lead us to believe that they may have an emotional reaction to politics not so much as conscious processing of political information.

An additional argument on how voters behave that encapsulates the present thesis essence is offered by David Sears, an American psychologist that says: "It is certainly easier to base one's decisions on how a person looks rather than on the arguments he is putting forward. One gets the impression that voters prefer to think about politics in terms of individual personalities rather than abstractions. The principal contents of candidate images seem to have to do with personal qualities rather than with policy decisions" (Sears, 1968 in Bull, Hawkes, 1982, 95). Starting from this, we can identify a very well-articulated and growing literature and an increased interest of researchers to study the role of appearances in the formation of first-impressions about the political candidates (Ahler, Citrin, Dougal, & Lenz, 2017; Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007 in Olivola, Tingley, Todorov, 2018).

It is argued that, from the area of psychology, faces are one of the most studied categories of stimuli (Calder, Rhodes, Johnson, & Haxby, 2011 in Mende-Siedlecki, Verosky, Turk-Browne, Todorov, 2013, 2086) and there is extensive research on the social perception of faces (Todorov, Said, & Verosky, 2011; Zebrowitz, 2011 in Todorov, Porter, 2014, 1). From facial appearance derives a long list of interpersonal impressions that can be formed, even though the accuracy of these inferences is uncertain (Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Hassin & Trope, 2000).

Following the arguments of Downs and Wattenberg, that first and foremost discuss about peoples' rationality and the voters' rationality implicit, if voters are rather uninformed about political candidates and their programs, and if the political

entertainment promotes the image of candidates, voters will focus more on personal characteristics of candidates and thereof on their image (Downs, 1957; Wattenberg, 1991).

Individuals use first-impression judgments in everyday life to form assessments about others on physical and/or character traits (Mattes and Milazzo, 2014, 4). Thus, heuristics, information shortcuts, stereotyping, and thin slices of information are used by voters that are not familiar with detailed policies. More, as Lau and Redlawsk argue, there is a simple assumption that "voter decision making cannot be much different from other decisions people make in their daily lives", therefore the use of heuristics in decision-making proves to be essentially and universally for all types of voters (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006, 21).

As Lau and Redlawsk (2001) show, voters are cognitive misers, looking for mental shortcuts that prefer to base their behavior on simple cues. The candidates' appearance represents one of these cues that we judge. Another cue that can impact our judgment is represented by the candidates' gender and automatic assumptions or stereotypes that we associate with the candidate, and its suitability for the office. These two variables that generate rapid inferences towards the candidates should be taken into consideration if we want to analyze how voters react to candidate images. John and Shephard (2007) highlight that even the voters' gender is essential in shaping the final judgments related to candidates. They concluded that voters react differently to candidates' appearance: voters assign "warmth" traits to female and "strength" traits to male candidates, so the effect of gender stereotyping on trait evaluations is visible. Nonetheless, they add that candidates are judged using anti-stereotypical features, while males candidates are judged according to warmth and female candidates are judged according to strength (2007, 447), implying that male candidates should emphasize more their warmth characteristics during the electoral campaign.

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) argue that as for researchers from the field of political science and economy, it is quite unpleasant to hear information from socio-psychological studies that show that people's rationality, and thus the way they make decisions, is actually lower. An important role that plays in the human mind is represented by the two distinct decisional systems as presented in the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion, firstly described and defined by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). When confronted with new information, people have two ways to process information and make decisions: a system based on the central route of persuasion, and a system based on the peripheral route of persuasion. The central model of persuasion involves a thorough analysis of the message, the active involvement of the participant in the decision process, and the motivation to make a well-informed decision. Whereas, the peripheral route of persuasion is influenced by superficial cues that persuade for the message besides the strength of the arguments. The peripheral route is influenced by external influences like the attractiveness and friendliness of the source, the gender of the source, the simplicity of the message, the expert status of the speaker or the medium of transmission of the message (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986, 50). The central route is slower, deliberate,

and rationale, while the peripheral route is fast, effortless, and performed automatically and unconsciously. Here, the common man is seen as a "everyday scholar," a "little scientist" who logically organizes information, analyzes it, makes correct deductions, and arrives at conclusions without error and subjectivity (Iluț, 2009, 140). People gather information about the surrounding reality, judging selecting and processing a great deal of information, and finally, issuing judgments based on this information. Therefore, following this argument, political decisions that are rationale, assuming an extensive analysis of policies and candidates are part of the central route of decision-making, while political decisions based on heuristics, stereotypes, on the assessment of the candidates' image, are part of the peripheral decision-making route. Thus, heuristical and stereotypical decisions operate outside of the conscious awareness, when people's attention is distracted and may cause errors which make judgments predictably irrational.

The present thesis fits into the study of social cognition, on how people, on the basis of the information they hold, make inferences, social judgments about individuals, groups and social phenomena. Through the study of social perception, as it appears in the social-psychology textbooks, the emphasis falls on how people perceive and evaluate other people based on inferences from the facial appearance, from facial expressions or nonverbal communication in general. Thus, the emphasis falls on the mechanism of forming impressions of someone else, in which a significant role is played by the difference between what is obvious, what "jumps in the eye" and the background of the perception (Iluț, 2009, 139).

Commenting on the basic voters' superficiality, McGinnis in his book from 1976, when talking about Presidential elections from the U.S., makes a sour but on point description: "Voters are basically lazy. Reasoning requires a high degree of concentration: impression is easier. Reason pushes the viewer back, it assaults him, whereas impression can envelop him without making an intellectual demand. Thus the emotions are more easily aroused, more malleable. Let's not be afraid of gimmicks. Get the voters to like the guy and the battle's two thirds won" (McGinnis, 1976 in Bull, Hawkes, 1982, 95).

One of the authors who has studied extensively the role of the image in political campaigns, but more specifically, the purpose of first impressions in the evaluation of political candidates is Alexander Todorov, Professor at Princeton University, in the United States of America, one of the exponents that started the research on the first impressions, since the 2000s. His and his colleagues' research has raised the interest in the role of first-impression and triggered a long series of papers on this subject, in what proved to be a happy interdisciplinary approach between psychology, neurosciences, political science and sociology. The study that inspired this thesis and is one of the foundation stones is named "Inferences of Competence from Faces Predict Electoral Outcomes", written by Alexander Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren and Hall in 2005, that proves that inferences of competence based solely on facial appearance of the candidates predicted the outcomes of U.S. Senate elections in a proportion of 68%. Contrary to the perspective that voters are rational and make informed decisions, summing up to a

growing literature on voters' decision-makers, Ahler et al. (2016) emphasize that the simple act of adding photographs with the candidates faces in voting ballots can change voting intentions, therefore, the candidate appearance can influence the electoral results. The arguments and conclusions found by Todorov and other scholars raised a debate related to the importance that appearance really does play in elections. A long list of other relevant variables that could affect these relations could take into account the campaign spendings, incumbency, the gender, age and ethnicity of the candidates, and so on. Nonetheless, the experimental results are robust even in the context of primary or general races, among Democratic and Republican candidates, senators or governors, and in context of the same race and gender (Ahler et al., 2016, 98). All of these results raise questions about the types of heuristics used by voters and their ability to make democratic and rational decisions.

Thus, discovering this area of study that brings together my interests in psychology and social cognition and political sciences, and trying to replicate Todorov's study from 2005, for the present thesis I have developed three quasi-experimental studies that are based on Todorov's findings, that try to describe how Romanian voters make political decisions and how they assess the facial appearance of political candidates.

Therefore, I have developed two quasi-experimental studies that are based on evaluations of the candidates that ran for the European Parliament elections from 2014, and one experiment that is centered on assessments of the Romanian candidates that ran for the Mayor office at local elections from 2016, which, at the time of the experiment, was a projective study. One author mentions that in previous studies on the role of appearance and electoral results there have been tested a posteriori past elections with electors that participated or not at that elections, resulting in more observational studies than confirmatory ones (Ahler, Citrin, Dougal & Lenz, 2017, 78). To counteract this critic, two of the studies represent a retrospective analysis, as they examine past elections, while one of the quasi-experiment is prospective, in trying to anticipate what Romanian electors will vote.

Overall, the three studies sum up a total of 536 participants, based on a convenience sample, and were carried out during 2016-2018. The experiments' results were treated in two other previous studies, pre-requisites that underlie the present thesis (Culic, 2019a; 2017). For the studies that were developed below, the main intention was to explore the implications of personality trait inferences, derived from facial appearance, on how voters evaluate and make decisions to support a candidate or another. In the quasi-experimental approaches, I have tried to capture both the role of personality assessments derived from facial appearance, but also how the gender of candidates or voters influences these assessments, as distinct variables.

The main research questions and hypothesis that directed the research are the following, with small variations:

1. How are political candidates evaluated based on the Attractiveness, Competence, Trustworthiness, and Intention to vote inferences deduced from their pictures?

H1: There is a positive link between the candidates' attractiveness assessments and the voting intention for those candidates.

H2: There is an increased correlation between attractiveness and competence assessments.

2. What is the most used personality trait in evaluating political candidates?

3. What type of personality assessments are used by Romanian voters in evaluating pictures of political candidates?

H3: There is a positive link between assessments on the candidate's 'competence and their age and gender.

4. Does the gender of the voter influences the type of personality traits inferences made?

H4: For male voters, there is a positive link between the attractiveness evaluations and the intention to vote for the candidates.

H6: For female voters, there is a positive link between the competence evaluations and the intention to vote for the candidates.

To balance the quantitative approach of the study, after the quasi-experimental analysis, I have conducted in-depth interviews with specialists. A total of 15 in-depth interviews with specialists from academia, from the political science, sociology and psychology domain were taken, but also with political candidates and counselor. All of these interviews aim to test the ground, to capture a plurality of opinions and validate several methodological implications of the topic studied, thus the exploratory role of interviews. Again, all of these implications were discussed in a previous study (Culic, 2019b).

After stating the research intention of the present thesis, in the following paragraphs I will present each chapter and its summary. Chapter I debuts with clarifications over the social-psychology domain of reference and on the social-cognitive studies that try to explain how attitudes, stereotypes, attributions, and personality factors are formed. The attempt to explain the necessity to understand how voters make their decisions is explained through the Rational-Choice model of making decisions and voting, but also with additional models of decision making.

Next, Chapter II tries to define and explain what heuristics and stereotypes are, their role and importance in the process of decision-making and how they are used by voters. Known as mental shortcuts, and employed on a daily basis, they simplify the choice between candidates, providing voters with a reasonably accurate decision in most of the cases. Also, the use of stereotypes is explained, with a focus on the role of gender stereotypes and gender stereotypes in politics, since this

interests in encompassed in the title of the thesis. An extensive list of gender stereotypes is exemplified as well as recent research that is correlated with first-impression inferences and their influence in politics.

Chapter III examines what first-impression are, how are they measured and the state of the research on the topic. A focus on Alexander Todorov's studies is presented, since with his studies debuted all the interest in the role of first-impressions and their connection with electoral races. The chapter also examines the role of beauty in politics and its connection to gender, as more attractive candidates have higher chances to win the elections. A list of other studies that show different predictors for winning the campaign has been analyzed as well. Chapter IV analyzes and describes how were constructed different experiments in social cognition in order to measure the first-impression effect on electing the candidates. Discussions about a suitable methodology, the research design and standardization of stimuli were in the focus. This part was essential in offering a model of analysis for the empirical part of the thesis.

More, Chapter V offers an extensive look into the methodological design of the thesis. The use of the three quasi-experiments is detailed, with reference to the sample, stimuli, the software that was used and also to results. Finally, after the quasi-experiments, a discussion about the experimental limits and disadvantages was undertaken. The next empirical part of the thesis is detailed in Chapter VI that analyzes in great detail a set of in-depth experts' interviews that were taken and their results.

The final chapter of the thesis, Chapter VII, reunites all of the findings from the quasi-experimental methodology and the qualitative methodology and presents the final results and conclusions.

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