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CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARTY LEADERS IN EASTERN EUROPE

A Comparative Study between Hungary and Romania

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN
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1. Party Leaders and Political Perception

This chapter explains the theoretical framework used in the study, reviews the literature on the formation of perceptions, and addresses the research gap in the existing literature. The first section defines and explains the key concepts, namely political parties, party leaders, and political perception. Following that, two sections of the literature review address the main theoretical contributions to the understanding of public perceptions of political leaders, and the main determinants of political perception. The second section presents the main theoretical contributions from the social psychology literature, such as the consistency theories (balance theory, dissonance theory, and social judgment theory), the social cognitive theories (political cue theory, and cognitive shortcuts), and the information processing theories (the memory-based model, the impression-driven model, theory-driven theory and data-driven theory). The third section underlines how other factors such as personality and character traits, the political leader's background, and the media may potentially influence political perception. The last section emphasizes the main gaps to be found in the literature and explains how this paper intends to resolve those past limitations.

1.1. Conceptual framework

This section defines and discusses the key concepts used throughout the paper: political parties, party leaders, and political perception. First, political parties refer to "any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office" (Sartori, 2005, p. 56). Political parties are also defined as "voluntary organisations that channel citizens' demands into the public political realm in order to influence the political agenda, place candidates in elections and often (but not always) aim to obtain control of government" (Bonotti, 2011, p. 19). Moreover, parties are "representative agencies" and "expressive instruments" (Sartori, 2005, p. 24), as they represent citizens by aggregating and expressing their interests (van Biezen, 2003, p. 4). Political parties' activities involve maintaining political stability, mobilizing the electorate, recruiting the elite and political leaders, forming the government, mediating collective interests, influencing public policies, setting the political agenda, and interacting with civil society (van Biezen, 2003, pp. 4–5; Luna *et al.*, 2021, p. 4). In addition, parties can shape the stable preferences of the electorate over time (Gherghina, 2014).

Regarding party organization, it is important to bear in mind several components such as the party's organizational units, the intra-party decision-making process, the membership, party leadership continuity, resources allocation, and the social networks established with other, non-political organizations in order to achieve electoral benefits. Different types of parties, such as cadres or mass parties, can involve two types of organization: hierarchy or stratarchy. Firstly, within a hierarchical structure, decision-making power is held by an elite of people. Secondly, in a stratarchical structure, the power is distributed among several units that have interdependent roles, namely the local units that deal with electoral mobilization and member recruitment, and the central units that define party policy. However, some degree of hierarchy exists between the central and local organizations, since representatives from the center set the directions that must be pursued and adhered to by the regional and local levels. It is considered that in a political party, three layers are involved in the decision-making process: the party in public office, the party in central office, and the party on the ground. Among these, the central and public office elites are the most visible ones of the party, and are essential for the party homogeneity. Elites from the central office are also in charge of the communication strategies, administration, candidate and party leader selection, funds allocation, and the elaboration of party policy. These activities reflect the level of centralization of the party (Gherghina, 2014, pp. 35–38).

Some scholars suggest that a dominant and personal leadership style has emerged in the new democracies in Southern and East-Central European countries, whereas membership has started to lose its relevance. The party's national leadership and (especially) the party leader are most influential, by controlling the party apparatus, the permanent executive composition, the party's finances, and candidates' selection for public office (van Biezen, 2003, pp. 205–206). Political parties are understood in this paper as political groups that participate in elections in order to place their candidates in public office.

Second, the party leader is defined as “the person in charge of guiding the party organization, defining its main political strategies and managing its relationship with the general public” (Musella, 2017, p. 12). Party leaders are political representatives positioned at the top of a political party. They are variously referred to as party president, party leader, chairman, general secretary, or secretary. The party leader's role is dependent on the party's position in the institutional arrangement of contemporary democracies (such as in government or opposition, parliamentary or extra-parliamentary), and on the degree of centralization in the three faces of the party's activities (in public office, in central office, and on the ground) (Musella, 2017, p. 10).

Often, the party leader in office occupies the most important government position (Ennsner-Jedenastik and Müller, 2015, p. 930). For instance, in the Westminster system, the power is concentrated in a single person, the party leader,

who is also the leader of the party in public office (parliament or executive), in central office, and in electoral campaigns. However, in other systems, the party leader cannot be a member of the government at the same time. It is not always the party leader who has the most power over the party, as there are situations where the leader of the parliamentary group is the 'real' leader of the party. Other times, when the party is in power, the prime minister has the real power in the party, and not the party president, who oversees the extra-parliamentary group. Conversely, when the party is in opposition, the leader of the extra-parliamentary group is the real leader. Further, there are situations where parties reject the concentration of power in the hands of an elite and decide to be administered by a collective leadership instead. Therefore, in some cases it is difficult to distinguish the real leader of the party (Pilet and Cross, 2014).

Party presidents coordinate the general activity of the party and play several key political roles, especially in decision making. These include, among other things, taking responsibility for the party's electoral performance, the party's image, as they are the main exponents of the party, voter mobilization, the party's ties with the electorate, negotiations and alliances with other parties and actors, the selection of candidates, the party's policies, agenda-setting, the promotion of the party's program, and the party's overall survival (Scarrow, Webb and Farrell, 2000; Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Dowding and Dumont, 2014; Pilet and Cross, 2014; Cross and Pilet, 2015; Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller, 2015; Aaldering, van der Meer and Van der Brug, 2018; Passarelli, 2019). Party leaders are sometimes described as brokers between office-seekers and benefit-seekers:

Where they control electoral resources and access to nominations, candidates and elected officials must cooperate with them. As a result, party leaders will have some discretion over where the benefits of governmental control shall be bestowed. They can use these benefits to induce participation and contributions from the party membership (Goldstein, 2002, pp. 328-330).

Political party leaders can use several tools to attract citizens, such as clientelism, patronage, and the media (Blondel *et al.*, 2010, p. 46). Also, the leadership style of the party leaders is essential for the mobilization of the electorate and to the internal organization of the party (Gherghina, 2020). Citizens can change their party according to the leader or according to leadership criteria (Foti, Fraser and Lord, 1982; Pillai and Williams, 1998). Although these are not the only factors influencing voting choice, due to their centrality, party leaders have become the main electoral drivers, with a growing impact on the voting decisions of individuals (Aarts, Blais and Schmitt, 2013; Aaldering, van der Meer and Van der Brug, 2018). In this thesis, party leaders are regarded as the formal president of the party (the title matches the role of party president), since the

formal role of the party leader can differ from the title depending on the country or party's structure.

Third, in the psychology literature, the perception of another person is referred to as "person perception" or "social perception" (Heider, 1958). Social perception has been defined as:

a process between the center of one person and the center of another person, from life space to life space. When A observes B's behavior, he "reads" it in terms of psychological entities (and his reactions, being guided by his own sentiments, expectations, and wishes, can again be understood only in terms of psychological concepts). A, through psychological processes in himself, perceives psychological processes in B (Heider, 1958, p. 33).

Person perception is a general concept that covers the wide variety of ways "in which we first perceive social cues, judge social targets, and subsequently form impressions of social actors" (Kruglanski and Higgins, 2007, p. 53). In other words, person perception involves the formation of impressions about another person and then making inferences based on those impressions (Bierhoff, 1989). The perceptual process is often described as the interpretation of information from the environment in order to make sense of it (Malim, 1994, p. 35). Some consider that the perceptual process involves "an active interpretation of the environment, motivated by people's need for information in order to engage in goal-directed behavior" (Feldman and Conover, 1983, p. 813).

The prior literature provides two general theories that distinguish between direct and indirect perception. On the one hand, the theory of direct perception holds that perception is the detection of information from the environment without making use of inferences, memories, or mental representations. On the other hand, the theory of indirect perception holds that perception is the interpretation of information with the intervention of memories, expectations, and representations stored in people's minds (Michaels and Carello, 1981), or simply put, "finding the best match for 'what is out there' with representations in memory (what is 'in the head')" (Hinton, 2016, p. 18). Accordingly, the process of perception largely employs three components: the perceiver's experiences based on their memories, the context, and the perceiver's internal state (emotions and motivations) (Malim, 1994, p. 41).

Within this field of literature, perception is regarded as part of the cognitive processes (i.e., what happens when individuals observe and react to a stimulus) together with memory, attention, language, thinking, imagery, and the information processing that take place at the mental level (Cottam *et al.*, 2016, p. 53). Drawing from social psychology theories, perception has been adapted to the political context to explain how people make sense of the information coming from the political environment, and to explore what shapes the ways in which they perceive political leaders. Political perception represents "the process by which people develop impressions of the characteristics and positions of political candidates,

parties, and institutions” (Granberg, 1993, p. 70). In the study of political perceptions, there is little consensus on what determines the formation of perceptions. The perceptual process may be influenced by external stimuli, such as the political context, the media coverage of a political candidate, the political leader’s objective attributes (their party, stance on issues, character, and personality traits), or by the internal characteristics of the public. Therefore, it is unclear whether citizens’ perceptions are an accurate representation of political leaders, or simply misleading perceptions shaped by their own internal features, such as their personal values, traits, and attitudes, and by their political predispositions (ideology, partisanship, political preferences). For example, the qualities ascribed to a political leader could be determined by his or her actual characteristics, or by the perceiver’s values, attitudes, beliefs, etc. (Kinder, 1978; Granberg, 1993). In this paper, perception is understood as the way people think about party leaders based on the process of information from the political environment. The following section addresses the main theories that have attempted to explain how perceptions of political leaders are formed, and outlines the factors proposed in earlier research as potentially influencing the perceptual process.

1.2. Theoretical background in political perception

This section reviews the literature on the formation of public perceptions about political leaders. Several theories have been proposed to explain perceptions of political leaders, beginning with consistency theories (i.e., balance theory, dissonance theory, and social judgment theory), social cognitive theories (i.e., political cue theory, and cognitive shortcuts), and information processing theories (the memory-based model, the impression-driven model, theory-driven theory, and data-driven theory). Some of these theories and models focus on how people’s need for consistency in their cognition might influence them to form distorted perceptions, while others have focused on how people use cognitive shortcuts in the perceptual process in order to take simplified views on the complex political environment.

The literature on political perception often investigates the formation and determinants of perception from the perspective of social psychology. Perception is about how to process information about the world. This process is referred to in psychology as the cognitive process. Cognition refers to the process by which a person structures and uses knowledge about the world, which is organized in a cognitive system. Thus, the cognitive process represents “what happens in the mind while people move from observation of a stimulus to a response to that stimulus” (Cottam *et al.*, 2016, p. 53).

1.2.1. Consistency theories

When trying to understand the public's perceptions of political candidates, scholars have largely focused on consistency theories. Among these, Fritz Heider's "balance theory" (Heider, 1946, 1958) is one of the most frequently referred to. Balance theory holds that individuals need cognitive consistency (balance), which is why they avoid new information in the environment that could generate an imbalance. Heider developed the P-O-X model (where P represents citizens, O political leaders, and X an issue), where three possible cognitive relationships exist: first, the citizen's attitude toward a political leader (P-O), second, the citizen's attitude toward an issue (P-X), and third, the citizen's perception of political leaders' attitudes on the issue (P-O-X).

The political leader's attitude towards a certain issue might not be their actual orientation on that issue, but only the citizens' perception or estimation of that leader's attitude on the issue. Knowing all three cognitive elements makes it easier to understand the conditions for cognitive balance. A situation of cognitive balance occurs when the voter's attitude toward a government policy agrees or is consistent with their preferred or liked candidate's attitude towards that policy. Or, vice versa, it happens when a voter's attitude towards a government policy disagrees or is inconsistent with their non-preferred or disliked candidate's attitude towards that policy. In contrast, imbalance occurs if the citizen disagrees with their preferred candidate and agrees with their disliked candidate on a particular issue. For example, a Democrat citizen in the US (P) supports education policies (X) and the Democrat candidate (O) does not support those policies, but the Republican candidate does. In this situation, there is an inconsistency between P's position towards X and O's attitude towards X. When stress arises due to cognitive inconsistency, citizens may resort to several strategies to regain their cognitive balance (Heider, 1946; Shaffer, 1981; Granberg, 1993; Krosnick, 2002).

The easiest way to reduce inconsistency is by changing one of the inconsistent cognitions. Three solutions are considered to be the most straightforward ways to restore the balance: first, the voter can change their sentiment towards the candidate ('policy-based evaluation'), which can be positive when an agreement exists, and negative when disagreement exists; second, the voter's attitude toward that policy can change through persuasion, to adjust it to match the preferred candidate's policy position; third, through the alteration of the candidate's position ('projection hypothesis'), the voter may overestimate that the liked candidate has a similar position (positive projection) or that the disliked candidate has a contradictory position (negative projection). Beyond sentiment (liking or disliking a candidate), balance theory argues that projection can be regulated by 'unit relations' with candidates (the level of association or link between the voter and a candidate). For example, a unit relation might be formed based on shared characteristics such as party affiliation

or racial and ethnic identity, or might be based on how much a voter believes that a candidate can win the election (Kinder, 1978; Krosnick *et al.*, 1988; Krosnick, 1990, 2002). In concrete terms, “voters who see a candidate as likely to be elected will have a unit relation and will be disposed toward positive projection of that candidate’s policy attitudes. Voters who see a candidate as unlikely to be elected will not have a unit relation and may be likely to displace that candidate’s attitude away from their own” (Krosnick, 2002, p. 118).

Festinger’s “dissonance theory” refers to the inner conflict that appears as a consequence of the inconsistency between the attitude and behavior of individuals. According to dissonance theory, projection is regulated by choices (here, people’s voting choices). For example, after a voting decision has been made, a voter may perceive their chosen candidate more favorably and as closer to their issue position than the rejected candidates, even though this might not actually be true. Thus, to reduce post-decisional dissonance, individuals may resort to several projection mechanisms, such as ‘selective attention’, ‘selective retention’, or ‘selective rationalization’. This means that after deciding to choose a particular candidate, first, a voter may pay close attention to information that reinforces their decision; second, they might intentionally forget information that challenges their decision; and third, they may reevaluate and reinterpret their decision in order to justify their choice (Kinder, 1978; Krosnick, 2002; Cottam *et al.*, 2016).

Another important aspect of this topic is the “asymmetry hypothesis” in the perception of political candidates. Asymmetry assumes that the positive projection on liked candidates is stronger than the negative projection on disliked candidates. In other words, “although people clearly prefer to agree rather than disagree with others they like, they are not as concerned about disagreeing with others they dislike” (Krosnick, 2002, p. 119). In support of these strategies of restoring consistency, Sherrod examined the extent to which voters have a selective perception (rationalization) of political candidates when trying to reach cognitive consistency between their own and their preferred candidate’s issue position; the findings show that voters do appeal to selective perception or misperception when their preferred candidate issue position is in disagreement with their own. As the author argues, voters may “come to believe that their candidate’s position is the same as their own, selectively misperceiving or rejecting information which would indicate otherwise and thereby maintaining cognitive consistency” (Sherrod, 1972, p. 555).

Drawing upon consistency theories (balance theory and dissonance theory), Kinder tested the impact of sentiment relations, choices, and unit relations on voters’ perceptions about the issue positions taken by Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon in the 1968 US presidential elections. Several conclusions arise from this study. First, in accordance with balance theory, positive sentiment was the most powerful driver of voters’ perceptions. The higher the degree of affection for a candidate, the higher the impact on perception. Here, assimilation was