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The Use Of Stereotypes And Heuristics By Voters In Evaluating Political Candidates

- Thesis Summary -

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THE USE OF STEREOTYPES AND HEURISTICS BY VOTERS IN EVALUATING POLITICAL CANDIDATES

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). The first impressions that we have of people are strongly influenced by the behaviors we associate with them, leading

to the formation of automatic inferences regarding character traits (Todorov and Uleman, 2002, 2003). People make spontaneous trait inferences by the simple act of observing a single behavior of another person. These traits and personality inferences work even after minimal time exposure to the faces (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2009; Willis & Todorov, 2006 in Todorov, Porter, 2014, 1).

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). The rapidity of forming first impressions is explored by Willis and Todorov (2006) that concluded that judgments over first impressions are made after a 100-ms exposure, a sufficient time to form an impression. 100-ms are enough to form an impression and to express a trait judgment; if exposure to the face increases, judgments become more negative, while the confidence of judgment increases, show Willis and Todorov (2006, 592).

From the psychology field, Hassin and Trope (2000) and Zebrowitz (1997) have shown that people use appearance as a low-information heuristic in cases of uncertainty, of lack of information. From the field of political science, Lenz and Lawson (2011) and Riggio (2010) show that voters that watch TV a lot and do not have a high political culture, this typology of voters relay on appearance. At the same time, a valid assumption is to believe that voters with a high political culture, will not use so much appearance heuristics.

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 it's 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, 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 (Ilut, 2009, 140. Here, 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 study 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 (Iluţ, 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"(McGinnis, 1976 in Bull, Hawkes, 1982, 95).

One of the authors who has studied extensively the image role 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. Him 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 fortunate 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 his findings, that try to describe how Romanian voters take 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. One author mentions that in previous studies on the role of appearance and electoral results there have been tested only a posteriori past elections with electors that participated or not at that elections, resulting in a more observational studies than confirmatory ones (Ahler, Citrin, Dougal & Lenz, 2017, 78). To counter-carate, 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 they were carried out during 2016-2018. For the studies that will be presented below, the main intention was to explore the implications of personality trait inferences, derived from facial appearance, on how voters evaluate and take 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 the 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.

Chapters' structure:

Chapter I debuts with clarifications over the social-psychology domain of reference and on the social-cognitive studies that are centered on the individual and try to explain how attitudes, stereotypes, attributions, and personality factors are formed. The attempt to explain how voters take 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, what is their role and importance in the process of decision-making and how they are employed by voters. Known as mental shortcuts, and used on a daily basis, heuristics and stereotypes 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 gender stereotypes and their role in politics, since this interests in encompassed in the title of the thesis. An extensive list of gender stereotypes are 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 they are 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 different experiments in social cognition were constructed, 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 the 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 implications.

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.

Methodological aspects:

The main question that guided all the studies is: *How are unknown political candidates evaluated based on personality inferences deducted from the candidate's appearance?* Inspired by Todorov (et al., 2005) findings and study, I have developed three experimental studies. Thus, I have developed two 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 evaluations of the Romanian candidates that ran for the Mayor office, at local elections from 2016. Two of the studies represent a retrospective analysis, as they examine past elections, while one study is prospective, in trying to anticipate what the Romanian electors will vote. Overall, the three studies sum up a total of 536 participants, based on a convenience sample, and they were carried out during 2016-2018.

For the studies that are presented below, the main intention was to explore the implications of personality trait inferences, derived from facial appearance, on how voters evaluate and make decisions. The approach of the methodology has turned to the multimodal strategy of method harmonization and data collection (Iluţ, 2009, 95). Thus, the empirical part of the thesis combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in what I hope to be a harmonious reunion of the methodologies.

Starting from this argument, all of the three studies that are presented are developed under the methodology of quasi-experiments that are interested in describing and predicting associations between the variables. It can be said that in the first place, I have conducted a correlational study, interested on the connection between the analyzed factors. After the experimental analysis, the qualitative part of the study is developed through in-depth interviews with specialists. 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, I can also say that the role of the interviews was an exploratory one.

In a meta-analysis conducted by Aussems and her colleagues it is revealed that almost 42% of the quasi-experimental studies used sample sizes less than 100 and even lower samples (Aussems, Boomsma & Snijders, 2009), a conclusion in line with the present approach of this thesis, where I will present two studies done on small samples and one study on a larger sample.

The downside of quasi-experimental designs it that they have a moderate level of scientific validity (Thompson & Panacek, 2006, 243). Some of the disadvantages of the quasi-experimental designs are represented by a low control over the experimental conditions, problems with the sampling procedure, low internal validity and possible errors from covariates and confounds (Grabble in Strang, 2015). As a correlational study, as Iluţ notes, one of the disadvantages of these studies is the reduced control of distortions, that there is no indication of the causal meaning in a correlation (Iluţ, 2009, 92). We can fall into the trap of the correlational illusion if we do not interpret carefully the results found (Iluţ, 2009, 220). It is difficult in a correlational study to express with certainty which variable precedes the other. High attention, the capacity to prove high control of the variables, the caeteris paribus principle, and the high attention to the hidden variables are essential in this case.

The ability to draw firm conclusions from the study results is directly proportional to the level of the scientific validity of the design. Because quasi-experiments rarely are randomized but have control and manipulation of the experimental test, their results are more prone to bias

(Thompson & Panacek, 2006, 245). Nevertheless, quasi-experiments are much more encountered in social research, and even though the degree of scientific validity is not as high as in true experimental designs, it remains a strong research design.

Moreover, based on quantitative discoveries, the data are also verified by conducting extensive interviews with political scientists, sociologists, politicians, and psychologists, who come with their know-how to dismantle or strengthen the conclusions of Todorov's studies. A total of 15 in-depth expert interviews were conducted between August-November 2017. Both the design of the experiment and the interview guide underlying the applied methods are presented in the below paragraphs, but also in Annexes. I have to add that the results of the studies were presented at conferences and published, as noted in the references (Culic, 2017, Culic, 2019; Culic & Pavelea, 2019).

Experiment 1:
The purpose of this experiment is to explore how Romanian voters use inferences about the personality of the candidates and, starting from them, and they evaluate them positively or negatively. We could say that this study aims to pre-test the link between attractiveness, competence, and confidence ratings and the strength and validity of this relation. The study was conducted in 2018 on a sample of 50 students from Cluj-Napoca. In order to answer the research questions, I have developed a quasi-experiment based on an online survey on Google Forms, filled by a convenience sample of 50 respondents. Inspired by the experiment used by Todorov et al. (2005), I have selected pictures with candidates from the 2014 MeP elections taking into account the size of the country they reside from. The argument for this was to analyze pictures of political candidates who are unknown to the Romanian respondents, so candidates from the European Union countries were selected, those who run for an Euro-Parliamentary seat in the 2014 EU elections. The sample consisted of 20 pictures of lesser-known candidates from all EU member states (7 women, 13 men). The pictures with headshots of the candidates were standardized in size (160 X 210 pixels), and placed on white/grey backgrounds (after Todorov et al., 2005). The final headshots were placed in a random order in comparison in pairs of two, and also in a random order in the left or right position on the page. Here is an example of pairs of pictures included in the experiment:

Graphic 1: example of standardized candidates headshots used in the research

The pair of pictures were tested on the attractiveness and competence score, intention to vote, but most importantly on a pair of personality traits attributes that featured in the previous literature: *unfriendly-friendly, unattractive-attractive, selfish-generous, superficial-authentic, incompetent-competent, weak leadership-strong leadership, immoral-moral, mistrustful-trustful*.

Experiment 2:

The next quasi-experimental approach proposes an online experiment and an exploration of the relationship between candidates' ratings on attractiveness, competence and confidence and the intention to vote for that candidate. In addition, I have included assessments of the socio-professional and personal features scales that can be deduced from the pictures. Similar to most of the cited studies (Todorov, Mandisodza; Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Olivola & Todorov, 2010), that used an experimental design applied on students from various universities, I have applied an online survey on students from Cluj-Napoca universities during 2016-2017, in order to find out what are voter's impressions about the appearance of unknown political candidates.

The present study explores the appearance inferences based on data derived from the 2014 European Parliament elections, starting from the main argument of using pictures with unknown political candidates. In order to select the pictures with the candidates to be included in the experiment, I have used the simple sampling convenience procedure from the 28 European Union countries. I excluded Romania from the list of the 28 states, so that respondents do not evaluate known candidates, so from the finale 27 countries I have randomly selected eight countries for analysis.

I have used quota sampling on a population of 377 students, with a confidence level of 95, where the average age is 21 years, 82% of the respondents have an urban residency, and 18% come from rural areas, 75% were women and the rest of 25% respondents were men. The majority of respondents are students that are specialized in social sciences (63%), followed by specializations in languages and literature (14%), technical specialization (13%) and in law (5%). There is an even distribution between first, second and third year students.

Selection of photographs

For each analyzed country, I have extracted the lists of final candidates that run for the position of MEP from the information available on the European Parliament website (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/home). Once I have established the list of candidates for the race, I searched for their picture initially on the European Parliament website, where most of the candidates are represented with a picture. Pictures were standardized, transformed into black-and-white. It resulted a total of 104 monochrome pictures, cropped to a square size, centered on the subject, displayed at 457 x 457 pixels.

The experimental procedure

The software designed for the experiment was a simple web application implemented in JavaScript. All the candidates from each county were selected to form pairs of photos through Math.random pseudo-random number generator to retrieve random pairs of candidates for each

county and question. Where the number of candidates was uneven, I have randomly removed a candidate for each county, in order to generate the pairs.

The experiment was administered online, based on an announcement posted online, on the student groups, which included the link to the experiment. The participants solved the experiment individually and were not paid or favored for their participation.

In addition to questions about the candidate's personality attributes, participants were asked to what extent they recognize the candidates' pictures. Also, at the end of the experiment, there were address some questions about their political preferences and their previous political participation. On average, the experiment lasted for about 15 minutes.

Experiment 3:

In the third experiment, I wanted to deduce the actual electoral results starting from the assessments of the attractiveness, trust and competence traits of the real political candidates enrolled in the 2016 local elections in Romania. The nature of the experiment was to predict whether these evaluations are useful and correlated with real election results. Thus, the purpose of this experiment is an exploratory one, especially since previous literature is centered on the study of past and not future elections. The experiment starts from the analysis of candidates' pictures from 15 municipalities and is applied to a sample of 109 students only from Cluj-Napoca.

The implications of this experiment are then related to the other research method, namely the interview with experts, regarding the future use of software that could help us in detecting winning political candidates. The present experiment was built and applied before the beginning of the electoral period, namely in April 2016, and focuses only on political actors who have been candidates for the post of Mayor and not for the Local Council.

Sampling

In order to select the pictures with the candidates to be included in the experiment, I used the stratified random sampling procedure. The administrative territories of Romania were divided into the 41 counties alongside the capital, representing our sampling basin. Thus, we applied the stratification element represented by Romania's macro-regions of development. In the end, there are 4 macro-regions, of which I selected by simple random sampling, 3 counties and county residences that we included in the sampling. Altogether, the 15 examined counties are Maramureş, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Braşov, Iaşi, Bacău, Brăila, Teleorman, Argeş, Prahova, Timiş, Dolj, Arad and the capital, Bucharest, from which, sector 1, 2 and 6. The argument behind this sampling is not to force the subjects of the experiment to go through an extensive list of candidates, given the scale of local elections.

Selection of photographs

I have selected the original list of the names of the political candidates enrolled at the 2016 local elections from the website of the Central Electoral Bureau (http://www.2016bec.ro/candidati/index.html). Once I have established the list of candidates for the race, I searched for their picture initially on the website of the Chamber of Deputies or Senators, in case they have had previous political activity, on the personal website of the

candidates and ultimately on Google as a general search, in case I could not get official campaign photos. In the 15 analyzed municipalities, a total of 154 candidates enrolled in the electoral race. Out of these 154 candidates, 19 candidates were not included in the analysis, since I was unable to identify any public picture of them, thus leaving a total of 135 photos of the candidates analyzed. Originally the photos were in color, and after that, they were turned into black-and-white and standardized in size.

It is also worth mentioning the effort to identify pictures with the candidates enrolled in the race. In most of the time, they do not have professional campaign pictures. Another issue is the poor quality of the photos, which lack the quality of professional campaign pictures. If the quality of the photos identified on the candidates' website was poor, I did a search on Google for a better quality picture, replacing the old photo. Even so, there are visible differences between the quality of the pictures, which is also an observable limit of the research methodology.

The experimental procedure

I have used the same experimental design, similar to experiment 2, a design in JavaScript. All the candidates from each county were selected to form pairs of photos through Math.random pseudo-random number generator to retrieve random pairs of candidates for each county and question. Where the number of candidates was uneven, I have randomly removed a candidate for each county, in order to generate the pairs. More, to test the hypothesis about the rapidity to form personality inferences about the appearance of the candidates, I have included a timer in JavaScript that measures the speed of choice in milliseconds from one click to another.

The experiment was administered online, based on an announcement posted online, on the student groups, which included the link to the experiment. The participants solved the experiment individually and were not paid or favored for their participation.
The final sample of 109 students is formed only by respondents who did not recognize the candidates. Each pair of candidates was presented on the screen until the participants selected the face that they perceived as more attractive, competent or trustful. The next trial was presented immediately after the participant's response.

Expert Interviews

After examining Alexander Todorov's assumptions and results, I wanted to see what Romanian experts think about these findings. For this, I have conducted in-depth interviews with 15 experts from the field of political sciences, sociology, psychology and with political counselors and politicians on topics like: the image of politicians, what attractiveness represents, about the Romanian voting behavior and predispositions and on the methodological perspective of a software that identifies the possible winning politicians. The interviews were conducted in between August and November 2017.
I defined the position of an expert as Harrison defines it (2001 in Audenhove, 2017), a person who has knowledge they gained from their position, whether that comes from experience or position. In the latter case, the focus falls on the experts' special knowledge and experiences

from their actions, responsibilities, or obligations within an organization/institution, or seen as a representative of an organization/institution.

Discussions And Conclusions

Contrary to the perspective that voters are rational and make informed decisions, in the past years, a growing literature emerged that emphasizes that voters use simplified cues for deciding for which candidate to vote, what party do they like or not. Voters turn to mental shortcuts, to cognitive simplifiers, to heuristics and stereotypes much more than analyzing the information rationally. One of the ways to simplify the processing of political information is to appeal to the peripheral route of decision-making and to guide our behaviors on cues that facilitate our voting decision. 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 his suitability for the office. These variables that generate rapid inferences towards the candidates should be taken into consideration if we want to analyze voters' behavior and decision-making.

Following these arguments, the present thesis has tried to provide an answer, starting from a mixed methodological design, of quantitative and qualitative studies, by developing three quasi-experiments and 15 interviews with experts. In the next part, I will present the conclusions of the three studies. All of the three studies started from a constant: How are unknown political candidates evaluated based on personality inferences deducted from the candidate's appearance? The research questions and hypotheses were mostly similar with small differences.

All of the three studies count a sample of 536 participants, from which the first study was applied on a sample of 50 students, the second study on a sample of 377 students and the last study on a sample of 109 students. All of the participants evaluated unknown political candidates from different elections.

The first research question was outlined from Todorov's studies that analyze the valency of personality inferences from the appearance of the candidates. Thus, I wanted to capture how are political candidates evaluated based on inferences about the Attractiveness, Competence, Trustworthiness, and Intention to vote deduced from their pictures?

Thus, for the first research question, the three studies showed that the three personality traits derived from the evaluation of the candidates' pictures have an essential role in forming the final evaluation of the voting decision. For all of the three studies, there is a positive correlation between the Attractiveness scores and the intention to vote for that candidate. An increase in the attractiveness of politicians correlates with a medium to the high increase in the voting intention for those candidates (r=.368, r=.534, r=.692). It seems that the best determinant of the voting intention for a candidate is his or her perceived attractiveness. The correlative findings are backed up by the regression results. For both study 2 and study 3 there were identified regressions worth analyzing. For study 2, centered on European Parliament elections from 2014, when tested all of the personality factors, the sole regression model that sustains the analysis is the model that tests the regression between the Attractiveness score, seen as the independent variable and the Voting intention, as the dependent variable. The attractiveness scores explain 28% of the voting intention variance. In other manner, 28% of the voting intention is explained by the voters' perception on the political candidates' attractiveness. The same regression is found

with good results, for study 3, focused on local elections from Romania. There is found positive and medium regression. In this case, the attractiveness score explains 45.7% of the variance of the voting intention. Thus, without a doubt, it can be said that the perceived attractiveness of the political candidates influences almost 50% of the cases the intention to vote for that candidate. Beautiful candidates have a 50% greater advantage over the majority of being voted and to be perceived as more competent, only because of their attractive appearance. If until now, it was not clear that the image plays a vital role in the election, all of these studies confirm that facial appearance, as part of the image, is essential in forming voters' first impressions of the candidates and in attracting their sympathy represented through the final vote.

An explanation for the strength of regression can also be found in the type of electoral and voting race for which the participants voted. Experiment 2 is built with pictures of the candidates that ran for the European Parliament elections, where the voting system is on party lists, with a pre-established list of candidates. Experiment 3, where the regression value is stronger, is based on the local elections from Romania, where the voting system is uninominal, in a single round. Thus, the degree of use of inference based on the appearance of candidates has a stronger valency in elections that are seen more closer to voters, where their appointment of the candidates is direct rather than on a list.

The next hypothesis tested whether there is a correlation between attractiveness and competence assessments. The hypothesis is best validated in the third study, where the most robust relation was identified between the attractiveness and competence assessments ($r=.865$, $N=109$, $p < .001$). The second study also presented a positive relation, but mild one ($r = .243$, $n = 377$, $p < .001$), while in the first study there weren't any results to sustain the hypothesis. Both foreign and Romanian politicians who are rated as attractive are also seen as competent. What is more, in the third study that analyzed the ongoing local elections from Romania, the regression analysis captures an excellent regression between the Attractiveness score, seen as the independent variable and the Competence score, with an R square$=.74$. The attractiveness score influences 74% of the Competence assessments for real politicians. The relationship is all the more significant as the attractiveness assessments of the candidates lead to their support and ultimately for voting for them, so Competence represents the characteristic that interposes within this relationship.

Beside these relations, there were other relevant correlations identified that help us to see how voters evaluate political candidates. Both experiment two and three highlight the medium-strong correlation between the Attractiveness and Trustworthiness ($r =.450$, $n = 377$, $p < 0.001$; $r=.680$, $N=109$, $p < .001$), while experiment one identifies a strong positive relation between unattractive-attractive scores and unfriendly-friendly evaluations ($r = 0.750$, $n = 50$, $p < 0.001$). As general studies in social psychology state, the halo effect is present, by which attractive people are assessed as having other positive personality characteristics. The present results reinforce this relationship. Experiment three also shows other strong links, between the Competence score and the Voting intention scores, and the Trustworthiness scores ($r=758$, and $p < .001$, $r=.749$, $N=109$, $p < .001$). Thus, a higher score on competence ratings also entails an increase in the voting intention for the candidate. Also, the more the person is rated as trustworthy, the higher the confidence in that person is.

Furthermore, one of the hypotheses of the first experiment tested if there is a positive link between assessments on the candidate's 'competence and their age and gender. For the correlation between the candidates' gender and the competence inferences, there were not any

significant results. Nonetheless, there was also tested the correlation between personality factors and the perceived age of the candidates and found two moderate negative correlations: between the candidates' age and incompetent-competent evaluations with a Pearson of $r = -0.370$, $p = 0.008$ and between the perceived age of the candidates and mistrustful-trustful evaluations with an $r = -0.442$, $p = 0.001$. We can interpret this link by emphasizing that the more a political candidate is getting older, the more he/she is seen as less competent and more distrustful to the young electorate, taking into account that our subjects were young students

What is more, in the third experiment, it was explored the relationship between the time of decision processing and the inferences on personality traits. For all the inferences based on facial appearance, it takes an average of 2.382 seconds for a respondent to form an opinion, with a minim of 0.3 seconds to make inferences and a maximum of 29.85 seconds.

To conclude, for a population of young voters, starting from facial appearances inferences, attractiveness represents the best predictor of voting intentions for a political candidate, according to the present studies. At the same time, the candidates' competence assessments are closely linked to the attractiveness assessments, so the two influence each other. We can say that politics is a game of appearances, in which attractive candidates are better evaluated and are perceived to have additional qualities that increase their winning chances in the campaign than less attractive candidates.

The next direction of the experiments looked at the type of personality assessments that voters make based on the candidate's image. In the literature, it can be noticed that other authors have tested other personality inferences derived from the candidates' appearance, besides those initially tested. Thus, in the first study, I have tested a set of 8 personality characteristics with dichotomous valances, while in the second study, I have tested 28 socio-demographic and personality traits. It should be noted that to these questions, respondents only validated which traits are the most important in their opinion and the analysis did not take into account the correlation between this list of personality traits and the intention to vote for the candidates. So, in the first experiment, respondents consider that from a picture, one can make inference if a political candidate is competent (in a proportion of 59%) if the candidate is friendly (48%) and if it owns a strong leadership style (47%).

In the second study, respondents were asked to rate what personality traits can be presumed from the candidates' pictures. In this case, respondents considered that one could inference first-impressions about the trustworthiness of the politician (in a proportion of 59%), his/hers sociability degree (36%), his/her temper (33%), character and empathy level (26%). Here, respondents answered that a picture could not convey if a politician is competent, but transmits how the candidates' extraversion trait, how outgoing and sociable a person is (42%) and how agreeable, kind, warm and considerate that person is (37%). These conclusions are in line with those that affirm that the agreeableness trait is the most easily identified (McCrae & Costa, 1987 in Ambady & Skowronski, 2008, 108).

Unlike the first two studies, the third study tested if personality traits inferences are a good predictor of the real vote, cast for the Local Elections positions from 2016 in Romania. Unfortunately, no statistically significant correlation was observed between the Competence, Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, and Voting intention scores and the actual vote. More, I have tested whether there are correlations between the Competence, Attractiveness, Trustworthiness and Voting intention scores and the respondents' gender, age, party affiliation, residence

background, but no significant results were recorded. What is interesting is, when the analysis was centered on male and female voters, so on subpopulations, for female voters there was found a strong positive correlation (r=.667, p=.025) between the intention to vote for candidates presented in the test and the real vote from the 2016 local elections. In this case, increased or low assessments of the politician's perceived trustworthiness determine the decrease or increase of voting intentions for that politician for female voters.

Another direction of the study tested the gender differences both for political candidates and for voters. One research question wanted to probe if male and female political candidates are rated differently on the personality traits assessments on attractiveness, Competence, trust, and voting ratings. For studies one and two, there were inconclusive results. In the case of experiment two, even in the analysis of the general personality factors derived from appearance inferences, they did not correlate with the age and gender of the candidates. The third experiment captured the most notable gender differences between the political candidates. One of the working hypotheses was whether female or male candidates were seen as more competent. From the list of inferences about personality traits, both for men and women candidates, the strongest correlation identified is that between Attractiveness and Competence, similar to the correlation values identified in the overall analysis, with Pearson values of r=.866 and, p < .001 for men and r=.847, p=.001. It signifies that almost in a similar manner, for both male and female political candidates, the most attractive candidates are also seen as the most competent. However, the difference occurs when the competence assessment is translated into the voting intention. For male candidates, the competence assessments are highly positively correlated with the Voting Intention, with r=.779, and p < .001, while for female candidates there is no significant correlation has been identified between the Intention to Vote and Attractiveness or Competence evaluations. In the present case, the results point out that, even though attractive women are seen as competent, these evaluations do not represent sufficient criteria or arguments for voters to support and vote for a woman candidate. In the case of male candidates, even the assumption on the trustworthy trait (r=.857, and p < .001) correlates in a higher degree with the voting intention, besides attractiveness and Competence. Therefore, it can be said that if a male candidate is evaluated as attractive, or as competent, or as trustworthy, he has higher chances to be voted than female candidates. It seems women are at a disadvantage here.

Another hypothesis further tested the gender differences among candidates, respectively if female candidates are seen as more attractive and trustworthy than male candidates. As I have shown above, for both men and women, the best trait relationship is between attractiveness and Competence. Nonetheless, the most significant correlation found for female political candidates is between Attractiveness and Trustworthiness, with an r=.875 p=.003, followed by the link between Attractiveness and Competence (r=.847, p=.001). It can be inferred that the more attractive a female politician is, the more trustworthy she is perceived by voters, a conclusion that is supported by the previous findings of other authors. Similarly, the more attractive a female politician is, the more she is perceived to be competent. However, these assumptions stop here, as I have shown that regardless of the inferences, women candidates are not so favored to be voted.

The last line of the three studies discussed voting differences between men and women electors. Significant differences were noted in all three experiments.

The first tested hypothesis states that for male voters, there is a positive link between the attractiveness evaluations and the intention to vote for the candidates. In all of the three studies, the attractiveness assessments made by male voters correlated positively with the intention to vote for the candidates. Moreover, in all studies, the correlations were well-articulated and robust. In the first study, attractivity scores correlated strongly, with a Pearson of r = .799, p= .010, while for women, the same correlation was insignificant. In the second study, there is a Pearson coefficient of r=.893, n=91, p<.001, and in the third study, we can observe a correlation score of r=.932, N=24, p < .001. For male voters, if the candidates' attractiveness increases, the intention to vote for that candidate's increases at a higher degree. These correlations are strong when calculated for all the candidates, whether women or men. These results are general in assumptions; for male voters, I could not find a close preference for the attractiveness scores of the candidate, the gender, and the intention to vote.

What is more, other subtleties and implications were discovered. In the second experiment, one strong negative relation that is well-articulated is between past political participation of male voters and the attractiveness scores and voting intention. The correlation presents with a Pearson coefficient of r=-.699, n=91, p<.001, and between past political participation and voting intention (r=-.615, n=91, p<.001). The results highlight that if male voters participated less in previous elections, the more likely they are to assess political candidates as more attractive, in the present situation. Furthermore, when tested the scores on attractiveness and the intention to vote for certain parties from Romania, I have identified some negative medium correlations. First of all, male candidates are less willing to evaluate candidates from the following parties as attractive and thus less willing to vote for PSD, PNL, ALDE, USR, and PMP parties. This connection deserves to be explored in connection with media exposure, in an attempt to find out why men do not associate attractive people with current political parties in Romania.

The next tested hypothesis verifies if, for female voters, there is a positive link between the competence evaluations and the intention to vote for the candidates. In all of the three studies, for female voters, competency scores were not a predictor of voting intention for political candidates, but it has implications worthy of discussing. In the first study, female voters associate the competence evaluations with a strong leadership style (r = 0.879, p < 0.001), in a high positive relation identified. Moreover, the competence inferences are correlated with the candidates' age, but in a negative direction (r=-.360, p=.021); we can infer that women voters see older candidates as more incompetent, to a certain extent. In the second study, the competence scores are correlated moderately with the attractiveness assessments (r=.276, n=286, p<.001). If a candidate is evaluated as attractive, the same candidate will enjoy high assessments of the perceived trust and Competence that he or she may or may not have. The same competence assessment is negatively associated with the future intention to vote for the Social-Democratic Party. A negative, small correlation was found, with a coefficient of r=-.116, n=286, p-.049. It seems that if a political candidate is perceived to be a member of the Social-Democratic Party, this candidate will be negatively evaluated on the competence trait by female voters. In the third study, for female voters, the strongest identified correlation is between the Attractiveness score and the perceived Competence of political candidates (r=.824, N=85, p < .001). However, the perceived Competence of the candidates does not influence the decision to vote in the case of female voters. Only male electors associate better the competence feature with voting intention,

in an intense, high positive relation (r=.921, N=24, p < .001). If a candidate is perceived as competent by male voters, it has the highest chances to be chosen.

The next part of the thesis tried to capture experts opinions on the same fundamental question: what does the role of image and first-impressions play in electing political candidates?

For this, I applied 15 in-depth interviews with experts from the field of psychology, political science, sociology, political counselors and politicians. Ask what the image role in the campaign is, political counselors, highlighted the concept of image as an equivalent for the politicians' personal brand. It represents a crafted image that accentuated the appearance features but also the professional characteristics that one politician has, and is intensely promoted on all communication channels. The academics see the concept of image as a construct, an umbrella-term that encompasses from physical appearance to mimics, gestures, clothing, oratory skills. Some of the interviewed experts talk about the personal authenticity and personal attributes that are transmitted through the image. More, behind the candidate's image, we can find a campaign team that personalizes the image according to the type of elections, where presidential or local elections are seen as the most personalized, while in parliamentary elections and euro-parliamentary the effort to construct an image is not so high.

Some of the advantages of a beautiful image are listed: first and foremost, it attracts public attention and compliance from the electorate. More beautiful candidates have more social and material benefits and represent an image advantage in campaigns since social media multiplies the image. Due to the halo effect, a candidate with a beautiful image will also attract positive personal evaluations. On the negative spectrum, some experts point out that for the Romanian electorate, a beautiful image attracts distrust and suspicion about the candidate, opposite reactions. Moreover, the issue of less attractive candidates that won the elections nevertheless arises. These examples are inconsistent with the studied theory.

The experts were the most vocal when they criticized Todorov's methodology of predicting the election based on the candidates' image inferences. Some of the advantages or favorable implication of such a methodology are represented by the premise that people and thus voters, are visually oriented and tend to select the candidate who has the cleanest image, argument that is well exploited by the political marketing. Some experts agree that it is a possible and plausible methodology and that it could generate high predictability conclusions if studies were to be conducted in perfectly balanced conditions. The methodology should be confirmed on a larger sample and by also evaluating single photos of the candidates, not only pairs of candidates. If there is a comparison of two by two candidates, probably some candidates are better evaluated and others rejected.

At the opposite side, the disadvantages of this methodology and implicit, those assumed of the present thesis, are the difficulty of measuring and aggregating a concept like "attractiveness" or "beauty," all the more so as the perception varies between voters and subpopulations. The perception of attractiveness is influenced by the voters' gender and also by the candidates' gender, as I have demonstrated in the three quasi-experiments, but also as the experts point out. There are significant gender differences in the way the appearance of the candidates is evaluated, but especially in the way their personality traits and skills are evaluated, differences written in the social climate, in the gender roles and stereotypes to which voters are exposed. Another issue is revealed by the changing nature of voters and of the political climate. If such a methodology should be valid and have high predictive value, it should have the

capacity to cope with unpredictable events occurring in electoral races. External factors such as the political or economic situation, unexpected events during the political campaign, but also the changing nature of the electorate, all are variables difficult to control by such a methodology.

Intending to conclude, based on the result highlighted in the three quasi-experimental studies, in the absence of previous information, I have shown that voters base their preferences on inferences derived from facial appearance. More, evaluations on attractiveness and competence, but also between attractiveness and the voting intention are highly correlated and show results that are sustained. It is also probable that in real life, additional information about the candidates may weaken the relation between inferences facial appearance and the voting decision, but we must be aware that this relation exists. The analysis of the impact of the appearance may lead to interesting conclusions regarding the selection of candidates and party communicators, while the disadvantage lies in the inherent subjectivism of evaluating aesthetic issues. Even if it seems an argument hard to swallow, both political advisers and politicians, but also researchers should accept that people are less rational than we like to believe and that in most of the cases, the electoral decisions are not founded on reasonable elements, but rather on non-rational influences, gained from cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, peer-groups, and mass communication strategies.

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