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Department of Sociology and Social Work

**SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL CORELATES OF THE
ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR**

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL SCENE PERCEPTION ON THE STABILITY
OF PARTY ATTITUDES**

– ABSTRACT OF THE PHD THESIS –

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1. The objective of the research

The aim of the research was to test a mechanism by which the perception of the social context in which we live influences biased attitudes change and how these changes are reflected on the expression of intention to vote, the results were compared with data on bias identification.

To achieve this major objective several specific objectives were established:

1. Examining the relationship between the political expertise, the perceived homogeneity of the social context and the change of bias attitudes:
 - identification of the existent differences in the perception of their own political expertise variations in the perceived homogeneity of the social context;
 - highlighting the existent differences between the level of the political expertise, measured objectively, according to the variations of perceived homogeneity of the social context;
 - establish the relationship between subjective and objective political expertise and attitude ambivalence expressed by differentiation between the parties (ie the difference between the two attitudes expressed vis-a-vis the two political parties);
 - determine the relationship between the objective and subjective political expertise and stability of attitudes towards political parties.

2. Analysis of the relationship between perceived attitudinal homogeneity of the social context, emotions it produces and changing of the bias attitudes:
 - establish the eventual differences in emotional valence depending on changes in the level of agreement perceived from the social context;
 - investigate the relationship between emotional valence and level of differentiation between parties;
 - analyze the role that emotional valence has on the level of political awareness objectively and subjectively;
 - investigate how emotional valence influences the changing of bias attitudes.

3. Studying the influence charged the agreement of the social context exerts on bias attitudes change through attitudinal ambivalence expressed by bias differentiation:
 - identify differences in the bias differentiation according variations in perceived

- homogeneity of the social context;
 - highlighting the existent relationship between bias differentiation and changing bias attitudes;
 - analyze the relationship between changing attitudes and bias voting options.
4. Making a comparison between the impact exercised by the variations of the level of agreement of perceived social context on the two types of attachment bias (bias and attitudes of party identification):
- identification of existing variables in the stability of party identification depending on the modifications of the level of perceived homogeneity of the social context;
 - a review relationship between bias identification and voting options;
 - comparing influences on bias identification and biased attitudes to exercise the option to vote on the expression.

2. Motivation research

Summarizing data in the literature, it may be that we are in the following situation:

- Biased attitudes are cyclical (parties in power lose voters in favor of the opposition) (Kenneth and Laver, 2006), fact which entails the changing of the options to vote, this behavior being the most direct, well-defined and operationalized accordingly to bias attitudes (Fark and Sagarin, 2009);
- Attitudinal composition perception of social context has significant impact on the stability of attitudes, but even people in a heterogeneous social context have a higher level of knowledge as those in a homogeneous context, individuals in the first category have a lower stability of attitudes in compared with those in the second category, the mechanism that generates this phenomenon remains very least explored (Levitan and Visser, 2009);

There are no conclusive data regarding comparison of the effect of party identification and attitudes on electoral behavior.

3. Short description of the three theoretical chapters (I-III)

Chapter I has been divided into two major components. One reviews the main definitions and theoretical models of electoral behavior, focalizing on sociological model, psychosocial and rational choice theory. The other component of the main research methods used to study electoral behavior, focusing on sociological investigation and experiment.

The second chapter addresses the subject of bias attachment on two perspectives: the identification and biased attitudes for both concepts being presented both theoretical models and instruments used to measure them.

If in terms of party identification measure the same instrument is used without large reserves in most researches, the variety of instruments used to measure attitudes required to perform a meta-bias own to identify the most efficient instrument (datas are also included in this chapter).

The third chapter of this theoretical research addresses the issue of social networks. Therefore, the chapter includes theoretical datas for the definition and characteristics of social networks, and critical analysis of the main methods of investigation of this concept used in political science: the name generator procedure.

4. Research Methodology

As reflected in the objectives stated above, the present research aims a proces of change of the bias attitudes, which according to literature is best pursued through a longitudinal study. Under these conditions, this research took place over a full year, during which we have resorted to 3 applications every 6 months, after which the resulting application at 3 studies whose conclusions will be presented in subsequent paragraphs. To achieve the research was used in a sample of 218 subjects. Data collection instrument was a questionnaire consisting of several scales, major scales that are part of these motor itself ind tool as described below, the questionnaire can be found in full in Appendix 2 the thesis:

- the scale for measuring bias attitudes - consists of semantic differentiators, unipolar scales that include some adjectives, and subjects are required to indicate on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 = not at all and 7 = very much, to what extent they believe that those adjectives are an adequate description for the concerned political party;
- the scale for measuring the perceived homogeneity of social networks that participants

belong to and these network's dimension; the instrument is based on the "name generator" procedure and assumes that subjects must list 5 people who discuss political issues, and then a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much, it must indicate the extent to which its opinion on political issues correspond to the network of each member of the list by completing the questionnaire (Richey, 2008);

- instrument for measuring objective political knowledge - consists of a set of multiple choice questions, asking subjects to choose one option for each question response;
- scale for measuring subjective assessment of their political expertise -consists of a 5-speed scale, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much, which subjects must indicate how they feel informed about political issues (Levitan, 2009);
- instrument for measure emotions related to discussing political issues within the social network - involves a list of words that represent such emotions. Ex. Anger, contentment, sadness, etc, which are directly presented to subjects. They must determine for each emotion separately on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very often, how often they experience this excitement during the discussion of various social political issues in their network;
- instrument for measuring bias identification-is represented by the battery described in chapter preserved to bias identification. The scale is composed of two questions, one of them asks subjects to say if they consider themselves a "liberal democrat, a liberal, social democrat or independent" (targeting only the 3 large scale in the political parties in Romania) and the other question for those who identified themselves with one of the political parties consist of the fact that subjects are required to say how confident they are about this identification, while those who declared themselves independent are asked which party they feel closest.

5. The main conclusions resulting from the first study

- differences in the perceived level of the attitudinal agreement in their social contexts generate differences in the level of knowledge on political themes and on the emotions that participants involved in the study experiment during the discussion of political issues;
- significant association exists between positive emotions and level of knowledge

on political issues;

- existence of association between awareness of subjects and the attitudinal ambivalence between political parties ;
- predictive role that bias identification and attitudes have on the expression of voting option.

6. The main conclusions resulting from the second study

- the level of positive emotions related with the political discussion of the experimented by the studied persons, their level of biased political information and changing attitudes are sensitive to changes in their level of agreement perceived social networks, lowering perceptual agreement reflected in lowering positive emotions, increasing political information and change biased attitudes;
- positive emotions are good predictor of political awareness, increase positive emotions in association with higher levels of knowledge;
- high level of political knowledge reduces biased attitudes change;
- once formed, the biased identification is stable, being a good predictor of voting option;
- variations of the attitudinal perceived composition and social context of perceived political awareness are not significantly related to changes in bias identification;
- biased attitudes are sensitive to perceived agreement within the social context, which is the basis of the result that showed that the attitudes of party retains the option to vote on the predictive power even after a period of six months.

7. The main conclusions resulting from the third study

- the profile of the people who perceive their own social networks as homogeneous attitude differs from that of those who perceive their social networks as heterogeneous, those in the first category tend to be less informed, to feel better informed and to change more least their biased attitudes compared to those in the latter category.
- positive emotions mediating effect in the relationship between the perceived agreement and political knowledge.

Political attitudes are sensitive to changes in perceived attitudinal composition of social networks, but this effect appears to be rather indirect, influence on changing attitudes exerted political knowledge and awareness perception of being more consistent.

In the context in which the agreement seen increased compared with the previous study of current research and changes attitudes and partisan voting Options stagnating, there is a decrease in the predictive power of bias attitudes on voting options.

In contrast to the bias attitudes, identification of the political parties does not change significantly even in the latter study, compared with the previous one, reinforcing the idea that this type of bias attachment is mainly the result of personal experiences, with little sensitivity to the social context in which we live and to the events taking place here. However, once formed, its predictive power on electoral behavior is considerable.

8. Final conclusions of the whole empirical research

Corroborating the results obtained after the completion of the three studies included in the present study some relevant conclusions can be drawn:

A first conclusion is that the perception that people have on the sample studied social context in which they live fluctuate. Thus, the perceived agreement on political subjects underwent both downward variations and increasingly, these variations being most likely caused by the number and extent of political events on the political scene, events are generating significant reduction of the agreement.

These data on the perceived agreement proved to be quite important even if it is seen how social context is distorted or not, this perception entail significant changes in the sphere of political knowledge level, the level of appreciation of their knowledge and changing attitudes vis-a-vis political parties. This led to the establishment of a real profile of people who perceive their social context as homogeneous in terms of opinions on political issues and those who see themselves as embedded in a heterogeneous social context. Therefore, people in the first category have a lower level of political knowledge and the rate of change of attitudes towards political parties, but show more confidence in information policy issues provided by their group members feel well informed compared with those in the second category.

Regarding the relationship between the agreement and the perceived political knowledge,

the explanation would be that in heterogeneous groups there is greater diversity of information conveyed, which allows members of these groups continually expand their own knowledge base, which coincides the formation of more stable attitudes (Levitan, 2009; Levitan and Visser, 2009). Nevertheless, our research has shown that positive emotions have mediating effect in the relationship between the perceived agreement and knowledge, positive affects being those that facilitate cognitive functions necessary for information acquisition and its storage (Hill et al., 2005).

In just as objectively measured level of knowledge and expertise subjective variations offered the same explanation. This time, however, it is considered that even the limited range of information conveyed in homogeneous groups makes these individuals feel less confused and therefore better informed than those in heterogeneous groups (Levitan, 2009).

If the variations in the level of knowledge and subjective expertise together with the level of agreement perceived from the social context there are already theoretical and empirical explanations, paradoxical attitudes remain data changes. Thus, as in other studies in the field, as in the present research, people who consider themselves integrated into attitudinal heterogeneous groups, despite the higher level of knowledge they have (which should ensure the stability of attitudes), tend to easily change their biased attitudes compared to those in homogeneous groups.

The explanation for this paradox given as by other studies in the field as by current research results refers to the fact that subjective expertise has the main role. So, people who feel better informed are more shure of the information they have, fact that may make them more susceptible to reject contradictory informations, thus developing more stable attitudes (Visser and Mirabeau 2004; Levitan, 2009).

However, biased attitudes changing could be an explanation that is not at all negligible. This explanation refers to conformity and group cohesion. Thus, it is assumed that homogeneous groups conformity and cohesion are higher than in heterogeneous groups (Dunlop, 2011), fact that leads people from the first category to accept easier the views of those in their own group and to reject the point of view from their outside, especially if they are contradictory to those expressed in the group to be rejected (Martin et al., 2002). This would have the effect of lowering opinion's diversities in the group and thus decrease diversities of comparison, which would allow the structure stable attitudes.

This hypothesis was not tested in the present research, for which further three studies we can only conclude that changing biased attitudes lines is more consistent in those who

perceive low levels of agreement in their social networks, compared with those who perceive high levels of this variable, fact that suggests that a solid knowledge base that's not always guarantee for the stability of attitudes, the way they perceive the reality in which we live can have a more consistent influence on changes in attitudes sphere. The effect seems to be rather indirect on the changing of bias attitudes, in the relationship between these two variables intervening factors such as subjective expertise of the subjects, conformity and probably still others unidentified.

To delineate the contribution of subjective expertise and of the conformism to attitudinal changes would impose conducting experimental studies to test attitudes including implicit level because this level is less influenced by social pressures.

Clear identification of factors that might explain changes in biased attitudes is important because according to the literature, the present research showed that attitudes have a good predictive power of expressing the option to vote, especially when both variables above undergoes changes in a given period.

Contrary to biased attitudes, bias identification proved to be much less influenced by the way in which participants in this study perceived their social context in which they live, but also other factors such as level of political knowledge and the subjective expertise, which suggests that it is likely that this type of attachment to develop mainly as a result of personal experiences such persons have lived over time (Bush, 2010), experiences related to political parties in Romania. In addition, the large number of subjects in the study sample who believes that does not identify with any political party in Romania shows that indeed the post-communist countries is the slow formation of party identification (Bush, 2010; Miler and Klobucar, 2000).

However, once formed bias identification is more stable than biased attitudes (one year we identifying statistically significant changes) predictive power on electoral behavior is higher compared with biased attitudes.

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