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STUDIES

CITIZENS’ PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PARTY LEADERS IN EASTERN
EUROPE

A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN HUNGARY AND ROMANIA

THESIS SUMMARY

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Relevance and objectives

The thesis entitled “Citizens' Perceptions about Party Leaders in Eastern Europe: A Comparative Study between Hungary and Romania” aims to analyse the population's perception about party leaders in the two countries. Although studies of political perception offer several explanations for how citizens form their opinions about political leaders, consensus on the predominant factors shaping perceptions is limited. Existing theoretical contributions emphasize several main factors of political perception, such as internal predispositions, cognitive shortcuts, political party affiliation, political ideology, and personality traits of leaders (Campbell et al., 1960; Sigel, 1964; Markus and Converse, 1979; Conover, 1981; Feldman and Conover, 1983; Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk, 1986; Wattenberg, 1991; Rahn, 1993; Caprara, Barbaranelli and Zimbardo, 2002; Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004; Hayes, 2005; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Cohen, 2015; Wyatt and Silvester, 2018; Ferreira Da Silva and Costa, 2019; Aichholzer and Willmann, 2020; Nai and Maier, 2021).

Moreover, previous research has mainly focused on the electoral context (Conover, 1981; Granberg, 1985; Kinder, 1986; Granberg, Kasmer, and Nanneman, 1988; Sullivan et al., 1990; Rahn, 1993; Funk, 1997, 1999; Hayes, 2005; Mondak and Huckfeldt, 2006; Barisione, 2009; Williams et al., 2009a; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Ferreira Da Silva and Costa, 2019; Pedersen, Dahlgaard, and Citi, 2019; McDonald, Karol, and Mason, 2020; Bor and Laustsen, 2021a), the perceptions of party leaders in other contexts and political systems being underexplored.

Therefore, this thesis aims to address this gap in literature, for a nuanced understanding of political perception. Starting from the research question: “Why does the population's perception of party leaders vary?”, the thesis investigates how the citizens of Hungary and Romania perceive the traits of party leaders, focusing on the main factors that determine these perceptions and their variation. The research aims to establish a hierarchy of the relevance of these factors, considering the variability of their effect depending on the context, in Hungary and Romania, which present a series of particular socio-political and cultural characteristics, due to their communist heritage, where different factors can shape perception compared to long-standing democracies. Also, the research conducted expands the scope by including more case studies, factors and leaders' traits, and political systems, to provide a comprehensive understanding of political perception.

Analytical framework

The paper investigates citizens' perceptions of the most important traits of party leaders: competence, honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, and charisma, in line with previous research (Markus, 1982; Glass, 1985; Kinder, 1986; Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk, 1986; Wattenberg, 1991; Bean, 1993; Pierce, 1993; Funk, 1997, 1999; Pancer, Brown and Barr, 2001; Valgarðsson, 2020). Also, several determinants are examined at the individual level: at the population level and the level of leaders.

At the population level, the analytical framework includes three factors: partisanship, political sophistication, and perceived similarity. Attachment to a political party can positively shape perceptions of party leaders because it acts as a filter for citizens (Campbell et al., 1960; Conover, 1981; Conover and Feldman, 1982, 1989; Feldman and Conover, 1983; Rahn, 1993; Hayes, 2005; Cohen, 2015). High political sophistication (political knowledge, interest, and involvement) can have a negative impact on perceptions, as a result of increased focus on performance-related criteria and less on the personal traits of leaders (Dalton, 1984; Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk, 1986; Pierce, 1993; Funk, 1997; Catellani and Alberici, 2012; Barnes and Beaulieu, 2019). The perceived similarity with party leaders (similar background, identity, values, political positions, etc.) can lead to positive evaluations of party leaders they relate the most (Granberg and King, 1980; Granberg, 1993; Shamir, 1994; Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004; Caprara et al., 2007; Vecchione, Castro and Caprara, 2011; Aichholzer and Willmann, 2020; Meng and Davidson, 2020).

At the level of party leaders, the analysis focuses on three factors: visibility, negative information, and seniority in office. Thus, greater visibility of leaders can lead to a positive perception of citizens (Cwalina, Falkowski and Kaid, 2000; Stevens and Karp, 2017; Geers and Bos, 2017), while negative information about leaders can negatively influence citizens' perceptions about them, weighing more than equivalent positive information (Lau, 1982, 1985; Klein, 1996; Bhatti, Hansen and Leth Olsen, 2013). The third factor, seniority in office, can have a positive effect on citizens' perceptions because leaders with extensive experience enjoy the trust of citizens due to competencies and skills developed over time (Markus, 1982; Kinder, 1986; Wattenberg, 1991; Pierce, 1993; Caprara, Barbaranelli and Zimbardo, 2002; Valgarðsson, 2020).

Methodology

In terms of case selection, the research focuses on Hungary and Romania, starting from the fact that similar results could apply to similar contexts (Gustafsson, 2017): communist past, high corruption, clientelistic practices, and experiences with populist parties. Also, the analysis includes parliamentary parties from the most recent legislative elections (Hungary in 2022 and Romania in 2020), due to their high visibility, as well as party leaders from 2020, for the accuracy of citizens' perceptions over time. Thus, the perceptions of the following Hungarian leaders were analyzed: Viktor Orbán (Fidesz), Zsolt Semjén (KDNP), Ferenc Gyurcsány (DK), Anna Donáth (Momentum), Márton Gyöngyösi (Jobbik), Ágnes Kunhalmi (MSZP), Gergely Karácsony (PM), Erzsébet Schmuck (LMP) și László Toroczkai (Mi Hazánk) and Romanian leaders: Marcel Ciolacu (PSD), Ludovic Orban (PNL), Florin Cîțu (PNL), Nicolae Ciucă (PNL), Dacian Cioloș (USR), Cătălin Drulă (USR), George Simion (AUR) și Hunor Kelemen (UDMR).

Individual data for testing the hypotheses was collected from two original surveys, conducted on nationally representative samples in Hungary (2022) and Romania (2021), via an online panel. Perceptions of party leaders' traits (the dependent variables) were measured on a ten-point scale (1 - not at all, to 10 - extremely), with respondents being asked to rate each leader on competence, honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, and charisma. Perception factors (independent variables) were measured primarily on a ten-point scale (1 not at all, to 10 - extremely). To examine the respondents' answers, the analysis used statistical methods such as bivariate correlation and multivariate regression. The dependent variable is analyzed by a cumulative index of the five traits and using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), and each trait is examined individually using Ordinal Logistic Regression to assess the strongest predictors.

Chapters summary

Regarding the structure of the thesis, it comprises seven chapters. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework, reviews the literature on political perception, and identifies the research gap. The key concepts used in the thesis are clarified: political parties, party leaders, and political perception, and the main theoretical contributions to the understanding of political perception in social psychology are described: balance theory, cognitive dissonance theory, social judgment theory, social cognitive theories and processing theories of information. Also, the main factors of political perception, identified in the literature, are underlined: personality traits, the environment

and the media, and the limits of previous studies, explaining how they will be addressed in the thesis.

The second chapter outlines the analytical framework applied in the thesis. The potential factors of the perception of political leaders at the systemic, institutional, and individual levels are presented, then the factors at the level of the population and party leaders, as well as the hypotheses. Also, the conceptualizations of political leaders' traits, identified in the literature, are detailed and the control variables included in the analysis are explained: respondents' age, education, ideological position, party age, and position in government.

The third chapter presents the methodology of the thesis. The selection of countries, political parties, and leaders, the operationalization of variables and data sources, as well as the applied analysis methods are clarified.

The fourth chapter focuses on political developments in the post-communist period, in Hungary and Romania, with particular attention to their political systems, institutional characteristics, and democratic elements. The dynamics of political parties are also examined, discussing their electoral performance, alternation in power, cabinet formation, and political crises, to provide a more detailed historical context.

The following chapter details the political activity of the leaders during their tenure as the party presidents, examining the context of their appointment, their political experience, internal conflicts, party reforms, and their strategic vision.

The sixth chapter analyzes the survey data on party leaders in Hungary. The results of correlations and regressions reveal that the predominant predictors of perception are leaders' visibility, citizens' perceived similarity with party leaders, and attachment to a political party. Also, the chapter examined separately the effects of seniority in office, party age, and position in government, variables that were not included in the survey.

The final chapter examines survey data on party leaders in Romania. The results indicate that the main drivers of the perception about party leaders are in a different hierarchy compared to the situation in Hungary, namely: citizens' perceived similarity with party leaders, attachment to a political party, and leaders' visibility. Also, the chapter analysed the effects of seniority, party seniority, and position in government, variables that were not included in the survey.

Conclusions

Findings indicate that in Hungary Anna Donáth was rated as the most honest, trustworthy, and empathetic party leader, while Viktor Orbán was perceived as the most competent and charismatic party leader. In Romania, Nicolae Ciucă was evaluated the highest on all traits by the respondents. The outcome data reveals that perceptions of party leaders are influenced by three key factors: partisanship, perceived similarity with party leaders, and leaders' visibility, but their effect varies depending on the context. In Hungary, the visibility of party leaders is the strongest predictor of perceptions, followed by perceived similarity and partisanship, while in Romania, perceived similarity with party leaders is the foremost driver of perception, followed by partisanship, and leaders' visibility. Empirical findings suggest that citizens are more likely to have positive evaluations about the party leaders they see most often and identify with the most. Regarding the effects of seniority in office, the results from Hungary suggest that leaders with less experience in office are rated as more honest, trustworthy, and empathetic, while in Romania the results are inconclusive, as experience in office does not affect public perception.

Evidence for the control variables indicates that in Hungary the leaders of the new and opposition parties are rated positively in terms of honesty and empathy. Conversely, in Romania, the leaders of the old and ruling parties show more trust among the citizens, compared to the leaders of the new and opposition parties. Moreover, in Hungary, party leaders are positively evaluated by young and educated citizens, while in Romania, by young and less educated citizens. In general, the research conducted reveals the variation of perceptions about political leaders in different contexts. Thus, in Hungary, charisma and empathy have a significant role for citizens, possibly tied to the historical and economic challenges, that demanded the imposition of a strong and empathetic leader, while in Romania, honesty and trust are considered essential by citizens, following the primary concerns for fighting corruption at the level of society, which requires honest and credible leaders.

Keywords: party leaders, perceptions, traits, public opinion, partisanship, quantitative, Hungary, Romania

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