

THEME ARTICLES: PARTY POLITICS, POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

MECHANISMS OF CANDIDATE EVALUATION IN LOCAL ELECTIONS¹

Andrei Gheorghită, Raluca Soreanu

This article investigates the dimensions of candidate evaluation employed by the citizens of Cluj-Napoca in the 2004 mayoral elections. Using survey data, it identifies six cognitive dimensions underlying voters' assessments of the three main candidates (active citizenship, socio-political compatibility, professional and managerial skills, democratic leadership, ethnic majority orientation, and family orientation) that can easily be regrouped in two broad evaluative patterns: a traditional-conservative one and a modern-democratic one. Furthermore, a regression model is used for testing the relevance and the direction of influence associated to each dimension in the general evaluation of each candidate. Finally, the study determines the extent to which variations in the significance assessed to different criteria of evaluation do occur among sub-samples of voters of the three candidates.

Rational versus cognitive approaches to candidate evaluation

The development of candidate evaluations is one of the least understood aspects of voting behavior. An increasing number of studies has

¹ A previous more comprehensive version of this paper (Raluca Soreanu, Raluca Perneş, and Andrei Gheorghită, "Mechanisms of Candidate Evaluation. The Case of Mayoral Elections in Cluj, 2004") was presented at the final workshop of the Invisible College (Bucureşti, Romania, July 5th 2004), a project developed by the Romanian Society of Political Science.

shown that, especially since the 60s, candidates have generally become more salient to voters than party attachment or issue concerns.² This transformation is usually related to the changes in the patterns of media communication in the age of television, where the “human touch” of politics is especially prominent.³ On the other hand, while it may be difficult for many voters to assess party issues and party manifestos directly, they might find it easier to evaluate the candidates according to their knowledge, trustworthiness, physical appearance, and eloquence in public debates.⁴ These evaluations are not superficial, irrational, or short-term. By focusing on the personal qualities of a candidate, voters may gain important information for trying to assess how that individual will perform in office.⁵

In the light of these developments, modern campaigning brings about more and more information concerning the candidates. However, the way individuals deal with this kind of information largely remains a mystery. Rational choice models⁶ argued that citizens gradually process the information available for judging the candidates and take the vote decision based on calculated overall utilities:

The voter canvasses his likes and dislikes of the leading candidates and major parties involved in an election. Weighing each like and dislike equally, he votes for the candidate toward whom he has the greatest number of net favorable attitudes...⁷

² See Arthur H. Miller, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Oksana Malanchuk, “Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates”, *American Political Science Review* 80 (June 1986): 521-540; Clive Bean and Anthony Mughan, “Leadership Effects in Parliamentary Elections in Australia and Britain”, *American Political Science Review* 83 (Dec. 1989): 1165-1179; Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics. Presidential Elections of the 1980s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Max Kaase, “Is There Personalization in Politics? Candidates and Voting Behavior in Germany”, *International Political Science Review* 15 (July 1994): 211-230.

³ Hermann Schmitt and Dieter Ohr, “Are Party Leaders Becoming More Important in German Elections? Leader Effects on the Vote in Germany, 1961-1998”, paper delivered at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC.

⁴ Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter. Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁵ Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, “Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates”, 522.

⁶ Also known as *memory-based models*. (Milton Lodge and Patrick Stroh, “Inside the Mental Voting Booth: An Impression-Driven Process Model of Candidate Evaluation”, in *Explorations in Political Psychology*, eds. Shanto Iyengar and William J. McGuire (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). 225-227.)

⁷ Stanley Kelley, Jr. and Thad W. Mirer, “The Simple Act of Voting”, *American Political Science Review* 68 (Jun. 1974): 574.

According to such models, the “for” and “against” evidence of the candidates recalled by the individual when asked to vote directly mediates his/her evaluations of the candidates.⁸ These assumptions of the rational models have been severely challenged in recent years. Doubts regarding this people’s “natural need for consistency” or the shallow analyses of storage and retrieval from memory processes have been frequently expressed.⁹

In the late 70s and early 80s, a different approach to candidate evaluations came from the field of cognitive psychology. According to this perspective, individuals do not evaluate each political contender *de novo*, but with respect to broad pre-existing categories (*schemas*), which direct their attention and assist them in the storage and retrieval of pertinent information.¹⁰ In other words, these schemas about candidates are:

[...] organized cognitions about them in their political role...that reduce the complexity of our impressions, by enabling us to categorize and label an individual politician according to certain abstract or representative features.¹¹

These schemas serve as a set of cues from which voters can draw further information about the candidate’s future behavior. According to this model, individuals filter the information through the lens of the schemas considered as relevant for the office at stake.

At this point, two important questions may arise. First, how does this mental process of candidate evaluation really work? And second, which are the criteria used by the voters in order to evaluate the contenders for a public office? We shall try to offer a brief answer to these questions in the following paragraphs.

The evaluation process

In an attempt to develop an integrative model of the evaluation process, Lodge and Stroh referred to four steps in the evaluation of candidates. First, a *recognition* phase takes place in which the individual, on being exposed to a political message, activates a search through long-term memory in order to identify the pre-existing categories that match the

⁸ Lodge and Stroh, “Inside the Mental Voting Booth: An Impression-Driven Process Model of Candidate Evaluation”, 226.

⁹ Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, “Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates”, 522.

¹⁰ Max Visser, “Five Theories of Voting Action. Strategy and Structure of Psychological Explanation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Trente, 1998), 52.

¹¹ Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, “Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates”, 524.

stimulus. It is a process that occurs automatically, “without conscious awareness of the search process involved”.¹²

The second step is the *categorization* stage, the central act of information processing with two possible outcomes, depending on the category activated in the long-term memory. The third step is the *labeling* process in which the candidate automatically inherits the “default” attributes of the category activated, that will more or less accurately represent him/her. The final step in candidate's evaluation is the *personalization* process, a developmental process that brings about, over time, a candidate-centered representation of the political landscape, in which the candidate becomes a new, superordinate category.

The critical stage is the third one, the *evaluation*. It is a particularly abstract phase, that implies automatic computation of a general evaluation (similar to a score, but imagine a nonnumerical score) of each candidate, that is stored in the long-term memory together with his/her name. Its future retrieval will take place separately from the attributes involved in it. This feature's immediate consequence is the fact that evaluative responses such as “I like him / I don't like him” tend to be expressed very fast by the individuals.¹³

Reconstruction is the last phase of the process – at this level we should have in mind the expression of the evaluations and, if necessary, of the reasons considered to support them. As we have mentioned above, when asked to express an evaluation on a candidate, people act as *cognitive misers* by simply reporting the affective impression stored together with candidate's name, without re-computing the general utility score (“for” versus “against”). However, if the individual is asked about the reasons lying behind that evaluation, Lodge and Stroh suggest that he/she “will reconstruct the reasons *now thought to contribute to his/her impression*”, in a ratiocination process.¹⁴

Schemas involved in the evaluation of political leaders

Most cognitive approaches to the study of voting action are focused on presidential or senatorial elections.¹⁵ This highlight is mostly due to the superior

¹² Lodge and Stroh, “Inside the Mental Voting Booth: An Impression-Driven Process Model of Candidate Evaluation”, 235.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 237.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 237.

¹⁵ See Arthur H. Miller and Warren E. Miller, “Ideology in the 1972 Election: Myth or Reality?”, *American Political Science Review* 70 (Sep. 1976): 832-849; Goldie Shabad and Kristi Andersen, “Candidate Evaluations by Men and Women”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 43 (Spring 1979): 18-35; Arthur H. Miller, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Oksana Malanchuk, “Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates”, *American Political Science Review* 80 (Jun. 1986): 521-540; Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney, “A Model of Candidate Evaluations in the Senate Elections: The Impact of Campaign Intensity”, *The Journal of Politics* 59 (Nov. 1997): 1173-1205; Carolyn L. Funk, “Bringing the Candidate into Models of Candidate Evaluation”, *The Journal of Politics* 61 (Aug. 1999): 700-720; David P. Redlawsk, “Affective and Cognitive Bases of Political Decision Making. A Dynamic

visibility of campaigning for the public offices mentioned above and also to the availability of data. For these elections, the primary criteria involved in candidate evaluations seem to be placed on personal level.¹⁶ Person-related characteristics tend to dominate the cognitions about the candidates, and, at least for the case of the United States, they prove to be extremely stable.

But not just any personal trait will do so. Impressions on presidents seem to be dominated by a few central characteristics. For the American case, Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk (1986) identified a five-dimensional solution, meaning five broad categories that cumulate almost all the criteria mentioned by the NES (National Election Studies) survey respondents. The first dimension identified was *competence*, involving the candidate's past political experience, his/her intelligence, comprehension of political issues, and ability as a statesman.¹⁷ The second dimension was *integrity*, in the sense of trustworthiness, dealing with remarks as "honest", "sincere", "just another politician", and references to corruption in government.¹⁸ The third dimension was *reliability*, serving as a bridge between the first two dimensions: dependable, strong, hardworking, decisive, aggressive, or the opposite of any of these. Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk named *charisma* the fourth factor revealed, a dimension involving the candidate's leadership, dignity, humbleness, patriotism, and "ability to get along with, communicate with, and inspire people".¹⁹ The last dimension was the most personal of all (for this reason it received the label *personal*), encompassing references to candidates' appearance (age, health, smile) or background factors (military experience, religion, wealth, previous occupation).²⁰

Different techniques of analysis have produced comparable results for the American presidential elections²¹, and the immediate consequence was the idea that Americans may hold "implicit personality theories" about their presidents²², an idea largely spread nowadays. Relatively consistent evaluative patterns were also identified in different other countries: France²³, Australia and Britain²⁴. For the case of Romania, Gheorghiiță (2002) identified a three-factor model for evaluating presidential candidates

Process Tracing Experiment", paper delivered at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA.

¹⁶ Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, "Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates", 525.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 528.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 528.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 528.

²⁰ Ibidem, 528, 537-538.

²¹ Donald R. Kinder, Robert P. Abelson, and Susan T. Fiske, "Developmental Research on Candidate Instrumentation: Results and Recommendations" (Ann Arbor: NES Report, 1979).

²² Donald R. Kinder and Susan T. Fiske, "Presidents in the Public Mind", in *Political Psychology*, ed. Margaret G. Hermann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986). 206.

²³ See Roy Pierce, "Candidate Evaluations and Presidential Electoral Choices in France", in *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, ed. Anthony King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁴ See Bean and Mughan, "Leadership Effects in Parliamentary Elections in Australia and Britain".

during the 2000 elections: *social competence, traditionalism, and political democratic competence*.²⁵

Purpose, data sources, and methodology

Dealing with voter evaluations in non-presidential elections is more infrequent, as the specific local component is of more focused interest. However, this study aims to discover the patterns of evaluating candidates for mayoralty in one of the most important cities in Romania, Cluj-Napoca. The local elections in Cluj-Napoca have been regarded as particularly significant by the main political forces, an opinion reflected in the nomination of three extremely strong candidates. The first one was the incumbent, Gheorghe Funar, nominated by the Greater Romania Party (PRM), coming after 12 years in office. The second one was Ioan Rus, Minister of Internal Affairs and Public Administration, nominated by the governing Social Democratic Party (PSD), and leader of the local branch of this party. The third one was Emil Boc, the Executive President of the opposition Democratic Party (PD), nominated by the “Justice and Truth” (D.A.) Alliance, formed of two parties, the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democratic Party (PD).

In order to identify the cognitive categories underlying voters’ evaluations of these three mayoral candidates, we have focused on survey data collected two weeks before local elections on a sample of 728 subjects living in Cluj-Napoca.²⁶ The main assumption of our analysis was that, given a spatial and temporal context, there is an identifiable pattern of candidate choice, meaning there are certain sets of criteria that account for the voters’ preference for one candidate or another. Apart from recognizing these cognitive categories, our study also attempts to investigate whether certain tendencies of variation in the use of these criteria do exist among the voters for each candidate. In other words, we shall try to look into the criteria that are preeminently valued by sub-samples of voters structured according to a declared electoral preference for a certain candidate.

Our exploratory analysis uses factor analysis as the main statistical technique. Factor analysis was applied to a series of 22 ordinal level variables, measured on a homogenous scale, ranking from 1 to 7, where score 1 means “of no importance” and 7 means “extremely important”. These variables demanded the subjects to formulate scores of the relative importance accorded to 22 given features for the future mayor of Cluj-Napoca (Table 1). By this technique, particularly adequate for exploratory studies, we have tested the

²⁵ Andrei Gheorghiuță, “Voters’ Evaluations of Political Leaders and Their Impact on Party Voting” (B.A. diss., Babeş-Bolyai University, 2002).

²⁶ Data collection was financed through a research grant of the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca.

existence of certain latent dimensions (or factors) underlying the evaluative scores, that could grant the model the needed explicative coherence.²⁷

The extraction method preferred was *principal axis factoring*, known to decompose only the common variance of the variables. The *eigenvalue* is set to 1, which means that the only factors which are taken into consideration are those that account for more than the variance of one variable; it is natural that the factors which explain less than the variance of a variable should be excluded of the analysis, because factor analysis is a *data reduction* technique. The predefined rotation method requested was *equamax*, as it has the advantage of minimizing the number of variables that load a factor and the number of factors that explain the variation of a variable.

The evaluative mechanisms displayed by the population of our sample can be reduced to six factors or latent dimensions, which explain 34.5% of the total variance of the variables. The factors identified are the following²⁸:

1. active citizenship;
2. socio-political compatibility;
3. professional and managerial skills;
4. democratic leadership;
5. ethnic majority orientation;
6. family orientation.

The explicative power of each factor ranges from 7.5% to 4.3%, displaying rather small variations among the relevance comprised in factors. The structure of the six factors is presented in table 2.

The most important factor (about 7.5% of the variance explained) groups a series of variables having in common a general reference to *active citizenship*. The key-attribute of the mayor encompassed in this factor is *activeness*. The mayor, and possibly the political leader or representative in general, is expected to get actively involved in the problems of the community, to be a positive actor that *initiates* action, not a spectator or a consultant.

²⁷ As most of our readers already know, *factor analysis* is a multivariate method that reduces the number of variables characterizing a phenomenon or a population of objects. Thus, it detects a series of latent dimensions of the investigated phenomenon or population of objects. The logic of factor analysis can be grasped if we picture the variables in question as measures of unobservable concepts, which are actually the latent dimensions. The variables that make up the same latent factor are strongly correlated among each other and less correlated with the variables that make up the other factors. Consequently, each set of strongly correlated variables generates a factor. There are two types of determination considered of interest in the interpretation of factor analysis. On the one hand, there is the extent to which the variables determine or *load* the factors and, on the other hand, there is the extent to which each variable is explained by the factors.

²⁸ One of the limits of the present study is that the latent dimensions of candidate evaluation identified by the factorial model are configured on the basis of a *predefined* set of criteria, namely the 22 variables used. Consequently, alternative criteria that voters might take into consideration when evaluating candidates are not considered. However, the 22-variable model is a highly comprehensive empirically developed tool, taking into consideration the most frequently expressed criteria involved in the mechanisms of candidate evaluation.

*How important is it for the future mayor of Cluj-Napoca
to have the following features?*

Table 1. Variables used in the factor analysis

| tems |
|--|
| V2_1 To be a fine Romanian |
| V2_2 To tolerate everybody's right to express opinions |
| V2_3 To admit his/her own mistakes |
| V2_4 To be a family person |
| V2_5 To have managerial and leadership skills |
| V2_6 To be a well educated and cultivated person |
| V2_7 To ensure order and discipline |
| V2_8 Not to have had an important position in the ex-communist party |
| V2_9 To be a fine Christian |
| V2_10 To be able to convince |
| V2_11 To be a true professional in his/her domain |
| V2_12 To defend the community against injustice |
| V2_13 To be a wealthy person |
| V2_14 To be active |
| V2_15 To have the same religion as you do |
| V2_16 To belong to the same ethnic group as you do |
| V2_17 To be a good citizen |
| V2_18 To fight against the corruption in the community |
| V2_19 To know how to treat people |
| V2_20 To have political experience |
| V2_21 To be sustained by a party you find close to your own political position |
| V2_22 To have a good sense of humor |

Data analysis: Relevant dimensions in candidate evaluation

It seems that in the case of the political representative, being a good citizen involves performing an *active duty*.

Another interesting observation is that the idea of active duty involves a segment of fertile communication with the citizens. Active duty is therefore performed in *dialogue*. An analysis of the rotated factor matrix displayed in table 2 will reveal that the variable referring to the knowledge of treating people loads both the active citizenship factor and the professional and managerial skills factor, to a comparable extent. Consequently, the capacity to sustain prolific interactions with citizens is regarded as strongly associated to the successful completion of both civic and professional duty.

Active citizenship also implies an energetic involvement in the *fight against corruption*. The importance the electorate gives to this topic might be a result of its great recurrence in the public discourse. Given the emergence of this anti-corruption rhetoric, it is interesting to observe that the electorate places the fight against corruption in the sphere of the active civic duty of the political leader. However, the degree of factorial determination of the anti-corruption variable is moderate (below 50%), which means there must be other explicative mechanisms that account for the rest of its variation.

The *socio-political compatibility factor* explains 6.4% of the variance of the variables. It is built around ethnic and religious similarity. However, ethnicity and religion are not the sole components of the factor; it seems that belonging to a party that is regarded favorably by the voter and not belonging to the former communist nomenclature are other elements that count as criteria for this category.

The emergence of this factor suggests that there is a category of voters that make their choice according to the logic of general similarity. The orientation of such voters indicates that candidates are also evaluated in terms of *perceived distance* from certain relevant socio-political groups that the voter feels affiliated to. The smaller the perceived distance is, the more favorable the evaluation is.

Apart from the general compatibility items, the factor is loaded by an apparently contrastive variable, referring to the economic status of the candidate (to be a wealthy person). The presence of this variable disturbs the logic of socio-political similarity comprised in the other variables loading the factor. Consequently, an alternative interpretation of the factor emerges: we might regard it not solely in terms of socio-political compatibility, but also as an *ideal socio-political profile factor*. The ideal candidate should have two fundamental virtues: on the one hand, he/she should be generally similar to the voter as far as ethnicity, religion and political orientation are concerned and, on the other hand, he/she should have a high economic status.

An important question might rise at this moment: why do voters expect the political leader to be a wealthy person? Most probably, it is because the electorate believes that an already acquired high economic status is positively associated with the exclusive concern for community issues. In other words, if the candidate has already got material comfort, it is unlikely that he/she should be concerned with acquiring wealth and it is expected that he/she should focus on solving collective problems. The third factor identified circumscribes the idea of *professional and managerial competence* and accounts for 6% of the common variance. Such a factor is the expression of the voters' views on political representation as a technical, highly professional activity, that which requires specific skills.

Table 2. Relevant factors in the mechanisms of candidates' evaluation

| Items | Factor | | | | | |
|--|--------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| V2_17 To be a good citizen | .690 | | | | | |
| V2_14 To be active | .579 | | | | | |
| V2_18 To fight against the corruption in the community | .453 | | | | | |
| V2_19 To know how to treat people | .452 | | | | | |
| V2_5 To have managerial and leadership skills | .401 | | | | | |
| V2_16 To belong to the same ethnic group as you do | | .624 | | | | |
| V2_21 To be sustained by a party you find close to your own political position | | .483 | | | | |
| V2_13 To be a wealthy person | | .475 | | | | |
| V2_15 To have the same religion as you do | | .458 | | | | |
| V2_8 Not to have had an important position in the ex-communist party | | .307 | | | | |
| V2_11 To be a true professional in his/her domain | | | .627 | | | |
| V2_19 To know how to treat people | | | .466 | | | |
| V2_12 To defend the community against injustice | | | .405 | | | |
| V2_10 To be able to convince | | | .404 | | | |
| V2_7 To ensure order and discipline | | | .383 | | | |
| V2_2 To tolerate everybody's right to express opinions | | | | .630 | | |
| V2_3 To admit his/her own mistakes | | | | .601 | | |
| V2_1 To be a fine Romanian | | | | | .696 | |
| V2_16 To belong to the same ethnic group as you do | | | | | .349 | |
| V2_4 To be a family person | | | | | | .691 |

It is interesting to identify and discuss the skills that are connected to the professional approach on local political leadership. One of the most highly rated skills is the knowledge of interpersonal relations, involving both communication skills and respect for the interlocutors. As we have already stressed, the ability to maintain productive relations with others is conceived as having a professional nature in the case of the mayor.

Other skills that make up the professional approach display a pronounced managerial reference. The mayor is expected to defend the community against injustice and to ensure order and discipline. These items suggest that the local leader should appeal to his/her authority in order to

perform all the prescribed managerial duties. Moreover, it seems that the persuasive capacity of the mayor is regarded as a merely professional attribute as well.

The *democratic leadership factor* is based on the respect for the free expression of opinion and judgement, and the ability to disclose personal mistakes. The factor, accounting for 5.6% of the variance, indicates a category of voters that attach importance to the democratic flexibility of the political leader. Such voters regard local political leadership as a non-authoritarian act, as an open process of negotiation between the local administration and the citizens. The emergence of an aggregate criterion of electoral evaluation based on democratic leadership traits reveals the fact that the general model of candidate evaluation does not consist exclusively of traditional patterns.

The fifth factor is the expression of an *ethnic majority orientation* and it explains 4.6% of the common variance of the variables. The Romanian majority is usually the one to regard ethnic affiliation as an essential criterion in the act of evaluating candidates, especially when the political discourse transforms ethnic diversity into a permanent issue. It is highly relevant that out of the six factors of comparable explicative power isolated through factor analysis, one specifically relates to the ethnic majority criterion. It is obvious that a substantial category of Romanian voters attach a great importance not only to the ethnicity of the candidate, but also to constant and manifest acts that state his/her ethnic majority affiliation.

The last factor is loaded by a single variable, *family orientation*. Although this factor explains the least of the common variation of the variables, namely 4.3%, it reveals a traditional pattern of thought according to which a good political leader has got to be a *pater familias* as well. We assume that there is a category of voters who see the ability to perform family duties successfully and the ability to attend the problems of the community as significantly interconnected.

An analytical approach of the six identified factors will reveal the fact that they can be regrouped in two broader categories of evaluative mechanisms:

1. *traditional-conservative* evaluative mechanisms, which include the following sets of criteria:

- § socio-political compatibility;
- § ethnic majority orientation;
- § family orientation.

2. *modern-democratic* evaluative mechanisms:

- § active citizenship;

- § professional and managerial skills;
- § democratic leadership.

This assumption regarding the coexistence of traditional and modern patterns of evaluation can easily be confirmed by resorting to a simple statistical procedure. This procedure consists in re-initiating the factor analysis with the particularity that this time we requested a factorial model that admits *only two* latent factors (Table 3). If the analytical assumption about the two essential patterns of evaluation is correct, then the two factors emerging from statistical procedures should indicate the same pair of criteria sets: traditional-conservative and modern-democratic.

Table 3. Grouping the factors into two main patterns

| Items | Factor | |
|--|--------|------|
| | 1 | 2 |
| V2_19 To know how to treat people | .614 | |
| V2_17 To be a good citizen | .596 | |
| V2_18 To fight corruption in the community | .557 | |
| V2_5 To have managerial and leadership skills | .513 | |
| V2_14 To be active | .510 | |
| V2_12 To defend the community against injustice | .503 | |
| V2_7 To ensure order and discipline | .459 | |
| V2_10 To be able to convince | .452 | |
| V2_11 To be a true professional in his/her domain | .445 | |
| V2_2 To tolerate everybody's right to judgement/opinion | .415 | |
| V2_11 To be a true professional in his/her domain | .445 | |
| V2_3 To admit his/her own mistakes | .388 | |
| V2_22 To have a good sense of humour | .346 | |
| V2_6 To be a well educated and cultivated person | .336 | |
| V2_16 To have the same ethnicity as you do | | .714 |
| V2_21 To be sustained by a party you find close to your own political position | | .551 |
| V2_15 To have the same religion as you do | | .500 |
| V2_13 To be a wealthy person | | .444 |
| V2_1 To be a fine/worthy Romanian | | .404 |
| V2_4 To be a family person | | .372 |
| V2_8 Not to have had an important position in the ex-communist party | | .338 |

The first factor, explaining 14% of the common variance of the variables, accounts for the modern-democratic pattern of evaluation, while the second factor (responsible for 9% of the variance of the variables) groups the conservative-traditional criteria involved in the process of

evaluating candidates. Thus, our hypothesis concerning the existence of two trends in the model of evaluation is confirmed.

Strong points, weak points.

Reflecting dimensions in the evaluation of major candidates

Once we have identified a six-factor model of candidate evaluation in local elections, it remains to evaluate how well did the candidates succeed in favorably fitting their images to voters' six dimensions of evaluation. Since the three mayoral candidates that are subject to our analysis have sensibly different political profiles, our expectations went towards identifying certain variations in the relevance and in the direction of influence associated to the factors for the case of each candidate. Furthermore, we assumed that the variations would consist in different *hierarchical orders* of the factors identified in the general model, and not in the emergence of differently structured factors.

In order to test these variations, we resorted to a multiple linear regression model. In our study, the rationale of using regression is not of an explicative nature: our intention was not to obtain a model that best predicts the dependent variable (in our case, the level of confidence in a certain candidate), but to order the factors that structure candidate evaluation according to their relevance. In addition, we expect to get a broad picture of the favorable or unfavorable effects induced by the six factors to the general confidence score of each candidate. To sum up, we seek to explore the intensity and the polarity²⁹ of the factors.

Generally, the quality of a regression model is synthetically evaluated by the adjusted determinacy coefficient (adjusted R squared). In the light of the previous notes, the determinacy coefficient does not provide us any useful information whatsoever, so we chose to ignore this index.

The next step in testing our hypothesis consisted in recoding the original 22 variables in our database. For this purpose, we computed a general score for each factor, as a sum of the variable scores involved, weighted with the factorial loadings. As a result, we achieved six new variables, each one measured as a score of the corresponding factor, which were introduced in the regression model.

The results of the regression model do not bring about much of a surprise, but there are a few findings that deserve particular attention. Confidence in Emil Boc is favored with a comparable intensity by high levels

²⁹ The numerical values displayed in tables 4 to 6 represent the standardized β coefficients, which indicate the number of standard deviations of the dependent variable, if the independent variable varies by one standard deviation. The positive values of the coefficients point to a direct relation between the dependent variable and the independent one, while the negative values point to an inverse relation.

of relevance given to three factors: democratic leadership, socio-political compatibility and active citizenship. On the contrary, the candidate is in a strong disadvantage among voters who value an ethnic majority orientation and in a less pronounced disadvantage if the voters attach importance to professional and managerial skills or to family values. Analytically speaking, we can detect a mixed pattern of evaluation: democratic leadership criteria are equally favorable to Emil Boc as indicators of socio-political compatibility. Those who voted for Boc seem to attach the same importance to the free expression of opinion and to their perceived similarity to the candidate in terms of ethnicity, religion or political position. On the other hand, it was expected that a pattern of candidate evaluation focused on managerial skills should be inauspicious to Boc, since he is a former member of the Parliament and, therefore, he is believed to have poor expertise in local administration issues. The fact that family orientation is unfavorable for the candidate would come as a surprise, given his constant referring to his father-role, if we were not to take into account its almost negligible absolute value.

Table 4. Hierarchical arrangement of factors in the case of Emil Boc

| Emil Boc | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Hierarchy of favorable factors</i> | <i>Hierarchy of unfavorable factors</i> |
| Democratic leadership (0.047) | Ethnic majority orientation (-0.143) |
| Socio-political compatibility (0.047) | Professional and managerial skills (-0.043) |
| Active citizenship (0.040) | Family orientation (-0.029) |

The case of Ioan Rus confirms the existence of a mixed strategy of evaluation, which combines traditional and modern patterns. Both evaluations based on active citizenship and those based on respect for family values favor Ioan Rus. The democratic leadership variable can be considered rather neutral in the present case, as its value is insignificantly small. On the other hand, it comes as a surprise that the evaluation based on professional and managerial skills should have the most unfavorable effect for the confidence in Ioan Rus, since he previously held the position of Minister of Internal Affairs and Public Administration. This surprising outcome might be explained by a strong tendency of voters to associate business involvement (an issue extremely salient in the case of Ioan Rus) with a propensity for corruption.

Although we might have expected a predominantly traditional arrangement of factors to favor the confidence in Gheorghe Funar, the pattern proved to be a mixed one. The most important criterion (ethnic majority

orientation) is indeed a traditional one, but the following two, active citizenship and professional and managerial skills, belong to a modern-democratic approach.

Table 5. Hierarchical arrangement of factors in the case of Ioan Rus

| Ioan Rus | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Hierarchy of favorable factors</i> | <i>Hierarchy of unfavorable factors</i> |
| Active citizenship (0.106) | Professional and managerial skills (-0.048) |
| Family orientation (0.034) | Ethnic majority orientation (-0.045) |
| Democratic leadership (0.002) | Socio-political compatibility (-0.029) |

This outcome might be considerably explained by Funar's incumbency status. During the last twelve years, the electorate was constantly exposed to the image of the active mayor, the community problem-solver. As expected, the democratic leadership factor is a considerable drawback for the candidate.

Table 6. Hierarchical arrangement of factors in the case of Gheorghe Funar

| Gheorghe Funar | |
|--|---|
| <i>Hierarchy of favorable factors</i> | <i>Hierarchy of unfavorable factors</i> |
| Ethnic majority orientation (0.273) | Democratic leadership (-0.112) |
| Active citizenship (0.084) | Socio-political compatibility (-0.024) |
| Professional and managerial skills (0.074) | - |
| Family orientation (0.021) | - |

All in all, the analysis proved that the evaluative categories are differently ordered in terms of relevance for the general level of confidence in each of the three candidates. In other words, the factorial model is not invariant. The outcome of our analysis was a set of three different hierarchical arrangements of factors, each fairly consistent with our previous expectations. However, the three evaluative models detected in each case display an important common feature: they are all *mixed models*, which means that the criteria that favor each candidate combine traditional-conservative outlooks with modern-democratic ones.

Are criteria valued differently?

Variations in the evaluative criteria among sub-samples

Why study electoral evaluation mechanisms on sub-samples of voters? Our hypothesis is that the voters for each of the three candidates associate different levels of relevance for criteria introduced in our questionnaire. But how do evaluative criteria vary in the case of the three sub-samples of voters? We intend to find an answer to these legitimate questions in the subsequent section of our study. For these reasons, we applied three independent sample t- tests. The t-tests are designed to establish if a certain measure significantly differs from one sub-sample to another.³⁰ We applied this statistical procedure to the initial 22 variables introduced in the factorial model.

Before analyzing the result of the t-tests, some preliminary observations should be highlighted. On the one hand, it was confirmed in the previous section of our study that a *mixed pattern of evaluation*, with *traditional-conservative* accents, based on attaching great importance to belonging to the ethnic majority or respecting family values, favors Gheorghe Funar. His political agenda is built up predominantly around nationalist issues and his discourse promotes a logic of ethnic exclusion.

On the other hand, Emil Boc seems to be preferred by voters who have stronger *democratic views* and consequently resort to criteria connected to active citizenship and democratic leadership. This finding is sustained by the candidate's constant appeal to the rule of law, the respect for the democratic order and equal rights for the citizens, regardless of their ethnicity.

Finally, voters who adopt a mixed strategy of evaluation, combining traditional sets of criteria with modern-democratic ones, placing a strong accent on active citizenship favor Ioan Rus.

The statistically significant differences identified by the t-tests will be interpreted in light of these findings. The set of t-tests completes the picture of candidate evaluation, allowing us to make some critical notes about sub-sample variability of the criteria involved in the evaluation of local political competitors.

The first t-test compares the scores of the 22 variables in the case of sub-sample 1 and sub-sample 3. It seems that Boc's voters and Funar's voters value differently the following features:

³⁰ For practical reasons, we will refer to the sub-sample of voters for candidate Emil Boc as sub-sample 1, to the sub-sample of voters for candidate Ioan Rus as sub-sample 2, and to the sub-sample of voters for candidate Gheorghe Funar as sub-sample 3.

Table 7. Differences in the relevance of criteria among Boc's and Funar's voters

| Variables | Values of <i>t</i> statistics |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| V2_1 To be a fine Romanian | -5.382 |
| V2_16 To belong to the same ethnic group as you do | -4.175 |
| V2_17 To be a good citizen | -3.275 |
| V2_19 To know how to treat people | -3.163 |
| V2_14 To be active | -2.500 |
| V2_4 To be a family person | -2.271 |
| V2_15 To have the same religion as you do | -2.222 |
| V2_18 To fight against the corruption in the community | -2.161 |
| V2_10 To be able to convince | -2.067 |
| V2_7 To ensure order and discipline | -1.999 |
| V2_11 To be a true professional in his/her domain | -1.998 |

It seems that the pre-eminently traditional strategy of evaluation adopted by Funar's voters, based on ethnic majority orientation, produces the most significant differences. The favourable nature of the active citizenship factor for candidate Boc is responsible for the next set of differences, which are less intense. Another distinguishable set of differences is grouped around the professional and managerial skills factor, which has a positive polarity for candidate Funar.

Table 8. Differences in the relevance of criteria among Rus's and Funar's voters

| Variables | Values of <i>t</i> statistics |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| V2_16 To belong to the same ethnic group as you do | -4.432 |
| V2_1 To be a fine Romanian | -3.381 |
| V2_19 To know how to treat people | -2.823 |
| V2_17 To be a good citizen | -2.410 |
| V2_18 To fight against the corruption in the community | -2.241 |
| V2_15 To have the same religion as you do | -2.027 |
| V2_11 To be a true professional in his/her domain | -2.020 |

Observing table 8 displaying the differences between sub-sample 2 and sub-sample 3 in terms of candidate evaluation, we conclude that the acutely traditional pattern of evaluation, which characterizes the voters of Funar, is susceptible of being at the root of the most intense statistical differences. Just as

in the case of the first t-test, the next set of differences follows the logic of the active citizenship factor: candidate Rus is obviously advantaged.

Table 9. Differences in the relevance of criteria among Boc's and Rus's voters

| Variable | Value of <i>t</i> statistics |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| V2_22 To have a good sense of humor | -2.26 |

The comparison between sub-sample 1 and sub-sample 2 generates a highly interesting outcome: the only variable that produces a statistically significant difference is the one referring to the sense of humor. Following the two candidates' evolution, we assume that voters who attach importance to having a good sense of humor favor Emil Boc. Beyond this sole difference, we must stress the striking similarity in evaluation criteria that characterizes the sub-sample of pro-Boc voters and the sub-sample of pro-Rus voters.

Conclusions

The evidence presented above provides consistent support for the existence of remarkably coherent patterns of candidate evaluation among Romanian voters.³¹ In other words, people seem to have pre-existing evaluative categories (or schemas) that help them filter, correlate, and structure the information about the political candidates. There are two broad patterns that seem to guide the assessment of political candidates, a modern-democratic one and a traditional-conservative one.

In the general frame of these patterns, this study identified six underlying categories of expectations that citizens hold about their mayor. *Active citizenship* is the factor grouping the best explicative power, encompassing that encompasses expectations about the mayor's active involvement in the problems of the community, his/her capacity of initiating action in dialogue with the citizens, and some sense of civic justice. The second dimension revealed relates to the idea of *socio-political compatibility*, involving a general need for similarity; – it's preferable for the mayor to hold the same ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation as the voter.

The third factor encompasses features evidencing the candidate's *professional and managerial competence*. It's a performance-related category,

³¹ It should be stressed here that this dimensional structure proved its consistency in rather unfavourable circumstances, where desirability effects tend to be high (subjects were asked to evaluate a list of potential features of the future mayor of Cluj-Napoca). We expect the structure of factors to be even more explicitly bound in circumstances closer to day-to-day life – open-ended questions etc.

as by focusing on such criteria, voters may infer how a given candidate will perform in the mayoral office, which is perceived as a technical, highly professional activity. The idea of *democratic leadership* is circumscribed in a fourth factor, involving respect for dialogue, free expression of opinion, and flexibility. The last two dimensions are strongly related to the traditional frame of evaluation. On the one hand there is the *ethnic majority orientation*, an expressed need for the mayor to belong to the Romanian ethnic majority group, and on the other hand there is the *family orientation*, as the family is regarded as a micro-level community, with similar implications.

The relevance associated to different evaluative criteria seems to differ significantly between Funar's voters and the electorates of Rus and Boc. However, citizens supporting Ioan Rus and Emil Boc seem to employ highly similar evaluative categories, a finding that suggests a strong relevance associated to criteria involving affiliation, mainly party affiliation and party support.

More generally, this study indicates that evaluating mayoral candidates on the basis of their personal qualities is not a superficial, instant or random act, but a highly structured and coherent mental process, involving comparison and inference.

References:

- Bean, Clive & Anthony Mughan, "Leadership Effects in Parliamentary Elections in Australia and Britain", *American Political Science Review* 83 (Dec. 1989): 1165-1179.
- Bucy, Erik P. & John E. Newhagen, "The Micro- and Macrodrama of Politics on Television: Effects of Media Format on Candidate Evaluations", *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 43 (Spring 1999): 193-210.
- Bulai, Alfred, *Focus-grup* (București: Editura Paideia, 2001).
- Culic, Irina, *Metode avansate în cercetarea socială. Analiza multivariată de interdependență* (Iași: Polirom, 2004).
- Funk, Carolyn L., "Bringing the Candidate into Models of Candidate Evaluation", *The Journal of Politics* 61 (Aug. 1999): 700-720.
- Gheorghită, Andrei, "Voters' Evaluations of Political Leaders and Their Impact on Party Voting" (B.A. Diss., Babeș-Bolyai University, 2002).
- Gidengil, Elisabeth; André Blais; Richard Nadeau & Neil Nevitte, "Are Party Leaders Becoming More Important to Vote Choice in Canada?", paper delivered at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC (2000).

- Kaase, Max, "Is There Personalization in Politics? Candidates and Voting Behavior in Germany", *International Political Science Review* 15 (July 1994): 211-230.
- Kahn, Kim Fridkin & Patrick J. Kenney, "A Model of Candidate Evaluations in the Senate Elections: The Impact of Campaign Intensity", *The Journal of Politics* 59 (Nov. 1997): 1173-1205.
- Kelley, Stanley & Thad W. Mirer, "The Simple Act of Voting", *The American Political Science Review* 68 (Jun. 1974): 572-591.
- Kinder, Donald R.; Robert P. Abelson & Susan T. Fiske, "Developmental Research on Candidate Instrumentation: Results and Recommendations" (Ann Arbor: NES Report, 1979).
- Kinder, Donald R. & Susan T. Fiske, "Presidents in the Public Mind", in *Political Psychology*, ed. Margaret G. Hermann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986).
- Lodge, Milton; Kathleen M. McGraw & Patrick Stroh, "An Impression-Driven Model of Candidate Evaluation", *The American Political Science Review* 83 (Jun. 1989): 399-419.
- Lodge, Milton & Patrick Stroh, "Inside the Mental Voting Booth: An Impression-Driven Process Model of Candidate Evaluation", in *Explorations in Political Psychology*, eds. Shanto Iyengar & William J. McGuire (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- Miller, Arthur H. & Warren E. Miller, "Ideology in the 1972 Election: Myth or Reality?", *American Political Science Review* 70 (Sep. 1976): 832-849.
- Miller, Arthur H.; Martin P. Wattenberg & Oksana Malanchuk, "Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates", *American Political Science Review* 80 (Jun. 1986): 521-540.
- Ottati, Victor C. & Robert S. Wyer, Jr., "Affect and Political Judgement", in *Explorations in Political Psychology*, eds. Shanto Iyengar & William J. McGuire (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- Pierce, Roy, "Candidate Evaluations and Presidential Electoral Choices in France", in *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, ed. Anthony King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Popkin, Samuel L., *The Reasoning Voter. Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- Rahn, Wendy M., "The Role of Partisan Stereotypes in Information Processing about Political Candidates", *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (May 1993): 472-496.
- Rahn, Wendy M.; Jon A. Krosnick & Marijke Breuning, "Rationalization

and Derivation Processes in Survey Studies of Political Candidate Evaluation”, *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (Aug. 1994): 582-600.

Redlawsk, David P., “Affective and Cognitive Bases of Political Decision Making. A Dynamic Process Tracing Experiment”, paper delivered at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA (2001).

Schmitt, Hermann & Dieter Ohr, “Are Party Leaders Becoming More Important in German Elections? Leader Effects on the Vote in Germany, 1961-1998”, paper delivered at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC (2000).

Shabad, Goldie & Kristi Andersen, “Candidate Evaluations by Men and Women”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 43 (Spring 1979): 18-35.

Visser, Max, “Five Theories of Voting Action. Strategy and Structure of Psychological Explanation” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Trente, 1998).

Wattenberg, Martin P., *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics. Presidential Elections of the 1980s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).