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Image Voting vs. Issue Voting in the Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan

This study is a preliminary investigation of a project for examining and analyzing what factors influence attitudes of voters in their responses to image vs. issue advertising of candidates and political parties. The paper also emphasizes the influential role of mass media in the election coverage

Key words: issue voting, image voting, parliamentary elections, political communication.

С. Қажымұратова
Дауыс беру образы. Қазақстандағы парламенттік сайлаудағы дауыс беру мәселелері

Мақалада сайлау барысында кандидаттарды сайлауға және саяси партияларға ықпал ететін факторлар қарастырылады. Сонымен қатар сайлау кезіндегі бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының рөлі анықталады.

Түйін сөздер: дауыс беру мәселелері, дауыс беру образы, парламенттік сайлау, саяси коммуникация.

С. Кажимурадова
Образ голосования. Проблемы голосования в парламентских выборах в Казахстане

В статье рассматриваются факторы, влияющие на избирателей кандидатов и политических партий во время парламентских выборов. А также определяется роль средств массовой информации в освещении выборов.

Ключевые слова: проблема голосования, образ голосования, парламентские выборы, политическая коммуникация.

This study is a preliminary investigation of a project for examining and analyzing what factors influence attitudes of voters in their responses to image vs. issue advertising of candidates and political parties. The paper also emphasizes the influential role of mass media in the election coverage.

Elections are an important political activity of citizens. They are able to use their right to choose the people to represent them in the government and promote the better life for themselves. Therefore, the voters' decision-making must be very critical and deliberate. The issues like self-presentational tactics, negative advertising and other concepts analyzed in this research can be helpful to voters since they give them a more critical understanding of election campaign mechanisms. Citizens who are aware of the mechanisms of the candidates' creating favorable images would be critical and evaluative towards campaign statements of candidates that usually contain only promises. Those voters would form their opinion and come to better-informed

decisions and less likely to be deceptive of manipulative machinations.

Gopoian (1993) in his research about Images and Issues in the 1988 Presidential Election in the United States used a methodology first suggested in "The two faces of Issue Voting" by Carmines and Stimson (1980) to disaggregate voters into "issue voters" and "image voters". In his study, Gopoian defines image voters as 'those inclined to give greater emphasis to images' and issue voters as "those inclined to give greater emphasis to issues in casting presidential ballots. The scholar also indicates that "issue voters and image voters behave differently and are guided by different priorities in the process of choosing between candidates". Gopoian admits that it is possible in any given election that "one party may theoretically hold an advantage among those voters choosing on the basis of issues, while the other party may be viewed more favorably among other voters choosing primarily on the basis of image".

The idea of "issue voting" and "image voting"

is new for Kazakhstani politicians and voters. Thus, this research is extremely unique and significant because there were no similar studies in Kazakhstan that ever examined the relative effects of issues and images on the outcome of the elections. Political campaign practitioners, communication scholars, journalists, as well as social sciences students can use the project results for the study in the area of the communication research.

Theoretical Conceptual Framework

Gopioian (1993) in his research about Images and Issues in the 1988 Presidential Election in the United States analyzed the relative effects of issues, images, and economic trends in shaping the outcome of the 1988 presidential election and concluded that “issue-voting was more prevalent than image-voting in 1988”. However, as the scholar stated, candidate images and their effects in the 1988 presidential election were remarkable because of the “dominance of negative, rather than positive, image voting. And contrary to the popular wisdom, Dukakis, not Bush, was the major beneficiary of negative voting”.

While analyzing the political election campaign in Germany, Schutz (1993) recognized the role of the mass media in providing the public with information and in creating certain impressions. He also mentioned about Noelle-Neumann’s (1977, 1980) and Keplinger’s (1979) arguments about “media bias in the presentation of candidates of different political parties” that raised a hot discussion on the “potency of the media in influencing viewers’ attitudes”. However, the findings have been heavily criticized for methodological and ideological flaws (Merten, 1983; Pottker, 1991). Nevertheless, as Schutz noted, according to Baggailey (1980), Kepplinger (1987), Mullen et al., (1986), Patterson (1982), Schulz (1984), it is undisputable that “viewers’ impressions can be influenced to a certain extent by the way in which a candidate is presented in the media”. He emphasized that the candidates’ personalities have played a major part in Western political election campaigns of the last few decades.

Shutz (1993) indicated that “it is not the issues that are the heart of electoral combat but the self-presentation of the political candidates (Holly, Kuhn and Puschel, 1968; Weis, 1976) and “the voters’ assessment of the candidate’s personality is a very relevant factor in the voting decision” (Campbell, 1960; Gelineau & Merenda, 1978;

Kenney & Rice, 1988). To investigate candidates’ self-presentational issues, Shutz referred to theories of impression management and self-presentation (Jones, 1964; Tedeschi et al., 1981, 1985; Schlenker, 1980, 1985; C. Snyder et al 1983; M. Snyder, 1974). These theories suggest a dramaturgical view of social interaction. “Self-presentation” as a term is used to describe “behavior designed by an actor to establish particular identities in the eyes of various audiences” (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). It includes more than the spoken word; it can also be verbal and nonverbal behavior. The scholar suggested the following classification of self presentational tactics: offensive, defensive and assertive. He agreed with Lanzetta, Sullivan, Masters & McHugo (1985), Norpoth (1979) and Schrott (1988) that a candidate’s public self-presentation on TV has considerable impact on his image and on voting behavior.

Image as a general impression of a candidate or a party is usually created through certain visual elements in the media: both print and electronic. Voters have in mind this image and their behavior and decision making at the moment of voting may be encouraged or discouraged.

In his research Schutz analyzed self-presentational tactics in a context in which it is very prominent: political campaign communication. This is one of the forms of electioneering or election advertising that is defined as “persuading voters in a political campaign and trying to influence people to vote for a particular candidate in an election”. Generally, candidates and parties use different forms of election advertising during the campaigning to promote or oppose, directly or indirectly, the election of a candidate or a registered political party.

Popkin (1991) in his book *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* gave greater insight and understanding into the American voter. The researcher showed us that voters “actually do reason about parties, candidates and issues” and this reasoning is described as “gut” reasoning or low-information rationality. The theory of “low-information rationality” or “gut reasoning” is derived from the Columbia University voting studies done in the 1940s, the economic theories of Anthony Downs, and cognitive psychology. One of the author’s hypotheses, mentioned in the study, is that “education affects politics not by deepening (that

is, not by increasing knowledge about government and current political debate), but by broadening the electorate. According to Popkin, broadening means “increasing the number of issues that citizens see as politically relevant and increasing the number of connections they make between their own lives and national and international events”. However, besides the issues promoted by the candidates during the political campaigning, the voter’s decision-making can be influenced by other factors, like images of the parties and candidates.

Jerry and Post (2004) researched the effects of candidate image on voting preference. Their study focused on the source valence in assessing candidate image in a local election. The findings of this research indicate that the role of political campaigns in voters’ decision making need to be reassessed.

Kaid and Holtz-Bacha (1994) indicate that “political campaigns in Western democracies have increasingly relied on television advertising to promote candidates and /or political parties”. Bartle, Griffiths (2001), Ponder (2000), Mughan (2000), Bennet and Entman (2001) support them and emphasize that traditional forms of interpersonal communication were replaced by new mediated ways. Mughan (2000) specifies one of the principal features of television-dominated political campaigning - the growing prominence of the party leaders. The same tendency is observed in Kazakhstan and this study will discover what party leaders are the most televised politicians and how the commercials contribute to the image of the political party and/or leaders.

Lee, Ryan, Wanta and Chang (2004) conducted a comparative research and compared newspaper photographs of presidential candidates in the United States and Taiwan. They revealed that “US candidates were more likely to be portrayed as a beloved leader, at leisure, from the side or back, looking determined, as a leader and follower, standing or walking, and with cheering crowds. Candidates in Taiwan were more likely to be depicted in a ‘glad-to-see-you’ pose, with a camera angle looking down, with no expression, as an equal to others in the same photograph, and with inattentive people”. These findings emphasize that the images created by media and through the media have an influential impact on the electorate.

Trimble & Sampert (2004) studied the framing

of the Canadian Election 2000 by The Globe and Mail and The National Post and indicated that “game framing individualizes campaign coverage both by fore-grounding party leaders, and by highlighting leader gaffes, personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies”. They noted that images rather than issues are offered to citizens in the print and electronic media in the election campaigns. Besides, their study found “considerable negativity in party evaluations by both national newspapers over the course of the 2000 election campaign”.

Wilke & Reinemann (2001) identified some common trends of election coverage that western democracies share. They are “(1) increasing personalization, (2) increasing negativism and (3) a tendency towards a more interpretive character of coverage, which is also displayed in a de-authentication of the depiction of candidates”.

Methods

Pinkleton and Austin (2001) in their research about individual motivations and perceived media importance emphasize that “media can serve as a catalyst for involved citizen decision making”. This suggests analyzing media products like commercials and newspapers that can serve as units of analysis in this research and political parties will be the units of observation. The other units of analysis will be visual elements used in the election campaign - TV-news and headlines in the front page of the newspapers. As for TV-news, they will be randomly selected from the top five TV channels evening prime-time news program over the period of two months of campaigning.

There are two key variables in this study: images of the candidates and parties as an independent variable and voter’s decision -making as a dependent variable. Measurement method this research will use is the same as those of previous researches on the related topic used. This is an unobtrusive method of content analysis. To measure the images of the candidates and parties, content analysis of headlines for election-related news stories in the newspapers over two months of the election campaign. This time period is reasonable because the coverage of election campaigning will be the central topic of the media. To determine the negativism of the image, manifest content will be used. Negative shape of the headlines will be identified by the use of such aggressive words or metaphors in relation

to the candidate or party: “attacks”, “blames”, “battle”, “oppose”, “challenge”, “duel”. TV- news will serve as the other material for negative image measurement.

The last parliamentary elections in the country are characterized by the variety of political communication of the parties and candidates including TV-commercials, posters, billboards, photographs, leaflets, and newspapers among others. These forms of communication created certain images of the parties and candidates and they influenced the voter’s behavior and his voting

preference. The issues of all political parties and candidates in the parliamentary elections were quite similar, but the images created during the campaigning were different. Specifically, this study would examine the role of the negative images in shaping the voter’s decision-making.

Generalizing from the above, the hypothesis suggests that negative images of the candidates and parties in the election campaign manipulate voter’s decision-making. Voter’s decision - making is understood here as his voting for the certain candidate and party, his preference and favor.

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