

THE FORMATION OF VOTING INTENTION IN MULTIETHNIC COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The present study is intended to examine the relationship between the ethnic factor and the electoral behavior from a demographic and sociological perspective, mainly in the phase of the formation of the vote intention and of the voting process proper. The study focuses on the multiethnic community formed of Romanians, Hungarians and Roma population (the proportion between the Romanian and the Hungarian populations is relatively close, while that of the Roma population is the highest in the country).

We shall try to answer questions such as: “Why do ethnicity and ethnic factor have a causal effect on voter turnout? “Why is ethnicity a significant factor in voter turnout”?

The paper is based on quantitative data from studies performed throughout 3 electoral cycles, as well as on a series of qualitative data obtained from interviews with respondents coming both from “pure” Hungarian, Romanian and Roma family backgrounds and from mixed families.

Key words: voting intention, multiethnic communities, ethnic vote

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Introduction

In its most significant study entitled „Modern Political Analysis”, Robert A. Dahl defined a political system as “any persistent model of inter-human relations which involves, to a significant degree, the concepts of power, rules and authority”. Starting from this definition, Nie and Verba defined political participation as “citizen activities which are more or less directed to influencing political deciders at a governmental level and the actions which they undertake” (Verba & Nie 1972). Political education starts in the early life, within the family, where children learn the parents and relatives’ attitudes, convictions and values, and continues along the educational system, by mass-media exposure as well as by the interaction with friends and

acquaintances (Conway 1991). Huckfeldt (1983) examines three explanations for the persistence of ethnic politics: social status, the social context of vicinity and geographic independence.

Methodology

For the objectives of this study we used a sample of 1320 people with a right to vote; the choice of the respondents was made by the multistage sampling technique. Respondent distribution was adequate, the sample had an error margin of $\pm 3,37\%$. This sampling method was preferred over others due to its remarkable practical advantages (Dussaix and Grosbras, 1993, Rotariu and Ilut, 1997). The data offered valuable information regarding ethnic identity and self-identity, voting participation intention, media interest etc. In the second phase of the research we applied a semi-structured interview guide to 30 Romanian, 30 Hungarian and 30 Roma subjects. As formal support, the interviewer received a semi-structured interview guide which contained the objectives which he had in mind during the discussion, which was later completed with observations and details. The questions were pre-defined in a logical succession. From the perspective of the socio-demographic profile, the sample structure used in the present study was relatively balanced.

From the ethnic argument to voting intention

We may consider ethnicity defined as the sum of individuals who consider themselves or are considered by others to be sharing common characteristics which set them apart from other collectivities in a society where they develop distinct behavior. Minorities are groups whose members are connected by common origin, language or religion, having the perceived feeling of being different from the majority of individuals in a political entity. Based on this perception of difference and numeric inferiority, minorities build some political claims, either for equality with the majority, or for special treatment based on the acknowledgement of these differences; or for autonomy and, in the most extreme cases, separation. From the perspective of cognitive-affective representations with an impact on political behavior, there are significant differences between Romanians and Hungarians. Their outlook on history, the relations between the two ethnic groups, their social status and their personality traits are many times divergent (Mungiu-Pippidi, 1999). Human political behavior is dominated by the ethnic element, with a primary distinction

between Romanians and Hungarians, with other categorizing modalities on a second plan (During the poll that the current study was based on, one of the items asked the respondents to evaluate the extent to which they believed that the ethnic criterion will matter in the local elections in Mureş county, 66% of them answered „much” or „very much”). Neither of these groups are insensitive to the highly notorious political characters (Zwarun, Torrey 2011); however, in the case of the Romanian voters, this sensitivity and orientation towards the actual vote seems to be higher than in the case of the Hungarians, where the element of community appurtenance is more important. An important aspect which is a differentiating element is the one regarding the political discussion within the family, together with the parents’ actual participation, with a direct influence on the young people’s future attitude towards politics and participation (Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, 2012). We could note the Hungarian people’s wider openness to political discussions in the family, the acceptance / implication of the younger members of the family in these discussions as compared to the Romanians and the Rroma ethnic groups.

The fact that Hungarian voters are a discipline electorate is common knowledge. Their votes are overwhelmingly directed to the representatives of the ethnic group, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania. At the same time, the votes of the Romanian electorate are divided among the different political parties, formed especially on ideological grounds. The votes of the Rroma population are only directed to their own representatives to a small extent; they mostly go to the candidates who, at the time of the electoral moment represent the best opportunity in meeting their immediate, mostly material needs. It is obvious that the Hungarian ethnic group vote with their ethnic representatives; however, it is not clear why we have this result. Is it simply a reason of ethnic self-identity or of group consciousness?

An essential aspect of our approach aimed perception and self-perception of an ethnic group. In this respect, the interview questions permitted the direct questioning of this subject. The answers indicated family “origin” as the main appurtenance criterion and they generally identified Hungarian ethnicity with parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Self-inclusion within the ethnic group, motivated by historical or local circumstances, is particularly interesting. There were respondents with at least one grandparent of an origin other than Hungarian (Romanian, German), but on a parental line, they consider themselves to belong to the Hungarian ethnic group. The appeal to the “pure family” is not incidental, although we currently have mixed origins 2 generations ago, with the mixed origin eventually being “sacrificed” in favor of the non-

equivocal belonging to one ethnicity. For Romanian respondents, the answers are relatively similar to those of Hungarians. Thus, parents, or rather their appartenance is essential, especially in the mixed case, while for the rest of the respondents the ethnic belonging goes back 2 or 3 generations. The resort to family “purity” is similar to the Hungarian respondents’, with the same observation in the case of the mixed families, where the mixed origin is sacrificed in favor of the model represented by one of the two ethnicities. We may therefore speculate about the relevance of a certain historical condition, doubled by a physical immediate reality which determines self-positioning.

The next step of the interview consisted of determining the necessary characteristics for the identification / belonging to a certain ethnic group, the respondents indicating the items of belonging. The most widely used term is “language”, knowledge of the language thus being an indicator of Hungarian ethnicity. Besides language, other terms which are used in expressing belonging to a certain ethnic group are history, culture, emotional and self-evaluating factors. Besides tangible matters – language, the presence of the Hungarian flag, family origin – there are also items related to the emotional sphere, to a sense of living in a “Hungarian way”, which is a perception linked to a mythic universe as well as to the collective imaginary. This appeal is not accidental, but it has repercussions on the vote, an effect which has also been demonstrated in other studies (Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, Daniella, 2007). In itself, speaking the language is not enough. It must be doubled by an active side - school attendance, community support – which holds an important place in defining ethnic belonging. We might speak of two sides of belonging, active and passive. Romanian respondents’ answers did not vary significantly. We also note the definition of belonging by means of cultural characteristics, which are also present in Hungarian respondents. There is also a resort to characteristics which are considered specific or defining for a certain part of the population, in combination to another resort, mostly related to ethnic self-evaluation (Abraham, Bădescu, Chelcea,1995) or to occupations which, in the present-day conditions, have an archaic resonance.

Analyzing the answers of the persons from mixed families, we note differences determined by the modality of ethnic self-definition. For example, in the case of Romanian respondents, the answers are based on the argument of the origin: if we analyze the answers of respondents from mixed families we note differences determined by ethnic modalities of self-definition. In the case of the Hungarian respondents one may note a strong tendency of

integration into the ethnic and linguistic community; knowledge of the language is doubled by other conditions in order to be accepted within the ethnic group.

Political information

There is a great difference between Romanians and Hungarians regarding political discussions. In the former case, eight of ten respondents declare that very seldom or never discuss politics, while in the latter case, this is the percentage of those who declare that they discuss politics often or very often. Moreover, in Romanian families politics is not a common topic, but it is a good topic at work, during meetings with friends or with neighbors. The young prefer political discussions over a beer with some friends. In the case of the elderly, discussions in the family are the most unlikely, being motivated most of the times by watching a TV program with a political character. However, they become a debate theme with neighbors, acquaintances, former colleagues. The study also revealed a fundamental difference: the fact that, generally speaking, political talks in the case of the Romanian respondents are not related to a particular electoral moment, nor are they intensified strictly because of the electoral campaigns. On the other hand, most of the Hungarian respondents declared that they discuss politics especially at home and especially around election time.

In an attempt to compare the answers to the questions “How often do you discuss political problems” and “Where do you predominantly discuss these political problems, with whom”, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Hungarians have an increased interest in discussing political subject compared to Romanians;
2. the electoral campaign substantially raises the interest in political discussions for Hungarians, while this is not equally valid for Romanians;
3. the predominant environment for political discussions of Hungarians is the family, then the circle of friends, while for the Romanians the political discussion is present predominantly in public spaces, especially pubs, clubs. The habit of discussing political subjects within families is not common;
4. in the case of Hungarians, children are dialogue partners in political discussions;
5. regarding the lack of interest in political discussions, the ratio between those who say they are not interested in the subject is approximately the same for Romanians and Hungarians.

The previously-mentioned differences between Romanians and Hungarians are not found anymore when assessing way in which political leaders communicate with citizens, with the members of the community. Both for Romanians and Hungarians, communication with political

leaders, in the sense of receiving information from the latter about their projects, is preponderantly accomplished through classic media of communication: the written press, the radio and, the most important of all, the television. The electoral campaigns, with their infrastructure for sending messages, is considered by 3 Romanian respondents to 1 Hungarian respondent to be the favorite means of communication, but only for the period of the campaign. One may infer the existence of structures of communication between leaders and the population, if we consider a respondent's declaration according to which "...a counselor communicates the messages from political leaders". Similarly, from a Hungarian respondent: "I am called and asked to participate...". A Romanian respondent also draws attention to the existence of a channel specialized on this type of communication, namely via "spokespersons", besides the mass media.

Although the classical mass media appear to be the main means of communication of political leaders' messages, one must note that more Romanian subjects exclusively mention television, in comparison with Hungarians. The following can be concluded:

1. all the subjects of the study receive most of the information on political leaders and their plans via the classical mass media; 2. television has an advantage over the other communication channels, particularly for Romanians; 3. electoral campaigns are regarded not only as a specialized form of communication in certain moments, but for some subjects, it is the only acceptable form of communication with political leaders; 4. the political representatives of the Hungarians have certain networks specialized in sending political messages, and they are possibly organized as parallel structures to the administrative and political structures; 5. the internet is not sufficiently taken advantage of as means of communication between the political leaders and the population.

Both Romanians and Hungarians frequently watch TV shows in order to find information on political issues. In both cases, the most often watched are the news programs, with the fundamental difference that many Hungarians prefer the Hungarian language stations. Although in the case of both ethnic groups the most predominant are the TV viewers, with former acknowledging the overwhelming influence of the media in making political decisions, for those who do not frequently follow media, the alternative channels which transmit political messages play an essential role in building electoral decisions. In the case of the Romanians, the attitude of the media to the candidate / party in the case of the general elections – in terms of

negative/positive – has a much stronger impact on voting intentions than in the case of the Hungarians (Trafimow, David; Rice, Stephen; Hunt, Gayle; et al 2012).

One must note that the Romanian respondents invoke the biased character of the media, but not the alternatives they resort to in order to shape their political decisions, while Hungarians simply reject media messages claiming that they already know very well who to vote for. Finally, another fundamental difference between Romanian and Hungarian respondents regards church legitimacy as transmission channel for political messages. Romanians are strongly against church involvement in politics, while Hungarians have a totally opposing view.

It is obvious that the results above, regarding the Church, are explained by a different interpretation of the expression “political message” in an ethnic context. For the Romanians, the political message in this context is not fundamentally different from what is generally understood by politics. On the other hand, for Hungarians, the meaning is fundamentally changed, gaining an important identity connotation.

Political behavior at a local level

The percentage of those who declared that they voted during the local elections is similar for the two ethnic groups. The differences appear at the moment of explaining the vote. If a percentage of 5% of Romanians openly declare that their vote of the Mayor was ethnically determined (“mostly because he was Romanian”, “firstly because he’s one of my Romanian folks”), in the case of the Hungarian respondents the percentage raises to 40%. Beyond the ethnic criterion, Hungarian respondents also claimed competence and the results of their favorite candidate’s activity. As a whole, these results suggest a significant difference between the declared reasons and the real ones which determined the local electoral behavior of the respondents. The Romanian respondents hardly mentioned the ethnic criterion, but nevertheless, they overwhelmingly voted for Romanian candidates. On the other hand, Hungarians invoked the ethnic criterion very frequently, but in some cases, they voted for a Romanian candidate. How can these results be explained?

An additional reason is given by the different degree of legitimacy associated to ethnic vote according to the citizen’s ethnic belonging. The minority status is frequently associated to a defensive position of identity and culture, in a justification of the open appeal to ethnic criteria in the electoral behavior. On the other hand, such an appeal from the majority is less justified, as it

is more likely to be perceived in terms of an abusive and arrogant attitude. In other words, even though they are aware of the fact that their choices are also ethnically motivated, Romanians have stronger reasons than Hungarians to conceal this

As expected, at the level of political sympathies there is a clear line between the two ethnic groups: Romanians opt for non-Hungarian parties and Hungarians vote especially for the political vehicle of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (DUHR). The Hungarians justify their political sympathies via a twofold mechanism: one from the voter to the political party (“DUHR because I’m Hungarian”) and another one, the other way round (DUHR, because they are the closest to us, they take care of our problems, no one else will”). Importantly, the connection between the Hungarians and DUHR is not necessarily a harmonious one, marked by a positive feeling, but rather it takes the aspect of duty to the ethnic group one is part of. The portraits drawn by respondents to their favorite candidates imply a major discrepancy between the “demand” and the “offer”, which leads to votes determined by reasons other than the candidate’s charisma and prestige.

Economic factors and ethnic vote

What do the results show? Indeed, one may note a clear connection between personal and collective social and economic difficulties on the one hand and political support on the other hand, at the general level of the respondents and in conformity with the cited theoretical models. While the connection between the economic variables and the electoral behavior at a general level is clear, it is equally clear that ethnic vote does not depend upon economic variables. Even though one may assert that the economic situation eroded part of the votes given by Hungarians to DUHR, it is clear that the ethnic vote in Romania is not essentially an economic one. There are economic arguments within the Hungarian community, but these are part of a larger identity structure and are probably meant to justify symbolic, more central motives. These arguments are in accordance with the results obtained in other parts of the world. Traditionally, a significant part of the research in this domain was motivated by the claim that regional social and economic disparities determine de ethnic vote. Another characteristic is interesting from the perspective of the voting intention formation, as resulted from our study: for the Romanian, the Hungarian as an individual is a friend, while as a group it is a potential enemy. There are some positive traits which are acknowledged for the Hungarian as an individual, and this is also valid at a collective

level, except that at this level, the problem of the negative intentions towards Romanians is also manifest. This situation creates a paradoxical pattern of coexistence, marked by harmony at an inter-individual level, and conflicting and competitive at an inter-group level. Therefore, in order to understand behavior at an ethnic level, one must focus not so much on individual stereotypy, but on identity processes. In the case of the Rroma population, this distinction is not necessary, because stereotypical representations at an individual and collective level are relatively identical. On the other hand, in the case of the Romanian – Hungarian relationship, it is essential.

In fact, this representational “dualism” explain why the Hungarians, although faithful voters of their representatives, voted for a Romanian candidate in the local elections: in this case, the representational level is the one which simply counts here, and this is active in a certain context: as long as the Hungarians’ electoral behavior has a collective stake, thus influencing the fate of the entire ethnic group, the vote will go exclusively to the Hungarian candidates or, in case of the presidential elections, to the candidate who is perceived to have the friendliest attitude towards the Hungarians. Conversely, if the stake is a local one, positive individual representations may appear, and the vote may go to representatives of the other ethnic group. This vision suggests not only that Hungarians can vote for Romanian candidates in certain conditions, but also that Romanians can vote for Hungarian candidates in similar conditions.

In the case of the Rroma population, it is interesting to observe the overwhelming declaration of their “official” belonging to an ethnic group – according to the community in whose vicinity they live – but also the acknowledgement of their belonging to the Rroma community in an unofficial environment. The explanations are linked to culture and tradition, with a remark to the differences which are perceived between diverse Rroma communities. Unfortunately, there is a small minority of Rroma, mostly from urban areas, with medium and higher education, who express the intention of participation (political vote) based on arguments, electoral campaign, and situational analysis. For most of them, the political discussion takes place in the electoral period and is generated / mediated by the community leader who, in most cases, also decides the direction of the vote. The political choice is motivated less by argument, appurtenance, identity and more by the possibility of co-interest, which is mostly material. In all cases, the group support, as well as the main opinion trend within the group are very important in the decision-making process; the model of political behavior is also influenced by the time

distance to the actual voting process (Ledgerwood, Alison; Callahan, Shannon P, 2012), and by the main opinion trend.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have three models regarding the formation of voting intentions. In the case of Romanians, the intention is formed as a consequence of trend of the moment, which is mostly determined by the influence of the social structure in which the voters live / perform their activity. There are cases when a candidate from another ethnic group is accepted, but this is the exception rather than the norm. For the Hungarians, ethnic identity is preemptive in the formation of the vote intentions, this involving the whole family, including children, who do not have the right to vote yet. These discussions take place especially during electoral campaigns, when the stakes are precise. In the case of the Roma people, political discussions are occasional and are largely related to the electoral campaigns. In their case, decision making processes include, in most cases, the argument of immediate benefices rather than cultural considerations or identity issues.

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