

## The voting behaviour in the local Romanian elections of June 2016

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**Abstract:** *The voting behaviour of people in the local Romanian election has important social implications, yet due to strong mentality influences in electoral research, it has rarely been studied from the behavioural analytical perspective. In this article a behavioural analysis of voting is presented from the moment of pre campaigning, campaign, until the voting day and how it has been affected by other factors, more complex than in other elections, including the analysis of the influence of the changes of electoral laws and restrictions of campaign budget. Moreover, the experience gained as a candidate in this local election, led me to write about the perception and the behaviour of voting people. It is concluded that such an analysis is both theoretically fruitful and empirically relevant.*

**Key-words:** *electoral campaign, behaviour analysis, political strategies*

### 1. Behaviour of Romanian voting people

Studying the behaviour of the electorate is equivalent in electoral marketing to the "market research" in economic marketing. Unlike classic marketing where it is perceived more as a necessity, in electoral marketing it has become a reality. Its aim is to provide knowledge and a forecast of the attitudes and behaviour of the electorate, a collection and analysis of information on the characteristics, needs, motivations, decision-making and public behaviour relevant to a political party.

The Romanian political market is changing from one election to another. Nowadays, the big problem of the Romanian political background is that politicians are behaving like technocrats and technocrats are behaving like politicians. In this case the consequences of this confusion are illustrated in the results of the election and in the future of democracy.

On 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2016, local elections were held in Romania and the elected officials were voted – all the mayors of villages, cities and municipalities; the village, town and city councils (Local Councils) as well as the Sectors' Local

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Councils of Bucharest, the 41 County Councils and the Bucharest Municipal General Council.

Democracy is built on political parties, because the parties have a different vision, based on values about how society should be oriented and led. I think there cannot be a party without a vision, as there cannot be democracy without parties and also in the democracy *a special role is played by working under a technocrat leadership*. The problem arises when the electorate do not understand the role of every player on this political move and the perception of people is that everyone is corrupt and has personal interests. It is hard to convince them that your intentions as a candidate are serious and to change mentalities.

Most people no longer trust political parties and as a result the turnout rate decreases radically on voting day.

### **1.1. Settlements and changes in the electoral market**

Election campaigns are designed at least in theory, to inform voters about the candidates and help them to better understand their positions towards the current issues, the causes they fight for and the parties they are campaigning for. Knowing the candidates, their thoughts and actions, voters can decide who to vote for, if they change their electoral options or keep them, if a change of Power is needed or not.

The stages of an election campaign are similar to the stages of an ordinary marketing campaign. As in the case of a commercial campaign, a political campaign is preceded by a thorough market study: field research, statistical analysis, etc. Based on the results electoral agenda topics, namely topics that are important to voters are established. These themes will be in turn segmented by various criteria to address groups of voters differently, depending on factors such as: age, income, education, status, lifestyle, behavioural characteristics of the electorate etc. *Such issues as* establishing a target or a target audience will determine how to position the product, in our case the candidate versus the other alternatives offered to the public / voters.

Romania's political system has undergone profound changes since the beginning of the reform process in 1990. The economy continues to be in a period of transition to a market economy, transition resulting in severe constraints on the activity of the whole public sector and the central administrative system. Since 1990, creating a modern and efficient system of public administration has been considered a priority for the Romanian Government. However, they could not mobilize the resources necessary for creating the legal and institutional framework, needed for central and local government administration and in particular, to effectively implement the reform measures. The causes that led to the impossibility of applying a real reform in the administration were:

- severe financial constraints;
- lack of political determination;

- reduced experience regarding the alternative administrative structures;
- unpreparedness of politicians and public officials to meet the demands and requirements arising from the rapidly changing environment;
- the absence of clear rules for staff and administrative structures, inadequate definitions of functions and inappropriate salary scales.

The way the election campaigns had previously been done, has changed since the modification of the Electoral Law and with the introduction of the Permanent Electoral Authority guide of campaign financing. Thus, due to these new changes, the candidates are restricted in terms of the amount allocated in the budget of an election campaign, but also on how campaign funds should be raised, managed and spent.

On the Romanian election market appeared a more important period than that of the actual campaign, when the candidates are promoted massively and are trying to convince voters to give them the vote, namely the pre-campaign period. If the current legislation does not allow a big investment for branding the election campaign, it seems that presently the candidates focus especially on branding the pre-campaign, the activities before the election being centred only on direct contact with the citizens and reaching the public target through online channels and mass-media.

From an organizational perspective, at these elections the Mayors are elected in a single round, and the Presidents of County Councils are elected indirectly, which is another factor that influenced the change in electoral strategies and actions.

According to the specialists, we are dealing with an aggressive campaign a few months before the election and a stylish campaign just before the election. It seems that the alterations that occurred are changing the strategies adopted by specialists in previous years. The precautions and elegance of the campaign as well as the results of certain parties have one main reason behind: the recently intense activity of the National Anticorruption Directorate. Such as in cases of private businesses where budgets for marketing campaigns were not allocated as they had been originally planned, in the case of the electoral campaign for the local elections of 2016, the candidates had to cope with and adjust to these expenses restrictions.

## **2. The behaviour of the electorate in the online environment**

The online environment was the one that gave us the President of the country, as concluded by specialists in studies after the presidential elections, and that is why many of the candidates in the local elections have focused on communication via the online, especially on Facebook.

A major difference between political communication on online platforms and classic communication via mass-media, is that for every public appearance of the candidate, the feedback obtained from the voters is much faster hence the impact a

message has is greater. Particularly disadvantaged are the candidates coming from rural areas where the online does not have the same development.

Increasingly more questions arise whether an election campaign is more about manipulation rather than information. The superficiality of information and the focus more on the political show rather than on substantive issues trigger the superficiality and instability of electoral options. Obviously, some can be partly blamed on the media. The lack of information of the voters is due to the way in which mass media cover the election campaign. The preference for scandal information and the presentation of the electoral competition as entertainment are the main directions for several newspapers as well as radio and television stations in Romania and, in fact, worldwide. This is another reason why voters choose to collect information from online channels, directly from websites or the Facebook pages of candidates / Twitter etc.

The trend is one of social media democratization. If in previous years, parties were organized into digital guerrillas and were ready to meet the leaders' messages either with positive or negative reactions, nowadays the online acquired a libertarian connotation, in the sense that responses are generated automatically by the citizens who are becoming more active and have a stronger voice. The language used is simple, direct, the voter having more courage to argue with the candidate in the digital environment, as compared to when they had direct contact with them.

Promotion is the most relevant part of election campaigns. Misinformed commentators, sometimes inflate the importance of advertising as the most important tool of communication, insofar as it becomes the entire marketing process. Such mistakes lead to failure in assessing the complexities of the entire strategy, not to mention other parts of the promotional mix. By focusing mainly on advertising, the marketing modern industry is probably not surprised that its public profile is considerably more high profile for those who prefer direct contacts and public relations, fields of action which are equally important in the communication of electoral marketing.

However, with the arrival of modern forms of promotion, particularly those related to Internet use (Facebook for example), those areas of the promotional mix started to win the public over and especially towards the political realm.

The promotional mix can be divided into two main parts, namely paid advertising and free advertising. The term paid advertising comprises all forms of visual advertising (paid posts and ads on social media - Facebook, Twitter) and the media (posters, etc.).

It should be noted that the current electoral law was changed, few restrictions being imposed in terms of investment made in the area of promotion - campaign materials and obsolete practices which involve giving small symbolic gifts to the electorate, branded gifts to boost mass election decisions in such a way as to choose a particular candidate were banned.

In the online environment candidates may present themselves in both formal capacity – status or political function and occupation or occupational field, official meetings as well as in their informal environment - family, hobbies etc. It is recommended to use simple phrases, a direct topic and an accessible vocabulary. Voters pay attention and react to posts as they are presented.

The best method of promotion for candidates in the local elections held in Romania was through the social network Facebook that we practically ended up identifying with the word Social Media. The campaigns were sometimes very dynamic which enabled the performance of micro targeting. In addition to Political Page sites, the candidates involved in campaigns and pre-campaigns could also use a number of free and paid advertising services offered by Facebook (Facebook Ads) that can be paid per click, per view or per interaction. The electorate did not feel annoyed by political add sites that appeared in the campaign, but there was an easily noticeable difference in promoting candidates during election years as compared to non-election years.

#### **4. Electorate behaviour on voting day**

Political behavior includes both internal reactions, such as attitudes and beliefs, and actions that can be evaluated, directly measurable, such as voting and election campaigns.

So voting behavior falls within the broad range of political behavior and it is an area of research, concerned about how people tend to vote in elections, the reasons why they vote as they do and how they react to outside influences. It is equally important to find out why some people do not vote, how many do not vote and whether they have characteristics which differ from those who actually go to the polls.

When analyzing behaviour on voting day, a low turnout, higher disinterest among the young population and distrust in candidates with political affiliations were detected. Surprising results were obtained by the independent candidates, and the ones who come from newly established parties, such as USR.

On the national level, the best percentages were obtained by the Social Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party followed by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats.

The conclusion, based on the study of the behavior of the electorate, is that there is a strong need for a renewal of the political class. In light of these local elections, myself as a candidate, I can say that not only our image as candidates mattered, but also the perception of voters on the political formation.

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