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Searching for a common methodological ground for the study of politicians' perceived personality traits: A multilevel psycholexical approach



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the three-stage psycholexical research was to systematize individual differences in voters' perception of politicians' personality traits and the differentiation dimensions of politicians' images using the example of Ukraine. On the basis of 200 interviews, politicians' personality lexicon was compiled and categorized. A representative sample of that lexicon was used in a study concerning the perception of several dozen politicians which allowed to identify four dimensions of politicians' perceived personality traits at the individual and aggregate levels, distinct from the classic Big Five. Another study confirmed the stability of the structure of perception based on 2-level CFA and a strong relationship of personality image with preferences for politicians based on 2-level regression analysis.

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1. Introduction

For a fairly long time, research on political behavior have focused on the exploration of factors influencing voter decisions (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Cwalina, Falkowski, Newman, & Vercic, 2004; O'Cass, 2002; O'Cass & Pecotich, 2005; Schoen & Schumann, 2007; Wang, 2016). Out of many factors, the key one is considered to be the image of a politician or of the party that a politician represents (Gorbaniuk, Kusak, Kogut, & Kustos, 2015; Koppensteiner & Stephan, 2014). Image is a special kind of idea formed in the voter's mind concerning a politician's characteristics, which, by evoking certain associations, becomes the source of attitudes and influences electoral behavior (Capelos, 2010; Winther Nielsen & Vinæs Larsen, 2014).

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Many scholars believe that the main component of a politician's image is his or her perceived personality traits (Bartels, 2002; Caprara, Schwartz, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2008; Catellani & Alberici, 2012; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Peterson, 2005). Most of the studies to date on the structure of personality traits attributed to politicians and on their significance in determining political preferences (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1997, 2002; Koppensteiner & Grammer, 2010; Koppensteiner, Stephan, & Jäschke, 2015) have been based on the structure of personality traits from the five factor model. The assumption that this model would describe politicians' perceived personality traits accurately was not confirmed by research results (Caprara et al., 1997, 2002). Investigators obtained a smaller number of politicians' perceived personality traits than the five factor model posits. This means that using this model in the study of politicians' perceived personality traits is not a good solution and that further exploratory and systematizing research in this area is needed.

The aim of this article is to propose a uniform procedure of investigating the structure of politicians' perceived personality

traits using the methodology borrowed from psycholexical studies (Angleitner, Ostendorf, & John, 1990; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996). The lexical approach has enabled the simultaneous application of most of the major criteria for the goodness of a structural model and has created more potential for agreement on a scientific taxonomy (Saucier & Srivastava, 2015). The procedure, comprising several stages, will be presented as it was applied in a research project conducted in Ukraine in 2011–2014. We believe that similarly to psycholexical research, which concerns particular languages – also research on the structure of politicians' perceived personality traits should be conducted for each country separately. The specificity of a particular country, its culture, and its political scene may play an important role in this respect.

1.1. The personalization of politics and the significance of politicians' personality traits in determining political preferences

Observations made by researchers studying the political scene indicate that ideological differences between politicians' programs and views are still important to voters but their importance is gradually decreasing (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Miller et al., 1986). At the same time, the importance of voter-perceived personality traits in politicians' image is observed to be growing to such an extent that some political scientists have proclaimed the onset of a new, candidate-focused era in politics as early as the beginning of the 1990s (Wattenberg, 1991). A content analysis of answers to open-ended questions in pre-election polls in Canada revealed already in the 1970s and 1980s that more than 75% of comments concerned politicians' personality traits (Brown, Lambert, Kay, & Curtis, 1988).

What is characteristic of the new democracies emerging in Eastern Europe is the tendency for parties to be built around leaders rather than for leaders to emerge from party organizations (Cwalina, Falkowski, & Kaid, 2000). Frequent changes of party names, prominent politicians moving from one party to another or leaving a party to build their own political group – these are common phenomena in Ukraine as well. With an unstable image of a political party, beliefs concerning the personality traits of politicians may be the anchor around which information about the politician as a person is organized, enabling the prediction of his or her behavior, including the assessment of consistency in fulfilling election promises.

Observations concerning the growing role of politicians' perceived personality traits in determining electoral preferences have been confirmed in numerous studies (Bartels, 2002; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Miller et al., 1986). The personification of politics may be regarded as a manifestation of the individualization of social life, where people want to perceive themselves and others above all as individuals rather than as representatives of a group (Garzia, 2011). This largely results from the increasing role of the media in politics (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; King, 2002). The exploration of differences in the perception of politicians' personality traits is important for several reasons. Firstly, scholars believe that relying on politicians' personality traits enables respondents to organize information about a particular politician in terms of a few basic dimensions. Every day people evaluate other people's personality traits, which means this is a routine operation for them (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). As relatively stable human characteristics, traits make it possible for voters to predict politicians' behaviors (Catellani & Alberici, 2012). Secondly, numerous studies have shown that politicians' perceived personality traits are significant predictors of voter preferences (Bartels, 2002; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Miller et al., 1986). Interestingly, politicians' perceived personality traits explain voter preference to a greater degree than do values attributed to politicians (Caprara et al., 2008). More recent studies also show that a tendency to be guided by politi-

cians' perceived personality traits in developing political preferences is found not only in late deciders but also in early deciders (Catellani & Alberici, 2012). Investigating politicians' perceived personality traits is important from both the theoretical and the practical points of view.

1.2. The dimensions of politicians' perceived personality

Studies on politicians' perceived personality traits have been conducted from the perspective of social perception and concerned attribution processes (e.g. Capelos, 2010; Pancer, Brown, Gregor, & Claxton-Oldfield, 1992) or from the perspective of personality psychology (e.g. Caprara et al., 1997, 2002; Miller & Miller, 1976; Pancer et al., 1992). The latter can be divided into two types: exploratory and confirmatory. The aim of exploratory studies was to identify the most important dimensions of politicians' perceived personality by means of an unstructured instrument, without hypothesizing what dimensions these are. Notable examples of the latter include the study by Pancer, Brown, and Barr (1999). Using a list of adjectives constructed on the basis of an earlier analysis of free associations, Pancer et al. (1999) did research among students from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, in which, using factor analysis, they extracted three dimensions of politicians' perceived image: Charisma, Competence, and Integrity. Another example of this kind of approach is analyses performed on the basis of data yielded by open-ended responses on candidate likes and dislikes in the 1972 ANES (American National Election Study) (Miller & Miller, 1976). The investigators distinguished five dimensions of a politician's image, four of which refer to personality traits: Competence (experience, ability), trust (honesty, integrity), Reliability (responsibility, stability), Leadership Appeal (inspiring, communicative), and Personal Appearance (age, other demographic features).

A different, confirmatory strategy was chosen by Caprara et al. (1997, 2002), who conducted a series of two studies in Italy and in the United States using a structured list of 25 adjectives, compiled earlier for the purpose of measuring the Big Five in ordinary people. It was established in the course of these studies that whereas individuals from outside the realm of politics (a sportsperson and a TV star) were perceived on five classic dimensions typical of the general population, politicians (Berlusconi, Prodi, Clinton, Dole) were perceived on a reduced number of dimensions. In the case of Italian politicians, the factor structure was limited to two dimensions (Energy/Innovation and Honesty/Trustworthiness), whereas in the case of American politicians it was limited to three dimensions, two of them similar to those in the Italian study (Energy/Innovation, Agreeableness/Conscientiousness) and the third extracted factor not named by the authors (Caprara et al., 1997). The structure of the perception of politicians was identical in various groups of voters and did not depend on the respondents' political preferences. A study conducted five years later based on the same list of adjectives confirmed the two-dimensional structure of the perception of the personality of prominent figures in Italian politics.

Analogous research aimed at identifying the key dimensions of politicians' perceived personality has also been done in Poland (Błaszczuk & Gorbaniuk, 2009; Gorbaniuk, 2009). However, it differed from Caprara's in that it concerned a larger number of politicians (24) and involved a longer list of adjectives (148), which judges selected from a larger list of 410 adjectives as those that differentiated politicians the most. In analyzing data, levels of analysis were distinguished (individual vs. aggregate). Factor analysis at both the individual and aggregate levels revealed the existence of four dimensions: Competence, Impulsivity/Disagreeableness, Extraversion, and Integrity. Moreover, at both levels of analysis, the dimensions extracted were found to be strictly related to prefer-

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