

**MEDIA TRUST AND POLITICAL TRUST: POLITICAL CAMPAIGN KEY
FACTORS**

The media's role in political communication during the elections

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Abstract

Numerous communicational experts, political consultants, or sociologists have searched for a standard, easy-to-use, easy-to-apply recipe for the voting mechanism. More precisely, what are the key elements which compose a voting option, what are the biggest influencing factors for the electorate, and how do citizens migrate from indecisive to the strongly involved electorate category? A standard recipe is hard to find, let alone to apply since the voting mechanism is a very dynamic process, strongly linked to election contexts.

The citizens can shift their electoral decision until the very last moment. However, some factors can tilt the scale or influence the result: political trust and media trust.

This paper searches what are the most influential elements which can alternate the political or media trust levels keeping in mind that on those two pillars one can build a political strategy from scrap. Moreover, the paper investigates how the Romanian voters positioned themselves towards the campaign in a very atypical year marked by the coronavirus pandemic. The specific timeframe analysis was the general elections in 2020.

The paper is structured in two: in the first section, we put relevant communicational concepts for building political and media trust in the spotlight while in the second part we present the quantitative research using the sociological survey along with relevant results and useful conclusions.

In the paper's first part we summarize agenda-setting theory followed by media framing and priming theories, agenda melding theory, and second-level agenda setting to set the political trust and media trust analysis framework. Then, we will seek how these two pillars form and change, what are their specifics, how do publics shift perspective towards different levels of trust and, finally, how the two pillars became a relevant part of voting mechanism. Furthermore, we will examine the connection between political credibility and the impact of mass media, why policies matter in determining voting behavior, and how political legitimacy and political support play a key role in building a solid political trust.

In the paper's second part we present the quantitative research applied to a heterogeneous public through an online survey during the official campaign period (the month before the elections

took place). We did not emphasize each individual's voting option but rather, we looked at how the key electoral influencing drivers formed and whether we could draw some relevant directions for further political campaigns.

In the first theoretical chapter, we investigated the mass media's role throughout the electoral campaigns, starting from agenda-setting. The media sets important or interesting topics for the audiences. Although the term was first used by McCombs and Shaw who researched the audiences' attitude towards a certain issue, agenda-setting was further researched and even distilled in numerous sub-branches over the years. Drawing an initial line, there is one conclusion: as long as the media forecast a topic more frequently the issue becomes more important for the target audiences. Furthermore, mass media can set the public's agendas by establishing which news is worth sharing and which is not.

One of the ramifications bearing a high influence in political campaigns is the priming theory. This is associated with psychology and has become one important media theory element through the subliminal impact on individuals. The priming theory is repeating keywords or different expression pairings. Most of the time, individuals do not recognize being subjected to priming effects. The best priming example presented also in the paper was used by Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) when he showed the soup versus soap example: people who get exposed to food-related words or expressions tend to compose the word soup instead of soap when presented with the "so_p" word. Media priming (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982) is linked to media's way of presenting different topics more vivid, more often to project different subliminal associations to the audiences. Therefore, mass media can establish some evaluation criteria for different public institutions or political actors by doing these afore-mentioned subliminal associations. Mass media can and will present some pieces of news detrimental to other news or events, will emphasize different parts of the news to stir the audiences' attention and attitude, and to establish how the political people and institutions are evaluated (Severin and Tankard, 2001). Different political campaign strategists use priming to set the public agenda, to create different reactions or just to change electoral perceptions.

One second branch of agenda-setting is the framing theory. This, as its name states, is linked with what frames of what context mass media uses to present different events. Each individual, based on their own experience tend to have a set of frame or references. Mass media can alter or

change these frames' set by putting a salience on some aspects detrimental to others (Carter, 2013). From the framing perspective, the audiences are directly influenced by how they perceive reality (Buturoiu, 2016) by having their attention routed or channeled to a topic or towards certain attributes. That's why, who controls the agendas, controls the topics' understanding in an electoral race (Wolfsfeld, 1997). The framing theory was associated with the second level of agenda-setting. The difference between first and second-level agenda setting is on the topics' level of salience. In other words, the first level agenda setting focuses on certain topics while the second level reaches towards attributes or certain aspects of a single topic.

With new media development and with almost instant access to information, the audiences' way of searching for topics or the way they consume the news changed. The public is no longer a simple passive receiver, it becomes a selection factor. Although the audiences meld their agendas by becoming information referees, the risk is at the information bubbles. The public tends to choose only some information sources and the risk of manipulation is bigger.

The paper's second chapter is focused on the mechanisms for building the voting option. Media credibility and trust are both very dynamic processes. Usually, the audiences tend to search for new information sources depending on whether mass media responds to each individual's needs and expectations or not. This becomes about creating a trust relationship (Gambetta, 1988). For this particular reason, mass media has to work on building and maintaining credibility levels. Through credibility, the media institution can or cannot tick the public's expectation levels (Rotter, 1967). Apart from the institutional credibility, there is another factor for determining the electoral result: the credibility of the news. In this case, the risk is the same as for agenda melding: media sources landlocking.

The media's credibility is under continuous change. When the new media development started to become more and more present in the daily consumer life, the media credibility became linked with the credibility of the media brand. In other words, the target audiences will pay more attention to the initial news sources rather than the news itself. This process works the other way around as well. The audiences look first at which brand is the closest to their needs and expectations and then will search for other, maybe alternative, information sources. Of course, the older media brands are, the more media credibility can own. A piece of news is not simple journalistic material any longer. It becomes an effect of the news brand's credibility, the target

audiences' preferences, and so on. The older news brands hold this market advantage because they confirmed the citizens' expectations in the past as well.

The media market evolved since the online part became more and more important. The classic media outlets (newspapers, television, or the radio) are not simple broadcasters any longer. We are seeing an expansion process: these outlets have websites, communicate through social media profiles, entice through PR campaigns, and so on, just to be close to their audiences and where citizens consume their news. The whole process is part of constructing or maintaining the media trust levels. This is why the role of the journalist changed altogether. A journalist has to adapt constantly, has to check the information sources continuously, broadcasting the news is not a linear process any longer.

The media credibility process changed once the consumers' media diet changed.

The political trust process works similarly with building the media trust process. In this case, the citizens choose to interact, to create a relationship with the political or institutional establishment for a certain region or country. The same principle works as well: building a trust relationship. A functional democracy is one where citizens are active players in the country's political life and agenda. The essence here is the voting process. And the political players' trust is dynamic meaning different high or low levels with some balance elements. (Altman, 2011).

Political trust is different from country to country, from one democracy to another. In older democratic systems, political trust is mostly seen more in how the institutions are perceived and less in parties or political actors. Whereas, in younger, more sparkling democracies, political trust is better linked to the economic and social contexts which those societies surpass (Sander and Putnam, 2010).

In the second part of the paper, we present the results from quantitative research done through a questionnaire aimed at analyzing what are the main factors influencing political and media trust (as the main two pillars in a political campaign). The research questions used in our survey relate to the participants' media diet, their levels of political and media trust.

We researched how different agendas work on individuals' behavior and electoral demeanors (for instance political efficacy, political trust, voting turnout). Political efficacy measures how citizens can influence a country's democratic process. In other words, political efficacy is a health indicator for the civic society (Sullivan and Riedel, 2011). Political efficacy means

directly involving in the life of the public's institution (by submitting petitions, by interacting with the establishment), indirect involvement (protesting, writing memorandums) or associated (by organizing elections in a way each citizen can democratically voice their preferences).

Political trust and voting turnout are indicators of how individuals chose to vote if they chose to vote or by involving in certain voluntary actions to help the candidates whom they root for.

We used three types of variables in the survey: dependent, independent, and socio-demographics.

The dependent ones were political trust, political efficacy, voting turnout, and political engagement. The independent ones were linked with media diet, more specific which were the sources individuals take the information from and socio-demographics were age, studies, occupation, monthly income levels.

We divided the research hypotheses into 4 distinct categories: presumptions linked to political trust, presumptions linked to media trust, presumptions linked to the individuals' media diet, and presumptions linked to the voting intention.

The political trust hypotheses are:

- 1a. When people consume more political-related news the political trust level rises.
- 1b. Women usually have increased political trust levels compared to men.
- 1c. Youngsters have less political trust levels compared to seniors.
- 1d. Highly educated people have higher political trust levels compared to lower educated people.
- 1e. When an individual is interested in politics the political trust levels will increase.

The media trust hypotheses are:

- 2a. Young people tend to have higher online media trust levels compared with seniors.
- 2b. Men have a higher tendency to check the political news compared to women.
- 2c. Higher educated people disagree more with the news they encounter compared with lower educated people.
- 2d. Young people are more flexible in changing their opinions on a political issue searched online compared with seniors.

2e. If an individual has increased levels of media trust, he or she has increased levels of political trust.

2f. If an individual has an increased media trust level, he or she will be more open to go and vote.

Media diet hypotheses are:

3a. Young people tend to consume more online news compared with seniors.

3b. Social media active persons present a bigger “news finds me” sentiment.

3c. The “news finds me” sentiment is higher in younger people compared with the seniors.

3d. Higher educated people have a higher “news finds me” sentiment compared with lower educated people.

3e. Women tend to search news on social media more compared to men.

3f. Social media active news consumers are more interested in upcoming elections compared with less active social media news consumers.

Voting intention hypotheses are:

4a. Young people tend to go to vote more compared to seniors.

4b. Men tend to vote more compared to women.

4c. Highly educated people tend to vote more compared to lower educated people.

In this subchapter, we searched what the voting intention is split into gender, age and what are the pillars building the political trust. Moreover, we assessed whether there is a specific influencing pattern for the election’s outcome and how political and media trust are a part of this.

We used the survey to test the assumptions, submitted exclusively online between October 30 and December 2 on 746 people, nationwide. The participants were as follows: 66.1% women, 33.1% men, and 0.8% not stating their gender. The participants’ average age was 35 years old. 71.04% stated they graduated university or post-university studies. 84.4% of participants were

living in urban areas (Bucharest included) while 10.9% said they were living in rural areas while 4.8% were living overseas. 8.3% of participants ticked low-level incomes, 59.4% said they were middle incomers, and 25.9% ticked high-level income.

As for the main results, we researched what were the main variables which can influence voting turnout. Therefore, men are more prone to vote and have a higher tendency in watching the news. The youngsters are more open to voting compared to seniors and higher-educated people have a better-established electoral option. Generation X and Millennials are the only ones who ticked high levels of political trust. Political trust is not related to gender, education, income levels, or residency. Political trust is linked however to institutional performance.

As for news consumption, although younger generations gather their pieces of information almost exclusively online, the media trust level resembles all generations regardless of the platforms used, what media products the individuals prefer or what types of news. The survey participants offered us a recipe for electoral involvement: where media and political levels are high or tend to go up so will the citizens' active involvement in the electoral process or voting process. If we summarize, the Romanian voter type (from this survey) is a middle-aged male, open towards the public agenda, watching carefully how various institutions communicate, and willing to vote.

As a conclusion, this paper tried to offer some landmarks on how media trust together with political trust and media diet can and, eventually, will influence voting behavior and results.

A party's political trust or a public institution's political trust is tied together with the political trust levels from a certain political person or candidate. Citizens will always check if their candidates managed to tick their political trust expectations, whether and how the candidates managed to deliver, and so on. The public institutions with political management or political components are strongly related to those candidates' political trust levels. Hence, the institution's trust is linked to the political actor's trust. This process works both ways. The public becomes part of an ongoing process of constructing or maintaining some relevant political trust levels. This is why we can assess the individuals who are part of a continuous electoral campaign as long as the politicians represent public institutions and public institutions englobe politicians in the management positions. The effects are impossible to assess. In short term, it does seem that politicians use institutions as liability factors to increase their trust levels. However, in the long

run, these effects will slowly but surely diminish the citizens' trust level in institutions, thus exposing the society to higher risks such as populism, protest movements, and so on. There is another face of this coin: the public, part of this continuous campaign, becomes more and more uniform. We are seeing a paradox: although age is not becoming a crucial factor in determining the voting option, although the electoral messages are addressed to be assessed by as many individuals as possible, the micro-targeting need for a tailored campaign is increasingly important. Individuals will first look at how to politician or the candidate provides this targeted message based on the individuals' needs and expectations and then he will search for the whole political campaign (if he will do this, it's not a guaranteed fact). So, there's the paradox: the political messages are tailored for the masses, but the masses vote based on how each politician or candidate communicates with each individual. Social media had a key factor in producing and providing this campaign paradox. Therefore, we can expect numerous changes to occur over the following years in how candidates will communicate with the electorate, in how the political messages will be delivered, and these will, eventually, affect the voting behavior. In this equation, media trust becomes increasingly important since it is perceived as a refuge for confirming or infirming certain information. One this remains certain and constant: the voting option although countered in a quantitative matter remains a purely qualitative assessment. Each individual will cast their vote based on specific, tailored needs and expectations. Again, this is why the media's role in all this process remains important.

The survey participants offered a somehow standard recipe for political involvement: where media and political trust are high (tick the high levels), the citizens can and will get more often involved in the country's electoral process or agenda, hence the citizens will vote. Of course, this recipe is strongly linked to social, economic, and even political context, but the principle stays the same: the media trust levels determine the political trust which influences trust in institutions and, eventually, determines even the citizens' media diet. Which can also alter the levels of political trust. Political skepticism remains, however, low where trust in politically linked institutions (such as the government, the Parliament, and so on) is high. However, the road towards lower political skepticism is long. Each election is a small part of this road and each change in the electoral behavior alters how political trust will look. The electoral campaigns changed over the last 20 or 30 years. The way politicians speak with citizens changed, the way media and political trust manifest changed. Therefore, political tactics and strategies have to

change. What could the political consultants use from this study? The fact that parties and/or politicians should use the public institutions more to build political trust. Moreover, future campaigns (since we are talking about a continuous mode of electoral-related messages and approaches) should focus more on the institutions and less on the parties or politicians. If these steps are not taken, the political levels risk dropping is higher, hence the electoral absenteeism.