

Russian and American students' images of their future presidents

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The structure of their future presidents' images among Russian and American students was studied. The general tendencies and specific features of the perception of a future president among Russian and American students were revealed. For respondents of both groups, the significant factors influencing their choice of whom to vote for were the program of the candidate, his strategic thinking, the reliability of his team, a high degree of professionalism and competence, leadership skills, the ability to speak and convince, and personal qualities. In regard to specific features, Russian students paid more attention to the business qualities of a future president than did American students; Russian students were optimistic and considered elections capable of effecting changes in the country. American students showed less interest in political events, along with the professional qualities of the leader; they paid attention to his appearance and believed that elections can affect the private life of people.

Keywords: perception of a political leader, political image, president's image

Introduction

The question of voters' perceptions of a political leader is very real in the context of political psychology. The image of political leaders held by voters in different countries is of particular interest. The issue of the image of political leaders is a problem that is widely discussed and studied in the field of psychology (Belitskaya & Nikolaeva, 1994; Boorstin, 1992; Bruce, 1992; Dubov & Pantelev, 1992; Labkovskaya, 1997; Strokanov, Rogers, Barclay, & Zhdanova, 2011). The following are examples of types of research on this subject. Ivannikova (2002) studied perceptions of a candidate's electoral campaign. The perception of leaders' personal characteristics and its impact on their attractiveness were explored by Shestopal & Novikova-Grund (1996). Komissarov (2007) conducted research on how the media creates images of politicians. Orlova (1997) devoted her research to the formation of positive images of public figures.

However, despite strong interest in the perception of political leaders as a whole, the specific perceptions held by voters from different countries are today among the least studied topics. Nevertheless, in a number of works the perceptions of Russian voters are noted. Research has found that Russian voters perceive political leaders according not to their political agenda but to their image. Ivannikova (2002) explains this phenomenon by pointing out the fact that different parties and candidates in Russia often have similar programs, so people do not perceive political ideas but have an image of specific personalities who carry out these ideas. A similar situation is observed in the politics of the United States.

Analysis of this subject shows that the image of politicians in most studies is considered as a socioperceptive phenomenon (Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972) and as a result of the perception of the real personal qualities of politicians and their political activities; this perception is carried out on the cognitive and emotional levels of information processing (Ivannikova, 2002).

Therefore, the structure of a politician's image can be revealed through analysis of cognitive, affective, and connotative (behavioral) components (Shestopal, 1995, 2002). Cognitive elements of an image are verbalized and perceived by a person; affective elements, in contrast, are rarely perceived; and connotative elements appear in behavior and precede the execution of an act (Shestopal, 2002).

The structure of a politician's image can be described through an analysis of rational and irrational characteristics. The irrational components include emotional characteristics that are immediate and can appear on the level of unconscious processes (Shestopal, 2002). Unconscious processes can be associated with specific features of voters, stereotypes existing in a society, or peculiarities of social attitudes that are representative of a particular culture.

Rational components of an image include an informative one and can be understood by analyzing the personal qualities of a politician (Shestopal, 2002); these qualities can be described through the study of personality (Osgood, 1952). In Osgood's approach, the image of a political leader can be assessed through attractiveness, strength, and activity. Attractiveness is one of the most important measurements in this assessment. According to Shestopal (2002), personal attractiveness, warmth, and humanity determine the overall impression of a politician and influence her perception and ratings. The attractiveness of a politician is often revealed through such personal qualities as charisma. The criteria according to which a person can be considered attractive have to include the following (Shestopal, 2002):

- appearance (clothing, demeanor) and bodily characteristics (health or disease, physical constitution, fullness or thinness, good or bad habits, masculinity or femininity, age, temperament, physical attractiveness)
- psychological features (nature, individual traits, speech speed) and ethical policy
- political, professional, and business qualities (experience, political views, leadership qualities, skill in political activities, competence)

Another key characteristic that helps to identify the attractiveness of a political leader is recognition. An increase in a politician's recognition is a measure of his success (Shestopal, 2002).

Important substantive characteristics of a politician's image also are indicators of strength and activity. Shestopal shows in her research that respondents evaluate personal qualities of politicians by understanding them as strong or weak. Activity as a personal quality of a politician is increasingly linked to the execution of power (Shestopal, 1995, 2002).

According to Ivannikova (2002), the structure of a politician's image can be viewed not from the position of her strength and activity but from professional qualities. Ivannikova points out four such qualities: moral qualities, business qualities, strong leadership qualities, and qualities of a caring leader.

Method

We organized and conducted a special research project with a view to studying the image and features of future presidents as perceived by students in the United States and in Russia. The research was conducted in April 2012 with a sample of students from the history faculty of Perm State National Research University (25 students) and students in different departments at Lyndon State College (Vermont, United States) (28 students). Russian respondents represented the Russian sample; the U.S. sample consisted of respondents who were born and lived in the United States. The total number of respondents was 53: they included 24 women and 29 men. The age of the respondents was 19–23 years old; the average age was 21.

The following methods and techniques were used in the research: a modified version of the technique of Bandurovich, Stehniy, and Churilov (2003), rank method (respondents were asked to estimate the intensity of a candidate's qualities), and a modified method of semantic differential (Osgood, 1952).

The methodological foundations of the research included the approaches of Ivannikova (2002), Shestopal (1995, 2002), and Bandurovich et al. (2003).

Results

The results of the research are presented in Table 1.

We didn't use segmental content analysis in this paper, which is a total of 100%, but we used continuous content analysis, that can give a total of more than 100%.

Data analysis indicated the presence of general trends regarding and specific characteristics of the students in the United States and those in Russia. Describing the overall trends, we can say that both the Russian and the American students were interested in politics in their own country and in the world. The survey also showed that they were interested in presidential elections; the majority knew that presidential elections in both countries took place in 2012.

Common trends included the fact that the main source of information about elections for the Russian and the American students was the Internet, as opposed to receiving this information from television or friends. This finding can be explained, apparently, by the fact that today the Internet is the most effective, quick, convenient, and affordable way of getting information.

The Russian students, as well as the American students, believed that elections in the United States are more democratic than elections in Russia; however, the American students were not as confident about this belief as were the Russian stu-

Table 1. Results of a comparative analysis of the structure of a president's image among Russian and American students, based on the criterion of Fisher's angular transformation

Category	Russian students, percent	American students, percent	Significant differences between groups of respondents, φ
1 Are interested in politics in their country and in the world	100	67.9	3.494 **
2 Know about the presidential election in 2012 in Russia	100	57.1	4.14**
3 Know about the presidential election in 2012 in the United States	83.3	57.1	1.69*
4 Have the Internet as the main source of information about elections	83.3	53.6	1.91*
5 Have television as the main source of information about elections	75.0	32.1	2.58*
6 Have friends as the main source of information about elections	66.7	7.1	3.97**
7 Believe that elections are more democratic in the United States than in Russia	100	42.9	4.97**
8 Are satisfied with the list of candidates	0	14.3	2.247*
9 Are not satisfied with the list of candidates	100	60.7	3.927**
10 Believe the list of candidates is enough	8.3	32.1	1.79*
11 Believe the list of candidates is not enough	91.7	42.9	3.27**
12 Believe business qualities are important	66.7	14.3	3.29**
13 Believe charisma is important	41.7	14.3	1.821*
14 Believe appearance does not influence the selection of the president	100	57.1	4.13**
15 Believe elections may effect changes in the country	50.0	21.4	1.76 *
16 Believe elections may effect changes in private life	25.0	57.1	1.93 *

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

dents. Every survey respondent in Russia agreed with this statement, but only 42.9 percent of the American students did. All the Russian respondents and 60.7% of the American respondents were not satisfied with the list of candidates for the elections. For example, students wrote that “elections are too obvious,” “there is no real deal,” “virtually no alternatives,” “no real opponent of the existing authorities,” “no real opposition.”

Regarding the candidates, Russian students named Vladimir Putin as their ideal winner and also named Barack Obama as the ideal American winner, arguing that Obama has a charismatic personality, has “powerful financial and administrative resources, successful PR”; “he is a Democrat, and the Bush policy was not effective.” When the question was asked, “Why did Putin win?”, most Russian students replied that the population trusts Putin; they feel confident in tomorrow. He has professional competence, charisma, experience. At the same time, they noted that there was no competition.

As a significant factor affecting the decision of whom to vote for, respondents from both groups addressed the structural components of the future president's image, including the following factors: his program, strategic thinking, solid team, high degree of professionalism and competence, leadership qualities, ability to speak and persuade, personal qualities such as kindness and understanding the concerns of people. Respondents from both groups believed that physical appearance is not essential when deciding whom to vote for.

The research also identified specific characteristics of the students, including the fact that the Russian students were generally more interested in political developments in their country and abroad ($\varphi = 3.494$; $p > 0.01$). This finding can be explained by the fact that the Russian students were in the history faculty and had a special interest in relation to their future profession, whereas American students represented different faculties, and their professional interests were not always associated with political policy.

The Russian students received information about elections from the Internet (83.3%) and television (75.0%), also from their friends (66.7%). The American students also received information from the Internet (53.6%); however, other sources of information were less significant than they were for the Russians, such as television (32.1%) and friends (only 7.1%). This may be the case because American students regard their political beliefs largely as a personal choice and don't always discuss politics even with friends.

Every Russian student believed that elections are more democratic in the United States than in Russia. The American students regarded that assertion with noticeably less enthusiasm. Only 42.9% of the American students thought that elections are more democratic in the United States. This finding can be explained by the fact that Russian students have a stereotype about American elections. It is quite different from the typical American student's belief on the matter; American students are considerably more critical of their country's democratic elections.

Every Russian student was not satisfied with the list of candidates. For example, they wrote: “Their campaign[s] are too zealous and unchanging.” Unlike the American respondents, the Russian students pointed out that not all social groups of the population were represented properly, such as young people, intellectuals, students, pensioners, the middle class, and they also indicated that there was no real opposition. Among the American students, only 14.3% were satisfied with the list of candidates.

Significant differences were evident on factors affecting the question of whom to vote for. The Russian respondents focused mostly on the competencies of the future president (66.7%). Among the American students, only 14.3% focused on

competencies. For example, they answered the question “Why did Putin win the election?” by citing his charisma, experience, professional competence, trust by the people, and also because people did not want an Orange Revolution.

All the students from Russia felt that a candidate’s appearance has no effect on the outcome of the vote. Of the American students 57.1% also believed that appearance does not play a role in winning elections. (It should be noted that race plays a significant role in American elections.)

The respondents from Russia evaluated the appearance of the political leaders who stood for president as follows: Prokhorov — 2.4; Mironov — 2.8; Zhirinovsky — 3, Putin — 3, Zyuganov — 3.8 (respondents were asked to choose numbers on a scale from 1 to 5 points). The American respondents were unable to evaluate the appearance of Russian candidates because they were not aware of most of them.

Compared with the American students, the Russian students were more optimistic and believed that the elections in their country would effect changes (50%). Thus, a Russian student wrote: “Elections affect the political situation in the country, but the outcome is predictable.” In the American sample only 21.4% of the respondents agreed with this statement. The American students, as we can see, were more pessimistic, although they were more objective about elections. The results can also be explained by the fact that the Russian students were receiving a specific historical education and their election expectations were therefore higher than those of other students.

This result is also apparent in the responses about the impact of elections on private life. The Russian students were much less inclined to think that elections might have an impact on their personal life (25%). However, the American students felt that elections could affect their private life; this opinion was shared by 57.1% of the American respondents. This discrepancy can be explained by the high level of anxiety of American students regarding postgraduate employment and the high interest-rate loans they would be expected to pay after the American elections.

It is interesting that the Russian students tried to give full answers as opposed to simple “yes” or “no” answers.

Conclusion

In general, the results allow us to reach the following conclusions:

1. There were common general trends among the American and the Russian students: their interest about events taking place in their country, their use of the Internet as an important channel for getting information about elections, their attitude toward elections. Respondents from both groups believed that elections are more democratic in the United States than in Russia, although American students were less certain about this conclusion. Also, the Russian and American respondents were not satisfied with the list of candidates. As significant factors affecting whom to vote for, respondents from both groups addressed the structural components of the future president’s image including his program, strategic thinking, team, professionalism and competence, leadership

qualities, ability to speak and persuade, personal qualities such as kindness and understanding the concerns of people. Respondents from both groups believed that physical appearance doesn't play a significant role for a candidate; however, the American students were not as sure about this belief as the Russian students were.

2. Specific characteristics of the students were identified during the research. Along with using the Internet and television as important channels for getting information, the Russian students also listened to their friends. The Russian respondents were strongly focused on the competencies of the future president; they were optimistic and believed that the elections could effect changes in their country. They were also less inclined to think that the elections might have an impact on their private life. The respondents from Russia also gave full answers, an indication of their openness and desire to express their views.
3. The American students were less interested in political events than the Russians, and they preferred to obtain information about elections via the Internet. They paid attention to a politician's appearance along with leadership skills, a finding that suggests that a candidate's appearance can have a significant impact on the outcome of the vote. They also believed that elections can affect the private life of people, but fewer believed that elections can have an impact on the life of the country as a whole.

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