ELECTION OPINION POLLS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON VOTING PREFERENCES OF SLOVAK AND POLISH VOTERS

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Abstract

The article deals with some factors that can mostly influence indecisive voters, who don't have any stable electoral attitude. Authors' opinions are based on knowledge of Cognitive psychology as well as on available findings of experts from the field of Psychology about the influence of some types of effects on the decision process. Among the others there are types of heuristics, but mostly the effect of priming, the Zajonc effect, bandwagon effect, underdog effect and momentum effect. Research centres are verifying, what influence do the chosen effects have on the voting preferences on Slovak and Polish first-time votes and young voters. The method of the experiment unambiguously showed significant impact of some effects of voting decisions on studied subjects. These findings bring significant stimuli on further investigation as well as on implications for practice of political marketing.

Keywords: priming, Zajonc effect, mere exposure effect, political elections, election

1. Introduction

Voters' decision making in elections is a process influenced by a number of factors. In their work focused on political marketing communication, W. Cwalina and A. Falkowski present several voting behaviour models: socio-structural model (that implies relationship between a voter's position within social structures and his/her election preference, stratification factor); psychological model (with an impact of, for example: identification with a particular party, value system, political alienation, life satisfaction and others); economic model (voter's decision is rational, e.g. Horváth, Machyniak [1]) but also multidimensional models including a marketing model [W. Cwalina, *Twarze i maski*, Charaktery, Portal psychologiczny, 2014, http://www. charaktery.eu/wiesci-psychologiczne/8852/Twarze-i-maski-/]. There are also

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various modifications and versions to the latter model, each of them however, including issues and topics of political activity, social concepts, emotions, candidate image, current events, personal events and epistemic issues (e.g. Neaga [2]; Petranová, Magál & Pravdová [3]; Pavlů [4]; Wojciechowski, Fichnová and Mikuláš [5]; Wąsiński, Szyszka & Tomczyk [6] and others). The models belong to the system of cause and effect approaches [7] where the cognitive domains are not interconnected and their impact on voter candidate support is an independent one. The model was reinterpreted by W. Cwalina and A. Falkowski [http://www.charaktery.eu/wiesci-psychologiczne/8852/Twarze-i-maski-/] based on the assumption that particular cognitive and emotional elements interact with each other. They also included in the model *media* as an additional factor (of their importance in political campaigns refers e.g. Hudíková [8], Solík, Višňovský, Laluhová [9], et al.). On the other hand, the authors O. Eibl, J. Janovský & J. Zagrapan [10] claim that voters do not tend to seek all the information about the candidates in order to do the most thorough election decision. Quite on the contrary, their decision, information collection and evaluation are influenced by already established opinions, or identification with the chosen option. B. Caplan [11, 12] is even more sceptical in his evaluation of a voter. According to him, a vote cast is a release of irrational (although pleasant) opinions and preconceptions, and not a rational decision. Nevertheless, in the research of O. Eibl, J. Janovský & J. Zagrapan [10] more than 49% of the voters decided only during the last pre-election week and more than 9% only on the election day. The indecisive and irresolute voters frequently make use of cognitive shortcuts - so-called heuristics to make the decision with the minimum cognitive effort. These enable a voter to make a decision so that he/she has a subjective feeling of making the right decision. At the same time, the voter is encouraged to make decisions that do not take him/her a lot of energy and thus are considered simple.

R.R. Lau and D.P. Redlawsk [13] identify five basic heuristics applied in voter's decision about whom to vote for:

a) affect referral - if there are more candidates in the elections that the voter agrees with and he/she knows them from the preceding elections, he/she will vote for the one with the highest ranking;

b) endorsement - voters follow the recommendation of their family, friends of political leaders with whom they identify;

c) familiarity - if a voter knows only one single candidate and not the rest of the election candidates and the rating of the candidate is neutral or a positive one, he/she will vote for that particular candidate;

d) habit – a voter votes in the same way as he/she did the last time;

e) viability – a voter selects only from the candidates that have a chance to win.

Several other phenomena can be added to the stated heuristics, including various psychological effects that function on an automatic and unconscious plane.

J. Kelley and I. McAllister [14] confirmed by their research that the candidates' alphabetical position on an election ballot is also important for the candidate selection (with indecisive or irresolute voters). It is so-called ballot position effect. According to this effect, there is the highest chance to get a mandate for the candidates starting with the letter *A* and the candidates whose surname starts with *Z* have the lowest chance. A. King and A. Leight [15] demonstrated this impact in their study and pointed out the electoral law change in Australia that in 1984 modified the order on a ballot paper from alphabetical to random.

The authors W. Cwalina and A. Falkowski [http://www.charaktery. eu/wiesci-psychologiczne/8852/Twarze-i-maski-/] also add the following to the above mentioned effects:

a) bandwagon effect - votes are handed over to the leader in pre-election polls thanks to which the expected winner obtains additional votes,

b) underdog effect - votes are handed over to the candidate with lower standing in the pre-election polls,

c) momentum effect – a political party is given votes at the moment when its popularity starts to rise rapidly,

d) tactical voting (strategic voting) - is manifested when a voter does not give his/her vote to the party preferred but votes in order to enable an equal distribution of the votes.

The most significant and probably also the best known is mere exposure effect.

1.1. Mere exposure effect

The effect was described already in 1968 by the American psychologist Robert Bolesław Zajonc [16]. Based on his clinical research, he established a thesis about so-called *mere exposure effect*.

According to R.B. Zajonc, it is sufficient to be exposed to an object ten times so that our attitudes start to modify [16]. The effect when new stimuli are perceived as welcome after a repeated exposition can be also found in further research, involving visual area employing complex polygons, originally unknown faces or incomprehensible ideographs [17], as well as audio [18-21], and somatosensory stimuli [22, 23]. Mere exposure effect was also observed in the area of social attitudes using face photos of various races [24].

Within advertising (marketing) area this effect is very prominent when comparing brand awareness (especially Top of Mind) and consumer attitude to the particular brand. Rising Top of Mind Awareness increases the number of people who like and use the presented brand although the brand (from the rational point of view) does not fulfil all the wishes and needs [The Economic Times,   http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/top-of-the-mind-recall]. Thus, the decision about how and what will the respondent perceive is often related to context and an effect called priming.

1.2. Priming

Priming signifies the influence of a preceding contact with the stimuli (prime) on later target processing following afterwards or perception anticipation of a different but semantically connected stimulus (semantic anticipation). Priming can facilitate or hinder information processing, for example, the recognition of the preceding stimuli. Priming also occurs when preceding stimuli are subliminal. An example of priming is not any impact (real/potential), but only the one which is linked to it. In relation to this E. Nęcka, J. Orzechowski & B. Szymura [25] give different types of priming based on the type of links it creates. They include repetition priming, semantic priming, positive priming, negative priming, affective priming, as well as controversial subliminal priming and others.

Research up to date hints that our behaviour is influenced by subtle signals that are outside the reach of our consciousness [26]. The research of J.A. Bargh et al. [26] was verified and showed another important issue: dynamic interaction between an experimenter and subjects [27]. The very research does not question priming (it was carried out via non-verbal and unconscious behaviour of experimenter's assistants). What is however undermined is the methodology of the research and the fact that it shows confirmation bias [28, 29].

The term priming was coined in the context of political communication at the end of the 80's [30]. Priming is defined as applying criteria and standards in the communication with the recipients where these serve to evaluate political reality. Political reality seems to be significant in the cases when media depict it (the more frequent theme depiction, the more important it is considered to be). Simultaneously, it relates to the way a politician is being presented in the media. In the current state of democracy, his/her potential voters have no opportunity to get to know his positive and negative qualities in detail [31]. We are therefore forced to use the information the media selected for us. The selection process and especially qualitative aspects of the context (even though it is combined with the quantitative one) is in its essence a political process. During an election campaign, the media focus on particular aspects of life and ignore others which can impact election results since the role of priming is to determine the status of events, parties or topics. The media give significance to certain information, using a deeply rooted urban legend that says that if something is important, it also appears in the media.

Based on the above mentioned we can assume that especially the voters who have not made their decision yet (according to the above mentioned authors - O. Eibl, J. Janovský, J. Zagrapan [10] a week before elections it is more than 49% of them) will be influenced more by the factors that are based on the way the candidates are presented, exposure frequency and also other phenomena. The presentation of pre-election preferences undoubtedly also belongs to one of such factors. These have a long standing tradition in pre-election battle and in political marketing. In relation to this, D. Vokounová mentions that they can be related to the success of a political party since according to her analysis the

success of political subjects does not depend on *„how many and what sort of sources they have at hand but rather how much and what sort of information they have"* [32]. The presentation of pre-election results is not only the ground for the campaign team to optimise its further steps, but based on the above mentioned effects we have a reason to believe, they are efficient tools to persuade a voter (especially a indecisive and irresolute) in his/her decision. Campaign teams disclose the fact (maybe unwillingly) especially by their protests when the poll does not meet their expectations (for example, the news by SITA from 30.10.2013 [http://www.infovolby.sk/index.php?base=data/pvm/prieskumy/30100231.msx]). We consider the facts stated to be very inspirational for our research.

2. Research

2.1. Research aim

To identify the influence of priming effect (applied also in election preferences of the respondents in the form of ranking a candidate in hypothetical pre-election poll) on the respondents' decision about whom to vote for.

To identify the scope and measure of the impact of so-called Zajonc effect on the respondents' final decision about which candidate to select.

To identify if the stated effects have a similar impact in two distinct countries by comparing two respondent groups – Slovak and Polish one.

2.2. Research issues

1. Is there a relationship between candidate ranking in the presented poll and his/her ranking in respondents' choice? 1.1.) Slovak nationality, 1.2.) Polish nationality
2. Does a published candidate CV bring any advantage (exposure effect) in comparison to the candidates that did not have such an exposure towards the respondents, in particular, are the final respondent preferences higher for the candidates with a CV? 2.1.) Slovak nationality, 2.2.) Polish nationality
3. Are there any differences between the Polish and Slovak respondents in the degree of how they are impacted by the exposure effect?
4. Are there any differences between the Polish and the Slovak respondents in the degree up to which they are influenced by priming effect?

2.3. Procedure and methods

The research was carried out in the form of traditional experiment (the respondents were put into groups randomly). The experimental group received written and graphical information (CV of a hypothetical candidate as well as a graph of a hypothetical poll done by three agencies with all the candidates

ranking). The ranking of the observed candidate varied in the research graph from the first place (group A) to the fourth position (group D). The control group had only the information from the poll. Simultaneously, the (hypothetical) candidates (N = 7) were divided into groups – the ones about whom the respondents received the most substantial information (both CV and pre-election ranking) and the ones about whom they had only information from the poll. The names of hypothetical candidates were selected based on their frequency in the particular country – we have chosen the most frequent surnames and first names (the source of the information: The Most Frequent Names in Slovakia [http://www.geni.sk/najcastejsie-priezviska-na-slovensku/] and The Most Frequent Names in Poland [http://evacska.republika.pl/materialy/teoria/ najpopularniejsze_nazwiska_w_polsce. htm]).

The research tool was an unstandardised questionnaire identifying which candidates the respondents would elect from the group of presented candidates. The questionnaire was broadly constructed, however, for the purpose of the study, we used only its part focused on identification of candidate ranking according to a respondent in hypothetical elections (respondent's task was to order the candidates based on his/her preference).

The data obtained were then analysed statistically via descriptive as well as inductive statistics using Excel spreadsheet.

2.4. Research file

The research file consisted of 79 respondents, including 37 Slovak nationals and 42 Polish nationals. The average age of the Slovak file was 23.64 years and the Polish one 27.8 years. The respondents were divided into four groups (A-D), each group received different candidate 'poll results'. Both sexes were represented equally. Respondents' permanent residence (thus also electoral district) included most Slovak regions; in Poland we covered the Silesia region.

2.5. Analysis and interpretation of the research results

In the first research variation, we observed how would rank a hypothetical candidate under the assigned name of Ján Lukáč with the Slovak respondents and Łukasz Lewanowski with the Polish respondents. In this variation, the candidate placed first in the feigned polls carried out by three agencies that were presented to the respondents in a graphical format (Figure 1 on the left) – that was the way how the information was presented to our respondents. At the same time, all the respondents received his brief biography.

As we can see in Figure 1, the respondents (either Slovak or Polish ones) voted almost without an exception in accord with the presented poll, i.e. they chose Ján Lukáč or Łukasz Lewandowský. The accord in the ranking was also confirmed statistically – for the Slovak file with the value R = 0.909 (Spearman rank order correlation coefficient, for (for $f = n-2 = 5$), α 0.05), which signifies a strong relationship. And the value R = 0.973 (for $f = n-2 = 5$), α 0.05) for the

Polish file – there is a strong relationship as well. Therefore we can see that the respondents were significantly influenced by the polls and their preference complied with that.
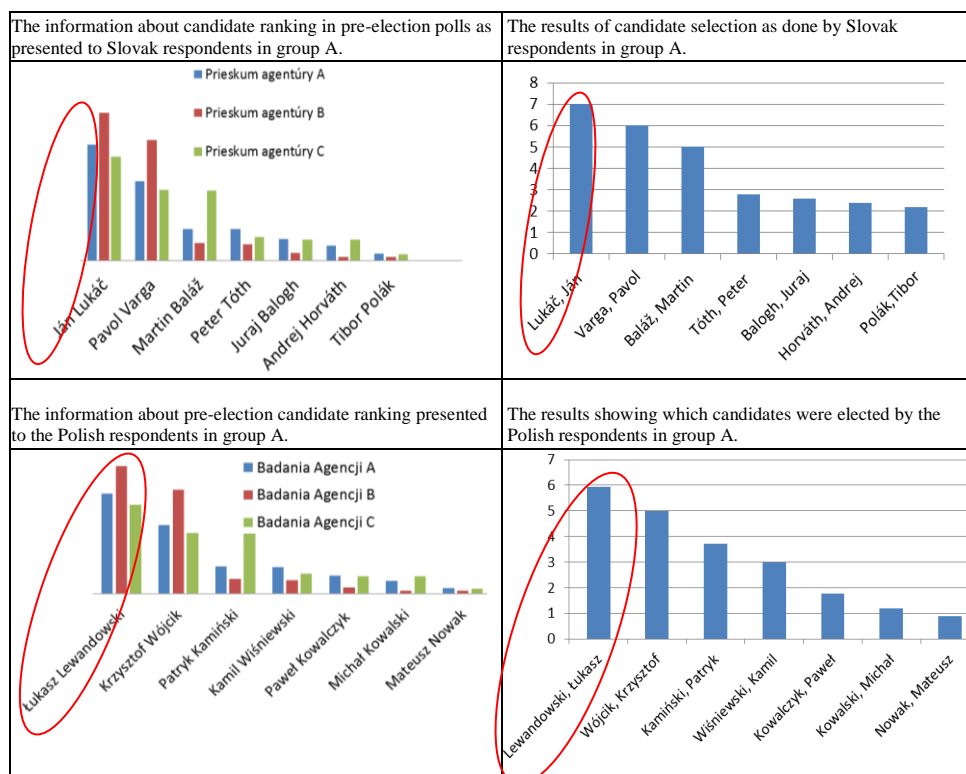

Figure 1. Graph comparison – on the left – a graph with hypothetical election results as handed out to the respondents as candidate information (Version A) and on the right a graph illustrating the results of respondents' election from the candidate group. Note: the obtained candidate ranking from the respondents was transformed into points to enable a graphic demonstration of the results.

All the obtained results with the Slovak file are presented in Table 1, where we can compare Ján Lukáč's ranking in four feigned and also how the polls influenced the respondents. We can also see another candidate - Pavol Varga in the table. He is the candidate which places first in four versions of the feigned polls, however, the polls had not secured him the highest ranking with the respondents.

The result demonstrates priming effect – feigned elections for Ján Lukáč turned out as the poll had evoked.

In the context of the Variant A results with Ján Lukáč as the 'winner' in the polls and also the winner of the respondents' election, we can assume that the success is caused by a factor that distinguishes the two candidates (missing Pavol Varga's CV or its presence in case of Ján Lukáč). The results thus demonstrate the effects: not only the priming effect of the poll but also exposure

effect (Zajonc effect) – Ján Lukáč was 'exposed' more to the respondents than the other candidates, because they also had information from his short CV. Therefore his ranking in the simulated elections was higher than in the presented hypothetical poll (Version B) where he placed the second. For that reason, the value of Spearman correlation coefficient shows a difference in the ranking between the presented poll and respondents' vote.

Table 1. Comparing candidate ranking in four poll variations with their ranking in the simulated elections with respondents from the Slovak file.

Candidate ranking: 'how would you vote?'	Version A			Version B			Version C			Version D		
	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd
Baláž, Martin	3	**3.00**	0.00	3	**2.50**	0.55	2	**2.00**	1.15	2	**2.20**	1.30
Balogh, Juraj	5	**5.40**	0.55	5	**4.50**	1.05	5	**4.00**	0.82	5	**5.40**	0.89
Horváth, Andrej	6	**5.60**	0.55	6	**5.17**	0.75	6	**5.50**	1.00	6	**6.00**	0.00
Lukáč, Ján	**1**	**1.00**	**0.00**	**2**	**1.00**	**0.00**	**3**	**2.50**	**1.73**	**4**	**2.60**	**0.55**
Polák, Tibor	7	**5.80**	1.64	7	**6.33**	0.82	7	**7.00**	0.00	7	**6.40**	1.34
Tóth, Peter	4	**5.20**	1.64	4	**4.67**	1.51	4	**5.00**	0.82	3	**4.00**	0.71
Varga, Pavol	2	**2.00**	0.00	1	**3.83**	2.48	1	**2.00**	0.82	1	**1.40**	0.55
	R = 0.909 (α 0.05)			R = 0.683 (n.s.)			R = 0.900 (α 0.05)			R = 0.895 (n.s.)		

Table 2. Comparing candidate ranking in four poll variations with their ranking in the simulated elections with respondents from the Polish file.

Candidate ranking: 'how would you vote?'	Version A			Version B			Version C			Version D		
	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd	Feigned ranking from an opinion poll agency	AM	sd
Kamiński, Patryk	3	**3.29**	1.10	3	**4.29**	1.50	2	**2.50**	0.58	2	**2.38**	0.87
Kowalczy, Paweł	5	**5.24**	0.83	5	**4.86**	0.90	5	**5.25**	0.96	5	**4.77**	1.36
Kowalski, Michał	6	**5.82**	0.73	6	**5.57**	1.62	6	**5.00**	0.82	6	**5.54**	1.20
Lewandowski, Lukasz	**1**	**1.06**	0.24	**2**	**2.00**	1.91	**3**	**1.00**	0.00	**4**	**2.23**	1.48
Nowak, Mateusz	7	**6.12**	1.54	7	**5.29**	2.36	7	**6.25**	0.96	7	**6.69**	0.63
Wiśniewski, Kamil	4	**4.00**	0.61	4	**3.43**	0.79	4	**5.50**	1.73	3	**3.62**	1.19
Wójcik, Krzysztof	2	**2.00**	0.61	1	**2.57**	1.99	1	**2.50**	0.58	1	**2.77**	1.79
	R = 0.973 (α 0.05)			R = 0.783 (n.s.)			R = 0.704 (n.s.)			R = 0.796 (n.s.)		

In the C and D versions there was the same tendency – the candidate that was 'exposed' to the respondents more than the other candidates (by also publishing his CV and not only known from poll results) was more preferred by the respondents. He always gained better ranking than evoked by the

hypothetical poll (in case of C version the hypothetical poll hinted the third place for him – the respondents, however gave him the second place; in case of D version where in the hypothetical poll he obtained the fourth place, the respondents from the Slovak file gave him the third place).

Similar results were noted with the Polish file (Table 2).The priming effect is relatively high although we can also observe the impact of exposure effect (Zajonc effect). It is especially strong with the Polish file where it exhibited in the versions B, C and D – the results have also been confirmed statistically. Łukasz Lewandowski moved from the third place in the hypothetical polls to the first place (C version) as well as in D version where he had the fourth place in the polls but in the respondents' choice he moved to the first place.
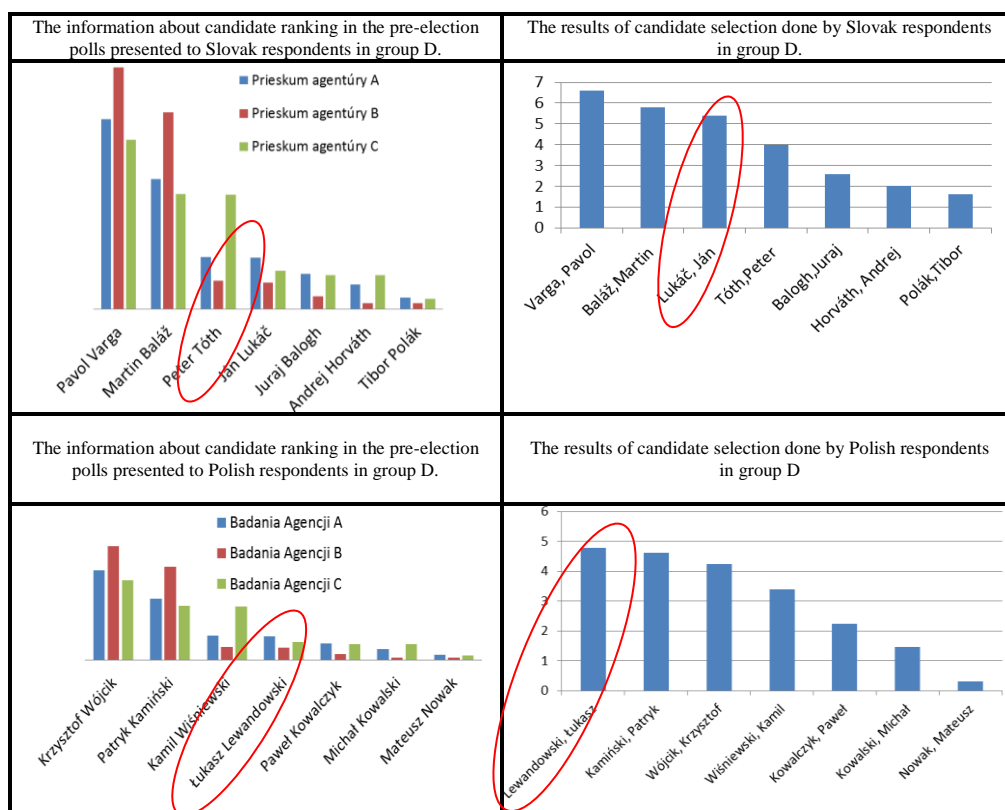

Figure 2. Graph comparison – on the left – a graph with hypothetical election results as handed out to the respondents as candidate information (Version D) and on the right a graph illustrating the results of respondents' election from the candidate group. Note: the obtained candidate ranking from the respondents was transformed into points to enable a graphic demonstration of the results.

Based on the results, we can give positive answers to the assigned research questions 1 and 2. The stated findings also show that although the priming effect (represented by presenting poll ranking) is relatively significant

factor influencing the voters (who are irresolute or for any reason have insufficient information about the candidates), exposure effect can change the decision and impact them even more (for example, the hypothetical candidate Pavol Varga who placed the first in B version poll did not defend his position in the respondents election and dropped to the third place).

The comparison between Slovak and Polish file in their election in particular groups (A-D) is presented in the annex. Particular elections were compared using mean difference test for two selections. The results demonstrate that the files were equally influenced by priming as well as Zajonc effect and that the respondents have a tendency to choose candidates in a very similar way – which was also confirmed statistically – there is no significant difference between the files.

2.6. Research limitations

It is also necessary to mention that the presented research had its limitations concerning on one hand a small file and on the other habd its structure – it would be ideal to use a stratified selection including a whole spectrum of voters from first time voters to the highest age group and also respondents from distinct regions. We were not able to fulfil such requirements with regard to our limited staff and budget options. Moreover, it would be convenient to observe more factors, not only the variables we had chosen. However, it is also possible to use the research as a pre-research finding to design a broader project.

3. Conclusions

Voters' decision is determined by a number of factors which need to be taken into account when estimating future results and especially when optimizing the possible steps of campaign teams and rearranging the campaign according to the findings. Based on the results of our research (though with a certain degree of caution), it can be assumed that, the **priming factor and Zajonc effect** play a significant role in the final decision of some voters. Priming is represented by ranking the potential candidate in pre-election poll presentation that can subsequently cause a number of other effects that were described in the theoretical part (for example: bandwagon effect, momentum effect, tactical voting). Eventually, this gives an advantage to the candidate with a higher ranking in pre-election polls. Such an idea has to undergo a more comprehensive research focused on more factors or examining its impact. Preliminary results of our research demonstrated the impact of priming on respondents' choice of a candidate with both observed groups (Polish and Slovak subjects).

Simultaneously, as hinted by our research, a candidate can attract voters if they consider him/her to be someone they know and this feeling is raised by candidate exposure frequency (or the information about him/her) – known as

exposure effect (Zajonc effect). As shown by our research 'exposure' does not bring advantage to only objects or verbal prompts (as in his research), but also to people (in our research only fictitious people – not real political life personalities).

Both effects have approximately the same strength across the two examined nationalities – Slovak and Polish.

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