

Psychological Aspects of the U.S. Election Campaign

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Psychological Aspects of the U.S. Election Campaign. Great diversity – racial and cultural as well as in terms of quality of life – in the United States forces versatility of electoral activities, pushing them to a certain level of generality, as specific, defined solutions may turn out too narrow for a broad electorate. In specific campaigns, psychological mechanisms become particularly important, especially those which in many ways provide a sense of closeness to the preferred candidate and build a relationship that leads to support and casting a vote in the elections. The present study focuses on three important – from a psychological point of view – issues, which are perfectly represented in the American elections – the narrative of the political image; communities created on the Internet thanks to management of specific electoral groups by politicians, and the presence of humor and satire in the campaign.

Key words: American election campaign; electoral behavior; narrative; narration; political image; humor; the internet in the US election campaign

Psychologické aspekty volebnej kampane v USA. Veľká rôznorodosť – rasová a kultúrna, ako aj pokiaľ ide o kvalitu života – v Spojených štátoch si vynucuje všestranné volebné aktivity, pričom ich tlačí na istú všeobecnú úroveň, pretože špecifické, vymedzené riešenia sa môžu ukázať ako príliš úzke pre širokú voličskú obec. V špecifických kampaniach nadobúdajú psychologické mechanizmy zvláštny význam, najmä tie, ktoré nejedným spôsobom vyvolávajú pocit blízkosti s uprednostňovaným kandidátom a budujú vzťah, ktorý vedie k podpore a vhodeniu hlasu vo voľbách. Táto štúdia sa zameriava na tri dôležité – zo psychologického hľadiska – problémy, ktoré sú dokonale zastúpené v amerických voľbách – príbeh politického imidžu; komunity, ktoré vznikli na internete vďaka riadeniu špecifických voličských skupín politikmi, a prítomnosť humoru a satiry v kampani.

Kľúčové slová: americká volebná kampaň; volebné správanie; príbeh; rozprávanie; politický imidž; humor; internet v americkej predvolebnej kampani

Introduction

Every four years, the world is pulled into the great drama, the true American show, directed by the best spin doctors, running political campaigns perfect in form and content. Along with the observable for several years now weak party identification – identification that usually strongly facilitates decision-making for the supporters of the Republican or Democratic parties – campaign activities gain in strength, as now a larger part of the electorate can be impacted

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and swayed in their choices.. Hence the subsequent campaigns break different, never-before-imagined records, and virtuoso spin doctors and magicians of electoral campaigns gain in experience – and importance. American elections are organized on an extraordinary scale, and are an amazing collective effort. Two huge propaganda machines working with the help of hundreds of thousands of people, among them both members of the campaign headquarters, party activists, various consultants, and volunteers who are involved in planned and spontaneous activities, initiated even on social networks. In addition, by analyzing the content of the media in the election period, it seems that journalists focus all their attention on the election. It is worth noting that a growing group of world-famous American stars of music and film are engaged by the candidates as support, and more so in every campaign. Some of them are actively involved in the campaigning; others only publicly express their support. The U.S. presidential elections are also closely followed by other nations. Interesting manifestations of this are the polls, diagnosing support for individual American presidential candidates in other countries. In the 2012 campaign, BBC World Service covered 21 countries in Europe, Asia, North America (Canada), South America and Australia with such a poll, asking which candidate the citizens would choose. In this sense, certainly one can safely assert that America is the greatest democracy in the world.

The United States is a country of contrasts. Great diversity – racial and cultural as well as in terms of quality of life – forces versatility of electoral activities, pushing them to a certain level of generality, as specific, defined solutions may turn out to be too narrow for a broad electorate. The Gallup Institute study found that American voters assessing the strength of presidential candidates in various aspects have much more to say about their personal characteristics such as honesty, good communication skills and strength of character than such elements as professional experience, preferred policies or political programme (*Americans See Different Strengths...*). It can therefore be assumed that in this specific campaign psychological mechanisms became particularly important, especially those which in many ways provide a sense of closeness to the preferred candidate and build a relationship that leads to support and casting a vote in the elections.

The present study focuses on three important – from a psychological point of view – issues, which are perfectly represented in the American elections. First, the narrative of the political images. Creating a narrative is a procedure that gives meaning to the behavior of politicians, makes the forming of the viewer's opinion quicker and more stable. The process of constructing stories about individuals is based on providing specific, consistent information, spread evenly over time. Consistency applies to both decisions and activities, public speaking, as well as opinions voiced. If these elements fit well together, they

are not unpredictable, surprising – if combined into a specific whole, it is easier to give them meaning. It is also easier to make predictions about the given individual's future behavior and actions in difficult situations, which implies greater confidence and peace of mind of the observer. This fact is important from the point of view of marketing in the context of the election, as a positive, stable and coherent opinion of a candidate may increase the support and thus the choice of a particular candidate who will receive the electoral vote. Second, the community created on the Internet through management of the specific target groups by the politicians. First of all, social media provide a platform for integrating and involving voters around specific actions aimed at bringing about a victory of a specific candidate. This is particularly important in the context of undecided voters who are initially involved in small matters, or persuaded to support a particular candidate by an individual. And, lastly, humorous elements as an integral part of the electoral operations. The use of humor, jokes, and satire at different levels performs several functions; among the most important is the softening of the image of a politician, reducing the distance between the politicians and their constituents and focusing the attention of potential voters.

Use of narrative in the construction of the relationship between voters and politicians

The American presidential election campaigns clearly reflect a significant trend in communications between voters and politicians. The individuals are not seduced by the political information as such, but by stories full of emotions and sensations, wherein the politicians are the heroes (more on the subject: Turska-Kawa, 2013). Masterful narratives become a focal point for the media and the public. They are not a one-off story, but a whole series of them, a soap opera, with its episodes, twists, conflict, and drama. It also has an audience in the form of potential voters, who are actively involved in the scenario through communication at the local level, opinions shown on the online forums and in political blogs or surveys, which are all an indicator of public opinion.

From the point of view of psychology, the most important factor is the way of understanding the narrative - as a "person's text"². Narrative psychology suggests a different perspective on the understanding of the text than the usual popular approach, or the one present in other fields of science. It is not a single story or even a novel. The narrative is defined as "a form of structuring of experience" which is not a product in itself, but "something that makes the final product possible" (Grzegorek, 2003, p. 211). The specificity of narrative

² Elżbieta Dryll views the narrative in humanistic science three-way: as an individual text, a cultural text, and finally as a person's text (Dryll, 2004, p. 9-12).

thinking arises from the need for granting general meaning to events and relationships. It organizes individual knowledge by ordering the personalized experience. "It is different to logical thinking, also called paradigmatic, where one tries to accurately generalize facts and make logical predictions based on cause-effect relationships. (...) Much more important than the objective connections between events are the visible and hidden desires, needs and goals of the individual" (Strelau, Dolinski, 2008, p. 723). Narrative psychology assumes, after cognitive constructivism, that our knowledge of the world is never directly given, but always remains an interpretation; it is a filter for new information while – at the same time – it is subject to being modified by the very same information.

It is a human need to on the one hand organize the inner experience, subjective knowledge, emotions, and on the other – to give meaning to external events. Auto-narration, created life-stories in which the individual is the main character cover even the early memories, emotional context of childhood, recreation, youthful ideals and values, models of authority and the main types of activity (McAdams, 1989, p. 160-174, McAdams, 2008). Narratives made up by the individuals in relation to the outside world allow one to control the excess of information, give them meaning, and thus to better remember and learn. From a marketing point of view, the issue is important when the message sender wants to manage the imagination and thinking patterns of the audience. In a world where we are bombarded with an avalanche of news and fast-moving images, narration has the power of focusing our attention. The indicated division is not disjunctive, since the planes of auto-narration and other narratives are intertwined. When stories activate imagination and emotions, then we treat them as personally important. An effective product or person's narrative should therefore be governed by strict rules. As pointed out by Eryk Mistewicz, a Polish political consultant and author of a narrative marketing strategy, it should "use a simple language, refer to the accumulated knowledge we have, combine unlikely elements, break patterns causing excitement and emotion which we immediately need to share with others. (...) The trick is also to prepare the narrative in such a way so it remains credible and resistant to counter-narration, in the form of mocking, attacks or attempts at neutralizing out story. But the basic premise is to create a narrative to which no one can remain indifferent "(Mistewicz, 2008, p. 116).

Already during the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama, the media devoted a lot of space to his biography, particularly early childhood experiences. The past of a black candidate for president garnered widespread attention, particularly the story of the relationship of his mother – Ann Durham, a white American from Kansas – and Barack Obama Sr., a black student from Kenya, was referred to repeatedly both in Obama's speeches and in the media

describing him. The story divided the Americans, initiating many counter-narrations – among the audience there were those who did not believe in the truth of it and tried to prove that the Democratic candidate was not born in the United States. In 2011, the White House released Obama's birth certificate to the media, clearly confirming his previously declared origin. However, by 2012 the Internet erupted into discussions about the allegedly forged birth certificate of the President, who, according to the initiators of these theories, had been born in Kenya, what would automatically undermine the legitimacy of his serving the office. For example, this story was picked up repeatedly in the campaign of 2012; the American billionaire Donald Trump, officially supporting Mitt Romney, announced that he would gift 5 million USD to charity if B. Obama would make his application for a passport publicly available.

Major role in explaining human behavior and relationships is played by emotions, which is why narratives created by politicians should reach out to the audience emotional side. Nico Frijda, the author of the functionalist theory of emotion, points out that emotions perform a signaling function in the regulation of behavior. As he explains, emotions can be understood as a process of signaling that something significant from the point of view of the welfare of the individual and the tasks performed by the cognitive system and behavior is happening (Frijda, 1998, p. 102). Frijda formulated a series of laws that organize knowledge about emotions (Strelau, Dolinski, 2008, p. 548-550). *The law of hedonistic asymmetry* states that sustaining positive emotions requires a change in incentives – lack of such change causes rapid adaptation. It can be assumed that a wide range of emotions, mostly induced by the politicians through media strengthens their image, focusing more attention of voters. *The law of conservation of emotional moment* states that events that induce emotions remain in effect for a very long time. One of the most exciting moments of the 2012 campaign was the record of the confidential meeting of M. Romney with sponsors, published in the leftist magazine "Mother Jones". In a conversation, the Republican candidate says that 47% of Americans do not pay taxes, feel like victims, are dependent on government assistance, and they always will support Barack Obama. These words became the foundation of many Democratic campaign advertisements, and were repeatedly emphasized by his rival during the meetings with voters, what strengthened the stereotypical view of M. Romney as a politician who will care only about the rich in his public service.

This now legendary statement until the Election Day reached almost every American, it was picked up by the foreign media and quoted not only by politicians, but also by satirists and comedians. As indicated in the Gallup Institute poll, 42% of Americans with lower incomes reported that this

particular Romney speech had discouraged them from voting for him, also 29% of independent voters had rated it equally negatively (*Voters' Reaction ...*). *The law of minimum load* states that in a situation of emotional arousal individuals avoid such recognition of the situation which would increase the strength of agitation – not being able to change the properties of the situation, people change its interpretation. An interpretation, which increases the sense of security is associated with rationalization of certain behaviors, giving them meaning. A kind of emotional catharsis is also brought by conversations with other people about the situation that gave rise to emotions; thus the process of rationalization may be the result of work of groups of citizens. Changing the interpretation is easier if more information about the behavior of the message sender is available to the individual, and if the sender behavior as well is consistent with a certain line of interpretation. During the campaign, Romney repeatedly enumerated arguments that suggested that his rival had not fulfill the promises given in 2008 – during his time in office, B. Obama had increased the budget deficit, the unemployment had grown and economic growth had fallen. One can assume that among the supporters of the incumbent president, a protective counter-rationalization was created, which was in turn reflected in the Gallup poll, showing clearly that the Americans more often blame George W. Bush for the poor state of the economy (*Americans Still Blame...*).

An effective narration is surprising, contains elements breaking patterns, and at the same time is of interest to voters, who get caught up in the scenario, and the sender should voice the message using the language of the audience. Such story should include elements in which individuals can find reflection of their needs, dreams and expectations. Further communication of the narration fragments and mobilization to follow the subsequent episodes will ensure its saturation with the values that are close to those of the public.

It is not about the values behind political programmes or scenarios to enhance economic indicators – the most important narratives are those where the citizens find elements close to them, are relatable, and to which they are able to give proper meaning (emotions they felt, events they experienced). As a result of this emotional engagement, the politics ceases to be perceived as an alien sphere, and the distance between politicians and voters is strongly reduced. B. Obama's experience in the field of social and civic activities is widely known to the Americans as well – he actively supported the voter registration program, as a lawyer he represented the social activists and plaintiffs in cases of discrimination and violation of Voting Rights Act. Thus, the narrative shows the president as a person acting for the good of others, particularly of vulnerable people, as someone who understands their problems. Another example – once, attempting to reduce the distance between himself and the students gathered at one of the meetings in 2007, B. Obama admitted

that in his youth he had experimented with drugs and had drunk alcohol (*Obama gets blunt...*), while at the same time critically judging that period of his life.

By creating a narration, the public sphere loses its character of untouchable authority. Politicians appear as individuals close to their voters, as people subject to different emotions, experiencing events which could happen to all of us. The narrative turns us into an audience cheering for someone's performance – wishing them success, excitedly discussing them with people close to us, drawing in new audience, i.e. voters, into the story. And the narration continuity makes it difficult for the involved individuals to withdraw, provided that the story does not lose its drama.

Building a community of followers on the Internet

Potential significance of the Internet in American campaigns had already been recognized in 2000³ and 2004⁴, but before 2008 the Web did not play a bigger role as a medium in the election campaigns. The World Wide Web sites, containing basic information about the candidates and their programmes, advertising and political speeches and photos were already used. The campaigns also used banners, e-mails and videos. Undertaking marketing activities on the Internet, therefore, was not a novelty in itself. However, in 2008⁵ and in 2012 the role of the Web grew tremendously. Among the most

³ Already in the Bush-Gore campaign, over 20% of voters visiting the candidates' official websites were undecided, and were actively seeking information to help them make a voting decision. In the Bush-Kerry campaign, the official web pages of the candidates were opened three times more often than in the previous presidential elections (Kolczyński, 2007, p. 360).

⁴ In the 2004 presidential campaign, 37% of adult Americans used the Internet to obtain current information about the candidates' actions, made use of it to lead political discussions or to get involved in the electoral effort otherwise. 18% of voters indicated the Internet as the key source of knowledge on the election campaign. Slightly over 50% of the Internet users (52%) obtained information on the campaign progress from the Internet. One third of the Internet users (35%) referred to the presidential elections in their e-mail communication (most often in the form of forwarded jokes about the candidates). 11% were directly engaged in campaign-related activities – small donations or volunteering. Over half (52%) of those seeking political information in the Internet stated that it had helped them reach a voting decision. Among them, one fourth (23%) were convinced that the Internet had encouraged them to vote (*The Internet and the 2004 election*).

⁵ More on the Internet in the electoral campaign in: Mazur, Turska-Kawa, 2010, p. 67-94.

dynamic changes associated with the use of the Internet in American elections, the following four factors should be emphasized:

- a) the scale of use of the Internet,
- b) the unconventional use of the Internet – both of previously known forms and new tools (for example, characters of politicians in video games),
- c) the dissemination of video campaigns,
- d) the campaigning on social networking sites.

The 2008 election campaign in the United States was the first one in which the Internet was used to such a wide extent. Sean P. Aune, one of the leading journalists of the portal *mashable.com the social media guide*, recognized 65 different official websites as sources of information during the presidential campaign. Among them are: the candidates websites, profiles on the popular social networking sites, websites containing the pre-election polls and projections, channels on YouTube, blogs (<http://mashable.com/2008/11/03/election-day/>). The candidate's staff, in particular that of the Democratic candidate, were trying to reach almost every voter, to get them interested and involved in the campaign.

Interactions among potential voters, taking place on the Internet were focused on the integration of individuals with similar social and political views who could share their opinions and doubts through electronic media. The social networking sites were the main plane of these interactions. In 2012, 34% of adult social media users⁶ used it to pass comments about socio-political topics, 33% - to actively respond to such comments made by other Internet users. 21% of users of social networking sites belonged to the group of those in some way involved in social or political activities (*Social Media and Political Engagement*). These media were also used for declarations of one's own political sympathies. 25% of the Obama supporters revealed their political affiliation on Facebook or Twitter, 20% of the registered supporters of M. Romney did the same. The indicated social networking sites and e-mails were also used for direct solicitation of votes – 30% of the registered voters declared that they had been encouraged to vote for the Democratic or the Republican candidate, 20% admit to encouraging others (*Social Media and Voting*).

Obama's election campaign in 2008, in which the social media were used at such a large scale for the first time, became a model for politicians all over the world. Over four years, however, this sphere has seen a lot of changes – furthermore, in 2012 the effect of the novelty stopped working. In his second campaign, B. Obama was present on new sites, including the most important ones such as Pinterest, Tumblr, Google Plus and Foursquare. On all of these

⁶ It is shown that about 60% of adult Americans have a profile at a social networking site (*Social Media and Political Engagement*).

portals, Obama's staff were actively communicating throughout the whole campaign. M. Romney did not push for such a wide presence in social media, focusing on the most popular sites. Interestingly, M. Romney debuted on one social media site where his opponent did not campaign officially – the music service Spotify. The effectiveness of the presence of the candidates on social networking sites is emphasized by numbers, which, however, clearly demonstrate B. Obama's victory in this sphere: on the Election Day, the Democratic candidate had 32 million fans on Facebook, his Republican rival only 12 million; on Twitter, B. Obama gathered 20 million supporters, M. Romney – 2 million.

Certainly among the novelties and activities in which Barack Obama's staff showed great understanding of the social media users was the Pet Lovers For Obama fanpage (<https://www.facebook.com/petloversforobama>). On Facebook, pet photos are one of the most popular content types. The Democrat suggested the users uploaded the photos of their pets with some gadget with a picture of Obama onto the specially created fanpage. Most gadgets turned out to be handkerchiefs, election posters, bottoms and stickers. The photos are inventive, funny, invite comments – until the Election Day, more than 45 thousand Facebook users expressed their "I like it".

A number of measures proposed by the candidates for the Internet users were trying to engage them in joint campaign-related efforts. B. Obama's website included a separate tab "Involved"; by using it, each of the potential voters could become involved more or less actively in the candidate's campaign. The user could join a specific group of supporters of the Democrat: Latinos, African Americans, LGBT Americans, Young Americans and many others. The users could join the ranks of the volunteers organizing campaign events in a given region and take an active role in encouraging other voters to support Obama. A similar option through his own Website was offered by M. Romney – the users were encouraged to join one of the groups supporting the candidate – farmers, Catholics, former supporters of Obama, Jews, etc., or to engage in volunteer activities in their electoral region. The perfectly prepared network tools effectively encouraged potential voters to be active – not only in the Internet, but also in reality (for example at voters' meetings). Both candidates have effectively created a support movement in the Internet – one made up of people truly engaged, ready to share their ideas and to mobilize independently at different levels, actively seeking other sympathizers. Belonging to this movement was a kind of declaration of voting in the "real life" for the candidate one was supporting in "virtual reality". Consistently with the mechanism of the "foot in the door principle" (Cialdini, 2007), voters were willing to engage in small projects, which not only did not cause them any problems, but also were attractive to them – while those very same small

matters were associated with the key campaign issue: actually casting a vote in the presidential elections.

Fundraising is an interesting form of political involvement – meaning the process of collecting funds for the electoral activities from individual donors. On the one hand, one could donate any amount of money in a very simple way. B. Obama offered his supporters the possibility of donating the amount of 5 – 1000 dollars, while M. Romney, in turn, from 15 up to 5,000 dollars. On the other hand, supporters could also create their own profile to raise funds for electoral activities. By creating an individual fundraising portal, the users in advance declared what amount they would be able to collect, and subsequently encouraged their colleagues, friends and families to support the campaign. This public declaration – voluntary and self-defined – was a kind of psychological guarantee of obtaining both funds and gaining supporters.⁷ Donations and their participation in the established plan were presented in a specially designed "barometer", which recorded to what degree the plan had been met at a given moment. Additional motivation was provided by the ranking of fundraisers.

Integration of candidate supporters on social networking sites was also important from the point of view of confirmation by others of the attitudes and values of an individual, as it is an important variable that determines the degree of sympathy. Studies conducted by Donna Byrne and Don Nelson have found that the degree of sympathy felt for other people was dependent on the perceived similarity (Byrne, Nelson, 1965, p. 659-663). The greater the similarity of attitudes of study participants, the higher the degree of sympathy declared. Similar conclusions were reached in the research of Theodore Newcomb – the author showed that one of the important variables determining the establishment of friendship had been shared beliefs and attitudes (Newcomb, 1961). The mechanism of similarity plays an important role in interpersonal attractiveness for two main reasons. First, individuals similar to us provide us with social support for our own traits and beliefs, confirming our conviction that we are right. This awareness inspires a sense of belonging. Second, one can assume that we think negatively about people that do not agree with us on important issues (Aronson, Wilson, Akert, 1997, p. 417-419). Thus, these actions clearly were aimed at highlighting the distinct boundaries between the supporters of different candidates.

⁷ Accordingly with the mechanism of the commitment (consistency) principle, after making a decision, individuals endeavor to keep their word, gaining the sense of being honest, just, and consistent (Cialdini, 2007).

Humor as a component of political image

The American election campaign, apart from offering substantive debates and discussions, is in an unprecedented manner saturated with humor and satire. Voters can see comic strips and jokes appearing regularly in the press, watch the skits and parodies created by well-known comedians, and cheer the presidential candidates appearing in satirical programs. It may be seen as one of the particularities of the American electoral battle – it is difficult to identify another country where politicians use comedic contexts in a similar, almost ritualistic way. During the campaign, politicians are the subject (and butt) of jokes and skits presented by famous comedians and satirists. Comedians often derided the wealth of M. Romney and his detachment from the problems of ordinary people, while B. Obama was often criticized for his inefficiency in the economic policy. David Letterman, host of CBS "Late Show" commented in front of the audience that according to the latest survey on what Americans most want to see, 6% of them said they wanted to see Romney's tax returns. "(...) We want to get a look at those tax returns because I believe we will discover that the man has not paid a nickel in United States federal income tax – Letterman said – That's right, we have a felon running for president." (*Letterman Suggests Romney ...*). Jay Leno in his satirical program joked that President Obama "(...) is encouraging more Americans to give up looking for work so the numbers will come down a little bit" (*Leno: Obama's Encouraging ...*). Another time he commented: "I tell you, the economy is in bad shape. In fact, the economy is so bad, President Barack Obama's new slogan is "Spare Change You Can Believe In" (*Jay Leno's Best ...*). The popular satirical program "Saturday Night Live" almost every week featured parodies and skits, the objects of which were the candidates running for President of the United States.

On the other hand, the use of different aspects of humor is important in terms of building a relationship with a potential voter for several reasons:

- a) *making fun of one's own failings and imperfections shows the voters that the politician has a healthy distance to his/her image and to reality*

The research conducted by Elliot Aronson and associates on how a combination of competence and imperfections affect the perceived attractiveness revealed that the most effective way to gain sympathy of others had been to showcase one's skills and competencies – but also to let oneself display some minor weaknesses. We like people who have some flaws because it reminds us of how imperfect we also are, and at the same time we feel worse when in the company of someone perfect we come off much worse compared

to them (Aronson, Willerman, Floyd, 1966, p. 227-228; Adler, Rosenfeld, Proctor, 2007, p. 257).

In one of the programs hosted by Jimmy Fallon, B. Obama, when asked what he found funniest, mentioned the sketch comedy show *Key and Peele* and how he loved the duo's impersonation of him, which involved Jordan Peele playing B. Obama, and Keegan – Michael Key as his "anger translator," offering an expletive-filled interpretation of the president's statement (*Key & Peele ...*). On October 18, 2012 at a charity gala organized by the Archdiocese of New York, B. Obama commenting on his own defeat in the first of the presidential debates said that it taught him that "there are worse things than forgetting to buy a gift for the marriage anniversary"⁸. At the same event, M. Romney referring to his membership in the Mormon Church, which absolutely forbids its members from drinking, explained that the key principle he followed when preparing for a debate was not to drink alcohol for 65 years.

b) appearances in satirical programs soften the image of the candidate, thus shortening the distance between voters and the politician

The analysis of the various functions of humor in communication suggests that a sense of humor is often seen as a social competence and interpersonal skill. The research shows (for example Cann et al., 1997; Feingold, 1981; Lundy, Tan, Cunningham, 1998) that the use of the elements of humor in communication enhances the attractiveness of the message sender in the eyes of its recipients, both in terms of physical attractiveness and similarity of attitudes.

In addition, this characteristic can also facilitate the achievement of the objectives set by the individual (Martin, 2007, p. 150). It should be noted that this applies to both positive goals – aimed at a conflict resolution, development, and integration – and negative goals, associated with manipulation and a desire to gain dominance over others.. Positive emotions felt for the preferred candidate certainly anaesthetize the voter when it comes to negative objectives, which could possibly be behind the actions of the message sender.

B. Obama was a guest of J. Leno's satirical show five times. During the October appearance, less than two weeks before the election, he responded with humor to questions about the current difficulties in his campaign – his lack of form in the first of the three debates between the presidential candidates and the relationship with Donald Trump, who urged the president to show his college and passport records. In another popular satirical program, hosted by David Letterman and aired on CBS, B. Obama argued hotly against the above mentioned statement by M. Romney that he (Romney) did not seek the votes of

⁸ The day of the debate (3 Oct, 2012) was Obamas' wedding anniversary.

47 percent of the Americans who "do not pay taxes, feel like victims and are dependent on federal government assistance." M. Romney declined the invitation of the program host.

c) saturation of the pre-election activities with humor focuses the interest of the public and attracts their attention by, for example, stimulating positive emotions and easing tension

The information given in a humorous form is easier to digest, and more often remembered by the recipient. It is worth noting that if we treat the electoral message on par with advertising, commercial messages, we may draw on many studies analyzing advertising messages to reach our conclusions. The researchers suggest that humorous information is usually similarly effective as the content transmitted to consumers in a more serious form (Brooker, 1981, Lull 1940; Pokorney, Gruner, 1969); but a significant difference is recorded in the intensity of focusing attention and easy understanding of the message by the audience (DeLozier 1976, p. 105).

An interesting political advertising gadget which can be treated in terms of humor was the offer of wool or cotton clothing for dogs with the official logo of the Obama campaign, available for purchase on the website store.barackobama.com. The site also offered a possibility to purchase advertising magnets with a picture of a dog and the slogan "I Bark for Barack". Among more standard gadgets, the virtual store store.mittromney.com also offered baby body-suit and cufflinks, all, of course, marked with the campaign slogan.

A verbal example can be the ambiguous joke of B. Obama (widely commented in the media) during the meeting with the LGBT community, attended by the president and his wife Michelle and Ellen DeGeneres (a journalist who openly admits to being a lesbian). The candidate said, referring to the two ladies dueling who can make more push-ups, that according to E. DeGeneres "Michelle did not go all the way down". The English phrase "go all the way down" can mean not only making a special effort – in push-ups in this case – but also oral sex, in this context between Michelle Obama and Ellen DeGeneres.

Certainly, a different kind of humor will be directed at the opponent – this occurrence being an integral part of a negative campaign. During the rallies, the election spots or during the debates, the candidates running for President of the United States repeatedly made fun of each other or told jokes to undermine the authority of the rival. On October 18, 2012 at a charity gala organized by the Archdiocese of New York, the Republican candidate joked with the guests in the presence of the Democrat, saying both candidates have crucial people on whom they rely. As Romney put it, "I have my beautiful

wife, Ann, he's got Bill Clinton." Obama retorted: "You have to wonder what he's thinking. So little time, so much to redistribute." The incumbent President followed up, pointing out once again the wealth of his rival: "Earlier today I went shopping at some stores in Midtown. I understand Gov. Romney went shopping for some stores in Midtown." During one of the discussions in the second presidential debate M. Romney asked B. Obama: "Mr. President, have you looked at your pension fund?" Obama riposted quickly with a smile: "I don't look at my pension. It's not as big as yours so it doesn't take as long." This type of cutting remarks can be identified in almost every long speech or discussion between the candidates. However, in assessing their consequences for the candidate's image, one should be very careful. Even a humorously worded criticism directed towards the opponent will trigger two types of emotions – positive in supporters of the message sender, and negative in supporters of the rival. However, it is difficult to predict the reaction of the segment of the public with no decided affiliation. On the one hand, a witty, cutting comment can, of course, make one laugh, inspire positive emotions, relieve tension, but on the other it can enhance the perception of the message sender as a person using unfair methods of political combat, not related to substantive issues.

Conclusions

The media are increasingly impacting the political process, and play a significant role in political communication. More and more advanced media technologies and the need of adapting the political messages to these developments impoverish their content – at the same time intensifying the visualization and schematization aspects. A scandal has now become a common language of politics, just as has negative information, or information about the private life of the politicians. The most important criterion in the evaluation of political messages is their power to attract viewers, an audience. An election campaign in a given period should disseminate information to the largest possible group of potential voters – to reach, attract and convince them to vote for a particular candidate. These goals leave less room for a substantive discussion, and encourage domination of nicely packaged, interesting, and exciting “news”. The evolution of American election campaign discourses indeed fits well with this trend – they are intended to grab the attention, engage, motivate. In addition, the diversity of form and content reaches even the smallest segments of voters, trying to get them interested using the method closest to them and adjusted to fit best with their needs or cognitive activity.

The tactics of reaching the public is based on a number of mechanisms, among which an important role is played by psychological mechanisms, which in their own way provide a sense of closeness and intimacy with the preferred

candidate, and consequently build a “connection” that leads to support and casting a vote in favor of the candidate in the elections. In the present study, three of these mechanisms were examined, namely the ones most relevant to and intensely used in the American election campaigns. The first – narrative political imagery – consists in reaching out to the audience using a dramatic storyline that allows the voters to get involved in the scenario. Through this mechanism, the politicians become closer to the voters who can observe their emotions, dilemmas and joys. The second method is the Internet community created by the politicians by managing specific groups of customers. In American election campaigns, the Internet is used to an extraordinary extent, especially through campaigning on social networking sites, through which politicians managed to reach a wide range of voters and further integrate them around the issues important to these groups. At the same time, the Internet has become a place of intensive fundraising for the campaign purposes. The third mechanism is the presence of humorous elements as an integral part of the American electoral operations. In the U.S. election campaign, in particular, we could observe the following comic elements in action: presidential candidates making fun of their own failings and imperfections; candidates’ participation in satirical TV programmes; and saturation of the pre-election activities with humor. These activities contribute to softening of the image of politics and politicians, and diminish the perceived distance between the politicians and the voters. They also arouse greater interest among the public by inducing positive emotions and easing tension.

All elections are associated with certain psychological costs, incurred by the voter. Participation in the election implies a need to allocate a certain amount of time to understanding the offer of the candidates, to getting acquainted with their policy proposals, tracking current events in the election. When the pre-election political scene is very fragmented, not transparent to the average citizen, the differences between the candidates’ political programmes are small, the participation in the elections is rendered even more difficult (Skarżyńska, 2002, p 44-45).⁹ Elections in the U.S. are by far among the easiest, in terms of psychological costs, due primarily to two issues. First, in the race for the White House, there are always (sooner or later) two major candidates, and in reality the entire fight takes place between them, which makes the choice easier for the average voter, as their attention is not distracted by the multitude of options.

⁹ Here it is worth mentioning the principle of generalized competencies that permits one to explain the citizens’ preferences for the minimalist understanding of politics, and is particularly useful for their decision-making in a context where the framework of reference is a relatively simple party format (two-party or two-block system), and the activities during the campaign weaken the clear-cut divisions in the political rivalry (Godlewski, 2009, p. 36; Wojtasik, 2012, p. 118-119).

One of them is a representative of the Democrats, the other – of the Republicans. Certainly, some of U.S. citizens are guided in their choice by particular personal characteristics and actions of a candidate during the election campaign, but the majority of voters in each case is guided by structural and traditional policy divisions – and for this group the crucial point is whether the next president is a Democrat or a Republican. Among the registered voters in 2012, 28% gave their affiliation as Republicans, and 35% as Democrats, as 33% presented themselves as independent (*Party Affiliation and Election Polls*). The second issue is the fact that the tradition of primaries, the main goal of which is to select presidential candidates who will eventually represent the political parties, lengthens the duration of the campaign. This makes it possible for potential voters almost from the beginning of the election year to share in the great political spectacle. In this way more information can get to the voters, and their activity is not limited to a narrow time scale of the election campaign proper. In addition, the voters also gain more time to make their decision. It should be noted that the vast majority of the voters, regardless of personal desire, become the recipients of political information in various forms – not only during meetings with the politicians or at public speaking events, when the elements of the candidate's programme are presented, but also in a less structured form – during candidates' participation in satirical television shows, skits presented by famous comedians, comic strips in the press and the Internet, or via a myriad widely available gadgets with images of the candidates, via speeches of well-known personalities from the sphere of culture (particularly film and music) that traditionally declare their public support of one of the candidates.

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