

**The Political Image of Left-wing Leaders in Poland:
How Young Voters Evaluate the Politicians from
Different “Political Generations”**

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Maciej Marmola

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1911-1125>

Krzysztof Darmon

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6393-7218>

Abstract:

In recent decades political activity has become more and more personalized. Thus, to achieve political success, it is necessary to have a recognizable and popular party leader. Polish left-wing parties have adopted a different strategy. Instead of betting on one leader, they promote “three tenors” from different political generations (Robert Biedroń, Włodzimierz Czarzasty, and Adrian Zandberg). The aim of our study (N=379) is to diagnose how voters perceive the political images of these left-wing leaders and what feelings they have towards them. We confirm the findings from other studies suggesting the effect of political preferences and ideological orientation on the perception of political image and emotional attitudes to party leaders.

Keywords: political image, party leader, left-wing parties, feeling thermometers, semantic differential

Introduction

Contemporary politics is rightly called the “age of manufactured images” (Newman, 1999). Technological changes, partisan dealignment, and declining interest in politics force political parties to change communication strategies. They stop focusing on the political programs and the party itself, putting party leaders at the center of the media and voters’ attention. Thus, as political scientists point out, there is a growing personalization of politics (Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Garzia, 2014; Karvonen, 2010), understanding as a process in which “the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines” (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007, p. 65). This process significantly influences the media coverage and the behaviors of politicians and voters. Personalized politics brings essential changes in voters' perception of politics. As Karvonen notes, people may

increasingly perceive politics as a competition between individual party leaders rather than organized collective interests and form their political preferences based on evaluations of the individual candidates (Karvonen, 2010, p. 5). Therefore, building an appropriate political image (expected by the electorate) becomes crucial for the election results.

Political image is considered one of the main determinants of electoral behavior (Falkowski & Cwalina, 2012; Newman & Sheth, 1985). Importantly, this image is a subjective structure and consists of the voter's evaluation of the candidate (i.e., her/his party affiliation, statements, attributes, qualities, and even appearance) based on media messages (Nimmo, 1975; Olszanecka-Marmola, 2020, p. 50). In addition, the perception of political image depends on voters' own characteristics (gender, age, level of education, employment status, political identification, etc.) and predispositions (knowledge, interest in politics, political sophistication) (Kaid & Chanslor, 1995, p. 84).

The people's feelings towards the candidates also play an essential role in perceiving the political image and intention to vote (Cwalina et al., 2005, 2000). Thanks to emotions, the voters can more easily process information about political events and specific politicians, which allows them to find themselves in an overload of media messages. Thus, citizens can better understand a complicated political reality. However, this can also have negative consequences and result in purely emotional voting decisions. Conducted research proves that people do not need to have any knowledge of candidates to express emotional attitudes toward them (Olszanecka-Marmola, 2019; Wattenberg, 1987). Campaign consultants try to exploit this phenomenon by creating more and more emotional content. This communication strategy allows them to convey their message to people who are not interested in political issues and thus increase the political support for a particular politician.

The growing personalization of politics is also visible in Poland (Mazur, 2014), where it is hard to imagine an election success without a strong and recognizable party leader. First, the decision-making process in parliamentary elections becomes similar to that which characterizes presidential competition. The significant predictor of electoral behaviors is the "leader effect," which is associated with the influence of a party leader on generating electoral support or voting against the leader of a political competitor (Peszyński, 2016). Hence, most established parties and their election strategies depend highly on experienced party leaders. This is proved by how the ruling party (Law and Justice, PiS) and the opposition formations (Civic Platform, PO and Polish People's Party, PSL) operate. Second, recently the new political initiatives established in Poland

mostly fit into the model of entrepreneurial parties (Marmola, 2020, 2019). This model of party organization is characterized by the following factors: (1) the party is a private initiative of its leader, who plays a central role in it; (2) the founder treats the party as a personal vehicle serving their own interests; (3) the founder has a decisive influence on the political project (at least in its initial phase), the party is related to an issue that is the priority for its founder and the message created by that person is essential to ensure voters' and supporters' identification with the party; (4) the party is not a "product" of the promoter's/sponsor's organization or a social movement, so it has no social roots; (5) the party's origin is not connected with the parliament (Hloušek & Kopeček, 2017; Kosowska-Gąstoł & Sobolewska-Myślik, 2017). Third, social media play an increasing role in political communication to foster personalized messages and bump up the importance of individual politicians (Metz et al., 2020).

Polish left-wing parties somewhat elude these tendencies. Facing the leadership crisis on the left, they decided to create a three-party coalition in the 2019 parliamentary elections, including Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), Spring, and Left Together. Despite the electoral bloc, these parties emphasized autonomy in their political activity and promoted their own party leaders. Thus, voters identified the Polish left not with one, but with three leaders coming from different parties.

Although in June 2021, the Democratic Left Alliance and Spring merged to form the New Left, the perception of the left among voters has not changed. The Polish left is perceived as dominated by "three tenors": Robert Biedroń, Włodzimierz Czarzasty, and Adrian Zandberg (Kowalska, 2021). It seems interesting because they derive from different "political generations" and have other qualities.

Czarzasty is the oldest of the left-wing leaders, having started his political activity in the 1980s in the communist Polish United Workers' Party. Although he was not a leading figure in it, presently political opponents, especially those coming from the anti-system opposition, often criticize him for his activity in the structures of the communist party of power. After 1989, he was not directly involved in politics, working in the publishing industry. However, he was a member of the SLD and, from 1999 to 2005, the member of the National Council of Radio Broadcasting and Television appointed by President Aleksander Kwasniewski. It was only in 2016 that he got involved in political activities for good, becoming the chairman of the SLD. Undoubtedly, Czarzasty is one of the politicians who combine the skills necessary for strong

organizational leadership (tough, slightly autocratic party structure management) and good media coverage (using irony and simple language, shortening the distance with voters).

Biedroń and Zandberg, on the other hand, represent a new generation of the political left, focusing on equality issues. Biedroń is one of the most recognizable LGBT + activists in Poland. He began his political activity in 2011, when he entered parliament on behalf of the left-wing Palikot Movement, becoming the first parliamentarian to openly describe himself as a homosexual. From 2014 to 2018 Biedroń was the president of Słupsk, and in 2019 he founded his own party - Spring, which took part in the elections to the European Parliament held in the same year. Although Biedroń became one of this party's three MEPs, it was the only independent start of this formation in general elections. In 2020 Biedroń ran for the presidential election as the only representative of the parliamentary left. However, he suffered a severe defeat, obtaining only 2.22% of the vote in the first round, which was the sixth result of all the candidates. Despite good communication skills and the ease of entering into contact with voters, Biedroń inconsistently builds his image. As one of the political commentators points out, he “cannot be small-town and European at the same time; cannot use the rhetoric of consensus and base the message on ideological progressivism; cannot strive for youthful vitalism and direct the majority of your program postulates towards retirees and pensioners.” (Pilawa, 2020).

The third tenor of the Polish left is Adrian Zandberg - a member of the Left Together party. Formally, he does not hold any function in this party, but the media and voters assign him the role of a leader. The breakthrough for Zandberg was the debate before the 2015 parliamentary elections. Many experts emphasized that he was victorious in this debate and that the Together party broke into the political mainstream thanks to him (Gieracka, 2015). Zandberg is a typical politician of the new left, who tries to combine equality, opposition to the liberal approach to the economy, and the defense of workers' rights (especially working class, public sector, and "junk contract" employees). Besides that, he can present himself in front of the camera and perform well in speeches and media appearances (Karpieszuk, 2019). These features mean that most left-wing voters would see him at the head of the Polish left (Szczęśniak, 2021).

The aim of our paper is to check how voters perceive Biedroń, Czarzasty, and Zandberg. In the study, we diagnose the emotional attitude towards these politicians and how their image features are assessed. Thus, we are trying to answer the question of which of the leading politicians of the left-wing parties would be the preferred leader of the entire Polish left.

Methods

In the presented study, we used an online survey method. Respondents were given a link that redirected them to an online worksheet page. Next, they anonymously and independently (without an interviewer) filled out the questionnaire concerning socio-demographic variables (gender, age, level of education, place of residence), political preferences, ideological self-identification, evaluation of political images of three left-wing leaders (Robert Biedroń, Włodzimierz Czarzasty, Adrian Zandberg), and emotional attitudes to them.

To measure a political image, we used semantic differential scales, which allowed the study participants to evaluate the image features of a particular politician based on opposing adjectives (Osgood et al., 1957). In this study, we created 10 seven-degree scales: *dishonest vs. honest*, *conflicting vs. conciliatory*, *unreliable vs. reliable*, *focused on the good of the party vs. focused on the good of Poland*, *inexperienced vs. experienced*, *untrustworthy vs. credible*, *lazy vs. hard-working*, *incompetent vs. competent*, *arrogant vs. tactful*, *looking bad in the media vs. looking good in the media*. At each scale, we added an option “I have no opinion,” coded as a neutral attitude. These scales produced high reliability in this study: Cronbach’s alpha for image scales exceeded 0.85 for each politician (Biedroń $\alpha=0.88$; Czarzasty $\alpha=0.86$; Zandberg $\alpha=0.94$). Hence, we decided to construct the index of the general perception of the political image, calculated as the mean value marked on each semantic differential scale.

To collect the data about emotional attitudes to leaders of left-wing parties, we employed feeling thermometers. In the study, participants were asked to define their overall feeling attitudes on a 101-point scale (0-100). Scores between 0 and 50 degrees meant that the respondents had negative feelings toward the candidate, 50 degrees constituted a neutral attitude, and values above 50 degrees indicated positive feelings toward the candidate. Both the semantic differential scales and the feeling thermometers are commonly used in political image research conducted in Poland (Olszanecka-Marmola & Marmola, 2021; Kaniewska-Sęba & Pawełczyk, 2020; Turska-Kawa & Olszanecka-Marmola, 2016) and Western democracies (Schill & Kirk, 2014; Kaid et al., 2007; Kaid, 2004).

The main goal of our study was to check how the voters assess the image features of three left-wing leaders and the feelings towards them. We also put forward four hypotheses, which we confronted with the research results:

H1: The perception of the image features of left-wing leaders depends on ideological self-identification.

H2: The perception of the image features of left-wing leaders depends on party preferences.

H3: The emotional attitude to left-wing leaders depends on ideological self-identification.

H4: The emotional attitude to left-wing leaders depends on party preferences.

The study participants consisted of Facebook users from: student groups of the University of Silesia, supporters' groups of various political parties, and online groups of politically engaged people. The research group comprised 379 people - 265 men (69.9%) and 114 women (30.1%). The sampling was non-random, so the results should not be generalized to the entire population. It is worth noting that this type of research instrument is often used on non-probabilistic samples (Kaid et al., 2007; Olszanecka-Marmola, 2020). Our study group was dominated by young people interested in politics, living in the largest cities, identifying with the left, and voting for left-wing parties. The exact number and percentage distribution of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

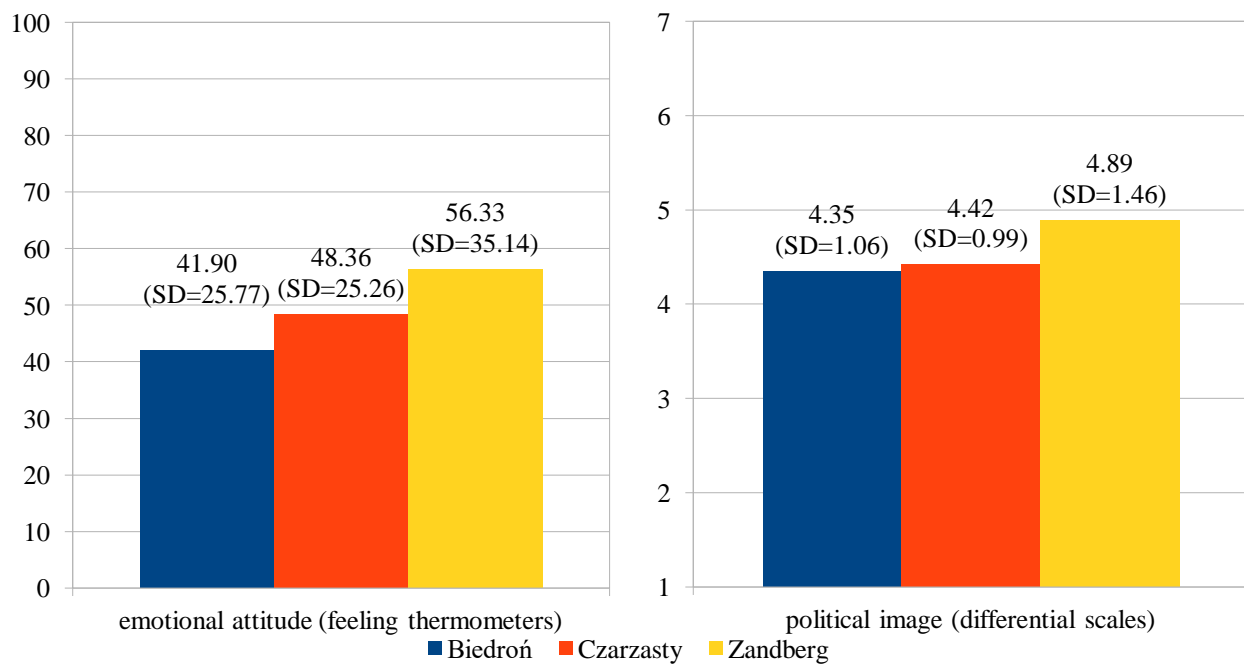
Variable	n (%)	Variable	n (%)
Gender		Ideological self-identification	
Male	265 (69.9)	extreme left	44 (11.6)
Female	114 (30.1)	left	130 (34.3)
Age		center-left	68 (17.9)
18-24	290 (76.5)	center	54 (14.2)
25-35	77 (20.3)	center-right	34 (9.0)
36-49	12 (3.2)	right	22 (5.8)
Place of residence		extreme right	8 (2.1)
rural area	55 (14.5)	I do not know	19 (5.0)
city (to 20,000 inhabitants)	27 (7.1)	Party preferences	
city (20,001-100,000 inhabitants)	61 (16.1)	Civic Coalition (Civic Platform, Modern)	38 (10.0)
city (100,001-200,000 inhabitants)	54 (14.2)	Left (New Left, Left Together)	178 (47.0)
city (200,001 and more inhabitants)	182 (48.0)	Confederation	42 (11.1)
Education Level		Polish People's Party	20 (5.3)
primary education	24 (6.3)	Law and Justice	13 (3.4)
secondary education	197 (52.0)	Other party	14 (3.7)
higher education	158 (41.7)	I did not vote	66 (17.4)
Interest in politics		I do not remember	5 (1.3)
no interest	1 (0.3)	I consciously cast an invalid vote	3 (0.8)
small level	11 (2.9)		
average level	78 (20.6)		
high level	161 (42.5)		
very high level	128 (33.8)		

Source: own study (n=379).

Results

The first results of the study apply to the sample as a whole. The research confirmed that Zandberg would be the best candidate for the leader of the Polish left. He was assessed best regarding the political image features. The respondents evaluated him the best in terms of both the feelings he had and the political image. Moreover, Zandberg was the only one to receive a rating above 50 degrees (above a point expressing a neutral attitude) on the feeling thermometers. The difference between him and Biedroń on the feeling thermometers was almost 15 degrees. The feelings towards Zandberg were also about 8 degrees warmer than towards Czarzasty. With regard to mean scores on the semantic differentials, the average rating of Zandberg's image was 4.89 (comparing 4.42 in the case of Czarzasty and 4.35 in the case of Biedroń). The t-Student tests confirmed the significance of the obtained mean differences.

Chart 1. Political image ratings of left-wing leaders and emotional attitudes to them



Source: own study (n=379).

Taking into account particular differential scales, Zandberg was considered the best in terms of seven image features (honesty, reliability, focusing on the good of Poland, credibility, hard-working, competence, and tactfulness). Biedroń was described as looking good in the media and conciliatory but at the same time the least honest and credible. The respondents most

appreciated Czarzasty's experience and competence, considering him, however, the most arrogant, conflicting, and focused on the good of the party.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations (in brackets) of image features of left-wing leaders

	Biedroń	Czarzasty	Zandberg
<i>dishonest vs honest</i>	3.58 (1.58)	3.96 (1.55)	5.01 (1.91)
<i>conflicting vs conciliatory</i>	4.96 (1.54)	3.73 (1.55)	4.11 (1.68)
<i>unreliable vs reliable</i>	3.43 (1.56)	4.64 (1.48)	5.18 (1.89)
<i>focused on the good of the party vs focused on the good of Poland</i>	3.66 (1.60)	3.24 (1.58)	4.57 (2.05)
<i>inexperienced vs experienced</i>	5.15 (1.37)	6.06 (1.19)	4.55 (1.50)
<i>untrustworthy vs. credible</i>	3.15 (1.70)	4.06 (1.56)	4.92 (2.01)
<i>lazy vs hard-working</i>	4.78 (1.42)	4.87 (1.28)	5.24 (1.64)
<i>incompetent vs competent</i>	4.20 (1.62)	5.02 (1.47)	5.12 (1.80)
<i>arrogant vs tactful</i>	4.62 (1.68)	3.74 (1.61)	4.78 (1.84)
<i>looking bad in the media vs looking good in the media</i>	5.95 (1.31)	4.90 (1.45)	5.38 (1.49)

Source: own study (n=379).

H1: The perception of the image features of left-wing leaders depends on ideological self-identification.

Similar to other studies (Olszanecka-Marmola, 2020), we confirmed the hypothesis that the image evaluation of left-wing politicians depends on ideological self-identification. Due to the overrepresentation of left-wing participants in the sample, we decided to combine groups with center and rightist views. The left-wing respondents assessed the political images of Biedroń [$t(358)=7.787$, $p<.001$], Czarzasty [$t(358)=6.872$, $p<.001$], and Zandberg [$t(358)=15.180$, $p<.001$] significantly better than those who indicated centrist and right-wing views.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations (in brackets) of evaluation of left-wing leaders' images relating to ideological self-identification

	Biedroń	Czarzasty	Zandberg
left orientation (n=242)	4.63 (0.99)	4.68 (0.86)	4.93 (1.48)
center and right orientation (n=118)	3.76 (1.00)	3.91 (1.06)	3.55 (1.27)

Source: own study (n=360).

H2: The perception of the image features of left-wing leaders depends on party preferences.

A one-way ANOVA confirms a significant effect of party preferences on the perception of the political images of Robert Biedroń [$F(4,286)=16.279, p<.001$], Włodzimierz Czarzasty [$F(4,286)=19.652, p<.001$], and Adrian Zandberg [$F(4,286)=73.706, p<.001$]. Left-wing leaders were assessed significantly better by those voting for the Left. On the other hand, voters of the right-wing Confederation evaluated them as the worst. Interestingly, we noted inconsistent results regarding assessing Zandberg's image. He recorded by far the best mean scores on differential scales among voters of the Left. At the same time, he was rated the worst by voters of other opposition parties (Civic Coalition, Confederation) and people supporting the ruling Law and Justice party. Thus, although the voters of the Left preferred Zandberg as the leader, the electorate of other parties generally valued him less than Czarzasty and Biedroń.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations (in brackets) of evaluation of left-wing leaders' images relating to party preferences

	Biedroń	Czarzasty	Zandberg
Civic Coalition (n=38)	4.33 (0.96)	4.18 (0.89)	3.87 (1.32)
Left (n=178)	4.69 (0.96)	4.79 (0.78)	5.80 (0.90)
Confederation (n=42)	3.41 (0.94)	3.55 (1.07)	3.16 (1.30)
Polish People's Party (n=20)	4.06 (0.97)	4.39 (1.13)	4.29 (1.18)
Law and Justice (n=12)	3.87 (1.41)	3.77 (1.41)	3.72 (1.29)

Source: own study (n=291).

H3: The emotional attitude to left-wing leaders depends on ideological self-identification.

T-Student tests prove that people with the left orientation have significantly warmer feelings for left-wing leaders than the center and right. The left-wing respondents have more positive emotional attitudes to Biedroń [$t(358)=9.529, p<.001$], Czarzasty [$t(358)=7.846, p<.001$], and Zandberg [$t(358)=19.195, p<.001$] than those who indicated centrist and right-wing ideological orientations. Again, Zandberg was gifted the warmest feelings of left-wing voters, and people with center and right-wing orientations were extremely hostile towards him.

Table 5. Means and standard deviations (in brackets) of emotional attitudes to left-wing leaders relating to ideological self-identification

	Biedroń	Czarzasty	Zandberg
left orientation (<i>n</i> =242)	49.38 (24.90)	55.37 (22.97)	74.96 (25.51)
center and right orientation (<i>n</i> =118)	26.02 (20.17)	34.49 (25.13)	21.27 (23.63)

Source: own study (*n*=360).

H4: The emotional attitude to left-wing leaders depends on party preferences.

The results taking into account the party preferences are also not surprising. A one-way ANOVA confirms a significant effect of party preferences on the perception of the political images of Robert Biedroń [$F(4,286)=13.179, p<.001$], Włodzimierz Czarzasty [$F(4,286)=15.280, p<.001$], and Adrian Zandberg [$F(4,286)=81.224, p<.001$]. The enormous disproportion of the emotional attitude was once again for Adrian Zandberg. In his case, the average result on the feeling thermometers among the Left voters was 79.49, but the right-wing Confederation electorate rated him only 15.71.

Table 6. Means and standard deviations (in brackets) of emotional attitudes to left-wing leaders relating to party preferences

	Biedroń	Czarzasty	Zandberg
Civic Coalition (<i>n</i> =38)	43.95 (23.08)	39.47 (23.59)	31.05 (28.83)
Left (<i>n</i> =178)	48.99 (23.79)	57.78 (21.69)	79.49 (23.22)
Confederation (<i>n</i> =42)	19.76 (21.24)	29.05 (26.94)	15.71 (23.49)
Polish People's Party (<i>n</i> =20)	37.50 (26.53)	48.50 (28.15)	38.50 (30.66)
Law and Justice (<i>n</i> =12)	38.46 (29.96)	43.85 (25.34)	36.92 (24.96)

Source: own study (*n*=291).

Discussion

Our findings are in line with other studies suggesting the influence of party preferences and ideological orientation on the perception of political image and emotional attitudes to political leaders. To some extent, we also confirm that the one-person party leadership is preferred over a

collective one in Polish politics. Considering the research results, it seems that Adrian Zandberg would be the best leader for left-wing voters. He was rated much better than Robert Biedroń and Włodzimierz Czarzasty among left-wing voters. On the other hand, he can generate a sizeable negative electorate, even among ideologically similar voters of other opposition parties. He was definitely negatively assessed not only by voters for the right-wing parties (Confederation, Law and Justice) but also by the liberal electorate of the Civic Coalition.

It is difficult to draw conclusions with regard to the perceived image features of left-wing leaders. In this case, there is a considerable variation in the results obtained by the leaders on the semantic differential scales. This may indicate that, as it were, they “complement” each other with their traits, compensating for each other's deficiencies. Czarzasty, for example, was rated the worst in terms of media coverage but the best in terms of experience. Biedroń, on the other hand, was evaluated poorly in terms of reliability and trustworthiness but the best in terms of media coverage and agreeableness. Zandberg also scored very differently on the differential scales. However, his features were perceived relatively best in the left-wing electorate. These observations are essential for election campaigning. Indeed, political consultants should design election strategies in such a way as to maximize the potential of each left-wing leader. For example, if experience is most important in campaign strategy, Czarzasty's role in the campaign should increase. However, if honesty, reliability, or focusing on ordinary people are necessary, Adrian Zandberg ought to become crucial in communication efforts. According to the research, Biedroń has the lowest political potential and was perceived the most negatively. This is probably related to the reception of his actions in recent years, including the wasted potential of the Spring party, resignation from the office of President Słupsk, or failure to fulfill the promise to relinquish his seat in the European Parliament to focus on Polish politics after the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Another conclusion we drew from our research is the perception of candidates' images depends on party preferences and ideological orientations. We found that people who fundamentally disagree with a particular politician perceive his image less favorably, even if some positive trait can be objectively attributed to him.

The presented study has some limitations regarding sampling methods and sampling size. Although we did not use a random sample, the results can be considered reliable. Since the study participants declared a relatively high interest in politics, we can assume that their assessments were not a coincidence but resulted from thoughtful reflections on the image of left-wing leaders. However, it seems justified to replicate this type of research on more diverse samples and consider additional variables (such as political knowledge and sources of information about politics). This improvement would make it possible to obtain a complete picture of the factors determining the perception of political image and attitudes towards particular politicians.

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