

Political Preferences

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POLITICAL PARTIES' ELECTORAL STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

Abstract

Taking part in an election, political parties implement their planned strategic activities, which involve making choices regarding competitive goals and maximizing the usefulness of the resources they have. A significant context of party strategies is political uncertainty. The paper discusses the importance of political uncertainty in three areas. First, political uncertainty is an instrument affecting the character of political competition. In the second area, the article presents its role as a factor of competition in the process of campaigning for votes. It also points out that political uncertainty may be a mechanism of institutionalizing new political parties. Some of the implemented party strategies, influencing the level of political uncertainty, assume possible electoral manipulations.

Key words:

electoral strategies, political uncertainty, political manipulations

Introduction

Political parties use various strategies when acting in a planned way to achieve the assumed goals. This strategy is broadly understood as a way to prepare and implement political offers which allow to obtain a certain electorate in order to win as many public offices as possible in the current social, cultural, political and economic conditions [Wiszniowski 2000: 76]. The basic dimension of a strategy involves the voter as the factor that determines planning activities and logistics of electoral campaigns. In this context, the voter's behaviors are analyzed and the electorate is divided into segments. Then certain messages are formulated for each segment with the use of communication

channels. Currently, individualized messages are mainly directed to selected segments through mass media. All these actions are based on the results of marketing studies and surveys [Newman 1994: 38].

Parties implement many different types of strategy. The most important are programme, electoral, marketing, communication and personal strategies. Some approaches also treat all the actions carried out by parties as elements of electoral strategies. In this case, personal, financial, communication, relationship and programme strategies are their components [Skrzypiński 2002]. However, all of them need to be market-oriented, assuming the effective use of the possessed resources in order to achieve the assumed results. This is done by means of intentional changes to the environment, especially in the fields that are critical for the party. Such changes are to improve the competitive position of the party with regard to other entities also competing on the political market. One of the factors influencing party strategies is political uncertainty. Changes in the level of uncertainty may strengthen or weaken the market position of the party.

The article presents the impact of changes in the level of political uncertainty on the electoral strategies used by political parties. Several hypotheses are verified in the paper. The main hypothesis H1 assumes that parties can influence the level of political uncertainty to achieve their strategic goals. Hypothesis H2 verifies the two basic components of political uncertainty: the institutional one and the communication one. Hypothesis H3 describes the potential role of institutional uncertainty. In hypothesis H4, the role of the communication component is assumed.

Political uncertainty

The concept of impact of political uncertainty on the democratic nature of electoral choice refers to the phenomenon of uncertain result of the election, and especially to the management of its dynamics in the electoral process. The uncertainty of election result may have an impact e.g. on the very outcome of the election, on participation in elections, or on the ultimate decisions taken. Scholars identify two basic sources of uncertainty of the result of electoral competition [Fowler, Smirnov 2007]. The first of them refers to uncertainty related to voters' behaviour and motivations determining their decision of participating in the election and choosing a particular party or candidate. The number of factors affecting the electoral decision, their character and subjective gradation of motivations of an individual voter allow to identify individualized uncertainty of a single voter's decision and the uncertainty of whole segments of the electoral market. The other type of source of uncertainty originates from the assumption that voters do not have appropriate resources to assess candidates'

or political parties' positions or that the perception of these positions may not be accurate. It results from activities of the candidates themselves, who "blur" the electoral message in order to increase the probability of their victory. In this case, decisions are taken on the basis of ideas and beliefs instead of rational knowledge [Westholm 1997].

Andreas Schedler [2013] treats political uncertainty as the basic parameter moderating electoral processes but he also sees it as an object of competition between political forces, who want to increase or decrease its level. The basic dimensions of political uncertainty are communication and institutional issues. Usually they are closely interrelated, having a synergistic effect on the subjects interested in changing the level of uncertainty. The basic assumption of communication uncertainty is the statement of a positive correlation between the pluralism of available information and the choice made with the use of this information. Hence, the temporal area in which communication uncertainty functions is the present time, as the image of reality providing the voters with the basis for their decisions is shaped in the presence. Political forces operating in the conditions of reducing information uncertainty focus on shaping the information environment which enables intentional selection of messages to create the expected attitudes and make choices in the conditions of imperfect access to information. In the opposite situation, when information uncertainty is the goal, the subjects of electoral competition tend to generate strategies which enable them to control increasing perception on the part of the recipients, the media compete to look for voters and reach them, and to ensure them free access to information. Contrary to communication uncertainty, the institutional dimension concentrates on the future, aiming at designing the institutional form of the political system which will make it possible to affect (increase or decrease) its level. Looking for the sources of reducing institutional uncertainty, we can identify the reactions which may serve as a protection from the increasing risk of uncertainty or creating and articulating expectations regarding its reduction. A classic mechanism of reducing institutional uncertainty is directional changes of political competition rules at the electoral level. By assumption, they reduce the chances of entities against which they are directed and as a consequence increase the perspectives of the originators of the changes. A classic example of that is changes of the electoral system, resulting from the existing system of political forces in the Parliament and the government. They make political parties promote the institutional models and procedures which give them chances to consolidate or increase their relative strength [Colomer 2004]. Protective responses to institutional threats result from identification of negative consequences of the high level of political uncertainty. An example of such mechanisms is the desire to reduce the effective number

of parties at the parliamentary level, treated as a panacea for high instability of governments generated as a result of elections. Opposite strategies, basing on attempts to increase the level of uncertainty, refer to the need to change the existing system of relations, and particularly to the possible alternation of power. Growing institutional uncertainty will in most cases serve against the ruling group, making it more probable for the political chances of the opposition parties to grow. A possible institutional factor of uncertainty growth is the reduction of institutional control of the formation and activity of political parties, also as regards formal requirements which condition running for election. A classic factor of increasing the degree of uncertainty in this case is the reduction or total elimination of financing party activity from public sources, whose existence promotes political parties with a high level of institutionalization.

Generally, the implementation of a strategy by the ruling parties should be based on the reduction of uncertainty level. However, in the case of institutional uncertainty, this conclusion is only partly true. Indeed, when treating institutional infrastructure as an environment in which decisions are made, it should ensure the conditions in which clear rules make the chosen activities and solutions transparent. It is achieved by procedures described in detail and implemented, which are verified and controlled at each stage. The responsibility for decision making is personal in nature and usually dispersed, which helps eliminate individual discretionary decisions. Collegiality is not a *sine qua non* for pragmatism in decision making, but its individual character may potentially lead to an increased possibility of influence other than concerning the substance. It is especially important in the case of evolution of the political leadership model towards the relational model, pointing out the significance of uncertainty level for the generated support [Turska-Kawa 2013].

The determinant that questions the absolute necessity to directionally lower the level of institutional uncertainty is the availability of the decision making process for the entities which participate in it. Excessive complication of decision making procedures or high cost of participation in political competition may reduce the actual competitiveness of the implemented strategy. It is similar if too high formal criteria – whose meeting is conditional for the availability of the offer – are established. The essence of activity in this case is to ensure the minimum level of institutional uncertainty above which competitiveness is reduced. This issue is important from the procedural point of view, as the decision making entities often create unjustified barriers for the availability of the offer, motivating that with the need to ensure the appropriate quality of the decisions.

An important element of influence of institutional uncertainty is to ensure the control of decision making. The decisions must not be arbitrary, since that would limit the competitiveness of political competition. Control

activities include on-going control and post control. In the first case, the activities depend on the current legal conditions, involving the right to question the unfavorable verdict. Then, ensuring uncertainty also involves ensuring the procedure of appeal to a body other than the one that issued the original decision. Post controls are to analyze the procedural character of the decision making process and do not affect directly the decisions already made. Their goal is not only to optimize the observance of norms but also to create a plane of influencing the decision making bodies. In this case, performing the adaptation function also plays a role: post control may lead to a future change of mechanisms of activity and modification of the implemented strategies.

The other dimension of uncertainty is communication solutions. The impact of communication uncertainty is rather oriented at the current matters. Their possible changes affect the entities which participate in political competition much more quickly than do the changes of institutional uncertainty. The effectiveness and provisional character of influencing communication uncertainty mean that it is used much more frequently than changes of institutional uncertainty. The specific way of implementing strategies means that in some cases the change of communication surroundings is more effective from the temporal point of view than the change of the institutional dimension. This relation may contribute to identifying the risk of reduced competitiveness. It happens when there is intensive activity addressed at the voters, aimed at changing the existing level of communication uncertainty.

Decision makers may influence the communication environment by directionally affecting the chances of entities interested in the outcome. This is much more often achieved by reducing communication uncertainty. Decision makers may purposefully fail to provide all the information or make the access to it difficult, and they may diversify the range of available information for individual stakeholders. The lack of full access to information may lead to differences in the chances of entities participating in the process of electoral competition. The parties that are strongly rooted in public awareness are the beneficiaries of such strategies. Access to information may be reduced by creating formal and material barriers or by managing the process in a way that creates a deterministic market of available information. Such a market should comply with certain norms but should not be competitive in terms of availability. The range of available information is usually diversified by formal means. A considerable share of informal information in the ongoing proceedings clearly indicates that the level of information uncertainty has been reduced.

A negative impact of increasing communication uncertainty is a relatively rare phenomenon. It results from the assumption that increasing the level of communication uncertainty ensures the conditions of better access to

information and consequently helps lower the risk of acting in the conditions of having incomplete information. However, in this case it is worth mentioning the possible range of reception on the part of information recipients, which differs from entity to entity but is always limited. A negative consequence of growing communication uncertainty may be a situation when the amount of available information is disproportionately high in relation to the reception capacity of the recipients. This may cause a temptation for the decision makers to generate so much insignificant information that it will exceed the recipients' ability to process it and as a result make the decision making more discretionary. In the critical situation, when the mass media favor one of the entities, that entity may fail to inform others of the criteria for dividing important from unimportant information.

Influence of uncertainty on political competition

In contemporary democracies, political competition occurs on three main arenas: electoral, parliamentary and cabinet ones. On the electoral arena, the basic element of political competition involves the fight for voters' support for candidates, social movements, and political parties. Phillippe Schmitter [2001] emphasizes that political parties are the best to aggregate social interest in the sphere of politics and create platforms of civic engagement in political processes, and competition between parties is the most reliable mechanism of ensuring rulers' responsibility. Also, collaboration between political parties is very often the only possible way of forming governments. They compete for support, presenting real or apparently alternative programme solutions providing the basis for the process of political identification and, as a result, structuring the party system. Political identification on the electoral arena may be based on the same positions of the voter and the party preferred by that voter in the area of political competition, on the voter's group affiliation and the related preferences to vote for particular parties, and on party identification in which electoral decisions are made on the basis of permanent, symbiotic attitude to the political parties competing within it, which initiates processes of partisan loyalty.

Robert Wiszniowski [2008] observes that political parties are national "organisms" and that is why the state level determines their programmes and strategies, and as a result, behaviors in the political space. The impact of uncertainty on strategies applied by political parties can be discussed from three basic perspectives: (1) as an instrument influencing the level of political competition; (2) as a factor of competition among entities fighting for votes; (3) as a mechanism of promoting new political parties. The possibility of influencing the level of political competition is fundamental for designing the strategies of political

parties' activity. By conditioning the possible impact on the level of communication or institutional uncertainty, we can try to achieve their mutual relation that will influence the possibility of success. In order to consciously influence the described relation, we need to know the direction of influence on communication and institutional uncertainty. Taking into consideration the wide spectrum of factors affecting political competition, activities either increasing or decreasing the level of uncertainty are possible in this case. The general tendency in this field, however, assumes the occurrence of stable, high levels of institutional and communication uncertainty. This will allow the political market to develop in accordance with voters' real preferences.

Analyzing the impact of uncertainty as a factor of political competition, we need to divide the entities into the ones that will be interested in increasing its level, and the ones that will desire it to decrease. The former include the entities whose goal is to achieve the highest possible level of usefulness of the electoral decisions made. These are e.g. bodies which supervise and control electoral competition. Reducing the level of uncertainty, in turn, will be good for those whose individual interests are connected with benefiting from a low level of uncertainty. Such activities may increase the risk of political manipulations.

Table 1. Actions increasing the risk of political manipulations

	Institutional decision makers	Political parties
Communication uncertainty	Increase or decrease	Increase or decrease
Institutional uncertainty	Decrease	Decrease

Sources: Own study.

Regulating the level of uncertainty may serve as a mechanism promoting the formation of new political parties. In this case, increasing the level of uncertainty may determine the formation of conditions that will promote new political movements. The opposite situation, in which political uncertainty is reduced, promotes the petrification of the existing system of dependencies in the party system structure. Thus, in such circumstances the level of uncertainty will be a kind of protection against excessive instability of the sphere of politics.

Conclusions

When designing and carrying out their electoral strategies, political parties often fail to realize that their activities will have an impact on political uncertainty level. This paradox results from the fact that unlike in the case of risk, the degree of uncertainty cannot be estimated, and hence its change cannot be measured either. The direction of the change can be determined, but its potential dimension cannot. That is why influencing the level of political uncertainty is not the basic goal of political parties.

A strategic goal of political parties with a stable institutionalization level is to reduce uncertainty, unless they want to decompose the existing system of reference. Stabilizing the level of uncertainty is also an important goal for the ruling parties, since in such conditions they can perform their appointment functions more easily. Through the described activities, they do not create the proper conditions for opposition parties to gain significance, either. These parties should be in favor of increasing the level of uncertainty, because in such conditions the probability of changing the direction of voters' support grows.

Increasing the level of political uncertainty is especially important for new political parties and for those that want to increase their relevance. It is improbable that in the conditions of stable or decreasing political uncertainty the environment will be in favor of new political movements. Increasing uncertainty affects voters in two ways beneficial for new movements. The first is to activate new groups of voters who were not stimulated to get involved in politics before (in a stable system of reference). In the other case, transitions in electoral support occur, and their natural beneficiaries are new political parties.

Taking into consideration the impact on political uncertainty, political parties implement four fundamental electoral strategies to adjust to the dynamically changing preferences of voters. They can be illustrated with proposals by Michael Laver [2005], describing political parties' adaptational strategies. The first of them refers to the aggregator, assuming continuous adaptation of party policy to the position of its average voter and following the changes in the electorate. In this case, the strategy aims at the stabilization (or reduction) of institutional uncertainty and reduction of communication uncertainty. The strategy of the "predator" is based on repeating activities that have brought the party the best results before (giving it electoral support higher than average). Such activity will surely be based on stabilizing the levels of both kinds of uncertainty. The "predator" adapts its activity to the place taken by the largest part of its electorate (or the largest political party), assuming that more voters can be found there. So as to achieve that, political parties not only have to

maintain stable institutional uncertainty but they have to reduce the level of communication uncertainty as well. The last type of party strategies involves focusing on a permanent political message and hoping that the voters will appreciate that. The implementation of this strategy requires the reduction of both institutional and communication uncertainty.

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