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Sophocleous, Harry

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Political Leaders' Commercialization and Depoliticization: The Case of Greece

Harry Sophocleous, Sofia Anastasiadou, Androniki Kavoura, Andreas Masouras, and Christos Papademetriou

Abstract The leadership patterns that prevail in a country reflect not only its socio-economic and political circumstances, but also the characteristics and democratic reflexes of its citizens. Since the establishment of Greece as an independent state to the present day, we have witnessed changing trends and popular preferences regarding the prevailing leadership models. In this context, the paper provides a conceptual analysis of the commercialization/consumption of the leader's image as a political marketing tool and in particular, as a political product, taking into account the evolving voting behaviour and the changing perceptions of the electoral body. Quantitative research and more specifically survey with Greek voters was used to measure the changing perceptions of the electorate and to reflect the depoliticization of the leaders' image. Comparisons were made both with the context and previous research on the specific Greek case by making a historical reference and with cases from other European states. Implications and limitations of the research are discussed.

Keywords Political Leader's Image · Commercialization of Political Leader

1 Introduction

In terms of political marketing, the image of the political leader is one of the main dimensions of the political product and therefore one of the vital components the wider political marketing mix. Moreover, the dominant characteristics of leaders in a particular country (political market) reflect the political circumstances, the level of political involvement and thus, the perceptions and behavioural patterns of voters.

H. Sophocleous (✉) · A. Masouras · C. Papademetriou
University of Neapolis, Paphos, Cyprus
e-mail: c.sophocleous.1@nup.ac.cy

S. Anastasiadou
University of Western Macedonia, Kozani, Greece

A. Kavoura
University of West Attica, Aigaleo, Greece

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In this context, this paper gives examples from other countries and references and meanwhile focuses on the Greek case by making a historical analysis of the image of the dominant leader of the Greek political market from the era of political transition (post-colonization) to the modern era and examines the implications and contextual distortions that evolve and transform the image of the dominant leader [1, 2] in doing so, the aim is to give a clearer and a more spherical context for the particular research.

1.1 Research Context and Examples from Other Countries

The average age of a European head of government is now around 5 years of age. In the 1980s, it was over [3]. French President Emmanuel Macron only entered formal politics five years before becoming president in 2017 at the age of 39, making him France's youngest leader since Napoleon. Rishi Sunak, three years his junior, spent just seven years in the House of Commons before becoming British prime minister last October. Italy had its youngest-ever prime minister in 2014, Ireland in 2017 and Ukraine in 2019. In 2017, Sebastian Kurz became chancellor of Austria at the age of just 31, setting a record as the world's youngest head of government, a title inherited two years later by the then 34-year-old Marin of Finland [4].

Previous research [14] compared the backgrounds of European prime ministers between 1945 and 2019 uncovered that about half of those who took office between 2000 and 2019 had served less than six years as a member of parliament, a fact that may support the argument of the depoliticization of Leader's Image. Accordingly, the professional experience of Europe's leaders has become less political and more technical. In that sense, Europe's leaders are no longer, nor the career politicians, neither the highly politicized personalities they once were. The particular fact supports the particular research hypothesis, which examines the depoliticization of Leader's Image in the contexts of Greece. Appropriately, if we consider the average Leader's Image in the Greek Political scene, we may clearly recognize the gradual decline of Political Leaders Politicization.

More specifically, in Greece, during the first years of the transition from the Colonial Junta to democracy, we saw leadership models/prototypes such as that of Constantine Karamanlis, with his long political involvement in democratic affairs, or that of Andreas Papandreou, with a deep ideological orientation towards socialism and social democracy and deep political slogans, prevail. These prototypes have gradually been changed, starting in the mid-90 s, with the transition from Papandreou to the more compromised and less idealism Konstantinos Simitis. The second step can be seen in the rise of Alexis Tsipras, who was politicalized but distanced from the traditional political families of the country. The third and decisive milestone in this direction was the rapid rise of Stefanos Kasselakis as the leader of the leading opposition, winning the Syriza party leadership elections just days after his appearance in the country and his unpoliticized declaration: "I am Stefanos, and I have something to tell you". The aim of this research is to provide a quantitative analysis of the commercialisation/consumption of the leader's image as a political marketing

tool and in particular, as a political product, taking into account the evolving voting behaviour and the changing perceptions of the electoral body The Greek case is expected to fill the current research gap by converging on the impact of voting patterns on the political product and in particular the personal and political identity of political leaders.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Human Branding and Product as an Element of Political Marketing Mix

Human branding is an ascending issue in the sphere of the conventional marketing. The value as a brand of an individual who is well known, and the subject of explicit marketing communication efforts is being explored in many fields. The notion has clear potential value in political marketing, as well, where the role of a political leader as a commercialized element and as a part of the political marketing, has been extensively recognized. Additionally, there is a responsive/circular relationship between leaders and parties, each of which has some unique brand associations, also provides a unique context in politics [2, 5].

The way of investigating the purpose of human branding and product as a marketing element in politics also delivers a context for reconnoitering and emerging certain connections between party and leader, human brand and organizational brand. Party leaders need brand accuracy as promoters of the party's brand authority to control the association and deliver the policies promoted [2, 6]. Considering the contemporary political reality of a country, is openly associated with the image and the broader characteristics of the political leader and is the principal methodological aspect of evaluating his/her action, coordinating the activity of the political institutions [5, 6].

Political marketing is the promotion of the features, concepts, values and procedures of a specific party, leader or candidate to form voting perceptions [2, 5]. In other words, political marketing it is the set of practices consumed to cover a political party, a leader, or candidate appear appropriate to potential voters in order to reach the highest number of voters and to highlight the differentiation between him and others in order to win elections. Accordingly, political marketing considers the use of marketing mix (Product, Place, Price and Promotion), in the same manner like in conventional marketing. In this specific manner, the context of the particular paper, concentrates on the leader's image, as a Political Product and as a substantial part of the wider marketing mix. Furthermore, the previous research, provides a conceptual outline and experiential means for understanding and evidently denoting what motivates the acceptance and accomplishment of contemporary political leaders by mirroring on the interconnections between perceptions of authenticity, regularity and

capability. Accordingly, the particular instrument it is acknowledged as the Triangle of Leadership [6].

What is a Leader? However, it may be useful to define the concept of a leader and summarize some of its main characteristics, in order to be able to assess the leader's image as an element of human branding and as a component of the political product. "A leader is a person who influences other people, gains their trust (by whatever means) and gets them to follow him voluntarily and willingly". [7] Nevertheless, another impression reveals this: The ideal leader is the one who challenges the establishment and, through vision and values, inspires and leads people, organizations or peoples to progress accordingly, making substantial cuts and leaving as a legacy a perfect governance framework, infrastructure and prospects for continuity. Douglas McGregor [8] moved on to develop two basic leadership orientations: Theory "X" and Theory "Y". In general, Theory "X" is based on the fact that "under-leadership" groups are over-assertive about their rights while failing in their responsibilities, and at the same time are passive and lazy recipients of manipulation. On the contrary, the "Ψ" theory is based on the fact that the "led" groups understand both their responsibilities and their rights and can influence the "leadership direction". McGregor's theory was based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Specifically, McGregor divided Maslow's hierarchy into "lower order" needs (theory "X") and "higher order" needs (theory "Y") [9]. In this way, it becomes clear that, as a rule, leaders worthy of the visions and values of their electorate emerge.

3 Methodology

3.1 Problem Statement

The particular study investigates how Greek political leaders are commercialized and perform as a political product by taking into account the notion of human branding and the qualities and the characteristics of leading politicians. It provides a conceptual analysis of the commercialisation/consumption of the leader's image as a political marketing tool and in particular, as a political product, taking into account the evolving voting behaviour and the changing perceptions of the electoral body. **Research Context.** Within a year, between May 2023 and June 2024, Greeks went to the polls four times (two for parliamentary elections, one for local elections and one for European elections). At the same time, the main opposition party of Greece, Syriza, had its own internal election battle, which led to the victory of the then newly appeared and unconventional Stephanos Kasselakis. In such a critical situation, the Greek voters were called upon to vote four times in a short period, a circumstance that undoubtedly had an impact on voting behaviour and, consequently, on their perceptions upon political marketing, and in particular, political product and leadership image. **Research Questions/ Hypothesis.** To facilitate the interpretation of well-defined aims and objectives, and thus enable the proposed research to be carried

out, the following specific hypotheses could be identified from the above indicative overview Hypothesis 1. The Leader's political Image as a political product, as it is perceived by the average Greek Voter and therefore the human branding of leading politicians, is commercialized and has become les politicalized than it used to be. Hypothesis 2. Leader's qualities and the characteristics and in particular, personal and political and personal identity qualities, values and characteristics, are perceived in a non-political manner [1, 5].

3.2 Quantitative Research Consideration

To meet the requirements of the proposed research objectives, certain research methods were considered essential. Primary research is therefore the only means of finding answers that are relevant to the company. It has been considered as necessary to carefully specify the research population and clearly identify the sample that represents this population in the actual research process in order to be able to approach a particular question in a thorough manner. The survey was carried out for the Greek electorate of a convenient sample of 492 Greek citizens with the right to vote, just after the European Elections. This particular timetable was selected with the aim of ensuring that only voters were consulted and that the evident influence of political product could be monitored.

3.3 Survey Result (Political Product-Personal and Political Identity)

Leader as a Political Product. Firstly, the survey examined the electoral impact of leader as Political Product and is reflected human branding [5, 10], by considering three elements: The Political Records, The Image as a Leader and The Image as a Social Entity (See Fig. 1). Accordingly, The Image of the Leader as a social rather than a political entity, appeared to have the highest mean value (3,91), while, The Image as a Political Leader and The Political Records, scored 2,46 and 3,28, respectively. The particular fact could indicate the depoliticization of the leader as political product and the decreased palatalization of Leader's Image. As for the demographic parameters, the survey indicated that "the electoral Impact of leader as political product" is higher for women rather than men. In addition, the results reported that the particular impact is decreasing as the age and the educational level is increased.

Political leader's Personal and Political Identity. Moreover, the survey involved the examination of 9 items (See Fig. 2), which tested the political (5 items), and personal identity of a Leader and which reflect his/her personal characteristics and qualities (4 items).

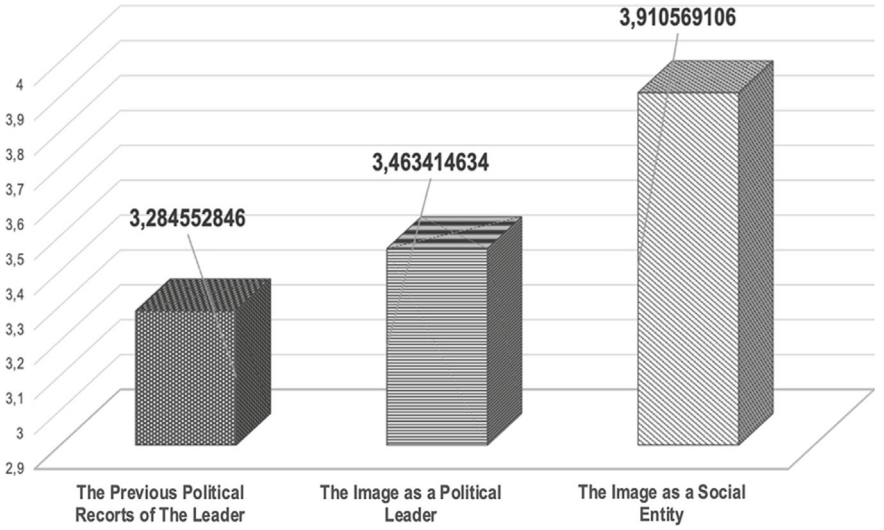

Fig. 1 Leader as a Political Product

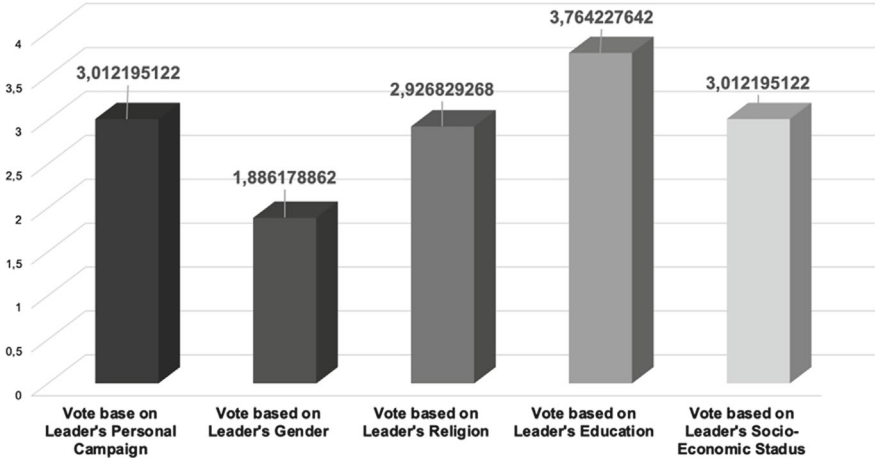

Fig. 2 Personal identity of a political leader

The personal identity of the Political leaders as candidates which reflects the human branding of the particular politician, shows a diversity of mean values between its different elements (personal campaign, gender of the leader, education of the leader, and socio-economic status of the leader). More specifically, the leader's gender (with a mean of 1.89) appears to be the element with the least clear statistical picture, since for the vast majority of respondents this fact could indicate the diversity of the way in which respondents perceive religion in relation to their overall voting

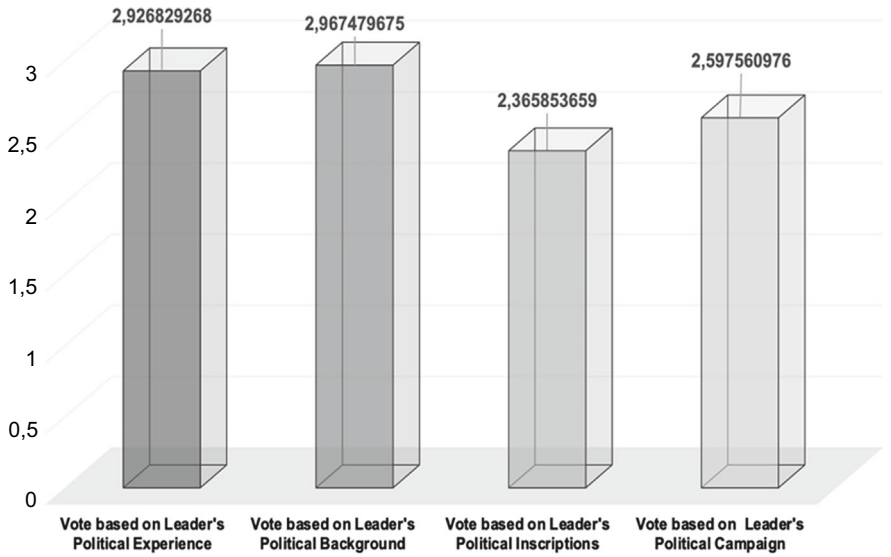

Fig. 3 Political identity of the political leader

behaviour. Furthermore, the leader's education (with a mean value of 3.76) appears to be the most important element of the leader's personal identity, followed by personal campaign and socio-economic status (3.01 each). Thus, "Leader's campaign" as an element of "personal identity" concentrates a mean value of 3.01, while as an element of "political identity" it concentrates only 2.60. In contrast to the case of the leader's personal identity, none of the elements of political identity has a mean value higher than 3. (See Fig. 3.) This may also be an indication of the depoliticization of the leader.

4 Research Implications

The average values of the three major examined elements (Pollical Product [3,4.6], Leader's Personal Identity [2, 9] and Leader's Political Identity [2, 10], as they arise from the gathered result seem to be higher (Product and Personal Identity) and lower (Political Identity), than those collected by previous research [1, 10], which were 3, 49, 2.79 and 2.90 respectively. From the three elements that are composing the wider element of Political Product, Previous Political Records, and Leadership Image, appeared to be slightly lower than last years, while the Image as a Social entity is slightly higher than Last years [10]. This may indicate that an individual leader's campaign is perceived more as a personal image than as a political statement. Moreover, in contrast to previous studies [11–13], the specific study emphasises on the element of political leader and shows a marginal impact of leader's political

background with a mean of 3.22 in contrast to the higher mean of 3.44 obtained on other studies [14, 15].

5 Conclusions and Limitations

According to the discussion points of the specific research, this may reflect the fact that the so called "Leadership Image" as it is perceived by the average the Greek voter, is mainly influenced by non-political factors. This particular fact confirms the paper's research hypotheses which suggested depoliticization of leader's image. In a rather similar way, the variance that was mirrored from the conclusions of the specific research regarding the appreciation of the importance of the electoral activity and the actual reflection of voting, is in line with previous research [1, 12] and indicates that voters (especially the younger ones) understand the importance of voting. However, their lack of participation to a certain extent is either a result of disapproval of the political system or a result of the general gratitude that their vote will not manage to change the current situation [8]. This stresses differences among the behaviour of different demographic segments of Greek voters. Finally, it can be argued that a number of research limitations have emerged, even though the reported research findings are consistent with the achievement of the stated objectives and generally confirm the basic hypotheses of the project. In addition, it is beyond the scope of this study to further apply the findings on "voter participation", "information seeking" and "stability", and therefore the data collected on "word of mouth" may not be as representative and may not reflect the actual impact of word of mouth on the electoral process.

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