WHO ARE POLITICAL OPINION LEADERS? - IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL MARKETING

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Abstract— Opinion leadership is a well-known term which has lately gained greater importance in politics. Political opinion leaders are people who influence other people's political choices and that is the reason why they are very valuable when it comes to political marketing. The main goal of this research was to identify some key characteristics of political opinion leaders in order to set some basis in political marketing segmentation. Also, research was aimed to explore some media habits of political opinion leaders so that political parties could create successful media strategy in their attempt to influence the influencers.

Index Terms— political opinion leaders, political opinion seekers, political marketing, voter behavior

I. INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of new media, the concept of political opinion leadership has lately gain more and more attention in political research. Traditional media like television and newspapers still play a crucial role in political coverage, but Internet has a great potential to influence political behavior. The emergence of new media (such as social networks) has enabled political opinion leaders to spread their influence to a greater extent. Political opinion leaders are important agents for political parties and that is the reason political parties should know their main characteristics in order to influence them. The aim of this research is to determine some major socio-demographic and psychological characteristics of political opinion leaders. The information obtained can be used as a valuable input in political marketing segmentation for political parties. Political parties should be aware who political opinion leaders are in order to efficiently focus their marketing efforts towards them. Influencing political opinion leaders means indirectly influencing political opinion seekers thus achieving double benefit. The other aim of this research was to explore media habits of political opinion leaders. Establishing which media they use most often helps political parties to successfully build their media strategy.

II. POLITICAL OPINION LEADERSHIP

Opinion leadership is old as society and community, and since the 20th century, this concept has increasingly become a subject of researches because of the appearance of mass media. In order to better understand the concept of a term and the context of politics in which it is written about in this paper, it is important to understand what opinion leadership is or who opinion leaders are. In paper [1] opinion leaders are described as "both more generally exposed to the mass media, and more specifically exposed to the content most closely associated with their leadership" (p. 316). Moreover, opinion leaders can be explained in an even simpler way as it stands in a reference [2] stating that: "When we actively seek advice from another, that person becomes an opinion leader." (p. 42). Additionally, as [3], [4], [5] concluded, opinion leaders have an impact on opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors on the people from their closer or farther surroundings. Also, they affect them in the desired way, and such an impact occurs with a certain frequency. Although they are very important, opinion leaders are not the only participants in the creation of political opinion. Reference [6] shows four kinds of groups based on the relationship between opinion leadership and opinion followership. According to the authors, these groups are: opinion givers/seekers, opinion givers, opinion seekers, and nondiscussants. In this paper, focus will be on opinion leaders, and, to a lesser extent, on opinion seekers. It is also important to note that an opinion leader does not always have to be an opinion leader and that an opinion seeker does not always have to be in that, seekers, role. Their roles can be replaced, depending on the situation, people, time and place. So, one person can be an opinion leader for one issue, and an opinion seeker for another issue (and vice versa) [6]. Additionally, opinion seekers are not always just passive followers. They can "actively seek out, compare, and evaluate multiple sources of opinions and their qualities" (p. 4440). Also, in some situations, (when issue do not concern their lives, when they are not interested enough or, simply, when they are not even familiar with the subject) individual is neither an opinion leader nor a follower. Opinion leaders can be divided into two groups: creators and curators. Creators are the ones who create the content themselves, and the curators are those who share the content created by someone else (creator) [7].

It is also interesting to note that opinion leaders from a

few decades ago do not have equal characteristics as the opinion leaders today. In fact, in mass media time, opinion leaders would read the news and information from them and accept (or not) them as they are. On the other hand, with the emergence of digital media and social networks opinion leaders have an opportunity to participate in the creation and sharing news, also they have an opportunity to express opinions that can become as accessible as the news itself [8]. As can be concluded, the basic difference lies in the engagement and interaction that was not possible in this form until the digital revolution. In most cases, the opinion leader notes a higher level of interest, knowledge, and ability to identify social issues than is the case with the rest of the population [9]. Also, opinion leaders are more often older and male than younger and female [10], [11]. Furthermore, they consider themselves more intelligent and more independent than others. Because of that and other mentioned factors, they consider themselves more eloquent for transferring information and forming opinions among others, i.e. nonleaders [12]. Based on cited conclusions about opinion leaders, it can also be concluded that they are individuals from society who often have enough confidence in themselves to think that they have a chance (and perhaps the responsibility) to be those who will help others to create an opinion about political and other issues.

IV. TWO THEORIES ABOUT POLITICAL OPINION LEADERSHIP

In [1] authors highlight that despite mass media have a strong influence on people's political opinion and on political voting, personal influence of opinion leaders has the same (or even greater) impact on opinion followers. Furthermore, opinion leaders and mass media are strongly linked. For example, mass media directly or indirectly form the opinion of the opinion leaders, and then they form the opinion of the people around themselves, i.e. opinion seekers [13]. Briefly, opinion followers are the last station on the path of information from mass media, and opinion leaders are the channel through which this information travels. The theory explained above is called two-step flow theory and it is described in [14] paper. According to the authors, opinion leaders are more interested in events in society and issues, and therefore better informed than nonleaders. For that very reason, they are often the main source of influence on the public. In addition, they process and connect information much faster than the rest of the public which leads to having pronounced efficiency in that regard. The aforementioned theory has progressed over time, and therefore new approach was developed. This theory is called diffusion of innovation and, in short, it describes how innovations have been spreading within a system of society. According to [15] and the theory of diffusion of innovations, the leaders of opinions (1) are more exposed to external forms of communication such as media, (2) have more purchasing power and higher socio-economic status, (3) are more innovative, and (4) they are in the center of interpersonal communication networks. In paper [5] the same author also states that the role of opinion leader is crucial in the diffusion process in the context of the media. Also in the context of innovation, opinion leaders think that they are pioneers in accepting it as well as some other social trends. Furthermore, they are, in this case, more courageous and more prepared than the rest of society [16], [17].

V. SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON OPINION LEADERSHIP

Along with mass media, one more form of media is very important today. With the appearance of computers and the Internet, digital media have emerged, and an important part of such media are social networks. Due to their structure and capabilities, today they represent an important source of information, and thus an important form of media. The basis of social networks is the creation and sharing of content [18], and that's what makes it a breeding ground for opinion leaders and opinion seekers. Because of such structure in which the sharing of opinions and reflection on them through commenting, retweeting or just liking encourages creation of or following various (political) opinions and attitude. Furthermore, according to [8] "individuals who are highly engaged in social media and use the multiple tools available on these sites are significantly more likely to attempt to persuade other people to vote a certain way or try to change others' minds about political causes or political candidates" (p. 230). Because of all mentioned above, it is not difficult to conclude that social networks are particularly suitable for opinion seekers when they are looking for information and attitudes related to the topics they are interested in. For opinion leaders (but also for seekers), social networks have removed barriers that existed while only traditional media was the main source of political information. New media have changed the way individuals could take part in politics and provided them with a low-cost way to participate in political discussions [19]. Thus, opinion leaders can more easily influence others, and seekers of opinions may find it easier to find the information they are looking for because of a chance for easier consumption, distributing, commenting and reacting on news and political information. Reference [20] shows that on social networks, it is possible to identify who leaders are - their characteristic is more frequent communication activities and also they are more likely to respond on political messages, start conversations and spread information. Earlier was mentioned what

are the characteristics of the opinion leaders (higher socio-economic status, knowledge, independency etc.), but that can change to a certain extent when the social network is introduced into the context. For example, reference [21] shows that "opinion leaders on Twitter tend to depend more on their own expertise and perspectives rather than on their social position." Namely, "the level of visible education or established social standing may not matter much in acting as an opinion leader on Twitter." The same author proved that there is positive connection between opinion leadership and frequency of Twitter use and information seeking motivation. Twitter is an interesting network in the context of politics, and it is often used for double screening, which implies the use of mass media and social media at the same time for monitoring political news. In some papers [22], [23], [24] it is mentioned that people use Twitter to track, search information and express opinions about political events, candidates and debates during live shows. It can be concluded that Twitter is, in this case, a great tool for opinion leaders who use it for that purpose. Additionally to Twitter usage, frequency of usage of other social networks is related to the desire to influence others [25].

VI. POLITICAL OPINION SEEKERS

There are less available papers and researches about opinion seekers than about opinion leaders. Still, it is entirely clear that "the existence of opinion leadership, however, is predicated on the idea that other people seek and then follow the advice of opinion leaders" [13] (p. 138). When there would be no opinion seekers, opinion leaders would not exist too, and since these two groups are in strong correlation, the same theories mentioned earlier (two-step flow and diffusion of innovation) also can be applied in the case of an opinion seekers but with vice versa approach. On the other hand, like it was mentioned before, opinion leaders can be opinion seekers in different situation under other circumstances. Reference [26] shows that two-thirds of opinion leaders in certain occasions was seeking for information in other occasions. It can also be said that in the sea of information it is often difficult to find the right ones, so opinion seekers consider the leaders as those who will filter such information for them [27].

In short, from their point of view, it may be easier to follow opinion leaders than to seek information alone. Social media impact is mentioned before, and in context of opinion seeking it is concluded that the frequency of using Twitter also has a positive and significant link to motivation to seek additional information in the policy context [25]. Since social networks are based on content and communication, it is logical that they are rich source of information for those seeking it.

VII. CLUSTER ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL OPINION LEADERSHIP

The aim of the analysis was to make clusters of political opinion leaders and describe their socio-demographic and certain psychological characteristics. Research was conducted in five Croatian counties using an in person survey method. Interviewers have administered paper questionnaires to participants over 18 years of age who are eligible to vote. Interviewers were instructed to choose one male and one female respondent from different age groups (18-31 years, 32-45 years, 46-59 years and over 60 years old). The research was conducted in year 2017 and 681 questionnaires were obtained. After preliminary analysis, 19 questionnaires were eliminated due to the large number of missing values and 662 questionnaires were analyzed. The data analysis was performed with the statistical program SPSS 21.0. The study sample is described in Table 1.

Two step cluster method was used to determine clusters of political opinion leadership. Measurement of cohesion and separation values were above the recommended value of 0.0. Analysis has resulted with two clusters. Table 2 shows the items that were used in cluster analysis and their means for each of the two obtained clusters. Respondents were given six statements about their political opinion leadership and were asked to evaluate on the scale from 1 to 5 their level of agreement or disagreement (1 – I completely do not agree; … 5 – I completely agree). The statements were adapted from the research of [28].

The analysis has resulted with two significantly different clusters which were, based on their characteristics, named political opinion leaders and political opinion nonleaders. As Table 2 depicts, political opinion leaders have significantly higher values of political opinion leadership than political opinion nonleaders.

Table 1. Sample description

		%
Gender	M	49.7
	F	50.3
Age at the time of the survey (years)	18-31	25.9
	32-45	25.7
	46-59	24.8
	≥60	23.6
Education	Primary school	9.4
	High school	56.5
	Faculty	31
	Master's degree	2.4
	Doctorate	0.7
Place of residence	Village	22.9

	Suburb	13.6
	Town/city	63.5
Employment status	Student	16.6
	Unemployed	9.7
	Employed	48.3
	Retired	25.4
Household income (€/month)	<400	10.3
	401-800	29.5
	801-1200	26.6
	1201-1600	19.8
	1601-2000	8
	>2000	5.8

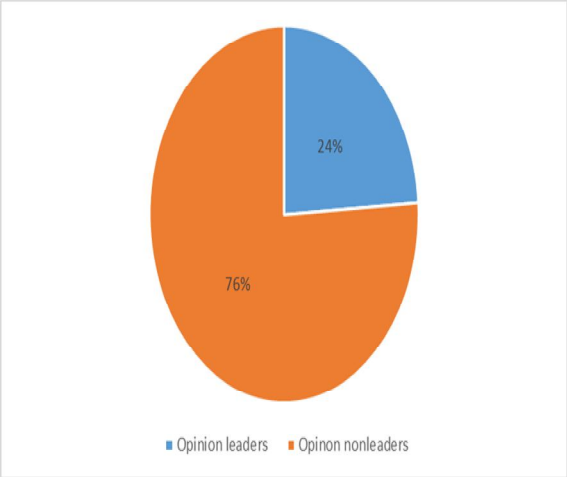
Table 2. Means for obtained clusters

Variable	Cluster 1 Political opinion leaders N=159	Cluster 2 Political opinion nonleaders N=503
People come to me for information about politics.	3,00	1,15
People around me sometimes make political decision based on my opinion.	2,96	1,21
I sometimes influence who my friends vote for.	2,80	1,16
I am regarded as a good source of information about politics.	3,35	1,43
I spend a lot of time talking about politics.	3,06	1,40
People around me ask from me information about politics.	3,03	1,51

Graph 1 shows the sizes of two obtained clusters. As it can be seen on Graph 1, the majority of respondents (76%) belongs to the cluster called opinion nonleaders. They could not be named as political opinion seekers since the fact that they are not leaders does not necessarily indicate that they actively seek information (they could be politically apathetic).

This cluster is characterized by extremely low values of political opinion leadership. On the other hand, 24% of the respondents belong to the cluster called political opinion leaders. They are characterized by significantly higher mean values when it comes to political opinion leadership.

Graph 1. Cluster sizes



The results of cluster analysis also provided some socio-demographic and psychological characteristics of each cluster. Psychological characteristics were measured by four different variables: political knowledge (adapted from the research of [29]), political interest (adapted from the research of [28]), political stability (adapted from the research of [28]) and informing about politics (adapted from the research of [31]). All of the variables were measured with Likert type scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the strongest level of disagreement and 5 being the strongest level of agreement). These four variables, as well as socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education and income) were included as evaluation fields in performed cluster analysis. The analysis has resulted with the description of two main clusters as it follows.

Political opinion leaders are mostly male respondents (71.1%), with high school education (51.9%), their household monthly income ranging from 801 to 1200 euros (27.7%) and their age ranging from 18 to 31 years old (30.8%). Political opinion leaders, in regard to political opinion nonleaders, are characterized with higher levels of political knowledge (3.51), higher levels of political interest (2.67), higher levels of informing about politics (3.34) and also higher levels of political stability (3.42). The latter is referred to the level in which respondents vote for the same political party. Political opinion leaders mostly inform about politics via television (4.10) and social networks (3.38).

Political opinion nonleaders are mostly female (56.7%), with high school education (57.7%), their household monthly income ranging from 401 to 800 euros (31.8%) and from the age 32 to the age 45 (28.2%). They are characterized with extremely low levels of political knowledge (2.14), political interest (1.41), informing about politics (2.85) and political stability (2.40). Political opinion nonleaders mostly

inform about politics via television (3.75) and via conversations with other people (3.12).

CONCLUSION

Political opinion leaders represent a very important segment for political parties and their political marketing strategies. The results of this research confirmed some previous research [10], [11] that political opinion leaders are mostly men. However, contrary to the same previous research, it has shown that political opinion leaders are mostly young people.

Political opinion leaders are also people with higher socio-economic status who inform about politics very often. It is proven that television still is their most used media, but social networks are right behind television. Research also confirmed that they are distinguished by high levels of political knowledge and interest in politics, and also shown that political opinion leaders have high level of voting stability (they continuously vote for the same party/candidate).

The implications of this research refer to political parties/candidates. It provides them the insight to some main characteristics of political opinion leaders so they can be positively influenced. The main limitation of this research is the sample.
The research was conducted on the convenient sample in only one region of the country so the results cannot be generalized especially in some other countries because of the influence of cultural, economic and political differences. Also, in this research, only political opinion leaders were analyzed, and it would be interesting to analyze political opinion seekers in the same way.

Further research should also explore some other psychological characteristics of political opinion leaders like, for example, their political attitudes or their political orientation. Also, given the importance of new media, future research should explore media habits of political opinion leaders in more details (for example, which social networks they use most and how they interact with others when it comes to politics).

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