



Gherghina, S. and Tap, P. (2021) First-time voters and honest political leaders: evidence from the 2019 presidential election in Romania. *East European Politics*, 37(3), pp. 496-513. (doi: [10.1080/21599165.2020.1824907](https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1824907))

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First-Time Voters and Honest Political Leaders: Evidence from the 2019 Presidential Election in Romania

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Abstract

Voters favour some personal characteristics of political leaders over others. Honesty is an important characteristic and research focuses extensively on perceptions of honesty. However, little is known about why voters prefer honest political leaders. This article aims to identify what determines the preferences of first-time voters for honesty as a characteristic of political leaders. It uses an original survey conducted on first-time voters in the Romanian presidential elections (N = 664). Our statistical analysis argues and tests the explanatory power of three categories of determinants: trust in political institutions, voting for candidates outside politics, and electoral campaign. We find that trust in government and the rejection of negative campaigning increase the preference for honesty. The preferences of young people are rooted in positive features of the political system.

Keywords: first-time voters, political leaders, honesty, campaign, Romania

Introduction

Political leaders are often associated with individuals who inspire and motivate followers, act firmly, outline a series of directions, and provide guidelines for others to follow (Willhoite, 1976; Lipman-Blumen, 2014). Their characteristics cover a broad spectrum ranging from competence, honesty, or self-confidence to emotional stability, communication skills or need for power (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Cottam *et al.*, 2015; Aaldering and Vliegthart, 2016; Gherghina, 2020). Political leaders often use their characteristics and abilities to rule the political institutions – to seek re-election or to implement policies. In pursuing both goals, leaders seek to persuade voters that they are the appropriate persons to rule. Voters' preferences and support of political candidates are influenced, among others, by a candidate's personal characteristics (Hayes, 2009; Kam and Simas, 2012).

Related to this, earlier research shows that a leader's physical appearance and personal characteristics are important drivers for voters' preferences. In terms of physical appearance, voters prefer tall candidates with a lower-pitched voice because candidates who possess these features are considered physically strong, wise, brave, dominant, and efficient compared to other candidates (Case and Paxson, 2015; Klofstad, Anderson and Nowicki, 2015). Relative to personal characteristics, voters prefer a leader who can create a charismatic and emphatic relationship with the electorate, speaks and dresses a certain way (Rosenberg *et al.*, 1986; Shamir, 1994; Stroud, Glaser and Salovey, 2005; Barbaranelli *et al.*, 2007). Honesty is an important personal characteristic. As an indication of its importance, the brand personality scale includes the characteristic as the first and more complex of the five dimensions for analysis (Aaker, 1997). We know that voters consider honest leaders more credible (Moorman and Grover, 2009; Moorman, Blakely and Darnold, 2018). So far, much of the literature analyses honesty either in terms of what voters want to see in a politician or with how they perceive this personal characteristic. However, very little is known about determinants of voters' preferences for honesty.

To address this gap in the literature, our article aims to identify what determines the preferences of first-time voters for honest political leaders in the 2019 presidential elections in Romania. First-time voters are a relevant group for the study of preferences because they are more open to various characteristics of leadership and they have limited exposure to previous campaigns. As such, first-time voters are less likely to make assessments based on previous interactions and succumb to information bias (including echo chambers), party identification or socialisation with candidates. Understanding why first-time voters prefer honest political leaders can uncover an important socialisation mechanism against dishonest behaviours – an issue that has plagued many political arenas in the last decades. The analysis argues and tests the explanatory potential of three categories of determinants: trust in political institutions, voting for candidates outside politics, and electoral campaign. We also control for voting cast in favour of one of the top-two candidates and gender. We use individual level data from an original survey conducted on 664 first-time voters in the aftermath of the 2019 presidential elections in Romania. The survey includes only respondents who actually voted instead of potential voters because people who do not vote may not have an interest towards political leaders.

Our analysis focuses on presidential elections because these are highly personalised contests in which the image of candidates matters (Garzia, da Silva and De Angelis, 2020). The arguments we make in the following pages are specific to semi-presidential systems so are therefore less relevant for legislative elections or any type of election based on list voting. We choose the Romanian presidential elections due to its high popularity within the electorate. The turnout is consistently and considerably higher than in national legislative elections after the two were decoupled more than 15 years ago. The study focuses on 2019 because the debates on corruption – a useful concept of reference for the idea of honesty – have been heated since 2017 when the government party made several attempts to loosen anti-corruption laws which was met with hostility by the population and country president. The leader of the government party was the main challenger in the presidential elections. Although addressing corruption has been on the Romanian political agenda for a long period of time, this period is marked by concrete actions against it: protests and an anti-corruption referendum in May 2019, initiated by the country president. The 2019 presidential elections took place in an environment characterised by high political participation of the Romanian youth, especially in the protests and referendum voting against corruption.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on honesty as a characteristic of political leaders and identifies several drivers for young voters' preferences. Next, we briefly present the research design with emphasis on the case selection, data and methodology. The third section provides an overview of the electoral campaign for the presidential elections, with emphasis on the main competitors and key themes. The fourth section includes the analysis and interpretation of the main findings. The conclusion reflects on the implications of this analysis for research on young voters and discusses avenues for further research.

Shaping Preferences for Honest Political Leaders

Honesty can be defined as a set of moral beliefs that are “affectively and cognitively managed to produce a context-appropriate, integrity-related behaviours” (Koortzen and Oosthuizen, 2019, p. 3). It is often associated with other features such as justice, respect, empathy or fairness (Monga,

2016). Some authors see it as “the recognition of the fact that you cannot fake existence (...) requires that one not use one’s consciousness to distort reality” (Becker, 1998, p. 158). Very often honesty is related with a category of leaders who strive to achieve the common good, with leadership oriented to individual needs (Monga, 2016).

We argue that first-time voters’ preference for honest political leaders can be driven by two major categories of determinants: attitude towards political institutions and the electoral campaign. Both arguments are built on a review of the literature about voters in general, with particular references to the group of first-time voters when the theory indicates that differences may occur. Each category of determinants is discussed in the following two sub-sections.

Government and Outsiders

Citizens’ attitudes towards political institutions are likely to shape preference for honesty in two ways: trust in government and openness to vote for someone outside the political establishment. We explain the logic of these mechanisms below.

First, governments organise the management of political, economic, cultural and societal matters and strive for the welfare of citizens. They aim to create a nexus between the involvement of civil societies, international cooperation and domestic means of crisis management (Shi, 2012). A trustworthy government is usually described as one that fulfils its promises and commitments. Citizens manifest affinity for and trust governments that provide economic prosperity, high-quality public services, fair decision-making processes and effective democracy (Whiteley *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, governments that cannot be trusted are associated with corruption, unfulfilled commitments and lack of fairness in decision-making processes (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007).

Taking into consideration the features of trustworthy governments, citizens are likely to associate these features with honest politicians. The citizens who support the government can have a higher preference for honesty as a characteristic of politicians. This happens because people who trust the government expect elected leaders to deliver reliable information. This is seen as a vital condition to fulfil their promises and to achieve their goals (Botindari and Reicher, 2015; Moorman, Blakely and Darnold, 2018). In practice, quite a few politicians who run for

presidency occupy executive positions at a certain moment in time or can be associated with the government.

Second, the openness to vote for a candidate outside the political establishment may lead to a preference for honest political leaders. Some voters associate the political establishment with political corruption or politicians' incompetence, thus resulting in citizens' disaffection with the political system. Honesty creates a solid relationship between leaders and followers (Bean, 1980). Such a characteristic opposes corruption, which is one of the major determinants of voter preferences for political leaders (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2015). In Eastern Europe, corruption is an important dimension of party competition (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2015; Hanley and Sikk, 2016). In Romania, the perceptions of corruption influence voting behaviour (Chiru and Gherghina, 2012; Klačnja, 2015). With corruption comes low credibility of political parties and politicians. Under these circumstances, politicians are different from honest leaders who are guided by moral principles such as the sense of justice, promise fulfilment, consistency and fairness, all of which fit the desires of the majority of voters and have the ability to sustain a trustful relationship (Sihombing, 2018). When confronted with such situations, citizens may seek honesty outside the political establishment. Openness to support a politician without previous experience in politics can indicate a quest for honesty that is unavailable among the other political candidates.

Openness towards candidates from outside the political establishment is also rooted in citizens' disaffection with politics. The incompetence of politicians, corruption scandals and their pursuit of private interests are among the reasons for this disaffection (Norris, 2011; Dalton, 2013; Gherghina, 2014). The possibility to vote for the first time also comes with great expectations, which can present an opportunity for outsiders (relative to politics). Political outsiders are often more likely to take political risks to gain popularity. When their rhetoric instils feelings of trust in the electorate and promotes an image of honesty, their chances of citizen support grow (Canon, 2010). Following these arguments, we hypothesise that the preference for honesty in political leaders is more likely among:

H1: The first-time voters who trust the government.

H2: The first-time voters open to candidates outside the political establishment.

Type of Campaigns and Information

The effects of an electoral campaign on the preference for honesty includes mechanisms related to attitudes and behaviours. The attitudes refer to voters' perceptions of negative campaigns and the perception of campaign as being informative. Behaviour is about the attention paid to the electoral campaign. The following explains how each of these can contribute to the preference for honest political leaders among first-time voters.

Contemporary politics and electoral campaigns often use negative rhetoric. Those who resort to negative campaigning aim to influence the public's perceptions, to sway opponents' voters and to mobilise undecided citizens. Usually, negative campaigning "provokes a sense of threat and elicits negative emotions about the opposing candidate" (Cho, 2015, p. 2562). The preference for delivering negative messages could be explained by the fact that negative messages are more persuasive and generate a bigger impact than positive messages (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2010). Negative messages are usually recalled much easier than the positive ones (Faber, Tims and Schmitt, 1993; Brooks, 2006).

Despite the desired effect of negative campaigning, studies reveal that some citizens oppose these strategies because they consider them "personal attacks containing no substantial information" (Min, 2004, p. 106). Another reason to reject negative campaigning is the possibility to mislead citizens' perceptions by distracting them from the real problems of society (Krupnikov, 2011). Some citizens consider negative campaigning to be superficial and harmful for democratic processes, preferring instead substantive information about policies and future commitments from candidates (Lipsitz *et al.*, 2005). This can happen even when candidates with clean records build their campaign around honesty yet engage in negative campaigning directed at exposing the corruption of their opponents. As a result, candidates whose political discourse targets the flaws of other candidates at the cost of discussing policies may be less appreciated by voters (Min, 2004).

These observations can be linked with preferences for honesty. Negative campaigning does not necessarily contain qualitative and reliable information (Brooks, 2006). The candidates

who do not resort to negative campaigning, present positive information about themselves, and deliver qualitative information about policies and future commitments are perceived as more credible and honest (Budesheim, Houston and DePaola, 1996; Sides, Lipsitz and Grossmann, 2010). The voters who dislike negative campaigning may prefer an honest leader because their messages are usually perceived as sincere and can create a liaison with the electorate based on candidates' features rather than on criticising others.

The second attitude is the perception about the informative character of campaigns. Citizens expect a relevant quality and quantity of information from electoral campaigns. The informative character of campaigns is vital because there are multiple sources of information on which citizens rely on to receive data about candidates. Among them, television, newspapers and more recently the internet are widely used (Faber, Tims and Schmitt, 1993; McAllister, 2016). Despite the increasing number of information sources, citizens have started to manifest disgust and a lack of trust coupled with a decreasing level of involvement into following electoral campaigning (Lovejoy, Cheng and Riffe, 2010).

Since contemporary electoral campaigns contain shallow information and promote personal attacks between candidates, these attitudes influence voters' perceptions of politics (Cho, 2015). They find the electoral campaigns less informative and unworthy to follow. There are several features that make electoral campaigns informative. Identification of information related to citizens and candidates' common values or the emphasis of candidates on policies, strategies and future engagements can all address problems in society (Bastedo, 2015). The internet can be a powerful tool when it comes to delivering political messages. For instance, if candidates use the Internet and social media to deliver authentic, honest and reliable messages about their ideas or personal characteristics, they create a strong bond with voters (Manning *et al.*, 2017). Transparency and closeness to the electorate can be favoured by campaigns that are perceived as informative. In light of these considerations, voters can develop a preference for upright and honest candidates (Rowbottom, 2012).

Turning attention to first-time voters and the electoral campaign, campaigns help voters receiving information about candidates, political dynamics, policies and strategies. In the absence of electoral campaigns, a comparison between candidates is hardly possible and citizens cannot

identify those characteristics, features and political strategies that they may favour (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Benoit and Marsh, 2008). Electoral campaigns often promote political agendas addressing a variety of problems, meeting the needs of several groups in society (Ilišin, Gvozdanović and Potočnik, 2018).

During electoral campaigns, candidates reach a broad audience through traditional and social media. The campaigns provide the opportunity to deliver large numbers of information in a relatively short period of time. According to value congruence theory, citizens favour candidates whose characteristics and values are perceived as being close to their own (Kalliath, Bluedorn and Strube, 1999; Williams *et al.*, 2018). These preferences can be filtered through characteristics such as a voter's political affiliation, ideology or socio-economic characteristics. Transparent candidates who tend to be closer to voters during electoral campaigns increase their chances of success at the polls (Johann *et al.*, 2018).

Those who follow the campaign are well informed about the candidates' profile, they possess enough information to compare them. Even though political parties and candidates instrumentalise discourses, honesty and integrity always play a crucial role in shaping voters' preferences (Breeze, 2019). As such, those who follow the campaign are more likely to prefer an honest leader because they have the necessary information to identify the suitable candidate. They are familiar with candidates' discourses, their characteristics and engagements, and honesty represents the most important characteristic for trusting relationships. Citizens want someone who they can rely on and who can fulfil promises; honest leaders tick these boxes.

Following these arguments, we expect the preference for honest political leaders to be more likely among:

H3: The first-time voters who dislike negative campaigning

H4: The first-time voters who consider the campaign informative

H5: The first-time voters who regularly follow the campaign

In addition to these main effects, we control for three variables that can produce an effect: the vote for incumbent, the vote for the main challenger and the gender of respondents. The first

two controls are context specific. So far, our arguments were general, with broad applicability to presidential elections across countries. We introduce these specific variables in the attempt to more accurately gauge the preferences for honesty in the Romanian elections. The incumbent president and the main challenger had different attitudes towards corruption over time and during the campaign (see the section about the 2019 presidential campaign). The incumbent used the fight against corruption as a key message in his campaign. The main challenger was the prime minister who pushed for the change of justice laws, a measure that was broadly conceived by civil society and international actors as favouring corruption. In that position, she has been often in conflict with the incumbent during their 18 months of co-habitation. Gender can also influence the preferences for honest political leaders since for the first time in post-communist Romania a woman was among the top candidates.¹

Research Design

This article uses individual-level data from an original web survey conducted among Romanian first-time voters in November-December 2019. The survey was launched immediately after the second round of the presidential elections and closed three weeks later. Our analysis focuses on the first-time voters in the Romanian presidential elections for three reasons. First, Romanians elect their president through popular vote and turnout is usually high compared to the legislative elections. This is the election in which the personality of candidates matters and thus honesty can be one of the features assessed by the public. Second, the 2019 presidential campaign included many references to issues such as corruption (see the following section), which are closely related to the idea of honesty. Corruption has often been on the Romanian political agenda since 1990, but it has become central to voters' attention in the recent years due to repeated attempts by the government to loosen anti-corruption legislation. Such attempts provoked massive street protests and the country president to call for an anti-corruption referendum in May 2019, half a year before the presidential elections.

¹ Apart from the controls included in the analysis, we also tested the effect of other variables that could have influenced the preference for honest political leader, e.g. media exposure, political interest, knowledge of politics, the use of political news or left-right self-placement. There is no empirical support for any of them and they are not reported in the findings, to keep the explanatory models parsimonious and easier to interpret.

Third, political participation of the Romanian youth has been high in the most recent five years. For example, in 2017 and 2018, many young people participated to the largest wave of anti-government protests in post-Communist Romania. These are considered part of a cycle of protests starting in 2011, which coincide with a reconfiguration of the Romanian civil society (Abăseacă and Pleyers, 2019). Another example, the share of young Romanian voters in the 2019 elections for the European Parliament was considerably higher compared to the previous European elections. A Eurobarometer survey (91.5) conducted in the aftermath of the 2019 European elections illustrates that higher participation of young people is a trend in the majority of EU member states. Romania experienced one of the largest increases in terms of youth vote shares compared to 2014.

The survey includes 664 young people born between 1999 and 2001 who voted in the presidential elections as their first time entitled to vote in national elections. The previous national elections were organised in 2016 when those born in 1999 were under the minimum age of voting (18 years old). Since we focus on young people who voted, we use convenience sampling. In the absence of official reliable statistics regarding the profile of young voters, we cannot know the features of the entire population and thus no probability representative sampling. Instead, we use a convenience sample in which the respondents are neither pre-selected nor part of a pool of available individuals. We are aware that such a sampling strategy confines the findings presented in this article to our respondents. Nevertheless, we consider them informative and with important implications for the study of youth preferences for honesty in political leaders.

We distributed the online survey mostly through messages on Facebook groups or discussion forums, and e-mails sent to organisations or associations. The dataset includes only the respondents who completed the survey. The questionnaire is in Romanian and the average duration of completion is nine minutes. There is great variation in the respondents' profile across all the variables included in this analysis (Appendix 1) and for other sociodemographic variables (e.g. medium of residence, living with parents).

Variables and methods

The dependent variable is the preference for honest political leaders, measured on a seven-point ordinal scale (1 is no importance and 7 is very important). The respondents were asked to indicate how important honesty is for a political leader like the country president. Trust in government (H1) is measured on a four-point ordinal scale with the help of the usual question from many international surveys about trust in political institutions. The values of the scale range between “not at all” (1) and “very much” (4). Vote for an independent candidate (H2) is a dichotomous variable based on the answers provided by respondents to the question of whether they would vote for such a candidate. The positive answers are coded 1, the negative answers are coded 0. The negative campaign (H3) is also a dichotomous variable, which is coded 1 for all respondents indicating that they would not vote for a candidate engaging in negative campaigning.

The informative character of the election campaign (H4) is operationalised as the answer to the question “How informative do you consider this campaign for presidential election was for you?”. The available answers are coded on a five-point ordinal scale that range between “not at all” (1) and “very much” (5). The campaign following (H5) is measured on a similar scale as the answer to the question “To what extent did you follow the campaign for the presidential election in November 2019?”.

The first two control variables are dichotomous and reflect voting for the incumbent or for the challenger in the first round of the presidential elections. The country president is elected in a two-round system in which the top two candidates from the first round qualify in the second. The legal provisions that require absolute majority of votes (i.e. relative to the total number of registered voters) make it very difficult for a candidate to win in the first round. We look at the votes in the first round because these are the genuine choices of the respondents; in the second round there is also strategic or negative voting. The answers are coded 0 if the respondents cast a vote for another candidate than the incumbent (first control) or challenger (second control) and 1 if the vote was for either of the two. Gender is a dichotomous variable coded as 1 for men and 2 for women. For all the variables, the “DK/NA” answers are treated as missing values and are excluded from the analysis.

The article uses ordered logistic regression to test the effects of the hypothesised effects (Model 1 in Appendix 2) including also the controls (model 2). Before running the regression, we tested for multicollinearity and the results indicate no highly correlated predictors, i.e. the highest value is around 0.39. There are theoretical reasons to expect a correlation between some of the independent variables. For example, following the campaign can be in theory associated to the perception about how informative the campaign is. In practice, at least in this survey, such a positive relationship exists, but it is not very strong. The independent variables do not correlate at a level that may raise problems in the multivariate regression analysis, i.e. the values of the VIF test for multicollinearity are smaller than 1.27.

The 2019 Presidential Campaign: Main Competitors and Themes

There were 14 candidates in the Romanian presidential election organised in November 2019. The election takes place in a two-round system with the top two candidates from the first round getting into the second. The candidates included the incumbent country president, the recently dismissed prime minister (one month before the election), the leader of the second opposition party in parliament, candidates from parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties, and independent candidates. The first four stood a chance to get more than 10% of the votes, most of the others were fringe candidates. The following lines provide an overview of the competition. They outline the profile of the main candidates, who could serve as a point of reference for the survey respondents, and the key themes used during the election.

The elections were won by the incumbent president, Klaus Iohannis, who built on the achievements of his term in office. The incumbent's candidacy was supported by the liberals, a party which had him as a leader for several months before his first term in office as country president in 2014. He promoted European values and principles. The rhetoric focused on improving the education and health systems, state infrastructure, fighting against corruption, and the creation of a fair legal system (Calea Europeană, 2019; Digi 24, 2019a). The second ranked candidate, who made it into the second round with the incumbent president, was the former prime minister belonging to the social democrats, Viorica Dăncilă. She had relevant political experience as a member of the European Parliament, as party leader, and as prime minister

between January 2018 and October 2019. Her electoral campaign focused on defending the Constitution and institutional order. Dăncilă tried to create a bond with the citizens by resorting to campaign slogans such as “alongside every Romanian”. She often said that she trusts the Romanians and call everybody who loves Romania to join her to “create a better future for Romanians and Romania” (Romania-Insider, 2019b).

Dăncilă’s main competitor for a place in the second round was the leader of the second largest opposition party (Save Romania Union), Dan Barna. He served as parliamentarian from 2016, as a member of the European Funds Commission, and as a Secretary of State in 2016 (Digi 24, 2017). His rhetoric covered topics such as education, health, infrastructure, economics, and the fight against corruption. In addition, Barna conveyed pro-European messages, complemented by the importance of maintaining transatlantic relations to strengthen border security (RFE Romania, 2019). The candidate who ranked fourth in the first round was an independent, Mircea Diaconu. He served as a parliamentarian for the liberals between 2008 and 2012, vice president for the same party, and then as a member of the European Parliament as an independent. During the presidential campaign, Diaconu’s speeches focused on the youth. He promoted the features of honourable, realistic and honest persons in public and political life. He focused on the ideas of giving back to Romanians the hope and confidence in themselves and in their future. Diaconu’s messages were quite broad, oriented at creating opportunities for development like those in Western Europe, the fight against corruption, the attempt to curb emigration, and the necessity of free education for children (Digi 24, 2019b; Romania-Insider, 2019a). The fifth-ranked candidate was Theodor Paleologu and represented the party of the former country president between 2004 and 2014. He was Minister of Culture, parliamentarian and ambassador in Denmark and Iceland. Paleologu’s rhetoric during the electoral campaign centred on reform of the intelligence service, the country accession to the Schengen area and the creation of an anti-terrorism intelligence agency. He had strong messages against corruption, organised crime, tax evasion, and the depoliticization of state institutions (Lica, 2019).

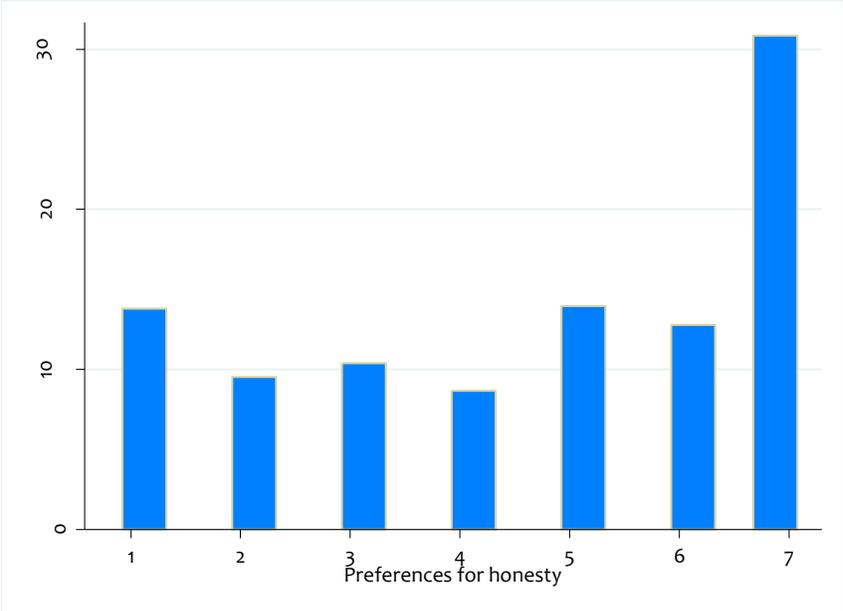
This overview of the five main candidates in the presidential election indicates that the fight against corruption played a prominent role in the campaign rhetoric. In doing so, candidates were preoccupied with integrity and honesty; emphasised qualities of honest leaders. Some of

the candidates explicitly referred to the contemporary problems of young people, either in general or relative to policies such as education. As such, some of the rhetoric had young people as a clear target audience, with messages hinting at or explicitly mentioning the issue of honesty.

The Effects of Trust and Negative Campaigning

Figure 1 includes the ranking of preferences for honest political leaders on the seven-point ordinal scale where 1 stands for no importance at all and 7 for very important. The vertical axis reflects the percentage of respondents. There is great variation among the respondents relative to their preference for honesty. Roughly one third of the first-time voters who answered our survey place great value on this feature. When adding up the percentages of the respondents ranking honesty on the top three positions (bars 5-7), we observe that these are roughly 60% of the total. At the same time, the percentage of those who do not value honesty at all in a political leader (column number 1) is the second largest in the distribution, equal with those who valued it at 5. Very few respondents picked the middle category (4), which indicate that there is no middle response category bias, i.e. too many respondents pick that option when they do not have a clear opinion.

Figure 1: The Distribution of Preferences for Honest Political Leaders (N = 664)



We ran two different ordered logistic regression analyses (Appendix 2): one without and one with the controls. Starting with the model without controls, Figure 2 depicts the effects of the five independent variables on the preferences for honest political leaders. The vertical line at 1 is the equivalent of statistical independence. The dependent variable is coded ascendingly from low to high preference and the interpretation of results has the low preference as category of reference. Higher likelihood of occurrence, i.e. all effects at the right of the vertical line, indicate empirical support for the hypothesised relationships. Three out of the five hypothesised effects are statistically significant at either the 0.01 or the 0.05 levels: trust in government, negative campaign and informative campaign.

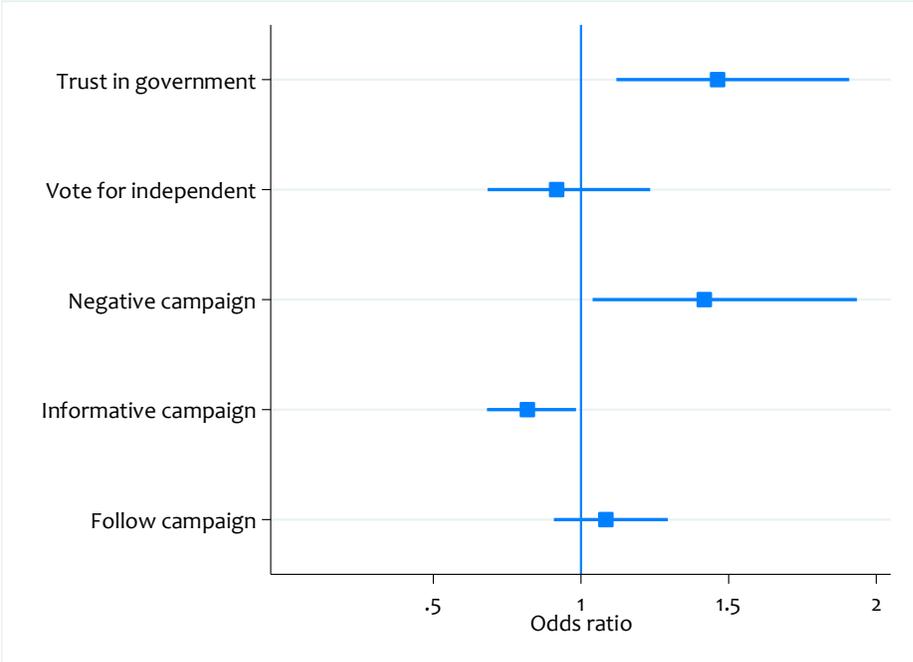
There is empirical support for two of the hypotheses. The regression coefficients indicate that the strongest effect can be observed among first-time voters who trust the government (H1). This group is almost 1.5 times more likely to prefer an honest political leader in comparison to the respondents who do not trust the government. This means that the young Romanians who have confidence in state institutions are more focused on who occupies the office. Their higher preference for honest political leaders confirms the theories according to how institutional trust can impact how the leaders are perceived. Very likely, those who do not trust the government have a higher preference for other features of a political leader such as competence, ability to handle problems or clarity of communication. These issues are reflected in the contemporary developments in Romanian politics, contentious politics and youth involvement. Young people have been actively involved in the recent years in anti-government protests. Protesters lack trust in the government's actions and usually demand a competent leader who can pursue the public good (as opposed to private interests) and act swiftly and in a transparent manner. These may be considered priorities and, consequently, honesty can rank lower.

The first-time voters who dislike negative campaigning (H3) are 1.4 times more likely to prefer an honest candidate compared to respondents who are indifferent or fancy negative campaigning. The effect is statistically significant at the 0.05 level and it confirms the theoretical expectations. It can be argued that the young people who vote for the first time are willing to cast a positive vote for candidates. They may want to elect political leaders for their qualities rather than voting against other political leaders for their flaws. Negative campaigns attack

political leaders on several dimensions from professional experience and performance to behaviours or individual characteristics. While honesty may be among these characteristics, our results show that voters who favour negative campaigning do not pick it up. Instead, the first-time voters who oppose negative campaigning may see the promotion of personal qualities and abilities (positive campaigning) as a more honest display of what the candidates can offer.

There is partial empirical evidence also for H5 in the sense that first-time voters who follow the campaign more have a slight tendency to prefer honest candidates. However, the effect is quite small (OR = 1.09) and it is not statistically significant. The poor evidence for this hypothesis can be linked to what is observed for the informative features of campaigns.

Figure 2: The Effects on Preferences for Honest Political Leaders



The first-time voters who find the campaign informative (H4) are less likely to prefer an honest candidate. The results are statistically significant at the 0.05 level and go against the theoretical expectations. One possible explanation for this result is that those who perceived the campaigns as being informative were interested in substantive issues, policy positions or priorities of candidates; hence, the honesty of the candidates matters less. Another possible explanation for this result can be that the type of information provided in the campaign for the 2019 presidential

campaign did not bring much new material for the first-time voters. As illustrated in the previous section, the themes were quite broad and many candidates covered the same topics, mainly because they are salient for the Romanian society. Under these circumstances, the respondents could form their preference for honesty in leaders either based on the issues that were presented to them – which they knew beforehand – or even before the campaign. The latter is associated with the limited influence of campaign following: a high preference for honesty was likely to form prior to the campaign.

The vote for an independent candidate (H2) on the preference for honest political leaders has a weak and not statistically significant effect. This goes against the hypothesised relationship with first-time voters not willing to vote for independents favouring honesty more. None of the controls has a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable. It is worth mentioning that voting for the incumbent and for the main challenger have different impacts. Those who voted for the incumbent president were less likely (OR = 0.74) to have a high preference for an honest candidate. Those who voted for the prime minister were more likely (OR = 1.89) to prefer an honest candidate. One explanation for these opposing trends is that the incumbent president did not face major criticism regarding his honesty. The prime minister was the representative of a party with several leaders accused of lacking integrity. Dăncilă could stand out as being a different candidate who often emphasised honesty in her campaign. This happened especially after often portrayals in the national media as a puppet of the social democrat party leader who could not occupy public office due to earlier sentences in court.

Conclusions

This article aimed to explain the preferences of first-time voters for honesty as a characteristic of political leaders. It used individual level data from the most recent presidential campaign in Romania to test for the explanatory power of three major causes: trust in institutions, likelihood of voting for candidates outside politics and political campaigning. The results indicate that trust in government and the rejection of negative campaigning increase the likelihood of a preference for honesty in political leaders. This means that the preferences for honesty are built among young people on positive experiences with the political system. Trust in government has often

been studied in relation to political participation, and our findings illustrate that it can determine attitudes towards specific characteristics of political leaders. It is a good sign for the future of society that such attitudes are not rooted mainly in reactions to disaffection with institutions. Second, negative campaigning is increasingly used in elections. Our results indicate that young people who vote for the first time identify the source of honesty in positive rather than negative messages.

Our findings also show that the amount of new information provided during the campaign decreases the likelihood of preferences of honesty in political leaders. This, in conjunction with the limited effect of campaign following, can mean two things. On the one hand, it is possible that first-time voters form an opinion about the political leaders before the actual campaign. On the other hand, it is possible that campaigns focusing on candidates' abilities and characteristics – as opposed to attacking the other candidates – are already known to voters and shape their preferences. These messages appear to be more effective for preference formation compared to the coverage of new policies, which provide more information and broaden the knowledge of the young electorate.

The analysis has important theoretical implications which go beyond the single case study analysed here. The results call for an analytical framework to explain the preference for honesty, one of the most common characteristics of leadership assessment in the literature. This framework is not context sensitive and can travel across various political settings. It shows the relevance of several key features related to institutions and campaigns, which inform the preferences of first-time voters and lie outside the behaviour of political leaders. In doing so, the framework connects several components of the political space and provides the possibility to be enriched with other determinants.

One limitation of our survey is the absence of items to directly gauge the perception of corruption. Corruption is partially included in the discussion about candidates from outside the political establishment. However, the salience of corruption as a potential driver for preference of honesty must be examined in detail. Future research can address this shortcoming and empirically test this effect. Another avenue for further research can take the discussion in the direction of explaining the causal linkages. This article identifies several potential sources of the

preferences for honesty in leaders but does not explain how young people form these preferences. Such an explanation requires different types of data, which can be collected with semi-structured interviews, focus-groups or experiments. These can focus on what young people consider as an important characteristic of political leaders and on how they assess these characteristics. Also, future research can follow the path of complementing the explanatory model with other variables that may be of importance for young people. For example, a future analysis can account for the activities that young people engage with on social media, the interactions they have with political leaders and how they understand politics. There is also room for comparisons with preferences for political leaders outside the electoral campaign, which can reveal important patterns across different moments in time.

Appendix 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Variables Included in the Analysis

	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Preference for honesty	4.61	2.19	1	7	587
Trust in government	1.91	0.59	1	4	658
Independent candidate	0.41	0.49	0	1	663
Negative campaign	0.66	0.47	0	1	663
Informative campaign	3.50	0.86	1	5	662
Follow campaign	3.94	0.92	1	5	661
Vote incumbent president	0.31	0.46	0	1	664
Vote main challenger	0.11	0.14	0	1	664
Gender	1.26	0.58	1	2	659

Appendix 2: The Ordered Logistic Regression for Preferences for Honest Political Leaders

	Model 1	Model 2
Trust in government	1.46**	1.49**
Independent candidate	0.91	0.90
Negative campaign	1.42*	1.45*
Informative campaign	0.82*	0.83*
Follow campaign	1.09	1.07
Vote incumbent president		0.74
Vote main challenger		1.89
Gender		1.07
N	581	579
Pseudo R ²	0.08	0.10
Log likelihood	-1065.84	-1058.75

Notes: Regression coefficients are odds-ratios; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05.

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