

Ukrainian students' political decision making after the Revolution of Dignity

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Abstract – Article is presented the results of the study students' decision making on parliamentary elections 2014 in Ukraine. It is showed that revolution events on Maidan did not influence the process of decision making for whom to vote in more meaningful way. More active citizens made the same cognitive errors as less active. But they felt statistically more confident in their choice of parties and deputies, in the quality of back up information, and that in case of failure, they again ready to go to the barricades. The possibility to change the future by increasing the rationality of the citizens' choice is discussed.

Key words – political decision making, Revolution of Dignity, rationality, illusion of competence, cognitive errors.

I. Introduction

Democracy gives us the right to vote, which most people use. But whether we can well dispose of this right? Can we choose worthy people, which will have motivation to develop the welfare of the country? Different events happened in Ukraine since proclamation of the independence. But most of the time citizens expressed their disagreement by the actions of political leadership. Two times their dissatisfaction was so strong, which led to revolutions, first "Orange Revolution" in 2005 and then "Revolution of Dignity" in 2014. There is a paradox, because we choose the deputies with hopes for the better future, but the reality shows that we cannot choose the right people for reforms and economical growth. This article is an attempt to look at this phenomenon in terms of political choice, which makes an average student. Perhaps something wrong with this choice? And whether public events can elevate the quality of our political decision making: namely did events on Maydan influence the process of decision making for whom to vote on elections to Parliament among students?

II. Background studies

Shane Frederick (2005) offered to students of different universities three logical problems. These problems contain a hint of wrong answer. But if they were able to resist the temptation to give the first best answer, they solved the task correctly. It was found that students of the most prestigious universities, Harvard, Princeton and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology solved all three problems correctly only in half of cases. And only 20% of respondents from the universities with less strict selection coped with the problems [1]. We can assume that if those same students would have the task to make a political decision then in the best case only 50% of young people will make some effort to the process of decision making.

And the rest pupils will be guided by the facts that are on the surface (advertising, news, other people opinions etc.). Note that these intuitive tips have very little in common with rational choice, quality facts and sources.

Group of researchers led by Alex Todorov (2005) [2] predicted the results of elections of senators, congressmen and governors in America by the way of students evaluation the photos of candidates. Rating students coincided with the victory of suitable candidates in 70% of cases. This result was confirmed during the election campaign in Finland, elections to the municipality in England, and various election campaigns Australia, Germany and Mexico [4, p.121-129]. The ability of such easy and fast decision making is appropriate in terms of human survival during evolution. But in the context of choosing political future of the country such strategy does not lead to the good consequences. There are no relevant scientific evidences that facial features linked to how well politician cope with his/her responsibilities.

We supposed that not only appearance, but much more types of irrelevant information can guide our political choice. And most people still do not realize that we often become victims of our own imperfect mental nature, even in very important decisions.

III. Research question

Mainly Ukrainian people believe that "Revolution of dignity" has changed our minds, made us wiser and more responsible for own future, aroused more interest to political life in the country and the desire to affect it. Have these events affected the ability of young people to invest more psychic energy in their own political decision making?

IV. Methods

The research was conducted 2 weeks before parliamentary elections 2014 in Ukraine. The study involved 105 students from Lviv Polytechnic National University. Students completed S. Federik three-item test, that measures people's ability to resist their first instinctive thoughts, answer questionnaire about their motivation to take part in the elections and their decision for whom to vote and why. So, the results of S. Federik test show us the personal ability to stop and think as opposed to giving first best intuitive answer. And as a result of filling the questionnaire we can count how many appropriate efforts the person make during process of political decision making (compare different candidates, canalize his/her previous professional experience, have read political program, use different sources of information etc.). Also the participants were asked to estimate their activity during events on Maidan on 5-point Likert Scale.

V. Results

The main results of the study are as follows: only 2% of participants coped with all three S. Frederick tasks correctly. But more than half of students put some efforts to resolve items and propose at least one not intuitive answer (though not always correct). However, correlation analysis showed that the ability to solve cognitively

complex tasks does not correlate with the amount of efforts students invests in political decision. Perhaps in this case context affects more than having specific cognitive skills. In other words the one can have the ability to "stop and think clearly", but, whether he use it depends on the situation.

Only 29% of students have tried to build on some rational arguments when they did their choice of political parties. For example, take into account the previous achievements of the candidates, educational level or proposed policy initiatives. But most of young people (it is 71%) thought like this: «Does this political party proclaim better future with Europe? Does it have strong leader? Was the candidate on Maidan? Does he help the army?» etc. All these options weakly predicted how the candidate will carry out the duties in parliament. But the vast majority of the students did not realize it and thought that their choice built on such evidences was good enough. 94% of them noted the medium and high level of confidence in their own choice. Also there was no correlation between the amount of rational arguments and personal evaluation of the quality of choice.

In order to assess the individual student efforts in the process of decision making we ask such questions:

Have you thought how your political decision for whom to vote affects the future? Half of the students take into account such possibility. However the rest (49 %) were astonished by the question. This might point at the tendency to live here and now in the euphoria of election promises and very poor prediction of the future.

Can you name any disadvantages of the party you are going to vote for? Only 43% of students can answer this question but more than half cannot. This statistic illustrates another cognitive weakness of our mind. As soon as we have found suitable solution, any contradicted information did not take into account anymore. So the decision looks almost perfect, what never happens in reality.

Can you name to sources of information you count on in making political decision and assess their quality? Students were equally confident that their sources were good enough regardless (an average of 3-4 out of 5) of real criteria of quality. So youth are extremely insensitive to the quality of information which backs up their final decision. As Daniel Kahneman writes: if the information is not discarded immediately as false, it enters the cognitive life and treats in the decision-making process, as evidence which backs up the final statement [5].

Student's gender, age and year of study did not affect their process of political decision making. The same cognitive errors made girls and boys, younger and older, freshmen and graduates.

Finally, whether the active citizenship during Revolution of Dignity influences the quality of the political decision? Can we say that people, who actively participated in the events, invested more mental energy in their voting decision? Not quite. More active students made the same cognitive errors. But they felt statistically more confident in their choice of parties and deputies, in the quality of back up information, and that in case of failure, they again ready to go to the barricades (57% vs 10%), whereas their peers are more likely will feel completely disappointed in case of failure (75% vs 11%). By the way, approximately 1/3 of the students described themselves as active participants of Maidan events, 1/3 – moderate and 1.3 - passive observers.

Conclusions

In this article we have tried to look at the political process in the country in terms of the rationality of voters. Students were a good example of how people tend to make mistakes and be guided by the illusion of competence. Even when they desperately want to change the system. We think that Ukrainians still need overcome a long way from emotional-spontaneous-revolutionary to careful-thoughtful-reflexive process of decision making in politics. And that might be the real chance to create a better future.

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