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Images of politics: a multidimensional analysis of implicit representations of political parties in a newly emerging democracy

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Abstract

What sorts of features define people's implicit cognitive representations about the political domain in a newly emerging democracy, with no previous experience of multi-party politics? This study used a multidimensional scaling (MDS) approach to investigate the dimensional structure of, and individual differences in, cognitive representations of the party political space before the recent first free elections were held in Hungary. It was found that three cognitive dimensions explained subjects' intuitive view of political parties, evaluation, conservatism, and an urban–rural dimension. Significant individual differences in the use of these dimensions linked to gender, education, and city versus country background were also found. The relationship between implicit cognitive representations about parties and political attitudes and behaviour are discussed, and the implications of the findings for our understanding recent political developments in Eastern Europe are considered.

INTRODUCTION

The study of individual differences in political perception and behaviour is one of the oldest, and most important topics in personality and social psychology. Of particular

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interest within this field is how political parties, the symbolic representations of different ideologies, values and attitudes are perceived by individuals. Since voting is ultimately an expression of people's implicit representations about the party political sphere (Eulau, Eldersveld and Janowitz, 1959; Forgas and Menyhart, 1979; Nygren and Jones, 1977), a better understanding of the variables determining such judgments is of obvious theoretical, as well as practical interest for social psychologists.

The recent unprecedented historical changes in Eastern Europe provided us with a unique opportunity to examine some of the cognitive structures and processes involved in how political representations are formed. Following decades of enforced exclusion from the political process, an electorate with little direct prior experience of multiparty politics was suddenly confronted with the task of forming stable and reliable cognitive representations about a newly established political domain, and in particular, about the position of various parties within this political spectrum.

How is such a task accomplished? What are the implicit features people use to differentiate between parties in this novel situation? What are the discernible links between cognitive representations of the various new political parties, and the historical and cultural context of these judgments? Is electoral success predictable from such cognitive representations? What role do individual differences due to gender, education and social background play in implicit political representations? This study sought answers to these questions by examining cognitive representations of political parties immediately before the first free elections for almost two generations were held in a newly emerging Eastern European democracy, Hungary.

Dimensions of political perception

Past research on political perception generally falls into one of three categories. Investigations within the *public opinion and survey research* tradition typically analyse the approval or favourableness ratings of parties, leaders or issues on predetermined dimensions, usually elicited within the context of a transient political situation, such as an election (e.g. Abrams and Rose, 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1960; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960; Pomper, 1975). However, neither the conceptualization, nor the methodology of such large-scale public opinion surveys allows the systematic assessment of the implicit structure and dimensionality of people's cognitive representations of the political sphere.

A second, somewhat different perspective is offered by studies conceived within the *attitude formation and change* paradigm. Such investigations usually explore the psychological processes involved in the formation of policy attitudes, and their role in voting behaviour (Kinder and Sears, 1985; Krosnick, 1990), typically using standardized scales to measure evaluative reactions to selected political targets, such as leaders (*cf.* Markus, 1986; Robinson, Rusk and Head, 1968). The discovery and analysis of people's implicit representation of the political domain is again of little interest in such studies. In any case, the use of standardized attitude scales usually precludes the evaluation of the implicit perceptual structures used by subjects.

A third tradition of research relies on *cognitive social psychological* principles to establish people's implicit mental representations about the political domain. While some of this work initially employed open-ended, descriptive methods, particularly in Europe (Rouquette, 1990), several investigators pioneered the use of quantitative, multidimensional techniques to describe what kind of cognitive dimensions underlie

people's political judgments. In an early study, Messick (1961) used similarity ratings between 20 U.S. and foreign political leaders as input to a multidimensional scaling (MDS) analysis, that revealed seven implicit dimensions used by both Republican and Democrat subjects. A reanalysis of these data by Tucker and Messick (1963) using a more sensitive 'points of view' model identified three distinct representational styles (or 'points of view'), differentiating between Democrat or Republican voters. A similar approach was used by Ahrens (1967) in a study of perceptions of German politicians, identifying two distinct 'points of view' in this sample. Several studies also demonstrated that conservatism is significantly linked to the structure of cognitive representations about politics, such as Sherman and Ross' (1972) analysis of judgments of 20 U.S. politicians. In a similar vein, Shikiar (1974) reports that 'Republicans and Democrats differ markedly in their perception of the political arena' (p. 461). These investigations suggest that in developed democracies at least, political judgments seem to be based on a stable, sophisticated multidimensional cognitive representation of the political domain by voters, that can be meaningfully linked both to party allegiances, as well as to other demographic and attitudinal variables.

Similar patterns were also found in several of our previous studies that examined the role of individual and cultural variables in political perception. Forgas, Kagan and Frey (1977) found significant differences in the perception of political leaders between British and German subjects that were readily interpretable in terms of historical differences, and the socio-cultural environment of these two nations. In a subsequent study, Forgas and Menyhart (1979) showed that judgments of 20 politicians by an Australian sample were defined by three implicit dimensions (evaluation, conservatism and intelligence), and that individual patterns of using these dimensions were significantly linked to measures of conservatism, mental rigidity, alienation and intolerance of ambiguity. In a later longitudinal study, we assessed implicit representations of politicians over a one-year interval, and found that measures of attitudes, personality and cognitive style were significantly related to shifting perceptions on such implicit dimensions as ideology, evaluation and leadership (Forgas, 1980). Similar structural changes in perception were also found in studies comparing implicit representations across developing (Papua–New Guinea) and developed (Australia) nations (Forgas and O'Driscoll, 1984).

More recently, Goddard and Russell (1987) examined the 'perceptual dimensions underlying 13 issues considered important to party activists from the two major political parties in British Columbia' (p. 275). The same three dimensions (party orientation, evaluation and conservatism) defined the cognitive space of issues for activists from both parties, but the perceived 'order and distances of issues along the dimensions differed in accordance with party policy' (p. 275). In another interesting study, Marx (1987) demonstrated how the emergence of new 'political parties emphasizing ecological issues has changed people's cognitive structures' (p. 429) about the political domain.

These studies jointly suggest that most people do seem to rely on a structured, multidimensional cognitive map of the political domain when performing political judgments, and that the structure of such representations is significantly influenced by a range of personological as well as cultural factors. It is important to note however that almost all prior work was carried out in stable and well-established democratic political systems in Western nations, where a robust and highly differentiated representation of the political domain had ample time to be established.

No previous investigation looked at cognitive representations about politics in emergent, newly established political systems. Yet a sensitive multidimensional analysis of implicit representations about the political sphere may be of greatest interest in such volatile, emerging contexts. Such an historical situation presented itself in Eastern Europe recently. With the surprisingly rapid collapse of these totalitarian one-party states, a relative political vacuum ensued, as the beginnings of a pluralistic political system began to take shape after decades of monolithic dictatorship. This study investigates the kind of implicit dimensions used by a group of voters as they attempt to discriminate between the numerous newly-formed political parties shortly before the first free elections were held in Hungary. As distinct from large-scale sample surveys, our aim here is not to study representative political attitudes; rather, the focus of this study is the socio-cognitive analysis of the implicit map of the political domain as perceived by a select group of subjects.

The political and cultural context

The Leninist–Stalinist one-party states in Eastern Europe were characterized by a monolithic centralization of state power unparalleled in recent history, and quite difficult to comprehend for those brought up in the Western liberal tradition (Smith, 1980). Bureaucratic and centralized state control was even more extensive in communist states than in earlier fascist dictatorships, and extended to every area of social, economic, religious and cultural activity. A feature of these systems was that most individual citizens were excluded from all forms of autonomous political activity, in the name of a political ideology that prescribed the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as both historically inevitable, and socially desirable. Indeed, in one telling instance in Hungary, even attempts at organizing small-scale voluntary self-help groups by the handicapped were vehemently suppressed as a challenge to the absolute power of the one-party state. One psychological consequence of the centralization of power on such a scale was the almost complete withdrawal from the political process by the majority of the population, resulting in wide-spread apathy and cynicism about politics and public affairs in general (Hankiss, 1982). The sudden collapse of the regime and the rapid emergence of multiple parties vying for attention in the resulting political vacuum during the year before the elections provides the basic context for the study reported here.

After a relatively brief period of rapid political transition, the new parties were subjected to the first free election in Hungary for over 40 years. Out of the dozens of political groupings in existence before the election, only a handful were likely to receive sufficient electoral endorsement to be transformed into viable political entities. An intense and rather emotional election campaign, characterized more by the manipulation of images and emotional symbols rather than clearly defined policies (Laszlo, 1992; Siklaki, 1992) no doubt contributed to a gradual crystallization of party positions. Until the election itself, there was little clearcut indication of the relative position and importance of the various parties. This sequence of events also allowed us to consider the links between the cognitive representations about parties before the election, and the outcome of the election itself.

This unique historical situation then provided an excellent opportunity to investigate several important psychological aspects of political perception. The first objective of this research was to analyse what kind of implicit features underlie

people's cognitive representations of emerging political parties, and to evaluate if there are any differences between these features and common dimensions of political perception found in more established democratic contexts (*cf.* Forgas and Menyhart, 1979). For example, do characteristics such as left-wing–right-wing, or conservative–radical have the same meanings, and the same importance in defining political representations as they do in Western political systems (*cf.* Forgas *et al.*, 1977)?

The second objective was to discover the extent to which pre-election cognitive representations may be predictive of electoral success. An interesting question is whether changes in cognitive representations are directly influenced by the election process itself. Although the structure of political representations tends to be remarkably stable according to some previous studies in Western nations (e.g. Shikiar, 1976), in this more complex and fluid situation the election and the attendant advertising and campaigning itself may have contributed to a significant volatility not only in the position of individual parties, but also in the kind of implicit cognitive dimensions that define the party political space. Perhaps most importantly, this study will also investigate the role of individual differences in political cognition, by empirically analysing the relationship between a person's perceptual style, and their individual characteristics in terms of gender, education and social background.

METHOD

Overview

Data for this study were collected in early 1990, some two to four weeks before the first free elections were held in Hungary in March 1990. Subjects were asked to indicate their implicit perception of 12 political parties in the form of pairwise dissimilarity ratings between each possible pair of parties. In addition, separate ratings of the parties on each of 14 bipolar scales were also obtained.

The ALSCAL multidimensional scaling package running under the SPSS-X program language was used to analyse these similarity judgments. In all analyses, an Individual Differences Multidimensional Scaling (INDSCAL) model was specified in order to construct an empirical representation of subject's implicit representations of political parties (Carroll and Chang, 1970). Input to ALSCAL consisted of a series of two-way (dis)similarity matrices between the parties, each matrix representing judgments by one subject. Separate ratings of the parties on 14 bipolar scales were later used to aid in the empirical interpretation of the emerging INDSCAL axes. The identity of the dimensions underlying the party political domain, and the perceived position of the parties were also analysed as a function of known individual and demographic differences between subjects.

Subjects

In order to ensure the heterogeneity of the sample, six distinct groups of subjects from widely different backgrounds were used. Subjects included high school students, technical university students, and students enrolled in arts/humanities, both resident in the capital, Budapest, as well as in country areas. The sample comprised a total of 134 subjects of both sexes, and from a variety of educational and geographic backgrounds. Although this sample is clearly not representative of the population of voters in

Hungary, the emphasis here is on the psychological analysis of the implicit cognitive dimensions that define the party political space, and not on broad demographic representativeness as is the case in large-scale sample surveys. While the present group of respondents provide a suitably heterogenous sample for a study of the structure of political cognition (Forgas, 1980), it is important to recognize that the results are not necessarily representative of the population at large.

Stimulus parties

Following the collapse of the one-party state, in Hungary as in most other post-communist countries numerous new political parties were formed within a very short period of time. Some of these parties claimed to be reincarnations of old political entities suppressed since the 20s and the 30s, such as the Christian Democratic Peoples' Party (CHDPP), the Independent Smallholders Party (ISHP), and the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Two new parties emerged from the split of the once all-powerful communist party into a moderate, social-democratic wing, the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), and an orthodox, bolshevik wing (Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party, HSWP). Some of the other parties were newly formed, more or less along the lines of popular mass parties familiar from Western democracies, such as the Greens (G), the Federation of Young Democrats (FYD), the Hungarian Democratic Forum (HDF), and the Free Democrats' Federation (FDF). Yet other, smaller parties emerged from various localized reactions to recent Hungarian history, representing more or less extreme positions in the political spectrum, including the Patriotic Electoral Coalition (PEC), Hungarian People's Party (HPP), the Hungarian October Party (HOP) and several others.

The decision as to which parties to include in our study had to be made well before the election, at a time when no reliable information about the likely future importance of the various parties was as yet available. From the scores of identifiable political groupings, the above 12 parties were eventually selected for further study, on the basis of two criteria: (a) each of these parties could be expected to be at least potentially attractive to a significant number of voters, and (b) at the same time, they appeared to provide the widest possible sampling of the available political spectrum at that time, representing both big and small, conservative and radical, country-based and city-based, pragmatic and ideological, populist and more 'high-brow' groupings. Fortunately, our choice of parties was ultimately vindicated by the election, as all the parties that were eventually to take their place in the new parliament were in fact part of our pre-election sample.

Materials and procedure

Each subject was asked to complete two separate sets of judgments. First, they were asked to directly judge the perceived overall similarity between every possible pair of the 12 parties. This was achieved by asking subjects to enter their judgment on a 7-point 'extremely similar–extremely dissimilar' scale into the appropriate cell of a lower-half triangular matrix representing all possible pairwise combinations of the 12 parties.

Next, subjects were asked to separately rate each of the 12 parties on a set of 14 seven-point bipolar scales. These scales were selected from the political and social

perception literature so as to tap the characteristics most likely to be relevant to subjects in thinking about parties (*cf.* Forgas *et al.*, 1977; Nygren and Jones, 1977; Shikiar, 1974). After extensive consultation with informants in Hungary, both laypersons and social scientists, care was also taken to include several additional scales that seemed specifically applicable to the Eastern European political situation. The following 14 scales were ultimately selected: conservative–radical; left wing–right wing; active–passive; selfish–altruistic; self-confident–insecure; sympathetic–unsympathetic; nationalistic–not nationalistic; urban–rural; biased–unbiased; constructive–destructive; rigid–flexible; weak–strong; big–small; clear–confused. Thus, although some of these dimensions were selected because of past evidence for their relevance to political perception in Western democracies (e.g. left wing–right wing, conservative–radical), others sought to tap uniquely Eastern European political characteristics (e.g. urban–rural; nationalistic–not nationalistic). The status of these scales is essentially that of a pool of potentially redundant hypothesis dimensions, only some of which are expected to be relevant to how judges actually discriminate between parties. One of the objectives of this study was precisely to determine which of the 14 hypothesis scales correspond best to the implicit dimensions judges use to perceive political parties.

Subjects were tested in small groups of 8–25 people at a time. the study was administered by paid and separately trained assistants in each of the locations where data were collected. The study was introduced as an investigation of social judgmental phenomena. Next, general instructions for completing the similarity rating task and the bipolar scale rating tasks were given (see Forgas (1979) for a detailed description of using MDS procedures). Subjects were allowed sufficient time to complete both tasks, which usually took between 25–40 minutes. A general debriefing concluded the procedure, where the aims and objectives of the study were explained. Subjects found the bipolar scales relevant and meaningful, and reported no difficulty in understanding and completing the tasks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results will be considered in two sections, describing (a) the construction of a multidimensional model of the implicit party political domain, and the labelling of the underlying dimensions, and (b) an analysis of individual differences in political perception.

The cognitive space for parties

The 134 dissimilarity matrices for the sample were used as input to a series of ALSCAL analyses using the INDSCAL model (Carroll and Chang, 1970). The program was run to construct 1-, 2-, 3-, 4-, 5-, and 6-dimensional configurations of the political domain for parties, accounting for 48, 53, 58, 59, 61 and 62 per cent of the variance in the input data, respectively. The three-dimensional model was selected as most appropriate for representing subjects' implicit cognitive view of parties before the election. In selecting the optimum number of dimensions, two main criteria were considered — (a) the interpretability and meaningfulness of the configuration, and (b) the amount of variance explained by it (*cf.* Forgas, 1979). Three dimensions accounted for markedly more variance than two dimensions (58 per cent versus 53 per cent), but only a small

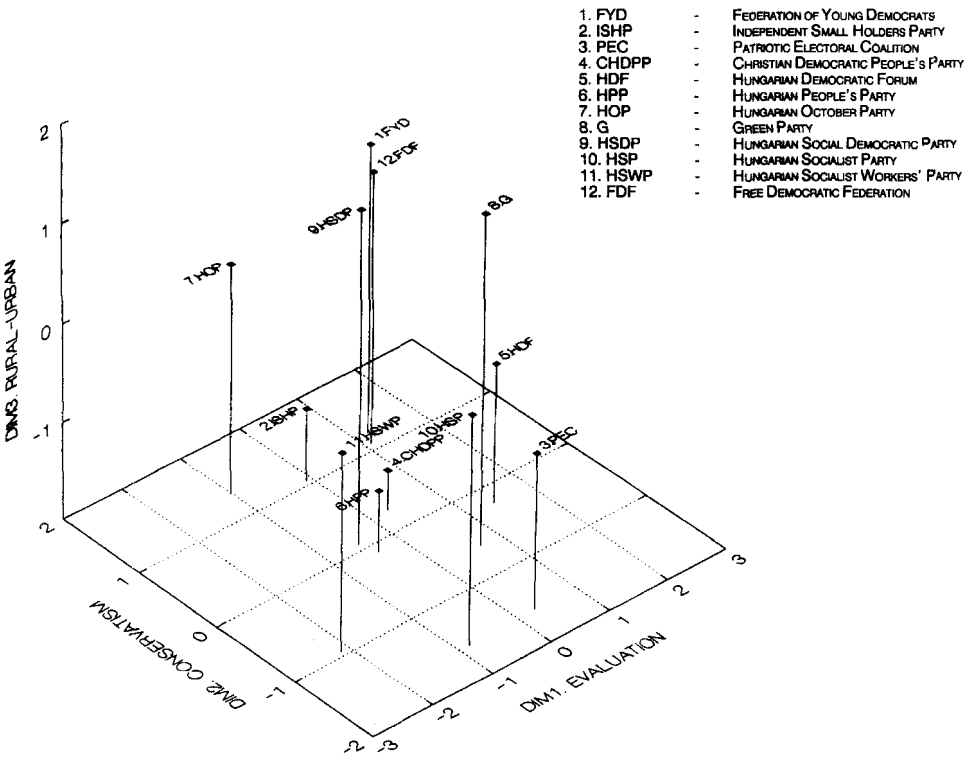

Figure 1. The three-dimensional representation of the implicit cognitive space for political parties before the election (for exact party labels, see text)

further improvement was achieved by adding a fourth dimension (58 per cent versus 59 per cent), suggesting that three dimensions were both sufficient and necessary to adequately represent the implicit structure of similarity judgments.

Interpretation

The labelling of the three ALSCAL dimensions was accomplished by analysing the correlations between each of the separately scaled 14 bipolar scales, and each of the three MDS dimensions, using the positional coordinates of the parties as the input data. The aim of this analysis was to identify the bipolar scales most similar to each INDSCAL dimension in terms of differentiating between parties. The Individual Differences Multidimensional Scaling (INDSCAL) model produces dimensions that typically do not require further rotation, and are directly interpretable (Carroll and Chang, 1970). According to the INDSCAL analysis then, the three axes in our model represent the best-fitting representation of parties as seen by a hypothetical 'average' subject (*cf.* Forgas, 1979). However, the model also allows that the axes may have different degrees of relevance to different individuals. These differences are revealed in individual subject weights calculated by the program for each subject and for each dimension. In effect, the 14 bipolar scales represent our *a priori* 'hypotheses' as to the identity of the previously unknown dimensions (axes) defining the party political space. By fitting the 14 bipolar scales to the three independently constructed IND-

SCAL dimensions, the implicit features used by subjects in their similarity judgments can be identified. The three-dimensional representation of political parties is shown in Figure 1.

Dimension 1 was most clearly related to the sympathetic–unsympathetic (0.816), clear–confused (0.789), biased–unbiased (0.788), flexible–rigid (0.785) and selfish–unselfish (0.784) scales suggesting that this was a general *evaluative* dimension. (The correlation between this dimension and the remaining bipolar scales was < 0.4 in all cases). At one extreme on this dimension were clearly negatively evaluated parties, with the unreformed remnant of the old doctrinaire communist party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party, occupying the most disliked end of this dimension. At the other extreme of this dimension we find several of the most promising, and (at that time) most positively evaluated new liberal political groupings. As it happens, the three most liked political parties (the Federation of Young Democrats, Hungarian Democratic Forum and Free Democrats' Federation) eventually also received the most significant endorsement at the subsequent election, and today constitute major groups in the Parliament. In fact, cognitive representations of the parties along this evaluative dimension show a surprisingly good correspondence with their forthcoming electoral success.

The critical role of affective and evaluative reactions in preference judgments (such as voting) has often been demonstrated in previous research on social judgements (Abelson, Kinder, Peters and Fiske, 1982; Forgas, 1992, 1994). However, it is perhaps unusual that such a broad and amorphous range of characteristics would be condensed into a single evaluative axis as found here. In prior work using MDS methods, features such as flexibility, clarity or lack of bias often represented separate dimensions unrelated to evaluation (Forgas, 1979). The fact that subjects used a multiplicity of quite divergent bipolar features as components of an evaluative dimension here seems interesting. It may be that in this instance, implicit representations separating liked and disliked parties as revealed by similarity judgments were relatively clearcut and unambiguous, yet subjects had some difficulty in assigning specific characteristics to parties in bipolar scale judgments. Perhaps this may reflect the relatively confused and complex state of the political domain in Hungary that preceded the election, and the lack of crystallized criteria for comparing parties.

Dimension 2 was mainly marked by the left wing–right wing (0.771), conservative–radical (0.589) and insecure–self-confident (0.588) scales, and was labelled *conservatism*, with correlations between this dimension and all other scales < 0.35. This dimension is frequently reported in studies of Western electorates, where left-wing parties and politicians are invariably seen as more radical than right-wing groupings (Forgas, 1980). It is a remarkable feature of our results — and indeed, the prevailing political climate in Eastern Europe — that here, it is the left-wing, socialist parties that were located at the conservative and insecure end of the dimension, while the more right wing, democratic liberal parties were predominantly perceived as radical and self-confident.

This unusual pattern is perhaps not so surprising in a political context where it was the nominally left-wing Communist party that has been held directly responsible for decades of a highly rigid and repressive regime, and endemic economic mismanagement. In contrast, the recently formed and more right-wing parties all had a platform calling for radical change. These findings may suggest a need to revise the long-held assumption in Western democracies that it is always the left-wing parties that stand for

radical change, while right-wing parties represent conservatism and the maintenance of the *status quo*. The post-communist societies of Eastern Europe may not necessarily be alone in perceiving right-wing parties as more radical and reform-oriented than are left-wing groupings.

Finally, the third dimension identified here was marked by a single bipolar scale, **urban–rural** (0.658), with all other scales correlated < 0.35 with this dimension. Such a feature has not previously been identified as important in political perception in well-established Western democracies. However, the urban–rural dimension has a considerable history and face validity in contemporary Eastern Europe, and not just as a label denoting mere geographical differences. A distinction between the somewhat more conservative, and nationalistic 'rural' areas and the more liberal, cosmopolitan political atmosphere in the capital, Budapest has certainly been a feature of Hungarian political life since the 19th century. However, the categories 'rural' and 'urban' in Hungary are also code-words describing a highly meaningful distinction between two competing socio-cultural ideologies that seek intellectual inspiration either from a return to traditional rural folklore and values, as against those seeking integration with mainstream European culture. The rural–urban, folk-based–cosmopolitan dimension has yet another, somewhat more sinister meaning that also cannot be ignored. 'Urban' or 'cosmopolitan' are labels that are often applied to identify the more internationally oriented Jewish members of the intelligentsia, while 'rural' and 'folk-oriented' are epithets frequently used to identify non-Jewish members of the intelligentsia espousing folk values. In several ways then, the emergence of an urban–rural dimension as a significant feature of political perception in Hungary can be meaningfully related to major currents in the past intellectual and political culture of the country.

At the 'rural' end of this dimension we find parties that explicitly appeal to rural and folk-oriented constituencies, such as the Independent Smallholders' Party, as well as parties that strongly espouse traditional Christian values such as the Christian Democratic People's Party, and the Hungarian People's Party. At the other extreme of this dimension are located cosmopolitan parties most removed from such 'folk' associations, such as the Greens, and the Social Democrats. It is noteworthy that this dimension also effectively separates the three most dominant and positively evaluated parties on the first dimension into the future Government, and the future Opposition: the Hungarian Democratic Forum, eventually to become the main Government party was clearly seen here as more 'rural' and perhaps populist than the Federation of Young Democrats and the Free Democrats' Federation, the main constituents of the future Opposition.

In conclusion then, the perceptual space for parties in this pre-election period and from a relatively small group of subjects nevertheless presents us with a remarkably sensitive and accurate mapping of the political environment of the country at a period of flux and transition. Both the location of the parties, and the identity of the major dimensions differentiating between them could be meaningfully related to the country's traditional political culture, as well as the peculiar political environment of a nation freshly emerging from decades of dictatorship. Indeed, the cognitive mapping of parties presented here could have served as the basis of a surprisingly accurate prediction for the emerging balance of forces in the newly constituted parliament: positively evaluated country-based parties came to form the Government, while positively evaluated, but more urban and cosmopolitan parties provided the mainstay of the Opposition.

Individual differences in perceptions of the political domain

In addition to mapping the party political space, the INDSCAL model also allows the quantitative evaluation of subtle perceptual differences between individuals or groups of individuals. Subject weights for each person and on each dimension measure the importance of that dimension to that subject — in other words, the extent to which each dimension was used by each subject in his or her judgments (Carroll and Chang, 1970; Forgas, 1979).

Further, the INDSCAL model also calculates an empirical measure of 'weirdness' for each subject, indicating the extent to which each person's unique pattern of subject weights deviates from the average 'normal' pattern for the group as a whole. A person with a pattern of subject weights proportional to the average would have a weirdness value of zero, while somebody with an atypical pattern of weights would have a weirdness value closer to one. Thus, by examining the differences in mean subject weights between different respondent groups, an empirical evaluation of implicit perceptual differences between them becomes possible (Figure 2).

Education and political perception

We first examined the relationship between *educational attainment* and political perception. Of the total sample of 134 subjects, 57 were university students enrolled in highly demanding and selective courses such as law and philosophy, while the remainder of the sample came from far less selective and demanding educational backgrounds. A multiple discriminant analysis of the subject weights of these two groups revealed an overall significant difference between their perceptual styles, chi square = 18.94; $df = 3$; $p < 0.001$. A detailed comparison of the mean subject weights of the two groups on each of the three dimensions suggested that more highly educated subjects tended to rely significantly more on the *conservatism* dimension in their judgments $t(132) = 1.99$; $p < 0.05$, while less well educated subjects made far more use of the first, *evaluative* dimension in their representations, $t(132) = 3.65$; $p < 0.001$. No significant differences in mean subject weight for these two groups were found on the third, urban–rural dimension (Figure 2).

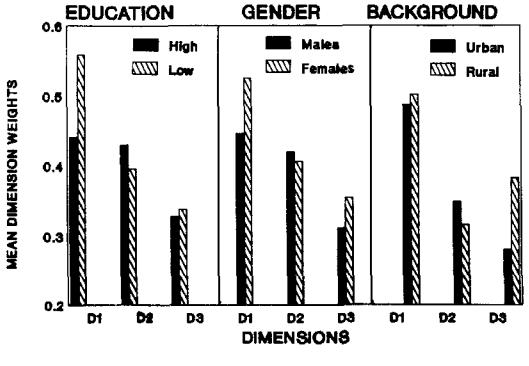

Figure 2. Mean dimension weights for subjects who differed in terms of educational attainment, gender and urban versus rural background; higher dimension weights indicate greater reliance by a group of subjects on a particular dimension in their implicit representations before the election

These results seem generally consistent with other evidence about the role of education in individual differences in political cognition (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Forgas, 1980), although no such effects have been previously demonstrated in the kind of emerging political context studied here. The present pattern suggests that reliance on an undifferentiated, global evaluative dimension in political judgment is more likely to be characteristic of less educated subjects. In contrast, ideological principles such as conservatism seem to play a greater role in the cognitive representations of highly educated subjects (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). It is perhaps not surprising that educational level should play a particularly important role in political perception in a complex situation where large numbers of previously untested parties compete for attention in an otherwise ambiguous political environment.

Gender differences in political perception

There was also a significant overall difference in perceptual style between males and females as revealed by a multiple discriminant analysis, chi square = 9.77, $df = 3$; $p < 0.01$. Females were significantly more likely to rely on the *evaluative* dimension, $t(129) = -2.35$; $p < 0.02$, and on the *rural-urban* dimension, $t(129) = -2.12$; $p < 0.03$, in their judgments than were males. However, there were no specific gender differences on the second, *conservatism* dimension. This result seems consistent with prior evidence indicating the importance of gender differences in numerous areas of political perception and behaviour (Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986). More generally, our findings confirm that individual and demographic differences can and do play an important role in mediating implicit cognitive representations of the political domain (Figure 2).

Differences between country and city subjects

A third multiple discriminant analysis of subject weights revealed that those subjects who came from the city (Budapest) had an overall cognitive representation of parties that was significantly different from that of country subjects', chi square = 12.84; $df = 3$; $p < 0.004$. We found that city subjects were significantly more likely to cognitively represent parties in terms of the *conservatism* dimension, $t(132) = 2.03$; $p < 0.05$, while country subjects relied far more on the *urban–rural* dimension, $t(132) = 2.95$; $p < 0.004$ (Figure 2). These differences make considerable intuitive sense, suggesting that respondents in the capital were significantly more sensitive to the emerging ideological characteristics of the parties in their representations, while country subjects, perhaps not surprisingly, were more inclined to see parties in terms of their perceived affinity with traditional, rural folk values.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that it is possible to construct a reliable empirical model of people's cognitive representations of political parties even in an otherwise amorphous and untested political environment. The three dimensions found to define such representations here, evaluation, conservatism and urban–rural, correspond only partially with features found to underlie political judgments in stable Western democracies. Unique aspects of the political space found here include the emergence of an urban–rural dimension so ubiquitous in the political life of much of Eastern Europe, and the unusual perception of left wing parties as located at the conservative end of the political spectrum. Significant differences in the implicit

perception of parties due to gender, education and urban–rural background could also be readily interpreted in terms of the political culture and traditions of this region.

The stability of cognitive representations

An interesting question is just how stable and enduring is the pattern of cognitive representations we found here? For example, did the election itself change people's perceptions? To gain some insight into this question, a small follow-up study was carried out soon after the election was over using the same procedures and methods previously described, with 65 persons drawn from the same educational and demographic backgrounds as the subjects. In most respects the post-election pattern of results closely matched the pre-election data, suggesting the relative stability of these representations. Ultimately, a direct test of perceptual differences between the pre-election and the post-election group requires that a joint analysis of both sets of data be performed, using all 199 matrices (134 pre-, and 65 post-election) as input. Results of this joint analysis suggested that a two-dimensional configuration was both sufficient and necessary to represent the shared representations of the pre-and post-election groups, defined by *evaluation*, and a *rural–urban* dimension.

Next, a multiple discriminant analysis was undertaken to assess temporal changes in judgments, comparing the dimension weights of the pre-election and post-election groups. Results showed no significant difference in judgments, chi square = 2.61; $df = 2$; $p < 0.65$, confirming that the parties were essentially perceived the same way before and after the election. This result seems consistent with earlier research by Shikiar (1976), who found that the structure of political representations appears to be remarkably stable over time. In the present case, the ambiguous political context, the absence of reliable information about the track record of parties, and an election campaign and attendant advertising largely focused on maintaining stereotypic party 'images' (Siklaki, 1992) probably all combined to make significant shifts in the structure of political representations particularly unlikely.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was thus successful in demonstrating that people do have relatively stable and well-formed implicit cognitive representations about political parties even in an amorphous and ill-defined political context such as the one that existed following the collapse of the totalitarian one-party states of Eastern Europe. A particularly interesting aspect of our results was that the structure of implicit representations showed a remarkable correspondence with ultimate electoral success, despite the non-representative subject group. The position of the parties on the evaluation dimension before the election was highly correlated with their performance in the polls, with the most 'liked' parties having the greatest electoral success. This suggests that the study of implicit political representations even in a relatively small sample can provide a potentially useful prediction of voter behaviour, and ultimately, electoral success. Further, our findings show that there has been remarkably little change in these representations from the period before the election to the period after the election. This may be due to the relative scarcity of objective details available about the parties, and the absence of established comparative information on which changing perceptions

could be anchored. Obviously, care has to be exercised in generalizing these results to other population groups. Unlike in large-scale political surveys, the aim here was not to representatively sample political opinions; rather, our objective was to discover and empirically represent the implicit cognitive space for political parties within a small, but heterogenous subject group.

A careful inspection of the kind of implicit dimensions people used to discriminate between parties in Hungary also suggest some intriguing differences in political judgment between Western, and Eastern European voters. The perception of left-wing, socialist parties as defining the conservative end of the political spectrum, while more right wing, populist parties were seen as occupying the radical end of this axis is most unusual. Clearly, the perceived bankruptcy of left-wing ideologies in post-communist societies (and perhaps not just there) goes some way towards accounting for these results. A similar re-alignment of the political spectrum may well become a feature of some Western political representations in the current period of post-communist ideological transition. On the other hand, the remarkable resurgence of left-wing, socialist parties in more recent elections in Eastern Europe, as was the case in Poland, suggests that voter perceptions may readily change over a period of a few years. There are also indications that left-wing parties may again be in the ascendancy in Hungarian politics. The second election in Hungary in 1994 offers an excellent opportunity to follow up the current results, and to investigate changes in implicit political representations over a period of four years.

The strong reliance by judges on an urban–rural dimension was another interesting aspect of our results. It is a common feature of Eastern European societies that they have emerged from feudalism considerably later than Western nations, their economies continued to be heavily based on rural production, and large-scale urbanization occurred only relatively recently. These factors help to explain the enduring importance of a rural–urban dimension in political representations here. Further, in the case of Hungary, the urban–rural category has also been adopted to identify conflicting traditions in the country's intellectual, academic and artistic life for many decades between the Jewish and the non-Jewish intelligentsia, lending additional importance to this label.

The demonstration here of individual differences in the way the political domain is cognitively represented also has considerable interest. Attitudes, personality, voting preference and demographic variables have all been linked to political cognition in the past (*cf.* Forgas, 1980, 1982). In the present studies, we found that gender, educational attainment and social background were all significantly related to the way the parties were cognitively represented. Although there has been some prior evidence for the role of gender differences in political perception and behaviour, most of the research comes from long-established democracies, with relatively well-informed voters (*cf.* Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986). In contrast, our sample consisted of respondents with little or no prior exposure to multi-party politics. That significant gender differences were nevertheless found attests to the robustness of these effects.

The same point can also be made about the role of educational level in political representations: generally, higher educational attainment was related to a weaker reliance on a global evaluative dimension in judgments, and the greater use of other, more substantive dimensions to differentiate between parties, consistent with evidence from other areas of political and judgmental research (*cf.* Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Forgas, 1982). The respondents' city or country background also made a significant

difference to how political parties were viewed. Given the historical and cultural importance of such a distinction as outlined above, the greater use of this feature to discriminate between parties by rural respondents makes good intuitive sense.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates a sensitive and reliable method for analysing subtle individual differences in cognitive representations about politics in a changing political environment. A particularly encouraging feature of our results is the close correspondence between pre-election cognitive representations, and the subsequent electoral success of parties. Future work may be oriented both towards exploring the actual mechanisms mediating cognitive representations and voting behaviour, and to studying the role of individual differences in the structure and quality of political representations.

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