

The Role of the Leader in Political Campaigns: An Analysis in the Context of Political Communication, Leadership and Image Management

Siyasi Kampanyalarda Liderin Rolü: Siyasi İletişim, Liderlik ve İmaj Yönetimi Bağlamında Bir İnceleme

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Öz

Bu çalışma, demokratik sistemlerde siyasi iletişim sürecinin temel dinamiklerini, siyasi liderlik ve lider imaj yönetimi perspektifinden literatür taraması yöntemiyle incelemektedir. Bu nedenle siyasi kampanya süreçlerinde liderin rolünün ve lider imaj yönetimi stratejilerinin seçmen davranışları üzerindeki etkisinin kuramsal çerçevede açıklanması gerekmektedir. Bu problem çerçevesinde çalışmanın amaçları şunlardır: (a) siyasi kampanyaların işlevlerini ve dönüşümünü analiz etmek; (b) siyasi liderlerin seçmen üzerindeki etkisini belirleyen özellikleri tartışmak; (c) lider imaj yönetimi stratejilerinin seçmen davranışları üzerindeki etkisini kuramsal düzeyde değerlendirmek ve (d) dijitalleşme sürecinin siyasi kampanya stratejileri ve lider imaj yönetimi üzerindeki dönüştürücü etkisini incelemektir. Araştırmada, siyasi iletişim, kampanya yönetimi, liderlik kuramları ve imaj yönetimi alanlarındaki ulusal ve uluslararası literatür sistematik bir şekilde incelenmiş; bu alanlardaki temel kuramsal yaklaşımlar ve ampirik bulgular derlenmiş, karşılaştırılmış ve eleştirel bir perspektifle değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışma sonucunda, siyasi iletişim sürecinin seçmenlerle karşılıklı bir etkileşim olduğu, siyasi kampanyaların demokratik katılımı artırdığı, lider imajının parti ideolojisinden daha etkili bir seçmen davranışı belirleyicisi olduğu ve güven unsurunun siyasi iletişimin temel koşulu olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Ayrıca, dijitalleşme sürecinin siyasi kampanya stratejilerini ve lider imaj yönetimini dönüştürdüğü, kişiselleştirilmiş politikanın yükseldiği, sosyal medyanın lider-seçmen etkileşimini doğrudan ve sürekli hale getirdiği, görsel ve sembolik unsurların siyasi markalaşmada kritik bir rol oynadığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Çalışmanın literatüre katkısı, siyasi iletişim, liderlik ve imaj yönetimi alanları arasındaki kuramsal bağlantıları sistematik bir çerçevede bir araya getirmesi ve dijital çağda bu dinamiklerin dönüşümünü kuramsal düzeyde analiz etmesidir.

Anahtar kelimeler

Siyasi iletişim, siyasi kampanya, siyasi liderlik, lider imajı, imaj yönetimi, seçmen davranışı, demokratik katılım, kişiselleştirilmiş politika, dijital siyasi iletişim.

Öne Çıkanlar

- Bu çalışma, siyasi kampanyalarda liderin rolünü siyasal iletişim literatürü çerçevesinde tartışmayı amaçlayan kuramsal bir incelemedir.
- Siyasi kampanyaların seçmenleri bilgilendirme, ikna etme ve harekete geçirme işlevleri büyük ölçüde liderin iletişim becerileri ve stratejik mesaj yönetimiyle şekillenmektedir.
- Araştırma, liderin kişisel özellikleri (güvenilirlik, karizma, tutarlılık ve iletişim gücü) ile seçmen tercihleri arasında güçlü bir ilişki olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.
- Lider imajının medya ve iletişim araçları aracılığıyla inşa edilmesi, kampanya sürecinde seçmen algısını doğrudan etkileyen kritik bir faktör olarak tespit edilmiştir.
- Sonuç olarak, başarılı siyasi kampanyaların lider odaklı stratejilerle yürütüldüğü ve liderin güven oluşturma kapasitesinin demokratik süreçlerde belirleyici olduğu anlaşılmıştır.

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Ethical Statement

This study does not require ethical committee approval, and the data used were obtained from literature reviews/published sources. It is hereby declared that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the preparation of this study and that all studies used are cited in the references. Sevinç Ergin

Use of Artificial Intelligence

No artificial intelligence-based tools or applications were used in the preparation of this study. All content of the study was produced by the author(s) in accordance with scientific research methods and academic ethical principles. Sevinç Ergin

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Abstract

This study examines the fundamental dynamics of political communication in democratic systems from the perspectives of political leadership and leader image management, using a systematic literature review. The main problem of the study is how the role of the leader and leader image management strategies in political campaign processes can be explained within a theoretical framework, with respect to their impact on voter behavior. Within this problem framework, the objectives of the study are as follows: (a) to analyze the functions and transformation of political campaigns; (b) to discuss the characteristics that determine the influence of political leaders on voters; (c) to evaluate the impact of leader image management strategies on voter behavior at a theoretical level; and (d) to examine the transformative effect of the digitalization process on political campaign strategies and leader image management. In the research, national and international literature on political communication, campaign management, leadership theories, and image management has been systematically examined; fundamental theoretical approaches and empirical findings in these areas have been compiled, compared, and critically evaluated. As a result of the study, it has been determined that the political communication process is a reciprocal interaction with voters, that political campaigns increase democratic participation, that leader image is a more effective determinant of voter behavior than party ideology, and that trust is the foundational condition of political communication. Furthermore, it has been concluded that the digitalization process has transformed political campaign strategies and leader image management, that personalized politics has risen, that social media has made leader-voter interaction direct and continuous, and that visual and symbolic elements play a critical role in political branding. The contribution of this study to the literature lies in bringing together the theoretical connections between political communication, leadership, and image management in a systematic framework and analyzing the transformation of these dynamics in the digital age at a theoretical level.

Keywords

Political communication, political campaign, political leadership, leader image, image management, voter behavior, democratic participation, personalized politics, digital political communication.

Highlights

- This study is a theoretical review that aims to discuss the role of the leader in political campaigns within the framework of political communication literature.
- The functions of political campaigns—informing, persuading, and mobilizing voters—are largely shaped by the leader's communication skills and strategic message management.
- The research reveals a strong relationship between leaders' personal traits (such as credibility, charisma, consistency, and communication ability) and voter preferences.
- The construction of leader image through media and communication channels has been identified as a critical factor directly influencing voter perception during campaigns.
- Consequently, it is concluded that successful political campaigns are leader-centered and that the leader's ability to build trust is decisive in democratic processes.

1. Introduction

The process of political communication is a central mechanism of interaction between political actors and citizens in democratic (or democratizing) systems. For political parties and candidates, political communication is not just an election campaign activity; it's a continuous strategic process aimed at maintaining organizational legitimacy, consolidating voter support, and ensuring access to decision-making power. In democratic contexts, political actors must persuade citizens, shape public opinion, and ultimately obtain electoral approval. Therefore, not only do they present policies; they are also obliged to influence attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral orientations in their favor.

From this perspective, political communication involves a reciprocal dynamic. Political actors seek to identify, interpret, and respond to citizens' expectations, demands, and value systems. This process requires systematic audience analysis, segmentation strategies, and message tailoring. Mobilization is possible when political actors successfully align their discourses with the socio-economic concerns, cultural codes, and emotional priorities of their target audiences. Therefore, it is indispensable to understand voter psychology, social identities, and issue salience.

On the other hand, target audiences are not passive buyers in this process. Citizens actively provide feedback through various communication channels, including public meetings, social media platforms, non-governmental organizations, and traditional media. Voting behavior itself serves as a powerful communicative act. Through participation or non-participation in elections, citizens send symbolic and concrete messages to political elites about satisfaction, protest, trust, or discontent. Thus, elections can be understood not only as mechanisms of representation, but also as communicative exchanges between the rulers and the ruled.

During election periods, the intensity of political communication increases significantly. Political leaders strategically use mass media to disseminate their rhetoric, policy proposals, and campaign promises. Compared to rallies or in-person campaign events, media platforms offer wider reach, greater repetition, and more control over message framing. Voters follow candidates' projects, ideological positions, and public performances more closely through mediated representations rather than physical campaign spaces. Media exposure shapes agenda-setting processes, influences issue prioritization, and frames the interpretive context through which political messages are understood.

Newspapers have historically played a significant role, particularly as sources of news and political information. As part of the press media, newspapers offer durability and archival permanence; once published, the content cannot be easily altered or retracted. This permanence gives political actors the opportunity to solidify their message in the public record. During election campaigns, newspapers can legitimize candidates' projects, reinforce campaign narratives, and reinforce political credibility. Additionally, opinion columns, interviews, and editorial positions help build political credibility and shape public perception.

With technological advancements, political communication has expanded beyond traditional press and broadcast media. The integration of digital platforms, audiovisual technologies, and multimedia tools has transformed electoral campaigns into highly sophisticated communication operations. Campaign strategies now include television commercials, social media campaigns, online videos, interactive content, and data-driven targeting. Audiovisual elements—campaign slogans, logos, and especially music—have become essential

components of political branding. Choice songs are composed to evoke emotional resonance, create collective enthusiasm, and enhance memorability.

In parallel with these developments, the study and construction of the political leader's image have gained increasing importance. Political image-making has become a professionalized field, supported by communication consultants, public relations experts, and image strategists. Leaders are carefully positioned to emphasize desirable traits such as reliability, charisma, competence, empathy, or strength. Visual presentation, body language, clothing style, speech patterns, and media performance are meticulously managed to differentiate candidates from competitors. Through strategic image-building, political actors strive to create a cohesive and attractive persona that aligns with voter expectations.

In conclusion, contemporary political communication reflects a complex interplay between persuasion, representation, media mediation, and image-building. As democratic competition intensifies and communication technologies evolve, the capacity of political actors to strategically manage messages, symbols, and mediated visibility becomes increasingly pivotal in shaping election outcomes and public opinion.

2. Political Campaigns: Definition, Purpose and Functions

A campaign can be defined as activities carried out to reach an audience through various tools, gain their support, and ensure their participation in pursuit of certain goals (Lilleker, 2014, p. 67). Political campaigning, on the other hand, refers to the process centered on political messages and goals. Nimmo (1996, p. 3) defines political campaigns as a persuasive form of communication designed to influence people's actions.

In contemporary governments and democracies, political campaigns are considered a central feature of the political process. Political campaigns are tools that allow persuading, informing, and mobilizing the public in the political process (Norris, 2002, p. 128). Political campaigns are strategically planned and employ communication methods. The political campaign process should be organized by individuals who are competent in their fields (Holtz-Bacha, 2007, p. 74).

2.1. Importance, Purpose and Functions of Political Campaigns

Political actors attach great importance to political campaigns. Although political candidates, parties, and states are prioritized, political campaigns are seen by all political actors as a complementary tool to their participation in politics (Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002, p. 1). These campaigns help turn attitudes into actions, mobilize democratic values, and raise voter awareness by reminding them to vote (Perloff Richard, 2014, p. 335).

This voting process is complex and multidimensional. Campaigns try to eliminate this complexity. The most important issues for voters reduce choices to simple ones. Sometimes they offer a binary choice between opposing candidates, styles, or characters. Campaigns are not the only determining factor of election results, but they do affect citizens' referendum and electoral behavior. Discursive efforts by political actors to increase the likelihood of electoral victory play a significant role in voters' preferences. Especially in critical and controversial elections, the campaign process can be a determining factor in the election result (Lilleker, 2014, p. 188). However, in referendums in which an unknown or new issue is presented to voters, campaigns do not play a critical role in determining the outcome (LeDuc, 2007, p. 29).

The purpose of campaigning in democratic systems is to persuade and mobilize voters to support candidates or ideas. As part of this persuasion process, political candidates and parties can reach voters through various communication channels before and during the campaign, using both moral and material resources. Therefore, campaigns are not only communication activities but also communication media (Nimmo, 1996, p. 41).

Election campaigns are designed to reinforce the positive attitudes held by voters. While negative attitudes are reduced, efforts are made to change perceptions about rival parties or candidates. Through campaigns, voters are motivated to choose among political parties, thereby supporting a particular party or candidate (Lilleker, 2014, p. 189).

Political campaigns are considered as communication processes that aim to influence management outputs and processes. In this process, one or more political actors seek to influence public opinion to change the outcomes produced by decision-making mechanisms. Political actors campaign because they think it will help achieve their political goals. For this reason, the political candidate tries to gain the support of the public or certain segments. Such public support contributes to the achievement of political actors' goals in referendums and elections, where voters make their own decisions (Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002, p. 3).

The professionalization of political campaigns has changed the content of campaigns and the nature of political parties. In the modern period, campaigns have become a framework that attracts the attention of all segments. Candidates and political parties using modern campaign strategies aim to reach a wide range of voters. In this context, the essence of their campaign is to capture voters' attention. For the purpose of interest, the personalities of party candidates or leaders are highlighted (Swanson David, 2004, pp. 49-50).

One of the goals of political campaigns is to create an environment in which candidates explain themselves, their promises and ideas to their voters. It is aimed to create cognitive associations in the design process of election campaigns. In this context, people develop beliefs about how parties or candidates will govern them. Creating a positive image in voters' minds is one of the main goals political actors expect campaigns to achieve (Perloff Richard, 2014, p. 21).

Lilleker (2014, pp. 72-73) specifies four different roles, focusing on the functions of political campaigns or their impact on the masses:

- First role: It is to ensure that the important issues in the election manifesto or party program are announced to the public through campaigns. An attempt is made to convince voters by identifying issues that are different from those evaluated by competitors.
- Second role: It's about the persuasiveness of campaigns. Efforts are made to persuade voters by highlighting various messages and issues.
- Third role: It contributes to the recognition of the candidate. Through campaigns, candidates create an image and communicate their promises to voters.
- Fourth role: It aims to motivate the farmers to go to the polls.

The lack of strong political campaigns can lead to confusion among voters. In terms of strength, campaign issues need to be clarified so voters can understand the campaign. Campaigns are very important tools,

but this importance does not occur in all circumstances. Even if candidates or parties make significant efforts by exerting all their resources to communicate their policies and explain themselves to voters, there is little that the campaign can do to bring about change when it comes to an effort that is not intended to be understood by the electorate (Marsh, 2007, p. 63).

3. Political Leadership in Campaigns

Leadership, one of the most important issues in politics, is central to political campaigns. In political campaigns and in all political activities and strategies, political messages are shaped by the leader, and the necessary resources are allocated to achieve electoral success. Throughout history, the decisions and policies of leaders have shaped the destinies of societies and nations.

In democratic societies, a leader is elected; he represents the people and establishes the government on their behalf. The political leader in question should know the society he is in very well, inspire trust in that society, and be able to direct the masses to the determined goals (Ünal Erzen, 2012, pp. 1-15). In this context, the personality traits of the political leader are expressed by Tan (2002, p. 38) as follows:

- Political leaders who are favored by voting in democratic societies must derive the power of legitimate authority from the people.
- In order for political leaders to be reliable and trustworthy, it is important that their behavior and words are compatible.
- In terms of effective governance, the political leader must be balanced and measured in his behavior and words.
- The political leader must show tolerance and respect in his dealings with people from all walks of life and his opponents. To maintain social solidarity and unity, it is important to avoid behavior or words that insult anyone.
- The state must adhere to principles and fundamental values that are considered immutable.
- It must be a social unifier to maintain unity and solidarity.
- With a realistic perspective, he should adopt goals aimed at advancing the society he governs.
- They should be able to manage and guide crisis periods.
- In terms of the interests of the country, the political leader should consult the opinions of experts before making decisions on various issues.
- He should not behave in a way that contradicts the lifestyle and value judgments of the society.
- Political leaders must keep certain state secrets secret that are essential to the security and interests of the country.
- The political leader should provide information about the activities he can perform; he should not promise things he cannot do to avoid disrupting stability and reliability.

Leaders who are more recognized by society than parties and have investment power beyond parties gain management power through their personal talents, characteristics, and behaviors. Leaders are individuals with

high social adaptability, self-confidence, strong communication skills, vision and creativity, speed, openness to change, bravery, sensitivity to their environment, and stability. Leadership is often shaped by these personal traits. In this context, political leaders should know their masses well and consistently carry the society they govern to higher levels in line with the goals they have set (Özel, 2009, p. 172).

4. Characteristics of a Political Leader

Although the influence of leaders on voter preferences varies with social characteristics, the duration of democratic rule, and living conditions, empirical evidence shows that it is important. It is observed that the primary factor in public opinion surveys and party preferences is the presidential candidates (Devran, 2004, p. 196).

In politicized societies, the most important factor shaping party preference and political participation is trust in the leader's messages and personality rather than the party's ideology and program. This sense of trust contributes to increased political participation. An abnormal level of love and trust towards the leader may cause the leader to be glorified and seen as the party's owner by ascribing features the leader does not have (Kalender, 2005, p. 39).

The most important issue in political communication is whether the messages convey can convince the recipient and lead to a change in their behavior and attitude. The essence of political communication activities aimed at winning over voters is to persuade and influence them. Rhetoric plays a significant role in political communication, aiming to build trust and credibility and, consequently, influence voters' opinions. There are three different types of rhetoric: "judicial", "political" and "epideictic" (Aziz, 2017, p. 59). Rhetoric can be defined as "the ability to observe the ways of persuasion that exist in certain situations" (Aristotle, 2013, pp. 19-20). Political rhetoric refers to speeches made by politicians; its primary purpose is to bring about change in the audience's behavior and attitudes. For this reason, rhetoric is of great importance for political actors trying to reach their target audiences (Aziz, 2017, p. 58).

The ability to persuade can be innate or acquired through subsequent training. Therefore, within the scope of political communication, the ability to persuade the target audience depends on the political leader's rhetorical power. Aziz (2017, pp. 61-62) expresses the features that reflect the rhetorical power in speech as follows:

- The information transmitted must be accurate and precise,
- Being within the framework of logic,
- Not allowing exaggerations; not making empty promises,
- Fluency of speech,
- Examples should be familiar and easy to understand,
- Clarity of sentences,
- If numerical data needs to be mentioned, average numbers should be given,
- Average speech rate,
- The speaker's tone of voice, emphasis, and color should be smooth,
- Good use of body language; correct use of facial gestures and facial expressions, eyes,

- Choosing clothes and different accessories according to the environment,
- Being able to joke when necessary,
- Having a ready answer,
- Being prepared for adverse situations.

However, a political leader is a person who evaluates conditions and events as efficiently as possible, predicts the future, and directs accordingly. One characteristic political leaders should have is assertiveness. In countries with democratic orders, the status of a successful political leader changes with prevailing conditions and events. Especially in periods when society is overwhelmed, the political leader should exhibit a constructive, logical, determined, integrative, entrepreneurial, and patient attitude to the public (Akdemir, 2008, p. 95).

To influence voters and ensure their support, political leaders must first get to know society in all its dimensions, understand its demands, present themselves as people who will meet those demands, continually renew themselves in line with social expectations, and build trust. Political leadership involves making strategic decisions in a changing environment and guiding followers towards the stated goal within a broader set of objectives. Political leaders who establish an emotional bond with society, continually renew themselves in response to people's expectations and demands, and develop strategies accordingly are more likely to be successful and to instill trust in the society they live in (Ünal Erzen, 2008, pp. 72-73).

Okumuş (2007, pp. 12-13) argues that, in addition to the basic qualities required for successful political leadership, it is necessary to know which actions to avoid, as they may lead to failure. At the same time, the most common dangers for a leader are: an inability to adapt to social, technological, and political changes; an inability to accurately analyze and meet voters' demands; and an inability to prevent intra-party divisions. For a successful political leader, it is important to have a program and vision that respond to the demands of voter groups, but this is extremely difficult in the early days of action. It is imperative for leaders to balance the elements of change and stability. The leader needs a vision and to set goals constantly; he must review and renew himself over time.

5. Political Leader Image Management

An important dimension of politics is creating an image and making people believe in it. In today's societies, the image of a politician is as important as his political views. "Image creation" is defined as campaign activities carried out jointly by advertising and communication experts and political parties. These campaigns employ strategies to shape the leader's public perception. In summary, image creation is an effort to develop the candidate's perception potential, enabling him to be successful in the eyes of voters (Erzen, 2012, p. 75).

An important issue in the creation of the image, following the candidate's self-knowledge process, is social relations, character traits, habits, communication skills, knowledge, intelligence level, sanctioning power, past experiences, policies, and actions related to problem solving (Balci, 2003, p. 153).

Yıldız (2002, p. 51) explains the importance of mass media and media in creating an image as follows: "In order for the product, institution or person to be imaged or transferred to reach its target audience, it must first be delivered to the audience through mass media. Formation of image: It depends on the overlap of the target audience and the audience, the strategic use of communication tools, and the structuring of the message in accordance with the purpose."

The image of the candidate formed in voters' minds during political campaigns can be examined from two perspectives. The first is the perception of the candidate's personal characteristics, including honesty, seriousness, strength, intelligence, expertise, and competence—especially trustworthiness. The second is to define the candidate visually and to evaluate it as a visual element (Uztuğ, 2007, p. 61). The image of political leaders is shaped by certain associations in voters' minds. Therefore, it is important for political leaders to develop visual, verbal, and behavioral strategies to shape and maintain their image. The process of creating a successful candidate image requires careful planning, strategy, and execution. The image of a successful candidate can enhance voters' positive perception of the candidate and serve as a significant step towards political success.

6. The Influence of the Leader in Campaigns

One of the most persistent and fundamental problems in politics is to prevent authoritarian rule. Leaders influenced by paranoia, megalomania, impulses, and sentimentality, including in the historical record and in the current period, have served their own interests by abusing the use of violence and force by states. The number of people who lost their lives due to despotism is almost as close to the losses in famine, disease, and wars (Dahl, 2010, p. 57).

People are being driven to despair due to the ongoing economic crisis. In this regard, the expected leader becomes a superhero. Every word he says is listened to and approved, and all his promises are believed. Unfulfilled promises cause the leader to collapse. In the context of the human theory of leadership, the question "What are the reasons why the person who fills the leadership role/seat in a group fills this role/seat?" is asked. Leaders can influence people in ways that differ from those of other group members because of their personality traits. In this way, the image of a talented, intelligent person is accepted by people with different dominant singular structures and is considered suitable for a leadership position. It is also noted that their personality traits differ markedly. Public figures in leadership positions can think on their feet. In short, political leaders tend to be highly intelligent, socially strong, self-confident, dominant, and able to dominate their followers or have these characteristics (Eysenck, 2004, p. 746).

7. Method

This study is a systematic literature review based on a qualitative research approach. The literature review method is a scientific approach for compiling, analyzing, and synthesizing existing information on a specific subject (Hart, 1998, p. 9; Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2011, p. 112). The main reason for choosing the literature review method in this study is to bring together the theoretical connections among the fields of political communication, leadership, and image management within a systematic framework and to evaluate the main theoretical approaches in these fields from a comparative and critical perspective.

7.1. Scope of the Study and Source Selection Criteria

The scope of the study covers political communication, political campaign management, political leadership, leader image, and image management. The following criteria were taken into consideration in the selection of sources:

- Being directly related to the subject,
- Including articles, books, and book chapters published in academic journals,

- Representing the classical studies that constitute the basic theoretical framework and the studies reflecting the current developments in the field in a balanced way,
- Prioritizing Turkish and English sources.

The literature review was conducted using Google Scholar, ULAKBİM, Web of Science, and Scopus databases. In the scanning process, "political communication", "political campaign", "political leadership", "leader image", "image management", "voter behavior", "personalized politics", "digital political communication" and their Turkish equivalents were used as keywords.

7.2. Data Analysis Process

The collected sources were examined using content analysis. Content analysis is a research technique that enables the objective, systematic, and quantitative analysis of texts (Bryman, 2016, p.23). The following stages were followed in the analysis process:

- Classification of sources according to their subjects (political communication, campaign management, leadership, image management),
- Determination of the main arguments and findings of each source,
- Identifying similarities, differences, and contradictions between different sources,
- Comparative evaluation of theoretical approaches,
- Identifying gaps in the literature and recommendations for future research from a critical perspective.

8. Discussion

Regardless of historical or cultural context, societies require leadership structures to organize governance, maintain social order, and articulate collective goals. In democratic systems, leadership legitimacy is primarily derived from the consent of the governed, expressed through free and competitive elections. In authoritarian systems, authority can withstand coercion; Democratic leadership depends on persuasion, representation, and public approval. Therefore, individuals who aspire to rule should not only possess administrative competence; they must also demonstrate leadership qualities that inspire trust and mobilize public support. Leadership in democracies is thus both a political and communicative achievement.

In contemporary politicized societies, voter behavior is shaped by perceptions of leadership credibility, authenticity, and reliability rather than rigid ideological commitment. While party ideology and political programs remain important, empirical evidence increasingly shows that confidence in a leader's personality, moral integrity, and communicative coherence outweighs abstract policy commitments. Voters assess whether leaders appear sincere, competent, and capable of delivering on their promises. In this sense, political communication becomes the central arena where leadership legitimacy is built and debated.

The effectiveness of political communication ultimately depends on its persuasive capacity. Messages should resonate with voters' lived experiences, values, and expectations. However, persuasion cannot happen without trust. Trust acts as the basic condition for message acceptance. When citizens perceive a leader as credible and transparent, they are more likely to internalize the leader's rhetoric and adapt their attitudes and behaviors accordingly. On the contrary, when trust is weakened, even well-designed political messages cannot produce the

intended behavioral results. Therefore, the success of political communication is inseparable from the establishment and maintenance of relational trust between leaders and society.

To influence voters sustainably, political leaders must have a comprehensive understanding of the society they aspire to lead. This understanding extends beyond demographic data; it should cover socio-economic inequalities, cultural identities, historical experiences, and new social demands. A leader who is disconnected from social realities cannot correctly interpret public expectations and develop responsive and inclusive policies. Effective leadership, therefore, requires continuous engagement with citizens, sensitivity to changing social dynamics, and the capacity to translate public demands into actionable political agendas.

In addition, contemporary leadership requires adaptability. Societies are not static; they evolve in response to technological change, globalization, economic fluctuations, and generational transformation. Leaders who fail to adapt to these changes risk losing relevance and public support. Renewal does not mean abandoning core values; instead, it involves rephrasing them to address current challenges. In this context, political communication serves as the mechanism through which leaders redefine their positions, clarify their vision, and reaffirm their commitment to societal well-being.

A fundamental dimension of modern politics is the construction and management of political image. In an era dominated by mass and digital media, political visibility cannot be separated from visual and symbolic representation. The image of a political leader—shaped through speeches, media appearances, body language, social media presence, and campaign aesthetics—is often as influential as the content of politics. Political image functions as a cognitive shortcut for voters; It allows them to quickly categorize leaders as trustworthy, strong, empathetic, or competent. In conclusion, image-building strategies have become an integral part of political campaigns.

However, political image is not just a superficial marketing tool. It functions as a symbolic representation of leadership identity and ideological positioning. When effectively aligned with political discourse and action, image reinforces credibility. When inconsistencies arise between image and behavior, public trust is quickly undermined. Therefore, sustainable political leadership depends on the consistency between the projected image and the actual management practices.

Ultimately, political leaders play a decisive role in promoting and maintaining political participation. Engagement increases when citizens believe that their voices matter and that leaders truly represent their interests. Trust in leadership is a key determinant in this process. In places where trust is strong, citizens are more inclined to vote, participate in public debates, and contribute to democratic processes. When trust is eroded, indifference, withdrawal, or polarization can intensify.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, democratic leadership is fundamentally a communicative and relational process. Persuasion rooted in trust requires building an image that aligns with responsiveness and authenticity rooted in societal understanding. As political landscapes become more complex and media-saturated, leaders' capacity to build and maintain public trust will continue to shape not only election outcomes but also the overall quality and stability of democratic governance.

The contribution of this study to the literature is to bring together the theoretical connections between the fields of political communication, leadership, and image management in a systematic framework and to analyze the transformation of these dynamics in the digital age at a theoretical level. However, the study has some limitations. First, since the study was based on a qualitative literature review, it did not contain empirical data. Secondly, the latest developments in digital political communication have not been fully reflected due to the limited availability of up-to-date resources.

Recommendations for future research include:

- Examination of certain election campaigns by content analysis method,
- Empirical investigation of how the image of a leader is built on social media platforms,
- Comparative analysis of political campaign strategies in different countries,
- Conducting field research on voter perceptions through surveys or in-depth interviews,
- Examining the impact of AI and big data analytics on political campaign strategies.

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