

FACETS OF POSITIVE CAMPAIGNING IN POLITICAL INTERVIEWS: AUTHENTICITY, HUMILITY AND FAIR PLAY

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Abstract

This paper looks into positive campaigning in political communication; more specifically, it tackles the way in which political contenders on the campaign trail resort to atypical self-assertion strategies like authenticity, humility and fair play in their discourse, so as to be perceived as truthful, relatable, trustworthy candidates and to form an emotional connection with potential voters. These strategies have been labelled as atypical since they are all self-effacing strategies, aiming to make the politician come across as a person just like everybody else rather than an outstanding leader endowed with exceptional qualities. In our research, we attempt to shed light on the costs and benefits of resorting to these techniques and to the ways in which candidates embed them into their discourse. The corpus covers three political interviews from the 2024 Romanian presidential elections campaign, the first round whereof was subsequently cancelled.

Keywords: positive campaigning; authenticity; humility; fair play; self-effacing strategies; emotional connection; risk.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2025/21/1.04

1. Introductory remarks

The present paper started off as an experiment. In today's political arena, replete with strong emotions and negative campaigning, we felt a strong need to put forward a piece of research that tackles a small, almost pristine wedge of political communication. Thus, we opted to focus on *positive campaigning* and, out of all the strategies candidates employ in this type of communication, we decided to analyse three: *authenticity*, *humility* and *fair play*.

To begin with, it is commonly known that, in political communication, *positive campaigning* appears when a candidate puts forward their own merits,

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accomplishments and positive qualities (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 60) – thus, it “builds a candidate’s reputation” (Bernhardt and Ghosh, 2020). One’s public persona is defined by one’s perceived value, by one’s professional or personal achievements, while positive campaigning revolves around urging the electors to vote **for** the speaker. By contrast, we are looking at *negative campaigning* when a contender attacks the opponent(s) in an attempt to tarnish their reputation. Instead of building their own reputation, when engaging in negative campaigning, a speaker damages that of a rival (Bernhardt and Ghosh, 2020). It involves criticism of the opponents, by either berating their ideology, political platform and professional trajectory, or even by launching personal attacks (*argumentum ad hominem*), such as trashing, for instance, their personal lives, their families or their loved ones; hence, negative campaigning puts forward a compelling appeal to vote **against** the opponent(s) and fosters the negative vote. There are degrees to negative campaigning, with the *argumentum ad hominem* being considered the lowest form thereof. With the *argumentum ad hominem*, also known as mudslinging, a political speaker attacks the opponent’s private persona, family or private life, rather than their ideology or alleged professional mistakes.

Sadly, in today’s fiercely competitive world, “elections feature more negative campaigning than positive; and, indeed, candidates with sufficiently limited resources only campaign negatively” (Bernhardt and Ghosh, 2020). In other words, the less a candidate can put forward to advertise for themselves, the more likely they are to turn to negative campaigning. To be positive in one’s approach, one needs to have accomplished things that speak for themselves and present them to the electorate; in the absence of such feats, tarnishing the opponent comes in as a handy replacement. Equally sadly, it seems that, by capitalizing on our negative emotions (anger, outrage, fear, frustration), political actors generate more interest than they would have, had they focused on their own achievements.

Thus, to the extent to which we can witness a marked shift towards negative campaigning in political discourse, as it works best in the absence of one’s own strengths, positive campaigning, by contrast, positions itself at the opposite pole of the political communication spectrum, as a counter-narrative to attack or smear tactics we so often see. To campaign positively translates into taking the high road, refusing to get involved in scandals and providing arguments that are either rational, or capitalize on the electorate’s positive emotions (hope, trust, pride, respect).

Generally speaking, indeed, positive campaigning is considered to be better, nobler, more commendable than negative campaigning, as it is constructive and possibly future-oriented. However, the two rarely appear independently (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 64); they usually go hand in hand, and it is not uncommon to see a politician highlighting their accomplishments while at the same time berating their opponents.

The three strategies we are focusing on, *authenticity*, *humility* and *fair play*, all seem counterintuitive tactics to take, especially in the context of positive campaigning based on self-assertion, as they go against what political communication should arguably be: a candidate attempting to stand out, to showcase they are better than their rivals. Instead, *authenticity*, *humility* and *fair play* are all *self-effacing strategies*. Paradoxically, however, they indicate emotional intelligence, for reasons we will attempt to highlight below. To end the current section of our research, we will stress that resorting to these strategies needs to suit a political actor's personality, to be in line with their overall image, with the public's perception of their persona; otherwise, the speech will sound rehearsed, the candidate will seem dishonest and audiences will likely be negatively impacted.

2. Political context and corpus

To begin with, it is important to point out that, when we embarked upon the present research, in November 2024, and decided to look into the presidential elections in Romania, no one could have predicted the outcome of the first round and the significant political upheaval that ensued. Fourteen candidates entered the race; against all odds, the frontrunner, the Social Democratic Party representative, Marcel Ciolacu, did not qualify to the second round. The two contenders that did were Elena Lasconi, the representative of the Save Romania Union (USR) and, unexpectedly, a far-right, pro-Russian candidate, Călin Georgescu, whose campaign intensively used TikTok to win over voters disillusioned with traditional parties and widespread, systemic corruption. Subsequently, however, to the extent to which intelligence reports revealed substantial Russian interference in the Romanian electoral process, through social media manipulation and cyberattacks, all in an attempt to sway the elections in Georgescu's favour, in an unprecedented move, the Constitutional Court annulled the results of the first round while the second round had already commenced in the diaspora. The decision has remained controversial to this day, leading to protests and debates over how susceptible our country may be to foreign influence and interference.

Unaware of what was to follow, we selected three political interviews conducted by Romanian journalist Andreea Esca with three of the main presidential contenders (Marcel Ciolacu, Elena Lasconi and Mircea Geoană – politicians from different ideological backgrounds, none of them having ever been labelled isolationists, extremists, or particularly controversial, so as to allow for a balanced analysis) and broadcast during the sweeps period on the seven o'clock PRO TV news. We chose to focus on political news interviews, which should rightfully be considered as "a sub-genre of the institution "political discourse" (Chilton, 2008: 72), because of their considerable impact on public opinion. On the one hand, they are submitted to the public in prime time, thus reaching a large audience despite the declining overall interest in television and, on the other hand, as they are short (none of these

interviews exceeds 18 minutes), they tend to stick in our memory by not overloading our ever shorter attention spans.

It goes without saying that political interviewers have to “exercise impartiality and balance and to refrain from the kind of editorial comment on public policy that would be found in politically aligned newspapers”, which means that they will “refrain from explicit approval or disapproval of interviewee’s statements, and from expression of personal opinion” (Chilton, 2008: 77). They must be “seen and heard to be scrupulously fair, balanced and neutral” (McNair, 2011: 76), a task that an experienced journalist like Andreea Esca has no difficulties meeting.

The interaction between a politician and a political journalist may be challenging, in that “politicians need media exposure (...) but with it come threats” (Brown, 2022: 7), such as the threat of hostile questions. It is important to note, however, that even when questions are not hostile, nor are they ever challenge-free. In that respect, each party involved in the dialogue has to pursue their own interest while keeping within the borders of balanced, deferential communication. Thus, the main purpose of the journalist stems from delivering newsworthy information and thus attaining higher ratings, while politicians, especially those on the campaign trail, aim to portray themselves as the best possible electoral choice.

While “most politicians are schooled in how to turn interviews into public relations exercises” (Brown, 2022: x), navigating questions is in no way easy. We will see, in the following sections of our research, how the three politicians we have selected embark upon strategies pertaining to positive campaigning, possibly weighing the costs and benefits of each word uttered, attempting to strike the balance between “getting political messages across in ways that stick in the minds of the audience and avoid irritating or boring the audience in the process” (Brown, 2022: 9) and, most importantly for our perspective, making use of the self-effacing strategies of *authenticity*, *humility* and *fair play* in order to build an emotional connection with the audience and to project themselves as truthful, relatable people.

3. Authenticity

Authenticity has been defined as “the perception of political actors as being “real people”, intrinsically a part of the community they represent, rather than being detached and part of an elite” (Lilleker, 2006: 39). The pursuit of authenticity in building one’s public persona responds to the growing demand of the electorate to see their representatives as people like them, rather than wealthier, better educated and members of a “superior” social class. In other words, “if the various combinations of verbal and visual cues [that a politician conveys] are seen as authentic, then a connection may be made between the voter and the politician” (Lilleker, 2014: 9), a connection that is, primarily, an emotional one. In this respect,

authenticity goes hand in hand with the concept of “Monsieur Tout-le-Monde”, a syntagm meant to describe a person just like everybody else. There are voices claiming that the concept in fact portrays a mediocre person lacking basic knowledge and culture (Siclier, 1962), that it describes a political construct responding to the *dumbing down* of political communication (Lilleker, 2006: 69) – defined as the way in which political communication is designed for media consumption, thus “promoting presentation, style and personalisation over policy and serious debate”. The phenomenon appears to go hand in hand with the increasing pressure of *infotainment* – combining information and entertainment (Lilleker, 2006: 99) and with the demands of *popular culture*, described as “what is in vogue” at a certain point in time (Lilleker, 2006: 157) and also known as *low culture* – a culture “aligned with the questionable tastes of the masses, who enjoy the commercial “junk” circulated by the mass media” (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2016: 17). However, the fact that audiences worldwide respond positively to this kind of political figure remains undeniable.

In political communication, authenticity refers to the perceived sincerity, transparency and honesty of political figures, to consistency between words and actions, to staying true to promises and past positions, without going back on their words, without gaslighting, without changing their opinion for no good reason, and to a lack of hypocrisy. A famous illustration in recent years involves the 2016 USA elections, where it was said that the reasons Trump won included, among other things, the fact that he (possibly misleadingly) came across as a more honest, more authentic person than Hillary Clinton, since he owned up to being a womanizer while she was perceived as an enabler in her husband’s infidelities (Wead, 2017: 308-324). Thus, by building up the image of a person honest about who they were and by not attempting to put up a holier-than-thou attitude, which is what his then opponent was perceived to be doing (Vohra, 2016: 121), Trump, some say, won in 2016 not because he pretended to be a saint, but because he openly admitted to the fact that he wasn’t one.

Out of the three features we have selected as indicators of positive campaigning, authenticity appears to be the most difficult to convey at the level of discourse, possibly because it has more to do with the overall presence, attitude and image of a politician, than with actual words uttered. The way politicians communicate cannot be analysed irrespective of everything else, but it needs to be genuine, relatable, and most importantly, consistent with their perceived values, with their actions and private lives. Thus, when candidates seem authentic, they tend to resonate more strongly with voters, they gain legitimacy and their messages emerge as more credible, since voters have become increasingly sceptical about rehearsed speeches and excessively populist messages.

Authenticity is undeniably most powerful in the context of *positive campaigning*. Since, as we have pointed out at the beginning of our research, positive campaigning

focuses on promoting a candidate's ideas, strengths, accomplishments and vision rather than on attacking the opponents, authenticity viewed against this background allows candidates to put forward an inspiring, positive, constructive message, conveying a genuine commitment to important issues rather than a taste for gossip and scandal. It is paradoxical, perhaps, that positive campaigning is rarer than the negative one, since the former fosters the loyalty and trust of voters in the "real" person they see, and the only possible explanation of this phenomenon appears to be that, for positive campaigning to be credible, it needs to rely on undisputed accomplishments, which are rare in today's political arena.

Candidates who come off as authentic appear to be more credible, more trustworthy, while their messages acquire increased legitimacy. As we emphasised earlier in this section, concrete indicators of authenticity at the level of discourse are not easy to identify, as authenticity pertains to the overall presence of a candidate. However, we can safely state that, out of the possible discursive strategies employed, the use of informal language, of a casual speaking style, public displays of emotion, personal storytelling, the use of humour and even uncertainty and hesitation (which show that the speaker does not see themselves as the holder of absolute truths) may act as indicators of authenticity, defining a candidate within the boundaries of a Monsieur Tout-le Monde identity, making them appear relatable and trustworthy.

Out of the three constructs we have opted to shed light upon (authenticity, humility and fair play), the first one also appears to be the most volatile. Unlike humility and fair play, whose scope is narrower and more targeted and whose boundaries are easier to delimit, authenticity is vaguer, more elusive, incorporating a wider range of factors ranging from discursive strategies to nonverbal communication and even elements pertaining to the societal perception of the political persona. While the list of features qualifying as facets of authenticity we have selected is by no means exhaustive and is rather suggested by the very corpus analysed, we strongly believe that these discursive strategies rank amongst the most commonly used by politicians to convey an overall impression of truthfulness. Therefore, in the following subsections of our research, we will look into *public displays of emotion*, *the use of humour*, *the use of a casual speaking style* and *invoking snippets of someone's private life*, aiming to show how political actors employ these strategies to bond with the audience and portray themselves as authentic, genuine people, deprived of any shrewdness or attempts to manipulate.

3.1 Public displays of emotion

Ex. 1. Elena Lasconi⁴: (...) it is the place where I feel the most emotional, I don't know if the mic picks up my heartbeat, but I really feel very emotional (...).

The example above is a classic case of communication whereby a political actor attempts to convey authenticity. Elena Lasconi started her professional life as a journalist; after working for several years for some little known, local radio stations, her career took a sudden upward turn when she joined the iconic TV station ProTV in 1995, the same year when the channel was launched and surged rapidly to national recognition and important ratings. She worked for ProTV for 25 years, becoming well-known due to her journalistic activity as a news presenter, reporter and correspondent, with her portfolio covering important broadcasting activities such as the 1999 earthquake in Turkey and the conflict in Afghanistan. It was only in 2018 that she became involved in politics by joining USR (Save Romania Union Party), a newly formed political faction that rose to fame by promoting itself as an anti-system, corruption-free party. In 2020, Lasconi became mayor of Câmpulung, a small Romanian town, and in 2024 she became President of the Party, thus reaching the climax of her political ascent.

During the 2024 elections campaign, Lasconi proudly referred to herself as a “new” politician, thus turning a potential weakness into a strength, as she highlighted the fact that what she may lack in experience she compensates for by being untouched by the usual flaws of older politicians: corruption and incompetence. Her successful management of Câmpulung and the fact that she won the mayorship for a second time in a row also vouched for her powerful leadership abilities.

The example above stands the candidate in good stead, as she projects the image of a modest person, a person who is genuinely touched by coming back to a place where she used to work for so many years and where she rose to fame. It helps convey the impression that she is neither cold nor conceited, that she has not forgotten where she started from, that she, like any human being, is vulnerable and subject to strong emotions. Public displays of emotion help make a politician appear authentic, true to themselves, revealing genuine reactions and eliminating any suspicions of a rehearsed discourse. The political actor thus shows they share normal human feelings with their audience, this generating trust and making the candidate appear truthful and likeable.

3.2 The use of humour

⁴ (...) e locul unde mă simt cea mai emoționată, nu știu dacă se simte și cum îmi bate inima, la lavalieră, dar chiar mă simt foarte emoționată (...) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPSMRZ9bOv8>, accessed on January 18, 2025, min. 1.02-1.06.

Ex. 2⁵. Andreea Esca: [In what respect are you better than] George Simion?
 Marcel Ciolacu: He's a retail agent at the moment, I don't want to disturb him too much. (...) He is boorish. I think we want something else for Romania.

Humour is a powerful force in communication across the board, albeit a force that needs to be used wisely and in moderation. It should not be used in very formal contexts, or when the audiences are not well-known to the speaker. However, Romanians are well-known for their love of humour and appreciation for jokes, therefore, attempting to be perceived as a political candidate with a healthy sense of humour is not a strategy likely to backfire. It builds relatability, projects authenticity and helps a candidate bond with their audiences in a way that feels approachable and human, contributing to their *Monsieur Tout-Le-Monde* stance. Jokes help defuse tense situations, build up optimism and put a positive spin on situations that may appear strained, even overwhelming.

In the example above, the candidate, who is the incumbent Prime Minister and therefore viewed as the candidate of the party in power, resorts to humour to respond to a question that aims to be serious, since a lot is at stake on a campaign trail flooded with isolationists like Simion, whom the interviewer mentions. However, instead of focusing on real qualities that would make him better than those of the opponent (a task that would not have been difficult, since Simion was generally perceived as the candidate of a far-right party, hence radical and unpopular), the speaker chooses to put a humorous spin on things by alluding to an unrealistic promise made by the opponent (that he would provide extremely inexpensive properties to potential buyers⁶). Thus, the speaker points out that his opponent appears to be a real estate agent at the moment and should not be bothered, a remark at which both he and his interviewer laugh. The candidate therefore comes off as a person endowed with candidness and personal warmth, a person not rehearsed and sincere. At a deeper level, the message is also likely to catch on, since the Romanian electorate at this point is mature enough to distrust deeply unrealistic promises. Consequently, the laughter also serves to highlight the speaker's disapproval of messages that force the limits of credibility.

When used adeptly and effectively, humour acts as a bridge, breaking down barriers between politicians and their audiences, adding a personal dimension to campaigns, making complex issues seem accessible and reinforcing a candidate's authenticity, positivity and trustworthiness. Humour, however, should not be shallow. There should be a cogent political persona behind, and audiences should always get the impression that the politician is not just trivially joking (which would be perceived

⁵ El e agent imobiliar în acest moment, nu vreau să-l deranjez prea mult (...) e grobian. Cred că ne dorim altceva pentru România. - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7tO-nqM894>, accessed on January 20, 2025, min. 10.50 -11.04.

⁶ <https://planulsimion.ro/casa-pentru-fiecare.html>, accessed on January 28, 2025.

as minimizing the electorate's very real problems). In a nutshell, joking should make it clear that a political speaker understands all the serious problems tackled and the audience's challenges, but that they choose to bond and foster the connection rather than adopting an overly dramatic tone that would burden everyone without helping in any way.

To back our perspective, we will point to the fact that that, after cracking the effective joke, the candidate returns to the serious tone, which goes to show that he is in no way minimizing the seriousness either of the political situation or of the question. This makes perfect sense, since appearing to take things lightly and joking about serious issues (and the threat of isolationism – which Simion stands for – is very serious in the current international context)– runs the risk of deeply antagonizing potential supporters.

3.3 The use of a casual speaking style and the informal register

Ex. 3. Mircea Geoană: If you don't have a juiced-up economy, if you don't bring in money... (...) this is what a president should do.⁷

Resorting to a casual speaking style is a strategy politicians sometimes use to bond with their audiences, and this can also include the use of slang and colloquial expressions. By making this conscious language choice, political actors aim to show that they are breaking away from the stiff, highly polished language that is often associated with traditional political discourse. By breaking away with a register that defines formal, academic communication and engaging with audiences like an everyday person, by incorporating slang or colloquial expressions that appeal to specific communities or generations (specifically, younger generations like millennials and gen-Z), politicians, even those traditionally perceived as members of the social and intellectual elites, signal that they understand the culture, values and concerns of their target audiences. Very much like advertising on social media (which is something you cannot live without nowadays), taking their language several steps down the formality scale will make a political actor appear relatable, approachable, and in touch with the realities of everyday life, rather than out of touch, living in a bubble of their own, protected from the worries of "normal" people (primarily from financial worries) and thus, unable to understand what motivates them.

In the following section of our study, we will provide a more in-depth analysis of Mircea Geoană's professional background. For now, we will simply say that he is naturally perceived as an elitist politician rather than a Monsieur Tout-le-Monde,

⁷ Dacă nu ai economie țapănă, dacă nu aduci bani... (...) asta trebuie să facă un președinte. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZL5QoJYYUyU>, accessed on February 2, 2024, min. 11.21-11.34.

which is why his choosing informal expressions may sound unnatural (especially since they do not fit with the rest of his discourse). However, he is careful not to overdo it, keeping the right balance between what people expect of him (to listen to an accomplished intellectual talking) and the image he likely attempts to put across (that of a political actor who has adapted to the way times have changed, fully grasping the needs and priorities of his voters). This is particularly true since Geoană has shifted from being a Social Democratic Party (PSD) representative, where PSD voters were mainly elderly people from rural areas, to being an independent candidate, targeting all possible voters and especially younger ones. Concretely speaking, in this situation he uses the syntagm “a juiced-up economy” which is ultra casual, but integrated within a stretch of discourse that is standard, yet the incompatibility does not strike us in an unpleasant way, possibly because modern consumers of political discourse have got used to the mix. It does not even conflict with the overall persona of the politician since, in recent years, communication in all professional fields, including political communication, has shifted towards a less formal style.

Resorting to slang and to a casual style also conveys the impression that a politician speaks freely, without pretence, without having rehearsed their speech and delivering their honest thoughts, without manipulating or spinning their message. Nowadays, as we have pointed out, having been disappointed one too many times, voters feel increasingly frustrated with “traditional” political rhetoric and overly scripted speeches. By contrast, they tend to respond positively to informal language, which signals a break from the formulaic approach to communication. Ultimately, casual language helps humanise politicians, bringing them down from their former pedestal amongst their voters, making them seem more accessible, more relatable, grounded in the realities faced by their audience and, ultimately, one of our own.

3.4 Invoking snippets of someone's private life

Ex. 4⁸. Marcel Ciolacu: I gave my shares to my wife (...) we didn't do business worth hundreds of millions of euros (...) we really are a normal, modest family.

Candidates may attempt to convey authenticity by putting forward the image of a “normal” person like everybody else. Thus, they may resort to personal storytelling, to hesitation/ uncertainty (showing that they do not hold absolute truths), to snippets of family life and to other such strategies. In the extract above, the political speaker emphasizes his personal modesty and financial transparency, which is something he likely feels electors need to hear, since the Social Democratic Party that backs him has a long-standing reputation for being corrupt and lacking financial accountability.

⁸ Am cedat soției acțiunile... nu făceam afaceri de sute de milioane de euro... chiar suntem o familie normală, și modestă. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7tO-nqM894>, accessed on February 2, 2025, min. 17.18-17.21.

In this case, not only does the speaker openly declare that he has transferred shares to his wife (thus reinforcing an image of marital stability, also needed in the context of malicious rumours surrounding his private life), but he also distances himself from the large-scale, possibly dishonest business dealings of which the party behind him has been constantly accused. Thus, he attempts to come across as a political figure endowed with integrity, transparency and accountability, while the following statement, that they are a normal, modest family, reinforces the image of a relatable persona, appealing to voters who value sincerity and honesty (and who doesn't?). Moreover, the informal tone, the direct language and the casual speaking style further convey the message that he is speaking candidly and spontaneously rather than delivering a rehearsed message, a strategy widely used on the political arena to bond with electors and appear relatable and truthful.

4. Humility

Humility and authenticity go hand in hand, although they are not the same. In political communication, humility refers to a speaker showing a realistic understanding of their own limitations, of the areas where they may be unable to perform, or where they can improve or learn, alongside respect for the opponent's positive qualities. "The notion of humility has been neglected in the field of political communication in favour of the persuasive strength of a dominant leader" (D'Errico, 2020), since "admitting possible shortcomings in one's knowledge or competence, as inherent in human nature" (D'Errico, 2020) may cast a shadow over a candidate's suitability to run for office.

Humility is a **risky** strategy, primarily because it takes maturity, depth, and powerful insight on the part of a voter to understand that a candidate openly acknowledging their weaknesses is not a flaw, that it does not mean they are incompetent but, on the contrary, it shows that they do not solely boast about their positive qualities, they also own up to their imperfections. Precisely because it is risky and it could backfire when used unwisely, and even when used wisely, displaying humility is a strategy that many candidates are reluctant to use, or even avoid using altogether.

In many ways, **elections are like interviews**, with the electorate being the employer. We are not referring to the fact that politicians are paid by voting taxpayers, but to the fact that the electorate must be lured, seduced and won over just like a job applicant would need to win over a potential manager. In interviews, "What are your weaknesses?" is a standard question to which "I don't have any" would be the ultimate faux pas. In politics, while the same general rules apply, discourses need to be more nuanced and drafted more tactfully because, as we have said before, not all the electors have the wisdom and maturity to differentiate between incompetence and normal human imperfection.

When used and understood correctly, *humility* contrasts with *overconfidence* and *arrogance*, putting forth the image of a political actor who is approachable, open to criticism and willing to admit they are not perfect. The ultimate (and riskiest) proof of humility is, in our view, acknowledging that an opponent has qualities you lack, which is also the point where humility and fair play tend to overlap. It is also the tack that would win a candidate the most points with insightful, politically mature, realistic voters.

When linked to positive campaigning, when used wisely and in moderation, humility can turn out to be a compelling asset, embellishing a candidate committed to the public agenda more than to their own benefits and interests. Humility stands a candidate in good stead from a humanlike perspective – it shows a lack of arrogance, the avoidance of a patronizing stance towards the audience, qualities that help convey the image of a person just like everybody else, with pluses and minuses, imperfect but perfectible.

“*Minuses and pluses*”, however, is the key characteristic that should back humility. Since, as we have said before, this strategy is extremely risky, in order to minimize the potential blow to one’s image and to do one’s best for it not to backfire, displays of humility need to go hand in hand with compensatory strategies, such as the prompt and undisputed emphasis of one’s strengths, of one’s merits, of one’s accomplishments. Being open about one’s minuses will turn out to be helpful only as long as it is made clear right away that one also has important strengths, strengths so crucial and so obvious that, by comparison, minuses seem forgivable. Only the strong can afford the luxury of admitting to also being weak. Paradoxically, in fact, humility is also a universally accepted feature of great leaders, since no leader is infallible; thus, it goes hand in hand with other positive traits like inclusivity, selflessness and respect for others. “Several studies in the field of organisational psychology (...) have identified an association between humble leadership and leaders who acknowledge personal faults, mistakes and limits; are open to new and even contradictory ideas, and have the tendency to give a voice to and acknowledge the credits of employees” (Liu, 2016, quoted in D’Errico, Bull, Lamponi and Leone, 2022).

Ex. 5⁹. Andreea Esca: Is the hat too big for you?

Elena Lasconi: Yes! Definitely! It is for anyone, if you think about what it means to be president.

Ex. 6¹⁰. Elena Lasconi: (a) If I were to speak about my weaknesses, and I am my best critic, I know my limitations, I could say about myself that I am not a traditional

⁹ E pălăria oare prea mare pentru tine? / Da! Categorie, e pentru oricine, dacă te gândești la ceea ce înseamnă un președinte. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPSMRZ9bOv8> , accessed on February 5, 2025, min. 3.26-3.32.

¹⁰ Dar, dacă e să mă refer la punctele mele slabe, și eu sunt cel mai bun critic al meu, și îmi știu limitele, aș putea să spun despre mine că nu sunt un politician din ăsta cu tradiție, așa

politician, as many politicians are, (b) that I may not be an expert on foreign policy. (c) But on the other hand I know I want what's best for this country, just like I wanted what is best for the community, (d) and I proved extraordinary things in Câmpulung, since I drew European funds as high as the town's budget for 40 years, (e) no other mayor in Romania has managed this in such a short time and, (f) when I set my mind to something, I go all the way.

Examples 5 and 6 above are somewhat similar as far as the strategies used are concerned. In example 5, the interviewer asks the candidate whether she feels the hat is too big for her, in other words, if she feels that the task of being the president could be overwhelming, extremely difficult to manage, and possibly exceeding the politician's capabilities.

To begin with, while it may appear that the question allows for several possible answers, this is not really the case. Lasconi could not have possibly replied "no", thus stating that the presidency is a "hat" she could handle easily, for several reasons. Firstly, as we have said before and as almost everyone in Romania knows, she is a relatively new politician, she only recently joined the political field and her experience is not vast; out of the candidates on the campaign trail in November 2024, she was one of the least experienced. Secondly, replying with a "no" would have made her seem overconfident, even arrogant, and would have likely eroded the confidence many voters had in her (since she made it to the second round of the elections, subsequently cancelled, it is safe to assume that a great many voters placed their confidence in her). Therefore, despite all appearances, claiming that the "hat" is not too big for her simply is not an option.

Judging by the swift response, we can assume that the candidate went over the mental trajectory above quickly and efficiently, and she responded in the only way she could have: with a "yes", thus confirming that presidency is, indeed, an overwhelming task for her. However, since, as we pointed out above, humility is a risky strategy and the only way one can make sure it will not backfire is by accompanying the minuses by pluses right away, Lasconi proceeds in the best possible way, by highlighting the fact that such a "hat" is too big for anyone, if you think about what it means to be the president. For anyone, including her more experienced opponents, without exception. Thus, the politician skilfully turns a potential minus into a plus, also giving the impression that she is a thorough person, that she has carefully considered what presidency entails. She, in other words, implies that, if anyone would claim

cum sunt foarte mulți politicieni, că poate nu sunt o expertă în politică externă, dar, pe de altă parte știu că vreau binele acestei țări, așa cum am vrut binele comunității și am demonstrat lucruri extraordinare la Câmpulung, pentru că am atras fonduri europene cât e bugetul orașului pe 40 de ani, nu a mai făcut niciun primar în România asta într-un timp atât de scurt, și atunci când îmi propun ceva, merg până la capăt. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPSMRZ9bOv8>, accessed on February 5, 2025, min. 3.32- 4.12.

they are prepared to be president, they have not considered the task in-depth, analysing not just the benefits, but also the difficulties, responsibilities and challenges involved. By putting this spin on the question and on her initial “yes”, the candidate scores all the right points: she comes across as thorough, well-prepared, realistic, responsible and humble in the good way – not that she is unable to do the job, but that she fully understands what the job entails and that understanding lies at the basis of her modesty.

Example 6 functions within the same parameters. As we have pointed out before, very much like an applicant in a job interview, a political candidate should at no time claim that they have no weaknesses or that they are unable to fail in any way. Lasconi, again, stresses the fact that she is not a traditional, experienced politician, a statement aiming to reach potential voters in two ways. At the surface level, also combined with what she has just said, that she is aware of her own weaknesses and limitations, the statement appears to be an open, courageous expression of humility, whereby the candidate admits to the fact that her experience is not that vast. At a deeper level, however, we must not forget who the target audience is, both of the party she represents, and of the candidate herself. The standard USR (Save Romania Union) electorate includes younger people from urban areas, people fed up with “traditional”, older parties like the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and even the National Liberal Party (PNL), factions whose reputation has suffered a lot over the years – PSD was involved in numerous corruption scandals and has become symptomatic of everything that, to this day, is wrong with our country (old-fashioned, corrupt politicians unable to implement reforms, inefficient employees etc), while the reputation of PNL has also suffered greatly over the years, primarily due to their association with PSD to form governments. Therefore, by dissociating herself from “traditional” parties, Lasconi does more than just own up to the fact that her experience is not that vast. Implicitly, she points out that she has nothing to do with the scandals in which other parties have been involved and reinforces her clean, corruption-free image, something that many Romanian electors yearn for.

While extract 6 (a) appears to be ambiguous, the speaker combining a genuine expression of modesty with a possible implicit attack against many of her opponents (but primarily Ciolacu and Ciucă, her then opponents), extract 6 (b) appears as a clean expression of modesty with no ulterior motive, the candidate emphasizing that her foreign policy experience is not comprehensive. Hence, since we are looking at a truthful expression of humility, a genuine acknowledgement of one of the politician’s minuses, this, as we have pointed out, needs to be counterbalanced right away, to not make the candidate seem weak and unprepared for the role they are striving to undertake. Hence, Lasconi immediately puts forward the message aiming to turn the weakness into a strength – she states that she knows what is best for this country - extract 6 (c). In other words, what she wishes to convey is the fact that, while she may be lacking in knowledge and experience, things that can be acquired anyway in some sort of on-the-job training, she compensates by her good intentions

and genuine embracing of the country's best interest – qualities that cannot be acquired, and that few of her opponents, if any, have proved to have up until that moment. Moreover, she does not limit self-advertising at mentioning her good intentions, she immediately comes up with a concrete example of a remarkable past achievement – her having obtained significant European funds as mayor of Câmpulung - extract 6 (d), a claim that this achievement is unrivalled extract 6 (e) - and, towards the end of this cluster of ideas, she shifts from the particular to the general – extract 6 (f), also returning towards the abstract realm of moral qualities – she states she is a decisive, unrelenting person. Thus, as we have repeatedly stated, to not backfire, displays of humility and the acknowledgement of one's minuses must be immediately compensated for by a firm assertion of one's pluses. Moreover, if we look at extract 6 overall, the very achievements the speaker invokes to counterbalance the acknowledgement of a minus in fact contradict it – had she been unskilled at foreign policy, she wouldn't have been able to draw such impressive European funds. This, we think, could make us wonder about how truthful displays of humility really are in political discourse, but attempting to answer that question goes beyond the scope of the present research.

We can see, therefore, in examples 5 and 6, the skilful way in which Elena Lasconi exhibits humility, does not attempt to come across as more knowledgeable than her opponents and owns up to her minuses, while at the same time using all the right words and putting forward all the right ideas that will make her appear sincere, honest, realistic and trustworthy.

Ex. 7. Andreea Esca: What do you think you lack?

Marcel Ciolacu¹¹: (a) I've had misgivings, for instance, about foreign relations. I didn't feel comfortable, it was not my thing. (...) Even now I have an English teacher, it is normal. (b) It's everyone's fight with themselves, to be better every day, but there is nothing to be ashamed of, (a) I am not ashamed to say, I have an economics teacher. (c) But I can tell you things I accomplished in a year, that I didn't think I would be able to accomplish: to convince Chancellor Olaf Scholz to have a strategic partnership. (...) (d) So, where I thought I had a problem, not only was I able to solve it, but I also found the best solutions.

The question that the interviewer asks Marcel Ciolacu is tricky. "Knowing how to respond to hard questions is another difficult balancing act for politicians, [as they]

¹¹ Am avut rețineri, de exemplu, în relațiile externe. (...) Nu mă simțeam confortabil, nu era zona mea... (...) Și acum am profesor de engleză, normal. E lupta fiecăruia cu el, ca să fie mai bun în fiecare zi, dar nu e o rușine. Mie nu mi-e rușine să spun: am profesor de economie. Dar vă pot spune lucruri făcute într-un an de zile, pe care eu nu credeam că le voi reuși. Să îl lămuresc pe cancelarul Olaf Scholz să avem un parteneriat strategic. (...) Deci, unde credeam că eu am o problemă, de fapt am putut să o rezolv și, dimpotrivă, am putut găsi și soluțiile cele mai bune. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7tO-nqM894>, accessed on February 5, 2025, min. 5.20-6.42.

know that any given answer can be picked up and highlighted by political commentators and amplified on social media; so the stakes are high” (Brown, 2022: 10). In example 7, again, there is no way the candidate could claim he lacks nothing and sound credible in so doing, especially since he has been extensively accused, in the public space, of not having a baccalaureate diploma and of not being intellectually brilliant. While some rumours of corruption also revolved around the name of the Social Democratic Prime Minister, they seemed to pale when compared to the fact that he did not shine intellectually, hence, pretending to do so would have backfired. Therefore, the candidate seizes the opportunity to capitalize on his most obvious weakness, and does so in a skilful way.

For a candidate like Ciolacu, joining the campaign trail with a *Monsieur Tout-le-Monde* approach was the safest way. While analysts claim that his failure to qualify for the second round of the presidential elections was a resounding fiasco for the Social Democratic Party, a fiasco never encountered before in the 35 years since the 1989 Revolution, given the context, and the allegations against the front-runner, Călin Georgescu (that his campaign was illegal and supported by obscure statal actors), put a completely new spin on the situation. Without foreign interference, it is very likely that the candidates qualifying for the second round would have been Elena Lasconi and Marcel Ciolacu, hence, the alleged defeat of the latter should be considered taken into account all the nuances of this atypical electoral situation.

Therefore, when confronted with a question about his shortcomings, the candidate plays the safest card. He owns up to the fact that he still has to study some subjects in order to get to a better level of knowledge – extract 7 (a). Admitting to the fact that he has an English teacher may or may not be wrong – on the one hand, it may be the wrong tack to take, since knowledge of English is a must in diplomacy. On the other hand, the President is not a diplomat, high quality translation services are available and even encouraged, and it may be a proof of honesty and transparency to use the services of a professional interpreter rather than to embarrass yourself by speaking English at an unacceptably low level in a high calibre international context. Similarly, wishing to improve his knowledge of economics will likely stand the candidate in good stead, showing him to be a thorough person, a person aiming to grow professionally and to gain an in-depth understanding of subjects that are not his immediate responsibility. The speaker skilfully puts a positive spin on all his perceived weaknesses – in an inspirational, motivation-driven approach, he turns his weaknesses into strengths by emphasizing the fact that he is willing to learn, to grow and to improve at every step of the way – extract 7 (b). Moreover, the end of the extract yet again shows what we were aiming to highlight, that humility needs to be immediately counterbalanced: right after having allegedly owned up to the fact that he has misgivings about foreign policy, the candidate comes forward with a concrete example that proves the opposite – that he has had a significant accomplishment, having convinced Chancellor Scholz to enter into a strategic partnership – extract 7 (c). Moreover, from this one singular achievement, Ciolacu generalizes, claiming

that he has had success at the very points where he thought he had a disadvantage – extract 7 (d). By shifting from the particular to the general, just like Lasconi in example 6, he seems to contradict the previous statement and its implications, that foreign policy may be one of his minuses, since everything that follows points to the fact that, in his view, in fact, he has been doing a very good job in that respect – which, again, makes it safe to wonder to what extent the candidate is genuine in his claims. But, as we have said, it goes beyond the scope of the current paper to raise or attempt to answer that question.

Ex. 8. Mircea Geoană: Only he who does not work, does not err. I've made mistakes, too. (...) I've made many mistakes. Some of them, I could have avoided, others I made because I was maybe too inexperienced, too romantic. What is important is that you learn from those mistakes and that you don't repeat them next time¹².

Example 8 stands, we believe, at the border between authenticity and humility, because it blends together elements pertaining to the former (such as the politician aiming to come across as genuine, a person just like everybody else) and to the latter (the politician acknowledging the fact that is not infallible and that he can make mistakes). In fact, the line between authenticity and humility can, in some situations, be rather thin, and this appears to be one of those situations. We have, however, decided to label example 8 as an illustration of humility rather than authenticity, because of its introspective, self-critical nature.

To begin with, the fact that a politician like Mircea Geoană would resort (albeit accidentally) to a self-effacing strategy is in itself remarkable. Unlike Ciolacu, Geoană is not a politician whose intellectual merit could ever be disputed. A seasoned diplomat with an outstanding academic background, he first studied at the Polytechnic Institute of Bucharest, a university commonly known as one of the most difficult in Romania, a university for the truly skilled professionals rather than a diploma factory (as some other universities are commonly perceived in Romania), then he went on to study at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Law (which gives him in-depth knowledge of legal and economic issues, further legitimizing his professional accomplishments), and then at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration in Paris, one of France's most prestigious and elite institutions. Thus, from an academic standpoint, the candidate's background is ironclad, and not even the most demanding opponents could ever say that Geoană is not qualified for presidency or, as Esca put it in her discussion with Lasconi, that the presidential "hat" is too big for him. Not only were his academic studies most accomplished, but he also had an outstanding career in diplomacy, having served as Romania's ambassador to the USA, as Minister of Foreign Affairs and President of the Senate. The climax of his professional ascent, however, stems from his being appointed Deputy Secretary

¹² Numai cine nu muncește nu greșește. Am făcut și greșeli, (...)am făcut multe greșeli. Unele puteam să le evit, altele le-am făcut pentru că eram, poate, un pic prea crud, poate prea romantic. Dar important e să înveți din acele greșeli și să nu le mai faci data viitoare. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZL5QoJYYUyU>, accessed on February 2, 2025, min. 15.06-15.21.

general of NATO in 2019, thus becoming the first person from a country that joined the Alliance after the Cold War to hold this position. It is therefore clear to anyone that, both in terms of academic education and in terms of professional evolution, Geoană's trajectory is impeccable.

Therefore, he could have easily opted for discursive strategies based on self-assertion, he would have had the legitimacy to do so, and no one would have been surprised, no one would have perceived him as an impostor (since his professional credentials vouch for his merit), and he would have been right to advertise himself as a member of the society's elite. Moreover, such a strategy would have been in line with the public's perception of his overall political persona. However, in this case, Geoană deliberately opts for a self-effacing strategy like humility, for the Monsieur Tout-le-Monde approach, since he is a skilled enough politician to understand that times are changing and that, in the current social and electoral context, this is the type of approach that best resonates with the audiences, that they tend to place more trust in people they perceive as similar to them, rather than as wealthy, possibly haughty members of the upper social strata.

Based on all the above-mentioned facts, as we have said, to see such an accomplished politician resort to a self-effacing strategy is remarkable, if not downright shocking. In example 8, Mircea Geoană admits to having made mistakes, to the fact that he should have known better, that he should have acted better; he only partially attempts to make excuses for his past shortcomings and courageously owns up to his past wrong steps. Then, just like his two opponents we discussed earlier in this section, he turns the minus into a plus, pointing out that what is important is to learn from these mistakes and to not repeat them in the future.

We believe it is also remarkable that candidates of very different political profiles, like Ciolacu, Lasconi, and Geoană, all resort to similar strategies when it comes to winning the presidential race. While their backgrounds, claims and ideologies could not be more different, we see all of them recognizing the importance of connecting with voters at a personal level, resorting to the audience's emotional capital and using humility and self-effacement as an element of their communication strategies. It is precisely for this reason that we have chosen to look into the electoral potential of a strategy like the display of humility, because in the current social context, when voters are increasingly sceptical of political elites, have been disappointed time and time again and it has become almost impossible to lure them and sound convincing, this approach allows candidates to come across as human, relatable, reliable and trustworthy. We may not vote for a member of the elites anymore, since we no longer believe in the superiority of the elites; we, however, may still vote for someone just like us because, at the end of the day, we still like ourselves and everyone like us.

5. Fair play

If humility is focused on the self, in that a politician admits to their own imperfections and shortcomings, fair play is focused on the other, in that it involves speaking about the opponents in an objective, even laudatory manner. Again, with an educated and insightful audience, fair play conveys an impression of integrity, respect and adherence to ethical standards, which is particularly difficult to achieve in a fiercely competitive environment like the political arena, and especially in the electoral context.

Fair play in political communication covers, but is not confined to, treating opponents fairly, speaking nicely about them, avoiding personal attacks, and campaigning within the bounds of honesty and respect, referring to facts in an unbiased way. It rejects mudslinging, disinformation and personal attacks, focusing on constructive debates about policies to implement and ideas to discuss. When behaving in this way, a political contender shows that their approach pursues true facts and does not undermine the democratic process, nor do they let negative emotions or personal interests and rivalries cloud their judgement. Fair play stands out as a positive campaigning strategy because it is constructive, deferential and fosters civilized polemics where contenders rely on objectively promoting their values and achievements, rather than on smear tactics aiming to discredit opponents without building anything back.

From the potential voters' perspective, it is reassuring to listen to a political candidate using a fair play approach towards their opponents. They have all the reasons in the world to feel confident that this candidate truly values the democratic process and is committed to elevating the quality of political debates. Infotainment may well be a thing these days, and, while it may be true that consumers of political communication may be enticed by scandal and gossip, this penchant does not necessarily translate into a vote. Large segments of the electorate still prize democratic values like honesty and respect. Perhaps even more importantly, engaging in a fair play approach has the potential to attract undecided or moderate voters who may be turned off by aggressive or divisive tactics.

Out of the three strategies we have chosen to look into, fair play appears to be the most difficult to implement. It appears to be incredibly challenging for a candidate to show fair play in their discourse, even more difficult than exhibiting humility, since it is easier to accept your own shortcomings than to acknowledge the opponent's merits. Especially if the opponent has attacked you, or if you have been the target of negative campaigning yourself, taking the high road and showing fair play appears to be more than most political candidates can handle. It is precisely for this reason that examples have been difficult to find and, even when we believe we have found them, the appearance of fair play surfaces intertwined with possible indirect attacks. Moreover, in this day and age, when we witness increased polarisation and media sensationalism, the strategic incentives to engage in negative campaigning often outweigh the benefits of maintaining fair competition. Even more

so than humility, fair play can backfire and turn inexperienced audiences against the speaker, making them question the former's capabilities and merit. Perhaps most importantly, while authenticity and humility, in that order, have a higher chance of being perceived as personal virtues, thus enhancing a candidate's appeal, fair play is an extremely challenging undertaking, running a higher risk of decreasing the speaker's perceived value before the audience, who may end up wondering why that speaker is running in the first place, if they are so willing to admit to the opponent's value. Thus, it is much harder to uphold, in the fiercely competitive political arena nowadays. When resorting to fair play, a political contender bets everything on the image of the "benevolent leader" characterized by "courage, honesty, strength of character, sense of fairness and justice, or compassion" (Trent, Friedenberg and Denton, 2011: 153), qualities they are willing to stand by at any personal cost to themselves. Only, the costs may be too high – which may explain why politicians often shy away from fair play discursive strategies.

Ex. 9¹³. Andreea Esca: In what respect do you believe that you are better than your opponents, for instance, Nicolae Ciucă?

Marcel Ciolacu: He is a kind man, Nicolae Ciucă, we got along well, we both brought stability to Romania in a very complicated moment. I am more dynamic than Nicolae Ciucă.

The interviewer's question is tricky, both to put the politician on the spot, and to provide infotaining content to the viewers. Sadly, no one will watch a political show where everything unfolds smoothly, where politicians get mild, challenge-free questions and where everyone agrees with everyone else. It stands to reason, in fact, since the political arena is primarily a competitive place where the points one scores with the audience are often snatched from someone else. Undecided voters frequently make up their mind as to whom to support in the aftermath of televised political discussions and debates. Therefore, the journalist asks this question of the political contender, a question that, wrongly answered, could cause irreparable damage to his image. Should he praise his opponent, he risks hurting his own image, the value that voters may see in him. Should he berate his opponent, he risks coming across as aggressive, incapable of constructive dialogue, of constructive criticism, and with a marked taste for mudslinging.

The candidate, however, answers impeccably, using a nuanced approach to fair play, while subtly incorporating what could be interpreted as an indirect attack. His tone is calm, deferential, with an appearance of objectivity, as he acknowledges that Nicolae Ciucă, the candidate of the National Liberal Party, is a "kind man". Here,

¹³ E un om cumsecade dl Nicolae Ciucă, ne-am înțeles bine, totuși amândoi am adus o stabilitate României într-un moment foarte complicat. Sunt mai dinamic decât domnul Nicolae Ciucă. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7tO-nqM894> accessed on February 5, 2025, min. 7.30-7.45.

we must point out that the speaker's task is made even more difficult by the fact that, against all political ideologies and doctrines, PSD (a centre-left party) and PNL (a centre-right party) were at that point governing together, so criticising Ciucă would have looked just as bad for him and for the Social Democratic party. Hence, the speaker uses what appears to be a compliment, by calling his presidential rival a "kind man". While no one could say that being kind is bad, in the political arena, where energy and stamina are of the essence, kindness may not be the first quality one is looking for in a president. A politician perceived as "kind" usually comes across as a soft, unenergetic person, unable to lead, to make decisions, to be firm when circumstances require it, in other words, in this context, a kind person could mean a pushover. Thus, while emphasizing their shared efforts and by keeping his answer in line with the principles of fair play, while avoiding direct personal attacks or any inflammatory rhetoric, Ciolacu still manages to cast a shadow of doubt over his opponent's suitability for the presidency.

Moreover, he reinforces this perspective by going on to explicitly say that he himself is "more dynamic" than Ciucă, thus introducing a comparative element that could easily be interpreted as an implicit critique. We are still not looking at an overtly negative statement, since it is, on the surface, a positive campaigning strategy, one whereby the candidate advertises himself rather than trashing the opponent; however, the comparative element itself turns it into a borderline statement, suggesting that Ciucă is less dynamic, less energetic, that he lacks stamina, none of which would recommend him for presidency. The speaker thus explicitly puts forward a contrast in leadership styles that benefits himself and that is likely to sway public perception, all the more so since no direct attack is involved. The indirect attack, in fact, is known to be less risky (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 62) and often more efficient than the direct attack. In conclusion, with this response, Ciolacu attempts to make himself stand out while putting forth an appearance of objectivity and fair play, strategically embedding an indirect attack into what appears to be a perfectly harmless, even self-effacing response.

Ex. 10¹⁴. Andreea Esca: Compared to Mircea Geoană? In what way do you feel [superior]?

Marcel Ciolacu: (a) I am more adapted Romania as it is today, to its environment. (b) He made too many concessions in the past, he pursued a type of politics that I

¹⁴ Andreea Esca: Mircea Geoană? Față de Mircea Geoană? Cu ce vă simțiți [superior]?

Marcel Ciolacu: Sunt mai adaptat zilei de astăzi din România și mediului din România. A făcut prea multe concesii în trecut, și a prins o politică pe care eu n-aș fi făcut-o. (...) Un om instruit, de altfel, adică nu vorbim de un om care nu a trecut prin diverse funcții, un om instruit, care a învățat. Are o ipocrizie pe care nu ar trebui să o aibă. Eu am ajuns în funcția de Prim Ministru datorită colegilor mei din PSD și datorită unui partid. Nu trebuie să ne fie rușine de acest lucru. Nu am făcut nimic să-mi fie rușine, din trecutul meu. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7tO-nqM894>, accessed on February 5, 2025, min. 8.22-9.18.

wouldn't have. (...) (c) An educated man, after all, that is, we're not talking about someone who hasn't held various positions—an educated man who has learned. (d) He has a hypocrisy that he shouldn't have. (e) I became Prime Minister thanks to my colleagues in the Social Democratic Party and thanks to a party. (f) We shouldn't be ashamed of that. (g) I have done nothing in my past to be ashamed of.

In example 10, the speaker, an experienced politician, puts forth an appearance of fair play that does not appear on its own, but skilfully embedded in an avalanche of snippets of negative campaigning, consisting of both direct and indirect attacks. When asked to state in what respect he considers himself superior to Mircea Geoană, Ciolacu begins in a seemingly harmless manner, by invoking an objective quality he believes he has over his opponent – adaptability to changing times – extract 10 (a). However, the comparison itself is enough to push the sentence close to the border of negative campaigning. On the one hand, the speaker could be alluding to the age difference which, although not overwhelming, is still significant, as Geoană is 9 years older than Ciolacu. However, on a deeper level, we may wonder whether this is not also an implication that, being older, Mircea Geoană may owe a debt of gratitude to the past communist regime. This possible tack is, in fact, reinforced by the assertion that his opponent has “made concessions” and “held various positions” (extracts 10 (b) and 10 (c))– statements that may be interpreted harmlessly, but could also come off as indirect attacks. The possible indirect attacks are immediately followed by a direct one in 10 (d) – Ciolacu accuses his rival of hypocrisy, and explains himself – while he, the speaker, admits to owing his political career to a party (10 (e)), his opponent, who was a PSD member for many years and even ran for president on behalf of PSD in 2009, now claims to be an independent candidate, to stand on his own and to rely solely on the meagre support that an independent candidate can harness. The extract ends on a positive note, with Ciolacu reiterating he is not ashamed of who supports him (10 (f)), nor is he ashamed of anything else (10 (g)), shifting from the particular to the general in a standard way, while the allegations against Geoană go on even after the quote we have selected; however, for the scope of our research, the citation does not cover the following sentences.

By explicitly stating he is not ashamed of being supported by a party he has been loyal to for many years, Ciolacu also aims to come across as an authentic person, a person who does not claim he has merits he doesn't have, a candidate who does not pretend he made it on his own, but who is indebted to others for having risen so high. He, thus, admits to not having outstanding qualities, admits to having played by the rules and having enjoyed transparent support from a possibly controversial political faction, in an attempt to be perceived as a genuine, authentic, transparent political figure, capable of honesty and gratitude. The one point, however, where he acknowledges his opponent's superiority – extract 10 (c) - has to do with the one aspect that is undeniable. He admits that Geoană has studied, that his academic accomplishments are undeniable. However, given the multifold meaning of the verb

a *învăța*¹⁵ and the context, we may legitimately wonder if the exhibited fair play is real, or just a front meant to sweeten the surrounding avalanche of direct and indirect attacks.

Taking into account what we have seen so far in our present research, fair play seems to stand out as the riskiest strategy, even more so than humility. While it seems more acceptable to own up to your own limits, thus showing humility, acknowledging the strengths of a rival may be an even more powerful two-edged sword. It may come off as a sign of weakness, alienating potential voters and turning them against you. Therefore, fair play is rarely used in political communication and, when it does occur, it almost never occurs in isolation. Almost always, it is accompanied by either self-assertion strategies or counterbalanced by snippets of negative campaigning or both, so as to minimize the risk to the speaker and stand them in good stead. This strategic layering helps the contender make sure that, should they be bold enough to risk a display of fairness, it will not end up eroding their credibility or electoral appeal.

6. Conclusions

In our research, we have embarked upon analysing the ways in which political contenders running for president utilize positive campaigning strategies in their discourse, in an attempt to build an emotional connection with the audience and to come across as genuine, relatable, trustworthy candidates. More specifically, we have opted to shed light on the strategies of conveying *authenticity*, *humility* and *fair play* at the level of discourse, all of them self-effacing strategies that may seem a counterintuitive tack to take. While it is commonly known that positive campaigning relies on a candidate advertising for themselves and putting forth a constructive attitude of emphasizing their own strengths rather than the opponents' weaknesses, thus urging the electorate to vote for them, it may seem unnatural that *authenticity* (speaking without pretension or manipulation), *humility* (owning up to one's shortcomings) and *fair-play* (acknowledging the opponents' merits) may be part of this type of communication. However, as we have attempted to show in our research, sometimes political actors do resort to these strategies, precisely in order to improve their image and to be perceived as the best electoral choice for potential voters.

A positive campaign incorporating the features above stands in stark contrast to a negative campaign based on attacking and berating opponents, on urging electors to vote against rivals rather than for the speaker, and on a destructive approach tapping into the potential of the audience's negative emotions (fear, anger, outrage, frustration). While it may be true that, athirst for infotainment and excitement,

¹⁵ The Romanian *a învăța* can translate into English as either *to learn* or *to study*. Moreover, it can, in some contexts, bear negative connotations, such as learning the tricks / manipulative ways of the game.

consumers of political discourse may be temporarily enticed by gossip and scandal, there is no guarantee that this penchant will ever translate into a vote. By contrast, a constructive campaign that comes across as positive, hopeful and solution-based, relying on deferential discourse and respect for the opponents, may foster greater voter engagement, more trust and long-term loyalty, may bestow more legitimacy upon those who use it and may contribute to a healthier democratic system.

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