

Sense of Control and Voting Preferences: An Empirical Test of Compensatory Control Theory

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of the study was to examine the effect of voters' sense of control on the perception of political candidates and the parties they represent. The theoretical framework of the analysis was Compensatory Control Theory.

Method: Based on evaluations of candidates' leaflets presenting different leadership styles, we examined whether the level of perceived control influences the perception of political views and electoral preferences. In the experimental study, both the sense of control and the type of political message—democratic or authoritarian—were manipulated.

Results: Individuals with an enhanced sense of control rated candidates with a democratic profile significantly more positively and were more willing to support the parties they represent. In contrast, voters with a diminished sense of agency showed a greater tendency to choose authoritarian leaders who offer structure and strength, with this preference serving as a form of compensation for the loss of personal control.

Conclusions: The observed interaction effects confirm that an individual's current psychological state shapes the interpretation of political messages, influencing declared preferences and willingness to vote.

Keywords: sense of control, political views, compensatory control theory, leadership style, electoral preferences

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The aim of the present study was to test the assumptions of Compensatory Control Theory in the context of political marketing and to examine whether an individual's sense of control influences the perception of candidates' political views and electoral preferences. The motivation for this research stemmed from the observed increase in support for autocratic forms of governance, as well as from the phenomenon described by Reykowski (2019) as disappointment with democracy. The theoretical foundation of the study is based on Aron Kay's (2008) concept, which describes compensatory mechanisms activated in situations where the sense of control is threatened.

Previous research on the role of sense of control in human social behavior indicates a causal relationship between a diminished sense of personal control and a tendency to defend external sources of agency, such as the government or God. Individuals demonstrate an ability to rationalize and legitimize socio-political systems that—at least to some extent—exercise control over their lives (Jost et al., 2004; Kay, 2008).

Although a personal sense of control effectively reduces the perception of randomness in the social world, it cannot always be maintained—especially in the face of unpredictable and difficult-to-explain events. In such situations, individuals may turn to external systems that impose order on reality, which—although they reduce personal responsibility—offer a semblance of control, or rather its illusion. The psychological need for order and predictability leads people to replace belief in personal agency with the belief that “things are under control”, regardless of who exercises that control (Antonovsky, 1979).

It is therefore worth asking whether a sense of control can influence the way political parties are perceived, as well as preferences for specific ideologies. If external systems of control, such as governments, religions, or social institutions, promise to reduce randomness in the social order, it can be assumed that individuals with a diminished sense of control will be more likely to rely on them. Accordingly, the present analyses focus on compensatory mechanisms influencing the perception of external sources of control.

It should be clarified that, in the present article, sense of control is understood as a state—that is, a current, situationally conditioned experience of agency that may undergo short-term changes under the influence of circumstances and cognitive content. This understanding is consistent with the tradition of experimental research in which sense of control is deliberately decreased or increased (e.g., through “lack of control” manipulations) (Kay et al., 2008; Landau et al., 2015; Langer, 1975; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Consequently, the interpretation of the results refers to the temporary level of perceived control rather than to relatively stable individual differences described by locus of control (cf. Bukowski et al., 2024).

Sense of Control: A Conceptual Overview

In the literature, the concept of control is often associated with Rotter's (1966) classical concept of locus of control, which distinguishes between internal and external orientations. An internal locus of control refers to the belief that

individuals have a real influence over the course of their lives—their successes and failures are the result of their own actions, decisions, and personality traits. In contrast, an external locus of control is associated with the belief that an individual's fate depends primarily on external factors such as chance, luck, other people, or institutions (cf. Drwal, 1995). In this context, reference to this theoretical tradition serves an organizing function and situates the concept of control within a broader theoretical framework; however, the studies presented in this article focus on the situational experience of control.

Sense of control plays an important role not only in everyday functioning but also in the domain of civic engagement, including political involvement. It is associated with the belief that the world—both at the personal and social levels—is not governed by chance. Research on the structure of locus of control indicates that this construct does not have to be unidimensional. The literature distinguishes, among others, between the dimension of personal control, referring to the sense of influence over one's own life, and the dimension of control ideology, concerning beliefs about the ability to influence the socio-political system (Gurin et al., 1969, 1978). From the perspective of Compensatory Control Theory, however, the key issue is not so much a stable locus of control as a situationally induced sense of agency, which may modulate the way external systems that impose order on reality are perceived (Kay et al., 2008).

Both of these dimensions are significant predictors of political engagement, with an internal locus of control fostering more frequent participation in public and political life. To explain the results of certain studies that identified a relationship between an external sense of control and a higher level of political activity, it has been suggested that participation in political activities may serve a compensatory function—constituting a way for individuals who perceive themselves as lacking influence to regain control over social reality (Skarżyńska, 2005). However, Klandermans and Oegema (1987) pointed out that, before assuming a direct relationship between locus of control and political engagement, it is necessary to consider the context of an individual's social position as well as their beliefs about whether a given form of activity will actually increase the scope of personal control or influence.

The concept of influence over reality is inseparably linked to the notion of self-efficacy, introduced into psychology by Albert Bandura (1977). He demonstrated that a higher level of self-efficacy increases motivation to act and translates into greater individual achievement. Within the framework of social cognitive theory, Bandura distinguished three main types of expectations guiding behavior: action–outcome expectancies, situation–outcome expectancies, and self-efficacy expectancies. While the first two types refer to the anticipated consequences of action, the third concerns an individual's belief in their own capacity to exert effective influence and directly relates to the domain of personal control (Bandura, 1997).

An individual who perceives themselves as lacking influence and decision-making capacity may completely withdraw from activity, as they believe that such actions will not produce any effects. A lack of personal agency is also identified as one of the key symptoms of depression, and a prolonged sense of helplessness may

lead to the development of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975; Sędek & Kofta, 1993).

In summary, a sense of agency constitutes an important element of an individual's self-awareness—it influences how we perceive ourselves as the authors of our own actions, processes, and events. Contemporary research shows that the experience of agency is important not only for intrapsychic functioning but also for understanding social relations and organizing one's perception of the surrounding world (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

Compensatory Model

Human beings have a fundamental need to perceive the world as orderly and predictable, free from randomness. When a sense of personal control is insufficient to satisfy this need, individuals may turn to external systems of control—such as political authority, religion, or other social institutions—either attributing agency to them or transferring responsibility for the course of events onto them (Kay et al., 2008).

This phenomenon stems from a deeply rooted need to reduce uncertainty and maintain a sense of influence, which constitutes one of the fundamental drivers of human functioning and a key determinant of psychological well-being. People strive to impose order on a chaotic reality—even if doing so involves cognitive distortions or erroneous interpretations of events. When it is not possible to establish genuine cause-and-effect relationships between elements of the environment, individuals may create illusory or false connections in an attempt to restore at least a sense of control. Ellen Langer (1975) referred to this mechanism as the *illusion of control*—the belief that one has influence over events that are, in fact, beyond one's control.

According to Compensatory Control Theory (CCT; Kay et al., 2008), threats to personal control activate motivational mechanisms aimed at restoring it. This increased motivation to control may be expressed in various ways, both through intrapsychic processes and through turning to external systems that impose order on reality.

One possible response to a threat to control is a distorted perception of one's own resources, leading to an unrealistic sense of agency and an overestimation of one's influence over the environment. This mechanism, resembling a belief in extraordinary personal abilities and powers, may be referred to as the “Superhero Effect.” Another form of compensation involves transferring control to external authorities, such as God, state institutions, or political leaders. In such cases, individuals maintain a sense of order and stability based on the belief that their fate is under the control of higher powers.

Belief in the agency of government may serve an adaptive function by strengthening individuals' subjective sense of security and addressing their psychological needs (Landau et al., 2015). At the same time, it may function as a means of imposing order on reality through reliance on social and institutional structures (Adorno et al., 1950).

The search for order and structure in the surrounding reality—referred to as *structure affirmation*—constitutes another compensatory mechanism activated in response to threats to the sense of control. It may relate directly to situations involving a loss of control or manifest indirectly through an increased need to find order in other domains of social functioning.

Among the strategies serving this purpose are belief in conspiracy theories (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), the search for a scapegoat (Rothschild et al., 2012), a tendency to submit to authority (Right-Wing Authoritarianism, RWA; Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996, 2006), and the need to identify a clearly defined enemy (Sullivan et al., 2010). These mechanisms enable individuals to simplify and organize a complex and unpredictable social reality, making it more comprehensible and, therefore, psychologically “controllable” (Landau et al., 2015).

It is worth emphasizing that these compensatory strategies are also evident in the domain of political marketing and voting behavior. Political candidates who employ simple messages and identify clear culprits for social problems may respond to the psychological need for order among voters experiencing a loss of control.

Against the background of Compensatory Control Theory (CCT; Kay et al., 2008), it is also useful to refer to the perspective of motivated social cognition (e.g., approaches associated with Jost and colleagues’ System Justification Theory), as both frameworks explain how psychological needs may shape social and political judgments. Although they share the assumption that evaluations are not based solely on “cold” information processing, they differ in their point of departure and core mechanisms. CCT focuses on the need to perceive the world as orderly and controllable, proposing that threats to personal control trigger compensatory processes through “substitute” sources of order (e.g., strong institutions, government, or authority), thereby increasing the attractiveness of structures that promise stability and order.

In contrast, motivated social cognition is a broader framework that emphasizes a set of epistemic, existential, and relational motives leading individuals to prefer stability, reduce uncertainty, and justify the status quo. Within this perspective, the mechanism does not necessarily involve compensating for lost control per se, but rather the motivated selection and interpretation of information (e.g., in ways that legitimize the system or defend the existing social order) (Jost et al., 2003).

In practice, these approaches are complementary. CCT specifies when and why a lack of control intensifies the tendency to seek external sources of order, whereas motivated social cognition describes the broader range of needs and processes that make such “order-providing” narratives and institutions cognitively and emotionally appealing.

Political Self-Identifications

If one of the compensatory mechanisms is the affirmation of structure, then the process of political self-identification may be considered in the context of coping with a loss of control. Research conducted by Kay and Gaucher (2008)

demonstrated that a diminished sense of personal control is associated with stronger preferences for government responsibility for citizens' well-being. In a study encompassing 67 countries, the authors used the independently measured Corruption Perceptions Index developed by Transparency International to account for levels of corruption across political systems.

The results showed that, in countries with low levels of corruption, support for government as the institution responsible for citizens' welfare was inversely related to individuals' perceived sense of control. In other words, the lower the sense of personal influence, the stronger the belief that the government should assume responsibility for the individual. If preferences regarding government responsibility vary as a function of perceived control, it may be assumed that other elements of political self-identification—such as orientation along the left–right ideological spectrum—may likewise be influenced by a sense of agency.

In the present article, political self-identification is analyzed along this continuum in the context of respondents' preferred image of a political leader.

Political self-identification along the left–right spectrum refers both to the content of beliefs held in the economic and identity domains and to an individual's psychosocial resources. From a theoretical perspective, according to Kitschelt's (1994) classification, the right-wing pole represents a free-market model combined with hierarchically organized communities, which may take either an authoritarian or paternalistic form. In contrast, the left-wing pole is based on a centrally planned economy, the principle of equality, and efforts to reduce socioeconomic inequalities. More recent research further indicates that psychosocial resources—such as locus of control and ways of explaining economic phenomena—may be associated with individuals' economic views (Pachnowski et al., 2024).

In more general terms, left-wing orientation may be understood as egalitarian collectivism in the economic sphere combined with egalitarian individualism in social relations, whereas right-wing orientation may be conceptualized as hierarchical economic individualism together with hierarchical collectivism in the social and political domains (cf. Reykowski, 1990).

The present article seeks to answer the question of whether a sense of control may help explain preferences for authoritarian or liberal approaches to the exercise of political power, and how preferences regarding the image of a political leader are shaped by the level of control subjectively experienced by voters.

Image of a Political Leader

The image of a political candidate plays an important role in electoral communication and may have a significant influence on voting preferences. It is defined as a mental representation formed in the voter's mind that, through the associations it evokes, endows the candidate with additional meanings, such as social, psychological, ethical, and personality-related attributes. Consequently, a candidate's image contributes to the electorate's emotional perception of that candidate (Cwalina & Falkowski, 2000; Cwalina et al., 2000).

Although a candidate's image is often analyzed separately from their policy positions on political issues, in political marketing practice these two elements are closely intertwined. The overall evaluation of a candidate or political party, as well as the decision to support them, results from the combined influence of substantive (issue-related) information and image-related cues. Of particular importance is the relative impact of these two types of information. Research indicates that the more confident voters are that a candidate possesses clearly defined political views and distinct personality traits, the greater the influence of that candidate's image on evaluations and voting decisions (Alvarez & Franklin, 1994; Peterson, 2005).

Leadership style, understood as the manner of establishing group goals and selecting preferred means of exerting influence, constitutes an important area of interest in social psychology (Hartliński, 2012). Research on this topic suggests that two fundamental leadership styles can be distinguished: authoritarian and democratic.

The authoritarian leadership style is characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of the leader, who independently determines the direction of state policy and exercises full control over key institutions, such as the education system, the media, law enforcement agencies, and the political opposition. In such a system, social institutions and political organizations possess limited autonomy, while individuals who do not accept the dominant ideology are often denied access to resources and may even be subjected to repression.

In contrast, the democratic leadership style is based on the free expression of opinions, value pluralism, and citizens' participation in decision-making processes. In a democracy, individuals have the right to shape their own lifestyles and beliefs, as well as to establish and participate in political groups and parties. The primary goal of a democratic leader is to foster social cohesion, which is achieved through negotiation and the pursuit of compromise (Hartliński, 2012).

From the perspective of Compensatory Control Theory, a particularly important question is whether preferences for a specific leadership style may be influenced by the level of control individuals currently experience. The present study aimed to examine whether a sense of control affects the perception of political views and voting preferences, using evaluations of campaign leaflets featuring politicians representing different leadership styles as an empirical illustration.

Hypotheses

Based on the assumptions of Compensatory Control Theory and previous research findings, two hypotheses were formulated:

- H1:** Voters whose sense of control is enhanced will exhibit more positive attitudes toward candidates and parties representing democratic views and will be more likely to express support for them.

- H2:** Voters whose sense of control is diminished will exhibit more positive attitudes toward candidates and parties representing authoritarian views and will be more likely to express support for them.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in Warsaw among full-time university students. The sample consisted of 100 participants, including 59 women and 41 men, aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 21.52$, $SD = 1.91$).

Design

The study employed a 2×2 experimental design. Two factors were manipulated: (1) level of perceived control (enhanced vs. diminished) and (2) type of political message presented (a leaflet featuring a candidate with democratic views vs. a leaflet featuring a candidate with authoritarian views). Four experimental groups were created, and participants were randomly assigned to one of these conditions.

Materials

Autobiographical Recall Method

To manipulate participants' sense of control, two versions of a narrative recall task were employed. Participants in the enhanced-control condition were asked to describe a situation from their own lives in which they had experienced a sense of control over the course of events and to identify and describe the emotions associated with that experience. The instruction read:

Recall an important situation from your life, within the last few years, in which you felt that you had control over what was happening. Describe this situation in as much detail as possible, paying particular attention to what you experienced—your feelings, thoughts, and psychological state.

Participants in the diminished-control condition received an analogous instruction but were asked to describe a situation in which they experienced a complete lack of control over what happened to them. The instruction read:

Recall an important situation from your life, within the last few years, in which you felt a complete loss of control over what was happening. Describe this situation

in as much detail as possible, paying particular attention to what you experienced—your feelings, thoughts, and psychological state.

Manipulations based on recalling and describing autobiographical experiences (*recall-based manipulations*) are among the most commonly used procedures for inducing a sense of control—or a lack thereof—conceived as a temporary psychological state in experimental research (e.g., Bukowski et al., 2024; Greenaway et al., 2013; Kay et al., 2008; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

Campaign Leaflets

For the purposes of the study, two versions of a fictitious campaign leaflet were developed, differing in the leadership style they portrayed. Both versions featured the same graphic design and basic information about the candidate. The first page included the candidate's name, number and position on the electoral list, a photograph, and the name and logo of the fictitious political party "NOWA DROGA" (New Path). The website address, *www.nowadroga.pl*, was also displayed at the bottom of the page.

The second page contained a statement from the candidate, including biographical information (age, education, family status, and interests), as well as a key section devoted to the candidate's vision of governance and the values underlying the electoral platform.

The first version of the leaflet presented the candidate as a supporter of a democratic political system. The text emphasized the importance of freedom, equality, and civic participation. The campaign slogan was "Equal opportunities as the foundation of society", and the party logo depicted a set of scales as a symbol of justice and equality.

The second version of the leaflet portrayed the same candidate as a representative of an authoritarian political system. The candidate's statement emphasized the values of strength, order, and hierarchy as the foundations of an effective state. The campaign slogan was "Strength and stability as the foundation of society", and the party logo depicted an aurochs, symbolizing strength and dominance.

In both cases, the candidate was fictitious and was not associated with any existing political party.

Attitude Toward the Leaflet

Evaluation of the campaign leaflet was conducted using four seven-point semantic differential scales. Participants indicated the extent to which the leaflet was perceived as likable, interesting, clear, and attention-grabbing.

Attitude Toward the Candidate

Participants evaluated the candidate using four seven-point scales, indicating the extent to which the candidate was perceived as likable, interesting, good, and appealing.

Attitude Toward the Party

Evaluation of the political party was also conducted using four seven-point scales. Participants indicated the extent to which the party was perceived as likable, interesting, good (vs. bad), and appealing (vs. unappealing).

Voting Intention

The voting intention index was calculated as the sum of participants' responses to two questions: (1) *Would you vote for the candidate presented?* and (2) *Would you vote for the political party represented by this candidate?*

Manipulation Check Measures

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, participants completed a manipulation check concerning their subjectively experienced sense of control. This consisted of a single item: "Did you feel a sense of control while performing the tasks?" Responses were provided on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicated *no sense of control* and 7 indicated *a complete sense of control*.

In addition, participants evaluated the political views of the candidate presented in the leaflet. To this end, they responded to the following question: "Do you perceive this politician as a democrat or an autocrat?" Responses were also recorded on a seven-point scale, where 1 indicated *definitely a democrat* and 7 indicated *definitely an autocrat*.

Procedure

The study was conducted under laboratory conditions using a paper-and-pencil procedure in groups of approximately 25 participants. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. At the beginning of the study, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and indicated their political preferences (on a left–right ideological scale) and self-reported level of political engagement using seven-point scales.

Participants then proceeded to the experimental manipulation. Depending on their assigned condition, they were asked to recall and describe a life situation in which they had experienced either a sense of control over the course of events or a complete lack of control. After completing the narrative task, participants were presented with a campaign leaflet featuring a fictitious political candidate representing either a democratic or an authoritarian political system, depending on the experimental condition.

Subsequently, participants evaluated the leaflet, the candidate, and the political party represented by the candidate using seven-point rating scales. In the final part of the study, participants answered questions concerning their voting intentions, the sense of control associated with the recalled situation, and their identification of the political views presented in the leaflet.

Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). To test the proposed hypotheses, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed with two independent variables: level of perceived control (enhanced vs. diminished) and type of political profile presented (democratic vs. authoritarian).

When significant interaction effects were observed, additional post hoc analyses or one-way analyses were conducted within the respective groups. All tests of statistical significance were performed using an alpha level of $\alpha = .05$.

Manipulation Check

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, participants' responses regarding (1) their self-reported sense of control after completing the narrative task and (2) their ratings of candidate authoritarianism after reading the campaign leaflet were analyzed.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted on the level of perceived control revealed a significant effect of the manipulation. Participants whose sense of control had been enhanced reported a higher level of control ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.96$) than those whose sense of control had been diminished ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.87$), $F(1, 98) = 35.682$, $p < .001$.

Similarly, an analysis of variance conducted on ratings of candidate authoritarianism revealed significant differences between the experimental conditions, $F(1, 98) = 86.344$, $p < .001$. Participants who were presented with the leaflet describing a candidate emphasizing the values of strength and stability perceived the candidate as more authoritarian ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.24$) than participants who read the leaflet portraying a candidate as a supporter of democracy ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.34$).

Evaluation of the Candidate

To examine whether evaluations of the political candidate depended on the candidate's political orientation and the voter's current level of perceived control, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the composite attitude-toward-the-candidate index. This index was calculated as the sum of ratings on four seven-point scales: likable, interesting, good, and appealing.

The analysis revealed that the main effect of perceived control was not statistically significant, $F(1, 96) = 0.954$, ns, indicating that perceived control alone did not directly influence evaluations of the candidate.

The main effect of the candidate's political orientation showed only a trend toward statistical significance, $F(1, 96) = 2.957$, $p = .089$. Overall, the candidate with a democratic profile was evaluated somewhat more positively ($M = 18.52$, $SD = 5.17$) than the authoritarian candidate ($M = 16.78$, $SD = 5.49$). This pattern may reflect the characteristics of the sample, consisting of young university

students for whom democratic values may be particularly appealing. However, the difference did not reach the conventional level of statistical significance.

The key finding was a significant interaction between the candidate's political orientation and participants' level of perceived control, $F(1, 96) = 7.30, p < .01$. Follow-up one-way analyses conducted separately for each control condition revealed that, among participants with an enhanced sense of control, the candidate presented as authoritarian was evaluated significantly less positively ($M = 15.92, SD = 5.45$) than the candidate presented as democratic ($M = 20.50, SD = 4.09$), $F(1, 48) = 11.15, p < .01$.

In contrast, among participants with a diminished sense of control, no significant differences in candidate evaluations were observed as a function of the candidate's political orientation, $F(1, 48) = 0.43, ns$.

Evaluation of the Political Party

To examine whether evaluations of the political party depended on the candidate's political orientation and the voter's current level of perceived control, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Party evaluation was measured as the sum of scores on four seven-point scales: likable–unlikable, interesting–uninteresting, good–bad, and appealing–unappealing.

The analysis revealed a significant interaction between perceived control and the candidate's political orientation, $F(1, 96) = 13.645, p < .01$.

To better understand the nature of this relationship, the data were analyzed separately within each condition. In the condition in which the candidate was presented as authoritarian, the political party was evaluated somewhat more positively by participants who had described a situation involving a loss of control ($M = 17.83, SD = 5.35$) than by those who had described a situation in which they experienced a sense of control ($M = 15.15, SD = 5.54$). This difference reached the level of a statistical trend, $F(1, 48) = 3.02, p = .089$.

For the candidate presented as democratic, the differences were more pronounced. Participants who had recalled an experience of control evaluated the party significantly more positively ($M = 20.79, SD = 3.82$) than participants who had described a situation involving a lack of control ($M = 16.12, SD = 4.96$), $F(1, 48) = 13.78, p < .01$.

Evaluation of the Campaign Leaflet

To examine whether attitudes toward the campaign leaflet depended on participants' level of perceived control and the candidate's political orientation, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Participants evaluated the leaflet using four seven-point scales measuring its attractiveness, clarity, level of interest, and overall impression.

The analysis revealed a significant interaction between perceived control and the candidate's political orientation, $F(1, 96) = 5.828, p < .01$. Follow-up

analyses were conducted separately within each condition. Among participants who recalled a life situation in which they had experienced a sense of control, the leaflet featuring a candidate presented as democratic was evaluated more positively ($M = 19.79$, $SD = 4.92$) than the leaflet featuring a candidate presented as authoritarian ($M = 17.62$, $SD = 4.11$). This difference reached the level of a statistical trend, $F(1, 48) = 2.90$, $p = .095$.

Among participants who described a situation involving a lack of control, the leaflet featuring the authoritarian candidate was evaluated more positively ($M = 19.25$, $SD = 4.84$) than the leaflet featuring the democratic candidate ($M = 16.77$, $SD = 5.34$), $F(1, 48) = 2.95$, $p = .093$, which likewise represented a statistical trend.

These findings suggest that evaluations of political content presented in campaign materials may be moderated by recipients' current psychological state, particularly their sense of control. Although the differences did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, their direction was consistent with the earlier findings concerning evaluations of both the candidate and the political party.

Voting Intention

One of the key aspects of electoral behavior is support for political candidates and parties, operationalized as the willingness to vote for them in an actual election. In the present study, the voting intention index was calculated as the sum of responses to two questions: "Would you vote for the candidate presented?" and "Would you vote for the political party represented by this candidate?"

The results of the two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant interaction between perceived control and the candidate's political orientation, $F(1, 96) = 18.617$, $p < .01$.

Follow-up analyses conducted within each condition showed that, when the candidate was presented as authoritarian, participants with a diminished sense of control expressed a greater willingness to vote for the candidate ($M = 8.25$, $SD = 3.61$) than participants with an enhanced sense of control ($M = 6.42$, $SD = 3.42$). This difference reached the level of a statistical trend, $F(1, 48) = 3.37$, $p = .072$.

For the candidate presented as democratic, the differences were more pronounced. Participants with an enhanced sense of control reported significantly higher voting intentions ($M = 10.25$, $SD = 2.11$) than those with a diminished sense of control ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 2.32$), $F(1, 48) = 4.31$, $p < .05$.

These findings suggest that the experience of personal control may strengthen preferences for politicians who promote democratic values, whereas a lack of perceived control may increase the tendency to support candidates with an authoritarian profile.

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 1 (p. 158).

Table 1*Means and Standard Deviations as a Function of Control Condition and Candidate Profile*

Variable	Control				No control			
	Democrat (n = 24)		Authoritarian (n = 26)		Democrat (n = 26)		Authoritarian (n = 24)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived Control	5.50	1.10	5.65	1.29	3.62	1.90	3.79	1.89
Perceived Candidate Authoritarianism	2.88	1.45	5.58	1.17	3.04	1.25	5.13	1.30
Candidate Evaluation	20.50	4.09	15.92	5.45	16.69	5.46	17.71	5.50
Political Party Evaluation	20.79	3.82	15.15	5.54	16.12	4.96	17.83	5.35
Campaign Leaflet Evaluation	19.79	4.92	17.62	4.11	16.77	5.34	19.25	4.84
Voting Intention	10.25	2.11	6.42	3.42	7.00	2.32	8.25	3.61

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine whether and how a situationally induced sense of control influences evaluations of political candidates and parties, as well as voting preferences. The results confirmed that experiencing control—or a lack thereof—significantly affects the way individuals perceive politicians, their political platforms, and the parties they represent.

All of the analyzed indicators—attitudes toward the campaign leaflet, the candidate, the political party, and voting intention—displayed a similar pattern of results. Participants with an enhanced sense of control evaluated candidates promoting democratic values (freedom, equality, and pluralism) more positively and expressed a greater willingness to vote for them. In contrast, participants with a diminished sense of control were more inclined to support an authoritarian candidate emphasizing strength, stability, and security. Importantly, the effect of perceived control emerged only in interaction with the candidate's ideological profile; perceived control alone was not sufficient to influence evaluations.

It should be noted, however, that the observed pattern was asymmetrical. In the enhanced-control condition, preference for the democratic candidate reached statistical significance, whereas in the diminished-control condition, the increase in preference for the authoritarian candidate was observed only at the level of a statistical trend. This finding may suggest that an induced sense of control reinforces acceptance of democratic messages more strongly than a lack of control automatically shifts preferences toward authoritarianism. Preferences for authoritarian candidates may emerge only under additional conditions, such

as heightened threat, greater uncertainty, or increased susceptibility to narratives that promise order and stability.

The experimental manipulation involved recalling a situation in which participants either had or lacked control over events. The results demonstrated that even a brief recollection of such an experience influenced the way political candidates were perceived. These findings clearly indicate that changes in a voter's psychological context may lead to different interpretations of the same political message. The leaflet featuring the same candidate was evaluated differently depending on the induced state of control.

The results are consistent with the assumptions of Compensatory Control Theory (CCT; Kay et al., 2008). When individuals experience a loss of control, they strive to restore a sense of order and predictability—even at the cost of relinquishing personal agency. One compensatory mechanism involves transferring control to external systems, such as governmental institutions or strong political leaders. As demonstrated by Kay and Gaucher (2008), a decrease in perceived control increases acceptance of the idea that the government should assume greater responsibility for individuals' lives.

The present findings support this mechanism: a lack of control increased the tendency to support authoritarian candidates who offer clear structures and strong leadership. This pattern also reflects the process of structure affirmation—the tendency to impose order on a chaotic reality, even through the search for external sources of control, scapegoats, or simplified political narratives (Rothschild et al., 2012; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

The findings are also consistent with the classical account of social mechanisms proposed by Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* (2014). Fromm argued that, in situations of uncertainty, individuals may relinquish freedom and personal responsibility in exchange for the security provided by larger social structures, such as the nation, political authority, or religion. Transferring control to a “greater power” offers psychological comfort and a sense of order, even at the expense of democratic values.

The results may also be interpreted in light of the contemporary geopolitical context, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, inflation, and ongoing economic crises. All of these factors may have weakened individuals' sense of control, which—according to the present findings—could increase the attractiveness of political messages emphasizing order, efficacy, and strong leadership. In public discourse, examples often cited as reflecting such sentiments include Donald Trump's electoral victory in the United States in 2016, as well as the growing popularity of political movements emphasizing decisive leadership and security across many European countries. The present study suggests that the broader social context influences how political messages are perceived and which political actors receive support, even when the content of those messages is relatively similar.

In light of the present findings, it may be argued that the level of socially experienced control plays an important role in shaping political preferences. When citizens feel secure and perceive themselves as having influence over public affairs, support for democratic solutions based on pluralism and participation

tends to increase. Conversely, under conditions in which control is threatened, there may be a growing demand for messages emphasizing order, stability, and decisive leadership. The results therefore suggest that the resilience of democracy depends not only on institutions and electoral procedures but also on individuals' psychological sense of agency, the weakening of which may increase susceptibility to populist and authoritarian narratives.

The present study contributes to both political and social psychology by integrating Compensatory Control Theory with the analysis of responses to campaign messages and evaluations of political candidates as a function of situationally induced experiences of control or lack of control. The findings highlight the importance of aligning political communication with the psychological state of the audience. In the context of electoral campaigns, this implies that even democratic politicians may need to address citizens' need for order and security in their public messaging, particularly during periods of uncertainty.

The study was conducted among university students living in Warsaw, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include participants from different age groups and with varying levels of education, social capital, and sense of agency. It would also be worthwhile to compare the effects of social and economic liberalism, as Skarżyńska and Henne (2011) suggest that the latter is more strongly associated with perceived influence, life satisfaction, and system justification.

Another limitation of the study is the absence of a neutral control group in the sense-of-control manipulation procedure. Two versions of a recall-based manipulation were employed (high vs. low control); however, without a no-manipulation control condition, it is difficult to determine whether both procedures were equally effective and against what baseline level they altered participants' sense of control. Consequently, it cannot be conclusively established whether the observed differences in candidate evaluations resulted solely from variations in perceived control or were partly influenced by other characteristics of the recalled events, such as their emotional intensity or domain-specific content.

Future research should therefore include a neutral control condition and a more comprehensive manipulation check (e.g., a multi-item measure of state control), which would allow for a more precise assessment of the effectiveness and specificity of both manipulation variants. It would also be valuable to examine whether the observed asymmetry of effects persists under stronger inductions of loss of control or under conditions of heightened uncertainty, and whether it depends on the type of experiences being recalled.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that perceptions of the same political messages may depend on a temporarily induced sense of control. The findings support the assumptions of Compensatory Control Theory while also highlighting the need for cautious interpretation in light of the asymmetrical strength of the observed effects and the limitations of the manipulation employed. From the perspective of political psychology, these results suggest that analyses of the effectiveness of campaign messages should take into account both the psychological context of recipients and the broader social conditions that contribute to heightened uncertainty.

Declarations

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that none of the authors has a potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The authors have no significant financial or non-financial interests that would require disclosure, nor any competing interests related to the content of the article. The authors also confirm that they are not affiliated with or involved in any organization or entity that could have a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Entities that contributed to the publication and their contribution

Not applicable

Ethical Approval

This study does not have the approval of the Ethics Committee because it was conducted as part of a master's thesis. For this type of research, separate approval from the Ethics Committee is not required, as the thesis advisor oversees the proper conduct and ethical standards of the research process and bears responsibility for it. In this case, Dr. Magdalena Gąsiorowska, the author, served as the thesis advisor.

Data Availability Statement

The data may be made available to other researchers upon reasonable request addressed directly to the corresponding authors.

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The Consensus tool was used during the preparation of the article to make stylistic revisions and improve the text's structure. The authors bear full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Declaration of authors' contributions to the manuscript

Magdalena Gąsiorowska: Conceptualisation; Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – first draft; Writing – review and editing

Ida Szatkowska: Data management; Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Project management, Resources, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – first draft

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