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Understanding voters' decisions: a theory of planned behavior approach

Abstract

A political party can be regarded as a service-provider. In exchange for a 'price' (i.e., a persons vote) the political party promises to deliver some societal and other benefits (i.e., the service-output), which usually are claimed to improve people's lives and the overall society. In a marketing context, voters can thus be seen as consumers who are consuming a service, i.e., the decisions and the actions of the political party. Based on such considerations, this paper tests the ability of a well-known consumer theory, the theory of planned behavior, in explaining political voting intentions. Data were collected from a web-based survey of Danish voters using self-administered questionnaires. Lisrel results suggest that the theory of planned behavior, with the inclusion of a path from perceived behavioral control to attitude, provides a good fit to the data and explains a high proportion (63.2%) of variation in voting intention.

Keywords: voting intentions, theory of planned behavior, Lisrel.

Introduction

Marketing models, theories and techniques have been applied in almost all areas of human behavior – from consumer to business markets and from culture to religion. Several authors (e.g., Cass and Pecotich, 2005; Shama, 1973) have argued that the marketing insight in consumer behavior is also relevant to other areas beyond the commercial domain. Indeed, significant distinctions between consumer behavior and, for example, voting behavior are no longer drawn by many researchers (refer to Cass and Pecotich, 2005; Crosby and Taylor, 1983). Voting behavior shares some fundamental characteristic with other kind of human (consumer) behavior. A political party can be regarded as a service-provider. In exchange for a 'price' (i.e., a persons vote) the political party promises to deliver some societal and other benefits (i.e., the service-output), which usually are claimed to improve people's lives and the overall society. In a marketing context, voters can thus be seen as consumers who are consuming a service, i.e., the decisions and the actions of the political party.

Some research (e.g., Burton and Netemeyer, 1992; Solgaard, Smith and Schmidt, 1998; Cass and Pecotich, 2005) has been conducted for the purpose of explaining voting behavior from a consumer behaviour perspective. We also suggest that the consumer behavior discipline has a lot to offer for the purpose of explaining and understanding voters' voting decision-making and behavior. Such insights may be beneficial to political candidates and parties who spend large amounts of money trying to influence voters' decision-making process and, ultimately, their final voting. Many consumer theories devote themselves to exploring consumer choice and decision-making behavior (see e.g., Hansen, 2005;

Bettman, Luce, and Payne, 1998 for an overview). In relation to this, the purpose of this paper is to test the ability of a well-known consumer theory – the theory of planned behavior – in predicting political voting intentions. The paper is organized as follows. First, we provide a detailed discussion of the theory of planned behavior. Next, the research methodology is developed. Then, the obtained results are presented. Finally, we discuss the implications of the study and provide suggestions for further research.

1. The theory of planned behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) regards a consumer's behavior as determined by the consumer's behavioural intention, where behavioral intention is a function of 'attitude toward the behavior' (i.e., the general feeling of favorableness or unfavorableness for that behavior), 'subjective norm' (i.e., the perceived opinion of other people in relation to the behavior in question), and perceived behavioral control (to what degree can the considered behavior be performed without perceived difficulties/obstacles) (Ajzen, 1985, 1991; Hansen, Jensen and Solgaard, 2004). TPB predicts intention to perform a behavior by consumer's attitude towards that behaviour rather than by consumer's attitude towards a product or service. Also, a consumer's intention to perform a certain behaviour may be influenced by the normative social beliefs held by the consumer. As an example, a consumer might have a very favorable attitude toward having a drink before dinner at a restaurant. However, the intention to actually order the drink may be influenced by the consumer's beliefs about the appropriateness (i.e. the perceived social norm) of ordering a drink in the current situation (with friends for a fun meal or on a job interview) and her/his motivation to comply with those normative beliefs (cf. Hawkins, Best and Coney, 2001).

Also, consumers are often confronted with situations in which the target behavior is not completely under the consumer's control. For example, a consumer may be prevented from purchasing a considered service if the consumer perceives the purchase process as too complex or if he/she does not possess the resources necessary to perform the considered behavior. Such considerations are incorporated into TPB (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). In comparison with its processor, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), TPB adds 'perceived behavioral control' as a determinant of behavioral intention. TPB is therefore an extension of TRA. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) can be conceptualized as the consumer's subjective belief about how difficult it will be for that consumer to generate the behavior in question (refer to Posthuma and Dworkin, 2000). The concept of PBC has been considered in relation to a number of various research settings. In investigating consumer complaint behavior Stephens and Gwinner (1998) use the term 'secondary appraisal' as a conceptualization of a consumer's perceived ability to deal with an unsatisfactory experience (e.g., file a complain). Shim, Eastlick, Lotz and Waarington (2001) have proposed and tested an online prepurchase intentions model, which includes the concept of PBC. In studying unethical behavior Chang (1998) has applied both TPB and TRA and thus included PBC in the investigation. In building a conceptual model of arbitrator acceptability Posthuma and Dworkin (2000) included PBC among a number of other key concepts adapted from e.g., control theory and organizational justice theories. TPB is displayed in Figure 1 (refer to Ajzen, 1991).

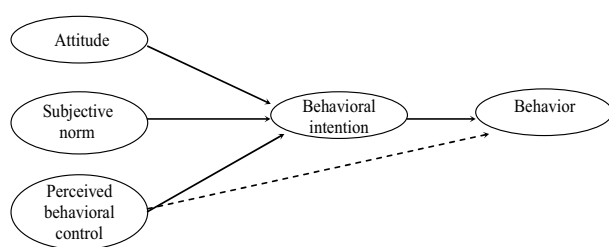


Fig. 1. The theory of planned behavior

TPB has been applied and validated in a large number of studies (refer to e.g., Hansen et al., 2004; Sheppard, Hartwick and Warshaw, 1988; Ajzen, 1991; Chang, 1998) but has also been subject to criticism. TPB assumes that consumers actively develop an attitude towards the considered behavior. However, a (typical low-involved) consumer may take immediate action based on simple belief-formation. For example, a consumer passing by a petrol tank may choose to visit the tank because of a perceived low price on petrol and, as another exam-

ple, a consumer waiting in line in a supermarket may choose a piece of candy because of its perceived appetizing appearance (Hansen, 2005). However, for a number of reasons TPB seems well suited for the purpose of investigating and predicting voters' political voting intentions. *Firstly*, in relation to an election voters are exposed to a myriad of stimuli concerning political candidates, parties, promises, discussion topics, and the like. Thus, people who intend to vote could be expected to engage in selective exposure, selective perception and integration processes in order to reach a mental basis (i.e., an attitude), which may guide them deciding where to place their vote. *Secondly*, in their voter turnout theory (Schram and Van Winden, 1991) voters are argued to belong to social reference groups. In such groups social pressures may be produced, which may be 'consumed' by non-producers (i.e., non-opinion leaders). Such voters, which represent the majority of the reference group, may attach utility to giving in to pressure and rationally decide to vote and perhaps even in a certain direction (Schram and Sonnemans, 1996; Schram and Van Winden, 1991). Thus, perceived social norm could be expected to influence peoples' voting decisions. *Thirdly*, the perceived behavioral control component seems relevant in relation to the voter's development of her/his voting intention. When changing voting intentions the voter would have to mentally construct a reason, which justifies the intended behavioral modification. Such a task may be mentally demanding, especially if it also conflicts with the direction of the social norm.

2. Research hypotheses

As a general rule in the TPB approach, the more favorable the attitude towards the considered behavior and subjective norm with respect to that behaviour, and the greater the perceived behavioral control, the stronger should be an individual's intention to perform the considered behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Since the purpose of this paper is to test the applicability of TPB in a political setting, we follow that rule and hypothesize as follows:

H1. Attitude is positively related to voting intention.

H2. Subjective norm is positively related to voting intention.

H3. Perceived behavioral control is positively related to behavioral (voting) intention.

As the empirical data used in this study were collected at one point in time (before the election took place) actual behavior was not included in the model (refer to Methodology section below for a discussion).

3. Methodology

3.1. The political context. This study concerns the February 2005 election for the Danish Parliament. Denmark has a single chamber parliament comprising 179 members. Four out of the 179 members of Parliament are elected from the Faroe Islands (two seats) and Greenland (two seats). Danish governments are often minority governments (not comprising a parliamentary majority), which means that Danish politics tends to be characterized by compromises among the various political parties. In the February 2005 election seven parties managed to be represented in the Danish Parliament. The anglicized names of these parties from the left to the right wing are The United Socialists (6 seats), Socialist People's Party (11 seats), Social Democrats (47 seats), Radical Liberals (17 seats), Conservatives (18 seats), Liberals (52 seats), and The Danish People's Party (24 seats). It is noted that the positioning of the parties on a socialist/bourgeois or left/right polarity is well established with the exception of the Radical Liberals, which can be placed between the Social Democrats on the left and the Conservatives on the right. The Danish government (as per October 2007) consists of the Liberals and the Conservatives with the Danish People's Party acting as a supporting party.

3.2. Data collection. Survey participants were recruited by asking 62 undergraduate university students enrolled in a methodology class to recruit each five potential volunteers among their friends and relatives. Reflecting the developed hypothesis concerning the perceived difficulty of switching to another political party (H2), only people who voted in the 2005 Parliament election were allowed to participate as respondents in the study. The final sample comprised 115 respondents resulting in a response rate of 38%.

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents using a self-administered web-based questionnaire. 55 % of the respondents were males and 45 % were females. Yet, more than half (55%) of the respondents were 21 to 30 years of age, around one third (31%) were students and a similar proportion (34%) had a personal yearly income below DKK 150.000 (approx. Euro 20.000). Considering the sampling and data collection procedure, the over representation of younger students with lower incomes is, of course, not very unexpected. Although, such a sample does not allow for making inferences of the results to the target population (Danish voters in general), we believe it is a reasonable sample for testing the proposed conceptual model. The data were collected in March 2005 (shortly after the February 2005 election) ensuring that respondents' decision-

making processes in relation to their voting behavior could still be activated from memory.

3.3. Measurements. The constructs attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control can all be measured indirectly on the basis of corresponding beliefs, or they can be assessed directly, by asking respondents to judge each on a set of scales (Ajzen, 2002). In this study, direct measuring assessed all three predictor variables. As the data in this study were collected at one point in time behavioral intention and actual behavior could not both be included in the model. Intention concerns future behavior, whereas actual behavior concerns whether the intended behavior is actually carried out. Therefore, actual behavior does not appear in the operational version of the model. It should be noted that the measurement of (future) actual political voting behavior might lead to different results as compared to the predicted results from this study. Such intention-behavior inconsistencies may occur because of developments and changes in e.g., the political environment, voter characteristics, candidates' characteristics, economic conditions, etc.

According to TPB, perceived behavioral control, together with behavioral intention, can be used directly to predict behavioral achievement (Ajzen, 1991). Although exceptions exist, intention has in various studies proved to be a rather good predictor of actual voting behavior (Watters, 1988; Locke, Fredrick, Bobko and Lee, 1984). In fact, Watters found that voting choice (actual behavior) in the 1998 US presidential election was highly consistent ($r = 0.84$) with previously expressed intentions. Once the voter has developed his/her voting intention, voting choice should not be expected to pose any problems in terms of volitional control (Ajzen, 1991), and perceived behavioral control is therefore largely redundant as a predictor of actual behavior. This theoretical contention also receives support from Getman, Goldberg and Herman's (1976) finding that 87% of voters in a union election voted in accordance with their intentions measured three weeks before the election. Thus, we assume that behavioral intention would be a main predictor of actual voting behavior, and that behavioral intention therefore is highly correlated with actual (future) voting behavior.

Multiple item scales were developed for each of the four constructs: subjective norm, attitude, perceived behavioral control, and behavioral intention (refer to Figure 1).

Subjective norm (SN) (perceived social influence) was measured by obtaining the respondents level of agreement to the following two statements: (1) Most of my friends and acquaintances think that voting on the same party as I did in the last election is a good

idea; (2) Members of my family think that it is a good idea to vote on the same party as I did in the last election. A five-point Likert scale (1 = disagree totally; 5 = agree totally) measured respondents' level of agreement to the two statements. The two statements were derived from Thompson, Haziris and Alekos (1994).

Attitude was measured by two items representing respondents' overall evaluation of the attractiveness of repeating their political voting. A five-point Likert scale (1 = disagree totally; 5 = agree totally) measured respondents' level of agreement to the following two statements: (1) Voting on the same party as I did in the last election will match my political attitudes; (2) I'm convinced that voting on the same party once again will be beneficial for Denmark.

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) was measured by two items representing respondents' perceptions of the ease of voting for another political party. The items were derived from literature concerning PBC (e.g., Chang, 1998; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz and Warrington, 2001): (1) Voting on a different party at the next election will not be an easy task for me; (2) If I voted on another party at the next election I would have a hard time justifying why. A five-point Likert scale (1 = disagree totally; 5 = agree totally) measured respondents' level of agreement to the two statements.

Voting intention was measured by obtaining the respondents' response to the following two questions (items): (1) How likely is it that you will vote

on the same party again? A five-point semantic scale (1 = not likely at all; 5 = very likely) measured the respondents' response. (2) I'm convinced that I will vote on the same party again. A five-point scale Likert scale (1 = disagree totally; 5 = agree totally) was applied. The applied constructs and measurements are all displayed in the Appendix A.

4. Results

4.1. Specification of the investigated model. The conceptual model in Figure 1 was translated into a Lisrel model consisting of a measurement part (confirmatory factor analysis) and a structural equation part (simultaneous linear regression). The relationships between the variables were estimated by maximum likelihood estimation. The framework was tested using a two-stage analysis (refer to Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). First, the measurement model is developed by conducting confirmatory factor analysis on the applied multi-item scales. Next, the measurement model and the structural equation paths are estimated simultaneously to test the proposed model (overall model). By applying this two-stage method we wanted to ensure that the measures of the constructs are reliable and valid before attempting to draw conclusions about relations between constructs.

4.2. Measurement model. The results of the measurement model, including the standardized factor loadings, construct reliabilities, and proportion of extracted variance, are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis results

Construct/indicator	Standardized factor loading ^a	SE	t-value	Construct reliability ^b	Extracted variance ^c
ξ1 Attitude				0.63	0.46
X1	0.778	-	-		
X2	0.566	0.110	5.301		
ξ2 Subjective norm				0.71	0.55
X3	0.763	-	-		
X4	0.719	0.310	3.063		
ξ3 Perceived behavioral control				0.75	0.61
X5	0.917	-	-		
X6	0.613	0.154	4.322		
η1 Behavioral intention				0.81	0.69
X7	0.664	-	-		
X8	0.970	0.243	6.311		

Notes: ^a The first item for each construct was set to 1. ^b Calculated as $\frac{\sum(\text{Std. Loadings})^2}{\sum(\text{Std. Loadings})^2 + \sum \xi_i}$ ^c Calculated as $\frac{\sum \text{Std. Loadings}^2}{\sum \text{Std. Loadings}^2 + \sum \xi_i}$

All factor loadings were significant (p < 0.01), which demonstrated that the chosen generic questions for each latent variable reflect a single underlying construct. The reliabilities and variance extracted for

each variable indicated that the model was reliable and valid. All composite reliabilities exceeded 0.60 and most exceeded 0.70. Variance extracted estimates were all above 0.50, except one, which was close to

0.50. The reliabilities and variance were computed using indicator standardized loadings and measurement errors (Hair et al., 1998; Shim et al., 2001). All items loaded significantly (t -value > 1.96) on their corresponding latent construct, which indicated that convergent validity was obtained. These initial model considerations indicate that the constructs do exist and that they are tapped by the measures used. The measurement model fits well to the data. The goodness of fit index (GFI = 0.96) is above the recommended threshold of 0.90 for a satisfactory goodness of fit (Bentler, 1992). Also, the point estimate of RMSEA shows a value of 0.01, which is below the recommended level of 0.08. Hence, we can conclude that the unidimensionality criterion is satisfied (Frambach, Prabhu and Verhallen, 2003).

To investigate the discriminant validity of the constructs included in the framework, an exploratory factor analysis was employed. The factor analysis results showed that the hypothesized discrimination between constructs was generally maintained in the survey. Discriminant validity of the applied constructs was also tested by applying the approach proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). In Table 2 the diagonals represent the variance extracted for each construct as reported in Table 1. The other entries represent the squares of correlations between constructs.

Table 2. Discriminant validity of constructs

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Attitude	0.46	-	-	-
2. Subjective norm	0.18	0.55	-	-
3. Perceived behavioral control	0.38	0.07	0.61	-
4. Behavioral intention	0.64	0.10	0.25	0.69

Notes: Diagonals represent average amount of extracted variance for each construct. Non-diagonals represent the shared variance between constructs (calculated as the squares of correlations between constructs).

An examination of the matrix displayed in Table 2 shows that all non-diagonal entries do not exceed the diagonals of the specific constructs except for attitude with respect to its correlation with behavioral intention (variance_attitude = 0.46 < squared correlation_attitude – behavioral intention = 0.64),

although 0.64 is below the suggested threshold of 0.85 (refer to Frambach, Prabhu and Verhallen, 2003). Also, as a path from attitude to behavioral intention is hypothesized (H1), the relatively high correlation is not surprising.

4.3. Fit of the full structural model. The chi square statistic was 48.80 (df. = 18, $p < 0.001$). The p -value is below 0.05, indicating that the model fails to fit in an absolute sense. However, since the χ^2 -test is very powerful, even a good fitting model (i.e., a model with just small discrepancies between observed and predicted covariances) could be rejected. Thus, several writers (e.g., Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black, 1998) recommend that the chi-square measure should be complemented with other goodness-of-fit measures. The value of the goodness of fit index (GFI) was 0.90, which satisfies the acceptable level of 0.90 (Bollen and Long, 1993) and indicates a good overall model fit. The value of CFI was 0.88, which is close to the suggested threshold of 0.90. The point estimate of RMSEA was 0.12, which exceeds the 0.08 level. Also, the parsimonious fit measure χ^2/df ($48.80/18 = 2.71$) falls without the proposed threshold limits for this measure (Jöreskog, 1970; Carmines and McIver, 1981). Thus, only limited support is provided for the overall model as initially proposed. However, the results of the modification indices strongly suggested the inclusion of a path from PBC to attitude. The addition of this path resulted in a chi-square statistic for the modified model of 21.07 (df. = 17; $p = 0.223$), now suggesting an acceptable overall model fit. The values of GFI (0.957), AGFI (0.908), NFI (0.926), and RMSEA (0.046) also supported the conducted model modification. In line with these findings, a chi-square difference test indicates that the modified model provides a significant improvement in fit over the initial model (p -value < 0.01). Moreover, the modified model explains 63.2% of the variation in behavioral intention (i.e., R^2), whereas the initial model explains 58.6% (refer to Table 3). Based on such results we conclude that a path from PBC to attitude should be included in the model.

Table 3. Model comparisons and fit measures

Model	χ^2	Df	$\Delta\chi$	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	R^2 (a)
TPB	48.80	18	-	0.904	0.880	0.123	0.586
TPB (+PBC → attitude)	21.07	17	27.73**	0.957	0.984	0.046	0.632

Notes: ** P -value < 0.01 (df: 18-17 = 1). (a) Explained proportion of variation in ‘Voting intention’.

4.4. Hypotheses testing. Standardized beta-coefficients from the estimated structural model are reported in Table 4 along with their corresponding

t -values. It was proposed that attitude would be positively related to voting intention (H1). This proposition was confirmed (standardized coefficient

of 0.787, p -value = 0.001). H2 is rejected in the study, as subjective norm did not significantly affect voting intention (standardized coefficient of 0.039, p -value = 0.626). From H3 we expected that PBC would positively affect voting intention. This expectation was not supported (standardized coefficient of 0.012, p -value = 0.939). While the direct effect of PBC on voting intention was insignificant the indirect effect of PBC on voting intention through attitude was significant ($0.612 \times 0.787 = 0.482$; p -value < 0.01). The results revealed in this study are discussed in the next section.

Table 4. Structural model estimation results

Path from/to	Standardized coefficient	t-value	Test result
Attitude → Voting intention (H1)	0.787	3.22 ^a	Accept
Subjective norm → Voting intention (H2)	0.039	0.49	Reject
Perceived behavioral control → Voting intention (H3)	0.012	0.08	Reject
Perceived behavioral control → Attitude	0.612	3.82 ^a	Path not hypothesized

Note: ^a Significant at 1% level.

Discussion

The overall purpose of this study was to test the ability of TPB in predicting voting intention. Our results suggest that the theory is capable of explaining a high proportion ($R^2 = 0.586$) of the variation in future voting intention. However, TPB with the inclusion of a path from PBC to attitude provides the significantly best fit to the data and provides the best prediction of voting intention ($R^2 = 0.632$). Attitude towards voting was the most important predictor of future voting intentions (H1). This finding supports TPB, which predicts that attitude towards behavior is a determinant of behavioral intention. However, our results did not confirm the hypothesized relations between SN and voting intention (H2) and between PBC and voting intention (H3).

We propose that a potential cause for the insignificance of the relation between SN and voting intention may be the evolvement of ‘individualism’ as a central value in the Danish society (Sørensen, 2001). As suggested by several writers (e.g., Jensen, 2002; Sestoft and Hansen, 2003) values can be considered central to peoples’ decision making. Claeys, Swinnen and Abeele (1995) claim that “values are the ultimate source of choice criteria that drive buying

behavior” (p. 193). Also, according to means-end chain theory (Gutman, 1982; Olson and Reynolds, 1983), values can be considered as drivers of behavior. Means-end chain theory regards attributes as means by which the product provides the desired consequences or values. In relation to this, striving for individualism can be linked to the rejection of dependency; that is, it is better to rely on oneself than on others (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). People who regard ‘individualism’ as a core personal value may thus be less inclined to follow the guidance of other people in order to reinforce their feelings of independence and self-identity.

While PBC did not show a significant influence on voting intention, the indirect effect on voting intention through attitude was significant. We find this to be a rather interesting result and suggest that it might be explained by cognitive dissonance theory. According to Festinger’s (1957) early conceptualisation, a person can be described as being in a dissonant state if two elements in her/his cognition (e.g., her/his knowledge of her/himself, her/his attitudes, feelings or desires) are in imbalance. Festinger suggests that dissonance can be “...an extremely painful and intolerable thing” (p. 266). Soutar and Sweeney (2003) propose that there are three main conditions for dissonance to arise: the decision needs to be important, irrevocable and voluntary. Since, on average, more than 80% of the Danish voters use their opportunity for voting in Parliament elections, we find that the first condition is fulfilled. Since, by nature, elections are both irrevocable (in Denmark for up to four years) and voluntary, the second and third conditions are also fulfilled. Thus, cognitive dissonance theory would suggest that voters who find it difficult to vote for a different party in the next election may develop a more positive attitude towards their present choice of political party in order to justify their present voting behavior. The overall purpose is to avoid a mental imbalance. That is, such voters need to establish a positive attitude so that they can mentally convince themselves that their present voting behavior is not caused by a lack of mental resources to vote differently. From the view of a political party this result suggests some interesting consequences for both small and large political parties. Small parties need to make it easier for voters to overcome the perceived barriers for voting differently. A possible campaign headline might in this instance be ‘Why not vote for Party X?’. On the other hand, a large political party needs to maintain barriers and to convince voters that voting differently would impose to a high risk. A possible campaign headline might in this instance be ‘Voting on Party Y you know what you get’.

Limitations of the study

It should be emphasized that only behavioral intentions are measured and explained in this research. Therefore, the measurement of (future) actual voting patterns *might* lead to different results. Also, this research is concentrated on analysing only one elec-

tion. This could mean that the results may suffer from a lack of generalizability when other elections are considered. A cross-section of elections, perhaps in different countries/cultures, ought to be studied to improve the generalizability of the results.

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Appendix A

Items used to measure the constructs in the survey

ATTITUDE

Voting on the same party as I did in the last election will match my political attitudes (X1).

I'm convinced that voting on the same party once again will be beneficial for Denmark (X2).

SUBJECTIVE NORM

Most of my friends and acquaintances think that voting on the same party as I did in the last election is a good idea (X3).

Members of my family think that it is a good idea to vote on the same party as I did in the last election (X4).

PERCEIVED BEHAVIORAL CONTROL

Voting on a different party at the next election will not be an easy task for me (X5).

If I voted on another party at the next election I would have a hard time justifying why (X6).

VOTING INTENTION

How likely is it that you will vote on the same party again? (X7).

I'm convinced that I will vote on the same party again (X8).