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Weaving a Web of Words: Persuasion, Manipulation, and the Psychology of Political Influence

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Abstract

This study investigates the pervasive nature of persuasion in contemporary society, acknowledging its role in shaping individual perceptions, attitudes, and values, ranging from consumer preferences to political ideologies. The primary objective of this research was to explore political persuasion and manipulation, examining their historical evolution and modern manifestations. Furthermore, this study incorporated an experimental component, employing a written survey to assess the susceptibility of individuals to specific persuasive techniques. The findings elucidate various methods employed for persuasion and manipulation, demonstrating through the anonymously disseminated survey that certain individuals exhibited a measurable shift in their views when exposed to particular persuasive strategies.

Keywords: Political Persuasion, Manipulation, Public Opinion, Cognitive Bias, Social Influence

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Aim of Study

1.1 Background of the Study

Politics, a dynamic and multifaceted arena where competing ideas and ideologies engage in constant friction, has historically and consistently served as a decisive battleground for the allegiances of the populace. This enduring struggle for influence is fundamentally driven by the intricate art of persuasion. It is through this art that individuals and groups seek to mold public opinion, subtly or overtly manipulate prevailing belief systems, and, in its most profound manifestations, exert a tangible influence on the trajectory of historical events.

The ability to effectively persuade within the political sphere is a potent instrument. It allows political actors to garner support for their agendas, mobilise populations behind specific causes, and ultimately achieve and maintain positions of power. This process often involves a complex interplay of rhetoric, strategic communication, and an astute understanding of societal values and aspirations. By skillfully framing narratives, appealing to emotions, and strategically deploying information (or, at times, misinformation), those adept at persuasion can cultivate widespread acceptance of their viewpoints.

The manipulation of beliefs, while a morally complex aspect of political persuasion, remains a significant factor in shaping political landscapes. By tapping into pre-existing biases, anxieties, and desires, political individuals can construct compelling, albeit potentially distorted, versions of reality. This can lead to the entrenchment of particular ideologies, the formation of rigid group identities, and the creation of divisions within society. The power to shape what people believe is therefore a powerful tool, carrying with it significant ethical responsibilities that are not always upheld.

Ultimately, the interplay of persuasion and the manipulation of beliefs has a direct and often indelible impact on the course of history. Political movements, revolutions, policy shifts, and the rise and fall of nations are frequently rooted in the successful (or unsuccessful) application of persuasive techniques. The ability to sway the hearts and minds of the masses can translate into tangible political power, enabling the implementation of specific agendas and the shaping of societal structures for generations to come. Thus, the study of political persuasion is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial endeavor for understanding the forces that drive human history and the ongoing struggle for influence in the public sphere.

Persuasion, as a concept, is multifaceted and complex (Burnell & Reeve, 1984). It can be viewed as a form of 'power' – the power to influence, to persuade, and to coerce. Propaganda, on the other hand, is a more aggressive form of persuasion, one that is "pitched to the masses" and often employed by authoritarian regimes and political extremists. Propaganda is a powerful tool, capable of inducing psychological shifts and even brainwashing, by systematically inundating individuals with selective, biased information (Cialdini & Cialdini, 2007).

The psychology of persuasion stands as a captivating and intricate domain of study, dedicated to unraveling the subtle mechanisms that govern human thought processes and subsequent actions. Research has consistently demonstrated the augmented efficacy of tailoring persuasive communications to the specific personality characteristics of the intended recipients, leading to a considerably heightened impact (Cialdini & Cialdini, 2007). This personalised approach underscores the substantial promise inherent in harnessing the diverse spectrum of individual differences to effectively realise particular political objectives. Understanding these psychological underpinnings allows for the crafting of more resonant and ultimately successful persuasive strategies within the political sphere.

Within the intricate landscape of politics, the power of persuasion presents itself as a dualistic instrument, capable of yielding both constructive and detrimental

consequences. On one hand, it serves as a vital catalyst for galvanising public backing, nurturing social cohesion, and inspiring collective action towards progressive societal transformations. Political leaders and movements often rely on persuasive rhetoric to articulate their visions, mobilise supporters, and build consensus around policy initiatives. This constructive application of persuasion is fundamental to the functioning of democratic systems, enabling the articulation of diverse viewpoints and the formation of collective will.

Conversely, the art of persuasion in the political arena is susceptible to manipulation, potentially leading to divisive outcomes, the perpetuation of oppressive regimes, and the entrenchment of power through unethical means (Burnell & Reeve, 1984). Historical and contemporary examples abound where persuasive techniques have been employed to disseminate misinformation, exploit societal anxieties, and undermine democratic principles. The capacity to influence public opinion, when divorced from ethical considerations, poses a significant threat to social harmony and political integrity. Therefore, a critical understanding of the psychological principles of persuasion is not only valuable for those seeking to enact positive change but also essential for citizens to discern manipulative tactics and safeguard against their potentially harmful effects. The ethical dimensions of political persuasion warrant careful consideration, emphasising the responsibility of communicators to employ these powerful tools with integrity and a commitment to truth and transparency.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Persuasion is part and parcel of our daily lives. We are being persuaded through marketing, which encourages us to trust in a product and purchase it, and we are also persuaded politically, through the use of media (including social media), to trust and vote for a particular individual or political party - or even to change our views about select social issues.

The pervasive influence of online information necessitates strategies for discerning truth from falsehood, with fact-checking emerging as a primary mechanism for reclaiming agency in the face of persuasive digital content. However, the effectiveness of traditional fact-checking initiatives is increasingly challenged by widespread technology illiteracy and a general lack of understanding regarding the methodologies and limitations of such processes. Consequently, individuals often find themselves excessively reliant on the information presented online, whether generated by advanced artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT or curated through the fact-checking mechanisms implemented by social media platforms. This reliance creates a vulnerability, potentially subjecting users to a system that prioritises visibility and vocalisation over factual accuracy.

Recent shifts in the approach to online content moderation underscore this evolving landscape. The acquisition of X (formerly Twitter) by Elon Musk saw the implementation of a community-driven fact-checking system, signaling a move away from centralized, expert-led verification. More significantly, in early 2025, Mark Zuckerberg's announcement that Meta (the parent company of Instagram, Threads, and Facebook) would discontinue its established fact-checking program in favour of community-driven "notes" represents a substantial departure from traditional moderation practices (Gibson, 2025).

While the notion of empowering online communities to self-regulate and determine the veracity of information may initially appear appealing, a critical examination of the potential ramifications is crucial. The decentralisation of fact-checking raises fundamental questions about the inherent costs associated with this newfound "empowerment" and the freedom granted to individuals to subjectively define what constitutes a fact. Concerns regarding the potential for bias, the spread of misinformation through coordinated efforts, and the erosion of objective truth become paramount.

The move towards community-driven verification systems, coupled with the increasing sophistication of persuasive technologies, unequivocally highlights the

growing urgency for individuals to develop robust critical thinking skills and gain access to effective tools for understanding and counteracting persuasive techniques. In an environment where the gatekeepers of truth are shifting and the digital landscape is saturated with potentially misleading information, the ability to independently evaluate claims and identify manipulation has become more critical than ever. The future of informed decision-making hinges on empowering individuals with the necessary skills and resources to navigate this complex information ecosystem.

1.3 Research Objective/Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the historical use of political propaganda to influence public opinion and mobilise support for political agendas, as well as the psychology of persuasion and how cognitive biases and social influence can be leveraged to manipulate behaviour. Apart from a review of propaganda and how it shaped history, a survey utilising certain persuasion techniques was also sent out to the general public. Through this survey, this researcher aimed to gather any signs that persuasion could also occur in a matter of a few minutes, through the use of the written word.

1.3.1 Specific Objectives

This study will also look at how everyday persuasion happens around us - be it through marketing techniques, social media, or even how news articles are written to influence in one direction or another. The public needs to be better informed about persuasion, if it ever hopes to be in more control of its own lives and thoughts.

1.4 Research Questions

This research endeavour seeks to examine the employment of persuasive techniques within political history, elucidating their implementation and the factors contributing to their efficacy. Furthermore, this study will endeavour to ascertain the susceptibility of individuals to manipulation via specific persuasive strategies, as investigated through survey data. Finally, this research will explore the resources available to individuals for safeguarding against persuasion or enhancing their capacity to recognise attempts at manipulation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

With the advent of the internet and the ensuing instantaneous access to information, the proliferation of misinformation has become widespread. Concurrently, the process of persuasion has been streamlined, resulting in a constant influx of messages, both overt and subtle, intended to influence our emotional and cognitive states. While certain forms of persuasion, such as product marketing, may be considered benign, the ethical implications become questionable when such strategies are directed towards encouraging vulnerable individuals, such as young people, to engage in activities like gambling. Indeed, a number of jurisdictions that have legalised gambling have subsequently enacted legislation to restrict marketing practices and their associated influences.

Persuasion is also a prominent feature in the realm of politics, particularly during election periods. Elections in the United States, in particular, have garnered significant attention in this regard, potentially due to the global ramifications of their outcomes. Fitzgerald (2024) posits that persuasion is an essential competency for individuals holding public office, and that the manifestation of persuasive techniques varies depending on the context, whether it be a debate, a formal address, or a meeting.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This research delves into the multifaceted phenomenon of persuasion, exploring its intricate workings within both historical and contemporary political landscapes. A central component of this study involves an online survey designed to meticulously assess participants' political inclinations and underlying values. This initial assessment serves as a crucial step in guiding respondents towards a carefully curated case study. The primary objective of this case study is to experimentally investigate the potential for persuasive messaging to induce cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is formally defined as the psychological discomfort arising from the simultaneous presence of conflicting cognitions, which may include beliefs, values, or attitudes, or from a discrepancy between one's actions and one's cognitions. This inherent conflict engenders a state of disequilibrium, compelling individuals to engage in processes that mitigate this dissonance. Such processes typically involve the modification of existing cognitions or behaviors to achieve a state of greater internal consistency and psychological harmony. This research will specifically aim to determine whether individuals can be prompted to question deeply held values through targeted information. Given the online administration of the survey, the methodology inherently limits the researcher's ability to engage in direct follow-up inquiries to explore the nuanced reasoning behind individual responses. This constraint necessitates a careful consideration of the survey design and the interpretation of the collected data.

While the principles and techniques of persuasion permeate numerous facets of human interaction, this research strategically concentrates its analytical lens on the political sphere. To a lesser extent, the study will also incorporate an examination of persuasion as it manifests in the realm of marketing. The inclusion of marketing serves a supportive function, providing comparative insights and reinforcing theoretical underpinnings. However, it is important to delineate the scope of this inquiry; other manifestations of persuasion, as well as related concepts such as

manipulation, fall outside the purview of this research. This focused approach allows for a more in-depth and rigorous analysis of persuasion within the specified domains, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of its impact on political attitudes and, potentially, individual values.

1.7 Organisation of the Study

This dissertation comprises five principal sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, and Discussion and Conclusion. Chapter Two presents an exhaustive analysis of the extant scholarly research. Chapter Three delineates the methodological framework employed in this investigation. Chapter Four systematically and objectively presents the results of the survey administered. Chapter Five provides an interpretation of the empirical findings, contextualised within the local milieu, and establishes connections between the results, relevant literature, and theoretical constructs. This chapter also serves to conclude the research. Subheadings are incorporated to enhance the clarity and organisation of the study and to elucidate the empirical outcomes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As described in the Introduction, propaganda is a form of psychological persuasion aimed at the masses. It has been a prevalent tool employed by various regimes, whether totalitarian or democratic, during times of war and peace.

While persuasion can take on more personalised approaches, propaganda often utilises mass communication techniques to influence public opinion and behaviour (Llaneza, 2019; Manzoor et al., 2019).

The use of propaganda and persuasion has a long-standing history, dating back to ancient civilisations. However, it was in the 20th century, particularly during the First and Second World Wars, that the foundations for effective propaganda were firmly established (Llaneza, 2019). Propaganda tactics have evolved over time, adapting to technological advancements and the changing communication landscape (Manzoor et al., 2019). Today, the prevalence of propaganda and persuasion in political, social, and commercial spheres is a testament to their persistent influence on human cognition and behaviour.

The nature of propaganda and its distinction from other forms of persuasive communication have been a subject of scholarly discourse. Propaganda is characterised by its attempt to influence the masses, often through the use of emotionally charged appeals and the selective presentation of information. In contrast, psychological persuasion may take a more personalised approach, tailoring messages to the individual's personality traits and preferences.

The main parts of propaganda include the following:

- Focusing on emotion rather than logic or reason
- Presenting a selective and biased portrayal of information
- Appealing to the masses rather than individuals

- Utilising mass communication channels for dissemination (Vlăduțescu, 2014)

The key aspects of personalised persuasion are:

- Tailoring messages to the individual's personality traits and preferences
- Utilising more personalised communication channels
- Appealing to the individual's self-interest and decision-making processes

Throughout history, both propaganda and personalised persuasion have played significant roles in shaping political, social, and cultural landscapes. The use of these techniques has had profound implications, both positive and negative, on the course of human events. (Cialdini, 1993; Manzoor et al., 2019)

2.1 Persuasive Language and Linguistics

The concepts of persuasion and manipulation are permanently challenging to define and have been objects of heated debate for decades, if not centuries. They both describe interpersonal activities with the asymmetrical direction of influence, in which, in Aristotelian terms, an 'orator' influences a 'hearer' (Harré, 2011). The difference is that while persuasion denotes activities and influence in the hearer's interests, manipulation implies treating the hearer instrumentally by the orator (ibid.) or that the orator has some ulterior motive and that the hearer is unaware of the direction of the communication process and its final, intended outcome (Tokarz, 2006). Therefore, as these two terms are discursive (or, in broader terms, semiotic; therefore involving signs and symbols to convey meaning), they are both very complex in both cognitive and moral sense.

Some thinkers believe that the concept of manipulation is broader, as it also includes activities for the hearer's benefit (Reboul, 2021). Others tend to believe that any kind of persuasion involves at least some elements of manipulation (Tokarz, 2006). Tokarz (2002) defines persuasion as any communicative activity that involves the conscious aim of bringing about a change, either in the addressee's attitude or belief system or

even in their behaviour. In that sense, manipulation could be called covert persuasion (ibid.; Łukowski, 2012).

According to Teun Van Dijk (2006), the term manipulation is one of the essential notions in Critical Discourse Analysis. He defines it as a form of discursive influence characterised by “illegitimate domination confirming social inequality”, which interferes with understanding, resulting in biases (ibid.). Therefore, it is a form of abuse of power. As power is directly related to knowledge, the manipulator takes advantage of the specific knowledge necessary to tackle the topics that victims of manipulation lack (Wodak, 1987).

As for the actual content of manipulative discourse, not only is it truth-defective, i.e., not necessarily entirely false but not true either, but it is also ethically problematic (Todd, 2013). Due to those deficiencies, manipulation is a deceptive practice breaking at least one of the Gricean conversational maxims, i.e., the maxim of quality: “Do not say what you know to be false” (Grice, 1975, 1989). The breach is due to the manipulator’s insincere behaviour aimed to influence their interlocutor without letting the latter notice that influence. Perelman argues that speech manipulation violates the truth and constitutes a failed argument; therefore, he calls it pseudo-argumentation (Perelman, 1989). Others view manipulation as a means of achieving goals through persuasion (Kress, 1990; Van Dijk, 1996).

Taillard (2000) and Blass (2002) develop pragmatic aspects of manipulative communication in detail and tackle the complex relationship between informative and manipulative intentions. Their works share one common feature, i.e., that manipulation is often characterised by using ambiguous words and phrases, sometimes uttered out of context or in an improper context.

Instead, an orator-manipulator employs various types of formal and informal fallacies. Some linguistic elements typical of persuasive discourse may signal the possibility of manipulation. Detecting them requires the hearer to have critical thinking skills, some external knowledge, general vigilance and a certain amount of suspicion or limited

trust in everything they hear. However, a high accumulation of linguistic rhetorical devices in the utterance, eg., presuppositions, metaphors, rhetorical questions, or passive voice reducing the prominence of specific agents, may sometimes signal that we are dealing with manipulative discourse.

Researchers from various fields dealing with persuasion and manipulation highlight several possible characteristics of manipulative discourse, most of which reflect and expand three classical Aristotelian overall rhetorical strategies: ethos (particular methods and practical techniques used to convince listeners, primarily concerned about the speaker's credibility), pathos (taking advantage or optionally also changing the emotional state of the hearer), and logos (the arguments themselves and their logical structure and form of delivery, i.e. argumentation):

1. Ethos – in rhetorical tradition, it comprises good sense, high moral character, and goodwill. Persuasive messages employing ethos are often constructed to emphasise elements such as trustworthiness, respect, titles, accolades, accomplishments, humanitarian work, authority, and empathy (Carey, 1996). Following significant 20th century discoveries in social psychology, Cialdini (2013) presented a more contemporary version of this classic typology, i.e., six principles of persuasion, which was later expanded to seven:

a) reciprocity: it is based on the social exchange principle and means that people feel obligated to reciprocate favours or concessions they have received. This principle is used in persuasion to encourage indebtedness and compliance, taking advantage of people's fundamental need to reciprocate, possibly making their decisions detrimental to their best interests;

b) commitment (and consistency): this principle, based on cognitive dissonance theory, holds that people seek internal consistency in their ideas, attitudes, and behaviours. When people commit to a course of action, they are likely to stick to it to retain their self-esteem and prevent psychological distress. Manipulative exploitation of this principle entails eliciting initial small promises or public pledges, gradually

increasing demands, and exploiting the desire for consistency to gain compliance. Such manipulative approaches may cause people to continue engaging in behaviours or beliefs inconsistent with their valid preferences or values;

c) social proof: people tend to follow the actions of others, especially when they are uncertain about what to do. When describing it, Cialdini referred to Solomon Asch's 1951 experiment that demonstrated that people were willing to go against evident logic out of a need to conform. This principle suggests that showing evidence of others' behaviour or opinions can influence an individual's decisions. For example, testimonials or reviews can persuade people to buy a product or service, and undecided voters who decide at the last minute to cast their vote are quite often guided by the polls rather than by their views or self-interest, which is also named the bandwagon effect (Bartels, 1988; Lanoue & Bowler, 1998; Schmitt-Beck, 1996);

d) liking – based on social psychology and interpersonal attraction theories, the concept of liking proposes that people are likelier to be persuaded by others they find likeable or similar. Manipulative exploitation of liking entails strategically building rapport, flattery, or similarity to ingratiate oneself and influence others' decisions or actions. Such manipulation may take advantage of people's desire for affiliation and connection, causing them to be convinced by superficial charm or phoney camaraderie rather than solid arguments or proof;

e) authority – drawing on Milgram's obedience experiments (Milgram, 1974), the principle of authority holds that people are more inclined to comply with requests from perceived authority figures or experts. Manipulative exploitation of authority entails presenting oneself or others as competent and trustworthy authorities to obtain obedience or acquiescence (Cialdini, 2013). This manipulation may take advantage of people's deference to authority, causing them to abandon critical judgment and comply with requests or directions that may not be in their best interests;

f) scarcity (exclusivity, rarity, urgency, or excess demand): a manipulator creates an impression of the exclusivity or scarcity of a given commodity that they want to sell to someone, an idea they want accepted by the speaker(s), or a message they present as an alleged secret (Cialdini, 2013). Some specific form of this tactic could be based on making the impression that the issue is urgent (time scarcity or urgency).

In building ethos, which refers to the credibility and ethical appeal of the speaker or writer, metadiscourse markers play a crucial role. They are an essential part of rhetoric and communication, used to help structure discourse, engage with the audience, and manage the interaction between the writer/speaker and the reader/listener. Some particular metadiscourse markers could be regarded as particularly important in building credibility, including:

(a) Hedges are language strategies used to reduce the strength or certainty of a statement. They suggest that the author is not making a forceful, absolute assertion but rather expressing some ambiguity or qualification. Examples include phrases like “it seems that”, “perhaps”, and “to some extent”, as well as the usage of modal verbs like “might” and “could”;

(b) Emphatics (or boosters) – these are linguistic elements that are employed to support or emphasise a specific point or argument in the text. They help to make the writer’s assertions more powerful or persuasive. Emphatics include intensifying adverbs (eg., “very”, “extremely”) with certainty markers (eg., “certainly”, “surely”, “absolutely”), superlatives (eg., “best”, “most”), or rhetorical techniques that emphasise the importance or relevance of specific ideas;

(c) Evidentials – they are linguistic markers or statements that show the source or certainty of information in a given utterance and which may be divided according to several features including (Chafe, 1986; Hassler, 2010; Kotwica, 2016): the mode of knowing (direct, i.e., acquired by senses vs indirect, i.e., acquired by report), the type of source (self, others, or data), the accessibility to the source (private vs universal

access to data) and the degree of (im)precision of the source (precise, i.e., unequivocally identified vs non-precise, i.e. impossible to identify as no data is provided). They include direct quotations (they indicate that the information being presented is directly sourced from another person or text, eg., “According to Jonas (2012), ...”), citations and references (addressing specific sources);

(d) Self-mentions – markers of this kind provide a way to demonstrate authorial identity and recognition in a specific discipline. Using first-person pronouns generally improves the status of statements in the eyes of the audience (Martínez, 2004), highlighting the speaker’s or writer’s role, experiences, or responsibility, thereby personalising the discourse and enhancing credibility through personal accountability, eg., “I believe...”, “In my experience...”, “We will see...”.

2. Pathos – in the Aristotelian triad, the Greek philosopher listed appeals to various emotions the speaker may use in their speech to increase the persuasive effect, i.e., fear, duty, hope, love, humour, gravity, and patriotism. In Mai’s (2016) classification, metadiscourse markers referring to pathos include:

(a) attitude markers – words that demonstrate the author’s approach to a notion, such as “hopefully”, “incredible”, and “unbelievable”;

(b) engagement markers – these include reader pronouns, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge, inclusive expressions, personalisations, directives, and questions (including rhetorical ones).

3. Logos – its elements include constructions with logical conclusions drawn from statistics, citing authority, or using comparison/analogy/precedent. From a linguistic point of view, multiple cohesion markers are required. One of the most comprehensive overviews of those was made by Hyland (1998), who has distinguished the following elements concerning, particularly, academic discourse. However, they may be easily applied to manipulative online discourse as one of their

main aim is to convince the recipients that a given piece is important and relevant, and thus they are virtually persuasive:

(a) Interpersonal metadiscourse – it is the language speakers or writers use to connect with their audience or to develop and maintain rapport, politeness, and interactional coherence, encompassing a variety of linguistic devices designed to manage the speaker or writer's engagement with the audience, including:

- Person markers – these are linguistic features that reveal the writer's and reader's position in the text (or the speaker's and hearer's position in the speech). They may contain pronouns (eg., "I", "we", "you", "they") or other indicators signalling the writer's participation in the discourse;

- Attributors – these are discourse markers referring to authorities to enhance the persuasiveness of the proposition;

(b) Textual metadiscourse – it is "the function that language has of creating text, of relating itself to the context – to the situation and the preceding text" (Halliday, 1978):

- Logical connectives – these are symbols or words/phrases used in logic to connect propositions or statements, resulting in more complex propositions. These connectives help us explain relationships between statements and form logical arguments, eg., conjunctions ("and"), disjunctions ("or"), negation ("not"), implication ("if... then"), or biconditional ("if and only if");

- Frame markers – these are linguistic devices used to signal the structure, organisation, or progression of discourse. They help guide readers through the text, indicating transitions between different parts of the discourse or highlighting important points. Frame markers can include words, phrases, or even punctuation that serve as signposts for readers to follow the flow of the argument or narrative. Examples of frame markers include "firstly", "secondly", "in conclusion", "on the other hand", "in contrast", "moreover", "however", or "therefore". These markers provide cues about

the relationship between different ideas, helping readers to understand the text more easily and facilitating comprehension;

- Endophoric markers – these refer to some other portions of the text and help to highlight additional ideational material, assisting addressees in recovering the addresser's argumentative aim. Furthermore, endophoric markers may be used to connect visuals and words, allowing the audience to form messages using images. Moreover, when used skillfully, they enable the speaker to repeat the persuasive message;
- Code glosses – they are characterised as actions that the writer or speaker takes to elaborate their discourse and make it plain and accessible to their audience, or as “small acts of propositional embellishment”, eg. reformulations (either expansions like “In other words...”, or reductions like “More specifically...”), exemplifications (“like”, “for example”, etc.).

Making use of the above elements does not mean that the discourse or language is manipulative, however, anyone who is attempting to manipulate through language needs to be proficient in the use of such language. This would ensure that the intended impression is made on the listener. This would be regardless of sound logic or consistency in the argument itself.

2.2 Persuasion and the Truth

There may be a false belief that in order to persuade and manipulate there needs to be an element of lying (Jakubowski, 2024). While there may be a relationship between manipulation and lying or deception, this may not necessarily be the case. In fact, someone may tell the truth, and still be manipulating the other individual. Therefore, manipulation should not be expected to always include lies (Parret, 1978). Manipulation involves the attempt to influence another individual or even control them. This is generally done with intent, as well as secretly (in the sense, the other is

not aware that you are trying to persuade them). This manipulation aims to get the individual to believe or do something that you want them to. On the other hand, lying involves the intended dissemination of untrue or false information, with the intent to deceive.

Manipulation can make use of a number of untruthful practices, such as the use of selective disclosure, exaggeration, or even the removal of information. However, if the speaker intends to be truthful, but they themselves are unaware that what they are conveying is not the truth, then this cannot be taken to be a form of manipulation through false information, as the intention of the speaker was in good faith.

Cohen (2023) argues that non-deceptive manipulation is frequent and commonplace, and this can be seen through advertising. Cohen explains that when seeing an advert, the intentions of the advertiser are clear (to buy or make use of a product, for example), however, the advertiser makes use of other manipulation techniques in order to convince their audience.

2.3 Persuasion and Emotions

Psychological principles significantly influence the dissemination of ideas online, with emotional arousal emerging as a key determinant of virality. A comprehensive analysis of 3,000 tweets from Austrian politicians revealed a strong correlation between heightened emotional arousal and increased resharing (Fagan, 2024). Similarly, an examination of influencer tweets demonstrated that emotional content outweighed argumentative quality in predicting sharing behaviour. News articles employing surprise and exclamation marks in headlines also exhibited higher rates of sharing.

A pronounced negativity bias is evident within emotional responses. A study of 51 million current affairs tweets identified three primary drivers of message virality: negativity, causal argumentation, and threats to personal or societal values. Both

authentic tweets and fabricated news stories were more likely to achieve viral status when imbued with strong negative emotions. An analysis of 105,000 news stories demonstrated that each additional negative word in the headline increased click-through rates by 2.3%.

However, excessive reliance on sensationalism, often termed "clickbait," may hinder sharing due to perceived manipulative intent. Numerous studies have reported that positive emotions can enhance content sharing, potentially because users are inclined to disseminate positive news (Fagan, 2024). Additionally, dominance has been identified as a powerful predictor of viral advertising, with a subsequent study attributing this effect to feelings of psychological empowerment.

This researcher posits that part of the reason why consumers are more likely to share positive news stories relates to their own desire to be seen as "positive" and non-argumentative. Unless individuals are in a political sphere, and therefore their own followers online happen to be in the political sphere as well, then the goal is to appear friendly and non-argumentative to the outside world. This can be seen by observing what individuals are posting online, such as through their stories, posts, or even comments. Individuals are more likely to post their 'good' moments, sometimes even highlighting and exaggerating them, to be viewed more positively.

2.4 Digital Persuasion

The digital realm is replete with persuasive techniques, ranging from subtle nudges to more overt manipulations (Fagan, 2024). Digital nudges, such as defaults, friction, and reinforcement, can be harnessed for both beneficial and harmful purposes. When employed in a transparent, optional, and beneficial manner, nudges can promote positive behaviour change. However, when used in a manipulative or deceptive way, they can constitute "dark patterns," (Fagan, 2024) categorised by the FORCES framework (Frame, Obstruct, Ruse, Compel, Entangle, Seduce).

Concurrently, psychological principles like negativity bias, the curiosity gap, and fluency are exploited to enhance the virality of social content. More insidious tactics, such as astroturfing (the creation of a fake grassroots movement to promote a product, policy or opinion, for example when the Russian Internet Research Agency influenced the results of the 2016 US elections), meta-nudging (attempting to influence individuals who can influence others, rather than going straight to your target), and inoculation (making use of a weak counterargument, to strengthen someone's existing belief, and thus make them resistant to further attacks), are employed to manufacture consensus. The increasing sophistication of technologies like predictive algorithms, generative AI, and virtual reality is poised to amplify the power of these techniques.

Recent research has formally categorised digital nudges into seven primary types: information provision, framing, salience, reminders and prompts, defaults and commitments, friction manipulation, reinforcement, and emotional engagement (Fagan, 2024).

Furthermore, advances in digital phenotyping have enabled the prediction of personality traits from digital footprints. A meta-analysis of 21 studies demonstrated the feasibility of predicting the Big Five personality traits from smartphone data, with correlations ranging from 0.23 to 0.35. Similarly, another meta-analysis revealed comparable correlations between the Big Five and social media data.

The practical implications of these findings are significant. A major Australian bank successfully employed personality-targeted advertising, achieving a conversion rate of 2.24% compared to 1.24% for generic messages. Generative AI, such as ChatGPT, has the potential to scale personalised persuasion, as demonstrated by a series of studies showing that AI-generated personalised messages are significantly more effective than non-personalised ones. This is one such example of a large business or corporation which made use of persuasive language to enhance their own business, rather than the interests of the clients that they serve.

The emerging landscape of virtual and augmented reality offers a fertile ground for psychological influence. A meta-analysis of 39 social studies revealed that virtual reality interventions have a more substantial impact on social attitudes than non-immersive methods.

2.5 Psychology of Political Persuasion

Political persuasion, a ubiquitous and often imperceptible force, constitutes the very bedrock of democratic discourse and the enduring dynamics of power in both liberal and illiberal politics. It is a sophisticated and multi-layered psychological phenomenon, extending far beyond simplistic appeals, fundamentally shaping individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours on matters of public concern. Understanding its intricate mechanisms requires a rigorous interdisciplinary lens, drawing insights from cognitive psychology, social psychology, communication studies, and political science.

The efficacy of political persuasion is inextricably linked to fundamental cognitive and social psychological processes. Several theoretical models provide explanatory frameworks for how individuals process persuasive messages and subsequently modify their attitudes or behaviours.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), posited by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), stands as a cornerstone in persuasion research. It postulates two distinct routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves high elaboration, where individuals engage in careful and thoughtful consideration of the argument's merits. Persuasion via this route is contingent upon the strength and quality of the arguments presented and leads to more enduring attitude change, greater resistance to counterpersuasion, and stronger correlations with behaviour. Conversely, the peripheral route is characterised by low elaboration, where individuals are influenced by heuristic cues such as source credibility, attractiveness, or the sheer number of arguments, rather than the substantive content. Persuasion through this route is typically temporary, less resistant to change, and weakly linked

to behaviour. The choice of route is determined by factors such as motivation (eg. personal relevance of the issue) and ability (eg. cognitive capacity, prior knowledge). Complementing the ELM, the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), developed by Chaiken (1987), also proposes a dual-process approach: systematic processing and heuristic processing. Systematic processing is akin to the ELM's central route, involving comprehensive and effortful scrutiny of information. Heuristic processing, similar to the peripheral route, relies on cognitive shortcuts or heuristics (eg., "experts are trustworthy," "consensus implies correctness"). A key distinction is the "sufficiency principle" within the HSM, suggesting that individuals strive to achieve a sufficient level of confidence in their judgment, employing heuristics unless systematic processing is deemed necessary to reach this threshold.

Social Judgment Theory (SJT), advanced by Sherif and Hovland (1961), offers a perspective rooted in existing attitudes. It posits that an individual's current attitude serves as an anchor, influencing their perception and evaluation of new persuasive messages. SJT introduces three latitudes: the latitude of acceptance, encompassing positions considered agreeable; the latitude of rejection, comprising positions deemed unacceptable; and the latitude of non-commitment, representing positions about which one feels neutral. Persuasion is most likely when the message falls within the latitude of acceptance or non-commitment. Messages falling within the latitude of rejection are often assimilated to the rejection latitude and can even lead to a "boomerang effect," reinforcing the original attitude. The degree of ego involvement significantly influences these latitudes: high ego involvement narrows the latitude of acceptance and widens the latitude of rejection, making persuasion more challenging.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, conceptualized by Festinger (1957), elucidates the psychological discomfort (dissonance) experienced when an individual holds two or more conflicting cognitions (beliefs, attitudes, values) or when their behaviour contradicts their beliefs. This uncomfortable state motivates individuals to reduce the dissonance, often by changing one of the dissonant cognitions, adding new cognitions, or trivializing the inconsistency. In political persuasion, this theory explains

how individuals might alter their political views to align with their actions (eg. voting for a candidate) or to reduce the discomfort of conflicting loyalties.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), hypothesise that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. This theory is crucial for understanding how group affiliation influences political persuasion. People are more likely to be persuaded by arguments originating from their in-group and to reject those from out-groups, especially when the issue is relevant to intergroup relations. The process of self-categorisation, where individuals define themselves as members of a particular social category, further reinforces the influence of in-group norms and attitudes on individual beliefs.

Finally, Robert Cialdini's (2001) principles of influence provide a practical taxonomy of psychological levers widely employed in persuasive contexts. These include:

- Reciprocity: The inherent human tendency to repay in kind.
- Commitment and Consistency: The desire to appear consistent with prior commitments and actions.
- Social Proof: The inclination to follow the lead of others, especially when uncertain.
- Authority: Deference to perceived experts or legitimate figures.
- Liking: The tendency to agree with people one likes.
- Scarcity: The perception that limited availability increases desirability.

These psychological principles, whether operating consciously or unconsciously, form the backbone of effective persuasive strategies in various domains, not least in the intricate world of politics.

2.5.1 Forms and Techniques of Political Persuasion

Political persuasion employs a sophisticated array of techniques, drawing from the aforementioned psychological principles to influence public opinion and behaviour.

These forms range from overt rhetorical appeals to subtle, almost imperceptible nudges.

Rhetorical Devices represent the classical art of persuasion. Aristotle's three appeals remain central: Ethos appeals to the speaker's credibility, character, and authority; Pathos evokes emotions in the audience; and Logos employs logical reasoning and evidence. Political discourse often blends these. A politician might establish ethos by highlighting their experience or moral integrity, evoke pathos through vivid narratives of suffering or triumph, and use logos by presenting statistical data or policy arguments.

Framing is a potent persuasive technique involving the presentation of an issue in a way that emphasises certain aspects while downplaying others, thereby influencing its interpretation (Entman, 1993). A policy might be framed as a matter of "economic growth" (gain frame) or "avoiding recession" (loss frame), each eliciting different psychological responses. Episodic framing focuses on individual cases or events, often evoking empathy or blame, whereas thematic framing places issues within a broader societal context, highlighting systemic causes or consequences. Politicians strategically choose frames to align with their objectives, whether to garner support for a specific policy or to demonise an opponent.

Metaphor and Analogy are powerful cognitive tools that simplify complex ideas and imbue them with emotional resonance. Describing immigration as a "flood" or a "tsunami" activates schemas of uncontrolled force and devastation, fostering fear and a sense of threat. Conversely, referring to a political initiative as a "bridge to the future" or a "safety net" evokes positive associations of connection, security, and progress. These linguistic devices are not merely decorative; they fundamentally shape how issues are conceptualised and evaluated.

Narrative Persuasion, or storytelling, is an ancient yet enduring form of influence. By weaving factual information into compelling narratives, persuaders can bypass critical scrutiny and engage audiences on an emotional level. Stories allow individuals to

vicariously experience events, fostering identification with characters and promoting empathy or aversion. Political campaigns frequently employ personal anecdotes of voters, or aspirational narratives of national destiny, to resonate with the public and convey their message indirectly but powerfully.

Beyond rhetoric, emotional appeals are central. Fear appeals are highly effective in politics, often used to galvanise support against an opponent or to justify a policy by highlighting potential dangers (eg, "vote for us, or face economic collapse"). However, fear appeals must be carefully calibrated; too much fear without a clear solution can lead to inaction or defensive avoidance. Hope appeals inspire optimism and collective action towards a desired future. Anger can mobilise individuals against perceived injustices or common enemies, while disgust can be used to demonise groups or policies.

Credibility and source characteristics are pivotal. A message delivered by a perceived expert or a trustworthy figure is inherently more persuasive. Expertise can be conveyed through credentials, experience, or specialised knowledge. Trustworthiness is often built through perceived honesty, integrity, and consistency. Attractiveness, both physical and social, can also enhance persuasion, particularly via the peripheral route, as people are more inclined to listen to and agree with those they find appealing.

Message characteristics themselves hold persuasive power. One-sided arguments present only the persuader's viewpoint, effective when the audience already agrees or is unlikely to be exposed to counter-arguments. Two-sided arguments, which acknowledge and refute opposing viewpoints, are more effective with educated or initially resistant audiences, as they enhance the persuader's credibility. The order of arguments (primacy vs. recency effects) can influence recall and impact. Repetition, while potentially leading to wear-out, can increase familiarity and liking for a message, particularly for simple political slogans.

Finally, understanding audience characteristics is paramount. Prior attitudes, deeply held values, demographic profiles, and underlying psychological needs (eg., need for cognition, need for closure) all modulate how persuasive messages are received and processed. Effective political persuasion involves tailoring messages to specific audience segments, aligning content with pre-existing beliefs, and leveraging salient values.

It is crucial to distinguish between legitimate persuasion and propaganda. While both aim to influence, propaganda often relies on misrepresentation, manipulation of emotions, and suppression of dissent to achieve its ends, sometimes crossing ethical boundaries. The line, however, can be permeable and subject to interpretation. Recent developments in nudging and behavioural economics also demonstrate how subtle alterations in choice can guide individuals towards certain decisions without explicit command or prohibition, offering a new dimension to political influence.

2.5.2 Application in Daily Life: Marketing and Social Media

The principles of political persuasion are not confined to electoral cycles or policy debates; they are intricately woven into the fabric of daily life, particularly evident in the realms of marketing and social media. These domains serve as fertile ground for understanding the pervasive nature of influence.

In marketing, the objective is to persuade consumers to purchase products or services, a goal directly analogous to persuading voters to support a candidate or policy. Cialdini's principles are overtly applied. Brand loyalty, for instance, is cultivated through strategies that encourage commitment and consistency, such as loyalty programs or limited-time offers that require an initial buy-in. Social proof is leveraged through testimonials, product reviews, and highlighting popular choices ("millions sold!"). Advertising frequently employs peripheral cues (eg, celebrity endorsements, appealing jingles, beautiful imagery) to influence consumers who are not highly motivated to scrutinise product details. Scarcity and urgency are omnipresent in

"limited stock" notifications or "flash sales," designed to trigger immediate action. The strategic use of authority (eg, doctors recommending a health product) or liking (eg, using popular influencers) is a standard practice to build trust and appeal. Emotional appeals, from evoking aspiration and joy to generating anxiety about missing out, are foundational to effective advertising campaigns.

Social media, perhaps more than any other contemporary medium, has become a dynamic arena for persuasion, blurring the lines between personal interaction, commerce, and political discourse. Its architecture inherently amplifies certain persuasive techniques:

- Echo chambers and filter bubbles: Algorithmic curation of content based on user preferences and past interactions leads to the reinforcement of existing beliefs and a significant reduction in exposure to diverse or counter-attitudinal information. This creates homogeneous information environments where in-group norms are solidified, making users highly susceptible to persuasive messages aligned with their pre-existing biases and resistant to external influence. This phenomenon underscores the power of social identity theory in shaping online persuasion.
- Virality and algorithmic amplification: The rapid dissemination of content, often emotionally charged, functions as a powerful form of social proof. A post or meme that garners numerous likes, shares, or comments is perceived as more credible or important, even if its factual basis is tenuous. Algorithms prioritise engagement, inadvertently amplifying sensational or divisive content that thrives on strong emotional reactions, irrespective of its truth value.
- Microtargeting: The vast amounts of personal data collected online allow for unprecedented levels of audience segmentation. Advertisers and political campaigns can craft highly tailored messages delivered to specific individuals or demographic groups based on their interests, values, and vulnerabilities. This precision targeting enhances the relevance of persuasive appeals and minimizes exposure to messages unlikely to resonate.
- Influencer marketing: The rise of social media influencers capitalises on the principle of liking and perceived authority. Individuals follow influencers they

admire or relate to, making them highly receptive to their recommendations, whether for products, lifestyles, or political viewpoints. This often bypasses traditional gatekeepers of information, allowing for direct and seemingly authentic persuasive communication.

- Disinformation and misinformation: Social media platforms are rife with intentionally false or misleading information. These campaigns often leverage cognitive biases (eg, confirmation bias, availability heuristic) and strong emotional appeals (fear, anger, outrage) to spread rapidly. The speed and scale of dissemination, coupled with the lack of immediate fact-checking, make such content highly persuasive, particularly to those already susceptible to its underlying narrative.
- User-generated content as social proof: Beyond official campaigns, individuals' own posts, comments, and shares act as peer-to-peer persuasion. Seeing friends or trusted figures endorse a product or a political stance serves as powerful social proof, influencing others within their network. This decentralised form of persuasion is incredibly potent, as it bypasses the perceived commercial or political motives of official sources.

The interplay of these elements creates a complex persuasive ecosystem on social media, making individuals both targets and unwitting agents of influence in their daily digital interactions.

2.5.3 Persuasion in Politics and Political Discourse

The arena of politics is arguably the most explicit battleground for persuasion, where the stakes involve governance, public policy, and national direction. Political persuasion manifests in a myriad of forms, from grand electoral campaigns to nuanced legislative debates.

In campaigns and elections, the primary objective is to persuade voters to support a particular candidate or party. Voter targeting is a highly sophisticated practice, employing demographic, psychographic, and behavioural data to segment the

electorate and deliver customised messages. This microtargeting allows campaigns to appeal to specific interests, values, or anxieties of different voter groups, ensuring message resonance.

Issue framing is central to political rhetoric. A proposed tax reform might be framed by its proponents as "tax relief for working families" (positive gain frame) to highlight its benefits, while opponents might frame it as "tax cuts for the wealthy" (negative loss frame) to emphasize its perceived inequity. Similarly, environmental policies might be framed as "protecting our planet" or "job-killing regulations," each evoking distinct emotional and cognitive responses.

Negative campaigning, or attack ads, are pervasive. These often leverage fear appeals (eg, depicting an opponent as dangerous or incompetent) or disgust (eg, highlighting scandals or perceived moral failings). While controversial, such tactics can be effective in lowering an opponent's favourability and mobilising one's own base through shared animosity.

Political rallies and public events serve as powerful vehicles for persuasion, leveraging the principles of social proof and emotional contagion. The collective effervescence generated in these gatherings reinforces shared identity and strengthens commitment to the cause, making individuals more receptive to the leader's message and more resistant to dissenting views. Candidate image building, often relying on ethos (demonstrating leadership qualities, experience) and liking (appearing relatable, charismatic), is meticulously managed to create a compelling persona. The deliberate use of "wedge issues"—highly divisive topics designed to split an opponent's base or galvanise one's own—is also a common persuasive tactic.

In policy debates and legislative processes, persuasion takes on a more deliberative, though still strategic, form. Lobbying, for instance, relies heavily on reciprocity (eg, political contributions, future support) and appeals to authority (eg., presenting expert testimony or research). Public relations campaigns by interest groups employ

sophisticated framing and narrative techniques to shape public opinion on specific policies. Parliamentary discourse, often characterised by intricate rhetorical manoeuvres, aims to persuade colleagues, constituents, and the broader public through logical argumentation (logos), emotional appeals (pathos), and demonstrations of competence (ethos).

Crisis communication is another domain where political persuasion is paramount. During national crises, leaders must persuade the public of their competence, empathy, and ability to navigate challenges. This involves carefully crafted messages designed to reassure, mobilise, or unify, often leveraging the principles of authority and trustworthiness to maintain public confidence.

Finally, the rhetoric of leadership itself is a masterclass in political persuasion. Effective leaders inspire, reassure, and mobilise populations through their speeches and public appearances. They employ a range of persuasive techniques to articulate a vision, define common enemies, or galvanise collective action, demonstrating the profound psychological impact of compelling communication on a mass scale.

Chapter 3 Methodology

In this research, the question was whether or not individuals were aware of their own political leanings, whether their values matched with their self-described political leaning, and ultimately, can one particular value shift slightly in opinion during the course of a short survey.

The survey, which was created for this research, included a section to request consent, and consent and confidentiality were explained. Another section involved basic demographic information (gender, age, educational level achieved til this point, nationality, and main residence in childhood - whether locally or abroad).

The following section related to political views, where participants were faced with three options to choose from, which were:

- a) The government should play a significant role in regulating the economy, Social progress and individual rights are more important than tradition, and International cooperation and diplomacy are essential for world peace.
- b) Economic freedom is essential for individual prosperity, Traditional values and social norms should be upheld, and A strong military is necessary for national security.
- c) Income inequality is a major problem that requires government intervention. The government should not interfere in personal matters, and National interests should always come first.

Apart from the above, participants were asked directly to mark whether they were:

- a) Right-leaning
- b) Left-leaning
- c) Centric

Through these two questions, we could see whether the political values marked in the first question matched with the political ideology the participants voted for. For

this survey, the first set of values related to left-wing values, the second set related to right-wing values, and the final set of values related to a more centrist approach.

The next part of the survey involved the cases, whereby the individuals' values were challenged in a direct way. For this purpose, it was what the participants chose in terms of values (not what they thought their political leanings to be) which determined which case they had to reply to. For values labelled (a) above, the participants had to reply to a case about immigration. For the values labelled (b), participants had to reply to a case about abortion, which is still illegal in Malta. For values labelled c), participants had to reply to a case about the right to vote. Each case questioned the participant's initial values and opinions about the topic, and then, through persuasive techniques, such as emphasis, exaggeration, and facts, participants were challenged with differing opinions about their topic. In the end, participants were questioned whether they still felt the same way about the overarching topic.

For example, in the case of abortion, participants were provided with real testimonies of women who had to seek abortions abroad, as well as women who were considering abortion due to medical complications. Emotive language brought these women to life in these cases, focusing more on the painful emotions, rather than on the logistical or logical.

In the case of the right to vote, participants were shown results from the Brexit referendum held in the UK, where voters ultimately decided to leave the European Union (EU). Analysis had shown that the majority of voters in favour of Brexit had been elderly (60+), and those in favour of staying within the EU were mostly voters in their 20s. This resulted in the question of whether or not the elderly should get the right to vote in such referendums, when the result will mostly impact the young.

The survey was a self-administered survey, which participants chose to fill in willingly, and in their own free time, on their own personal devices. They were not observed while filling in the survey, to ensure that responses were not influenced by how they

wanted to be perceived by the researcher. The survey only took a few minutes to complete, to avoid response fatigue.

Self-administered surveys or questionnaires tend to have fewer open questions, therefore leading to less fatigue from the participants' side (Bryman, 2016). The design is easy to follow, to minimise the risk of a respondent omitting a question, or responding inaccurately to what they intend. While self-administered surveys include a number of advantages, they also include disadvantages which are limitations to this research, with the main limitation being the inability to prompt or probe for further information, thus understanding the complex mechanisms which can persuade an individual.

The survey was created and shared through Google Forms. This is a type of survey which is commonly used in the Maltese Islands, and therefore it was chosen to ensure that most respondents are familiar and comfortable with the platform. The sampling of the survey was through convenience, and to a certain extent, also snowball sampling. Respondents were found through posts on social media and social media pages, and respondents willingly shared the survey with their family, friends, and also followers on their own social media. This ensured that the responses could be varied, and the researcher could also minimise their own bias in this way - by not selecting or choosing who had access to the survey, thus limiting responses. Nevertheless, one still needs to be careful to not over-generalise. Regardless of how the sampling came to be, one needs to note that findings can only be generalised to the population from which the sample was taken (Bryman, 2016). However, this gives us an indication of whether or not individuals in the Maltese Islands match their beliefs with their political votes, and whether or not their views on certain 'intense' topics can be swayed.

Chapter 4: Results

The survey, entitled “Political Views in Real-Life Scenarios”, was disseminated from October 2024 til November 2024. It collected 51 responses, mostly through convenience and snowball sampling. All participants consented to participate in the survey.

4.1 Demographic and Political Information

62.7% of respondents identified as female, and 37.3% identified as male. None identified as gender non-conforming or non-binary.

What is your Gender?

51 responses

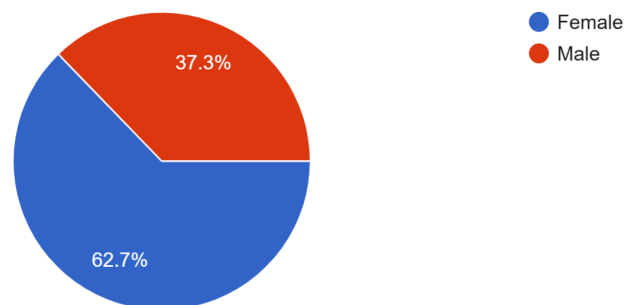


Fig.1 - Gender

The majority of respondents were in the 26-36 age range (51%). 19.6% were in the 37-50 age range, 17.6% were in the 51-65 age range, 9.8% were 18-25, and finally 2% were 66 years old or older.

What is your Age?

51 responses

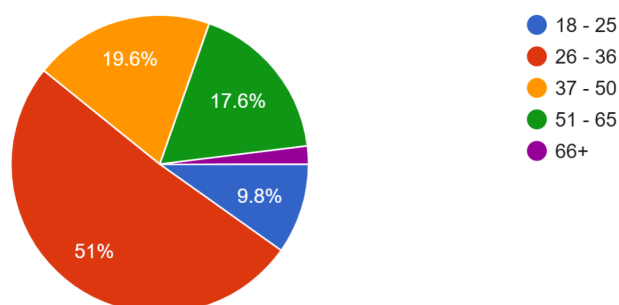


Fig. 2 - Age

Respondents were then asked about their nationality, as well as the primary place of residence during their childhood. This was essential since the political themes presented in the survey were targeting mainly those born and raised in the Maltese Islands.

In fact, 94.1% were of Maltese nationality, with the primary place of residence during childhood being Malta. Other respondents were from Poland (1 respondent), and South Africa (1 respondent). Another respondent identified as an Albanian national, who was raised on the sister island of Gozo.

Participants were also asked their highest level of education completed. One query related to persuasion is whether education level attained had an influence on whether or not someone could be more susceptible to persuasion. The majority of respondents had completed up to a Postgraduate degree (56.3%), the second largest group had completed til Bachelor's level (22.9%). 18.8% had completed up to Doctorate level, and 2.1% had completed up to Secondary School.

Highest Level of Education Completed

48 responses

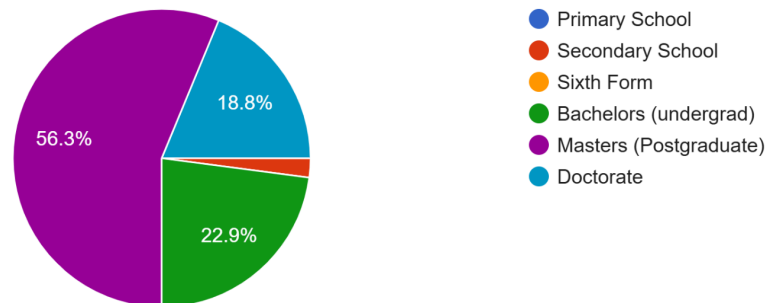


Fig. 3- Education

Following this section, participants were taken to another section related to their Political Values. The aim of this was to confirm whether participants were aware of what values they held, and which political leaning is more close to their values.

The majority (60.8%) voted that the government should play a significant role in regulating the economy, that social progress and individual rights are more important than tradition, and that international cooperation and diplomacy are essential for world peace. The second largest group (21.6%) voted that economic freedom is essential for individual prosperity, traditional values and social norms should be upheld, and a strong military is necessary for national security. Finally, 17.6% voted that income inequality is a major problem which requires government intervention, that the government should not interfere in personal matters, and that national interests should always come first.

Which of the following relate the most to your political views

51 responses



Fig 4 - olitical Views

The respondents were then asked to choose if they are more Left-Leaning, Right Leaning, Centrist, or if they Didn't Know what their political leaning was. 49% chose that they identified as centrist, 19.6% identified as left leaning, 13.7% identified as right leaning, and 17.6% claimed to not know what their political leaning is.

What is your political leaning

51 responses

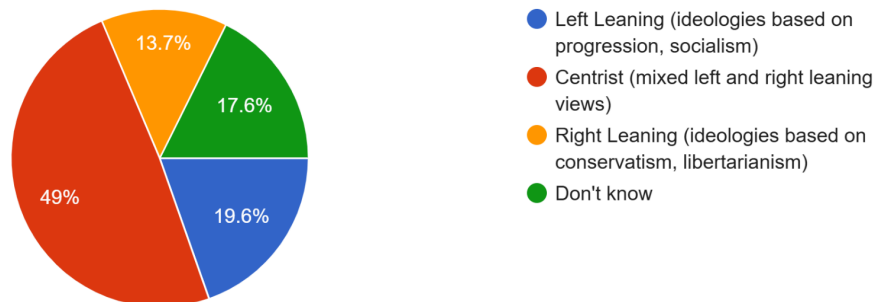


Fig. 5 - Political Leaning

4.2 Right-Leaning Case

Depending on what the response was to political views and values, the respondents were then taken to a particular case, with its own set of questions.

Therefore, the 21.6% who responded that “economic freedom is essential for individual prosperity, traditional values and social norms should be upheld, and a strong military is necessary for national security” were presented with a case related to abortion rights. The values they identified strongly with are related to right-leaning values, which are more traditional and conservative.

The first statement the participants had to respond to was that “Life begins at conception, therefore, abortion is always wrong”. The majority (36.4%) strongly agreed with this statement, while the second largest group (27.3%) neither agree nor disagree. On the other hand, 18.2% strongly disagreed with this statement. While 9.1% disagreed and agreed equally.

Life begins at conception, therefore, abortion is always wrong
11 responses

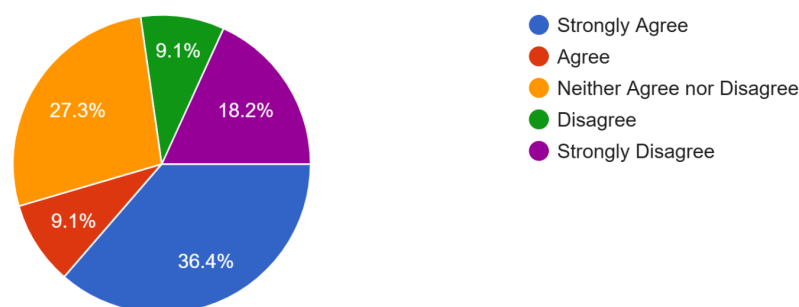


Fig. 6 - Abortion 1

The second statement related to how acceptable abortion is in cases of rape, which is an argument frequently also used in the pro-choice movement in order to persuade the pro-life movement to be less rigid in their views. In this case, 63.6% strongly

disagreed, while 27.3% disagreed, and 9.1% agreed with the statement “Abortion is only acceptable in cases of rape”.

Abortion is only acceptable in cases of rape

11 responses

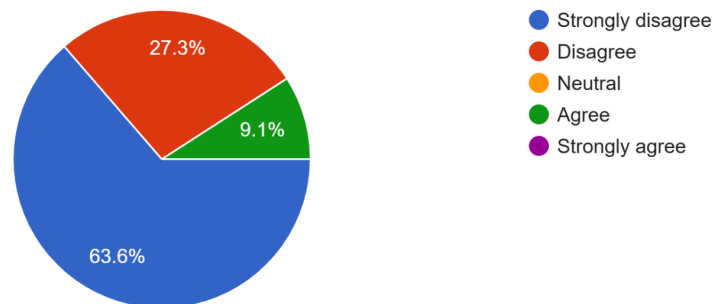


Fig . 7 - Abortion 2

The respondents were then faced with a true local story, which was summarised for brevity. Emotional language was used, and the text was written in the first person. In this story, a woman's wanted pregnancy became unviable as it was an ectopic pregnancy. Malta still has one of the most rigid abortion laws in the world, which means that there is a lot of bureaucracy to end unviable pregnancies, potentially putting the woman's life and fertility at risk. The first question related to the timely access to medical abortions in cases related to health risks. The vast majority (81.8%) agreed that access should be simpler and more timely. However, 9.1% replied "no" and "maybe".

The respondents were then faced with another case, this one was written in the third person, and the woman was given a name "Rita", which is a common old name in Malta. In this case, Rita is already a mother of two, and she is 50 years old. She thought she was experiencing menopause symptoms, however, while she was in peri-menopause she was unaware that she could still become pregnant. Rita is distraught by the news that she's pregnant, especially since she's also the full-time carer for her eldest son, who was in a car accident.

The question related to this case, is whether Rita should be allowed to seek medical advice abroad, even if that advice would be related to an abortion. The majority (72.7%) said that she should be allowed, while 27.3% said that she should not be allowed.

The final statement put to the respondents of this section was a statement by the World Health Organisation (WHO): “The lack of access to abortion in many parts of Europe not only puts women at risk of physical harm but also puts undue economic and mental stress on women and families, often on the margins of society that can afford it the least. It has been well documented that treating reproductive care as a luxury does not reduce abortions, it simply drives women to seek unsafe abortions.”

Responses were more mixed in this case, and respondents were allowed to write out their own responses to the text. 27.3% agreed strongly with the statement, while 18.2% agreed and disagreed equally. The rest were equally split between being unsure, and disagreeing strongly, and one respondent explained that since this is a documented and evidence-based statement, it was not up to the respondent to give their view on the statement.

Finally, respondents were asked if they wanted to mark another option from what was provided. Most replied that they did not want to change their replies, however, some did reply that “I believe if a woman is raped, she should also be given the right and chance to abort. I firmly believe in having less government intrusion in personal lives”. Another replied that “... I strongly disagree as abortion should never be accepted. Getting an abortion does not remove the trauma of rape, it is not a solution”.

4.3 Centric-Leaning Case

Nine (9) participants chose the values related to centric views, and were provided the case related to the right to vote. The first statement was “I believe everyone has the

right to vote, no matter their colour, sexuality, religion, disabilities, or social status”. 88.9% agreed strongly with the statement, while 11.1% were neutral.

Participants were then provided a list of statements, and they could mark as many as they wanted which related to how they feel about the right to vote.

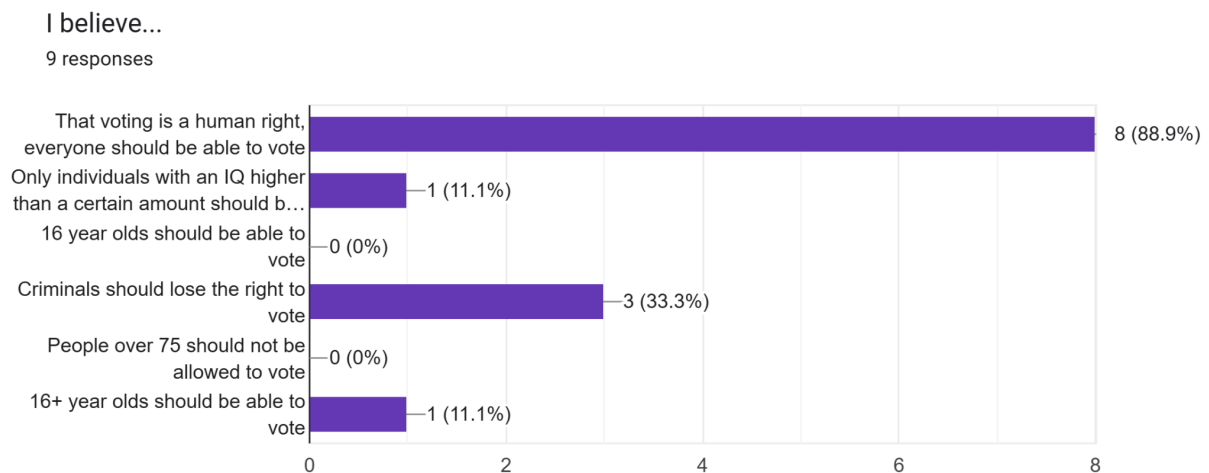


Fig. 8 - Right to Vote

The majority (88.9%) replied that voting is “is a human right, everyone should be able to vote”, however, despite this statement the respondents also marked that individuals with a low IQ and criminals should not have the right to vote. Further, not everyone agreed that 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote. However, no one marked that 75+ year olds should not be able to vote.

The respondents were then faced with a real newspaper article headline, with the explanation that in the Brexit vote in the UK, the majority of those who voted to leave the EU were the elderly, while the majority of those who voted to stay in the EU were the young. The respondents unanimously voted that “one person, one vote, this includes everyone of any age”, and did not agree that one cohort should have a stronger or weaker voting power.

Respondents were then asked if they would have marked a different option. Of those who replied, 3 answered that the 'one person, one vote' principle is fundamental for democracy. One of these three individuals noted, however, that those who have a lower IQ and a criminal record should not be provided with the 'one person, one vote' principle. Two individuals, however, did reply that it would be ideal that in situations which affect mostly the young, that the elderly refrain from voting.

4.4 Left-Leaning Case

The vast majority of the overall participants (31 out of 51) chose values related to left-leaning politics. Therefore, regardless of what political leaning they related to, they were provided with this case. In this case, the theme was freedom of movement and immigration.

The first statement was "I believe in freedom of movement, everyone should have the right and ability to seek a better life". 61.3% strongly agreed with this statement, 22.6% agreed, 6.5% were neutral or disagreed with this statement, and 3.2% strongly disagreed.

I believe in freedom of movement, everyone should have the right and ability to seek a better life
31 responses

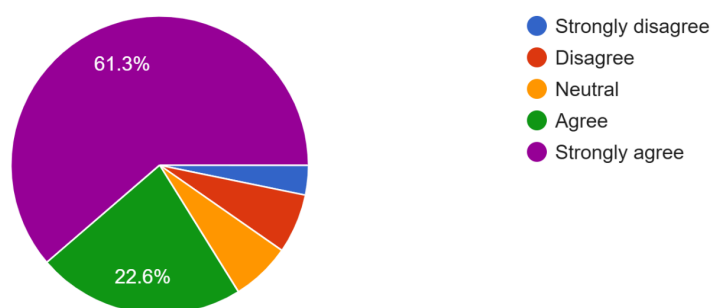


Fig. 9 - Movement

The respondents were then given 6 statements, and they were asked to tick each statement which they felt was true for them. 74.2% marked that it is easier for children to integrate, and that they need to be given time and support to integrate. 38.7% marked that immigrants (especially children) should learn to follow the values and customs of the country they are in. 32.3% responded that lack of integration causes problems for our local young people.

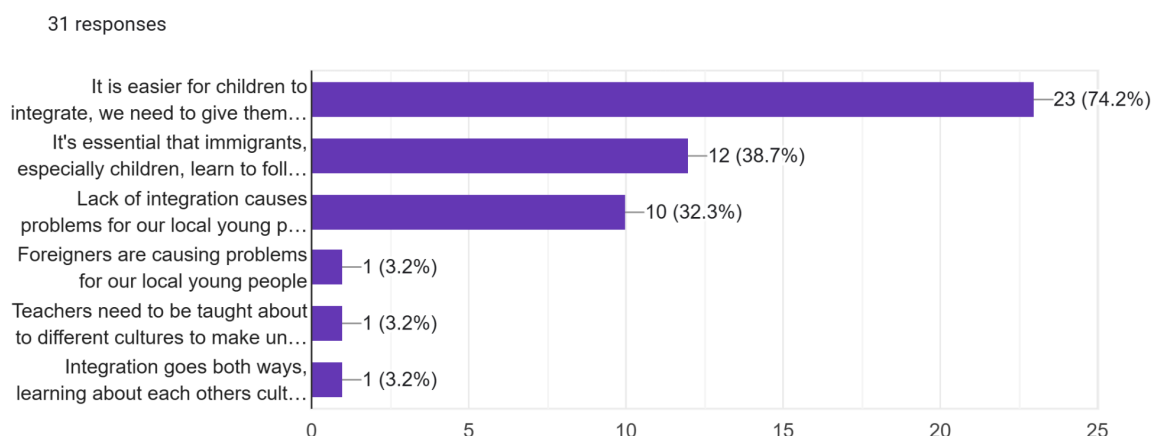


Fig 10 - Integration

3.2% marked that foreigners are causing problems for locals, that teachers need to be culturally-sensitive, and that integration can only work both ways - when both the locals and foreigners learn about each other's culture.

Respondents were then provided with a headline from a research article, highlighted that teachers' were observing that newly arrived refugee students in Norway had not integrated at all. Respondents were once again asked to mark all statements that related to their thoughts after reading the research article title. 45.2% claimed that immigrants should be helped. 19.4% felt that individuals of a certain ethnicity should be restricted from entering or staying in another country. 16.1% felt that immigrants enrich our cultures, while 6.5% felt that the rise in immigration is causing a rise in criminality. 6.5% also felt that there is enough input to help the integration of illegal

immigrants. 3.2% felt that integration should not be prioritised, and another 3.2% felt that integration reduces crime.

Respondents were asked to further elaborate on their responses, especially if they did consider changing their response. The left-leaning case resulted in the most responses in this section out of all three cases. Some respondents reiterated that some ethnicities should be restricted from entering, especially if their values are more conservative. Others stated that migration should be more strictly regulated, and others felt that immigrants are not truly trying to integrate, but rather expect locals to adapt to their culture.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Local Context

Prior to reviewing the results of the survey, it's essential to discuss the local context, including the Maltese political landscape. In Malta, there are two main political parties, the Nationalist Party (known to be the conservative or Christian democratic party), and the Labour Party (known to be socialist). Other political parties of note are the Alternattiva Demokratika (known as the Green Party, with centre-left leaning), as well as ABBA and Imperium Europa, both of which are associated with the far-right, with the latter having a neo-fascist ideology.

The Maltese political scene started to be developed in 1883, however, one can argue that it really took off after achieving independence from the British Empire in 1964, and becoming a republic in 1974.

Maltese politics includes the framework of a parliamentary representative democratic republic, where the President of Malta is the constitutional head of state, but whose powers make them a figurehead. On paper, the President of the country has executive powers, and the general direction and control of these powers are in the Government, mainly with the Prime Minister. However, while the President has executive powers, it is important to note that the President must always use these powers according to the decision of the Government or Public (such as through a referendum). Should the President disagree with the direction being proposed, then they have to resign as per the constitution. One such example of this occurred in 2014, when the Maltese Government approved a bill which would legalise civil unions for both heterosexual and also homosexual couples. The "Civil Unions Bill" was left on hold for over five weeks, with the President informing the Prime Minister that he was not willing to sign the bill into law. Back then, to avoid a constitutional crisis near the end of President Abela's presidency, the signing of the bill was delayed a further few weeks until Abela's successor could be presented with the bill.

The Prime Minister of Malta is the head of government, as well as the cabinet. Legislative power is in the hands of the Parliament, which includes the House of Representatives, including the Speaker of the House.

Malta's electoral system makes use of the Single Transferrable Vote (STV). This system means each voter is given a ballot with their possible candidates. Voters then mark their favourite with a '1', their second favourite with a '2', so on and so forth. Voters can stop marking at any point, and they can also give votes across political parties, depending on the candidates that they wish to vote for. Once a candidate achieves the necessary quota of first-preference votes to be elected, the remaining votes are given to the second-preferred candidate on the ballots until that individual also achieves the quota. The remaining ballots are then given to the third-preference, and so on. This electoral system is a reminder of British colonisation, as both the STV and the way Parliament operates (the Westminster model), were created by the British.

Since independence, it has been the Labour and Nationalist parties who have polarised politics, and no other third-party has managed to achieve any electoral success. For example, in the 2013 election, Alternattiva Demokratika (which was established in 1989) only managed to secure 1.8% of the first preference votes. In fact, despite the STV system allowing for an emphasis on candidates, and there is staunch competition between candidates of the same party, in Malta elections remain a party affair (Hirzcy de Mino & Lane, 1996), with each voter being encouraged to vote for candidates of their preferred political party even if they have no knowledge or interest in that candidate. This has also resulted in the emergence of the 'donkey vote', whereby voters mark candidates in chronological order, however, they appear on the ballot (of course, as long as the candidates are part of their chosen political party). This way of acting is not surprising, as despite elections being about candidates, the outcome of the election directly determines which party will form and run the Government.

5.2 Religious Context

When discussing the local context in Malta, one cannot ignore the religious context - specifically, how religion was used to influence and persuade. According to a survey undertaken by a local newspaper in 2018, 95% of the population identified as Christian (Sansone, 2018). Further, Christianity is established as the state religion, as per the Constitution of Malta. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2019, 83% of the population identified as Catholic (Discrimination in the European Union, 2019), which is a similar finding to what one can find in the census belonging to the Catholic church. Catholicism is also reflected in various elements of the culture. Nevertheless, despite the statistics, it appears that around half the population are not practicing Catholics, therefore they would attend Church on special occasions (such as Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, or Weddings), but they would not attend Sunday Mass or daily prayers.

Despite this trend, the second Article of the Constitution of Malta states that the religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic apostolic religion, further expressing that the Catholic Church has the duty, as well as the authority, to teach which principles are right and wrong, and that religious teachings shall be provided in all state schools, as part of compulsory education.

When signing Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the Maltese Government made a declaration that while it accepts the second article of this protocol (that parents have the right to educate their children in line with their religious and philosophical views), it will do so as long as this education is compatible with efficient instruction and training, but that it will also avoid unreasonable public expenditure since the Maltese population is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. This declaration highlights the importance given to the Catholic religion (and thus, identity) on the Islands.

To understand the effect that the Church has on public policy, one must be aware that the Church has always been a part of political discussions, with their views and opinions being considered of utmost importance. However, the public has been

growing more and more aware of the abuses undertaken by the Church to further their own agenda, hurting their followers in the process.

One such example is from the 1950s. Dominic Mintoff was a controversial figure in Maltese politics. A staunch socialist, with close ties to communist countries, put him on the radar of the Church in Malta, particularly Bishop Gonzi. This tension became heightened when Mintoff considered an integration with the UK, this was seen as a threat to Gonzi, as society may become more encouraged to join the Anglican Church in the UK (Bonnici, 2022). A referendum was held, and the Church instructed its followers to vote against the integration, or to abstain from voting. Voter turnout that year was of 60%.

The tensions only grew further from there. The Malta Labour Party in 1963 proposed a number of constitutional amendments, six of which are:

- Introduction of civil marriage and divorce
- Removal of obligatory religious education in state schools
- Right to be buried in a state cemetery
- Right of the State to halt religious functions aimed at political interference
- Morality based on Western European principles, rather than Catholic ones
- Every citizen to be considered equal when facing the law, including priests.

Considering the above amendments, it is no surprise that the Catholic Church viewed Mintoff as a threat. These tensions escalated over the years, up to the 1962 general election. By this point, the Church had declared an interdict (*Interdett*, in Maltese). This meant that Labour voters could not get married within the Church, but had to be married in the sacristy using mixed-religion marriage rites. Further, priests refused to give absolution to Labour supporters during confession, since voting for a Labour government was considered a mortal sin. Finally, members of the Labour Party who died during this period were buried in an unconsecrated part of the cemetery called “Il-Mizbla” (the landfill) (Bonnici, 2022).

Considering Malta's small size, and the even smaller size of the villages, it would not have been difficult for the local priests to be aware of the political affiliation of their congregation. This dark period in Maltese politics has left numerous scars on the followers - either becoming known as soldiers of steel, or even voting for the Nationalist Party to ensure that they would still be allowed into Heaven.

The effects of the Church's conservative values can still be felt til today, albeit less. Malta was the last European country (except for the Vatican) to legalise divorce, after a referendum was held in 2012. Civil marriages were legalised in 2016, including for homosexual couples, with the conservative Nationalist Party opposing adoption by homosexual couples, and abortion is still completely illegal.

5.3 Survey Discussion

A significant amount of participants indicated leftist views (60.8%), however, when asked directly for their political leaning, most indicated a centrist political leaning (49%), with 19.6% indicating a leftist leaning, 13.7% indicating a right leaning, and 17.6% indicated that they were not aware of their own political leaning.

This result is not surprising for this researcher. Politics is a taboo subject, with families indoctrinating and strongly encouraging their children to vote for the political party that they themselves believe in, without any further education (be it in school or at home), about the different values and electoral manifestos of the parties. Political discussions can quickly become heated, even within families who do not share the same values and opinions. This ensures that emotional intelligence and awareness of politics remains a difficult topic to access, even in schools, where educators may face backlash from parents if they attempt to provide education or information about politics on the Islands. It was because of this lack of political awareness that this researcher provided participants with case studies and questions based on their political values, without indicating to participants which values are linked to which political leaning.

5.3.1 Rightist Values (Abortion Topic)

The participants who selected the rightist values were provided with the conservative topic of abortion. This is something still illegal in Malta, and attempts at a discussion on the legalisation of abortion usually ends in a heated debate where no resolution emerges.

The first question “Life begins at conception, therefore, abortion is always wrong” was used to determine how staunchly participants are against abortion. 36.4% strongly agreed with the statement, with 9.1% agreeing. Interestingly, 18.2% strongly disagreed with the statement, and 9.1% disagreed. A large portion (27.3%) were neutral towards the statement.

The second statement utilised persuasive techniques, such as through the use of “always” or “only”, in this case “abortion is only acceptable in cases of rape”. Participants were less unsure of this phrase, with 63.6% claiming to strongly disagree with the phrase, 27.3% disagreed, and 9.1% agreed.

Later, a real story was shared with the participants - highlighting how the lack of legalised abortion placed a woman’s life, and fertility, at risk as she could not access the necessary treatment for an unviable pregnancy. The story was written using the first person, to give the participants a closeness to the situation, as if it was being told to them directly by the woman undergoing this traumatic experience. It was essential to highlight as well that the pregnancy was a wanted pregnancy, however, it was unviable as it was an ectopic.

Following the story, participants were asked if they believe that medical abortions should be simpler to access and more timely. 81.8% agreed to this statement, with 9.1% stating that they disagreed or that they were unsure.

The second case revolved around “Rita”, a fictional character who thought that she was experiencing menopause due to her age, only to find out that she was actually pregnant. Due to her age, the pregnancy is considered as high-risk, further, her son has recently been made dependent after a traumatic accident. At the end of this story, Rita is approaching her husband to discuss whether they should travel abroad for an opinion on her case. This case was written in the third-person this time, with themes which are easily relatable - themes of family, and caretaking.

The question tied to this story is whether or not Rita should be allowed to seek medical advice abroad, even if that advice could be related to an abortion. 72.7% declared that she should be allowed, while 27.3% declared that she should not. Interestingly, these were all males. The assumption could be that since the story and case relates to a female, it would be easier for female participants to imagine themselves, and imagine the fear experienced by Rita at needing to make such a difficult decision. On the other hand, men would not have the same experience of the fear of a missed period, or a pregnancy. No one stated that they were unsure.

Finally, participants were faced with a factual quote, provided by the World Health Organisation, which highlighted that lack of abortion access puts women at risk of physical harm, as well as economic and mental stress. Despite the quote being more factual than the other two stories, the responses were far more mixed. 27.3% declared that they agreed strongly with the phrase, while 9.1% disagreed strongly. 18.2% disagreed with the phrase, but a similar percentage agreed with it.

The difficulty for men to imagine the abortion scenario affecting them can also be seen in the question about whether or not medical abortions should be more timely. The individual who replied that it should not be more timely was a male, while the individual who was unsure was a female, indicating a level of doubt despite previously replying that she strongly agreed with the phrase “abortion is always wrong”. Interestingly, this particular participant emphasised that she was staunchly against the provision of abortion, even disagreeing with the WHO statement provided

in the survey - however, when she was faced with the narrative persuasive techniques in the survey, she would mark that she was unsure if medical abortions should be more timely, and she marked in favour of Rita accessing abortion advice abroad.

According to Bullock et al. (2021), narratives are easier to process than non-narratives (such as the WHO statement), and when processing is eased then so is persuasion more likely. Research in this area has found that exposure to narratives leads to attitude change (de Graaf et al., 2012), increased risk perceptions about health topics (Moyer-Gusé and Nabi, 2010), and prosocial behavioral intentions (McQueen et al., 2011), among other desired outcomes. Further, when an individual identifies with a character in the narrative, then the individual is more likely to lose their own self-awareness, and to become enmeshed with the feelings, motivation, and perspective of the character (Cohen, 2001). There are various ways to encourage an individual to identify themselves with a character, and these include portraying a character in a positive light or the use of first-person perspective. Each of these manipulations is hypothesised to affect identification by increasing an audience member's ability to see events through the character (Tal-Or and Cohen, 2010).

The abortion debate is one of the most enduring and polarizing political issues globally, deeply entrenched in moral, ethical, religious, and personal beliefs. Political persuasion here is often characterized by extreme emotional appeals and the strategic redefinition of key terms.

Pro-choice advocates typically frame the issue around bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom. The central argument asserts that individuals have the fundamental right to make decisions about their own bodies and reproductive health without government interference (logos/ethos). This appeals to principles of personal liberty, privacy, and self-determination. They frequently emphasise the issue as a matter of healthcare access, arguing that abortion is a legitimate medical procedure essential for women's well-being and equality. Pathos is often invoked through

personal stories of hardship, detailing unintended pregnancies, lack of resources, or the devastating impact of forced childbirth on individuals' lives, aiming to elicit empathy and support for choice. Terms like "reproductive rights," "women's health," and "healthcare access" are used to normalise and legitimise abortion within a broader framework of rights and health.

In stark contrast, pro-life advocates frame the issue around the sanctity of life and the moral imperative to protect the unborn. Their core argument asserts that life begins at conception, and therefore, abortion constitutes the termination of a human life, which they often equate with murder (pathos/ethos). This appeal leverages deep-seated moral and often religious convictions, drawing on the principle of authority from religious texts or doctrines. They frequently employ vivid, emotionally charged language and imagery, referring to "babies" or "unborn children" rather than "fetuses," and using graphic depictions of fetal development to emphasize the humanity of the embryo or fetus and evoke a strong emotional response of protection. The "slippery slope" argument is also used here, suggesting that acceptance of abortion devalues human life more broadly and could lead to infanticide or other ethically problematic practices. Their persuasion often involves framing abortion as a societal evil and a moral failing, appealing to collective guilt and the need for moral righteousness.

5.3.2 Centrist Values (Right-to-Vote)

Participants who were provided with this scenario were asked the initial question "I believe everyone has the right to vote, no matter their colour, sexuality, religion, disabilities, or social status". The vast majority (88.9%) responded that they strongly agreed with this statement, however, 11.1% replied that they felt neutral towards the topic, indicating that they did not have a strong opinion either way.

To understand the values and opinions of the participants further, they were asked to mark certain statements about voting rights. Participants were allowed to mark as many or few statements as they wanted, as long as they reflected their true opinions.

88.9% marked that they believe that voting is a human right and everyone should be able to vote. However, 1 responded that only individuals with an IQ higher than a certain amount should be allowed to vote. Only 1 respondent marked that 16 year olds should be allowed to vote (it is worth mentioning that 16 year olds in Malta can vote and be elected in local council elections). Interestingly, even amongst those who initially responded that “everyone has the right to vote”, 3 participants responded that convicted criminals should lose the right to vote. This is interesting for this researcher, as it begs the question if people have an idea of what their values should be, but when asked specific and nuanced questions about their values, the cracks can start to be seen.

Participants were then provided with a true newspaper article which discusses the vote for Britain to leave the European Union (known as Brexit). The article highlighted that most youth wanted to remain in the EU, but it was the elderly (65+) vote that made the ‘Leave’ camp win. When asked what the participants felt about this, all participants felt that “one person, one vote, this includes everyone of any age”, indicating that they felt that the opinion of the elderly is just as valid and respected as the vote of the young.

Participants were then asked if they would have considered marking a different option, and while many replied that they would not change their opinion, this researcher did receive some interesting replies. One participant replied that while they chose that everyone’s vote is equal, they did question marking another option, because “the new generation one day will replace the old generations, and they will suffer from the repercussions brought on by previous generations”, this is echoed similarly in another response, which stated that while they believe that everyone’s vote is equal, it “would be nice if the elderly did not vote on something which would not impact them so much”. These two statements are interesting, as once again we see cracks forming in the values presented previously. We moved from “one person, one vote”, to the assumption that not every person should vote on every topic, and that the person should decide by themselves to step away from topics which do not affect them. This possibly highlights that while there is no wish for direct legal or

governmental pressure or influence to stop someone from voting, there is still the desire for not every vote to be used in elections.

The assertion that every adult individual possesses an inherent right to vote, irrespective of age, cognitive capacity, or other personal attributes, constitutes a cornerstone of modern democratic theory. Yet its practical implementation and the persuasive strategies employed within its discourse present significant ethical considerations. The debate over universal suffrage, particularly regarding potential limitations, invariably implicates fundamental principles of equality, autonomy, and collective decision-making. The psychology of political persuasion plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion on these matters, often highlighting intergenerational and socio-cognitive divides, as vividly exemplified by the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum.

The foundational ethical premise of universal suffrage rests on the principle of political equality, proposing that every citizen's voice holds equal weight in the democratic process. This egalitarian ideal is closely linked to concepts of self-governance and popular sovereignty, where the legitimacy of government derives from the consent of the governed. Denying the right to vote based on immutable characteristics (such as sex or race, as historically practiced) or, more contentiously, on mutable ones (like age or perceived intelligence), is typically viewed as a violation of fundamental human rights and democratic participation. The argument often aligns with the notion of autonomy, asserting that competent adults should have the right to shape their own collective future.

However, ethical challenges to unfettered universal suffrage, while often controversial and quickly dismissed as elitist, periodically surface, particularly in the context of complex societal decisions.

Age and cognitive maturity constitute one of the most prevalent challenges in debates surrounding electoral participation. Critics argue that individuals below a certain age, typically 18, lack the requisite cognitive development, life experience,

and comprehensive understanding of complex political issues necessary for making informed decisions. They suggest that younger voters may have less at stake in long-term policy outcomes due to their shorter period of societal contribution, such as tax payments. Ethically, however, this perspective faces strong opposition; it overlooks the fact that young people are directly affected by political decisions and that excluding them constitutes a form of "taxation without representation." Moreover, cognitive capacity varies significantly across age groups; numerous younger individuals demonstrate high levels of political engagement and understanding. Denying their right to vote based solely on arbitrary age thresholds can be construed as paternalistic and detrimental to their fundamental rights of participation. Given that policies often have disproportionate long-term effects on future generations, their inclusion in electoral processes is both justified and necessary.

Similarly, arguments based on intelligence, competence, and mental capacity, though less frequently invoked in contemporary liberal democracies, historically served to restrict suffrage. Proponents contend that voters lacking adequate information or susceptible to manipulation could jeopardize rational collective decision-making. Such views implicitly raise concerns about individuals' vulnerability to persuasive yet misleading political messaging. Ethically, these arguments are heavily contested; defining and measuring intelligence or competence objectively is fraught with difficulties and risks perpetuating elitism or abuse, potentially disenfranchising marginalised groups. The core principle of electoral fairness emphasizes that all citizens possess an inherent dignity and an equal right to civic participation, regardless of intellectual background or educational attainment. While there are pragmatic considerations for individuals with significant cognitive disabilities—necessitating safeguards such as assisted voting—the overarching aim remains safeguarding autonomy while ensuring practical inclusiveness. Historically, excluding voters based on criteria like literacy or property ownership often served to entrench existing power structures. Present-day debates extend to the voting rights of incarcerated felons and non-citizen residents, raising fundamental questions about civic responsibilities vis-à-vis human rights and the universality of voting rights.

The overarching ethical dilemma in these debates is how to balance the ideal of universal, unconditional political equality with concerns about informed decision-making and the long-term stability of the polity. The persuasive techniques employed on both sides of these debates often reveal these underlying tensions.

Political persuasion operates at multiple levels within the debate over the right to vote. Advocates for universal suffrage employ rhetoric grounded in human rights, social justice, and democratic ideals (ethos and pathos). They highlight the moral imperative of inclusion, the potential for oppression when voices are silenced, and the civic benefits of broad participation. Conversely, those who argue for restrictions (even if rarely explicitly stated in terms of intelligence, but often implicitly in terms of age or experience) may use fear appeals, warning of uninformed decisions, societal instability, or the erosion of "traditional" values. They may frame the issue as one of safeguarding the nation's future from impulsive or naive choices.

The ethical tightrope in this persuasive landscape involves the distinction between informing and manipulating. Legitimate persuasion seeks to engage citizens in reasoned deliberation, providing factual information and logical arguments (logos) to facilitate informed choices. Manipulation, however, aims to bypass critical thought, exploiting cognitive biases, emotional vulnerabilities, or informational asymmetry (eg, through misinformation or highly deceptive framing) to compel a desired outcome. The ethical concern escalates when persuasive tactics target specific demographic groups, leveraging their unique vulnerabilities or interests to sway their votes without fully transparent and honest engagement. The role of media literacy and critical thinking becomes paramount here, enabling citizens to dissect persuasive messages, identify potential biases, and verify information.

The 2016 UK referendum on European Union membership serves as a potent empirical illustration of how political persuasion interacts with demographic divides, particularly concerning age, and raises significant ethical questions about democratic outcomes. The referendum result—51.9% to leave vs. 48.1% to remain—was largely driven by a stark intergenerational split in voting patterns.

Numerous post-referendum analyses consistently demonstrated a clear age-based cleavage in voting behaviour. Data from sources such as YouGov and the British Election Study (BES) indicated:

- Approximately 75% of voters aged 18-24 voted to remain in the EU.
- This percentage progressively decreased with age.
- Conversely, around 60% of voters aged 65 and over voted to leave the EU, with even higher percentages in older cohorts (eg., over 70).
- The median age of a Leave voter was significantly higher than that of a Remain voter, underscoring that the outcome was disproportionately shaped by older demographics.

The Brexit campaign saw both Leave and Remain camps employ sophisticated psychological persuasion techniques, often raising ethical concerns, especially when viewed through the lens of intergenerational equity:

1. Targeting and Framing: Both campaigns engaged in extensive microtargeting, tailoring messages to resonate with specific demographic segments.
 - Leave Campaign: Focused heavily on themes of sovereignty, control, and immigration. Their core slogan, "Take Back Control," was a powerful frame appealing to national pride and a desire for autonomy, resonating strongly with older voters who might feel a sense of national decline or a loss of historical influence. They effectively used fear appeals concerning immigration, linking EU membership to uncontrolled borders and perceived strains on public services. The argument about sending £350 million a week to the EU, which could instead fund the NHS, was a potent (and later widely debunked) misleading statistic designed to evoke anger and a sense of unfairness, particularly among those reliant on public services. This played to anxieties about national resources and identity, often more prevalent among older segments.

- Remain Campaign: Emphasised economic stability, security, and international cooperation, often using gain frames ("stronger in," "staying safe"). They appealed to younger voters with arguments about future opportunities, freedom of movement for work and study, and Britain's global standing. However, their persuasion was often criticised for being overly focused on economic statistics and less on emotional appeals or a clear, unifying narrative, struggling to compete with the simpler, more emotionally resonant "Take Back Control" message. As highlighted previously, narratives can be more persuasive than facts by themselves.

2. Emotional Appeals and Misinformation:

- The Leave campaign's use of fear appeals regarding immigration was particularly effective in mobilising older voters. This was often coupled with misinformation about immigration numbers or the ease of entry for criminals, tapping into existing anxieties and biases (confirmation bias). The "£350 million to NHS" claim was a classic example of using a simple, repeated, and emotionally charged (pathos) claim that, despite being factually inaccurate, resonated deeply and was hard to dislodge. This raised significant ethical questions about the responsibility of political actors to present factual information, especially when such claims are widely disseminated and demonstrably influence public opinion.
- The Remain campaign also used fear appeals about economic recession or job losses (a "Project Fear" narrative), but these were often perceived as less credible or too abstract compared to the Leave campaign's concrete (though misleading) examples.

3. Long-Term vs. Short-Term Stakes and Intergenerational Equity:

- A central ethical challenge in the Brexit referendum was the disparity in who would bear the long-term consequences of the decision. Older voters, who predominantly voted to leave, would, on average, experience fewer of the long-term economic, social, or geopolitical repercussions of Brexit compared to younger generations, who would live with the consequences for decades. This created a profound question of intergenerational equity: Is it ethically justifiable for one demographic segment, which has a shorter remaining lifespan, to make a decision that fundamentally alters the future trajectory and opportunities of younger generations, particularly when the latter overwhelmingly voted for a different outcome?
- This situation implicitly revived elements of the debate around age-based voting rights, not by suggesting disenfranchisement, but by highlighting the ethical burden of decisions made by an electorate with significantly disparate stakes in the outcome. Persuasion strategies that exploited short-term anxieties (eg, immigration) over long-term implications (eg, economic disruption for youth) raised questions about the democratic process's capacity to adequately represent and protect the interests of all generations.

The Brexit case study underscores significant challenges to democratic legitimacy when persuasion tactics are perceived as manipulative or when deep demographic divides shape outcomes. When a significant portion of the population, particularly the younger demographic, feels that their future has been determined by a group with different interests and values, and perhaps influenced by misleading information, it can erode trust in democratic processes. This can lead to political alienation, reduced civic engagement among disaffected groups, and heightened societal polarisation. The ethical imperative for political persuasion in such contexts is not merely to win votes, but to foster genuine deliberation, ensure informational integrity, and respect the diverse, long-term interests of all citizens.

5.3.3 Leftist Values (Freedom of Movement)

Those who responded with mostly left values were asked about freedom of movement, linking the topic with immigration. The first statement was “I believe in Freedom of Movement, everyone should have the right and ability to seek a better life”. The responses were the most varied out of the 3 scenarios. Most (61.3%) claimed to strongly agree with the statement, with 22.6% responding that they agreed. 6.5%, respectively, responded that they felt neutral or disagreed with the statement. And 3.2% strongly disagreed with the statement. This is interesting for the researcher, as it seems that despite exhibiting very leftist views and values, the topic of immigration is still not that clear, possibly influenced by other existential factors which the participants experience.

To understand the views of the participants further, they were provided with a checklist, and they had to mark which statements they agreed with the most, and were free to mark as many or as few as they wanted. 23 respondents believe that it is easier for children to integrate; therefore, they should be supported to do so. 12 responded that immigrants and their children should learn to follow the values and lifestyle of the society they’re integrating into. 10 replied that a lack of integration can cause issues for local young people, and 1 responded that all foreigners are causing problems to young people. Only 1 respondent felt that teachers need to be educated and taught about different cultures, and only 1 respondent felt that integration goes both ways and both sides need to respect each other’s cultures.

These responses are quite interesting, as despite the majority believing in freedom of movement, there still seems to be a strong fear related to integration, with integration being seen mainly as the responsibility of the immigrant to learn to follow the structures and values of the country or society they hope to join.

Interestingly, if one had to observe the definition of integration given by the International Association for Migration, or even the Migration Data Portal, one will find that integration is defined as a mutual process, whereby immigrants and their descendents are accepted in the society they are in, being able to participate fully in

the social, cultural, and economic life of their host country. Most importantly, this can be done while still retaining aspects of their cultural identities (IOM, 2012).

Participants were then asked to reflect on a headline which emphasised the struggles experienced at schools to integrate children of migrants. They were then asked to mark which statement resonated with them the most. The majority (42.2%) replied that immigrants should be helped. 19.4%, however, replied that certain ethnicities should not be allowed to immigrate to the country, and 16.1% replied that they believe that immigration enriches the adopted country's culture. 2 respondents (6.5%) felt that enough is being done to support immigrants, and another 2 respondents felt that immigration brings with it more crime. Linked with this last statement, 3.2% felt that integration is a means to reduce crime. 1 respondent felt that enough is being done already, and integration should not be prioritised.

Following this exercise, participants were asked if they would have wanted to choose a different statement, or if they wanted to elaborate on their decision. Some responses provided were particularly interesting, such as the belief that immigrants do not try to integrate, but rather, they expect the host country to adapt to their culture. Another respondent highlighted the wish that immigrants from particularly "closed-minded" countries should not be allowed to enter the host country. Another participant felt that locals should not "sacrifice [their] culture/customs for immigrants...some extremists tend to want to change our ways instead of being grateful for being welcomed in our country". This sentiment was reflected amongst other respondents as well, and there was an overarching feeling that immigrants and immigration would result in the loss of the local culture and values.

Politically, immigrants are often seen as contributing to the economy by filling labour shortages, starting businesses, and paying taxes. However, concerns also exist about potential impacts on wages and employment for native-born workers. For example, in many European countries and North America, debates revolve around the need for skilled workers versus the potential strain on social welfare systems. Anti-immigrant sentiment has fueled the rise of right-wing populist parties across

Europe, including in Germany, France, Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Politico.eu, March 13, 2025). These parties often employ narratives that stigmatise migrants as threats to national security, cultural identity, and economic stability (Krzyżanowski, 2020).

Disinformation about migrants, including myths about their numbers, economic impact, and propensity for crime, has been strategically promoted and exploited to influence public opinion in Europe (European Policy Centre). Sensationalist media reporting and the spread of hateful narratives on social media have contributed to negative stereotypes (Anti-immigrant Rhetoric, 2025). For example, UK tabloid newspapers have faced criticism for misleading headlines that cast immigrants as instigators of violence (Anti-immigrant Rhetoric, 2025).

The effects of the above issues can be seen even in the survey conducted with the participants in this research, who believe that crime is increasing due to immigration, as well as the thought that immigration is a threat to cultural identity. Both of these arguments have been debunked numerous times by reputable sources, however, these opinions persist.

The past six years have seen significant policy shifts and increased enforcement measures, often accompanied by rhetoric emphasising the need to secure borders and remove undocumented immigrants (Recent White House Actions on Immigration, 2025; The Trump Administration's Early 2025 Changes to Immigration Law). For instance, the Department of Homeland Security launched an international ad campaign in March 2025, warning "illegal aliens" to self-deport (DHS, March 15, 2025). Malta had a similar ad campaign, where legal migrants were also offered the opportunity to be deported back home if they were 'homesick'.

Despite the different contexts, some persuasive techniques remain consistent with historical propaganda:

- Stereotyping and Dehumanisation: Immigrants are often portrayed through negative stereotypes, such as criminals or a drain on resources, which can contribute to their dehumanisation.
- Scapegoating: Immigrant populations are frequently scapegoated for economic problems or social issues, diverting attention from other potential causes.
- Fear-Mongering: Narratives often emphasise threats to national security, cultural identity, or public safety allegedly posed by immigrants, playing on public anxieties.
- "Us vs. Them" Dichotomy: A clear distinction is often drawn between "us" (the native population) and "them" (the immigrants), fostering division and distrust.
- Misinformation and Disinformation: The spread of inaccurate or deliberately false information is used to shape negative perceptions of immigration.

The discourse surrounding migration is highly charged, intertwining economic, social, cultural, and security concerns. Persuasion tactics on this issue often play on existing societal anxieties and in-group/out-group dynamics.

Advocates for more open migration policies often frame the issue as a humanitarian duty and an economic benefit. From a humanitarian perspective, the argument focuses on the moral obligation to assist those fleeing conflict, persecution, or economic hardship, appealing to universal empathy and compassion (pathos). This often involves personal stories of refugees and asylum seekers, highlighting their plight and resilience to foster connection and understanding. Economically, arguments are made that migrants fill labour shortages, contribute to economic growth, pay taxes, and foster innovation (logos). Culturally, migration is often presented as enriching societies through diversity and new perspectives. The discourse may emphasise international law and agreements regarding refugees, appealing to a sense of global responsibility and adherence to established norms (ethos). Terms like "refugees," "newcomers," and "diversity" are chosen to elicit positive or neutral associations.

Conversely, those advocating for more restrictive migration policies frequently frame the issue as a national security threat and an economic burden, heavily relying on fear appeals and social identity theory dynamics. They emphasise the potential for increased crime, the strain on public services (eg, healthcare, education), and the threat to national identity or cultural cohesion (fear appeal). The language often employs a strong "us vs. them" dichotomy, reinforcing in-group loyalty and out-group derogation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Migrants may be labelled as "illegal," "invaders," or "uncontrolled," evoking images of chaos, lawlessness, and a loss of sovereignty. Arguments often focus on the perceived cost to taxpayers and the competition for jobs, activating economic anxieties. The "slippery slope" of uncontrolled borders leading to societal collapse is a common rhetorical device. Appeals to national sovereignty and the right of a nation to control its borders are central, leveraging a sense of patriotism and self-preservation. Such rhetoric often leads to the dehumanisation of migrants, making it easier to justify harsh policies by stripping them of their individual humanity and portraying them as a collective, undifferentiated threat.

5.4 Dehumanisation

Dehumanisation is one of the ways that persuasion techniques are used to justify discrimination, violence, or oppression. This is usually done by stripping individuals or groups of their own humanity and autonomy.

In Nazi Germany, there was systemic propaganda which was used to dehumanise the Jewish people. The emphasis was on the idea that the Jews were a threat to German racial purity and national wellbeing. This systemic propaganda was done in various ways, such as through the portrayal of Jews as 'parasites' and 'disease' (Lockwood, 2021; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). Propaganda could be found through advertisements in the street, and even in children's books. Viewers were provided with images of the leader, who would support and help them through the crises they were experiencing, while also providing them with an image of the problem - the Jews.

This dehumanisation resulted in legalised discrimination - with the Nuremberg Laws stripping the Jewish people of their citizenship and basic rights, which in turn further allowed more dehumanisation and persecution.

Linguistic research by Landry et al. (2022) examined the differences in linguistic use in propaganda leading up to the Holocaust, and the propaganda that was used during the Holocaust itself. Landry's findings were that in the time leading up to the Holocaust, the emphasis was on the Jewish incapacity to experience human emotions and sensations - thus started the dehumanisation.

On the other hand, propaganda during the Holocaust itself focused increasingly on malevolence. At this point, the Jews were demonised and were shown as having the ability to think and make plans that could harm the Germans. The aim of this change could have been to shift the view to Jews being masterminds, who therefore were increasingly more and more dangerous, thus validating the Nazi efforts to wipe out this dangerous race.

North Korea can be seen as a more modern example of how dehumanisation can be utilised. North Korea uses these techniques to dehumanise defectors, and other 'enemies of the state'. The media (which is state-controlled) disseminates narratives that depict defectors as morally corrupt and dangerous, and thus should be severely punished. North Korea's isolationist policies contribute to this sense of 'us and them', thus also creating distrust, and even hostility, towards foreigners. Propaganda is used to depict the outside world as corrupt and hostile.

Dehumanisation is also being used towards the LGBTQIA+ communities, including the Trans community. This is seen all over the world, between Donald Trump's rhetoric of the dangers of Trans individuals to children and the local communities, to Italy's Government (under Giorgia Meloni) only allowing biological parents on birth certificates (thus making it impossible for two women, or two men, to be on birth certificates), and making surrogacy a federal crime, even if that surrogacy was used

abroad. To make these narratives possible, both Trump and Meloni made use of stereotypes and misinformation to dehumanise these populations, and reducing their autonomy.

5.4.1 Dehumanisation in Conflict

This process can manifest in various forms, including animalistic (eg, referring to people as "animals" or "cockroaches") and mechanistic (eg, viewing them with indifference or a lack of empathy) dehumanisation.

Animalistic dehumanisation involves associating individuals or groups with animals, often those considered base, unclean, or lacking in higher cognitive functions. This can be achieved through the use of derogatory labels, such as referring to people as "animals," "cockroaches," "vermin," or other terms that evoke primal instincts and a lack of human qualities. By equating individuals with non-human entities, this form of dehumanisation serves to strip them of their inherent dignity, complexity, and moral standing, making it easier to justify mistreatment, discrimination, and violence against them.

Mechanistic dehumanisation, in contrast, involves perceiving others as inanimate objects, machines, or mere instruments devoid of feelings, thoughts, or individuality. This form of dehumanisation is characterised by indifference, a lack of empathy, and a tendency to view individuals as interchangeable and disposable. People subjected to mechanistic dehumanisation may be seen as cogs in a machine, their worth solely determined by their functionality or utility. This can manifest in treating others with coldness, detachment, and a disregard for their emotional well-being, ultimately eroding interpersonal connection and fostering a sense of alienation and objectification.

Both animalistic and mechanistic dehumanisation share the common outcome of diminishing the perceived humanity of others, albeit through different conceptual pathways. Animalistic dehumanisation emphasises a perceived lack of higher human

attributes by drawing parallels with the animal kingdom, while mechanistic dehumanisation emphasises a lack of human agency and inner life by drawing parallels with inanimate objects. Understanding these distinct yet related forms of dehumanisation is crucial for recognising and addressing the psychological underpinnings of prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict.

Extant scholarly research indicates the protracted presence of dehumanizing rhetoric within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, undergoing continual transformation and adjustment in response to varying historical epochs and incidents.

Several scholars have identified nascent elements of dehumanisation within the foundational texts and rhetoric of early Zionism. Mark Levine and Eric Cheyfitz, in their 2025 analysis, highlight Theodor Herzl's conceptualization of Zionism as a civilizational bulwark of Europe against Asia, an advanced outpost confronting supposed barbarism. This perspective, they argue, was intrinsically linked with Herzl's desire to facilitate the removal of the existing, "penniless population" across the envisioned borders of the Jewish state.

Herzl's framing, by contrasting a civilised European Zionism with a barbaric Indigenous population, established a hierarchical dichotomy that mirrored the justifications employed in other settler colonial enterprises globally. This rhetorical strategy positioned the native inhabitants as an obstacle to progress and civilization, thus creating a conceptual space for their displacement or subjugation. The characterization of the indigenous population as "barbarians" served to diminish their humanity and rights, making their removal appear as a necessary step in the advancement of a superior civilization.

This early discourse, while perhaps not fully articulated as a comprehensive dehumanisation strategy, contained the foundational elements that could later be developed and utilised in ways that further marginalised and disenfranchised the Palestinian population. The coupling of civilisational superiority with the imperative of population transfer laid a problematic groundwork for future policies and actions. The

echoes of such framing can be observed in subsequent Zionist thought and practice, contributing to a complex and often fraught relationship with the indigenous inhabitants of the land. Understanding these early rhetorical constructs is crucial for comprehending the historical trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the ongoing challenges in achieving a just and equitable resolution.

5.4.2 Dehumanisation in Education

Dehumanisation, in the context of education and educational materials, refers to the systematic process by which individuals or groups are stripped of their humanity, dignity, and moral standing within the formal learning environment. This process, often subtle yet pervasive, can occur through curricular design, textbook content, pedagogical approaches, and the broader institutional ethos of an educational system. Its aim, frequently implicit, is to justify societal marginalisation, discrimination, or even violence against the targeted group by portraying them as less than human, thus outside the realm of moral concern.

Dehumanisation in educational settings is enacted through several interconnected mechanisms:

1. **Omission and Erasure:** A primary method involves the strategic exclusion of a group's history, cultural contributions, experiences, or even their very existence from the curriculum. This omission creates a historical and social void, rendering the group invisible or irrelevant within the national narrative. For instance, studies on educational materials in conflict zones frequently reveal the absence of the 'other' group's perspective or their complete marginalization (Al-Rishani & Pliakos, 2022). By effacing their presence, their humanity is implicitly denied, as their narratives and suffering are deemed unworthy of recognition.

2. **Stereotyping and Negative Portrayals:** When present, the targeted group is often depicted through demeaning stereotypes, caricatures, or as monolithic entities lacking individual agency and complexity. They may be presented as inherently violent, barbaric, primitive, unintelligent, or a perpetual threat to the dominant group's security or values. Research by Nurit Peled-Elhanan (2012) on Israeli school books, for example, illustrates how Palestinians are frequently portrayed in a dehumanizing manner, often associated with violence and lacking the nuanced humanity afforded to the dominant group. Similarly, studies on textbooks in various contexts show how "the enemy" is constructed through consistently negative attributes, justifying conflict and animosity (Pingel, 2010).
3. **Pathologization and Securitization:** Educational materials can pathologize the 'other' by framing their grievances, resistance, or cultural practices as irrational, fanatical, or indicative of an inherent flaw, rather than as responses to political, social, or economic conditions. Concurrently, the group is often securitised, presented primarily as a national security threat. This framing diverts attention from structural injustices and legitimizes suppressive measures, as seen in analyses of how various "enemy" groups are portrayed in national curricula (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011).
4. **Discourses of Supremacy and Exceptionalism:** Education can foster dehumanisation by cultivating a sense of national or ethnic supremacy in the dominant group. This often involves narratives of exceptionalism, divine right, or a unique civilizing mission, which inherently diminish the value and rights of 'outgroups'. By elevating the dominant group's moral and intellectual standing, the 'other' is implicitly positioned as inferior, validating their subordinate status or justifying actions taken against them (Said, 1978/2003).

Nurit Peled-Elhanan's research offers a critical analysis of Israeli schoolbooks and their contribution to the perpetuation of anti-Palestinian sentiment within the Israeli education system. Her work reveals a systemic pattern in how these educational materials construct a narrative that legitimizes Israeli state actions, including what she terms the "colonization of Palestine and the ongoing occupation." This is achieved through various representational strategies that consistently marginalize and dehumanize Palestinians.

One of the key aspects highlighted by Peled-Elhanan is the portrayal of Palestinians as either a "demographic threat" or a "security threat." This framing serves to justify a range of policies aimed at controlling the Palestinian population, extending to the extreme of rationalizing "massacres and their elimination." By presenting Palestinians as an existential danger, the educational materials create an environment where actions against them can be seen as necessary for self-preservation.

Furthermore, Peled-Elhanan's research points to the systematic erasure of Palestinian history and culture within these schoolbooks. The dominant narrative presented often depicts the land of Palestine as either empty or lacking significant civilization prior to Zionist settlement. This historical revisionism effectively denies Palestinian indigeneity and undermines their claims to the land. By omitting or misrepresenting Palestinian history, the education system constructs a skewed understanding of the conflict, positioning Zionism as a civilizing mission in a supposedly barren land.

The implications of such educational practices are profound. By consistently framing Palestinians in negative terms and erasing their history, Israeli schoolbooks contribute to the normalization of discriminatory attitudes and actions against them. This ingrained bias can have long-lasting effects on the perceptions and behaviours of Israeli citizens, shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions. Peled-Elhanan's work underscores the critical role of education in shaping societal narratives and the urgent need to critically examine the content of schoolbooks in

conflict zones to understand how they contribute to the perpetuation of conflict and hinder the prospects for peace.

The long-term ramifications of dehumanisation propagated through educational frameworks are profound, multifaceted, and self-perpetuating, extending far beyond the immediate learning environment. One significant consequence is the normalization of prejudice and discrimination. Children, as impressionable recipients of curricular content, internalise dehumanising narratives, which subsequently become foundational to their developing worldview. This internalization renders preconceived biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviours socially acceptable within the broader societal fabric, thereby impeding the cultivation of empathy and critical thought towards the 'other' (Bar-Tal, 2007). Such a pervasive acceptance of prejudice fosters an environment where discriminatory policies and actions are not only tolerated but often perceived as justifiable or even indispensable.

Furthermore, this educational process contributes directly to the perpetuation of intergroup conflict and violence. By systematically portraying the 'other' as sub-human, inherently flawed, or an existential threat, education lays the psychological groundwork necessary for the commission of violence. Dehumanisation is a well-established precursor to atrocities, as it facilitates moral disengagement, allowing individuals to inflict harm without experiencing the typical emotional or ethical distress (Bandura, 1999). This psychological distancing, cultivated through consistent educational messaging, perpetuates cycles of conflict, as successive generations are indoctrinated into a framework that rationalizes hostility and vengeance, thereby significantly hindering prospects for genuine peace-building and reconciliation (Staub, 2000).

A critical impact also manifests in the impediment to identity formation and self-esteem, particularly for members of the dehumanized group. Exposure to consistently negative and demeaning portrayals within educational materials can lead to internalized oppression, self-hatred, or a diminished sense of self-worth. This can result in considerable psychological detriment, adversely affecting academic

performance, social integration, and overall well-being. Conversely, for members of the dominant group, such an education can inadvertently foster an inflated sense of self-importance and a marked absence of critical self-reflection concerning historical injustices and contemporary inequalities (Adams et al., 2011).

Finally, the propagation of dehumanisation through educational systems fundamentally undermines the core tenets of democratic values and human rights. By instructing students to perceive certain groups as less deserving of rights, dignity, or respect, it erodes the collective societal commitment to principles of equality, empathy, and pluralism, which are indispensable for a just and equitable society. This intellectual and moral erosion creates fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian tendencies and the suppression of dissent, as the 'other' has already been established as unworthy of protection or voice, thereby weakening the very foundations of a robust democratic framework (Tuvya & Zohar, 2017).

Dehumanisation functions as a potent instrument of persuasion, exhibiting heightened efficacy during periods characterized by conflict, social unrest, and heightened intergroup tension. By stripping individuals or groups of their human attributes and portraying them as less than human, this persuasive technique aims to diminish empathy, justify aggression, and facilitate harmful actions against the targeted group. The portrayal often involves associating the target with animals, diseases, or inanimate objects, thereby eroding moral constraints and fostering a sense of detachment among the persuaders and their audience.

Notwithstanding its persuasive power, dehumanisation is not the exclusive persuasive technique at one's disposal. Its effectiveness is often contingent upon specific contextual factors. Critically, dehumanisation frequently necessitates the existence of a clearly defined opposing group, a distinct "them" against which an "us" can be constructed. This dichotomy forms the bedrock upon which dehumanisation thrives, as it relies on accentuating the perceived differences and negative

characteristics of the out-group to solidify in-group cohesion and justify discriminatory attitudes or behaviours.

In situations where the aim of persuasion does not inherently necessitate an adversarial out-group, and where cultivating a stark "us versus them" dichotomy is neither practical nor desired, a range of alternative persuasive strategies gain salience and efficacy. These approaches frequently involve emphasising shared values and common ground, thereby fostering a sense of unity and cooperation through the highlighting of overlapping beliefs, goals, and aspirations. Furthermore, the strategic framing and construction of narratives can significantly shape perceptions and influence attitudes by accentuating particular aspects while de-emphasising others. Beyond the negative implications of dehumanisation, emotional appeals, such as those eliciting empathy, compassion, guilt, or hope, serve as potent motivators for shifts in attitudes and behaviours. Persuasion can also be achieved through intellectual engagement by presenting well-supported claims and logical reasoning. Finally, the influence of trusted figures or sources, particularly when perceived by the audience as knowledgeable and unbiased, can be leveraged to enhance persuasive impact.

5.5 Psychology of Political Influence

The landscape of modern society is undeniably shaped by the subtle yet pervasive forces of political influence. From the grand narratives of national policy to the nuanced appeals in local elections, the art and science of swaying public opinion remain central to governance and civic life. Understanding the psychology underpinning political influence is crucial, not only for those who wield it but, more importantly, for citizens seeking to navigate a complex information environment and make autonomous, informed decisions.

Political influence operates through a sophisticated interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social processes, often leveraging deeply ingrained human tendencies. Its

efficacy lies in its ability to modify beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, frequently without overt coercion. Several key psychological models and strategies underpin its functioning:

1. Dual-Process Theories of Persuasion:

- Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986): This model posits that persuasion can occur via two routes:
 - Central Route: Involves careful and thoughtful consideration of the arguments and evidence presented. This route is engaged when individuals are motivated (e.g., highly interested in the topic) and able (e.g., have the cognitive capacity and time) to process information. Influence through this route tends to be more enduring and resistant to counter-persuasion. Political influencers using this route focus on logical arguments, factual data, and reasoned debate, appealing to an audience's intellect.
 - Peripheral Route: Occurs when individuals are unwilling or unable to elaborate on the message content. Instead, they rely on peripheral cues such as source attractiveness, credibility (e.g., expertise, trustworthiness), the number of arguments, or emotional appeals. Influence via this route is often temporary and easily susceptible to counter-persuasion. Many political advertisements and speeches heavily rely on peripheral cues like a candidate's perceived likability or a powerful visual image.
- Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Chaiken, 1987): Similar to ELM, HSM suggests that individuals can process information systematically (like the central route) or heuristically (using mental shortcuts). Heuristics, such as "experts are usually right" or "more arguments mean a stronger case," can quickly guide judgments. In political discourse, the repeated assertion of a claim, even if unsubstantiated, can become a heuristic cue for its validity.

2. Cognitive Dissonance Theory : This theory suggests that people experience discomfort (dissonance) when holding conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. To reduce this discomfort, individuals are motivated to change one of their cognitive elements. Political persuaders can create dissonance by highlighting inconsistencies in an opponent's stance or by showing how a person's current behavior conflicts with their stated values, thereby motivating a shift towards the desired political position. Conversely, once an individual commits to a political stance or candidate, they are likely to seek information that confirms their choice and dismiss contradictory evidence to maintain consistency (Festinger, 1957).
3. Social Judgment Theory: This theory explains how people evaluate persuasive messages based on their existing attitudes. It identifies "latitudes of acceptance" (positions considered acceptable), "rejection" (unacceptable), and "non-commitment" (neither acceptable nor unacceptable). Persuasion is most likely when a message falls within the latitude of acceptance or non-commitment. Messages too far from one's initial position (in the latitude of rejection) are likely to be assimilated or contrasted, making persuasion difficult. Influencers understand the importance of incrementally shifting attitudes rather than attempting radical changes in one go (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).
4. Aristotelian Appeals (Ethos, Pathos, Logos):
 - Ethos (Credibility): Focuses on the persuader's character, trustworthiness, and authority. Political figures strive to build a strong ethos through consistent actions, perceived integrity, and demonstrated expertise.
 - Pathos (Emotion): Appeals to the audience's emotions, such as fear, hope, anger, empathy, or patriotism. Political campaigns frequently use emotionally charged narratives or imagery to bypass purely rational processing and elicit strong reactions that drive support or opposition.

- Logos (Logic): Employs reason, logic, facts, and evidence to persuade. This involves presenting arguments in a structured, coherent manner. While often perceived as the "ideal" form of persuasion, its effectiveness depends heavily on the audience's willingness and ability to engage in central route processing.
5. Cialdini's Principles of Influence (Cialdini, 2001, 2013): These six (sometimes seven) empirically validated principles are widely applied in political influence:
- Reciprocity: People feel obligated to return favors. A politician might offer a small benefit, hoping for a larger reciprocation in votes.
 - Commitment and Consistency: Once people commit to a position, they are more likely to stick to it. Encouraging public pledges or small acts of support can lead to greater commitment.
 - Social Proof: People look to others for cues on how to think or act, especially in uncertain situations. Endorsements, polling data (bandwagon effect), and mass rallies capitalize on this.
 - Liking: People are more easily persuaded by those they like. Candidates often strive to appear likable, relatable, or similar to their target audience.
 - Authority: People tend to obey legitimate authority figures. Politicians often emphasize their experience, position, or endorsements from respected figures.
 - Scarcity: Opportunities seem more valuable when their availability is limited. Campaign messages can create a sense of urgency, framing an election as a "once-in-a-lifetime" chance or a crucial moment.
 - Unity (added later by Cialdini): People are more influenced by those with whom they share an identity. Political campaigns reinforce shared national, ethnic, or ideological identities to foster solidarity.
6. Framing and Narrative: The way an issue is presented (framed) can profoundly influence perception. Framing involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of a perceived reality while omitting others, thereby promoting

a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). Political narratives—coherent stories that give meaning to events and define heroes and villains—are powerful tools for framing issues and shaping emotional responses.

While circumstances and access to resources play significant roles, certain personal attributes and learned skills consistently emerge as crucial for political influence:

1. **Credibility and Trustworthiness (Strong Ethos):** Influential individuals are perceived as honest, reliable, and possessing integrity. They build this through consistent behavior, delivering on promises (or appearing to), and demonstrating transparency where possible. A strong moral character, even if only perceived, forms the bedrock of their appeal.
2. **Perceived Competence and Expertise:** People are more likely to be influenced by those they believe know what they are talking about. This involves displaying a deep understanding of policy, economic principles, social issues, or security matters. Credentials, experience, and articulate explanations contribute to this perception.
3. **Charisma and Emotional Intelligence:** Charismatic leaders possess a compelling charm and the ability to inspire loyalty and enthusiasm. This often involves strong public speaking skills, the capacity to connect emotionally with an audience, and a deep understanding of collective sentiments (emotional intelligence). They can articulate a vision in a way that resonates profoundly.
4. **Exceptional Communication Skills:** Beyond charisma, influential individuals are masters of rhetoric. They can craft messages that are clear, concise, memorable, and adaptable to various audiences. This includes adept use of persuasive language (eg. metadiscourse markers like emphatics, hedges, self-mentions to build ethos), storytelling, metaphor, and strategic framing.

They know what to say and how to say it to maximize impact.

5. **Relatability and Authenticity:** While projecting an image of authority, influential figures also often manage to appear relatable and authentic. They might share personal anecdotes, express vulnerabilities, or demonstrate understanding of the everyday struggles of their constituents, fostering a sense of connection and shared identity.
6. **Strategic Thinking and Adaptability:** Political influence is not static. Influential people are strategic thinkers who can anticipate reactions, adapt their messaging in response to evolving circumstances, and identify the most effective channels and timing for their communications.
7. **Resilience and Conviction:** The political arena is challenging. Influential individuals often possess strong conviction in their beliefs, which fuels their resilience against criticism and setbacks. This perceived conviction can itself be a powerful persuasive force, inspiring others to believe.

While political influence is skillfully wielded, its effectiveness is equally contingent on inherent human characteristics and situational factors that create vulnerabilities:

1. **Cognitive Biases:** These are systematic errors in thinking that affect the decisions and judgments people make.
 - **Confirmation Bias:** The tendency to seek out, interpret, favor, and recall information that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs. Political influencers exploit this by providing information that aligns with a target group's existing worldview, reinforcing their beliefs rather than challenging them.
 - **Availability Heuristic:** The tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events that are more easily recalled. Media sensationalism or repeated

political messaging can make certain issues or threats seem more prevalent than they are.

- Anchoring Bias: Over-reliance on the first piece of information offered (the "anchor") when making decisions. Politicians often set an initial frame or number to influence subsequent perceptions.
- Bandwagon Effect: The tendency to do or believe things because many other people do or believe the same. This is heavily exploited through polling data, endorsements, and social media trends, creating a sense of widespread acceptance.

2. Emotional Vulnerabilities: Emotions play a central role in human decision-making and are highly susceptible to manipulation.

- Fear: Appeals to fear (eg. economic collapse, national security threats, immigration crisis) can bypass rational thought and compel action or support for a particular agenda.
- Hope: Inspiring hope for a better future, progress, or societal improvement can mobilize individuals and foster loyalty.
- Anger and Resentment: Tapping into existing grievances or frustrations can be a powerful tool for galvanizing opposition or support for a populist agenda.
- Empathy and Compassion: Stories of suffering or injustice can evoke empathy, prompting support for humanitarian causes or policies.
- Negativity Bias: The tendency to pay more attention to and be more influenced by negative information. News headlines and political messaging often exploit this, as negative content tends to be more viral (Fagan, 2024).

3. Lack of Critical Thinking and Media Literacy:

- Technology Illiteracy and Digital Nudges: The rapid evolution of digital platforms means many users lack the skills to critically evaluate online information. Subtle "digital nudges" (e.g., defaults, friction,

reinforcement) and "dark patterns" (Fagan, 2024) can influence behavior without explicit awareness.

- Information Overload: The sheer volume of information online makes it difficult to discern fact from fiction, leading people to rely on simplified narratives or trusted (or seemingly trusted) sources.
- Inability to Detect Manipulation: Without awareness of rhetorical devices, logical fallacies, or the mechanisms of propaganda, individuals are more vulnerable to deceptive practices, including "truth-defective" arguments or selective disclosure of information (Todd, 2013).

4. Social Identity and Group Affiliation:

- In-group/Out-group Dynamics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979): People derive a sense of self-esteem and belonging from their group affiliations (e.g., political party, nationality, social class). Political influence often exploits this by strengthening in-group solidarity ("us") while demonizing or dehumanizing the out-group ("them"). This can lead to biased processing of information favoring the in-group's narrative and rejecting anything from the out-group.
- Need for Belonging: The fundamental human need for social connection makes individuals susceptible to conforming to group norms and opinions, even if they privately disagree, to maintain acceptance.

5. Uncertainty and Ambiguity: In times of crisis, rapid change, or complex issues, people seek clarity and direction. Political influencers can step into this void, offering simplistic solutions or clear narratives that reduce uncertainty, even if they are oversimplified or misleading. Ambiguous language can be strategically used to appeal to different groups simultaneously without committing to a clear stance (Taillard, 2000; Blass, 2002).

The human propensity to care about what others tell us is deeply rooted in our social nature and evolutionary history, serving both adaptive and potentially exploitative functions. From early childhood, our understanding of the world is largely constructed

through social learning and the acquisition of knowledge from others. Experts, educators, and peers provide invaluable insights and information that would be impossible for an individual to acquire independently. This reliance on social learning extends profoundly into political matters, where individuals routinely glean insights from journalists, academics, and political leaders to form their perspectives.

Furthermore, in a world of increasing complexity, individuals often rely on others for efficiency and cognitive load reduction. The sheer volume of information on any given issue makes it impractical for one person to thoroughly investigate every facet. Consequently, deferring to others, particularly perceived authorities or those within trusted social circles, offers mental shortcuts, or heuristics, that reduce cognitive effort and facilitate faster decision-making. We inherently trust that these sources have undertaken the necessary diligence on our behalf.

Beyond efficiency, a fundamental human need for social acceptance and belonging drives our susceptibility to influence. As social beings, we possess an innate desire to be accepted by our groups, whether they are family, friends, or broader political affiliations. Conforming to the opinions and behaviors of our peers or salient social groups helps to maintain social harmony and avert ostracization, a phenomenon widely recognized as "social proof" (Cialdini, 2013), which acts as a potent driver of collective opinion.

Our inclination to consider information from others is also deeply tied to trust and credibility. We are naturally more receptive to sources we perceive as credible, competent, and trustworthy. When a political figure, for instance, cultivates a reputation for integrity or demonstrates expertise in their field, their statements inherently carry greater weight. This trust is typically built over time through consistent actions and an alignment of values with their audience.

Moreover, emotions play a significant role in fostering shared understanding and acceptance. Emotional contagion is a powerful phenomenon, wherein individuals can experience similar feelings when a charismatic leader expresses strong emotions or

a group rallies around a particular sentiment. This shared emotional experience not only reinforces group identity but also amplifies the impact of messages. Concurrently, humans are intrinsically wired to construct a shared social reality; if a particular belief gains widespread acceptance within one's social milieu, it tends to become integrated into one's perceived reality.

Finally, the principle of reciprocity further compels our consideration of others' input. This principle dictates that when someone provides us with something—be it information, a perceived benefit, or an expression of support—we often feel a subconscious obligation to return the favor. This reciprocal dynamic can extend to accepting their viewpoints or supporting their cause, thereby completing a cycle of influence.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Political persuasion, an inherent and potent force within human societies, operates as a double-edged sword. Its pervasive influence on governance, public policy, and even the fabric of societal values necessitates a rigorous and ongoing ethical examination. At its core lies a fundamental distinction: the chasm that separates legitimate persuasion, grounded in respect for individual autonomy and reasoned debate, from outright manipulation, which seeks to bypass conscious thought and exploit inherent human vulnerabilities. While the former operates through the presentation of arguments and evidence intended to sway opinion through rational engagement, the latter often resorts to tactics of deceit, coercion, and the strategic exploitation of emotional and cognitive biases, aiming to achieve a predetermined outcome irrespective of the genuine interests or informed consent of the audience.

The escalating sophistication of data analytics and psychological profiling in contemporary political campaigns has amplified these ethical concerns to an unprecedented degree. The capacity to gather and analyze vast amounts of personal data allows for the creation of highly granular audience segments, enabling the delivery of meticulously crafted persuasive messages tailored to individual psychological profiles and vulnerabilities. This raises the specter of highly targeted manipulative persuasion, campaigns designed not to foster informed deliberation but rather to subtly and surreptitiously bypass critical thinking, tapping into subconscious biases and emotional triggers. The implications for democratic processes are profound, as such techniques risk undermining the very foundations of rational discourse and informed consent upon which legitimate political engagement rests.

The emergence of the so-called "post-truth" era further complicates this already intricate ethical landscape. In a climate where factual accuracy increasingly takes a backseat to emotional resonance and deeply held personal beliefs, the bedrock of evidence-based persuasion is eroded. This phenomenon presents a significant challenge to the ideal of informed citizenship and the health of robust public discourse. When objective truth becomes a contested and malleable entity, the vulnerability of audiences to manipulative tactics is amplified. Individuals lacking strong critical media literacy skills, or those experiencing heightened emotional states, become particularly susceptible to persuasive strategies that may not align with their best interests, or indeed, with objective reality. This reality underscores the critical imperative for comprehensive educational initiatives designed to equip citizens with the necessary tools to critically evaluate information, discern credible sources from disinformation, and develop resilience against undue influence.

Furthermore, the regulatory environment governing political communication finds itself in a perpetual state of catch-up with the rapid pace of technological advancement, particularly in the realm of social media. The inherent opacity of algorithms that curate and amplify content, the ease and speed with which disinformation can be disseminated across vast networks, and the significant challenges associated with establishing clear lines of accountability for online content

collectively raise profound questions about how to effectively safeguard democratic processes from malicious persuasive campaigns. Navigating this challenge requires a delicate balancing act: how to implement measures that protect the integrity of public discourse and prevent manipulation without simultaneously impinging upon fundamental rights to freedom of speech and expression.

Political persuasion, despite its inherent ethical complexities, remains a fundamental and inescapable element of modern political life. It serves as the engine that drives political campaigns, provides the language for policy debates, and underpins the very art of leadership. Its effectiveness is predicated upon a deep and nuanced understanding of human psychology, encompassing a broad spectrum of cognitive processes, emotional responses, and social dynamics. Theoretical frameworks, ranging from dual-process models of information elaboration that explain how individuals process persuasive messages through central or peripheral routes, to the practical principles of social influence that delineate techniques such as reciprocity, scarcity, and authority, illuminate the intricate psychological pathways through which attitudes and behaviors are shaped and modified.

The ubiquitous presence of persuasive techniques in the fabric of daily life, particularly as mediated through the pervasive lenses of marketing and social media, underscores its seamless integration into contemporary human experience. These platforms, characterized by their sophisticated algorithmic amplification mechanisms and their unparalleled capacity for microtargeting specific demographics and even individuals, have revolutionized the speed, scale, and precision with which persuasive messages can be disseminated. This technological transformation has simultaneously empowered communicators with unprecedented reach and analytical capabilities while simultaneously challenging the critical discernment and resilience of audiences.

Within the explicit domain of politics, persuasion operates as the very engine of electoral campaigns, the essential language employed in shaping and contesting policy debates, and a defining characteristic of effective leadership. Examining

contentious societal issues such as euthanasia, abortion, and migration reveals the deliberate deployment of carefully constructed rhetorical frames, the strategic leveraging of emotional appeals, and the activation of salient social identities as potent tools employed to sway mass opinion. These case studies serve to highlight the inherent moral and ethical dilemmas that arise in the context of such profound influence, particularly in instances where political rhetoric veers into the territory of dehumanisation of opposing groups or the intentional obfuscation or outright denial of established facts.

Ultimately, effectively navigating the multifaceted and increasingly complex landscape of political persuasion demands the cultivation of a vigilant and critically engaged citizenry. The long-term health and vitality of democratic societies are inextricably linked to the capacity of individual citizens to develop a sophisticated understanding of the underlying mechanisms of influence, to possess the skills necessary to discern credible and reliable information from manipulative and misleading rhetoric, and to actively engage in thoughtful and reasoned deliberation rather than passively succumbing to unexamined convictions or emotionally charged appeals. As persuasive technologies continue their relentless evolution, the imperative for robust media literacy education across all segments of society, the adherence to high ethical standards in communication practices by political actors and media organizations, and a renewed societal commitment to factual accuracy and evidence-based discourse will only intensify in their importance in safeguarding the integrity of political processes and preserving the autonomy and informed decision-making capacity of the individual.

The initial survey findings highlighted a notable divergence between participants' self-identified political leanings, often centrist, and their actual value-driven responses, which skewed more towards leftist views. This discrepancy points to a potential lack of explicit political self-awareness or a hesitation to declare strong political affiliations, likely influenced by the societal taboo surrounding political discourse and a perceived deficit in political education.

The exploration of specific political topics—abortion (linked to rightist values), the right to vote (centrist values), and freedom of movement/immigration (leftist values)—illuminated the complex and often contradictory nature of public opinion when subjected to different persuasive techniques. On the deeply divisive issue of abortion, the survey compellingly demonstrated that emotionally resonant narratives and personal stories were significantly more effective in influencing opinions towards greater accessibility than purely factual information, such as statements from the World Health Organization. This outcome strongly supports existing research indicating that narratives are more easily processed and thus more persuasive than non-narratives, fostering attitude change and character identification (Bullock et al., 2021; de Graaf et al., 2012; Cohen, 2001). The observed gender differences in responses further suggested that personal relevance and the capacity for empathy critically shape an individual's susceptibility to narrative persuasion.

The discussion on voting rights, while initially met with overwhelming support for universal suffrage, revealed "cracks" in participants' values when confronted with nuanced questions concerning specific groups, such as convicted criminals or the aged. The analysis of the UK's Brexit referendum served as a potent empirical illustration, exposing stark intergenerational divides where older voters, influenced by emotionally charged and sometimes misleading frames, disproportionately determined an outcome with profound long-term repercussions for younger generations. This case study underscored significant ethical dilemmas concerning democratic legitimacy, particularly when persuasive tactics are perceived as manipulative, potentially eroding public trust and fostering political alienation among disaffected groups.

Finally, the examination of freedom of movement and immigration unveiled a striking contradiction, particularly among participants expressing predominantly leftist values. Despite a majority initially supporting the principle of freedom of movement, responses often revealed underlying fears related to integration, cultural identity, and perceived increases in crime. This sentiment appears to be significantly shaped by the strategic dissemination of stereotypes, misinformation, and sensationalist media

narratives, even when such claims have been widely debunked. The persistence of these opinions, despite factual inaccuracies, highlights the enduring power of fear-mongering, "us vs. them" dichotomies, and the exploitation of cognitive biases, mirroring established historical propaganda techniques. The persuasive discourse surrounding migration, whether humanitarian or restrictionist, consistently leverages emotional appeals, framing, and social identity dynamics to sway public opinion.

The survey findings collectively underscore that political influence is a sophisticated process that leverages inherent human vulnerabilities—including cognitive biases, emotional susceptibility, the fundamental need for social acceptance, and varying levels of critical media literacy. While individuals may hold abstract political values, their concrete opinions and behaviours can be significantly swayed by the strategic framing of issues, the emotional resonance of narratives, and the perceived trustworthiness of sources, often leading to inconsistencies between stated ideals and nuanced responses. This research reiterates the critical imperative for fostering robust media literacy and critical thinking skills, enabling citizens to dissect complex persuasive messages, identify manipulative tactics, and engage more critically and autonomously in political discourse, thereby contributing to more informed and resilient democratic processes.

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