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What motivates voters?

Michael Briguglio

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As Malta's national elections are approaching, one should consider what motivates voters. An analysis of the Maltese context must give due weight to the country's commonalities and differences with other countries.



Academic colleagues Corbett and Venendaal defined political patronage amongst other factors, there are strong connections between political patronage, the dishing of favours, and the dependency on the party in power. We have seen ample evidence of the current Labour government further extending certain open positions in positions of trust.

social welfare services.

The hyperpersonalisation of politics can thus comprise a broad range of interactions, ranging from corrupt practices to a politician's articulation of their constituents' social needs and wants. The latter is not necessarily corrupt, for example when politicians voice the needs of communities to have accessible pavements or urgent works.

There are also other factors which may motivate voters which are not necessarily related to a country's size. These may include political identification which one may be socialized into from family, friends and the media. This could range from association with a particular political party from a young age, to associate with one's peers to belong to a social 'in group'. It is quite telling to analyse how, for example, in different elections both the Labour and Nationalist parties managed to convince a substantial amount young people to identify with their respective causes. When I was a University student back in the 1990s, I remember the Nationalist Party as being the 'natural party' of tertiary students.

Which takes us to one's social background and/or identity(ies). Traditionally, for example, Labour was more attractive to working class voters, and this still quite holds. Yet in today's Malta things are not so clear cut: You have voters from different social classes identifying with different political parties. In turn, the particular motivation of such voters may vary.

Similarly, in different elections, political parties were respectively more attractive to certain identities. For example the PN was more attractive to pro-EU voters during Malta's respective accession process, whilst the PL has recently managed to be more attractive to those who identify with particular issues such as hunting and LGBTIQ rights. Then again, one would be mistaken to stretch this example to an absurd conclusion that all hunters and LGBTIQ persons are Labourites: One's voting preferences may be influenced by a variety of other personal, psychological, social and political factors.

In turn, an analysis of voters' motivations should also give due weight to emotional aspects, such as considering a party to be an extension of one's identity, or, conversely having a sense of antipathy towards another party – which is sometimes dubbed as 'negative partisanship'.

Media exposure is also a powerful tool which may motivate voters, but again, one cannot simply reduce voting motivation to one factor: To begin with, Malta's media-sphere is not monopolized by one media house: There are different agendas, interests, and discourses which may or may not influence public opinion. Political parties themselves have their own tools for campaign management: Again, these are not always successful. For example, it transpired that PN's over-emphasis on governance and corruption in the 2017 general election was not translated into votes, even though this was a prominent issue in the media.

Besides, we are living in an age of 'prosumers', where we are not simply consumers of the media: The social media enables us to produce content, and, while this may itself be influenced by the more influential media voices, this is not necessarily the case. Of course, this may also result in situations where sensationalist clickbait goes viral whereas slower evidence-based communication has less of a political impact.

At this point one may ask what role does political ideology play in the motivation of voters. Again, I suggest that there is no straightforward reply to this question. Few of whether a party looks to the left or the right, but some o importance to certain issues and considerations over otl left/right divide. For example, one may be left-wing wher to the role of the state in the economy.

Besides, voters may make their voting choices out of oth or particular issues. Some voters prize the fact that they open however, such voters have by and large chosen on one party or another may be related to different m

shortcomings and contradictions. A party leader or specific politicians at constituency level may enjoy higher levels of trust than others.

In the upcoming election, some other considerations which I believe have some degree of influence include the following: Whether Robert Abela is considered to be a continuation of Joseph Muscat or whether he represents more of a shift, and, in turn, how this should be judged; whether the turbulence within the Nationalist Party will result in a net gain or loss of votes; and whether the PN can be seen as offering a more credible alternative to Labour in terms of voters' respective aspirations and preferences. To date, opinion surveys confirm the trend of all elections held in Malta after 2008: namely that Labour's electoral coalition enjoys a healthy lead.

Finally, I wish to add that even though much political discourse is produced within the media-sphere, it would be analytically unhelpful, politically unproductive and socially detached to reduce all political considerations to the issues and voices which make the headlines or go viral. For beyond the loudest and most sensational voices, there are silent majorities and interests, backstage, articulated in house visits, committee rooms and informal social gatherings.

Dr Michael Briguglio is a sociologist and senior lecturer at the University of Malta

www.michaelbriguglio.com

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