Democratization

Voicing Politics: How Language Shapes Public Opinion

by Efrén Pérez and Margit Tavits, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023, 232 pp., £100.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691243412

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Israel and some Arab Gulf states, portraying political Islam as the enemy, and challenging Iranian dominance in the MENA region. Given the recent contention between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, this study area is critical, as these two leading digital powers compete for supremacy. It is also essential to evaluate how their disinformation synergy will shift amid the ongoing rivalry and impact online deception operations and their modalities.

The book has many strengths as it unpacks how Western PR firms failed to combat digital authoritarianism, leaving activists and regular users vulnerable to tyrants projecting their influence electronically. In this regard, Jones points out the issue of digital orientalism and how social media companies and online forums embrace a neo-liberalist ideology. He notes that Twitter, for example, does not seriously handle reports of hate and abuse in languages other than English. Understanding the extent of authoritarian entities' efforts to restrain freedom is imperative, but acting on that awareness and preventing it is equally important. Additionally, as Jones emphasizes "the urgency of the disinformation problem" (42), he presents accessible and engaging research on the topic while considering his explanation's readability to academics and non-academic readers.

Although the book provides insightful scholarship, it falls short in exploring digital authoritarianism as a low-cost tool to target the Arab Gulf diaspora and the complicity of host countries in enabling transnational repression. Furthermore, while women are the cornerstones of the new Arab Gulf identity, Chapter 12's discussion on "Attacking Women" as a unique component of the region's disinformation campaign lacks depth and does not include enough examples of women activists from the area. Researchers could expand on this by examining how these operations created community divisions, provoked online and offline violence, and reshaped regional policies and identities post-Arab Spring.

Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East presents public-impact research investigating Arab Gulf politics and media through Marc Jones' personal experiences, enriching case studies, and theoretical analysis. It is highly recommended for scholars and students interested in Middle East politics and journalism.

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The notion that different languages can influence human perception of reality has been present for several centuries. To what extent is this relevant to the domain of political behaviour? In what ways can language shape political preferences? How significant is language's role in democracy? Efrén Pérez, and Margit Tavits, have succeeded in

developing a novel experimental approach to address these issues, which they present in their book, *Voicing Politics: How Language Shapes Public Opinion*. This work holds significance for political science as a whole and is particularly pertinent to the study of democracy.

Democratization, in general, is a prolonged process that often requires short-term compromises and sacrifices for the sake of fostering elevated development and a more sustainable future; neglecting these aspects can lead to significant backlash several decades later. Based on five groups of studies, each of which is devoted to the interaction of language with political behaviour, *Voicing Politics* makes a crucial contribution to both academic researchers and policymakers. The book offers a robust toolkit for estimating policies that promote democracy and facilitate the transition to a democratic system in a smoother way: it delves into the role of language in eliciting public opinion, its impact on time preferences, perceptions of social and political minority groups, and inclinations for political transformations.

Voicing Politics comprises six chapters and extensive appendices for each. Pérez & Tavits commence their book by providing a concise though informative overview of the history of hypotheses on language effects which ranges from a rather strong assertion that language determines the way people think to a more subtle and modest suggestion that language might influence human thoughts (chapter one). To isolate the effect of language (chapter two), the authors employ the following experimental approach: they assemble a group of bilinguals (proficient in both Russian and Estonian languages) and randomly assign languages to the participants to ascertain their effect on their political opinions. This elegant idea devised by Pérez & Tavits enables the researchers to disentangle the impact of language itself from numerous confounding factors. Their aim is to demonstrate that those who speak a gender-neutral language at home exhibit similarly liberal attitudes towards a higher representation of women in economics and politics. Expanding their research to Sweden, in chapter three, where a newly introduced gender-neutral pronoun emerged in 2015, the authors of *Voicing Politics* illustrate that pronouns indeed hold significance in shaping people's perspectives on gender equality, including LGBTQ+ issues. Shifting their focus in the fourth chapter to the comparison between *futured* languages (employing a special tense for speaking about the future) and *futureless* languages (where present tense is used to discuss the future), Pérez & Tavits discover that individuals expressing their opinions in the latter (futureless languages) tend to exhibit significantly greater environmental concern (e.g., showing more support for "green" taxes) and a predisposition for long-term policy orientation. Additionally, the authors reveal that when individuals are asked to state their preferences in the language of the minority, they are more likely to correctly identify anti-minority political figures and consider ethnic relations as a more substantial concern (chapter five). In the concluding sixth chapter, the authors delve into sophisticated details concerning the impact of the language in which information is organized and stored in memory.

There are several notable advantages that *Voicing Politics* possesses. Firstly, the book serves as an excellent demonstration of the elegance of experimental methods, showcasing how such methods can be harnessed in the social sciences to distil subtle effects like the influence of language on human opinions. Secondly, it provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of the existing literature concerning language and political behaviour. Thirdly, the elaborate recommendations proposed by Pérez & Tavits for potential directions for future research into language's role in political

behaviour are particularly attractive to those extensively immersed in this field of study.

One critical worth-mentioning point of *Voicing Politics* is the notable scarcity of a discussion on the limitations of language-opinion effects, which actually reflects the current state of the literature. In which contexts does language not matter? What are the fields in which language effects do not hold?

Furthermore, it's crucial to recognize that the impact of language sensitivity also extends to the realm of economics. As a result, investigating the effects of language on economic preferences and understanding their corresponding limitations holds significant academic and public-policy importance. These questions offer a potential avenue for further research that could provide a more profound understanding of the language effect in the political and economic domains.

Overall, *Voicing Politics* stands as an exemplary work that adeptly navigates subtle technical details critical to research while simultaneously captivating the attention of a more general readership. Both newcomers and professionals will benefit from reading this book: while the former will discover a diverse universe of experimental approaches in political science, the latter will find inspiration for prospective research on well-known problems.

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