

Exploring the Boundaries between Persuasion and Manipulation in Political Communication

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Abstract

The researchers explored the boundaries between persuasion and manipulation in political communication. The objective was to ascertain the extent to which these tactics are used in political discourse and their impact on public opinion. The study was guided by the theory of reasoned action and the propaganda model and employed a library research approach, analysing secondary data sources such as articles, books and official reports. The discourse highlighted the distinct differences between persuasion and manipulation in political communication. While persuasion is characterised by transparency, reasoned argumentation and respect for individual autonomy, manipulation employs deception, coercion and emotional appeals to influence beliefs or behaviours. The discourse also revealed the extent to which these tactics are used in current political discourse, with manipulation posing significant challenges to democratic norms and ethical political practices. The intersection of politics, communication and religion further complicates the issue, with religion often used as a tool for both persuasion and manipulation. The media's role in political communication was also examined, with the rise of social media presenting new challenges for regulating political communication and combatting the spread of manipulative content. In light of these discourse, the study concluded with several recommendations to enhance the integrity and transparency of political communication. These include upholding ethical standards in communication practices, promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public, and strengthening regulatory frameworks to address the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation.

Keywords: Boundaries, Communication, Persuasion, Politics, Propaganda

Introduction

Communication is the lifeblood of political activity, enabling politicians to articulate their policies, engage with citizens and shape public opinion (Bassey, 2024). However, its role in politics is complex and multifaceted. While communication can serve as a powerful tool for persuasion, it can also be employed for manipulation. The line between persuasion and manipulation in political communication is often blurred, raising significant ethical and democratic concerns (Halfdanarson & Conrad, 2022).

The relevance of this study is underscored by the increasing use of manipulative communication tactics in politics. In recent years, there has been a rise in the use of 'fake news,' propaganda and other forms of manipulative communication in political campaigns around the world (Abuelwafa, 2021). This has been facilitated by the growth of social media, which allows for the rapid dissemination of information and the targeting of specific audiences. Understanding the boundaries between persuasion and manipulation in political communication is therefore crucial for promoting ethical and democratic political practices.

Persuasion and manipulation are both forms of influence, but they differ in important ways. Persuasion involves the use of reason and evidence to convince someone to change their beliefs or behaviour. It is a transparent process that respects the autonomy of the individual. Manipulation, on the other hand, involves the use of deception, coercion, or emotional appeals to influence someone's beliefs or behaviour. It is a covert process that undermines the autonomy of the individual (Ali & Rashid, 2022). Thus, in the context of political communication, persuasion is often seen as a legitimate tool for politicians to use. It allows them to present their policies and arguments in a compelling way and to engage in debate and discussion with their opponents. However, the use of manipulation in political communication is more controversial. It can undermine the democratic process by distorting the truth, suppressing dissent and manipulating public opinion (Oparinde, Rapeane-Mathonsi & Mheta, 2021).

The intersection between politics, communication and religion further complicates the issue. Religion can be used as a tool for both persuasion and manipulation in political communication. Politicians may appeal to religious beliefs and values to persuade voters, but they may also use religion to manipulate public opinion and legitimise their power (Vera- Vera-Revilla, Grundy-López, Flores-Vilca, García-Toledo, Gutiérrez-Aguilar & Duche-Pérez, 2024).

The mass media play a crucial role in political communication. It can amplify the voices of politicians, but it can also hold them accountable. The media can be used to promote both persuasion and manipulation in political communication. However, the rise of social media has created new challenges for the regulation of political communication, as it allows for the rapid dissemination of manipulative content (Garba & Inobemhe, 2022). Such manipulative deemed harmful to the very fabric of our nation and society.

The use of manipulation in political communication is not only an ethical issue, but also a practical one. It can undermine public trust in politics and lead to political polarisation. Moreover, the use of manipulation can backfire, as citizens become more sceptical and critical of political communication (Dowding & Oprea, 2024). A lot of the time, political actors take advantage of manipulation and people with good media literacy and critical thinking are able to decipher such which is why some also explore the use of persuasion in the political process. However, persuasion in political communication is not without its challenges. The Generalising Persuasion (GP) Framework highlights the complexity of persuasion, which involves multiple factors such as the source, message and audience (Druckman, 2022). Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective persuasive strategies in political communication.

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Marketing provides useful insights into the use of persuasion and manipulation in communication. The development of persuasive systems for marketing involves the interplay of persuasion techniques, customer traits and persuasive message design (Braca & Dondio, 2023). These insights can be applied to political communication to better understand the use of persuasion and manipulation.

The lack of clarity and consensus on the boundaries between persuasion and manipulation in political communication is a pressing issue that impacts contemporary society. As political discourse increasingly permeates daily life, understanding the nuances of these tactics becomes critical, particularly as manipulative tactics can erode public trust and undermine informed decision-making (Abuelwafa, 2021). Despite its importance, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the distinction between persuasion and manipulation. This study aims to address this gap by exploring these boundaries, providing a comprehensive understanding of their implications for democratic societies and contributing to the development of ethical standards to promote transparency and accountability in political communication. In essence, this study aims to explore the delicate boundaries between persuasion and manipulation in political communication, drawing on a diverse array of theoretical and empirical sources. Through a comprehensive analysis, this research seeks to enhance our understanding of political communication and its broader implications for democracy and ethical political practices. The study was conducted to explore the boundaries between propaganda and manipulation inherent in political communication.

Theoretic Framework

This study is underpinned by two key theories: the theory of reasoned action and the propaganda model. These theories offer valuable insights into the dynamics of persuasion and manipulation in political communication. The theory of reasoned action, proposed by Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) suggests that an individual's behaviour is determined by their intention to perform a particular action, shaped by their attitudes towards the behaviour and their perception of social norms. In political communication, the theory helps to understand how politicians use persuasive tactics to shape public opinion and influence behaviour by framing policy issues positively and highlighting the negative consequences of opposing viewpoints (Druckman, 2022).

The propaganda model, developed by Herman & Chomsky (1988), provides a framework for understanding how power and ideology shape media content, including political communication. This model posits that media content reflects the interests of dominant elite groups who use their influence to shape public opinion and maintain power. Politicians and media outlets employ manipulative tactics such as fear-mongering and scapegoating to promote their agendas and suppress dissenting viewpoints (Abuelwafa, 2021). This study applied both the theory of planned action and propaganda model to examine how politicians use persuasive and manipulative tactics to shape public attitudes and perceptions, thereby advancing their political agendas and justifying their policies and actions.

Conceptual Review of Persuasion and Manipulation

Persuasion stands as a cornerstone within political communication, serving as a mechanism to sway individuals' attitudes or behaviours towards political matters. Grounded in logical reasoning and evidential support, persuasion aims to prompt voluntary acceptance of a particular viewpoint (Braca & Dondio, 2023). In political contexts, this tool becomes paramount for garnering support for policies, candidates, or ideologies, often manifesting through persuasive speeches delivered by political leaders to mobilise public opinion on contentious issues (Burnell & Reeve, 2009).

In contrast, manipulation takes on a more surreptitious form of influence, characterised by covert tactics such as deception and emotional appeals, often operating without individuals' full awareness or consent (Ali & Rashid, 2022). Within political communication, manipulation finds expression through strategies like spin and propaganda, where biased information, misrepresented facts, or exploitation of emotions are employed to sway public opinion (Whitfield, 2020).

Understanding Political Communication

Political communication, as a multifaceted domain, encompasses the generation, dissemination and interpretation of political messages, serving as a conduit for shaping public opinion and facilitating political engagement (Garba & Inobemhe, 2022). Amidst this complex landscape, political communication becomes an arena where power dynamics intersect with persuasion and manipulation, as various actors vie to advance their interests (Abrahamyan, 2020; Vera-Revilla *et al* 2024).

In essence, persuasion and manipulation emerge as pivotal components of political communication, wielding significant influence over public opinion and democratic processes. While persuasion operates on principles of transparency and reasoned argumentation, manipulation often traverses ethical boundaries through deceptive maneuvers. The ethical dimensions of their use underscore the importance of promoting transparency, accuracy and respect for autonomy within political discourse, ultimately shaping the quality and integrity of democratic governance.

Persuasion and Manipulation as Expressed in Political Communication

Persuasion is a fundamental aspect of political communication, involving the use of reasoned argument to influence people's attitudes or behaviours (Druckman, 2022). It is a transparent process that respects the audience's autonomy and right to make informed decisions. For instance, a political leader may use persuasive speeches to rally public support for their policies or to influence public opinion on contentious issues (Ebunuwele, Ekhareafu & Asemah, 2022). However, when persuasion crosses into manipulation, the ethical implications become more complex.

Manipulation is a more covert and deceptive form of influence, often employing tactics such as deception, distraction, or emotional appeal to influence people's attitudes or behaviours without their full awareness or consent (Dowding & Oprea, 2024; Tappin, Wittenberg, Hewitt & Rand, 2023). In political communication, manipulation can take various forms, such as spin, propaganda, or doublespeak. For example, politicians may

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manipulate public opinion by presenting biased information, misrepresenting facts or exploiting people's emotions (Abuelwafa, 2021; Lapadat & Lapadat, 2020). Thus, while persuasion and manipulation share the common goal of influencing people's attitudes or behaviours, they differ significantly in their methods, ethical implications and effects on the audience. Persuasion relies on logical argument and evidence, respecting the audience's autonomy and right to make informed decisions. In contrast, manipulation undermines these principles, using deceptive or coercive tactics to influence people's attitudes or behaviours without their full awareness or consent (Druckman, 2022; Oparinde, Rapeane-Mathonsi, Mheta & Champion, 2021).

The boundary between persuasion and manipulation in political communication is not always clear-cut. Politicians often use persuasive techniques such as framing, storytelling and rhetorical devices to present their arguments in a compelling way. However, these techniques can also be used manipulatively, for instance, by framing an issue in a misleading way or by using emotional stories to distract from the facts (Oparinde *et al* 2021).

The rise of digital media and social networks has further complicated the boundary between persuasion and manipulation in political communication. Politicians and political campaigns can now use sophisticated data analytics and micro-targeting techniques to tailor their messages to individual voters, potentially manipulating their attitudes or behaviours without their knowledge or consent (Almahasees & Mahmoud, 2022).

Moreover, the use of persuasion and manipulation in political communication can have significant implications for democratic governance. On the one hand, persuasion can foster informed debate and political participation, contributing to the functioning of democracy. On the other hand, manipulation can breed misinformation, distrust and political polarisation, undermining the principles of democracy (Garba & Inobemhe, 2022).

Therefore, it is crucial to promote ethical communication practices in politics, such as transparency, accuracy and respect for the audience's autonomy. This requires not only the commitment of politicians and political communicators but also the active participation of citizens and the media. Citizens need to develop critical media literacy skills to discern between persuasion and manipulation in political communication, while the media need to uphold their role as watchdogs of democracy, scrutinising political communication for signs of manipulation (Umoro & Asemah, 2023; Crain & Nadler, 2019).

Furthermore, regulations and policies can play a crucial role in preventing manipulation in political communication. For instance, regulations on political advertising, campaign financing, and data protection can help to limit the use of manipulative tactics in political communication (Braca & Dondio, 2023).

However, the challenge lies in striking the right balance between regulation and freedom of speech, as any restrictions on political communication need to respect the principles of free speech and democratic debate. Therefore, any regulations or policies aimed at preventing manipulation in political communication need to be carefully

designed and implemented, taking into account the complexities and nuances of political communication. Persuasion is, therefore, a legitimate and necessary aspect of political communication, while manipulation poses significant threats to democratic governance. Thus, it is essential to promote ethical communication practices in politics, enhance critical media literacy among citizens and develop effective regulations and policies to prevent manipulation in political communication.

Persuasion and manipulation in politics in general and political communication in particular have received a focus of researchers. According to Noggle (2021), a manipulator usually attempts to change the desires and beliefs of another person by presenting bad reasons made to look good, arguments of faulty foundations disguised as one with sound judgement, all geared towards an aim. Systemic manipulation coupled with disinformation across virtual spaces pose significant risk to democracy (Jones, 2021). The implication is that there will be public distrust leading to widespread weakening of democratic institutions across the world. In deed, social media present interesting times for the world as they enable the spread of all forms of polarisations, control narratives and the identity and politics-linked division (Shahbaz, 2020).

In a study conducted by Oparinde *et al* (2021) on rhetorical choices in the political speeches of Nigerian politicians, findings showed that manipulative rhetoric is strategically used by people in politics through the adoption of hyperbole, modalities, pronouns, metaphor and repetition. In political discourse in Nigeria, politicians have been shown to be conversant with their lexical choices while utilising figurative expressions such as hyperbole, repetition and many more to interact with the Nigerian public who are the electorate. Most importantly, they use repetition to obfuscate their audience repeating a single word to draw and maintain their attention and focus on that which they want them to visualise and think about.

Fadhli & Nur (2023) conducted a research on the use of linguistic devices for the purpose of manipulation and persuasion of audiences during the 2020 presidential elections in the United States. Findings showed that Donald Trump utilised Pathos (linguistic device that appeals to emotions) to garner support from the American public. This, however, contrasts with the campaign of his opponent, Joe Biden, who used a rhetorical strategy that could be described as "balanced." Furthermore, the finding revealed that during debates, the two contenders used Logos prominently while leveraging "emphasis" to stress on a matter they deemed important and intended the people to show full concentration going into the polls. A term "patriots" was used severally by Trump as a persuasive means for a sense of unity while exploring unverified statistics and straight lies whenever he chose to be manipulative.

Methodology

The library research was used for this study as it focused on secondary data sources through gathering of articles, books, official reports, records and many more. The researchers subjected data collected to careful analysis through the use of thematic method and produced themes related to the focus of the study.

Discussion

Persuasion in Political Communication

The ability and capacity of a clear and concise communication in the political domain is considered a point of strength for any political actor or institution. Candidates standing in an election and their political parties alike are considered strong once they meet the criteria. Talking about persuasion in political communication would include the entire communication architecture which includes strategic use of language, framing and clear message communication as well as tailoring the message and communication to the target audience (Lane & Pritzker, 2017). Since the idea behind political communication is to convince and mobilise the electorate that help secure victory at the polls, then persuasion must be on the table. Here, persuasion in political communication is about communicative attempts to convince voters to support a political cause (Barthe, 2010; Blumenherst, 2023).

Political persuasion in the political process is not done haphazardly as there are strategies, tactics or methods that can be adopted for the best outcomes. Sivarajs (2023) discussed common persuasive tactics which are hereby condensed and discussed hereunder:

- a. **Convey value:** A political platform must be presented to the electorate in a pattern that appeals to their moral values.
- b. **Mold the Candidate's Image:** It takes time to shape the image of a candidate because breaking through negative perceptions is quite tasking. When at this task, the winning attributes of the candidate must be highlighted to the electorate.
- c. **Identify and Target an Enemy:** Political enemies are real. In line with the Machiavellian thoughts on voter psychology, creating one's enemy in politics is a political persuasion method. A policy issue, a group or the opposing candidate can be the enemy. Therefore an issue must be picked and the tools like repetition to highlight the weakness of that enemy to the electorate.
- d. **Gather Endorsements:** To get endorsements by influencers is considered an important method of political persuasion. Such moves have the latitude to increase the trustworthiness of the candidate in the estimation of the voters. A good example of how endorsement works is Joe Biden vs. Bernie Sanders in the US election where a single move of endorsement shifted the momentum. It is tactically germane to gather as much as one can. Additionally, politicians, local unions, political parties, influential locals, local media, community leaders and local unions among others are key stakeholders that can provide such endorsements in a political context.
- e. **Peer-to-peer and Social Persuasion:** Volunteers can be recruited to build a base towards getting the required votes. Additionally, supporters across social media platforms

can be motivated to become vocal about their support. This will help drive peer-to-peer persuasion leading to organic supporters on and offline.

f. **Political persuasion for supporters:** Techniques for persuasion must also focus on supporters and getting them to vote on the scheduled day. Here, importance of voting and assurance of a seamless process must be the focus in order to get them motivated to queue on the D-day.

The above demonstrates that there is a rich step-by-step guide that can be deployed by a campaign to advance a political agenda for a candidate that means political persuasion in political communication efforts. Sivaraj (2023) identifies face-to-face interaction, phone calls, text messages, news channels and newspapers and social media advertisements as the popular channels of political persuasion that can be explored by political institutions and their candidates.

Political Communication and the Act of Manipulation in Modern Times

In politics, manipulation can be in many ways and they could be in communicative and non-communicative forms. It is manipulative for a politician to intentionally circulate false information to improve one's winning chances in an election and such could also be the spread of malicious rumours about an opposing candidate, quote and post fabricated statistics to support the policy agenda of an incumbent or go as far as promoting claims of electoral fraud to put a question tag on the election results and totality of the outcomes of the electoral process. This strategy or route to manipulation in politics is termed deceptive communication (Dowding & Oprea, 2024). In some climes this route seems popular and therefore often applied in political contexts.

Relatedly, there is the linguistic manipulation. In fact, manipulation has been described in most studies as linguistic strategies used in political discourse (Dyrorine *et al* as cited in Polyakova, Yuzhakova, Zalavina & Dyrorina, 2020). This is demonstrative of the powers of words and language in modern political discourse. In fact, on account of the powers of linguistic manipulation, it is established that social media influencers and journalists manipulate opinions of people in our world through the words they choose to describe situations, things and people (Myatt, 2023).

Metaphor and similes, tautology, alliteration and assonance, imperatives, variable tone, leading questions, hyperbole and emotive language, choice of pronouns, contrasting pairs and the rule of three are of the techniques employed to actualise political motives through linguistic manipulation. In political discourse, two main types of manipulation have been identified and these according to Marieiev, Chornyi, Balaban, Kobets, Berezovska-Chmil & Shchur (2023) are employed to influence others when taking on certain subjects in political discourse. These are:

a. **Referential Manipulation:** This is about the distortion of reality and the endpoint is focus manipulation where the point of view is changed resulting in change of perception; fact manipulation and distortion of facts.

b. **Argumentative Manipulation:** This is about the violation of the basis postulates where integrity of text and the logic accompanying its formulated get violated.

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Furthermore, it involves masking of statements, expression of opinion in an undeniable form, avoidance of answers, distortion of information, and objection of guise of consent.

It is imperative to note that political manipulation in today's world leverage on the strengths and features of the new media and related aspects such as the social media. Across platforms, users are inundated with all manner of manipulative contents before, during and after elections and even outside of the electoral period, all geared towards achieving a goal or set of goals in the polity. Junk news, all manners of disinformation and misinformation are widespread on social media and are sometimes manipulative and persuasive (Rogers & Niederer, 2020). This makes social media platform the main base in which persuasion and manipulation in political communication thrives.

Dissecting the Boundaries between Persuasion and Manipulation in Political Communication

Navigating the fine line between persuasion and manipulation in political communication requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics at play. While these concepts may appear similar on the surface, there are fundamental differences that distinguish them (Dowding & Oprea, 2024). Persuasion entails a holistic approach, where all parties involved are considered and open discussion is encouraged. In contrast, manipulation is driven by a singular goal, often seeking to impose a particular viewpoint while exerting influence over others' perceptions or behaviours (Monteiro, 2024). This distinction underscores the ethical considerations inherent in political discourse, highlighting the importance of integrity and transparency in communication.

The ethical implications of persuasion versus manipulation become particularly pronounced in the context of political communication. While persuasion can serve as a constructive tool for advancing shared goals and fostering consensus, manipulation undermines the democratic process by prioritising individual agendas over the common good (Monteiro, 2024). In the business world, leaders may leverage persuasion to promote their ideas or products/services, provided it is done transparently and ethically. However, when persuasion devolves into manipulation, serving personal interests at the expense of others, it erodes trust and integrity in the political arena (Monteiro, 2024).

Empathy emerges as a critical factor in the persuasive process, enabling individuals to better understand others' perspectives and adjust their communication accordingly (Monteiro, 2024). By cultivating empathy, communicators can forge genuine connections and foster meaningful dialogue, laying the foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation. This empathetic approach stands in stark contrast to the manipulative tactics employed by those seeking to exploit others for personal gain (Monteiro, 2024). It is important to note that once an individual is empathetic about the other person, then care is taken not to overtly exploit and deceive.

The distinction between persuasion and manipulation is not merely semantic, but carries profound implications for political leadership and governance. Leaders who wield influence responsibly, inspiring confidence and fostering a sense of commitment among their constituents, embody the essence of persuasion (Monteiro, 2024). In contrast, those who resort to manipulation to achieve their objectives betray a lack of integrity and moral

clarity, undermining the very fabric of democracy. By elucidating these boundaries and advocating for ethical communication practices, we can uphold the principles of transparency, accountability and respect in political discourse, thereby safeguarding the democratic process for future generations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study delved into the intricate interplay between persuasion and manipulation within the realm of political communication. Recognising communication as the cornerstone of political activity, we unraveled the nuances of these concepts and their implications for democratic governance. Through a comprehensive review, it became evident that while persuasion and manipulation both seek to influence attitudes and behaviours, their methodologies and ethical underpinnings differ significantly. Persuasion, characterised by transparency and reasoned argumentation, fosters mutual understanding and consensus, whereas manipulation, shrouded in deception and coercion, undermines democratic principles and erodes public trust. Moreover, the proliferation of manipulative communication tactics, amplified by the advent of social media, poses significant challenges to ethical political practices and democratic norms.

In light of these findings, several recommendations emerge to enhance the integrity and transparency of political communication.

1. Firstly, policymakers and political leaders must uphold ethical standards in their communication practices, prioritising honesty, accuracy, and respect for the autonomy of citizens.
2. Additionally, initiatives to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public are essential to combatting the spread of manipulative content and fostering informed civic engagement.
3. Furthermore, regulatory frameworks should be strengthened to address the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on digital platforms, holding purveyors of manipulative content accountable for their actions. Ultimately, by advocating for ethical communication practices and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, we can safeguard the democratic process and uphold the principles of democracy for generations to come.

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