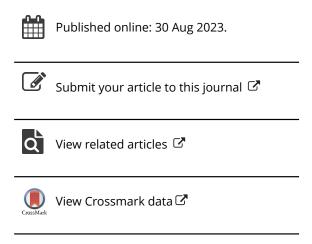# Voicing Politics: How Language Shapes Public Opinion

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

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BOOK REVIEW

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

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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