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## The political state of the nation

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Last weekend, the 'State of the Nation' survey commissioned by the President of Malta was published.

In this article, I will comment on the findings related to politics.

Let's look at some numbers first. 48.3% of respondents said that Maltese politics is very important for them, 37.3% said that it is not so important, whilst 12.9% said that politics has no importance in their life. Men give slightly more importance to politics than women (52% vs 44.4%), whilst those who are older and have a lower level of education respectively tend to give more importance to politics when compared to other cohorts. 48.4% of students do not give any importance to politics in Malta.

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Around 43.9% of respondents said that their opinions on various issues are influenced by their respective political parties, as against 29.4% who do not. 26.7% said that they did not know how to answer this question. In this regard, men (50%) are more likely to be influenced by their respective party than women (37.1%); and people with a higher level of education are less likely to be influenced by their respective parties (36.4%).

82.7% of respondents said that they always voted for the same party in the past, whilst 17.3% said that they voted for different parties in the past. Those coming from the Southern Harbour area (87.6%) are more likely to be in the former category, whilst those with a higher level of education (21%) are more present in the latter category.

55.8% of respondents stated that they are not considering to vote for a different party in the future, as against 27.3% who said they do consider this and 16.9% who said they don't know. Younger people, aged between 16 and 25 are those most likely to consider voting for another party (50.3%) in the future. The same applies for people with a higher level of education and those who live in the Northern part of Malta.

The above figures show that social class, age, level of education, gender, and residence play important roles in political orientation. Hence the importance of political discourse which give due importance to the concerns, aspirations, and expectations of different voter types. As I have emphasized time and again in various articles on this newspaper, value perceptions are not just those which gain most media attention and spectacular news headlines. Reality is grounded in different spheres, from one's smartphone to the shopping mall and from the village square to one's household.

The survey shows that younger and more educated voters are less likely to be 'loyal' to political parties, meaning that political shifts can take place, creating historic changes in the process. Labour's massive shift in the 2013 general election has been replicated in practically all general, European, and local elections, as well as surveys, since 2009.

The survey thus confirms the political influence of floating voters, switchers, non-voters (including tactical ones) and new voters, who in turn, may or may not replicate their voting patterns in subsequent elections. In turn, these categories may each be characterised by different political demands.

Some other main findings include that the population is more likely to be satisfied with its situation, most of the population gets its news from Facebook, Maltese is the main language used, by far, and the family (in its plural form) is a bastion of trust and social belonging.

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One thing which needs to be analysed further is the social ramifications of the large numbers of non-Maltese citizens living on the island, who did not form part of the research population.

The survey clearly shows that despite the criticism towards political parties, they are major institutions and sources of identity in Malta. As things stand, they are here to stay: And judging by recent elections and surveys, the 2-party dominance is not under threat. It enjoys popular consent by most of the population.

In turn, Labour has a considerable and consistent power bloc, where it manages to unite a broad coalition behind its banner. I am reliably informed that as the general election looms closer, Labour is accelerating its power of incumbency with pre-electoral manoeuvres. No surprise here: This is an old tactic used by parties when in Government.

Here one may ask, and rightly so, what about civil society? It is quite clear that Malta has a vibrant civil society, made up of a wide range of organisations which engage in activism including through protests, sectoral lobbying, and voluntary work. For various reasons, some attract prominent coverage on the media, others are more active behind-the-scenes within the corridors of power, and others are present on the ground with communities far away from the spotlight of spectacle. Some single-issue impacts or victories are made along the way, yet Malta's electoral landscape remains predominantly red.

In this context, the Government often co-opts grievances into its decision-making repertoire, by saying that it listened. Again, this tactic, which is an essential part of democracy, has been used in various instances under other administrations.

The 2008-13 legislature saw the dismantling of the Nationalist era and the birth of Labour's hegemonic formation from the opposition benches. It is quite clear that today's Nationalist Party has not reached a similar stage from its opposition benches, and it is unlikely whether it will do so in the foreseeable future, all other things being equal. I discussed some reasons for this in my article in the Malta Independent on 13<sup>th</sup> May. In the meantime, the latest MaltaToday survey, published last Sunday, shows that the gap between PL and PN is of around 48,000 votes. Hence, single-issue antagonisms to keep being played out in a red landscape.

In the final instance it is general elections which give the ultimate form of power in governance. And even here, there is no 'essential' or pre-determined direction. Internal and external factors, opportunities and constraints, unintended consequences and mere incidents of history take place during the political journey.

Even though non-party contention is a vital and innovative pillar of democracy, political parties are essential agents of political change in Malta's polity. It is no coincidence that various civil society demands are more likely to have social impacts when involving party political entrepreneurs, both directly and/or indirectly.

In sum, I cannot help emphasizing that society is not just made up of the bubbles and echo-chambers which often have the loudest voices in the public sphere. Grounded social-scientific research, through various methods and tools is imperative for political parties aspiring for electoral victory. Gone are the days where a backroom of elites from the same social background has a monopoly of truth.

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