

## **‘MEDIA-TED’ ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS: EUROPEANISATION AND POSTCOLONIAL DYNAMICS OF VOTERS’ USE OF MEDIA PLATFORMS IN MALTA**

**Maria Brown and Vincent Marmarà**

*University of Malta*

**ABSTRACT** Media are an agent of citizenship education. The ways citizens consume media are impacted by socio-demographics, perceptions as well as past and ongoing social dynamics. The study discussed in this paper investigated if media consumption is related to citizen opinion formation, particularly during electoral campaigns; and to voting behaviour. The paper presents the findings of a quantitative study of media platforms followed by voters in Malta to source news in the run-up to the 2017 general elections and the 2019 elections of members of the European Parliament (MEP) and the local councils (LC). The study also investigated voters’ engagement with national politics in 2021, a few months before a yet-to-be announced general election. The main findings of this study are that use of television predominated (76.0% in 2017, 62.5% in 2019) - particularly among older, female and less educated cohorts. Use of online sources was prevalent among younger and more educated cohorts ( $p < 0.001$ ). The study investigated values attributed to Maltese politics, consideration of party position when forming opinions, past and prospective voting trends. There was a preponderance of younger cohorts among those considering voting for a different political party (50.3% among those aged 16-25, 42.0% among those aged 26-35). Older cohorts predominated among the 83% who reported always voting for the same party. Postcolonial communications and media studies inform the paper’s analysis of Malta’s long-standing

partisan duopoly; risks of polarisation and radicalisation; and recommendations on media literacy to resist sensationalised or fake news and radicalising agendas.

**RIJASSUNT** Il-midja huma aġent ta' edukazzjoni dwar ċittadinanza. Fatturi soċjo-demografici, perċezzjonijiet, kif ukoll dinamiċi soċjali kurrenti u tal-imġoddi jaffettwaw il-konsum tal-midja. L-istudju diskuss f'dan l-artiklu investiga jekk il-konsum tal-midja huwiex relatat mal-formazzjoni tal-opinjoni f'ost iċ-ċittadini, partikolarment waqt kampanji elettorali; u ma' kif iċ-ċittadini jivvutaw. L-artiklu jipprezenta r-riżultati ta' studju kwantitattiv li xtrarr liema pjattaformi tal-midja uża l-elettorat Malti għall-aħbarijiet waqt il-kampanji elettorali tal-elezzjoni generali tal-2017, u l-elezzjonijiet tal-membri tal-Parlament Ewropew u l-Kunsilli Lokali tal-2019. L-istudju investiga wkoll dejta miġbura fl-2021 dwar perċezzjonijiet u esperjenzi politiċi tal-elettorat – f'tit xhur qabel tħabbret elezzjoni ġenerali. L-istudju sab li l-użu tat-televiżjoni iddomina (76.0% fl-2017, 62.5% fl-2019) – speċjalment fost votanti li huma ikbar fl-età, votanti nisa u votanti ta' livell ta' edukazzjoni formali iktar baxx. L-użu ta' pjattaformi onlajn spikka fost votanti iżgħar u dawk ta' livell ta' edukazzjoni ogħla ( $p < 0.001$ ). L-istudju investiga l-valur li lelettorat jagħti lill-politika Maltija; kif ukoll l-influenza tal-pożizzjoni tal-partiti politiċi fuq opinjonijiet personali; u anki xejriet ta' kif wiehed ivvota fl-imġoddi, u kif bi hsiebu jivvota fil-gejjieni. Kien hemm aktar votanti li jikkunsidraw li fil-gejjieni jivvutaw partit differenti minn dak li vvutaw fl-imġoddi fost dawk iżgħar fl-età (50.3% fost dawk ta' età bejn 16-25, 42.0% fost dawk ta' età bejn 26-35). Kien hemm aktar votanti li dejjem ivvutaw għall-istess partit fost dawk ta' età ikbar (83.0%). Mnebbha mill-perspettiva postkolonjali ta' studji ta' komunikazzjoni u midja, id-diskussjoni tal-artiklu tanalizza dduopolju partigjan stabbilit f'Malta; kif ukoll riskji ta' polarizzazzjoni u radikalizmu bħala kollaterali ta' użu ta' pjattaformi onlajn biex jinkisbu l-aħbarijiet. L-investiment fillitterżmu nazzjonali tal-midja huwa rakkomandazzjoni ewlenja fil-konklużjoni tal-artiklu; bħala għodda kontra aħbarijiet sensazzjonalizzati jew foloz, u aġendi bi skop ta' radikalizmu.

**KEYWORDS:** Media, Communications, Political education, Local government, Critical literac

## **Introduction**

Citizens' increased access to information is consistently recommended and attempts are made to improve the quality of democratic elections and government performance (Boudreau et al., 2019). The role played by the availability of information in the acquisition of political knowledge has attracted scholars' attention (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990). In the context of the study informing this paper's discussion, citizens' use of one or more media platforms around election time is considered as having potential to gain control over one's social environment and, consequently, as nurturing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 1977). Empirical evidence suggests that citizens' engagement with the media is positively associated with political efficacy, knowledgeability, and participation. Many of these studies refer to Internet use in particular (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Tedesco, 2007; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Johnson & Kaye, 2003). However, this study also considered the literature on the risk of radicalisation arising from people accessing information that confirms their existing views and undermines their level of trust in the institutions of society (Kydd, 2021). In this sense, radicalisation can result from the combined impact in the consolidation of an existing standpoint that motivates estrangement from the social contract and, possibly, extremist practices. For example, the attack on Capitol Hill in the United States of America on 6 January 2021 was associated with the combined impact of the rise in the use of social media, political and media polarisation, widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories and the formation of armed right-wing groups (Kydd, 2021). These insights corroborate the relevance of media for citizens' political

education, political agency, engaged citizenship and participatory democracy.

Informed by the foregoing, this paper presents the findings of a quantitative study that comparatively analysed quantitative data on the use of media platforms during the 2017 general election campaign and the campaigns preceding the 2019 elections to the European Parliament and to the local councils in the EU island state and former colony of Malta, as well as data on voters' perceptions of politics collected in 2021, a few months before a yet-to-be-announced general election. More specifically, the study ascertained which media platforms (local television and radio stations, printed and online newspapers, Facebook) Maltese voters used during the thirty days preceding these elections in 2017 and 2019; whether this differed between the two election campaigns and/or different cohorts of participants, with special reference to age, gender and votes cast at the preceding election. The study also elicited perceptions of political issues in 2021, a few months before the announcement of an election date that would bring to an end the 2017 legislature.

Postcolonial media and communication theory were used as a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the findings to examine the implications for citizenship education; specifically, as regards the media's reach and role in fostering an informed electorate in the island state's formerly colonised societies. Before discussing the tenets of postcolonial media and communication theory that informed the data analysis, the next section presents the context of the study, with special reference to the long-standing political bi-party system and Malta's partisan, tribalized and colonial legacies.

## Context

The Maltese Islands are in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. With a total area of just over 315 square kilometres and a population of 514,600 (NSO, 2020), Malta is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Colonised by various rulers for centuries, Malta gained its independence from the British Empire in 1964, albeit many parts of the country remained under British control until 1979. In 1974, Malta became a republic and, in 2004, it became an EU Member State. Malta's democratic government comprises the President of Malta and the House of Representatives.

Malta's electoral system uses proportional representation and the single transferable vote (PR-STV). In the ballot, voters can rank as many candidates as they wish in order of preference. They can also float votes from one party to another, as well as to any independent candidates (Farrell, 2001). Whilst participation in elections is keen and features a 'near universal turnout' (Hirczy, 1995) (e.g., 92.1% turnout in the 2017 general election (Electoral Commission of Malta, 2021)), strong party loyalties (Vella, 2018) and "intense and pervasive partisanship" (Hirczy, 1995, p 255) exist. Only 1% of the electorate reported cross voting (Bezzina & Buhagiar, 2011) and research on non-voters revealed that the type of election affects turnout because "the Maltese electorate is more likely to abstain and to utilize non-voting as a form of protest in local and European rather than in parliamentary-level elections" (Vella, 2018, p 410). Although the PR-STV is associated with multi-party politics and enjoyed this influence in Malta until the first post-independence election (1966), Malta has consistently elected bi-party parliamentary compositions (Hirczy, 1995). For decades, members of parliament (MPs) and MEPs have hailed solely from the Labour Party (PL) or the

Nationalist Party (PN). Unless, as in the case of the 2017 general election, a third party managed to get candidates elected by coalescing with one of the two main parties prior to election day. This happens because the number of votes achieved by a party does not determine the allocation of parliamentary seats. The latter is contingent upon winning at least one seat quota in at least one of the 13 electoral districts (Bezzina et al., 2021).

It is only as an outcome of internal party conflict during term in office that an MP has come to sit as an independent. Notably, internal party conflict also precipitated the establishment of all the political parties in Malta challenging the PL or the PN (e.g., Partit Demokratiku, Alternattiva Demokratika – the Green Party), save for the very recent establishment (2021) of Volt Malta, which forms part of Volt Europa. Conflictual narratives of ‘betrayal of constituents’ have been inevitable for MPs crossing the floor to a new party or sitting as independents. The latter is generally perceived and experienced as a temporary expedient until the end of the term in office, rather than an attributed inherent value.

Such ‘us and them’ has neither beginning nor end, nor a single identifiable independent or dependent variable in Maltese society. Tribalism, often featuring binary engagement, is endemic in how the Maltese interact with politics but also with patron saints, band clubs, football teams, immigrants and lobby groups advocating for or against issues such as divorce and abortion. The Maltese socio-political culture has been described “as a culture that accommodates both a *tribal duopoly* (where the tribes are in competition with each other) and a *duopoly of tribes* (where they collaborate...for their mutual benefit) at one and the same time” (Baldacchino, in Baldacchino & Wain, 2013, 86–87).

Malta’s significant economic growth in recent years (OECD, 2021) raises questions of comparability with other southern European countries, such as Greece and

Portugal, where “the economic crisis...deepened the legitimacy crisis” (Freire et al., 2014, p 413). In Malta, however, legitimacy concerns arise primarily from geopolitical and partisan matters resulting from its smallness, ‘islandness’ and contradictions (Bezzina et al., 2021) between stability and change; seclusion and exposure; conservatism and modernity; tradition and innovation (Vassallo, 2012). Malta’s postcolonial, island state and Europeanisation dynamics are further characterised by a growing secularisation in response to a predominantly Catholic recent past; increasing sociocultural differentiation resulting from economic and irregular immigration and a growing middle class coexisting with increased income polarisation (Eurofound, 2021).

In this context, the use of media platforms during electoral campaigns can inform an understanding of media as agents of citizenship education; particularly with respect to opinion formation and especially on matters of public interest – including voting at elections. As an agent of citizenship education, media do not operate in a vacuum; they interact with the complexities inherent to citizens and their contexts. In Malta, for instance, it is relevant to think of media as agents of citizenship education operating in a formerly colonised, small EU island state with media prosumers<sup>1</sup> engaged with the tribal, partisan dynamics explained. Notably, shortly before the time of writing, the Maltese private media company Lovin’ Malta - a media company that operates solely online - filed a crowdfunded legal bid to “declare the perceived bias of party-owned

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Prosumer’ is a derivative of the term ‘prosumption’, coined by Alvin Toffler (1980) and refers to a combination of production and consumption. Reference to ‘prosumers’ can also be found in the article “Media literacy challenges to debates on civil rights” in this special issue.

broadcasters unconstitutional” (Walsh, 2021). *Euronews* reported the case by underlining how

The hegemony of Malta’s two establishment parties over its broadcast media has been a *fait accompli* for three decades, acknowledged openly over the years by politicians from both tribes and exacerbated by the setting up of competing media companies wholly owned by the Labour Party (PL) and Nationalist Party (PN) in opposition to each other. (Walsh, 2021, para 4)

In light of the foregoing, the discussion in this paper draws on postcolonial media and communication theory to inform the implications that can be discerned from the study’s data analysis. The main tenets are reviewed in the following section.

### **Postcolonial media and communication theory**

The contributions that postcolonial theory can make to media and communication studies include the former’s historicised analysis of global power, politics, economics, culture and conflict, and its potential to decode “blatant inversion of emancipatory discourses... (and)... the deployment of essentialized discourses of alterity” (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018, p 348). Yet postcolonial theory has been criticised for failing to consider popular culture and contemporary media practices in its investigation of narratives and representations of colonised cultures (Cere, 2011). However, media studies have articulated concern with “representation, stereotyping, identity formation and ideological workings of popular media cultures”, with “emphasis...on the new and the now and...little attention to the historical and to the intersection...with the colonial and postcolonial” (ibid., p 3).



By productively dwelling on the existing affinities between these two branches of scholarship, Sangeet Kumar and Radhika Parameswaran (2018) built a case for a newly emerging area of inquiry, namely postcolonial communication and media studies. Communication and media studies would betray “ideals of social justice, global solidarity and an acute awareness of power relations” if they were to disavow “the vast historical reach of colonialism that profoundly changed the world as we know and experience it today” (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018, p 348). Postcolonial media and communications elucidate “complex mediations through which our “realities” are constantly being shaped and produced” and illuminate “new vocabularies and logics (especially related to postcolonial mediations) for understanding our mediated world” (Shome, 2016, p 261). While it is widely accepted that media are not politically neutral resources, postcolonial media and communications theory can help to ascertain how the role of media as citizen educators is at risk (or possibly guilty) of a colonising approach if embracing the ‘civilizing mission’ of earlier colonialisms (Fernández, 1999); particularly because the humanitarian rhetoric of media is an asset to the imperialist project. It is through this rhetoric that decent people become supporters of imperialism (Said, 1993).

## **Method**

In response to the review of the literature on the Maltese context discussed above, selected aspects of national and party politics queried in the study address the importance of Maltese politics for the participants of this study. These aspects were, namely, the extent to which these participants considered the position taken by the party supported (if any) when forming personal opinions, the extent to which participants voted for the same or different

parties in the past, and the likelihood of their doing so in the future.

The overarching research questions of the study discussed in this paper are:

1. What media platforms did various cohorts of the electorate of Malta follow during the 30-day run-up to the 2017 general election, 2019 MEP and local council elections?
2. What were the electorate’s perceptions of selected aspects of national and party politics in 2021, a few months before the announcement of the next general election?
3. What similarities and differences emerge between various cohorts of the electorate (gender, age and way of voting in the last election) with respect to the media platforms followed by the various cohorts and their engagement with national and party politics?

Table 1. Samples and Population Characteristics

<b>Population</b>			<b>2017 data collection round n1=5200</b>		<b>2019 data collection round n2=5200</b>		<b>2021 data collection round n3=1064</b>	
<b>Margin of Error</b>			+/- 1.35%		+/- 1.35%		+/- 3.0%	
<b>Variables</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>								

Female	228,634	49.7	2,646	50.9	2,725	52.4	527	49.5
Male	231,663	50.3	2,554	49.1	2,475	47.6	537	50.5
<b>Age Group</b>								
16-25	56,892	14.5	638	12.3	569	11.0	144	13.5
26-45	137,270	35.1	1,819	35.0	1,586	30.5	389	36.6
46-65	115,968	29.7	1,630	31.3	1,793	34.5	326	30.6
66+	80,919	20.7	1,113	21.4	1,251	24.1	205	19.3

The study draws on the analysis of quantitative data collected by telephone in 2017, 2019, and 2021 as part of more extensive studies on national trends. The respective samples of the Maltese population ( $n_1=5200$ ;  $n_2=5200$ ;  $n_3=1064$ ) reflected the demographics of Malta (NSO, 2018) (Table 1). Using a 95% confidence level, it was possible to compare population and sample to calculate the margins of error in the extent to which the sample of respondents represented the population. The data collection rounds of 2017 and 2019 featured samples that differed from the actual population (margin of error) by +/- 1.35%. The 2021 data collection round comprised a sample that differed from the actual population (margin of error) by +/- 3.0%. Table 1 details how these variations translated into relatively minor differences in the sizes of the gender and age cohorts of the 2017, 2019 and 2021 samples.

The 2017 and 2019 questionnaires elicited the media platforms (local television and radio stations, printed and

online newspapers, Facebook) that respondents followed in the 30-day run-up to the 2017 general election and the 2019 MEP and local council elections. The 2021 dataset informing the discussion in this paper comprises responses to questions administered between April and May 2021, a few months before a yet-to-be-announced general election. Questions elicited voters' perceptions of and engagement with politics, with special reference to national politics and political party allegiance.

Descriptive and bivariate analyses informed the examination of trends and testing for associations between socio-demographic variables and responses – more specifically Chi-Square testing with a p-value of .05 as the level of statistical significance. Using this test made it possible to determine if responses differed in a statistically significant manner within the population under study, as informed by the sample of responses available. Attention was paid to differentiating between general, European, and local council elections in view of varying interest and mobilisation among members of the Maltese electorate with respect to different types of elections (Vella, 2018).

## **Results**

The study found that figures on news sourcing during the 30-day period leading up to the 2017 general election were higher across all media platforms than for the 2019 European and local council elections (Figure 1). During the 2017 general election campaign voters primarily kept themselves informed by watching television, followed by online newspapers, Facebook, radio and printed newspapers, whereas during the 2019 European Parliament and local council electoral campaigns there was an increase in Facebook followers and a decline in the readership of printed newspapers. It is noteworthy that

Facebook and online newspapers together surpassed television viewing during both electoral campaigns, albeit by less than half a percentage point during the 2019 campaign (Figure 1).

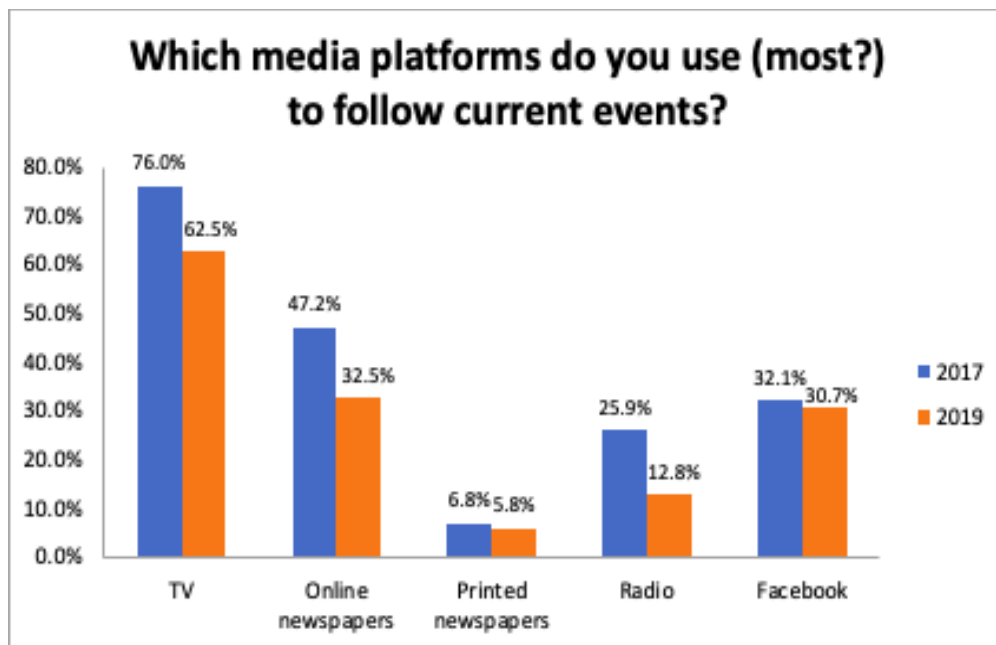


Figure 1. Media platforms

The study also found that the youngest cohorts and voters with the highest level of education were more likely to follow online newspapers (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 977.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 2) and Facebook (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 109.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Table 3). The reverse was found when analysing television followers (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 543.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These included more people in the older cohorts and voters with lower levels of education (Table 4).

Table 2. Online newspapers

	<b>16-25</b>	<b>26-35</b>	<b>36-45</b>	<b>46-55</b>	<b>56-65</b>	<b>66+</b>
<b>2017</b>	82.0%	72.1%	57.8%	47.1%	29.6%	12.7%
<b>2019</b>	52.6%	50.5%	42.7%	41.4%	21.1%	11.8%

	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>
<b>2017</b>	42.7%	51.9%
<b>2019</b>	28.8%	36.6%

	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>A' Levels/ Diploma</b>	<b>Tertiary</b>
<b>2017</b>	10.4%	40.8%	71.9%	77.9%
<b>2019</b>	8.3%	27.6%	46.5%	61.0%

	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Domestic tasks</b>	<b>Pensioner</b>	<b>Student</b>
<b>2017</b>	41.4%	64.1%	26.5%	15.9%	83.5%
<b>2019</b>	32.0%	46.8%	19.0%	13.0%	50.6%

	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non- voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	44.3%	45.5%	36.4%	67.3%	45.5%
<b>2019</b>	30.0%	34.9%	30.0%	32.0%	36.6%

Table 3. Facebook

	<b>16-25</b>	<b>26-35</b>	<b>36-45</b>	<b>46-55</b>	<b>56-65</b>	<b>66+</b>
<b>2017</b>	47.3%	47.3%	51.7%	40.4%	11.3%	5.1%
<b>2019</b>	56.7%	57.6%	45.7%	28.5%	18.0%	7.3%

	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>
<b>2017</b>	38.5%	26.0%
<b>2019</b>	31.3%	30.4%

	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>A' Levels/ Diploma</b>	<b>Tertiary</b>
<b>2017</b>	8.5%	27.5%	39.4%	47.6%
<b>2019</b>	4.5%	28.6%	55.1%	52.1%

	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Domestic tasks</b>	<b>Pensioner</b>	<b>Student</b>
<b>2017</b>	23.3%	46.5%	20.5%	7.0%	40.0%
<b>2019</b>	48.0%	44.9%	18.8%	8.6%	43.8%

	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non- voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	30.8%	32.3%	33.0%	40.3%	35.9%
<b>2019</b>	28.9%	24.7%	30.0%	36.0%	34.9%

Table 4. Television

	<b>16-25</b>	<b>26-35</b>	<b>36-45</b>	<b>46-55</b>	<b>56-65</b>	<b>66+</b>
<b>2017</b>	55.9%	70.3%	67.0%	84.2%	86.7%	86.7%
<b>2019</b>	18.6%	32.0%	51.9%	62.2%	82.8%	88.4%

	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>
<b>2017</b>	83.2%	69.0%
<b>2019</b>	66.1%	58.6%

	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>A' Levels/ Diploma</b>	<b>Tertiary</b>
<b>2017</b>	90.9%	78.5%	80.1%	42.0%
<b>2019</b>	90.8%	70.7%	42.0%	24.5%

	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Domestic tasks</b>	<b>Pensioner</b>	<b>Student</b>
<b>2017</b>	58.3%	74.1%	80.3%	91.8%	55.2%
<b>2019</b>	60.0%	44.9%	82.6%	87.7%	28.1%

	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non- voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	81.7%	83.8%	75.0%	52.2%	77.4%
<b>2019</b>	67.4%	62.2%	30.0%	55.3%	57.9%



Since analysis of the 2021 data showed that the importance of politics among the Maltese voters increased with age (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 154.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Figure 2), the findings of this study suggest, albeit in a preliminary manner requiring further targeted research, that those attaching importance to politics followed television more than other media platforms during the election campaign under study.

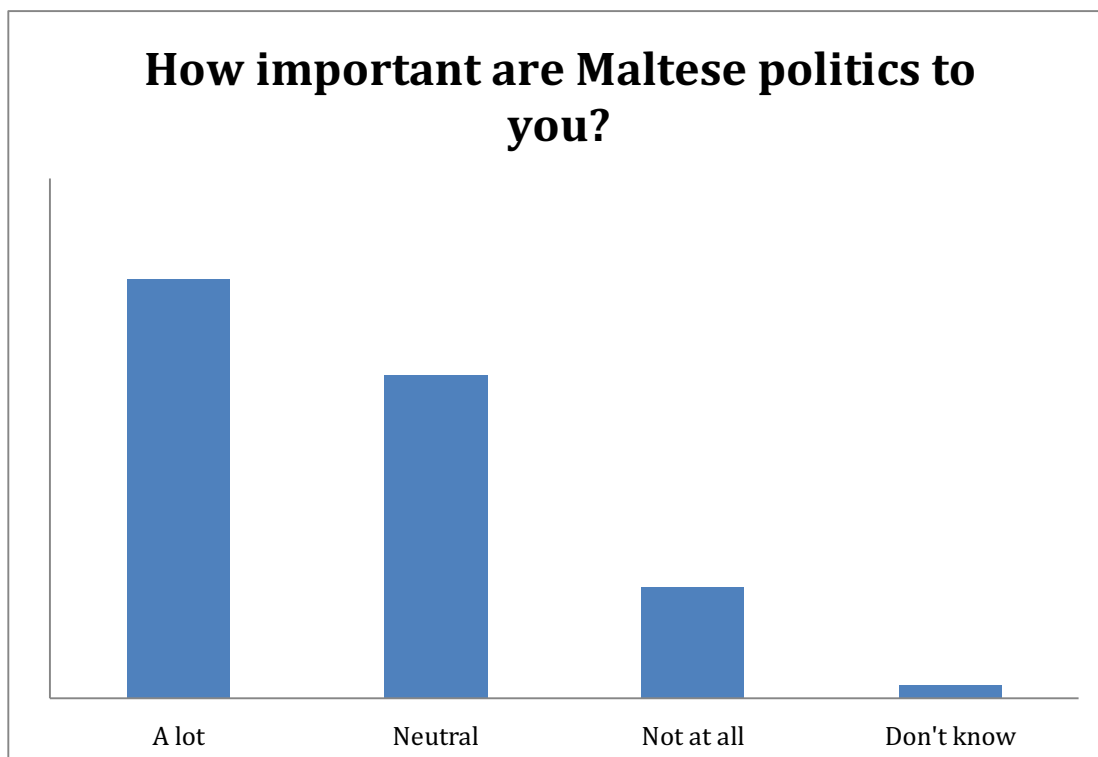


Figure 2. Importance of Maltese politics

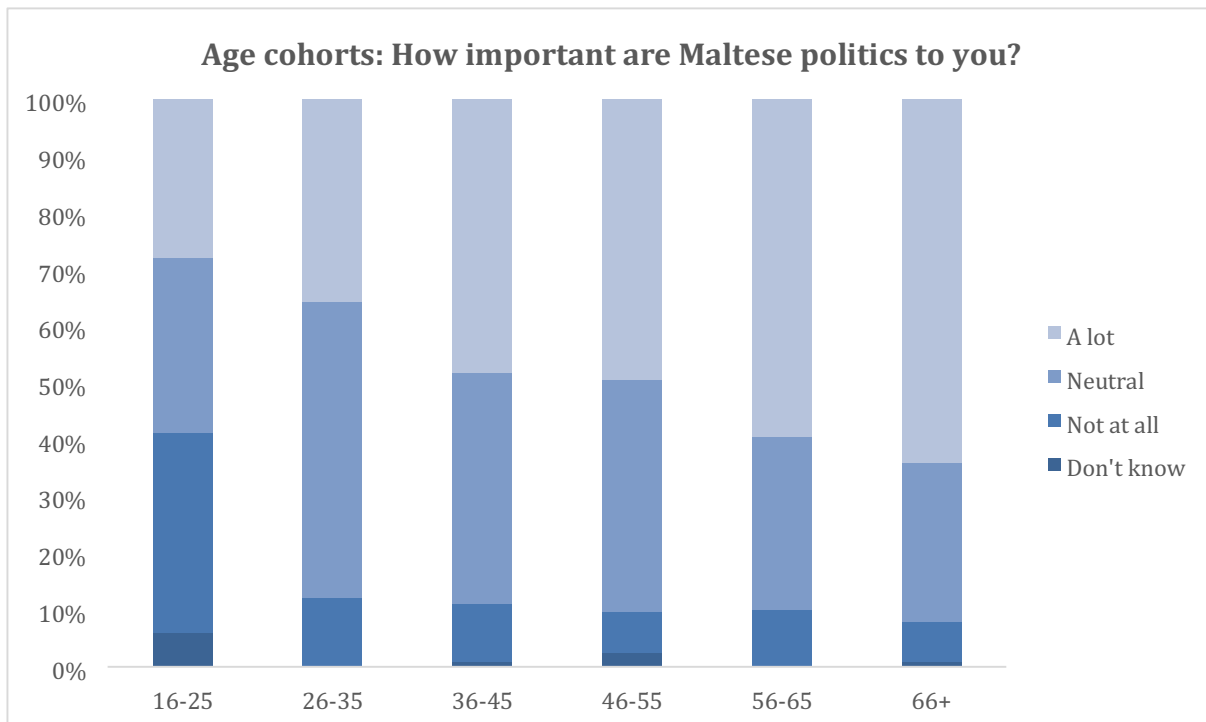


Figure 3: Age cohorts - Importance of Maltese politics  
 Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 154.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$

Additionally, the study found that women followed more television than did men during the 2017 general election campaign (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 22.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Table 3). Interestingly, the analysis of the 2021 dataset showed that the percentage of participants who reported considering the line of the party they support when forming an opinion did not constitute a majority (Figure 4); and among the 43.9% who reported considering the party line, there was a decided preponderance of men (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 22.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This raises questions requiring further targeted research on the impact of television viewing during election times on the possibility of considering (and, possibly), eventually embracing the party line. However, given that 27% stated 'I do not know' there is room for speculation that more than 70% of participants could be considering the party's position when forming an opinion.

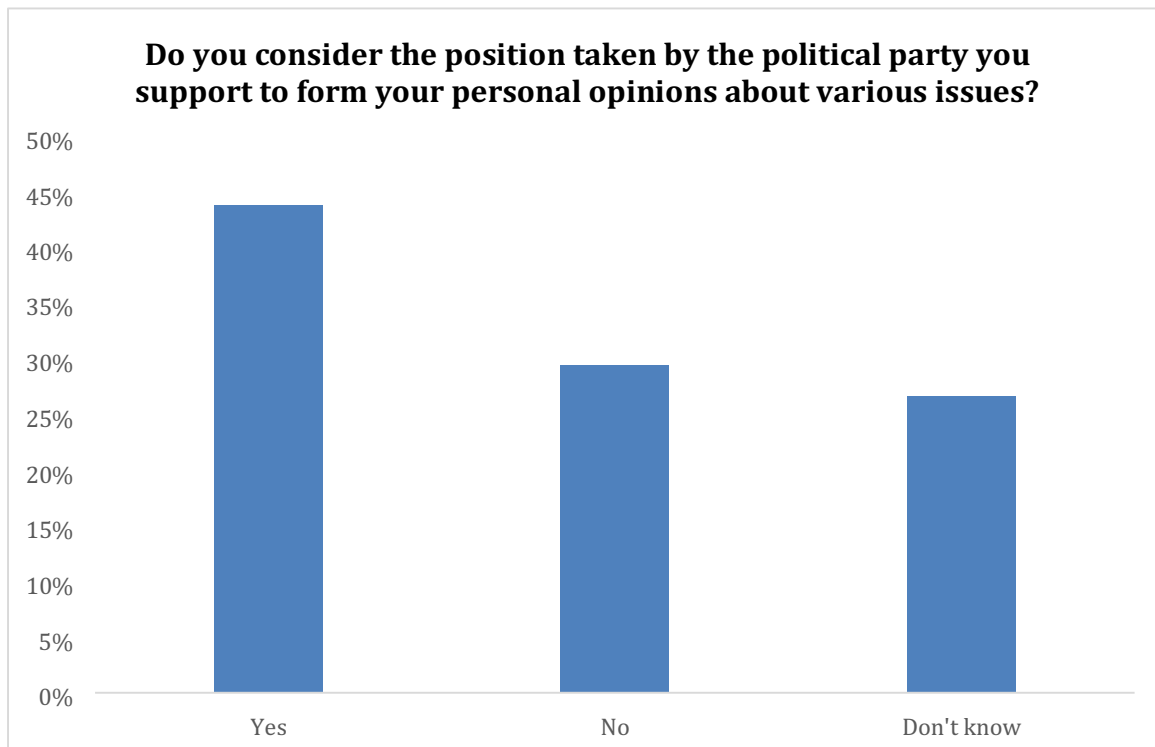


Figure 4. Consideration of party position

Data analysis also confirmed the persistent existence of core voters in the Maltese Islands. Not only because of those participating in the 2021 data collection 83% reported having always voted for the same party (Figure 5), but also because 56% reported that they were not considering voting for a different party in the future (Figure 8).

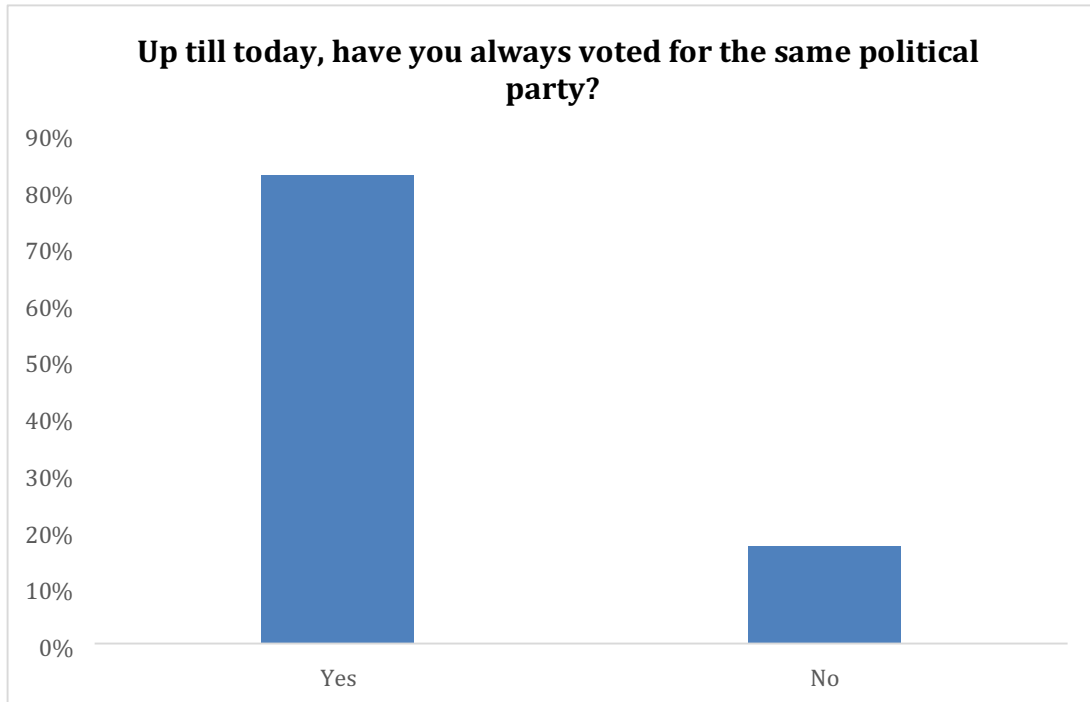


Figure 5. Past voting trends

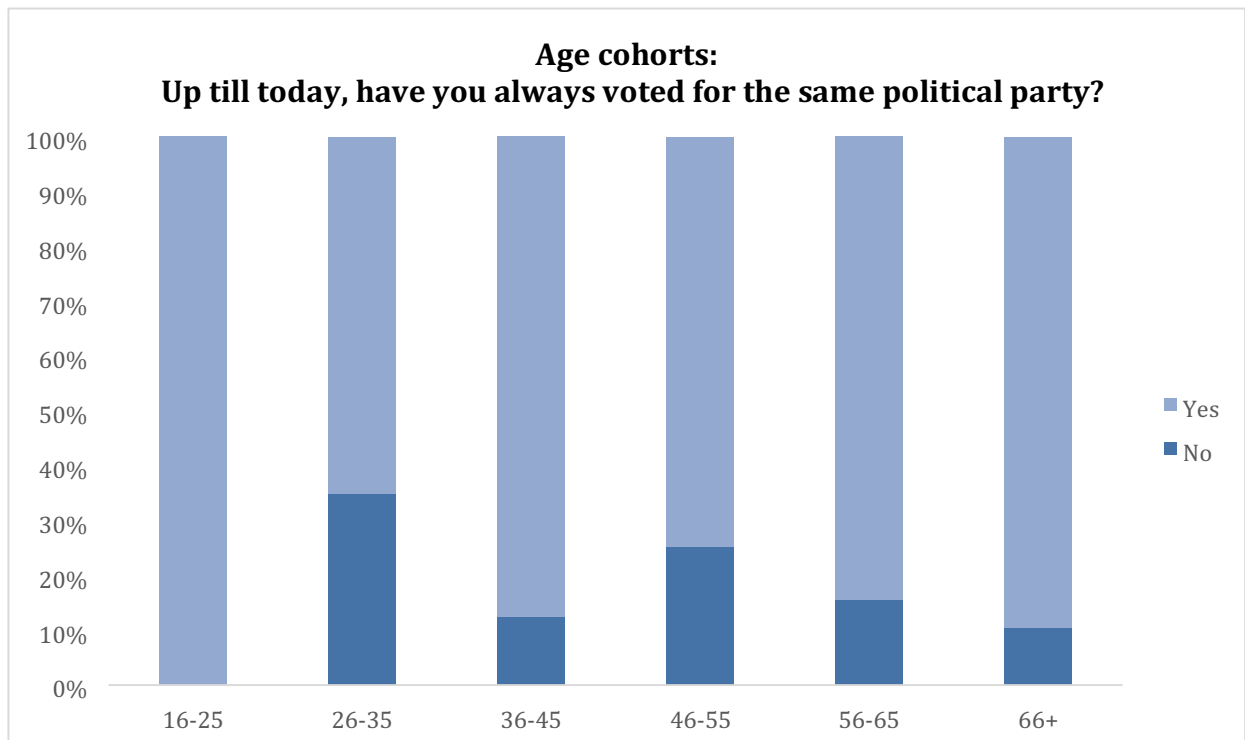


Figure 6. Age cohorts: Past voting trends  
 Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 211.10, p < 0.001$

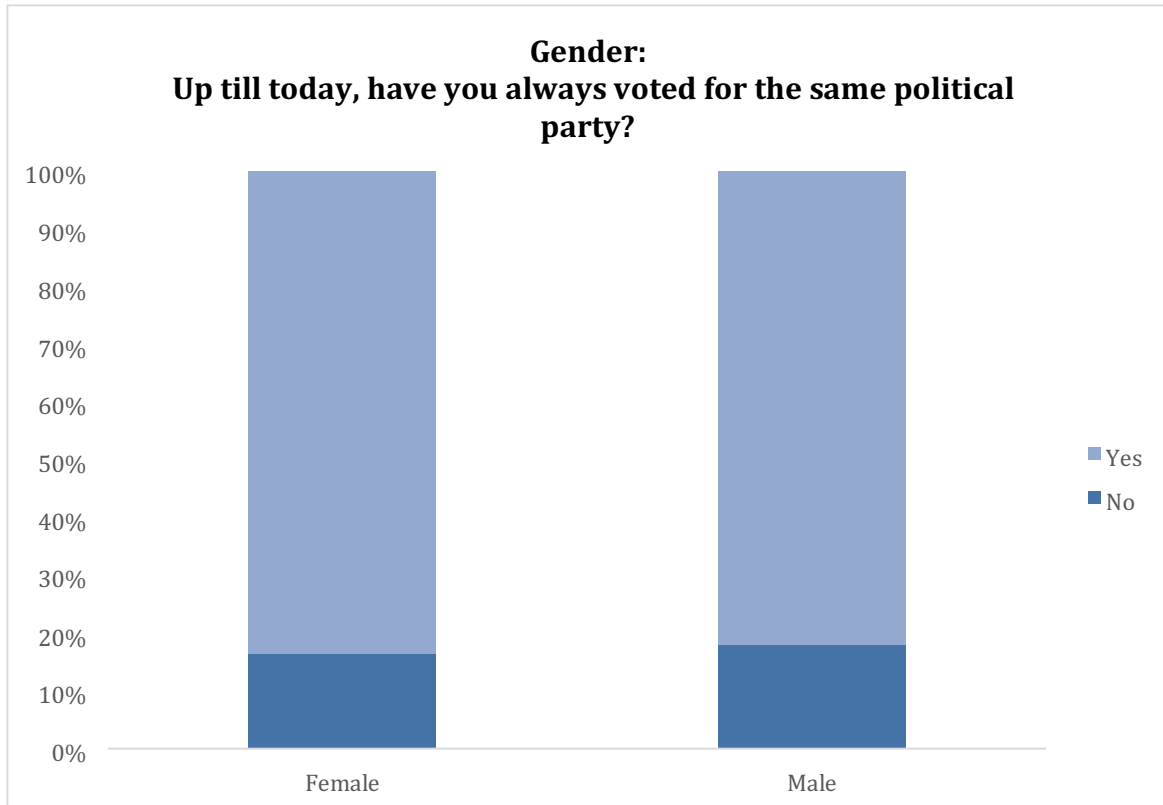


Figure 7. Gender: Past voting trends  
Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 4.55, p = 0.103$

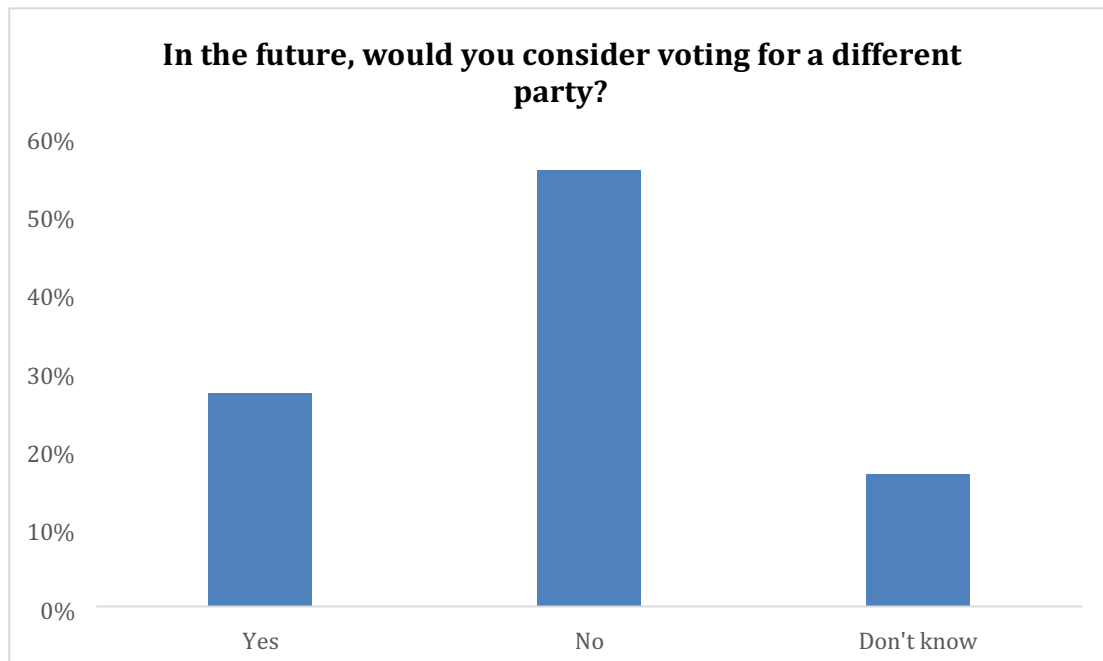


Figure 8. Prospective voting trends

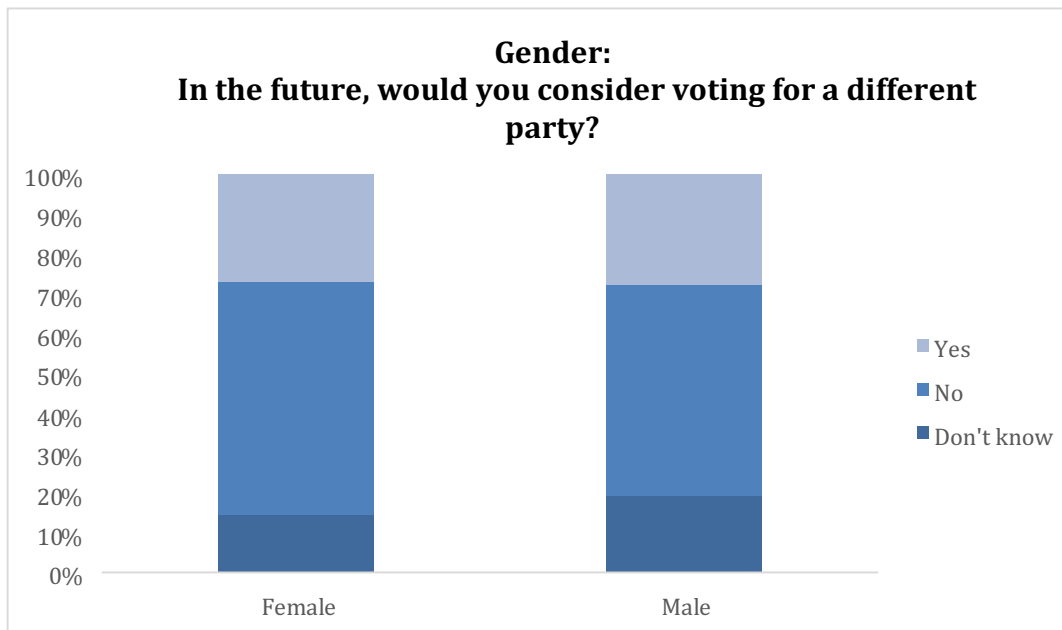


Figure 9. Gender: Prospective voting trends  
Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 9.86, p < 0.05$

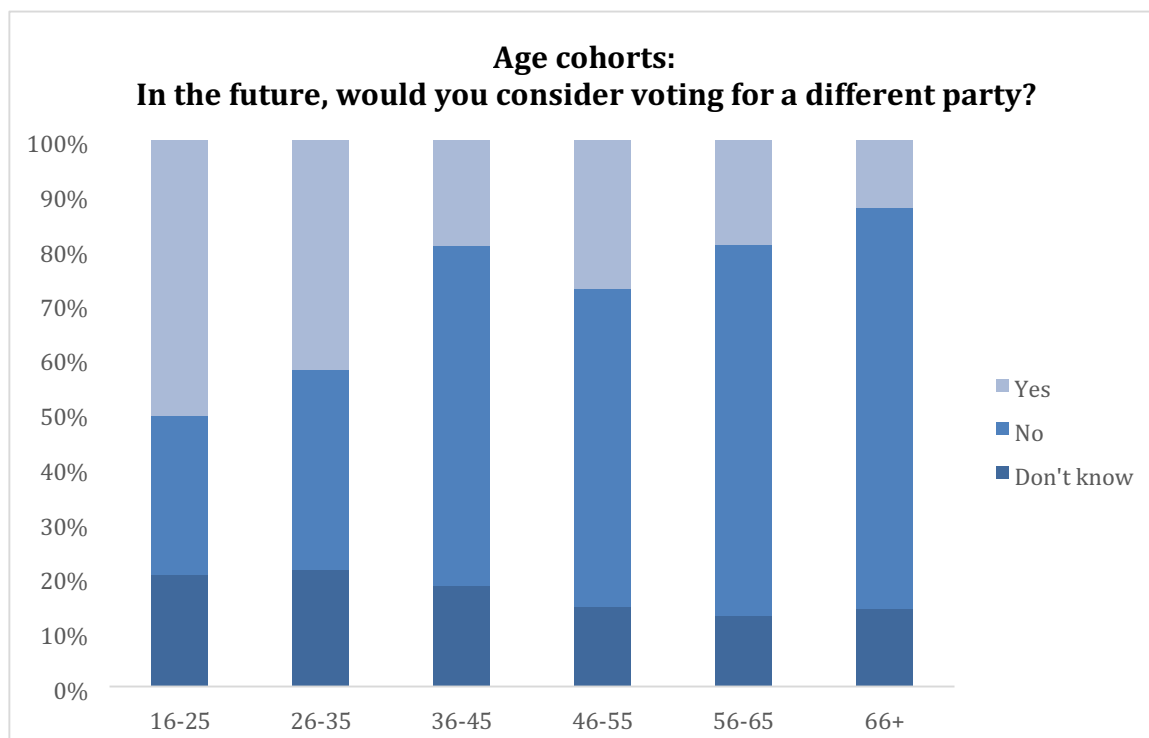


Figure 10. Age cohorts: Prospective voting trends  
Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 129.27, p < 0.001$

The size of the majority (56%) who stated that they were not considering voting for a different party in the future (Figure 8) is likely to increase closer to the general election and/or when the general election date is announced because a number of those reporting 'I do not know' (16.9%, Figure 8) at the time of the study, are likely to cease sitting on the fence. These results did not vary with gender (Figure 9), but respondents in the youngest age cohorts were prominent among those stating they would consider voting for a different party in the future (Chi Square Test:  $\chi^2(1) = 129.27, p < 0.001$ ; Figure 10).

Since, as explained earlier, the youngest age groups predominated among those using Facebook and online newspapers to source news during electoral campaigns, the results of this study suggest that those following Facebook and online newspapers may be among those likely to vote for a different party in upcoming elections. Nonetheless, further target research is required to validate this projection.

Consistency within partisan cohorts also emerged when scrutinising which media platforms were followed during the 2017 and the 2019 electoral campaigns (Table 5). It is noteworthy that, in the campaigns, before the 2017 general election and before the 2019 MEP/LC elections, negligible differences emerged in voters' following of specific media platforms (notably PL and PN adherents). This was particularly the case regarding the use of Facebook.

Table 5. Voting and use of media platforms

<b>Local TV</b>	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non-voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	81.7%	83.8%	75.0%	52.2%	77.4%
<b>2019</b>	67.4%	62.2%	30.0%	55.3%	57.9%

<b>Printed Newspapers</b>	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non-voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	8.3%	8.3%	0.0%	2.3%	5.5%
<b>2019</b>	6.2%	7.6%	0.0%	7.6%	4.3%

<b>Online Newspapers</b>	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non-voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	44.3%	45.5%	36.4%	67.3%	45.5%
<b>2019</b>	30.0%	34.9%	30.0%	32.0%	36.6%

<b>Radio</b>	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non-voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	30.4%	33.9%	0.0%	8.9%	23.0%
<b>2019</b>	15.0%	14.2%	10.0%	6.6%	9.1%

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>PL</b>	<b>PN</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Non-voters</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2017</b>	30.8%	32.3%	33.0%	40.3%	35.9%
<b>2019</b>	28.9%	24.7%	30.0%	36.0%	34.9%



## **Discussion**

The study found that the following of news during the 30-day period leading up to the 2017 general election was higher, across all media platforms, than in the run-up to the 2019 European and local council elections. This confirms differences in interest and mobilisation with respect to different types of elections in Malta (Vella, 2018). This study has also shown that although television consumption remains strong - particularly among the older cohorts, women and those with lower levels of education - Malta's younger and more educated voters are gradually shifting to online platforms in sourcing media content. Use of Facebook is also on the rise, irrespective of the type of election (general, MEP/local) and party allegiance (as inferred from voting in the last election). These findings confirm the globalised pervasiveness of the digital revolution and of virtual platforms of citizenship education, in this case media (or their potential for this). These findings also corroborate studies in other, larger countries. For example, 74% of United States' millennials (18-34-year-olds) source their news from the Internet; and 88% from Facebook alone (American Press Institute, 2015). However, besides corroborating the latter, this study empirically documents the digital penetration in news sourcing during election campaigns in a small island state and postcolonial context, where research on related matters is lacking.

This is a first step, which, however, also indicates the need to investigate the short, medium, and long-term impacts and developments that such trends may yield in an island state context with bi-party politics and tribal cultural trends – all the more so because this study found negligible discrepancies between adherents of the two main political parties in sourcing news during electoral

campaigns, irrespective of the type of election. This finding was particularly pronounced in the use of Facebook. Such results raise concerns informed by alarming studies on the echo chamber effect of Facebook and other online platforms (Jääskeläinen & Huhtinen, 2020; Dahmen, interviewed by Brichacek, 2016, para. 20-22), popularised by the Netflix (2020) docudrama *The Social Dilemma*. Research examining the impacts on tribalized bi-party contexts like Malta is likewise lacking. Yet the findings of broader research ring radicalisation alarm bells – triggered by how PL and PN voters were found to be increasingly using Facebook to source news during electoral campaigns – because there

is no single, universal Internet, but rather a multitude of Internets. Social automation, machine learning, and artificial intelligence mean that propaganda is becoming more sophisticated and harder to track. ... democracies are using individuals to design and operate fake and highly automated social media accounts. The public conversations on social media have become more polluted and polarized. ... language, jokes, memes, tweets and interaction on these platforms help users to slide into more radical theories and thoughts through the game-like nature of the interaction. (Jääskeläinen & Huhtinen, 2020, p 151)

In brief,

What we see on Facebook is dictated by algorithms that decide what you see based on what you like and dislike, what you comment on and click on... Rather than getting a diversity of perspectives that contribute to political discourse, we see an echo

chamber. (Dahmen, interviewed by Brichacek, 2016, para. 2022)

The tribalized partisan context explained earlier in this paper may be fertile soil in which technologically supported radicalisation can thrive more easily. This substantiates the relevance of the postcolonial media and communication theoretical framework informing this study to interpret findings and design media literacy programmes because of the potential to decode discourses (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018) associated with postcolonial media and communication perspectives. Additionally, the literature on radicalisation articulates mass self-indoctrination as involving a large group that formulates an ideology for itself. This ideology would be selectively informed by media outlets and politicians that resonate with the group's preferences and pre-existing beliefs. Contrary to traditional top-down indoctrination and propaganda, mass self-indoctrination is more bottom-up; yet still supported by media and politicians when these do not stray far from their patrons' tastes to avoid losing them to competitors (Kydd, 2021).

Nonetheless, recent research in Malta (Vella, 2018) identified increased numbers of floating voters, cross-party voting and non-electoral forms of political participation among the indicators of distrust in political parties and representative democracy. The same research found differences in the socio-demographics and of motivation among non-voters; yet still these tended to be

younger, better-educated, and cognitively mobilized, as well as more liberal and oriented towards the left of the political spectrum. Non-voters are also more likely to uphold progressive rather than conservative or moderate views and values, and are more likely to adhere to extremist

rather than centralist ideologies. Non-voters also have a higher predisposition to come from mixed, floating, or politically antagonist family backgrounds. (Vella, 2018, p 411)

These recent findings suggest improved media literacy over the past decade because earlier analysis associated high electoral turnout with the Maltese electorate's reluctance and lack of ability to manifest "critical thought about politics" (Falzon, interviewed by Grech, 2009); albeit it needs to be underlined that non-voters comprise a small minority of the electorate (less than 10%). Nonetheless, Vella's (2018) observations show how, in Malta, a higher potential for critical political and media literacy among younger non-voting generations co-exists with extremist and antagonist traits. Consequently, radicalising self-indoctrination (Kydd, 2021), critical dealignment and, possibly, realignment (Vella, 2018) are not mutually exclusive scenarios.

Ambivalent co-existence, particularly in Malta, can be further understood with reference to how (as mentioned earlier) stability and change, seclusion and exposure, conservatism and modernity, tradition and innovation (Vassallo, 2012) are often two sides of the same coin. Postcolonial media and communication perspectives inform on how such ambivalence and co-existence are the Maltese electorate's articulations of "logics", and "mediations" (Shome, 2016, p 261) and thus can support the design, delivery, and evaluation of targeted media literacy programmes.

These insights confirm the existing literature on radicalisation, where "its meaning is ambiguous and the major controversies and debates that have sprung from it are linked to the same inherent ambiguity" (Neumann, 2013, p 873). While corroborating an understanding of radicalisation as involving "processes of cognitive and

ideological transformation, mainly at the individual level” (Malthaner, 2017, p 369), these insights shed light on the social (rather than the individual) contributors of such cognitive and ideological transformations that should be factored into the design, delivery, and evaluation of targeted media literacy programmes. Consequently, this prospect of ambivalent, nuanced engagement demonstrates the relevance of postcolonial media and communication studies in discerning trends identified in other research on citizen, adult and community-based education in Malta which, drawing on the works of Gert Biesta (2006), pointed out “the educational value of such nuances because they provide spaces to come into presence in an unscripted manner” (p 16). In this regard, Malta’s island ‘insularity’ and small size potentially increase the likelihood of physical encounter with ‘Otherness’ with the potential to breach echo chamber silos.

Most participants of this study reported considering their personal position when forming an opinion, rather than uncritically adopting the position of the party. However, this finding is significantly challenged by the 83% core vote identified in this study. The two concurrent findings suggest that voters can perhaps barely discern boundaries between personal opinion and political party influence. The tribalized context discussed earlier in this paper and the echo chamber/radicalisation impacts of online sources discussed earlier in this section would complement this inference. Lack of disparity in the increased use of online sources (and Facebook in particular) by PL and PN voters corroborates this.

On the other hand, the prevalence of younger voters within the cohort willing to consider voting for a different party in the future suggests possibilities of resistance to the radicalising impacts of online influences, notwithstanding that younger cohorts were found by this study to be prevalent among those following the news

using online sources - and Facebook in particular – during the electoral campaign. On the other hand, the prevalence of television viewing during the electoral campaigns researched for this study, particularly among older cohorts and less educated cohorts, gives relevance to the crowdfunded legal bid mentioned earlier in this paper - incidentally initiated by a media company that operates solely online - against party-owned television stations. All the more so, since this study also revealed that older voters were also more prevalent among those who always voted for the same party and less prevalent among those considering voting for another party in the future. In this regard, the postcolonial media and communications perspective adds value to the findings of this study in that they shed light on the implications of the mentioned legal bid for a politics of representation and dislocation in the postcolonial context under study. Pertinent questions for future research and debate include: to what extent is this legal case an unscripted response of resistance to the tribalized Maltese context described earlier in this paper? To what extent is it nuanced itself, given that the media entity instantiating it has a vested interest of sorts in stating that party owned competitors are unconstitutional?

## **Conclusions**

This quantitative study used data on media platforms used by voters in Malta to source news in the 30-day run-up to the 2017 general election and the 2019 MEP/local council elections as well as data on voters' engagement with national politics a few months before a yet-to-be announced general election. The main findings of this study are that use of television was prevalent - particularly among older, female and less educated cohorts while the use of online sources and of Facebook in particular was on

the rise particularly among younger cohorts and more educated cohorts. Younger cohorts dominated among those who reported considering voting for a different political party from the party for which they had most recently voted while there was a preponderance of older cohorts among the 83% reporting they had always voted for the same party.

The data from collection rounds in 2017, 2019 and 2021 implied that respondents differed between data collection rounds. This somewhat inhibited the statistical analyses. For example, it was not possible to test the likelihood of following a specific media platform among those reporting that they would consider voting for a different party in the future, or among those reporting they had always voted for the same party. Another limitation is that the study did not include forms of media which may also act as significant sources of political information and propaganda: billboards, leaflets and door-to-door canvassing. This could inform future research.

Similarly, since the quantitative study focused on trends in news sourcing during electoral campaigns and perceptions of selected aspects of national and party politics a few months before the announcement of the next general election, it was beyond the scope of the study to scrutinise whether the electorate differentiated the quality and type of media content consumed (or presumed). Given that media may simultaneously act as an informative and empowering or emancipating tool for critical political analysis while prone to the dissemination of political information of poor quality, including biased information and fake news, the researchers also recommend further research on this aspect.

A further limitation is that in interpreting findings, party allegiance can only be inferred from data provided by participants on how they voted in the previous general election. This may not always indicate party allegiance in a valid manner as voting during a specific election may be

motivated by several (possibly intersecting) reasons. However, the findings of this study revealed the need for further research on these aspects. The methodology adopted also made it possible to elicit voter perceptions before the start and towards the end of the current governmental term.

This study affirms the relevance of postcolonial theory to communication and media studies and to the “still emerging area of inquiry...postcolonial communication” (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018, p 347). Postcolonial communication and media perspectives confirm the relevance of Malta’s postcolonial nuanced context in fostering opportunities for ‘unscripted’ responses that may catalyse resistance. However, discussion also identified a risk of radicalisation - particularly given the increased use of online news sourcing noted in this study. It also noted the risk that radicalisation can thrive in Malta’s tribalized socio-cultural milieu. However, while younger voters are at greater risk of the arguable radicalisation impact of online news sourcing because of their popularity among online users, they have more access to pluralised platforms than do older cohorts, who primarily get their news from television.

Thus, in this study, postcolonial communications and media studies were useful to understand the ambivalence emerging from trends associated with increasing critical engagement with partisan politics coexisting and with trends suggesting extremist partisan engagement associated with (potential) radicalisation. In a context where media bear the onus of the ‘fourth estate’ yet are challenged by the risk of systemic and institutionalised fake news, policies and practices need to ensure the quality and validity of news and to minimise the risk of platforms becoming corrupted by fake and sensationalised and radicalising agendas. A particular risk may be those losing popularity, which this study identified to be radio and printed newspapers. The findings support continued



investment in media literacy, in lifelong learning and citizenship education and with a differentiated approach since the findings of the study revealed demographically differentiated use of media platforms during electoral campaigns.

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