FACTS OF (FINANCIAL) LIFE: POLITICAL POWER AND RE-VISUALIZATION STRATEGIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Digital political visualizations are a growing genre, providing an elegant solution to the informational overload that citizens encounter as they learn about the political world from social media. As visual representations of the numeric, scientific and seemingly impartial (Porter, 1996), the introduction of visualized political information and data is often viewed as a positive turning, away from personality politics and towards data-centered public debate (Naerland, 2020). However, when digital visualizations are used as part of political campaigns, they may also serve to misinform, persuade and divert attention (Amit-Danhi and Shifman, 2020). Thus, visualizations comprise a unique meeting point between political interests and the democratic greater good.

In political campaigns, candidates are engaged in a contest over the winning narrative. In a hybrid media world, political power, or the ability to "*create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable the agency of others*" Chadwick, 2017: 285) may afford specific actors a head start in the race. Power manifests in different discursive and persuasive strategies. Powerful actors tend to focus on their persona (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007) through displays of emotionality, while peripheral actors tend to narrate reality through issue-oriented content (Samuel-Azran et al., 2018). Demonstrated by widespread grassroots campaigns in the past decade, (e.g., #metoo, BLM) the digital world offers a challenging, though somewhat effective pathway for awareness-raising.

In recent years, studies have explored the narrative, engagement and emotionality potentials of digital visualizations (see Kennedy et al, 2016; Weber, 2020; Kennedy and Hill, 2018). However, an analysis of the ways in which different actors utilize visualization for political persuasion and rhetoric has yet to emerge. Accordingly, I ask: "*How do different types of political actors visualize the same political reality*?"

Method

Stemming from a failed budget approval process, Israel's 2015 election-cycle uniquely revolved around repeated refuting and confirming of financial facts. Using qualitative grounded analysis, I analyze a sample of all cost-of-living visualizations posted to Facebook by various political actors during the campaign period (n=209), and contrast rhetorical strategies with the political power-stance of the posting actor.

Findings

Across the sample, different narrative, visual, and information-oriented strategies were applied by the actors in regards to Israeli cost-of-living. Analysis exposed two main visualization strategies: *Progress Makers & Hinderers* and *Re-visualized Economy*.

In the category of *Progress Makers & Hinderers*, visualizations tend to anoint and celebrate economic progress-makers, battle over credit, or assign blame (hindering). In this category, peripheral actors tended claim progress based on indisputable data such as parliamentary voting records in traditional scientific formats (see Fig.1), whereas primary actors visualized broad, uncited statements using simplified graphs (see Fig. 2). Several times throughout the election, the latter type of *Progress-Maker* visualizations were reposted by challenger-primary actors, overlaying their own narrative on top of the original claim (see Fig. 3).

Alternatively, in the category of *Re-visualized Economy*, peripheral actors' visualizations challenged existing perceptions of economic reality as part of an ongoing debate about the existence (or the extent) of an Israeli economic crisis. Two main strategies emerged: *Humanizing Poverty*, wherein visualizations emotionally contextualize economic data to define poverty in terms of its emotional and moral consequences (see Fig. 4); and *Greener Grasses* in which both peripheral and primary actors employ global comparisons of financial metrics to counteract the incumbent Prime Minister's claims about Israel's prospering economic state (see Fig. 5).

Despite their shared similarity in timeframe and subject, the visualizations in this sample took starkly different approaches, beginning with *what* was information chosen, as well as *how* it was visualized and *for what rhetorical end*. The visualization approached identified suggest rhetorical dynamics that correspond with political power structures, relating to three types of power: the powerful role of (visualized) numbers in political discourse, the persuasive power of emotions, and the political power of the actors posting the visualizations to social media. Across my findings, I highlight re-visualization an act of discursive and political resistance by weakened actors. Re-visualization is used by powerful actors in order to reclaim political narratives of achievements and failures (e.g., Fig. 3). Alternatively, when used by peripheral actors, re-visualization is applied in order to better their political stance in the battle of narratives. When they invite audiences to find the moral faults in the humanized reality of progress claimed by primary actors, or to be appalled at the wilting grasses of Israeli economy in comparison to its neighbors', they engage in acts of resistance (i.e. power-gaining) against primary narratives, by enlisting both the power of numbers, and the power of emotional persuasion.

Conclusions

This paper contributes a first in-depth exploration of visualization rhetoric as an expression of political power and a tool for resistance against it on social media. While studies have looked at political mechanisms of visualizations, the interplay depicted in this study provides much needed insight into the wide variety of strategies this growing genre provides political actors of all types for the dissemination of both benign and dis-informative visualized messages on social media. Through the strategies defined and the political patterns detected, future studies may use this local study to explore the ways in which political actors utilize the power of visualization and revisualization throughout different political contexts.

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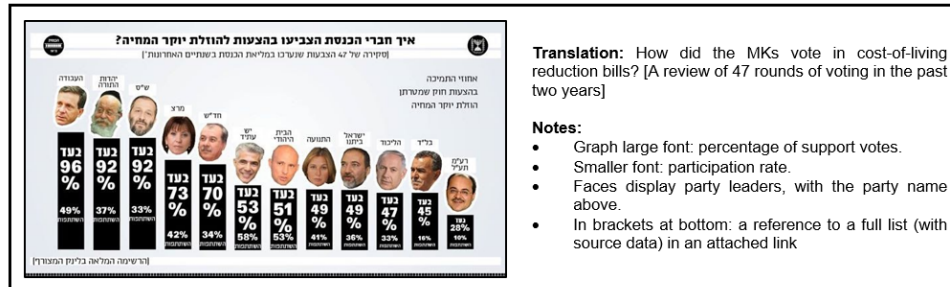
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Translation: How did the MKs vote in cost-of-living reduction bills? [A review of 47 rounds of voting in the past two years]

Notes:
- Graph large font: percentage of support votes.
- Smaller font: participation rate.
- Faces display party leaders, with the party name above.
- In brackets at bottom: a reference to a full list (with source data) in an attached link

Fig. 1: How did they vote? February 22, 2015.

Translation: Lowered unemployment
[subtitles] Unemployment today is of the lowest in the Western World

Fig. 2: Netanyahu. March 5, 2015.

Translation: When others talk the Likud steals the credit

Note: in both visuals, icons and graph icons are used to signify a list of achievements by the departing government. The source cited is an opinion piece by an economic correspondent

Translation: When others work the Likud (headed by Netanyahu steals the credit

The Likud is trying to claim credit for Lapid's achievements in the Treasury. Don't be gullible, Yesh Atid continues ahead, full speed!

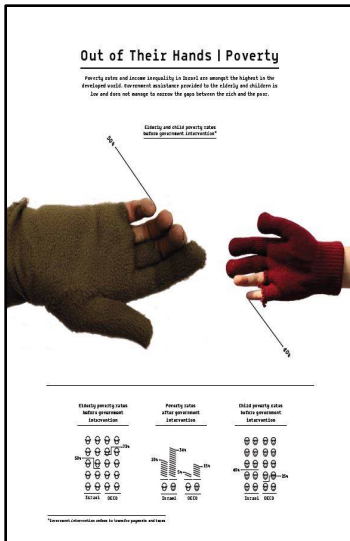**Fig. 3**: Revisualized Progress Making. Netanyahu (right) and Gadi Meiri (Left), January 20 and 30, 2015.
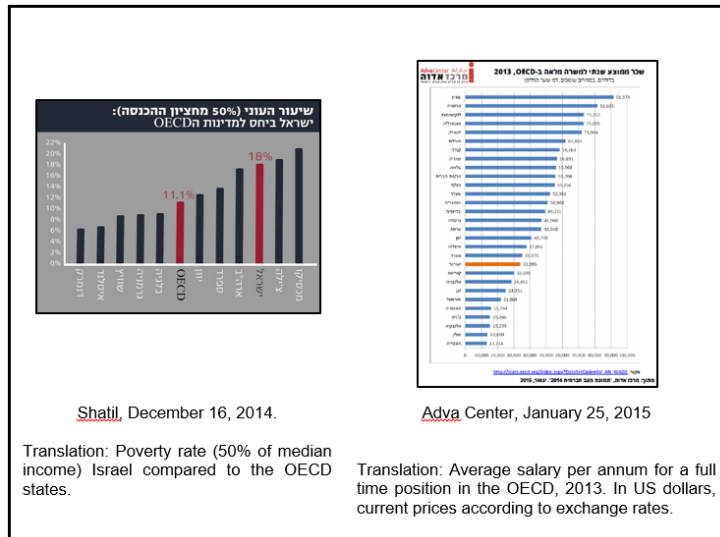
Fig. 4: Taub Center, February 1, 2015.

Fig. 5: Greener grasses - comparing Israel to its OECD peers.

Shatil, December 16, 2014.

Translation: Poverty rate (50% of median income) Israel compared to the OECD states.

Adva Center, January 25, 2015

Translation: Average salary per annum for a full time position in the OECD, 2013. In US dollars, current prices according to exchange rates.