

Manipulation in Politics

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Summary

Manipulation is a means by which a person is gotten to do something that the person was not initially inclined to do. As such, it is a form of power. Distinguishing it from other forms of power, such as persuasion, coercion, and physical force, is both important and difficult. It is important because it often matters which form of power a political actor uses, and manipulation is commonly thought to be a form of power whose exercise is undesirable. It is difficult because the line between manipulation and persuasion is often obscure, and because the term *manipulation* can be applied to tactics that influence the target's state of mind, and tactics that change the target's situation. Political theorists and philosophers have offered several accounts of manipulation: Some see it as deceptive influence, some see it as covert influence, some see it as influence with covert intent, some see it as offering bad reasons, and some see it as changing the external situation. While each of these approaches gets some things right about manipulation, each faces important challenges as well.

One reason why manipulation seems undesirable is that it appears to undermine autonomy. This fact helps explain why concerns about manipulation arise in discussions of “nudges” that are meant to improve people’s decision making without coercion. Even if nudges benefit their targets, they may be undesirable on balance if they involve autonomy-undermining manipulation.

Manipulation is a useful tool for autocrats, but it poses serious problems for democracies. This is because it appears to undermine the consent on which democratic legitimacy depends. Some political theorists argue that the problems posed by manipulation can be best addressed through deliberative democracy. Others dispute this suggestion. At the level of practice, there is reason to worry that late-20th- and 21st-century developments in psychology and the social and information sciences, as well as changes to the media landscape, threaten to make manipulation more prevalent and effective.

Keywords

manipulation, persuasion, coercion, power, nudges, deception, influence, deliberation

Manipulation in Politics

Alan Ware (1981) wrote that the concept of manipulation is “of central importance in democratic theory,” but that “it remains one of the least studied of the concepts that are usually recognized as members of the power or control ‘family’” (p. 163). In the decades after Ware’s remark, a great deal more work has been done on the concept of manipulation, both by political theorists and by philosophers. Nevertheless, Ware’s assessment still rings true: Much more work remains to be done.

To begin, it will be helpful to have some examples of political phenomena to which the term *manipulation* is commonly applied:

- A candidate tarnishes his competitor with innuendoes, suggesting that he is soft on crime or likely to start a war.
- A candidate deliberately conceals the fact that, if elected, he will support a policy that most voters oppose.
- A leader appeals to xenophobia to garner support for restrictive immigration policies or an aggressive military action.
- Legislators investigate the leader of a rival party on corruption charges they know to be baseless, hoping that the mere fact of an investigation will lead voters to question his integrity.
- The dominant party redraws electoral districts to concentrate voters from the opposing party into a number of districts that is smaller than the opposing party's proportion of the electorate.
- Legislators attach a "poison pill" or "wrecking amendment" to a piece of legislation they oppose, making it so unappealing that its supporters vote it down.
- A chairperson carefully arranges a series of votes to maximize the chances of obtaining the outcome that the chairperson favors.

These examples all involve manipulation in politics where "politics" is construed very narrowly. But if "politics" is construed more broadly to include economic relationships, then examples like this might also count as political manipulation:

- An advertiser employs clever psychological appeals to induce consumers to feel self-conscious about some aspect of their appearance that the product being advertised is designed to enhance.

If “politics” is construed even more broadly to include social and interpersonal interactions, then most, if not all, forms of ordinary, everyday manipulation might also be instances of political manipulation:

- A child nags his parents to buy him an ice cream.
- A group of adolescents employs peer pressure to enforce conformity with the group’s norms.
- One spouse induces the other to feel inappropriate guilt in order to get their way.

This list is certainly incomplete, and further reflection might suggest that some items on it are not really examples of manipulation after all. However, it should serve to illustrate the variety of tactics that might plausibly be regarded as examples of political manipulation.

Manipulation and Power

According to the classic definition of power put forward by Robert Dahl (1957), “A has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do” (pp. 202–203). On this view, manipulation is a form of power, since, whatever else it may be, manipulation is a way of getting a person to do something that the person was not initially inclined to do. Dahl’s definition of power is sufficiently broad to include physical force, coercion, manipulation, and rational persuasion. There are, of course, important normative differences among these forms of power: It matters quite a lot whether a government uses coercion or rational persuasion to achieve some policy objective, for example. It is relatively

straightforward to give a rough characterization of coercion, rational persuasion, and physical force. Manipulation is more elusive. Although the distinction between manipulation and physical force seems clear enough, the lines between manipulation and coercion and between manipulation and persuasion are more difficult to draw.

This problem is compounded because the term *manipulation* can be used to describe two very different strategies for getting someone to do something. Consider this example from philosopher Joel Rudinow (1978):

Smith presents himself to the admitting officer at the psychiatric clinic, ... saying that he has just had another terrible battle with his wife and claiming that if he is not admitted he will ... wind up drunk, brawling, and finally either in the emergency ward or in jail. The admitting officer refuses his request, explaining that to admit Smith ... would constitute inappropriate use of already overburdened facilities. Smith responds, "All right then, ... I will climb to the top of the water tower and create such a scene that you'll have to admit me," and departs. Half an hour later Smith reappears at the admitting officer's desk, this time escorted by policemen, who report having "talked him down" from the water tower and suggest that he be admitted overnight for observation. Smith is admitted. ... It seems intuitively beyond question that Smith had successfully attempted to manipulate not only the admitting officer but the policemen. (p. 340)

Rudinow's case illustrates two very different ways that a person can be gotten to do something, both of which seem aptly described as manipulation. Smith manipulates the police officers by changing their state of mind to make them believe that he is a suicide risk. But he manipulates the clinic's admitting officer by arranging the situation in such a way that he gets what he wants.

Thus, it appears that the term *manipulation* can be applied to two rather different ways that Smith can try to get his way: by influencing the *state of mind* of the person whose decision will get him what he wants, and by changing the *situation* so that he gets what he wants. Let us call these forms of manipulation *psychological* and *situational*, respectively.

Both forms of manipulation occur in the political realm. Two of the most famous—or infamous—political advertisements in U.S. history are the Willie Horton ad and the Daisy ad. The first was used during the 1988 U.S. election between George Bush Sr. and Michael Dukakis; it involved an African American man convicted of murder who committed additional violent crimes when furloughed under a Massachusetts program while Michael Dukakis was governor. The second was used during the 1964 election between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater; it showed a small child counting flowers just before a nuclear explosion, with a voiceover insinuating that Goldwater was likely to start a nuclear war. These two ads, which are often cited as examples of manipulation (Klemp, 2011), clearly fall into the category of psychological manipulation.

But tactics like wrecking amendments, dividing an opposing coalition, gerrymandering, and engineering the order of a series of votes to shape the outcome are also often described as forms of manipulation. These tactics do not work by influencing the targets' mental state. Rather, they operate, as William Riker (1986) put it, by “structuring the world so you can win” (p. ix). Thus, they would seem to fall into the category of situational manipulation.

A closer look at these examples reveals that situational manipulation itself seems to include two rather different kinds of tactics. In Rudinow's example, Smith gets his way by changing the situation so that the admitting officer has no viable alternative but to do what Smith wants him to do. Wrecking amendments seem to operate like this: They change the situation so that it is no

longer viable for those who support a piece of legislation to continue to do so. In both cases, the changes to the situation induce someone to change their decision. But other tactics that seem to be examples of situational manipulation work instead by changing the rules or procedures in such a way that the manipulator gets what the manipulator wants without having to change anyone's decisions. Gerrymandering, for example, does not change anyone's decisions; rather, it changes the rules in such a way that the gerrymanderers get what they want. The difference between these two forms of situational manipulation involves whether they are mediated by anyone changing their mind: In the first form, changing the situation makes it rational for the target of manipulation to choose the way the manipulator wants. In the second, changing the situation in and of itself is sufficient to ensure that things go the way that the manipulator wants.

The existence of both psychological manipulation and situational manipulation, and the distinction between the two kinds of situational manipulation, complicate attempts to distinguish manipulation from other ways of getting someone to do X rather than Y. Any attempt to characterize manipulation will assume or imply some claim about the relationship between psychological and situational manipulation: Are they manifestations of the same phenomenon, closely related phenomena, or distinct and unrelated phenomena to which the same word just happens to be applied? Moreover, are forms of situational manipulation where changing the situation induces a change in behavior more like situational manipulation because they involve changing the situation, or more like psychological manipulation because they change someone's behavior?

In addition to distinguishing it from other forms of power or influence, a theory of manipulation should also illuminate its normative status. Manipulation is generally regarded as an undesirable thing; the term "manipulation" has a negative connotation that the term

“influence” lacks. One important question facing theorists is whether to take the negative connotation of “manipulation” as a datum to guide theorizing, so that the common disapproval of manipulation and being manipulated is taken to be a fact that an adequate account of manipulation must explain (Baron, 2014), or whether to treat “manipulation” as a purely descriptive term that names some phenomenon which will then be subjected to an independent moral analysis (Wood, 2014).

A related question concerns how much continuity should be required between a concept of political manipulation and the use of the term “manipulation” in ordinary discourse. Should theorists treat “manipulation” as a technical term and stipulate that it refers to some theoretically interesting phenomenon, or should they rely on how the term is used in ordinary discourse to see whether it applies to various political phenomena? This question is complicated by the fact that the term “political” can be used very narrowly to include only “what politicians do,” or so widely as to include any form of influence between persons. If “political” is defined to cover any use of power, and if “power” is defined broadly enough to include manipulation, then it would seem that manipulation is always political. This fact suggests that any attempt to limit the scope of the term “political manipulation” in a way that sharply distinguishes it from more ordinary forms of manipulation like those that occur within families or between private individuals would need to be justified. In the absence of such a justification, it seems difficult to draw a sharp line between political manipulation and ordinary, everyday manipulation.

These questions are all theoretical. But answering them will help us address more practical questions: How do various forms of manipulation work? What effect does manipulation have on political institutions, especially democratic ones? Assuming that manipulation is often undesirable, how can its frequency and its effects on politics be reduced? When do attempts to

employ psychological findings to help effect political change or increase social welfare cross the line between morally benign influence and morally dubious manipulation?

Characterizing Manipulation

Any attempt to characterize and understand manipulation should identify some feature or set of features shared by all instances of manipulation. These features should explain why instances of influence with those features count as manipulation rather than some other form of power or influence. This process might result in deciding that some putative examples of manipulation are either not manipulation at all or that they are instances of a distinct form of manipulation. In particular, theorists will need to settle the question of the relationship between psychological and situational manipulation (and between the two forms of situational manipulation). There are two strategies for doing this. One would be to assume that situational and psychological manipulation are instances of the same phenomenon and seek features present in both but absent in other forms of power or influence. The other would be to investigate each one separately and then figure out whether they are instances of the same phenomenon later, after a good understanding of each has been achieved.

The accounts of political manipulation put forward by the early 21st century can be divided into five main categories: those that characterize manipulation as deceptive influence, those that characterize it as covert influence, those that characterize it as influence with covert intent, those that characterize it as influence via bad reasons, and those that characterize it as influence that operates by changing the external situation.

Manipulation as Deceptive Influence

In his book *Manipulatory Politics*, Robert Goodin (1980) proposed an influential account of political manipulation as deceptive influence. He wrote that manipulation “is power exercised (1) deceptively and (2) against the putative will of its objects” (Goodin, 1980, p. 8). According to Goodin (1980), manipulation operates in such a way that the target is unaware of what is happening: “In the strongest sense, ‘manipulation’ is something which actually happens invisibly” (p. 9). For Goodin, manipulation “involves bending another’s will” (Goodin, 1980, p. 18), deflecting the target from what he was initially going to do—what Goodin called his “putative will”—to what the manipulator wants him to do. According to Goodin, the test for whether an influence is manipulative involves two conditions: “1. Is the interference deceptive? 2. Is the interference contrary to the putative will of those subject to it?” (Goodin, 1980, p. 35).

Goodin showed how this definition applies to many tactics that seem like paradigm instances of manipulation: lies, deception, rhetorical tricks, and other methods of making things seem other than they really are, when such tactics are used to steer the target away from the target’s “putative will,” namely, away from the decision that the target would have made but for the manipulation.

An important challenge to Goodin’s proposal is that it is not clear that all forms of manipulation are deceptive in the way that Goodin’s theory requires. Appeals to emotion that would normally be described as manipulative, for example, do not always involve deception. It is difficult to see anything deceptive about the appeal to fear in the Daisy ad, yet it is often treated as a paradigm example of political manipulation. This difficulty is compounded if continuity between the political concept of manipulation and the more everyday use of that term is a requirement, or even a desideratum, of an adequate theory of political manipulation. Nagging and peer pressure are commonly regarded as forms of manipulation, but they do not seem to

involve deception. Or consider the influence tactic known as “social proof,” which exploits the human tendency to follow the crowd. Presumably, this tactic can sometimes be manipulative—its use in Nazi Germany and by Jim Jones’s People’s Temple seem like clear examples of manipulation. But there seems to be nothing deceptive about exploiting this tendency to do as others do.

The account faces further challenges if it is important for a concept of political manipulation to apply to both psychological and situational manipulation. If gerrymandering or wrecking amendments are manipulative, then it does not seem that this status depends on their being deceptive. Of course, as Goodin (1980, pp. 15, 31) noted, it is undoubtedly easier to get away with such tactics if one is deceptive about them. But if gerrymandering or wrecking amendments are manipulative in and of themselves, then it seems reasonable to think that they should remain so even when done openly.

Manipulation as Covert Influence

Some political theorists characterize manipulation as covert influence. An early version of this approach was proposed by Alan Ware (1981, pp. 165–166), who provided four conditions for it to be true that A manipulated B:

1. A’s intervention successfully changes B’s “tastes, lifestyle, values,” or the goods B chooses, or the reasons he chooses them, or the weight that those reasons carry in his decision making.
2. A restricts or “structures” B’s alternatives to increase the probability that B will choose as A wishes. To illustrate what he means by “structures,” Ware offers the example of A withholding information from B (Ware, 1981, p. 173). This suggests that “structuring” is

not something that A does to B's options themselves, but something that A does to the psychological processes by which B chooses among them.

3. B either has no knowledge of, or does not understand, the ways in which A affects his choices.
4. A moral agent in A's position would normally be held morally responsible for all the results of structuring the alternatives facing B.

According to Ware (1981, p. 168), the distinguishing feature of manipulation is that it is covert in the sense that targets are unaware of how they are being influenced. Ware's inclusion of both "structuring" options and limiting them as mechanisms for manipulation is presumably intended to handle cases of both psychological and situational manipulation (or at least forms of situational manipulation in which one changes a person's situation to influence that person's choice).

Keith Dowding (2011) offered this summary of a view like Ware's:

Both force and influence are overt: the actor being forced or influenced is usually aware that of being subject to this pressure [*sic*] ... Manipulation, however, is normally thought to be carried out behind the back of the subject, so to speak. ...

We might define manipulation in the following manner: A manipulates B by getting B to choose something B would not otherwise have done by restricting B's alternatives in some manner, where B does not understand that A is thus affecting his or her choice. The restriction on the alternatives of B might be a physical reduction in them—forcing B into a restricted choice set. But often such manipulation occurs through B's lack of knowledge or information about the other

alternatives. Indeed, restricting or affecting the information that the subject receives is the most discussed form of manipulation in the literature. (p. 398)

In offering this paraphrase of Ware's account (which Dowding cited) in his short encyclopedia article on manipulation, Dowding may be suggesting that this is the received view, or something near to it.

A similar view is proposed by Daniel Susser et al. (2019), though their view does not include limiting options as one of the forms of manipulation. They wrote that "manipulation is hidden influence. . . . Covertly influencing someone—imposing a hidden influence—means influencing them in a way they aren't consciously aware of, and in a way they couldn't easily become aware of" (Susser et al., 2019, p. 4).

Despite its appeal, the covert influence account of manipulation faces challenges similar to those facing the deceptive influence view. It is unclear that manipulation always involves the target's lack of awareness of the influence. While situational manipulation like gerrymandering or wrecking amendments are often hidden, it is not clear that this is what makes them manipulative when they are hidden, or that they cease to be manipulative when done openly. And some ordinary forms of psychological manipulation, like nagging, peer pressure, guilt trips, and other plays on emotion appear to be manipulative even when—as is often the case—targets are well aware of the influences on their decision making. Moreover, manipulation of these kinds can still be effective despite being overt rather than covert. It is probably true that covert forms of manipulation are, *ceteris paribus*, more pernicious than overt forms, in part because they are more difficult to resist or guard against. But it seems difficult to maintain that influences like nagging, peer pressure, and guilt trips are not manipulative simply because they are overt.

Manipulation as Influence with Covert Intent

Closely related to the idea that manipulation is covert influence is the idea that it is influence with covert intent. On this view, the manipulative *influence* itself may or may not be hidden from the target, but the manipulator's *intent* must be hidden. The philosopher Radim Belohrad (2019) defended such a position, writing that:

In manipulation, the influencer is keen to create an impression that her motives are very different from what she projects. ... Manipulation essentially involves deception. The deception may occur in the content of the manipulative influence, as is the case in lying, for instance, but, more importantly, it occurs in the intentions of the manipulator. The manipulator always projects intentions that differ from her real intentions. (pp. 457–459)

The political theorist Gregory Whitfield (2020) offered a similar theory:

An act of manipulation is any intentional attempt by an agent (A) to cause another agent (B) to will/prefer/intend/act other than what A takes B's will, preference or intention to be, where A does so utilizing methods that obscure and render deniable A's intentions vis-à-vis B.

Whitfield suggested that the covertness of the manipulator's intentions distinguishes manipulation from other forms of power or influence. Although he counted deceptive tactics as forms of manipulative influence, he also regarded "altering either incentives or the structure an agent acts within in order to secure a preferred outcome" as "one of the central types of manipulation" (Whitfield, 2020). Whitfield contended that his analysis of manipulation applies to instances of psychological manipulation like misleading voters about an opponent, giving incorrect directions to the polling place to supporters of one's rival, and so on, as well as instances of situational manipulation like strategic voting and gerrymandering.

However, the covert intent approach faces significant challenges. Certainly, many instances of manipulation involve—and perhaps require—covert intentions. Iago’s manipulation of Othello likely required Iago’s true intention to remain hidden, to take a famous example. But many cases of ordinary manipulation do not seem to require the manipulator’s intentions to be hidden. The child nagging for ice cream clearly and transparently intends to get the adult to give them ice cream. The adolescents using peer pressure to induce a fellow to smoke clearly and transparently intend to get their fellow to light up. Despite the clear and obvious intentions, both of these seem like paradigm cases of manipulation. The case for thinking that the Willie Horton ad or the Daisy ad are manipulative seems strong despite the fact that the intentions behind them—to influence people to vote against Dukakis or Goldwater—were quite transparent.

This problem seems even worse for instances of situational manipulation—especially those that change the outcome without changing anyone’s decisions. Whitfield’s view seems to imply that gerrymandering, for instance, is only manipulative if the perpetrators hide their intentions. But notice that this tells us nothing about why the gerrymandering *itself* is manipulative. If gerrymandering is a form of manipulation in and of itself, then why does it matter whether the politicians pretend to be innocent of any intent to gain a disproportionate number of legislative seats? Tying the question of whether gerrymandering is manipulative to whether the intent is hidden or blatant seems to miss the very things about gerrymandering that lead some people to count it as a form of manipulation, namely that it involves gaming the system by exploiting the rules, or loopholes in them, in ways that allow the manipulator to gain or exercise political power that has not been legitimately acquired.

Of course, as a practical matter, those who engage in gerrymandering have reason to pretend that they intend only to engage in a non-partisan administrative cartographic exercise. Such

pretenses are presumably manipulative. But the fact that it is advantageous to hide one's intentions to take a certain action seems insufficient for pronouncing that action manipulative in and of itself. After all, it is generally advantageous to hide one's intention to do anything that others are likely to find objectionable, be it gerrymandering or automobile theft.

Perhaps aware of these worries, Whitfield (2020) sometimes fell back to a weaker position, claiming that manipulation only requires "plausible deniability" about one's intentions. But this fallback only raises new questions without answering the main challenge. To whom must the deniability be plausible? How plausible must it be? Nor does it address the key challenge: If gerrymandering is a form of manipulation, then why should it only be so if the perpetrators have tried to hide what they are doing? Why should judgments about whether the Willie Horton or Daisy ads are manipulative depend on whether their creators did or could "plausibly deny" that they were trying to influence people's votes?

Manipulation as Offering Bad Reasons

A rather different approach to manipulation characterizes it as an attempt to trick the target into acting for bad reasons. The philosopher Claudia Mills (1995) offered a straightforward version of this view:

A manipulator tries to change another's beliefs and desires by offering her bad reasons, disguised as good, or faulty arguments, disguised as sound—where the manipulator himself knows these to be bad reasons and faulty arguments. . . . A manipulator is interested in reasons not as logical justifiers but as causal levers. For the manipulator, reasons are tools, and a bad reason can work as well as, or better than, a good one. (pp. 100–101)

A similar view has been offered by James Fishkin (2011), who wrote:

A person has been *manipulated* by a communication when she has been exposed to a message intended to change her views in a way she would not accept *if* she were to think about it on the basis of good conditions. (pp. 32–33, emphasis original)

Robert Noggle (2020) argued that:

manipulation is the attempt to get someone to adopt *any* faulty mental state: belief, desire, emotion, etc. Typically, the manipulator hopes that adopting the faulty mental state will lead the target to act in ways that the manipulator prefers. (p. 243, emphasis original)

This can be seen as a version of the bad reasons approach inasmuch as getting someone to act on a faulty mental state like a false belief, an inappropriate or excessively strong emotion, or an irrational desire is tantamount to getting that person to act on a bad reason.

The idea that manipulation involves tricking the target into acting on bad reasons can also be discerned in a pair of important papers by Keith Dowding. Dowding's goal is to set out ideal conditions—which he calls “reliability conditions”—for persuasion in deliberative democracy. He claims that if these conditions are met, then the attempted persuasion is neither coercive nor manipulative. Although this is not quite a definition of manipulation, Dowding's reliability conditions are sufficient for the *absence* of manipulation. Hence, they provide at least a partial and indirect characterization of manipulation. Dowding's conditions apply when some influencer, *i*, offers some reason or evidence, *E*, to *j*, in order to get *j* to accept some claim about what is true or some proposal about what to do, *S*. According to Dowding, such an attempt at persuasion is neither coercive nor manipulative if the relevant “reliability conditions” are satisfied.

The first reliability condition in (Dowding, 2016) is that:

- (1) the reasons (E) that lead *i* to assent to S must constitute the reasons that *j* has for assenting to S. (p. 6)

This condition requires influencers to appeal only to considerations that they themselves regard as good reasons for the claim that they want the other person to accept. Thus, if the persuasion is successful, it will turn out that “both *i* and *j* believe S on roughly the same grounds” (Dowding, 2016, p. 7). This condition trivially prohibits trying to convince someone of something one regards as false or unsupported by any reasons at all. Moreover, it prohibits doing what Mills (1995) saw as the hallmark of manipulation: offering bad reasons disguised as good.

The second “reliability condition” is that:

- (2) *i* persuades *j* of S on grounds E with the intention that together they learn the truth or, in other contexts, come to some agreement. (Dowding, 2016, p. 7)

The idea here is that the influencer must be guided by the intent to arrive at the truth or to come to some genuinely mutual agreement about what to do. Thus, influencers must refrain from treating their own beliefs as beyond question and from adopting an inflexible win-at-all-costs strategy in discussions about what to do. As Dowding (2016) put it, “Being honest and trustworthy involves a genuine desire to seek the truth and willingness to change one’s own beliefs if the force of another’s evidence and arguments prevail” (p. 12). Thus, one fulfills Dowding’s second “reliability condition” by caring more about truth or reasonable agreement than about winning the argument.

Dowding (2018) focused on the role of emotion in non-manipulative communication. He offered two conditions under which an appeal to emotion is neither coercive nor manipulative.

(3) an agent *i* induces individual *j* to assent to *S* at least partly through the induction of emotion *F*, and what induces *F* in *j* is also what induced emotion *F* in *i*.

(Dowding, 2018, p. 250).

(4) the emotions expressed by *i* are genuine. (Dowding, 2018, p. 251)

As before, the idea is that persuasion is not manipulative if the grounds that the influencer offers are the same grounds that the influencer accepts. For example, an influencer who makes the target fear what the influencer does not fear would violate this condition. Moreover, the emotion must not only be shared, but it must be based on the same grounds. Thus, it would be a violation of this condition for a politician to try to get voters to share the politician's fear of immigration by getting them to see immigrants as potential criminals, when the politician's own fear of immigration is based on the prospect of immigrants gaining citizenship and supporting the opposing party.

The addition of an emotional component to Dowding's theory is significant because many cases of political manipulation involve appeals to emotions. If the Willie Horton or Daisy ads are manipulative, this is presumably at least in part because of the way they appeal to emotion. When Iago manipulates Othello, he does so in large part by playing on Othello's emotions. Appeals to hatred, fear, and xenophobia to sell the public on an aggressive war seem to be manipulative precisely because of the way they appeal to emotions. But there are also appeals to emotion that do not seem manipulative at all—at least if that term's normal connotation of moral disapprobation is to be maintained. Evoking sympathy for the disadvantaged does not seem manipulative. Many of Churchill's most celebrated World War II speeches were designed to stir the emotions, but it seems implausible to say that this made them manipulative. Government campaigns to warn the public about the dangers of smoking, vaping, or texting while driving

may seek to instill emotions ranging from concern to a healthy level of fear, but it seems incorrect to label them as manipulative. Like some of the other bad reasons accounts, Dowding's account offers the possibility of distinguishing manipulative from non-manipulative appeals to emotion.

However, the bad reasons account faces its own challenges. First, it appears unable to account for situational manipulation (especially those tactics that change the outcome without changing anyone's decisions). If wrecking amendments or gerrymandering are instances of manipulation, then they do not seem to work by offering anyone bad reasons. It appears that the most that the bad reasons account can say about such tactics is that any attempt to camouflage them would be manipulative. It seems unable to label them as manipulation in and of themselves.

A second challenge is that such accounts typically define manipulation in terms of the manipulator's beliefs about which reasons are good or bad. This may not be a problem for a theory of manipulation that is meant to guide moral judgments about individuals. But at the level of politics, it poses a serious challenge. Many instances of putative political manipulation are carried out not by single individuals but by groups of individuals. A single campaign ad might be the work of dozens of people. Even a speech given by one politician may have many authors. Whose attitudes toward the reasons embodied in such a message determine whether it is manipulative? Must everyone involved agree that the reasons being offered are bad? Or perhaps the majority of those responsible for the message determines whether it is manipulative? Or perhaps a message is manipulative if the final decision maker, or the person delivering the message, regards the reasons on offer as bad ones?

Manipulation as Heresthetic

In his classic book, *The Art of Political Manipulation*, William Riker (1986) coined the term “heresthetic” to refer to “structuring the world so you can win” (p. ix). Riker did not offer a formal definition of this kind of manipulation; instead, he provided a series of detailed case studies. The tactics displayed in these cases include dividing one’s opposition, gerrymandering, and arranging the order of votes to make one’s preferred outcome more likely. These are all examples of situational manipulation, in particular the form that does not involve changing the situation in order to change what someone else does.

A crucial feature of Riker’s account of heresthetic manipulation is that he does not see it as a bad thing. In his discussion of an aviation club chairperson who manipulates the club’s votes about which planes to lease in favor of his own preference, he noted “the absence of a general equilibrium of preferences” (Riker, 1986, p. 31), that is, the fact that different voting procedures will often yield different outcomes, as justification for the chairperson carefully choosing the voting procedures to make the vote come out the way he prefers. Riker saw nothing wrong with this because the chairperson “could not have constructed an outcome-neutral agenda” (p. 31). It is not as though the chairperson is hijacking the legitimate will of the group, for there is simply no single answer to the question of what the group prefers in the kinds of cases where different agenda-orderings or different voting procedures will yield different outcomes. That being the case, perhaps it is not unreasonable to give the answer Riker expects to the question: “Is it not an odd standard to require a man to act against himself?” (Riker, 1986, pp. 31–32). However, this position seems less compelling when Riker (1986, pp. 76–77) applied it to gerrymandering. Even if, as he noted, there is no uniquely correct way to draw legislative districts, it does not follow that all ways of doing so are equally legitimate, or that it is equally legitimate to draw boundaries that disenfranchise groups of voters as to draw them in ways that make their representation more

proportional to their numbers. Moreover, Riker (1986, pp. 73–77) seemed unbothered by the fact that the case of gerrymandering he discussed is accompanied by considerable subterfuge designed to camouflage its nature.

Riker's work raises several important questions. The first concerns the relationship between Riker's heresthetic tactics and tactics like the Willie Horton ad. This, of course, is simply the question of whether psychological manipulation and situational manipulation are variants of the same phenomenon or different phenomena altogether. All of Riker's examples are forms of situational manipulation. Moreover, they are all examples of the kind of situational manipulation that changes the outcome without changing anyone's decisions. Although Riker (1986, pp. x–xi) distinguished heresthetic manipulation from psychological manipulation, he offered no opinion on how, if at all, they are related, except to say that one is persuasive while the other is strategic.

It is possible that the most reasonable conclusion is that, contrary to ordinary linguistic usage, situational manipulation is quite different from psychological manipulation. Perhaps situational manipulation is best seen as a sort of power grab which illegitimately augments or exercises political power by exploiting rules that were not meant for this purpose. Perhaps gerrymandering or careful agenda engineering are manipulative because drawing legislative boundaries and setting agendas were meant to be mere administrative tasks rather than tools for augmenting or wielding significant political power. If so, then it seems likely that the factors that make heresthetic manipulation manipulative will be rather different from those that make psychological manipulation manipulative. On the other hand, given that such power grabs are typically disguised, perhaps the common view that they are manipulative involves conflating the intuition that attempts to disguise them are manipulative with the intuition that the tactics themselves are manipulative.

To see this, consider the difference between a trick and a trap. Both are ways of getting someone to do something, but their mechanisms are quite different. A trap works by closing options that were previously open. Trickery gets the target to choose one option over others without eliminating any of them. But a trap works best when the target does not recognize it; hence, traps are typically disguised, or the prey is tricked into entering them. Perhaps it would be best to think of psychological manipulation as being rather like a trick, and situational manipulation as being more like a trap, but one which often requires trickery to work.

In addition to this taxonomic question, another important question concerns the moral status of heresthetic manipulation. Is it correct, as Riker (1986) suggested, that heresthetic manipulation is not in itself immoral? Andrew Sabl (2011) argued that while heresthetic manipulation may not be immoral in the abstract, in the real world it is often accompanied by what he called “heresthetic overload,” which occurs “when a team of actors deliberately provides, or at least encourages, the release of colossal amounts of information, followed by a biased frame put out to make sense of it—a frame that serves the purpose of the team, not the audience” (p. 233). This overload is designed to obscure “how politicians are manipulating the available choices about policy” (Sabl, 2011, p. 233). According to Sabl, it is easier to produce cognitive overload with respect to the procedures exploited in heresthetic manipulation than with respect to the public policy issues themselves, simply because those procedures are so complex and arcane. Rather than trying to hide what they are up to, Sabl argued, politicians practicing heresthetic manipulation can simply overload the audience with so much arcane procedural information that most will be too bewildered to understand how politicians are exploiting it to get their way. Moreover, Sabl suggested, it is often simply not rational for political outsiders to acquire the expertise to recognize heresthetic manipulation. The result, Sabl (2011) argued, is the

“troubling fact . . . that knowledge of political maneuvering is inherently an insiders’ game” (p. 237).

One might wonder, though, whether heresthetic manipulation is undesirable for reasons that go beyond those embodied in Sabl’s critique and the observation that psychological manipulation is often used to camouflage heresthetic manipulation. Scholars have thought about the normative implications of specific forms of heresthetic manipulation: Much has been written on gerrymandering as a mechanism for disenfranchisement, for example, and some works (e.g., [Dowding & Hees, 2008](#)) have examined the normative status of strategic voting. However, little work has been done to determine whether there are common normative concerns that apply to *all* forms of heresthetic manipulation, and whether they are related to the normative concerns about psychological manipulation. Sabl’s work is a beginning, in that he employs some of Goodin’s ideas about psychological manipulation in his analysis, but more work remains to be done.

Manipulation and Autonomy

Manipulation is generally thought to undermine the autonomy of the person being manipulated. Psychological manipulation gets someone to make a choice that they would not otherwise have made. Robert Goodin used the term “putative will” to refer to the choice that the target of manipulation would have made but for the manipulation. Thus, manipulation directs a person away from that person’s “putative will” and toward some choice that the manipulator prefers. Thus, to the extent that the person acted autonomously in forming a putative will, by deflecting the person away from it, manipulation compromises that person’s autonomy. This is not simply because there is a re-direction away from the target’s putative will, but because of the *way* that this re-direction occurs. After all, rational persuasion can also induce an agent to act in a way

that the agent was not initially inclined to act. But rational persuasion does this by helping agents to change their putative wills to more accurately reflect facts about how best to pursue their preferences, or to revise those preferences in light of facts about how best to pursue their deepest values and aims, or to subject those deepest values and aims to rational self-reflection. These changes to a person's putative will maintain, and perhaps even enhance, that person's autonomy. Psychological manipulation, by contrast, induces changes to the target's putative will, or the preferences upon which it is based, that do not reflect facts and good reasons. Such changes make the target's putative will less reflective of, and less likely to achieve or express, the target's deepest values and aims.

Situational or heresthetic manipulation does not undermine the target's autonomy during the process by which the target forms a putative will. Rather, it limits the target's autonomy by closing off options that might have been chosen by the target's autonomously formed putative will. Thus, this form of manipulation is perhaps better seen as limiting or impeding the target's autonomy, since it limits the target's ability to *pursue* a putative will rather than undermining the target's autonomy in *forming* a putative will.

Nudges and Libertarian Paternalism

Concerns about manipulation and its effects on autonomy arise in debates about the “nudges” championed by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein. Thaler and Sunstein (2009) characterized nudges as minor interventions designed to help people make better choices—where “better” is judged from the perspective of the person being nudged. However, if nudges provide these benefits by means that are manipulative and thus undermine autonomy, they may nevertheless be undesirable.

Thaler and Sunstein (2009) referred to their advocacy of nudges as “libertarian paternalism.” It is paternalistic in that they only advocate nudges that “influence choice in a way that will make choosers better off, *as judged by themselves*” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 5). They argued that it is libertarian because nudges are weak and easily resisted influences; thus, when they are deployed, “choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 5).

The nudges Thaler and Sunstein (2009) advocated come in many forms. Some merely provide better and clearer information about such things as food nutritional qualities and the details of mortgages and credit cards. Others help people stick to their commitments, by making it more difficult to undo a decision to save for retirement, for example. These nudges do not seem to raise serious concerns about manipulation, nor is it even clear that they should count as paternalistic (Hausman & Welch, 2010, pp. 127–128).

However, other sorts of nudges employ psychological mechanisms that do raise concerns about manipulation. These nudges often work by affecting the relative salience of the available options or by harnessing various reasoning and decision-making biases. Consider these examples: First, a benevolent cafeteria manager arranges the offerings so that more healthful options are displayed more prominently, in order to make customers more likely to choose them. Second, a benevolent human resources manager arranges for employees to be enrolled in a retirement savings plan unless they opt out, counting on the decision-making bias in favor of the status quo to make employees more likely to remain enrolled in the savings plan that is in their long-term financial interests.

Nudges like these raise concerns about manipulation. To the extent that they work, they appear to harness forms of psychological influence of which their targets are not aware, and

which do not seem to provide good reasons for the choices that they make more likely. Thus, there is reason to worry that, as Till Grüne-Yanoff (2012) wrote:

Such steering policies are *manipulative*, first because the government employs them with the intention of affecting people's choices. Secondly because they deliberately circumvent people's rational reasoning and deliberating faculties, and instead seek to influence their choices through knowledge of the biases to which they are susceptible. (p. 636)

Proponents of libertarian paternalism respond in various ways. One is to reiterate that the only nudges they endorse are ones that help people satisfy their pre-existing preferences. However, as Mark White (2013, pp. 61–80) argued, this reply faces a serious epistemic problem: How can the nudger be sure what interests each of the targets of a given nudge really have? Against this worry, Thomas R. V. Nys and Bart Engelen (2017, p. 204) suggested that because nudges only exert weak influences, anyone who does not have a pre-existing preference for what the nudge helps them choose will simply resist that weak influence.

Defenders of nudges also claim that nudges are not problematic because everyone is already bombarded with influences similar in kind and magnitude to those introduced by nudges (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, pp. 10–11). However, the fact that a certain kind of force is already acting on an agent does not entail that it is unproblematic deliberately to deploy a similar force to influence that agent: The mere fact that people are already getting jostled about on a crowded train car certainly does not prove that it is unproblematic to jostle someone deliberately to move the person where you like.

Others defend nudges against charges of manipulation by claiming that they are best seen as recommendations (Levy, 2019), or that, contrary to initial appearances, nudges support rather

than undermine or bypass rationality (Schmidt, 2019). Still others argue that while some nudges may be somewhat manipulative, their potential to help their targets makes them justified on balance (Hanna, 2015; Moles, 2015; Nys & Engelen, 2017). On this view, even if nudges are manipulative, and even if that fact counts as a pro tanto reason to avoid them, the good that they can do in the lives of their targets outweighs the moral reason that one normally has to avoid engaging in manipulation.

A final worry about nudges, which has yet to receive much attention, concerns their aggregate effects. To see this worry, consider the famous critique of advertising put forward by John Kenneth Galbraith (1958). In addition to his well-known contention that advertising allows businesses to create consumer demand for products it wants to produce, Galbraith also worried about the aggregate effect of advertising. He suggested that the effect of an environment suffused with advertising warps consumers' more general preferences in favor of private consumption and away from public goods. This second (alleged) effect of advertising is not the effect of any single ad, but rather an overall effect of pervasive advertising. In a similar way, one might worry that, even if an individual nudge does not manipulate the target's underlying preferences, an environment suffused with nudges might do so.

The question whether at least some nudges are manipulative, and whether this makes them incompatible on balance with free society, remains very much open. Progress in this debate will require careful distinctions among different sorts of nudges, a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms by which they operate, and a greater consensus about the nature of manipulation and the conditions under which it may be justified.

Manipulation and Democracy

Because manipulation is a form of power, it may occur in any political system. Indeed, it is an especially useful tool for authoritarian regimes, since they must maintain public support, or at least acquiescence, despite their authoritarianism. The potential for manipulation in democracies was recognized by the ancients. Ancient critics of democracy often pointed to its susceptibility to influences that could be characterized as manipulation. As Terrence Ball (2011) wrote:

one of the stock weapons in the arsenal of aristocrats and other opponents of democracy is the assertion that, of all forms of government, democracy is the most open to manipulation—to disinformation, appeals to prejudice, and the machinations of demagogues. (p. 43)

Such critiques are prominent when Aristotle (1998) discussed how democracies are liable to descend into tyranny in Book V of the *Politics*. And in Book V (chapter 97) of his *Histories*, Herodotus (2014) opined that Aristagoras failed in getting the Spartan king to agree to help the Ionians against Persia, but succeeded in getting Athens to do so, because a group is more easily deceived than a single person. Interestingly, such critiques point not only to deception and disinformation, but also to stirring up of emotion and desires for such things as honor and gain.

For these ancient critics of democracy, the possibility of manipulation is a *practical* concern: Manipulation might lead to bad decisions, such as empowering tyrants or undertaking unwise wars. But the possibility of manipulation raises important *theoretical* concerns for any political system that derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. Such concerns are magnified in any system where citizens participate in choosing leaders, passing laws, and setting policy. Hence, they are of special concern in democracies.

Where the decisions of citizens have been influenced by manipulation, questions will arise as to whether they confer political legitimacy in the way that democratic theory assumes. As

James Fishkin (2011) wrote, “If one believes that public will formation is potentially meaningful, then manipulation is objectionable, because it is intended to distort the public will for the sake of political advantage” (p. 37). This is not merely the practical problem that voters can be manipulated into making bad decisions. Rather, it strikes at the core of democratic theory, namely the idea that the government should reflect the will of the people. As Assef Sharon (2019) wrote:

The problem then is not that people’s judgments will be uninformed, irrational, or self-interested, but that they do not, properly speaking, constitute judgments at all; they express no independent will. (p. 368)

To the extent that voters’ choices are manipulated, they do not seem to express the autonomous, independent decisions that are supposed to be the foundation for democratic political legitimacy. Even worse, to the extent that governing elites manipulate the public, government may be molding public opinion rather than responding to it and deriving legitimacy from doing so.

Some scholars who have taken this problem seriously have suggested that it is a reason to prefer deliberative forms of democracy. Thus, Fishkin (2011) wrote that:

Avoiding manipulation, one is led to deliberation—to at least some degree and in some institutional contexts by or on behalf of the people. The cure for Madison Avenue is a dose of Madison. (p. 40)

Not everyone is convinced that deliberative democracy is a panacea for the perils of manipulation, however. Sharon (2019) urged caution:

If opinion is controlled and the will expressed by the public is manufactured, then the very foundation of deliberative democracy—to constitute a form of self-government—is compromised. . . . In fact, popular engagement in political

discussion might only make things worse: The circumstances of public discussion create the conditions for the manipulation of public opinion and are thus an impediment to collective self-government rather than its realization. (p. 368)

Thus, deliberative democracy faces two distinct challenges: First, the opinions and values that citizens bring to the deliberative context may already be warped by manipulation. Second, the deliberative process may simply become a forum for more manipulation. Meeting this challenge would seem to require a very robust notion of deliberation, one that not only excludes manipulative communications during the process of deliberation, but also counteracts the effects of manipulation on the opinions that the participants in deliberation bring into the process.

These challenges set the stage for Keith Dowding's theory of manipulation (which is discussed in more detail in the section "Manipulation as Offering Bad Reasons"). Although Dowding (2011, 2016) emphasized how his "reliability conditions" exclude manipulative tactics from the process of deliberation, one might hope that the conditions requiring deliberators to aim at finding the truth (even if that requires revising one's own opinion) rather than winning the argument by any means might allow deliberators to see through any manipulation to which they were subjected before the deliberation began.

Of course, adding conditions to deliberation might exacerbate the problems that deliberative democracy already faces, such as the difficulty of reconciling the values of democratic inclusiveness with the rigors required for genuine deliberation (Parkinson, 2003). Perhaps, though, this problem can be mitigated by recognizing, as Nathaniel Klemp (2011) urged, that there is a middle ground between the ideal form of deliberative persuasion and manipulation. Klemp (2011) called this middle ground "strategic persuasion," and he argued that while it is not the ideal form of political communication, it "neither diminishes nor enhances democracy in

significant ways” and “plays a legitimate role in politics but is less desirable than deliberative persuasion” (p. 79).

Manipulation and Twenty-First-Century Democratic Politics

Questions about whether it is possible to construct an ideal form of democratic deliberation which is free of manipulation and capable of undoing prior manipulation lead naturally to the question of how much manipulation exists in 21st-century democratic politics.

Unfortunately, there are grounds for pessimism on this question. These grounds go beyond the fact that examples of manipulation in 21st-century politics are easy to identify. The existence—even ubiquity—of political messaging that ranges from borderline to clearly manipulative is not a new phenomenon. Much of the easily spotted manipulation in 21st-century politics involves variations on the same tactics that have raised concerns all the way back to ancient critics of rhetoric. What is both distinctive and potentially more worrisome in the 21st-century political landscape is that advances in technology and in the understanding of psychology provide new and perhaps more potent tools for the manipulator. As William Gorton (2016) argued,

Methodological and technological developments in the behavioral social sciences and related fields, in conjunction with marketing techniques . . . , are beginning to produce the power to manipulate, in fairly precise and predictable ways, individuals’ beliefs and behaviors. (p. 62)

Of particular concern are findings from cognitive and behavioral psychology that improve the power to predict ever more precisely how the framing of a message will affect how it is received, independent of its propositional content. Of course, it has long been known that it matters how a

message is phrased: Ancient teachers of rhetoric warned their students to choose their words carefully, and George Orwell (2013) famously analyzed the political power of euphemism. But advances in psychology and the social sciences have greatly increased the sophistication by which communicators can choose words, metaphors, and ways of framing messages to maximize their influence.

A pioneer in this regard is Frank Luntz (2008), who used focus groups to craft messaging for the U.S. Republican Party, most famously advocating replacing the neutral phrase “estate tax” with the emotionally laden term “death tax.” Another is the liberal scholar-activist George Lakoff, who drew on work in cognitive science to suggest different ways of framing key issues on which liberals seek to increase political support (Lakoff et al., 2004). As Gorton (2016) argued, such tactics are potentially manipulative inasmuch as they involve “intentionally and precisely targeting their unconscious cognitive processes” so that the message “alters a person’s beliefs and attitudes without her knowing why or how her beliefs and attitudes have changed” (p. 75).

Operatives like Lakoff and Luntz employed cognitive and social psychology to hack the human mind in search of levers to influence attitudes and opinion. Larger-scale, more quantitative social science techniques are also yielding tools by which politicians can influence voters’ opinions and attitudes in ways that raise concerns about manipulation. Gorton (2016) discussed well-known political science field experiments which appear to have changed voter behavior by using “canned messages” rather than “sincere attempts to use reason and evidence to persuade citizens to vote” (p. 67). In language reminiscent of the characterization of the manipulator as being “interested in reasons not as logical justifiers but as causal levers” (Mills, 1995, pp. 100–101), Gorton (2016) wrote that “the messages’ value is purely a function of their

power to prod people to the polls. The content of the argument or evidence in the message does not matter as such; all that matters is that the message ‘works’” (p. 67).

Gorton (2016) also worried about the manipulative potential for using data mining to predict the effectiveness of political messaging:

Big data’s ability to comb through enormous amounts of data ... offers the promise of much greater predictive power compared with the random sampling methods of traditional statistical analysis. ... Importantly, such analysis can be conducted absent any theory or hypothesis linking causes and effects. ... As such, big data offers—indeed, boasts of—the power to predict without understanding. (p. 73)

One way that this happens is through “microtargeting,” that is, slicing the electorate into ever more specialized groups and tailoring political messaging to those groups, based on what the data-mining algorithms predict will be most effective. This process has a further consequence, especially as the number of slices grows. As Gorton (2016) wrote:

In addition to producing highly individualized messages, microtargeting produces messages that can more easily fly under the radar of the press and the broader public, markedly increasing their power to mislead and misinform viewers with impunity. ... Reporters and independent fact-checking organizations simply lack the time and resources to monitor all the microtargeted messaging. (p. 72)

Gorton’s worries about micro-targeting of political messages parallel a worry about the fragmentation of news media. As citizens increasingly tune to politicized news media that match their political views—the so-called “echo chamber”—they make themselves vulnerable to manipulation either perpetrated or allowed by those very media. Whether and to what extent a politicized media operation is inherently manipulative depends on how the line is drawn between

“mere spin” and outright manipulation. But even where a partisan news media is not itself engaging in manipulation, it is probably less likely to help its viewers recognize manipulation by politicians in its own ideological camp. In a healthy democracy, one role of the free press is to provide a bulwark against manipulation; but this is a role that a partisan media is less likely to play—or play vigorously—when the manipulation comes from its own side.

Journalistic ethics may provide some guardrails here: Journalists at conservative Fox News debunked Donald Trump’s false claims that the 2020 U.S. election was “stolen,” even as those false claims were being repeated on the opinion side of that same network. But the increasing fragmentation of the media makes it easier to find an audience for a news organization populated by people with fewer ethical scruples than Fox’s news division journalists. Ironically, charges of manipulation can themselves be used to accelerate this process: Charges that the “mainstream media” is a purveyor of “fake news” may drive conservative viewers to ever more partisan right-wing news media, just as charges that “mainstream media” is an engine of capitalist ideology may drive liberal viewers to ever more partisan left-wing news media.

Clearly, then, there is much about the 21st-century political climate to trigger worries about political manipulation. Although it seems relatively uncontroversial that manipulation undermines democratic legitimacy, determining whether any given tactic or development is genuinely manipulative requires more careful analysis of the concept of manipulation, and how it is to be distinguished from persuasion and zealous but honest advocacy for one’s own political views.

The Continuing Theoretical and Practical Significance of Manipulation

The concept of manipulation is important to political theory for several reasons. The prospect of manipulation poses challenges both to understanding and to achieving political legitimacy on any theory or form of government that asserts that legitimacy flows from the autonomous consent of the governed. At the level of practice, the fact that manipulation seems undesirable creates challenges for understanding how governments and political actors can remain on the right side of the line between effective persuasion and autonomy-undermining manipulation. Yet the concept of manipulation remains poorly understood. While there are several theories of manipulation, each of them faces serious challenges. Hence, important questions remain both for understanding what manipulation is, and for addressing the theoretical and practical challenges posed by manipulation for both the theory and practice of politics.

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