# The Impact of Art on Social Preferences in Farabi's Perspective

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| **Article type:**<br>Research Article<br><br>**Article History:**<br>Received 16 December 2022<br>Revised 21 November 2023<br>Accepted 06 December 2023<br>Published Online 06 January 2025<br><br>**Keywords:**<br>Farabi,<br>Utopia,<br>Social Preferences,<br>art,<br>film. | Abu Nasr Farabi believes in the critical influence of the arts of his own time, such as poetry, paintings, images, statues, and crafts in the utopia. The second rank of Farabi's utopia includes 'carriers of the religion' who are orators, poets, music composers, and others. There is a shared task between the first two ranks, which is the translation of intellectual concepts and ultimate happiness into imaginable forms in order to make them understandable for the public. The philosopher, on the first level, uses allegories to render the intelligible into imaginable, and it is this regard for the public that makes him the prophet. The media and artists' duty, on the second level, includes the same task of simplification of intellectual concepts and ultimate contentment. This is what makes them the 'carriers of religion.' But how effective is art in changing political preferences? This essay reports what is probably the first scientific study of the effect of media and art on political preferences. Using a randomized experiment, this study measures the extent to which a short film weakens misogyny. |

## Introduction

Abu Nasr Muhammad Farabi, the second master (Druart, 2021),[1] a renowned philosopher of 9th and 10th century,[2] strongly believes in the influence of the arts, discussing the arts of his own time, such as poetry, paintings, images, statues, and crafts. The logical place to start is an account of Farabi's utopia.[3] Exploring the issue follows Farabi's hierarchical society. Farabi's utopia (al-madīnat al-fāḍila), literally means the excellent state. Farabi designs a hierarchical utopia consisting of five levels, the first of which belongs to the philosopher (fīlsūf) or the prophet (nabī).[4] The second rank includes carriers of the religion, who are preachers, orators, poets, music composers, writers and others (Farabi, 2004). There is a shared task between the first two ranks, which is the translation of intellectual concepts and ultimate contentment into imaginable forms to make them understandable for the public. The philosopher, on the first level, uses allegories to render the intelligible into imaginable and it is this regard towards the public that makes him the prophet. The art's function and artists' duty, on the second level, includes, but is not limited to, the same task of simplification of rational and intellectual concepts and ultimate contentment.

Farabi explains the need for people to various methods of thinking; for a single method could not lead us to different convictions about problems. What leads us to different convictions about the many classes of problems is various methods. Unaware of their varieties or the specific differences between them, we believe we are using the same method for every problem. Thus, although for one problem we ought to use a method that leads to certainty, and for another, a method with which to arrive at a similitude or image, or a method that leads to persuasion and belief, we think that the method is one and the same, and that the method we use in the latter case is the same as the one we use in the former. Such is the situation in which we find ourselves, for the most part, and also the great majority of the speculators and investigators we see around us" (Mahdī, 1962).

This is what makes artists the carriers of religion. An interpretation of Farabi's discussions on philosopher, prophet and utopia could lead to the notion that religion is a kind of artistic creation of the philosopher; a product which tends to approximate the public to the intellectual truth as well as ultimate contentment.

In The Attainment of Happiness, Farabi states, "there are two ways of making a thing comprehensible; first, by causing its essence to be perceived by the intellect —this is the method of "certain demonstration"— and, second, by causing it to be imagined through the similitude that imitates it — this is the method of persuasion. When one acquires knowledge of beings or receives instruction in them, if he perceives their ideas themselves with his intellect and his assent to them, this is by means of certain demonstration; then, the science that comprises these cognitions is philosophy. But, if they are known by imagining them through similitudes that imitate them, and assent to what is imagined of them is caused by the persuasive method, then the Ancients call what comprises these cognitions religion" (Mahdī, 1962: 44; Maftouni, 2007: 75-76).[5]

Farabi's theory sounds giving excellence to the artists and arts.[6] However, the crucial issue is how can we ascertain the effectiveness of the theory? That is, how might we measure that art actually

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1. In Islamic philosophical tradition and amongst contemporary scholars, he is also called "the Second Teacher," following Aristotle who was known as "the First Teacher." (López-Farjeat, 2020; Corbin & Nasr, 2001: 173)
2. "Abu Nasr Muhammad Al-Farabi, known in the West as Alpharabius, was a renowned early Islamic philosopher and jurist who wrote in the fields of political philosophy, metaphysics, ethics and logic. He was also a scientist, cosmologist, mathematician and music theorist." (Ludwig, 2009)
3. Despite Farabi, Plato disbelieves arts and artists. "Art, mostly, as represented by poetry, is closer to the greatest danger than any other phenomenon Plato speaks of." (Pappas, 1989: 381-389; 2012: 669-678; 2020)
4. On different occasions in various writings, Farabi introduces the head of utopia to be the philosopher, the prophet or the lawmaker (wāḍeʿ al-nawāmīs) (Farabi, 2003; 2005; See also: Nūrī, 2019). These are three characteristics of the same entity.
5. See also: Maftouni (2012: 239-248); Nuri (2022: 4-13).
6. Farabi's standpoint of view seems quite different from what is attributed to Plato: "The imitator is a long way off the truth and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them and that part is an image. For example, a painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter. Now, do you suppose, that if a person were able to make the original as well as the image, he would seriously devote himself to the image-making branch? The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations. The imitative artist will go on imitating without knowing what makes a thing

affects political preferences?[1] In general, we surely admit the influence of the artists, artworks, and media. In 2007, Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, maintained that "we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media … we are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our Muslim umma [community]" (Rogan, 2007: 89). And that battle they largely won. Using elaborately crafted films, pictures, and music videos, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, ISIS, succeeded in recruiting tens of thousands of fighters from around the world (Fernandez, 2015).[2]

The use of art to further political goals dates back to antiquity. The Bistun Inscription (c. 515 BC) dramatizing the ascendance of Darius I to the Persian Empire's throne is regarded by many historians as a pioneering example of political art (Nagle, 2009). A few centuries later, the Antonine Wall was built not only to physically, but also psychologically deter enemy from attacking south. Sculpted images that sought to depict Rome's superiority over native Scottish tribes were periodically embedded into the wall at strategic locations (Hanks, 2018).

But how much effective are artists and arts in changing the political preferences of masses? How could we measure the size of that effectiveness, if at all? Despite its significance and age-old utilization, we know little about the precise effect of art on politics. The question of how exactly an artwork and artistic product will influence public opinion is largely unexplored. While there is a wealth of studies conducted on the determinants of preferences and on art, the connection between the two seems neglected in the literature of various fields that deal either with the dependent or independent variable of this question. A search for "art" or "the effect of art on politics" in relevant outlets, e.g., American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Annual Review of Sociology, and American Sociological Review, yields no relevant results.

There is no question that art has been used throughout history with the *intention* of influencing people's preferences. New methods of research, however, have not been employed to study the issue. It is not clear whether conveying the same message using artistic mediums and artworks, as opposed to, say, plainly expressing it or including it in textbooks, is more effective in changing ideas. Furthermore, the fact that such artworks were often created in periods, in which there were already social and political movements that supported their creation, raises the probability of endogeneity.

The current paper reports what is presumably the first scientific research into the effect of art on political preferences. Using a randomized experiment, we measure how a film affects misogynism. More specifically, the experiment measures the extent to which a short film that we have directed weakens the belief among some Muslims that women are not as competent as men for positions of leadership. We found that the film reduces misogyny by 22.48 percent, compared to a control treatment that presents the same argument and story verbally.

However, the importance of art as a stimulus goes beyond effectiveness. Equally important is its ability to outperform other stimuli in the competition for attracting people's attention. Human brain has a limited attentive capacity. We can pay attention to a very small fraction of all the sensory stimuli and information available to us at any given point (Druckman & Lupia, 2016).

This means that, for all their merits, most studies of preferences are of little value beyond the study setting. No matter how successfully a stimulus can change political preferences in scientific research, nothing can be inferred regarding its capacity to do so in the real world. This is because in most studies, people's time is virtually monopolized by the prompt. The researcher, RA, or canvasser gets them to pay attention to the treatment, and hence not to the infinitely many available alternatives. In everyday life, by contrast, each moment of an individual's time is subject to fierce competition from the myriad stimuli that vie for her attention. A prompt that, by current measures, is assumed to change the preferences of a given percentage of people could be buried under its more entertaining rivals and change nothing.

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good or bad. [...] He has no knowledge worth mentioning of what he imitates. Imitation is only a kind of play or sport." (Euron, 2019: 2)

1. Common ideologies that can form a central part of the identity of a political party include liberalism, conservatism, socialism, communism, anarchism, fascism, feminism, environmentalism, nationalism, fundamentalism, Islamism, and multiculturalism.

2. "ISIS succeeded in recruiting and persuading an unprecedented number of people to physically participate with it in the conflict." (Bajekal, 2014; T'ng, 2019: 40)

In addition to introducing a research agenda of its own, this study contributes to existing work on the determinants of political, social, and religious preferences (e.g., Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Kinder & Kam, 2010; Monroe et al., 2000; Transue, 2007; Bolsen et al., 2014). Although there is a rich literature that empirically investigates the causes of preferences, it seems to have totally neglected the role of art.

The findings also relate to the literature on the sociology of art. Current studies either take art as the dependent variable or do not make a clear distinction between the dependent and independent variables under analysis (Deinhard, 1970; Becker, 1982; Quemin, 2006; Nakajima, 2012). There is, moreover, a dearth of empirical evidence for hypotheses raised in the literature. We take art as the independent variable and investigate how it affects social norms.

Moreover, the experiment focuses on the vast literature on political history and the history of art. It is usually taken for granted that throughout history, certain art forms have been employed to influence societies and alter the course of events. Works by Sergei Eisenstein and movies and paintings produced under Joseph Goebbels are often considered paradigmatic cases (Hull, 1969). There is, however, little scientific evidence for the claim that art has a causal effect on politics and society.

Last but not least, the findings contribute to the literature on Islam and the relationship between Islamic teachings and attitudes and gender (Ross, 2008; Alesina et al., 2011; Jamal et al., 2019; Jamal & Milner, 2019). The extent to which misogyny[1] and prejudice against women can be attributed to a belief in Islam has long been a subject of controversy. The treatment used in the study illustrates scientific facts orthogonal to Islamic teachings. It does not alter people's faith. Thus, the findings demonstrate that prejudice against women does not result from Islam, but rather from unscientific beliefs about men and women's relative capacities.

## Literature

Many factors are known to influence political preferences. Politicization, for example, is identified among the determinants of political preferences. When respondents are given the same information, but preceded by a politicization prime stating that, "It is increasingly difficult for nonexperts to evaluate science," their opinion moves in the opposite direction compared to what it had been without the prime. (Bolsen et al., 2014)

There are also multiple strands of literature demonstrating that identification with a social group directly affects political, social, and economic preferences (e.g., Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Kinder & Kam, 2010; Monroe et al. 2000; Transue, 2007). Nationality, family, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and partisanship are among identity factors with significant impact. Moreover, the impact of racial and ethnic identities is conditioned by one's economic status (Chong & Kim, 2006). Surprisingly enough, identity plays a role even when it is temporarily made up, and subjects know that it has been made up a few minutes ago. (Tajfel, 1970)

Determinants of prejudice against women have, in particular, been the subject of scrutiny. Some have studied whether prejudice against women stems from a belief in Islam (Ross, 2008; Jamal et al., 2019; Jamal & Milner, 2019). Ross (2008) argues that oil, not Islam, is the source of women's diminished participation in the labor force. A particularly interesting finding is that societies that did not rely on plough agriculture are more likely to favor a traditional division of labor among genders. (Boserup, 1970; Alesina et al., 2011)

Despite all their merits, however, most of these studies have a major limitation. They offer little policy advice. Most determinants of identity, e.g., race, are not sufficiently malleable to be influenced by the policy maker. Those that are malleable, e.g., religion, appear to be mostly forget in adolescence and young adulthood (Sapiro, 2004; Van Deth et al., 2011; Niemi & Jennings, 1991). Some determinants may change but largely due to factors outside the government's control (Shrestha, 2006; Huddy, 2003). Those that can, in principle, be fashioned by the government, e.g., economic status, have proved notoriously hard to manipulate.

In this respect, existing theories of the determinants of preferences are the political equivalent of economic theories of development that attribute growth to geography, history, or natural endowments. An underdeveloped country cannot change its agrarian history or wish its oil resources away. As

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1. As Johnson asserted, "misogyny is a cultural attitude." (Johnson, 2000)

Pritchett, Sen, and Werker (2017) put it succinctly, the policy advice gleaned from such theories is, "get yourself a good history rather than the bad one you seem to have suffered; this may be truthful but not quite the helpful advice to nations that are trying not to fail".

Cinema stands in stark contrast to hitherto identified factors. Expressing messages using this medium is an efficient, cost-effective way to mold the preferences of society. Unlike most other determinants, which can take generations to change, a movie usually takes no more than months to make and hours to watch.

## Experiment

Current experiment was put into practice in summer 2019. Subjects were self-identified observant Muslims. A survey was administered prior to the treatment. The same survey was conducted afterwards again. The questionnaire contained one question that asked the respondents about the extent of their agreement with the following statement.

**Women are less appropriate and competent than men for positions of leadership.**
The viewpoint of participants was measured utilizing the Likert scale as

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Indifferent
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The treatment was a short film we have directed. Participants in the active treatment were shown the film. A text was administered among the control group that contained the argument and the story that formed the plot of the film. The theme was as follows.

Competence is not an innate characteristic predictable by one's gender. Many acquired factors affect whether someone is competent in any area, including leadership. For example, language is an important vehicle of competence. People seem more intelligent, capable, and powerful depending on the language they use and their command of the language.

244 people participated in the study. The table below shows the summary of the results.

|  | Control | Treatment |
|---|---|---|
| Avg. Opinion Before | 0.148 (0.327) | 0.529 (0.277) |
| Avg. Opinion After | 0.037 (0.322) | − 0.705 (0.213) |
| Avg. Change in Opinion | − 0.111 (0.061) | − 1.235 (0.184) |
| Avg. Treatment Effect | − 1.124 (0.033) | |

Answer choices on the questionnaire are coded as

| | |
|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | − 2 |
| Disagree | − 1 |
| Indifferent | 0 |
| Agree | 1 |
| Strongly agree | 2 |

Support for the statement declined by 1.124. Given that the coded responses range from − 2 to 2, the normalized average treatment effect is 0.2248 or 22.48 percent.

The results confirm that the medium of cinema has a significant impact on the political preferences of Muslims. After watching a short film illustrating that competence is conditioned by language not gender, self-identified Muslim observants tend to oppose the view that women are less suitable than men for positions of leadership. Note that the average opinion before and after exposure to the treatment is − 0.705 and 0.529, respectively. That is, not only did support for the prejudiced statement

decline upon exposure, but sentiments flipped from supportive on average to opposing on average. Subjects in the control group, who were exposed to a verbal treatment that expressed the same argument and story as in the film, exhibited significantly less change (from 0.148 to 0.037).

## Conclusion

As mentioned, Farabi designs a hierarchical society consisting of five levels. First of which belongs to the philosopher or the prophet. The second level includes carriers of the religion who are preachers, orators, poets, music composers, writers and the like. There is a shared task between the first two levels, which is the translation of intellectual concepts alongside ultimate contentment into imaginable forms to make them understandable for the public. The philosopher, on the first level, uses allegories to render the intelligible into imaginable, and in this regard, he is deemed the prophet for the public. The artists' duty and arts' function, on the second level, includes, but is not limited to, the same task of simplification of intellectual concepts vs. ultimate contentment. This is what makes them the carriers of religion. An interpretation of Farabi's discussions on philosopher, prophet and utopia could lead to the notion that religion is an artistic creation of the philosopher, a product tending to approximate the public to the intellectual truth and ultimate happiness.[1]

Expressing the same argument in the language of cinema, as an art as well as media, has a significantly higher impact on people's political preferences. However, the study is not free from limitations. One example is the sample size which could be significantly increased. The length of the film was likely a limiting factor that discouraged some potential participants. The larger sample size, in turn, will increase the power of the research. Additionally, a variant of the study with a shorter film can potentially attract a larger audience.

The long-term stability of the effect is another concern. Under the current study, it is not clear that the change in preferences will persist in the long run. An alternative could be another experiment in which we remain in touch with subjects and survey them after longer periods of time to measure how the effect will develop across time.

The extent to which misogyny and prejudice against women can be attributed to a belief in Islam has long been a subject of debate. The treatment used in the study illustrates scientific facts orthogonal to Islamic teachings. It does not alter people's faith. Thus, the findings also demonstrate that prejudice against women does not result from Islam, but rather from descriptive beliefs about men and women's relative capacities.

Notwithstanding all probable limitations, the current study provides some evidence that film and cinema could be used as proper tools for policy makers to have a significant impact on society's preferences. The benefits of the findings go beyond governments. Private actors, e.g., NGOs and movie studios, which have values and pursue social goals as well as profits, can benefit from this research agenda and apply an informed approach. Ideally, deciphering the formula of cinema can pave the way for establishing a genre of political drama, which seeks to yield change, using the all-powerful instrument of cinema.

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1. In spite of what Farabi believes, "Plato (c. 429-347 B.C.E.) condemned art in general". Following Plato's theory of forms, the essence of reality is an immaterial (i.e., spiritual), eternal, perfect, changeless and unique (i.e., single) form. Everything in the material world is a copy of an immaterial, eternal, perfect, unchangeable and unique form. Material reality is nothing but an imitation of the immaterial world of forms, a world which exists "beyond the sky" (hyperouranios). This is the true reality of things. Forms (or ideas) are models or archetypes of material things. Material things are a copy of immaterial forms. Things we meet in our everyday experience are nothing but an imitation of the full reality of forms. The real world is the world of perfect, eternal and immaterial forms, not the one of everyday experience. Truth is only known by means of intellectual knowledge. Materiality is essentially bad and far away from the truth. Forms are objects of intellectual knowledge. The joiner, making a material table, looks at the eternal, perfect and immaterial form of "table," which is in the world "beyond the sky" with his mind's eye. What about a thing that we would call today "a work of art"? A work of art is an imitation of reality. The artist paints a table and makes a copy of a material table, which is already a copy of the immaterial form. The work of art is a copy of a copy, it is two times removed from reality, and is therefore a deception. Works of art deceive and artists are deceivers. True knowledge is the intellectual vision of forms. An artist is not a philosopher and he does not have any knowledge of the things he imitates … According to Plato, art is false knowledge of reality. An artist's imitation can deceive common people, not the philosopher, who knows the essence of reality or the real being of things." (Euron, 2019: 1-2)

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