



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EMOTIONAL POLICY ENTREPRENEURS

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UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONS
OF PROTECTIVE POLICIES
PROTEMO Thematic Briefs



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How do emotional policy entrepreneurs strategically deploy emotions within Israel's policy arenas, and what implications does this have for public trust, polarization, and de-radicalization?

Key Insights from Roundtable Discussion:

- *Different stakeholders noted that emotional policy entrepreneurs (EPEs) are key actors in modern politics, consistent with the scholarly definition of actors who strategically deploy emotions in pursuit of policy goals (Maor, 2024). While some are constrained by ethical standards, others operate with little restraint.*
- *A unifying, emotionally laden common-ground issue increases the effectiveness of manipulation by enabling messages to cross political camps. This effect is contingent on the type of emotion invoked and on entrepreneurs not being perceived as aligned with a particular political camp.*
- *In extreme cases, a few stakeholders noted, repetitive manipulation by EPEs can cause manipulated emotions to remain stable for a long time, resulting in a total influence of the target population's cognition, acting like a "poison machine" of influence.*
- *A stakeholder noted that an emotion may be manipulated on a specific issue to achieve policy goals on another issue.*
- *Stakeholders noted that the view that "everyone today is an emotional policy entrepreneur" is relevant due to social networks. The key difference is whether the execution of emotional strategies is top down (i.e., by political elites) or bottom up (i.e., by the public using AI and micro-campaigns).*
- *Once information enters social media, EPEs lose control over it. However, internal or external circumstances can lead to disruption, offering the original initiator an opportunity to "ride on this disruption."*
- *Steve Bannon's strategy to "flood the zone with shit" (interview with author Michael Lewis, 2018; quoted in Maynor 2025) implies that chaos and manipulation are not a bug but a feature of the current policy ecosystems.*
- *A few stakeholders noted that a sophisticated strategy is to build an alternative reality not solely on fake content, but on components, some of which are truth, upon which EPEs can build an augmented reality.*
- *A stakeholder noted that educated audiences can decide which emotion to flow with, while less educated individuals will follow the manipulated emotion because they do not understand its implications. This view is consistent with Tamir's (2016) findings that individuals differ in their capacity and motivation to regulate emotions based on their understanding of emotional goals and consequences.*
- *The moment a message is perceived as political, some target populations will not be willing to listen to it, necessitating emotional strategies that appear non-partisan.*
- *All stakeholders noted that EPEs must continually adapt and innovate their strategies, as repeated use of the same approach diminishes its effectiveness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The political landscape across democracies is currently undergoing a profound transformation, moving away from a model where policy is primarily shaped by rational debate and evidence-based analysis towards one dominated by strategic emotional activation (PROTEMO, 2023; Wenzelburger, 2025; Stempel, 2025). Emotion is no longer a mere byproduct of political engagement but has become a core strategic lever wielded by policy actors to influence public attitudes, manipulate behavior, and achieve specific policy goals. This thematic brief, born from the insights of a specialized round-table discussion, investigates this critical shift within the volatile and emotionally charged Israeli policy arena. The findings presented herein are crucial for all policy actors – politicians, public administrators, civil society leaders, and communicators – who seek to navigate this environment, restore public trust, and address the acute risks of polarization and radicalization.

The Importance of Emotional Strategy to Policy Actors

For policy actors, understanding the mechanics of emotional strategy is no longer optional; it is fundamental to governance and democratic health. Psychological research shows that individuals often rely on emotions as their most accessible and immediate source of truth, especially when confronted with complex, abstract, or overwhelming information (e.g., Damasio, 1994). This reliance makes the public acutely vulnerable to EPEs, particularly those who operate with little or no ethical restraint and deliberately exploit this vulnerability for strategic gain.

Policy actors must comprehend that the EPE's primary goal is to bypass the slower, more deliberate process of cognitive reasoning to compel an immediate behavioral response: to "go out to vote," "go out to a protest," or demand a policy change (Maor, 2024). Where trust in institutions is relatively low, a significant segment of the voting public is driven by anger and fear, creating a fertile ground for these

emotional strategies to take root. Without this fertile ground, emotional strategies may fail to make an impact. Furthermore, a crucial dynamic for policy actors is the finding that a strategy's efficacy depends on its target: a different set of tactics is required to solidify a "political base" (e.g., reinforcing collective anxiety) versus attempting to move a marginal number of voters from a rival's political base to the centre (e.g., by activating a "common ground" emotion). The context of implementing strategies when there is a tie between political camps, as opposed to a clear majority for one camp, also dictates a shift in focus from mobilization to persuasion.

The ramifications of unconstrained emotional manipulation are severe. The discussion highlighted the development of an "alternative reality" built not on total falsehood, but on an augmented reality where genuine components of truth are mixed with fabricated ones, giving the manipulation a credible, persuasive veneer. This tactical erosion of shared facts, epitomized by Steve Bannon's concept of "flooding the zone with shit" (interview with author Michael Lewis, 2018; quoted in Maynor 2025), which treats chaos and manipulation as a feature rather than a bug of the political system, destabilizes a common societal foundation. The use of negative strong emotions, which increases viewing time, response rates, and public anger, is a key component of this strategy. The most extreme and damaging consequence identified is the phenomenon of the "poison machine" of influence, whereby repetitive manipulation by emotional policy entrepreneurs (EPEs), particularly those operating with little or no moral restraint, causes negative emotions to become chronically stable within the target population, exerting a persistent – and at times even total – capture of cognition.

Policy actors facing such systemic erosion of reality must be equipped to counter these strategies to preserve the legitimacy of democratic processes and public policy decisions, which are perceived as valid only if they appear to be based on facts, not just feelings. The extreme case of Mamdani's campaign, where the public used his photos and AI to launch emotion-loaded, viral, bottom-up

micro-campaigns, underscores that the execution of emotional strategies today is both top-down and bottom-up, making everyone today an emotional policy entrepreneur.

Objectives and Methodology of the Brief

This thematic brief draws on an in-depth qualitative analysis of an expert roundtable held in Israel on November 6, 2025, which brought together leading scholars and participants from civil society and the private sector, including directors of political survey firms and public lobbyists. Given that the analysis is based on expert evaluations generated within a single qualitative setting and shaped by Israel's low-trust political context, the findings should be treated as exploratory.

The brief's methodology is rooted in interpreting the shared expert discourse to distil actionable insights for policy application, with a crucial focus on ensuring that the findings regarding the sophisticated nature of target populations, their willingness to listen, and the need for innovation are integrated. The core objectives of this brief are structured around the three key, interconnected research questions that guided the expert discussion:

1. Who are the central emotional policy entrepreneurs in the policy arenas in Israel, and what is the target audience of these entrepreneurs?
2. What are the emotional manipulation strategies being used, and how effective is this use?
3. What are the implications of using emotional manipulations, especially regarding de-radicalization among the Israeli public and preventing emotional polarization?

Our Contribution: Leveraging Emotional Strategies for De-radicalization

The most significant contribution of this brief to policy actors lies in its findings related to countering emotional polarization and charting a path toward de-radicalization. The discussion established that emotional manipulation, while often divisive, also reveals a critical mechanism for unification: the ability of certain messages

and emotions to cross political camps. This crossing is only possible when the emotional issue or the entrepreneur promoting it is not perceived as belonging to one political camp. The strategic manipulation of emotion on a specific topic to achieve a policy goal on another topic demonstrates that emotion is a tool that can be redirected toward constructive outcomes. Furthermore, the use of emotions can temporarily level the field between a professor and laypeople; if channelled correctly, can create a space for dialogue.

The ultimate, actionable finding for policy actors is the paradoxical necessity of using emotion to fight emotional radicalization. The experts concluded that for genuine de-radicalization to occur and for the hostile relationship between political camps to soften, "every side must talk with the other using the same emotional language to create trust." This implies that emotional common ground must be established to bridge political divides. By focusing on identifying and amplifying a common ground emotion – a shared feeling of unity, compassion, or responsibility that bypasses partisan identity – policy actors can learn how to create viral, emotion-loaded micro-campaigns that are leveraged not for division, but for a unifying political purpose.

2. MAPPING CHALLENGES AND SHORTCOMINGS OF CURRENT AND PROPOSED POLICIES/PROJECTS

Policies designed to mitigate the negative effects of strategic emotional manipulation (e.g., polarization, loss of trust, and radicalization) face structural and cognitive limitations. These difficulties stem from the nature of emotional influence itself, the dynamics of modern communication platforms, and the inability of governments and civil society to keep pace with rapidly evolving manipulative strategies.

The Challenge of Innovation: A Constant Cat-and-Mouse Game

Emotional manipulation loses its effectiveness once tactics become predictable, which forces

EPEs to continually adapt and adopt new tools. Consequently, a central difficulty is the policymakers' inability to keep up with the innovation cycle of EPEs.

Regulation of digital platforms, by contrast, is typically ex post and rule-based, making it reactive and slow. By the time policymakers respond to one harmful tactic, such as deepfakes or coordinated online harassment, EPEs have already shifted to newer, subtler forms of emotional activation, including AI-assisted micro-campaigns, hybrid narratives grounded partly in truth, or targeted bottom-up mobilization. This innovation gap is particularly pronounced in low-trust environments like Israel, where bureaucratic processes are slow and policy implementation often lags behind technological development. As a result, regulations of digital platforms tend to become obsolete even before they are fully operationalized.

Structural and Cognitive Barriers: Subjectivity and Sophistication

Efforts to regulate emotional communication face deeper cognitive and philosophical challenges. Emotions are inherently subjective, and any attempt to correct or neutralize them risks appearing patronizing or partisan. Emotional messages “level the field” between experts and laypeople, making rational debate difficult; one cannot reason someone out of an emotional state. In politically polarized, low-trust contexts, almost every message is interpreted through a political lens, making it nearly impossible to distinguish legitimate emotional appeals from manipulative ones.

A further limitation involves the education gap among target audiences. As the discussion noted, more educated individuals can recognize and regulate their emotional responses, deciding “which emotion to flow with,” whereas less educated individuals may lack cognitive tools to understand or resist emotional manipulation. Current media literacy campaigns fail to address this educational gap, leaving the most vulnerable exposed to repetitive influence from what participants termed the “poison machine.”

Challenges in De-radicalization Policy

Many de-radicalization efforts rely on cognitive reframing or factual correction, overlooking the emotional foundations of political identity. If polarization is cemented by strong negative emotions such as fear or anger, factual counter-arguments will not succeed. Effective de-radicalization requires engaging people in the same emotional register, creating trust before offering alternative perspectives.

This is compounded by the difficulty of crafting messages that cross political camps. Emotional reconciliation works best when the messenger or message is not perceived as belonging to one side. Government agencies, political leaders, or known partisans cannot easily generate such cross-camp emotional resonance, which is why EPEs using tactics like goal displacement, mobilizing emotions around a unifying issue (X) to achieve a partisan objective (Y), remain so influential.

Shortcomings of Regulatory and Content-Control Policies

Regulatory approaches often fail because social media communication is decentralized and uncontrollable once released. Even when content is deleted, its emotional impact cannot be undone. Moreover, strategies grounded in chaos, as used by actors who intentionally “flood the zone,” are designed to overwhelm regulatory efforts. Targeting one misleading source does nothing when the system produces thousands more. Policies that try to restore “order” without addressing underlying incentives for emotional manipulation are inherently limited.

3. TOWARDS A MORE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

To address these challenges, policy actors must adopt a multi-layered strategy that integrates emotional, cognitive, institutional, and digital components. Rather than attempting to suppress harmful content alone, a comprehensive approach should strengthen

emotional awareness and reflective engagement, foster trust, and enable constructive emotional communication.

Leveraging Emotional Language for De-radicalization

A major finding is that the fight against polarization must be conducted on the emotional terrain. Trust cannot be rebuilt by facts alone; it requires speaking in the same emotional language as the target audience. Policy actors should therefore identify and amplify shared emotional narratives (e.g., common values, collective responsibilities, and experiences of compassion or hope) that can bridge political divides.

Drawing on the techniques used by EPEs, policymakers can deliberately mobilize emotions around broadly shared, non-partisan concerns, such as national security, public safety, or collective resilience, to advance concrete governance objectives, including bipartisan cooperation and reduced political hostility. For example, appeals to shared responsibility for national security and collective preparedness can be strategically used to build trust and support sustained cross-party cooperation on critical national security infrastructure. To minimize partisan backlash and enhance credibility, such emotionally framed messages should be communicated through trusted civil society organizations, professional associations, or other actors perceived as politically neutral, rather than by partisan political figures.

Strengthening Emotional Awareness and Reflective Engagement

Closing the education gap – a reasonable proxy for emotional awareness and reflective engagement – requires expanding traditional media literacy into emotional literacy. Citizens need tools not only to verify information but to recognize and regulate their emotional responses. Teaching people to shift from the immediate emotional stimulus to the “meta-message” (i.e., how the manipulator wants them to feel) can increase resistance to bad-faith actors. Emotional literacy highlights the limits of rational debate when subjective feelings

dominate and helps citizens better understand when and how they are being manipulated.

Strategic Innovation and Countering Digital Chaos

Policy must recognize that EPEs thrive on disruption and constant innovation. Instead of relying on slow, top-down content removal, digital platforms and regulators should pursue strategies such as:

- **Incentivizing constructive contagion:** Reducing virality for content driven by strong negative emotions while amplifying unifying or solution-oriented messages.
- **Empowering bottom-up creativity:** Supporting neutral or cross-camp actors in launching emotionally resonant micro-campaigns that can compete with manipulative messaging.
- **Deploying augmented-reality counter-narratives:** Using the truthful elements embedded in manipulative narratives to build ethically grounded alternative understandings, rather than merely denying falsehoods.

Restoring Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Ultimately, emotional manipulation thrives in environments of low trust. Sustainable solutions therefore require addressing the deeper legitimacy crisis of institutions. When public trust is restored and messages are perceived as legitimate and non-partisan, emotional manipulation becomes less effective. Leaders must commit to transparent, ethical use of emotional language – not to divide but to mobilize collective action and solidarity.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The roundtable discussion underscores that emotional manipulation is now a central feature of political life in Israel. EPEs operate at all levels (i.e., political elites, civil society, and ordinary citizens empowered by AI), shaping public behavior through anger, fear, and goal displacement. Their effectiveness depends on

audience sophistication, political context, and the continual innovation of tactics.

Manipulation operates through dual targeting (political base vs. political centre), and its most extreme form, the “poison machine” of influence, can lock a population into stable emotional states for long periods. Because emotions level the field between experts and laypeople, rational debate alone cannot reverse these effects.

Effective de-radicalization therefore requires strategic emotional engagement by messengers not identified with partisan camps. Emotional common ground must be cultivated deliberately. In some cases, disruptions in the information environment can be used to advance constructive narratives, but only when the messages are trusted.

Finally, policy legitimacy is deeply tied to emotional strategy. When audiences understand not only the content but also the intent behind emotional messaging, they may redirect their emotional responses away from targeted out-groups and toward the actors deploying the emotional appeal. While fragile, this dynamic offers a meaningful pathway for de-radicalization.

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