

COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL MARKETING

Claudiu MARIAN¹

ABSTRACT:

THIS ARTICLE STARTS FROM THE ASSUMPTION THAT POLITICAL ACTIVITY HAS LOST ITS SACRED CHARACTERISTIC AND WAS FORCED TO ADAPT TRADITIONAL MEANS OF COMMUNICATION TO THE NEW CANNONS AND SITUATIONS, BECOMING AN OBJECT OF A CONTINUOUS DESCRIPTION IN TERMS OF THE SPECTACULAR FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE MEDIA AND PARTICULARLY FROM TELEVISION. THE ROLE OF ELECTORAL COMMUNICATION IS DEPICTED IN THE WIDER CONTEXT OF POLITICO-ELECTORAL MARKETING, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS LAID ON ITS INSTRUMENTS AND THEIR FURTHER IMPACT ON THE ELECTORAL PROCESS.

KEY WORDS: ELECTORAL COMMUNICATION, POLITICAL MARKETING, ELECTORAL MARKET, CITIZEN, VOTE, DEMOCRACY

Politics has always had a theatrical and spectacular dimension: the historians of Antiquity narrated the contemporary political life through the more or less glorious facts, but in any case spectacular, of the great characters and great leaders.

Today's spectacular dimension of politics, caused by the media does not represent a revolutionary transformation of the field: massive communication has simply gathered an ancient narrative heritage and has faced it with (the political) reality which had previously proven highly susceptible in respects to dramatization².

Becoming an object of a continuous description in terms of the spectacular from the point of view of the media and particularly from television, political activity has lost its sacred characteristic and was forced to adapt traditional means of communication to the new cannons and situations. This led to a "restructuring of the symbolic and expressive devices of political representation". In respects to the citizens, political communicators no longer rely on the mediation of militants, "they can no longer make use of the rhetoric of mobilising the sympathisers, but must adopt the rhetoric of seducing the masses"³.

The most significant result of mediatising politics is a mutation of the political discourse: today, no politician can communicate without making appeal to the support of the media and no politician can communicate efficiently without moulding their message

¹ Claudiu MARIAN, PhD in International Relations and European Studies, "Babes-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, claudiu80075@yahoo.com.

² G. Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998): 88.

³ D. Lecomte, *Sociologie du politique*. (apud Mazzoleni, op cit.): 88.

on the basis of linguistic schemes of mass communication, which are those of entertainment, of show and publicity which, together build the “show of politics”.

In all democratic contexts, election campaigns are moments of great political and media stir: the facing of the two forces in the political arena catalyse and always gains the interest of the means of communication, of public opinion and of science⁴.

Electoral communication comprises almost the entire field of political communication, in the sense that it is born, intersected and overlapped with the communicational dynamics linked to the obtaining of consensus and to the mobilisation of the people’s needs which are realised particularly during elections.

The high interest for studying and research in respects to electoral communication is given by the premise that, at present, election campaigns have become permanent. They no longer last a month, nor a year but begin the day following the elections and finish the day before returning to the urns. This is why they are called “permanent campaigns” and are characterised by diverse activities which accompany the various phases of a legislature like, for instance, through constant monitoring of the health-state of the government and the opposition, of the use of strategies of communicative placement in non-electoral times (Berlusconi’s posters and TV spots), of socio-economic analysis of the uninominal constituency and of searching for the best adversary/competitor from the ranks of the defeated and of maintaining the relations with the citizens throughout the office.

There are three characteristics of electoral competitions which have determined their popularity within the scientific community:

- 1) the dramatic nature
- 2) the analogy between political and economic competitiveness
- 3) the fact that they represent the space in which the actual capacity of the media to intervene in politics is measured

Examining the aforementioned aspects one by one, the following can be stated:

- 1) Democratic election campaigns are recording increasingly more frequent spectacular events to impress public opinion, to attract the attention of the media and to lead the game against the opponents.
- 2) The concept of “electoral market” derives from the manner in which the economic pattern is applied to the analysis of political phenomena, which emphasises the analogies between the manner in which the political system and the market function⁵. Elections appear, from this point of view, as an immense market in which the demand of the consumer-citizens meets the offer of the manufacturer-parties. The persuasion and selling tactics, negotiation or conflict between the parts the refusal or the transaction of business, similar to the state of economic markets are elements of great interest for researchers. Through these, they can understand which are the successful operators and how the script of future exchanges will look like.
- 3) Lastly, “the power of the media” has always been a point of interest for scientific research. Since media is comprised of instruments and, at the same time, of important actors of postmodern election campaigns, the study of the direct and indirect impact on the competition dynamics of the electoral market has developed almost automatically. In fact, many researches study the effects the media might have on the electors and thus on political elections⁶.

It is important to emphasise that an election campaign is the product of the communication between two different actors: the political system and the system of the

⁴ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 164-165.

⁵ G. Pasquino, *La politica italiana. Dizionario critico 1645 – 1995*. (Bari: Laterza, 1996), 202-203.

⁶ G. Losito, *Il potere dei media*. (Roma: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1994), 83.

media. As a consequence, there are two categories of election campaigns: campaigns of the media and campaigns of the political selves.

The first type of campaign does not intend to persuade the receiver of the message and the act of communication is mainly of an informative-referential or critical nature and so, non-persuasive. The senders are various media organisations and the receivers are on the one hand their audience, to whom they supply information and comments and on the other hand, the politicians, the interlocutors of the action of criticism.

The election campaigns of the political subjects is characterised by a “willing” communication, namely one directed towards a declared and precise goal: that of obtaining the electors’ vote. The senders, the producers and managers are the political parties, their leaders, the candidates; the receiver is the electoral body. The message is of a persuasive type and thus belongs to the wide field of publicity; it is generally “self-made”, i.e. produced by its own financial means or spread instrumentally by the media which, in this case, borrows its own channels, usually with payment, but also freely, in the case of specific norms⁷.

MODERNISING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS OF THE POLITICAL SELVES

The election campaign is a fundamental moment in the process of representation: it is the moment in which the candidate presents himself publicly, exposes his ideas and political programme and declares how he intends on representing the people’s will, if he will be elected. Such an “advertisement characteristic” lies at the basis of the entire communication activity among parties, candidates and electorate. The election campaign, led by political selves consists of advertising and persuasive techniques elaborated and perfected through time within political cultures of various democratic systems⁸.

Within the systems in which the presence of the parties is a highly important element and the electorate is divided according to party diagram (as is the case of European countries) the communicative resources are traditionally mobilised by and through the parties themselves. The communicative pattern is based on the “us against them” diagram: the candidate insists upon the belonging and convictions of an electorate which he already knows to be “his own” and uses the media to gather new adhesions. On the contrary, the use of media and sophisticated techniques of communication within systems with weak political identities and organisations (as is the case of the US) represents for political forces and candidates a necessity for maximising the results. The pattern is no longer “us against them”, but “conquer all”, and thus the main objective is to ensure the consensus of the electorate in its complexity and not only of certain well-defined segments⁹.

But this distinction is no longer so blunt because of the phenomena of contamination and transnational imitation which made certain means of communication impose themselves in institutional contexts which were not aware of their existence or which were not provided for. In fact, many of the advertising techniques and those of political marketing developed and used in the US were widely diffused after World War II in Western countries, even there where the institutional system was not of a presidential type and the electoral system was not of a majority type. The progressive “Americanisation” of the election campaigns was a phenomenon which was highly accelerated in all countries,

⁷ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 200-201.

⁸ M. Livolsi, U. Volli, *La comunicazione politica tra prima e seconda repubblica*. (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1995), 52.

⁹ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 215.

particularly after the spread of television and due to the more recent selling of radio and television systems.

Modernising the companies of political subjects is not only given by merely placing television in the spotlight, but is the result of an important series of processes regarding the old western liberal democracies which were also known by more recent countries of the former Communist Bloc. It is about:

- 1) making politics secular and commercial
 - 2) the increased availability of media channels for political communication
 - 3) making politics and political activities more professional
1. Through secularisation one understands the decrease of the importance of ideological belonging and the henceforth resulted necessity of looking for a complete consensus. It is a process which, even though has been in existence for a long time, has become more visible in the 80s, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Political marketing is based on transferring the logics of the market to political competition. It is important to emphasise that while the process of secularisation is a characteristic of the political process of the old continent and had no connection whatsoever with the United States that have a particular history and political culture. Marketing, on the contrary, is a process created and consolidated in the US many decades before reaching Europe.
 2. Following the increased availability of communication channels, election campaigns have gradually become “media campaigns”: communication, publicity and eliciting consensus take place, at present, particularly through media channels and languages. It is equivalent with a campaign led by politicians under media spotlights (TV and the press) and with a campaign related by the media according to the rules of creating news.
 3. The complexity of contemporary election campaigns and the dispersion of the electors – usually in vast territories or in those intensively populated – demands the candidates a more systematic approach and a planning of the communication strategies which impose the necessity of seeking the advice of non-political professionals and to trust them not only with devising the strategy, but also the management of the entire election campaign.

This professionalization is the basis of developing and propagating political marketing, the real art of successful communication between the “seller” and the elector. It represents the qualitative leap from the election campaign of the past, of the pre-media era to the modern, mediatised and technological campaigns.¹⁰

THE DEFINITION AND THE INSTRUMENTS OF POLITICO-ELECTORAL MARKETING

The techniques of political marketing are not a revolutionary and unforeseen novelty, but have profound, antique roots.

Five centuries ago Niccolo Machiavelli devised the most suggestive definition of the political man’s marketing: “*There was nothing that could grant a prince as much appreciation as the fact of completing grand actions and of providing an exceptional image of the self. [...] A prince must, first and foremost, try to offer the image of a grand man of excellent ingenuity. [...] He should even, at favourable times during the year, entertain his people with parties and various other entertainments.*”¹¹ The essential components of modern strategies of election campaigns were even at that time

¹⁰ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 169-171.

¹¹ N. Macchiavelli, *Il Principe*. (Milano: Bur, 1992), cit. pp. 199, 201, 207.

individualised: image and entertainment. Politico-electoral marketing is based on these two elements and furthermore, uses the instruments and the technology of communication.

It is crucial to state the “parenteral relation” between politico-electoral marketing and the commercial one.

The definition of economic marketing is: “*the entirety of the techniques which have as an objective adapting a product to its market, of making it known to the consumer, of differentiating it from current products and with a minimum of resources, optimising the sells-deriving profit*”¹².

The definition of politico-electoral marketing is not very different from the one above: “*politico-electoral marketing represents the entirety of the techniques which have as an objective favouring a candidate’s adequateness to the potential elector, of making him known to an as big as possible number of electors and to each of them in particular, to differentiate himself from the competition and with a minimum of resources, to increase the number of votes that must be won during the campaign*”¹³.

The product-candidate identification was strongly contested by ideologically-marking parties and by various cultural media that found the commercialisation of politics and companies to be a threat upon the democratic process. The concept of “soap-party” is not scandalous if one keeps in mind the simple coincidence of sales techniques of one product or the other with the “selling” techniques of one party or the other.

The fact that a message is political as far as its conception and content go does not exclude the fact that it can be presented in extravagant and spectacular manners which make the language of media culture a language that the electoral audience is capable of deciphering.¹⁴ The implied idea of selling a political product as a possibility of “cheating” the possible “consumer” is denied by numerous researchers who spread the idea that proper political marketing “seduces by informing” a consumer who is a citizen whose eye must be caught and whose interest must be mobilised through the means of a piece of information that could regard his own or his country’s future etc. It is based on a communicative strategy with a persuasive character, in the service of a political project, i.e. able to offer politicians a major possibility of positioning themselves strategically. This would improve their skills of communicating with their electors, making them more aware of the risks they can undertake and achieve their goals efficiently.

The instruments of political marketing are divided in three major categories:

- 1) traditional techniques
 - 2) audio-visual techniques
 - 3) direct marketing techniques
1. Traditional techniques, in the sense that many of them were used in the election campaigns of the pre-marketing era, are in turn classifiable in two groups: *interactive techniques* and *unidirectional* ones. The *interactive techniques* imply a direct contact between the candidate and the possible supporters; these are home visits (*porta-a-porta*) with possible variations like visits at the market, in the neighbourhood, handshakes which are intended to transmit an image of a people-oriented politician; banquets and support committees; meetings with groups and movements; the comitias of markets. Classical *unidirectional techniques* are mostly based on a written support: the press in the service of militants, external propaganda

¹² Bongrand, *Le marketing politique*. (cit.13, apud Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 176).

¹³ Bongrand, *Le marketing politique*, 176.

¹⁴ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 109.

press (from party newspapers to fliers), the poster (paid or militant), souvenirs (car stickers, bandanas, hats, T-shirts, key-chains and others of the kind).

2. Audio-visual techniques are mainly linked to television, using it directly, against payment (the spot) or free of charge (party broadcasts) or indirectly, by the candidate exploiting the opportunities offered by the media (debates or taking part in cultural or entertainment broadcasts).
3. Direct marketing techniques have been more recently used in election campaigns even by parties that are reluctant of such means. These are: *direct correspondence*, i.e. mailing messages to a target public selected after a social analysis of electoral districts; *telemarketing* – the same aforementioned technique, but using the telephone as its means of communication, with the advantage of a direct contact with the electors. Developing the new telematics media means has broadened the array of direct marketing instruments, beginning with the distribution of video products (cassettes) and multimedia ones (CDs), ending with videotext and audio-text messengers, with the sites of various parties and election committees¹⁵.

The marketing plan consists of a precise analysis of the electoral environment, of the plausible target-groups and their socio-demographic characteristics. The most efficient techniques for knowing the trend of public opinion and the main instruments in preparing the marketing plan are surveys and focus-groups.

The protagonists of election campaigns are the candidates and the parties, but the unseen actors who direct from backstage are more and more often the political consultants: experts, specialists that come from the field of commercial marketing, from survey institutes, from advertising agencies, from journalism, from the field of research and universities who offer their services to political clients and whose purpose is to obtain votes and positions or maintaining them. In Italy, the birth of political consultancy was registered at the beginning of the 80s, much later than in the US, but remained a rather marginal practice up to the moment of the '94 campaign.

Finally, without hesitation, part of the techniques of political marketing is “the image strategy” or image management, activated by a political force to mobilise the electors’ consensus within a “market” of the politics’ offer and the citizens’ demands. The image has become one of the strategic resources of the electoral market and the stage on which images are exposed (by the candidates) during and after the elections is, par excellence, television¹⁶.

¹⁵ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 178-179.

¹⁶ Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, 110

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