Theories and Concepts in Political Marketing

3

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- state the characteristics of modern political marketing management
- distinguish between wide and narrow interpretations of political marketing
- identify seven key themes in political marketing.

Introduction

Marketing theory has been influenced by many different disciplines, but it has also contributed to the development of other academic areas within management studies and beyond. While there is a considerable stock of knowledge concerning political marketing management, especially in the areas of campaign management, political strategies and comparative political marketing management, the essence of political marketing theory remains somewhat opaque. This is sometimes explained by the notion that 'traditional marketing frameworks do not fit neatly into a political marketing configuration' (Dean and Croft, 2001: 1197). Furthermore, there is no clear understanding of the ontological and epistemological implications of a marketing perspective on politics due to the primary research focus on descriptive studies that attempt to explain what political actors actually do (Marland, 2003). This refers to the fact that marketing theory makes specific assumptions about the 'fabric of reality' (ontology) and how knowledge claims can be made about this reality (epistemology). These assumptions can be applied to politics and constitute a political marketing perspective. In this chapter, we argue that the managerial focus is only one element of political marketing theory. What has been neglected is an epistemological view of political marketing as a 'research lens', a meta-theoretical vehicle for making sense of the political sphere. In order to develop this argument, we first provide a concise overview of the state of affairs in political marketing, followed by a discussion of 'narrow' and 'wide' interpretations of the nature and scope of political marketing research. We will then discuss seven key themes that we consider to be essential research foci.

The state of affairs in political marketing

It has often been argued that the application of marketing tools and instruments in politics is nothing new (Baines and Egan, 2001). This may or may not be the case, but what certainly has changed in the last twenty-five years is not just the magnitude of political marketing management but the belief that political actors not only act in marketing terms but also think in marketing terms; they themselves as well as outside experts believe that they *do* marketing management (even if they may not admit it publicly), and they try to integrate their use of marketing instruments in a coherent marketing strategy (Dermody and Scullion, 2001). This is notwithstanding the idea that much of their marketing knowledge might be 'political folk wisdom' (Scammell, 1999: 738). In this context, political actors include not only political parties, politicians and political consultants, but also governments, single-issue groups, lobbying organisations and so on, and political marketing applications have moved from solely a communication tool to an integrated way of managing politics, be it policy development, permanent campaigning or even governing. Six main developments of applications of political marketing management can be generalised for most democratic political systems in the last two decades:

- an increased sophistication of communication and 'spin'
- an emphasis on product and image management, including candidate positioning and policy development
- an increased sophistication of news management, that is, the use of 'free' media
- a more coherent and planned political marketing strategy development
- an intensified and integrated use of political market research
- an emphasis on political marketing organisation and professionalisation of political management.

However, most political actors are far from possessing an integrated and sophisticated understanding of marketing applications for their specific political exchange situations. Political marketing management has caused some parties and candidates to adopt a simplistic and populistic 'follower' mentality, contributing to the disenchantment of the electorate and a resulting cynicism regarding politics in general (Henneberg, 2006).

Serious, intensive and coordinated research activities on how marketing can be applied to politics is a fairly recent addition to the area of social and non-profit marketing. The academic field of political marketing started to form in the late 1980s and concentrated on topical events and in-depth

analyses of marketing instruments, but none offered a general theory of political marketing. However, research on political marketing management quickly gained momentum, driven mainly by the increasing use of marketing applications by political parties and candidates. Although technological drivers, especially in the media arena, are often quoted as being the main reason for this acceleration, various changes in the political sphere fostered this development, such as lower levels of party identification and higher electoral volatility. Furthermore, increased competitive pressure in the political market with single-issue groups for resources such as volunteer labour and member subscriptions, less differentiation between political offerings and a general professionalisation of political marketing management activities characterise modern political markets (Panebianco, 1988). To provide an understanding of these phenomena and the reactions of political actors to them, research on political marketing management became an established sub-discipline of marketing, especially in France, the UK, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and the USA (Perloff, 1999). The need to describe and understand these phenomena instigated numerous academic articles, books and conferences. So whilst the institutional requirements for the development of political marketing theory are in place, an assessment of current research on political marketing shows shortcomings.

A distinct bias in the research foci of marketing instrument usage in campaign situations obscures more general and theoretical discussions. Whilst communication activities, market research tools and other political marketing instruments and activities have been well analysed and compared, this has been undertaken on a descriptive level. Higher-level concept development or prescriptive studies are rare. Furthermore, more fundamental issues such as ethical dimensions of political marketing, the underlying exchange mechanisms and the interaction of marketing activities with the political system have remained under-researched. As such, political marketing 'theories' have not been developed in any depth and so empirical work is not well anchored. Many crucial discussions about definitions have remained unresolved, not due to competing positions and interpretations but because of negligence and inactivity in these areas. Furthermore, a tendency towards ossification exists as many political marketing studies use an oversimplistic instrumental/managerial interpretation of marketing, oriented towards the '4P' marketing mix of product, price, promotion and place (see Baines et al., 2011: 15). This causes a decoupling of research in political marketing from fresh developments in commercial marketing theory, be it on conceptual or epistemological levels. For example, relational marketing concepts which have gained importance in commercial marketing theory in the last decades do not find their equivalent in political marketing (Bannon, 2005). Several arguments have been put forward that theoretical and applied research on political marketing need to be more innovative. In the next section of this chapter, we will examine 'narrow' and 'wide' interpretations of the scope and nature of political marketing theory.

Narrow and wide interpretations of political marketing

Essentially, the different aspects of political marketing theory can be exemplified by the two different possible research objects that political marketing theory could focus on: political marketing management, on the one hand, and political exchanges, on the other. Whilst the first research object concerns managerial aspects of marketing in politics, the second is concerned with an epistemological stance and is therefore not limited to marketing applications but encompasses all political interactions and exchanges. Together they provide the core for a holistic theory of political marketing (Henneberg, 2002).

The initial aspect of a political marketing theory takes its impetus from existing practice in the political sphere: political marketing management. It manifests itself in such diverse activities as focusing campaign strategies on the salient political issues of swing voters or through the application of sophisticated segmentation techniques, through a consequent voter orientation, the application of celebrity endorsement strategies as part of an integrated marketing communication or the institution of powerful directors of communication and campaign consultants. Furthermore, political actors, political communicators and to some extent the electorate believe that marketing activities have become an essential part of political management in many situations. This belief has now entered the mainstream through endless discussions and analyses of the ill-defined concept of 'spin' in the media (Harris, 2001).

As a result of these (perceived or real) occurrences of marketing practice and language in politics, the use of marketing theory as a means of explaining these phenomena seems obvious. Whilst political science (or other related disciplines) have little to say about topics such as segmentation, brand management or strategic capability management, they fit easily into an explanatory scheme that is based explicitly on management and marketing theory. As such, political marketing theory is a necessary (if not sufficient) way of getting to grips with some of the modern developments in democratic life. It allows us to describe certain political phenomena in a way that political science is not able to. Furthermore, as part of the established tradition of commercial marketing theory, political marketing theory can integrate a descriptive understanding of political marketing management with a prescriptive theory, that is, a theory that can help political actors to apply political marketing management techniques effectively and efficiently. Such a research view has been entitled a 'Theory of Political Marketing Management' by Henneberg (2002). However, this theory cannot break out of its self-induced narrow focus on marketing activities, relegating everything else in politics to the level of unknowns or exogenous variables. Hence, in such a narrow interpretation the wider political environment that frames the application of commercial marketing management

to the political sphere remains somewhat 'alien' and ill defined in its relationship with marketing theory.

On the other hand, a wide interpretation of the nature and scope of political marketing attempts to understand the whole of politics, that is, its constituting exchange and interaction structures, not just political marketing management practice. This is done via the application of the underlying concepts of marketing theory through a marketing oriented epistemology. Such a claim needs justification that can best be provided by looking at some of the embedded elements.

First, a wide interpretation of political marketing theory is not solely concerned with marketing activities, but tries to integrate these activities with the political environment in which they are used. Therefore, only an holistic understanding of all political activities, interactions and exchanges, players, structures and so on will be sufficient to understand the specific ramifications of and for political marketing management. Such a development seems necessary in light of the frequent claims that political marketing theory has not as yet developed any meaningful ethical frameworks or analyses regarding the implications of political marketing activities on macro-level structural variables of politics such as the party system, voting behaviour, the media landscape and power distributions in society (Henneberg, 2004).

Second, a wide interpretation of political marketing theory is concerned with epistemology, that is, the 'enquiry into our knowledge of being' (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000: 6). This is not to say that political marketing *is* an epistemology but rather that certain ontological and epistemological positions can be connected with a political marketing perspective, for example the specific and fundamental issues that establish the identity of the field of political marketing. The constituting elements or premises of commercial marketing theory provide such a position as outlined below, although not all of these ory provide such a position as outlined below, although not all of these principles are uncontested in the commercial marketing literature. These positions, in so far as they differ from those of political science, provide a new and innovative way of understanding the political sphere. As with all ontological/epistemological stances, limitations exist in as much as they obscure certain issues and highlight others, and therefore need to be supplemented by alternative perspectives.

Third, political marketing theory as a way of understanding political interactions and exchanges in general has to be seen as part of a methodological pluralism. The implication is not that a marketing-related epistemology would explain the political sphere better than a political science, sociological or psychological epistemology. However, evaluative judgements need to be employed with regard to the appropriateness of certain epistemological positions in the face of a specific phenomenon, for example seeking an understanding of the impact of negative political advertising on voter decision-making processes in order to provide guidelines for self-regulating bodies of political advertisers. Hence, this is concerned with the respective explanatory power of different epistemological stances in a concrete situation

and for a given purpose. As an abstract concept, no preferences can be deduced beyond that.

Therefore, a political marketing theory of politics would not supersede but complement other (such as political science) theories. It would be more appropriate in explaining certain elements of political life whilst others would not be covered in the same depth, rigour or quality. Additionally, certain explanations might contradict those of political science directly, without it being clear which claim is of higher appropriateness, thus stimulating further discussions. As such, a wide political marketing theory would consist of theories of middle-range and would have no ambition to provide any general theories. Understood in this epistemologically oriented way, a theory of political marketing cannot be anything but a sense-making framework, that is, a way of knowing. Whilst these theoretical considerations can only present political marketing theory as a possibility for enriching our understanding of politics, the ontological and epistemological essence of a political marketing theory needs to be described in order to gauge an understanding of how far these provide a specific and valuable lens for the gaining of knowledge in the political sphere.

The character of marketing as focusing on exchange (theory) provides an ontological foundation for political marketing. The assumption is that 'reality' is made up of actors (or forces) in relation to each other. Everything achieves its characteristics and qualities within a web of (multiple) 'pairings' (Bagozzi, 1975). Marketing, in its simplest form, cannot be carried out by one actor alone; it is always an exchange between actors. Thus, the corresponding epistemology would prescribe an enquiry that looks at dyads (or networks of relationships) as the main focus of analysis. While these dyads/networks consist of actors, the exchange focus of political marketing means that, for example, research on political campaigns should not focus on the political marketing activities of parties/candidates, but take into consideration that the political marketing exchange consists of three interactions in the electoral, parliamentary and governmental marketplaces. Perceptions, interpretations and representations of activities and other meaning-laden properties such as intentions, positions and resources within the political exchange become the defining epistemological characteristics of political marketing enquiry.

Related to this point is the ontological assumption of a 'qualified' market exchange. A managerial perspective of political marketing is linked to a traditional (micro-economic) market understanding as a clearing mechanism, prescribing the exchange characteristics of independent actors with self-interested goal functions which they maximise in episodic and unrelated transactions. However, political marketing theory characterises interactions and exchanges between interdependent actors and structures. This would also encompass cooperation and collaboration, and in some cases also collusion, which in traditional markets are deemed to be anomalies. Furthermore, an increased emphasis on time dynamics is implied: not only single transactions are analysed but also the totality of interactions and exchanges constructed within

relationships over time. Historical determinants, as well as future-oriented considerations, become real forces within these market exchanges.

A third element is concerned with the embeddedness of politics, especially its relationship with social and other narrative models of representation. It can be posited that the political sphere does not exist independently of other cultural and social aspects of life (Butler and Collins, 1999). The interactions and interdependencies of politics on the economy, the legal system and social and cultural experiences give a clear indication for the arbitrariness of any attempt to disentangle politics from its contextual frame (Mancini and Swanson, 1996). As this condition is existent on both an epistemological level (in the way we attempt to gain insights about politics) and on an ontological level (the fabric of politics as is), any political as well as social marketing enquiry needs to look at interconnected systems; and cannot focus simply on an arbitrarily delineated political sphere (Brenkert, 2002). This complexity makes simple and uni-dimensional explanations very unlikely. Furthermore, it becomes difficult for political marketing theory to find clear-cut 'horizons' for its explanatory purpose.

Lastly, the structural connectedness of the management of politics and politics itself is ontologically anchored in political marketing theory. The difference between content and packaging in politics is treated as spurious. Any political management or marketing activity relates inevitably to policy/politics content either through considerations regarding development, execution or assessment of policies, and is recognised as such by other actors. On the other hand, policy-making and governing encompass management issues. So any enquiry in political marketing can be said to look at aspects of politics that in a narrow sense do not have anything to do with marketing instruments. As such, political marketing theory cannot limit itself to political marketing management as the application of tools and concepts from commercial marketing to the political context. Directly linked to this is a recognition that marketing is not a neutral aspect or tool of politics and that ethical considerations have to be an integral part of any political marketing theory.

The delineation of wide and narrow understandings of political marketing theory has implications for political marketing research, especially with respect to the current state of affairs of the discipline. It is the main contention of this chapter that the current realities of research on political marketing can be explained through connecting them with the two different perspectives on political marketing theory. The underpinning idea is that the shortcomings of current research are linked to a research community that subscribes to the narrow interpretation of political marketing theory that is concerned with understanding marketing activities in politics. While this managerial stance is widespread, this happens predominantly implicitly, this managerial stance is widespread, not only with researchers but also commentators on, or opponents of, political marketing, and so political marketing actually mirrors the most limiting aspects of mainstream marketing. Political marketing theory has not yet been employed or conceptually discussed widely and this lack of research

causes the field of political marketing to be short-sighted and without a solid, theoretical foundation. The main implication of this chapter is that research on political marketing needs to be broadened in order to enhance knowledge development in political marketing. In the following section we discuss seven key themes that we perceive to be central to the advancement of the discipline of political marketing.

Key themes in political marketing

Theme 1: grounding in exchanges and interactions

Whilst commercial marketing theory can now look back on decades of theory and concept development which manifest themselves in different schools of marketing thought (Wilkie and Moore, 2003), this is not the case for political marketing thought. The research domain of political marketing was made possible on the theoretical level by the 'broadening debate' of marketing in the 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s that political marketing became the focus of serious research. As the historical development of political marketing stems from commercial marketing, marketing theory provides the ontological rationale for political marketing and it is therefore important to link the knowledge gained from political marketing research with underlying and fundamental marketing concepts (Henneberg, 2008). As a core concept in commercial marketing theory concerns the exchange and interactions, this needs to be represented in research on political marketing. Commercial marketing theories use distinct tenets about the underlying monadic, dyadic or network exchange processes that shape and restrict marketing interactions. Such an understanding of the structural characteristics, based on social exchange theory, provides clear ontological delineations and partitioning for theory development in political marketing.

A critical analysis of the assumptions that guide theory and concept development in political marketing is necessary in order to avoid the development of conceptual models with little epistemological discussion of the fundamental assumptions of each model. However, such a discussion of assumptions regarding the epistemological grounding is rare in political marketing research (Baines and Egan, 2001). Furthermore, it seems as if our understanding of the nature of exchanges and interactions in political marketing is underdeveloped. The grounding of research in clear discussions of exchange and interaction characteristics and their differences from traditional marketing exchanges has rarely been attempted. The fundamental question of the political marketing exchange characteristics which lies at the heart of filling the metaphor of the 'political market' with life has not been clarified theoretically in enough depth. This is true for campaign exchanges as well as for other relevant interactions, especially the service implementation of policies (governmental

political marketing). This limitation means research in political marketing is not rigorous enough with regard to the underlying exchange morphology which determines theory and concept-building efforts.

Theme 2: pluralism of theoretical marketing approaches

When it comes to underlying marketing theories, it must be noted that marketing is somewhat eclectic: many different theories and schools exist that are based on differing perspectives that are often incompatible. Marketing as a 'magpie discipline' borrows theories from other disciplines such as economics, psychology and sociology, and what is needed is a further step, using these borrowed theories to provide insights from which to build specific theories of political marketing which can be the foundation of a theory-driven discipline (Burton, 2005). At present there are many competing theories of commercial marketing and with this comes the ability to sustain multiple research approaches, something that can be seen to have a positive and liberating effect on the discipline. For example, despite the existence of several schools of thought in the late 1980s, this did not stop the development of relationship marketing approaches (Grönroos, 1994) or interaction and network theories of marketing (Ford and Håkansson, 2006). Pluralism within a discipline is not necessarily a problem, as having multiple perspectives can increase the understanding of different facets of the research field. However, the eclectic nature of marketing also makes it a 'low-paradigm' field (Weick, 1995) in which dominant approaches are weakly defined and detailed with regard to other approaches.

Political marketing theories and concepts are obviously highly influenced by research in marketing. However, it has been observed before that an instrumental view of marketing management is dominating political marketing research. An adaptation to the political market of the 4Ps framework and the marketing mix paradigm is crowding out other research streams of marketing. As such, political marketing theory is developing into a 'strong' paradigm, focused on a singular approach that is, however, often seen as obsolete or naïve in mainstream marketing theory. Pluralism of marketing schools is not used enough in political marketing, that is, functional, relational, or network-oriented concepts are rare in political marketing theory development (Henneberg, 2007).

Theme 3: adaptation of existing marketing and political science theory and concepts

The issue of multiple theoretical approaches is doubled in the area of political marketing: theories that are developed from both marketing and political science can be used, and these theories and concepts can also be overlaid,

integrated and compared. As such, political marketing theories and concepts depend on borrowing and adaptation of existing theories from both marketing and political science. Although this is dependent on the exchange characteristics of the political market, such an integrating nature of theory and concept development from different disciplines remains an important aspect of contemporary political marketing research. This problem is further compounded owing to the very different ways in which both commercial and political marketing are understood and that some of their theories are incompatible. However, the existence of multiple ways of understanding the research field can increase theory-building creativity by searching out similarities and friction points in alternative theories.

Unfortunately, research on these alternative theoretical positions in political marketing is not high on the research agenda, as research carried out by marketers and by political scientists remains isolated from each other. Not many truly 'interdisciplinary' research groups or projects exist in the field of political marketing. Consequently, integrated or adapted theories that bridge the disciplinary divide are rare. In fact, there are currently two different ways of thinking about political marketing that exist, which are not integrated except on the most superficial level (Dean and Croft, 2001). State-of-the-art theories and concepts are not used across disciplinary borders to challenge existing theories and concepts in political marketing and to develop new theories and concepts. For example, important marketing concepts like market orientation, the service-dominant logic of marketing and value-network concepts are only starting to creep into political marketing research. However, with the development and acceptance of political marketing as an established sub-field of marketing theory and political science, this can go some way to encouraging cross-disciplinary research.

Theme 4: integration of pragmatic and abstract discipline views

Another issue of political marketing research concerns the aim of this research: should it be the development of theories and concepts that are ultimately capable of being applied by political marketing practitioners, for example candidates, governments, single-issue groups and their marketing advisers, or should it be about understanding politics through a marketing approach (Henneberg, 2008)? Although the former, more pragmatic approach towards theory-building seems to underpin most management research, such a narrow application of political marketing research may hinder the discipline more than it gives it focus. Therefore, the issue of the research aims could lead to different 'discipline borders' for political marketing theories, that is, a narrow vs. broad view of the limits of research in political marketing.

Surveying current political marketing research, it becomes clear that most efforts are focused on a 'narrow' definition of political marketing, that is, one

that is related to the description and application of political marketing strategies and instruments. This is connected to the multiple approach characteristic of political marketing research with its primary focus on instrumental/managerial marketing theory. Whilst this in itself is not a harmful development, the lack of more abstract and 'wider' theories of political marketing does make discussions with political scientists more limited. In fact, we would argue that wider theories of political marketing can actually help provide political marketing research with the intellectual rigour and legitimacy which will allow it to become a contributing factor to political theory itself (Henneberg, 2007).

Theme 5: theories cover what, how and especially why (and justify these choices)

'Good' theory consists of building blocks: 1) the *what*, the concepts or constructs and the variables that operationalise these; 2) the *how*, the interrelationships between the concepts and constructs; and 3) the *why*, the underlying rationale for the selection of specific factors and relationships (Whetten, 1989). The *why* issue is necessary for a comprehensive theory as it is arguably the explaining part (Weick, 1995). According to Hunt (1991), these explanatory models need to be pragmatic, intersubjectively certifiable and have empirical content. However, whether a theory needs to be judged by its application depends on the definition of theory itself; good theory can also be abstract and non-applied. Furthermore, rules for good theory-building include aspects of how the variables are defined: the focus is especially on the uniqueness of the variables, a clear understanding of the limits that each of the variables can explain, a logical way of deriving relationships between constructs, and the link between theory and empirical support (Wacker, 1998). Such theories (or concepts) cannot be justified by just selecting specific variables. It is important to explain *what* variables have been selected, *how* these have been selected and *why* they are believed to be connected.

Coming to the essence of building theory in political marketing, it is necessary to have a better and more precise definition of variables and constructs. Too often, political marketing research employs a very loose way of using conceptualisations without clearly spelling out the differences between constructs and their interactions with other constructs. Critical discussions such as the applicability of the value concept in political exchanges (Brennan, 2003) or of the meaning of market orientation for political actors (Ormrod, 2007) are rare. Furthermore, the *why* question that features so prominently in Weick's (1995) discussion of theorising is mostly absent from the literature on political marketing. A more conscious and reflective way of presenting the gestation process of political marketing theory development may actually increase the likelihood that other researchers will engage with these theories and develop them further.

Theme 6: theories contextualise as well as bridge levels

Theories and concepts need to be placed in a context; they need not attempt to be universal laws but should at least attempt to model specific contexts. Whetten (1989: 492) calls this the who/where/when questions, which are linked to providing a multi-level outlook. Macro- and micro-structures and their relationships need to be developed theoretically. Klein et al. (1999) have summarised the benefits of multi-level work: bridging theoretical gaps, integrating the focus of different research areas to provide richer explanations, and getting to grips with complexity to 'illuminate the context [macro level] surrounding individual-level processes [micro level]' (p. 243). However, barriers to such an outlook are the fact that especially in overarching knowledge fields, the macro- and micro-levels are often integrated. Furthermore, with regard to political marketing theory, a clash of interest exists between commercial marketing theory with its main focus on individual-level analyses, and political science with its main focus on structural perspectives.

Level issues in theory development are among the most difficult aspects. Political marketing research does not always provide a clear indication of the explanatory level it operates on. Individual actors such as candidates and professional political marketers are mixed with organisational levels such as parties and governments. The interaction between the macro- and micro-levels often remains obscure, and the party system level as a further macro-level has so far been excluded from political marketing research. However, as the structures of the party system may be an important contextual variable, it seems reasonable to expect more research that is linked to the aspect of the interplay of political marketing management by actors/organisations and the political party system itself (a relationship that is clearly bi-directional).

Theme 7: juxtaposition of theoretical and empirical plane

The last theme extends theory and concept development by integrating it with empirical data. A validation of theories and concepts needs to link the abstract process of theorising to the empirical plane by assessing the likelihood of providing support for hypotheses and structuring empirical phenomena. Consequently there exists a need to develop more stochastic models in contrast with deterministic explanations, and therefore any theory or concept of political marketing needs to be constantly compared with political experiences. However, the relationship between data and theory is a two-way interaction, with theories and concepts explaining and shaping the data, and with data testing the explanatory power of theories and concepts.

Empirical research, especially theory-testing projects, are still rare in political marketing research. Only through a strong empirical involvement can we achieve substantive theories (Cornelissen and Lock, 2005). However, mostly descriptive and qualitative approaches dominate the methodology

agenda in political marketing research, and describing or categorising data do not fulfil theory development, although they can already contain an unconscious recognition of a theory as part of the process of assembling the data (Weick, 1995). What is missing in political marketing research are rigorous quantitative and especially comparative analyses that integrate theory and concept development with a deep understanding of data. Research on political voting behaviour in relation to political marketing instruments leads the way in this area (Newman, 2002), but other theory aspects of political marketing research need to follow.

Conclusion

Whilst political marketing management is a well-established focus of research, political marketing theories and concepts are not afforded the same importance. This is arguably a direct result of the widespread adoption of a narrow interpretation of the nature and scope of political marketing. Instead, this chapter argues that it is necessary to widen the focus to include questions regarding the impact of political marketing on society. This chapter has also proposed seven key themes that are central to the advancement of the field of political marketing. Common to them all is the need for a better understanding of the theoretical and conceptual foundation upon which political marketing research is based.

Discussion questions

- Think about your political system. Which of the two interpretations of political marketing is most prevalent?
- Now think about the characteristics of modern political marketing management. Which of the two interpretations of the nature and scope of political marketing do they fit best with?
- We advocate a broad interpretation of the nature and scope of political marketing; do you think that this is realistic given the current focus on political marketing management by politicians, political professionals and the media?

Key terms

Narrow interpretation (of political marketing)

Wide interpretation (of political marketing)

Further reading

Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007): This chapter is based on some of the work published in Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy's (2007) article in the *Journal of Political Marketing*.

Henneberg (2008): This chapter is based on some of the work published in Henneberg's (2008) article in the *Journal of Political Marketing*.

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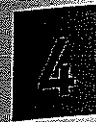
The Triadic Interaction Model of Political Exchange

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- distinguish between the concept of exchange in commercial and political marketing theory
- distinguish between electoral, parliamentary and governmental interactions
- describe how the three interactions that make up the political exchange can be integrated into research in political marketing and political marketing management practice.

Introduction

Marketing theory is conceptually grounded in an understanding of exchanges and interactions between actors. With the broadening of the marketing concept into non-profit areas in the late 1960s and 1970s, non-traditional and social exchanges have joined commercial exchanges as being essential to the understanding of marketing as a research area and organisational practice. The underlying rationale for an exchange, irrespective of context, is the concept of reciprocated value, and social exchange theory is generally assumed to be fundamental to understanding this feature of marketing. Therefore, it is important for marketing theory to understand and incorporate the relevant underlying exchange structures and the corresponding aspects of value, power and (inter-) dependency in research and explanations of marketing phenomena. This is irrespective of whether the actors involved operate in the commercial or non-profit market.

Arguably one of the more unconventional arenas in which exchanges take place is the political marketplace. The characteristics of interactions between actors have been identified as one reason why the application of marketing theory to the sphere of politics, whilst legitimised by marketing scholars

The Ethics of Political Marketing

7

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- identify the ethical perspective adopted by political actors
- justify or criticise political decisions from alternative ethical perspectives
- discuss the ethicality of political advertisements from alternative ethical perspectives.

Introduction

Ethics are our own personal 'codes of conduct' that rest on the values that we live by. Even the simplest personal decision often has an ethical component. Trust, an ethical concept, underpins most human activity and is therefore an important concept in marketing. Without trust there would be no commerce, no socialisation and no community. In private life, ethics can be summarised as a regard for the sensitivities, rights and feelings of others. The fact that we live in a community where an ethical perspective is relevant to understanding human behaviour can be seen in social marketing campaigns. For example, anti-smoking campaigns stress the consequences for others – such as children and other members of the family – rather than the consequences for the individual. All political decisions have ethical consequences, for example, how do we use the wealth of our country? Should the government raise taxes in order to create jobs, or should the government lower taxes and let the free market take care of the rest? For a political party to be seen as lacking in ethics provokes a public outcry; look at any political scandal and this will be clear.

Everyone has an opinion on the ethics of political marketing, and it is often an unflattering one, as political marketing is known to the majority as 'spin'. Irrespective of name, political marketing has become associated in the public eye with the idea of manipulation and is one of those things that it is fashionable to worry about. Numerous political advertisement watchers in the American press testify that this is a matter of public concern. One area of anxiety, for example, is the idea that opinion is being 'bought' by the richest rather than the best, and this offends democratic notions. That there are ethical problems associated with political marketing is thus not in doubt. But what are the ethical problems – and whose ethics are we concerned with? What are the ethical problems worthy of serious attention, and even legislation? Are the ethical problems worthy of serious attention, and even legislation? What if the wrong ethical problems are defined, and the wrong solutions embraced?

Ethical theory will not answer these questions, but it might help to clarify them, illuminating those areas where there should be real worry and offering reassurance when anxieties have been unnecessary, replacing a vague moral view of political marketing with more focused concerns organised within a coherent structure. The aim of this chapter is to review some of the principal contemporary and classical ethical theories of interest to political marketing, as summarised by O'Shaughnessy (1995): that is, **Kantian, utilitarian, contractarian, communitarian, objective relativism** and **cultural relativism**. Our question in this chapter is 'Can these ethical theories discriminate usefully among the mass of criticisms of political marketing, and offer enlightenment as to where the common interests are really being served and where anxieties should truly lie?'

The deontological (Kantian) approach

Although ancient Greece did not actually have a direct a word for 'duty' *per se*, the language possessed a term that referred to the imperative – the thing one must do; but in English the word means 'connected with duty'. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that action should flow from elemental principles that are both the moral basis for the action and the universal principles upon which all should act. This is actually an argument for moral absolutism, for the basing of all actions on rules to which all reasonable people should seek to conform: it is a non-negotiable morality formulated as an antidote to the potential dominance of all our lives by pleasure-seeking behaviour. How society actually arrives at these rules is left rather vague by Kant, and he appears to believe that they can be formulated by a process of reasoning alone.

The problem with the Kantian approach is that it is insensitive to context, defining the limits of what is permissible with no regard to circumstance; but in questions of political ethics – in ethics generally – context is all-important. Even duplicity can on occasion be justified, and the Kantian imperative is therefore of limited value in formulating an ethical basis for the conduct of political marketing. For example, if one were seeking to formulate such

rules, the layperson might immediately suggest an agreement to ban negative advertising. As will be seen, even negativity has its articulate defenders on the grounds that the character of a politician is a legitimate element of the political offering.

Yet the criticism of political marketing sometimes seems rather Kantian, grounded as it sometimes is in normative models or ideals of democratic behaviour (Jamieson, 1992; Franklin, 1994). An example of this would be the normative model of voting decision-making based on objective information and full deliberation. For the convinced Kantian, any deviation from this would be unacceptable once it had been endorsed as universal law. Yet voters are not in the end particularly rational decision-makers, but respond to gut feelings and emotion. They cannot follow this model because of the intrinsic complexity of the decision-making task; therefore they use the cognitive shortcuts and cues provided by political advertising, journalism, etc. in order to facilitate a decision (Sniderman et al., 1993).

The consequentialist tradition

Consequentialism as an ethical approach emphasises that the results of an action should be used as the criteria for evaluating their ethical base. The question here is what is the consequence of a particular action, and is it ethical? In the political context this question can be applied to whether political marketing is an ethical activity; is the result of applying marketing to politics good government? This leaves us with another question: what is good government – is it responsiveness to public opinion? In this case there might be some vindication of the marketing conceptualisation of politics.

Utilitarianism is one form of this tradition, with its claim that the truth of ethics can be objectively established via rational means, and Benthamite-derived utilitarianism was popularly expressed by J.S. Mill (1806–73) as that which provides the greatest good for the greatest number. There are different forms of utilitarianism; for example, *act utilitarianism* claims that actions are justified by their contribution to the increase in welfare, whereas *rule utilitarianism* would seek out a set of rules that would lead to the maximising of welfare. Another form of utilitarianism is *motive utilitarianism*, where the worth of a particular motive is the issue, although this may be ascribed to a different system of ethics called 'teleological ethics', which incorporate the virtue of the motive, the argument being that there is a critical distinction between intentional and unintentional consequences.

There is, however, vagueness about how to operationalise these precepts: how is the worth of these motives evaluated, and what is 'welfare'? It raises as many questions as it solves. Both utilitarianism and the deontological approach can be reconciled by an argument that says the moral base on which one takes a particular action should be universal (that is, valid for all),

and yet at the same time one must be guided by the consequences of that action for others (Hare, 1981). Yet utilitarian perspectives are possibly the richest field of ethical critique of political marketing. In particular:

- Issues may be prioritised for reasons other than their contribution to welfare: a political consulting firm may perceive political issues to be marketable commodities, and therefore select and market issues based on the criteria of their dramatic appeal. Important but perhaps less value-symbolic issues may be bypassed as a result.
- The marketing of issues based on dramatic appeal may be divisive, with deliberately polarising issues selected as the best marketing strategy. As Ansolabhere and Iyengar (1995) suggest in the case of negative advertising, an optimising strategy may be to deliberately seek to freeze out the political centre from any political participation. Motive utilitarians would certainly condemn this.
- Decisions may be made with no reference to the long term, because marketing considerations may mean maximising popularity in opinion polls without considering other consequences. Issues that are not dramatic get neglected until it is too late. Although it is reasonable to assume that the mass electorate knows where its own interests lie, on issues that have an inevitable though distant future impact, such as energy consumption and the environment, the electorate may be irresponsible.
- Political marketing methodologies also tempt people to use communication to fill the space vacated by ideas and ideology (Sherman, 1987): communications are substitutes for action, creating a world of professional campaigners and amateur statesmen.
- A 'fix-it' mentality is created, with pressure for instant, media-friendly solutions to elaborate problems. These are utilitarian-derived criticisms, because the claim is that only addressing an issue after it becomes necessary to address the issue leads to worse government and therefore a failure to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number.

Another criticism of the use of marketing in politics is that the costs of marketing create the need for significant campaign finances. In the USA, laws designed to curb expenditures on advertising have led to the creation of political action committees (PACs), ostensibly autonomous groups that function as the collector and administrator of campaign funds from citizens and professional groups. The favour is returned by benevolent legislation, and this can be seen as undermining the efficiency of government in terms of its ability to deliver the best for the most. The risk of losing contributions from groups whose concerns are seldom identical with those of the majority of voters can make it difficult for elected representatives to pass legislation that is best for the majority of voters. The US National Rifle Association and the tobacco industry are cases in point, where the political struggle against them has had to be carried out in the courts since the funds they provide are essential to successful campaigns.

Yet it would be unfair to state that the use of marketing tools and concepts in politics was by definition bad, as the use of marketing in politics can also be defended in utilitarian terms. First, marketing can increase the amount of information available to the public from which to make an informed decision (Ansolabhere and Iyengar, 1995) and can provide alternative perspectives on a particular issue (Banker, 1992). Banker (1992) provides an example where polling revealed that an incumbent candidate (Senator Denton) was perceived as rich and aloof. As a result of this, Denton's rival focused in a negatively styled advertising campaign on the incumbent's use of official monies to pay country club membership and on his anti-social security vote. In this context, the negative advertising can be justified in that it led to a more informed contest. Second, basing marketing priorities on the results of opinion research with voters can introduce legitimate public concerns into the election that might otherwise have been missed, because no issue can be successfully marketed without meeting some form of voter need. To argue otherwise assumes that the electorate is naïve and can be influenced by a simple stimulus–response model of political communication (Kraus and Davis, 1976).

Flanagan (1996) makes several significant criticisms of the Kantian and utilitarian philosophical approaches. Both Kantianism and utilitarianism are vague; from Banker's (1992) example of Senator Denton, Kantian and utilitarian arguments can be used to justify negative advertising campaigns, a style of campaigning that is usually considered to be a harmful by-product of using marketing in the political sphere. The key problem is therefore that abstract concepts need to be made concrete in coherent, workable rules that can guide actions, and the respective theoretical variables of duty and happiness need grounding in more precise values to give direction. Kantians have trouble articulating the categorical obligations – 'duty' – in a detailed way, whilst utilitarians are constantly debating the meaning of what the various philosophical 'goods' are, and how these goods can be ordered to maximise the greatest good overall.

The contract view of ethics

Utilitarianism has had many critics from its very beginnings as a coherent philosophy. For example, Rawls (1972) points out how the emphasis on the greatest good for the greatest number could lead to the sacrifice of individual liberty; indeed, communism itself can be justified on utilitarian arguments, for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' represents precisely that. Thus an important source of criticism has been human rights perspectives, because the pressures of crude majoritarianism can sometimes be seen as overriding the liberty of the individual. Theories of rights were thus developed to protect the autonomy of the individual; Rawls regards the right to equal liberty as

being the basis of all other freedoms and rights. But ethics involve both rights and duties – there is a social contract in operation between individuals, institutions and society. These contractarian perspectives argue that a bargain is struck between individuals, institutions and society for the benefit of all, an exchange that includes the acceptance of some restrictions on individual liberty.

There are of course important limitations to this perspective – what, for example, happens when rights of one group conflict with the rights of another group? If one can imagine such an invisible contract, then clearly some of the things political marketers do would be illegitimate in the sense that they would violate exchanges based on rights and duties. One area where this clearly emerges would be that of manipulated imagery in political marketing, such as the controversial George W. Bush subliminal television advertisement that flashed 'DemocRATS' at the boundary of perception. This is an instance of obvious manipulation but, more generally, political marketing may appear to give permission to be rather more generally evasive. If, for example, the entire area of spin control is admitted into the domain of political marketing – although there are arguments for saying that spin belongs to a separate conceptual realm – then the ethical critics of political marketing must be heeded.

Another potential problem from the contractarian perspective is the criticism that politicians are ceasing to try to enlist the direct physical participation of citizens in politics, as there is no real incentive for them to do so now that marketing can perform the persuasion task. By being active members of political organisations, people engage in self-persuasion and justify their actions retrospectively. As such, the argument is that marketing makes active membership of political organisations redundant, and the lack of active participation in politics today makes for a superficial commitment of support that is quickly lost. Perhaps more worryingly from a political perspective is that this development weakens the direct link between governors and governed.

Another area of potential interest to contractarians is the changing nature of the individual's relationship with the state. Perhaps there will be a loss of dignity if governments come to be seen as just big service organisations, and an erosion of loyalties and ties between governments and the governed is a consequence of citizens being taught at the aggregate level to be consumers in everything we do. Political marketing may be viewed as facilitating this tendency towards teaching people to think of themselves as political consumers. This may be another point at which we can discuss negative advertising, presenting it as a form of contractual violation. In fact, the ethical argument over negative advertising is a complex one and does not have any easy solution. As Banker (1992) proposes, the argument and the form of the argument need to be distinguished from one another: 'an individual "negative" political ad is an argument, at least implicitly. As an argument it may be reasonable or unreasonable. That does not mean that all "negative" ads, the argument form, should be discouraged.' However, the effect of negative

advertising is to reinforce partisanship and remove the political centre: this may be the effect, and it is arguably sometimes the intent as well. It is this aspect contractarians might object to on the grounds that negative advertising may represent a deliberate seeking of the self-disenfranchisement of large numbers of people, thus undermining the very idea of democracy.

Communitarianism and virtue ethics

Communitarianism places virtue within the context of a parochial social setting. Virtues are traits and they are formed by a long process, underpinned by emotionally driven conviction (MacIntyre, 1981). Ethical traditions and sensitivities are seen as arising out of community. Aristotle argued that virtue was not a rule book, but a skill whose art lay in negotiating circumstance (Soloman, 1993). Yet these propositions are rather vague as a source of potential ethical guidance. Certainly it is true that some of the practices of political marketing are more acceptable to some cultures than to others. If virtue is what the community teaches, it is apparent that different communities teach different things, as will be clear from the very mixed reception that was initially given to the export of American political marketing techniques to different countries. Tradition legitimates, and the American tradition is to place an almost non-negotiable value on freedom of speech. It is this value of freedom of speech that has stood in the way of legislative attempts to, for example, control expenditure on campaign advertising.

It may be argued that other countries value freedom of expression less, and social integration more – there is a trade-off. The origins of political marketing and some of its associated practices, such as negative advertising, do in fact go back a long way in America, because they arise out of the particular value that culture has traditionally placed on the idea of liberty. The first negative campaign using modern media appeared fully formed in the California gubernatorial campaign of 1936 (Mitchell, 1992) in which Upton Sinclair was the unfortunate victim, while the first advertising agencies were enlisted in 1916 (O'Shaughnessy, 1990). A second, related, tradition is the value Americans place on market freedoms: the state should not tell people how to spend their money, and this includes more generous freedom than elsewhere to spend it on political involvement – as is the case, for example, with political action committees. Cultures with greater traditional intolerance of market freedoms have also tended to restrict the access of finance to politics more.

Community tradition is one locus for virtue ethics, but it is not the only one, as some philosophers have criticised community both for conservatism and excessive belief in the merit and possibility of communal consensus. Organisations are also viewed as relevant communities, with the relationships between different roles in the organisational community generating mutual obligations. These philosophers reject notions of hard and fast rules, as the key thing is to sponsor a cultural climate supportive of ethical behaviour: 'if the cultural climate is not openly supportive of ethical behavior, the motivational climate for ethical conduct will be missing' (O'Shaughnessy, 1995). More rules are not seen as particularly illuminating, and value is placed on developing skills to weigh up conflicting interests. As with the moral theories described above, attention has been focused on significant aspects of moral life whilst perhaps obscuring some of the salient features of morality and the problem of finding, at the real level, a particular solution to a particular moral dilemma. There is still a need to know what are the key moral issues today and what magnitude of importance is attached to them.

Motivation to comply

For the seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza, any system of ethics must be internalised and not just verbally endorsed. The key is motivation. Under the deontological (Kantian) position and utilitarianism, motivation arises from the appeal of reason and from a wish to behave in an ethically sound way. Contractarians perceive motivation as elevated self-interest, whilst communitarians see motivation as the emotions arising out of community-based custom, value and tradition. However, David Hume (1711–1776) spoke of the necessity of having an emotional base to ethical conduct. Others, such as the economist Frank (1988), endorsed essentially the same view, that ethics cannot be apprehended at the level of reason alone, but need emotional commitment, because emotions engender, energise and direct responses; otherwise 'short-termism' will rule. Frank (1988) claims that, in the long run, ethical conduct builds up trust and is linked to success. In fact it is a fallacy to divorce emotion from reason as completely as is so often done because it is only through emotion that we can convert decision into action or choose among the competing claims presented by reason. Indoctrination and social conditioning are more relevant here than abstract knowledge; as Aristotle wrote, you get a virtuous adult by training a child to do the right thing.

For those who would seek a way forward on the ethics of political marketing, the question is whether to anchor those ethics in reason, for example, enlightened self-interest, or find some way of getting politicians to adopt this emotional adherence to ethical values. It is not, however, easy to think of a way of achieving this, because unethical behaviour has sometimes been rewarded. Self-interest is probably a much stronger argument. However, arguably, any tendency to moral drift in American politics is held in check by the fact that negative or dishonest political advertisements can backfire. First, they can incite a counter-attack from opponents, who now have access to instant rebuttal facilities via the internet. Second, all political marketing

may be subject to arbitration by the independent mass media. The media can fix a maligned interpretation on a text that is quite different from that which the party or candidate intended, the classic example being when the Canadian press accused the Tory Party of attacking a facial deformity of the Liberal leader Jean Chretien. Whether or not this was intentional on the part of the Tories, for most voters their only exposure to the advertisements was through the interpretative framework attached by television, and it suddenly became 'politically incorrect to be a Tory' (Whyte, 1994). In fact the Tories, previously the largest party in Canada, were left with just two seats.

The system in which political marketing occurs may perhaps be seen as possessing an in-built self-corrective mechanism in which extremes of unethical behaviour, or even as in the Chretien case the mere suspicion of them, will be punished. For a political marketing text (such as an advertisement) stands in its own right as an autonomous political event with independent political consequences; it is not merely a conduit of persuasive information from encoder to decoder. The fact that harshly negative advertising is such a volatile weapon thus brings its own restraints. For example, a 1996 candidate for the Alabama Supreme Court, Harold See, was subject to one of the most vicious negative campaigns of recent years (Johnson, 1997). Commercials featured a skunk morphing into Harold See's face, and there were claims (strongly disputed) that he had abandoned his wife and children years before. However, See still won; a negative advertisement is as much a statement about the values of the attacker as it is about the values of the defender, and extremes have a tendency to alienate. Yet, as Johnson (1997) remarks, 'when other capable and civic-minded citizens contemplate the ridicule and vilification endured by See and his family, many will conclude that running for office today is not worth the price'.

Objective relativism

Objective relativists such as Putnam (1981) claim that the right ethical decision is relative to circumstance. This is a position that might provide some justification for the ethos, and many of the practices, of political marketing, because there is a credible argument that it has been propelled forward by circumstance, for in common with all voluntary civic activities, the willingness of people to be actively involved as citizen activists has been in sharp decline in America and Europe (Richardson, 1995). This coerced privatisation of hitherto public activity serves to create a need for persuasion to be electronic, and purchased. Put simply, it is difficult to persuade people to become volunteers. Moreover, with voting behaviour no longer driven by inherited class loyalties to the extent that it once was (a phenomenon of dissolving class barriers), the task of persuasion is greater because partisanship is less. In addition, there has been a significant decline in the willingness of

US media to cover politics as competition for ratings becomes more intense and entertainment values become ever more dominant on television. According to some authorities, television news has reduced its purely political coverage by as much as 60 per cent since 1995. Consequently, it is suggested that circumstance actively means resorting to marketing methods where the media does not live up to its traditional responsibilities.

Banker (1992) has argued:

> when considering whether a particular communication act was ethical the situation must be considered. Political campaigns are a competitive situation; there is just one winner. It is ridiculous to expect the same standards to apply to such a situation as apply to polite social discourse.

Any context prescribes specific rituals and rhetoric, and a political context is ultimately about the leadership and future direction of the nation and therefore may merit higher levels of rhetorical aggression than are legitimated by other communications situations, including commercial ones. Banker (1992: 846) would also include in this the *ad hominem* attacks that make the critics of political marketing so indignant: 'an election campaign is not just about what issues candidates favour and oppose, it is also, by its very nature, concerned with who we elect – the motives and character of the man or woman who will lead us'. Perceived character is an integral part of the political offering that is exchanged for votes. It is important because any publicly visible individual is perceived as symbolising values of one kind or another, and in practice it is difficult to create a separation between *character* and *issue* and declare the one off-limits to public curiosity. These points are valuable in that they provide a justification for the negative advertising that abounds in modern election campaigns, but they are of course not an entirely satisfactory answer to the critics of political negativity.

Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism resolves ethical conflicts between one culture and another by accepting that ethical standards are relative to culture (O'Shaughnessy, 1990). However, whilst accepting that legitimate intellectual and moral differences and traditions exist, not least in regard to the differing values placed on the needs of individualism versus the demands of community, cultural relativism becomes more difficult to accept once one gets down to the level of individual practices (e.g. the institutionalised bribery and 'kleptocracy' rife in certain political systems). At its worst, cultural relativism is simply an excuse to suspend the operation of judgement. As O'Shaughnessy (1995) argues:

There is evidence from both anthropology and history demonstrating the essential ethical similarities among different cultures. In accepting ethical relativism, we put up a rival standard, namely, universal ethical tolerance as the absolute virtue. To make ethical tolerance the absolute virtue means treating public wellbeing, honesty and justice as of secondary concern. This cannot be acceptable.

In a sense, to tolerate all is in fact to believe in nothing.

For the extreme cultural relativist, political marketing in the USA might indeed present no problems at all, although these philosophers might balk at its export to countries with no such tradition on the grounds that it represents an alien cultural graft. However, there may be some merit in permitting elements of the cultural relativist critique to creep into the ethical analysis of political marketing. The different political traditions of different countries must be seen as embodying different value systems but contain an internal coherence, so that to change one variable in any particular political system (US or otherwise) is to change the interrelationships of all its internal components. Thus elements that might be objectionable on an individual basis, like the role of money in US politics, may be justified as a structured part of the overall workable pattern of US politics. The transfer of a marketplace ethos, that is, conceptualisation and techniques, applies to many areas of American life, where in other countries commercialisation might be perceived as some kind of devaluation.

The use of money to purchase political persuasion is part of the US political system, with money seen as a legitimate expression of power, although it is often difficult for even the richest in the land to merely buy political office. For example, Michael Huffington lost $20 million in his bid to become a senator for California (*Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 2000), and as for another multimillionaire 'the more he spent, the more obscure he got' (*Daily Telegraph*, 9 June 2000). Another US tradition is to recognise that power in a democracy is not only a function of the numbers of those who have a particular stance on an issue, but also a function of those who feel most intensely about that issue. In a sense this represents elements of a stakeholder approach to social ownership of US politics, an approach that is also manifest in the power of political action committees in the US political system.

Yet it is possible that a cultural relativist with an educated knowledge of US history would claim to see coherence here with other aspects of US life and tradition. The amounts spent on the campaign trail are exceptional, but the practices that are used are not. Another ideological trajectory for the cultural relativist to follow would be that of postmodernism, claiming that political marketing was just another category of postmodernist culture, reflecting and reinforcing its core themes. Such a critic would be troubled less by the notion that political marketing has tended to lead the political agenda into a focus on symbolic goals and the serial creation of meaning. Thus Axford and Huggins (2002) see political marketing as part of a broad postmodernist culture of signs and symbols, a phenomenon of dissolving class barriers where people lose their traditional anchors. They take the example of Forza Italia as an extreme case of this, a media-created party that

seemed to answer a huge appetite for change, a party people were comfortable with. They see political marketing as simply part of a world of serial symbolism and media saturated imagery, whose self-referentiality is captured in a scene from *Murphy Brown*, where she watches Dan Quayle criticising her giving birth outside wedlock.

Conclusion

The application of ethical frameworks does not generate any final answers, as no ethical debate is ever final; ethical questions can only ever be taken further, not answered. What the ethical debate does seek to achieve is further clarification of the nature of the moral issues associated with political marketing, and some sort of ordering among them as a magnitude of priorities. However, the overall direction of the ethical critique is clear, that it is an error to state that political marketing in general (and negative advertising and spin in particular) is by definition a bad thing. What is morally questionable is not so much the genre and its derivatives, but the individual cases where negative campaigns become toxic, legislative seats are bought and video images are merely fabricated.

Despite this, utilitarians, objective relativists, cultural relativists and communitarians would place the balance in favour of political marketing as it sharpens debate (utilitarian), arises out of cultural–political tradition (cultural relativist), is legitimated by competitive context (objective relativist), and the nature of the postmodern condition enforces it (cultural relativist), as it is a response to, rather than a cause of, the social and economic phenomena of these times. Freedom of speech, including economic speech, would be an argument of particular interest to communitarians. Against these, however, there are certain strong contractualist arguments: where the generation of imagery can be a substitute for political action and for the direct civic participation of citizens, the contract-violation criticisms cannot be dismissed as merely trivial. As can be seen, there is no final resting place for the ethical debates surrounding the uses – and abuses – of political marketing.

> **Discussion questions**
>
> - Find a negative advertisement from an election campaign on the internet. Taking each ethical approach in turn, try to justify the advertisement. Then try to criticise the advertisement using each of the ethical approaches.
> - What other elements of political life can be judged using ethical approaches?
> - Look at the web sites of the major political parties in your country. What are their main policy positions? Are these ethically justifiable? Remember to think about the different ethical approaches.

Key terms

Kantianism (deontological ethics)

Utilitarianism

Contractualism

Communitarianism

Objective relativism

Cultural relativism

Further reading

Banker (1992): This article focuses on negative advertising and the impact it has on voter opinions about the practice of political marketing. Banker argues that instead of causing voter apathy, negative advertising can have a positive effect when it is used to increase the amount of knowledge available to voters with which to make an informed voting decision.

Henneberg et al. (2009): This article identifies three main 'schools of thought' in current political marketing research and practice, and demonstrates the extent to which each school is compatible with the political science theories of participatory democracy and competitive elitism. Henneberg et al. conclude that whilst all three schools of political marketing are compatible with the two democratic traditions, the school that is least compatible is, ironically, that which forms the foundation of most of the current research into political marketing.

O'Shaughnessy (2002): This chapter is based on O'Shaughnessy's article.

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