

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE ROLE OF PRESCRIBERS IN SHAPING ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR: A STARTING POINT

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Abstract

Electoral marketing is the most important component of political marketing. In the literature, no clear-cut distinction is always made between electoral and political marketing. However, there are some specific items of electoral marketing that we intend to deal with in the present study, on taking into account the electoral market and its specific features that distinguish it from the goods and services market. A considerable influence on the electoral market is exercised by prescribers, as part of the micromedium of political organizations, namely the persons holding important positions, who can orientate the behavior of others. They can do this whether they adopt or not the recommended behavior themselves. In classical marketing, term „prescription” is to be met especially with reference to the medical field. Doctors play the role of prescribers, „prescribing” a particular medication to patients. Therefore, physicians play an important role for drug manufacturers and distributors. Similarly, in the political world, prescribers play a very important role for both people and political parties. It is in our interest to see whether their role can be determined with the precision expected from an exact science and which are the specific marketing ways that make this prescription work in politics.

Keywords: *electoral marketing, electorate, political communication, political organizations, prescribers, voting behaviour*

INTRODUCTION

Usually, people look indifferently at the implacable decisions taken by the governments of democratic states and societies, even if they affect the life of everybody: private sectors, business, civil society or simple individuals. We are forced to look at their apparent irrationality from the angle of the rational decision taken by the voter when he is called to exercise his democratic right.

Consequently, in general terms, the complex manner in which the elector takes his voting decision will be related to the explanation and origin of the quality of his daily life. We may

learn from here whether the expenditures made by the state are meant at reducing unemployment, whether the taxes will increase or decrease, whether a better circulation of goods will be attained or whether our daily activities will be better organized.

Along the years, several studies have been devoted to the complex mechanism through which the elector makes his voting decision. *People's Choice*¹ seems to be the first academic report aiming at evidencing the relation between two research domains traditionally viewed as different: research on the role played by mass-media and studies on decision-making processes.

We are therefore offered a first instrument influencing voting decisions: mass-media, even if the study entitled *Personal Influence*², analyzing the results of the research developed during the presidential campaign of 1940, evidenced that radio broadcastings and the written press appeared as having negligible effects upon voting decisions and no influence at all upon *changing* the already made decisions. However, the authors, Katz and Lazarsfeld, did not remain at these negative conclusions, being interested to know how voters take their decisions and why do they change them. In such a situation, if mass-media is not a major determining factors, then which are they?

In such investigations, special stress has been laid on the persons who changed their voting decision during an election campaign. When asked what had contributed to this, most of them replied: **other persons**. In this way, a source of influence much more important than other factors contributing to modifying voting decisions was identified, namely: **personal influence**.

THE MAIN PROBLEM OF THE RESEARCH

This problem may be expressed as: which is the influence of prescribers upon the electoral behaviour?

To realize a complex analysis of such a theme, it is necessary to clearly define the research area, in our case - the political marketing domain, stress being laid on the electoral behaviour of voters. As this type of behaviour is manifested only during electoral campaigns, the area of research is limited to electoral marketing. For not leaving aside important elements, the characteristics specific to the political marketing to which the electoral marketing belongs should be first identified. Equally, all such information is necessary for identifying the role of prescribers in the political world. This also involves study of the type of people - namely the voters - with whom the prescribers have contacts and upon whom their influence should be exercised. For exercising their influence upon the electorate and for attaining good results, the manner in which the prescribers transmit their message is extremely important. Consequently, political communication should be also discussed in this context.

Political marketing is a component of non-paid marketing, specific to non-profit activities and to extra-economic domains. The concept of non-profitable marketing has been introduced in the literature of the field by³, who defined its sphere as *"elaboration, application and control of programs, with the objective of obtaining adhesion to an idea, cause or to some social behaviour, from the part of one or several target groups"*.

The literature of the domain provides several definitions of political marketing, such as:

- "an assembly of techniques meant at favouring adequation of a candidate to his potential electorate, at making him known by an as high as possible number of voters, at differentiating among competitors - and rivals - and at optimizing, with minimum means, the number of votes collected during an election campaign"⁴;

- "the social interaction between two units, one of them (the candidate) trying to obtain a response expected by the other social unit (the

voters), whose response is free, yet **susceptible of being influenced**, by means of certain benefits that may be offered by the first unit, **electoral marketing** appears as the most important component of political marketing. Specialized literature does not always make a clear-cut distinction between electoral and political marketing. Electoral marketing cannot be analyzed without correlating it with the **electoral market** and without taking into consideration its specific traits, which differentiate it from the market of goods and services, respectively much more specific dimensions of the market, as development of the electoral market can be realized only by modification of the number of voters; there exists only one winner, electoral meetings are organized at significant time intervals, unlike the economic life in which companies develop their activities any moment, giving a vote to a candidate and, implicitly, against other candidates, which involves a high emotional charge.

A considerable influence upon the electoral market is exercised by **prescribers**, a component part of the micromedium of political organizations. They are **persons occupying important positions, so that they may influence the behaviour of other persons**. They may do this by either adopting themselves or not the respective behaviour. Classical marketing makes also use - especially in medical domains - of term "prescriber", as doctors play such role, "prescribing" certain types of drugs to their patients. Therefore, physicians play an especially important role for both producers and distributors of drugs. In a similar manner, in the political world, prescribers are key factors for political people and parties.

In the political world, prescribers are also known as trainers. This category includes:

- "**notabilities**": the doctor, the teacher, the priest - who may have a considerable influence upon voters behaviour;
- "**pilot personalities**": singers, actors, writers, businessmen - who influence mainly the image of the candidate;
- "**experts**": mass-media professionals: journalists, poll specialists, capable of influencing by their comments on political events and by their anticipations;

- **“guide of opinion”**: a specialist in some domain, interested in information related to his profession, well-informed and having access to mass-media, with interpersonal contacts both with other trainers and also with the voters he may advise. He belongs to the group upon which his influence is exercised, the people forming the group accepting him as their representative, sharing his norms and values.

The role of these prescribers is the more important the higher is the influence they have upon a group of persons. The individuals belonging to the group have common scopes and interests. Political representatives establish contacts with these groups and are interested in associating their members to the actions of political power.

*“To build up, to adopt and even to substitute a political behaviour (within the group) assumes the existence of some imaginary objects, unconsciously invested with a certain meaning, to which one cares for and towards one judges oneself. People will adjust their political behaviour as a function of an imaginary, collective, yet, certainly advantageous objective. Individuals whose personal prestige is known and admired have access to power, **manipulating the decision-making process**, the collective norms, individual behaviours, making use of the confidence people put into them and of the mechanism of repeating their argument by the force of the authority they have acquired”.*

Political communication represents the assembly of means employed for attracting or maintaining the loyalty of voters for some political „symbol”. Involved here is the whole mass of citizens having the right to vote, of special interest for all political representatives. Arousing the interest of such groups, known for their lack of interest in “politics” is quite difficult, creating problems for the politician as: (1) on one side, the group to whom the electoral messages are addressed should be satisfied, (2) on the other, the reserve of those inclined to reject them, from either systematic opposition or total lack of interest should be overcome. Consequently, one should have to select among:

- non-differentiated communication strategies, addressing to all potential consumers, with no differences, with the same message,

- differentiated communication strategies, assuming different political strategies for each segment in part;

- concentrated communication strategies, assuming mobilization of all efforts for one or two categories or segments of potential voters.

CONCLUSIONS

Study of the electoral behaviour is one of the domains of sociology to which several investigations and researches have been devoted in latest decades. The right to vote is a fundamental right, upon whose free exercise the whole edifice of democracy is based. In the attempt of establishing the factors influencing one’s political option, several French specialists initiated ample investigations, performed over more than ten years, upon the French electorate. Analysis of the thus collected data put into evidence a close dependence between the affiliation to a certain social or ethnic class, religion, or possession of a certain patrimony, on one side, and one’s political option, on the other. In other words, electoral behaviour may be probabilistically associated to an organized system of representations, attitudes and norms. It includes first the perception upon the political world, without being restricted only to this, but also consisting of a pattern of representations of the social field, of the convictions and feelings, analyzed in relation with the legitimacy and illegitimacy of the winners⁵. This observation shows that the manner in which electoral prescribers intervene in filtering and distributing information is a highly actual aspect. No electoral campaign may be nowadays organized in the democratic world without the presence of trainers, who are expected to orient people’s political view, to stimulate the presence to voting or even to obtain votes for some candidate. As already observed, the background against which these persons are expected to act is vast and complex. In most cases, the campaign teams make use of the source represented by trainers exclusively during the campaign, in the absence of any scientific substantiation or of any possible estimation of the attained effects. Or, in relation with the role of the electoral campaigns, Lazarsfeld⁶ made

mention of three possible types of effects: activation of indifferent people, consolidation of the relation with the previously preferred party and persuasion of undecided voters. Studies on this topic showed that the most important effect of the actions of political communication refers to the consolidation of the relation with the preferred party/candidate, as only about 8% of voters change their opinion during an electoral campaign. This is the starting point of a new type of investigation, dedicated to both quantitative and qualitative aspects of electoral behaviour. Once known that political marketing has common elements with non-profit marketing, the present study will have no direct economic impact. Its scientific importance refers to the new topic it approaches, also in relation with electoral behaviour, namely identification of some variables specific to the influence exercised by prescribers, realization and testing of new procedures of investigation, identification of new opinions and attitudes among voters and establishment of an electoral behaviour pattern that should also consider the influence of prescribers. The final scope of this investigation is to provide information necessary for conceiving and implementing efficient campaigns of political communication, to be further included among the other strategies of political – and not only electoral - marketing.

Acknowledgement: This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134197 „Performance and excellence in doctoral and postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain”

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