

OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL CANDIDATE MARKETING<sup>1</sup>

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Political campaigns have increasingly been compared to marketing campaigns in which the candidate puts himself on the voters' market and uses modern marketing techniques, particularly marketing research and commercial advertising, to maximize voter "purchase." It is argued here that the very essence of a candidate's interface with the voters is a marketing one and always has been. Alleged differences between commercial marketing and political marketing are shown to be overstated.

The American public is treated every few years to the illusion that they run their country by making a choice among the men who want to run their country for them. During the 1972 presidential election year the candidates for various national, state, and local offices managed to somehow spend over \$400 million in less than two months on their campaigns (Weiss, 1973). The presidential candidates themselves spent 25 percent of this sum, or \$98 million (Advertising Age, 1973). Of this, the Republican candidate spent 61 percent of the total, or \$60.2 million. Needless to say, he won the election.

Political campaigns have increasingly been compared to marketing campaigns in which the candidate puts himself in the vote market and uses modern marketing techniques, particularly marketing research and commercial advertising, to maximize voter "purchase." The marketing analogy is more than coincidental. It is argued here that the very essence of a candidate's interface with the voters is a marketing one, not only in recent times but far back into the past. Candidates seeking to win elections cannot avoid marketing themselves. The only question is how to do it effectively and responsibly.

Interest in the marketing aspects of elections has been stimulated to a large extent by the spectacular growth in political advertising. There has also been a substantial growth of scientific opinion polling (i.e., marketing research), computer analysis of voting patterns (i.e., sales analysis), and professional campaign management firms (i.e., marketing organizations). The subtleties of the marketing approach go beyond the rising expenditure levels and the use of certain information and planning approaches. They are delineated in a series of popular books (White, 1961; McGinness, 1969). In a quieter way, several scholarly works have also noted the marketing character of political elections (Kelly, 1956; Glick, 1967; Nimmo, 1970).

It would be a gross mistake to think that election campaigns have taken on a marketing character only in recent years. Campaigning has always had a marketing character. Prior to the new methodology, candidates sought office through the handshake, baby kissing, teas, and speechmaking. They still use these methods. The "new methodology" is not the introduction of marketing methods into politics but rather an increased sophistication and acceleration of their use. According to Glick (1960, p. 1):

The personal handshake, the local fund-raising dinner, the neighborhood tea, the rally, the precinct captain

and the car pool to the polls are still very much with us...the new campaign has provided a carefully coordinated strategic framework within which the traditional activities are carried out in keeping with a Master Plan. It centers on a shift from the candidate-controlled, loosely-knit, often haphazard "play-it-by-ear" approach to that of a precise, centralized "team" strategy for winning or keeping office. Its hallmarks include the formal strategic blueprint, the coordinated use of specialized propaganda skills, and a more subtle approach to opinion measurement and manipulation. And, though there is a world of difference between selling a candidate and merchandising soap or razor blades, some of the attributes of commercial advertising have been grafted onto the political process.

Nimmo (1970, pp. 67-68) takes a cynical view of this development:

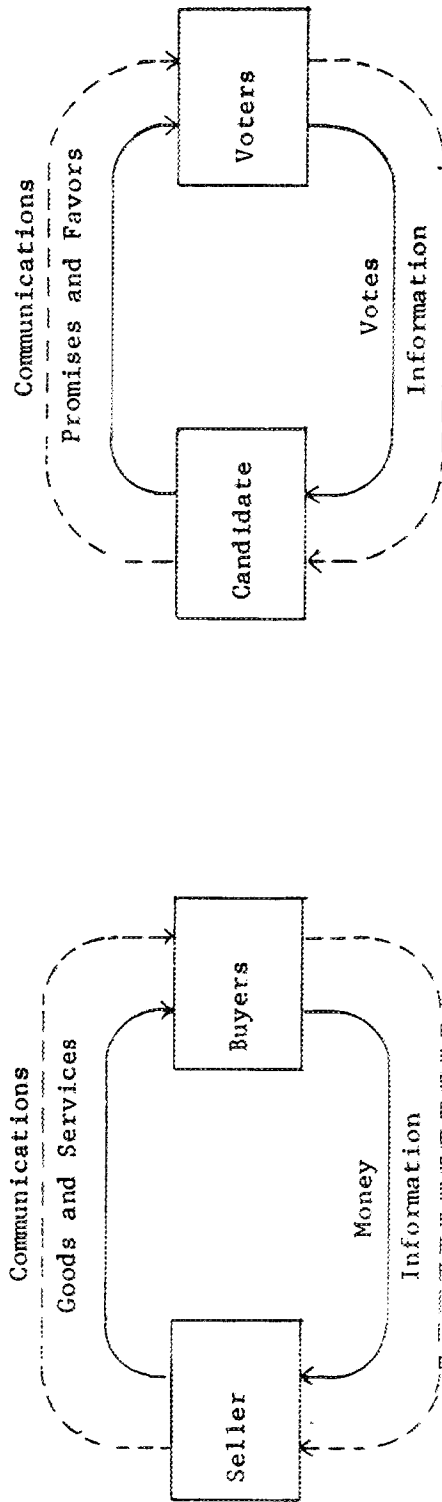
In screening potential candidates the mercenaries have given a new definition to the notion of "availability"; the marketable candidate is selected on the basis of his brand name, his capacity to trigger an emotional response from the electorate, his skill in using mass media, and his ability to "project." Analysis of social problems and issues yields to parroting of themes; televised debates between contenders produce meaningless confrontations rather than rational discussion. Negotiations with party politicians assume the form of "out-of-town tryouts"; primary elections are approached as "presale" campaigns; and general elections emerge as the "Giant Sweepstakes." In the end one candidate owes his election not to party but to his personal organization of paid and voluntary workers; once elected he responds not to party programs, but to the interests also represented by the professionals.

The major fault with Nimmo's observation is that it takes on a moral, judgmental tone. It implies that something is happening to political contests that is called marketing and it is bad. It fails to recognize that the marketing problem exists no matter what means or style of marketing is used. In fact, marketing styles vary from product to product and time to time; but the marketing problem is always present.

### The Anatomy of Political Marketing

Figure 1 presents two maps comparing business and political marketing. The business marketing map shows a seller dispatching goods, services, and communications to the market; in return he receives dollars and information. The inner loop is an exchange of money for goods; the outer loop is a flow of information. The political marketing map shows a political candidate dispatching specific promises and favors to a set of voters in exchange for their votes. He uses general communications to convey these and gathers voter information to plan next period's marketing effort. Schematically, the structural processes of business marketing and political marketing are basically the same. Both can be analyzed in terms of exchange theory.

Figure 2 shows the political candidate's marketing problem in greater detail. (i) The environment which defines the salient issues and oppor-



A. Business Marketing  
B. Political Marketing

Figure 1. Business and Political Marketing Compared

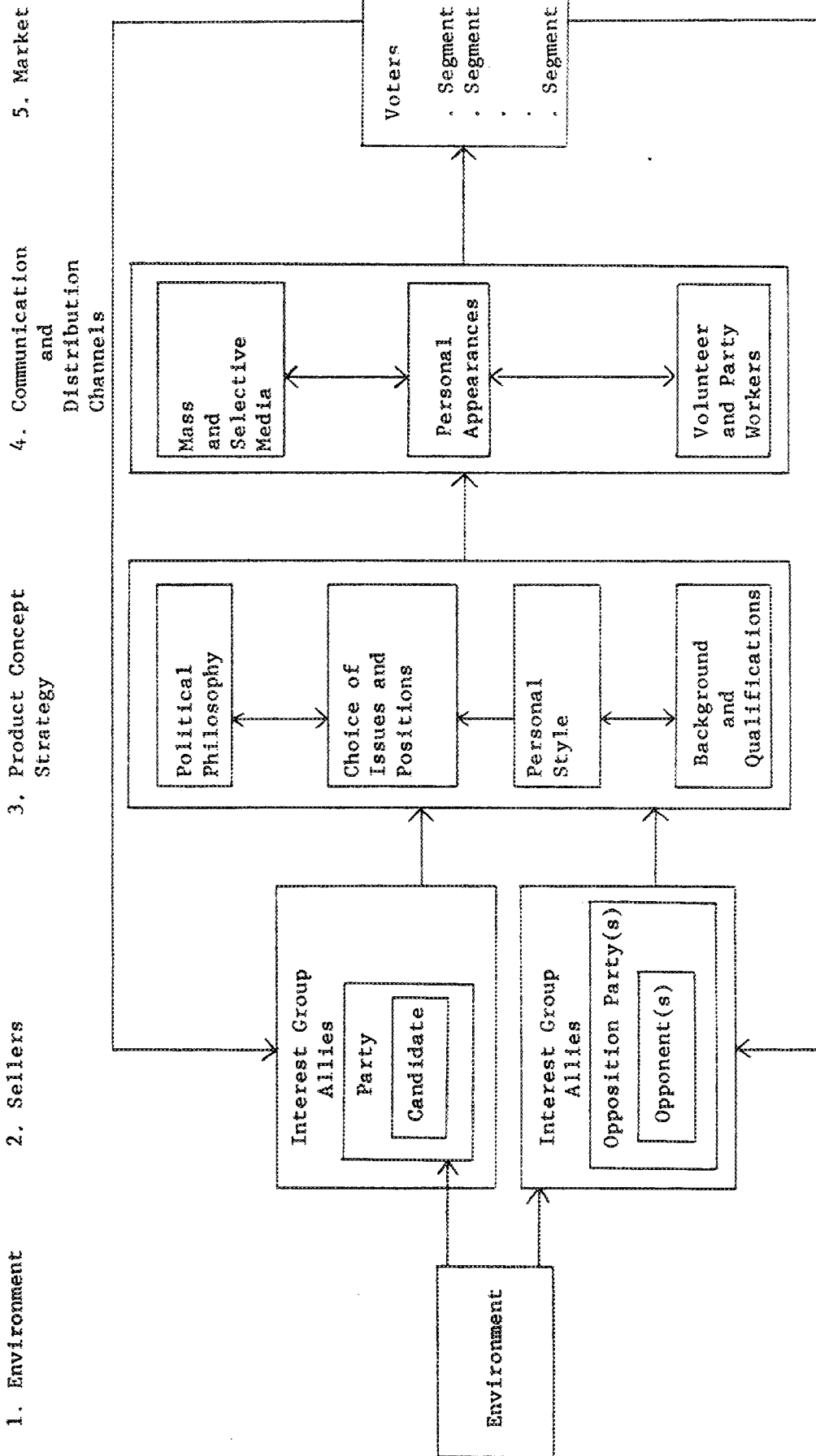


Figure 2. A Comprehensive Political Marketing Map

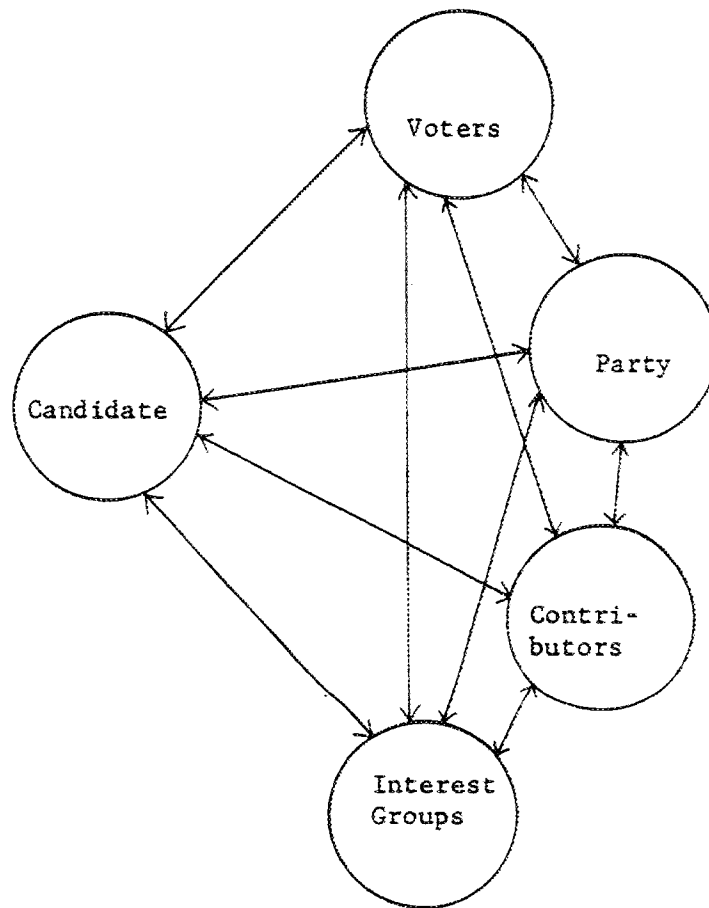


Figure 3. Four Markets Faced by the Candidate

tunities for the candidates is shown at the far left. (2) The candidates, their parties and their interest group alliances are the sellers. (3) Each candidate develops a product concept that he believes is merchandisable to the voters. The concept is built on a mixture of political philosophy, stands on particular issues, personal style, and background qualifications. (4) Each candidate seeks to reach the voters through three major distribution channels: mass and selective media, personal appearances, and volunteer and party workers. These channels interact, e.g., a personal appearance reaches an immediate audience and also a larger audience through mass media coverage. (5) All of these efforts are adjusted for different voter segments, and the results are continuously reviewed for further campaign modification.

The candidate must not only develop a marketing strategy calculated to win the support of voters but also of the party, contributors, and interest groups. Figure 3 shows the four markets he faces. The interactions among these markets are complex and the candidate cannot afford to formulate his marketing strategy simply on the basis of voter market response. For example, taking a strong stand as an anti-machine candidate will gain voters' votes but hurt party support and some contributions. Furthermore, each stand has distributive effects within a particular category. Taking a pro-labor stand increases the contributions from labor and reduces the contributions from business. Thus, political marketing strategy cannot be developed by simply calculating the distributive effects within the voters' market. Similarly, business marketing strategy aiming at building buyer support cannot ignore the impact on dealers, stockholders, government, and competitors.

#### Alleged Differences Between Political and Business Marketing

Certain differences between political marketing and business marketing are alleged to exist in the public mind. They relate to characteristics of the product, buyers and sellers.

1. Any specific commercial product, such as a can of beans or a ton of steel, is relatively fixed in its characteristics at a given point in time. The political candidate, on the other hand, is more variable. For one thing, the political candidate can talk back.

Comment. The variable nature of the political product is matched in the commercial world by services. Services are inseparable from the people who render them. The housewife can testify that her hairdresser can talk back, that his hairdos vary in quality, and so on. Physical products, too, can be changed through product reformulation, sizing, or packaging.

2. It is held that the political candidate cannot be as thoroughly formulated for the market's needs as can physical products or services. For example, new foods and soap products can be formulated to meet specific market wants. But a given political candidate cannot be varied freely in the same way. He has a history and fairly set personality. It is not easy or even possible to remake a humorless old candidate into a vigorous young one.

Comment. The freedom of manufacturers to alter the character of some commercial products is also quite limited. Steel is steel and salt is salt. On the other hand, a political image can be changed to some extent. Richard Nixon in successive campaigns has taken on the image of an anti-Communist, a statesman, and most recently, a man-of-action. There are limits, of course, and organizations often choose to launch brand new products rather than to do the job of repairing the old one.

3. Business products are normally available for purchase any time at the discretion of the buyer. Political products, however, are only "put on sale" every few years.

Comment. There are instances of economic products that buyers can only buy at certain times. One can buy a Rembrandt only when it is put up for sale or auction. One can enroll in a college only during certain times of the year. Many government contracts carry announced dates for bidding. Purchase frequency is not a basis for distinguishing between commercial and non-commercial products.

4. The buyer of a commercial product or service usually expects personal benefits enjoyed within a reasonable time period. Many citizen voters do not expect to accrue any personal or early benefits from their act of voting.

Comment. There are various commercial products and services that do not appear to give personal or short-run benefits, that people nevertheless buy. Examples are insurance, wills and estate plans, and so on. People also contribute to various charitable causes from which they do not anticipate personal benefits. On the other hand, many voters get quite involved in some election contests and act as if they anticipate personal benefits. The charismatic candidate is someone who gives a great number of voters the feeling that they will personally benefit through the candidate's election.

5. Buyers of commercial products and services are used to hard marketing tactics whereas voters do not expect, and somewhat resent, hard marketing tactics in the political area. A political candidate who would offer trading stamps or who overdoes hard-sell advertising would be taking great risks.

Comment. Hard-sell marketing tactics are characteristic of certain goods such as automobiles, cigarettes, soap and cosmetics. The marketing of earth moving equipment, computers and airplanes is conducted much more on the rational merits of the product and the company's reputation for service and reliability. There is nothing about marketing method that requires hard-sell tactics.

6. The messages reaching the public about a commercial product are largely marketer-controlled, through paid advertising. The media rarely feature or comment on a brand of beans or toothpaste. On the other hand, the messages reaching the public about a political candidate are largely developed by the news media. As a result, the political candidate finds it necessary to market himself as much to the press as to the ultimate public.

Comment. It is true that the press takes an active role in commenting and interpreting political candidates to the public. This makes the political candidate's marketing task easier in some ways (he gets more free publicity) and harder in other ways (he has less control over what they say).

7. A business firm succeeds if it obtains any market share that yields a good return on its investment; the political candidate succeeds only if he obtains a plurality of the votes, that is, the largest market share.

Comment. There are business markets, too, where the seller either gets all or none of the business. For example, an airframe manufacturer who bids for a government contract either wins or loses. The criteria of what constitutes a viable market share makes little difference to whether marketing planning and strategy are useful.

8. The aims and means of the business seller and the political candidate are different. The business seller is seeking profits. The political candidate is seeking power. The business firm tries to secure more profits through creating satisfied customers. The political candidate does not as clearly try to secure more power by creating satisfied citizens.

Comment. Business firms actually pursue multiple objectives, as do political candidates. There are, in fact, business firms that pursue power and political candidates who seek profits. Furthermore, business firms and political candidates can choose from a range of philosophies on which to base their marketing. There are politicians who aim at producing satisfied citizens; and business firms that aim at quick profits.

#### The Marketing Problems of the Political Aspirant

Assume that a candidate has decided to enter politics and his ultimate goal is to achieve an elective office. At the beginning, he is an unknown product. The office seeker must put himself on a market, the voters' market. He has to go through many of the steps that occur in product marketing: develop a personality (brand image), get the approval of an organization (company image), enter a primary election (market test), carry out a vigorous campaign (advertising and distribution), get elected (market share) and stay in office (repeat sales).

Specifically, he must solve four successive problems in the achievement of a successful political career.

First, he must join a political organization and become known. He will want to develop a political style that will earn respect and leadership in his party. He knows that this means finding out what the members of the political organization appear to want from the political process and the extent that he can appear to be instrumental in their desires.

Secondly, he must eventually exhibit an interest in becoming his party's candidate in an upcoming election. He must fraternize with the leaders and attempt to get their backing. He must enter a primary election and win the support of the party's voters.

Thirdly, if he wins the primary, he will have to go before the voters in the general election. He will have to make important decisions on campaign strategy, including issues, advertising, appearances, and funding. He will face a problem in voter analysis, choosing targets, allocating resources, and timing them for maximum impact.

Fourthly, if he is elected, he must do the kind of job in office that will get him reelected. This will be a function of the organization he builds, the positions he takes, and the rhetoric he uses.

At each stage, the political aspirant must have a good understanding of his market's needs, perceptions, and preferences. He must be guided by reliable and valid models of consumer behavior.



## FOOTNOTES

1. An expanded version of this paper will appear in Philip Kotler, Marketing For Nonprofit Organizations (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), Chapter 19.
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