

The University of Liverpool
Department of Social and Environmental Studies
School of Politics and Communication

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Lecturer: Professor Dennis Kavanagh

Essay:

Explain the differences in political marketing between Britain and the USA

Student: Felix Poetschke

Student ID: 200153008

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Introduction

It is not classified information today that political marketing has spread around the world. Election campaigns are being orchestrated and professionally run in nearly all parts of the world. The notion of ‘Americanisation’ of election campaigns is used to describe this phenomenon. There are, however, enormous differences between campaigns in different countries, and it is therefore a justified question, in how far this term is useful.

In this essay I want to explain the differences between political marketing in the United States and Great Britain. Firstly I will explain the factors that are accountable for differences in the specific countries and will then show in which way they constrain or foster political marketing and where the differences actually lie. The focus will be on political marketing for general and presidential elections, respectively.

1. Factors

The following items have been named as being accountable for the differences in political marketing in various countries: Election system, party competition, the role of the parties in the political system, the regulation of campaigning and its financing, the extent of professionalization, the national political culture, and, last but not least, the media system and its regulations¹. All these areas of political life and political communication determine the form political marketing can take in different countries. In fact they can all be summarized under three categories, which then contain the above issues: election system, party system and party roles, and the media system.

1.1 Election System

One key factor for the fast growth of marketing efforts in the United States is the very person-focused election system and, furthermore, the sheer amount of elections: 41 of the states in the United States now hold primaries for presidential candidates², where candidates of one party have to compete for the candidacy with a member of their own party. This means that there have to be 41 campaigns before the actual election campaign has in fact started. And the general election campaign is naturally focused on the presidential candidate. The President of

¹ Swanson & Mancini 1996a and Baines et al 2001.

² <http://www.thegreenpapers.com/PCC/StAll.html>

the United States is elected directly through the voters³, thereby bypassing the parties in the election process. This in return fosters the need for personalized campaigning in view of the issue to be addressed: one man, the president. Furthermore, the first-past-the-post system in the national states, where only one of the candidates is able to win and there is no such thing as a party list, forces the candidates to throw all their power and efforts into persuading the voters to vote for them. The House of Representatives and the Senate, who are elected at the same time (and two years later again), have nothing to do with the election of the president. The president is usually a member of a particular party, yet he is not really linked or associated with a party but stands for himself. There is overall an absolute dominance of persons over parties in the US electoral system.

In Great Britain the election system is very similar at the basis in view of the majority vote, but there are striking differences in the general view. First of all, the Prime Minister is not elected directly but by the Parliament. The members of Parliament are elected in their constituencies via a majority system. In the constituencies there is therefore a certain degree of personalisation to be stated. However, the voters in the constituencies do rather vote for a party than for a particular candidate⁴.

1.2 Media System

The second key factor that determines the differences between the United States and Great Britain is the media system. Both systems are more or less diametrical. The United States has a private media driven by commercial interests. Great Britain has a primarily public broadcasting system with the state-controlled BBC. Then again, there have been private channels for a long time in Britain and meanwhile there are more and more channels available from digital and satellite television. The focus of British television audiences, however, is still on the public broadcasting. The American system is by far more developed than the British, if one counts a high number of available channels to a large audience as paramount. This does have significant effects on the nature of political marketing, as we will see.

³ It is not a real direct vote, as the voters in fact vote for electors who in turn vote for the president. However, the electors stated their candidate preference before the election, which basically makes the system a direct system.

⁴ For more information on the parties, see further down.

1.3 Parties

As noted above, parties are losing their bonds to the public more and more. An increasingly socially complex society with a great number of various interests and fragmented beliefs and with loosening ideological bonds due to the vanishing of social classes leads to a segmented social reality, in which parties are no longer the producers of political culture⁵.

The United States has always had weak parties with “a less programmatic basis and fewer formal membership processes than the parties of other western countries.”⁶ There has never been such thing as an ideological party in the United States (at least not an important and successful one), which is especially mirrored in the fact that the nature of the parties alters from state to state; and sometimes a party might have more in common with the national counterpart than their own party⁷. Parties in the United States on national level are seen more as a kind of ‘presidential’ party, only organised to give the candidate a platform and background⁸.

British parties on the other hand do have a long ideological tradition. However, there has been a steady decline in party affiliation, too. As Kavanagh notes, “strong party identification with the Labour or Conservative parties has virtually halved since 1964.”⁹ Furthermore, parties now try to shake off their old ideologies in order to become ‘catch-all’ parties; not aiming at their ‘natural’ clientele but only looking to win key and swing voters for maximizing the party’s success¹⁰.

2. Political Marketing in the United States and Great Britain

We have seen which the most important issues in shaping political marketing are. I now want to concentrate on how these factors influence the political marketing process in the United States and Great Britain and where the differences can be located. I will concentrate on television advertising for two purposes: Firstly, television is the one medium which most people use to get information about political processes and it is furthermore the medium they trust most¹¹. Secondly, by the means of television advertising, campaign managers can bypass

⁵ Swanson & Mancini 1996a.

⁶ Foster & Muste 1992, p. 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kavanagh 1992, p. 83.

¹⁰ Especially the Labour party has made huge efforts to abandon their ties to Unions and the working class, who were traditionally associated with them. For a good explanation of these efforts, see Lees-Marshment 2001.

¹¹ Bartels 1992.

journalists. Thus, it is the only way of unmediated political communication and should best reflect the key features of the modern publicity process¹².

2.1 The United States

Political advertising is big business in the United States. All the local elections, primaries, elections for the Senate and the House of Representatives and of course the presidential election taken together, there is a vast amount of election campaigns going on all the time, overlapping in their schedules. Hence there is also a great demand for specialists, who manage a campaign professionally and skilfully. And these consultants have in the United States in fact replaced the party structures. They do all the things the parties used to do: fundraising, issue research, scheduling, budgeting, even candidate recruitment¹³. “Gone are dominant, mixed and omnipartisan participatory patterns, they have been replaced by candidate-centered, consultant-based, and media-driven politics.”¹⁴

The private media system in the United States makes the political television advertising the most proliferating means of political communication. Candidates can buy as much advertising time as they like to – and they have to. There is no such thing as allocated free time for candidates or parties, the candidates are obliged to *buy* the time on television. And they do it happily. Just a few numbers¹⁵: about 75% of the total budget of presidential candidates today goes into television advertising. In 1992, Bush spent about \$49 million and Clinton about \$44 million. This is, however, not a recent development: General Eisenhower spent \$6 million on television time buying, which equals about \$32 million in 1992 dollars.

There are laws regulating spending and fund-raising in the United States. They have, however, had the effect of intensifying the candidate-centred nature of the election process. Candidates are eligible for matching funds provided by the government if they raise \$5000 in small nominations¹⁶. If they accept the matching funds they also have to accept general spending limits during the campaign and in certain states (\$ 28 million). Yet this does not

¹² Kaïd & Holtz-Bacha 1995 b.

¹³ For a frightening description of these tasks see also Dick Morris (1996??). He was the main campaign and strategy consultant for Bill Clinton in the 1996 elections. Not only did he recommend Al Gore as Vice President; his book also shows how Morris set the issues agenda for Bill Clinton and how the President happily accepted this.

¹⁴ Nimmo 1996, p. 35.

¹⁵ All from Devlin 1995.

¹⁶ All figures in this paragraph from 1988, taken from Foster & Muste 1992.

prevent candidates to spend as much money as they want, as there is another law that allows non-party organisations¹⁷ to spend money for advertising on behalf of a candidate. These organisations do of course stand in direct contact with the candidate. In general, the financing system increases the influence of the candidate at the cost of the parties: In the nomination phase parties are excluded and the candidates must raise the money on their own. During the actual campaign the ‘soft money’ spent by the non-political organisations decreases the role of the parties further¹⁸.

The US media system, with local stations in every state, makes it an even better tool for the political campaigner. Using polls for finding key swing states and target voters, candidates can direct different ads at specific audiences. They can virtually decide which person gets to see which ad and in what length¹⁹. Furthermore, as the candidates are buying their television time themselves, they can also decide which format the commercial spot can take. Most ads today take the format of 30-second spots; 97% of Clinton’s commercials in 1992, for instance, were 30 seconds long. There are still some longer and even shorter (15 seconds) spots, but the 30-second ad has definitely been the most successful in recent years, partly because viewers are prepared to see short spots and especially because longer messages are not better in view of their message recall abilities for the audience²⁰.

There are different types of spots used in the United States: one is the very popular ‘talking-head’ spot, in which the candidate is the only thing on screen, informing viewers about issues, thereby generating an image of the candidate. Other types are person-in-the-streets ads, documentary ads about the life of the candidate, testimonial ads and, especially, negative ads, which were used by all the presidential candidates since 1976²¹. It has become one of the most favoured ad type used in presidential election campaigns. The ratio of positive to negative ads in 1992 was 50/50, which was a new high in negative advertising²².

¹⁷ PACs, for example, Political Action Committees.

¹⁸ Foster & Muste 1992.

¹⁹ President Bill Clinton, for instance, aired targeted spots for over a year before the election campaign began in several key states. The whole issue stayed largely undiscovered, as the ads were not aired in areas with a high concentration of national journalists, like New York or San Francisco. According to Clinton’s consultant Dick Morris, these ads were crucially important for the outcome of the election. Clinton won. See Dick Morris 1999.

²⁰ Devlin 1995, p. 191.

²¹ Devlin 1995, p. 195.

²² Devlin 1995, p. 197.

Negative ads are presumably the most powerful commercials in political advertising. There are numerous reasons for that: Increasingly, not the one candidate wins who is most favoured by the voters, but the one who is least disliked. Secondly, the negative ad appeals to the fact that people become more and more cynical about politics and therefore they are more susceptible to negative spots. Furthermore, negative ads appeal to people as it emphasizes drama and conflict. It is much more interesting to watch a candidate being torn into pieces than listen to all the fabulous achievements the advertising candidate has made in his previous career. Negative ads are overall more memorable than positive spots. Also very important is the fact that negative advertising creates additional free coverage in the news media. A controversial spot will be aired again in the TV news and discussed in the newspapers. A good example for that is the famous ‘Willie Horton ad’, aired only a few times in a few states in 1988. But the media covered it again and again, sometimes showed the ad in full length in their news programmes²³. Additionally, and maybe most important, negative advertising wins voters. It is the negative ad that converts the undecided, whereas the positive ad only reinforces one's previous preferences. Negative ads simply work better than positive ones²⁴.

Another important feature the American culture of television and advertising brings forth is the rapid response ad, also called ‘rapid rebuttal’. Because candidates can buy television time whenever they want to, it is easy to respond to a negative attack, fired by a challenger, in a very short time. Virtually overnight the rebuttal ad can be composed and aired. The result is a virtual televised debate between the candidates.

What can be concluded from this? The election system, the media system, the financing laws, and the amount of money spent in the campaign increase the personalisation of American election campaigns. Parties do not play a great role in the whole process, candidates or incumbents work on their own, usually assisted by professional campaign managers, taking over the traditional roles of the parties. Negative television spots and rapid response ads have made the American elections a playfield for “Dirty Politics”²⁵.

²³ Devlin 1995, p. 199. For a full description of the Horton issue, see Jamieson 1995, Chapter 1. Another famous negative spot is, for example, the anti-Goldwater spot in 1964.

²⁴ Devlin 1995, p. 198.

²⁵ The title of Jamieson's book about political campaigning and television advertising. Jamieson 1995.

2.2 Great Britain

Political marketing has rapidly taken its place in the political environment in Great Britain in recent years. Especially since the arrival of 'New Labour' has the conduction of election campaigns reached an unprecedented level of sophistication and orchestration. But there are still many constraints in British political and commercial culture, which prevents the campaigns to become completely 'Americanised'.

The British media system makes for a completely different campaign style compared to the United States. The most important aspect in this respect is that political advertising is not allowed on television and radio. Parties do have the opportunity of unmediated political communication via the party election broadcasts (PEB), where they are given free time for advertising during the campaign. Outside the campaign, that is, not in the three to four weeks prior to the campaign, they are allowed to broadcast the so-called party political broadcasts²⁶. The overall time allocated to the parties is given to them depending on their last election results and recent opinion polls. In 1992, the Conservative and the Labour party both were allowed to broadcast five 10-minute long PEBs, the Liberal party was allotted four of them²⁷. Parties may decide to reduce the time of their PEBs to five minutes, but they are not allowed to make them shorter²⁸. This discloses British parties not only from using the supposedly most effective 30-second ads like in the United States but also prohibits the rapid rebuttal ads so popular in America. Furthermore, PEBs are only broadcasted on four channels: BBC1, BBC2, ITV, and Sky news, which volunteered to transmit them. But all other channels, all digital and satellite channels are not obliged to broadcast them and they do not. It is therefore very easy for a viewer to vote with his remote control and simply switch to another channel. But the PEBs still attract a fairly huge audience, about 13 million in 1992²⁹, which is on the one hand plausible, as the PEBs are for many voters still the main source of political information, on the other hand it is surprising, because the audience finds party ads boring and "less believable than virtually any other media source..."³⁰ In the 1997 general election roughly a fifth of the population was said to have seen a PEB by one of the three major parties³¹.

²⁶ Blumler et al 1996, p. 61.

²⁷ Scammell & Semetko 1995, p. 24.

²⁸ Blumler et al 1996, p. 61.

²⁹ Scammell & Semetko 1995, p. 20.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

³¹ Ibid.

With the limited number of broadcasts available, the major function of the PEB is to serve as an agenda setting tool. Media coverage, as we have seen above, could most easily be achieved by negative advertising with attacks on the opponents. This is also the case in Britain³², but not in such radical terms as in the United States. There have been some examples of negative advertising in recent campaigns, like the famous ‘Jennifer’s Ear’ ad by Labour in 1997 or the ‘tax bombshell’ or ‘New Labour, New Danger’ ads by the Conservatives in 1992 and 1997, respectively³³. Especially the ‘Jennifer’s Ear’ broadcast generated a great deal of media attention. But British parties are still somehow resenting extensive use of negative advertising. In 1992 less than 20% of the PEBs were of attacking content³⁴ – nothing compared to the 50/50 ratio in the United States.

The PEBs are overall in decline due to an ever more dismembered television audience and are loosing their paramount role under the political advertising instruments. They are, though, the only way of unmediated communication to the voters the politicians and parties have in Britain and will therefore stay on the campaigning agenda.

As noted earlier, the parties still play a major role in politics in Great Britain. They have the control over nomination of candidates and they create party manifestos, which serve as the issue agendas for all candidates. Their leading figures “derive their standing primarily from their standing in the House of Commons”³⁵. The party sponsors the campaign and conducts it. This is clearly mirrored in the PEBs: about 40% of them emphasize the party, and not the candidate³⁶. But this is not only a consequence of the parties strength but again the by-product of the British media system: apart from the prohibition on commercial political spots, candidates can not broadcast a person-centred commercial in their constituency, as there is no real local television.

Aside the limitations on broadcasting time there is another factor which severely constrains any advertising comparable to the United States: the money involved. There are rigid spending limits for the single candidates in the constituencies as well as for the party

³² Baines et al 2001, p. 1110.

³³ Pattie & Johnston 2002.

³⁴ Scammell & Semetko 1995, p. 37.

³⁵ Blumler et al 1996, p. 58.

³⁶ Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 1995c, p. 212. There are, however, great differences between the parties (and the researchers, too). The Tories emphasized their leader in 80% of their spots, the Liberals in 60%, and Labour only in 30% (Scammell & Semetko 1996, p. 35). These numbers are, however, from 1992; since ‘New Labour’ under Tony Blair there has been a much greater emphasis on him as the party leader than before.

campaign. Candidates are not allowed to spend more than £5000 in their constituencies. They cannot conduct their own opinion polls or pay for lavish campaign events when they want to stay within their expenditure limits³⁷.

Conclusion

The differences in election campaigning between the United States and Great Britain are evident and can easily be explained by the differences in the shaping factors: the election system, the role and status of the parties, and, most important, the media system. As Kaid & Holtz-Bacha note, “it seems as if free purchase of broadcast time is the crucial factor for the development of political advertising on television.”³⁸

The degree of personalisation, the quality and kind of television advertising, and the involvement of parties and leaders in the campaigns are a great deal different between the two countries. While on the one hand, in the United States, everything is cut to size for the candidate, the parties play less and less a role and television advertising has become the major campaigning tool, being aggressive half of the time, the British experience, on the other hand, shows, if not contrary, at least very different patterns. The parties still are the major political players, television advertising is not allowed and the PEBs are hardly a substitute for them, and the candidate cannot stand out due to a greater centralisation in election and party organisation.

The American model of political marketing has had a great influence on the British market, but, thinking of all the systemic differences, this influence has probably reached its limits³⁹.

³⁷ Blumler et al 1996, p. 61.

³⁸ Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 1995 a, p. 17.

³⁹ Baines et al 2001, p. 1107.

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