

## Political Marketing's Influence on Intra-Party Democracy

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### Abstract

*The development of the political world, mostly to have taken part in the past decades, has benefited greatly from the broader understanding and adoption of marketing's instruments and concepts. From the classical two-party system, led by established elites, we find ourselves today in a political market with more and more new parties, and younger and bolder contestants. Marketing's communication tools and the technological advances have left their mark on the political world, not only regarding electoral events and gaining people's sympathy, but also in improving the party's decision making, policy development and grassroots members' representation. Harnessed the right way, the influence that marketing can exercise for the implementation of democratic rules and principles, inside a political party, has benefits for both the party members, and for the electorate.*

**Key words:** political marketing, democracy, political parties, representativity

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### 1. Introduction

Policy making has been the playground of elites, since the beginning of organized communities. Once the activity of royal family members and aristocrats, policy making has evolved, alongside the political regimes, in accordance with social developments. Moving the focus on the democratic regimes from the last centuries, a wider access to politics has been granted, to more and more people. With the expansion of the universal vote around the world, political parties opened their doors to the general public, and new faces started to emerge from inside the party, to the front stage of politics.

The influence of the common members over the party leadership, and policy making, or the access to public service dignities, have changed for the better as time passed by, but we cannot say that one's path through the party or towards a public service, is based solely, or mostly, on his qualities and performance. Unfortunately, the democratization of politics did not necessarily mean competence, expertise and the professionalization of politics. There were not always high quality political characters, replacing the old elites, while trying to bring their experience or knowledge from their professional life.

With the penetration of marketing in politics, grassroots members gained more importance and visibility, throughout the party and the society. It is easier to climb the ladder and to receive the party's support for a public office, both named or elected. Powerful messages and ideas can reach the management of the party, or even the general public, building up support.

In a modern political entity, where the principles of marketing are understood, and its instruments are part of the overall strategy, organizational democracy can help at every level, working not only from the bottom to the top, but also the other way around. I intend to underline, both positive and negative aspects, of the presence of political marketing in today's parties, and its influence on the level and quality of the democracy, inside this kind of organizations. Analyzing for and against the link between democratic parties and political marketing, should contribute to the better understanding of the helpful role that marketing can have, both for a party's constituents, and for its members and leadership. There are limitations to the degree of democratization, and of

representativity of the member's views and hopes, mostly because these instruments, that can spark real interest and change inside a party, are limited by the intervention of the established leadership, in order to maintain the status-quo, whilst gaining the public's sympathy, for apparently trying to modernize and democratize the party.

## 2. Theoretical background

Studying the state and evolution of democracy in the contemporary world, Max Kasse identifies the declining trend in support for the democratic systems. The author lists a set of measures, meant to serve as solutions, resulted from a 2005 Council of Europe's research. Among those recommendations, there are:

- intra-party democracy;
  - electronic support for candidates;
  - online deliberation systems;
- All of these could help parties and candidates, in regard to their public performance and their constituent's good representation (Kasse, 2010).

A direct democracy, understood in the form of the empowered voter, that relies on popular initiatives and referenda, does not necessarily exercise its influence on the voter turnouts. While it can bring important knowledge for the party, and build the link between them and the constituents, it also raises the cost associated with voting. The price for their choice, from the elector's point of view, raises, because most of them spend more time and attention, in engaging with the political product and its messages, before casting their vote. Therefore, although it promotes a closer connection between the politicians and the electorate, the most important goal in the political market, to bring the votes to the party, in order to win and govern, is not accomplished through this initiatives, as they do not visibly increase voting participation (Cebula, 2008, p.640-642).

Local party members can be, in general, divided into two groups:

- the ones that like to get involved in the major decisions of the party, such as leadership changes, and to receive general information, forming the majority;
- the smaller group, of engaged members, which gets involved in discussions, in local events, in policy making, and interacts with the community, receiving the real feedback, therefore establishing the real grassroots connection, and contributing to the party's image (Reeves, 2010, p.100).

Looking further than from the strategic leadership point of view, where marketing is considered a function of the party administration, political marketing can make a real impact on intra-party democratic practices, when it involves local members. Through their work, not only as message communicators to the local communities, but also in the process of policy making, they can prove to be one of the most important assets of any party, and can have a meaningful impact on the political organization, by closing the ties with the constituents, and by addressing real problems, thus becoming more representative (Reeves, 2010, p.104).

Research of digital democracy at the European Union's level shows the fast adoption of social media platforms, with their growing importance and role, in the political life. By using new communicational tools in the digital environment, this form of social implication can have multiple benefits, for all the parts involved in the political process. A closer contact with the politicians, the parties and the government, crowdsourcing ideas, establishing support groups or sharing news and updates, are just few of the positive aspects for the citizens. On the other hand, parties and politicians are offered a direct and permanent distribution channel for the messages, and the much-needed exposure. There are still improvements to be made in the strategical approach of digital democracy, in order for the political contestants to maximize the gains, but, even in its simplest form, digital communication provides a more representative relationship, between the voter and the elected (Timonen, 2013, p.104-111).

A study of Belgian political parties, in terms of internal participation and democracy, was based on four political activities: going to party events, voting in internal referenda, in the leadership election and in forming the party's candidate list. Although the author notices the implementation

of such procedures, inside the Belgian parties after 1990, he states that these are mainly formal measures, that do not change the balance of power, from the centre to the grassroots. These practices are good for the public eye, but remain only an image of democratic practices at the intra-party level, while the real impact and influence, on all party decisions, remains to the elites. These political actors do understand the benefits of a democratic internal party life, but the leadership uses most of the political marketing tools only formally, to re-engage and attract more attention from constituents and members, by showcasing their alleged strong points such as: leadership representativity or communication, both from the local members up to the management, and down (Wauters, 2009, p.22-28).

In an editorial analysis of the intra-party democracy limits, Andrei Tiut states that the purpose of a party is to be representative. While it can be said that a certain amount of democracy is good, showing the probable attention focused the voter's demands, after the electoral win, it does not necessarily bring stability to the party, and to its political strategy. Enabling more groups to form policies, to communicate their agenda, or even to make decisions not fitted into the party's offer, can hurt the political marketing strategy. So, the party leadership tends to limit the spread of different opinions inside the organization.

The author focuses on the energy, that any party should not lose in internal debates, but should be focused on its performance on the political stage. Discipline and democracy should be balanced by a strong party identity, having both a communicational coherence, and a democratic debate on real projects and policies, in line with the political positioning. For the voter, there is no clear choice, based solely on the internal democracy level. If it is not lost in internal fights, if it can bring together its grassroots, than the party can understand and make policies suited for the true public needs (Tiut, 2018).

Beside the influence of the technological and social advances, and of marketing's knowledge and tools, intra-party democracy faces increased interest and scrutiny, from the both the state, and the European regulators. There are some countries in Europe, in which political parties are required to be internally democratic, such as Spain and Germany, and the authors add that forums, such as the Council of Europe, have shown more interest in this matter. With this trend of more regulation on internal business, political organizations face changes, that are not necessarily adapted to today's communication requirements, and can limit their success. Also, an ethical problem could be the fact that, state interventionism can alter the decision-making capabilities of the parties, and it can transfer authority, from the leadership to the judiciary, limiting political freedom and rights (Biezen et al, 2013).

Also outside of Europe, in Australia, there are discussions about state interventionism in party democracy. while considering the elections to be the central moment in the electoral cycle, the democratic practices inside the party could hurt the representativity, mostly for the mass parties, as the messages could differ from activist to activist, losing unity and consistency. On the other hand, a democratic approach could link better the voters, with their representatives in public offices.

The need for regulation is stated by the author, even from outside of the party, by the state, in order to bring more transparency to both inter, and intra-party activities, mostly in the light of a rising wave of extremism (Gauja, 2006).

### **3. Methodology**

In order to start understanding the relationship between marketing and inner-party democracy, I have reviewed literature that refers to party democracy, digital democracy, political marketing, and the use of its instruments, for the members and constituents. Then, I decided to base this research on a series of interviews, taken with political candidates, at the local elections in Romania. The question regarding political marketing's role, and influence on the democratic system inside a party, was asked as part of a broader study on political marketing's understanding and use. The respondents were nominees, ranging from different parties, or independents, competing for different offices: County council, City council, Mayor's office .

The respondents were encouraged to address the questions, but there was no limitation in developing the subjects. In doing so, I tried to avoid short and formal answers, and to let the candidates truly express their opinion about democracy, political marketing, and party or politics progress.

#### **4. Findings**

The vast majority of the respondents were accustomed with some notions of political marketing, or at least with the electoral communication and promotion part. The question about the possible positive implications, of adopting and implementing political marketing inside the party, led most answers towards the idea that, the feedback function, which is more and more efficient through today's technological developments, can be used at a party level, just as well as it is nowadays, in relationship with the voters. So, the democratic environment of a political structure is ought to be improved, if the voice of the grassroots is heard by the party leadership, and, if local communities can help form the policies, that are intended for them. Another use of intra-party marketing, was considered to be in the internal selection process, where candidates should represent the local communities and their local colleagues, thus increasing the representativity of the political class. Their link to the local voters is one of the most important tools that a political organization can possess, offering knowledge and data about the wishes of the electorate, for impactful policies, and for maintaining a good voting pool for the party.

There were a couple of candidates, that did not consider marketing to be a good influence for the party's internal life, seeing it only as a promotional tool, for the outside general audience and the electorate, especially and mostly, in the campaign period. On the other hand, one politician considered that, due to the lack of political culture, and in a scenery filled with sensationalism, marketing is needed more and more, both intra-party, and for the electorate. He stressed that, part of the politician's mission is to educate the people, and to promote the values that really matter for the evolution of the political system, and of the society as a whole.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Political marketing, part of the social marketing's larger group of sub-disciplines, does not have a broad and unitary understanding or implementation, just like classic marketing. The visibility and importance of non-profit marketing segments is in full expansion, with more and more organizations realizing the need to integrate a comprehensive marketing strategy, in order to keep up with today's society requirements and expectations.

Marketing is a field of study that is quickly evolving, being enriched with new theories and instruments to respond to social changes. Its political segment is subject to developments as well, with every new round of elections showcasing new elements and approaches. Unfortunately, political marketing is mainly viewed only through its electoral component, ignoring in most cases the period between elections. Focusing on the electoral campaign casts a shadow over the pre-electoral marketing and on the governing period. Grassroots electoral marketing proved to be successful, in a number of cases, ranging from the 2008 Obama win in the U.S.A., to Iohannis's success in the 2014 Romanian Presidential Elections. But, in the vast majority of time, local members do not have a role, being active only for the campaign's time.

To truly benefit from its member number and their qualities, and to harness their power in its communication, a party must adopt a political marketing strategy for the whole electoral cycle. Members are a party's greatest power, when they are part of the decision making process, when their voices are used to spread a clear and specific message, and when they act as a continuous polling tool in their community.

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