Toward an Ethical Framework for Political Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to focus and organize the public and academic debate on the ethics of political marketing by soliciting answers in the application of ethical theory. Principal ethical theories of interest to marketing and the particular illumination they lend to political marketing are discussed. Often the answer they yield is ambivalent (not least because ethical propositions can only be argued, never resolved). It is concluded that, although utilitarians and others tip the balance in favor of political marketing practice, the strength of the contractarian critique means there is no closure in this debate. © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Everyone has an opinion on the ethics of political marketing, and often it is an unflattering one: from jeremiads on the "shallow science of imagistics" (Philo, 1993) to meditations on the chicaneries of "spin" (Jones, 1995), political marketing and its ready public associations with the idea of manipulation has become one of those things it is fashionable to worry about, the political face of a cultural "dumbing down." Numerous ad 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 thus ethical problems associated with political marketing is thus not in doubt. But what problems—and whose ethics? Are

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they worthy of serious attention, and even legislation? If the wrong problems are defined, the wrong solutions are embraced, yet the real dangers of political marketing may be the more hidden and less publicly discussed ones, for example, the extensive focus on negativity may blind us to other things such as the short-term decision making it may engender. Such debates also have political consequences if sufficiently arousing. Public policy may enact, for example, controls of electoral expenditure or espouse the public funding of political parties.

Ethical theory will not answer these questions, but it might clarify them, illuminating those areas where there should be real worry and offering reassurance when anxieties have been unnecessary, replacing a vague moral superstition about the entire area of political marketing with more focused concerns organized within a coherent structure.

In this article, therefore, the aim is to review some of the principal contemporary and classical ethical theories of interest to marketing, as summarized by O'Shaughnessy (1995): that is, Kantian, utilitarian, contractarian, communitarian, objective, and cultural relativist. Can they 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 approach is addressed first.

THE DEONTOLOGICAL APPROACH

Although Greek did not actually have a direct a word for *duty* per se, they 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 nonnegotiable morality formulated as an antidote to the potential dominance of all our lives by pleasure-seeking behavior. 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 eschew negative advertising. As will be seen,

even negativity has its articulate defenders on the grounds that character is a legitimate issue.

Yet the criticism of political marketing sometimes seems rather Kantian, grounded as it sometimes is in normative models or ideals of democratic behavior (Franklin, 1994; Jamieson, 1992). 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 feel 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 (Newman & Sheth 1987; Reid, 1988; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman, Body, & Tetlock, 1993).

THE CONSEQUENTIALIST TRADITION

This tradition emphasizes results of action as the criteria for evaluating their ethical base—in the political context, is the result good government (but what is good government—responsiveness to public opinion? In that case there might be some vindication of the marketing conceptualization 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 (1806–1873) as that which conduces to 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 the corpus of rules that would lead to the maximizing of welfare. Other forms of utilitarianism include motive utilitarianism, where the worth of motives is the issue, though 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, a vagueness about how to operationalize 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 take a particular action should be universal, 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:

1. Bogus issues may be incentivized. A commercial organization, the political consulting firm, perceives a political issue as a marketable commodity, and there is therefore an incentive for it to create and merchandise issues selected on the irrelevant criteria of their dramatic appeal: Important but perhaps less value-symbolic issues may as a result be bypassed.
2. Such issue entrepreneurship may in fact be divisive, with deliberately polarizing issues selected as the best strategy. As Ansolabhere and Iyengar (1995) suggest in the case of negative advertising, an optimizing strategy may be to deliberately seek to freeze out the political center from any political participation. Motive utilitarians would certainly condemn this.
3. Decisions may be made with no reference to the long term, because a business-derived conceptualization of politics may lead to the thrust to maximize market share (measured by votes) without considering other consequences. Issues that cannot be publicly dramatized get neglected until it is too late (the savings and loan imbroglio?). Although it may be assumed that the mass electorate could reasonably be said to know where its own interest lies, on issues that have an inevitable though distant future impact, such as energy consumption and the environment, the electorate may be irresponsible.
4. Political marketing methodologies also tempt people to use communication to fill the space vacated by ideas and ideology (Sherman, 1987): Communications substitute for action, creating a world of professional campaigners and amateur statesmen.
5. 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 they lead to worse government and therefore a failure to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. Another criticism would be that the costs of political marketing create the need for a wealthy paymaster, normally a string of political action committees, because 70% of campaign costs in the United States now go on advertising. The favor 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. Vested interests, whose concerns are seldom identical with those of the majority, can frustrate the service to that majority of its elected representatives. The NRA and the tobacco industry are cases in point, where the political struggle against them has had to be carried out in the courts, since legislators seem either bribed or intimidated.

Yet it would be dishonest to pretend that the phenomenon of marketed politics had nothing useful to deliver. It is ironic that the phenomenon can nevertheless be defended in utilitarian terms as a contribution

to public information. Ansolabhere and Iyengar (1995) review the evidence that political advertising increases public knowledge of salient issues by increasing the amount of information in circulation. Banker (1992) argues that "they can be viewed as supplying voters with alternative perspectives for understanding political reality," they enable us to "reframe political facts, to allow the public to see it from a different perspective." Second, and in reply to the earlier criticism about issue entrepreneurship, their locus in opinion research can introduce legitimate public concerns into the election that might otherwise have been missed, because no issue can be successfully manufactured and sold without meeting an underlying resonance in public opinion. To argue otherwise is perhaps to entertain the notion of a naïve, jejeune electorate and a crude stimulus response or hypodermic model of political communication (Kraus & Davis, 1976). Banker discusses a case in point, where polling revealed that an incumbent candidate (Senator Denton) was perceived as rich and aloof: Projective polling suggested his rival focus on Denton'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 as a legitimate awareness exercise that led to a more informed, if more, embittered contest.

Flanagan (1996) makes several significant criticisms of the above philosophical approaches. Both Kantianism and utilitarianism are vague; Kantian and utilitarian arguments occur, for example, on both sides of the abortion controversy, and the key problem is therefore that abstraction needs embodying in coherent, workable precepts to guide actions. The respective theoretical variables of duty and happiness need grounding in more precise values to give direction. Utilitarians are constantly debating the meaning of what the goods are and how they are ordered to maximize the greatest good overall, whereas what Kantians have trouble doing is articulating the categorical obligations in a detailed way.

THE CONTRACT VIEW OF ETHICS

Utilitarianism has had many critics from its very beginnings as a coherent philosophy (as Cardinal Newman wrote in the nineteenth century, "The philosophy of Utility, you may say, Gentlemen, has at least done its work; and I grant it,—it aimed low, but it has fulfilled its aim"). For example, Rawls (1972) points out how the mantra of the greatest good for the greatest number could lead to the sacrifice of individual liberty: indeed, communism itself could be seen as constructed on such an argument, 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–as if in fact there were a societal contract in operation between individuals, institutions, and society. These contractarian perspectives posit a bargain struck with each other 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 conflict? But 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 fraud and fakery—the extent of manipulated imagery in political marketing that could easily be called deception, such as the controversial George W. Bush subliminal television advertisement that flashed "DemocRATS" at the boundary of perception. Thus a University of Oklahoma study of over 2000 political advertisements from the 1950s onward found that more than 15% were manipulated in some way (USA Today, May 23, 1996). And a study of the 1996 presidential campaign found that 28% of 188 advertisements analyzed revealed questionable use of technology: "news conferences that were never held, debates that never took place, use of audio or video tricks to stereotype or ridicule opponents" (Johnson, 1997). The number of ads using altered images, according to the National Science Foundation, rose from 13% of those made 1950–1962 to 70% post 1980 (USA Today, May 23, 1996). Such manipulation has become customary—the lowering of George Bush's voice in a 1988 advertisement would seem to be rather typical. In another case a Senator was actually dying but sufficient shots of his reelection announcement were pasted together to hide the fact (O'Shaughnessy, 1990). Image manipulation can of course be quite open. The appeal in this case is not to reason; rather the target is being invited to share in a mutual fantasy of vilification as co-partners in the production of hyperbolic meaning. These techniques include "morphing," such as in a 1996 California ad that merged the face of child murderer Richard Allen Davies with that of incumbent Vic Fazio; another ad ran Davies with Democrat Walter Capps as a kind of double ticket (Johnson, 1997).

These are clear instances 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—and there is certainly an argument for saying that this belongs to a separate conceptual realm—then its ethical critics must be heeded. Thus in the London Times (July 4, 2000) Michael Gove criticized what he called the manipulation of public spending announcements by the government: "the practice of double-counting, or triple-announcing, by which rises in ex-

penditure are trumpeted, re-trumpeted and then orchestrated again for brass band and pulled strings, has created a deep rooted cynicism towards all government initiatives. . . . When Alan Milburn announced . . . that ward sisters would be given £5000 to improve their patients' environment it was welcomed . . . but six weeks later the Department of Health informed hospital trusts that the policy was to be funded by a cut in their capital allocation." Another example was the introduction of "nurse consultancies"—for which however no new money was forthcoming. This critique is typical of many that have appeared in the British press with increasing regularity—and all relaying similar examples. Another of numerous instances is when the British government chose to include the compulsory tuition fees levied on the parents of students (an amount that within the next three years will reach £1.2 billion) as part of public investment in higher education (Times Higher Education Supplement, November 24, 2000).The functionaries of the British state have jettisoned their old bureaucratic language for the new hyperbole, but reading it—as in this example—leaves one perhaps no wiser than before: "Mr. Milburn will be creating a top-level NHS modernisation board to drive through the changes in the NHS. In a move designed to overturn traditional Whitehall bureaucracy and hierarchy, board membership will include the brightest and best modernisers in the health service. The changes signal a vote of confidence in frontline clinicians and managers who are consistently trailblazing new ideas. These are the people at the rockface with the experience and enthusiasm to drive home the modernisation programme" (Times, February 23, 2001).

No contractarian perspective on political ethics could accept this kind of institutionalized evasiveness, where governments repeatedly violate their side of the bargain that is assumed to be implicit between citizen and state. Problems, insofar as they are solved, are solved rhetorically. Perhaps politicians actually come to believe their own verbalizing and confuse communication with action. Political efficacy comes to reside exclusively in communication skill, arguing away real-world problems as they multiply.

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: There is no real incentive for them to do so now that marketing can perform the persuasion task. The argument is that marketing makes redundant the kind of proselytizing organization that Ellul (1973) reckons to be central to the learned commitment to a cause. People internalize adherence by participating, therefore engaging in self-persuasion and retrospectively justifying actions, and the lack of active participation in politics today (Richardson, 1995) makes for a superficiality of support, quickly lost, and no direct link between governors and governed. An extreme case of this was Forza Italia: "Slickly presented, adopting American political techniques in a

context devoid of American restraints, Berlusconi used television with a skill that made the enigmatic arts of the Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti as redundant a political weapon as the letters of Cicero . . . Veneziani explains that Berlusconi built his instant movement, Forza Italia, on a base which was both apolitical and non-ideological. Its structure is not that of a political party but of a network of football supporters' clubs"(Times Literary Supplement, January 6, 1995). People are less likely to be involved in politics at a personal level: Britain's Labour Party found it could create a substantial "credit card" membership through advertising, but it was also later to discover the fickleness of its new membership base.

Another area of potential interest to contractarians, which flows out of this, is the changing nature of the individual's relationship with the state. Perhaps there is a loss of dignity if governments come to be seen as just big service organizations, and an erosion of loyalties and ties is a consequence of being taught at the aggregate level to be consumers in everything we do. Political marketing may be viewed as involving this learning, at a higher level of abstraction, in which we are teaching people to think of themselves as political consumers, and perhaps, merely as political consumers.

It would perhaps seem natural to discuss negative advertising also here, and present it too as a form of contractual violation. In fact, the ethical argument over negative advertising is a complex one and does not admit any easy resolution. As Banker argues, argument and argument form 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." What though is clear, as discussed earlier, is that the effect of negative advertising is to reinforce partisanship and remove the political center: That may be the effect, and it is presumably sometimes the intent as well. It is this aspect contractarians might object to on the ground that the tactic may represent a deliberate seeking of the self-disenfranchisement of large numbers of people, thus undermining the ethos of democracy.

COMMUNITARIANISM AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Communitarianism locates virtue within the context of some 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 rather than 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 given to the export of American political marketing techniques in different countries, with notable rejection in for example Greece and Scandinavia, although Johnson (1997) makes clear this is more a rejection of the idea of American-influenced elections than of the ethos of political marketing per se. Tradition legitimates, and the American tradition is to place an almost nonnegotiable value on freedom of speech: It is this value 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 (in the U.K., for example, expenditure per parliamentary seat is limited to around £5000).

Community tradition is one locus for virtue ethics, but it is not the only one, because some philosophers have criticized community both for conservatism and excessive belief in the merit and possibility of communal consensus. Organizations are also viewed as relevant communities, with role relationships generating obligations. These philosophers reject notions of hard and fast rules: The key thing is to sponsor a cultural climate supportive of ethical behavior: "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.

These contemporary moral theories—utilitarian, contractarian, virtue-theoretical (communitarianism) have focused attention on significant aspects of moral life, but they have perhaps obscured 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 an obscurantism: there is still a need to know what are the key moral issues today and what magnitude of importance is attached to them: "I do

not believe that morality has a nature that can be revealed by moral philosophy—better to talk of actual and possible worlds and visions of human flourishing therein" (O'Shaughnessy, 1995).

MOTIVATION TO COMPLY

For Benedict Spinoza any system of ethics must be internalized and not just verbally endorsed. The key is motivation. Under the deontological position and utilitarianism, motivation arises from the appeal of reason and from a wish to behave in an ethically sound way. Contractarians perceive it as elevated self-interest, virtue theorists as the emotions arising out of community-based custom, value, and tradition.

But 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 needed emotional commitment, because emotions engender, energize and direct response: Otherwise expedient "short-termism" will rule. He claims that, in the long run, ethical conduct, by building up trust, is linked to success. In fact it is a fallacy to divorce emotion from reason as completely as is so often done, because, for example, 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 said, you get a virtuous adult by training a child 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 internalize this emotional adherence to ethical values. It is not, however, easy to think of a way of achieving this, because unethical behavior has sometimes been rewarded—in 1988 for example, Banker argues "Dukakis was skilfully portrayed as a weak, liberal, do-gooder lacking in common sense. The man who demonstrated moral restraint paid for that restraint by losing the election" (the name "Willie Horton" is evidence enough here).

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 counterattack from opponents, who now have access to instant rebuttal facilities via the Internet. Second, all political marketing may be subject to arbitration by an independent source they cannot control, the free media, with its ad-watches, etc. Media can fix a maligned interpretation on a text that is quite different from that which the party or candidate intended—for example, when the Canadian press accused the Tory Party of attacking a facial defor-

mity 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.

To undertake political marketing is to undertake a journey but not to control its destiny. The system may perhaps be seen as possessing an in-built self-corrective mechanism in which extremes of unethical behavior, or even as in the Chretien case the mere suspicion of them, will be punished. For a political marketing text stands in its own right as an autonomous political event with independent political consequences; it is not merely a paid messenger or 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 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 claims (strongly disputed) that he had abandoned his wife and children years before, etc. But See still won: A negative ad is as much as statement about the values of the attacker as the defender, and extremes have a tendency to alienate. Yet, as Johnson 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 (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), and this coerced privatization 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 behavior 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 U.S. 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% since 1995. Consequently, it is suggested that circumstance actively compels resort to marketing methods where the media abrogates 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." Context prescribes ritual 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 would 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 favor 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 product that is exchanged for votes: It is important because any publicly visible persona is probably perceived as symbolic of values of one kind or another, and in practice it is less easy therefore to create some neat dichotomy between *character* and *issue* and declare the one off-limits to public curiosity.

These points are a valuable corrective to the tendency in much of the literature to dismiss negative advertising as an unqualified loss for American public culture, but they are not an entirely satisfactory answer to the critics of political negativity: by the early 1990s 50 states with 62% of the voting age population suffered full negative campaigns (Ansolabhere & Iyengar, 1995), and negativity on that scale probably needs a stronger defense than this.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism resolves ethical conflicts between one culture and another by accepting that ethical standards are relative to culture (O'Shaughnessy, 1991). But, while 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., institutionalized bribery and "kleptocracy"). 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 well-being, honesty and justice as of secondary concern. This cannot be acceptable." In a sense, to tolerate all is in fact to believe in nothing.

But for the extreme cultural relativist, American political marketing might indeed present no problems at all—for surely that's America, part of its gaudy, vigorous way of being: Though the relativists might balk at its export to countries with no such tradition, on the grounds that it represents an alien cultural graft. But, there may indeed though be some merit in permitting elements of cultural relativist critique to creep into the ethical analysis of political marketing. The different political traditions of different countries must be seen as embodying value systems that differ but contain an internal coherence, so that to change one variable in an integrated system is to change the interrelationships of all its components. Thus elements that might be objectionable on an individual basis, like the role of money in American politics, may be justified as a structured part of some overall workable pattern. Political marketing is pre-eminently American, in invention and operation, conceived and energized by American culture, values, and tradition. First, although speech in America has never been absolute—witness the current laws on hate speech or earlier generations' prohibition on pornography, the bias toward this as a desirable social end has been strong, with some support in the constitution, even to the extent of the American Civil Liberties Union defending the rights of Nazis to demonstrate. This might be contrasted with its U.K. counterpart Liberty (formerly NCCL), which has never defended this or any other freedom of the far or indeed near right.

The use of money to purchase political persuasion is part of this tolerance, 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: Michael Huffington lost $20 million in his bid to become a senator for California (Daily Telegraph, June 7, 2000), and as for another multimillionaire "the more he spent, the more obscure he got" (Daily Telegraph, June 9, 2000). Another American tradition is to recognize that power in a democracy is not only a function of the numbers of those who feel, but of those who feel most intensely: 80% of Americans have consistently favored more gun control, but the 20% who oppose this are vehemently opposed, and so far they have usually gotten their way (O'Shaughnessy, 1990). In a sense this represents elements of a stakeholder approach to social ownership of American politics, an approach that is manifest also in the power of political action committees in the American polity: In the last U.S. presidential election, 150,000 pro-choice women were contacted by the pro-choice movement in Pennsylvania alone (Independent, October 27, 2000).

Moreover another historic feature has been the acceptance of a relatively free market in most things, including religion, as Moore (1994) outlines in his book, and this is combined with the near universalization

of the business ethos; as Moore argues, churches from the early days in America learned to sell themselves. The transfer of a marketplace ethos, that is, conceptualization and techniques, applies to many areas of American life, where in other countries commercialization might be perceived as some kind of devaluation. John Corzine, who paid $140 per voter to win the 2000 Democratic Senate primary in New Jersey (Daily Telegraph, June 9, 2000) used similar marketing techniques to those other wealthy candidates Forbes and Perot before him, "bombarding voters with television and billboard advertisements and showering down contributions on every level of his state's Democratic Party machine . . . " Toward the end of the presidential election itself Republicans had made 62 million phone calls, issued 110 million pieces of direct mail, and spent $40 million on getting supporters to the polls (Daily Telegraph, October 31, 2000).

Yet it is possible that a cultural relativist with an educated knowledge of American history would claim to see a coherence here with other aspects of American life and tradition: The amounts are exceptional, but the practice is 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 are bereft of 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 criticizing her giving birth outside wedlock.

CONCLUSIONS

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 process 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.

But the overall direction of the ethical critique is clear—that it is an error to proclaim a general anathema against political marketing and the key generic practices such as negative advertising most commonly

associated with it. What is morally questionable is not so much the genre and its derivatives, but particularized individual cases of application, the specific instance that embodies the idea of excess; toxic individual negative campaigns, legislative seats merely purchased, allegation and video image merely fabricated. But utilitarians, objective relativists, cultural relativists, and communitarians would place the balance in favor 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 and not a cause of the social and economic phenomena of these times. And freedom of speech, including economic speech, would be an argument of particular interest to communitarians.

But against these 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. There is no final resting place for the ethical debates on political marketing.

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