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Political Marketing and Social Media

Marketing polityczny i media społecznościowe

• **Abstract** •

This paper explores the evolving subject of political marketing, which integrates principles of commercial marketing into the political sphere to strategically influence voter behavior, shape public discourse and guide institutional processes. While political marketing draws heavily on concepts such as market orientation and customer satisfaction, it diverges from commercial marketing by addressing the unique complexities of democratic systems. The rise of digital technologies – particularly the Internet and social media – has transformed political marketing, enabling direct, personalized and data-driven communication between politicians and citizens. These platforms have expanded political engagement, amplified campaign messaging and facilitated the spread of cultural tools like memes. However, they also introduce challenges related to misinformation, reputational risk and the sustainability of democratic processes. The study examines theoretical foundations, key definitions, and real-world applications of political marketing, with a focus on how digital media have reshaped campaign strategies and citizen interaction. Ultimately, the paper highlights the dual role of political marketing as both a tool for engagement and a force that must be managed responsibly within democratic societies.

• **Abstrakt** •

W niniejszym artykule poddano analizie ewoluujący obszar marketingu politycznego, który integruje zasady marketingu komercyjnego ze sferą polityki w celu strategicznego wpływania na zachowania wyborców, kształtowania dyskursu publicznego oraz kierowania procesami instytucjonalnymi. Choć marketing polityczny czerpie w dużej mierze z takich koncepcji jak orientacja rynkowa czy satysfakcja klienta, różni się od marketingu komercyjnego, ponieważ odnosi się do unikalnych złożoności systemów demokratycznych. Rozwój technologii cyfrowych – zwłaszcza Internetu i mediów społecznościowych – przekształcił marketing polityczny, umożliwiając bezpośrednią, spersonalizowaną i opartą na danych komunikację między politykami a obywatelami. Platformy te poszerzyły zaangażowanie polityczne, wzmocniły przekaz kampanii oraz ułatwiły rozpowszechnianie narzędzi kulturowych, takich jak memy. Jednocześnie wprowadzają one wyzwania związane z dezinformacją, ryzykiem reputacyjnym oraz trwałością procesów demokratycznych. W artykule omówiono teoretyczne podstawy, kluczowe definicje oraz praktyczne zastosowania marketingu politycznego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem tego, w jaki sposób media cyfrowe przekształciły strategie kampanii i interakcje z obywatelami. Ostatecznie podkreślono podwójną rolę marketingu

politycznego – jako narzędzia zaangażowania
oraz siły, którą należy odpowiedzialnie zarządzać
w ramach społeczeństw demokratycznych.

Introduction

Political marketing is an evolving interdisciplinary field that blends principles of
commercial marketing with the political process. Initially grounded in concepts
from business and consumer marketing, political marketing has since developed
its own theoretical framework to address the unique characteristics of political
environments. At its core, political marketing involves the strategic use of com-
munication, branding and public opinion research to satisfy voter needs, shape
political behavior and influence institutional processes. With the advent of the
Internet and the rise of social media, political marketing has undergone significant
transformation, enabling more direct, personalized and data-driven engagement
between political actors and citizens. This paper explores the concept of political
marketing, its theoretical underpinnings and its contemporary applications, with
particular focus on the influence of digital platforms on political communication
and campaign strategies.

What is political marketing?

Political marketing is a term that involves the connections between commercial
marketing and political context. Historically, definitions of political marketing have
closely aligned with those found in commercial marketing literature (Ormrod,
Henneberg, & O'Shaughnessy, 2013, pp. 4, 9). There are numerous contemporary
definitions of commercial marketing, yet they all emphasize one fundamental point.
The essence of marketing lies in satisfying customer needs, as this is regarded as the
most effective way for a company to achieve its objectives (Płoński, 2003, p. 127).

Recent theoretical advancement within the discipline of political marketing have
emphasized fundamental distinctions between political and commercial context. As
a result, there is a growing imperative to establish a definition of political marketing
that is grounded in political marketing theory itself (Ormrod et al., 2013, pp. 4, 9).

At its core, political marketing involves applying theories and concepts from business, services and non-profit marketing to politics. A key element is the marketing orientation – a market-focused approach that represents the most advanced stage of market management, moving beyond simple product or sales orientation (Nowak, 2012, p. 39). It is well-established that political marketing derives its theoretical and practical foundations from commercial marketing principles, appropriating its methodological apparatus and conceptual framework. Philippe J. Maarek articulated the subsequent differentiation between political communication and consumer products (1995, pp. 25–28).

Political marketing, while shaped by the political system's mechanisms, also significantly influences the behavior of politicians, citizens and the functioning of institutions and political processes. The aim is to defend both politics and marketing – as a tool that incorporates modern methods of communication and public opinion research, including media, the Internet, advertising, and public relations. Whether these tools are used in line with democratic ethical standards largely depends on the political culture of elites and society. While political marketing may sometimes frame politics as a spectacle, it does not strip it of substance. The political message remains multilayered, reflecting the complexity of policy programs across all areas of state activity (Ulicka, 2010, pp. 12–13). As a result, political marketing serves as both an influential force and a reflective mechanism within democratic
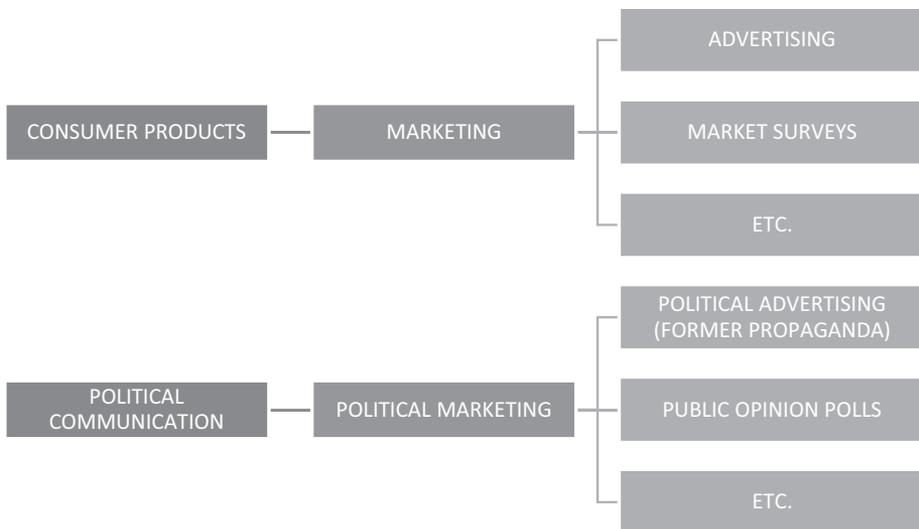

Figure 1. Consumer Products and Political Communication
Source: Maarek, 1995, p. 28.

systems, shaping actors and processes while preserving the substantive complexity of political discourse.

Robert P. Ormrod conducted a comprehensive review of political marketing definitions, discussing the evolution of understanding this term and identifying five significant perspectives on the analyzed subject matter. Beginning with the approach presented by Shama (1976), who posited that marketing represents the approach whereby political hopefuls and their concepts are targeted toward citizens to fulfill their prospective demands and consequently earn their endorsement for the specific candidate and ideas being promoted. Another perspective was offered by Lock and Harris (1996), who advocated the following position: political marketing is the analysis of interactive processes between political organizations and their external context, as well as among political actors themselves, with special emphasis on how these entities position themselves and communicate strategically. Political marketing works to create, preserve and improve lasting political partnerships that serve society's interests, allowing both individual political figures and institutions to reach their aims through shared exchanges and keeping their pledges to one another – this represents Henneberg's (2002) understanding of the studied phenomenon. The American Marketing Association (AMA, 2007), in turn, conceptualizes political marketing as marketing strategies developed to sway targeted voter segments toward supporting a specific candidate, political party, or policy proposal at the polls. The final proposition is Winther-Nielsen's (2011) perspective – political marketing deals with the two-way trading of benefits that occurs between political organizations and their external environments. Ormrod argues that the issue of defining political marketing remains unresolved (2012, pp. 4–5). His approach is entirely comprehensible, as it is challenging to adapt a definition to a fluid phenomenon which political marketing appears to be. All attempts and definitions of this concept should be continuously updated – particularly due to the evolution of new media such as social media platforms. These media constitute an element driving change, serving as tools of political marketing and potentially becoming sources of subsidiary instruments – including new forms of communication such as, for example, short-form video content.

Marek Jeziński claims that political marketing is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that involves a complex interplay between tangible results and intangible, symbolic values such as authority and prestige. It is characterized by processes that are often ambiguous and difficult to measure, drawing on both formal and informal sources of power within the political sphere. The success of political marketing strategies relies on their ability to adapt creatively to changing political circumstances, institutional structures, and the expectations of political "clients",

namely, voters and stakeholders. Modern political marketing integrates traditional campaign tactics with innovative approaches, making it a key component in shaping public perception, building party image and sustaining competition in evolving political environments (Jeziński, 2004, pp. 9–15).

Political marketing fundamentally applies commercial marketing principles – such as market orientation and customer-centric strategies – to the political arena, emphasizing the satisfaction of voter needs as essential to achieving political objectives. Although it shares theoretical and methodological foundations with commercial marketing, recent scholarship highlights important distinctions arising from the unique mechanisms of political systems and the normative demands of democratic culture. As a dynamic and multifaceted discipline, political marketing not only shapes the strategies of political actors but also reflects and preserves the substantive complexity of policy discourse while adapting continuously to innovations in media and communication technologies.

Popularization of the Internet

The development of the Internet was initially associated with hopes for the emergence of a new public sphere, where free and unlimited access to diverse content would foster open debate and democratic participation. However, as online communication evolved, scholars began to observe the rise of so-called "echo chambers", where users increasingly seek out information aligning with their pre-existing beliefs, avoiding opposing viewpoints and reinforcing cognitive biases (Szpunar, 2014, p. 71). The emergence of echo chambers has significantly influenced political marketing strategies, prompting campaigners to tailor their messages to highly segmented audiences in order to maximize persuasion within ideologically homogeneous groups.

In recent years, the Internet has become an increasingly important tool for political communication. Its technological progress and influence on commercial marketing have significantly shaped how politicians interact with the public. The Internet has turned into a vast "rumor mill", enabling traditional media to update information more quickly and shifting communication from a "pull" model, where users seek out information, to a "push" model, where content reaches recipients effortlessly. This transformation greatly increases the speed and reach of political messaging. The Internet played a vital role in Barack Obama's successful 2008 presidential campaign and was also used effectively by French politician Ségolène Royal during the 2007 elections. The exponential growth of Internet usage is illustrated by the sharp rise in the number of websites – around 700 million worldwide in

July 2009, nearly double the amount in 2005 (Maarek, 2011, pp. 158–159). This expansion is not only quantitative but also qualitative, as ongoing improvements make the Internet increasingly valuable for both commercial services and political marketing.

The Web has transformed political communication by enabling real-time audience engagement and connecting various media formats, such as live blogging, forums, and social media platforms. Political blogs, especially those led by influential commentators, have created new communicative spaces, making political discourse more dynamic and accessible. The analysis of UK political blogs from 2010 highlights how blogs serve as markers for digital activity, reflecting evolving language, themes, and personas within the online political landscape (Richardson, Parry, & Corner, 2013, pp. 74–75). Digital platforms have become essential in political marketing, enabling targeted communication and immediate feedback between politicians and voters. Online media now plays a crucial role in shaping political narratives and influencing public opinion, making the integration of web-based tools vital for effective campaign strategies. However, blogs have now lost much of their former significance as a key instrument in political communication.

Digital communication tools have fundamentally transformed political public relations by enabling interactive, relationship-focused approaches that facilitate direct voter engagement. The concept of interactivity in digital media allows political campaigns to connect with constituents through nonlinear information pathways, while social media integration provides unprecedented opportunities for direct communication without traditional media filters. This digital revolution represents a shift toward more democratized political communication that enhances dialogic engagement between political organizations and their key publics (Sweetser, 2011, pp. 294–295). The evolution of political marketing reflects a shift from mass media approaches of the 1950s and 1960s to advanced digital strategies. Contemporary political communication increasingly uses personalized, one-to-one methods and digital tools, mirroring changes seen in commercial marketing (Maarek, 2014, pp. 13–15). It is important to acknowledge that the Internet presents not only significant opportunities but also numerous risks. Engaging in virtual environments requires a high degree of caution, particularly in situations where the reputation of a political party or individual politician may be vulnerable to harm.

The 2015 General Election in the United Kingdom illustrated how the Internet, particularly social media, facilitated greater participation in public debate from marginalized parties and citizens, even as traditional print and television media maintained primary influence over campaign discourse. Political parties responded to shifts in digital culture by incorporating new technologies – such as social media

platforms, email, and websites – into their campaign strategies, with the Conservative Party exemplifying innovative use of digital data and online communication. Case studies from this period reveal the significant impact of grassroots social media engagement and underscore the central role of digital technologies in shaping campaign tactics and public involvement during the election cycle (Ridge-Newman & Mitchell, 2016, pp. 99–100).

This evolution marks the culmination of the Internet's transformation into a cornerstone of political marketing. As digital platforms continue to grow in sophistication and reach, their integration into political strategy is no longer optional but essential for engaging voters, shaping narratives, and navigating the complexities of modern political discourse.

The social media era

The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the way political messages are communicated and received. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become powerful tools for politicians to engage directly with voters, bypassing traditional media channels. This new era has reshaped political marketing, making it more immediate, personalized, and data-driven than ever before.

Uploading photos and videos has become the most habitual activity for many social media users, as advances in technology have made sharing large amounts of data simple and accessible. For a significant number of users, media sharing is perceived as a more effective form of self-expression compared to traditional written updates, with activities ranging from selfies to livestreaming facilitating deeper social connections (Mc Mahon, 2019, p. 47). Social media platforms are thus characterized by their focus on visual communication and the continual integration of digital interactions into users' everyday lives and as a result they may be effective tool for politicians.

Social media platforms have emerged as vital spaces for storytelling and self-expression, enabling users to construct personal narratives and forge social bonds. This process of storytelling is essential for human connection and identity formation. Digital tools do not merely host narratives – they actively shape the ways individuals relate to one another and to broader communities (Sujon, 2021, pp. 11–12). Thus, social media is characterized by its dual function: facilitating both personal expression and collective engagement.

The messaging function of social media, though often overshadowed by its public and visible aspects, plays a crucial role in private communication and psychological

dynamics. This feature, typically referred to as private or direct messaging, allows for discreet, intimate exchanges that contrast with the more visible forms of interaction emphasized in other chapters. While under-researched due to its private nature, messaging significantly influences how users connect and communicate (Mc Mahon, 2019, p. 61). Social media platforms, therefore, are characterized not only by their visibility and reach but also by the nuanced ways in which they enable interpersonal engagement.

While discussing social media we should also address an issue of memes. Memes represent fundamental units of cultural information that are transmitted verbally or through repeated action from one mind to another, functioning as easily transferable ideas that create collective identification when large groups of users engage with particular images or slogans. Contemporary meme culture demonstrates how digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of cultural practices and ideas, with memes serving as symbolic packets that travel easily across diverse populations due to their inherent capacity for imitation and adaptation (Sujon, 2021, pp. 16–17). Moreover, digital memes manifest across various social media platforms – as GIFs and image macros on Twitter, text-based posts on Reddit or Facebook, and short videos on YouTube, highlighting their multifaceted role in online cultural communication (Foster, 2017, pp. 133–135). Nowadays, memes also function as strategic elements within contemporary political marketing, where their rapid spread and emotional resonance are leveraged to shape public opinion and mobilize support but can also increase popularity. In this case we can consider political marketing as a part of entertainment industry.

Currently, critical perspectives reveal how power within digital networks operates through symbolic and material means, with user interactions continuously generating affective data that both enable personal agency and facilitate systematic exploitation. This connective logic transforms every engagement – whether a simple click or shared content – into a commodifiable asset that obscures underlying ideological structures. The ambivalent nature of new media renders each digital action simultaneously a lived experience and a mechanism of economic valorization (Sujon, 2021, pp. 79–80).

Social media platforms offer a range of affordances that can be strategically leveraged in political marketing. Their capacity for direct and personalized communication facilitates more immediate and targeted voter engagement. The prominence of visual content and narrative construction supports the development of persuasive political identities and emotionally resonant messaging. Furthermore, the viral potential of memes and symbolic content enhances the dissemination of political discourse and the mobilization of public support.

The use of social media for political marketing purposes

Political marketing is changing while adapting to the social media era. Contemporary political discourse has witnessed a convergence with entertainment media, wherein political actors strategically design their public performances to maximize audience engagement and societal appeal.

Digital media has become crucial for modern political communication, enabling politicians to reach a wide range of audiences through websites and social media. Politicians' websites serve as key hubs, directing users to various digital resources and encouraging engagement from both supporters and the general public. Social media platforms and services like YouTube further broaden the reach, attracting even those not initially interested in politics and amplifying campaign messages through user-generated content. This strategy notably contributed to the effectiveness of Obama's 2008 campaign (Maarek, 2014, pp. 18–19). Modern political campaigns have increasingly harnessed the Internet and social media as professionalized marketing tools, exemplified by the extensive use of online platforms for fundraising and electorate mobilization during the 2008 and 2012 US presidential elections and analogous digital strategies in European contests such as the 2007 French, 2010 UK, and 2011 Polish elections. This shift reflects a broader mediatization of politics – originating with television's rise in the 1960s and evolving through the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 – where campaign messaging is carefully tailored to follow media logic and engage voters across diverse digital networks (Ahmad & Popa, 2014, p. 98).

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, have become integral to contemporary society, profoundly impacting both the volume of users and the amount of time spent online. Their growing significance makes them unavoidable in the strategic planning of businesses and political entities. Over time, social networks have not only amplified the reach of marketing and political campaigns but have also sparked critical societal changes, as seen during events like the Arab Spring. However, the expansion of social media has also introduced new challenges, sometimes failing to sustain democratic progress even in regions where initial positive changes were observed (Merlă, 2018, pp. 326–328). The use of social media for political marketing purposes has significantly expanded the reach and influence of political campaigns, enabling rapid mobilization and direct communication with the public. However, this expansion also brings challenges, as the same platforms that facilitate political engagement can struggle to support long-term democratic development.

On the other hand, digital media has significantly increased the visibility and vulnerability of politicians by rapidly disseminating their smallest mistakes to vast

online audiences. The widespread replication of such incidents on platforms like YouTube and social networks intensifies public scrutiny and often forces political figures to address controversies almost immediately. This phenomenon not only affects electoral candidates but also shapes public discourse around political decisions and government actions (Maarek, 2014, pp. 19–20). Moreover, global social media platforms facilitate the cross-border circulation of politicians' missteps in real time, thereby amplifying reputational risks by exposing even minor errors to international audiences and intensifying demands for immediate accountability (McCoy, 2017, pp. 245–247). Moreover, social media's transcendence of physical borders grants citizens unprecedented first-person insights into political events, thereby elevating public expectations for transparency and accountability (Kuru & Pasek, 2017, pp. 243–245).

As stated above, social media platforms have transformed political communication, enabling candidates and political parties to reach and engage with wider audiences. The use of these platforms facilitates the exchange of ideas between diverse groups, mobilizes first-time and previously disengaged voters, and allows lesser-known candidates to gain visibility. However, despite their positive influence, social media has also contributed to the spread of extremist views and hate speech, highlighting challenges in managing the impact of digital channels on public discourse (Merlă, 2018, p. 329). Overall, social media's integration into politics underscores both its democratic potential and the new complexities it brings to political life.

Social media has revolutionized political marketing by enabling immediate, personalized, and data-driven engagement, allowing politicians to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and connect directly with diverse audiences. While platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube amplify campaign messages and mobilize new and previously disengaged voters, they also accelerate the spread of extremist content and increase reputational risks through rapid dissemination of missteps. Ultimately, the integration of social media into politics underscores its democratic potential for participation and dialogue, while also introducing complex challenges related to accountability, misinformation and the long-term sustainability of democratic processes.

Conclusions

Political marketing has become an indispensable component of modern democratic systems, shaping how political actors communicate, engage, and compete. While rooted in commercial marketing principles, it has adapted to the political sphere by addressing the complexities of democratic participation and public discourse.

The digital revolution, especially the proliferation of social media, has dramatically transformed political marketing by enabling real-time, interactive and personalized communication. These platforms not only amplify political messages but also democratize participation, giving voice to previously marginalized groups. However, they also present new challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, increased reputational risks and questions about the sustainability of digital democracy. As political marketing continues to evolve, it must balance technological innovation with ethical responsibility to support transparent, inclusive and accountable political engagement.

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