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SOME IMPLICATIONS OF MARKETING FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE

Last fall, I took POSC 110g: Ideology and Political Conflict. In this course, we discussed, among other things, efforts by candidates for public office to create name awareness and persuade voters to favor their candidacy.

Although voting ought to be a high involvement activity, the reality is that many actual and potential voters do not spend much time following the news and investigating the views of different candidates. Therefore, it is often a struggle for candidates to come to the attention of even those voters who most share their policy preferences. This is a problem not much different from smaller share brands that are not well known among consumers. Name awareness can be generated to some extent by advertising. Some candidates have access to considerable budgets—whether by spending large amounts of money themselves and/or by strong fundraising—and can advertise extensively. This is especially the case for many incumbent office holders who are able to raise a large “war chest” from donations to their campaigns. Candidates who are not currently in office and are not otherwise well known, however, often have difficulty raising enough money to buy extensive advertising and must find other ways to generate name awareness. In recent years, social media has become increasingly important.

Candidates who run for President and Vice President of the U.S.—once they have reached a certain level of support in public opinion polls—will tend to get some coverage on television and in other media. Candidates for statewide office—such as Governor or U.S. senator—also frequently get considerable coverage. Yet, some offices are—such as Governor—are inherently more “interesting”

than seemingly more mundane offices of State Treasurer and Secretary of State and, as a result, there will usually be less coverage here.

Social media can both be a source of influence in and of itself and as a means to “amplify” conventional media coverage. Individuals can both express their views and post links to articles supporting their favored candidates on Facebook and Twitter. Although a voter may have many online friends with different political views, a disproportionate number often hold similar values and may thus be receptive. Even if a social media user does not influence all of his or her friends, he or she can have a large influence by those who tend to hold similar views and trust his or her judgment.

Using social media for local elections can be challenging since, nowadays, many people have friends across the country—and many even across the world. Because local news generally receives less attention than national news, candidates at the local level may have even more of a problem generating name awareness and getting out their views. In many cases, these candidates end up relying on lower tech methods such as signs on their supporters’ yards and strategically placed signs often made with low budgets.

In order to capture potential voters’ attention, it is essential for advertising and other campaign communication to be able to break through the “clutter” of other advertising and distractions in the voter’s environment. Vivid images with strong emotional appeal are often used to attack the opponent. For example, a pro-life candidate may show pictures illustrating the brutality of late term abortions; a candidate who opposes the incumbent’s policy of supporting a repressive foreign government may show images of human rights violations. It has been found—both in marketing generally and in politics—that consumers often place more emphasis on negative—rather than positive—information, so there is often more of an emphasis on attacking the opponent. Still, of course, the candidate wants to highlight favorable aspects of his or her candidacy, including such aspects as military history and success as an entrepreneur.

Many candidates will find that they have no real potential to appeal to some of the voters and that can count on the support on another group. Thus, budgets are often spent on reaching the “undecideds,” whose votes are up for grabs—whether independents or voters who tend to vote for one party but will occasionally vote for a candidate of the other party. This is an example of segmentation and target marketing.

Political elections differ from marketing activity in general in that elections usually represent a “winner takes all approach.” Thus, the emphasis is more on getting a majority vote than on maximizing the “market share” of votes. In U.S. Presidential elections, the outcome of the election is determined by the Electoral College rather—where most states cast all their votes for the winning candidate. This means that some states become more critical than others. California, for example, is likely to receive less advertising since the state swings heavily to the Democratic side. If a Democrat cannot win California without advertising in California, he or she will probably not have much of a chance of winning the national election.

References

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