
Political communication has been evolving through much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, beginning with propaganda during the First World War and carrying forward to today’s strong emphasis on political marketing and brand identification. Margaret Scammell, in her latest book, *Consumer Democracy: The Marketing of Politics,* offers students of political communication hope in regard to the impact of political marketing on citizen participation in elections. Scammell argues optimistically that, far from contributing to the crisis in public communication (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Negrine, 2002), political marketing is now an entrenched feature of competitive democracies and should not be viewed with disdain. She suggests that we should alter our perception and attempt to improve our understanding of political marketing and create more market-literate citizens who can distinguish between bad campaigns and those that encourage citizen participation and enable accountability. Scammell further argues that there are important political lessons to be learned from marketing—namely that enjoyment matters, as does what citizens think and feel.

This well-written book draws on a focused and well-articulated literature review that places the notion of “consumer democracy” at the intersection of the practical reality and democratic ideal of modern elections (p. 6)—between a focus on the individual (party, candidate, voter) and one on system-wide effects and democratic ideals. In six chapters, Scammell constructs a considered conceptualization of our current understanding of political marketing and its effect on citizens as consumers of political brands. She provides us with empirical evidence of the success of branding politicians such as Tony Blair and George W. Bush.

In Chapter 1, Scammell provides the rationale for her book and why political marketing matters. In particular she focuses on the importance of marketing literacy in relation to normative ideals of democracy. She also highlights a strong commitment to the analytical value of the marketing approach to political communication research. Chapter 2 focuses on the practitioners of political marketing arguing that their work has been largely neglected in academic scholarship. She shines a bright spotlight on the profession and how it is transforming the way politics is practiced. The next three chapters look at the practical application of branding in campaigns and governing, and examine what works and how political marketers assess effectiveness using marketing metrics. She uses the examples of Tony Blair and George W. Bush to underscore the effectiveness of commercial marketing as a political communication technique. Finally, in Chapter 6 Scammell places the practical into the broader theoretical frame of markets and democracy, arguing that they are twinned and in a state of permanent tension (p. 10).
It is hard to dispute Scammell's latest contribution to the field of political communication, but it can leave the reader wondering where to go next in terms of making her hybrid approach to political marketing a reality. In addition, her theoretical approach does not adequately capture the influence of manipulative power in a democracy, which can shape the very wants and desires of the public (Lukes, 2005). If we accept her claim that there is room for optimism in making political marketing fit the democratic ideals of inclusion and participation, what is the process of building awareness among citizens to distinguish between good and bad marketing campaigns? Scammell rejects the notion that the winning imperative in politics does not always need to clash with more normative democratic behaviour. She points to the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, which has been widely regarded as a campaign that energized activism, provided emotionality, and encouraged participation. There is an inherent difficulty in her example of the Obama campaign in terms of sustained public engagement in the public space. The Obama administration largely failed to sustain and encourage democratic participation while in office. In fact, youth participation in the 2012 election campaign fell by six percent from 2008 (Centre for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 2013). While her book does not focus on the issue of sustainability and ongoing democratic participation, it is fair to call into question what impact political marketing has on ongoing democratic engagement between competitive elections.

**Consumer Democracy** is perceptive and makes a substantial contribution to the literature on political marketing, the public sphere, and communication. Scammell creates a sense of moderation and a hybrid approach that has been lacking in some of the literature surrounding political communication. She rejects the more critical viewpoint of deliberative democracy, favouring a middle ground that highlights the deliberative potential of political marketing techniques. What is particularly notable is her continued commitment to the normative principles of ethical engagement espoused by public sphere theorists, while she simultaneously offers an approach that reflects the practical realities of modern campaigning. From my perspective, her approach offers the potential to take the construction of good political marketing and apply it in a manner that not only engages voters during elections, but as a tool that government can utilize to engage the public on larger questions of public policy in an ongoing and sustained manner. Can we use marketing techniques as a mechanism to revitalize the public sphere and encourage ongoing political conversation in households and town halls across the country? Will political marketing become the frame in which we mark the passing into a new form of ethical political engagement? While I suspect the next election in Canada will feature a certain degree of negative advertising and political marketing, Scammell offers us the hopeful prospect that there is a path forward to more authentic and ethical engagement with electors using marketing techniques.

**References**


Michael Burke Christian, York University