Modern media innovation in electoral campaigns

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Abstract

In the last years we can observe the appearance of a common pattern of different types of innovation in the election campaigns, but also the existence of an accelerated rhythm of engendering in all types of democracies. This pattern has different appearances or adopts local forms being formed by several elements that are associated with the concept of media (focused democracy). Television has a strategic role in the election campaign because it is the main source of news and entertainment, being also capable of aiming at the public that is not interested directly in the political life. Television news and electoral programs ("shows") are considered universally essential for the success of the candidates and of the political parties. The development of the communicational methods, especially TV, had decisively transformed the public sphere.

Keywords: electoral campaigns; media focused democracy; media innovations; political advertising; Americanization.

Introduction

In Romania, election campaigns had become very familiar activities that are all focused and concentrated on the efforts for earning political power and for placing someone in a position which allows a significant influence of the political power. The campaigns are presented as appeals towards the electors (citizens with the right to vote). The ensemble of communication actions that are presented by written word, spoken word, or by the help of images, tries to maintain favorable voting behavior and to modify those that are not favorable. From this point of view, Arsith (2004) comments: "Communication and politics are co-substantially. Communication relations are inseparable from power relations, which depend on the form and content, from the material or symbolic power of the accumulated

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political institutions and agencies engaged in such employment. Political communication has the specific manifestation of tension between cooperation and conflict. Political discourse allows finding the agreement but the same type of discourse promotes conflict and domination." (p. 7). The election practices are very dynamic, but "election campaigns – their strategies, techniques and technologies – are the product of the electoral systems within which they are waged." (Katz, 1980 *apud* Denemark, 2003, p. 601) Change is more or less consistent in the habits and practices of earning a function, but the election process differs from country to country.

Media focused democracy

In the last years we can observe the appearance of a common pattern of different types of innovation in the election campaigns, but also the existence of an accelerated rhythm of engendering in all types of democracies (which are characterized by a stable political culture, restored or new formed democracies, democracies under tensions). This pattern has different appearances or adopts local forms, being generated by several elements that are associated with the modern concept (which is now familiar) of media (or focused democracy): "today's politics are *mediated politics*, where the media are one of the main spaces of political action—a great number of political events take place in and through the media. This happens to the extent that one could say that the legitimation of politics is partly obtained through media." (Johansson, 2008, p. 398). Another point of view regarding the role of media comes from Berger (2002): "as the function in communication that is manifested through a carrier of signs (or a vehicle: see Metz, 1974) to multi-point destinations"(p. 22)

In the United States, the media focused democracy was characterized by some analysts as being corrosive for powerful politicized institution and also a vibrating public sphere of civic speech. Similarly, fear also appeared in other countries where mass media, especially television reached to dominate the political and the election parties. Televison is seen in this paper as a cultural medium that "consists of the programs that are transmitted, the meanings and pleasures that are produced from them, and, to a lesser extent, the way it is incorporated into the daily routine of its audiences." (Fiske, 2001, p. 12)

Political advertising and the Americanization of the electoral campaigns

From this perspective, we can concentrate our efforts of explaining the phenomenon by presenting a well known method of expressing and communicating

the political message to the public: the ads. Political advertising refers to "the process by which candidates, parties, individuals, and groups promote themselves and their viewpoints through mass communication channels. Political advertising is generally considered a form of paid media in which the promoter (or sponsor) buys the space or time for distributing the advertising message." (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p. 558).

Like all advertising, political advertising is subjective, presenting a biased point of view, whether we speak about "partisan bias" or "structural bias." In any case, the term reflects "media exhibiting an unjustifiable favoritism as they cover the news." (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p. 433) Just as a Ford ad is selling Fords, not other car brands, a political ad is selling a specific candidate. That can sometimes be obscured by the noble trappings in political ads, which are often filled with images of American flags, Mount Rushmore, amber waves of grain, and the White House. "Don't expect you're going to get objective voter information from political ads", says Christopher Malone, a political scientist at Pace University in New York. "That's definitely out of the question."

Political advertising has been around since the mid-19th century, but it took the arrival of the major media in the 20th century to elevate its importance. Before there were large daily newspapers, national magazines, or coast-to-coast radio and TV networks, political ads were mostly limited to buttons, banners, and posters intended to generate local turnout at candidate rallies and at polling places on Election Day. Sanders (2004), an expert in the use of advertising and the media in the US, argues that successful political advertisements should exhibit four features. They should:
-   have dramatic impact, to ensure interest and aid recall;
-   draw on familiar themes, stories and genres to appear relevant;
-   focus on people, often real people and not politicians or actors, rather than policy;
-   be simple, so carrying one easily understood message. (*apud* Lilleker, 2006, p. 148)

The advertising known methods transform themselves into what is known as *"post-modern campaigns",* understood as those where "the coterie of professional consultants on advertising, public opinion, marketing and strategic news management become more co-equal actors with politicians, assuming an increasingly influential role within government in a 'permanent' campaign, as well as co-ordinating local activity more tightly at the grass roots. The news media fragment into a more complex and incoherent environment of multiple channels, outlets and levels" (Norris, 2002, p. 130). Political advertisements had faced strong criticism over the years from scholars and others who believed that campaign commercials denigrate democracy by focusing on images rather than important public policy issues. Such criticism stems from the belief that American demo-

cracy works best when voters study the relevant issues of a campaign and then cast their ballots for the candidates who will best serve the country. Not only are political commercials incapable of contributing to a reasoned discourse, critics contend, they warp the political system by swaying voters with short messages that stress personality traits and other trivial matters.

On a micro-theoretical level, the "Americanization" is a proper description of the innovation during the election campaigns which continuously emerged in many democracies all over the world. This term was initially used to denote a process of adaptation to the way things are or look like in the United States. It may be translated into "characteristics of what was seen as typical for American-style campaigning: engaging political consultants and other experts from the marketing industry, poll-driven campaigning, a media- or televisioncentered campaign, negative campaigning, personalization, de-politicization" (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p. 32). More recent formulation includes the use of Americanization as professionalization or modernization, thus abandoning the use of U.S. campaigns as role models. From this last point of view, "many do identify that the techniques associated with the postmodern era are becoming far more widespread, therefore it is appropriate to talk of both professionalisation and Americanization provided one is aware of their limits as explanatory terms as well as their inappropriateness for responding to societal changes and technological advancements in all political systems." (Lilleker, 2006, p. 35)

It seems to emerge two great themes which engender electoral innovation. One of them refers to the fundamental transformation of the relationships between the political parties and their members. In successfully old democracy, political parties have traditional organic relations with their members, this relations being strengthened and perpetuated in time to by stable and well defined engagements. In spite of all these, the parties' connections with private groups and with certain institutions lowered their intensity and their possibilities of influencing the electoral opinions (the unions and organization of German farmers and the traditional religious association from Italy).

A second theme is that all the programmers are rather populist than based on traditional political doctrines. This fact made the forming and cultivating public opinion crucial for the electoral success. In the modern society influencing the public opinion has become more and more related to mass media and communication through specialized firms. The influence of mass media on governments and political parties was more and more reduced. Mass media has became the dominant source of information to entertainment in almost all the societies, in many countries assuming a new level of independence in order to make its voice heard in the political disputes.

Fiske promotes this idea in the term of television-as-culture, "as a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure" (2001, p. 1). Television has a strategic role in the election campaign because it is the main source of news and entertainment also aiming at the public that is not interested in political life. The form taken by politics in entertainment may be different in important ways from the form it assumes in news and current affairs, but this is no reason to ignore it. Thus, in thinking about the relationship between politics and mass media, "we need to look beyond the traditional corrals of news and current affairs, and to analyse the ways in which political values and the representation of politics are part of our daily pleasures. The way 'politics' emerges in mass entertainment is through the stories it tells, the jokes it makes and the motives it assumes" (Street, 2001, p. 79). Television news and electoral programs are considered universally essential for the success of the candidates and of the political parties. TV represents, from this point of view, the medium for the political candidates to express and promote their discourse, seen as "a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area" (Fiske, 2001, p. 13), predetermined by the party or the general campaign. "Discourse is thus a social act which may promote or oppose the dominant ideology, and is thus often referred to as a "discursive practice." Any account of a discourse or a discursive practice must include its topic area, its social origin, and its ideological work: we should not, therefore, think about a discourse of economics, or of gender, but of a capitalist (or socialist) discourse of economics, or the patriarchal (or feminist) discourse of gender. Such discourses frequently become institutionalized, particularly by the media industries, in so far as they are structured by a socially produced set of conventions that are tacitly accepted by both industry and consumers" (Fiske, 2001, p. 13)

As Kaid suggested, we can define a new wave of political communication through mass media, especially through television. The media have power: "they determine the fate of politicians and political causes, they influence governments and their electorates. They are, therefore, to be numbered with other political institutions – parliaments, executives, administrations and parties." (Street, 2001, p. 231) This tendency is known as videostyle – "the way political candidates present themselves in political advertisement" (Kaid, 1998, p. 143). Kaid and Davidson (1986) identified three major factors that can determine a candidate's videostyle: verbal content, nonverbal content and the video production techniques (Kaid, 1998, p. 143).

Media and electoral innovations

Electoral innovation appears as anticipated results of political reforms, without having any obvious connection with modernization. One of the causes to the appearance of modern methods of electoral campaign in Romania was the reform of the electoral system by passing to the minimum brink which restricted the access in the Parliament, and also the new law of setting-up and functioning of political parties, which reduced the breaking-up of an electoral space. As the presidential election system became different by the parliamentary election (from 2004, in Romania) we expect that the communication will be realized by passing the focus in the election campaign, to the candidate and not onto the party.

The innovations in modern campaigns are characterized by *Norris (2002) depicting the media complexities:* *"*In the news media, national television becomes the principal forum of campaign events, a more distant experience for most voters, supplementing other media. And the electorate becomes increasingly decoupled from party and group loyalties. Politicians and professional advisers conduct polls, design advertisements, schedule the *theme du jour,* leadership tours, news conferences and photo opportunities, handle the press and battle to dominate the nightly television news*"* (p. 130). The new style of electoral campaign seems to have been adopted as a part of sustained effort which tries to stimulate and accelerate the process of modernization as a whole. Democracy doesn't represent a purpose but a modality to change the living standard, the academic development, the development of the market economy and the integration in European struc-tures. Election campaign had started before the democratic political structures were established and also before the electorate started to become a key-element. Romania offers examples of media-focused campaigns which were as pure as the ones in certain countries with traditions.

Modernization leads to weaker political structures and to a more powerful role of the mass media: This fact seems to be the first case of the change of election, practices and also the cause of passing to the modern model of the election campaign. This causal complex (weaker parties and a more powerful and inde-pendent media) needs three other aspects:

- An additional intermediate condition can be sometimes identified in prag-matic political reforms which can be carried on outside the premises of mo-dernization (as is the wish for more efficient administration).

- Political advisers do their best into convincing candidates and political parties to adopt innovating election techniques before the appearance of favorable con-dition in which they can be realized. In this case the new techniques are not used until the political and mass-media space has reached a certain level that allows their application.

- In the case of new democracies (Romania is in this situation) the modern model of election practices is adopted in order to stimulate more general organization process.

The television is not omnipotent but it has an important role in the campaign. Television is the most agreeable informing method that can be easily understood and is the place where political personalities can affirm best. The most impressing aspect is considered to be the social time volume absorbed by watching TV. The negative aspect of this matter is the public effect: "For citizens, the typical experience of the election becomes more *centrally passive,* in the sense that the main focus of the campaign is located within national television studios, not local meetings, so that the experience becomes more distant" (Norris, 2002, p. 130). It seems that the time spent watching TV in average, is almost the same with the work time (Coste Cerdan and Le Diberder, 1991, p. 150).

In accordance with the available statistic at the moment in Romania, 90 percent of the households have a functional TV. Television, then, plays a vital role in what Morley (1986) calls "the politics of the family." By this he refers to "the patterns of power and resistance within the everyday culture of the home. The two main axes of this power are between parents and children, and men and women. Parents frequently use television as a means of discipline, particularly by depriving children of viewing as a means of punishment." (Fiske, 2001, p. 74)

Another important aspect is the social homogenous of the television consumption. In spite of all these, the researchers demonstrated that the most of apolitical electors, mainly those who are less interested in politics, are the most vulnerable to the influence of television (Schwertzenberg, 1995, p. 203).

Conclusions

We have simultaneously observed a raise of the importance of television because it acts like a substitute of the daily experiences. A great part of the public experiences is transferred in the private sphere which becomes an element of the extended public sphere due to television access. The mediation through television becomes a substitute of direct public experience. This thing results in the reconfiguration of the political communication on the model that was proposed by television. "The visibility management" (Thompson, 2000, Hainet, 2002) has become the most important element of modern electoral practices and it led to the politicizing of daily lives, to the organization of the public agenda by television, to the Americanization of politics, to using publicity and marketing strategies in leading campaign by treating the political actor as a product of instantaneous measuring of the communication effects by polls and by the public opinion.

The most important function of the debates is giving useful information to the electors. Therefore, the quality of information is very big and it will not be used in the same manner by all the people who watched TV. They have different informational needs, so they will use the information in accordance with these needs. The growth of the power of television has direct influence on the way the political transaction works and on using the poll that is supposed to redefine the position between political actors. The direct result was the appearance of the "experts" – a new species that translates for everybody the results of the polls (it is also said that electoral democracy is in fact an opinion democracy).

The governors, that are an interface between political actors and the public, have learned about the internal affairs of organizing the polls in order to maintain their status. This way, the poll is validated in the eye of the public opinion as a privilege knowledge instrument. Empirical researchers are important regarding the perception of the final debates because their potential effect on public opinion can be estimated. This fact has an extremely important practical utility conceiving the elaboration of communicational strategies in the election campaigns.

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