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Ethical Dilemmas of Political Marketing. Polish Members of Parliament on Political Communication (analysis of survey results)

Abstract: Political marketing has changed not only the way election campaigns are conducted, but also the standards and principles that have lain at the foundations of the liberal-democratic political system for years. First and foremost, the ideal of the rational voter has lost significance as the citizen has been transformed into a consumer. At the same time, the mechanisms of economic marketing have been transferred to the realm of politics, which seems to be one of the indicators of the ongoing destruction of the ideals and principles of liberal democracy. It is not an easy task to measure the scale of these changes, though. This paper is an attempt to outline the degree to which the deputies to the Polish Parliament have internalized market axiology in the realm of politics assessed on the basis of the results of surveys conducted during three consecutive terms of the Polish parliament (in 2004, 2006 and 2008).

Key words: political marketing, political communication, commercialization of democracy, liberal democracy, axiology of politics

Introduction

The development of political marketing has been accompanied, among other things, by a change in how election campaigns are conducted. The realm of politics has adopted the rules that used to govern the realm of economics, thereby contributing to rather profound changes in the functioning of the political system of modern democracies. Values that were formerly not deemed the axiological foundations of liberal democracy have begun to play an increasingly significant role. Political marketing has contributed to the commercialization of liberal democracy, leading to a certain trivialization of politics, which has been reduced to a commodity launched on the market. By this token, voters have been assured of their competence in line with the principle that, being consumers, they know about the commodities they purchase (Pawelczyk, 2007, p. 9).

First and foremost, the ideal of the rational voter has lost significance, as he has been turned from a citizen into a consumer. The supreme value of politics (most often unmentioned in official statements) has become efficiency (instead of representation, truth or wisdom) measured in terms of election results and regular opinion polls. Efficiency has become a goal in itself, and one increasingly often achieved applying the principle that the end justifies the means. The reason for that is that election victories are ensured by market rules. This will continue as long as political marketing remains the most efficient weapon in the struggle for political power in the modern democratic state. It is a paradox,

however, that this transfer of economic marketing mechanisms to the realm of politics is perceived as one of the indicators of the progressing destruction of ideals and principles of liberal democracy (Pawełczyk, Piontek 1999, p. 89).

Therefore, it is as erroneous to reduce political marketing only to its techniques as it is to define democracy solely in terms of formal procedures. Political marketing has changed the functioning of the liberal-democratic political system, which can also be observed in Poland. It is not easy to measure the scale of this change, though. Mere description is not satisfactory enough. It is particularly difficult to assess the degree to which the interference of market rules in the realm of politics is accepted, in particular as far as it concerns the level of internalization of the norms that govern a market democracy among politicians and voters. This paper is an attempt to outline the degree to which MPs in the Polish Parliament have internalized market axiology in the realm of politics, which is assessed on the basis of the results of surveys conducted during three consecutive terms of the Polish parliament.

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Observation of Polish politics quite clearly indicates that the process of supplanting democracy by market, and citizen by consumer, is irreversible. It can therefore be concluded that it is justifiable to propose a hypothesis that the market axiology has been at least partially internalized by Polish MPs. This hypothesis was verified by means of a survey conducted for the first time in December 2004 (during the fourth term of the Sejm), repeated after two years in December 2006 (in the fifth term) and concluded in December 2008 (the sixth term of the Sejm and seventh term of the Senate). The survey covered 134 deputies of the Sejm of the fourth term, 132 deputies of the Sejm of the fifth term, and 105 deputies of the Sejm of the sixth term and 21 senators of the seventh term in the Senate. The surveys were conducted in cooperation with the Instytut Badania Opinii i Rynku Sp. z o.o. PENTOR (PENTOR Institute for Public Opinion and Market Research) – Poznań.

Each survey was conducted in three stages. The first stage involved sending e-mail or paper mail with a questionnaire to all 460 MPs (and Senators in 2008) and requesting they answer the questions and return the questionnaire. After one week, the pollsters contacted each MP's constituency office (and Senator's constituency office in the third survey) by phone to remind them about the questionnaire to be filled. Whenever possible, the questionnaire was conducted over the phone. Eventually, the MPs returned the questionnaires by e-mail, fax or paper mail. In total, 134 questionnaires were filled in 2004, 132 questionnaires two years later, and 126 questionnaires in the last sample. The questionnaires were anonymous and included six closed questions, three of which concerned the MP's attitude to the market model of political communication dominated by political marketing.

The first question asked about the results of the commercialization of liberal democracy. MPs were to choose from two alternative responses. They could agree with the statement that ultimately victory depended on the true talents of the politician who won the chance to present himself and his platform to a wide audience, thus enabling voters to make a conscious, non-coerced and rational choice. Alternatively, the respondents could

admit that the election result was less and less dependent on the content of the message the candidate was conveying and more and more on its form.

The second question concerned the assessment of the development of political marketing. Is it an integral process connected with the emergence and development of a market economy, where it is also in the political arena that independent and free entities can autonomously make election decisions that are optimal from the point of view of the efficiency of their activity; or is it a result of an erroneous belief in the positive influence of market rules on the functioning of democratic election procedures, which eventually leads to the objectification of citizens and deprives them of the possibility to thoroughly assess a situation and consequently make a choice that would be optimal from the point of view of their interests?

The last question addressed the assessment of recipient-oriented communication, which is typical of most modern types of communication, including political communication. The purpose of this question was to determine whether the MPs believed that communication processes allowed the recipient's actual opinions and views to be identified, thus making an offer that was directed to him later on as beneficial as possible for him, since it reflected not only his own point of view, but translated into a broader context of the opinion of the whole society which facilitated its optimal implementation; or whether it was the opposite, and the result was the lack of accountability of the senders while the offer they presented was reduced to competing with other candidates in flattering as large an audience as possible.

Despite their political affiliation, nearly all the MPs covered by the survey were surprisingly unanimous in their assessment of the commercialization of democracy and the increasing role of political marketing in Poland. Nearly four fifths of MPs surveyed (79.9% in 2004, 76.5% in 2006 and 74.6% in 2008) believed that the outcome of the commercialization of liberal democracy was that the election result had become less and less dependent on the message conveyed by a candidate and more and more on the form of the message. Only approximately twenty percent of the respondents (17.9% in 2004, 18.2% in 2006 and 20.6% in 2008) were of the opposite opinion, maintaining that victory depended on true talents of the politician who won the opportunity to present himself and his platform to an extensive audience, thus facilitating the voters' conscious, non-coerced and rational choice.

Taking an overall view of all three survey samples and the answers obtained, it can be concluded that three fourths of the politicians said that, on account of the process of commercialization of democracy that has been continuing in Poland and elsewhere as a result of the development of political marketing, currently the platform of a political party or politician, his knowledge or experience, were irrelevant, as it was purely his ability 'to sell' himself to the voters that counted. In this way the deputies confirmed that a majority of voters did not make a conscious choice on the basis of rational premises and the analysis of the candidate's platform and personal skills. Therefore politicians have to do their best to encourage votes, mainly applying an attractive form to convey their message. Simplifying the matter to a certain extent, it can be concluded that in modern Poland, and elsewhere, content and topical discussion in politics fade into the background, defying the liberal-democratic ideal of the rational voter. It is not surprising that the politicians overwhelmingly admitted to the supremacy of form over the content. It was a measurable con-

firmation of their acceptance of the significance of political marketing in election success. On the basis of these results it can be concluded that the politicians on the level of parliament accept the increased importance of political (and election) marketing, and they realize that a rejection of marketing techniques most often means election failure.

On the other hand, though, in 2004 only a little more than half (51.1%) the respondents believed that the development of political marketing was an integral part of the emergence and development of a market economy, allowing the subjectivized citizen to make a free choice of optimal election decisions. As many as forty four percent of the MPs claimed that the development of political marketing resulted from an erroneous belief in the positive influence of market rules on the functioning of democratic election procedures. This has led to the objectivization rather than subjectivization of citizens, who are deprived of the possibility to thoroughly assess the situation and make an optimal choice. Counterpointing this question with the previous one, it can be found that for some MPs the critical assessment of the influence of political marketing on the election process was not a sufficient reason to give it up. What other explanation can be suggested for a situation where, let it be repeated, 79.9% of the MPs in 2004 and 76.5% in 2006 believed that the personal talents and messages conveyed by politicians did not count because only an attractive form of the message did, while 44% of the respondents (2004) were critical of this fact, followed by only 31.1% in 2006.

This trend was partially confirmed in 2008. A few more politicians were more critical of the development of political marketing than in 2006, but their number was significantly smaller than in the first survey. During the sixth term of the Sejm, a majority of politicians (57.9%) were of the opinion that the development of political marketing was an integral part of the development of a market economy. Only a little more than one third of the respondents (38.1%) agreed with the statement that the above was caused by an erroneous belief in the positive influence of market rules on the election system, which resulted in the objectivization rather than subjectivization of voters. Over half the MPs accepted the development of political marketing and saw no contradiction of the principles of a liberal democracy there. Roughly one third claimed that citizens were deprived of the possibility of making a thorough assessment and rational choice. Taking into account the answers given to the previous questions one can talk not only about acceptance and acquiescence but even about the internalization of the principles of political marketing in Poland, at least among politicians of the highest level.

The last question asked the respondents whether, in their opinion, recipient-oriented communication, which was typical of a majority of modern types of communication, including political communication, allowed for society's actual opinions and views to be identified, thus letting politicians implement the postulates of their voters more effectively; or whether it was the opposite, and the result was that the election offer was limited to the perceived postulates of voters, while competing candidates outpaced one another in flattering as large an audience as possible. In 2004, a definite majority of the respondents (61.9%) maintained that voter-oriented communication resulted in a lack of sender accountability and a limitation on the offer presented, while only a little over one third of the respondents (35.1%) believed in the positive results of this process and thought that the election offer prepared was optimal as it had been based on the accurate identification of voter postulates.

Two years later, only 48.5% of the respondents argued that the preeminence of recipient-oriented communication had an adverse impact on the liberal-democratic ideal. Over half the MPs in the fifth term of the Sejm believed that the extensive application of this orientation in political communication made it possible to identify the actual views of the electorate. The answers to the last two questions appear to confirm that the authoritarian way of thinking which is present in Polish public life, manifested by the rejection of the idea of a social contract as a source of values and public debate as a practical consequence of this idea being implemented, is accompanied by an increasing acceptance for the adverse results of the process of commercialization of democracy. The last survey practically confirmed this trend. In 2008, a slightly larger proportion of the deputies (50.8%) opted for the opinion that recipient-oriented communication dominated in political communication resulting in flattery, and an even larger percentage of the respondents than before (46.8%) said that this orientation made it possible to identify the actual views of the electorate, which resulted in presenting the best election offer for them.

It seems that the 50.8% of the respondents who were critical of politicians turning excessively towards their voters does not constitute a sufficient argument to support the claim that, although Polish deputies deem the techniques and methods of political marketing necessary, they actually long for the liberal-democratic ideal of a rational voter on the one hand, and a politician who offers his competence and knowledge to voters on the other. On the contrary, the comparative analysis of the results of the three surveys indicates a clear increase in the acceptance of the consequences of adopting the recipient-oriented political communication. In the first survey only 35.1% of the deputies were convinced of the positive results of this process, two years later there were 43.9% of them, while 46.8% of the respondents shared this view in the last survey. Combined with the distribution of answers to the previous questions, it is a fact that political marketing has been commonly accepted by Polish MPs.

All the results obtained in this survey allow several conclusions to be reached. It seems that the crisis of liberal democracy is accompanied by a cult of political efficiency and, despite some critical voices, by the actual acquiescence for the abandonment of democratic ideals for the sake of marketing tricks which reduce the institution of elections to a specific sale and purchase agreement. A stable proportion of nearly 80% of the respondents (in 2004, 2006 and 2008) continues to believe that election victory depends not on the content of the platform and the candidate's skills, but first and foremost on the form of political communication, in particular of political advertising. By this token, the actual importance of the concept of representation and rational choice, as well as that of the rational voter, is being erased, thereby undermining the fundamental rules and principles of liberal democracy. Fewer and fewer deputies are critical of this process, no longer treating it as the way to objectivize citizens. A majority of politicians are of the opinion that this is an ordinary aspect of the evolution of democracy at the time of free market, and they accept it.

The consent to the deviation from democratic ideals in favor of marketing tricks was only slightly moderated the views of just over sixty percent of the respondents in 2004, who believed that this process resulted in the minimization of sender accountability (mainly the senders of political messages) and the actual limitation of the election offer.

In 2006, only just under half the respondents (48.5%) expressed the opinion that flattering voters resulted in a limited election offer. Two years later half the politicians surveyed (50.8%) shared this view. That is why, in the literature, one of the main reasons for the crisis of democracy in the 21st century is considered to be the ritualization of elections, which have become a modern variation of 'games', together with election campaigns. The result is the disorientation of a considerable proportion of electorate who actually do not make a rational choice between the candidates and platforms, and whose voting is largely accidental. Therefore, ritual elections (which are most common nowadays) have become a practical instrument of controlling and governing citizens by the political elite (Żukowski, 2005, p. 78 and next).

The offer addressed to voters is not treated as a proposal rooted in the candidate's views, opinions and personal beliefs, or on his knowledge, which will allow him to successfully work for the public good. The entire offer is the candidate's response to voter expectations, and its content is a product of the analysis of expectations of potential voters. Potential voters by no means account for the entire society but only for that part which declares their willingness to participate in the elections (in Poland this is a minority). A consequence is that the election proposal is settled by a strong, decided minority. In this case, the passive attitude and discouragement of Polish society is taken advantage of. The winner is the candidate who identifies voter intentions and postulates more accurately and develops an optimal election offer that is a political platform in name only. This process is increasingly more accepted by its participants, including the main players. It should be clearly highlighted that each survey showed an increasing percentage of respondents who believed that recipient-oriented political communication allows electorate's actual opinions to be identified, so such an orientation was accepted. The understanding of the rules and principles of political marketing is therefore coupled with the acceptance of their results as well as of the axiology that provides its foundations, the primacy of market logic in politics.

The results of the surveys show that the MPs, even if somewhat critical towards the commercialized political reality of modern Poland, abide by its rules, as they are aware that only in this way can they assure their political success. This is why the approval of the market concept of democracy, frequently also combined with the rejection of a constitutive element of liberal democracy (both in theory and in practice) by politicians – the social contract – poses a real threat for the liberal-democratic future of Poland. The lack of confidence in the state and its institutions, coupled with a surprisingly easy sacrifice of individual freedom for authoritarian security, which is so visible in a Polish society which deserves the name of a civil society less and less, is undermining the contractual nature of Poland. As a consequence, the axiology forming the foundations of this real, functioning, political system no longer refers to the tradition of the social contract (or even overtly rejects it). It is based, firstly, on the authoritarian definition of fundamental values symbolically transforming the subjectivized citizen who used to define good and evil with other citizens, by means of a compromise, into a 'faithful' citizen; and secondly, on the market and the 'consumer' it has generated. The principles (or rather practice) of political marketing seem to favor the implementation of authoritarian values (efficiency as a goal in itself) much more than the promotion of liberal-democratic values (openness, tolerance, public debate and mundane achievement of compromise).

It can be concluded that debate and agreement lose out to a 'sense of mission' and monopoly of truth, as well as to the political product of a commercialized democracy. The comparative analysis of surveys conducted among the Sejm deputies in the fourth, fifth and sixth term (and Senators in the seventh term) clearly indicates that all the threats undermining the liberal-democratic future of Poland have intensified in recent years. Survey results confirm that the MPs elected in 2006 and 2008 have a much more favorable opinion of the role and influence of political marketing on Polish democracy than their predecessors in the fourth term of 2004. Political marketing is well received in Poland, where it does not have to compete against well-rooted liberal democracy, the way it has in the West, and its main competitor is the religious authority of the Catholic Church, which is more market- than citizen-oriented. The imperfect Polish liberal democracy has lost more than one 'battle' to the process of commercialization of democracy. The question whether the 'war' has also been lost remains to be answered, although there are more and more arguments supporting the conclusion that the process of commercialization is irreversible and the Polish liberal version of democracy has been consistently transforming into a market democracy (with quite a considerable share of religious authoritarianism) bringing all its consequences for the state, society and politics.

Literature

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Streszczenie

Etyczne dylematy marketingu politycznego. Polscy parlamentarzyści o komunikacji politycznej (analiza wyników badań)

Marketing polityczny zmienił nie tylko sposób prowadzenia kampanii wyborczych, lecz również normy i zasady, na których budowany był przez lata liberalno-demokratyczny system polityczny. Na znaczeniu stracił przede wszystkim ideał racjonalnego wyborcy, który z obywatela przekształcił się w konsumenta. Równocześnie przeniesienie mechanizmów marketingu ekonomicznego do sfery polityki jawi się jako jeden z wyznaczników postępującej destrukcji ideałów i zasad demokracji liberalnej. Nie jest jednak łatwo zmierzyć skalę tych zmian. Niniejszy tekst przedstawia próbę nakreślenia skali internalizacji aksjologii rynku w sferze polityki przez polskich parlamentarzystów, w oparciu o wyniki badań ankietowych przeprowadzonych podczas trwania trzech kolejnych kadencji polskiego parlamentu (w latach 2004, 2006, 2008).

Słowa kluczowe: marketing polityczny, komunikacja polityczna, urynkwienie demokracji, liberalna demokracja, aksjologia polityki

