Introduction

What does the title "Consumer Democracy" mean? At its simplest it suggests that politics are sold like commercial products, and that citizens judge, and are invited to judge, politics as commercial products. As such, "consumer democracy" is an unlikely term of praise. It cuts directly to our anxieties about the state of politics; about what politics should rightly be, and that politics should be judged, lived, and contemplated by standards of the public good. By contrast, purchase decisions are not held to such demands; they are somehow divested of the idea of the public, typically seen as private and individual matters or, worse, anti-public and, when entwined in the political arena, corrosive to the fundamental principles of the public good.

The point of the title is precisely acceptance of the idea that politics *are* sold in similar ways to products; similar but not exactly the same because this simple definition of consumer democracy masks layers of complexity about political activity and voter choice, consumer purchases, and indeed commercial marketing itself, which is a living and contested theoretical field with no simple single formula for selling success. However, the title does not imply that "consumer democracy" is necessarily a descent from high principles of proper politics. Rather, this book considers how marketing might enhance democratic politics, for parties and for citizens.

This may seem contrary given the evidence that we shall see of, for example, branding in politics in the cases of Tony Blair and George W. Bush. There is no doubt that marketing as it is practiced is often problematic in politics. It has been associated fairly convincingly as a contributor to two of the abiding crises of modern politics: the crisis of public communication (Blumler, 1995; Coleman and Blumler, 2009) and the crisis of citizen engagement (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1997). Much contemporary political marketing is dull or ugly or both, avoiding the big issues of poverty, social justice, and climate change and reverting all too easily to oversimplification, robotically repetitive messages, and vilification of opponents (Scammell, 2003). Accepting this, is it possible that marketing might enhance democratic politics, make it more vibrant, responsive, and accountable? This book argues that it can. Complex problems of citizen engagement, of low levels of citizen knowledge and participation are not solved by simple, unidirectional, one-size-fits-all remedies. These are matters that involve fundamental questions about, inter alia, electoral systems, political cultures, media environments, the distribution of wealth, and educational opportunities. However, the case here is that marketing *can* contribute to solutions, instead of being part of the problem as it seems to be so often now.

An immediate difficulty with this approach might be that marketing in politics seems inherently suspicious. Political marketing raises concerns about manipulation, trivialization, and uneven relations of power between self-interested, well-funded, and often apparently beholden political actors and us as ordinary citizens negotiating our way through an information environment that is simultaneously overwhelming, inadequate, and biased. In fact, suspicion is the right starting place. Commercial marketing, despite its astonishing resources as an industry and despite our often willing compliance with its blandishments, struggles to justify itself as a force for social good. Even before the latest wave of consumer activism exposed brands' reckless disregard of human rights and their pillaging of "public and mental space" (Klein, 1999: 340), thoughtful practitioners

admitted a problem of public legitimacy. Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, is acknowledged as a founding father of promotional marketing; he infamously branded Lucky Strike cigarettes as "torches of freedom" to attract custom from the 1920s women's rights activists. He later reconsidered the power of marketing for good and ill, and devoted much of his career campaigning for the licensing of public relations professionals. PR was a field of great social impact, Bernays (1992) argued in a speech to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. "Those persons who heavily influence the channels of communication and action in a media-dominated society should be held accountable and responsible for their influence…."

Skepticism, not to be confused with cynicism, is healthy for democracy. Modern democracies are founded on principles of distrust and the necessity to restrain those with the potential to abuse power (Warren, 1999). The good citizen is critical and will not invest trust in haphazard fashion in those who claim authority over society. If this is true for democracy, then skepticism is essential for the claims of marketing. Promotional marketing, after all, is often based on manipulation. Understandably the very word "manipulation" hoists the red flag for danger. However, of course, much manipulation is harmless; we often welcome and greatly enjoy it. We are eager accomplices in our own manipulation whether in "retail therapy" or in entertainment, most obviously in fiction books and films, which rely on the deft skills of the storyteller to draw us into compelling narratives. Moreover, emotional manipulation is enlisted for socially desirable aims, such as greener communities and fitter, healthier people: it is called "social marketing." However, commercial marketing is driven by self-interested motives, and is too often careless, as Bernays highlights, of its wider social impact. As such its manipulation *is* inherently suspicious; and crucially, unlike the fields of media, film, and literature, there is no developed and dedicated body of marketing criticism.

Thus, skepticism is the necessary starting point. But skepticism does not prejudge conclusions. It does not assume that

all marketing is automatically bad, somehow inherently anti-democratic, antipublic, and corrosive of citizenship. Imagine that there was no place in politics for marketing. What might that look like: no market research, polling, or focus groups, no advertising, no razzmatazz, no slogans, no rhetoric, no news management counterweight to media power, and no image making? To flip the old adage on its head, can we really argue that promotional politics should be *less* professional than selling corn flakes? Politicians have a democratic right and duty to communicate, and one cannot, and more importantly *should not*, attempt to thwart effective correspondence and connection with citizens. One could Canute-like cry "halt" to the incoming tide only to demonstrate the limits of kingly intervention. Alternatively we can seek to channel the tide, protecting communities with sea walls where necessary while tapping its energy for socially beneficial ends.

So these are two main goals of this book: first, to consider how marketing might enhance politics; and second, to contribute to a debate about standards for criticism of political marketing as it is practiced, to differentiate the democratically good from the bad and to help develop a political marketing that is genuinely aimed at connection and correspondence with citizens and not merely at strategic and short-term tactical gain. Underlying this, and in the spirit of skepticism, will be the continuing theme of the relationship of marketing and democracy, and, more specifically, political marketing and democracy.

POLITICAL MARKETING: BETWEEN IDEALS AND PRAGMATISM

Any student of political marketing cannot help but be struck by mismatches between ideals and practice. On the one hand, there is democratic theory and from right and left critiques of the flaws of democracy and failures to meet the ideals of free, autonomous citizenries being the genuine authors of the laws that govern them; and on the other, there is the often grubby and petty reality of scrap, compromise, apathy, cynicism, triviality, and self-interest

that characterizes much of the day-to-day reality. This sense of mismatch is evident abundantly among commercial marketers themselves when they come to think of politics. Normatively political marketing splits the field. There are those who take the managerial (management science) view that political parties and candidates are simply organizations like any other with something to sell. Surely, the specifics of the political marketplace are unique; it has its own set of ethical problems and its particular competitive structures and is peopled with producers and citizen-consumers with deeply held views that are often linked to fundamental issues of personal and social identity. However, many markets are unique; children's products, health care, financial and voluntary sector services each raise distinctive ethical questions and tap into consumers' most privately held anxieties and wider social views. The difficulty, from a managerial perspective, is not that politics is unique; it is to refine marketing theory to make it more valuable to politics in practice, to improve political efficiency, responsiveness, and ethical sensitivity. Philip Kotler (1981; Kotler and Kotler, 1999), the influential business management scholar, is a leading proponent of this view.

On the other side, there are those, also often from the business marketing discipline, who balk at the idea that politics may be considered a commodity or service like any other. Market values are not morally neutral, as political philosopher Michael Sandel argues forcefully in *What Money Can't Buy* (2012: 17); they cannot be applied with impunity to all walks of social and public life. Markets are valuable and effective tools for "organizing productive activity," but we must beware the social costs if all aspects of public life "are made over in the image of the market." Democratic politics is, or should be, about fundamental questions of social justice and the common good, and these cannot be reduced to simple questions of supply and demand. Therefore, encouragement of the notion that there is no basic difference between political and consumer choice is inherently troubling. It undermines the (normatively desirable) rationality of voter decisions, promotes selfish rather than public interest, and lends credibility to irrational motivations, which may be

relatively harmless in daily shopping behavior but are much more threatening when applied to decisions that affect the common good. Above all, democracy provides the framework that legitimates and guarantees all rights and responsibilities, including those of producers and consumers. The risk of the marketing approach is that it may turn democracy itself into a product. I have sympathy with both sides of the argument. Political parties are not unlike other organizations operating in competitive conditions; strategic options, communication strategies, and even activist behaviors have broad similarities. However, the idea of politics as a commodity like any other is potentially frightening. "War and bigotry by consumer demand?" It is no stretch of the imagination. It feeds into contemporary nightmares about a slide into an instant e-voting "plebiscitary democracy" that "eschews significant deliberation and throws important decisions at an otherwise passive and propagandized public" (Barber, 2003: 36).

In part this gaping divergence reflects a difference of focus: the marketing advocates deal with the individual (party, candidate, and voter), while the critics are concerned with systemwide effects and broad principles: the former deal with the pragmatic within relatively short time horizons, the latter focus on the protection of democratic ideals and look to the middle distance. "Consumer democracy" stands at the intersection of the ideal and grubby reality. It takes seriously the ideals of particularly neo-pluralist democracy, as espoused by Robert Dahl, and deliberative democracy, as championed by Jürgen Habermas. If democracy is to aspire to the founding goals of autonomy, self-determination, liberty, equality, and the common good, it cannot remain indifferent to day-to-day practices that undercut these ideals. It must, therefore, be on its guard against political marketing and a win-at-any-cost, ends-justify-the-means campaigning practice. However, this account is also informed by historical reality in the sense that, even if consumer democracy falls way short of democratic ideals, it is not historically a fall from a state of grace, tumbling from a mythical golden age of public spirited politicians and citizens.

Histories of high politics and of campaigning demonstrate again and again that self-interested calculation, scandal, dirty tricks, and corruption are not inventions of modern times (Troy, 1991; Scammell, 1995; Schudson, 1999). From Cicero to our modern politicians, maneuvering, compromise, deception, manipulation, and backstabbing are familiar in political practice. Politics is a blood sport, in which, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, one may be killed many times. The tedious "narrative of decline" that underpins so much of our media and politics scholarship does more than simply glaze the eyes of thousands of students; it is insidious in that it fosters cynicism, offering no route to progress except, improbably, backward.

Possibly democracy, like sausage, is so much more appealing if one does not delve into the details of its making. Doubtless, the focus of this book will make politics appear unappealing to many, analyzing as it does the strategies and techniques of electoral success. For me, though, the reverse is true. It is part of the appeal of political marketing that it makes politics flesh and blood; it speaks the language that practitioners actually use; it reveals problems as they see them. It recognizes that political practice is also the story of driven human beings with all-too-human weaknesses working in complex situations not of their own making. In that sense, a sympathetic account of political marketing is underpinned by sympathy with democratic politicians. We impose upon them monstrous expectations of knowledge, commitment, and integrity, and then congratulate ourselves for our sophisticated cynicism when they inevitably fall short. We expect them to court us for our votes but are suspicious or even horrified if they are smart at it, and scornful when they are dull and clumsy. We want them to be in touch with that great intangible, the public mood, but accuse them of weakness and lack of principle if they too obviously pay close attention to polls and focus groups. An intuitive grasp of public sentiment is a political virtue it seems, while the study of opinion surveys is somehow a priori evidence of insincerity and absence of mission. We deride their inconsistency when they seem buffeted to and

fro by media headlines, but then are intensely suspicious if they assemble mighty "spin machines," complaining that the "permanent campaigns" of many contemporary governments threaten basic principles of democratic accountability.

To put all this another way, we seem to want political leaders who are naturally – *authentically* – talented at the arts of marketing, but without the insidious apparatus of marketing, or the spinmeisters, the pollsters, the brand builders, in short the group of people we can call collectively "the political marketers." Collectively these are now the villains of popular political entertainment: witness Stephen Meyers, the corrupting press aide in George Clooney's *Ides of March*; Conrad Brean (played by Robert De Niro) in *Wag the Dog*, who is the unscrupulous political consultant who fakes a war in Albania to divert attention from the sex scandal engulfing the U.S. president; foul-mouthed Malcolm Tucker, in the film satire *In the Loop*, is overtly based on Tony Blair's powerful spin doctor Alastair Campbell, bulldozing senior politicians and civil servants to promote the war on Iraq; Bruno Gianelli, loosely modeled on Bill Clinton's strategist Dick Morris, is the brilliant and amoral counterpoint to the idealist activists of Jed Bartlet's *West Wing*. Kasper Juul is the morally dubious "spin doctor" (and yes, they use the English term) in the Danish political drama *Borgen*. These political marketers encapsulate much that seems wrong with our modern politics: the virtual reality of images honed for media consumption, the calculated self-interest, the fake sincerity, the lack of principle, the cynical manipulation of voters and media. To paraphrase Bill Clinton's erstwhile pollster Stan Greenberg (2009: 2), collectively consultants' reputation is akin to that of drug dealers: they tempt politicians into vice with poll pills to popularity and image quick fixes.

Precisely this group of people, the political marketers, and their work provide much of the subject matter of this book. It investigates this new class of political professionals and their world of "practical politics": what is distinctive about their contribution, how do they know what works, and how they are changing politics.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Chapter 1 provides the rationale for this book: why political marketing matters. It expands two of the arguments already alluded to: the importance of political marketing literacy and the theory and practice of political marketing in relation to normative ideals of democracy. It also proposes a third and more unusual reason why political marketing matters: the analytical value of the marketing approach. Typically accounts of political marketing, whether from practitioners or from political communication scholarship, focus on its strategic and tactical uses and normative consequences. It is commonly regarded as a kind of practitioner's tool set created from a complex of causes including resistance to media power, adaptation to communication technology, and submission to neoliberal hegemony. Thus, political marketing is normally considered as the object of explanation. It is more rare to see marketing theory used as the explainer, as a detached analytical approach to understanding contemporary campaigning (this sort of scholarship has been pioneered in the *Journal of Political Marketing*). Chapter 1 argues that the neglected analytical power of marketing is crucial for the development of political marketing literacy.

Chapter 2 examines the main protagonists, the heroes and villains of consumer democracy: the political marketers. The professionalization of political communication is a much-noted phenomenon throughout most of the democratic world. However, as a new class of political actors, the marketers are strangely understudied. This chapter explores the evidence to offer a portrait of who they are and what expertise they think they are bringing to politics in the light of underlying concerns about "politics lost" and "politics transformed."

The next two chapters examine branding as the most evolved form of political marketing. Lifted directly from the commercial arena, branding, including its methods and insights, provides a means to emotional connection with citizens. These chapters look at how branding works in practice, with the example of Tony Blair, and investigates its use-value as a tool for the understanding

and critical evaluation of political communication, focusing on George W. Bush's 2004 campaign.

Chapter 5 cuts to the question that every student and every practitioner wants to know: what works? It examines how political marketers themselves assess campaigns and how, in parallel with commercial marketing, they rely on plausible narratives, case studies of success, and increasingly, marketing metrics. More fundamentally, it raises the question of what is a good campaign, and how we might judge that, not merely from the point of view of effectiveness, but in terms of democratic dimensions. It asks the question whether the imperative of winning is somehow antithetical to democratically desirable objectives.

This question is explored further in Chapter 6 in the broader context of markets (and marketing) and democracy. It argues that markets are twinned with democracy, but in a state of permanent tension. Marketing is simultaneously a lubricant of, a beneficiary of, and a threat to democracy; it requires democratic regulation and citizen surveillance, but at the same time it reminds us that active and rationally engaged citizenship is facilitated by rewards of pleasure and sociability. It offers a marketing critique of political marketing. This is not merely that substance and style, consumption and citizenship, emotion and reason can coexist in democratic harmony; it is that marketing encourages us to focus on the experience of politics and to consider how to make citizenship a pleasure as well as a duty.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE AND CONTEXT

This book draws from a wide range of literatures, sometimes linked, sometimes discrete, and not usually put together: political science (democratic theory, voting behavior, campaign studies, democratic design, political psychology); propaganda studies (a mix of history, communication, and politics); political communication, which itself is a hybrid of political science and media studies; business marketing scholarship; political marketing studies, again a hybrid of commercial marketing and politics; and practitioner literature, including biography, insider campaign