1 Introduction: The Electronic Soapbox

'The people reign in the American political world as the Deity does in the universe. They are the cause and the aim of all things; everything comes from them, and everything is absorbed in them.'

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

'Political Marketing' – a term we see increasingly in newspapers, a part now of the baggage of conventional orthodoxy – has come into its own with popular recognition that it is a convenient shorthand for something people recognise as central to the operations of their democracy. In 1988 the Presidential campaign confirmed yet again the magnetism of approaches that conceived of politics as a product marketing exercise, with chairmen of major advertising agencies backing top Republican candidates Dole (Gray Advertising) Kemp (BBDO) and Bush (the ex-Chairman of Young and Rubicam).

This book is concerned with political advertising on the paid media and other promotion channels and, to a lesser degree, with free publicity from television news. For this is the fulcrum of the American political process, and its prizes go to those best able to modulate the media. We examine the import of commercial selling techniques to politics and the use of modern technology to communicate candidate, party and programme, arguing that such promotion is demonstrably highly effective and that from this fact flow ominous consequences. In Presidential campaigns, this marketing task will centre on the management of events, speeches and debates, and such esoteric exercises as damage limitation and press control; in lower campaigns purchased media is the focus.

But our conclusions are of the tentative rather than the declamatory kind. The central thesis is that American politics are shaped by the need to market candidates and parties as if they were soap powder, employing techniques taken from the world of business. The consequences, so often negative, are by no means always so, for there is about this entire subject an inherent moral ambivalence.

Many aspects of the political process from the very earliest times could be described as primeval forms of marketing under its most broad-brush definition. We could say indeed that all politics was
marketing but this would be tautologous; speech-making and advocacy is promotion of a kind, and so are the venerable political skills of packaging a programme to appeal to a strategic coalition of constituencies. Yet this would be to nag the term to its furthest limits and deprive the concept of its usefulness. For the definition to be functional, it must be tight. It should embrace a bounded category, a point at which conventional politics ends and a distinctive appendage begins.

Yet the term ‘political marketing’ operates upon several levels. One is mechanical, a description of a set of commercially derived techniques and their application. The other relates to orientation – the consciousness of the marketing concept on the part of politicians and their associates, and the insights and behaviour that flow from this. This is not to claim that politicians always see themselves as performing a marketing activity, for marketing is simply a description of the reality that arises even if they would ostensibly spurn such a label.

Marketing is furthermore a derivative of what people seek in so far as this can be determined. It is not simply the attempt to persuade them to a point of view; therefore the election conducted by the British Labour Party in 1987, though it used media creatively, was not driven by any marketing concept: it was advertising devoid of the larger awareness that marketing brings, otherwise the party would have attended more to the popularity of its ‘product’, that is, its policies, as well as to its communications. The essence of marketing is reciprocity: ‘consumers’ themselves bring something to be on the selling; they are not passive objects and the process is an interactive one.

POLITICS AND MARKETING THEORY

In 1960 the American Marketing Association (AMA) defined marketing as ‘the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producer to consumer or user’. The subsequent history of the discipline was one of expanding this definition, a history that is important to us since a pre-requisite of this work is to establish the legitimacy of the political marketing concept. Marketing as an academic study originated in the early years of this century, a derivative of applied economics that emphasised the analysis of distribution channels; later it focussed on the increase of