The case of Alexis Tsipras: Political personality collective identity and political marketing

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ABSTRACT. The outdated clientelistic and bureaucratic political system in Greece on the one hand, and the new trends – as the results of the recent municipal and national elections showed – with regard people’s choices of candidates and political parties, on the other, motivated this case study. The present study examines the case of Alexis Tsipras in the Greek political scene through the management and use of political marketing tools. Alexis Tsipras is 33 years old and was one of the candidates for mayor in the municipal elections in Athens, Greece. He is a member of the Coalition of Radical Left (SY.RIZ.A) and was supported by this coalition in the 2006 election for the municipality of Athens. SY.RIZ.A is a coalition of left political parties, environmental, anti-racist and equal rights movements and activists (parenthetically this acronym makes the Greek word “syriza” which literally means “from the roots”). Alexis Tsipras over-doubled (110%) the percentage that the Coalition had in the 2002 municipal elections and received 10.51% of the votes of the citizens of Athens. Thus, the clientelistic political system of the “old boys’ network” got a strong message. However, it is interesting to know whether this is just a warning message to the two major political parties – the liberal-right and the social democrats – on the part of citizens in order to make them focus on people’s everyday real problems, or it shows that people literally want to see radical changes, new policies and faces in power. Although these are not mutually exclusive, they are two different issues. The Coalition and Alexis Tsipras moved an unexpected high percentage of citizens - who sent a message of dissatisfaction with the establishment of the two major political parties and/or a message of willingness for change and trust for “the new and different” – through the use of modern political marketing tools.

Aim The aim of this case study is to analyze the successful entrance of Alexis Tsipras in the Greek political scene through political marketing and communication strategies. What made Tsipras to be different as compared to other candidates? Why did he get the quite unexpected percentage of 10.51%? What does he thing about the political marketing tools and their usefulness?

Methods To analyse the case, the present study used quantitative data collected through a telephone questionnaire from a random sample of 300 Athenians who voted in the 2006 municipal elections – the response rate was 33% - as well as qualitative data. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 5 experts in political communication and an interview with Mr. Tsipras.

Results Mr Tsipras has used political marketing in a unique way, though not exactly systematic, taking advantage of its useful modern tools.

Keywords: political marketing, political advertisement, leadership, politics, municipal elections, political communication, public opinion polls, mass media, political party, Greece
INTRODUCTION

Lately, experts in political communication in Greece have started being interested in the ways political marketing tools affect people’s voting choices. Since the foundation of the modern Greek State in the beginning of 19th century and until very recently Greek politics used to have the same characteristics. The particularly bureaucratic organizational system of the modern Greek State combined with the clientelistic relationships between the state and the citizens, turned political elections – national as well as local – to political parties’ tools to manipulate people’s choices to a large extent. This means that voters formed and used their voting choices according to the possibility that political parties gave them to satisfy personal needs such as employment in the public or private sector, good health care or better education for their children. Until recently most of the Greek voters used to make their choices not on the basis of what is good for the society in general, but on the basis of what they believed was good for them personally and on the basis of their family’s political tradition. Lately, in particular the last two decades, the political scene has changed; some of the reasons for this change are the following:

- The frequent economic, judicial, and political scandals have shaken the image of the Greek state as a credible institution that people can rely on.
- News papers and the deregulated private television have played an instrumental role in revealing political opponents’ attempts of building or maintaining clientelistic relationships.
- Rapid technological development has made – particularly young – people to communicate and become active citizens through networks of interpersonal communication. Thus the internet has started replacing the traditional mass media which due to their involvement in many of the revealed scandals and their partisan image have also lost a large part of their credibility.

Within this context of events and changes, communication between politicians and their constituents has changed not only in the way it is exercised but also in the way it is perceived. Thus, political marketing – which due to the particular relationships between politicians and voters did not have room to grow before- has made its appearance in the Greek political scene. The case of Alexis Tsipras is indicative of the changes that have taken place in Greek politics with regard to its substance and also the methods used.

Political Marketing: The Americanization and the systematic professionalisation of politics

Political marketing is defined as the use of tools, philosophy, and concepts of marketing in the field of politics, pre-election campaigns and the internal relationships in political institutions and organizations. It was used for the first time in 1956 by the political scientist Stanley Kelly (Monou, 2005). Kotler and Lavy (1969) introduced the concept of political marketing in the election processes. In Europe political marketing was used for the first time in UK in 1980 by Thatcher and Kinnock.
Political marketing includes the concept of Americanization of politics. It is related with the concept of new politics (Demertzis, 2002) and the innovative pre-election campaigns that include mass media strategy development, televised debates, the focus on the image and on public opinion polls, use of targeted public relations and consultation by experts who focus on candidates’ or parties’ image development, communication strategies, implementation of campaigns and budget management.

Joseph Schumpeter (Corner and Pels, 2003) focused on another common point between politics and market. To the extent that a company negotiates selling oil, politicians negotiate votes; both follow the universal rule of demand and supply. Successful business as well as successful politics means having a product that consumers are willing to choose; the competition shows that the best wins. Politics advertise themselves, voters are their target, the political party is the firm, and candidates are their image. Thus, political marketing strategies and political science overlap. The concept of market is in the centre of the democratic process. The aim of politicians is to use the above aspects of political marketing the best way they can. Furthermore, as Lees-Marshment states (Corner and Pels, 2003) it is not just enough to make the connections between politics and market rules, but it is necessary for politics to use techniques and methods of marketing. This is directly related to what we call political marketing which has three different but interrelated orientations – product, sales and market- and four dimensions: product, price, promotion and place. Political marketing does not simply describe a political party’s position but how it functions.

At this point, a clarification important for the case study we will analyse later seems to be at place. The strategy and use of political marketing may be different depending on the specifics of a political contest. For example, voting for president in the United States is quite different from voting for a political party in Greece. Also, the issues in national elections are quite different from the issues in local/municipal elections.

**Political Marketing in Greece**

Greece is an interesting case of a country where, for historical and institutional reasons, political marketing was not developed as it did in other countries in Europe or in USA. The seven years of dictatorship from (1967 – 1974) and the fact that television was state owned did help in the development of political marketing up until the mid 80’s when the deregulation of radio and television took place. The lack of infrastructure, experts, and experience combined with the lack of knowledge on the part of politicians kept political marketing away from the hard core of the electoral process in Greece until the mid 80s. Actually the electoral campaigns in Greece were – what Pippa Norris called– pre-modern campaigns and they had the following characteristics: the campaign took place at local level; it was based on interpersonal relations, the local press was very strong and people had strong partisan identities.

In the last two decades, political parties and politicians – influenced by the concept of political marketing - have started changing their symbols and their rhetoric. Political issues “americanized” and the focus turned to individual candidates; furthermore, the focus started
being on their personal characteristics rather than their ideology. Thus, nowadays Greek politicians try rather sporadically (Apospori, Avlonitis and Zisouli, 2006) to use political marketing tools in order reach their goals.

**Methodology**
The case study we will present is based on quantitative as well as qualitative. The quantitative data were selected through telephone questionnaires administered in a random sample of 300 Athenians who voted in the municipal election of September 2006; the data collection took place on October 2006 and the response rate was 33%. The qualitative data come from the semi-structured interviews with top experts in political campaigns in Greece. Each interview contained 36 questions which aimed at making the connection between the political personality of Alexis Tsipras and the way he and the coalition that supported him used political marketing.
The experts who participated in the qualitative interviews were:

- Yiorgos Sefertzis: Chief Executive of strategic planning in Evressis Consulting communication company
- Thanassiss Chaliotis: Political Advertisement Manager in Evressis Consulting communication consultancy
- Gregory Tsimoyiannis: CEO of POLITICS strategic communications company
- Yiorgos Flessas: CEO of Civitas Group communication company
- Thalis Coutoupis: CEO of Coutoupis P. Thalis communication company

Further information for the case has been collected through an interview with Mr Tsipras.

**Municipal Elections October 2008: The context**
Alexis Tsipras was candidate for mayor in the Municipality of Athens with the coalition “Open City” supported by the political party of SY.RIZ.A; their motto “We are getting into the game” showed that they were determined to play a significant role in those elections. Parenthetically it should be noticed that in the 2004 national elections SY.RIZ.A got 6.3% of the votes in Athens and in the 2002 municipal elections the candidate supported by SY.RIZ.A received about 5% of the votes.

The other three major candidates were Kaklamanis supported by the liberal party of “New Democracy”, Skandalidis supported by the socialist party of PASOK and Chalvatzis supported by the Communist Party. Kaklamanis, a communicative person, had already used the national media and built a good image while was minister of Health; he had a good background of political action. In that electoral contest his aim was not just to win the elections but to surpass the standards set by the two previous mayors of Athens that came from the same liberal-right wing party of New Democracy. Trying to keep this very positive image, he did not expose himself to public debates, talks and speeches. He used mainly bill board advertisements with the motto “I have nothing to say but a lot to do”.

The candidate supported by the socialist party, Skandalidis, had –and still has- the image of a good, honest, bold and experienced politician but he did not manage to persuade voters that he had these qualities needed to lead the municipality of Athens. He had the image of a loyal party member and a good labourer of politics; “he was
identified with traditional political mechanisms in an era that political parties and mechanisms are strongly doubted by people”. His campaign was rather dull and behind schedule. Chalvatzis, a member of the communist party, was supported by the party; his campaign had the typical communist party’s rhetoric which would more appropriate for national elections rather than for municipal elections. Kaklamanis won the elections (46.1%), while Skandalidis (28.8%) and Chalvatzis (8.5%) did not meet their expectations with regard to the percentage of votes they thought they would receive.

Tsipras received the quite unexpected percentage of 10.51 in an electoral contest that was characterized as “indifferent” and “apathetic”. Forty four percent of the voters abstained from voting. If we assume that abstention from municipal voting indicates political apathy and lack of interest towards politicians and politics, this is an uneasy finding for the Greek political scene in which, for decades, high percentage of voting participation was one of the major characteristics of electoral contests. Despite this not-so-positive climate, Alexis Tsipras made a very positive impression and won people’s hearts and votes mainly because he showed some new leadership characteristics and because he used modern political marketing in a very innovative way.

- He was literally young and metaphorically not-worn-out in Greek politics.
- His rhetoric was modern, informative, thoughtful and realistic as compared to the typical verbose and inflexible rhetoric of traditional politicians. According to Mr Sefertzis – top expert in political communication – “he is an extremely capable speaker and debater with very smart and to the point arguments”.
- He was original and novel. As he emphasized in the interview we had with him “we tried to positively provoke and create curiosity among people about us so that we attract their attention and make them to listen to us. We showed them that we are anti-conformists and we did dare to go upstream in many social issues”.
- He was radical with very innovative ideas and against any type of negative social stereotypes. He openly supported the marriage between people of the same sex while his coalition was the only one which included, in the candidates’ list, representatives from gay and lesbian groups, despite the well-known conservative attitudes that Greek society has on these issues. These were only two of the many radical moves he made as a candidate.
- He was not afraid to take a radical stand on the issue of confession in schools. Despite the power of Greek Orthodox Church in education – education and religion are under the same ministry – and in the society in general, he clearly and unequivocally was against the confession of pupils in schools.
- He was a firm believer in team-effort : “I believe that what can make the difference is not the individuals but the collectivities”.
- Although young and with not-so-much experience in these type of political contests, he actively pursued to have open and non-structured debates with his opponents who avoided him. He tried to express his ideas in a not structured and protected environment.
- He was well informed and had well-planed ideas and programs on how to approach and deal with every day problems in the city of Athens such as garbage management and historical buildings’ restoration and protection.
His overall program was clear, to the point, and with specific propositions for the relevant issues. So political marketing did not substitute the lack of specific ideas—as it usually happens in the Greek politics—but supported existing and realistic ones.

- He had a well-organized pre-election strategy which was part of an integrated political marketing plan.
- He took calculated risks—"What I can say with confidence is that I like innovation, I like to take risks in politics; otherwise politics is non-sense to me and I would rather stay away from it. Calculated risks make interesting whatever you deal with".

Use of political marketing tools in the case of Tsipras
Advertisement and public opinion polls

The analysis of the quantitative data for study showed that 49.2% of the respondents said that public opinion polls published in the pre-election period was not a criterion for them as to whom they will vote for; only 1.7% of the respondents said that this was an important criterion for them.

Political advertisements are one of the basic tools in political communication. They have to summarize the political message of the candidate in a simple and clear way so that perspective voters receive it as the candidate wishes. However, our data showed that 50.7% of the respondents said that this was not an important criterion for them while only 0.7% said that this was a very important criterion in their decision making. Furthermore, 59.1% said that they did not trust at all candidates' advertisements on television and 78.3% said that they did not trust at all advertisements on billboards. In particular, 44.9% of the respondents said that political advertisements were untrustworthy, 7.4% that were persuasive, 16% that they “made sense”, 21% that they were informative, 9.8% that they were interesting, 52.4% that they were useless for the voters and 45% that they were useful for the candidates.

Voters had a similar perception about public opinion polls; 53% do not trust them at all and 5.7% said that they trusted them a lot. In particular, 37.7% of the respondents said that the publicised public opinion polls were not trustworthy, 29% said that they were persuasive, 34% that they were informative, 22% that they were “indifferent”, 77% that they were not useful at all to the public, while 55% said that they were useful for the candidates.

According to our experts, political advertisement can be very successful if it reaches out and moves people in a unique way and in the appropriate timing. According to the experts Tsipras political advertisement was an exemplar in the field. As Tsipras himself noticed in the interview “what we tried to do through the advertisement was to create a climate that would fit well with the philosophy of our candidacy. We tried to “shock” the public and made them curious about us, so we made them to listen to what we had to tell them. I went out to the traffic lights of the city and -like a beggar- I was holding a cardboard saying “ALEXIS TSIPRAS, Candidate for the Municipality of ATHENS”. That was an anti-conformist picture and that was the essence of the message we would like to convey. In a similar way, we would like our entire campaign to be anti-conformist, deeply radical and “fresh””. The meaning of these characteristics was analysed Mr Thanassiss Chaliotis—one of our
Alexis Tspiras like beggar holds a cardboard that says: Alexis Tspiras. Candidate Mayor of Athens. On the background the motto: we are getting into the game.

Alexis Tspiras in front of the puzzle of the town of Athens: Alexis Tspiras. Candidate Mayor of Athens: we are getting into the game. On the background: Get into the game. Take Athens in your Hands
Evi Markaki and Eleni Apospori

expert interviewees: “When the message can not stimulate the ear or the eye, when it is so flat and people are so familiar with it, it does not have any chance to get through; people are just passing by another picture of a well trimmed and smartly dressed candidate. Successful political communication must be attractive, stimulating, innovative, different and interesting; Tsipras and his coalition made it”.

People do not like and are not attracted by political advertisements – as Mr Coutoupis and Mr Chaliotis emphatically noticed – if these are not based on the principle of differentiation but on the principle of repetition and, thus, have nothing new and interesting to say. Also, since many times advertisement tries to touch people sentiments rather than appeals to their common sense, this may get it outside a realistic framework and make people react negatively to it. People - who these days face many every day problems in the city of Athens - need inspired leaders who at the same time give them prospects for these problems; good political marketing should target at these problems in a realistic down-to-earth way. In that sense successful political marketing focuses on a product that people really need and they know that.

At the same time, discussions among experts about the role of public opinions in pre-election campaigns are constantly put at the forefront of political interest. Since lately the role, as well as the usage, of publicized polls have become more complex the Greek government prohibited polls taken within the last fifteen days prior to elections to be publicized. This created some unrest among candidates. According to Mr Flessas, an expert in political communication, “there is no research that has shown that public opinion polls affect people’s political opinion and choices. However, it is probable that polls affect a small part of perspective voters who wait up to the last minute and vote for the candidate that the polls show as the prospective winner”. On this issue Mr Sefertzis said that “publicized opinions sometimes play the role of balancing power. That is, if someone who may like a political party and is planning to vote for it, sees that this party may get an overwhelmingly proportion of votes any way, she/he may choose not to vote for that party so that the political system may be more balanced”.

All of the interviewed experts agree with the quantitative findings of our research that public opinion polls are a good and useful tool for the candidates. According to Sefertzis, it is beyond any doubt that polls allow public opinion to define clearly and with precision its needs and wishes. However, we have to evaluate the usefulness of public opinion polls on three levels. First, public opinion may function as a defence on the part of prospective voters against a political propaganda. At a second level, public opinion polls may be used for the manipulation of the prospective voters through impression management that does not necessarily coincide with reality but is based on an arbitrary interpretation of findings. At a third level, public opinion may result in people’s unexpected reactions; Mr Sefertzis mentioned the example according to which “A political party that wants to attract the undecided voters who go with the winner, the last week before the elections publicizes a poll showing that it will by far the winner. This may have the
unexpected result of loosing other voters who would like a more balanced political system”.

With regard to the content of public opinion polls Mr Flessas noticed that although these polls have a large number of questions, they do not cover all the critical for the political contest issues. So many times publicized of polls may result in more questions than answers. Mr Tsimoyiannis said the polls may be more powerful than the mass communication media; in that way polls may not be an analytical tool but a persuasive tool. Along a similar line of reasoning, Mr Chaliotis said it is naïve and rather politically risky to think that polls just describe a situation; publicized polls transfer information to prospective voters and affect the political climate which again through later polls is transferred to the public as information and so on. Consequently publicized polls affect to an extent public opinion and political choices.

“When a politician’s strategies, policies and practices are based mainly on public opinion, this may actually neutralize his/her role. A politician should not plan based on polls, majorities’ opinion and mainstream trends because in this case (s)he will be a follower rather than a leader. Mainstream forces always go for no-changes and for no-innovation. Mainstream people feel more comfortable with familiar things regardless of whether this is good for them or not” said Alexis Tsipras.

**New mass media communication**

Image management through the utilization of mass media is a critical part of political marketing. It is even more critical for less known candidates, like Alexis Tsipras, and for this reason well planned strategy was necessary. Tsipras’ target group was young people under the age of thirty. Thus he and his team used internet more than any other scheme of candidates. As he said, he took advantage of the internet to communicate with young people not only because this age group was using it and, therefore, it was easier for him to reach them but also because he believed that the internet was a new public social place where free political debates and circulation of ideas are realized. “I think that internet is a very important tool because the user has very high degree of freedom. Before internet, people were mostly passive receivers of messages through the mass media communication that are usually controlled by big corporations. After internet, people actively produce and circulate messages... I think that the internet is very interesting and is more interesting to see how it will evolve and how people will participate in this process and mode of communication. … However, its main problem is that despite the free access and circulation of information among people, the process takes place while people are physically away from each other so that the sense of community is weak. So, the debate about electronic democracy and how it can substitute actual communal processes is very crucial … Anyway, although we used internet extensively in our pre-election campaign, I cannot say that I spend most of time in front of a computer…”

**Political personality or political party?**

Gregory Tsimoyiannis very interestingly noticed that the “pure concept of party as an entity regardless of the persons who made it up existed in the former communist countries.. ‘the party said’…‘the party decided’… In western democracies individuals within parties are always
playing the most important role since it is these individuals who transform strategies and policies into practice. However, in Greece the balance between political party and political individual personalities is not so clear and straightforward. Still the party-identification tradition among Greek voters is relatively strong. Up until lately, there were families that traditionally used to vote certain party –right, left or centre. This was partly due to the memories from the civil war between communists and nationalists after World War II. In the last two decades, people have started paying more attention to political individual personalities than political parties.

However, according to Mr Coutoupis “people lately have started showing dissatisfaction with political personalities that resemble to Madame Tisseau figures and have a wooden-like inflexible, verbose and stereotypical rhetoric”. Both Yiorgos Flessas and Gregory Tsimoiannis agreed that this political context functioned to the advantage of Alexis Tsipras or rather Tsipras took advantage of this context. As Flessas said, Tsipras was the pebble thrown in the lake, so he made waves. He took advantage of the fact that the socialist candidate was rather indifferent to non-conservative voters and, therefore, he made an effort to attract them. The other major candidate supported by the liberal right-wing party chose not to expose himself to the public –his motto was “I have nothing to say but a lot to do”- because he was sure that he would win the elections as he actually did. So, Tsipras took advantage of this context and made a really dynamic entrance in the Greek political scene. According to Sefertzis, Tsipras attracted voters not because he had something more concrete to offer than the other candidates, but because “his face was a new message, in a timing that faces function as messages at the front scene while political parties are in the backstage. At the same time he was the face/message of protest against the status quo in a timing that popular disaffection was looking for an outlet.

All the interviewed experts agreed that Tsipras took advantage of this context and timing and used innovative techniques and tools of political marketing to promote himself and to attract voters. Although Tsipras was a new, young, “fresh”, political face that “refreshed” the Greek political scene and had an overall positive impact, he, coming from a left wing political coalition, placed an extra emphasis on collectivity, team-work and the importance of the coalition he was leading. So, in this case both the candidate’s political personality and political party’s collective identity played an important role. However, experts’ opinion about his leadership ability and the right use of political marketing tools do not coincide. For some of our communication experts –e.g. Mr Flessas– “so far Tsipras has not revealed some strong leadership characteristics, but he meets people’s perceptions of and expectations for change. He has just shown radicalism, dynamism, and boldness that one cannot see in among older politicians”. On the other hand, according to another expert – Mr Sefertzis “Tsipras has a leadership quality but he still has to work on it and he has a long way to go. But, at this point his main advantage and what actually made the difference for him was that he did not have any of the leadership characteristics of traditional mainstream politicians. Tsipras was people’s message to traditional politicians; he was the anti-prototype in established politics. According to Mr Chaliotis Tsipras showed two very important qualities; one is his ability to listen in a
conversation – something rare for politicians who would rather talk. Another quality is that - although he has shown that he appreciates and appraises the role of collectivities in politics – he has gone out of strict partisan lines.

CONCLUSION

Summing up our case we will take a final look at the advantages of Tsipras’ political marketing management.

- He used an informal, apparently relaxed, humorous and direct way to communicate with his main target group which was mainly people under 30 and first time voters.
- He did not pretend to be like traditional politicians. He did not wear suit and tie, continued to ride his motorcycle and to “speak the language” of his generation. He was bold and original. According to our experts being original is a big advantage in political marketing.
- He clearly showed that he had the courage to express the values that he believed in and not the values of mainstream trends. Successful political marketing is based on truth.
- He had eloquence and very smart arguments. He had the ability to reach and talk with demanding, diligent and conscientious social groups.
- Overall, his choices at the level of targeting and action were both dynamic and direct. Parenthetically, it must be said that two years after the municipal elections Tsipras continues to project the same personality and dynamism. He is mostly involved in educational issues and young people’s and minorities’ problems.

On the other hand some of Tsipras’ the negative sides according to our experts are:

- He is very young and, therefore, lacks experience needed to lead successfully the very demanding municipality of Athens. His leadership skills have to develop and endure in the times to come.
- He is not a “surprise” any more. The innovative techniques of political marketing he used cannot take him any further. From this point on he will be tested mostly for his actions rather than his humour or eloquence.

As we are literally finishing these lines of this case, Alexis Tsipras - two years after the municipal elections - was elected President of the political party of SY.RIZ.A in the party's convention by 70% of the electorates and the immediately following public opinion polls showed that if national elections would take place today SY.RIZ.A would take 11% of the votes at national level. Greek society seems to need clear-cut changes; a third party is needed to put an end to the bipolar partisan transition to power between the liberal-right and the social-democrats. From this point on Tsipras has another big chance and challenge to prove himself.
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