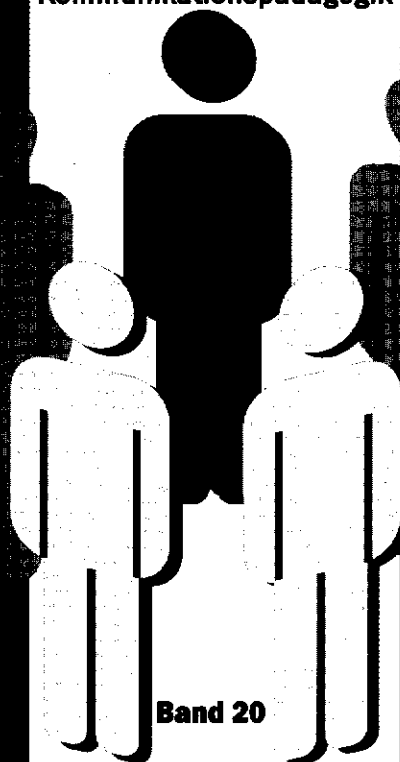


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# Communication and Political Change

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## The Beginning and Evolution of Political Marketing in Poland after 1989: A Short History

So-called round table talks held in 1989 opened a new era in the Polish political system. A pluralistic party system and a system of free elections were introduced. Breaking down the state monopoly of the press market and opening a path for de-monopolisation of electronic media created new circumstances for political communication.

The first imperfect free elections in Poland in June 1989 began an era of political marketing. Since that time, five parliamentary, three presidential and three self-governmental campaigns have taken place, new experiences have been collected and more and more sophisticated techniques of persuasion elaborated. American and West European standards of conducting political communication have been accepted as a pattern of new relations between politicians, media and citizens. This does not mean, of course, that foreign experiences are fully present in Polish conditions: some of them did not work, some were impossible to implement, and some were transformed into a specific form of local color.

Changes in the position of the mass media in the social and political systems have evoked new challenges both for media and politicians. They had to learn how to manage their mutual relations and, what is more important, how to conduct political discourse in front of citizens.

The television and radio act of 1992 introduced a duopoly in electronic media. Former state television and radio stations gained a status of public

media in the European (British) sense of the notion. It means they have a privileged position in comparison with commercial broadcasters, but also some obligations to fulfill. According to existing law, public radio and television broadcasting organizations shall reliably present, analyze and discuss viewpoints represented with regard to crucial public issues by political parties, national organizations of trade unions and unions of employers, and must produce and transmit programs enabling political parties to present their viewpoints. Detailed conditions of such programs are described in the regulations of the National Broadcasting Council.

Meeting quantity indicators is not, however, tantamount to reaching quality standards of political discourse, which are described in terms of ritual chaos rather than a significant exchange of opinions and debate. Both politicians and the media are to be blamed for this. It results in a negative image of politics and politicians as well as media efforts in political life in Polish public opinion.

Considering media factors and some financial, organizational, legal and historical limitations, the development of political marketing in Poland seems to be very dynamic, but irregular, and has specific dimensions not present in stable democracies.

In the Polish election system, parties taking part have a handicap of free airtime for advertising. Article 24 of the Broadcasting Act states that political parties and other organizations participating in elections to the Sejm, the Senate, and local self-government and candidates for the President shall be entitled to transmit election programs via public radio and television services free of charge; the broadcast time is divided in proportion to the number of registered rolls; the election programs are broadcast in blocks in which the order of the individual committees' program appearance is established by drawing. Neither television nor radio management can interfere in messages prepared by committees. Public

electronic media serve, in this case, as channels of communication between parties (candidates) and voters. But the public media are also under obligation to create their own campaign programs. These are usually interviews, debates among politicians and discussions with experts.

Political marketing in Poland was born in 1989. April 13<sup>th</sup> brought a proclamation of elections settled on June 4<sup>th</sup>. It was the beginning of the first election campaign, quite a new quality in Polish political life. Two main powers took part in a challenge: the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP, the Polish Communist Party) (then still in power) and Solidarity. The latter availed itself of an interesting strategy: to select as many candidates as it could win according to the round table agreements. The idea was to suggest that voters not vote for persons, but rather for the program. The candidates' main form of advertising was famous pictures with Wał sa, one of the legends of Solidarity and its best-known leader. A lack of time (only a few months for a campaign), a lack of money and a lack of access to television, which was still under total control of the state created significant limitations, but at the same time evoked creativity not present on the PUWP side. In May 1989, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral Gazette) started to be published. It was the most important and the biggest forum for Solidarity at that time. Keeping its name, *Gazeta Wyborcza* has become with time the most influential and powerful opinion maker. A not very sophisticated, but a vivid and enthusiastic campaign brought Solidarity a victory. It won everything it could at that time: 35% of the seats in the Sejm (the lower chamber) and 99% in the Senate (one was taken by an independent candidate).

During the first presidential elections, six candidates were running. For the first time, elements of negative campaigning, directed especially against Stanisław Ty mi ski, called "a man from nowhere," were observed. In spite of the negativity, that man, a Polish emigrant from Canada unknown before

the start of the campaign, successfully reached the second ballot, where he lost to Wałsa. Tymiski used some techniques of American campaigning. Other candidates also tried to behave professionally, although they relied on volunteers recruited from show business.

In 1991, the first totally free parliamentary elections took place. The most important form of advertising was the party political broadcast (called election programs, in which the broadcast time was divided in proportion to the number of registered voters) on television. Some of the broadcasts were bizarre, some dull, most were full of talking heads, but they attracted a lot of public interest as they were something new in the political communication process.

The 1993 parliamentary elections are remembered as the first attempt to adopt American standards of political marketing. More than 20 committees (parties) were running and most of them were supported by professional advertising agencies that did not have much experience in political persuasion. Only one party – the Liberal-Democratic Congress (LDC) – decided to employ a foreign company – Saatchi & Saatchi. This was the most professional campaign, however, it did not work. The campaign's American style – dynamic, optimistic, full of joy, music, happenings, entertainment – stood in contrast with the mood of voters facing negative social results of economic reforms (unemployment, lack of social security, business scandals, corruption, etc.). The party, whose leader was an incumbent prime minister, failed. Some innovations were introduced at that time: songs as election anthems of particular parties, show-business people supporting campaigns, billboards with images of leaders and leading slogans<sup>1</sup>, but still television election programs with talking heads dominated. In messages, the emphasis was on symbolic forms rather than on issues. Parties did not take their own polls because of high costs and

relied on the results of those published in media by independent agencies. Only the LDC systematically ordered surveys and used focus groups.

In 1995, Aleksander Kwa niewski won the presidential election with a slight lead in the second ballot. The campaign was a new quality in Polish conditions: it was professionally prepared and based on non-media instruments. The media, especially television, favored Wał sa, so Kwa niewski's headquarters emphasized direct meetings with voters. A tour around Poland in a special bus was organized; the candidate was perfectly familiar with local problems, thanks to the great work of the local structures of the Democratic Left Alliance (supporting Kwa niewski). After the first ballot, public television organized for the first (and so far the last) time a debate in the studio between two candidates. Journalists invited by the politicians taking part in the debate asked the politicians questions, and candidates did not discuss them with each other. Debates were won with no doubt by Kwa niewski, who was perfectly prepared and able to keep his cool, which cannot be said of his opponent. After the first ballot, the campaign became more negative and full of mutual accusations of lies and financial falsehoods.

For the 1997 parliamentary campaign, the main parties were well prepared. It became common to employ professional agencies and use the media not only in terms of free of charge limits. Politicians strived for interviews and used other public relations instruments. Leaders published their books; committees organized mass meetings with free beer and sausages for voters. Images of candidates and parties became more and more important. For the first time, the Internet was used on a large scale, and although there was limited access to the Internet among Polish population, regular users of this technology were recruited from the upper classes so they could act as opinion leaders. Most committees made their own quantitative and qualitative surveys of public opinion.

The 2000 parliamentary campaign witnessed a failure of the first totally negative campaign directed against the incumbent president, who was supported by more than 70% of the voters. As a result, Kwa niewski won in the first ballot with a huge lead over the others. As an interesting innovation, the media proclaimed a “wives’ war,” rightly assuming that the First Lady was a great advantage for the incumbent president. Extremely popular because of her charity activities, as well as her personal charm and style, she was able to appeal to floating voters or voters not interested in politics. Marketing tools were used very cautiously because for the first time committees were legally subject to financial limitations on campaign spending.

The 2001 campaign was probably the most populist since 1991. Some new parties were established just before the campaign. Although their leaders were well known from their previous activities, voters were confused and the campaigns concentrated on differentiation strategies. Standards that had been worked out before were strengthened, but expense limitations introduced by the election law narrowed the possibilities for new interesting solutions. The campaign itself was rather dull, but its outcomes were quite surprising and provoked discussion about the role of the media (especially television) in the political process. The success of at least two parties may be a contribution to the hypothesis of the spiral of silence<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Very popular among graffiti artists, who made funny or caustic inserts. For example: the Labor Union slogan “you deserve more” was completed by “than Labor Union,” “first, economy” received a note “second, don’t steal.”

<sup>2</sup> Two weeks before elections, two parties, the League of Polish Families (LPF) and Selfdefence, scored about 1-2 points in polls. During the elections, the LPF reached 7% and Selfdefence 10%. Their success resulted from the support of certain media (mainly Radio Maria, a Catholic, orthodox, anti-European radio station regularly listened to by about 3 million voters) and the possibilities opened up by free air time in the public media. It was LPF’s first chance to present itself to the broader audience and for many voters it was the first possibility to hear opinions they share on nationwide media.

The media system in Poland can be characterized as a duopoly in the electronic media (public and commercial) and free and commercial press market. Broadcasters try to distance themselves from politics, which – in the case of public media – is an obligation, whereas the press does not avoid showing its preferences. As mentioned before, public broadcasters have some responsibilities to the political sphere; politicians try to influence journalists to advance their views. Commercial broadcasters confine themselves to information formats and do not engage in political discourse. There is, however, one exception: *TVN 24*, a commercial information channel, patterned after CNN, was launched just before September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It offers a wide range of information about domestic and international politics, studio discussions with experts and increased analyses. The National Broadcasting Council has control over electronic media. According to the 1992 Broadcasting Act, the National Broadcasting Council was appointed as a state organ, competent in matters connected with radio and television. It consists of nine members representing different social and political circles. Four of them are appointed by the Sejm, two by the Senate and three by the President. Thus, it is political in origin and is very often criticized as not being objective in its activities and statements. In the electoral process, it ensures that public broadcasters fulfill their obligations properly.

There are five main dimensions that condition the development of political marketing in Poland. The first one is legal. There are time limitations for public broadcasting of political commercials in the media (usually three weeks before elections), both unpaid and paid. Proportional parliamentary elections force party strategies, although the role of leaders, and their personalities is still increasing.

The second condition is financial: there are legal limitations on election spending (12 million PLN [about 3 million €] for presidential campaigns,



29 million PLN [about 7,25 million €] for the last parliamentary elections); successful committees can count on state subsidies, so fundraising is not a central campaign issue. The system, however, does not favor the development of expensive, sophisticated techniques of political marketing and polls; campaigns are strictly centralized because of financial requirements.

The third dimension – political – is connected with the party system: the political scene in Poland is still not stable. The very Polish tendency to split existing parties generates – especially before elections – new parties, coalitions or alliances which creates a lack of continuity in marketing activities and disorientation among voters; the growing brutality of political life discourages voters from following campaigns and participating in voting.

Fourth, the media factor results from the existing media system and the historical role of the media in the political system. The public electronic media try to fulfill the objectivity rule (equal access, equal time), and do not encourage meritorious, issue-centered debate; they are not too insistent, or investigative. Journalists let politicians say what they want, so it usually happens that politicians take over the discussion, which means quarrels, avoiding answering questions, making personal comments which are often not understandable for viewers. The politicians' comments and behaviors are predictable, the debates usually do not bring anything new – so it is no wonder that the average share of studio debates is about 2% and election programs are viewed by 3% of the voters. On the other hand, the commercial media are not really interested in covering politics, including campaigns, as they seem not to be interesting for the audience which is seen as a market.

The last, but not least, dimension is of a mental nature. Politicians believe in their natural charisma and skills, so they are not aware of the

need to practice public relations tools. They still hesitate to use professional training and still have an arrogant attitude of knowing better. There are only a few political actors who are able to understand and use the media as a means of persuasion and as a means to create personality. On the voters' side, there is a lack of trust of politics and politicians, and a distrust of or suspicion towards positive self-presentations, attitudes or appearances, which are so typical of politicians during campaigns. Polish citizens are not interested in political or social activities. The standards of political culture are still being shaped. The level of education within Polish society is relatively low, and its voting decisions are almost unpredictable because of a huge rate of floating voters.

One may say that a present form of political marketing in Poland is a matter of mutual dependence between political marketing and external dimensions which influence its development; another may say that it is a vicious circle. Nevertheless simple, not to say primitive political marketing, is not the main factor affecting the political process. Existing conditions do not favor the development of modern sophisticated political marketing. Considering many critical opinions on the role of political marketing in contemporary democracies, it may be a controversial question whether this is to be considered a good or a bad thing.