



# Political communication management

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## The strategy of the two main candidates during the 2007 French presidential elections

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to investigate the communication strategy of the two main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections, deconstructing the process of communication in its main elements: context, message, media-mix, and communication strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Secondary data were collected from a variety of secondary sources, such as texts, articles, statistics and interviews on the subject of the 2007 French presidential elections, published in various journals or web sites, and then re-interpreted from the perspective of two researchers, who were direct participants and observers of these political events.

**Findings** – The findings present an analytical discussion of the central political message used during the presidential campaign, complemented by an analysis of the media-mix and the level of media exposure of the two main candidates.

**Research limitations/implications** – The limited focus of the paper on the communication campaign implemented by the two main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections does not permit a general evaluation of the political marketing strategy.

**Practical implications** – The conclusions of this study can provide a useful insight for political communication specialists.

**Originality/value** – The main contribution of the paper lies in the presentation and discussion of the main communication methods and tools used in a political system different from the Anglo-American context, which is analysed in most empirical and theoretical studies on the subject of political marketing.

**Keywords** Communication management, Elections, France, Politics

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

In the last 20 years, political marketing has become an academic discipline and a practical application field in its own right. Although the legitimacy of political marketing has been questioned by some researchers, who consider it merely as a manipulation of the public image of political leaders (Philo, 1993), the marketing principles and methods are nowadays widely used by political parties in order to obtain a differential advantage during political campaigns (Butler and Collins, 1994; Mauser, 1983).

Advocating the use of political marketing, Harrop (1990) argues that the application of marketing principles can enrich and enhance the activity of political parties, providing a frame of action and analysis that is fundamentally different from the



traditional perspective of political science, which is mainly focused on party ideologies and politics. However, at a theoretical level it is still not clear how easy it is to apply the classical principles and concepts of marketing to politics. Some authors consider that “the problems facing the political campaigner are strikingly similar to those confronting the marketing manager” (Butler and Collins, 1994, p. 19), while others have identified a series of differences between classical marketing and the political marketing approach (Butler and Collins, 1994; Dean and Croft, 2001; Lock and Harris, 1996). This conceptual difficulty is determined by the immaturity of the political marketing science, which is still at a “craft” stage (Lock and Harris, 1996, p. 23).

A number of authors have indicated the similarity of various marketing branches with political marketing. Harrop (1990) considers that political marketing activities are developed to enhance the value and the efficiency of exchanges between parties and electorate, and finds similarities between political marketing and service marketing. The service marketing basis of political marketing is also emphasised by Scammell (1999). Relationship marketing, with its emphasis on mutually beneficial, long-term relationships between organisations and clients, was also presented as a useful approach for political marketing activities (Dean and Croft, 2001; Kavanagh, 1995). Finally, Wring (1996, 1997) applies the strategic marketing management approach to political marketing campaigns, emphasising the necessity of strategic planning and market-orientation.

A striking feature of political marketing theories and empirical studies is the almost total dependence on the Anglo-American tradition (Baines *et al.*, 2002; Bowler *et al.*, 1996; O’Shaughnessy, 2001). Initially, the introduction of political marketing methods in European elections was considered as the Americanisation of European politics, determined by the desire of political parties to enhance the effectiveness and the efficiency of political campaigns (Baines *et al.*, 2001). Today it is obvious that, although some of the concepts and methods used in the US political system have been imported to Europe, their application in European electoral campaigns is adapted to the traditions and realities of national political systems (Kolovos and Harris, 2005; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996; Plasser *et al.*, 1999). It can be said that one of the main challenges for the development of a mature political marketing science is the introduction of a cross-cultural dimension (Newman and Vercic, 2003), and the investigation of various political systems, in order to understand the specificity of applying political marketing concepts and methods in various cultural contexts. From this perspective, the present study, which analyses the communication strategy of the two main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections, is an attempt to enrich the field of investigation to other political systems than the UK or the USA.

### **Communication as a central part of political marketing**

Communication is considered by many authors as the central part of political marketing (Kolovos and Harris, 2005).

Kavanagh (1995, 1996) and Scammell (1999) consider political marketing as a set of strategies and tools used to study the public opinion before and during an election campaign, in order to develop political communication and to assess its impact on various audiences. Maarek (1995) also emphasises that the introduction of marketing in political campaigns was determined by the necessity of elaborating a complex policy of

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political communication, and defines political communication as the central part of political marketing.

Lock and Harris (1996) indicate that communicating with party members, media, funding sources and the general electorate represents the essence of political marketing activity. However, they also criticise the orientation of political analysts, for whom political marketing concerns only the communication realised by political parties in the immediate pre-election period. Indeed, many studies have outlined the continuous nature of political communication, which is not limited only to pre-election campaigns, introducing the concept of permanent campaigning (Nimmo, 1999; O'Shaughnessy, 2001). This approach is considered by many researchers to indicate the strategic approach used in the design and application of political marketing, which requires a long-term perspective (Dean and Croft, 2001; Smith and Hirst, 2001), strategic planning (Baines *et al.*, 2002; Peng and Hackley, 2007) and a comprehensive market positioning of various political parties (Lees-Marshment, 2001a).

The long-term strategic perspective of political marketing emphasises the need to develop positive relationships (O'Shaughnessy, 2001) with party members, the media, and the electorate, through a carefully planned process of strategic analysis and implementation. The political communication plays an essential role in the development and maintenance of these positive relationships. In this context, Franklin (1995) defined political communication as the study of interactions between media and political systems, and the analysis of:

- the political content of the media;
- the actors and agencies involved in the production of content;
- the impact of political media content on the audience and/or on policy development;
- the impact of the political system on the media system; and
- the impact of the media system on the political system.

However, Lees-Marshment (2001b) indicates that political marketing is much more than just political communication, combining in a strategic approach campaigning, political communication, market intelligence, product design and product promotion.

However, it is not clear if and how the basic concepts of marketing communication can be directly applied for the analysis of political campaigning. It is difficult to find a direct match between the classical communication mix (advertising, publicity, direct selling and public relations) and the political communication mix. For example, O'Shaughnessy (2001) has emphasised that the use of negative advertising in political marketing has no direct counterpart in the classical marketing approach. The same might be true for the media-mix or for the process of message creation and diffusion, which must be re-considered in the political marketing framework. For example, the complex influence of media exposure and media planning on the success of political campaigns was emphasised by many authors (Butler and Collins, 1994; Dean and Croft, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, 2001).

This paper attempts to investigate the communication strategy of the two main candidates to the 2007 French presidential elections, using a case study approach. The study deconstructs the process of communication in its main elements: context, message, media-mix, and communication strategy, and applies a dynamic analysis

approach, considering the various political events which took place between April 2006 and May 2007. The paper ends with a summary of the main findings, and with several propositions for future research projects in this growing area of marketing.

### Research methodology

In order to investigate the communication strategy of the two main political candidates to the 2007 French presidential elections, using the concepts and the research framework of strategic marketing, this study has defined the following research objectives:

- To present the political context and the main phases of the French presidential campaigns of the two main candidates, starting a year before the date of the second round of presidential elections (April 2006).
- To analyse the central political message used in the presidential campaigns of the two main candidates, as well as the evolution of this message.
- To discuss in detail the main communication methods and media mix used by the main candidates during their campaign for French presidential elections.

The data collected to answer these research objectives came from secondary sources, such as texts, articles, statistics and interviews on the subject of the 2007 French presidential elections, published in various journals or web sites. In the first stage of the research process, an extensive corpus of documents was developed, which included all the relevant articles published on the topic of French presidential elections between 1 April 2006 and 30 September 2007 in the national newspapers *Le Monde* (116 articles), *Le Figaro* (134 articles) and *Les Echos* (184 articles), as well as the information published on the web sites:

- [www.presidentielle-2007.net](http://www.presidentielle-2007.net);
- <http://elections.france2.fr/presidentielles/2007/>;
- <http://2007.tns-sofres.com>;
- <http://ouiounon.net>; and
- [www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/election-presidentielle-2007](http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/election-presidentielle-2007)

The three national newspapers used as a source for the collected corpus of political articles were randomly selected among the five French national newspapers that have a daily distribution of more than 100,000 copies: *Le Parisien/Aujourd'hui en France*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Liberation* and *Les Echos*. *L'Equipe*, which is also distributed in more than 100,000 copies, was automatically excluded because it is specifically focused on sport events. The five web sites selected for this study were the most relevant five sites regarding the French presidential elections indicated by the Google search when the research was initiated (September 2007).

The detailed investigation of this information provided a multi-dimensional image of the French presidential campaign built from the dynamic combination of various narratives and interpretations. Finally, the researchers participating in this project have identified and analysed the specific information that described or answered the three research objectives defined in this study, using discourse analysis methods. The interpretation of these research topics was realised using triangulation to compare

the data collected from various secondary sources, and focusing the analysis on objective facts rather than on subjective opinions.

The research method applied in this study is content analysis, which represents a “technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). In line with the model developed and proposed by Holsti (1969), the researchers have analysed the antecedents (source and encoding process), the characteristics (channel, message and recipient) and the consequences (decoding process) of the political communication campaign realised by the two main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections.

### The political context of the 2007 French presidential campaign

The main political events that have characterised the 2007 French presidential elections were the direct expression of a trend towards political change and social transformation. This tendency was well illustrated by the profile of the two main presidential candidates: Ségolène Royal the candidate of the French Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste – PS), and Nicolas Sarkozy, the leader of the Coalition for a Popular Movement (l’Union pour un Mouvement Populaire – UMP).

Both these candidates were, for the first time, engaged in a presidential election, and both wanted to be perceived by voters as a new and different political solution in comparison with the traditional approach taken by their parties. Their personal profile is presented in parallel in Table I.

Nicolas Sarkozy was a member of the existing governmental team, but he clearly stated many times that he represents a change of political orientation. During his previous political career he attempted to project the image of a dynamic, result-oriented, competent politician, who is not afraid to expose uncomfortable truths when this is necessary to reform the political system. Although as Minister of Interior Affairs and Territorial Organisation he worked closely with the Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and with the president of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy made clear in his statements that he has a much more ambitious political program than the existing government, targeting the fundamental problems of the French society.

Ségolène Royal initially seemed to have no realistic chance of gaining the socialist party presidential candidacy, because she was competing with more experienced

Profile	Ségolène Royal	Nicolas Sarkozy
Age	54 years	52 years
Political party	PS (The Socialist Party)	UMP (The Coalition for a Popular Movement)
Profession	Lawyer	Lawyer
Family situation	Not married, four children	Married twice, three children
Previous government positions	1992-1993 Minister of Environment 1997-2000 Minister of School Education 2000-2001 Minister of Family and Children 2001-2002 Minister of Family, Children and Disabled People	1993 Minister of Budget 2002-2004 Minister of Interior Affairs 2004 Minister of Economy of Finance and Industry 2005-2007 Minister of Interior Affairs and Territorial Organisation

**Table I.**  
The profile of the two main candidates for the 2007 French presidential elections at the start of the campaign

political members: Laurent Fabius and Dominique Strauss-Kahn. However, her charisma and her political discourse that emphasised the need for change attracted the sympathy of many party members. On the other hand, she was perceived by the French people as the embodiment of another type of politics, fundamentally different from the existing male-dominant political class, being the first woman candidate for the French president elections.

Two other elements define the novelty of the political situation during the 2007 French political elections:

- (1) The pre-campaign period was relatively long. The political specialists define the start of the presidential campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy on 28 November 2004, when he was elected the president of the UMP. The same specialists consider that the PS started the presidential campaign as early as 2002 when a number of possible candidates were already known by the public. However, Ségolène Royal appeared on the political scene only in 2005, being strongly supported by a large number of party members.
- (2) From an ideological point of view, the 2007 presidential elections offered to the French electorate a veritable choice between two clearly polarised political orientations – UMP and PS. The main themes of political debate have been clearly presented to the electorate, and then discussed and developed in the political programme of the main presidential candidates: social themes (marriage and homosexual adoptions), economic themes (reforms, development, and the reduction of unemployment) and ethical themes (the right to die in dignity).

In total, 12 candidates competed in the 2007 French presidential elections, but during the entire electoral campaign it was obvious that the main confrontation was between Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal. The only important challenger was, in the first round of votes, François Bayrou, the candidate of the Coalition for French Democracy (UDF), who obtained 18.57 per cent of votes, in comparison with 25.87 per cent obtained by Ségolène Royal, and 31.18 per cent obtained by Nicolas Sarkozy (France-2007, 2007a). Bayrou offered an alternative to the highly polarised political confrontation between right and left ideologies and programmes, representing a party positioned to the centre of the French political spectrum.

Table II presents the main political events of the 2007 French presidential elections campaigns in relation to the two main candidates. An investigation of these data indicates the existence of three main phases of the political campaign:

- (1) the party nomination of the presidential candidate;
- (2) the presentation of the political programme of each candidate; and
- (3) the confrontation between the two remaining candidates in the second round of votes.

The following sections of this study will analyse and discuss the central message(s) and the media mix used by the two main candidates. A synthetic presentation of the communication strategy applied by the two candidates will then integrate all these elements into a coherent dynamic process, considered in relation to the three main stages of the political campaign.

Date	Event
<i>2006</i>	
11 April	Public declaration concerning the “probable” candidacy of Ségolène Royal for the 2007 French presidential elections
16 November	After the main candidates (Laurent Fabius, Ségolène Royal, Dominique Strauss-Kahn) of PS present their political programme during a TV public debate, 60.6 per cent of the party members choose Ségolène Royal as the official PS candidate for the 2007 presidential elections
29 November	Nicolas Sarkozy announces his candidacy to the 2007 French presidential elections
End of December	Record participation of the French population in the registration on the electoral lists
<i>2007</i>	
14 January	98.1 per cent of UMP party members choose Nicolas Sarkozy as the official party candidate for the 2007 presidential elections
11 February	Ségolène Royal presents her political programme
2 April	Nicolas Sarkozy presents his political programme in a book entitled <i>Together (Ensemble)</i>
22 April	The first round of votes in the 2007 French presidential elections
28 April	TV debate between Ségolène Royal and François Bayrou, the candidate classed the third after the first round of presidential elections
2 May	TV debate between the two candidates to the second round of 2007 French presidential elections: Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy
6 May	The second round of votes for the 2007 French presidential elections

**Table II.**  
The main political events  
of the 2007 French  
presidential elections  
campaign

### The central messages of the two main presidential candidates

The central message represents one of the most important elements of the political campaign. According to Faucheux (1994) the message expresses the candidate's rationale for competing, and represents the most compelling reasons why the electorate should vote the candidate and not the opposition. During the political campaign the message is declined into various forms, such as texts, images, slogans, signs and speeches. But, no matter how it is conveyed, the message must be clear, consistent, understandable and relevant to the existing political choice (Faucheux, 1994).

The analysis of the political messages used by the two main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections was made using contextual and discourse analysis techniques, in order to deconstruct the meaning of political communication in the specific context of the political campaign. This method of analysis is advocated by Floch (2001) for marketing communication messages and applied by Faucheux (1994) for the slogans used by US presidential candidates, and by Palma (2003) to the slogans used by candidates during the 2002 French presidential elections.

The strategy used by the two main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections is very different in terms of the central political message. Nicolas Sarkozy used only one central message during his entire campaign: “Together, everything becomes possible” (Ensemble, tout devient possible). On the other hand, Ségolène Royal changed her slogan twice during the election campaign:

- (1) "In order to change dramatically" (Pour que ça change fort);
- (2) "With more justice, France will be stronger" (Plus juste, la France sera plus forte);
- (3) "The France president" (La France présidente).

Using only one carefully chosen slogan, Nicolas Sarkozy attempted to emphasise the clarity of the message as well as the stability of the candidate and of his ideas. Although in the pre-campaign period, Nicolas Sarkozy repeatedly outlined his desire to change the political approach of the existing government, and to impose structural reforms in various areas of French society, the message used during the political campaign is not directly centred on the idea of change, but on community and participation for the construction of a better future. Using this approach, Nicolas Sarkozy tried to present himself as the right leader for a quiet and peaceful change, and to appeal to the entire nation for support. This idea of participative community is also present in most of his political discourses during the presidential campaign, in which he presents himself as "the president of all French people". Another strong idea emphasised in Nicolas Sarkozy's political message is the belief in success – "everything becomes possible", which makes an indirect allusion to his capacity to solve the main problems of French society. This idea is consistent with the image projected by Sarkozy in all media as a dynamic, direct and competent person, who not only has clear ideas about what needs to be done, but also the energy and the competence to bring them to fruition.

By contrast, the communication approach of Ségolène Royal seems less structured and clear. Her first slogan outlines the idea of forceful and uncompromising change. Using this message, the candidate tried, on one hand, to outline her new political orientation within the Socialist Party, and, on the other hand, to answer her prejudiced critics that argued that a women president will not have the necessary determination and force to change things for real.

The second message introduces the idea of justice that must be created and used in order to strengthen the entire nation. The approach is this time more abstract and more idealistic, emphasising a "token" word – "justice" – which is often used during political campaigns.

Finally, her third message – "The France president" – suggests that the entire nation will share the responsibility of national governance and decision-making, but also attempts to develop an indirect identification of Ségolène Royal with a national symbol (in the French language, France is a noun of the feminine gender). This slogan was reinforced by the messages transmitted by the candidate during the last part of her campaign, when she appealed to French people to join in a participative democracy in order to find solutions to the existing national problems.

The central messages adopted and used by these candidates have been reinforced by the images projected through various media and communication methods.

### Posters

The electoral posters represent an important media in the communication mix of political candidates, using a powerful combination of text and images that synthesise the central message and the profile of the candidate.

The first electoral poster of Ségolène Royal displays her first electoral slogan, but also the name and the address of the Socialist Party. It is a full colour image, in which the candidate is presented in the middle of a large group of people, smiling confidently. Her face is placed right at the centre of the poster, between two texts, one presenting the name and the message of the candidate, and the other her political connection (see Plate 1).

Ségolène Royal then changed her poster, as well as her slogan, presenting for the first round of votes a much simpler image, which displays her face in black and white, with the words “The change” at the top and with her name at the bottom, written in white on a red background, and then with her electoral slogan written on the lower part of her picture (see Plate 2). The specialists in political communication were negatively impressed by this poster, indicating various errors and inconsistencies (Mineur, 2007; Ouiounon.net, 2007): the electoral slogan is written using as a background the chin of the candidate, the black and white image transmits the feeling of an old and outdated picture, the word president was written in majuscule, and the succession of words creates a confusing and ambiguous message: “. . . The Change . . . France . . . President . . . Ségolène Royal”.

For the second round of votes, Ségolène Royal changed again her electoral poster, choosing a large, calm, smiling image of the candidate dressed in white, with the text of the electoral slogan written in blue on the lower part of the photograph, the words announcing ‘The Change’ being eliminated (see Plate 3).

In contrast, Nicolas Sarkozy used for his entire campaign the same electoral poster, with small variations (see Plate 4). The candidate is presented smiling with calm and



Plate 1.  
The first electoral poster  
of Ségolène Royal

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**Plate 2.**

The electoral poster used  
by Ségolène Royal for the  
first round of votes

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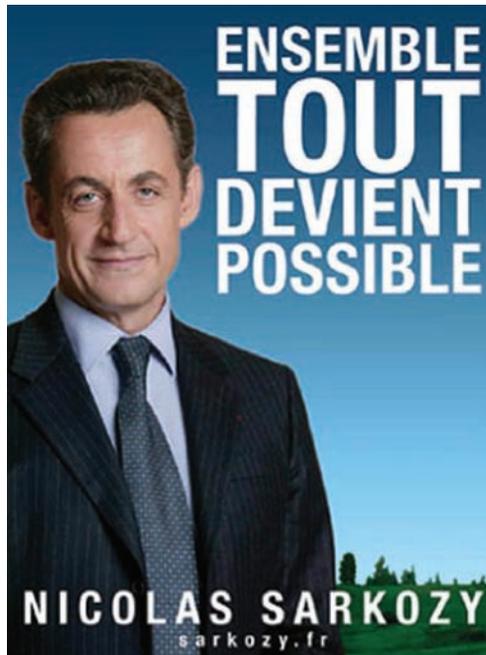


**Plate 3.**

The electoral poster used  
by Ségolène Royal for the  
second round of votes

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**Plate 4.**  
The electoral poster used  
by Nicolas Sarkozy during  
the presidential campaign

confidence, wearing a suit, white shirt and tie, on a natural background showing a blue, cloudless sky, and a green hill.

The electoral slogan occupies the entire top right hand corner of the poster (with the word “everything” a little larger than the rest of the message). The name of the candidate together with the e-mail address of his blog web site are written on the lower part of the image.

The analysts have criticised this poster, outlining the artificiality of the image, and the ambiguity of the text, since it is not clear if the “everything” which becomes possible refers only to positive outcomes (Ouiounon.net, 2007).

### **Internet and viral marketing**

The intensive use of the internet and viral marketing tools is one of the specific characteristics of the 2007 French presidential campaigns (*La documentation française*, 2007). Already in 2001, O’Shaughnessy indicated that the use of the web is changing the style and the strategy of political communication, offering to parties and politicians the possibility to engage in a real-time, interactive dialogue with the electorate.

Among the parties participating in the electoral campaign, UMP made an intensive use of internet communication. Using a budget of 1.5 million euros, UMP designed and implemented a complex online communication strategy, using the services of the enterprise “l’Enchanteur des nouveaux medias”. By September 2005, more than 2 million internet users had received unsolicited messages with the title “Nicholas Sarkozy has sent you a message”, in order to recruit new supporters. This initial operation was followed by a personalised dialogue with the people who answered the

appeal. This online campaign was a success, having twice the impact of a traditional communication campaign (Bénilde, 2006).

“L’Enchanteur des nouveaux medias” also launched advergames and displayed publicity banners on French web sites. Specific keywords have been reserved on Google search engine, such as “police”, “riots” or “suburbia”, during the November 2005 riots, and they were linked with a discussion forum hosted by the UMP web site (Michalowska, 2007). UMP also tried to target specific groups of people, opening a site for women – “Agora elles” and another one for young people (Cousin, 2007). On its side, the Socialist Party has launched on 9 March 2006 an online recruitment campaign, with the result of almost 85,000 new party members registered until 1 June 2006.

The main candidates in the 2007 French presidential elections also used blogs in order to reach and group their supporters. In June 2006, UMP has identified, using an online platform, 900 blogs that were supportive of the right wing politics, and invited the party members to create their own blog in order to transmit and debate ideas. A synthesis of the opinions expressed on these blogs was sent each week to Nicolas Sarkozy. The UMP candidate launched his own blog on 14 January 2007, right after he was nominated as the party candidate to presidential elections. On the other side, Ségolène Royal created a special blog [www.desirsdavenir.org](http://www.desirsdavenir.org), as a tool for promoting the participative democracy method that she advocated in her political programme (Michalowska, 2007).

Despite the hype of this new media, a report published by OpinionWay on the subject of the online political campaign, showed that the internet did not succeed to outclass in popularity the traditional media channels such as newspapers or television (Michalowska, 2007; Vedel, 2007). The study shows that only 32 per cent of the French people have visited the blog of a political candidate, 13 per cent have participated in a political debate on a discussion forum, 10 per cent have sent an e-mail of support to a political personality, and only 6 per cent have participated in a real-time “chat” with a political personality.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that a survey report published by ISOP shows that the main sources of political information accessed online are still virtual extensions of traditional media: 63 per cent of respondents prefer the web sites of known newspapers, 50 per cent of respondents the general information portals, and 34 per cent the sites of TV or Radio Channels, while 20 per cent of respondents access the sites of various political parties, 19 per cent the site or the blog of a political personality, and only 10 per cent the political discussion forums (Michalowska, 2007).

### **Traditional media: the central role of television**

Both Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal have used a large variety of traditional media in order to transmit and debate their political message. Among these media, a central role was occupied by television, which was accessed daily by at least 75 per cent of voters (Vedel, 2007).

The candidates and the political parties used television as a privileged channel of communication with their electorate, to win more popular support and to keep the campaign momentum. The importance of television becomes obvious when we consider some of the main events of the presidential campaigns that were broadcasted in direct by the French national television:

- *16 November 2006*: Ségolène Royal, Laurent Fabius and Dominique Strauss-Kahn present their political program and vision for the 2007 presidential elections in a televised debate. As a result of this confrontation, Ségolène Royal is elected as the PS candidate for the presidential campaign.
- *20 February 2007*: Ségolène Royal is interviewed during the televised show ‘I have a question to ask you’, in which she presents the main elements of her political programme.
- *27 April 2007*: François Bayrou criticises Nicolas Sarkozy during a televised interview on the RTL TV Channel.
- *28 April 2007*: TV debate between Ségolène Royal and François Bayrou, in which the PS candidate attempts to attract the supporters of Bayrou for the second round of presidential elections.
- *2 May 2007*: TV confrontation between Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy broadcasted in direct by TF1 and France 2 Channels.

The final debate between the main candidates represents an electoral tradition in the USA, and it was introduced in France in 1974. In 2007, this confrontation was organised using two TV presenters: Arlette Chabot – Channel France 2 and Patrick Poivre d’Arvor – Channel TF1. The debate lasted two hours, the two candidates having the right to equal time to express their opinions. The position of the two candidates, as well as the order of speech was established using a draw. Both candidates used this public appearance to express their own political vision, and to attack and criticise the opposition, in an attempt to obtain the support of the electorate who voted for other candidates in the first electoral round (France-2007, 2007b).

A very pertinent question in political marketing concerns the relation between the degree of media exposure and the success of a presidential candidate. To answer this question, two experts in public surveys from TNS-Sofres have analysed the media exposure of the main presidential candidates, using an indicator called the Unit of Media Buzz (UMB). UMB measures the media visibility of candidates, defined in relation to each type of media (e.g. the editorial space provided by newspapers; the number of minutes of broadcast on TV and radio), which is then pondered with the number of people who accessed this information (TNS – Sofres, 2007). The analysis shown that, with the exception of short periods, the media exposure of Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal was clearly superior to the media exposure of the other candidates, Nicolas Sarkozy having the highest degree of media exposure. Indeed, the two main candidates used 60 per cent of the media space during the presidential campaign, leaving only 40 per cent to the other ten candidates. The role of television was essential, representing 45 per cent of the total media exposure of the two main candidates (TNS – Sofres, 2007).

### **Discussion: the campaign communication strategy**

An analysis of the communication strategy used by the two main presidential candidates shows that the communication campaign was divided into three main phases, each with its own objectives and style of communication:

- (1) *The differentiation of the candidate within his/her own party.* This phase starts in the pre-campaign period, with the first declaration about the intention to

candidate for presidential elections, and ends with the party nomination of the official presidential candidate. For Nicolas Sarkozy, this period starts on 28 November 2004, when he was elected the president of the UMP party, and ends on 14 January 2007, when he was nominated the UMP presidential candidate during the UMP congress. For Ségolène Royal this period is much shorter, starting with her declarations about a “probable” presidential candidacy, on 11 April 2006 and ending with her official nomination by party members on 16 November 2006.

The main communication objectives during this period were to clarify and differentiate the candidate’s image and political vision within his/her own political party. This objective is usually achieved in terms of communication, using repeated criticisms of the existing political orientation, and outlining the general elements of a specific political vision, which will later define the political programme of the candidate. The candidate also attempts to progressively increase his/her media exposure, in order to be recognised by the general public and to attract the attention of the electorate.

- (2) *The presentation of the political programme.* This phase starts with the official party nomination of the candidate, and usually ends with the results of the first round of votes. During this period the main communication objective is to present a clear and convincing political programme, which appeals both to party members and to the general electorate. The candidates define their own political vision during a series of media appearances, in which the main problems of the nation are defined, analysed, debated, and possible solutions are proposed.
- (3) *The final confrontation between the main candidates.* After the first round of votes only two candidates remain in the race for the presidential position. When neither of them has an absolute majority, their success in the second round of votes depends on their capacity to attract the electorate of the other candidates. Their communication has an increased emphasis on the main elements of the political programme, often combined with a direct criticism of the other remaining candidate. In the 2007 French presidential elections both candidates attempted to attract new voters. Using the TV debate with the third most important presidential candidate, François Bayrou, Ségolène Royal tried to convince his electorate that the two political programmes were not so much different in comparison with the radical reforms promised by Nicolas Sarkozy. On the other hand, the straightforward political approach of Nicolas Sarkozy may have appealed to the supporters of Jean-Marie le Pen.

As the campaign wore on, the discourse of the two main candidates became more extreme (e.g. Ségolène Royal repeatedly warned the electorate about the dangers associated with the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy; while he emphasised the lack of realism and coherence in the political programme of Ségolène Royal). This phase of direct confrontation reached its peak during the TV debate between Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal. It is interesting to note that at the end of the TV debate, Ségolène Royal addressed the possible prejudice of a part of the French electorate, emphasising that being a woman is not a handicap in managing well a country, and offering the example of Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor.

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The separation of these three communication phases is not absolute. In fact, elements of each phase can be identified in the other two. For example, Ségolène Royal continued to criticise the political position and declaration of some PS party members, who did not fully support her candidature and campaign, even after she was nominated as the party candidate. On the other hand both candidates repeatedly criticised the political programmes of the opposition, during various phases of the political campaign. However, despite its shortcomings, the analytical approach presented in this study allows a deeper understanding of the main communication objectives and methods used during the presidential campaign.

### Conclusion

From a general perspective, the political analysts (TNS-Sofres, 2007; Vedel, 2007) agree that the communication campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy was better in terms of structure, clarity, consistency, media relations, media exposure, and reactivity to the initiatives/declarations of other candidates. Ségolène Royal attempted a more emotional approach to the French electorate, using her personal charisma and offering an “alternative” political vision, based on a more feminine approach.

Despite the fact that some analysts considered that the American electoral style used by Nicolas Sarkozy was the main reason of his success (Delcayre, 2007), others emphasise that there are still many differences between the French and American electoral methods (Vedel, 2007). Despite repeated confrontations between the two main candidates, the debates did not reach the level of negativity and verbal violence characteristic for American political campaigns. On the other hand, TV political advertising is forbidden in France, which also eliminates the possibility of using negative political advertising; and French media are much more reticent than American media to analyse and attack the private life of candidates. Finally, the role of political advisers is much less important in France than in the USA, where there is an active offer and demand for political counselling services.

The complexity of a presidential electoral campaign can hardly be fully analysed in only one paper. Therefore, the main limitation of this article is the analytical focus on only one aspect of the 2007 French presidential elections: the communication strategy of the two main candidates. However, presenting the inter-relationship among various communication elements, this paper attempted to provide a synthetic image of the main methods and tools used in the French political marketing.

The framework proposed and applied by this study can represent a useful analytical and practical tool both for political specialists and academics. Political campaign managers should consider the following elements emphasised in this study:

- (1) The communication strategy of presidential candidates has to evolve according to the specific objectives and characteristics of the three main phases of the political campaign:
  - the differentiation of the candidate within his/her own party;
  - the presentation of the political programme; and
  - the final confrontation between the main candidates.

These three phases are specific not only for the French presidential election, and can be encountered in most other democratic systems (e.g. USA, UK, Australia, etc.).

- (2) The communication strategy of presidential candidates must be based on simple and coherent messages. Although a simplified image of the presidential candidate may be somehow stereotypic, inconsistencies and unnecessary complexity can eventually confuse and alienate the electors.
- (3) The communication strategy of presidential candidates has an antagonistic and differentiating function. The political brand that is built through various campaign messages should individualise the candidate in relation to other participants in the presidential race. This function becomes essential in the final phase of direct confrontation between the main presidential candidates.

The application of these principles can significantly increase the effectiveness of political communication campaigns, making the difference between success and failure.

Future studies should continue to investigate the political marketing methods used in systems outside the traditional Anglo-American context. Only such an approach can provide a deeper understanding of the specificity of each political system, and allow a real cross-fertilisation among various political traditions. It is important to understand that political success is not always defined and determined by the same factors, and that the needs and expectations of the electorate might vary from one country to another.

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#### Further reading

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