

# Table of Contents

Marketing Electoralism in the USA . . . . . 1



# Marketing Electoralism in the USA

By Scott Evans

Scott Evans reports on the sometimes surreal, relentlessly commercialised drive to 'get out the vote' in this year's US election

If you participated in the 2004 US election, you would have been eligible for a variety of perks. Even if you missed Ben & Jerry's 'Free Cone Day' you could still have picked up complimentary ring tones for your cell phone. Even better, if you could prove that you were registered to vote there was a free beer for you in Rochester, NY, tickets to the Bonnaroo Music Festival, or a night's stay at the Clinton Hotel in Miami! Registration was easy, just a dash to the 7-Eleven, and you could get a discount on Big Gulp® soda while you were at it. You could even sign up at the strip club.

This year 'get-out-the-vote' campaigns reached a fever pitch as capital shifted away from issue-oriented advertising and towards rallying the parties' bases. 'You need to do both,' said Grover Norquist, a leader of the conservative movement, 'But I think that dollar for dollar, get out the vote is going to be more important this time.'

And more was at stake than the profit margins of brand Kerry and brand Bush. With electoral participation languishing at around 50 percent of the voting age public and cynicism running high in the wake of the 2000 election, the American political sector has been working overtime to shore up popular stock in electoralism. Get-out-the-vote campaigns weren't simply hawking a politician, they were selling a forum for civic engagement.

## ELECTORAL MARKET SEGMENTATION

No matter what market niche you inhabit, there was a campaign eager to sell you a piece of the American-style democracy pie. This year you could Rock the Vote, Rap the Vote, Blog the Vote, Click the Vote, Pray the Vote, Shop the Vote, Redeem the Vote, Zoom Out the Vote, or even Smack Down the Vote.

The original Rock the Vote, an organisation harnessing 'cutting-edge trends and pop culture to make political participation cool', still had the largest market share among young Americans. Bankrolled by media giant Viacom and a litany of corporate partners, RtV claims to have registered over a million people, but a search of their website fails to reveal how much money they made on their edgy clothing line (co-branded with FCUK™ and DKNY®). DKNY's new t-shirt series, said RtV president Jehmu Greene, 'ensures that a new generation of Americans will fully enjoy the fruits of democracy.'

Decidedly less hip, but noteworthy none-the-less were the various big-business committees that gambled extraordinary resources on boosting employee electoral turnout. The Association Committee of 100, the Business Industry Political Action Committee (BIPAC), and the US Chamber of Commerce all ran campaigns to provide pro-business 'voter education' and registration in the workplace. BIPAC's 'Prosperity Project' worked with some 500 companies, targeting an estimated 20 million employees.

And of course, there were '527s', political organisations that could accept unlimited 'soft money' contributions from corporations, unions, and wealthy individuals thanks to newly created loopholes in Section 527 of the Internal Revenue Code. These ostensibly non-partisan groups allowed some of America's richest businessmen to flex their investment muscle where \$100,000 contribution limits would have otherwise tied their hands. Peter Lewis, a self-described billionaire 'screwball', wrote

\$14.78 million worth of cheques. He even gave money to a 527 for punk rockers!

With so much capital being poured into marketing the democratic process, an outside observer might have had the feeling that America's political sector was engaged in crisis management.

## MARKET RECESSION

The marketing of a product is affected not only by the strength of its brand and comparison with its competitors, but also by the overall standing of the whole class of products and their sector. – MORI Social Research Institute, 'Why Politics Needs Marketing'

Since 2000 the United States has had two recessions, the best documented of which was economic. Far less has been written about the political recession that started on 3 November, almost four years ago. Following the dramatic failure of American political structures in the Bush-Gore presidential race, Washington's longstanding goodwill deficit threatened to explode into a crisis of legitimacy.

Americans have long been suspicious that their votes don't really count. Thanks to the Electoral College, an antiquated constitutional mechanism, presidents are appointed by state electors rather than by direct popular vote. As a side effect, individual votes in competitive 'swing states' count for more than others. With only ten to twenty swing states in any given election, over half of Americans live in political dead-zones where elector outcomes are virtually pre-determined.

Of course, a ballot having more or less value assumes that it makes it into the final tally. According to a nationwide study by Caltech, four to six million votes were lost during the 2000 election. That's roughly 1 in 25 ballots! But accidents happen, right?

Despite at least peripheral awareness of these shortcomings, half of the eligible American population continue to drag themselves to the polls every four years and engage in this ancient Greek ritual. The 2000 election, however, significantly challenged this tenuous popular support. Millions of Americans watched in horror as national reports emerged of widespread fraud and voter disenfranchisement. One well documented offence involved the illegal purging of 90,000 disproportionately black voters from Florida's state registries. Following a now infamous Supreme Court decision handing Florida to Bush, 14 members of the Congressional Black Caucus attempted to submit a formal objection. They needed the support of only one senator, but not a single member of the all white Senate was willing to stand with them.

The objection was sabotaged, but anger among voters, particularly African Americans, was not. The Reverend Jesse Jackson called the election 'a corrupted, tainted process.'

The Democratic Party, deriving a significant percentage of its power from African American support, was quick to recognise the potential damage it would suffer from a major blow to faith in the electoral system. And so the spin-doctors began working to revise history. Politicians retold the story of Florida, leaving out the chapters on vote suppression, with a new moral: 'Bush won by only 537 votes, therefore, every vote counts.' Never mind the fact that every vote didn't count. Liberals largely abandoned use of the word 'disenfranchisement' and the much-discussed electoral reforms failed to materialise.

## SUSTAINABLE MARKET DOMINANCE

Maintaining a frenzied state of civic urgency has become the political sector's most powerful weapon in distracting public attention from the faulty nature of its product. Americans are constantly reminded that this is the most important election ever, an assurance that has been replayed every year since 1960

when both Kennedy and Nixon first leveled the dire prognosis.

Whether or not 50 percent of Americans continue to buy it is an open question at the time of writing, but some abstentionists have organised campaigns to undermine this year's crop of spin. A 'voter's guide' put out by the Don't Just Vote, Get Active campaign argued that voting is the 'least efficient and effective means of applying political power.' Operating out of a dozen states and relying on a varied stock of print material and street action, many activists have tried to demonstrate the desirability of directly democratic social relationships.

While the mass boycott of America's cheap-imitation democracy is unlikely to abate, lasting change won't be won by absenteeism alone. Sooner or later, disenfranchised voters will have to look for the real thing.

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