

Political Public Relations: Old Practice, New Theory-Building

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Introduction

In 64 BC, it was time for a new election for consul in Rome, what was then the highest office in the Republic. Standing against Antonius and Catiline was Marcus Tullius Cicero, who in contrast to the other candidates was from a small town outside of Rome and not part of the nobility. For many of the blue-blooded families, who held most of the power in Rome, voting for such a candidate was unlikely. However, thanks to the fact that many even among the noble families and the powerful classes viewed his main contenders with skepticism, while he himself was considered a great orator, Marcus was a viable candidate despite being an outsider (Freeman & Cicero, 2012).

In this context, the brother of Marcus, Quintus Tullius Cicero, decided to write a pamphlet in the form of a letter to Marcus on how to wage a campaign and win an election. This pamphlet, in Latin called the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, is probably the first publication on electioneering and political public relations.

In this pamphlet, Quintus emphasized that running for office includes “securing the support of your friends and winning over the general public” (Freeman & Cicero, 2012, p. 27), but also knowing your enemies and those against you as well as “impressing the voters at large” (p. 61). Among the most important pieces of advice were “take stock of the many advantages you possess”, (p. 5), “cultivate relationships”

(p. 9) with important people, make sure “your family and those closely connected with you” are “all behind you and want you to succeed” (p. 29), “secure supporters from a wide variety of backgrounds” (p. 29), “seek out men everywhere who will represent you as if they themselves were running for office” (p. 47), remember that there “are three things that will guarantee votes in an election: favors, hope, and personal attachment. You must work to give these incentives to the right people” (p. 33), and that the “most important part of your campaign is to bring hope to people and a feeling of goodwill toward you” (p. 79).

What this suggests is not only that the practice of political public relations is virtually as old as politics and society itself (Martinelli, 2011; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011a), but also that many contemporary political public relations strategies and tactics have ancient roots. This includes, for example, relationship management and cultivation (Ledingham, 2003), reputation management (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007), stakeholder engagement (de Bussy, 2010), positioning and segmentation (Davidson & Binstock, 2012), opposition research (Johnson, 2007), rhetoric (Heath, 2009), and persuasion (Pfau & Wan, 2006).

Still, while the practice of political public relations is old, more concerted efforts to apply public relations theory in political contexts and to build theory in the field of political public relations is new (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b). Although a strong case could be made that public relations strategies and tactics were first established by political actors, in political contexts, and used for political purposes (Cutlip, 1995; Lamme & Russell, 2010), the bulk of public relations theory and research still focuses on corporate settings, and many textbooks treat public relations in political contexts mostly in passing. At the same time, most research on politics, political communication, political marketing and election campaigning pay scant attention, if any, to public relations theory and research. Thus, there is a disconnect

not only between practice and theory in political public relations, but also between theory and research in public relations, political science, political communication and political marketing.

To remedy this is important for several reasons. First, bridging the gap between theory and research in public relations, political communication, political science, political marketing and other relevant fields is necessary to build theories that draw on each field's cumulative knowledge and that can help us understand the practice as well as theory in political public relations. Second, developing theory and research in political public relations can help establish a mutually fruitful relationship between practice and theory, where practice can inform theory and theory can inform practice. Third, applying general public relations theories in political contexts is not only a means to build theories on political public relations specifically, but also to test the applicability of public relations theories in settings beyond the corporate sphere and hence to contribute to theory-building and theory-development in public relations in general.

Against this background, a few years ago we edited the first book focusing specifically on political public relations, titled *Political Public Relations. Principles and Applications* (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b). For the same reasons, we proposed to edit this Special Issue of the *Public Relations Journal* focusing on political public relations. Our *Call for Papers* resulted in the submission of 28 abstracts. After these were reviewed, seven teams of authors were invited to submit full manuscripts. After a double-blind peer review process, six manuscripts were eventually accepted for publication. The final acceptance rate was thus 21 percent.

The purpose of this introductory article is twofold. First, to advance our definition and conceptualization of political public relations, and second, to explicate some of the ways in which politics and political settings differ from that of business

and corporate settings, and hence to elaborate on why it is important to build theory on political public relations.

Defining and Conceptualizing Political Public Relations

Broadly speaking, political public relations can be defined as *the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals* (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b, p. 8). Similar to several prominent definitions of public relations in general, it stresses that political public relations is about a management process and that communication and relationships are at the core of what public relations is about (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham, 2003), but several features are important to note. First, what makes political public relations distinctive from public relations in general is that the organization or individual actor in question is engaging in public relations activities for *political purposes*. Thus, political public relations includes public relations activities by all organizations and individuals trying to influence politics, including political parties and candidates but also governmental and public sector agencies, think tanks, unions, commercial businesses, as well as various interest groups and non-profit organizations that are more or less engaged in efforts to influence political processes or outcomes (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b). Second, political public relations is about both *communication* and *action*, in contrast to some definitions of public relations that emphasize it is about communication only (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Third, political public relations is about efforts to influence and to establish, build and maintain beneficial *relationships* as well as *reputations*, and does not

privilege one concept over the other. Applying the ideas of Hutton et al. (2001), political public relations is critical to all stages of stakeholder engagement, whether it involves an adolescent first developing an allegiance to a political party all the way to a lifelong volunteer for a civic organization. Thus, political public relations is not limited to simple information dissemination and exchange for peripherally involved publics, but it is also not important solely for engagement of highly involved stakeholders. Whether reputation or relationship cultivation is most important rather depends on the level of stakeholder engagement. Thus, the concepts of reputation and relationship cultivation should *both* be seen as paramount to capturing the short-term and long-term orientation regarding the engagement of political organizations and the multiplicity of their publics (Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2011).

Fourth, political public relations includes all kinds of models of public relations, including the publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model and the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Our conceptualization of political public relations is thus *non-normative* and *descriptive* rather than prescriptive, and agrees with contingency theory that the preferred model of public relations depends on a host of factors and moves on a continuum ranging from total advocacy for an organization to total accommodation of a public (Cancel et al., 1997).

What this discussion suggests is that political public relations has much in common with general theory on public relations, but that it in contrast to many established definitions of public relations is non-normative and descriptive *and* more inclusive as it includes communication as well as action and relationships as well as reputations. The key feature that distinguishes political public relations though is whether various organizations or individual actors engage in public relations activities for political purposes, broadly conceived.

What this discussion and the close linkages with public relations in general also suggest is that virtually all public relations theories could be applied in research on political public relations. Such research could help inform public relations as well as political communication and political science theory and research, and would help explore the extent to which various public relations theory are valid also in political contexts. This is particularly important, as there are many things that set politics apart from the corporate settings from which most present public relations theories have originated and been explored and tested.

Differences Between Political and Corporate Settings

Ultimately, politics in democratic countries is about processes dealing with “who gets what, when, how” (Lasswell, 1936) insofar as the question is at least partly answered through authoritative decision-making where the decision-makers are popularly elected or, directly or indirectly, receive their mandate from popularly elected political bodies. The fact that virtually no part of society is unaffected by the consequences of political decisions creates incentives for many different organizations and individuals to try to influence political processes and outcomes. If the defining characteristic of political actors is that whether they have political agendas and are trying to influence politics (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b), there are consequently a huge number of political actors, potentially involved in political public relations, in any given society.

At the core of political processes are however political parties, individual politicians, and governmental bodies. When discussing what sets politics and political contexts apart from corporate and other settings, we will thus primarily focus on these political organizations and actors and the situations they face. Although not an

exhaustive list, there are at least ten aspects in which politics and political contexts differ from other domains and contexts.

First, politics always deals with normative questions related to the common good. This follows from the fact that politics ultimately is about authoritative decision-making where all parts of society are directly or indirectly affected, and that democratic policy-makers and those working within governmental and public sector organizations are supposed to always have the public interest in mind. This is in contrast to the corporate sphere where the extent to which the public interest is taken into consideration is optional.

Second, the number and complexity of publics and stakeholders is greater in politics than in virtually other settings. Following the situational theory of publics and depending on the level of problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of involvement, people can be classified into nonpublics, latent publics, aware publics and active publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This holds true in all settings, but what sets politics apart is that the number of latent as well as aware and active publics arguably is larger than in corporate settings, while basically everyone can be defined as a stakeholder in politics.

Third, the number of regulations and the level of transparency and oversight are arguably greater in politics than in most other settings, although the institutional frameworks differ between countries. Nevertheless, all democracies have some kind of freedom of information laws, there is always a political opposition with an interest in exposing potential political or administrative wrongdoing, and the media are always interested in information that might suggest improper behavior, incompetence, or a scandal. Consequently, political organizations and actors can seldom operate outside of the public domain.

Fourth, while the main currency in business is money, the main currency in politics is ideas and power. The political product is thus less tangible, while the link between the political organization or actor and the political product is much more direct and stronger than in commercial markets where it is possible to like (or dislike) a product or service without liking (or disliking) or even being aware of the business behind the product and service (Lock & Harris, 1996). In addition, there are always those who have an interest in criticizing and misrepresenting any political organization and its ideas and values.

Fifth, politics often albeit not always has the character of a zero-sum game. This is most obvious in elections, where there is a finite number of votes and where one's win is always another's loss. It is however also true in many policy processes. Even though compromises are often possible, not everyone can get the policy outcome they wish for. The acceptance of one set of policies always means the rejection of another, except in those rare cases when there is consensus on a matter. Hence, political processes always produce winners and losers.

Sixth, political organizations and actors are much more dependent on the news media and their coverage than commercial business. This holds particularly true outside of the United States., where political advertising is either not allowed or less important (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006). Thus, political organizations cannot control their communication and how they and what they stand for are represented to the same extent as other types of organizations can. In addition, most news media and journalists in contemporary democracies perceive it as an intrinsic and important part of their role to act as a watchdog and be critical towards those who have political power (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Although the watchdog might not bark all the time when warranted (Bennett et al., 2007), this makes it more difficult

for political organizations to control their communication with different publics and people at large.

Seventh, the level of conflict is higher in politics than in virtually all other settings. This follows from the fact that politics is about ideas and power, that there are always opposing camps, that political processes always produce winners and losers, and from the multiplicity of stakeholders and publics and that virtually all parts of society are affected by political decisions. It also follows from the dependency on news media communication in politics and that the news media have a strong tendency to focus on – and create incentives for political actors to focus on – conflicts in politics (Groeling, 2010; Lengauer et al., 2012).

Eight, while crisis management and communication is essential for all organizations, the nature of crises differ between political and other settings. Though all types of organizations might face victim crises, accident crises and preventable crises, one key difference is that in politics, both opponents and the media might have an interest in manufacturing perceptions that a crisis is at hand and that some political actor or organization is responsible for this. Thus, crises in political settings are more likely to be rooted in perceptions rather than in objective conditions. Political organizations might also be more likely to find themselves assigned responsibility for crises that originate outside of their control. On the one hand this might give them an opportunity to cast themselves as heroes, but it also increases the risk that they are cast as villains, although they had little or no control over the situation. Corporate and political crisis managers also face different constraints on crisis communication and criteria for judging what constitutes success in crisis management (Coombs, 2011).

Ninth, political organizations rely much more heavily on members, activists and volunteers than do commercial organizations. Although there are differences

across political organizations within and between countries and while many parties across the world have lost members (van Biezen et al., 2012), paid employees play a lesser role in most political organizations than in virtually all commercial organizations where volunteers and members matter more (van Aelst et al., 2012). Thus, political organizations have less control over those within the organization; the boundaries between those within and outside of the organization are more fluid; and political organizations have a greater need to recruit, organize, and mobilize volunteers and grassroots supporters.

Tenth, the measure of success and the nature of the “buying-decision” differ between political and corporate settings. In corporate settings, success is basically measured by a number of objective financial indicators such as sales, market share, the price-earnings ratio, stock prices and profits, and the development of these and other financial indicators can be tracked on a daily basis. In politics, the only objective measures of success are on Election Day when all votes have been tallied and when policy decisions are made. These measures are not only more infrequent – and that of course holds particularly true with respect to elections – what constitutes success or failure is also more open to interpretations and thus battles over how a particular outcome should be interpreted. What is more, when an election is over or a policy battle has been settled, there are often years until the next election or chance to change the policy in question.

The Need for More Research on Political Public Relations

This list of differences between politics and political contexts on the one hand and business and corporate settings on the other is by no means exhaustive. A more detailed analysis would reveal more differences, and there are many differences also between different political as well as different corporate organizations and settings

both within and across countries. The distinction between politics and business is also not absolute, not least because “politics is not only the playing field, but the umpire, referee, and coach” (Heath & Waymer, 2011, p. 138) and because many businesses have political agendas and operate in political contexts.

What this discussion nevertheless suggests is that it cannot be assumed that general public relations strategies and tactics apply equally well, or that public relations theories are equally valid, in political as in corporate settings. The only way to find out the extent to which general public relations theories are valid in political contexts is to apply and test them in research on political public relations. This is in itself a strong argument for more research on political public relations. Further research on political public relations would also likely yield insights that could serve to inform general public relations theory, which is another argument for more empirical and theoretical research on political public relations. A third argument is that we need theories that can help us understand and explain the practice of political public relations, and that requires more research that helps bridge the current gap between theory and research on public relations, political communication, political science, political marketing and other related fields (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b; Strömbäck et al., 2010).

It is thus hoped that this *Special Issue* will encourage and serve as a springboard for more research on political public relations. The articles in this *Special Issue* also show a variety of analytical and empirical approaches to political public relations and settings in which political public relations can be explored.

In the first article, *Sources of Citizens’ Experiential and Reputational Relationships with Political Parties*, Seltzer, Zhang, Gearhart and Conduff integrate concepts related to reputation management into a model of political organization-public relationships. Based on this, they investigate how different sources of

information regarding political parties in the United States influence perceptions of reputation and of political organization-public relationships. They also provide an empirical test of the reputation-relationship continuum within political public relations.

One core area of political public relations is government communication. This and the use of social media by local governments is the focus *Government Public Relations and Social Media: An Analysis of the Perceptions and Trends of Social Media Use at the Local Government Level* by Graham and Avery. Among other things, this article addresses how social media are used as public relations functions to serve democratic, participatory and transparency models across a range of local government contexts within the United States.

The use of digital media is also at the center of attention in the third article by Karlsson, Clerwall and Buskqvist. In *Political Public Relations on the Net. A Relationship Management Perspective* they investigate whether and to what extent Swedish political parties, in the context of the 2010 national election, took advantage of what digital media offer in terms of long-term relationship building, commitment, and reciprocity. Among other things, the article suggests that Swedish political parties do not fully use the potential of social media to cultivate long-term relationships with voters.

In the fourth article, *Political Public Relations in Advocacy: Building Online Influence and Social Capital*, Saffer, Taylor and Yang investigated how public relations activities supported advocacy efforts to defeat the 2012 Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). Their major findings showed that political public relations increase the network positions of organizations, diverse ties strengthen advocacy, and that social media can be used effectively by organizations when political activism arises on key issues.

The fact that political public relations is relevant not only in national, but also international, contexts is highlighted in the fifth article, in which Valentini examines political public relations in the European Union via the perspectives of relationship cultivation and reputation management. Her analysis suggests that both views are important for understanding the role of political public relations in this context and that more empirical research is needed to test the conceptual associations proposed from these perspectives.

In the sixth and final article, Fitzpatrick, Fullerton, and Kendrick examine the linkages between public relations and public diplomacy. Although such connections have been proposed in other studies, their analysis is unique by exploring them empirically. The findings confirm that strong potential linkages between these two fields from both a conceptual and applied standpoint.

In closing, the studies accepted for this special are by no means exhaustive in terms of areas meriting future attention in the emerging field of political public relations. Nonetheless, we believe they, along with the areas outlined in the 2011 book, represent a strong opening gambit. We hope they can serve as launching pads for ongoing research in this area of scholarship going forward.

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