Political Advertising in Canada

Paul W Nesbitt-Larking
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EDITED BY
DAVID A. SCHULTZ

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Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Tennessee
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Media, Politics, and Political Advertising

Edited by David A. Schultz
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Note to the Reader

Please visit the web site for *Lights, Camera, Campaign! Media, Politics, and Political Advertising*. At this site are many of the political commercials and ads that are discussed in this book.

The web site is located at http://davidschultz.efoliomn2.com. Click on the tab with the title of the book *Lights, Camera, Campaign! Media, Politics, and Political Advertising*. When it asks for the user, enter “student” and then enter “campaign” for the password.
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Behavior in Primary Elections.” Paper presented at the Western Political Science
Association, Denver, CO, March 27–30.

Secretary of State, California. 2003. “Results of Randomized Alphabet Drawing.”

Trounstine, Philip J. 2003. “Democratic Daze.” California Volume 34, Number 11,
November 19–21.

August, 23–26.

Number 6, August, 56.

Prentice Hall.


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These Websites are currently up and running and contain two to three commercials each
for Gray Davis and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

http://www.no-recall.com/mediaroom.asp


These two Websites may be helpful for readers and provide lighthearted looks at the recall
through the eyes of comedians, late-night talk show hosts, editorial cartoonists, and
others.

http://politicalhumor.about.com/cs/california/

http://www.sacbee.com/content/opinion/cartoons/babin/. See the section marked “Recall
Gallery.”

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Political Advertising in Canada

Paul Nesbitt-Larking
Jonathan Rose

Introduction

Not quite married and yet unlikely to experience an ugly separation, Canada
and the United States can be described as comfortable if asymmetrical
cohabitants of the North American continent. The complex relationship that
has evolved over almost 250 years is foundational to the Canadian identity
if not quite to the American. The continued existence of Canada as a sov-
eign state had been rearticulated and reasserted in every generation as a
deliberate act of collective will. The pull of the United States—culturally,
economically and strategically—has grown throughout the past fifty years as
the United States has emerged as the global superpower. Canadian popular
culture is saturated by American media, such as TV shows, magazines,
movies, and music. Canadian security and defense initiatives are intricately
bound to those of the United States through our membership in NATO and
NORAD. Canada is an export-dependent economy, and over 80% of its
exports go to the United States. Living in a multicultural and radically
decentralized federation in which the sum of the parts often appears to be
greater than the whole, Canadians are fervent in their quest for an identity.
The only certainty seems to be that Canada is not the same as the United
States.
The consequence of Canada's coexistence with the United States is the simple and yet compelling impulse to remain politically independent. There is a dialectic between the impulse of assimilation and integration into the American orbit on the one hand and the abiding compulsion of the European heritage on the other. Canada's political economy, political culture, and state formations are rooted in the tensions between the negative freedoms of liberal possessive individualism (the American way) and the more positive freedoms of communitarianism (the European heritage). This is why McRae (1964) and Horowitz (1966) describe Canada's ideological characteristics as fundamentally liberal but with conservative and socialist influences. It is for this reason, too, that while Lipset (1990) states that the political cultures of Canada and the United States share much in common, Canadian political culture is "more class-aware, elitist, law-abiding, statist, collectivity-oriented, and particularistic (group-oriented)" (p. 8) than the United States. The very connotations of the word liberal are discursively distinct in Canada and the United States, and such a distinction illustrates the more general ideological gap. To be liberal in the United States is to occupy the progressive, equality-based end of the American ideological spectrum and has in many quarters a pejorative connotation. In Canada, liberal encompasses a much broader range from the progressive and egalitarian to the classical/business and freedom-oriented end of the scale.

The tensions between the American model of liberal individualism and the European traditions of solidaristic collectivism have prompted Mendelsohn (2002) to remark (on the basis of his empirical analyses of public opinion) that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Canada remains: "more collectivistic, more open to diversity, more supportive of state intervention, more deferential, and more prepared to find solidarity with people in other countries than its southern neighbour" (p. 1). The remarkable longevity of Canadian political cultural distinctiveness is noteworthy, according to Mendelsohn, in light of the impact of a decade of globalization, continental economic integration, federal and provincial neoliberal fiscal policies, and the consequent erosion of the Canadian welfare state.

The characteristic patterns of ideological tendency in Canada and the United States are mirrored in their respective patterns of political advertising. In general, advertising constitutes a sensitive measure of the cultural character of a time and place, and careful analyses of advertising can reveal much about core values and beliefs. While political advertising in Canada exhibits marked trends toward the American model, there are key moments of distinction and divergence. As a quintessentially possessive individualistic practice, our analysis anticipates that despite the similarities, political advertising in the United States is relatively more widespread, less regulated, freer in expression, and less culturally reserved than in Canada.

Our chapter consists of four substantive sections. These explore, in turn, the political economy of advertising, the regulative role of the state in political advertising, the mutual interplay of political advertisements and the Canadian political culture, and Canadian governments as political advertisers. According to Lynda Lee Kaid, political advertising can be defined as: "the communicative process by which a source (usually a political candidate or party) purchases the opportunity to expose receivers through mass channels to political messages with the intended effect of influencing their political attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviours" (Kaid in Romanow et al., 1999, p. 12). This American definition is a useful general definition but immediately illustrates the fundamental distinctions between the two polities. In Canada, political advertising not only includes a substantial quantum of free exposure but has been increasingly subsidized and supported by the state in recent years. Moreover, governments themselves have become major players in political advertising. We now turn to an examination of these points of distinction.

Canadian Political Economy and Political Advertising

Canada and the United States share much in common when it comes to the political economy of advertising. Both polities have developed free markets in which rights to basic civil freedoms are taken for granted. It is not at all surprising that advertising in general, and political advertising in particular, is a multimillion-dollar business in both countries and that, as the junior partner, Canada's trends in political advertising borrow from and replicate American advertising techniques and trends after the customary election cycle time gap. In Canada, advertising is a $9 billion per annum industry. In the United States, advertising contributes over $183 billion to the economy each year (Rose, 2000, p. 41). Advertising is clearly a vital component of each nation's economic prosperity. However, according to the total populations of the two countries in 2002 (Canada: 31.5 million; United States: 280.5 million), advertising expenditures should be 9.2 times as great in the United States as in Canada, other things being equal. In fact, the Americans spend 20.3 times as much on advertising—over double the per-capita rate of Canadians. When it comes to political advertising, the dif-
ferences are even larger. While Canada is a capitalist country, its economic development has emerged historically in the context of the strong, even dirigiste state and a political culture that is powerfully communitarian. The United States is grounded in a tradition of less restrained and cautious capitalism. This is evident in comparative data on entrepreneurial risk taking, venture capital, public spending and taxation, macroeconomic and microeconomic indicators of fiscal prudence, and investment in innovation.

American elections are highly expensive. In comparison with the hundreds of millions of dollars devoted to election spending in the United States, Canadian parties spend quite modestly.

To place matters in perspective, Bush and Gore between them spent over $305 million in 1999-2000 during the American presidential election. The combined spending of the five major political parties in the Canadian general election of 2000 was between $22 and $23 million expressed in American dollars (Elections Canada). Dianne Feinstein’s successful contestation of a California Senate seat in 2000 saw her spending more than the entire Liberal Party of Canada spent in that year to win their third term (Federal Elections Commission; Elections Canada). John R. Thune, running for Congress in South Dakota in 2002, disbursed almost as much in his state (with a population of 756,000) as did the Canadian Alliance in its national campaign to unseat the Liberal Party in 2000 (Federal Elections Commission; Elections Canada).

When it comes to the manner in which total election spending is distributed, the contrasts between Canada and the United States are interesting and significant. On the whole, American candidates and parties devote between two-thirds and three-quarters of their total campaign spending to political advertising (Kaid et al., 1986, p. xii; Paletz, 1998). In Canada, the proportion is smaller and has varied between one-half and two-thirds for the major parties since the 1970s (Fletcher, 1988, p. 164; Kline et al., 1991, p. 284; Fletcher and MacDermid, 1998, p. 1). The entire business of elections in Canada is understated. Owing to Canada’s parliamentary system, election campaigns are shorter in comparison with their American counterparts (MacDermid, 1997, p. 86), and there are far fewer full-time political consulting firms in Canada. There are, as Leiss et al. (1990, p. 390) put it, too few elections to support consultants specializing only in political work.

The proportion of total campaign spending devoted to political advertising in the Canadian federal election of 2000 by political parties was as follows: Canadian Alliance: 78.3%; Liberal Party: 61.4%; Progressive Conservative Party (PC): 48.1%; New Democratic Party (NDP): 30.7% and

the Bloc Quebecois (BQ): 23.1% (Elections Canada). The variations among the Canadian parties suggest some important realities. First, the two traditional parties of government (Liberals and PCs) devoted approximately half their budgets to the political advertising campaign. Second, the grassroots parties (NDP and BQ) employed interpersonal communication strategies rather than the mass media for the dissemination of their views. Finally, the Alliance was the only party to approximate the American style of campaign spending and needed to do so in order to convey their message to the voters of Ontario with only minimal campaign staffs in the ridings. The Canadian Alliance data are particularly instructive. Of the major political parties in Canada, the Canadian Alliance (formerly the Reform Party of Canada) emerged as the most pro-American in its policy orientations and the most “American” in its structure, policies, and style. Despite some powerful regional support in Alberta and British Columbia, the party failed to make an electoral breakthrough in the heavily populated core provinces of Ontario and Quebec. (In December, 2003, the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party united to form the new Conservative Party of Canada.)

If the American style and policies of the federal Canadian Alliance have anything to do with its limited success in Ontario, the picture is complicated by the fact that a provincial party, the Progressive Conservative Party, has enjoyed great success on the basis of a broadly similar ideological and operational character. Under their leader, Mike Harris, the Ontario Progressive Conservatives (PCs) won a famous come-from-behind electoral victory in 1995 (MacDermid, 1997; Fletcher, 1999; MacDermid and Albo, 2001). The impressive and unexpected victory of the Harris PCs in 1995 was grounded in an American-style managed campaign built around the marketing of the party platform, referred to as “The Common Sense Revolution.” Harris’s campaign team included Tom Long, who had worked for Ronald Reagan, and Leslie Noble, who had worked for Republican candidate Jack Kemp. Long brought in American attack ad specialist Mike Murphy, who worked with Long, Noble, Paul Rhodes, and Jaime Watt to create the television advertising campaign of 1995. It was masterful in its execution. Taking the incumbent New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party by storm, the Harris team strategically purchased TV time that would bring them to the maximum number of their most desired demographic groups for the least advertising dollars. The ads themselves were a skillful combination of populist rhetoric and attacks on carefully chosen targets, notably welfare recipients, criminals, and beneficiaries of employment equity programs.
In January 1999, the governing PCs introduced changes to the Election Finances Act of Ontario that permitted substantial increases in campaign contributions, increased spending limits, and increased the amount of campaign time during an election campaign in which it would be permissible to advertise. The government also allowed the more widespread use of soft money donations by declaring important campaign costs such as polling expenses, furniture and equipment, office rentals and professional fees to be no longer reportable and regulated campaign costs. The combined impact of these changes was to the advantage of those political parties with existing financial resources and those parties able to attract further financial resources. The built-in positive impact of these changes for the incumbent PCs was formidable. In the 1999 provincial election, the Harris team had far more money to spend than the other parties. The 1999 provincial election was also preceded by a flurry of PC political ads criticizing the Liberal Party and its leader, who were caught out by the (then) unconventional decision to launch advertisements before the official start to the campaign. The benefit of this was that expenditures on advertising spent outside of the election period are not regulated by the Elections Financing Act.

While recent developments in Ontario suggest a trend toward the Americanization of political advertising, matters seem to be moving in the other direction at the federal level. However, before moving to a consideration of the Canadian state and political advertising, it is noteworthy that following the controversial and divisive 2000 Presidential Election in the United States, Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002, thereby “Canadianizing” American federal practices to some extent. The act places restrictions on the use of soft money and attack ads hitherto disguised as “issue advocacy.” The new legislation increases hard money limits but requires disclosure of campaign contributors. Business, trade, and labor associations are now barred from “electioneering communication” (Briffault, 2002). Each of these developments is designed to enhance transparency, to reduce the impact of big money in future elections, and to diminish the undignified assaults of attack campaigns. In subsequent sections of this chapter, it will become apparent that even with such changes in place, the character of American political advertising is likely to remain less regulated than that in Canada. Moreover, it seems certain that the law will be subject to strong constitutional challenge. Whatever else can be said, however, it does represent the aspiration of people who have hitherto resisted regulatory instruments that there must be some limits to the unfettered power of money to buy tools of mass persuasion.

The Canadian State and Political Advertising

The Canadian Constitution underwent a profound shift in the early 1980s. Then Prime Minister Trudeau undertook the twin tasks of patriating the Constitution and underwriting it with a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Patrination abolished the last remnants of British colonial regulation of the Canadian Constitution. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, while not supplanting British common law nor ending Parliamentary supremacy, entrenched a range of justiciable rights and freedoms that gave Canada its own “Bill of Rights.” Freedom of expression has long been a characteristic of Canadian civil society, under the common law traditions, but the Charter rendered this and other freedoms more certain. By the 1990s, Romanow and his colleagues could say (1999, p. 181):

On both sides of the border, constitutional free-speech provisions support a system of paid political advertising. This in turn means that there are limits upon the limits that can be imposed on advertising. It also means that moral arguments can take up where legal boundaries end.

Canada’s freedoms of expression, of the press, and other media of communication have self-consciously evolved in the context of the sacred respect accorded to First Amendment rights of free speech in the United States. In one of her rulings, Canadian Supreme Court Justice L’Héroux-Dube stated: “it may be helpful to look at the American experience, not with a view to applying their decisions blindly but rather to learn from the process through which they were derived” (L’Héroux-Dube in Trudel and Abran, 1991, p. 42). Recent rulings by the Supreme Court of Canada reflect self-conscious moves toward the elevation of freedom of speech to a constitutional principle that is equal in importance with the right of the accused to a fair trial and to the principles of peace, order and good government.

Despite these important similarities and apparent convergences there are significant differences between the two nations in the relationship of the polity to the state. The American polity developed in spite of the state; the Canadian polity developed because of it. Canada’s longstanding dependency on the state finds expression in the field of political advertising. Every major government report on Canadian broadcasting or culture from the Aird Report in 1929 stresses the centrality of the Canadian state in promoting and protecting a Canadian mass media.

The 1986 Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force on Broadcasting Policy said:

"Unlike American communications legislation which was designed primarily for co-ordination purposes, Canadian broadcasting policy has always
pursued social and cultural objectives” (Trude and Abran, 1991, p. 66). Given the asymmetry of the North American binational relationship, the United States has always exerted the most powerful economic, cultural, diplomatic, and political pressures on Canada to conform. The Canadian state has been obliged to devise strategies and structures to preserve and promote Canadian identities, if not always Canadian unity. Without these safeguards, and the necessity to ritually reinvent them each generation, Canadian culture would quite naturally be pulled into the American orbit. This is why Fletcher and MacDermid (1998, p. 30) offer the following balanced assessment:

Canada has a long history of borrowing campaign techniques from the United States. However, it has retained important areas of distinctiveness: expenditure limits, a limited period for broadcast advertising, the availability of free as well as paid time, and a party-centred campaign process appropriate for a parliamentary system.

Americans are proud of their First Amendment freedoms of speech and the press. Even when fairly conclusive evidence has been offered that advertisements have caused harm, there is great reluctance to limit freedom of expression. Freedom of speech and the media is almost an absolute guarantee in the United States, but even in the United States these rights have been hedged in certain ways by the evolution of legislation needed to sustain minimal order and assist in the promotion of limited standards of equity in the face of societal inequalities. While limited, the heart of federal legislation on political advertising is the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), first passed in 1974 and amended frequently since then, which regulates the conduct of both presidential and congressional elections.

Despite such regulation, an early attempt to limit the amount Political Action Committees (PACs) could spend in an election campaign was ruled unconstitutional in the 1976 case Buckley v. Valeo. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the law limiting election spending by third parties, such as PACs, was unconstitutional because it limited freedom of speech. In its findings, the Supreme Court indicated that demonstrable waste, excess, and stupidity were insufficient criteria to permit governments to determine spending ceilings for PACs. If free speech was vitriolic and vindictive, it was the people who should evaluate it, not the government that should limit it in advance. PACs grew into the thousands in the 1980s and 1990s and came to dominate both the funding of election campaigns and the character of the advertisements. (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Diamond and Bates, 1997; Jamieson, 1982)

Both Canada and the United States operate with certain legal safeguards against the dissemination of certain kinds of advertisements, including political advertisements. Depictions deemed to be offensive, obscene, or liable to incite violence are subject to criminal prosecution. It is always open to candidates to issue civil suits against any advertisements they deem to be defamatory. In both polities, however, the bar is set high, and prosecutions on both criminal and civil criteria are almost nonexistent. There appears to be an implicit acceptance of the fact that in politics there are no false or unjust claims. Agencies exist in both countries to protect consumer rights and enforce advertising standards. While they are similar in many respects, it is interesting to note how the primary emphasis in Industry Canada’s Office of Consumer Affairs is on “protection,” while the first terms employed in the American Federal Trade Commission’s mandate statement are to ensure that “the nation’s markets are vigorous, efficient and free of restrictions” (Canada; Federal Trade Commission).

The overall statute for controlling political advertising in Canada is the Canada Elections Act. The fundamental provisions of the act have been in place since 1974. Political parties are legally and formally recognized and thereby granted certain rights and responsibilities. In return for openness in reporting all receipts and expenditures, they are granted reimbursement by the state of a proportion of their expenses for advertisements and other costs. Moreover, the state grants them a quantum of free election advertising time. Perhaps most importantly, generous tax concessions are available to individual donors to political parties. For most modest donors, a 75% tax refund is available for financial support given to their party of choice. The Canada Elections Act is altogether more restrictive than the American FECA when it comes to electoral advertising. Like the American legislation, the Act stipulates that messages must be authorized (section 320) and that services offered to one party or candidate must be offered to all and be made available at the cheapest rates. However, the Canada Elections Act goes much further. It stipulates that each broadcaster must make available a maximum of six and one-half hours of paid prime-time broadcasting to the parties (section 335), and that these hours must be divided according to a formula in which various indicators of the parties’ electoral and legislative strength are factored into the evaluation of an equitable share (section 338). New official political parties are guaranteed a minimum number of purchasable minutes (section 339), and a certain number of free broadcast minutes (up to three and one-half hours) must also be made available to the parties on the basis of their established shares of the paid time (section 345). The Canada
Elections Act further stipulates a number of regulations concerning the quantity and quality of election advertisements. For instance, there is an advertising blackout on election day, and all advertisements must name the sponsor (section 320).

The Canada Elections Act (sections 346 and 347) further delegates the task of issuing guidelines to broadcasters to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). The CRTC communicates with each licensed station within days of receiving the order from the chief electoral officer. The CRTC also supervises the administration of the act during and immediately after each election. Stations are required to log each advertisement and its sponsor and to ensure that the allocation of paid and free time among candidates is equitable. The CRTC issued *Les Entreprises* in 1991, a document whose language reflects the distinctly public service character of Canadian agencies vis-à-vis the conduct of elections (Trudel and Abran, 1991, p. 78):

The ... provisions of the [Elections] Act unequivocally attest to Parliament’s intent that, in supervising the use of radio frequencies, which are public property and limited in number by the radio spectrum, the greatest possible emphasis be given to the affirmation of the right to freedom of expression, subject to the requirement for programming of high standard and subject to achieving an intelligent harmony with the requirement for balance in the discussion of matters of public concern.

In a dramatic move away from the Americanizing trend toward big spending campaigns and access to soft money purchases, the federal government has recently passed legislation that limits the rights of certain groups to donate to political campaigns (Bill C-24). This initiative sets it on a course that contradicts trends set in the Progressive Conservative governments of Ontario under Mike Harris and Ernie Eves. (The Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty, elected in 2003, seems likely to follow federal trends in campaign regulation.) The legislation limits corporate and union donations dramatically to $1,000 per annum. Individuals will now be permitted to donate up to $5,000 per annum. The quantity of public money available to parties has been increased to compensate for anticipated shortfalls. Eligibility thresholds for reimbursement of election expenses have been lowered from 15% to 10%. The reimbursement rate for registered parties has been doubled to 50%, bringing it into line with the current reimbursement rate for candidates. The Income Tax Act has been amended to substantially increase the levels of individual donations that are partially refundable. Any person making a donation of up to $400 per annum (up from $200) will receive a 75% tax refund. These new provisions are applicable for the first time to riding associations, leadership contestants, and party nomination contestants. With these sweeping changes it is anticipated that the amount of public money in federal party coffers will increase from the current level of about 60% to about 80%.

The historical tension in Canada between negative and positive freedom, between unfettered freedom of expression and state-promoted equity, has been nowhere more evident than in the ongoing struggle to develop appropriate and constitutionally sound public policy on the issue of “third-party advertising.” Third-party election advertising can be defined as material funded and disseminated to influence the outcome of the election by persons other than official candidates and parties. Initial legislation to limit the capacity of third parties to fund election campaigns was challenged in the Alberta Court of Appeal in 1984. The court ruled that the Canada Elections Act violated the free speech provisions of the Charter. The federal government decided not to appeal the ruling to the Supreme Court, and in the 1988 federal election campaign, third-party spending, notably by groups opposed to abortion and in favor of free trade, reached historically high levels. Many commentators became alarmed at the perception that those with the resources to buy advertising time on television were able to exert undue influence over public debate. Alarm diminished somewhat in 1992 when, despite enormously outspending their opponents, the “Yes” side was defeated by the “No” side in a major and comprehensive referendum on constitutional change, known as the Charlottetown Accord.

In May 2000 the federal government introduced an elaborate new set of clauses into an amended Elections Act. These facilitated third-party advertising under certain conditions but set limits on spending levels. The Alberta Court of Appeal ruled the government's third-party legislation unconstitutional in December 2002. The court agreed with the appellant, Stephen Harper, that third parties should not have to limit their spending or disclose their donors. The current situation with respect to third-party advertising is unclear as the Harper decision is under appeal, and in the meantime Elections Canada are abiding by the Alberta appeal court decision. The complex vacillation on this issue reflects the reality of the Canadian approach to political advertising, balanced uneasily as it is between freedom and responsibility. The role of the Canadian state is likely to be further challenged in the months and years to come, not merely from the seemingly inexorable pressure of political deregulation, which originates in a globalizing political economy, but also from the sheer diffusion of techniques of mass and niche marketing.
The CRTC has given up on any attempt to control the Internet and existing attempts by Elections Canada to regulate Internet use have proven inadequate. The future role of the Canadian state in political advertising will be conditioned by new trends in Internet distribution techniques, rapid and computerized dialing techniques, and sophisticated database demographic marketing tools that permit highly specialized direct mail campaigns. In the end, what Canadians will or will not accept with respect to political advertising is a matter of the evolving political culture. The economic forces of globalization or the political impact of regulations notwithstanding, Canadian citizens are agents with the capacity to choose or refuse.

**Canadian Political Culture and Political Advertising**

As an increasingly integrated region in the North American market, Canada has readily adopted and followed most of the principal developments in advertising techniques and strategies (Leiss et al., 1990). Trends in political advertising made popular in the United States have been replicated in Canada following a lag of a few years. As we shall see, however, not all developments in political advertising have been welcome in Canada.

The earliest modern advertisements emerged in the radio age in 1930s Canada. Prime Ministers Borden and King both employed advertising agencies, and the first major controversy over political advertisements arose in the 1935 federal election. The Conservative Party aired political advertisements, known as the “Mr. Sage” advertisements, which attacked the Liberal Party of Mr. King without identifying the Conservative Party as sponsor. Despite the advertisements, King won the election and subsequently introduced electoral legislation that included a ban on dramatizations in political advertisements and a requirement that sponsors be named. By the 1950s and 1960s, the television era necessitated the further sophistication of campaign techniques, and the Liberal Party's Keith Davey introduced strategic planning into election campaigns with the assistance of Kennedy's pollster, Lou Harris. By the 1970s, Kline and his colleagues (1991, p. 227) could report that “the integration of polling, advertising, touring and media exposure” had become “essential to efficient campaign management.” Following American cultural trends, Michael Posner stated in the early 1990s that, “Just like a box of soap, a can of soup or a carton of cornflakes, they [politicians] require marketing strategies, promotion campaigns and plenty of spin to grab that all-important market share” (Posner, 1992, p. 40). The existence of American-style political advertising in Canada is undeniable, and yet it has never occupied the central cultural role that it has in the United States.

There is, in the political culture of Canada, a resistance to the glibness and superficiality of political advertisements and the manner in which they devalue reflective judgment, slow deliberation, and social responsibility. In the United States, because American creed is so deeply imbedded, political debate is a matter of genuine market choice. In Canada, the parliamentary traditions of government and opposition, in combination with the relentless search for a political identity, render political debate altogether more philosophical and ideological. In this context, it is relatively less acceptable to present politicians, issues, and parties as brands and labels. Moreover, in the Canadian parliamentary system, there is less need for the kind of American candidate identification advertisements that package the fresh face and introduce the person to the voters (Diamond and Bates, 1992).

Most leaders are already known to the people through their apprenticeships in their parties as backbenchers and cabinet ministers. Whereas in the United States political advertising is largely a matter of consumer choice and should therefore remain largely unfettered, in Canada there is a greater sense of equity and seriousness in ensuring that each side is presented adequately in any public debate. Perhaps it is for this reason that Fletcher and MacDermid (1998) report that Canadian political advertisements tend to be more party centred than their U.S. counterparts.

Despite the abundant intellectual distaste for attack ads and a generalized mood of revulsion among the Canadian public, such advertisements have been employed in Canada since the 1980s. In the 1988 federal election campaign, political advertisements by the Liberal Party called Brian Mulroney a liar, and advertisements by the Progressive Conservative Party referred to John Turner as a liar. The 1993 federal election campaign contained the now-notorious Progressive Conservative ads that captured images of Jean Chretien with his naturally twisted mouth accentuated. The voice-over referred to Chretien as “an embarrassment.” While attack ads decreased in the campaign of 1997, the Reform Party produced a composite of four Quebecois political leaders on a poster with lines drawn through their faces (Fletcher and MacDermid, 1998). The idea was to make the point that Canada has had too many leaders from Quebec, and that by inference, that is why those Quebecers always get what they want at “our” expense. Jean Charest and Jean Chretien were two of the four politicians shown. Charest called it “bigoted,” and Chretien said that it was “the most divisive campaign in Canadian history.”
Romanow and his colleagues (1999) conducted the principal study of attack ads in Canada in their exploration of the 1993 federal election. Their principal conclusion—that extensive use was made of attack ads in that election—is in our judgment an exaggeration. In order to be classified as an attack ad, the material should meet Taras’s (1990, p. 219) criteria: “ridicule . . . savaging of their character . . . . The competence, motives, intelligence, and integrity of opponents are brought into question. The object is to draw blood, to inflict irreparable damage.” The object of the attack can be an individual or a class of individuals. Attack ads tend to be unsubstantiated, insinuating, and often resort to ad hominem arguments (Gauthier, 1994). On the basis of these definitions, not many of the 1993 ads studied by Romanow and his colleagues meet the criteria.

In fact, our reanalysis of their classification system confirms the judgement of Wearing and Tilley (in Romanow et al., 1999, p. 6) that while Americans prefer a personal attack on politicians, Canadians emphasize political scandal. Despite the fact that the 1997 federal election was genuinely a cleaner campaign than 1993, Fletcher and MacDermid’s (1998) analysis of the attack mode in the latter election generates a more accurate image of the scope of attack ads in Canadian elections. They acknowledge that very few of the hard-hitting advertisements were “directed at the competence or character of the leaders” (Fletcher and MacDermid, 1998, p. 21). In fact only 9 of the 87 spot advertisements they classified in the 1997 campaign contained attacks on personal character or style. They conclude that “it could not be said that the spots were ‘down and dirty’” (Fletcher and MacDermid, 1998, p. 21).

Irrespective of the cultural response of Canadians to negative ads and to the degree to which one can claim that they have been employed in Canadian elections, what can we say of their more specific impact on Canadian audiences? Based on his studies of the 1988 federal election, Jean Crete (1991, p. 17) concludes that attack ads only work if they attack the issues. He also offers some more general insights into the matter of audience reception of political ads. First, less-informed voters are most likely to derive information content from spot advertisements (p. 23), and second, political advertisements of any kind rarely change minds; rather they serve to reinforce existing opinion (p. 27). Citing Palda’s (1973) research, Canadian Environics polls, and American research, Crete concludes (1991, pp. 29–30) that advertisements can be effective and that there is a tendency for those who spend the dollars to get the results. Fletcher and MacDermid (1998, p. 7) claim that in Canada, “advertising has had significant effects on campaign dynamics and voter choice and exposure is high.”

Certainly the advertising strategy of Allen Gregg and his Progressive Conservative team seemed to pay dividends in 1988. Following the leadership debates in mid-campaign, the Progressive Conservatives were alarmed to see that John Turner and his Liberal Party were rising rapidly in popularity. Gregg produced a series of negative ads attacking Turner’s credibility (Taras, 1990, p. 222). They seemed to work and the remainder of the campaign saw the PCs increasing in popularity and ultimately winning. Of course, part of the success can be attributed to the fact that the numerical dominance of the PCs in the 1984 federal election gave them more minutes of free and paid television advertising time according to the Elections Act formula. It is also probable that the PCs benefitted from the enormous sums of third-party money devoted to promoting the free trade cause. In the light of this mixed evidence of Canadian revulsion and yet some limited impact, what can we conclude? To some extent, the cautionary words of MacDermid (1997, p. 74) are salutary:

“The prospect of coming up with a research design that could study the effects of advertising free from experimental effects and in a true election environment is still distant and probably nonexistent.”

We should also pay attention to Andre Pratte’s claim that it is what goes on in the campaign itself and how the media cover the campaign trail that exert the most impact on election outcomes. Political advertising, he claims, only really exerts a strong impact when it is not well done (Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2003).

**Government Advertising in Canada**

As with political advertisements between Canada and the United States, there are some significant differences in government advertising between the two nations. The same pattern emerges in government advertising as with political advertising. Specifically, the differences between the two countries can also be traced to different cultural traditions and differing beliefs about the role of the state in national life. In Canada, the federal government spent over $200 million on advertising in 2000 and over $212 million in 2001, when it was the third largest advertiser in the country (AC Nielsen data).

In comparison, the United States government spent over $1 billion in 2001 but came in twenty-fourth in terms of expenditures. In per-capita figures the difference is clear. We demonstrated earlier that Americans spend
much more on advertising expenditure per capita (almost twice as much as Canadians). On government advertising, however, the data are reversed. In 2001 the American government spent $3.57 per capita on advertising while the Canadian government spent $6.34 per capita. While clearly an important player in advertising, the U.S. government has never been in the top 12 advertisers in any medium (television, magazine, newspaper, cable television, outdoor advertising, or radio) according to *Marketing* (Hiscock, 2002, p. 24). Political advertising by government is an important and ongoing concern for governments, opposition parties, and the media in Canada. In the United States it is not an important concern either in popular debate in the media or in the scholarly literature on advertising.

In fact, like its political culture, Canada is a hybrid of American and British practices and beliefs in its government advertising efforts. As a result of this or perhaps as a result of the fusion of power in parliamentary systems, Canadian government advertising bears a closer resemblance to British government advertising than American. In both Canada and Britain, recent governments have come under attack for using advertising as a partisan vehicle of party propaganda. Scandals, which bear more than a passing similarity to Canadian government advertising scandals, have appeared in the British press alleging that “government is using taxpayers’ money for unnecessary information campaigns” (Kleinman, 2003, p. 3). Moreover, both Canadian and British governments have been accused of using advertising as a means of patronage and tendering lucrative government advertising contracts to political friends. COI Communications, which is the British government’s advertising arm, was the largest advertiser in 2001 beating the number two advertiser, Procter & Gamble, by £28 million by spending £142.5 million (Hiscock, 2002, p. 24). This pattern of state advertising largesse in Canada bears a much closer resemblance to British practices than it does American.

How governments in the United States and Canada advertise also tells an important story. The Canadian government’s top three advertisers in 2001–2002 were the Departments of Tourism, Health and Welfare, and the Canadian Information Office. While we might understand the need for a large tourism advertising budget and see that the provision of information on health issues warrants a significant expenditure in that, the third largest spender in the government is telling. Until it was recently disbanded, the Canadian Information Office was a scarcely hidden propaganda arm of the federal government. Now subsumed under Communications Canada, its goal, according to its own euphemistic description, is to “listen actively to the opinions of Canadians so that the Government of Canada can respond.”

Given the perilous place of Quebec in federation, one of the main purposes of state advertising in Canada is to extol the virtues of a united Canada to soft Quebec nationalists. This is compared to the United States where the Department of Defense (and now Homeland Security) regularly is among the top three government spenders. The little academic attention that government advertising has received in the United States focuses on issues of economic inefficiencies in government advertising (Mullen & Bowers, 1979, p. 39) or concerns about the government dominating the airwaves (Yarwood & Enis, 1982, p. 37). In Canada, like the United Kingdom, there is much greater concern about the state using advertising as a vehicle of propaganda or for national unity purposes.

Advertising by the state in Canada has a long history and, given the precarious nature of the Canadian identity, has been used to foster nationalism and create citizenship. It has been used less for the provision of information than it has in the creation of myths. According to Northrop Frye, these myths are important stories that are passed on from one generation to the next. They give meaning to community and help create allegiances to the state and pride in citizenship. For Jacques Ellul (1972), these myths are the basis of *integration propaganda* and serve an important and positive function. Advertising by the state in Canada differs from American government advertising in this regard. In Canada this integration propaganda has primed and shaped the public conversation, sometimes overtly, at other times in a subtle and sophisticated manner.

One of the most early overt examples of this was early twentieth-century immigration ads, which in a verbal and visual sleight of hand that would put present-day Madison Avenue to shame, extolled the virtues of Canada’s winter climate. Yes, it was true, as one ad famously boasted, Winnipeg was free from malaria in winter. Another campaign dreamed up by Clifford Sifton, Prime Minister Laurier’s minister of the interior, used the government’s policy of “free land” as a ready-made slogan in its ads. All of them, however, placed in American newspapers, laid the foundation for much of the current mythology of Canada as a nation of open spaces and rugged beauty as well as establishing a precedent that the state ought to be involved in creating national mythologies. Historian Pierre Betton (1984, p. 18) writes how these early campaigns were truly a multimedia affair:

tens of thousands of pamphlets and exhibits at state fairs, 200,000 pamphlets distributed at the St. Louis Fair in 1904 alone; one thousand lantern-slide lec-
tures in England in a single year; one thousand inquiries a month at the High Commissioner's office in London; and a thirty-five thousand dollar arch at the coronation of Edward VII, trumpeting the advantages of immigration.

The most obvious manifestation of myth-making government advertising in Canada is the recurring Canada Day campaigns. They are myth-making because they use an ostensibly non-contentious celebration to make contentious arguments about federalism. The first large-scale advertising of this began with Expo '67 in Montreal. The federal government used Expo to tie ads into Canada's 100th anniversary of confederation and to counter the nascent but growing sovereignty movement in Quebec. Taking its lead from Clifford Sifton in earlier times, the federal Liberal government began a coordinated marketing campaign ostensibly to encourage Canadians to visit Expo but having the result of strengthening Canadians' loyalty to a united Canada. It marked the beginning of a maple-leaf branding campaign that Jean-François Lise has called a "never-before-seen sociopolitical experiment aimed at leading to a rebirth of feelings of Canadian identity as a way of reducing the separatist vote" (Kucharsky, 2000, p. 19).

Again in 1992 when Canada celebrated its 125th anniversary, the federal government began an aggressive advertising campaign whose goals seemed innocuous, but whose real purpose was to prime a federalist vote in the referendum on a set of constitutional changes in the same year. The massive spending by the federalist side was highlighted by a series of televised ads featuring prominent Canadians such as Olympic athletes and astronauts who spoke of the beauty of Canada from outer space or the pride felt by an Olympian on hearing the national anthem. As if that weren't enough, the television campaign also highlighted Canada's number one ranking by the United Nations based on life expectancy, education, and purchasing power and brought out one of the most powerful symbols of nationhood, the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) musical ride.1

Advertising on constitutional issues or fiscal imbalance has been one way that the federal government in Canada has participated in important national deliberations. So entrenched in political life are ads by government that advertising has been used by one government to communicate to another. In the 1999 federal budget, for example, the government of Quebec spent over $300,000 to tell Quebecers that, according to the Premier of Quebec, "there will be less money for health than we had hoped" (Gamble & Cherry, 1999, p. A1). The centerpiece of that campaign was a powerful and visually evocative ad that showed two blood bags, a larger one labeled "Ontario" and a smaller one labeled "Quebec." The tag line was a succinct

"How do you feel now?" (see Figure 11.1). In a semiotic flourish, the federal government responded with an ad that showed Quebec literally dominating Canada with fleur-de-lis and dollar signs over a map of the country. Its tag line was an equally stark "24% of the population [but] 34% of new transfer payments" (see Figure 11.2).

Figure 11.1: Government of Quebec advertisement, 1999.

24% of the population

34% of new transfer payments

24% of the population

34% of new transfer payments

Sources: http://politics.queensu.ca/~rose/figure1.tiff

On constitutional matters the government's advertising has been more subtle. In 1982 when the Canadian constitution was being patriated from Britain even though Canadians democratic assent was not formally required, the federal government ran a now-famous ad, "Flight," which merely showed a slow-motion flight of Canada geese taking off from water. "Oh
Canada” is hummed in the background while the narrator intones the virtues and importance of freedom to Canadians. Two years prior to that, during the first referendum on sovereignty in Quebec, the federal government spent millions touting the importance of the federal presence in Quebec. Flags were flown on all federal buildings; tours by senior cabinet ministers were undertaken, and extra money was allocated to Quebec programs. All of these activities were, of course, supported by a massive federal advertising campaign in support of the federalist “no” side. Typical of the pervasiveness of the advertising the federal government ran a vigorous anti-smoking campaign that said in large letters “SAY NO!” In smaller letters below was “to smoking.” The act, of course, was an argument for the federal position in the referendum.

Until recently, the United States government did not use advertising as a way to create consensus on important policy issues. September 11 changed all that and launched the U.S. government in a myth-making exercise previously unknown in peace time. The efforts of the U.S. government went beyond government advertising or promotion. It represented what Van Ham (2001) calls the ascendancy of “state branding,” the pervasive and systemic application of marketing and advertising principles to all aspects of public life.

The task of branding the United States fell to Charlotte Beers, the U.S. undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, whose job was to “shape effective messages explaining U.S. policies in new and ongoing issues” (State Department Website). She was hired just days after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 and given an unprecedented amount of resources for selling America and its values to the Muslim world in particular. She has described the United States as a “beautiful brand” and television as a “fast delivery system” for the American government’s message (McKenna, 2003, p. A4). Some of her techniques, like dropping pamphlets in Afghanistan, have failed miserably. Others, such as the $15 million (U.S.) shared-values campaign featured Muslims talking in glowing terms about their life in the United States, were quietly and quickly scrapped by the State Department. The campaign was derided by many who believed that it was misguided because it did not respond to the perceived problems in U.S. policies but merely papered them over with ads.

While the jury may be still be out on the success of the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, the U.S. Army has followed its lead. The Army has become a significant advertiser and has attempted to radically refashion its brand beginning with changing their longstanding slogan “Be All That You Can Be” to “An Army of One”—a more individualistic slogan designed to appeal to the short attention span of their target audience—72 million Generation Y kids. The aggressive advertising campaign exists alongside an
interactive Website that includes a downloadable video game called “America’s Army: Operations,” a four-man team arriving at colleges, high schools, or fraternities in a huge yellow Hummer with spray-painted images of army life; and a vehicle giving away army branded hats, jerseys, headbands, wristbands, and dog tags (Joiner, 2003).

While Canadian government advertising is still much more significant than American advertising in creating and developing nationalism, the newest development post-September 11 may change that in the United States.

Conclusion

A case study of American and Canadian political ads tell us much. They remind us how similar the two countries are in terms of the centrality of advertising. They also remind us of crucial differences, born of different political cultures and beliefs about the role of the state in national life. Though significant differences exist, we see a broad convergence in the style and arguments found in campaign ads in the two countries. There are however, significant differences in the way in which governments use advertising. Canadian advertising by the state has a much more robust history of being used to support federalism than in the United States. Still, similarities persist. In both Canada and the United States advertising is deeply embedded in the practice of democracy. Politicians have used rhetoric accessible to citizens since the days of Cicero’s orations in Rome. Advertising, in some ways, is merely the most recent manifestation of this kind of public discourse, but perhaps more worrisome, as Daniel Borstine reminds us, “advertising is the characteristic rhetoric of modern democracy.” (Borstine, 1962, p. 3) One of the important lessons to be drawn from this study—and any study of political ads—is that a study of modern politics cannot be divorced from an understanding of the actions and behaviors of symbolic handlers who routinely organize, plan, and manage the communications of political actors. The fact that increasingly the way in which we talk about politics is through the lens of advertisements leads not only to an abdication of governing according to Bruce Newman (1999) but also a devaluation of politics itself.

ENDNOTES

1. These ads may be viewed by following the “Government of Canada Ads” link on the Website http://politicalads.ca

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