

ABSTRACT

The objective of this dissertation is to explore the historical development of the mechanisms of personalization and spectacularization of politics through the analysis of three particular cases. These two mechanisms have slowly changed the life and the ways of political competition. They were spread by technical development and by the diffusion of television and mass media, and they took different shapes over the years, entailing significant changes in the political structures in which they happened.

Spectacularization of politics refers to the process by which the political communication conforms to the rules and practices of television and its programs, leading to simplified languages and the predominance of images, radically transforming not only the relationship between society and institutions, but also the role of political information itself.

The personalization of politics, consequently, appears to be a process brought too by the growing importance of the media, which contribute in making the leader and his qualities the image and the agenda of the party he represents; in doing so, electors can at once identify the political formation with the one that guides it.

Both the processes took different aspects over the course of their development.

A first example took place in the 1960's, in the United States of America. Thanks to a huge improvement in the economical field, which permitted the enrichment of the middle class and the development of the «American dream», television became an integral part of the daily life of the American society, and it contributed in overcoming the regional differences between each State.

In this context, the value of the image factor could not be ignored, and it revealed itself to be crucial in John F. Kennedy's political strategy for the 1960 presidential campaign. The new communicative strategies used in that occasion marked a turning point in regard of breaking models that were believed to be outdated in what concerned the tools for researching and conquering the electoral consent.

Kennedy showed how crucial the party's primaries were as an instrument for getting visibility and the attention of the media, which allowed him to reach the notoriety that his adversary, Nixon, already had. The modern and complex organization of the campaign apparatus, which allowed the candidate to focus only on his public appearances, leaving the more technical details to the trustworthy men he was surrounded by, made the execution of the campaign easier; it also permitted a constant connection to the local level and to the electors. The model of «permanent campaign» was starting to take shape, and it was indeed characterized by the continuous research and control of the electors' tendencies.

Nevertheless, the aspect that would bring the most innovations in communicative strategies of the future president would be represented by the use of images. The «spectacle-politics» was born: the candidate was put in the center of the political scene, with his charisma and his abilities to appear on the TV screen. The media became instruments to recognize value, and communication started to shape itself onto the structures of advertising; the language used started to become simpler and more similar to the typical one used by the population, who was an active and receptive audience.

The cornerstone example of the significance of this transformation were the presidential debates in which both Kennedy and Nixon appeared. They embodied the first time when the American people could watch live the «fight» between the two candidates; Kennedy's victory was indeed facilitated by his communicative capabilities, by succeeding in appearing young but experienced, engaging and ready to promise great prosperity; these abilities allowed him to capture the attention of the public right from the first impression he left on them.

About thirty years later, Ross Perot re-mediated the concept of spectacle-politics of which Kennedy was the maker. The experience of United We Stand America's leader during the presidential elections of 1992 was radically new for the

American political history for two main reasons.

First of all, Perot was a *political outsider*, that is a man almost unknown to the public and stranger to the political establishment. Furthermore, for the first time, a third-party in the well-established bipolar American system managed to gain almost the 19% of the electoral vote.

The essential characteristic of Perot's strategy was the creation of a «company party», a party which was sustained by the profits and the employees of Perot's businesses. Furthermore, it was a «personal party», that is a party entirely shaped on the image and qualities of its leader.

Thanks to a marketing logic based on the great use of surveys and the strategic broadcasting of political advertising, Perot was able to conquer an outstanding favor. Moreover, a peculiar strategy of *sidestepping* of traditional media, and in particular of journalists, was actively put into effect, especially through the participation to talk-shows and call-in shows. The special structure of these programs, where the anchorman only played as the mediator, allowed Perot to steer the discussion, speaking directly to the public via the simple and immediate language that was typical of those shows, and he was also free to choose the themes to analyze and the accuracy to do so, because, indeed, there were no specialized journalists who could coordinate the debate.

A few years later, the processes of personalization and spectacularization that had reached Italy during the 1980's, prompted again by the American example of Ronald Reagan, were brought to an extreme in the wake of «Americanizing» mechanisms that aimed for the research of personalities with great leadership and charismatic qualities, during a moment of deep institutional crisis. The turning point that led to a great innovation in the Italian political system was the birth of Forza Italia in 1994, the first «personal party» ever to appear in the Italian context.

Silvio Berlusconi's experiment had a lot in common with Ross Perot's; he, too, created a company-party and a «medial-party», that made direct communication with citizens one of the most important points of its electoral strategy.

Driven by the people's will to see a true change in the difficult situation of their country, and by the ample political space left open by the disappearance of the historical parties such as Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy) and PSI (Italian Socialist Party) after many scandals of corruptions, Forza Italia presented itself as the

right choice to save the country, both economically and morally, by presenting young and new candidates, and by the leadership of a businessman who could make his fellow citizens reach the same success he had obtained.

As it had been for the other two examples, the language of politics was simplified, getting more similar to the one of commercial programs; a strong campaign of advertisements was used in order to promote both the political program of the new formation and the image of its leader; surveys and polls became crucial for the study and the collection of the approval, since they determined the tendencies of society, to which the party had to respond.

In the few months of electoral campaign, thanks to the strong communicative structure, Forza Italia was able to conquer victory at the elections, showing that even in Italy a strategy that was more oriented towards the American model rather than the traditional one could be effective.

The mechanisms of personalization and spectacularization, obviously, were not only represented by these three examples that, although, were symbolic. Moreover, with the birth and development of the new information technologies, more capable of directly connecting parties and people and spreading information, it may be proposed that there will be a new tendency towards these processes, which may take even more different shapes.