



Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them

Susan Delacourt

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A witty, insightful, and provocative look at the inside world of political marketing and its impact on democracy

Inside the political backrooms of Ottawa, the Mad Men of Canadian politics are planning their next consumer-friendly pitch. Where once politics was seen as a public service, increasingly it's seen as a business, and citizens are considered customers. But its unadvertised products are voter apathy and gutless public policy.

Ottawa insider **Susan Delacourt** takes readers onto the world of Canada's top political marketers, explaining how parties slice and dice their platforms according to what polls say voters' priorities are in each constituency, and how parties control the media. Provocative, incisive and entertaining, *Checked Out* is *The Age of Persuasion* meets *The Armageddon Factor*.

Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them Details

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Katie says

A must-read for anyone interested in understanding the current state of civic and political culture in Canada. Delacourt writes an approachable, engaging, and highly informative book.

Penny McGill says

This was a great book. 5 stars or more and I'm so glad I caught an early CBC interview with Susan Delacourt earlier in the Fall. I knew that I would love to read anything that provided insight into how our political parties are 'sold' and she did that topic justice with a great blend of storytelling and facts. I had so many moments, while reading this book, that I would remember something a politician had said or an advertisement I'd seen, and I'd think "aha!"

She is giving us the ultimate behind-the-scenes look at Canadian politics and adds a fair bit of psychology and marketing strategy at the same time. It reminded me a bit of the old tv show The West Wing because there is so much thought and preparation put into the decisions that are made about what a candidate wears, says and chooses to visit. They know where we live, what we purchase, where our kids go to school and how much debt we carry. With that information they can tailor their message so that they are practically guaranteed to make a connection.

Without a doubt one of the best books I've ever read and one of my top picks for non-fiction. Susan Delacourt writes so well and on a topic that I found fascinating. Can't wait to pass this book on to adults and students.

Young_Tulip says

I wanted to get this book as a read for the 2015 federal election to be more informed. Plus working in communications made this book incredibly interesting. It's enraging, thought provoking, and eye opening. I whole heartedly wish that people coast to coast to coast were more engaged, at least on one issue, when it comes to federal politics. A must read.

Steven Spriensma says

An interesting diagnosis of an oft-ignored part of our national character: Canadians as consumer-voters.

Janine says

Fascinating... also read this one going into the 2015 election. Great backgrounder as to how we'd gotten to this.

Ken says

Bracing look at recent political culture in Canada. Depicts Canadian politics as practised by the Conservatives as little more than like browsing the shelves at the mall. We look for items and services that will enhance our lifestyles and add to our convenience with little or no consideration of the common good.

Steven Lee says

It was convenient timing that had me reading *Shopping for Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them* during the 2015 federal election. Delacourt lays out in a clear narrative how marketing and advertising has changed politics over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is an interesting intersection in this book between changes in Canadian society, culture and politics. The rise of consumerism caused all three to adapt. One would impact upon another and force the other to change further. The introduction of basic marketing principles gave parties a distinct edge in the 1950s and 60s, but then as voters became cynical politics was forced to follow.

One of the things I appreciate about this book is that it has given me a knew lens through which to look at Canadian politics. As I alluded to above, the cultural shift towards a distrust of institutions and politics could be more accurately found in consumerism than politics. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's brutal central control is rooted in his understanding of consumer-citizen politics and what it takes to succeed in a world of brands, slogans and value propositions.

Delacourt makes frequent reference to a certain category of Canadians, the Tim Horton's voter. Tim Horton's successful marketing and massive market share has made it a national symbol. It also typifies a certain class of voter. Middle class/lower-middle class, without airs, not particularly engaged in politics. This cohort is a significant portion of the Canadian electorate. Swinging as much as 10% of the electorate can be the difference between third-party and governing majority. The parties have used market research and databases to slice and dice the electorate. They pinpoint the voters they know are in their camp, target them, find the poachable groups and pull them into winning coalitions.

The consumer-citizen (a concept and phrase that makes my skin crawl) has resulted in some idiotic policy. The example that comes to mind from *Shopping for Votes* is the snowmobile tax credit. Rural outdoors-people was a target group and so the Conservatives developed a policy directly to appeal to them. Governing is secondary in the focus-grouped, messaged-controlled reality of the era of consumer politics.

In her book Delacourt presents feasible explanations for the 2011 Conservative majority and the Orange Wave in Quebec. In marketing terms a more traditional advertising campaign launched the NDP into first in Quebec, while modern micro-targeting brought the Conservatives to majority. At the conclusion of the book Delacourt suggests that all three parties are now using the same strategies. Perhaps it will merely come down who can most effectively micro-target and mobilize voters.

The sad reality is that voters do process candidates and parties like products in many ways. Brand loyalty and

partisanship are not so dissimilar. Commercial products have become more political as well, arguing that they stand for sets of values and not simple products/services for profit. The idealistic, classic liberal view of democracy is not rooted in reality, sadly. How candidates look, sound and any number of other obscure items can shape a voter's intention. I tease my mom because she's leaning towards voting NDP, but doesn't like Tom Mulcair's beard. On the other hand the beard is becoming part of the brand and being taken on by NDP partisans as a fun symbol.

I would strongly recommend this book for anyone wanting a deeper understanding of how Canadian politics (and other modern democracies) work. This book is similar to Sasha Issenberg's *The Victory Lab*, but far more accessible and better framed in the world of politics than the opaque worlds of academia and advertising. Check it out, and be warned that it might be hard swallow if you have high-minded values of democracy.

You can follow me on Twitter @SLee_OT or at my blog at <http://theorangetory.blogspot.ca/>

Brian Ross says

An excellent primer on how and why marketing has become a primary driver of both political campaigning and governing. It is presented as a history, and tells the story of how the lessons of consumer marketing were adopted and adapted for Canadian politics, premised around the thesis that voters are no longer viewed as citizens but rather as consumers - both by the political class and by voters themselves.

This book helps make sense of what the various parties are doing. Most sobering is their conclusion that appealing to a broad spectrum of voters was less effective than identifying and targeting persuadable swing voters and marketing themselves to their specific interests, resulting in micro-targeting with niche policies and frankly pandering to existing prejudices. A fascinating tidbit - political advertising is not governed by the same standards as commercial advertising - a company can't run down the reputation of a competitor in their advertising, but when the rules were made lawmakers ensured that those same rules don't apply to political advertising, thus enabling attack ads.

For me, one of the most sobering consequences of the obsession with marketing combined with the use of "big data" that provides unprecedented ability to discover and target communications right to the level of individuals, is the conclusion that the route to acquiring and holding power is no longer by appealing to the broadest electorate, but by building and turning out YOUR base, and ideally discouraging anybody else from voting at all. This applies not just to campaigning, but to governing - govern for the benefit of those who get you into power, and disregard the rest. Cynical, but worryingly effective.

Jake M. says

This is an essential read for voters and politicos during and between election cycles. The book highlights how consumerism and politics are fused together through marketing techniques. Delacourt gives a history of how private sector marketers sold their services to political campaigns, and how politicians now collect data to advertise policies to swing-voters and apathetic populations with hired private sector expertise. Attention

is also given to how all parties now view Canadians as consumers rather than tax-payers, and how politicians pander to pocket-book concerns of voters rather than long-term policy needs. The text flows with some mild slowdown when introducing a number of political marketing pioneers. All in all, this book will encourage voters to look behind the curtain to see the new mechanics of campaigns and governance.

Phil Spencer says

Well-written. Great mix of historical anecdotes and contemporary examples. I learned a lot from this book.

Lara Arend says

Smart.

Josh Lindner says

Shopping for Votes is a great book. Susan Delacourt does a serious job of reaching into the past and explaining how the modernization of politics and campaigning came to be today and why it seems to be a different world than what it once was. She helps explain how each party reached over to the American political scene but also how the private sector and business helped learn and reach over to politics and how the two sides have been ever increasingly intertwining themselves. An excellent read for anyone who is a nerd of Canadian Politics but an important read for anyone who seems a bit overwhelmed by what politics has become today in a modern 21st Century world.

Andrew Griffith says

Good overview of how politics has become more sophisticated in marketing approaches, and shift from citizens to consumers and related policy implications. Also striking contrast between evidence-based social science approaches to electoral strategies and rejective of such approaches in policy development.

David Whitehouse says

A fascinating look at the development of marketing techniques not merely for winning voters but as a central part of policy making. It extends well beyond the Canadian political scene with well-made comparisons with the US and the UK. The book sheds light on the disconnect between politicians and voters, and deserves to be read by both.

Maryanne Henderson says

Written by Susan Delacourt, Canadian journalist and winner of the 2011 Charles Lynch award, Shopping for Votes is likely a book I am going to have to return to the library and buy my own copy. Any book whose Introduction links our politics to our stereotyped obsession with Tim's (sorry Starbucks) is one I want on my shelves! She writes of the corporatization and branding of politics so that politic speeches no longer aim to educate or inform; dare not "talk of sacrifice, collective good, fact, problems or debate".

The subtitle of Shopping for Votes is How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them, which doesn't really describe the current system of political electioneering in Canada. Shopping for Votes delves into the 'science' of marketing behind Canada's federal political parties, the evolution of their advertising strategies and the high-tech data collection that is used to create targeted ads and position politicians' sounds bites.

Delacourt's research is excellent. She traces the history of today's voter market analysis back to the 1950s, describing the ebb and flow of Canadian citizens relationship with government and to the marketplace. She examines the influence of successful marketing campaigns to create neo-liberal shifts in the US and UK (Reagan/Thatcher) and their eventual usage in Canada. She does this in a way that is easy to read, definitely more Tim Horton's and tomato soup aisle than anything ivory tower.

Personally, I earned my BA in political science in the early 1990s when computers were word processors, Canadians were citizens and elections were meant to choose who governed - not just who won. Delacourt's book has me in a silent rage as I realize that, after I left university and worked and raised a family, there were a number of insidious, cunning individuals who only cared about winning, not governing and who would use their money and data mining to manipulate voters. I am speaking primarily of the Harper conservatives, but over time, the tactics of the new conservative party spread to all major parties.

Harper's infamous statement that when he was done, no one would recognize Canada, includes the CPC efforts to turn Canadians from Canadian citizens to mindless consumers, focusing only on the number of dollars in their pocket. Political party efforts to control the message to consumers; er, I mean, citizens has almost eliminated the connection of Canadians to government. The CPC intentionally targeted the 10% of people that didn't vote and dumbed their message down to one drumbeat that ignored all the details of what government does and needs to do. (Note: I was a Progressive Conservative until Harper's unite-the-right campaign changed my party. I have been a party orphan since.)

There are several instances of message manipulation, such as the Conservatives naming of bills to play well as headlines, for e.g., when a controversial bill on internet privacy was labeled the "Protecting Children from Internet Predators Act." The book quotes two prominent Canadian lawyers, Edward Greenspan and Anthony Doob, who charged "Criminal justice policy is a product being shaped by the 'need' to attract votes. Conservative criminal justice policy is developed not to serve public or societal needs but to help market the Conservatives to specific constituencies." (p. 241.)

As Delacourt tracks the cultural change from political advertising to marketing to modern data mining and voter/constituent modeling, she spends time discussing the existence of party databases. These databases are held by all parties; although liberalist.ca is accessible on-line, individual's information is not accessible due to privacy concern). This is a frightening thing because, over the last couple of decades the political parties have gotten very good at collecting data on all of us - no longer using simple who subscribes to a hunting magazine vs a travel magazine, today's parties track every survey signature, every contact with a constituency or party office; Delacourt relates that some parties even encourage canvassers to report on the makes/models of vehicles in your driveway and decals in your car's window. Since this information is held by a political party, not the government, Freedom of Information does not apply and the information they hold on you is held from you.

The biggest issue I see with the focus on winning elections is that it is too easy for politicians to forget about governing. Many voters complain that we never seem to be out of the election campaign and Shopping for Votes certainly gives a number of indications why (including the fact that we have shifted from having a high number of lawyers elected as MPs to having a high number of business people elected to Parliament).

This system, and I have to point to the US election of Trump, minimizes the focus on policy and good government, minimizes thorough discussion of issues and long-term pros/cons of current government decisions, and weakens voter's efforts of critical thinking about government and politics. Ultimately, by focusing efforts on whose vote they can get, political parties forget they are supposed to govern for all Canadians once elected and focus too much of their legislation on rewarding those who gave them power.

Delacourt's book explains the current system (it is a couple of years out-of-date) and doesn't provide ideas for changing the manipulation inherent in today's system. Those solutions have to come from people who want to define themselves as Canadians, as citizens, not just taxpayers.
