

## **“Money and Media dominate modern day politics” – how far do you agree?**

It is widely claimed that the media, and the money available to dominate it, has a much wider grasp over the voting public than manifesto or policy. The majority of the world's media sources hold some sort of partisan alignment, and its hold on the public means this bias is passed on to the electorate. How much it influences the electorate however, is different amongst many theories. The manipulative theory suggests that the media submerges real news in meaningless trivia in order to benefit itself. An example of this is Rupert Murdoch's support of Labour only once they'd dropped clause 4 of the constitution. The Hegemonic theory agrees with the accusation of the biased nature of the media but argues that it is less calculating. Any political stance it holds is the genuine opinion of the papers or broadcasters, and its publicising of these views is not in an attempt to manipulate the electorate. The pluralist theory argues that the customers choose the media, not the other way around, and their political views are reflected by their choice of newspaper or broadcaster, not changed by it. Though these theories have different ideas on the motives of the media, they all essentially say the same thing, the hard truth that the media is biased, and that its opinions are carried by its consumers. Another undeniable fact is that the political groups with the most money have the greatest chance of gaining the favourability of the media.

Television has led the nature of elections, but more so in America than Britain due to the differing regulations relating to media, and the different motives that broadcasters have across the Atlantic. Firstly, the US doesn't have a publicly funded broadcaster, and all broadcasting channels have a profit-driven business plan. They will therefore only show the most popular candidates in bite size chunks, not allowing for in depth and democratic coverage. Reports suggest that in the 2008 campaign, Barack Obama's images were larger, more colourful, and positive than the ones of John McCain. This also provokes voting behaviour based on personality as opposed to policy. Secondly, there are no rules governing the democratic spread of coverage regarding candidates. Campaigns can therefore spend extortionate amounts to gain press time, such as the record setting 30 minute political commercial by Barack Obama in 2008.

Britain however, has regulations on airtime, sharing it out proportionally to however many people that party has standing at the election. This is made possible through the publicly funded broadcaster, BBC, which is said to have neutral politics stance, though it has been accused of holding a liberal position. There is however, a much heavier influence coming from the press sector of the media in Britain. America's heterogeneous nature means that local press are the standard newspaper to read and these already reflect the views of that state, which unlike Britain votes united in an electoral college. In the 1992 general election, with Kinnock and Labour the favourites, the sun released the headline, "Will the last person to leave the country turn out the lights". A few days later, after a shock conservative victory, they released a follow up headline, "It was the sun what won it". Just 3 years later they switched allegiance, with "Sun backs Blair", something pointed out as one of the factors in Labours landslide 1997 election victory. This, along with the fact the paper has backed the winner in all but 3 elections in the last 50 years, implies that Britain's biggest newspaper holds immense influence over the electorate. However, it can also be argued that with only 3 million papers in circulation, the Sun doesn't have enough readers to change the result of an election. Not only has this but it faced opposition from big papers such as the mail and the telegraph as well.

It is not just television and newspapers however, with recent elections being dominated by the internet. Access to watch the debates at any time anywhere around the world and the use of social networking filled the electorate with images and stories of the candidates in every corner of their lives. This also meant however, that the already low levels of genuine political news stories were being drowned out by an obsession with image and personality.

Barac Obama spent an unprecedented 300 million on his campaign for election, spending about \$10 per vote he gained. This was almost twice the amount his rival spent, and is likely to have been a factor in the outcome. The system in America requires any candidate to gain 5% of the national vote to receive national funding, so minor parties or independents stand a very poor chance of breaking into the system. If they do manage to, they then have to have the ability of raising large sums of money. Billionaires such as Ross Perot (independent 1992) could combat

this, but even the third party in 2000 (Ralph Nader – Greens) claimed that he simply could not keep up with the spending of the two major parties and would never be in with a chance. There have been some limitations however, in the form of the Federal Election Campaign Act (1974) limiting individual contributions to \$1000 and corporate contributions (from PACs) to \$5000. This seems less of a ceiling to expenditures and more of a skyline, considering the spending patterns of the last election.

It is a little different in the UK, with a maximum of £7000 allowed to be spent in any one constituency, and candidates that tend to spend less than three quarters of this. The heterogeneous nature of the USA would obviously require more expenditure in a campaign, but the 5, 6, and sometimes 7 figure expenditures in senate races seem slightly out of proportion.

In Japan the electoral system was making candidates of the same party campaign against each other, which gradually pushed the price of campaigns up and up until reform was enforced. The influence money was having on elections had created a rift amongst parties as well as losing a sense of democracy.

It is clear that money and the media have a huge influence on voting behaviour, but not in the way it may first have been perceived. Where the theories generally carried the view that money could drive the media, and the media in turn influence the electorate, I believe it is changing voting behaviour in a different sense. Money and the media have glorified politics, and particularly in America have given it a Hollywood effect. The public are reacting to this by voting not based the manifesto and ideologies of candidates, but voting for the greatest 'celebrity'. Money and the media do play too great a role in modern day politics, and have replaced the electorate's voting on policy with its voting on personality.