When political marketing strategy ignores delivery: Lessons from the Greek experience

Iordanis Kotzaivazoglou¹, a

¹Department of Business Administration, Technological Educational Institute of Central Macedonia, Serres, Greece

Corresponding author: ikotza@teiser.gr

Abstract: Implementing a political marketing strategy requires not only that a party listen to the needs and wishes of the electorate and shape its product accordingly, but also be in a position to deliver it once elected. The purpose of this paper is to describe the outcomes that making excessive pre-election promises, which are impossible to implement when in government, can have for a party. The method used is a descriptive case study, with data drawn from Greek experience and PASOK’s political marketing strategy under the leadership of George Papandreou in 2009-2011. Shortly before the economic crisis engulfed the country, PASOK pursued a strategy of extravagant campaign promises that gave him a comfortable electoral win. Afterwards, however, those pre-election pledges prevented him from promptly taking the austerity measures needed to deal with the crisis. The result was as adverse for the party as it was for the country and its citizens. This case study helps fill a gap in political marketing theory concerning the choices that a party of government might make or avoid when it will be governing at a time of economic crisis, which will force it to take severely unpopular measures that are contrary to the voters’ wishes.

Keywords: Political Marketing Strategy, Political Marketing in Greece, Greek Political Parties

1. Introduction

A party of government that wants to sell itself to the electorate has to develop a strategy that meets two main requirements [1], [2]. The first is that it has to enable the party to garner the most votes possible and win the election. This means that it has to take account of the needs and wishes of voters from different social groups [1] [3]. The second is that delivery be feasible after the election, when the party forms a government. But the pressure to win at the polls can be so great that delivery may be ignored. As has been emphasised in political marketing theory (e.g. [4], [2]) however, this second element is of key importance, because it is delivery that will achieve the aim of political marketing: (a) citizen satisfaction, (b) the weal of state and society, and (c) long-term power for the party [5].
A major party, especially when it assumes the reins of government, cannot for long pursue a strategy based continually on the wishes of its voters [2]. Theoretically, there is an ideal point where a government alternates the roles of follower, monitoring the needs and wishes of the voters, and leader, raising issues and directing the public towards the right decisions [6]. This strategy, however, can only be implemented successfully when the needs and wishes of the electorate coincide with those of the state, or when the voters have both the knowledge and the will to choose the public good, even when this goes against their own interests.

In political marketing theory, however, it is worth looking at the opposite case as well, when the needs and wishes of the people run counter to the good of the country, as happens at times of severe economic crisis. It is interesting to consider what strategy should be adopted by a party that on the one hand wants to win enough votes to take power and on the other will then immediately be required to tackle urgent economic problems by taking austerity measures which the people do not want and will be unwilling to apply.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this discussion, drawing insights from the case of PASOK under the leadership of George Papandreou in the period 2009-2011 in Greece. As will be described in detail below, PASOK made pre-election promises that were to the liking of the voters and in line with their needs and wishes. This strategic choice gave it a comfortable victory at the polls. But the economic crisis that engulfed the country not only made it impossible for it to fulfil its promises but forced it to take a swingeing series of anti-popular measures, which led it to premature loss of power and support.

The experience gained from the case of PASOK helps demonstrate the challenges and problems facing a potential governing party that comes to power in a period of looming or existing crisis and has to take the right decisions right away, steering a tricky course between two opposing forces: the pressures and wishes of the voters and the needs of the country. This is an aspect of political marketing that the relevant literature has not so far dealt with in depth. This paper aspires to help fill that gap. Political marketing is a rising new, growing area of academia, with many fields that are worth further investigation [2]. Taking into account the uncertainty prevailing in the global economy, which may well provoke financial crises [7], the future may find various major parties and governments from different democratic countries confronting, to a greater or lesser degree, these sorts of dilemmas and difficulties. It is therefore useful to enrich the theory of political marketing with such cases.

The remainder of this paper begins with an outline of the theoretical background concerning the steps taken by a party seeking to adopt a political marketing strategy. This is followed by a presentation of the research methodology used and a brief analysis of the Greek political marketplace between 1974 and 2009, which serves as an interpretative context for PASOK’s actions and the behaviour of the electorate. The next two sections describe the strategy that gave PASOK a comfortable victory at the polls in the 2009 general election in Greece, its post-
election choices as the government of the country, and the outcome of those choices. The seventh section discusses the party’s tactics and their implications for theory, while the final one presents the conclusion and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical background

Although political marketing initially focused on party promotion and communication, especially in the pre-election period, for many years now the emphasis has been on strategy [8]. On that level the issue for a political party is more its political product, what it is offering the voters, and less how to promote it [8]. The strategic approach to political marketing relies in one way or another on marketing research, that is, looking for and identifying the needs and wishes of the different groups existing within and without the party or the country [9], [10], [11], and especially those of the voters [3], [2].

In general, the steps followed by a party seeking to apply an integrated marketing strategy can be grouped into: (a) marketing research, (b) product offering, (c) two-way communication, and (d) delivery. In this regard, Lees-Marschment [12], [8] distinguishes two categories of party: the sales-oriented party (SOP) and the market-oriented party (MOP). In the case of the SOP, the party has already developed its product and uses marketing research, which Lees-Marschment calls market intelligence, to shape its communication accordingly in order to sell it to the voters in the best possible way. In the case of the MOP, the party shapes the product it offers on the basis of marketing research; in other words, the product offered derives essentially from the needs and wishes of the voters.

Marketing research, as an element of the environmental analysis fundamental to the theory of commercial marketing strategy [13], includes all the various quantitative and qualitative methods – e.g. polling, focus groups, etc. – that can be used to determine the needs and wishes of different groups, especially the electorate [14], [11], as well as other kinds of research, such as the image of the party and/or its leader, and opposition or policy research [2].

Product offering includes all those elements that a party offers the electorate, e.g. its programme policies, promises and pledges, as well as emotional elements that present the party as a brand [15]. In developing its product the party takes into account a whole set of elements, among them its history and ideology, the demands, wishes and expectations of different groups, and particularly those of its target groups of voters, the needs of the country and society and the personality of the party leader [3], [2].

Two-way communication between party and voters helps the party to present its positions, build its brand image, attract voters and create mutual relationships with them [3], [2]. This is essentially a more evolved version of traditional promotion, where the traditional channels and means of promotion, which were basically one-way, have been supplemented by such new means as the internet and the social media, which permit two-way communication [16], [17], [18].
Delivery refers to the post-election implementation of the party's pre-election promises [12], [8]. In today's politics, where party identification has been weakened and ideological distinctions between the parties are blurred, more and more people vote on the basis of administrative rather than ideological criteria [19], [20], [21]: that is, they vote for the party they think is best able to govern the country. Delivery is thus an increasingly important factor in the voters’ assessment of a party in power, and seems to contribute the most to a party's long-term electoral success [22].

Figure 1. Steps in a party's implementation of a political marketing strategy

![Diagram of the steps in a party's implementation of a political marketing strategy]

These four steps in the implementation of a party's integrated marketing strategy are presented in schematic form in Figure 1. It is a circular process, since the relationship between party and electorate is not completed with the delivery of the product promised by the party before the election. On the contrary, it has to be continuous, integrated, evolving and constantly renewed in the light of what is known as 'permanent campaigning' [1], [14].

3. Methodology

The analysis of PASOK's political marketing strategy in the period 2009-2011 that follows is based on the four steps outlined above. It covers the choices of the party and its leader, George Papandreou, both before and after the October 2009 general elections, from the campaign period through its time in office to its fall from power. This follows a brief presentation of the Greek political marketplace in the preceding
period, for a better understanding of the context in which this strategy was
developed and of voter behaviour.

The descriptive case study method was used in the collection and processing of
the research data. This qualitative method was selected because it permits in-depth
insights into complex phenomena embedded in their context through purposeful
sampling and the collection of data from secondary sources of evidence [23], [24]. In
the particular case, it was appropriate for studying the policy followed by PASOK in
Greece between 2009 and 2011. Data collection involved sifting through a variety of
secondary sources, which further strengthens the reliability and validity of the
research [25]. These sources include PASOK’s 2009 election platform, national and
international press material, public statements and speeches by senior officials and
politicians, published public opinion polls and party programmes. Due to its
importance, the economic crisis in Greece and the choices of the Greek government
to address it attracted much attention from the domestic and foreign media, so that
there is a wealth of reports, analyses and alternative approaches. Some of these are
conflicting, unconfirmed, even unsubstantiated. No such information was used in
this paper; the data presented are based on published material and reports that are
on the whole commonly accepted and were extensively presented in the media and
by current events commentators.

4. The Greek political marketplace 1974-2009

After a seven-year dictatorship that ended in 1974, a democratic regime was
restored in Greece in the form of a presidential republic [26]. The majority system
applied – with some variations – in the years that followed enabled the party that
won the election to form a one-party government. The result was that for the next
thirty-five years two major parties dominated the Greek political scene: the centre-
right New Democratia (ND) and the socialist, centre-left Panellinio Socialistiko
Kinima (PASOK). These parties alternated in power (Table 1), usually winning more
than 80% of the total vote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Governing party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974-1981</td>
<td>ND government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1989</td>
<td>PASOK government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-1990</td>
<td>Two coalition governments led by ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1993</td>
<td>ND government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-2004</td>
<td>PASOK government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2009</td>
<td>ND government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the early years, the differences between the two parties were basically
ideological. However, a series of political and social changes both in Greece and
abroad changed the face of the parties. The most important of these were the
predominance of the free-market philosophy after the collapse of ‘Existing
Socialism’, the country’s accession to the then EEC (later EU) in 1981 and its entry
in 2001 into the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), and changes in Greek society itself [28], [29].

The result of these changes was that the two major parties gradually shifted towards the broader middle ground [21], [30], the ideological differences between them lessened, and they became ‘loose ideological formations’ [31] whose aim was election-winning by attracting as many voters as possible from different ideological, political and social groupings.

Gradually, the dilemma facing the voters at each election became mainly administrative rather than ideological [21]: which of the two major parties had the leader best suited to be Prime Minister, which had the more capable cadres, and which offered the best programme for the country.

Significant changes also occurred during this period in the country’s media landscape. Private broadcasting appeared towards the end of the 1980s, followed in the new millennium by new, internet-based media [32]. For the parties, these changes multiplied the possibilities of promotion and communication with the electorate.

These developments led both ND and PASOK to adopt political marketing techniques. The first examples appeared in their electoral campaigns, especially in party promotion [33]. Later, however, they spread to the strategy level with the extensive use of marketing research and the analogous moulding of the political product offered, both before and between elections.

Although both parties followed strategies that often included elements of populism, they cannot properly be described as populist parties, since they dominated the political scene in Greece for nearly four decades. According to Winder and Tenscher [34], populist parties aim at achieving electoral success using political marketing techniques, but are not concerned with developing long-lasting relationships with the electorate or long-term sustainability; they are ideologically flexible and have no clear, long-established profile or position within the political market.

The political choices and decisions of both parties of power were shaped primarily in response to the short-term needs and wants of the voters, and rarely in consideration of the long-term well-being of the country [28]. For years, different social groups and powerful minorities with political pull exercised strong pressure on each successive government – often with the support of the opposition – in order to look after their interests [35]. Presumably fearing the political cost, the government usually met most of their demands. The parties also developed patronage relationships with the voters [36], [37], many of whom were guided mainly by self-interest when casting their votes. The whole system operated within a prevailing atmosphere of assumptions and accusations, often unfounded, of interlocking interests between the two parties and high-ranking members and large corporate groups or media moguls [38] while the unwieldy bureaucracy made matters worse [39].
This state of affairs brought an artificial prosperity to a large segment of the population, but the country’s economic indicators were worsening: rising national debt and deficits and decreasing competitiveness, to name just a few. The governments avoided tackling the problem directly, at best taking measures involving little political cost, which were often attacked by both the social groups affected by them and the opposition parties.

5. The general election of 2009 and the strategy adopted by PASOK

The outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008 found the Greek economy defenceless. The ND government led by Kostas Karamanlis had lost its dynamic force. It had been elected four years earlier on a pledge to 'rebuild the country', a promise it failed to keep. On the contrary, it continued the policy of giving in to the demands of different social groups and inflating the national debt. This, however, was no longer possible. With economic crisis on the country's very doorstep, unprecedented austerity measures had to be taken without delay. The government, however, with its slender parliamentary majority, did not take the necessary measures. It tried at first to conceal the real state of affairs, but in the end was forced to call an early election for October 4, 2009.

In the run-up to the election Karamanlis admitted that the Greek economy was in difficulties, but continued to conceal the true picture and the real extent of the problem. In a change from the usual practice of a Greek party seeking re-election, however, he – initially at least – made no lavish promises. He began to use words like belt-tightening to warn people that a financial crisis was coming and would have to be dealt with, but without actually spelling it out.

PASOK, then the official opposition and the pollsters' odds-on favourite to win the election, opted for a different strategy. Papandreou claimed that the austerity measures would plunge the country into recession, and his party presented a campaign programme promoting growth and job creation through increased public expenditure, protection of the workforce and targeted reforms. Table 2 shows the party's basic commitments regarding employment and the economy, based on its campaign platform. The same programme included pledges relating to green development, improvements to the welfare state, investments in education and culture, public services and foreign policy.

Table 2. PASOK's campaign pledges for 'economic recovery'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise salaries and pensions by more than the inflation rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change the tax system to make it an instrument of redistribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring prices down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award targeted income supplements to vulnerable groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection for consumers from abusive bank practices and overcharging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen SMEs and channel liquidity into the real economy, among other things by reducing contributions, granting loans and freezing loan obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures to support the job market and the unemployed including</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. PASOK’s campaign pledges for its first 100 days in government [41]

1. Income support, with
   - increases over the inflation rate,
   - a special solidarity benefit,
   - protection measures for borrowers,
   - a one-year freeze on utilities rates.
2. Support for the economy, with
   - an increase in public investment spending to 4% of GDP from the first budget and acceleration of NSRF,
   - an injection of liquidity into the market,
   - modification of the TEIRESIAS system (affects businesses with outstanding debts),
   - amelioration of the business climate.
3. Measures to protect and boost employment and support for the jobless.
4. Housecleaning of public finances by tackling wastefulness and boosting tax revenues.

The PASOK’s political product was offering was designed to attract the maximum number of votes and was based essentially on the results of its marketing research. It covered the demands and desires of voters from different social groups, most of whom wanted to hang on to their privileges and continue enjoying their illusory prosperity, regardless of how this was to be achieved and indifferent to the country’s long-term prospects. Given the possibilities of the Greek economy, this programme was essentially unachievable. When Papandreou was asked where he was going to find the money to implement this programme, he replied with a vague ‘the money’s there’, a phrase that became the party’s watchword and is forever associated with his name.

PASOK used every available traditional and modern means of communication to promote its product: mass meetings, advertisements, media interviews and PR exercises, with extensive exploitation of on-line communication. The main focus was on their economic agenda, since the polls showed that this was what the voters were chiefly concerned about.

Their reward was 43.92% of the vote, more than ten percentage points ahead of second-place ND, and 160 of the 300 seats in Parliament (Table 4), an outcome that
allowed PASOK to form a single-party government with a solid parliamentary majority.

Table 4. Percentage of votes per party and number of Parliamentary seats won in the 2009 general election [42]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political party</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
<th>Parliamentary seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PASOK</td>
<td>43.92%</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td>33.47%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KKE</td>
<td>7.54%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAOS</td>
<td>5.63%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYRIZA</td>
<td>4.60%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>4.84%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. The government’s delivery and the results of PASOK’s strategy

The new government at first attempted to show that it was implementing its campaign programme, for example by granting a small benefit to vulnerable social groups. From the outset, however, it was obvious that the government could not deliver on its pledges. Senior cabinet ministers began to reveal the real state of the economy: for example, two weeks after the election the Finance Minister himself reported that the deficit was enormous and that radical measures needed to be taken without delay [43]. Roughly two months later, the Labour Minister publicly admitted that the coffers were empty and that it might not be possible to pay that month’s unemployment benefit [44].

As the then head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Dominique Strauss-Kahn later revealed [45] [46], Papandreou had engaged in secret talks with him and other IMF and EU officials right after forming his government, seeking a solution to the situation. But, held back by his pre-election promises, he hesitated to take action immediately. The result was that the economic situation continued to deteriorate. In the end, Papandreou was forced to admit in public statements that the economy was in a desperate condition and that austerity measures were unavoidable. Needing a good reason for failing to keep his pre-election promises, he blamed the previous government for the whole state of affairs, alleging that it had deliberately presented a misleading picture of the economy based on false data. He claimed that the previous government had deceived him and that he had had no idea of the actual condition of the Greek economy in advance of the elections. Within months, however, this claim was refuted by high-ranking EU officials and representatives of other international organisations who affirmed that he had been made aware of the situation long before polling day.

The revelation of the true state of the economy brought all serious economic activity to a halt and sent the spreads soaring [46], [47]. The suffocation of the Greek economy in the end led to the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which placed the country under the joint control of the IMF, the EU and the European Central Bank, known as the ‘troika’ [49]. Papandreou presented this development as a personal success but, as Strauss-Kahn later admitted, the
agreement had many weaknesses [46]. The national debt would soar, possibly past the point where it could ever be repaid, while deep recession was inevitable.

In general, the Papandreou administration continued to employ the same tactic, presenting the developments that were plunging the Greek economy deeper into crisis as successes. Moreover, when it had to implement the agreed policies, the government concealed the unpopular measures it was about to take and denied any rumours of further measures, obviously fearing the political and social cost. When it did go ahead, it cast the blame entirely on the troika. It simply slashed salaries and pensions and increased taxes, making no real attempt to tackle the structural problems that ought to have been its priority. Meanwhile, it kept claiming to be a tough negotiator in talks with the troika, leaking positive reports about the country and the population to the press, which were rapidly contradicted by events. It also presented itself as constantly saving the nation from disaster when in reality the situation was steadily deteriorating for state and population alike [50]. In contrast to his pre-electoral claims, the crisis deepened, GDP and salaries slumped, taxes and unemployment soared, the welfare state shrank, and many businesses closed [51] [52], [53], [54]. As one violent public protest meeting succeeded another, there were injuries and even deaths [55], [56], [57], foreign media reports spoke disparagingly of Greece and the Greeks. The very stability of the country was threatened, and there was a real risk that it might be forced out of the euro zone [58].

The Papandreou government held on to power for about eighteen months after the arrival of the troika, completing roughly two years in office. Papandreou himself resigned under strong pressure from the party, the public, and his European partners [59]. From beginning to end of this administration opinion polls recorded growing public dissatisfaction with the government’s performance. The results of two such polls carried out shortly before the fall of the Papandreou government are indicative of the climate. In the first [60], just 7% of respondents said that they were satisfied with the way the government was operating, while 92% were unsatisfied. In the other [61], 80% were of the opinion that the Papandreou government could not lift the country out of the economic and social crisis, 82% that the government had not done enough to turn the economy around and make new austerity measures unnecessary, and 79% that the sacrifices demanded of the people over the previous 12 months had been in vain. The source of this discontent was poor delivery, poor handling of the crisis, and generalised anger against Papandreou and his government, since most citizens felt they had been duped.

After a short-lived attempt at coalition government, new double general elections were held in May and June 2012. The voters relegated PASOK and its new leader to third place, giving them respectively 13.18% and 41 seats and 12.28% and 33 seats, a drop of more than 30 percentage points [62]. The party entered a period of deep crisis. In the January 2015 general election the once mighty PASOK barely scraped into Parliament, winning just 4.68% of the vote and taking only 13 seats. Papandreou contested the election at the head of his own new party, which, winning just 2.47% of the vote, failed to attract enough - under current electoral rules -
support to give it a seat in Parliament [63]. PASOK’s electoral performance in the period 2009-2015 is charted in Diagram 1. The party’s dramatic loss of support, in terms of both votes cast and seats won, is all too apparent.

7. Discussion of PASOK’s strategy and implications for theory

In the short term, the strategy PASOK followed in the 2009 general election campaign enabled it to win the election by a sizeable margin and form a strong government, but in the long run left it a minor opposition party in deep crisis. This case demonstrates the potential effectiveness of a marketing strategy based on marketing research, a political product tailored to the needs and wishes of the voters, and appropriate promotion methods. It also shows that a party that deliberately promises policies which it knows it will not be able to deliver is trapped by its campaign pledges and doomed to decline.

The case of PASOK also illustrates the likely consequences of making non-feasible populist promises at a time of looming or full-blown crisis. Extravagant promises have been a feature of almost all major party election campaigns in Greece for many years [28]. Voters have always known that only part of those promises could be implemented. But no previous government was under such pressure to adopt unpopular measures, and usually they would put off taking such decisions for fear of the political cost. The PASOK government, however, was rapidly forced to take harsh austerity measures, and the distance between the party’s campaign promises and the policy it was obliged to follow was all too apparent.

In political marketing delivery is extremely important, because it is what creates long-lasting relationships between the party and the voters [4], [12], [2]. However, determining a government’s delivery is a complicated issue. Comparing what a party promised in its election campaign to what it actually did once in office is overly simplistic. A government is constantly having to respond to urgent, unforeseen situations, which upsets its policy priorities. A party in power has to alternate between the roles of leader and follower, sometimes steering the people towards the
right decisions and sometimes following their demands and wishes [6]. Often, an ineffective public administration means that a government lacks the human resources to implement its policies [8]. Also, governments have to take difficult and frequently anti-popular decisions, which erodes their support, especially in periods of economic crisis.

How the media present government delivery is another factor that affects voter perception. Many messages projected are controlled by the parties, but they often have no control over the messages conveyed by the media. Media criticism is often harsh, focusing on the negative sides of a government’s performance and emphasising its failures and omissions. The result is that actual delivery is not fairly presented [22].

On the other hand, in many cases the voters do not perceive delivery as the government would like them to or as it actually is. Their judgement is often based on personal criteria, and many of them lack the knowledge to judge the long-term effects of a governmental policy. They have become more cynical as regards the past and are often overly and unfairly critical. Often, too, they expect the government to deliver immediate solutions to problems that affect them, without allowing it time to deal with them [8].

Figure 2. The triangle of delivery

Figure 2 attempts to illustrate the complexity surrounding delivery. The factors conditioning delivery are grouped into three categories, forming a ‘triangle of delivery’. These categories relate to: (a) actual delivery, i.e. which pre-election promises the party has actually implemented, how it handles crises and unforeseen situations, and how it mobilises and is supported by the machinery of state; (b) projected delivery, i.e. how party and media present this delivery through controlled
and uncontrolled messages or how they criticise government policy; and (c) perceived delivery, i.e. how citizens and voters see the party’s delivery based on their personal experiences, needs and expectations or involvement in politics.

In PASOK’s case, however, assessment of its delivery is much simpler, because the difference between its campaign pledges and their implementation is so great. The party made extravagant promises before the election, knowing that it would not be able to fulfil them, not least because of the developing financial crisis. But the voter expectations it created then followed it throughout its two years in office. The outcome was delays and postponements in the taking of decisions at a critical juncture for the country, and generally a poor delivery that led to voter disenchantment, the party’s loss of most of its support and its eventual decline. It also had significant negative consequences for the country and the people. This confirms Lees-Marshment’s position [8] that, in developing their policies, political parties - and especially those that may be voted into office - should consider what is feasible and not just what the voters want.

There is, however, one last feature of PASOK’s case that should not be ignored. It was voted into office shortly before the outbreak of an unprecedented economic crisis for the country. Dealing with this crisis required a strong government capable of taking deeply anti-popular measures that would almost certainly provoke strong reactions from a population unprepared for such an adjustment. This raises a number of questions that should be of keen interest to both theorists and practitioners of political marketing:

1. What is the outcome for a party or a government that speaks frankly to the people, before or after an election, when the electorate does not realise how severe the country’s problems are and acts only in the light of personal interest?
2. To what extent can a government impose unpopular decisions that provoke strong public reaction, lead to public unrest, and threaten the country’s democratic system?
3. What campaign positions should a potential governing party adopt in the face of a looming crisis, when the good of the country requires a strong majority government that can impose harsh measures and demands sacrifices that people are unwilling to make?

If PASOK had adopted a strategy of greater frankness both before and after the election, it would most probably have been unable either to form a one-party government or to take such harsh measures. In that case the country’s future would have been rather different, but not necessarily better. Clearly while the findings of this case study are of little help in answering those questions, they do illustrate the complexity of the decisions that have to be addressed by those who take a practical or theoretical interest in political marketing.

8. Conclusions and suggestions for further research
This case study demonstrated the negative outcomes, for itself, the country and the citizens, that can result when a party of government makes immoderate pre-election promises. It is a strategy that can win the party the election. But when it comes to power it finds itself limited by those same promises, which hinder it from taking appropriate action when required because it has to explain to the electorate why it is not keeping them. Often, these explanations fail to satisfy the voters, who, moreover, precisely because of those excessive promises, have great expectations of the government and judge its delivery even more severely. As the case of PASOK has shown, these problems are aggravated when the country is facing a very serious economic crisis, which requires the government to take immediate, drastic action. A party, then, especially a major party that may assume the reins of government, ought to be relatively sparing with its pre-election pledges and not promise things that it cannot deliver. Such a strategy is preferable, even if it costs the party some of the votes it would otherwise have attracted. Nonetheless, even if it has adopted a more moderate strategy in its election campaign, when a party of government is elected during a period of crisis the austerity measures it is required to take may well lose it some of its support. This loss would probably be even greater if the people were unprepared for the consequences of such a policy, had voted out of self-interest and not on the basis of the good of the country, or the government was bombarded with criticism by the opposition and the media. There are, in other words, a series of questions that have to be taken into consideration when a major party is debating its strategy in a period of crisis. The case of PASOK sheds light on only some of these. The experience of other major parties in other countries that have faced similar problems could be of real value in enriching collective knowledge of this aspect of political marketing.

References


