

Voters didn't like the product that politics was selling

November 10, 2016 by **Jack Modzelewski**, FleishmanHillard, [Be the first to comment](#)

If politics as usual is a product, voters just made the decision to change brands.



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My takeaway from this one-of-a-kind U.S. election has nothing to do with how wrong the pollsters had it or the relative effectiveness of one campaign's strategies and tactics over another's. There will be plenty of post-mortems about the five or seven things the campaigns did right or wrong.

My takeaway is that this year, more than others, I heard politics described often as a "product"—not unlike information, entertainment, energy, and other products we consume. Semantic purists will argue that *politics* is a profession, while also a *science*, as in the political science studied in universities. A dictionary defines politics as "activities that relate to influencing the actions and policies of a government or getting and keeping power in a government."

To me, politics is more than a profession or product; it's a business. Maybe that's because I grew up in Chicago, with all of its rough and tumble—not to mention, unsavory and sometimes tragicomical—politics. Keeping political power in Chicago has been described as a "family business," since political offices and government jobs have been passed along to family members, generation after generation. And Chicago is hardly alone in that distinction.

So if you acknowledge that politics can be viewed as a business, then political marketing is what gets people to buy—buy either the candidates themselves, the campaigns' promises, or just the dream that things may get better someday if I vote for this person or party versus that one. All the stuff of modern political marketing and communications is fascinating book material, but that's not what I want to say in this day-after reflection.

When it all gets analyzed, this presidential election may not have been decided by the character strengths and flaws of the major candidates, their leadership traits, histories, themed messages and program ideas, or even their popularity or lack thereof. Certainly they were all factors in voters' decisions.

I think a bigger conclusion will be that voters—once again—didn't like the product that politics is delivering, and that product is government itself. Millions of voters certainly don't like the price we are paying and the value we are receiving for federal or local government services. And after all, for most people, government taxes and service fees are the biggest item in their annual household budgets. When something is the biggest fixed annual cost you and your family must pay, you are bound to periodically demand your money's worth. We not only pay dearly for services performed by government, but we also pay for all the government mistakes of the past and the enormous debt service on past and future borrowing.

Elections are the rare time, in a marketing sense, where people get to make a choice among competitive political options. This time, one presidential candidate, rightly or wrongly but always shrilly, told voters they were getting screwed by their own government, and that he would find ways to put a stop to it. He now owns that promise, as past presidents have owned their promises to fix things.

Of course, there is also that recurring theme of inevitable change: that voters frustrated by so many things in America want change at least every eight years, occasionally sooner. When big segments of the population are as angry and as frustrated as they appear to have been this year, they vote for change, especially economic change. Change they hope to feel in their wallets and checking accounts someday, as illusory a prospect as that may seem.

Whether all the post-election analysis bears it out, I believe that many people in this election voted, at the national level at least, for a better return on their future tax payments in the way of personal, household economic benefit. Whether that will happen, who knows?

The only curious point may be why more incumbents in Congress weren't booted out by the voters? Without hard evidence, my conjecture is that this presidential election—with all its reality-show-like drama—superseded many local electorate interests. Also, members of Congress have distinct advantages for re-election and remaining in power.

And perhaps another reason is that one of the two major candidates was tagged as a proxy for sluggish economic performance for the country, and one was viewed as the fresh antidote. People swallow antidotes, however bitter, if they think it will restore good health.

I serve on the board of the Better Government Association, and we believe that people genuinely want better government for many reasons, but especially because they are paying dearly for it and deserve better. It's now up to the elected and re-elected officials, from the president on down, to deliver on their promises.

Jack Modzelewski is global president of business development and partnerships at FleishmanHillard.

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