
Hobson's choice on Tuesday

By Niraj Dawar

One of the things that marketing does really well is to make small differences loom large. To believe the ads, the difference between Tide and Sunlight laundry detergents, between Coke and Pepsi colas, Nike and Adidas athletic shoes, and Shell and Exxon gasoline, are so vast and so consequential that you should make your decisions to buy one or the other very very carefully.

But common sense tells us that the differences are not so large, and the choices not so consequential that we cannot switch between them, or even choose not to choose at all.

Could it be that the perception of extreme polarization of American politics, the perceived gulf between the right and the left, the supposedly irreconcilable differences between the red states and blue states, are the result of the magnification of small differences – the result of marketing by the two parties to frame the debate as a choice, and maximize the perceived differences between a diet Coke and a diet Pepsi, between a mocha latte and a mocha cappuccino?

Perhaps the choice between alternatives that are almost indistinguishable is the result of a two-party system in which both parties must appeal to a broad center. That gives us the spectacle of the two parties trying to make a very big deal of differences that are otherwise trivial (they are both less filling; they both attempt to taste great). Each campaign has spent one billion dollars trying to stir up storms in teacups.

A multi-party system would be messier in that it would bring out more and different positions. But under the present system, those positions are aired and dispensed with early, in the primaries, when few people are watching: the Ron Pauls and Dennis Kucinichs have their say at the fringes, and exit left or right before even making it to the main stage. So ideas like the ones in Ron Paul's (2012) and Dennis Kucinich's (2008) primary ads (as in the examples below) are sidelined before they ever get to be heard by the

mainstream.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/hobsons-choice-tuesday>

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