Branding and liberal autonomy
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5 Why Branding is Special in Structurally Violating Liberal Autonomy

We arrive now at the fourth step of the argumentative design that was mapped out in chapter 1. I noted there that if autonomy is violated in a host of organizational practices besides marketing, it would seem that I have been developing an argument not so much against branding, but against complex societies. Hence, the scope of my normative analysis must be expanded. Given the considerable work that went into establishing whether branding violates liberal autonomy, I confine myself to analyzing two subsequent organizational practices that are intuitively most likely to violate autonomy.1 My argument will be that even on the most sympathetic reading of the evidence for autonomy violation in religion and political promotion, these violations are not irreconcilable with liberal autonomy. If so, then branding would seem to be special in violating liberal autonomy.

In section 1, I turn to religion and argue that although stable ecological features may exert pressure in the direction of autonomy violation, people are able to give proper consent to religious practices. Hence, at least the consent threshold is not transgressed. In section 2, I consider political promotion, which turns out to transgress all practical thresholds, but to do so – I will argue – for a good reason (from the perspective of liberal legitimacy).

1 Liberal Autonomy and Religion

It can be argued that the assessment of autonomy violation in branding applies to religion as well because of structural similarities between branding and religion. Specifically, recent research carried out by Ron Shachar and colleagues suggests that religiosity and brand reliance may function as substitutes.2 To begin with, it turns out that the number of brand stores (for brands such as Apple and The Gap) negatively correlates with the number of congregations and religious attendants both on the level of states (within the US) and on the level of counties within California, Texas and New York.3 This is suggestive evidence for some type of similarity in appeal, since alternative explanations in terms of income, education and urbanization were controlled for. Subsequent psychological experiments corroborated this interpretation. When subjects (with diverse religious backgrounds) were asked to write about a personal religious experience they thereafter were less likely to choose national brands over equivalent products than a control group that was not primed with religion. Crucially,
this effect occurred only for products that can be used to signal something to others (e.g., watches, sunglasses and soccer socks) and not for purely functional products (e.g., bread, batteries and medicine). In a follow-up experiment it was found that self-ratings of chronic religiosity were negatively correlated with the choice for national brands (for products that have signaling functions). If all of this is correct, then it can be argued that religion might appeal to the same signaling motivations as branding, and that it will therefore violate liberal autonomy for similar structural reasons.

On the other hand, religion is also different from branding in that it is not a devise to enhance profits. Moreover, religious doctrines and rituals are constrained by tradition, from which they typically receive much of their authority. If that is true, then religious agents do not have the same elbow room and incentives as brand managers for appealing to stable motivations. As a result, there is no similar pressure to undermine autonomy. Admittedly, this does not rule out that religious traditions are the result of some type of competition. In fact, naturalistic accounts of religion would predict that the types of religion that were most effective in appealing to cognitive and motivational structures have survived. Still, this does not entail that the same pressure for autonomy violation existed for religions as it exists today for brands. If religions are typically constrained by tradition, then the form of their appeal to the affiliation module was probably shaped way back in human history when people may not have had many competing affiliations. If so, then there was no pressure on traditional religions to develop autonomy violating techniques.

What I need then in order to assess structural autonomy violation in religion is a naturalistic account of religion that takes these different ecological conditions into account. That is, if we know the psychological and ecological constraints under which traditional religions emerged, then we can assess whether these have generated pressure to undermine autonomy. This is what I do in section 1.1, where I argue that this may indeed be the case. However, in section 1.2 I go on to argue that – precisely because of the role of tradition in religion that sets it apart from branding – the practical threshold of liberal autonomy violation is not transgressed, at least with regard to consent.

### 1.1 Structural Autonomy Violation in Religion

Since the explanation of religion is the main focus of research of naturalistic accounts of culture there is no shortage of theories in this regard. Some of these theories consider psychological conditions for religion independent of ecological constraints. Among these theories, most aim to explain the structure of belief in supernatural beings. Part of the emerging consensus in this regard is that the mindreading module that we use to interpret behavior of others is calibrated in an oversensitive way, so that it tends to interpret nonhuman phenomena (such as the blowing of the wind) as caused by some agent. Another part of the explanation is that there is an attention optimum for religious beliefs, such that they should be sufficiently odd to arouse attention but not so counterintuitive that they cannot be related to other thoughts (and hence cannot be remembered). Whatever the details of these explanations, they are not relevant for my purpose, because these properties of beliefs do not violate minimal autonomy.

Other naturalistic theories of religion take ecological constraints into account. One type of explanation points out that the environment in which most major religions emerged was ridden with distress caused by death, deception, disease, pain, loneliness and injustice. Given some minimal assumptions about a motivation to assuage fear, religions may be expected to tap into this motivation under these ecological conditions. The main support for
this claim – besides the anthropological record on fear inducement in religion – comes from psychological experiments, carried out by Scott Atran and Aran Norenzayan. These experiments demonstrate that American subjects report stronger belief in God and supernatural intervention after they have been exposed to a story about a terrible accident, just as a group of Maya subjects was more likely to believe in the efficacy of prayer after being exposed to death primes.9 Granted, many religious rituals actually induce intense fears in practitioners, but, as Atran and Norenzayan note, this fear is always assuaged in the end.10 It is not clear though by which precise psychological process fear is assuaged, while the experiment has also not been replicated for other religions. Still, this line of research offers suggestive evidence for thinking that religions tap into a fear-reduction desire. If so, then the presentation of religious symbols and doctrines to people who experience negative affect might conceivably induce introjection.

A second type of ecological constraint that is used to explain religion is the problem of cooperation. That is, in order to extract resources from the environment as well as for the purpose of protection against threats, it is beneficial to cooperate not only with those to whom one is genetically related (i.e. inclusive fitness) and those who reciprocate, but also with people in communities whose size makes it impossible to keep track of reciprocal relations due to limited human memory capacity.11 The standard problem in explaining such cooperative behavior is that sacrificing self-interest for the collective is an evolutionary dead-end if there are free riders in the group who benefit from such efforts without contributing (the energy thus saved by the free riders translates into a host of minor benefits that increase their reproductive success). In response to this problem, some have proposed that humans signal their trustworthiness by making costly commitments to the group and that such sacrifices occur in the context of religion.

There is some empirical evidence that supports this view. First of all, the anthropological record shows that sacrifice is endemic in religion.12 Moreover, a study which compared around 200 religious and secular communes from the 19th century found that religious communities were four times as likely to outlast secular ones, while subsequent analysis demonstrated that the costs imposed by religious communities positively correlated with their lifespan. Another study found that men from a Kibbutz acted more altruistically in a resource game than secular males and females as well as female Kibbutz members, which was explained by the fact that only men were required to pray three times a day.13 However, costly commitments in themselves do not seem to guarantee cooperation from a member (since they could be made because of opportunistic calculations). It still needs to be explained then why and under which conditions costly commitments are a reliable signal of cooperative intent.

One way to account for the reliability of commitment signals, proposed by Candace Alcorta and Richard Sosis, is to point to the deep emotions involved in rituals, which are difficult to control by the executive system in the brain.14 That is, primary emotions are rooted deep in the brain where they took root early in mammalian evolution to deal with threats and opportunities. As such, they function relatively independently from higher-order mental capacities that developed much later in the neocortex. Hence, the higher-order intention to free ride would be unable to make the organism fake authentic happiness, sadness or fear.15 Of course, not any display of deep emotion will do in convincing a person that her group members will cooperate. They must be sensible displays of commitment to the group. Alcorta and Sosis point to two kinds of displays as most credible. One is the display of group identification by means of positive emotions, while another is the display of fear for justice-type gods who punish those who fail to cooperate. Positive emotions are aroused by
the dopaminergic reward system and motivate approach related behavior. When this system is activated – in rituals that arouse positive emotions – dopamine is released and a reward is experienced. If the system is repeatedly activated in relation to symbols that mark the group, Alcorta and Sosis argue, then incentive learning occurs via some associational network, and the symbol that stands for the group is invested with positive valence. A similar process of association – with even more lasting effects – occurs when justice Gods are associated with negative emotions processed in the amygdala, which is particularly common in dramatic rites of passage. On this account, part of the function of rituals is to create the conditions – with the help of chanting, dance and music – under which implicit attitudes are evoked.

A limitation of this approach is that all of these mechanisms serve to assess the cooperative intent of other people. As such, they can only explain cooperation in small communities and not for larger social settings in which individuals are no longer able to assess the cooperative intentions of other members. In response, Joseph Bulbulia has proposed that for the purpose of cooperation people not only assess other members for their intentions but also environmental signals that are effective in triggering cooperative behavior. Such signals must indicate three things for them to effectively reduce uncertainty of cooperation. They must signal that others are motivated to cooperate, they must signal that these motivations are synchronized and they must do both of these things reliably.

The main idea behind Bulbulia’s proposal is that the reliability of environmental signals is secured by their automaticity. He notes a number of priming studies in which pro-social behavior is triggered automatically by cues in the environment. If there are such processes, then the corresponding cues may be taken as reliable signals of future cooperative behavior (of whoever the members of the community may be), since the motivations that are triggered are not contingent on possible Machiavellian machinations of system 2 processes. The evidence for such functioning of environmental signals is not yet very strong however. Bulbulia mentions one neuroimaging study which shows that when a group of Danish Christians were praying, their dorsal stratum was activated, which is associated with delayed reward. Thus, ritual prayer may indicate that anti-social goals – that may interfere with cooperation – are suppressed and hence signal to a person that future cooperation is likely.

With regard to synchronization, Bulbulia notes a study which shows that synchronous movement (passing a cup) and singing is associated with decreased rates of defection in a subsequent game. Although this argument is largely speculative, I will opt for a sympathetic reading and accept that there is a suggestive case for thinking that both in small groups and larger collectives religious music, bodily practice and prayer may function as environmental signals of cooperative goal sharing. If this is true, then such practices would – together with possible occurrences of introjection in religious fear-responses – violate minimal self-control and authenticity conditions for structural reasons.

1.2 Practical Thresholds of Autonomy Violation in Religion
There is unequivocal evidence on the central and lasting impact of religious practices on the lives of converts. Since it can therefore not be seriously doubted that religious persuasion transgresses the centrality threshold I will focus here on the practical thresholds for retrievable intentions and consent.

Retrievable Intentions to Violate Autonomy in Religion
There are two theoretical reasons for thinking that the opportunity of religious specialists to manipulate participants is constrained. First of all, if religious rituals consist in part of emo-
tional displays of cooperative intent, then cynical religious officials would have a hard time deliberatively manipulating their subjects without believing in the creed themselves as well (at least to some extent). This is of course not a safeguard against manipulation, but the argument suggests that the pool of manipulators will be restricted to those who actually believe in the religion.22 Such manipulation, in which religious officials use free slots in rituals to deliberatively change behavior and attitudes is by itself of course still unacceptable if it involves the structural activation of unconscious pathways.23 Secondly, next to constraints upon the formation of manipulative intentions there are constrains upon the ability to carry out such intentions. Put simply, performing a religious ritual is not doing whatever the official feels like doing at that moment. Religious rituals are typically rigid, repetitive and highly scripted, while ritual practitioners tend to be obsessed with strictly carrying out rituals, thus limiting the discretionary space in which religious specialists can act upon possible manipulative intentions.24

One objection to this argument is that new religious groups are not constrained by ties of tradition, so that their leaders have the discretionary wiggle room to intentionally implement autonomy violating practices. In response, a pragmatic argument can be constructed for granting small groups some leeway. For what sociological studies demonstrate is that small cult groups have a chronic shortage of money due to their time-intensive and demanding group activities (once you are in, you have to take on lots of commitments and have less time to work and earn money). Hence, members are forced to go out and collect money for the group, which brings them into contact with different opinions and leads to high defection rates. So although the leader of a new cult may wield extensive power in designing ritual practices, financial constraints keeps expansion of such groups in check.25

Consent in Religious Conversion
With regard to consent in religion what we need to know is whether potential converts are in a position to properly assess what they are to consent to. For one, because religions are typically constrained by tradition and therefore highly stable, it would seem that potential converts can be held responsible for informing themselves about the ritual practices of the religion they want to join. If such practices are realistically knowable, then the crucial question is whether conversion processes are structured in such a way that seekers can take steps to acquire this information before conversion. For the purpose of such an assessment I will work with the taxonomy of conversions that has been developed by John Lofland and Norman Skonovd.26 They identify six conversion motifs, of which one half is classified as gradual conversion and the other half as quick conversion. The gradual intellectual, affectional and experimental conversion motifs royally grant participants the opportunity to inform themselves about the religion as they move through various stages. This is not necessarily the case for mystical, revivalist and coercive conversion motifs, which entail very short conversion periods in which the to-be-converted are subjected to various mental and physical pressures.

There are good reasons not to be all that worried about the latter cases though. First, the most serious impediment to proper consent is so called sudden or instant conversion. However, although early twentieth century conversion research was obsessed with such conversions, it has systematically failed to come up with hard evidence.27 Notions of instant mass conversion are even more problematic, as there are no reliable eyewitness accounts of any such events. Its assumed role in the rapid spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire for example was the result of sloppy calculations.28 Secondly, even quick conversions (which need not be instant conversions) are a relatively rare phenomenon. A recent study based on
the Lofland and Skonovd model underscores this point: of 70 cases of conversion to Islam in the United Kingdom, only 10 cases could be classified as Mystical, 3 as Coercive and none as revivalist (by contrast, intellectual motifs were reported by 60 converts, experimental by 42 and affectional by 46). Furthermore, statistical analysis of self-reported experiences of Christians shows that these map rather nicely on a model of gradual conversion developed by Lewis Rambo, in which the convert goes through no less than seven stages. Thirdly, participatory research by Rodney Stark and Norman Lofland in small religious groups demonstrates that conversion typically occurs by establishing personal contacts (which facilitates a gradual conversion process).

In sum, religion has a central impact on believers and its officials may have some room for pursuing manipulative intentions. But when it comes to consent, religions do not transgress the minimal practical threshold because they are stable and because conversion is typically gradual.

The central argument of this section has been that religion is different from branding when it comes to autonomy violation mainly because it is constrained by tradition. In this regard it must be noted that this conclusion does not apply to the peculiar development of religion in the United States over the past century. Since the late 19th century, a number of US churches have begun to apply marketing principles for the purpose of attracting new members and retaining existing ones. This development has accelerated from the 1950s onwards because of the emergence of so called mega churches (defined as having on average over 2000 attendees) which may have as much as 43,500 members per ‘church’ (these churches are in fact huge stadiums). At present there are 1384 of such mega churches in the US alone, with huge protestant mega churches now arising in South Korea as well. As a result of massive sales of Christian popular music, movies and books, mega churches now command considerable resources – and hence marketing budgets – with an average income in 2008 of $ 6.5 million per church.

With this money religious officials are actively devising strategies to increase growth, for which they rely on the assistance of about 5000 religious consultants (as estimated by the Church Executive Magazine in 2005). These include denominational consultants (who are employed by churches and have titles such as ‘church growth consultant’ or ‘director of church development’) and nondenominational consultants (who are hired for fees on a project basis). In order to facilitate the work of such consultants, churches now regularly order demographic assessments, surveys and focus group session to keep track of changes in demand. Some of the consultants have been reported to advice their clients to add contemporary music, modern presentation styles and more drama to the sermons. Indeed, a 2008 Hartford Institute survey found that 96% of mega churches make use of electrical guitars or bass while 97% use drums and visual projection techniques. According to a 2005 Newsweek report, a new residence of the leading Willow Creek mega church is totally free of stained glass, bibles and crosses because market research found that attendees do not like such traditional features. Thus it is fair to conclude that constraints of tradition hardly count for anything in mega churches. As a result, practical consent and retrievable intention thresholds are transgressed, and that means that ‘brands of faith’ must be put in the same evaluative category as commercial brands.
2 Liberal Autonomy and Political Promotion

There are several *prima facie* reasons for thinking that the conclusions about autonomy violation in branding apply also to political promotion. First of all, political promotion is developed by the very same public relations firms and advertising agencies that develop branding campaigns. If the same people serve two competitive markets then it stands to reason that they draw on the same talents and techniques. Secondly, branding campaigns and political promotion campaigns are evaluated on the basis of the same criteria by the professionals involved. As such, Barack Obama and his team defeated the teams behind Nike and Apple to win the 2008 marketer of the year award.42 Finally, a study using the Implicit Association Test showed that voting behavior of Italian swing voters (i.e. the ones who could not tell on who they were going to vote before the election) can be better explained when implicit attitudes are taken into account besides explicit attitudes.43 Thus, the type of attitude that is most vulnerable to autonomy violation (i.e. implicit attitudes) is predictive of relevant behavior in the political context as well.

However, for my normative assessment of branding to carry over to political promotion, it must be true that stable ecological and psychological features of the type that make autonomy violation in branding structural exert pressure on political promotion as well. This is obviously not the case with regard to economic conditions because political parties do not operate in a market and because voting behavior is not public (so that it is at least not evident that voting is subject to the same three motivational constraints, which have as their main output signaling behavior). Hence, it must be investigated whether there are psychological and ecological features of the political domain that make autonomy violation in political promotion structural. This is what I do in section 2.1 where I argue that this is indeed the case. In section 2.2 I go on to establish that practical thresholds for liberal autonomy are transgressed in political promotion as well. However, I then claim that political promotion is different from branding in that there is a compelling reason for the liberal state to allow for autonomy violation in the former but not in the latter.

2.1 Structural Autonomy Violation in Political Promotion

As in the case of branding, we need to ask whether there are structural pressures for political campaigners to engage in autonomy undermining activities. And we must do so both for influence on actions and influence on mental states.

*Triggering Voting Behavior*

The feedback mechanism that I postulated for branding works differently for political promotion, since the latter is not produced in the context of a market. The amount of promotion that a political organization is able to produce is not even simply a function of the amount of votes that the organization receives. Instead, this amount is determined by the quantity of money that the organization manages to acquire from donors or (depending on national regulation) the state. All the same, there are several reasons for assuming that there will be a strong correlation between campaign funds and election results. First, funders are a subgroup of voters for a party, so that one may assume that – all things being equal – when the group of voters increases, the group of funders will increase as well. Second, funders will want their contributions to be effective, where effectiveness will be assessed in terms of the
share of votes that a party (or a proposal) gains. Thirdly, public funding of political campaigns is often contingent on the amount of votes that a party received.

If this is correct, then there are structural pressures to use persuasive techniques that directly influence voting behavior. As direct influence on behavior will count – as in the case of branding – goal activation. Recent research on the influence of locations on voting has provided evidence for precisely such an effect. Jonah Berger and colleagues for example found an influence of voting in schools on support for a ballot initiative on education spending in the state of Arizona. Even after they controlled for demographics and the political views of voters, people who voted in schools were still significantly more likely to vote in favor of higher education spending. The researchers reasoned that if this effect was due to priming, they should be able to replicate the effect in a laboratory setting. Thus they had subjects rate either images that were related to schools (such as classrooms) or images that were not related to schools (e.g. office buildings). It was found that on a subsequent task subjects who had rated school-related images were more likely to vote for the education spending initiative. What is more, two weeks before the experiment the attitudes of the participants on a range of issues – including school reform – had been obtained. Interestingly, the effect of these attitudes was the same between the two priming conditions, so that the voting effect is probably not due to previous relevant attitudes rising to the surface of consciousness. Similarly, subsequent analysis of election results suggests that voting in a church may have facilitated voting for conservative candidates as well as for a ban on same-sex marriage.

Changing Political Attitudes

With regard to mental state formation due to branding I identified two features that exert pressure in the direction of triggering associative processing over deliberative processing. One was psychological and concerned stable motivations and the other was cultural and concerned stable social norms. I will now argue that there are similarly, on a sympathetic reading of the evidence, both motivations and norms that drive political messages in the direction of autonomy violation.

If the structural nature of autonomy violation in political promotion were to be rooted in motivations, then there would have to be stable motivations that consistently pull citizens in an identifiable political direction. For political campaigners will structurally craft their messages such that these motivations are mobilized in favor of their position only if they are confident about the effects of their messages. Thus, the first crucial question is whether there are stable positions in political contests (to which motivations could relate in a stable way). In this regard, the two core dimensions equality and openness to change can be argued to capture most of the left/right (or liberal/conservative) divide. These dimension by no means go together always for everyone, but they appear to go together for most voters most of the time across societies. John Jost and colleagues propose to call these two dimensions core principles of ideology and to distinguish this core from peripheral principles. If there are indeed relatively stable ideological positions, then motivations and cognitive styles that correlate with such a position would be the type of features that can make autonomy violation structural. Interestingly, a meta-analysis by Jost and colleagues indicates that there may be two relevant features in this regard.

The first group of motivations that correlate with political orientation thus defined is epistemic in nature. To begin with, experiments in a number of countries show an association between political attitudes and the Need for Cognitive Closure scale, which measures people’s motivation to have simple, clear and certain views. That is, it is consistently found
that those who score high on the Need for Cognitive Closure scale report having more conserva-
tive attitudes. Similarly, those who have a high need to evaluate – i.e. people with the
propensity to perceive the world in good/bad terms – report having more conservative atti-
tudes. Conversely, people who score high on the Need for Cognition scale (which measures,
among other things, how much people enjoy thinking) have more liberal views. Taken
together, research in political psychology suggests that more cognitive elaboration is associ-
ated with more liberal views. If that were true, then cognitive load manipulations should
lead subjects to shift their attitudes to the right. This is indeed what has been found in a
number of experiments. In one, the propensity to blame persons for their problems (i.e. a
conservative view) was shown to increase if subjects were prevented from undertaking cogni-
tive correction efforts. Likewise, if subjects consumed alcohol, their opinions were consider-
ably more conservative. If this is correct, then conservative political campaigners may have
a structural interest in impeding cognitive elaboration efforts (although not of course on all
and every issue).

A second group of motivations is related to the motivation for group affiliation. In par-
ticular, the mechanism studied in Terror Management Theory by which threat cues trans-
late into greater allegiance to one’s in-group appears to be more conducive to conservatives.
That is, showing an existential threat prime led voters to shift their preferences from the
liberal presidential candidate John Kerry to the conservative candidate George W. Bush.
And a study that tracked a group of republican and democratic voters who were highly
exposed to the September 11 attacks for 18 months after the event showed that these voters
shifted their attitudes disproportionally to the right. If the affiliation motivation indeed
informs political preferences, then at least conservative political campaigners have an inter-
est in appealing to it. However, in doing so, they face the same constraints that brand manag-
ers have to deal with. As a result, a similar structural pressure in the direction of autonomy
violation that characterized branding may be operative in the political domain.

Besides motivations, stable social norms might also exert structural pressure in the direc-
tion of autonomy violation in the political domain. In particular, social norms might make
subliminal influence more effective than explicit influence. In an internet-based study, Joel
Weinberger and Drew Westen have recently found evidence of explicit attitude change with
regard to political candidates due to subliminal influence. In one experiment, subjects
rated an unknown political candidate more negatively on a number of seven point scales if
they had been subliminally exposed beforehand to the word RATS, but not if the word
STAR or the letters XXXX were used. In a second experiment, the effect was replicated for
the well-known Democratic politician Gray Davis, who was in 2003 – at the time of the
study – negatively evaluated by voters across the political spectrum. It was hypothesized that
since Democratic and Independent voters evaluated Bill Clinton positively, subliminally
associating him with Davis would boost their explicit rating of him. Since Republicans held
a very negative opinion of Clinton, their already negative rating of Davis was expected to
worsen still further after the subliminal association. Both predictions were validated. Thus,
subliminal influence might work both for new and familiar political figures in a real world
setting (i.e. that of the internet users that participated in the study).

However, all this may – given that subliminal attitude change violates minimal authentic-
ity and self-control – at best prove the possibility of autonomy violation. For it to be a case of
structural autonomy violation it would have to be true that subliminal messages are more
effective than explicit messages in changing voting-relevant attitudes. Hence it must be indi-
cated at least why political campaigners would have an incentive to use subliminal influence.
In this regard, I propose to say that campaigners have a reason to use subliminal messages if
they know the message to be effective if it were not for negative explicit reactions due its violation of a social norm. In the realm of at least the political arena of the United States, racist messages have proven highly effective in political campaigns. However, openly playing the race card is a dangerous strategy, because it violates strong norms of equality. This may alienate voters from issues of the campaign and it may alienate them from the politicians who authorized the campaign. In that context, subliminal (or associatively processed) racist messages may be assumed to be more effective than explicit racist messages.

2.2 Practical Thresholds of Liberal Autonomy in Political Promotion

When it comes to practical thresholds of liberal autonomy, there is no reason to assume that political promotion will be any different from branding. Although political campaigns are waged only before elections, changing political attitudes and behavior has major ramifications so that the centrality of the presumed autonomy violation cannot be disputed. Similarly, retrievable intentions to change attitudes and behavior will be similar to those that motivate brand managers, especially since the same people and organizations develop political promotion campaigns. And because political messages are in flux and transmitted via the same media, consent conditions are similar to those in branding as well.

As such it would seem to follow that the liberal state should act against the types of political promotion that violate liberal autonomy. Although this argument would uncontroversially apply to priming efforts in the voting booth, I want to argue that there is a compelling reason not to restrict efforts aimed at political attitude change. This compelling reason is that political communication is constitutive of liberal legitimacy. This is the case because political legitimacy is contingent on democratic involvement, and democratic involvement is possible only by virtue of free political communication. Thus, if political communication is restricted, then liberal legitimacy may decline. So although autonomy violation in political attitude change is objectionable, restricting political communication – and all the risks that it brings with it – is far more objectionable from the perspective of liberal legitimacy. If this is a sound judgment, then autonomy violation in political promotion should not be confined.

One can of course argue that although branding violates liberal autonomy this fact is – just as in the case of politics – trumped by a good reason, which is the efficient functioning of markets. But such an argument is not plausible. Whether branding increases market efficiency is first of all an empirical question, and one on which economists continue to disagree. That is, the market power theory of advertising argues that advertising leads to more artificial product differentiation, and thus to less perceived substitutability on the part of consumers. The result would be reduced price elasticity. The information theory of advertising, by contrast, argues that advertising informs consumers about substitutes and thus increases price elasticity. There are empirical studies backing both sides, so that the debate is now about which overarching theory best accounts for the mixed data. Hence, the net effect of advertising on market efficiency is not clear, and if this effect would turn out to be positive estimates do not exceed a gain of around 1% of Gross Domestic Product. That would hardly be a compelling reason for justifying autonomy violation.

To sum up, religion is different from branding because it is highly stable in content and practice and hence offers realistic opportunities for consent, while political promotion is different from branding because it is a necessary condition for liberal legitimacy. In other words, branding is special in violating liberal autonomy because it is not stabilized by tradition and because there is no good reason that justifies its autonomy violation.