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# Political marketing – *vive la différence!*

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## Introduction

The explicit use of techniques in politics which we would now describe as marketing dates back at least to 1920 in Britain (Wring, 1994). Since the Saatchi and Saatchi poster – "Labour isn't working" – it has become commonplace to speak of political marketing, and many marketers have come to believe that there is a direct transference of their concepts and tools to the political arena. To an extent this has been true, but there are a number of key differences between conventional product and service marketing settings, and the political choice process and how it may be influenced. These have received little, if any, attention in the literature to date. In addition, while the subject is beginning to develop some taxonomic frameworks, there has been a dearth of published work measuring and predicting the effect of political advertising and other communication tools.

In this paper, we consider the differences between political and mainstream marketing and suggest some areas in which we believe that marketers may learn from the political science literature. At this stage we confine our analysis and most of our examples to mainland British politics.

## Differences between political and product or service marketing

Political marketing is concerned with communicating with party members, media and prospective sources of funding as well as the electorate. Its multiple audiences mean that it has a great deal in common with marketing for public and non-profit organizations, see Kotler and Andreasen (1991) and Lovelock and Weinberg (1984). Its parallel objectives relating to members, funding and votes do not have exact equivalents in most mainstream marketing situations. We identify the seven following significant areas in which political marketing is different:

(1) For any one election, all voters make their choices on the same day (with trivial exceptions such as postal and proxy votes). There are almost no purchasing decisions with this characteristic and certainly none which affect as large a number of people. Thus while there are similarities between opinion polls and tracking measures of brand shares, the latter are aggregations of real purchasing decisions as opposed to the essentially hypothetical questions of the former.

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(2) While some might argue that there are long-term individual costs or regret (in the economist's sense) in electoral choices, the fact that there is no price directly or indirectly attached to voting or the choice of party sharply differentiates it from a purchase. Despite being normally constrained to making only one valid choice, the conventional utility-maximizing framework subject to budget constraints fits electoral choice poorly and the link to personal outcomes subsequently is at best tenuous.

(3) Although the actual act of voting may not have a price attached to it, apart from emigrating, a voter has to live with the collective choice, even though it might not have been his or her own preference. This shows the sharp distinction between public choice issues and consumer markets.

(4) Winner takes all in the UK first past the post election, whether in an individual constituency or across a general election. The nearest business equivalent would be bidding to run the National Lottery and the monopoly it grants.

(5) The political party or candidate is a complex intangible product which the voter cannot unbundle. As a consequence most voters have to judge on the overall packaged concept or message. Apart from general economic self-interest, it appears that single issue voting has in the past had a minor effect on the overall outcome of British elections. We argue that, while there are other complex products or services which consumers are unable to unbundle, the range of concepts and issues in the political bundle distinguish it from such situations. Furthermore, in the case of complex product or service choice, consumers are usually able to change their minds, albeit at a cost, if they believe that they have made a mistake. Voters have to wait until the next election.

(6) While there may be means of influencing the direction of a local or national party (with clear parallels with conventional product modifications or brand extensions), the possibility of introducing a new brand in the form of a new party is relatively remote – witness the short but eventful life of the SDP. A recent European example is the Forza Italia movement of Silvio Berlusconi, although the recent denouement may discourage other media moguls from attempting to emulate it. Apart from communism in the past, international brands do not really exist and there seems little immediate prospect of cross-border parties even in the EU, although we recognize that parties have been able to form transnational groupings in the European Parliament since its formation.

(7) In most marketing situations, brand leaders tend to stay in front. In the UK, while governments may win successive elections, there seems to be an increasing trend for them to fall behind in opinion polls between elections. This is of course connected with the fact that governments have to make difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions, particularly when choosing between controlling expenditure and raising taxes. This

cycle may well become more accentuated as it appears that governments' borrowing capabilities are becoming increasingly constrained by financial markets.

These key differences between electoral choice and conventional purchase choice settings have received little if any coverage to date. It is suggested here that they present distinct marketing challenges, both in theory and in practice which, have not been addressed systematically. As a consequence political marketing is at a "craft" stage, without the formal underpinnings required for the development of an applicable technology. The assumption that there is a direct transferability of marketing theory and applications seems to us to be questionable. Scammell (1995) shows the way in which opinion polling and marketing influenced the development of policy and electoral strategy in the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher's leadership, though the discussion of the topic offers limited insights of a theoretical nature beyond the exemplification of what a marketer might describe as a positioning strategy. We also observe that this specific example occurred at a period when the positioning strategy of the Labour Party might have been seen to be driven by very different considerations. The implications for political marketing strategies when both parties are driven by similar considerations do not appear to have been addressed from a theoretical perspective in the literature.

The consequences of the differences identified above are first that political marketing as a discipline has to develop its own frameworks adapting those from the core marketing literature, and, second, that it has to develop its own predictive and prescriptive models if it is to inform and influence political action.

We are also able to report a challenge to the belief of the transferability from another quarter, though not everyone will be entirely convinced by the argument underpinning the judgment. In the 1996 Irish High Court Appeal Case hearing against the Yes vote in the Divorce Referendum, a major issue was the impact of the last four weeks' advertising campaign by the Irish Government on the outcome of the vote and whether such activity could have influenced the result. There is very little evidence on the impact and evaluation of political advertising on voting intention and the propensity to turn out and vote in a particular way. An exception is Rothschild (1978), which is now dated. It focused on television and did not cover other electoral communication methods (in Eire the regional press appears to have significant influence). Interestingly in the High Court Case, the three judges (see *Irish Independent*, 1996 and *Irish Times*, 1996) ruled out evidence from a marketing communications evaluation specialist that advertising could be used to influence decision making (voting decisions) on the grounds that there could be no conceivable link between influencing voters on a moral issue and using the same tactics in consumer markets to buy a particular brand. This has interesting implications for political marketing and the measurement of its effects, though we suspect that marketers would find the argument hard to accept.

### The political brand image

In (5) above, we argue that as voters are unable to unbundle the electoral product offering, the vast majority therefore choose on the basis of the overall political package, concept or image. Typically in consumer markets, consumers have remarkably homogeneous perceptions of product characteristics, even if their relative preferences vary (Holbrook, 1995). Beyond very broad generalizations, voter perceptions of party characteristics can be blurred, as can be seen by the work of Rentoul *et al.* (1995) who studied voter perceptions of the parties in the 1992 election campaign and found that knowledge of specific policies is low. We deal with the awareness issues in the next section. Here we are concerned with the reasons for these blurred political images, in comparison with heavily promoted brands.

Political parties are coalitions with diffuse power bases to a much greater extent than are commercial organizations (Blondel, 1974). A clear spectrum of opinion within a party is readily visible to voters (q.v. the “Eurosceptics” in the Conservative Party). While the party leader has a considerable influence on the direction of party policy, the determination of a party’s positioning on an issue such as the European Union is not necessarily driven by a rational analysis of the optimal electoral strategy, much as the leader might wish it to be. Even in office, the complexity of modern government leaves the Prime Minister with limited influence over individual ministries. We thus arrive at the apparent paradox that a party leader is at the core of its brand image, while his or her ability to influence its policy direction is constrained by the need to construct a series of informal coalitions.

The use of the party leader as a central theme in political communication, was largely imported from the USA, the early home of modern political marketing (Maarek, 1995; Newman, 1994). In the UK this has been reinforced by the televising of Prime Minister’s Question Time in the House of Commons and the increasing focus on the party leader (Kavanagh, 1995; Scammell, 1995). However, the question of its actual centrality to perception or expressed preference is more difficult to dissect. While a leader in a parliamentary democracy may be more or less popular than the party in opinion polls, evidence suggests that voters’ views of what parties stand for in general terms remain remarkably stable and that their perceptions of their relative financial well being and security determine much of actual voting behaviour. It is worth noting that people appear to recall the Saatchi and Saatchi advertising in the 1979 general election much better than any projection of Margaret Thatcher’s image, whose reconstruction came subsequently (McNair, 1995).

At the simplest level, the brand is the party name. The name becomes attached as a brand to a wide variety of different “products”, beyond the national party and party leader noted above. Individual candidates, local parties, councils, social organizations (e.g. Conservative Clubs), and the party manifesto all carry the party name. Apart from the manifesto, the leader or the national party’s ability to control the presentation of these products bearing the party name is constrained to a greater extent than a commercial organization with a number of outlets. Combined with the complexity of the political bundle and the nature of the bargaining process by which this emerges, this multiplicity of semi-controlled uses of the brand at different levels is at the root of the fuzziness of brand images.

Some attempt has been made in the UK to create symbols or logos designed to convey the party image (e.g. Labour's Red Rose, the Conservatives' Torch of Freedom and the Liberal Democrats' Bird of Liberty). However, while these are renewed or renovated more frequently, their use in front of the general public is largely confined to the party conference and press conference backdrops, election leaflets, and a limited use in poster advertising (though rarely as the main image).

Negative aspects of image in political marketing should not be ignored. Media exposure of political figures and political issues is high, although very little of this exposure is purchased. However, surveys of awareness of political figures apart from leaders consistently show remarkably low proportions of voters able to name more than a handful. Elector awareness of political leaders does not show up particularly well against, say, that for Heinz Baked Beans (Nossiter *et al.*, 1995). It might be argued that a significantly higher proportion of paid for, and therefore controlled and planned, media coverage would increase awareness and reduce the fuzziness of voter perceptions. We do not believe that the evidence from party political broadcasts, which are apparently made with professional marketing guidance, offers much support for this proposition (Tait, 1995).

Voter and especially youth disillusionment with parties and politicians has grown markedly and presents a distinct contrast with brand marketing. While brands may have low awareness, very rarely do they evoke strong negative reactions (are BNFL, Lada, Skoda, or Yorkshire Water exceptions in the UK?). Even when a party wins a general election, the proportion of voters holding strong negative views of the party and the leader remains high by normal marketing standards.

## The decline of parties

For major mainstream parties, the overriding objective is to attract voters, win elections and hold power. One might adduce other objectives such as maintaining a broad ideological or relative political positioning, but over longer time periods these appear to be quite flexible.

In order to achieve the principal objective, however, apart from appealing to electors as a whole, parties need to attract and retain members and funding, whether from individuals or from companies, unions or other organizations. The needs for funding are relatively obvious, but parties also need members for a wide variety of political activities including those related to basic electoral mechanics and campaigning. Membership numbers may act as a substitute for funding, both in running elections and activities between elections, and in providing a loyal base for word-of-mouth communication with the broad mass of electors. Seyd and Whiteley (1992) show that levels of membership and activism of Labour members in constituencies in the 1987 and 1992 general elections had a direct impact on whether results improved or not.

Since the Second World War membership of political parties has declined markedly in Britain (Ware, 1995). One has to be cautious with quoted figures as it is not always clear that they relate to fully-paid up members and the Conservative Party did not publish figures regularly. Butler and Butler (1986) suggest that the maximum level of Tory membership was about 2.8 million in 1953, dropping to about 1.5 million in 1975 and 1.2 million for the period 1982-1984. Butler and Butler's figures for Labour Party membership show a peak of individual membership of just over one million in 1952-1953 (with just over five million affiliated Trade Union members), declining to 295,000 in 1983 (though Trade Union members had increased to 6.1 million). There has apparently been a recent upturn in Labour Party membership, but it is too early to say whether it is the reversal of the long-term trend. The profile of Conservative Party membership is increasingly ageing (Whiteley *et al*., 1994).

This has several effects. In quite a number of constituencies, membership of one or more parties has declined to levels where they are effectively dormant. As member numbers decline, constituency parties are increasingly vulnerable to being taken over by specific sectional interests (c.f. the past influence of Militant in a number of constituency Labour parties). Even national organizations become vulnerable as numbers decline. The Young Conservatives have declined to less than 1,000 members. The Federation of Conservative Students has been disbanded because its attitudes and behaviour became embarrassing to the party leadership (Whiteley *et al*., 1994, p. 44). More generally, the links between the parties and the broader community have tended to decline. Fewer voters identify closely with a particular party or know people who belong to one. This decline in identification works the other way as well. The messages required to communicate with members has tended to diverge from those which will convince the core of voters. A distinction should be drawn between this view of a personal linkage and broad electoral brand loyalty. It has been widely assumed that traditional party allegiances are declining and that voters are becoming more ready to switch, and there has been some empirical evidence to support this view. However, Heath *et al*. (1995) present evidence on class-party relationships updated with results from the 1992 UK general election which suggests that there is not a general trend of weakening class-party relationships.

## Political marketing's influence on marketing

Opinion polls carried out by market research agencies have been a familiar feature of the post-war political scene. While they represent a source of income in themselves, they have also been an opportunity for agencies to increase potential commercial clients' awareness and to construct databases for corporate exploitation. For those whose estimates are closest to actual election results, it appears that there are commercial gains. When they all "get it wrong", as with the 1992 election, there is much soul searching (Whybrow, 1995).

Political opinion polls have helped drive improvements in research technique. The intellectual origins of Acorn or Mosaic can be traced back to analyses developed to improve stratification methods for opinion poll samples. In a similar vein, we can point to the seminal importance of the work by Mass Observation in assessing the public mood in the Second World War for the Government in the subsequent development of social and marketing research. Interestingly it was Gallup's first associate in Britain, Dr Henry Durant, who both carried out the first forecast for a by-election result in West Fulham in 1938 and was involved in polling population attitudes throughout the war.

## What can marketing learn from political science?

Political processes play an important role in many marketing situations, particularly business to business ones. Harris and Lock (1996) analysed the growth of political lobbying in the UK and have argued that coverage in the marketing and strategy literature is woefully lacking. Similar concepts are readily applicable to organizational selling processes across the spectrum of marketing settings. There is also now an extensive negotiation literature (see, for example, Fisher and Ury, 1986; and Raiffa, 1982), largely developed from political situations, which is readily transferable to business and marketing. In addition the growing literature on pressure groups, interest groups and policy networks (Grant, 1955; Richardson, 1993; Smith, 1993) outlines much which is useful in accessing decision making and buying behaviour, and offers insights and potential analytical tools for those trying to formulate understanding in areas of strategic and marketing management.

## The nature and boundaries of political marketing

Few papers on political marketing attempt to define the field or to delineate its boundaries. Even Butler and Collins (1994), a seminal work in political marketing from a marketing perspective, seem to shy away from a clear definition, despite a most influential discussion of its structural characteristics. Political scientists have generally used the term political marketing in the context of political communications in the immediate pre-election period. (We note, however, the similarity of Himmelweit *et al.*'s (1985) representation of voting behaviour to marketing views of consumer behaviour.) One exception is Harrop (1990) who picks up Kotler and Armstrong's (1989) definition that marketing involves facilitating exchanges between an organization and its environment. This links with exchange and relationship perspectives on marketing (see for example, Axelsson and Easton, 1992; or Bagozzi, 1975). A simple exchange view of marketing shows exchanges as a sort of black box between the firm and its environment (notably customers), with government (and other regulatory agencies) as a third node, essentially setting the rules of the game. The reason for noting the governmental/regulatory dimension to exchange theories of marketing is to observe that we cannot treat government as a disinterested or exogeneous component in an exchange perspective on political marketing, as government politicians play a significant role in political marketing exchanges, and control of government is the key objective in political processes. Regulation of political marketing thus becomes much more part of the exchanges themselves than in traditional commercial marketing settings. Exploration of the way in which electoral law emerged and emerges in such a setting is an interesting direction for further research, although beyond the scope of this paper.

The importance of regulation and deregulation as a driving force in political exchanges as opposed to the regulation of the political process is, as we have argued elsewhere (Harris and Lock, 1996), an area which has not received enough attention in either the political science or marketing literature. If you can influence politicians via the plethora of pressure groups, think tanks, policy networks and lobbying to change the shape and characteristics of markets then it has major strategic implications for those researching in marketing. The methods of privatization and subsequent regulation of utilities in the UK present a good example of this.

The exchange perspective appears to us to have a great deal to offer as a working definition of political marketing. Having noted the changed role of government, as the third participant in exchange processes, we change the organization as the key actor in commercial marketing to the political entity. Similarly, while the consumer is the key figure in the environment for the firm, the voter becomes the central environmental element for the political entity. Why, however, do we use the somewhat opaque term “political entity”? While the party often appears the central initiator of action that is recognizably marketing in politics, this initiation is also undertaken by individual politicians, notably as candidates, by pressure groups and by those affected by political actions, which includes firms and individuals. Thus the politician and the party can be both the initiator and recipient of marketing exchanges in a different relationship from that between seller and purchaser.

We note that the exchange definition is a very broad one. It is arguably capable of subsuming everything that is conventionally regarded as political science. To separate out political marketing, we have to focus on the insights into and questions about political phenomena that marketing perspectives can generate. It could well be that all political phenomena may be analysed from such perspectives. This does not mean, however, that there are not other dimensions of these phenomena which may be explored from a basis in other disciplines, nor does it mean political marketing as a discipline generates a complete set of insights, prescriptions and predictions from those characteristics which are addressed by it.

Our working definition of political marketing is, therefore, as a discipline, the study of the processes of exchanges between political entities and their environment and among themselves, with particular reference to the positioning of those entities and their communications. Government and the legislature exist both as exogeneous regulators of these processes and as entities within them. As an activity, it is concerned with strategies for positioning and communications, and the methods through which these strategies may be realized, including the search for information into attitudes, awareness and response of target audiences.

We are concerned to stress the importance of comparative analysis in the development of political marketing in the future There is still relatively little work in political marketing comparing the development of the activity and its impact across different international settings and different political systems and structures (for some examples of what has been done see Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 1995; Maarek, 1995 and O'Shaughnessy, 1990). This paucity of work means that it is very difficult to draw general conclusions about political marketing, as it is usually very difficult to disentangle the national/local-specific contribution to observed outcomes. Furthermore, it presents problems in predicting the impact of actions or events which have occurred in one national setting if they are transferred to another.

## Ethics and political marketing

The emergence of political marketing has evoked a number of interesting responses. One is a somewhat atavistic longing for the good old days when politics was about real issues, before the soundbite, the spin doctor and the marketing message. Unfortunately for those steeped in such nostalgia, such images of an innocent political past are more myth than reality (see for example, Harrop's conclusions, 1990). Despite this the political science literature clearly exhibits an ambivalence towards political marketing as a phenomenon and a sub-discipline, with concern being expressed that ethics are rarely covered explicitly in key marketing and service marketing texts, though this is less true than it was.

On the other side of the fence, marketers and advertisers working on consumer products often express surprise (and a little disgust or contempt) at what they see as political parties getting away with misrepresentations in advertisements and party political broadcasts which they feel would fall foul of advertising standards watchdogs and media regulatory bodies, they related to conventional products and services. Party political broadcasts in the UK do not have the same regulatory restrictions placed on them, perhaps because they are allocated and regulated by the politicians themselves.

It is clear that there are widespread concerns about ethics in political marketing. Mainstream marketing in most developed economies exists within a world of product and advertising regulation with professional codes of conduct. Within these frameworks, ethical issues do not loom large because the frameworks largely preclude practices which most marketers, advertisers or market researchers would find unacceptable. Political marketing messages appear less constrained, and it is often left to individuals, agencies or companies to determine which parties or causes they are prepared to work for and the means or messages they are willing to deploy to those ends.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that the term is comparatively recent, political marketing is far from being a new phenomenon. The emergence of television and other new media have made it more obvious and the decline in party membership has accentuated the importance of two-way communication between party and voter. The conceptual development of political marketing is still in its infancy and much work has focused on the narrow setting of the immediate build-up to elections. We argue that models and theories of political marketing have to cover all actors and entities in political and governmental processes and suggest that exchange theory can provide a most useful vehicle for exposition and analysis.

We have endeavoured to show that political marketing is sufficiently different from mainstream marketing for direct transference of techniques and solutions to be less obvious than is often assumed, though marketing perspectives and analytical methods clearly have considerable applicability. The acceptance of the validity and impact of marketing techniques in the political and legal arenas is still limited as can be seen from the example of the Irish Divorce Referendum Case. Dare we say it "that the jury is still out" and that as we move into the more qualitative political science arena for the marketing discipline there are still more questions than answers. We have noted the potential for conflict between the roles of government and legislature as regulators of, and participants in, political processes. We do not believe that ethical concerns about political marketing phenomena (as distinct from sleaze) will diminish, but forecast that there will be increasing pressure for some form of regulation, no matter how difficult this is to achieve in an increasingly internationalizing world. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*?

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