

Political Relationship Marketing

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- identify the characteristics of relationship marketing in the commercial and political spheres
- distinguish between political marketing at the macro-level and at the micro-level
- discuss the major issues that affect the ability of a relationship marketing approach to contribute to our understanding of the political sphere.

Introduction

Marketing theory concerns itself more and more with network phenomena as part of the new dominant logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Within a network context, exchange is not seen as happening between two actors but as being part of complex and ongoing interactions. Building on this, there has been a shift in emphasis in marketing away from a product-based, instrumental or dyadic view and towards an emphasis on **relationships** and the co-creation of value within service-centred models of exchange. Based on this, relationship marketing has become central to marketing theory in the last decades; not only in business-to-business settings but also for business-to-consumer interactions (Bagozzi, 1995).

However, relationship marketing and the theoretical and conceptual implications for social and non-profit marketing are still somewhat under-explored (Hastings, 2003), especially in the field of political marketing (Bannon, 2005). This is strange given the possibility of a beneficial connection between what we will call **political relationship marketing** (PRM) and the development and legitimacy of political actors (as in parties, candidates, single-interest groups, governments), but also for the overall liberal party system itself (O'Shaughnessy, 1990; Newman, 1999). The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide an argument

for the development of a rigorous conceptual framework of PRM by discussing existing, as well as potential, applications of relationship marketing within the political sphere. To achieve this we will distinguish between two perspectives on political relationship marketing: a **micro-perspective** that is concerned with specific entity and exchange-oriented aspects of PRM, and a **macro-perspective** concerned with the interplay with the wider political structures and the overall political system.

Relationship marketing: a new horizon for political marketing?

Political marketing theory has neglected issues around relationship management so far (Bannon, 2005), and so theoretical studies on political marketing are still crowded out by more applied and comparative studies about political campaigns and the use of marketing tools and instruments in politics (Scammell, 1999). As such, this mirrors the managerial and the instrumental schools of marketing theory that focus on tools such as the marketing mix and the 4Ps framework. The marketing mix was developed in the 1960s and is usually exemplified through McCarthy's (1960) 4Ps framework. Whilst the marketing mix and the 4P framework lend themselves perfectly to managerial application (Grönroos, 1994), they do not fulfil the essential elements of a reliable marketing concept or categorisation scheme and only partly fit within the commercial marketing concept of a customer orientation. Thus, the managerial school has come under considerable criticism for practical reasons since the 1980s because of its reliance on simple (albeit pedagogic) concepts and its misunderstanding or reinterpretation of some original sources.

Implicitly, theories emanating from the managerial and instrumental schools perceive the exchange as characterised by one-off transactions between active sellers and passive customers. In business-to-business as well as in business-to-consumer marketing all these elements are representative of only a small number of marketing management activities and exchange situations (Ford et al., 2003). A more realistic (and intellectually rigorous) approach is to understand exchanges as occurring within and between networks of actors with indirect and direct interactions being relevant. Customers, be they consumers or other businesses, become heavily involved in the exchange process and even in the value-creation process in cooperative and collaborative ways (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This leads to multiple transactions occurring over an extended period of time, forming relationships of stable interaction patterns. Activities are dependent on relationships in addition to those between the other actors that are directly involved; cooperation and collaboration become more important than opposing positions.

Many of the characteristics of relationships formed the main argument against the hitherto leading paradigm of marketing theory. Consequently,

schools and methodologies that tackle these issues, the so-called relational marketing theories, became more influential in marketing theory development, especially as part of the new dominant logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). What is important for the purpose of our argument is the fact that there is considerable conceptual and methodological diversity within and outside the leading paradigm in marketing theory, which makes the discipline vibrant (and just a little chaotic) (Arndt, 1985). If we look at theory-building in political marketing, a different picture emerges. Not surprisingly, academic interest in political marketing takes the leading (managerial/instrumental) paradigms of its mother-discipline for the purpose of theory-building (Peattie and Peattie, 2003) and mirrors the approaches adopted in marketing textbooks. Therefore, analyses of political marketing instruments (Newman, 1994; Lloyd, 2003) and managerial applications of these political marketing instruments (Butler and Collins, 1996; Newman, 1999; Smith, 2001) dominate the literature. This is fostered by the fact that political marketing management practice leads the way. The momentum of the research agenda is set by new (managerial) developments in the political marketplace (Baines et al., 2003). This also means that the literature is characterised more by description than prescription (Henneberg, 2004).

While this seems to be normal for any young discipline, it may cause the development of political marketing research to slow down and stagnate at some point; our opinion is that political marketing is presently at this point. Most of the current research on political marketing does not utilise state-of-the-art marketing theory. Furthermore, political marketing theory has neglected to incorporate major developments in commercial marketing theory as part of the leading political marketing management paradigm, e.g. market-orientation (Ormrod, 2007) and resource-based theories of the firm (Hunt and Lambe, 2000). Therefore, it is time for political marketing to embrace a 'second wave of research' fuelled by the adoption of new marketing theory perspectives. We have chosen the relationship marketing theory as the foundation of this chapter because of the importance of relationships within social and political exchanges. Although political marketing was initially transaction-oriented (O'Shaughnessy, 1990), it has been suggested that relationship marketing will help research and analyse the phenomenon of political marketing (Bannon, 2005). This is in line with Dermody and Scullion's (2001) reinterpretation of political marketing as a process of signification and representation.

Towards political relationship marketing

Building and maintaining long-term trust- and commitment-based relationships is an interesting proposition for political actors. Political parties and candidates, and also voters and citizens, perceive political exchanges not merely as

isolated transactions (like the episode of actually voting for a party or a candidate) but as an enduring social process of interactivity within which they live their daily lives (Sniderman et al., 1993). This implies that understanding the character and the mutuality of the political exchange process is central to understanding the character of the market orientation of political actors. Analogously with traditional economic activity, it has been argued that political actors are moving away from a focus on instrumental (transactional) exchanges and towards a focus on building value-laden relationships and marketing networks in the form of social contracts with citizens (Newman, 1999).

Despite a twenty-year history of research in the commercial marketing literature, research into PRM is virtually non-existent. One of the few studies was carried out by Dean and Croft (2001) who used a relational stakeholder model adapted from Christopher et al. (1991) to the political sphere. Whilst this provided a better understanding of the complexities of political exchange processes and hinted at a wider framing of political marketing definitions, the essence of these relationships was not discussed. While as yet there is no explicit conceptual foundation of PRM, there are nevertheless many examples of political marketing management which follow the relationship marketing premise. It is these examples, historical and contemporary, that we will use to build an initial understanding of the construct of PRM in order to facilitate future conceptual development.

Macro-/micro-perspectives of political relationship marketing

This section reviews the ways in which PRM has been used in practice and examines why PRM in theory might impact and transform politics (the macro-perspective), and reviews both current practice and earlier history where anticipatory elements of PRM have been visible (the micro-perspective). Broadly speaking, we review practice which falls far short of a holistic PRM approach but in some ways foreshadows it. We further make the case for PRM at the theoretical and applied levels and outline key contributions that PRM could make to the literature. We then assess the potential transforming contribution that PRM could achieve if applied seriously, with numerous tactical and strategic ideas to give the concept political flesh and blood. The suggestion is that PRM is intrinsically a valuable approach that has the potential to reduce the alienation of voters and replace crude manipulation with something that is less superficial.

Macro-issues of political relationship marketing

At one level, the proposition of PRM is common sense: to use a commercial analogy, we are more likely to get repeat purchases if we think of marketing

as a search for customers (i.e. interaction partners) rather than simply selling goods and services. Key elements in PRM are seen as the fulfilment of a promise (something that political parties find notoriously difficult) and, related to this, trust. The political party or candidate must establish (earn) an image of trustworthiness as a basis for PRM. In the case of politics, the short-term, electoral orientation of politicians makes this issue even more acute. Politicians are more likely to think in terms of popular election pledges such as tax cuts than seeking lasting relationships with citizens or members of their own party.

In transactional marketing the price sensitivity of customers is often high: the electoral equivalent of price competition is an economic bribe or promising a popular response to an emotional hot topic such as the immigration scare of the type perpetuated by the Tories in the UK general election of 2005. In contrast:

A firm pursuing a relationship marketing strategy, on the other hand, has created more value for its customers than that which is provided by the core product alone. Such a firm develops over time more and tighter ties with its customers ... Relationship Marketing makes customers less price sensitive.

[Grönroos, 1994: 11]

Grönroos (1994) claims that organisations have the opportunity to provide customers with various kinds of added value: technological, information, knowledge, social and so on. Similarly in politics the PRM approach offers social involvement, chances to contribute to policy and participation in public events. These attractions of PRM are not merely intuitive but well grounded in psychology. Humans are cognitive misers so that the creation of explicit and lasting relationships becomes highly desirable:

Research has shown that consumers process information rapidly and protect their memories from being inundated with unwanted information by erecting perceptual barriers. One study has revealed that, on a typical day, approximately 550 advertisements are directed at consumers, yet they pay attention to less than 1% of these.

[de Chernatony, 1993: 71]

Modern elections are about small numbers of swing voters concentrated in certain (geographical or socio-demographical) areas. Some 10 per cent of UK voters in 2005 did not know which way they would vote late on in the election campaign, and one third of those who did were still not absolutely certain (O'Shaughnessy, 2006). It could therefore be argued that the election lay in the hands of just one million undecided voters resident in 100 constituencies. It follows that seeking a relationship with this group, investing time and resources over a period of several years, is the only insurance policy political actors have against political 'consumerism'. In the

US, President Bush only won by a small margin twice (Thomas et al., 2004). Seen in this light, the promise of adopting a PRM approach is significant. It may make a marginal difference, but elections are all about margins.

Another issue of PRM relates to the nature of the exchange offering. Too often political parties have appealed exclusively to economic criteria and therefore created political consumers and not new loyalists; notions of a rational voter lead merely to temporary support and not the creation of converts. Allegiance is merely borrowed and people will desert the party for a more convincing monetary bribe. Because of this, PRM has to be about values as well as issues. Elections seem to be becoming more value-oriented, and liberal intellectuals ignore their salience in voter decision processes at their peril (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). The last US presidential election in 2004, though planned as a campaign structured round political and personality themes, became in the end a referendum on values. Bush demonstrated a strong belief system and clear value judgements; in fact, a Manichean world view of absolute right and absolute wrong.

One aspect of this value orientation is the characteristics of the political actor, at the extreme alternately seducing and frightening segments of the electorate (Britt, 2005). It is this kind of intimacy that a PRM approach would certainly seek to embody. The internet (which is still exempt from candidate-endorsement rules in many countries) could be employed as the private voice, its negative imagery removed from public (mainstream) media. Contrast George Bush's initial suburban-safe, airbrushed 2004 campaign television advertising with this video on his campaign website:

A woman, sitting at a keyboard, seeks information about Senator John Kerry on the Internet. She unearths all sorts of scandalizing titbits. 'More special interest money than any other senator. How much?' she says. The answer flashes on the screen: '\$640,000. 'Ooh, for what?' she says, typing out 'Paybacks?' and then reading aloud from the screen, she says, 'Millions from executives at HMQs, telecoms, drug companies.'

(O'Shaughnessy, 2004: 168)

So what would be the contribution of PRM if it were completely and comprehensively implemented as a governing ideology of political organisations? Much of course depends on the quality and imagination of the implementation, but, properly done, PRM could stabilise a party's core support, reduce the number of swing voters and the volatility of the party system, make politics less overtly cynical and manipulative and deepen democracy by increasing a plebiscitary element (Scammell, 1999). The main thrust of a PRM approach would be greater involvement: voters would be consulted more often (and not only for election purposes), party members turned into stakeholders, the nation would become better informed and be asked for its ideas on policy as well as have its responses to new political suggestions intelligently regarded. An energised, aware public that could

self-mobilise would become relevant to governing elites both as actor and reactor. This could include elements of involvement in governmental political marketing, the policy delivery and implementation process that is an often forgotten interaction in the political marketing exchange.

The bonds of intimacy and solidarity that PRM aspires to bring about can be created in several ways, such as giving people confidential information and the kind of detail they would seldom get from the press. Such solidarity can also be achieved by fostering a sense of political ownership: technology can enable a move to greater internal party democracy via the inclusion of non-party members in policy development (Heidar and Saglie, 2003). The plebiscitary internal party democracy could be extended towards the mass public, but it is its potential for motivating party members that is critical. Party members can vote for policies and participate in policy forums and online electronic debates could be held (Hudson, 2005). This need for involvement and influence is a commonly felt need: a society where we 'bowl alone' will always have a latent appetite for that social intimacy that the postmodern social order lacks (Bauman, 2000). This possibility of intimate dialogue with voters is historically unique.

PRM allied to internet technology can broaden not only a party's membership base, but also the range of creative and policy inputs feeding into it. There are great possibilities here; for example, to test-market a party's advertising or policy suggestions. It can invite in the creative talents of the people, for example, in the construct of a party slogan. The response could be stronger than anticipated: thus www.moveon.org, a cyber-pressure group, sponsored an anti-Bush advertising contest and found 1500 commercials on its website: the two comparing Bush to Hitler received national publicity (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). Not all innovations work; in one episode, the Republican internet invitation to make a pro-Bush poster was swamped with anti-Bush material.

PRM can also make it possible for an unfunded candidate or minority party to achieve a wide exposure. The Democratic nomination bid of Howard Dean pioneered political uses of the internet; the key to Dean's campaign was the new forms of direct involvement and participation that the internet permitted (Rosenthal, 2003). The campaign was the opposite of the 'traditional' approach, seeking volunteers and donations from website conversations. 'Blog for America' permitted visitors to post any message they wanted and received 40,000 hits per day, and by November 2003 there were half a million email addresses on the Dean database, while the campaign had raised \$5 million in the last days of September alone; his campaign in Tennessee was 'so virtual ... it does not even appear to have a telephone' (O'Shaughnessy, 2004: 170). Clearly, such a campaign anticipates a PRM approach even though it does not technically constitute one. The claim is that the public are keen to express their views once requested to do so. British Liberal Democrat Steve Webb, who gained the Channel 4 politics award for best use of new technology to encourage political participation, had a dialogue with approximately 3000 constituents

by text and email, and the response had been 'hugely positive', with one constituent apparently claiming it was the 'nearest thing to democracy' he had encountered (O'Shaughnessy, 2006).

Micro-issues of political relationship marketing

In this section we will discuss the actual and potential application of PRM to politics today and in the past. Parties and politicians do not tend to recognise any of the things they do as PRM, but some of what they do anticipates the PRM approach and some of what they do parodies it. There appears to be no authentic, comprehensive application or general managerial concept of relationship marketing extant in politics, that is, the integration of tactics within a strategy that derives from intellectual recognition or ideological acceptance.

In both the US and the UK, the expenditures on targeted marketing relative to other forms of political marketing are now colossal. This cannot really be said to amount to PRM, but the tactical understanding behind it will inevitably drive parties towards adopting PRM since it embodies the recognition that electoral success lies less in communicating to an undifferentiated mass electorate than in the depth of engagement with specific target groups within that mass. The British Conservative Party sent prime-ministerial candidate Michael Howard's pre-recorded messages via telephone, and newsletters were targeted via voter interest.

The British Labour Party manufactured DVDs for marginal seats, which featured local celebration and dynamic, caring Labour Party candidates. Labour intended to communicate directly to its own disaffected supporters seven times in the later stages of the 2005 general election. Seats with majorities of fewer than 5000 voters (i.e. so-called 'marginal' seats) received personalised letters and phone calls from the party's call centre in Gosforth, Tyneside (O'Shaughnessy, 2006). Meanwhile the Conservative election machine was in the process of contacting 2.5 million key voters. In the US presidential elections, the targeting of political television advertising was precise; for example, there were half a million airings that only appeared in three to six states. Thus 60 per cent of voters were excluded from any exposure to political television commercials (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2007).

The PRM approach seeks the intimacy of the targeted medium with its associated accents of emotion and no compromise. Echoes of this were seen in the US election cycle (nomination/presidential cycle 2003–2004), where candidates sought to speak to a select coterie by mail or internet in a more uncompromising voice as a way of securing their loyalty. With PRM, this kind of private voice can be taken much further to a micro-targeted and therefore highly differentiated level. A dual private and public strategy was pursued by US primary candidates. Parties' and candidates' ability to target has now become much more refined. Political agents mix in data on consumer and credit history purchases with geo-demographic software,

telephone canvassing and electoral rolls to target individual voters and turn them into prospects. The theory is that a habitual drinker of Coors beer (for example) is more likely to vote Republican (Elliott, 2005). Such political database marketing ideally lends itself to the logical extension to PRM, although parties and candidates rarely recognise this.

PRM has a history and a prehistory. In the past, parties and candidates have carried out tactical manoeuvres which could be seen as PRM and would be the kind of measures that the PRM approach would result in. However, these do not add up to a PRM approach, and sometimes they seem to be a caricature of it. Frequently, political operatives get it wrong: the idea of having a deep relationship with voters may be applied clumsily, or backfire because of crude tactical implementation. In fact, there is a long prehistory to the 'technology' of PRM practice, particularly targeted direct mail: an early user was Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s (Warren, 1996). The Republican Party reinvented it in the post-Watergate era when it was compelled to seek a mass participation membership, and since then political direct mail has become a feature of political life in the United States. There are of course other historical precedents such as the handwritten address by Margaret Bonfield in 1924 or the 1950 Tory personalised letter to opinion formers; by 1981 Britain's new SDP party was creating computer-generated direct mail while the first recorded use of email for campaigning was by Jerry Brown in 1993 (Jackson, 2005).

This said, a 'direct-mail relationship' is not the only primordial form of PRM. In earlier times some parties perceived the importance of creating relationships with key cadres by mixing politics with entertainment and socialisation. In his book *Selling God*, Moore (1994) concluded that the popularity of religion in that supermarket of churches, the United States, was facilitated by faith entrepreneurs who understood the need to mix entertainment with religion. A similar situation existed in the political sphere, where early examples include the British Conservative Party's Primrose League, established in the late nineteenth century in memory of Benjamin Disraeli, and more recently the Young Conservatives of the 1950s. The latter organisation was ostensibly a mass political movement which catered to its members' social needs; entertainment took centre stage and it quickly became known as a 'marriage bureau'.

The tactics of PRM were thus discernible, but they remained ideas without an explicit place in the wider political strategy. By the 1980s, some US politicians used several types of media in an attempt to create a permanent relationship with other stakeholders that would pay dividends at election time. In the words of one Congressman:

I am not only a news maker, but a news man – perhaps the most widely read journalist in my district. I have a radio show, a television programme, and a news column with a circulation larger than that of most of the weekly newspapers in my district.

[O'Shaughnessy, 1990: 70]

By the late 1990s, internet technology had given rise to a new kind of political intensity, the precursor of PRM:

campaign contributions can be solicited; policy papers posted for voter inspection; interactive chat lines established, so that the campaign can respond to questions from voters; volunteers recruited; candidate schedules publicised; and press releases and other announcements posted.

[Johnson, 1997: 18]

Other methods such as the 'town meetings' held by the British Conservative Party tried to connect with voters, but these were merely tactical devices, whilst the British Labour Party's model of credit card participation had the same limitations as single-issue group membership, that is, no real participation in policy discussions and a high membership turnover (Richardson, 1995). The practice is to appear to be getting closer to the people or hearing them or communicating with them, such as the British Conservative Party's mantra 'Are you thinking what we're thinking?' in the UK 2005 general election (Ormrod and Henneberg, 2006). But these moves are seldom more than opportunistic; a concept of achieving greater intimacy is just another electoral trigger device rather than part of some wider political strategy that might have informed and directed it. This continues today, as politicians still use online technology as a means of monologue rather than dialogue.

So how can the concept of PRM be applied in practice? The answer to this question is a matter of creativity and of evolving imaginative ideas that enable PRM to facilitate a more involved and responsive politics. It is also a question of understanding the potential of various technologies, especially the online media, to enhance the creation of special relationships between parties, their members and their broader stakeholders. For example, Jackson (2005) provides a laundry list of 'what to do' to make online newsletters more effective, and things to avoid (self-promotion, campaign commercials, email attachments). These are also the methods that lead towards a truer realisation of the PRM concept; for example the possession of a fast feedback facility and its processing. This also raises possibilities of PRM as the pathway to a better (in the sense of more responsive) form of (party) democracy. But the content of online newsletters risks becoming simply a rehash of press releases, or at best a digest of a range of sources (Jackson, 2005). Adopting a PRM approach to creating an online newsletter would mean emphasising topicality and relevance to the target group and speaking to them in their own language.

Thus for all of this to be effective, PRM needs to begin with a core segmentation strategy (Smith and Hirst, 2001), as its effectiveness is governed by its ability to target the culture of a specific subgroup. However, the broader targets of PRM fall into four groups: first, the party's core supporters and activists; second, the party's national members; third, the party's loyal voter base; and fourth, voters in general and their various sub-segments. These are

different groups with different needs, and whilst they all require PRM, they do not require the same relationship strategies. Creative ways are needed to motivate and involve the activists, who are the foot soldiers of any campaign. They must be distinguished – as in the case of the structure of pressure groups (Richardson, 1995) – from the inactive party members, whose function is to give money (and whose loyalty, as New Labour found, is always tenuous; single-issue groups can lose most of their members in the space of a single year) (Richardson, 1995). Incidentally, it is worth recalling that for Jaques Ellul, the French theoretician of propaganda, membership was essential for successful persuasion: enlist someone in a cause, get them to perform some task, and they are the more convinced (Ellul, 1973).

Voters in general are also an important target of PRM: they can be segmented almost infinitely, with each subgroup sent regular updates about what the party is doing for their specific group or community. The idea is of more than 'instrumental' exchange – it is the notion of mutual dependency and trust. Such tactics might achieve the ends of PRM, but its operational effectiveness is dependent on a party or candidate's ability to optimise the information sent to each segment, and to the amount of detail a political actor can accumulate about people. The party can then maintain the relationship by continually updating the members of the segment with relevant and timely news (Smith and Saunders, 1990; Smith and Hirst, 2001). But segmentation approaches can also be used to attract crucial younger generations by fashioning appeals and modes of involvement that cater to their needs and wants. Currently, segmentation opportunities by relationship 'type' are not widely exploited by parties, despite the fact that their affinities and memberships are not monolithic.

Thus the need is to identify ways in which parties can imagine and implement PRM tactics. In short, by listening as well as initiating, by leading as well as following, organisational entities can forge meaningful relationships with their stakeholders (Henneberg, 2006). What would a relationship-oriented party look like? The answer to this question lies partly in posing another: how can loyalty be created? Is it a question of authentically empowering members and giving them a say in policy or a vote in online policy forums, or will we see the rise of loyalty card schemes with party credit cards, hotel discounts or special offers on other products? These are very different ways in which the concept of PRM can be reinforced, but they cannot form the essence of a relationship. The key to the relationship is to cater to modern tastes and conditions, seeing the political relationship as more than just an electoral interaction. Alongside the offer of privileged access to political decision-making elites in parties and policy-implementation structures in government, the bonds of solidarity could be reinforced by actually sustaining and replenishing social networks, that is, using a holistic citizenship concept. This is not a new idea; British Minister Without Portfolio and Labour Party Chairman Hazel Blears wrote in *The Times* on 14 June 2006:

first, we need to analyse the success of membership organisations such as the RAC or RSPB and learn how to recruit and retain members. Secondly we need to focus on local activities – political or social – which engage people in their communities. If local book groups can involve thousands in local discussion and debate, so can political parties. Thirdly, we need to harness technology such as podcasting, texting and blogging, learning from campaigns such as Make Poverty History.

The keys to PRM are appeals to a sense of involvement, participation and solidarity with others in the political and social sphere, essential to the creation of legitimacy. Mass publics are arguably nothing more than apolitical and inadvertent consumers of political information, who look for heuristics or recognition devices as a way of reducing cognitive effort in the decision-making process (Sniderman et al., 1993; O'Shaughnessy, 2004). Solidarity, on the other hand, is created through interactions with like-minded individuals; there is a commonality of (political) values that serves as a basis of affiliation and attraction (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). This suggests that the social dimension can play a significant role.

A further purpose of PRM is fund-raising, as PRM is arguably as much a revenue-generating strategy as it is an attempt to include voters in the policy development process. Whilst this may seem at first glance a cynical view of relationship-building, it reduces the reliance of parties and candidates on donations from wealthy individuals and lobby groups who expect something in return for their financial support. So PRM can also facilitate a mass donor-base driven by involvement.

Political relationship marketing: panacea of politics (?)

PRM represents an opportunity for all kinds of political actors in that it has the potential to reverse the lack of interest in politics that is evident in most people: the alienated and disinterested citizens. Whilst more traditional political marketing activities such as negative advertising and centralised policy-making contribute to voter apathy (Dermody and Scullion, 2003; Lilleker and Negrine, 2003), PRM could combat that apathy, as the essence of what it offers is a social connection and involvement.

Questions need to be asked about if, and in what way, the use of political marketing concepts in politics changes or affects party systems and the functioning of democracy itself. We have claimed before that '...political marketing can be viewed as a means of neutralising the deeply alienated in society' (O'Shaughnessy, 1990: 15). Such a regaining of trust, the reversal of the erosion of confidence in the political system, hints at the necessity of creating meaningful bonds between political actors and their constituents (Newman, 1999). PRM may be a means to achieve this re-enfranchisement. A further point is that PRM should not lead to the abdication of leadership. The tendency of

political marketing towards more 'plebiscitary democracy' (Abramson et al., 1988) is not a new phenomenon (Scammell, 1995). Whilst this abdication of leadership could be induced by an overemphasis on a follower mentality in political marketing (Henneberg, 2006), such tendencies have been observed in the increasing use of focus groups, opinion polls and plebiscitary elements (like grass-roots votes on people, positions and political issues) by many political institutions. However, a market orientation in the sense of a relational approach does not necessarily predispose companies to follow but balances elements of a customer-led with a customer-leading approach (Ormrod, 2005; Henneberg, 2006). Therefore, a relationship-building approach of political marketing management would provide a framework for elements of leadership which are supposedly destroyed by a more traditional, that is, customer- (voter-) led approach (Scammell, 1995).

The merit of PRM, therefore, is that it increases the likelihood that politicians would seek genuine relationships with stakeholders. Sales (votes and support) would follow as a by-product. This contrasts with cruder forms of political manipulation which parties resort to in the absence of relationships with large sectors of the electorate. However, a relationship is something that has to be maintained, not just fabricated at election time. So far parties have been about hired loyalty, material appeals – we as voters and citizens want to internalise loyalty and parties are failing to do this. Much of what occurs in elections is so blatantly manipulative that it probably does more harm than good: solving things at the plastic level. The individual's sense of powerless irrelevance is one of the defining features of the postmodern condition (Bauman, 2000) and manifests itself in the political sphere in such phenomena as low voter turnout and widespread cynicism. In Britain, this voter apathy reached alarming levels (for democracy, anyway): in 2005, first-time voters were more likely to vote in reality television shows than at the UK general election (*Sunday Times*, 13 March 2005).

Currently, the problem is that political actors merely rent the allegiance of their voters by appealing to the electorate on purely economic criteria. PRM would instead appeal to values so that when the inevitable economic downturn occurs, the goodwill that the party or candidate has built up can help it to weather the storm. PRM is a critical orientation for political parties and candidates to adopt if they are to refresh their membership lists and retain voters' allegiance and trust as well as providing legitimacy to their party and to the overall party system. It is probably the most important thing marketing has to offer political actors. Currently, politicians focus on appealing to voters at election time, and impose policy demands on their ideologically driven followers and party members.

We argue that PRM has an untapped potential in the political context, although it is no absolute panacea for the problems facing modern political parties and candidates. As O'Malley and Tynan (2000) point out, there is a real difficulty in creating emotional bonds via technology-mediated interaction. The idea of building and maintaining relationships has such intuitive

plausibility that we are apt to forget some of the problems, not least those of sound implementation; for example 'the employment of direct and database marketing in operationalising R[elationship] M[arketing] may actually undermine the process of relationship development, because what marketers call "intimacy" ... many consumers view as "intrusive"' (O'Malley and Tynan, 2000: 808). The complaint is that (political) relationship marketing can develop into mere technique with a focus on building databases rather than relationships. As O'Malley and Tynan (2000: 807) remark: 'It may be that the metaphor of interpersonal relationships has been so successful that the academy has forgotten that it is a metaphor which is being used.' Critics suggest that (P)RM too easily becomes a type of business rhetoric, and that attitudes towards consumers continue to represent them as passive targets and deny them autonomy. In politics we have to be particularly sensitive to these considerations. In the end, 'relationship marketing' is a slogan as well as a concept, and like all slogans it directs us to some truths but blinds us to others. For example, the claim is made that social exchange theory, on which the theories of relational marketing are based, overemphasises the role of trust, commitment, communication and mutuality in exchange within consumer markets: 'Social exchange theory ties us into the language and rhetoric of interpersonal relationships, particularly those of marriage' (O'Malley and Tynan, 2000: 807). This represents only a partial view of exchange. Further understanding of, for example, 'interimistic' relationships (Lambe et al., 2000) will broaden our perspective of PRM. We therefore need to base PRM on a clearer and deeper understanding of the essence of political exchanges, be they in the electoral, parliamentary or governmental markets (Peattie and Peattie, 2003; Henneberg and Ormrod, 2013).

Conclusion, implications and further research

More prescriptive theory-building is needed in political marketing research in order to escape purely descriptive studies anchored in existing approaches. While 'explaining events is logically prior to explaining facts' (Elster, 1989: 3), political marketing needs more of the latter. For this purpose, new theory development needs to be encouraged, based on the empirical evidence that political actors use elements of relational marketing. As relational and service-related theories gain considerable influence in contemporary commercial marketing theory (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), it is necessary for political marketing to utilise these prescriptive theories. PRM has been more or less completely neglected by theoreticians despite a twenty-year publication history in this field in commercial marketing theory; this said, very few commercial organisations actually practise relationship marketing successfully. Why, therefore, should parties, candidates or any political organisation do any better?

The practical case for PRM is simply stated. With the professionalisation of politics (Panebianco, 1988) has come voter detachment and disengagement (Richardson, 1995). Parties have become like self-perpetuating clubs, and we reach for the language of the old communist empires to describe them, with words like 'cadre' or 'apparatchik' (Lilleker and Negrine, 2003). The scale of the task is significant; high levels of non-voting combined with mass party membership ostensibly in terminal decline. Public cynicism has apparently become universal in democracies.

The task requires the focus of parties and candidates to be on a range of stakeholders; voters are the main electoral interaction partners, but party members, non-member donors, the media and competitors are also relevant. There is an urgent need to re-engage in meaningful, longer-term and involving interactions. Any tool that might be useful can be explored, and PRM has intuitive plausibility. Of course, PRM is not a panacea; the cynicism and apathy of voters are established and apparently immutable facts and it is difficult to see how they could be countered other than by some measure of relational marketing approach, although how the concept is operationalised and implemented remains open territory for debate.

With the PRM concept we are in fact reviving the practices of an earlier political generation via modern technology and for modern conditions. At one time the party was a social identity definer, but the decline of class-based politics has entailed the demise of the mass-membership party. The British Labour Party maintained close links with trade unions whilst the British Conservative Party itself was a middle-class social network, a social club in the provincial regions. Party functions were social functions. Relationships were mediated through this. Thus there was once a kind of relationship between different political actor groups, as the party was the public political expression of private trade union involvement or performed a social role at the local level. All this has gone; in a postmodern and 'liquid' social order (Bauman, 2000) we seem to focus on rented allegiance rather than relationships. To change this requires membership, the act of joining and of performing some service for the cause, as this stimulates retrospective self-justification and therefore strengthens adherence. Historically, those causes which lack a membership but merely float on media curiosity and the goodwill of a few rich backers do not last long.

There are other reasons why PRM must be treated very seriously, both in the practical sphere and by research in political marketing. If, for example, we move to a more value-based politics, as seems to be the case in the US, relational concepts represent a useful way of exploiting this, since values may embody a more effective basis for sustained relationships than appeals to economic self-interest. There is also the renewed recognition of the significance of maximising the electoral participation of a party or candidate's own voters – 'getting out the vote' – particularly in the closer contests which

now arise from political consumerism and the demise of inherited loyalties. People expect to be contacted, and putting a 'face' to the party in every home can only be achieved with volunteers, the local party members and their friends; campaigns that are fought principally in the mass media cannot really leave people with a sense that they own their government in the old way, or are responsible for what it does in their name (as the 80 per cent of the British population who did not vote for the Labour Government in 2005 would doubtless testify).

While the case for the importance of PRM in theory and practice can be made, we suggest that more conceptual as well as descriptive research is needed in order to get to grips with this phenomenon. We have attempted to provide a wide overview of the facets of PRM by putting forward some macro- and micro-views. We are aware that we have maybe raised more questions than we have answered. However, these initial considerations need now to be formalised into a more rigorous theoretical framework, underpinned by discussions of the operationalisation and implementation of the PRM concept and its implication for the whole fabric of electioneering, daily politics and theories of democracy. This should also include the question whether or not PRM may end up being as tenuous as much of the application of customer relationship marketing has proven to be (Bolton et al., 2004). We therefore see efforts that continue our initial discussion of PRM through more specialised studies as a necessary next step of research.

Discussion questions

- Do you think that political relationship marketing can contribute to our understanding of the macro-level of the political sphere?
- Do you think that the adoption of a relationship marketing approach by political parties will be a good thing for politics in particular and society in general?
- Do you think that the introduction of loyalty card schemes like those in commercial retailers are an option for political parties?

Key terms

Relationships
Stakeholders
Political relationship marketing

Micro-perspective
Macro-perspective

Further reading

Bannon (2005): This article develops the commercial understanding of relationship marketing to the political context, and argues that a relationship-based approach by parties can increase voter activity and electoral stability. Relationships can be managed over time and as such can be initiated and ended by both parties and voters (stakeholders), and thus can adapt in line with the dynamic nature of society.

Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2009): This article forms the basis of this chapter.

Vargo and Lusch (2004): This article argues that the traditional focus of marketing on transactions has been superseded by a focus on relationships and the co-creation of value. Vargo and Lusch argue that this implies a shift from the importance of the actual products that are produced to the services that these products provide.

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