Defining the Stakeholder Concept for Political Marketing (extended abstract)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of a 'stakeholder' is often misused in the academic literature; stakeholders can range from the few actors with which the organisation has a direct interaction (Carroll 1993), to anything that can exert some form of influence over the organisation, including nature, the deceased and the unborn (Starik 1995). It is therefore necessary to provide a precise definition of the stakeholder concept to maintain academic rigour. However, a specification of the nature of the stakeholder concept is generally missing in political marketing literature. This paper addresses this issue by discussing how the stakeholder concept is understood, and then applies the stakeholder concept to the political marketing context, proposing a definition of the stakeholder concept for political marketing research.

2. STAKEHOLDERS

There is little agreement about the precise definition of a stakeholder, and the stakeholder concept is often used without considering its meaning (Waxenberger and Spence 2003). The various understandings of the term 'stakeholder' encompasses a range of actors from a narrow focus on actors that have a direct interaction with the organisation (e.g., Carroll 1993), to a broad focus on a wide range of actors such as non-living and naturally-occurring things (Starik 1995), and even God (Schwartz 2006). Unsurprisingly, this has led to ambiguity as to the nature of a stakeholder in the academic and the management literatures (Kaler 2002), resulting in a dilution of the explanatory power of the stakeholder concept (e.g., Stoney and Winstanley 2001).

Friedman and Miles (2006: 11) developed a framework that mapped the many definitions of the stakeholder concept on two dimensions: the focus of the definition (broad or narrow), and the emphasis on the strategic or normative relevance of the stakeholder to the organisation. A narrow focus includes only those stakeholders without whose support the organisation would fail, whilst a broad focus includes any entity that is relevant to the organisation. Adopting a strategic perspective implies that only those stakeholders that are necessary for the organisation's survival are taken into consideration, whilst adopting a normative perspective indicates managers' own ethical position on which stakeholders ought to be taken into consideration is in focus. Jones and Wicks (1999) argued that normative and strategic approaches could in fact be integrated when selecting stakeholders; i.e., the grounds for including stakeholders in a given context could be strategic necessity, the manager's own moral code, or both.

3. THE STAKEHOLDER CONCEPT AND POLITICAL MARKETING

Hughes and Dann (2009) discuss the stakeholder concept in the political marketing context and propose a categorisation scheme for seventeen, named stakeholders. However, no explicit definition of the characteristics of a stakeholder is made explicit, although the choice of stakeholders dictates a convergent approach (e.g., Jones and Wick 1999; Parmar *et al.* 2010). Some of the stakeholders that Hughes and Dann (2009) explicitly name, such as core voters, are necessary for electoral success and thus can be understood from a strategic perspective. However, any definition of the stakeholder concept needs to allow for those voters who did not support the winning majority but must live with the collective decision (Lock and Harris 1996). As such, any definition of stakeholders in the political marketing context must be wide enough to capture those who have no strategic importance for the political actor, that is, including a normative element (Ormrod *et al.* 2013).

Therefore, what is needed for the political marketing context is an understanding of the stakeholder concept that emphasises a wide range of stakeholders, and can reconcile strategic and normative issues; all actors that exist in society have some level of reciprocal influence vis-à-vis the political actor, irrespective of whether this influence is based directly or indirectly upon normative or strategic claims but this influence varies according to context, structured within the three interaction marketplaces the make up the political exchange of value (Henneberg and Ormrod 2013).

Therefore, this paper argues that in the political marketing context, stakeholders are:

context-specific actors that can directly and indirectly influence and be influenced by the behaviour and ideology of political actors

4. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper has been to briefly discuss issues that impact on how the stakeholder concept can be defined in the political marketing context. We argue that it is necessary for academics and practitioners to look beyond purely strategic criteria for understanding relevant stakeholders and towards a broader emphasis on *reciprocal influence* as a guide to managerial decision-making. This will have the added benefit for researchers of enabling a focus on the influence of stakeholders rather than on specific stakeholders that may not be relevant or even exist across political systems.

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