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# The product, sales and market-oriented party

## How Labour learnt to market the product, not just the presentation

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**Abstract** *Comprehensive political marketing informs how parties determine their policies and organisation, not just how they campaign. This article applies the marketing concepts of product, sales and market orientation, combined with tools such as market intelligence, to party behaviour as a whole. Producing a comprehensive theoretical framework, it explores how a product, sales and market-oriented party would behave and go through a marketing process. This framework is used to analyse the British Labour Party, showing how Labour moved from a product-oriented approach in 1983, through to a sales orientation in 1987, finally achieving a market orientation – and electoral success – in 1997. This demonstrates the potential of political marketing to deepen our understanding of a wide range of political behaviour.*

Comprehensive political marketing holds the potential to develop our understanding of a wide range of political behaviour. Marketing concepts as well as techniques can be applied not just to how political organisations communicate with their market, but how they determine their behaviour or “product”. Taking the marketing concepts of product, sales and market-orientation, combined with marketing techniques, this article seeks to create an integrated and comprehensive theoretical framework of how political parties behave when they use political marketing and illustrates this with an analysis of the British Labour Party.

### **Political marketing and political parties**

Political marketing is about political organisations adapting business-marketing concepts and techniques to help achieve their goals. Political parties, interest groups and local councils are amongst those entities that increasingly conduct market intelligence to identify the concerns of those they serve, change their behaviour to meet those demands and communicate their “product offering” more effectively. The dominant thread of political marketing research has been in political communication[1] and, as noted by Butler and Collins (1996, p. 32) in the last special issue on political marketing, studies have neglected comprehensive utilisation of marketing theory.

Here, we set out a more comprehensive theoretical framework, using comprehensive political marketing (CPM) (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, chapter one). This is distinguishable from previous work in five respects:

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**1161**

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- (1) CPM views political marketing as more than simply political communication.
- (2) CPM applies marketing to the whole behaviour of a political organisation. In this article, therefore, marketing is applied to party behaviour as a whole: not simply how they campaign, or how individual candidates organise, but how parties design their “product”. Analysis is made of behaviour at the beginning through to end of an electoral cycle (not just the election campaign) and includes the leadership, MPs (and candidates), membership, staff, symbols, constitution, activities such as party conferences and policies.
- (3) CPM uses marketing concepts, not just techniques: the product, sales and market-orientation as well as market intelligence, product design and promotion. This article incorporates the use of marketing techniques and the 4Ps to create a marketing process for each type of party.
- (4) CPM integrates political science literature into the analysis. Marketing is integrated and adapted to suit the understanding gained from traditional study of parties. The party’s ‘product’ is therefore defined to include all the aspects of parties we study.
- (5) CPM adapts marketing theory to suit the differing nature of politics. The article changes the standard 4Ps of product, price, promotion and place to create more appropriate activities for party behaviour.

Comprehensive political marketing requires a greater integration and mix of literatures than has previously been attempted. In doing so it does not completely override, nor claim complete originality from, previous work. By design, it incorporates understanding from a wide range of areas within political science as well as the marketing literature. But it goes further than those such as Niffenegger (1989), Wring (1994-1995), Newman (1994, p. 12 and 32), and Sackman (1996), Scammell (1996), Wring (1996) and O’Cass (1996) in the last special issue. It builds on previous work to push the political marketing field on further[2]. It integrates theoretical concepts with empirical illustration[3], exploring how the Labour Party went through all three orientations from 1983 to 1997, as outlined in Figure 1.

### The product-oriented party and Labour in 1983

A product-oriented party argues for what it stands for and believes in. It assumes that voters will realise that it is right and vote for it. It refuses to change its ideas or product even if it fails to gain electoral or membership support. The behaviour of the Labour Party in 1983 most closely resembled a product orientation. It offered a programme far removed from the concerns of

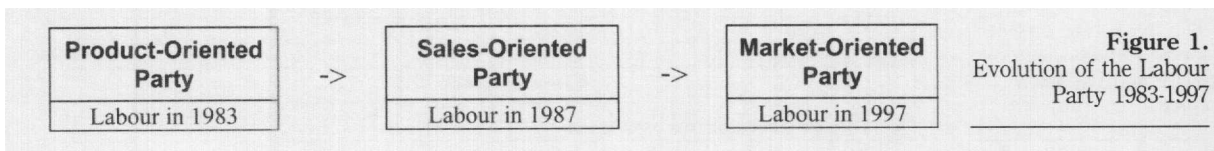


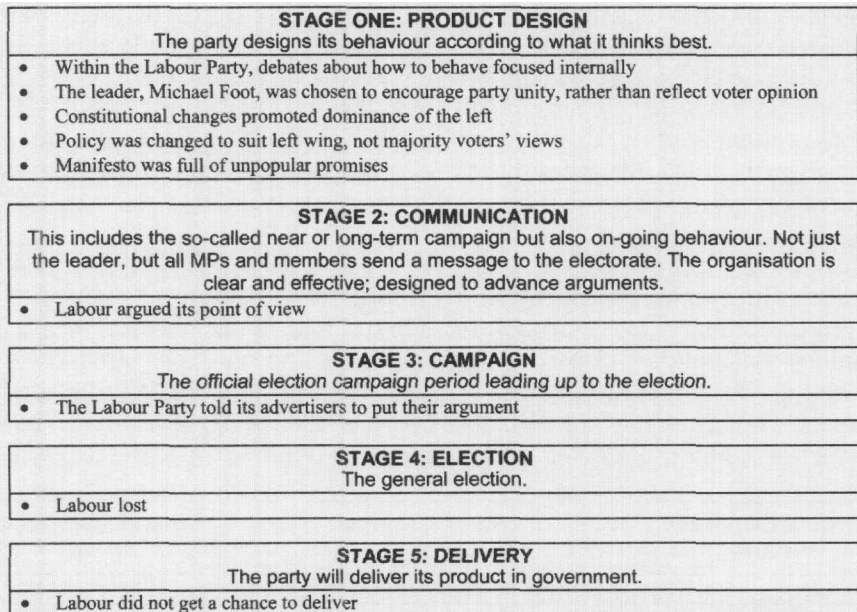
Figure 1.  
Evolution of the Labour Party 1983-1997

the majority of voters. Figure 2 sets out how a product-oriented party goes through the marketing process and shows how Labour's behaviour more closely followed this model.

Labour's approach in 1983 leaned towards a product orientation. The Party's left wing became dominant both organisationally and ideologically and was not concerned with designing their product to respond to voters. They simply wanted to make their argument. The Party's manifesto was unpopular with the majority of voters. A product orientation did not win the election, however. Labour lost the election, winning only 209 seats and 28 per cent of the overall vote. Its membership also declined. As Whyte (1988, pp. 48-9) observed, "some members of the Party persist in their error, when they claim that they lost the election because their policies were badly presented and misunderstood" – a reaction which caused Mr Healey to quote Oscar Wilde – "The play had been a great success; it was the audience which was at fault". British electoral conditions however are such that voters will not support parties that simply appeal for support on the basis that they are right or are arguing for a normatively-valuable ideology.

### The sales-orientated party and Labour in 1987

A sales-orientated party focuses on selling its argument to voters. It retains its pre-determined product design, but recognises that voters may not want it. Using market intelligence to understand their response to its behaviour, the party employs the latest advertising and communication techniques to persuade voters that it is right. A sales-oriented party does not change its behaviour to suit what people want, but tries to make people want what it



**Figure 2.**  
The marketing process  
for a product-oriented  
party and Labour in  
1983

offers. Labour's attempts to win the 1987 election utilised the sales orientation. They focused efforts on designing the most professional and effective communication and campaign. In following this approach, Labour went through a marketing process for a sales-oriented party, as outlined in Figure 3.

The product, sales and market-oriented party

<b>STAGE ONE: PRODUCT DESIGN</b>
The party designs its behaviour according to what it thinks best.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Labour leader Neil Kinnock was elected to unite the Party and appease its left-wing; but lacked wider electoral appeal</li> <li>• The Labour membership (or sections of it such as militant and the trade unions) were unpopular; the Party conference/hard left continued to argue against changing policy to suit voters' views</li> <li>• Constitutionally, MPs remained subject to local de-selection</li> <li>• Staff with professional expertise, e.g. Peter Mandelson, were recruited to run communications; advertising agency was appointed</li> <li>• A new symbol was adopted: a red rose</li> <li>• There were still unpopular policies in the manifesto, e.g. unilateralist policy on defence, expansion of state ownership and intervention in economy; poor image on economic management and unions</li> </ul>
<b>STAGE TWO: MARKET INTELLIGENCE</b>
The party aims to discover voters' response to product; who does not support the party but might, so communications can be targeted on them. Informally it 'keeps an ear to the ground,' talks to party members, creates policy groups, meets with the public. Formally it uses quantitative research (electoral results, public opinion polls and privately commissioned studies) and qualitative research such as a focus group.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour appointed MORI early on to conduct surveys, polling and a panel study; especially of target groups and marginal seats to inform campaign design</li> <li>• Focus-group research was conducted by Philip Gould</li> <li>• This revealed weaknesses in product; and the results fed into design of campaign</li> </ul>
<b>STAGE THREE: COMMUNICATION</b>
This includes the so-called near or long-term campaign but also on-going behaviour. Not just the leader, but all MPs and members send a message to the electorate. Attempts are made to ensure all communication helps achieve electoral success, and to influence others in the communication process. The organisation is clear and effective; designed to advance arguments. It also makes use of selling techniques such as direct mail and targeted communications to persuade voters to agree with the Party.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour conducted an audit of the existing communication operation</li> <li>• The whole system was consequently re-organised; more power given to Director of Campaigns and Communication; Shadow Communications Agency created; more use made of mass media</li> <li>• The new Party symbol helped to down-play the Party's reputation for only representing working class</li> <li>• The Party conference was more stage-managed</li> <li>• Several mini-campaigns were run in years running up to election</li> </ul>
<b>STAGE FOUR: CAMPAIGN</b>
The official election campaign period leading up to the election. The party continues to communicate effectively as in Stage 3.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This was well-planned in advance; effectively organised</li> <li>• Good use was made of photo opportunities, timing of events determined to suit television news deadlines; effective election-broadcast focused on leader</li> </ul>
<b>STAGE 4: ELECTION</b>
The general election.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour lost</li> </ul>
<b>STAGE 5: DELIVERY</b>
The party will deliver its product in government.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour did not get a chance to deliver</li> </ul>

**Figure 3.**  
The marketing process for a sales-oriented party and Labour in 1987

As Hewitt and Mandelson (1989, p. 54) said, their efforts “won the campaign, yes, but it could not win the election”. Although the leader tried to change aspects of the Labour Party, the overall focus was not on changing design of the product to suit voters’ demands but achieving a more effective presentation. Labour lost the election, with only a slight improvement up to 32 per cent of the popular vote, and membership figures declined from 1983 to 1987.

### **A market-oriented party and Labour in 1997**

A market-oriented party designs its behaviour to provide voter satisfaction. It uses market intelligence to identify voter demands, then designs its product to suit them. It does not attempt to change what people think, but to deliver what they need and want. A market-oriented party will not simply offer voters what they want, because it needs to ensure that it can deliver the product on offer. If it fails to deliver, voters will become dissatisfied and the party will risk losing electoral support in the long-term. The Labour Party in 1997 is a classic example of a market-oriented party. A market-oriented party goes through a longer and more complex marketing process, displayed in Figure 4 alongside empirical analysis of Labour’s behaviour.

The new leader Tony Blair fully accepted the need for a market orientation; full-scale market intelligence was conducted and many aspects of the product altered to suit voters’ demands. The new product was communicated so effectively that by the time of the election campaign the party had little to sell: voters already knew what they had to offer. The approach had extremely positive results: Labour won a landslide victory. Labour won the election with a swing from the Conservatives of over 10 per cent, attracting 43.2 per cent of the popular vote and 419 seats with a majority of 179. The Party also took seats normally considered unwinnable by any Party other than the Conservatives and attracted a wide base of support, in terms of geographical distribution and social and age groups. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, membership numbers rose from around 280,000 in 1993 to 400,000 by the 1997 election.

### **Importance of the three orientations**

The three orientations are very different in nature. It is important to note what is “missing” from the process for the first two orientations: there are certain stages that only a market-oriented party would go through. There are also significant differences in the order. Like a market-oriented party, a party with a sales orientation engages in market intelligence but only after designing its behaviour, in order to determine how to sell its product to voters. With the market-oriented party, identifying voters’ needs and wants comes before a party determines how to behave. This results in potentially divergent products.

A product-oriented party is most similar to the conventional view of politics. It captures what parties might simply stand for and argue what they believe in. In some ways it might be argued that the day of the product-oriented party is over. However even today parties adopt a product orientation: one recent

**STAGE TWO: MARKET INTELLIGENCE**

The party aims to discover voters' response to product; who does not support the party but might, so communications can be targeted on them. Informally it 'keeps an ear to the ground,' talks to party members, creates policy groups, meets with the public. Formally it uses quantitative research (electoral results, public opinion polls and privately commissioned studies) and qualitative research such as a focus group.

- Post-election analysis was conducted, focusing on traditional Labour supporters who had voted Tory
- Internal discussion occurred through policy groups
- NOP conducted surveys and polls and focus groups were run
- Proposed policies were even pre-tested

**STAGE TWO: PRODUCT DESIGN**

The party designs its behaviour in response to voter demands, found from Stage 1.

- The new leader, Tony Blair, had less linked to traditional labour movement; pro-change; a strong leader; popular with voters
- MPs and candidates were under strict leadership
- Members rights were increased; one member, one vote achieved; the Party distanced from Trade Unions
- Increased use made of staff with professional expertise, especially those closest to the leader, e.g. Alastair Campbell
- Clause IV of the constitution altered to remove unpopular commitment to state ownership
- The slogan *New Labour, New Britain* was adopted
- Specific pledges were made in issue-areas most important to voters, e.g. education, health service; general commitment to fiscal prudence, low government spending and income tax
- A mini-manifesto was launched a year before election to pre-test policies; the final manifesto was popular

**STAGE THREE: PRODUCT ADJUSTMENT**

The party then adjusts its model product design to consider:

**achievability:** ensures promises can be delivered in government  
**internal reaction:** history/ideological framework  
**competition:** promotes opposition weaknesses and highlight own strengths  
**support:** focuses on winning support party needs to win power; use target marketing

- Specific pledges for delivery were short and limited; included details on how it would achieve them, e.g. cutting waiting lists in the NHS by reducing money spent on bureaucracy
- Internal members were consulted on changes to Clause IV and balloted on manifesto
- Past weaknesses removed e.g. reduction of link with trade unions and reassurances made on income tax and economic management; Conservative weaknesses exploited
- 'Middle England' voters were targeted especially in communications

**STAGE FOUR: IMPLEMENTATION**

The product design is implemented throughout party. A majority need to broadly accept the new behaviour and comply with it.

- A strong leadership style ensured high party unity; public accepted the Party had changed

**STAGE FIVE: COMMUNICATION**

This includes the so-called near or long-term campaign but also on-going behaviour. Not just the leader, but all MPs and members send a message to the electorate. Attempts are made to ensure all communication helps achieve electoral success, and to influence others in the communication process. The organisation is clear and effective; it uses selling techniques to convey the message (rather than change voters' demands).

- Communications were tightly run from new centre in Millbank Tower
- A strategy to gain positive relationship with press was pursued
- The media were fed positive stories
- Party figures who stepped outside official product designed were reprimanded
- The product was well communicated to voters before campaign even started

(Continued)

**Figure 4.**  
The marketing process for a market-oriented party and Labour in 1997



<p style="text-align: center;"><b>STAGE SIX: CAMPAIGN</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">The official election campaign period leading up to the election. The party continues to communicate effectively as in Stage 5.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This was tightly run and well-planned; good communication within party organisation</li><li>• Repeated the message Labour had changed</li><li>• A rebuttal unit dealt with criticism</li><li>• Campaigning on ground focused on target seats needed to win</li><li>• Posters reinforced Party's pledges; photo-opportunities used</li></ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>STAGE SEVEN: ELECTION</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">The general election.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Labour won with 419 seats and 43 percent of the popular vote; membership also rose</li></ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>STAGE EIGHT: DELIVERY</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Party will deliver product in government.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Party focused on delivery; issued annual reports on its performance; delivered on constitutional reform but voter-dissatisfaction with quality of public services</li></ul>

Figure 4.

example is the Conservative Party because it became increasingly dismissive of voters' concerns and dissatisfaction during 1992-1997[4].

The concept of a sales-orientated party helps to explain why political marketing is often criticised as not being new or as nothing more than spin-doctors and sound bites. Substantial political communication literature already exists to demonstrate that politicians use communication techniques and if parties adopt this approach they do focus on using selling techniques. However a sales orientation adds two significant contributions to our understanding of this type of behaviour. First, in terms of the concept, if political organisations adopt this focus they will be likely to produce the most effective presentation of the political product because all energy is put into communication. Second, in terms of techniques, communication is designed in conjunction with results from market intelligence and can be used with marketing techniques, such as target marketing and direct mail. This diverges slightly from Scammell (1999, p. 733) who, working without the differentiated three orientations, notes that it could be argued that the difference between Labour before and after the 1987 campaign might be the use of marketing techniques and the adoption of the marketing approach. Rather, the difference is explained by differentiating between a sales orientation and a market orientation. Techniques such as targeted communications were used in both periods of behaviour, but after 1987 Labour moved towards a market orientation; whereas before its behaviour represented more a triumph of a sales orientation. Similarly O'Shaughnessy's (1990, p. 2) comments that Labour's 1987 campaign "was not driven by any marketing concept" are also in need of refinement: the party did not use the market-oriented concept but it did use the sales-oriented concept. Another important aspect of the sales-oriented party is that such parties do engage in persuasion and try to make voters want what the party offers. This type of party is therefore most amenable to the normative criticism conventionally surrounding political marketing.

Nevertheless, the market-oriented party is arguably even more contentious although for different reasons. The idea that political parties should design



their product to suit voters, rather than argue their case, goes against traditional views of politics. Alternatively it could be contended that it shows parties are becoming more responsive to people, which might be seen as good for democracy. Using market intelligence, parties gain a better understanding of voters' needs and wants. Parties which adopt the market-oriented concept focus energy on trying to satisfy voters' demands, rather than arguing or selling their own views. Either way market-oriented politics has significant implications for parties and the political system as a whole[5]. This discussion also shows the importance of using CPM: utilising not just marketing techniques but concepts and applying it to the whole behaviour of an organisation.

### **Implications for electoral consequences, politics and marketing**

This analysis implies that the orientation parties adopt has electoral consequences. A product and sales orientation did not win for Labour, which suggests that if major parties want to win general elections in Britain today they need to adopt a market orientation. Between 1983 and 1997, Labour learnt to market not just the presentation but the product. Not all parties will follow a market orientation at all times, however. Keith (1960) observed how businesses developed over time from product through to sales to marketing orientations, but successful product-oriented businesses are still to be found today (see, amongst others Foxall (1989, p. 13) and Houston (1986, p. 85) for further discussion). They may, however, be in danger of losing their market share, as will product-oriented parties. As Lees-Marshment (2001a) outlines, today the recommended position for major parties seeking to win a general election has to be the market-orientation. Voters no longer accept a product or sales-oriented attitude. They are more educated, exposed to different points of view and more critical and demanding of their politicians. Parties are moving towards the market-oriented party model because they know that is the only one that works. The implications of this for the next British election are significant. Currently both major parties, Conservative and Labour, are attempting to follow this model. Labour now faces the obstacle of having been in government and needing to deliver on previous product promises. It would however be unwise to return to its previous orientations when it knows it lost electoral credibility through that type of behaviour and offered itself to the electorate in 1997 on the basis of being a new, responsive Labour Party. The Conservatives, under William Hague, have sought to engage in market intelligence, identifying core voter concerns especially amongst its traditional supporters and developing policies to suit. This has laid both open to criticism: Hague for being too populist, Blair a follower of fashion and focus groups. Yet a return to sales or product orientation at any time in the next decade seems unlikely and inadvisable.

Nevertheless this argument raises more questions. First, it challenges standard views of politics within political science (see Lees-Marshment, 2001b) although it may reflect the contemporary views of politics today held by

general political observers, including politicians themselves. It may also raise questions for marketing itself: should marketing, originating in the business arena, be transformed and altered and applied to the political sphere? As already indicated, there are normative issues here. A product-oriented party is more traditional and more easily accepted. The sales-oriented party suggests parties use complex selling techniques to persuade voters to support them, which hints of manipulation. The idea of a market-oriented party may bring politics into disrepute, for all the reasons suggested by the current criticism of the major party leaders as outlined above. It raises questions about belief, ideology, integrity: aren't political leaders supposed to lead rather than follow? It may also harm the reputation of marketing. A defence is still possible, however. Market-oriented behaviour is more responsive to the public and the application of marketing to politics may render our politicians more focused on delivering rather than simply talking about change, it may ensure they place their efforts where the public most wants them, it may guard against arrogance, complacency and dogma. The debate about the consequences of CPM is set to run for a while yet, indeed it has hardly begun, but it should be a lively and important one for politics and marketing.

### **The utility of political marketing perspective**

Political marketing analysis helps to explain how parties behave and offers the potential to predict the consequences. Obviously it has limits. The three party types are only ideal: for instance, at the time of the 1992 election Labour was somewhere in between a sales and a market orientation. Even in the run-up to the 1997 election Labour did not follow the market-oriented model completely. Using marketing is not necessarily easy in practice: party (or any organisational) change is typically difficult to bring about. Kohli and Jaworski (1990, p. 16) note how changes in orientation take place slowly: it may take several years to introduce a market orientation to an organisation. With regard to the market-oriented party in particular, the idea that parties aim to provide voter satisfaction is problematic. Measuring satisfaction is difficult, but we can (and parties do) use polls, surveys and focus groups which evaluate party behaviour. Even if a party wins a general election this does not mean it will provide satisfaction. Market intelligence may be open to flaws but British parties have been extremely effective in identifying voters' demands. Implementation is not easy to do within any organisation, especially a political party, but it is important that internal members broadly accept the new product design, otherwise voters will receive a mixed and off-putting message about how the party might act in a future government. With regard to delivery, conventional wisdom suggests that parties never keep their promises once in power, but that does not mean parties never will. The current Labour government is extremely focused on delivery. To remove this element of political marketing would take out one of the fundamental characteristics of marketing. If there is a potential problem with it, it is merely more important to study.

The other reservation to make is with regard to the alleged link between party orientation and electoral behaviour. It cannot be proved beyond doubt that it was the particular orientation that lost or won Labour general elections. Obviously the behaviour of the other parties in competition need to be taken into account but even then any conclusions reached lead analysis into the minefield of voting behaviour. It may be that political marketing analysis will rarely meet positivist behavioural tests: as Scammell (1999, pp. 736-7) observed, political marketing has yet to demonstrate effectiveness clearly. This does not mean it is wrong.

Clearly further research could be done in this area. CPM could be used to study different parties in different countries, but the use and effectiveness of each orientation will vary according to various factors. These include the individual party's type (minor/major), dominant goal, the country's notion and structure of party and institutional factors like the electoral and party system. Political marketing may also hold the potential to observe and even advise political organisations on how they keep in touch with their market. As Kotler and Levy (1969, p. 15) argued in their seminal article on broadening the concept of marketing, marketing "can keep in constant touch with the organisation's consumers, read their needs, develop 'products' that meet these needs, and build a programme of communications to express the organisation's purposes". Indeed, CPM may be applied to other areas of politics: to interest groups, local government, the civil service, the media and the public services.

### Conclusions

This article has shown that political marketing, if studied comprehensively, has significant potential to advance the understanding of political behaviour. CPM makes it clear that marketing concepts as well as techniques can be applied to the design of behaviour, rather than just its presentation. If the field takes the broader CPM approach, it becomes clear that political marketing asks different questions, such as how political organisations listen to the people they seek to serve, determine what they offer to the public, and how they achieve their goals. It connects study of an organisation to analysis of its market: parties and voters, the health service and patients, interest groups and participants. Comprehensive political marketing moves the field of political marketing distinctly beyond mere discussion of communication and stimulates wider analysis of organisational behaviour that will in time add greatly to our understanding of the political arena.

### Notes

1. For a review of existing literature, see Scammell (1999).
2. For a further theoretical detail on the framework and its origins (particularly with regard to marketing literature), see Lees-Marshment (1999, 2001a).
3. Empirical illustration draws on a wide range of literature. Covering a 20-year period, it is too exhaustive to list here, but includes academic accounts, direct contributions from politicians and party staff, party documents and statistical measurements of voter

evaluations as provided by polls and the British Election Study. For further detail see Lees-Marshment (2001b).

4. For further details see Lees-Marshment (2001b, chapter 5).
5. For further discussion, see Lees-Marshment (2001b, chapter 6).

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