

Special issue papers

Brands and political loyalty

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Abstract

Incumbent political parties, like the providers of commercial goods and services, are seeking to secure repeat sales at a time when consumer loyalty is under threat from proliferating choice and social realignment. As with other large and infrequent purchases, parties need to use marketing not only to win a sale (an election) but also to minimise post-purchase dissonance and encourage brand loyalty so that consumers will buy their product in the future. Successful parties develop brand attributes in their leaders to maintain relationships with supporters beyond the initial transaction, although in doing so they create problems for leadership succession.

Taking its cue from early accounts of political parties being sold like soap powder, political marketing has developed into a recognised sub-discipline of political science.¹ Political marketing analyses are premised on two assumptions. First, that the choices voters make at election time are analogous to the choices consumers make between commercial products or services. Secondly, and by extension, that parallels exist between marketing a consumer product or service and promoting a political party. Such analyses vary in the degree of explanatory power that they attribute to commercial marketing models. Some assume strong parallels between commodity marketing and political advocacy.² Others make weaker assumptions about shared terminology and techniques.³ Many are careful to highlight the dangers of taking the analogy too far, and of

overlooking the differences between promoting a set of policies and marketing a commercial product.⁴

Existing political marketing analyses tend to have two limiting characteristics. The first is that they are generally applied to election campaigns, where there are structured opportunities to 'sell'; scholars have come more slowly to the recognition that politicians pursue promotional strategies just as assiduously once elected. The administrations of Reagan and Thatcher, which retained close links with campaign advisers and pursued aggressive news management strategies, sharply exposed the need for marketing analysis from within government. Blumenthal's *The Permanent Campaign* and Cockerell, Hennessy and Walker's *Sources Close to the Prime Minister* were early efforts by journalists to capture this dimension of the governing process.⁵ However, like the academic analyses that later

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followed,⁶ these approaches have been of limited value. They tend to be descriptive, telling the story of how Thatcher, Reagan, Clinton or Blair used the communications machine rather than developing and testing an explanatory model of communicating as an incumbent. Further, such analyses tend to present governing as a sub-category of campaigning. Promotion from within office is perceived either as an extension of the winning campaign, or part of the 'long campaign' that precedes the next election. Similarities of personnel and tactics between campaigning and governing are taken as indications that the strategy remained unchanged from the campaign to the incumbency.

A second limitation of political marketing analyses is that they tend to offer simplistic and outdated models of marketing, failing to encompass the changing paradigms in what Henneberg calls the 'mother discipline'.⁷ Political marketing has caught up slowly with the shift within commercial marketing from a commodity focus to a brand focus, reflected in the rise in market value of 'intangible' assets.⁸ There is no political variant of the diverse marketing literature that defines and dissects the role of the brand. Discussions of intangible aspects of political appeal have tended to focus on narrower concepts such as image and reputation.⁹ Where branding has entered political marketing analyses the brand has been equated with the party name, and used as a descriptive term rather than as an explanatory variable with strategic implications.¹⁰ It is helpful to consider how a brand focus can improve understanding of political decision making, and, in particular, repeat purchasing at elections.

BRAND LOYALTY IN POLITICS

There are several characteristics of a brand that render it a useful explanatory concept for analyses of voter choice. First, brands simplify choice and reduce dependence on detailed product information, in much the same way as party labels relieve voters of the need to familiarise themselves with all the party's policies.¹¹ Secondly, brands provide reassurance by promising standardisation and replicability, generating trust between producer and consumer, much as parties emphasise unity and coherence in order to build up voter trust.¹² Thirdly, brands, like parties, are aspirational, evoking a particular vision of the 'good life' or holding out the promise of personal enhancement.¹³ Fourthly, to be successful, brands must be perceived as authentic and value-based, necessitating congruence between the internal values of the product or company and its external message. In the same way, successful parties must link their external presentational strategies to a set of core values, if they are to retain voter support.¹⁴ In politics and the marketplace, voters and consumers must negotiate the conflicts between loyalty to trusted brands and the novelty of the new, while making sense of complex and conflicting product information. For fast-moving consumer goods such choices must be negotiated on a daily basis, whereas political choices are more infrequent. However, even within the political marketplace there is diversity: the 'big' purchases every four to five years at a general election; the 'second-order' purchases of local and European elections; and the regular choices about which party's version of events or policy options should be accepted and endorsed.

Conceiving political parties as brands helps to explain two aspects of voter decision making. First, party brands provide a basis for long-term loyalty in an environment where products (policies) are fairly fluid. Initial patterns of support — for political parties as for other infrequent purchases such as financial products — are likely to be shaped by family, but the process of detachment from these formative social settings appears to be intensifying.¹⁵ A well-studied process of political dealignment has left many citizens without political loyalties, and an increasing number inactive in the political marketplace.¹⁶ Many supporters remain loyal though dissatisfied through fear of taking a risk with the unknown, turning out at elections to back a party for which they have little enthusiasm.¹⁷ Levels of consumer dissatisfaction and withdrawal from the commercial marketplace are less pronounced, although the literature on post-materialism indicates a body of people who are less concerned with acquisition and market participation.¹⁸ In this more fluid environment, parties and companies must work harder to build long-term relationships with supporters to ensure repeat sales.

A barrier to loyalty in politics, as in the marketplace, is the proliferation of new products. Consumers and voters have more choice than in the past. In the commercial sector, they negotiate a marketplace in which the range of choice is not limited to local stores but incorporates the seemingly infinite choices available on the internet. In politics in the UK, the number of political parties has proliferated. Over 130 parties stood at the general election in 2005, up from 30 in 1979. Even if novelty candidates are ex-

cluded, it is still possible to identify in most constituencies five or six parties that are realistic challengers in local, regional or national elections.¹⁹ For voters the complexity of choice has been increased by the introduction of new electoral systems for different contests. A voter in London in May 2004 would have been voting on the same day using three different electoral systems for the mayoral elections, Greater London Assembly and European parliament. Voters must make choices between a diverse range of parties in a variety of systems, reconciling tensions between long-standing loyalties with the appeal of newer parties with narrow, more focused messages. The success of the UK Independence Party in pushing the Liberal Democrats into fourth place during the European parliament elections in 2004 highlights the willingness of voters to experiment with the new, particularly in so-called 'second-order' elections.²⁰

A second feature of brand-based analyses of politics is that they help to explain how voters make decisions in an environment of informational complexity. A brand focus steers analysts away from unrealistic assumptions about political knowledge. It is known from economic and sociological theory that asymmetries of information, bounded rationality, herding behaviour, 'satisficing' (settling for what is readily available rather than striving for maximum rewards), and concerns about status and belonging create the lens through which consumers (and voters) make choices about cost and quality.²¹ Accompanying product proliferation is the unprecedented access voters and consumers have to information about the products on offer. In addition

to newspapers' expanding consumer supplements, the internet provides an enormous amount of information about products, offering price comparability and personal testimonies about particular products. Similarly, political parties now disseminate more information than ever before, through their websites and e-mail listservs. Online news sites, message boards and weblogs provide an unprecedented amount of detail and commentary. While the availability of such information can assist consumers and voters in making choices, it raises the opportunity costs of making an informed assessment. The existence of much information that does not come through the trusted filter of a newspaper or a pressure group leaves consumers and voters with the complex job of assessing its reliability. The high costs of acquiring information compared with the likely payoffs act as a disincentive to become informed.²² Studies have suggested that voters rely on cognitive shortcuts as a substitute for detailed information.²³ These shortcuts are developed on the basis of impressionistic perceptions of candidate and party, justified by *post hoc* rationalisations.²⁴ The clear parallels between this process and the way that consumers use brands in the commercial marketplace suggest that parties can gain electoral payoffs if they understand and utilise branding insights.

BRANDING INCUMBENTS

All political parties face the challenge of fostering an attractive brand, but there are distinctive challenges for incumbent parties. Incumbent parties are under pressure to sustain their winning coalitions from within office

in order to secure 'repeat purchases'. In a political terrain of declining party membership and voter dealignment, successful candidates cannot assume that the positive impressions that brought them to victory will keep their winning voter coalitions together until the next election.²⁵ They must build relationships with voters in order to secure positive endorsements, whereas opposition parties may be able to secure support simply through a policy of differentiation. Thus the challenge for incumbent parties can be conceived as one of effective relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing is a useful focus for politics, because it moves away from a transactional focus on the point of sale, ie the election.²⁶ It also avoids the assumption, embodied in the term 'permanent campaign', that election campaigning and governing blend into one.²⁷ It recognises that political parties, like companies, must retain existing supporters as well as converting new ones.²⁸ The value of relationship marketing for politics has been noted by a number of authors, although the distinctive strategic position of incumbent parties has not been discussed. It is a process of reducing what de Chernatony and McDonald call 'post-purchase dissonance'.²⁹ In the relationship marketing approach attention is focused on what Grönroos calls the *promise concept*.³⁰ As he puts it, 'Fulfilling promises that have been given is equally important as a means of achieving customer satisfaction, retention of the customer base, and long-term profitability'.³¹

Egan notes that relationship marketing may be particularly important in sectors where purchases are far apart: 'Throughout the intervening period

the supplier may be using marketing communications to keep their product at the “front of mind” of the consumer.³² Egan uses the example of long-term financial purchases to illustrate his point but his comments have clear relevance for politics. For incumbent parties they can do this through securing the credit for successful policies while blaming others (their predecessors or ‘globalisation’) for unsuccessful ones. However, as White and de Chernatony argue, parties must offer emotional as well as functional payoffs to the electorate.³³ They must develop appeals that resonate with the aspirations and instincts of voters as well as showing a capacity for competent policy delivery. Such an approach can form the basis of an ongoing relationship with voters, helping to secure repeat purchases.

O’Shaughnessy argues that political parties fail to recognise the importance of relationship marketing and branding.³⁴ However, it is possible to argue that it is sensitivity to the symbolic and emotional aspects of relationship building that helps to explain successes and failures in recent election campaigns in the UK and USA, in particular the success of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and George W. Bush. It can also help to illuminate the failures of single-term politicians like George Bush senior and John Major. These examples are discussed in more detail below. Further it can cast light on the difficulties that successors to successfully branded leaders face in winning voter support. In addition to Bush senior and Major, such problems have been experienced by Al Gore and may be a problem for Tony Blair’s eventual successor, looking likely to be

Gordon Brown. The role of these party leaders (or *de facto* party leaders in the case of presidents) in personalising the brand needs further exploration.

PARTY LEADERS AS BRANDS

The importance of political leaders to a party brand has been noted.³⁵ Smith gives examples of party images tested by MORI, and shows the interrelatedness of leader and party brands.³⁶ A MORI poll in the 2001 election showed that voters said that image (of leaders and parties) was a greater determinant of voting behaviour than the parties’ policies.³⁷ For parties seeking to develop relationships with voters over several elections, orienting their appeal around a popular leader helps to consolidate the party’s appeal. This is particularly the case given a media environment that is increasingly focused on personality.³⁸ Through using the party leader as the brand, a shortcut to sum up all the desirable attributes of the party, it is possible for parties to reconfigure loyalty in an era where institutional ties are weak.³⁹

Taking the successes first — those party leaders who were able to secure repeat purchases through re-election — it is possible to identify a number of common themes: a politician with apparent conviction and an acute sensitivity to public opinion, success at identifying and promoting symbolic policies, and an adeptness at securing personalised rather than general party acclaim. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan associated themselves with an era of smaller government, lower taxes, individual self-reliance and a robust defence policy. Butler and Collins note:

'Ronald Reagan garnered much support in US presidential elections by dwelling on themes — appealing to the masses with a broad focus, symbolism and emotiveness, rather than with the specific positions and programme that are followed only by the "political nation".⁴⁰

Scammell argues, 'Thatcherism was not so much as ideology, but more a style of leadership and a set of values'.⁴¹ While the detail of policies was shaped by their market, their appeal was that of a successful brand: simple, aspirational and clearly differentiated from those of the opposition. Despite public (or at least media) outrage at some of their policies — Reagan's Iran-contra adventures, Thatcher's remodelling of the NHS — they were leaders who successfully achieved repeat purchases. Indeed, they were never rejected by the voters; both left office for reasons other than electoral defeat.

In the leadership strategies of Clinton and Blair it is possible to see attempts by centre-left parties to replicate these strategies. Both leaders strived to develop simple, reassuring and credible messages, which distinguished them from opponents and resonated with the aspirations and values of voters. These premiers were particularly effective at differentiation from opponents and at appealing to voter aspirations, although the value dimension was problematic for leaders who much of the time looked too eager to please.⁴² Tony Blair became mired in repeated accusations of 'spin', which ultimately led to the resignation of his communications adviser.⁴³ Clinton struggled in his early years of office to develop a distinctive message which left him with the reputation of being a weak president. As Klein puts it, 'the

notion that Clinton had no "core values" was becoming a Beltway cliché'.⁴⁴ However, they too were never rejected by the voters. Clinton left office after the maximum two terms, and Blair has indicated that he will step down as Labour party leader before the next general election.

These successful political brands can be contrasted with the electoral failures of their successors: George Bush senior and John Major. In both cases these leaders won one election but were unable to create relationships with voters to secure repeat purchases. Both leaders attempted to differentiate themselves from their predecessors but in doing so were unable to develop positive narratives to appeal to voters. Major attempted to develop a political brand that was more conciliatory and caring than that offered by Thatcher but failed to marshal symbolic achievements or promote strategic vision during his time in office.⁴⁵ Similarly, George Bush senior offered a more hands-on and policy-oriented presidential style but could not offer a distinctive set of values — and indeed was portrayed in the cartoon *Doonesbury* as an 'invisible man' for his lack of political presence.⁴⁶

For the purpose of understanding political brands these examples are instructive. The successful leaders differentiated themselves not only from the opposition but also from elements of their own party, thereby building problems of succession into their appeal. Reagan, Thatcher, Clinton and Blair defined their personal brands in opposition to traditional elements within their party, and continued to do so even after gaining office. They emphasised the break with the past, rather than continuity, a perhaps

surprising tendency given the need to retain loyalty. Clinton, for example, offered people ‘a choice that “is not conservative or liberal, Democratic or Republican” and depicted himself as one of “a new generation of Democrats”’.⁴⁷ After the Republican success in the 1994 Congressional elections, he developed a strategy of ‘triangulation’, ‘a third position, not just in between the old positions of the two parties but above them as well’.⁴⁸ Similarly, Blair continued to evoke the spectre of old Labour after taking office, associating it with the ‘forces of conservatism’.⁴⁹ In that sense it is more appropriate to see these leaders’ appeal as based on personal rather than institutional brands. Their popularity in office did little to secure the long-term success of their parties, and may indeed have hampered the opportunity to deliver repeat purchases by weakening voters’ affinity with party brands. Just as the line between celebrity and product brands has blurred, as music and film stars use their names as brands on which to hang product lines, so it is possible to see politicians promoting their party on the coat-tails of their personal appeal.

The case of Al Gore is instructive, and may offer clues to the likely success of Blair’s successor. Gore was less successful than Bush senior and Major in that he failed to achieve an initial sale, let alone a repeat purchase. Many of the same problems of differentiation attended Gore like these other leaders, however. In the final two years of the Clinton presidency, as Clinton was reasserting his political authority in the wake of the Lewinsky scandal, Gore was distancing himself from the president to develop his own political appeal.⁵⁰ Ultimately this strategy was ill

conceived, as Gore failed to achieve credit for the economic vigour of the Clinton years, and did not develop his own distinctive political project. The lesson from this for Blair’s successor is that they must develop a brand that is distinctive from that of Blair, while offering a simple and aspirational narrative. For Gordon Brown, a man often described as lacking an ‘emotional hinterland’,⁵¹ the ability to offer voters an emotional as well as a functional promise, as White and de Chernatony put it, may prove elusive.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Three arguments have been made here. The first is that voters use brands in politics similarly to how consumers use brands in the marketplace: to reduce complexity in an environment of proliferating choice and information. The second is that brands are the basis for ongoing relationship marketing through which incumbent parties can keep their winning coalitions together in order to ensure repeat sales. The third is that successful party leaders have sought to promote personal brands by focusing on a small number of key attributes and by using policies as signalling devices. Successful leaders are those who are able to offer personalised brands, with simple, aspirational and consistent messages, built on a small number of symbolic policies rather than a broad legislative programme. Such leaders thrive by distinguishing themselves from their party brands rather than embracing them, and secure repeat purchases — re-election — by convincing voters that the alternative both from the opposition and from their own parties is unappealing. Problems of succession

arise from such a strategy, however. Recent popular and successful leaders in the UK and USA have been succeeded by leaders who failed to establish enduring relationships with voters.

This discussion has conflicting implications for politics. On the one hand it allows parties to thrive under charismatic leaders. On the other it makes it difficult for a party to sustain success once a charismatic leader leaves office. Parties need to make choices about whether leader-based brands represent the best hope of electoral success in a media environment which personalises and simplifies politics, or whether they might be able to sustain a party brand which could be the basis for longer-term repeat sales.

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