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Populism and political marketing: is the discipline still relevant?

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Abstract

This article offers a conceptual analysis of the response of political marketing scholarship to the rise of populism across the globe. It starts with the premise that, as it first emerged as a discipline, political marketing scholarship was closely allied to political science. For nearly 30 years, between the mid-1980s and mid-2010s, political marketing scholarship offered lessons to political science and communication studies about campaigning. It moved us from the *how* parties communicate to the *why*. The analytical power of the marketing approach provided insight that complemented conventional political communication approaches, which have been clustered around two basic ideas: the increasing institutional media power relative to politics and the transformative capacities of communication technology. Instead, analysing party campaigning behaviour as competitive marketing highlighted hitherto neglected areas, e.g: relationships between parties, members and voters, the significance of competitive positioning, market segmentation, and the importance of data and market research. Moreover, the brand concept broadened and deepened analytical thinking about the slippery idea of political image. However the shocks of the last 10 years – migration and economic crises, the pandemic, and the rise of populism across much of the world – have provoked soul-searching in the political science communities. Are conventional models up to the task of explaining new political realities, and above all: is democracy itself in danger? However, political marketing scholarship seems curiously detached from these urgent concerns. The article tests this by exploring the ways in which political marketing scholarship has dealt with populism. It analyses articles in the leading political marketing journal over 10 years and finds that, while these contribute to our knowledge of communication, they do not draw from specifically marketing concepts. This raises the question: is marketing still a useful way of understanding the political world? In what ways is political marketing scholarship relevant now?

Introduction

To what extent does political marketing research help us understand our political world? That question is the driver of this article in a year (2024) of some 70 national elections around the world, amid widespread claims of democracy in crisis and evidence of democratic backsliding across the globe. The primary focus here is populism, which over the last decade has been on a rising tide in much of the world but perhaps most notably in Europe and the Americas. Authoritarian or anti-pluralist populism, in particular, is implicated, both as symptom and cause, of our current democratic anxieties and has triggered an explosion of research in the social sciences, especially, of course, political science. This article investigates what

political marketing researchers have had to say about populism over the last 10 years, and indeed, how much they have had to say. In fact, we shall see, it is astonishing how little attention is paid to populism.

This article takes seriously a foundational claim of political marketing research as it emerged as a distinctive field through the 1990s and Noughties; that it can and should provide “an alternative research lens on politics itself” (Ormrod, Hennenberg, O’Shaughnessy, 2013: 193). Authors argued that the marketing perspective offered lessons to political science and communication studies (Scammell, 1999; Harrop, 1990). At one time political marketing seemed to lead the way. It offered new ways to analyse party and candidate behaviour; tools to examine competitive positioning and strategic options (Collins and Butler, 1996), to get a grip on the total political offer across representation, identity and policy; and it provided a fundamental new way to understand the perpetually thorny issue of political “image” within the burgeoning field of brand research and the value of intangibles. For 20 or so years, the marketing approach seemed to fit perfectly with outstanding election triumphs, such as Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential win, through New Labour’s landslide of 1997 in the UK, Gerhard Schroeder’s SPD victory in Germany in 1998, Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2002 and Kevin Rudd’s Australian Labor Party in 2007. These were all to varying degrees, good-to-near-perfect examples of marketing in action with: clear external orientations, with the political product modified in line with detailed market intelligence, sharp strategic positioning and voter targeting, and evident attention to the importance of image, with publicity calibrated to building the brand. Barack Obama’s 2008 success seem to offer ultimate proof of the brand concept, with its reciprocal “open source” bottom-up, top-down, social media-powered campaign.

However, can we still say that political marketing scholarship is cutting edge when we look at the growth of populism? The formerly stable political systems of Europe and the Americas have been profoundly shaken. Where once, even in proportional representation systems in Europe, the two largest parties garnered the vast majority of the vote, there has been considerable fragmentation. New parties, outsider candidates and radical movements have gained traction across the continent. In Europe, for example, completely new or previously marginal populist parties have increased their vote share at national elections from about 10 percent in the early

1990s to more than 30 percent by 2023 (Popu-List, 2023). We are in a new, and for many, a dangerous political landscape. According to the University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute's "Varieties of Democracy Project", "advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out" since 2012. For the first time in 20 years, there are more closed "autocracies than liberal democracies" on the planet. (V-Dem, 2023). Evidence of 'democratic backsliding' - measured by *inter alia* increased media censorship, repression of civil society organisations, and academic and cultural freedom of expression - was identified in countries across the globe, including Hungary, Poland and Greece in Europe, Nicaragua, Brazil, El Salvador and Uruguay in Latin America, India and Thailand in Asia, and Israel and the United States. Norris (forthcoming) examines the causes of this backsliding and clearly the growth of populism, especially of the anti-pluralist right wing, is a significant contributory factor. An historic number of national elections - more than 79 - were slated for this year (2024) and in many countries populists are contesting as either incumbents or energetic challengers. "Can democracy survive 2024?" enquired Alec Russell in a special "big read" feature in the *Financial Times*. (Results from elections in the first half of 2024 present a mixed picture for populist parties and candidates, but are far from signalling that is a declining threatⁱ.)

The key question for this article then arises: how to focus the examination of political marketing's response to populism? It was decided ultimately to survey the literature on populism over 10 years from 2013-2023 in the *Journal of Political Marketing (JPM)* for reasons that are set out in the methods section (below). This followed a broad search across libraries, relevant journals and the internet that revealed, as suspected, that there was remarkably little political marketing research on populism. First, however, and in the interests of clarity it is helpful to set out definitions; what do we mean when we talk about the discipline of political marketing and how is populism defined. Following this, we examine the *JPM* articles in detail before broadening into a discussion about political marketing's overall contribution to understanding populism and the questions this raises for the state of the discipline.

Defining political marketing: the discipline

Political marketing is self-evidently multi-disciplinary, drawing not only from its parent fields of political science and commercial marketing but also overlapping with communication and media studies, history, propaganda studies, and consumer and political psychology. Nonetheless, it has established a distinct identity with a dedicated academic journal, university courses, readers and handbooks, and regular conferences. Researchers identified its distinctiveness in core features and boundaries. Lock and Harris (1996) defined it as the “study of the processes of exchanges between political entities and their environment”, and emphasised the importance of competitive positioning. The idea of *exchange* is key to the most influential definitions of political marketing, and is especially developed among European researchers influenced by relationship marketing theory with its focus on service, rather than product, markets (Gronroos, 2000; Gummesson, 2002). Henneberg (2002) adapted the theory to suggest that through the process of mutual exchange political marketing “seeks to establish, maintain and enhance long-term political relationships at a profit for society so that the objectives of the individual political actors and organisations involved are met”.

However, even while there is a variety of definitions there is common ground on the point made by seminal author Philip Kotler (1981: 2) that election campaigning has an inherently marketing character and that there are clear similarities of salesmanship in business and political markets. In short, frameworks derived from the study of commercial markets can be usefully applied to the study of political campaigns. Kotler went further and engaged with political practitioners, proposing key marketing concepts as a means for improving campaign efficiency (Scammell, 1999: 722). This last point highlights a further significant aspect of political marketing as a discipline; that many researchers in the field are concerned not merely with analysing politics, they seek to improve it, advancing claims that, for example, the marketing concept or relationship marketing can strengthen democracies (Henneberg, 2004; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Johansen, 2012, Scammell, 2014; Butler & Harris, 2009). One might think, then, that political marketing research would be abundantly evident in the proliferating “democracy in crisis’ debates.

This leads to a valuable distinction made between “narrow” and “wide” interpretations of political marketing (Ormrod et al, 2013: 12-13). The narrow approach is equated with “political marketing management”, effectively the

empirical study of the campaigning behaviour of political actors, and the extent to which they employ marketing logic and promotional tools. Historically and currently this is the dominant paradigm in the field. By contrast, the wide interpretation is more concerned with theory building and creating “a theoretical and conceptual lens through which to understand phenomena in the political marketplace” (Ormrod et al, 2013: 12). The authors argue that researchers need to abandon the “unhelpful fixation on the instrumental/managerial interpretation of marketing” and draw more from the non-profit marketing literature at large, moving away from a purely transactional focus to longer-term views of political markets, with all their complexities and stake-holders (Ormrod et al, 2013: 192-5). The wide and narrow distinction is significant as we move on the discussion of political marketing and populism.

Defining Populism

Relatively early accounts of political marketing in practice acknowledged populism as an issue of concern, and potentially a threat to representative democracy. However, typically, this did not involve extended analysis of the concept; rather, an assumption that populism implied a follow-the-polls strategy for politicians chasing popularity. As O’Shaughnessy (1990: 247) put it: “usage - or abusage - of these marketing methods will make for a lack of political leadership” as politicians adopt “a servile rather than directional attitude towards public opinion”. This was a common criticism of political marketing: governance reduced to a series of actions pre-designed and pre-tested according to opinion surveys. It might lead to a “new form of populist democracy, indeed a ‘mobocracy’ where leaders were being replaced by...media performers willing to be delegates to ill-informed public opinion” (Scammell, 1995: 16). Populism here is equated with the idea of a “follower mentality” and scholars, especially those with business marketing backgrounds, were quick to refute it. Baines & Worcester (2001) explained the difference between using surveys and market intelligence to *inform* political decision-making rather than to *direct*, or effectively *bypass*, the normal political channels of decision-making. Essentially this was a defence of marketing against political critics, who viewed it reductively as packaged politics; spin machines, focus groups and suchlike. It was an attempt to clear up a confusion between being *market-oriented* and *customer (voter)-led* (Slater and Narver, 1999). Poll-follower strategies were ultimately “bad

politics and bad marketing as well" (Ormrod et al, 2013: 63); doubtless some political actors might benefit with short-term electoral gain but they could not ensure long-term success. Thus, essentially populism was conceived as "marketing misunderstood"; it was a criticism to be answered and a confusion to be corrected.

The "follower" conception was clearly inadequate as populist parties and movements became powerful forces across the continents in the 21st Century. The 2016 shocks of Brexit in the UK and Donald Trump's triumph in the United States blew the fuse and populist scholarship moved mainstream and out of its regional and case-specific locales (e.g. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Berlusconi in Italy, and Jörg Haider in Austria). Suddenly, populism seemed to be everywhere and the term polemically applied almost indiscriminately to grassroots movements and new insurgent parties: whether right-wing Fidesz in Hungary, Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, Emanuel Macron's centrist En Marche, Spain's leftist Podemos, or the UK's youthful Momentum. It was as though "all opposition movements, from xenophobic nationalists to critics of neoliberal policies" were equally populist "regardless of the principles underlying their critique" (Urbaniti, 2019, 112).

Clearly, such broad brush usage was not helpful, neither for uncovering the root causes of the phenomenon, nor for recognition of which particular parties and movements signalled a danger to the foundational institutions and principles of liberal democracies. In the search for more precise definitions, common threads emerged. First, that populism pits "the people" against the elites. Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017: 6) much-cited definition says populism is a "thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'". There is debate over whether populism is truly an ideology, and perhaps is better considered as a set of ideas or a particular performative style and form of rhetoric (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffit, 2014; Norris, 2020). The latter idea has generated research focusing on the potential of social media to facilitate populist communication (Aalberg et al., 2017). However, the idea of a "pure" or "real" people versus corrupt elites is generally accepted as a definitional cornerstone. A second commonly-accepted thread is that populism is made possible by democracy. Scholars such as Muller (2016) and Urbaniti (2019) note that populism arises with the advent of

representative democracy; it is nourished by the same ideas, the nation and the people, “that have fleshed out popular sovereignty in the age of democratisation, beginning in the eighteenth century” (Urbaniti, 2019: 114). Moreover, typically, populists contest elections and come to power through the popular vote. Thus, for Muller, populism exists as the shadow of representative democracy.

However, the championing of the sovereignty of the people and criticism of elites are not uncommon features of political discourse and by themselves insufficient to transform populism into an existential threat to liberal democracy. The prime danger is seen in the anti-pluralist cast of many of the most successful populist parties and leaders. They are seen as deliberately polarising, splitting populations into “friends and enemies”. Muller defines this as an “exclusionary form of identity politics”; only *some* of the people are the real people. Recall, Muller (2016: 21) says, Nigel Farage celebrating the Brexit vote as “victory for real people”, thus consigning the 48 percent who voted “remain” as not quite real. Especially in right-wing populism, those excluded from the category of “real people” can be a wide list: political and cultural elites, ethnic and sexual-orientation minorities, and the benefits-dependant poor who “scrounge” off the hard work of others. Urbaniti (2021) emphasises the point:

“...populism introduces an unpleasant new style into ordinary political language that leads to forms of verbal and emotional intolerance in the public sphere towards those who are not regarded as belonging to “the people”...This exclusionary logic and linguistic practice stifles opposition, and dissent more generally. It means radical majoritarianism and the humiliation of those who are in the minority – culturally and morally, as well as politically. This climate of intolerance... prevents the use of reasoned discussion and deliberation among citizens to help them to define their views or change them.”

A third notable, although less widely accepted, defining feature is the importance of the strong leader. According to Muller (2016: 36) anti-pluralist populist parties “are almost always internally monolithic with the rank-and-file clearly subordinated to a single leader”. Even while populist successes may require a party structure, they are marked by direct communication between leader and followers. They seek to “cut out the middleman...and rely as little as possible on complex party organisations as

intermediaries between citizens and politicians” (Muller, 2016: 35). Effectively the appeal to popular sovereignty is subverted into acclaim for the sovereignty of the leader. The “real people” have one authentic voice: that of the strong leader. Clearly, social media provides a perfect platform for direct communication, and its use is a prominent characteristic of many populist examples, most obviously Donald Trump and Twitter (X).

Instances of populism displaying these three characteristics - the pure people versus the elites, exclusionary definitions of “the people” and strong leader as the people’s voice - may be drawn from left and right of the political spectrum. However, the bulk of current and recent cases are associated with the right, for example: Geert Wilders (the Netherlands), Jair Bolsenero (Brazil), Giorgia Meloni (Italy), Narendra Modi (India), Victor Orban (Hungary), Javier Milei (Argentina) and Trump, USA).

Method: locating the target; political marketing research and populism

The review of the response to populism focuses ultimately on articles in the *Journal of Political Marketing (JPM)* over the period 2013-2023. The journal was selected for three main reasons. First, it is the only dedicated journal in the field. Founded by Bruce Newman in 2002, it was “and continues to be the only academic and professional publication devoted to the advancement and recognition of the role of marketing in politics” (Newman, 2012: 1). Almost all of the most cited and influential researchers in the field have published in its pages over the years. It represents, then, a fair indication of trends in research interest and foci in the discipline over more than 20 years. Second, and significantly, a keyword search, combining references to “populism” or “populist” with “political marketing” or “marketing’, across a number of relevant journals, Google, Google Scholar, the Library of Congress and the library of the London School of Economics & Political Science, uncovered no books and few articles precisely on topic (see Table 1 for search details). It was hoped that this broad search might uncover some literature grappling with issues emerging from populism, especially from scholars associated with developing political marketing theory. In fact, it found little and sometimes nothing. Two potentially relevant chapters, addressing the intrinsic obstacles to market orientation in populist parties, were published before the 2013-23 timeframe

and thus, although referred to, are not included in the detailed analysis below (Winder & Tenscher, 2012; Lederer et al, 2005). Hence, *JPM* remained the likeliest, and indeed was, the main source of articles, across all the searches and it provided the most cited titles.

Table 1: political marketing and populism: the literature search (2013-2023)

| | Search focus | Key words |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Journal of Political Marketing</i> | Content pages of every issue. All non-book review titles / relevant abstracts | Populism or populist |
| Search Engines: Google / Google Scholar | Titles | Populism or populist and political marketing or marketing |
| Libraries: Congress / LSE | Titles | Populism or populist and political marketing or marketing |
| Journals: <i>Public Affairs</i> ; <i>European Journal of Marketing</i> ; <i>International journal of Market Research</i> | Titles | Populism or populist |
| *Comparator journal: <i>Party Politics</i> | Titles | Populism or populist |

The third reason for selecting *JPM* was that it was possible to compare trends throughout its history. In its 10th anniversary, Williams (2012) tracked “trends and changes” through a content analysis of all the non-book review articles in *JPM* since its inception. This provides a valuable means of comparison, since the analysis here also covers all non-book review titles, from 2013 to 2023, a total of more than 200 articles.

A check of the contents of every issue across the 10 years found only four articles that include either “populism” or “populist” in the title (see Table 2). A fifth article, by Jennifer Bast, is included since, although not in the print editions, it was published online in 2021. Doubtless this underestimates references to populism in the journal, since there are several articles that look specifically at political actors who might be considered as populist, such as Donald Trump (e.g. Cornfield, 2017), Narendra Modi and Vladimir Putin. However, these were excluded if populism as a phenomenon was not a key theme. A cross-check on titles with the subject “democracy” included in the title, confirmed the accuracy of the selection. Overall, the trend of titles since 2013 is similar to that found by Williams (2012) with a predominant focus on election campaigns, candidates and new technology.

However, in the past decade social media use and political branding have also emerged as major topics for researchers.

Thus, we can see that populism has featured as only a minor topic in *JPM*. This is a huge contrast to the burgeoning literature in political science. Hunger and Paxton’s quantitative review (2022) identified more than 800 populism-focused articles in peer-reviewed political science journals in the period from 2004-2018, an increase of 200 percent over that period. While it is evidently unfair to measure *JPM* against the whole of the political science academy, a sharper comparison comes from a single journal - *Party Politics* - that shares with *JPM* core interests in parties and elections. In the ten years from 2013-2023 it listed more than 200 populism titles. Thus, it seems clear, on this topic there is a wide gulf in research interest. We explore below possible reasons for this. First, however, let us look in more detail at the contributions of articles listed in Table 2.

Populism and Political Marketing: Analysis of the articles

Table 2: Populism-focused articles in Journal of Political Marketing: 2013-2023

| Author | Title | Year |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Cranmer, Mirjam | The Effects of Populist Emotive Appeals within Direct-Democratic Campaigning | 2015 |
| Jensen, M. & H.Bang | Populism and Connectivism: An analysis of the Sanders and Trump Nomination Campaigns | 2017 |
| Nai, Alessandro | Fear and Loathing in Populist Campaigns? Comparing the Communication Style of Populists and Non-populists Worldwide | 2021 |
| Grbesa, M. & B. Salaj | “Send in the Clowns”: The Rise of Celebrity Populism in Croatia and its Implications for Political Marketing | 2023 |
| Bast, Jennifer | Managing the Image. The Visual Communication Strategy of European Right-Wing Populist Politicians on Instagram | 2024* * Published online 2021 but in 2024 (Jan-March) print edition |

At the time of writing Alessandro Nai’s (2021) *Fear and Loathing* was the most cited of the five. It is a substantial piece of original research that draws on expert surveys to compare the use of rhetoric among 195 populist and non-populist candidates in 40 national elections over the year June 2016-June 2017. The research tests the widely held view that populists messaging is more aggressive, offensive and fear-laden than non-populists. Nai takes a minimal definition of populism - the pure people versus the corrupt elite - disregarding the other commonly accepted characteristics (exclusionary identity, anti-pluralist, leader-dominated). This deliberately limited definition advances Nai’s main question: (do populists, whether left or right) communicate differently from non-populists? Data for the study comes from his

Negative Campaigning Comparative Expert Survey (NEGex; <https://www.alessandro-nai.com/negative-campaigning-comparative-data>) and in this instance, survey answers provided by 764 politics and elections experts within the 40 countries. Expert surveys have become a leading methodological tool in political science, facilitating broad international data sets for comparative research (e.g., the *Electoral Integrity Project*; Norris, 2014; Norris, 2017). The advantages are abundantly obvious for Nai's paper. It would have been impossible to cover the range of elections, candidates and campaigns using more conventional content analysis methods.

In this case, populist candidates/parties were identified through previously published research and case studies, and the experts were asked to assess the tone of all the campaigns on a negative-positive scale, whether attacks were character or issue focussed, and the emotional tone of messaging on a fear-enthusiasm scale. Subjected to controls (e.g., incumbency/challenger status, ideology, gender), Nai finds that the intuitive view of aggressive populist campaigning is accurate. It is significantly more negative, contains more character attacks and more fear appeals than non-populist mainstream candidates. This finding appeared across the board, regardless of left-right ideology or incumbency status. The article is an important contribution and directly addresses a lacuna in populism research, which typically has lacked detailed comparisons of populist and non-populist communication strategies, styles and rhetoric (Stanyer et al., 2017: 363).

Jensen and Bang's (2017) analysis of the Bernie Sanders and Trump nomination campaigns contrasts in approach but also complements Nai's *Fear and Loathing*. Their focus is on two campaigns, both often labelled as "populist" but coming from opposite wings of the ideological spectrum. Their method is the more orthodox content analysis of specific media; in this case the candidates' Facebook communication (Jan-May, 2016). Significantly also, they adopt the more complete definition of populism; not just the people versus the elite, but also the anti-pluralist exclusionary identity elements and, crucially, the role of the strong leader. Whereas Nai seeks differentiation between populists and non-populists, Jensen and Bang are investigating similarities and differences among populist candidates. They develop the idea of connectivism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), or connective action, "as an alternative form of political organisation operating with a distinct logic" (Bang &

Jensen, 2017: 347). Movements such as 15M or Occupy Wall Street, for example, claimed to be speaking on behalf of the people against establishment elites but did not have the anti-pluralist and strong leader dimensions.

They use these alternate frames (populism/ connectivism) to analyse Trump's and Sanders' Facebook posts and report that while both emphasised anti-elitism, Trump (the populism frame) stressed his leadership authority: "I am your voice and I will fight for you". Even while praising his supporters and calling them a "movement", he offers them no role other than to get out the vote for him. Sanders by contrast, exemplifies the connectivism frame, and highlighted the power of his supporters: "It wasn't Governor Cuomo who had the idea to raise the minimum wage. It was the people telling him what to do. That's how change happens....This is your movement" (both quotes are cited in Jensen and Bang, 2017: 355). Trump's posts are weighted significantly more than Sanders' to the issue of identity but are clearly exclusionary, imagining a pure American identity threatened by, for example, Muslims and illegal immigrants. The authors conclude that these frames enable important distinctions when assessing the democratic threat from outsider oppositional movements. Populism, by virtue of its exclusionary identity and strong leader component is "a grave danger to democratic pluralism". Connectivism, while critical of existing representative democratic systems, "may be a path to democratic renewal", demanding a more inclusionary participatory practice for the citizenry at large.

Both these articles emphasise the importance of communication for understanding populism. Grbeša and Šalaj introduce a new lens, arguing the importance of "celebrity" for populist success, especially when trust in political institutions is low. The paper does not develop a critique of populism. Rather, it takes the baseline definition (people versus corrupt elites) and draws on research that emphasises the performative style of populists, which seems designed to feed news media appetite for spectacle, scandal and controversy. The fusing of popular culture and politics has been a much-noted feature since the 1990s, often linked to increasing media power (Esser & Stromback, 2014) and resulting in the personalisation of politics (Langer, 2011) as leaders come to be assessed, and even selected, by criteria of style, appearance and personality. Within celebrity obsessed popular cultures, the rise of celebrity politicians was deemed almost inevitable. Grbeša and Šalaj's paper offers a

case study from the Croatian presidential election of 2019-20, in which Miroslav Skoro won nearly a quarter of the vote. Like Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected Ukraine president in 2019, Skoro was a political outsider whose reputation was built on entertainment. Zelensky, of course, was a comic actor playing a teacher who becomes president in a Netflix series; Skoro was one of Croatia's most popular singer/entertainers. Together with the successes of comedian Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy (2013) and Trump in 2016, celebrity became an undeniable feature of democratic politics and for some researchers (e.g. Street, 2019) a contributory factor in the rise of populism.

Grbeša and Šalaj examine the Facebook campaigns of three populist anti-elitist candidates in the first round of the Croatian presidential election: Skoro, Mislav Kolakusic and Ivan Pernar. They describe Skoro as a "celebrity populist" (a celebrity using populist rhetoric in a political campaign), while Pernar is a "populist celebrity", that is a politician who uses celebrity techniques to boost name-familiarity and support. Kolakusic (from the populist party Zivi zid) pursued a messiah-like strategy (it's "either Mislav or it's the same"; Pernar used "extremely eclectic, exhibitionist" Facebook posts (Grbesa & Salaj, 2023: 226), more like a "social media influencer than a politician". In the event, none of these candidates won through to the second round, although Skoro with nearly 25 percent fared by far the best of the three (Kolakusic 6 percent; Pernar, less than 3 percent). The authors conclude that "celebrity appeal and a populist narrative create a potent mix" and, especially in countries such as Croatia where mainstream parties are held in low esteem, the populism-celebrity fusion has clear marketing potential (Grbesa & Salaj, 2023: 229).

Cranmer's article (see Table 2) employs experiments to test the appeal of emotion-laden populist messages prior to Swiss referenda on a ban on minarets and a ban on arms exports. The choice covers both left wing (ban on arms exports) and right wing (minaret ban) populist campaigning. The results were mixed but sufficient for Cranmer to advise marketers that emotive appeals are most likely to impact at the beginning of a campaign before key concepts and arguments are already widespread. The driving question of the article concerns the influence of emotional messaging and the article does not enter debates about the nature of populism itself. The final piece is Bast's visual content analysis of Instagram messages of eight

European political leaders, who are all considered right-wing populists: Nigel Farage (UK), Marine Le Pen (France), Alice Weidel (Germany), Matteo Salvini (Italy), Siv Jensen (Norway) Geert Wilders (Netherlands), Tom Van Grieken (Belgium) and Heinz-Christian Strache (Austria). The article examines a random sample of 100 images for each politician over the years from 2015-18. Bast concludes that the messages are “strikingly similar” to non-populist Instagram communication, tending to display the candidates’ expertise, trustworthiness, interaction with citizens and colleagues and endorsements. Professional contexts are supplemented with some private life insight; again a common occurrence across the board in politicians’ Instagram messages. The one exception was Geert Wilders who incorporated exclusionary identity material, especially concerning Muslims and immigrants. Thus, she concludes, most right-wing populist politicians may use visual messaging primarily to define their image as professional or approachable, rather than to propagate typical right-wing views. This is a counter-intuitive finding that opens up a set of new questions, regarding for example, how campaigners apportion specific channels for particular tone and style of messaging.

Findings: the political marketing contribution to understanding populism

All five articles focus on communication (see Table 3 summary). In itself that is not surprising given the weight given to rhetoric and performative style in seminal accounts of populism.

Table 3: summary of findings

| Author | Short Title | Core focus | Populism defined | Method | Marketing implications specified |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--|---|---------------------------|---|
| Nai, Alessandro | Fear and Loathing | Overall campaign communication | Limited: people vs elites | Comparative/Expert survey | No |
| Jensen, M. & H.Bang | Populism and Connectivism | Primary campaigns on Fbook | Full: people v elite, identity, strong leader | Content analysis | No. Emphasis on democratic consequences |
| Grbesa, M. & B. Salaj | “Send in the Clowns” | Celebrity populist communication on Fbook | Limited: people vs elites | Content analysis | Yes: potential as effective marketing strategy |
| Cranmer, Mirjam | Emotive Appeals | Emotional messaging | Limited | Experiments | Yes. Emotional appeals can stimulate interest/support |
| Bast, Jennifer | Managing the Image. | Right-wing visual communication on Instagram | People vs elites; exclusionary identity | Visual analysis | Yes. Practitioners should note rivals/differential use of text and visual |

Taken together these pieces contribute valuable insight into distinctions between populist and non-populist campaigns; noting the particularly aggressive and fear-laden populist tone. They highlight communicative red flags of threat to liberal democratic principles and warn against throwing all apparently populist campaigns into the same basket. They analyse the use and importance of emotional content in messaging and emphasise the significance of personality, particularly celebrity, in populist success. In fact, Grbeša and Šalaj suggest celebrity populism as a marketing strategy in its own right, in certain contexts. Theirs is the only piece that deals directly, albeit briefly, with populism as a marketing strategy.

The articles use a variety of research methods; most employ forms of content analysis but also experiments and an expert survey. Williams (2012: 4) review of trends in the *JPM* found a predominance of United States focused articles, twice as many as Europe, which was the next largest group. However in the five articles (above) only one is solely located in the U.S.; Jensen and Bang's comparison of Trump and Sanders. Nai's expert survey covers 40 nations around the world, while the three others all examine European examples. Latin America, which Williams found had scarcely featured over 2002-12, is also absent here even though it has a long history of populist governments.

On the one hand these articles could indicate the multi-disciplinary range of political marketing research and the importance of political science, communication, political and consumer psychology and media studies. On the other, they signal a glaring absence, because what is missing from all of them is a specifically *marketing* lens. There is little or no reference in any of them to the founding concepts that seemed to make marketing analysis useful for politics in the first place: no reference to ideas of exchange, market orientation, competitive positioning, stakeholder relationships, or even branding theory. It is notable how few specifically political marketing citations there are in any of the pieces; over the five articles there are fewer than 10 citations from either *JPM* or other consumer marketing journals. In fact, they resemble more closely, in approach and citations, the plentiful articles on populism in political communication journals. Marketing as an alternative lens on politics? It is simply not here. The question is: why?

Discussion: the end of the road for political marketing?

Part of the answer may lie in the continuation of the dichotomy between theoretical and empirical research that Williams (2012: 6-7) noted across the first 10 years of *JPM*. She found that “two distinct type of articles”, those dealing with theory and those with campaign practice, effectively operated in separate domains. What Ormrod et al (2013) refer to as the “narrow interpretation” of political marketing (campaigns and campaign management) is still the predominant focus of research in the field, and the “wide lens”, the broader examination of politics itself, remains a minority pursuit. That is part of the answer. However, there is also the more fundamental and unsettling possibility that the political marketing theory developed over the 1990s up until the early 2010s is no longer as clearly relevant as it once was. After all political marketing theory developed mainly in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand during the 1990s and early 2000s; that is, all countries with long-established representative democracies and relatively stable oligopoly party competition, usually between two main rivals.

Even before the rising populist tide of the past decade in Europe and North America, democratic theorists warned of impending threats to stability from a number of indicators: declining electoral turnout, collapsing party memberships, and mounting survey evidence of decreasing public trust in the formal institutions of politics (Norris, 1999; 2011; Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Stoker, 2006). Some political science critics highlighted the use of marketing in politics as a contributory culprit: narrowing public debate, emphasising the negative, fostering individualism over collective compromises (Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007), while consumer culture generally encouraged juvenile “instant gratification” over more mature acknowledgement of complexity in negotiation of the public good (Barber, 2007). These criticisms opened up something of a theoretical divide in political marketing research between those who continued to seek the marketing-concept-driven (the product-sales-marketing evolution) in party campaigning (e.g. Lees-Marshment, 2001)) and the relationship marketing theorists. The latter often accepted the criticisms of consumerist-style political salesmanship and the harms it might do. They looked instead to the ways in which relationship-based marketing might conform to or even enhance progressive ideas of participatory democracy (Johansen, 2012). Henneberg et al (2009: 179) argued: “only the relationship-oriented model...has any potential for compatibility with the ideal construct of a deliberative democracy. This derives from the model’s

insistence on the maintenance of relationships with real people, ... [it] inherently invites dialogue, even if not necessarily the ideal deliberation of the public sphere". In short, a *better*, (Scammell, 2014) more long-term democratically informed approach to marketing could help solve problems that short-term profit-seeking marketing created.

However, the 2016 shocks of Brexit and Trump and the growth of radical populism across Europe signalled a full-blown crisis of democracy, as is evident in the proliferating literature, for example: *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018); *How Democracy Ends* (Runciman, 2018); *The End of Democracy* (Buffin de Chosal, 2017); and Sunstein's (2018) fears about authoritarianism in America, *Can it Happen Here?* The world seems in turmoil, buffeted by a multiplication of crises: austerity after the financial crash, the climate emergency, the COVID pandemic, economic downturn, wars and mass migrations of people. As the political academy searched for the root causes of populism, seminal explanations of political choice were thrown into doubt. Chief among these was Anthony Downs' (1957) famous economic theory of democracy, which is hugely influential in models of voting behaviour and is a theoretical foundation for political marketing theorists. Downs proposed the seminal rational choice model of how candidates must position themselves in order to optimise their chances of being elected. This is the median voter model: candidates seeking to maximise votes need to place themselves at the median of a normal distribution of voter policy preferences. Hence, logically challengers for government will gravitate to the centre ground where most voters are located. The theory assumes economic rationality on the part of both candidates and voters: each acting rationally to maximise their interests (Scammell, 2014: 23). Effectively, the logic of competition renders parties in democratic politics "analogous to entrepreneurs in a profit-seeking economy" (Downs, 1957: 295). It is easy to see from this how the marketing concept fits the model: rational parties will seek external orientation to the market rather than fixate on internal disputes over ideology, mission and purpose.

Populism challenges the Downs model from multiple directions. First it is associated with a polarisation of politics, as voters move to more radical and extreme ideological parties and candidates. The political centre, or median voter, is less clearly an optimal strategy. "Can the centre hold" became an urgent question for centrist practitioners (Zivan, 2024). Some parties and candidates, which might in

marketing terms be considered as nichers, have not changed their orientation; the people have come to them. For instance, neither Jeremy Corbyn nor Bernie Sanders watered down their ideological standpoints but found that a spontaneous movement of people raised them to hitherto unexpected challenger status. Second, a widespread reaction, perhaps especially to the Trump and Brexit triumphs, was that voters had behaved *irrationally*. Misled by false promises they had voted against their own rational interests; after all, it was the wealthy and corporate America that gained most from Trump, not his blue collar supporters. Third, and this is the major departure from economic-based explanations, Norris and Inglehart (2019) advanced the theory of cultural backlash. They argued that culture, rather than economic grievance, was the strongest predictor of support, particularly for authoritarian populism and strong man rule. They maintain that generations brought up in more affluent post-war decades are more educated, materially secure and urbanised and have become the basis of support for the marked trend towards social liberalism on issues of gender, sexuality and multiculturalism. In contrast, older, less well-educated generations have culturally come to “feel like strangers in their own country”. Cultural backlash is the main counterpoint to theories that emphasise economic grievance as the driver of populism; the latter arguing that the “left behinds” were the bedrock of support, that is people disadvantaged by globalisation, market liberalisation and the dislocations of new technology. Norris and Inglehart argue that while economic grievance can be a reinforcing factor, culture is the single most important driver. Cultural backlash theory has been criticised for being over-dependant on the Trump and Brexit examples, neglecting non-authoritarian examples of populism, and exaggerating the generational divides (Shafer, 2022). However, together with economic grievance, it remains an influential theory.

How, if at all, does marketing theory sit in relation to this populism debate? Political marketing, as a distinct disciplinary approach, arises from the economic analyses of democracy and is premised upon similarities between political and commercial markets. Could it be that the fragmented and polarised competitive conditions, in which populism thrives, are simply too complex for the overlay of market models? Are the relationship marketing insights from service markets no longer applicable in political markets where movements arise (apparently suddenly) out of protest, ideology and culture? Are there commercial equivalents to the impact in politics of

outsider personality and celebrity brands, “superhero” leaders (Schneiker, 2020) who gain huge followings from seemingly nowhere?

Political marketing scholarship has always drawn from business and marketing theory, but maybe in this instance commercial and even non-profit marketing theory is not hugely helpful. This is not an article on commercial marketing theory, but since politics has drawn lifeblood from it, it is worth asking; what does business marketing have to say about populism? A limited keyword search of Google Scholar and selected journals (*European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Public Affairs* and this journal, *International Journal of Market Research*) unearthed remarkably little. Older pieces (e.g. Baines & Worcester, 2000) contrasted the populist “follower” and market orientations: while more recent contributions are mostly concerned with how populist governments may aid or disrupt the business environment (e.g. Feldman & Morgan, 2023).

The influential theory of disruptive innovation (Christensen et al, 2015) looked briefly might it have some impact following Trump’s 2016 presidential win. Disruptive innovation is the theory of how new or relatively small niche companies with fewer resources manage to unseat established successful organisations. Typically the disruptor will exploit new technologies and target new or neglected market sectors; Netflix is a frequently cited example. Disruption occurs when the niche peels off sufficient numbers of mainstream customers to provoke transformation of practice in the entire market (see King & Baatartogtokh, 2015 for a review of the theory’s usefulness in business). Trump self-presented as the arch-disruptor, “draining the swamp” of the political establishment in Washington D.C., and flouting all the usual rules of campaign management: shunning the apparatus of professional political consultants, focus-group and data-driven messaging and TV commercials. In fact, the Trump-style campaign had already been pre-figured by European populists, such as Bepo Grillo in Italy: charismatic (celebrity) leadership, bypassing the usual mainstream media channels, exploitation of social media, mass rallies and messaging based on simple slogans in blunt speech. As it turned out, disruption innovation theory has not gained traction in political marketing scholarship. In fact, marketing contributes little to the theory of “hybrid campaigning” that has emerged as a widely accepted explanation among political scientists for modern campaigns. Centralised campaign management still exists,

especially for the major established parties, but the old legacy channels of mass media communication are supplemented with new media and more loosely connected social media networks (Chadwick, 2013; Langer et al, 2019).

Crucially populism raises difficult questions for political marketing theory that challenge the early optimism of scholars that marketing, practiced ethically and with social responsibility, might enhance democracy, even offer a profit for society. The marketing concept, by offering a closer fit between political policy and the needs and wants of the electorate, seemed almost automatically democratising in theory. The “party’s just begun” was the sub-title of one influential contribution examining British politics in the 1990’s (Lees-Marshment, 2001). It was not envisaged that closing the gap might lead to anti-pluralist attacks on representative democracy. Likewise populism is troubling for relationship marketing theorists. There are multiple examples of populist parties in government who manage sustained popular connection with large swathes of the electorate. They are not, however, models of deliberative engagement, but rather examples of connection between a strong leader and large sections of the people. Worse, typically they provide the major democratic back-sliders of the last 10 years, according to V-Dem (2023): for example, India, Hungary, Türkiye, Serbia, and Brazil under Bolsonaro.

From its beginnings political marketing scholars warned of the “over-marketing of political marketing” (O’Shaughnessy, 2001) and emphasised significant differences between the political and commercial spheres (Lock & Harris, 1996; Ormrod, 2007 Collins & Butler, 1999). A key difference was that political markets contain counter-consumers, who vote tactically to oppose their least favoured option. Arguably, counter-consumers, voters thoroughly disenchanted with established political elites, provide the bedrock of populist support. Thus, there is the prospect that populism sharpens the differences between political and consumer markets. Lederer et al (2005: 145-6) suggested as much in their study of the rise and fall of Austrian populist Jorg Haider’s Österreichische Volkspartei from 1986-2002. In fact, they ask sceptically, if the Haider example raises the question of “whether politics by its very nature can ever be market orientated”.

Conclusion: populism and the marketing lens - narrow and wide interpretations

This article has presented a critical review of political marketing scholarship and its response to the rise and potential threats of populism over the last 10 years. It is concerned with political marketing concepts and does not claim to provide a comprehensive examination of all the relevant literature in the field. Non-English contributions were excluded, as were articles on particular candidates and parties if the words “populist” or “populism” were not in the title. Thus, it underestimates that amount of attention on the topic, a limitation that should be acknowledged. Nonetheless, the initial literature search and focus on *JPM* provide two reasonably confident conclusions. First, is the widening gulf in research interest between political science and political marketing. While the former has become increasingly consumed by the rise and impact of populism, the latter has contributed relatively little and for the most part remained on the margins. Second, that overall the political marketing analysis tends to fall within the realm of political communication; it does not provide a specifically marketing lens.

The selected articles from *JPM* come under the rubric of the “narrow interpretation” of political marketing, which, as outlined earlier, focuses on political campaign management and the use of marketing tools and instruments. This has always been the predominate focus of political marketing research. In this regard the discipline is a long way from the end of the road. The articles highlight the importance and particular usage of communication - promotion, if one prefers. However, they suggest also future research possibilities of comparison and contrast between and among populist candidates/parties as well as non-populists. Grbeša & Šalaj's *Send in the Clowns* (2023) points to the possibilities of populism as a campaign strategy, a research avenue that is currently under-explored in the political marketing literature (Winder & Tenscher, 2012). Moreover, *Send in the Clowns* could and should lead us to one of the richest theoretical entrants in the political marketing field; brand research. Ironically, a decade ago commercial marketing researchers were urged to examine politics in order to develop the theory of “human branding” (Speed et al , 2015). The authors argued that, unlike business, “there is always a human brand aspect to the political brand”, since parties connect to voters through leaders and candidates (Speed et al, 2015: 147). Further, they continue, unlike celebrity, the human brand in politics is normally connected to an organisation (party) and thus is both a modifier and modified by the organisational brand. However, populism has disrupted that

leader-party brand couplet. Populism is often characterised by charismatic and celebrity leaders with organisations that effectively *are* the leader brand; for example, Macron's En Marche (now Renaissance), the one-person focused Sarah Wagenknecht Alliance in Germany, and in the Netherlands Geert Wilders, whose party has one member - him. Donald Trump, meanwhile, has all but subordinated the Republican party brand to his own image. Hence, there is clearly scope here for future research; for example, comparison and contrasts among populist and celebrity brands and more conventional party and leader (human) brands. Pich & Newman's (2020) summary overview highlighted this potential, encouraging study into *inter alia* alternative, non-traditional and new political brands, as well as the moderating effects of particular settings and contexts.

What of the wide interpretation, however? What has happened to the ambition to create a marketing lens that promotes our understanding of phenomena in the political market place? Political marketing scholarship does not shed any new light on populism. One conclusion might be that marketing frameworks are simply not capable of explaining the new polarised political realities. However, even if that is the case, it is curious that political marketing scholars have so little to say, especially since populism was acknowledged as a potential effect when the discipline took its fledging steps. It is clear that those early definitions of populism as a "follower" orientation are inadequate, and surely the time is ripe to revisit the question. The varieties of populism around the world offer a rich seam for case studies and comparative research to examine how marketing is used; and to test, refine or even replace the current predominant models of relationship marketing and the market-oriented organisation. If the discipline fails to grapple with the theoretical questions populism raises, it risks slipping entirely into the "narrow interpretation" category.

The "wide interpretation" has always been invested in the crucial questions of democracy, its health and survival. It might now also seek future research inspiration in seminal works from the business marketing field that have precisely used a marketing lens to critique democratic design. Quelch and Jocz (2007) drew attention to the need for a fair market place, with sufficient choice, reliable information, opportunities for active engagement and mutual respect between buyers and sellers. By these standards, they conclude, American democracy is sadly lacking. Philip Kotler, one of the prime movers of marketing in politics, offered a

similar critical analysis in *Democracy in Decline* (2016). As a professional economist and marketer, said Kotler (2016: 7-8), “I know when a product is working and its method of selling is working”. It was clearly not working in politics and the democratic system needed a re-design. These authors both take us to the fundamentals of political reform and lead us to key debates in political science see e.g. Norris, 2004).

A fair criticism of this article may be that it raises more questions than answers. It does not provide solutions. However, it comes from a perspective that has valued marketing insight into political practice and is concerned that it has become less relevant at a time of urgent need. A hallmark of a maturing discipline is the capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism. That is imperative now. Let us ask, not just, what does political marketing reveal about populism. Let us also reverse the lens: what does populism reveal about the state of political marketing.

¹ Election results until September 2024 provide a mixed picture for populist parties. Far right populist parties made significant gains in the European Union elections in June, especially in France, Germany and Austria. The populist right continued to spectacular successes in the Austrian general election in September, and also in state elections in Germany in the same month. However, Modi's BJP, while returning to government, fell surprisingly short of its target majority in the Indian elections in June. Marine le Pen's National Rally looked on course for victory in France but then was beaten in the parliamentary elections in July.

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