

Political marketing can be an asset rather than a threat to democracy

By Democratic Audit UK

*The once distinct spheres of politics and marketing have become more entwined in recent decades, with mixed results. **Clare Lovett** explores the strengths and weaknesses of the political marketing approach to 'selling' the Labour Party from 1992 to 1997 with a view to demonstrating that, within certain frameworks, political marketing is not a threat but an asset to democracy.*



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Political marketing, [described by Lees-Marshment](#) as a “marriage” of politics and marketing’, is a new growth area in practice and in academia with no universally accepted definition. [Lees-Marshment](#) goes on to describe it as the application of marketing concepts from business to politics, not by simply imposing one over, but by each drawing on the other discipline. [Henneberg et al](#) state that the distinction between political marketing, political management and political communications is not clear and that the various concepts have overlapping interpretations. They maintain that this is in line with the ‘multi-faceted nature of commercial schools of marketing’.

However, there is little dispute that political marketing is ‘[an integral part of modern politics](#)’. According to [Newman](#) ‘There is a common consensus that political marketing has notable importance in politics/is extremely important for politics: elections, referenda, governing, lobbying, public services management, etc., they all represent the marketing triumph of an approach that first originated in business and then transformed the nature of modern politics’.

In its Greek origins ‘democracy’ implies ‘the people being the source of power’. Therefore, while some have argued that political marketing concentrates power in the hands of [unelected hired consultants](#) others contend that whether or not political marketing has a detrimental impact on democracy ‘[depends on the views of democracy we hold](#)’. However, it is contended here that political marketing advances the public will rather than parochial ideology thereby giving the effect to the notion of ‘the people being the source of power’.

The first part of this post discusses Lees-Marshment's market-oriented party approach to political marketing. The second part analyses the highly successful utilisation of this approach by the Labour Party to win a landslide in the 1997 general election. The concluding part discusses the evolving role of the electorate as citizens or political consumers resulting in a higher level of political expectation and engagement and suggests that this provides challenges and opportunities to political marketing as an asset to democracy.

There are different academic theories and approaches to political marketing including [Newman's model of political marketing](#) and [Ormrod's political market-orientation model](#). Lees-Marshment identifies three political marketing distinctions: product-oriented, sales-oriented and market-oriented parties. This is the most uniform distinction and is based in political science. It contends that marketing concepts and techniques are applicable to the overall political behaviour and suggests the steps a party can follow throughout the election cycle.

In the words of [Lees-Marshment](#): "A MOP [market-oriented party] designs its behaviour to provide voter satisfaction to reach its goal. It uses marketing intelligence to identify voter demands, then designs its product that meets their needs and wants, is supported and implemented by the internal organisation, and is deliverable in government." The objective is to deliver what people need rather than change what they think. This approach differs from the more orthodox views of political parties as organisations in sole pursuit of ideological vision.

In the classic model the following activities are required to achieve market-orientation: market intelligence, product design, product adjustment, implementation, communication, campaign, [election and delivery](#). However for present purposes, these eight steps can be reduced to three main activities: "[marketing intelligence; behaviour design and behaviour communications](#)". These three steps involve the party identifying the needs, behaviour and demands of the voters through research, responding by adapting its behaviour and communicating its new behaviour in a positive way to the voters. [Lees-Marshment](#) has demonstrated that the Labour Party exploited these aspects of political marketing significantly between 1992 and 1997.

In this period, the party utilised various forms of market intelligence, including post-election analysis and considerable quantitative and qualitative market research. Proposed policy initiatives were tested amongst focus groups and the response to the party's draft manifesto, *New Labour, New Life for Britain*, launched in 1996, was analysed and problematic aspects removed before the publication of [the final manifesto in 1997](#).

The party also changed its symbols, constitution and policies in response to the findings from market intelligence in order to [appeal to a wider electorate](#). Thus, at the 1994 party conference the slogan 'New Labour, New Britain' was launched, beginning the concerted efforts to emphasise how the party had changed. Furthermore, in 1995, the 'market-orientated' Tony Blair succeeded in changing Clause IV, section iv of the party's constitution, which implied a policy commitment to collective ownership of the economy and state economic planning. Finally, the party's manifesto, *New Labour – Because Britain Deserves Better*, provided a ten-point contract with the people that reflected the results of market intelligence.

With Labour's new policies already well communicated to voters before the 1997 election, the party's campaign effort, which was extremely well disciplined, simply reiterated the message of change and successfully projected images that depicted the party as being in harmony with the electorate and their [demands and aspirations](#).

The Labour Party was extremely successful in using a market-oriented approach in winning the 1997 general election. Indeed, the sheer scale of the landslide victory – including a record number of 419 MPs and the largest majority for any administration since 1935 and the biggest in Labour history – is a testament to the strength of political marketing in giving effect to the will of the people.

However, New Labour's political marketing strategy had some weaknesses. For example, it changed the internal dynamics of the party by relegating party members to the background and giving prominence to unelected, hired strategic advisors who do not necessarily share the party's ideology. Furthermore, the party changed its policies, organisational structure and even its title in order to appeal to a majority of voters while playing down its core ideology. This has been branded a manipulation – "[the political elite getting inside the head of voters](#)" – which does "[not bode well for the future of democracy in Britain](#)".

However, it must be remembered that political marketing is very complex and different to the marketing of

business as parties need to respond both to voters' and members' concerns. Therefore, the Lees-Marshment's market-oriented party model incorporates an additional stage of product adjustment, which requires that after the production of an 'ideal' product design to suit the voters a party needs to adjust this design to suit its members. It is contended that any failure by the Labour Party to do this should not be regarded as a weakness of the political marketing approach itself.

The most frequently cited criticism of New Labour's political marketing approach is the perceived neglect of its traditional voter-constituency and ideological traditions. However, it is submitted that this is an affirmation, rather than a denial, of democracy in its truest sense. As [Lees-Marshment and Lilleker](#) note:

'The party adopted a market orientation that allowed New Labour to take shape in line with the perceptions of the electorate. This was achieved by creating a link between policy and needs, opinion and manifesto, and although it led to changes in policy it remained linked with historical traditions. The process not only allowed New Labour to achieve victory but also to lay claim to being an expression of the general will, reflecting the ethos of state as a reflection of its constituent parts: Rawlsian communitarianism.'

This essay has sought to demonstrate that the market-oriented party approach to 'selling' the Labour Party to the British electorate between 1992 and 1997, which incorporated an additional stage of product adjustment to align the interests of voters and member and permitted the integration of traditional values, was beneficial to British democracy. Indeed, by enabling the party to achieve not only a landslide electoral victory but also a popular mandate expressing the general will, the political marketing approach gave effect to democracy.

However, it should not be forgotten that political marketing is ultimately a tool for parties to build long-term relationships with the electorate and [thereby strengthen democracy](#). Thus, looking ahead, the evolving relationship between the electorate and the political class brought about through new forms of communications will continue to provide both challenges and opportunities to political marketing as an asset to democracy. The electorate are now playing a more active role in the political system and thus becoming more active citizens and 'political consumers'.

Consequently, politicians are keen to be seen to listen, understand and respond both to the majority and minority segments of the electorate, including many that may not have been heard before. [Lees-Marshment and Pettit](#) state that new market segments emerge and parties are responding through using differentiation products whilst maintaining overall coherence. Ultimately, these new terms of political engagement can only enhance the legitimacy of political marketing as an asset to democracy by supporting the delivery of promises made to the electorate.

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