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The Study of Political Marketing at a Local Level: Conceptual Foundations and Research Directions

Abstract

Whilst political marketing has become established as a research theme, there has been a lack of conceptual and empirical research into local political marketing strategies and practices. In the context of U.K, this paper begins to explore local political marketing as a subject. The notion of local political marketing is therefore introduced, before the role of local party members in political marketing is considered. The paper then outlines current and potential future research avenues in local political marketing, before closing with conclusions.

Key: *local, political, marketing.*

Track: *Marketing of Public and Non-profit Organisations*

1.Introduction: local political marketing

There has been very limited research into political marketing at a local level. Admittedly whilst there has been some useful research on local political marketing issues (e.g Baines, Harris and Lewis, 2002; Franklin and Richardson, 2002; Lilleker and Negrine, 2003; Newman and Sheth, 1985; 1987; Reeves, 2007), academic research has tended to focus on the strategic nature of political marketing strategies; of which there is a substantial literature (e.g Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Lees-Marshment, 2001; 2004, Newman, 1994; 1999a;1999b; Maarek, 1995; O'Shaughnessy, 1990; O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2002). Moreover, there has been some political science literature that considers the impact of local campaigning (e.g Cutts and Shryane, 2006; Denver and Hands, 1997; Denver, Hands and Henig, 1998; Pattie, Johnston and Fieldhouse, 1995; Whiteley and Seyd, 1994; Whiteley, Seyd and Billingshurst, 2006, Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994), yet it is not focussed on political marketing issues and practices. It therefore can be argued that there is a significant gap in the literature in relation to the use of political marketing strategies and practices at a local level. Whilst the arguments in this paper are based upon the U.K local political marketing context, the observations which are advanced may have relevance to other political systems outside of Britain.

1.1 Why study local political marketing?

It can be asserted that it is necessary to study local political marketing because of a number of reasons. First, as it is undoubted that political marketing practices are becoming prevalent in political parties, it is necessary for academic research to broaden out its base (Lees-Marshment, 2003) beyond strategic analyses of political marketing strategies. Local political marketing is therefore a means of allowing researchers, practitioners and other relevant audiences to appreciate how the political marketing idea has permeated the lower levels of a political party, and its grassroots activity. Second, it is a matter of public policy concern as to how local political parties are impacting democracy through their use of political marketing strategies. Third, local political marketing research is important as it is often too easy to forget the local dimension to politics, when national media coverage is so fixed upon the strategic direction of a political party, and its leading senior personalities. Finally many grass roots local party members are new to political marketing ideas, and accordingly their perceptions and views of the local political marketing process are somewhat under-researched.

1.2 Geographic scales in local political marketing research

Local political marketing could be viewed, in terms of its scope and scale, as essentially local constituency based politics. This is political marketing activity which is co-ordinated by a local constituency party, which usually aligns with geographically defined constituency parliamentary electoral boundaries. However, it can be argued that political marketing can occur at an even more local level (such as electoral wards for local councillor elections, or even at neighbourhood level where there is an important political issue facing citizens). In addition, local constituency based political marketing can contribute, or even be integrated into higher geographic scales, for example during European Parliamentary elections where candidates are elected on a regional basis, or when there is a directly elected mayor contest for a town or city. In all of these situations, a local constituency party has some role in a political marketing strategy, yet this role is determined by the election context and its geographic scale. Research therefore must be clear about its objectives, and specify the scale of local political marketing it is concerned with. An understanding of local political marketing is not something

that can be gained without recognising the competing and /or complementary geographic scales which condition and determine local political marketing strategies and practices. It can be asserted that local political party members can have a valuable role in political marketing at these geographic scales, and therefore the paper will now progress to consider the relationship between political marketing and local party members.

2. Local constituency party members and political marketing

In this section of the paper, there is discussion of the role of local party members in facilitating and contributing to political marketing strategies and practices. This is commenced by drawing a clear distinction between the two main types of political party members and the resultant implications for local political marketing. There is then consideration of ideological factors, and how they impact on local political marketing. The section closes by discussing whether, and to what extent, local party members can contribute to political marketing.

2.1 Political party member types and implications for local political marketing

It is necessary to draw a clear distinction between the two main different types of members. There are those members in political parties who like to for example, receive information from the party, and vote on major issues such as a leadership change, but are not in any sense of the word 'active' in the internal dynamics of a political party. These members (who are typically the majority of the membership¹) are what could be described as 'recipients' of political marketing information from the central and local party.

The other type of member (who are typically the small minority of a political party²) are individuals who are active in a political party's affairs, in that they attend meetings, events and conferences, contribute to internal decisions and debates, and actively canvas support on behalf of the party at local levels. These members are more engaged with the political marketing process (although they may not couch it in those terms), since they contribute to *the design* of a political marketing programme via the democratic policy making process, and contribute to *the communication* of a political marketing programme in terms of their interactions with external audiences (whether this be the local press, canvassing with the electorate, or attempting to recruit new members). Locally active members are therefore of critical importance in this communication of political marketing ideas to external audiences, in that they become a real life personification of a political party's identity, when they communicate with external audiences. This ultimately contributes to the externally perceived image of a political party (Reeves, 2007).

2.2 The ideological dimension in local political marketing

There is however an inherent tension in the political marketing paradigm, as active members tend to be ideologically committed and have a clear set of values in relation to how they wish to see society to progress (Lees-Marshment and Lilleker, 2001). This is because they hopefully have personal values which align the values of a political party. The values of a political party are very often something which emerged (often many years ago) from some

1 See Whiteley, Seyd and Billingshurst (2006), Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson (1994) and Seyd and Whiteley (2002) for further discussion on the degree of party member activity for major British political parties.

2 See Footnote 1.

kind of ideological struggle within a society, and are conditioned by philosophical and academic debates about how a society should function (Jones et al, 2001). These values are often poorly defined, and are inherently contestable. They are more suited to a kind of ideological politics, which is not in keeping with a political marketing orientation, and is more suited to the notion of “persuading” and “selling” the ideological ideas of a political party to the electorate (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Reeves, de Chernatony and Carrigan, 2006). For that reason, ideologically driven party members may not align completely with the agenda of political marketing that seeks to identify and satisfy the needs of the electorate (Lees-Marshment, 2001). The effect of this tension is to some extent mitigated against by the prospect of their party gaining power, and members’ commitment to serving their local community. There is however a danger (when following a political marketing orientation) that a political party’s strategy, although aligns as well as is achievable with the widest possible range of contemporary electoral opinion, it becomes disconnected with ethos and values of the grass roots membership (Needham, 2001). Therefore senior strategists need to balance the needs of the electorate with the demands of the membership. This is vital as the central party is reliant on grass roots members for the communication of its political marketing programme. Despite this, there is however a danger that this communication becomes inconsistent and inauthentic when there is not a satisfactory synergy between members’ values and the political marketing strategy (Needham, 2001).

The inherent tension between ideological party members and the political marketing approach is to some extent exacerbated by what is increasingly perceived as an increasing professionalization of political marketing practices (Panebianco, 1988). This has been contributed to by acceptance that the class based mass party model (Duverger, 1954) of internal party governance has declined as an effective explanatory framework in contemporary British politics (Kirchheimer, 1966; Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983; Rose and McAllister, 1985). This has led to debate as to whether local members can really be empowered by a political marketing strategy, or whether it merely reinforces power dynamics in favour of the party leadership (Lees-Marshment and Quayle, 2001; Wring, 1997).

2.3 Can local party members contribute to political marketing?

Whether or not local party members can contribute to a political marketing strategy depends upon the conceptualisation of political marketing the researcher assumes. If political marketing is viewed as an exclusive strategic leadership function controlled by senior strategists at the top of the party, then there is limited scope for grass roots involvement in the *design* of political marketing strategies, unless the design process is well connected to the democratic structures of the organisation. An alternative stance could be that whilst the strategic direction of political marketing is determined by the leadership, the party none-the-less has a culture of communication and dissemination of political marketing ideas to the lower levels of the organisation. This means that local party members can contribute to the *delivery* of political marketing strategies. The critical factor to enable this remains, however, that there is a need to find channels of communication of political marketing materials; whether in the form of briefing sessions, training, documents, e-resources etc. The challenge in this approach however rests upon the ability of the central party to trust members to deliver the political marketing strategy. In addition, members need to handle political marketing materials in a responsible manner, so that rival parties cannot gain any advantage over them. In reality, it is too much to expect the central party to be sole gatekeeper and distributor of political marketing materials to local constituency parties, and there is therefore a need to develop systems and structures at lower scales in the party to forward and advise on political

marketing practices in an accurate, relevant and timely manner (Reeves, 2007).

It can be argued that the conceptualisation of political marketing needs to be an eclectic and holistic one, that impacts upon every aspect of a political party's affairs. In these terms, local members have a valuable role not only in the *delivery* of political marketing strategies and practices, but also in the *design* phase, since it can be advanced that by members contributing to the democratic structures of the party, they are in effect also contributing to the wider political marketing concept. In other words, political marketing is not something which is at odds with the notion of internal democracy and debate, but rather something which can contribute and enrich the internal democracy of a political party. In addition, it should be recognised that members come from a variety of backgrounds, and it is likely that within the membership base that there are individuals with experience of marketing from their education and/ or careers. This resource should be effectively utilised at all levels of the party, but especially at local level, given the finite level of human and financial resourcing which is available to a political party in Britain (Reeves, 2007). Such valuable resources can only add value and further the political marketing idea within British politics. There is however a need for empirical research into how such resources can be utilised in local political marketing, and thus the paper will now progress by examining possible research avenues in this area.

3. Local political marketing: current research and potential future research

This researcher would argue that there is a need for significant future research into political marketing practices at a local level. This author is therefore attempting to start this process by undertaking a study into the use of local political marketing which will examine in the context of a major British political party, local political marketing practices. It will examine:

- ↳1) To what extent are political marketing practices utilised at a local level?
- ↳2) What does political marketing mean at the local level?
- ↳3) What support or encouragement is provided by higher levels of the party to facilitate political marketing practices?
- ↳4) What difficulties do local political parties face when implementing local political marketing campaigns?

The study will be based on depth qualitative interviewing with the lead individual responsible for political marketing / campaigning practices in Local Constituency Parties (LCPs). It is intended that around 11 interviews³ will be conducted at LCP level across the U.K. In addition, a small number of interviews (e.g 2-3 interviews) will be sought at higher / strategic levels of the party with individuals who have a more strategic remit over local political party marketing strategies. This will enable the research to be placed in a wider strategic context of the party's affairs.

Other areas of research into local political marketing could occur by replicating the above study to multiple political parties within the U.K. It may also be interesting for researchers to explore local political marketing strategies and practices within other political parties in other countries. The approach to be adopted in this researcher's study is to collect data outside an election campaign, so that a wider macro-view of political marketing practices can be discerned from interviewees, rather than them merely commenting on issues associated with a given election campaign at the time of data collection. It can be asserted that there is indeed some value in conducting research during an election contest where the researcher can directly experience the intensity of a political marketing strategy being implemented in a

³ The number of interviews may increase, dependent on the researcher securing additional research funding.

'live' campaign. The danger however with such an approach is that respondents are likely to be too busy to give adequate time to the study. Alternatively if data collection is completed outside election periods, then the respondents are likely to offer more reflective and insightful observations in relation to the party's use of local political marketing strategies and practices.

There are also a number of other potential interesting areas of research in local political marketing (e.g studies of town/city mayor elections, referenda on local issues such as proposed congestion charging measures in towns and cities), and elections onto local boards concerned with public policy issues (e.g economic development and regeneration boards). Each of these potential research areas do not have developed research bases from a political marketing perspective, and therefore offer considerable scope for research activities. This research could be completed by collecting data from the *'political marketers'* themselves, and/ or from external recipients of the political marketing programmes, for example the electorate, the media and other stakeholders.

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the subject of political marketing is under-researched, and therefore it is necessary to augment the literature in this area. There is attention paid to the notion of competing and complementary geographical scales in local political marketing. The role of members in local political marketing is discussed, and it is noted that the majority of local party members are 'inactive' in a political party's affairs, and are therefore largely 'recipients' of political marketing information. In contrast, there are a minority of local party members in a political party that are 'active', and are important to a political party in terms of the dissemination and delivery of a political marketing programme. It is however argued that there is an inherent tension for involving members in political marketing activities in that they tend to be ideological. It is suggested that this ideological view of politics may to some extent be in opposition to a political marketing orientation. There is also consideration as to whether local party members can effectively contribute to political marketing. It is suggested that if political marketing is viewed narrowly as a strategic leadership function, then there is likely to be limited scope for involvement in political marketing strategy design, unless the democratic apparatus of the party functions effectively, with regards to this issue. If this is not the case, local party members may still have an important role in the delivery, communication and dissemination of a political marketing strategy, providing this role is supported by appropriate systems and structures. Alternatively the author advanced a more eclectic view of political marketing, which suggests that by members contributing to the democratic structures of the party, they are also in effect contributing to the wider political marketing agenda. In these terms, political marketing is not something which is at odds with internal party democracy, but rather is something that can enrich the process. The paper closed by discussing current and potential future research avenues. In short, this paper is intended to act as 'launch pad' for further discussions as to how the local political marketing research agenda can be taken forward at conceptual, methodological and empirical levels.

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