

Marketing After the Election: The Potential and Limitations of Maintaining a Market Orientation in Government

Jennifer Lees-Marshment
Auckland University

Abstract: Political marketing—the utilization and adaptation of marketing techniques and concepts by political parties—is increasingly used by opposition leaders seeking to win elections the world over. They can adopt a market orientation and develop a product in response to market demands. However, how they maintain a market orientation while in government has rarely been considered. This article discusses how marketing can be used *after* the election, utilizing new theoretical perspectives and comparative empirical research to create a framework for market-oriented government. It also discusses the potential for marketing to be a tool of good government.

Keywords: Political marketing; Political communication

Résumé : Le marketing politique, qui est l'adaptation et l'utilisation de concepts et techniques de marketing commercial par les partis politiques, est une méthode qui gagne en popularité auprès des chefs de partis d'opposition afin de remporter des élections, et ce à travers le monde. Ce faisant, ils suivent une « approche-marché » et développent un produit électoral qui répond aux demandes qu'expriment les consommateurs visés (les électeurs). Toutefois, peu d'études se sont intéressées à la poursuite de cette « approche-marché » lorsque les partis d'opposition remportent l'élection et forment un gouvernement. Cet article examine précisément comment le marketing politique peut être employé après une élection. Il propose des nouvelles perspectives théoriques et s'appuie sur des données empiriques comparatives qui jettent les bases d'un cadre explicatif de l'utilisation du marketing au sein des gouvernements. Enfin, l'article démontre comment le marketing politique peut devenir un outil de bonne gouvernance.

Mots clés : Marketing politique; Communication politique

Jennifer Lees-Marshment is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand. She is author or co-editor of seven books, including *Political marketing: Principles and applications*, the first textbook in political marketing. See www.lees-marshment.org for details. Email: j.lees-marshment@auckland.ac.nz.

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Political marketing—the utilization and adaptation of marketing techniques and concepts by political parties—is increasingly used by opposition leaders seeking to win elections the world over. Bill Clinton’s early use in 1992 of market-oriented politics, where “products” are designed to suit public demands, was copied and adapted by Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, Gerhardt Schroeder in Germany, and Helen Clark in New Zealand (see Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005). Conservative parties have also shared ideas and consultants, with the public relations firm Crosby-Textor advising leaders in Australia, the U.K., and New Zealand. Canada is no exception (see Marland, 2005), and as noted by Paré and Berger (2008), the Canadian Conservative Party used significant elements of a market-oriented strategy. However, once politicians have won power, what happens after the election? The realities of government present many constraints, complexities, and crises, while public demand for demonstrated delivery on election promises increases. Can marketing help governments maintain support, and if so, can it be more than spin and media relations?

This article analyzes how marketing can be used *after* the election. Utilizing new theoretical perspectives from marketing literature on maintaining a market orientation and data from interviews with elite practitioners,¹ it outlines the nature of a market orientation explores the difficulties of marketing in government, and posits a framework for market-oriented government. It also discusses the potential for marketing to be a tool of good government.

Political marketing and market-oriented parties

Political marketing is a growing phenomenon, and few political parties would seek to compete in an election without utilizing at least some of its tools to help them understand their market and compete more effectively. As a research area, political marketing grew out of communication and campaign studies that observed changes in the way parties responded to market research and in how they designed their campaigns and advertising (see Scammell, 1999, for a literature review). More recently this area of research expanded to consider the influence of public opinion research on the political behaviour of elites—the “product” side as well as many other aspects, including internal marketing and e-marketing (see Lees-Marshment, 2009). One area in particular has gained significant attention: the extent to which parties adopt a market orientation. Although political marketing can be used to help parties sell themselves, political marketing literature argues that parties who wish to gain control of government need to change what they offer—or the political product—to suit market demands. A market orientation in politics has been the subject of significant research because it offers a potentially successful approach to winning elections. However, this orientation also raises concerns among volunteers and party figures who have strong investments in and/or attachment to a particular party or candidate. These stakeholders may have strong views on how to change the world and be reluctant to change party policies and behaviour to suit the results of market research.

A number of scholars have defined and modelled a market orientation in politics, including Lees-Marshment (2001), Newman (1994 & 1999), and Ormrod (2005). The underlying principles are that a market orientation involves the politician or party being in touch with and responsive to ordinary voter concerns.

While acknowledging debate over its merits (Lees-Marshment, 2006, and Ormrod, 2006), the Lees-Marshment model of MOPs (market-oriented parties) has been utilized in empirical analyses in Canada (see Marland, 2005, and Paré & Berger, 2008), the U.K. (Lees-Marshment, 2001 & 2008a), and other countries (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005). Lees-Marshment (2008a, pp. 20-21) defined a MOP as follows:

A Market-Oriented Party uses party views and political judgment to design its behaviour to respond to and satisfy voter demands in a way that that meets their needs and wants, is supported and implemented by the internal organisation, and is deliverable in government. . . . Parties may use their ideology as a means to create effective solutions to public demands, but party elites try to respond to market demand, rather than trying to shape opinion.

Obviously not all parties use marketing to inform product design; some parties mainly use it to inform communication. Indeed, Lees-Marshment (2008a, p. 30) noted two alternative party types: product-oriented parties (POPs) and sales-oriented parties (SOPs), with the former being more traditional while SOPs “aim to sell what they decide is best for the people, utilising effective political marketing communication techniques. Market intelligence is used not to inform the product design, but to help the party persuade voters it is right.” In this case, communication is designed in conjunction with results from market intelligence and can be used with marketing techniques, such as target marketing and direct mail. However, with the market-oriented party, identifying voters’ needs and wants comes before a party determines how to behave. Although judgment and ideology is still used to inform the development of solutions in a market-oriented party, elites *respond to* market demand, rather than trying to *shape it*. The process they go through places focus on pre-communication stages:

Figure 1: Political marketing process for “Product, Sales and Market-Oriented Parties” (Lees-Marshment 2001)

Stage One: Market Intelligence

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

Stage Two: Product Design

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

Stage Three: Product Adjustment

The party then adjusts its model product design to consider:

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

Stage Four: Implementation

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

Stage Five: Communication

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

Stage Six: Campaign

The official election campaign period leading up to the election. The party continues to communicate effectively as in Stage 5.

Stage Seven: Election

The general election.

Stage Eight: Delivery

The Party will deliver product in government.

As previously noted, several studies have found that parties around the world utilize market-oriented behaviour. Lilleker and Lees-Marshment (2005) included in their comparative study the countries Germany, Austria, Brazil, Peru, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand, the U.K., and the USA. A work-in-progress by Lees-Marshment, Rudd, and Strömbäck (in press) explores market-oriented political marketing in the Australia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Japan, New Zealand, Peru, Russia, South Korea, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, the U.K., and the U.S. Naturally, the extent and nature of a party's market orientation has been shown to be affected by the constraints of different political systems and cultures, and it also varies over time. Although, given the natural complexity of analyzing voting behaviour, it is difficult to prove that marketing helps win elections, parties in most countries around the world use market-oriented strategies to increase their support.

To date few academics have studied how a party that becomes market oriented to win an election might remain so once it gets into government (see Lees-Marshment, 2008b for an exploratory discussion). The rest of this article will

consider first the nature of government and the implications this may have on marketing before discussing how parties might maintain a market orientation in government.

The differences arising from marketing in government

Governing is different from being in opposition: as Newman (1999, p. 110) observes, a candidate must adapt “from the campaign marketplace to the governing marketplace.” Many factors work against maintaining a market orientation in government. Incumbency does not encourage critical, self-reflective thinking. Leaders become separated from the public quite easily; they gain experience, knowledge, and power, and with this, they can become arrogant. As Alastair Campbell (2005), Tony Blair’s chief press secretary, observed when interviewed, Westminster operates “in a political bubble,” and when in government you “need to step outside the bubble and get back with the public,” but “it’s very hard” to stay in touch. Leaders can forget to respond to market intelligence, and their advisors can become deferential and unable to challenge them in office as they did in opposition.

Mike Munro (2006), who was New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark’s press secretary, noted when interviewed how “a large element of government ends up being crisis management. That’s just the nature of government really. You’re fighting fires almost every day. Things go wrong, hospitals botch up operations, schools shut down, crime waves occur, weather events come along and smash up infrastructure or whatever, so you spend a lot of time reacting and responding.” A study of strategy in government by Fischer, Schmitz and Seberich (2007) noted a number of obstacles to strategic thinking, which include a lack of time, politicians’ resistance to advice on strategy management, and external advisors’ ignorance of the complexities of political decision-making processes. Lindholm and Prehn (2007, p. 19) quote a minister of foreign affairs and minister of finance in the Danish Nyrup government called Mogens Lykketoft: “Before you know it, you find that everyday problems have crept up on you and made their presence felt. Ministers are dragged into dealing with issues and media explosions. They have to attend events abroad, meet with pressure groups and participate in protracted meetings in parliament.” This makes it hard to find time to think about how to use marketing strategically.

Most of the conditions in government work against fostering a market orientation and the reflection and responsiveness it requires. At the same time, the desire for the public to see tangible delivery of the political product grows. This is despite delivery being a slow process in government. Failure in delivery causes concern for politicians and strategists, for it threatens the chances of re-election. However, it is impossible to ensure that 100% success will be achieved. In business this gap between customer expectations and what is delivered is known as the *service delivery gap*; as Newman (1999, pp. 37-38) explored, in politics there are gaps “between quality specifications and service delivery.” Even where leaders understand market demand and accept the need for a problem to be solved, they may be incapable of doing anything about it (Newman, 1999). Bill Clinton, elected in 1992 in the United States as a New Democrat president promising a middle-class tax cut, found once in office that the deficit

was far worse than the Democrats had previously been told and what they had promised to do was impossible. As Arterton (2007, p. 147) noted, in the U.S. presidential structure, “the government can neither dictate nor assume legislative action.” Barack Obama, when interviewed by *Time* magazine before assuming office, noted the number of substantial issues facing his administration, including Afghanistan, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and the economy. He conceded that “even if we take a whole host of the right steps in terms of the economy, two years from now it may not have fully recovered” (quoted in Von Drehle, 2008, pp. 37-38). Such issues are not always planned for during pre-election marketing: as Von Drehle noted, Obama “may not have predicted when he set out to become President that he would face such circumstances” (2008, p. 42).

A more subtle challenge is that once in office, leaders want to lead, and indeed the public wants them to show leadership. How this balances with responding to public opinion is unclear. As Philip Gould (2007), strategic advisor to Tony Blair both in opposition and in government, reflected when interviewed:

It’s absolutely crucial to listen in modern politics, but equally important to lead. . . . You have to balance flexibility and resolution. . . . You have to be listening . . . you have to be participatory. But you also have to have the courage and your convictions. Now that’s very hard. The art of . . . modern politics, is . . . being able to perfectly blend these two together and to make them work. I mean, if you become too much of a listening party you just get nowhere. If you become too much of a leadership government, then you start to disconnect your voters, which is bad also.

Listening in opposition is less complex than when in government. Tony Blair’s resignation speech in May 2007 noted this problem:

Every one always says: listen to the people. . . . When you are in Opposition, you meet this group and they say why can’t you do this? And you say: it’s really a good question. Thank you. And they go away and say: it’s great, he really listened. You meet that other group and they say: why can’t you do that? And you say: it’s a really good question. Thank you. And they go away happy you listened. In Government you have to give the answer.

At the same time government does offer incumbents advantages—a bureaucracy, staff, offices, and funds to carry out marketing activities such as opinion research. But how do leaders remain responsive to public opinion, and deliver on previous promises, while creating time to integrate and consider fresh and continual market intelligence in order to redevelop the product for the next election? Perhaps market-oriented politics, which responds to public opinion more overtly, is only suitable for opposition and in government parties revert to spin and media management? The rest of the article explores how a market orientation could work in government and become a much more consultative, strategic, and long-term public relations program.

A market-oriented government framework

Despite the challenges, using marketing in government is arguably even more

necessary, not simply for political expediency—to be re-elected—but to maintain the trust of the electorate to enable political leaders to introduce less popular but necessary policy to help development and progression in society. Building on the Lees-Marshment MOP model for parties, a new theoretical framework for governments can be developed. This utilizes specific suggestions by Lilleker and Lees-Marshment (2005) and Lees-Marshment (2008b); it also integrates new work on strategy by Fischer, Schmitz and Seberich (2007), on communication by Robinson (2007), on e-marketing by Jackson (2006), on delivery at the local level by Lilleker (2006) and Steger (1999), and on pertinent commercial marketing literature, such as the work of Slater and Narver (1994), Narver, Slater, and Tietje (1998), and Baker and Sinkula (2002), which suggest that factors such as whether there is an effective competition, having an internal learning orientation and culture, adopting a clear strategy, utilizing a market-back approach, and being both a leader as well as a follower of public demands all help maintain a market orientation. The framework also draws on lessons from new empirical research, including interviews with staff who have worked on marketing in government in the U.K., U.S., Australia, and New Zealand, and the case of former U.K. prime minister Tony Blair, which is unusual for having used new tools to improve the leader's image after he had spent a long time in power and made some unpopular decisions. Although this framework is unlikely to be perfect, it provides a good starting point for discussion of marketing in government.

Just as political marketing is not only confined to the election campaign but also influences the product offered to the electorate in opposition, in government, parties can move beyond more manipulative communication such as spin and media management to market-oriented governing. A MOP definition can thus be applied to government: A Market-Oriented Government aims to maintain a responsive relationship with the public, continuing to consult a range of markets, to reflect and review delivery progress, offer appropriate leadership, and engage in strategic product development in the context of government realities to provide satisfaction over the long term.

Market-oriented governments can engage in different marketing activities in a similar way to parties. Unlike the more chronological or linear MOP process, governing involves a range of activities, many of which need to be carried out concurrently throughout government. There are five main areas within this framework:

- Delivery management and communication
- Continual market consultation
- Responsive product re-development and strategic thinking
- Product refinement in response to the competition, the internal market such as party members, and public support
- Maintenance or re-establishment of a market-oriented attitude among MPs and the leadership
- Engagement in market-oriented communication

Each area will be explained in turn, with appropriate empirical examples and discussion.

Delivery management and communication

Delivery of the political product is crucial to the success of political marketing. Indeed, the former director of the U.K. Delivery Unit, Michael Barber, (2007) recalled when interviewed, “I never have a conversation with a government now when they are not worrying about how to improve delivery.” He said one way to judge whether opposition politicians “are really serious about running the country is whether they are already thinking about how to do delivery.” In marketing terms it also includes actual delivery, the management of expectations, and communication of delivery.

Actual delivery

Delivery is obviously difficult to achieve in practice. What political leaders have done, however, is to give it a high profile and set up new units that focus on delivery. Ben Keneally (2008), who heads the premier’s delivery unit in New South Wales, Australia, said when interviewed that “having that sense that it is the premier who is committed to this issue and wants to see measurable improvement, that does help crystallize the importance of it.” The U.K. government created a delivery unit, and a federal government cabinet implementation unit was created in Australia. As Peter Hamburger from the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet noted in a paper on implementation, “It is no longer enough for those advocating major policy to have a good idea. . . . The Government demands that we think through our ideas and how they are going to be implemented” (Hamburger, 2006).

Besides establishing specialised units, it is also important to develop a strategic, results-oriented culture and work across different bureaucratic sections: the U.K. delivery unit worked across government departments—increasing coordination, co-operation, and the communication of results, and maintaining a high profile with and support from the prime minister (Barber, 2007). Keneally (2008) said that the targets for the delivery unit in New South Wales were “profoundly successful in terms of galvanizing the public service and giving the public service a sense of direction beyond responding to the everyday.”

Management of expectations

It is important to manage the expectations the public has of a new government—if not during the campaign, then soon after winning office. Without clarity, voters project their own aspirations onto promised product. When voters have different and unrealistic beliefs of what a party will do in power, stimulating demands that are unlikely to be satisfied, this causes problems for the government. A potential solution is for the government to define the central parts of the promised product, using methods such as pledges, contracts, commitments, or guarantees. The House Republicans in the U.S. did this in 1994 with their mid-term Contract with America; the Labour Party in the U.K. issued both a contract and credit card-sized pledges in 1997, 2001, and 2005; New Zealand did the same in 1999, 2002, and 2005. New Zealand’s National Party issued a commitments card.

Such initiatives help to focus voters and politicians' minds on what is the most important. Politicians are saying "at the very least we will get these few things done." Another possible solution is to explain the realities of government so there will be understanding of mistakes. This can include admitting weaknesses in performance. Ben Levin (2008), former staff in the Canadian provincial governments of Ontario and Manitoba, commented when interviewed, "The reality . . . is voters know . . . you're going to screw some things up, so why are you pretending you got everything right? You'd be far better off saying yes, we missed that one, so we're going to fix it."

Communication of delivery

Even if parties succeed in delivering the product, it is hard to get this message across. Alastair Campbell (2005), Blair's former press secretary, claimed when interviewed that the media "deliberately obstruct the link between government and hospitals/NHS [National Health Service]." When Scott Stanzel (2007), deputy press secretary to U.S. president George W. Bush, was interviewed, he noted "the healthy tension between policy-makers and the media" but added, "I just think it's our job to help present the policies of the president in a way that explains why he's doing it, why he thinks it's important, and why it should get done."

However, Barber (2007) argued in his book that "citizens have to see and feel the difference and expectations need to be managed," and "where progress is slow, it's even more important for people to understand the strategy" (pp. 369-371). Communication of delivery is therefore also about trying to convey specific progress. The Labour/Blair government in the U.K. issued annual reports in its first term. Elected officials can also do this individually; in the U.S., members of Congress claim credit for a number of activities in their states, including fixing funding formulas and opposing potentially damaging regulatory legislation (Steger, 1999). U.K. MPs claim similar success and also issue annual reports (Lilleker, 2006). Butler and Collins (1999) also argue that in Ireland, MPs try to improve their service delivery to provide a degree of immunity from electoral swings that may move against them.

Communication of delivery should not only involve communicating with the public, but with all important markets. Barber (2007) made the important point about the need to communicate with professionals actually delivering the product on the ground. "We didn't communicate enough to the people working in the front line of education or health what we were trying to do, so instead of being advocates they tended to be critics."

Continual market consultation

Governments need to consult with their markets continually. This includes the usual quantitative and qualitative research, segmentation, and opposition research to identify current and future market demands, needs, and behaviour. The Labour/Blair government was successful in continuing to conduct market intelligence while in power; this alerted them to problems in the second term and ensured there was a chance to do something about them for Blair's third election. As Philip Gould, Blair's strategist, said, "We never, ever took the electorate for

granted; we were always vigilant” (Gould, 2002). From 2001 to 2005, for example, the Labour Party continued to obtain formal intelligence from ICM and Stan Greenberg/Mark Penn. Matt Carter (2007), general secretary of the party at the time, recalled when interviewed how “in the period before 2005, the numbers show[ed] that . . . there was an issue to do with trust, that people felt Tony Blair had somehow moved away from the agenda that they had elected him on.”

One of the advantages of government is that there is access to public funds to conduct opinion research. Canada’s Conservative government took advantage of this, increasing spending amounts from the previous Liberal government (McGregor, 2007). Michael M. Fortier, the former minister of public works and government services, noted that “public opinion research is an important tool that allows us to better understand the needs and expectations of Canadians to deliver appropriate policies, programs and services” (Fortier, 2007). In government consulting the market also involves other activities: market-back analysis, public consultation, and expert consultation.

Market-back analysis

Narver, Slater, and Tietje (1998) call this a *market-back* approach. In business, organizations can engage in continuous learning from feedback from their markets and thereby maintain a market orientation over time. In government, therefore, over time, politicians can evaluate “what works and what does not” and achieve incremental progress through continual development.

Public consultation

Governments can also run public consultations, utilizing various forms of listening exercises or engaging in deliberative democracy. These consultative methods can measure existing performance as well as determine new priorities or deliver fresh perspectives on ongoing issues. In 2003, Labour in the U.K. launched *The Big Conversation* to get back in touch with the public. This was an extensive range of events that facilitated positive, reflective, and constructive discussion—a different mode of market intelligence from focus groups and polls—as a “way of engaging the public beyond the party,” in the words of Kamlesh Karia (2004), political development officer for the party. Karia argued that the format encouraged more mature discussion than previous consultations. In Australia, Keneally (2008) noted how the New South Wales delivery unit went “through a fairly extensive but time-constrained consultation process, went around the state, spoke to communities all over the place about what . . . they thought the priorities for state government were. And we ended up publishing a document: thirty-four priorities based around five themes,” with “measurable performance indicators and targets.”

Expert consultation

Once in government, parties have access to additional expertise—reports by think tanks and civil service and internal party ideas—which can be utilized to check performance and develop future strategy. The prime minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, engaged in public consultation via a summit called *Australia 2020* at Parliament House on April 19 and 20, 2008, to help shape a long-term strategy for the nation’s future “beyond the usual three year electoral cycle” (Australia,

2008). It drew on expert participants drawn from business, academia, community and industrial organizations, and the media.

Responsive product re-development and strategic thinking

In response to consultation, governments need to adjust and re-develop their product to create new goals and objectives for the second term, responding to any changes in public concerns and the needs of the country. Governments can draw on government staff and resources to do this, but a supportive, not conflictual culture between government departments and senior government politicians needs to be created to enable this. To be successful, there are two particular factors governments need to bear in mind: adoption of a learning orientation and encouragement and support of strategic thinking.

Adoption of a learning orientation

Many governments have struggled to re-invent themselves and offer a newly developed product after winning the first election. To ensure effective re-development, governments need to adopt a *learning orientation* (Baker & Sinkula, 2002). They must proactively question whether existing behaviour and practices actually maximize their performance, thereby being willing to challenge the status quo and be open to new ideas. Changes in existing government products can include refreshing the overall team at suitable points to promote fresher, younger faces, particularly if the leader remains the same. Whereas Tony Blair had been the cornerstone of communication in the 1992 and 2001 elections, in 2005 the party featured the overall Labour team, including younger ministers. In New Zealand, Helen Clark promoted junior ministers and publicized the retirement of older MPs alongside new candidates for office. Although her party, Labour, lost the 2008 election, such behaviour both limited the extent of the loss and ensured that new MPs were elected to lay foundations for the emergence of a new market-oriented product for the next election, helping the party's prospects in the long term.

Encouragement and support of strategic thinking

Research by Fischer, Schmitz and Seberich (2007) suggested that a number of factors help governments overcome the barriers to effective marketing in government. The U.K. strategy unit, established in the second term, provided a means by which new ideas from academia, think tanks, private industry, and non-governmental organizations were integrated into government. As with delivery, the support of the leadership is crucial to the success of strategy. The U.K. Blair government also re-defined qualifications for high-level civil servant jobs to include strategic thinking as a core skill, to try to institutionalize strategic expertise within the civil service.

Product refinement in response to the competition, the internal market, and public support

As in opposition, marketing in government need not try to please everyone. However, targets may be chosen not so much according to which would yield the most votes as to which might need greater attention in policy and ideological terms, such as the homeless or working parents. There are always more policies

on offer than a government can realistically choose to action. When making this choice, a government can consider the competition and its internal market. Analysis of the competition considers potential opponents and coalition partners if the party seeks election within a proportional representation (PR) electoral system. Competition management is also concerned with ensuring the party develops superior and distinctive attributes that make its product worth choosing over the alternative. Adjusting the product to suit the internal market will encourage party-led differentiation as well as encourage grassroots supporters to support and campaign for the new product.

Maintenance or re-establishment of a market-oriented attitude among MPs and the leadership

While political parties may adopt a market orientation overall to win power, once they get into government, they can become complacent. Parties in government need to ensure the following as part of their operations:

- Internal dissemination of consultation and market analysis results to ensure politicians remain in touch, including internal policy debate and member feedback
- Adequate resources and time to maintain and develop a clear strategy
- Debate as to how best to serve the public and other markets to ensure continued reflective thinking
- Balance between leadership and following public opinion

The market orientation of the leader in particular is important, but as already noted, many factors work against leaders maintaining responsiveness. In Blair's case a market orientation declined during his second term, 2001 to 2005, largely due to unpopular policies on university education fees, foundation hospitals, and the Iraq war, but also a change in attitude by Blair. Alastair Campbell, his chief press secretary, left Downing Street in 2003 and Blair lost a source of critical feedback. Blair's perspective changed: in his resignation speech in May 2007 he observed, "My duty was to put the country first. . . . But what I had to learn as Prime Minister is what putting the country first really meant." In 2005 he had argued that although on the war it was easy to "hit the button on exactly what the public wants to hear" in cases such as war, he could not make decisions "on the basis of the number of people who demonstrate, or on the basis of this opinion poll or that opinion poll" (Blair, 2005).

The problem with the decision to go to war in Iraq was not only was it unpopular, it conveyed an arrogance and dismissiveness. Similarly, in New Zealand Helen Clark's chief press secretary, Mike Munro, resigned in 2005. Clark thereby lost a significant source of support and arguably criticism, and the government became less responsive to underlying public concerns. It could also be argued that the realities of government mean that all leaders will end up taking unpopular decisions. Marketing can identify when leaders need to acknowledge public concern with their behaviour and show respect for criticism, even if they will not change the actual decision. In 2004-05, coming up to Blair's third election, the Labour Party followed advice from the co-creation company Promise

(www.promisecorp.com). Research showed that not only were the public concerned about Blair's actual decision being questionable, he appeared to dismiss voters' concerns entirely, thus undermining his market-oriented image. As Matt Carter (2007), then general secretary of the party, explained when interviewed: "Until that issue had been engaged in and discussed and their [the public's] views and concerns had been heard, I don't think they were willing to listen to the other issues that were at stake."

Promise (2005) utilized expressive techniques including role play that enabled people to express deeply held feelings from which to then re-construct solutions for Labour. They used Two Chair Work, where one of the people in a chair was a voter and the other one played Mr. Blair—first as voters currently saw him and then as they would like him to be, where "he" acknowledged their discontent and was more humble. This market research laid the foundations for a re-connection strategy where Blair met the public in a range of places, including shopping malls, and listened to their criticism, demonstrating respect for their concerns. This strategy played a significant part in re-habilitating Blair's overall image and limiting the damage it had done to the Labour brand. Such market research and strategic advice can therefore help manage unwanted behaviour by government, as long as advisors continue to monitor the brand before it is too late and as long as leaders are prepared to listen to good strategic suggestions.

Leaders need continued access to critical advisors with the ability to give them an objective appraisal. Bob Carr (2008), former premier for the Australian state of New South Wales, said when interviewed that you "want people around you that will disagree with you. You absolutely must have it. They've got to be comfortable about not telling you what you want to do." When interviewed about his experience advising Tony Blair, Roy Langmaid (2008) from Promise noted the importance of having appropriate advisors around the leader: "We were very lucky, we had some pretty astute people around him. One or two of whom thought similarly to us." Analyses by both Glaab (2007) and Lindholm and Prehn (2007), of Germany and Denmark, respectively, suggested that strategy tended to become associated and carried out by a small informal group—usually around the leader. Leaders need to have the time to think about future strategies and directions as well. When the firm Promise first presented ideas about re-branding to Tony Blair in 2004, he asked his private secretary Jonathan Powell to make sure he had the time to consider their ideas over the weekend (Promise, 2005).

Engagement in market-oriented communication

All of the preceding activities and behaviour need to be communicated. Communication in government includes not only demonstrating delivery progress, but also showing that the government has engaged in consultation and conveying the new product for the next election, for example, by showing a re-developed and refreshed team as well as new policy priorities and progress. Communication also includes counteracting any weaknesses the leader has developed while in power. Such communication can be informed by market analysis and the concept of a market orientation. Adapting Robinson's (2007) theory of how political advertising can be devised to suit market-oriented government, communication should:

- Demonstrate a sense of and response to voter needs, with images of party and/or leader interaction with target voters including images of listening and words of togetherness.
- Demonstrate government is offering something new in policy and/or leadership.
- Identify and target the competition, showing a concern to increase market share.
- Maintain relationships with traditional voters, through evocation of party history and myth as well as acknowledgement of shared characters, themes, and stories; images or words of care for core supporters; and/or other texts recognizable to core supporters.

Even though Blair was going to leave office in 2007, Labour strategists worked to improve his image to benefit the party as a whole, using the media to re-connect with the public. Downing Street's own website had visual and audio recordings of Blair's interview with Chris Evans, on the children's TV show *Blue Peter*, and a series of films showing what it was like to be prime minister. Blair even appeared in a comedy sketch for a charity fundraising show for Comic Relief with the "stropky teenager Lauren, better known as comedy actress Catherine Tate" (United Kingdom, 2003), which appealed to the public. A lengthy interview on the *Parkinson* chat show discussed the difficulties and pressures a prime minister faces, and Blair was more reflective and humble. Such communication initiatives did help to soften Blair's image, and they could be used by any prime minister.

Additionally, e-marketing offers the potential to ensure communication is two-way and market-oriented. Political marketing combines the same concepts of market orientation and utilization of market analysis data to suggest that electronic communication including Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace is not just another means of communication to sell a particular party or position. Rather, as Jackson (2006) notes, such communication can be used to build up a long-term relationship with voters; it can also stimulate political participation. Effective e-marketing should, according to Jackson,

- be used before and after an election campaign;
- suit the requirements of the receiver, not just the political party;
- enable and stimulate two-way communication;
- help build "networks" between parties and supporters and MPs and constituents. (2006, p. 95)

While such principles can be utilized by national parties, as shown by the U.S. Democrats/Obama presidential campaign in 2008, they can also be used by governments to maintain an effective volunteer base for the next election and by MPs in the way they communicate with their electorates.

There are therefore a number of ways that parties in power can use marketing to maintain a market orientation and therefore a positive, long-term relationship with the public. The majority of these methods not only go beyond spin but

are also more concerned with communication in a two-way or consultative form, as well as how parties behave and deliver in office. Political marketing nevertheless raises several questions in terms of its impact on democracy, and the next section discusses the extent to which it would be a tool of good government.

Political marketing as a tool of good government

The use of marketing in politics has attracted criticism for its potential implications for democracy (see, for example, Coleman, 2007; Savigny, 2008a and 2008b; and Smith & Saunders, 1990). If political marketing is used by governments in the ways outlined in the framework above, it raises a number of issues concerning its impact on leadership, the consulting of citizens, and the relationship between government and citizens.

The impact on leadership

The first area of concern is the impact on leadership. Being responsive to voter opinion when in opposition may be acceptable, but it could be argued that once they are in power, politicians have to decide what is right according to the information they get in government. Several political leaders have spoken of the need to follow their conviction. For example, Lindholm and Prehn (2007, p. 56) quote a minister of foreign affairs in the Danish Nyrup government as saying "It may be that contract democracy" has "gone too far. We may well be facing a chance in direction, where the people are getting tired of politicians aligning their policies with opinion polls. . . . There is little respect for politicians who simply tell people what they want to hear. Voters expect politicians to lead the field and show the way." In their acceptance speech for the nomination to run for the 2000 U.S. presidential election, both Al Gore and George W. Bush tried to argue that they did not and should not use polls in decision-making:

The presidency is more than a popularity contest. It's a day-to-day fight for people. Sometimes you have to choose what's difficult or unpopular." (Gore, 2000)

I believe great decisions are made with care, made with conviction, not made with polls. I do not need to take your pulse before I know my own mind. (Bush, 2000)

Politicians' objections aside, complete ignorance of public opinion would however be undemocratic, as well as likely to herald loss in future elections. Instead, leading and following can happen within the same market-oriented government. Of course, there will always be a dilemma of when to lead or when to follow public opinion. No framework, whether a marketing one or otherwise, can be a substitute for the final decision a leader takes. Market analysis and consultation can sometimes anticipate the unpopularity of necessary or chosen policies, however, or at least identify problems once they have occurred. Furthermore, understanding public concerns can help to create appropriate communication to make policies more tolerated, as demonstrated by the strategy created by the market research firm Promise in the case of Tony Blair. Additionally, market analysis can help guide leaders as to what the public might be persuaded to support and inform the design of communication to effect change.

The consulting of citizens

While political marketing is not just about doing whatever anybody wants, market-oriented government does suggest the public should be at least listened to and responded to. However, it can be argued that the public should not be consulted on how to run government, because as Lane (1996) notes, compared to political elites, the mass public is generally:

- less interested in politics and less likely to discuss politics;
- less supportive of open discussion of conflicting opinion and more willing to forbid discussion of policy issues considered to be sensitive;
- morally more rigid and conventional, moralistic, and more ready to make categorical moral judgments;
- less able to weigh the costs of policies they support. (pp. 47-49)

Indeed, Coleman (2007) contends that “voters are promiscuous and rationally irresponsible in the range of inconsistent views they hold at any one time, and rarely think about long-term policy consequences in ways that politicians and their advisors are required to do” (p. 181). Similarly Walsh (1994) argues that “the central questions of politics, the nature of punishment, the organisation of health and education, foreign relations and the formation of law cannot be settled on the basis of consumers’ expression of wants” (p. 68).

Nevertheless, practitioners who have engaged in consultation speak of a greater maturity and complexity of understanding among voters than observers or elites might expect. Carter (2007), who now works for PSB research, argued that “voters tend to be pretty rational . . . they tend to be pretty consistent. . . . The biggest danger for political parties is where they dismiss the feelings and the thoughts of the public.” David Glover (2007), from the New Zealand research firm Gravitas, said when interviewed, “I can honestly say, hand on heart, I have never run qualitative research on anything with anybody where I haven’t got a reasonable group of people together who can have a say on something, even if they don’t really understand it. . . . People are not stupid.” Glover and Gould (2007) both pointed to the need for the public to be consulted in a way that is more deliberate and gives them more information—perhaps to enable them to understand the “consequences” Coleman suggests that only politicians receive otherwise. However, considering citizen input into decision-making, to whatever extent and in whatever form, suggests a changing relationship between citizen and the state that needs further discussion.

Changing the relationship between citizen and state

Market-oriented politics, in both opposition and now government, suggests that the relationship between citizen and state is changing. Indeed, Tony Blair said at the 2004 Labour Party conference that “the relationship between state and citizen has changed. . . . In an opportunity society, as opposed to the old welfare state, government does not dictate; it empowers. It makes the individual—patient, parent, law-abiding citizen, job-seeker—the driver of the system, not the state.”

However, market-oriented behaviour by governments suggests that the public should be treated like consumers, and this threatens the notion of citizens and

associated democratic values such as collective obligation; community; the need for debate, discussion, and exchange of ideas to ensure the best allocation of resources according to principle; and the desire to improve society, rather than just meet market demand (see Needham, 2003). The potential effect of consumerism on politics means that voters may want a more tangible rather than a rhetorical product, want more evident and instant delivery, and prefer achievement over aspiration; they may seek pragmatic effectiveness over moral principle. Savigny (2008b) argues that referring to the public as consumers of politics reinforces the New Right emphasis upon markets as the best way to create solutions to societal problems. In this view, individuals are not always able to pursue and maximize their own self-interest, and elites only consider consumer wants to suit their goals, because marketing is used to satisfy the goals of politicians rather than the wants of the public. Removing the notion of the citizen removes obligations as well as rights (see also Savigny, 2008a, and Scammell, 2003).

However, marketing can bring a number of benefits. It enables governments to understand public concerns more effectively not just at elections and re-connect government with the governed. Marketing can provide a means for governments to listen to the public, which in turn can improve policy-making and implementation. As Gene Ulm (2007), a U.S. public opinion professional, noted when interviewed, "Politicians who say the public doesn't matter usually don't last that long . . . because we don't live in a dictatorship, we can't function without them." Scullion (2008) argued that consumer sovereignty gives the public power, which meets rather than erodes democratic ideals. Market populism, he wrote, is anti-elitist and can encourage greater participation in politics, as people are asked to call government or other organizations to account. Culver and Howe's study of a Canadian city's residents (2004) argued that it did succeed in encouraging citizen participation; at the end of the process both civic officials and participants wanted more consultation, and elites were open to new methods in which more people might participate in future.

Furthermore, when consulting citizens, values and ethics can still be integrated. Slocum (2004) notes how "in the USA, personal wellbeing may be at the heart of much consumer action, but it is doubtful that people only think of themselves when they consider the safety of food, water, and other goods: they think of kids, family, and even community" (p. 767). Consumers can care about issues. Scullion (2008) contends that citizenship can exist within a consumer culture, and consumerism in politics can create avenues for the public to take on civic qualities, including accepting responsibility to shape their own lives. Consumerism may encourage voters to demand that parties and politicians ensure they have governing capability and that political promises be costed and realistic. However, this can be good for government and ensure that politics is about what is delivered and changed not just what is promised in an election campaign.

Although we may worry that if political elites ask voters what they want, voters will answer selfishly, broader frameworks of consultation may produce a more balanced response that is in the interests of the community, not just the individual. Utilizing deliberative democracy forms of consultation could help ensure that marketing in government supports, rather than threatens, the traditional rep-

representative relationship. When Gordon Brown, the U.K. Labour prime minister since 2007, launched a series of citizen juries in 2007, he argued that "Citizens Juries are not a substitute for representative democracy, they are an enrichment of it" (United Kingdom, 2007). As Lees-Marshment and Winter (2009) argue, "Deliberative political theory is focused on deliberation rather than voting and . . . considers opinion and will-formation before voting; and can be an expansion of representative democracy, indeed the *res publica* itself beyond just interest aggregation." Deliberative democracy involves a range of methods, including citizen juries, national deliberation days, local parliaments, neighbourhood initiatives, and citizen panels. "Deliberative mechanisms offers further strengths in facilitating the efficacy of local knowledge, and where training or information is provided, may mitigate some of the weaknesses in mass public knowledge and understanding compared to elites. Deliberative theory of politics may therefore offer greater insight into how governments can consult the public, [and] make that consultation more worthwhile, both theoretically and in terms of practice" (Lees-Marshment & Winter, 2009).

The integration of consultation into government within a market-oriented framework undoubtedly needs further work. As Gould (2007) cautioned when interviewed:

You're going to get a situation where the public in those kinds of exercises want to do one thing and the government will want to do something else. That's a listening-leadership clash again. And that's not been resolved. . . . Say, for example, the public come out and say we don't want to have nuclear power. And the government thinks we absolutely have to have nuclear power. What do you do there? You need a kind of a methodology, a theory of democracy that can deal with it, which is quite hard. . . . People want the government to lead, and the government has to lead, and how you involve people in that process, it's difficult. But it's got to be doable, because people do want to be involved and so they should be.

Therefore, while the detail of such a framework has yet to be fully worked out, there remains the potential remains for a deliberative approach to be integrated into government and provide participation and consultation appropriate to the twenty-first century. When political marketing in government is taken to an extreme and caricatured as being purely about following rather than leading, then clearly there are problematic implications for democracy. But in reality as well as in theory, political marketing is not black and white, and neither are the democratic consequences.

As when used by a political party in opposition, political marketing in government is not just about spin, and although the activities are different from those carried out in opposition, in government there is arguably even more need to use marketing to maintain a positive relationship with the public. This article has outlined a number of potential concepts with empirical examples to provide a starting point for discussion. While political marketing is only one of many factors that affect government's support and success or failure, and while it is not necessarily the overriding determinant in political fortunes, it is one avenue gov-

ernments do and can consider. The basic principles of market-oriented government are that the government and its leader(s) will remain in touch with ordinary voter concerns, interested in public views, responsive to what the public are concerned about, and that they will demonstrate this in the way they behave (not just how they sell themselves).

Activities market-oriented governments can engage in include delivery management and communication; continual market consultation; responsive product re-development and strategic thinking; product refinement in response to the competition, internal market and public support; maintenance of a market-oriented attitude; and engagement in market-oriented communication. In this way political marketing in government is a much more consultative, strategic, and long-term public relations program. Market-oriented governments aim to maintain a responsive relationship with the public, continuing to consult, reflect, review, and develop their product alongside appropriate leadership in the context of government realities to provide satisfaction over the long term. As such, although there are many potential limitations to and concerns about political marketing, it could potentially become a tool of good government.

In the conventional area of political campaigning, studies observed a move from a focus on the short pre-election campaign to a permanent campaign; in political marketing there should arguably be a move from pre-election marketing to permanent marketing, where communication between political elites and the people is much more reflexive, complex, and mature. Parties in opposition would be wise to think about marketing in government before they aim to win the election. Indeed, the way marketing is used could have even broader ramifications. In the early twenty-first century there are many challenges to the relationship between voter and government, as citizens exhibit continual disaffection from political elites in Western liberal democracies. Political marketing could have implications for this changing relationship between citizen and state, and while it is important to be aware of the limitations as well as the potential of political marketing in government, this is a debate well worth beginning.

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Note

1. Interviews were conducted between 2005 and 2009 mostly with practitioners in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. The majority were face to face, but additional interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews were semi-structured, with each one tailored to suit the position and experience of the practitioner. Generic questions asked were what worked in their role, what did not work so well, and what barriers or constraints did they face in their work.

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