

The Politics of the shrinking marketplace: Marketing voter disengagement

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Abstract

Marketing is traditionally associated with expanding the market for a branded product in order to increase profit; brands undertake research to ensure they possess a thorough understanding of the consumer, their wants and needs. We would all perhaps expect that the brand that is closest to their consumers, most on the pulse of the market, would be expected also to be the most profitable within a competitive marketplace. While a simplification of marketing, this highlights the important irony with political marketing; that while marketing increases in use and sophistication within political campaigning and communication, voter disengagement rises contiguously.

Data collected during the 2005 UK General Election, and a long term study within the political parties' heartlands, allows us to understand the nature and causes of political disengagement, and see why marketing is one root cause. The segmentation of voters, and targeting of those voters who can deliver the greatest profit, a victory in a marginal seat, leaves the majority of the electorate metaphorically out in the cold feeling unrepresented and marginalized. Through a comparison of attitudes within a safe and marginal Labour seat we find the dichotomy between opinions is stark on questions of representation, efficacy of the democratic process and interest in politics. This dichotomy filters through to voting behavior and attachment to the parties and candidates and will often argue that they will only turn out to vote if they are asked and that support is deserved.

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The conundrum at the heart of professional campaigning

There is a conundrum at the heart of the modern political process, one which particularly relates to the connection between the citizen and the elected political institutions; that while the political parties are increasing their uses of marketing concepts and tools throughout their behavior public disengagement is growing and deepening. While political marketing, as this is defined, is suggested to be the route for reconnecting politics to the people; there is a reverse effect being witnessed. Hence predictions that heralded political marketing to be the means by which political institutions would become more in touch, providing the things that the citizen requires, and so being recognized as offering a range of desirable products at election times (Lees-Marshment, 2001) seem rather flawed and their exponents misguided. However, I do not suggest that those who viewed political marketing as the panacea for public mistrust and disengagement were erroneous in making these suggestions. The problem we recognize at the heart of political marketing is the difference between what it is and what it could be; the actual versus the normative. Normatively political marketing is suggested to involve a process by which parties discover the electorate's key needs and wants and offer a range of policies that will deliver to their requirements. While this implicitly means parties must build greater connections with voters using more of a bottom up approach to politics as opposed to elite-oriented decision making. The problem is that a comprehensive study of political marketing at the UK 2005 General Election (Lilleker et al, 2006) found that marketing as a philosophy that places the customer or voter first is practiced at best patchily, and the stress is placed on designing effective communication to sell bland catch-all policy statements; therefore there is little sense of politics following a true model of marketing.

Studies of political marketing in non-Anglo-American contexts can find huge positives in pursuing a more grass roots approach, where the party and their leader are organic to the community who offers them votes. Cotrim-Maceira (2005) argues that the ongoing success of Brazilian President Lula da Silva is due to the combination of his down to earth, man of the people image and matching opinion-led program reform he provided both the style and policies that the Brazilian voters were seeking. Arguably Tony Blair in the UK in 1997 (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2005), and George W Bush in the USA in 2000 (Knuckey & Lees-Marshment, 2005), did just the same; however, both honeymoons were short lived and accompanied by a collapse in turnout at elections. While one could point to a number of reasons for this, many of which can be related to the professionalisation of politics and its attendant communication, this paper focuses upon one small but highly significant area: the political view of the electorate as a marketplace and the strategic targeting of voters. While the research is drawn from two studies of the UK, the core argument relates to any nation where first past the post elections take place and where electoral success depends upon victory in geographic areas where support is divided between two of the major contenders but where the margin for victory is close. This paper notes that the within the UK marginal seats, and indeed the US swing states, participation in elections is higher, voters are more engaged and informed and the contest is seen as important. But this scene of democracy thriving is notable for its scarcity; hence this paper suggests that elsewhere we find lower turnout, disengagement and a lack of enthusiasm or interest within electoral contests. It is this disparity that this paper explores, so linking political marketing to political disengagement, and explains theoretically why voting patterns are linked closely to campaign energy.

Campaign strategy in two horse races

It is simply a truism to talk of the evolving professionalisation of campaigning strategy over recent decades (Norris, 2000). We are also aware of the fact that there is no longer one single election campaign, but a number of interlinked campaigns running parallel with one another. Gaber (2006) notes of the 2005 UK General Election three distinct campaigns, one targeted at individual voters by the mass parties, a further campaign run nationally through the broadcast and print media, while at the local level candidates were encouraged to reach as many voters as possible using all media and resources available to them. It is two of the strands of the campaign this paper focuses upon, the national targeted communication and the campaign at the local level. These are not mass campaigns, but in the UK in 2005 more strategically targeted than ever before. The national parties used personal letters, telephone calls, emails and doorstep visits to talk to, according to some estimates, no more than approximately 741,000 voters, 2% of the total electorate (Savigny, 2005). These voters lived in seats with the narrowest of electoral margins at the previous contest, they had no real loyalty to any party, research suggested they had a propensity to vote for the party contacting them and they could be swayed by communication on issues relevant to them, and importantly they were statistically likely to actually vote. The party faithful, non-voters or those living in seats deemed as safe received communication via the mass media only, some direct in the form of advertisements, broadcasts and possibly a single leaflet; more likely their information was mediated via news or editorials. Hence this suggests a cleavage between information haves and have-nots; the majority being excluded from any more advanced form of participation beyond being audiences to the campaign and voters, possibly, on polling day.

This targeting is not designed to exclude voters from active participation in the contest; it is simply following the logic of economics and the marketplace. In the UK finances dictate how what resources are available to each of the parties for their election campaigning. Both major parties commonly bankrupt themselves in the process of trying to be elected; equally they attempt to gain funds from as many sources as possible, this practice often leads to serious question being asked and, following the 2005 election, a police enquiry into whether donations were exchanged for honors. This environment necessitates that scant resources are targeted for maximum benefit.

The conundrum which resides at the heart of the strategy is that strategists appear aware of the importance of local campaigning and the targeting of messages to individuals. This was suggested during interviews with candidates and their agents within three marginal UK seats, members of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat campaign teams and was reinforced in a statement made by UK Premier Tony Blair speaking at a briefing at Labour's headquarters in February 2005, instructed candidates that face-to-face contact with the voters would be vital to "inspire, enthuse and engage and give the public a sense of empowerment" (BBC News (www.bbc.co.uk/news/1/hi/uk_politics/4272741.stm accessed 17 February 2005)). A senior Conservative went slightly further: "the only way to get voters interested and engaged is talk to them, either on their doorsteps, in letters or on our websites about things that matter to them and offer them a solution they find plausible and attractive and that they will be able to see happen and will deliver to them what they want (Interview, June 2005). While this suggests adherence to a marketing philosophy, party strategists all admitted that the voters they sought to engage with were a narrow minority.

The criteria described above, of the disloyal voters within key geographical battle zones, matched

each party's target for their election communication. Only the Liberal Democrats argued they encouraged the long term "nursing of all out seats" though this is due to the recognition that the party on the whole does not have truly safe seats. However the Liberal Democrats resources were largely put behind their decapitation strategy, aimed at unseating senior Conservative MPs; a strategy that one Liberal Democrat agent argued lost them Guildford as "Sue Doughty [Liberal Democrat MP until the 2005 Election] had half the resources that Anne Milton [Conservative victor in 2005] did", equally he argued that the decapitation strategy served to also mobilise the Conservative faithful; hence the strategy targeted resources in the wrong places. Asked if a campaign should try to mobilise all voters, all strategists argued this was impossible and that it was the role of television to perform that task. A Labour agent made this point most succinctly: "what is the point of wasting time and money asking someone to vote for you who will anyway, or lives somewhere that enough vote for you or one of the other lot that it doesn't matter, or who isn't going to vote anyway; none that's the point" (Interview, May 2005). Thus sophisticated marketing software was used to stratify voters by voting behaviour and propensity to vote and for those whose names came out who lived in the marginal seats the campaign was brought to them using every means available. It appears therefore that while an election may be about democracy, the campaign is not; all voters are not equal and not all votes have same value in the UK or US political marketplace.

The mobilized and engaged minority: scenes from the marginals

This section draws on a questionnaire distributed one week of the 2005 UK General Election, May 6th-11th, and nine focus groups which took place in June 2005. The project was designed to test for campaign and incumbency effects within marginal constituencies and used three local seats, Mid Dorset, Dorset South and Dorset West. The key results were published elsewhere (Lilleker, 2005a, 2006), however other interesting data were collected that build a reasonably rich picture of voter engagement in seats where the campaign was most intense.

The first important point to make, drawing purely on the quantitative data, was the high level of recall for communication from the two main competitors. The incumbent received the highest recall, on average 96% across all three seats, however this was only marginally higher than the main competitor who all averaged 89%. Notably third placed candidates gained little recall, as they did not really have a campaign, however the Green candidate in Dorset West, UKIP in Mid Dorset and the RESPECT candidate in Dorset South averaged 20%, higher than the third placed candidates, and a not insignificant level considering their lack of resources and little chances of winning. Of more importance is that the main communication recalled was firstly leaflets, the staple form of communication in an intense localized battle, but secondly actually meeting the candidates. Exactly half of all respondents met at least one of the candidates; just under a third met both main contenders. The strong correlation between having face to face interaction with a candidate and then voting for that candidate is strong at 60% and highly significant, indicating that this type of campaigning is highly successful and the ability to be present across the constituency can be a key element to winning these contests. Incumbents all had the advantage, the reason not campaign related but due to their long term profile building activities. Independent of voting behavior, incumbents within these seats were rated highly for performing their duties as a local representative, on average they were scored seven out of ten with Dorset South MP Jim Knight earning an average of 9.8. This score was founded upon ongoing communication which was backed up by the more intense election campaigning. Hence we see that the high activity

campaigning is recognized by voters locally and that there seem to be high rewards for a candidate who works hard on the ground.

The attitudes which are encouraged among voters are the more significant element for the development of the argument of this paper. In focus groups the self-selecting volunteers demonstrated their possession of generally cynical attitudes towards politics generally. Consistent with the generally rehearsed negative attitudes, these voters argue the parties are insufficiently dissimilar, that party leaders seek personal power, fame and fortune, that their promises can not generally be trusted and that politics is generally not worthy of great consideration. Most of the voters who participated in this stage of the research watched television news, read a local or national paper reasonably frequently but none were the political anoraks that actively seek out political information; consistent with Stephen Coleman's dichotomy of younger voters they are more likely to seek information on Big Brother, or at least non-political news items, than be monitoring activity in the Westminster village. Yet, during the 2005 General Election they accumulated a significant amount of information concerning both the main candidates, were interested in the contest and its outcome, were keen to register their vote and stayed up to watch the result which was greeted with either disappointment or joy.

The reason for the fact that unlike many UK voters here was enthusiasm and excitement was firstly the closeness of the contest generally, so every vote mattered and a greater importance was placed in participating; this was shown by the higher turnout across all three constituencies, 71% as opposed to the broad national average of 59%. Secondly however was the attitude that the outcome of the contest mattered to them personally. Many participants argued that the incumbent deserved to be re-elected; equally those who voted for the opposing candidate said they would prefer a Conservative or Liberal Democrat MP and believed that candidate would make a good MP. While many comments could be examples of post hoc rationalization of voting behavior the fact that both the qualitative and quantitative data reinforced the dual importance of both national and local factors, local factors being those relating to the candidate as a representative, it is suggestive that the choice in the ballot box was determined by both general political factors as well as elements determined by the campaign.

Furthermore, the campaign had the effect of mobilizing many of the voters. One participant argues that she "probably wouldn't have bothered voting if the MP hadn't come to my door", this factor was shared by others who had "never met an MP before" or, more importantly, "no-one's ever asked me for my vote personally before". Equally, the face to face communication allowed voters to interact with candidates on the issues important to them. One voter met both candidates in Dorset West, it was the fact that MP Oliver Letwin could not make any direct statement on party policy towards supporting the disabled while his Liberal Democrat opponent Justine McGuinness could point to actual achievements by the party in the area of disabled rights and benefits that swung her vote. By the same token, Letwin's support for a special bus service for pensioners in rural areas to Dorchester hospital earned him support. Mid Dorset MP Annette Brooke won support for her ability to articulate the proposals for Local Tax Reforms and getting police onto the streets, building on her long term campaigning. These are all evidence of voters finding the election communication relevant to them and being able to ask questions personally and test their candidates on the issues that matter to them. Those with these experiences argued the media never ask the right questions, and that they want to know how each candidate will help them personally at the local level. Consistent with the view of the parties as offering similar products, one voter argued that "on the big policies they [the parties] are pretty much the same,

but whether they'll protect the local hospital is important, or what they'll do about.... The things that matter round here, that's what I want to talk about".

Thus we gain an impression of voters being engaged in a campaign, caring about the outcome and seeing politics as personally relevant to them. In a vibrant democracy this is how an election should be viewed, however this is only one perspective; elsewhere the picture is rather bleak.

Disenfranchised and demobilized: the marginalized heartlands

The data from which this section has been developed was conducted during June and July of 2001 in an attempt to assess the attitudes towards New Labour within the party's traditional heartlands, specifically in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. The research was entirely qualitative and conducted among those who consider themselves as loyal Labour supporters generally but who either did not or considered not voting at the 2001 UK General Election. While the data is not strictly comparable, and was largely regarding the relationship between loyal Labour voters and the party (see Lilleker, 2005b), due to the nature of qualitative focus groups many comments were made about the election as this was fresh in the minds of these members of the electorate and was used as indicative of the attitude of the party to the constituencies. The three Barnsley seats, Central, East and Mexborough, and West and Penistone, are all safe Labour seats, incumbents enjoying majorities of 35-40% of the vote, but turnout is low, on average 48% in 2005 and drop of one percent from 2001. Thus the intention is offer some reasons for this in light of the marketing and segmentation strategies employed by Labour over the last two elections.

The key, stark difference is the fact that these voters expressed the cynical and negative view of politics and election campaigning but related this not to what is heard through the media, as was largely the case for the Dorset voters, but drew on personal experiences of contact with the party or, which was more likely, lack of contact with candidates, party workers or the election campaign at all. Out of 48 participants only one could recall receiving a leaflet, none were visited, received telephone calls or any of the communication associated with the professional and marketised election campaign. Equally, few had any idea if their MP worked on their behalf as a constituency representative, on the whole they were unaware of any office hours they may have, those living in Barnsley West & Penistone said their MP Michael Clapham did post his hours in the local paper, but none knew if the MP had taken up any case work whatsoever on behalf of a constituent. While it would be virtually unthinkable for an MP to do no casework, something which most backbench MPs like the Barnsley incumbents see now as their priority role (Rush, 2004), it seems they see no necessity to publicize their activities to their constituents either via the local newspapers, personal or party websites, or through newsletters to the constituency, tools used by all incumbents and even one of the candidates in the marginal Dorset seats, and had no budget to produce extensive literature to advertise their achievements during the election campaign proper.

The problem here though is the attitude that this engenders among these members of the electorate. They feel they are unrepresented, both by the Labour party, which they felt should be "their party", "looking after people like me" or "looking after the working class", but also the MP himself. One participant colorfully argued that Barnsley Central MP Jeff Ennis was interested in "nothing but Jeff Ennis, he buys big houses and feathers his own nest". This was uncorroborated and potentially libelous; the problem seems that Ennis does not conduct sufficient communication with the constituency to counter such attitudes. Specifically talking about the election, these

voters felt that no-one cared about their vote, it was unimportant and so as a natural corollary they were unimportant as citizens. Though using their own language the majority expressed feeling disenfranchised, while partly the result of the perceived swing to the right by the Labour Party under Tony Blair, the lack of reassurance and direct and visible representation at the local level did nothing whatsoever in alleviating these attitudes and feelings. A left-winger residing in Dorset South expressed similar views about the Labour Party, expressing highly negative views towards most modern politicians, yet he had only positive comments to make about Jim Knight as his MP independent of the fact that he regarded the MP as “a soft leftie really”. While the Barnsley focus group participants were political similar to the Dorset South voter, their negative attitudes towards politics were not being countered in any way. They felt no reason to vote, that politicians did not care about them or their area, and the minority who did vote did so only out of duty; one said it was out of solidarity with the Suffragettes only and was applauded for her contribution.

This is a bleak picture, and intentionally so. However it fairly reflects the attitudes of those who participated in the Barnsley focus groups. The fact that turnout declined slightly 2001-5 maybe suggests the picture is unchanged and may explain why Labour’s heartland seats experienced the lowest turnout of all seats nationally; Conservative safe seats were on average just above the national average at 62%. The fact that the Labour Party are the most professional in their electoral strategy, and concentrate their campaigning resources carefully (Denver & Hands, 1997; Denver et al, 2001; Hands et al, 2005), there seems to be some correlation here. This paper suggests why this would be the case theoretically in the next section.

Beyond the election campaign: theorizing voter psychology

The first important point to stress is that there is a general and widespread negative reaction to political communication. MORI polls consistently show politicians as being on of if not the least trusted professional groups in the country, this attitude was borne out by the research in both geographical areas; the only difference was that in the marginal constituencies there was a feeling that the incumbent was trustworthy if all others may not be. These negative attitudes lead to a mistrust and so rejection of messages emanating from the political sphere. Election broadcasts are viewed, as one Dorset West voter put it, as “empty words strung together to fool us they care”; advertisements are probably viewed similarly, and any talk of achievements are blocked out because of the widespread reaction that “they would say that” consistent with mistrust and the lack of perceived credibility political communication sources generally engender. Hence these negative attitudes act as noise that obstructs a message reaching the intended receivers.

The difference between voters in the marginal seats, where their MP is highly visible and will engage in a large amount of long-term, often face to face, communication with the local electorate, is that they have developed a relationship with the incumbent. These MPs, and candidates where they have been in place and campaigning for a significant period prior to the campaign proper, have permission to contact the electorate. As a corollary, their communication is not rejected and the messages are retained, considered and effect attitudes towards the democratic process. The fact that there is a motivation to engage with the campaign means that the minority of voters who faced with a strong permanent campaign reinforced through an intense, on the ground election campaign become mobilized and interested, develop a desire for the re-election, or election, of one of the candidates and have a far higher propensity to vote.

This element of motivation is central to theories of communication processing: the cognitive responses experienced by receivers on facing a message. Petty & Cacioppo’s influential Elaboration Likelihood Model argues that in order for any receiver to be persuaded by a message they must be motivated to think about that message. This means that the message itself, the style of communication and the source all become bundled together in a split second decision

over whether to read a leaflet, listen to a speaker or engage in a debate. While many potential receivers may pick up elements of a campaign via the mass communication, mediated or unmediated, they will not have sufficient motivation to consider their electoral choice and will either follow their traditional patterns of voting, vote due to perceptions of the leader or a single issue or, as is more likely within many safe seats, not bother voting at all. These voters are less likely to have strong attitudes regarding any of the candidates or their parties and, in theory; their vote can be swayed by a variety of factors relating to the campaign or their experiences of politics and political communication more generally.

The strength of attitudes on the voter choices made by both groups of voters bear out this hypothesis. Among all the voters in the Dorset marginals there was a strong positive attitude towards the candidate they had chosen, the nature of representation within the constituency and the service they had access to from their MP. The opposite was largely the case within Barnsley. While many had once considered themselves Labour they indicated they would like an alternative but their mistrust prevented them engaging with the national campaign and so they had little knowledge of the parties. Equally they felt no loyalty to the incumbent, felt unrepresented and largely disenfranchised. The only strong attitude was one of negativity to the campaign, and the democratic political process, in general. Hence while one group felt the election was important, the result was interesting to them and they had a desire to participate; in contrast the others attitudes to the contest are best summed up by one fifty year old man who had previously voted out of duty but decided in 2001 that he saw no good reason to participate: "elections don't matter, they promise stuff but do what they want anyway, as far as I care they can all go to hell".

Hence, based on the attitudes of these two groups of very different members of the electorate, it appears that the choice of whether or not to vote, and then who to vote for, becomes a rational and reasoned action. For those who feel the outcome is a foregone conclusion, and who feel their participation will have little or no impact, there is a general attitude that voting is not a worthwhile activity. The difference within the marginals is that while the national contest may well reaching an obvious outcome locally it is not. Equally, within the marginals where MPs and in some cases candidates expend much energy proving their worth, constituents can develop a vested interest in the result. Importantly, however, they are also made to feel important. Election communication tells them their vote matters, the nature of the campaign and the service provision of the incumbent makes them feel important as citizens, hence they not only feel a duty to participate but also a desire to go to the polling booth on election day.

Why the marketplace is undemocratic and democracy is not a marketplace

The research presents a very diverse picture. In Dorset democracy is alive, vibrant and participatory; while Barnsley sees disengagement and feelings of a lack of representation and disenfranchisement. At the heart of this is the logic of the marketplace. Parties, like any other advertisers, are targeting their resources for maximum profit; while logical it is against the principles of democracy. If political marketing is about more than winning elections, if it is true that underpinning a political marketing strategy is providing for the complex needs and wants of citizens of a democratic nation then such tactics are unacceptable. The rhetorical language used by Tony Blair in encouraging his MPs and candidates to inspire, enthuse and empower the electorate was seemingly followed only where Labour felt they were in danger of losing; suggesting that this was not about nurturing democratic engagement more widely. Electioneering needs to change to

provide the political marketplace with what it requires.

Politics is essentially bottom up, a concept that is central to the notion of representation. Political marketing has enforced a top down strategic overview of the nation, one that uses concepts such as target voters, key marginals and which profiles voters on their propensity to participate and be influenced by campaign communication. Such concepts are fine for supermarkets, banks etc, here there is choice for the consumer. However, democracy does not offer choice if voters are demobilized and detached from the process of voting. In this way we can argue that democracy is not a marketplace, as there are few competitors and a perception of even less competing ideas. The neo-liberal managerialism that is central to modern government leaves voters unable to distinguish any tangible bases from which to form a choice and need more not less communication. This communication does not solely have to be about local political issues but also the major issues of the day. Voters in Dorset South valued the opportunity to talk to a member of the government about a whole range of issues and how a Labour government may tackle them if elected for a third term, the problem is that these were among that minority of 2% of all voters who were targeted. Politics, it appears, is now for the few.

In theory an election should be a time when all those who can vote are motivated to consider their electoral choice; this is currently not the case. The logic of the marketplace demands that resources are targeted, hence there are few who are cognitively engaged as the campaign is only taken to the few; this is incompatible with democracy. Hence this paper argues that strategists within nations where first past the post elections are the norm and where there is the need to conduct local level election contests must consider not how to target resources most efficiently but how to reach as many voters as possible independent of who they are. While there may well be those who will never vote regardless, it may also be the case that being engaged by the campaign can weaken the negative attitudes towards politicians that appear prevalent and encourage greater long-term interest in the democratic process. What would be inappropriate is for the key target voters in the marginal seats to remain the only ones who care about the outcome as 741,000 voters do a not a majority make.