The Conundrum of Leading or Following in Politics? 
An Analysis of Political Marketing Postures

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Abstract

While research on how political parties use political marketing instruments exists, the lack of emphasis on strategic marketing, especially with regard to theoretical frameworks of political marketing orientation, can be seen as a major problem area for the development of political marketing research as a subdiscipline of marketing and political science. Therefore, a concept is suggested that defines a party’s orientation towards political marketing management, using two crucial elements of strategic marketing theory with regard to customer orientation: leading and following. Three generic types of political parties are characterised with regard to their stance on these two elements here described as “strategic postures”. Furthermore, the implications of the different strategic postures for the fulfilment of certain political marketing functions as well as organisational issues are briefly discussed. While traditional parties with a rigid content-based approach towards policy-making can be characterised as “Convinced Ideologists”, modern catch-all parties have moved towards being “Tactical Populists”. While both of these postures are prone to being perceived as either dogmatic or untrustworthy and fickle, a third posture (that of “Relationship Builder”) is proposed that integrates “leading and following” by using a relational approach towards marketing, as suggested in the evolving literature on
strategic marketing and marketing orientation. This “Relationship Builder” stance constitutes a theoretical posture that needs to be clarified by empirical research in the political arena. Thus, to foster further empirical and theoretical research, several propositions will be derived in a process which is in line with the demands of theory-building and hypothesis-driven exploration as suggested for new disciplines such as political marketing.

*Key words:* Political marketing; political postures; political orientation

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The Conundrum of Leading or Following in Politics? – An Analysis of Political Marketing Postures

Political parties and (marketing) strategy

Political actors such as political parties or candidates are said to develop and follow “strategies”. These strategies might, for example, consist of a plan how to win an election campaign (Newman 1994; Newman 2002). To this end parties may apply political marketing tools such as specific communication policies but also distribution or cost management policies to fulfill certain marketing functions that allow them to reach their strategic aim (Kotler & Kotler 1999; Henneberg 2002). It has been stated that it “has become impossible not to incorporate a marketing orientation when running for political office” (Newman, 2002, p. 2). However, besides these “situation-specific” strategies, which are usually called campaigns, political parties need to address some more fundamental strategic issues of political marketing management. Although these are not normally part of campaign-centred political marketing (Newman 1999), they touch upon the essence of political marketing and concern the basic “orientation” of the party towards political marketing management, i.e. the end towards which they deploy political marketing instruments. While the area of political marketing instruments and their use by political actors is now a commonly researched issue (see for example Newman 1994, Kavanagh 1995, Wring 1999), questions of political marketing orientation and the contingencies of strategic frameworks have been largely neglected (Scammell 1995; O’Cass 2001). The basic orientation of a party with regard to political marketing management can be called a “strategic
posture”. Fundamentally, political parties (a term which I use in this context as a signifier for the acting party politicians within that party) have two different dimensions to choose from:

- They can try to lead, i.e. “know” that their political concept (i.e. political product, ideology) is essentially “right”. This means that political marketing management is a tactical means to fulfill a certain mission (driven by Sendungsbewusstsein). Leading essentially consists of trying to actively convince others (party members, voters, other constituencies) of the beneficial nature of a political offer. Leading means influencing others to do something (e.g. provide resources, vote for the party) to “realise” a political concept.

- On the other hand, a party can choose to follow, i.e. it can guess, anticipate or analyse the wishes of their specific constituency and then create a political offering that best integrates and articulates the wishes of the biggest possible number of constituency members. In this case political marketing is not only a managerial tool to “execute” strategies but consists of the strategy itself to develop a political offering.

By having to decide about their strategic orientation, political parties/candidates face the same decisions and trade-offs as other commercial and non-commercial organisations with regard to their approach towards marketing and customer orientation. While most marketing literature defines these concepts mainly as anticipating and analysing customer demands and consequently fulfilling them (Davis/Manrodt 1996), this definition reveals only half the story. It represents the “market-driven approach”, what can be called the “Procter&Gamble approach to customer orientation”: based on extensive market research for profitable sub-
segments, new products or product positions are based on what customers “really want”. In effect, this approach of following customers leads to a policy of frequent incremental improvements. However, another expression of marketing and customer orientation is also discussed in marketing theory: a creative approach towards offering development, i.e. a “market-driving approach” (McDonald/Wilson 2002; Hellensen 2003). This can be called the “Sony approach to customer orientation”, after the often cited example of the Sony walkmen leading to a new and revolutionary product that fulfilled latent demands, hitherto unknown to companies and customers alike (Kotler 2003). Marketing research, product testing and the whole plethora of modern NPD methodology was not able to come up with such an innovative value proposition, nor was it able to show and substantiate its immense sustainability in economic terms.

The approach of leading is based on conviction (even in the face of contradicting evidence) but also requires empathy with one’s key constituents. However, it must be also based on pragmatic knowledge of what is possible and achievable; “leading” without gaining a followership is not really leading. Leading in a marketing sense means understanding the key components of customer preferences to gain empathy and the ability to judge if one’s conviction is a “reasonable” one in the eyes of the customer. In fact, leading has always been an important positive attribute of politicians. Herrmann/Huber (1996) show in a conjoint-based study of attributes of political candidates that the ability to lead is one of the three main factors of a positive perception by voters (the other being social competence and integrity).

1 However, one could also cite many more example, e.g. Toyota’s Lexus automobile.
2 These results are astonishingly stable in different European party systems (Herrmann/Huber 1996)
Having said this, one caveat needs to be applied to the definitions above: although leading and following, i.e. driving the market or being driven by it, are seemingly antagonistic concepts on a continuum, this is not the case when discussing a (political) marketing orientation. As will be seen below, the degree to which both dimensions are applied simultaneously constitutes the specific strategic posture a political party or candidate holds. Leading and following can both happen as part of political marketing management. In the following, several postures and their characteristics will be represented in terms of generic options for political parties involved in a competitive situation characterised by democratic elections. It will be shown that the quality and the degree of freedom of policy-making as well as the characteristics of political marketing instruments changes fundamentally with the choice of different political marketing postures.

**Political marketing postures**

Figure 1 shows a simple representation of four generic postures of strategic political marketing. It uses continua along the two dimensions “leading” and “following” to span a two-by-two matrix of strategic options.

Besides the two more extreme postures of either being dominated by a leading approach (“The Convinced Ideologist”) or a following mentality (“The Tactical Populist”), a posture is proposed that scores high on both dimensions, *de facto* integrating both elements of leading and following (“The Political Relationship
In the following discussions “The Political Lightweight”, scoring low on both dimensions, will be omitted, although it may be argued that empirical studies might find a fair amount of parties and candidates clustered in this category.

**Figure 1: Generic postures of strategic political marketing**

Before the main characteristics of the various postures are examined in more detail, it is necessary to briefly address pertinent points relating to the relationship of these proposed postures and the development of party systems over time. Traditionally, parties that have orientated themselves around cleavage lines (Lipset/Rokkan 1967), such as bourgeois parties and mass-integration parties have followed a clear “convinced ideologist” posture. However, with the crisis of both the classical bourgeois and the mass-integration parties, the emergence of the catch-all parties (a

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3 Terminology like “ideologist” or “populist” is here employed to describe certain strategic stances no positive or negative judgement is intended.
classical example of which is the German Christian Democratic Party CDU in the 50s and 60s) have meant a move towards more “following”-dominated postures in order to integrate rather diverse political opinions/preferences across cleavage lines (Kirchheimer 1966; Bartolini/Mair 1990) and the targeting approaches have changed to what is called in marketing management an “undifferentiated approach” (Henneberg/Egbalian 2002).

Figure 2: Generic postures and political parties

Nowadays it can be argued that this development has been driven to new extremes with more and more emphasis on follower strategies and consequently more parties adopting the “tactical populist posture”. However, this does not mean that the “convinced” ideologists have become extinct; besides individual candidates, single issue parties and extremist parties can still be classified as adopting this posture. Green parties or civil right parties but also certain neo-communist parties are good
examples of this use of ideology. The quadrant of the political “relationship builder” seems still somewhat unoccupied (see figure 2). However, with the backlash against “spin” and what is perceived as an unashamed emphasis on merely following public opinion, a more balanced approach seems to be one way of recapturing political trust. It must be said that these development of party postures cannot be exclusively explained by media and technological innovations, as sometimes done. In fact, these developments have to be seen at least partly as long-term strategic decisions (Wring 2002)

Characteristics of different postures

The characteristics of the four different generic postures are described in the following by looking at the following questions (a more detailed analysis of the characterising functions of political marketing management is given, for example, in Henneberg 2002):

- How does the party approach policy-making or, in marketing terminology, proposition development?
- How are political marketing concepts and tools used?
- What political marketing instruments dominate the political marketing mix?
- For which activities is political marketing applied?
- How does the posture affect the wider organisational structure of the party?

It has to be born in mind that the described postures are generic constructs and therefore a description of their characteristics always tends to be prone to
overgeneralisation. The postures are derived from marketing theory and are therefore a hypothesis about what one would assume parties that apply a certain posture would look like. Therefore, the main value of these descriptions is to provide a conceptual framework for further (empirical) investigations. In the last section of this article several propositions are derived from this framework that will take this approach to the next level.

*The Convinced Ideologist*

The Convince Ideologists (CI) scores high on the “leading” scale while its “following” capabilities are not very developed. This posture is characterised by a clear focal point for policy-making; a good example of this is ideology or religion where policy content determines the proposition for the convinced ideologist. Preferences of voters or current opinion shifts are secondary, the constituents need to be convinced of the beneficial value of the political offer. This gives the CI party a monolithic appearance and inhibits changes on strategic level. Therefore, strategic marketing concepts that enable a political party to develop a customer-centred offering like segmentation and targeting, as well as value proposition development concepts (McDonald/Wilson 2002; Kotler 2003) are not used as they would interfere with the “purity” of the political offer. However, political marketing has a home within a CI party by providing the tools to influence and convince voters in election campaigns, i.e. as a means specifically of political communication and the news-management (Jamieson1992; Franklin 1994; Henneberg 2002), but also to manage

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4 However, it is noteworthy that the three main party postures proposed here overlap to some extend with Wring’s (2002) evolutionary model, separating a propaganda phase, a media phase, and a political marketing phase of political party development with reference to the UK Labour Party.
The Tactical Populist

The Tactical Populist (TP) party is diametrically opposed to the Convinced Ideologist. Being characterised by “following” more than “leading”, this party is clearly outward-looking and feeling the political pulse of the electorate is the most important strategic aim. Therefore, strategic marketing techniques are applied to ensure that the political propositions on offer are always in sync with public opinion (Huber/Herrmann 1999). This means that they must be flexible with regard to even core characteristics of their political offer which can change rapidly. Micro-segmentation and concentration on “marginal” seats might mean that differentiated propositions need to be managed by this party (Baines 1999; Smith/Hirst 2001). Besides being embedded in the policy making process, political marketing concepts also dominate the tactical application and execution of political tools. Besides communication and product functions, political marketing instruments also help with news-management and fund raising. Furthermore, political marketing is used to optimise the tactical requirements of managing the TP party’s own grass-roots (internal cohesion function) and other political network partner (parallel campaign management function). Political marketing becomes a necessary tool for managing what is sometimes called the “permanent campaign” i.e. also comprising of some essential elements of governing (Nimmo 1999). This is also exemplified by the use of many “electoral professionals” - think tanks, quasi-independent advisers and communication consultants – which are
building a shadow apparatus besides the official party structure (Panebianco 1988). Wring (2002) shows this tendency clearly in the development of the present-day British Labour Party.

_The Relationship Builder_

The Relationship Builder (RB) party scores relatively high on both dimensions of marketing, leading and following. The political offer is “developed” using political marketing concepts while a clear and trustworthy proposition is created through incorporating the “brand heritage”, e.g. ideological roots or long-held overarching political beliefs. Such a amalgamation of a stable orientation with the ability to react flexibly to public opinion shifts is in line with contemporary strategic marketing theory. A focus on longer-term relationships, away from a purely transactional focus (e.g. winning the next elections) by using a relational management concept is often seen as a paradigmatic shift away from mechanistic marketing mix considerations and the 4P concept (Ravatyiary/Sheth 2000; Hollensen 2003). Such an approach which has been developed in B2B marketing (e.g. IMG with their emphasis on interaction theory, see Hakanson/Snehota 2000) but also for services marketing by the “Nordic” school of marketing (Berry 2000) and the CRM approach for consumer marketing (Groenroos 2000) would allow a RB party to achieve long-term sustainable success in “locking-in” voters and other constituents into a commitment-trust relationship (Morgan/Hunt 1994). It would mean a time horizon longer than just the next election date, a philosophy of promises and delivering on these promises, active listening and use of (proprietary) information, and an integrated use of marketing instruments to
fulfil the political marketing functions in an interconnected way. The RB party also use many “outside” groups and individuals, as the TP party. The difference between the two, however, is the fact that there are no two party organisations (an official one and an overlapping shadow one as in the case of the TP). In fact, it becomes unclear where the borders of the RB party itself are, they become blurred through the incorporation of other constituencies such as voters or donors, into their “value-creation” process of politics. Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the three proposed party types.

**Table 1: Characteristics of strategic postures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Posture</th>
<th>Convinced Ideologist Party</th>
<th>Tactical Populist Party</th>
<th>Relationship Builder Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proposition</strong></td>
<td>• content-driven</td>
<td>• outward-driven</td>
<td>• content-mediated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>development</strong></td>
<td>• tactical use only</td>
<td>• strategic and tactical use</td>
<td>outward looking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of political marketing concepts</strong></td>
<td>• mainly communication, distribution, and news-management functions</td>
<td>• product, distribution, communication, news-management, fundraising, and parallel campaign functions</td>
<td>• integrated strategic and tactical use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generic functions emphasised</strong></td>
<td>• election campaign focus</td>
<td>• permanent campaigning</td>
<td>• co-ordinated fulfilment of all generic functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Permanence of political marketing management</strong></td>
<td>• “professional” party organisation</td>
<td>• reliance on “outside groups”/advisors</td>
<td>• permanent relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party organisation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mix of outside and professional elements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion and research propositions**

While research on how parties use political marketing instruments exists, the lack of emphasis on strategic political marketing, especially with regard to theoretical
frameworks of political marketing orientation, can be seen as a major problem area for the development of political marketing research as a subdiscipline of marketing and political science (Henneberg 1995). For this reason, a concept of political party orientation towards political marketing management has been suggested, using mainly two crucial elements of strategic marketing theory with regard to customer orientation: leading and following. Three generic types of political parties have been characterised with regard to their stance towards these two elements which has been described as a “strategic posture”. Furthermore, the implications of the different strategic postures with regard to fulfilling certain political marketing functions, using political marketing instruments, and the effects on organisational issues have been briefly discussed. While traditional parties with a rigid content-based approach towards policy making can be characterised as “Convinced Ideologists”, modern catch-all parties have moved towards being “Tactical Populists”. Both postures are prone to being perceived as either dogmatic or untrustworthy and fickle, a third posture has been proposed that integrates leading and following by using a relational approach towards marketing, as suggested in the evolving literature on strategic marketing and marketing orientation. This “Relationship Builder” party constitutes a theoretical posture that needs to be clarified by empirical research in the political arena.

In order to transform the previous discussion on strategic postures of political marketing for parties into further empirical and theoretical research, several research propositions are derived below. This process is in line with the demands of theory-building and hypothesis-driven exploration as suggested for new disciplines such as political marketing (Saunders et al. 2000). Invariably, the suggested propositions are
the ones that the author find most interesting and therefore constitute a very subjective choice.

As discussed above, it was proposed that two dimensions can distinguish a political party’s strategic approach towards customer orientation. Therefore, the first derived proposition is:

\[ \text{P}_1 \quad - \quad \text{Political parties differ in their strategic approach towards identifying and satisfying the needs and wants of their constituencies. These differences can be described along the two principles of leading and following.} \]

Furthermore, a link between the posture of a political party, i.e. its strategic stance, and its use of political marketing instruments has been postulated. In addition to this, a link to the party organisational structure has been made.

\[ \text{P}_2 \quad - \quad \text{The use of political marketing instruments depends on the strategic posture a political party takes.} \]

\[ \text{P}_3 \quad - \quad \text{The existence of “shadow” organisations within political parties and the use of external advisors depends on the strategic posture a political party takes.} \]

Although two of the suggested postures can be mapped onto accepted political science construct of political parties (e.g. catch-all party), the RB party has no equivalent in political science literature which suggests the proposition that:
P₄ - *The Relationship Builder Party is a theoretical posture that has not yet taken hold in Western party systems.*

Another set of propositions relates strategic posture and party performance, especially with regard to fulfilling the eight main generic functions of a party (Henneberg 2002):

P₅ₐ - *Parties scoring high on one (or both) dimensions of the strategic posture show a better performance with regard to fulfilling the main political marketing functions.*

P₅ᵦ - *In terms of overall performance the RB party outperforms PB and CI parties.*

In a further set of propositions, the impact of exogenous variables like the make-up of the party system or the electoral voting system might be connected with P₅.

A last set of propositions deals with the dynamics of the party posture in time. Two specific propositions are made, one more short-termed, the other one with regard to long-term developments:

P₆ₐ - *Before and during election campaigns political parties modify their postures by increasing emphasis on the “following” dimension; during terms in government political parties modify their postures by increasing emphasis on the “leading” dimension.*

P₆ᵦ - *Being out-of-office for a long time increases the likelihood of the adoption of a TP (or RB) approach.*
Bibliography


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