

Understanding how political parties manage their volunteers in the political marketing process

This working paper outlines the background to a proposed empirical study of how political parties manage their volunteers, as part of the political marketing process. The data analysis is informed by the following conceptual themes: (i) rewards and incentives; (ii) training; (iii) resources; (iv) skills; (v) participation willingness levels; (vi) recruitment and retention; (vii) technology, and; (viii) performance evaluation. Qualitative interview data will be collected and analysed from senior political party officers responsible for strategic coordination of volunteers in 20 major political parties. The methodology, data collection, data analysis and results remain under-development.

Track: Political marketing

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Introduction

In the extant political marketing literature, there has been limited consideration of the role of volunteers as part of the political marketing process. Lees-Marshment and Pettitt (2014) have considered volunteering in the context of political marketing although it is based on data from 2006-2009 from the UK, US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Other coverage has largely been either: (a) part of a wider study of other aspects of political marketing, and/or (b) based on conceptual arguments, and/or (c) based solely on quantitative data predominately from party members. Other literature from political science has focussed on local campaigning, but does not adopt a political marketing approach (e.g. Whiteley & Seyd, 1994; Whiteley, Seyd & Billingshurst, 2006).

There are a number of weaknesses in extant knowledge that this study aims to begin to fill. First there is a need for research on volunteers in a wider sense than a focus on party members. Political parties now often have a hierarchy of participation levels, yet very little is known about how they manage these different segments in the political marketing process. Second there is a lack of research from the perspective of party volunteer managers, and in particular how they attempt to manage volunteers to achieve political marketing strategies and objectives. Third, there is a need for studies of volunteering in the context of political marketing, as parties despite increased professionalization, remain reliant on volunteers in both off-line and increasingly on-line political marketing arenas. Fourth there is a need for more current comparative qualitative methodologies which examine volunteer management across major political parties in different countries, so that the major trends in political marketing and volunteering can be more effectively understood.

The paper begins by reviewing the background political marketing literature which discusses aspects allied to political party volunteering. The paper then progresses to conceptualise some indicative categories in explaining the management of volunteers in the context of political marketing, which then leads onto the development of research questions and a proposed methodology. Hence at the time of writing the methodology, data collection, data analysis and results remain under-development.

Background / Literature Review

Butler and Collins (1994) and Lock and Harris (1996) noted the reliance of political parties on volunteers/ members in political marketing. Hughes and Dann (2009) however argue for a broader stakeholder approach to political marketing which includes party members and supporters; a theme echoed by Pettitt (2011) who stresses the importance of the 'party on the ground'. Van Aelst et al (2011) considers the role of party members as akin to part time marketers which enhance representativeness and connectedness of the party. There have also been studies which have attempted to consider the political marketing orientation construct (Ormrod, 2005) in relation to party member activity levels (Ormrod and Henneberg, 2010;2011). Granik (2005) and Pettitt (2011) examined the incentives for people to become active in political party affairs.

Lees-Marshment and Quayle (2001) consider whether Conservative Party reforms, which gave an input to members, were an exercise in empowerment or a marketing strategy. This tension is further addressed by Reeves (2010) who discusses the role of local party members, and the extent to which they are responsible for the design or delivery of political marketing. Reeves' (2013) empirical study of local political marketing in the Conservative Party gives emphasis to local party members issues such as their use of technology for data management and targeting purposes, awareness raising and communications of messages, and central-local

party political marketing support and compliance. Lilleker (2005) discusses the impact of political marketing on internal party democracy. Lees-Marshment & Pettitt (2014, p.257) suggest that parties need to “enlist activists in creating the party message”, “create activist centred campaign structures”, “encourage activists through training and leadership”, with the aim “to build an inclusive and electorally effective party organisation”. The authors also highlight debates on the role and responsibilities of volunteers with regards to access to data for campaigning purposes. Other research provides some context on the ‘ground war’ in US presidential elections and how the parties attempted to mobilise their volunteers and supporters through the use of technologies (Panagopoulos & Francia,2009; Cogburn & Espinoza, 2011; Towner & Dulio 2012).

Conceptualisation

The extant political marketing literature enables the study to posit indicative categories to guide the theoretical conceptualisation of this study.

Rewards and incentives – Granik (2005) and Pettitt (2011) consider the incentives for political party membership. In particular Pettitt (2011) and Lees-Marshment and Pettitt (2014) draw upon the work of Clark and Wilson (1961) to suggest incentives can include material, solidary and purposive incentives. Influenced by this, it can be articulated that incentives can include activities undertaken by political parties to reward and incentivise its volunteers during the political marketing process. For example, material incentives may include tangible benefits such as partnerships with other organisations which offer volunteers special offers, discounts, reciprocal agreements etc, solidary incentives may relate to opportunities for networking and shared social experiences, and purposive incentives may relate to the enablement by the political party for volunteers to contribute to, and participate in a shared vision for societal development.

Training, resourcing and skills. Reeves (2010; 2013) is one of the few authors which consider the importance of training, resources and skills utilisation in the context of political marketing, and how in particular political parties manage this in the context of their volunteers’ contribution to the political marketing process. This may include issues such as how effectively a political party utilises the skills, appropriately resources (e.g financial, human resources support etc), and offers training and development for its volunteers so that they can appropriately and effectively contribute to the political marketing process.

Willingness to Participate – A number of studies highlight that different party members may have different expectations of how they may be involved in a political party (Reeves, 2010; Ormrod and Henneberg, 2010; 2011; Van Aelst et al, 2011). It therefore follows that given the different levels of volunteerism in political parties (e.g. full member, associate/ affiliate membership, recognised supporter, occasional volunteer, social media follower etc) there are important issues to be considered as to how political parties are managing the contributions of these varied participation segments, and in particular their potential contributions to the political marketing process.

Recruitment and retention - Lock and Harris (1996) and Pettitt (2011) allude to the importance of recruiting and retaining party members. It therefore follows that political parties need to have strategies to recruit and build commitment/ relationships with its volunteers so that their political marketing process can be sustained. Such issues are especially important in resourcing the party during election campaigns, but there needs to be

greater understanding of how political parties are engaging with their volunteers in between and throughout longer term electoral cycles.

Technology - Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) and Reeves (2013) provide some evidence of how specific political parties attempt to use technology to support a political parties' volunteers in the political marketing process; through the use of designated ICT based systems. However, there is a need for greater understanding of the trends in the use of technology for political marketing management in more political parties, as the technology utilisation evolves over time.

Performance evaluation - Baines et al (2002) and Van Aelst et al (2011) highlight the importance of members for feedback and evaluation in the political marketing process. Influenced by these arguments, it becomes apparent that there is a need for greater research into how political parties assess and evaluate the performance of its volunteering strategies, and hold accountable relevant actors (i.e. party volunteer managers, local parties, volunteers) for their performance in enabling political marketing activities and outcomes.

Research Questions

The above conceptualisation enables the research to arrive at the following research question to guide the data collection process.

As part of the political marketing process how do political parties: (i) reward and incentivise (ii) train; (iii) resource; (iv) utilise skills; (v) take account of differing participation willingness levels; (vi) recruit and retain; (vii) utilise technology, and; (viii) evaluate performance of its volunteers?

Method

The study proposes to use the above conceptual framework as a basis for an indicative interview discussion guide. As such the interviews will be semi-structured in their approach. This will enable the researcher to be guided by the general categories, but let the discussion uncover emergent themes that will add to theory development in the context of political party volunteering in the process of political marketing. The interviews will be undertaken with senior political party officers responsible for strategic coordination of volunteers in 20 major political parties. The political parties to participate will be dependent on the researcher gaining appropriate access. The study will be international in scope, with no more than two political parties chosen from one country. Where possible, interviews will be conducted in English although where this is not possible, in-interview translation services will be arranged. Given the international scope of the research, interviews will be undertaken electronically using a video conferencing system. Subject to interviewee consent all interviews will be recorded, and data will be transcribed verbatim and analysed in accordance with principles of qualitative data analysis (Miles et al, 2013)

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