



# An ideology of disconnection: For a critical political marketing



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**ABSTRACT:** The processes of contemporary politics are increasingly informed by ideas and principles that derive from conventional marketing. This, we suggest, is intimately connected to the neoliberal ascendancy which characterises the global political environment. In this article we seek to historicise the structural and ideological embedding of economic ideas within the political realm. We argue that marketing both informs and is a product of these changes and that there are important consequences, notably the further detaching of an already disaffected public from the electoral process. Consequently we conclude that the “marketisation” of politics has come to represent an “ideology of disconnection.”

**KEYWORDS:** political marketing, ideology, neoliberalism, disconnection



## INTRODUCTION

There is now a widespread and intensive debate over what is to blame for the marked decline in voter turnout and the increase in public disaffection with their politicians. This is particularly the case in the most advanced western democracies (Crouch, 2004; Hay, 2007). Many of those involved examine the phenomenon through a variety of essentially culturalist explanations, which emphasise the importance of media and technological change (Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Lloyd, 2004; Stoker, 2006). Such accounts tend to overlook the most profound contextual changes during the period in question and consequently relegate the importance of the rise and consolidation of neo-liberalism over the last thirty years. This article aims to remedy this deficiency and historicise the structural and ideological embedding of marketing not only as an economic activity, but as a way of thinking about the practice of contemporary politics. It will be argued that this “marketisation of politics” has been informed by a set of economic assumptions that serve to discon-





Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

nect the public from the process of engagement: it is an “ideology of disconnection” (Taylor, 2006).

The article proceeds by contextualising the development of the use of marketing in political practice, and locating marketing as a literature to its economic foundations. In turn, it will be demonstrated how these economically informed ideas in relation to marketing have become embedded as political practice. A critical evaluation of this process highlights the potential problems this poses for both political structures (the democratic process) and more broadly, the way in which politics is conceived of within the public sphere. While political marketing is generally accepted to refer to the campaign and electoral practices of political elites, informed by concepts and ideas from the business environment, we argue that the marketisation of politics is more than the use of marketing techniques in election campaigns. Rather it represents the wholesale inculcation of marketing values and beliefs into the formal political sphere – that is politics as practised by elite level actors with its subsequent impact upon the public and the political context. This, we argue, is a consequence of a series of broader contextual factors, and reflective of historically embedded underlying ideological structures, grounded in economic thinking. In turn we also highlight the complexity of elite level political actors’ engagement with these structures and the consequences that flow from this.

## **POLITICAL MARKETING AND ITS BROADER CONTEXT**

The marketisation of the economy has been accompanied by a similar process within the democratic sphere to the extent that, as Newman observes, it is arguably inconceivable for major candidates to not use managerial techniques, personnel and concepts in their bid to get elected. Furthermore marketing has become an entrenched approach that has shaped the character and nature of some modern government (Newman, 1994; 2001). These developments have been acclaimed as evidence of a more potentially responsive politics in which leaders become more increasingly accountable to their publics (Harrop, 1990; Scammell, 1995; O’Cass, 1996; Street, 1996; Lees-Marshment, 2001). This optimism is perhaps misplaced not least because the intensification in the use of marketing has actually further undermined the already meagre attention paid by elites to many citizens’ concerns. Essentially the management of democracy has meant ever more attention paid to certain segments of the electorate at the expense of those who either always vote the same way or feel disinclined to participate at all (Wring, 2005).

Rooted in the seminal work of Kotler and Levy (1969) there is now a wide and proliferating literature which has charted the changing character of electioneering, but this literature is far from homogeneous. Some use marketing as a framework to describe and analyse elite level political behaviour (e.g. Bowler, Farrell, 1992; Kavanagh, 1995; Scammell, 1995) and in so doing, while some see this as a positive phenomenon (e.g. Harrop, 1990; Scammell, 1995; O’Cass, 1996; Lees-Marshment,





2001), others adopt a more critical approach highlighting some of the difficulties of transferring marketing to politics (e.g. O'Shaughnessy, 1990, 2001; Wring, 1995, 2005; Henneberg, 2004; Savigny, 2007, 2008). In contrast, some espouse a more managerial approach to political marketing and use the literature to positively prescribe practice (e.g. Kotler, Levy, 1969; Mauser, 1983; Maarek, 1995; Smith, Saunders, 1990; O'Cass, 1996; Lock, Harris, 1996; Egan, 1999; Kotler, Kotler, 1999; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Newman, Davies (eds.), 2006; Worcester, Baines, 2006). Any casual perusal of the burgeoning literature on election campaigning and communications also demonstrates a growing interest from practitioners in the role of marketing (see, for instance, adviser Geoff Mulgan on his experiences working for Tony Blair – Mulgan, 2005).

Most of the political marketing literature begins with the ontological supposition that parties can be conceived of as business, voters as consumers, both engaged in an exchange in a marketplace. This simple premise has become more than an analytic or heuristic device, and as noted above, the prescriptive literature adds a normative dimension. Yet, this assumption has been largely ignored or taken for granted (see Savigny, 2007). Marketing scholars argue that for marketing to be successful, not only does marketing provide a set of strategies and activities for its operationalisation (e.g. market research and advertising) but crucially, it must be adopted as a guiding strategy, a philosophy (Kotler, Andreasen, 1996:37). Within the political marketing literature there is endorsement of this position (e.g. O'Cass, 1996; Lees-Marshment, 2001) and our argument focuses upon this acceptance of marketing *per se* as an underlying philosophy, and the way it has both become embedded and manifested itself in the world of practical politics, which remains as yet unaddressed within the political marketing literature. Here then we argue, there is a need for further exploration of the particular historical and ideological developments that have fostered major changes, and have led much more profoundly to a “marketisation of politics.”

On one level we argue that the resulting emergence of political marketing as theory and practice has been encouraged by observable inter-related factors, most obviously the rise of voter volatility, economic liberalisation and politicians willing and able to avail themselves of strategic advice (Wring, 1999). On another however, we contend that this is a consequence of broader ideological changes in the political environment; specifically adherence to a neoliberal political and economic agenda. The constant discussion of phenomena like “spin” provides further illustration as to the impact of the marketisation of politics. Much of the resulting debate centres around promotionalism of various kinds but it nevertheless reflects a truism of modern democracy, specifically that the greater acceptance of political marketing has enabled appointed “electoral professionals” – the spin doctors, policy wonks, image makers, to exercise greater control at the expense of more voluntary, quasi-democratic party structures (Panebianco, 1988). But these actors are symptoms of a deeper cause. And here there is a need to consider the specific historical circum-





Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

stances behind the growing marketisation of politics as well as the ideological inspirations and consequences of this process. Both, we contend, are inimically bound up with the rising influence of the New Right and its rigorous prosecution of the movement's neo-liberal credo.

## THE NEW RIGHT COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Most popular and some academic analysis of political marketing has become preoccupied with the consequences of the increased mediatisation of the democratic process. But this is only part of the story and it is imperative to look at the wider transformation of the political economy rather than assume recent changes, as evidenced by the marketisation process, have been driven by primarily cultural and technological phenomena. The aim here is to firmly understand and root developments in an underlying ideological trajectory brought about through the New Right counter-revolution against a longstanding post-Second World War social democratic consensus (Phelps-Brown, 1990). This is not to suggest political marketing is a wholly new phenomenon but to recognise that early, especially inter-war experimentation with electoral advertising and related techniques were limited to presentational activities (Wring, 2005).

The widespread use of management personnel, especially market researchers, intensified during the 1950s and became a feature of politics as it did the so-called affluent consumer society. It is no surprise that this was the era in which Anthony Downs published his groundbreaking *An Economic Theory of Democracy* which anticipated and abetted the subsequent marketisation of politics. Advocacy of marketing throughout the public sector eventually became commonplace (Downs, 1957; Kotler, Levy, 1969). Moreover new public management as a guiding philosophy of UK governments reinforced the primacy of management assumptions as frame through which governance could be enacted. Similarly mainstream political scientists acknowledged increased market sensitivity could and would play a greater role in fostering the emergence of entities like the "catch-all party" (Kirchheimer, 1966). Perceptions of political issues as ones which were conducive to market solutions was accompanied by the acceptance that electoral practice and campaigning itself was something which was also conducive to the use of market techniques. The fundamental starting point for the political marketing literature is that parties can be conceived of as business, voters as consumers taking part in an exchange process. Premised upon the assumption that business managers and political campaigners face similar challenges, in a similar context (of a marketplace) the political marketing literature developed to describe this activity, but also within this literature were claims that because of this ontological supposition, similar responses/methods were appropriate (Kavanagh, 1995, p. 8; Reid, 1988; Newman, 1994, p. 34; Butler, Collins, 1996). Yet, this literature and marketing in political practice, have distinctly economic undertones.





The political marketing literature itself acknowledges its Downsian roots (Mau-ser, 1983; Newman, 1994; Wring, 1996; Butler, Collins, 1999, p. 55; Scammell, 1999, pp. 726, 739; Lees-Marshment, 2001, p. 694, for development of this point see also Savigny, 2004). The similarity between rationalist accounts of voting behaviour and marketing consumer behaviour has also been noted (Smith, Saunders, 1990, p. 300; Lock, Harris, 1996, p. 20). Not only have these rationalist roots and similarities been observed but management marketing (which underpins and informs the political marketing literature) can be clearly identified as explicitly driven by economic values (Sheth et al., 1988, pp. 22–5). Jones and Monieson's genealogy of marketing (1990) further demonstrates its location in neoclassical economics (derived from English classical economics) and institutionalism (traced back to the German historical school of economics). The identification of this economic underpinning is crucial for understanding the development and hold of marketing ideas in the British context, which are part of a broader set of ideals and principles underpinned by a commitment to the primacy of the market.

While most academic theorising has limited immediate impact, no matter how enthusiastically a case may be prosecuted, a correlation of ideas with the contemporary political zeitgeist (where business is structurally privileged) means a much greater likelihood of their acceptance. It does however, take fundamental events to stimulate major change, and the catalyst, we argue, proved to be the 1973 oil crisis. This seismic episode led to the undermining of a social democratic consensus that had helped govern many leading industrialised countries in the West. Many such states experienced profound challenges and most of their incumbent ruling parties lost power, in no small part because of their inability to cope with deep economic crises. The key beneficiaries in this uncertain environment were the so-called New Right who, inspired by Hayek and his Mont Pelerin Society disciples, developed a coherent critique of "big government" by advocating that market rather than regulatory mechanisms should dictate policy outcomes (Harvey, 2005, pp. 19–22). Inherent in this was a belief in the primacy of enterprise and sovereignty of individuals as consumers rather than purely as citizens.

The New Right agenda to undermine the collective as a recognised, credible social force would have significant consequences not least in the realm of politics. Simultaneously the popularisation of Downs' thesis encouraged the development of rational choice theories of voting and notions that electoral behaviour increasingly resembled the process of shopping rather than an act of social solidarity with a kindred group. The latter interpretation had been a major tenet of the hitherto dominant explanation of voting. The ever more explicit identification of the democratic process with marketing techniques, personnel and especially concepts (which refer to parties as products and voters as consumers) helped forge a climate that was highly favourable to the New Right agenda for transforming the political economy. This in turn had relied on a wider campaign, often waged through the mass media, to promote a rapacious consumer culture during the





Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

Cold War era and beyond (Baran, Sweezy, 1966; Galbraith, 1969; Fones-Wolf, 1995; Frank, 2001).

Where voter's apathy or dissent has become widespread this is not a significant concern for neo-liberalism. Rather this is an aspect of a wider depoliticisation which, together with the dissolution of the welfare state as a legitimate social and economic actor, has further entrenched the New Right counter-revolution (Burnham, 2001). It is no irony then, as has sometimes been expressed, that conviction leaders like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Malcolm Fraser were also responsible for overseeing a decisive intensification in the marketisation of politics (Little, 1988). These and other leading public exponents of New Right orthodoxy exploited environmental circumstances, electoral uncertainties, and voting systems to launch a strategic offensive to wrest power from social democratic inclined incumbents. It should also be noted that other key pioneers of what Harvey terms the "neo-liberal state," notably the dictator Pinochet, voter opinion had no bearing on Chile's own version of the New Right revolution because free elections and viable opposition parties were outlawed following the fascist coup of 1973 that removed the legitimate Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende (Beckett, 2003; Harvey, 2005).

In analysing political marketing it needs always be borne in mind that the act of consumption (or voting) greatly differs in its intensity when compared with a production process that is characteristically continuous, strategic and intensive (Gamble, 1974). And though the New Right was vigorously prosecuted, it never succeeded in converting significant sections of the electorate in various states throughout the world. Electoral success came not from merely mobilising less committed voters in the market – the focus of Downs' theorising – but from redefining the terms of debate and understandings of the wider political environment. The latter point is implicit in Mauser's sometimes overlooked early book length analysis, *Political Marketing*, which appeared shortly after Reagan and Thatcher's triumphs (Mauser, 1983). A key point of the study challenged Downs' assumptions by demonstrating how electoral coalitions can be built by focusing on core voters and then through careful positioning to maximise support among the undecided through preference "shaping" rather than "accommodating" strategies (Dunleavy, Ward, 1991).

Those responsible for promoting the New Right agenda – a group of practitioners that included diverse talents such as Maurice Saatchi and Richard Viguerie – demonstrated the importance of marketing as a social rather than purely economic activity (Viguerie, 1980; Kleinman, 1987). In turn the politicians they helped elect pursued policies that returned the favour by boosting the size and influence of the private service sector. The marketing industry was itself a key beneficiary from this process. Perhaps most importantly the New Right's success in reshaping the economy was conjoined with a similarly influential political project which convinced those leaders who followed Reagan, Thatcher and their allies to adapt to the prevail-





ing neo-liberal consensus and the “new” political economy. Significantly this included rival partisans who had previously expressed their ideological opposition such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. Both were nominally on the liberal/left of the political spectrum and took to re-branding their parties with the help of the “new” prefix in order to demarcate themselves from their pasts.

Aside from developments in the west there has also been a protracted campaign to export political marketing around the globe, notably through the auspices of the National Endowment for Democracy established by Ronald Reagan (Sussman, 2005). Set up during the latter stages of the Cold War, the NED and its various agencies have been at the forefront of a determined effort to intensify the marketisation of politics across all continents and particularly in the so-called new democracies of South America, Central and Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Unsurprisingly most of the consultancy and financial resources available have been devoted to supporting those candidates whose platforms could be described as being accepting of the need for sound finance and economic reform.

## MARKETS AND DEMOCRACY

Wellhofer traces the existence of the market as an ordering mechanism for liberal societies back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Wellhofer, 1990, pp. 9–28). He argues that not only has the market interpretation of what democracy is and what it is for become increasingly accepted, it has also become increasingly appropriate in liberal capitalist democracies. This, he argues, has been “favoured” by a decline in party organisation and the development of techniques of mass and potentially manipulative communication (Wellhofer, 1990, p. 24). Allied to this 1980s witnessed the implementation of strategies which fundamentally reshaped the ideological terrain (Hall, 1983). This was reflected through the marketisation of many areas of public life, formerly provided by the state, which became subject to internal and quasi-markets from health, broadcasting to education and transport (Leys, 2001; Marquand, 2004). The broader context of an acceptance of marketing principles and underlying assumptions are complimentary to the broader ideational climate in the UK.

With its roots in economic liberalism, neoliberalism came to dominate political discourse and was underpinned by two key ideas: the limited role of the state and the promotion of freedom. The idea of individual empowerment occurring as a result of market competition was a dominant theme which characterised much of New Right discourse. If neoliberalism represents a linkage between classical liberalism and neoclassical economics, the underlying shared assumptions are:

- a focus on the individual who is regarded as a rational, self interested, utility maximiser,
- free-market economics – premised upon the supposition that the market is the most efficient mechanism through which scarce resources can be allocated, at the same time this is assumed to enhance individual liberty,





Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

- a laissez-faire approach – markets are, and should be, the appropriate ordering mechanism. As they are self regulating, the state should only intervene to protect the rights of individuals within that market.

Neoliberalism is, however, both a political as well as economic programme as evidenced through the shift away from an “overloaded” Keynesian welfare statism towards a laissez-faire approach that celebrated the public choice orthodoxies of James Buchanan others (Buchanan, Tullock, 1962; Niskanen, 1971, 1973; Buchanan, 1975; Rose, Peters, 1977; Birch, 1984). These theorists advocated that the greater deployment of market mechanisms would eliminate the inefficiencies and oppressiveness of state provision of public goods and services. In the UK, for instance, over 50% of the public sector was transferred to the private sphere on the initiative of the Thatcher governments (Marsh, 1994, p. 1). This broader acceptance of neoliberalism has clearly also had an impact on the nature of party competition. The conduct of the British Labour government first elected in 1997 is arguably evidence of this influence (Heffernan, 2002, p. 743). Labour have subscribed to the agenda pioneered by their Conservative predecessors which holds to the view that markets should be dominant with minimal state intervention. Furthermore, Labour has accepted the assumption that taxes and public spending need to be reduced and/or kept down while the role of trade unions should be marginalised as far as is possible (Crouch, 1997, p. 352).

Some have suggested the structure of the market is in itself a major reason for the marked partisan convergence over the last two decades (Smith, 2006, p. 6). Allied to this use of sophisticated marketing tools and techniques have, together with exogenous shocks including Labour’s repeated electoral defeats, led to the leadership privileging the median voter above all else (Butler, Kavanagh, 1997, p. 51). The party has been, in effect, “playing the politics of catch up,” “accommodating Thatcherism,” and can be regarded no longer as a social democratic party (Hay, 1994, 1999; Wickham-Jones, 1995; Laver, 1997; Taylor, 1997). To use Hay’s phrase, ideological convergence of this kind has resulted in the *de facto* creation of a “one-vision polity” (Hay, 1997, p. 372). So set against traditional Downsian thinking, with its emphasis on median voters and party strategies that seek to win over them by moving to “the centreground,” Labour’s behaviour appears explicable.

The conviction politics of the Thatcher governments do, however, challenge Downs and his narrow focus on the market rather than wider contextual factors. To put it bluntly, the New Right has succeeded in being able to critically re-engineer the terms of debate by transforming the wider political environment (Hayes, 1994). Certain policy options are now off limits and much of what passes for contemporary electoral debate has become overly stylistic. Hence there has been a rising interest in political marketing as a form of practice and analytical tool. Previous accounts have tended to focus upon the functionality of marketing as a method of both practising and theorising politics (Wring, 1997; Lees-Marshment, 2001). However, discussion of the importance of the underlying ideological and structural







changes inspired by the neo-liberal counter-revolution has been largely absent from the academic literature about campaigns and elections. And here there is a need for a more critical (study of) political marketing that recognises the New Right's success was not only about, as it happens, exploiting the latest techniques and strategies for their own electoral purposes but also about reconstituting the very limits of what was politically acceptable.

Neo-liberalism and the attendant rapacious consumer culture it champions have created new opportunities for a marketing industry that has burgeoned since the 1970s. In tandem with this development, traditional ideological beliefs, particularly of a more collectivist impulse, have been disavowed and downgraded; put simply the market now dominates as Finlayson recognises:

The ideological content of political marketing is not contained in the message [...] but in the very fact that politics has to go to the market in the first place, that it has to submit to that logic and cannot develop its own. Propaganda is unnecessary if the mechanisms of ideological reproduction and legitimisation can occur through the dominance of the market itself (Finlayson, 2003, p. 48).

Further to this, the internalisation of marketing as a guiding strategic philosophy has also involved the embrace of rational choice assumptions with implications for the nature of party competition, democracy and legitimation. Consequently Downsian predictions about the nature of party competition become self-fulfilling. This also renders the voting paradox ever more plausible, that is the more that voters perceive political actors using marketing behaving in a Downsian manner (whether consciously or unconsciously), the more likely it is that voters themselves will respond in the manner predicted by Downs (Savigny, 2004). Moreover, at an ideological level, this reinforces an assumption that people are, in reality, rational self interested actors, which emphasises the primacy of the individual at the expense of the collective.

## **AN IDEOLOGY OF DISCONNECTION**

In a devastating critique of rational choice theory, Taylor argues that it is an “ideology of disconnection” because it assumes (and idealises) a world where individuals are disconnected from their own lives, from each other and from broader social and cultural practices (Taylor, 2006, p. 87). In its acceptance of the underlying economic rationalist foundations of marketing thought, political marketing suffers from the same theoretical difficulty. Voters in models are assumed to be disconnected from their broader interests, outside of those which are useful to those of political parties/candidates seeking to achieve their goals. The theoretical slippage between analytic and ontological assumptions evident within the political marketing literature suggests that the marketisation of politics has instrumentalised the role of voters in politics to the point where they are rendered disconnected from both their own interests and the broader political system.





Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

This disconnection is further reinforced through an acceptance (albeit often implicit, although for acknowledgement of this see (Wring 1997)) of a Schumpeterian elitist (and latterly Downsian) economic conception of democracy as an institutional arrangement which facilitates “the competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (1976, p. 269). Schumpeter sought to provide an empirically based, realistic model of democracy, and again, the political marketing literature follows this lead, in seeking to describe the workings of competing political elites within a democratic system. Herein, voting is viewed as a buying process (Reid, 1988) where voters (consumers) exchange their vote for (purchase) a political “product” on the day of the election (for example, Newman, 1994; Lees-Marshment, 2001). Elites compete for the popular vote and the goal of politicians, in the political marketing literature, is assumed to be simply the winning of elections (Lock, Harris, 1996, p. 18). In this way, political marketing, as with Schumpeter, view democracy as a method (Schumpeter, 1976, p. 269), for actors to achieve their goals. Where the political marketing literature departs company from Schumpeter is in operating with a largely implicit conception of democracy as procedural, a struggle with for the popular vote between competing elites, while at the same time, as Yannis (2008) observes, failing to adequately theorise or engage with the issues raised by democratic theory. This instrumental and procedural view of the workings of a capitalist democracy reinforces the functional role of voters to parties/candidates. Voters are simply a means to a parties’ ends. Moreover, and reinforcing Taylor’s thesis, Schumpeter’s model highlights (albeit for different reasons in that it is the size of the state which makes individuals remote and disconnected) how this form of democracy functions to disconnect individuals from the political context in which they are situated.

The experience of marketing’s impact on the electoral process, particularly in the US and UK, is intimately linked with the rollout of the New Right’s wider ideological project designed to foster a post-Keynesian consensus in which the notion of a “centreground” is seriously challenged because the latter has greatly moved to the right. From this vantage point there is a huge irony in the neo-liberals’ deployment of “public choice” because the consequence of their prescription, from a voting perspective, is to seriously restrict debate and policy options available to only those parties who endorse the new orthodoxy and can be safely deemed “electable.” Much rapid marketing communication has been subsequently devised to convince electorates that they do, in fact, have a choice; the realisation that they do not is arguably the central factor in the marked decline in voter turnout over the last two decades. This should of course be placed in a wider context involving the neo-liberal promotion of “market populism” and the “citizen-consumer” (Frank, 2001; Needham, 2003).

Markets, in perfect competition models, fail to distinguish between large and small organisations. Large organisations have greater resources which enable them to better orientate consumer choice to their product. This can be pursued through advertising and other persuasive techniques, which challenges the ideal of con-





sumer sovereignty if preferences can be shaped by the producer (Galbraith, 1969). This is then about manipulation rather than empowerment (Qualter, 1985). On the consumption side, some have more resources to participate than others. However whereas in economics the wealthy have greater amounts of money with which to participate, politics (in the electoral sense) is governed by the egalitarian principle of one person, one vote. But the process of marketisation has seriously challenged this by empowering some at the expense of others. In electoral terms the wealthy become those “floating voters” living in selected marginal constituencies and it is their (self-)interests and wants that become increasingly paramount (Savigny, 2007).

### THE MARKETISATION OF POLITICS: TOWARDS A CRITIQUE

The marketisation of politics promotes a notion of participation which assumes that voters take part in the formal mechanism of elections. But here electoral turnout is primarily regarded as important in terms of its ability to enable the competing actors to realise their goals. Yet in conventional political terms, turnout is important as it is also a means of legitimating the entire system; declining participation and increasing disaffection among (non) voters are therefore key areas of concern. This is irrevocably linked to the material basis of politics and here there is a linkage between the changing social, political and technological environment, often characterised by growing malaise, and the marketisation process which has fostered a decline in partisan attachment, decrease in class identification, growing consumer society and the proliferation of communication networks. The response of politicians has been to engage in marketing strategies which are, as noted above, underpinned by economic assumptions which link the material with the ideational. This has arguably contributed to the growth of a “malaise” that the political marketing literature has yet to systematically analyse (Savigny, 2008).

As noted, these economic accounts emphasise the individual at the expense of the collective. Crucially, this undermines the potential for participation in politics to be motivated by the opportunity to achieve collective outcomes. The way which much of the political marketing literature adopts these assumptions negates the role of political ideology and civic duty which is essential for Downsian theorising to overcome problems of collective action and voter mobilisation. Removing any “meaning” from political electoral participation exacerbates, rather than resolves, the problematic paradox of voting. In so doing, political marketing removes incentives for individuals to take part and subsequently its use by political actors reinforces the idea of non-voting and “malaise.” To rationally choose not to participate does not necessarily equate with apathy. And this is not to argue for compulsory mass participation or voting (traditionally the hallmark of authoritarian democracies). Rather, it is argued that to re-engage the public, attention to political needs to be restated.





Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

The political marketing literature which has charted, described, analysed and in places has sought to inform, changes in the electoral context has far reaching implications. To understand politics as a marketing activity undertaken by elite level actors, invokes a set of underlying principles that are informed by neo-classical economic assumptions. Democracy is understood as a practical set of arrangements and the *lingua franca* of the political marketing literature is a discourse which refers to politics using the terms production, consumption, exchange and markets; marketing is normatively presented as a “good.” This perspective did, as noted, gain crucial academic legitimacy with the publication of Downs’ groundbreaking analysis (Downs, 1957). Yet, this discourse of marketing ultimately serves a broader function than a mechanism through which the behaviour of political actors in election campaigns can be evaluated. What this does is embed the importance, even the hegemony, of markets as solutions to all social, economic and political concerns. The idea of marketing in politics becomes in many ways a logical response to a broader environment which is characterised by a commitment to market mechanisms as a solution to all societal problems, to the privatisation of public welfare provision, to the celebration of wealth, and a focus on the individual, rather than the collective. But politics is not only about the regulation of markets and whether concerned with conflict resolution, resource allocation or whatever, it is fundamentally underpinned by the concept of power (Leftwich, 2004; Lukes, 2005). What the definition of democracy as a marketing activity does is to reinforce the location of structural power within the economic system and this dovetails with a key tenet of neoliberalism, namely the delegitimisation of the state as an actor. Moreover, and allied to this point there is further scope to explore the way in which the marketisation of politics has been driven by a mainstream school of North American marketing which promotes managerialism rather than any democratic ethos within the organisation (Johansen, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

There is something in the claim that “the main challenge facing Western democracies today is not what determines a citizen’s vote but rather why so many ‘customers’ are choosing not to ‘buy’ anything” (Johansen, 2005, p. 102). And this is arguably the point: to conceive of voters as customers and politics as something which can be “purchased” changes its fundamental nature. It thereby constructs politics as something which is material; something which can be discarded when no longer of use or does not satisfy the self interest of the individual; and something which does not require loyalty, engagement or longer-term commitment. But this neglects the way ideas and values are critical to the democratic process, as ideally is a vision of what a “good society” ought to be. Some things are simply not amenable to commodification.

Politics and markets had previously been held to be mutually exclusive categories. The New Right’s counter-revolution served to popularise a rational choice un-





derstanding of democratic procedures that has blurred the boundaries and subordinated the political to the economic and democracy to the market. Overall this had resulted in a denigration of the public sphere where critical-rational debate is limited and there is difficulty in holding elites accountable for their actions (Habermas, 2006). Rather the marketisation of politics has promoted inherently individualistic notions of both public and political actors, and places greater emphasis upon the fulfilment of differing short term goals. To reclaim politics debate needs to transcend the language of the marketplace. Within political marketing the discussions of politics in terms of production, consumption, exchange, markets, serve to reinforce and embed hegemonic ideas in relation to markets, political economy and neo-liberalism. It has been argued that political actors have been complicit in this process by adopting methods, the terminology and techniques of marketing, which in turn have a detrimental impact upon the democratic process. This needs to be addressed more systematically. There needs to be a critical turn in political marketing.

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Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

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Heather Savigny, Dominic Wring

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