

## **Market research in politics: revealing the contribution consultants make when advising our politicians**

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Extended summary of a regular research paper for inclusion in conference proceedings of WAPOR (World association for public opinion research) 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference *The New World of Public Opinion Research* June 14-16, 2012 Hong Kong

### **Author bio**

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### **Abstract**

Aside from public opinion polls, market research in politics remains a largely hidden process and activity. Even though we know all parties and governments do it, and political marketing academics engage in heated debate about it, there has been little focused study of the scope and value of political market research in practice. This paper utilises interviews with practitioners from the UK, US, New Zealand, Australia and Canada including those who conducted and advised on research for world leaders such as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Kevin Rudd, Helen Clark and Stephen Harper to construct lessons about what works in political market analysis. It identifies 'rules of the game' for using a range of methods of analysis - polling, focus groups, quantitative and qualitative (including deliberative and co-creation) research, segmentation, voter profiling, targeting, GOTV, candidate or opposition research, predictive market analysis, global knowledge sharing and consultation), as well as how to make the relationship between consultants and clients work. It demonstrates that market analysis in politics is a multi-varied activity, and thus the criticism that political marketing means politicians simply follow focus groups is a gross over-simplification. Instead, the purposes, uses, methods and attitudes to market analysis in politics are broad-ranging. It therefore plays a valuable role in identifying a range of potential choices that politicians can make, enhancing the decision making process – and overall leadership - of political elites.

### **Introduction**

The growing use of research by politicians, parties and governments not just in how they communicate but the decisions they make has received more attention in recent decades because of the growing sub field of political marketing. This research pre-dominantly argues that for politicians to get elected, they should use market research in the form of polls and focus groups to develop a political product that aligns with voter demands. This suggestion attracted controversy because of the democratic implications, given potential problems with the elevated power of market research consultants and loss of leadership or conviction amongst politicians. However due to the secrecy that often surrounds the work of consultants and strategists, there has been little research into political market research and its' relationship to political decision making. This paper seeks to provide greater insight into this process and the democratic consequences by utilising in-depth interviews with practitioners including market researchers and political advisors involved in politics and government in the UK/US/New Zealand, Australia and Canada. It suggests that the criticism that political marketing means politicians simply follow focus groups is a gross over-simplification. Instead, the purposes, uses, methods and attitudes to market analysis in politics are broad-ranging. It can even play

a valuable role in identifying a range of potential choices that politicians can make, enhancing the decision making process of political elites.

### **The debate in existing literature on market research in politics**

Academic analysis of the use of market research in politics falls into two distinctive but related fields: public opinion research and political marketing. Public opinion is an older field and analysis both the measurement of opinion and how such opinion is formed; political marketing is a newer field which explores how political elites use information on that opinion to inform their policy and campaign decisions. Political marketing tends to use the term market research rather than public opinion research, and studies the use of specific tools by politicians both to understand public opinion (focus groups, polling, role play, co-creation) and strategically respond to it (segmentation, voter profiling and targeting - see Lees-Marshment 2009). But both fields have engaged in controversial debate about the democratic impact of market research in politics. The basic idea that politicians might use research to inform their decisions attracts both hope (that this ensures politicians listen and respond to voter demands) and concern (that politicians are rendered panderers to the latest poll or focus group and avoid leading beneficial societal change). As Jacobs and Shapiro (2000, 11) observed, 'the proliferation and visibility of public opinion polling during the Clinton administration...led many critics of American politics to fear that poll taking, focus groups and the like has permanently replaced political leaders.' Paleologos (1997: 1184) argues that 'a poll-driven society...ignores creativity. It overlooks new ideas. It prohibits change and true reform.' Another concern is that market research in politics does not identify completely objective results, and is thus open to manipulation of advisors. Political marketing studies critique UK Labour's use of focus groups under the leadership of Tony Blair for failing to avoid the 'interviewer effect': Wring (2007, 87) argued focus groups were used to push a political agenda and Savigny (2007, 130) that under Blair 'Labour defined the issues for discussion...Gould's interventionist approach, to argue and challenge participants, further meant that discussion could be inhibited. Particular viewpoints could be prevented from being expressed.'

On the other side, that market research encourages politicians to listen to voters is argued by some to be positive for democracy (see Lees-Marshment 2001) and case studies of politician's use of research have tended to conclude that the use of polling does not mean politicians forget the need to lead. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000, 13) concluded from their presidential study that presidents don't pander extensively; Murray's (2006: 495) study of the Reagan presidency found that survey data was also used to find potential 'overlap' between the leadership goals and public opinion, and Canes-Wrone (2006, 185) argued that presidents commonly monitor and arouse public opinion to achieve policy change – pandering is therefore conditional; and Goot (1999: 237)'s study of the Australian Prime Minister John Howard found the leader used market analysis to make his proposal to sell the publicly owned telecommunications company Telstra more attractive to the public. With the benefit of practitioner experience, Mortimore and Gill (2010, 255) argue that 'leadership judgement is also indispensable' to a party using marketing: 'even a party with no ideological principles would need sometimes to defy public opinion' and marketing can help 'create appropriate communication to make [unpopular decisions] more tolerated.'

This research seeks to move beyond such a polarised debate by exploring how market research is really used in politics by presenting the perspectives of those who are actually engaged in conducting and using it. Despite the value of previous research on both sides of the debate, much of it is written from the ivory tower of academia without primary empirical research. Whilst studies of presidential uses of public opinion research have attempted to correlate policy and polling, no one had asked those who are involved in political market research how it is conducted or used. This analysis seeks to remedy this by obtaining the perspectives of political practitioners involved with market research to provide a more nuanced, reality-based understanding of a potentially profound area of political behavior.

### **Data collection and methodology**

In-depth interviews were conducted with a range of practitioners involved market research in politics, whether actually collecting it for a particular party or candidate, or government/policy/social research

or utilising that research because of being a strategy, communications or policy advisor or politician themselves. Such an approach has been used by other scholars seeking to gain insight into political practice at elite levels (see Romzek and Utter 1997 and Simeon 1991 for example). Whilst the material presented here does not and could not claim 'truth', what it does is provide the perspective of those who have actually 'been there' which is an important addition to our understanding of this area of politics.

Interviews were conducted with political practitioners between 2005-2012 in the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada – those western liberal democracies most commonly critiqued in previous literature for their use of market research - and included advisors to political leaders including US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, UK Prime minister Tony Blair, Canadian Prime ministers Stephen Harper, Paul Martin and Pierre Trudeau and New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark. Some of those interviews were initially analysed for a broader project identifying principles for success in all aspects of political marketing (Lees-Marshment 2011), but the way market research was used in politics emerged from this initial project as a central theme in its own right which would benefit from further analysis. Thus an additional 5 interviews were conducted with advisors to additional Prime Ministers Gordon Brown, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and John Key 2010-2012. The original interviews were filtered to create a more select list of those which discussed market research and merged with the additional interviews which create a new total of 42 interviews. In terms of country spread, 13 were in the UK, 6 in the USA, 7 New Zealand, 5 Australia and 11 from Canada. Whilst this doesn't represent a perfectly symmetrical sample and we could always ask for more, because obtaining access to such a group is challenging and, moreover, the data from this group provides valuable new insights, it was re-analysed to produce the new perspectives and presented in this paper.

### **How market research is used in politics**

Both practitioners who have worked on the outside as market researchers and on the inside of campaigns/government note the value of market research as a means to check assumptions and provide more impartial advice, particularly as it is difficult for politicians and their staff to know for sure what is going on outside the campaign or government bubble. This is not just true of politicians but their staff who spoke of becoming isolated from the ordinary public and how it is difficult to get a real feel for public opinion in the middle of a campaign. Market research plays a role in counteracting elite isolation from the public and can be used to identify the real problem behind falling opinion polls and identify possible solutions.

Whilst polls and focus groups attract most critique, the reality is that a wide range of different tools and methods to understand the public are utilised in politics. Market researchers use the usual quantitative polling and qualitative focus group work but also more diverse methods such as in-depth interviews, role play, as well as co-creation and predictive modelling to explore not just what public opinion is, but why, and how it might evolve in relation to several proposed actions.

Methods are chosen and used with varying purposes depending on timing in the election cycle or what the goal is of the research. Research can be used not just to identify voter demands but to track popularity over time, perception of government performance and delivery on particular issues, brand tracking, testing of messages before they go out. Thus the main sense is that in politics there is a much more diverse use of market research than previous literature suggests.

Practitioners acknowledged the potential problem of moderator bias when collecting market research. An Australian advisor also advised that politicians need to commission research from at least two different companies to overcome natural prejudices which researchers can develop. Market researchers also spoke of self-awareness and practising utilising more than one researcher to ensure different perspectives are brought to the process.

In politics research is not just used to identify voters demands or sell them a political product; the process is much more holistic. Research can inform a spectrum of potential behaviours including following voter views wholesale, communicating more effectively and leading the public.

Strategically, practitioners discussed how market research can be used in numerous ways: to find new segments to represent, put resources in the best place, confirm existing policies and decisions are being accepted, suggest that adjustments need to be made to a position, or that parts of the political product need to be re-developed, as well as identifying when it is not possible to change opinion and political elites need to become more responsive. Often researchers are asked to explore the possibilities for politicians to lead and change public opinion, and they present a range of options. Thus the research that attempts to predict how the public might react to different scenarios, as already discussed, is used to help politicians show leadership. Research helps identify and anticipate potential opposition and support and is thus used more strategically to achieve strategic goals.

Given this, it is not surprising that practitioners also discussed how research informs a range of communication strategies. Research can be used to ensure candidates talk about issues people care about, to explain issues that politicians themselves are passionate about more effectively, to check assumptions, to pre-test communication before it is made public, decide which policies/candidates should be prominent in a campaign, identify unknown potential audiences for a product and identify blocks in the public's perception that have to be dealt with. It informs prioritisation, identifying the most popular aspects of product which should form the centrepiece of any campaign. Others talked of using research to pre-test communication, such as key phrases.

Given this, what emerges from the data is the sense that the relationship between market research and the decisions that politicians make is not in any way direct. Partly this is because research is just one of many different inputs politicians receive. Leaders receive multiple sources of advice.

Despite its' importance, market research - and market researchers - does not determine what elected politicians do in campaigns or government. Politicians still have to make the final decision.

#### **Conclusion: the democratic contribution of political market researchers**

Political market research is a more diverse, complex and nuanced activity than previous literature suggests. It utilizes a range of methods thus avoiding over reliance on focus groups or a poll, and has a more nuanced and subtle influence on political decisions by politicians. It is, and will always remain, a profound and important aspect of political behavior, and remains the starting point in developing a marketing product or communications strategy. Research can also be used to identify the potential for politicians to lead and create societal change. Nor does it render the practitioners who conduct the market research as a force for democratic misconduct. Indeed, given that they hold the potential to inject more objective perspectives into the political process, it could be argued they are a positive role in our democracy.

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