

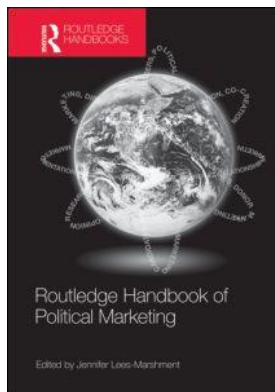
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Making space for leadership

The scope for politicians to choose how they respond to market research

Jennifer Lees-Marshment

The topic: leadership and political marketing

Leadership is an important part of democratic politics. Not only are political leaders a key focus of the political offering at election time, but they are the ones who make the final decisions as a president or prime minister with the potential to affect not just an individual country but the world. Leadership and political marketing both encompass many different activities and concepts, but this chapter focuses on how leaders respond to one aspect of political marketing, market research, which is a crucial part of political marketing. Market research offers politicians the opportunity to understand public opinion, and can help politicians demonstrate a feeling of being in touch. However, it could also prevent them making the ‘right’ decisions on policy against the findings of market research. Towards the end of his leadership, Tony Blair, once critiqued for being a follower of focus groups, commented:

The easy thing to do, frankly, is to hit the button on exactly what the public wants to hear ... The responsibility, though, in the end, particularly in the case of war, is to do what I believe to be the right thing for the country. I can't do it simply on the basis of the number of people who demonstrate, or on the basis of this opinion poll or that opinion poll. You've got to do, on an issue like this, what you genuinely believe to be right for the country, and then pay the price at the election if people disagree with you.

(Tony Blair, Tony and June, Channel 4, 30 January 2005)

If politicians do not feel free to act against market research, then they do not have the space for leadership. Without entering a big debate about what constitutes leadership generally, the issue for this chapter is to what extent leaders have scope to make a range of policy decisions in response to market research findings, and be free to be the kind of leader they choose. Previous literature and new concepts will conceptualise how leadership might be exercised when using

market research, and new empirical research demonstrates how politicians and their advisors have sought to exercise leadership in response to market research.

Previous research: political marketing is a threat to leadership

One of the previous dominant themes in political marketing research was the rise of market-oriented politics, where politicians researched the market to identify demands and then created political products – and policy promises – to suit them. This suggested that politicians ended up following market research too much. Paleologos (1997: 1184) argues that ‘a poll-driven society ... ignores creativity. It overlooks new ideas. It prohibits change and true reform’. Smith and Saunders (1990: 298) contended that ‘pandering to the prejudices of the majority might herald a tyranny of the ill-formed. Capital punishment, forced repatriation and other lowest common denominator issues could become important if marketing research showed a short-term benefit in courting them.’

However, on a theoretical level Henneberg (2006: 17) explained that politicians can choose to lead or follow; indeed, ‘leading and following can happen simultaneously as part of political marketing management’. An empirical example of using research to achieve change is provided by Allington *et al.* (1999), who demonstrate that marketing was used to help politicians sell a policy of privatization in the UK in the 1980s. In order to gain support, communication was aimed not at typical shareholders but at the general public, with communication designed to appeal to their interests and perspectives. When selling British Gas the campaign used the slogan ‘Tell Sid’ to convey the message that ‘privatisation represented good news for ordinary people because they could now get a piece of the action’ (Allington *et al.* 1999: 634). It was attractive to individuals because it implied that share buying was a higher-class activity but one that was open to all. Responsive marketing communications can therefore be used to change opinion: Allington *et al.* (1999: 636) conclude that ‘marketing ... has the power to change things and even to change the world order’. Presidential studies such as Jacobs and Shapiro (2000: 11) observed how ‘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’, but their own studies concluded that generally politicians do not pander to polls and that ‘presidents can use polls to determine how to explain and present already determined proposals and policies to the public’ (*ibid.*: 13). Goot (1999: 237) studied how the Australian Liberal leader John Howard used market analysis to make the proposal to sell the publicly owned telecommunications company Telstra more attractive to the public. Goot concluded that it is not true ‘that on every issue, or even on all the important ones, polling necessarily commits politicians to the position of the median voter’. Murray’s (2006: 495) study of the Reagan presidency concluded that whilst some party-driven issues were sidelined, and changes were made if too much opposition was encountered, survey data were also used to find potential ‘overlap’ between the leadership goals and public opinion, ‘to thereby identify political opportunities where it could accomplish some of its ideological goals and satisfy some of its partisan constituents, while staying within broad constraints established by majority opinion’. The use of research does not dictate the decision that leaders make; it merely informs it. With the benefit of practitioner experience, Mortimore and Gill (2010: 259) argue that despite the value of market research, ‘the leadership function is crucial, and that leader must exercise judgement when to follow the dictates of the market and when to defy it’. This literature provides insights into the complexity surrounding market research and leadership, which this chapter builds on by putting forward new theories for the different responses politicians can make to market research, and exploring them empirically through interviews with political advisors.

New research: market research and the space for leadership

On a conceptual level, it can be theorised that whilst market research and strategy are utilised in politics by all leaders, this does not mean that they simply have to follow the public and have no room to achieve changes. Instead, research can be used more proactively, to understand and overcome opposition, and create space for leadership. Market research can therefore be used in a range of ways by leaders: see Figure 27.1.

However, we still need to know to what extent this more nuanced use of market research occurs in practice. Some 100 in-depth interviews were conducted with a range of staff in all areas of political marketing in 2005–09 in the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The complete findings are presented in Lees-Marshment (2011), but here discussion focuses on what practitioners said about how they conduct and use market research. The interviewees included consultants and advisors to political leaders including US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, Canadian Prime Ministers Paul Martin and Stephen Harper, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark and Australian Premier Bob Carr. Data were collected inductively – i.e. without any starting position or theory in mind. Interviews were qualitative, unstructured, soft and intensive, with content led by the participant (see Lees-Marshment 2011 for further discussion of methodology).

The research found that practitioners are aware of the need to avoid relying on market analysis for product ideas. From his UK Labour experience, Carter (interviewed in 2007) said, ‘there was never a decision taken on this single fact or on that piece of research. It’s never a focus group has said go and do this so somebody went and did that.’ Evans (interviewed in 2006) argued that:

research is essential in politics, but it can only tell you where you’ve been and where you are. It can’t really tell you where you want to get to ... It shouldn’t affect where you ultimately want to get to but it can affect maybe how you get there. You have to believe in something in politics before you can go out and sell it.

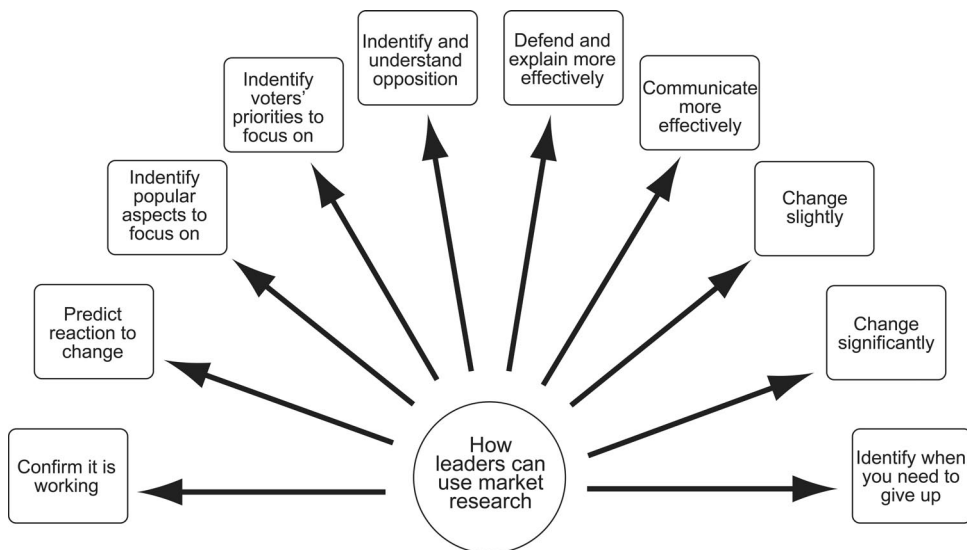


Figure 27.1 Leaders’ options for how to use market research in politics

Mortimer (interviewed in 2006) explained that:

the public can't tell you new policies because they actually don't know much about politics. Politicians have to be able to come up with the new answers and the new solutions ... we can tell you what percentage of the public are running around flapping about an issue, but it's not going to tell you what the policy solution to that problem should be.

They therefore use market research in many different ways. It can simply be used to communicate existing decisions more effectively, thus not impacting on leadership at all. Mills (interviewed in 2009) argued that 'overwhelmingly, polling is used to work out how to communicate policies or even how to prioritise which policies are communicated in election campaigns rather than determine policy'. Mellman (interviewed in 2007) said:

we want to use the data analysis we're generating to answer sort of three questions. And if we've answered those three questions, we've gone a long way towards developing their strategy. Where do we want to say it, who do we want to say it to, when do we want to say it?

It can be used to identify the most popular aspects of a product that should feature strongly in communication. As Rennard (interviewed in 2006) explains,

the policy we had of increasing income tax by a penny in the pound to pay for more investment in education was very successful. And market research confirmed that was a very popular policy. Therefore we would emphasise that fairly heavily in communication in '92, '97 and 2001. Market research gave us confidence that it was a particularly good thing.

More recently,

on foreign affairs, the Iraq war, our policy was very popular, particularly of course for minority communities and for traditional Labour voters. So ... the degree to which we emphasised the Iraq war was strengthened by market research and guided us in Brent, and in Liverpool, and in Birmingham and by-elections like that. Having tested people's feeling on it, it was a good card to play.

Research also helps to ensure that MPs and candidates talk about issues that local people care about: Noble (interviewed in 2009) notes how:

you can't just govern your principles from opinion research, but you can certainly refine them. You might have 100 things that you stand for, but no single voter, no collective voting block is going to be able to process them. So, we did a lot of market research to hone in on the things that we were talking about that really mattered to people. What are going to be their ballot drivers? What are they going to go to the polls and actually cast their ballot deciding? What are the most important issues for them?

Research helps to communicate issues about which the politician cares: Taylor (interviewed in 2008) recalled how in the White House:

The research was very useful in helping us communicate the messages which the president wanted to talk about. President Bush is not somebody who was interested in sort of just,

he just doesn't take a poll and decide what to talk about; he says here's what I'm saying, if you can help me articulate it in a way that resonates with people better, I'm all ears ... We knew kind of instinctively what issues he wanted to talk about and then it was conducting focus groups, doing traditional survey research and figuring out exactly what it is, the nuances, how to communicate. How to best utilise examples.

Just because politicians use market research does not mean that they follow it blindly. Indeed, Reid (interviewed in 2009) noted that:

even if you were wholly venal and shallow as could be, and you came to the job with no preconceived notion of what you wanted to do and you would be more than happy to be directed solely on the basis of what appears most popular – you actually can't always make that – there's a million issues that confront you on a daily basis, a thousand decisions, and frequently people don't have a point of view about a particular topic.

Carter conceded the value of research but again said:

there is a gap here which is for judgment. And the leader has to make their decisions on the basis of judgment and on the basis of good advice and sound evidence, high-quality research – yes, but also on the basis of good judgment.

Market research can therefore be used in a range of ways by political leaders: it is a tool to inform, not dictate, decisions.

Research does still influence decisions, however, as it can identify when politicians can't change opinion, with Carr (interviewed in 2008) noting how 'qualitative polling can help you, sometimes in identifying ideas that simply don't work'. Politicians who ignore polls do so at their peril: as Harris (interviewed in 2006) noted, '[Michael, leader UK Conservatives 2003–05] Howard ended up running a very nasty right-wing campaign, and yet that's not something that anyone advising him at the beginning would have recommended' – and they lost against the then unpopular Labour incumbent, Tony Blair. Similarly, another politician who lost an election, John Kerry, was noted to be anti-polls: Mellman described how:

Kerry wasn't that interested in polls per se ... the candidate wasn't all that interested in the polling, so it was probably less useful to him because it just wasn't his thing ... on the message side, I mean, you know, there are certainly various points where, you know, he was not, you know, particularly enamoured of what it is we were suggesting for various reasons, had his own things he wanted to do, what he's talking about, we wanted to talk about.

Leaders need to be 'sufficiently flexible when clearly an announcement or a policy or an issue has not gone down well', and have 'the courage to acknowledge that maybe it wasn't the right issue, if the weight of the community reaction or other stakeholder reaction is such that you know that they're suggesting that this isn't doable at this time' (Tyson, interviewed in 2008).

Research helps to prevent leaders becoming too remote and dismissive of the public. Griffin (interviewed in 2006) notes how:

what you have to do when going into an election campaign as an incumbent Prime Minister is swallow your pride, forget you are the Prime Minister, and go back and petition

people – you are asking people to vote for you, that's not a mandate for you to tell them how clever you are, and how well your Government has done. You have to engage at a far different level.

However, this is not easy. As Callingham (interviewed in 2009) notes:

they get out of touch, they have to. They may meet thousands of people, but they're still meeting them as a Prime Minister. They're not meeting them as Joe Blog in a caff; they're not meeting them as someone in a queue in a post-office.

Reid noted how:

incumbency becomes a real threat because it is isolating the apparatus of government ... so incumbency starts to equal complacency, and complacency starts to equal self-interest, and you can start taking it for granted, and suddenly you don't seem like you're well motivated, so you don't communicate that you get it. And maybe you don't ... it is sufficiently isolating that if you are in government for too long that people tend to conflate their own opinion with the national interest.

Similarly Campbell (interviewed in 2005) noted how Westminster is 'in a political bubble', and 'it's very hard' to stay in touch; it is particularly hard to be the prime minister, as you're 'surrounded by security' and 'lots of people talking to you all the time telling you their own ideas and agenda'. Being in power works against responsiveness: 'it's a trait of government that the longer they go on, the less they remember to think about that. The more ministers become ministers, they think as ministers rather than thinking as politicians' (Robertson, interviewed in 2006).

However, whilst leaders need to be flexible and willing to change position if a new idea is not accepted, this does not mean that politicians should simply follow public opinion. Research can encourage politicians to make adjustments, rather than wholesale change: 'more and more, I would see candidates understanding the value of research, and then really sending the results, and adjusting their policies, or programme-manning efforts, or their positioning overall based on research' (Braun, interviewed in 2009). Moreover, whilst research may point out the need to give up on certain policies, it can also help guide leaders as to when they can sell something and not be too cautious. Somerville (interviewed in 2007) noted how:

serious politicians have a good rule of thumb, which is, if you give me something that I think I can sell, then I will, if it is going to make sense. But if I don't think I can sell it, then I won't sell it ... leadership is saying what I can sell ... it is much more an instinctive judgment – Asylum liberalization, no that's gonna kill my party. Baby bonds – that's not going to be popular in certain areas, but I think I can sell that.

Research identifies the space for leadership: former premier Bob Carr said: 'there are some issues where the public attitude might affect you and doesn't count; one because it's something you want to pursue, and two, because by leading you can change public opinion'. Carr said:

a strong leader can shape public opinion. You might look at a bit of polling information that shows 55–45 division, but by simply staking your case and heading the media, you can

see that flip over. Secondly, the issue might not be in the media for that long. So even if you're behind, it may not hurt you.

Response to research therefore needs to vary depending on the issue, and effective leadership includes both leading and following and somewhere in between. When discussing the Blair government, Gould (interviewed in 2007) conceded that 'it may be a fair criticism to say in the early days that it was poll-driven or too much, I don't know, public opinion-driven', although 'in the later stages ... almost nothing Tony Blair did was popular. Everything was based on conviction.' However, Blair lost support when he adopted a more conviction-based strategy. Gould argues that:

The art of politics, modern politics, is kind of being able to perfectly blend these two together and to make them work. I mean, if you become too much of a listening party you just get nowhere. If you become too much of a leadership government, then you start to disconnecting your voters, which is bad also. If you're too flexible it's bad, if you're too inflexible it's bad, so you need to balance these ... it's absolutely crucial to listen in modern politics, but equally important to lead ... you have to balance flexibility and resolution. What I call soft-hard politics. You have to be soft, you have to be flexible, you have to be listening ... you have to be participatory. But you also have to have the courage and your convictions. Now that's very hard.

In practice, research is used alongside other considerations such as the party itself, because as Utting (interviewed in 2008) explained,

politicians aren't slaves to opinion polls because politicians are slaves to other more substantial interests like ... the internal dynamic level in their party ... what their support level is in caucus, what the attitudes of some of their big donors are, the cultural institutional things ... they're the kind of real things that they have to sort of balance.

Politicians must aim to position themselves in relation to both internal and external opinion to both maintain support and achieve progress. Polling is more of 'a stepping off point for political strategy' (Gould) – it does not set the goal itself.

Furthermore, it is also pragmatic to avoid following research at all costs. Leaders need some kind of position and should not just follow, not least because voters want them to have some kind of integrity: 'it's much better to have a consistent position and I'd say be slightly out of centre than make that desperate dash to the centre and weaken any kind of credibility that you've got' (Utting). Harris, who was marketing director for the UK Conservatives, argued that you need positive vision to win:

you need vision ... Howard never ever created a sense of belief in what his overall vision was and all he did was get stuck into the negatives, and then with IDS he also had no clear sense of purpose. I think that without a noble purpose you're sunk.

Lavigne (interviewed in 2009) recalls how he worked on Canadian New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jack Layton's leadership campaign for the 2003 election, and:

when we sat down at the kitchen table at the very beginning, and we started to talk about the kind of party we wished to build and the kind of country we wished to build, that's

where the vision of where you want to take the party, and where you want to take the country, that's where it starts.

Evans said that marketing needs to be driven:

by a vision and a set of values. As long as it is about political ideas and doesn't become reduced to a tactical squabble for power. Anyone involved in that game will get out-flanked. Another party provision will come along and will get traction with vision as to where people want to get next. Politics and marketing have a bad reputation individually, put the two together and it is deeply mistrusted. But without that compass, you'd get found out. You wouldn't go to tap into people's aspirations.

Political marketing need not result in creating politicians who just follow – not only is it problematic democratically it is also problematic on a pragmatic level.

Practitioners suggested that any changes in position to suit polls need thinking out and justifying. Sparrow (interviewed in 2007) recalled how research tells the politicians in the UK that the public 'love the NHS and they want the politicians to love it as well', and that even if it's not something politicians feel passionate about:

they go out and talk about it, they do what the researchers and strategists tell them to do, but they do it without the conviction that they have for the things that they do actually feel really passionate about. So they don't actually get the message across.

Evans argued that 'if you are not authentic you will fail, maybe not initially, but ultimately ... I wouldn't go as far as to say there is a collective intelligence but the public tend to figure out what's going on'. Reid said that it is not enough to show responsiveness to the public, the message had to be authentic. Changing position to suit polls all the time can back-fire: Mills noted how 'polling may show that right now 75 percent of voters favour Policy A but if you had declared passionately against Policy A a few months back you can't now advocate Policy A without a cost to your personal credibility'. Duncan-Smith (interviewed in 2006) commented how in his experience as a party leader 'if we attack something one day we are considered as hypocrites if we then go back to that position later on and say we are in favour of it now.'

Advisors, therefore, take into account the politician's history and beliefs. Ulm (interviewed in 2007) said that he had:

never had a candidate ask me 'What should I believe on this?' Never had. Never had it once. Usually the candidate has a core history, a core set of beliefs, and you're trying to figure out of all those, what's the best way to win? Is the history both good and bad?

The same works for communication: Mellman explained how 'if your message is we need someone who's tough and you have a wimpy sort of candidate – doesn't work so well. That can't really be your message ... you have to work with the material you have'. Despite the use of research and advice, politicians need to be genuine otherwise 'you get found out pretty quick. There's no doubt about that' (Fitzpatrick, interviewed in 2008).

Furthermore, leaders can use research proactively to help them achieve change in public opinion, rather than just change their position. Tyson explained how research can be used to work out how to sell something, to tailor the message, and then on a continual basis so that

politicians are ‘finding out what will appease people, to get them to back down’. Similarly, Mellman said:

my view is you shouldn't base public policy on polling in particular. On the other hand, sometimes politicians come to us and say well, this is what I've decided to do, what I need you to do is tell me how do I sell that? How do I get people to support that, given that this is what I want to do? That's perfectly appropriate and responsible in my view, because our job isn't to dictate public policy to them, but it is to help them figure out how to sell their policies for the maximum impact.

Market intelligence can be used to advise on a predetermined, locked-in position without changing the product. Duffy (interviewed in 2009) said that ‘the best use of market-research, in my experience, is ... it can show you a pathway through what appears to be an insurmountable barrier’. Research can help suggest a way forward through opposition:

it tells you ‘Well actually if you link your agenda – if you call it that you'll have a problem, but if you don't call it that, if you call it something else, and if you present the motive behind what you are doing as being conservation in aid of environmental best-practices, then the public will buy it.’ So, that's what market research does. It gives you some quantifiable basis on which you can venture your opinions.

Gill (interviewed in 2007) said that his experience at Mori showed that ‘public opinion can be led and changed very substantially on a lot of issues, because most of the time most people aren't thinking about these issues that politicians and government are thinking about very much’. Research helps to understand the level of support or opposition, and who supports or opposes, and what might make them change. Nanos (interviewed in 2009) argues that the best politicians use research by ‘saying I have an objective, then they are on the right track. Can it be achieved? Is it the right objective? What are the resources that are going to be needed to achieve that objective? How relevant is it?’ It helps identify potential risks. It can predict how voters might change or react to changes. Utting explained that although traditional research simply researches where people are right now, more sophisticated sensitivity modelling can explore what impact a politician changing position on something will have on public opinion: ‘you can almost create a kind of black box situation where you can try different options within your model, and just see how it affects things like vote choice or other outcomes you're interested in’. Research can help identify the potential room for politicians to lead public opinion.

Research remains useful even when leaders adopt a position that is, or becomes, anti-market, helping politicians to understand opposition to their positions and show respect for public opinion even if they do not agree with it. In 2004–05 more innovative research by the company Promise for the UK Labour/Blair government identified that the problem wasn't just Blair's policy on Iraq, but that people felt neglected by Blair, that he hadn't listened to them and became too focused on international rather than domestic issues. This then informed a reconnection strategy, which as Carter explained,

involved taking the Prime Minister to studios after studios and putting him in front of live audiences that could engage and talk with him and put their concerns, those events helped to show that the Prime Minister had not moved off the key agendas that he had been elected on, but indeed remained very focused on them, even though there had been other things going on.

When the public have negative perceptions of politicians who have already been elected or are known to them, practitioners can work to offset them. When former first lady Hillary Clinton stood for the Senate as well as president, she conducted a listening, conversation tour to combat concerns that ‘people were weary of her, they didn’t know her, they believed in the negative stereotypes about her, and the way to dispel them was to appear personally in small groups that were open, so people could report on them’ (Blumenthal, interviewed in 2007). It is important to use research to identify the real source of any weakness so that it can be managed more effectively.

Overall, this research demonstrates that, as suggested by previous literature, political marketing does not lead politicians to simply follow market research. Instead, research is used to inform a variety of positions and decisions. Indeed, for both pragmatic and principled reasons, politicians should use market research more reflectively. Taking our understanding beyond theoretical assertions, this gives us a rare insight into the thinking of politicians and their advisors who conduct and use market research when making leadership decisions about policy.

Advice for practitioners

Practitioners would be wise to understand that market research is only part of the decision-making process, and politicians should not simply follow the results of research. Market research needs to be used carefully, to guide leaders to make decisions which will both maintain support and help politicians achieve policy change: see Box 27.1.

Box 27.1 How political leaders should use market research in politics

- 1 Try to achieve a few changes and use market analysis to help identify how to change opinion
- 2 Manage anti-market positions: continue to conduct market analysis; show awareness of and respect for opposition; and conduct listening exercises to get back in touch
- 3 Use market analysis proactively to inform, not dictate decisions
- 4 Balance leading and following the public
- 5 Ensure changes are justifiable and credible
- 6 Adopt a proactive, visionary position: do not just follow

Impact on politics

What this means for politics is that there is still room for politicians to take a range of policy decisions in relation to market research. Whilst political marketing is clearly a prevalent force in politics, it need not be a constraining force in democracy that prevents politicians taking up certain policies. Yes, they do need to stay in touch and they do need to listen, but that does not mean they need to do everything the public wants. It is about nuance – leaders can take a range of positions in response to research, and research can be used to find a way to create public support for change as well as stop politicians doing something that is deeply against the public will. There may be a maturing of political leadership which could help to create a more positive relationship between government and citizens, but this positive impact will only happen in practice if politicians choose to use political marketing more effectively. Ultimately the decision rests with them.

The way forward: for research, study, training and practice

Whilst political marketing has extensively researched how politicians follow market demands, there needs to be more research that explores how marketing might be used to create space for leadership decisions that go against public opinion and managing anti-market decisions more effectively. The leadership literature itself needs to be integrated, and it would be beneficial if a model of reflective leadership were created and tested on specific empirical cases. Practitioners need to be aware of the need to utilise market research in a proactive way to help create the room for leadership, and to spend time reflecting on how to respond to the public. Political marketing will then help leaders not just win elections but help meet public long-term needs and be beneficial for society as a whole.

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