

Niche marketing the Greens in Canada and Scotland

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The topic: niche marketing

In May 2010 the Green Party of England and Wales made history when party leader Caroline Lucas won the Brighton Pavilion seat in the UK-wide Westminster election. The victory demonstrated that a niche party could win wider support in a first-past-the-post electoral system. Green Party of Canada (GPC) strategists jumped on the Lucas bandwagon, emailing GPC e-newsletter subscribers, calling for donations so that their leader might emulate Lucas (interview with Cantin 2010). The Scottish Green Party (SGP) said the victory ‘changes everything’, providing an excellent platform for the 2011 Scottish parliamentary election (Scottish Green Party 2010a). The SGP and GPC reactions may suggest they were consolidating base support through standard political communications methods, or – viewed through a political marketing lens – may reveal an attempt by either party to rework their niche appeal, using the Lucas victory for political validation.

The concept of political niche marketing builds on fundamental business model characteristics. Although Toften and Hammervoll note a lack of a ‘widely accepted single conceptual definition of niche marketing’ (Toften and Hammervoll 2007: 1380), niche markets are mainly seen as being compact, with specialized appeal for a small defined group whose members are distinguished by common needs and/or interests (Keegan *et al.* 1992; Dalgic and Leeuw 1994; Kara and Kaynak 1997). A producer aiming to cultivate such a group positions the product(s) to satisfy the narrowly defined interest (Porter 1980; Bantel 1997; Hezar *et al.* 2006). According to Bantel, this allows for producers to deploy sparse resources strategically (Bantel 1997: 246). Overall, it follows that niche marketing can generally be described as ‘positioning into small, profitable homogeneous market segments which have been ignored or neglected by others’ (Dalgic and Leeuw 1994: 42). This chapter will explore a niche marketing approach by studying the Canadian and Scottish national Green parties.

Previous research on niche marketing

The range of political choice in many democratic countries widened in the latter decades of the 20th century, as a significant number of new political parties – including niche parties – were

formed (Meguid 2008). The new niche parties, including some Green parties, focused on non-traditional issues or identities, appealed across left–right divisions, and offered a narrow range of policies (Meguid 2005, 2008). Although Green parties are not homogeneous (Burchell 2002), and some have attempted to broaden their perceived ‘single issue’ policy base, they share political and policy antecedents that justify the niche categorization (Müller-Rommel 1989; Burchell 2002; Talshir 2002).

Acknowledging Lees-Marshment’s caution that ‘politics cannot simply be fitted into a marketing framework that stems from analysis of the business world’ (Lees-Marshment 2003: 9), it is still valuable to highlight a number of parallels between niche market conditions in both spheres. In the business sphere, an increasing range of products and shifting consumer expectations fundamentally altered the largely one-size-fits-all marketing landscape (McKenna 1988; Kotler 1989; Dalgic and Leeuw 1994). This focused attention on the concept of niche marketing. The balance of power had shifted; the marketplace was required to respond more nimbly to specific consumer desires. The resulting acceleration of niche marketing had a significant impact on wider culture (Anderson 2006; McKenna 1988).

In the political sphere, Butler and Collins (1996) utilized marketing elements to reconsider the categorical framework – which included the ‘nicher’, along with the market leader, the challenger and the follower – set by various scholars (Porter 1980; Kotler 1994). Butler and Collins (1996: 29) described a nicher party as the ‘leader in [a] narrowly defined market or niche’, with ‘specialist appeal’. It is not solely issue-based; successful nichers have also targeted specific linguistic groups, voters within a defined geographic area, and recent immigrants (*ibid.*: 33). Similarly, in business, Kotler (1989) noted that a niche market specialization could run the gamut from product to geography to quality/price.

There are also parallels with respect to successful strategic nicher behaviours. In business, Dalgic and Leeuw (1994: 45–46) and McKenna (1988: 93–94) noted the necessity of marketing the company as well as its product, treating customers as individuals, responding to their unique needs, and establishing strong long-term relationships. In politics, Butler and Collins (1996: 32) cited the importance of strong, lasting relationships between nichers and their targeted political consumers. Raynor (1992) concluded that a successful niche strategy in the business sphere cannot be communications-driven. Instead, a genuine niche must first be identified, and only then can a specialization, tailored to meet consumer expectations, be effectively delivered. Similarly, political marketing theories (Lees-Marshment 2001; Newman 1994; Wring 1997) generally posit that successful market-oriented political parties identify constituent wants/needs through market research before tailoring their product/policy accordingly.

Following Butler and Collins, who identified the importance of a ‘create, expand and defend’ nicher strategy (Butler and Collins 1996: 32), it can be said that a political niche party must adopt specific behaviours, as outlined in Figure 8.1, if it hopes to engage in niche market-oriented politics.

These identified behaviours are utilized as a guide for analysis that first explores whether the GPC and SGP can be categorized as niche market-oriented political groups, and then considers the possible implications of our conclusions.

New research: niche marketing the Greens in Canada and Scotland

Research analysed strategies employed by the GPC during the 2004 and 2008 Canadian federal election campaigns, and by the SGP during the 2003 and 2007 Scottish parliamentary election campaigns (for the sake of comparative consistency with the SGP, the 2006 Canadian federal election, for which GPC strategies were largely an expansion of those used in 2004, is excluded

A niche market-oriented political party will:

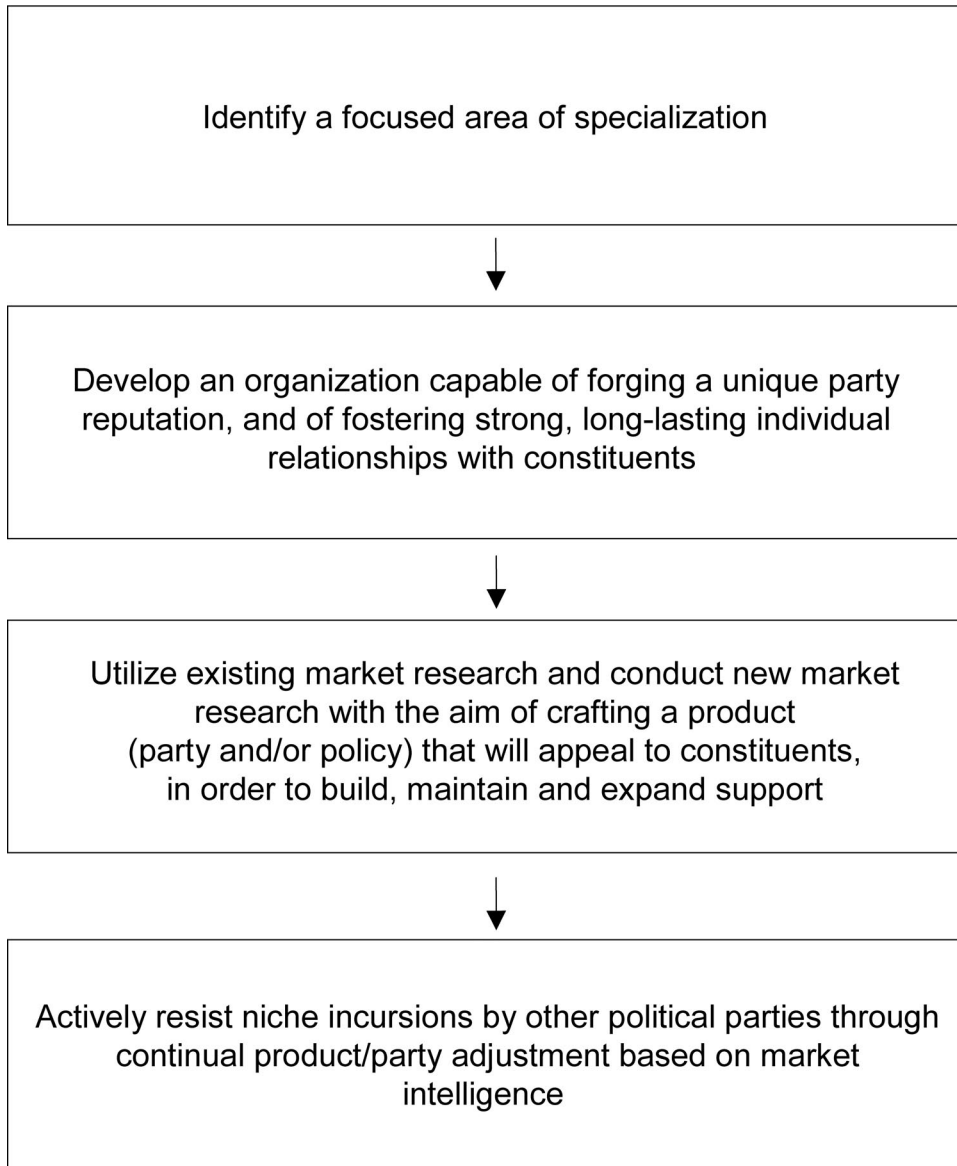


Figure 8.1 Indicators of niche market-oriented political behaviour

from analysis). To date, their most meaningful party activity has been organized around those elections. The authors conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews over five months in 2010 with nearly a dozen senior GPC and SGP members in key decision-making roles. The questions were open-ended, focusing on organization, technology, research, strategies and political niche marketing concepts. The findings were triangulated with information gathered from party

manifestos/platforms and slogans produced for the studied campaigns, alongside news reports, press releases and the authors' existing research material.

The Greens in Canada and Scotland

The Green parties in Canada and Scotland are niche parties with similar philosophical roots and areas of specialization. Both emerged from ecology-based campaigning movements and faced the challenge of how to transform themselves into successful, functioning political parties, while retaining their unique political identities. Since its formation in 1983, the GPC has attempted to develop as a force for environmentally focused social and political change. It first attracted notable support in 2004, winning 4.3 percent of the popular vote – still marginal compared with the leading parties (12.4–36.7 percent), and still short of electing members, but significantly higher than its own 0.8 percent in 2000. The GPC's geographically dispersed popular vote rose to 6.8 percent in 2008 but it again failed to win a seat. The SGP formed in 1990 by amicably moving away from the UK party and, in 1999, elected a member to the re-established Scottish Parliament and gained 3.6 percent of the vote. In 2003 it won seven seats (6.9 percent of the vote), reduced to two (4.0 percent of the vote) after the 2007 election (when assessing vote share, note that the SGP stood in the regional list and did not compete for constituency votes).

However, the GPC and SGP have faced differing challenges. Canada's national first-past-the-post or single member plurality (SMP) political landscape is dominated by four parties (Conservative, Liberal, New Democrat and Bloc Québécois). SMP favours parties with concentrated support over smaller parties which tend to have dispersed backing. In contrast, members of the Scottish Parliament are elected by an Additional Member System whereby each elector has two votes: one to elect a regional member – 56 across eight regions – and one to vote for a constituency Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) (73 members) using first-past-the-post. The number of MSPs elected under the regional list portion aims to reflect broadly the portion of votes won by that party, acting as a top-up for parties who may have received substantial numbers of votes at the constituency level but secured few or no seats (Herbert *et al.* 2007). The SGP was constrained financially to contesting the regional list (interview with Harvie 2010). No party gained a majority in the first three elections to the re-established Scottish Parliament. The Labour and the Scottish National parties are the two leading parties, with the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties each garnering a decent share of seats. The smaller parties, including the Greens, took three seats in 1999 and 2007 and 17 seats in 2003, a direct contrast with Canadian smaller parties, which remain sidelined and seatless.

With six times as many eligible voters spread unevenly across territory more than 125 times the size of Scotland, Canadian political life plays out in unique ways. The influence of regional interests and the resources required to campaign nationally loom large in Canadian party fortunes (Carty *et al.* 2000). The 2004 changes to the electoral funding system, which subsidized parties winning a minimum of 2 percent of the national vote, had an impact on the behaviour of political parties (Flanagan and Jansen 2009). The GPC, as will be discussed, was no exception. It qualified for state funding in 2004, receiving approximately (CDN) \$1,000,000 annually; this rose to around (CDN) \$1,800,000 after the 2008 election. The SGP has limited funds, mostly from individual small donors. In 2003 they had £63,864 (Electoral Commission 2003) to fight their campaign; in 2007 this was boosted by Green MSPs donating 20 percent of their salary to party funds.

The similarities and differences allow us to examine GPC and SGP campaign behaviour from a niche market-oriented perspective, while considering variables that might influence success, including electoral systems, geography and funding. Accepting that both parties satisfy the first

indicator of political niche marketing through their focused area of appeal, our case studies will analyse the extent to which they engage the remaining three indicators as evidenced by their governance and campaign decision-making structure, candidate selection process, and platform/manifesto development process, as well as their application of existing and new polling data and other feedback mechanisms during two campaign periods. If we find evidence of political niche market-oriented techniques, we will ask what this means for the cohesion of their parties and democracy. If we find no such evidence, we will ask if adoption is possible, and if greater electoral success would result.

Green Party of Canada (GPC) – federal elections 2004–08

The GPC's governance structure was designed to facilitate decentralized decision-making, a Green party feature that allows Greens to portray themselves as unique entities dedicated to promoting a non-traditional approach to politics (Müller-Rommel 1989; Burchell 2002). However, the GPC has been evolving towards a more traditional centralized and leader-centric structure during campaign periods. Its first significant shift occurred in 2004 (interviews with Crookes 2010a, Travis 2010b), when it attempted a more 'professionalized' campaign style (Gibson and Römmele 2001). Emulating larger parties, the GPC ran its first full-blown national leader's tour, and aimed for consistent and more top-down party messaging through the provision of national campaign materials to Electoral District Associations (EDAs). However, limited resources hampered consistent cohesion between the two levels (interviews with Travis 2010a, 2010b).

With the possibility of qualifying for post-election public subsidies, the party secured funding at the national level through private loans and donations, before and during the campaign period (Elections Canada 2004a, 2004b). The money enabled it to top up its one part-time staff member with nearly five dozen paid staff and volunteers (interview with Travis 2010b). It set up a more centralized campaign structure with paid staff in key decision-making roles; this was reprised in 2008. The professionalization attempts arguably caused some erosion of the GPC's claim to the unique political behaviour that was part of its original niche attraction. During both campaigns the party experienced internal tensions and subsequent media coverage reminiscent of the traditional political parties from which it was seeking to set itself apart (Harada 2006, 2009).

Two measurements of the GPC's ability to forge strong relationships with its constituents are common political participatory methodologies: candidate selection (Erickson and Carty 1991; Cross 1998); and policy development (Carty *et al.* 2000). In 2004 the GPC had a decentralized structure for candidate selection. It lacked resources to develop a rigorous central process, leaving it to EDAs and local volunteers whenever possible (interview with Travis 2010b). Still, a significant new top-down strategy of running a full slate of candidates was imposed. This had a two-fold objective: to attain the popular vote level necessary for state funding (which resulted in a number of parachute candidates), and to recast its minor party status. Post-2008 there was talk of requiring central party pre-screening of local nominations, in order to minimize the possibility of candidates who might damage party credibility. However, it was recognized that significantly centralizing candidate selection could alienate the party's grassroots (Harada 2009). Allowing local members to largely retain candidate selection power enabled the GPC to conserve a crucial element of its unique identity, which likely helped preserve relations with core niche constituents.

The participatory nature of the GPC's policy development process is examined within the framework of its campaign platforms. In 2004 the GPC used the internet to maximize voter

engagement. The platform chair designed an interactive ‘wiki’ that allowed party members to create and edit the platform’s policy planks; non-members could view and comment only. Three rules governed plank development: existing party policy, passed at convention, could not be contradicted; existing policy need not be included; and policy gaps could be filled with new planks (interview with Pilling 2010). By 2008 the largely decentralized process was appreciably altered, although the intent – to seek as much input as possible while building constituent–party relationships – remained the same. The GPC held a series of pre-campaign policy conferences across the country, involving party members, subject-area experts and the general public. The GPC’s leader and shadow cabinet crafted an omnibus policy document, which incorporated results from the conferences alongside existing party policy: the planks of the subsequent 2008 campaign platform were pulled from that document. That process provided a more indirect connection between grassroots participation and the final platform than did the 2004 process. However, the final 2004 product had attracted critics, notably environmentally focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs), one reason the interactive ‘wiki’ experience was not repeated (interview with Travis 2010b).

Lees-Marshment (2001, 2003) notes that market intelligence is crucial for political parties seeking to become market-oriented. As outlined above, it is also crucial for niche political parties seeking to defend and expand their niche support. Limited resources meant that the GPC largely relied on public market research. In 2004 it parlayed its growing support levels in public polls into mainstream media coverage – a bid to build credibility and create a sense of momentum. This strategy continued in 2008. In 2004 other strategies included attempts to change public perceptions that the GPC was a left-leaning, single-issue party: it embraced more fiscally conservative policy planks (interview with Pilling 2010), and made efforts to ensure that its leader discussed a wide range of issues, not just the environment (interview with Crookes 2010b). By 2008, with a new, high-profile leader, the GPC had repositioned itself into a more leader-centric entity. The national campaign and television advertisements focused on leader Elizabeth May; she led GPC efforts to muster public support for her eventual inclusion in the nationally televised debates, which traditionally involved only the leaders of the larger political parties. As participation was largely restricted to parties with seats, May’s inclusion was also strategically enabled by the GPC’s pre-campaign recruitment of an independent Member of Parliament, who later failed to keep his seat under the Green banner.

Informal market intelligence was gathered through internet outreach. The website was increasingly professionalized and the GPC grew more adept between 2004 and 2008 at utilizing its website and emails for campaigning and fundraising. Feedback mechanisms such as blogs were linked into the site. An internal system of voter ID management was developed and made available to local campaigns, and was used at the national level to target support more efficiently (Harada 2009).

The GPC had sufficient resources to commission some limited formal market research in 2004 and 2008. In 2004 national surveys were conducted by Oraclepoll Research before and just after the election call, probing issues of importance to voters, as well as their openness to alternatives such as proportional representation and tax shifting. EDA-specific surveys were also undertaken to identify support levels (interviews with Crookes 2010a, 2010b). The market research influenced messaging in news releases, some of the leader’s speeches and resource investments in one EDA. It had no impact on the platform, mainly because polls were anathema to some GPC members (interview with Travis 2010c). Although information released by the party about 2008 market research is limited, it acknowledged hiring an external expert to analyse polling data to help it make decisions about resource concentration. It also surveyed popular support in half a dozen key ridings. During the campaign, it conducted market research

to gauge support levels for the GPC leader's electoral bid (Labchuk 2008). Overall, the strategy of funnelling additional funding and human resources support into specific EDAs in 2004 and 2008 was a tactical departure for a party with a philosophy of decentralization, as was the decision to actively commission market research. The latter move was particularly significant. Even so, the information garnered from the research seemed to direct campaign strategies rather than lead to product adjustment.

The fourth characteristic of a niche market-oriented political party is its ability to resist incursions by other parties through continual product/party adjustment based on market intelligence. The incursion threat was greatest in 2008, when public opinion surveys identified the environment as one of the main issues concerning Canadians. The major parties staked substantial claims on the climate change file, given its prominence as an issue of concern (Ellis and Woolstencroft 2009; Jeffrey 2009; Erickson and Laycock 2009). The left-of-centre New Democrats, in particular, were cognizant that they could lose crucial support from young voters attracted to the GPC's environmental emphasis (Erickson and Laycock 2009: 99). Although the opportunity existed, the GPC did not consistently meet the incursion threat by promoting its own unique identity. On the one hand, the party tied the top-of-mind environmental issue to its tax shift policy; when the Liberals adopted a similar 'green tax shift' programme the GPC portrayed it as a marker of its own political relevance. On the other hand, the party leader aligned herself with the Liberal leader (who personally championed climate change issues), when the two struck a deal to not run candidates in each other's ridings. The deal ignited a controversial internal/external debate about strategic voting, and about GPC identity as a movement versus a political party (Harada 2009); it did little to assist the GPC with incursion resistance.

Scottish Green Party (SGP)

In 2003 the SGP enjoyed its greatest electoral success, gaining seven regional list members of the Scottish Parliament. The party's '2nd vote Green' election campaign sought to differentiate the traditional first-past-the-post constituency vote from the regional list vote. Voters had two votes; the SGP campaign suggested that people could follow 'tribal loyalties' with the first, but that the second was the conscience or freedom vote (interview with Baird 2010). This campaigning technique was employed by the SGP and the Scottish Socialist Party, while larger parties appeared to stick to traditional constituency-based tactics (Ministry of Justice 2008). The campaign encouraged the idea of vote-splitting (interview with Harvie 2010) – backing a different party on the constituency and list ballots. The political landscape in 2003 lent itself to this campaign; when the party manifestos were launched, political commentators struggled to differentiate between the parties (MacWhirter 2003). Arguably, the main division between the parties was over the war in Iraq, a policy area not devolved to the Scottish Parliament (Burnside *et al.* 2003: 26). One candidate said that given the similarities between the main parties, constituents were willing to give smaller ones, such as the SGP, a chance with their regional list vote (interview with Ballance 2010). Of those who voted, between one-fifth and one-quarter cast their second vote for someone – including the SGP – other than one of the four parties that had dominated the 1999 parliament (Curtice 2003).

The 2007 Scottish parliamentary election presented a very different political landscape. The election was viewed as a two-horse race between the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Labour Party, which supports Scotland remaining a part of the United Kingdom. The possibility and cost of Scottish independence were constant campaign themes. Voters had clear choices between the parties on issues that were devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The

outcome of the vote was expected to be very close, prompting speculation that voters were less willing to risk their second vote with smaller parties such as the SGP (Curtice 2007). In the first two elections there were two separate ballot papers: one for the regional vote and one for the constituency vote. In 2007 a single ballot contained both. Arguably this worked against smaller parties seeking to focus on list votes. The new format may also have contributed to the abnormally high number of spoilt ballots. In 16 constituency contests the number of spoilt ballots was greater than the winning candidate's majority (Denver 2007: 62). The single ballot paper containing both regional and list contests precluded a repeat of '2nd vote Green'. In 2007 some 146,099 ballots were rejected (Electoral Commission 2007c). The 2003 SGP vote was around 150,000. The head of SGP communications for the 2003 election argued that given the margins with which the SGP was getting elected, the loss of spoilt ballots was enough to almost wipe it out in 2007 (interview with Burgess 2010).

The SGP operates from four principles: ecology, equality, radical democracy, and peace and non-violence (Scottish Green Party 2007a). The party functions democratically such that the final manifesto can be a distillation of ideas from all party members. In reality there is a small core of active members (Bennie 2004), and drafts go through party committees before one person pulls the ideas together into one coherent policy platform (interview with Baird 2010). Traditionally, the gathering and use of market intelligence has not played a role in the development of party policy.

The election of seven MSPs in 2007 dramatically changed the party's ability to forge a unique identity between election periods. The SGP was a relative unknown to many voters, and MSPs worked to build credibility throughout the parliament, possibly neglecting public campaigning and local branch development (interview with Harvie 2010).

The SGP ramps up activities ahead of a Scottish parliamentary election. Scarce party resources are concentrated upon elections where there is a perceived stronger chance of winning seats (interview with Ballance 2010). Local parties take the lead on candidate selection in line with the SGP principle of decentralization. The national party will act as an overseer to try to ensure gender balance and, as one former MSP put it, 'avoid rogue elements embarrassing the party' (interview with Baird 2010).

The seven SGP MSPs elected in 2007 boosted party funds by contributing 20 percent of their parliamentary salary. Local party branches also had an MSP to hold accountable and to communicate with voters through the media. The party had access to policy research conducted by SGP staff employed by parliamentarians. Harvie likened it to a loose association of local societies suddenly having the staff and resources of a sizeable national NGO (interview with Harvie 2010). The additional money and resources enabled the national party to have a degree of influence on, for example, locally issued press releases. However, with the strong principle of decentralization, local parties and individual MSPs continued to act independently on local concerns (interview with Baird 2010), suggesting that there was no clear single party message.

Decision-making by members at the SGP conference, as well as at a series of meetings throughout the year, can be lengthy and complex. There has been some internal debate about reforming the policy process to make it more responsive and nimbler, but no specific changes have been made (interview with Harvie 2010). The main relationships that the party forges are with its own membership through the policy-making and campaigning stages. List candidates must campaign across substantially larger regions than their constituency candidate counterparts. South of Scotland stretches across the width of the country encompassing around 30 market towns (interview with Ballance 2010), while the Highlands and Islands is a region the size of

Belgium (interview with Scott 2010). Rather than using a marketing strategy, Scott said that campaigning would likely be conducted where volunteers were available. In 2007 those MSPs not holding down outside jobs were able to dedicate themselves to ‘campaigning twenty-four-seven’. They also had enhanced knowledge and resources, having served in parliament (interview with Ballance 2010).

In 2003 restricted funds meant that public outreach was limited to the party election broadcast (assembled by a friend of a party member with an edit suite (interview with Harvie 2010)), the free delivery of an SGP-financed leaflet to every household, activists putting up street placards, and maximum possible media coverage (interview with Burgess 2010). The SGP received more limited media coverage than the four main parties. Media attention was focused on the Iraq war and, as one journalist put it, multi-party politics between all-male, middle-aged leaders who agree on more nurses, teachers and police is hard to fit into media news values (Fraser 2003). For the 2007 election the SGP had much more money (£437,107), but still a fraction of the SNP’s £1.4 million (Electoral Commission 2007b). The shortage of funds meant that the party struggled with a lack of information about voters. One MSP noted that in 2007 the SNP had a clearer idea of who Green voters were than the SGP, and deliberately targeted their vote. The size and funding of the party limited its options ahead of the 2007 poll (interview with Ballance 2010). The SGP was still very much at the building stage of conducting market research, largely to reinforce existing SGP positions and help to shape internal policy debate (interview with Harvie 2010).

There is a concern that the party must stick to its core principles, communicating these to voters rather than adapting them to popular sentiment (interview with Baird 2010; Bennie 2004). The SGP is confident that it has the true environmental and social justice credentials and directly criticizes other parties’ environmental rhetoric (Scottish Green Party 2007a, 2007b). A long-serving member of the party argued that, rather than changing the SGP to meet popular opinion, there is a need to let the public know that the SGP addresses wider issues and that the environment is a core issue, not a fringe concern (interview with Baird 2010). The SGP appears to operate under the assumption that it is too small to set the political agenda but can use circumstances to further its cause, be it the electoral system or the victory of the Greens south of the border. As the next SGP conference approached, the victory by Caroline Lucas, leader of the Green Party of England and Wales, was front and centre in the publicity material (Scottish Green Party 2010b).

The GPC and the SGP did not wholly conform to our theoretical framework for political niche market-oriented parties, as noted in Figure 8.2.

A number of factors limit the ability of the GPC and SGP to operate as true niche market-oriented parties, including:

- Money: market intelligence is crucial, but expensive (Marland 2005). The GPC has some means to conduct limited market research and has shifted closer to a marketing model in that sense. However, it was the SGP, with fewer resources, that won representation, suggesting that although money is a factor, the electoral system is also critical to success.
- Green principles: being a niche political party in a marketing age can be a double-edged sword. Non-traditional party behaviours help create niche support, while adopting traditional marketing techniques may be equated with traditional political party behaviour. Parties face tension between core beliefs and their somewhat elaborate democratic structures versus a growing realization of a need to streamline operations and be more responsive to public opinion in order to be electable.

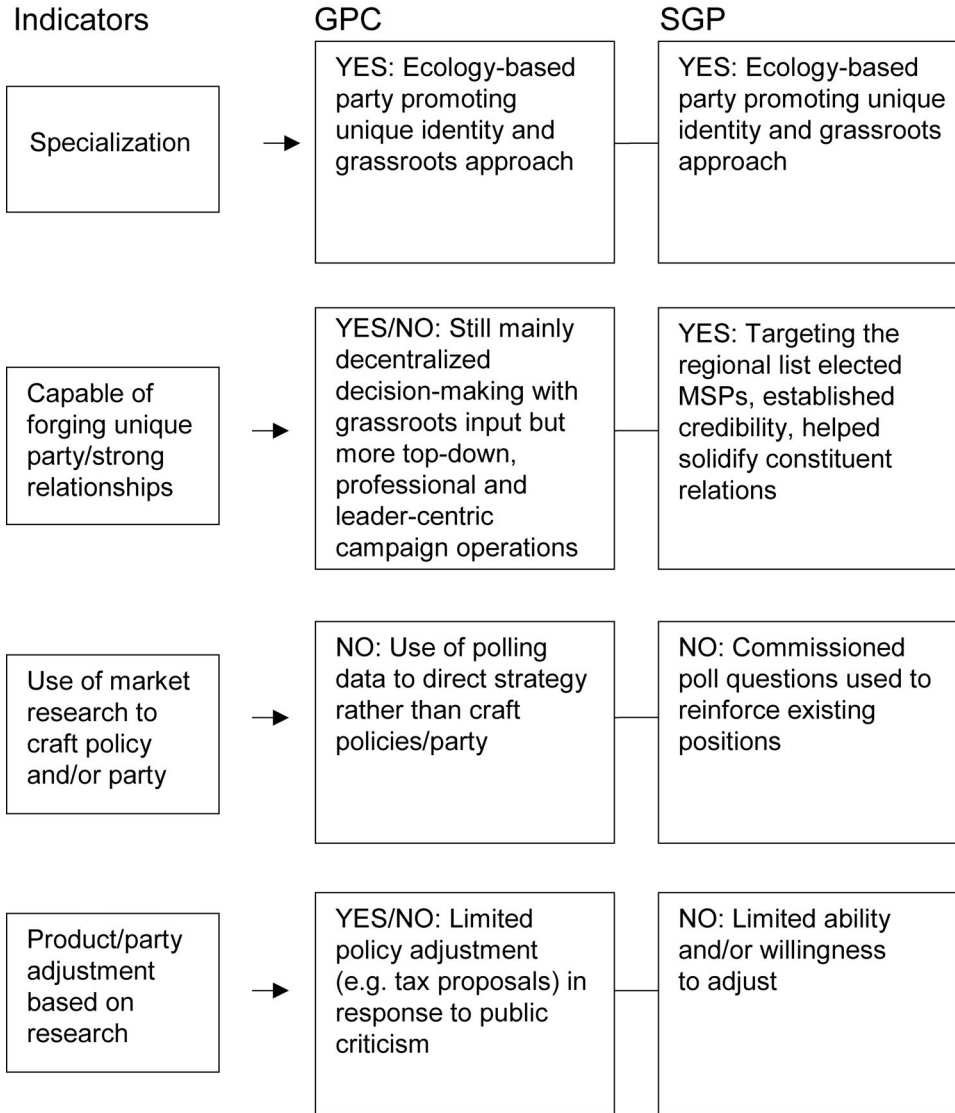


Figure 8.2 Indicators of GPC and SGP niche market-oriented political behaviour

Advice for practitioners

Noting Bantel’s (1997) earlier point about niche firms having the ability to employ scarce resources strategically, niche parties may consider a variation of Anderson’s ‘Long Tail’ model, which involves marketing to individual niches rather than mass marketing (Anderson 2006). This variation could aim to selectively deepen the niche rather than expand it in ways that might alienate core support or deviate from fundamental party principles. As such, it would differ from ‘segmentation’, which Shani and Chalasani define as a ‘top-down approach’ to dividing up a large market, and instead more closely resemble what they term a ‘bottom up’ niche marketing approach (Shani and Chalasani 1992: 35). In our view, a niche market-oriented party could

present unique aspects of itself to portions of the population rather than marketing the party as a whole to the entire electorate. This includes:

- Marketing a leader as a distinct and winning brand rather than marketing the whole niche party;
- Marketing the niche party at a lower level of government to establish credibility; electing even one member can demonstrate that the party has legitimate, productive representatives, and is not simply a campaigning group;
- Exploiting aspects of the electoral system which lend themselves to niche parties, such as regional list voting and proportional systems, rather than trying to compete head to head with mainstream parties.

Impact on politics

Political parties may be able to adopt some niche market-oriented behaviours while minimizing the need to drastically retool their unique party identities. They might retain their core niche vote while attracting new support and giving the political consumer a wider range of choice. Circumstances and electoral systems would dictate how that would translate into concrete post-election political and policy action. An electoral system such as a regional list system may give citizens access to a greater variety of political representation to advocate on their behalf. Within a traditional SMP system, the impact of niche party representation would depend on the parliamentary makeup. Unless the elected niche party members had sufficient representation to hold the balance of power in a minority parliament, members may have limited influence on policy. On the other hand, the election of even one representative, such as the leader, could have great symbolic value for the issue(s) or political philosophy championed by the niche party. The representative could be deployed strategically, to deepen the party's support.

It may be that the framework of the political environment will ultimately limit the choices of niche parties and compel them to play within the rules of the game set by the larger parties. Although that limitation can hinder democracy, in a certain sense it can also encourage the push towards democratic values. If the end result is that niche parties are forced to gain a fuller understanding of their constituents in order to elect representatives within established frameworks, their hard-won understanding might lead, in the end, to a more meaningful representation of minority interests.

The way forward

It is possible that Green parties in particular need to consider marrying a market-oriented mindset with more pragmatic electoral strategies. A closer study of the UK and Australian electoral successes may provide assistance for niche party campaigners elsewhere, enabling them to adapt successful Green strategies.

Market-oriented basics – professionalizing and building credibility – could sharpen the niche party's ability to tap into existing 'green' supporters and gain their vote. This could be more effective than attempting to change unduly its product in the search for a new support base. Further research could assess the feasibility of applying a version of the Long Tail model to niche parties. A political variation of the model has already been popularly defined within the context of US politics as being 'every variety of political belief that does not fit within the two major parties' (Kling 2005). This goes full circle to the question of whether Green parties can expand their support base to reach those who hold a variety of political beliefs, and whether, in

doing so, they can still retain their original niche constituents. It would be painstaking work to set a Long Tail-type framework and then track support across differing systems and through several campaigns in order to answer that question, but it would be an interesting and worthwhile pursuit that could ultimately encourage political participation.

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