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Essay:

What are the practical limitations on models of scientific campaigning?

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Political marketing has taken over political parties all over the world. Since the decline of stable party alignment for voters and the decreasing identification of people via social class, parties have come to adopt marketing techniques in order to overcome these looming problems. With more and more sophistication voters are getting measured, weighed and classified as key, core, or target voters and treated accordingly. The greatest effort is made to persuade key voters in key constituencies to vote for the right party. In adopting research techniques from marketing and business, politicians and parties try to get closer and closer to the voter. This so called scientific campaigning is meanwhile one of the main factors shaping political communication in Great Britain. But while all sides of the political spectrum are using it and some believe it to be the holy grail of political marketing there are still some practical limitations on scientific campaigning, constraining it from different sides. This essay wants to explore what scientific campaigning is, who uses it and why, and finally, what the limitations on this approach are today.

Now what exactly can be understood as scientific campaigning? In a sense, it is a subdivision of political campaigning, electioneering or political marketing, whatever name one wants to call it. While political marketing is concerned with the general conduct of an election campaign, with communicating the message, with advertising and agenda setting, scientific campaigning can be regarded as a means to shape all these different ways of political campaigning. Data is being generated via surveys and focus groups about the voter's most salient issues, target voters and key constituencies are being identified, the effect of ads and speeches is being tracked as well as the party's image etc. One could therefore say, as all political campaigning these days employs the strategies of scientific campaigning and cannot work without it, that political campaigning in general *is* scientific campaigning. However, for the purpose of this essay I want to concentrate on the notion of scientific campaigning as an aid for political marketing.

The methods of scientific campaigning are basically derived from social science research as well as from business or marketing research. Traditional opinion polling in form of surveys and questionnaires is used as the quantitative approach while the qualitative approach via focus groups is supposed to help gaining a better understanding of the deeper concerns of the public.

The uses of scientific campaigning lie in very different areas but are all employed to help the using party gaining a better stance in public opinion, elections, or within the party. Several uses for scientific campaigning have been named in research literature. These include election timing, image building, policy-making, tracking, targeting voters and changing the party¹. Other uses include suggesting language in advertisements and speeches², although one could regard these included in the ‘targeting’ point of Kavanagh (1995), and pre-tested soundbites are even used in parliamentary debates.³ Butler and Ranney (1991) find: “Sample surveys have been employed to help in determining strategic needs and to assess the likely impact of specific campaign themes or phrases. Focus groups can explore in depth how voters feel about parties, issues and leaders. Daily tracking polls provide quick feedback on how new tactics are working.”⁴

However, the main objective of scientific campaigning is to provide parties or politicians “with information as to the opinion of the voter.”⁵ This is precisely the point where modern parties differ from ‘old’ parties: the orientation to the voter. Lees-Marshment (2001) summarises this fact in the notion of the market-oriented party. The market-oriented party is a party that is listening more to the voter’s concerns and wishes than conventional parties, as to provide voter satisfaction. The party is thereby incorporating business practices as they do not provide a product (the party, policies) and then try to persuade the public of its usefulness in trying to change what people think, but rather ask the public what they think and try to design the product around their needs and wants.⁶ Obviously this information about the public’s needs can only be obtained by polling or focus groups. One can conclude, hence, that scientific campaigning is pivotal to modern marketing-oriented parties; that in fact scientific campaigning is the ground on which these kind of parties are built. They cannot work without it.

One can divide the uses of scientific campaigning into two categories: internal and external use, although both of them are eventually connected with each other. Both use public opinion as the material but the direction of the usage is different. Internal use is to be understood as a use, which is primarily or mostly employed within party matters and does not refer to voters

¹ Kavanagh 1995

² For examples see Butler and Kavanagh 2001, who find that the Conservatives have used polling and focus groups to adjust speech and advertisement language; and Hall 2002 finds that Reagan used scientific campaigning heavily for these purposes during his presidency.

³ Butler & Kavanagh 2002.

⁴ Butler & Ranney 1992, p. 280.

⁵ Bowler & Farrell 1992, p. 230.

⁶ Lees-Marshment 2001a

or the public in the first place. Election timing, changing the party and especially tracking can be assigned as internal use. Tracking is used for monitoring perceptions of the party, the leader or policies and to see which work and which work not.⁷ Eventually this is then used again to change party strategy and then can become external, but initially it is internal. External use is especially the case where material from focus groups or surveys is used to suggest topics or language for advertisements or speeches and where it is used for the general party strategy, in identifying the voter's key issues.

While the use and influence of scientific campaigning has been growing over the last two decades or so, there have been limitations, criticisms and caveats against it ever since. It is possible to distinguish between three big factors in this context: Firstly, there are general objections by politicians and parties; then there are the obstacles pollsters and campaign advisers have to face in a party; and there are the general problems every campaign has to face and which also apply to scientific campaigning. In addition to this, there are some general concerns or problems regarding scientific campaigning, which I want to talk about at the end.

While scientific campaigning has come a great way from the 1960s, when a Labour front-bencher found that polling was alien to British democracy and condemned it sharply⁸, there are still some obstacles for it in the parties and through the politicians. Generally, as adopting scientific campaigning for modernisation or policy-adjusting purposes often means that policies, organisational structures, MP's behaviour or even the leader of a party have to be changed, objections can arise fairly quickly⁹. A party and politicians are not empty drawers, which can be filled, with whatever position is the best for winning votes; a party has a history and an ideology which can be quite contrary to what scientific campaigning can suggest to the party. For example, after the 1992 defeat many left-wing Labour members claimed that "the party had, on the behest of pollsters and publicists, abandoned its principles in the search for 'designer socialism'"¹⁰

Another point is that some politicians have made it a habit declaring that they will not be packaged¹¹. This arises out of the desire of the politician to be regarded as genuine and "down to earth" and not an artificial product only following the will of the people without really

⁷ Kavanagh 1995; Herbst 1993

⁸ Kavanagh 1995

⁹ Lees-Marshment 2001a

¹⁰ Kavanagh 1995, p. 105.

¹¹ Kavanagh 1995, p. 166.

leading. They are afraid that they might be seen as lacking principles and convictions and that they needed to be packaged¹². However, since the big success of “New Labour” and its exemplary use of political communication and especially scientific campaigning, these objections arise less and less often; and more and more politicians and parties rely heavily on scientific campaigning.

The second limitation scientific campaigning has to face lies in the relationship between pollsters and parties or politicians. While pollsters have achieved the status of extremely influential political consultants in the United States, their influence in Great Britain is “contingent not constant”¹³. This is mainly due to the different extent political marketing in general can take and has taken in Great Britain in comparison to the USA, where especially the amount of money available allows for a much greater use of pollsters and where they are more often employed by single candidates due to the different election and political system. In money terms, Clinton’s pollster Stan Greenberg claimed to have spent \$125 million and that he could have spent even more¹⁴. The amounts of money the parties in Britain spend are only peanuts in comparison to these amounts. Labour, for instance, spent only about £680.000 in 1997, which is nowhere near the sums in the USA¹⁵. Still, the influence is growing more and more. While Kavanagh (1996) finds that big problems for the pollster arise out of the fact that they are not part of the party’s strategy team and that they lack direct access to the party leader, this certainly has changed for New Labour under Tony Blair, where Phillip Gould and Stan Greenberg were very much involved: “Gould was closely involved throughout in shaping Labour’s campaign thinking ... and was in frequent face-to-face contact with him [Blair].”¹⁶ However, the problem still remained within the Conservatives even in 2001, where there were great problems in communication between the pollsters and the party leaders.

A survey or focus group finding is only as good as the users want it to be. Even if the conduction is excellent and the findings most reliable, the material is worthless if the politicians using it do not believe it or do not want to believe it. Quite often especially the Conservatives were so stubborn and “regularly dismissed the accuracy of the opinion polls.”¹⁷ Also, as Hague was pursuing his battle against Europe, the focus groups suggested that voters were

¹² Kavanagh 1995, p. 166.

¹³ Kavanagh 1996, p. 116.

¹⁴ Kavanagh 1996.

¹⁵ Butler & Kavanagh 1997, p. 242.

¹⁶ Butler & Kavanagh 2002, p. 128.

¹⁷ Butler & Kavanagh 2002, p. 130.

interested in Europe and also knew what the Tories were fighting for, but still were much more interested in other issues, which they ascribed to Labour. Instead of shifting the focus of their campaign, Hague was more “perplexed” that his anti-euro stance was not helping him gain votes but did not do anything about it.¹⁸ If a party is not willing to change and give up its old dogmas, then the best research is worthless. The Tories in 2001 seemed not willing enough to change, as an insider reports in Butler & Kavanagh (2001): “This campaign was one-eighth research and seven-eighths dogma”.¹⁹

It also happens quite often that eventually the pollsters and campaigners have a different idea of the party’s (advertising) strategy than the leaders. Margaret Thatcher in the 1987 campaign, for example, was disappointed when the party’s advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi presented her advertising material that was mainly negative. She wanted to highlight more of the government’s achievements and especially on health, although there was, according to research, not the government’s strength.²⁰ John Major during the campaign in 1997 was mostly driven by his own beliefs and morals and therefore turned down negative ads Saatchi & Saatchi suggested and he also did not want to adopt a more Euro-sceptic line suggested from Central Office because he did not deem it appropriate for a prime minister’s behaviour. In view of the not very successful anti-euro policy of William Hague in 2001 it is rather questionable if this would have made any impact on the electorate anyway.²¹ The same happened in the Labour party in 1997, for instance: Tony Blair insisted on the posters during the campaign being positive.²²

Much of scientific campaigning suggestions can be diluted if the responsibilities within the party are not clear and there is a lack of organisation, or rather if the organisation is just too complex. This was the case within Labour in the 1970s and 1980s, where ultimately the polling agency MORI was drawn into a rivalry between right and left wings of the party. The Tories can stand up as such an example in 2001, when the pollsters did rarely report to the leaders and the polling was not part of the strategic and political decision-making process.²³

¹⁸ Butler & Kavanagh 2002, p. 129.

¹⁹ Butler & Kavanagh 2002, p. 131.

²⁰ Kavanagh 1995, p. 63.

²¹ Butler & Kavanagh 1997, p. 229.

²² Butler & Kavanagh 1997, p. 240.

²³ Butler & Kavanagh 2002, p. 131.

A third big constraint on scientific campaigning is made up of the same problems that occur in the broader political marketing. When research is used for finding out key issues of the voters, the fact that the party cares about them obviously has to be communicated. However, spinning the message or the policies is not always so simple. The media today is more mature than it was before political marketing took over and they are very much aware that they are sometimes used for party purposes. Politicians today can hardly communicate unmediated to the electorate. The verbatims of politicians are now only most rarely carried through the media; they usually comment and explain the politicians' movements and try to 'deconstruct' the party's message. And sometimes, although in terms of research usage everything was made correctly, the message coming across is quite different to the one intended. One could call that 'mis-packaging of the message' or maybe 'spinning into the wrong direction'.

One example for that can be the handling of the euro theme by the Conservatives in the 2001 election. The first mistake, as mentioned before, was that the issue was not one with a high salience for the voters, so the initial decision of making it one of the major campaign themes was wrong. But the Tories were reassured: the issue featured prominently in the newspapers, which also said that it would dominate the Tory campaign – this apparently was fed to the press before the campaign by Tory spin doctors. At least the Conservatives could claim to have made a success in agenda setting. However, as soon as the issue was at the front, the Conservatives still mismanaged it – emphasizing uninteresting constitutional objections instead of connecting it with the British government. In the end, the voters were not impressed, thought the Tories were obsessive about the euro issue, and only a few votes changed due to this Conservative effort.²⁴

The obvious question that poses here is the one of the effectiveness of scientific campaigning. In the last two British general elections the party, which adopted a scientific marketing concept more rigorously, has won it. But quite clearly, or at least it seems so, Labour could have won the elections, especially in 1997, with an sack of potatoes as candidate and a housewives magazine as manifesto, so big was the call for change, and so poor was the voter's perception of the Conservative party. Or maybe quite the contrary: the changes implemented by Blair into the party were clearly based on research and they did help to overcome the old resentments that stood firmly in the voters' minds against Labour. And maybe only so could Labour

²⁴ Butler & Kavanagh 2002, pp. 244.

come out of the deep grave that their closeness to the Trade Unions and their old socialist legacy had dug them.

However, it is not possible to isolate the effects of any of the factors in a campaign and measure them independently. There is generally a big question mark to the allegation that campaigns do in fact matter. As most of the people have decided how to vote before the campaign even starts there is the question of what impact it can eventually make. However, although most of the people know who to vote for there is still a significant proportion of people who decide only during the campaign where to cast their vote. Still, already in 1944 Paul Lazarsfeld found in his study of electoral behaviour that “a campaign appeared to hold very little sway over how people voted.” They concluded what today is still a valid assumption in political and media science: “Campaigns tend to reinforce existing political preferences for those who already expressed a vote intention or activate latent predispositions among those who are undecided. *Conversion* – changing vote intention during the campaign – was found to be the least likely outcome.”²⁵ Furthermore, most politicians do recognise the fact that election outcomes can easily be explained in terms of party strength amongst the electorate and of retrospective evaluations of the incumbent party.²⁶ If the incumbent party had a good Parliament and the opposition had not much chance to gain ground against them, then there is no question that the incumbents will win; and the same of course the other way round; apart from the unlikely event that one party will conduct a horrible campaign and destroy everything they gained during incumbency or opposition. This fact is mirrored when Butler & Kavanagh, talking about the Conservatives election defeat: “The party played their best cards, but they were not sufficient to stem the mood of change. (...) A six-week campaign could not undo the memories of the previous five years.”²⁷ Therefore, as long as all candidates and parties “are waging serious campaigns, the information generated is likely to have a cancelling out effect.”²⁸ There can then be only one conclusion: scientific campaigning is necessary for every professional party these days, and without it a party would most certainly lose an election or at least definitely decrease their voter’s share. But it can only generate a campaign winning effect if the race is very close.

²⁵ Holbrook 1996, p. 6.

²⁶ Holbrook 1996, p. 11.

²⁷ Butler & Kavanagh 1997, p. 230.

²⁸ Holbrook 1996, p. 17.

Some minor problems connected with SC shall only be mentioned briefly: Surveys in general have their problems, as they can never be completely exact. Question wording and sample errors can skew the results and sometimes generate a completely different picture.²⁹ Obviously the pollsters employed by the parties try to avoid these problems but they can never be completely ruled out. So if a question is asked the wrong way and the results are used for advertisements or speeches, for example, the effort can very well backfire. This is not a major problem but it has to be kept in mind when dealing with survey findings.

While all parties try to persuade the key voter in key areas, who usually is not a right or left-winger but finds his political beliefs rather in the middle, parties become more and more similar. Therefore, scientific campaigning efforts draw critique from all sides. There have been allegations about the loss of beliefs and convictions in politics; it has been said that politics has become populist and opportunistic in following the people's choice rather than the politician's choice. But others find that finally real democracy has arrived: politicians are listening to the voters and their demands and finally create their policies around the ideas of the people.

However, scientific campaigning is a prerequisite for today's political market. A party that is not listening to voters and that is not tracking its own progress, a party that cannot identify their key areas and key voters, a party that is not able to adjust their ads and speeches to meet voters' issues is very unlikely to succeed. Although there are problems in adopting this approach, and not everybody is happy with it, there seems to be no other way. While scientific campaigning is not necessarily decisive in an election campaign, it has to be used if not only for the sole reason that everybody else uses it as well and one can not afford to leave it to the others. But, if scientific campaigning is used appropriately and the findings from it are implemented properly, scientific campaigning can make a difference in a close election.

²⁹ See Kavanagh 1981 and Herbst 1993

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