

Marketing in the 2010 British General Election: perspectives, prospect, and practice

Abstract This editorial article discusses how televised debates transformed the British General Election campaign of 2010 and impacted upon political leader standing in the election. Papers are introduced in a number of areas including political branding, analysis of attack advertising and its implications, channel experience effectiveness measurement, consumption and co-creation in the sensitive policy area of immigration, the Europeanisation of British political marketing, and how UK expatriates could be targeted by political parties. In addition, we consider continuing gaps in political marketing research including ethical considerations, the application of frameworks from social and not-for-profit marketing, and the link between lobbying and political marketing.

Keywords political marketing; British General Election 2010; prime ministerial debates

Perspectives: background to the campaign

In this Special Issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management*, we seek to outline the story behind a remarkable regime change in the UK political landscape that saw the first coalition government come to power for more than 60 years. Table 1 outlines the formal period of the election campaign in the 2010 British General Election and highlights key moments in the campaign. It particularly highlights the importance of the three main TV debates, but also other potentially pivotal moments such as the launch of the party manifestos and the only really significant unscripted event in the campaign, the moment when Gordon Brown called Mrs Gillian Duffy, a Rochdale voter, a bigoted woman on a live microphone. Brown had thought this had been turned off during a flying constituency visit involving a discussion on immigration, which resulted in media headlines pronouncing and describing Gordon's gaffe in micro-detail.

Interestingly, although immigration was reported as an important issue by many voters during the election campaign (Worcester, Mortimore, Baines, & Gill, 2011), the parties were collaboratively silent on the issue until the TV debates when David Cameron suggested the Conservative Party would reduce immigration from 'hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands' of immigrants, and Nick Clegg indicated

Table 1 General Election campaign timeline 2010.

Date	Event
Tue 6 Apr	Brown announces the general election date as 6 May
Wed 7 Apr	Final pre-election Prime Minister's Questions. Senior business people announce their support for Conservative national insurance policy
Thu 8 Apr	Labour and the Conservatives are accused of copyright infringement over use of images of Cameron portrayed as TV show detective DCI Gene Hunt from <i>Ashes to Ashes</i>
Mon 12 Apr	Dissolution of Parliament. Labour manifesto launched
Tue 13 Apr	Conservative manifesto launched
Wed 14 Apr	LibDem manifesto launched
Thu 15 Apr	First leaders' debate, on domestic affairs (ITV, Manchester)
Tue 20 Apr	Close of nominations, new registrations and applications for postal votes
Thu 22 Apr	Second leaders' debate, on foreign affairs (Sky, Bristol)
Wed 28 Apr	'Bigotgate': Brown calls a Rochdale voter a 'bigoted woman' in an unguarded, unscripted moment, much to his later embarrassment on Jeremy Vine's Radio 2 show, where he is photographed with his head in his hands
Thu 29 Apr	Letter from entrepreneurs published in <i>The Times</i> warning against a Lib-Lab coalition
Thu 29 Apr	Third leaders' debate, on economic affairs (BBC, Birmingham)
Sat 1 May	<i>The Guardian</i> comes out in support of the Liberal Democrats
Sun 2 May	Final TV debates between four main party leaders in Scotland and Wales. The <i>Daily Telegraph</i> declares its support for the Conservatives
Thu 6 May	Election Day
Tue 11 May	Gordon Brown resigns as Prime Minister: Queen appoints David Cameron

Source: Adapted from Worcester et al. (2011, p. 199).

that the Liberal Democrats favoured a regional quota system to distribute the impact of immigrants across the nation. Brown prevaricated, not really outlining any Labour policy on this issue, except to say that he would reduce numbers of immigrants, but he did not say how. In many ways, this was and continues to be the political issue that dare not speak its name in Britain. In a paper entitled 'Co-production and Co-consumption: Perspectives on Immigration through a Discourse Analysis of Voters' Blogs in the 2010 General Election', Lim and Moufahim, consider the electorate's views on this pivotal issue in the blogosphere, noting just how untrusted politicians are on this crucial issue, regardless of their party allegiance.

New (coalition) politics

While the first-past-the-post system has tended to hand the British electorate a decisive government over the years, it has returned a coalition only on the very rare occasions that the electorate really cannot make up their mind on who to vote for, and the popular vote is close. In a paper entitled 'The Europeanisation of the British Political Marketplace', Butler, Collins, and Speed argue that coalition politics has

come again to Britain and that it has fundamental implications for political marketing theory and practice, not previously considered in the political marketing literature, although it is considered more extensively in the political science literature. Such implications allow the development of multifaceted, cooperative models of political marketing management – echoing the contention of Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy (2009) that networks and relationships hold a rich new vein for future political marketing research.

Influence and expenditure in different campaign channels

Expectations and anticipations were high about the potential decisive impact that digital and social media were likely to have on the outcome of the 2010 UK General Election in the national press. This was despite the fact that the Internet had previously not been significant in influencing voting intentions in previous general elections in the UK (Worcester, Mortimore and Baines, 2005) although it has been in the USA (Anstead and Chadwick, 2008). The ‘traditional’ power of television in the form of the political leaders’ head-to-head debates appears to have been the key factor influencing the outcome of the 2010 British General Election (Williamson, 2011), resulting in an historic first coalition government in the UK for more than 60 years. Because of the amazing influence of the television debates, the 2010 election has been christened ‘The X-Factor Election’ (Harrison, 2010). Thus, the 2010 British General Election appears to have ushered in a new era of Americanisation as the campaign debates in the UK model those that have been run in America since the 1950s. Yet the debates were not the only influence on voters, even if they were the most important. Baines, Macdonald, Wilson, and Blades, in an article entitled ‘Measuring Communication Channel Experiences and their Influence on Voting in the 2010 British General Election’, use a new research approach which they call real-time experience-tracking to evaluate how different communication channel experiences influenced floating voters during the campaign period of the 2010 British General Election. Their study highlights the influence of the debates but, more surprisingly, also indicates the relative importance of party election broadcasts and posters. There is an important discussion which deserves further consideration, not least because political parties expend considerable sums of money, both public and private, on conducting elections in Britain, as Table 2 outlines.

The 2010 British General Election was remarkable in many ways in that it was the first election since 1997 where the governing Labour Party went into the campaign without Tony Blair in charge, one of the key architects of the original New Labour Project, together with Peter Mandelson, Philip Gould, and Alastair Campbell. Surprisingly, however, both Mandelson and Campbell were resurrected and became key members of the Brown campaign team.

Much has been made of the so-called ‘Blair effect’ on the decline in New Labour’s popularity post the invasion of, and war in, Iraq in 2003 and subsequent accusations of UK–US complicity to topple the Saddam Hussein regime using the pretext of the imminent threat from Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), for which no evidence was ever subsequently found. Tony Blair’s decision to stand down from the Prime Minister’s office in 2007 in favour of the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown’s candidature, merely added to the rumours of intrigue behind the scenes (the so-called TB-GBs) that appeared to unsettle the Labour Party.

Table 2 Party expenditures at the 2010 British General Election.

Item	Conservative Party	Labour Party	Liberal Democrats	Totals
A. Party Political Broadcasts	£699,124	£430,028	£152,747	£1,281,899
B. Advertising	£7,532,636	£785,509	£230,482	£8,548,627
C. Unsolicited material to electors	£4,779,090	£4,154,985	£3,051,525	£11,985,600
D. Manifesto/party political documents	£215,869	£345,688	£47,096	£608,653
E. Market research/canvassing	£701,918	£477,911	£496,776	£1,676,605
F. Media	£439,141	£165,997	£147,139	£752,277
G. Transport	£895,018	£291,620	£473,426	£1,660,064
H. Rallies and other events	£895,185	£749,334	£87,894	£1,732,413
I. Overheads and general admin	£524,892	£608,411	£100,508	£1,233,811
Gross total	£16,682,873	£8,009,483	£4,787,593	£29,479,949

Source: Electoral Commission, full details available at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk>

The successful renaissance of the Labour party as ‘New Labour’ under the charismatic leadership of Tony Blair, which culminated in Labour’s victory in the 1997 British General Election, can therefore be contrasted with Gordon Brown’s unease and often uncomfortable and unconvincing media appearances once he assumed the role of Party Leader and, more importantly, Prime Minister.

Brown’s discomfort in front of the camera in the TV debates in particular and perception by many as a ‘dour Scot’ did not play well with the electorate or the news media, or for that matter with many of his Labour Party colleagues. His candidature for the continuation of the prime ministership seemed doomed and indeed it turned out to be so. Yet he did succeed in denying the Conservative Party a majority, and potentially set the scene for Labour to return to power in 2015. Arguably, the decision to go ahead with the party leaders’ head-to-head debates during the 2010 General Election campaign could be seen as something of a gamble on Gordon Brown’s part, although his performance during the three head-to-head debates was generally seen to be better than many commentators had expected it to be, a topic we discuss in more detail in the next section.

Leaders and debates

In evaluating the political marketing campaign, as distinct from the political campaigns per se (see Newman, 1994, for a consideration of the difference), and the outcome of the 2010 British General Election, one key question to ask is: just how important were the three prime-time televised debates in influencing the result and the turnout? The evidence suggests that the broadcasts were pivotal in engaging the public. Viewing figures for the three prime ministerial debates hit 9.7 million (on ITV1, hosted by Alastair Stewart in Manchester on domestic affairs), 4.2 million (on Sky News, hosted by Adam Boulton in Bristol on international affairs) and 8.6 million (on BBC1, hosted by David Dimbleby in Birmingham on economic affairs)

(Allen, Bara, & Bartle, 2011). Such high viewing figures, comparable with the size of audience for major soap opera programmes such as *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street*, were significantly higher than the debate held in 2005, which operated under a different format, and drew 4.1 million people (Worcester et al., 2005, p. 197). Turnout at 65.1% was up almost 4% on the previous 2005 election at 61.4%, and the young aged 18–24 years old showed a 7% increase in turnout to 44% this time around (Worcester et al., 2011).

Was there also a ‘Gordon Brown factor’: had the country become disenchanted with Brown’s leadership and with Brown as an individual, or were other factors at work? For example, was the electorate tired with Labour after 13 years of government, disillusioned at the feuding between Blairites and Brownites in government, or did it simply feel that the governing party looked worn out and devoid of new ideas? It was clearly evident that the electorate did not see Brown as having saved the world during the 2008 ‘credit crunch’ banking collapse, despite his party’s best efforts to position him this way.

An alternative question is: did David Cameron lose it for an overall Conservative Party victory and give fuel to the publicity-starved Liberal Democrats by agreeing to the television debates? Lord Ashcroft certainly believed that the Conservatives’ engagement in the TV debates was a ‘tactical error’ exposing a ‘strategic problem’, arguing that Cameron, by allowing the Liberal Democrats to take part on a joint platform in the prime ministerial debates, gave them the credibility and publicity which they normally lack at the expense of the Conservatives, who had failed to resonate with the electorate as *the* party of change (Ashcroft, 2010). An alternative question is: did Brown lose the election by trying to gain a tactical advantage in boosting the Liberal Democrats via the coverage generated by the TV debates – an idea originally suggested by Lord (Peter) Mandelson to stop the Tories from winning an outright majority? Did the perceived marketing success and euphoria around Nick Clegg (‘Cleggmania’ as it came to be known) and the Liberal Democrats mean that they over-extended themselves by trying to campaign in more seats than they could handle, and hence, they actually lost seats? The sitting Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West campaigned in the neighbouring seat of Oxford East during much of the election campaign period trying to clinch this marginal seat and ended-up losing his own seat next door.

At least on the surface, the 2010 General Election appears to have been as much a story about the failure and unpopularity of the incumbent Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, as about the remarkable upsurge of popular support for Liberal Democrats leader, Nick Clegg, but not necessarily for the Liberal Democrat party. In their paper entitled ‘Measuring the Changes to Leader Brand Associations During the 2010 Election Campaign’, Smith and French consider the impact that paid-for advertising, uncontrolled events, and the television debates had on the brand image of Brown, Cameron, and Clegg, the three main party leaders. They also examine how the number of leader associations increases with which policies over the election campaign. They also conclude that Brown’s image was relatively unaffected by the so-called ‘Duffy’ affair.

The 2010 UK election was dominated by discussions of the economic situation, and claim and counterclaim about how it should be addressed. Perhaps because of the complexity of the arguments about this and the unwillingness of the parties to be specific about their plans, there was also a strong streak of advertising aimed

at undermining the credibility and image of opposition parties and their leaders. Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd's paper entitled 'An Introspective, Retrospective, Futurespective Analysis of the Attack Advertising in the 2010 British General Election' covers this topic in detail discussing how parties ironically both support and reject the use of attack advertising in election campaigns. They present the attack advertising campaigns for the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat parties, outlining the negative consequences of attack advertising for long-term political engagement and trust. Without changes in future political marketing practice, they herald a clarion call for the long-term reputation of political marketing.

In another paper on engagement entitled, 'UK Expatriate Political Connectivity and Engagement: Perspectives from the Far Side of the World!', Garry and Roper identify, using a qualitative research approach, some of the issues associated with why so few UK expatriates vote in British general elections, and develop a segmentation tool and engagement strategies to target expatriate potential voters. This unique paper explores issues associated with targeting and positioning to extra-territorial voters, an increasing problem in a globalising world.

Prospects: the future of political marketing research

The papers contained in this special edition of the *Journal of Marketing Management* were all double-blind-reviewed. Our thanks go to a small pool of anonymous reviewers who worked diligently to assess the articles over the course of the year from September 2010 until April 2011. The only exception to this process was the paper by Baines et al, which was reviewed through the *Journal of Marketing Management's* standard reviews procedure rather than through the editorial board set up specifically for this special edition. We believe that the papers contained in this edition add valuable perspectives on political marketing research in a number of areas, but many areas remain unresearched and under-researched.

We think, more generally, that the political marketing discipline has made some good progress in developing the field of political marketing research. Two journals focus extensively on political marketing: the *Journal of Political Marketing* and the *Journal of Public Affairs*. Both are specialist journals founded in the early 2000s. Over the years, there have been other special editions of journals on political marketing besides this one, which include *Revue Française du Marketing* (Anon, 1978; Antoine & Piquet, 2006), the *Journal of Marketing Management* (Harris & Wring, 2001; Dermody, Harris; & Wring, 2005), *European Journal of Marketing* (Harris, 1996, 2001; Harris & Lock, 2010), *Psychology and Marketing* (Newman, 2002), and *Marketing Theory* (Butler & Harris, 2009). It seems therefore that political marketing is becoming increasingly influential in the twenty-first century, as consumers become more used to being influenced and persuaded to vote using commercial mechanisms. The political marketing discipline has derived at least partly from the study and practice of public relations and propaganda, particularly the work of Edward Bernays, who defined the concept of the 'engineering of consent' (Bernays, 1947), and Kotler and Levy (1969), who advanced the notion of political marketing within the scope of social marketing more generally in their seminal 'broadening the concept of marketing' article (discussing the use of political public relations by the Greek military junta in 1967; see Baines, 2011). While the political

marketing discipline has considered the traditional marketing concepts of marketing and market orientation, the marketing mix, strategic planning processes, and the general applicability of marketing concepts and tools, it should seek to further develop unique political marketing concepts of its own, not only adapted from the commercial, social and not-for-profit marketing literature and practice (as has tended to occur to press) but also developed from much stronger links with political science academics who are considering similar concepts in electoral studies and political communication sciences from a different disciplinary base. The future of the political marketing discipline probably resides in much greater collaboration between these two groups of researchers, publishing in each other's journals and developing joint research bids for research council and other sources of funding. The authors hope that this suggestion is not simply a pipe dream. To proceed thus would probably require, at least in the UK, some disregard for the pressure of the Research Excellence Framework, which has tended to push academics to publish in their own narrow disciplines.

In our call for papers, we called for the consideration of a number of critical issues in researching our discipline. While our selection of six papers contained within this special edition meets some of these original themes, others remain completely under-researched. We outline how each of these considerations has been met in Table 3.

Those areas that remain under-researched include the applicability of concepts from the social marketing and not-for-profit marketing field in the area of political marketing, the crossover application of strategic management concepts in political campaigning, and considerations of how corporations and NGOs get involved in election campaigning from a marketing implications perspective. However, other areas are also relatively under-researched including the link between lobbying and political marketing, and a discussion of how ethical theory impacts upon political marketing. We hope political marketers work to plug these gaps in our knowledge over the coming years.

Practice: the election results and the beginning of coalition politics in the UK

In fact, as the election results revealed, the Liberal Democrats actually lost a net five seats, compared with their position after the 2005 General Election (57 seats vs. 62 seats), even though in terms of total votes cast they gained an extra 1% of the total vote. Labour were the main losers, with a loss of 91 seats and 6% fewer votes overall. With 307 seats, the Conservatives (a 5% swing from Labour) failed to secure the 326 seats necessary for an absolute majority, and hence faced the prospect of trying to operate in a hung Parliament unless they formed a coalition with one or other of the minority parties. David Cameron, Conservative party leader, was quick to seize the initiative in offering to form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. Despite some prevarication and tentative negotiations with the Labour party over a possible 'Lib-Lab' coalition (perhaps remembering the disastrous pact in the Callaghan government of the late 1970s), these talks came to nothing.

On May 7, David Cameron and Nick Clegg gave their first formal joint press conference to announce the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. This stage-managed event, held in the No 10 Downing Street Rose Garden, epitomized the importance of the personalities, symbolic gestures, and the new language of

Table 3 Themes considered/unconsidered in this special edition.

Theme	List of themes considered with published authors
Reflective and critical perspectives of the scope/definition of political marketing	● Butler, Collins, and Speed
Criticisms and prescriptions on the use of market segmentation and market positioning techniques in political campaigns	● Garry and Roper
Evaluations of the effectiveness of marketing's use in political campaigns	● Smith and French ● Baines, Macdonald, Wilson, and Blades ● Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd
Consumption perspectives and prospects in postmodernity	● Garry and Roper
Prospects for the use of branding techniques and strategies by political parties	● Lim and Moufahim ● Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd ● Smith and French
Application of marketing psychology theories in political consumption behaviour	● Garry and Roper
The application of ethical theory and perspectives to political marketing contexts, concepts and campaigns	● Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd
Critical consideration of the applicability of not-for-profit, social and service marketing concepts in political marketing campaigns (e.g. fundraising, campaigning, volunteering, donor/recipient customers and credence, trust and commitment, engagement)	● Not included in this special edition
Evaluations of campaign strategies from a variety of strategic marketing/management perspectives (e.g. the resource-based view, survival-based strategies, etc.)	● Not included in this special edition
Considerations of how non-governmental organisations, including corporations, involve themselves in election campaigns from a marketing perspective (e.g. single issue campaigning, lobbying, political donations)	● Not included in this special edition

the 'new politics', as Clegg called it, and the cooperation that the two leaders claimed would herald a new era in politics in the UK. After the Alternative Vote referendum in May 2011, the 'New Politics' has been stretched to breaking point as the Liberal Democrats lost the referendum and with it their hopes of transforming the British electoral system. The real question now is how will the two parties position themselves against each other at the next election.

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