

Helene P.M. Johansen, *Relational Political Marketing in Party-Centred Democracies*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. £55.00 (hbk), xi + 224pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-3905-9

Political marketing is an emerging and ever-burgeoning field of academic study that simultaneously offers conceptual insight and obscurity to political science. For this reason it is a field of significant interest while also being highly controversial due to its attempts to marry the concepts of marketing to politics. The debate rages over the extent that core concepts of politics such as leadership, campaign strategy, governance and voting behaviour can be explained through the lens of marketing. Johansen's contribution highlights both the potential and pitfalls of the political marketing paradigm while offering a fresh perspective for judging academic and practical applications of marketing within the sphere of politics.

Johansen's contention with much political marketing literature is that marketing is used as a catch-all theoretical framework which envelops professionalisation and mediatisation to explain the behaviour of political organisations. The descriptive accounts of political organisational behaviour, she argues, lead to little focus being given to systemic differences and, crucially, the differing contexts of the US-style presidential system and the European party-centred democracies. The focus on political marketing on 'exchange alone' (p. 13) may be a little harsh when taking into account the totality of literature, but it is a fair point to argue that the managerialist tendencies of political marketing scholars lead to a derogation of citizen co-creation of the political 'product' (party, leader character or behaviour, or policy) and that this perspective, when put into practice, leads to minimalist democracy with declining party membership, voter turnout and, therefore, legitimacy. Johansen expresses her clear aim is to develop theory that offers normative direction to reverse these trends that bridges marketing and political science and reflects the differing contextual environments of presidential and party systems.

The contexts Johansen introduces is one of a commercial market place, as she characterises the US political system, and the party system which is akin to high-touch service industries (p. 41), one that is built upon a high-quality, and highly personalised, customer service experiences. Through her expansive, engaging and thoughtful critiques of managerial models of marketing which largely inform political marketing, she builds the compelling case that "long-standing democratic systems which are clearly founded on significantly different ideas of democracy [to the US]" but because of the US being preponderant in founding the theoretical framework for both marketing and political marketing "we lack good theory with which to account for such systemic differences" (pp. 135-6). The solution is to propose a relationship marketing framework for understanding party systems drawing on European scholarship.

The relational paradigm is rarely employed within political contexts, this Johansen argues is the weakness in political marketing literature as it captures more effectively the decentralised nodes of the organisation, the network features (which map the stakeholders with whom parties interact) and parties' task-oriented behaviour (built around assemblages which form to work on specific projects). However, the key aspect of the relational paradigm Johansen believes needs to be introduced, or reintroduced, into political behaviour is the "simultaneous production and consumption [processes]... and how these process are facilitated" (p. 145). She argues

that the full-version of a relational political marketing paradigm would include an availability of opportunities to participate in a meaningful way in the development of the political product. The mechanism would be party membership and that understanding the vital role that this part of the broader electorate play, as co-creators of the product, the organisational identity and its campaign enriches our understanding of the party as an organisation. More importantly, the augmented experience offered within a party-centred democracy, by some if not all organisations, becomes part of the product itself providing both political and social legitimacy. Johansen thus argues that her model better explains the complex political participation processes of representation, policy development, voter turnout and legitimacy than existing political marketing literature and contributes broadly to political science based understandings of the relationship between citizens and political parties.

Johansen accepts not all citizens will participate and there is flexibility built into the model to accommodate traditional campaigning, or what she refers to as “the production and distribution of prefabricated ideas of values” (p. 158). The opportunities to engage in wider participation are the key for her and her conclusion captures neatly the ideas to offer a normative guide for implementation. The guide is sold on the win-win zone characteristic of many works from a relationship marketing perspective, that high internal democracy leads to cohesion, greater loyalty, strength of purpose and so a tighter more focused active support. This of course is not a new direction for political parties. Johansen explicitly invites parties to “take a step back” (p. 187) into a halcyon age of internal democracy.

The argument is highly compelling, the critique is rich and well-constructed and the overall logic will find many adherents in both academia and the world of practical politics. Johansen’s argument needs to be given voice, encouraging political strategists to think more about inclusion than persuasion as often currently seems to be the case. The problem is whether the centralising and managerialist tendencies have become too engrained in political strategic thinking. In defence of political marketing scholarship one can argue that the adoption of managerialism is a reflection of practice and that academic research is simply describing the process of political marketing as a practice using appropriate models. Relationship marketing is an under-employed lens because it is an under-employed paradigm informing practice, thus relational political marketing is locked into offering idealistic normative guidelines that do not filter into the real-world of politics. Johansen’s work may follow similar studies, but it does not deserve to. To follow her idealistic line, let us propose this as the manual that guides political strategy; politics needs stronger democracy at multiple levels, Johansen’s model offers a route to strengthening the muscles of democracy.

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