

## *Debate*

# **A Critique of the Lees-Marshment Market-Oriented Party Model**

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This article presents conceptual and empirical criticisms of the Lees-Marshment market-oriented party model. Conceptual criticisms are the short-term approach, the narrow focus on voters, the nature of the relationship to competitors, a tendency towards centralisation and the lack of a distinction between the related concepts of 'market orientation' and 'marketing orientation'. Empirical studies demonstrate problems with the model when applied to certain party types and electoral systems, the limitations on implementation of the model due to ideology and scarce resources, the partial application of the model in practice, and the constraints on the market-oriented party when in government.

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## **Introduction**

One of the most important concepts in commercial marketing, market orientation, has only recently been applied to political parties (e.g. Lees-Marshment, 2001a and 2001b; O'Casey, 1996, 2001a and 2001b; Ormrod, 2004 and 2005), and by far the largest amount of empirical work has examined Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party model. This article will first describe Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party model and then provide conceptual criticisms from the commercial market orientation literature and criticisms based on the results of empirical studies carried out in various countries around the world.

## **The market-oriented party model**

Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) proposes three basic types of political party, the product-, sales- and market-oriented party. A product-oriented party develops its policies internally and then argues their merits to the voting public. The policies define the party; they will remain the same irrespective of whether they enable the party to gain political influence. The sales-oriented party uses communication techniques from the business world to sell its policies to voters, realising this is necessary as not all of the electorate will automatically vote for it. The sales-oriented party is similar to the product-oriented party as policy is still developed internally, but differs in that market intelligence is used to design the sales strategy. Finally, Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party first generates information on voter preferences and then 'designs a product that will actually satisfy voters' demands: that meets their needs and wants, is supported and implemented by the internal organisation, and is deliverable in government'



**Table 1: The marketing process for the market-oriented party  
(adapted from Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 31)**

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Activity	Market intelligence	Product design	Product adjustment	Implementation	Communication	Campaign	Election	Delivery

(Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 30). Furthermore, the market-oriented party 'does not attempt to change what people think, but to deliver what they need and want' (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 30). It is Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party type that is the focus of her work, and also of this article.

Lees-Marshment's (2001a, p. 31) model (Table 1) charts the process the market-oriented party passes through during the electoral cycle. The first stage, *market intelligence*, refers to the activities carried out by party professionals and volunteer members that generate information from formal (analysis of opinion polls, questionnaires, focus groups) and informal (social interaction with individual's network) sources. Volunteer party members are important, as stages two and three, *product design* and *product adjustment*, describe the process that the results of the *market intelligence* stage must go through to gain the acceptance of the party faithful. As many volunteer members as possible should be included in the formulation of policies, as this will 'increase co-operation and understanding between them and help to reduce the chances of an "outsider/insider" (professional/party member) distinction arising' (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 33).

Stages four and five, the *implementation* and *communication* of party policy out to the electorate is carried out continuously, and if successful, stage six, the *campaign*, 'is then almost superfluous to requirements but provides the last chance to convey to voters what is on offer. If the party is the most market-oriented of its main competitors, it then wins the election' (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 211). Finally, if the party wins the *election* in stage seven, it must then deliver on its election pledges in stage eight, *delivery*, which 'is crucial to the ultimate success of marketing and therefore political marketing' (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 40).

## Conceptual critique

The concept of 'market orientation' in the commercial marketing literature was first introduced more than 40 years ago by Theodore Levitt (1960), who argued that more attention should be paid to the markets that the business served instead of concentrating on the product that the business made.<sup>1</sup> Interest in the concept grew in the 1990s after the publication of two articles (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990) to the extent that Barbara A. Lafferty and G. Tomas Hult (2001) could identify five distinct approaches to how a market orientation was

understood and then synthesised these into four common dimensions, an *emphasis on customers*, the *importance of information*, an *interfunctional co-ordination* and a *responsiveness by taking action*.

All of Lafferty and Hult's (2001) four dimensions of commercial market orientation are present in Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) work. The first dimension, an *emphasis on the customer*, is a fundamental characteristic of Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party; without this emphasis the party is product oriented. Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) conceptualisation of the market-oriented party has, however, its primary focus on the fulfilment of expressed voter needs and wants in the short term, rather than including the future needs underlined in the commercial market orientation literature (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Lafferty and Hult, 2001; Narver and Slater, 1990). This narrow focus may cause the wider issues of the long-term development of society to be neglected, and brings with it the risk that the information generated from voters will be restricted, either consciously or unconsciously, to those segments of the electorate or particular constituencies that will actually make the difference at election time: consider the phenomena of target seats in Britain, where a disproportionately large number of resources are used to swing the seat in question in the party's favour.

The second dimension, the *importance of information*, is present and emphasised, as resistance to change by volunteer party members can be reduced by making the results of investigations available to them and can 'promote a feeling of involvement, value and worth amongst those within the party' (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 33). Lees-Marshment (2001a) also advocates an awareness of competitor actions in that it is recommended that a SWOT analysis is carried out (Strengths and Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats; see Kotler (2000) for an in-depth treatment of this tool), but this is an arms-length method and does not take into account the co-operative nature of some political systems (Bowler and Farrell, 1992). Finally, the commercial market orientation literature acknowledges the influence of the external environment on the ability of organisations to be profitable (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Reukert, 1992; Slater and Narver, 1995), and from a political marketing perspective, Robert P. Ormrod (2005) argues that an understanding of society in general is essential for market-oriented parties, but generating information directly from other external stakeholder groups is not included in the Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) model.

While Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) conceptualises *market intelligence* (stage one) as being primarily the expressed needs and wants of voters, Ajay K. Kohli and Bernard J. Jaworski (1990) define their *intelligence generation* construct as being much broader, including information gathering on the unexpressed and future needs and wants of customers, together with the forces exerted on the organisation by actors and events in the external environment, and Stanley F. Slater and John C. Narver (1998) distinguish between being customer led and market oriented. Lees-Marshment claims that 'the basic argument of a market orientation is to follow, rather than lead, voter demands' (Lees-Marshment, 2001a, p. 223), and as such is voter led; using the commercial understanding of the term a market-oriented party would consider all of society – including for example the media,

trade unions, lobby groups and pressure groups – as relevant actors from which to generate information.

The third dimension, the *interfunctional co-ordination* of the marketing-related efforts of the organisation, is included to a certain extent. Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) advocates that the party rank-and-file should be consulted by means of, for example, committees, and that they should be included in the marketing and strategy formulation process as a prerequisite for party success, but there is no precise description of the methods whereby the results of this consultative process can be integrated into the wider policy portfolio. The size of political parties may also cause problems, as even in small parties with memberships under 5,000, the co-ordination efforts and resources that would have to be used by the party top to process the intelligence generated by all party members is likely to be prohibitive. In Britain, large sections of the electorate have to be persuaded to vote for the party using the mass media, so analysing national voter opinion may actually provide results that are more useful than those uncovered by an internal consultative process prior to policy development, given the resource constraints under which parties exist.

Lafferty and Hult's (2001) final dimension, a *responsiveness by taking action* is, like an emphasis on the voter, a central characteristic of the market-oriented party – without continually responding to voter opinion in the appropriate manner, the market-oriented party will become out of touch with the electorate and, according to Lees-Marshment (2001a), risks losing the following election as a direct result of this. The problem of Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) short-term approach is again relevant as the market-oriented party is likely to adopt a strategy of using marketing as a governing tool, also known as the 'permanent campaign' (Nimmo, 1999; Sparrow and Turner 2001). If taking action is restricted to the fulfilment of current voter needs and wants there is a risk that the future direction of society in general will be neglected.

The concepts of 'market orientation' and a 'marketing orientation' in the commercial marketing literature are not the same (e.g. Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Lafferty and Hult, 2001; Narver and Slater, 1990). A 'marketing orientation' refers to the activities of the marketing department that encourage the organisation to become more responsive to the requirements of customers. A 'market orientation' is implemented by the entire organisation and refers to an acceptance of the importance of relationships with all stakeholders, and aims towards being responsive to the internal and external markets in which it operates. When applied to parties, a 'political marketing orientation' would include activities such as image management, voter opinion research and advertisement creation, all carried out by party professionals principally during the run-up to an election. A 'political market orientation', on the other hand, would be characterised by all party members feeling a responsibility for taking part in both the development of policies and their implementation and communication.

Although Kohli and Jaworski (1990, p. 15) note that a '[market] orientation is useful only if the benefits it affords exceeds the cost of these resources', and that in some circumstances a product or sales orientation would be more profitable to the firm due to the nature of the competitive environment (e.g. Gray et al., 1998;

Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Noble, Sinha and Kumar, 2002), the adoption of a market orientation is generally considered to result in superior performance, irrespective of the nature of the organisation (Lafferty and Hult, 2001), while a marketing orientation may actually lead to a lower relative performance by under-exploiting the resources of the organisation outside of the marketing department (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990).

Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) does not distinguish between these two related concepts, and while the party type is labelled as market oriented, it is in fact closer to a marketing-oriented party. Despite including volunteer party members in the information generation process, Lees-Marshment (2001a) emphasises that party professionals are primarily responsible for monitoring developments in general voter opinion, rather than the commercial view that all departments can contribute a unique perspective on the various markets in which the organisation operates (Kohli, Jaworski and Kumar, 1993). Charles Lees (2005) notes that in order for Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party to be successful, a high degree of centralisation is necessary, implying that the internal consultative process is counterproductive and thus the opposite of the general view taken in the commercial market orientation literature.

### **Criticisms based on empirical studies**

Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party is primarily based on empirical work into the behaviour of the British Conservative and Labour parties. These parties have memberships that number in the 100,000s and operate in an electoral system where essentially only two parties compete for control of the government. There are three problems associated with this: a reliance on empirical results rather than a conceptual foundation, the electoral system in which the parties exist and the type of party that is analysed. By using an empirically driven methodology, Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) has fallen foul of the common criticism of political marketing research as simply rationalising empirical results (Henneberg, 2004), by mapping the behaviour of the two parties in question rather than developing a generally applicable concept.

Lees-Marshment (2001a) argues that adopting the characteristics of the market-oriented party is a prerequisite for success in general, but does warn against an unquestioning adoption of the market-oriented party model in other political systems. In an exploratory study, Jesper Strömbäck and Lars Nord (2005) compared the Swedish and British political systems and the effects on the ability of parties to adopt the characteristics of Lees-Marshment's (2001a) market-oriented party. Strömbäck and Nord (2005) came to the conclusion that there were differences both between countries and between parties in single countries, and that simply adopting the characteristics of Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party will not necessarily lead to election victory in all party systems; in some systems it may lead to an electoral backlash.

Strömbäck and Nord (2005) argue that in order to be successful, a party that consciously adopts the characteristics of Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-

oriented party should be a major party with plentiful resources, where the activism of volunteer members as a percentage of total membership should be low, and where voters are characterised by a lack of identification with a particular party and by using their own values as a choice criterion for voting behaviour rather than ideological identification. While this exists in Britain, it is not easily transferred to multi-party systems such as Denmark (seven parties), Germany (five parties) and especially Italy (eight main parties), where party identification is stronger and generally causes ideology rather than the need to gain mass voter appeal to guide policy development.

Furthermore, in political systems structured around the candidate rather than the party (such as in the English and US national electoral systems), and where a commercialised and adversarial mass media considers politics to be 'a strategic game' (Strömbäck and Nord, 2005, p. 19), the market-oriented party may well be the superior party type to adopt; otherwise, the characteristics of Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) sales-oriented party (internal development of policy, market intelligence to uncover the most effective advertising methods, communication and so on) may be a wiser choice.

The Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) model has been investigated in Lilleker and Lees-Marshment (2005), an edited book that presents cases from various countries using the model as a framework for empirical analysis. The various contributors' conclusions support Strömbäck and Nord's (2005) reservations for the application of the model as a rigid either-or set of behaviours. Declan P. Bannon and Robert Mochrie (2005) note that resource limitations and especially ideology affect the behaviour of the Scottish Nationalist party (SNP), as it appears to have adopted a hybrid of the characteristics of Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) sales- and market-oriented parties; the SNP is sales oriented on the question of Scottish independence and market oriented when responding to the needs and wants of the electorate. Both McGough (2005) and Lederer, Plasser and Scheucher (2005) come to similar conclusions in their analyses of the Irish Sinn Fein party and the Austrian *Freiheitspartei Österreich*, respectively.

Studies carried out by Lees (2005) in Germany and Lederer, Plasser and Scheucher (2005) in Austria show that market-oriented parties as conceptualised by Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) become more constrained by events and actors in the political environment when in government than when in opposition. To account for this, Lilleker and Lees-Marshment (2005, p. 32) suggest that there may exist a 'market-oriented government', where the successful market-oriented party is less likely to use public opinion as the foundation, instead taking a long-term perspective. There are two problems associated with this: firstly, when carrying out empirical work on New Zealand using the Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) model, Chris Rudd (2005) notes that there appears to be a significant overlap with Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) sales-oriented party. Secondly, as the market-oriented government listens less to public opinion as a result of constraints imposed by the non-voter environment, it is implied that Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party can only exist in opposition with the sole aim of gaining office.

**Table 2: Summary of the criticisms of the market-oriented party model**

Conceptual criticisms	<p>Only short-term, expressed voter needs and wants are considered to be important to the market-oriented party, not the future or unexpressed needs emphasised in the commercial market orientation literature.</p> <p>Only voters and competitors are analysed in the market-oriented party model; the commercial market orientation literature also emphasises the importance of understanding the environmental forces that affect these groups.</p> <p>Information on competing parties is only generated at arms length in the market-oriented party model; this does not take coalition partners into consideration.</p> <p>For the market-oriented party to be successful, a high degree of centralisation is necessary; the opposite of the commercial market orientation.</p> <p>No distinction is made between the related concepts of 'market orientation' and 'marketing orientation' – the label 'marketing-oriented' is more appropriate, given the characteristics of the party.</p>
Criticisms based on empirical studies	<p>The market-oriented party model is developed from an empirical study of the behaviour of the British Labour and Conservative parties; no other type of party or electoral system is included.</p> <p>Ideology affects the ability of a party to become market oriented. Resource limitations affect the ability of a party to become market oriented.</p> <p>Parties often adopt an hybrid approach, implementing either sales or market orientation, depending on the individual policy area.</p> <p>The 'market-oriented government' has more in common with a sales-oriented party, implying that a market-oriented party can only exist in opposition with the aim of gaining office.</p>

## Summary

This article has provided conceptual and empirical (Table 2) critiques of the Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party model. The conceptual criticisms concentrate on the short-term perspective that is used to analyse voter and competitor behaviour, the tendency towards centralisation and the confusion of the related terms of 'market orientation' and 'marketing orientation'. Lees-Marshment's (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party model was developed from an empirical study of the British Labour and Conservative parties rather than including a literature review of previous work, and case studies of other party types and electoral systems have demonstrated the importance of ideology,

resource limitations, policy areas and environmental pressures, especially when in government.

While the Lees-Marshment (2001a and 2001b) market-oriented party model has been used with some success to map the behaviour of the British Labour and Conservative parties, the issues detailed in this article must be addressed in order for it to develop further. Otherwise it is doubtful whether the model can become a true conceptual addition to the field of political marketing, and the empirical criticisms detailed in this article present a serious challenge to the wider applicability of the model.

## Notes

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- 1 The commercial market orientation literature is a diverse field that numbers several hundred articles in the last 10 years alone; as such it is not possible for an in-depth treatment in the current work. Suggested publications for the interested reader are: Lafferty and Hult (2001) for a literature review, classification and synthesis of the modern literature; Deshpandé (1999) for a collection of the seminal papers from the early to mid-1990s; Kohli and Jaworski (1990) and Narver and Slater (1990) as the first attempts to quantitatively measure a market orientation; and Slater and Narver (1998) for an explanation of the fundamental difference between being customer led and market oriented. For an alternative conceptualisation of a market-oriented party see Ormrod (2004 and 2005).

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