

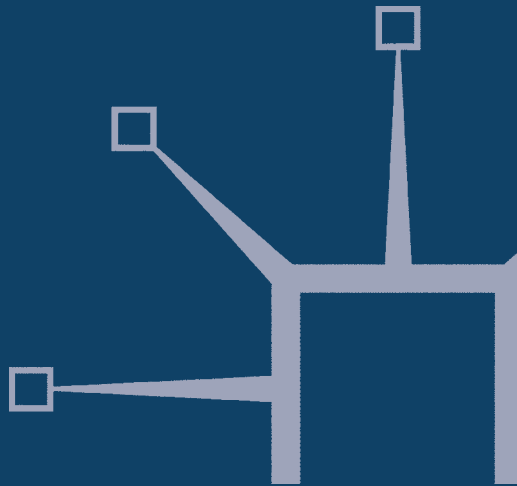
palgrave  
macmillan

# Marketing the Populist Politician

The Demotic Democrat

---

Robert Busby



## Marketing the Populist Politician

*Also by Robert Busby*

DEFENDING THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY: Clinton and the Lewinsky Scandal

REAGAN AND THE IRAN-CONTRA AFFAIR: The Politics of Presidential Recovery

# Marketing the Populist Politician

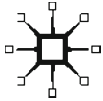
The Demotic Democrat

Robert Busby

*Lecturer in Politics*

*Liverpool Hope University, UK*

palgrave  
macmillan



© Robert Busby 2009  
Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-0-230-52227-5

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2009 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-35701-7      ISBN 978-0-230-24428-3 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1057/9780230244283

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Busby, Robert.

Marketing the populist politician : the demotic democrat /

Robert Busby.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Marketing – Political aspects – Great Britain. 2. Marketing – Political aspects – United States. 3. Communication in politics – Great Britain.

4. Communication in politics – United States. I. Title.

JA85.2.G7B87 2009

324.7'30941—dc22

2009013178

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

*To Mia*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Leadership and Ordinarity</b>	<b>9</b>
Political marketing and leadership: The issues	13
Leadership and political parties	17
Leadership, marketing and the media	33
Conclusion	37
<b>2 Cloth Coats and Camelot</b>	<b>40</b>
Nixon: Ordinary and exceptional	41
John F. Kennedy	54
Conclusion	61
<b>3 Thatcher and Major: Marketing a Conservative Identity</b>	<b>64</b>
Elite or ordinary: A Conservative dilemma	66
Margaret Thatcher	69
John Major	77
Conclusion	85
<b>4 Confronting an Elite Identity</b>	<b>88</b>
Ronald Reagan	90
George Bush Sr	96
Bill Clinton	105
Conclusion	108
<b>5 New Labour and Tony Blair</b>	<b>113</b>
The context	114
Tony Blair	117
William Hague	130
Ordinary women and ordinary children	134
Conclusion	137
<b>6 Bush, Nascar Dads and Wal-Mart Moms</b>	<b>140</b>
Target audiences	142
George Bush Jr: A regular guy	147
Democrats: Towing the line	151

2008: A populist pitch	159
Conclusion	165
<b>7 Cameron and Brown</b>	<b>168</b>
The Conservatives: Still out of touch?	169
Cameron: Becoming an ordinary person	173
Project Gordon: Marketing a prime minister	191
Conclusion	196
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>199</b>
<i>Notes</i>	208
<i>Index</i>	224

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wife Louise for her support through the writing of this project. Mia and Anna assisted in their own special way.

Alex Waddan, Michael Holmes and Bill Jones provided valuable support through the final stages of writing and gave up valuable time to assist. Thanks too to colleagues and friends at Liverpool Hope who have endeavoured to assist across time in bringing this work together.

# Introduction

In the contemporary era the political identity and character of a political leader is pivotal in dictating the success and failure of government and opposition. In both the United Kingdom and United States attention upon political leaders has become saturated, with issues above and beyond their political and ideological objectives becoming subject for discussion and debate. Indeed across a broad and diverse array of media productions significant attention is now directed at politicians as much for who they are and how they socially and morally conduct themselves as for their policies or executive or legislative skills. This has been fuelled by changes in media coverage across time, the evolution of celebrity culture and its interplay with politics, alongside a willingness by the political elite to use their personal backgrounds and circumstances as political tools to be utilised to compete for power.

In the realm of political marketing and in the selling of the modern politician to the electorate, leadership has had a significant role to play in shaping popular interpretations of modern politics. Across a broad swathe of theory on political marketing, leadership is only one component part amidst a broader array of policies and ideas advanced to a demanding voting public. However, the increasing prominence of leaders who are cast as both political leaders and as individuals suggests that, at the least, the voter is likely to take instruction and guidance from the social attributes of a political leader as much as from an in-depth study of their policy issues or from long-term retrospective considerations. This in part helps to explain why short-term poll fluctuations are common irrespective of whether policy announcements have been made and why leaders, such as the leader of the Conservative party in Britain David Cameron, could manufacture changes in poll statistics

## 2 *Marketing the Populist Politician*

even though new explicit policy directions were not spelled out for some time after his successful party leadership election in 2005.

This text evaluates the relationship between wealth, social class and leadership and how it is interpreted by the electorate. It argues that in the modern political era candidates and leaders, across a spectrum of political dispositions, have attempted to portray themselves as representing an imaginary and largely artificial class niche. They have used this portrayal so as to give themselves social and emotional ties with both mass and niche voting blocks. This has taken place across several decades with leaders generally trying to suppress the features that elevated them to high levels of power and potential leadership, such as elite education and economic well-being, in favour of stories of hardship and struggles against adversity. There have been pronounced changes across time in this area of political presentation. There has been a transformation from a period in 1960s America, where the American voter witnessed Camelot and the election of the 'best and the brightest', to a political culture which now seeks to elect candidates who, although they are largely from the same stock of society, seek to accentuate issues of hardship and ordinariness rather than issues of elitism or exceptionalism. The paradox here is clear. In order to get to positions of political power leaders need to avail themselves of the facilities offered by elite positions and status. Thereafter, in order to address the needs of the mass public the appearance of elitism is marginalised in favour of a manufactured position grounded upon market considerations. This has been a challenge for both presidents and prime ministers and for leaders of governments and opposition parties. The marriage of elite and ordinary is prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic through the interaction and communication between political parties and, as a consequence the exchange of political advisors and information, the approach to the political marketing of the elite nature of political candidates has become similar in both countries.

This work evaluates how political leaders have addressed the problem of class portrayal since the 1960s in the United States and United Kingdom and have used social and emotional issues to form meaningful bonds with the electorate. It does this by looking at a select number of political leaders and addressing how they manufactured changes in their public image and rhetoric, or accentuated points of weakness, in order to be more palatable and marketable to the electorate. In doing this it provides information on the comparative strategies used in both countries, allows an appreciation of which strategies worked and which did not and, through a chronological evaluation, charts how and why

an evolution in this approach to political leadership and marketing has taken place.

The selected political leaders in this text are those who tried to market themselves as ordinary when, in large part, they emerged from traditional political backgrounds, that is they were wealthy and had lifestyles which were not typical of the general populace. Even in cases where the political leaders, such as John Major and Richard Nixon, were from relatively ordinary backgrounds they endeavoured to market their childhood experiences as points through which they could advance images of their past as political assets. The intent and purpose of this work therefore is to give a general profile of how the political marketing of individual character, especially that related to elitism and wealth in politics, has evolved on both sides of the Atlantic through selected case studies. Naturally in a study of this type many political figures who might have been appropriate for consideration have to be left out of discussion. Individuals such as Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Presidents Ford and Carter all have attributes and aspects of the marketing of their identity which would have made for meaningful case studies. However, in order to allow an appropriate combination of both breadth and depth, concentration has been directed at political leaders who give meaning and in some cases, such as John F. Kennedy, provide contrasts in the issue of political marketing and wealth. There are also omissions in the chronological evolution, but the candidates and political leaders who are discussed provide adequate coverage of the nature of, and problems posed by, the issue of marketing wealthy individual politicians to an electorate which perceives itself as detached from, and doubtful of its associations with elite society.

Political marketing with respect to political identity and socio-economic standing has long-standing roots. In the nineteenth century in the United States several presidents made play of their humble origins in the prelude to political office. The pursuit and acquisition of the presidential office was advanced as one based on individual merit rather than elite standing or personal wealth. Although these marketing roots are important, this text takes as its foundation the politics of the 1950s and 1960s and the emergence of mass communication to inform voters of candidate attributes. This analysis of leadership and wealth initially looks at the leadership strategies employed by Kennedy and contrasts the presentation of his leadership and his emotional connection with the voter with the strategies employed by Richard Nixon. Across the period in question political presentation changed, albeit slowly, with a greater consideration of the visual image and an

enhanced appreciation of voter expectations about how the identity of the political candidate could be marketed so as to satisfy perceived voter demand. Much has been made of the 1960 election contest, and the communications strategies adopted by Kennedy and Nixon. In part these were about conveying political platforms but, in addition to this, efforts were made to accentuate some of the trials the candidates had endured in their personal lives. Kennedy was forced to address queries about the impact of his religion upon his political responsibility, and played tactfully to the elite standing of his family background and military experience. By contrast Nixon was largely unable to market his genuinely regular background, and while internally holding some resentment against the 'eastern liberal elite', was unable to transform this into a tangible and meaningful political criticism of Kennedy. He was unable to demonstrate that elite social standing was detrimental to the marketability of a political candidate. In this context, as a snapshot, elitism and the elite social position of candidates appeared to be of little consequence in the electoral process. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary era, where perceptions of elitism are consistently and actively suppressed, for fear that associations with elite standing and the wealth that accompanies it may have a corrosive impact on the relationship between the elector and the elected.

There have been significant changes with candidate portrayal and its association with wealth and social class in both the United States and United Kingdom. Not all candidates are suited or comfortable with a manufactured or re-branding of their character, and some have proven to be uncomfortable with the utilisation of their private lives as facets for political advancement. This has presented marketing issues related to family, with concerns about exploitation and matters of privacy coming to the fore. However, even given the reservations it is clear that the evolution of modern politics demands a combination of the selling of the personal and the political, with consideration about the message that is delivered to the public, and its salience, being important in shaping the political fortunes of both political parties and their leaders.

In advance of changes in communications and the exposure of the private lives and private wealth of political figures there appeared to be an acceptance on the part of both those who were elected and those who elected them that there was a social and class gap between the two groups. However, it is evident that by the 1970s there was a slow and gradual change in how the political establishment was viewed and, accordingly, its key players were forced to address and accommodate changing societal views about the personal profiles of those subject to

election. Wealth appeared to be an issue which shaped perceptions of how political figures might understand the electorate, and conversely how the electorate perceived the character and political identity of politicians. For example, a slow but purposeful modification by Margaret Thatcher of her image and background was implemented so as to present her as a female political leader in keeping with the experiences of both men and especially women, in the 1970s. This incorporated discussion of her past, her homelife, and her experiences as a woman and mother. These had emotional salience and played to stereotypical images of a woman working to conquer a predominantly male environment. Social and class issues were managed so as to portray Thatcher as a political figure who was legitimate and authentic as a voice for ordinary Britons. It involved an effort to market a modified class position and to downplay any accusations of elitism. A 'them and us' environment was to be avoided, and a classless one accentuated. This was not only directed at contemporaneous political campaigning and marketing, but towards shaping Thatcher's permanent political legacy.

This is in keeping with a broader remit within political marketing where the image of social inclusiveness and ordinariness is continued into the period following the occupation of the political office. In the memoirs of virtually all politicians who have left office, and those discussed in this text who have produced memoirs, suggestions are made that they were of a lower social standing than they actually were, or that they, on the grounds of character, could associate easily with members of all social classes. In 2008, Barack Obama continued this trend with discussion of his humble roots and financial difficulties prior to his legal and political career. This further enhances the general concept of a reworking of class interpretations and emotional connections with the voter and social positioning as a central component in the marketing of a political identity.

In both British and American politics there has been a marked and rapid evolution in image manipulation and political marketing directed at conveying manufactured political identities. Through the 1980s on both sides of the Atlantic the preferred political image, and the one that has remained into the contemporary era, has been one where the elected politicians have been portrayed as ordinary and unexceptional in their origins, yet exceptional and gifted in their leadership. This is borne out through the analysis of a number of political figures addressed in this work. John Major presented himself as the son of circus performers and the product of a working-class background. President Clinton cast himself as the product of a problematic and disrupted childhood and

as a politician who could empathise with the problems of recession hit America. He conveyed issues to the electorate that gave a profile of him as a person as well as a political leader. Only a limited political knowledge was needed in order to form a bond with the candidate, and this played heavily upon weaknesses in the 1992 re-election campaign of President Bush. Blair followed suit in the United Kingdom by casting the Conservative party as out of touch with ordinary people and elitist in its membership and leanings. He engaged personally in a series of populist oriented actions designed to make him and his entourage appear at one with the interests and emotions of 1990s Britain. This was achieved by using focus groups, spin-doctors and effective media presentation. Blair's elite background, which had helped to elevate him to assume the leadership of the Labour party in the first place, was downplayed, while his family activities, social meetings and interests were accentuated to give a him universal appeal. Efforts were made by the Conservative party to follow this lead, but the legacy endured by the party and its leadership from its prior time in government during the 1980s and early 1990s, alongside prevailing stereotypes concerning its elite interests, ensured that it was hard to convince voters that the leadership had undergone a personality change or that the party represented and understood the needs of the ordinary person.

By 2000 the benchmark in the political marketing of class and social origins was clear in British and American politics. Candidates and leaders could no longer afford to be perceived as elite or products of wealthy backgrounds, nor could they be perceived to be out of touch with the daily concerns of the electorate. Conspicuous wealth and the lifestyle that it offered was thought to be a potential barrier to gaining affinity with the voter. The political response was balanced and considered, reflecting extensive research into what voters wanted, and what candidates could realistically offer in presenting themselves at one with the populace. Underpinning the need of the political elite to understand the electorate was the use of poll statistics, market research into the nature of the voter as a consumer, media investigation into the role of character in political life, and the treatment of the political candidate as a 'celebrity', as well as a political figure. Often issues were raised for discussion that were not part and parcel of political debate, with political leaders and opposition challengers appearing on daytime chat shows, discussing lifestyle habits and family issues designed to make them appear at one with the nation. This was important in shaping David Cameron's challenge for the Conservative leadership in 2005, and in the re-branding of Gordon Brown following Blair's decision to

relinquish his leadership position during 2007. Both played down their pasts, accentuated trying personal issues, particularly involving health care, and fought to hold to a social, emotional and political position which would endear them to the British public.

The development of a manufactured political identity has followed a relatively predictable path in the contemporary era. Both Gore and Bush, alongside the other candidates in the 2000 presidential primaries, sought to cast themselves as ordinary and regular Americans. This continued into 2004, when Bush and Kerry cast themselves as sharing the interests, feelings and emotions possessed by ordinary Americans. All of the major candidates in 2004 read from the same hymn sheet, identifying areas of hardship, impoverishment and trying circumstances which aligned them with the American people. Personal childhood hardship and family health concerns were favourite areas for political reinvention and exploitation. This was achieved through strategic and selective presentation, no candidate overtly criticising any other on account of their wealth or social background, and all candidates casting themselves as being from similar backgrounds or in one form or another as not having been affected by wealth in an untoward manner. The result was a competitive endeavour to highlight personal characteristics, past troubles, social habits and the ordinary attributes of each candidate.

The presentation of leadership identities, both political and personal, as major components in modern marketing is evidently a component of modern politics that now occupies a prominent role in political communication. An emergent feature is that political leaders may be judged for who they are and the lifestyle choices they make, rather than for the policies they advocate. The concentration on the selling of political identities, rooted in the presentation of ordinariness, gives the opportunity for the voter to determine political outcomes having considered issues that have little political meaning. Yet, social and emotional presentations, conveyed with authenticity and legitimacy, allow voters an additional component through which to make a political choice. In an era where concentration in the centre-ground of politics is commonplace and policy differentiation between political parties in terms of policy may be difficult, this may give additional indicators which enhance the information available to the voter. Evidently wealth and trappings of elite society are factors that appear to alienate the voter. Because the social origins of most notable political figures are still from esteemed and wealthy sections of society, it has become the norm to reinvent the pasts of candidates and convey selected aspects which will resonate with the voter. While class, wealth and social standing are presented as

being issues which no longer create a divide between electors and the elected, part of the reason for this is that it has been marketed so as to be an issue which no longer matters. That the political strategists and politicians themselves give the issue considerable time and attention suggests that it is an issue which does matter and is an important component in the modern search for popularity and power.

# 1

## Leadership and Ordinariness

The evolution of political marketing in the modern era has been rapid, with significant study of its practice, significant investments in its refinement, and marked improvements in its implementation taking place over the last 20 years. A large proportion of the marketing changes have taken place against a mixed background of political successes and failures, and these have informed its evolution. It is clear that changes in the demands of the electorate and understandings of what might be desired from a political candidate have had a meaningful role to play in determining the type of leadership candidate required in western democratic societies.

There are limitations in the type of candidate that can be marketed to an electorate. For each political party involved there are limitations in the ideological disposition of the candidate that can be chosen on account of their political allegiances, voting record and their chosen mandate, particularly relating to issues considered important by the party elite and political membership. For example, candidates must choose domestic and foreign policy positions in keeping with the general ideological thrust offered by the party which has elected them as leader. While ideological or platform reform can take place with respect to overall party disposition, sometimes rapidly, often it is slow to change and is subject to internal debate and dissent about abandonment of tradition or deviation away from party roots. The challenges faced by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in creating the New Democrats and New Labour are testament to this with respect to party modernisation and change.

Although traditional party frameworks create a number of marketing constraints one area that can be addressed with much more freedom is that of the character and the socio-demographic profile of the candidate.

In theory candidates will be drawn almost exclusively from elite social positions where individuals have the connections and wealth to access political institutions and have the social networks necessary to pervade party structures. Indeed, historically that has been the case in both the United Kingdom and, to a large part, in the United States. Yet in the contemporary era there has been a pronounced effort to distance candidates from their social and economic roots and to cast them as something other than their real selves. To be seen to be of the elite is to be seen to create a political liability and an impediment to elected office. This has had pronounced consequences for political marketing as this outcome gives candidates a challenge in accentuating the parts of their social and economic background that can honestly and legitimately be marketed to the mass, but it also adds an additional component. Parts of the candidate's background will be purposefully manufactured so as to present a political product that appeals to a significant majority of the population. This creates an ironic scenario where the product that is being marketed is one that is purposefully modified to present it as something less than its true potential value, and individual flaws and lesser social standing are pushed to the fore at the expense of excellence and exceptionalism. This is founded largely on political pragmatism, with an ability to alter the leadership product available in accordance with perceived public demand.

This chapter addresses several issues important to an appreciation of the role of a candidate's social and economic background in the realm of political marketing. It considers firstly the theory on political marketing, and thereafter addresses the role that leadership is considered to play in shaping political marketing and popular support for candidates. It is a factor that appears increasingly important to political culture and has a significant bearing upon the type and nature of media coverage afforded a candidate. It is now also pivotal in determining the type of candidate who can advance themselves as a viable contender for leadership, and determines to a great degree the extent to which they will have to reinvent themselves in order to appeal to the voting mass.

Consideration thereafter is given to a number of the variables relating to the marketing of candidates on both sides of the Atlantic. At first sight the United States has led the way in marketing candidates in an effective manner to the voter, with advancements in communications technology and market research into voter preferences playing a key role in the modern political era. Part of the reason for this was the advent of mass ownership of televisions in the 1950s and 1960s and the ability of the American voter to witness a visual image whilst also consuming

material on the substance of policy. This approach to consumer culture accentuated America's progressivism, alongside the structural needs of America's presidential political system. Across time, evidence, research and experience demonstrated that the visual image and personal characteristics of the individual leader could be important in shaping voter preferences and they, accordingly, have become central features of the modern political campaign. In addition there is now comprehensive research into voter preference through conventional market research strategies and the use of focus groups to observe how the characteristics and appearance of political figures are greeted in public circles.

Political systems are significant in shaping the opportunities available to candidates when seeking to manufacture their image to suit the voter. In the United States the electoral system employed to elect the president naturally makes it an imperative that the candidate tries to appeal to a majority of voters across the nation, each individual having an ability, theoretically at least within the limitations of the electoral college system, to influence the outcome of the election within their state. In the United Kingdom the dynamics are fundamentally different. The British public do not have a direct voice in determining the specific person who will potentially be a prime minister, but rather are expressing a desire to have a constituency representative and, through that, a particular party elected to government. The leader of the party is chosen by the political party members and is not subject personally to a national election or mass popular referendum. The role of marketing in Britain is therefore directed at a different political base. It confers legitimacy upon a party choice, and has significance in symbolically selling national values through a political platform. However, there is also a contemporary move towards personification in politics where the individual is thought to encapsulate the values entertained by the political and party movement as a whole.

A significant issue with respect to candidate election is the role of the party and its membership in helping to select a candidate who generally reflects its views. The preferences in the type of candidates parties wish to have are based partly upon the historical tradition of the party, alongside the type of person who will appeal to its core membership. In determining the characteristics of the candidate, parties run risks in portraying themselves as elitist, out of touch with voting blocks or simply unattractive to the voting block as a whole. This has been an ongoing feature of British politics for some considerable period of time. In particular this has been a problem for the Conservative party which has been perceived to have an exclusive and elite identity and to have

an elderly and largely aloof party membership. In the contemporary era efforts have been made to distance Conservative leadership candidates from this profile, yet this has proven difficult to achieve. In part this has arisen because the opponents and critics of the Conservatives are happy to play the class card in trying to distance the Tory party from swing voters and to portray its leaders, in particular, as socially distanced from the electorate. In America the tension, on class grounds, is marginally less apparent, yet both parties have roots and associations with voting blocks associated with ill-defined but nevertheless applicable socio-economic and demographic patterns. The Democrats are still associated with voters who have a lower socio-economic profile than the Republicans, who are in turn associated with moneyed and elite interests.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of social and moral issues however distorts the relationship between wealth and partisan support. Thomas Frank argues that this aspect serves to provide the backdrop for the support for the conservative movement in America, which hides its true economic intentions behind an array of value laden rhetoric, its 'leaders systematically downplay the politics of economics. The movement's basic premise is that culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern'.<sup>2</sup>

An emergent feature of debate concerning political marketing is the extent to which party leaders actually reflect their party's traditional background. In an era where the centre-ground of politics is increasingly congested, and the fight for swing voters has become intense, alterations in the presentation and marketing of both party organisations and candidates has occurred. With the reinvention of the identity of both the New Democrats in America in the early 1990s and New Labour in the United Kingdom in the mid-1990s there has been pronounced alterations in political and ideological placement. Contemporary evidence would suggest that candidates still come from traditional routes in seeking the nominations of their respective parties. They are commonly wealthy (Kerry and Bush), have experienced outstanding educations (Blair and Cameron) and have social connections to the political elite in society. However, on a national stage the economic and social attributes they hold are altered to try to convey meaningful bonds with the voter. Conspicuous wealth, elite education and social contacts are suppressed, and this has been a feature for leaders across the breadth of the political spectrum. The route to power and the attributes necessary to be an eligible candidate are manifestly different to the skills considered essential to holding office and execute power, and the marketing strategies differ accordingly. Ordinarity appears to be a feature

demand of those seeking office, while exceptional political ability appears to be demanded of leaders once they have achieved office. This appears uniform irrespective of party identity, and the outcomes in politics are plainly visible. Identikit candidates, who reflect one another in the presentation of their social lives, interests and backgrounds are now commonplace in politics. This is not only a product of centre-ground congestion but also of market-based research which identifies the characteristics and appearances which are likely to have resonance with the voting public. In effect partisan affiliation is a feature which can be downplayed or minimised by accentuating leadership attributes which overtly appear to have no significant linkage to traditional class-based politics.

### **Political marketing and leadership: The issues**

The evolution of research on political marketing is relatively recent. Its emergence has coincided with an enhanced appreciation of marketing techniques to sell commercial products, the emergence of a communications age and an appreciation of the consumption habits and preferences of voting blocks. The usefulness of marketing techniques in politics is pronounced, with the voter being considered as a consumer who will generally make rational choices based on the type of product that is available, and its appeal transcends parties, institutions and in many cases national borders. The importance of political marketing has not been lost on the political establishment, with considerable time and resources being given to enhancing research into voting preferences and habits.

At the heart of marketing is the political consumer. They drive the market, taking stock of the political products on display and making a selection based on their contemporaneous needs. Marketing research suggests some degree of sophistication on the part of the consumer, their being able to consider a large number of components when selecting their desired products. The communication of information works two ways. Lilleker and Lees-Marshment assert, 'Political marketing is the study of how politicians interface with their electorates'.<sup>3</sup> Voter decisions are made through retrospective evaluations and the anticipation of future political actions. However, in multiparty democracies the voter is commonly presented with a choice between competitive parties, where some degree of sophistication is required to make an informed decision about likely voting outcomes. In the context of this study, with media saturation concentrated largely on complex policy

positions, party leaders are the central focus of inquiry, their prominence, encapsulation of party identity and their personal characteristics all having importance in conditioning voter response. Party profiles are linked to the identity of individual political leaders and candidates. Increasingly in the contemporary era, when the boundaries between celebrity and politics have become blurred, the nature of the character of the political leader and how it is received by the public has an increasingly important role to play. Selling candidates to the populace marries the political environment, at least superficially, with sales activity encountered in commercial activity. It is not a new phenomenon, but has been enhanced and modified across time. In 1956 Leonard Hall, the Republican National Chairman claimed, 'You sell your candidates and your programs the way a business sells its products'.<sup>4</sup>

A large part of the research into political marketing has advanced parties as the key vehicles through which voters shape their political identification. Historically, this is persuasive and gives a clear indication of voter choice and political ideology. In the contemporary era traditional party identities have become blurred, particularly with a concentration of politics on both sides of the Atlantic in a congested middle ground. While the absence of clear water between parties may now make political choice a challenging task, the advent of a communications revolution enhances the volume and detail of information available to the political consumer. This has gone hand-in-hand with the willingness of political leaders to expose themselves to media coverage of their personal lives, accommodating personal biographies and family experiences into the political theatre. This has added a further issue for the voter to consider at the ballot box.

Party organisations have to market their ideas and political ideology via a number of means to the mass market, to niche groups and to individuals. The materials that can be marketed are broad and include policy, political legacy and reputation, personality and identity. Given its prominence and seemingly persuasive impact on voter choice, the character and identity of leadership is one of the core emergent themes of marketing and political research. In 1990s Smith and Saunders argued that there were potential problems if there was party movement to the centre-ground in politics, specifically with respect to political marketing and the maintenance of a discernable political identity. They contended, 'The idea of product positioning also warns against the "flight to the middle ground". This will make differentiation around Unique Selling Propositions difficult to achieve.'<sup>5</sup> In terms of policy the case advanced may well be true, yet the advent of a concentration of party

platforms and profiles in the centre makes the characteristics of leadership ever more important in the marketing framework, with a need to give distinctive identity to a party structure where the parties struggle to differentiate themselves from one another on the basis of policy or platform alone. This concept is endorsed by Billig in an analysis of the importance of political rhetoric: 'Because the ideological difference between political parties are often small and because many of the issues are highly complex, personalization can be expected. Voters are looking for leaders whom they feel they can trust and who will have the character to react well to unforeseen crises.'<sup>6</sup> If policy divisions are increasingly difficult to differentiate and advance to the populace then leadership can be used as an effective tool through which to levy popular support. Moreover, in addition to the identity and visual image of the political leader, the political rhetoric used by leaders has ramifications above and beyond the simple advancement of policy themes to the public. Nicholas Jones argued that the sound bites employed in the modern era are 'a highly individualistic form of expression. At their most effective they not only convey political messages but also say something about the person who utters them. The most memorable seem to reinforce already well-known personal characteristics.'<sup>7</sup> Furthermore Pancer, Brown and Barr argued, in 1999, 'that perceptions of candidates' personal characteristics can even affect party popularity and, occasionally, even election outcomes'.<sup>8</sup> If policy and platform differences are now blurred then character becomes a core vehicle through which to carry party identity, however much this might be considered to introduce celebrity to the overall democratic policy process and be detrimental to its credibility.

Lilleker and Lees-Marshment have identified a number of products, including leadership, which can be marketed by a political party to the electorate. Leadership is defined as: 'Leadership: powers, image, character, support/appeal, relationship with the rest of the party organisation (advisers, cabinet, members, MPs), media relationship.'<sup>9</sup> While recognising the policies and identity of a party, this text concentrates upon how this leadership has been marketed across time via an evaluation of selected political leaders. It addresses in particular socio-economic standing and efforts to present candidates attuned to the social, economic and emotional attributes of the nation they seek to represent. The evolution of leadership and the methods of presentation to the public merges public relations, media role and function, popular receipt of messages based on the perception of character, and the reinvention of the lives of candidates and leaders to suit prevailing popular moods.