

Lessons from the Tea Party: What Happens When You Can't Please Everyone All the Time

Introduction

In the US, the emergence of the Tea Party Movement (TPM) has been one of the most influential forces in American politics in many years. However, whilst there is an underlying agenda of fiscal responsibility and 'small' government, the movement lacks a specific definition of policy and scope and this has led to a loose variety of policies and priorities being associated with the movement. The benefit is that there is wide appeal but the challenge of such a situation is that it is difficult to satisfy everyone when the scope is so wide. This paper puts the appeal of the TPM into context within the context of the principle of 'political market orientation' and reflects upon the nature of the political 'product' offered by political movements. It then considers the extent to which its product satisfies the needs and wants of the stakeholders involved and considers the implications for political marketers and practitioners.

The Tea Party Movement (TPM)

In the US, the financial crisis of 2008 not only had a profound effect upon the financial markets, it also had spawned a movement that would have a profound effect upon the political system for the next three years; the Tea Party Movement (TPM). The 'tea party' analogy, with its reference to the Boston Tea Party protest in 1773, has often been used by anti-taxation protesters in the past (Holmes 1991). However, the TPM in its present incarnation appears to have evolved out of a disparate series of grassroots protests over the US government's response to the 2008 banking crisis and, in particular, the fiscal stimulus programme.

A variety of different protests have been cited as the catalyst that prompted the emergence of the TPM in 2009. Whilst Mary Rakovich's protest in Florida (Montgomery 2010) and Keli Carender's 'Porkulus Protests' in Seattle have both been cited as key, it was CNBC reporter Rick Santelli's Squawk Box 'rant' against government debt and bailouts paired with his call for a new American tea party that appears to have really caught the imagination of both the media and a significant number of the US public (Bedard et al 2010). Broadcast from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Santelli was cheered by those around him as he suggested that a tea party should be held for traders with the aim of dumping derivatives associated with the stimulus plan into the Chicago River. Featured in the Drudge Report, the recording of Santelli's 'rant' immediately went viral. Within two weeks a Facebook page calling for nationwide Tea Party protests was established and a 'Nationwide Chicago Tea Party Protest' was called for February 27th 2009 and coordinated across 40 different cities (Roesgen 2009). The concurrence of grass roots protests, mainstream media attention supported and enhanced by the viral characteristics of digital and social media appear to have given what might otherwise be seen as a series of disconnected protests a level of organisation and a critical mass that might not have been possible in a non-digital age.

Whilst the TPM might be described as a political movement, it is clearly not a political party in the classical sense. Instead, its apparent emergence from a

collection of grass roots movements have resulted in what Rasmusson and Schoen (2010) describe as an organisation comprised of a loose affiliation of local and national groups that lack both formal leadership or an agreed set of principles and policies. Mardell (2010) highlights the fact that rather than a formal set of policies or agreed ideology, their position is relatively conservative and where a consensus of opinion exists within the movement, it is generally over principles of fiscal responsibility and the need to reduce the size of federal government. He also notes that the 'hydra headed' movement also lays claim to a variety of other concerns over social issues many of which are tied closely to fundamental Christian beliefs. Opposition to gay marriage, denial of the existence of climate change, and the importance of immigration control are all areas that various elements of the TPM have strong opinions about.

The fragmented nature of the movement has also resulted in some startling contradictions. Ward (2010) highlights the fact that many of those protesting about 'big government' are the same people who rely so heavily on government programmes such as Medicare for support. Similarly, supporters of the TPM have displayed great distaste for the influence of big business in government, yet some of the strongest supporters of the movement are the billionaire Koch brothers who, it is believed, founded and bankroll 'Americans for Prosperity' (Mayer 2010). Americans for Prosperity is an organisation that campaigns on the TPM's behalf and seeks to influence those in government to adopt a stronger deregulation agenda and in particular to fight against taxes on carbon use and the activation of a 'cap and trade' programme.

It is generally assumed that the TPM is a Republican movement and evidence from Gallup (2011) does suggest that whilst there appears to be a positive Republican bias towards it. Indeed, in the 2010 midterm elections, 138 candidates had Tea party support and all were campaigning on a Republican ticket. However, acceptance of the TPM is by no means universal amongst Republicans as only 54% of Republicans said that they were supporters of the TPM.

That aside, the TPM may be seen to have achieved a significant level of impact on a variety of fronts. The 2010 election cycle saw a number of candidates endorsed by Tea Party Movement achieve election success and even overturn established Republican candidates in primaries in states such as Utah, New York, Delaware, Colorado and Florida (Zernike 2010). They also appear to have energised political debate as members of the public who would not otherwise have joined political movements or taken part in political protests actively became involved in the debate (Montgomery 2010).

Political Market Orientation and the Tea Party Movement

One of the reasons why the TPM may be seen to have had such an impact is that, on many fronts, they had an effective political market orientation. The concept of political market orientation has conventionally been applied to traditionally organised political parties in the UK (Lees-Marshment 2001) and in Australia (O'Cass 2001). However, whilst the concept has previously been applied to organised parties, when seeking to understand the relative appeal of a political movement, there appears no reason why the concept should not also have some relevance when looking at to less conventionally structured political movements.

According to Lees-Marshment (2001), within politics, an organisation that possesses a 'market orientation' is one that 'uses market intelligence to identify voter demands, then designs its product to suit them' (p.696). However, Dean and Croft (2001) highlight the existence of multiple 'stakeholders' within the context of a political 'market' and this is reflected in Ormrod's (2005) vision of a political marketing orientation. Ormrod (2005) adopts a stronger stakeholder perspective and is one in which '...all members of a party are sensitive to internal and external stakeholders attitudes, needs [,] and wants and synthesize these within a framework of constraints imposed by all stakeholders to develop policies and programs with which to reach the party's objectives (p. 51)'.

One of the potential differences between applying the concept of political market orientation to a conventional political party and to a grass roots campaigning political movement relates to the way in which the insight into the 'market' wants and needs are derived. Savigny (2007) suggests that political parties have long used focus groups, opinion polling and other quantitative techniques have to ascertain public opinion and they are now instrumental in the shaping of individual political parties' political 'product'. However, in the case of political movements such as the TPM, traditional methods may not be applicable or even necessary. Members' campaigning activities mean that their demands are proactively articulated and the act or pro-actively of 'joining' a group suggests that there is already a degree of positive correlation between the member and 'product' that the movement has on offer.

The Tea Party Movement's 'Political Product' (adapted from Lloyd 2005)

It has been noted previously (Lloyd 2005) that the political 'product' is a complex entity comprised of multiple components. Ideology, 'people' and 'party' (Butler and Collins 1994), policy (O'Shaughnessy 2001) and policy commitments (Harris 2001) have all been identified as important elements. However, taking the 'service' aspect of political delivery into account, Lloyd (2005) identifies five key components that comprise the political 'product': services offering, representation, accommodation, investment and outcome (Table 1).

Table 1: The Five Components of the Political Marketing Mix (adapted from Lloyd 2005)

Component	Explanation
Services offering	The management ability and expertise possessed by the party or organisation.
Representation	The way that the party or organisation represents itself to its stakeholders.
Accommodation	The ability of the party or organisation to recognise the needs and priorities of their stakeholders and to respond to and accommodate them.
Investment	The cost to the stakeholder which can take a variety of forms including money (contributions/taxes), time and emotion.
Outcome	This not only includes the ability to deliver on promises and policies but also the relative positivity of the impact of the

	party/organisation's actions on the stakeholders.
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When looking at the TPM within the context of the political marketing mix, it is clear that in the short term, it appeared to have a strong market orientation. At the outset the 'services offering' appeared strong as protests sprung up all over the USA. Facebook pages devoted to the campaign appeared quickly and the expertise offered by organisations such as FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity and the coordinating activity of the The Tea Party Patriots served to raise and mobilise large numbers of grass roots groups across the USA very effectively and in a relatively short space of time.

The 'representation' element of the TPM was extremely important. Because the movement appeared to have originated from the grass roots, the image of the typical TPM protester was very different to the stereotypical political activist. According to Reynolds (2010) 'These aren't the usual semi-professional protesters who attend anti-war and pro-union marches. These are people with real jobs; most have never attended a protest march before.' Social identity theory (Tajfel 1978) suggests that individuals might have been more willing to accept the TPM product because they could identify with those who were involved. Similarly, Sarah Palin used her 'soccer mom' credentials as a key campaigning tool. According to social identity theory (Tajfel 1978) suggests that individuals will be more receptive to ideas if they are put forward by 'in-groups' or individuals or groups with whom they feel they can positively identify.

The gulf between the TPM and conventional political parties is probably most clearly exposed in the element of 'accommodation'. The political classes in Washington DC have the potential to seem much more remote than the local, grass roots nature of the TPM organisation. This paired with the speed and flexibility of internet-supported communication networks meant that, in stark contrast to their elected politicians, direct access to the TPM was relatively easy. As a result, the TPM had the potential to be much more responsive to the needs and priorities of individuals more quickly and in a much more personalised way than political parties.

The element of 'investment' is probably the most relevant to the underlying cause of the TPM in the first place. 'Investment' for conventional political parties is the element that relates to the cost to stakeholders of the provision of governmental services. It has been noted that much of the discontent associated with the TPM arose out of the willingness of government to use taxation revenue to fund federal spending and bail out the banks and other failing financial institutions. However, Rasumssen and Schoen (2010) note that it was not just the monetary cost that was important; anger at Washington DC's apparent unwillingness to listen to grass roots concerns was also generating an emotional cost. In contrast, the voluntary nature of 'investment' associated with the TPM makes it appear much more market oriented. By choosing to support and participate in TPM activity, it is assumed that the 'investment' required has already been considered acceptable. Therefore the time and effort associated with attending rallies and protests together with the voluntary nature of donations was comparably much more palatable.

The final component of the political marketing mix, 'outcome', relates to delivery and, it can be argued, this particular component of the political marketing mix should be divided into two; short term and long term outcomes. In the short term, the TPM clearly delivered effectively. Its presence raised issues associated the TPM agenda in the public consciousness, affected candidate selection and candidates overtly supporting the TPM agenda were elected to Congress. However, whilst the long term impact of any movement is difficult to ascertain without appropriate historical perspective. However, it does appear that in the long term that the TPM is proving to be far less effective. Indeed, one might question as to whether it is a sustainable movement, is a 'flash in the pan' or whether the TPM is actually in decline.

The Tea Party Movement – a Flash in the Pan?

The TPM clearly tapped into the concerns and fears felt by many following the financial crisis in 2008 and displayed, in many ways, a strong political market orientation. However, by 2011, support for the TPM appeared to be on the wane. According to Gallup about half of Americans (47%) had an unfavourable image of the Tea Party Movement; the highest since it emerged on the national scene.

It is possible that the longer term aspects of the political 'product' offered by the TPM display areas of weaknesses that have impacted upon its credibility and may well affect its long-term sustainability as a political movement. Three components of the political marketing mix appear to have weaknesses in the long term; 'services offering', 'representation' and 'outcome'.

Firstly, with regard to 'service offering', it is clear that the organisation is highly capable in the fields of public relations and viral communication. However, the capability to deliver on policy and credibility of specific figures associated with the movement have raised questions. Most notably, Sarah Palin has been subject to particularly high levels of ridicule after making a number of very high profile political 'gaffes' whilst the Arizona Senate President and self-proclaimed 'Tea Party President' Russell Pearce, faced accusations of fraud and ethics violations (Biggers 2011).

Furthermore, the way that aspects of the TPM and its supporters have represented themselves or have been represented in the media may have also become an issue. The rather loose agglomeration of interests that originally made the movement so attractive on such a wide scale may, in the long term, be part of its downfall. Whilst the vast majority of TPM supporters tend to reflect the profile of a Republican party supporter, over time individuals who claim an association with the TPM have been characterised as racist (Stelter 2011), neo-Klansmen and hillbillies (Jonsson 2010). Reference group theory (Bearden and Etsel 1982) and social identity theory both suggest that individuals will move away from disassociative or 'out-groups' and towards groups that more positively reflect their identities and aspirations.

Finally, and possibly most importantly the ability for the TPM to deliver a successful 'outcome' may well have been questioned. It has already been noted that Sarah Palin, a high profile member of the TPM had been castigated nationally and internationally for her political 'gaffes'. However, an unwillingness on the part of

TPM supporters to compromise over budget cuts of \$61 million may have lead many to contemplate the implications of a partial of certain government services including the payment of social security and the salaries of government employees.

Implications for Academics and Political Marketers

Without empirical evidence it is impossible to ascertain the true longevity of the TPM and the relative role and importance that each element of its political 'product' plays in the satisfaction of the variety of needs of its many stakeholders. However, a few key observations might be made.

Firstly, in situations where a political group, party or movement does not clearly state its ideology, its aims/ objectives and does not specify the parameters within which it works, there is significant scope for those on the periphery of the organisation either to hijack it or to tarnish it with more radical or extreme interpretations of its mission. At the outset, there is the temptation for new movements and organisations to welcome those in sympathy with its aims with open arms but care must be taken to ensure that those who join fully understand the parameters so that, in the long term, those on the fringes of the organisation do not undermine its mission, push existing members out or dissuade new members from joining. Similarly, consistency in representation is essential to ensure that misunderstandings are minimised. The aim should be to communicate the underpinning mission and values of the organisation through every touchpoint of the organisation. Finally, it is an imperative for political movements to understand the outcomes sought by their stakeholders. Ultimately, people join political parties and protest groups to gain some form of benefit. If those benefits are not realised, they will simply drift away and either find another party/movement that satisfies their needs or become disillusioned with politics and disengage.

The implications for political marketers and practitioners alike are simple. At the birth of a new movement, it is natural for the parameters of that movement to be flexible but, for longevity, the principles and ideology should be clearly articulated to ensure that extreme or undesired elements are not associated with it. Efforts should be made to ensure that the desired outcomes of stakeholders are identified and those with the capability to deliver on those outcomes are identified and nurtured. Finally, the values, attributes and capabilities of that movement should be communicated consistently across all touchpoints to avoid confusion, misinterpretation and ultimately, disillusionment.

Summary

The aim of this paper has been to consider the implications of a political market orientation for a movement whose definition of mission is loose and open to interpretation. It is clear that in the short term, success can be achieved if the management logistics and communication are effective, but in the longer term, the integrity of the organisation and the ability to deliver on what stakeholders perceive to be key outcomes becomes the over-riding priority. This becomes problematic if the perceived outcomes are misunderstood or misconceived. Essentially, whilst it is tempting for emerging political movements to recruit as many members as possible, care should be taken to ensure that new members understand objectives, mission and

the parameters of the movement. Otherwise mainstream supporters are likely to be put off by those on the fringes.

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