



Party brands and voting

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ABSTRACT

Some scholars argue that Western societies have seen a decreasing impact of voting behavior based on cleavages and party identifications. Equally, issue ownership voting is seemingly not increasing its relevance by filling this gap. From this departure we seek out an alternative variable by posing the question: Do party brands influence voting behavior? Currently, we do not know because the two research fields of voting behavior and party brands are currently not explicitly linked. Traditionally, the study of voting behavior has gained powerful insights from concepts such as cleavage structure, party identification and issue ownership. On the other hand, the study of political brands has illuminated how people employ brands in their identity construction and how voters use party brands to differentiate between political parties. In this light, the article first distinguishes the brand concept from related heuristics and voting models. Next, the article measures the brand value of Danish parties by utilizing a representative association analysis. Finally, this measure is used to conduct the very first empirical analysis of a party brand's effect on voting behavior. Overall, the primary finding demonstrates that political brand value (PBV) has an effect on voting behavior—also when a number of other relevant explanatory variables are held constant.

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Do party brands influence voting behavior? Currently, we do not know because the research fields of voting behavior and party brands are not explicitly linked. Traditionally, the field of *voting behavior* has gained powerful insights from concepts such as cleavage structure (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), party identification (Campbell et al., 1960) and issue ownership (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). On the other hand, the field of *political brands* has illustrated, for example, how a brand is used by voters to differentiate between political parties (Scammell, 2007; Smith and French, 2009), project a certain identity (Smith, 2009), or establish brand loyalty (Needham, 2005; Phipps et al., 2010). Against this background, this article aims to bring together the two fields of voting behavior and

political brands to examine whether a party brand influences a voter's propensity to vote for that particular party. In this way we investigate whether it is possible and productive to conceptually and empirically integrate the political brand concept within the massive literature on voting behavior.

Overall, this article finds that there is a conceptual and empirical void to be filled by the political brand. On a conceptual level we demonstrate, that the political brand help voters internalize public sentiments circulating in the political sphere, by working as a heuristic which push them in the direction of parties, which currently have an aura of momentum or likeability. On an empirical level, we find support for a brand effect on voter decision-making. Based on a representative sample of Danish voters, we show that the political brand of different parties appears to have an effect on voting behavior—also after a number of other relevant explanatory variables from political science (such as cleavage structure, party identification and issue ownership) are held constant.

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To present this case, the article is divided into five steps. First, we motivate our focus on the political brand in light of recent theoretical and empirical developments. Second, we conceptualize the political brand. Specifically, this article employs a voter centric conception of the political brand, focusing on how associations constitute the brands of political parties in the minds of voters. As such, we frame the political brand concept as a heuristic voters use on Election Day. A heuristic distinct from related ones we typically see in political science. Third, we briefly situate the political brand concept in relation to the main theories of voting behavior to analytically separate a brand optic from constructs such as cleavage structure, party identification and issue ownership. Fourth, we describe the association method, which constitutes the brand measurement by looking at the study's context, data and operationalization. Fifth, we use a representative, two wave panel survey to measure the political brands of Danish parties, along with traditional political science variables, in order to examine whether a party brand influences voting behavior. Finally, the article summarizes the results and outlines future directions for the study of political brands.

1. On the need for a political brand concept in voting behavior

Brands are vital to people. They are able to create signals, both emotionally and functionally, that can ease the decision-making process when a person is confronted with a complex bundle of alternatives (e.g. Keller, 1993). Although the importance of brands was originally established in marketing research, its logic has diffused to many areas of society (Marsh and Fawcett, 2011); in particular, during the last two decades, the study of brands in politics has evolved in regards to parties (Harrop, 1990; Schneider, 2004; French and Smith, 2010), party leaders (Lock and Harris, 2001; Needham, 2005) and party campaigns (Kavanagh, 1995).

One explanation for the growing interest in political brands is the changing nature of post-war Western democracies. The increase in valence issues (Thomassen, 2005), voter volatility (Dalton, 2000, 2012) and practices of political marketing strategy among parties (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999; Kavanagh, 1995; Nielsen, 2012; Scammell, 2007) have all paved the way for analyzing politics through the lens of brands (Smith and French, 2009; Smith and Speed, 2011). Moreover, some scholars argue that traditional grand variables in voting behavior are slowly decreasing in explanatory power as cleavages have weakened following the resolution of many social conflicts (e.g. Berglund et al., 2005). Likewise, party identification has gradually eroded in many Western countries, partly because people today are more individualized and educated (Clarke and Stewart, 1998), which makes it germane to proclaim that: "*As partisanship in the electorate has weakened, it stands to reason that voters would have to substitute other factors in their decision-making process*" (Dalton et al., 2000: 49). Also a more recent concept designated to fill this lacuna, such as issue ownership voting, seems to be stagnating rather than increasing, especially in a number of European countries (see Aardal

and Van Wijnen, 2005; Smith, 2005). Even so, all these traditional variables are of course still very crucial to the study of voting behavior, but party brands can potentially provide an alternative venue for explaining contemporary voting behavior.

However, if one accepts that there is room for an alternative perspective, the introduction of a brand concept in a political context, naturally raises the broader question of whether marketing concepts are commensurable with politics. Put bluntly: Can buying washing powder be compared to voting for a party? In many cases the short answer is no. The differences are obvious between the world of politics and the world of business. In particular, when it comes to voters facing a single transaction (i.e. Election Day) instead of multiple encounters, an intangible product instead of a tangible product, and no explicit price tags instead of clear-cut prices (Johansen, 2012; Lock and Harris, 1996). In this light we shall be careful when transferring concepts from marketing to politics.

Nevertheless, Needham (2005: 347) and other political scientists (e.g. Harrop, 1990; Kavanagh, 1995; Scammell, 2007; Schneider, 2004) have argued that ideas from marketing such as the brand concept can be applied when recognizing the particularities of politics. In practice, the focus should be on service marketing rather than product marketing. A service (i.e. an operation at a hospital) is sold on trust, not a random promotion campaign of certain product features of washing powder. The trustworthiness of the service must be gained year round (i.e. the hospital tells their patients about their rate of success when making surgeries), since we cannot touch the offering in the moment of purchase. Political offerings are thus more similar to services since they are based on a promise to be delivered in the future. In this regard, it is relevant that many marketing scholars argue that a valuable brand is more important for organizations providing a service, in contrast to a product (e.g. Berry, 2000), simply because a service, for instance, the political promise to deliver better health care is often fast-changing, complex, intangible and almost impossible to evaluate before it is consumed. In brief, the current brand status of parties can reduce these insecurities and reassure people of their political choice. By this token there seems to be enough potential, and perhaps even an explanatory need, for a brand concept in the study of short term explanations of voting behavior.

2. The political brand as an explanatory force: a new voter heuristic

Having argued that brands can be a part of voting behavior research, we are now left with the much more difficult task: Laying out how the explanatory logic of political brands fits into the larger scheme of voting behavior research. In the following, we argue that a political brand can be understood as a voter heuristic: a helping hand in a complex political world. Yet, unlike other such heuristics, the brand heuristic is based on learning. That is, the brand voter is considered an unmotivated learner, who picks up the public sentiments that surrounds different parties. In this regard, he has no special allegiance to just one party,

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