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The role of the marketing concept in politics
-
Examining the impact of political products on voter preferences

PhD Dissertation Theses

Szeged, 2023

University of Szeged

Faculty of Economics and Business Administration

Doctoral School of Economics

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1. Relevance of the topic and aim of the dissertation

Political marketing examines this exchange process and uses the conceptual framework and methodology of marketing to reveal the characteristics of political decisions on both the supply and demand sides. In my essay, I explore exchange phenomena in the political market in a world where the emergence of new information technology tools and the societal organizing force of consumption have made our knowledge about politics uncertain. Preferences are increasingly shaped not by the rational maximization of utility in the economic sense but by the constructed realities created through bubbles. This challenges the rational exchange interpretation of economics, but it doesn't render the exchange paradigm useless. On the contrary, through reinterpretation, it can offer valid explanations for understanding the political market.

Political marketing is an emerging field of study that is gaining increasing interest both in the academic sphere and in public discourse. The intensive growth of campaign costs, the relationship between social media and manipulation, and the convergence of populism and marketing tools draw attention to the role of political marketing in 21st-century democracies. There is a consensus that politicians apply the marketing mindset and tools, encompassing not only political advertisements but also meeting the demands of voters and using methods necessary for shaping them.

Political marketing, considered as nonbusiness marketing activity within the extended marketing approach, requires an interdisciplinary approach for conceptualization. This primarily involves a dialogue between marketing theory, political economy, and political communication. There is a dominance of Anglo-Saxon researchers, meaning that the conclusions of publications may be limitedly applicable in a domestic context due to differences in institutional systems and cultural environments. While more authors in domestic literature are dealing with political marketing, there is still a significant lag compared to the literature on political communication. The field is characterized by a lack of paradigm, and therefore, widely recognized theories are missing. In my essay, I consider the marketing concept as a starting point and then interpret the exchange process using postmodern marketing theories and methods.

In the context of international scholarly dialogue, my dissertation contributes to the application of postmodern marketing in political marketing and tests theoretical concepts with mainstream, quantitative, and postmodern, qualitative methods. In the domestic literature on political

marketing, the application of alternative marketing approaches is considered incomplete, and there is limited harmony between theoretical background and empirical research. I argue in my dissertation that defining the political product is key to interpreting political marketing as an exchange process, thus playing a connecting role between the theoretical framework and empirical research. My central question is how political products influence the political preferences of Hungarian voters.

Based on these intentions and central questions, the objectives of my dissertation are:

- Interpretation of political marketing and the political product,

- Identification of political marketing strategies based on the concept of the political product,

- Examination of the impact of political products on voters.

The most important theoretical result of the dissertation is the outline of the structure of political products, through which I identify strategic profiles of political marketing. The empirical result is the modeling of the impact of political products on voter behavior in the 2022 parliamentary elections. I see the applicability of the results in scientific discourse in the extended marketing concept and understanding various political phenomena, while in practice, it can aid political actors in strategy and policymaking and planning nonbusiness marketing activities.

2. Literature review

Political marketing is a dynamically evolving field, but it is burdened with numerous theoretical challenges and uncertainties (Scammel, 1999). In the following, I present these problems and attempt to uncover the questions that are crucial for reflecting on my research question and developing my conceptual framework. According to Tóth (2011), there are many misconceptions about political marketing in both everyday language and the scientific world. One reason for this is the lack of a clear, consensus-reaching, universally accepted definition of political marketing in scholarly discourse (Scammel, 1999; Henneberg – O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Lees – Marshment, 2003; Mihályffy, 2009; Tóth, 2011). These theoretical uncertainties hinder the application of marketing in the political field (Orosdy, 2010). Henneberg and colleagues (2009) argue that after the dynamic development of the 1990s and 2000s, theoretical stagnation and inability to evolve threaten the field, with the primary reason being the lack of application of alternative paradigms within marketing theory.

Scammel (1999) considers it a significant problem that campaign- and tool-specific studies push aside writings that clarify theoretical foundations. The consequence is that the creation of theoretical models and their consistent testing in empirical research is still underdeveloped. According to Henneberg and colleagues (2009), "state of the art" synthesizing approaches are pushed into the background, and the application of alternative trends within marketing theory (e.g., relationship marketing, SDL, tribal marketing, etc.) does not appear in theoretical development. They see a fundamental competition between positivist approaches and postmodern theories within marketing theory. The mainstream approach is considered positivist, 4P-based, transaction-oriented, but it is continually losing its strength and becoming less capable of providing valid explanations. This is primarily attributed to the transformation of society, described by Bauman (2000) as liquefaction, resulting in questioning economic voting as the primary voter motivation in the political market. Simultaneously, there is a revaluation of relational and network approaches. This raises questions about the interpretability of the exchange process and establishes that voters are increasingly difficult to involve in this common value-creating operation, which can also be referred to as "co-creation." In this interpretation, exchange does not occur between two entities but appears as a phenomenon embedded in a complex interactional structure (Henneberg - O'Shaughnessy, 2009).

The focus of the marketing concept is not on individual transactions but on a process in which consumers are continuously engaged with the enterprise and actively participate in the creation of the product. Based on this approach, we can conclude that political marketing should not be envisioned as a series of individual transactions but rather as a process, expressed differently, as a service. As mentioned earlier, political marketing does not have a universally accepted, consensus-reaching definition (Scammel, 1999; Henneberg – O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Lees – Marshment, 2003; Mihályffy, 2009; Tóth, 2011). However, I will now present some attempts at defining the field from influential authors in the following table (Table 8).

Table 1: Definitional attempts to define political marketing

Author	Political marketing definitions
Wring (1997)	*„The party or candidate's use of opinion research and environmental analysis to produce and promote a competitive offering which will help realise oigemisational aims and satisfy groups of eledors in exchange for their votes.''* (Wring, 1997, 653. p.)

O'Cass (2001)	*„the analysis, planning, implementation and control of political and electoral programs designed to create, build and maintain beneficial exchange relationships between a party and voters for the purpose of achieving the political marketers' objectives"* (O'Cass, 2001, 1004. p.).
Hughes és Dann (2009)	*A set of activities, processes or political institutions used by political organisations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver and exchange promises of value with voterconsumers, political party stakeholders and society at large.* (Hughes és Dann, 2009, 244. p.)
Cwalina, Falkowski and Newman (2011)	*„A politikai marketing a politikai piac szereplői (politikusok, pártok, szavazók, érdekcsoportok, intézmények)* **közötti cserék és kapcsolatok kialakításának**, *fenntartásának és fejlesztésének folyamata. Célja az igények azonosítása és kielégítése, valamint a* **politikai vezetés fejlesztése***."* (Cwalina et al., 2011, 17. p.).
Ormond, Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2013)	*„Political marketing is a perspective from which to understand phenomena in the political sphere, and an approach that seeks to facilitate political* **exchanges of value** *through interactions in the electoral, parliamentary and governmental markets to manage relationships with stakeholders."* (Ormond, Henneberg, és O'Shaughnessy, 2013, 18. p.)

Source: *own source*

The common element among the definitions of political marketing is the concept of exchange. Each definition takes the exchange process as its starting point, which occurs among various political actors, and sees the relevance of marketing theory in focusing on this. According to O'Shaughnessy (2002), definitions related to political marketing can be distinguished based on which marketing paradigm is reflected in them. Typically, either transaction-based or relationship marketing orientations can be identified. It is also noteworthy that definitions can be differentiated based on whether they portray political marketing as tool-oriented, operational activity or as a holistic, strategic approach. All the definitions presented in Table 8 fall into the latter category, and it is observed that in international literature, this perspective has become fundamental, with rare encounters of the view that political marketing is solely operational and tool-oriented, related to election campaign activities.

Scammel (1999) notes that some authors see the essence of political marketing in politics driven by opinion polls ("poll-driven politics"). While acknowledging that the focus is on exchange, he considers the source of definitional uncertainties to be the varied and unreflective thoughts about the nature of exchange. O'Cass (1996) also takes a voter-centric approach, as do Hetesi and Veres (2013), who view political marketing as the application of the classical economics-based approach to politics. Additionally, Newman (2000) emphasizes a more abstract approach, suggesting that the exchange offer is the leadership that a candidate offers for the votes of the electorate. Based on these perspectives, we can say that marketing is a consumer-oriented business philosophy, and the marketing concept is key to understanding political marketing.

Political marketing is defined on one hand as a leadership mindset (Kotler 1998, Meffert 2000, Hoffmanné 2004), and on the other hand, as an associated toolkit (Józsa et al. 2005). The mindset focuses on voters, to whom it sells a good with some value (e.g., product, service, idea, concept, emotion), which can be briefly referred to as its exchange management (Bauer – Berács 1998, Józsa et al. 2005, Kotler - Keller 2012, Rekettye et al. 2019). On the supply side, the object of exchange, the politician's currency, is defined in harmony with marketing theory as an offer (Gummesson, 1995). Additionally, political marketing goes beyond understanding and satisfying voter needs since it includes preference shaping (in the Schumpeterian sense of leadership) and, consequently, gaining acceptance through the marketing toolkit (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Based on these considerations, my definition is as follows: "Political marketing is a political leadership mindset and communication toolkit whose focus is on voter preferences in a democratic institutional system. In the service process, the task of politicians is to create offers for voters and to gain acceptance for political decisions, measures, and actions through the marketing toolkit." To interpret the exchange object as the political product, I use the agenda-setting theory and strive to theoretically connect the two areas, with the political product and the agenda item/issue concept creating a common ground.

Table 2: Interpretations of the political product

Author(s) of interpretaion	Political product concept
Downs (1957)	**Program:** It aims to be more policy-oriented and focuses on enhancing individual well-being.
Kotler és Levy (1969)	**Politician:** someone whose personality and statements should be constructed according to the voters' needs and showcased to them through marketing tools.
Wring (1997)	**Competing images** represent the product, with components including the politician, the party, and the program.
Newman (2000)	It signifies the **election program** offered by the politician and their party.
Józsa (2004)	A **solution package** that is fundamentally of ideological nature and is associated with moral messages and promises.
Török (2005)	A **construction product** that voters learn about through agenda items.

Orosdy (2007)	A **vision** of the future, representing aspirations and promises for the future, with mobilising power.
Harris és Butler (2012)	It is a combination of **politician, party and ideology**.
Scammel (2015)	The political struggle is about **competing images**, so this is the primary focus of the marketing approach. The object of image can be anything.
Simons (2020)	The product is a combination of the **image** of the party and its politicians, and the **statements** made on each agenda item.

Source: *own source*

Interpretation of Political Product: In the context of interpreting political products, we typically encounter six approaches that identify the product through:

- the program and similar promises (e.g., vision),

- the politician,

- the party,

- the ideology,

- the image,

- or aligning with the agenda topic.

The following will present these interpretations and summarize the main directions with the help of influential authors in the field (Table 2). The program-based interpretation of political products is not limited to electoral or policy programs published in written form by candidates and parties. This approach has deep theoretical roots, and Newman (2000), one of the most influential authors in political marketing, supports this view. Downs (1957) also builds his theory on this, emphasizing voter preferences and the corresponding program, primarily of a policy nature. However, it's noteworthy that he attributes a significant role to ideologies, as labeling ideologies provides citizens with a quicker understanding of a politician's ideas.

Orosdy (2007) interprets the product as a vision, viewing it as a combination of the program and ideology, encompassing both policy and value elements. Identifying the politician as a product, as proposed by Kotler and Levy (1969), originated from their study aiming to broaden the boundaries of marketing by likening the "sale" of a politician to selling soap. While this

analogy has been successful in common language and pop culture, it has also been a source of criticism for political marketing. Some argue that a politician is not a commodity like detergent or soap and cannot be sold in the same way (Oleár 1995, Kiss 1999, Szilágyi-Gál 2011). Still, this doesn't render the interpretation of the product irrelevant in the political arena.

According to Merkovity (2008), a politician is not a product but the provider of a service, playing a crucial role in the communication process. The role of politicians becomes more prominent due to phenomena like leadership and personalization (Kiss 2020). However, this shift also sidelines the role of parties as voters increasingly identify parties with the qualities of individual candidates, leading to the empowerment of the individual. The concept of ideology appears in the works of several authors (Wring, 1997; Józsa, 2004; Harris - Butler, 2012), highlighting the communicative nature of the political product. However, interpreting the political product solely as an ideology is problematic, as ideologies should be seen as causes shaping preferences rather than the products themselves. The concept of "competing images" (Wring, 1997; Scammel, 2015) also draws attention to the communicative nature of the product. Image cannot be interpreted as a commodity, as it is a consequence. Every political force seeks to shape and make its image attractive, but we cannot narrow it down to being just a product. Combined solutions are also present (Wring, 1997; Józsa, 2004; Harris - Butler, 2012), blending elements frequently found in the literature, such as the politician, party, ideology, and program. However, these combinations often obscure the essence and do not provide an answer to the question of the exchange object.

The sixth approach, drawing from media effect theories, emphasizes the significance of agenda topics in interpreting political products. Political marketing interpretations from political science often focus on mediatization and identify agenda-setting as a primary tool for influence. McCombs and Shaw (1972) established agenda-setting as a branch of media theories in the 1970s, where the basic unit of analysis is the "issue," representing individual topics and matters on the political agenda (Gálik, 2018; Bajomi – Lázár 2020). Török (2002) sees the product as a construction phenomenon created through politics, mainly perceptible to citizens through communication. Political reality can be understood through agenda topics, and they play an essential role in interpreting the product.

In summary, the interpretation of the political product is built on these six approaches. It starts with the assumption that citizens are fundamentally characterized by two types of choices: "issue-voting," where voters choose based on specific issues, and "affiliation voting" (Sodaro, 2001), where the choice is based on identity towards parties or political communities. The

essence of political marketing is to gain new voters through issue-voting and to shape identity, thus retaining committed voters. In both cases, formulating the offer, consistent representation, and reminders are central tasks. The interpretation suggests that the political product is equivalent to the exchange object offered in the political service process, which can be of both policy and symbolic nature. Therefore, the product should be narrowly understood as an offer to voters, answering the questions "Why vote for it? Why support it?" Voters vote for these offers, associate them with individual politicians, and learn about them through agenda topics. The next chapter explores the relationship, importance, and linguistic framing of the offer, the politician, and agenda topics, outlining our theoretical model for the structure of the political product.

3. Theoretical model

A political product is the central element of political marketing activities (a quasi-action unit), as it serves as the exchange object that forms the basis for the interaction between the politician representing the supply side and the voter representing the demand side. In the following, I present the theoretical model that illustrates the structure of the political product, its essential elements, and the relationships between these elements (Figure 2). The model aims to "translate" the marketing mindset and operation to the level of political action, providing an analytical framework for studying voter decisions. During model development, I focus on the first goal, while empirical research will address the second goal.

My starting point is that the product should be divided into two dimensions: the perceptible and the latent dimensions. In the perceptible dimension, we find the attributes of the product, the characteristics that are visible and perceptible to voters. These elements come to the voters' minds when thinking about politics, and through them, they become acquainted with political processes. This can be referred to as the spectacle of politics, the political theater (cf. hyperreality, spectacle, spectator democracy), and here we find politicians, agenda topics, and linguistic framings. These elements, which can be called carriers of meaning using Edelman's (2005) terminology, create the connection points with voters.

However, there is also a deeper level of the political product where we encounter the abstract product, the offer. The offer is a cognitive expectation regarding the future behavior of a political force, answering the question of why one should vote for it or why not. In this interpretation, the carriers of meaning represent this underlying meaning, which arises from the co-creation of interactions between political forces and voters. In this process of meaning

creation, political actors usually take the initiative, while voters tend to react. Thus, the offer always exists, regardless of how consciously the political force has strived to create it, as a construction forms in the minds of voters regarding the expected behavior of politicians. In connection with this conclusion, it is worth mentioning the idea of Lees and Marshment (2001) that the product of a party is its behavior, continually presenting an offer to voters, not just during elections. Interactions between politicians and voters encompass the co-creation of shared meanings, resulting in the offer and the associated exchange process.

Figure 1: Model of the structure of the political product
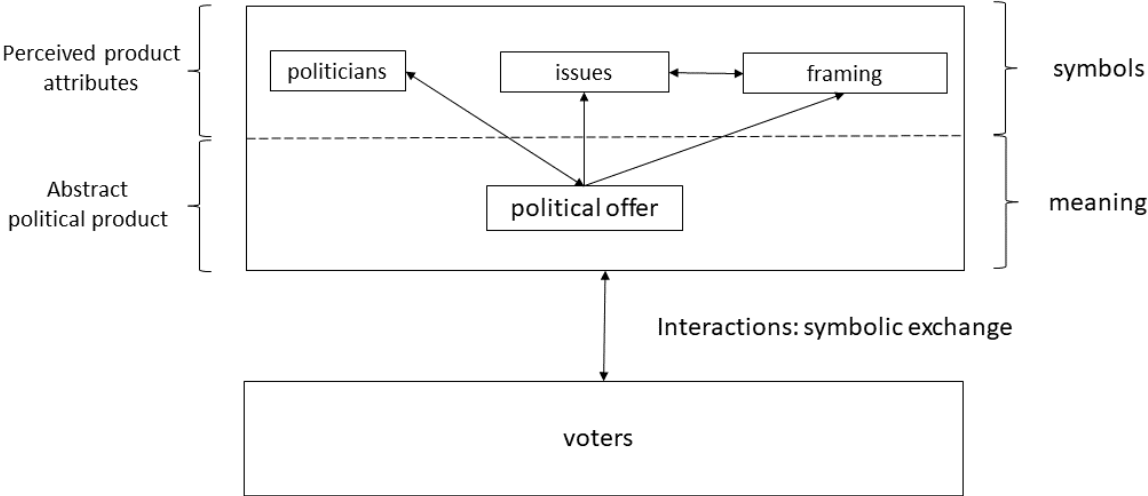
Source: *own source*

The concept represents the four elements of the political product: the offer, the politician, the agenda topics, and the linguistic framings. In the following, I introduce these elements and analyze the relationship between them. My starting point is that we need to separate the offer from the politician, and my claim is that voters primarily vote for offers, which can be both policy-based and symbolic. These offers can merge with the personality of the politician, who can embody and authentically represent them, but without an offer, there is no exchange, and therefore we cannot speak of political marketing activities.

An individual cannot vote for a politician without expectations, and it is the duty of the politician to simultaneously serve and shape these expectations. During the planning process, the politician and their team strive to find the most attractive offer that can authentically appeal to as many voters as possible. Thus, we are talking about a dynamic, iterative process in which the characteristics of the politician and the intentions of the politician are both given and factors to be shaped. A prominent phenomenon today is that the personality of politicians is becoming

increasingly important, receiving more attention, and voter identity is increasingly tied to them. Overall, the model recognizes and considers leadership, personalization, emotions, and political identity as highly important phenomena. An essential conclusion is that competition today occurs not primarily in the dimension of impersonal ideological and policy promises but in the dimension of symbols derived from the connection between the character of the politician and the offer, which can form the basis of political identity. The credibility of politicians also comes from the harmony of these two factors. The next question is how voters get to know the offer and the candidate, how they interact with each other. This process is interpreted with the help of one of the most influential theories in political communication, the agenda-setting theory. Political actors strive to shape the public agenda, so voters deal with issues (issues) they consider important and base their votes on them in the next election. Through agenda influence, citizens perceive certain issues as more important than others (priming), fundamentally shaping their preferences (Török, 2005). In addition, discussions about topics often use the vocabulary and linguistic framings provided by political forces, creating their own interpretation of the world (framing) (Bajomi – Lázár, 2017). Voters simultaneously seek these interpretations, often for confirmation, but can also create them from existing elements. These compress the individual's values, beliefs, emotions, and passions. The consistent use of political forces' language is therefore also a strategic issue, as it can help build identity, and loyal voters can immediately place new agenda topics within learned frames. Linguistic framings also shape the culture of society in the long run, and thus the value preferences of society members, ultimately determining the future political offers formulated by future politicians in a spiral process.

In my dissertation, I analyze the interactions between political products and voters through three empirical studies. I employ three methodologies that build on each other and use them to examine different elements of the political product:

The first is a netnographic study where I analyze the relationship between linguistic framings and voter judgment. The goal is to identify heuristics influencing voter judgment in a specific political product – the extraordinary situation and action plan introduced by the Hungarian government due to the Covid-19 pandemic, called the "Economic Defense Action Plan." I chose this analysis subject as it provided a unique political situation and policy package. I examined a total of 10 Facebook posts and 3,300 comments, aiming to identify the most common heuristics influencing voter judgment.

The second is a focus group study where, through ten groups, I engaged in conversations with young voters before the 2022 parliamentary elections over six months (October 2022 – April

2023). The goal is to examine the politician as one element of the political product and the assessment of individual political characters and their relationship with other product elements. The pre-election and parliamentary campaigns provided an excellent opportunity for this, as the opposition primary allowed me to focus on the images of five candidates. I then followed how young people constructed the images of the opposition prime ministerial candidate and the prime minister, identifying differences.

The third is a survey, reflecting the Hungarian population in terms of gender, age, and type of residence. I conducted the survey directly on social media just before the 2022 parliamentary elections, and with quota sampling, I obtained a sample of 2,000 respondents. The aim of the research is to identify voter clusters based on the perception of the importance of agenda topics (priming).

Figure 2: Analysis of the elements of the policy product
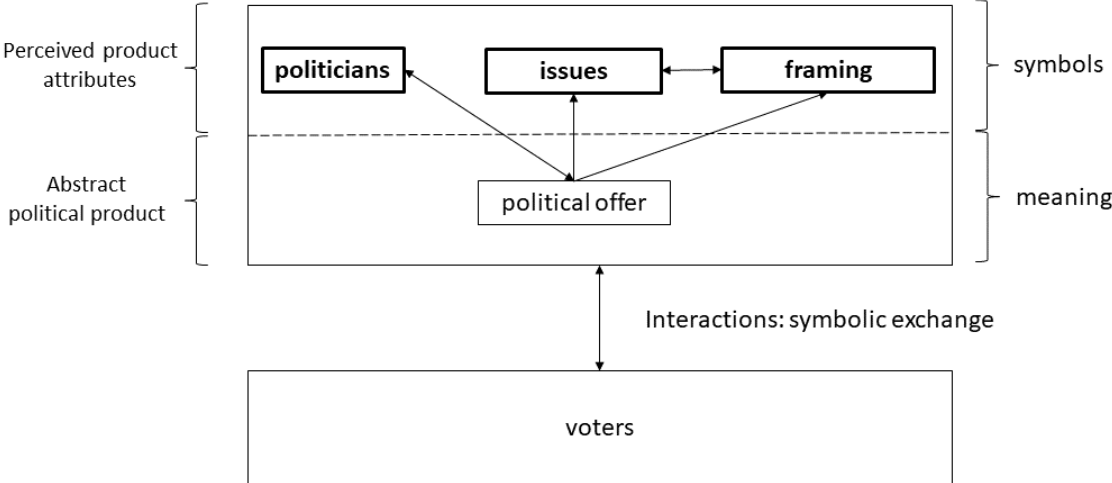
Source: *own source*

The three methodologies build on each other to examine different elements of the political product – the politician, the topics/issues, and political language framings (Figure 2). Beyond that, I always incorporated the experiences of previous research (e.g., What are the most important agenda topics? What are the most used linguistic framings?), thus building upon the knowledge gained. Among the elements of the political product, I consider only the visible, above-surface elements (politician, topics/issues, linguistic framings) as the direct subjects of my investigation, but I try to formulate cautious conclusions, intuitions regarding the latent element – the offer. All three studies were exploratory (Babbie, 1998), aiming to identify

specific phenomena rather than fully describing or explaining them. In this thesis, I present the results of two studies – the focus group study and the cluster analysis.

4. Focus group research on young people's image of the prime ministerial candidates

In my second empirical research, I focus on politicians as one element of the political product, aiming to explore how their image influences the perception of the entire political product (Figure 9). In line with the trend of personalization, we can argue that the role of politicians' personalities is gaining significance today, and they can be considered one of the most crucial elements of the political product. In my empirical study, I examine the image of the prime ministerial candidates who participated in the opposition primary in 2021 and the parliamentary election in 2022, based on a theoretical model presenting the structure of the political product. The central question of my research is: What agenda topics do individual candidates possess according to young people?

I conducted exploratory research focusing on the construction processes of young voters. I structured the interviews, their guidelines, and the analysis process along these questions. Following the scientific approach and methodological directions of discourse analysis (Carver, 2004; Torfing, 2004; Cook, 2008; Szabó, 2016), I conducted the study through focus group interviews. I conducted eight focus group interviews with young people born between 1997 and 2003, who volunteered to participate in the groups. Each group consisted of 6-12 participants, totaling 73 individuals, with a gender distribution of 45 (62%) male and 28 (38%) female. Following the process of the primary, I held the first three groups between the first and second rounds, the next three groups in the week after the primary, and the last two groups two weeks before the parliamentary election. During the first three groups, I focused on the competition between the two candidates, the next three on the evaluation of the entire primary, and the last two on the chances in the parliamentary election. Between the two rounds, I examined the images of Klára Dobrev and Péter Márki-Zay relative to each other, while after the election, we focused on Viktor Orbán and Péter Márki-Zay. To ensure debates and interpretations during the composition of the groups, I aimed for heterogeneity based on party and candidate preferences (Vicsek, 2006). Additionally, I sought heterogeneity based on attitudes towards the primary institution, so each group included young people who voted in some round of the primary, those who wanted to vote but did not, and those who did not want to vote. In some round of the primary, 39 individuals participated (21 only in the first, 12 only in the second,

and 6 in both rounds), while 16 did not participate but wanted to, and 18 did not want to participate at all.

Unlike the positivist philosophy of science, discourse analysis does not consider language as a mirror describing reality but as a tool that creates reality (Szabó, 2016). This can also be termed a postmodern approach (Virág, 2014; Mitev & Horváth; 2015; Simon, 2016), leading to significant philosophical (Gajduschek, 2013; Pál, 2013; Bretter, 2014) and public debates. To unfold the participants' interpretations of reality, I used two main tools:

The first is the aforementioned heterogeneity, meaning that supporters of Péter Márki-Zay, Klára Dobrev, and Orbán Viktor, as well as undecided and apolitical participants, were invited to the same groups. Preferences were measured through a screening questionnaire, and efforts were made to have a mix of participants in each group.

The second is the natural mapping and collage methods (Mitev & Horváth, 2015), activating the participants' thinking. In the natural mapping, participants, in teams of two or three, had to categorize all parties and candidates based on criteria they deemed important. First, they had to divide them into two groups according to the chosen criterion, then repeat the process. Through the resulting categorizations, we can draw up perception maps that help deduce conclusions about the images of parties and candidates. In the collage, participants had to characterize individual candidates with images, which they had to stick on a white sheet. They could choose from fifty images related to current agenda topics. The collage's advantage is its easy comprehensibility for the subjects, and it encourages multiple associations, making it well-suited for exploratory research. Due to our constructivist approach, it is essential to highlight that it allows us to examine the process of attribution of meaning, leading to the creation of political products.

I was interested in finding out whether there were topics that certain candidates had appropriated and represented independently. To answer this question, I employed the collage technique, where participants had to assign images representing agenda topics to individual candidates. I compiled a list of fifty agenda topics for this purpose. Additionally, participants were asked to write down on post-its the three agenda topics they considered most important before using the list. Then, I instructed them to stick the post-its with the most important topics next to the candidates on A3 sheets provided by me. The closer a topic was placed to a candidate, the more closely it was associated with them. I organized and systematized the collages and created the perception map based on the most frequently indicated agenda topics,

resulting in the ownership of topics (Figure 3). Only topics that were placed in the given position by voters in more than half of the groups (which means nine, as there were 22 groups of 2-4 participants based on the six focus groups) were included in the map. Therefore, topics assigned to a candidate less than eleven times were not included in the map.

Table 3: Issue ownership based ont he focus groups
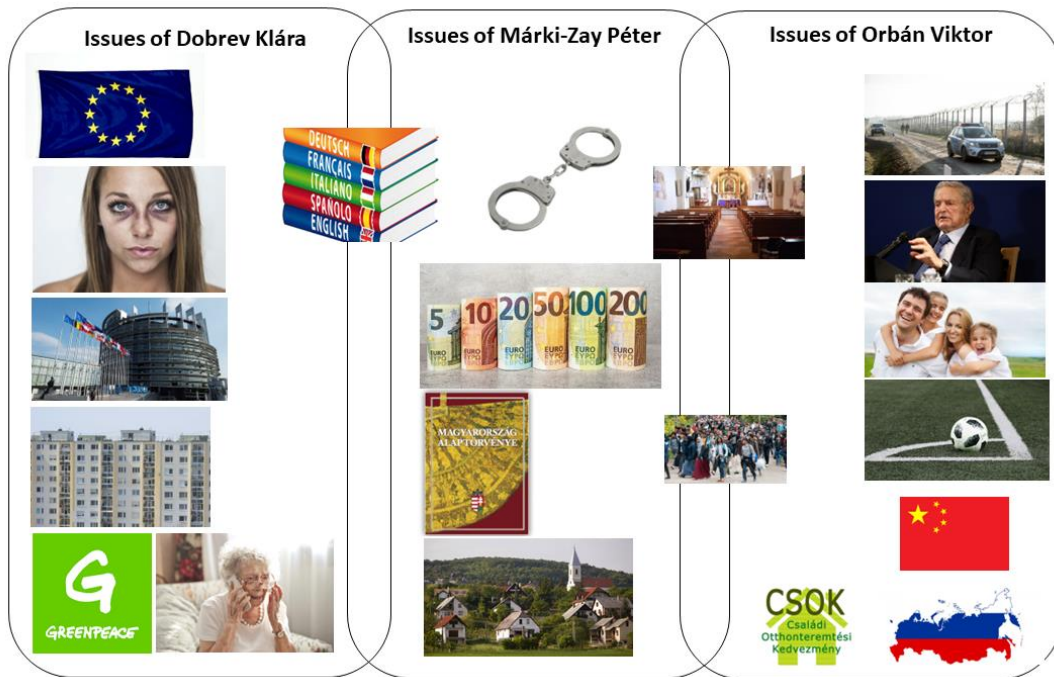
Source: *own source*

Among the most important topics mentioned were education, healthcare, corruption, virus management, inflation, and climate change. Regarding topic ownership, we do not observe significant differences among opposition candidates, although in the case of Klára Dobrev, topics related to the European Union were more dominant, while for Péter Márki-Zay, issues related to corruption and accountability were slightly more dominant. The issue of introducing the Euro is the only European Union-related question that was more associated with Péter Márki-Zay. Examining the temporal changes in topics and rivals is worthwhile because we can see that every topic that was more attributed to Klára Dobrev is taken over by Márki-Zay Péter. Thus, a kind of image transfer has occurred through the primary. It is also noteworthy that the topics most easily "attachable" were those related to the candidates' characters, such as language proficiency, large families, and Christian religion. Between Orbán Viktor and Márki-Zay Péter, several elements can be found in the common set, as topics related to migration and Christianity were assigned to both candidates.

The primary goal of the research was to examine the image of the prime ministerial candidates in the opposition primary in 2021. Based on the theoretical model of the structure of the political product, I conducted focus group research, and the results of the study primarily contribute to the examination of political leadership from a marketing perspective while focusing on young people as a specific segment. The main results of our empirical research are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of focus group results

A fókuszcsoportos kutatás főbb eredményei	Jellemző idézet a fókuszcsoportos interjúkból
Generációs élmény: egyes fiataloknak generációs élmény volt az előválasztás és társadalmi nyomást is éreztek a bevonódásra.	*„Kellemetlen kicsit úgy elmenni valamire szavazni, hogy nem tudja az ember, hogy mire."* - Ágnes;
Negatív preferenciák: a negatív preferenciák meghatározzák az ellenzék iránti elvárásokat.	*„2022 után is az lesz tipik, ami most van: Soros, oroszok, Kína, Paks II, EU-ból pedig kiléptetnek minket."* - Zita
Nem Orbán ajánlat: az ellenzék elsődleges ajánlata a kutatás alanyai szerint az Orbán-korszak antitéziseként értelmezhető.	*„Nekem mindegy, hogy ki nyer, csak az győzzön, aki képes megnyerni a választást."* – Ildikó
Diskurzusgyőzelem: Csak Márki-Zay Péter képes legyőzni Orbán Viktort" ajánlat	*„Szerintem sokan nem azért szavaztak Márky-Zajra, mert nagyon szimpatikus, hanem hogy ne az Orbán nyerjen."* – Felícia
Karakterküzdelem fontosabb mint szakpolitikai és szimbolikus ajánlatok.	*„Dobrev a nép tyúkanyója lehetne, aki kordában tartja a srácokat"* - Ildikó
Jobb – bal címkék: a jobboldali és baloldali címkéknek továbbra is fontos szerepük van.	*„Mi más alapján tudnánk csoportosítani a pártokat?"* - János
Régi – új címkék: a régiek és újak törésvonalnak majdnem olyan fontos szerepe van, mint a jobb és baloldal törésvonalnak.	*„Az old school és az újhullámos pártokat különböztettük meg egymástól."* - Péter
Szakértői stílus: a szakértői státusz és beszédmód pozitív attitűdöt vált ki a fiatalokból.	*„MZP szakértő, több nyelven beszél, külföldön is nagy cégeket irányított."* - András

Source: *own source*

I would like to highlight three findings from the empirical results, which can be considered as novel and may serve as subjects for further research. The role of negative preferences is

emphasized, as it derives from the interpretation of reality, driven by discourses occurring within sub-publics. This leads to the "Not Orbán" offer and the character struggle, while specific policy preferences take a back seat. Additionally, we discuss a phenomenon that increases polarization. The second noteworthy result is the identification of discourse victory as a primary factor in Márki-Zay Péter's success. Consequently, those who can determine the stakes of the election, formulate and gain acceptance with the right language in the public sphere, gain a strategic advantage. The examination of the first and second highlights can be further explored using the guidelines of discourse analysis and qualitative techniques since the aim is not to measure and generalize preferences, but to uncover the reasons behind their formation. The third highlight pertains to the relationship between the expert style and young people. Participants resonated well with the expert style, synonymous with expert image and language. One possible reason for this is the participants' socialization, as they were all university students, making familiar topics and expressions attractive to them. Young people represent a specific segment, and their broader investigation emerging from the realm of higher education is justified and can fill a gap in research.

5. Voter cluster analysis for the 2022 parliamentary elections

I conducted quota sampling on Facebook between March 23 and April 2, 2022, resulting in a sample of 2000 Hungarian voters reflecting the basic population characteristics by gender, age group, and type of residence. The primary goal of sampling was to create heterogeneity, reaching voters of different age groups and residence types. Emphasizing the type of residence is crucial as the rural-urban dimension has emerged as a significant influencing factor in the study of voting behavior in recent years (Vida, 2016). Another advantage of this sampling method is its speed and cost-effectiveness compared to personal or phone interviews, allowing for easier adaptation to emerging agenda topics during questionnaire preparation (e.g., the Ukrainian-Russian war). However, it suffers from two distortive factors: respondents with higher involvement (93% of the sample are certain voters, totaling 1859) and those with complaints are more likely to fill out the questionnaire, leading to an overrepresentation of opposition coalition voters. The sample illustrates this phenomenon well, with 67% supporting the opposition coalition "Egységben Magyarországért," 25% supporting Fidesz – KDNP, 2.2% supporting the Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party, 1.5% supporting Our Homeland, and 4.1% being undecided or apolitical. This poses a significant challenge for party preference studies aiming to represent current power dynamics, but this research has a different purpose: to explore the impact of political products and understand voter behavior with the help of a large sample.

The questionnaire included nine questions related to agenda topics, selected based on preliminary qualitative research. I conducted eight focus group interviews from the opposition primary to the parliamentary elections, examining the phenomenon of topic ownership. It's essential to note that the subjects perceived issues such as price-fixing, the child protection referendum, family policy measures, and the border fence as government issues, while topics like the introduction of the euro, corruption, accountability, the establishment of separate health and education ministries, and the war and its economic consequences were seen as opposition topics. I further added the war and its economic consequences to cover a broader spectrum. Four government-related, three opposition-related issues, and the war, treated as a given topic irrespective of parties, were included in the study using two questions. The wording of the agenda topics mirrored the political language since it is an integral part of understanding and describing the issues (e.g., "LGBTQ propaganda"). I employed cluster and cross-tabulation analyses using SPSS. While this method is mainly used for distinguishing behavioral types and creating target groups in marketing research, its main limitation lies in the lack of generalizability (Simon, 2006).

Regarding the "Ukrainian-Russian war" and its "Economic consequences," respondents, regardless of candidate preference, considered these issues important. Moreover, the economic consequences were perceived as more significant on average (4.38) than the war itself (4.01). Among government supporters, these topics were generally the third most important, following family policy measures (4.7) and the border fence (4.66), while among opposition supporters, they ranked fourth (4.32) after corruption (4.92), health and education (4.75), and the introduction of the euro (4.57). These data show that, although there is a connection between party preference and the perceived importance of the war, it is a more consensual issue compared to others. The most divisive topics were the "child protection referendum," the "introduction of the euro," and "price-fixing," while moderate connections were observed between "border fence," "health and education," "family policy measures," and "corruption." These issues are suitable for creating fault lines and strengthening identity. Noteworthy is the perception of "family policy measures" (2.93) and the "border fence" (2.62) as moderately important among opposition voters and health and education among government voters. These are topics whose acceptance and reinforcement can help in coalition-building and achieving discursive victory.

Next, I present the cluster analysis, aiming to create homogeneous segments based on agenda topics, separately for government supporters and opposition coalition voters. Initially, I created

two sub-samples from the overall sample and identified four government and three opposition clusters using hierarchical clustering and the Ward method. I will first present the government voters' clusters, followed by the opposition voters. Within government supporters, I created four clusters: Active Fidesz voters, Passive Fidesz voters, Leader Theme Supporters, and War Segment, which I will detail below (see Appendix: Table 5). To provide a more detailed description of each segment, I utilized cross-tabulations, focusing primarily on demographic characteristics deviating from the average.

- „*Active Fidesz voters*" constitute the largest segment within government supporters (41%). They can be considered the most committed segment, as they find all government-related issues and the war important, while considering all opposition-related issues irrelevant. This suggests active political engagement and a learned understanding of which issues to prioritize. Their commitment is evident in the fact that 97% are certain voters, 94% identify as right-wing, and 96% are satisfied with the government's governance over the past 12 years. Retirees are overrepresented in their group (25%) compared to other age groups (average: 14%).

- „*Passive Fidesz voters*", the second-largest segment (26%), finds government-related topics important but also considers opposition-related issues relevant, making them less committed compared to the Active group. Those living in smaller towns (non-county seat) and villages are overrepresented (80.5%) compared to other clusters (69%), as well as those with a vocational education background (38%, the average for other clusters: 24%). However, their commitment is not much lower than the Active group, with 97% being certain voters, 90% identifying as right-wing, and 93% being satisfied with the government's governance over the past 12 years.

- „*Leader Issue Supporters*" segment (15%) stands out for considering only topics clearly aligned with the government as important; the war is not among their priorities. They do not reject opposition topics, but their importance is moderate ("Establishment of a separate health and education ministry" – average: 2.99) or low ("Introduction of the euro" – average: 2.1). They identified three issues as outstanding: family policy measures, the border fence, and the child protection referendum. The 18–29 age group is overrepresented (25%) compared to other age groups (average: 17%). Their commitment is lower than that of Passive Fidesz voters, with only 81% being satisfied with the government's governance over the past 12 years. However, 94% are certain voters, and 88% identify as right-wing.

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- Finally, the „*War Segment*" (18%) shows a remarkable characteristic of perceiving this topic as unequivocally the most crucial, making it a key factor in their voting decision. They are overrepresented among those living in the capital and county seats (45%, average: 31.2%) and the 18–29 (23%, average: 14%) and 30–39 (22%, average: 16%) age groups. Thus, we can assume that urban youth responded more sensitively to the war topic.

To interpret the results, I find it worthwhile to visualize the clusters based on the strength of commitment and identity (Figure 6). The use of sets is useful for illustrating the camps "onion-like," depending on the degree of support and the size of the group. According to the presented results, we can say that narrative learning – assuming strong political interest – results in the most committed cluster being Active Fidesz voters, followed by Passive Fidesz voters, Leader Theme Supporters, and the War Segment.

Figure 6: Clusters among Fidesz voters
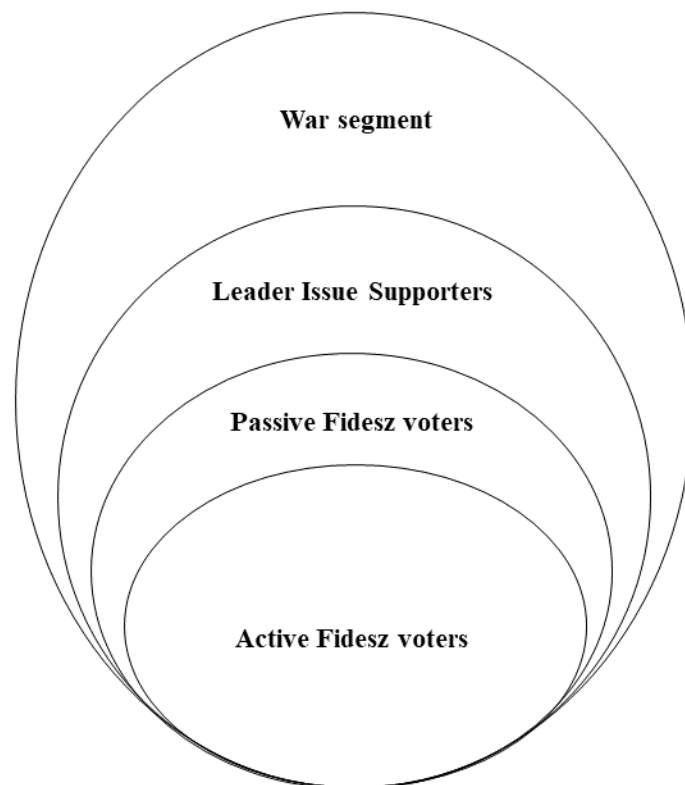
Source: *own source*

In the following, I present the cluster analysis conducted within the opposition coalition and the identified segments (Figure 7). Within the voters of the opposition coalition, I was able to create

three clusters based on the perceived importance of agenda topics: active opposition supporters, passive Fidesz rejectors, and the Western-progressive segment.

- *„Active Opposition Supporters"* (77%): Active opposition supporters react similarly to the perception of agenda topics as active Fidesz supporters. This means they consider every opposition issue important, while deeming government-related topics unimportant (average for child protection referendum: 1.07; price fixing: 2.31; border fence: 2.7). There is a somewhat exceptional case for family support measures, which they find moderately important (average for family support measures: 3.02). It is noteworthy that they also consider the war and its economic consequences important. Compared to other opposition clusters, their proportion of left-wing identities is lower, and the percentage of centrists is higher (71% left-wing, 12% centrist). The percentage of certain voters is 97%, and 99% are dissatisfied with the governance of the past 12 years.

- *„Passive Fidesz Rejectors"* (18%): The main characteristic of passive Fidesz rejectors is that they do not consider either opposition or government-related topics important, indicating disillusionment and apathy. 81% identify as left-wing, 95% are certain voters, and 97% are dissatisfied with the last 12 years. This segment can be considered one of the most interesting findings of our research since they did not identify with opposition issues, yet still vote reliably for the opposition. From this, we can infer that the opposition coalition failed to resonate with this segment, and they primarily vote against the Orbán government due to negative attitudes. In terms of demographics, 71% live in non-capital cities and villages (compared to the average of 65% in other clusters), and those aged 29-39 are overrepresented (21% in this group compared to an average of 14%).

- *„Progressive–Western Cluster"* (5.5%): The progressive-western cluster attributes primary importance to the Child Protection Referendum (4.6) and, in addition, to the issue of war (4.2). Upon closer examination, we see that 80% agree that homosexual couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples. 90% believe Hungary should be the most loyal member of the European Union and NATO. Based on this, we can say that for this segment, progressive values and Western orientation are their most important demands, influencing their voting behavior the most. 69% are women (average: 52%) and 46% are aged under 29 (average: 15%), making young women overrepresented in this group. This is the most left-wing identity segment, with 82%

left-wing, 87% certain voters, and 93% dissatisfied with the governmental performance of the past 12 years.

Interpreting the results, we can observe that 77% of opposition voters are explicitly committed voters, open to opposition topics, having learned what to consider important and what not (similar to active Fidesz voters). However, it's interesting that a significant segment, 18%, can be described as disillusioned and, unlike the government-supporting clusters, does not consider opposition topics their own. These are the passive Fidesz rejectors, whom the opposition parties have failed to engage with regarding the topics, but they oppose the government's policies to the extent that they vote for the most likely opposition candidate. Additionally, there is a Western-progressive segment where voting based on issue preference becomes more emphasized, as they consider LGBTQ rights of paramount importance. If we were to depict this camp based on commitment (voting intention, ideological self-classification, satisfaction with the government's performance over the past 12 years), we can say that active opposition voters are the most committed, followed by passive Fidesz rejectors, and then the Western progressives.

Figure 7: Clusters of opposition coalition voters
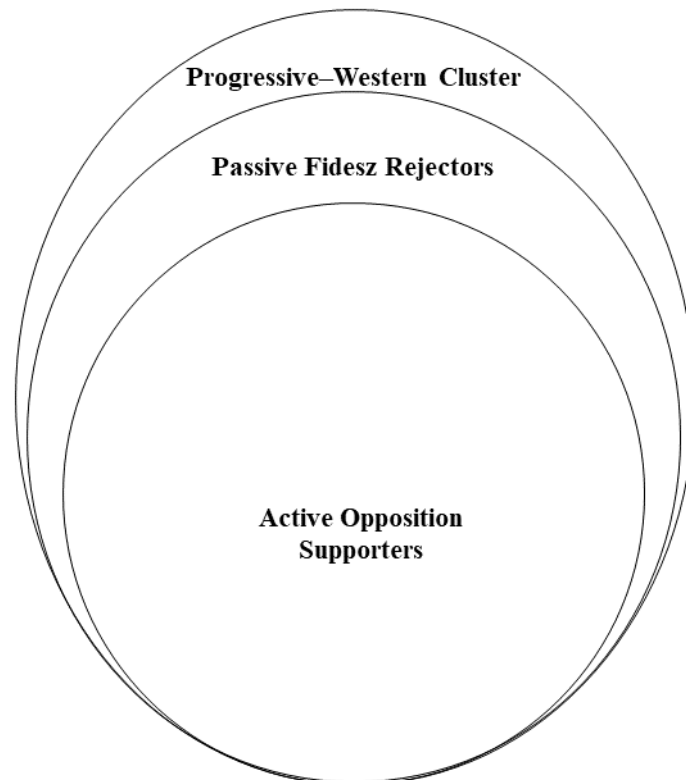
Source: *own source*

6. Conclusion, theses and limitations

In my dissertation, I examined three different visible elements of my political product concept through exploratory research conducted in three empirical studies. In the first study, I focused on political language, identifying heuristics influencing voter judgment through netnographic analysis. The second study centered on politicians, investigating the image of prime ministerial candidates participating in the primary and parliamentary elections through focus group interviews. In the third study, I aimed to uncover voter segments through a questionnaire survey involving a sample of 2,000 Hungarian voters reflecting the basic population in terms of gender, age, and residence type. I created voter segments based on the third element of my political product concept, the agenda items, exploring the possibility of creating subgroups based on the perception of issue importance among government and opposition voters.

I present the results and conclusions of my dissertation in two blocks, first introducing theoretical and then empirical findings. The key theoretical results stem from the content analysis of challenges in the field of political marketing, suggesting that the theoretical foundation of the field is underdeveloped, prompting the need for synthesizing and conceptualizing studies. The following theoretical results are emphasized:

- Many attempts to define political marketing consider political marketing as a reactive action, involving understanding and serving voter preferences. However, I argue that it should be defined as a management mindset, which may include shaping preferences.

- Political exchange is primarily considered symbolic exchange, where political products, created as a combination of interpretations and meanings, are jointly constructed by politicians and voters. The power dynamic is different as politicians usually initiate the creation of products and symbols.

- The foundation of my political product concept is the separation of observable and latent elements. This includes politicians, agenda items/themes, and political language belonging to the political spectacle. When discussing political discourse, we usually talk about politicians and issues using a specific language. However, this is only the surface of the political product, and it is equally important to examine the offers constructed by voters based on this spectacle.

- Political marketing orientation can be defined as market-oriented, focusing on voters as a management activity. However, it is not advisable to claim that a political force carries out all its activities in this mindset. It is more practical to examine the extent to which

certain actions and political products consider voter preferences at the time of their creation.

- When handling individual political products as a package, fundamental market management strategic profiles can be identified. The two most important strategic profiles are the Collector and the Populist, which apply different growth logics. The Collector strategy is equivalent to differentiated marketing, aiming to cover the entire market by creating segment-specific political products. It primarily seeks to create promises based on the preferences of median voters and uses material persuasion as a prominent tool to create the voter majority. In contrast, the Populist strategy is suitable for polarized preferences and involves creating a strong and divisive identity. The goal is to apply the "us versus them" logic, with a larger identity group in the "us" category than in the "them" category.

- In summary, applying the marketing concept in politics can provide valid and insightful explanations for party and voter behavior, particularly when using the exchange paradigm.

Regarding empirical findings, I would like to highlight the following:

- Cognitive biases and heuristics play a crucial role in the information processing process, affecting voter judgment. Their role is notable in two aspects: first, they can be learned, so political actors may use them as "thinking crutches" in evaluating certain actions. Second, they often serve as cognitive dissonance reducers in this market, aiding in maintaining loyalty.

- Well-chosen agenda items and positions can win over certain segments even without significant party identity. An example of this is the war segment among government voters, for whom the war issue was the most important.

- However, issue-based and identity-based voting are challenging to separate, and they often merge today, similar to symbolic and functional consumption in business markets. Taking a strong, potentially divisive stance on an issue can serve as a source of identity, creating a community-building symbol.

- The role of character conflict has become more prominent in elections, as witnessed in the 2021 primary election and the 2022 parliamentary election.

- The material-postmaterial cleavage appears sharply in Hungarian politics, and we can say that the preference for maintaining the status quo in the 2022 parliamentary election competed with abstract value preferences.

- Government and opposition voters have different political realities, and it seems as if they exist in two parallel worlds where entirely different factors are important and valuable.

A primary limitation of my empirical research is the difficulty in measuring the relationship between the political spectacle and latent factors. The practical consequence is that in the case of questionnaire surveys, it is challenging to establish cause-and-effect relationships, so it is prudent to carefully state how certain issues may influence party preferences. Longitudinal, panel studies can partially address this problem, but their implementation requires significant financial investment. Despite the known limitations of surveys in social media, I consider it an exciting and promising methodology, but the focus should be on addressing the issue of engagement.

However, it is worth emphasizing that, in line with the postmodern approach, I see promising possibilities for the development of qualitative methods, which can often provide more valid explanations for understanding certain phenomena than quantitative techniques. The main reason for this lies in the relegation of methodological individualism - typical of most survey research - and the emphasis on the treatment of community interactions. The future directions of my research can be shaped by this perspective, as I intend to move towards the application of tribal marketing and postmodern theories and methodologies. I expect more valid results by examining community interactions and the binding elements of tribes rather than focusing on differences between individual voters.

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