

Political Brand: trusting a candidate in the age of mistrust

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Abstract

The mind-set of voters, taking part in general elections of Pakistan has matured over the years. Politically, they have become more aware and at the same time demanding as well. Therefore, it is argued that the political parties, in the near future, shall have to plan their political marketing in a more responsive, accountable and in a professional manner. That could be the major possible reason that research interest in application of brand management principles to political parties is continuously increasing in developed countries. Managing a political party on the basis of brand management is very challenging task. But, by applying traditional branding theories to political marketing, it is possible to develop an increased knowledge of brand behavior in politics. In addition to brand attributes, trust plays a significant role in developing long-term relationship with voters. Voters make electoral choices analogous to commercial brand typology to choose among the available choices based on trust. Election results are evident of the fact that voters are continuously switching parties due to lack of trust in politics of the Pakistan. Purpose of this paper is to identify the possible reasons of decline in trust and the role of trust in making electoral choices. Specifically, this paper investigates three core questions. First, what are the reasons for candidates' decline in trust? Secondly, what are the key factors, according to the political experts, that will help to regain and strengthen the lost in trust? Third, what a candidate can do or should do to improve his/her trust among voters? A study sample has been drawn from the Gujrat District, where voters have a long history of selecting different political candidates over and over again since 1990.

Introduction

Generally speaking, these days' consumer lives are highly influenced by brands. There is reason to believe that even the way voters choose political parties has similarities to how they make their choices about brands (Reeves et al, 2006). Drawing

on commercial marketing analogies, an election can be seen as the moment of sale: the point of choice, where voters employ the knowledge they have about a candidate or political party and make their choice (Needham, 2005). In the exchange system 'trust' plays a significant role as a mediating variable (Aaker, 1991; Gundlach and Murphy, 1993, and Keller, 1993). It is a well established fact that there is a positive relationship between political trust and voter turnout (Shaffer 1981, and Hetherington, 1999). Electoral behavior of the voters has changed in recent time due to increase in knowledge and interest about political parties than ever before. After knowing the facts and information the cynicism is becoming the part of voter's personality. Viewing with cynical eyes has caused a miserable decline in the level of trust that they (voters) have in brands (Lantieri and Chiagouris, 2009). According to He (2006), trust can be defined as "The degree of cognition and feeling that the consumers hold to the brands acts in accordance with their own expectations".

Empirical research has proven that political trust has very strong influence on the electoral behavior. This behavior results in two kinds of extreme reaction towards the political candidates. On the one side of the spectrum, high level of trust shows that voters are fully confident and have faith in the political candidates that they will satisfy their expectations. On the other side, the low level of trust reflects that voters have no or very weak confidence in the political figures and they tend to develop a very negative perception about them. The dissatisfied voters may behave in different ways to show their reaction toward political parties in general and the political candidate, in specific, as a consequence. Possibly, they use their option and simply don't vote for them that result in the decline in vote turnover (Hetherington 1999). May be, the voters make their choice to vote for the opponent not because of their trust; rather they do so just in the reaction (Pauwels, 2010) or there might be a possibility that voters do not cast their votes at all (Rydgren 2007).

Literature also highlights the voters' reactions to their political representatives in terms of their motivations, responsiveness to citizens, demands, policy making skills, trust and so on. These factors indicate that voter's trust has been declining over time (Patterson 1999). This paper investigates three core questions. First, what are the reasons for voter's decline in trust? Second, what are the key factors, according to the political experts, that will help to boost the trust level among voters? Third, what a candidate can do or should do to improve voter's trust in him/her?

Above all, the fundamental aim of this study is to enhance the political trust among the voters in a bid to increase the vote'-bank of a candidate by winning or taking over the electorates of the competing candidates.

Literature Review

Trust proved to be the main binding force in strengthening the relationship between the political leaders and the voters. The fundamental objective of marketing is to

develop an intensive bond between the brand and its consumer, and the trust plays the most significant role in building this bond (Hiscock, 2001). Indeed, it is the consumers, who play significant role in the development of strong brands (Phipps et al., 2008). It is notable from the literature that trust in politics is continuously declining. The intensity of trust falls between two extremes of high to low (Miller, 1974). The unresponsiveness of government institutions and political leaders are the powerful factors behind the shift in political trust (Miller et al. 1980). Currently, the voters are matured enough to judge the apparent differences between what they actually deliver and what are promises of these institutions and leaders precisely before and after the election campaign.

Based on the literature search, from the domains of Psychology, Political Science and Political Marketing, the political trust can be categorized into three specific dimensions (Schiffman et al., 2008):

- (1) Trust in government form;
- (2) Political cynicism; and
- (3) Incumbent trust.

These dimensions of political trust can be further elaborated to build the strong understanding of political trust.

The “form of government” or “regime-based-trust” provides the strong basis for enhancement in the level of trust. The stability of trust in political system or form of government is dependent on the running policies of the government. If the government is successful in implementing the better form of government then the degree of trust in the political system will be fairly better and stable (Sherman and Schiffman, 2002). The second dimension of political trust is Political cynicism, the information and awareness age has empowered the consumers or voters to evaluate products with more cynical eyes. This kind of evaluation results in the distrust of the products. In fact, political cynicism is commonly known as the political distrust (Barber, 1983). Although, this political cynicism is continuously piling up the distrust among voters but, on the other side of the spectrum, it is increasing the political involvement or engagement of voters with political parties or political candidates (Fieschi and Heywood, 2004). Lastly, the dimension of political trust is incumbent trust, the official termed as “officeholder” or “incumbent” has direct interaction with the public trust. These officials are actually the frontline facilitator of the government policies and provision of services. This interaction results in the fluctuation of the political trust as service providers play key role in it (Kotler et al., 2009). Trust is based on relationship between the citizens and an incumbent and is purely dependent on the actions of government officials (Levi and Stoker, 2000). However, it is also dependent on the citizens, how they perceive the service of officeholder against their preset expectations (Craig et al., 1990). The scope of this paper is to investigate the contributing factors between the relationship of political leaders and their voters primarily based on trust.

According to Easton (1975) political trust can be divided into two dimensions. First one is based on the perception about the responsiveness of the administration in power. Secondly, it is based on the perception about the responsiveness of the system itself. The negative perception or belief of public in political candidates is due to their unresponsiveness to implement their promised agendas and strategies (Miller et al. 1980). This is because that in the election campaigns voters attaches their expectations with the political leaders, not with the political system. When they fail to meet their expectation, commitments, voters are dissatisfied with political candidates and they intentionally vote them out in the future elections (Dalton, 2006). Because, this situation normally matures the political distrust or political cynicism that politicians will not meet those expectations that are best in the interests of the country and public (Govier, 1994). Specifically, to enhance the level of trust among voters, political-moves play vital role.

Methodology

As this research is primarily focused to explore the possible reasons that are vital in the trust building, therefore a qualitative research approach has been selected. This approach provides basis to explore the complex issues and phenomena involved therein. The Political trust is a complex issue and needs to be fathomed in depth. In depth semi- structured interview instrument is used to collect the required information. The reason to use semi-structured interview instrument is to provide freedom to respondents to share their intellectual opinion along with input on the key structured issues relevant to the topic.

A sample of 30 respondents was selected for this study, based on pre-defined selection criteria. To be eligible for this study, the respondent should have well established and a recognized political fame in the Gujrat district and must have participated in last six general elections since 1988. It was quite difficult to find respondents who satisfy the aforementioned criteria. Therefore, initial respondents were selected then a snowball sample method was used to find out the desired number of respondents according to pre-defined criteria. Snowball is a non probability sampling technique used to identify members of desired population through initial respondents. It is commonly used when it is difficult to identify members of the desired population (Saunders et al., 2007). This experience will facilitate the respondents to provide responses to the long-term changes in the politics of Gujrat District, where the electoral behavior has changed considerably. The respondents were informed in advance to be interviewed on the issue of political trust. This was considered necessary to ensure that they are able to map their minds in order to provide the relevant and required information. Interviews were conducted at their residencies and offices and it lasted 30-40 minutes. All the responses were recorded with the permission of respondents. The recorded interviews were then transcribed to conclude the respondents' point of views.

Results

After conducting interviews, the audio tapes and interview notes were analyzed to extract the opinions of all the respondents. Statements having common approach and contents were placed under one category. In this way, the most important reasons were categorized and views of respondents were placed under these categories. This approach provides a summary of the results based on views and inputs provided by the respondents. The results of the interviews with political experts reveal that the trust of voters is continuously waning due to a number of reasons. The highlighted reasons have been described under different topics having common belief or opinion. This provided us very useful source to be considered by the political leaders for rebuilding or enhancing their level of trust among voters.

1. Voter's discrimination

In the political system of Pakistan the most powerful voters (e.g., business associations, professional associations, and the dominant families or voters etc) have attached their loyalties with a single political party. No matter, which the candidate is, they will only vote for the party in power. Once the political party or political candidate is in power, they start extracting benefits for their loyalties with the party. This situation gives rise to the voter's discrimination. The dominating voters start oppressing the opposition parties and their supporters. The political experts have exposed a number of events in which the political candidates have benefited their powerful voters only. Protecting the rights of few voters leads to the damaging the rights of an overwhelming majority of the other voters. This reflects political candidates' vision that they are focusing on short term outcomes by scarifying the long-term benefits. Eventually, these kinds of events result in winning the devotions of only few voters and loosing the devotion of majority of voters. This negative attitude of the political figures and treating the voters discriminatively creates the sense of distrust and frustration among voters. Almost all the respondents were of the view that this is the prime reason, why the voters keep on changing their affiliations and electoral choices in every election.

2. Too high expectations, too low fulfillments

According to the marketing principles, expectations and promises, attached with the product, should be achievable because if product fails to meet the expectations of the consumers, they become disappointed. If the product successfully meets the stated expectations and promises, the consumers are satisfied and when it exceeds the expectations, the consumers are rather delighted (Kotler et al., 2009). All the respondents highlighted that majority of the candidates fail to meet the pre-election stated expectation and promises. However, the significant discrepancy between their stated expectations and their fulfillment/implementation results in the decline of the voter's trust. During the election campaign, candidates make promises to fulfill all of their voters' needs and requirements including development of infrastructure, supply of electricity and gas, job opportunities, business uplifts, social welfare, security and right protection, economic development and fair treatment of law enforcing agencies.

But after winning the election, the elected members either do not give attention to these expectations or at least they are determined to meet the expectations, but they face a lot of hurdles from the opposing parties or circumstances. Sometimes, they even fail to arrange the required resources to meet the expectations. This failure results in the disappointment among the voters and creates a distrust-fissure in their relationship with candidate.

3. Weak mutual relationship

This was the common understanding of the respondents that the trust-development depends on the candidates' ability to sense the prevailing requirements of the voters. This is possible only by having frequent interaction with their voters and by keeping them on board. Unfortunately, the elected candidates change their priorities and have a very low contact profile with voters. They always prefer bridging this relationship gap via some government official or personal assistants. These officials always manipulate the information and resources and keep the candidates informed that all is going ok. On the other hand, the citizens want to see their elected candidates among them on different occasions. Citizens have to wait for a long time to even meet them. This interaction gap deepens the frustration of the voters and they tend to be more distrustful over time.

4. Too less choices, too few differences

Freedom to choose the best option among available choices always increases the competition among the competing products. To gain the competitiveness, firms put all their energy and resources in product differentiation and quality up-gradation. This severe-competition not only increases the availability of right products at right price with additional features but also empowers the customer. It is widely pointed out by the political experts that there are too limited electoral choices available in the political system of the Pakistan. Unfortunately, there are no substantial and apparent differences among the tactics of the competing political candidates. This situation empowers the political candidates with strong belief that in case they failed to be elected this time, it is guaranteed that they would be selected next time. As a result, political candidates are more reluctant to adopt as well as adapt the political strategies that could benefit them in the future. Differences that are not visible and explicit among the competing political candidates always deeply damage the trust of voters. Voters begin to express their distrust in the political candidates as well as their political agenda. An overwhelming majority of the respondents believe that the voters are highly indifferent to the political statements due to this distrust. That is why the political agenda of the candidate most of the time dooms to failure and they fail to attract the people to vote for them.

5. Party domination

It was generally accepted by the respondents that party domination in Pakistan makes it harder for political candidates to perform their own way to earn the trust of the voters. Especially, in political system of Pakistan, candidates are supported due to a particular party representation. Once, a political candidate gets the ticket from a

particular party, he/she becomes more conspicuous and dominating due to utilization of party platform and logo. It is the ground reality in Pakistan, that many candidate win election not by their personal trust, support or political abilities, but only because they are representing a powerful political party. In such a scenario, the political candidates play submissive role and obey the political party's directions only. It is quite impossible that the party leaders are aware of problem prevailing in consequences. The parties generalized strategy can not always pay attention to the each specific problems and requirements. The uneven allocation of energy and resources results in the disappointment and frustration of the voters. Distrust among voter is bound to the consequences of this dissatisfaction and frustration. Therefore, next time around, it takes efforts to win back the trust of the voters. This political inability of candidate, acquired due to the political party domination, is one of the major hurdles in earning the voters trust.

Further, it was argued that the party domination has been engineered through 18th amendment in the constitution. The 18th amendment gives absolute power to the party president. Therefore, the president is in the position to move the party in his/her own way. Thus the individual choices and position of a parliamentarian stands compromised. This is bound to further contribute to the trust deficit.

6. Weak personality

During the election, voters select the most appropriate choice for them by having trust and confidence to harvest a better output in future. Unfortunately, in the political system of Pakistan, each candidate behaves in similar manners by ignoring the voters' interests and promotes their own vested interests. It was the frequent observation by the respondents that candidates lack personal political capabilities to meet the expectations and requirements of the society. They simply fail to utilize their reign in the best interest of citizens. Another very strong and pertinent observation is that candidate only obey or advertize the political interests of the party without focusing on area specific agenda. Generally, they are unsuccessful to politicize the simple future plan and clear messages to the voters. It is quite difficult for voters to differentiate among these plans. Therefore, candidate can not project themselves in unique way as candidate do so in developed countries. This situation can not validate the post purchase reassurance by letting the voters to assure that their purchase/electoral decision is purely right and without a sense of risk. It also reflects the inability of the political candidate that they are not competent enough to understand the ground realities and to compare the international political scenario. Interpersonal inability disappoints the voters to rely on the political agenda and messages of the candidates that result in the increase of distrust to many folds.

7. The cynical voters

The emerging information age has educated and has increased political awareness tremendously among the voters. Voters' behavior has changed a lot now and they have become more educated, politically mature and aware of their rights. Many voters, if not

most, have reformed their opinion and therefore their decisions regarding the political system in Pakistan. It is generally argued that given the 'mess' in the political system, the voter have been more cynical and skeptical about the system. It was an often observation by the respondents that voter's cynicism is the strongest single reason for a decline in the level of the trust. Owing to instability in the political system of Pakistan, now voters scrutinize political candidates with much more critically. The information age has enabled the voters to learn and get more information about political systems and politicians than ever before. Media, in general, and internet, in particular, has empowered the voters to evaluate the practices and agendas of local politicians against the political system and politicians of the different nations. In recent times, many voters are more involved in bench marking due to having access to the global political information. This awareness and criticism has multiplied the cynicism of voters. According to Kotler (2009), dissatisfied consumers spread information about products or services to more people than the satisfied consumers. In the political system of Pakistan, voters are more socially linked with each other due to extended-family system, cast system, and their professions. Due to this strong social linkage/association, voters tend to spread information more rapidly. This is the result of cynicism that voters have tendency to switch their affiliations from one candidate to another.

Implications for Political candidates

The fundamental and core aim of this study was to determine factors responsible for the political trust deficit in the Gujrat and to give recommendations to political candidates, so as to build strong relation with voters based on trust. Especially, in the political system of Pakistan where environment of distrust is increasing day by day, it is very hard to repair trust fissure but it can be improved significantly by the following measures. Analysis of the factors and reasons, specified by the political experts in their interviews, can be categorized in seven arguable reasons and considered to be the major source contributing to a sharp decline in the trust. Purposely, to revamp, maintain or enhance the trust among voters, political candidates need to mediate these factors identified through interviews. Majority of the issues conceptualized in the study are in the control of the political candidates. Beginning from the personal skills, a political candidate should concentrate on the development of above stated weaknesses. Firstly, the most crucial personal skill is to have the adequate communication skills, which reflects the ability of the candidate to convey and communicate clear and memorable messages to the voters in an impressive way. Candidate should be able to evaluate the ground realities as well as the ability to handle the global manipulative influences. Secondly, the candidate should promote themselves as the trustworthy individual. Thirdly, to convince the voters and to win their trust, a candidate should be aspirational and have ability to communicate effectively about the desires and ambitions. Lastly, candidate should have a unique political approach. Besides, their party agenda, they should promote the personal and area specific agenda. By focusing the factual problems

and area specific requirements, they will be able to manifest their deep involvement in appraising and solving these problems.

Another important issue manifested by the respondents was the ability of the candidate to treat all the voters fairly and impartially. After winning the election, candidates should substantiate that they are not representing a specific group but all the citizen of the area. Above all, candidate should have team based approach by bringing all the important individuals on the board to find the appropriate solution of the issues. The previous practice of promising too high expectations should be discouraged. Analysis of circumstances based on facts and figures should be done before launching the election campaigns. Limitations during the past terms should be conceded and accepted with open heart and the future promises and expectations should be based on actual situations. Once, these factual promises have been finalized, candidate should promote them clearly and objectively and remain affirm to achieve them. Candidate should try their level best to meet the expectations and in case they fail to come up to the expectations of their voters they should face the voters and clarify them regarding the obstacles in way of the achieving of those. This effort and gesture will ultimately help to understand the situations and end-up with high level of trust building among the annoyed voters. Primarily, in the circumstances when there is peak level of trust deficit and when there are difficulties to maintain personal integrity of being honest, there is a strong recommendation by the experts that political candidate should admit mistakes immediately followed-up by exerting full efforts to bring things back on the right track. Naturally, people are very forgiving and forgive those who admit mistakes with promise not to repeat them in future. Because to commit a mistake is something innate human nature and anybody can make a mistake.

Bridging the gap between voters and the political leaders is the most important reason to restore the dysfunctional trust of the voters. This was a common recommendation of the respondents. Winning candidates should actively participate in the community affairs and social activities. It is only possible by having frequent interaction with the voters and by making their access/approach easy and free to the common voters. The continual interaction with the voters will reassure that voters' choice was right and their dreams will come true. This was unanimous indication of a significant proportion of respondents that if the political candidates comply with the aforementioned issues they will be able to build a strong and unflinching relation with the voters and vice versa.

Direction for further research

This research reveals the important factors and trends that need to be addressed by the political candidates to avoid the decline in the distrust of the voters. At the same time, it provides bases for candidates to further enhance their trust among voters. This particular research focused exclusively on the views and comments of the political experts. That represents only one sided view of the picture. To deeply understand the phenomena of trust and trust breach between political candidates and voters, voters

should be brought on the board and their views should be compiled. A very important future research direction is based on the identification of reasons and factors contributing in the decline of the trust, from the view point of political experts as well as voters in the political system of Pakistan. After their identification a research should be conducted using the social network methodologies to prioritize these reasons. This will help the political candidates as well as political parties to utilize the research findings to strengthen the relationship with their voters based on trust.

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