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# THE VOICE OF THE CITIZEN CONSUMER

*A History of Market Research,  
Consumer Movements, and the  
Political Public Sphere*



*Edited by*  
*Kerstin Brückweh*

THE GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

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## Foreword

In the run-up to the general elections of 6 May 2010 the British public could, for the first time, watch a series of three television debates between the leaders of all three major parties. Immediately after the end of each debate, viewers were presented with a 'temperature graph' showing the reactions of a carefully selected public towards each of the statements of the candidates. Polls on which of the candidates had performed best were also conducted by other independent polling agencies. The leader of the Liberal Party, Nick Clegg, seemed to be the clear overall winner of the debates. Everyone, therefore, expected a vast increase in Liberal votes at the general election. This did not happen. Their popular vote was up by only 1 per cent, and the party actually lost six seats compared to the previous election results.

Opinion polling permeates modern political life, and critics fear that it will undermine democracy by turning political decision-making from a rational exchange of arguments into a marketplace, where values and principles are shaped and sold like cars and clothes according to the short-lived preferences of a volatile public opinion. The last British general election was a showpiece in the complexity of political elections and the formation of public opinion not just as the result of spin doctors' manipulation of the media and its consumers. It cannot be overlooked, however, that there are obvious parallels between the mechanisms of advertising and decision-making on the consumer market and in contemporary politics, and therefore also between market research and political opinion polling.

Especially in modern global markets, consuming can be a highly political activity, and the mechanisms of its choices are often as complicated as those behind the decision-making in political voting. This has become particularly clear during the recent economic crisis when German consumers posed a problem. They did not consume enough. This was remarked on critically by several foreign governments. By withholding their appetite for new acquisitions, German consumers added some strain to already tense international economic relations.

The fact that consuming and politics are so closely intertwined in modern societies poses particular problems for political theorists of democratic government, who fear that this will undermine the basis of politics in the exchange of rational arguments. Others are more relaxed about this and point out the various mechanisms and institutions by which political as well as market consumers make sure they can make informed choices. Whatever the fears or hopes may be, there can be no doubt that this is a topic which is at the centre of any critical analysis of modern politics. It is therefore surprising that relatively little research has been conducted into the connection between market research and opinion polling.

At the German Historical Institute this topic forms part of a project conducted by Kerstin Brückweh within our newly established main research area, Political History in Social and Cultural Perspective. In this research area we try to contribute to the analysis of modern British society by looking at the shifting boundaries of the realm of politics and of 'the political'. The international conference 'Consumers in the Public Sphere: Conceptualizing the Political Public in a Consumer Society', which was held at the German Historical Institute in May 2008, made an important contribution towards this aim. I am very grateful, therefore, to Kerstin Brückweh not only for organizing this conference with participants from Britain, the United States, Austria, France, Switzerland, and Germany, but also for editing this volume. I am sure it will be an important stimulus for future comparative research in this field.

The volume has profited not only from the essays which have been included in it, but also from all the other papers and contributions by commentators and chairs given at the conference. I should like to thank all those colleagues who helped by sharing their expertise, in particular, Sheryl Kroen and Frank Mort for their papers; Andreas Ellmeier, Kai-Uwe Hellmann, Benjamin Ziemann, and Christina von Hodenberg for comparatively commenting on the papers; and Stefan Schwarzkopf, Anja Kruke, Bernhard Fulda, and Martina Steber for moderating the panels. My thanks also go to the staff of the German Historical Institute: to Tanja Wiczorek who helped with the organization of the conference; and Angela Davies who undertook the task of translating the German and revising the English manuscripts, and preparing

the volume for publication with her usual care. Finally, my thanks go to Oxford University Press, to the referees whose useful comments improved the manuscript, and to Sarah Holmes and the Delegates who accepted this volume for publication.

Andreas Gestrich

*London*  
*August 2010*



## Acknowledgements

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Plate 12.1 Clou der Party (*Clou* of the Party). *Source*: Kultur- und werbe-geschichtliche Agentur, Freiburg im Breisgau (KWAf).

Plate 12.2 Erfolg mit Nivea (Success with Nivea). *Source*: Beiersdorf AG, Hamburg.

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# PART I

## Introduction



# Perspectives for a History of Market Research, Consumer Movements, and the Political Public Sphere

KERSTIN BRÜCKWEH

'If there were a General Election tomorrow, which party would you support? . . . Which brands of Advocaat/Egg Flip have you heard of?'<sup>1</sup> These are the sorts of questions market researchers and opinion pollsters typically ask in omnibus questionnaires. They are always followed by clarifications about occupation, employment status, income, age, sex, family status, and so on. There is presumably nobody today who has not been approached to answer questions such as these. Market research, audience research, and opinion polls are prominent features of today's society. While the first two have influenced the economic sphere for almost a century, the latter was mainly established in European nations after the Second World War. Since then, democracies in modern consumer societies have become increasingly dependent on surveys. When parties want to find out if voters will support them in general, or on a specific issue, they carry out an opinion poll. The same is true for the marketplace. When companies want to know if a new product will be successful they hold a survey. Without doubt, market research and opinion polls have shaped the political public sphere in Western consumer societies, especially after the Second World War. However, this evident connection between market research and opinion polling has attracted little interest in historical research. Where historians have paid attention to the use of surveys as an important social technique in the twentieth century, they have mainly focused on either market research or political opinion polls,<sup>2</sup> although there are good

<sup>1</sup> UK Data Archive, University of Essex, Colchester (distributed Jan. 1979): UKDA study no. 696, Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Limited, Gallup Polls, Jan. 1974.

<sup>2</sup> On opinion polling see e.g. Anja Kruke, *Demoskopie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Meinungsforschung, Parteien und Medien 1949–1990* (Düsseldorf, 2007); David Broughton, *Public Opinion Polling and Politics in Britain* (London, 1995); Andrew Taylor, "'The Record of the 1950s Is Irrelevant': The Conservative Party, Electoral Strategy and Opinion Research,

reasons to treat both at the same time: they have the same origin, use the same techniques, are frequently carried out by the same private companies, and, as can be seen in the introductory example, often treat their fellow citizens as both citizens and consumers, asking them questions relating to both areas in one and the same survey.<sup>3</sup> In focusing on these two areas of application—the political sphere and the consumer's sphere—this volume connects new political history and the history of consumption.

Surveys constitute only one voice of the citizen consumer in the public sphere. Citizen consumers also act on their own initiative, and they have done so since long before surveys became prominent in the public sphere. Thus consumer movements have built another important voice for consumer citizens, one which has made an impact on the political public sphere. While consumerism can often be seen as a social and political movement,<sup>4</sup>

1945–64', *Contemporary British History*, 17 (2003), 81–110; Laura Dumond Beers, 'Whose Opinion? Changing Attitudes towards Opinion Polling in British Politics, 1937–1964', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), 177–205; Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics* (Chicago, 1993); Jon Cowans, 'Fear and Loathing in Paris: The Reception of Opinion Polling in France, 1938–1977', *Social Science History*, 26 (2002), 71–104; Loïc Blondiaux, *La Fabrique de l'opinion: Une histoire sociale des sondages* (Paris, 1998). On market research or special areas of application see e.g. Stefan Schwarzkopf, 'Discovering the Consumer: Market Research, Product Innovation, and the Creation of Brand Loyalty in Britain and the United States in the Interwar Years', *Journal of Macro-Marketing*, 29 (2009), 8–20; Harm G. Schröter, 'Zur Geschichte der Marktforschung in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert', in Rolf Walter (ed.), *Geschichte des Konsums* (Stuttgart, 2004), 319–36; Ina Merkel, 'Alternative Rationalitäten, fremdartige Träume, absurde Utopien: Über Werbung und Marktforschung im Sozialismus', *Zeitgeschichte* (2004), 5–20; Gerben Bakker, 'Building Knowledge about the Consumer: The Emergence of Market Research in the Motion Picture Industry', *Business History*, 45 (2003), 101–27; Benjamin Ziemann, *Katholische Kirche und Sozialwissenschaften 1945–1975* (Göttingen, 2007); Clive D. Field, '“The Secularized Sabbath” Revisited: Opinion Polls as Sources for Sunday Observance in Contemporary Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 15 (2001), 1–20. Studies written by market researchers or opinion pollsters themselves are e.g. Colin McDonald and Stephen King, *Sampling the Universe: The Growth, Development and Influence of Market Research in Britain since 1945* (London, 1996); Robert M. Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling* (Oxford, 1991); Nick Moon, *Opinion Polls: History, Theory and Practice* (Manchester, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Studies that link market research and political opinion polling are Joe Moran, 'Mass-Observation, Market Research, and the Birth of the Focus Group, 1937–1997', *Journal of British Studies*, 47 (2008), 827–51; Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Daniel J. Robinson, *The Measure of Democracy: Polling, Market Research, and Public Life 1930–1945* (Toronto, 1999); Jean Converse, *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence, 1880–1940* (Berkeley, 1987); Frank Mort, 'Competing Domains: Democratic Subjects and Consuming Subjects in Britain and the United States since 1945', in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2006), 225–48.

<sup>4</sup> On consumerism in Britain e.g. see Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003).



it is sometimes inspired by a purely economic motivation. Hence the innovations put forward by consumer movements in the twentieth century range from the publication of product tests that are mostly concerned with best buys to initiatives such as ethical consumerism or the fairtrade movement.<sup>5</sup> In the long run, the different development of consumer movements in European nations was influenced by governmental regulations, at both national and supranational level, as this volume shows.

While consumer movements can be quite powerful, unorganized surveyed citizen consumers remain a diffuse powerless bulk. Moreover, surveyed citizens give away personal data which can be used for the future work of market researchers, opinion pollsters, and users of surveys (for example, governments). Giving away data can take the form of the already mentioned questions on occupation, sex, age, and so on in omnibus questionnaires where citizen consumers consciously give away data about themselves, but it can also take more indirect forms, such as the use of databases that were built up for different purposes (for example, the assessment of creditworthiness or bonus systems in supermarkets). The increasing use of computers in all fields of society made possible an enormous data flow from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>6</sup> These were also the years when marketing departments as users and producers of market research were generally established in many companies.<sup>7</sup> With the increasing applications of surveys and technical advancement, the number of competing interests has risen; some fear that the privacy of personal data is threatened,

<sup>5</sup> For a history of the fairtrade movement see Matthew Anderson, 'NGOs and Fair Trade: The Social Movement behind the Label', in Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton, and James McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2009), 222–43.

<sup>6</sup> For histories of the influence of computers see e.g. Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine* (2nd edn. Boulder, Col., 2004); James W. Cortada, *The Digital Hand: How Computers Changed the Work of American Manufacturing, Transportation, and Retail Industries* (Oxford, 2004); and Jon Agar, *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For the establishment of marketing departments in German companies see Hartmut Berghoff, 'Marketing im 20. Jahrhundert: Absatzinstrument—Managementphilosophie—universelle Sozialtechnik', in id. (ed.), *Marketinggeschichte: Die Genese einer modernen Sozialtechnik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 11–58, at 17. Some companies had marketing departments even before the Second World War; see the example of Unilever's in-house agency Lintas discussed in Schwarzkopf's essay in this volume. For the history of marketing see e.g. Christian Kleinschmidt and Florian Triebel (ed.), *Marketing: Historische Aspekte der Wettbewerbs- und Absatzpolitik* (Essen, 2004); and Roy Church and Andrew Godley (eds.), *The Emergence of Modern Marketing* (London, 2003).

while others become heavily dependent on as much data as they can get to satisfy their clients. Political and economic marketing and surveying therefore need to comply with data protection regulations legislated by nation-states in accordance with guidelines from the European Union or other supranational and transnational bodies.

The essays in this volume follow up these developments in three parts, each of which deals with France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The choice of these three countries is not intended to be exclusive, but draws on current European research and literature. While Britain has a strong tradition of connecting the history of consumption with the history of politics and civil society, France has been influential in looking at the impact of opinion polling and of power in general in different fields,<sup>8</sup> for example, in politics, a topic also addressed by German research, one of whose main strengths is work on experts and their influence on the political process. From the perspective of the history of market research, which is still in its fledgling stage, it seems too early to claim these three countries as paradigmatic for modern European developments, and the USA is, of course, a steady point of reference. The second part of this volume, entitled 'Producing Knowledge about Citizens and Consumers', demonstrates connections between market research and opinion polling, and asks how market researchers and opinion pollsters have produced knowledge about citizens and consumers in the UK, France, and Germany. This part also deals with the question of how market researchers placed themselves in the political sphere and how they can be placed in it. Stefan Schwarzkopf provides an overview of the origins of British market research and argues that market researchers in the UK had an almost radical left-wing political past. While Schwarzkopf takes a long perspective, Judith Coffin focuses on a case study to show how knowledge about 'the female public' was produced and presented in 1950s France. She focuses mainly on

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Meinungsforschung: Eine "Wissenschaft" ohne Wissenschaftler', in id., *Rede und Antwort* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 208–16, first published in *Pouvoirs*, 33 (1985). In addition, this volume is obviously influenced by another French intellectual, Michel Foucault, and his ideas on governmentality, which go back to two lectures given at the Collège de France in 1978/9. For an English translation and discussion see Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality. With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michael Foucault* (Chicago, 1991). For Germany see e.g. Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann, and Thomas Lemke (eds.), *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart: Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000).