

# *Making of a Politician Brand in India: A Curious Case of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and BJP*

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## **Abstract**

Political Marketing has evolved in the last few decades to become more person dependent, or politician-driven than ever. This has led to the phenomenon of politicians being branded based on electoral expectations and aspirations. While there has been extensive research on how and why a politician is branded, there isn't much work on how does a politician brand journey's through a voter's mind from the lowest level of association to the highest. This restricts the brand-building effort only to the perceptions of voter's needs and expectations. This paper explores the journey of a politician brand in a voter's mind from being unaware of the brand, to become an advocate of the brand. A framework has been presented to explain this journey of a politician brand, along with discussing a contemporary case of politician brand building in India. Extensive literature review and case studies have been used as an approach to critically analyze the subject, which is not restricted to India, but touching upon global democracies including – the US and the UK. Politician brands steadily transcend in the electorate's mind. This would help in a more concerted and focussed effort on brand building in the electorate's mind.

**Key Words:** Political Marketing, Political Branding, Leader Branding, Politician Branding

**JEL Classification:** M31, D71, D72

## **Introduction**

Political branding, as a sub-set of political marketing, has been in existence for a long time, with political leaders being one of its significant pillars. A politician or leader brand aims at propagating a brand identity to its target audience, to create a favorable brand image in an individual's mind. An established brand image helps individuals to cut short their decision-making process and reduce associated risks. Politician branding hence is a critical aspect of the overall political marketing landscape. The literature on politician leader branding often has the trait-based or consumer-expectation based studies at its core. However, forming an image in an individual's mind is not a fleeting event. A brand goes through a

journey in the consumer's mind, transcending various stages before a positive image, it aims at, is firmed up.

Despite extensive literature available on branding and political marketing, there is a limited theoretical exploration in the direction of a brand journey in an individual's mind in terms of his association with the brand, from none to the strongest. Politician brands must be cognizant of these stages and tenets for each of the stages that affect the brand's journey. In this paper, we have tried to demonstrate this journey through a BA4 (Brand - Awareness, Association, Acceptance, and Advocacy) Funnel where each stage of the funnel represents progressive phases of a brand's journey in an individual's mind.

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### Political Branding: Evolution and Perspectives

A brand is defined as a distinguished name or symbol intended to identify and differentiate the goods and services of one seller from another seller (Aaker D. A., 1991). However, (de Chernatony & Dall'Omo Riley, 1998) argued that the brand is more than just a logo for identification purposes. (Smith & French, 2009) stated that brands help people decide while reducing their acquisition risk. Political branding as a sub-set of political marketing, deals with building, managing and leveraging a brand and its brand equity throughout its life.

It is built upon the personal and cultural relationship between the voter and a political entity, which could be an ideology, party or the candidate (Kumar, Dhamija, & Dhamija, 2016). From the political point of view, the image of a political brand for a consumer (voter) can be explained with the help of the associative network model of consumer memory. The image received by the voter (based on identity propagated by the brand) (Kapferer, 2008) and the associations held in his memory concerning the brand, are stored in a memory as individual information nodes along with other details (Srull & Wyer, Jr., 1989). Such associations are held in memory of voters for political entities and are compared with each other for comparison and benchmarking purposes (Cwalina & Falkowski, 2015).

A political brand could be created based on any of the three distinct political entities – (i) political ideology, (ii) political party and, (iii) political leader. While a vast majority of voters make a decision based on the overall political package (Harris & Lock, 1996), a party leader often plays a central role in influencing this decision. The contribution of ideology has been posited to be declining, with consumer expectations a center stage (Reeves, Chernatony, & Carrigan, 2006). The rise of political leaders, superseding political party, as a political alternative has affected the voter decision making a journey.

This shift to a leader-centric democratic (electoral) system increases focuses on political leaders (or politician brands) for developing political theories and concepts (Teles, 2012). (Lott, 1986) stated that politicians are the focal entity

of political branding which helps limit opposition in the political landscape.

### Politician Brands: Global Perspectives and Cases

Politician brands or branded politicians have been a long-existing phenomenon globally. Politicians have branded themselves to align themselves with the voters' expectations. Politicians are branded to give a face to the political party and be able to connect to the electoral effectively. (Smith & French, 2009) suggest that a political brand helps in providing sociological, rational, and psychological benefits to voters. It presents relationships with the help of elements of the brand or sender (physique and personality), elements of the target audience, or receiver (reflection and self-image) and the relationship (proposed and actual) between the sender and the receiver (relationship and culture) (Kapferer, 2008).

(Guzmán & Sierra, 2009) proposed a brand image framework for Mexico's 2006 presidential candidates, based on five factors (competence, empathy, openness, agreeableness, and handsomeness) of personality. These factors, which were created basis Aaker's brand personality and Caprara's candidate personality frameworks, configured the politician brand's image in minds of Mexican voters. The brand identity propagated for the candidates is based on the electoral expectations of the country. Mexican voters evaluated presidential candidates primarily on their capability and energy. A fair proportion of influence is exerted by the physical appearance of the candidate too in the Mexican elections. This combination of various elements of the candidate's personality helped create a brand image in the voters' minds. The identity hence conceived and propagated by the candidate for the voters encompassed aspects to influence the politician's brand image.

Positing on the political landscape in the US, (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2007) explained the political branding of George W. Bush during the 2004 elections. Personality dimensions play a critical role in the acceptance or rejection of the politician brand by the voter. They provide the cognitive 'cues' that act as short cuts for voters in decision

making, without needing to understand complex policy arguments (Rapoport, Hartman, & Metcalf, 1989). Voters in the USA associate themselves with a leader who is a mix of a hero and a warm person.

For a political 'product', the personality is its core feature and plays an important role in pursuing voters for their allegiance. Bush's personality was projected to match the voters' expectations of a true American leader. The identity propagated for Bush through his interactions, formal and informal, was of unreflective self-confidence and American values (personified by his golf stories).

A politician's brand image is created essentially around the personality features of the politician, which can connect to people's beliefs (Cwalina & Falkowski, 2015). While such a brand image is created to further its support among the loyalists, it also aims at capturing the attention of fringe voters or those who are not engaged with the politician (Carpini, 1999).

The 'New Labour', under the leadership of Tony Blair, swept to power in a landslide election victory in 1997. Tony Blair achieved this largely by propagating an ideology of inclusive politics, hence leaping at the ideological age (White & Chernatony, 2002). (Needham, 2005) highlighted the importance of voter perception as a measure of success in the election process and communication to the voters. It was with this objective that perceptions were created and managed with specific and targeted policy commitments to the voter groups by Blair. The differentiation sought by a politician brand does not necessarily depend upon the performance but on the attributes of the brand.

All politician brands are built by projecting a brand identity of themselves while trying to establish a favorable brand image in the target audience (voters). The link between the brand identity elements (physique and personality of the sender) and the brand image elements (reflection and self-image of the receiver) is the relationship that the brand has with the customer, which is affected by its internal culture. Kapferer's brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2008) helps one understand, how a brand positions itself in the target audience's minds, courtesy its own identity. However, if

one wants to understand the phased movement of a brand from the lowest to the highest level of its relationship with the consumer, a different construct needs to be put in place, which could demonstrate this movement across levels of brand-consumer relationships in a political scenario (least strong to most strong).

### **Making of a Political Brand in Voters' Minds: A Case in Indian Political Landscape**

Political parties and leaders project themselves wrapped in identities that create a favorable perception about themselves in their target audience's (or voters') minds. It is especially important in the wake of the declining role of ideology in voters' decision-making process. These identities are carefully woven keeping in mind voter expectations and needs, which are backed by thorough consumer research (Reeves, Chernatony, & Carrigan, 2006).

Fundamentally, political marketing focuses on what the brand owners (politician and party) perceive their brand to be, and how they can manage key capabilities of the brand over and above that' (OCass & Voola, 2011). While it has been firmly established with the help of expansive literature that the voters rely on cues and impressions of the politician brands to make a selection to avoid complex information processing (Marland, 2013; Cwalina & Falkowski, 2015; Guzmán & Sierra, 2009; Kumar, Dhamija, & Dhamija, 2016), the transcendence or journey of the brand inside the voter's mind has largely been untouched.

A positive brand image in a consumer's mind helps it take a quick and favorable action for a brand while the negative decision helps the consumer take a quick negative action for the brand. However, the brand image established in the consumer's mind is not created in a given moment. It transcends from the lowest level of association with the brand to the highest level.

We propose the '**BA4 Brand Journey Funnel**' in this paper, to show the transcendence of a politician brand in voters' mind from the least strong relationship to the strongest relationship. The BA4 funnel is explained with

the help of a contemporary case of the current ruling party in the country, Bhartiya Janta Party (hereafter, BJP). The politician brand that BJP is trying to build and position against its main opposition party, Indian National Congress (hereafter, Congress), is Brand 'Sardar Patel'. BJP, the current ruling party in the world's biggest democracy, unveiled the world's tallest statue of the first deputy prime minister & home minister of free India, 'Sardar' Vallabh Bhai Patel on his 143<sup>rd</sup> birth anniversary on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2018 (My Gov India Fortnightly Newsletter, 2018). BJP, riding on its electoral successes in 2014 and then in 2019 Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament) elections (Sridharan, Varshney, Kumar, & Ganguly, 2014), is in one of its most successful phases since its formation in 1980 (1951, if we consider its journey from when it was Bharatiya Jan Sangh (2019)). But there's a natural handicap with BJP unlike its competitor, Congress. BJP was formed after India achieved independence from British rule in 1947. The BJP owes its founding to the erstwhile Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which was formed in 1951 by Syama Prasad Mukherjee. After the State of Emergency in 1977, the Jana Sangh merged with several other smaller parties to form the Janta Party, a single opposition against the Congress party (led by Indira Gandhi). After three years in power, the Janata party dissolved in 1980 with the members of the erstwhile Jana Sangh reconvening to form the BJP under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani (Guha, 2007) (Chaulia, 2002) (DiSilvio, 2007).

Of course, Congress itself has evolved majorly from how and why it was established in 1885 with A.O. Hume as its president. He formed Congress after his conviction about the opposition that the British rule faced in India, which also led to thatching of rebellion against the rule (Bevir, 2003). At that time INC consciously decided to avoid issues that could foster antagonism, including women's rights and social status. It was only after Gandhi's rise in the party that social issues were made integral to the INC. However, the core of the party was tested and changed multiple times as the party went through multiple splits owing to changing allegiances and ideologies (Low, 1988). This can be understood by the icons that the current party

holds close to itself, like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajeev Gandhi who were not intimately associated with the establishment of the Indian National Congress. There are no mentions of A.O. Hume or SD Banerjee, the founding fathers of the INC. Congress in its current form was a breakaway faction from the erstwhile Indian National Congress, which was later recognized as the INC by the Election Commission (EC) (Mukherjee, 2011) (Hardgrave, Jr., 1970). However, it has been successfully able to create a perception among the masses as one of the oldest party of the country that fought for independence and has been there for more than a century.

Unlike Congress, BJP does not have a pre-independence 'freedom fighter' leader brand name associated with itself. Congress, on the other hand, has always enjoyed the advantage of 'owning' the biggest leader brand of this country ever, Mahatma Gandhi (hereafter, Gandhi). BJP, hence to have its challenger brand to give it a historical significance, needs to build it from scratch, to build a credible image for itself in the mind of the masses, the same way as Gandhi has helped build for the Congress.

A distinguished brand would help it enjoy the benefits associated with this brand i.e. loyal supporters and brand advocates (LLC, 2016). However, a brand is built after a long-term brand building endeavor that gets stronger with time while going through various challenges and keeping up with its brand promise. Gandhi has been associated with India's independence which is considered as the biggest milestone in the country's journey. This association has made BJP's job even more difficult, as the challenger brand had to show an accomplishment almost as big as winning independence. What could it be?

To manage this, BJP for the last six years while it has been in power, has been making conscious attempts, to build on the persona and ideology of one of the Congress' tallest historical leaders, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel (hereafter, Patel). The dedication of the world's tallest statue of Patel, also known as the 'Iron man of India' was a step in this direction. In a typical sense of keeping all eggs in one basket, Congress has overtly been dependent upon Gandhi

and to some extent on the first Prime Minister of free India, Jawahar Lal Nehru (hereafter, Nehru) to have a historical brand associated with itself. BJP sensed this overreliance of Congress on one or two brands, while ignoring other possible brands, and embarked on the journey of creating Brand Patel for itself. When India won its freedom in 1947 from the British rule, it was a tattered group 565 princely states, many of whom wanted to remain independent. It was Patel who successfully executed the mammoth task of bringing these states, fiefdoms, and cities together and integrated them into what is today a single unified country, India (Singh, 1986).

BJP's strategy is not only to build upon its own set of popular leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee but also add to its list the leaders from Congress which have been neglected by Congress i.e. Sardar Patel.

**The BA4 Brand Journey Funnel**

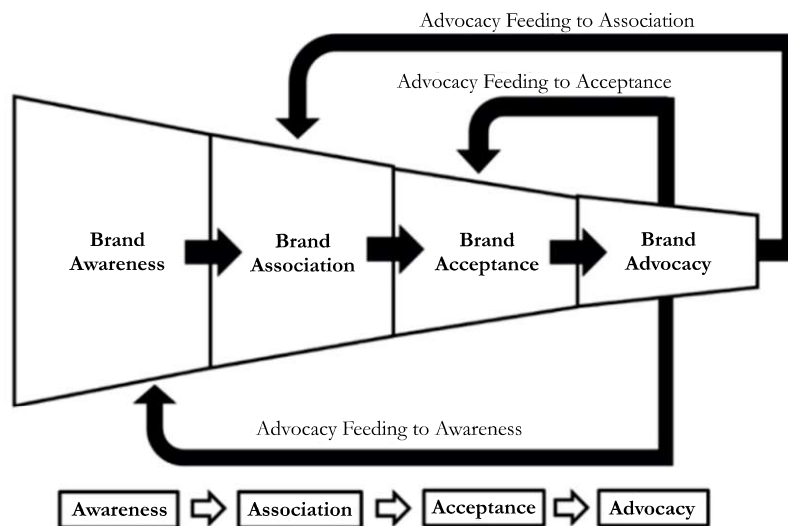
The choice of BJP in harnessing Patel to build a brand in the voter's minds is hardly surprising. The choice of Patel emerges from a host of reasons. Not only the fact that Patel was the actual choice to lead the country as prime minister because he was chosen by the PCC (Raghavan, 2016) over Nehru but was side-lined to push Nehru ahead

is a very strong plot for the BJP.

His strongman image and bias towards action and unity are some of the other factors that could come to aid the strategy (Singh, 1986) (Sharma, Singh, & Singh, 2015) (Building a Nation, 2019) as these may find resonance with BJP's image projection of a 'do-er' (Mehta, 2016). A political leader brand transcends through the voters' minds in various stages.

Each stage has an entry point, external and internal factors driving the journey of brand and an exit point. We propose a brand journey funnel that shows this journey of a brand in people's minds. The brand transcends from people being unaware of it to finally become advocates for the brand. This journey goes from Brand Awareness to Brand Advocacy, through two intermediate stages, which are Brand Association and Brand Acceptance (hence, BA4). Each of the stage's outcome is the entry point for the next stage.

Brand Advocacy, in turn, completes the loop by feeding back into the Brand Awareness, Brand Association, and Brand Acceptance stages. We shall understand the BA4 Brand Journey Funnel further with the help of the political scenario introduced above.



**Figure 1: BA4 Brand Journey Funnel explaining the journey of a politician brand in a voter's mind**  
 Source: Authors' Representation

**Brand Awareness:** Brands aim at creating brand equity for themselves by achieving a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand among the target group (Keller, 1993). Voters are exposed to various politician brand across their lifetime. Exposure to a brand through various mediums and messages forms the basis of brand awareness. Brand awareness sometimes can be critical in influencing the purchase decision of a consumer (Keller, 2008), and is often cited as the foundation of brand equity of a brand (Kotler, Keller, Koshy, & Jha, 2013).

While recognition and recall, two components of brand awareness, have each a different trigger and source, based on the exposure of the consumer to the brand, brand awareness is generally a function of repeated exposure. The exposure could be to the whole brand or its elements, and the medium of exposure could be advertising, promotion, sponsorship, events marketing and public relations (Keller, 2008).

However, in the political landscape, the choice made by a voter is a serious one, even though he has to live with the collective choice which may not be his own (Harris & Lock, 1996). Unlike recognition, which is a factor of repetition of exposure, recall requires linkages in the memory to the appropriate category of the brand (Keller, 2008). These linkages are created in the voter's mind based on implicit and explicit messages from the brand as well as through discussion and exchange of thoughts within a closed group of the audience like friends, family, and acquaintances. Brand awareness itself is not a binary feature, but a continuum. The brand awareness moves from the lowest stage (unaware) to the highest stage (top of mind).

A systematic and significant effort is expended by the ruling BJP in exposing voters to the stories, struggles, and contributions that Patel made towards the country. The messaging has been consistent with Patel being a national leader, who did not get his due from the Congress to keep Nehru and his successors in the forefront (Business Standard, 2016). While the messaging was reinforced by various stories, the communication was kept alive on discussion, news reports, public relations corridors and

even mass media (Business Line, 2018). Patel's statue that was dedicated to the nation in 2018 was in the same line, to make the nation aware of Patel and encourage discussion around his contribution to the country, while also invite views on his treatment in the Congress. Researches have shown that recognition alone can result in more positive feelings for brands and even people (Aaker D., 1996).

Political marketing tenets as propounded by (Kotler, 1975) suggest that building a political brand requires the hopeful (politician) has to place itself in the voter market, just as the product is placed in the consumer market, and appeal to the consumer by communicating vigorously the right image.

The placement of Brand Patel by BJP in the voter market as a challenger brand to the long-entrenched Brand Gandhi belonging to Congress was also a part of a systematic strategy. This was keeping in mind the rise of consumer-driven politics (Reeves, Chernatony, & Carrigan, 2006) and the importance of political leader's relevance for the voters (discussed in 'Acceptance' stage).

While awareness is the first step for a brand in the brand journey, it in itself cannot encourage the consumer to make a decision (Aaker D., Managing Brand Equity, 1991). Brands have to instead manage strategic awareness or being remembered for the right reasons and avoid being remembered for the wrong reasons (Aaker D., 1996). This is of higher significance for a political brand as brand salvage is much more difficult for a person brand than for a product brand.

It is worthwhile to mention that BJP has managed to play down Patel's views about Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (hereafter RSS), which is the ideological parent of BJP. Also, Godse (who assassinated Gandhi) was affiliated to RSS, and Patel had sharply criticized the organization in the past for the same. These aspects could turn out to be detrimental to the BJP's strategy to work for them.

Brand awareness, which itself is a factor of internal and external drivers, is a critical but an exploratory stage of the building of a politician brand in voter's minds. A brand creates linkages and finds engagement with the target

audience, i.e. voters during the Brand Association and Brand Acceptance stages.

**Brand Association:** It is during the Brand Association stage in the BA4 funnel that the brand aims to create an association with the TG, i.e. voters. Before associations with the TG are sought by the brand, it has to conceive a brand story, which will resonate with the TG.

While brand awareness alone is enough to create favorable consumer response, in most cases the strength, favourability, and uniqueness of brand associations play a critical role in determining the differential advantage among the brands (making up for a brand's equity) (Keller, 2008), that leads to the selection of the most preferred brand. The association plays a significant role in creating customer attitude towards a brand, and it delves on the intangible, emotive and softer- aspects of the brand.

Since the association hence established is emotional, it is imperative to understand the latent needs of the voters, which is also emphasized as an essential of political marketing (OCass & Voola, 2011). People associate with brands that they feel are like themselves and what they aspire to be. Voters are naturally inclined to support a politician brand which they feel has similar

sociodemographic, ideological and partisan traits (Marland, 2013). Voters identify with and can associate better with political brands that resonate with their thought process and also have ideologies that are similar to themselves. The association with a political brand can even go up to an extent when a supporter thinks of himself as an extension of the political brand which he supports (Kumar, Dhamija, & Dhamija, 2016). Hence, the association is doing with how similar the voter thinks the brand is to himself. This is done based on the political brand identity that is propagated through the brand's physique and personality.

Using cognitive psychology to explain consumer's perspectives towards the creation of a brand, (Smith & French, 2009) postulated that consumers form stronger and more impactful associations with the leaders who can communicate a more identifiable personality. While brand physique is the overall perception that is formed around their physical (leader's gait and posture etc.) and sartorial attributes (leader's attire and accessories etc.), personality often reflects the symbolic representation of different ideologies and values that forms the political brand (Forgas & Kagan, 1977). The politician brand image thus received by the voter (which in itself is a combination of reflection with the brand and self-image) finally forms the specific associations with the brand. These associations play an important role in the final acquisition decision. The brand image adds a layer of emotional connection, with the brand that works deeper than the functional utility of the politician brand (Scammell, 2007).

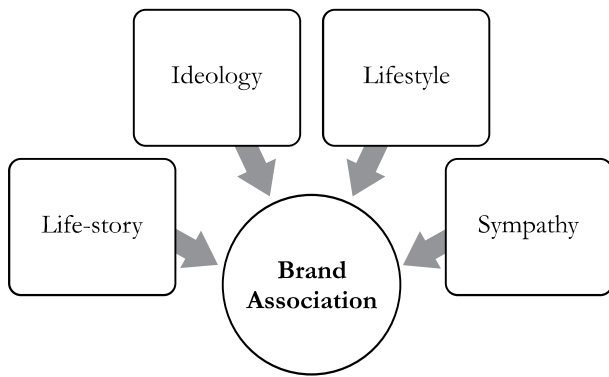
Lincoln's elongated neck portrait and Vladimir Putin's bare-chested fishing outing are all part of brand image building to create a favorable association with the TG. This is in line with the outcome of many types of research which have established that voters rely on impressions of a leader's personality and heuristic cues to make decisions (Marland, 2013). The relatability of the political brand with the TG is a key aspect of Brand Association. Relatability is built based on an understanding of specific and latent demand of the TG and forging an identity that fits seamlessly into the voter's imagination of the political brand. Political brand identity helps in creating distinctions that help build specific associations that support decision making. Emotional aspects and personality traits portrayed about the leader communicated through the brand identity play a critical role in building brand association' (OCass & Voola, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup>Brand Attitude is a sum of each attribute belief strength multiplies by its favorability (Keller, Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity, 2008)

<sup>2</sup>Refer Kapferer's Brand Identity prism for more on Brand Physique and Brand Personality (Kapferer, The identity prism, 2008)

Practically, the question that the voters ask is –"Is the brand like me?" Hence, the brand identity portrayed and the brand story that is conceived for the politician brand should be able to favorably answer the above question. A political leader brand is formed in the minds of the voters if there exists a relatability with it, from the TG's perspective. Distinct brand identity and a relatable brand story in context with a politician leader brand can be a factor of life story, ideology, lifestyle and even an unjust treatment that may invoke sympathetic emotions towards the politician brand. We first look at these factors theoretically and understand them with the help of the building of Brand Patel in India's political landscape.



**Figure 2: Drivers leading to Brand Association**

**Source: Authors' Representation**

**Life story:** Everybody likes an inspiring 'rags to riches' turn-around story which brings out the struggles of the leader. A country that earned freedom, but had the little resource to support itself, the widespread problem of scarcity, a difficult childhood and a struggle to make ends meet had been a common attribute of majority of people. Even for the young, who themselves may not have gone through this resource-stricken phase in their lives, the reminiscent stories of their parents and grandparents have kept this emotion of scraping through scarcity alive.

The narrative based on such a story hence is an easy way to build an association with the TG. It is equally important how the story is told to the audience which is easy to understand and absorb (Mucundorfeanu, 2018).

This particular approach also helps in creating an acceptance (explained further in the section) among the TG by demonstrating the functional and hard skills that would have helped the leader overcome the hardships and make a better life for himself. Another aspect of the leader's life that influences the TG is the individual's self-concept which is reinforced through the politician brand. Association between the brand and the TG is also established when an individual identifies with the life story of the brand which he inherently admires and aspires to be like. This suggests that association is easier to be made with a brand whose life-story is consistent and congruent with the individual's self-image (Smith & French, 2009).

**Ideology:** Brands cannot afford to sit on the side-lines hoping to be neutral and be acceptable to everyone. In his interview published in 2019, Phil Knight, the iconic co-founder of Nike said – “You can't try and go down the middle of the road.

You have to take a stand on something” (Snyder, 2019). However, in a conflicting view, (Freedman, 2006) suggested through his 'trap of ideology' comment that too strong an ideology leads to dreadful results in politics and leaders with a strong ideology propagate “...ideology as an instrument of 'totalitarian seduction', an all-encompassing system of ideas based on a 'single truth' and a drive for self-justification...”. This position establishes the need to be more balanced in the ideology that is adopted and communicated. Ideology as an attribute of branding is especially important not only when consumers are more committed to the cause (Massa & Testa, 2012), for example, politics but also in seemingly mundane choices (Khan, Misra, & Singh, 2013). Ideology plays an important role in building consumer brand attachments and acceptance (Chan & Ilicic, 2019).

While a political leader needs to take a stand to create an association with its TG, at the same time, the ideology, in case of a political brand, should not be too far left or too far right, which ends up alienating a big segment completely irreparably. More importantly, a political leader needs to choose the right TG for itself and then be acceptable to everyone in that TG.



It is essential to resonate with everyone in the chosen TG while ensuring that you don't alienate others irreversibly. This is line with the research done by (Dean, Croft, & Pich, 2015) who suggested that political parties (brands) evoke certain emotional connectivity among those who identify with their philosophy and ideology. The integration of the country and the nationalistic commitment behind the mammoth exercise which has been associated with Patel also suits the BJP which has nationalism as one of its key ideologies. This makes it easy for them to seamlessly integrate Patel's brand identity with their own.

**Lifestyle:** Association is a factor of relatability. A politician brand always tries to maintain that relatability with its TG. Voters look at how close the politician is from themselves. This observation is continued to be made even after the selection has been made by the voters, irrespective of the election outcome. Leader lifestyle plays an important in shaping voter perception positively or negatively. Leaders who are seen to have a non-pretentious lifestyle restricting luxuries are well accepted by the Indian voters, for the simple reason that these leaders are seen closer to themselves. There is a strong connection between the leader attributes and its impact on how the brand is perceived by the audience (Doss, 2011). Patel's arduous childhood and commitment towards peasants, laborers and the country as whole (Kusum, 2017), a strong secular ideology with a dash of patriotism (Sharma, Singh, & Singh, 2015) and a simple lifestyle despite being the deputy prime minister and home minister of the country made his association with the TG convenient.

**Sympathy:** When a leader is projected as someone who was wronged by the elite, or system or fate, it is bound to attract sympathy. Sympathy, in more than one way, helps in building an emotional association with the person in question. It also helps in curating negative emotions towards the 'perceived' wrongdoer against the person. An unjust treatment meted out to a leader by the rich and powerful is just the right narrative for people to rally behind the leader. Such a narrative builds a common sense of purpose for cross-segment voters to resurrect the 'wronged' leader. People attach their emotional self to the

leader who is portrayed as being side-lined or not given the right due etc., because of a selfish individual or reason. (Gilsinan, 2014) Voters rally behind such a leader because they vicariously want to fight the injustice meted out to the leader.

Patel had to withdraw his name from the claim of president-ship of Congress party (& hence for the first PM of free India) on Gandhi's insistence as Nehru was Gandhi's preferred choice, although Patel received more votes than that of Nehru. In fact, out of the 15 PCC members (Pradesh Congress Committee, or the state-level units of the party) who were to vote for their preferred candidate, no one voted for Nehru while Patel got 12 votes (Raghavan, 2016). Further, Patel was bestowed with the country's highest civilian award posthumously in 1991, 41 years after his death in 1950.

The delay in awarding him the award raised eyebrows and intention of the Congress was questioned. It was blamed to be side-lining political leaders from non-Nehru & then non-Gandhi family, as in the case of Patel who was given a conscious snub (The Economic Times, 2017). The narrative created due to this was of sacrifice by Patel (to let Nehru become the prime minister) and of unfairness (delay in the award of Bharat Ratna to him, especially when Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi received the award much before Patel, while the third in line prime minister from the Nehru-Gandhi family, Rajiv Gandhi received the award in the same year as that of Patel) (Open Govt Data (OGD) India, 2019).

This created a strong sense of unfairness meted upon Patel in people's minds and hence strengthening the association with Brand Patel. BJP tore into Nehru's personality while giving halo righteousness to Patel's personality using this narrative.

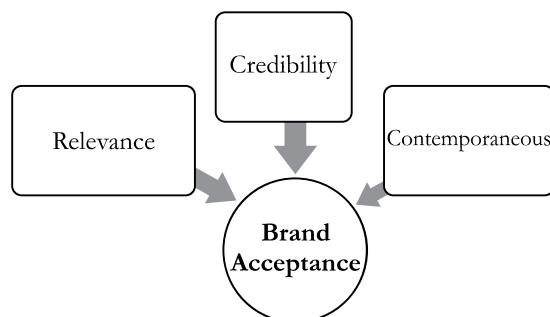
**Brand Acceptance:** While Brand Association creates a relationship between the brand and the TG, the customer need not necessarily choose the same brand. Brand Acceptance, which is the next stage of the BA4 funnel, is the real test of the strength of the associations formed between the brand and the TG. It is in the Brand

Acceptance stage is where the user makes a purchase or acquisition or voting decision. The decision is a factor of the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of association with the brands (Keller, 1993), as well as of specific factors that drive a voter to accept a brand as a preferred one. The consumer (or voter) makes this choice after forming a brand's image in his mind which is a function of brand identity that is propagated (Kapferer, 2008).

It is in this stage that the efficacy of the brand identity and the relatability of the brand story is tested. A favorable outcome for a brand will be for a voter to either vote for the politician brand or attach himself with the party or ideology that the brand seems to support.

There can be an instance where people may form an association with a brand but need not necessarily accept (acquire) it (or vote for it). (Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2003) discussed the extent and magnitude of the leader's trait on leadership while in another paper (Zaccaro, 2007) tried to predict leadership behavior based on combinations of traits and attributes

This brand image is, in turn, a factor of what consumer believes about the brand, irrespective of the brand identity that is propagated by the brand. In an age where there are multiple brands, and more than one brand may be able to make an association with the consumer, a brand must offer relevance, credibility and contemporaneous to its offering to move from the consideration set (due to association) to the purchase decision (hence, acceptance) (del Blanco, 2010).



**Figure 3: Drivers leading to Brand Acceptance**

Source: Authors' Representation

A successful brand, no matter what it is, has to be unique and should be differentiated from its competitors (Needham, 2005). Brand Acceptance depends upon multiple factors that drive the acceptance of a politician brand in the electoral's mind. These factors are essentially based on the brand's offering (over and above the brand identity that is propagated). We first have a look at these factors theoretically and then understand these in context with Brand Patel and Indian political landscape—**Relevance** – While brand association helps TG to build a connection with the brand, for acceptance of a brand, the TG looks for the brand's offering to answer the question – Is the value offered by the brand relevant to me? Simply put, does it satisfy my needs? The politician brand has to perpetually ensure that everything involved with the personal brand becomes and remains relevant (del Blanco, 2010). While relevance per se is an individual aspect, where every voter may have a different expectation and hence may deem a brand relevant or not, based on his judgment, it could still be managed by an efficient segmenting and targeting exercise. The selected segments can then be targeted for communicating the leader-fit based on their expectations and hence making a politician brand relevant to them.

Patel was also a known peasant and labor leader who fought for livelihood and better compensation for peasants and laborers, first in Gujarat and then nationally (Kusum, 2017). Farmer politics is picking up in the country and his work for the community could give an association benefit to the BJP government, in promoting itself as a pro-farmer party. For the TG on the other hand, Brand Patel has always been relevant (through his ideology and work), which has gained more importance and relevance in the recent times when there is a widespread debate on nationalism and its definition.

In a political spectrum where each political party has a core and a non-core agenda, nationalism and culture-based unification are one of the core agendas of the ruling BJP. The debate on nationalism has also been kept alive that would keep the focus of the whole nation on nationalism, which helps BJP connect with its TG with ease. Hence,

Patel's nationalistic posture with a farmer-friendly image certainly makes him a very relevant brand in the current scenario for voters. Agriculture, despite its lowest contribution in terms of value, has the highest number of people dependent on it for livelihood, directly and indirectly. Farmer's distress and importance of farmers in the building of a nation, make rural population and urban dwellers equally accepting of the idea of farmer-friendly leaders and ideology. Political parties, hence always keep farmer's issues as the core of their narratives and manifestos for creating political brands in the country

**Credibility** – A customer aims at reducing his acquisition risk while making a purchase decision. The credibility of a brand helps build trust between the brand and its TG, which essentially reduces the risks associated with the acquisition of the brand. The question that the customer asks is – Is the brand honest in making and keeping a promise? Again putting it simply, does it do what it says?. This is a critical factor for a politician brand as politicians worldwide, especially in the sub-continent, are not trusted by the electorates largely. This is usually on the account of over-promising and under-delivering, which is an epidemic issue.

A politician brand that is deemed credible, hence, has a significant differentiation against other competitor politician brands. This is in line with various researches that have linked the credibility of the brand endorser to the positive association and purchase intention among the consumer (Wang & Yang, 2010) (Aghdai, Dolatabadi, & Aliabadi, 2012).

Patel's commitment in building a unified India and exemplary success in achieving that promptly (note that Sardar Patel died within three years of India's Independence) speaks volumes about the credibility of the leader (Tandon, 2019). The geography of India with territorial and administrative continuity and integrity has often been acknowledged as Patel's doing along with three other key persons – Lord Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru, and V.P. Menon (Building a Nation, 2019).

As a principal driving force for a unified country, Patel was an excellent administrator which made him attended to the complex and sensitive challenge of partition and successfully led the charge for the unification of the country (Singh, 1986).

The first president of free India, Dr, Rajendra Prasad, famously wrote in his diary – *'That there is today an India to think and talk about, is very largely due to Sardar Patel's statesmanship and firm administration.'* (Building a Nation, 2019). Hence, Patel's image as a credible politician brand is widely accepted by the country, as his role as a shrewd strategist and an able executioner have both been acknowledged too. This makes him a trusted politician brand for the TG.

**Contemporaneous**– Automation and technological benefits have led to fast obsolescence of differentiation among brands. At the same time, consumer needs are evolving fast due to changing lifestyles and global exposure. Brands need to remain contemporary by transforming themselves from time to time to satisfy ever-changing consumer needs (Ghosh & P, 2019). Further, the rise of social media has added to the shorter shelf lives of brands and dynamic consumer behavior. This has added to the pressure for brands for being contemporary (Biswas, Ingle, & Roy, 2014). Technological advancements have also had strong political implications which have been discussed by (Malik, 1982) which has fastened the diffusion of information and perception among the TG.

Politician brands are usually in the system for a long time before taking up a central stage. Also, politician brands are made through a long history in the political landscape. This requires them to be agile in adopting and adapting to newer norms, issues, needs, and expectations of the electorate. The youth of the country grew up during the liberalization era and have seen the country grow frantically at a pace never seen before. Their expectations are different from what used to be their parent's expectations. They seek a decisive leader who can take decisions and execute them promptly while bringing everyone together (Kwatra &

<sup>1</sup>Between the years 1947 and 1949, 565 princely states were integrated to join the Indian Union in record time (Building a Nation, 2019)

Bhattacharya, 2019).

Patel's image of a strongman who delivered result is that aspect of a personality that is more alluring to the youth of this young country that adds 2 crores, new voters, every year (Sharma S. N., 2018). To add, Patel delivered the promise of unification in a structured manner by taking everyone together, which has ensured that the integration did not fall apart once he was gone. Another aspect in this relation is the subject of nationalism which has struck a chord with the young voters who discuss the implications of nationalism (good and bad) at various forums, online as well as offline. In this scenario, the idea of patriotism & nationalism, and the idea of one nation as propagated by Patel makes his ideology and vision very contemporary for the young voters.

Brand 'Patel' smoothly manages to transcend through this phase of the brand journey. BJP, which is a right-wing party with nationalism as one of its core agenda, could not have asked for a better brand icon. Patel was a tall political leader who unified free India and was identified as a patriotic leader, who believed in the idea of one nation and saw through the integration of the country with strategic intent and efficient execution. In Patel, BJP found an icon who valued and pushed for nationalism and unity across regions of the country (Sharma, Singh, & Singh, 2015). Brand acceptance is the moment of truth for a politician brand. For all the strategies related to a politician brand's identity conception, communication, and delivery, to form a favorable image in the TG's mind, it is the acceptance of the brand that finally matters.

Awareness and association, while are key for a brand to succeed, the brand acceptance 'is' the success. However, once the TG is aware of the brand, it forms an association with the brand and has finally accepted the brand, it's time for the brand to take the relationship with the TG to the next level. This is driven by more than just the functional and emotional factors. Brand Advocacy for a politician brand leads to an organic expansion of the brand beyond its existing TG.

**Brand Advocacy:** With the acceptance and selection of a

political brand, a politician brand not just achieves a follower (or a customer), it also achieves a brand ambassador. Word-of-mouth is a critical piece of any marketing strategy. What customers (or followers) say about the brand is more important and holds greater significance for the potential customers or fence-sitters, than what the brand says about itself (Cebrzynski, 2005). Brand Advocacy is achieved when its customers (or followers) advocate for the brand and help it expand in the segments which have not accepted the brand as yet. Followers, now connected with their co-followers discuss how they feel about a politician brand. This can largely influence the overall perception that the TG has about the brand (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2007).

This effort by the followers of the brand, which is often dubbed as word-of-mouth or C2C (customer to customer) communication, plays a critical role in creating awareness and encourage brand choice (brand acceptance) (Lawer, 2006). A trusting relationship that is beyond self-indulgence (followers or customers who don't keep their allegiance to themselves, but rather share it with others) helps a brand to ensure stable and strong followership as the strong followers less likely to switch to the competitors. Not just because they are loyal to the brand, but because they have advocated for the brand in the social setting (Urban, 2004).

While Brand Association creates an emotional relationship between the brand and the TG, and the Brand Acceptance creates a transactional relationship driven by functional and utility-based factors, Brand Advocacy is about creating a sustaining mutual trust for the long-term. It encourages followers (or customers) to propagate a brand's ideology and values to others with compassion, without any monetary benefit. While values are inherent aspects of a brand's personality, trust is a function of promises kept by the politician brand and the expectations met of the supporters (or customers).

When the expectations are met, and the brand can build trust with its TG, followers take it upon themselves to spread the word about the politician brand. The last block of the BA4 funnel, Brand Advocacy, is the result of a long

term association and acceptance (in the form of loyalty). While advocacy is an enduring phenomenon, it requires a well-thought-of 'Advocacy program'(Knox, Pralle, Sayre, & Visser, 2011; Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2007; Walter, 2013) which goes beyond short wins through incentivization. The efforts related to advocacy are systemic and require understanding the core of the brand and the TG.

It is formed in consumer's mind through a step by step process like a funnel starting from awareness, then building favorable associations with the TG, then ensuring the acceptance of the brand and finally becoming advocates for the brand. Advocacy (which is naturally nurtured through the strong relationship between the brand and the TG) is especially significant in the case of the high involvement brands and services (Lowenstein, 2016), as a political leader. In the case of politics, advocacy is high where people support and advocate for political leaders and parties of their choice. Favorable discussions are initiated and managed not just in closed informal groups like friends and family, but also in closed formal groups like colleagues and business acquaintances, and also in unknown informal groups in public settings like trains, buses, and restaurants.

Sardar Patel was known to be a patriotic leader with a strong report card on accomplishing the unification of the country (Building a Nation, 2019). Information consumed by people in India has been fairly consistent on the subject of Patel's contribution to India's freedom movement as well as in the country's integration post-independence. Heroic and positive communication around Patel has helped people build strong and enduring emotions like trust and respect for Brand Patel. Advocacy for Brand Patel comes naturally for the people of the country, but BJP carved out an identity for him that made him look closer to the current day BJP than to the Congress. To add, the narrative of being 'wronged' by Congress party and Nehru (which is being propagated with a strong push by the BJP) adds to the anti-Nehru case that BJP has been pushing in its communication to people. It also strikes a chord with people of the country who emotionalize the "Truth

prevails in the end" phrase and hence would like to "resurrect" the glory of the 'Ironman of India'. (BBC News, 2013; Tripathi, 2018; The Asian Age, 2018).

Advocacy for a brand is not an isolated event as it supports the other three stages of the funnel. It reflects a positive word of mouth which has the potential to change the perception about the brand. Brand advocates feed into the other stages of the brand funnel by voicing their views on various platforms. Brand advocates discuss brands and factors affecting these brands in front of people who are not aware of the brand, hence expanding brand awareness of the TGs. For a set of people, the brand is in the awareness stage, but the association is missing due to a lack of knowledge about the emotional aspects of the brand. Brand advocates discuss and put across these aspects of the brands with the aware-but-not-associated audience. This helps the brand's awareness evolve into an association for the aware-but-not-associated set of people.

Finally, functional and utilitarian aspects of the brand are critical in acceptance of the brand by the TG. Brand advocates help in filling that information gap for the TG which is aware of but is still at arm's distance when it comes to accepting the brand (or voting for the brand). Brand advocates present the brand as a viable and efficient alternative as compared to the other alternatives. Since they are not associated formally with the brand or the politician, they are accepted as more credible by TG (or voters). A healthy discussion, initiated by brand advocates in formal and informal settings helps TG to transcend into the next stage of the brand funnel, the brand acceptance, which in turn, based on factors discussed earlier transcend to brand advocacy itself.

### Conclusion and Discussions

Politician Branding reduces the perceived risks associated with choosing a particular politician or his ideology for voting in. Hence, a politician brand tries to create a positive image in its target audience's mind, which eases the decision making for the individual. This image is a function of the brand identity that the brand propagates to its target audience. The brand transcends through four critical

stages in an individual's mind before it gets firmed up as a preferred and recommended brand.

This journey of the brand from non-known to an advocated one can be represented by a BA4 Brand Journey Funnel where a politician brand transcends from a state of non-awareness (lowest level of brand-customer relation) to advocacy (highest level of brand-customer relation) influenced by a multitude of factors. There are various factors under each of the four stages which lead to the transcendence of the brand from the lowest level of association to the highest level of association, namely – awareness to advocacy.

Fortunately for the BJP, Sardar Patel's identity and traits come close to the current ideology of BJP, at least on the idea of nationalism and national integration. This has helped BJP to not only cement its standing as a nationalistic party but also present itself as the right extension of Brand Patel in current times. In the Indian case, as discussed in this paper, while BJP has been doing well to own Brand Patel, the dilemma with the Congress is deepening. It has its power brand in Mahatma Gandhi, which people still believe in.

What is missing specifically is a convincing brand story with a strong promise, which is relevant as well as contemporary for the current TG. It needs to start its brand story conception with a question – Do young voters identify with the ideology propagated by Gandhi, and to what extent? Do they find Brand Gandhi relevant and contemporary as far as their thoughts and aspirations are concerned? On the other hand, the dilemma is, if they want to bolster Brand Patel themselves to keep it to themselves, which may mean diluting their association with Brand Gandhi or Brand Nehru?

Marketing is often called the battle of perceptions and it's true concerning the Congress' problem in this context. With Brand Gandhi, the problem is not the brand, but the communication which might need a re-jig to make it more relevant, contemporary and resonant to the audience. Till that happens, BJP will be more than happy to create and harvest Brand 'Sardar Patel' as its challenger brand. While

the paper takes up the building of the politician brand with a specific emphasis on Sardar Patel and how BJP's endeavor is towards achieving its strategic objectives towards the same for its advantage, the theoretical framework can also be extended for more generic applications.

Political Marketers have the job cut-out for them to create a successful politician brand in the head of the electoral. Formation of a politician brand through a strong positioning and effective communication could sustainably help the political entities. However, while understanding the stages of brand transcendence also helps in creating a distinct identity for the brand in question, it is not the first step of this exercise. A thorough and meaningful analysis of electoral and its expectations are a key to a successful brand transcendence. Without exhaustive electoral research, politician branding will be a fallible exercise.

To some extent, the same story is being played in the current realm of politics in India too, with the incumbent prime minister Narendra Modi on one side with BJP, while the Gandhi scion Rahul Gandhi on the other side with Congress. A politician brand must craft a credible brand promise and a relatable brand story to propagate an identity, which results in a positive brand image for itself. Thorough planning and execution around the tenets of BA4 Brand Journey Funnel, as discussed in this paper would help politician brands to not just earn support and votes, but also create brand advocates who help the overall momentum of their brand.

### Ending notes

With the BJP government's second stint at the center, the efforts to associate itself with Brand Patel have accentuated. They have also been concrete effort to create more such brands for itself, like that of Subhash Chandra Bose, With a strong resolve to create historic 'hero' brands for itself and a party organization which is at its strongest, these attempts are only going to become more coordinated, structured and stronger. BJP continues to push forward towards its endeavor as discussed in this paper, with another addition to the list of monuments

dedicated to Sardar Patel. The world's largest cricket stadium is going to be inaugurated by the US President, Donald Trump during his visit to India. The stadium is named after Sardar Patel and is called Sardar Patel Gujarat Stadium. It is located in Motera, near Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Modi. How successful these attempts prove to be finally, and how much electoral leverage they can have with this strategy, will be seen in the coming times, and future elections.

Voter breaks up and the impact of such a brand-building effort could be monitored over some time to understand the efficacy of such a strategy. Quantitative research on the audience sentiment could be taken up as a further study to the current subject.

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