

Introduction to the Study of Campaign Consultants

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Elections are arguably the single most important event in American democratic life, an opportunity for Americans to both give their consent to be governed and to hold their representatives accountable for past performance. Modern competitive elections for local, state, and national office are often dominated by professional campaign consultants structuring what candidates say and do. The strategies, tactics, and the management techniques of these professionals have had a fundamental impact on the quality of American elections and the nature of our democracy. The rapid rate of change in modern campaigns has been reflected in the development of specialized expertise, division of labor, and the diversification of professional needs to win an election. Although there has been a rapid growth in campaign consulting, it is often out of public view, which in turn prohibits in-depth knowledge of the extent of such activities.

The first political consultants were most likely volunteers in the elections of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson who gave their candidates advice about debates, circulating printed materials, making speeches, and getting out the vote. Campaigns have needed consultants, whether volunteers or paid professionals inside or outside a party organization, from the beginning of our democracy. However, paid professional political consultants outside political parties who make a living from campaigns are relatively new to American politics. Political parties, the center of campaign activity until three decades ago, have now taken a back seat

to the campaign consultants. Major changes in financing campaigns and dramatic changes in campaign technology have helped the rapid growth of campaign consulting. Campaign consulting is a relatively new profession that continues to evolve and redefine itself in each election cycle. Political consultants have an impact on candidates, voters, the outcome of elections, and ultimately on governance and public policy. Who are the political consultants? What do they believe? What will they do to win? Are political consultants hurting or helping the conduct of election campaigns and democracy?

The primary theme of the essays in this book is that political consultants have an important impact on campaigns and elections. Consultants have helped to redefine the role of political parties and have transformed the way candidates communicate with voters and the way voters judge candidates. They are at the core of the electoral process in the United States and in many other nations. This is, of course, not news to political consultants or candidates running for office. Candidates and consultants know they need each other and the rapid growth and diversification of the profession reveals that sense of interdependence. Although professional political consulting outside of political party organizations has been around since the 1930s, it has only recently sparked interest among political scientists, journalists, and the public. Relatively little is known about the world of political consultants.

Studies have treated campaigns as symbolic events, as propaganda activities with the power to change voter preferences, and as a determinant variable in elections, but there is little known about the role consultants play in campaigns. Studies about campaigns and elections have focused on voting behavior and the determinants of vote choices, recruitment (or why people run for office), the role of the media, campaign finance (why contributors give, how much they give, to what effect, and the need for reform), party activists and the role of party organization in elections, special interest groups in elections, the impact of negative advertising on the electorate, and the incumbent advantage in elections.

When voters moved away from partisan cues as the basis of voting, campaigns and electioneering began to matter. When campaigns and electioneering started to make a difference, so did the profession of political consulting, but empirical political science research on consulting did not keep up with the growth and influence of the industry. Campaign activities and political consulting deserve close analysis. Dan Nimmo noted that “campaigns may no longer be battles between candidates but

between titans of the campaign industry, working on behalf of those personalities.”¹ With the rise of candidate-centered elections, political parties have become less important; at the same time, the amount of money spent by candidates has skyrocketed. Consultants have taken the place of parties in most areas of campaigning, and they are spending vast amounts of money to make sure that candidates are competitive and win. It is essential to understand the individuals, and their beliefs, who are playing such a major role in modern elections. Only by doing so can we understand their importance on modern American democracy.

We need to know more about consultants, but much of the writing about the political consulting industry is atheoretical, produced by journalists or by practitioners whose writing consists of insider accounts of campaigning and “how to” books. Some scholars have attempted to combine the insider knowledge of practitioners with that of political scientists in their study of campaign management.² Although the scholarly literature about consulting is much more theoretical than that of the practitioners, it is also primarily descriptive in nature, based exclusively on case studies, interviews, or surveys of members of the industry.³ Since the state of knowledge and theory about political consultants is limited, it is difficult to examine their influence in campaigns. The intent of this book is to analyze consultant influence from a variety of perspectives.

The essays in this volume collectively present original data and analysis describing the world of campaign consultants and their impact on elections. Each chapter analyzes campaign consulting from a different perspective. Chapter 2, by James Thurber, Candice Nelson, and David Dulio, presents results from two hundred in-depth interviews with consultants and describes who consultants are and their attitudes on the consulting business, voters, the media, ethics, and the need for campaign reforms. Dennis Johnson, in chapter 3, presents a comprehensive description of the diversification and complexity of consulting as a business. In chapter 4, Martin Hamburger, a veteran campaign media consultant, provides a rare insider’s perspective of the consulting industry and describes lessons he has learned from many years in the campaign business. Paul Herrnson, in chapter 5, tests the impact of consultants on fund-raising, strategy, communications, and electoral success in congressional elections. In chapter 6 Stephen Medvic builds on Herrnson’s study by analyzing the importance of consultants and candidates in the outcome of congressional elections. Robin Kolodny reports on her analysis of consultants as electoral partners with state political parties in chapter 7. In

chapter 8 David Magleby and Kelly Patterson analyze the role of consultants in initiatives and referenda. Shaun Bowler and David Farrell in chapter 9 report on the internationalization of election campaign consultancy and the spread of political consultancy worldwide.

Classic Works on Consultants

The earliest works on modern political consulting explore the origins of the consulting industry and the background of campaign consultants. Historic accounts of elections as early as the 1828 contest between John Quincy Adams and General Andrew Jackson reveal the evidence of involvement of a variety of political consultants. The historic accounts are based on secondary sources and observations that tell us little about the role and impact of the consultants. Many studies of the role of political parties and their activists are in effect analyses of the role of consultants within parties. Reports of discussions with consultants and case studies about their role in campaigns within the past fifty years have provided a rich picture of their importance but have not provided systematic data on the profession.

Past studies explored whether consultants came from public relations backgrounds, as opposed to public service or careers in the political parties.⁴ These analyses found that consultants with public relations backgrounds dominated the political world in the middle of this century and that political consultants were effective because they provided information and communication expertise to campaigns.⁵ Nimmo also found that consultants became much more specialized in the 1960s and were not only experts in technology and communication but resource allocation as well: “Their major contribution to a campaign is rationality in allocating scarce resources—time, money and talent.”⁶

Aside from historic works about specific elections and the accounts of journalists and practitioners, the world of political consulting remained virtually unexplored by academics prior to the 1970s.⁷ As a result of Larry Sabato’s work and the heightened media attention given to the increased importance of consultants in the late 1980s and early 1990s, political consulting began to attract the interest of more academics who initiated studies into the impact of consultants upon elections.⁸ Chapter 2, “Portrait of Campaign Consultants,” stems from two hundred in-depth interviews from a national sample of general campaign specialists, pollsters, media experts, and campaign fund-raisers and presents the first

detailed description of the backgrounds, attitudes, and reported behavior of consultants.

Consultant Influence on Electoral Outcomes

What impact do campaign professionals have on electoral politics? Up to now there have been primarily two lines of research concerning the impact political consultants can have on elections. The first explores whether the use of consultants leads to increased funds for campaigns.⁹ The second examines whether retaining political consultants leads to a higher percentage of the vote for a candidate.¹⁰ These lines of research are extended in this volume with Herrnson's work, as reported in chapter 5, and Medvic's study of professionalization in congressional campaigns in chapter 6.

Herrnson in chapter 5 explores the financial implications of campaign professionalization. Candidates' viability is based on judgments concerning campaign organizations. He finds that campaign professionalization has an important impact on candidates' fund-raising success. The more consultants a campaign hires, the more money the campaign is able to raise.¹¹ Political parties, political action committees (PACs), and individuals who make large contributions want to invest their money in campaigns that have the highest chance of success, and they look to campaign professionalization as one potential indicator.

Herrnson finds that professionalism has a significant impact for both incumbents and nonincumbents on the ability of campaigns to raise funds from PACs and political parties. However, professionalism only significantly affects incumbents' ability to raise funds from individual contributors. It does not significantly improve nonincumbents' chances for raising money. Evidence is mixed regarding whether use of consultants can increase a candidate's share of the vote in elections to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Medvic in chapter 6 finds the strongest evidence that, for both challengers and open seat candidates, a more professionally run campaign equals a greater percentage of the vote. He also finds that the simple presence of professionals leads to a significant increase in the total vote, even after controls for the impact of money and quality of candidate are applied. Further, he finds that using consultants benefits Republican nonincumbents but not Democratic nonincumbents. When nonincumbents are further separated into challenger and open seat categories, Medvic

finds that both Republican challengers and open seat candidates benefit from consultant use, but Democratic candidates do not.

Although Dabelko and Herrnson did not find support for the professionalization hypothesis in their study of the 1984 House election, Herrnson used more recent data and reports in chapter 5 that candidates who waged amateur campaigns had an abysmal record and those who mounted highly professional campaigns had a much higher probability of winning, especially in open seats.¹²

Relationship between Consultants and Political Parties

There is general agreement that the decline of political parties has led to a rise in the use of political consultants (see chapters 4 and 5 in this volume). Political consulting firms have taken over many of the traditional party functions. However, there is disagreement over whether the increased use of political consultants is good or bad for political parties. Some scholars suggest that consultants weaken political parties by encouraging candidate-centered campaigning.¹³ Others disagree and argue that consultants help parties achieve collective party goals by providing services to candidates that the parties cannot do themselves (see chapter 6). Still others find that consultants depend on political parties for future business.¹⁴

Kolodny, in chapter 7, explores the two basic views of the relationship—the adversarial versus allies—between consultants and parties. Are consultants little more than “advertising agencies” for candidates, only interested in their own win/loss record, or are consultants interested in promoting a particular ideology and party goals?

Kolodny finds that Republican consultants were more likely than Democrats to have worked for the party organization. She also finds that consultants who worked for the party prior to becoming consultants were more likely to have the party as a client and were more likely to coordinate their efforts with the party. Finally, those who worked for the party organization had a more positive opinion of the party than those who did not. Overall, Kolodny’s research lends support to the allies view of the relationship between parties and consultants.

Consultant Use in Initiative Campaigns

The growth of the initiative industry is fueled by the difficulty of qualifying a measure for the ballot. Firms that specialize in initiatives are con-

centrated in California and Washington, D.C.; however, D.C. firms tend to do a mixture of candidate and initiative work. Signature gathering firms are necessary to get enough names to qualify. “To meet these signature requirements, initiative proponents in large and small states routinely hire signature-gathering firms”; if sufficient funds are available, any issue can qualify for the ballot.¹⁵

Magleby and Patterson describe in chapter 8 the role that consultants play in initiatives and referendums. First, they inquire whether citizens or consultants are the force behind initiative campaigns. Most consultants report that their role is to respond to the needs of citizens, not to create needs. However, it is possible that ideas for initiative campaigns have come from consultants. Second, Magleby and Patterson examine who hires consultants for initiatives and find that they are frequently hired by organized interests.

In addition, they query consultants about their feelings toward the initiative process. The consultants interviewed support the initiative process but note that initiatives have the potential to undermine representative government when they become too frequent. In California elected officials will not act on important matters because they can place the tough decisions in the hands of voters. Others complain that the initiative process is purely emotional and that voters make ill-informed decisions.

Further, the authors find that consultants who work on initiative campaigns do not work solely with members of their own party. In this, they differ from consultants who work on candidate elections. The latter group of consultants typically work only with other consultants of the same party.

Comparative Works: The Future of Consulting?

Sabato was the first to comment on the growing tendency for consultants to work overseas.¹⁶ The International Association of Political Consultants (IAPC), founded in 1968, has grown from fifty to almost two hundred members over the past thirty years. The association meets regularly to exchange ideas and tactics. There is some baseline scholarship from political scientists in other nations who explore the role of political consultants in their nations;¹⁷ however, little research from American scholars explores the way in which U.S. consultants have exported their talents overseas and to what effect.

Bowler and Farrell in chapter 9 examine some of the reasons for the internationalization or “Americanization” of consulting. In addition, they describe some of the limitations facing consultants who try to “go international.” They survey the members of the IAPC to probe the role that overseas consultants play, which services are in demand, and the level of cooperation between U.S. consultants in overseas campaigns.

Conclusion

Although election campaigns are a major event in American democratic life and much is written about those battles, we know little about the campaign consultants who help to structure the strategy, theme, and message of those important events. Campaign consultants are major players in modern elections, but we know little about who they are, their role, and their influence. Collectively, each chapter in this book helps to fill the gap of knowledge about campaign consultants. Each author brings original, new data and systematic observation about political consultants that helps to expand the empirical and theoretical work about campaign consultants and their impact on elections.

Notes

1. Dan Nimmo, *The Political Persuaders: The Techniques of Modern Election Campaigns* (Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 50.

2. See James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson, *Campaigns and Elections American Style* (Westview Press, 1995); Daniel M. Shea, *Campaign Craft: The Strategies, Tactics, and Art of Campaign Management* (Praeger, 1996); and Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary A. Copeland, *Inside Political Campaigns: Theory and Practice* (Praeger, 1997).

3. See Stanley Kelley Jr., *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956); Nimmo, *The Political Persuaders*; Larry J. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections* (Basic Books, 1981); Frank I. Luntz, *Candidates, Consultants, and Campaigns: The Style and Substance of American Electioneering* (Basil Blackwell, 1988); Mark P. Petracca and Courtney Wierioch, “Consultant Democracy: The Activities and Attitudes of American Political Consultants,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill., 1988.

4. Kelley, *Professional Public Relations*; Nimmo, *The Political Persuaders*.

5. Kelley, *Professional Public Relations*.

6. Nimmo, *The Political Persuaders*, p. 41.

7. For accounts of journalists, see Sidney Blumenthal, *The Permanent Campaign: Inside the World of Elite Political Operatives* (Beacon Press, 1982). For practitioners, see H. M. Baus and W. B. Ross, *Politics Battle Plan* (Macmillan, 1968); J. M. Perry, *The New Politics: The Expanding Technology of Political Manipulation* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1968); G. Wyckoff, *The Image Candidate* (Macmillan, 1968); Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969); Robert Agranoff, *The New Style in Election Campaigns* (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1972); Joseph Napolitan, *The Election*

Game and How to Win It (Doubleday, 1972); S. J. Guzzetta, *The Campaign Manual: A Definitive Study of the Modern Political Campaign Process* (Anaheim, Calif.: Political Publishing Company, 1987); Gary Selnow, *High Tech Campaigns* (Praeger, 1994); and Mary Matalin and James Carville, *All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President* (Random House, 1994).

8. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants*; Mark P. Petracca, "Political Consultants and Democratic Governance," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 22 (1989), p. 11–14; Petracca and Wierioch, "Consultant Democracy."

9. Paul S. Herrnson, "Campaign Professionalism and Fund-Raising in Congressional Elections," *Journal of Politics*, 54 (1992), pp. 859–70.

10. Stephen K. Medvic and Silvo Lenart, "The Influence of Political Consultants in the 1992 Congressional Elections," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 22 (1997), pp. 61–77; Stephen K. Medvic, "Is there a Spin Doctor in the House? The Impact of Political Consultants in Congressional Campaigns," Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1997; Stephen K. Medvic, "Party Support and Consultant Use in Congressional Elections," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1997; Kirsten la Cour Dabelko and Paul S. Herrnson, "Women's and Men's Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives," *Political Research Quarterly*, 50 (1997), pp. 121–35;

11. Herrnson uses two-stage least squares (TSLS) to capture the reciprocal causality that certainly exists between professionalism, money, and competitiveness.

12. Dabelko and Herrnson, "Women's and Men's Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives."

13. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants*; Luntz, *Candidates, Consultants and Campaigns*; Robin Kolodny and Angela Logan, "Political Consultants and the Extension of Party Goals," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1997.

14. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants*; Luntz, *Candidates, Consultants and Campaigns*; Kolodny and Logan, "Political Consultants and the Extension of Party Goals."

15. David Magleby and Kelly Patterson, "Consultants and Direct Democracy," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1997.

16. Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants*.

17. See Shaun Bowler and David Farrell, chapter 9 in this volume; Shaun Bowler and David Farrell, eds., *Electoral Strategies and Political Marketing* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); David Farrell, "Political Consultancy Overseas: The Internationalization of Campaign Consultancy," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1997. Also see David Butler and Austin Ranney, eds., *Electioneering: A Comparative Study of Continuity and Change* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Fritz Plasser, "Tracing the Worldwide Proliferation of American Campaign Techniques," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association of Political Consultants, Milan, Italy, 1999.