Abstract: This article gives an overview of the role of political consultants. It reviews theories and recent research findings focusing on the activities of political consultants and the relationship between political consultants, candidates, and political parties. Special attention is paid to growth in the profession, the changing media environment, and the evolving relationship between consultants and political parties.

Entry:

A political consultant is a paid, outside advisor to candidates, political parties, or interest groups. In the U.S. and abroad, political consultants have an important impact on campaigns, elections, and more recently, governing. The origins of political consulting have been traced to the Handbook of Electioneering written by Quintus Cicero in 63 B.C. Some consider President William McKinley’s political advisor Mark Hanna to be the first political consultant. In 1933, Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter formed Campaigns, Inc., the first political consulting firm in the U.S. The arc of the profession stretches from Madison Avenue to K Street. The earliest campaigns were organized by parties. Then political consultants, with origins in the marketing and advertising industry, created the beginnings of the profession that would come to dominate campaigns. Recently, political consultants have sought to smooth out the cyclical business model of elections by taking on work related to issue advocacy. Particularly in the U.S., the profession continues to experience growth in size and influence, changes in the media environment, and an evolving relationship with political parties.

The growth of the profession over time is well established (De Vries, 1989; Thurber, 1995; Thurber and Nelson, 2000). Both the number of political consultants and the amount of money spent on campaigns has grown. American Association of Political Consultants, founded in 1969 with approximately 30 members now has more than 1,100 active members and a permanent office in Washington, D.C (AAPC, 2013; De Vries, 1989). Driven by growth in the advertising industry, professionalization of the political consulting industry, and increased spending on campaigns, the field experienced significant growth in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In the 2012 election cycle in the U.S., the top ten political consulting firms directed the spending of $611 million, according to the Center for Public Integrity. According to ABC News, the campaign of 2012 Republican Presidential
candidate Mitt Romney spent 35% of its June budget on consulting services. There is some evidence that the rise of political consultants experienced in the U.S. is underway as well in other parts of the world (Farrell et al., 2001; Steiner and Jarren, 2009; Lees-Marshal and Marland, 2012). Outside of the U.S., professional associations of political consultants include The International Association of Political Consultants, The Asia Pacific Association of Political Consultants, The Association of Latin American Political Consultants, and the European Association of Political Consultants. Despite this growth, the academic study of the profession has begun only relatively recently (Thurber, 1998).

Political consulting has become increasingly specialized and professionalized. A recent survey of political consultants found that individual consultants perceive of the industry as having important markers of professionalism, including occupational institutions, a base of applied knowledge, and a service ethic (Grossman, 2009). The profession is also becoming more specialized. A survey of Swiss political communication consultants identified a division of the field into three distinct sub-fields: campaigning, political public relations, and lobbying (Hoffman et al., 2008). Other scholars acknowledge the existence of many more sub-fields of political consulting.

As the number of consultants has increased, new attention is being paid to the influence of consultants on campaigns and campaigning. As would be expected, campaigns seek out consultants with a track record of success in winning elections. Candidates’ perceptions of the quality of consultant is influenced by the track record of the consultants and these perceptions affect consultants’ compensation (Martin and Peskowitz, Unpublished). The use of consultants by campaigns also plays a role in the dissemination of campaign strategies. Nyhan and Montgomery (2012) find that clients of the same consultants more likely to use similar strategies than would otherwise be expected. In addition, political consultants influence the candidates for whom they work. A nationwide survey of American candidates for elective office found that campaigns which employed consultants were more likely to consider it acceptable to use negative campaign tactics (Franci and Herrnson, 2007). However, the same survey found that candidates who hire professional consultants are less likely to consider it appropriate to attack an opponent on private personal matters [See also Thurber et al., 2000].

Political consultants, and the campaigns they serve, have experienced three stages of media development: the newspaper age, the television age, and the digital age (Farrell et al., 2001). Scholars have argued that the demands of the digital age have increased the reliance of campaigns on political consultants, weakening the role of political parties (Farrell et al., 2001). A study of the role of political consultants in Norway found external consultants providing important technical assistance to campaigns seeking to utilize new technology (Karlsen, 2010). In addition to political consultants making use of the new media
environment. The media has become increasing aware of the role consultants play in campaigns. Mentions of political consultants in major newspapers grew steadily from the 1970s to 1990s (Panagopoulos, 2006).

Conventional wisdom suggests that the rise of political consultants has contributed to the weakening of the political parties in the nomination and election process (De Vries, 1989). Recent scholarship suggests that the parties may be exercising influence through the use of political consultants (Montgomery and Nyhan, 2010; *Thurber et al.*, 2002). First, political consultants often have close relationships with political parties (*Thurber and Dulio, 2003*). Second, affiliation between consultants and parties can serve the interests of both the campaigns and the parties. Cain (2013) examined the 2010 House primary election campaigns and found that the use of party-connected consultants increased a primary candidate’s electoral prospects. The author also argues that hiring consultants connected the national party increases fundraising from out-of-district sources, that incumbents in destabilized districts are more likely to rely on party connected consultants, and that hiring reputable consulting firms by out-party candidates increases elite perceptions that a race is competitive (Cain, 2012a; Cain, 2012b; Cain, 2011). The author argues that these findings suggest a mechanism of party influence on the nomination process. Other scholars have gone so far to argue that political consultants should be considered independent contractors employed by the parties (Kolodny and Dulio, 2003).

One role of political consultants which requires further study regards services provided to candidates, the parties, and interest groups after campaigning ends and once governing begins (Thurber, 2010a). This advent of the permanent campaign has benefited the political consulting industry but raises questions about possible conflicts of interest related to the influence of political consultants who work both for campaigns and as issue advocates (Thurber, 2010b; Thurber, 2002).

References and Suggested Readings


Thurber, J. and Dulio, D. 2003. The symbiotic relationship between political parties and political consultants: Partners past, present, and future. In State and Of the Parties: The


