



6-2001

## Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections - Book Review

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### Recommended Citation

Donovan, Todd, "Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections - Book Review" (2001). *Political Science*. 5.  
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Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections by James A. Thurber; Candice J. Nelson  
Review by: Todd Donovan

*The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Jun., 2001), pp. 488-489

Published by: [American Political Science Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118161>

Accessed: 23/10/2014 16:37

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**Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections.** Edited by James A. Thurber and Candice J. Nelson. Washington, DC: Brookings. 216p. \$42.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Todd Donovan, *Western Washington University*

The study of political campaigns has an awkward place in political science. At one level, we have grown to accept that "campaigns matter." A growing literature now provides many different tests of this proposition. At another level, a cliché sometimes mouthed by campaign professionals and journalists is that 90% of what campaigns do does not matter—it is the remaining 10% that is critical. The relative accuracy of these proportions aside, this cliché raises an important question: What is the critical part of modern campaigns that "matters"?

The editors of this volume begin with the proposition that one answer is professional political consultants—those people paid by candidates to make strategic decisions about communications, media purchases, allocation of campaign staff, and myriad details associated with modern campaigns. Depending upon the chapter at issue, the working definition of "consultant" in this volume may include other individuals paid to conduct more or less specialized campaign tasks. A common theme of the book is that their role is important, if not critical, to understanding candidate success and election outcomes. By focusing on the role of consultants, the contributors take our understanding of "campaign effects" beyond well-established models of how spending affects election outcomes. Here, we see arguments for the importance of who spends the money.

The contributors provide an informative look at what consultants do, and their tests of the effects that consultants have on electoral politics raise some important questions. As rich as this volume is, it also reflects an enduring problem with the study of campaign professionals. Research has been dominated by insider accounts of campaigns and by descriptive studies of what key actors actually do when they practice their craft. Thus, we have built a large history of the evolution of campaigning, particularly in the United States (i.e., books by Stanley Kelly, Dan Nimmo, David Rosenbloom, and Larry Sabato). Much less, however, has been produced in terms of systematic theories about campaigns and campaign resources, and there is not much in the way of testable hypotheses.

This is due, in part, to the fact that campaign techniques are a bit of a moving target. Professionals are paid to apply new techniques in each election cycle, and several chapters in this volume include a substantial amount of description about what these actors do. Many chapters improve upon the descriptive literature by using systematic survey methods to assess what consultants do. For example, Thurber, Nelson, and David Duilio (chap. 2) report on a survey of 200 professionals engaged in various aspects of modern campaigns. They find that these professionals dislike the media, dislike campaign finance reform, and tend to believe "scare tactics" and "suppression of voter turnout" are not unethical. The authors' interpretation of these results is interesting but quite contestable, such as their optimism that "only one-half" of consultants said that unethical practices occurred "sometimes" or "very often" (p. 27). If most campaign professionals do not consider much to be unethical, however, a reader might ask whether the glass is half empty or half full.

Paul Herrnson's chapter also makes use of surveys to describe the role of consultants in U.S. House elections (chap. 5). Readers of his 1998 book on congressional elections may have seen some of these data before, but as used in

this volume they put statements about consultant activity in better perspective. Herrnson illustrates that it is difficult to distinguish between the paid consultant and the congressional aides employed by 81% of incumbents to manage their campaign. He finds that these paid staff perform many of the activities that other scholars might attribute to consultants hired from outside.

Stephen Medvic (chap. 6) also notes that survey respondents (candidates) might not understand what is meant by the term "consultant" (p. 95). Using data from *Campaigns & Elections* magazine, Medvic reports that 64% of House candidates employed professional consultants in 1992, but Herrnson's method leads him to put the figure at 19%. Despite these differences in establishing how many candidates use "consultants," each author presents rich data on the types of activities (e.g., polling, GOTV, FEC reporting) in which a wide range of professionals engage. The difficulty, it seems, is establishing when someone is a staffer, a pollster, or a consultant.

Description of this sort is the most valuable component of the book. Additional chapters offer an overview of consulting as a business (Dennis Johnson, chap. 3) and from the perspective of a former Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee staffer who worked as a professional consultant (Martin Hamburger, chap. 4). Shaun Bowler and David Farrell (chap. 9) report the results of a survey of consultants outside the United States to give a portrait of the emerging internationalization of campaigns. Robin Kolodny (chap. 7) investigates how political parties use consultants. She argues that modern campaign techniques have exceeded the institutional capacity of parties, which now play a role in matching candidates with consultants. Although it is well established that national party committees behave this way, Kolodny uses survey data to illustrate that state parties engage in these collaborative relations with consultants.

David Magleby and Kelly Patterson (chap. 8) draw from detailed interviews with dozens of consultants and a survey of a larger sample to present a rich portrait of professionalization of ballot initiative campaigns. Although these occasionally retain a populist or grassroots image, the authors find that well-funded interest groups have substantial advantages. Failing to echo the editors' more sanguine impression of consultants, Magleby and Patterson suggest that consultants have assumed considerable control of the initiative process, and democracy has suffered as a result (p. 150).

Many contributors speculate about the overall effects of consultants (e.g., on election outcomes, party strength, voter attitudes), but there are few explicit attempts to test for the effects of their actions. Herrnson (p. 67) claims to use his data "to demonstrate that campaign professionalism has a positive effect" on campaigns, but no systematic tests are reported. Medvic, in contrast, uses OLS models to estimate the effect of professionalism on House elections. He finds that hiring more professionals had a significant, positive influence on challengers' vote margins in 1990 and 1992, but the models are misspecified. Incumbent and challenger spending, for example, is specified as independent of each other.

It will be interesting to see whether statistical models will detect any effects of consultants in future elections. Various contributors note that these professionals are adept at rapidly applying new technologies, that they "learn" (p. 92) what works, and that professional campaign staff is being hired increasingly from established, institutionalized firms. Over time, then, the use of professionals—and their potential

effect—may become a constant in most races. If anything, as dispersion of consultant use increases and as consultants become more professionalized, the marginal influence of their activity, as estimated in statistical models, should decline. This volume, although it provides several rich portraits of the consulting profession, would benefit from a concluding chapter that considers such issues and suggests directions for future research.

**The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action.** By Joseph F. Zimmerman. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999. 248p. \$59.95.

Frank Bryan, *University of Vermont*

With the exception of Jane Mansbridge's important and groundbreaking analysis of "Shelby," Vermont (*Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 1980), published scientific investigation of face-to-face democracy in the New England town meeting is almost nonexistent. Thus, Zimmerman's volume is not part of a genealogy of scholarship on what I call "real" democracy, to distinguish it from the direct democracy of referenda and initiatives with which it is often confused. For many years his interest has been what he terms (accurately) "law-making by assembled citizens." Given the general misuse of the term town meeting by politicians (which began with Carter and was perfected by Clinton), intent on cloaking a variety of self-serving public relations ploys in the robes of "pure" democracy, Zimmerman provides at the very least a much needed reality check for political scientists. In fact, in the popular American lexicon (and even in the understandings of many political scientists) town meeting has taken on a totally new meaning, as exemplified in Andrew Ferguson's essay ("Ye Olde Town Meeting Gimmick," *Time*, March 2, 1998).

Zimmerman's book is a mandatory first read for anyone interested in the study of America's oldest political institution, the New England town meeting. For political scientists willing to journey into the untouched terrain of real democracy, this book is the demarcation point. Its usefulness is found in the central six chapters, which describe the legal basis, structural parameters, and procedural variants of town meeting in each of the New England states. The roles of town officers (especially the moderator), citizens groups, and initiatives and other attendant processes to town meeting democracy also are discussed. No other source brings together this kind of essential material for a novice's introduction to the subject, and by novice I mean the huge proportion of political scientists.

I count several problems in the book. The first, atrocious editing, is more irritating than important. For instance, sentences seem to hopscotch through the book, landing here and there from earlier chapters almost in their entirety. The sequence and substance of the discussion is flat and predictable, which lends a manual-like tone to the prose. The second problem is more important. When attention switches from description of structure to analysis of process, the book's method draws into question the accuracy of the data and its comparative usefulness. The primary source is mailed questionnaires to town officers in each state, which suffers from all the familiar drawbacks of such techniques. This is especially true for the tables on the all-important matter of attendance rates. A primary problem is that, with exceedingly rare exceptions (such as Athens, Vermont), attendance is not formally recorded. The only way to know about attendance is to be there and count, although attendance varies throughout the meeting, so when it is counted is also critical. Zimmerman does not tell us whether there is uniformity in the

counting, when the counting occurred, or even whether a count was taken. Town clerks often equate attendance with the total number of votes cast when (and if) a paper ballot is used during the meeting, which often underestimates the count. Some clerks report attendance as the number who vote by day-long paper ballot (called the Australian ballot), which allows people to enter the town hall, vote, and then leave immediately without attending the meeting. This overestimates the counts. Zimmerman may have corrected for these problems, but that is not indicated in his book.

The third problem is that Zimmerman seems to let his enthusiasm for town meetings (which I share) becloud his judgment. Also he is not certain what the optimal defense should be. Often, wisely, he compares town meetings to other law-making institutions and asks: Where in the United States is political life more complete or fulfilled for the average citizen? This is when he is at his best. In fact, this argument could have been made with far more energy. If attendance at town meeting averages, for example, only 20% of the voters year in and year out, and if it takes three or four hours out of the day (or evening), which may cost the attenders a day's pay, is 20% not remarkably high compared to the national electorate, which can barely muster 50% turnout only once every four years for an act that seldom takes more than half an hour?

Zimmerman falls into the trap of defending town meetings not from the high ground of communitarianism but by charging into the cannons of liberalism. If attendance is low, it can be explained as de facto representation. If participation seems weak and unformed, it is reinforced and enhanced by a committee system of advisory panels and citizen boards. Communal decision making is rescued by representation, and public talk is saved by legislative structures. Zimmerman seems unwilling to concede there are real problems associated with town meetings and ends up defending a perfection that does not exist. For instance, he dismisses Mansbridge's finding (and my own to some extent) that "town meeting attendees are not representative of the citizenry at large" with the notation that a similar charge would "apply equally to elected town councils" (p. 185). True enough. In fact, city councils are less representative of the people than town meetings. This is a very good point, but it is not *the* point. Mansbridge is correct in questioning the degree to which town meetings meet the test of a perfect match between citizenry and assembly, especially when it comes to the very lowest status groups in a town.

Zimmerman's defensiveness leads him to emphasize Mansbridge's criticisms of town meetings, and this deprives readers of his view on the broad range of insight she brings to bear, which in many respects is remarkably supportive of the town meeting. A puzzlement for me is that when political scientists refer to Mansbridge's work (and now and then my own) they nearly always go straight to the negatives. This is the "ah-ha!" of a mind-set primed for criticism. Perhaps that is understandable, given the superlatives in which town meeting defenders are all too willing to wallow. Besides, the town meeting is often considered a threat to liberalism, which is the principal paradigm today. Is the town meeting (to quote Robert Frost) "something we somehow haven't to deserve"? Could it be that the reason, à la Thomas Wolfe, we cannot go home again is because we are afraid to? The development of a truly communitarian alternative rests on the willingness of scholars such as Zimmerman to defend the town meeting on its own (communitarian) terms, face up to its real weaknesses, and see if these can be resolved in the context of the coming (and I hope decentralist) sociocultural paradigm.

All this aside, my instinct is to applaud Zimmerman for the