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Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections - Book Review

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Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections by James A. Thurber; Candice J. Nelson
Review by: Todd Donovan
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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 that consultants have assumed considerable control of the campaigns, 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 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.

Despite these differences in establishing how many candidates hire paid consultants, each author presents rich data on the activities that other scholars might attribute to consultants. 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.

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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%. Failing to echo the editors’ more sanguine 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 de-
cline. 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
$59.95.

Frank Bryan, University of Vermont

With the exception of Jane Mansbridge's important and
groundbreaking analysis of "Shelby," Vermont (Beyond Ad-
versary 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 Fergurson's essay

Zimmerman's book is a mandatory first read for anyone
interested in the study of America's oldest political institu-
tion, the New England town meeting. For political scientists
willing to journey into the untouched terrain of real democ-
cracy, 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
officials (especially the moderator), citizens groups, and ini-
tiatives and other attendant processes to town meeting
democracy also are discussed. No other source brings to-
tgether this kind of essential material for a novice's introduc-
tion 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 predict-
able, 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 ques-
tionnaires 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

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