The United States is the land of elections. Over any typical four-year cycle, there are more than a million elections, everything from the presidency, U.S. senator, and governor to big-city mayor, city council, and local school board bond issue. Americans vote into office approximately 513,000 elected officials and decide on thousands of ballot initiatives. No other country comes close to the number and variety of elections that are held in American states, cities, counties, and other political jurisdictions.

Most elections are low-profile, low-budget contests. For many voters, the first time they learn that an issue or some minor office is even being contested is when they close the curtain in the voting booth and see the official ballot. Candidates seeking office in these low-profile contests usually rely on their own shoe leather, pay for their own election expenses, and rely on assistance from family, friends, and other volunteers.

But in contests for big-city mayors, governors, members of Congress, and other contests, professional political consultants are used to help guide candidates, political parties, and interest groups through the complexities of today’s elections. These are the expensive, often high-profile contests, where candidates and interested parties will raise hundreds of thousands, even millions of dollars to fund their races. It is not unusual for candidates for the U.S. Senate to raise and spend $10 to $15 million. It was once a rarity for candidates for Congress to spend $1 million; now it is commonplace. In some jurisdictions, candidates who are elected to the state supreme court might spend $5 or $8 million, while some school board candidates in big cities have been known to spend well over $100,000. Statewide spending in California presents a special case. In 2005 alone, with no governor, no state legislators, and no other state officials to elect, still over $500 million was spent by participants trying to defend or defeat ballot issues.

Where does the money go? Much of it, of course, goes to television advertising or direct-mail expenses, but a considerable portion goes to a battery of professionals who are hired by the campaigns to help win the public over to their side. Campaign consulting is a thriving business; no serious candidate in an important contest can do without consultants. Yet, campaign consulting is a relatively new business.

Through much of American electoral history, campaigns were run by political party machines and operatives. Parties recruited candidates, funded election drives, urged people to vote, and tried to generate excitement through mass rallies and torchlight parades. But by the middle of the twentieth century, the political party was no longer the focus of campaigning for many elections. Increasingly, the focus was on the individual candidate. The candidates relied on others to assist them, and increasingly, as campaigns became
The Beginning of the Business of Political Consulting

The business of political consulting traces back to the mid-1930s, when a California husband-wife public relations team, Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter, created a firm called Campaigns, Inc. Throughout their 25-year career, Whitaker and Baxter were enormously successful, providing public relations and communications services to a variety of candidates, ballot initiatives, and issue causes.

Others followed, but even by the early 1950s, most political consulting was still a sideline for public relations firms. One study showed that by 1957 some 41 public relations firms, located mostly in California, Texas, and New York, offered campaign services. But during the 1950s a new specialty was emerging: the professional campaign manager or political consultant. These were political activists who were making campaign work their principal business. By the 1960s the political consultant was becoming a fixture in presidential, gubernatorial, and U.S. Senate races.

The first generation of consultants included Joseph Napolitan, Walter De Vries, F. Clifton White, Herbert M. Baus, William B. Ross, John Sears, Stuster Spencer, and Joseph Cerrell. They tended to be generalists, who would handle a campaign’s overall strategy, develop themes and messages, and run campaigns. Others were known for special skills. Louis Harris, Albert H. (Tad) Cantril, Oliver Quayle, William Hamilton, Richard Wirthlin, Robert Teeter were among those who focused on research; Matt Reese was known for his campaign-organizing skills. Media specialists Charles Guggenheim, Tony Schwartz, David Garth, Marvin Chernooff, and Robert Squier crafted television commercials for Democratic candidates, while Robert Goodman, Douglas L. Bailey, John D. Deardourff, and others worked on the Republican side.

The business of political consulting grew quickly in the 1980s through 2000, and in 2008 approximately 3,000 consulting firms specialized in political campaigns. A few political consultants have become widely known to the public, like Karl Rove, Dick Morris, and James Carville. But during the 1950s a new specialty was emerging: the professional campaign manager or political consultant. These were political activists who were making campaign work their principal business. By the 1960s the political consultant was becoming a fixture in presidential, gubernatorial, and U.S. Senate races.

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The business of political consulting grew quickly in the 1980s through 2000, and in 2008 approximately 3,000 consulting firms specialized in political campaigns. A few political consultants have become widely known to the public, like Karl Rove, Dick Morris, and James Carville. But they are the rare exceptions. Most consultants work quietly, and comfortably, behind the scenes. Even at the presidential level, few Americans would recognize the names of principal consultants for 2008 presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Rudy Giuliani, or John McCain.

The Role of Political Consultants in Campaigns

What do consultants bring to the modern campaign? They bring skills, experience, and discipline to an essentially unruly process. Few events are as potentially chaotic, vulnerable, and unpredictable as a modern campaign. They are, by definition, contests, pitting one side (or more) against another. So much can go wrong. There is such a steep learning curve for the campaign, so many ways to make a mistake, an often inattentive public, and an opponent and allies doing their best to knock your candidate off track.

In some campaigns, no amount of skill or energy from a consultant would change the ultimate outcome. Winning (and losing) is contingent on a variety of factors, and many of those are beyond the control of consultants. But consultants can make the vital difference between victory and defeat when contests are close. Furthermore, consultants can help candidates avoid big, costly mistakes. They can bring order, discipline, focus, and consistency when things might otherwise be falling apart; they can keep a volatile situation from total meltdown and fire up a listless, drifting campaign that has lost its direction.

Campaign consultants come with a variety of skills and occupy different niches in campaigns. For an $8 million U.S. Senate race, a candidate might hire a bevy of consultants. The candidate will hire strategists (a general consultant, a campaign manager, pollster, direct-mail specialist, media expert) and specialists (candidate and opposition researchers, fund-raisers, lawyers and accountants with specialized knowledge of campaign finance law, speechwriters, television time buyers, electronic media specialists, telemarketers, micro-targeting specialists, and others). The campaign will also use campaign vendors (firms that supply voter files, campaign software, yard signs, and more).

Many consultants offer niche services, such as providing state and federal election law advice, buying time for radio and television advertising, providing voter and demographic databases, geo-mapping, and sophisticated targeting techniques, helping candidates in debate preparation, preparing their stump speeches, or providing that all-important cadre of fund-raisers who collect money that provides the fuel for the entire campaign.

New specialties have emerged just as new technologies have been introduced. No serious political campaign now would be without a Web site, e-mail, and blog. One of the newest job descriptions is that of director of electronic media: the person on the campaign responsible for maintaining the Web site, coordinating e-mails, and monitoring the campaign’s blog. Particularly since the 2004 presidential campaign, candidates have found that online communications can be cost-effective and efficient ways to reach out to volunteers, collect campaign funds (usually in smaller denominations), and keep activists and others engaged in the campaign.

Campaign consultants provide services for more than the traditional candidate campaign, such as a gubernatorial race or big-city mayor’s race. In fact, very few campaign consultants work on only election cycle campaigns. Many are involved in ballot issue campaigns, such as found in California and about 25 other states. Many too provide services in issue advocacy.
campaign consultants

fights, such as the battle over national health insurance, immigration reform, gay marriage, and many other issues. Consultants will work for corporations, trade associations, and other business interests. Finally, American consultants have found a lucrative market during the past 30 years going abroad and working on campaign elections in other countries.

The Business of Political Consulting

The business of political consulting is just a small fraction of the commercial marketing world. Many of these firms have fewer than ten employees and generate $1 million or less in revenue. Private political survey research represents only about 2.5 percent (or $100 million) of the $4 billion annual revenues of the polling industry. Direct mail for political causes constitutes but 2 percent of the direct-mail commercial market, and political telemarketing is less than 1 percent of the overall telemarketing industry.

While citizens watching television during a heated presidential primary might think that there is nothing but political commercials dominating the airwaves, in fact, such commercials are just a tiny portion of the market. In recent presidential campaign years, for example, during the six months that preceded the general election, political commercials represented only about 1.0 to 1.5 percent of all commercials. In a typical presidential election year, mass-marketing companies like Procter & Gamble or General Motors will each spend about the same amount selling their own products as all presidential candidates combined.

In the early twenty-first century, political campaigns pose special problems for candidates, consultants, and their campaigns. It is so much harder to get people’s attention. There has been a fundamental shift in where people get their news and how candidates can advertise. Newspaper readership is declining; weekly newsmagazines have become slimmer and less relevant in a 24-hour news culture; network television, which once dominated viewers’ attention, has lost little of its former power. Communications outlets exploded with the advent of cable television in the 1970s, followed by the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, and instant messaging. The communications marketplace is extraordinarily splintered, making it much harder for campaigns to reach voters with their messages. The mass market of three television networks has largely been supplanted by niche markets with hundreds of choices.

At one time, campaigns were much simpler: one candidate vying against another. Television, radio, and print advertising from one camp were pitted against the advertising from the other side. Since then, campaign communications have become much more complicated. Other voices added their messages and get-out-the-vote drives in the campaigns. For example, labor unions, political parties, trade associations, even private individuals have been willing to spend great sums of money to influence a contest. Then contests became nationalized. By the mid-1990s, congressional races that once were considered only local contests were seeing advertising campaigns from abortion rights, pro-gun control, anti-NAFTA, and English-only advocates—national groups, all—trying to influence the outcome. On top of these influences has come the wide open, robust influence of citizen activists through blogs and Web sites, adding their voices to the mix. This makes it all the more necessary to have professional campaign help to fight through the clutter and competition in the contest and make the candidate’s views and positions known.

Consultants often get blamed for the harsh, negative tone of campaign rhetoric, especially in television ads. They defend their craft by saying that they are providing useful information, albeit in stark and clear terms, about the differences between their candidates and the opponents. Academics and public citizen groups worry about the negative impact such ads might have on democratic behavior or voter turnout.

If anyone is to be blamed, it must be the candidate, who ultimately is responsible for the conduct of a campaign. An unfair, slash-and-burn campaign commercial, a “dirty tricks” stunt against the opponent, an embarrassing photo digitally pieced together, a cruel, salacious comment by a campaign staffer—all these unfair or unethical practices redound against the campaign and the candidate.

The negativity and the harsh words found in contemporary campaigns will likely only get worse. New voices, without the constraints of professional responsibility, have entered the picture. We should expect campaigns to get uglier and louder. Particularly with online campaigning, there are so many more voices filling cyberspace, from bloggers to e-mail rumors, to the online posting of sound bites and video clips. Professional media consultants, knowing they have reputations to uphold and are working for a candidate and a party or interest group, will use some semblance of caution. The really wild, outrageous comments or videos posted on the Web will come from outsiders, often anonymous, unfettered by constraints. The early twenty-first century may become the Wild West period of campaigning.

Challenges and Opportunities of Online Campaigning

Particularly since Howard Dean’s run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2003–4, we have seen a challenge to the dominant form of professional campaigning. Dean and his campaign manager touted a new approach to campaigning. That approach was to listen to the voices expressed on Dean’s blog and other online sources and emerge with a bottom-up campaign, gaining ideas from the people, listening to (and presumably acting on) their concerns, rather than imposing a command-and-control, top-down campaign (with the implication that it did not listen to the people).

While the approach sounded promising, it was less than what it appeared. A critical ingredient in any
successful campaign is top-down control: message
discipline, a fixed but flexible strategy, the ability to
cut through all the noise (electronic and otherwise)
of a campaign, set a firm, clear direction, and plan to
beat the opponent. This is what traditional, profes-
sional campaigning does best: it brings order out of
chaos. But at the same time, successful campaigns are
not out of touch with what voters want or feel. They
conduct polls, run focus groups, and monitor blogs;
candidates engage in “listening tours,” greet voters in
malls, coffee shops, and private homes. In short, they
listen very carefully to what people think.

In recent election cycles, a thriving blogging com-

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